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FEBRUARY 1, 1910.

M. VINCENT D'INDY ON CÉSAR FRANCK.*

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

One could wish that the first book on César Franck to appear in England had been written by an Englishman, if only as an indication that Franck's music was already well known in this country; but as that, unfortunately, is not yet the case, it is well to have the work of propaganda done by any competent writer, and of M. Vincent d'Indy's unusual competence in this matter there cannot be the least doubt. Himself a pupil of Franck, an accomplished musician sympathetic to most that is good in modern music and yet with his roots firmly embedded in the past, a thinker and a not inconsiderable man of letters, he is on the whole the writer most fitted to speak with authority on César Franck and his music. His own temperament, in which austerity occasionally becomes tartness, does indeed obtrude itself disadvantageously here and there; but on the whole the book is admirably sane and sound. Mrs. Newmarch has of course done the work of translation excellently, and has made the volume more useful to English readers by a preface in which she discusses the progress of musical taste in France during the 19th century, and gives an interesting *résumé* of the career of M. d'Indy himself.

It was quite in keeping with the irony of things that the greatest French musician of the second half of the last century should not have been a Frenchman. History is full of these little strokes of humour. The greatest Frenchman of modern times—Napoleon—was an Italian. The greatest modern German musician—Beethoven—was half a Dutchman. Germany gets the credit, not only for Liszt, who was a Hungarian, for Gluck, who was a Bohemian, and for Haydn, who was a Croat, but for four of the greatest living conductors—Richter (a Hungarian), Nikisch (a Hungarian), Mahler (a Bohemian Jew) and Weingartner (a Dalmatian), César Franck was a Belgian, born at Liège in 1822, in the Walloon country, which, as M. d'Indy says, is 'peculiarly French, not only in sentiment and language but also in its external aspect,' and at the same time 'German in its customs and surroundings.' It is not too fanciful to trace to this complex heredity and environment, as M. d'Indy does, the main qualities of Franck's eclectic nature, that made him 'the creator of a symphonic art that was exceedingly French in its balance and precision, while at the same time it

rested upon the solid basis of Beethoven's art, itself the outcome of still earlier musical traditions.' The Franck family settled finally in France in 1846, and César in time became a naturalised French citizen. For nearly half-a-century he lived a laborious life in Paris as a comparatively humble teacher of music, chiefly the organ and composition. The leading French musicians of the time, especially those holding official positions, were insensately jealous of him and unkind to him. M. d'Indy's explanation seems the right one—that they knew him to be their superior in every way, and dreaded him accordingly. The teaching at the Conservatoire appears to have been strangely incompetent in many respects, and we can imagine that when Franck became professor of the organ there, in 1872, some of his colleagues were made to look rather small. One anecdote told by M. d'Indy will suffice to show the intellectual and musical calibre of some of the prominent Parisian musicians of that day. When Franck's Symphony was given in 1889 by the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, M. d'Indy asked one of the authorities—'a professor at the Conservatoire and a kind of *factotum* on the committee'—what he thought of it. 'That a symphony?' he replied in contemptuous tones. 'But, my dear sir, who ever heard of writing for the cor anglais in a symphony? Just mention a single symphony by Haydn or Beethoven introducing the cor anglais. There, well, you see, your Franck's music may be whatever you please, but it will never be a symphony!' There could hardly be much communion of soul between Franck and a man like this; and when Franck's abilities and the natural loveliness of his nature drew to him most of the best of the younger musicians in Paris, he seems to have been disliked even beyond the normal limits of hatred permissible in Conservatoires and Academies and other places where men are engaged in teaching the humanising art of music. When he gave a private performance of the then unknown 'Beatitudes' at his house, and invited the Minister of Fine Arts, the critics, and the Conservatoire professors, thinking—good, simple man—that all these disinterested seekers after truth would be anxious to hear a new and beautiful work, most of them found they had engagements elsewhere, while the one or two critics who turned up 'fled in a few minutes.' When he died, in November, 1890, 'no official deputation from the Ministry or the Department of Fine Arts accompanied the body to its last resting-place. Even the Conservatoire, which reckoned him among its professors, neglected to send a representative to the funeral of this organist whose lofty views of art had always seemed dangerous to the peace of this official institution. The director, Ambroise Thomas, who had all his life been given to pouring forth platitudes on less worthy tombs, quickly took to his bed when he heard that a member of Franck's family had come to invite him to the funeral. Other important professors followed suit, and were conveniently taken ill, in order to avoid compromising themselves.' It seems incredible that such rancour should have been

* *César Franck*. By Vincent d'Indy. Translated, with an Introduction, by Rosa Newmarch. John Lane. 7s. 6d. net.

