



SAINT-SAËNS' LEGACY

*One of the most versatile musicians of his generation, (1921–2021)
Saint-Saëns contributed extensively to every genre of French music.*

Text by Sabina Teller Ratner

A MONUMENTAL FIGURE

Camille Saint-Saëns was one of the most versatile musicians of his generation and his country. He contributed voluminously to every genre of French musical literature and influenced musical life in France as composer, teacher, pianist, organist, conductor, critic, chronicler, poet, and playwright. During his life, he was both revered and reviled, and different schools of thought either extolled or disputed his fervent efforts.



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Liszt considered Saint-Saëns the ablest and most gifted of contemporary composers, and Berlioz called him “one of the leading musicians of his time” after sitting on the jury during the Exhibition of 1867 that awarded Saint-Saëns its musical prize for *Les Noces de Prométhée*.

As early as 1876 Eduard Hanslick, the influential Austrian music critic, said of Saint-Saëns: “There is throughout the works of Saint-Saëns wit, humor, many formal qualities, a sharp liveliness of pace and, above all, his compositions reveal an eminent skill in construction, an extreme facility in handling all kinds of musical expression equally.”

Camille Bellaigue, Parisian biographer and music critic, wrote in 1889: “If we had to characterize Mr. Saint-Saëns in two words, we would have to call him the best musician in France. There is no other who knows his craft and his art like the composer of *Henry VIII*, who excels like him in all genres, and who has, I am not

saying more genius, but as much talent.” Jean Montargis referred to him, Rameau and Berlioz, as the greatest musicians France has ever known.

At the time of his death Gabriel Fauré claimed: “Numerous opinions have proclaimed Saint-Saëns the greatest musician of his time. During the first half of his long career he was, however, the contemporary of Berlioz and Gounod. Would it not be more exact, and not less glorious, to designate him the most complete musician we have ever had, complete to the point that we can only find a similar example among the great masters of long ago? His knowledge which knew no limits, his brilliant technique, his clear and acute sensibility, his conscience, the variety and astounding number of his works, do they not justify this title which makes him recognizable to everybody forever?”

As a national hero, the French gave him a monumental funeral on 24 December 1921 which was subsequently succeeded by years of indifference. Later, on 14 July

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Saint-Saëns
1911

Jean Montargis
Paris

Fonds St-Saëns 47

HIS GREAT FACILITY, HIS BRILLIANCE, HIS PRODIGIOUS MEMORY, IMPRESSED BOTH LISZT AND WAGNER...

1930, Arthur Dandelot wrote in the preface to his biography of Saint-Saëns: “I believe I have to publish this book at this moment because I find the disfavor, after a period of sometimes extravagant exaltation, in which Saint-Saëns’ music is now found, unjust and exaggerated.”

The turn of the tide occurred in the seventies. The movement, during the twentieth century, towards neo-classicism and objectivity succeeded in activating this renaissance and rehabilitating Saint-Saëns. New interest in his life and work started with the rebirth of intellectual curiosity. Several doctoral dissertations exploring his creative accomplishments commenced in the seventies with the piano works and the symphonies, followed by the chamber music, the organ works, the concertos and the songs. By the end of

the century at least five new biographies had appeared, authored by James Harding (1965), Michael Stegemann (1988), Brian Rees (1999), Stephen Studd (1999), and Jean Gallois (2004). A catalogue raisonné of his complete works was launched (Sabina Teller Ratner, 2002) as well as a research guide (Timothy S. Flynn, 2003). New issues of his essays appeared as did translations of his articles in English and other languages.

His contractual publishers, Éditions Durand, produced new editions of his works in France. In other countries such as Germany, Hungary and the US where copyright laws permitted, the publications proliferated. A comprehensive critical edition of his entire œuvre is being undertaken. Various recording companies have produced complete or selected works in a single category e.g. the complete symphonies, the symphonic poems, the complete piano works, the complete violin works, the complete organ works, the complete works for the cello, the concerted works for the violin, the concerted works for the piano, collections of chamber works, the operas: *Samson et Dalila*, *Henry VIII*, *La Princesse jaune*, *Hélène*, *Proserpine*, *Les Barbares*, *Étienne Marcel*, *Phryné*, selections from *Ascanio*, *Déjanire*, ballets from

Parysatis, *Javotte* and theatrical music from *Antigone* (1893), *Andromaque* (1902), *La Foi* (1909) as well as the first film music from *L’Assassinat du Duc de Guise* (1908).

In considering the work of this great musician it is necessary to bear in mind that he does not belong to the generation of Debussy and Dukas, nor to that of Fauré and Vincent-d’Indy, but rather to that of Bizet, César Franck, and Massenet, all being born approximately within the same decade. His career was one of the longest,

most active, the most enriched in musical history, starting with his precocious childhood when his compositional career began at age three. His great facility, his brilliance and his prodigious memory impressed both Liszt and Wagner early in his life.

As we assess Saint-Saëns’ achievements we are struck by his consummate knowledge, his technical mastery, his ease in producing in all genres, the great range and the all-encompassing nature of his work and the creative instrumentation.

His productivity never diminished, nor was there a genre or form that he did not attempt—piano piece, mélodie, sonata, trio, quartet, quintet, septet and other kinds of chamber music, concertos, symphonies, symphonic poems, cantatas, oratorios, operas, ballets, and even film music. He was first and foremost a musician. Music was the centre of his being and the art and craft of music encompassed his life.



