

## ‘Modulez, modulez!’

Gérard Condé

One may wonder what inspired the late passion for operatic composition of César Franck (1822-90), which produced two works in the genre, *Hulda* (1879-85) and *Ghiselle* (1888-90). He seemed to have given up the theatre after a couple of unsuccessful early attempts, *Stradella* (around 1841) and *Le Valet de ferme* (1851-53), in favour of pure music: the Symphony in D minor, the Violin Sonata, the Piano Quintet and the *Variations symphoniques*, whose ardent lyricism has no need of words to conjure it up. It was to him that the new generation had turned, eager to master the style and the forms of instrumental music, a discipline not taught on the curriculum at the Paris Conservatoire.

Though he had been head of the organ class since 1872 and was a pillar of the institution, the prestigious titular organist of the Cavaillé-Coll at Sainte-Clotilde had no warrant to teach composition. But he necessarily reserved a large place in his lessons for techniques of improvisation linked to the requirements of the liturgy and the vagaries of circumstances in the organist’s workplace. Accompanying plainchant, dashing off an *O salutaris* conducive to generosity at the moment when the collection plate went round, prolonging a piece for Communion or a *Sortie* (exit music at the end of Mass) on a motif treated in the strict style (imitation, counterpoint) or in more gracious fashion (variations) without committing harmonic solecisms: all of this far exceeded mastery of the manuals, of the pedalboard and of choice of registrations, in terms of efficiency, but above all of aesthetic. Franck’s imperious cry of ‘Modulez,

modulez!' to his students (reported by Léon Vallas) testifies to the fact that, through his advice and criticism, he was in reality giving lessons in composition. Indeed, many students attended his class only to drink in the magisterial words of an apostle of pure music, an artist whose ideal was diametrically opposed to the alleged commercialism of the official purveyors to the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique, who tailored their inspiration to the tastes of a public generally reckoned to be lazy and ignorant.

To be sure, when he set to work on *Hulda* (in November 1879, Franck was not thinking of joining those fallen angels who tarnished the Heaven of Art, sacrificing their convictions to the Demon of success. Perhaps he intended to give himself the wherewithal to apply for the succession to Victor Massé or Henri Reber and thereby take his place among the professors of composition. For that discipline, designed to train aspirants to the Grand Prix de Rome, the main examination for which consisted in writing an operatic scene, was solely entrusted to dramatic composers. As plausible as it is unverifiable, this hypothesis by Joël-Marie Fauquet sets in perspective the previously widespread notion that Franck was pressured by his wife and his eldest son in the hope of a success that would be considerably more lucrative than the virtually non-existent sums on offer for oratorios or instrumental music, for which publishers paid only very stingy prices.

How ever that may be, the wind did not turn in his favour: Guiraud and then Delibes were preferred over him at the Conservatoire. But the eight months of holiday he devoted to *Hulda* (until September 1885) testify to the persistent care he took to confer lyrical eloquence on a drama by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, *Halte-Hulda* (Lame Hulda), which he had discovered in 1870, even though the adaptation by Charles Grandmougin (librettist of Massenet's *La Vierge* and Godard's *Le Tasse*) could retain only the broad lines of the original.

The plot is simple: Hulda swears to avenge the death of her clan's men-folk. The curse she lays on their murderers will come to pass in the course of the work: one by one she will witness the death of the warriors of the opposing clan who have held her captive without realising the threat she represents. But the darkness of the drama and its internal plot twists

may seem caricatural. The (anonymous and undated) reader's report on the libretto in the archives of the Paris Opéra concludes that the piece is 'absolutely impossible'. These scathingly ironic comments left no chance that the score, which was probably not yet finished, would ever be accepted for production. In fact, it was only thanks to the tenacity of Franck's eldest son that it was taken up elsewhere, at the Théâtre de Monte-Carlo in March 1894, then in Toulouse and The Hague in 1895, and finally in Nantes in 1899. The same is true of the occasional partial performances that were given in public or privately, at least until Franck's centenary in 1922.



