

The eclecticism of Camille Saint-Saëns:
defining a “French sound” in music 1866-1896.
Spring 2008

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) started out as a prodigy child pianist. Also an organist and a writer, he is now best remembered as a composer. In many respects, Saint-Saëns was a classicist who composed in traditional “Germanic” forms such as the sonata and the symphony, rarely going against established textbook formulas. By 1910, and his infamous outcry against Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Saint-Saëns revealed himself as an irredeemable reactionary. Back in the 1870s, however, he had stood at the forefront of French musical life, working out ways in which French composers could assert their national identity while at the same time not reneging on their allegiance to the German masters they admired, such as Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and even, closer to them, Wagner.

Saint-Saëns was keen to compose music in many different styles, traditions and historical period than his own. This paper seeks to explore the nature of Saint-Saëns’s eclecticism and to try to elucidate connections between this and conceptions of a national French “sound.”

I. Examples of musical quotation and imitation

1. A look at Saint-Saens’s catalogue

A glance at the titles in Saint-Saëns’s catalogue serves to chart out the breadth of the composer’s musical interests. The subjects of his pieces are **medieval** (e.g. the operas *Frédégonde* and *Henry VIII*, the scène lyrique *Macbeth*, and the choral piece *Ivanhoë*), **biblical** (the opera *Samson et Dalila*, plus, evidently, all of Saint-Saëns’s religious

output), **mythical** (the opera *Proserpine*, the scène lyrique *Antoine et Cléopâtre*, the piece for piano with orchestra *Phaëton*), and sometimes even **contemporary** (he wrote a couple of pieces in honor of airplane pilots!). Then come pieces with geographic associations. The **oriental pieces** (Chinese/Japanese/Arabic/African) are most numerous (the opera *La princesse jaune*, the choral pieces *Les djinns* and *Nuit persane*, the *Mélodies persanes* song cycle, the orchestral piece *Suite algérienne*, a military band piece *Sur les bords du Nil*, the 2-piano work *Caprice arabe*, and *Africa* for piano and orchestra). This propensity is probably due to the fact that Saint-Saëns loved to travel to Algeria. In fact, he died there. Then come the **Spanish/Portuguese/Cuban** pieces (*Jota Aragonese* and *Une nuit à Lisbonne* for orchestra, two pieces for solo violin and orchestra: *Caprice Andalouse* and *Havanaise*, and a *Valse Canariote* for solo piano), followed by **Italian/Venitian/Sicilian** pieces (choral: *Saltarelle*, orchestra with piano: *Tarantelle*, chamber: *Barcarolle*), and **French/Breton/Auvergnat** pieces (the three *Rhapsodies sur des cantiques Bretons* and the *Rhapsodie d’Auvergne*). Saint-Saëns also wrote a few odd **northern European** pieces, such as the chamber piece *Caprice sur des airs danois et russes*, as well as Mazurkas and Polonaises no doubt influenced by Chopin. The Shakespeare-inspired operas could be included in this category as well. Predictably, Saint-Saëns circumvents anything overtly inspired by German-speaking countries. This notwithstanding, Saint-Saëns appears to have been aware of, and, to varying degrees, inspired by, all of the types of music with which he might have entered in contact. Since Saint-Saëns traveled a lot, he got firsthand exposure to the music of many foreign traditions.

2. Why we can't talk about the obvious suspect: *The Carnival of the Animals*

The vast array of sources shown by these titles demonstrates the eclecticism of the composer's output, but it doesn't say anything regarding the level of eclecticism *within* a given piece. The most famous examples of such "inner eclecticism" are to be found in Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals*. Its function there is deliberately comic, which is the reason this work shouldn't be discussed here. Composers of all stripes have used these conventions of musical humor: roughly or oddly juxtaposing fragments of highly contrasting music, quoting well-known or popular tunes of the day (like Saint-Saëns, who quotes "Partant pour la Syrie" in the *Carnival*), or imitating certain styles of music in the spirit of parody. Because such pieces do not constitute "serious" statements, they do not really inform us about the composer's voice. The fact that Saint-Saëns refused to let this piece be published during his lifetime (with the exception of one movement, *The Swan*), fearing that it would be detrimental to his reputation,¹ demonstrates that the tone of this piece must be viewed as distinct from that of the rest of his output.

Indeed, we would be hard-pressed to find in another one of the composer's pieces the sudden, kaleidoscopic juxtapositions of short quotations that appear, for instance, in *Fossils* or in the Finale of the *Carnival*. We thus need to limit this study of the way in which Saint-Saëns quotes "other" music to selections the composer *did* authorize.

3. What counts as "other" music?

¹ "While on holiday in Austria [Saint-Saëns] dashed off *Le carnaval des animaux* in a few days (he forbade performances of the extravaganza, apart from 'Le cygne', during his lifetime, with an eye to his reputation)." Sabina Teller Ratner et al., "Saint-Saëns," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 May 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

Precisely defining the meaning of “other”² is a challenge and deserves some discussion. When a composer (say, Mozart) writes a horn call in his music, to what extent is this passage a reflection of the composer’s individual voice? Is it a Mozart horn call, or is it “other,” extraneous? Presumably the difference lies between a horn call that the listener can recognize as belonging to the established repertoire of hunting calls, or as having been composed by a composer other than Mozart. It becomes a Mozart horn call when it cannot be recognized as anything else, when it is integrated within the larger context of Mozart’s music, or it is arranged in a specifically Mozartean fashion.

