SYMPHONIC VARIATIONS

THURSDAY AFTERNOON SYMPHONY
Thursday 9 April 2015

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Friday 10 April 2015

GREAT CLASSICS
Saturday 11 April 2015
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sydney symphony orchestra
David Robertson Chief Conductor and Artistic Director

CLASSICAL

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CHOPIN 24 Préludes, Op.28

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with Sydney Dance Company
BIZET Carmen: Suite No.1
SARASATE Navarra
GINASTERA Concerto Variations
PIAZZOLLA
Le Grand Tango
The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires
Libertango
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PARRY My soul there is a country
LEDGER War Music • PREMIERE
TALLIS Why fumeth in fight...?
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THURSDAY AFTERNOON SYMPHONY
THURSDAY 9 APRIL, 1.30PM

EMIRATES METRO SERIES
FRIDAY 10 APRIL, 8PM

GREAT CLASSICS
SATURDAY 11 APRIL, 2PM

SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE CONCERT HALL

SYMPHONIC VARIATIONS

Yan Pascal Tortelier conductor
Louis Lortie piano

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756–1791)
Symphony No.31 in D, K297 (Paris)
Allegro assai
Andante
Allegro

CÉSAR FRANCK (1822–1890)
Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra, Op.46

INTERVAL

MOZART
Rondo in D for piano and orchestra, K382

FRANCK
Symphony in D minor
Lento – Allegro non troppo
Allegretto
Allegro non troppo

92.9 ABC Classic FM
Friday’s performance will broadcast live across Australia by ABC Classic FM.

Pre-concert talk by David Garrett in the Northern Foyer 45 minutes before each performance. Visit sydneysymphony.com/speaker-bios for more information.

Estimated durations:
17 minutes, 15 minutes, 20-minute interval, 8 minutes, 37 minutes

The concert will conclude at approximately 3.25pm (Thu), 9.55pm (Fri), 3.55pm (Sat).

COVER IMAGE: Advertising poster (1929) by Raoul Dufy.
From a private collection / DaTo Images / Bridgeman Images
The young Mozart plays for French aristocracy in this 1766 painting by Michel Barthelemy Olivier: The English Tea (Le Thé à l'Anglaise) and a Society Concert at the house of the Princesse de Conti, Palais du Temple, Paris. Mozart’s touring adventures as a boy included performances for royalty and heads of state, just as César Franck had performed, as a 12-year-old, for Leopold I of Belgium.
Symphonic Variations

The son was astonishingly talented, a musical prodigy; the father was ambitious. There were concert tours and performances before royalty. The young virtuoso at the keyboard was already composing. This is the well-known story of the boy Mozart. It’s also the story of César Franck.

Their biographies diverge quite early on, however. Mozart continued giving concerts as a virtuoso pianist and composed steadily and prolifically throughout his all-too-short life. The Belgian-born Franck, however, resisted the idea that he might be a second Liszt, a 19th-century Lang Lang, and after breaking away from the influence of his father, spent the major portion of his career as a church organist and teacher in Paris. It was not until he was in his 60s that he found his ‘groove’ as a composer and it was during this period that all his acknowledged masterworks were written, including the two in this concert.

It’s a program of elegant balance and recurring ‘themes’. From each composer there is a symphony composed in Paris. And from each there is a work for piano and orchestra, but neither of these is a concerto in the conventional sense. Mozart’s Rondo K382 was composed as an alternative – and more popularly appealing – finale for an earlier piano concerto; Franck’s Symphonic Variations offers a ‘collaboration’ between piano and orchestra in an unusual and completely individual form.
ABOUT THE MUSIC

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)
Symphony No.31 in D, K297 (Paris)

Allegro assai
Andante
Allegro

Mozart’s return to Paris in 1778, years after his first visit as a child prodigy, was not a happy one. His mother, who had travelled with him, died in Paris, and he had the difficult task of telling his father. His hopes for a brilliant salaried position outside Salzburg did not materialise, and his music was not very much appreciated by the Parisian public. Mozart responded by disparaging French taste and judgement in his letters to his father. His comments on the likely reception of the symphony he had written for Paris reveal how far he had tailored his writing to the audience as he assessed it:

I can answer for its pleasing the few intelligent French people who may be there – and as for the stupid ones, I shall not consider it a great misfortune if they are not pleased. I still hope, however, that even asses will find something in it to admire – and moreover, I have been careful not to neglect le premier coup d’archet [the first stroke of the bow] and that is quite sufficient. What a fuss the oxen here make of this trick! The devil take me if I can see any difference! They all begin together, just as they do in other places. It is really too much of a joke.

The ‘first stroke of the bow’, of which the French were so proud, is exploited by Mozart in a way that verges on parody. At the same time, he was obviously excited at the possibility of writing for the large and efficient orchestra of the Concert Spirituel, whose impresario Le Gros had commissioned the symphony. The wind section included clarinets, making their first appearance in a Mozart symphony.

