The Catholic-Christian Masking of César Franck and Alternative Erotic Readings of his Piano Quintet, Violin Sonata, and Prelude, Chorale and Fugue

by

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César Franck (1822-1890) is, for many, a problematic composer. He was born a Belgian, naturalized a Frenchman, but is often cited as an example (musically) of the Germanic. In the wake of this supposed identity crisis one particular identity has stuck: that of the *Pater Seraphicus*, composer of music imbued with deep Catholic-Christian piety. Those largely responsible for this identity are Vincent d’Indy and Alfred Cortot. However, as outlined in chapter 1, there are many problems with this interpretation, especially when one looks closely at Franck’s music, which is filled with musical markers of the erotic. Chapter 2 explores some procedures associated with eroticism, focusing on sources directly associated with Franck, namely Wagner, Liszt, and Debussy.

Subsequent chapters develop new interpretations of Franck’s music, starting with the Piano Quintet (1880). Chapter 3 explores its explosively dramatic first movement, whose second
theme awakens a latent, subversive eroticism, which is ultimately punished and crushed by the destructive forces of the first theme. Cortot’s spiritual interpretative incentives were most famously and influentially pronounced in reference to the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue (1884), which is discussed in the fourth chapter. The frequently-cited paradigm in this work of an incorruptible diatonicism’s adjacency and resistance to its decadent sibling chromaticism is shown to be problematic, and the Chorale theme of this work is viewed instead to be a possible erotic symbol. Additionally, a parallel is traced between the work’s structural plan and the trajectory-towards-climax paradigm so beloved of Wagner. Chapter 5 explores the Violin Sonata (1886), a work whose first half is pregnant with erotically-symbolic impulses. Here possible cross-pollinations with Debussy are considered, including consonant use of “voluptuous” sonorities (such as the dominant ninth chord) and sinuous melodic commingling which may depict, respectively, erotic languor or activity. Chapter 6 summarizes these arguments and suggests implications in performance as well as directions for further research, including alternative analyses of Franck’s other works as well as those of other composers. This chapter concludes with a brief consideration of other aesthetics which may similarly entangle religious piety with eroticism.
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Chapter 1

César Franck, *Pater Seraphicus*?

1.1 The problem of musical placement with Franck

“César Franck has always been a problem to musical theorists and historians—perplexing, on the one hand, those who claim that music has a national basis, by his singularly un-French characteristics, and on the other the upholders of the classic tradition, on account of his orthodoxy in matters of form as contrasted with the many daring harmonic progressions to be found in his works. These latter hesitate to admit into their midst so dangerous an ally. They are beginning to realise that if they accept Franck as the true spiritual heir of Bach, they are, as it were, leading the wooden horse within their walls in whose capacious belly are hidden a score or so of bloodthirsty impressionists.”

The above quotation effectively articulates a key problem with César Franck and his career as a composer, organist, and teacher. One does not have to look far to find scholarly disquisition of the perplexing, even bewildering difficulty of how to categorize Franck in the music of late nineteenth-century Europe, or indeed in Western Art music, generally speaking. This is most certainly owing to the fact that Franck was Belgian by birth—to this day, his late keyboard masterpieces are frequently chosen by competitors in the prestigious Queen Elisabeth Competition who are required to present a representative Belgian work. At the same time, he became a naturalized citizen of France and spent nearly his entire life in Paris teaching, performing and composing. However, the instant temptation to champion Franck as a truly French composer has been declared problematic by more than one musical scholar. Already in 1922, one musicologist highlighted this side of the issue: “Where in Franck [ . . . ] are the typical French virtues—the critical sense, the delicate economy of means, the sensuous grace, the wit, the gaiety?” Keyboard literature magnate Stewart Gordon notes that “18th-century contrapuntal practice is very much at the heart of Franck’s style, along with the chromatic harmonic language

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associated with the Liszt-Wagner school.”

We hear something similar from R.J. Stove: “Franck possessed half-German ancestry, and without the German examples of Mendelssohn and Wagner his mature style would scarcely have developed in the way it did.” Perhaps the most resounding (and apocryphal) reading of Franck’s artistic origins and heritage can be found in the opening paragraph of the highly interesting biography of the composer written by his most enthusiastic pupil, Vincent d’Indy: “On December 10, 1822, the very day upon which the giant of symphony, Ludwig van Beethoven, put the finishing touches on the manuscript of a work which is justly regarded as his most perfect masterpiece—the sublime Mass in D minor—a child was born into the world destined to become the true successor of the Master of Bonn, both in the sphere of sacred music and in that of symphony.” However outrageously over-the-top a statement this may be, there is, in fact, a slight shade of truth which has been recognized by many—Franck’s musical language was, in many ways, a Teutonic one. This may be echoed in the words of Liszt, after hearing Franck perform some of his organ music: “these poems have their clear place alongside the masterpieces of Sebastian Bach!”

As seen, the aesthetic and national placement of César Franck remains as enigmatic today as it may have been during his life. However, this problematic milieu has been circumvented and/or marginalized by more than one highly influential musical figure, as will shortly be seen.

1.2 The *Pater Seraphicus* tradition

To begin, one does not need search far before a curious “identity” begins to crop up as that which is most true to the heart of Franck. In the often factually-questionable booklets which accompany recordings of Franck’s late music (here, the examples are from recordings of the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*), one finds such statements as the following: “The choice of the triptych form and ternary structures for each individual piece could be interpreted as a sort of representation of the Holy Trinity and a progression towards the Light, which is even more

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obvious in *Prelude, Aria and Finale*; “The chorale, traditionally a communally-sung celebration of religious spirit, became for Franck an almost mystical personal meditation.”

Even renowned English pianist Stephen Hough gives a similar suggestion as regards the symbolic meaning of the chorale: “the ‘motto’ motif of the redemption happens to be shaped like a cross. The final (unintentional?) pun is that the same ‘motto’ theme, present and transformed in both works, appears in the ‘Transformation Scene’ from *Parsifal* when bread and wine are changed into Christ’s Body and Blood—the redeeming re-enactment of the Last Supper. This interpretation might not seem too far-fetched if we recall that Franck habitually left his organ bench during the Mass to kneel at this same moment of transformation.”

In other liner notes, the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* is simply characterized by its “deep religious motions.”

These are not anomalies, and one finds this kind of talk throughout the scholarly literature on Franck. Charles Rosen has cited the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* as an important representation of something he calls the “hyper-religious” genre in the Romantic era.

One of the more prolific Anglophone Franck scholars, Norman Demuth, writes of a theme in the *Chorale* (again of the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*) that it is “one of those infinite themes which seem Heaven-sent.”

Carl Van Vechten gives the following description of Franck’s Symphony: “The terrible first movement warns us of the Judgment Day and then in melting human tones forgives us of our sins. The allegretto is like a graceful dance of angels [. . .] Santa Teresa would have loved this music, music mystic and beneficent at the same time.”

R.V. Dawson was evidently quite agitated by d’Indy’s assertion that César Franck was the true successor to Beethoven, and wrote at length about the two—he did, finally and thankfully, reach the conclusion that there are important spiritual differences between Beethoven and Franck:

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7 Inger Södergren, Liner Notes, *César Franck: Sonate violon piano en la majeur - Prelude, choral et fugue - Prelude, aria et final*, Inger Södergren (piano), CAL6804, 1997, compact disc.
12 Norman Demuth, *César Franck* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 149.
“Beethoven built his faith on the widest possible foundations, the revaluation of accepted ideas, the widening of conceptions and the deepening of penetration [. . .] How different was the faith of Franck! His expression is responsive expression, less comprehensive, more intimate, but not nearly so significant. His view was united by the Church; he accepted its dogmas and traditions. His attitude then, is not synthetic, for he accepts meekly the synthesis he is given, the synthesis of the Roman Catholic Church, and awaits patiently the affirmation of its truth [. . .] He cannot take his faith and show the process by which it was built up, but he can take the faith he has received and disclose its beauty and its holiness. He can persuade others to wait patiently until revelation comes to them; he cannot lead them to revelation.”14

From this particular article, Dawson does seem thoroughly convinced that he has figured out the mind of Franck—this assurance and confidence of tone may be detected in another (French) text by Alfred Cortot, which will be looked at shortly.

Julian Tiersot gives the following account of a monk-like Franck: “Possessing a generous heart, a tender soul, moved with pity for the poor, the humble and the simple, he listened from the elevation of his organ-bench to the words of Christ, and was impenetrated by them.”15 Charles Tournemire, one of Franck’s last organ students, takes every chance to ascribe “ecstatic religious inspiration to almost every work of Franck.”16 For instance, his description of Franck’s Organ Cantabile reads thus: “(it is) the soul’s unsatisfied desire—a saint’s inner supplications—incessant pleas—faith in divine mercy.”17 Elsewhere, one finds in what is supposed to be a “review” of d’Indy’s biography of Franck, a somewhat entertaining bit on Father Franck’s “mystical” identity:

“César Franck, as everyone exclaims at his first acquaintance with his music, is a mystic; and before him, mysticism had hardly found voice in music [. . .] His mysticism is himself—not the chance product of a life spent in this or that way, but the substance and the colour of the stuff that was in him from his birth. He was a mystic by election, not by

17Ibid.
circumstance. The serenity and simplicity of his outer life reappear in his art. Had he been a medieval Fleming, he would have dwelt like other mystics, in a hut in a forest, not because he was disgusted with the world and weary of sinning in it, but because in this way he could best pour out the simple gladsomeness of a heart that found the earth, on the whole, a thing of beauty and harmony.”

While the writer of this review, Ernest Newman, has been described by none other than the canonical Grove as “the most celebrated British music critic in the first half of the 20th century,” it seems he has swallowed d’Indy’s vision hook, line, and sinker.

1.3 The conduit of Franckian Catholic projections

“The interpreter should not only be a musician: it is even more important that he be a believer.”

This statement now brings us to the previously mentioned francophone text, written by the highly influential Alfred Cortot who was “as an interpretative artist, one of the strongest minds of the age.” This work is the heavyweight which has, perhaps even more powerfully than d’Indy’s biography, set a precedent in the commentary on Franck. Cortot’s multi-faceted position as a (French) pianist, conductor and pedagogue placed him in an ideal position to direct the flow of splintered commentary on Franck. With French Piano Music’s chapter on Franck, Cortot effectively circumvented the nationalistic/aesthetic problem, and championed César Franck as a composer whose output is, above all, religious. The essay on the pianistic output of Franck reveals enormously informative and thoughtful analysis of the composer’s music, while at once making a grand statement as concerns the spiritual heritage of Franck’s music, specifically in Cortot’s discussion of the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue—the end result is a (subsequently colored-in) sketch of Franck as the prayerful organist and composer of works

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infused with religious sentiment. In addition to his Franck chapter in *French Piano Music*, one will find this extremely evident in any of Cortot’s editions of musical works (pianists familiar with his edition of the Chopin *Etudes* will instantly relate)—in the case of Franck, it is perhaps seen best in his “heavily annotated Italian edition published in 1950, with extensive commentary [. . .] in (the edition’s Preface) he gives detailed advice in his very personal manner combined with the floweriest of imagery, sometimes including preparatory exercises for particular passages, his own fingerings, and ways of dividing passagework between the hands. Occasionally he reprimands Franck for interpretative indications he doesn’t like. Whereas for Chopin his imagery is often decidedly secular, his approach to Franck is always in the ‘Pater seraphicus’ tradition.”

Before diving into Cortot’s writings, it is important here to underline something which has made Cortot so attractive to musicians of the past century:

“His great mental independence, his need for artistic freedom and his unconventional views have made the master pianist into one of the most outstanding interpreters of the works of Chopin, Debussy and Schumann. Not only a virtuoso but also an absolute individualist, *Cortot took the liberty of interpreting the works of each composer not in the composer’s interest but in his own* (author’s emphasis). He was always trying to create an image, his subjective vision whilst making music.”

For music critic Michael Steinberg, this crucial aorta of the musical “heart” of Cortot is essential in his effectiveness as an artist:

“Listening, one gets an extraordinary sense of identification of performer with composer: Cortot seems truly to have entered the mind and spirit of César Franck and become one with them. Having strongly felt this while listening, I was delighted to find verbal confirmation in Cortot’s Franck essay: ‘If we admit that the art of the performer lies at its best in the re-creation of (the composer’s) thought, and breathing into it as natural a vitality, and as eloquent an expression, as originally inspired it, it implies that he comes

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to the interpretation of the finished work in the same mental state as the composer’s when
he was working on it.”24

Cortot’s discussion of the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue is largely fixated on interpretational
qualities and considerations which support themselves on fundamental ideas of the triptych’s
conception. Of the work, Cortot notes it is an excellent example of “the amazing truthfulness
with which art can mirror the essentials of personality and even of character,” and “If anyone is
anxious to create for himself a true picture of Franck, to penetrate the warm simplicity of his
beliefs, to understand his spirit [. . .] he has only to turn to this inimitable masterpiece.”25 Later,
he gives his definitive (and subjective) interpretation of the Chorale:

“There is no ambiguity possible. Its character is obvious after a first reading [. . .] The
symbolical meaning of it can thus be accurately read without any possibility of distorting
Franck’s own thought: a first phrase in march rhythm, characterized by a melodic quaver
figure, plaintively chromatic, punctuated with syncopations, and breathing a sentiment of
unwearying supplication—the eternal quest of humanity for justice and consolation.
Then the response of the second phrase sounded three times, emerging from veiled
revelation to luminous certainty; this bears an almost immobile rhythm of crotchets in
massed diatonic harmonies, through which the Godhead speaks.”26

The fact that the Franck chapter in French Piano Music is intensely personal and subjective
throughout is almost certainly the reason for its incredible impact—it is hard to miss the feeling
that Cortot has deeply-rooted affinity for this music. In fact, it may come across most powerfully
in his defense of it. Though the accusation had been made nearly half a century before, Cortot
feels it necessary to quote Saint-Saëns’ famous, irascible critique of the Prelude, Chorale and
Fugue: “A work [. . .] uncouth, and tiresome to play, in which the chorale is no chorale, and the
fugue no fugue, for it breaks down as soon as the exposition is over and wanders on through
endless digressions which are no more like a fugue than a mollusk is like a mammal, and which

24Michael Steinberg, Liner Notes, Great Pianists of the 20th Century: Alfred Cortot II, Alfred Cortot
25Alfred Cortot, French Piano Music, translated by Hilda Andrews (London: Oxford University Press,
1932), 70-1.
26Ibid., 76.
are a dear price to pay for a brilliant peroration”27—and answers, with an equally powerful response:

“Saint-Saëns quite rightly said, though in blind misunderstanding of it: ‘This fugue is no fugue.’ The exposition, the successive entries of the four parts are, undoubtedly, conventionally strict, and the ensuing development is inspired by the most correct models in the genre. But all the time in the inner murmur of the music one is conscious that even the fugue subject does not contain within itself its own impulse and its own end, that it has its being in a world of such contrite anguish that some external intervention must be invoked to relieve it from its pain. And so, after the appearance of the quaver triplets which increase its restlessness, and the climax of the crescendo which sweeps up to a paroxysm of agony and entreaty, the theme of the Choral re-enters, gentle solace amid the liquid trembling of celestial harps; and we, who have just witnessed that intolerable pain, experience such relief and regained calm that the tumult of triumphant voices proclaiming the Word in the peroration seems like the release of our own emotional tension. Here, indeed, is a consequence that no treatise on counterpoint, nor the over-academic musicians, could calculate on. But then they are not supposed to take genius into account; and it is genius of the purest imaginable that inspired this sublime work of art, grave and lofty expression of a Christian spirit longing for his God, which by the very glory of its music convinces us of a universal plan, and turns the pathetic echo of human desires and aspirations towards a glorious ideal.”28

Thus, in this undeniably eloquent and heartfelt response to a critique on something of a purely structural concern, Cortot firmly establishes his (and for many, the) interpretation of Franck’s music, and gives it an identity, in the wake of its supposed “identity” crisis.

1.4 The source of Cortot’s interpretational criterion

Now we must take a step even further back: d’Indy. Anyone who wishes to write on Franck must consult d’Indy, as Cortot most certainly did. As previously mentioned in passing, d’Indy is

27Ibid., 73-4.
28Ibid., 77-8.
the ultimate source of this “true” identity of Franck. His biography is the first written on a composer about whom arguably not a lot would otherwise be known. D’Indy’s relationship with Franck would seem perhaps the most legitimate claim on his authorship of a “definitive” biography—however, as many have noted, it certainly colors his view of the situation and of Franck. The biography itself contains many, many references to Franck and his music which are clothed in explicitly Christian language and metaphor. The following description (found in the chapter entitled “The Physical and Spiritual Man”) serves as a representative sample from d’Indy’s constructed portraiture of his mentor: “Franck was an ardent believer. With him, as with all the really great men, faith in his art was blent with faith in God, the source of all art [. . .] The seraphic personality of “Father” Franck, who worked for Art alone, soars higher and higher into the light towards which, without faltering or compromise, he aspired throughout his entire life.”

It is now necessary to address an enormous elephant in the room. D’Indy, as a composer of Western Classical music, is a figure secondary to Franck. His importance as a founder of the Schola Cantorum is undeniable, as is the importance of a handful of his works (for instance, the Symphony on a French Mountain Air, and Istar). But, perhaps due to his (for whatever historical or aesthetical reason) sidelining in the company of Franck, it has seldom occurred to Franck scholars to investigate in greater detail the life of this most important conduit of Franck-related knowledge.

Of special interest is the childhood of Vincent d’Indy. He would face many things throughout life which could not be described as other than absolutely heartbreaking—this began at d’Indy’s birth with the tragic childbed death of his mother Matilde. His parents had been married one year (Matilde was 21 at the time of d’Indy’s birth and her death), and this left d’Indy’s father Antonin in “a state of acute shock and depression. The overriding need to get away from his own state of misery took hold of him; leaving his newly born child in the care of his mother, Thérèse, he embarked upon a period of travel in Italy. On his return, evidently restored, he found a new wife, Catherine de Glos, whom he married in 1855, and from this union three children were born [. . .] he acceded to Thérèse’s request—very wisely, as things turned

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29Vincent d’Indy, César Franck, 68-9.
30For instance, his wife’s premature death from a brain hemorrhage.
out—that she herself should take full charge of her grandson’s upbringing and education in her own home at 97 rue du Bac.”

This is an especially interesting turn of events. Vincent’s father would take up residence with his new family in a different house, while making visits to Vincent and remaining involved in Vincent’s life. This is all interesting, in light of what would happen later in Vincent d’Indy’s life, and his adoption of César Franck as “Father” Franck. Indeed, Vincent’s father Antonin does not always come off in the best light, if one looks at things in more detail—he strongly opposed Vincent’s first marriage, an “episode which may have left a psychological scar.” There are many psychological implications which might be explored in greater detail, but upon even a superficial check of the facts it seems almost a foregone conclusion that d’Indy grew up with a painful father situation, and found in César Franck a perfect father-figure. It is of note that d’Indy seems to have been the pupil who first put the “Father” in front of Franck. It seems this enormously important connection has not been brought out nearly as boldly as it might have been, as there is much having to do with Franck that it may color. Much has been made of d’Indy’s upbringing by his grandmother, who is often mentioned as important due to her creation in d’Indy of a structured, disciplined, militaristic attitude towards life (articulated humorously by Demuth: “It is doubtful if he ever relaxed”). But not much is mentioned of his lack of a father.

While this is extremely important in realizing exactly what has happened with so much commentary on the music of Franck, it is only one side of the coin. Vincent d’Indy was, without a doubt, a devout Catholic (and according to Vallas, a Catholic “of burning fervor”). The same devout Catholic held Franck’s oratorio *Beatitudes* (a work which has been widely conceded as one of uneven quality) to be his magnum opus and the culmination of all he stood for.

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32 Ibid., 41.
33 The situation becomes even more interesting when it is discovered that d’Indy and César’s son Georges seemed to have harbored an intense dislike for each other (Leon Vallas, *César Franck*, translated by Hubert Foss [London: Harrap, 1951], 188).
37 Leon Vallas, *César Franck*, 188.
for as an artist, musician, and human being. Speaking of *Beatitudes*, Thomson writes, “the work constituted a milestone of the highest symbolic value in his own spiritual development, which, moreover, helped to engender the myth of Franck as the *Pater Seraphicus* over the ensuing years. This seemingly saint-like figure, of an irrepreschable purity of spirit, became the beacon of d’Indy’s Christian and Catholic conception of art and civilization in a scientific, positivistic age, whose intellectual climate of skepticism constantly undermined belief in permanent religious values.”

There are other reasons to question much of what d’Indy has left us in regards to Franck. Much has been said of his highly controversial curriculum for the Schola Cantorum, and it is enlightening to briefly cite one such notice, as it has implications for d’Indy’s questionable creation of an ideal Father figure in César Franck: “[as d’Indy’s] historiography was simultaneously fused with his political ideology, the genres, styles, and composers he traced were ideological enunciations.” As seen, d’Indy does not seem to be characterized by the strict separation of his ideology from his musicological handiwork. Here, it seems entirely legitimate to suggest that the *Pater Seraphicus* we know from d’Indy’s biography could very well be a completely different person from the César Franck who composed such works as the Piano Quintet, Symphony in D minor, and *Psyché*.

1.5 An outline of subsequent chapters

It is the goal of this dissertation to explore in greater detail the erotic aspect of Franck’s music, which has been sidelined by theological interpretative analyses. This Catholic-Christian interpretation’s firm entrenchment in the scholarly writing on Franck has just been explored at length; while d’Indy’s unique placement as Franck’s pupil and biographer underlines the considerable influence of his situation, his interpretation is certainly more than problematic (and, along with Cortot’s later analyses, tinged with deep personal needs and concerns).

In the forthcoming chapter, examples of devices and procedures associated with eroticism in Western art music will be explored—the focus is on sources which are directly associated with

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38 Andrew Thomson, *Vincent d’Indy*, 45.
Franck. As has oft been noted, the compositional procedures of Wagner are especially salient to this discussion—chromaticism as a harmonic life-blood (for many symbolizing the “breakdown” of tonality) is, from the appearance of Tristan, something which Franck seemed irrevocably attracted to (some have even noted his musical style suggests the subsequent progeny of early Berg and Schoenberg). In recent years there has emerged a great deal of compelling and thought-provoking scholarship on the erotic in late nineteenth-century European music—these sources are also consulted throughout (Laurence Dreyfus, Stephen Downes, Derek B. Scott, and Susan McClary, among others).

Since the work done is from the perspective of a performer, this dissertation will not be limited to a simple cataloguing of erotic devices found in the music. In the manner of Cortot, who was, for many, one of the greatest musicians of the past century, new interpretational possibilities will be created and suggested, based on evidence in the music itself. The works discussed in chapters three, four, and five were composed within a short span of especially productive time, and they share Franck’s mature compositional voice and procedures. The relationships between structural features and erotic signs will be central considerations. An obvious starting point is the Piano Quintet (1880). The third chapter explores the explosively dramatic first movement, whose second theme awakens a latent, subversive eroticism, only to be ultimately punished and crushed by the destructive forces of the first theme.40

The fourth chapter will consider the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue (1884), as well as Alfred Cortot’s Franckian spiritual interpretative incentives most famously and influentially pronounced in reference to this solo piano triptych. As will be seen, his interpretation of this work is full of holes—one enormous one coming at his misplacement of the work’s most resounding climax (a mistake which, interestingly, supports his argument that the work is one imbued with Catholic-Christian fervor). The frequently-cited paradigm in this work of an incorruptible diatonicism’s adjacency and resistance to its decadent, degenerate sibling chromaticism is also problematic, as will be shown by the way Franck handles these materials. In addition, the previously mentioned “motto” theme of this work, long associated with the austere divine, is frequently (more concretely) related to the supposedly religious Parsifal Leitmotif, but a closer examination of the

40Even more erotically fertile territory may be found in the third movement, an exuberant vocalization of wild excitement barely held in check until a volcanic ending—a scheme many will relate to structural paradigms of the erotic.
implications therein reveals it to be just as erotically symbolic. Among other noteworthy observations are the curious parallel one finds between the structural plan of the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue and the classic trajectory-towards-climax paradigm of which Wagner was so enamored (as well as Debussy and other, more distant relations such as Scriabin), in addition to the work’s chromatically rich and harmonically audacious expressive language. While some may find the associations of this particular work with the religious especially difficult to reconsider, it is worth exploring in more detail.

The fifth chapter will explore the Violin Sonata (1886), a work frequently cited for its connection to the marriage of the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe. Franck’s gift of the Sonata to Ysaÿe has prompted associations with the idea of the work as analogous to married life—something along the lines of Schumann’s Frauenliebe und Leben. The Sonata has also been linked to Marcel Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past, “in which chamber music by an imaginary composer named Vinteuil […] drifts in and out of the narrative, provoking meditations on memory.”

While these associations have contributed to an understanding of the work in a more domestic than religious light (which seems beneficial for this discussion), there are little or no analyses which contemplate markers of the erotic, which are plentiful in the languorous, lush and non-developmental first movement and in the frenzied commingling of the second. Some songs of the most famous French “eroticist” of Franck’s time, Claude Debussy, are discussed (it is little known that he was a one-time student of Franck) which augment the possibility of an erotic reading. But, as is argued, eroticism is a subsidiary force in this work’s choate narrative—its emotionally-charged undulations reveal an expressive spectrum which ranges from the most euphoric to the most despondent, ultimately suggesting a trajectory of arousal, experience, pain, and, finally, reconciliation.

