

***Symphony in D Minor***  
**César Franck (1822–1890)**

Written: 1887–88

Movements: Three

Style: Romantic

Duration: 40 minutes

When Nicholas-Joseph Franck arrived in Paris with his thirteen-year-old son César, it was with the hopes and dreams of a pushy stage father. César was only ten when he earned a first prize in piano at the Liège Conservatory, so papa was then ready to take the world by storm with his precocious son. César enrolled at the Paris conservatory, where he again won the *premier prix* in piano. However, by the age of twenty his career as a virtuoso wasn't going anywhere, so the Francks returned to their native Belgium. César eventually escaped his father's clutches, moved back to Paris, got married, supported himself by teaching private lessons, and worked as an organist at a small church. Ultimately, he got a more prestigious appointment at the basilica of Saint Clotilde, where he spent the rest of his life. César also drew a small circle of students around himself, known as the *bande à Franck*. (They would become the next generation of France's leading composers.) Nowadays, his fame rests on the music that he wrote during the last ten years of his life. Perhaps the best known is his *Symphony in D*.

The short melodic idea that begins the *Symphony in D* forms the basis for the entire work. Slow, dark, and foreboding, it is reminiscent of a similar theme used by Beethoven, Liszt, and Wagner to evoke the idea of "fate." After an extended slow introduction—nearly six minutes long!—the symphony finally gets going. Eventually, a second theme emerges, much more positive in tone, that some call the "faith" motive. After substantial development, the "fate" theme returns, this time presented with awesome power by the brass.

Franck combines the standard slow second and fast third movements of a symphony

into a single movement. The English horn begins the beautiful main theme accompanied by harp and pizzicato strings. In the middle of this movement, there is a brief diversion, introduced by the clarinet. Explaining the last movement, Franck wrote, "The finale takes up all the themes again, as in Beethoven's Ninth. They do not return as quotations, however; I have elaborated them and given them the role of new elements."

César Franck had his detractors. "Incompetence pushed to dogmatic lengths," declared Charles Gounod. Others insisted that his music was "Cathedrals in sound." Nevertheless, Franck's *Symphony in D Minor* almost single-handedly brought symphonies by French composers back to concert halls.

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