

Franck  
~~~~~

Music

# Hail, César Franck

Writing the life of the great Belgian composer

by R.J. STOVE

**T**he notion of an 18-year human pregnancy is unknown to medical science. An online search suggests that the longest pregnancy ever recorded was a mere 375 days—in 1945 at a Los Angeles hospital, should you care. Nevertheless, if a baby could indeed remain in the womb for 18 years, I would be, after a fashion, the mother of that baby. Because that was the gestation period for my book *César Franck: His Life and Times*, which has now emerged, weighing approximately six pounds, no doubt with hidden deformities galore, but at any rate unencumbered by the more obvious forms of placenta.

Nine-tenths of the book's writing was done in two separate bursts of inspiration. The first happened in 1993-1994, when my father was still alive, and when I possessed an unflinching authorial ease that I have long since lost. Today I border on the state of self-consciousness that apparently tormented Plato, who is said to have rewritten one of his sentences no fewer than 70 times. Back then, I felt less awed by the grandest literary projects than I would now feel by the job of compiling a laundry list. This lunatic assurance is the optimum condition in which to write a first draft. And what I wrote in those days amounted to a first draft, though at the time I predictably assumed that it had the force of Mosaic Law and could not be amended, let alone abridged, save through an act of spiritual violence.

By the time Inspirational Burst #2 occurred in the early 21st-century, there had impinged upon me the news of an amazing new contrivance known as the Internet. Actually the Internet proved the book's salvation because during the 1990s—convinced as I then was that P. J. O'Rourke constituted the greatest scholar of all time—I possessed a supercilious impatience with footnotes. Consequently, although my research had disclosed innumerable priceless quotes, many in French, I lacked the smallest wherewithal for reminding myself whence these lines had come. But for such

miraculous websites as Google's books subdivision, I am not sure I could ever have brought my biography to an end.

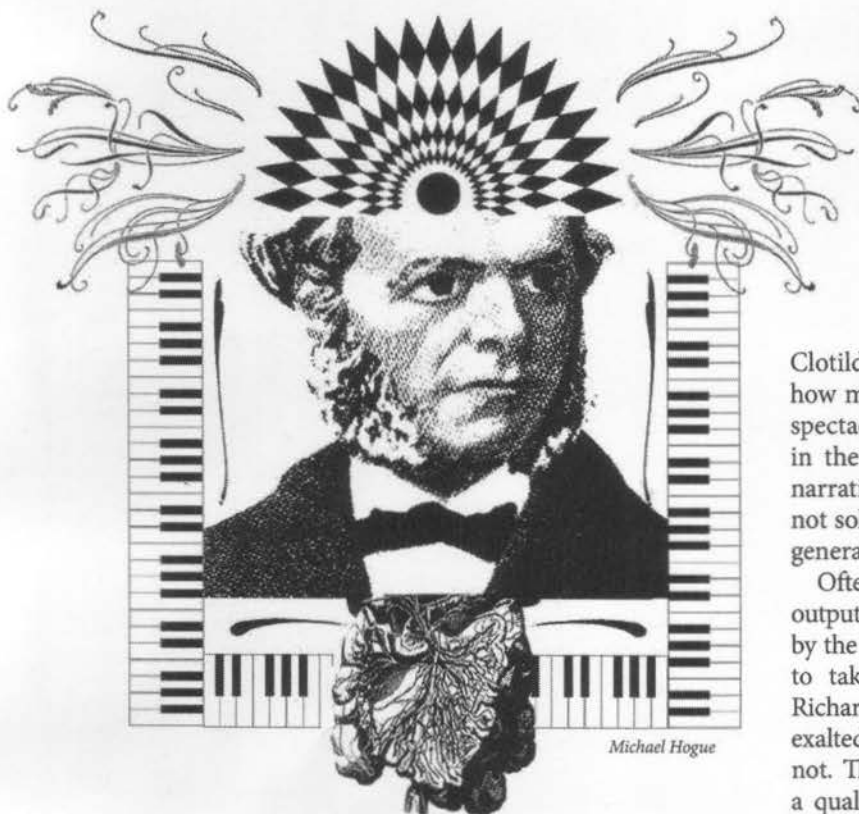
We talk glibly of "reinventing the wheel." I needed to reinvent about 14 wheels in each chapter. Let that be a dire admonition to any novices who might be reading these sentences. If you value your sanity, note the location for each utterance and each anecdote that you find, banal though it be, and store all your references in a safe place, by which I do not mean a hard drive.

