



## Souvenance: Mélodies of César Franck

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Video link here: <https://youtu.be/8CGBI7VXWNA>

### SLIDE 1

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For the Sake of Music

### SLIDE 2

Welcome everyone!

Thanks to ICVT for inviting me to share my research about composer César Franck

I'm Amy Pffimmer, Associate Professor of Music from Tulane University in New Orleans, USA

My partner on the piano today is Maria Curry from Louisiana State University

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That was the first verse of César Franck's *Le sylphe*! a song that exemplifies his early style with its lightness and brisk, playful accompaniment. It seems important to mention right away that I have a particular interest in the mentorship of a specific generation of Paris Conservatoire students BY composer and organist César Franck - Franck's students included some of the greatest mélodie composers- So who is César Franck and why is he important to the history of SONG? Born 1822 in Belgium, Franck's family emigrated to France where Franck's Father hoped César would begin a lucrative career as a concert pianist. Of course, the reason he is best known is that he was a brilliant composer of organ music and became well known in his position as the titular organist of Sainte Clotilde Basilica in Paris. His skill as a master organist and improviser caused Franck to be selected by the great organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll to inaugurate several instruments of Paris. Together, Franck and Cavaillé-Coll revived organ music in France following the degeneration of organ culture that occurred after the French Revolution. That decline was certainly due to the instrument's association with the church. The new symphonic sound of the organ made possible the new Romantic aesthetic with which Franck is closely associated.

Though he had long taught organ and composition lessons privately, in 1872, at long last, Franck was appointed as Organ Professor (and unofficial composition professor) at the Paris Conservatoire where he mentored and taught some of the finest young composers and organists of the day. Later he was a Founding Member of Société Nationale de Musique, an important forum for new French music, and was elected its President in 1885. Today Franck remains famous for just a small number of compositions written in his last years

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Franck's organ and other compositions endure, but what is little known is his work as a song composer. So, why don't we know Franck's songs? Are Franck's mélodies inferior? To be sure, some great composers have areas of weakness in their output, and there are good reasons to ignore such works. But Franck's vocal writing simply does not fall under this category. Still, historically, Franck's songs have rarely been included in written discussions of the mélodie or in French song anthologies.

As I see it, there are specific reasons that Franck's reputation as a song composer did not take off. One of the most significant was that Franck lacked connections and had no real political savviness. Until joining the Paris Conservatoire faculty in 1872 - at the late age of 50 - he had little financial stability and taught endless hours just to support his family. There was no time to give serious attention to his own composing. He was something of a late bloomer who showed limited creative output 1848-1870. Then the Franco-Prussian War interrupted Franck's life and with it his creativity.

As a devout Catholic, Franck was known for his seriousness as well as Emotional and Spiritual Intensity. He rejected commercialism and had no desire to court the Parisian opera loving public's favor AND his harmonically complex and introverted compositions were not originally well received. Another contributor is the limited number of his songs. Although Franck had a large output of keyboard compositions, he wrote only 22 mélodies and six vocal duos for treble voices. And yet, despite all these reasons that Franck should have failed as a song composer, his songs still exist and hold interest.

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Of course, Every artist has had bad reviews, but Franck's critics were truly harsh! In Franck's time, the critic Henri Blanchard was particularly cruel - he took a dislike to Franck and to the managerial tactics of Franck's father - and because of this took every opportunity to persecute

Franck in the press. “Certainly this young man has talent, but...for him inspiration as a composer or executant is a closed book. He knows and does not feel.” (Henri Blanchard Review et Gazette Musicale). In the 1960s, Frits Nöske, a noted French song authority, was so unflattering to Franck’s compositional ability that his opinions contributed to an entire generation of singers and pianists dismissing their chance to even know and judge Franck’s songs for themselves. His opinion was so low that he wrote: “If Franck was indifferent to the laws of versification and incapable of grasping the value of poetic image, he did not necessarily lack a sense of poetry. He undoubtedly HAD such a sense, but it lived, so to speak, outside the poem’s words.”

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The ultimate key to understanding the music of César Franck is found in his personality. His student Louis Vierne described Franck as “a man of utmost humility, simplicity, reverence and industry.” In his memoirs Vierne wrote that Franck “showed a constant concern for the dignity of his art, for the nobility of his mission, and for the fervent sincerity of his sermon in sound; Joyous or melancholy, solemn or mystic, powerful or ethereal.”

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Next let’s turn to characteristics of Franck’s songs. Franck’s Romantic compositional style merges elements of the Classical form typical of Mozart and Beethoven and fuses these with the tonal language, as well as the structural and expressive innovations pioneered by Liszt and Wagner.

Prominent song characteristics are:

- strophic settings
- one note per syllable settings
- chordal accompaniments in block, broken, or arpeggiated figures
- simple vocal lines
- and increased density of harmonic texture full of chromaticism as the composer matures

Franck maintained his steadfast commitment to emotionally genuine artistic expression and insistence that song compositions must be personal and meaningful (even if his songs were sometimes considered sentimental and theatrical). These commitments were later embodied in the philosophy of the Schola Cantorum.

