

Review-Article

RE-READING SAINT-SAËNS

BY JANN PASLER*

FOR MANY LISTENERS AROUND THE WORLD who continue to enjoy the composer's works today, it might come as a surprise to read of a 'Saint-Saëns problem' (p. v). Yet, rather than addressing why his music still appeals after almost a century, and why more of it is performed than the music of most of his contemporaries, Roger Nichols begins the preface to his new edition of Saint-Saëns's writings¹ by citing a snide comment by a young turk of the new generation, Stravinsky, who once referred to Saint-Saëns as 'a sharp little man' (p. v). Of course, much was at stake in pushing aside this old master with his towering career. But there is no evidence that Stravinsky had any direct contact with Saint-Saëns. So why start there? According to the dust jacket, Nichols aims to provide a 'counter-discourse to the strong modernist music critics who rallied around Debussy and Ravel'. Indeed, between Ravel's friend Émile Vuillermoz and the disciples of Vincent d'Indy, Saint-Saëns was almost written out of subsequent French music histories, his accomplishments denigrated in the shift to modernist musical values. Instead of addressing this generational shift, Nichols's purpose is to offer 'a warmer, more generous portrait of the man and his music' (p. 7), to show that the man was not only capable of great wit and insight, sometimes expressed with sharp directness, but also love. In reading these essays, one notices that Nichols may have been inspired by the composer's example. In many of the texts, such as on Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Liszt, Gounod, and Massenet, Saint-Saëns himself begins with negative opinions associated with his subjects. In coming to their defence, he shares his personal experiences and what gave rise to his 'lively affection' (p. 86) for the human beings behind the reputations. In the first essay too, Saint-Saëns's introduction to *Harmonie et mélodie*, Nichols seems to echo the composer's position: given that so many 'legends' persist about his opinions, this book, like Saint-Saëns's own essay collections, is offered to those who prefer 'the real truth' (p. 3).

Camille Saint-Saëns on Music and Musicians consists of elegant, accessible English translations of twenty-six essays by the composer—eleven about 'music' and fifteen about 'musicians' (plus four poems dedicated to friends). They come from a variety of sources; all but one appeared in newspapers and magazines and were later republished by the composer in his essay collections. Nine articles come from his *École buissonnière*,

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¹ *Camille Saint-Saëns on Music and Musicians*. Edited and translated by Roger Nichols. xii + 187 pp. (Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 2008, £15.99. ISBN 978-0-19-532016-9).

seven from *Harmonie et mélodie*, seven from *Portraits et souvenirs*, and two from *Au courant de la vie*.² Such choices raise a number of questions concerning Nichols's criteria for selection. When the composer was almost as prolific in prose as in music, why choose essays already widely available?³ Did Nichols, again like the composer, think it was important to follow Saint-Saëns's lead as to what he wished future generations to know about his thinking? The fact that these essays do not follow a chronological arrangement is also puzzling. Nichols does not explain his organizational structure, and the table of contents gives the original publication dates of only half the essays. Still, a certain narrative can be intuited, one that builds on fundamentals before looking at specifics and that constructs a kind of internal dialogue with the composer's various recurring preoccupations.

