

EVOLUTION THROUGH SYNCHRONICITY? TYPES OF CÉSAR FRANCK'S HARMONIC LANGUAGE AND CATEGORIZATION OF HIS TONALITY

Nikola Komatović

Independent researcher
nikolakom@gmail.com

Primljeno / Received 30. 08. 2022.
Prihvaćено / Accepted 15. 11. 2022.

Abstract: The harmonic language of César Franck (1822–1890) is one of the aspects of this composer's opus that scholars seem to have infrequently explored, so it has – loosely speaking – remained neglected. In general discussions, it was usually described with old clichés such as “highly chromatized or influenced by Franz Liszt and/or Richard Wagner”. However, there have been no in-depth debates about the possibilities of typifying and classifying it. During his research of Franck's harmonic language, which stemmed first from his MA thesis and then his PhD dissertation, the author attempted to infer some regularities in the composer's harmonic language. This paper presents some of those research results. The categorization and typifying of Franck's creative language is proposed on two levels: first, based on the chronology of his creative production (taking into account and focusing on genre peculiarities) and then through the treatment and perception of tonality as the referential language system. To concretize and support those premises, the paper includes relevant analytical examples from very different creative genres in the opus of this composer. Finally, the author concludes that Franck's harmonic language should not be contextualized through the prism of the members of the New German School, which has been a relatively widespread practice. Instead, he should be seen as a legitimate continuator of the French compositional and theoretical tradition.

Keywords: César Franck, harmonic language, tonality, chromaticism

Sažetak: Harmonska jezik Sezara Franka (1822–1890) predstavlja jedan od aspekata u stvaralaštvu ovog kompozitora, kome se teoretičari nisu preterano često obraćali, te je – slobodno rečeno – na izvestan način i ostao zanemaren. U generalnim diskusijama, za njega su često korišćene određene opšte fraze, poput „visoko hromatizovanog, na tragu Franca Lista i(lj) Riharda Vagnera“, međutim, suštinske rasprave o mogućnostima tipologizacije i klasifikacije u vezi sa njegovom genezom nisu činjene na obuhvatniji način. Tokom autorovog iskustva iz proučavanja Frankovog harmonskog jezika, koje je izniklo, najpre, iz master rada, a potom i doktorske disertacije, pokušano je izvođenje određenih stilskih karakteristika kompozitorovog harmonskog jezika, te se deo tih rezultata predočava i kroz ovaj rad. Kategorizacija i tipologizacija Frankovog stvaralačkog jezika se sprovodi na dva plana: najpre, kroz prizmu hronologije njegovog stvaralaštva (pri čemu se, najviše, u

obzir uzimaju žanrovske specifičnosti), a potom i kroz tretman i percepciju tonaliteta kao referentnog jezičkog sistema. Za konkretizaciju i argumentaciju svih navedenih premissa, koriste se odgovarajući notni analitički primeri iz najrazličitijih stvaralačkih žanrova ovog kompozitora. Konačno, autor dolazi do zaključka da Frankov harmonski jezik ne treba kontekstualizovati kroz prizmu stvaralaca „nove Nemačke škole“, što je, kao što je već nagovešteno, česta praksa, već na protiv, kao punokrvnog nastavljača francuske kompozitorsko-teorijske prakse.

Ključne reči: Sezar Frank, harmonski jezik, tonalitet, hromatika

The harmony of César Franck (1822–1890) was successively the subject of my master's thesis (2011–12) and my doctoral dissertation (2013–18). I believe that my almost decade-long experience in studying works of this composer has given me enough insight to, at least briefly, summarize some results, categorizations, and typologies of his oeuvre for the purposes of this article. In that regard, this article should be understood as an overview of the fundamental characteristics of Franck's harmonic language and by no means the final judgment of all aspects of his opus.