Let’s look at a different example. If, in one of his pieces, Saint-Saëns quotes a Spanish song he copied from an anthology, this song has little connection to Saint-Saëns, until he modifies something about it, by, for instance, providing a typically Saint-Saëns-like arrangement. Yet, were Saint-Saëns to quote a popular Parisian tune, he could claim more of a degree of ownership, even though he didn’t compose it, because he is himself a Parisian. At the same time, if Saint-Saëns travels to Egypt, hears a song and notates it, to what extent does it become his song? Having traveled to find it, notated it, and traveled back to share it with his French audience, it has, in some respects become Saint-Saëns’s song, even though it doesn’t belong to his tradition, and he did not compose it.

What if Saint-Saëns, not being Arabic, but inspired by Arabic music (as well as by imitations of Arabic music) composes a melody that his audience finds perfectly convincing as an Arabic tune? To what extent would this represent Saint-Saëns? Such questions and their answers, while they lend themselves to endless legalistic parsing,

² Ralph Locke uses the words “Other” (with a capital) and “otherizing” (the composer making the music sound “Other”) similarly. Ralf P. Locke, “Cutthroats and Casbah Dancers,” in *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 104-ff.

make it clear that all music can, to varying degrees, count as “other.” Fortunately, Saint-Saëns gives us a number of examples where he signals the quotation in his title.

4. Examples of direct quotation

The most obvious way of integrating “other” music into a piece of music is to use a direct quotation from another piece, usually a pre-existing folk song. Let’s take a look at the ways Saint-Saëns treats these borrowings in his music.

In his *Rhapsody on Breton Melodies* Op. 7, No. 3 for organ (1866), Saint-Saëns introduces the second Breton theme by imitating in his choice of registration the Breton bagpipe (*binou*), as well as its drones. This sets the audience in a pastoral mood that, hopefully, evokes Brittany. The composer then gradually brings in a thicker registration, overlaps themes (exhibiting un-pastoral counterpoint), and introduces increasingly chromatic harmonies. As the texture becomes progressively more complex, the piece first obtains a grander, more religious affect until, at its climax, its effect is symphonic. The progression from the simple pastoral to the massive and complex texture is never jarring.

When the Breton theme returns at the end of the piece, after the climax, Saint-Saëns uses more subdued timbres that no longer evoke the bagpipe. We get the sense here that the melody has been not only adopted, but also pacified; the intention here being to raise the status of this provincial peasant’s music (which, while French, belonged to a part of the country that cultivated a distinct language and culture). The Parisian composer alters it by endowing it with the aura of his craft (counterpoint, chromaticism), and that of the church (with the organ and its space), to glorify what would otherwise be an unassuming found object.

The word “rhapsody” indicates a threading together of disparate elements. In the late 19th century, the rhapsody is a common nationalistic vehicle.³ Saint-Saëns’s *Rhapsodie d’Auvergne* (1884), another example of the genre, is a 10-minute work for piano and orchestra. In the introduction of the piece, the composer alludes to the convention of stating the theme using a relatively bare texture, and an unobtrusive arrangement. However, once the introduction is over, he does not actually grant his first Auvergne melody a “clean” statement (as one would typically find at the beginning of a set of variations): it occurs already harmonized in a style reminiscent of Beethoven that is too chromatic to pass off as pastoral.

The first statement of the second theme appears in a developed form (using imitation between the oboe and the piano), and seems, moreover, to have been truncated – it would be impossible, at any rate, to reconstruct with certainty the way in which the original melody ends. Thus, the way in which Saint-Saëns treats his themes appears to betray an eagerness to distort it and a certain level of impatience.

In both pieces, Saint-Saëns uses the oboe to convey the pastoral origins of the theme. This is similar to his registration picks that evoke the *biniou*. Interestingly, as we will see, the oboe will also prove most suitable for conveying melodies in the Arabic style (presumably imitating a North African double reed instrument). The timbre of the oboe thus becomes a marker of the foreign in Saint-Saëns’s works.

Musical borrowing (or very close imitation) was current in the 19th century. (We all remember, for instance, how Bizet borrowed melodies from Yradier to use them in his

³ John Rink, “Rhapsody,” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 May 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

opera *Carmen*.) Saint-Saëns might have engaged in the same process in pieces where the title (unlike our first two examples) does *not* specifically indicate borrowing:

[The *Jota aragonese*] is Saint-Saëns's transcription for orchestra of an Aragonese *jota* melody. This melody appeared in a French publication called *Echos d'Espagne*, which contains thirty-eight Spanish songs collected and transcribed by P. Lacombe and J. Puig y Alsubide and was first published in 1872. ... It is possible that Saint-Saëns modeled his own work after the "Jota aragonesa" in this collection rather than after original Spanish sources of the melody.⁴

One must note that even when the composer quotes a folk song directly, his primary aim is to transform it and subject it to a set of textural and harmonic processes that will result in convincingly integrating it within a piece of "serious" Western music. When he subjects his nationalistic (Breton or an Auvergnat) themes to this process, it tends to result in obscuring what made the melody characteristic. With quotes of "foreign" origin, however, Saint-Saëns can freely oscillate between a process of adoption and integration on the one hand, and the development the aspects of the music that lend it its foreign sound on the other.

5. Examples of the imitation of a style

In most of his pieces, rather than quoting, Saint-Saëns is interested in *evoking*, by imitating selected features of the music. Many of his Oriental pieces fit this model, although a modern listener familiar with ethnographic recordings is likely to find these to be mere suggestions than successful imitations. Given the title of his 1870 song cycle *Mélodies persanes*, one might expect that, similarly to his Breton organ rhapsodies, Saint-Saëns will have used original Persian melodies as the basis for his piece. They could never be construed as such. It doesn't help that the lyrics are in French (the sound of which doesn't tend to evoke anything exotic, particularly to French listeners) and that

⁴ Martha D. Minor, "Hispanic Influences on the Works of French Composers of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" (Ph. D. Diss., University of Kansas, 1983), 48.

