

## MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF LE CHEMIN DE LA CROIX OP. 29 BY MARCEL DUPRÉ

<sup>a</sup>MAREK ŠTRBÁK

*Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra*  
Tr. A. Hlinku 1, 949 01 Nitra, Slovak Republic  
email: "mstrbak@ukf.sk"

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**Abstract:** The presented study focuses on the musical characterization of the organ work *Le Chemin de la Croix* Op. 29 by the French composer Marcel Dupré, which by its content, conception and scope occupies a unique and irreplaceable slot in the organ repertoire. This study introduces the composer of this work, as well as the author of the poem of the same name, Paul Claudel, and the circumstances of the composition's formation. Subsequently, all fourteen components of this organ cycle, i. e. the fourteen Stations of the Cross are analyzed from a musical point of view.

**Keywords:** Marcel Dupré, *Le Chemin de la Croix* Op. 29, organ, organ music, musical characteristics

### 1 Marcel Dupré

Marcel Jean-Jules Dupré was a prominent French organist, composer, teacher, musicologist and publisher. Most of his works form an integral part of the repertoire of many organ performers. His work as a composer as well as a teacher significantly influenced subsequent generations of not only French but also foreign organists.

He was born in 1860 in Rouen in northern France and inherited his musical talent from his parents. His father, a pupil of the famous French organist and composer Alexandre Guilmant, was a music teacher at the Lycée Corneille and organist at the church of Saint-Ouen in Rouen. His mother was a gifted pianist and a pupil of Aloys Klein. The art of organ improvisation impressed Marcel Dupré early in his childhood. At the age of eleven he became an organist at the church of Saint-Vivien in Rouen. Already at this age he was a frequent visitor to other churches in Rouen, where he improvised at vespers. When his father returned home on Sunday evenings, little Marcel was always confronted with questions about his improvisations - what keys he used, registration, forms, in which voices he led the theme, and so on. Each of the improvisations was subjected to a brief but rigorous analysis.<sup>1</sup>

In 1902, Dupré began attending the Paris Conservatoire, where he became a pupil of Alexandre Guilmant and Charles-Marie Widor. There he won the Prix de Rome in 1914 with his cantata *Psyché*. Six years later he performed the complete organ works of Bach in ten concerts at his alma mater, and a year later he reprised the series at the Palais de Trocadéro. From 1926 to 1954 he taught organ at the Paris Conservatoire, and his pupils included future eminent figures in the art of organ performance, such as Marie-Claire Alain, Pierre Cochereau, Rolande Falcinelli, Jean Guillou, Jean Langlais, Gaston Litaize, Olivier Messiaen, Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini and others. Dupré has composed approximately one hundred works for organ, piano, orchestra, choir or chamber ensembles, but the focus of his work is on organ compositions. Several of these - such as the 15 *Versets* Op. 18, the *Symphonie-Passion* Op. 23, or the *Chorale et Fugue* Op. 57 - were originally written in improvisation.<sup>2</sup>

*Le chemin de la croix*, Op. 29, which is his most extensive organ composition, is no exception. In his memoirs, Dupré mentions that for his First Communion he received, among other gifts, a beautiful Bible with illustrations by Gustave Doré, who was an important French painter, graphic artist and illustrator. One of Dupré's first compositions - the cantata *Le Songe de Jacob* - premiered by his father and his choir on the occasion of Marcel's fifteenth birthday, was directly inspired by scenes from this

Bible.<sup>3</sup> How many other illustrated biblical scenes, not excluding the Stations of the Cross itself, had influenced Dupré in his early youth? Where do the beautiful imagery in his other program music come from? Perhaps it is here that we find a source of inspiration for *Le Chemin de la Croix*.

