



Louis-James-Alfred Lefébure-Wély, lithograph

Louis-James-Alfred Lefébure-Wély

A sesquicentenary assessment

Michał Szostak

2019 marks the 150th anniversary of the death of this greatly significant figure in the development of 19th-century French organ music. In this major article, Dr Szostak considers a number of important factors in the life and work of this remarkable musician.

Prologue

This year sees the 150th anniversary of the death of an interesting and important figure for the French organ and organ music world of the 19th century, Louis-James-Alfred Lefébure-Wély (1817-1869). He was called by his contemporaries the “prince of organists”, a “notability”, a “dandy”, the “Auber of organ” and even – this is the very word of Alexandre Guilmant – “the most significant, the greatest and timeless organist of France”.¹

Anniversaries are good opportunities to recall characters who – although forgotten today – played an important role in their field in their time. This article presents facts from the life of this musician, and sheds light on the realities in which he lived.

Historical context

The cultural and moral plight that reached France during the Great Revolution (1789-1799) and the subsequent decades of the 19th century reflected a significant turning point in the whole culture of the country, but also – more significantly from our standpoint – in organ music. The period marked a temporary closure of the organ class at the Paris Conservatory; on the one hand, completing the work of the “old” classical era and, on the other, the arrival of the “new” romantic era. Organists of the so-called Golden Age left without leaving successors who would cultivate the Baroque (classical in the French sense) organ-playing technique. In this case, there was no natural transition for the old techniques into new ones. It can be

said that new music – in the spirit of developing Romanticism – began to appear in French organ music in the '30s and '40s of the 19th century. This phenomenon was closely related to the appearance in Paris in 1833 of Aristide

Cavaillé-Coll (1811-1899) and his instruments built in the spirit of symphonic style.

Another important factor at this time was the enlargement of the orchestra, an area enabling composers to create larger and larger symphonic works, where such factors as *crescendi* and *diminuendi* played a more expressive and important role.

It must also be remembered that



Lefébure-Wély's father's workplace: the organ in the Saint Jacques du Haut, Paris



Collection of 34 Noël's (1805-1823). Autograph of Antoine Lefébure-Wély. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

even up to the end of the 1860s, there was a relaxed atmosphere in the French churches – far from contemplative piety, as we know it. Whilst women naturally entered churches wearing hats, men did also, and the congregations would often vividly react to the music they heard by turning to face the organs, and the works that were liked were applauded.² When Adolph Hesse visited Paris in 1844, he observed that “organ playing in France was generally irreverent, although occasionally a significant talent came to my attention within this irreverence. Not infrequently a light pastorale heard during a church service, would turn into a thunderstorm before closing with a sort of operatic grand finale in free style. Given that this is not aligned with the German religious

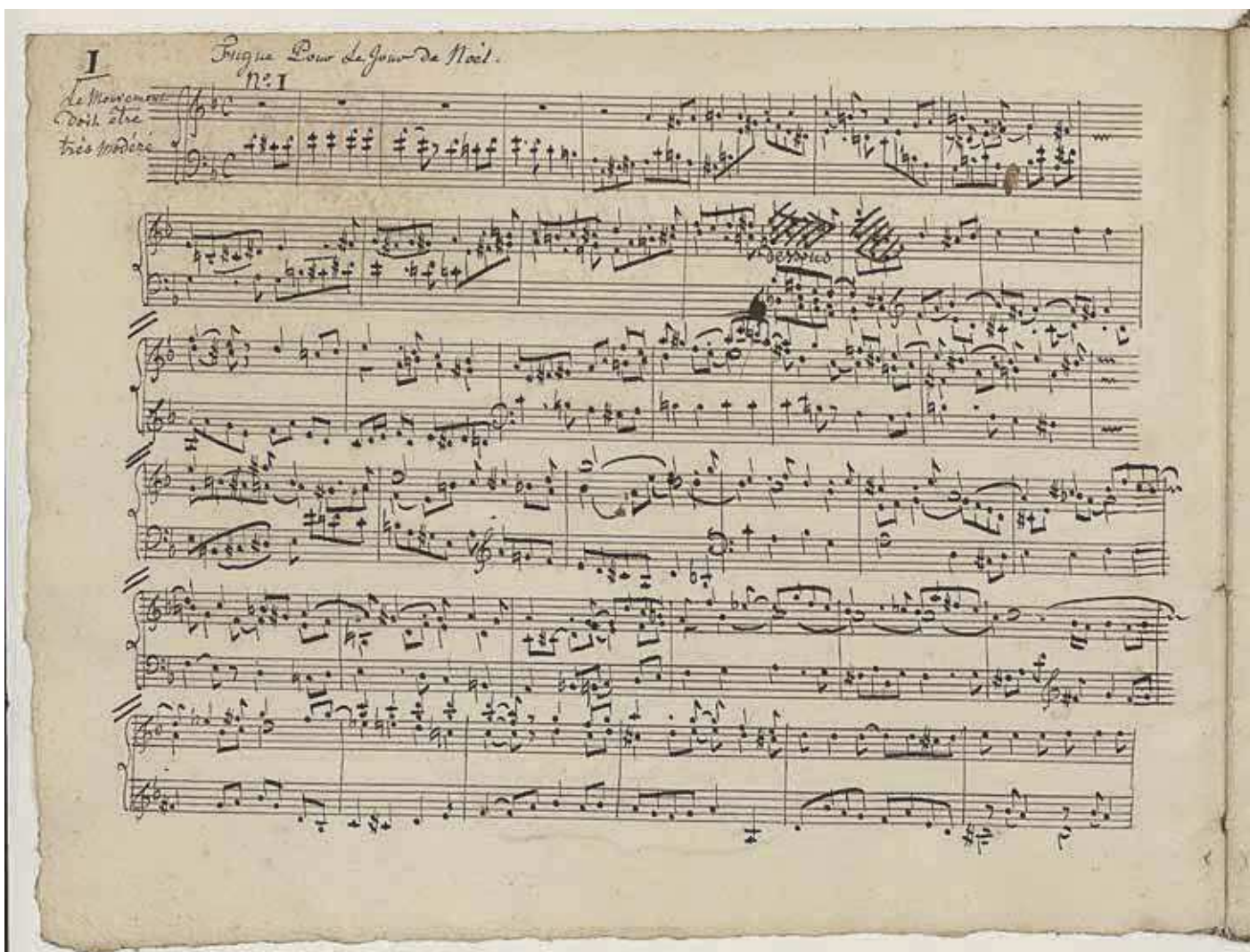
viewpoint, it must be admitted that such things are often performed with talent. In response to my astonishment over this, I was told that the clergy as well as the congregation expected light-hearted music.”³

These elements, as well as others, were important factors in creating one of the most original characters in the organ world of 19th century France.

Louis-James-Albert's father

The first natural and musically important person in the life of Louis-James-Alfred was his father, Isaac-François-Antoine Lefebvre. He was born in 1756 and lived all his life in Paris. He was an organist, a master of the harpsichord and the newly-invented pianoforte and also a composer.⁴ His first position as an

organist was at the comparatively insignificant church of Saint Jacques du Haut Pas in Paris. From 1802, he had been a substitute organist in Saint-Roch – close to the Tuilleries Garden and the Palais Royal – and in 1805, after a contest between Nicolas Séjan, Gervais-François Couperin and Isaac-François-Antoine, he became organist in this prestigious church in the city centre of Paris with its fine classical organ by Clicquot. After this, he changed his name from Isaac-François Lefebvre to Antoine Lefébure-Wély, which combined the original English surname of his wife to give him more noble character. He began to publish his works in 1778 and continued to do so throughout his life. As well as much religious music and compositions for the organ, we also find



Collection of 34 Noël (1805-1823). Autograph of Antoine Lefébure-Wély. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

within his oeuvre occasional comic operas (“Agès Bernau”, “Labyrinth”), sonatas for harpsichord and violin, a large-scale “Sonata for the piano-forte” (1808) and the “Fantasy for piano and harmonium”.⁵ In his organ compositions, in the form of airs, marches, *récitatifs*, fugues, Noël, *sorties* – written in the classical French style – we can also find examples of uncomplicated music, with simpler clear structures, easy to grasp but also full of charm. All these features will be found later in the art of his son, Louis-James-Alfred, to whom (as we have indicated) he was both the loving father and the first proud teacher.

