

Introduction: Deconstructing Saint-Saëns

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A composer whose career spanned seventy years and five continents, a virtuoso who performed, wrote, and excelled in nearly every musical genre, a writer almost as prolific in prose as in music, and a man who cultivated long friendships worldwide with astronomers, philosophers, botanists, and ordinary music lovers: it is no wonder that during his lifetime Saint-Saëns was so eminent, to some the quintessentially French musician. Music biography, however, is often a function of music history, linked to style, influence, legacy. When fashions change, agendas shift and historians elevate new heroes; disenchantment can ensue. A life understood as valuable in one context can lose its meaning in another. Whether on account of his controversial positions on the future of music or his wartime rejection of German music, Saint-Saëns was pushed to the sidelines of history. At the same time, his music was never far from concert halls. What then are we to make of Saint-Saëns's double-sided reputation: on the one hand, as a monumental composer, the "French Beethoven,"¹ and on the other, as a crusty old reactionary, resentful and resistant to change? And why, almost a century after his passing, does his music continue to appeal?

This book deconstructs such a paradox and, in the tradition of the Bard Music Festivals, gives us reasons to reconsider Saint-Saëns and his world. Proposing a new approach to music biography, with a postmodern tolerance toward incongruities, it examines the ironies and contradictions within the composer and his reputation. With a kaleidoscopic approach to narrative, it presents a collection of micro-stories and analyses: seven longer articles and twenty-three short essays. The latter were commissioned to shed light on a particular musical event, scientific or philosophical idea, aesthetic interest, or personal relationship as represented by concert programs (both within France and abroad, by amateurs as well as professionals), scientific essays, letters, and poems. Pretexts for investigating important but lesser-known aspects of his personality, opinions, and career, these shed light on not only his musical activities, but also his private life, his playful as well as serious nature, his sense of adventure as well as his commitment to his nation. Saint-Saëns understood that Paris was a world driven by competition and rivalry over resources and prestige; to survive he needed time

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away and personal warmth, especially after his mother and two children passed away and he separated from his wife. Frequent concert tours and residencies abroad, especially in North Africa, provided both privacy and recognition. Through his correspondence, he kept in touch. A self-fashioned cosmopolitan, Saint-Saëns was perhaps the first truly global musician. As we look closer, we learn his legacy was not confined to the Western world, and that, contrary to what we may have presumed, more than thirty works continued to be performed in a wide variety of contexts.

While Saint-Saëns self-consciously contributed much to French glory, he also knew his limits and was capable of self-mockery, wit, and humor. In his personal collection in Dieppe is not only a bigger-than-life bronze likeness once offered to the composer, but also a tiny sculpture that, only a few inches in height, pokes fun at that grandeur. With one arm resting on a stack of his eight opera scores, the other on a small lyre, he stares upward as if possessed, his large head, bigger than his entire body, surrounded by a golden halo. Saint-Saëns had a close relationship with the prestigious Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, as Kern Holoman outlines, and was elected to the Institut de France in 1881—ironically, two years before he composed his opera *Henry VIII* and nine years before *Samson et Dalila* appeared on French stages. In fact, his most recent accomplishment had been his stewardship of a committee charged with reflecting on music instruction in elementary schools, a report reproduced here. Such recognition honored in part his remarkable public spirit, a commitment he bemoaned as noticeably lacking in the next generation. Not only did Saint-Saëns take seriously his role in judging the annual Prix de Rome in composition, making sure to be in Paris for the competitions; as a good republican, believing that all should have access to art music, he wrote innumerable works for worker choruses and students, conducted an amateur orchestra, and served on juries of *orphéon* competitions. He also dedicated many church organs, even late in life, as William Peterson explains in his contribution to this volume.

Saint-Saëns benefitted from this official status by writing frequently in the press and winning the attention of philosophers like Gustave Le Bon and astronomers like Flammarion, the former relationship explored here by myself, the latter by Léo Houziaux. The composer loved science. Early in life, he turned away from religious belief to embrace rational logic. But his combative nature, unafraid of controversy, and his love of polemics fueled debates. Such attributes, along with the reputation of being *peu mondain*,² not a socialite, were uncommon among those in official positions of power.

