



Charles-Marie  
**WIDOR**

Piano Music

Daniel  
**GRIMWOOD**

Widor composed for stage, voice, orchestra, chamber ensemble and, most famously, organ. When a composer's primary mode of expression is the king of instruments, a certain austerity can attach itself to their reputation and this is arguably the case with the popular view of Widor, because hardly any composers are simultaneously so famous and so unknown. Were it not for John R. Near, the writer of Widor's only definitive biography, who first made me aware of Widor's solo piano music it is likely I would never have encountered it. The piano works show aspects of Widor's art less present in his seminal cycle of ten Organ Symphonies, which bear the weight of his considerable intellect and erudition; writing for piano Widor seems able to explore other, more fanciful aspects of his nature and our understanding of this great composer is enriched by it. I have tried to select works which represent the great variety of styles to be found in his solo piano music.

The son of an organ builder—in his old age, when asked about his choice of profession he answered with characteristic wit, “My vocation? It's quite simple. I was born in an organ pipe.”—Widor was first taught by his father, and aged 11 became organist at the secondary school of his native Lyon. He subsequently studied organ at the Brussels Conservatoire with the patrician Jacques Lemmens and composition with François-Joseph Fétis; as a theorist, hugely respected in his lifetime; as an historian, controversial in our own time. Aged 24 he became assistant to Saint-Saëns at the Église de la Madeleine. In 1870 Widor was appointed to the very prestigious role of organist at Saint Sulpice, Paris, where he would remain for 63 years as the longest serving organist in that church's history. He succeeded César Franck as organ professor at the Paris Conservatoire where he would later become professor of composition. He died at the age of 93 after a long and very well-lived life and is interred in the crypt of Saint-Sulpice.

*The Variations sur un thème original* Op. 29 (1892) are a reworking of the *Variations de concert sur un thème original* (1867) Op. 1. The revision—a little shorter for notes, a little longer for Variation IV being marked Adagio—demonstrates an appreciation for “antique music” that Widor likely inherited from his teacher Fétis who was, unusually for the time, an enthusiastic advocate for early music, and it is telling that he chose a piece with such baroque conceits as his Opus 1. Of the works on this album this pristine set of variations on a ground bass comes closest to the style of organ music.

The first time I performed the *Carnaval* Op. 61 (1889) in public was in France the day after Bastille Day. As the festivities started to warm up we could hear a village band tuning; strident, a little out of tune, full of charm and vigour, and it sent a thrill down my spine as I realised I was experiencing the sort of thing the first movement *Trompettes et Timbales* represents. Widor’s *Carnaval*; sexy, profound, whimsical, dangerous, occasionally silly; is clearly modelled on Schumann’s work of the same title and makes a few nods of acknowledgement in the direction of Leipzig. Where Schumann depicts characters of the *commedia dell’arte* and characters of his own time or imagination, Widor presents a more varied cast without always providing clues to their identity: I cannot be certain that Francesca is from Rimini, but I do know she is voluptuous and lovely! The cycle veers helter-skelter between extreme virtuosity (*Bal masque*) to shimmering, soulful resignation (*Francesca*), from fleet-footed (*Entrée Turque*) to heavy (*Hongroise*). This series of character sketches, with swooning waltzes, lively dances and dreamy melodies is framed by two marches, the awkward, at times shrill opening movement answered by the *Final* in the major key, which was in my mind as I watched the firework display that concluded the festivities the evening before my concert.

Op. 71 has an intriguing publication history. Available sources show it first appeared as part of Widor's Second Collection of Waltzes in 1903 despite some of them not conforming to the genre. The opus number infers that these five pieces were written around 1895. A revised edition of the collection was issued in 1923, which is the version recorded here. Both appear in Volume 6 of the Crescendo Music Publications of Widor's complete piano works edited by Daniel Mitterdorfer and Harold Fabrikant.

*Valse gaie* abundantly lives up to its name, the piquant harmonies of the *staccato* main theme like the wrinkles at the corner of a smile usher a whirlwind of a dance with a more introspective *Schumannesque* central section. The swift *Allegro vivace* tempo makes this a work of considerable virtuosity with a tremendous and muscular coda.

By contrast *Valse Triste* loses itself in a grief-ridden spiral of chromatics. Interestingly it predates the *Valse langoureuse* Op. 120 by Saint-Saëns which was published in the same year as the Second Collection of Waltzes, and which contains a similarly experimental series of startling chromatic sidesteps.

Kermesse derives from Dutch combining *Kerk* (church) and *Mis* (mass) and was a church festival which usually included mass and a celebration in honour of a patron saint. Widor uses the title *Kermesse carillonnante* for this joyful tintinnabulation in what Harold Fabrikant describes as "surely Widor's most bravura-style piano piece, made to measure for concert use." It shows Widor, who knew Liszt both as a musician and a man, as a master colourist who knew how to maximise the possibilities of the piano.

*Valse oubliée* alternates a desolate melody in the bass with what feels like the merest breath of a Schubert Waltz finishing with a *tranquillamente assai* where time seems to stand still.

*Après la Fête* which completes Op. 71 feels narrative. As with the preceding Valse two contrasting themes are alternated; the first outlines a descending scale, the

second—more explicitly waltz-like—begins with rising scales. Both keep breaking off and are twice interrupted by impassioned outbursts. It creates an atmosphere of unreality which seems to me to point toward Prokofiev's *Cinderella*. My personal narrative for this experimental piece (which is my favourite of the set) is of morning-after recollections of a party stabbed through with pangs of guilt for some drunken misdemeanour or other.

