Steven G. Young

# Follower of Franck: The Cyclic Style in the Music of Louis Vierne

Louis Vierne, an often neglected composer in the early twentieth century, felt deeply the influence of César Franck, especially Franck's cyclic style. Although Vierne was accepted in the organ class of Franck less than a month prior to Franck's untimely demise in 1890, the younger man had enjoyed several encounters with the great master while studying at *l'Institution nationale des jeunes aveugles*. (Vierne only had about 7% of what we consider to be normal vision, because of congenital cataracts.) Franck had paid frequent visits to the school as an examiner for the jury exams, and stayed in close contact with one of his prize pupils, Adolphe Marty, professor of organ at *l'Institution*. Through Marty, Vierne had begun to develop his love of the organ, improvisation, composition, and, most allowed especially, of Franck's music. Because of Vierne's prowess as an organist, he was allowed to audit Francks's organ class at the Conservatoire for well over a year before his official enrollment. Vierne developed a deep affection and respect for the great French master, as evidenced by Vierne's claim that Franck's death "was like losing a father for the second time."[1]

In spite their relatively limited personal interactions, Franck's music left an indelible imprint on the young Vierne, as can be seen in Vierne's use of the cyclic style. From his earliest compositions, the consistent use of a recurring thematic idea, though frequently reharmonized, became part of Vierne's trademark style, a style strongly rooted in the French tradition. We see this idea in Vierne's particular attraction to two forms, the A-B-A form and the Sonata-allegro form, both of which usually involve a return to previously stated material.

Beginning with the *Quatour à cordes*, composed in 1894, Vierne's first attempt at chamber music, we see the seeds of the cyclic phenomenon. Example 1a gives the opening melodic idea in the cello, a simple turn figure which reappears, in one guise or another, in each of the four movements. While the turn figure may not stand out as a particularly substantial melodic idea, it clearly functions as a "cyclic motive" in the manner of Franck. The young composer, only in his early twenties, thus pays homage not only to the work's dedicatee, Charles-Marie Widor, Vierne's mentor and dear friend, but also to Franck.

Example 1a. *Quatour à cordes, Opus 12*, movement I, m. 1–2
manuscript BN Res. Ms. 1070
N.B. All examples from this work come from this manuscript
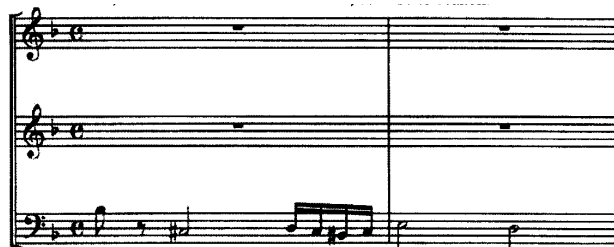
Within the four movements of the quartet, we find the recurring motive treated to augmentation, both intervallically and rhythmically, as well as inversion. It is hidden in inner voices and blatantly presented in the prominent melodic instrument. Example 1b shows the initial phrase of movement II; the motive in measure 2 uses the exact same pitches as in the opening figure from movement I, only with the turn figure in inversion.

Example 1b. *Quatour à cordes, Opus 12*
Movement II, m. 4–6

Later, the viola has the motive in augmentation. (Example 1c)

Example 1c. *Quatour à cordes, Opus 12*
Movement II, m. 37–40

Movement III obscures the melodic figure slightly as it comes at the end of the theme, rather than at the outset, and it has a more relaxed rhythm (Example 1d.1). A livelier, slightly altered version of the motive is found later in the movement as seen at the *poco agitato* in Example 1d.2. Finally, in the last movement, the turn figure is expanded in several ways, with a final recollection of the idea coming late in the movement appearing as part of the subject of the fugue that closes the work (Examples 1e.1 and 1e.2).

Example 1d.1. *Quatour à cordes, Opus 12*
Movement III, m. 5–7.

Example 1d.2. *Quatour à cordes, Opus 12*
Movement III, m. 34–37.

Example 1e.1. *Quatour à cordes, Opus 12*
Movement IV, m. 143–145.v

Example 1e.2. *Quatour à cordes, Opus 12*
Movement IV, m. 160–161.

Moreover, Vierne provides an additional moment in the last movement that recalls and transforms an earlier idea from the opening movement. Late in the movement, the viola has a melodic figure that uses an inversion of the descending diminished seventh that began the opening movement, now seen and heard as an ascending sixth (compare examples 2a.1 and 2a.2 with example 1a).

Example 2a.1. *Quatour à cordes, Opus 12*
Movement I, m. 9–13.