Part I, 'Music', begins with Saint-Saëns's explanation that opinions are based on context, and contexts change. His example: Wagner. In some ways, it is unfortunate to begin the volume with Saint-Saëns back-peddling, expressing both admiration for Wagner's music and anxiety about the impact of 'the Wagnerian religion' in France. The composer, who earlier had been an ardent Wagnerian, performing Wagner's music in Paris, visiting Wagner in 1876, and promoting him in the French press, comes across as very conservative. Nichols might have explained that this essay, from March 1885, was written amid significant protectionism in France, especially vis-à-vis Germany, and was not the composer's first such essay. On 25 October 1884, in a widely reproduced speech at the Académie des beaux-arts, 'Causerie sur le passé, le présent, et l'avenir de la musique', Saint-Saëns signalled a crisis in music. Without mentioning Wagner, he criticized Germans' 'increasing disdain for melody', worried about the possibility that this might 'consign melody to the least importance', and asked whether the French have 'enough influence to stop this movement'. The next year, when the *Revue wagnérienne* was created, he published this speech in *Harmonie et mélodie*, along with the 'Introduction' translated here.⁴ Perhaps Nichols chose to begin with this text because in it Saint-Saëns points out that it is not composers who matter, 'it is art'; Saint-Saëns is an 'eclectic' and 'cannot allow people to tell me what I should admire' (p. 9). Or perhaps Nichols chooses this essay because Saint-Saëns ends by calling for young composers to be French: 'be yourselves, of your time and country! The future is with you' (p. 11). Yet there were consequences to these positions for Saint-Saëns, consequences that in some ways contradict the kind of image Nichols wants to project.⁵

The next essay, 'Art for Art's Sake', jumps to 1913. Here Saint-Saëns expounds on what he means by 'art'—namely, 'a mystery' (p. 13). At the same time, while 'it possesses

² *École buissonnière. Notes et souvenirs* (Paris, [1913]); *Harmonie et mélodie* (Paris, 1885); *Portraits et souvenirs: L'art et les artistes* (Paris, [1900]); *Au courant de la vie* (Paris, 1914).

³ One might also question the need for translations when so many of these have appeared previously in English. Edwin Gile Rich's translation of *École buissonnière* as *Musical Memories* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1919) was reissued by various publishers in 1921, 1949, 1969, 1971, 2007, and 2008; it is currently available online as a Project Gutenberg ebook. This translation, however, needs updating. See n. 8 below.

⁴ Nichols must have been working from a later edition of this *Harmonie et mélodie* (Paris, 1885), for he gives 1899 as its publication date. By 1890 it was already in its fourth edition.

⁵ During his German concert tour in Jan.–Feb. 1886, many Germans reacted to these texts with anger and some cancelled his performances. That November, Vincent d'Indy and Ernest Chausson staged a coup at the composers' league, the Société nationale, hoping to alienate Saint-Saëns and take control of the organization. When Saint-Saëns heard that they had voted 42 against 26 to introduce foreign music into concerts that had been entirely for music by living French composers, he resigned as president. With this, he became dangerously close to sharing the intolerance he associated with Wagnerians. See my *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley, 2009), 513–15.

line, shape, instrumental colour, all within an ideal sphere', the art of music is also 'an attempt at satisfying a legitimate need, one of the most aspirational and respectable needs of human nature: the *need for art*' (pp. 13–14). Saint-Saëns also writes provocatively: 'Art has no call to be moral' and 'The aim of Art is Art and nothing else' (p. 15). To take this as representative of the composer's aesthetics throughout his life, one would have to deny works such as *La Jeunesse d'Hercule* (1879). So reader beware: as the composer pointed out in the first essay, such statements need to be understood in their proper context and those contexts change. The year 1913 was a very different period in the composer's life than the late 1870s and 1880s, and on the eve of the Great War an unsettling time for his readers as well.

The third chapter addresses the nature of music, returning to an essay in *Harmonie et mélodie* from July 1879. While devoting much attention to melody and to listeners whose experience of music comes mostly from melody (a topic that returns in chapter 13 on Rossini), Saint-Saëns criticizes the idea of music as an 'instrument of physical pleasure' (p. 19). At the same time, he admits that pleasure 'cannot be the aim of music, but it is the attraction by which it seduces its audiences' (p. 20)—attitudes that Debussy will later debate. Saint-Saëns is here a reader of Stendhal, who felt similarly about music, a composer deeply engaged with music history, especially the music of Mozart and Beethoven, and someone who espouses Western notions of progress. For him, the development of harmony took place in the West, and the appreciation of 'fine harmonies' is the 'mark of a listening public that has reached a high point of culture'. Although in an 'author's note' from 1885 Saint-Saëns admits that 'my ideas about Oriental music have changed slightly' (p. 21), he here presents 'Orientals and savages' as 'the public that blocks the course of art across the world' (p. 21). Western to the core, he writes, 'music . . . will prevail because it is the art of advanced peoples, the expression of a civilization . . . unknown to other ages and peoples' (p. 27).

