

19TH CENTURY FRENCH ORGAN MUSIC

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SUMMARY. The following work contains important historical information regarding the great composers of the 19th century late Romantic French organ music, and the new symphonic instrument built by Cavaille-Coll. These instruments offered a new sound world which has been an inspiration for Cesar Franck, Charles-Marie Widor, Luis Vierne and other important representatives of this time. The work also contains detailed information regarding the new types of registrations and interpretation techniques developed during this rebirth of the French organ music, which constitute the basis of the organ schools of the 20th century.

Keywords: 19th century, organ, French, late romantic, symphonic, style, harmonic.

After the 1789 Revolution the French organ music had reached a period of decay caused by the lack of instruments and the fact that the composers had lost interest in creating new and valuable music.

In the nineteenth century however two schools started to develop, a classical oriented school represented by Pierre Alexandre Boely, Camille Saint-Saens, Eugene Gigout, Alexandre Guilmant and Leon Boelmann, whose works were influenced not only by the old French music but were also inspired by the music of Bach and Beethoven; and then, there was the symphonic school represented by Cesar Franck, Charles-Marie Widor, Luis Vierne and Marcel Dupre whose works were inspired by the organs built by the renowned organ builder Aristide Cavaille-Coll.

The symphonic approach of Cavaille-Coll has lead to a new style in organ creation and interpretation. These instruments present certain novelties in their sound and technique. The stops are divided in several groups depending on there type just like in case of a symphonic orchestra: reeds, strings, woodwind, mutation stops and mixtures. On the technical side, the balanced sound is achieved by the constant wind supply and by the separate wind chests for each stop group. The wind chest of the mixtures, the mutation stops and the high-pitched reed stops can be operated by individual pedals

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found at the console called “appels”. The air pressures also vary from low to high depending on the pitch of the sounds. The higher air pressure the more it intensifies the sound of the reed stops and it also accentuates the character of the labial stops. The mixtures built by Cavaille-Coll are not very high-pitched since they have the role to sustain the sound whereas the reeds have a very important role of creating the unique symphonic sound. Another novelty was the introduction of the pedal with a bass function. During the earlier period of French music, the pedals were used to play the line of the cantus firmus and were not provided with 16’ stops. Sometimes the Trompette and Clairon stops were built to A^1 or F^1 in order to be able to play notes lower than C. Boely had introduced the “pedal-klavier” with long pedals.

This new type of organ with a truly orchestral sound encouraged composers to write music that was symphonic in its target. The composers from this period have not only written symphonies, they have also tried to develop the old musical forms like the Prelude and Fugue or the Toccata. These creations gave birth to new forms characterized by a free improvisatory style such as the Prelude Fugue and Variation. A frequently used form in this period was the Toccata characterized by virtuoso elements, massive sound and continuously repeated rhythms.

During this period, many organs were built in concert halls and many concerts were held in the workshops of the organ builders. Several music pieces were written for organ inaugurations where the audience did not look for complicated intellectual music but wanted only entertainment and the show. The best way to win the attention of an audience was to improvise. One of the best improvisers was Philippe Lefebure-Wely who had huge audiences during his concerts and inaugurations. This free improvisation style was also used later on by Vierne, Franck, Widor and Dupre in their oeuvre. Many times these pieces were given liturgical titles like *Offertoire*, *Elevation*, *Communion*, *Sortie*, *Choral* or *Priere* (Prayer). These titles however indicate the character of the piece in question rather than the musical form of it. This period brought novelties in the playing technique too. Nicolas Lemmens was a pioneer when it came to the pedal technique. Due to the fact that before the nineteenth century the pedals were used only to play the cantus firmus, the French organists did not have a very good pedal technique. Lemmens was a teacher at the most important music schools in Paris, and many great composers and organists learned pedal technique with him. This new technique was characterized by the following: complete legato in playing, using silent finger changes and “notes communes”. The symphonic trend was not limited only to France, but had reflections in Germany too, for example the organs built by Eberhard Friedrich Walcker provided with a crescendo roll were adequate for the works of Franz Liszt, Julius Reubke, and Max Reger.

