

From EDOA honorary member  
David Aprahamian Liddle:

### A harmonium project

With thanks to Adrian Corleonis, I include some information to set the context.

In 1889 the publisher Énoch commissioned César Franck to compose 100 pieces for harmonium, an instrument patented in Paris in 1842 by Debain. Air, pumped by the player's feet, causes the free reeds to sound. The pitch of these brass reeds stays fairly constant despite increase or decrease of pressure, whereas the volume can be varied, giving the harmonium its 'expressive' character. Having produced his first harmonium pieces in 1863, Franck had a deep understanding of the instrument.

Thrifty French publishers, hedging their bets, frequently advertised their offerings as being "for organ or harmonium", as in the case of Franck's 1889-90 collection. However, this expressive music, with its open textures and absence of pedal parts, is plainly for harmonium, much of it transferring far more naturally to piano rather than to organ.

Between August 16th and September 20th, 1890, Franck completed 63 pieces, of which 59 were published posthumously in the autumn of 1891 with the misleading title *L'Organiste*. Thus, they are contemporary with the *Trois Chorals* for organ and, though on a smaller scale, share their unflagging invention.

As Franck left it, the collection is divided into eight suites, each of seven pieces (with an incomplete ninth suite outstanding), following a standard plan of three numbers in the major, three in the minor, an Amen, and a rhapsodic concluding movement which weaves together the themes of the preceding. Sometimes Franck gives titles to the pieces, suggesting that he intended them primarily for liturgical use (hence the Amens, *Sorties*, *Offertoires*), and he occasionally incorporates folk song – "Chant Béarnais", "Chant de la Creuse", "Noël Angevin" and the like.

I have owned a Holt reed organ since I was 15. My love for the harmonium was kindled by Anne Page's inspiring performances and her recording of *L'Organiste*. This led me to acquire harmoniums and to spend a year trying to master the instrument, and memorising from Braille all 63 pieces of the inappropriately named *L'Organiste*. Incidentally, I recently read that Franck himself was fluent in Braille music, and personally supervised the proof-reading of some of his own scores in Braille! Franck's intention in *L'Organiste* of providing a Suite in all twelve keys was tragically curtailed by his untimely death on November 8th 1890.

Anne Page was one of many brilliant exponents from around the world who attended the Bern International Harmonium Festival in Switzerland in June 2016. My attention was captivated by several YouTube videos made at this event. There is a breath-taking Fanfare by Lionel Rogg, written for and played by Anne. I soon discovered the wonderful playing of Joris Verdin, Artis Wodehouse, Marc Fitze and many others. Another major find was the YouTube channel – Mustel1887 – of the San Francisco-based harmonium player, Michael Hendron. Michael has travelled far and wide, seeking out ancient instruments in dusty corners of French cathedrals and village churches, recording interesting repertoire on the authentic sounds. He has made videos at Sainte-Clotilde and La Madeleine in Paris, on harmoniums dating from the time of Franck, Fauré and Saint-Saëns.

I am thrilled to report that I recently welcomed Michael Hendron to St Barnabas Pimlico, where I am the proud owner of a magnificent 2-manual harmonium built in 1868 by Philip J Trayser of Stuttgart. Michael filmed us each playing a few pieces, and we duetted in one number. You can see the results at:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/Mustel1887>

or simply search for mustel1887.

Soon after, Anne Page also visited St Barnabas to try out my Partita from the newly prepared score. It was indescribably exciting to hear my own music being so sensitively performed. Anne considers that we have there an ideal instrument and location for some harmonium recitals.

My *Partita espressiva* picks up where Franck left off: in the key of A. It is both a salute to the master, while also being a personal expression in my own idiom, perhaps bearing witness to my serious illness in early 2016. (It is no exaggeration to state that playing the harmonium has been of immense therapeutic benefit to me.) Many of Franck's typical features are incorporated in my composition, but in a different 'dialect', as it were. Light and dark aspects of a theme are explored, and two Armenian melodies are revisited, having appeared in my organ piece *Sharounag* Op. 20. Even the role of the Amen is significant in this musical sequence, looking equally towards concert or church performance. Anne paid me the greatest compliment, when she stated that I had caught the essential spirit of the Franck suites in my Partita.

*David Aprahamian Liddle*

More videos of David playing various instruments can be found on his YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIIN6K61DCHxhjbZ62WQQA/videos> Ed.