

## SAINT-SAENS – More than a Carnival of Animals – 1921-2021

### UCT Summer School 2021 Presented by Elizabeth Handley

#### INTRODUCTION

- **Content:** the life, times and music of one of the most prolific composers of the 19<sup>th</sup> C Romantic Era.
- The object today: to draw your attention to his less well-known music – the “hidden gems”.

#### LIFE & WORK

##### Childhood

- Born Paris 9<sup>th</sup> October **1835**, only child of Jacques-Joseph-Victor Saint-Saëns (1798–1835), and Françoise-Clémence Collin (1809-88).
- Perfect pitch; gifted child. First lessons with great-aunt Charlotte, then with Camille-Marie Stamaty.
- First public performance: Salle Pleyel, 1845, 10 years.
- **Paris at this time:** Alexandre Dumas, Baudelaire, Balzac, Victor Hugo, Heinrich Heine, and Chopin’s writer-activist mistress, Georges Sand, Ingres and Delacroix, Kalkbrenner, Chopin and Franz Liszt, and opera composers Auber, Bellini, Rossini and Meyerbeer.
- The Napoleonic Era -> restoration of the Bourbons: Louis XVIII then his Charles X (r 1824-30). 1830 Revolution -> Louis Philippe, Duke of Orléans, the “Citizen King”.

**The Romantic Era:** Symphonic or Tone Poem (Liszt), “programme” symphonies - described scenes in nature, told stories, and expressed emotions and philosophical ideas in music.

- The piano: *the* quintessential instrument of Romantic expression: Chopin, Liszt, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Schubert and Brahms -> the piano virtuoso –“Titans of the Keyboard” eg. Franz Liszt, Tauszig, Kalkbrenner and the Rubenstein.
- **1848:** Paris Conservatoire (Daniel Auber): conservative approach. Students to learn the organ. Composition teacher: Fromental Halévy (1799-1862) (opera *La Juive*, 1835)

##### Early career

- **1853:** organist at Saint-Merri, **1858:** la Madeleine
- SS conservative, favoured the old modes of composition, but promoted “modern” music: Franz Liszt and Wagner - bitonality -> *atonality* (early 20<sup>th</sup> C).
- SS essentially a Classicist: Sonata Form. Used Classical styles, with the spirit of Romanticism.

**The Classical Aesthetic:** (Haydn, Mozart and the young Beethoven): homophonic, emulated the arts of Classical Greece and Rome: restraint, order, balance, perfection, grace, elegance, and *good taste* -> SS’s **concertos**: 5 for piano, 3 for cello, 3 for violin: fugal writing (incorporating fugues, contrapuntal.)

- **1861:** only teaching post: *Niedermeyer École de Musique Classique et Religieuse* (est.1853)
- **1864:** second attempt at the Prix de Rome – again unsuccessful.
- **1865** -> dual career as concert pianist and composer. Also conductor

##### Impressionism

- Monet, Renoir, Sisley and Frédéric Bazille: experimentation with form and colour. Claude Debussy (1862-1918), Respighi and Delius.
- **Franco-Prussian War** (19 July 1870 – 10 May 1871)
- **1871:** *Societe Nationale de Musique - Ars Gallica*; SS vice-president; also Henri Duparc, Gabriel Fauré, Cesar Franck and Jules Massenet.
- Franz Liszt a great musical *pioneer* - “invented” the Symphonic Poem/Tone Poem - a single movement work -> SS composed 4 symphonic poems.
- **1872:** first opera: *La princesse jaune* (*The Yellow Princess*) - one-act.
- **Japonism:** Impressionist painters, and composers: Puccini, Debussy, and SS: pentatonic scale.
- **1875 marriage:** Marie-Laure Truffot (1856-1950). Not a success. 2 sons (André & Jean-François)

- **1877**: first operatic success, ***Samson et Dalila***: premiere in Weimar, in German.
- **1880**: an unusual chamber work: Septet: neoclassical – used 17<sup>th</sup> C French dance forms, inspired by great French Baroque composers, Lully and Rameau. Written for Émile Lemoine's *La Trompette*.

**La Belle Époque**: a “Golden Age” in France, c 1880 - WW I in 1914; the **Third Republic**: peace, prosperity, colonial expansion (imperialism), and technological, scientific, and cultural innovations. French arts flourished - literature, music, theatre, and the visual arts. New forms of light entertainment; the *nouveau riche*; *Folies Bergère* (1869), *Moulin Rouge* (1889), *Casino de Paris* (1890).

- **Toulouse-Lautrec** (1864-1901) – dancers *La Goulou* and *Jane Avril* - poster art. The *Can-can*. **Montmartre**: Bohemian lifestyle, large immigrant population.

