



ars organi

Booklet Notes

for

French Romantic Church Music

NO ORGANIST of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries achieved greater international renown than **Alexandre** (originally Félix-Alexandre) **Guilmant** (1837–1911). Few others came close. During a professional life that spanned more than five decades, Guilmant — born in Boulogne-sur-mer, and initially Brussels-trained, but thereafter mostly Paris-based — dominated organ-playing in France; regularly gave concerts in neighbouring countries; often visited Britain (during 1890 he played in Queen Victoria’s presence); and toured Canada as well as the USA. At the 1904 World’s Fair in St Louis, he gave forty recitals, all of them from memory.

Yet in one respect, Guilmant’s labours as an itinerant virtuoso were subordinate to his functions as composer, teacher, and liturgical musician. Appointed in 1896 to the Paris Conservatoire’s organ professorship, Guilmant had already been for twenty-five years the organist-in-chief at the Paris church of La Trinité; from 1894 he helped establish, along with his much younger colleagues Vincent d’Indy and Charles Bordes, the Schola Cantorum. Tireless in resuscitating neglected organ repertoire from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Guilmant taught many of France’s leading organists. Well below middle height, plump, bearded, of rubicund complexion (in his photographs a smile never seems far distant), level-headed in his quotidian piety, he inspired among pupils the soubriquet ‘Père Guilmant.’

How did so industrious a pedagogue, archivist, and administrator as Guilmant find time to compose? Somehow, he did; and if his published work-list is small by the criteria of such graphomaniacs as Hindemith, Milhaud, and Villa-Lobos, it includes ninety-four published opus numbers, most of them involving the organ. These pieces, consistently satisfying (though nowhere easy) for executants, reveal a basic communicativeness which never disregards the needs of listeners.

Guilmant’s habitual cosmopolitanism enabled him to learn from foreigners’ accomplishments, and simultaneously to uphold his own nation’s musical heritage. Among the earliest Frenchmen to revive Bach and Handel, he also championed Schumann, hitherto seldom known in France, and still more seldom liked. (Mas-

senet harboured sorrowful memories of being ordered, in youth, to ‘come and amuse us with your Schumann with its detestable false notes!’.) Always exhibiting broad-minded artistic tastes, Guilmant eagerly attended stagings of operas by Wagner and Debussy, at a time when both composers retained widespread reputations for being outrageous subversives.

Guilmant and **César Franck (1822–1890)** knew and esteemed each other from the early 1860s; both men gave inaugural performances on the new Notre-Dame organ in 1868. The sheer abundance of organ works which Franck left, apart from his twelve canonical compositions for the instrument — the Six Pièces, the *Trois Pièces*, and the *Trois Chorals* — is apt to be disregarded: a mistake both regrettable and (not least among organists themselves) widespread. Franck’s *Offertoire in F sharp minor*, from 1861, eluded print until the 1905 collection of *Pièces posthumes*. In its rondo form and regal grandeur, it calls to mind Couperin’s epoch, with only the murmured close consistently bespeaking the Romantic period.

Bordeaux native and Guilmant student **Joseph Bonnet (1884–1944)** lived for years in America — during the 1920s he established the Eastman School of Music’s organ department — and in 1940 crossed the Atlantic once more, this time a refugee from the Wehrmacht. (He died while on a vacation in Quebec.) Organists still play Bonnet’s *Variations de concert*; but he also composed half a dozen motets, such as this poignant (and somewhat Franck-influenced) 1911 Latin version of the Lord’s Prayer, a text that has attracted curiously few musical settings.

Charles-Alexis Chauvet (1837–1871) preceded Guilmant as La Trinité’s organist and, like Guilmant, harboured an evangelistic passion for Bach. His early death elicited from Gounod the valid encomium ‘It is a great loss! There are few Chauvets, unfortunately.’ *Offertoire sur un Noël* shares with Bonnet’s piece various hints of Franck, thanks to Chauvet’s ingenious chromatic harmonies, which highlight — rather than impairing — the Christmas melody’s modal attractiveness.

Two restrained Guilmant organ miniatures, both of them dating from 1876, initially appeared in a twelve-volume series which the composer called *L’Organiste pratique*. They form admirable accompaniments for communion, or for other meditative ecclesiastical contexts. *Prière* harks back to Mendelssohn’s Songs *Without Words*, above all through that quintessentially Mendelssohnian device, the concluding tonic pedal-point. *Absoute* (‘Absolution’) discloses, through its resourceful enharmonic side-winding, how expressive Guilmant could be even at his most uncluttered.

Music-lovers tend to overlook how vital a role the organ played in the astonishingly long musical career of **Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)**: and this in spite of the fact that his Third Symphony counts as the default organ-with-orchestra piece, for today’s concert managements. Between 1857 and 1877, Saint-Saëns served as chief organist at La Madeleine in Paris. There his playing won tributes from Liszt, who called him ‘not only in the first rank, but incomparable.’ Both Saint-Saëns and Guilmant appeared as organ soloists in concerts which took place at the Paris Trocadéro. Altogether Saint-Saëns left no fewer than five *Ave Maria* settings, written between 1859 and 1914. The setting heard here (the composer permitted the use of a cello for the bottom line) is his fourth, from 1865. It exemplifies how Saint-Saëns could impart to a simple

diatonic motif, one that looks bland on paper, an obstinate memorability. Near the conclusion comes an unexpected Neapolitan sixth to disconcert listeners.

