



Henri Duparc

Born: January 21, 1848, Paris

Died: February 12, 1933, Mont-de-Marsan, France

Aux étoiles (*Paris, 1874; revised 1911*)

Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, and strings

Performance time: *ca.* 6:00

Have I not loved too well the beauty of shapes and colors . . . [?]
Henri Duparc

It is a pity that Henri Duparc never allowed the full potential of his musical genius to reach fruition. When Duparc was only thirty-seven, a severe neurasthenic condition psychologically crippled him to the point of abruptly abandoning composition for the remainder of his life – and, at eighty-five, he lived a long one. Furthermore, he was overly inclined to self-criticism and was in the habit of needlessly destroying his works. Many of these pieces were regarded as masterpieces by his fellow distinguished artists – Saint-Saëns, Fauré, and d’Indy for instance. However, the comparatively small amount of material that Duparc did leave for posterity (less than forty extant works) is absolutely sublime. His complete musical legacy rests in some seventeen art songs written before 1879 as well as several compositions for orchestra. The songs, especially, are considered to be among the greatest in this form.

As a young man Duparc attended the Jesuit College of Vaugirard in Paris where he initially enrolled as a law student. Simultaneously he studied piano with César Franck and eventually relinquished his potential legal career to become one of the maestro’s first composition pupils. Franck considered Duparc to be extremely gifted. It was during the late-1860s that Duparc first began to publish his music and, of course, destroyed far more than was ever printed. Following his lessons with Franck, he joined with Camille Saint-Saëns and founded the Société Nationale de Musique Moderne in 1871. Fourteen years later, in 1885, Duparc would cease composing for the remainder of his life – nearly fifty more years.

Considerable insight into Duparc’s peculiar mental state can be gained from a poignant letter of January 19, 1922 to his close friend (composer) Jean Cras. Here Duparc explains the perplexing rationale behind the destruction of his music.

Having lived 25 years in a splendid dream, the whole idea of [musical] representation has become . . . repugnant. The other reason for this destruction . . . was the complete moral transformation that God imposed on me 20 years ago and which . . . obliterated all of my past life.

Deparc, *Aux étoiles*

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He spent most of his remaining years in Switzerland devoted to his family. Here he read and painted until ultimately becoming blind and paralyzed.

Duparc sought to express beauty as purely and simply as possible. While there is an impassioned warmth to his music, there is also a profound sadness of unspoken depth. Wagner's influence is apparent in his melodic inspiration and harmonic style, yet the foretelling of Debussy's "impressionism" is unmistakable.

Aux étoiles (Toward the Stars) is all that remains from a three-movement orchestral work entitled *Poème nocturne*. It was premiered in Paris on April 11, 1874 at the Société Nationale de Musique Moderne. The short work begins and ends quietly. Throughout there is a lush sadness filled with sensuous yearning and emotional depth. If only Duparc had possessed the confidence and stability to preserve his music.



Francis Poulenc

Born: January 7, 1899, Paris

Died: January 30, 1963, Paris

Concerto in G minor for Organ, String Orchestra, and Timpani (Paris, 1938)

Instrumentation: solo organ with string orchestra comprising violins, violas, violoncellos, double basses, and timpani

Performance time: ca. 25:00

I know perfectly well that I'm not one of those composers who have made harmonic innovations like Igor [Stravinsky], Ravel or Debussy, but I think there is room for new music which doesn't mind using other people's chords.

Francis Poulenc (1942)

In 1893, American-born heiress Winnaretta Singer (daughter of Isaac Singer, the sewing machine magnate) wed Prince Edmond de Polignac of France. Even though she was the twentieth of twenty-four children, there was ample money to go around and Winnaretta brought an immense dowry to her marriage. Singer's inheritance, combined with the established wealth of Prince Edmond's made for a nearly unshakeable fortune. Their union was based upon mutual respect and of artistic friendship expressed primarily through a love of music. By 1894, the opulent couple established a music salon at their Parisian mansion – a 1500-square-foot room capable of seating 250 guests. It was here at

the Polignac salon that premieres of music (some through invitation and others from commission) by Chabrier, d'Indy, Debussy, Fauré, Ravel, Stravinsky, Milhaud, de Falla, and Francis Poulenc took place.

