

Vincent d'Indy, César Franck (1906)

In 1906 Vincent d'Indy released his first book on music, devoted to his revered teacher who had died sixteen years earlier. This *César Franck*, the second volume in the series "Les Maîtres de la musique" published by Félix Alcan, appeared the same year as *Palestrina* by Michel Brenet (Marie Bobillier) and André Pirro's *Jean-Sébastien Bach*. Franck having been studied theretofore only in minor publications (which d'Indy readily cites), the book is a landmark and would remain the most important and influential until *La Véritable Histoire de César Franck* (1955) by Léon Vallas, also a biographer of d'Indy,

D'Indy's *César Franck* is divided into three parts: "The Man", "The Artist and the Musical Work", and "The Educator and the Human Work", supplemented by a catalogue of Franck's oeuvre and a bibliography. The second part is by far the largest, with its ample study of the composer's three "periods". The author's avowed intention is "to show the man and make him loved just as [d'Indy himself] knew and loved him" (d'Indy, *César Franck*, pg. 236). The author wears his subjectivity on his sleeve, lacking as he did the necessary temporal or emotional distance from his subject. Idealising his teacher, he portrays him as a man of profound goodness, almost a saint, drawing numerous parallels to the figure of Christ with emphatic rhetoric that makes one smile today. The work has often been compared for this reason to a hagiography. But while d'Indy adorns Franck with numerous virtues (charity, modesty, industry, etc.), he also reveals his "passionate" temperament (ibid., pg. 42) and the faintly ridiculous and touching side of his character. Nor does he refrain – quite the contrary – from criticising those of Franck's works that he considers less successful, including the youthful compositions, certain pages of *Les Béatitudes*, and the operas *Hulda* and *Ghisèle*.

The book is of course marked by d'Indy's ideas and biases. The grey areas in Franck's life allow him to exaggerate his role in nineteenth-century music history. From page 1, two guiding ideas appear: Franck is the "true successor of the master of Bonn" (ibid., pg. 1) and, though born in Liège, in Wallonia, he is a French composer. D'Indy tries to make him the link between the "young French school", his own milieu, and the tutelary figure of Beethoven. As director of the Schola cantorum, he identifies this institution in closing as the repository of Franck's teaching. In a more polemical vein, he vents his grudges against the Conservatoire, certain government ministries, and the Institut, which had afforded Franck scant consideration. Similarly, as in all his writings, d'Indy works in allusions to current events: critiques of materialism and *verismo*, darts thrown at Grieg and Zola (in reaction to their aesthetic or their position in the Dreyfus Affair) and at the Germans.

D'Indy's point of view on Franck has since been nuanced, discussed, and contested, and rightly so. The work has nevertheless remained a reference for subsequent biographers, and its numerous personal recollections and anecdotes – often recounted in the first person singular – are irreplaceable. Joël-Marie Fauquet, Franck's most recent biographer in French, gives it its due, not without criticising it on a number of points. Far from a coldly scientific presentation, the work contains numerous aesthetic or even philosophical reflections and pictorial comparisons, which, though highly subjective, give it interest and originality and situate Franck in the artistic context of his time.

Coming from one of the most authoritative *franckistes*, d'Indy's *César Franck* enjoyed a predictable success and was reissued several times. It has been translated and published in several languages in Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

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