César Franck is, to quote an earlier critic “a composer whom people love to hate” (quoted in Stove 2012, vii). From the historical perspective, his oeuvre had variable success. In Belgium and France, this composer was not fully recognized during his lifetime. Posthumously, primarily due to his students' work, his reputation improved somewhat. After the war, he was seen as a Romantic composer of average merit, and only the previous 30 years have brought some awareness of his importance. I would dare call that a new dawn for Franck.

From the perspective of analysts, Franck's status followed a similar path of development. The awareness of his composing technique was first spread by his former students, the so-called *Bande à Franck*, which included, for instance, Vincent D'Indy (1851–1931)¹. In the later decades, a broader interest in that aspect of his work emerged. Above all, analysts praised Franck's mastery in composing larger forms; therefore, his compositions, such as the Sonata for Violin and Piano or Symphony in D Minor, are often found in the curricula of music theory departments across the world. One aspect of his oeuvre is, however, still highly neglected: harmonic language.

Incredible as it may sound, the harmony of this contemporary and admirer of Franz Liszt's (1811–1886) and Richard Wagner's (1813–1883) (who seemingly followed many of their composing postulates) did not elicit the interest of the broader scientific community. Therefore, in this article, I will try to explain why this problem should be approached with more caution in the future.

¹ Compare with D'Indy's monography of Franck. See bibliography for details.

Theoretical Premises: Categorization of Harmonic Language

The phrase “Franck’s harmonic language” in the singular is, in theory, not incorrect. However, my analytical practice – and this article will attempt to show that – demonstrates that it might be more sensible to speak of multiple harmonic languages, which evolved through different chronological stages of his music production but could also co-exist concurrently and side-by-side. That entails not only the evolution of technical characteristics, typical for all composers, but also the elements of individual style that bring new peculiarities through the natural changes in someone’s opus. Instead, as some of you might already know, the backbone of Franck’s oeuvre is the works written in the final two decades of his life. Still, compositions of different genres possess different characteristics.

Therefore, the following categorization might be suitable for Franck’s harmonic language:

- 1) Youthful harmonic language (the mid-1830s – 1850);
- 2) Mature diatonic harmonic language (the mid-1860s – 1890);
- 3) Mature chromatic-enharmonic harmonic language (the mid-1860s – 1890).

Franck’s youthful harmonic language is predominantly diatonic, with occasional chromatic elements. Therefore, he does not deviate from the early Romantic “average.” In that respect, one should bear in mind Franck’s young age, his teachers, and his creative exemplars. So, this part of his oeuvre encompasses compositions written roughly between the age of 11 and 28. Among his teachers were people such as the theory and composition professor Anton Reicha and piano professor Joseph Zimmermann (also a fine theorist). Some of the creative exemplars of young Franck were Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827), young Franz Liszt, Charles Valentin Alkan (1813–1888) and Johann Nepomuk Humel (1778–1837). From the perspective of the genre, this time frame is quite colorful. Young Franck is primarily a piano composer, but he also writes other works: for example, one opera and one oratorio. There are certain clues that he also wrote one program composition, *Ce qu'on entend sur la montagne*, not unlike a symphonic poem.²

To explain precisely some of the characteristics of Franck’s language of this epoch, see Example 1, a short segment from his *Piano concerto* from 1834. This composition is officially numbered as *the second*, but there is no evidence that he had written another piano concerto before this one.³

² Of course, it bears the same name as Liszt’s composition, officially the first symphonic poem ever.

³ This is yet another controversial question. Franck’s biographers, such as Joël-Marie Fauquet, are convinced that the numeral “Second” was fabricated by the composer’s father to suggest that his son had already composed two piano concertos until his early teenage years (Fauquet 1999, 67).

Example 1

César Franck, *Piano concerto No. 2*, excerpt for two pianos, 1st movement, mm. 196–199 (edited by the author of this paper)

A Maj: II V⁴ 6 7 5 3 I

In the example presented above, one can observe the cadence harmonic motion, the standard shift of the subdominant function (second grade), the dominant and tonic, with the figurative melody in measure 198, which does not affect the harmonic structure of the chord.

