



CELLO

Cello Music of Camille Saint-Saens

by David Carter

Camille Saint-Saens, 1835-1921, was a remarkably prolific composer and brilliant child prodigy performer. Franz Liszt called him the world's greatest organist. In addition, Saint-Saens wrote widely on a variety of scientific and philosophical topics. He is well known to the cello world for three famous works: the *Concerto in A minor*, Op. 33 (1872), dedicated to his cellist friend Auguste Tolbecque, *Allegro Appassionato*, Op. 43 (1873) and *The Swan*, from *Carnival of the Animals* (1886). The first two early works were very successful, as was *The Swan*, though it was actually the only part of the *Carnival* that Saint-Saens allowed to be published during his lifetime. In addition to these three, he wrote a number of other works for the cello:

- *Suite in D minor for Cello and Piano*, Op. 16 (1862), orchestrated as Op. 16b for cello and orchestra (1866?), the slow movement extracted as the *Romance in E*, Op. 67 (1866), for solo horn or solo cello
- *Sonata in C minor for Cello and Piano*, Op. 32 (1872)
- *Romance in F*, Op. 36 (1874) for solo horn or cello
- *Romance in D Major*, Op. 51 for cello and piano (1877)
- *Chant Saphique for Cello and Piano*, Op. 91 (1892)
- an incomplete *Sonata in D major for Cello and Piano*, after 1898
- *Concerto #2 in D minor* (1902)
- *Sonata in F for Cello and Piano*, Op. 123 (1905)
- *La Muse et le Poète* for solo violin, solo cello and orchestra (1910)
- *Priere for Cello and Organ in G major*, Op. 158 (1919).

Subjective observations on selected works:

The *Suite* Op. 16 is a 5-movement work, varied in terms of technical difficulty and musical style. Many of the fast movements display Saint-Saens' interest in earlier

music, such as Bach (first movement). It's difficult to make a strong case for playing the entire suite, especially with other early works being so much more accessible. The *Romance*, however, (orchestrated as Op. 67) is a charming piece in simple ABA form. It is lyrical and unassuming, technically not too demanding, and would be an excellent choice for an intermediate student.

The *Sonata in C minor*, Op. 32 is dedicated to the French cellist Jules Lasserre. It is a marvelous work with all the directness and verve of Saint-Saens' early style. The third movement reminds one of the second movement of Rachmaninoff's for all its forward impetus. The piano writing is virtuosic and brilliant, and the cello is handled idiomatically.

The *Concerto #2* is far different from its earlier "sibling." It is much more difficult (Saint-Saens called it "too difficult"), including fiendish and extended double stop passages, reminiscent of similar pyrotechnics in Goltermann's *Concerto #1*. Yet there are similarities; the contrast between the first and second themes mirrors and expands on the concept introduced in the first concerto. The musical language of the second concerto is spell binding at times, the end of the opening movement notably, while other sections, such as the second movement, push forward relentlessly. The concerto ends with a brief third movement, again with remarkable lyricism. The *Concerto #2* and *La Muse et le Poète* were dedicated to

the Belgian cellist Joseph Hollmann (1852-1927), a pupil of Servais and the cellist who premiered Bruch's *Kol Nidrei*.

The second sonata is a large scale, heroic work with lots of variety and technical challenges. It reminds me, in terms of its scope, melodic and harmonic language, of the

Strauss *Sonata* Op. 6, though emotionally it is more mature, being the work of a composer in the final stages of his career as compared to Strauss who was merely 18 when he composed his Op. 6. The Saint-Saens is in four movements, taking nearly 30 minutes to perform, and has a daunting piano part. It has many interesting musical elements; a large fugue as one of the variations in the second movement not the least of these. The third movement is elegiac and serene,

and the fourth movement full of brilliance and charm.

La Muse et le Poète is alternately lyric and dramatic. It does not quite match the drama (or the technical demands) of the *Concerto #2*, but it comes close. The lyricism is truly along the road to that of Saint-Saens' favorite pupil, Fauré.

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Joseph Hollmann