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SAINT-SAËNS' LYRICAL LEGACY

Modern interest in Saint-Saëns' operas has increased in every sphere. *Samson et Dalila* continues to fascinate around the world with performances in such far-flung places as Canada (the Quebec Opera company), Israel (the Israeli Opera), Italy, Germany and South America, among others. By 1920, the Paris Opéra alone had performed the opera more than 500 times.

The Metropolitan Opera International Radio Broadcast Information Center selected *Samson et Dalila* for teaching the humanities. Between its premiere in New York, 8 February 1895, and their most recent rendition, 2 March 2006, the Metropolitan Opera gave 226 performances of the opera which places it among

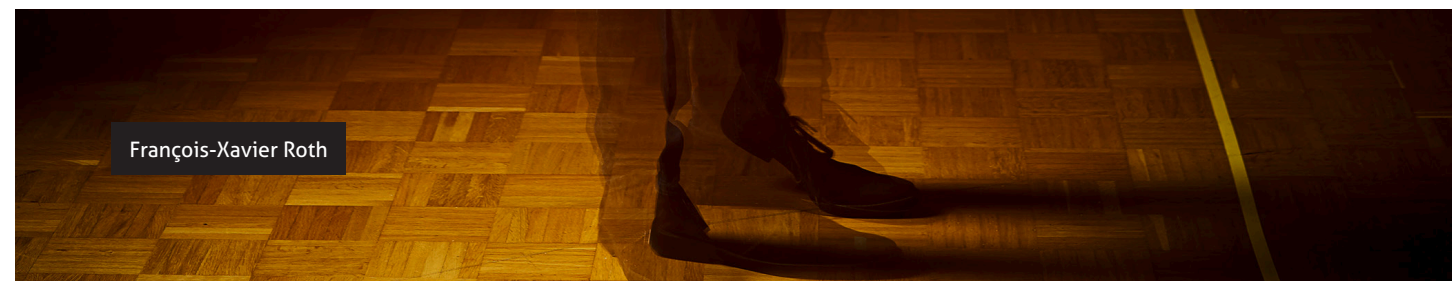
their 36 most-performed works. Recently *Samson* has been played at the Opéra national de Paris-Bastille (2016), Wiener Staatsopera (2020), Opéra de Monte-Carlo (2018), Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin (2019), and Metropolitan Opera (2018).

La Princesse jaune, the first of Saint-Saëns' operas to be staged, was probably the first European opera to incorporate Japanese musical patterns and dialogue. Recently revived in a new recording and performances in England at the Royal Academy of Music (May 2004) and the Paris Opéra-Comique (13 December 2004), it is attracting new attention. Other Saint-Saëns operas have also resurfaced. As a featured work in the Montpellier Festival *Étienne Marcel*, based on an epoch in Parisian history, was revived at

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François-Xavier Roth



A MAN OF THE THEATRE

Theatre music was one of Saint-Saëns' passions. Early in his career he created lyrical scenes. Later he provided music for significant dramatic productions. For Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, staged by Paul Meurice and Auguste Vacquerie in 1893, Saint-Saëns tried to recreate ancient Greek music, to support the actors' presentation of the text. In 1902, at the request of Sarah Bernhardt, he composed incidental music for *Andromaque*, the tragedy by Racine, which premiered 7 February 1903. Saint-Saëns was asked by Eugène Brieux (1858-1932) to compose incidental music for his five-act play *La Foi*, which deals with Egypt during the Middle Empire. As

Saint-Saëns spent his winters on the shores of the Nile, the subject appealed to him greatly and his score was prepared well before the 10 April 1909 première in Monte Carlo. He also provided music for *La Nuit florentine* by Émile Bergerat (1845-1923) based on *La Mandragore* by Machiavelli and *On ne badine pas avec l'amour*, a comedy in three acts and eleven tableaux, by Alfred de Musset (1810-1857) which Paul Gavault staged at the Théâtre Odéon (première 8 February 1917).

Saint-Saëns' theatrical work laid the foundation for his film experience. In 1908 he was commissioned by Henri Lavedan to write music for *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise* produced by Le Film d'Art. This music set a precedent as the first music

specifically created for a film, a milestone in the history of film music. Film music today is a significant area of musical creation for composers.

Saint-Saëns' choral music became more popular with local and international performances. The Christmas Oratorio (*Oratorio de Noël*) still receives its seasonal nod, while the *Requiem* never fails to elicit the desired emotional response. In Britain, works like *The Lyre and the Harp* and *The Promised Land*, created for English Festivals, and the Symphony no. 3, commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic, invoke the Saint-Saëns enigma. *Le Déluge* and *La Nuit*, two magistral works, also elicit universal admiration.

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the Opéra Berlioz in Montpellier (11 July 1994) and promoted on the radio. Similarly, *Henry VIII* opened the new Théâtre Français de la Musique at the Théâtre Impérial de Compiègne (1991) directed by Pierre Jourdan. Receiving numerous performances, it was subsequently recorded and issued in both CD and video formats and proceeded to capture the prize in its category at the Cannes Festival in 1992. Recently, *Hélène* was revived in Australia as a fitting commemoration of the life and achievements of Nellie Melba who sang *Hélène* in the première of the work in Monte Carlo and London, resulting in a recording and reissue of this mythological work whose libretto was created by Saint-Saëns.