French is a language that tends to sets syllabically (which precludes the characteristic Arabic melismas). Saint-Saëns does try all the same (e.g., in “La Brise,” the melismas on “ongles,” m. 20, and “résonne,” m. 30), although not very convincingly. The Persian aspect is present foremost in the narrative content of the lyrics, and in the piano accompaniment. In “La Brise,” Saint-Saëns uses an E dorian scale (the key signature of D major). Midway, he fixes the key signature to E major, provides an E major context in the piano, while the melody seems rooted on C sharp (creating a tension between major and Aeolian modes). Nevertheless, at the outcome of the piece, the listener is returned safely to Europe with a $V^7/V - V - I$ progression. Throughout the rest of the set, Saint-Saëns doesn’t seem overly concerned with keeping to the Arabic mood in the music, letting it occasionally come through (in a way that is always well-woven in); and if the last movement “Tournoiement,” which depicts an opium-induced dream had been entitled “Toccata” or “Autumn Wind,” and been given corresponding lyrics, the audience is likely to have never detected anything Oriental, let alone Persian, about it.

Saint-Saëns appears to experience some difficulty when he tries to depict an Oriental scene that isn’t North African or Arabic but rather Far Eastern (namely Japanese or Chinese). The music in his opéra comique *La princesse jaune* (1872) is a case in point. In its overture, the composer has trouble deciding between the identifiably Arabic influence of the first theme (harmonic minor scale, featuring the indispensable augmented second) and the pentatonic scales and bell sounds of the second theme that are more characteristic of Far Eastern music. A great deal of the pentatonic music in this opera is treated in a way that is similar to that in which Dvorak treats them in his *New World*

Symphony: the melodies are indeed pentatonic but their harmonization involves the full arsenal of 19th century chromaticism.

“Outsou Semisi Kamini,” the first number in *La princesse jaune* does a good job conforming to the stereotypical and comic Japanese or Chinese sound (pentatonic, choppy, with staccato flutes and metallophones), but the composer appears to tire of this easily, and, by the second number, he has reverted to an altogether European sound.

“Vision dont mon âme est éprise” shows again a deliberate effort at using the pentatonic idea in the accompaniment. Unfortunately, Saint-Saëns seems utterly unable to sustain the pentatonic pitch language. One note from the pattern suddenly descends by a step and, soon enough, the accompaniment escapes into a traditional European seven-note scale, ruining the intended effect.

This ambivalence can be explained otherwise than by the composer’s own impatience with the scalar constraints. In his autobiography, Saint-Saëns recounts the genesis of the piece as follows:

Japan had recently opened to Europe. Japan was in fashion, everyone talked about Japan, it was a craze; [my librettist Louis Gallet and I] got the idea to make a Japanese opera. It was submitted to [Camille du Locle, director of the Opéra Comique], but the idea of staging a pure, unadulterated Japan scared him; he requested that we tone it down, and it was he, I believe, who had the idea of the half-Dutch, half-Japanese location where this little work that is called *La Princesse Jaune* takes place.⁵

The Grove’s synopsis for the work clarifies what the plot became:

Léna (soprano) is in love with her cousin, the studious Kornélis (tenor), who is entranced by everything Japanese, particularly his portrait of a Japanese girl he calls Ming. In a fantasy induced by a

⁵ Camille Saint-Saëns, *École buissonnière* (Paris: Pierre Laffite et Cie., 1913), 58: « Le Japon, depuis peu, était ouvert à l’Europe. Le Japon était à la mode, on ne parlait que du Japon, c’était une fureur ; l’idée nous vint de faire une pièce japonaise. Elle fut soumise à du Locle, mais le Japon tout pur, mis à scène lui faisait peur ; il nous demanda de la mitiger, et ce fut lui, je crois, qui eut l’idée du milieu moitié hollandais, moitié japonais, dans lequel se meut ce petit ouvrage qui s’appelle *La Princesse Jaune*. »

potion he is transported to Japan, but there realizes that he really loves the Dutch girl Léna after all.⁶

The taking of the potion is reminiscent of the opium song “Tournoiement” mentioned above. Was du Locle correct in suggesting that the audience would be uncomfortable with an opera that whole-heartedly took it to Japan, without leaving strong narrative roots in Europe? Did he mean for this advice to also apply to the music? Saint-Saëns must have thought so, since his score only temporarily explores “other” music, while never truly leaving Europe.

Once again, though, in Saint-Saëns’s *Suite Algérienne* (1880), the exotic connections are rather tenuous. Bafflingly, the first half of the suite’s second movement, “Rhapsodie mauresque,” is highly contrapuntal and evokes most a grand European fugue. The pentatonicism introduced in the second half of the movement is, here as well, more reminiscent of Dvořak than of the Orient. Before getting something exotic, the listener needs to wait until the very last section of the piece, when Saint-Saëns brings in a tambourine and launches a rhythmic flute melody. And still, the joyous ending and horn calls sooner evoke a central European forest than a Moorish dance. The connections to the Orient are perhaps more evident in the following movement “Rêverie du soir,” with its melismatic melody (which includes the short Armenian musical-suffix – *do-me-re-me-do* – so characteristic of the music of Hovhanness, further obscuring, for the modern listener, the issue of the location evoked). In the end, the music seems to find its way somewhere else: in this case, Spain, which, admittedly, isn’t so far removed from Arabic tradition after all. These three examples raise a number of questions. Must we interpret them as failures on the part of Saint-Saëns’s to escape from the European style? Does it

⁶ Hugh Macdonald, “La Princesse Jaune,” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 May 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

reflect his ignorance of the styles being imitated or of how to achieve their effect? Or does it reflect again a certain impatience with these sounds and textures, which results in their being used sparingly? Finally, to what extent did it matter to Saint-Saëns and his audience that a piece indiscriminately evoke North Africa, Spain, or Japan? Perhaps a hint as to the answer may be found in the poem “Tournoiement” by Armand Renaud, which Saint-Saëns set for his final song in the *Mélodies Persanes* cycle (the opium-song):