A concluding chapter will summarize the findings of this research and suggest implications of performance practice (in the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue) as well as directions for further research. Among these suggestions is the proposal of further alternative analyses on Franck’s other works which are seemingly inextricable from the Pater Seraphicus narrative (some fall almost naturally into this mould, such as the Three Chorales), as well as on other composers most closely related to Franck—Chabrier, Chausson, Lekeu, Duparc, and even, interestingly,

d’Indy. The closing discussion briefly considers other composers outside this circle who deserve equal exploration, and other aesthetics which similarly entangle religious piety with eroticism.
Chapter 2

Influences besides the *Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*, and the introduction of another interpretative possibility in the music of César Franck

2.1 Wagnerian revolution

At this point it is highly informative to take a look at the musical situation in France around the time Franck “blossomed” as a composer. As many have noted, Franck’s composition of a symphony was met with some disdain (the symphony was considered by many a bailiwick of Teutonic tradition); Gounod called it “impotence pushed to the length of dogma,”¹ while one critic ironically called it “largely sublimated Gounod.”² But, arguably, it is the most significant and important representation in the genre from France from the entire Romantic era. At the same time, Franck’s *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* is often cited as one of the most significant keyboard works to appear in France since the death of Chopin. Indeed, anything going on in France at this time is necessarily overshadowed by an enormous presence in Germany—one which caused reverberations throughout the continent and the world, and one which we are still trying to sort out today: Wagner. Leon Botstein notes: “After the failed revolution of 1848 and the coup d’état of Napoleon III, French musical culture, despite that country’s political and economic strength, experienced its most radical domination from outside its borders. This took the form of the profound French enthusiasm for the music of Wagner. One of the most influential instruments of cultural influence was none other than the journal *Revue Wagnerienne*, and the rabid partisanship for Wagner that extended from Charles Baudelaire to the young Claude Debussy.”³

Besides France, Richard Wagner had an immense influence on the whole of Europe—and it is of paramount importance to appreciate (especially for Franck) what a truly spectacular impression he created. At the same time, it must be noted that while there existed “profound enthusiasm” for Wagner in France, it appears there was also a great deal of ambivalence towards the

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²Ibid.
composer and his music—and not without reason, given the unstable nationalistic situation of the
time. The Franco-Prussian/German War of 1870 (with the end result of a Parisian surrender on
January 28, 1871) was fresh on everyone’s minds, and Wagner’s frequent tendency to say
outstandingly pro-German things (“I was above all born a German!”4) did little to ingratiate him
to average citizens of France. An example some have suggested may have helped invigorate the
belligerence of Germany in the first place is worth quoting (in an 1867 letter to King Ludwig II):

“Germany feels the life force within her. What is German and what is the German
spirit?—that is what we wish to show to the world, and we wish to fill the dessicated
arteries of the poor, unbelieving Teutonic world with new life. Let then, from Munich,
the flags of the noble Germanic genius fly over Germany, all united as I envisioned it—
flags that my glorious Siegfried will wave and flaunt throughout the country! The acts of
French insolence and menace touch the honor of Germany; the entire people desire a
reply.”5

This conflagration of a letter many will find disturbing, even chilling in its language. Needless
to say, many French musicians most likely felt, if nothing else, discomfort at what might lie
below the surface of Wagner’s undeniably intoxicating, “addictive” idiom (the German Nietzsche
would later describe a period in which he was enamored of Wagner as a spell of “disease”6).

It is more than a little interesting to note one particular adversary of the Wagnerian revolution in
France. The previously mentioned classicist Camille Saint-Saëns was, in a particularly vitriolic
manner, quite opposed to the whole idea of Wagner and his music:

“Wagner's works have forced themselves on the French public, who think they admire
them, whilst in reality they do not understand them at all, and they cannot understand
them, for these works are at once musical and literary. These lyrical dramas deprived of
their text—of which generally wretched translations can give but a false notion—are for

Quarterly. Vol. 35, No. 3 (July 1949), 390.
5Ibid., 405.
6Laurence Dreyfus, Wagner and the Erotic Impulse (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2010), 117.
Some have suggested Saint-Saëns’ objections to Wagner may stem from nothing more than his own patriotism, and were not, in fact, indicative of the French Zeitgeist—Saint-Saëns was perhaps wise to clothe his acerbic critique of Wagner and German music in such language (this quote is taken from a volume which Saint-Saëns assembled on the subject and titled Germanophilie). Nonetheless, Wagner’s music had an immense allure for many groups—most importantly for us, one of these was la bande à Franck.

2.2 Wagner’s Tristan in Franck’s Psyché

Célestin Deliège notes: “The general spirit of Franck’s instrumental works exemplify Franck’s chosen compositional models (Beethoven and Liszt); Wagner—especially the Wagner of Tristan—is Franck’s harmonic model.” Indeed, other countless references to the influence of Wagner appear when one investigates analyses of Franck’s most important works—this is especially evident with a very interesting work which might seem, from the first hearing, a progenitor of Debussy’s characteristically lush, sensuous idiom: Psyché, a symphonic poem for chorus and orchestra completed in 1888. Davies notes of Psyché’s Garden of Love: “Franck’s orchestration for the first time takes on a floating, Tristanesque quality [. . .] There is no doubt, whatever interpretation we care to place on it, that Psyché is a somewhat voluptuous work.” R.J. Stove suggests: “Perhaps Psyché could never have been conceived without Wagner’s example in Tristan.” Vallas notes that Félicité Franck “disliked the new work, which she regarded as too sensual.” Franck himself articulated this very charge while discussing Psyché

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9Laurence Davies, Franck (London: Dent, 1973), 47.
10R.J. Stove, César Franck, 263.
11Leon Vallas, César Franck, Translated by Hubert Foss (London: Harrap, 1951), 206.
and his *Beatitudes*: “What I like most about this work (the *Beatitudes*) is that it does not contain a single bar of sensual music.”

Perhaps here we should step aside from Franck for a moment; it should be noted that while Wagner has, famously, been charged with many sins (bellicose anti-semitism and the breakdown of the tonal system in Western music, to name a couple), one which has been often overshadowed by larger concerns is his unabashed pursuit and creation of *eroticism* in his music. One need not go far to find citations of this obsession (Dreyfus has called it a *leitmotif* of Wagner’s life): “Wagner’s contemporaries recognised in his music a proposition that moody sensuality and a rejection of societal norms of behaviour constituted a manifesto for real social change that was somehow grounded in forms of sexual expression.”

Derek B. Scott, in his article *Erotic Representations from Monteverdi to Mae West*, notes the relative difficulty for music directors wishing to “eroticize” Poppea, as opposed to those directing “Wagnerian music drama, where it (is) accepted that eroticism would be recognized in the music, if not in the performer.” J.P.E. Harper Scott recently wrote:

> “Is it only in Wagner that we can find such a suggestive parallel between tonal music whose functional control of desire and (denied) resolution is radically reduced to its fundamental elements (essentially a teasing focus on variously powered dominant chords) and an art form whose current dominant style similarly treats human bodies, and particularly female ones, literally as body parts, as partial objects of desire, many-holed machines for producing orgasmic outcomes from certain inputs conceived in orthodox fashion?”

One commentator has effectively summed up a common understanding by describing *Tristan und Isolde* as “an exercise in ‘orgiastic ecstasy.’”

Most importantly, it was this incredible Germanic influence which was absolutely integral to the fabric of Franck’s musical idiom. Franck himself never made contact with Wagner although he

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12Ibid.
owned a copy of both *Walküre* and (according to several sources) *Tristan*. Many of his students were avid worshippers of the sage of Bayreuth—d’Indy’s “Wagnerolatry” was shared by his friend and fellow Franck-student Chabrier, who, while attending his first performance of *Tristan*, is reputed to have begun weeping uncontrollably during the Prelude because of a specific timbre: “I know it’s stupid, but I can’t help it [. . .] I’ve been waiting for ten years of my life to hear that A on the cellos.”17 It seems Duparc (notable for the ephemeral quality of his oeuvre) was in fact the first Wagnerite of la Bande à Franck; Stove notes that “he loved Wagner’s music, having heard it as early as 1869.”18 Lekeu’s penchant for chromatic instability and a certain kind of sensual angst in his music (an example being found in the G major violin sonata) could easily be called out as the imprint of Wagner. But, most importantly, Franck himself seems to have been deeply affected by Wagner, while there remains the impression that he harbored a certain amount of reticence about the German. Demuth notes that “he always wanted to go to Bayreuth but it did not occur to anyone to make him a present of the trip. Instead he was forced to study the works in score [. . .] Of *Tristan und Isolde* he thought highly.”19 Elsewhere we read: “Franck’s Wagnerism is seen by recalling his attitude toward *Tristan und Isolde*: he treasured his copy of the score—without seeing fit to remove the word “poison” he early had scrawled on the title page.”20

Indeed, many biographers of Franck (Stove, Vallas, and others) often make a passing reference to “Tristanesque” qualities or Wagnerian influence in a Franck work, but are often less than specific about what exactly lends this quality to the work in question (or, indeed, what exactly this quality is). It simply seems taken for granted that there is some sort of unnamable “sensuality,” “eroticism,” or sexual tension which acts as an undercurrent. Many scholars have begun to articulate exactly what kinds of procedures—be they harmonic, timbral, gestural or other—constitute what may be understood as “erotic” in Western music (and more specifically, music of the Romantic era). It is of utmost importance that some of these procedures and examples be examined here, as they will inform further sections of this dissertation. For now, it

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18 R.J. Stove, *César Franck*: 139.
is worth giving a hardly controversial example from Wagner of something decidedly erotic—nämlich, *Tristan*, and placing it next to the Franck work previously mentioned: *Psyché*.

Of note is Dreyfus’ discussion of the oft-cited “curve” of the *Tristan Prelude*. Characteristics which are especially important include (naturally) the *Tristan* chord itself and its accompanying *chromatic* motive: “The chief marker of the Tristan erotic is of course the rising four-note chromatic motive (often called Desire) that occurs at the beginning of the opera. Embedded in the famous half-diminished chord and given a slinky bit of voice-leading with an irregular resolution, the progression mystified someone even as sophisticated as Berlioz. Or did it?”

Dreyfus goes on to describe Berlioz’s (perhaps knowing) description of the opening gesture as “‘a kind of chromatic moan [. . .] whose cruel effect is reinforced by long suspensions which appear in place of proper harmonic resolutions.’ Even in his disapproval, Berlioz, like many others, grasped what came to be recognized as a quintessential emblem of mimetic sexual desire” (Ex. 2.1):

Example 2.1. Wagner, *Tristan and Isolde*, Prelude, mm. 1-3

Here, two important characteristics of the *erotic* in music should be underlined: *chromaticism* (Susan McClary has famously cited descending chromaticism as a “common trope for female seduction”23), and, the importance of diminished24, half-diminished 7th chords, or other, unrelated chords used in succession. Wagner’s recognition, and yet denial of, the magnetic underpinnings of tonality is precisely what makes this procedure so effective—his undermining of traditional tonal procedure makes these thirsting, unsatisfied sonorities possible. This same procedure was quickly picked up by many others; for Franck, a “slinky bit of voice-leading” is

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22 Ibid.
24 “The use of a diminished seventh chord exchanging with the tonic [a nonfunctional coloristic effect] is a seductive harmonic resource” (Derek B. Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology*, 23).
often all that holds together a combination of undeniably lush harmonies which could not otherwise exist together—frequently among these is the half-diminished’ (°7) chord.

Concerning its initial appearance in Tristan, Dreyfus states: “The identification of the ‘erotic’ first chord of the Tristan Prelude or Einleitung [Introduction], as it is marked in the score, makes more sense if one consults the pre-history of the ‘half-diminished’ (°7) chord in Wagner's own works, a narrative that sheds light on its subsequent erotic significance.”25

More importantly, it seems clear from Wagner’s own writings that the structural trajectory of the Prelude is meant to correspond to some sort of sexual fantasy—this is done by way of “only a handful of harmonic progressions—repeated in sequential cycles,” giving, in effect, “a protracted, arched structure.”26 Dreyfus explains Wagner’s developmental procedure: “The ‘long articulated breath’ of the opening that ‘swells upwards’ via a chromatic ascent through the octave embraces the three statements of insatiable yearning leading to the deceptive cadence characterizing unquenchable desire. Wagner repeats and develops this substantial musical paradigm in three subsequent passages.”27

While a detailed harmonic exploration of the Tristan Prelude side-by-side with a corresponding analysis of Psyché is far beyond the scope (or intentions) of this paper, it may be enlightening here to cite two documents related to the over-arching ideas beneath the composition of both works. Wagner wrote of the inspiration for the Tristan Prelude:

“[The musician] therefore caused insatiable yearning to swell upwards in a long articulated breath, from the most timid confession and the most tender attraction, through anxious sighs, hopes and fears, moans and wishes, joys and torments, until the mightiest blast, the most violent effort to find the rupture which unlocks for the boundlessly craving heart the path into the sea of unending sexual bliss. In vain! Swooning, the heart sinks back so as to languish in yearning, in yearning without success, since every success is only again a renewed yearning, until, in the final wilting, an inkling dawns on the interrupted glance of achieving the highest bliss: the bliss of dying, of being no more, of the final release into that wondrous realm, from which we strayed the furthest, where we

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26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
strive to penetrate with the most vehement force. Do we call it Death? Or is it the nocturnal world of miracles, from which, as the legend informs us, a (strand of) ivy and a vine once grew upwards on the grave of Tristan and Isolde in the most ardent embrace.”

Franck’s text which accompanies the score of Psyché bears a few (more subtle) parallels to the Wagner text:

Part I (Psyché asleep)

“Psyché sleeps… In the dim regions of her dreams, her spirit becomes aware of some perfect bliss, not of this world, which she feels will yet be hers. Suddenly the air vibrates to strange sounds… Psyché is borne away by Zephyrs to the Garden of Eros.”

Part II (The Garden of Eros)

“More beautiful than beauty personified, Psyché reclines on a bed of flowers, while rejoicing nature does homage, as to a queen. Voices murmur in her ear of the power of love… She wakes in gentle agitation… The murmuring Voices speak of the invisible spouse who is even now approaching… Enchanted, she listens and waits… In graver tones the Voices sing: “Remember! On the face of thy mystic lover thou must never look… Forget not!” The spirits are silent: but another voice is now heard, sweet yet clear; it is the voice of Eros himself. Psyché timidly answers… soon their souls commingle… All is passion, all is radiance, all is happiness… to last forever, will Psyché but remember!”

Part III (The punishment, Psyché’s sufferings and tears, Apotheosis)

“Psyché has disregarded the warning. “Her punishment begins!” sing the Voices… while Psyché weeps… will Eros pardon her?

Psyché weeps: her grief is measureless, for she has known measureless bliss. On earth nothing is left her but to suffer the fires of longing unappeasable—to perish in one last sad aspiration towards that ideal love which she has lost forever, but which she still hopes to regain.

28Ibid.
“Eros hath pardoned!” sings the mysterious choir, and the universe throbs with joy…
Rest now, poor Psyché! Thy yearning, strong as death, hath gone up to the great Eros,
and he himself comes down to thee; his kiss restores your former love; nature sings her
old song of joy. See, in the arms of her immortal lover, Psyché soars upwards from the
earth, triumphant in a cloud of glory!”

Much has been said of the Tristan Prelude, but of Psyché’s music itself, Franck’s own admission
of “sensuality” is easily audible. Consider the following passages in comparison—Example 2.2
is the climax from the “love duet” of Tristan’s Act II, which corresponds in the drama to the
long-awaited consummation of Tristan and Isolde’s relationship (prior to its shocking
interruption):

![Musical example](image)

Example 2.2. Wagner, Tristan und Isolde, Act II, love duet

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Here (Ex. 2.3) we see Franck’s own palpitating orchestral gestures in the climax of *The Garden of Love*, in which Psyché, having awoken in “gentle agitation” awaits her “commingling” with Eros (“all is passion, all is radiance”):

Example 2.3. Franck, Psyché, *The Garden of Love*, mm. 91-104

Many things should be instantly recognizable; the rhythmic thrusts of each example are both fairly *throbbing* with anticipation of an expected (intensely desired) goal—in the Wagner, the thoroughly chromatic melodic gesture is repeated over and over again, nearly always with a syncopation (manifesting itself as a tie over the barline). Franck’s melodic material is just as chromatic, and it is punctuated by syncopations (gasp?)—sometimes with half-notes on weak beats, elsewhere with literal rests, as seen. In addition, both examples, after an increasingly excited chromatic climb, come to dominant 7th harmony with a pedal point in the bass—perhaps the most obvious example of *expectation* in Western music. Here, Wagner will differ from Franck, providing the screaming “coitus interruptus” diminished 7th, while the *Pater Seraphicus* will deliver the anticipated A-flat major harmony.
What some may find to be highly ironic is just who Father Franck decided to dedicate this unholy work to. It was none other than his pupil, Vincent d’Indy! This seems to have caused some embarrassment for the Catholic protégé—Stove notes d’Indy’s feeling about *Psyché*’s dedication to him might be comparable to that of a “Sunday-school teacher if abruptly called on to acquaint riotous adolescents with *The Song of Solomon.*”\(^{30}\) It is interesting to see how he dealt with this problem; in his own biography of Franck, d’Indy’s discussion of *Psyché* is thus given: “it would be difficult for us to consider it other than as an ethereal dialogue between the soul, such as the mystical author of *The Imitation of Christ* conceived, and a seraph descended from heaven to instruct it in the eternal truths.”\(^{31}\) Stove notes, further on, that “such high-flown interpretations would be all very well were it not for Franck’s actual music, which in almost every measure is of the most breathtakingly lush type.”\(^{32}\) Another humorous anecdote regarding the long-suffering Félicité Franck appears as well: “The sole time Félicité compelled herself to attend a performance of *Psyché*, she discovered—in a spirit of bona fide passive-aggressiveness—that she had ‘accidentally’ forgotten to bring her tickets with her.”\(^{33}\) Richard Langham Smith corroborates Stove’s opinion of the matter: “Can we really believe Vincent d’Indy when he claimed that the piece was entirely free of sensual passion? [. . .] Many find this interpretation hard to believe, and have commented on the overt eroticism of the piece which tells of the unseen love object, contemplated only later in the act [. . .] it is a work with a unique atmosphere and a dark, rich sound: qualities which have prompted many commentators to remark on its dark, sensual, even carnal, atmosphere.”\(^{34}\) Smith also notes of the first section of *Psyché*, in which Psyché sleeps and dreams of a “perfect bliss” she may have with her lover: “surely this itself is enough to dispel d’Indy’s plea of innocence: the Freudian psyche is having an erotic dream!”\(^{35}\)

But, to return to the point in question, it must be seen that Franck’s ties to Wagner are not easily dismissed. Even more so, Wagner’s bequeathal of a harmonic idiom drenched in eroticism to much of Europe (reviled by Saint-Saëns and others) is significant in the creation of a new, more

\(^{30}\)Ibid., 262.


\(^{32}\)R.J. Stove, *César Franck*, 262.

\(^{33}\)Ibid.

\(^{34}\)Richard Langham Smith, Liner notes, *César Franck: Psyché (complete), Le Chasseur maudit*, Tadaaki Otaka (conductor), CHAN9128, compact disc.

\(^{35}\)Ibid.
accurate understanding of Franck and his mature oeuvre. Franck’s frequent citation as some kind of “Wagnerian” does not help the cause of those who still cling to the comfortable picture of the innocent St. Clotilde organist, who, interestingly enough, is notable in the tradition of Roman Catholic music only for his “comparative failure as a writer of music for liturgical use.” Nor is it that *Psyché* is an erotic “one-off.” It would be equally difficult to look askance at the brimming erotic undercurrents of such works as the Violin Sonata, the two piano triptychs, and, especially, the Piano Quintet (this last work will be discussed at length in the following section).

### 2.3 Debussy’s Franckian model

Finally—and as has been alluded to from time to time—Franck may be related, if distantly, to Debussy. It is perhaps not common knowledge that Debussy, at one time, actually audited Franck’s class at the Paris Conservatory—recently several scholars have put forth research which shows Debussy, despite a wide gap in age as well as stylistic and musical goals, actually looked to his haloed elder for inspiration, even into his late, mature years. James Briscoe has noted: “Despite his differing temperament, the young Debussy frequently turned to Franck for models of structure in instrumental music.” Later, an interesting case is given: “A clear example of Debussy modeling upon Franck is his symphonic suite with chorus, *Printemps*. He completed the first version on 23 February 1887, during the Prix de Rome sojourn, and his model most probably was Franck's *Psyché*.” This should not come as a surprise, given Debussy’s later embrace of all things sexual—examples of this might include the piano piece *L’isle Joyeuse*, which effectively “captures a mood of hedonistic abandon and drives to ecstatic heights”—the work’s “impressionistic” intent is to evoke an orgy. Or, a far more obvious example is Debussy’s musical erotic dream found in *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*—one may go no further than Grove itself to find this example given, in no uncertain terms, as a

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37This connection will be discussed at length in chapter five.
40Ibid., 30.
representation of the erotic. In addition, Debussy’s own Quartet (which, Briscoe notes, carries the lone distinction of opus number and key) may have been inspired by Franck’s own magisterial Quartet, however, “the more compelling compositional model for Debussy's Quatuor was probably Franck's Quintet in F minor.”

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Chapter 3

“Paroxysms of Earthly Passion” in the Piano Quintet of César Franck

3.1 “Le Père Franck me ravage”: the Quintet’s remarkable premiere

The history of Western art music is filled with interesting stories, and one in particular concerns the first performance of César Franck’s *Piano Quintet* on 17 January 1880.¹ As recounted by Davies, the premiere made quite an impression on all those present. César Franck had enlisted the help of the aforementioned Camille Saint-Saëns in performing the piano part of the *Quintet*. The string quartet was comprised of musicians Marsick, Remy, Van Waefelghem, and Loys.²

What transpired is on some level highly amusing, although at the time it must have been somewhat awkward for many. The problem concerned Saint-Saëns, and, as noted by Davies, “was chiefly owing to the great man’s skill as a sight-reader.” He goes on:

“It gradually dawned on the more astute members of the audience that what the pianist was playing was both new and alarming to him. It was not that he had made any noticeable mistakes of execution. Rather, the content of the work seemed to be impinging on his sensibilities for the first time, causing him to experience a mild attack of nausea. When the performance was over, the unsuspecting Franck went up to offer his congratulations, at the same time making over the dedication of the new Quintet to his friend. This was altogether too much for the scowling Saint-Saëns, who stamped noisily off the platform leaving the manuscript still standing on the piano. Such an ill-mannered gesture could hardly have failed to communicate itself to the persons sharing the stage. Even so, Franck’s pupils did not appear to be aware of it, and it fell to one of Pleyel’s assistants to retrieve the offending document from the waste-paper basket into which it was eventually plunged.”³

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² Leon Vallas, *César Franck*, Translated by Hubert Foss (London: Harrap, 1951), 166.
What was it about Franck’s music which Saint-Saëns was allegedly sight-reading that made it so inflammatory? By many accounts, it was the work’s “extremely expressive force and emotional violence”⁴ and perhaps, even eroticism which caused such a stir.

One does not have to venture far to discover many accounts of “eroticism” in the Piano Quintet. In addition, if there is sexual passion in this work, the same scholars seem in agreement as to the identity of the catalyst which aroused this passion in the aging, “Father Franck,” long-married organist at the St. Clotilde Basilica in Paris. Her name was Augusta Holmès, and she was a young student in Franck’s composition studio. At the age of 24 she became a naturalized Frenchwoman⁵ (she was born in Ireland), and upon her arrival in the Parisian artistic circles it seems she incited many a “crush,” among her peers and instructors—Leon Vallas cites Saint-Saëns’ own admission “I am completely infatuated with the beautiful Augusta.”⁶ Stove mentions Augusta as “the former Franck pupil who allegedly aroused in him (Franck) most unspiritual desires at the time he worked on his Piano Quintet.”⁷ The allegedly unrighteous inception of the Quintet has been absorbed efficiently by the world of music criticism. For instance, one easily finds such as the following (in a review of William Howard [piano] and the Schubert Ensemble’s performance of the work): “Félicité Franck, César’s wife, would have not liked this performance of the Piano Quintet. She hated the piece because she knew that her husband was thinking passionately about his student Augusta Holmès when he wrote it, and these performers concentrate on the intimacy and tenderness of this extremely romantic piece—intimacy and tenderness that Franck never directed towards his wife.”⁸ Davies writes of the premiere, “Loyal friends of the composer like Charles Bordes later confessed how uncomfortable the music had made them feel, while the performance is said to have brought a blush to the cheeks of no less an amorist than Liszt. Perhaps the most amusing comment on the evening’s entertainment was that made by Delaborde, who simply said: ‘Le Père Franck me ravage.’”⁹ Davies also corroborates

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⁶Leon Vallas, César Franck, 169.
⁹Laurence Davies, Franck, 229.
the account of Franck’s wife: “she, at any rate, was left in no doubt as to the unholliness of her husband’s affections.”

Such is the proliferation of this hermeneutic conjecture, that someone named Ronald Harwood has even written a novel about it, entitled César and Augusta. This book is, undoubtedly, historical fiction, with such fabricated exchanges as the following: “‘What is that music you are playing?’ asked Félicité Franck as her husband composed. ‘I emphatically dislike it.’” As might be guessed, this episode concerns the embryonic stages of Franck’s Piano Quintet. Richard Dyer effectively summarizes some principal ideas of César and Augusta in his review of Harwood’s novel: “The place of Augusta Holmès in the history of music is secure, not because of her teacher’s effect on her (Franck never succeeded in disciplining her genuine but unruly talent) but because of her effect on him: only after his lessons with Augusta Holmès did Franck begin writing the music by which he is remembered today. The unexpected passion of the Piano Quintet, the first of Franck’s famous works, was inspired by his feeling for Augusta, and everyone knew it.” He goes on to remind potential readers that the novel is clearly placed in the category of “fiction”: “The most authoritative biographers say that the actual relationship between Franck and Augusta Holmès was timidly conventional and without a trace of impropriety.” Obviously, a novel based on an affair which occurred between two people whose relationship, “historically speaking,” was “without a trace of impropriety” must be a little problematic. Nonetheless, it is this very type of situation which seems to perpetuate discourses of musical inspiration and meaning.