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In Franck's songs we sometimes find refined miniature form harmonic progressions that nod to the larger scale works for which Franck is most renowned. Franck's legacy emphasized melodic invention and harmonic discovery (sometimes with unexpected modulations), as well as lyricism and the melodic line development of major themes. And, of course, Franck's songs are enhanced by TEXTS by such beloved and respected literary figures as Victor Hugo, Alfred de Musset, and Sully-Prudhomme, BUT his text setting ability and/or respect has sometimes been called into question. Franck focuses on the main messages of text in his songs and achieves his goals of finding overarching emotional content, lending us memorable melodies, linked to tender and poignant stories.

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Franck's students and followers included prominent composers of the Romantic Period who became an important counter current in French Art Music and were sometimes called *Franckistes*.

This 1885 painting by the Henri Fantin-Latour, features several Franckistes, including Emmanuel Chabrier and Vincent D'Indy. The Franck pupils displayed distinct individual styles, even though the students knew their music was not necessarily what the establishment wanted to hear. Franck's insistence on personal artistic integrity above all else encouraged the development of their unique voices. And because of them, Franck's reputation continued to grow after his death with his students advancing the cause of his music. They also generated greater public acceptance of his style.

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Franck's students and followers also became known by the name La bande à Franck. Among the most prominent and historically important are Henri Duparc and Ernest Chausson, widely regarded as two of the very best mélodie composers. Franck's students also included Guillaume Lekeu, Louis Vierne, Paul Dukas, Erik Satie, Augusta Holmès, Emmanuel Chabrier, and Vincent d'Indy. Franck's most notable and direct compositional influence on the later generation of Romantic composers was his chromatically adventurous harmonic writing that his students explored through his expansive tonal palette and experimentation using the harmonic language of Liszt and Wagner. Franck used these and added a French sense of refinement to his own music.

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Franck's songs are usually divided into three distinct style periods  
In his early period:

- Some songs already show daring chromatic progressions for the period.

- In the early songs, Franck chooses romantic themes.
- Poetically, early style songs are often delivered as narrative ballads.
- The pieces are reminiscent of the expressive and sentimental French *romance*.
- They are also evocative of German Lieder, particularly those of Franz Schubert, who happened to be Franck's favorite composer.
- Franck often sets a simple melody over sparse, diatonic accompaniment.
- And he often shows little respect for textual rhythm.
- In general, the early songs are light experiences, offering simplicity of sound, and demand for legato in the vocal line to contradict brisk and playful accompaniments.

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Next we'll present *Souvenance*, dedicated to no less than Pauline Viardot, which is modeled after the French Romance - and is a "folk" text setting of Chateaubriand. The piece is in modified strophic form strongly revealing the influence of Schubert. Graham Johnson notes that the quote "Niceties of literature were not as important to this composer as the overall poetic feeling of a text." *Souvenance* is in the style of a ballad, in which the narrator remembers and dreams of returning to "my country."

According to Frits Nöske, an accompanying motif resembling Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade* sustains a vocal part that begins in a hesitating way but blossoms out to express the nostalgia of the narrator. Alterations between major and minor and use of different opening and closing keys are a peculiarity. When compared to the poem the major/minor alterations seem slightly unbalanced, but the climax of the song, whatever the key, is emotionally touching.

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In Franck's Middle Style Period:

- The songs take on more finely balanced forms.
- The pieces are emotionally direct, warm, and sincere.
- And in the middle period, Franck's melodic lines gain fluidity.
- In the middle period, the awkwardness of his accompaniments have mostly disappeared.
- The texts he chooses are ardent and he pairs them with romantic melodies.
- The later songs in the middle period have more complicated harmony and richer sonority.
- Arguably, in the middle period, Franck also displays improved text setting.
- Late style chromaticism appears gradually through this period and is fully present in the song *Le vase brisé*.

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In his middle period, Franck offers us such uncomplicated, lovely *mélodies* as *S'il est un charmant gazon*. This strophic song in a playful and lilting 6/8 features subtle syncopations and sunny modulations every bit as pleasant as those in Fauré's setting of the same poem in *Rêve d'amour*. With this period Franck's style becomes more transparent and one might say more "French."

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In this period, Franck also gives us the *mélodie* *Le mariage des roses* with its simple gracefulness. The piece has been described as quote "an emotionally winning little piece." It is full of charm, freshness and depth of emotion while retaining grace and elegance not always found in Franck's writing. The melodic opening moves into a more openly chromatic section at the end of each verse. The piece also displays a broadening of tempo and thickening of piano texture that rarely occurs in the work of other French song composers of Franck's era.

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In 1879, *Le vase brisé* was Franck's first song composition in six years. The piece has elevated characteristics of what we consider to be the composer's late middle style. Franck employs a grim triple time, minor key ostinato, which, according to Franck biographer

R.J. Stove, "derives its power from its very obsessiveness." Here, Franck's poetic sense went beyond the text of the verse, to the wider themes and subject of the poem. Exploring wider poetic themes allowed him to write a work of dramatic consequence despite any lack of attention Franck may have paid to verse structure. *Le vase brisé* has been much criticized for what is seen as the mismatch between the emotional music and the rather stiff words of Sully-Prudhomme - which seemingly cause Franck to stumble in trying to dramatize the poetry's warning "N'y touchez pas."