aroused by a man who, from all accounts, was singularly amiable, modest, tolerant and lovable, and that for some time after his death his influence should have been chiefly confined to his pupils, and a very small circle beyond these. The explanation seems to be that while Franck was big enough to arouse the suspicious fears and hatreds of smaller people, he had not the masterful kind of bigness that feeds on and is nourished by hatred and abuse—the quality that makes a man like Wagner or Strauss simply set his teeth and swear that he will come out on top or die. There was nothing of the fighter in Franck. Certain aspects of life, indeed, he never understood. Those of us who have heard the ‘Beatitudes’ have noted with some amusement how completely he seems to stand outside the character of Satan. Into all the other sentiments of the oratorio he enters with peculiar intimacy; but the sentiment of evil is something he knows only by hearsay, and his conscientious but unsuccessful attempt to express it in his music reminds us of an artist who has never been out of his own Midland village, and never seen the sea, trying to paint a wreck in a storm. M. d’Indy finds the explanation of the failure of this part of the ‘Beatitudes’ in the fundamental sweetness and simplicity of Franck’s nature. ‘I can never forget,’ he says, ‘his efforts to put on an awe-inspiring air, his frowns, the contortions of his mouth and the queer sounds of his voice, which caused us to smile rather than tremble, when he sang “C’est moi l’esprit du mal, qui sois roi de la terre.” Poor, dear master! His good faith was unshaken, and he honestly believed himself for the moment to be “the spirit of evil”—he who had only lived and worked for good! Incapable, therefore, of drawing upon himself for the expression of emotions which he never felt but superficially, he borrowed the style of the most inferior eclectics, and here . . . falls back on Meyerbeer.’ A man like this was wholly lacking not only in the art of Conservatoire intrigue, but in the art of impressing himself upon the general public; and it is not at all surprising that when, after being passed over by the State for many years, he was decorated with the ribbon of a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour in 1885, it was not as a composer but as ‘Franck (César Auguste), Professor of Organ.’ Yet this gentle, humble, and retiring man was the biggest force in French music of the latter half of the nineteenth century, and has given it, by his own work and through his pupils, an impulse so fecund that its vigour is still undiminished.

What he has done, in the first place, is to raise immensely the standard of French instrumental music. France, until recently, has not been rich in this kind of art, and the fact that there is still, I believe, no commodious concert hall in Paris, as distinguished from theatres or opera houses, is very significant. Expert observers like M. Romain Rolland date a distinct renaissance of French music from 1870. For a time it lay under the Wagnerian influence, the most vital reaction against which came first from César Franck and

afterwards from Debussy. It is perhaps the very individuality of Franck that has stood in the way of a general German appreciation of him, for our good friends in Germany have got into a sad habit of thinking that great music means simply German music. Most of them have not yet grasped the elementary fact that music may talk French, or English, and still talk sensibly and profoundly. They are inclined to be a trifle condescending to music that has a non-Teutonic idiom. M. Rolland gives an instance. In an article on ‘Musique française et musique allemande,’ he tells us of a recent festival of French and German music held in Strasburg, at which he was greatly hurt by the apathy of good German musicians towards the best modern French art. That of César Franck was received coolly, but the audience waxed enthusiastic over a superficial work of Charpentier, and Richard Strauss graciously confessed to M. Rolland that he found it charming, ‘real music of Montmartre.’ M. Rolland rightly waxes indignant at the patronising impertinence of this attitude, with its implied theory that the French are only good enough to supply the world with piquant, sparkling trivialities, while it is to the Germans we must look for profounder things. There is a ‘French spirit’ that means gaiety, lightness, and glitter; there is also a ‘French spirit’—the spirit of the great serious poets and thinkers and dreamers of France—that means more than this, that means earnest emotion, and intellectual lucidity, and incomparable grace of style. And of all this César Franck is perhaps the best modern representative in music. He is modern, yet not Wagnerian; a consummate technician, yet no mechanical product of the schools; a man of deep feeling, but of a type of feeling that is wholly characteristic of himself and his race, owing nothing to the Teutonic tradition. He is indeed one of the heirs of Bach and Beethoven, but in no sense an imitator of either of them. He has thus been able to give French music an impetus it sorely needed; and wherever we look into the changed conditions of Parisian musical life—at the newer schools of composers, at the larger and more intelligent public for serious instrumental music, or at the excellent work done by the *Schola cantorum*—we find either his influence at work or some other influence that has grown out of that.

(To be continued.)

MUSINGS IN A LIBRARY.

I.

I am no antiquary; indeed old things rather repel than attract me; but it interests me to spend my rare intervals of leisure in that oddest of odd places, a musical library. Few people have ever had the run of this place; few would be able to find it even if they knew where to look for it. It is a sort of den, or vault, contrived in the heart of a large building and having no walls but the gigantic

J. Rongier, pinxt.

Braun & Co., photo.

CÉSAR FRANCK.

(1822—1890.)