César Franck

String Quartet in D, FWV9 from String Quartet in D, FWV9;
Piano Quintet in F minor, FWV7
Naxos CD 8. 572009

Cristina Ortiz *pf*, Fine Arts Quartet

'I do not care to hear this Quartet in a crowd'
(Compton Mackenzie on the Franck String Quartet in *The Gramophone* 1925)

A new Naxos coupling of the César Franck String Quartet and Piano Quintet (Fine Arts Quartet and Christina Ortiz) prompts reflection on performance practices of French music of this era, somewhere at the end of nineteenth-century practices and the evolution of a new style for so-called 'Impressionism'. Franck was neither looking forward to the new style but nor was his music entirely suited to Germanic practices. His somewhat grave piano music demanded more depth than the off-the-page fleetness of a pianist like Louis Diémer, a renowned Saint-Saëns interpreter, who also had a way with Chopin.

Franck's pianism will, however, have to wait, for a little foraging reveals that there is more than enough of a performance (and reception) history of the String Quartet to interest those who, like myself, regard this piece as the greatest French string quartet of the nineteenth century. If not the greatest it is certainly the grandest: Debussy being the rival of course. But his quartet followed fast on the heels of Franck's, and whatever he said about the 'Pater Seraphicus', his quartet would not have been the same without the model of Franck who in the realms of the string quartet and the violin sonata was a *sine qua non*.

I perhaps need to lay my cards on the table: accepting that there are many who find the Franck String Quartet turgid and overlong: I couldn't live without my piano-duet transcription nor my library of recordings of it, now happily expanded backwards in time thanks to having to write about it.

Ringing in my ears when I put keys to screen was a phrase of David Fanning recently helping the record-buying public to build their library of the Tchaikovsky Piano Trio on BBC Radio 3. One or other of his clutch of CDs indulged in 'old-fashioned slides and swoops' (I paraphrase). Some listeners might like 'something closer to the printed score', he mused. What a lot of issues are raised by this 'building a library' approach which is necessarily pluralistic in its approach! Yes there is a split clientele, and I know many on both sides. There are those (including Conservatoire examiners, reviewers and organists) for whom playing away from the score is a punishable offence. There are those who can't get enough of it.

Three recordings in particular could be claimed to start a benchmarking process for performing Franck. First comes the premiere recording of the Franck Quartet, a 1925 recording by the Gramophone Company's own promotion, the Virtuoso Quartet, led by Marjorie Hayward. Some years later comes a classic recording for pianists and violinists alike: Thibaud and Cortot's electrically recorded performance of the Franck Violin Sonata (1929). It was in

fact their second recording of the work, an acoustic recording having been cut in 1923. The importance of this later recording, expertly cleaned up and transferred by several companies, can hardly be overestimated. Apart from its insight into Thibaud's playing of a complex and extended modern work, it is a lesson in duo-playing and gives a unique insight into the way in which pianistic expressive techniques of the era, especially dislocation, can be matched to what might be seen as their violinistic equivalent: an enormous range of ways of getting from one note to another, ranging from the clean shift, through a range of *portamenti* shapes, to a full glissando.

A further lesson in Franck performance is the 1927 recording of the Piano Quintet with Cortot and the International String Quartet. The hesitant first bars of the second movement of this, with their quiet but exaggerated *portamenti*, take us back in time to *fin-de-siècle* expressivity like no other recording I know. To be fanciful and with the literary context of Franck's music in mind, one might say the recording provides a window into Proust's bedroom. Unparallelled!

All this is very well, but criteria need to be decided, perhaps more stringent than whether we like dirty old playing or prefer to be 'closer to the score'. Two overarching principles might be put forward as yardsticks by which these early recordings (and more modern ones) can be evaluated. The first is the 'face' of the score: what it says on the printed page. The second is its 'heart': the techniques of the composer's idiosyncratic musical language which need to be absorbed into the players' bloodstreams and perhaps brought out. And underneath, we hardly need to be reminded, are the welter of techniques used for expressive purposes, and which often seemed to go against a prescriptive reading of the score. These were an imperative of the period, largely obliterated by the ridiculous tradition of blinkered over-respect for the *urtext* on the part of performers.

Here we encounter an overriding consideration beyond issues of historical performance itself: that expressive overlay to the score – any score – must arise from its inner structures; its particular expressive devices and the character of its ideas. In Franck's case we must first ascertain the nature of these.

His reputation has been damaged by two rather silly critical approaches to him which to this day have refused to die, and which you will find ample evidence of in the liner notes for several of his currently available recordings. The first is this overblown nature of a 'Pater Seraphicus', promulgated by d'Indy. It was exploited by the English writer Compton McKenzie, who had a sideline in the criticism of gramophone records and even wrote a book with 'Gramophone Evenings' prescribing amateur evenings around the gramophone where they might enjoy themed programmes with a cup of tea, white-bread sandwiches and simnel cake. In his review of the premiere recording he advocated listening to music in the comfort of one's study as better than listening live in the concert hall. He reiterated the idea that Franck's place – of inspiration, of close to Godliness and of alliegance to the King of Instruments – was in the organ-loft of St Clotilde:

> He, perhaps, more than any other composer, requires the right mood for his music, and how seldom shall we find it in a concert hall! I do not care to hear that quartet in a crowd, but in my own room with my own books and pictures round me, I am beside him in his organ loft, and I have heard the 'seraphim whose footfalls tinkled on the tufted floor'. Surely, if ever the Holy Angels walked beside a human being, they walked beside César Franck up there in the organ loft of Ste. Clotilde.[1]

[1] *Gramophone* (1925): 158.