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One of the most important instruments built by Cavaille-Coll is the organ of Saint-Clotilde Basilica in Paris. The stops of this typical symphonic instrument are the following:

Grand-Orgue, C-f ³ (Great organ)		Positif, C-f ³ (Positive)	
Montre	16'	Bourdon	16'
Bourdon	16'	Montre	8'
Montre	8'	Viole de Gambe	8'
Flute harmonique	8'	Salicional	8'
Viole de Gambe	8'	Flute harmonique	8'
Bourdon	8'	Bourdon	8'
Prestant	4'	Prestant	4'
Octave	4'	Flute octaviante	4'
Quinte	3'	Quinte	3'
Doublette	2'	Doublette	2'
Plein jeu VII		Plein jeu harmonique (III-VI)	
Bombarde	16'	Cromorne	8'
Trompette	8'	Trompette	8'
Clairon	4'	Clairon	4'
Recit expressif, C-f ³ (Swell)		Pedale, C-d ¹ (Pedals)	
Flute harmonique	8'	Sousbasse	32'
Bourdon	8'	Contrebasse	16'
Viole de Gambe	8'	Basse	8'
Voix celeste	8'	Octave	4'
Basson-hautbois	8'	Bombarde	16'
Voix humaine	8'	Basson	16'
Flute octaviante	4'	Trompette	8'
Octavin	2'	Clairon	4'
Trompette harmonique	8'		
Clairon	4'		

Tirasse Grand Orgue (Great organ couplers)

Tirasse Positif (Positive couplers)

Positif au Grand Orgue (Positive to Great organ couplers)

Recit au Positif (Swell to Positive couplers)

Octaves Graves Grande Orgue (Lower octave to Great organ couplers)

Octaves graves Positif (Lower octave to Positive couplers)

Octaves graves Recit au Positiv (Lower octave from Swell to Positive couplers)

Anches Pedale (Reeds to pedals couplers)
Anches Grande Orgue (Reeds to Great organ couplers)
Anches Positif (Reeds to Positive couplers)
Anches recit (Reeds to Swell couplers)
Tremblant Recit (Swell Tremolo)
Expression Recit (Swell box of swell organ)
Orage (Thunder effect)

Just like in the Baroque period, the art of the registration had to follow some general rules. The usual registrations on a Cavaille-Coll organ were the following:

1. Jeux de Fonds, 16', 8' and 4' Foundation Stops occasionally together with the Hautbois 8' from the Swell, which corresponds with the string section of an orchestra reinforced by the soft woodwinds. The Voix humaine and the Voix celeste stops are not to be included in this type of registration since they have a pronounced solo character.
2. Fonds + Anches + Mutations (Aliquots and Mixtures) – this registration corresponds with the "Tutti" sound of an orchestra.
3. Solo registrations with Hautbois, Clarinette, Trompette harmonique ad so on.
4. In order to obtain a very soft sound one can choose combinations like Fonds 8' + Voix celeste or Fonds 8' + Voix humaine + Tremblant.

These stop combinations create the unique symphonic sound that inspired the most important composers of that period. Cesar Franck, the first French composer ever to write an Organ Symphony once said: "*Mon orgue. C'est un orchestre!*" – My organ, it is an orchestra! His works are the first representative compositions of the symphonic style and they were inspired by the organ of the Saint-Clotilde Basilica in Paris. Franck was a friend of Cavaille-Coll, and he composed and played music at the inauguration of his organs. In 1871 he became a member of the "Societe national de musique", a society which promoted the new French music. He was also an organ teacher at the Music Conservatory of Paris where he imprinted his style on the future generations of organists. His pupils included Vincent d'Indy, Ernest Chausson, Louis Vierne, and Henri Duparc. His complex works are influenced by German classics like Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. Many of his works employ the cyclic form, a method of achieving unity among several movements in which all of the principal themes of the work are generated from a germinal motif. He did not compose many works, but the most important ones, twelve by number, are considered to be milestones in the development of the organ music. The many intensive modulations and romantic harmonies, along with the free dynamics are the main characteristics of his music. The most