Distinguished conductor François-Xavier Roth recalls with great affection the operas of Saint-Saëns:

the *Bacchanale* and magnificent arias of *Samson et Dalila*, the duo and extraordinary flute solo of *Ascanio*, and the opera *Le Timbre d'argent* which he directed at the Opéra-Comique in 2017. "It is a kind of music of the combined tastes of romantic musical Europe, with a totally personal and unique signature... He knew how to absorb and transmit a certain idea of French art at a given moment. The orchestra is very rich. It even includes a contrabass trombone. The overture is unbelievably developed... An orchestra with the role of narration, of drama when the voice can express nothing more... Finally we must emphasize the importance of the chorus whose role, musical as well as theatrical, proves fundamental."

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INVENTOR OF THE FRENCH CONCERTO

The concerto, a form hardly utilized in nineteenth-century France, is well represented in Saint-Saëns' production. The five piano works, individually designed and propagated by the composer himself, have been and continue to be played regularly throughout the world, especially the second and fourth piano concertos. Ravel, in discussing his own concerto, admitted that he modelled it on the forms of Saint-Saëns.

Eminent pianist Marc-André Hamelin reveals his connection to Saint-Saëns: "One of the records that was frequently played around my house was the *Second Piano*

Concerto and the *Fourth Piano Concerto* with Jeanne-Marie Darré and Louis Fourestier. My father had the scores and I used to follow them very enthusiastically. It would be years before I played it. I have performed it many times since then. I could say that Saint-Saëns' music has accompanied me almost all of my life because of these two pieces. At the time, it did not strike me how much of a fantastic work it is—if only perhaps because of the opening, which is completely an homage to Baroque masters. I don't think that anybody has started in so opulent a way with piano alone. Saint-Saëns is, as a matter of fact, the first major French composer to have written such piano concertos.

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Marc-André Hamelin

It was really an innovation to start a concerto like that; it sounds now completely natural and inevitable.

One of the most remarkable moments is shortly before the end of the coda of the *Second Piano Concerto*. I marvel at this passage. He introduces a passage which is completely unexpected. You would expect him to go to the coda; instead he inserts a passage which imitates very large bells at the piano. You don't know where it comes from! It is an absolutely fascinating moment.

You know, Saint-Saëns was very much his own man; there was no one like him. His approach was very different from the "Franckistes": no heavy chromaticism, no

constant modulations in his works. As one of the most remarkable music prodigies, like Mozart, Liszt or Rachmaninov, he was literally born for music."

The first and third violin concertos and the *Introduction et Rondo capriccioso* were dedicated to Pablo de Sarasate who premiered and promoted them. The third concerto is a staple in the violin repertoire today while the first is still played occasionally. The esteemed violinist Andrew Wan recounts his experience: "When Maestro Kent Nagano suggested we record all three of Saint-Saëns' violin concertos with our stellar ensemble, l'Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, I was

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Andrew Wan

especially excited to take on this challenge of recording the first concerto. To me, the protagonist in this underappreciated work is prodigiously and unabashedly expressive, naive, and nostalgic - all of this is communicated exquisitely and with such beauty in a mere 12 minutes. I am not sure I can name many other works of this scale and of this genre that have this effect on me."

However, it is the *Introduction et Rondo capriccioso* which is performed and recorded universally. *The Havanaise* op. 83, the *Caprice andalous* op. 122, and *Morceau de Concert* op. 62 regularly enrich



Kent Nagano

the musical scene. Andrew Wan evaluates his experience. "I think it would be absolutely accurate to say that my appreciation for this composer has deepened over the years. Every aspiring violinist goes through a rite of passage when it comes to dabbling with virtuoso works, and his unforgettable *Introduction et Rondo capriccioso* was very much a necessary part of my education. I remember realizing how beautifully crafted this work was. From its memorable, yearning opening to its hair-raising (especially for the performer!) final page, I still find myself enjoying this artifact not only as a violinist, but

I REMEMBER REALIZING HOW BEAUTIFULLY CRAFTED THIS WORK WAS.

perhaps even more so as someone who happily accepts the dramatic narrative of this work. I suppose this is the main quality that I value so much in Saint-Saëns' music - his reliable ability to hold our attention through the progression of a work, always with finesse, and consistently through hummable tunes and natural, satisfying transitions."

The two cello concertos, op. 33 and op. 119 are still incorporated in the cello repertoire today. Other concertos feature instruments of great variety such as the flute, clarinet, organ, horn, cello, violin, harp, and various combinations of instruments. *Tarentelle* op. 6 for flute and clarinet with orchestra or piano, *Morceau de concert* op. 94 for horn and orchestra, *Romance* op. 37 for flute or violin and orchestra, *Allegro appassionato* op. 43 for cello and

orchestra or piano, *Odelette* op. 162 for flute and orchestra, *Morceau de concert* op. 154 for harp and orchestra, *Cyprès et Lauriers* op. 156 for organ and orchestra fill precious lacunae.

Renowned cellist Steven Isserlis shares his opinion: "Saint-Saëns loved traditional forms, but he is also very original.

He is often described as old-fashioned, but in fact, he is constantly experimenting with forms, genres, textures and so on. The second cello concerto, for instance, is extraordinarily shaped.

The thing with Saint-Saëns is that it is impossible to pigeonhole him, because he was constantly reinventing himself. I remember that one evening I played a recording to a friend and asked him to guess the composer: he couldn't - the answer was 'Saint-Saëns'. I

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played another piece, very different from the first one, and asked the same question: again he was flummoxed - and again the answer was 'Saint-Saëns'. And a third one, also very different: my friend said, 'It can't be Saint-Saëns, can it?'; but it was! There is nothing like a Saint-Saëns style because he was so fluid, so interested in so many types of music. I think this is why so many people have been critical of him. You can recognize Debussy or Ravel pretty immediately; Saint-Saëns, you can't.

