



# César Franck

**John Challenger**  
plays the 1876  
Father Willis organ of  
Salisbury Cathedral

## CÉSAR FRANCK 1822–90

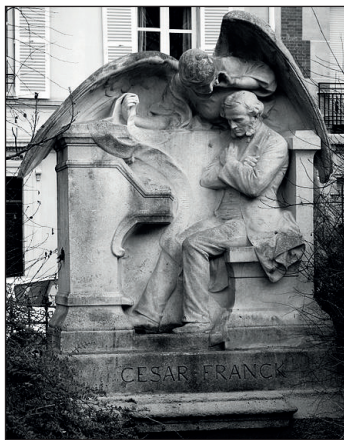
- |                                       |  |       |
|---------------------------------------|--|-------|
| 1                                     | <b>Pièce héroïque</b><br>No 3, Trois Pièces pour le grand orgue, 1878/pub. 1883          | 8:44  |
| 2                                     | <b>Prélude, Fugue et Variation Op. 18</b><br>No 3, Six Pièces d'orgue, c. 1862/pub. 1868 | 10:15 |
| 3                                     | <b>Cantabile</b><br>No 2, Trois Pièces pour le grand orgue, 1878/pub. 1883               | 6:30  |
| <b>Trois Chorals pour Grand Orgue</b> |  |       |
| 4                                     | I. Mi majeur/E major<br>August 1890/pub. 1891  | 16:04 |
| 5                                     | II. Si mineur/B minor<br>September 1890/pub. 1891  | 14:54 |
| 6                                     | III. La mineur/A minor<br>September 1890/pub. 1891                                       | 12:53 |

Total timings: 69:23

## JOHN CHALLENGER organ

Recorded in Salisbury Cathedral on 30 & 31 January and 1 February 2018  
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In 1904 a sculpture was dedicated in the garden outside the Basilique Ste-Clothilde, Paris. The work, by Alfred Lenoir, is dedicated to César Franck, and it casts the composer seated at the organ under the wings of a guardian angel, who whispers inspiration to the mortal composer. Such imagery will often be seen as a memento of Franck's most famous work, *Panis Angelicus*, but the associations are surely greater. The Corpus Christi hymn 'Sacris Solemniis' by St Thomas

Aquinas, from which the stanza 'Panis Angelicus' is drawn, concludes with a bidding that we may glimpse the light of heaven, and church musicians down the ages have sought to enhance this vision. The early-twentieth-century Organist of Notre-Dame, Louis Vierne, recalled the overwhelming effect of hearing Franck's improvisations for the first time in 1881, when he visited the Basilique Ste-Clothilde as an eleven-year-old boy:

I could not hold back my tears. I knew nothing; I understood nothing; but my natural instinct was violently shaken by this expressive music echoing through my every pore.

Traditional angelic imagery represents a meeting of two worlds: that of explained earth and unexplained heaven, of things visible and invisible. Such imagery implies transcendence, and such forms of expression as architecture, painting, hymnody or, indeed, improvisation may result in an effect greater than their component parts. Vierne described the moment in further detail:

[Franck] played a mysterious prelude, quite unlike any I had heard at Lille; I was bowled over and became almost ecstatic. There was more to come at the Offertoire, where

the master had more time; the theme so unfamiliar, yet so attractive, such rich harmonies, such subtle figurations, and a pervasive intensity that astounded me. I revelled in such delights and wished they would never end. We listened to the *Sor-tie* right up to the last note; it was a long paraphrase on the *Ite missa est*, full of lyrical flights of fancy that conjured up for me heavenly visions of processions of angels chanting 'Hosanna'.