representative work of Franck is the “Grand Piece Symphonique” reflecting the orchestral approach of the composer. The continuous repetition of the main theme and the alternation between solo parts and Grande Choeur parts create a unique symphonic form. The piece hides many Beethovenian influences and sometimes reminds of one of the Wagnerian style.

Other representative works of Franck are the *Trois Pieces*, *The Piece Heroique*, *The Cantabile* and *The Three Chorales*. *The Three Chorales* were composed during the last months of his life and they were presented to an audience only one year after his death. The title of “Chorale” leads us thinking about the German protestant church music characterized by the rigidity of its harmonies and rhythm. However, the nineteenth century French music presents us with a new kind of chorale influenced by the chorale fantasies by Liszt. In the works of Franck the chorale is developed during the entire length of the piece by using long and intense musical sentences. The interpretation of his music requires a high degree of interior support and a very good technical knowledge from the performer. With regards to the registration of the pieces, Franck had chosen his options based on the stop list of the Saint-Clotilde organ. This organ allowed him to obtain the Crescendo and Decrescendo effects he was so fond of. Cavaille-Coll had built a swell-box which made the execution of these dynamic elements possible the following way: the first step was to couple all the 8’ foundation stops to the Great organ (in case of Franck together with the Hautbois stop from the Swell organ) with the swell box closed, followed by a transition from the Swell organ to the Positive and then to the Great organ, where, on the Great organ one must first add the reed stops from the Swell organ and slowly open the swell box; at the point where the swell box is completely open one must add the reed stops from the Positive and finally the reeds from the Great organ and reeds from the pedals. The organ of Saint-Clotilde also allowed Franck to choose the Cromorne stop as a solo instrument accompanied by the reed stops of the Swell organ. Andre Marchal once said: “the Recit on Franck’s instrument was very small, sounding very well when the box was open, but when closed the reeds would disappear behind the foundation stops of the other manuals.” Thanks to the technical possibilities of his instrument and the dynamic novelties introduced by him, when listening to his music one truly has the impression of a symphonic orchestra.

In the period when Franck had shown the first signs of the symphonic style, there was another important composer, Alexandre Guilmant, whose opinion was different when it came to the orchestral approach. In his own words: “Organ playing may be divided generally into two schools. In one, the organ is treated as an orchestra, the production of orchestral effects being sought; while the other holds that the organ has so noble a tone quality and so many resources of its own, that it need not servably imitate the orchestra.

I belong to the latter school.” Guilmant was a traditionalist and he was very fond of the Belle Epoque style. He was the owner of a Cavaille-Coll-Mutin organ with classical stops like Flute creuse 8', Viole de gambe 8', Cor de nuit 8', Nasard 2 2/3, Tierce 1 3/5 and Cromorne 8' and a Positive Expressive. His opinion was that: one must have an organ that combines the modern sound and technique with the tradition in order to be able to play both the contemporary music and the earlier creations. He disliked the fact that the new generation of organ builders eliminated the early French stops like the Jeux de Tierces and the Jeux de Cromorne. He was also a teacher at the Paris Conservatoire, where he taught his pupils how to choose the proper stop combinations. Other than the stop combinations used by the representatives of the symphonic style, his options were as follows:

