

## Through the trapdoor of history

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Say what you like, the documentary value of a forgotten opera is always indisputable: whether it is an early effort, a politically motivated commission or a paragon of academicism, any and every score is both the reflection of an era and a piece in the jigsaw puzzle of history. But when it comes to claiming that an opera should enter the repertory and be integrated (or sometimes reintegrated) into regular seasons, that is another matter. To separate the wheat from the chaff is not as easy as all that, given the obvious subjectivity that hovers over any radical distinction between the operatic masterpiece and the musical archive. César Franck's *Hulda*, in spite of its chaotic history, self-evidently belongs among the 'necessary' works that the most prestigious opera houses could put on without blushing. And yet, until very recently, the only trace of it was to be found in evasive references in biographies of its composer.

For a persistent misconception has left us with an image of César Franck as an austere organist, dividing his time between mystical devotion and an exclusive interest in arduous instrumental music. This stereotype was cultivated by his most loyal pupils, who held up for inspection his probity, his morality, his lack of interest in fashion, but also the intellectuality of his creative processes, with the aim of sanctifying a movement in French music capable of combating the Wagnerian and Debussyan aesthetics. Deceived by these imposed filters, posterity has retained only a handful of works out of the hundred or so that Franck composed, mainly those that can be presented as a unique object and which give the impression of a genesis devoid of trial and error: 'the' Piano Quintet, 'the' Violin Sonata, 'the' String Quartet appear to have no model and to have

produced no legacy. The same may be said of *Les Béatitudes* or of the Symphony in D minor, whose cyclic structure was presented as a model of that formal principle. The operas were refused this accolade, which – in the case of *Hulda* – was a terrible error of judgment. In celebrating the bicentenary of the composer's birth in 2022, with the collaboration of the Liège Royal Philharmonic and the Namur Chamber Choir, the Palazzetto Bru Zane was determined to restore the work to its full lustre so that we might form a definitive idea of it.

It would not be right here to gloss over the fact that a similar project was undertaken in 2019 for the Naxos label by the conductor Fabrice Bollon, directing the Philharmonisches Orchester Freiburg, the Opernchor des Theater Freiburg and an international cast. He too had sensed the importance of awakening this sleeping beauty. Instead of playing the game of multiple comparisons, we should congratulate ourselves that there are now two interpretations of an opera that deserves many more: how many pointless *Traviatas* will be released when, in all likelihood, only two *Huldas* will be competing with each other for years to come? Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out for the benefit of the interested reader that the present recording opens out some of the musical cuts on the Bollon discs and includes several textual variants from the original version that they omitted.

*Hulda*, composed between 1879 and 1885, was never staged during Franck's lifetime. This bloody medieval tale, based on a Norwegian play, recounts the multiple acts of vengeance its heroine visits on the Aslak clan, which has slain her family, and later on her unfaithful lover Eiolf. Although the imaginary Norwegian setting brings Wagner to mind, the composer continues the tradition of French *grand-opéra* while adopting the contemporary Verdian idiom. Rejected by the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique in Paris, then by the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels, this ambitious opera became a perpetually thwarted hope for Franck. His death stimulated new interest in his unpublished works, however, and the Théâtre de Monte-Carlo gave *Hulda* its premiere in March 1894 with Blanche Deschamps-Jéhin in the title role. But this production, in an abridged version with minimal staging, aroused little excitement. The work

was then deliberately buried by Franck's pupils, who preferred to conserve the image of a composer of 'pure' music and to keep for themselves the glory of personifying the French operatic revival. Nowadays, of course, these issues are irrelevant, but we still have *Hulda*: 'A first-rate score, overflowing with invention, with gripping evocative power and a lyrical quality of the highest order' (Joël-Marie Fauquet).

If one were to present the qualities of this music in a few lines, the first thing to be mentioned would be the variety of orchestral colours and the constantly shifting harmonies, which form an unsettled discourse that subtly reflects the feelings of the characters. For example, the duet for Swanhilde and Eiolf in Act Four eludes all formal divisions. Another key quality is the power of the choruses and the dramatic effectiveness of the ensemble numbers. Franck calls upon all the technique he had acquired in church music to nourish extended choral scenes (the funeral chorus that closes Act Two, for example, or the chorus of fisherfolk that opens the Epilogue). Yet we never have an impression of misappropriated sacred music, but rather of a genuinely secular and eminently theatrical discourse (the fluidity of the *Chanson de l'hermine*, at the opening of Act Two, testifies to this). The next element deserving of admiration is the portrayal of the heroine: her strength of character is presented in such a multifaceted way that she becomes both credible and sympathetic. Finally, we should not end this brief survey of the work without mentioning the richness of *Hulda*'s ballet music. While it would be idle to deny that we owe this extensive purely orchestral section, with its rather naive subject, to Parisian convention, Franck summons up all his symphonic skills to transmute this mandatory ingredient into a lesson in orchestration and composition. Few ballets in French Romantic opera can claim to sustain such quality from beginning to end, a fortiori over a duration of nearly thirty minutes.

Yet, no matter how hard we may try to justify in theory and in print the reasons why we consider *Hulda* to be one of the most important rediscoveries made by the Palazzetto Bru Zane since it opened in 2009, nothing can replace the experience of listening to it. Bear in mind,

though, that works of this complexity and length require several hearings to reveal their full complexity and richness. How many potential *Carmens* have been doomed to perdition by hasty, flippant, lazy reviews? So, happy listening!



Blanche Deschamps-Jehin (Nadar Studios), undated.  
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Blanche Deschamps-Jehin (ateliers Nadar), sans date.  
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.