As early as 1919, twenty year old Poulenc began performing at the concerts hosted by Princess Winnaretta Singer-Polignac. Here he introduced the song set *Cocardes* for soprano and piano where the sound of a street band was imitated. Poulenc's favor with the Princess had begun and he returned frequently to her stage as a pianist. Beyond that, his acceptance in wider musical circles grew as a member of *Les Six*, an arbitrary grouping of young French composers that included Milhaud and Honegger, among others. A little over a decade later in 1932, Poulenc first performed his Concerto in D minor for 2 Pianos and Orchestra at the salon – his first commission from the heiress.

Poulenc's two-piano concerto was well received and two years later, in 1934, the Princess began conversations with the composer about an organ concerto. Many years earlier, after her husband's death in 1901, a magnificent multi-rank Cavallé-Coll organ had been installed in the great room and the Princess wanted to display its grandeur . . . herself!

Poulenc, Concerto for Organ

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Over the next four years, Poulenc found the writing of the organ concerto to be slow and even tedious. This was partly due to the fact that he was a pianist not an organist and because other projects distracted him – for example, the Mass in G and a film score *Litanies à la vierge noire*. At one point, he wrote to the Princess that:

It [the organ concerto] is not the amusing Poulenc of the Concerto for Two Pianos, but more like a Poulenc on the way to the cloisters.

Finally, in the spring of 1938, the Princess began to press Poulenc for completion and proposed a June premiere. He begged for more time and bore down on the composition during his summer holiday at the tiny village of Anost in rural France. Again he communicated with his patroness:

Never, since I first began composing, have I had so much trouble finding my means of expression, but I nevertheless hope that it now flows freely without giving the impression of too much effort . . . it is an honorable work . . . you will surely understand . . . how hard it would be for me to risk compromising the result of so many months of labor through lack of care at the end.

Poulenc eventually finished the manuscript at Anost, but now had a work that required far more virtuosity than the generous Princess could offer. For the premiere slated for December 16, 1938 at the de Polignac salon, Poulenc enlisted the services of Paris Conservatoire organist Maurice Durafilé – himself a noted composer. Durafilé had given copious advice on the organ registrations and Poulenc showed his gratitude by

inscribing the great organist's name on the title page of the score. The unveiling of the concerto transpired as scheduled with Nadia Boulanger conducting, Durafilé at the organ, and Poulenc in the audience . . . considerably relieved. The first public performance was six months later on June 21, 1939 at Paris' Salle Gaveau with Roger Désormière conducting the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris and, again, Durafilé as soloist. *La revue musicale* applauded the piece for its "exalted and virile inspiration . . . written in a very forthright style."

The concerto is played without pause. It is, perhaps, best understood structurally as an introduction (reminiscent of Bach) with five principal sections (fast-slow-fast-slow-fast) and a reflective coda. Along with its abundant contrasts in tonal color, the work is stylistically diverse deriving elements from many traditions – from Buxtehude and the Baroque organ to Vierne and late-Impressionism. With its rhythmic vitality and flow of unbroken musical line, the Concerto in G minor is a masterpiece of the organ repertoire. In the end, it is probably just as well that Princess Winnaretta graciously only funded the commission and left the performing of it to the masters.



César Franck

Born: December 10, 1822, Liège, Belgium

Died: November 8, 1890, Paris

Symphony in D minor (*Paris, 1886-8*)

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 cornets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, and strings

Performance time: *ca.* 38:00

After a while . . . the deafening clatter [of Franck's improvisatory experimentations] would die down to gradually a murmur, to near silence, and at last to nothing at all . . . The Master had found what he was looking for.

