Playing Franck in America: Perspectives on Authenticity

David Enlow

The famous portrait by Jeanne Rongier

The organ, Sainte-Clotilde (photo by David Enlow)

César Franck's organ works are part of many American organists' repertoire, on many college or conservatory repertory lists, and on many recital programs (though some pieces are neglected without any good reason). With all that familiarity comes a sense that we all 'know' Franck, that we have, as American organists, developed a school of playing his music that is sensible and 'authentic'—specifically, that we reproduce the sound and substance of the original expression as nearly through the original medium as possible. The trouble with this assertion is manifold: many organists do not know the totality of Franck's music, for to understand him as a composer requires an approach from *outside* the organ literature; also, no American organ will ever *be* a Cavaillé-Coll; and most American churches do not appear or sound Parisian in any sense. Authenticity of expression cannot be found naturally in the instruments or settings we have here; to have a truly authentic Franck performance means that more thought and sensitivity are required, and that our criteria for authenticity must be shaken, and revised.

Franck as early music?

It almost seems that we treat Franck as 'early music'; it is true that in the vanguard of early music performances the nineteenth century has been claimed as fertile ground for rediscovery (witness the period-instrument performances of works of Berlioz, Mendelssohn, *et al.*) but we largely think of nineteenth century (Romantic and post-Romantic) music as 'our own', a period of music that we understand readily and without being taught. There is no recording of the Franck Symphony on period instruments, no Violin Sonata, no A-Major Mass, and so on. Why then does Franck's distinctive Cavaillé-Coll Récit division at Ste. Clotilde receive the dubious courtship of labored imitation and inspire the wagging finger of organ teachers? "No 16-foot reed tone!" they thunder, sometimes even in Franck pieces written for the Palais du Trocadéro organ, which had a massive, complete, and more useful Récit.

The Franckian Récit

This case of the Récit particularly is one in which the approximation of the effect of Franck's home organ can be troublesome. The Ste. Clotilde Récit was not only interesting in its specification, but in its position, distant in the rear of the case. So when the doctrinaire approach insists on registering the cantilena passages in the A-Minor and E-Major Chorals with a solo comprising the foundations and both Swell reeds, one of which is perhaps a large English-style chorus trumpet in a Swell division much more prominently placed, with the accompaniment on dull Choir stops with the box closed, the effect of such strong reedy presence and ineffectual accompaniment is not the authentic expression of the original distant, harmonically rich voice accompanied by the flutes of a Positif only half-way as far up, and therefore very present to the listener in the nave (in how many performances is the very fine and elaborate counterpoint Franck wrote in the accompanying voices of the first and third Chorals never heard! [Example 1]). In cases when the Swell trumpet and oboe drawn together are both too colorless and too loud, there is nothing authentic about it (unless of course they are out of tune!).

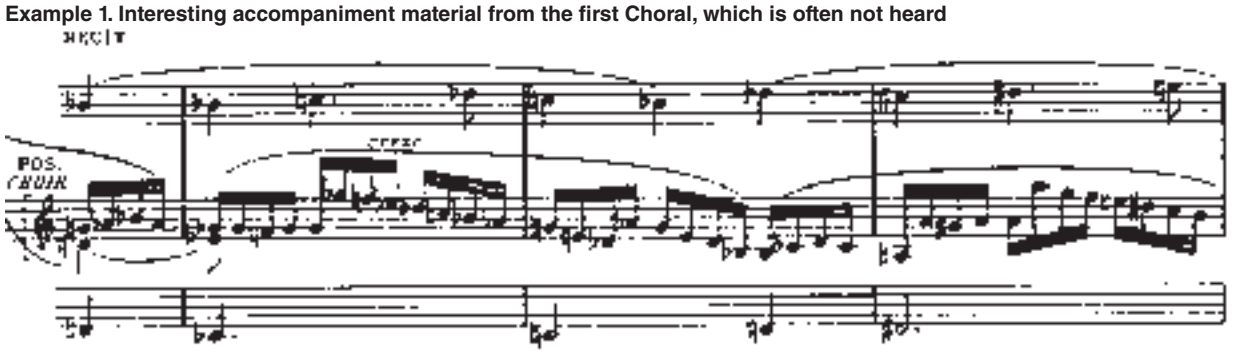
One solution, for example, at the American Symphonic organ of reasonable size is the Solo Corno di Bassetto 8′, or Swell Oboe 8′ if it is large enough, accompanied by the Choir Flûte Harmonique with or without the Bourdon 8′, or perhaps (if the solo is on the Swell) by an expressive Solo flute. This registration stays true to the proportion, character, and nature of the piece.