As we have seen, the event of the Quintet’s premiere stands in stark contrast with the established conceptions surrounding Franck’s music—perhaps what is most interesting in this case is just how “uncomfortable” everyone around Franck seems to have been at the time. Whereas a composer like Scriabin would become a kind of cult figure from whom outrageous ravings and “eroticisms” of every variety were something expected and accepted, Franck’s position seemed to have carried a great deal of expectation—from his wife, children, and from his students—from which it must have been difficult to escape. Many of these musicians around Franck are

10Ibid.
12Ibid.
the ones responsible for the creation of a “Franck aesthetic” whose primary characteristic is a fixation on Christian theology.

There simply cannot be denied that, perhaps as a result of expectations and of Franck’s frequent shattering of them, there is something much more complex (and interesting) going on in his music than d’Indy’s “blatant hagiographic propaganda”

Andrew Thomson gives a spot-on summation of the situation in his article César Franck—mind, flesh and spirit: “Certainly, he was a simple good man, devoted to his pupils and with a religious faith based on the Gospels. His worldly ambitions were limited to providing for his family and to hearing his music performed. At the same time, a vein of repressed sexuality found sublimation in many of his finest works.”

3.2 The trajectory-towards-climax scheme and its proponents

It is necessary to recall an integral element already mentioned in reference to Wagner’s Tristan; as noted, the trajectory-towards-climax scheme found in a work is often symbolic of its erotic intentions. In Wagner, the repetition of materials which are, each after the other, increased in intensity but not allowed to reach climax, directly (and more importantly, aurally) corresponds to his description of the Prelude as an erotic dream. Many have noted Wagner’s specific aesthetic goals (strongly influenced by Schopenhauer) are played out in the whole of Tristan—the only real harmonic closure is prevented until the very end of the opera, and is symbolic of death. But throughout, the idea of desire is at the forefront—desire for something unattainable or distant, and frequently something nearly reached or consummated.

Many examples of this “trajectory-towards-climax” may be found in music contemporary to Franck’s own output. Liszt, an avid supporter of Franck’s music and a personal friend of the composer, has often been cited as an influence on his idiom—certainly one may see the Lisztian inspiration behind early works such as the Trios (Op. 1). It might be suggested that Franck’s penchant for cyclic unity in his works is also informed by Liszt’s much-famed process of

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thematic transformation (seen, for instance, in his Sonata in b minor, and perhaps to some extent in nearly every one of his best-known works for piano)—it should come as no surprise that d’Indy seems to have labored tireless to legitimize the “sanctification of Franck’s cyclic forms as the theological symbol of perfection.” Any appearance of the number “3” only exacerbates the crucifixionary precedent. In any case, the cyclic principle is shared with Liszt; further investigation of these procedures must surely invoke echoes of the Wagnerian Leitmotif.

“The erotic figuring of the encountered woman, and the creative function of devilish intoxication, similarly inform Liszt’s first Mephisto Waltz (1860).” This example is but one among many; Downes notes that its “second theme, marked espressivo amoroso, is a model of seductive, erotic dissonance.” A description of the theme (Ex. 3) which follows will reveal some highly interesting characteristics: “(there is) chromatic alteration of the dominant of D-flat (the mediant of the piece’s home key, A) by melodic insinuation. The raised fifth (E natural) ascends to generate the dominant thirteenth; the B-flat (the ninth) which follows then chromatically falls (with an octave displacement) through A to A-flat. The latent whole-tone flavor in the dominant alterations, the rising then falling semitonal resolutions, and the melody’s syncopation and deft articulation all contribute further to the erotic tone”:

Example 3.1. Liszt, Mephisto Waltz No. 1, mm. 341-348

For those familiar with the first Mephisto Waltz, it will be remembered that the amorous theme seen above makes a nearly volcanic, overwhelmingly passionate explosion of virtuosity at the end of the piece, after which “pounding octave bass figures and cascades of notes in the right

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17 Ibid., 17.
18 Ibid.
hand move to a glimpse of post-coital languor, before the music rises up revivified in the final *Presto* cadential flourish."\(^{19}\)

Many of examples in Liszt’s and Wagner’s examples found their way into the erotic compositional techniques of another, quite distant composer: Scriabin.\(^ {20}\) In many ways, his ambitious music takes eroticism to an extroverted extreme (and is, for many, crystallized in a highly idiomatic musical language). An example of the trajectory-towards-climax in which the idea of desire (as discussed previously, the joy in the process of desiring something, and the thrill of the ultimate consummation) comes across very audibly might be named in the climacteric Fourth Sonata. Many have discussed the eroticism of this work at length (see Kenneth Smith) but, if nothing else, there certainly remains an audible argument to be made for this music’s carriage of the erotic. An initial hearing of the work reveals music which is fairly brimming with surging energy; sudden surges and driving cascades of notes are repeatedly not allowed to reach climax—Scriabin dissipates an enormous amount of energy in flying, fleeting jumps around the keyboard, constantly (and sometimes barely) keeping said energy in check until the coda (in a final outburst of repeated chords marked—in true Scriabin style—“overjoyed,” and “passionately”\(^ {21}\)).

We may make several observations from these examples. It goes without saying that the music of Scriabin, and an example of overt eroticism like Liszt’s *Mephisto Waltz* (or the previously mentioned *L’isle Joyeuse*, for that matter) inform the scholarship on what can be called “erotic” in Western music. To give a sort of short-list, some of these devices include the trajectory-

\(^{19}\)Ibid.  
\(^{20}\)However exciting it may seem to bring such an overt sensalist as Scriabin into a discussion of the *Pater Seraphicus*, we must be at this point measured in how much we can take from his example. Scriabin, a Russian, was nineteen years old when Franck, a Frenchman, died. Franck’s inheritance of a Bach/Beethovenian tradition stands in stark contrast to Scriabin, whose highly idiomatic musical style, as Jonathan Powell notes, “could perhaps have occurred only in Russia where Western harmonic mores, although respected in most circles, were less fully entrenched than in Europe,” (Jonathan Powell, “Skryabin, Aleksandr Nikolayevich,” *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/25946 [accessed March 29, 2012]; one legitimate reason to bring him into this discussion is that scholarship on the eroticism of his music is in no short supply. Besides Powell’s succinct analysis of his music as “the sanctification of a creative process in which the sensation of uplift towards otherworldliness and ecstasy (often symbolized by the sexual act) is central to Skryabin’s mature output,” Rimm has noted “his later sonatas attempt parallels to orgasm and its subsequent relaxation” (Robert Rimm, *The Composer-Pianists: Hamelin and the Eight*, (Portland: Amadeus, 2002), 76); world-famous pianist Vladimir Horowitz sums up Scriabin nicely: “[Scriabin’s music is] super-sensuous, super-romantic and super-mysterious” (David Dubal, *Reflections From the Keyboard: The World of the Concert Pianists*, [New York: Schirmer, 1997], 216).  
toward-climax scheme (seen in examples from Wagner and Liszt), dense chromaticism—both harmonic (symbolic of *decadence*) and melodic (seen frequently in “seductive” tropes\(^\text{22}\) – melodic syncopations (“gasp”), and, the appearance of “palpitations” at the climactic point—in the examples from *Psyché* and *Tristan* seen in chapter 2 these manifest themselves in orchestral tremolos and increasingly obsessive “fetishistic” repetitions of the same motive. In pianistic terms, we can take the following as manifestations of “palpitations” (repeated chords seem to be favored):

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\(^{22}\)A most literal (and contemporary) example of this is found in the Habanera from Bizet’s Carmen.
3.3 Sexual narratives in the Piano Quintet’s *Molto moderato quasi lento*

To return to Franck’s Piano Quintet, we must now ask, how do these observations apply? Where is the “intensity curve,” and the palpitations (or, repeated chords)? While an in-depth analysis of the *entire* work (and especially, the third movement) will certainly yield an enormous number of *eroticisms*, this discussion will limit itself to the first movement. Even a superficial reading of the first movement yields the unmistakable impression of an extremely *dramatic* narrative—one particular interpretative plan is suggested at the end of this discussion.

Chromaticism makes an excellent starting-point. Franck’s music has been oft cited for its dense chromaticism, and the Quintet stands out as an especially excellent example. Franck’s penchant for *melodic* chromaticism is easily seen as early as the opening bars (Ex. 3.5):

Example 3.5. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, m. 13 (piano).

This music is penultimate to the second entrance of the string quartet, and what is notable is Franck’s engagement with every possible chromatic tone to reach the final dominant harmony: in
the left hand the line reaches through G—A-flat—A—B-flat; in the right hand two lines move upward similarly, with the end result of a single measure drenched in chromaticism (for those counting, every note in the chromatic scale is touched except B-natural). Additionally, the lower voice’s arrival at the E which is integral to the dominant harmony is delayed until the last eighth note—this is the sort of chromatic procedure Franck favors throughout the movement.

Elsewhere, Franck creates an unsettling and unstable ground with his sliding chromaticism (an effect described elsewhere by McClary as a “maddeningly slippery chromatic floor”23) (Ex. 3.6):

Example 3.6 Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, m. 26 (piano).

This motive is repeated a few bars later and reinforced by a doubling in the violin (Ex. 3.7):


Later, Franck uses this “slippery” bass chromaticism as transitional material (between first and second theme areas); the right hand’s strange chromatic “planing” in this passage fills out an unstable harmonic picture (A minor to A-flat minor to G minor [Ex. 3.8]):

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Example 3.8. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 64-68 (piano)

The point here is simply that Franck’s language is one which is thoroughly chromatic, and hence, *Wagnerian*. In Example 3.5, where all but one of 12 possible tones are utilized within a single measure, his use of chromaticism could be called sensually “indulgent” (it is difficult to imagine such a measure in anything by Saint-Saens); where other composers (such as Bizet) may use chromaticism as a special effect, it is more of a life-force in Franck’s music.

One of the most erotic moments in the first movement is found in (and just prior to) the second theme area—some of this music will later be revealed as integral to the structure of the entire work. As well as chromaticism, it is also one of the first (of many) obvious instances of *palpitations*, seen first in the piano (Ex. 3.9):

Example 3.9. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 74-77 (piano)

However, it is the vocal, sighing string writing in this passage which may be the most evocative (Ex. 3.10):

Example 3.10. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 73-77 (viola)
The 2nd Violin re-iterates this sighing music but expands the second ascending leap and thereby creates a slightly more passionate gesture (Ex. 3.11):

Example 3.11. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 77-82 (2nd violin)

Beneath the strings, the piano writing continues to build in excitement, while still serving a more accompanimental role (Ex. 3.12):

Example 3.12. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 79-81 (piano)

The trajectory-toward-climax continues with the re-emergence of palpitations (Ex. 3.13):

Example 3.13. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 82-85 (piano)

Finally, the vocal strings give way to the entrance of the second theme, stated in the piano. (Not surprisingly, this will turn out to be one of the two most prominent themes in the first movement and a unifying theme for the entire Quintet [Ex. 3.14]):

Something happens to this theme (initially marked *tenderly but with passion*) which crosses an erotic line in a passionate and nearly uncontrollable manner—and, in the process, reveals a crucial element of the movement’s dramatic narrative (Ex. 3.15):

Example 3.15. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 98-102 (piano)

While there certainly remains *passion*, the music does not remain *tender*. Instead, it thrusts forward in an unprecedented six measure surge which increases in sonority and volume—it is here that the suggestion of a sublimated emotion overtaking the motivic material itself seems especially potent.

At this point a third erotic marker should be named: the trajectory-towards-climax scheme. The entire second theme area (from the appearance of palpitations in m. 74 to the end of the piano surge in m. 103) is on a curve towards a much-anticipated climax—this is accomplished with literal dynamic indications as well as timbral augmentation and/or excitement. There is not, however, a satisfying climax after this 30-bar build (Ex. 3.16):
Example 3.16. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 103-107

In fact, the real climax of this movement occurs much later. The placement of this major event, the manner in which it happens, and the materials which are taken up in the process reveal a shocking, highly dramatic picture of the whole movement’s narrative.

To articulate the effectiveness (and eroticism) of this climax, a framework must first be given. As mentioned, this movement is driven by two primary ideas (one of these being the second theme), both of which have several off-shoots and supporting gestures—the introduction seems, initially, something of a “commentary” on what is to come. A dramatic tug-of-war is immediately evident (Ex. 3.17a, 3.17b):
As seen, the string quartet is responsible for a full-blooded wall of grief, fortissimo and \textit{dramatico} (Ex. 3.17a). This is answered by a much more placatory piano (Ex. 3.17b), which gently moves the music to the peaceful key of D-flat, before relinquishing back to the dominant. While these two materials are secondary in the large-scale scheme of the first movement, they are related to the two primary ideas previously mentioned; the first grieving gesture of the introduction (Ex. 3.18) is a progenitor of the equally overwrought harbinger-gesture of the exposition (Ex. 3.19):
Example 3.19. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 50-1 (strings)

The piano’s gesture (Ex. 3.17b), on the other hand, stands in stark contrast, and will not be related to any other material *until* the climax—from a superficial viewpoint, its plaintive expressiveness has more affinity with the *tenero ma con passione* second theme area (Ex. 3.14) than with the dark, rhythmically-thrusting fragments of the first theme area of the exposition (Ex. 3.20a, b, c):

![Example 3.20a. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, m. 52 (piano)](image)

Example 3.20a. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, m. 52 (piano)

![Example 3.20b. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, m. 53 (strings)](image)

Example 3.20b. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, m. 53 (strings)

![Example 3.20c. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, m. 56 (piano)](image)

Example 3.20c. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, m. 56 (piano)

It is these first gestures (Ex. 3.20a, b) and their slightly altered counterpart (Ex. 3.20c) which will threaten the survival of the erotically-charged second theme. Several altercations in the tangled and explosive development lend the first theme renewed reserves of energy at its emergence in the recapitulation—it appears just as threatening as in the exposition (Ex. 3.21):
However, the second-theme area (which was, in the exposition, nearly overtaken with suppressed emotion brimming to the surface—manifested in a flood of throbbing, palpitating music) emerges as a mere *shadow* of what it had been (Ex. 3.22):

The significance of this cannot be overstated. Two pale measures are all that remain, in the recapitulation proper, of the erotically-charged second theme. But, of course, Franck is not yet finished—the introductory piano material appears again, mysteriously, in further dialogue with *pp sostenuto* statements of the second theme (Ex. 3.23):
Example 3.23. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 312-313 (piano)

This ushers in the coda, in which the second theme finally makes a full-blooded appearance (Ex. 3.24):


Immediately evident are the timbral choices Franck has made; besides a doubling of the theme in the string quartet, the piano is given the pulsations in its lowest, darkest registers which have been previously associated with the first theme area. Also evident is Franck’s expressive marking—obviously, the character of the music has changed, even while the erotic markers remain. More overt threats on the second theme’s formerly exuberant eroticism appear—here, the lower three strings deviate from their partners with a sudden interruption from the first theme area (Ex. 3.25):
Example 3.25. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 337-340

The erotic second theme gives way to forceful, “wailing” strings—this “intercessory” gesture is recognized as that of the (formerly placatory) opening piano, now characterized by urgency and desperation (perhaps to avert an inevitable tragedy?) (Ex. 3.26):


Underneath this screaming timbre, the piano grows increasingly turbulent (rhythmic patterns are picked up and dropped quickly, each becoming more rhythmically unstable) (Ex. 3.27):

Example 3.27. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 350-354 (piano)

The chromaticism of this section is perhaps more audible than in the previously discussed passages; Franck has written out a twisting undulation of swells and drops, each exceeding its predecessor—again, the overall arch is one of a trajectory-towards-climax. Fragments from the first theme area continue to emerge, and the piano is given several feverish outbursts in octaves (Ex. 3.28):
A final clash is set up with a final appearance of the second theme. Its eroticism is now on full display—as seen, palpitations are everywhere; Franck’s inexhaustible frustration of rhythmic stability is obvious in the piano’s repeated chords which seem intent on chasing the second theme to its death (Ex. 3.29):

Example 3.29. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 382-387

Finally, the second theme is completely overpowered and driven headlong into the climax (Ex. 3.30):

The chillingly violent music from the *Piu Presto* on seems a sort of “subconscious-realized”—a visceral manifestation of the disturbing intimations of the first theme area. In any case, its brutal thrusts effectively nullify the second theme (and its eroticism). This leads us to several interesting interpretative possibilities, including one the author finds especially compelling. Could it be that Franck’s own “repressed sexuality” is being punished? The narrative is certainly as violent as it is erotic—in any case, the author finds this hard to hear as something theological.

### 3.4 Concluding thoughts

In light of the alleged musical evidence, it seems very possible that the first movement of Franck’s Piano Quintet (notably, his first masterpiece of chamber music) is imbued with erotic overtones—this is to say nothing of the second movement, or the third, which has been discussed as perhaps the *most* erotic sample from the whole work. Indeed, there are so many erotically-symbolic characteristics of the work which have been repeatedly cited as to make this allegation impossible to ignore—among these are Franck’s thorough engagement with a harmonic procedure which mirrors that of Wagner (and can be found readily in his most erotic works) and which is so saturated as to make instances of complete 12-tone engagement readily demonstrable in the space of a single measure. Slippery melodic chromaticism is favored throughout, especially by the erotic second theme, whose underlying impulse reveals billows of intense, *passionate* expression; harmonic indulgence is also adopted throughout the movement—reflecting Wagner’s famous denial of satisfaction in the unresolved *Tristan* chord, itself at once a symbol of *desire* and of tonal dissolution (and later, of sexual “sickness”). The movement’s feverish sublimations of passionate expression border on timbral audacity if not outright *violence*. As noted, the possibility of an affair with a student may at least tangentially color an assessment of this unexpectedly dramatic work, but it is the music itself which suggests a reading other than one “in nomine Patris et fillii et Spiritus Sancti”—Franck’s entanglement of thematic areas incites nothing if not antagonization and conflict; but, moreover, it is the outcome of this drama which is most consequential. The most erotically-charged element in the whole of the movement, the second theme, is absolutely obliterated by violent outburst of dark, destruction-bent (and, interestingly, resoundingly tonic-insistent) forces which threatened it throughout.
In a number of measurable ways, the Quintet’s opening movement is potently suggestive of a sexual narrative—the remarkable event of its premiere is an inevitable bolster to this idea.

More importantly for the following discussion, where does this leave us in our understanding of Franck’s aesthetic voice? In analyses of other works (nearly all of which feature the cyclical element), musicians and scholars have often suggested a religious interpretation; but, as demonstrated, one might as easily put forth an erotic interpretation. Additionally, it might be suggested that a needless schism has been created here between religion and eroticism; elsewhere, one may find examples of an artistic voice and aesthetic which seeks to reconcile these two (supposed) adversarial beacons.24 For example, one of the most monumental figures in twentieth century music, Olivier Messiaen, has been named by many as Franck’s successor as regards French organ music (and more than one scholar has drawn a comparison between the two).25 His music is deeply Catholic—cycles for solo piano and organ include Vingt regards sur l’enfant-Jésus and Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité. At the same time, many have noted the incredibly erotic sounds in some of his works. For instance, the Turangalila Symphony is filled with raucous, bacchanalian burstings. Messiaen seems not concerned about this juxtaposition, and may find, “sensual subject matter [as] a mirror of divine love.”26

To step away from music, we find an example in Christina Rossetti, a devoutly Catholic writer and poet. Many scholars have found in her work highly erotic elements—for instance, a quick search on her poem Goblin Market yields some of the following articles: Goblin Market as a cross-audenced poem: Children’s fairy tale, adult erotic fantasy, “Come buy”: The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti’s Goblin Market, and, most interestingly, “Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me”: Eucharist and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti’s Goblin Market. In this final article, Marylu Hill argues: “the both/and nature of Rossetti’s central image of the erotic body as the vehicle for salvation—an image that is at once profoundly spiritual and profoundly erotic—can only be understood through an appreciation of the Anglo-Catholic doctrine of the Holy Eucharist.” She goes on, “This doctrine, shaped by the teachings of Saint Augustine and heavily influenced by such key Tractarians as Edward Pusey and Robert Isaac

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24An aesthetic which is, depending on who you talk to, responsible for some of the greatest art ever created.
25Laurence Davies, Franck, xviii.
Wilberforce, is, like *Goblin Market* itself, a bewildering and eroticized combination of the physical and the spiritual. Moreover, the doctrine of the Eucharist offers a paradigm of desire, echoed in *Goblin Market*, which acknowledges the physical body and asserts that the body may be used (and even enjoyed) in the service of what Augustine and Pusey see as the highest good, that is, ‘the closest union of God and man.’”

These thoughts are highly interesting in the context of César Franck’s music. As seen, his is music which might also be given the description: “a bewildering and eroticized combination of the physical and the spiritual.” Hill’s presentation of the Eucharist as a “paradigm of desire” is also highly interesting. Is it possible that Franck, who surely participated in the Eucharist thousands of times throughout his life, saw the erotic implications in this most intimate of Christian symbols (as have scores of Protestant and Catholic theologians for centuries)?

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28Ibid.
Chapter 4

Cortot’s Problematic Analysis of the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue and An Alternative Exploration of Connections to the Erotic

4.1 The Prelude, Chorale and Fugue: an “Act of Faith”?

“One does not detect any definitive relationship between artistic talent and religious faith. A very pious man can be a very poor artist and his talent does not improve if he decides to build a church, to write a Mass, to compose pious verse or to paint religious subjects. As an artist, he remains just what he is.”

To approach our next work in terms of the erotic is, in many ways, a much greater challenge than looking at the Piano Quintet. A disinterested analysis would reveal it to be in many ways a bedfellow of the Quintet; the piano writing is remarkable (and demanding) in terms of resourcefulness, and in approximation of timbres and colors foreign to the piano. The work is again in a three-part structure, with Franck’s trademark structural cyclicism acting as a unifying thread; expressively the work is every bit as dramatic as the Quintet, every bit as dark, and perhaps even more intimate. In terms of elements of the erotic, there may be no greater trajectory-towards-climax scheme in all of Franck’s music—the one seen here is a perfect and forceful marriage to Franck’s cyclic procedure, which itself is often cited as the perfect archetype (or at least, the most thunderingly evident). Many elements organic to the work are clothed in expressive surroundings nearly identical to those seen in the Quintet—as will be seen shortly, in one passage Franck uses a fragmenting procedure whose effect runs parallel to the intensification exacted on the second erotic theme of the Quintet’s first movement. The work’s harmonic

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goings-on are thoroughly “decadent,” with its harmonic substance again a kind of dense, high chromaticism. However, unaccountably, this chromaticism (indistinguishable from that which functions as the life-blood of the Quintet) is widely seen more critically through a vicar’s lens; for some it appears to exhibit: “the touching simplicity of that contemplative chromaticism [. . .] which might be called passive in opposition to the stirring and turbulent chromaticism of Liszt and Wagner.”

The work in question has become, in a practical sense, a “shield of faith” for followers of the Pater Seraphicus—while it has a counterpart triptych which is far more redolent of organ textures and churchly antiphony, this particular work has undoubtedly been seized upon because of its centerpiece, which happens to be a Chorale.

In any case, the summer of 1884 saw César Franck begin work on what would turn out to be his most celebrated work for the piano, the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue (its counterpart triptych, the Prelude, Aria and Finale, would follow in 1887). This sudden creativity in the realm of piano music may have come unexpectedly for many, especially after a drought of nearly forty years. Some inclined to psychoanalysis have attributed this remarkable compositional dearth of music written for the piano to Franck’s youthful (and most likely traumatizing) shackling to an unsuccessful virtuoso career in piano and the demands placed on him therein by an overbearing father—simultaneously highlighting how the organ seemed to become for Franck, in many ways, the perfect foil to and escape from Lisztian pianism. But this long-harbored reticence to the piano was bound to deliquesce, and might have been predicted prior to the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue’s composition— as noted, the composer’s recent writing for the piano in the Quintet was richly generous to the point of audacity, and his experiments with the triptych idiom awaited an apotheosis somewhere. The first (formally worked-out) of these experiments for the keyboard had appeared as the Prelude, fugue, and variation, op. 18 for organ (1860-62), an economic work whose ingenuity is thoroughly Franckian, if less complex and ambitious than its consequent sibling.

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3 The relevance of this early organ work to Franck’s piano triptychs is asserted in Jo-Chi Lin, “From Virtuoso to Master: César Franck as a Composer of Solo Piano Music” (DMA diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2000), 94-5.
Relatively little is known of the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*’s conceptual origins or subsequent gestation, and what is known comes mostly via d’Indy. D’Indy gives the following account:

“The important movement started in France by the Société Nationale de Musique had only brought forth a very few interesting pieces for piano solo, its activity being chiefly directed to encouraging orchestral or chamber music. César Franck, struck by the lack of serious works in the style, set to work with a youthful fervor which belied his sixty years to try if he could not adapt the old aesthetic forms to the new techniques of the piano, a problem which could only be solved by some considerable modifications in the externals of these forms.”

Vallas conjectures additionally that: “the recent examples of Saint-Saëns and Fauré seem to have reawakened in Franck his old interest in the piano, which he had neglected since the days of his boyhood and youth.” Additionally, the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* crops up a few times in César Franck’s correspondence—the few references to it are mostly unhelpful; for instance, in a letter from Louis de Furcaud the writer mentions it thus: “The large piece for piano that you have announced to me will be for certain a first-rate composition. I do not know of anyone but you who is able to handle with authority the composition of such a three-part work, and I am eager to hear it.” In a letter to an unnamed recipient which contains some reference to a performance of the work in place of an ill-rehearsed performance of the Violin Sonata, Franck himself writes: “I propose to you a piece for piano solo that will be shorter than the Sonata, that will not give you any embarrassment and that will be absolutely well-interpreted by my cousin Mlle. Cecile Monvel. This piece is entitled *Prelude, Choral et Fugue*, and despite the austerity of the title it will go over very well with the audience.” In any case, at least one credible catalyst which emerges is the perceived derelict state of the piano repertoire available to Conservatory students and Franck’s consequent desire to pour new (undeniably Wagnerian) wine into old (Bachian) wineskins.