### 2 Sources of inspiration for the composition

The idea of combining poetry and organ improvisation was born with Madeleine Renaud-Thévenet, a well-known actress and professor at the Brussels Conservatoire. She proposed to recite Paul Claudel's Stations of the Cross in verse, with an improvised musical commentary after each stop. Dupré enthused the idea very much and, after discussing it with his spouses, decided to try out the idea at the Saint-Sulpice church in Paris. The success or failure was to be decided by Mrs Dupré and Mr Renaud. The experimental private concert was a promising success and preparations for the Brussels performance could begin. Dupré suggested that the poetry and music should last no longer than ninety minutes, and that the Stations of the Cross should be preceded by several chorale overtures by J. S. Bach. This dramaturgical plan and the musical performance itself were a great success in Brussels. Inspired by it, Dupré and his wife, on their return trip to Paris, agreed to write down and publish these improvisations in sheet music. The following year he performed his work at the Palais Trocadéro, but Claudel was not mentioned on this occasion, and it is uncertain whether his verses were performed at this concert.<sup>4</sup>

The themes for the Brussels improvisations were not chosen at random. They were created by Dupré himself, inspired by his study of an extraordinarily large repertoire of sacred music from the Renaissance to the 20th century. He took several musical symbols or motifs from the works of Schütz, Bach, Handel, Beethoven, Franck, Wagner and others, referring to this mode of composition as "traditional symbolism".

The details of Dupré's relationship to the text of the Stations of the Cross are unknown. Its author, Paul Claudel, was an important French poet, playwright, novelist and diplomat. Although he came from a Catholic family, he lost his faith during his school years. At the age of eighteen, he found it again thanks to a profound spiritual experience during the Christmas Vespers. This deep faith became the foundation and inspiration for his work, which includes some 4,000 pages of texts on the relationship between God and His creation, His mystery and His purposes. The *Way of the Cross* was written between 1911 and 1913, when Claudel returned to France after a thirteen-year sojourn in China. This text was of immense value to him. He wrote it from the bottom of his heart, with the intention of expressing his fervor and religious zeal to the best of his ability. He wished this meditation on the Passion of Jesus to be read during the devotions of the Stations of the Cross or jointly with other prayers. The text is also a contemplation on sin and the fate of every man who bears his cross in ordinary life. The combination of Claudel's text and Dupré's music has created a concrete and realistic rendering of a story that is inherently violent and terrible, yet filled with tenderness and trust.<sup>5</sup>

The two main characters in Claudel's *The Way of the Cross* are Jesus and his mother. At the beginning we are confronted with Pilate's condemnation of Christ to death as he accepts the cross and struggles to drag it to Calvary. Along the way he falls three times, encountering his Mother, Simon of Cyrene helping him with the burden of the cross, and Veronica with a clean towel. Last, he instructs several weeping women. Dupré masterfully describes musically, even shares, the agonies and sufferings of the Saviour right up to the Crucifixion itself. As Jesus' body is laid in the tomb, the composer's deep faith is palpable in the

<sup>3</sup> DUPRÉ, M. 1981. *Erinnerungen*. Berlin : Merseburger Verlag, 1981. p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> STEED, G. 1999. *The Organ Works of Marcel Dupré*. Hillsdale : Pendragon Press, 1999. p. 92 - 94.

<sup>5</sup> STEED, G. 1999. *The Organ Works of Marcel Dupré*. Hillsdale : Pendragon Press, 1999. p. 95.

<sup>1</sup> DUPRÉ, M. 1981. *Erinnerungen*. Berlin : Merseburger Verlag, 1981. p. 35.

<sup>2</sup> STEED, G. 1999. *The Organ Works of Marcel Dupré*. Hillsdale : Pendragon Press, 1981. p. 147 - 152.

music. Mary appears at the fourth stop, and her presence is prominent later in the piece. The conclusion of the tenth stop is a reminiscence of the incarnation, and Jesus' mother is present even at his death. She holds her Son's body after it is taken down from the cross and sees it being laid in the tomb. Each of the fourteen sections is full of human and spiritual drama. Dupré's use of twelve melodic and six rhythmic themes or leitmotifs was sufficient to portray it.<sup>6</sup>