His early life

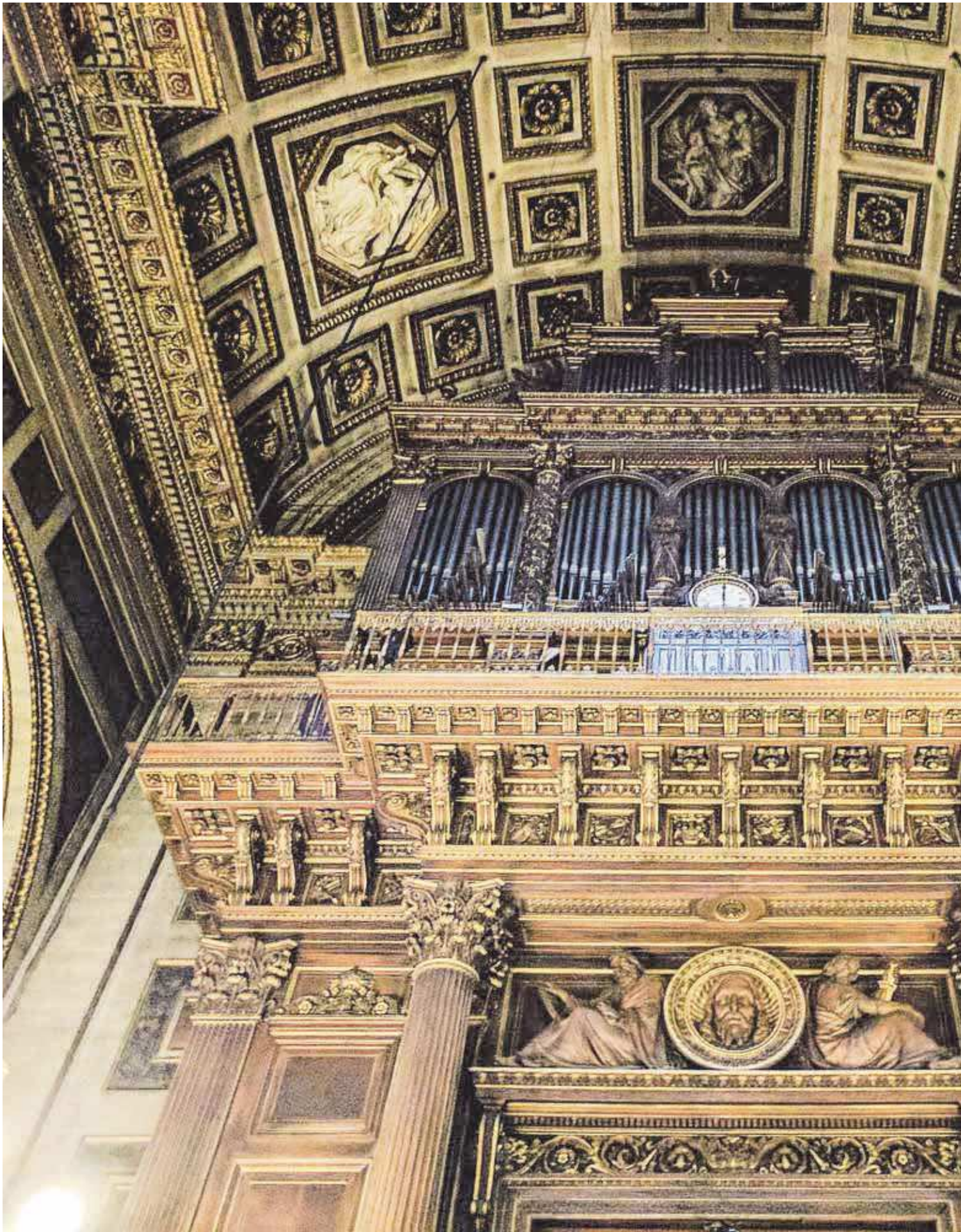
Louis-James-Alfred was born on Novem-

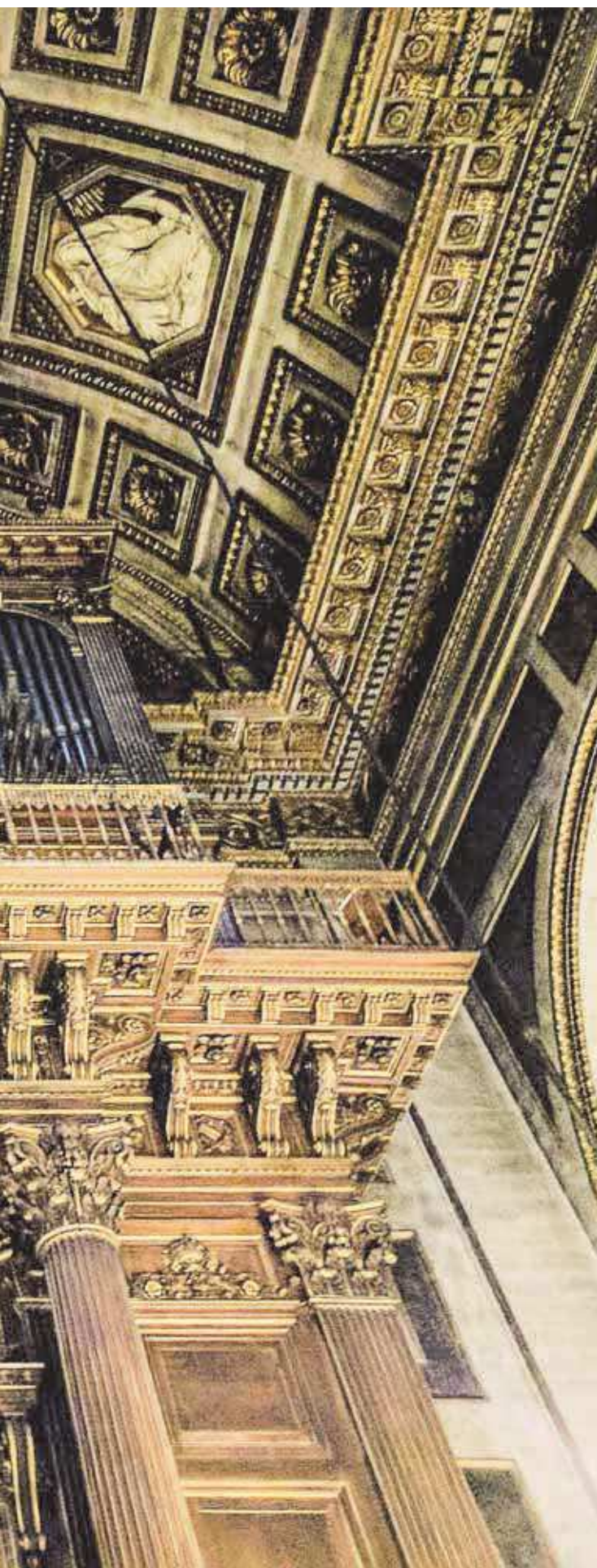
ber 13, 1817 in Paris. He was musically precocious and a natural organist; it was said he learned musical notes before the letters of the alphabet. The manuscript of his father’s unpublished Mass bears the note: “This Mass was played Easter Tuesday 1826 by my little boy Alfred, aged eight years and four months, on the organ of Saint-Roch to the satisfaction of everyone present. He retained throughout the Mass an extraordinary presence that surprised the people who were near him at the organ.”⁶ A year and a half later, his father suffered a stroke, paralysing the left side of his body and, in the days before disability insurance and employee benefits, it was imperative that the father be substituted by the son. Throughout those years, Antoine Lefébure-Wély

wrote down music for his son to play. Young Alfred substituted his father for the next five years until his father’s death in June 22, 1831, at which time the 14-year-old boy, thanks to the generous protection of Queen Marie-Amélie de Bourbon-Siciles (1782-1866), succeeded him as organiste titulaire.

