

## **CAMILLE SAINT-SAENS**

(1835 - 1921)

*Violin Concerto No. 3 in b minor, opus 61*

French composer Charles Camille Saint Saëns is, perhaps, best known for his orchestral work "The Carnival of the Animals". Born in Paris to a government clerk (who died only three months after his son's birth), he was raised by his mother with the aid of her aunt, who introduced Camille to the piano. He turned out to be one of the most talented musical child prodigies, beginning piano and composition studies at age two. His precociousness was not limited to music as he could read and write by the time he was three, and had learned Latin by the age of seven. At ten years of age, he gave his debut public recital at the Salle Pleyel, playing Mozart, Handel, Kalkbrenner, Hummel, and Bach. As an encore, he offered to play any of the thirty-two Beethoven piano sonatas from memory.

In the late 1840s, Saint Saëns entered the Paris Conservatory, where he studied organ and composition. He won many top prizes and the reputation these awards garnered him resulted in his introduction to Franz Liszt, who became one of his closest friends. For income, he played the organ at various churches in Paris. From 1857 - 1877, he served as organist at the Église de la Madeleine, where his weekly improvisations stunned the Parisian public and earned Liszt's 1866 observation that Saint Saëns was the greatest organist in the world. From 1861 to 1865, Saint Saëns held his only teaching position as professor of piano at the École Niedermeyer, where he raised eyebrows by including contemporary music - Liszt, Gounod, Schumann, Berlioz, and Wagner - along with the school's otherwise conservative curriculum of Bach and Mozart. His most successful students at the Niedermeyer.

Saint Saëns was a multi-faceted intellectual as well. From an early age, he studied geology, archaeology, botany, and mathematics. Later, in addition to composing, performing, and writing musical criticism, he held discussions with Europe's finest scientists and wrote scholarly articles on acoustics, occult sciences, Roman theatre decoration, and ancient instruments. In 1871, he was co-founder of the Société Nationale de Musique in order to promote a new and, specifically, French music. Saint Saëns continued to write on musical, scientific and historical topics, travelling frequently before spending his final years in Algiers. In recognition of his accomplishments, the government of France awarded him the Legion of Honor.

His important works for violin and orchestra were composed for the Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate, who, the composer related in his memoirs, knocked unexpectedly one day at his door in Paris. "As if it were the easiest thing in the world," Saint-Saëns recalled, "he had come quite simply to ask me to write a concerto for him. Flattered and charmed to the utmost, I promised I would." Composed during 1880, the Violin Concerto No. 3 in b minor premiered, with Sarasate as soloist, on January 2, 1881. The concerto is cast in the traditional concerto format of three movements. Like all of his works for solo instrument and orchestra, it displays elegance, brilliance, and melodiousness. The first movement evolves around a bold, dramatic first theme, a songful contrasting theme, and fistful of rapid scales, arpeggios, and double-stops. The slow movement, a limpid, barcarolle-like section, exudes an easy, flowing grace. The finale begins with a recitative-like introduction, which moves on to a main theme for the solo that bristles with energetic, proud bravura. The work is brought to a brilliant close as the solo violin whips up ultimate excitement.