

Saint-Saëns

The Complete Works for Piano and Orchestra

(The Romantic Piano Concerto 27)

Piano Concertos nos 1 op. 17, 2 op. 22, 3 op. 29, 4 op. 44, 5 op. 103

Allegro appassionato op. 70; *Rapsodie d'Auvergne* op. 73; *Valse-Caprice* op. 76;

Africa op. 89

Stephen Hough *pf*

City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra

Sakari Oramo

Hyperion CDA67331/2

Notes and translations included.

Camille Saint-Saëns was one of the main actors of the post-romantic era who preferred to celebrate the large-scale gesture rather than a more intimate lyricism. The capacity of dealing with gigantic length and highly complex 'narration' was typical of the era between Schumann and Debussy. An appreciable number of composers tried to exceed the grand gestures of Beethoven, Berlioz and Wagner, and many dreamed of writing music yet more complicated and 'sublime' than that of their predecessors. No topic seemed too big or universal for the Symbolistic approach of a generation already used to thinking globally, at least in the framework of romantic exoticism. The most pretentious (and suspect) composers, like Felix Draeseke (1835–1913), still believed themselves to be able to deal with *Christ* himself in a 'Mystery in an Introduction and three Oratorios' (another example would be August Bungert and his cyclic opera *Homerische Welt*), whereas Arnold Schoenberg had to realize that even *Moses und Aron* was an operatic subject too much for one human being. The simultaneity of new kinds of (basically romantic) ideologies and the accomplishment of the means (inspired by the technical and industrial revolution) allow us to look at the Saint-Saëns generation as the culmination of an epoch, highly demanding in terms of professionalism and magnitude of expression, but at the same time problematic under the eye of critical modernism.

The idea of magnificent gesture, perfection of technical proficiency and grand mannerisms could have been the preliminary notion for the approach of Stephen Hough, Sakari Oramo and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra to Saint-Saëns's complete piano concertos (opp. 17, 22, 29, 44 and 103) and four other pieces for piano and orchestra: *Allegro appassionato* op. 70, *Rapsodie d'Auvergne* op. 73, *Valse-Caprice* op. 76 and *Africa* op. 89. The latter works illustrate four different aspects of the late nineteenth-century popular concert tradition: the classic-romantic, the folkloristic, the entertaining and the exotic. For this double-CD recording – altogether a generous two and a half hours of music – anyone could easily conjure up superlatives of various kinds, as has been the case in practically all previous reviews of these recordings. In 2002 this recording was given the Gramophone Award 'Recording of the Year'. The dynamic sound of the great symphonic orchestra, the Steinway Grand ('big is beautiful!') and the means of a high-end digital recording simply open the door to a glorious world of urban imperialism, a collective enthusiasm in the arts

and everyday Western civilization (namely heroic colonialism, symbolic exoticism and other so called 'virtues' of late nineteenth-century Europe).

All this belongs to the cultural context of Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), better known as the composer of the grand opera *Samson et Dalila* op. 47 (1877) and the magnificent 'Organ Symphony' op. 7 (1886). Hough and Oramo are the masters of a faultless music machine – still quite in the spirit of the 1850s World Exhibitions, less of Symbolism – displaying unlimited power, a speed of execution hardly surpassed and the fireworks of fantasy, always supreme in expression and precision. In this respect comparison with the earlier expeditions of Philippe Entremont and Michel Plasson (Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse by Sony), Pascal Rogé and Charles Dutoit (three London orchestras by Decca), or Aldo Ciccolini and Serge Baudo (Orchestre de Paris by EMI) – take such moments as the beginning of the Presto of the Piano Concerto no. 2 – seems fruitless.

If there are any significant 'buts', these would relate to some of Saint-Saëns's likely intentions as a special case within his historical context, compared with the individual merits of those by Hough and Oramo. Some may feel that the famous Steinway sound of today is too bright (like titanium in the context of an era of steel construction and deep coal mines) and the velocity of Hough's and Oramo's unquestionably accurate and flexible phrasing somewhat too high and mechanical for the French symphonic style of the day (analogous to the heavy steam locomotives of the era and the first trial experiments of automobiles and early aeroplanes); anyone with such doubts, however, would certainly accept that these musicians have reached a level on which one can at least clearly imagine the still far too rare 'hundred per cent perfection' of style and technique.