The fourth chapter, on the Birmingham festivals, seems included for British readers: there are no chapters on the many other places Saint-Saëns visited and about which he wrote, such as 'Impressions d'Amérique', 'Lettre de Las Palmas', and 'Algérie'. This essay is also chosen over one on receiving an honorary doctorate in Cambridge. The implication, in following chapter 3, is that, with its Handel oratorio festivals beginning in the eighteenth century, Britain offers an example of music in its 'advanced' stage. Meanwhile, Saint-Saëns is quick to point out that in the 1870s French performances of Bach and Handel oratorios, by conductors such as Charles Lamoureux, had also 'reached a perfection that could not be surpassed' (p. 31).⁶ In chapter 5, from 1914, Saint-Saëns takes a step back, this time to muse about 'strange aberrations' in public taste. In a moment of humour, he writes: 'An art gives rise to a powerful suggestion, and through it the moon instantly appears as green cheese' (p. 33). Bemoaning the fact that the public 'in its innocence' buys into all this, Saint-Saëns concludes, returning to the theme of chapter 1, 'art does not change' but men 'change their opinions' (p. 36).

The next two essays shift to specific music and Saint-Saëns's tastes. Chapter 6, a very short essay on his opera *Hélène*, is the only one here devoted to an individual work. Why this piece and his essays on no others, one might ask? Nichols's point perhaps is

⁶ In a footnote, Nichols explains that Lamoureux was known for his Wagner; but more appropriate would have been mention of the French oratorio society, the *Harmonie sacrée*, that Lamoureux founded in 1875. Likewise, more important than recording the date of his Prix de Rome, it would have been useful to know that Bourgault-Ducoudray directed a choral society bearing his name, with aristocratic and bourgeois members, that also performed Baroque oratorios (p. 31 n. 2).

to show the compositional process, with Saint-Saëns claiming the right for composers ‘to obey without concerning yourself with anything else’ (p. 38). At the same time, we learn of the relationship between *Hélène* and sections of *Die Walküre*, an analogy the composer confesses he ‘was unable to avoid’ (p. 38). In other words, despite what he would have preferred in 1914, Saint-Saëns, at age 79, was still caught under the spell of Wagner. Chapter 7, the only unpublished excerpt in the book, seems to be chosen as a response to the previous chapter, although written seven years earlier. The composer here pleads with the addressee of the letter (apparently a poet, unidentified by Nichols) that he understands ‘nothing about the theater’, that his theatrical tastes are often quite different from those of the public, and that if Wagner’s operas interest him it is ‘only from the musical point of view’ (p. 40).

Chapter 8, an essay on ‘musical trends’ commissioned in 1897, is one of several such essays the composer published over the years.⁷ Building on but also contradicting what we read in the previous chapters, Saint-Saëns explains, ‘the public’s taste, whether good or bad, is an invaluable guide for the artist, and when he has genius—or simply talent—he always finds ways of doing good work while conforming to that taste. It is an entirely novel idea to suggest that the artist should consult nothing but his own will, and should obey nothing but his own caprice’ (p. 42). More than in any other essay, imperialist vocabulary permeates his critique of the contemporary taste for hybridity in both concert music that has become dramatic and theatrical music that has become symphonic—‘a compromise that leaves nothing in its rightful place’ (p. 43). The essay also harks back to the East/West relations mentioned in chapter 3, only here Saint-Saëns calls on ‘Oriental immobility’ as a way to ‘mock the West’s instability, its current incapacity to retain a form or style for any length of time and its mania for hunting out the new at any price, without rhyme or reason’ (p. 44). By the end of the century, then, we hear a composer digging in his heels: ‘this is not the progress that we had reason to hope for when, fifty years ago, the musical world began to ferment: It is a crisis, a chaos from which . . . a new order will arise’ (p. 43). It would have been interesting to reproduce earlier and later essays on this subject, such as ‘L’Évolution musicale’, published in *Ménestrel* in 1906.