I love both the famous pieces such as *Le Carnaval des Animaux*

(genius!), but also lesser-known works such as the Requiem. I have played [and recorded] almost all of his cello output, and I love it all: both Sonatas, both Concertos, the morceaux. Perhaps my favorite cello piece of his is the *Prière* for cello and organ, very special and so touching.

I would say he is a constantly rewarding composer: the more one knows about him, the more one is fascinated by him. And as a man - a Renaissance man! He wrote plays, books of poetry and philosophy, about acoustics and ancient theater; he was a keen amateur

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Steven Isserlis



astronomer, a travel-writer, an animal rights activist. He was an amazing organist and a very good conductor, as well as a great pianist. He was a phenomenon, in fact.

He could be quite vitriolic, but could also be very kind, and liberal; he gave money for the defence of Dreyfus for instance. And he could be very funny; he was a great star of the Parisian salons! He was also so lovely to Fauré, one of my great musical heroes. Saint-Saëns was like a father to him.

The variety of his music and the restlessness of his imagination mean a lot today. They are

inspirational. True, he hated *The Rite of Spring* - he wasn't a modernist in that way; but a composer that original can never sound dated. And he cared about neglected instruments, giving the oboe and the bassoon, for instance, such fine sonatas, at the end of his life. That in itself is touching. He clung to the values of the past, of perfect forms, beauty and elegance, but that does not make him old-fashioned."

CHAMBER MUSIC MASTER

Although Saint-Saëns as a performer was greatly involved in chamber music, his classical works in this area are limited to his two violin sonatas, op. 75 and op. 102, two cello sonatas, op. 32 and op. 123, his piano trios, op. 18 and op. 92, his piano quartet op. 41, piano quintet op. 14 and his *Septuor* op. 65 for trumpet, strings and piano. Interestingly the septet has garnered curiosity through the years and has been included for its uniqueness in chamber programs

universally. The two string quartets, written late in his life, op. 112 (April 1899) for violinist Eugène Ysaÿe and op. 153 (August 1918) for his publisher Jacques Durand, have fared less well, with rather sparse performances. *Sérénade* op. 15 for piano, organ, violin, and viola or cello, and *Romance* op. 27 for violin, piano, and organ-harmonium have received specialized attention. One of the virtues of Saint-Saëns' output is the extraordinary variety of instruments for which Saint-Saëns has provided a prod-

igious repertoire. Included are neo-classical solo sonatas for oboe, clarinet and bassoon, as well as solo works for flute and harp. These works provide variety and diversion to the individual limited scope of most instrumental repertoire using traditional forms. *Prière* op. 158 for cello, *Élégie* op. 160 for violin, and *Cavatine* op. 144 for tenor trombone have sparked occasional attention. Saint-Saëns employed an extraordinary range of styles and forms in his music. He was inspired by baroque forms as well as more

contemporary free-form works, very traditional tonal styles to more innovative use of modal, whole-tone, and chromatic palettes, from strict sonata to freer form impressionistic works. Today, Saint-Saëns epitomizes French Music throughout the world, along with Berlioz, Bizet, Gounod, Debussy, Ravel and Poulenc. Conductor Kent Nagano shares his astute assessment: "The sovereign way in which he achieved his personal style, displaying a certain brilliance in an entertaining and creatively inventive way allowed many of his works to enjoy immense popular success. The genius of many of these works assures that they remain pertinent today and in the future. As a young student, my piano professor introduced me to the *Carnaval des animaux*. Later

as a conductor, the first work of Saint-Saëns I performed was accompanying his Cello Concerto I in A minor. Whilst both are very strong memories, these works have held an active position throughout the course of my musical development since both are established, fundamental parts of the standard repertoire. What Saint-Saëns realized musically through his performances as a pianist and his composition was often technically flawless music - this places him in the elite company of few composers. More importantly however, beyond virtuosity, his compositions often effectively brought elements of surprise and entertainment at a time when music was evolving rapidly and radically, where serious, earnest symphony was separating from entertainment music."

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THE TRAVELER Contributions to other cultures.