The next steps in his life were the happy consequences of the protection and flowering of his musical talent. Louis-James-Alfred Lefébure-Wély’s first published composition (created when he was 13 years old) was announced in the “Journal Bibliographie de la France” in their issue of August 27, 1831 – entitled “Rondo composé pour le piano-forte, œuv. 1”.

In 1832, Lefébure-Wély entered the Paris Conservatoire and studied comp-





Specification

The Cavallé-Coll organ, La Madeleine church, Paris (1846)

I. Grand-Orgue (C-g³)

1	Montre	16'
2	Gambe	16'
3	Montre	8'
4	Salicional	8'
5	Flûte harmonique	8'
6	Bourdon	8'
<i>Jeux d'Anches</i>		
7	Prestant	4'
8	Quinte	2 ² / ₃ '
9	Doublette	2'
10	Fourniture	V r.
11	Cymbale	V r.
12	Trompette	8'
13	Cor anglaise	8'

II. Positif (C-g³)

1	Montre	8'
2	Viole de gambe	8'
3	Flûte douce	8'
4	Voix céleste *	8' II
<i>Jeux d'Anches</i>		
5	Prestant	4'
6	Dulciane	4'
7	Octave	2'
8	Trompette	8'
9	Musette	8'
10	Clairon	4'

* first use of this stop in church organ ever

III. Bombarde (C-g³)

1	Soubasse	16'
2	Flûte harmonique	8'
3	Flûte traversière	8'
4	Basse	8'
5	Flûte	4'
<i>Jeux d'Anches</i>		
6	Octavin	2'
7	Bombarde	16'
8	Trompette	8'
9	Clairon	4'

IV. Récit-expressif (C-g³)

1	Flûte harmonique	8'
2	Flûte octaviante	4'
3	Basson-Hautbois	8'
4	Voix humaine	8'
<i>Jeux d'Anches</i>		
5	Bombarde	16'
6	Trompette	8'
7	Clairon	4'
8	Trémulant	

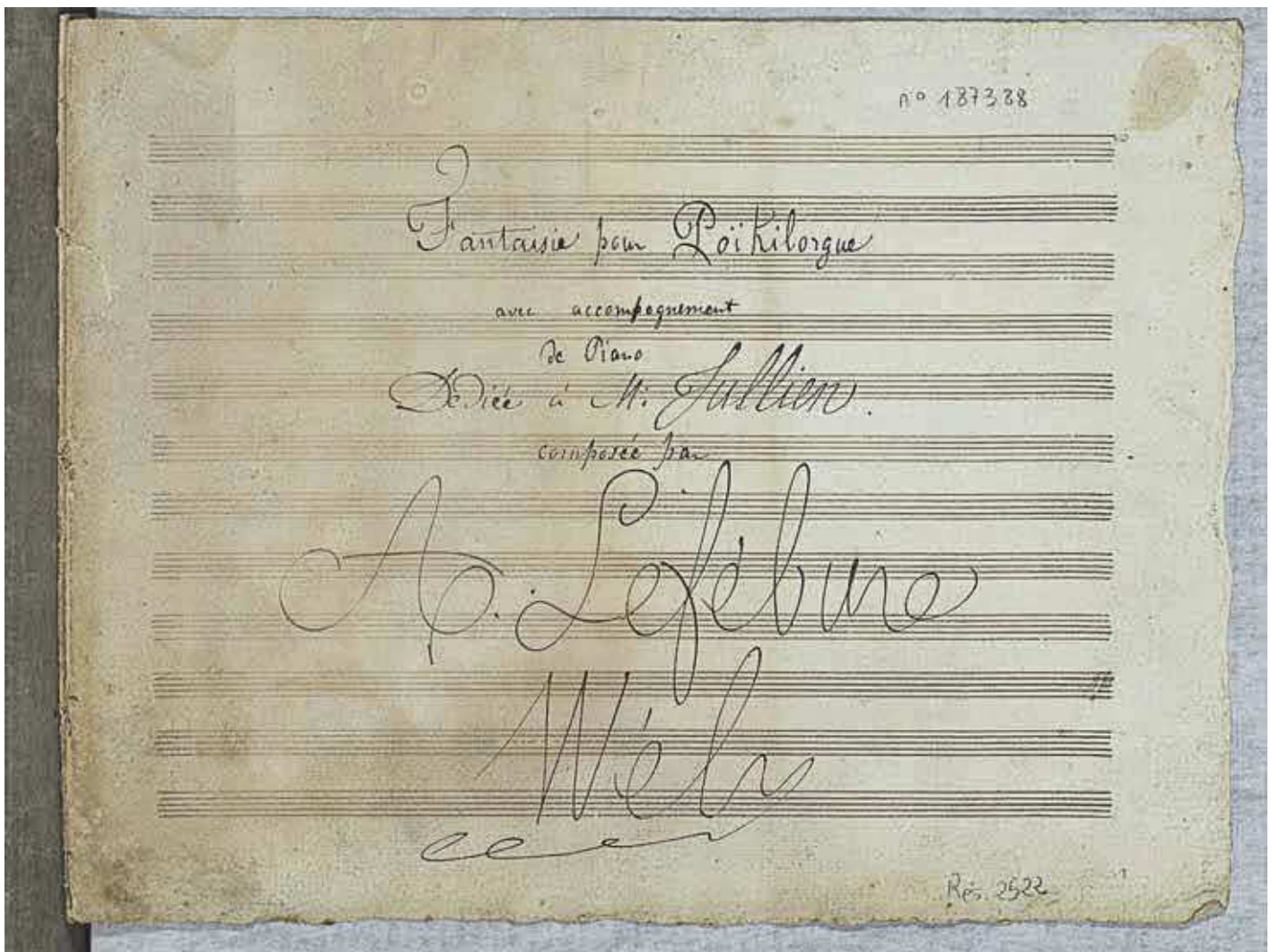
Pédale (C-f¹)

1	Quintaton	32'
2	Contrebasse	16'
3	Flûte	8'
4	Violoncelle	8'
<i>Jeux d'Anches</i>		
5	Bombarde	16'
6	Basson	16'
7	Trompette	8'
8	Clairon	4'

Couplers:

Positif/G.O., Bombarde/G.O., Récit/G.O., Bombarde/Positif, Récit/Positif, Récit /Bombarde, Tirrasses: G.O., Positif, Bombarde, Récit, Appels d'anches: G.O., Positif, Bombarde, Récit, Pédale, d'Orage

Source: Le Moël Michel, "Les Orgues de Paris", Délégation à l'action artistique de la ville de Paris, 1992.



Autograph *Fantaisie pour Poikilorgue avec accompagnement de piano*. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

osition under Henri Montan Berton (1767-1844), Jacques Fromental Halévy (1799-1862) and Adolphe Adam (1803-1856), organ under François Benoist (1794-1878) and Louis Nicolas Séjan (1786-1849) and piano under Pierre-Joseph-Guillaume Zimmermann (1785-1853). Three years later (1835) he left the Conservatoire with first prizes in piano and organ.⁷