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What hooey! Who knows exactly where this hagiography originated (reading his book on Franck one suspects d'Indy) but it was the first of two entirely wrong-headed approaches to a musician who was as adept in the recital hall as he was as the *titulaire* of St Clotilde.

Linked with this idea is the view that first and foremost Franck was an organist (as if a term of abuse) and that his 'organ-style' lay at the heart of all his work: not, therefore, a 'real' composer. Tovey was certainly not the initiator of this view but he put it most amusingly in his article on Chamber Music in *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*:

> The string quartet is full of excellent organ music, and it imitates the organ very skillfully. But, except for the scherzo, which is full of anybody's brilliance, there is strangely little evidence that it is a quartet at all.[2]

Yes, the String Quartet begins with a home-key pedal point, as if he has double-pedalled a perfect fifth on the pedal-board of his rather second-rate Cavaillé-Coll. But it's a huge piece and lasts longer than any other French String Quartet of its time (there weren't many) and it requires an introduction with gravitas.

Has the second-movement Mendelssohnian Scherzo anything remotely to do with organ playing? And could the intricate chromatic counterpoints of much of the piece ever really be realized on the organ? I think not.

Contrary to Tovey's silly remarks, the face of the score is skilfully articulated for quartet, both in terms of its slurring and bowing, and in terms of its rather unusual directions, in his case in Italian. These occur in most detail in the first movement and it would seem that by the time the players have been through this, instinct will take over. Most notable in this movement are varying degrees of sweetness. We have *dolce*, *molto dolce* and *dolcissimo*, and sometimes coupled with these is the indication *vibrato*. The Virtuoso Quartet recording observes these indications to the letter. In between passages are performed with relative coolness, with the leader playing with neither much *vibrato* as a part of tone-production nor *portamenti*. But although far more sparingly than Thibaud in his Sonata recording, the more *dolce* passages are played more *legato* and *vibrato*, the former effected by moderate and varied *portamenti* here and there.

All is not, however, heavenly sweetness. There are fugal passages and other long structures built upon *ostinati*, and sequences rising in intensity, with full-sounding harmonic accompaniments provided by the two middle voices in tricky double-stopping. These are frequently marked *energico* and on a couple of occasions Franck prefers the delivery to be *amaro* (no sugar in the coffee) warning the players against a lyrical interpretation with the indication *non troppo dolce*. The legato in *dolce* phrases – sometimes lyrical melody, sometimes a web of expressive counterpoint – is on occasion marked in what was in Franck's time a relatively modern notation where bowing or phrase marks overarched ties.

In another way, too, Tovey's cloth-eared remark about organ music was indulging in a critical habit of the time: to embroider the anecdotal rather than to engage with the score – a pity his *Gramophone* reviews were not up to the usual standards he maintained in his more academic writing. Although the

[2] *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, 3 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1929–30): Vol. 1, 251.

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opening might sound well on a Cavaillé, many of the subsequent motives are entirely idiomatic for strings and too intricate for the organ. Apart from the diaphanous Scherzo there is a particular delight in double-dotted repeated notes in the piece, easily achieved, of course, by a quick turn of the bow but not an effect well suited to the sluggish action of the average turn-of-the-century organ.

One feature makes interesting comparison with the Thibaud/Cortot recording of the Sonata. In the Quartet the more 'learned' movements are indicated to be played less *dolce* and the Virtuosos obediently oblige. Listening again to Thibaud's Sonata I had forgotten that in the canon on which the finale is based, he and Cortot do exactly the opposite, delighting in all kinds of expressive devices: Thibaud with his slidy characterizations and Cortot with his greasy tenor thumb.

The statue outside St Clotilde, where the composer played Sunday services for years, is a more important monument to his reputation than the countless critical snipings which have been aimed at poor old Père César! Every genre of Franck's output has been symmetrically chiselled out on the monument. His organ works are among them but by no means dominating. The memorial is perhaps a little optimistic in promoting him as an opera composer. To assert that he didn't quite have the stagecraft of Bizet is a bit of an understatement, but his opera *Hulda* does take its place among a repertoire of operas in which France was fascinated by Scandinavian (perhaps Celtic) mythology. As for his chamber music, the Quartet, neglected for so long, takes pride of place, superceded in reputation by the much-played Piano Quintet.

