

Program Notes for VSO Concert – Franck and Saint-Saëns February 14-15, 2025
Franck – Symphony in D minor; Saint-Saëns – Piano Concerto #5 (The Egyptian)

By Jonathan Berkowitz

César Franck (1822 to 1890)

The French poet and journalist Anatole France said, “France! Great in all the arts, supreme in none.” It is true that France did not produce a Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, or Tchaikovsky. But it did produce a Saint-Saëns, Debussy, and Ravel. And, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Paris was home to many important French composers including Franck and Fauré, and their followers: d’Indy, Chausson, Lalo, Dukas, and others. They are generally not household names. Their music didn’t travel well outside of France and lies largely neglected. One exception is Franck’s Symphony in D minor which is a staple of modern orchestral repertoire.

Franck was born in Liège, Belgium, but lived almost all his life in France. He was another child prodigy who achieved a reputation for remarkable proficiency on the piano. His mother died when he was young and, after his father’s death a few years later, Franck entered the Paris Conservatoire. It was there that he developed his unique musical voice, experimenting with harmonies and structures that would come to define his compositional style.

In *The Lives of the Great Composers* Harold Schonberg relates this story. Franck was rather cocky and at the finals of the piano competition, he was given a difficult piece to sight-read. He decided to transpose the entire piece into a different key. The judges were mesmerized, unanimously awarding him first prize. Schonberg shares this excerpt from the reporting of La France Musicale in 1838, “The jury has now decided that M. Franck stands so incomparably far ahead of his fellow competitors that it is impossible to nominate another to share the prize with him.”

But after that promising beginning, he sank into obscurity until, at age 30, he switched from piano to organ. He specialized in church work and was considered the greatest improviser of his time. He revived “Classical” (baroque) organ playing in France as the organist of Ste. Clothilde from 1858. Deeply spiritual, he drew inspiration from his Catholic faith, often infusing his compositions with a sense of reverence and mysticism. In many ways, Franck was a French version of Anton Bruckner, discussed in previous program notes.

César Franck was a dominating musical force of the period in France, as teacher and composer. His pupils did everything but worship him. Franck was kind, serene, and without harsh or derogatory words. He wasn’t interested in money or honours. The younger generation looked up to him which caused distress for more established composers including Saint-Saëns.

As a professor of organ at the Paris Conservatoire students called him the only progressive figure in the conservative institution. He taught pupils his ideas on harmony and form, as well as counterpoint, the art of combining multiple independent musical lines into a cohesive whole. He changed keys frequently; modulation was his signature.

Little of his early music is played because, as a composer, he matured rather late. In fact, the D minor Symphony premiered in 1889, a year before his death. His music was not performed frequently during his lifetime but garnered increasing attention and appreciation posthumously.

His music has been characterized as noble and sincere, but many listeners think it too saccharine, too thick, with obvious modulations, and weak construction. However, those who respond to the sensuous elements of sheer sound love Franck's music. Perhaps one needs a musical sweet tooth to fully identify with his music.

Why has César Franck's legacy as a composer and organist endured long after his death? He had an innovative approach to harmony that was ahead of its time and influenced the later Impressionists. His use of cyclic form in works like his Symphony in D minor paved the way for 20th-century musical developments. His compositions are imbued with a profound sense of emotion and intensity with a timeless quality. Today, we regard Franck as an important figure of the Romantic era.

Symphony in D minor – César Franck

Orchestration: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, cor anglais, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 cornets, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, harp, and strings.

César Franck's only symphony was his last major work. It stands as a cornerstone of the Romantic symphonic repertoire, showcasing his mastery of form, harmony, and orchestration. But, as with many of the masterworks on modern orchestral programs, his Symphony was a failure at its premiere. Charles Gounod's famously called it "An affirmation of incompetence pushed to the length of dogma." Sour grapes indeed. Can you name any work by Gounod other than his opera *Faust*? It was only after the influential conductor Hans von Bülow championed the symphony that it began to gain popularity. It became one of the most frequently performed French symphonies and rivalled the popularity of Beethoven's works.

It has a cyclic form in only three movements, rather than the usual four of a classical symphony. The opening four-bar theme introduced in the first movement is referred to in all three movements. Franck's compositional style was to weave together recurring motifs and themes to create a sense of unity and continuity across the movements. Replete with richly textured harmonies, intricate counterpoint, and full-bodied orchestration, the symphony creates a powerful and expressive sound world. Franck's changes of keys add to the sense of drama and tension.

The first movement—*Lento; Allegro non troppo*—opens with a flexible little theme in the strings that sets the tone for the entire symphony. It moves through widely different keys and undergoes a series of transformations, building to a powerful climax before flowing seamlessly into the second movement.

The second movement—*Allegretto*—is two-in-one, blending a slow movement with a scherzo, which gives a sense of repose followed by anxiety. A lyrical and introspective interlude leads into a scherzo-like section with rhythmic drive and playful energy. It is famous for the haunting melody played by the cor anglais (aka English horn, a lower-pitched cousin of the oboe) over a plucked harp and strings. Early reviews were highly critical of the use of this instrument!