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7Ibid., 175. (As an interesting aside, Franck also mentions in this particular letter that the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* will take all of 13 minutes to perform—most performances and recordings of the work last around 20 minutes, so one can only wonder what Franck meant by this).
The forty-year interval seems to have created the perfect vintage—Franck’s first efforts at piano music are unrecognizable next to the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, and, as noted, it is widely recognized as a masterpiece: “it has won acclaim from all the leading pianists of later generations,”\(^8\) and is perhaps “indispensable to pianists specializing in the Romantic repertoire”\(^9\) as an expansive, ambitious work of consequence comparable to that of Liszt’s B minor Sonata. This does not seem to have been Franck’s initial intention—d’Indy notes: “Franck started with the intention of simply writing a prelude and fugue in the style of Bach, but he soon took up the idea of linking these two movements together by a Chorale, the melodic spirit of which should brood over the whole work.”\(^10\) Demuth confirms this: “his original plan was to write a Prelude and Fugue which might be a worthy opposite number to the ‘48.’ The idea of the Chorale grew during the course of the composing process when he felt that the two movements required some kind of a link; but in the first place it was never intended that this link should be of any length or significance.”\(^11\) He goes on to articulate how the “onward rush”\(^12\) of the Prelude was specifically in need of a *cantabile* antithesis, which the Chorale provided. Outside of this there is nothing further known about Franck’s intentions—the Chorale seems, in a *practical* sense, an essential addition to Franck’s highly individual structural apparatus.

### 4.2 Reception and reaction

Its premiere at a concert of the Société Nationale on January 24, 1885 (at the hands of Mme. Marie Poitevin) elicited no such vehement response as the *Piano Quintet* had five years earlier—in fact, it seems it was an initial success. As Vallas notes, “the audience at that concert welcomed the work with a devoted admiration, though it had no notion at the time of its future influence, both formal and emotional. Not a word of serious criticism was heard at the time, not even from Saint-Saëns.”\(^13\) Whatever motivated Saint-Saëns’s tight-lipped attitude at the premiere would, before long, *completely* vanish, as has been seen—Davies frames his criticism

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\(^9\) Ibid., 66.
\(^10\) Vincent d’Indy, *César Franck*, 164.
\(^12\) Ibid., 145.
\(^13\) Leon Vallas, *César Franck*, 185.
thus: “Saint-Saëns at once set out to probe the work’s deficiencies, relying on his triumphant
malice to shake the faith of its advocates.”\textsuperscript{14} We read again (as in Cortot’s essay) that Saint-
Saëns’s “gleeful” conclusion was: “the chorale is not a chorale, and the fugue not a fugue.”\textsuperscript{15} But Davies notes Saint-Saëns’s criticism in regards to the supposedly unpianistic writing of the
\textit{Prelude, Chorale and Fugue} may have been to more detriment: “this expert pianist—whom Liszt
once ranked as his only surviving rival—found the whole thing ‘uncouth and tiresome to
play.’”\textsuperscript{16} But Saint-Saëns notwithstanding, most musicologists and pianists since have
acknowledged the work’s ingenuity and masterful working-out\textsuperscript{17}—especially in the context of
any music written for the instrument in France during the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{18}

Others have conjectured a great deal concerning the work’s plausible inspirations—some of
these are worth mentioning. Many of Franck’s biographers feel the \textit{Prelude, Chorale and Fugue}
owes something to several composers (not surprisingly, most influences are decidedly Teutonic);
Vallas provides a short-list: “in the work as a whole one observes the Beethoven of the more
important sonatas, the Schumann of the Etudes symphoniques, and, above all, the Liszt of the
\textit{Weinen klagen} variations, which themselves came very near to realizing the true Franckist
ideals.”\textsuperscript{19} John Horton gives a similar listing (although it should be noted the mention of
Mendelssohn will be starkly rejected by others): “it is in some degree indebted to the great
pianist-composers of the romantic period—Schumann, Chopin, Liszt, and Saint-Saëns, but also
to Mendelssohn, from whose organ sonatas, piano Prelude and Fugue in E, and Cello Sonata in
\textit{D} Franck seems to have gained more than a hint for the use of a choral or choral-like melody and
for integrating it with the larger forms of the variation, the fugue and the sonata.”\textsuperscript{20} R.J. Stove’s
reckoning of influences places an emphasis on the importance of Liszt and the all-too-obvious

\textsuperscript{14}Laurence Davies, \textit{César Franck and his Circle} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970, 221.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., (Davies here also notes one G. Hughes’ humorous observation on the structural/formal focus of
Saint-Saëns’s criticism: “Saint-Saëns could hardly have denied Franck the right to call his first movement a
prelude”).
\textsuperscript{17}Franck’s work continues to make its mark—Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu has noted listening to the
\textit{Prelude, Chorale and Fugue} was his “second discovery” as a musical individual—(Haruyo Sakamoto. “Toru
Takemitsu: The Roots of his Creation” [DM diss., Florida State University, 2003], 4).
\textsuperscript{18}After Chopin’s death in 1849, the composition of piano music for the \textit{salon} as well as the budding
\textit{virtuoso} became predominant in France. One need look no further than at some of the titles of Franck’s own
youthful efforts at composition for the piano—at the behest of his opportunistic father—which betray a Zeitgeist of
effervescence: \textit{Grand Caprice No. 1 pour piano, Grand Fantasie No. 1 pour piano, Souvenir d’Aix-la-Chapelle}, etc.
\textsuperscript{19}Leon Vallas, \textit{César Franck}, 184.
figurehead of Germanic counterpoint: “the Prelude, Choral et Fugue is haunted not so much by the early Liszt of the ‘studies in transcendental execution,’ as by the middle-period Liszt of the B minor Sonata […] yet it would be totally wrong to call Franck’s creation a mere copy of Liszt or of anyone else. To the pull of the Bach tradition, Liszt remained largely indifferent; Franck could not resist this pull and did not want to.”21 Still, Stove seems to find one other composer as more consequential: “more striking even than the hints of Johann Sebastian in much of the Prelude, Choral et Fugue’s keyboard writing is the out-and-out echo of Wagner, which dominates the Choral itself.”22 The reader will recall from Chapter One that English pianist Stephen Hough’s commentary is informed similarly by the Wagner connection—specifically to a theme found in Parsifal. Here Hough is simply re-iterating what many others have also noticed (including Vallas)—that the Chorale theme is “similar to the Bell Leitmotif […] but there is no direct evidence to suggest that he intended the passage as a quotation.”23 While Hough perceives this relation between the Parsifal bell Leitmotif (whose first four tones correspond to the first four of the Chorale) and the Lord’s Supper of which the Knights partake,24 Stove suggests further that there is more to the music than an accidental (or subliminal) thematic connection: “the Wagnerian resemblance becomes all the stronger when the Choral is heard in Pierne’s powerfully effective orchestral transcription.”25

Indeed, perhaps more than any of the other late masterpieces Franck wrote, this work has been championed by the disciples of Franck—in the words of the inimitable Alfred Cortot: “It was the task of Franck to introduce the spirit of prayer into music, and, like many another work of art, the ‘Prelude, Choral, et Fugue,’ and ‘Prelude, Aria, et Final,’ are acts of faith.”26 It is Cortot’s chapter on Franck in French Piano Music which musicians seem most often to reference, and within this chapter it is of course in his discussion of the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue and defense of it from the stinging critique of Saint-Saëns that we find the cradle of the “faith-blent-in-art” precedent. This precedent we may find in some of the following characterizations of the

22Ibid., 248.
25R.J. Stove, César Franck, 248 (Gabriel Pierné, himself a student of Franck, was notable as a composer, conductor, and organist, and in fact succeeded Franck as the organist of the Saint Clotilde Basilica in Paris. His transcription of the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue highlights his imagination as a composer and his deft understanding of orchestration, but it is seldom recorded or programmed).
26Alfred Cortot, French Piano Music, 49.
Prelude, Chorale and Fugue in liner notes: “there is a kind of narrative line suggesting the struggle of darkness and light;”27 by another, both the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue and its counterpart the Prelude, Aria and Finale are seen to exhibit an “essentially religious atmosphere [. . .] somewhere between mystic inwardness and hymnic ecstasy.”28 The reader will recall some others cited in Chapter One: “The choice of the triptych form and ternary structures for each individual piece could be interpreted as a sort of representation of the Holy Trinity and a progression towards the Light”29; “The chorale, traditionally a communally-sung celebration of religious spirit, became for Franck an almost mystical personal meditation.”30 Some of Franck’s more recent biographers seem equally susceptible to this interpretative precedent—Joël-Marie Fauquet’s description of the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue all but mirrors that of Cortot: “the architectural shape, however logical and rational, is perceived above all as a psychological progression: the painful imploring of the Prelude, weighty gravity of the Chorale, and reassuring certainty of the Fugue”31—exactly how the Fugue is, on the whole, “reassuring,” is somewhat obscure. In other analyses (by Horton, Vallas, and Demuth, among others) we find, if not a nod to the cherubic Cortot precedent, nothing in the way of contrast or challenge—the materials taken up and the construction of the work are simply examined and explained.

Although it has been cited once previously, the analysis of Cortot must be looked at a second time, and under a magnifying glass. A number of things about this undoubtedly subjective (if highly convincing) piece of writing are ambiguous—chief among them the fact that Cortot’s writings are not tethered to specific cross-reference points in score examples. This makes much of what he says, stripped of its passionate, confident tone and seeming depth of understanding, less easily measurable, and, thus, more vulnerable to question.

29Inger Södergren, Liner Notes, César Franck: Sonate violon piano en la majeur - Prelude, choral et fugue - Prelude, aria et final, Inger Södergren (piano), CAL6804, 1997, compact disc.
30Esben Tange, Liner Notes, Piano Music by César Franck, Maurice Ravel, and Claude Debussy, Jens Elvekjaer (piano), CLASSCD711, 2004, compact disc.
4.3 An exploration of the triptych

Before this deceptively transparent interpretation is explored, it will be enlightening to examine the \textit{Prelude, Chorale and Fugue} on its own terms as a musical organism, and, \textit{alternatively}, as a creation whose impulse and character are potently erotic. The work’s audacious chromaticism is one immediately identifiable marker, but perhaps more interesting is the work’s fundamental cell: the two-note \textit{sigh} figure. It is from this quintessential expressive gesture that all the work’s other materials and realizations spring, and even those which \textit{ought} to be auxiliary (such as the texture, the milieu surrounding and/or setting of the sigh-figure, etc.) become, as a result, consequential. This is to say nothing of one immensely interesting connection many scholars (starting with d’Indy) have made from the \textit{Chorale} to \textit{Parsifal}, or of Franck’s unusual preference for a subversive use of “divine” compositional vessels such as the \textit{Fugue}—demonstrated perfectly in the one seen here.

4.3.1 \textit{Prelude}

As intimated, the \textit{Prelude} of the triptych is a striking and resoundingly individual working out of motivic fragments which are, stripped of their equally significant surroundings, incredibly simple—so much about this paradigm and its realization is unmistakably Franckian. Its form, like the \textit{Chorale’s}, is easily discernible—a kind of A-B-C-A2-B2-C2-A2/coda. Many have noted Franck’s masterful wielding of remarkably compressed motivic cells throughout the \textit{Prelude, Chorale and Fugue}; Horton articulates the first and most fundamental of these as “the fall of a major or minor second which is to be heard at the outset of the \textit{Prelude}.”\textsuperscript{32} This cell is seen immediately in the opening figuration (music described by Stephen Hough as “truncated sobs”\textsuperscript{33}). These cells are the most simple of melodic sighs, caught in a swirl of arpeggios which, on quick observation, seem no more than background brushstrokes of the harmonic landscape (Ex. 4.1):

\begin{ex}
\begin{music}
\begin{notation}
\begin{equation}
\text{Example 4.1}
\end{equation}
\end{notation}
\end{music}
\end{ex}

\textsuperscript{32}John Horton, \textit{Cesar Franck}, 22.

Much later, this arpeggiated figuration will itself be taken up (unexpectedly) as a structural brace in possibly the most remarkable and recognizable moment in the whole of Franck’s oeuvre for piano. Perhaps it is for this reason that the figuration ought to be given a second glance—these undulations are, on their own, perfectly stable, but when punctuated with syncopated melodic sighs, they become something quite different—the “onward rush” previously cited is entirely “onward” because of these incredibly expressive syncopations. This effect is, in fact, a device utilized by pianists from Cortot to Horowitz to Grimaud in the act of performance: *breaking*—playing melodic notes rhythmically unmatched from corresponding accompanying notes—but here it is actually written out by Franck. The effect of *breaking* highlights the piano’s limitations in realizing the *vocal*—in the same way as the violin’s portamento imitates expressive idiosyncrasies of the voice, piano *breaking* is, at heart, the same kind of thing, albeit for a much less vocal instrument. Playing the melodic note *after* the accompaniment may give the impression of a *hesitant/intimate* voice, and *before*, a voice unable to contain itself, unable to wait because of excitement or urgency. When done effectively, this expressive tool lends vocal autonomy to the melodic contour, a being still fettered to its accompaniment but threatening, in sudden moments of expression or ebullience, to break free. Indeed, this expressive device serves as an analogy for the work as a whole; expressively volatile sublimations (such as those which will be seen in the B section of the *Prelude*) are consistently held in restraint throughout—their innate character often indistinguishable from the upward surges of the *Tristan Prelude*. 
The penultimate measure of the first section demonstrates again Franck’s undying penchant for chromaticism. This measure touches every note but one (f) of the chromatic scale, and the two-note sighing figure can be found in many forms (Ex. 4.2):

Example 4.2. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, m. 6.

The first section’s presentation of the two-note sigh becomes an absolute fixation in the first B section (Ex. 4.3):

Example 4.3. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 8-9.

Here the f-sharp—e is realized with an emphatic shape; where Franck’s initial presentation of this figure may bring to mind “truncated sobs,” its subsequent reiterations are altogether more forceful and threaten to create an agitated catharsis (Ex. 4.4):

This sudden surge of expression is placated by a third, *molto espressivo* clothing of the 2-note sigh (Ex. 4.5)—of all the music in the *Prelude*, this is the most closely related to the *Chorale*, and in its second guise will lead to one especially significant prefiguring:

Example 4.5. Franck, *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, mm. 13-16.

Franck repeats these three realizations of the same cell in the minor dominant, but there is at least one portending deviation which appears just before the second B section (Ex. 4.6 is an extension of the music which corresponds to the music of Ex. 4.2):

Example 4.6. Franck, *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, m. 22.

Besides its harmonic audacity, this measure is notable for its left-hand writing, which reveals itself as a foreshadowing relation of textural materials taken up in the fugue’s cyclic apex, in which the chord/octave alternation seen above returns and is fully exploited.\(^{34}\) The connection shown by these two moments exemplifies the dramatic narrative at play in the work as a whole—something as auxiliary as the *texture* is significant (Ex. 4.7):

\(^{34}\)Additionally, the culminating passage in the *Fugue* (Ex. 7) is notable for its *right-hand* writing, which is an *inversion* of its relation in Ex. 6.

But, a far more significant (and audible) prefiguring of the *Fugue* subject itself will occur in the C section. This moment is precipitated by the third musical cell (Ex. 4.8):


This third cell is expanded beyond what was allowed in the previous A-B-C-A-B sections (Ex. 4.9):

Example 4.9. Franck, *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, mm. 31-34.
And suddenly the music arrives at a consummate moment of remarkably intimate expression (apart from a few moments in the *Chorale*, this is certainly the most heartfelt and luminous dialogue in the entire work). The two-note sigh is expanded and given a greater emotional weight—over the left hand’s chromatic heartbeat, the *molto espressivo* third cell gesture is broken into punctuated whisperings which become increasingly vocal (Ex. 4.10):

![Example 4.10. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 34-37.](image)

Franck’s motivic cells are manipulated by an increasingly tremulous expressive impulse which finally gives way to the previously mentioned prefiguring of the *Fugue* subject (Ex. 4.11):

![Example 4.11. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 38-40.](image)

The seven boxed notes are skeletal protrusions of the *Fugue* subject whose sudden emergence seems initiated by the expressive freedom previously seen (and simultaneously reveals the *Prelude*’s chromatic sighs and “truncated sobs” as its own relations). This unexpected ripple in the harmonic texture is softly and delicately assuaged (perhaps requiring the rigorous apparatus of a *Fugue* to contain its volatile expressive power?), and a subsequent quasi-coda takes up the A section’s materials with a melancholic resignation, reigning in the harmonic thirst of previous sections and settling into b minor. But even this relief is temporary (Ex. 4.12):
4.3.2 Chorale

It will prove interesting to explore two alternative estimations of what is at work in the much-discussed Chorale. First, it must be highlighted that the second movement’s completely saturated chromatic dialogue is the standard texture, with the Chorale theme itself lending resounding (seemingly) diatonic deviations which are remarkable in their figuration as well as in their inevitable vulnerability to Franck’s chromaticism (both the transitional beginning and ending of the Chorale fall back into this harmonic language). Take, for instance, the very opening of the Chorale (Ex. 4.13):


Besides the local harmonic restlessness of this example—seen immediately in the unexpected substitution of C-flat major on the downbeat of the second bar—the sudden upsurge of the soprano voice in the fourth measure seems nearly to come un-tethered from its underpinning harmonic scheme; if it were not bound by chordal restraint this expressive flare might erupt into something threatening to disrupt the “ideal curve” of the whole work. According to Cortot, the performer has an immense responsibility of sensitivity to moments such as the one above: “one
disproportionate outburst of emotional feeling—and the ideal curve that encompasses the whole piece is spoilt.”35

“Ideal curve” aside, what should be immediately evident in the Chorale as a whole is again the chromatic language—specifically in its interludes. In the following example, Franck’s harmonic intentions appear more or less conventional by the grounded Bb in m. 91 and Eb in m. 93, but the way he reaches these points is nothing if not “maddeningly” slippery. The alarming disorientation created by the bass’s inter-polar chromatic ascent is heightened all the more by unexpected substitutions. While Franck’s implementation of a 6/3 (G minor) substitution on the downbeat of measure 91 creates a slightly unexpected harmonic deception, his use of a flat 6/3 (G-flat major) sonority on the fourth beat is almost a disturbance of expected harmony, an irresistible uplift which again demonstrates the work’s chromatic lifeblood. These kinds of substitutions are plentiful; again in m. 93, Franck uses a 6/3 (C minor) substitution for the expected E-flat major harmony (Ex. 4.14):

![Example 4.14. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 89-96.](image)

Remarkably, some have even seen God in this opulent, decadent chromaticism—alongside Cortot’s previously cited “contemplative chromaticism,” Demuth inexplicably describes the “interludial matter” as something which seems “Heaven-sent”36—surely it is anything but. If one must ascribe theology to any material in the Chorale, it seems that the Chorale theme itself would be the lucky candidate.

Surely, though, it is not ridiculous to ascribe religious sentiment to a work whose crux is a Chorale. By the implications of its title alone, “religious intent”37 might easily be inferred; this

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36 Norman Demuth, *César Franck*, 147.
37 Dorothy Cheung, “Selected Piano Works of Franck, Haydn, and Chopin” (DMA diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1992), 44.
is all very well—and more than one musician in the past few decades has happily taken up the arms of the *Pater Seraphicus*—but there may be more here than meets the eye. Concerning the whole issue of the *Chorale* and its supposedly *mystically* symbolic inclusion in the triptych, it is perfectly legitimate to suggest (as at least one Teutonic Franck scholar, Wilhelm Mohr, has) that this melodic *link*, while undoubtedly integral to the whole work, is perhaps less spiritually endowed than demanded by the majority of gloss surrounding the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*—or, if it is, there may be symbolic implications which complicate its impulse beyond a simple, *pure* spirituality. Mohr suggests there is an important distinction to make between the *absolute* and *programmatic* with the *Chorale*—while Mendelssohn and Liszt used famous Chorale melodies in their music, Bruckner was (along with Franck) perhaps the only composer of the time to give the Chorale a purely *absolute* identity. Mohr notes that the listener who recognizes a famous chorale melody will instantly associate with it the religious text, and/or religious values and feelings that are a fundamental part of the melody’s creation—composers such as Mendelssohn and Liszt who used such melodies most likely sought to invoke a spiritual atmosphere or feelings, or give some sort of commentary on the religious idea. Moreover, when a composer *invents* a Chorale melody—such as Franck has done in the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*—it *may* be with the intention of creating a “religious” atmosphere, but there is just as well a *much* broader range of possibilities. Mohr states that the invented Chorale contains within itself a quality which is “intensely-personal,” and carries a direct communicative power. The *Chorale*, he argues, is used as an expressive element, and cites d’Indy’s emphasis on the expressive importance of the *Chorale* melody, not necessarily religious fervor, in the *Chorale*. It is here that the “intensely-personal” expressive potency of the *Chorale* theme seems to suggest a kind of paradigm of *desire*. The reader may recall Hill’s use of this phrase in reference to the *Eucharist*: “This doctrine (is) [. . .] a bewildering and eroticized combination of the physical and the spiritual. Moreover, the doctrine of the Eucharist offers a paradigm of desire [. . .] which acknowledges the physical body and asserts that the body may be used (and even enjoyed) in the service of what Augustine and Pusey see as the highest good, that is, ‘the closest union of God

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38 Debussy, an erstwhile student of Franck, will later adopt this procedure to humorous ends with his inclusion of the chorale melody *Eine Feste Burg Ist Unser Gott* in *En Blanc et Noir*.  
39 Wilhelm Mohr, *Caesar Franck* (Tutzting: Hans Schneider), 1969, 95-8; Mohr also notes humorously that Franck’s triptych is not *physically* bound to the church (as are the last Organ Chorales).
and man.” To take this one step further, it is extremely interesting to take a closer look at some of English pianist Stephen Hough’s ideas concerning the triptych (ideas which, like Cortot’s, are passionately articulated and convincing, and will not be entirely endorsed by this paper). As others have done, Hough relates the more chromatic material in the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue to J.S. Bach’s Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen as well as the Crucifixus from the B minor Mass—music which is surely emblematic of the humanity of Christ’s existential duality—and, as mentioned, to Wagner’s Parsifal: “(the) ‘motto’ theme, present and transformed in both works, appears in the ‘Transformation Scene’ from Parsifal when bread and wine are changed into Christ’s Body and Blood—the redeeming re-enactment of the Last Supper. This interpretation might not seem too far-fetched if we recall that Franck habitually left his organ bench during the Mass to kneel at this same moment of transformation.”

The scope and intentions of this paper preclude an extended exploration of the Catholic theology of the Eucharist, but it is worth mentioning in brief to highlight its potential relevance for the interpretation of Franck’s music. There are many things about this “paradigm of desire” which might have made it especially attractive to Franck. The vault of implications created by this incense-laden symbol of intimacy is one seldom scrutinized in musical scholarship, but it has a legitimate place here. Casad notes the proliferation of a potent sexuality in theology of the Eucharist which has supplanted the veracity of blood: “the true production of knowledge [. . .] came to be seen as intimately and naturally linked to the point where authenticity was to be found most deeply in the intimate recesses of each person’s sexuality.” This kind of a conceptualization of the Eucharist is something felt to be ideal—indeed, this symbolic act of cannibalism in an effort to become one with someone idealized and loved illustrates in an extremely fundamental way this impulse of desire—an impulse which, when leant the potency of sexuality, may become something far more intimate, far more meaningful, far more resounding as a symbol: “The result of a highly sexualized understanding of the Eucharist is one wherein communion and intimacy are to be desired, both with other members of the assembly and with

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41Stephen Hough, Liner Notes, César Franck.
the one whom one consumes and takes into one’s body: Jesus.”  Similarly, Anglican theologian Timothy Squier notes: “to understand intimacy we must ground ourselves in a clear concept of desire. (Intimacy) is an experience of participation wherein a longing for another is satisfied and perpetually grows.” He then articulates the realized paradigm of this concept of desire: “the Christian rhythm of desire is intimately expressed in the bread and wine as Christ’s body and blood. The sacrament of Eucharist is that expression of unity through which we sensually experience the intimacy of God and God immanently experiences our love in return. The Eucharist is the sensual desire-filled expression of Christ’s body in us and us in Christ’s body.”

There is, of course, no way of knowing whether or not Franck intended the Chorale theme as a quote of the Parsifal leitmotif, but many (including d’Indy himself) have noted the connection, and the implications are highly significant in the context of what we know of Franck’s life and of what I have outlined about his music thus far. Far too often to ignore, Franck’s musical creations are characterized and driven by vast deluges of barely-suppressed expressive forces and their consistent thirst for consummation. It is not at all inappropriate to suggest that in this case, a complex symbol of theological consequence has become a vessel for these forces.

Additionally, any of the Chorale theme’s possible Eucharistic connections are equally informed by the theme’s setting. As the single most diatonic element in the work as a whole, it might easily be first expected in a guise of spiritual austerity and immutable, lofty sovereignty—in contrast with its “decadently” chromatic surroundings—but this is not the case. There are a few things about the Chorale theme’s initial appearance which must certainly stand out as remarkable to the performer—first of these is the rhythmic figuring of the theme (Ex. 4.15):

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43Ibid., 7.
45Ibid., 70.
Example 4.15. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 68-70.

By any musical account, this is an incredibly subversive way to present a Chorale theme, especially one which is meant to personify the austere divine, and, in the words of Hough, is “shaped like a cross.” The first and final tones of the theme are on weak beats, but what is surely more remarkable is how this rhythmic placement highlights the two-note slur far more emphatically than the diatonic contour of the melody as a whole. Additionally (as noted by Cheung’s analysis), the Chorale theme appears nestled amongst its highly expressive, highly chromatic interludial punctuations (Ex. 16):

Example 4.16. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 76-79.

Here it is interesting to reference a second dialectic at work in the Chorale (one which has been pointed out many times previously): the supposed opposition of chromaticism and diatonicism. In light of the Wagnerian influence and Franck’s frequent adoption of the Wagnerian harmonic criterion and structural procedure, it is essential to investigate where the two composers differ.