The Parisian public expected strong contrasts of loud and soft, and Mozart provides plenty of these in the brilliant first movement, as well as orchestral build-ups (crescendos) which show the influence of the then-famous composers based in Mannheim. The French taste for elegance is catered for in the subsidiary passages, which also feature dialogues between string and wind instruments, much enjoyed in Paris, as the craze there for concertante symphonies with wind instruments shows. Mozart, it seems, realised he must provide the audience with plenty of variety and effects.

Concert promoter Le Gros thought the slow movement was too long and contained too many modulations, but this attitude

Keynotes

MOZART
Born Salzburg, Austria, 1756
Died Vienna, 1791

Leopold Mozart described his son as ‘the miracle that God allowed to be born in Salzburg’. But Leopold was also eager that Wolfgang’s talents be recognised far beyond their provincial home. Accordingly, by age 10, young Mozart had played in most of the major west German cities, as well as Brussels, Paris, Amsterdam and London. When Mozart was in his early 20s, Leopold sent him away again, first to Munich and then to Paris, but now in the hope of finding paid patronage and preferment.

PARIS SYMPHONY
This was the first completely new symphony Mozart had composed in over four years, and it was full of new ideas. Since his Paris orchestra had them, Mozart included clarinets for the first time in a symphony. He also planned several features to tease his French audience, such as the opening of the finale, which begins whisper quiet (piano), before an unexpectedly blazing loud chord (forte). The concert promoter thought the middle movement was too full of strange modulations. So Mozart, unfussed, replaced it with a simpler piece, deciding he also liked it better than the first. Perversely, posterity takes another view, and it’s the original that is performed today.
is hard to understand, and the original movement, which Mozart defended in a letter to his father, is almost always played in preference to the substitute composed at Le Gros’ request. Clarinets, trumpets and drums are omitted in the song-like, tender Andante.

The last movement again shows Mozart aware of the Parisian style – the cuts and alterations in the manuscript of this symphony show how much extra work this awareness imposed on him. Here he made a stunning effect, which he describes:

Since I had heard that all the final allegros here begin just like the first one – with all the instruments at once and usually in unison – I began with only the first and second violins, playing very softly for just eight bars and a loud forte immediately afterwards. Just as I had expected, when they heard the soft beginning, the audience went: ‘Sh-hh...’ Then came the forte... For them, hearing the forte and clapping their hands were practically the same thing. So after the symphony, out of pure joy I went right to the Palais Royal, ate a large ice, said the rosary I had promised, and went home.

DAVID GARRETT © 1988

The orchestra for Mozart’s Paris Symphony calls for pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets; timpani and strings. And on at least one occasion, Mozart was delighted to have an ensemble exceeding the size of a modern symphony orchestra: ‘forty violins, the wind-instruments were all doubled, there were ten violas, ten double basses, eight violoncellos and six bassoons.’ [In these concerts we field 30 violins, 12 violas, 10 cellos and 8 double basses, but only two bassoons.]

The SSO first performed the Paris Symphony in a 1943 studio concert conducted by Percy Code; the first performance in a subscription concert was in 1950 under Eugene Goossens. Our most recent performances of the symphony were in 2012, conducted by David Robertson.

Ice Cream in Paris

So after the symphony, out of pure joy I went right to the Palais Royal, ate a large ice, said the rosary I had promised, and went home.

What kind of ‘ice’ did Mozart devour after that joyous first performance of his Paris symphony? Did he choose a custard-style ‘ice cream’, thickened with eggs? Or a fruit-juice based sorbet? Did he pay any attention to the debate then raging among Paris distillateurs concerning the precise method of administering the sugar in iced treats?

And which café did he visit on the famed Palais Royal? Maybe he visited the highly fashionable Café du Caveau [which later claimed to have introduced liqueur-flavoured ices to Paris]. Or perhaps he ended up at the Foi, which enjoyed an exceptional privilege: permission to serve refreshments in the gardens of the palace itself, although not to set tables. Now there’s a thought – eating ice cream the way Mozart might have done, resting his supper on a chair.

‘For [the Paris audience], hearing the forte and clapping their hands were practically the same thing.’

MOZART
César Franck
Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra, Op.46
Louis Lortie piano

César Franck’s D minor symphony has established itself in the orchestral repertoire as his most frequently performed work. One other orchestral work by César Franck which is by common consent a complete success is the Symphonic Variations, yet its length (about 15 minutes) makes it hard to program – not quite a concerto – and while it is gratifying for the soloist, it lacks the unabashed technical display and the big gestures which virtuosos can’t resist. It is in fact a highly original collaboration between piano and orchestra, and as a work in variation form, daring, in that the theme of the variations doesn’t appear in a full statement until well into the work.

This music was composed in 1885 as a thank-offering to the pianist Louis Diémer, who had played the important piano part in the first performance of Franck’s symphonic poem Les Djinns earlier in the year. He also premiered the Symphonic Variations, with Franck conducting, in Paris on 1 May 1886. The title immediately recalls the Etudes symphoniques for solo piano of Robert Schumann, and Franck’s structural concerns, subtly disguised as poetic expression, also recall Schumann.