Example 2a.2. *Quatour à cordes, Opus 12*
Movement IV, m. 92–95.

The *Quatour à cordes* represents only the first step in the maturation process of a composer so devoted to this style that cyclicism completely saturates one of the late masterworks. Several years later, in 1902, Vierne completed his *Deuxième Symphonie pour orgue, Opus 20*. The symphonic structure is, in many ways, well-suited to Vierne and the cyclic principle. Most of Vierne's organ symphonies consist of five movements; fast-slow-fast-slow-fast, suggesting an overarching cyclic structure. The first and last movements of the symphonies tend to be in sonata-allegro form, reinforcing this sense of formal balance. So, it seems only natural that Vierne's first serious attempt at writing in a cyclic style using thematic (melodic) material should be evidenced in an organ symphony. One such example of the cyclic technique is found in the final measures of the opening theme of the symphony that is reincarnated and rhythmically transformed when it reappears in the *agitato* section of the second movement, as seen in examples 3a.1 and 3a.2.

Example3a.1. *Deuxième Symphonie, Opus 20.* J. Hamelle et Cie (1903)
Movement I, m. 5–7.
N.B. All examples from this work come from this edition.

Example 3a.2 *Deuxième Symphonie, Opus 20*
Movement II, m. 33–34.

Vierne's style has evolved and he now begins to use actual thematic material, not just motives as previously witnessed. In the *Deuxième Symphonie* we can observe the emergence of Vierne's truly personal imprint.

For example, this symphony makes use of adventurous, far-reaching tonal relationships, especially in the slower movements. In one instance, the composer moves within the tonal areas of Ab Major, B minor, E minor, and C Major. Vierne's distinctive voice often recalls the cyclic style of Franck, as in the first movement's development section. There the two main thematic ideas are combined, heard simultaneously in the outer voices within the C minor portion of this movement. (This combination of themes recurs in the Coda of this movement as well.)

Beginning with the second movement, Vierne reintroduces material from the opening *Allegro*. The second theme of the first movement, rhythmically altered, becomes the basis for the melody that opens movement II. With this rhythmic alteration comes a new agogic stress on the second beat of the theme, partially disguising the cyclic relationship (see Examples 3b and 3c).

Example 3b. *Deuxième Symphonie, Opus 20*
Movement I, m. 39–42.

Example 3c. *Deuxième Symphonie, Opus 20*
Movement II, m. 1–4.

We do not hear material from the first movement again until the Final. Here, in this last movement, the second theme recalls the opening melody, now in a much smoother setting than that of the jagged opening (see Examples 3d.1 and 3d.2).

Example 3d.1. *Deuxième Symphonie, Opus 20*
Movement I, m. 1–4.

Example 3d.2. *Deuxième Symphonie, Opus 20*
Movement V, m. 88–89.

But Vierne does not appear to be satisfied enough to stop there – instead, he takes the second lyrical theme from the third movement *Scherzo* and transforms that melodic idea into the aggressive, more active theme that begins the final movement, as seen in Examples 3e.1 and 3e.2.

Example 3e.1. *Deuxième Symphonie, Opus 20*
Movement III, m. 73–78.

Example 3e.2. *Deuxième Symphonie, Opus 20*
Movement V, m. 9–10 (cyclic transformation)

Again, the rhythm and the musical stresses have been altered and the tonality has been changed, but the theme can be clearly heard upon careful listening. In contrast to the recurrence on a simple figural idea, as observed in the earlier quartet, this thematic manipulation and recall represent a truly cyclic style.

The seminal *Deuxième Symphonie* serves as a point of departure, which led the composer into more adventurous areas of cyclic transformation and development, culminating some twenty years later in the *Cinquième Symphonie, Opus 47*. An intermediate step in this development appears in the next major piece of chamber music, the *Sonate pour violoncelle et piano, Opus 27*.

This sonata, composed in 1911, was written at a time when Vierne's life was not at its happiest. He had been recently divorced from the singer Arlette Taskin, and forbidden by the Catholic Church to remarry. Vierne was a very devout believer. In addition, he lost his youngest son to tuberculosis, while his mother and his best friend, Alexandre Guilmant, died within one month of each other from uremia. He was refused a second time for the position of *professeur d'orgue* at the *Conservatoire Nationale de Musique*, and his friendship with Gabriel Fauré, then director of the Conservatoire, faltered for a lengthy period.