<p>Devant mes yeux troublés tout passe, Jetant une même lueur ; [...] Les soldats qui vont, sabre au poing, Au milieu des marchés d’esclaves, Au bord des volcans pleins de laves, Chez les Mogols et chez les Slaves, De tourner je ne cesse point. [...] Mes pieds ne touchent plus le sol ; Je monte au firmament nocturne ; Devant la lune taciturne, Devant Jupiter et Saturne, Je passe avec un sifflement ; Et je franchis le Capricorne.</p>	<p><i>Before my clouded eyes all passes, Radiating a same light ;</i> <i>The soldiers brandishing their swords In the middle of slave markets, On the edge of volcanoes filled with lava, In the land of Mogols and Slavs, I do not cease to spin.</i> <i>My feet no longer touch the ground; I rise toward the night sky; Before the taciturn moon, Before Jupiter and Saturn, I pass with whistle; And I pass the Capricorn by.</i></p>
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For Europeans, all of these images blend into one. They all belong to the same exotic idea, and so can they in the music.⁷

6. Examples found in Saint-Saëns’s piano concertos

The evocation of “other” musics doesn’t occur only in character pieces or tone poems with explicit titles. They can be found in Saint-Saëns’s piano concertos, works whose title indicates a deep connection to the German romantic tradition. None of these pieces are explicitly programmatic (with the possible The Fifth Concerto, which will be discussed below).

⁷ At the same time, Saint-Saëns’s Spanish music is rather more successful. Partly, no doubt, because Spain was closer by.

throughout the final decades of the century, particularly in serious musical presentations at the Paris Opéra and elsewhere (less often in comedies).” He cites two operas as examples: one by Méhul in 1793, and one by Cherubini in 1803. In a different part of the article, where he discusses the “revival” of the chaconne, we read: “Already during the earlier 19th century several leading composers had found themselves inspired by the chained ostinato-variation idea, without necessarily calling the resulting works ‘chaconne’ or ‘passacaglia’.” There he mentions Beethoven’s 32-Variations (woo80) from 1806 as an example.¹⁰ Thus, even if the chaconne experienced a particularly dry spell between 1803 and 1806, it probably didn’t affect Saint-Saëns (who wasn’t born for another three decades) very much. With Saint-Saëns as an organist fully immersed in the traditions and processes surrounding religious music, the composer’s knowledge of the procedure comes off as even less of a surprise. What is striking therefore is not so much the rediscovery of a style of music, but that Saint-Saëns *included it in a piano concerto*.

While the opening of the Second Piano Concerto (1868) is not a quote, the audience couldn’t miss the fact that the passage referred to Bach. In that respect, Saint-Saëns goes against the Romantic precept of the composer expressing his own personal voice. If we choose to trace the opposition back to the source of the Romantic era, within Beethoven’s own symphonic works, Saint-Saëns emerges from the tradition of the *Pastoral Symphony* (tuneful, light, pastoral, based on music that quotes or evokes the external world, and the “other”) rather than of the Fifth.

¹⁰ Alexander Silbiger, “Chaconne,” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 May 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

Saint-Saëns's concertos, and its finales in particular have been viewed critically as symptoms of the decadence of the *Second Empire*.¹¹ A famous quote in connection with the Second Piano Concerto is that it “begins with Bach and ends with Offenbach.”¹² Jacques Offenbach, the famous composer of operettas that were particularly in vogue during that period, might have inspired the carnival-like atmosphere of the finale of Saint-Saëns's Second Piano Concerto. We should note, however, that while usually festive (with the exception of the 4th which is more majestic than festive, although the two moods aren't necessarily incompatible), none of these finales are comic. Saint-Saëns bases the finale of the Second Piano Concerto on a tarantella, originally an energetic dance from southern Italy thought to be useful in warding off the effects of the tarantula's bite. Erich Schwandt calls this story a “popular but repeatedly discredited legend.”¹³ It might have nevertheless influenced composers such as Chopin who used the form as the medium for virtuosic piano works.¹⁴ The idea of the toxic bite prompting a frenzied dance connects well with the two pieces where an intoxicating substance (a potion in *La princesse jaune* and opium in “Le Tournoiement”) induces travel to the Orient. This connects in turn with the idea of the carnival where a period of time is instituted during which people are allowed to dawn masks, get intoxicated on alcohol, and behave like “others.”

¹¹ Although Saint-Saëns was among the first to call for a new direction after the French defeat in 1870. (Saint-Saëns seems to have had a very keen sense of what music was *appropriate* to compose at any given time, steering his output accordingly throughout his career.) Michael Strasser, “L'invasion germanique in the 1870s,” *19th-century Music*, Vol 24, No. 3, Spring 2001, 227-228, 241.

¹² This *bon mot*, while very widespread, is, as far as I can tell, anonymous and thus undated. Only one, rather unreliable-looking source attributed it to the Polish composer Zygmunt Stojowski.

¹³ Erich Schwandt, “Tarantella,” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 May 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

¹⁴ Such as his *Tarantella* in A flat major, op. 43.

