

CHARLES-MARIE

# WIDOR

# SYMPHONY

# 3

NO.

IN E MINOR  
OP. 13, NO. 3



**PIERRE LABRIC, ORGAN**

Few have been the organists who have had such a profound influence as the French organ masters of the late nineteenth century. This was the period in France when several young artists were appointed to the famous churches of Paris: Gigout to Saint Augustin (1863), Widor to Saint Sulpice (1869), and Guilmant to La Trinité (1871). The great Franck, Pater Seraphicus as he was known to his colleagues, held forth at Saint Clotilde.

Widor was born in Lyons, France, February 21, 1844, and here he completed his general education. As a young man he went to Brussels, where he became a pupil of Lemmens and Fétis. It was here that he learned the real elements of the Bach tradition in organ playing, upon which he built his own superstructure, which was to play such an important part in the development of the French school. Returning from Brussels, he became the successor of his brother in an organ position in Lyons. His father, an Alsatian of Hungarian descent, was organist at the church of St. François, Lyons, and his grandfather installed organs in Alsace. By the time Widor had reached his twentieth birthday, his fame had spread as far as Paris and in 1867 he was engaged as organist at the large Cavillé-Coll organ. In 1870 he was appointed organist at St. Sulpice.

As composer, organ virtuoso, teacher of innumerable first class organists, writer, lecturer, editor, advisor to French musicians, leader in thought and as Secrétaire Perpetuel of the Académie des Beaux Arts, which is one of the greatest honors conferred in France, Widor contributed mightily through the force of his great genius, his indomitable will and his high idealism.

One of the most popular men in France, he was revered by everyone for his personality was positively captivating and he had a wonderful

sense of humor. Widor was a man of deep spiritual values, a good friend in any gathering, an inspiration the eager and serious student, a man to whom the whole organ world looked to as a real leader.

There is no doubt that Widor was the most distinguished organist of all France, a man of clarity, simplicity, sensitive wit, an extraordinary scholar who wrote with ease Latin verse and Greek. He saw little of his colleagues except for Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Delibes, Massenet, and he took no sides. His lectures at the Académie were little masterpieces, distinguished by the linguistic elegance of an Anatole France. Of critics, he said, "We must be careful when we judge the tastes of our elders according to our own, the needs of the imagination and of sensibility change so much with the generations."

Widor had two habits: upon leaving church he would point to the magnificent murals painted by Delacroix in the Chapel of the Angels, and go to the clavecin of Marie Antoinette, which he had placed in one of the small chapels, and playing a few measures of the Mozart Sonata in A, would say over and over, "Yes, yes, he was the god of music."

For thirty years, he remained the undisputed master of a whole Pleiad of organists, which he had himself developed; e.g. Boulanger, Vierne, Dupré, and Schweitzer. He retained a clear mind until his last day, in spite of cruel physical suffering. He had a prodigious energy and his frankness was proverbial, however, he suffered greatly from insufficient recognition, without ever uttering a murmur of complaint.

It was Widor who said, "the modern organ is primarily symphonic; a new instrument, it requires

a new language, another ideal from that of the polyphonic school.” The grand maitre was not alone, for it was Saint-Saens along with Gigout who opened the way for the French Romantic School. The suite, sonata, or symphony, so well known and utilized by the orchestra, was adapted to the organ.

From Widor’s occupation of his maternal ancestors, he seized upon a slogan which stands upon the title page of each of the first eight organ symphonies, namely “Soar Above.” His mother was a descendant from the famous Montgolfier family, air navigators and inventors of the balloon. “Soar Above” he does in these works as no other organ composer since Bach has been able to do. Certainly no composer for organ has expressed himself in so varied a rhythmic manner as Widor.

The organ at St. Sulpice and Widor’s first eight symphonies so bound up with each other that the one cannot be appreciated or understood without a knowledge of the other. It was Widor himself who said that the organ and service at St. Sulpice were the direct basis for these works. French art is famous for its logic, clarity, moderation and balance, and that French music since 1870 has been of great importance historically there can be no doubt. France has always had her musical giants, but one of the peculiar glories of the French school has been the finding of perfect expression for the ordinary human passions. Its distinctive features, skilled improvisation and great brilliance of effect, were so eminently realized in the genius of Cavallé-Coll.

The polyphonic instrument which provided Bach with inspiration, no longer held the interest of the French. A new type of instrument was sought, one

which would provide an unfailing wind supply and a reliable mechanism, and also one which would contain a proper balance of timbres and beauty of tone. If a musician such as Rameau, a professional organist, never wrote for the organ, it is certainly because he did not find in the cold machinery of his time any adequate vehicle for his musical sensitivity. The old organs held little of interest with their faulty wind supply, their crude coupling of manuals, incomplete pedalboards, a certain weakness in foundation stops, similarity in the quality and intensity of flutes and diapasons, and no expressive means was supplied. Thus the eighteenth-century organ left much to be desired, and it was Cavallé-Coll who learned from Lemmens that an organ required a careful balance of foundation stops and mixtures, at least two manuals of 54 notes and a pedalboard of 32 notes.

