

CÉSAR FRANCK'S METRONOME MARKS: FROM PARIS TO BROOKLYN

Newly Discovered Indications for the *Trois Pièces*

Rollin Smith

New information concerning the tempos of César Franck's organ works has come to light with the recent discovery at the Brooklyn Museum of Art of three letters written by Franck to an unidentified correspondent. The letters were found by Deborah Wythe, archivist of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, while examining papers relative to McKim, Mead & White, architects of the museum, originally called the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences.¹ The Franck letters had obviously been misfiled, since they were found among unrelated records from 1897–1903.²

To whom were they written? The letter of October 12, 1887, bears a stamp indicating that it was received at Faulkner, Page & Co, a New York City dry goods firm located on Leonard Street. A connection between this firm and an organist has not been determined, though it is possible that an organist may have worked there, most church musicians, then as now, having to augment their income. An interesting and logical possibility is that two of the letters were addressed to R. Huntington Woodman (1861–1943), for we know that he studied with Franck for three months in Paris in 1888—the only American to have done so.

R. Huntington Woodman was born in Brooklyn on January 18, 1861, and was trained by his father, a New York oratorio singer. In 1880, at the age of 19, Woodman became organist of Brooklyn's First Presbyterian Church and remained there for the next 61 years, one of the longest tenures in the history of American church music. He studied composition and orchestration with Dudley Buck between 1881 and 1885. After 1880, he taught at the Rutgers Institute and later at the Packer Institute in Brooklyn. He died on Christmas Day, 1943 after a brief illness.³

The Department of Music of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences was organized in November 1891, at which time Woodman became a charter member. He later served as president of the department through 1937 and as a member of an advisory council until his death.

One of America's foremost architectural firms, McKim, Mead & White, designed the new museum building on Eastern Parkway in 1893; the cornerstone was laid in 1895 and the first section opened in 1897. There is no record of an organ in the Institute until one was donated by Mrs. Edward C. Blum, wife of the then chairman of the board of Abraham and Strauss, and built by Ernest M. Skinner as his Opus 758. Woodman designed the organ with G. Donald Harrison and it was dedicated on October 28, 1929, by the great American organist Lynnwood Farnam. R. Huntington Woodman played one of the subsequent inaugural recitals and had a contract for the museum's monthly Sunday organ recital series from 1930 through 1932.

One letter is undated and seems to be in response to a request for Franck's biography and a list of his works. In the 1880s, Franck was relatively unknown in America and few of his works were played; of course, the *Trois Chorals* had not been written. Perhaps the addressee wished to write an article or an entry in a dictionary or encyclopedia or maybe the information was to be used for program notes. The letter begins:

César Franck began his studies at the Liège Conservatoire, where he won a first prize for piano at the age of eleven. He then went to Paris, entered the Conservatoire,

and obtained successively the first prize for piano, counterpoint, and fugue and a second prize for organ.

He was heard as a virtuoso for several years then devoted himself particularly to composition and organ study. He is presently professor of organ at the Conservatoire de Paris and organist of Ste. Clotilde.

Franck then lists his principal works, first chamber works, then the four oratorios, six organ pieces in one volume and three organ pieces in one *livraison*, a Mass with orchestra, four symphonic poems, the *Variations symphoniques*, and a *Symphonie* for orchestra, some choral works, piano pieces, and songs. Since the *Symphony in D Minor* wasn't completed until August 1888 (premiered February 17, 1889), this letter was the last written of the three. It may also not have been written to the same individual as the first two, since it is unlikely that the composer would have written out a catalog of his works twice for the same person.

The first of the letters from César Franck is seven pages and is dated October 12, 1887. Addressed to "Monsieur and cher collègue," it is written in response to two letters, the second of which Franck received around October 4, both of which he had to have translated. Franck writes:

It is a real joy for me to know that someone so far away is involved with my music and I am grateful for your encouragement. . . .


You asked, dear Sir, if I have written other organ pieces. The answer is no. So you have all that I have composed for the King of Instruments.


