

LINDA LANIER-KEOSAIAN

CHORAL No. 3 IN A MINOR FOR ORGAN

**By
Cesar Franck**

The form of the chorale is ABA, but with smaller sections within each large one. The name “choral” derives from Franck’s intention of writing something similar to J. S. Bach’s chorales for organ.¹ Rather than using a pre-existing chorale or hymn tune, as Bach did, however, Franck used his own original chorale.

The performance of this piece may suggest both a scherzo-like opening and closing, with a romantic solo melody in the B section; and it may also be heard as an intense, driven piece with hidden wells of energy. The excitement derives from the juxtaposition of fast and slow, sweet and bitter, with constant harmonic shifts, and the accompanying registration changes of all of these. The sound of the piece is best heard on the original Cavaille-Coll organs for which Franck wrote it, but may be closely approximated on a well-designed modern organ with romantic stops and acoustics.

The opening [A1] section, *Quasi allegro*, begins with the first statement of Theme I, in A Minor: five measures of broken chords in sixteenth notes.² The left hand plays the tonic on beats one and three, while the right hand follows swiftly with these broken chords, especially thirds, in sixteenth notes, off-the-beat. The $vii^{\circ} 4/2$ in m. 5 leads us to expect A minor. But it is followed by the *Largamente* transitional material: rising sustained arpeggios in eighth notes, which ends in m. 7 with a V7 (and b9) of D. Then follows Theme I again, (m. 8), this time seven measures, and in D Minor. The following transition is five measures, marked *Largamente*, ending in the fifth measure with a *Piu largamente* which, with a descending tritone leap in the pedals, dives immediately into a three-measure *Quasi allegro* section with sixteenth-note scales (m. 20-22).

Measure 22 features the V7 of A but is followed with a deceptive F Major chord in m. 23. The *Quasi allegro* ends abruptly with a seven-measure transition of sustained eighth-note arpeggios, this time descending. The cadence at m. 30 is in A Minor. This ends the [A1] section of the chorale.

The [A2] section begins in m. 31 with the first statement of the chorale, in A Minor. The four-part, hymn-like chorale is typically presented with a change to gentler registration, with a soft reed stop in the ensemble. In m. 33 the F natural in the bass line “wants” to go to E but is delayed in this resolution until the statement cadences in m. 46, in E Minor. Theme I occurs again beginning in m. 48, in E Minor, and lasts five measures until m. 52. Then follows four measures of the transitional material: rising eighth-note arpeggios. At m. 57 begins another statement of the chorale, in E Minor. In m. 63-64 there is deceptive (non-cadential) harmonic motion. The V7 in m. 63 is followed by a V 4/2 that then resolves to VI, C Minor, which then creates a half-cadence by going back to V of E Minor. The VI chord here can actually be considered the upper neighbor to V. The chorale cadences in A Minor at m. 78.

At m. 80 begins the longest statement of Theme I, eleven measures. This time the pedal is brought in, and the left hand figure gives the feeling of imitation between the left and right hands. This is in A Minor and ends with the usual transitional figure of rising eighth-note arpeggios at m. 91- 96. The last chord is the dominant seventh of A Major, the parallel minor. This ends section [A2].

Section [B], begins in A Major, the parallel major, with the famous liquid and very romantic melody in the right hand on a prominent reed stop, the left hand and pedal accompanying. I have called this section an Aria for its very singable nature. Franck simply marked it *Adagio*. There is a rich use of chromatic harmony to support the melody. The

wandering harmony is often offset with the underpinning of a pedal point, as in m. 106–109. In m. 104, marked *molto espressivo, e dolce*, there is a series of dominant seventh chords, in parallel motion, finally ending with a diminished seventh which spills into A Minor at m. 105. The melody itself can be seen as “free” in that it is not necessarily an embellishment of the chorale. However, there can be seen some of the same contours in the melody and the chorale. The repeated note used so prominently in the melody, e.g. at m. 107-108, can be seen in the chorale in m. 62-63, 74-75, and in the sequence at m. 41-44.