The finale of the Third Piano Concerto (1869), while festive, doesn't take the listener to any exotic lands, and, in fact, the finale of the Fourth Piano Concerto (1875) doesn't either. What the latter does, however, is to make the listener travel in time. Far from any carnival, it involves a majestic and medieval feeling, conveyed by a modal feel in the melody, the second half of which travels through a number of other keys (d minor, a minor, before returning to C major). (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Theme from the finale (Allegro) of the Fourth Piano Concerto¹⁵



The finale of the Fifth Piano Concerto (1896) starts somewhat similarly to that of the Third with a festive Germanic idea (actually a sort of bear dance), but it sounds eerily like a fast ragtime, something not entirely unlike Zez Confrey's 1921 *Kitten on the Keys*. It is unclear how Saint-Saëns would have arrived at this particular texture, as nothing quite like it existed at the time for it to be an imitation. According to Davinia Caddy, the craze for the cakewalk did not take off until the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900.¹⁶ Perhaps Saint-Saëns came into contact with the music of Louis-Moreau Gottschalk when the pianist and composer from New Orleans visited Paris between 1845-1849 (around the

¹⁵ Derived from the piano and the first violin parts. Camille Saint-Saëns, *Quatrième Concerto pour Piano et Orchestre* (Paris: Durand edition & Cie. 1970), 105ff.

¹⁶ Davinia Caddy, "Parisian Cakewalks," in *19th-Century Music*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2007), 291.

time the young Saint-Saëns was entering the Conservatoire) and played pieces like “Bamboula” and “La Savane” at the Salle Pleyel.¹⁷ But these connections seem tenuous and the ragtime enigma remains unsolved.

The examples from the concertos we have examined so far reveal the eclecticism of the sources Saint-Saëns used in his pieces. They also reveal that Saint-Saëns doesn’t feel the need to limit the inclusion of these “other” styles to tone poems and rhapsodies.

II. The second movement of the “Egyptian” Concerto: eclecticism as a formal issue

1. A dissatisfied listener

The Second Concerto includes both Bach reference and a Tarantella, and even though the two appear in different movements, some critics are already disturbed by the hodgepodge nature of the piece as a whole. A particularly dyspeptic, but revealing critique of Saint-Saëns’s music (taking as an excuse for its outpour the issue of a set of recordings by Aldo Ciccolini) stems from the English modernist composer and music critic Bill Hopkins, writing in 1971:

Few standard composers have been as unimportant as Saint-Saëns; but a happy relationship with the Muse, together with a fervent belief in old-fashioned professionalism, sufficed to lift him to a minor mastery by whose sculptured impersonality (or superficiality) he will for some time yet be remembered. ... In fact, Saint-Saëns’s trouble was that as a composer he was half-hearted, toying with ideas (often enough with modern-sounding false relations) which he less than half believed in. At moments of crisis, his recourse to neo-styles paved the way for a later century’s bad faith. Never does it seem to have occurred to him to take the plunge into a personal style and to sweep up once and for all the quirky crazes which impinged on his music throughout his career.¹⁸

The accusation of “impersonality” comes from both Saint-Saëns’s use of “other” music, and from his somewhat “automatic” treatment of the rest of the piece, which doesn’t steer too far away from previous models (Hopkins mentions Chopin and Mendelssohn),

¹⁷ Irving Lowen and S. Frederick Starr, “Gottschalk,” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 May 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

¹⁸ G. W. Hopkins, Review, *The Musical Times*, Vol. 112, No. 1543 (Sep., 1971), 869.

lending the music an “academic” flavor. In other words, Saint-Saëns has great facility, he is a highly skilled imitator, but he fails completely when it comes to expressing something individual. Hopkins portrays the use of “neo-styles” (in reference to the neo-classic, neo-baroque styles, and by extension, the quotation or imitation of all “other” musics) as the symptom of a lack of inspiration. For Hopkins, Saint-Saëns’s constant oscillation between the exotic on the one hand and the comfortable realm of Beethoven and Mendelssohn on the other reveals nothing more than a deep but constantly frustrated desire to break free. Unable to find within himself a language by which to do so, Saint-Saëns resorts to imitation and borrowing. The borrowed music fails to open up any new avenues (Hopkins might add that it couldn’t possibly, because such an approach is utterly wrong-headed), and the uninspired Saint-Saëns has no option than to spin his academic wheels.

In case there was any question as to the process Hopkins so wished for Saint-Saëns to discover, he goes on to write:

... The Fourth [concerto] is a considerable success: the cyclicality of this work is yet more subtle and satisfying than in either the Cello Concerto or the Third Symphony; perhaps it is from his Beethoven Variations that he has learnt to transform and embroider his themes with such diversity and strength.

One of Saint-Saëns’s big crimes in much of his music is thus this lack of *cyclicality*: the ability for a composer to find endless ways in which to develop a theme, or even better, a motive. The fact that Saint-Saëns often limits himself to re-arrangements (changes of texture and harmony) of entire melodies, that his only other means of contrast are vacuous virtuosity or the inclusion of an entirely new theme (e.g. in the rhapsodies), demonstrates at best half-heartedness and impatience, at worse complete lack of inspiration and sterility.

Given such a perspective, the *Andante* of the Fifth Piano Concerto couldn't elicit anything else than a virulent condemnation:

The last 45 years of [Saint-Saëns's] life saw only one piano concerto—probably just as well, to judge by its markedly inferior quality. This is the 'Egyptian' Concerto, a mere shadow of the earlier promise; the subtitle arises from some weird (and very pretty) exoticisms in the long slow movement—needless to say, he doesn't bother to integrate them and the rest of the work is rather ordinary.

Hopkins's isolating this particular movement for criticism is far from fortuitous. Until then, none of the examples from the concertos we have looked at are internally eclectic. When quotation appears in the composer's pieces (other than *Carnival*), it is usually in an acceptable, conventional form: as the theme for variations, or one of the themes developed in a rhapsody. If Saint-Saëns includes passages that *evoke* particular styles of music, they will take up an entire movement, and otherwise, they are at least allotted ample time in the form, and weaved in such that they do not in any way protrude.