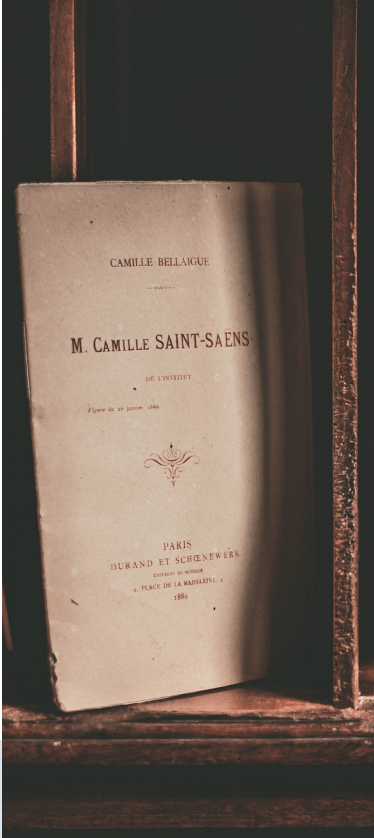
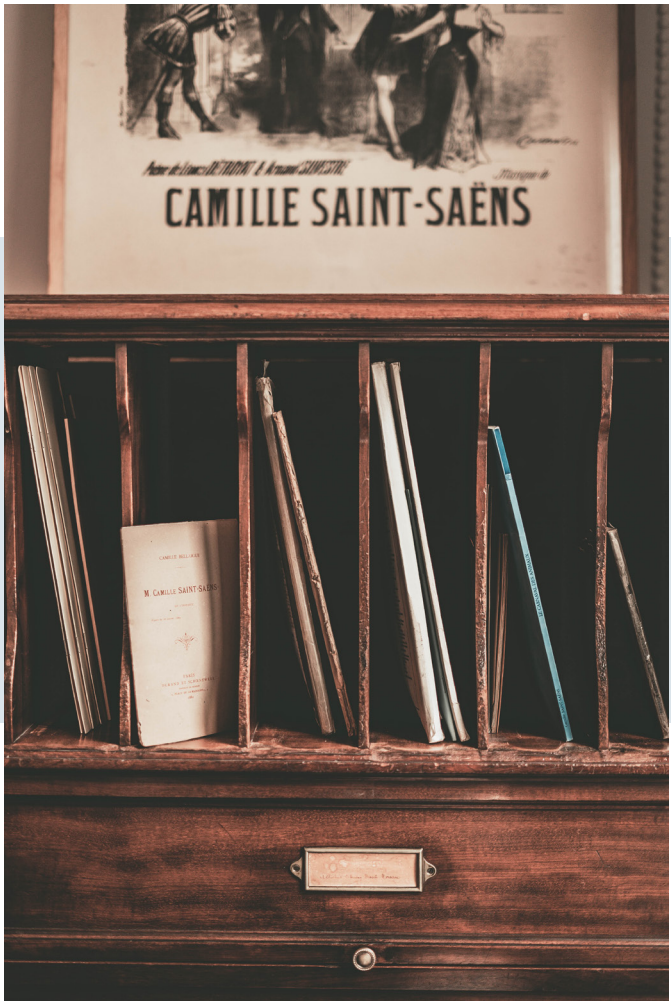
Saint-Saëns manifested an interest in exotic and oriental music before ethnological exploration was fashionable in European music-making. Spending his winters in the warmth of North Africa the patterns of the music he heard there were indelibly etched in his consciousness and found their way into in his musical creations. As a great explorer and traveler throughout Europe, Asia, North Africa, South America, and the United States, he often incorporated native music in his creations and tailored his music for the particular region, producing an abundance of works with geographical inspiration.

AFRICA: *Caprice arabe* op. 96 for two pianos, "Vision congolaise" from *Triptyque* op. 136 for violin and piano, *Orient et Occident* op. 25 march for military band, *Sur les bords du Nil* op. 125 for military band, *Suite algérienne* op. 60 for orchestra, *Africa* op. 89 for piano and orchestra (or two pianos or piano solo), Piano Concerto op. 103 ("The Egyptian"), *Souvenir d'Ismailia*

op. 100 for piano. **CANARY ISLANDS:** *Valse canariote* op. 88 for piano, *Les Cloches de las Palmas* from *Six Études* op. 111, *Paso-doble*. **ENGLAND:** *Marche du couronnement* op. 117 (for King Edward VII), *Henry VIII* (see below) **FRANCE:** *Rapsodie bretonne* op. 7bis, *Rhapsodie d'Auvergne* op. 73, *Ouverture de fête* op. 133 for orchestra.

GREEK ANTIQUITY: *Le Rouet d'Omphale*, *Phaëton*, *La Jeunesse d'Hercule*, *Hélène*, *Déjanire*. **ITALY:** *Symphonie en Fa* "Urbs Roma", "Chanson napolitaine" from *Album* op. 72, *Souvenir d'Italie* op. 80 for piano. **PORTUGAL:** *Une Nuit à Lisbonne* op. 63 for orchestra. **RUSSIA:** *Caprice sur des airs danois et russes* op. 79 for flute, oboe, clarinet, and piano.

SPAIN: *Jota aragonese* op. 64 for orchestra, *Paso doble* (South America), *Havanaise* op. 83 for violin and orchestra or piano, *Caprice andalous* op. 122 for violin and orchestra. **URUGUAY:** National anthem **UNITED STATES:** *Hail California* for orchestra, organ, and military band, *Cavatine* op. 144 for trombone and piano.



A CURIOUS SYMPHONIC HERITAGE

IT IS VERY GRATIFYING FOR THE CONDUCTORS TO INTERPRET IT.

Influenced by his esteemed friend Franz Liszt, Saint-Saëns wrote four symphonic poems, three based on mythological themes, the fourth on a poem by Henri Cazalis. He wrote the first *Le Rouet d'Omphale* (op. 31) for two pianos in February 1871, soon followed by the orchestral version in March 1872. The following year, in March 1873, he completed the second, *Phaéton*. *Danse macabre* op. 40, based on a *Mélodie* he had written in 1872 based on “Égalité, Fraternité” by Cazalis, premiered in October 1874 and remains one of Saint-Saëns’ most illustrious compositions. Even when it does not appear in the concert hall it is omnipresent in contemporary media. Many movies and television series have co-opted its themes and orchestration and its

meaning and effects are well recognized by the audience, in particular the innovative use of the xylophone to imitate the sounds of rattling bones. Franz Liszt must have approved of Saint-Saëns’ achievement for he transcribed the work for piano solo in 1876 and dedicated it to Sophie Menter-Popper. Saint-Saëns in turn arranged several of Liszt’s works: *La Prédication aux Oiseaux* for organ, his symphonique poem *Orphée* for piano, violin and cello, and the monumental Sonata in B minor for two pianos.

