

# Saint-Saëns, Camille (1835-1921): Summary of Writings

Camille Saint-Saëns published more than 435 texts on musical subjects in the general and specialized press, in France and abroad; this does not include articles sometimes far removed from musical questions, as he also expressed himself abundantly on subjects as diverse as his interests. All of this adds up to a varied corpus of writings, an abundant and heterogeneous body of work, scattered over more than a hundred periodicals and a half-century of production (1872-1921), alternating between intense activity and long periods of silence.

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 column for *Renaissance politique et littéraire*, the first magazine created at the advent of the Third Republic. An atheist and a republican freethinker, he was at the same time organist at La Madeleine church, and a protégé of Princess Mathilde, whose musical salon he frequented. This paradoxical position, these protections close to imperial power, these links with the clergy and perhaps the fear of losing his position as organist, are among the reasons why he didn't write for the press earlier. His motives, however, puzzled and even irritated some of his contemporaries, who wondered about his sudden need to speak out, when he was already a renowned virtuoso and a composer whose reputation was only growing. Some claimed that, as he was unable to get himself played at the Opéra, he sought, by way of compensation, to spread his opinions in the press; others thought that a good column enabled him to promote his friends and publishers, or else felt that he was too partisan to judge works that were not to his taste.

Saint-Saëns was paid for his articles, but his work as a music critic was only a negligible source of income; he earned most of his living from performer's fees and royalties. This financial independence gave him freedom of speech and action, both in terms of tone and subject matter, and in his attitude towards editors, sometimes storming off when they tried to steer him in a direction contrary to his opinions.

The press was a propaganda tool, and he quickly understood all the advantages he could draw from it. Newspapers enabled him to disseminate long-cherished ideas, and to accustom his readers to the fact that repertoires and genres other than comic opera, operetta, or grand opera were possible and accessible. A wide range of themes emerge throughout his writings, including his gratitude to the "old" masters, some of whose works—Rameau and Gluck—he helped to revive and disseminate; his veneration for Bach, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven; his loyalty to those who, like Charles Gounod, Hector Berlioz, and Franz Liszt, played an important role in his career; his support for the young French school and its friends: Georges Bizet, Ernest Guiraud, Léo Delibes, Augusta Holmès; his admiration for singers such as Pauline Viardot or Adelina Patti; his antipathy for César Franck or Vincent d'Indy, and to a certain extent Jules Massenet (the man, not his work); his aversion to figures such as Richard Strauss; his irritation with publishers who "mutilate" scores, and with the rise of "star" conductors; his disdain for operetta, which he loathed; his interest in organology and advances in instrument making; or his judgments on the institutions for teaching and disseminating music, reflected for example in articles in which he evokes competitions, the Prix de Rome, and festivals.

Saint-Saëns did not restrict his articles to musical journals with a more-or-less confidential readership, but rather, with a certain opportunism, endeavored to collaborate with the major dailies, whatever their political leanings, and to write in the most widely distributed and widely read press. His easy expression, independence, pugnacity, and taste for polemic made him the spokesman for a generation of musicians who willingly conceded this role to him. He aimed for efficiency, as evidenced by a note sent to Gaston Choiseul, who warned him about the

protection of his texts: "I don't see the need for copyright for my articles. So much the better if other newspapers reproduce them, I'll have more readers, and that won't prevent me from putting them together in volumes later." (Letter to Gaston Choissel, 4 March 1911). Concert criticism was a gateway to writing for newspapers, but was a debate of ideas that Saint-Saëns invited his readers to engage with.

From his earliest years writing for the press, Saint-Saëns planned compilations of his articles. Eight volumes were published, four of which were widely commented on when they appeared: *Harmonie et mélodie* (1885), *Portraits et souvenirs* (1900), *École buissonnière* (1913), and *Germanophilie* (1916). Four other volumes, less polemical in tone and further removed from current musical events, were less widely read: *Rimes familières* (1890), *Problèmes et Mystères* (1894), *Au Courant de la vie* (1914), and *Divagations sérieuses* (1922). Another collection was to have been published under the title *La Plume et la lyre*, but the composer's death in 1921 prevented its completion.

Saint-Saëns also wrote plays—*Botriocéphale*, *La Crampe de l'écrivain*, *Le Roi Apépi*, *Gabriella di Vergy*, *Le Château de la Roche-Cardon*—of no literary significance, they were conceived for parties given by his pupils at the École Niedermeyer or as simple entertainments. To this must be added a very voluminous correspondence (estimated at over 20,000 letters), of which several corpora are currently being prepared for publication.

A "shadowy, passionate, vibrant nature, sometimes excessively nervous" (Augustin Filon, "Courrier littéraire," *La Revue bleue*, no. 21, 22 November 1890, p. 667), independent, intent on saying everything and everything well, with a certain intransigence, these are the characteristic traits of Saint-Saëns's personality. "A warrior by temperament, as soon as a subject of discussion tempted him, he would seize his polemical pen and use it roughly, furiously, valiantly, wielding it like a fearsome, vengeful sword." (Alfred Bruneau, « Les funérailles de Saint-Saëns à Paris," *Le Monde Musical*, no. 23-24, December 1921, p. 377). Saint-Saëns's style was characterized by concision, clarity, a sure sense of formula, rapidity and fluidity of discourse and ideas. "His vision was very clear. His mind, so cultivated, so well-balanced, put things in place and clarified them. In his memory, images, ideas, and judgments were filed away under exact, precise words that adhered to their content like faithful labels. That's why he wrote so well. The neatness of his style, the pleasure and unexpectedness of more than one formula, are reminiscent in their own way of Voltaire's lively epistolary sparkle." (Adolphe Boschot, *Maîtres d'hier et de jadis*, Paris, Plon, 1944, p. 104).

Saint-Saëns's articles were eagerly awaited and commented upon. They were important in the musical life of his time, which no doubt explains the author's early desire to publish selections of them for posterity.

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### Further reading

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. This volume also contains the full bibliography of Saint-Saëns' published texts on music and other topics with their variations and adaptations (p. 1091-1125)

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