



César FRANCK

Symphonic Variations, M. 46

César-Auguste-Jean-Guillaume-Hubert Franck (10 December 1822 – 8 November 1890) was a composer, pianist, organist, and music teacher who worked in Paris during his adult life. He was born at Liège, in what is now Belgium. He gave his first concerts there in 1834 and studied privately in Paris from 1835, where his teachers included Anton Reicha. After a brief return to Belgium, and a disastrous reception to an early oratorio *Ruth*, he moved to Paris, where he married and embarked on a career as teacher and organist. He gained a reputation as a formidable improviser, and travelled widely in France to demonstrate new instruments built by Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. In 1858 he became organist at Sainte-Clotilde, a position he retained for the rest of his life. He became professor at the Paris Conservatoire in 1872; he took French nationality, a requirement of the appointment. His pupils included Vincent d'Indy, Ernest Chausson, Louis Vierne, Charles Tournemire, Guillaume Lekeu and Henri Duparc. After acquiring the professorship Franck wrote several pieces that have entered the standard classical repertoire, including symphonic, chamber, and keyboard works.

The *Symphonic Variations* (*Variations symphoniques*), M. 46, is a work for piano and orchestra written in 1885 by César Franck. It has been described as "one of Franck's tightest and most finished works", "a superb blending of piano and orchestra", and "a flawless work and as near perfection as a human composer can hope to get in a work of this nature". It is a fine example of Franck's use of cyclic unity, with one theme growing into various others. The piano and orchestra share equally in the continuous evolution of ideas.

While there is no doubt that it demonstrates Franck's mastery of variation form, the overall structure of the *Symphonic Variations* has been a matter of debate. Donald Tovey called it "a finely and freely organized fantasy, with an important episode in variation form". It has three broad parts, played without a break: introduction, theme and variations, and finale. These parts resemble the fast-slow-fast layout of a three-movement concerto. While the whole piece is thematically unified, the proper variations occupy only the central third of the work. The introduction has reminded many commentators of the theme of the slow movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 in G.

The entire work is based on two themes. The first part begins in the home key of F minor with different elements of the themes played by the orchestra and the piano. Soon both themes get a proper statement, the first (ascending) in A major by the orchestra the second (descending) in C minor by the piano. A transitional section with orchestra and piano interplay lead to the second part of the work.

It is this second part that contains the variations. The main theme is announced by the piano, the variations follow. Their number is debated, ranging from six to fifteen, depending on how one counts: brief variations having similar character can be analyzed as just sections of longer and more complex variations.

The last variation is marked *Molto più lento*. It changes the mode from minor to major. After this, the music returns to minor for a new transitional episode, in which the descending theme reappears played by the strings with a mysterious piano accompaniment.

The work ends with a brilliant final in the parallel major key. It is a compact sonata-form movement, complete with first (the descending theme) and second (the ascending theme) subjects, development, and recapitulation.