

Score Review

Camille Saint-Saëns, *Le Carnaval des animaux*, ed. Sabina Teller Ratner. Bärenreiter Urtext (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2024). xxv + 65 pp.

As Bärenreiter slowly issues the planned 39 volumes of its monumental edition of Camille Saint-Saëns's instrumental works, the firm has published some scores, with their accompanying scholarly texts, as stand-alone items. Thanks to the devoted editorial hand of musicologist Sabina Teller Ratner, *Le Carnaval des animaux*, 14 miniatures for the quirky ensemble of two pianos, flute, clarinet, xylophone, harmonica (more later), and string quintet, has now joined this family. It will count as an important addition, for this 'grande fantaisie zoologique' (the composer's insightful generic neologism), burlesque and indeed carnivalesque, stands as one of Saint-Saëns's genuinely popular works: compared to most of his others, it is more frequently performed, beloved by a broader and essentially different audience, and heard in more contexts—and it has faced plenty of suspicion from advocates of the composer's 'serious' music and others inclined to elitism.

Carnaval's fortunes have been borne by an extensive and varied publication history, involving many arrangements and transcriptions, which got off to an unusual start. Saint-Saëns wrote the piece in early 1886, during a scandal-plagued concert tour of Germany, as an item for a Shrove Tuesday concert planned for the upcoming carnival season. He may have intuited, to his concern, the type of appeal for which it was destined, for even as the ink was drying on the manuscript, he forbade his editor, Auguste Durand, from publishing it. He did allow 'Le Cygne,' an instant hit, to be issued in 1887, and he later amended his will to permit the entire collection's posthumous publication, but the embargo otherwise stood firm. (He even extended it to the concert hall, suppressing all performances after leading just a few and trusting a handful more to colleagues.) The first edition thus did not go to press until 1922, some 36 years after the premiere and a brief three months after the composer passed away.

At our end of this story, Bärenreiter's new *Carnaval* arrives soon after two other noteworthy publications. Brepols, in 2018, issued a luxurious facsimile of the composer's autograph manuscript.¹ That document's free digital availability will likely limit the volume's appeal (as will the 220 Euro price tag), which is a pity because the accompanying texts by musicologist and archivist Marie-Gabrielle Soret offer some excellent insights.² The new edition also faces a competitor in G. Henle Verlag's 2021 'Urtext' score, produced by Ernst-Günter Heinemann, a house veteran whose editorial credits include Volume 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and all of Debussy's piano works.³ Therefore, many potential buyers of a modern

¹ Camille Saint-Saëns, *Le Carnaval des animaux*, facsimile with introduction by Marie-Gabrielle Soret (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).

² The manuscript is accessible at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b55007215h/f1.item.r=Saint-Saëns%20carnaval%20animaux%20manuscrit>.

³ Camille Saint-Saëns, *Le Carnaval des animaux*, ed. Ernst-Günter Heinemann (Munich: G. Henle, 2021).

'Urtext' *Carnaval* will have already acquired a fine one. If you or your institution's library count among them, does Bärenreiter's offering merit an additional investment?

The score is beautifully presented and flawlessly printed; the paper and binding are of the quality expected of this prestigious publisher. At 31 cm x 24.3 cm, the volume is considerably larger than the Henle edition (24 cm x 17 cm). The latter is crisply set and perfectly legible, but many eyes will welcome the larger musical font of the Bärenreiter score. Ratner's scholarly texts are more extensive—by far—than their Henle counterparts. Sources are described according to the detailed methods of high twentieth-century positivist musicology and scholarly editorship. In the same tradition, six dual-column pages of 'Critical Commentary' enumerate minute editorial interventions and discrepancies between sources. The Bärenreiter edition is in a league of its own in these domains. If it matters to you that some folios of Saint-Saëns's autograph bear watermarks but others don't, or if you want to know the original source for the fermata markings in bar 26 of 'Personnages à longues oreilles,' this is the score for you.

Ratner has made a career of documentary research on Saint-Saëns; we owe her an indispensable thematic catalogue, among other important resources.⁴ Her expertise shines in the generous introduction, written in English, with able translations into French and German. Informed by a command of the sources matched by few, Ratner's discussions of the work's origins, first performances, and early editorial history will surely satisfy most readers. (Those left hungry can turn to her thematic catalogue, from which she draws many details on these subjects). The Introduction also offers probably the most extensive commentary on *Carnaval*'s famous musical quotations and travesties. The author identifies the works and subsections Saint-Saëns references and gives context for the citations. She even explains some of the jokes (the travesty in 'L'Éléphant' of the 'Ballet des Sylphes' from Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* is funny, we read, because Saint-Saëns radically slows the tempo and transfers the sylphic waltz tune to the ponderous double bass). A section on performance matters helpfully (and reassuringly) clarifies, citing evidence unearthed by Soret, that the mysterious 'harmonica' for which the score calls was likely a kind of glass keyboard with a timbre resembling the celesta, the instrument modern performers usually deploy.