#### PREMIERE AND POSTERITY

The baptism of fire represented by the Monaco performance did not make Franck's biographers any more indulgent. Although the incomplete and revised posthumous premiere of *Hulda* at the Théâtre de Monte-Carlo in 1894, served by fine voices and an impeccable orchestra which compensated for the miserable sets and the poor staging, was a public success, it did not do much to reduce the prejudices of Franck's admirers concerning the strictly dramatic value of the work (independently of its undeniable musical qualities). Maurice Emmanuel, in *César Franck, étude critique* (1930), mentions *Hulda* merely 'for the record' (*pour mémoire*) – which is tantamount to approving the fact that it had fallen into oblivion – and defers to what Vincent d'Indy had declared twenty years previously: 'Franck was content to make beautiful music without seeking a new dramatic expression, which the texts placed at his disposal could not suggest to him.'

The work might also have forced them to remove the icon of their god from the golden frame in which they had confined it. But it did no such thing, and it was only with the publication in 1955 of *La Véritable Histoire de César Franck* that the devil of a man that Franck also was emerged from the stoup of holy water in which his disciples preserved him. Noting

in his book that this appalling drama had 'enchanted the gentle César [...] as if *goodness* could only be expressed and made manifest in the face of the monstrous events that threatened it', Léon Vallas rightly observed:

It is almost invariably the case, but has hardly ever been remarked upon, that his works of pure music, the masterpieces, very clearly represent an ardent transposition of the emotions of a tormented, impetuous, even blazing soul, which is cloaked by a placid exterior, an apparent resignation. One can observe in virtually every one of his great scores the force of an emotional conflict, the heat of the battle between warring elements: the brutality of fate, the tenderness of man, who, beneath crushing blows, retains an indestructible hope, a smiling or ardent optimism, affirmed, at the end of the composition, when an enthusiastic hymn soars aloft. Just think of the Symphonic Variations: something quite different from a mere set of variations for piano and orchestra – a stirring musical tragedy!

Vincent d'Indy, who thought the opposite of this, had raised his point of view to the status of dogma. Is it any wonder that, in the fervent monograph he devoted to his mentor in 1906, *Hulda* and *Ghiselle* are mentioned so briefly and described as trial runs (*essais*)? A paradox which the disciple at once explains:

[...] the reason is that, despite their very high musical worth, which is unquestionable and unquestioned, [these works] do not seem to me to represent, in dramatic terms, the forward movement, the generous and renewing impulse that occurs in all the symphonic music of this third period of the master's life.

'Third period'? Here we reach the nub of the matter. For d'Indy, the artistic career of Franck, whom he saw as 'destined to become, in both sacred and symphonic music, the true successor of the Master of Bonn', comprised three stages, akin to those in which Wilhelm von Lenz, in

*Beethoven et ses trois styles* (1852), had laid down the milestones of an exemplary evolution. Seen from this perspective, Franck's first period, that of the virtuoso pianist whose works contained more notes than original ideas, merely permitted the commentator to measure the solidity of the foundations. The second period bore the marks of a laborious maturation, with regrettable but touchingly innocent backward glances, and sublime lapses commensurate with the progress made.

The third period was one of glorious blossoming: the masterpieces followed and complemented each other, the public applauded without any need for the composer to grant them platitudes. For his admirers, this was the moment when he measured himself against Wagner and indeed surpassed him in the loftier sphere of the symphony, in which the sublime composer of *Parsifal* had only a juvenile attempt to his credit.

Franck had read Wagner's scores with the admiration he reserved for the greatest composers, but he had only heard excerpts from them in concert and, because he had been unable to go to Bayreuth, did not appreciate their theatrical significance. As a result, from d'Indy's point of view, *Hulda* and *Ghiselle* had not been sufficiently nourished by the achievements of Wagnerian drama to compete on the same ground. These works could therefore only figure in the third period as mere 'trial runs' in which Franck's genius had been wasted when it could have triumphed on its chosen terrain.