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46 Debussy’s La cathédrale engloutie is a literal example of musical/score “shape,” where the contour of the music is meant to show an outline of the sunken Ys cathedral.
The following analysis of *Parsifal’s* harmonic narratives resonates incredibly well with the narrative seen here in the *Chorale*:

“As in *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*, the modes of chromaticism and diatonicism are counterposed, but whereas in those two works the signification was relatively clear, in *Parsifal* the relationship of the two is more equivocal. The realms of the Grail and of Klingsor are associated with diatonicism and chromaticism respectively, but between these two poles are many cross-currents: Amfortas’s suffering, for example, conforms exclusively to neither category, confirming that his experience, while ultimately the catalyst for the redemptive process, is tainted by depravity. The propensity for tonal dissolution in *Parsifal*, for diatonicism to yield to chromaticism, is a potent metaphor for the theme of spiritual degeneration. Tritones, augmented triads and mediant tonal relationships, which all undermine the tonic-dominant hierarchy, contribute to the uncertain nature of a tonal continuum that veers between diatonicism and chromaticism, stable and unstable.”

The model here—the *yielding* of diatonicism to its “degenerate” sibling chromaticism which signifies for Wagner the vulnerability of the spiritually pure to sensual decadence (“depravity”)—is strikingly similar to Franck’s scheme in the *Chorale* (a scheme microcosmic in relation to *Parsifal*). However, it seems that here Franck’s handling of the *diatonic* is both gentle and, in a way, deferential—the *Chorale* theme’s first presentation is, if rhythmically deviant, wrapped in a lush, sumptuous couching (at its greatest reaching across five octaves of the keyboard), and its second, hidden appearance is deftly and delicately realized—the materials gathered around work to *preserve* its autonomy (it is not in any way fragmented or developed). Later the heartfelt expressiveness of the interludes seems to support and even initiate the impulse of the *Chorale* theme, as in the following example (just prior to the *Chorale*’s final appearance (Ex. 4.17):

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The melody’s initial outward boundaries (which outline the range of a diminished fourth—g to c-flat) cannot contain the sudden upward wrenching seen in the fourth measure of this example, in which the melody actually does come rhythmically un-tethered. This excerpt is a more emphatic counterpart to the opening of the \textit{Chorale}, and its surge of expression perfectly prepares the way for the \textit{Chorale} theme. The “intensely-personal” implications of the \textit{Chorale} theme seem, on second glance, not so far away from the expressive consequence of the highly chromatic, \textit{decadent} texture seen throughout—in fact it may be an integral extension (or a shrouded elemental).

The significance of the \textit{Chorale} and its motto theme as symbolic of the eroticized intimacy of the Eucharist can be taken yet further; as clarified below, its potential existence is here denied consummation. Thus, the theological act of \textit{transubstantiation}\textsuperscript{48} is not realized, in any sense. As a result, it conforms perfectly to an erotic paradigm of unfulfilled desire.

The \textit{Chorale}’s final upward efforts are unable to reach transformation—the final harmony is a dark, wresting cadential affirmation of e-flat minor (Ex. 4.18):

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{48}For those unfamiliar, the phenomenon through which the bread and wine of the Eucharist are believed to physically transform into the body and blood of Christ.
4.3.3 Fugue

Before approaching the Fugue it is worth noting something hardly anyone has mentioned in relation to Franck’s music: his ambivalence towards the fugue as a form. While he is undoubtedly influenced by the contrapuntal procedure of J.S. Bach, there is an enormous difference in how he processed this structural embodiment of the Baroque; for Bach (and perhaps to a lesser extent, Beethoven) the fugue often seems to serve a spiritual purpose—and its most transcendent forms seem models for the ultimate distillation of a spiritual impulse. M.E. Marty articulates Bach’s musical ethos thus: “by all evidence Bach believed firmly that music was essential to show and understand the majesty of God’s creation. Music was of ethical and even cosmological importance to him.”\(^5\) Marty then quotes Bach expert John Butt: “Bach sees music as being part of a mechanical process by which humankind comes to terms with the divine,” and subsequently highlights how “Spinoza’s term ‘the intellectual love of God’ seems remarkably appropriate for Bach.”\(^5\) Further on we read his estimation of the Art of Fugue as one zenith indicative of this spiritual use of the fugue. Beethovenian examples of this same idea are easily cited in the Op. 110 Sonata—a work whose last movement invokes a fugue to transcend the decidedly human suffering present in its arioso passages. This scheme was perhaps a progenitor of that seen in the initial conception of the monumental Op. 130 String Quartet, whose finale movement was originally the Grosse Fugue; its antecedent is the heartfelt and vocal Cavatina, whose impulses are, again, profoundly expressive, and seem to demand

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\(^{50}\)Ibid.
fulfillment which is realized in this enormous contrapuntal working out. Other works, such as Brahms’ *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel* (Op. 24), are equally touched by this idea of the *fugue* as a spiritual culmination and necessity.

But when one examines Franck’s use of the *fugue*, something entirely different appears. The previously mentioned *Prelude, Fugue and Variation* must, by its very title, indicate the secondary nature of the fugue—in this instance the Fugue is almost abortively short, and is unable to provide a satisfactory solution to the plaintively expressive *Prelude*; it is instead supplanted by the theme of the *Prelude* which returns in variation. In the second piano triptych, the *Prelude, Aria and Finale*, Franck utilizes a *fugue* in the development of the *Prelude* which is similarly done away with in favor of music of the most *dolce* expressive voice; indeed, in its context it seems almost to project a kind of threat to the expressive needs of the whole work. In the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, the *fugue* as a formal apparatus (apart from its contents) is similarly, brilliant as it may be, unable to consummate the expressive needs of the work as a whole, and in fact is overtaken by a prescient, latent impulse which surfaces at the *Fugue’s cadenza* and gathers around it all salient materials into a passage of enormous emotional and structural consequence. The point here is simply that Franck seems to view the *Fugue* as a means to an end, and his compositional procedure here does not align with an idea of the *fugue* as an apparatus whose being is necessarily spiritual.

Dispensing with a lofty, “spiritual” reading of the *fugue* in reference to the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* will allow an entirely different musical organism to emerge. Indeed, even the contents of the *Fugue* seen here are drenched in expressive/erotic markers. In the way of chromaticism, there is nothing to be found in the whole of the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* which matches the threatening instability and “decay” of the *Fugue’s* writing—this comparison could just as easily be made by placing the *Fugue* next to the entirety of Franck’s oeuvre, or in fact any music composed up to the fully-saturated chromatic audacity of early Berg or Schoenberg.\(^{51}\) Besides this, the *Fugue* is itself a breathtaking *tour de force* infamous for its difficulty, its scope and its conceptual/structural ambitions which are, by most accounts, successful. On his own terms,

Franck certainly achieves something of a “superb peroration,” if not a substantial Romantic touchstone in this masterfully innovative re-thinking of the *Fugue*. Of the Romantic-era fugue, there may be no better example—while contrapuntal procedure found its way into many a Romantic keyboard work, there are few examples (Brahms’ Op. 24 being another) which are truly a transformative embodiment of the Baroque formal archetype.

Preceding the outset of the *Fugue* proper, Franck gives a sort of bridge from the *Chorale*. This bridge is, for obvious reasons, often grouped with the *Fugue*, but is not an integral part of its structural apparatus (Ex. 4.19):

![Example 4.19. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 115-121.](image)

The *Fugue* subject is here stated in full, but it seems almost a *faux* appearance—more a linear consequence of its harmonic underpinnings: a series of diminished 7th chords punctuated by pregnant silence, which are inexorably drawn back to the e-flat minor of the *Chorale*; here the soprano initiates a sudden escape from this weighty descent (on the downbeat of the sixth measure, moving deftly from B-flat to C-flat to create yet another flat 6/3 harmonic substitution). This tremulous “escape” proves itself to be a catalyst which will release a sudden and overwhelming expressive outburst—its initial appearance here brings forth a more forceful, agitated statement of the *Fugue* subject (Ex. 4.20):

![Example 4.20. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 122-127.](image)

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52Vincent d’Indy, *César Franck*, 165.
As seen, this bleeding chromaticism will pick up and drop several harmonic suggestions until arriving on a dominant 7 B major harmony on the downbeat of m. 128 (Ex. 4.21). The next section grows increasingly turbulent (Ex. 4.21):


The “escape” figure continues to provoke responding fragments of the *Fugue* subject, which then become even more forceful, threatening to overtake the texture—the most vehement of these appears in mm. 134-135 but still it does not succeed in ushering in the *Fugue* proper. More “escape” figures will appear, eventually in a *stretto* figuring which will successfully arouse the deeply sublimated impulse of the *Fugue* subject (Ex. 4.22):


A final outburst will usher in the *Fugue* (Ex. 4.23):
There is no shortage of analyses on the Fugue’s structure, so here two particular moments will be looked at in the body of the Fugue. The first is perhaps one of the most audibly chromatic passages in the repertoire for piano, which deserves to here be quoted in full from the third entrance of the fugue subject to the first pianissimo (Ex. 4.24):
Franck’s mature compositional voice is, to be sure, thoroughly chromatic, but in a passage such as the one above, harmony becomes subsidiary to an impulse whose criterion is the intense desperation to *express*. Alone, each of these voices is, by any measure, *remarkably* expressive—the bewildering suggestion of some sort of “contemplative” *chromaticism* at work is surely next to absurd. It seems a foregone conclusion that the “unhealthy,” *decadent* Wagnerian contrapuntal language is here the most pure form of expression (condensed within the keyboard boundaries of Bach). The significance of this cannot be overstated; the emblematic *decadence* seen here is in Franck’s voicing of what is certainly the most archetypical expressive device in Western music: the *fugue* subject. The subject and the voices gathered around it are spoken with the most sensual rhetoric “possible” in the Romantic harmonic language.

The *Fugue* continues to unfold in a manner whose audacity lies in texture and harmony rather than form. Another expressive couching unmistakably redolent of the *erotic* is seen in a second array of vocal subject entrances which appears in syncopated figurations (Ex. 4.25):


But this is not as consequential as the second marker (Ex. 4.26). The tail of the second subject entrance will be overtaken by a burgeoning chromatic current, while the third entrance makes futile attempts at entering the texture—these fragments grow in intensity to an enormous climax:

This second example of interest contains a procedure which is remarkably similar to one seen previously in the Piano Quintet. In both cases, an important melodic cell (above, the *Fugue* subject, and below, the second theme of the first movement of the Quintet) is fragmented and overtaken by a subliminal emotion (Ex. 4.27):

Example 4.27. Franck, Piano Quintet, *Molto moderato quasi lento*, mm. 98-102 (piano).

This passage is important in the expressive scheme of the entire *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* (here, as with every outburst thus far excluding the one which precipitates the *Fugue* proper, the music deliquesces without a satisfying *denouement*).

Following an inventive appearance of the *Fugue* subject in inversion, the *Fugue* will succumb to a darker mode of expression (Ex. 4.28):


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53 This moment’s sudden and audibly striking appearance almost seems to suggest Franck’s plausibly self-conscious intention of directing focus away from his prior distillation of *decadence* and back to his contrapuntal virtuosity.
Where the beginning of the *Fugue* may have been emotionally lucid, the music seen here seems to verge on an emotional breakdown, a complete shattering of the psyche. Ephemeral iterations in the form of ghost-like chromatic scampers create and feed an atmosphere of total instability and unease. The *Fugue* theme appears enfolded in these frantic cascades and swirls (Ex. 4.29):

![Example 4.29. Franck, *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, mm. 248-251.](image)

This passage builds to an almost uncontrollable pitch which further fragments the subject and comes to fixate on the two-note sigh (affirming its embryonic impetus for the whole work from the outset [Ex. 4.30]):

![Example 4.30. Franck, *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, mm. 280-282.](image)

A surging fourth entrance of the subject will precipitate the anticlimax of the entire work, and on its heels is an enormous, upwards culmination, by which the music enters an area widely recognized as Franck’s most consummate realization of his cherished cyclical structural procedure (Ex. 4.31):

![Example 4.31. Franck, *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, mm. 280-282.](image)

This inexplicable *cadenza* appears at the expressive behest of the *Fugue’s* quondam stirrings and materializations; in a breath it is transformed into a remembrance of something already experienced (Ex. 4.32):


The figuration/texture of the *Prelude* is immediately recognizable. This astonishing interjection—be it closely related to the initial *cadenza* figuration, will gradually and gently take its full form, but in this unforeseen instance, its expected melodic skeleton is altered (Ex. 4.33):

The *Chorale* theme is here incarnate, wrapped in the *breaking* textural figuration of the *Prelude*. And here it is necessary to reference in full the analysis of Alfred Cortot. Previously in his essay on Franck’s music he seems to find speech of the “Godhead,”\(^{54}\) the thorough impenetration of *Gregorian* chant (unlikely, by any other source consulted) in Franck’s musical language,\(^{55}\) and, even in the decidedly sensual and subversively *erotic* *Violin Sonata*, the imagining that Franck might easily have inscribed upon its final draft *Soli Deo Gloriam* (“Glory to God alone”\(^{56}\)). The reader will recall his most heartfelt and subjective outpouring appears because of Saint-Saëns’s *acerbic* remarks (“the chorale is no chorale, and the fugue no fugue, for it breaks down as soon as the exposition is over and wanders on through endless digressions which are no more like a fugue than a mollusk is like a mammal, etc.”\(^{57}\)):

“Saint-Saëns quite rightly said, though in blind misunderstanding of it: ‘This fugue is no fugue.’ The exposition, the successive entries of the four parts are, undoubtedly, conventionally strict, and the ensuing development is inspired by the most correct models in the genre. But all the time in the inner murmur of the music one is conscious that even the fugue subject does not contain within itself its own impulse and its own end, that it has its being in a world of such contrite anguish that some external intervention must be invoked to relieve it from its pain. And so, after the appearance of the quaver triplets which increase its restlessness, and the climax of the crescendo which sweeps up to a paroxysm of agony and entreaty, the theme of the *Chorale* re-enters, gentle solace amid the liquid trembling of celestial harps; and we, who have just witnessed that intolerable pain, experience such relief and regained calm that the tumult of triumphant voices proclaiming the Word in the peroration seems like the release of our own emotional

\(^{54}\)Alfred Cortot, *French Piano Music*, 76.
\(^{55}\)Ibid., 51.
\(^{56}\)Ibid., 53.
\(^{57}\)Ibid., 73-4.
tension. Here, indeed, is a consequence that no treatise on counterpoint, nor the over-academic musicians, could calculate on. But then they are not supposed to take genius into account; and it is genius of the purest imaginable that inspired this sublime work of art, grave and lofty expression of a Christian spirit longing for his God, which by the very glory of its music convinces us of a universal plan, and turns the pathetic echo of human desires and aspirations towards a glorious ideal.”58

This is all well and good, but Cortot seems, unaccountably, to stop short. While the absence of musical examples in his essay makes exact calculation/interpretation more difficult than it otherwise need be, it seems (and this writer would suggest anyone else familiar with the score in question must concur) that Cortot believes the ultimate climax of the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue to occur at the entrance of the Chorale in m. 316 (Ex. 4.33)—specifically its “gentle solace amid liquid trembling of celestial harps” which seems to relieve the listener (or at least, Cortot) of his “emotional tension” by a triumphant proclamation of the “Word.”59 But, as noted, Cortot, inexplicably, stops short (Ex. 4.34):

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58Ibid., 77-8.
59Even most recent analyses continue to adopt this fundamental conceit of Cortot’s: “Formally what is most important about the procedure is the architecturally satisfying effect of the triumphant (author’s emphasis) return of the chorale theme towards the end of the fugue,” in McCarrey & Wright, Perspectives on the Performance of French Piano Music, 2014.
From m. 337 we see the *Chorale* theme hammered out in octaves—a “triumphant proclamation.” But in m. 339 (the fourth beat) the *Fugue* subject enters once again, signaling for all listeners at once the ultimate realization of cyclic unity as well as the undeniably chromatic cradle from whence the entire work emanates. Cortot’s reading of divinity in the *Chorale*’s first appearance may be convincing on paper, but it totally misses the main event, which is the juxtaposition of all three structural elements in what is surely the climax of the entire *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*. Indeed, this passage’s resounding consummation of the “intensely-personal” *Chorale* with the erotically-laden *Fugue* subject is as forceful as it is obvious; in any case it seems ridiculous to entertain an exegesis of the climactic peroration which willfully ignores the final entrance of the *Fugue* subject seen here, regardless of what one argues for its emblematic significance.

One may make conjectures on Cortot’s intentions with this very specific and yet misplaced interpretation of the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* (which, as noted, would quickly find itself firmly established as the preeminent design on Franck’s musical oeuvre). Cortot performed both triptychs and was a great proponent especially of the undeservedly overlooked *Prelude, Aria and Finale*. It is not at all out-of-the-way to suggest that the need to project a luminous, divine spirit as radiating from the heart of the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* seems to preclude an entirely open interpretation of the work; here it almost seems such an analytical lapse could have been intentional. In any case, it is difficult to look past such an enormous oversight.

While this brilliant consummation and distillation of materials in their fullest form creates an absolutely spectacular climactic moment, there is one final, extended climax which is, in a way, more revealing of what is at the heart of this work. Following the tripartite juxtaposition, Franck begins to break these voicings apart into their common elements—the *Fugue* subject is
fragmented and becomes increasingly expressive in the process (and in m. 354 is overtaken by a sudden upward surge [Ex. 4.35]):


The throbbing rhythmic urgency of m. 354 is taken up as the impulse which will precipitate the final fugal outburst—the music here is familiar (Ex. 4.36):


This final entrance of the subject reveals the expressive crux of the entire work. While Franck’s forceful and resounding cyclicity is most prominent in the climactic passage prior, here the final voicing of the *Fugue* subject transforms into a headlong descent of the greatest emotional consequence (Ex. 4.37):
Horton notes here that this “descent through an octave and a half of the chromatic scale fixes the impression of a single idea—that of the falling second—dominating the whole of this long and intricate composition.” Indeed, Franck’s subtle (and blatant) Fortspinnung of this most expressive cell is in guises which are, more often than not, related by their sensually-emblematic couching.

The penultimate passage will echo with yet more emphasis the unyielding weight of the previous chromatic descent, and finally break into an ebullient undulation of B major chords containing the initial tones of the Chorale theme—perhaps the only real “release” of the entire work (Ex. 4.38):

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4.4 Concluding thoughts

There are several points here which need restating. Franck’s *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* has been given nothing in the way of interpretative analyses alternative to those created by Cortot. On a closer look (with score in hand), Cortot’s analyses, which are already incredibly laden with his own passionate subjectivity and informed themselves by the problematic perspective of d’Indy, are, surely, at least misleading if not conceptually delinquent. This in itself is enough to invite a different perspective.

Furthermore, the narrative consistently given of a diatonic *Chorale* theme which personifies the divine, the *Godhead* or any given religious symbol, in contrast to the Wagnerian decadence of texture and expression Franck favors throughout the rest of the work, is problematic. If nothing else, there is something that needs explaining—Franck’s rhythmic figuring of the theme is a significant choice, and his intentional threading of it in the extremely expressive interludes indicates that this (supposedly pure) music is much closer in its impulse to its surroundings. Further, its similarity to the *Parsifal leitmotif*—a connection made by so many musicians that it would be irresponsible to ignore—suggests an obvious (if subversive) connection to an erotic paradigm of desire.

Still further, the idea of *chromaticism* (crystallized in its first appearance as a two-note sigh figure) is so preponderant that it cannot simply be written off. As previously seen, Franck’s attraction to this Wagnerian expression is articulated interestingly by Swindells: “By 1873 Franck had heard *Lohengrin, Tannhäuser* and *Die Walküre*, though Duparc described Franck’s
reaction to the last Opera as ‘ tepid.’ In 1874 Franck heard the Prélude to Tristan for the first time, and James Briscoe describes how ‘Franck [. . .] treasured his copy of (Tristan und Isolde) without seeing fit to remove the word ‘poison’ he had early scrawled on the title page.’”\(^{61}\) This quotation articulates at once Franck’s obvious attraction to Wagner entirely because of Tristan and his obvious duplicity of feeling towards its “poison”—it is here interesting to note a plausible reason for this:

“In conjunction with the rise of psychological/sexual science starting around mid century, the critical reception of Wagner became inflected with the rhetoric of health and sickness. Just as the rhetoric of sexuality in music criticism had been imbued with moral values, so too did critics imply that sickness could be of a sexual nature. As already established, Wagner himself was quite explicit in his use of sexual metaphors and analogies, which in a way opened himself to attacks of indecency and impropriety. As the discourse of sickness (both psychological and physical) became intertwined with that of the budding science of sexuality, it was only a matter of time before critics who considered themselves morally superior began to associate Wagner with the pathological and the degenerate.”\(^{62}\)

Equally interesting is the ambivalence Franck harbors towards the “intellectual” vessel of divine inspiration, the fugue. Francois Sabatie corroborates this previously discussed characteristic in his writing on some of the works for organ: “Franck himself saw the fugue more as a means of development, never an end in itself.”\(^{63}\) Indeed, the fugue is simply not enough. If nothing else, here it should be an easier thing to see why it is problematic to accept César Franck “as the true spiritual heir of Bach,” which may be, according to the previously cited Cecil Gray, leading a sort of Trojan horse within the walls of supposed security—a horse in “whose capacious belly are hidden a score or so of bloodthirsty impressionists.”\(^{64}\)

\(^{61}\)Rachel Mary Swindells, “Tonality, Functionality and Beethovenian Form in the Late Instrumental Works of César Franck” (PhD diss., University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2011), 32.

\(^{62}\)Laurie McManus, “The Rhetoric of Sexuality in the Age of Brahms and Wagner” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011), 139-140.


Chapter 5

César Franck, Claude Debussy, and the influence of a “sensuous, hedonistic art” in the Violin Sonata

5.1 Possible cross-pollinations with a “bloodthirsty impressionist”

“The same kind of emotional feeling inspires both the Sonata and the Quintet—a hidden drama of the soul, undefined in its unfolding, strong enough, indeed, to exorcise from our thoughts any preconceived judgments, any admirers of Franck the organist, the sweet-natured mystic, nearly attaining the state of true holiness.”¹

Chief among the “bloodthirsty impressionists” mentioned at the close of the previous chapter was, of course, Claude Debussy. The reader will recall that Debussy attended (if for a brief time) Franck’s composition class at the Paris Conservatory, and that it is likely he took many of Franck’s works as models for his own compositions—some of these include the choral-symphonic poem Psyché and possibly the Piano Quintet. Underlining these works’ significance is a larger principle which Debussy adopted from Franck: structural cyclicism.² But at a much more interesting intersection are the musical feelings Debussy seems to have harbored towards Franck, and, by proximity, Wagner (whose Leitmotif is a barely indistinguishable sibling of Franckian cyclicism). It is well-documented that Debussy was initially, along with many musicians in France, a passionate enthusiast of this “new art,” which “was a sensuous, hedonistic art, and as such sought expression most naturally in music.”³ As previously discussed, it was just at the time of Franck’s composition of his own highly chromatic and audaciously expressive masterworks—among them the Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue, Piano Quintet, and Violin Sonata—that Wagner’s new art made an eruptive appearance in France and initiated an

¹Leon Vallas, César Franck, Translated by Hubert Foss (London: Harrap, 1951), 199.
²Marianne Wheeldon has discussed this at length in “Debussy and the Cyclic Sonata,” The Journal of Musicology, Vol. 22, No. 4 (September 2005), 644-679.
enthusiasm which “bordered on delirium.”⁴ By 1903, Debussy would have completely disowned any allegiance he might have once had for the Teutonic figurehead⁵: “German influence never had any ill effect on anyone except those people easily impressed, or, to put it another way, on those who take the word ‘influence’ to mean ‘imitation’ [. . .] Wagner, if one may be permitted a little of the grandiloquence that suits the man, was a beautiful sunset that has been mistaken for a sunrise.”⁶ Barbed belligerence aside, Debussy’s famous estimation would prove to be for many an extremely insightful one.

At the same time, while the turn of the century saw Debussy take a consistently churlish and sardonic tone towards all things Wagnerian (both in writing and in music), the German would prove to be “a figure whose language haunted Debussy until late in his creative life”⁷—an influence perhaps tangentially enhanced via Franck. The point taken here should be that, musical realization aside, there is, in the way of inspiration, a great deal of common ground between Wagner and Debussy. Indeed, it would be difficult to miss the obvious overlap in the highly erotic musical intentions and goals of both composers. Robin Holloway notes:

“Wagner’s musical motion achieves an erotic swell, varying in intensity from placid to frenzied but always effecting a sequentially overpowering yet at the same time predictable ‘machine-made’ incandescence: while Debussy seems to be employing for his altogether more delicious, less monumental version of the same effect (author’s emphasis), nothing corresponding to the inner motions of mind and body; only the nerves⁸, only the sense of touch, only what titillates and lightly arouses. Wagner’s music is a metaphor for the whole range of emotions involved in the bodily acts; Debussy’s is a simulacrum of their whole range of sensation and delight.”⁹

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⁴Ibid., 40.
⁷Ibid., 67.
⁸Holloway’s description is reminiscent of an earlier estimation of Debussy’s music: “C’est de la musique sur le pointes d’aiguilles”—this observation was made by Franck himself (Lockspeiser 173).
In any case, the equally erotic goals of both Debussy and Wagner seem to have been often successful; French novelist and performer Colette would recount, upon visiting Bayreuth: “I was still throbbing, but I concealed my emotion like sensual desire,”\(^\text{10}\) while Wheeldon notes of Debussy that “it seems that his music was also partially responsible for the seduction of both his wives.”\(^\text{11}\) Wheeldon goes on to describe Debussy’s song *C’est l’extase* (from the *Ariettes oubliées*) as the particularly seductive perpetrator—Kimball gives a description of this song which is of great interest in relation to this discussion: “Verlaine’s poem is intimate and sensual, a portrait of two lovers at one with nature—and with each other. The opening bars mirror the physicality of the text—the languorous fatigue of afterlove. Debussy’s setting is richly evocative; the accompaniment is highly chromatic [. . .] he uses small intervals and a narrow-range melody to create an intimate, confidential atmosphere, and uses larger intervals at points of extreme emotion.”\(^\text{12}\)

These descriptions and reactions betray an obvious *intention*—something which is relatively easy to measure for both Debussy and Wagner, neither of whom served out their lives as a church organist, or found themselves the surrogate father of a fanatically Catholic and outrageously (by all accounts) “hagiographic,” propagandizing young student. Some of the events previously cited in Franck’s life made humorous by their demonstration of a conservative sensibility regarding the erotic being completely upended—namely, the suffering of Félicité’s possibly “passive-aggressive” persecution at the performance of a work with unequivocally erotic undertones (*Psyché*), or the witnessing of a red-faced Saint-Saëns’ outraged stage-exit at having been unintentionally involved in the premiere of a work brimming with expressive violence and eroticism—are, perhaps, difficult to imagine in the lives of Wagner or Debussy; at least, such events are emphatic manifestations of Franck’s vastly *different*, constrained, even “domesticated” milieu of life. But a common *erotic* point of resonance has been cited in the works of all three composers—in the case of Franck, often with a little more cautious hesitation. As a contemporary and important early source of compositional models and processes, Franck is without a doubt an at least peripherally influential point—and one which Debussy himself acknowledged *consistently* in a positive light, if with occasional reservations. Richard Langham

\(^\text{10}\)Quoted in Richard Langham Smith, *Debussy on Music*, 66.