### 3 Musical characteristics of the composition

The first part of *Jésus est condamné à mort* (Jesus is condemned to death) is, together with the third and ninth, perhaps the most dramatic part of the whole cycle. This movement begins with a melody played on the register of the *Trompette 8'*, which symbolizes Pilate's washing of his hands over the fate of Christ. In the fourth bar, marked *Agitato*, a motoric movement in eighth notes begins and gradually graduates. Here the composer has masterfully conveyed the gradual build-up of the restlessness and aggression of the assembled crowd, which is continuously echoed by cries of "Barabbas, Barabbas", composed as an empty triple-note composed of a pure fifth and a pure octave. These are echoed in the upper position (in the case of women?) as well as in the lower (in the case of men?). The gradual addition of registers, moving from a sonically weaker to a stronger manual, and the constant layering of musical material characterizes an increasingly frenzied mass that allows itself to be influenced by a few shakers. The highlight is Pilate's judgement itself at bar 102 - the most powerful and brutal chord of the entire movement. After its sounding there is a gradual calming down - the crowd has achieved what it desired and slowly disperses. From the distance, the call of "Barabbas" is heard three more times in a deep position, backed by the *Basson 16'* register. The whole drama dissolves in the *pianopianissimo* of the last repeated motif, which is composed of three eighth notes. The last solo short deep notes in the pedal are only a dim memory of the previous tense musical progression.

In the second movement, *Jésus est chargé de la Croix* (Jesus receives his Cross) begins the slow and difficult journey to Calvary. The opening motif, composed of sixteenth- and eighth note dotted notes, recalls the stumbling feet of Jesus and interweaves through each bar, whether in the left hand, right hand, or pedal. Its counterpoint of sorts is the cross motif - a descending pure fifth that is heard on the third manual on the tonguing register. This motif is also treated canonically (e.g. in bars 5-7, 21-23 etc.) In bar ten Dupré extends the cross motif to a rising major second and two pure fifths. It is the motif thus constructed that can be seen as "lifting" the cross onto Jesus' shoulders - its heaviness is emphasized by the fact that it is also treated canonically - for he accepts the cross not only "for himself" but also for all sinful humanity. The gloomy, dark tone of the movement is emphasized by the slow tempo marking *Lento, pesante*. In bars 32-35 we find an interesting combination of all three motifs of the movement. However, the "lifting of the cross" gradually fades away - for the cross has already "found its place" on Jesus' shoulders. The last deep B note in the pedal on the register of *Soubasse 32'* can be seen as the immense depth of Christ's suffering and at the same time a symbol of the death that is slowly but surely approaching.

During the third part of *Jésus tombe sous le poids de sa Croix* (Jesus falls the first time), we watch the Saviour as weakness and weariness take hold of him. While the quarter notes in the left hand and the pedal with occasional quarter dashes depict the irregular stride of Jesus, the relentless and continuous eighth-note withdrawals are reminiscent of marching soldiers in full armour, urging the condemned man on mercilessly. The first half of the third stop is a continuous escalation from *piano* to *tutti*. In bar 12 a new melancholy theme is heard, symbolizing pain and suffering. It is interesting, however, that during it Jesus' footsteps disappear - as if he has stopped despite the soldiers marching on. After eight bars, they all start marching again and

the momentum continues to build. At bar 35, Jesus' footsteps stop again and the theme of pain and suffering is heard again. This time Jesus stands for ten bars. From bar 45 the soldiers force him to take more intermittent steps, but it doesn't last long - Jesus doesn't even fall, perhaps, he just slumps to the ground in complete silence at bar 51, where there is only a dash of *fermata*. The soldiers have unequivocally stopped as well. After this moment comes only the melody of some distant lament on the register *Gamba 8'* and a kind of "echo" of the whole movement in the last four chords, broken by dashes.

The fourth part, *Jésus rencontre sa mère* (Jesus meets his mother), shows the Mother in pain in the flute solo. Her "song" is accompanied by quiet chords and the movement of the eighth notes of the left hand on the quiet register *Voix célestes 8'*. The theme of the Mother consists of one straightforward long note followed by a simple downward decomposition of a major fifth chord. Later in the course, the theme is enriched by the motif of a certain question in the form of a rising third. One can tell that there are no tears in the Mother's eyes, no expression on her face, only a silent mouth. This grief is too deep for tears. (This same music is heard in the thirteenth station, when the Mother holds the limp body of her Son in her arms.) The poignant expression and transcendence of the musical content of this movement are indescribable in words. Dupré's combination of simple melody, quiet registration, and harmony in the accompanying voices achieves an outright mystical atmosphere where time stands still and the listener is lost in the moment.