In passages when the full Récit is indicated, must we use no 16-foot stops? It is not as simple as 'Ste. Clotilde had no 16-foot stops, so we may not use them.' Is the *effect* brought across in all cases by the Swell without its Double Trumpet or Bassoon? Would Franck truly have left off the 16′ registers in *all* 'full Récit' registrations when performing his music at churches in which the Récit was large and complete? The answer cannot be categorical, at least not in the positive. To say that Franck would have emulated the Ste. Clotilde organ wherever he went is to belittle his intelligence. The parallel assertion is to say that Chopin's piano music must always be delicate because he was slight and frail, ignoring his famous remark to an apologizing student who broke a string during the *Polonaise Militaire*: "Young man, if I had your strength and could play that polonaise as it should be played, there would be no strings on the instrument when I finished!" Composers' original performances are not always the ones they hoped for, nor are they always to be emulated.

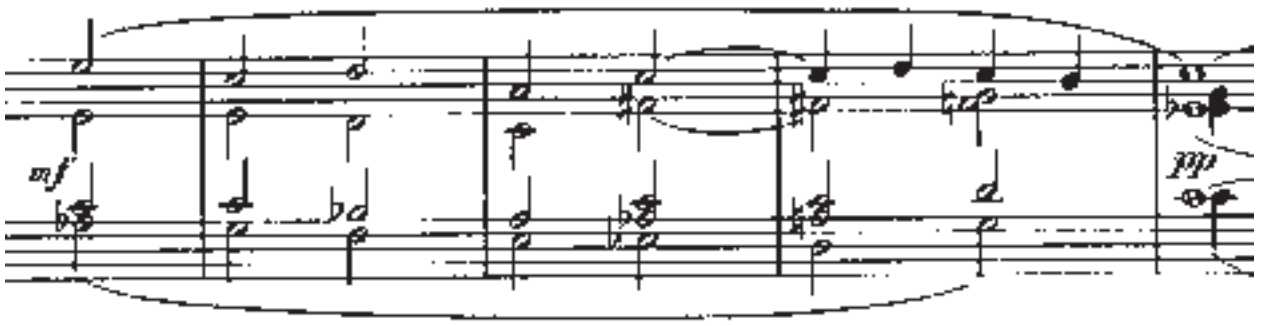
It is unique to Franck's organ works that one original instrument is taken into such intense consideration, which is partly legitimate, given how widely organs vary from place to place, even in the work of the same builder in the same period. However, the educated pianist knows that elements of piano construction were different in the 1860s than today, and yet this is not one of the first elements he or she considers when developing an interpretation. The pianist who sits down to learn the accompaniment to the Franck Violin Sonata thinks not on refinements to double-escapement, but rather on supporting the solo line, on finding the best tempo, on form, on Franck's intensely chromatic, constantly transforming harmony—on all the *real musical material* and not on the instrument the première was played upon, or the tempi of particular isolated performances.

This is not to say organists should not know everything there is to know about the Ste. Clotilde organ and French organs of Franck's day generally, rather that the application of that knowledge must be a thoughtful, dynamic one and that the consideration of the musical material must come before all complications of the instrument. Where the form, balance, harmony, or tempo is injured by imitating the restrictions or peculiarities

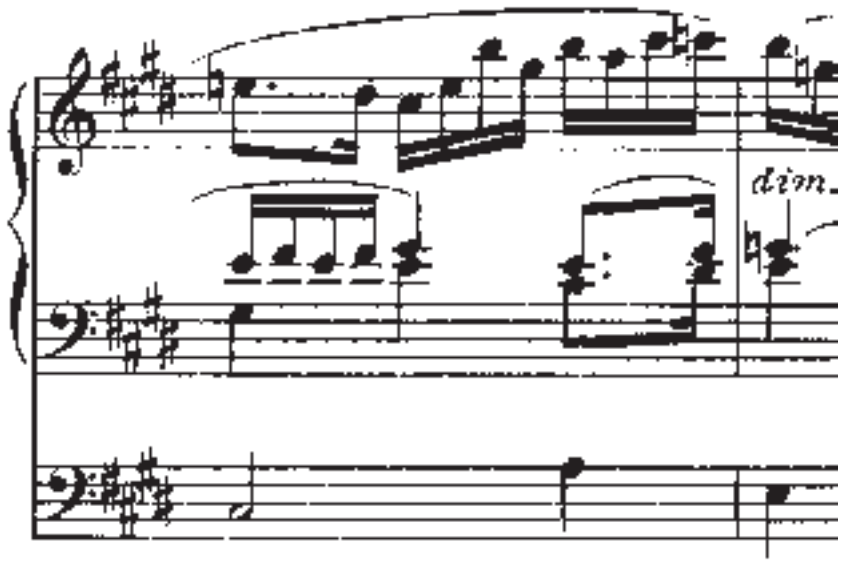
Example 1. Interesting accompaniment material from the first Choral, which is often not heard



