

Program Notes for VSO Concert – October 5 with soloist Lang Lang

By Jonathan Berkowitz

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 to 1921)

A strong case can be made for Camille Saint-Saëns as the most awesome child prodigy in the history of music, more gifted even than Mozart. Consider this evidence. He could read and write before he was three. He could play tunes on the piano at two-and-a-half and composed his first piece at three. At five he was analyzing the full score of the opera *Don Giovanni*. He had absolute pitch (aka perfect pitch). And by the age of seven he was reading Latin and exploring science.

His formal musical training started at seven and gave his official debut piano recital at ten. As an encore at that recital, he offered to play any of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas from memory. His fame reached the US. The *Boston Musical Gazette* of August 3, 1846, wrote that "there is a boy in Paris, named St. Saens ... who plays the music of Handel, Sebastian Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and the more modern masters, without any book before him." Whatever music he heard or book he read was forever in his memory.

For twenty years Saint-Saëns served as organist at the famed Church of the Madeleine in Paris. Franz Liszt, with whom he had an enduring friendship, called him the finest organist in the world. For a few years he taught piano at the Ecole Niedermeyer, counting Gabriel Fauré as his most prominent pupil. Fauré would later teach Maurice Ravel. Both men were heavily influenced by Saint-Saëns and regarded him as a genius.

One of his most important efforts in French music was co-founding the Société Nationale de Musique (National Society of Music) in 1871. It promoted performances of the most significant French orchestral works of the succeeding generation—composers such as Fauré, Franck, Lalo, Debussy, Ravel, Chabrier, and Dukas, whose *Sorcerer's Apprentice* is in tonight's program. The Society was called the cradle and sanctuary of French art.

Saint-Saens was an intellectual omnivore. A member of the Astronomical Society of France, he was interested in archeology, geology, botany, and mathematics. He wrote poetry, a play, and music criticism. He was also a world traveller (he died while on vacation in Algiers) and was fascinated with anything oriental. He brought the musical idioms of Egypt, Algeria, Japan and more into French Romanticism. You will have a chance to hear the VSO and soloist Javier Perianes perform his Fifth Piano Concerto, known as the *Egyptian* (composed in Luxor), on Feb. 14 and 15.

Saint-Saëns left us an immense musical legacy, contributing to nearly every genre of 19th century French music. Pianist Stephen Hough commented about Saint-Saëns' ease at composing, "You do not feel there were beads of sweat on his forehead as he composed." Saint-Saëns said of himself, "I produce music as an apple tree produces apples."

Last year, the VSO performed his *Symphony No 3*, also known as the *Organ Symphony*. That work alone would be enough to keep the name of Saint-Saëns alive. The listener is transported when the organ makes its majestic final entrance. Saint-Saëns knew he had done something remarkable. He said, "I gave everything to it I was able to give. What I have here accomplished, I will never achieve again." Other oft-performed, and much-loved, works include *Danse macabre* and *Le Rouet*

d'Omphale (*Omphale's Spinning Wheel*), the opera *Samson et Dalilah*, his *Piano Concerto No. 2*, and, of course, *Le Carnaval des animaux* (*Carnival of the Animals*); the latter two we will hear tonight. His *Second Cello Concerto* can be heard on Feb. 28, 2025, with soloist Santiago Canon-Valencia, in the VSO's new "Classical Afterworks" series. These, and three hundred other works that rarely get played, are the product of a lifetime devoted to musical perfectionism

Through the course of his career, he evolved from a musical revolutionary to an archconservative. Saint-Saëns stayed with classical models of French music that emphasized craftsmanship and form. That made him unusual in the Romantic period. But his use of colourful harmony influenced the French Impressionist composers, including Debussy, Ravel and others, who became popular near the end of his life. Saint-Saëns wrote, "Fundamentally, it is neither Bach, nor Beethoven, nor Wagner that I love, but Art. I am an eclectic. This is perhaps a major flaw, but it is impossible for me to correct: one cannot change one's nature." Of his music he said, "I ran after chimera of purity of style and perfection of form."

Perhaps his ability to weave exotic harmonies and melodies into classical forms is what makes Saint-Saëns' music so irresistible, surprising and delighting at the same time. Classical elegance meets vitality and spontaneity.

Saint-Saëns lived a long life; his 86 years spanned nearly the entire Romantic era as well as the dawn of twentieth-century modernism. He was born eight years after Beethoven died and lived long enough to attend the premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. He even became the first important composer to write movie music, for a 1908 silent film.

Through his compositions and his influence on his students and successors, Saint-Saëns was one of the great musicians in the development of twentieth-century music. Harold Schonberg summarized the multifaceted and multi-talented Saint-Saëns this way. "He spanned many of the musical revolutions of two centuries and he had his own contribution to make. He grew up to be one of the important pianists and organists of his day, a fine conductor, a brilliant score reader, a composer who worked prolifically in all forms, a sound musicologist, and a lively critic."

