



Camille Saint-Saëns

Piano concerto No. 2

Charles-Camille Saint-Saëns was a French composer, organist, conductor and pianist of the Romantic era. His best-known works include Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso (1863), the Second Piano Concerto (1868), the First Cello Concerto (1872), *Danse macabre* (1874), the opera *Samson and Delilah* (1877), the Third Violin Concerto (1880), the Third ("Organ") Symphony (1886) and *The Carnival of the Animals* (1886). 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 expressionist 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. Saint-Saëns held only one teaching post, at the École de Musique Classique et Religieuse in Paris, and remained there for less than five years. It was nevertheless important in the development of French music: his students included Gabriel Fauré, among whose own later pupils was Maurice Ravel. Both of them were strongly influenced by Saint-Saëns, whom they revered as a genius. Although a keen modernist in his youth, Saint-Saëns was always deeply aware of the great masters of the past. In a profile of him written to mark his eightieth birthday, the critic D C Parker wrote, "That Saint-Saëns knows Rameau ... Bach and Handel, Haydn and Mozart, must be manifest to all who are familiar with his writings. His love for the classical giants and his sympathy with them form, so to speak, the foundation of his art." Less attracted than some of his French contemporaries to the continuous stream of music popularised by Wagner, Saint-Saëns often favoured self-contained melodies. Though they are frequently, in Ratner's phrase, "supple and pliable", more often than not they are constructed in three- or four-bar sections, and the "phrase pattern AABB is characteristic". An occasional tendency to neoclassicism, influenced by his study of French baroque music, is in contrast with the colourful orchestral music more widely identified with him. *Grove* observes that he makes his effects more by characterful harmony and rhythms than by extravagant scoring. In both of those areas of his craft he was normally content with the familiar. Rhythmically, he inclined to standard double, triple or compound metres (although *Grove* points to a 5/4 passage in the Piano Trio and another in 7/4 in the Polonaise for two pianos). From his time at the Conservatoire he was a master of counterpoint; contrapuntal passages crop up, seemingly naturally, in many of his works. Saint-Saëns was the first major French composer to write piano concertos. His First, in D (1858), in conventional three-movement form, is not well known, but the Second, in G minor (1868) is one of his most popular works. The composer experimented with form in this piece, replacing the customary sonata form first movement with a more discursive structure, opening with a solemn cadenza. The scherzo second movement and *presto* finale are in such contrast with the opening that the pianist Zygmunt Stojowski commented that the work "begins like Bach and ends like Offenbach". The Third Piano Concerto, in E \flat (1869) has another high-spirited finale, but the earlier movements are more classical, the texture clear, with graceful melodic lines. The Fourth, in C minor (1875) is probably the composer's best-known piano concerto after the Second.

The **Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 22** was composed in 1868 and is probably Saint-Saëns' most popular piano concerto. It was dedicated to Madame A. de Villers (née de Haber). At the première on 13 May the composer was the soloist and Anton Rubinstein conducted the orchestra.[1] Saint-Saëns wrote the concerto in three weeks and had very little time to prepare for the première; consequently, the piece was not initially successful. The capricious changes in style provoked Zygmunt Stojowski to quip that it "begins with Bach and ends with Offenbach. The piece follows the traditional form of three movements but allows for more freedom in tempo markings. Normally, the first movement is fast-paced, while the second is slower, but the first movement here is slow and the second movement has a scherzo-like quality, resulting in a form resembling a typical four-movement symphony but lacking the first movement (a form also represented by Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata). The movements in the concerto are: Andante sostenuto (in G minor and sonata form), Allegro scherzando (in E-flat major and sonata form) and Presto (in G minor and sonata form) The concerto is scored for solo piano, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, crash cymbals and strings. A performance lasts around 23 minutes.