

### A return visit to César Franck's console

In 1984 I was very fortunate to be awarded a Belgian government scholarship to be part of a group of international students taking part in what was to be one of the last annual summer schools which Flor Peeters directed. This took place at the cathedral in Mechelen where he had been the titular organist for so many years. By this stage he was physically quite frail (although mentally entirely alert), but he still gave sterling performances of Bach's Toccata in F and Franck's first Choral at the Sunday morning High Mass.

(As an aside, given that we were a multi-national group, I was surprised that there were no French students, particularly given Peeters' strong connection with Tournemire. I commented on this to him and he replied something to the effect that the French would never be seen coming to study the organ in Belgium!)



*César Franck's console*

As part of this fortnight course, he invited us to his house one afternoon to view in his study the organ console which Franck had played at the Basilica of Sainte Clotilde in Paris. (The console had come into Tournemire's possession following the enlargement of the instrument during his tenure as Organist there, and, on his death, had passed into Flor Peeters' ownership.) This was, obviously, a fascinating experience, and Peeters pointed out certain features of it, which, he explained, were necessary to be aware of if one is to make complete sense of the implications of some of Franck's registration directions in his organ works. (He also gave us copies of a series of articles he'd authored on Franck's organ works for an American journal.)

Following the death of Peeters in 1986, the console was moved to the Royal Flemish Conservatory in Antwerp. Since 1991 it has been exhibited in that same city's Museum Vleeshuis, along with other historic instruments of many different types.

With the passing of more than three decades, I decided that it would be well worth going to renew my acquaintance with this console to see whether I had forgotten or not noticed any of its details, particularly as we were a group of some 15 or 16 eager students all jostling each other in our attempts to view it at the same time all those years ago!

So on a Friday morning in early October, in marked contrast to that previous occasion so long ago, I found myself the only person viewing the console and was able to take a leisurely approach to verifying my recollections.

Below is a list of what I consider to be points of particular interest:

- 1) The compass of the manuals only extended upwards to F and the pedals to D.
- 2) The order of the manuals from lowest to uppermost was Grand Orgue, Positif, Récit in accordance with the French Romantic tradition. This makes a lot of sense when an organ is being used symphonically and extensive crescendos and diminuendos are needed as there is a natural progression downwards or upwards across the manuals.
- 3) The balanced swell pedal was in the far right hand corner. (This balanced pedal was installed at some later stage; certainly in Franck's early years at Ste Clotilde, when the organ had just been completed, the box was 'spoon shaped' and only had three fixed positions.) However, this placing of the swell pedal well away from the centre poses interesting questions – would Franck have had to employ his left foot extensively to play the pedal part (making a less than absolute legato style necessary in places) while operating it solely with his right foot? Or might an assistant/page turner have sometimes operated it for him?
- 4) There was no *Récit/Pédale* coupler. This explains why the left hand is asked to duplicate the pedal part in, for example, the second Choral at bar 115, where the hands are playing on the Récit with a *Voix Humaine* and *Tremblant* registration. However, as the organ had a mechanical action with Barker Lever assistance, when Franck asked for the *Récit/Positif* coupler to be activated, and with the *Positif/Pédale* coupler also specified, any pedal notes would have drawn down the corresponding notes on the Positif, which would in turn have pulled down the equivalent notes on the Récit, effectively then rendering this manual coupled to the Pédale.
- 5) Likewise, there was also no *Récit/Grand Orgue* coupler. Consequently, it is important, therefore, to remember that when Franck directs for the music to be played on the Grand Orgue with the *Récit/Positif* and *Positif/Grand Orgue* couplers in use, the Récit notes would have been activated in a similar way.
- 6) In these last two instances, it is therefore important to realise that if one is playing on a modern organ where the Swell does not get similarly coupled through to the Great or Pedal indirectly, then the *Swell/Great* and *Swell/Pedal* couplers need drawing in addition to the specified registration, otherwise Franck's intended sonorities will probably be radically altered. For example, at the opening of the second Choral, the distinctive and characteristic sound of the Récit *Hautbois* would therefore have also been heard in the pedal part. (The *Hautbois* at Ste Clotilde was not, incidentally, on the reeds ventil, but with the foundation stops, possibly due to the Récit being comparatively small on that instrument.) Also, in the section beginning at bar 148 it is marked to be played on the Positif, but the Récit would still have been coupled, as also evidenced by the crescendo and diminuendo markings in the passage; the reeds of the Récit are marked to be added to the texture at bar 195 and the transition to the Grand Orgue at bar 210 therefore still requires the timbre of those reeds to be present – the reeds of the Positif and Grand Orgue are not called for until bars 226 and 230 respectively.

When one looks at Franck's registration schemes in detail, one realises just how brilliant and innovative his approach was in utilising the exciting and relatively new possibilities of Cavallé-Coll's instruments to orchestrate his organ works to magnificent effect in a truly symphonic way.

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<https://search.museumvleeshuis.be/Details/collect/187398>  
Ed.