As a representative of variation form, Franck’s Symphonic Variations is adventurous – departing from the classical conception of variation form and exploring the theme’s musical essence rather than merely its melodic outline. One of the most perceptive analyses of this piece, by Sir Donald Tovey, describes it as ‘a finely and freely organised fantasia with an important episode in variation form’. This ‘episode’ is preceded by an introduction almost half as long and followed by a finale more than twice as long. The theme is only hinted at in the introduction, and is brought in as a bass counterpoint in two passages in the finale.

The introduction recalls the slow movement of Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto in the way a gruff motif from the strings is answered by the piano’s gentle pleading. These two themes are worked up in dialogue. Then the music changes to triple time, and plucked strings, with winds and kettledrums, give out two phrases of what is to turn out to be the theme. The piano rhapsodises on the theme of its answer, which will also provide the main material of the finale. The dialogue resumes, quietens down, and the piano states the theme in full – a quiet, thoughtful theme.

Keynotes
FRANCK
Born Liège, Belgium 1822
Died Paris, 1890

César-Auguste-Jean-Guillaume-Hubert Franck (César to his friends, ‘Père Franck’ to his students and admirers) was a revered figure of Parisian musical life in the 1870s and 1880s. His musical career began as a touring virtuoso pianist and from his mid-20s he held various church organist posts. A profound and reserved rather than populist and prolific composer, he completed all of his small handful of masterworks after turning 60: his single Symphony in 1888, his symphonic poem The Accursed Huntsman in 1882, his great Prelude, Chorale and Fugue for solo piano in 1884, and the magisterial Violin Sonata in 1886.

SYMPHONIC VARIATIONS
The Symphonic Variations was composed in 1885. But only after Franck’s death, and thanks to the advocacy of his former students – including Chausson, d’Indy, Dukas and Duparc – did this powerful work become properly appreciated in Paris, and later internationally.

This is an unusual work: it’s scored for piano and orchestra but isn’t a piano concerto, and its structure blends variation form with more fantasia-like elements in a single movement with connected sections. At first the expansive, energetic opening seems to prefigure a full-scale piano concerto. But it gives way prematurely and unexpectedly to a slower, ruminative central episode. A propulsive scherzo-like section then leads into the final stretch and its glittering major-key close.
The **first variation** breaks the theme into dialogue phrase by phrase, the second hands it to the cellos over piano figuration, which becomes even more flowing in the next variation, contrasting with *pizzicato* strings. Variation four re-introduces the unison string theme from the introduction, relating it, *fortissimo*, to the variation theme. The fifth variation is less lively, in the same rhythm, and dies away into the sixth, a poetic reverie with rippling piano in counterpoint to the theme. In the final variation, under constant piano arpeggios, the cellos ‘spell out a wonderful dream’ (Tovey) on the first phrase of the piano’s answer from the opening bars.

This is suddenly transformed rhythmically, to the accompaniment of a long piano trill, into the dance tune which dominates the **finale**, and to which some wit put the words ‘get your hair cut’! No doubt this catchy tune contributes to the popularity of the variations, and it is brilliantly treated, not without a contrasting solo passage more typical of Franck’s lofty tone, which appeals so much to longhairs.

DAVID GARRETT © 1999

Franck’s Symphonic Variations call for an orchestra comprising pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons; four horns and two trumpets, timpani and strings.

The SSO first performed the Symphonic Variations in 1940 with Georg Schnéevoigt conducting and Beatrice Tange as soloist, and most recently in 2008 with Lothar Zagrosek and soloist Michele Campanella.

...a highly original collaboration between piano and orchestra...
INTERLUDE

Who was César Franck?

The Franck family’s favourite portrait of the composer was a painting by Madame Jeanne Rongier. It shows him at the console of the Cavaillé-Coll organ in Ste Clotilde, where he became titular organist in 1858, when the basilica and the organ were both new. Franck held this position for the rest of his life, and won most recognition as an organist. In 1872 he became Professor of Organ at the Paris Conservatoire. When Franck belatedly received the ribbon of a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour, in 1885, the citation said only ‘Franck (César), Professor of Organ.’ When he died in 1890, after being struck in the side by the pole of an omnibus, musical officials shunned his obsequies. According to Franck’s disciple Vincent d’Indy, Ambroise Thomas, the Director of the Conservatoire, ‘quickly took to his bed when he heard that a member of Franck’s family had come to invite him to the funeral’. Musical officialdom was never happy in its dealings with Franck, and gave him little credit for his achievements as a composer. His largely posthumous fame was considerably due to his champion’s among his pupils, the ‘Franckistes’, such as Duparc, Chausson, Guy Ropartz and d’Indy himself. They regarded themselves as ‘a vigorous symphonic school, such as France had never before produced’, and paid tribute to Franck’s example and teaching.

Franck’s single symphony is the only composition of his appearing regularly in orchestral programs. Occasional performances of the Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra don’t alter this generalisation. The distinguished French pianist Michel Dalberto was taken aside at the beginning of his career by the celebrated record producer Walter Legge. ‘Let me give you some advice that may be useful,’ said Legge. ‘There are two works for piano and orchestra which are rarely performed, but always succeed when they are: Richard Strauss’s Burleske, and César Franck’s Symphonic Variations. You should take them into your repertoire.’ Dalberto did, and Legge’s advice proved good. Even the Symphony, successful with the public, has a mixed press from the critics. Here’s a representative sample: ‘This Symphony, which owes its unquestionable popularity to the beauty and eloquence of its themes, is marred for many people by the extreme rigidity of the cyclic structure.’ Debussy said of Franck’s symphony, ‘I could do with fewer four-bar phrases. But what splendid ideas!’