The fifth part, *Simon le Cyrénéen aide Jésus à porter sa Croix* (Simon the Cyrene helps Jesus to carry the Cross), brings a change of atmosphere. The pastoral music highlights the rural origins of Simon, who on his way to the city unexpectedly becomes a direct participant in the events of the day. A melody on the *Trompette 8'* register echoes in the pedal to the simple accompaniment. This motif is familiar to us, heard already in the second part but in reverse. Whereas then the major second and the two pure fifths were rising (the cross was lifted onto Jesus' shoulders), here they sound like a descending melody as the cross weighs Jesus down immensely, pressing him to the ground with its weight. The first two times the melody is heard from the key  $e^1$ , but the third time it is a semitone lower from  $e^1$ . Jesus truly cannot stand, and the soldiers seek help from the accompanying crowd. They pull out a random passer-by, Simon of Cyrene. He finds it hard to carry the cross with Jesus and cannot seem to match his stride. This is illustrated from bar 29 onwards, when fragments of the theme echo first in the upper position for Jesus and then in the lower position for Simon. The theme of the cross is heard in the canon later in the movement - as if Jesus had walked a little earlier and Simon had merely followed him. It is only in bar 63 that their theme is heard in unison - they have managed to find a common rhythm and are walking in unison. After three notes of the theme, they both sound the notes D (Jesus) and  $d^1$  (Simon). Interestingly, at bar 79 the "Jesus tone" stops sounding and only Simon's is heard - the cross remains on his shoulders for a time.

In the sixth part, *Une femme pieuse essuie la face de Jésus* (Jesus and Veronica), Veronica comes to Jesus from the group of women to wipe his brow. In the left hand there is a simple two-part accompaniment composed on the principle of imitation, while a similar imitation is heard in the solo in the right hand, which is registered on the sound of *Hautbois 8'* and *Flûte 4'*. The solo voice is essentially a duet in which the lower voice imitates the upper voice, in a sense mirroring its accompaniment. In bars 21-23 and 27-30, the now familiar symbol of the cross is heard in the solo pedal - a descending major second followed by two pure fifths. At this point, Jesus' footsteps stop. Dupré's combination of simple melody, quiet registration, and harmony in the accompanying voices achieves an outright mystical atmosphere where time stands still and the listener is lost in the moment. The wiping of the face is symbolized by a rising or falling three-note compassion motif, which graphically or also when played acts as a "wiping" motion. In bar 35, Dupré interestingly transfers the "wiping" to the left hand accompaniment, and the motif from the beginning of the

<sup>6</sup> STEED, G. 1999. *The Organ Works of Marcel Dupré*. Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 1999. p. 98 - 100.

movement is heard again in the solo. In bars 48 - 50 and 53 - 54, the cross symbol is heard again in the pedal solo. After its second introduction, only a calm melody consisting of a four-note motif appears, sounding in "heavenly calm" on the register *Voix célestes* 8'. The deeper meaning of this part are both compassion and courage. Veronica is able to come to Christ, to touch him, to wipe away his sweat and blood, to find peace of soul and to try to share it with the Saviour.

After the previous intermezzo of calm comes the dramatic seventh movement *Jésus tombe à terre pour la deuxième tombe* (Jesus falls a second time). The second fall occurs almost unnoticed. This halt is closely linked to the third part. In the pedal, Christ's uncertain and pawing footsteps again appear, accompanied by the soldiers' unrelenting rhythmic stride, this time much more insistent by virtue of the added sixteenth-note values. Dupré's addition of all the mixtures achieved an unusual sound effect, where the brass clanking of the Roman soldiers' armour is heard throughout. The crowd presses in on the condemned from all sides and the burden of the cross becomes unbearable. Unlike the third part, the melancholy theme of pain and suffering is not heard here - no one makes Jesus stop. The cruel pain of the scene is heightened by the increasingly terrible dissonant chords. In bar 47 Christ descends unnoticed to the ground - this is depicted in slow descending two-note motifs. The soldiers' step is lost in *pianissimo*. Did Dupré mean to imply a loss of consciousness in Jesus? We don't know. The second fall concludes the first half of the cycle.