Taking a closer look at the previous chronology, one might notice a ten-year gap between 1850 and 1860. That is not accidental because, although Franck did not fall into romantic misanthropy (like Alkan, for instance), he was not creatively productive because he was a performer. He worked as an organist in different Parisian cathedrals during that time, primarily at Notre Dame de Lorrette (Fauquet 1999, 269). Many of his compositions from this time frame were not notated, i.e., they were improvised.

Therefore, it remains a matter of conjecture whether Franck's eventual harmonic features went through some sort of development phase. That this might be the case we find out through his *Six pieces for Organ* from the early 1860s. This cycle is dedicated to Alkan and was published at Liszt's persuasion. An essential composition of the cycle is *Grand pièce symphonique*. Let us briefly examine one modulatory and chromatic sequence from this composition (see Example 2).

Franck's organ pieces generally show more avant-garde harmonic means (more frequent modulation frequency, rarer and more uncommon tonal relations, etc.) than his works that belong to other genres. That is, of course, understandable given that the composer spent almost ten years exclusively using that instrument and actively improvising. It is, however, worth noting that this harmonic picture would soon be reflected in other genres, primarily orchestra and piano works.

Example 2

César Franck, *Grand pièce symphonique*, mm. 132–136 (example taken from the author's doctoral dissertation).

132

F#maj: VI^{6<} V G#maj: VI V A#maj: VI

Franck's mature diatonic harmonic language is distinctive of genres such as spiritual, scene and chamber compositions.⁴ Let us look at an example typical of such harmonic language: Sonata for Violin and Piano (see Example 3).

In the previous example, you might have noticed that the composition, rather unusually, begins with a dominant ninth chord, which is more typical of impressionism. Furthermore, there is a very unusual harmonic relation between the dominant and the second-degree chord, also typical of Debussy. In some practices, this is called a *deceptive turn*.

Franck's mature chromatic-enharmonic harmonic language appears in his most important compositions, i.e., primarily in organ works, symphonic works, and – to a certain degree – works for piano solo. Those are the compositions in which Franck demonstrates his most extraordinary creativity, both in the harmonic field and generally.

You might have noticed that I do not use the commonly used term *highly chromatic harmonic language* but rather *chromatic-enharmonic harmonic language*, and I believe that I am entirely right to do so. Why?

Suppose we perceive the French theoretical discourse from the first half of the 18th century. In that case, we see a differentiation between the treatment of chromatic alterations and modulations on the one hand and enharmonic modulation and notation on the other. This discourse began with the famous quarrel between Jean Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).⁵

⁴ This is not to say that it might not encompass chromatic elements, which are, however, not structural.

⁵ Its traces are still visible in the textbook written by Franck's contemporary Henri Napoleon

Example 3César Franck, *Sonata for Violin and Piano*, 1st movement, mm. 1–8.

Allegretto ben Moderato

Violin

Piano

A maj: V

9

molto dolce

5

Pno.

pp

A maj: (V) II V I

Typology of Tonality

The tonality division suitable for Franck's oeuvre is also closely related to 18th- and 19th-century French tonality theories and, highly likely, Franck's own perception of tonality. Spanning from the early treatises of Jean Philippe Rameau to the theorists of Franck's era, dozens of contributions on harmony and tonality were made. Some were similar to each other, while others differed substantially. One of the central aspects for many theorists is that tonality is not perceived as a single or uniform system but rather a pluricentric one. That was the case as early as Rameau. He considered a division within the 17th and 18th-century categories, such as diatonic, chromatic and enharmonic. After the French Revolution, the younger generation of theorists took over the considerations of the development of history and destiny of tonality. Probably the main contribution in that respect was made by François

Reber (1807–1880) (Reber 1880, 58). Like Franck, Reber was also a student of Reicha's. The Rameau-Rousseau dispute was the subject of my article “Modulate! Modulate! Modulate! But do not change the key[...].” (see Komatović 2018b).