Critics of the orchestral writing in the symphony have used Franck’s reputation as an organist as a stick to beat him: ‘The convulsive and at times noisy scoring bears all the signs of Franck’s preoccupation with the sustained sonority of the organ and its sudden changes of registration.’ The Rongier portrait, too, has been ‘read’ as showing the master ‘marking time with his left hand and pedals while with his right hand he manipulates the cumbrous stop-knobs’. Is Franck then a typical organist-composer, with all the defects this implies? There is an irony here. César Franck’s published works for organ are few – enough to fill only two CDs. Although he spent the last 30 years of his life in the faithful and near-daily service of the Church, even his fanatical admirers admit that Franck’s sacred compositions are inferior to the best of his other music. His Mass for Three Voices, with its pendant, the Panis angelicus for tenor in the sweetly devotional tone of unreformed 19th-century Catholic church music, does not escape Vincent d’Indy’s strictures. It was a pity, he thinks, that Franck was not exposed earlier to the pure music of Palestrina and the Gregorian chant. His disciples made up for this – in 1896, after Franck’s death, they formed the Schola Cantorum, a teaching institution aiming to reform church music by revisiting the great models of the past. What inspired this aim was less Franck’s sacred music than his music for the concert hall and the organ recital.

Franck’s reputation as a composer rests on a handful of works, all dating from the last years of his life. Vincent d’Indy instances the Violin Sonata
Rongier’s portrait of Franck at the console of the organ in Sainte-Clotilde.

(1886), the Symphony (1886–88), the String Quartet (1889) and the three Chorales for organ (1890). He doesn’t mention the Piano Quintet (1879), one of Franck’s most enduringly popular works – one which Debussy at one time found ‘thrilling’. There is a story behind this. D’Indy’s 1906 book César Franck, a work of discriminating hagiography, relied on biographical information from the composer’s family. For them the Quintet held bad memories. Its strikingly passionate musical language could be suspected of carrying an erotic charge. Franck’s family knew that at the time of writing the quintet he had been stirred out of his usual asceticism by the attractions of his blonde and statuesque pupil, the pianist and composer Augusta Holmès. Mme Franck was unhappy, and the Piano Quintet became an equivocal part of the legacy. It is one of Franck’s best works, nevertheless, in spite of failing to conform to the image of the otherworldly Pater
Seraphicus (Angelic Father), the name from Goethe’s Faust affectionately given to Franck by his disciples.

To complete the list of Franck’s best works, add the symphonic poems Psyché, for orchestra and chorus (1887–88), and Les Djinns, for piano and orchestra (1884). These very rarely appear in concert programs, regrettably, as their poetry and delicacy balance the impression given by the Symphony. ‘That damned hunter’, as the symphonic poem Le Chasseur maudit (1882) has been called, turns up slightly more frequently, when conductors can’t resist its bombast.

The music lover beginning a discovery of Franck can be reassured that getting to know his best music is a manageable project. After the symphony, try the Piano Quintet, then the Violin Sonata. The String Quartet (which d’Indy considered the first to build creatively on the example of Beethoven’s late quartets) should perhaps be left until last, when Franck’s style is more familiar. Those who have no aversion to organ music – or perhaps especially those who have – should try one of the organ Chorales, perhaps the first. Impressive also are the late works in which Franck renewed the tradition of French piano music, such as the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue (1884). And do not neglect the orchestral excerpts from Psyché, favorites of former SSO chief conductor Willem van Otterloo.

The explorer will find in Franck’s musical legacy hardly a trace of ‘organ loft’ stuffiness and pedantry. True it is that Franck’s chromatic harmony and his tendency to shift from key to key may be put down to improvising at the organ, and linking musical parts of the church service in different keys. Changing key often was a habit ingrained in Franck. When Debussy improvised in Franck’s organ class, Franck exhorted him ‘modulate!’ – to which Debussy retorted ‘Why should I? I’m quite happy where I am.’ These aspects of Franck’s musical language he found in Liszt, and even in Wagner. Franck was regarded as the saviour of French music from the excesses of ‘Wagnerism,’ and scribbled across his score of Tristan und Isolde the word ‘poison,’ but at one time of his life he studied Wagner ardently, though he never made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth, pleading lack of funds. Franck’s later reaction against Wagner, and against the more flamboyant side of Liszt, was at root a matter of temperamental incompatibility.

His family had it right – Franck was happiest up there at the back of the church, out of sight, at his organ console. Here he improvised, renewing contact with the inspiration of Johann Sebastian Bach and Beethoven. Liszt, hearing Franck play his own compositions in Ste Clotilde exclaimed ‘These poems have their place beside the masterpieces of Sebastian Bach!’ Franck was a diffident man, the worst of self-promoters, and played more to express what was in him than to make an impression. This could be a lingering after-effect of his childhood as a driven prodigy, whose Belgian father moved the whole family to Paris so that his two sons could gain adulation as professional performers.

