

Saint-Saëns, Camille (1835-1921): brief presentation of his writings

Camille Saint-Saëns published more than 435 texts on musical subjects in the general and specialized press, both French and foreign; not counting the articles that were sometimes far removed from the musical field, as he expressed himself abundantly on subjects as diverse as his interests. The whole constitutes a corpus of writings with a varied typology, a teeming and heterogeneous body of work, disseminated in over a hundred periodicals over half a century of writing production (1872-1921) in which periods of intense work and long silences alternated.

Saint-Saëns only began to express himself in the press after the change of political regime. As early as 1872, under the pseudonym Phémus, he wrote a musical chronicle in the *Renaissance politique et littéraire*, the first journal created at the advent of the Third Republic. An atheist and free thinker of Republican sensibility, he was at the same time an organist for the church of La Madeleine, and protégé of Princess Mathilde, whose musical salon he visited. This paradoxical position, and close protections from the imperial power, these links with the clergy and perhaps the fear of losing his position as an organist are among the reasons that can explain why he did not come forward sooner. His motivations, however, leave some of his contemporaries perplexed and even irritated, as they wonder upon this sudden urge to speak up, even though he is already a renowned virtuoso and a composer whose reputation is on the rise. Some claim that, unable to get himself accepted at the Opera, he seeks, by way of compensation, to spread his opinions in the press; others think that a good article allowed him to advertise to his friends and publishers, or feel that he was too partisan to judge works that were not to his taste.

Saint-Saëns was paid for his articles, but this activity of musical critic barely represented a decent income; the substantial part of it came from his performer's fees or royalties. This financial independence allowed him a freedom of speech and action which he demonstrated both in the tone and subjects covered, and in his behaviour towards the editorial staff, from which he sometimes vehemently distanced himself when someone tried to steer him in a direction contrary to his values.

The press is a propaganda tool from which he quickly understood all the benefits he could draw from it. Newspapers allowed him to spread his well-thought upon ideas and accustom his readers to the fact that other repertoires, other genres than comic-opera, operetta or grand opera are possible and accessible. Throughout the pages, we can thus see many themes emerge among which we can mention the following: the appreciation of the "old" masters, some of whom - Rameau and Gluck - have contributed a great deal to the re-birth or diffusion of their works; his veneration for Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven; his loyalty towards those who,

like Charles Gounod, Hector Berlioz or Franz Liszt, have mattered in his career; his support for the young French School and his friends: Georges Bizet, Ernest Guiraud, Léo Delibes, Augusta Holmès ; his admirations for singers such as Pauline Viardot or Adelina Patti ; his dislike for César Franck or Vincent d'Indy, and to a certain extent Jules Massenet (the man himself, not his work) ; his aversion for personalities such as Richard Strauss; his disdain towards publishers who "mutilate" the scores, against the "star-making" of conductors, his irritation for operetta which he hates; his interest for organology and the progress of instrumental manufacturing; and his judgements about the structures of music teaching and distribution, which are reflected, for example, in articles about competitions, the Prix de Rome and festivals.

Saint-Saëns did not limit his articles to the more or less confidential music journals, but on the contrary, with a certain opportunism, tried to collaborate with the major dailies, whatever their political leanings, and to write in the best distributed, most widely read press. The easiness of his speech, his independence, his pugnacity and his taste for polemics had made him the spokesman of a generation of musicians who more than willingly, conceded him this role. He aimed at efficiency, as this post sent to Gaston Choïsnel testifies. The latter warned him about the protections of his texts: "I don't see the necessity of copyright for my articles. Even better if other newspapers imitate them, I will have more readers, and this will not prevent me from reuniting them in volumes later." (Lettre à Gaston Choïsnel, 4 mars 1911). Concerts criticism gained him access to the written press, but it is rather to a debate of ideas that the readers were invited to by the musician.

From his early years in the press, Saint-Saëns had planned to publish a series of selected articles in the form of collections. Eight volumes were thus published, of which four were widely commented upon when they were released: *Harmonie et mélodie* (1885), *Portraits et souvenirs* (1900), *École buissonnière* (1913), *Germanophilie* (1916). Four other volumes, of which the content was less controversial and more distant from the musical news, were of a more confidential diffusion: *Rimes familières* (1890), *Problèmes et Mystères* (1894), *Au Courant de la vie* (1914), *Divagations sérieuses* (1922). Another collection should have been published under the title *La Plume et la lyre*, but the musician's departure in 1921 put an end to the achievement of it.

Saint-Saëns also wrote theatre plays: *Botriocéphale*, *La Crampe de l'écrivain*, *Le Roi Apépi*, *Gabriella di Vergy*, *Le Château de la Roche-Cardon*, without a literary reach, were created for parties hosted by his students of the Niedermeyer School or as pure and simple entertainment. In addition, there is a very large volume of correspondences (estimated at more than 20,000 letters) of which several corpora are currently being prepared for publication.

The characteristics of Saint-Saëns' personality can be described such as a "shady, passionate and vibrant nature, sometimes excessively nervous" (Augustin Filon, "Courrier littéraire", *La Revue bleue*, no. 21, 22 novembre 1890, p. 667), all of which with an independent and certain intransigence that says it all. "With a fighting temperament, as soon as a subject of discussion came up, he seized his controversial pen and used it roughly, furiously, valiantly, handling it like a

formidable and vengeful sword." (Alfred Bruneau, « Les funérailles de Saint-Saëns à Paris », *Le Monde Musical*, n° 23-24 décembre 1921, p. 377). Saint-Saëns' writing style is characterised by his conciseness, his clarity, an elaborate sense of formula, speed and fluidity of discourse and ideas. "His vision was very clear. His cultivated, well-balance mind set things in place and clarified them. In his memory, every image, idea and judgement all neatly matched accurate and precise words which all adhered to their content like rightful labels. That is why he wrote so well. The clearness of his style, the pleasure and the unforeseen of more than one formula, are not without reminding in their own way Voltaire's nervous genius when writing letters." (Adolphe Boschot, *Maîtres d'hier et de jadis*, Paris, Plon, 1944, p. 104).

Saint-Saëns' articles were awaited and commented upon. They were important in the musical life of his time, hence the author's early desire to publish selections to pass them on to posterity.

Marie-Gabrielle SORET
03/04/2018

Trans. Kiefer Oakley

For further information :

Camille Saint-Saëns, *Ecrits sur la musique et les musiciens, 1870-1921*, édition présentée et annotée par Marie-Gabrielle Soret, Paris, Editions Vrin, 2012, collection MusicologieS, 1160 p. It also contains the full bibliography of Saint-Saëns' published texts on music and other topics with their own variations and adaptations (p. 1091-1125)

To quote this article : Marie-Gabrielle Soret, "Saint-Saëns, Camille (1835-1921): brief presentation of his writings", *Dictionary of Writings by Composers*, Dicteco <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/person/2267>, ed. E. Reibel, last edited : 28/05/2020