The third movement—*Allegro non troppo*—is a grand finale that begins with a joyful melody then revisits themes from earlier movements. The coda recaps all the core themes and builds to a triumphant conclusion by bringing the symphony back to where it started. Franck wrote, “The finale, as in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, recalls all the themes. But they do not appear as mere quotations. I make something of them, they become new elements.”

However, this is a composition that really does not need analysis of its structure or Franck’s composing technique. Just let the emotional elements draw you into a universe of searching and seeking.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 to 1921)

This biography was first presented as part of the October 4 program of Saint-Saëns with pianist Lang Lang performing the Piano Concerto No. 2 and, with his wife Gina Alice, Carnival of the Animals,.

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 began formal musical training 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. The Society was called the cradle and sanctuary of French art.

Saint-Saëns 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.

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*). 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. 5 in F major, Op. 103 (The Egyptian) – Camille Saint-Saëns

Orchestration: 2 flutes, piccolo, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, timpani, tam-tam, strings, and solo piano

Saint-Saëns wrote his fifth and last piano concerto in 1896, 20 years after his fourth. He was the soloist at its premiere at his own Jubilee Concert that year, and he continued to play it himself even past his 80th birthday. It was given the nickname of “The Egyptian” for two reasons, one geographical and one musical. He composed it in the short span of three weeks in Luxor, during one of his many winter vacations to Egypt. It is the second movement that reflects the exotic musical influences of the Middle East, Java and Spain. The Concerto was both a popular and critical success, in part because of Paris society’s 1890s Belle Époque fascination with the east. Saint-Saëns himself likened the piece to a sea voyage. Try to imagine glamorous ports of call in the wide range of musical ideas he presents.

The Concerto follows the standard three-movement fast-slow-fast arrangement. Orrin Howard wrote, “The ‘Egyptian’ Concerto is from the typical Saint-Saëns mold, which is to say it is melodious and straightforward and exudes the sophisticated charm and brilliance of a craftsman of the highest order.” In Saint-Saëns’ own words, “The artist who does not feel completely satisfied by elegant lines, by harmonious colors, and by a beautiful succession of chords does not understand the art of music.” The first and third movements are perfectly European with a classical balance of themes and tempos, while the second highlights the Egyptian influences.

The first movement—*Allegro animato*—has two contrasting themes. After a 10-second orchestral introduction, the pianist introduces a very simple theme. As it develops, the energy in each new variation grows, with technically challenging and brilliant passages running up and down the keyboard. A slower, more introspective theme now appears. Then the two themes alternate, much

like waves overlapping one another, and the movement ends with a gentle coda. No showy cadenza is needed; the finger work throughout is impressive enough.

The second movement—*Andante*—provides the reason for the nickname. From the marking of *andante* you might expect a slow, expressive movement. However, this one begins with a bang on the timpani and a rhythmic string part, followed quickly by the piano with an exotic-sounding run. That introduces the first Egyptian-influenced theme. It is based on a Nubian love song that Saint-Saëns heard boatmen sing as he sailed on the Nile in a *dahabiah* boat. The development is rich and evocative, clearly earning the Concerto its nickname. As the movement nears an end, the piano and orchestra produce sounds representing the frogs and crickets of the Nile habitat. It is a clear sign of the emerging wave of French Impressionism.

Hugh Macdonald, author of *Saint-Saëns and the Stage (2019)*, says that the second movement “is unlike anything else by Saint-Saëns or anyone else. He explains that “It is not simply that most of the themes have a Middle Eastern character, based on modal intervals; it proceeds strangely from one episode to another without any apparent direction, like an improvisation, although the balance of the movement is cleverly controlled.”

The third movement—*Molto allegro*—is a tour de force. It begins with low rumbling in the piano that brings to mind the deck-shaking vibrations of ship propellers. The energetic first theme has the pianist’s hands flying all over the piano. While this is going on, a driving new melody arrives from the woodwinds. Just as he did in the first movement, Saint-Saëns combines and overlaps the two themes to great effect. The movement ends triumphantly and emphatically with a jaw-dropping display of piano virtuosity. Perhaps the third movement is the return trip of the sea voyage, with the piano pyrotechnics reminding us of the hectic pace of urban life in the West. If you have a view of the pianist’s fingers, you may wonder how it is possible to move them that fast!

Here are some more remarks from Hugh Macdonald, writing for the Boston Symphony Orchestra. “If Saint-Saëns had been just a pianist, he would have been as famous and as acclaimed as Anton Rubinstein, Leschetizky, Paderewski, or any other lion of the age. His piano concertos, all of which he played himself, provide scintillating evidence of his astonishing technique both in weight and nimbleness... it takes a player of special gifts to throw off those cascades of scales and arpeggios as though they were the easiest thing in the world—as for him they were. His works are appealing, superbly crafted, and full of surprises.”

That explains why I am an unabashed fan of Saint-Saëns!