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Jann Pasler, ed., *Camille Saint-Saëns and His World*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012. xviii + 422 pp. Index and notes on contributors. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-691-15556-2.

Review by Clair Rowden, Cardiff University.

*Camille Saint-Saëns and His World* is the twenty-third book to come from The Bard Music Festival, published in conjunction with Princeton University Press. Since 1990, the Festival, presided over by Bard President, conductor, musicologist and educationalist, Leon Botstein, has taken one composer as its focus, and published a multi-authored biography of that composer and his world. Only the second French composer to receive this “honour” (after Debussy in 2001), Camille Saint-Saëns, his life, his works, and for this prolific *littérateur*, his writings (both published and private correspondence) are featured in a volume that brings an unusual approach to biography.

As the volume's editor Jann Pasler explains in her introduction, this biography is not concerned with the style, influence and legacy of a composer, but rather offers a kaleidoscope approach to narrative comprising micro-stories and analyses (p. xi); indeed, the volume comprises seven longer articles and twenty-three short essays, the latter commissioned to shed light on particular events, ideas and collaborations. Another particularity of this series is that source texts (in translation) relating to the composer's life, works and writings are also reproduced in juxtaposition to and in dialogue with their critical introductions. In this case, therefore, Camille Saint-Saëns also appears half a dozen times as author on the contents page. The result is a hotch-potch, sometimes almost arbitrary but nevertheless, or perhaps, an all the more revealing and compelling picture of the composer's activities, interests and career trajectory.

The book is divided into five sections: part one deals with Saint-Saëns the person; part two, Saint-Saëns the musician; part three, Saint-Saëns the globetrotter; part four, Saint-Saëns's aesthetic beliefs; and part five, Saint-Saëns in the twentieth century. I wonder whether Saint-Saëns the person might have waited to introduce himself until a little later in the book, as the presentation of the composer's complex web of interests and personal connections—his business affairs with his publisher Auguste Durand (Pasler), his unlikely friendship with operetta composer Charles Lecocq (Gérard), his professional rivalry and admiration of his arch-nemesis Jules Massenet (Branger), his writings as an amateur yet recognized astronomer (Houziaux)—seems as arbitrary as it does enchanting. Indeed, the first chapter of the book packs an immediate punch by portraying Saint-Saëns as a playful cross-dresser, extremely proficient at lampooning celebrated female opera singers and the roles they played. But as Mitchell Morris rightly points out, making sense of people's lives is the central task of any biography (p. 3).

The second section looks at Saint-Saëns's performing career, as well as the performance of his music in Paris and abroad. Dana Gooley highlights Saint-Saëns's affinity with the figure of the virtuoso-composer *à la* Liszt or Anton Rubinstein, but also demonstrates how this image, this association with the piano and virtuosity, was detrimental to his reputation as a composer. But Saint-Saëns worked hard to maintain his professional profile in Paris and this becomes evident through the succession of chapters that close this section. Here and elsewhere, Michael Strasser has demonstrated Saint-Saëns's role in the creation of the Société nationale de musique (SN), his role as its vice-president and as defender against its

critics. But here Strasser also highlights how frequently Saint-Saëns's works appeared on the Société's programmes and how often he performed both his own works and those of others.

After his defection from the SN in 1886 due to confrontation with César Franck and Vincent d'Indy over the inclusion of foreign works in the Société's concerts, Saint-Saëns became president of the Société des Compositeurs for four years, effectuating an overhaul of their concert activities which were restricted to French music of both living and dead composers. While Saint-Saëns's status at this point in his life could afford him a privileged position on their concert programmes, Laure Schnapper's chapter reveals how hard Saint-Saëns continued to work to make sure the Parisian concert public was exposed to his music. By the early years of the twentieth century, concert societies, such as the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, relied on Saint-Saëns's works as part of their staple repertoire and were able to organise Saint-Saëns festivals, and then prestigious memorial concerts in 1922, following the composer's death.

