

CÉSAR FRANCK

Symphony in D minor

BORN: Liège, Belgium, December 10, 1822

DIED: Paris, November 8, 1890

WORK COMPOSED: 1888

WORLD PREMIERE: February 17, 1889, in Paris. Jules Garcin conducted the orchestra of the Société des concerts du Conservatoire.

The dark initial motif announced by the low strings during the symphony's opening moments becomes the principal theme of the ensuing *Allegro*, the main body of the first movement.

Beginning with Berlioz, French composers have loved the sound of the English horn. Franck features this instrument in the second movement, providing one of the most famous English horn solos in the orchestral literature.

The history of music is replete with child prodigies, performers or composers who attain exceptional prowess at an early age. Some of them — Mozart and Mendelssohn, for example — go on to rich artistic achievement. More often, the early brilliance fades and the youthful promise is unfulfilled. And on rare occasions, the two trajectories merge: the young savant struggles upon reaching adulthood but eventually recovers and blossoms into an important artist.

This was true of Rachmaninov, and it is even more so of César Franck. Having caused something of a sensation with his feats as a child prodigy, Franck soon settled into a rather staid and unremarkable career as a teacher and church organist. Although his improvisations at the organ were by all accounts phenomenal (Franz Liszt reportedly left one of these performances muttering comparisons between Franck and Bach), his early compositions were anything but that. From about 1870, however, Franck's music began to take on a greater boldness, clarity and depth of expression, and his fame now rests on those works completed during the last 12 years of his life. Chief among them is his Symphony in D minor.

This composition, Franck's only work in symphonic form, dates from 1888 and crowns the extraordinary creative metamorphosis of the composer's maturity. It also is among the most successful attempts to fuse the essentially Austro-German form and character of the symphony with traditional French concern for color and supple melodic lines. Significantly, Franck was not French but Belgian by birth, and although he spent most of his career in Paris, he was more receptive than most native Frenchmen to musical influences from outside France.

Franck enriches the composition with thematic cross-references within and between its three movements. (As we heard already, Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto follows the same practice.) Adhering to classical precepts of symphonic design, the composer prefaces the opening movement with an introduction in slow tempo. Here Franck foreshadows the principal theme of the fast-paced music that follows. A second important subject, one marked by a broad syncopated rhythmic figure, appears only well after the movement is under way.

The *Allegretto* that follows serves as both slow movement and scherzo. Its opening passage, a memorable English horn melody sung over an accompaniment of harp and string pizzicato, is perhaps the loveliest

idea in the symphony, as well as the most famous. Franck develops this theme further in the brisk, scherzo-like central section. The finale begins and concludes with a robust subject introduced by the cellos and bassoon, but this movement also contains conspicuous recollections of themes heard earlier in the symphony.

Scored for 2 flutes; 2 oboes and English horn; 2 clarinets and bass clarinet; 2 bassoons; 4 horns; 2 cornets and 2 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani; harp; strings.

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