In the cello sonata, the use of cyclicism appears not in several movements as it did in the *Deuxième Symphonie*, but only in the last movement. There, Vierne recalls themes from both of the previous movements in a type of retrospective that calls to mind the fourth movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony where the Scherzo material is repeated as well as the final movement of his Ninth Symphony where all previous themes are recalled. Significantly, Franck has been considered by some, according to his biographer Vincent d'Indy, to be the French heir and propagator of Beethoven's style. That being said, it may follow that Vierne, successor to and spiritual son of Franck, would wish to emulate Beethoven as well. Vierne expands this recollection technique beyond the manner employed by Beethoven. Vierne brings the allegro movement to a virtual halt prior to the recapitulation, calling for a tempo of *Doppio più lento*, and then the piano offers themes from the previous movements simultaneously: the right hand has the first subject from the second movement, while the left hand concurrently plays the first theme from the first movement (see Example 4a).

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Example 4a. *Sonate pour violoncello et piano, Opus 27*
Durand et Fils, Paris (1911)
Movement III, m. 169–172.
N.B. All examples from this work come from this edition

Following this brief retrospective, the recapitulation proceeds, but then, once more, the music slows down to recall again the themes from the earlier movements, this time with the cello participating in the thematic remembrance (see Example 4b). This second nostalgic return is briefer than the first, as the work quickly resumes the *allegro* tempo and closes in a dramatic style, with the third-movement themes being tossed between the instrumentalists in a fiery dash to the finish.

Example 4b. *Sonate pour violoncello et piano, Opus 27*
Movement IV, m. 249–253.

The year 1917 was yet another tragic time in Vierne's life, as he lost his only remaining brother and his eldest son in the battles of World War I. As a response to his grief, Vierne composed his *Quintette pour piano et cordes, Opus 42*. Vierne wrote of this piece:

> "I am composing as a votive offering a quintet of vast proportions which will express the depth of my tenderness as well as the tragic fate of my child. I shall create something powerful, grand, and strong which will touch the deepest chords in the hearts of fathers who grieve for dead sons...As for mine, the last of my name, I shall bury him with a roar of thunder and not with the plaintive bleating of a resigned, stupid sheep."

The quintet opens with a dramatic and unsettling theme in the piano which moves to the strings. One might infer the great depth of Vierne's grief through his extreme use of dissonance as he uses 9 of the 12 available chromatic pitches before repeating any notes (see Example 5a).

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Example 5a. *Quintette pour piano et cordes, Opus 42.* Editions Salabert (1924)
Movement I, m. 1–4.
N.B. All examples from this work come from this edition

The movement goes on to include several themes, which will recur throughout the piece. The string theme that makes prominent use of descending minor seconds becomes elongated in the second section (*più mosso*) of the second movement (see Examples 5b.1 and 5b.2).

Example 5b.1. *Quintette pour piano et cordes, Opus 42*
Movement 1, m. 5–6.

Example 5b.2. *Quintette pour piano et cordes, Opus 42*
Movement II, m. 47–50.

Despite the lengthening, the descending minor seconds are still prominent – made even moreso by the agogic accent placed on the note that precedes the descent. Here we see a transformation of a theme through the addition of extra notes, whose intervals have also been an important part of the opening movement. (Included among these intervals are the tritone and the minor sixth.) The final movement of the work, in sonata-allegro form, recalls themes from the previous two movements but not in small sections, as witnessed previously in the cello sonata. Here the themes are lengthy and oft-repeated, interspersed with new material. Additionally, characteristic intervals that permeate the initial themes recur and are given places of importance, especially the ascending minor second. These recollections demonstrate a progression in Vierne's style. He now recreates and integrates entire themes rather than motives or fragments, clearly committed to the cyclic technique and synthesizing several significant influences.

If the *Quatour à cordes* represents Vierne's early attempt at composition using the cyclic technique, the *Cinquième Symphonie pour orgue*, Opus 47, stands as his crowning achievement, his apotheosis of the cyclic principle. This work, written in 1923, demonstrates nothing short of complete mastery of a distinctive style as well as the skill of a composer working at the height of his power. Every movement displays the cyclic principle, and Vierne does not limit himself to suggestions, hints, or fragments of thematic material; instead entire themes from the opening slow movement appear later in masterful reincarnations.

The two melodic ideas that begin the *Cinquième Symphonie* appear in every movement of this symphony in one form or another. Example 6a.1 gives both these ideas: the first, an arpeggiated figure in the pedals that outlines a major seventh sonority and the second, a more plaintive melody in the manuals that begins with a rising semitone and further reaches upward with a leap of a minor seventh, seemingly yearning for an octave.