- The Eiffel Tower (1889) - the World's Fair, the Opéra Garnier - the new art - *Art Nouveau* designs.

- Railways: linked major cities of Europe to French spa towns: Biarritz, Deauville, Vichy and Riviera.

- SS's Third Violin Concerto: for Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate (1844-1908).

- **1881**: SS elected to the French Institute (includes the *Académie Française*.)

- 28 July: in La Bourboule on vacation – leaves his wife. “Adopted” by Gabriel Fauré and his family.

- SS's most important chamber works: his **sonatas**: 2 for violin, 2 for cello, and one each for oboe, clarinet and bassoon, all with piano accompaniment. Bizarrely, no piano sonatas.

- **1906 and 1909** successful concert tours in the USA as a pianist and conductor.

- SS dubbed “the French Beethoven” - partiality to Classical forms and styles.

- SS a pioneer in **recorded music**: **1904** The Gramophone Company of London

- The “**new music**” emerging – SS not interested; conservative views -> fell out of fashion.

**Cubism**: Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)

- **Les Six**: Darius Milhaud, Poulenc, Honneger, Georges Auric, Louis Durey, and Germaine Tailleferre.

**Les années folles / the “Crazy/Mad Years” (1920's)**: French economy boomed from **1921** until the **Great Depression** in **1931**: Paris the capital of art, music, literature, cinema... and **fashion**.

Writers: Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, WB Yates, Ezra Pound and Josephine Baker.

- **New artistic movements** flourished in Paris: Dadaism, surrealism, cubism and futurism. Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Amedeo Modigliani, Marcel Duchamp, Maurice Utrillo, Kees van Dongen and Alberto Giacometti.

- **New music**: Erik Satie, Maurice Ravel, and Igor Stravinsky with Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*. George Gershwin - *An American in Paris*.

- **1924**: Paris Olympic Games; major international expositions in 1925 and 1937, and the Colonial Exposition of 1931, influenced Parisian architecture and culture.

- **The 1920's**: period of Parisian high fashion: Paul Poiret, Jeanne Lanvin, *Arpège*, René Lalique. Coco Chanel - Chanel No. 5 (1920), the “little black dress” (1925). Jean Patou, Elsa Schiaparelli, Madeleine Vionnet, Cristobal Balenciaga, and Nina Ricci.

- **SS's last year – 1921**: a sonata for each woodwind instrument, Classical basis. Other examples of neoclassicism: Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony* (1916-17), Stravinsky's ballet *Pulcinella* (1920) and opera *The Rake's Progress* (1951).

- November **1921**: SS's last concert **86** years old, mainly own works.

- **16 December 1921** died of a heart attack. Remains laid to rest in the Cimetière du Montparnasse.

## **CONCLUSION**

- SS's works are consistent. He did not evolve a distinctive musical style.

- He defended the French tradition against Wagnerian influences; created an environment that nurtured his French successors.

- A Neo-Classicalist; conservative approach *but* colourful orchestral music, characterful harmony and rhythms.

- His rhythms are usually pretty standard, but some exceptions, eg. 5/8 passage in his Second Piano Trio.
- He was a master of counterpoint – incorporation of the Baroque contrapuntal form: fugue
- Not the most *original* of the Romantic composers, nor one of the most profound. *But* a fine craftsman. Revered the art of Bach, Haydn, and Mozart; recreated Classical forms in a Romantic spirit.
- Rarely took risks *but* preserved his equilibrium, thus allowing his listeners to preserve theirs.
- His music represents a vast range of Western musical history: French Baroque (Lully, Rameau and Couperin), Classicism (Mozart & Haydn), 19<sup>th</sup> C Romanticism (Beethoven), a touch of Impressionism and *La Belle Époque*, and... a hint of Paris in the 1920's -> **universal appeal**.