Long years of service to the church in Ste Clotilde gave Franck much opportunity for the contemplation that suited his personality, so gentle yet so sure of its artistic preferences. The handful of his pieces that will live forever are those of a late developer, and are utterly distinctive. Fingerprints in the Symphony will be recognised in all Franck’s late works. It was a preoccupation with issues of form that led Franck to develop the cyclic treatment of his themes which he traced back to Beethoven, through Liszt – this was unusual in a French composer. So were the spiritual qualities of the man, whose music his admirers found full of ‘goodness’, ‘love’, and ‘faith’. Exploring beyond the Symphony, we may be seized by some of the fascination this composer of genius exerted on his followers. ‘Father Franck’, leaving the organ loft, demonstrated that there can be as much music in a quintet, a sonata or a symphony as in the whole of an opera. Thus he pointed to a new path for French music, worthy of contemplation in itself.

DAVID GARRETT ©2005/2015
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Rondo in D for piano and orchestra, K382

Louis Lortie piano

The year 1773 effectively marked Mozart’s debut as a composer of solo concertos. While still working with his father at the Salzburg court, the 17 year old wrote his first violin concerto (K207) in April, and in December his first mature piano concerto, in D major (K175). Though he composed five more piano concertos at Salzburg, he retained a fondness for this earliest work. He kept it in his personal repertoire for an unusually long time, performing it even after his move to Vienna in 1781, though not without one major alteration. In February 1782, with another performance planned, he decided to replace the concerto’s original finale with a new one, this Rondo (K382). He completed it early in 1782, and from then on he used it in all his own performances of the composite work – the first two movements of K175, and K382 as finale – and in the first published edition of 1785.

Mozart had ‘adopted’ the rondo [or rondeau] format as first preference for concerto finales only shortly after completing of the original D major concerto. His earliest attempts include the rondeau finales of the four Salzburg violin concertos (Nos 3–5) he composed during 1775. In doing so, he appears to have been emulating a recent trend among some fashionable Paris-based violinist-composers, such as Simon Leduc, Giovanni Giornovichi, and the Chevalier de Saint-Georges, who had popularised the use of rondeau-type movements in their violin concertos only a few years previously. From then on, Mozart also began to prefer rondo movements for his keyboard concerto finales as well.

Mozart’s concerto rondo-finale offers a variety of different takes on the basic form. This one is essentially a theme-with-variations, in which the theme’s opening strain serves as the main recurring rondo tune, the defining element in any rondo structure. Meanwhile, in this example, a sequence of variations populates the other essential constituents of the form, the couplets [or contrasting episodes] that separate the carefully timed recurrences of the rondo theme, as follows:

**Theme (Allegretto grazioso):** for full orchestra

**Couplet: Variation 1** for piano solo

**Rondo** [first strain of the Theme only]: full orchestra

**Couplet: Variation 2** for piano and winds (oboes, bassoons and horns)

**Couplet: Variation 3** for piano and strings

**Rondo** [first strain only]: full orchestra

**Keynotes**

**RONDO, K382**

This rondo movement for piano and orchestra was composed as an alternative finale for an old piano concerto which must have been close to Mozart’s heart: he kept it in his concert repertoire for a decade and was still performing it after he moved from Salzburg to Vienna.

It combines the features of two basic musical forms. First, the rondo which, like a popular song, alternates a recurring rondo tune (the ‘chorus’) with contrasting episodes (the ‘verses’). Second, theme and variation form, in which a main theme is decorated and varied in different ways each time it is heard.
Couplet: Variation 4 (in D minor) for piano with strings
Couplet: Variation 5 (back in D major) for piano with woodwinds, horns and strings in alternation
Couplet: Variation 6 (Adagio) for piano with strings and winds
Couplet: Variation 7 (Allegro in triple time) for full orchestra, with repeat for piano with winds, and codetta
Cadenza: solo piano – Mozart wrote down one possible version of this to send to his sister in 1783, but probably improvised it afresh at each of his own performances
Rondo and Coda: (Tempo primo, back in duple time) for piano and full orchestra

Mozart duly premiered this new rondo in a performance of the D major Concerto at his grand academy on 3 March 1782, and was still playing it a year later, as he reported to his father on 12 March 1783:

My sister-in-law, Madame Lange, gave her concert yesterday in the theatre...it was very full and I was received again by the Viennese public so cordially that I really ought to feel delighted. I had already left the platform, but the audience wouldn’t stop clapping and so I had to repeat the rondo, after which there was a regular torrent of applause.

GRAEME SKINNER © 2015

The orchestra of the Rondo K382 comprises flute and pairs of oboes, horns and trumpets; timpani and strings.

The SSO’s most recent performance of this rondo was in the 2012 Discovery series with Kathryn Selby as soloist and Richard Gill conducting.
Franck
Symphony in D minor

Lento – Allegro non troppo
Allegretto
Allegro non troppo

The most provocative new art music of the 1860s and 1870s was being written in Germany. Wagner and Liszt, particularly, were re-drawing boundaries in the realms of harmony, form and instrumental texture in a manner that compelled the attention of composers throughout the Western hemisphere.

