

Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 78, "Organ" Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Saint-Saëns composed the Organ Symphony in 1886 and conducted the first performance with the London Philharmonic Orchestra on May 19, 1886.

Saint-Saëns voiced a complaint in 1871 that sounds very much like the grumbling of composers a century later:

"Not so very long ago a French composer who was daring enough to venture onto the terrain of instrumental music had no other means of getting his work performed than to give a concert himself and invite his friends and the critics. As for the general public, it was hopeless even to think about them. The name of a composer who is French and still alive had only to appear on a poster to frighten everybody away. The chamber music societies, flourishing and numerous at the time, restricted their programs to the resplendent names of Beethoven, Mozart, Haydn, Mendelssohn—and sometimes Schumann—as proof of their audacity."

If the complaint seems like those of today, so did the solution. In order to combat prejudice against contemporary French chamber music, Saint-Saëns and Fauré founded the Société Nationale de Musique, which was similar in purpose and activities to many composers' organizations functioning today. Other leading members of the organization were César Franck and Édouard Lalo. The Society met with unexpected success. Not only was it responsible for the premieres of many fine new French compositions, but also it showed the public that such music was worthwhile. As a result, modern French music began to appear on other concert series. Before too many years had passed, the Society had 200 members, many of whom met regularly at Saint-Saëns' house to discuss and play new music, including Vincent d'Indy a devoted Wagnerian, who wanted to add music by "foreign" composers. The ensuing rift between him and Saint-Saëns was never healed.

Their disagreements escalated over the succeeding years, and each enlisted allies. The proponents of d'Indy's position were the composers most influenced by Wagner. They took as their leader César Franck. Franck had been a friend of Saint-Saëns and had dedicated his Quintet of 1880 to his colleague. But that piece also symbolized the rivalry between these two leading French composers: Franck's work had been inspired by his passion for a particular woman, to whom Saint-Saëns was also attracted. Saint-Saëns heard rumors that Franck's pursuit had been more successful than his own. His personal resentment of Franck fueled his professional jealousy: Franck had a circle of devoted disciples and students, while Saint-Saëns did not. And, a few years later, Franck's Symphony in D Minor, which owed quite a lot to Saint-Saëns' Third Symphony, eclipsed its model in popularity.

Saint-Saëns understood that he was in the minority in the Society, and that those under the spell of Wagnerian aesthetics were both more numerous and more powerful than his own allies. Saint-Saëns resigned in 1886. He felt the Society had done its work. His departure, after 15 years as president, marked the end of an era.

The year 1886 ended an artistic era for Saint-Saëns as well. He conducted the premiere of the composition that was destined to be his last effort in the symphonic genre: his Third Symphony. In his remaining 35 years, he composed only a few incidental orchestral works (in addition to several works for soloist with orchestra). He turned his attention instead to the theater, writing seven operas, a ballet and incidental music to seven plays.

The Third Symphony (actually it was the composer's fifth, since two youthful works were never numbered) is quite conservative. It looks backward to the heroic symphonies of Beethoven, and it all but ignores the new Wagnerian sounds that excited Franck and d'Indy. It was with no small sarcasm that composer Charles Gounod said, as Saint-Saëns mounted the podium to conduct the symphony, "There's the Beethoven of France!"

He dedicated the symphony to Franz Liszt, who died shortly after the premiere. Liszt's style of orchestration is echoed in the symphony. In particular, Saint-Saëns took from the Hungarian composer's tone poem "Battle of the Huns" the idea of including an organ in the orchestra.

The symphony received splendid receptions at both its London and Paris premieres, but, apart for its influence on Franck, it had little subsequent impact on French music. Saint-Saëns understood that the Third Symphony represented a dead end. "I have given all that I had to give," he wrote. "What I have done I shall never do again."

The composer referred to himself in the third person in the extensive program notes he provided for the London premiere:

'The first of the symphony's two movements comprises an adagio (which Saint-Saëns called "plaintive") which leads to an allegro moderato and, after a transition, to a full-fledged adagio (the composer described this section as "extremely peaceful and contemplative"). The second movement begins with the usual scherzo, complete with trio section. The second time the trio occurs, it becomes a transition (labeled "a struggle for mastery, ending in the defeat of the restless, diabolical element") into the final section: a maestoso introduction ("triumph of calm and lofty thought") to a fugal allegro. The organ helps delineate the implied four-part symphonic structure. It is silent in the first section, then enters at the start of the slow section. It is absent from the scherzo but marks the arrival of the finale with a massive C major chord.'

Like Franck's Symphony in D Minor, Saint-Saëns' Third is cyclic. This means that certain important themes recur in different movements. It was appropriate for Saint-Saëns to omit formal recapitulations, since the main themes of the earlier sections recur in later sections. An additional source of unity is the symphony's rhythmic style. In many places a tune can be felt either with or against the beat. Only by listening carefully to the accompaniment can we sense the beat, but the accompaniment is sometimes ambiguous or even nonexistent. This situation occurs, among other places, at the start of the first allegro moderato, at the beginning of the scherzo and at the transformation of

the first movement's first theme that is heard soon thereafter. The allegro moderato theme returns in the introduction to the finale and again toward the end of the symphony, each time with its relation to the beat changed. What was off the beat later falls on the beat.

The symphony projecting many different moods. It is sometimes dance-like, sometimes intimate, and sometimes grandiose. It is a large, romantic work of a sort that was falling into disfavor in France. Yet it is a spectacular orchestral showpiece, and its return to popularity in our time is due largely to its ability to show off a virtuosic orchestra at its best. It is scored for solo organ, 3 flutes (incl. piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, triangle, bass drum, piano four-hands, and strings.

—*Stephen Larmore*