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In the late style period:

- Franck delivers his most developed songs both harmonically and musically, although at this time he was composing primarily large scale works and very few *mélodies*.
- In the late period, his pieces gain depth and harmonic lines are more ample.
- Increasingly, Franck's songs display rich, involved harmonies.
- Also, the songs demonstrate emotional authenticity.

- In this period, Franck gives the greatest attention yet to his texts, resulting in improved text setting.

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*La Procession* and *Nocturne* are two late style songs that are widely regarded as Franck's best melodies. Today I have chosen to offer you an excerpt of *Nocturne* that has a clear formal structure following the stanzas of poetry. This song demonstrates, once again, the qualities of emotional authenticity and individuality that were hallmarks of Franck's playing, composing, and teaching.

The opening to *Nocturne* looks on the page and sounds somewhat like an organ improvisation. It features circling chromaticism that occurs verse by verse, eventually returning to the home key. After three verses in minor keys, the fourth verse arrives at a major key, with broader arpeggiated figures in piano that produce a sense of spaciousness with the voice riding increasingly full accompaniment to an elevating effect. As a point of interest, this *mélodie* was eventually scored for voice and orchestra by Guy Ropartz, a Franckiste

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I would be remiss if I did not point out that Franck composed other sacred and liturgical works, and that he composed 6 Duos for female voices during this period. Franck's simplicity and reverence most prominently emerge in a substantial number of sacred vocal compositions. Among his most celebrated compositions is the musical setting of *Panis Angelicus* (Bread of Angels) to a text by Saint Thomas Aquinas for the Feast of Corpus Christi. The piece boasts an extended instrumental introduction, and is symphonic in breadth and scope, unfolding a rich tapestry of thematic materials with the occasional harmonic surprise thrown in.

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In closing, I would like to leave you with a list of my favorite Franck *mélodies* and a few final thoughts. César Franck fashioned his songs as miniatures displaying inventiveness in a variety of styles - and his songs are a beautiful and important part of the history of the *mélodie*. Franck emerged as a counterbalance to France's opera fanaticism, composing in his own style and remaining true to himself by refusing to give in to the demands of popular culture. Without a doubt, Franck was a musical genius whose organ and (according to Graham Johnson) other "contributions to and experiments with chromatic harmony and cyclical form, combined with

aesthetic, which was anchored in an all-pervading religious faith, were an antidote to the simplistic musical fripperies of the Second Empire, and worked as powerful influence to add a new dimension to what was understood by the term ‘French Music.’” He mentored, and in turn, “received” encouragement from the next generation of French composers, becoming known as their “Père Franck” and “Pater Séraphicus.” At Franck’s funeral, Emmanuel Chabrier credited Franck’s tutelage for creating “A generation of robust, true believing and thoughtful musicians.”

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If you would like to explore these songs further, please email me, and I’ll happily share scores, recordings, and translations. My email address is pfrimmer, my last name, pfrimmer@tulane.edu There are also commercial recordings available.

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Thank you all so much for your attention and this opportunity to share my research! Again thanks to ICVT and the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna for hosting my talk today and to Maria Curry from Louisiana State University for serving as my collaborative partner and pianist. Thank you so much!

IMSLP Links to scores

*Le sylphe*

[https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/b/bc/IMSLP145608-PMLP229503-Franck\\_-\\_Le\\_sylphe\\_VS\\_Sibley.1802.16736.pdf](https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/b/bc/IMSLP145608-PMLP229503-Franck_-_Le_sylphe_VS_Sibley.1802.16736.pdf)

*Passez! Passez toujours!*

[https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/2/26/IMSLP145621-PMLP229509-Franck\\_-\\_Passez\\_passez\\_toujours\\_VPf\\_Sibley.1802.16736.pdf](https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/2/26/IMSLP145621-PMLP229509-Franck_-_Passez_passez_toujours_VPf_Sibley.1802.16736.pdf)

*Souvenance*

[https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/4/41/IMSLP145623-PMLP229513-Franck\\_-\\_Souvenance\\_VPf\\_Sibley.1802.16736.pdf](https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/4/41/IMSLP145623-PMLP229513-Franck_-_Souvenance_VPf_Sibley.1802.16736.pdf)

*S’il est un charmant gazon*

<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k392507h/f2.item>

*Le mariage des roses*





<https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglinks/usimg/8/84/IMSLP215184-SIBLEY1802.16735.618f-39087012009504Mariage.pdf>

*Le vase brisé*

<https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglinks/usimg/5/59/IMSLP223728-SIBLEY1802.16756.f6c2-39087012009504vase.pdf>

*Nocturne*

<https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglinks/usimg/6/61/IMSLP223719-SIBLEY1802.16753.e762-39087012009504Nocturne.pdf>

*Panis Angelicus*

<https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglinks/usimg/a/a5/IMSLP198122-WIMA.9683-pas.pdf>