Louis James Alfred Lefébure-Wély

(13 November 1817 – 31 December 1869)

Now that it is well past the middle of 2017 I find that I have seen very little evidence of any celebrations for the 200th anniversary of the birth of the great French organist Lefébure-Wély. It might well be that I simply have not noticed a surge in the performance of his music and that around the globe there have been parties where the champagne flowed and the loudspeakers were throbbing with *Offertoires* and *Sorties*, while the partygoers gyrated wildly to this organ music that was so popular with the public in the middle part of nineteenth century Paris. Lefébure-Wély was not so popular with some of his fellow musicians but he must have been rated highly by the authorities at La Madeleine and S. Sulpice otherwise he would not have spent so many years between the two great Parisian churches.

Alfred was the son of an organist, Isaac-François-Antoine Lefebvre who, on being appointed organist at a fashionable church in Paris, changed his name to Antoine Lefébure-Wely. Alfred was a talented child; it is recorded that at the age of eight he ably accompanied in church a Mass that had been composed by his father. He later became a prize-winning student at the Paris Conservatoire and went on to delight people with his particular style of playing. After his death it was his successor at La Madeleine, Saint-Saëns, who commented that his improvisations were wonderful but that he left behind a few unimportant compositions. Lefébure-Wély clearly wanted to compose, and since he composed so much, it is probable he wanted to be taken seriously as a composer. At one point he ceased to be organist of a church so that he could concentrate on composing an operetta. Sadly, it was not a success and that is when he moved to S. Sulpice.

The great French Organ builder Cavaillé-Coll knew only too well how a performance by Lefébure-Wély could make an organ sound beautiful, attractive and above all, exciting. He therefore engaged Lefébure-Wely as his in-house organist. Opening recitals on new instruments were usually given by Lefébure-Wély and he could be called upon to demonstrate instruments to prospective customers. Lefébure-Wély maintained this position with Cavaillé-Coll until Paris entered a more sombre musical mood spearheaded by Jacques Lemmens. At that point organists of a more serious musical disposition became preferable, thus Cavaillé-Coll engaged César Franck to give the recitals and demonstrations.

I was introduced to Lefébure-Wély's music by my friend and RCM contemporary, the recitalist and recording artist David M. Patrick. From somewhere he had obtained a not altogether legible copy of the famous ("Great") *Sortie* in B flat. It was some years before I obtained a copy of this, but in the early 1980s I found a publication edited by Piet van der Steen, "Meditaciones Religiosas" Op. 122. This book is dedicated to the Spanish Monarch, Isabella II, possibly because her outlook was of a moderately progressive persuasion, something admired by Lefébure-Wély. In this book there are ten pieces, including the now famous Andante in F (nicknamed by some the "Nuns' Chorus"), also a Fugue, *Offertoire* and the "Little" *Sortie* in B flat. In fact I had forgotten that I already possessed some ancient looking nineteenth century copies, donated, in the way that most organists receive music, by somebody who could not bear to throw away the music their partner had used for sixty or so years. I now realise that in these books there are some interesting, even exciting pieces I need to get to grips with, and I have started to do so. The other well-known *Sortie* in E flat I received in 1993 as a gift whilst I was organist of the English Church in Geneva. Gaby Heitzmann, the Organist Emeritus, wanted me to have a copy of the edition he used and I wish I could remember the story he told me; it involved a Russian Princess and a link back to associations with Lefébure-Wély in Paris. However, he wrote on the front of the copy "the famous *Sortie*". There is an

account of a meeting with Lefébure-Wély in the memoir of the English North Country organist, Dr William Spark, who had been assistant to S. S. Wesley at Leeds Parish Church and later, Leeds City Organist. Dr Spark visited Paris sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century and met Lefébure-Wély, and he said of him that "he was a fine improviser and a charming man".

It is quite surprising the emotions that the name or music of Lefébure-Wély stirs up. For some years, if I were ending with a piece by Lefébure-Wély at the Chingford summer recital series, a regular audience member would tell me that she would leave beforehand, as she really did have a distaste for this music. Now she is no longer with us she was saved from walking out this summer when I played about twenty minutes of Lefébure-Wély, so that at least someone celebrates his anniversary. I will repeat this, and a little bit more, in Marlow Parish Church during October. It was in the mid-1980s that I last played that amount of Lefébure-Wély, at a recital in Chichester Cathedral. I wonder how many times English Cathedrals have been filled with the sound of Lefébure-Wély for more than one or two pieces at the most; I am sure it is not very often.

