



César FRANCK

Variations Symphoniques

César Franck (10 December 1822 – 8 November 1890) was a French Romantic composer, pianist, organist, and music teacher born in modern-day Belgium. He was born in Liège (which at the time of his birth was part of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands). 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 of 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 musical improviser, and travelled widely within France to demonstrate new instruments built by Aristide Cavallé-Coll. In 1858, he became organist at the Basilica of St. Clotilde, Paris, 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. After acquiring the professorship, Franck wrote several pieces that have entered the standard classical repertoire, including symphonic, chamber, and keyboard works for pipe organ and piano. As a teacher and composer, he had a vast following of composers and other musicians. His pupils included Ernest Chausson, Vincent d'Indy, Henri Duparc, Guillaume Lekeu, Albert Renaud, Charles Tournemire and Louis Vierne.

Franck's **Symphonic Variations** (*Variations symphoniques*), M. 46, is a work for piano and orchestra written in 1885. 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 development of ideas. The work is in F# minor (with the last movement in F# major). Duration in performance is about fifteen minutes, and the instrumentation is piano solo and orchestra: pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons; four horns; two trumpets; timpani; and strings. (*History*) The work was dedicated to Louis Diémer, who on 15 March 1885 had premiered *Les Djinnns*, a symphonic poem for piano and orchestra that brought Franck one of his rare critical successes. He promised to reward Diémer with "a little something", and the similarly scored *Symphonic Variations* was the result. Franck started work in the summer of 1885, and completed the piece on 12 December. (*Premiere*) The premiere on 1 May 1886, at the annual orchestral concert of the Société Nationale de Musique, went almost unnoticed. The soloist was Diémer, and the composer conducted. The second performance was not until 30 January 1887, at a concert devoted entirely to Franck under the conductor Jules Pasdeloup, with Diémer again as soloist. It still failed to impress. Before and after Franck's death, however, his works were championed by his students, including Vincent d'Indy, Henri Duparc, Paul Dukas, and Ernest Chausson; and the *Symphonic Variations* soon entered the repertoire of major pianists. It was mainly through the *Symphony in D minor* and the *Symphonic Variations* that Franck became posthumously famous. The work is now regularly performed, and has been recorded many times. It was later arranged for two pianos, four hands. (*Structure*) 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. (*Arrangements*) In 1946 the choreographer Frederick Ashton used Franck's work for a ballet, also called *Symphonic Variations*. Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Fantasia* (quasi variazione) on the Old 104th Psalm Tune for piano, chorus, and orchestra (1949) has some similarities to the *Symphonic variations*, but it lacks Franck's adherence to classical variation form.