Smith notes that Debussy “seems to have retained a surprising degree of respect for ‘Père’ Franck,”13 and Jeanne Golan writes that while “Debussy was impressed by Wagner on a visit to Bayreuth, his chief influences were French, from Fauré to César Franck [. . .] to his great friend Ernst Chausson,”14 while Wheeldon gives an articulate and broad picture of Debussy’s estimation of the Belgian:

“Although Debussy seems to have lasted only six months as an auditor, some of his comments from this period show that he admired Franck’s works if not his teaching style. A conversation between Debussy and his composition teacher Ernest Guiraud in 1889 (recorded by Maurice Emmanuel) finds Debussy speaking enthusiastically about Franck’s Symphony in D minor (1889): ‘I could do with fewer four-bar phrases. But what splendid ideas! I even prefer it to the Quintet, which I used to find thrilling’. In an article of 1903, Debussy continues to speak favorably of Franck, and despite a few reservations he praises the composer for his ‘wise, calm genius’ and ‘real devotion to music’. In this light, it would seem that Debussy’s early imitation of Franck stemmed from a true regard for the composer.”15

5.2 Erotic representations in La Chevelure and C’est l’extase

Where comparisons and connections have already been made between the String Quartet, Piano Quintet, as well as the voluptuously erotic Psyché and several of Debussy’s works, it will be of most interest here to investigate some of the more erotic of Debussy’s songs. Three elements emerge that facilitate potent carriage of the erotic in musical terms—the same three elements (some of which have been previously discussed) are vital aortas in Franck’s Violin Sonata: firstly, a dichotomy between traditionally “lush,” coloristic sonorities (such as ninth chords) which are treated as consonances16 and chromaticism which is used for more erotic tension and which initiates climactic moments; secondly, the frequent appearance of rhythmically relentless

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13Richard Langham Smith, Debussy on Music, 332.
15Marianne Wheeldon, Debussy’s Late Style (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 82.
figurations, sometimes manifested in off-beat pulsations ("palpitations"); and thirdly, the remarkable and significant *commingling* of two melodic lines (the piano with the voice or instrumentalist) and these melodic lines’ inherent characteristics—one of the most interesting being a barely maintainable restraint within a frame.\textsuperscript{17} Other significant cross-pollinations can readily be found—one point which is very near *unique* to Franck is the tremendous over-reaching across the keyboard for the most sumptuous, resonant sound possible (something which usually appears at climactic points). Debussy unaccountably adopts this same kind of writing to create massive sonorities at climactic points (of whose erotic nature Debussy made no secret).

The paradigm and inspiration of the previous mentioned *C’est l’extase* is closely related to Debussy’s crystallization of style in the *Chansons de Bilitis* (1897), “generally conceded to be the most perfect example of Debussy’s ability to merge musical and poetical elements”\textsuperscript{18} and at once providing “one of the most moving revelations of the hedonistic, pagan art of Debussy.”\textsuperscript{19} The “poetical elements” of these three songs (pened by Pierre Louys\textsuperscript{20}) “deal with erotic initiation and consecration in the Foucaultian sense.”\textsuperscript{21} Of special interest is the second song, *La Chevelure*—the text’s eroticism is obvious:

“He said to me, ‘Last night I dreamt I had your hair around my neck. I had your locks wrapped like a black collar around the nape of my neck and over my chest.

‘I caressed them and they were mine; and we were bound like this forever, by the same locks, mouth on mouth, like two laurels having only one root.

‘And little by little, it seemed to me our limbs were so entwined—that I became you or that you entered into me like my dream.’

\textsuperscript{17}Or, to quote Kimball again, the use of “small intervals and a narrow-range melody to create an intimate, confidential atmosphere,” and the use of “larger intervals at points of extreme emotion.”

\textsuperscript{18}Carol Kimball, *Song*, 198.

\textsuperscript{19}Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy*, 133.

\textsuperscript{20}Louys was an interesting figure in whose life the erotic figures perhaps more prominently than anything else; Julie McQuinn discusses at length his efforts in writing to sanctify sexual freedom, citing “‘a real fascination with the written expression of eroticism’” as well as an obsession with feminine sexuality ‘autonomous and independent of man’” (128).

\textsuperscript{21}Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” 129.
When he had finished, he softly laid his hands on my shoulders and looked at me so tenderly that I lowered my eyes, shivering.\textsuperscript{22}

Lockspeiser notes that Debussy’s setting of this text is written in an “undulating and flexible” style, recalling “the eroticism of the tower scene in \textit{Pelléas} […] It is a dream of ecstatic love rendered strangely archaic by its use of reiterated notes in the vocal line which, however, is allowed to soar into an outburst of passionate vitality as the poet touches upon the vision of Pan and Bilitis eternally united in body and soul.”\textsuperscript{23} McQuinn gives a description of the song which is resoundingly similar to the narrative created by the second movement of Franck’s Violin Sonata: “the entwinement of Bilitis and Lykas in Lykas’s dream is matched by the entwinement of narratives […] the sinuous, chromatic motion on the downbeats in combination with the repeated chords on the offbeats together create an erotic tension that is ‘relieved’ only during two points of climax, where the only significant rising melodic lines occur, first when the two are metaphorically joined, and second, when they are physically united.”\textsuperscript{24} Additionally, musicologist William Gibbons articulates in greater musical detail how this narrative is accomplished:

“The composer accomplishes this depiction largely through tempo, dynamic, and texture changes […] with only a single brief interruption halting the acceleration that culminates at the fermata in m. 19. This measure likewise marks the high point dynamically; while the majority of the song is \textit{piano} or \textit{pianissimo}, mm. 18 and 19 reach \textit{fortissimo}. In addition, the piano texture changes rather abruptly in m. 18, becoming denser and entering a higher register. The voice behaves in much the same manner, reaching up to a high F # —the highest note of the vocal part. In short, all musical elements build to mm. 18 and 19, which set the text where Lykas recounts his complete union with Bilitis, an obvious allusion to the buildup and release from sexual climax.”\textsuperscript{25}

The sexual climax described by Gibbons —the second of the whole song—is seen here (Ex. 5.1):

\textsuperscript{23}Edward Lockspeiser, \textit{Debussy}, 133-4.
\textsuperscript{24}Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” 130.
\textsuperscript{25}William Gibbons, “Debussy as Storyteller,” 12.
Example 5.1. Debussy, *Chansons de Bilitis, No. 2, La Chevelure*, mm. 17-21

Two of the erotic elements previously mentioned are immediately recognizable in this example. Neither of these is explicitly examined by Gibbons, who seems mostly concerned with the trajectory-towards-climax scheme evinced by obvious augmentations in the most fundamental musical ways (“tempo, dynamic, and texture changes”). The unmistakable rhythmic “gasps” mentioned by McQuinn are everywhere. The consummating eruption of sonority on the words “you entered into me like my dream” is, after a brief rest, displaced by this figuration—perhaps another realization of “the languorous fatigue of afterlove.” What is even more significant about these rhythmic pulsations is their relentless nature—as noted, only twice is this erotically evocative rhythmic pattern “relieved.”

Additionally, while Gibbons cites the “denser” piano writing, he does not make mention of how unusual this is in Debussy’s writing for the piano—in this instance the chordal writing is impossible to play without breaking, and is acutely redolent of both Franck and the organ, especially when placed next to a passage such as the one seen below (incidentally, at the second climax of the Violin Sonata’s first movement [Ex. 5.2]):

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26Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” 130.
Example 5.2. Franck, Violin Sonata, *Allegretto ben moderato*, mm. 84-91.

Returning to *C’est l’extase*, one finds another curious resemblance in the means which Debussy implements to realize musically Paul Verlaine’s text, which is concerned with the sensory experience of “afterlove”:

“It is ecstasy, languorous, it is the fatigue of love, it is all the trembling of the woods, among the embrace of the breezes, it is towards the gray branches, the choir of small voices.

Oh the frail and fresh murmur! All these things twitter and whisper. They resemble the cry so sweet that the waving grass breathes out. You would say, under the water that turns, the dull rolling of pebbles.

This soul that laments in this dormant complaint, it is ours, is it not? Mine, say, and also yours, from which exhales the humble anthem on this warm evening, very low?”

Part of the resonance of this picture of “two lovers at one with nature—and with each other” certainly has to do with the whole idea of desire which, in this instance, is surrounded in

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atmospheric, sensory-laden perceptions. Both these perceptions and the heart of Verlaine’s text—a fascination with the idea of knowing someone or some being through the most intimate form of communication and expression possible—are set in high relief by Debussy. Conspicuous musical markers of the erotic emerge (Ex. 5.3):

Example 5.3. Debussy, Ariettes oubliées, C'est l'extase, mm. 1-5

The first erotic marker previously mentioned (but which was not seen to as great an extent in La Chevelure) is the excessive and even consonant use of traditionally coloristic harmonies—the piano’s opening music “allows its voluptuous message to linger [. . .] among gliding chords of the ninth.”28 Here it is interesting to quote one salient observation of one of Franck’s earlier biographers: “While Liszt may be said to have immortalized the diminished seventh and Brahms the sixth, Franck certainly played an equal part with the dominant ninth—and here let us remember that it is Debussy who is usually credited with this venture.”29 Indeed, Debussy’s music is replete with examples of this lush, sensuous harmonic sonority—here it is used with a clear dichotomy in mind. Whereas the expressive indications “slow and caressing,” and “dreamily,” are clear enough, it is the music’s harmonic formulations which reveal even more clearly its expressive intentions; indulgent enjoyment of the sybaritic ninth chord continues uninterested in and undriven by any tension—its existence is entirely to create the atmosphere of decadent eroticism. This becomes most clear when the ninth chord is juxtaposed with chromaticism, which occurs in mm. 22-27, at the first climax of the song. Both the piano and the voice slide against each other with a chromatically-commensurate friction—there is an obvious

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28Edward Lockspeiser, Debussy, 126.
29Norman Demuth, César Franck (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 47.
erotic interplay between them; something very similar will be seen in the second movement of Franck’s Violin Sonata.

5.3 Voluptuous consonance, pulsating rhythms, and melodic commingling

When one remembers that Franck’s Violin Sonata was composed in 1886, and Debussy’s C’est l’extase in 1888, the distinct possibility of cross-pollination and/or common response to Wagner’s music becomes as compelling as it is intriguing. The Sonata was composed during the creative final interval in Franck’s life—in the same decade one finds the Symphonic Variations for piano and orchestra (1885), Psyché (1886–88), the Symphony in D minor (1886–88), the two piano triptychs, and the Piano Quintet (Franck’s culminating chamber work, the String Quartet, was soon to follow). The Violin Sonata has come to be recognized as Franck’s most representative, if not best, chamber work, and perhaps even his most famous work, hands down. Davies humorously (albeit subjectively) highlights this assertion which, regardless, many hold to be accurate: “Franck wrote nothing greater than this alternatively erudite and melodious work with its four deeply contrasting movements.”30 Later he even goes so far as to suggest that “Brahms is possibly the only serious contender Franck has in this genre.”31 The end result was quite possibly, upon further study, due to an enormous gestation period—while there is not documented anything along the lines of the extreme caution and self-doubt of Brahms’s experience in approaching his first legitimate venture into the writing of a symphony, Franck did seem at least intent on writing a Violin Sonata as early as 1859.32 This ambition twenty-seven years prior had been brought about by a special interest in Franck’s music expressed by none other than the famous daughter of Liszt (and wife of Richard), Cosima Wagner. Whatever attempts Franck may have made at that time were either discarded or, possibly, found their way into the work of 1886, although the latter suggestion is pure conjecture. This work Franck

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31 Ibid., 38.
finally completed ended up bearing a dedicatee other than Cosima: Eugène Ysaÿe, whom it seems Franck had heard perform as early as 1877, when Ysaÿe was only nineteen years old.\(^{33}\)

This dedication has, for some, been viewed as significant in coloring possible interpretative and narrative choices regarding the work itself—the reason being, perhaps, that it involves a *wedding*: “on September 28, 1886, in the town of Arlon—just west of the Belgium-Luxembourg border—Ysaÿe married Louise Bourdeau, daughter of an army officer. Franck could not attend this event, but he sent in his place Charles Bordes, whose sister-in-law, pianist Léontine Bordes-Pène, was also there.”\(^{34}\) Bordes carried with him a special gift—the manuscript of the *Sonate pour piano et violon*—which was then sight-read by Ysaÿe and Mme. Bordes-Pène; Stove quite properly speculates on how smoothly this might have gone, specifically in regard to Mme. Bordes-Pène’s part: “even her dexterity must have been challenged by (the Violin Sonata).”\(^{35}\)

The work’s public premiere was, typically for Franck, not without hitch. Ysaÿe and Bordes-Pène were again the performers, and, met a “fiasco” described humorously by Davies: “this time it was caused by a failure in the lighting arrangements.\(^{36}\) By the end of the first movement, the hall had become so dim that it looked as if the concert would have to be abandoned.” Davies continues: “at the crucial moment, Ysaÿe struck the music-stand with his bow, and gallantly called out ‘Allons! Allons!’ to his wilting partner. Plunged into darkness, the performers seized hold of their courage, racing through the rest of the work from memory. It was not often that Franck’s music had been so adroitly saved from disaster.”\(^{37}\)

Throughout the analytical literature on the Violin Sonata, one finds the mention of rhythmic pulses which are “always exciting, sometimes even brutal, as (in) the *Quintet,*”\(^{38}\) a “sensuous and yearning”\(^{39}\) utility of the composer’s cherished cyclic procedure, and Franck’s beginning to treat the chord of a dominant ninth, notably, “a harmony that the French impressionists were to find

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\(^{33}\)Ibid.
\(^{35}\)Ibid., 257.
\(^{36}\)“Open fire, including candles, was prohibited at the newly renovated *Musée des Beaux-Arts.*” Lorenz Amadeus Gamma, “The Sonata by César Franck: A Critical Edition for Violinists” (DMA diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2005), 6.
\(^{37}\)Laurence Davies, *Franck*, 230.
\(^{38}\)Leon Vallas, *César Franck*, 199.
one of their most useful resources,” as an “apex of a chord.”  

At the same time, the lack of an outrageously discomforting and controversial event at the work’s premiere (such as Saint-Saëns’s infuriated, one-time-only sight-reading of the Quintet) seems to have quelled any outright suggestion or interpretation of eroticism. It is also worth noting this might be a consequence of Franck’s much younger, more generous performers—Ysaÿe, himself warmly receptive to new music, would go on to perform and write a significant oeuvre of music for violin, including works with erotic undertones.

In any case, Ysaÿe’s championing of Franck’s Violin Sonata was certainly more heartily enthusiastic than was Saint-Saëns’s of the Quintet. In fact, artistic reception and reaction to performances of the new work are highly interesting—in addition to the oft-noted possibility of Proust-ian inspiration, Davies has recounted that the art nouveau sculptor Victor Rousseau “was inspired to carve his statue, Ecstasy, as a result of listening to [Ysaÿe perform] it.” The subsequent “vaguely lesbian” depiction is that of “two female figures raising their arms to the heavens.” Even if one does not contemplate the Sonata’s relatedness to its possible artistic offspring, the work’s frequent comparison to the Quintet merits a further exploration of erotic musical potential. Several markers, both local and larger-scale, quickly emerge; a harmonic palette which takes as consonant traditionally lush, coloristic chords (such as the ninth chord), and engages with its most obviously chromatic impulses in tandem with textural augmentation or increased density (seen in over-reaching pianistic demands and in feverish, throbbing activity) and, significantly, melodic coupling, mirroring procedures utilized by Debussy. While the trajectory-toward climax scheme has been discussed at length in previous works, one of the most

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41 Two of these works in particular are interesting to cite briefly for this discussion. The first, entitled Exil (1918), was composed upon Ysaÿe’s forming of “a seemingly hopeless attachment to one of his violin students,” and is, effectively “an attempt to find a musical outlet for the futility of these newly aroused feelings.” The second (and perhaps more recognizable) work is the solo violin sonata Extase (1921), in which “similar emotions of mingled yearning and renunciation are obviously at play,” Bradford Robinson, Extase, op. 21, Poème pour violon et orchestra: Preface (Musikproduktion Jürgen Höflich/Konrad con Abel & Phenomenology of Music Muenchen), http://www.musikmph.de/musical_scores/vor worte/299.html (accessed 2 February, 2014).
42 Stove notes “the Sonata is often said to have left a profound impact on Proust, who ostensibly used a ‘little phrase’ from it—possibly the opening two measures—as the basis for the sonata by ‘Vinteuil’ in Remembrance of Things Past” (César Franck: His Life and Times, 259).
43 Laurence Davies, César Franck and his Circle, 232.
44 Ibid.
45 Bradford Robinson, Extase, op. 21, Poème pour violon et orchestra: Preface.
resounding can certainly be found in the Allegro movement seen here—a large-scale exercise in maintaining an “ideal curve,” whose eruptive climax occurs at in its final bars.

5.4 The Violin Sonata

5.4.1 Allegretto ben Moderato

To speak of Ecstasy, and more specifically, to return to the voluptuousness created and enjoyed by the protagonists of C’est l’extase, a highly resemblant relation is found in perhaps this most famous example of a ninth chord in the entirety of Franck’s oeuvre, right at the beginning of the Allegro ben moderato (Ex. 5.4):

Example 5.4. Franck, Violin Sonata, Allegretto ben moderato, mm. 1-5

For an excessive amount of time, the music bathes itself in the warm, resonant harmony of the same ninth chord—even the violin’s entrance serves to outlines this lush harmony (this eighth-quarter motivic and melodic cell will play an important role in the work’s narrative). As Gregory Karl notes: “The opening movement of Franck’s sonata, a binary structure that has been described as a sonata form without development, contains no sharp contrasts, no sudden changes, no sense of urgency. Its slow harmonic rhythm and relaxed tempo, its dwelling on lush ninth chords which are treated as consonant sonorities, and its emphasis on arpeggiation in the principal theme all contribute to a sense of warmth.” Karl’s observations are even more interesting when one considers Franck’s initial, even more “lush,” intentions with this movement’s tempo—intentions which were more likely than not at odds with what is usually

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heard in modern performance halls. This is almost certainly due to the work’s dedicatee, Eugène Ysaÿe. R.J. Stove recounts: “Ysaÿe, with his habitual ebullience, insisted on playing it at a pace faster than the creator has envisaged. By doing so, he irked yet another Liégeois violinist, Armand Parent (concertmaster of the Colonne Orchestra), who asked Franck in person: ‘Why the devil does Eugène not take the exact speeds which you indicate?’ To which Franck, less concerned with the letter than with the spirit of his inspiration, replied: ‘It’s possible, but relax, I really think that it’s he who’s right.’”

Additionally, the absence of a development—a strange structural choice for Franck—indicates the secondary nature of anything other than the sensory indulgence in sound. Sound which is, it should be stressed, treated in a consonant way—the standard, most fundamental impulse of expression is here one of sensuality.

Indeed, when the music finally leaves its initial ninth chord (only after both the piano and violin have exhausted nearly every possible intervallic exploration of this harmony), it will continue to insatiably seek out a new harmonic ninth. After chromatic exploration which covers “a lot of ground without actually getting anywhere,” the music will finally come to rest on another ninth harmony, but this time its impulse seems set on achieving climax. As seen, the eighth-quarter, eighth-quarter rhythmic cell which is persistently applied up to this point effectively initiates an increase in dynamics, tempo, and textural density—creating an intensity of expressive force which marks one of two climaxes in the first movement. The arrival itself is realized with enormous, over-reaching keyboard writing (Ex. 5.5):
out of the way to suggest the first movement’s non-developmental, sensory-centric harmonic expression and suggestive (but non-committal) voluptuousness as an effort at creation of some sort of erotic representation—if explicit cues are taken from the previous Debussyan examples, this music could be said to correspond to an erotic *dream*, or an opaque contemplation of desire. At its very least, on a structural, skeletal level, the *Allegretto ben moderato* manifests an atmosphere drenched in the most audibly sensual possibilities of music contemporary to Franck’s day.

5.4.2 *Allegro*

“The fragment not only reflects the experience of desire, it creates desire; its pull toward the unknown encapsulates the very essence of longing. By showing us a teasing glimpse, the fragment makes us want more, in what Reynolds refers to as ‘the erotics of the fragment - part known, part hidden - in the erotics of the feminine - part veiled, part known, part guessed.’”

While the first movement’s expressive needs seem to exist more in the hazy realm of dream and *possibility*, and are not overtly in pursuit of consummation, the second movement’s impulses and expressive forces are nearly the polar opposite. Where the first movement’s favored harmonic language was one of sensuality (coloristic sonorities), the second movement’s is thoroughly chromatic, and will rely heavily on a kind of fragmentation to realize threatening emotional drives which bring to mind McQuinn’s description of a (similar?) force seen in Debussy’s most erotic early songs: “a mysterious, sensual terror.”

By all accounts, Franck’s *Allegro* second movement is an infamously difficult (and for some, even “overwritten”\(^52\)) *tour de force* of virtuosity and, possibly, *violent* expression. Indeed, the paradigm seen in the Piano Quintet resonates especially well here, but where the Piano Quintet’s

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\(^{50}\)Rachel Iwaasa, “Fragmentation and Eros in Debussy’s *Chansons de Bilitis* and *Six Épigraphes Antiques*” (DMA diss., University of British Columbia, 2006), 60.

\(^{51}\)Quoted in James M. Keller, *Debussy: Jeux, Poeme Dansé, C’est L’extase (Songs arranged and orchestrated by Robin Holloway)*, and *La Mer* (San Francisco Symphony: Program Notes & Articles), http://www.sfsymphony.org/Watch-Listen-Learn/Read-Program-Notes/Program-Notes/DEBUSSY-Jeux,-Poeme-danse-%E2%94%82-C%E2%80%99est-l%E2%80%99extase-(songs.aspx (accessed 14 February 2014).

\(^{52}\)An assertion this author first heard articulated by Belgian-American pianist Kevin Class.
first movement clearly has two principal theme areas driven by two distinct motivations, this movement’s materials are more related than not. Indeed, the narrative of an “argument” which might be given to explain the Allegro’s headlong, overly passionate utterances is one which, while imaginative and undoubtedly effective as a strategy for many a performance, may not take into consideration the remarkable and significant way in which Franck has often arranged his materials.

The piano’s many-tentacled intensity seems, inexplicably, somewhere between the feral and the mechanical—its unmistakably Franckian over-reaching is made even more difficult by an unrelenting pulse of sixteenth notes. Amidst this inexorable torrent are chromatic fragments whose abrupt expressive urgency is most immediately and audibly resemblant of gasps. Karl notes: “On the one hand we find relentless, driving sixteenth-note motion in the accompaniment and crisp rhythmic figures focused on the strong beats in the melody, features which, in the context of an allegro movement in D minor and the expression marking passionate, suggest great energy and agitation—even frenzy.”

Interestingly, Karl goes on to note that “The intervals and contours of the melody, by contrast, suggest restraint or at least an effort at restraint; the almost exclusively conjunct motion of the violin, often involving chromatic steps, is an important factor in this effect, as is the deliberate and systematic progress of the line as a whole—rising by thirds between each of its first three phrases and rapidly and thoroughly filling in each of its few small leaps.” Some have placed this violently expressive music significantly in the company of another composer: “the steady upward chromatic ascent (and ensuing descent) evokes a kind of manic energy rarely heard in Wagner.” Karl’s reckoning of possible interpretations of the Allegro’s surging onrush includes “the attempt to control a strong impulse, emotion, or other force.” The initial presentation of this frenzied, passionate material and the fragmented chromatic gasps is seen below (Ex. 5.6):

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54Ibid., 188.
56Ibid.
The chromatic fragments which puncture this wildly undulating textural figuration work consistently upwards, but the most expected and demanded climax of this expressive deluge is subverted and driven headlong backwards, down the chromatic scale (Ex. 5.7):

Here it is necessary to address a common “floating” idea which seems to have penetrated much of the practical discourse on the Violin Sonata, at least in this writer’s experience with the pedagogical understanding of the work espoused in performance settings. Perhaps stemming from the previously cited fact that Franck decided to present the Violin Sonata as a wedding gift to Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe, and from obvious but cursory assessments of the work’s large-scale plan, the Violin Sonata appears to come, for some, implicated with a number of narrative possibilities involving the experience of married life, not unrelated to the narrative structures of Schumann’s Frauenliebe und leben. Pianist Nicholas Burns has given his own incredibly specific and yet vaguely supported take on this interpretative projection:
“The work itself neatly encapsulates the story of the happy bride and groom. The first movement evokes the first flickers of attraction, eventually building to great outbursts of love. The couple, now together, face their first feud in the second movement where the spurned party can be heard in the pleading quieter passages while the violent fury of the faster writing vividly portrays their conflict. All is resolved in the quietly meditative slow third movement before the famous finale cleverly captures the wedding ceremony itself. Written in canon, the violin follows the piano exactly before the roles are reversed, mirroring the repetition of the wedding vows. The quiet, solemn writing evokes prayer and again huge outbursts of emotion punctuate the writing before we once again hear the celebratory Parisienne bells right at the end.”57

This interpretation is certainly problematic on simple structural/cyclical terms, and for some it might seem difficult to translate some sort of peaceful “resolution” in the harmonically _dejected_ (”mesto”) final motions of the third movement, whose undeniably _unfinished_ business is then addressed in the fourth movement. In any case, this author has heard other similar interpretations colored by such an idea, naming Franck’s first movement as containing a narrative of “courtship,” the second, a heated argument, and the fourth, an—alternative to the suggestions seen above—aged and perhaps more “detached” reflection on past events. Of course, when it comes to narrative strategies in performance, _possible_ conceptions are abundant, but of these, the conviction that the _Allegro_’s expression intends to depict an _argument_ seems, to this author, especially applicable and worth addressing to some extent.