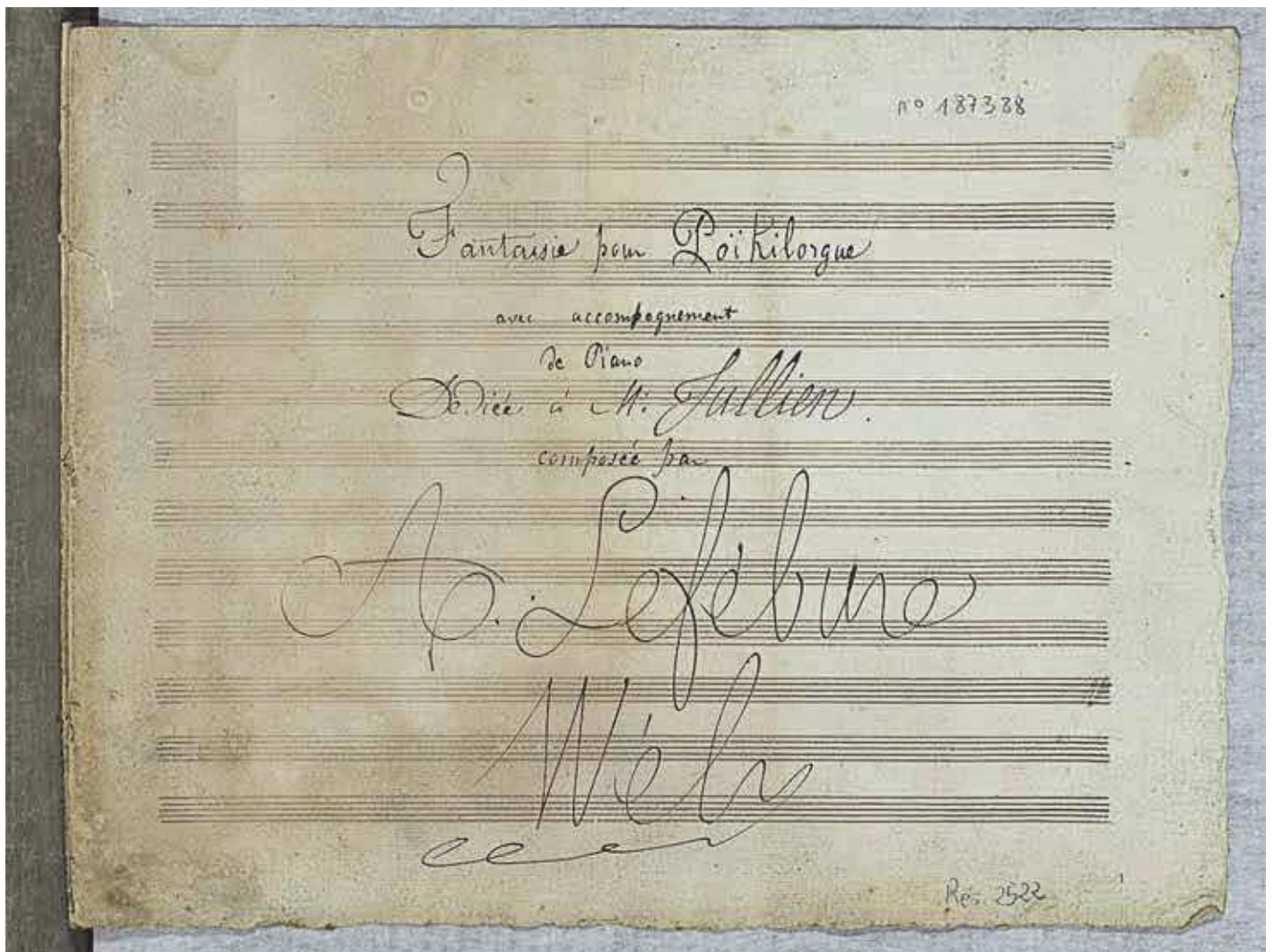
Lefébure-Wély quickly established his reputation as a virtuoso on the piano, organ, pédalier, harmonium, harmoniconde, melodium, poikilorgue and on virtually any other new keyboard invention that would spread his fame or, perhaps more significantly in the circumstances, fill his purse.⁸

Significant Friends and Colleagues

The significance of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll

for the organ world – not only in France – is in no doubt (see: “An appreciation of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll on the 120th anniversary of his death”, in: “The Organ”, No 387, February-April 2019). This innovative organ maker was a great admirer of various French and Belgian organists, whose talents helped him to introduce and develop the symphonic organ to the wider organ world. Among this group of preferred organists were: César-Auguste Franck (1822-1890), Nicolas-Jacques Lemmens (1823-1881), Charles-René Collin (1827-1911), Henri-Victor Tournailon (1832-1887), Félix-Alexandre-Amédée Guilmant (1837-1911), Henri Messerer (1838-1923) and Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937). But the highest and the most solid place was taken by the oldest person in this group, Lefébure-Wély. The close relat-

ions and friendship between Lefébure-Wély and Cavaillé-Coll were on professional and private grounds. Their cooperation began immediately when Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, a 21-year old organ builder from Toulouse, who, in 1833, moved to Paris and – within a matter of days – was awarded contracts to build organs for the Royal Basilica of Saint-Denis and for the Church of Notre Dame de Lorette. Cavaillé-Coll had a practical admiration for the 16-year-old Lefébure-Wély: he valued his musical skills as much as his ability to sell an organ. In 1839 Lefébure-Wély demonstrated *poikilorgue* two hours a day, four days a week, for the Exposition of Industry in Paris. He did the same during the following Exhibitions of 1844 and 1849 playing the organs installed there by Cavaillé-Coll, and was



Autograph *Fantaisie pour Poikilorgue avec accompagnement de piano*. Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

rewarded with medals for his playing of these innovative instruments.

For many years Lefébure-Wély was always the first to be asked by Cavaillé-Coll (and also other organ builders) to demonstrate and inaugurate their new instruments. Lefébure-Wély did so – alone or with other organists – for some of the most prestigious and most important organs in France, including the Parisian churches of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette (1838), Saint-Denis (1841), Saint-Roch (1842), La Madeleine (1846), Saint-Vincent-de-Paul (1852), Saint-Louis-d’Antin (1858), Sainte-Clotilde (1859), Versailles (1863) and the great French cathedrals of Saint-Brieuc (1848), Toulouse (1852), Saint-Omer (1855) and Carcassonne (1860),⁹ as well as instruments abroad, (for example, that of Saint-Nicolas in Gent, Belgium).

Church organist

Lefébure-Wély was appointed the titular organist of a number of the most prestigious Parisian churches: at first, Saint-Roch (1841-1846) located at the city centre,¹⁰ then in the newly built La Madeleine (1847-1857) and finally the largest instrument of Cavaillé-Coll in Saint-Sulpice (1863-1869) which was during that period the only five-manual instrument to emerge from the Cavaillé-Coll workshop. Lefébure-Wély became renowned for his mastery of instruments that were so powerful, more and more entering into the spirit of the symphonic organs and the increasing amount of music that was being written for them.

On being appointed organist to the Madeleine, in 1847 (succeeding Alexandre-Charles Fessy, 1804-1856), he

found the first newly built symphonic instrument of Cavaillé-Coll (see: “Evolution of Cavaillé-Coll’s symphonic organs”, in: “*The Organ*”, No 384, May-July 2018). Its resources, until then ignored, were destined to put within his power the realisation of his creative inspirations. With great ardour, and extraordinary skill, he assisted the impulse given to organ-building at this times. By physical science, and constant application he acquired the arts of different combination stops, extraordinary taste, alongside an inexhaustible variety of sonorous effect with his virtuosity. He found, in this church, musically select, delicate, and impressionable listeners, who responded to his natural inclinations and the originality of his playing, and who were transfixed by his brilliant exhibition of extempore playing.¹¹



As organist of La Madeleine, Lefébure-Wély had occasion to play important ceremonies. For example, he performed organ music – between works played by orchestra with soloists – for instance during the funeral of Frédéric Chopin in 1849. His organ performance of chosen Chopin's preludes “produced a profound sensation and went straight to the hearts of the audience”.¹²

He relinquished as church organist in 1857 (his successor was Saint-Saëns) and started then to work on his comic opera *Les recruteurs*, which was premiered 1861 in Paris but never achieved great success. But he continued to participate in public organ inaugurations of strictly church instruments.