Widor composed incidental music for August Dorchain's play *Conte d'Avril* based on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, though Dorchain was at pains to explain that his was an original creation based on the same sources that Shakespeare used. It was premiered in 1885 with Widor providing some music from backstage, but the expanded and extended orchestral score was not published until 1892, a year after the piano arrangement. The exquisite *Nocturne* is a reworking of the third movement of the Suite for flute and piano Op. 34 (1884).

John R. Near's biography of Widor is entitled "Widor: A Life Beyond the Toccata" highlighting the fact that this most important of French composers' reputation rests almost entirely on one movement of one piece. To my knowledge the version of the Toccata I have recorded here is the only piano transcription of a very famous organ piece made by the composer themselves, Liszt notwithstanding, Widor manages to incorporate most of the pedal part into the left hand and adds a few pianistic effects here and there to guard against monotony.

I am indebted to John R. Near, Harold Fabrikant and Daniel Mitterdorfer; their immaculate, painstaking research and passion illuminates this wonderful and important composer.

*For John R. Near*

Daniel Grimwood is best known as a world-leading exponent of 19th century virtuosic piano repertoire. Received with critical acclaim, Grimwood's recordings and performances of the music of Adolph von Henselt mark him out as a unique voice amongst his generation of pianists. His recording of Henselt's *Complete Etudes* garnered "instant classic status" by Gramophone Magazine, which also named it piano release of 2023.

In 2023 Daniel was invited to open the 34th Season of the highly prestigious Husum Piano Festival in Germany, with a concert of works including Field, Blumenfeld, Liszt, William Sterndale Bennet, Henselt and his own transcription of Purcell's *Chacony*. He returned to Husum in 2025 to perform works by Josepha von Fladt, Henselt, Carl Baermann Junior, Amy Beach, Eduard Schütt and Widor.

His discs of Liszt and Chopin, performed on an 1851 Erard piano, received a unanimous chorus of praise from the press; the Liszt album was Daily Telegraph CD of the week and Editor's Choice in Gramophone Magazine.

Daniel has performed at many of the world's leading concert halls, including the Wigmore Hall, Symphony Hall Birmingham, the Rachmaninoff Hall in Moscow, as well as venues in Germany, Austria, Italy, The Netherlands, Slovenia, Estonia, Taiwan, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Lebanon, Oman and Australia.

In demand for his thoughtful, innovative, and ingenious programming, Daniel enjoys a busy solo and chamber music career, and alongside Joseph Wolfe and Jonathan Ayling is a founding member of the Tier3 Piano Trio and the Paddock Wood Proms.

Daniel's dynamic mastery of the piano is combined with a laser-like curiosity about composers, and historical performance practice. A highly informative and entertaining

speaker, Daniel has thrilled audiences with his lecture/recital programmes.

He is currently a Research Associate at the University of York, specialising in 19th Century Performance Practice. Daniel's award-winning Urtext edition of the Adolph von Henselt Etudes is published by Edition Peters and his book about the Etudes of Adolph von Henselt has been met with enthusiasm. Daniel regularly performs on live broadcasts on BBC Radio 3, and has been featured in BBC Four's TV documentary series "Revolution and Romance".

His musical interest started as a 3-year-old playing the next-door neighbour's piano in Kent, and by the age of 7 he was performing in front of audiences. His training continued with Graham Fitch at the Purcell School, where he also studied violin, viola and composition, giving him a broad appreciation of classical music, and later with Vladimir Ovchinnikov and Peter Feuchtwanger.





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DDD

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76:56

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## Charles-Marie Widor (1844-1937)

### Variations sur un

#### Thème original Op. 29 7:44

- [ 1 ] Andantino 1:24
- [ 2 ] Var. 1 L'istesso tempo 1:07
- [ 3 ] Var. 2 Legato assai e sostenuto 0:58
- [ 4 ] Var. 3 Vivace 0:59
- [ 5 ] Var. 4 Adagio 2:26
- [ 6 ] Vivace 0:48
- [ 7 ] Tempo I - Vivace 1:15

#### Carnaval Op. 61 (original version) 36:37

- [ 8 ] 1. Timbales et Trompettes 4:35
- [ 9 ] 2. Flirt 2:38
- [10] 3. Bal masqué 3:29
- [11] 4. Rosita 2:28
- [12] 5. Entrée Turque 2:05
- [13] 6. Zanetto 3:35
- [14] 7. Viennoise 1:15
- [15] 8. Entrée polonaise 1:08
- [16] 9. Hongroise 4:24
- [17] 10. Bohémienne 1:21
- [18] 11. Francesca 5:04
- [19] 12. Finale 4:25

### Cinq pièces Op. 71 22:59

- [20] Valse gaie. Allegro vivace 5:52
- [21] Valse triste. Moderato 1:52
- [22] Kermesse carillonnante.  
Tempo giusto 6:38
- [23] Valse oubliée. Andante 4:58
- [24] Après la Fête. Andante 3:39  
(earlier version)

### From Conte d'Avril Op. 64

- [25] Nocturne. Andantino 3:21

### From Organ Symphony No. 5 Op. 42

- [26] Toccata. Allegro (arr. Widor) 4:57

## Daniel Grimwood

Piano