The tale is told of Martin Routh, a freakishly polymathic Oxford scholar, who eventually reached the age of 99. Just before his death, a young Anglican clergyman sought Routh's advice, hoping to pick that capacious nonagenarian brain for stunning metaphysical insights, such as he must have acquired over the previous 98 years. Routh's response was prosaic but justified: "You will find it a very good practice always to verify your references, sir!" Were someone to ask me for equally stunning metaphysical insights, I could do no better than that.

Here I have neither the willingness nor, frankly, the skill to summarize César Franck's life in a few paragraphs. Therefore I shall not make more than the briefest mention of Franck's birth (1822) in Liège, now Belgian but then under Dutch rule; his subsequent transplantation to Paris; his years as a child prodigy, once thought comparable to Mozart and Mendelssohn; his "years in the shadows," to quote one of my own chapter headings, between the 1848 revolution and the Franco-Prussian War; and his eventual recognition, not only as an outstanding composer but also, by the time he died in 1890, as one of the Paris Conservatoire's most inspiring professors. I want now simply to hint at what Georges Clemenceau might have called the "splendors and

*R.J. Stove is the editor of Organ Australia and author of the forthcoming César Franck: His Life and Times.*

## Music



miseries" of being a Franck biographer.

The splendors are easily dealt with. There aren't any. The miseries—if that is not too melodramatic a term for a task that, on the whole, gave me more pleasure than pain—are numerous. I feel a mixture of envy and annoyance at biographers of Berlioz, Liszt, and Wagner. Writing books about these composers must practically be a cinch. All three men issued prodigious quantities of prose, self-revealing even when mendacious. Their charismatic personalities elicited such prose from friends and enemies also. They could scarcely be stopped from writing manifestos by any force short of the Grim Reaper. Besides, vast amounts of what they themselves said, or what others said about them, reached print before 1900.

With Franck it is thoroughly different. His correspondence comprises mostly thank-you notes, more formal letters to public officials, and bulletins to family members or the occasional student. Whole years passed where even these letters went unwritten. He kept no diary and attempted no memoir. The few comments he made on his own music revealed almost nothing about his motives in writing it. Politics, after the national convulsions of 1848, never much interested him. So merely assembling the relevant primary sources on Franck, let alone analyzing them, is almost like pulling teeth. No more than a fraction of such

sources have appeared in English before now. Fully two-thirds of the book relies on materials never previously available except in French.

There remains another problem. Inextricably the life of Franck is tied up with the religion of France and particularly the Catholic Church that he served, most notably as organist for 32 years at the Paris Basilica of Sainte-Clotilde. It could well be impossible to convey how much damage this devoted—though unspectacular—religious adherence did Franck in the eyes of those pundits so enslaved by narratives of modernist revolution as to hate not solely religious music but Christendom in general.

Often I have wondered if any of Franck's own output could appeal to a mind wholly immured by the New Atheism: a mind able, for instance, to take such unrelenting carpet-chewers as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris at their own exalted estimate. I increasingly suspect it could not. There is, in even Franck's liveliest works, a quality of aspiration toward an unseen but longed-for goal. Very seldom are these works as overt in their hedonism as, say, most Debussy. Nor, on the other hand, do they regularly storm the heavens, as Mahler symphonies and Richard Strauss tone-poems so often do. Perhaps Bruckner comes closest to Franck in his aesthetic intimations that—as St. Paul put it—"here we have no abiding city." Franck certainly attended a Paris organ recital of Bruckner's and might on that occasion have met him. But he never showed any interest in Bruckner's music, nor Bruckner in his. Resemblances are coincidental.