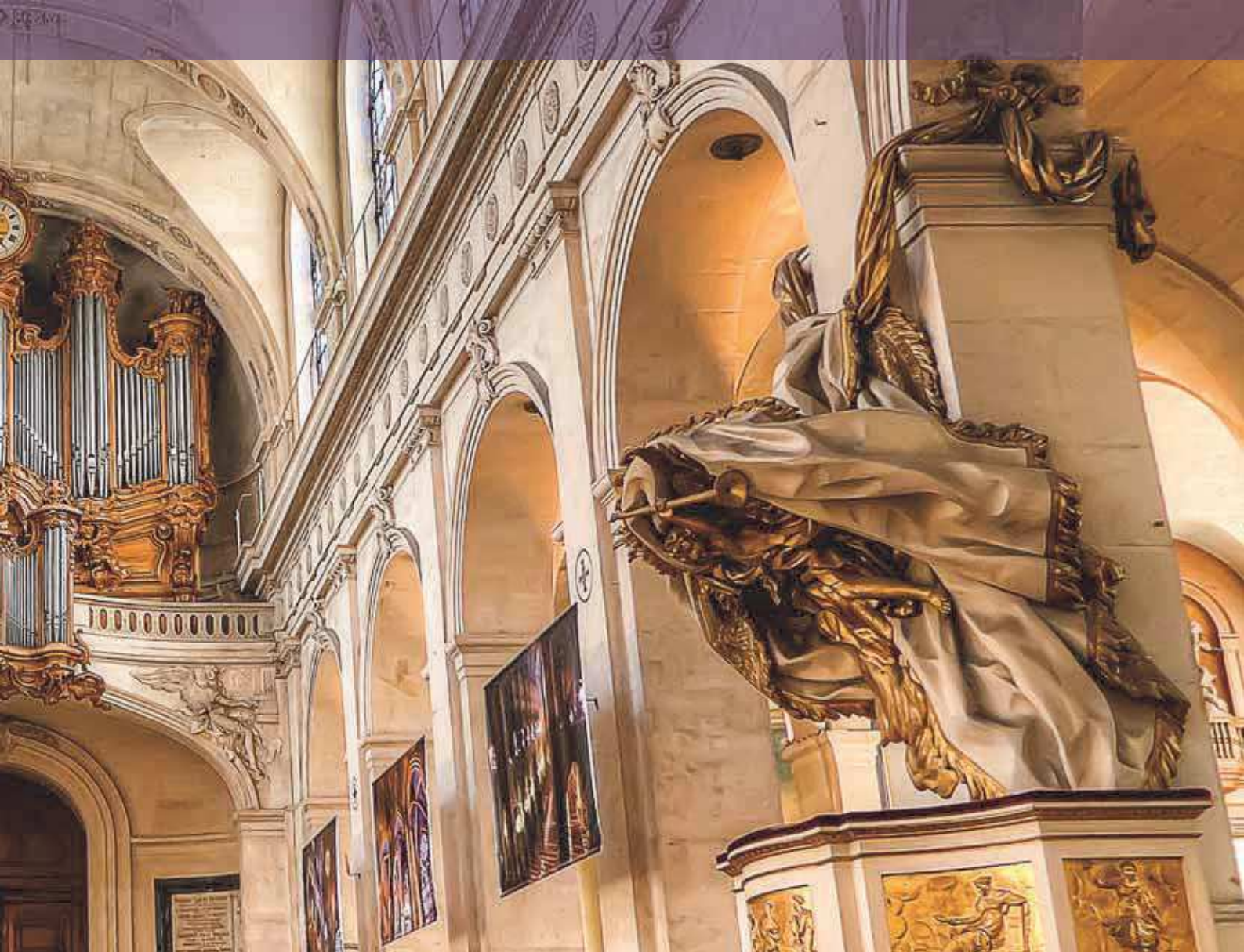
Lefébure-Wély was at the height of his reputation, when, in the month of April, 1863, he took possession of the

newly rebuilt (1862) Cavallé-Coll great organ at Saint-Sulpice succeeding Georges Schmitt (1821-1900). In his new position, he found himself exposed to the jealousy of his rivals, and to a fresh outburst of criticism. The principal charges against him were the want of religious character in his ideas, but that, however, constituted a great part of the secret by which he achieved success in a church – the services of which he undoubtedly distinguished. He could not bring himself not to shine, not to please, and for this he tended to sacrifice seriousness. The intellectual side of his art, the style of the fugue, damped his dashing nature.

Not that he ignored or did not appreciate these things; far from it. In his notebook for May 1865, he wrote: “I extemporised today an interminable fugue for them; I hope they will not now

say that I can play polkas only!” He was a profound harmonist, and no one was more capable of coming back to his melody, by a series of chords, sometimes astonishingly daring. On other occasions, a simple modulation sufficed to carry him away from his original theme. Yet, such was his love for art, that he neglected nothing which could contribute to expand and embellish and then extemporised according to the sense and character of the words. Ought not every good organist to do the same? His extempore playing was, indeed, the accentuated re-echo of his nervous disposition. He entranced and carried away even those who did not like his manner.

His activity as a church organist was generally speaking not ‘standard’. He occasionally did anything for an effect: for example, he asked church wardens



Interior, Saint Roch

to turn down the gaslights during his rendition of a “storm” or he would run back and forth between the great organ on the loft and a harmonium in the front of the church at the solemn closing of the Month of Mary, before the 5,000 plus congregation of Saint-Sulpice¹³ (for a description of the different sources of inspirations for the performer see: “Instrument as a source of inspiration for the performer”, in: *The Organ*, No 386, Fall 2018). Rossini once said to Lefébure-Wély, justly: “People like you much more for your faults than for your good qualities”.

As Author

In 1845, as an organist at Saint-Roch church, Lefébure-Wély published (at Costallat et Cie Editeurs in Paris) his “Méthode Théoretique et Pratique pour harmonium” which, although intended

for those learning to play harmonium and poikilorgue was, until the appearance of the organ school of Lemmens (1862), the only French-language set of organ rules in a new romantic style and a new way of execution which required constant legato and homophonic thinking. Lefébure-Wély emphasises in his work that learning how to play the harmonium is a great introduction to learning to play the organ by permitting the student to become familiar with the majority of performance problems that occur in organ playing. Due to the small size and the affordable price of the harmonium, the publication was a great success for the practitioners of this new instrument at that time.¹⁴

As Improviser

Lefébure-Wély was equally known and valued for his organ improvisations,

particularly of music that contemporary society liked to hear in operas and at concerts – music that was accessible, full of imagination, and rhythmic. At that time, secular works of operatic provenance were often heard in churches, with drunken songs becoming subject to liturgical improvisations. Rolls and galops were played during Offertories, and hunting songs used as substitutes for Sequences. Clergy even demanded this type of music from organists, believing that it attracted people to churches.¹⁵ The only figure who stood out from this background was Lefébure-Wély, who could find the compromise between demands from people and good taste with elegance.

His admirers called on him many times to adopt the ‘religious style’. However, he had his habits and his preferences and above all his ‘clientele’.

Also, even though his contemporaries were unanimous in their admiration for his improvisations, he often seems to have taken the easier alternative, the immediately accessible option, music that doesn't ask any questions. An important Parisian organist at the time, Auguste Bazille (1828-1891), described his improvisations as "endowed with a charming imagination". He knew how to show off the organ's different timbres.¹⁶ He captivated musicians as well as laymen. Rossini attended one of his recitals, at Saint-Sulpice on Easter Monday, 1864, and was ready to leave after hearing Lefébure-Wély's Offertoire in F and Bach's Fugue in E Major, but he changed his mind when the organist started to perform a storm. Rossini said: 'A storm! I always enjoyed those. I will stay'. And he did¹⁷ (to have the notion how a storm could sound under the fingers of Lefébure-Wély, see his "Scene pastorale pour une inauguration d'orgue ou une messe de minuit", No 1 in "L'Organiste moderne", 9e Livraison, 1867). Saint-Saëns described Lefébure-Wély's organ technique as typical of the period, "his style is better adapted to the piano than to the organ and his pedal playing similar that of the other French organists" (we may compare such a comment with the pedal parts of Franck's organ works).