The introduction in some places seems decidedly less helpful. The performance section pours cold water on a happy tradition: *Carnaval*, insists Ratner, is 'absolutely not a work written for young people, let alone children,' because its 'unusually smart and subtle' allusions and quotations demand 'an erudite public.' (p. X). Elitism, it seems, can tug in both directions. Generations of delighted youngsters, few of them connoisseurs, would take umbrage. Though it belabours this performance issue, the Introduction barely touches one ripe for comment: present-day musicians sometimes play *Carnaval* as 'chamber music' (with one player per string part) and sometimes as 'orchestral music' (with several). What should they do? From information scattered throughout the Introduction, readers will piece together that early renditions went both ways, but they will find frustratingly little more. (The publishing house, on the other hand, has taken a decisive stance: the

⁴ Sabina Teller Ratner, *Camille Saint-Saëns 1835–1921: A Thematic Catalogue of His Complete Works*, Vol. 1, *The Instrumental Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and Vol. 2, *The Dramatic Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

instrumental parts are sold individually, but for the five-voice string section, buyers must purchase a set of at least 15.⁵)

Editors of *Carnaval* enjoy a relatively uncomplicated set of sources. Ratner draws upon the composer's meticulously prepared and (as Heinemann notes) virtually error-free full-score autograph, Durand's 1922 edition of the score and parts, and Durand's 1887 publication of 'Le Cygne.' She also cites a set of parts produced by a copyist for the first performances and a copy of the score eventually used by Durand's printers, both now lost. Following 'Urtext' philosophy, Ratner adopts the composer's manuscript as her principal source. Where it disagrees with the 1922 prints, she defers to the latter. Though existing documents do not link these modifications directly to the composer, the editor reasonably surmises that they originated in the now-lost copyist's parts, which he must have overseen. Most such interventions involve notational minutiae: the occasional missing clef is supplied, 'Più all^o' becomes 'più allegro', sundry articulation and accent markings are added to match analogous musical contexts, and so on. The few minor discrepancies among the sources affecting pitch, rhythm, and texture—including some string figuration in one bar of 'Fossiles' and an octave transposition of part of the contrabass solo in 'L'Éléphant'—give little reason to doubt the approach pursued here. (*Note bene*, that transposition goes unmentioned in the Critical Commentary: despite the editor's fastidiousness, there are some oversights here.)

One of Ratner's editorial decisions does call for extended comment. Her policy of deferring to the first edition applies only to musical signs; it does not extend to some paratextual, asterisk-like symbols and corresponding footnotes introduced by Durand in 'Tortues,' 'L'Éléphant', and 'Pianistes,' and not present in the composer's manuscript. The notes in 'Tortues' and 'L'Éléphant' acknowledge musical quotations ('theme excerpted from *Orphée aux enfers*' by Offenbach and reproduced with the permission of M. Heugel, owner-publisher,' reads the former). Readers might have found these notes quaint, given the recent history of messy litigation over analogous quotations in recorded popular music. Nonetheless, as editorial interpolations originating in a publication the composer had no hand in preparing, most would agree they do not belong in an 'Urtext' score. The note in 'Pianistes', a number poking fun at Czerny-like technical exercises, however, is another story since it amounts to a crucial performance indication, one observed in many, though not all, commercial recordings: 'The performers should imitate the clumsiness of a beginner's playing (Editor's note).'⁶ As with the others, Ratner's exclusion of this annotation follows the letter of 'Urtext' editorial law. But does it capture its spirit? It is worth querying the indication's origins. It seems improbable that Jacques Durand (Auguste's son), who venerated Saint-Saëns as an artist and a colleague, would have invented and imposed this performance practice. Surely, the footnote was meant to convey an established tradition. Since the work was given only about a dozen times before its belated publication, and since Saint-Saëns participated in all the earliest performances (with other alums involved in most of the rest), the note, in all likelihood, communicates how the composer himself played the piece. Also relevant are the limitations as a source of Saint-Saëns's autograph. Because he produced this score for his use, with

⁵ See www.baerenreiter.com/en/shop/product/details/BA10965/ (accessed 31 October 2024).

⁶ "Les exécutants devront imiter le jeu d'un débutant et sa gaucherie (Note des Editeurs)". See Camille Saint-Saëns, *Le Carnaval des animaux* (Paris: Durand, 1922): 34.

no view to it being interpreted independently of his supervision (let alone to its publication), he would have had no reason to clutter the page with such an indication. To be sure, Durand's footnote to 'Pianistes' does appear, alongside myriad other discrepancies between the sources, in the new edition's Critical Commentary. However, only readers patient enough to slog through a half dozen tedious pages on cautionary accidentals and tenuto markings will notice it. Ratner buries it in the score's equivalent to fine print, and even here, she does not comment on it or even translate the French. The number, it hardly needs to be emphasized, comes across very differently when the keyboardists imitate beginners than when they play with the professional polish the rest of *Carnaval* demands. Whether the editor's suppression of the footnote and her silence on the performance tradition it supports owe to her ambition of claiming *Carnaval* for 'an erudite public' (many youngsters, of course, *can* get this joke) or other reasons, they are disappointing. Readers will rightly make up their minds about how 'Pianistes' should go, but they will just as rightly expect an edition claiming to be the most authoritative not only to acknowledge a matter of such importance, but also to provide sensitive critical remarks.

This flaw stands out, for the edition otherwise offers much to recommend. Realized according to sound and consistent editorial practices, the score is as trustworthy as one could reasonably expect. The Critical Commentary and source descriptions offer a unique resource for scholars and performers interested in textual matters. The Introduction presents a trove of facts and some interesting context. Although much of this information is available elsewhere, readers will discover some new nuggets and benefit from Ratner's curatorial expertise.

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