- 1) Jeux de fonds (Foundations stops) is a combination of the Montres, Bourdons 16' and 8', Prestant 4', by adding the Flutes 8' and 4' one could obtain a round and a full sound; by adding the Gambe, Violoncello and Salicional one could obtain a more penetrating sound. The Principal 2' is necessary in case of fast movements like Fugues in order to obtain a clear sound. In this case one shall not use the 16' stops. The Flutes harmoniques must be avoided since they make the Great organ sound unclear. Stops like Unda Maris and Voix Celeste should not be used too often, because after a while their sound can be tiring for the audience. It is also wrong to combine 16' stops with 4' or 2' stops since they produce a glassy sound. However sometimes it is possible to combine a Gambe 8' with an Octavin 2'. This combination creates a fine sound when playing an octave lower with the swell box closed. In the pedals, a combination of a 16' stop and a 4' stop would generate a very odd sound, especially when playing staccato.
- 2) Jeux de Mutation – Unlike other composers of his time, Guilmant was very fond of Mixture stops and high pitched stops. His opinion was that these stops are the ones that make the organ sound truly grand and unique. He separated these stops the following way: mixtures (Fournitures, Cymbales) made of tin; and Cornets, Nasards, Tierces, Larigot, Septimes and Piccolo made of tin and lead. The Plein jeu is a combination between Fourniture and Cymbale. One should never add Tierce, Nazard or Flute 2' to this combination because their sounds do not match. The Cornet completes the sound of the reed stops. He was very fond of the new reed stops of the Swell organ and of the sound effects they produced when working with the swell box or even when using them as solo stops.

Although he was an expert when it came to combining stops and obtaining fine colors, his music was not very creative and it was not very well received by the public. He was the most productive French composer

and he wrote music using classical forms like the Sonata, the Prelude and Fugue and the Choral. His most important creations are his sonatas, the *Marche funebre et chant seraphique* and *The Cantilene pastorale*.

Another important composer of this period was Charles-Marie Widor. He was the organist of the Saint-Sulpice Church in Paris and the successor of Cesar Franck at the Paris Conservatoire. His most renowned students were: Marcel Dupre, Louis Vierne, Charles Tournemire and Darius Milhaud. The organ at Saint-Sulpice was one of Cavaille-Colls masterpieces. It had not less than five manuals, one hundred stops and special couplers. The Great organ called Grande Choeur united all the other manuals, and together with the swell-box it created tremendous dynamic effects. The extraordinary technical and musical capabilities of this instrument were an inspiration for Widor. His music was adapted to the new type of symphonic instrument. He liked a lot the sound world of the organs that was built by Cavaille-Coll.

He composed ten symphonies in a suite-like form and always returned to re-edit them. The works are the expression of a symphonic virtuoso approach and they show the mastery and the refinement of his contrapuntal technique, while exploring to the fullest the capabilities of the Cavaille-Coll organs for which these works were written. His influence can be found later in the creations of his pupils. The first four symphonies represent Widor's early style and they show a great variety in writing, but they can not compare to his later works where one can experience the maturity of a complex composer.



Fig.1 The Cavaille-Coll organ at Saint Sulpice Paris Console of the Saint-Sulpice organ

The first four symphonies represent Widor's early style and they show a great variety in writing, but they do not compare with his later works where one can experience the maturity of a complex composer. The most famous work is *The Fifth Symphony* with its massive movements and the renowned Toccata at the end. This Toccata is very often played at weddings or other special occasions. The seventh and eighth symphonies are the longest ones, each lasting about fifty minutes, and the last two are Gothic and Roman symphonies. Regarding the registration of his music, Widor made very simple choices. He followed some strict rules as he was not fond of experiments. One can assume that he was influenced by his teacher Jaques-Nicolas Lemmens who stated that the young artists continuously change the stop combinations and thus ruin the music. Widor once said to his pupil Louis Vierne: "*Pas de lanterne magique, je vous prie*" – "No magic lamps please". He strongly disliked special effects and too colorful stop combinations: "*Le principal caractere de l'orgue est le grandeur ... il faut nous tenir a qutre pour ne pas nous laisser ebouir au millieu des richesses qu'elle nous offre, pour ne pas nous egarer loin du droit chemin*" – "The main characteristic of the organ is its greatness ... we must be careful not to be blinded by the richness of its sound and of the search to find the right path."

