

CD Liner notes:

Although **Charles-René** is today nearly unknown as a composer, he was a respected figure in the musical community of Paris in the late 19th century. He was born Charles Olivier René Bibard in Paris in 1863 into a family of traveling theater artists. His father, Charles Victor Bibard, also known simply as René, taught music in his retirement and was his son's first teacher. ("René" was the family's stage name, deriving from the middle name of Charles René's great-grandfather.) At the Paris Conservatory, Charles-René's teachers included Delibes. After winning a piano performance competition and one in counterpoint, he entered the prestigious Académie des Beaux Arts competition, the Prix de Rome, in composition. In 1883, he won a "second Second Grand Prize," behind the "first Second" won by a composer he seemed destined to follow, Claude Debussy. The following year, Debussy won the competition outright, and Charles-René took first Second prize with his opera, *The Prodigal Son*.

Charles-René was primarily a music teacher, and held a position at the Institute Rudy in Paris. He is most often remembered for teaching harmony, counterpoint, and composition to a young Maurice Ravel and for urging Ravel's father to send his son to the Paris Conservatory. It was Charles-René "who gave the future composer of *Rhapsodie Espagnole* his solid foundation of musical notation with the harmonic sophistication that characterizes the work of Ravel."*

Charles-René appears to have been not just a cloistered academic, but quite active in the Paris music scene. He followed Debussy into the position of accompanist for an amateur choral society, directed by Charles-Marie Widor, composer and organist at the church of Saint-Sulpice. He was also a member of the Salon of French Musicians, founded in 1911, that included Massenet, Saint-Saëns, Widor, Fauré, Dukas, and, of course, Debussy. Charles-René was a vice president of the Salon at the time of his death in 1935.

Charles-René produced a small but varied body of pieces, including a number of piano transcriptions of orchestral works. Charles-René wrote two masses, both of which appear to have been neglected for many years. *La Première Messe* was recently "rediscovered" and performed at a choral festival in Heilbronn, Germany, in 2009.

La Deuxième Mass, The Second Mass in A-flat, for a chorus of two voices, two soloists, and "orchestra or organ (or piano)," was first published in 1905 by the now defunct publisher, Adrien Sporck. A second edition was published in 1927 by Lemoine, Paris, but is no longer in print.

The format of this mass is unusual in that it does not end with full chorus. Instead, the concluding *Agnus Dei* and a preceding

motet are sung as a duet by two soloists. The mass is also unusual in that this motet is the hymn *Panis Angelicus*. The liturgical traditions of the Catholic church in France differed from those of the Roman rite well into the 19th century, and it was commonplace for a sacred motet, usually *O Salutaris*, to be inserted into the Ordinary the Mass. In contrast, the use in a choral mass of *Panis Angelicus* is very unusual. In 1872, César Franck added his often-performed *Panis Angelicus* as an afterthought to his *Mass in A* of 1860. Like its precursor, the Charles-René *Panis Angelicus* can be considered a stand-alone piece; the first publisher of the *Le Deuxieme Messe* offered the extracted motet for sale as a separate score.

The Charles-René *Second Mass* begins with a church-bell like theme in the *Kyrie*, lightly sung above an accompaniment of scale-like figures. The *Gloria* opens in a joyous spirit, with a lively accompaniment in a bouncing rhythm. Following a more lyrical section (Domini Fili), the lively rhythm returns and builds to a satisfying “Amen.”

The *Credo*, initially contemplative in mood, grows with conviction as the piece progresses. The soloists are introduced in a short duet (“Qui propter...”), followed by a return by the chorus to the tempo and material thematically related to the beginning of the section. A slight variation on the theme of the *Kyrie* is heard in the accompaniment, played here on chimes, while the choir intones “Et homo factus est.” The composer indulges in word painting, as “Crucifixus...” grows in an urgency which is resolved as the choir sings, “...et sepultus est,” Christ entombed. In a more hopeful tone, and increasing relentlessly in tempo, the choir begins “Et resurrexit.” “Et unum sanctam...” is presented as a sort of coda, in the initial tempo and key of A flat, with the two voices of the choir singing a slight rhythmic variation of the *Kyrie* in octaves. Inserted in this coda is a moving short passage, in which the soprano soloist sings “...et expecto resurrectionem...” and is joined by the lower voices of the choir singing a very affirmative, “Credo,”—I believe.

The *Sanctus* begins with a joyous, swinging melody which changes into a sweeping “Pleni sunt coeli” over an arpeggiated accompaniment, similar in emotional affect to a passage in the *Agnus Dei* of Faure’s *Requiem*. Not quite half of the sweet *Panis Angelicus* is sung by the soprano soloist who is then joined in duet by the mezzo-soprano soloist. In the *Agnus Dei*, the theme of the *Kyrie* returns once again in the accompaniment, repeated in variation several times between arpeggiated figures. The soloists sing an exquisitely gentle duet, somewhat antiphonal, with the Mass ending “semper tranquillo.”

The *Second Mass* is presented here with a small sample of other choral and organ music from composers who were certainly part of Charles-René’s musical environment. He could not have escaped

the influence of César Franck, organist at Saint Clothilde and Professor at the Paris Conservatory till his death in 1890, here represented by the Easter motet, *Alleluia* (originally *Dextera Domini*, 1871). Gabriel Pierné (1863-1937) was a nearly exact contemporary of Charles-René. He was Franck's successor at Saint Clothilde, and was the Prix de Rome winner in composition the year before Charles-René first competed. Gabriel Fauré, nearly 20 years senior to Charles-René, composed the motet *Maria, Mater gratiae* in 1887, a year before the first performance of his *Requiem*. The year of publication of Charles-René's Second Mass saw Fauré begin his rather revolutionary presidency of the Paris Conservatory.

--Sally De Fazio

*Denis Havard de la Montagne

Special thanks to M. de la Montagne, editor-in-chief of the site "Musica et Memoria," <http://www.musimem.com>

and whose biography of Charles-René on that site provided much of the information for these notes:

<http://musimem.com/prix-rome-1880-1889.htm#charles-rene>