There is a great range of pieces to explore. For example there is his "Storm" in which he uses the Tonnerre (which can be reproduced by using a small plank of wood across the lower 6 or 7 pedals), his "Boléro de Concert", written for harmonium, "La Retraite Militaire" (Caprice de Genre pour le piano), an interesting "Fantaisie sur Guillaume Tell" for Harmonium, and his twelve books of "L'Organiste Moderne". Some of these pieces have been republished but most are available from public domain websites where nineteenth century copies have been scanned. My nineteenth century editions I have already mentioned are interesting as some are edited by William Rea and the others, the twelve volumes of "L'Organiste Moderne" by W. T. Best, adding English Organ registrations and directions. These are confusing as the suggested fingering is of the time and so fingers are as for string players: 1, 2, 3, 4 and + for the thumb; also, some of the note stems are on the wrong side for the present day. I have volumes 1, 2 and 5 of these original W. T. Best English editions. Apart from all of this music there is more piano music and some choral items and songs, a few have been recorded and are perhaps deserving of more exposure.

It might be some of Lefébure-Wély's compositional techniques that annoy certain musicians. His compositions certainly stick to conventional forms, often ternary form, possibly with a coda, or there might be a sense of a sonata form or even a hint of a rondo form. Like most composers, he knows when he has a good tune and will keep using it. He is particularly good at the big symphonic/operatic ending: many repeated chords alternating the dominant and tonic for a few bars and perhaps finally several tonic chords with rests between, or often a tonic chord held for several bars, and of course it will be ff or fff! There are also his key changes to consider. Those of us who might find ourselves accompanying an anthem by John Rutter know only too well how there can be sudden modulations into many more sharps or flats than one started with. Lefébure-Wély was doing this in the nineteenth century, he produces modulations that suddenly lift the music onto a new level of excitement and colour – and difficulty for those who are not fond of playing in several sharps or flats.

One might say that his compositional techniques are the same as many other composers of organ music, yet somehow the way he uses them is far more direct than others. Lefébure-Wély makes full use of the immediate decay of organ sounds with only the acoustic of a building giving length or lack of length to notes. This he contrasts with the ability of the organ to sustain notes at the same volume and with a seamless legato. He makes good use of the different manuals for contrast and solo melodies and undoubtedly, when he composed, he kept in mind

the qualities of the Cavaille-Coll organs he was familiar with, as well as the French Harmoniums for which he wrote so many pieces.

There was one particular time when he was roundly congratulated and admired by his fellow Parisian musicians. Chopin's funeral was at La Madeleine and so he was the organist, and although Chopin had requested that only the Requiem by Mozart should be performed, which it was with Meyerbeer conducting, Lefébure-Wély arranged and performed the B minor and E minor Préludes from Op. 29 during the funeral service. For this his fellow musicians showed great appreciation. There were other composers who said good things about him, such as Adolphe Adam and Rossini, the latter making a couple of knowing comments, but they were possibly faint praise, such as telling Lefébure-Wély that people liked his music more for its faults than virtues. When he decided to leave a recital being given by Lefébure-Wély, Rossini realised that a "Storm" was about to be played, so he turned back to listen as he said he always found storms amusing. However, both Alkan and Franck must have had respect for him as they each dedicated a piece of music to him.

Like Franck, Lefébure-Wély was known as an improvisator at the organ and so many of his compositions began life during the Mass whilst improvising at the Offertory or Communion. It was in the Catholic tradition for the priest to carry on preparing the Eucharist while the organ played, hence the great tradition of the Organ Mass that went back to Couperin (*Messe pour les Paroisses* and *Messe pour les Couvents*) and Frescobaldi (*Fiori Musicali*), amongst other composers, and this was continued by Lefébure-Wély and his contemporaries in the nineteenth century. In certain editions Lefébure-Wély does state that an Offertoire, Pastorale or Communion composition is based on themes he used for an improvisation during a Mass.

Lefébure-Wély was frequently to be found in bourgeois salons where the aristocracy met, and there he would perform with his wife, who was a singer. His two daughters, who were talented pianists, would sometimes perform with them. He died at the age of 52 and as with so many other composers who died before their time one wonders how his later compositions would have been affected by the changes in society and other world events, as well as the dawn of the twentieth century. We shall never know the answer to this, but we can be thankful that such a talented and colourful figure graced the Parisian organ stools for 35 years or so and then left behind a large collection of compositions. Many of his quiet Versets, Communions and Andantes would be very useful for those organists who improvise (some say doodle) in a meandering manner without tune or form; such organists would find it far more satisfying were they to perform these not too difficult quiet pieces by a real master of improvisation.

Jonathan Marten