This is far from the only account of Franck's legendary improvisations at Ste-Clotilde, Paris, where he played the organ from 1857 until his death in 1890, and though affecting, it fails to represent the actuality of Franck's often insipid reception as a composer *outside* the organ loft, *outside* ecclesiastical parameters. The respect and admiration earned within his circle of friends ran somewhat against the mainstream musical thought of the time: his orchestral symphony of 1888 was proclaimed by Charles Gounod (albeit sanctimoniously) as 'the affirmation of incompetence pushed to dogmatic lengths'. To contemporary, nationalistic critics, the work was a carriage-crash of German-symphonic, cyclic, and improvisatory elements—the implication being,

not altogether benevolently, that it was the work of an *organist*. For Franck was nothing if not a melodist: this symphony's exquisite themes and the haunting beauty of the *Cor Anglais* melody (the use of which, as a solo instrument, was taboo) were lost on the critics, and they failed to appreciate the immense fulfilment in the return of longed-for motivic material, its development and its conclusion.

The organ upon which Franck was improvising, and which Vienne heard on that transformative day so vividly recounted in 1881, was the instrument completed in 1859 by the French organ-builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll for the new church of Ste-Clotilde. Franck—a born Belgian and adopted Parisian—was the first custodian of this instrument, which appeared relatively early in a lifetime of astonishing productivity for Cavaillé-Coll; indeed, Franck may have had some influence on its design. Cavaillé-Coll's new 'orchestral' instruments rose in the wake of the previous century's Revolutionary destruction. Charles-Marie Widor attributed the evolution of the new 'orchestral' school, which was born with Franck, to the 'special, magical sound' of Cavaillé-Coll's instruments, and indeed, their sound is remarkable. Cavaillé-Coll came to view

Franck as the perfect medium for his creations, and vice versa. The expressive powers of the instrument at Ste-Clotilde were remarked upon by André Fleury:

Then there was that swell box, so sensitive. It was incredibly effective. When it was shut, you could barely hear a thing, and when it was opened, it suddenly made its presence known.

Such descriptions illuminate our understanding of the colours at Franck's disposal: in particular he was fond of the other-worldly effect created by the distant, tremulous *Voix Humaine* stop, a sound of extreme tenderness on these instruments, reserved for moments of particular thematic poignance.

A major feature of these new instruments was the ventil system developed by Cavallé-Coll, whereby certain stops placed on a separate wind-chest (mutations, mixtures and chorus reeds) could be drawn in advance, but remained silent until activated via a combination pedal; until this device was deployed, only the foundations and soft reeds would sound when drawn. This made it possible, for the first time, for the organist to manage a crescendo or decrescendo layer by

layer, facilitating lengthy improvisations with thematic variation, cross-referencing and super-imposition. (We see this same thematic use in Franck's orchestral symphony, hence the word 'cyclic' being apt.)

Franck's first substantial organ compositions manifested themselves in his collection of *Six Pièces d'orgue*, published in 1868. The significance of this publication, and its impact upon the development of the genre, is great. Together these pieces display the inventiveness of the symphonic poems of Franz Liszt, Felix Mendelssohn's organ sonatas (1844–5) and Liszt's Fantasy and Fugue on 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam' (1850). Yet, unlike the frivolous offerings of Franck's Parisian contemporaries, this music stirred, for the first time, a profound form of expression through the medium of Cavallé-Coll's instruments. It is from the *Six Pièces* that the haunting **Prélude, Fugue et Variation** is taken (track 2), the Salisbury *Hautbois* stop matching the exquisite melody so compellingly. The publication of a set of *Trois Pièces* followed in 1883; from this collection, the dramatic **Pièce Heroïque** and expressive **Cantabile** are drawn (tracks 1 & 3). Franck's towering final achievement, the **Trois Chorals pour Grand Orgue**

(tracks 4–6), appeared in 1890, immediately prior to his death. These gigantic works marry Franck's beloved cyclic form with chorale-like melodies, which incorporation has huge historical precedent, most notably in the works of Bach. Incidentally, Franck's second Choral—a passacaglia—is surely a nod towards Bach's own *Pasacaglia* (BWV 582). Franck managed to complete the composition of these three extraordinary works prior to his death, though he did not have time to complete the registrations.