Nichols continues to play with contradictions and ironies in Saint-Saëns’s positions. His chapter 9, from 1899, begins with the composer’s criticism of ‘intolerance in art’. Despite Saint-Saëns’s attack on hybridity in the previous chapter, here he defends the combination of singing and dialogue in *opéra-comique*. Although some find this ‘abominable and ridiculous, and incompatible with art’, ‘irrational and displeasing to a critical ear’, Saint-Saëns explains that ‘the fact that it has survived so long, with such success, proves that it has its uses’ (pp. 46–7). Public taste again prevails. Although there is the much longer essay, ‘Drame lyrique et drame musical’, following this one in *Portraits et souvenirs*, perhaps Nichols chose this chapter for its nationalism. Saint-Saëns concludes, if ‘our fine French humour produced our *opéra-comique*’, so much the better (p. 49).

Chapter 10 continues Saint-Saëns’s rant ‘against the mania for reform’ while he admits, ‘I’m infected in my turn . . . and the contagion is not to be avoided’ (p. 55). The context is the Conservatoire. Nichols may have placed this essay here, together with a short section from one on the organ, as a lead into Part 2. More than anything

⁷ For clarification, in case readers wish to consult the original French, this chapter, ‘Le Mouvement musical’, comes from *La Revue de l’art ancien et moderne*, not *La Revue de l’art*. Published in the form of a letter to the director, the letter is dated 12 Nov. 1897, but it appears in the issue dated 10 Dec. 1897, pp. 385–90.

else, these chapters are autobiographical. Saint-Saëns tells us about his first teachers of piano, organ, and composition; his ‘extremely unequal’ earliest works (p. 52); his experiences listening to the Conservatoire orchestra; and what it meant to be an organist at La Madeleine.

Part 2 consists of two chapters each on Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner, and Offenbach, together with essays on Meyerbeer, Rossini, Gounod, Bizet, Massenet, and Pauline Viardot, followed by poems to Viardot, Fauré, and Holmès. All on composers Saint-Saëns knew, they are arranged according to composers’ birth dates. Chapter 23, Saint-Saëns’s ‘Memories of Childhood’, placed in the middle of these according to his own birth date, returns to the themes of chapter 10. It is thus part of a continuum, as other chapters also contain his *souvenirs*. Throughout, Nichols provides short footnotes identifying the various people to whom Saint-Saëns refers, although not always with information that enhances understanding of the context at hand.

Nichols’s decision to open with a long essay on Meyerbeer, from 1913, may be explained by Saint-Saëns’s discussion of what it means to be an ‘artist’ (Gluck and Berlioz) as opposed to a ‘composer’ (Meyerbeer) (p. 60), thereby setting up the chapters that follow. Here, as elsewhere, Saint-Saëns gives a range of views on the composer. At first he observes, ‘Meyerbeer’s music, a witty woman once said to me, is like a painting on the scenery: it doesn’t do to look at it too closely’ (p. 61). The rest of the chapter elucidates the other side of the story, the innovations in the works and interesting anecdotes of possible importance to biographers, such as the origins of the skating ballet in *Les Huguenots*. Writing towards the end of his own life brings a certain sweet sadness at times and the need to defend Meyerbeer. I yearned to know his thoughts on Meyerbeer when the composer ‘once dominated all the opera houses of Europe’ (p. 59), not just fifty years later.