The eighth part, *Jésus console les filles d'Israël qui le suivent* (Jesus comforts the women of Jerusalem), is a beautiful musical evocation of the pity and compassion of those who accompany the condemned and see both pain and suffering. The cantilena, with its theme of pity, is one of the most urgent melodies of the whole work, but it always remains a part of the accompaniment and comes across as pastoral, even trivial. For the weeping women fail to grasp the higher meaning of Christ's sacrifice; in their simplicity they feel only sorrow and deep regret. Jesus' words of admonition and consolation come as a solo in tenor position on the *Trompette* 8' register. One can see some affinity with the Mother theme here - Jesus also begins with a decomposition of a "pure" major fifth chord, but unlike the Mother, the first two notes ascend, and are thus a kind of invocation. Despite Jesus' best efforts, the women do not accept the consolation; their frenzied accompaniment dies down only at the end, when Jesus runs out of strength and his "singing" ends on a long-held note. Once again, Dupré masterfully links two seemingly unrelated worlds - the ordinary, humble and fervent grief of a simple man confronted with God's wisdom, kindness and peace.

The ninth part, *Jésus tombe pour la troisième fois* (Jesus falls a third time), of Jesus falling a third time at the foot of the cross, depicts a crowd that, irritated by the slow pace of Jesus' steps, begins to bay for blood and spew insults. This section is the most technically demanding, fast-paced and dramatic of the entire cycle. Jesus' uncertain footsteps are again in the pedal, but there are not many more of them and they become increasingly unrhythmic, punctuated by longer pauses. The drama unfolds primarily in fast seven-note motifs in sixteenth notes and three-note descending motifs in eighth notes in the left hand. The madness of the crowd escalates sequentially, reaching an unbearable level, and, along with the soldiers, brutally forcing Jesus to walk on. The terrifying climax of the movement comes at bar 118 - in the organ *tutti*, the march of the soldiers breaks into deafening octaves in the pedal, with harsh dissonant chords sounding in the left hand, supported by frenzied fast figurations in the right hand. The final and definitive fall at the execution site comes suddenly in bar 158 and is literally devastating. Jesus collapses to the ground and an agonised silence ensues. This is followed by a brief moment of exhalation on the fundamental registers before the final humiliation. The fragments of some sighs resemble only the transmitted fragments of words spoken in a whisper.

In the tenth part, *Jésus est dépouillé de ses vêtements* (Jesus is stripped of his clothes) and the Roman soldiers roll dice against his garments. Jesus awaits his end. The movement is built on a short three-note motif consisting of a descending pure fifth and a rising minor seventh. Dupré prescribes articulation in *staccato* and a special registration composed only of the sound of the string registers in 16', 8' and 4' position. This combination makes the music resemble the sound of cubes in a jar and acts as a constant "shaking". The occasional chords in the *staccato* in turn evoke laughter from the soldiers. Overall, the movement gives the impression of an eerie scherzo. At bar 98 the atmosphere changes abruptly. The playing is over, there is only a simple melody which always rises on the first four notes and falls on the next four. We can think of it as the inhalations and exhalations of Christ, who has nothing left but bare skin. This simple, stripped-of-everything human simplicity is confirmed by the simplest registration on the *Flûte* 8' sound on the third manual and the final "clean" as C major.

The basic motif of the eleventh movement, *Jésus est attaché sur la Croix* (Jesus is nailed on the Cross), is the hammer blows that echo with relentless and terrible regularity. In the pedal, the motif of the cross is confirmed in the repetitive form of three descending blocks. The strikes in the manual are mostly empty chords made up of only pure fifths and pure octaves - one can look for pure and primitive human evil behind them on the one hand, and absolute pain on the other. In bar 19 the theme of pain and suffering, already familiar from the third movement, echoes into the hammer blows. This is followed by a brief lull in bar 28, as if to question whether all this suffering makes any sense at all and whether humanity is doing the right thing. In bar 29, however, the hammer blows return, shifted up a minor third - so everything is much more intense. The music of this movement is the most violent, agonising and tormenting in the whole cycle. Nor does Claudel spare the listener's imagination and feelings in his description of the crucifixion in the text. The horrible words in the context of the terrible musical commentary are brutal and literally devastating.

