

Prélude, Aria et Final -- César Franck

César Franck (1822-1890) was a remarkable figure in Western Classical music, not least because of the interesting combination of his national heritage (Belgium), his adopted country (France), and his adopted *musical/compositional* style (Germany)—the latter two especially were, for many people, contradictory. A child pianist prodigy, Franck was exploited and worked nearly to death by his father, who at many points used his son as the sole breadwinner for the family. Fortunately through marriage Franck was able to make a break and find a “new” family, and from his early 20s until his 60s would live and work peacefully in Paris. Over the years there gathered around him a cohort of enthusiastic musicians and students who argued forcefully in favor of Wagner’s music—this created no small controversy in unsympathetic (and war-torn) France, what with Wagner being about as belligerently pro-German—and anti-French—as one can imagine. But Franck himself seems to have remained the “eye of the hurricane”—from all accounts he was a warm, deeply caring, if sometimes naïve, person.

His music thus bears a strong influence from Wagner. Additionally, Franck’s 40-year hiatus from the piano was supplemented by a 40-year love affair with the organ—Franck was, for most of his life, the organist of Saint-Clotilde Basilica in Paris. This influence is especially clear in the *Prelude, Aria and Finale*.

Prelude

Clocking in at around 10 minutes, the very title *Prelude* seems a bit misleading. It is, in fact, a fully-fledged sonata movement, complete with developmental fugue (!), and is the largest in scale, texture, and density of any of the movements. The opening chordal theme, marked *Allegro moderato e maestoso*, is warm, lush, and (somehow not conflictingly), march-like. Here and throughout one hears organ textures aplenty—thick, chordal writing is standard, but it is always rich with *counterpoint*. Additionally, the formal proportions are quite clear—a cadential trill and pause will mark the appearance of the second, more pensive, theme, first framed in high register (here again the organ’s antiphonal facility is invoked, with soprano statements answered by mellower treble/bass statements). The first truly turbulent music will be seen prior to another clear break which precipitates the development, which itself begins with a dark, severe and jagged fugue subject (an unorthodox subject in *octaves*). This slow-burn fugue will reach a violent outcry, which is suddenly assuaged by the most luminous, *cantabile* melody, carried downward by a rippling undercurrent. The recapitulation is again framed clearly, and will arrive in a most sublime way at the coda (for those interested in harmony, one of the most beautiful and unexpected modulations occurs here, when Franck introduces by deft slight-of-hand, the Neapolitan key).

Aria

As its title suggests, this is a *cantabile* movement whose inspiration is most likely domestic/secular, but it often approximates in texture the *Chorale* movement of Franck’s other, more well-known work for piano (the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*). Things often occur in threes in Franck’s music, and this movement is a god example—after

the improvisatory introduction, Franck gives three melodic cells; the first is child-like, simple, and seems to have the contour of a cradle song. The second is closely related, but intimates by its harmonic complexion more troubled inner impulses. The third melody is truly “Franckian”; the most chromatic, and with Wagnerian harmonies underneath. When each melody appears it is stated twice—once in the soprano and then in the bass—and throughout the movement this happens twice (for a total of four). Franck’s reliance on this scheme verges on dangerous—one further statement could weary the listener. In fact, it may be an intentional red herring—the very *opening* (and closing) melody, in high relief atop a swath of arpeggios, will prove to be a much more important component of the whole work (this is seen in *Finale*).

Finale

This is one of the truly virtuosic, exciting Romantic *finales* (and remains, along with its two preceding companions, undeservedly under-played). The opening chromatic rumble will be recognized as a counter-subject in the dark fugal development of the *Prelude*—here it is a theme in its own right, and one of malevolent intentions. Its harmonic twisting and side-stepping is nearly exhausting, and is only supplanted by the most heroic impulses of the second theme whose march-like chords reach the physical extremities of the keyboard. This theme will be framed again under a shimmering, joyful right hand just prior to the development. Franck’s love of cyclical music (if not clear from the *Finale*’s outset) is certainly obvious around the middle of the development—after the opening rumbling theme, the *Aria*’s childlike theme appears, almost celestial amidst a constellation of arpeggios. But it is the moment of the coda’s onset which is perhaps the most exhilarating cyclic achievement in the entire work—here, over a thundering torrent of octaves in the bass, the opening *maestoso* theme of the *Prelude* appears triumphantly. Immediately following is a passage of sublime beauty—Franck has wedded this theme (the *Prelude*’s opening) to the first theme of the *Aria* in an opalescent couching of arpeggios. This is at once recognized as the moment of *complete* cyclical consummation—all themes have been brought together. Listeners will be struck at the optimistic, patient way Franck achieves this; where the cyclical point of the *Prelude*, *Chorale and Fugue* is certainly on a more thunderous, epic scale, the one seen here is quietly understated, and is allowed to play out and deliquesce with a graceful tranquility.