Very little of Guilmant's vocal music has been recorded before. A shame, since the motets of his included here confirm his ability to furnish texturally well-balanced, approachable, but always dignified writing for time-poor church choirs.

At this art, many more pretentious composers than Guilmant have dismally failed. Both pieces come from his Op. 14 *Douze Motets* of 1876 (he reissued *Tantum ergo*, in somewhat altered form, thirteen years afterwards). Whilst for *O Salutaris* Guilmant chooses a relaxed, confident G major — minimising the implicit drama of the words' allusion to 'our foes [who] press hard on every side' — *Tantum ergo* (less optimistic than settings of the same text by Widor and by England's Samuel Webbe) inhabits a bleak and severe A minor.

Two almost totally forgotten priests are represented on this disc: **Cyprien Boyer (1853–1926)** and **Louis-Lazare Perruchot (1852–1930)**. Boyer took organ lessons from Guilmant before he started employment at the seminary of Bergerac, in the Dordogne. Though his brief Communion sounds unusually Mendelssohnian for 1909 (the year it was written), its ending's ostinati hint at French rustic calm. Perruchot, having worked at the Schola Cantorum, directed from 1904 to 1929 the choir at Monaco's cathedral. He thereby embodied the Schola's explicit plan to disseminate worthwhile liturgical music-making outside (as well as inside) Paris. *His Memorare* — undated even in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's catalogue — demonstrates Guilmant's impact, in the music's fundamental diatonicism and (above all at the words *et exaudi*) clear Handelian echoes.

The varied oeuvre of **Charles-Marie Widor (1844–1937)** would have achieved far greater recognition but for the erroneous belief that he wrote nothing valuable except the familiar *Toccata* from his Fifth Organ Symphony. In 1889 Widor issued an anthology named *Quarante-quatre mélodies*, which included the *Ave Maria* on the present recording. When he expanded his anthology in 1907 from forty-four vocal works to fifty-four, the *Ave Maria* appeared again. Its climaxes conjure up Italian opera, and the Vatican's 1903 *Motu Proprio* condemned such theatricality in church music; but Widor acknowledged no impermeable barrier between the profane and the sacred. A little-known genealogical datum warrants citation here: Widor's great-niece was the superb violinist Ginette Neveu.

When Chauvet died, **Théodore Salomé (1834–1896)** had hoped to be appointed to the Trinité post. Gounod and Saint-Saëns thought well enough of Salomé to write him letters of recommendation. Nonetheless, Guilmant defeated him. This circumstance failed to damage the friendship between the two men, each of whom dedicated several creations to the other. Now and then, Salomé deputised at La Trinité for Guilmant. Here he is represented by *En forme de canon* (one of at least two pieces to which he gave this name), well suited to church use in its concision and dignified polyphony. It dates from 1875.

Louis Vierne (1870–1937), pupil of Guilmant and (earlier) of Franck, evinced a harmonic venturesomeness which at times brought him closer to Reger and Karg-Elert in Germany than to his own compatriots. Legally blind, he required gigantic

manuscript paper in order to notate anything. With the *Préambule* of 1913 he makes ear-catching use of the organ's lowest octaves, in long-breathed themes that set off the neo-Wagnerian chord sequences elsewhere.

Of all this CD's composers, **Léon Boëllmann (1862–1897)**, from Ensisheim in Alsace, had the fewest connections with Guilmant; but as organist at the church of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul in Paris, he moved in the same musical circles as the older man. So completely is Boëllmann's name associated with his *Suite Gothique* that the rest of his unfailingly craftsmanlike output has been too much overlooked, notwithstanding a recent six-volume edition of his works. The text of his 1887 *Ave verum corpus* differs slightly from the words that Byrd, Mozart, and Elgar used for their own, much more famous, treatments. Boëllmann's conception is tender and, in the organ part's persistent four-note scalic figure, slightly menacing.

Tuberculosis, which slew Boëllmann and Chauvet, also killed **Gabriel Dupont (1878–1914)**, who had studied organ first with Guilmant and then with Widor. Despite Dupont's origins in the northern city of Caen, his music frequently possesses a vivid Mediterranean colouring, as if he had absorbed Bizet's example (his opera *Antar* inspired critical comparisons with *Carmen*). This 1910 *Carillon sur trois notes* — alternatively named *Sortie* — will remind many hearers of the 'Carillon' movement (likewise in E major) from Bizet's *L'Arlésienne*. That the three-note ostinato avoids inducing boredom testifies to Dupont's stylistic panache and harmonic ingenuity.

