



Camille SAINT-SAËNS

La Muse et le Poète

Charles-Camille Saint-Saëns (9 October 1835 – 16 December 1921) was a French composer, organist, conductor, and pianist of the Romantic era. His best-known works include Introduction and *Rondo Capriccioso*, the *Second Piano Concerto*, the *First Cello Concerto*, *Danse Macabre*, the opera *Samson and Delilah*, the *Third (“Organ”) Symphony*, and *The Carnival of the Animals*.

Saint-Saëns was a musical prodigy; he made his concert debut at the age of ten. After studying at the Paris Conservatoire, he followed a conventional career as a church organist, first at Saint-Merri, Paris and, from 1858, La Madeleine, the official church of the French Empire. After leaving the post twenty years later, he was a successful freelance pianist and composer, in demand in Europe and the Americas.

As a young man, Saint-Saëns was enthusiastic for the most modern music of the day, particularly that of Schumann, Liszt and Wagner, although his own compositions were generally within a conventional classical tradition. He was a scholar of musical history and remained committed to the structures worked out by earlier French composers. This brought him into conflict in his later years with composers of the impressionist and dodecaphonic schools of music; although there were neoclassical elements in his music, foreshadowing works by Stravinsky and Les Six, he was often regarded as a reactionary in the decades around the time of his death.

The grand duet ***La Muse et le Poète*** for violin, cello with piano accompaniment was composed in between 1909-1910 in Port Said, Egypt. The musical dialogue between the pair of instruments features the cello as the poet and the violin its muse. Saint-Saëns’s work appears as if from a previous epoch, yet such is the limpid quality of its expression that it effectively transcends any specific style or period, and speaks just as directly today as it did when it was first performed in London on June 7, 1910, with Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaÿe and Dutch cellist Josef Hollmann as the soloists. One of the few examples of the double concerto design, *La Muse et le Poète*, Op. 132 is only infrequently performed today.

Although Saint-Saëns never divulged a program for this work, it was apparently inspired by a series of four lyrics by the poet Alfred de Musset, in which a poet, disappointed in love, is consoled and inspired by a series of dialogues with his muse. Therefore, the title, though imposed by Saint-Saëns’s publisher rather than chosen by the composer himself, is apt, with the roles of Muse and Poet taken by a solo violinist and a solo cellist, respectively.

The work opens in a mood of gentle melancholy - wistful, as if expressing the poet’s unfulfilled love. First to initiate the conversation is the violinist - note how the music appears to brighten in its tonality with the soloist’s entry. The cello replies, clearly in despondent mood. There is no need to translate into words the import of the subsequent dialogue between the soloists - the music they play is eloquent enough, reminding one of a famous saying by one of Saint-Saëns’s favorite composers, Mendelssohn: “What a piece of music that I love expresses to me are not thoughts that are too vague to be contained in words, but rather too precise.”