

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### **César Franck**

Born December 10, 1822, Liège, Belgium.

Died November 8, 1890, Paris, France.

### **Symphony in D Minor**

César Franck composed his Symphony in D minor between 1886 and 1888. The first performance was given on February 17, 1889, at the Paris Conservatory. The score calls for two flutes, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets and two cornets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-one minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Franck's D minor symphony were given at the Auditorium Theatre on February 2 and 3, 1900, with Theodore Thomas conducting.

César Franck matured as a composer very late in life, but he first won acclaim as a child prodigy. He was born in Liège, in the French-speaking Walloon district of the Netherlands; this heritage was reflected in the mixture of French and Flemish in his name. Early on he showed unusual musical talent, which his father, Nicolas-Joseph, set about nurturing, promoting, and finally exploiting. In 1830, his father enrolled him in the Liège Conservatory, and César made his first tour as a virtuoso pianist at the age of eleven, traveling throughout the newly formed kingdom of Belgium. (His specialty was playing variations on popular opera themes à la Liszt.)

Having outgrown the Liège Conservatory, César moved to Paris, with his entire family in tow, for advanced study in 1835. When the Paris Conservatory initially rejected his application because of his Belgian birth, Nicolas-Joseph sent for French naturalization papers. César was an exemplary student, and he walked off with many top prizes. He was always interested in composing, but his father discouraged him from entering the prestigious Prix de Rome competition in the hope that he would devote his life to concertizing. Nicolas-Joseph even pulled César out of school in 1842 to send him off on another recital tour, which was highlighted by a meeting with Franz Liszt, who encouraged him to keep composing.

Franck next won fame as an organist and a composer of organ music (his impassioned organ improvisations were greatly celebrated). Then, in middle age, he devoted himself to teaching, and, in the process, influencing an entire generation of French composers, including Vincent d'Indy and Ernest Chausson, who were nearly idolatrous in their devotion. Like Bruckner (with whom he has sometimes been compared), Franck came into his own as a composer late in his career. His major works—this Symphony in D minor, along with the violin sonata and the piano quintet, the Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra, and several symphonic poems—were all composed between 1880 and 1890, the last decade of his life.

The symphony is by far the best-known of Franck's orchestral works. Although Franck called it a symphony in response to his students, who quite literally demanded that he try his hand at the form, it is not so much a work in the tradition of Beethoven as a hybrid characteristic of Franck, combining elements of both symphony and symphonic poem in a thematically unified whole. Even in the late 1880s, the French musical public was put off by the unclassifiable nature of the piece. "The subscribers could make neither head nor tail of it," d'Indy wrote of the chilly reception at the premiere, "and the musical authorities were in much the same position."

Although we think of Franck as a one-symphony composer like his countryman Georges Bizet, he had in

fact written an earlier symphony when he was studying in Paris (it was even performed in 1841) that was plainly indebted to the Viennese classical tradition. The symphony he wrote in the mid-1880s, however, is the “real” Franck, inspired by the music of Liszt and Wagner, masters of thematic transformation, novel orchestral effects, and bold new forms. Franck also was influenced by the French orchestral tradition, although d'Indy, ever the loyal pupil, insisted that Franck completed his symphony before he knew Saint-Saëns's *Organ* Symphony, which was premiered in May 1886. But Franck's short-score sketch is dated September-October 1887, so his symphony may have been, at least in part, a reaction to Saint-Saëns's striking new work. We know that Franck finished the orchestration in August 1888, and that he also arranged the symphony for piano duet that year, obviously hoping it would be a piece people would want to play at home. He must have been as dismayed as his students when the work fell flat at the premiere.

The D minor symphony has three movements, a formal layout that Franck used in nearly all his major works (a fondness inherited by his students as well). The entire score is saturated with the main theme of the first movement, a three-note motif that echoes the famous questioning motto of Beethoven's last string quartet—he gave it the words, *Muss es sein?* (Must it be?)—which Liszt later transformed to unforgettable effect in his symphonic poem *Les préludes*. (It also is mirrored in Wagner's “fate” motif in *The Ring*.)

The Allegretto is both slow movement and scherzo rolled into one. Its main melody, unfolded at a leisurely pace, is introduced by the English horn, an unconventional choice that particularly offended one of the conservatory professors who attended the premiere: “Just mention a single symphony by Haydn or Beethoven with an English horn,” he demanded of d'Indy that night, failing to recall the quite fantastic symphony by Berlioz that makes magical (unforgettable, one would think) use of the instrument. Muted strings suggest the spirit of a scherzo, continuing and at the same time complementing what has gone before.

“The finale takes up all the themes again, as in [Beethoven's] Ninth,” Franck wrote. “They do not return as quotations, however; I have elaborated them and given them the role of new elements.” That is the essence of the entire score—music continuously revisited, transformed, and in the process reborn. “I risked a great deal,” Franck said of his new symphony, “but the next time I shall risk even more.” Perhaps chastened by the cool reception the work received, however, he wrote no more orchestral works. It was only after his death in 1890 that the D minor symphony began to be played more and more—a spectacular performance in Paris in 1893 may have marked the turning point—eventually becoming the most popular work in Franck's small but prime catalog.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

---

© Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may be reproduced only in their entirety and with express written permission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs subject to change without notice.