Counterbalancing this was Saint-Saëns's sense of humor, particularly evident in private. Playful and fun-loving, he would cross-dress, reputedly

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even with Tchaikovsky, though, as Mitchell Morris here explains, this did not mean he was necessarily homosexual. He loved travesty as a form of sociability. This also came out in piano performances. Once in East Prussia, when competing with other pianists in “funny tricks at the piano,” he beat them all by playing the minuet from *Don Giovanni* with his right hand and, with his left hand on the strings of the piano, accompanying himself as if on the harp, thereby preceding Henry Cowell by more than two decades.³ His letters abound with his imaginative wit, represented here in a letter to Durand about what to call his Suite, op. 90. So too his drawings that sometimes adorn them, such as an image of a pot cooking over a fire, signaling his ongoing work on the ballet in *Samson et Dalila*. Such playfulness also permeates some of his music. In the *Carnival of Animals*, he not only parodied Offenbach, Rossini, and other composers, he put himself among the fossils, with a bit of *Danse macabre* in the xylophone; in 1892 he wrote a one-act comedy, *La Crampe des écrivains* (Writers’ cramp), for his friends in Algiers.

Also paradoxically, Saint-Saëns was both open and resistant to new trends in music. To understand this, we need the context, for the composer lived long enough to intersect with several generations. Leon Botstein sees Saint-Saëns (born 1835) as the “leading conservative” in French nineteenth-century music, certainly more so than Bizet (born 1838). Yet most of his music vigorously supported democratic republican ideals, left-of-center when the republicans came to power in 1879, albeit more centrist in the 1890s when republicans made alliances with conservative monarchists to fight anarchism and the spread of socialism.⁴ To avoid falling back into civil war, republicans needed a new sense of history that incorporated the heritage of both the ancien régime and the Revolution. In response, Saint-Saëns sought ways to negotiate tradition and modernity. *Henry VIII* makes allusions to a five-act revolutionary tragedy, gives the common people a parliamentary role, and synthesizes the influence of Gounod and Wagner. *Les Barbares* shows how people can rise above conflict, as if art could reconcile Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards.⁵ With his *Organ Symphony* (1886), its original analytical program notes here introduced by Sabina Ratner, Saint-Saëns also forged “a fertile alliance between what does not die with what progresses.”⁶ And in *Phryné*, he returned to the humor, charm, and delicacy associated with opéra-comique, the quintessential French genre, reminding his contemporaries of certain values long associated with the French race.

At the same time, as Dana Gooley demonstrates, Saint-Saëns resembles Liszt, another child prodigy virtuoso-composer, in using his performances to impose “modern” pieces on audiences, especially abroad. Moreover, Marie-Gabrielle Soret, like Julien Tiersot before her, points out how the

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composer, with his independent spirit, curiosity, and frankness, used his press reviews to defend and promote progressive composers such as Liszt, Bizet, and Wagner, wielding warrior metaphors that suggest criticism as a form of combat. When it came to Wagner, what he first deemed progressive he later condemned as a threat to the very nature of French music, a position he took before Debussy too shifted from writing *d'après* to *après Wagner*. Less known is how concert organizers, such as Padeloup and Colonne, often placed his music next to their first performances of Wagnerian works, as if Orientalist timbres in works such as his *Bacchanale* presented a strong French counterpart to Wagner's innovations.

At the heart of this paradox is the word *classical*, often used to describe the composer's music. Throughout his life, he admired the "vigorous grace" of Mozart's concertos, learned all of them as early as 1863, and performed them continuously until his death. He was attracted to Beethoven for his music and "the idea of universal brotherhood," as Romain Rolland put it, and wrote his own Variations on a Theme of Beethoven for two pianos. Gooley and Michael Stegemann explore his reception in Germany. As Botstein points out, Rolland compared Saint-Saëns to Mendelssohn and Voltaire, the latter for his clarity of thought, elegance, and precision of expression. From the eighteenth century he also inherited his "love and need of liberty."⁷ But Saint-Saëns was equally invested in the French Baroque, especially Rameau, performing the same pieces for decades and serving as general editor of a new edition of Rameau's music, a preface to which Katharine Ellis introduces in this volume.

The classicism of ancient Greece also became increasingly important to Saint-Saëns. He studied it on frescos, contemplated it through figures such as Hercules and Helen, and tried to reproduce it, almost literally, in his incidental music to *Antigone* (1893). This was not a reactionary turn, but rather a vision of France's future as rooted in the Mediterranean, as opposed to northern Europe, a source of recent cultural "decadence." In *Antigone*, imitating Pindar's choruses, he sought to create a modern equivalent for ancient Greek *mousiké*, thereby recapturing its power. If this experiment failed, it did not stop Saint-Saëns from continuing to study ancient Greek musical instruments (his essay is included here), perhaps as the key to making new kinds of sounds.

