

Camille Saint-Saëns: Cello Concerto in a minor, op. 33

By Jeffrey Solow

In the program notes for a 1919 Boston Symphony concert the prolific and versatile Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) is credited as “composer, pianist, organist, acoustician, archaeologist, playwright, comedian, caricaturist, feuilletonist [essayist], critic, traveler, amateur of art, mathematics, astronomy, man of the world.” Like Mendelssohn, Saint-Saëns' stupendous and precocious musical gifts enabled him to crystallize his compositional style at an age when most composers are still searching for their own voices. Also like Mendelssohn, Saint-Saëns' style changed very little; his compositions may differ in artistic worth but the difference is due more to the inspirational creativity that enlivens each work rather than to the period in which it was composed. Perhaps not one of history's titanic creative geniuses, “Nevertheless,” Christopher Grier notes, “if he rarely scaled the heights, he moved with admirable and enviable ease among the foothills.”

Saint-Saëns was a pure artist who produced music as naturally “as an apple tree produces apples” and who believed that art exists for and of itself “and in its self-sufficiency lies its greatness.” Romain Rolland, writing in 1908, says: “He brings into the midst of our modern restlessness something of the sweetness and clarity of past periods, something that seems like fragments of a vanished world.” Saint-Saëns' own words perfectly articulate the Apollonian classicism expressed through instrumental brilliance that characterizes the style of most of his music.

“Form is for me the essence of art. The music-lover is most of all enchanted by expressiveness and passion, but that is not the case for the Artist. An artist who does not feel a deep sense of personal satisfaction with elegant lines, harmonious colors or a perfect progression of chords has no comprehension of true art.

Virtuosity gives a composer wings with which to soar above the commonplace and the platitudinous.”

Saint-Saëns' remarkable knowledge of instruments other than his own enabled him to be one of the very few composers who wrote concertos that remain in the active repertoire of violinists, cellists and pianists as well as frequently-performed sonatas for violin, oboe, bassoon and clarinet. In addition to two cello concertos, he also enriched the repertoire with two cello sonatas, a suite for cello and orchestra, many short pieces for cello with orchestra or piano and numerous chamber works that include the cello.

He dedicated his first cello concerto, written in 1872, to his friend August Tolbecque (1830-1919), solocellist of the *Conservatoire* orchestra and, like the composer, a man of many talents: cellist, music historian, author, violin maker and collector and restorer of antique musical instruments. Perhaps under the influence of Liszt, whom Saint-Saëns fervently admired, the concert's three movements are interconnected and the principal theme runs through the entire work. This theme, comprised of legato running triplets, is a unique one that unites the cello's lyrical quality with the instrumental virtuosity that satisfies performers and pleases audiences. Saint-Saëns solves the balance problem, the greatest difficulty in writing a successful cello concerto, through careful scoring that often leaves the cello playing alone with the orchestra contributing only punctuating chords.

In his old age, Saint-Saëns clearly retained the talents and tastes that he had developed early on and maintained throughout his long life. The American violinist, Albert Spalding, describes in his memoirs meeting the great French composer in 1906:

I had thought myself alone in the room, and I was startled to hear a high-pitched voice with a pronounced lisp address me. When I admitted to my host's query that I was, indeed, the violinist Spalding, I was given a cordial welcome.

Camille Saint-Saëns, stunted in height but impressive once you accustomed yourself to looking down on Majesty, could be genial when he wished. This morning it was apparent that he wished. . .

He sat at the piano playing accompaniments with a marvelous fleetness of fingers that belied his age. He asked me mine.

"Seventeen? That is a coincidence. One-and-seven. And I am just seven-and-one. It is an omen. We must have a concert together. Would you like it?"

His piano-playing was remarkable: rhythmically incisive, individual, and with a patrician disdain of every obvious effect. . .

He had an astounding parlor stunt in which he delighted like a child. This was the ability to *solfège* at an incredible speed. The opening sixteen[th-note]

scales of the closing movement of one of his violin sonatas he lisped out with breath-taking rapidity as accurately as a finished virtuoso could have delivered them.

. . .later he asked me to join him in some Mozart sonatas. "No one was ever like Mozart!" he exclaimed, with childish enthusiasm. "One should really invent a new adjective when speaking of him. Transcending an artificial age, he is nature itself. Master of every form of technique, he is the soul of simplicity. What say you?" turning to me. "No, I suppose one-and-seven prefers Wagner. You have to be seven-and-one to understand and love Mozart!"