



Saint-Saëns, Camille (1835-1921)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Though now considered a rather conservative composer and one of the last proponents of nineteenth-century French musical Romanticism, Camille Saint-Saëns was widely regarded as a virtuoso by his peers and contemporaries, and he was one of the most highly honored French artistic figures of his day.

His personal life was both dramatic and glamorous, and he traveled in circles that included many of the most prominent homosexual figures of the *fin-de-siècle*.

Charles Camille Saint-Saëns was born on October 9, 1835 in Paris. His father, an official of the Ministry of Interior, died of tuberculosis when the boy was three months old. He was subsequently raised by his mother, with whom he lived until her death in 1888, and his great-aunt, Charlotte Masson.

Saint-Saëns early demonstrated musical gifts. Madame Masson began teaching him piano before he was three years old, and he was able to play difficult pieces within a year; by the age of five he was composing songs. He began his formal musical training in 1842 and made his debut as a concert pianist in 1846, before his eleventh birthday.

After graduating from the Paris Conservatory in 1853, Saint-Saëns gained recognition among his peers as an organ virtuoso and thus won the coveted position of chief organist at the Madeleine Church in Paris, a post he held from 1858 to 1877.

Simultaneously, he pursued a career as a pianist and conductor, taught at L'Ecole Niedermeyer in Paris (where his students included Gabriel Fauré and Andre Messager), and composed a prodigious number of musical works of various genres.

Among Saint-Saëns's best-known compositions are his Second Piano Concerto in G minor (1868), the tone poems *Le Rouet d'Omphale* (1868) and *Danse macabre* (1875), the First Cello Concerto in A Minor (1873), the opera *Samson et Dalilah* (1875), the Third Violin Concerto in G minor (1881), and the Third Symphony in C minor with organ (1886).

His body of works also includes chamber music, masses and other choral compositions, a dozen operas, a wide variety of orchestral music, numerous songs, and solo pieces for organ and piano.

His unique and now-familiar *Le Carnaval des animaux* (*The Carnival of the Animals*, 1886), for two pianos and orchestra, was intended as a private entertainment for his friends, and he forbade its public performance during his lifetime. The part of the narrator, now usually included, was added by others after his death.

During his lifetime, Saint-Saëns's private life gave rise to many rumors and much speculation, and it continues to do so even now. In some ways he was a solitary, even secretive individual, prone to



John Philip Sousa (left)
with Camille Saint-
Saëns.
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"disappearing" for weeks. At the same time, he was a remarkable host who entertained lavishly at his Paris home, where his performances in drag (particularly his impersonation of Marguerite, the female soprano lead in Charles Gounod's opera *Faust*) were well-known among his circle.

He is reputed to have danced in ballerina attire for the benefit of his fellow gay composer, Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky.

Although he is reputed to have stated--perhaps sardonically--that he was not a homosexual but rather a pederast, Saint-Saëns's homosexuality is now, for the most part, taken for granted. Nevertheless, at least one recent biographer, Stephen Studd, has attempted to claim him as a heterosexual.

Long a bachelor, Saint-Saëns married, at forty, a woman less than half his age. Although the marriage quickly produced two sons, it was nonetheless an unhappy one from the beginning. In 1878, both children died (from a fall from a fourth-floor window and from illness, respectively) within a six week period. His wife's purported negligence became a pretext for his deserting her, which he did in 1881.

After vanishing while on vacation, he wrote advising her that he was simply no longer able to live with her, and afterwards never saw her or communicated with her again.

Thereafter the composer traveled extensively, and spent his winters in Algeria, which, while still a French colony, became a favored holiday spot for European homosexuals who enjoyed the adolescent male companionship offered there.

He died of pneumonia in Algiers, at the age of 86, on December 16, 1921.

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About the Author

Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.

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