Saint-Saëns had other ideas about the future as well, especially involving assimilation, another republican ideal at home with the working classes, and abroad with the colonized. The first Frenchman to incorporate the pentatonic scale in *La Princesse jaune* (1872), he also explored the augmented seconds of Arabic music, imitated the sounds of Arab orchestras, and created musical heterogeneity and coexistence. I explore these, along with their racial, historical, and political implications, in his *Africa*

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fantasy. Through Orientalism, he even found common ground with his rival Jules Massenet, as Jean-Christophe Branger points out in their correspondence about Massenet's *Thaïs*. Saint-Saëns was also fascinated with "the idea of what America will eventually be," seeing it as a forerunner of the "new world" that lies ahead. And he got involved in the newest technologies, recording his music on the gramophone and writing music for an early film, analyzed here by Martin Marks.

Saint-Saëns's relationship to the avant-garde, post-1900, is perhaps least understood. Byron Adams and I reflect on his concept of evolution as the philosophical basis for his rejection of decadence and atonality. He could be utterly dismissive of newer musical trends, yet also warm and encouraging to young composers, such as Florent Schmitt, recent winner of the Prix de Rome; as another composer Charles Koechlin pointed out, he was "known for great generosity." For their part, this generation was ambivalent, though respectful. Michel Duchesneau examines the reasons why they may have included one of his fugues on a concert for the Société musicale indépendante, an organization they founded in 1909 to promote contemporary music. In a review just after he died, Emile Vuillermoz presented his late fugues as emblematic of Saint-Saëns's musical resistance to Wagner: "clarity, logic, measure, simplicity, lucidity, and reason."⁸ Ravel was particularly drawn to Saint-Saëns. His personal library, now at the Bibliothèque nationale, was full of Saint-Saëns scores, many of them annotated; MS 17649 is his analysis of *La Jeunesse d'Hercule*. Koechlin, who never ceased defending Saint-Saëns's work despite the composer's sometimes offensive opinions, noted how Ravel learned orchestral balance from his music. Michael J. Puri shows that it was not only brilliant piano writing and orchestration, but also self-parody, ambiguation, and other dynamic aspects of Saint-Saëns's development sections that strongly influenced Ravel's music. Though more than one critic has remarked that Saint-Saëns's focus on abstract beauty was a precursor to Stravinsky's neo-classicism, this never proved a reason to rethink his legacy.

Still another paradox underlies Saint-Saëns's public image as cold and competitive, for, as we show, he had a great capacity for friendship. As René Thorel tells it, he had "three faults: to be too good, sometimes too frank, and always too modest." His frankness, in particular, earned him enemies as well as friends.⁹ Impatient and never satisfied with his successes, always focused on the next work, he was forever hounding his publisher Auguste Durand to do more to promote his music. And, yes, he had rivals, especially Massenet, who was more successful in the theater, and César Franck, less successful in the concert hall. These rivalries also played out between and within French musical organizations, as suggested in the essays by Michael Strasser and Laure Schnapper. Yet even after cofounding

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the Société nationale for composers, Saint-Saëns appeared more often as performer than composer, using his considerable skills to promote the work of his colleagues, including Marie Jaëll and the Vicomtesse de Grandval, female composers who also studied with him (see my essay with Florence Launay). This generosity also emerges in his voluminous correspondence. In this volume we have chosen to highlight the interchanges not with his student Gabriel Fauré or his librettist Louis Gallet, the pianist Caroline de Montigny de Serres or his painter friends, but rather little-known relationships that also lasted several decades. Yves Gérard points to a lifelong friendship with the operetta composer Charles Lecocq, surprising in that the two wrote such different music. An essay reproduced here by Paul Viardot serves as a window on Saint-Saëns's close ties to Paul's mother Pauline and her family. I look at the composer's personal relationships with friends in the French colonies, where a shared passion for music, botany, acoustics, and animals sheds light on the composer's "indulgent heart" and lively sociability. Here we get an idea of how Saint-Saëns lived abroad, especially in Algiers on and off over fifty years, and in what forms his music reached audiences there.

If "this artist, essentially classical in his works, led the most fanciful of lives,"¹⁰ his intellectual restlessness matched by his physical restlessness, still Saint-Saëns's ongoing health problems are another puzzling paradox. These sent him to North Africa, first in 1873 and so often thereafter, but they also did not make travel easy. When he finally made it to the United States for a two-month tour in 1906—after projecting this trip so many times, beginning in 1888—he caught a cold on the ship that developed into diphtheria and some paralysis. This forced him to cancel his first engagement in Boston. As Carolyn Guzski recounts, he performed in New York, despite continuing symptoms throughout the tour. Nonetheless, he never slowed down, as is clear in Stéphane Leteuré's essay. In 1916 he returned for his third tour in Latin America, discussed by Carol Hess, and concertized until days before he died in 1921. As the young French-Algerian composer Raoul de Galland put it, he was "eternally young, ardent, enthusiastic."¹¹