Today the performer must make decisions in the light of some discrepancies regarding accidentals, slurs, tempi, registrations, and, in the case of the *Pièce Heroïque*, a surviving alternative ending: I have taken each decision on a case-by-case basis. Typically for the genre, Franck left specific instructions regarding registration, though again, these are not complete in the *Trois Chorals*. A balance needs to be found, therefore, between respecting the colours believed to be specified by him, having an understanding of French registrational practice, and being led by the particular qualities of the instrument on which the music is to be performed. Tonally and structurally, the organ of Salis-

bury Cathedral has been modified very little since its completion; it is a fine example of the work of the Victorian organ builder Henry Willis, and it retains the scale and scope of its 1876 design. The Cathedral is a vast space, and yet this relatively small instrument is capable of accompanying liturgy on a grand scale. The organ is divided between two cases, the 32ft pipes being located in the north transept. Listening from the spire crossing, these constituent parts are brought together like a great symphony orchestra, and one gets a sense of the instrument as a whole; this has influenced the placing of microphones on this recording.

The situation of Salisbury's instrument is rather different from Franck's at Ste-Clotilde, it is true: rather than thundering forth from the west gallery *à la française*, the Salisbury organ is located in the quire, its primary purpose being to accompany a choir. The buildings which house these two great instruments represent different ages, and are contrasting in Gothic flavour too: Salisbury is Early English, Ste-Clotilde is Revival French. To a greater extent than his peers, however, Henry Willis aspired to the ideals of Cavallé-Coll, and whilst many of Willis's instruments have been

the subject of changing fashion, Salisbury's organ retains its blazing chorus reeds, exquisite oboes and softer reeds, stringy diapasons, and harmonic flutes; the Swell reeds, in particular, possess a French, rather than an English, accent. The instrument offers seemingly endless variety in the orchestration of Franck's music, whether in the mixing of a *tutti*, the blending of the many foundation stops, or the array of solo colours, and much of this derives from Cavallé-Coll's philosophy. Once the colours are chosen, the music flows freely.

After Willis had completed Salisbury's instrument, the Oxford music professor Sir Frederick Ouseley wrote to the then Cathedral Organist, John Richardson: 'I honestly believe that you have the finest church organ in the world—certainly the best in England, and I heartily congratulate you on the same.' A strong statement, but the compelling power of this instrument remains: its elevation and the building's upward thrust reinforce the Romantic ideal that such sounds emerge from heaven. The works on this disc were not written for worship; yet in such surroundings they may afford the glimpse of a greater world. Vierne surely believed

this. In 1924, he described Franck's third Choral in the following words:

Franck's genius never reached a greater height. Here inspiration takes on a hitherto unknown grandeur and serenity, whose majestic architectural proportions reveal the transcendent musician.

**John Challenger**  
All Souls 2018









*'There is nothing I can say that can begin to convey the technical brilliance, artistry, musicality and seemingly effortless organ management of John Challenger. Flawless! Phenomenal!'* (Organists' Review, 2015)

Organist and conductor John Challenger has been Assistant Director of Music at Salisbury Cathedral since 2012, where he was appointed at the age of 23. A Fellow of the Royal College of Organists, he was taught the organ by Frédéric Blanc, David Briggs, Jeremy Filsell, Mark Williams, and the late David Sanger.

In 2015 he released his début solo CD on the organ of Salisbury Cathedral, featuring transcriptions of orchestral works by Edward Elgar. The recording was awarded five stars by Choir & Organ Magazine, and received enthusiastic reviews in the American Record Review, Hi-Fi Plus, Organists' Review, and on Classic FM, while Cathedral Music Magazine commented that 'it would be difficult to imagine a more auspicious début CD'.

In early 2017, he acted as Director of Music of St John's College, Cambridge (where he had been Organ Scholar), during the sabbatical of the College's Director of Music, Andrew Nethsingha.



During this period the world-famous choir's performances were praised in Gramophone Magazine, and the choir broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

Recent engagements have included directing Salisbury Musical Society and Salisbury Symphony Orchestra in Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*, and appearing as organist for 'Organ Vespers'—a sequence of organ cycles by Olivier Messiaen, performed in new liturgical contexts at Salisbury Cathedral.

