

Violin Concerto No. 3 in B minor, Op. 61

Camille Saint-Saëns

Monsieur Saint-Saëns possesses one of the most astonishing musical organizations I know of. He is a musician armed with every weapon. He is a master of his craft as no one else is. ... He plays, and plays with the orchestra as he does the piano. One can say no more.

So wrote the composer Charles Gounod of his fellow Frenchman. In marveling over Saint-Saëns's talents, Gounod might also have noted that he was a highly accomplished organist (who for two decades reigned in the loft at the Church of the Madeleine), a champion of forgotten earlier music and of contemporary composers, an inspiring teacher (who, as professor at the École Niedermeyer in Paris, did much to shape the talents of Gabriel Fauré and André Messager), a gifted writer, a world traveler, and an aficionado of such disciplines as Classical languages, astronomy, archaeology, philosophy, and even the occult sciences.

He started piano lessons at the age of two-and-a-half, soon began studying piano with a former pupil of Kalkbrenner's and Mendelssohn's, and embarked on composition and organ instruction at seven (by which time he was already performing Bach, Handel, and Mozart in public). In 1846, when he was ten, Saint-Saëns played his formal debut recital at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, with a program that included piano concertos by Mozart and Beethoven. The applause was resounding, so he topped off the event by offering to play any of Beethoven's piano sonatas from memory, as an encore. "He knows everything, but lacks inexperience," lamented his friend Hector Berlioz.

Saint-Saëns produced six works for violin and orchestra: three concertos (the so-called

Second, Op. 58, in 1858; the First, Op. 20, in 1859 — these were not published in the order they were composed — and his Third, Op. 61, in 1880); his famous Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, Op. 28 (1863); the rarely played Romance in C major, Op. 48, for Violin with Orchestra or Piano (1874); and Morceau de Concert in E minor, also for violin with orchestra or piano (1880). Three of these — the Concertos Nos. 1 and 3 and the Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso — were written for, dedicated to, and premiered by the Spanish virtuoso Pablo de Sarasate.

Saint-Saëns was immensely impressed by Sarasate, a decade his junior and only 15 years old when he introduced the First Violin Concerto in 1859. They became instant friends and remained so until the violinist's death, in 1908. The composer had no compunction about consulting "his violinist" on technical matters relating to the instrument. This surely accounts for a measure of the general

IN SHORT

Born: October 9, 1835, in Paris, France

Died: December 16, 1921, in Algiers, Algeria

Work composed: March 1880; dedicated "A Monsieur P. Sarasate"

World premiere: October 15, 1880, in Hamburg, by the Philharmonisches Orchester, Adolf Georg Beer, conductor, Pablo de Sarasate, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 16, 1894, Anton Seidl, conductor, Eugène Ysaÿe, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: June 19, 2015, Charles Dutoit, conductor, Renaud Capuçon, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 29 minutes

violinistic fluency displayed in the Third Concerto; and the last measures of the second movement, in which the soloist plays stratospheric arpeggios in harmonics, seems overtly crafted to reflect Sarasate's much remarked upon ability to negotiate passages in harmonics with unusual aplomb.

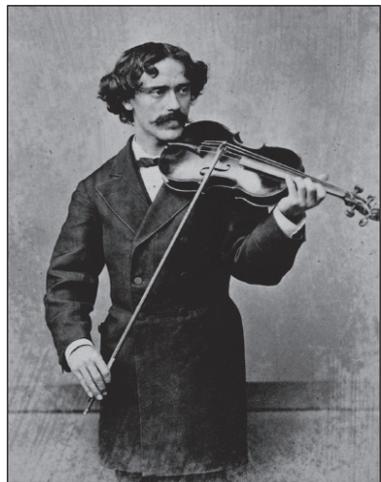
The Third Concerto quickly became one of Saint-Saëns's most played and admired compositions. Sarasate performed it often, but it was Timothée d'Adamowski who introduced it to America (in 1890, with the Boston Symphony Orchestra) and it quickly entered the repertoires of such notable virtuosos as Eugène Ysaÿe, Jan Kubelík, Mathieu Crickboom,

and Georges Enesco. Saint-Saëns applauded them all. He was less happy about Émile Sauret, who effected substantial modifications to the solo part and then had the American firm of G. Schirmer publish his version as an "authorized edition." Saint-Saëns went ballistic, but there was no stuffing the genie back in the bottle and that unquestionably *unauthorized* edition remains in print.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo violin.

Angels and Muses

Pablo de Sarasate was born in Pamplona, in the Spanish province of Navarra, on March 10, 1844, and died in Biarritz, in southwestern France, on September 20, 1908. Like Saint-Saëns, he was a child prodigy. He began violin lessons at five and, encouraged by his musical father (a military band director), played his debut recital in Pamplona at the age of only eight. He was swept off to pursue advanced study first in Madrid, then at the Paris Conservatoire. He concluded his work at the latter in 1859 and immediately embarked on the international concert circuit.



By the 1870s Sarasate had earned a spot among the leading virtuosos of his day. His profound preparation in the workings of compositions endeared him to many leading composers. Among those who dedicated important works to him, apart from Saint-Saëns, were Max Bruch (his Violin Concerto No. 2 and the *Scottish Fantasy*), Édouard Lalo (*Symphonie espagnole* and Concerto in F minor), Henryk Wieniawski (Violin Concerto No. 2), and Antonín Dvořák (*Mazurek*, Op. 49).

Sarasate was noted for silken bowing, impeccable intonation, and an elegant nonchalance that made him the toast of the salon set. When he died he bequeathed his two Stradivari violins to the conservatories of Madrid and Paris, but his other treasured possessions went to the city of Pamplona, where they can still be viewed in a museum constructed in his honor.

Pablo de Sarasate, ca. 1880