And indeed, why not?—one may find it all but named elsewhere in the adjectives frequently chosen to describe the _Allegro_’s impulses (to name a few: “high-strung,”58 “tensed, anguished, almost alarming,”59 and even “the most fiery music Franck ever wrote”60), and given Karl’s charge of the movement’s “agitation,” and exertions to “control a strong impulse,” this seems,
perhaps on first glance, compelling. But the Violin’s initial entrance and subsequent musical placement against the piano is, if anything, an incredibly *complementary* commingling (Ex. 5.8):

Example 5.8. Franck, Violin Sonata, *Allegro*, mm. 13-18

Both the violin and the piano are in perfect unison—a striking compositional choice, if this is meant as a musical rendering of an argument. Neither part antagonizes or conflicts with the other; both are locked into a pulsating, repetitious rhythmic drive, stating parallel chromatic gasps which, interestingly, begin *consistently* on syncopations. Towards the end of this entire frenetic onrush the parts will come slightly undone (Ex. 5.9):

Example 5.9. Franck, Violin Sonata, *Allegro*, mm. 19-24
But even then, the slight unlocking is only by half a beat. At the tail of this example new, more expressive and dramatic melodic material is taken up by the piano (the first gesture of which is a minor-seventh downward leap), but the sixteenth-note figuration remains, unrelieved. Of note is again the rhythmic placement of these overtly expressive fragments. While the piano attempts to communicate these larger-scale gestures, its phrases are continually interrupted by “gasps” for air—the breathless torrent of sixteenth-notes are anchored to a demanding and persistent rhythmic paradigm. As is often the case with Franck’s music, this second array of expressive augmentation will initiate a second, much more vehement sequence of the first passage (Ex. 5.8), in which both parts are again at one with each other. To suggest some sort of argument scheme at the heart of the Allegro seems, for this reason, obscure; for the first three pages both the violin and piano are, in every possible musical sense, in agreement. There is, indeed, nothing even in the way of dialogue, which, to this author, would seem to preclude an argument.

The remarkable energy of this music gradually begins to run out (Ex. 5.10); here, in the exposition’s transition section, one may detect perhaps the first clearly audible instance of cyclicism. The violin’s movement by third seems a more persistent relation of its “unruffled” counterpart in the Allegretto ben moderato’s opening. Harmonically, Franck’s remarkable insistence on thwarting expectation is seen in the way the half-diminished B7 chord (seen on the downbeat of m. 44 and then emphatically repeated) is denied satisfaction; instead of attaining the dominant of F major the leading tone is pulled backwards into to B-flat minor, which will then collapse plagally onto F major—a key establishment which will prove temporary:

![Example 5.10. Franck, Violin Sonata, Allegro, mm. 44-47](image)

A brief rest is taken by both parts, as they seek to re-align; the piano’s experimentation with a new triplet eighth-note rhythm in m. 47 will lead to a new, slightly less frenetic rhythmic
underpinning in the second theme area—here the expressive urges of the violin, seemingly aroused by the piano’s relaxation, become more overt and audacious (reaching C-sharp in m. 53—only the second in this movement). While never “at odds” with the piano, its contour is lent a great deal more freedom, and continues to venture further away from the piano’s melodic construction. The music will rise and fall in two clear waves (mm. 44-51, mm. 52-66), neither of which can achieve climax, before gradually sinking into a section marked *molto dolce* and *pianissimo* (m. 67), which itself comes to rest in a way which might be described as *languorous* (Ex. 5.11):

![Example 5.11. Franck, Violin Sonata, Allegro, mm. 79-83](image)

Example 5.11. Franck, Violin Sonata, *Allegro*, mm. 79-83

This inexplicable *Quasi lento* is of great interest, given the unmistakably agitated material seen previously. Again, the harmonies which both parts come to rest on are, in no traditional sense, consonant, and for this reason it is interesting how much time Franck dwells on them. All sense of drive has, for the moment, been exhausted—at this point a clear over-arching rhythmic structure emerges of complete frenzy to utter fatigue. The music, nonetheless, will make a half-hearted effort to regain some of its activity—the piano picks up a teetering, rhythmically somnolent pattern which will completely deliquesce in four measures (Ex. 5.12):

![Example 5.12. Franck, Violin Sonata, Allegro, mm. 84-88](image)

Example 5.12. Franck, Violin Sonata, *Allegro*, mm. 84-88
The development of the *Allegro* might be described as the incredibly overweighted counterbalance to the *Allegretto ben moderato*’s non-existent development. Sudden thrusts from the piano seem to infuse a new, doubly impassioned energy into the music, and the figuration of the opening will return, again with both the violin and piano locked into parallel gestures. This figuration will lead to some incredibly expressive outbursts, like the one seen in mm. 102-103:

![Example 5.13. Franck, Violin Sonata, Allegro, mm. 99-105](image)

Still, nothing like a real climax is achieved—expressive outpourings such as the one above are not harmonically cadential. The recapitulation reveals further a large-scale trajectory whose expressive frissons continually threaten to create a total explosion. This is especially apparent from the transition onwards—not only is the dynamic palette augmented (*sempre ff*), but the harmonization is much more restless and the piano’s writing is intensified by a virtual doubling of sonority due to increased range (Ex. 5.14):

![Example 5.14](image)
Where this music in the exposition was pulled downwards and frustrated both harmonically and in expressive allowance, the music here will continue to expand to the very timbral extremes available (albeit while experiencing a similar plagal thwarting). The piano reaches the lowest A on the keyboard in m. 164, and the violin an A sharp in m. 167. The obvious musical paradigm seen in this moment is one of a *structural* necessity of (harmonic) restraint exerted on explosive expressive urges which then continue, unaccountably, to expand until reaching *physical* boundaries. This new charge of “stamina” which finally and similarly exhausts itself, will come to rest on chords (mm. 185-192) which reflect vaguely the almost static, listless chords in the exposition—but here the harmonic character is grounded and goal-oriented (articulated most obviously by an unrelenting D pedal-point). But it is perhaps the coda which is most indicative of a Franck’s large-scale structural trajectory, and specifically its *outcome*. Sidelining the local erotic markers seen thus far, the coda might seem a perfect model in the genre—indeed, in any other work the indication *animato poco a poco* and subsequent expansion in virtuosity from both parts and increase in every possible way to a climax which is the only cadentially satisfying moment in the entire movement might suggest, most simply, triumph (or, for some, an argument successfully resolved). But there are number of significant choices Franck has made which invite at least the suggestion of a more subversive interpretation.

In the case of Franck’s Violin Sonata, the expressive indication *animato poco a poco* might be seen in a different light. Yet again, it is a perfect descriptor of his musical *materials*—notice the choices of rhythmic placement in the piano which stress weak beats and have an audibly unmistakable effect of *syncopation* (Ex. 5.15):
Example 5.15. Franck, Violin Sonata, *Allegro*, mm. 186-194

The coda in itself is a perfect trajectory-towards climax. The violin’s four-note upward motive becomes *spiccato* (m. 194)—a quivering, expectant expressive impulse; the piano resumes its torrential sixteenth-note frenzy. The contours of both parts rise and fall in unison with each upward wave becoming more expressive and more intent on consummation; the penultimate one of these, after a headlong downward descent, will precipitate the final climax—the violin’s frenzied *spiccato* quiverings are concentrated into an ecstatic trill, while the piano thrusts upwards, finally achieving a transformation in major (Ex. 5.16):
If the previous local markers of the erotic as well the substantial and unusually physical demands of this movement are considered, the “straightforward” paradigm seen here might be, without too much mental effort, traced as a narrative suggestive of erotic intimacy. A number of easily measurable musical augmentations (which are often all that is needed to describe a musical eroticism in Debussy\textsuperscript{61}) are, when this interpretation is sustained, imbued with new possibilities of meaning; of these, it is perhaps the immense major transformation in the coda which might be especially descriptive of the outcome of such an interpretation. However, it is only one part of the entire work’s narrative.

5.4.3 *Recitativo—Fantasia*

“A fragile thread stretched between dream and reality.”\textsuperscript{62}

The third movement, bearing the evocative title *Recitativo—Fantasia* is perhaps the real expressive heart of the work; it seems to exist in a world removed from, but not emotionally divest of, the voluptuousness of the *Allegretto ben moderato* and the feverish eroticism of the *Allegro*. Erotic markers do appear, but they are ones seen previously; their placement and expression reveal a much larger emotional landscape and a structural compass informed by time,

\textsuperscript{61}As was seen above in William Gibbons’s straightforward description of musical augmentation in *La Chevelure from the Chansons de Bilitis*.

consequence, and, possibly, the exigencies and necessities reality must impose on fantasy. It is clear from the opening bars that any experiences of the erotic are now situated in the past; the first page of the *Recitativo—Fantasia* is harmonically redolent of what has come before, with a clear struggle between dominant flat ninth and ninth—the very chord (transposed) which was contemplated, undisturbed, in the first movement’s opening bars. Here this Rückblick’s harmonic unrest and enchainment to a pedal D portend a different dramatic impulse (and outcome, as will be seen)—indeed, the troubled piano opening, while instantly recalling previous material, suggests an overall harmony far-removed from the home key of F-sharp minor; the D pedal is itself a projection of the harmony these opening bars come to rest on: D7—the dominant of g minor. Additionally, the obvious melodic cue of the rising third in the piano also brings to mind the gently pensive melodic explorations of the first movement (Ex. 5.17):

![Example 5.17. Franck, Violin Sonata, Recitativo—Fantasia, mm. 1-9](image)

The fixation on the rising third will finally precipitate a full voicing of the *Allegretto ben moderato*’s opening melody in m. 12. Karl beautifully describes the moment just prior: “in measure 11 the piano seems to have this idea on the tip of its tongue, so to speak, but cannot

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63That is, if one adopts the first two erotically-charged movements as projections of wayward fantasy, the *Recitativo—Fantasia* must be a working-through of repercussions and realities brought on by these fantasies—one may easily find possible parallels in Franck’s own life (especially when Augusta Holmès is mentioned).

64John Horton, *César Franck*, 50.

65It is not until the movement’s final passage that the significance of *this* harmony is revealed.
recall it at first.”66 This melodic fragment will coalesce in an enormously significant reminiscence which occurs in the second half of the movement, initiated by the most exposed, dramatic outbursts of expression (expression potently evocative of regret) seen in the whole of the Recitativo—Fantasia.

From the outset, this new perspective which is informed by the past indicates narrative implications and needs beyond the erotic—in which “yearning” and attempts at “renunciation”67 may play a part. The piano and violin have an interplay which is no longer parallel, and even the violin’s opening recitative confidings, while comprised of entirely new material, are still haunted by what has come before, and seem more set on recovering/regrouping than experiencing, or indulging; as seen, its first entrance is a shadowy resonance of the immediate past—the final ecstatic trill in the Allegro—but this remembrance and subsequent iterations are far from ecstasy. The violin’s expressive needs here project an emotionally-charged but intimate verbalization whose character reflects a significant departure, or change, in the Violin Sonata’s underlying expressive spirit.

Further recitative statements, some of which contain further fragmented reminiscences of the previous movements, give way to a Molto lento section, also characterized by this confessional-style of writing. Karl notes here that “the slower tempo and the doleful, repetitive three-note descent in the violin suggest lamentation, and the harmonization confirms this impression [. . .] a further reason for interpreting the passage as a lament is provided when this music returns in the final seven bars with the more explicit indication, molto lento e mesto.”68 The violin will eventually adopt a consistent pulse of sixteenth-notes, becoming increasingly restless—here the piano’s sinking, bare, almost attritional chromaticism seems to seek to placate the anxiety and harmonic restiveness of the violin—a restiveness perhaps brought on by dolce but troublesome fragments of the past (Ex. 5.18):

67Terms used in reference to the music of Ysaÿe in Bradford Robinson, Extase, op. 21, Poème pour violon et orchestra.
This most simple of consolations is unsuccessful, and the violin’s volatile urgency suddenly comes to a throbbing culmination which precipitates outbursts from the piano (Ex. 5.19):

Example 5.19. Franck, Violin Sonata, *Recitativo—Fantasia*, mm. 44-46

This climactic midpoint is consequential in arousing deep, sympathetic expressive impulses from both the violin and the piano which are able, for the first time, to find a parallel conduit of communication. An impassioned intensity is vocalized immediately in the piano’s insistent chords, and in its perfect matching of the violin’s downward gestures. This music will lead to the most significant expressive figuring in the entire movement—just prior the music is given, for the first time, an unexpected textural lucidity, which seems, finally and possibly, capable of eliciting a confrontation with the troubling intimations which have thus far been only vaguely hinted at and glimpsed in fragmentary forms. The piano’s hesitant upward rippling which seems just unable to voice the impulse from which it emanates is suggestive of the “truncated sobs” seen in the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*—Franck’s rhythmic figuring and scant bass support are here masterfully evocative (Ex. 5.20):
This texture—incidentally, the only thing close to “warmth” in the whole of the Recitativo—Fantasia—will enswathe the first new melody of the movement, which proves to serve an intercessory purpose (similar to the placatory opening gesture of the piano in the Quintet). This melody, which Karl notes seems one of “hopefulness,” will be unable to prevent the further initiation of a soaring, exposed melody from the violin, which effectively condenses all its previous exertions into a single, profoundly sorrowful gesture—along with its second appearance, surely the most dramatic and consequential outpouring of the whole Recitativo—Fantasia (Ex. 5.21):

The wounds and confusion which were so vehemently thrown up previously are here experienced anew with a disconsolate, throbbing despair. A second appearance of the first “hopeful” melody follows on the heels of this outburst, suggesting an intercessory consolation, but the fluctuating undulations of the texture seem intent on going elsewhere. The music, escaping its grief, suddenly emerges into the rich warmth of C-sharp major, and at once into a “remembrance of things past” (Ex. 5.22):

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69Ibid.
Here the violin vocalizes music which is unmistakably familiar: the longing, sensual opening motive of the *Allegretto ben moderato* first movement (“a dreamlike reminiscence”)\(^\text{70}\)—an instant, crystallizing articulation of the preponderant crisis haunting the whole of the *Recitativo—Fantasia*. This *dolcissimo* appearance seems almost a projection distorted by the inevitable reconstructions of memory; where its first presentation was one of almost nonchalant, sensory suggestion (underlined by the ternary pulse and rhythms), the *remembrance* seen here is leant a great deal more vitality, even passionate *ardor*—perhaps an irrevocable, transformative consequence of the erotic experiences of the *Allegro*. But this unexpected remembrance cannot be re-possessed or brought back—this realization initiates an even more overwrought outpouring of the sorrowful gesture seen previously (Ex. 5.23):

\(^{70}\)Ji Young An, “In Search of a Style: French Violin Performance from Franck to Ravel,” 15.
This concentrated expression of *regret* cannot be assuaged. But the final bars of the *Recitativo—Fantasia* further reveal this symbolic defeat (Ex. 5.24):

![Example 5.24. Franck, Violin Sonata, Recitativo—Fantasia, mm. 111-117](image)

The indication of *Molto lento e mesto* noted by Karl is the most immediately recognizable marker, but it is the *audible* harmonic thwarting of these final bars which is the most symbolic. In beat 3 of m. 115 the music is perfectly prepared to cadence in g minor—the deceptive harmonic home of the beginning of the movement—but a sudden downward torquing of a semitone[^71] darkens even more a clear depiction of failure, and of loss.

### 5.4.4 *Allegretto poco mosso*

The Violin Sonata’s final movement is unlike anything else in the work. While we will not find in it anything as overtly erotic as previously seen, its inextricable intertwinement with an overall narrative which contains an abundance of sexual possibility makes it all the more important to discuss, if briefly. Among Franck’s melodic creations, the one which warmly ushers the listener into the *Allegretto poco mosso* must be one of his most generous. Its contour and framing immediately suggest an expressive impulse which is almost child-like—a happily resigned, ingeniously simple melody spun out in *canon*, which becomes, on occasion, even jovial. In any

[^71]: A symbol of defeat—see the fourth movement of Beethoven’s Op. 110 sonata and its initial, unsuccessful fugue for a similar downward shift by semitone negotiated through the enharmonic reinterpretation of a dominant seventh chord as a German augmented sixth.
case, the creation here is undeniably one of good nature (its relations might be named in the final stretches of the Symphonic Variations and the last movement of the Symphony\textsuperscript{72} [Ex. 5.25]):

\begin{center}
Example 5.25. Franck, Violin Sonata, \textit{Allegretto poco mosso}, mm. 1-5
\end{center}

The benevolent sincerity of this melodic organism is, while worlds away from the sensuous indulgences of the \textit{Allegretto ben moderato} and the convulsive eroticism of the \textit{Allegro}, a consequential psychological and emotional need, whose appearance in the whole work requires a brief recapitulation of what has occurred musically, and what has only been implied. While the Sonata’s choate musical narrative suggested here may not explicitly contain a cause of emotional fracture, between the impassioned impulses of the \textit{Allegro} and the vulnerable, inconsolable grief of the \textit{Recitativo—Fantasia} a fracture has undoubtedly occurred. Structurally, this is clearly evident—the midpoint marks the abandonment of a musically motivic perspective uninformed by the past. As discussed, the \textit{Recitativo—Fantasia} contains the first explicit references to previously-composed material, and comes to fixate on the initial sensually indulgent contour of the \textit{Allegretto ben moderato}’s opening in a way suggestive of loss, or regret—more importantly, its realizations of past musical materials are approached and rendered gently\textsuperscript{73} and its most

\textsuperscript{72}Indeed, the overall structural paradigm at work in the Sonata is quite similar to that of the Symphony; one finds an evocative description from Stokowski, who, while unquestionably adopting d’Indy’s and Cortot’s portraiture of the \textit{Pater Seraphicus}, relates the first two dark and emotionally-draining movements and their themes to Franck’s inner world—a world constructed within the “cloistered seclusion” of St. Clotilde’s imposing gothic architecture, while in the last movement “César Franck seems to come from his church into the sunlight and life of his friends outside. The first theme expresses friendly good-humor.” This movement will subsequently reflect on things previously experienced, but serves, ultimately, as a joyful benediction. (Leopold Stokowski, \textit{Outline of Themes for the Franck Symphony. Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra: CD Premieres of their Rarest 78 rpm Recordings}, Music & Arts Programs of America CD-1173, 2006).

\textsuperscript{73}For instance, the piano’s hesitant, almost unspeakable voicing in m. 12 of the \textit{Recitativo—Fantasia} suggests, most fundamentally, tentative, whispered guise of the opening melody whose harmonic transposition into the minor mode gives an impression more indicative of loss than of possibility.
significant remembrance (Ex. 5.22) immediately triggers a dramatic outburst of lament. Still further, the Recitativo—Fantasia’s inability to re-attain the dreamlike impulse of the first movement or the melodic lucidity and energy of the Allegro seems still further to suggest a silent crisis which does not occur musically, but is implied; without a doubt something has changed after the ebullient consummation of the Allegro’s coda. In short, if the first two movements are interpreted as contemplation and experience of the erotic, the Recitativo—Fantasia must, in the wake of an “off-screen” schism, come to terms with these experiences. For all its expressive catharsis, its final motions are of symbolic and harmonic “failure,” and thus require, in Franck’s musical aesthetic, some sort of fulfillment, which is supplied by the Allegretto poco mosso.

Franck’s canonic invention here and its relation (a falling four-note “chortling”) are remarkable expressive catalysts; they seem to wisely preside over all the goings-on of the whole movement, and will warmly transform everything they encounter. This force of goodwill dismisses the concerns contemplated in the Recitativo—Fantasia—even its most feverish outburst (Ex. 5.22) which encapsulated so resoundingly a character of regret and loss will experience, in the work’s final climax, an absolving release. These moments, tangentially important in articulating the overarching narrative, will be looked at briefly. The first appearance of the “intercessory,” “hopeful” melodic cell from the Recitative—Fantasia will appear with “fresh counterpoint”\(^{74}\) from the violin, whose almost playful character carries remarkably less import than was seen in this music’s initial framing—a significant choice (Ex. 5.26):

Example 5.26. Franck, Violin Sonata, Allegretto poco mosso, mm. 36-40

\(^{74}\)John Horton, César Franck, 51.
The disquiet of this material—perhaps relaying a troubled concern—subsequently emerges and a further *dolce cantabile* appearance of the opening canon then appears—the first transformation of previous material associated with pain and regret (Ex. 5.27):

Example 5.27. Franck, Violin Sonata, *Allegretto poco mosso*, mm. 46-55

A further assertion of the intercessory melody will appear (vocalized by the violin, a rendering more expressively proximate to its antecedent in the third movement), only to find itself again transformed—this time the music seems intent on inveigling stronger impulses of joy from the texture (seen especially in the piano’s energetic frolicking [Ex. 5.28]):

Example 5.28. Franck, Violin Sonata, *Allegretto poco mosso*, mm. 76-80
This will lead to a concentrated, even more simple relation of the canon: the previously mentioned diatonic four-note “chortling” (also framed in canon), which seems at once to warmly absolve and dismiss any intimations of grief or regret brought to its door by the intercessory gesture. These transformations are achieved with a straightforwardness of texture and relative simplicity of harmony (usually in the way of a minor-to-major transformation)—there is nothing overtly threatening and no strenuous, contrapuntal “working-through”; the “intercessory” gesture is, however, perhaps not the most harrowing motivic cell to transform.

The most climactic and significant event in the *Allegretto poco mosso* is a final appearance of the throbbing, sorrowful gesture from the *Recitative—Fantasia*\(^75\) (Ex. 5.29):

![Example 5.29. Franck, Violin Sonata, Allegretto poco mosso, mm. 143-145](image)

A forceful piano interlude, perched on the edge of a release of all the tension which has preceded, will quicken a second and final outburst which has grown in volume and expressive force (the expressive indications given are sempre fortissimo and grandioso [Ex. 5.30]):

![Example 5.30](image)

\(^{75}\)An appearance precipitated by a fragmented minor-mode repetition of the canonic figure—perhaps a camouflaging of a motive whose intent is now more cathartic.
This eruption seems to finally realize a musical catharsis—a long-harbored pain and yearning is overcome and the music is transformed into the symbolically pure key of C major. The piano’s ebullient scalar descent is an unmistakable extension of the four-note “laugh,” and is accompanied by the “intercessory” gesture, now a gleeful commentary. It is after a final, gentle statement of the canon, that this four-note chortle, encapsulating the underlying spirit of the *Allegretto poco mosso*, will overtake the texture with a jovial assurance—as noted by d’Indy and others, this music’s warm generosity is so buoyant it borders on outright dance.

5.4 Concluding thoughts

“A century and a quarter after Franck’s piece first delighted Ysaïe, it remains as fresh as ever.”

Indeed, the Violin Sonata is as expressively vital as it is consummately representative of Franck as a composer and musician. At the same time, it is a work which is undoubtedly redolent of erotic expressive devices and sonorities readily connotative of voluptuousness, with its most sexually pregnant landscapes placed first and second in order. Franck’s engagement with these first elements is remarkably convincing and effective; Stove also notes the seemingly unpredictable existence of the second movement’s “wild intensity” in particular, after the *Allegretto ben moderato’s* “yearning start.” Indeed, the *Allegro’s* overwhelming piano writing

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76 It is in connection with the coda that d’Indy utters his warning against vulgarizing the rhythm, through an excessively fast tempo, into a kind of polka-step,” Horton, *Franck*, 51.
77 R.J. Stove, *César Franck: His Life and Times*, 259.
78 Ibid.
has, while undoubtedly an absolutely musically-integral apparatus, come to be regarded as a kind of infamous “measuring stick” of technical facility. Technique aside, there is something about this movement’s keyboard athleticism which, it might be suggested, seems intent on eliciting some sort of reaction—its sinuous paroxysms and torrential virility subversively belie the Pater Seraphicus, organist of St. Clotilde. If nothing else, the visceral, incredibly physical expressiveness which consistently engages both voices in a commingling friction, and which culminates in an equally physical coda, demands an explanation alternative to the argument.

To speak of the work’s “yearning start” is to address an embryonic ember related closely to impressionistic incandescence—Franck’s proximity to Debussy is one often overlooked or left unconsidered, but even a cursory glance at the music he wrote contemporary to Franck’s life reveals a significant amount of cross-pollination. Even were it not replete with harmonically-voluptuous language, it is impossible to ignore the Allegretto ben moderato’s possible structural carriage of the erotic—as cited, its altered sonata form, without a development is an interesting compositional choice, and a rare one for Franck in a genre such as this.