🐦 @johnorganist

## SALISBURY CATHEDRAL ORGAN

For almost 800 years the Cathedral at New Sarum has stood as an awe-inspiring symbol of the presence of God, which it has sought to proclaim through exceptional liturgy. It is likely, therefore, that the Cathedral was furnished with a fine organ from the earliest days, the first recorded reference being 1480. The present instrument was completed by 'Father' Henry Willis in 1876–7. A gift of Miss Chafyn Grove, it cost £3,500 to build, and the casework and blowing apparatus an additional £2,000. The console was originally located in a loft within the north organ case. In 1934, Henry Willis III undertook an extensive rebuild of the instrument. By good fortune, the Cathedral's organist, Sir Walter Alcock, demanded that very few tonal alterations be made, and indeed no pipes were removed from the building during the rebuild. A few carefully-chosen additions and transfers of stops were made to enhance the original specification, and the instrument received its electro-pneumatic console, installed in a new loft on the south side. Further minor renovations took place in 1969, 1978, 1993 and

2006, and aside from small changes of layout, mechanics and specification, the organ remains as Willis left it in 1876–7. The Great and Swell choruses are still cone-tuned, and the organ retains its original sharp pitch. The organ is divided on either side of the quire. The Swell and Choir divisions are located on the south side, and the Great and Solo on the north. The Pedal department is dispersed either side of the instrument, and some 32ft pipes are located in the north transept. This recording is one of the last to be made before a major restoration of the organ by Harrison & Harrison of Durham in 2019, and hence some wind leakage and action noise may be audible at times. Proceeds from the sales of this recording will help support the music at Salisbury Cathedral. To learn more about the work we do to preserve our rich musical heritage visit [salisburycathedral.org.uk/worship-music](https://salisburycathedral.org.uk/worship-music).





**Great** Double Open Diapason 16 / Open Diapason I 8 / Open Diapason II 8 / Claribel Flute 8 / Stopped Diapason 8 / Principal I 4 / Principal II 4 / Flûte Couverte 4 / Twelfth 2 $\frac{2}{3}$  / Fifteenth 2 / Mixture IV / Trombone 16 / Trumpet 8 / Clarion 4

**Swell** Contra Gamba 16 / Open Diapason 8 / Lieblich Gedackt 8 / Viola-da-Gamba 8 / Vox Angelica 8 / Octave 4 / Flûte Harmonique 4 / Super Octave 2 / Mixture III / Vox Humana 8 / Hautboy 8 / Contra Fagotto 16 / Trompette 8 / Clarion 4 / Tremolo

**Choir** Lieblich Gedackt 16 / Open Diapason 8 / Flûte Harmonique 8 / Lieblich Gedackt 8 / Salicional 8 / Gemshorn 4 / Flûte Harmonique 4 / Lieblich Gedackt 4 / Nazard 2 $\frac{2}{3}$  / Flageolet 2 / Tierce 1 $\frac{1}{3}$  / Trumpet 8 / Tremolo

**Solo** Violoncello 8 / 'Cello Celestes 8 / Flûte Harmonique 8 / Flûte Harmonique 4 / Cor Anglais 16 / Clarinet 8 / Orchestral Oboe 8 / Tremolo / Tuba 8 / Tuba Clarion 4

**Pedal** Double Open Diapason 32 / Open Bass 16 / Open Diapason I 16 / Open Diapason II 16 / Violone 16 / Lieblich Gedackt (Ch) 16 / Bourdon 16 / Octave 8 / Viola 8 / Flute 8 / Octave Viola 4 / Octave Flute 4 / Mixture IV / Contra Posaune 32 / Ophicleide 16 / Clarion 8

**Couplers** Sw to Gt / Sw 4 to Gt / Sw 16 to Gt / Ch 4 to Gt / Ch 16 to Gt / So to Gt / So 4 to Gt / So 16 to Gt / So to Sw / Sw 4 / Sw 16 / Sw Unis Off / Sw to Ch / Sw 4 to Ch / Sw 16 to Ch / So to Ch / So 4 to Ch / Gt Reeds on Ch / Ch 4 / Ch 16 / Ch Unis Off / Gt to So / So 4 / So 16 / So Unis Off / Gt to Ped / Sw to Ped / Sw 4 to Ped / Ch to Ped / Ch 4 to Ped / So to Ped / So 4 to Ped