### **Musical Illustrations**

- 1: *Carnival of the Animals* (1886): *Introduction and Royal March of the Lion*
- 2: Symphony No.1 in E $\flat$ , Op.2 (1853): IV *Finale. Allegro maestoso*
- 3: Piano Concerto No.1 in D (1858): I *Andante: Allegro assai*. Pascal Rogé (piano) (b 1951)
- 4: Symphony No.2 in A minor, Op.55 (1859): I *Allegro marcato, Allegro Appassionato*
- 5: Piano Concerto No.2 in G minor (1868): I *Andante sostenuto*. Pascal Rogé (piano)
- 6: Piano Concerto No.2 in G minor (1868): III *Presto*. Pascal Rogé (piano)
- 7: Piano Concerto No.3 in E flat (1869): I *Moderato assai*. Pascal Rogé (piano)
- 8: *Les Nuits Persanes (Persian Nights)* Op.26 (1870): I *La brise (The Breeze)* Op. 26, Anne Marie Rodde (soprano) & Noel Lee (piano)
- 9: *Omphale's Spinning Wheel* (1871)
- 10: Cello Concerto No.1 in A minor (1872): I *Allegro non troppo*. Camille Thomas (Belgian, b 1988)
- 11: *Danse macabre* Op.40 (1874). Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, Andrew Wan, Kent Nagano
- 12: *Le timbre d'argent (The Silver Bell)*: Act II: *Entracte & Chorus: Gloire à la belle*. Les Siècles, François-Xavier Roth & Accentus
- 13: *Requiem* Op.54: *Sanctus*. Le Madrigal de Paris, Clémentine Decouture & John Eliot Gardner
- 14: *Samson et Dalila: Printemps qui commence (With the coming of spring)*. Met Opera NY, Elīna Garanča (Latvian mezzo-soprano) (with Roberto Alagna)
- 15: Septet in E flat, Op.65: *Finale*. Chamber Orchestra BOS (Bilbao Symphony Orchestra) *Grupo de Cámara*: Anastasia Chernyavskaya piano, Vicente Olmos Trumpet, Samuel García Violin I, David García Violin II, Adriana Grigoras Viola, Javi Martínez Cello & Christoph Filler Double bass
- 16: Violin Concerto No.3 in B minor (1880): III *Molto moderato e maestoso*. Joshua Bell (violin)
- 17: *Henry VIII*: Act II, VI: *Chère Anne que j'adore*. American Symphony Orchestra, Leon Botstein. Jason Howard (baritone) & Jennifer Holloway (mezzo soprano)
- 18: Violin Sonata No.1 in D minor, Op.75 (1885): IV *Allegro molto*. Dong-Suk Kang (violin) & Pascal Devoyon (piano)
- 19: Symphony No.3 in C minor, Op.78: I *Adagio – Allegro moderato*
- 20: *The Carnival of the Animals: The Aviary*
- 21: Fantasia for Piano and Orchestra, *Africa*, Op.89. Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Andre Previn. Jean Philippe-Collard (piano)
- 22: Piano Concerto No.5 in F major, *Egyptian*: II *Andante*. Pascal Rogé (piano)
- 23: *Étude en forme de valse* (1912). Ariel Lanyi (piano)
- 24: Bassoon Sonata in G major, Op.168 (1921): II *Allegro scherzando*. Theo Plath (bassoon)
- 25: Piano Trio No.2 in E minor, Op.92 (1892): II *Allegretto*. "Latitude 41" Trio: Livia Sohn (violin), Luigi Piovano (cello) & Bernadene Blaha (piano)

**26:** Symphony No.1 in E flat (1853): IV *Finale. Allegro maestoso*: the fugue section

**27:** Symphony No. 3 in C, "Organ", Op. 78 (1886): IV *Finale*

### **SS Memoir:**

<http://www.hellenicaworld.com/Music/Literature/CamilleSaintSaens/en/MusicalMemories.html>

**SS's playing, conducting, and his voice (at the very end – very short):**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z9kAJUTWUA>

### **Recommended Listening**

**Chamber works:** Piano Quintet (1855), Piano Quartet

**Woodwind sonatas:** Oboe Sonata & Clarinet Sonata

**Ballet:** *Javotte* (1896)

**Film score:** *L'assassinat du duc de Guise* (1908)

**Incidental music to a dozen plays:** (1850 - 1916) 3 were for revivals of classics by Molière and Racine, in which he incorporated music by Lully and Charpentier

**Symphonies:** "Urbs Roma" Symphony (1856)

**Symphonic poems:** *Phaëton* (1873), *La jeunesse d'Hercule* (*The Youth of Hercules*, 1877)

**Songs:** *Le lever du soleil sur le Nil* (*Sunrise over the Nile*, 1898) and *Hymne à la paix* (*Hymn to Peace*, 1919), for voice and orchestra. **Song cycle:** *Le Cendre rouge* (*The Red Ash Tree*, 1914), dedicated to Fauré.

**Three violin concertos:** First: 1858, published 1879, as the composer's Second in C major. Concerto in A, completed in 1858.

**Piano Concerto No.4** in C minor (1875)

**Cello Concerto No.2** in D minor (1902)

**Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso** in A minor, Op. 28 (1863), composed for Sarasate.

**Solo piano pieces:** *Souvenir d'Italie* (1887), *Les cloches du soir* (1889) and *Souvenir d'Ismailia* (1895)

**Solo organ:** *Offertoire* (1853), *Bénédiction nuptiale* (1859), *Communion* (1859)

**Oratorios:** *Oratorio de Noël*, (*Christmas Oratorio*) Op. 12, *La terre promise* (*The Promised Land*) Op.140 (1913), *Le déluge* (1875)