

# CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

Born October 9, 1835 in Paris; died December 16, 1921 in Algiers

## Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Opus 78, "Organ" (1886)

PREMIERE OF WORK: London, May 19, 1886

London Philharmonic Orchestra

Camille Saint-Saëns, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 34 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, organ, piano (four hands) and strings

"There goes the French Beethoven," declared Charles Gounod to a friend as he pointed out Camille Saint-Saëns at the Paris premiere of the "Organ" Symphony. This was high praise, indeed, and not without foundation. Though the depths of feeling that Beethoven plumbed were never accessible to Saint-Saëns, both musicians largely devoted their lives to the great abstract forms of instrumental music — symphony, concerto, sonata — that are the most difficult to compose and the most rewarding to accomplish. This was no mean feat for Saint-Saëns.

The Paris in which Saint-Saëns grew up, studied and lived was enamored of the vacuous stage works of Meyerbeer, Offenbach and a host of lesser lights in which little attention was given to artistic merit, only to convention and entertainment. Berlioz tried to break this stranglehold of mediocrity, and he earned for himself a reputation as an eccentric, albeit a talented one, whose works were thought unperformable and probably best left to the pedantic Germans anyway. Saint-Saëns, with his love of Palestrina, Rameau, Beethoven, Liszt and, above all, Mozart, also determined not to be enticed into the *Opéra Comique* but to follow his calling toward a more noble art. To this end, he established with some like-minded colleagues the *Société Nationale de Musique* in 1871 to perform the serious concert works of French composers. The venture was a success, and it did much to give a renewed sense of artistic purpose to the best Gallic musicians.

Saint-Saëns produced a great deal of music to promote the ideals of the *Société Nationale de Musique*, including ten concertos and various smaller works for solo instruments and orchestra, four tone poems, two orchestral suites and five symphonies, the second and third of which were unpublished for decades and discounted in the usual numbering of these works. The last of the symphonies, No. 3 in C minor, is his masterwork in the genre. Saint-Saëns placed much importance on this composition. He pondered it for a long time and realized it with great care, unusual for this artist, who said of himself that he composed music "as an apple tree produces apples," that is, naturally and without visible effort. "I have given in this Symphony," he confessed, "everything that I could give."

Of the work's construction, Saint-Saëns wrote, "This Symphony is divided into two parts, though it includes practically the traditional four movements. The first, checked in development, serves as an introduction to the *Adagio*. In the same manner, the scherzo is connected with the finale." Saint-Saëns clarified the division of the two parts by using the organ only in the second half of each: dark and rich in Part I, noble and uplifting in Part II. The entire work is unified by transformations of the main theme, heard in the strings at the beginning after a brief, mysterious introduction. In his "Organ" Symphony, Saint-Saëns combined the techniques of thematic transformation, elision of movements and richness of orchestration with a clarity of thought and grandeur of vision to create one of the masterpieces of French symphonic music.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda