

# Camille Saint-Saëns

ON MUSIC AND MUSICIANS



EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY

Roger Nichols

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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

Many years after seeing Saint-Saëns at the first concert performance of *Le sacre du printemps* at the Casino de Paris in 1914, Stravinsky remembered him as “a sharp little man”. If we take this judgment as being not entirely friendly, then Stravinsky was hardly alone in finding Saint-Saëns’s sharpness something to be negotiated, a dangerous reef in the far from untroubled waters of Parisian musical life.

The “Saint-Saëns problem”, insofar as there was one, stemmed from three interconnecting factors: in today’s parlance, he was nobody’s fool, he was an elitist, and he tended to shoot from the hip. Also it was not really possible to ignore him, or at least not until a little way into the twentieth century when, beset by Impressionism, Symbolism and various other isms, he began to indulge in his fossil impersonations—an act that did his posthumous standing no good at all. In retrospect we can see that in his very last years, between 1917 and his death in 1921, there was quite a lot to be fossilized about, especially in Paris. His reaction to Milhaud’s *Protée*, that music in several keys at once could never be anything other than a hubbub and that happily there were still some lunatic asylums in France, was hardly surprising if we compare that music to his own luminous Clarinet Sonata of the same era, about as firmly in E flat as anything could be; and the fact that Milhaud framed this response and stuck it on his wall does not necessarily prove the case either way. It has to be said though that, nearly 90 years later, Saint-Saëns’s piece is heard rather more often than Milhaud’s.

On the surface, this sharpness is evident when we consider all the things he was against. “Theories are of no great value; works are everything”; “literary people are music’s worst enemies”; “few people understand art”;

“Ibsenism and its imitators are forms of mental aberration”; and, perhaps most tellingly, “when you want to mortify yourself, you enter a convent.” This last statement gives a vital clue to one of the mainsprings of Saint-Saëns’s own music, namely a Mozartian conviction that there were limits to noise and misery-inducing discord beyond which true music could not go. From this belief were born the deliberately “fossilized” sonatas of his last years, undoubtedly written as a challenge, not only to Milhaud, but to the various other fractious experimental oddities all around him that were taking succour, sometimes none too discriminatingly, from *Le sacre*. But we should not be misled by this picture of him as an old fogey. At least until he was 60, he was remarkably open to all kinds of music, as we can hear most enticingly in the Egyptian noises in the slow movement of his Fifth Piano Concerto of 1896; and in the early 1860s, when he taught Fauré at the Ecole Niedermeyer, it was he who introduced the students to the dangerous sounds of Schumann, Liszt and, yes, Wagner: or at least the Wagner of *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*.

I won’t preempt the reader’s pleasure by paraphrasing what he himself says of Wagner with such wit and, in most cases, insight. But for him Wagner was a prime example of a composer who took theories to dangerous extremes, just as Milhaud was to do half a century later. Saint-Saëns was pre-eminently a man who believed in balance, in proportion, in the Delphic motto of “nothing too much”. He was suspicious of the “Germanic preoccupation with going beyond reality” both in an inclination towards the mystic (not one of Saint-Saëns’s own domains) and, in Wagner’s case, in asking instrumental players for the impossible: from this came skimping, and from skimping a lack of clarity. It is in the interests of clarity that he wants the words in opera to be heard and so not too much going on in the orchestra, and certainly not too loudly; it is in the interests of clarity, rhetorical clarity, that he condemns enharmony as heretical, an unintended consequence of equal temperament that led to *Tristan* and beyond.

I will again leave him to explain what he understands by the word “melody”. But I was surprised when putting together the notes for these translations at how many of them involved opera singers. Whatever he was against, he was without doubt “for” opera as a medium, in which of course he was very much a Frenchman of his time. “The voice,” he says, is an instrument that “survives when the others pass by, are transformed, and die.” He does not turn his back on the instrumental developments of his century—far from it, as we can see from his symphonic poems and their debt, acknowledged by him, to Liszt. But there can be no doubt that one of the major disappointments of his life was that only one of his 12 operas, *Samson et Dalila*, made it into the regular repertoire, and even that

one owed its life to Liszt's performance of it in Weimar in 1877, rather than to the Paris Opéra, which finally got round to staging it only 15 years later. There is therefore, behind his engagement with opera and the operatic stars of the time, a tinge of regret at being, as he felt, ill used: in which context it may be noted that opera directors do not get off scot free.

The downside from the sharpness perceived by Stravinsky has been that Saint-Saëns has been too casually written off as a cold, calculating composer, overly concerned with form and correct syntax at the expense of "letting it all hang out", as that horrible phrase had it 20 years or so ago. The best response to this, in many cases, is the music itself, but only if you follow his written instructions (like his "grand-pupil" Ravel, he really did know best how his music should go) and play it with vigour and conviction: if you play it like Kalkbrenner, then of course it will tend to sound like Kalkbrenner.

To conclude this preface, I make two offerings towards a warmer, more generous portrait of the man and his music. He wrote that it was "not the absence of faults but the presence of virtues" that distinguishes the great composer. It could be argued that in this he was defending his own prolific record. Maybe he was, but his argument is nonetheless a strong one: could we be sure that Bach would have written *Wachet auf* or *Vergnügte Ruh'* if he had not also written many other cantatas of lesser worth? And a century or so after Saint-Saëns, Olivier Messiaen was talking of periods when he was "inspired" and others when he was "less inspired". Saint-Saëns fully accepted that "the spirit bloweth where it listeth" and that all composers can do is hone their technique so as to take advantage of any chances the spirit may provide (again, a point of view championed by Ravel). To this extent, he was a far freer and more open composer than he has been given credit for. He explains, in his article about his opera *Hélène*, how he was attracted not by her virtue so much as by her faults and asks, with some justice, "Who was ever interested in Menelaus?"

My final offering towards a more human portrait of the man is that he was capable of love. We see it in the touching correspondence with Fauré and also, in the present volume, in his memories of Berlioz and Bizet, and especially in his long article about Gounod, here translated into English for the first time. If we are to believe him (and why should we not?), this was a true meeting of hearts and minds. Altogether sadder is his article on Massenet whom, one feels, he might well have loved if that colleague had given him any encouragement.

There are then multiple layers beneath the crisp surface of Saint-Saëns's prose, enough to test any translator. But also there is an intimacy with the reader and an absolute refusal to be a Gladstone to our Queen Victoria and address us as though we were a public meeting. For me the chief joys



of this selection lie in the positive virtues of the three factors I identified at the start as contributing to “the Saint-Saëns problem”: his intelligence, his determination to maintain standards, and his addiction to plain, sharp speaking. Being a friend of his might have had its dangers, but the rewards were clearly immense.

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# **Part I**

## *Music*

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## INTRODUCTION

(Harmonie et mélodie,  
*Calmann-Lévy, 1899, 1-31*)

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Far be it from me to contradict those extremely sensible people who feel that an artist should cultivate his own art exclusively, and that his time is more usefully spent producing works rather than giving his views on the works of others. The problem is, the general public has begun to fret unconscionably about the opinions of artists, composers especially, and when the public has got something into its head, who can resist it? Before they have heard a note of Mr X or Mr Z, they want to know what his preferences and antipathies are; and if Mr X or Mr Z doesn't feel like speaking, then someone will speak for him.

So it is that I have read, in articles of pure invention, opinions supposedly held by me in which I attacked everything that those who have engaged in a serious study of music are accustomed to respect. That is how legends are born, and Heaven knows, legends have a habit of persisting! Some bright spirits have shown that this is how things should be: that legend will always be right and the truth always wrong. Not that I am stupid enough to want to change the opinions that anyone may form about me. I merely thought that there might be, here and there, one or two refractory spirits who preferred the real truth to the legendary one: it is for them that I have taken up my pen, and not for the pleasure of writing on staveless paper; manuscript paper is far more to my taste.

The fragments I have gathered together, taken here and there from articles I have published at various times, have nothing to commend them except their utter sincerity. I have also not jibbed at leaving, side by side, slightly different views of the same object, when they have been expressed at different periods. I enormously admire those who, in artistic matters, can make an instant judgment that they never change, even if I can't understand them. Music for me is like people—only really knowable over time. So many factors can influence one's judgment of this art that moves in time, like time runs quickly, and only through the more or less helpful



caprices and moods of the performers reaches the more or less capricious audience, itself well or less well disposed!

The first time I heard Schumann's celebrated Piano Quintet, I was deaf to its fine qualities, to an extent that still amazes me when I think about it. Later on, I took a liking to it and for many years it filled me with an overwhelming, wild enthusiasm! . . . Since then, this fine fury has abated. While I still recognize this famous piece to be an exceptional work, and one that was epoch-making in the history of chamber music, I now find serious faults in it that make listening to it almost painful.

I had been aware of these faults for a long time, but refused to acknowledge them. You fall in love with works of art and, while that love persists, their faults are as though non-existent, or else they may even pass for virtues; then love falls away and the faults remain.