The musical materials of the final symphonic poem, *La Jeunesse d’Hercule* op. 50 of 1877, reappears in the tragédie *Déjanire* which finally evolved in 1910 into the tragédie lyrique (opera) *Déjanire*. Although three of his published symphonies are performed sporadically and have received numerous recordings, it is primarily the third symphony, with its unusual instrumentation requiring both organ and piano, that is consistently played. Originally commissioned by the Philharmonic Society and premiered at St. James Hall in London, its unusual form and musical

materials still provoke interest. It is often selected as representative of French nineteenth-century music and is performed regularly in concert halls around the world. It was chosen by the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (OSM) to inaugurate the new organ in their concert hall in 2014. Conductor François-Xavier Roth, who has recorded it, calls the final movement of the third symphony remarkable and unique in the symphonic repertoire. Organist Olivier Latry extols Saint-Saëns’ ability in combining the organ and orchestra, thus achieving a brilliant effect.

“I rapidly discovered in my youth the Third symphony of Saint-Saëns in the recording with Gaston Litaize and Daniel Barenboim. I listened to this piece practically every day when I was 12 to 13 years old, while I was doing my homework. However, I interpreted it much later, I must have been 27 to 28 years old, at La Madeleine with the Orchestre de la Garde Républicaine.

The organ part is important in this symphony. It was very instructive for me to see how one could

combine the organ with the orchestra, and Saint-Saëns produces, from this point of view, a magisterial success, which only a composer like Poulenc could equal. He had, in a way, understood everything.

However, when I was doing my studies in the eighties, one liked to denigrate this piece. It was not academic, but very well managed; the harmonic rhythm was well conceived, there was a very particular lyricism, it’s even an astounding piece. At that time, no one or very few people played it; today it is the opposite. One must say that it is very gratifying for the conductors to interpret it. I play it now very regularly with Christoph Eschenbach, Stéphane Denève, Pascal Rophé and so many others; Without a doubt, I have played it more than eighty times.”

A COLORIST WITHOUT COMPARISON

Saint-Saëns’ keen sense of colour manifests itself in his fine orchestration. Ravel admired his orchestral skills and innovations in the formal structure of his works, considering Saint-Saëns a genius. Following the pattern set by his friend Hector Berlioz, Saint-Saëns capitalized on the unusual effects he was able to attain. For example, in *Danse macabre* he initiated the use of the xylophone and the violins scordatura. In *Samson et Dalila* he tuned his basses BGDA and the *Bacchanale* invokes the Middle East in an extraordinary manner. The utilisation of the violin in a skilled exemplary fashion is obvious in all his work. Every violinist in the world attempts the *Introduction et Rondo capriccioso*.



Marc-André Hamelin

THE PIANO

Despite the fact that Saint-Saëns was a highly skilled and esteemed pianist, few of his solo piano works are in the regular piano repertoire today. His traditional proclivities did not lead him to write sonatas for the piano. Bagatelles, mazurkas, gavottes, minuets, waltzes, bourrées, études, suites, variations, souvenirs, feuillets d'album, fugues, marches, variations, polonaise, scherzo, and caprice proliferate in this vast panorama.

The three sets of Études, op. 52, op. 111, and op. 135, each encompassing six études, are of special interest. His publishers Éditions Durand, reissued a volume in 2006 containing all eighteen of these unique études incorporating studies of technical difficulties such as independence of fingers, major and minor thirds, major chromatic thirds, chromatic runs, and three preludes and fugues, various rhythmic problems, and a toccata movement. Marc-André Hamelin admits: “The Études

seem to me formidably demanding, conceived by a pianist with huge capacities. This is very good piano music, extremely difficult to achieve.”

Six Études pour la main gauche seule probably provides the most original and innovative approach. No doubt the prelude, alla fuga, moto perpetuo, bourrée, élégie and gigue influenced and inspired Ravel in writing his concerto for the left hand. Ravel himself has admitted Saint-Saëns’ influence.

Saint-Saëns’ work for two pianos

four hands have been played and recorded by many two-piano teams. Especially noteworthy are the *Variations* op. 35 on a theme of Beethoven (taken from the Menuet of Sonata op. 31 no. 3) and the *Scherzo* op. 87 which employs the whole-tone scale.

Nevertheless, it is the concertos that have garnered most attention, in their original or solo forms: *Allegro appassionato* op. 70, *Africa* op. 89, *Rhapsodie d’Auvergne* op. 73.

AN ETERNAL CARNAVAL

During a concert tour in Prague Saint-Saëns composed a large composition for the Mardi gras, consisting of fourteen numbers, which he called *Le Carnaval des animaux*. He found it terribly amusing and wrote his friend Auguste Durand that he was saving it for his posthumous works. The première took place on 9 March 1886 (Shrove Tuesday) with Charles Lebouc,

Saint-Saëns, Louis Diémer, Paul Taffanel, Charles Turban, Jean-Pierre Maurin, Charles Prioré, Émile de Bailly, and Tourcy at the annual Mardi Gras Concert of the violoncellist Lebouc.

It was repeated on 25 March 1886 by the group La Trompette at the home of Émile Lemoine to celebrate mid-Lent (la Mi-Carême) with another reprise on 2 April 1886 at the home of

Pauline Viardot, with Liszt in the audience.

The work was often played in the spring with celebrity performers. Shortly after Saint-Saëns’ death and the publication of the work, it was performed at the Concerts-Colonne by Gaston Blanquart, Hippolyte Lopès, Juste, Édouard Garès and Henri Etlin under the direction of Gabriel Pierné.