Joseph Fétis (1784–1871).⁶ In my thesis, I also considered how such a typology might be adapted to Franck's oeuvre.

Generally, I divided it into three categories, with one additional subcategory.

- Category (Type) 1 is mainly based on so-called Viennese classicism. It primarily includes altering the primary chords and main functions (tonic, subdominant and dominant).
 - Subcategory (Subtype) 1A additionally includes some aspects of modality. For instance, Franck's oeuvre often entails certain elements of the Mixolydian or Dorian mode.
- Category (Type) 2 is probably most widely used in Franck's opus. It includes a combination of diatonic with some chromatic chords. Or, more precisely, its structure is still diatonic with some solid elements of chromaticism.
- Finally, Category (Type) 3 is dominated by chromaticism and the enharmonic, which penetrate the very tonal structure.

Example 1, with diatonic chords and a clear succession of all three harmonic functions, fully corresponds to Type 1 tonality, as does the following example to a certain extent.

Example 4

César Franck, *Symphony in D Minor*, 3rd movement, mm. 19–22 (example taken from the author's doctoral dissertation).

F#min: IV^{3<} I IV^{3<} I (G maj)

The examples provided until now did not include Type 1A tonality in the true sense. Therefore, example 4 offers a short excerpt of the Dorian mode, from the third movement of Franck's *Symphony* in D minor. In the example presented above, although not very frequent, the link between the subdominant and the tonic is additionally emphasized by alteration, more specifically, by raising the third of the

⁶ Fétis attempts to explain the system's historical evolution by dividing it into four chronological phases: unitonic, transitonic, pluritonic and omnitonic (Fétis 1867, 163–199). For more information, see the cited book.

subdominant (which thus becomes a major chord), and F-sharp minor – albeit subsequently and shortly before the tonality shift – transforms into the sharp Dorian mode.

Examples No. 2 and 3 correspond to another Type 2, although in the case of the Sonata for Violin and Piano, there are some arguments in favor of Type 1A because of the unusual link V-II.

Example 5

César Franck, *Organ Fantasy in A Major*, piano excerpt, mm. 21–30 (edited by the author of this paper).

This example from Franck's mature organ work, *Fantasy in A Major* is not unusual only in its extraordinary number of non-tonal chords (primarily non-tonal dominants) or its significant number of non-chord tones but also because the lack of a clear tonal rounding off contributes to the absence of a clear tonal center. Starting from measure 24 at the latest – with the beginning of an ascending-second sequence – even the slightest feeling for tonality disappears and is partially restored only in measure 27, at the start of the highly chromatized cadence process in A major.

Brief Conclusion

This article is only the tip of the iceberg of researching Franck's harmonic language. Further research, some of which I have already done, involves examining his understanding of modulation theories and the process of tonality change. Other aspects worthy of research include structural, harmonic octatonicism. I generally think that this aspect should neither be superficially understood nor neglected by the scientific community.

List of references:

- Despić, Dejan. 2002. *Harmony with harmonic analysis (Harmonija sa harmonskom analizom)*. Belgrade: Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva.
- Emmanuel, Maurice. 1930. *Les musiciens célèbres: César Franck*. Paris: Librairie Renouard.
- Fauquet, Joël-Marie. 1999. *César Franck*. Paris: Fayard.
- Fétis, Francois-Joseph. 1867. *Traité complète de la théorie et de l'harmonie*. Neuvième édition Paris: G. Brandus et S. Dufour.