There is not a single movement in which Hough and Oramo feel able to try out the slowest possible tempo. This collection, being an excellent reference edition, does not invite the listener to think about the 'other side' of the late nineteenth century, indeed very close to Saint-Saëns: the twilight of Victor Hugo and a new kind of Symbolistic religiosity, reflected in Saint-Saëns's private *Divagations sérieuses* and in the 'poème biblique' *Le Déluge* op. 45, which reveal a broad and more than superficial interest in astronomy, archaeology and foreign cultures.¹ Hough and Oramo present an affirmative and assenting (post-war Anglo-Saxon or 'Nordic?') vision of an era that many listeners (or at least those on the continent) might also associate with the increasing feeling of cultural crisis and the end of true Western civilization, one that is accessible even through the conservative genre of the piano concerto.

Hough and Oramo have created an almost analytical document of Saint-Saëns's multilateral virtuosity, probably reflecting the fact that the composer himself premiered all the concertos but at the same time took the composer's responsibility for the texture as a whole. Saint-Saëns is said to have been particularly sensitive about the interactive discourse of the soloist (first and foremost himself) and the orchestra. Hough, Oramo and all the CBSO members have clearly understood this; the composer himself spoke of the contextualization of the 'dramatic role'.² The Fifth Concerto, premiered on 6 May 1896, celebrated

¹ See p. 52; cited in Michael Stegemann, *Camille Saint-Saëns* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1988), 90).

² See Emile Baumann, *Les Grandes Formes de la musique: L'Œuvre de M. Camille Saint-Saëns* (Paris, 1905), 223.

the fiftieth anniversary of his first public performance as an 11-year-old piano virtuoso and pupil of Camille Stamaty, himself a student of Kalkbrenner. As a soloist in Mozart's Piano Concerto in B flat major KV 450, Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 3 in C minor (op. 37) and a selection of solo pieces, including a Bach Prelude and Fugue, on 6 May 1846, Saint-Saëns had been acclaimed the 'new Mozart' of the day.

Even his early pianistic manners showed, in point of fact, a quite ambivalent attitude towards the ethics of industrialism. Compared with some of the extremes of the Paganini–Liszt School, Saint-Saëns was inclined to follow the 'lyrical' and sentimental line of Mozart, Chopin, Kalkbrenner, Wieniawski and Vieuxtemps. The display of his artistic skills was always an understatement, and he himself never wanted to be labelled a 'virtuoso' in the traditional meaning of the word.³ And yet his piano concertos belong to some of the most technically difficult in the history of the genre. This may all seem contradictory, but instead it makes Saint-Saëns the perfect example of what I myself once called the 'aesthetics of virtuosity' in *Virtuosität und Werkcharakter*.⁴ The 'aesthetics of virtuosity' include all the significant aspects of the texture, reflecting qualities of the once so-called perfect performance. This by no means alludes only to technical skill and the speed of the finger but also power, melodic elaboration, and the exposition of new ideas.

Another important aspect of Saint-Saëns's musicianship is also well illuminated in Hough's and Oramo's interpretation: the role of the organ as an ideal instrument of improvisation and free ad hoc elaboration of the musical genius. The recording engineers of Hyperion Records have helped Hough create an organ-like sound with an overwhelming bass line. Like César Franck, Anton Bruckner, Max Reger and Ralph Vaughan Williams, Saint-Saëns belongs to those late nineteenth-century composers whose admixture of brilliant polyphonic writing, harmonic complexity and effect, combined with a sublime mind, can indeed be read as idiomatic of an organ player who has access to one of the great romantic instruments of Aristide Cavallé-Coll and his successors.

Saint-Saëns frequently played the organ during the services in Saint-Merri and the Madeleine, but to call Saint-Saëns a 'religious composer' in a more specific sense would indeed be dubious, as Emile Baumann has suggested (particularly in *Les Grandes Formes de la musique*). At the same time, it would be trivial to regard 'true religiosity' of the human being as a *conditio sine qua non* of a 'religious composer'; it is enough to know that the composer's artistic mind was sensitive to spiritual matters and that his contribution to the 'mammothism' and 'gigantomania' of the late nineteenth century was influenced by Western civilization (including the Bible and Western myths) rather than the romanticism of nature. The latter was more obviously the case with Siegmund von Hausegger's *Natursinfonie* of 1911, a work based on the 'relation of the human being to Nature' in which the central topic of Nature is 'reflected in the deep chords of the organ'.⁵ (Hausegger is one of those late nineteenth-century composers who still needs to be 'discovered' by adventurous conductors like Sakari Oramo.)

³ See *Neue Musikzeitung*, 17 (1906): 19, 424; and Stegemann, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, 18.

⁴ See Tomi Mäkelä, *Virtuosität und Werkcharakter* (Munich and Salzburg, 1989), 55–88.

⁵ See August Spanuth, 'Musikalischer Mammutismus', *Signale für die musikalische Welt*, 8 (21 Feb. 1912): 243–5.