"Saint-Saëns the Globetrotter" follows the composer's travels worldwide, Stéphane Leteuré drawing attention to the composer's role as an *artisan de la francophonie*, an ambassador for French culture due to his close relationships with numerous heads of state. Michael Stegemann's overview of Saint-Saëns's reception in Germany complements this discussion, but these chapters do create a sense of repetition and overlap with the previous discussion about Saint-Saëns, the traveling virtuoso-composer. Stegemann situates Saint-Saëns's reception in the context of the "Battle of the Romantics," the aesthetic quarrels and polemics of the New German School. Saint-Saëns's relative failure to impress in Leipzig, both in 1865 and again later, can be attributed in part to his association with and championing by Liszt (and the Weimar camp). Jann Pasler examines Saint-Saëns's exotic travels, his quasi-secondary residence in Algeria and the way he was adopted and revered by cosmopolitan and Westernised society in Algiers.

Parts four and five are the weightiest in terms of analysis of the composer's work, aesthetic values and writings. Annegret Fauser's chapter addresses the respective roles of the composer and of the poet, the aesthetic framework for Saint-Saëns's *mélodies*, and Saint-Saëns's poetic and musical choices as he positioned himself as a modern Homeric bard. As the symbolist and Parnassian poets laid claim to the musical dimension of language, French composers of *mélodies* had to reclaim the sonic dimension of poetic lyricism, or be out of a job! Fauser also demonstrates how songs for voice and orchestra fused *mélodie* with the Lisztian symphonic poem. A past master in this genre himself, Saint-Saëns reveals this experience in his 1887 song, *La Fiancée du timbalier*, through its taut and careful musical organization and in the range of orchestral effects it displays. Indeed, adding orchestral colour to songs further supported the craft of the modern bard by adding further expressive qualities to music for larger spaces.

Pasler's longest essay, "Saint-Saëns and the Ancient World: From Africa to Greece," examines the composer's attachment to Oriental musics, and is essentially an analysis of his 1891 work for piano and orchestra, *Africa*. She twice concludes that the instability and aggressivity of the African musical elements appropriated by Saint-Saëns are taken on and developed for Western ends, and in a typical contextual approach for Pasler, she reflects upon Saint-Saëns's other contemporaneous artistic projects--works inspired by Breton and Auvergnat folk tunes--to suggest that all these works, whether concerned with the external or internal exotic, are rhapsodies on a succession of folk-like themes that develop and interpenetrate, and suggests that pastoral themes in music can connect the West and Africa. This leads her to think also about Saint-Saëns's Greek-inspired works, and the composer's experience of North Africa as rooted in the ancient interconnectedness of regions bordering the Mediterranean.

If the developmental lines from processes of thought to creative practice were more consistently and specifically drawn as they are in later chapters (by Marie-Gabrielle Soret with reference to Saint-Saëns's the correspondence, for instance), this chapter could have been even stronger. It seems rather odd though, not to follow this with Soret's introduction to Saint-Saëns's text on "Ancient Lyres and Citharas" that occupied him continually for nearly thirty years, rather than jumping to Katharine Ellis's

essay, "Saint-Saëns, Writer," which would then have created a more natural flow from writer to Saint-Saëns as editor and champion of Rameau's music, and his relationship (not always as antagonistic as one might think) and shared musical ideals with Vincent d'Indy, founder of the Schola Cantorum.

Soret's chapter reminds us of Saint-Saëns's prolificacy with the pen, the composer publishing 500 articles in more than 100 different publications between 1870 and 1921, only a handful of which were published in the evocatively titled collected editions *Harmonie et Mélodie*, *Ecole buissonnière*, *Portraits et souvenirs*, *Au courant de la vie*, *Problèmes et mystères*, *Divagations sérieuses*, et cetera with which we are familiar. However, the eclectic taste of this Renaissance man--revealed in subjects as diverse as the intelligence of bees, soccer, and the use of wild blackberries--frequently left him open to criticism. Soret is one of those scholars who has begun making inroads into the study of the composer's private correspondence, estimated to comprise some 20,000 letters.[1]

The last section of the book, "Saint-Saëns in the 20th Century," refreshingly reflects on Saint-Saëns as a man of the modern era (Saint-Saëns turned sixty-two in 1900 and lived until 1921) without referring in any detail to his well-known and growing antipathy towards Wagnerism, his petitioning for the exclusion of German works not yet in the public domain from French concert programmes during the war and his hardening anti-Germanic feeling as expressed in his diatribe *Germanophilie*, published in book form in 1916.[2] Pasler's description of Saint-Saëns's advocacy for the teaching of singing and *sofège* in primary schools in 1881 could have benefitted from the contextualisation of previous similar initiatives in the 1830s by Wilhem, and the role of the *sociétés chorales*. Indeed, it is unclear what this chapter is doing in this section of the book unless we think of Saint-Saëns's action in terms of any long-term effect, Pasler demonstrating how singing manuals written in the wake of this report, by Danhauser and Marmontel, were still very much in use in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover Pasler's rather amnesiac approach to this subject probably reflects Saint-Saëns's own willingness to ignore previous Parisian efforts under the restored monarchy which resulted in the popular Orphéon movement which, by this time, was largely discredited in musical terms.