Let's end with two little mysteries about Saint-Saëns' name. Why does his name have a diaeresis (two dots) over the "e"? The mark usually indicates that two vowel sounds are to be pronounced separately. But now the "e" is silent. And why is the "s" at the end of his name pronounced? It wasn't originally. The story is that Saint-Saëns said he wanted his name to be pronounced like that of the town, as it was until about 1940–1950, according to historian Claude Fournier. Today, it is mostly pronounced with the "s", but you are on solid historical ground if you don't say it.

Piano Concerto No. 2 in G minor, Op. 22 – Camille Saint-Saëns

Orchestration: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings, and solo piano

Saint-Saëns' second piano concerto is the perfect example of his classically elegant composing style. It is polished, perfectly proportioned, and pianistically precise. It is the earliest of his works performed regularly and is his most popular piano concerto.

He composed it in 1868, remarkably, in under three weeks! Saint-Saëns was a close friend of Russian pianist-composer Anton Rubinstein. They played and performed music together, usually with Saint-Saëns conducting and Rubinstein as the solo pianist. Rubinstein wanted an opportunity to conduct in Paris, so Saint-Saëns wrote this concerto. He was the soloist while Rubinstein conducted. Rehearsal matters! The virtuosity required in the work was a challenge even for Saint-Saëns. With little time to prepare, the premiere was not successful, but the work has enjoyed tremendous popularity ever since.

The concerto has three movements. The first, unusually, is a slow one, recalling the form Beethoven used in his *Moonlight Sonata*. Marked *Andante sostenuto*, it begins with a long, elaborate piano solo that sounds rather improvisational. It is a tribute to J. S. Bach's organ music, written in a fantasia-like style. After the orchestra's opening passage, the piano presents a rather melancholy first theme, borrowed from Saint-Saëns' former student Gabriel Fauré, who considered this a marvellous honour. There is a brief second theme, then a middle section. The main theme returns, this time in *fortissimo*, followed by a long free-wheeling cadenza. Throughout this movement, listen to how Saint-Saëns uses "glittering cascades of notes, thundering octaves, and dazzling passage work," as musicologist Robert Markow puts it. The movement ends with a little surprise, a subdued coda recalling the Bach-like opening motif.

In contrast to the slow first movement, the second, marked *Allegro scherzando*, picks up the pace. It is a scherzo, from the Italian word for "joke"—a piece that is sprightly and humorous, usually in fast triplets. The movement has two main themes, both clever and light-hearted, and reminiscent of Felix Mendelssohn. They demonstrate Saint-Saëns' musical wit, so evident in *Le Carnaval des Animaux*. Think about what image the second theme brings to mind; one suggestion is dancing horses. This movement was an audience favourite even at the premiere.

The third movement is marked *Presto* which, as a musical instruction means "at a rapid tempo" but also indicates the sudden appearance of something often as if by magic. This movement shows a master craftsman at work, with a tour de force of rhythm, described by John Henken of the LA Phil as a "muscular tarantella." The French pianist and conductor Alfred Cortot wrote, "the music displays neat and even brilliant rhythms, more intelligence than sensibility, more verve than feelings." The fiery virtuosity and technical bravura of the conclusion is guaranteed to delight you and bring you to your feet!

In case you'd like to try playing this concerto at home, check out the transcription for solo piano written by Georges Bizet.

The Carnival of the Animals (*Le Carnaval des animaux*) – Saint-Saëns

Original orchestration: Two pianos, two violins, viola, cello, double bass, flute (and piccolo), clarinet (C and B♭), glass harmonica, and xylophone. It is now frequently played with a full orchestral complement of strings, and a glockenspiel instead of the rare glass harmonica.

The Carnival of the Animals is a suite of fourteen short movements, some less than a minute in length, each depicting an animal, including the human variety (pianists and music critics) and fossils, using many themes from other composers. It is a witty zoological fantasy burlesque.

- I. *Introduction et marche royale du lion* (Introduction and Royal March of the Lion)
- II. *Poules et coqs* (Hens and Roosters)
- III. *Hémiones (animaux véloces)* (Wild Asses (Swift Animals))
- IV. *Tortues* (Tortoises)
- V. *L'Éléphant* (The Elephant)
- VI. *Kangourous* (Kangaroos)
- VII. *Aquarium*
- VIII. *Personnages à longues oreilles* (Characters with Long Ears)
- IX. *Le Coucou au fond des bois* (The Cuckoo in the Depths of the Woods)
- X. *Volière* (Aviary)
- XI. *Pianistes* (Pianists)
- XII. *Fossiles* (Fossils)
- XIII. *Le cygne* (The Swan)
- XIV. *Final* (Finale)

Perhaps Saint-Saëns's best-known and most beloved work, *The Carnival of the Animals* was written in 1886 (coincidentally, the same year the City of Vancouver was incorporated!) He was on vacation in Austria, taking a "time out" from writing his famous *Third Symphony* (the *Organ Symphony*). The piece was written for private performance only, by two pianos and chamber ensemble. Saint-Saëns was adamant that the work not be published during his lifetime because he didn't want this wonderful musical joke to detract from his reputation as a serious composer. He did make one exception, and a year later published *The Swan*, the famous cello solo with piano accompaniment. The full suite was published the year after his death and performed in public to a tremendous response. *Le Figaro* reported, "We cannot describe the cries of admiring joy let loose by an enthusiastic public. In the immense oeuvre of Camille Saint-Saëns, *The Carnival of the Animals* is certainly one of his magnificent masterpieces. From the first note to the last it is an uninterrupted outpouring of a spirit of the highest and noblest comedy. In every bar, at every point, there are unexpected and irresistible finds. Themes, whimsical ideas, instrumentation compete with buffoonery, grace and science. ... When he likes to joke, the master never forgets that he is the master."