2. What happens in the second movement

The slow movement of the Fifth suddenly breaks that rule; it is the most eclectic and kaleidoscopic movement we will ultimately find. Saint-Saëns wrote the following description of this movement for his friend, the pianist Louis Diémer:

It is a kind of voyage to the Orient which even goes, in the episode in F-sharp, to the Far East. The passage in G is a Nubian love song which I heard sung by the boatmen on the Nile while I was going down the river by *dahabeah*.¹⁹

(Hence Saint-Saëns knew the difference between Arabic and Far Eastern music!)

The movement opens with the strings playing a rhythmic background. The piano enters playing a *fortissimo* ascending d harmonic minor (of course) scale, which leads into a long descending sequence (*sempre forte* and using the same scale) that unmistakably

¹⁹ Quoted in: Seung Won Yoo, "Camille Saint-Saëns' Piano Concerto No. 5 in F major, opus 103," (Ph. D. Diss., University of North Texas, 2004), 4. (A *dahabeah* is a passenger boat used on the River Nile in Egypt.)

denotes Arabic music (which prompted the piece’s nickname “Egyptian” – a word that is nowhere to be found in the *édition originale* score). What follows is essentially an accompanied *cadenza* that is quite rhythmically complex, imitating a very melismatic vocal line, declaimed in rather stentorian fashion, and emphasized by repetitions of 1- and 2- measure passages. This is reminiscent of Mussorgsky’s portrait of a rich Jew “Samuel Goldenberg” in his *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874). What then follows is one of the most timbrally striking passages in Saint-Saëns’s output: (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Fifth Piano Concerto, mvt. II, mm. 34-35



The main melody, played in the left hand, is doubled up by a twelfth (an octave plus a fifth), and also up by two octaves and a major third. This creates a string of parallel major chords, a device called “planing” usually associated with Debussy (who, that same year, 1896, was writing his “Sarabande,” that would later be included in *Pour le Piano*, one of the first pieces to feature the technique). The notes in this chord are placed consistently with their spacing in the harmonic series, and the dynamics, which Saint-Saëns notates twice (using both the *pianissimo* marking and the smaller noteheads), underscore this effect, since it makes them sound not like individual notes, but like partials of the fundamental tone. Based on this one example, Saint-Saëns could even be construed as an ancestor of the French Spectralists of the end of the 20th century.

Next, comes what Saint-Saëns was alerting Diémer to: the Nubian “barcarolle,”²⁰ followed by the F sharp Far Eastern episode. The choice of key derives from Saint-Saëns, the keyboardist, naturally gravitating toward using the black keys of the piano to write Chinese/Japanese-sounding music, since they outline a pentatonic scale.

3) The connection with another, rhapsodic, work: *Africa*

Saint-Saëns appears to have prepared himself for the Fifth Piano concerto by writing his 1891 fantasy for piano and orchestra *Africa*. Beyond the forces at play, the two bear many similarities. They both start with a fast pulsating rhythm (the concerto uses a more complicated accelerating rhythm), which is reminiscent of the pulsating background of Mendelssohn’s *Italian* (again, exotic) symphony. *Africa* shortly evokes the tarantella texture (rehearsal # 1), the oboe is again put to work (rehearsal # 2), and the rising parallel idea of the concerto is previewed in *Africa* with descending parallel tenths in the upper register (rehearsal # 3). *Africa* also features a number of successful experiments that Saint-Saëns does not reprise in his concerto, for instance the idea of the major melody suddenly inflected by a rapid wave gesture in parallel thirds, in the minor (fourth measure after rehearsal #13, in the piano, then repeated in the 12th measure in the orchestra). The rhythmic main theme (in the “percussive bear dance” sort of way) that features a hemiola doesn’t return either, nor does the janissary music passage (main theme heavily doubled at the unison and octave, with cymbals).

Appropriately, for two works that are so formally similar, the term used to describe the form of the Fifth Piano Concerto’s second movement is: “free rhapsodic,”²¹ a form that would evidently be anathema for Bill Hopkins, and other critics guided by

²⁰ Seung Won Yoo, “Camille Saint-Saëns’ Piano Concerto No. 5 in F major, opus 103,” (Ph. D. Diss. University of North Texas, 2004), 8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

what Ralph Locke calls “a lingering formalist and organicist bias.” Locke summarizes their qualm as follows:

If, such critics seem to feel, the exoticism is on the surface, it cannot be organic, nor therefore can it be artistically cogent. Only once it is absorbed into the prevailing musical language of a composer—an achievement of first-generation modernists, such as Strauss and Debussy, that was carried further by Igor Stravinsky, Messiaen, and others—does it become clean enough to praise, precisely because it has shed most of its allusive power, its reference to a world beyond the West, its claim to “represent” another culture.²²

III. Discussion and Conclusion

1) Ways in which Saint-Saëns’s music makes sense

At this point, we need to, if not rebut Bill Hopkins’s outlook, describe the ways in which Saint-Saëns’s music makes sense. As Hopkins points out, much to his chagrin, Saint-Saëns’s eclecticism can be viewed as a precursor to neo-classicism in the early twentieth century. One of the aims of neo-classicism was to provide an alternative to the massive, post-Wagnerian, overly romantic music of a composer like Richard Strauss (music that also happens to be highly chromatic and cyclical).

