

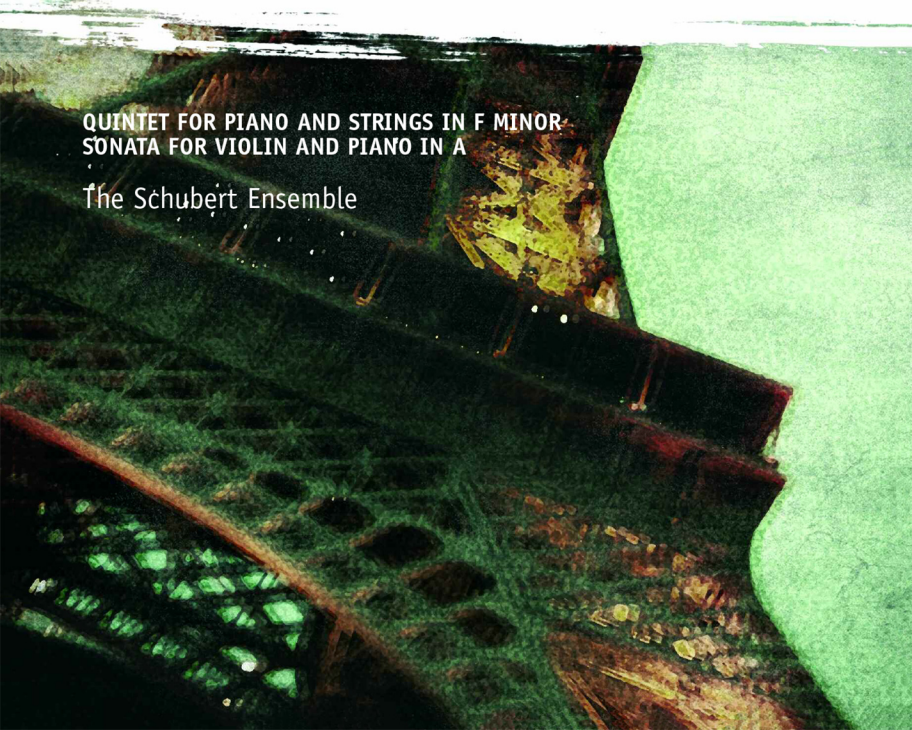


CHAMPS HILL  
RECORDS

# César Franck

QUINTET FOR PIANO AND STRINGS IN F MINOR  
SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO IN A

The Schubert Ensemble



## CÉSAR FRANCK (1822-1890)

### QUINTET FOR PIANO AND STRINGS IN F MINOR (1878-1879)

1. *i Molto moderato quasi lento – Allegro* 16:00
2. *ii Lento, con molto sentimento* 10.30
3. *iii Allegro non troppo, ma con fuoco* 9.40

### SONATA FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO IN A (1866) \*

4. *i Allegretto ben moderato* 6.27
5. *ii Allegro* 8.17
6. *iii Recitativo – Fantasia* 7.42
7. *iv Allegretto poco mosso* 6.41

Total time: 65.17

The  
**Schubert**  
ensemble

Simon Blendis ~ *violin* \*  
Jan Peter Schmolk ~ *violin*  
Douglas Paterson ~ *viola*  
Jane Salmon ~ *cello*  
William Howard ~ *piano* \*

French music before the First World War, noted Ravel, was a severely partisan, factional phenomenon, divided broadly into two opposing schools. 'The Old comprises the disciples of César Franck [d'Indy, the Schola Cantorumites, Duparc, Dukas], and Claude Debussy may justly be considered the principal initiator of the New' (*Cahiers d'aujourd'hui*, February 1913). Notwithstanding, artistic crossover and the open admiration of one for the other, wasn't discouraged – witness Debussy in the Easter issue of *Gil Blas* (13 April 1903): 'In Franck we find a real devotion to music. We must take it or leave it. Nothing in the world could have made him alter any part he considered right and necessary, however long it may have been – we just have to sit through it [...] Franck is united with other great musicians, those to whom every sound had an exact meaning taken in its context: each sound is used in a precise way, and it asks nothing but to be taken for what it is. This is exactly why he is so different from Wagner, who is uniquely beautiful but impure and seductive. César Franck serves music without any glory. What he takes from life, he puts back into art with modesty that is almost selfless.'