#### A CLASSICAL OPERA

Without disputing the right of Franck's disciples to place at the service of a pious severity the convictions that strengthened their admiration, it is permissible to consider *Hulda* from the perspective of Romantic opera (from *Euryanthe* to *Hamlet*) and its roots (Gluck's *Alceste*, Grétry's *Guillaume Tell*) rather than that of the Wagnerian 'musical action' (*musikalische Handlung*), to which it is completely foreign.

Having attended the premiere and witnessed idle discussions about the Wagnerian nature of the work, Julien Tiersot went so far as to specify (in *Le Temps* dated 6 March 1894):

*Hulda* is an opera in the fullest sense of the word, a classical opera, like *Don Giovanni* or *Fidelio*, completely different in style, but deriving from the same principle, and having no other aim than to interpret musically situations suitable for lyrical development. [...] It is certain that the harmonies are as rich in Franck as in Wagner; they flow from the same sources: Bach, Beethoven [...] but, starting from the same point, the two men came up with very different results. The harmonies of *Hulda* are specific to its composer; they are Franck's harmonies; and even if Wagner had never existed, the French master would have been perfectly capable of finding them on his own.

Alfred Bruneau also knew and admired Franck and Wagner intimately enough to avoid a reductive confusion. This allowed him to emphasise, in *Gil Blas*, after the premiere in Monaco:

The orchestral line does not develop by means of thematic recurrences, of combinations or intertwining of motifs; but, in the intimate union of voices and instruments, the slightest cell serves as a useful commentary, the most unobtrusive line adds its symphonic significance to the effect of the word, and the harmonies are always extraordinarily rich in their descriptive power, while the melody, expressive and clear, attains prodigious heights by sheer force of inspiration.

Considered in this way, from the essential (in the true sense), if not exclusive, viewpoint of its musical quality, the score of *Hulda* is not only executed with sovereign skill, with that mastery of modulations which is so different from that of Weber, Meyerbeer or Thomas. It is also powerfully lyrical, with demanding vocal writing (close in its starkness to that of Lalo's *Le Roi d'Ys*) that culminates in the two great love duets of the

tenor with the heroine, then with her rival. The third act is probably the peak of the work, with the nocturnal tryst that Joël-Marie Fauquet, having dismissed any resemblance to the *Tristan* duet (apart from the 'principle of extending the intensity of feeling over time'), does not hesitate to place on the same level as its Wagnerian predecessor, emphasising 'the sureness of touch with which the psychological progression determines the thematic and harmonic structure of this incredible duet' and 'the captivating beauty that emerges from the fusion of voices and orchestra. The music transports lovers and listeners alike towards ecstasy'.

The music of *Hulda* is not simply beautiful. It can stand revealed on the stage as genuinely dramatic, conceived with a very sure sense of theatre. It is also sensual, following in the line of the symphonic poem *Psyché*, the most unjustly neglected of Franck's masterpieces, with touches of orchestration that are eloquent in their power, respecting a just balance between stage and pit, as well as in the subtlety of their refined timbral blends, notably in the allegorical ballet (*Lutte de l'Hiver et du Printemps*) that Franck chose to conduct at the Trocadéro in Paris and then in Antwerp in 1885 and 1886.

We have the advantage over d'Indy and his contemporaries – and even over Charles Van den Borren (author of a campaigning volume entitled *L'Œuvre dramatique de César Franck: Hulda et Ghiselle*, 1907) – of no longer judging *Hulda* according to the reductive criteria of modernity or immediate credibility. The expansion of the repertoire makes an operatic season consisting of *Les Huguenots*, *Così fan tutte*, *La Périchole*, *Elektra*, *Rigoletto*, *Jenůfa*, *L'Orfeo*, *Tannhäuser*, *Manon* and *Atys* seem at once plausible and attractive. In other words, ten works obeying as many different conventions, sometimes radically opposed to each other. This does not prevent one from feeling more immediately affected by Verdi, say, than by Gounod or Wagner, but it sets preconceptions in perspective and opens the way to unexpected sensations.