- d'Indy, Vincent. 1919. *César Franck* (huitième édition). Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan.
- Komatović, Nikola. 2018a. *Spättonale Phänomene bei César Franck. Eine Untersuchung anhand ausgewählter Orgel- und Orchesterwerke des Komponisten vor dem Hintergrund der Geschichte der Harmonik und ihrer Lehre in Belgien und Frankreich* (unpublished doctoral dissertation) (*Late tonal phenomena by César Franck. Research of selected organ and orchestral works of the composer from the perspective of history of harmony and its teaching methods in Belgium and France*). Vienna: University of Music and Performing Arts.
- Komatović, Nikola. 2018b. "Modulate! Modulate! Modulate! But do not change the key. The development and transformation of the term modulation in the 19th-century French theory". In *Rasprave*, 44/2, 517–526.
- Komatović, Nikola. 2018c. "My Symphony Does (Not) Speak German! A Possible Perception of the National Element in César Franck's Symphony in D Minor". In *Proceedings of the Fifth International Students' Scientific Conference "The Sound Ambiguity"*, 25–33.
- Kunel, Maurice. 1947. *La vie de César Franck: l'homme et l'œuvre*. Paris: B. Grasset.
- Reber, Napoleon Henri. 1862. *Traité d'harmonie* (ninth edition). Paris: Colombier.
- Stove, Robert J. 2012. *César Franck: his life and times*. Plymouth: Scarecrow Press.

Rezime

EVOLUCIJA KROZ SINHRONICITET? TIPOVI HARMONSKOG JEZIKA SEZARA FRANKA I KATEGORIZACIJA NJEGOVOG TONALITETA

U radu *Evolution through synchronicity? Types of César Franck's harmonic language and categorization of his tonality*, autor predočava svoje višegodišnje analitičko iskustvo sa harmonskim jezikom francusko-belgijskog kompozitora Sezara Franka (1822–1890). U tom smislu, polazi se od premise da ovaj aspekt kompozitorovog iziskuje podrobnije proučavanje u budućnosti, naročito jer se dovodi u vezu sa Listovim i Vagnerovim jezikom, koji se smatraju velikim inovatorima u tom pogledu. Autor najpre razmatra teorijske kategorizacije Frankovog harmonskog jezika, stavljajući ovaj pojam u množinu („harmonski jezici“), te ga klasificujući hronološko-žanrovski, od mlada-lačkog, preko zrelog dijatonskog do zrelog hromatsko-enharmonskog, pri čemu su potonje dve kategorije istovremene, mada se primarno javljaju u različitim žanrovima. Ovo se argumentuje analitičkim primerima iz *Klavirskog koncerta*, *Velikog simfonijskog komada za orgulje*, *Sonate za klavir i violinu*, te *Orguljskog korala br. 3*. U nastavku se razmatra Frankova percepcija tonaliteta kao referentnog jezičkog sistema. Polazeći od kategorizacije karakteristične za francusku teoriju XVIII i XIX veka, autor kompozitorov tonalitet organizuje u tri tipa, tj. kategorije: 1 (dijatonski, baziran na baštini Bečkih klasičara), 1A (dijatonski sa modalnim uplivima), 2 (hromatizovan) i 3 (hromatsko-enharmonski), što se argumentuje primerima iz *Simfonijskih varijacija za klavir i orkestar*, *Simfonije u d molu i Orguljske fantazije u A duru*. U duhu kategorizacije harmonskih jezika, i percepcija tonaliteta kod Franka je uglavnom hronološko-žanrovskog karaktera, mada, kako se to očituje na primeru visoko-hromatizovanih *Simfonijskih varijacija*, više tipova tonaliteta (a i harmonskih jezika) može egzistirati i u istom delu. U kratkom zaključku, autor poziva teoretičare da rekontekstualizuju Frankovo stvaralaštvo u duhu francuskog teorijskog nasleđa, umesto kroz prizmu stvaralaštva tzv. Novonemačke škole, te stavlja do znanja da se dalje novine u stvaralaštvu ovog kompozitora mogu pronaći u istraživanju njegovog poimanja umanjene lestvice (oktatonike).