Louis Vierne, another great composer of this period, was the organist of the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris. Though he held one of the most prestigious organ posts in France, the Notre-Dame organ was in a state of disrepair throughout much of his tenure at the instrument. He eventually undertook a concert tour of North America to raise money for its restoration. The tour, which included major recitals on the famous Wanamaker organs in New York and Philadelphia, was very successful, although it physically drained him.

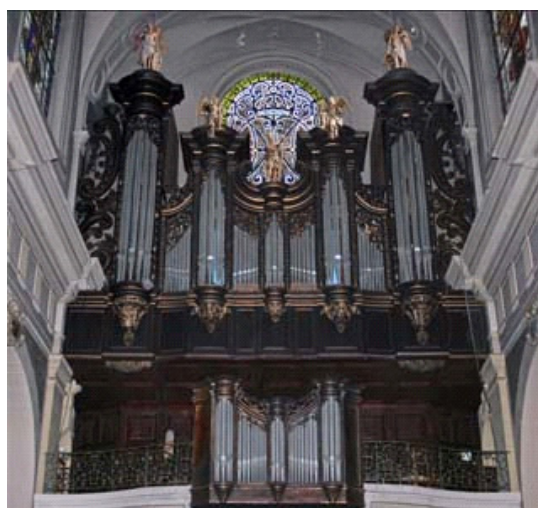


Fig. 2 The organ of the Notre-Dame in Paris

The organ was restored by Cavaille-Coll and it had five manuals and eighty-six stops. He was considered one of the greatest musical improvisers and virtuosos of his generation. His few improvisations that were preserved on early phonograph recordings sound like finished compositions. His life was very difficult and it was filled with spiritual trials due to the fact that he had congenital cataracts and he was almost completely blind. He wrote most of his music in Braille. His most important works are the six symphonies, the Twenty-four Pieces en style libre, and the Pieces de Fantaisie. He was the pupil of Cesar Franck and of Widor and their influence can be detected in all of his works. After 1911 he became the successor of Guilmant at the Paris Conservatoire. His musical language is filled with chromatic elements. It is romantically rich and theatrical, therefore he is considered to be the link between Franck and Faure. Vierne also considered that: "the performer should avoid the strident sounds and the eccentric effects". He was fond of Mixture stops generally avoided by the early generations of organists. At his last recital, Vierne suffered a heart attack whilst preparing his improvisations, and he died at the console of the great organ of Notre-Dame.

In the fourth quarter of the 19th century new tendencies were born in the music of Charles Tournemire and Marcel Dupre. Although the roots of their musical approach lies in the symphonic style one can sense a strong influence of the developing post-impressionism.

Tournemire was a pupil of Cesar Franck and Widor at the Paris Conservatoire where he attended classes from the age of sixteen. He was a very talented improviser and he won his first prize at the age of twenty-one. From 1898 he became the organist of the Saint-Clotilde Basilica where he remained until his death. He was also an organ improvisation teacher at the Paris Conservatoire. While he could play the conventional organ literature expertly, he rarely played anything in his titular post other than his own improvised works. His improvisations were consistently brilliant, and most often rooted in Gregorian thematic material. His output contains many organ works, eight symphonies (one of them choral), and several chamber works. His most important works are as follows: *The Triple Choral*, *L'orgue mystique*, *The Sei Fioretti* and *The Sept Choral-Poemes pour les sept paroles du Christ*. *The Triple Choral* is a single movement piece inspired by the three chorales written by Franck in which he presents three chorale melodies symbolizing the Holy Trinity. The first melody represents the Father and the Creator of the World, the second one represents the Son whilst the third one symbolizes the Holy Ghost. The piece has a very complex structure, but it can be hardly recognized by the listener since the musical lines stay vague and the tonality is always unstable. *The Sei Fioretti* was inspired by the "Fiori musicali" by Girolamo Frescobaldi and is considered to be the first neoclassical work of the composer. It is an interesting metamorphosis between the nineteenth century French style and the Old Italian style. The

composer uses many arpeggios and ornaments similar to the ones found in the works by Frescobaldi. The Sept Chorale-Poemes pour les sept paroles du Christ is a piece filled with Gregorian and Hindu scales, somehow introducing the style later developed by Olivier Messiaen.

