



## *Trois Poèmes pour orgue by Charles Tournemire*

### POÈME N° I

(DATE OF COMPLETION: 25 NOVEMBER 1932)

*Au Révérend Père Dom Charles Letestu (1902–1982), Organiste de l'abbaye de Solesmes*

PSALMUS XXI (XXII) • DEUS, DEUS MEUS, RESPICE IN ME: QUARE ME DERELIQUISTI?

**M**Y God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? (*Psalm xxi/xxii*)

### POÈME N° II

(DATE OF COMPLETION: 11 NOVEMBER 1932)

*À son ami André Marchal (1894–1980), Organiste de Saint-Germain-des-Prés, à Paris*

PSALMUS XXII (XXIII) • DOMINUS REGIT ME, ET NIHIL MIHI DEERIT

**T**HE Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul. (*Psalm xxii/xxiii*)

### POÈME N° III

(DATE OF COMPLETION: 26 OCTOBER 1932)

*À son ami Joseph Bonnet (1884–1944), Organist de Saint-Eustache*

PSALMUS CL • LAUDATE DOMINUM IN SANCTIS EJUS  
(LAUDATE EUM IN CYMBALIS BENE SONANTIBUS)

**P**RAISE him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals. Let every thing that hath breath praise the Lord. (*Psalm cl*)

## *Programme Notes*

**C**HARLES TOURNEMIRE was a seminal musical influence of the twentieth century, particularly in the realm of sacred music. Born in Bordeaux in 1870, Tournemire, who was a student of César Franck and Charles Marie Widor, was organist of the Basilica of Sainte-Clotilde in Paris from 1898 until his death in 1939 where he was known as an improviser extraordinaire. He produced an enormous compositional output of incredible profundity. His greatest work, the magnum opus *L'Orgue Mystique*, transformed the sound of the organ world, hearkening to the past with its use of Gregorian chant and yet welcoming it into modernity with its innovative mystical sonorities. A nigh-forgotten genius, Tournemire's music represents some of the most profound works in organ repertoire, and this bicentennial year for Tournemire's maître, César Franck, offers us an opportunity to reflect upon the Sainte-Clotilde Tradition and how Tournemire perpetuated the Franckian Legacy.

Tournemire composed the *Trois Poèmes pour orgue* in the autumn of 1932 (shortly after the composition of *L'Orgue Mystique*) to celebrate the renovation of the Sainte-Clotilde organ. He premiered the latter two of these

*Poèmes* at the inaugural recital of the newly restored instrument on the thirtieth of June 1933. The first movement premiered on the twentieth of April 1934 at Sainte-Clotilde performed by Noëlie Pierront, organist of Saint-Pierre du Gros-Caillou, where it served as a musical prologue to Marcel Dupré's *Le Chemin de la Croix*.

In an article in *Le Monde Musical* dated the thirtieth of September 1934, Maurice Emmanuel described the second two *Poèmes* played by Tournemire at the inaugural recital at Sainte-Clotilde as such: "Modern art also had its part: The titular organist had, in preparation for the inauguration, composed two important poems based upon the Psalms of David: the first, of pastoral peace; the second, shining with the glory of the Most High."

The *Trois Poèmes* were published by Lemoine in 1933. Of the piece, Tournemire wrote, "A work to which I attach great importance. It was composed in Auvergne." Of the first hearing of two of the *Trois Poèmes*, Tournemire recounted the audience's positive reaction: "The inauguration of my organ in Sainte-Clotilde. A beautiful demonstration. My *Poèmes* for organ were loved (!)."

Through this tone-poem psalm trilogy, Tournemire depicts three intellectual and visceral aspects of the human religious experience and a teleological or eschatological journey to a divine understanding or union:

Tournemire begins his *Trois Poèmes* with *Psalm xxxj/xxxij*. Most famously considered one of the Seven Last Words of Christ on the Cross, through the opening lines of this jeremiad, one hears the vacuity and immanent suffering found in the innate concupiscence of temporal, material life, along with a saudade for a fugitive Paradise. Then, through the text of the beloved *Psalm xxxj/xxxij*, one is presented with the blissful yet haunting qualities of eternal divine wisdom and consolation and the experience of the individual as one is shepherded through life's *vale of tears*. Finally, through *Psalm cl*—which, as the final Psalm, serves as the doxological omega to this renowned Jewish plenarium of canticles—Tournemire depicts an auditory beatific vision of a soul's apotheosis and consummation with the divine and the ecstatic experience of deific adoration.

Upon receiving a copy of the *Trois Poèmes* from Tournemire, the organist Olivier Messiaen—of whom Tournemire believed “comes from a great line of mystics”—wrote in gratitude:

“My dear Sir,

“Returning from vacation, I discovered your *Trois Poèmes pour orgue*.

“Thank you very much for sending them and writing that dedication, which affected me infinitely. It seems to me that the style is quite different from *L'Orgue Mystique* (despite the very personal touches that make your music recognisable from afar) and that you have once again renewed, which proves the youthfulness of your extraordinary sensibilities.

“Little fugues arise here and there, but it is of the most beautiful music compared to the “false” Bach that one hears in concerts today.

“The harmonic and modal richness of the first poem, and the *alléluatique* and *glorifiante* of the third, make them very beautiful pages.

“I particularly like in the second movement how the flowing stream of the eight-foot Bourdon and the admirable choice of the timbres bring out the freedom of counterpoint and the extreme external and internal emotion of the music.

“Finally, I am very pleased to have received and played these beautiful pages.

“If all modern musicians had faith like you, they would perhaps not have the quality of your music, but at least their work would have more of the grandeur of life.

“As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself.’... (*Saint John xv*)

“Pardon me, my dear maître, for writing so long and believe in all my feelings of renewed gratitude and respect. —Olivier Messiaen”

In a 1938 article for the *La Revue musicale*, Norbert Dufourcq wrote of this work:

“On the organ, Tournemire's art is reflected in a registration that is perhaps more recherché than that of his contemporaries. The neoclassical instrument, with the richness of its simple and composed mixtures, responds in part to the concerns of the author, who is a poet of sounds and a magician of timbres. The touches of bright colours, the entrance of suddenly projected light to which the softest tones respond, overlap and complement each other. The plainsong passes here and there from the pedal to the upper parts of the manuals, often as a simple pretext for flamboyant arabesques or warm harmonies. Through a single Bourdon, or an eight-foot Flûte, or a Voix humaine, Charles Tournemire knows how to elicit seductive poems. So too, using all the strength of the instrument, he knows how to be deliberately harsh or to show a real acerbity of language, to which is added the austerity of this modal music. While he pays particular attention to the registration, Charles Tournemire, while remaining symphonic, is wary of overloading, which is the enemy of balance. Between the different parts, the air circulates, and the author, concerned with clarity and limpidity, likes to make the voices sing in the higher compass without remaining attached to the middle register.

“The last works of the organist of Sainte-Clotilde respond to the same concerns and reveal identical tendencies. In the *Trois Poèmes*, in the *Fantaisie symphonique*, the liturgical themes are perhaps neglected, but a ‘Gregorian spirit’ still presides over the birth of these free ‘musics.’ The language also remains supple and diverse. The frequent *staccato*, repeated notes, a few fugal passages, here and there a short canon or an episode of a chorale in five or six voices, animated and chromatic themes, numerous trills, on which, in the manner of a decorative plaque, arise picturesque harmonies, finally a succession of strange and clipped rhythms. . . . It is with the help of these artifices, these sound combinations, that the musician manages to fix his impressions, to exteriorise himself.”