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César FRANCK (1822-1890): Offertoires et Pièces posthumes

Elke Völker (organ), rec. 2003, orgue Cavaillé-Coll de la Basilique Notre-Dame de Bonsecours, Rouen, Seine-Maritime, France. AEOLUS AE10341 [78:20]

Lovers of late-romantic organ music will find this foray into some of the lesser-known organ works of César Franck an attractive proposition. For me Franck ranks alongside Max Reger as one of the greatest composers of organ music after J.S. Bach. He came along at the right time, when organ music in France was suffering a dip in fortunes due to waning of interest. His legacy helped kick-start a revival which laid the groundwork for composers such as Charles-Marie Widor, Louis Vierne, Marcel Dupré and Olivier Messiaen.

The less familiar territory featured on this disc spans a decade from 1854 until 1864, when the composer was in his thirties and the organ was central to his creativity. It all really begins with the Piece in E flat major of 1846. At just over 12 minutes it's an extensive work, penned three years after he had completed his studies at the Paris Conservatory. It remained unpublished until 1973.

Franck displayed an ingenious talent for improvisation on the organ, and apparently enjoyed improvising on Christmas melodies. There are two attractive 'Noël' Offertoires included. Two seasonal staples 'Nous voici dans la ville' and 'Quoi, ma voisine, es-tu fâchée?' are incorporated into the first, which begins with a flute-like improvisation weaving its magical web around a familiar hymn-like melody. Offertoire sur un Noël Breton portrays 'The Angels' and 'The Shepherd' in a delightful piece that showcases Franck's compositional adeptness, resourcefulness and flair.

Franck's exploration of differing emotions offers the listener plenty of contrast. A perfect example is the solemn demeanour of the Offertoire in F sharp minor, which inhabits a world far removed from the small-scaled Andantino, a gem whose simplicity and lyrical bent would, I'm sure, have won it many admirers when published in 1857 – it was his debut organ publication, by the way.

The Pièce pour Grand Orgue of 1854 calls time with resplendent brilliance. At 13½ minutes it forms an imposing conclusion to this compelling recital. What better way to showcase the magnificent splendours of the Cavaillé-Coll organ? Völker highlights the contrasting moods, rhythms and dynamics of the music with fluency and artful musicianship.

A few words about the organist Elke Völker. Her curriculum vitae is impressive by any standards. She studied organ, church music, musicology and German and Romance languages at the universities of Mannheim, Mainz and Heidelberg. Her teachers have included such notable names as Wolfgang RübSam, Nicholas Kynaston and Jean Guillou. She has picked up some significant accolades along the way, including the Grand Prize and Audience Prize at the prestigious Internationales Orgelwettbewerb Dom zu Speyer in 1995, as well as achieving a final position at the Concours International d'Orgue de la Ville de Paris and 3rd Prize in the International Organ Competition of Erfurt in 2002. She now has an extensive international concert and teaching career. I was particularly interested to discover that she specializes in the organ music of Sigfrid Karg-Elert.

The massive sound proportions of the Aristide Cavaillé-Coll organ (1857/1889) of the Basilique Notre-Dame de Bonsecours have been warmly captured by the Aeolus engineers. The basilica's acoustic renders clarity and detail. Völker offers a wide range of attractive registration combinations. The documentation, in English, French and German, is first class.

Stephen Greenbank