## AN OVERVIEW OF THE SCORE

The numerous (unacknowledged) cuts made to the printed score at the time of the Monte Carlo premiere of *Hulda* in 1894 do not suggest a concern to delete what might be perceived as longueurs so much as a deliberate effort to remove what seemed to fall into the category of pre-Wagnerian opera. The first cut significantly affects the conclusion of the first act: in order to end with Hulda's curse ('Je serai la ruine et la mort'), in F sharp minor, the darkly triumphant chorus that answered it ('Victoire! Victoire!') was removed. This was to ruin the contrast provided by the brutal simplicity of an (almost) unaltered G minor, and also the contrast between its 6/8 pulse, evocative of some wild hunt, and the utterly different pastoral 6/8 (undermined by chromatic anxieties) of the first scene. These were deliberate decisions on Franck's part – as dramatically justifiable as the space allotted to the chorus of fishermen: an apparent irrelevance which might seem to weigh down the action, whereas in fact it is the calm before the storm.

When the curtain rises again on Act Two, the harmonious sounds of a female chorus create an unexpected atmosphere in the palace of the ferocious Aslaks. But the *Chanson de l'hermine* (addressed to a creature so soft to the touch when it has been killed) conceals a resigned cynicism; its feigned blandness is contrasted, by means of a more chromatic style, with the warriors' primal joy.

Moreover, this exceptionally delicate number makes it possible to lend a fresh ear to the somewhat sibylline exchanges between Gudrun, Halgerde and Thördis. 'Words of overly innocent and somewhat ridiculous banality. And so Franck shows himself in an inferior, almost poor light', says Van den Borren. But this 'poverty' is entirely strategic, for it would have been detrimental to draw the listeners, still under the spell of the chorus, out of their floating attention. The first phrase that counts, 'Je crains Hulda', underlined by a reminder of the syncopated chromatic descent that accompanied Hulda's curse, is quite striking, but without the excess that would suggest what is to come. Will we go so far as to say that this female



chatter, which dissolves under the reiteration of a depressive motif (an echo of Swanhilde's torments), prepares the way for the eruption of the masculine quarrels, the abrupt violence that breaks out between Gudleik and his brothers, the object of which is not immediately clear either? In fact, it is enough that we should understand it only at the end, as in instrumental music, which proceeds by means of a succession of musical puzzles and resolutions.

Taking a broader view of things, if one sought to consider the drama-turgy from a symphonist's point of view, the *Chanson de l'hermine* would be Theme A, the dialogue would serve as a bridge passage to Theme B (the male quartet), and Gudrun's solo ('Mes enfants...') – a fine example of lyrical recitative-arioso – would function as a double development-liquidation: the first section calms the men, the second addresses the women, who leave in their turn.

This quasi-symphony can also be seen as the prologue to the more extended one it introduces, whose four episodes (Hulda's Monologue – Procession of the Betrothed – Combats – Lament) are governed by the same laws of contrast and complementarity. However cavalier it may appear, this way of looking at the unfolding of the score is less reductive than a division into successive numbers.

One would wish, for the sake of beauty or of convenience, that it were possible to view the entire opera as a vast vocal symphony, with the four acts as the four canonical movements... It might well be possible to do so, with a modicum of dexterity, but one would miss the point, with nothing to show for it but the illusion of having neatly pigeonholed a work in which the tragic action is confronted by episodes of unexpected freshness. Act Three, the climax of the work, hardly foreshadows the festive character and exorbitant dimensions of the last act, where one would not feel comfortable in claiming to detect traces of a typical Beethovenian finale: a royal march with chorus, a ballet in the park, a ball in the castle, all developed as if for the sheer pleasure of doing so...

Is this proof positive that Franck, the organist and symphonist, understood nothing of the theatre? Perhaps it is, rather, a sign that he saw it

differently from his disciples. He was as familiar as they with the audience that comes to the opera house to be moved and delighted. But he despised that audience less. Was it not the very same public that, for similar reasons, filled the churches on high days and holidays? His long years of service at the organ of Sainte-Clotilde had convinced Franck that the role of the musician was not to expose his artistic convictions, but to satisfy with dignity the expectations of the bride and groom or the relatives of the deceased. All the same, to fall in line with such expectations was not to demean oneself.