Lefébure-Wély's playing was virtuosic, and as a performer he was rated above eminent contemporaries including César Franck. Cavaillé-Coll preferred Lefébure-Wély's music and his relationship with an audience more than those of Franck. Cavaillé-Coll in a letter, dated November 15, 1857, wrote his impressions after a funeral played by Lefébure-Wély at La Madeleine: "The prelude was

a genuine funeral symphony (compare "Marche funebre" from "Meditaciones religiosas", op. 122, 1857) and the sortie a great, beautiful funeral march. Lefébure-Wély shows what a great artist he is on the solemn occasions. All the orchestras in the world cannot equal, for liturgical purposes, a symphony played by Mr. Lefébure on my organ". Thanks to his improvisational skills, Lefébure-Wély was the best-known and the most respected French organist in Europe.¹⁸

As Composer

Lefébure-Wély's organ compositions – according to reported comments by Saint-Saëns's – did not match his improvisations. Lefébure-Wély was the first of a new generation of romantic symphonic organists in the homophonic trend – alongside Fessy and Charles Simon (1788-1866) – who grew up in opposition to the 'old' classical organ school, with Alexandre Pierre François Boëly (1785-1858), Félix Danjou (1812-1866) and Benoist as their representative.¹⁹ Five years younger, César Franck was a great admirer of Lefébure-Wély's compositions and improvisations²⁰ (compare Franck's "Andantino", op. 25, composed in 1858, which looks like it was based upon music of Lefébure-Wély).

As a composer, Lefébure-Wély was an enthusiastic purveyor of light, elegant and successful music – witty trifles that combined sparkling melodic verve with simplistic rudimentary compositional techniques.²¹ The organist of Leeds Town Hall described Lefébure-Wély as "undoubtedly one of the most clever organists of the day. He wrote some very attractive pianoforte pieces and many

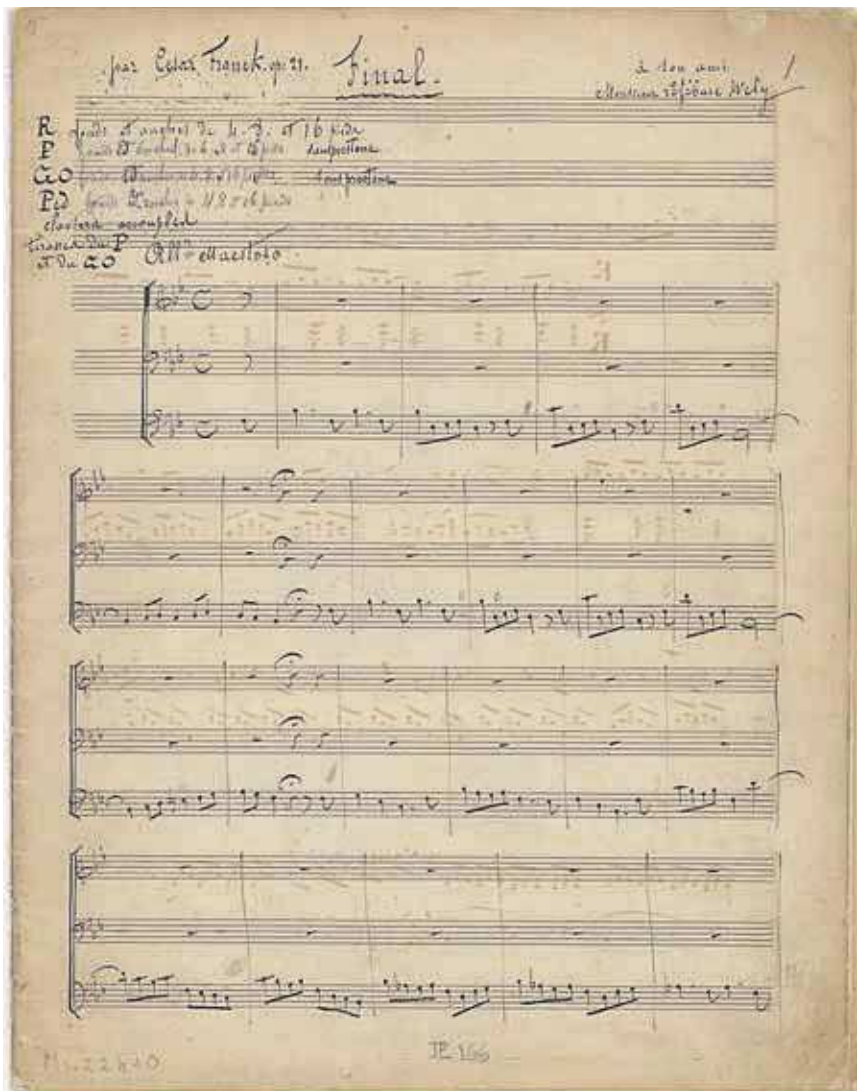
popular organ works which had been played by many organists in England and had made his name not only familiar, but famous."²²

Among about 200 compositions Lefébure-Wély wrote works for piano, harmonium, organ, choir, chamber ensemble, symphony orchestra and opéra-comique. His compositions for organ include (in chronological order): "Six offertoires", op. 34 (ca. 1857); another "Six grands offertoires", op. 35, composed for his son (c. 1857); "Meditaciones religiosas", op. 122, dedicated to 'À sa majesté la reine Doña Isabel II' (1858), where we can find pieces of organ music in different character – from Sortie and Marche with great power up to sweet flute cantilenas and adorable "Choir de Voix Humaines"; "L'Office catholique. 120 Morceaux divisés en dix suites composés pour l'harmonium ou l'orgue à tuyaux", op. 148, which was the Hommage à Monseigneur de la Bouillerie, Évêque de Carcassonne, published by Régnier-Canaux (1861); "Six morceaux pour l'orgue", op. 36, contained 3 Marches and 3 Élévations, published by Graff (1863); the famous "Boléro de concert", op. 166, published by Régnier-Canaux (1865), composed for harmonium but executed on organ with great popularity; "L'organiste moderne. Collection de morceaux d'orgue dans tous les genres. En 12 livraisons", Hommage à Mr. l'Abbé Hamon, Curé de St. Sulpice – these pieces are based on improvised motifs during Offices at St. Sulpice (1867-69); "Vade-mecum de l'Organiste", op. 187, contains Entrées et Sorties de Chœur, Versets, Préludes pour Amen, Élévations et Communions, Offertoires, Marches brillantes pour Processions (1869).²³

Lefébure-Wély shows what a great artist he is on the solemn occasions. All the orchestras in the world cannot equal, for liturgical purposes, a symphony played by Mr. Lefébure on my organ"



Interior, Saint Sulpice



Autograph of the “Final”, op. 21, of C. Franck with dedication to L.J.A. Lefébure-Wély.

Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Because of the changing tastes of 19th century audiences Lefébure-Wély's compositions are less substantial than those of Franck and others. They have not held such a prominent place in the repertory since his death; but his music in the years following continued to appear in programmes on the Continent and at the Leeds' Town Hall (a pastoral fantasia)²⁴ and in Edinburgh on the renovated organ in St Paul's Episcopal Church.²⁵

The mutual respect in which Lefébure-Wély was held among musicians is demonstrated by the works dedicated to him. Franck did so for his “Final”, op. 21, composed in 1860-1862, while Saint-Saëns did the same for the series of “Six duos pour harmonium et piano”, op. 8, composed in 1858. Lefébure-Wély

dedicated his works mainly to those clergy who appreciated his talent, or who were in charge of the churches and important organs where he played; he also dedicated his works to those members of the aristocracy who supported his musical activities financially.