Approaching the musical techniques of the mature Franck leads us into the second underlying principle of appropriate performance practice. What are the characteristics of the 'heart' of his music that must form the yardsticks of any judgement of performances? Some commentators have cited Schubert as a possible inspiration for Franck's constant wavering between major and minor. Whatever the case, major/minor alternations are an integral part of the expressivity of his music. Whether or not the quartet players have studied the harmony to ascertain their relative importance in the flux of tonality, or whether it is a result of natural musicianship, the recordings currently available either succeed or fail in this respect. Music of this period in France has often been criticized for its overuse of the repetition of two-bar phrases. Whatever the case, these need to be dealt with by performers and their essence is that repetition is always never the same.

There are other considerations. First, there is his counterpoint. In a string quartet voices need to emerge and recede: a bland texture won't suffice. I'm afraid the latest Fine Arts offering isn't the highest scorer in this respect. For a long time we lived only with the Fitzwilliam recording made at Snape in 1978. It was matchless: no other post-war quartet had taken on serious challenge of the piece, bringing the freshness of more modern recording techniques to the work. The result was a first stepping stone which was alone in the catalogue for almost a decade. With its warm sound, the much-lamented Christopher Rowland brought a full-blooded conviction to this pioneering interpretation, beautifully dialogued by Ioan Davies' impeccable phrasing. Those for whom this was the introduction to the work still wouldn't be without this recording, I suspect. As I write it is again available across the world from Australian Decca.

Phrasing the expressive arches of Franck's lines – very much idiomatic for strings and not at all organ-like – is an art in itself. The Vilnius Quartet, another

very impressive reading, play in a different way from the Fitzwilliams, more legato (sometimes hyper-legato) but always intensely musical and doing that thing with the major/minor shifts I've already proposed as essential. They are also a lesson in a musical interpretation of the flux of Franck's chromatic harmony: its ebb and flow. They have, unlike the Fine Arts, and the Dantes (another available recording) an outside ear which ensures unity of purpose, but compelling counterpoints. It is a considered and thoughtful reading but somehow not very French. Compelling though, so never mind.

The compelling expressivity in the Vilnius recording, which has the danger of perpetual slowing raises another issue central to Franck's music: his clear streak of Classicism. His respect for classical forms and his love of Bach surely counter his vagrant harmony, where we are sometimes on the edge of getting lost. And then there are the returns of the cyclic themes: these too are restless, never recapitulations but referring us back while at the same time taking us forward.

It is abundantly clear that the use of exaggerated slowing as a technique for intensification was crucial to the way the Virtuosos played: certainly a wider fashion of the times. Possibly, in their case, this is a case of the message being tailored to the medium in that the changes required by the 78 were pandered to rather than overcome. Where other interpretations aim for continuity, particularly in the long and sectional first movement, the Virtuosos exaggerate the sectionality to the extent that a massive long ritardando of over 20 bars makes the first section sound as if it is a movement in itself. There's a hint of this in the version of this movement, recorded by the Pro Arte Quartet in 1933 though they don't impose the long ritenutos of the Virtuosos. Even so their first movement comes out at seventeen-and-a-quarter minutes: a good one-and-a-half minutes longer than the first recording, and the third movement is slower still with some real *pianissimo* hush before the recapitulation. Representative of the Franco-Belgian school with its sweetness of tone and traditions of expressivity bearing much similarity to those of Thibaud, this recording has an authentic quality which the earlier English players – interesting and excellent though they were – did not possess.

Permitting myself to throw a couple of subjective adjectives at their readings of the slower movements, there's a deeper melancholy about the opening of both, and a restrained quality throughout. But it gets going later and some of the beating accompaniments are the most energetic on any of the recordings. The diaphony of the second movement is deliciously delicate, translucent and more contrasting with the chordal sections: a further strong point of this version which has constant fantasy and imagination. Having at last got hold of this recording, it's one I wouldn't be without.

The *Gramophone* reviewer of the Pro Arte's version represented a diametrically opposite view from Tovey's: C.M. Crabtree rather liked the work, although he had one or two reservations about intonation, not to mention his reporting of what he claims as a majority view of the work's worth:

> Many people consider the Quartet Franck's greatest work. The first movement is magnificent, perhaps the finest ever written, by anyone, and the second and third are almost as wonderful, each in its way; the opening of the Finale I find, if anything, more effective than that of the Finale of Beethoven's Choral Symphony.[3]

[3] *Gramophone* (Feb. 1934): 32.

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Some might think that's going it a bit! Never mind 'greatest works': the performance and reception history which, I am more inclined to believe, must be studied in tandem, are not a way back to the past but forward to the future. I think.

Can you now imagine Baroque Music without its trills, its *messa di voce* and its light upbeats (just to name a few attributes)? I can't conceive of an engaging future of the performance of Franck without an advance on the features sifted through in our brief examination of its historical performance practice as we can deduce from this string of string recordings. Pianism next time for scrutiny.

Richard Langham Smith
Royal College of Music

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Select Discography

Virtuoso Quartet (recorded 1925) Historical Recordings HRCD00032 (www.historic-recordings.co.uk CD and download available at time of going to press)
Pro Arte Quartet (recorded 1933) Biddulph LAB106
Fitzwilliam Quartet (recorded 1978) Decca Eloquence 476 8463
Vilnius Quartet (recorded 2008) Brilliant Classics 93716
Fine Arts Quartet (released 2009) Naxos 8.572009