The last representative composer of this period was Marcel Dupré. Renowned for his exceptional musical memory and improvisational skills, he entered the Paris Conservatoire at the age of sixteen where he studied piano, organ and fugue compositions with Guilmant, Diemer and Widor. At the age of eleven he had been named the titular organist of the Saint-Vivien Church in Rouen. Dupré won the Grand Prix de Rome for his cantata, "Psyché". In 1926, he was appointed professor of organ performance and improvisation at the Paris Conservatoire. In 1934 he succeeded Widor as titular organist at the Saint-Sulpice in Paris. He became famous for performing more than two thousand organ recitals throughout Europe, the United States, and Australia, which included a recital series of ten concerts of the complete works of Johann Sebastian Bach in 1920 (Paris Conservatoire) and 1921 (Palais du Trocadéro), both performed entirely from his memory. During his educational career at the Paris Conservatoire, the Ecole normale de Musique and the American Conservatorium he had published many organ teaching methods: "Traite d'Improvisation", "Methode d'orgue", "Manuel d'Accompagnement du Plain-Chant Gregorien, Cours complete de Fugue"; and organ works to complete these methods: "Chorales", "Le tombeau ed Titelouze", "Inventions", "Quatre fugues Modales".

Dupré contributed extensively to the development of the organ technique. His technique was characterized by the smoothness of the hands and ankles, by the precision in executing the difficult rhythms. As a composer, he produced a wide-ranging oeuvre of 65 opus numbers, and also taught two generations of well-known organists such as Jehan Alain and Marie-Claire Alain, Pierre Cochereau, Jeanne Demessieux, Rolande Falcinelli, Jean Guillou, Jean Langlais, and Olivier Messiaen, to name only a few. Aside from a few fine works for aspiring organists (such as the 79 Chorales op. 28) most of Dupré's music for the organ ranges from moderately to extremely difficult, and some of it makes almost impossible technical demands on the performer. His more successful works combine this virtuosity with high degree of musical integrity, qualities found in works such as *The Symphonie-Passion*, *The Preludes and Fugues*, *The Esquisses and Evocation*, and *The Cortege et Litanie*.

The Symphonie Passion is based on a four movement improvisation made by the composer at the Wanamaker Studio in Philadelphia. The four movements (1. The World Expecting the Messiah 2. The Birth 3. The Crucifixion 4. The Resurrection) are inspired by the Gregorian melodies: "Jesus redemptor omnium", "Stabat Mater" and "Adoro te" and the Christmas Carol "Adeste fideles".

The Second Symphony, and also the most difficult one, was presented in 1929 at the New York Wanamaker Auditorium. Fascinated by the softness of the new American electrical tracker action, he tried to push the possibilities of the instrument to its limits. Although the work is very difficult from the technical point of view, its interpretation must not sound like it, but it must only reflect the colorful world of sound imagined by the composer.

His spellbinding virtuosity and the supreme musical intellect which enabled him to improvise with miraculous ease - tended to obscure the poetic and the spiritual side of his creative personality. His musical thought and the subtle refinement of his harmonic language can often be fully appreciated only after repeated listening, and the familiarity with the lesser-known pieces can only enhance our appreciation of the more popular works. He was not just a master craftsman but also a poet, a poet who could declare from the heart: 'I love colorful harmonies, I adore them....For me music should be a caress for the ear.'

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