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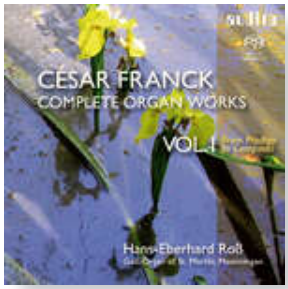

César Franck: Complete Organ Works Vol. I

aud 91.518

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Take the phone off the hook and throw out the phone – you won't want to be disturbed for the next two and a half hours. Why? Because this is an organ collection like no other, magnificently played on the new Goll instrument at St Martin, Memmingen. And if you think you know your Franck be prepared for a surprise – these performances are nothing short of revelatory.

This hybrid CD/SACD set is the first in Audite's three-volume survey of Franck's œuvre for organ, played by Hans-Eberhard Ross. A graduate of the Hochschule für Musik in Würzburg and now music director of St Martin, Ross has at his disposal the splendid Goll organ inaugurated in 1998. The Audite website has some interesting video clips on the instrument and its construction, which will surely be of interest to organ buffs.

As Martin Weyer points out in his detailed liner-notes 'historically informed performance practice' or HIPP – already familiar in orchestral and instrumental repertoire – has a parallel in organ music. In this case the Goll instrument was chosen because it has similar qualities to the Cavaillé-Coll organs Franck would have known, especially that of his last post at the Basilica Sainte Clotilde.

Franck devotees will know that he came to the organ relatively late in life and this collection begins with the Pièce en mi bémol, his earliest work for the instrument. At the time he was organist at the not very prestigious Notre Dame de Lorette, whose older Cavaillé-Coll probably accounts for this work's limited colour palette. That said one is immediately struck by the heroic grandeur at the start and finish of the piece but even more so by the delicately-wrought writing in between.

The real star throughout is the Goll organ, which is simply astonishing in its purity and accuracy of tone, qualities the Audite engineers have captured to perfection. No audible clanks and wheezes, dodgy reeds or excessive reverberation here; indeed, this is one of the most satisfying organ discs I've heard in years. In its basic CD form it's a fine recording, full and clear, but in SACD the music sounds even more clean-limbed and well articulated, the quieter passages luminously beautiful.

The Pièce pour Grand Orgue and the G minor Andantino have a new-found rhythmic vitality that Ross conveys with considerable grace and skill. In the former that marvellous section beginning at 2:10 where the notes seem to hang suspended above a deep, steady pedal, not to mention the carillon-like figures at 6:40, are a joy to hear. And in the Andantino Ross adds remarkable poise and charm to his growing list of accomplishments. Surely this music has never sounded so airy and buoyant, the rhythms so naturally sprung? And have the final moments ever seemed so like a lingering farewell? A miraculous little piece, so perfectly shaped and characterised.

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The gentle introduction to the C major Fantaisie, played here in the first of three versions, is another of those moments when it seems a veil has been lifted from the music, such is the startling realism of the recording. All three versions are included in this set but I much prefer the lighter, more 'hear through' quality of the first; that said the later versions retain much of the original's magical melodies.

Franck's pupil Louis Vierne arranged the Cinq Pièces – written for harmonium – yet the composer's distinctive style is left intact. Indeed, apart from what Weyer describes as a few 'careful alterations' all Vierne needed to do was transcribe the music from two staves to three. And even though all the movements are essentially Andantes such is the range and shade of Franck's colour palette that this never feels like too much of a good thing.

The remaining pieces on disc one – the brief little Offertoire in A major and the Quasi Marcia – are very similar; the first is light and ethereal and, despite its title, the second sounds even more so. The latter may be a transcription but Franck's pealing melodies are just captivating, the whole piece a model of restraint and elegance.

This collection is subtitled 'From Prodigy to Composer' and disc two contains works that date from Franck's tenure at Sainte Clotilde. It was an important appointment and one he was to hold until his death in 1890. The third (1868) version of the C major Fantaisie shows just how much Franck the composer had matured in two decades. Whichever version one might prefer they all share a limpid beauty and, at times, an understated majesty that's hard to resist. Certainly the pedals of the Goll organ won't shake the rafters but they do have thrilling weight and authority.

The Grande Pièce Symphonique is often trotted out in organ collections but I can't remember it sounding quite so integrated or the harmonies so dark and velvety. Certainly there is an extra breadth and weight to the writing compared with Franck's earlier works, and while there is less of that high loveliness Ross does manage to capture the score's air of Gallic sophistication. As always the acoustic is a real advantage, with complex musical textures – so often blurred or bloated – sounding wonderfully crisp and coherent.

It's easy to forget that Bach's organ works – published in 1844 – were still a novelty, yet Franck's Prélude, Fugue et Variation, with its endless stream of melodies above a stern but gentle bass line, is every bit as rewarding as Bach's. A quick CD/SACD comparison at this point reveals extra bloom and nuance in the treble, with a sense of unlimited space above and around the notes. A reminder, if one were needed, of the format's many sonic advantages.

The Op. 19 Pastorale comes across as one of the most delectable pieces on this extraordinary set. I simply cannot imagine this diaphanous score shaped with more finesse than here. Perhaps one could go so far as to characterise this as faerie music à la Franck, such is its lightness and charm.

Prière, dedicated to the composer's erstwhile teacher François Benoist (1794-1878), isn't particularly liturgical but it does have an air of solemnity to it. It may even seem a little dour after the playful Pastorale but the composer's irrepressible lyricism is never too far away – just listen to that sublime tune that materialises at 5:52.

Scholarly, grave, even a little dry, Prière gives way to the extrovert Op. 21. As the finale to the Six Pièces and the set this shows Franck at his most Lisztian. The music veritably thunders and rolls around the church in a spectacular display of music-making. But even in such bravura pieces Ross retains a remarkable

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consistency of approach, favouring a subtle, self-effacing style of playing that suits this music so well.

This isn't the first time the fabulous Goll organ has been committed to disc; Ross has recorded a mixed programme for IFO (IFO45), Ulfert Smidt has taped some Franck and Langlais for MDG (MDG 90614) and Jane Parker Smith plays an eclectic mix of pieces for Avie (AVI-34). I have yet to these but I'd be very surprised if they come even close to the sonic and musical splendour of this Audite release.

And of course there are two more instalments in this series – Audite 91.519 and 91.520 – which, if Volume I is anything to go by, must make this the finest and most satisfying survey now before the public. One hesitates to use the word 'great' but in this case nothing else will do.

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