Pasler and Adams examine Saint-Saëns's 1906 published views on "Musical Evolution" in the light of the work of Gustave le Bon (particularly *L'Evolution de la matière*) with whom the composer corresponded.[3] Saint-Saëns's unwavering belief in evolutionary determinism meant that he viewed music history as a series of cycles, or a spiral that can never return to its point of origin. Thus he believed firmly in progress and consequently, in periods of decadence, for while progress always moves forward it does not always bring improvement. Indeed, Pasler highlights elsewhere that this sense of degeneracy in the West was one thing that constantly attracted Saint-Saëns back to the Orient. Michel Duchesneau explains why the newly established Société musicale indépendante, founded in opposition to the SN in 1910, would include a Prelude and Fugue for Organ by Saint-Saëns on its second concert programme. By using Saint-Saëns's music as a model of classicism and Western learned technique, they managed to throw the modernism and exoticism of other pieces such as Charles Koechlin's gamelan transcriptions, the *Pièces javanaises*, into high relief. Such juxtapositions of repertoire thus underlined the aural gaps between works marking the borders between tradition and modernity, but also served as a nod to Saint-Saëns's position in cultural terms as one of the founders of an established French tradition upon which future generations could build.

Michael J. Puri's chapter is one of only two real musical analytical chapters in the volume, and the second to concentrate on concertato piano works. Here the interest lies in investigating the points of intersection, affinity and continuity between the piano concertos of Saint-Saëns and his spiritual/musical grandson (as a pupil of Gabriel Fauré), Maurice Ravel, Puri demonstrating how traditional forms can be made complex and dynamic without sacrificing clarity in the works of both composers. Martin Marks rounds off this section with a glimpse at how Saint-Saëns's music has been appropriated by filmmakers from the 1930s onwards, remarking how, surprisingly for Saint-Saëns, the composer never left any record of his thoughts on cinema, despite having written a score for the silent film *L'Assassinat du duc de*

*Guise* in 1908. Marks deals with examples from Jean Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (1939) to Terence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978), but his description of the students' favourite *Babe* from 1995 seems to miss out a stage of appropriation and adaptation. He quotes Farmer Hoggett saying to the sheep 'dog' (pig) Babe, "If I had words to make a day for you, I'd sing you a morning golden and new" (p. 362), and then refers to the 'goofiest' pop vocal version of the *maestoso* theme, the flashy *coup de théâtre* from the second movement of Saint-Saëns's *Organ Symphony* sung by mice during the film's end credits. But where was he in 1977, when Yvonne Keeley and Scott Fitzgerald topped the (British) charts with the song "If I had words to make a day for you," sung to Saint-Saëns's music with the addition of a 'goofy' reggae bass line and beat? It may be an impossible task, but suggestions for the reasons why Saint-Saëns's music remains appealing and open to such appropriation would have been welcome.

The variety of outlook and approach in this book begins to reveal Camille Saint-Saëns--the composer, the writer, the traveler, the dilettante--in all his complexity. As I have previously done in the reviews section of H-France, I cannot congratulate enough my colleagues in French music studies who have diligently researched their subject area, and the editor who has carefully constructed a volume which will be invaluable for students of French music in the years to come. But this one nevertheless comes with a sting in the tail. Leon Botstein's overarching presence in this series means that the last and longest chapter is left to him. Despite his wide-ranging interests and activities, Botstein is not known as a scholar of French music and is better known for his work on Germanic musical culture contemporaneous to the life and works of Saint-Saëns. His essay seems rather whimsical in its presentation of three main areas: Saint-Saëns through the eyes of social and artistic critic, Romain Rolland (a lover and supporter of German culture); a comparison of Saint-Saëns with four French contemporaneous painters, highlighting their similar (classical) aesthetic visions; and a *rapprochement* between Mendelssohn and Saint-Saëns as prodigies.