Whatever the influences upon Franck's creativity, one thing is sure: many have loved Franck's music and many have loathed it; no one who has once heard it is indifferent to it. One's reaction to it will frequently depend upon one's reaction to the organ, that repository for so much of Franck's inmost artistic thought. All too many concert-goers regard the organ *per se* with either boredom or active repugnance. Virgil Thomson, as correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*, passed in 1945 the following peevish verdict:

in two centuries scarcely twenty pieces have been written for the organ that could be called first-class music... César Franck, perhaps, did the best, though none of his half dozen best organ pieces is as commanding a work as any of his half dozen best chamber and orchestral works. Also,

Franck's position as a major composer in any medium is doubtful.

Nor was Thomson alone in writing thus. In England, six years afterward, historian Martin Cooper likewise dismissed organ composition with a single harrumph:

There is no other branch of music, except the liturgical, in which all musicians would admit the inferiority of everything written in the last two hundred years, of organ music written after 1750, to that written before. In fact organ music has, for at least a century, interested nobody but organists.

Operating at a decidedly higher level of awareness than Thomson and Cooper, Jacques Barzun asked in 1985, with genuine sadness:

How many among your musical friends do you know who run to every respectable organ recital and collect records by the great performers? Try, moreover, to talk with confidence about the masterpieces of organ music and their distinctive qualities. You will find, I think, that they do not present themselves with any vividness or charm to the minds of chamber-music enthusiasts, opera buffs, and symphony subscribers.

In much of Franck's oeuvre, naturally, the organ plays no role. It is nevertheless valid to suggest that the organ's qualities permeated Franck's attitude and that the characteristics most associated with organ writing—dignity; solidity; a certain discursiveness; a tendency to suggest improvisation in even the most precisely calculated passages; an impatience with, and lack of conviction in, the theatrical—suffused Franck's overall manner.

For what it may be worth, I earn a good part of my living as an organist. In that role I have publicly performed several Franck organ compositions. It is intriguing how valuable this process becomes for an adequate appreciation of them. Repeatedly I have seen published comments on Franck's organ style that through their sheer ineptitude simply could not have been made by anybody who has experienced what the music feels like under his own fingers and feet. I would go further by saying this: show me a musicologist who is not also a performer, and I will show you a lousy musicologist.

While I am in confessional mode, I might as well explain that my own taste for Franck antedated my or-

gan renditions. It began when, by pure accident at an Australian high school, I discovered an LP recording of the middle movement from Franck's *Symphony in D Minor*. At the time I had scarcely heard of Franck's name, and certainly I had never heard a single phrase of his music, apart from the inevitable exposure to his *Panis Angelicus* at a few weddings. Enraptured by the unostentatious originality of what greeted my ears, I eventually explored more from the same pen and accordingly gained a specific musical satisfaction that no other composer has quite provided.

With any luck, even those unfortunates hostile to Franck the Creator might be interested in my account of Franck the Teacher. Here, too, I have endeavored to stick as far as possible to original sources, which paint a very different picture of Franck's pedagogy from those sarcastic invocations—cropping up in various secondary studies—of his lessons as mindless love-feasts. I have even furnished what I believe is the only convincing solution to one of the 19th century's greatest musical enigmas: why that brilliant Franck pupil Henri Duparc stopped composing, for all practical purposes, when not yet 40. This puzzle has exercised amateur sleuths ever since.

Some of the wilder assumptions, such as the idea that Duparc owed his writer's block to tertiary syphilis, can now be junked. Tertiary syphilitics are not known for their ability to live to 84 while leading active public careers in every non-musical respect, as Duparc did. (He died in 1933.) But I shan't tell you here what my explanation is. You must read the book to find that out. I merely cite, at this point, Sherlock Holmes's aphorism: "Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth."

And that, in sum, is what I have aimed at. Franck's reputation has all too often been a nationalistic battleground; to adapt a famous P.G. Wodehouse witticism, jingo calls to jingo like mastodons bellowing across primeval swamps. The fact that Franck was born in Belgium intensified, rather than lessened, this syndrome. All I can claim to have done in my book is to have exploded some tenacious myths, filled in some blanks, and made fewer mistakes than my predecessors, in a field where no English-language biography—as opposed to the occasional monograph on specific Franck pieces—has appeared since 1973. I offer it to the world in reverence—a reverence which, I trust, stops well short of the hagiographic—and I should like to imagine that those who study it will thereby be moved to seek out more of Franck's music for themselves. They will not, I believe, regret this quest for a moment. ■