As mentioned earlier, Saint-Saëns tends to start with negative aspects of his subject’s reputation—Meyerbeer’s ‘carelessness over prosody and his indifference towards the verses given to him’ (p. 59), Berlioz’s use of instruments ‘in defiance of common sense’ (p. 81), Liszt’s ‘penchant for princesses’ (p. 92), Gounod’s ‘living off borrowings from the past’ (p. 117) and writing music that ‘conceals a certain nucleus of vulgarity’ (p. 143), and Massenet’s preference for simply giving pleasure, enjoying the ‘public’s favor’, and not being ‘profound’ (pp. 164–5). When it came to Wagner, he threw up his hands: ‘art has its faults, like everything in this world’ (p. 113). But Saint-Saëns believed that ‘it is not the absence of faults but the presence of virtues that makes great works and great men’ (p. 59).⁸ Thus he attacks the various legends associated with them and comes to their defence by means of anecdotes, personal experiences, opinions, and short analyses of works. In the case of Berlioz, Saint-Saëns insists on correcting the record. The source of Berlioz’s reputation for ‘malevolence’, he explains, was an unsigned article on Hérold falsely attributed to him (p. 86). Sometimes, however, he is a little tough: ‘My opinion is that Rossini fell silent because he no longer had anything to say. As a spoilt child of success, he could not do without it’ (p. 77). And while calling Wagner on his claims to have ‘never intended to insult France: what then did he intend?’ Saint-Saëns tries to reduce the impact he actually had, suggesting, ‘he only hates those people who don’t like his music’ (p. 107). He also belittles Wagner, quoting him as saying of his early theoretical works, ‘I can no longer understand them’, then following this with, ‘what is not well conceived cannot be

⁸ Compare Nichols’s more idiomatic translation to Rich’s 1919 translation: ‘it is not the absence of defects but the presence of merits which makes works and men great’.

clearly expressed' (p. 110). Still, as with the other composer essays, Saint-Saëns ends on a positive note, not associating Wagner's music with anarchy but with tradition: 'he sent his roots deep down into the earth of past learning, into the nourishing soil of J. S. Bach: and when, later, he hammered out rules for his own use, he had earned the right to do so' (p. 115).

Context, Saint-Saëns repeatedly argues, is vital for understanding these composers. When it came to Gounod's early career, for example, he points to the importance of Pauline Viardot: 'she knew everything in literature and art, she had a deep understanding of music, kept up with all the most varied trends and was at the forefront of artistic endeavor' (pp. 120–1). Saint-Saëns is careful to recount the early reception of works, stories about the singers with whom the composers worked, and even some cross-comparison among them, such as between Berlioz and Gounod (pp. 142–3). When it comes to public taste, something Saint-Saëns both criticized and took seriously, context could have an unfortunate effect on the musical world. Operetta 'has given the civilized world a taste, a passion almost, for what is cheap and small'. Saint-Saëns does not blame Offenbach, but instead portrays him as 'a victim of circumstance'. His more important shortcoming, for Saint-Saëns, was having 'squandered' his immense talents, 'more than were required for success' (p. 149, 152).

Like Nichols, Saint-Saëns is also drawn to his subjects' character, with empathy at times, even identification. Berlioz 'wasn't a cunning person: he was sincere . . . and naive' (pp. 78–9). And yet, Saint-Saëns observes of this beloved friend, 'it is because he saw himself as Faust and Hamlet that, in his memoirs, he painted himself in totally false colors, claiming to hate mankind—he who was moved to tears by the slightest expression of sympathy' (p. 79). On Bizet, Saint-Saëns writes, 'he was loyal and sincere, and honest about his likes and dislikes. There was a similarity of character between him and me that brought us together' (p. 162). Saint-Saëns's affection was often mixed with admiration. From Bizet, he 'acquired new strength from contact with the powerful reasoning power [*sic*] wrapped up in endless jokes, from the well-tempered character that no disappointment could keep under' (p. 162). When praising Liszt, it was for one who 'dared' to be, 'the most terrible thing in the world'. Saint-Saëns writes of Pauline Viardot's character as 'certainly one of the most astonishing I have come across' (p. 168). Women will appreciate Nichols for ending his collection with Saint-Saëns's tribute to Viardot, a composer of 'highly original' works of which little is known because of her 'horror of publicity', a singer who damaged her voice by wanting to sing everything, and a woman with a talent for 'entering into every style', keeping up 'with the literature of every country', and 'in correspondence with the whole of Europe'. 'Happy those natures of flame that consume themselves', he concludes (pp. 168–71). Much about Saint-Saëns's own values—in life, in humanity, and above all in music—can be learnt from such essays.