Master of the organ loft (Ste Clotilde, Paris), artist of 'truth and luminous serenity', messenger of 'spiritual [light], excluding the least touch of violent colour' (d'Indy's 'gospel', 1906), 'enamoured of gentleness and consolation; (Camille Maclair, *La Religion de la Musique*, 1909), was the image of Franck nurtured by his disciples. The emotions of the *Piano Quintet* and *Violin Sonata*, the eroticism of *Psyché*, the high peaks of the *D minor Symphony*, tell a different story, however, posing an earthier man, less chaste, freed of starch and wing-collar. Central to this perspective was a woman. Not his dutifully religious consort, Félicité (married in 1848), but a decorously rampant student twenty-five years his junior, Augusta Holmès (who had entered his organ classes at the Conservatoire in 1875). An 'impure and seductive' Wagnerite of Irish/Scottish descent, this imperious, politically-charged mademoiselle, we're told by Saint-Saëns' biographer James Harding (1965), was possessed of 'bold, beautiful features, abundant golden

hair, and handsome breasts of which she was justifiably proud'. 'Très décolletée', Rimsky-Korsakov could not help but notice at the 1889 Paris Exposition. Muse and mistress to an era, she bewitched Franck to the end of his life (he dedicated the third of his organ *Chorals* to her in 1890). And repeatedly turned down marriage proposals from Saint-Saëns, who was later to write: 'We were all in love with her. Literary men, painters, musicians – any one of us would have been proud to make her his wife.'

The explosive cocktail of Franck and Augusta, Saint-Saëns and Félicité (rebuffed lover, rejected wife), ignited with the *Piano Quintet* (1878-79), première in Paris by Saint-Saëns and the Marsick Quartet at a promotion of the Société Nationale, 17 January 1880. In its pages Debussy found 'true music'. Not, though, 'lynx-like' Félicité (sensing almost certainly that after nearly thirty years of marriage the feelings displayed within had little to do with her) – her loathing, 'hatred' even, of the piece becoming a marital issue. Nor 'tortured' Saint-Saëns, masculine pride dented – whose public snub Vincent d'Indy recorded for history. 'At the end of the concert, good old Father Franck, in great delight (he was always pleased with any performance, however poor, of his works) went up to Saint-Saëns, with a wry smile ("grimaçant un sourire") – those who witnessed the scene can never forget it – twirled round and made off towards the exit, leaving the precious score on the piano. Long afterwards, an employee of the firm of Pleyel found it among a heap of waste paper' (*Cobbett's*, 1929).

Dating from the decade of the *Symphony*, *String Quartet*, *Violin Sonata* and *Prélude, Chorale and Fugue for piano*, the *Quintet*, like them, is organised cynically, its 36 minutes bound (hovered over, d'Indy says) by a melody 'in the highest degree expressive' – the (Symphony-anticipant, second beat emphatic) second subject of the first movement, motto-melody of the work. Post-Liszt-fashion, this recurs in different keys, tonal relationships, rhythms, meters and time-stretches, without ever losing sight of its critically tensioned opening dominant-minor

sixth/dominant-major sixth oscillation. The ascending contour of the gapped interval is faithfully preserved too, albeit floating between a minor third and fifth. Franck was drawn to tripartite schemes and triptych structures. Here, the outer movements, in F minor and F major, are sonata designs with introductions, binary expositions, toughly argued developments, and Beethoven-descended *codas* orbiting around the motto-melody variously contextualised and psychologically aspected – initially calming, latterly ‘called upon to fill the office of regulator [...] with the object of setting all in order’ (d’Indy). The elegiac 12/8 *Lento* in A minor is striking for a subsidiary figure (initially a descending minor triad followed by the motto’s minor sixth falling to the dominant) proving sufficiently significant to be reworked in the *finale* as the basis of the second subject (major triad replacing minor). The motto-melody is recalled in a D flat middle section, its remoteness of key, d’Indy suggests, lending it the presence of ‘some holy mountain til now untrodden’.