Lemmens came to Paris to play a recital at Saint-Vincent de Paul (1852), and it was this very concert that gave to Cavallé-Coll the basic and guiding principles which he lacked until then. From this came the organs of Saint-Sulpice, Notre Dame, Saint-Ouen de Rouen, and soon the artists (Boëly, Widor, Alkan, Franck, Guilmant) began to write music for the organ. Thus emerged a symphonic school of organists which found in Cavallé-Coll the unique vehicle for their art. The great organ of Saint-Denis (1841) by Cavaille-Coll was the actual beginning of a new era in organ building which continued until the war of 1914-1918. Cavallé, that great man, so scrupulous, so modest, so intent upon his task, went every Sunday to hear his instruments here and there so that the experience acquired would help him in building other instruments.

Abandoning that which constituted the essence of the characteristic organ of Robert Clicquot, the *plein jeu*, the organ ceased to be an instrument for

the elite, but rather it became a wind orchestra addressing itself to the masses. It lost in nobility and color, but gained in strength and effects.

Cavaillé-Coll truly revolutionized the organ by providing an increased wind pressure in order to improve the power of the grand orgue. He adopted the Barker lever which permitted coupling manuals without an increase in key action pressure. Not only did he create pedal pistons, but pedal virtuosity was facilitated by a vast improvement in design and with this came the use of the heel for the first time in France. Providing the organ with new lungs in the form of reservoirs and boxes designed to stabilize the air, he transformed the tonal composition which had been in existence since Louis XIII. If he did in fact retain the *plein jeu* or a cornet, it was primarily intended to balance the reeds rather than to provide a rather than to provide a support of foundation character. All of this made certain the demise of the polyphonic instrument, for the polyphonic oriented organists no longer responded to the new type of organ.

Thus Widor wrote as Franck, that is, for the organ of Cavaillé-Coll. The elaborate art of Lemmens who is considered the founder French school of organ playing. Fascinated by the Widor amplified the Franckist thought and created the organ symphony. These symphonies represent a grand ensemble, which from a musical standpoint cannot be compared to the works of Franck. Imbued with an advance in form, technique and style, they represent a virtual arsenal of formulae which continue. After so many years, to amaze and interest us. This music is vibrant. Alert, always dynamic, a music which quietly but firmly transformed a rather static musical world.

Widor's influence was a virile one, vigorous strength which progressed through his

symphonies. Written between 1876-1900. The first eight were composed in an interval of eleven years. These symphonies, with their persuasive force, are irresistible. They are never dull, but have fire, drive, passion; small wonder that his compositions always attract an audience.

The first four symphonies were written in 1872, three years after he took his place at the console of St. Sulpice. This period saw whole symphonies extended, changes and changes were made which he considered to be improvements, movements were omitted, others added, always changing for the better.

In the *allegro vivaci* of the first, fourth, and sixth symphonies we see the basis of the pieces de concert which Vierne later utilized to such a large extent in his works; two themes in staccato providing the color, one another, one in opposing the other., melodic, providing the theme or verse. The final, the *llegros* are equally constructed on two motifs. If the thematic grand material of Widor lacks the nobility of those of Franck. They certainly carry a commonness or popularity. They can be remembered for their remarkable rhythm which none of his contemporaries possessed. He was a monumental creator. A virtuoso, who employed pauses, periods of silence, changing manuals, contrasting timbres, all of which gave a character to his works such as the grand musicians of the seventeenth century were known to employ.

Widor was one of the first, in France, after Lemmens to use the staccato for an entire section (Finale of *Symphonie II*, *Toccata* of *Symphonie V*), providing a framework of iron, accompanied by a lordly and domineering rhythm.

The extended studies made by the composer on the first group of symphonies paved the way for

the fifth and sixth symphonies in 1881, and these in turn for the more dissonant and more modern seventh and eighth symphonies in 1890. In these four symphonies he practically exhausted the rhythmic and registrational possibilities of the organ. He therefore turned to conquer a new field and the result was the *Gothique*, inspired by the Abbey Church of St. Ouen de Rouen, and the *Romane*, inspired by St. Sernin de Toulouse. Here the wealth of spiritual values as inherent in Widor come to a climax and we have before us masterpieces which will outlast any other organ compositions since Bach.

Three periods might readily be discerned in Widor's ten symphonies. The first four were based to a large extent upon the foundations of the past. The second group of four opens up a whole world of new organ thought and, although a century has passed since their composition, nothing has since appeared which threatens to eclipse them. The *Gothique* and *Romane* form a third period in which the spiritual quality appears on its highest plane.

The recording of these symphonies comes as a rather Herculean task, not only due to the fantastic technical skill required, but also because few of Widor's most illustrious students chose to promote their master's talent. Rather, they sought every opportunity to pass lightly over this great statesman of the French Romantic School. The complete set of symphonies were recorded in three sittings: symphonies one through six in one sitting, symphonies seven, nine and ten in the second sitting and the eighth last.

PETER J. BASCH

## SYMPHONIE III

*Prelude* in E minor, into two expositions of the same motif, however, separated by a clarinet solo, the first of which is in C Major, then repeated in B Major.

*Minuetto*, in classical form, the theme of the minuet, in B minor, is followed by a trio in G Major, then, returning as it began, the first theme is woven into various exquisite modulations, finishing in B Major.

*Marcia*, in F# Major, march step rhythm, a second theme in Bb, is more restful. After a development which is constructed on the fragments of the first theme, it returns in the original F# Major key.

*Andantino*, a single theme in 9/8, canon at the octave, continues until the evanescent conclusion in A Major.

*Final*, begins with a long introduction in D minor, unfolds from grave movement to a breathless development, gradually returns to the opening grave mood, slowly emerges into a broad E Major.

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