César Franck was a gentle, religious man, extraordinary organist and composer for organ, a fine teacher, a man of quietude, rather shy and of modest ambitions who never promoted his own work. The fury following his Symphony in D Minor (his only symphony, written when he was 64) was an enormous surprise and thoroughly unintended to “upset the apple cart.” This controversy emerged because the music seemed to strike right at the heart of French nationalism and taste that reveled in opera.

Contemporary French composers initially led the charge, but audiences for some time followed their stance. Charles Gounod announced that this symphony was “the affirmation of impotence carried to the point of dogma.” The controversy permeated the Conservatoire de Paris and made it very difficult for Franck to get his symphony premiered. When his score was rejected by the leading conductor Charles Lamoureux, Franck resorted to the conservatory orchestra, which was obliged to play faculty works. Even then, rehearsals were desultory and reaction negative. The review in Le Ménestrel called it “morose. … [Franck] had very little to say here, but he proclaims it with the conviction of the pontiff defining dogma.”

One Paris Conservatory professor remarked to Vincent d’Indy, “Franck’s music may be whatever you please, but it will certainly never be a symphony.” And where is the fourth movement? The premiere occurred on February 17, 1889, and was conducted by Jules Garcin. Franck, for his part, said, “It sounded well, just as I thought it would.”

Ultimately this huge symphony became one of Franck’s most beloved works. Written late in life, the work became one of Franck’s signature pieces and enduring part of orchestral repertoire. The symphony “so fuses with the popular image of César Franck that it is nearly impossible to think of him without also thinking of this 40-minute orchestral juggernaut.” (Blair Johnston) Germanic atmosphere and thick orchestration are, in part, responsible for the poor initial reception; listeners found in its sound a “betrayal” to French music in general. Franck’s enthusiasm for Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt was infuriating to many; his intensity was considered over-wrought. The form seemed sloppy. And, Franck did not have a big name for himself. “Who is the Mr. Franck?” queried one reviewer. Only his beloved students and loyal friends (la bande a Franck) stood by their mentor, proclaiming the symphony to be magnificent.

Franck explained his intentions in these words: “The work is a classical symphony. At the end of the first movement, there is a recapitulation, exactly as in other symphonies, for the purpose of more firmly establishing the main subjects, but here it is in an alien key. Then follow an andante and scherzo. It was my great ambition to construct them in such a way that each beat of the andante movement should be exactly equal in length to one bar of the scherzo, with the intention that after the complete development of each section, one could be superimposed on the other. I succeeded in solving that problem.”

A Lento (slow) introduction presents a dotted three-note motif “question,” which is the fundamental seed of the first movement and appears throughout the symphony. (Wagner used this motif in his
Ring of the Nibelung as the theme of “Fate.”) This small idea is repeated with urgency and insistence until the main theme surfaces at the Allegro ma non troppo marking, absorbing the idea in its format and structure. In traditional classical manner, Franck includes a full melody statement (in F Major, the relative major) for the second theme, which returns in the third, final movement. The composer launches a turbulent development, “Wagnerian harmonies,” high drama and generous polyphonic/canonic passages, which were said to “bewilder the audience.”

The second movement (Allegretto) presents an exquisite triple meter dance-like tune, sounded by English horn over strumming harp and pizzicato strings. (The use of this instrument also was irritating to French audiences.) Basically the form is ABA: a center section offering up a scherzo-like scurrying in the strings before the A section returns. This last segment blends both moods simultaneously.

An exuberant finale in D Major (allegro non troppo) begins with a stunning, joyous melody sung by winds. Steadily, the familiar questioning motif gains more and more assurance; the melancholy tune from the second movement arrives in happy garb, transformed into joy. The coda recapitulates the core themes of the entire work, closing with a strong re-iteration of the opening ideas.

There is a wonderful recording and stunning interpretation by Maestro Raymond Leppard conducting the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO RECORDS) of the D Minor Symphony, Catalog No. 204469-201.

Mario Venzago was on the podium for the Orchestra’s last performances of Franck’s Symphony in D Minor in May 2006.