Franck’s melodic casting is distinctively personal – as much for the cellular interrelationships he fashions and draws upon as the minor/major flux of their modal habitat. In isolation, stripped of harmonic underlay, the seven pitches of the twelve notes of the slow movement’s opening four-bar phrase are typical, tracing falling sequences in D Dorian, D Aeolian/A Phrygian, and A major. Relying often on pivotal links, sometimes shock tactics, the tonal dynamic is similarly very fluid. In the exposition of the first movement, the motto-melody only reaches A flat (the relative major of the classical F minor model) via the unpredictability of D flat, E and G. In the *finale* the second subject comes first in B major/minor, before being spirited into F sharp minor for the largely F major recapitulation (remembering possibly the F major/F sharp minor digression in Beethoven’s *Eighth Symphony*?). Together with Brahms and Bruckner, Franck’s Renaissance counterpointing of themes was legendary – at the beginning of the *finale* reprise, when the first subject is entwined with the opening idea and subsidiary figure of the slow movement, we encounter his art at its most dramatically concentrated.

The celebrated *A major Sonata* (1886, according to the second edition for either violin or cello), was written as a wedding present for Augène Ysäye, who gave the first performance at a concert of the Société des XX in Brussels, 16 December 1886, together with Léontine Marie Bordes-Pène (dedicatee of Franck's later *Prélude, Aria and Finale*) 'The Séance, which began at three o'clock', d'Indy recalled, 'had been very long, and it was rapidly growing dark. After the first *allegretto* [...], the performers could scarcely read their music. Now the official regulations [of the Musée Moderne de Peinture] forbade any light whatever in rooms which contained paintings, even the striking of a match would have been a matter for offence. The public was requested to leave, but the audience, already full of enthusiasm, refused to budge. Then Ysäye was heard to strike his music-stand with his bow, exclaiming "Get on, get on". And then, unheard-of-marvel, the two artists plunged in gloom in which nothing could be distinguished, performed the last three movements from memory, with a fire and passion more astounding to the listeners in that there was an absence of all externals which could enhance the performance. Music, wondrous and alone, held sovereign sway in the darkness of the night. The miracle will never be forgotten'. (*Cobbett's*).

Cross-referenced thematically (the intervals of the minor/major third being particularly important) and cadentially (dynamically swelled tonic key groundings suspended to heighten tension), the work ranges in character and mood from rhapsody to fantasy, Classical discipline to Romantic abandon, tender reflection to elated climax. Its impulsion is splendid, the sweep grand, the voluptuous fruit of the *Quintet* sweetly mellowed into a wine of rampant bouquet. Resolving the ruminative 'question' of the opening 9/8 movement, the swirling rhythms and restless tonal/tempo currents of the second (a sonata-'scherzo' in four), and the speech patterns of the formally liberated third, the easy song of the *finale*, a canonic *rondo* lyrical and lordly, is justly famous.

## The Schubert ensemble

After 26 years at the forefront of British chamber music, the Schubert Ensemble is firmly established as one of the world's leading exponents of chamber music for piano and strings. Regularly giving over 50 concerts a year, the Ensemble has performed in over 40 different countries. It has recently performed in major concert halls in Europe and North America, including London's Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam's Concertgebouw Hall, Oslo's Konserthus and for the Coleman Chamber Series in California, and given a four-concert Brahms series for BBC Radio Three at St. George's, Bristol.

In 2008 the Ensemble celebrated its 25th Anniversary. The year began with a concert at LSO St. Luke's for the Barbican/BBC Judith Weir weekend (Telling the Tale) and a tour of the USA. It continued with a performance of six recent Ensemble commissions at The South Bank. The Ensemble gave two further 25th Anniversary concerts at Wigmore Hall in November, concerts in Luxemburg and Turkey, and a four-concert Fauré series at St. George's, Bristol, which was broadcast on BBC Radio 3.

Alongside its busy concert schedule, the Ensemble has established a reputation for innovation in the field of new music, education and audience development. It has also built up strong relationships with many of the UK's leading composers, and has an impressive list of over 80 commissions. Its vision in combining education and new music initiatives led to the creation of the groundbreaking national project, Chamber Music 2000.

The Schubert Ensemble is supported by The Schubert Ensemble Trust which gratefully acknowledges funding from the PRS Foundation.

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photos: John Clark

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