In the ethereal atmosphere of the twelfth stop, *Jésus meurt sur la Croix* (Jesus dies upon the Cross), the Saviour utters his last seven words. The accompanying simple harmony sounds the simple sound of the *Bourdon* 8' register, and the *Vox humana* 8' register (i.e. "human voice" - Jesus dies as a man) is used for the first and last time in the solo. The first three words (Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do / Today shalt thou be with me in paradise / Woman, behold, thy son! Behold, thy mother!) are similar in motive - they consist mostly of descending intervals and express consolation. Unusually, for the fourth word (My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?), Dupré uses exactly the same motif with which Jesus comforted the women in the eighth section. The invocation is symbolized by three ascending intervals - the first time by a pure fifth, the next two times by a pure fifth. At the end of the phrase the melody descends, so Jesus finds no consolation. The fifth (I thirst) and sixth words (I am finished) are built from the same motivic material. The seventh word (Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit) is sung without musical accompaniment; the motivic material of the first three words is used. Jesus is thus reconciled to his fate and dies in silence. At that moment the earth trembles, which Dupré achieved with a trill in the pedal on the notes E and F and on the sound of the deepest 32' and 16' registers. The realization of this method of musical notation causes a real acoustic tremor. There is a temple burst, which is symbolized by short two-note motifs consisting of an eighth note with a dot and a sixteenth note. Then thunders are added on dissonant chords registered on all the linguistic registers of the third manual. The scene soon quiets down, and the final bars reveal the bleakness after the accomplished Crucifixion. Only the accompaniment from the beginning of the movement sounds, but without the words of the dead Christ. It is accompanied by a deep three-note motif in the pedal. The movement ends on a deep note registered on *Soubasse* 32'. This sound seems like a glimpse into a bottomless black abyss. It has no expression, death has caused a complete end.

The thirteenth part, *Jésus est détaché de la Croix et remis à sa Mère* (The body of Jesus is taken from the Cross and laid in Mary's bosom), is a strange musical description of the unwinding and falling ropes, as well as the slowly gliding dead body they fold from the Cross. The accompaniment features a constantly repeating fast 12-note motif with minor modifications; the solo consists mostly of a four-note ascending motif. Curiously, the removal of the body is not described by Dupré in a descending but ascending melody. Is he suggesting perhaps that this body will later be resurrected and taken up to heaven? The musical picture becomes even more intense from bar 32 onwards, when the melodic motif is heard in two-part pedal and the accompaniment is doubled in the right and left hands. In bars 61-62 a *rallentando molto* comes in and Christ's body seems to rest in Mary's arms. Then the conclusion of the fourth part is quoted verbatim, where - as here - space has been given to the grieving Mother and her unspeakable pain.

The ultimate, fourteenth part, *Jésus est mis dans le sépulcre* (The body of Jesus is laid in the tomb), is a kind of epilogue to the entire cycle. It is built on the cantilena with the theme of regret that belonged to the grieving women in the eighth part. This time, however, no consolation comes. The dull musical action gradually builds up, but only using 8' labial registers, which does not allow for a very dynamic level to be reached. In bar 52 we hear this cantilena again on the *Gamba 8'* register and without harmonic accompaniment. In bar 56 a new theme is added on a strange sound composed of the *Bourdon 16'* and *Flûte 4'* registers, thus lacking the basic 8' position. This quiet theme, consisting of six quarter notes and one half note, is a quasi-explanation of the death of Jesus and serves as a mitigation of grief. In bar 69, a new musical world arrives. In the quietest possible sound of the organ - in the left hand the register *Voix célestes 8'* and in the right hand the *Flûte 4'* - both in *pianopianissimo* - it is as if the gates of heaven are opening and heavenly silence is spreading. Suffering is transformed into the fruits of the Redemption and opens the gates of heaven to all those who have participated in the recent events. As if after expressing the past horrific events, Dupré opens his soul and brings his own perspective to the story - all suffering had a higher meaning and purpose because it brings love, hope, and redemption.

#### 4 Conclusion

Le Chemin de la Croix is not only a magnificent fusion of Claudel's poetry with Dupré's music. It offers us an unprecedented glimpse into the thought and spiritual world of both authors, while at the same time becoming a message to all of us about the meaning and value of suffering, pain, grief and the weight of "one's own cross" in our own lives. Dupré, using extremely expressive musical means, has managed to faithfully describe all the events of the biblical story of Christ's Passion, but he has also managed to enrich them with his own understanding of its meaning. The uniqueness of this monumental work also lies in the fact that it is closely linked to the poetry of Paul Claudel, without which it cannot be fully understood. Dupré has thus succeeded in creating a composition which, in its originality, scope and musical statement, occupies a unique and irreplaceable place in the organ repertoire.

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