But it is the third movement which reveals a richly imaginative and evocative narrative, which has sublimated the erotic in the service of a greater emotional life. The previous description “emotions of mingled yearning and renunciation are obviously at play”79 (which was seen applied to the music of Ysaÿe) is equally resonant in the Recitativo—Fantasia; an applicable narrative might underline the expressively vulnerable, disjunct confessions in the opening as characteristic of a longing for happiness experienced and lost; this longing precipitates a luminous, provocative remembrance of the first movement, which will be finally grieved over in a throb, disconsolate lament—even the audible harmonic cues point to a reading of symbolic failure. An expressive “heart” of the musical organism, the Recitativo—Fantasia is, perhaps, an attempt at reconciling the imaginings, projections, and fantasies emanating from the “cloistered seclusion” of the composer’s inner life with outward reality—the introduction of a warm, benevolent impulse in the fourth movement will finally and ultimately provide the necessary reconciliation. The mention of Augusta Holmès might be salient here—in relation to her significance in Franck’s life, Paul Crossley notes: “perhaps, as with Janacek [. . .] a release of

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79 Bradford Robinson, *Extase, op. 21, Poème pour violin et orchestra.*
powerful feelings provided the impetus for a final supreme creative effort.”80 An even more
telling observation is made later: “though his pieces often arrive at the end triumphant or
radiantly transfigured [. . .] their actual course suggests something passionately desired but
unattainable. Like Liszt before him, and like Messiaen after him, Franck expressed the rapture
of his deep Catholic belief. But, also like them, he found no conflict, no incongruity, between
the ‘certainties’ of that faith and the paroxysms of earthly passion.”81

The comparison to Messiaen, whose music often purports to use “sensual subject matter [as] a
mirror of divine love”82 has been made previously—and it is this very connection, as well as
others with Wagner and Debussy, which underlines the unaccountable absence of the erotic—by
this author’s estimation, a very large life-force in Franck’s music—from analyses and
interpretations of the composer’s most consummate musical creations. Indeed, the points in
favor of a new estimation of Cesar Franck, Pater Seraphicus, are acutely overwhelming.
Certainly, this composer’s wife, friends, and students actively worked to create an imaginative
construction of this character who was, simultaneously, betrayed by the deafeningly vocal
contradictions of his innermost creative expressions. Franck’s is an art which warmly welcomes
the erotic metaphor along with the gesture and structural paradigms of desire, and adopts the
most concentrated and intimate vocalization of expression possible. To conjecture at the exact
emotions or experiences which are meant to be communicated is to “hold the mirror up to
nature.” Art is, for many, best described as a reflection of the human experience, and is able, at
its best, to expand “our existential experience beyond what our daily lives have to offer [. . .] by
interacting with great art our minds are enriched and rendered great”83—constructions of what
any given work of art embody are also, at best, jigsaw puzzles, assembled over time by
audiences who are able to agree on points of resonance. The argument for erotic expression in
Franck’s music is undeniably a piece of his “puzzle”—and Franck is a composer whose “puzzle”
deserves to be put together.

80Paul Crossley, “Between the Certainties of Faith and the Paroxysms of Passion,” Franck: Piano Works,
Paul Crossley (piano), B00000DSLK, 1994, compact disc.
81Ibid.
to 1950.
83Henry Chow, “Ars Longa, Vita Brevis,” Program notes, Piano Recital, Robert J. Werner Recital Hall,
Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music, Wednesday, 20 October 2010, 8:30 PM.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

6.1 A review of arguments

For those who have exerted a great deal of effort to “suspend a sense of reality” during the previous suggestions that Franck’s Piano Quintet, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, and Violin Sonata are works imbued with eroticism seen in audacity of expressive language, gesture, and even fundamentally in their musical narrative structures, it is hopefully evident that the music of the Pater Seraphicus can be seen in an entirely different light. The thoroughly pervasive undercurrent of religioso sentiment which seems to necessarily come with any rendering or reading of Franck is clearly problematic. As articulated previously, Franck obviously became at once a fixation, figurehead, and father-figure for his most Catholic student, Vincent d’Indy. As a post-mortem figurehead, Franck gave the perfect—if silent—validation for d’Indy’s hagiographic musicological distortions in his Schola Cantorum curriculum, which undoubtedly stemmed from d’Indy’s need to legitimize his and his circle’s compositional efforts. Perhaps the most obvious example of this (occurring, incidentally, outside the Schola and academia) may be found in d’Indy’s direct linking of Franck to Beethoven in the opening paragraph of the biography. But most importantly for this discussion, it was d’Indy’s anointment (and subsequently, Cortot’s propagation) of an inveterate Franckian interpretative/performance tradition rooted in the soil of Catholic-Christian spiritual fervor which is most precarious. As seen in the music discussed, there are frequently “un-theological” impulses and forces at work, and there are simply too many similarities to comparable models of eroticism (in Wagner and in Debussy) to ignore the possibility of a much-needed alternative interpretation.

An obvious place to start my study was the dramatic Piano Quintet, which seems to give one of the most revealing glimpses into Franck’s inner life, and outward milieu of life. The incredible event of its premiere demonstrates that this music was obviously upsetting for many of Franck’s

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2There are plentiful insights to be made here in regards to how much we know of Franck being simple projection. As previously articulated, “Father” Franck became so entirely because of d’Indy, who was raised a staunch Catholic by his grandmother.
circle (one outside this circle, Debussy, would voice his enthusiasm for the Quintet). In the first movement alone, an examination of the theme groups and their interactions reveals a passionate, audaciously expressive organism with surging, erotic impulses which are broken only by the most violent impulses. As with all the works discussed here, chromaticism is the life-blood of Franck’s compositional voice in the Quintet (seen texturally, harmonically, and melodically)—the most erotically-charged example of these chromatic iterations is surely the second theme, marked tender and passionate; of these markings, certainly passionate becomes the dominant character, overtaking the music in an unprecedented surge which is abruptly halted mid-breath, unresolved. This kind of procedure is one Franck favors throughout the work, as well as in the other works discussed here.

In the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue one may find an apotheosis of this idea—the only satisfying climactic moment comes in the final pages, when all other apparatuses have proven futile (even the spiritually consequential Fugue). In this piano triptych, it is the oft-cited religious symbolism “inherent” in the Chorale theme—found most literally in its “cross-shaped” diatonic contour—which has fuelled interpretations of this work as an expression of a “Christian spirit longing for his God.” But the Chorale theme’s placement and threading throughout the texture of the interludes suggests it is in fact more closely related to its decadent surroundings than to the austere divine. This placement additionally reveals the perception of a warring diatonic and chromatic (leant the symbolic meanings of spiritually pure and sensually decadent) as an unnecessary opposition in Franck’s case. Again, Franck’s use of chromaticism (seen at once in the two-note sigh which opens the work) is pervasive, and his wielding of volatile musical materials throughout serves to create one of the most resounding examples of a trajectory-towards-climax narrative in the piano repertoire.

The Violin Sonata offers an incredibly fertile landscape of erotic possibility—the non-developmental structural apparatus of the Debussyan first movement gives way throughout to a voluptuous fixation on sound for its own sake (seen most easily in its generously consonant use of the ninth chord). The wildly chromatic palpitations of the second movement are full of erotic markers, with one of the first being a sinuous melodic commingling (rendered “breathless” by

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fragmentation and syncopation). The torrential frenzy of this movement is held in check, until the very end, in which a major transformation suggests an overall trajectory which might run parallel to an experience of the erotic (and an outcome of the fantasies of the dream-like first movement). But it seems Franck here uses the erotic as one of many expressive implements which serve a larger-scale narrative; the second half of the Sonata must deal with the experiences of the first half. As discussed, the third movement seems characterized by “yearning” and attempts at “renunciation,” while the warm-blooded benevolence of the fourth offers a final absolution and affirmation.

6.2 Performance practice and implications

How these possibilities might be taken into the ephemeral and endlessly subjective world of sound in a concrete manner is nebulous and paradoxical. Two incredibly insightful citations are salient here—one, occurring in a masterclass with Canadian pianist and pedagogue Marc Durand in which a student, evidently troubled by Durand’s suggestion to take a different way of phrasing in a certain passage, objected “I just can’t feel it that way.” Durand responded candidly, “I don’t care about how you feel, I care about how it sounds.” A separate but related episode similarly highlights the complexities of transforming something as personal as feeling into sound; in a lesson I observed with American pianist James Giles on the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue it became evident at one point that there was a disconnect between interpretation of the score and the sound desired—specifically in a section marked molto espressivo but non troppo dolce. The indications dolce and espressivo seem often to come with implications of warmth, of intimacy, or other emotionally consequential impulses—but at the same time these terms themselves carry a different set of such implications from one composer to the next. Giles articulated this whole quandary easily enough: “one man’s dolce is another man’s espressivo”—in practice, he left it up to the student to decide whether to take one or the other marker as indicative of saccharine sweetness or intimate, warm confiding; but further, this exchange

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4Terms used in reference to the music of Ysaÿe in Bradford Robinson, Extase, op. 21, Poème pour violon et orchestra.

5In a masterclass on Scriabin’s Third Piano Sonata at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto.

6The specific moment discussed is the section from m. 35 on in the Prelude.
suggested to the author both the obvious futility of adopting concrete ways of expression and of relying on a particular point of emotional resonance to be universally communicated at any given moment in any given score.

At the same time, the “humble and unadulterated taste of the subjective”—that is, the very personal and drastic communicative lucidity of music in performance—cannot be discounted. Indeed, for many, it is music’s mysterious power in this regard which has the most impact, and is, in fact, the most meaningful. From a wider perspective of art, this is a much greater situation echoed in many an artist’s ode to the unknowable sublime whose secrets resist analysis (Whitman’s familiar description of the celestial night is one such reflection).

With these thoughts in mind, a circumspect discussion of just a few possible choices (and their implications) in performances of the Prelude, Chorale and Fugue will be briefly entertained. Perhaps the most obvious place to start is the Chorale theme, the most emblematic “motto” of the whole work:

Example 6.1. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 68-70.

As discussed, what is surely one of the most immediately striking things about the Chorale theme is its unusual rhythmic framing—as the most diatonic musical gesture in the entirety of the work, Franck’s rhythmically subversive handling of it seems significant. Arguably the most “comfortable” way of realizing this music in performance is to shape the theme in a way which articulates the falling fourths (this is heard most literally in Ivan Moravec’s 1962 recording, in which he actually detaches each fourth), even while it may deceptively alter the rhythmic

8In *When I heard the learn’d astronomer.*
underpinning given by Franck which highlights the two-note slur that pervades the entire work and is important to the erotic reading suggested in this dissertation. Some pianists give the very top C, which begins the theme, a ringing tone which outweighs that of the G on the downbeat of m. 69 and continue to shape in a “falling,” decreasing way (one hears this in Sviatoslav Richter’s 1983 recording from a live concert in Budapest, Stephen Hough in one performance in the Louvre Auditorium in Paris, France, as well as Samson Pascal François’s 1955 studio recording). Others phrase the theme in a “static” way where each note is given an equally luminous tone (e.g. Jorge Bolet’s 1989 Decca recording)—in effect, treating the entire theme in the context of its diatonic contour rather than the two-note slur suggested by its rhythmic framing. But, there are a few performances which, instead, seem to intentionally highlight the two-note slur (the more expressive but perhaps counter-intuitive choice)—one of which is somewhat ironic: the seminal 1929 recording of Alfred Cortot.

Those who recall the section just following the initial statement of the *Chorale* theme, in which the theme itself appears nestled amidst decidedly more “expressive” material, might consider that this “golden thread” is surely something to be highlighted as well. In the context of this discussion, its appearance here reveals for the musician the instant association the *Chorale* must have with its expressively decadent surroundings, as well as indicating the futility of adopting an idea of diatonicism (as a symbol of purity) as at odds with chromaticism (as a symbol of decadence and of the erotic). This, finally, casts at least one aspersion on the idea that the *Chorale* itself is an immutable motto of the “Godhead”:

![Example 6.2. Franck, Prelude, Chorale and Fugue, mm. 76-79.](image)

Indeed, it is seldom literally brought out in performance. But, the audacity of showing this inner impulse of the expressive variation which enswathes it is great—doing so would obviously
disrupt the line in a rhythmically irregular way, and could be seen as an unnecessary uprooting of structural subtleties. It could be suggested that the *Chorale*’s hidden appearance here is perhaps one of the many special secrets known only by the performer. As William Rothstein notes, “Dramatic truth and analytical truth are not the same thing; a performance is not an explication du texte. The performer’s task is to provide the listener with a vivid experience of the work, not an analytical understanding of it.”

A larger-scale topic for exploration is that of total performance time for the triptych. As noted previously in a footnote, Franck’s own correspondence regarding the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* contains a curious reference to its performance time: in a letter to an unnamed recipient in which it seems Franck is suggesting the possibility of Mlle. Cécile Monvel performing the triptych in place of a badly-rehearsed Violin Sonata, Franck writes that the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* will take all of 13 minutes to perform. Performances of the triptych in the past few decades are significantly longer: Sviatoslav Richter’s 1983 Budapest recording clocks in at 19:38, Jorge Bolet’s 1989 recording at 19:49, Grigory Sokolov’s 2001 Helsinki performance at an enormous 20:56. There are outliers in the upward extreme as well, but none from before the halfway point of the twentieth century—Moravec’s recording is 21:31, and a 1986 performance of Mieczyslaw Horszowski is 22:01. In addition, there are just as many middle-of-the-road performances of the work; Cziffra’s recording is 17:32, Rubinstein’s 18:41, Hough’s 17:06, Kissin’s 18:04, and Katchen’s 18:16. While tempting, it is precarious to attribute faster performances to virtuoso temperament or the nerves of live performance; if nothing else, it does seem evident (even from a cursory assessment) that most recent recordings hover around 18:00. What can also be said is that not a single recording known to the author realizes Franck’s offhanded estimate. Only a few, earlier recordings approach it—one by Egon Petri, from 1942, is 15:55, and François’s, from 1955, is 16:27. The two earliest recordings of the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue* (by Blanche Selva in 1928 [18:39] and Cortot in 1929 [17:08]) are difficult to categorize in this milieu. Cortot’s recording is inevitably chained to his religioso conceptions and intentions in writing; Selva’s seems linked fundamentally with d’Indy’s Franckian projections: “the interpretative ideas of Blanche Selva, exemplified in her one extant recording as
well as in her writings, are entirely in accord with d’Indy’s view of the motivation of the piece: hardly surprising, for this player was dubbed both as a ‘Scholiste’ (meaning someone upholding the attitudes of d’Indy and his Schola Cantorum) and also “the grand priestess of Franckism.”

Clearly, assessing these two recordings in terms of what was intended by Franck is nothing if not problematic.

It might be suggested, then, that the gradual standardization of performances of the *Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue* (and the mystical, protracted gravitas thus made possible in such recordings as Sokolov’s and Moravec’s) in the past century is indebted to Cortot’s (and d’Indy’s) espousal of the *Pater Seraphicus*’s true intentions of divinity. The regrettably fragmentary piece of evidence from Franck himself (suggesting a thirteen-minute performance), however, suggests something different—something which, in the words of d’Indy might betray a “youthful fervor which belied his sixty years.”

A quicker tempo is certainly possible—something around the ballpark of what Petri achieves heightens, most basically, the expressive vitality and narrative urgency of the triptych—and something entirely unlike what one hears in Sokolov’s ponderous reading is realized.

### 6.3 Alternative analyses on other works and composers

Moving beyond the articulation of possible implications related to the performance or performance tradition of the works discussed in this paper, there are other, equally fertile musical landscapes waiting alternative, subversive explorations. Franck’s musical “last will and

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12Some extremely conspicuous connections relating directly to tempo and its implications can be found plentifully in Cortot’s own edition of the *Prelude, Chorale and Fugue*, in such commentary as the following (on Franck’s initial tempo marking): “The absence of any metronomic mark and also the instinctive notion of speed inherent to the notation of the pattern in demisemiquavers which envelopes with its harmonies the enunciation of the initial melody of the Prelude, often induce the executant to adopt a tempo too fast in these first bars. But what is needed is a sort of meditative relaxation: the mark ‘Moderato’ should be understood as synonymous to ‘Andante Moderato’”; on the sudden tempo change just prior to the entrance of the Fugue proper: “Pay attention not to play too fast the following bars [. . .] the ‘molto vivo’ imprudently marked by Franck at the beginning of this episode is surely responsible for this misunderstanding in the interpretation,” *César Franck (Revisione di Alfred Cortot)*, *Preludio, Corale e Fuga* (Milan: Edizioni Curci, 1950), 5 & 22.
testament,”\textsuperscript{14} the \textit{Three Chorales} for organ, is one such place to start. Despite Mohr’s observation that these works are physically manacled to the church and the subsequent implication that they may be meant to embody some sense of the religiously spiritual—in a way more marked than in the keyboard triptychs—it might be suggested, in tandem, and perhaps more saliently, that they are the most intensely \textit{personal}, even confessional, of Franck’s works. This idea is enhanced by commentary of Stove (himself an organist): “Listening to all three \textit{Chorals} consecutively on disc, or playing them consecutively oneself on the organ, can be quite unnerving. The sense of Franck bidding a protracted good-bye is evident throughout. Musical expressions of leave-taking are as easy to recognize as they are impossible to define. They can occur as readily as in the Schubert who faced death at thirty-one (see his \textit{Winterreise}) as in the Strauss who faced death at eighty-five (see his \textit{Four Last Songs}).”\textsuperscript{15} Stove goes on to reference Franck’s untimely death as the result of injuries which might have been prevented\textsuperscript{16}: “it is well-nigh impossible, to believe that the \textit{Chorals}’ composer retained any illusions about his chances of full physical mending.”\textsuperscript{17}

Given these observations, it is surely significant to whom Franck chose to dedicate the \textit{Three Chorales}, and especially the \textit{third}. While at least one of Franck’s oft-cited biographers\textsuperscript{18} has pointed out an apparent enigma in the plan for the dedications (some \textit{Chorales} bear, depending on which source is consulted, multiple dedicatees). Still, four of the five possible dedicatees seem to make more obvious sense than the last. These four—Théodore Dubois, Alexandre Guilmant, Auguste Durand, and Eugène Gigout—were all organists and colleagues of Franck; in this sense his choice could easily be taken as a gesture of gratitude and immense mutual respect in Franck’s artistic circle. There seems to have been one curious last-minute change however; the fifth dedicatee (of the \textit{third Chorale}) is none other than Augusta Holmès. This is made more obscure when one considers Augusta was not herself an organist, nor a real colleague of

\footnotesize \begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14}Leon Vallas, \textit{César Franck}, Translated by Hubert Foss (London: Harrap, 1951), 232.
\item \textsuperscript{15}R.J. Stove, \textit{César Franck: His Life and Times} (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow, 2012), 283-4.
\item \textsuperscript{16}In early July, Franck was on his way to the apartment of Paul Braud to perform a piano duet, but “in Paris’s Port Royal, he was hit on his right side, and almost certainly at chest level, by the carriage pole of a passing bus. (Authorities differ as to whether Franck had been travelling in a cab or was crossing the road on foot.); this accident led to complications resulting in his death a few months later, on November 8th, Ibid., 279.
\item \textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 284.
\item \textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 302.
\end{itemize}
Franck\textsuperscript{19} and when other possible dedicatees might have included his wife Félicité, his son Georges, or his star pupil Vincent d’Indy.

Among other works less encumbered over time with \textit{Pater Serphicus}-style commentaries is the masterful and interpretatively pregnant \textit{Prelude, Aria and Finale}—indeed, this undeservedly neglected piano triptych remains largely unexplored. While (as previously seen) heavily influenced by the writings of Cortot, Stephen Hough’s evocative and insightful comparison of this work with its earlier counterpart is of great interest here:

> “In spite of the internal similarities, the two pieces have significant differences. Where the \textit{Prelude, Chorale and Fugue} has a distinctly religious flavour, the \textit{Prelude, Aria and Finale} seems more secular (the \textit{Chorale} a divine song, the \textit{Aria} a human one); and where the former work is universal in its message, the latter seems almost domestic, though no less spiritually serious. The \textit{Prelude, Chorale and Fugue} has a tremendous unity, a feeling of magnetic inevitability which almost pulls it forward to its triumphant close; the \textit{Prelude, Aria and Finale} is more like a sonata in three separate movements, although the thematic material is profusely and masterfully interconnected throughout the work. The ending, in contrast to that of the \textit{Prelude, Chorale and Fugue}, is profoundly tranquil and peaceful, the ‘motto’ theme not so much representing a victory over evil as a healing of pain.”\textsuperscript{20}

Hough’s conception of the \textit{Prelude, Chorale, and Fugue}’s large-scale trajectory and perhaps more “epic” expressive intentions seems to place a veil over its younger sibling—but at once suggests such a veil may obscure personal, guardedly intimate confessions and impulses (certainly just as meaningful and valuable as “universal” expressions).

Outside of Franck himself, some of the most immediately obvious candidates for alternative analyses might be those in “la bande à Franck.” “Distinct Wagnerian influence” is evident in the miniscule oeuvre of Duparc, perhaps most easily seen in the “shifting chromaticism produced by the enharmonic modulations of \textit{Soupir},” and in the “minor 9th chords of \textit{Elégie} and the

\textsuperscript{19} Only a few of her works include the organ, and always in a supportive role—these are hardly-known and rarely (if at all) performed: (in 1872) \textit{Tantum ergo sacramentum} for tenor, baritone, and organ, (in 1887) \textit{Veni creator}, for tenor, choir, and organ, and \textit{Dance almées} for four-voice choir and organ.

deliberate ‘Tristanisms’ of Extase.”21 Dubal notes “the majority of his songs express romantic nostalgia, yearning, grief, and frustrated eroticism.”22 Chausson’s music, similarly, is found by some to be “impregnated”23 with Wagner but his most expressively successful works certainly contain an impulse of individuality—examples being the emotionally direct and even, at times, overwhelming Concert for Violin, Piano and String Quartet, Op.21, or the incandescent Poème, Op. 25 (dedicated, incidentally, to Ysaÿe, who was responsible for the composition of some of its virtuosic passagework). “Strutting, seduction, Toulouse-Lautrec-style nightlife”24 is found in the music of another member of la Bande à Franck, Emmanuel Chabrier; indeed, the mention of so many of Franck’s students suggests still further another candidate for exploration. As Mark Seto notes: “Despite their apparent prudishness, Franck and d’Indy penned works of an unabashedly sensual—even hedonistic—nature.”25

While the possible existence of eroticism in the music of Franck has been explored here, the same possibility in d’Indy’s music is sometimes overshadowed by the enormity and undeniability of his Catholic faith. But, if only by association, Franck’s star student is clearly a person of interest in this regard. One of the most obvious (and nearly alarming) starting places might be his Symphonic poem Istar:

“The piece depicts the descent of Istar (Ishtar), the Assyrian and Babylonian goddess of love and fertility, into the underworld to rescue her lover, Tammuz. Istar is led through a series of seven gates, and at each gate a guardian removes an article of her jewelry or clothing. First her tiara is taken, and then, in turn, her earrings, necklace, breast ornaments, girdle, and wrist and ankle bangles. At the seventh gate, the final veil is removed from her body and Istar is brought naked before the Queen of the Underworld, Ereshkigal [. . .] Taken out of context, Istar’s nudity becomes eroticized; she comes to resemble that other notorious woman whose striptease captivated the imagination of male artists at the fin-de-siècle, Salome. D’Indy, however, was no Oscar Wilde. The

23Ibid., 490.
24Ibid. 482.
composer was a devoutly religious man, described in Andrew Thomson’s biography as a ‘pillar of Catholic rectitude.’ His setting of this overtly voyeuristic tale, then, points up an apparent contradiction between d’Indy’s musical and moral identity.”

Perhaps something else can be seen in this sexually-tinged inspiration taken up by d’Indy—something which is effectively an undercurrent in this dissertation’s choate discussion, and something which exists largely within and outside of the musical sphere: the relation between artistic depictions of religion and eroticism. D’Indy’s vehement denial of anything “sensual” existing in Franck’s “frankly erotic” symphonic poem Psyché and subsequent description of “Istar as a set of ‘symphonic variations,’ thus emphasizing the work’s formal ingenuity rather than its colorful pictorialism” serve to insinuate this—something often acknowledged but seldom analyzed in literature on all kinds of Western Art. As previously mentioned, Franck’s French “heir” to organ composition, Messiaen, is a perfect example of this juxtaposition of inspirations and expressions. But where Messiaen’s unabashed, “modern” perspective allows him to accept and acknowledge these influences, the process of dismantling and interpreting is pointedly more difficult in the cases of composers living in a time when it seems pervasively needful that “all the (operatic) heroines with a sexual past die.” Indeed, there is no shortage of nineteenth-century discussion proximate to the erotic which is fraught with clinical, “scientifically-sound” understandings of “sickness” and health—understandings vague and foreign to the perspective of this dissertation. Because of these plentiful (and often disturbing) historical consequences, full interpretations of the erotic in music from the late Romantic era and before must grow and develop from the obscure, but they are all the more needed, for the same reason.

Finally, it is the author’s hope that, if nothing else, this research will have demonstrated that Cortot’s outrageous ultimatum “the interpreter should not only be a musician: it is even more

26Ibid., 232-234.
28Seto, Symphonic Culture, 22.
important that he be a believer”\textsuperscript{31} in order to properly interpret the music of Franck is only illustrative of the utility of giving the \textit{Pater Seraphicus} an alternate reading. And, moreover, that Cortot’s statement can at once underline the (problematic?) situation of a musical/artistic apparatus serving both religious and erotic inspirations, and perhaps in some cases, the possible— if vaguely perceivable— artistic \textit{marriage} of these inspirations in “a bewildering and eroticized combination of the physical and the spiritual.”\textsuperscript{32}


\textsuperscript{32}Marylu Hill, “‘Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me’: Eucharist and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti’s \textit{Goblin Market},” \textit{Victorian Poetry} 43.4 (2005): 455.
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**Discography**