The four poems—all but the Viardot poem replicating the original rhymes—come as the ultimate tribute, here a kind of postlude, though without any footnote explaining what occasions they celebrated. The last line of the book—Saint-Saëns's exhortation to Augusta Holmès to be 'proud, My dear, of what you've earned', prefaced with 'Hate is the greatest homage'—begs an explanation. Holmès is hardly a household name, even among scholars. Nichols lets them stand, without comment, like songs of adieu.

If I have devoted this review to trying to explain Nichols's editorial decisions, all very reasonable, I'm still left with questions. What underlies the composer's apparently constantly changing attitudes towards the public and public taste? How did he become so reviled by the modernists? A number of other essays, published in the four volumes

from which these are chosen and elsewhere, would have shed light on a wider range of influences and concerns, also important to the composer: (1) those on dead composers whose influence on Saint-Saëns was significant, such as Bach, Handel, Rameau, Weber, Gluck, Haydn, and Mozart; (2) on Félicien David, given Saint-Saëns's taste for exotic music; (3) on Louis Gallet, the librettist with whom he most worked; (4) on Victor Hugo, the poet he most admired; (5) on the Société nationale de musique, which he co-founded; and (5) on performers, such as Sarasate or Artur Rubenstein, or on painter-musicians like Ingres. Saint-Saëns also wrote on subjects other than individuals, such as education, antique instruments, the acoustics of bells, optics, animals, and astronomy. The full range of Saint-Saëns's eclectic interests then does not come across in discussions centring on composers. Moreover, the composers Nichols selects were born before 1847, which leaves out the following generation entirely. Why not end with the review cited on the first page of the editor's preface, that is, with Saint-Saëns's reaction to Milhaud's *Protée*? For a composer who lived until 1921, his engagement with younger contemporaries is as important as with the older ones, discussed from the distance of his later years.

In a book that is less than 200 pages in print, I also questioned why Nichols treats the original texts differently. Some appear complete, unedited. Some are cut drastically, some only a little. Whereas in the Meyerbeer essay and others, close analysis of a number of works is left intact, in the first Liszt essay 'descriptions of the individual symphonic poems' (p. 90) are removed. Cutting 'the details' of the 1876 Bayreuth performance of Wagner's *Ring* from his August 1876 essay on that subject is particularly unfortunate, as many readers might be attracted to this text precisely for Saint-Saëns's interpretation of that historically significant event. Organists would most likely have been fascinated with Saint-Saëns's description of the 'technicalities of playing' the organ (p. 55), had most of this essay not been eliminated from the book. Moreover, not all the cuts are explained, some only noted with ellipses that Saint-Saëns also uses, thereby causing confusion.

In short, *Camille Saint-Saëns: On Music and Musicians* is not a book for Francophones, who can look forward to an edition of Saint-Saëns's complete writings, soon to be published in France. But it will be very useful to music-lovers, scholars who do not read French, and students. Thanks to Nichols's lively and idiomatic translations, Saint-Saëns comes to life in his complexity, idiosyncrasies, and perceptiveness. Perhaps this derives from what Nichols calls his 'intimacy with the reader'. Even if the composer belittled those who wrote about music, he was deeply engaged in his writing himself. As we see here, it could be brilliant as well as self-contradictory, intolerant as well as generous. We can agree with Saint-Saëns or not that these fragments 'have nothing to commend them except their utter sincerity' (p. 3). But that in itself is reason enough to take them seriously.