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.

After these confidential remarks, I don't imagine anyone will be surprised if I respond calmly to the accusation of having sometimes changed my opinions. In the matter of Wagner's music, I have been so bitterly reproached with burning what I once adored, that I am quite glad of the opportunity to explain myself on this point once and for all. We are allowed to change our minds about Beethoven or Mozart; but Wagner! . . . it is a crime, or rather a sacrilege. This is no longer a matter of art; we're talking about a cult.

Truth be told, it is not I that have changed, but the situation.

At a time when Wagner had got no further than *Lohengrin*, before we were able to foresee the transformations this powerful creative spirit was to undergo, and when we saw passages like the March from *Tannhäuser* and the Prelude to *Lohengrin* provoking howls of indignation, I never thought to be critical. I was on the side of art against the Philistines, and there was no other possible attitude.<sup>1</sup> Now the work is complete; the pas-

<sup>1</sup> Saint-Saëns is probably referring to the three concerts Wagner gave in Paris in January and February 1860, each consisting of the *Flying Dutchman* Overture, selections from *Tannhäuser*, including the March, the *Tristan* Prelude and selections from *Lohengrin*, beginning with the Prelude. Apart from the *Tristan* extract, the music was enthusiastically received by the audience; but not by the critics, to whom, as a mark of his contempt, Wagner had allotted no press tickets. He did send tickets to Berlioz, whose review appeared on 9 February. In a letter of 29 January Berlioz wrote: "Wagner has just given a concert that exasperated three quarters of the audience and enthused the rest. Personally, I found a lot of it painful, even though I admired the vehemence of his musical feelings in certain instances. But the diminished sevenths, the discords and the crude modulations made me feverish, and I have to say that I find this sort of music loathsome and revolting."

sage of time takes us further away from it each day, and distance allows us to judge his output in its entirety.

It happened that while his music was achieving the place in the musical world that was its due, it took over the press to an extraordinary degree and the bass drums of publicity beat an exuberant symphony in its honour. The Parisian public followed the press, and people who had covered their ears at the suave sounds of *Lohengrin* now shouted for joy and cried “encore!” at picturesque, exciting but fearful dissonances, that were for music what pickles are in the kitchen. Given that my viewpoint is not the same, it is surely natural that my impression should be quite different; it would indeed be amazing if it were not.

Ah well! All the same, I have not changed much. Some things that I didn’t like and about which I reserved judgment, now I don’t like for certain, that’s all. It is true that I should now no longer write that Brünnhilde’s awakening is “an enchantment”. Not that the orchestral accompaniment to her awakening has ceased to strike me as enchanting; but what comes before it is so long and what follows so slow, and the prolonged trills of the two lovers so strange, that the few bars of the awakening proper seem to me insufficient compensation. On the other hand, my admiration for *Das Rheingold* has continued to grow, as it has for three quarters at least of *Tristan* and *Die Walküre*. But even while I admire the colossal power of *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal*, I cannot take to their complicated and, in my view, ill-balanced style. This criticism is, of course, only general: you would, I think, have to be totally unmusical not to admire Brünnhilde’s funeral oration over Siegfried’s body or the second scene of *Parsifal*.

Unfortunately, with Wagner it is never just a question of music; it is also a question of drama, and here he and I have to part company.

In the legendary days of Wagnerism, when for a brief moment the charming Gasperini was his prophet in France,<sup>2</sup> it was a matter of rescuing the lyric drama from the tyranny of routine and of the singers, in order to turn it into the great modern drama; and in accordance with the excellent idea that drama should reach out to the masses, there was talk of popular works whose subjects would be taken from legends that everybody knew, as opposed to works composed for an entirely fashionable elite who moved in a false, ideal world of the imagination that was inaccessible to the crowd.

*Lohengrin* fitted reasonably well into this programme. The libretto is sufficiently interesting; the declamation does not prevent singing and the singing does not slow down the action. For all its lofty qualities, the work

<sup>2</sup> Auguste de Gasperini (c. 1825–1868) was music critic of *La France musicale*, *Le Ménestrel* and *Le Figaro*. His book on Wagner was published in Paris by Heugel in 1866.

did not frighten the public. In fact, it is the greatest success, the *popular* success in Wagner's output. *Lohengrin* is in the repertoire of every opera house in Europe and America, except Paris, which it would have reached long ago but for political reasons.<sup>3</sup>

Then what happened? First of all, Wagner suppressed, one after the other, all the means of giving pleasure that opera had at its disposal in order to give free rein to the drama; then he suppressed drama and replaced it with a bizarre phraseology and a so-called philosophy whose meaning escapes me completely.