In France, where relations with Germany reached their nadir in war and the Commune of 1871, composers seemed compelled to respond to the challenges of the New German School (as Liszt and his followers were called), but, for the most part, were equally compelled not to ‘sound German’. In various guises, these responses are heard in the later operas of Massenet, where systems of leitmotif come into play; in Saint-Saëns’ tone poems, which owe their vivid pictorialism to the models established by Liszt; in Duparc’s songs, which are in some ways all meditations on the world of Tristan und Isolde; and even in the ballet music of Delibes, where the Wagner of Tannhäuser sometimes peeps through the pretty colours. Perhaps the most striking and original response to the New German School in France, though, is contained in the small but distinct output of the Belgian-born composer César Franck.

Although Franck’s Symphony is now regarded as one of the cornerstones of symphonic expression, it has been in and out of fashion many times over. After its first performance, in Paris in 1889, Gounod’s view that this symphony was ‘the affirmation of incompetence pushed to dogmatic lengths’ was only an extreme expression of common opinion. Franck was 65 when he finished the piece, yet he was anything but an established composer at this time in the eyes (and ears) of the musical establishment. He had written music early in his adult life, but had spent most of his career as an organist and teacher, and although he continued to compose religious music, he did not write a major instrumental work until the strongly Lisztian symphonic poem Les Eolides of 1877. He was regarded by many of his colleagues as either incompetent or presumptuous, yet he was idolised by the circle of pupils he gathered round him, both as a private composition teacher and as Professor of Organ at the Paris Conservatoire. These included Henri Duparc, Ernest Chausson and Vincent d’Indy, the last of whom was to become Franck’s principal propagandist after his death.

Keynotes

FRANCK

Franck was of Flemish birth and partly German ancestry, but Paris was his home. (He became a naturalised Frenchman in 1837 in order to enrol in the Paris Conservatoire and a citizen when he was appointed professor of organ there in 1872.) Franck’s musical style reflects the complexity of his background and influences: not wholly French but frequently Germanic in his approach to harmony and structure.

SYMPHONY

The D minor Symphony is Franck’s most often performed orchestral work. It was composed between 1886–88, during a period when Franck – already in his 60s – had finally found his ‘groove’. It is organised in three movements rather than the more conventional four movements of a Germanic symphony. But in fact the second movement (Allegretto) combines elements of both a slow movement and a playful scherzo: the two movement types it replaces.

Although the symphony is in a minor key, normally associated with sad music, its musical ideas seem joyous, vital and uplifting. The big tune in the first movement has been called a ‘motif of faith’. By the end you may find that themes from all three movements are running through your head. This is no accident, but the result of something known as cyclic structure in which each movement brings in ideas from the previous movements, to cumulative effect.
The D minor Symphony is one of a handful of works from the last years of Franck’s life on which his reputation rests, the others being his Violin Sonata, the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue for piano, the Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra, the Piano Quintet and the String Quartet. The personality this music reveals is one influenced by Beethoven’s concentration of expression, Wagner’s orchestral texture and harmonic colours, and the time scale of Wagner’s music dramas. It is also influenced by many years in the organ loft, and by the freedom from formal sonata procedures Liszt had advocated in his symphonic poems, in particular Liszt’s method of structural development: ‘transformation of themes’, in which a work’s overall structure is determined by the major points of change to its principal themes.

Franck welds these potentially contradictory elements into something unique and big-hearted in this symphony. Like Beethoven, his principal motifs are often short, and he is able to transform these germ-like ideas with power and success. Like Beethoven, too, he has no time for elaborate introductions in his music – in each movement of this symphony he plunges almost straight into the argument at hand – and his codas do not meander. But the results are not at all Beethovenian, because Franck’s sense of scale is so spacious. He is inclined to parade his good ideas in emphatic review so that, for example, the slow introduction to the symphony becomes a kind of motto theme for the first movement as it progresses. And his final, elaborate recapitulation in the finale is not the work of a man in a hurry. This epic style of utterance was also a result of his re-examination of traditional formal procedures, by which process he took Beethoven’s notion of ‘the symphony as personal testament’ further into the heart of Romantic feeling.

In effect, this symphony’s dark first three notes are the basis of all that follows. They are the first movement’s main, anchoring theme, and they establish the movement of the semitone as a governing factor in the whole work. To note just two of the long-term implications of this theme here: First, the big chorale tune of this opening movement, which is in effect the first climax of the piece, is really the shining side of the opening’s darkness. This chorale tune, in turn, becomes the generative force for the final movement’s main syncopated figure. Second, the cor anglais melody which dominates the second movement is clearly a creature of the same cast as the theme which opens the symphony.

The notion of thematic inter-relatedness is more closely observed in this work than in any of Liszt’s symphonic poems,
where ‘transformation of themes’ had its birthplace. It is one of the symphony’s most innovative characteristics, and while it enraged some of Franck’s contemporaries, it delighted others. The young Claude Debussy’s response was one of pleasure: ‘[The symphony] is amazing. I should prefer a less four-square structure. But what smart ideas!’