Even though Saint-Saëns was famous for his outspoken 'national' attitude and for his key position in the 'Ars gallica' movement of the Société nationale in Paris from 1870 to 1896, he always distanced himself from the imperial monumentalism of minor composers like Albert Becker in Berlin. Yet even within the 'Ars gallica' Société, Saint-Saëns remained a moderate Wagnerian composer and had to listen to commentaries denouncing his music as an anti-patriotic act with 'mêmes brouillards, même absence d'idées, mêmes sonorités vides' (Pierre Véron in *Le Charivari*, 15 July 1872), which has since been cited and interpreted by Manuela Schwartz in *Wagner-Rezeption und französische Oper des Fin de siècle*.⁶ It may be argued that his point of view was 'gallic', but at the same time it was undoubtedly universal. Certainly he can be seen to represent the second generation of romantic exoticism in France – preceding Félicien David and *Le Désert* – but he could also be compared to György Ligeti who, in his Piano Concerto of the 1980s, found a way to integrate exotic elements (the 'Otherness' in detail) into the occidental genre.

Ligeti's concertante Africanism is preceded by a global kaleidoscope in Saint-Saëns's Piano Concerto no. 5 of 1896. This unique composition is rightly called the 'Egyptian', as one can easily look at the urban Egypt as a cultural melting pot and one of the most important 'heterotopics' of the nineteenth-century world. In point of fact, Saint-Saëns composed a major part of this work in Cairo, but in reality even Paris was a cosmopolitan centre for different kinds of 'Otherness'. The Fifth Concerto is a wonder of syncretism and syntheticism. A harmless and classic-romantic first movement, it deploys fragments of polyphonic texture as well as lyrical subjectivity (*nota bene* the paradigmatically French harmonic sequences) and pastoral visions. The second movement is like an audible World Exhibition imitating Spanish and Gypsy melodies, the sound of the cymbalon, even perhaps the African lamellophone (playing the famous Nubian love theme), and classic Japanese or Chinese effects within a symphonic narrative. It is by no means a worthless rhapsody of exotic sounds and feelings of 'Otherness'. In all these respects the Fifth is preceded by the speedy fantasy *Africa* (one of the highlights of Hough's and Oramo's radiating musicianship) completed 1891 in Cairo after a lengthy cruise to Ceylon. The third movement of the Fifth – always played fast but in this recording even faster – is often heard as an illustration of the Mediterranean ship's propellers and the idea of the composer returning home from Egypt. A similar passage begins the *Africa* fantasy. This naive interpretation might easily give Saint-Saëns the reputation of an early 'mechanical' romanticist, comparable even to Arthur Honegger and his *Pacific 231*. There is hardly a better example of the deep ambivalence of the composer's idiom. The display of multilateral metric movement, not unusual in a solo concerto finale, is interrupted by the second subject, a romantic configuration permitted to unfold in a polyphonic texture like a flower, with many obvious stylistic links to the later popular style of solo piano writing by Rachmaninov. Saint-Saëns achieves a euphoric air – powerfully intoned by Hough and Oramo (the steam boat does in fact sound like the *Titanic*) – which is strongly subjective and melancholy, far beyond twentieth-century 'mechanical' romanticism and even the plain idea of taking the boat back home. Like the music of Rachmaninov, this would fit well as the accompanying music to a

⁶ See Manuela Schwartz, *Wagner-Rezeption und französische Oper des Fin de siècle* (Sinzig, 1999), 81.

heroic cinematic scene but it is not intentionally programmatic in content or design.

The great stylistic and expressive variety of Saint-Saëns becomes evident as we remember that, as a rare instance in the history of music, he brought a technical and creative fertility to all branches of composition (he composed opera and music for theatre (and films) between 1870 and 1917, church and choral music between 1850 and 1921, songs between 1855 and 1921, orchestral music of varying kinds between 1848 and 1920, chamber music between 1855 and 1921 and solo works for the piano between 1855 and 1921). At the same time the very nature of Saint-Saëns's musical language makes it difficult to use popular tools of biographical illustration to describe a changing or evolving style throughout his life since extraordinary variety exists from work to work and from genre to genre. Even the relatively limited corpus of Saint-Saëns's compositions for piano and orchestra alone, beginning with op. 17 (1858) and ending with op. 103 (1896), provides an exacting stylistic variety. One can sense perhaps the composer's affinity to the compositions of Anton Rubinstein (e.g. his Concerto in G major op. 45 or the most famous in D minor op. 70) who was a close friend of Saint-Saëns and the conductor of the premiere of his popular Piano Concerto no. 2 in G minor (1868).