As a Person

The operatic composer Ambroise Thomas (1811-1896), called Lefébure-Wély “a sure, devoted, and faithful friend; endowed with cutting frankness, tempered, however, by a large amount of kindness; an amiable companion; generous with the calculating spirit peculiar to musicians; witty and caustic like a real child of Paris, as he was, and, moreover, a spoilt child of Paris; of naturally distinguished manners, an

enemy of everything trivial and commonplace. Possessing, like all men upon whom fortune smiles when they are young, a very strong opinion of himself individually, and never neglecting an opportunity of declaring his own merit, such, with well-directed activity, and exceeding versatility of humour, is the complete physiognomy of Lefébure-Wély, whose reputation extended to foreign countries, especially Germany.”²⁶

The afore-mentioned organist of Leeds Town Hall, on describing Lefébure-Wély's personality, said: “I never met with a more genial, kind-hearted Frenchman. He was the beau ideal of a gentleman. I hope I have said sufficient to show that Wély was no ordinary character, but a genius of which the musical world is justly proud.”²⁷

Lefébure-Wély married a noted soprano (to whom Charles Gounod in 1855 dedicated his popular song “Sérénade”), who gave him two daughters, Marie and Émilie (both played duets with their father), and a son (who lived in Germany). Marie Lefébure-Wély had fallen deeply in love in 1864 with Pablo Sarasate (1844-1908), the Spanish violin virtuoso; after a three year courtship they were engaged to be married, but when Sarasate returned from a concert tour he found his beloved engaged to someone else.²⁸ The second daughter, Émilie Lefébure-Wély, was married to Paul Brunet in September 1870; the ceremony took place in La Trinité church, with music by Alexandre Guilmant performed on the Cavaillé-Coll organ; Ambroise Thomas was the whiteness of the bride.²⁹

Last moments

Nothing lasts forever and the joyful life of Lefébure-Wély began to decline. “The Musical World” described his last moments with these words: “A blade so thoroughly tempered, naturally wore out the scabbard. On the organ at St. Sulpice, requiring a great deal of physical strength, Lefébure, whose health during the last years of the 1860s

was already much shaken, expended his energies with an ardour that accelerated his end. He was eaten up by fever; his extempore playing revealed his state. He seemed to fear, the other day, that he would not have sufficient time to sing, in his own harmonious language, all the melodies in his soul. The moment arrived, however, when he was compelled to beg Mr. André Louis Dessane, the organist of the choir, to take his place 'up there'; when he was compelled to trust his reputation to that gentleman, as distinguished as modest, whom, during his life time, he designated as his successor. It was only with great difficulty that Lefébure could now ascend the steep stairs leading to the organ loft. One day, he promised to perform at a marriage, and he wished to keep his word. He was, therefore, laboriously making his way up, when suddenly the Swiss gave the sign with his halberd, announced the commencement of the ceremony. In less time than is required to write down the fact, the gallant artist, ran up forty steps, and, bathed in perspiration, and suffering from a cough which brought blood-tinged foam to his lips, he placed his hands upon the keyboard. He was never, perhaps, grander. It was his last piece of extempore playing; the farewell of the organist to the organ, the strains of which are like an echo of the Infinite."³⁰

Lefébure-Wély passed away on New Year's eve, December 31, 1869. Because it was at night, some sources show 1870 as the year of this death. He left two daughters, a son, beloved wife – herself an eminent artist, who appreciated him so well – and many sympathetic friends.

Information about the death of Lefébure-Wély spread around Europe fast. Just nine days after the tragic situation the London based, "The Musical World", said: "M. Lefébure-Wély, the well-known French organist and composer for the organ, fell dead, a few days since, at the foot of his organ, in the church of St. Sulpice, Paris".³¹

The funeral took place at Saint-Sulpice church, where the great organ

was draped with a long and wide black crepe, dotted with silver stars. In the nave a congregation of artists headed by Ambroise Thomas and Charles Gounod; among the people of the world who had come to say a last goodbye to their favourite organist, were the most elegant faithful of Faubourg, Saint-Germain and Chaussée-d'Antin. Lefébure-Wély's body was laid to rest in a grave at the Père-Lachaise cemetery not far from the Chopin monument. At the request of Ambroise Thomas, Victor Baltard (1805-1874), the chief architect of the City of Paris, took charge of the drawings for the funeral monument of Lefébure-Wély and a friend of the family, H. Chevalier, executed the sculpture.³²

In memoriam

As Ambroise Thomas proclaimed, at the tomb in his lengthy funeral oration: "By the death of this great virtuoso, aristocratic and elegant Paris has lost its own particular organist. I mean, that one among contemporary organists, whose talent was a more faithful expression than that of any one else of a class of persons of the present epoch, who pursue the road to Heaven with every possible regard to their own comfort. This favour, this reputation, was something he saw spring up and grow without much effort on his part, for he simply obeyed his artistic temperament, and followed the impulses of a lively disposition, and of an extraordinarily fertile imagination; it placed him at the head of a new school, which possessed the secret of combining, in due proportions, melody and sentiment with science. Lefébure-Wély wrote a great deal for his instrument, for the harmonium and for the voice. I will cite merely his 'Cantiques', which are exceedingly well known; a remarkable 'O Salutaris'; a collection of 'Offer-tor-

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ies'; some pieces composed expressly for the Mustel Harmonium; a fantasia entitled 'Titania', for piano; the 'Duo sympathique', dedicated to his two daughters. At the opéra-comique, he brought out a work, 'Les recruteurs', in which Capoul [Joseph Victor Amédée (1839-1924), French lyric tenor] made his first appearance. It is

but a few days since that, with a hand already struck by death, he traced his last compositions: 'Le chant du Cygne', a melancholy reverie, for pianoforte and harmonium, in which we perceive very plainly the presentiment of his approaching death. He has left some posthumous works. In all that he composed we must always admire the grace, the good taste, the purity of the style. He has left works, noble in character, and elevated in sentiment, which will bear evidence of his passage among us, and of the influence he must have exerted. This valiant and sincere artist has left his mark. In the gallery of organists of Saint-Sulpice, in which Nivert represents correctness; Clérambault majesty; Couperin, religious uncton; Nicolas Sejan, elevated thought; Louis Sejan, elegance of form; and Georges Schmitt, impetuosity, and brilliancy; Lefébure-Wély may claim many of the qualities of his predecessors, adding the radiant charm of melody, and the scintillations of a most charming fancy. Lefébure-Wély had taken his place among the most eminent organists, not of his time, but of all ages, of all schools! This is a great justice rendered by a great musician, organist himself, to a virtuoso-improviser who had not feared to take in-hand the destinies of the modern organ illustrated by Cavaillé-Coll. But what could this innovator have been without the genius of appropriation of Lefébure-Wély? For it was not one of the least merits of this organist

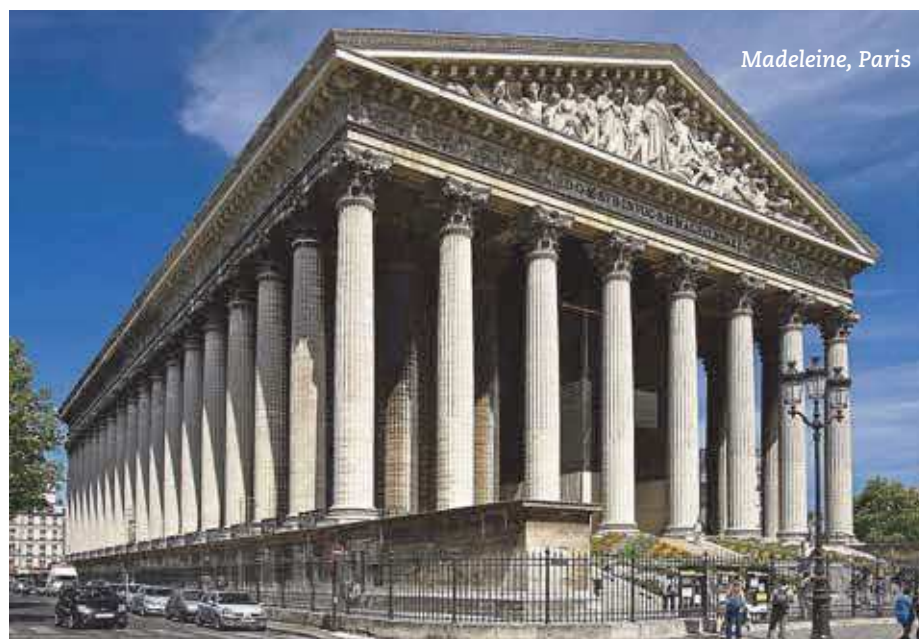
that this ardent zeal, desirous to produce the new inventions, to bring them up to him. Without the immense and versatile talent of this virtuoso, do the harmonium, the melody and the harmonichord exist today as instruments of concert? It is doubtful, Lefébure had made school there; many imitators followed his path, but none could match him. Always in progress, Lefébure marked for each year a new path. Who does not remember in recent times his beautiful symphonic sketches performed on the Mustel organ. Was it not a new transformation of style and execution, that great art applied to small organs? We will no longer hear him, but there will still be a considerable number of written works from him. In some of these light works, one must always admire grace, taste, and purity of style; others a noble character, a high feeling, which will bear witness to his passage and the influence he was to exercise. Valiant and sincere artist, he has left his mark and must be unanimously regretted. A reliable, devoted and faithful friend, he leaves in our hearts a sweet and tender memory which will never be erased!"³³