After a brief statement of the chorale at m. 117-118, the left hand takes two-measure sections of the melody and the right hand and pedal take over the accompaniment. The left hand melody appears in A Major at m. 119, and is then transposed to C# Major at m. 122. These two melodic sections are separated by another short section of the chorale, at m.121. There follows another short statement of the chorale in m. 124-126. In m. 127, there appears a different section of the melody, drawn from m. 106 – 107, but here in G# Minor. At m. 131, both hands go to the Great, the largest division of the organ. Measure 131-132 is an exciting change of texture for the player, in that a short section of the melody becomes a motive and is imitated in close succession in the soprano and alto lines. The use of the repeated note in m. 133-135 (seen before in the chorale in m. 62-63 and also in m. 107 – 108) creates a drive to the next section, the transition to the toccata. There is a build-up of sound with registration change, especially in m. 136³. The chorale melody can be heard in the soprano in m. 140-141. In m. 142-143, the chorale can be heard in octaves in the pedals, and, briefly imitated by the alto and tenor lines in m. 142-143. Measures 143-146 are marked *Molto slargando*. The Harvard Dictionary of Music defines *slargando* as “slowing down.”⁴ Here, both hands are playing chords in modally mixed tonality

(C Major/C Minor), while both feet are playing in octaves, E and D#, which seems to lead to E Minor.

Section A' begins in C Major at m. 147 but moves quickly through many other harmonic centers. Again, there is the underpinning of pedal point throughout. Notable pedal points are found at m. 151-161, 162-168, and 169-170. This section is marked *Le double plus vite (Mouvmt. du commencement)* and I have called it a Toccata, for its fast, virtuosic, “touch-style” quality. Theme I, expanded, forms the basis of the section, but with the chorale superimposed on it in m. 157-161, 164-168, and m. 173-189. There is also the feeling of counterpoint between the left and right hands in m. 161-163 and m. 168-170. In those sections, the left hand figure is taken on a louder stop on the great division, and a comparison of the two sections shows the left hand eighth note figure in m. 168-170 to be a diminution of the quarter note figure in m. 161-163. A tonic pedal point at m. 189 gives the feeling of A Minor, but the V-I cadence in A Minor does not occur until m. 193-194.

The Coda, m. 190-199 ends with a plagal cadence in A Minor at m. 199. Melodic material in the Coda is drawn from the chorale. The descending eighth-note arpeggios that once again return at m. 194, are an expansion of transition material from m. 23-25. There is a *Largamente* quality here, but there is no marking from Franck to this effect. Measure 197 is a harmonic “misfit” to great effect. Composed of mostly non-chord tones, it could roughly be called V of IV (D Major). The player experiences much the same anticipation as that felt in the Bach organ chorale, *O Mensch, bewein dein Sunde gross*, with the approach of the Neapolitan of the dominant, in root position, just before the final cadence. This use of harmony has a dramatic effect in both places.

Well-played, this work can have listeners “on the edge of their seats.”

NOTES

¹ Vallas, Leon. *Cesar Franck*. Translated by Hubert Foss. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973) 232. Franck spoke to personal friends of his intention to write organ chorales, as Bach had, but on a different plan.

² Franck, Cesar. *Organ Works*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. 1987
This is the edition of the score recommended by Marie-Louise Langlais as being closer to the original manuscript, which is still in the hands of the family.

³ It is customary here to add stops beginning at m. 131. The largest boost in sound begins (depending upon the teacher and interpretation) either on the first sixteenth note of m. 136, or, as Mme. Marie-Louise Langlais urges, precisely on the second sixteenth note, echoing the beginning of the melodic phrases in much of the melody from the **B** section.

⁴ Apel, Willi. *Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Cambridge: Belknap Press. 1970. p. 780.