The individual movements really don't need explanation. It is immediately apparent how each title matches the corresponding musical style. For example, *The Royal March of the Lion* has the pianos playing low chromatic scales suggesting a lion's roar. *Hens and Roosters* features a "pecking" theme. In *The Cuckoo*, the clarinet plays the same two-note figure at the same pitch throughout, mimicking the cuckoo's call. *The Kangaroos* are portrayed by "hopping" chords.

But a few of the movements have some in-jokes and musical quotations worth sharing.

The Tortoises. Listen for the strings playing a slow version of the can-can (the *Galop-infernal*) from Offenbach's comic opera *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

The Elephant. The theme comes from the *Scherzo* in Mendelssohn's incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Berlioz's "Dance of the Sylphs" from *The Damnation of Faust*. The two themes were both originally written for higher and lighter toned instruments (flute, other

woodwinds and violin). The joke is that Saint-Saëns relocated the theme to the double bass, the lowest and heaviest-sounding instrument in the orchestra.

Aquarium. By using glissando-like runs and arpeggios in the pianos, Saint-Saëns recycles one of the most pleasing effects of his *Organ Symphony*, a piano duet rippling against string harmonies. (Personal note: My brother and I played that duet in a performance by the Edmonton Youth Orchestra about fifty years ago!)

Characters with Long Ears. The shortest of all the movements, this has two violins alternating high, loud notes and low, buzzing ones like a donkey's "hee-haw". It has been speculated that the movement was intended to compare music critics to braying donkeys.

Pianists. Pianists practise scales and do finger exercises. If you took piano lessons, you might recall learning studies by Carl Czerny. Here's your chance to see in the concert hall what usually stays in the practice room. The movement covers four scales, starting with C. Listen for the transitions between keys. This movement does not end with a resolution or cadence. The final three chords lead into the next movement.

Fossils. Here Saint-Saëns quotes musical themes from his own composition, *Danse macabre*, which uses the xylophone for dancing skeletons. You will also hear allusions to *Ah! vous dirai-je, Maman* (known in English as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*), as well as French nursery rhymes *Au clair de la lune*, and *J'ai du bon tabac*, an aria from Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. Leonard Bernstein said the musical joke here is that the pieces quoted are the fossils of Saint-Saëns' time.¹

The Swan. The slow lyrical melody evokes the swan elegantly gliding over the water. A short ballet solo, *The Dying Swan*, was performed by the great dancer Anna Pavlova over four thousand times.

Finale. The finale serves also as a recap of many of the previous movements. A simple melody is augmented with typical Saint-Saëns harmonies and piano effects—scales, glissandi, and trills. Which animal gets the last laugh before the final set of chords? I won't spoil the surprise. You will certainly recognize the musical figure and the animal.

Ogden Nash Verses

In the late 1940s, Columbia Masterworks Records and conductor Andre Kostelanetz had the inspired idea of adding poetry to Saint-Saëns' score. The obvious and only choices were Ogden Nash as poet, and Noël Coward as narrator for the recording released in 1950. My parents had the album, which I grew up listening to and loving. I still have it in my collection.



Here are Ogden Nash's opening and closing verses. You can find the complete set of Nash's verses online, if you are interested.

Introduction

*Camille St. Saëns was wracked with pains
When people addressed him as "Saint Sains."
He held the human race to blame
Because it could not pronounce his name.
So he turned with metronome and fife
To glorify other forms of life.
Be quiet, please, for here begins
His salute to feathers, furs, and fins.*

Finale

*Now we reach the grand finale,
Animale, carnivale.
Noises new to sea and land
Issue from the skillful band.
All the strings contort their features,
Imitating crawly creatures.
All the brasses look like mumps
From blowing umpah umpah umps.
In outdoing Barnum and Bailey and Ringling,
St. Saëns has done a miraculous thingling.*

I decided to try my hand at versifying in Nash style.

The Chameleon

*Monsieur Saint-Saëns was one cool dude;
His tonal colours matched his mood.
Like skin tones changing freely on
A lizard, he's Camille-eon.*

Conclusion

*The set of poems does not include
The giant ape on film best viewed.
Nash, sadly, did not laud King Kong
For Gina Alice and Lang Lang.
No Fay Wray or Naomi Watts;
Instead, our pair's got talent—lots!
With Otto Tausk and VSO
We guarantee a top-notch show.*

I hope I made you smile!