Times did change. *Pierrot Lunaire* hit Paris in 1922. It became fashionable to "(1) flee charm and sweetness," "(2) seek violent rhythms," and eventually "(3) move toward atonal and serial music."¹² Yet, even without the numerous students and disciples enjoyed by fellow composers d'Indy and Fauré, Saint-Saëns was never forgotten, although increasingly he had to share the public sphere, particularly with Debussy. His music continued to be performed in France and worldwide. In Helsinki, for example, one of the rare capitals he never visited, the Philharmonic played it almost every year from 1882–1931, more than the music of any other French composer. Leopold Stokowski in Philadelphia and Piero Coppola in Paris

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recorded some of his works in the 1920s, and later many more. Radio-Paris, for example, broadcast *Samson et Dalila* in 1929 and in 1930 put on a Saint-Saëns festival. Radio orchestras in Algiers and Rabat performed more than thirty different Saint-Saëns works in 1928–1930, most of them multiple times and often something every day.¹³ Listeners in Algiers specifically asked to hear a number of his works performed and broadcast in 1932. In a 1935 book for radio listeners, Vuillermoz and his collaborators, who otherwise reduced him to a “superior dilettante,” began by illustrating the idea that “music is an art of thinking with sounds” with the theme of the *Organ* Symphony; in the weekly radio lectures this critic gave in the early 1940s four of the eight lectures in Vuillermoz’s personal archives are on Saint-Saëns’s music.¹⁴ By the late 1940s and 1950s, Saint-Saëns’s Christmas Oratorio made it all the way to equatorial Africa, where a protestant missionary music manual called for its final chorus to be sung to a Gabonese text in Fang.¹⁵ Martin Marks has so far counted ninety-six film scores that borrow his music.

Given Saint-Saëns’s eclecticism—compositions in all genres and collaborations with those representing the full range of society—no book about him can cover all facets of the composer and his work. Saint-Saëns’s operas, little discussed here, deserve their own volume. Annegret Fauser uses his songs, not mere miniatures, to survey the stylistic variety of his oeuvre. We hope that the reader will agree with Koechlin that, like good apples that yield excellent calvados whose years in the bottle do nothing to alter the flavor, it is time to partake of his music anew.¹⁶

NOTES

1. Camille Bellaigue, “La Musique française au XIXe siècle,” *La Musique des familles*, 19 October 1889, 5. Gounod also used this expression after hearing his *Organ* Symphony.

2. Charles Koechlin, “À propos de Camille Saint-Saëns,” *La Pensée*, May–June 1949, 28.

3. Hugo Leichtentritt, unpublished memoir, in the chapter, “Back in Europe: London and Paris,” Leroy Robertson Archive of the J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, kindly provided by Mark DeVoto.

4. See Jann Pasler, *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), especially chapters 5 and 11 and pp. 301–305 on the republican ideals underlying his *La Jeunesse d’Hercule* and *Etienne Marcel*.

5. Brian Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns: A Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1999), 347, and Pasler, *Composing the Citizen*, 656.

6. A. Landely, *Art musical*, 30 June 1889, 92.

7. Romain Rolland, “Saint-Saëns,” in *Musicians of Today*, trans. Mary Blaiklock (New York: Henry Holt, 1914), 102, 104.

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8. Emile Vuillermoz, "Camille Saint-Saëns," in *Musiques d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: G. Crès, 1923), 102.
9. René Thorel, "Saint-Saëns intime," *Musica* 6/57 (1907): 92–94.
10. Maurice Emmanuel, Emile Vuillermoz, et al., eds., *L'Initiation à la musique* (Paris: Tambourinaire, 1935), 292.
11. Raoul de Galland, "Silhouettes de musiciens illustrés: Encore quelques notes sur Camille Saint-Saëns," *Revue musicale de l'Afrique du Nord*, 1 February 1912, 1.
12. Koechlin, "À propos de Camille Saint-Saëns," 33.
13. In fall 1928, for example, Radio-Maroc broadcast *Suite algérienne* (14 times), *Samson et Dalila* excerpts (12), *Danse macabre* (8), a ballet from *Henry VIII* (7), suites from *Ascanio* (7), *Javotte* (6), Prelude to *Le Déluge* (4), *Etienne Marcel* (4), *Serenade d'hiver* (4), etc.
14. *L'Initiation à la musique*, 3, and Emile Vuillermoz, "L'Initiation à la musique," grande emission radiophonique hebdomadaire, 1941–1944. Typescript lectures in the Coll. Médiathèque Musicale Mahler, Paris.
15. See hymn no. 25 in *Nten ô Bya e wume Nzame: Recueil de cantiques en fang* (Paris: Société des missions évangéliques de Paris, Mission du Gabon, 1947).
16. Koechlin, "À propos de Camille Saint-Saëns," 34.