One of the smartest manifestations of the work’s concentration of thought is the combination of slow movement and scherzo into one movement. As the English music scholar and critic Donald Tovey wrote of the Allegretto, ‘it has the allure of a slow minuet; but by using the harmony of the cor anglais tune and – simplest of all means – halving its note values, Franck creates a contrasting, quicker set of themes that eventually coalesce with the stately tune that opened the movement.’

Franck presents his ideas with, for the most part, such skill that it is easy to miss the ease with which he moves between keys. Before the first 30 bars of the symphony are through, Franck has shifted from his home key of D minor through F sharp minor to E flat. When the work was new, this was another aspect of it that offended conservative taste. His melodic ideas, as already noted, are not so freewheeling, and are often dependent on the movement upwards or downwards of the semitone, a characteristic which, in the words of French music specialist Martin Cooper, ‘suggests the action of the organist’s fingers or feet executing a sliding semi-tonal descent on the keys or pedals. The undulating dotted semiquaver theme which sits in the centre of the second movement is a good example.’

Franck’s symphony was an influential work: the symphonies of Dukas and Chausson, two of the next generation of French composers, are based closely on its shape and variations of mood, and the language of Debussy’s Prelude to The Afternoon of a Faun has clearly been informed by the lusciousness of Franck’s juicier moments. But after World War I, when the European avant-garde had no taste for expressions of Romantic aspiration, the work receded from view. It only established its modern reputation gradually, from the 1940s, and was restored to favour with the help of the long-playing record.

PHILLIP SAMETZ © 1993

Franck’s Symphony in D minor calls for two flutes, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets, bass clarinet and two bassoons; four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones and tuba; timpani, harp and strings.

The D minor Symphony was first performed by the orchestra of the Paris Conservatoire on 17 February 1889, conducted by Vincent d’Indy. The SSO was the first ABC orchestra to perform the work, conducted by Malcolm Sargent in 1938. Our most recent performance was in 2002, conducted by Emmanuel Villaume.

‘But what smart ideas!’

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FRANCK
César Franck was not the first, or only, composer to write a work under the title of symphonic variations. Dvořák’s Symphonic Variations, Op.78 (based on one of his own songs, ‘The Fiddler’, and scored for orchestra without soloist) predates Franck’s by seven years. Dating from nine years after Franck’s is the Symphonic Variations for solo cello and orchestra by another Parisian organist-composer, Léon Boëllmann. From the UK, Arnold Bax’s massive Symphonic Variations of 1914 carry Franck’s piano solo scoring into the new century and across the channel. All are worth sampling!

Conveniently, a few compact disc compilations pair Franck’s Symphonic Variations with his only Symphony. Here are two worth considering: The Sony disc is from the Vienna Philharmonic, under Carlo Maria Giulini, and features British pianist Paul Crossley in the variations. The Chandos release features the BBC Philharmonic with Yan Pascal Tortelier conducting and with Louis Lortie playing the variations. Indeed, you may well find it on sale in the foyer as you leave!

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When it comes to Mozart, an embarrassment of riches can make it hard to decide what to listen to next. Putting aside Mozart himself for the moment, if you are interested in hearing more orchestral music from the French capital in the 1770s, try the Chandos recording of the first two symphonies of Parisian composer and entrepreneur, François-Joseph Gossec (to Mozart he was ‘a very good friend with a very dry sense of humour’), here played by the London Mozart Players under Matthias Bamert. Another option, from the following decade, is the set of ‘Paris’ Symphonies Nos 82–87 by another Austrian visitor, Haydn.

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Staying with Mozart himself, try that other famous product of his Paris visit, the Concerto for Flute and Harp, K299. Together with the Paris Symphony and a third orchestral work from Mozart’s visit, the Sinfonia Concertante for four woodwinds, K 297b, it is available on a Harmonia Mundi disc, from the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra [on period instruments], directed by the concertmaster Gottfried von der Goltz.

HARMONIA MUNDI HMC901897

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Friday 10 April, 8pm
SYMPHONIC VARIATIONS
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Saturday 25 April, 8pm
ANZAC DAY SALUTE
Richard Gill conductor
Ayse Göktnur Shanal soprano
Gondwana Chorale
Copland, Ledger, MF Williams, Parry, Tallis, Vaughan Williams

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SYDNEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA HOUR
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Nicola Lewis talks about the almost athletic experience of being a member of the SSO first violin section. Hosted by Andrew Bukenya.
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Yan Pascal Tortelier began his musical career as a violinist. At 14 he won a first prize for violin at the Paris Conservatoire, and made his solo debut with the London Philharmonic Orchestra shortly afterward. After general musical studies with Nadia Boulanger, he studied conducting with Franco Ferrara at the Accademia Chigiana in Siena. From 1974 to 1983 he was Associate Conductor of the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse.

Thereafter he was Principal Conductor and Artistic Director of the Ulster Orchestra (1989–1992) and Principal Guest Conductor of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (2005–2008). He was Principal Conductor of the Sao Paulo Symphony Orchestra (2009–2011), and remains its Guest Conductor of Honour, returning to the orchestra a number of times each season. Following his outstanding work as Chief Conductor of the BBC Philharmonic (1992–2003), including annual appearances at the BBC Proms and a successful tour of the US celebrating the orchestra’s 60th anniversary, he was awarded the title of Conductor Emeritus and continues to work with the orchestra regularly.