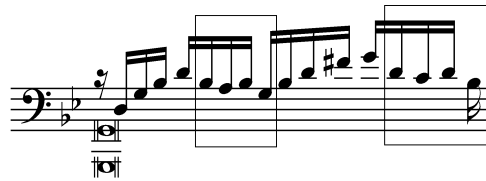
With his rhapsodies and concertos, Saint-Saëns pits himself very clearly in a different camp that favors a certain amount of emotional reserve, a reserve that extends to not obsessively indulging in thematic parsing and recasting. Bill Hopkins interprets the Bach quotation at the beginning of the Second Piano Concerto as “pretentious.” Among the styles in which Bach composed, the prelude is the lightest and freest form (by contrast with, for instance, the fugue, which is very cerebral, and dance forms such as Allemandes and Sarabandes, and even Chorales, which are more or less ponderous). What immediately follows the Bach quotation is the First Theme, which, given its

²² Ralf P. Locke, “Cutthroats and Casbah Dancers,” in *The Exotic in Western Music*, ed. Jonathan Bellman (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 135-136.

accompaniment, is unmistakably a “barcarolle.” Hopkins chooses to see here a perfectly awkward juxtaposition. A different interpretation involves noticing that the Bach texture *prepares* that of the barcarolle: both textures are thin and flowing. They both evoke water. The prelude is rhythmically free, it has the improvisatory quality of a cadenza, whereas the barcarolle is metric. We thus have a traditional progression from an introductory section of music, which is, in some way, “searching” and unstable, to a main theme that is more controlled and in focus. Here, the instability is metrical rather than harmonic (as G minor is the unassailably the key from the very start of the piece).

Moreover, while not psychotic about it, Saint-Saëns *does* in fact compose cyclic music. A very short motive introduced right at the beginning of the concerto (Fig. 4) is the seed for the material throughout the piece.

Fig. 4 The Second Piano Concerto’s opening gesture with the seminal motive indicated:



This motive returns immediately in the barcarolle, it returns in the scherzo’s (second movement) first theme, and it forms the basis for the tarantella in the last movement.

While the lack of unity apparent in the second movement of the “Egyptian” concerto cannot be refuted, the esthetic premise that unity pervaded the music of all the masters of the past can. Mozart, for instance was a very eclectic composer, and we alluded earlier to the rift within Beethoven’s own works.

2) Philosophies and Politics relating to nationalism and music, and the French style.

Hopkins's critique revives an old nationalist opposition: that which pits the German "mainstream" against satellites such as France, Russia, and he even mentions his own country, England, in the latter category.

In 1871, shortly following the defeat of Napoléon III against the Prussians (a defeat that led to the annexation of the Alsace and Lorraine territories to Prussia), French composers, including Vincent d'Indy and Saint-Saëns, founded the *Société Nationale de Musique Française*. Jane Fulcher, describes the goals of the Society as follows:

[Its members were] dedicated to the rebirth of a new and more "serious" French music. Most had suffered under the dominance of grand opera during the Second Empire, when music was controlled by a small group of selected successful composers, to the exclusion of younger French artists. Sensitive to German charges that French "frivolity" had helped to bring its defeat, they now sought to define and affirm the basic qualities of "la génie française." [sic] They were thus convinced that abstract musical forms, to this point largely belittled in France in favor of lyric theater, could be filled with what they believed to be "French content," emphasizing clarity, formal ingenuity, and grace.²³

The members of the Société were divided regarding the figure of Wagner. The criticism leveled at Wagner's music by French detractors serves as an antithetical statement of nationalist aesthetics. Jacques Cheyronnaud summarizes: "[The detractors] saw in [Wagner's] production nothing more than music that was noisy, German, fat, thick and Teutonic. An invasion from the North. The exact opposite of the French spirit: light, alert, striving for a just balance."²⁴

²³ Jane Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics and Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 23.

²⁴ "D'autres, peu satisfaits ou peu friands de Wagner, ne voyaient ou voulaient voir dans sa production que de la musique bruyante, une musique allemande, de la musique teutonnes grasse et épaisse. Une sorte d'invasion venue Nord. Tout le contraire d'un esprit français, léger, alerte, enclin au juste milieu." Cheyronnaud, Jacques, " 'Éminemment français,' Nationalisme et musique," in *Terrain, revue d'ethnologie de l'Europe*, No. 17, Oct. 1991, (Accessed 2 May 2004), <<http://terrain.revues.org/document3016.html>>.

Saint-Saëns, who had initially been an admirer of Wagner came to eventually reject him vehemently.²⁵ Jane Fulcher describes how French musical aesthetics were debated and developed between 1870 and 1914. In 1900, Alfred Bruneau, a composer and *de facto* “spokesman for the Republican musical esthetic”²⁶ wrote a report for the government, which Fulcher describes as follows:

[Alfred Bruneau] presents Saint-Saëns’s symphonic poems as incarnations of French independence, since, formally, they refuse to be “slaves” of tradition or placidly to follow routes already traced; French values, for Bruneau, as seen in Saint-Saëns, include not only measure and clarity (ideals that date back to the Société Nationale) but also the more Romantic characteristics of frankness, “heart,” and audacity.²⁷

Both the ideas of refusal of formal slavery and that of “audacity” appear to allude rather directly to the formal issues present in Saint-Saëns’s rhapsodies and his “Egyptian” concerto.

Fulcher’s history of this period shows to what extent French composers who, back in 1870, were divided in their reception of, and ambivalent about, German music, became influenced by governmental propaganda, and gradually built an aesthetic that unequivocally opposed and excluded that of German composers. For nationalist writers such as Barrès and Maurras, “ ‘French’ comprised not only a language, but a mode of thought and feeling, common values and traits that bound the community in a political and aesthetic whole.”²⁸ When these nationalist writers theorized further, emphasizing a fundamental dialectic between “irrational” German romanticism on the one hand, and French “classicism” on the other,²⁹ Saint-Saëns’s eclectic works became clearly excluded from either category: classicism dictating formal unity (not rhapsodies), and romanticism

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jane Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics and Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 41.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jane Fulcher, *The Composer as Intellectual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 21.

²⁹ “French values or characteristics were henceforth to be considered as fundamentally “classical,” in marked distinction to the romantic, now associated with both irrationalism and the German enemy.” Ibid.

implying inwardness (not exoticism). Eventually, the right-wing nationalist theorists of the Action Française ended up sealing out these pieces altogether from the French canon.