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Le Carnaval des animaux is presently one of the most popular works in the repertoire and a constant in concerts for young people, frequently scheduled and performed throughout the world, with numerous recordings, videos, transcriptions for every possible instrumentation. *Le Cygne* (The Swan) is a perennial favorite of cellists, dancers, and musicians. It was first choreographed by Mikhail Fokine on 22 December 1907 at the Théâtre du Cercle de la Noblesse

(Hall of Nobles) in St. Petersburg under the title *La Mort du cygne* (*The Dying Swan*) with set design by Léon Bakst. This work has become an emblem of the eternal ethereal allure of ballet. It had been excerpted and used for ballet during Saint-Saëns’ lifetime by Pavlova, Mariquita, and Napierkowska among others, and it still is today.

Celebrated conductor Kent Nagano, who has conducted many of Saint-Saëns’ works, lauds his achievement. “In my opinion, two

of the most striking examples of this combination of highly polished technique, surprising form, and unusual structure are: a) *Danse macabre* b) *Carnaval des animaux*. In these compositional points he found the exact, perfect way to fulfil a genre of work that people somehow needed: a combination of virtuosity and entertainment anchored with the weight of creative invention and poetic narrative.

Whilst it may be tempting to look down upon music which

THE ORGAN

Franz Liszt considered Saint-Saëns the finest organist in the world. He served as organist first at St. Merry (1853-57) and later at La Madeleine (1857-77), one of the most coveted positions in Paris. In addition to his regular duties, he was often invited to play at other churches where his students were the organists. He was known for his excellent improvisations. He left a rich repertoire for the

organ consisting of three rapsodies, three fantasies, two books of three preludes and fugues each, seven improvisations, a *Marche religieuse* and a *Benédiction nuptiale*, all very useful to a resident organist.

Today, many organists have recorded the complete organ works or various selections from this multi-form repertoire. The distinguished organist Olivier Latry (Notre Dame Cathedral) recounts his experience: "I have a kind of

direct connection with Saint-Saëns as I was a student of Gaston Litaize who had been a student of Marcel Dupré, in turn who had worked with Saint-Saëns without directly being his student. I know by this link that, while his music does not express it particularly, as it shows a certain positive tone, Saint-Saëns was a very demanding person, indeed irascible. Without doubt he had suffered greatly from various dramas which punctuated his life."



Olivier Latry

represents the meeting point of virtuosity and entertainment, Saint-Saëns lays claim to something special, something which is a recurrent theme in the world of classical music. This position holds direct ties to classical romantic music (reflected in the legacy of Liszt, Paganini, Chopin, Joachim, among many others) and represents an important part of the development of classical music from the 19th to the 20th century and, it could be argued, even into our own 21st century.

History has shown that we will always be impressed by, enjoy, and appreciate virtuosity. However, virtuosity alone is not enough to earn an enduring place in music history. Beyond the brilliance, Saint-Saëns' music contains something which is also a part of this 19th-to-20th century development - the element of explaining or telling something musically - (*raconter des histoires*). There is a narrative aspect which is neither scientific nor academic. In Saint-Saëns' music, this "telling

of a story" is founded upon the integrity of solidly formed structural concepts which provides the interpreter with unusually strong pictures of sound and fantasy through which to build an interpretation - to musically "recount a story".

The music of Saint-Saëns in France occupies a very interesting position in that he composed for a specific public desire - his concertos stand in the middle point where one finds his renown virtuosity and entertainment buttoned together. He

was not a composer of spectacular klang spectrum, nor do his compositions reflect pioneering symphonic colors or huge, radical inventions as one might find in Berlioz, Wagner, or later Debussy.

But in his music he created such a special, personal mixture of creative expression that much of his œuvre remains distinctly relevant and universal in content. His contribution to the French cultural influence upon the development of European classical music holds a uniquely

important position as the enduring popularity of *Le Carnaval des animaux*, *Danse macabre*, the Piano Concertos and *Samson et Dalila*, among others reflect.

Saint-Saëns wrote during the time of Wagner and, whereas many have suggested that his music (and that of several gifted composers of other cultures) could be seen as overshadowed by developments in German culture - Liszt, Wagner, Brahms, the young Strauss, and young Sibelius, to name only a few - he developed a unique style of

programmatic music, written reflecting a personal imagination of formal structure, dramatic tone, and unusual melodic sensitivity. The exceptional quality of many of the works assures that Saint-Saëns will hold a fixed and established position in the standard repertoire. In my opinion, his legacy in the history of French music will be (along with Cesar Franck) as the important bridge of compositional development from Berlioz, Gounod, and Bizet to Debussy, Ravel, and their contemporaries."



ONE OF THE GREATEST MASTERS

Saint-Saëns' perceptive and illuminating writing about life in Paris in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide us with honest, colorful views of this era which are increasingly consulted by musicians, historians, and sociologists. Four volumes of controversial essays, *Harmonie et Mélodie*, *Portraits et Souvenirs*, *École buissonnière*, and *Au courant de la vie*, reveal the age in which Saint-Saëns lived, clarified by his insights, sentiments, and descriptions. Saint-Saëns was a clear thinker, a pungent writer, a sharp critic. His publications are attestations of his vigor and power.