He then appends a three-page list of his 13 major works with the publisher of each: four oratorios; the *Mass; Prélude, Choral et Fugue* for piano; three symphonic poems: *Les Djinnns, Les Éolides*, and *Le Chasseur maudit*; the *Variations symphoniques* for piano and orchestra, the last four available in transcriptions for two pianos; four trios; the *Quintette*; and the *Sonata for piano and violin*, and says that "It would please me if you could adapt some excerpts for organ." A finer permission from a composer to make organ transcriptions of his works would be hard to find. As a postscript, Franck adds "a piece to this already long list—a *grand Morceau symphonique* from the oratorio, *Rédemption*, for four hands and which one of my students, M. Pierre de Bréville, has arranged admirably for two pianos." This Symphonic Interlude was arranged for organ by Marcel Dupré and played every year at the Christmas Eve Midnight Mass at Saint-Sulpice. It was finally published in 1972, the year after his death.


The next Franck letter was written on New Year's Eve of the same year (1887) and is evidently in response to a request for tempo indications for his nine major organ works. The first four pages are missing, but on the fifth and sixth Franck has written out the incipit of each of the last four of the *Six Pièces* with metronome markings. The indications of the *Six Pièces* correspond to those quoted by Joël-Marie Fouquet in his 1999 biography of César Franck.⁴ Fouquet's citations were inscribed in Franck's hand on what may have been his own score, now in anonymous private hands in Paris. The

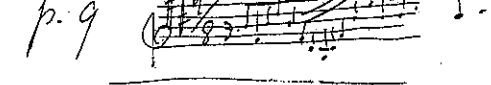
5

N^o 3 *Pièce, Jugement Variation*

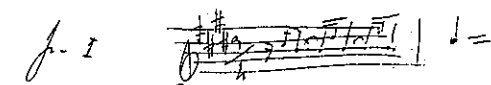
p. 2.  ♩ = 72

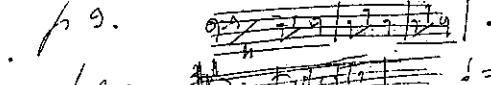
p. 5.  ♩ = 60


p. 6.  ♩ = 112

p. 9.  ♩ = 72


N^o 4. *Pastorale*

p. 1.  ♩ = 76.

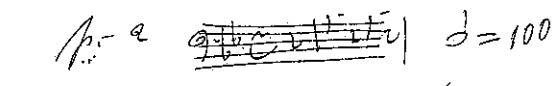
p. 9.  ♩ = 126

p. 9.  ♩ = 76

N^o 5 *Prière*

p. 2.  ♩ = 92.

N^o 6. *Final*

p. 2.  ♩ = 100

2 m^{es} pour que vous
 dans le moment le
 recueil. J'espère
 pour le n^o 7 il faut
 beaucoup. Postérieur
 dans l'interprétation.
 pour le n^o 2 ♩ = 92.
 pour le n^o 3. pour l'orgue! = 104
 Je terminerai en vous
 souhaitant que Messieurs
 avec qui. Nos amitiés
 pour bonne nouvelle ainsi

Charles Franck

91 X^{bre} 1887.

The last two pages of Franck's letter of December 31, 1887

tempos are considerably faster than those adopted by the French organists trained by Franck, his students, and their successors. The metronome marks in the Brooklyn letter are identical to those written on the score in Paris—indeed in this letter Franck quotes them just three years before his death.

But the real surprise is that Franck continues with tempo markings for the *Trois Pièces* of 1878. He said that he didn't have the collection of the *Trois Pièces* at hand at the moment but that for the first there must be "a great deal of fantasy in the interpretation," a modest pun on the title of the *Fantaisie in A*. If writing the letter without access to a score, Franck must have either remembered the metronome marks he had inscribed in his own scores or tried each piece with the metronome and noted it in the letter. Thus, he continues:

Pour No. 2, ♩ = 92.

Pour No. 3, Pièce Héroïque, ♩ = 104.