Vincent d'Indy, *César Franck* (1906)

For years, César Franck's students at the Paris Conservatoire (d'Indy, Dukas, Duparc, *et.al.*) had urged their teacher to write a symphony. Although the great organist began composing as a teenager (in fact, age 12), it was not until after his fiftieth birthday that works of mastery and genius finally flowed from his pen. Many of Franck's most famous pieces were conceived in the 1880s as evidenced by the Piano Quintet (1880) and Violin Sonata (1886), the symphonic poem *The Accursed Huntsman* (1882), and the Symphonic Variations (1885) for solo piano and orchestra. However, the humble professor (and he was) had reservations about obliging his pupils' persistent request. Franck was all too aware that the Germans, and not the French, were regarded as the champions of this form. Yes, Berlioz had boldly presented his *Symphonie fantastique*

nearly sixty years earlier along with three others by 1840, Gounod had two to his credit in 1855-6 with Saint-Saëns offering his first two in the same decade. Regardless, up to that point the French had excelled in most every other musical structure except the symphony. In the public's eye, it was Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, or Brahms . . . not a Frenchman. Franck internally wrestled with this perception. Finally, he surrendered to the prodding of his Conservatoire disciples and began to compose a monumental symphony.

Franck started the Symphony in D minor in 1886 as the Basilica of Sainte Clotilde where he had been organist for thirty years. Here, cloistered in the profound silence of this magnificent Parisian church, César Franck heard and manipulated themes based upon the mysterious and unresolved three-note motif that had intrigued composers before him.



Beethoven had used it in a late string quartet (Op. 135) and wrote above it in the score “Must it be?” Wagner incorporated it in the Ring Cycle as the questioning theme of fate and Liszt made it the central subject of *Les préludes*. When the score (dedicated to his student Henri Duparc) was finished on August 22, 1888, Franck held a symphonic masterpiece in the “cyclic form” where all the principal melodic subjects grow out of this Franck, Symphony in D minor

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brief theme and are then repeated in the final movement.

The premiere took place at the Société des Concerts du [Paris] Conservatoire on February 17, 1889 with Jules Garcin conducting. Franck called it a “response to his students.” Sadly, the occasion was close to a fiasco. From the outset, the musicians in the Conservatoire orchestra viewed the new work scornfully. Although extremely talented, they seemed unable to relate to Franck’s ingenious thematic transformations, vivid orchestral colors, and daring new forms. The young players strongly expressed their objections and, at times, even had the audacity during rehearsal to put their instruments down. It was only Garcin’s firm leadership that brought the symphony to performance.

Composer Vincent d’Indy, Franck’s most devoted student, gives some particulars about the premiere in his biography *César Franck*:

The subscribers could make neither head nor tail of it, and the musical authorities were much in the same position. I inquired of one of them . . . what he thought of the work. ‘That a symphony? . . . who ever heard of writing for the English horn in a symphony?’ . . .

Obviously, Haydn’s Symphony No. 22, “The Philosopher,” and Berlioz’ *Symphonie fantastique* had been either ignored or forgotten as both included *cor anglais*. The review *Le Ménestrel* called it “morose . . .” and Charles Gounod, clearly no friend of Franck’s, proclaimed that it was “incompetence pushed to dramatic lengths.” Fortunately, the composer’s confidence remained unwavering for upon returning home after the concert, he told his family that “. . . it sounded well, just as I thought it would.”

The symphony has three movements with the second being two synthesized into one. The entire score is saturated with the three-note motif presented at the outset. This simple thematic statement forms the basis for everything that follows. The opening *Lento*; *Allegro ma non troppo* spins the brief subject through widely different keys. The ensuing *Allegretto* beautifully renders the theme as a haunting melody played by the English horn above pizzicato harp and strings. The finale, *Allegro non troppo*, joyously recapitulates the core material bringing the symphony back to its origins.

Postscript: A little over a year after the opening night performance, Franck was run down on a Paris street by an omnibus and injured severely. He rallied, to a degree, but in October developed pleurisy and died a few weeks later. His funeral was simple and attended by few from musical Paris. Chabrier delivered the eulogy while Lalo, Widor, and Fauré found their seats in the pews. The Ministry of Fine Arts neglected to send a delegate and with the exception of the ever faithful d'Indy, none of Franck's students were at the service. At the time, France seemed unaware that a great artist had passed.

Scott Sorenson