He has also collaborated with the London Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Czech Philharmonic, St Petersburg Philharmonic, Oslo Philharmonic, Filarmonica della Scala Milan. Outside Europe he has appeared with the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Boston, Chicago, and Montreal symphony orchestras, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Tokyo Metropolitan Symphony, and the Hong Kong and Malaysian philharmonic orchestras.

Highlights of recent seasons have included his debut with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra, and return visits to the Dresden Philharmonic, the Residentie Orkest in The Hague, the Pittsburgh Symphony, Utah Symphony, New Jersey Symphony, Bournemouth Symphony and Royal Scottish National orchestras.

This season he returns to the United States to conduct the orchestras in Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Minnesota and Baltimore. In Europe he conducts performances with the Iceland and Bochum symphony orchestras, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and BBC Philharmonic. His most recent appearance with the SSO was in 2001. On this return visit to Australia he also conducts the Queensland, Melbourne, and Adelaide symphony orchestras.
French-Canadian pianist Louis Lortie studied in Montreal with Yvonne Hubert (a pupil of Alfred Cortot), and later with Beethoven specialist Dieter Weber in Vienna and with Schnabel disciple Leon Fleisher. He made his debut with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra at the age of 13. Three years later, his first appearance with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra led to an historic tour of the People’s Republic of China and Japan. In 1984 he won First Prize in the Busoni Competition and was a prizewinner at the Leeds Competition. In 1992 he was named Officer of the Order of Canada, and received both the Order of Quebec and an honorary doctorate from Université Laval.

He has performed with such conductors as Riccardo Chailly, Lorin Maazel, Kurt Masur, Seiji Ozawa, Charles Dutoit, Kurt Sanderling, Neeme Järvi, Andrew Davis, Wolfgang Sawallisch and Mark Elder. As pianist and conductor with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, he has performed all the Beethoven and Mozart piano concertos. He is also actively involved in chamber music projects, including upcoming tours with Augustin Dumay, and with his regular piano-duo partner Hélène Mercier.

As a solo recitalist he has performed complete Beethoven sonata cycles at London’s Wigmore Hall, Berlin’s Philharmonie, and the Sala Grande in Milan. He presented the complete piano works of Ravel in London and Montreal for the BBC and CBC, and is renowned for his performances of the complete Chopin études. He marked the bicentenary of Liszt’s birth in 2011 with performances of the complete Years of Pilgrimage, and returned to Carnegie Hall last year to perform the cycle there.

This season he appears with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra, with Charles Dutoit and the Chicago Symphony, the Krakow Philharmonic, the Toronto Symphony, Rotterdam Philharmonic, and San Diego Symphony. He also performs recitals at London’s Wigmore Hall and in Vienna, Berlin, Calgary and Brussels as well as in Melbourne. Several of these recitals feature preludes of Scriabin, the centenary of whose death occurs in 2015.

Louis Lortie’s most recent appearances with the SSO were in 2010, when he performed Ravel’s G major concerto, and in 2007, when he performed concertos by Mozart and Tchaikovsky.

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Resident at the iconic Sydney Opera House, where it gives more than 100 performances each year, the SSO also performs in venues throughout Sydney and regional New South Wales. International tours to Europe, Asia and the USA – including three visits to China – have earned the orchestra worldwide recognition for artistic excellence.

The orchestra’s first Chief Conductor was Sir Eugene Goossens, appointed in 1947; he was followed by Nicolai Malko, Dean Dixon, Moshe Atzmon, Willem van Otterloo, Louis Frémaux, Sir Charles Mackerras, Zdeněk Mácal, Stuart Challender, Edo de Waart and Gianluigi Gelmetti. Vladimir Ashkenazy was Principal Conductor from 2009 to 2013. The orchestra’s history also boasts collaborations with legendary figures such as George Szell, Sir Thomas Beecham, Otto Klemperer and Igor Stravinsky.

The SSO’s award-winning education program is central to its commitment to the future of live symphonic music, developing audiences and engaging the participation of young people. The orchestra promotes the work of Australian composers through performances, recordings and its commissioning program. Recent premieres have included major works by Ross Edwards, Lee Bracegirdle, Gordon Kerry, Mary Finsterer, Nigel Westlake and Georges Lentz, and the orchestra’s recordings of music by Brett Dean have been released on both the BIS and SSO Live labels.

Other releases on the SSO Live label, established in 2006, include performances with Alexander Lazarev, Gianluigi Gelmetti, Sir Charles Mackerras, Vladimir Ashkenazy and David Robertson. In 2010–11 the orchestra made concert recordings of the complete Mahler symphonies with Ashkenazy, and has also released recordings of Rachmaninoff and Elgar orchestral works on the Exton/Triton labels, as well as numerous recordings on ABC Classics.

This is the second year of David Robertson’s tenure as Chief Conductor and Artistic Director.

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