Example 2. Abrupt dynamic indications in the third Choral



Example 3. The highest range of the cantilena in the first Choral, often glossed over



Franck's tomb, with the bronze roundel by Rodin of 1891

of the original instrument, those injuries must be overcome. Our situation nowadays is that they are not overcome, but almost reveled in.

Appropriate venues—and phrasing

There is another context in which many performers seem not to consider the circumstances of the origin of the Franck works at all: in the choice of when and where they should be performed, and which pieces. There is an air of unfortunate spectacle when the A-Minor Choral is played in a church or hall with no acoustical ambiance, on an organ of around twenty ranks. It would challenge the greatest interpreter to bring the drama and fire of the piece across in those circumstances. Plaintively, the question from the resident musician comes, "Am I never to play the A-Minor Choral on my church organ?" And the gentle but firm answer is that the instrument is not suited to it, and the wise, judicious musician will play instead the *Prelude, Fugue et Variation*, the *Fantaisie in C*, or perhaps the *Prière* on such an organ, and save the Chorals for instruments and settings which are equal to their demands.

More importantly still, consideration of phrases based on their melodic and harmonic content, and their position in the larger form, is often lacking in performances of the Franck works. It is not enough to follow the dynamic indications in the Chorals, for example; they are very late works, and had not the same opportunity for revision and consideration before being published that others had. (The very odd swell action called for in the chorale statements of the A-Minor Choral can be overridden and replaced, with good justification [Example 2].) It is not thoughtful enough to play the repeated chords in the *Pièce Héroïque* half-value as Marcel Dupré might have indicated for a gallery organ in a church

The Basilique Sainte-Clotilde from a contemporary postcard

with eight seconds' reverberation time, but their effect in the given room at the given tempo must be considered when determining how long they should be. Another common transgression of the nature of the music is in the cantilena sections of the first and third Chorals, and the C-Major Fantasy. In these, the problem is that they are played without any consideration of range. They are such vocal lines that a thorough examination of the natural high and low points of each phrase (and high and low points of whole sections) is vital (Example 3).

As it is with any revival of a work which belongs to an age now past, the truly authentic performance of Franck is the one which brings the essential substance of his expression to life. The rote learning and mimicry of stop combinations is no better in Franck than it is in the music of other great composers, and it may be worse. Rather, the ability to combine under the hands of one performer the intimate lyricism of the Violin Sonata with the overwhelming dramatic arc of the Symphony is one the organist is fortunate to possess. The organist must take up that mantle; the music demands no less. ■

David Enlow is organist and choirmaster of the Church of the Resurrection in New York, where he directs a professional choir. He is a member of the organ faculty of the Juilliard School in New York and sub-dean of the New York City AGO chapter. Enlow holds both an undergraduate and a master's degree from the Juilliard School, where he studied with John Weaver and Paul Jacobs. He also studied at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia and with John Tuttle in Toronto. He performs under the management of Phillip Truckenbrod Concert Artists.

Enlow is a Fellow of the American Guild of Organists, where he won the S. Lewis Elmer Prize, and an Associate of the Royal Canadian College of Organists, where he won the Barker Prize. He has won several national performance competition first prizes, including those of the Arthur Poister Competition and the Albert Schweitzer Organ Festival USA.

His choir at the Church of the Resurrection performs over fifty Mass settings each season, often with orchestra. While in Philadelphia he was sub-organist of St. Clement's Church, and an assistant at the Wanamaker Grand Court Organ. Visit <www.davidenlow.com> for a concert calendar, sound files, and more.