Conductor François Xavier Roth summarizes his achievement: "The work of this composer which has often been called conservative or academic is abundantly filled with

innovative passages. Here are a few: The passage in the immense work of Saint-Saëns which has always impressed me the most is the beginning of the Egyptian Concerto for piano, which I had heard when I was an adolescent with Jean-Philippe Collard and André Previn. I remember this disk, which I listened to until it wore out, very well. This Mediterranean passage in Saint-Saëns' music was a shock for me; the harmony, the rhythm — it dances like a Mediterranean incantation. I was greatly impressed. I must certainly also mention Saint-Saëns as a composer of opera, be it in the Bacchanale of *Samson et Dalila*, with its magnificent arias, the duo of *Ascanio* or the opera *Le Timbre d'argent* that I directed later. Lastly, I would like to speak of the great C Major of the Symphony for Organ which

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SAINT-SAËNS IS THIS GREAT COMPOSER WHO THOUGHT ABOUT THE EXISTING FORMS AND WHO, IN MAKING THEM “FRENCH”, ARRIVED AT FURNISHING WHAT WAS BEST IN FRENCH MUSIC.

begins the finale and is something unique, exceptional in all symphonic production.

Saint-Saëns is often said to be the great classic of the romantics. To me, this is possibly more true of Richard Strauss. One could almost say, in jest of course, that composers like Saint-Saëns and Strauss “lived a little too long.” Saint-Saëns, like Strauss, started as a kind of musical phenomenon, and as time went on and generations passed, he was somewhat overtaken by younger composers and perceived as dated.

As for me, I would retain of Saint-Saëns to the contrary this young composer interested in creating in genres which, until then, had not been produced by other French composers. And it is true that when one thinks about Saint-Saëns, one thinks about this period which was so exceptional in the

history of our music in France which has always been in competition or at least compared to what was happening on the other side of the Rhine. Saint-Saëns, he is this great composer who thought about the existing forms and who, in making them “French”, managed to elicit what was best in French music. What I also retain, is that it is Saint-Saëns who looks at the production of a composer like Jean-Philippe Rameau and who suddenly decides, while it is a music that was no longer played much, to restore it for performance for the great symphonic orchestras, to create critical editions for it. Saint-Saëns, as a champion of French music, worked to highlight the music of previous centuries and present it in the most alluring way. One could say that the direct descendants of Saint-Saëns could be a Paul Dukas, an Albert Roussel, a Florent Schmitt,

although they overlap at the level of generations. After them, in the twentieth century, it is difficult to find a kind of heir to the music of Saint-Saëns. I would say that there is, without a doubt, a filial relationship with composers like Henri Dutilleul who care about symphonies and have become the greatest symphonic composers of their time. One can find there a kind of filiation at the level of orchestral color, of treatment of the different groups.

In other music, not only French, for example in England, where Saint-Saëns always had a great following amongst the public and composers alike, perhaps someone like Ralph Vaughan Williams or William Walton could be considered heirs of Saint-Saëns the symphonic composer.

In his piano music and his chamber music, Poulenc is certainly also a kind of ‘child’ of Saint-Saëns.

MILITARY MARCHES

Like John Philip Sousa, Saint-Saëns wrote many memorable marches that delighted the recipients of his attention, from *Orient et Occident* for his friend Théodore Biais, to *Sur les bords du Nil* for the Khedive of Egypt to *Pas redoublé* for the Société des Touristes du Midi and the *Marche dédiée aux étudiants d’Alger* for the students of Algiers. The *Marche héroïque*, in memory of his beloved friend Henri Regnault, an artist and singer, who was killed in the Franco-Prussian War, and *Vers la victoire*, written towards the end of the first World War, have proven popular in France.

One of the most frequently played is the *Marche militaire française* from the *Suite algérienne*. In Britain, the *Marche du couronnement* for Edward VII is probably the most significant.



“I ACHIEVED THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM OF MY YOUTH; I LIVED ENOUGH TO LEAVE WORKS WHICH HAVE THE CHANCE OF SURVIVAL.” —SAINT-SAËNS

I do not know what he would have said to the composers of today, because he is so tied to his time: one cannot say that he is a composer whose music reaches beyond the 19th century. He is the great romantic composer, sometimes a composer for the salon, the theatre, always connected to his era. Some of his contemporaries, even those who are older, like Berlioz or Liszt are, for me, composers who transcend the 19th century, that is to say, composers who project themselves a little into a timeless musical future. It isn't the case with Saint-Saëns.”

Saint-Saëns himself best summed up his personal contribution to the history of music. From Bône, 23 February 1901, he wrote to Durand: “I achieved the impossible dream of my youth, I attained my goal; I have lived long enough to leave works which have the chance of survival. You cannot write the history of the music of this time without at least mentioning them! I shall pass away with the awareness of having spent my time well. You must not be ungrateful towards your destiny.”

The significance of Saint-Saëns' work in the 21st century

may be measured by this single fact: his evocative melodies, captivating rhythms, and illuminating forms have written more than 20 compositions that remain in the mainstream repertoire: *Samson et Dalila* (the 3rd most popular French opera after *Carmen* and *Faust*); Violin concerto no. 3, *Introduction et Rondo capriccioso*, *Havanaise*—perennial favorites; Piano concerto in G minor, Piano concerto in C minor; Cello concerto no. 1, Trio op. 18, Quartet op. 41; Sonatas for solo instruments: violin, cello, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, all partnering with piano; Symphonic poems: *Le*

Rouet d'Omphale, *Phaëton*, *Danse macabre*, *La Jeunesse d'Omphale*; *Le Carnaval des animaux*; Symphony no. 3.

As Saint-Saëns aptly divined: “There are works you remain in love with all your life; there are others that triumphantly resist all the vicissitudes of taste. It is these very rare works that are the true masterpieces, and even the greatest masters don't create them every day.” ■

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