Thus, in a section entitled "Saint-Saëns in the 20th Century," this final chapter squarely situates Saint-Saëns and his aesthetic ideals in the nineteenth-century. Botstein repeatedly refers to Saint-Saëns's "normative [aesthetic] standards" and his prizing of "beauty, nobility, form and clarity," ideals which could not be valued in the Modernist era (p. 372), to the composer's hard-won status in European musical culture viewed as a symptom of a discredited culture and aesthetic. He seems hell-bent on destroying the nuanced picture provided by the rest of the book. In a reductionist way, Botstein summarises the aesthetic code of Saint-Saëns and, indeed, all French music of the nineteenth century as merely "historicist and realist techniques which were subsumed into neoclassical formalist norms that helped construct a shared French national heritage" (p. 389).

This is not an intrinsically false sentence, but it was so much more than that! And we can only read this in a reductionist way in the light of certain howlers--in terms of modern, perceptive musicological writing on French music which relies on strong historical and archival documentation as demonstrated in much of the book up until this point--that have slipped past the editor, but which ultimately undermine all that she has tried to achieve. Botstein affirms some things that are shocking and almost offensive to those of us who have long had to defend (and yes, I'm a partisan) French music from an old Germanic musicological tradition which has erected the scaffold of German culture as normative and ignores cultural difference and context as it judges everything by frankly inappropriate yardsticks. Botstein refers to "an endemic superficiality of taste and criticism and the sterile and rigid classicist academicism prevalent in Parisian musical circles in the 1840s and early 1850s" (p. 372). Ask those who work on this period, on performers and composers, musicologists and critics such as Fétis and D'Ortigue, what they think of that!

He also casts Saint-Saëns, normally viewed as pillar of moral, artistic and intellectual integrity, in the role more often (yet unfairly) assigned to Massenet, as a composer who merely wanted to please his "paying public": "Saint-Saëns's appropriation of the narrative potential of music in his instrumental compositions, [was] a concession to contemporary taste and a veritable key to the immediate affections

of the musical public” (p. 383), or “Saint-Saëns's ambition [was] to please his public's taste with sounds that are easy to listen to” (p. 392), although it is not clear here whether this is his own voice or that of Romain Rolland, as these are frequently confused throughout the chapter. Yes, Saint-Saëns appropriated from Liszt the narrative potential of music in his instrumental compositions, but he did it because of firmly held aesthetic beliefs and an artistic and musical training that prepared him for the writing of dramatic music, or perhaps I should say, music which comprised dramatic musical gestures. And yes, those works pleased his public because that was what they were supposed to do. Saint-Saëns's music fulfilled their horizons of expectations but nobody was pandering or fawning in the way Botstein implies.

And because Saint-Saëns was not a tortured artist doubting the intrinsic aesthetic merit of his works such as perhaps Brahms or Dukas, Botstein advances: “But in Saint-Saëns the triumphs of youth [which were predominantly as a performer rather than a composer] bred an unshakable confidence and resistance to self-criticism—a cocky sense, entirely legitimate, of an essential superiority that derived from his undiminished and unrivaled facility” (p. 388). Cocky? Would he say the same of the even more fêted Massenet who was perhaps one of the most insecure creative artists of this era? Those scholars who have made detailed study of Saint-Saëns's correspondence would no doubt beg to differ, and what does Saint-Saëns's perpetual need to escape Paris to foreign climes say about his self-assurance? Many things perhaps, but not that he was cocky, complacent or superior! In a parting shot, Botstein affirms that the composer had never believed in progress, but this is precisely the subject of earlier chapters authored by Pasler herself.

None of this should take away from the achievement this book represents. Saint-Saëns is revealed and yet remains intensely private: the book speaks volumes on the composer's life, views, working methods, and cultural and social status, but Camille remains as elusive as ever.

## NOTES

[1] See the recently published volume of over 1000 pages: Camille Saint-Saëns, *écrits sur la musique et les musiciens, 1870-1921*, ed. Marie-Gabrielle Soret (Paris: Vrin, 2012).

[2] Camille Saint-Saëns, *Germanophilie* (Paris: Dorbon aîné, 1916).

[3] Gustave le Bon, *L'Evolution de la matière* (Paris: E. Flammarion, 1905).

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