Example 6a.1. *Cinquième Symphonie, Opus 47.* Editions Durand et Cie, Paris (1927)
Movement 1, m. 1–9.
N.B. All examples from this work come from this edition

The second movement, *allegro molto marcato*, commences with the initial descending arpeggio in the manuals revitalized in a rhythmically aggressive inversion (see Example 6b). The second theme appears in the bass, in a sort of invertible counterpoint achieved through the register exchange of these two themes. The second theme now extends to the octave that it originally failed to reach in the first movement, and will expand further as the movement progresses. (This was in fact foreshadowed in movement I, m. 72.)

Example 6b. *Cinquième Symphonie, Opus 47*
Movement II, m. 1–4.

The *Scherzo* utilizes the second theme for its melody, now in a playful compound duple meter, with an entirely staccato touch that adds lightness to its character (see Example 6c.1).

Example 6c.1. *Cinquième Symphonie, Opus 47*
Movement III, m. 1–3.

Once again, Vierne employs one of Franck's favorite techniques, that of combining themes. As the A section of the movement returns, the pedal has the descending arpeggio (theme I) in an even rhythm, supporting the rapid fire movement of the second theme, as seen in Example 6c.2.

Example 6c.2. *Cinquième Symphonie, Opus 47*
Movement III, m. 51–54.

Disguising the thematic material adds another dimension to the cyclic technique, as seen in example 6d. Vierne completely transforms the descending slow arpeggiated figure from the first movement into this intriguing melody found in the fourth movement *Larghetto* of the *Symphonie*.

Example 6d. *Cinquième Symphonie, Opus 47*
Movement IV, m. 29.

Vierne opens this fourth movement with an inversion of the original second theme, with the characteristic rising seventh now descending. As the movement continues, the original first theme (the arpeggio) returns, also in inversion, with yet another new syncopated rhythmic configuration and using some unusual intervals (whole steps and diminished thirds). The movement closes with another distinguishing feature – Vierne's intense chromaticism. In the last statement of the inverted second theme, Vierne harmonizes the melody with a series of rising chromatic thirds, creating exquisite tension before the final resolution.

The glorious *Final* opens with the original first theme in an iambic dance rhythm that swings like the peal of bells under a carillon-like accompaniment (see Example 6e). Vierne reintroduces the original second theme, still in inversion, at the tempo change. The work concludes with the initial theme alternating between the hands and feet, all accompanied by the carillon-like figure that opened the movement. Vierne harmonizes the tune with rich, colorful chords that resonate with dissonance and consonance, tension and relief, triumphantly demonstrating his total command of an inherited compositional technique that he has made entirely his own.

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Example 6e. *Cinquième Symphonie, Opus 47*
Movement V, m. 1–9.

Notes

¹ Louis Vierne, *Mes Souvenirs, Cahiers et mémoires de l'orgue* (numéros spéciaux de la revue l'orgue), CXXXIV (1970).

Santrauka

C. Francko pasekėjas: Notre-Dame katedros vargonininko Louiso Vierne'o ciklinis stilius

Beveik aklas Notre-Dame katedros vargonininkas L. Vierne'as tyrinėtojų yra laikomas jo mylimo mokytojo, vieno žymiausių ciklinio stiliaus pradininkų C. Francko „dvasios sūnumi". Nors L. Vierne'as pas Francką mokėsi gana trumpai, bet daug ką perėmė iš jo muzikinės kalbos. Gausiame L. Vierne'o kūrybiniame palikime galima rasti nemažai pavyzdžių, kuriems būdinga Francko chromatinė muzikinė kalba ir cikliškumas.

Šiame pranešime tyrinėjama Vierne'o ciklinės technikos plėtra Paryžiaus XIX a. pabaigos muzikos kontekste, ypač atkreipiamas dėmesys į jo muzikoje vis labiau įsigalintį chromatiškumą. Taip pat įvertinamas L. Vierne'o indėlis į prancūzų muzikos stilių raidą, aptariamas jam būdingas spalvinių harmonijų ir ostinatinių ritmų naudojimas. Nagrinėjamos dvi iš šešių kompozitoriaus simfonijų vargonams: *Deuxième* (0) ir *Cinquème* (V) bei trys kameriniai kūriniai: *Quartet á cordes* (Styginių kvartetas), *Sonate pour violoncelle et piano* (Sonata violončelei ir fortepijonui) ir *Quintette pour piano et cordes* (Fortepijoninis kvintetas). Ši analizė įrodo, kad L. Vierne'as puikiai suprato ir įvaldė C. Francko stilių, kartu išreiškė individualų savo braižą.