Fulcher summarizes their outlook as follows:

“Purity” was considered essential and demanded the immediate extirpation of all foreign traits that could “pollute” any component of the mythic “génie national.” For Action Française, the most consistent danger in the past arose from “Jewish art,” which, even if the artist was a French citizen, brought in an “éclat oriental.” From this point on, a principal concern in artistic judgment was thus “purity,” or the absence of traits construed as foreign, or not endemic to the national classic style.³⁰

It isn't clear to what extent Saint-Saëns would have been sensitive to such arguments. Nonetheless, starting in 1896 (the year of the Egyptian concerto), Sabina Teller Ratner discerns that “a stylistic change is noticeable in much of Saint-Saëns's music,” and that the composer acquires an “austere tendency.”³¹ Indeed, after that date, Saint-Saëns composes only a few “exotic” works: two Barcarolles and the *Caprice Andalous* (1904). His attention becomes more firmly routed in classicism (that of antique Greece, as well as the musical classicism exemplified by the composition of pieces in established classical forms like the sonata.) For Ratner, this “serves to emphasize the classical aspect of Saint-Saëns's nature which, latent earlier, had seldom been displayed in such rarefied form.” Is it possible that Saint-Saëns's eclecticism was eventually reigned in by these theories?

3) Eclecticism and French identity

At a time when the dogmatic insecurity of French composers was at its peak, eclecticism temporarily lost its right to exist. Yet, upon the end of World War I, eclectic juxtapositions and quotations would return in full force to the forefront of French art,

³⁰ Jane Fulcher, *The Composer as Intellectual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 22.

³¹ Sabina Teller Ratner, et al., “Saint-Saëns,” in *Grove Music Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 May 2008), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>.

albeit with a different cast. While the Dadaists, and later the surrealists proposed a different alternatives to the excesses of romanticism in literature and art, composers learned to transcend the old French/German, Classic/Romantic dialectic. Erik Satie wrote formally aimless pieces and many of Francis Poulenc's works involve juxtapositions and quotations. Evocation and quotation are central to Darius Milhaud's style. His *Saudades* for piano are polytonal treatments of Brazilian folk tunes and his *Création du Monde* is based on the jazz idiom he encountered in New York City. Saint-Saëns, and particularly the Saint-Saëns who lived to see some of these works might have rejected any connection, but his earlier rhapsodic works provided a precedent for such pieces. The formal effect of eclecticism in these works had a pioneering aspect.

If we reject the idea that Saint-Saëns's rhapsodic works were a result of an *inability* to develop his ideas, what we have is a style of music that *deliberately refuses* to substantially develop the ideas. This lack of development can be interpreted in two opposing ways: either it *burdens* the form, turning it into a sort of indigestible pudding³² (literally a *pasticcio*) rich, and thick with too many ideas, or it *lightens* it by never dwelling very long on a particular idea, fleetingly moving from one to the next, like a stream of a consciousness, evoking the mercurial quality of human experience. This is supported by the fact that the ideas strung together in Saint-Saëns's pieces are not unrelated, as shown in the case of the beginning of the Second Piano Concerto. Eclecticism connects with the French ideals of lightness and clarity.

Eclecticism and quotation result from a fascination with new sounds. To this day, the French spectralists trace their genealogy back to Berlioz's orchestration. The

³² Or what Dahlhaus calls a *pot-pourri*, resulting from a "cobbling" together of ideas. Carl Dahlhaus, *Between Romanticism and Modernism*, trans. Mary Whittall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 50, 58.

preoccupation with timbre and orchestral color became one of the distinguishing features of the French (along with the Russian) traditions. As we go back in time, tracing the steps that lead the spectralists to emerge from Berlioz, we may find along the way Pierre Boulez (for instance, for his creative use of instrumental timbres in *Le marteau sans maître*), Pierre Schaeffer (and his explorations of *concrète* sound), Olivier Messiaen (preoccupied with orchestral color and, among other things bird calls and the Balinese gamelan), and Ravel and Debussy (both brilliant orchestrators). And, then, no doubt, along the way there will be a stop for Saint-Saëns. Saint-Saëns, after all, was one of the first to introduce the piano as an orchestral instrument (in his *Organ Symphony*); his *Carnival* includes a part for the glass harmonica. His exotic pieces, and the harmonic explorations these involved (such as the one shown in Fig. 3), fit within the same concern, the same obsession for timbral contrast.

After reading Jane Fulcher's description of the very deliberate and artificial efforts and the cultural debates involved in the development of a French aesthetic, it is difficult to believe that there is anything truly "natural" or even consensual about that concept or its evolution. While indeed, much music was written in response to these pressures and philosophies, French composers nowadays, a century after the fact, no longer grant much validity to the French/German dialectic. Much has happened in that century, including modernism, the push for the unification of Europe, a gradual disinterest of the government in supporting "serious" (or "academic") art, aiming any propaganda efforts at what the population actually most listens to: popular music. The new dialectic involves European tradition versus the hegemony of American popular culture. In this, the Germans and the French find themselves finally united.

In the 1990s, American Rap, North African *rai*, regional music from Corsica and Brittany (for instance at the “festival inter-celtique,” where the *biniou* is alive and well), all entered into a dialogue with the tradition of French *chanson*. The resulting effect was not so much a cacophony as an exciting eclecticism that no doubt mirrored that Saint-Saëns might have witnessed in his travels, or ambling through the many *Expositions Universelles* that took place in Paris throughout his lifetime (1855, 1867, 1878, 1889 and 1900.)

The rhapsodies of Saint-Saëns, however cobbled together, however much they evoke a spirit of childish novelty, do also evoke the child’s fascination for what is new, what is different, and what is foreign. Reaching that point of view entails both lucidity and tolerance, traditions that, even if they have suffered many unfortunate exceptions throughout French history, the French people still seek to hold as national values, to this day.

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