In Rubinstein's own piano concertos the harmonies and wide gestures seem to suggest an unlimited, individual power of invention. This is also a quality of the French composer Charles Valentin Alkan, whose Piano Concerto op. 39 preceded Saint-Saëns's op. 17 only by a year. The detail and freedom of the melodic elaboration (high virtues of the Beethoven–Brahms tradition as well as of Tchaikovsky) are in these cases less important. In Rubinstein's as well as Saint-Saëns's concertos it is occasionally surprising to see how seldom the soloist is asked to contribute to the melodic surface. In the first movements of the First and Third Piano Concertos in particular (1858 and 1869 respectively), the artistic fireworks of the pianist are hardly equal to the grand, impressive gestures of the orchestra. Hough gives the piano texture as much character as is possible given the circumstances of the whirlwind tempi; Oramo, who has the complex mind of a great conductor, creates a sense of aesthetic perfection out of almost nothing.

But Saint-Saëns altogether implicates stylistic spheres far above the range of Rubinstein's relatively limited imagination. His First Concerto cannot perhaps compete with Johannes Brahms's D minor masterpiece op. 15, premiered the same year (1858), but the Second Concerto – one of the paradigmatic compositions of the 'French style' before *La Mer* – can easily stand comparison with Edvard Grieg's popular concerto in A minor op. 16 (both works, incidentally, date from 1868), and the Fourth Concerto easily surpasses Tchaikovsky's grandiose B flat minor concerto op. 23 (both 1875) at least in originality of detail and overall form. The Fifth Concerto, premiered five years before Rachmaninov's legendary Second Piano Concerto in C minor op. 18 and ten years before Ferruccio Busoni's experimental concerto op. 39, is clearly superior in modernity and individuality. Saint-Saëns's Fourth Concerto, written a few years after the 'drame lyrique' *Le Timbre d'argent*, was criticized pejoratively as 'Wagnerian' by the 'real patriots' of Paris. Even *Danse macabre* op. 40 (1875) was by no means an immediate success, and the long-lasting trouble with continuing delay of the premiere of *Samson et Dalila* (1868) kept his mind gloomy during the whole of 1875. This may have been the reason for the prevailing melancholy of the Fourth Concerto even though 1875 also marked the year of his marriage.

The Fourth Concerto is expressively perhaps the weakest of the Hough–Oramo recordings. In particular the first movement (*Allegro moderato*) includes passages that invite the interpreter to experiment with the slowest possible tempi (for example in the style of Ivo Pogorelich's Chopin), an invitation which seems too much of a risk for Hough and Oramo.

Hans von Bülow's oft-quoted casual opinion of Saint-Saëns's Fourth Piano Concerto made in 1890 – it 'may cure you of the disgust of music' – hits the nail on the head.⁷ There is no ethically suspect monumentalism nor a sense of vulgar circus in this composition but a timeless, formal modernity of two great movements, the latter of which could occasionally be associated with Brahms's op. 15. Bülow's enthusiasm may indeed be due to certain elements of conservative innovation. Here again the question of getting the tempo just right becomes relevant. In my opinion, Saint-Saëns's Fourth Concerto would deserve the same weight of articulation as anyone would give to a 'German symphonist' like Brahms. Hough and Oramo aim to achieve weight through the magnitude of the sound and amplification of speed. The brilliance and clarity, as well as the flexibility of the gestures, deserve full respect, but the danger is that those most personal and subjective qualities of the concertos are sacrificed in favour of technical perfection (which also includes the recording equipment). In phrasing the choral melody in the *Allegro vivace*, I personally prefer Pascal Rogé's old recording because of its lyrical flexibility and 'vocal' intonation. On the other hand, this very passage also exhibits the finest nuances and professional intonation of Hough, Oramo and the CBSO. The image is simply more 'neo-classical', dance-like, playful, easy-going, and far less tragic than it could be. The human tragedy of late nineteenth-century culture can only be seen as a 'mise-en-scène' (or as a secondary dimension of the interpretation), not as a significant topic of the score.

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Debussy

Songs

Christopher Maltman *bar* Malcolm Martineau *pf*
Hyperion CDA67357 (73 minutes: DDD)
Notes and translations included.

These recordings of Debussy songs have a lot going for them, not least because of the questions they raise about the criteria by which the singing of Debussy's music can be evaluated. The centrepiece of Maltman's disc, a commanding if sometimes mannered rendering of the composer's challenging and central Baudelaire songs, is complemented by a recording of three of the same songs in an intriguing orchestration by John Adams, which could be categorized as

⁷ Cited by Stegemann, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, 2.