The drama of *Tristan und Isolde* is admirable in its initial conception, and the end of the first act provides one of the finest scenes to be found in the theatre. But, in the event, it became a succession of long conversations between two characters holding forth endlessly about the brilliance of the night and the darkness of the day. It is fine poetry, but it is not drama, it is an "armchair spectacle" with orchestra, an exquisite experience for those rare mortals who can read the score. I shall never be persuaded that it is good theatre to keep a character on stage for two whole acts, and what acts! It is a wilful abuse of the strength of both singers and spectators.

"The soul," says *The Imitation of Christ*, "has two wings, which are simplicity and purity." Wagner has constructed several dramas on this idea.

Lohengrin is an impassive character whose purity is his only good feature. Torn between love of Elsa and the loss of his power, he does not hesitate; he bids farewell to Elsa in the most affecting fashion, but he leaves.

Walther has never learnt anything, not poetry, not music: it is only through the simplicity of a happy nature that he "knocks out" the learned mastersingers. Here Wagner has, unintentionally, satirised himself. Naïvety is the least of his faults and any talented young composer would have no trouble writing far more appealing things than the great duet in *Parsifal*. But *Die Meistersinger* is an extraordinary work and the libretto is charming, despite its longueurs and some tasteless moments in Beckmesser's part where the *grotesquerie* is taken too far.

The whole of the *Ring* seems designed to lead up to the appearance of the hero Siegfried. And Siegfried is puberty and brute strength, nothing more. He's as thick as an ox, charges headlong into every situation and excites not the slightest sympathy. Parsifal is even worse; he is unwitting and pure, "reine Thor", words which, according to the most experienced Wagnerians, have no really precise meaning. And it is because he knows nothing and understands nothing that he finally manages to break the spells in which the holy men have allowed themselves to be entrapped.

<sup>3</sup> This complaint of 1885 was soon to be answered. The opera was first heard in Paris at the Eden-Théâtre on 30 April 1887. It was premiered at the Paris Opéra on 16 September 1891 and reached its 100th performance there on 28 April 1894.

Where is the philosophy in that?

Womankind in Wagnerian drama, initially loving and tender like Elsa or passionate like Isolde, becomes sublime with Brünnhilde who, in her love and sorrow, progresses from divinity to humanity—a bold idea, indeed a truly modern and philosophical one. But what becomes of this idea with the mystical, mysterious Kundry? “To understand the character of Kundry,” says one commentator, “one had to have made a profound study of all ancient theologies.” Heavens above! Some task, and one that takes us a very long way from popular drama.

I read somewhere that the appearance of the Parsifal text was an event not only of the aesthetic type but also ethical, marking a new era in the moral development of mankind. That is quite possible, and I am quite prepared to believe it once someone has provided me with some solid proof. Until that time I shall content myself with considering Wagner’s works from an aesthetic point of view, which is quite sufficient for works of art.

If what I am saying were addressed exclusively to musicians, I could discuss in detail the musical questions thrown up by these colossal works. I could show how their style, which in principle is fairly humdrum and out of keeping with the loftiness of Wagner’s conceptions, was first of all refined, but then became increasingly complicated, multiplying notes needlessly, abusing the resources of music to the point of wastage, and ultimately requiring of voices and instruments things beyond what is possible. His disdain for rigid structures, which was not yet a feature of his early works, comes across initially as liberating and emancipating, but then, in the late works, gradually turns into a licence that destroys all form and balance. He is constantly swept away by the typically Germanic preoccupation with going beyond reality. In this sense his instrumentation draws much of its character from passages that are impracticable and can only be played more or less accurately. The “Summoning of Fire” in *Die Walküre* is the acme of this procedure. The result is extremely beautiful, but surely it is dangerous to encourage players in this kind of attitude? “More or less” can easily become a habit. In some theatres where Wagner is given often, the orchestra plays out of tune and the singers sing out of tune, and no one notices: the ears of both players and audience have been untuned.

Given all these points, you can appreciate whether it’s easy to reach a decisive judgment on works that are so complex and so different and which, from *Rienzi* to *Parsifal*, embrace so many varying styles. The Wagnerians have a simple way of dealing with this problem: they admire everything. One will tell you quite seriously that, when you go to a performance of one of the master’s works, you must lay aside all critical sense; another will say that such and such a passage involving singers is beautiful, quite apart from the effect of the voice parts. Other composers