Many churches where Lefébure-Wély inaugurated new instruments organised a funeral service in his memory. A memorial ceremony took place in the church of Saint-Sernin on Thursday, January 20, 1870 as the "Journal de Toulouse" reported: "This eminent and much lamented artist inaugurated the organs of the principal churches of our city: St Jerome, St Nicolas, St Sernin, la Dalbade, Saint Etienne, la Daurade and Jesus; more than these he will be remembered so much for his remarkable talent which has given him a place among us, and it is for: that the artists of Toulouse want to associate, in the same feeling, to offer him a testimony of unanimous and sympathetic regrets. Artists, music lovers, and all friends and admirers of the famous organist are invited. Mass will be sung in Gregorian chant; at the Offertory, the 'Recordare' composed there by M. Massis and

interpreted by several basses in unison."³⁴

Also in London, "The Musician" in the issue from February 19, 1870 said: "English Church musicians have, for the most part, their own view of the deceased French organist. Although both as composer and executant he exercised a not inconsiderable influence in the formation of the modern French organ school, it may be questioned whether his labours really advanced the true interests of art. Lefébure-Wély and his fellows are a creation of circumstances which do not affect us in England. The brilliant and dramatic masses and other service music of the Roman Catholic Church of modern times have long had the effect of indisposing the worshippers of that faith to listen to the strict organ music of Bach and Mendelssohn; and thus has arisen a demand for a more orchestral and dramatic handling of the king of instruments. The question propounded to themselves by the late Lefébure-Wély and his followers was not how they could sustain organ music in its special dignity and purity, so much as to how they could supply organ voluntaries which should satisfy popular cravings; by relying upon the

more worldly qualities of strongly expressed and exciting emotions, and incessant brilliant action. On the other hand, these men have in a certain direction, and with the aid of modern mechanical improvements of an orchestral tendency, succeeded in adding to the number of organ effects by building upon orchestral methods. The organ music of this school is but one more illustration of the craving for high colouring in all branches of modern art. In breadth of conception, and in a certain large method of handling his material, such as it was, Lefébure-Wély probably surpassed most, if not all, of his peers. However, some of his music borders upon the limits of vulgarity. He had, however, to a considerable extent, the precious gift of tune, a strong sense of rhythm, and an appreciable grasp of form and proportion. His harmonies are at times characterised by chromatic crudeness, though occasionally he attained boldness and weight. The offertories, graduals, communions, and other organ works of this writer are, for the most part, well known in England. He also laboured in other branches of the art – notably as an arranger. His adaptation, for instance, of the famous



Madeleine, Paris

old air of Stradella's for violincello and piano, has enjoyed much popularity on the continent, as an effective piece of chamber concert music."³⁵

The wide knowledge of his talent is confirmed when the London-based journal, "The Musical World", informed its readers that "the sum subscribed towards a monument in honour of Lefébure-Wély" reached 5,877 francs by the day of April 3, 1870.³⁶

Executive style

Lefébure-Wély's music today has been the subject of increasing interest. It may not be comparable to the wide esteem enjoyed by Franck, Guilmant or Widor, however, the composer's character is unmistakable and his compositions appear more frequently in today's organ recital programmes. Several publishers (e.g., Cramer Music Ltd.) have issued revivals of chosen Lefébure-Wély's organ compositions and we can find new CD recordings devoted – sometimes entirely – to his works (such as that performed by Richard Lea on the organ of Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, Ben Van Oosten on the organ of the Parisian La Madeleine, and Ursula Hauser on the Ladegast organ of Schwerin Cathedral).

What is the executive style of Lefébure-Wély's works? The performer who wants to interpret his organ music in a historically oriented way should perform a number of preparatory actions before proceeding (or in parallel) to work on the instrument.³⁷ As examples: 1. become acquainted with the instruments that the composer had at his disposal, or had in mind at the time of creation (for Lefébure-Wély it will be the following Parisian instruments: Saint-Roch, La Madeleine, Saint-Sulpice); 2. get to know the composer's views on the implementation of his

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music or heralded assumptions in the field of agogics, dynamics, articulation; 3. study the source scriptures and treatises that reflect the spirit of a given epoch (literature about 19th century French organ music is extensive and easy to access). In this way, the performer, equipped with theoretical knowledge and the recognised historical context,

can – in a historically oriented way – proceed to the implementation of the studied assumptions practically on an instrument.

The executive practice of Lefébure-Wély's works, which is the resultant of his compositional style and echoes of the era, is characterised by the following features:

1. Smooth changing of fingers on the key to keep legato;
2. Shortening the value of notes (by inserting pauses) to separate the harmonic divisions in live narration;
3. Combining common notes in different voices;
4. Using pauses in the parties of one hand to change the registration,³⁸
5. Use of distinct rhythms (e.g. cheerful pastorals, marches, polkas, waltzes),³⁹
6. Using live temp and accelerandi and ritardandi to emphasise the narration in the work;
7. Focus on the effect that music would give – spectacular examples here are imitations of nature scenes (storm,⁴⁰ battle scenes, scenes from the life of village communities);
8. Unusual musicality;
9. The use of chromatic scale, reduced chords and seventh chord sequences;
10. Manual texture drawing from piano technique;
11. Relatively poor – though independent – pedal part usually playing the role of a bass base;
12. Registration using all the colour

possibilities of symphonic organs (i.e.: great contrasts, colouristic diverse sets of solo, possibilities of dynamic expression), its performances were directed more towards the expression flowing from the instrument than to the expression flowing from the composition.⁴¹

Epilogue

Again, using the words of Ambroise Thomas: "The organ, that sublime instrument with a powerful voice and infinite riches, was not to participate in the prodigious movement of musical art in the 19th century. Lefébure-Wély took his glorious place among the most eminent organists. If his instinct refused him to follow the too philosophical tendencies of his time, he was and he remained simply a great virtuoso, a great musician. It is left to others to recall this marvellous execution, this profound science of combinations, this exquisite choice, this happy mixture of so many different timbres, this inexhaustible variety of effects and sounds, and finally those beautiful improvisations which were uniting charm, elegance, clarity, often greatness."⁴²

Lefébure-Wély had an exact sense of the sound space of the organ. He understood perfectly well, as his father had of the harpsichord to the piano; that the organ of classicism had evolved for the symphonic world. His art is that of the orchestra of the 19th century, or the piano executed on the organ, and in this he prodigiously advanced the literature of his instrument. Make no mistake, in his steps, in the meditations of his elevations, he opened the door to the new universe that will quickly encompass Franck and Widor. And if the latter brings a new technical virtuosity to the organ, it is because he learned it in Germany, in a world still based on the polyphonic variation of the chorale, a virtuosity which Lefébure-Wély then César Franck seem well to have utilised in their composition for the pipe instrument. The virtuosity of the effect, a reflection of a bourgeois society, is

almost the essence of the art of Lefébure-Wély. The art of Lefébure-Wély is not in the rehabilitation of his predecessors, but in the certainty based on Cavaillé-Coll's research, that it was necessary to look forward, towards a musical message of progress in the performance, improvisation and composition. He was a perfect example of the honest man of his time.⁴³

Lefébure-Wély is a rare case of an organ composer, whose works show us true happiness of living and the pure joy of making music with charm, a smile and the great esteem for an audience. We cannot forget that one of the main purposes of music (organ music too) is to give hope to the people – hope for a better tomorrow, a hope for a better world. Let's take these works and play them with appropriate esteem and elegance to keep the memory alive of an interesting man who finished his joyful life 150 years ago. ■

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