

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

**Concerto No. 1 for Cello and Orchestra
in A minor, Op. 33**

- I. *Allegro non troppo*
- II. *Allegretto con moto*
- III. *Allegro non troppo; Un peu moins vite*

“Camille Saint-Saëns was one of the most versatile musicians of all time.” writes David Ewen. “Besides his activity as a composer, he was a distinguished organist, pianist, conductor, editor, scholar and teacher.” It should also be noted that he was a very pointed, opinionated and influential critic. As a composer, he wrote a great number of well-crafted and stylish compositions. But his works never quite ascend to that hierarchy of composers that he so wished to attain. Philip Hale evaluates Saint-Saëns the composer: “Possessing an uncommon technical equipment . . . (he was) French in clearness of expression, logic, exquisite taste; a master of rhythm, with a clear appreciation of tonal color and the value of simplicity in orchestration. He is seldom warm and tender; seldom does he indulge himself in sentiment, passion, imagination. With him unorthodox form must always be kept in mind. His wit and brilliancy are indisputable. He seldom touches the heart or sweeps away the judgement. He was not a great creator, yet his name is ever to be mentioned with respect.” This is not to minimize the fact that he did create truly outstanding masterpieces including the Organ Symphony, his opera *Samson and Delilah* and the witty *Carnival of the Animals*, among others. His concertos for piano, violin and cello remain staples in the repertoire today.

The Cello Concerto in A minor was completed in 1872 and dedicated to August Tolbecque, the distinguished principal cellist of the Paris Conservatory Orchestra. It was first performed by that orchestra on January 19, 1873 with Tolbecque, as the soloist. Edward Downes has commented: “The Concerto is a modest work: engagingly unpretentious, yet far from frivolous and equally far from being academic.” It is, in fact, as tuneful as it is dramatic. The Concerto is set in three movements played without pause. However, the overall feeling is of one large movement divided into three sections. The first, *Allegro non troppo*, begins with a punctuated chord in the orchestra after which the soloist takes off. It is athletic throughout. Saint-Saëns chose not to include a full-blown cadenza in the first movement. Instead he has the soloist gracefully provide the transition to the next. The second, *Allegretto con moto*, is a delicate interlude. The finale recalls the thematic material from the first. As it develops, the virtuoso brilliance of the solo part increases. This includes dizzying scales, octaves, arpeggios and harmonics. The excitement intensifies and drives the Concerto to a brilliant conclusion.