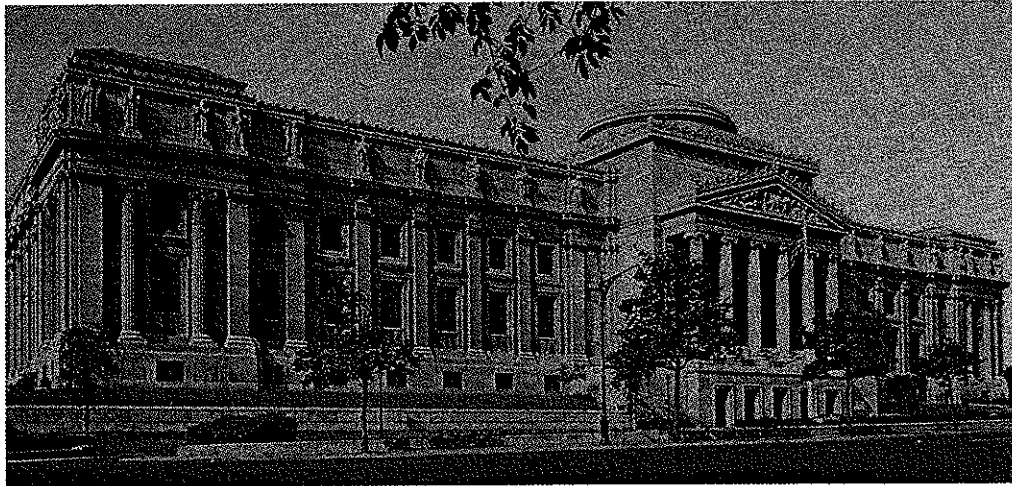
Franck's tempo of ♩ = 92 for the *Cantabile* is as disconcerting as the identical ♩ = 92 for the *Prière* and certainly assures the player's adhering to the tempo marking, *Non troppo lento*. As a reference point we note that Charles Tournemire, Marcel Dupré, and Jean Langlais all interpret the *Cantabile* at ♩ = 69, although Tournemire actually played it at ♩ = 76 on his 1931 recording.⁵ In order to explain Franck's almost consistently rapid tempos, Ton van Eck, in his article, "César Franck's Metronome Markings Reconsidered,"⁶ hypothesizes that while Franck played through each piece a student set the metronome but called out the number from the bottom of the cursor rather than the number at the top.⁷ If Franck had been playing at ♩ = 72, the student, observing the number below the cursor, would have read

♩ = 92. Franck's ♩ = 92, if corrected to ♩ = 72, thus becomes a barely imperceptible difference from the tempo of the three organists quoted. The numbers vary a few degrees depending on the manufacturer of the metronome. This explanation presupposes that not only was Franck's student ignorant of how to use a metronome but that Franck was also unfamiliar with the most common of musical tools, and that he was satisfied to quote incorrect metronome markings for his music until the end of his life.

Franck marked the *Pièce héroïque* (note his capitalization of "Héroïque") *Allegro maestoso*, but his metronome mark of ♩ = 104 seems extreme. A tempo of ♩ = 96 is indicated for the *Pièce héroïque* by Charles Tournemire in his book, *César Franck*,⁸ and maintained by Jean Langlais on his earliest recording of Franck's complete organ works, released in 1964.⁹ Charles Courboin, the Belgian American virtuoso, playing quite freely on his 1939 Victor recording, oscillated at ♩ = 88–96.

If Franck had read the number below the metronome cursor, however, the actual tempo would have been ♩ = 80, the precise tempo given by Joseph Bonnet in 1928 to his student William Self and the same tempo indicated by Marcel Dupré in his 1955 Bornemann edition of Franck's organ works, although Dupré played the *Pièce héroïque* at ♩ = 92 on his 1926 recording (the earliest phonograph record of a Franck organ work) at London's Queen's Hall.

The American organist Winslow Cheney studied the *Pièce héroïque* with R. Huntington Woodman and referred to him in a 1937 article on performing the work.¹⁰ Cheney made no specific mention of tempo in his article, but if Woodman had adhered to Franck's ♩ = 104, it seems certain that Cheney would have mentioned it as being considerably faster than other organists were playing it.



The Brooklyn Museum (photo: Louis H. Frohman)

We have an eyewitness account of Franck's own performance of the third of the *Six Pièces*: Alexandre Guilmant, one of Franck's first champions as an organ composer who regularly included his music on his recital programs. In a survey of organ music, he wrote:

Does it not happen even today that modern pieces are often played too fast? A piece like César Franck's *Prélude, Fugue et Variation* is often played *Allegro*, although the composer simply marked *Andantino cantabile*! That is misplaced virtuosity! The composer did not play it like that. The tempo was about $\text{♩} = 52$ for the *Prélude* and *Variation* and $\text{♩} = 72$ for the *Fugue*.¹¹

Below is a comparison of Franck's metronome indication for the *Prélude, Fugue et Variation*, a "corrected" interpretation of his indication, Guilmant's remembrance of Franck's own playing, the suggested tempo of Tournemire, and Marcel Dupré's 1930 recording¹² (his Franck edition suggests $\text{♩} = 63$ for the *Prélude* and *Variation*, and agrees with Tournemire's $\text{♩} = 88$ for the *Fugue*).

	Franck	Franck Corrected	Guilmant	Tournemire	Dupré
Prélude and Variation	$\text{♩} = 72$	$\text{♩} = 48$	$\text{♩} = 52$	$\text{♩} = 60$	$\text{♩} = 58$
Fugue	$\text{♩} = 112$	$\text{♩} = 90$	$\text{♩} = 72$	$\text{♩} = 88$	$\text{♩} = 116$

Guilmant's tempo coincides pretty well with the corrected Franck tempo for the two outer movements, but his marking for the *Fugue* is conservative. Tournemire's tempo for the *Fugue* is almost identical to the corrected Franck tempo. On the other hand, Dupré actually played it faster than Franck's autograph tempo.

We know that a number of Franck's pupils studied his works with him: sometime during the 1887-88 term, Marie Prestat brought the *Pièce héroïque* to study with him. Albert Mahaut and Adolphe Marty, both first-prize winners in Franck's organ class, studied Franck's works with him. Louis Vierne said that in 1889-90 he heard Franck indicate the tempos, shading, articulation, and phrasing of the *Six Pièces* and the *Trois Pièces*. None of these organists was ever criticized in the press for playing Franck's organ works too slowly, and none of these players ever mentioned that Franck had indicated a faster tempo for his organ works than that at which they played them.

It might be mentioned for consideration that, quite early, there may have been disagreement between Franck's tempos and those that his students considered to be appropriate. When Eugène Gigout, uninvited, took it upon himself to play the *Cantabile* at Franck's funeral, Louis Vierne, with Tournemire, a student in Franck's last organ class, remem-

bered that Gigout "played it too fast and without expression."¹³ Could the real "Franck tradition" have been conveyed by Gigout and not, as we have always supposed, by Franck's own students?

The author is indebted to Deborah Wythe, archivist of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, for her generosity in providing access to Franck's letters and for her kind help in the preparation of this article.

NOTES

1. The organization was founded in 1823 as the Brooklyn Apprentices' Library, reorganized in 1843 as the Brooklyn Institute, and again in 1890 as the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences. A museum was opened in 1897 and the name formally changed to Brooklyn Museum of Art in October 1896.
2. Correspondence between Franklin W. Hooper, director of the Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences, and McKim, Mead and White. The file contained disorganized materials from 1897-1903 relating to the planning and construction of the museum building.
3. Obituaries appeared in *The American Organist* (Jan. 1943, p. 43), and *The Diapason* (Jan. 1943, pp. 1-2)
4. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1999, pp. 950-51.
5. Polydor 561047.
6. *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST* (Feb. 2002), pp. 52-55.
7. This may have been a Francophone trait. Louis Vierne once asked a former student, Philipp de Bremond d'Ars, how to read the metronome, "that is, from above or below the sliding weight. 'From above,' de Bremond d'Ars replied; to which Vierne sharply protested, 'No! It must be read from below!'" (Rulon Christiansen, "Hommage à Louis Vierne: A Conversation with André Fleury," *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, Dec. 1987, p. 64.) This explains the obviously incorrect metronome markings in Vierne's *Third Symphony*, but not the correct tempos of other works. Vierne's confusion was evidently intermittent.
8. Translated into English in Rollin Smith, *Toward an Authentic Interpretation of the Organ Works of César Franck*, 2nd edition (Hillsdale, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 2002), p. 88.
9. Gregorian Institute of America M 108/109/110; S 108/109/110. Copyrighted in 1963, this LP was recorded that year or earlier. It has been reissued on compact disc GIA 272.
10. "A Lesson in Playing Franck," *The American Organist*, August 1937, pp. 263-66.
11. "La Musique d'orgue," *Encyclopédie de la Musique et Dictionnaire du Conservatoire*, Deuxième Partie (Paris: Delegrave, 1926), p. 1,157.
12. At Queen's Hall, London, Gramophone D 1843.
13. See Rollin Smith, *Louis Vierne: Organist of Notre-Dame Cathedral* (Hillsdale, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 2000), p. 49.

Rollin Smith was organist of the Brooklyn Museum from 1968 to 1974. He has recorded the complete organ works of César Franck twice and published two books on the interpretation of Franck's music. His recent book, *Louis Vierne: Organist of Notre-Dame Cathedral*, has won the first Max B. Miller Book Award established by the Organ Library of the Boston AGO Chapter to recognize distinguished scholarship in the fields of organ literature and performance