This is why Charles van den Borren insists on the quality of what might appear to be a concession to the ghosts of *grand-opéra*: the ballet.

Thanks to frequent changes of metre and tempo, as well as extreme asymmetry in the groupings of note-values, there is something flimsy and ethereal about the whole of *Hulda's* ballet, something that, moreover, is admirably in keeping with the imaginary world whose doings it comments on [...]. The second part of the ballet is full of humour: Franck has achieved an extraordinary impression of clumsiness and comedy. [From a few notes] Franck constructs a piece of heightened orchestral buffoonery quite comparable in spirit to that of Pan's dance aria in J. S. Bach's cantata [*The Contest between*] *Phoebus and Pan*.

There is no need to poke fun at the classic device for emptying the stage – the announcement of a banquet in a nearby hall –, so delicately does Franck handle the return to the drama and its mounting excitement. It is the timid Swanhilde, whose sorrows have been kept in the background until now, who effects this dramatic reversal with arguments whose determined nature is underlined by the music in the course of a second love duet, quite different from the previous one and which does not pale in comparison with it.

What experienced opera composer would have attempted and overcome such a challenge? If the beauties of this number were not enough

in themselves to justify admiration, it could also be pressed into service to attest the dramatic bent of Franck's genius.

How can we refuse to attribute to a mastery of the proportions and effects of the sung theatre the dramatic progression of the first act, in which the threat that hangs over the orchestral introduction grows clearer as an informal dialogue develops, with the prayer as its culmination, the fishermen's chorus as its continuation, the irruption of the warriors as its disrupting event and their triumph as its denouement?

How can we ignore the fact that Gudrun's Act Two solo combines subtle discernment in the choice of the melodic intervals, of the modulations and of the rhythm of delivery (the key to eloquence) with the virtuosity of the symphonist who deduces the organic extensions of a simple musical cell?

But above all, what distinguishes an operatic composer is the generosity with which he breathes into all his characters a vocal plenitude deserving of empathy. Their words and deeds may be reprehensible, but the music refrains from judging them. Is it not remarkable that one of the most moving episodes (thanks to the powerful unfolding of the music) is the extended lament on the death of Gudleik, a seemingly secondary character, whose demise seems thoroughly merited and could be dealt with in a few concluding bars? If, over and above the pleasure of developing a threnody, Franck deemed it necessary to mourn the eldest of the Aslak brothers, it is because the entire drama derives from his love for Hulda. Without that love, the daughter of the Hustawick chieftain would have become the wife, just a little highly strung, of an ordinary man.

A heroine by circumstance rather than by temperament? The ambivalence of Hulda's behaviour, which enriches her personality, also merits discussion. After her threatening apostrophe at the end of the first act, one might have expected vengeful reiterations of the same on the morning of her forced marriage to her captor, the cynical murderer of all her family... And yet she speaks of love, a love she hardly dares to utter, not knowing if it is reciprocated, which has stealthily taken hold of her and dominates her to the point where she almost forgets the duty with which

she has invested herself of seeing justice done. The librettist's choice? No doubt, but the delicacy of tone, the sensuality, the ardour of the declamation are Franck's domain; the dignified funeral oration that she pronounces over Gudleik's body is remarkably ambiguous, leaving open the hypothesis that she is moved despite herself. The hatred she felt wavers in the face of this dead man who fought for love of her.

Without entering into considerations of, at best, elementary psychology, we can guess that Hulda's fragility is the driving force behind her outbursts. The torments of the character, which Franck has subtly brought out, will underpin the great love duet with Eiolf discussed above. The vengeance with which she threatened the Aslaks will be accomplished without her participation: Gudleik is killed by Eiolf, whom he challenged; Arne is slain by his father; and his other brothers will fall victim to their urge to avenge the death of their eldest sibling. Hulda's assertion, 'Tous ont péri par moi, par amour', is inaccurate. 'Elle est folle!', Eiolf's warriors will exclaim. Here again, Franck does not settle the question: Hulda's suicide is situated somewhere between insanity and the resolve to oppose with a woman's determination, more powerful than their weapons, the cowardice of the men who threaten her.

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