From the Haute-Garonne came **Marie-Joseph-Alexandre Déodat de Séverac (1872–1921)**, another Guilmant-d'Indy protégé. After his Schola Cantorum sojourn, he dwelled mostly on southern soil, and set Occitan-language as well as French-language poems. Visitors to Toulouse will find a train station that bears his name. Folk-like pentatonicism marks his *Salve Regina* of 1917; the resemblance between the vocal line's opening phrases and those of the standard *Salve Regina* plainchant tune is probably intentional.

Guilmant student **Alexandre Cellier (1883–1968)** spent over half a century (from 1910) as organist at a Protestant church in Paris, the Temple de l'Étoile. Still, the clearest influence on his 1913 *Offertoire* is the Catholic Massenet, whose miniature *Le Dernier Sommeil de la Vierge* — which Sir Thomas Beecham naughtily mistranslated as 'the Sleep of the Last Virgin' — enjoyed vast acclaim around 1900. (Nobel literature laureate Romain Rolland, in a half-admiring, half-exasperated passage from his ten-volume novel *Jean-Christophe*, spoke of 'the Massenet who slumbers in all French hearts [*le Massenet qui sommeille dans tous les cœurs français*].') Cellier uses the same key, G major, as the Massenet hit.

Although **Vincent d'Indy (1851–1931)** wrote little for the organ, what he did write could attain exceptional eloquence, nowhere more than in his *Prelude* (1913), employing that most sumptuously Romantic of keys, E flat minor. The music fits d'Indy's retrospective self-description: 'I became one of the heated partisans [*chauds partisans*] of the Wagnerian idea.' Its Tristanesque modulatory sighs, and its forlorn chromatic somnambulism through Klingsor's garden, go beyond even the lushest Franck. The last phrases' yearning suspensions justify the piece's dedication to Vierne. (There also exists a manuals-only version of this *Prelude*, intended for harmonium.)

Marcel Dupré (1886–1971), one of Guilmant's youngest pupils, toured on five continents, attaining an international recognition exceeding even his master's. His final work, *Souvenir*, nevertheless remains surprisingly often overlooked. He meant it for the funeral of a family friend's mother; its manuscript (1969?) reposed among his private papers after his demise. An ambiance of English pastoral nostalgia dominates, with a certain appropriateness, given that Dupré gave concerts in the United Kingdom. But the four succulent dissonances near the end are as utterly Gallic as any Métro accordionist.

When Guilmant and his French contemporaries accompanied plainchant, they habitually used for each sung note a different chord. In neophytes' hands this procedure could sound gauche, but the stern and granitic power of Guilmant's 1886 versets to *Pange lingua* shows how convincing the note-for-note method could be with a truly skilled musician. Since at least Louis XIV's reign, France's Catholic liturgies had necessitated succinct, often extemporised organ interludes, generally based on whichever chants the day's ceremonies required, and always alternating with the singers' verses: whence historians' references to *alternatim* ecclesial practice. Thus, with the five-verse chant heard here, only the first, third, and fifth verses are sung. Substituting for the second and fourth verses are Guilmant's organ commentaries. His initial verset keeps in the uppermost line the glorious chant theme (which Liszt's symphonic poem *Hunnenschlacht* had quoted). The next verset has the tune in the tenor register. For the Amen, the tune is back on top.

En mémoire de Charles Bordes derived from an improvisation of Guilmant's at Bordes' Requiem Mass (1909). Like 'Papa' Haydn, 'Père Guilmant' can too easily be underrated because of his music's predominant sanity, its freedom from aggressive angst. But just as the usually good-humoured, companionable Haydn produced the desolate *Sturm und Drang* symphonies, so Guilmant produced this grief-laden homage to his friend, with agonised suspensions in almost every bar. Its masterstroke occurs with the ending's soft, insinuating, tonally *vague memento mori*, which makes one wonder if Guilmant had encountered the year's greatest operatic scandal: Strauss's *Elektra*.

After such despair, the present CD's final piece sounds particularly jubilant. Guilmant composed in 1884 the *Sortie*, which he based on a hymn that honours the Virgin Mary: *Quid nunc in tenebris tristis aberras*. Along with the *Pange lingua* versets, this *Sortie* first appeared in a ten-volume set entitled *L'Organiste liturgique*. Dominating this set is music much more explicitly plainchant-oriented than most of Guilmant's earlier output had been. Yet whereas in the versets Guilmant glories in irregular rhythms and modal harmonic sequences, the *Sortie* adheres to a steady 2/2 pulse and a tonally straightforward C major. The result complies with John Philip Sousa's brusque criterion for evaluating processional music: 'a march,' Sousa maintained, 'should make a man with a wooden leg step out.' One oddity manifests itself thrice in the *Sortie*'s bass line: the leap of a tritone, downwards in both outer sections, upwards in the quieter central section. These tritones, which break all pedagogical rules of traditional voice-leading, would have driven many a nineteenth-century professor to apoplectic rage. Their conspicuousness surely precludes origins in either compositional haste or typographical errata. It is pleasant to hypothesise that Guilmant here found irresistible the chance to poke gentle fun at his more pedantic colleagues.