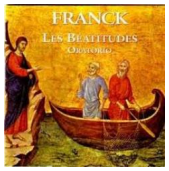
César Franck - Les Béatitudes (Helmuth Rilling) [1990]



1-1 Prologue 5:46 1-2 Beatitude I: Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit, For Theirs Is The Kingdom Of Heaven 13:41 1-3 Beatitude II: Blessed Are The Meek, For They Shall Inherit The Earth 10:47 1-4 Beatitude III: Blessed Are Those Who Mourn, For They Shall Be Comforted 18:16 1-5 Beatitude IV: Blessed Are Those Who Hunger And Thirst For Righteousness, For They Shall Be Satisfied 9:56 2-1 Beatitude V: Blessed Are The Mercyful, For They Shall Obtain Mercy 15:25 2-2 Beatitude VI: Blessed Are The Pure In Heart, For They Shall See God 14:40 2-3 Beatitude VII: Blessed Are The Peacemakers, For They Shall Be Called Sons Of God 15:57 2-4 Beatitude VIII: Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted For Righteousness' Sake 12:39 Tenor – Keith Lewis, Scot Weir Alto – Cornelia Kallisch Baritone – Gilles Cachemaille Bass – John Cheek, Juan Vasle, Reinhard Hagen Mezzo-soprano – Diana Montague, Ingeborg Danz Gächinger Kantorei Stuttgart Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart Conductor – Helmuth Rilling

We read in the anonymous notes accompanying this issue that César Franck died without ever hearing his oratorio Les Béatitudes, yet Martin Cooper in his celebrated book on French music (1951) tells us that it was performed, albeit privately, in 1879. Whichever is the case it would seem that Franck worked on it for almost ten years. Given the nature of the text and the nature of the man, it must have been a labour of love.

For the non-specialist music lover, César Franck's reputation probably rests above all on three works: the Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra, the Violin Sonata and the Symphony in D minor. I think it's as well if curious listeners begin with these pieces rather than the organ music, of which there is a fair amount. It tends to thickness and opacity, which on its own is enough to discourage us from investigating further the output of this composer; there is also a tendency to pedantry where passion might be hoped for. The three works cited above are more encouraging, though when he came to write a symphony it was almost as if he wanted to convert the symphony orchestra into a monstrous organ, and that work more than any other puts me in mind of Stravinsky's famous remark about the organ that "the monster never

breathes." But this is only one side of a composer who was capable of lighter things: the finale of the Violin Sonata is a particularly charming essay in canon, and the work as a whole is totally successful, and the end of the Symphonic Variations demonstrates a lightness of touch, even a lightness of heart, that Haydn might have recognised and appreciated.

A mixed composer, then, and his oratorio is certainly a mixed bag. The work takes as its starting point the eight beatitudes, or paragraphs of Christ's sermon to the multitudes on the mountainside as recounted in chapter 5 of St. Matthew's Gospel. We can't know if Franck agreed with each and every sentiment delivered to the multitudes that day, but we can understand, given his deeply religious nature, how the subject would have appealed to him. At a little over two hours the oratorio is quite a long haul, and two elements which might have helped the listener – variety and drama – are both in short supply. This is hardly surprising, of course, given the source material, and perhaps the immense importance and gravity of the text blinded the composer to the difficulties it presented, its weaknesses as a vehicle for music. Christ's sermon was neither varied nor dramatic: there is not much opportunity for a composer to differentiate between "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven" and, say, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." If we want to be charitable we can think that Franck appreciated this, and that drama was not part of what he was trying to achieve. In a two hour span, however, we do need something. The sung text was written by a certain Madame Colomb, and it amounts to a meditation on each of the eight beatitudes, with a prologue. In the third section, "Blessed are those who mourn", a mother expresses her pain at the loss of her child and a child mourns the loss of mother; Christ speaks, enlarging on the words attributed to him by Matthew. Unfortunately Madame Colomb was no Victor Hugo, at least on this showing, and her words are commonplace and uninspiring. And then there is the Devil. Even though there is little to terrify in Madame Colomb's conventional words, another composer might well have made a better shot at portraying evil. Franck, sadly, just wasn't up to it. Such criticisms do not amount to the whole story, however, as there are many, many beauties along the way. Time after time the listener is struck by a turn of phrase, a particularly expansive moment, more especially perhaps, a striking use of orchestral colour. This all makes for very pleasant and even compelling listening almost all the time, but the fact remains that the work is fatally short on the kind of cumulative power which leaves the listener satisfied at having accompanied the composer on a long and eventful journey.

Recorded in 1990, this performance was originally issued by Hänssler. Helmuth Rilling directs a compelling performance of Franck's oratorio in which he gives the impression of being totally convinced by the work. Even he, however, can do nothing about the overall structure of the piece, and there is no sense of journey, nor can there be, nor arrival; there is no goal here, in spite of much incidental beauty. The soloists are excellent, which is just as well as there is a lot of work for them to do. It's difficult to know who is singing at any one time, but I find Gilles Cachemaille particularly effective in his assumption of the words of Christ. His voice is extremely beautiful and individual, and he sings with as much intelligence here as on a recent Warner reissue of music by Frank Martin. The choir is extremely well-drilled and altogether

excellent, as is the recorded sound.

The booklet contains an essay which spends most of its time justifying the work as one of the masterpieces of the twentieth century. This is a pity: no-one gains from this kind of special pleading with quotes from anybody and everybody, and the work is interesting enough in its own right not to need it. It would have been better to devote the space to giving more background information. The sung text is provided, which is much to be commended, but there is no translation, so only French speakers will understand what is going on.

There has been at least one other recording of this piece, conducted by Armin Jordan on Erato, and which I haven't heard, but the present performance is first rate and I can't imagine Jordan's can be greatly superior. The present issue is also extremely cheap, and anyone with a particular interest in the composer, in choral music of the period, or indeed in this kind of curiosity should disregard any reservations I might have about the music and purchase this admirable set right away. ---William Hedley, musicweb-international.com

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