

Cello Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 33

Camille Saint-Saëns

“Monsieur Saint-Saëns possesses one of the most astonishing musical organizations I know of,” wrote his fellow French composer Charles Gounod. “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.” Gounod might have noted that the Parisian composer was also a highly accomplished organist (who for two decades reigned in the loft at Church of the Madeleine), a champion of forgotten early music and of contemporary composers, an inspiring teacher (who did much to shape the talents of Gabriel Fauré and André Messager), a gifted writer, a world traveler, and an informed aficionado of such disciplines as Classical languages, astronomy, archaeology, philosophy, and even the occult sciences.

Camille Saint-Saëns started piano lessons at the age of two-and-a-half and embarked on composition and organ instruction at seven, by which time he was already performing in public. He made his formal recital debut in 1846 in a program at Paris’s Salle Pleyel that included piano concertos by Mozart and Beethoven — with a cadenza he had written for the Mozart — plus solo pieces by Bach and Handel. “We have attended the debut of a charming child of ten who in a concert given chez M. Pleyel has made known to us one of the most formidable talents of the day,” reported the magazine *L’Illustration*. “He knows everything, but lacks inexperience,” bantered Hector Berlioz.

Saint-Saëns was born when Beethoven was still being mourned and died when Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* was being assimilated into the repertoire. Some viewed him as a curious relic of antiquity, to be sure, but those with open ears could hardly overlook that his style continued to develop practically until

the day he died, at the age of 86, while on vacation in Algiers; he was in the midst of a series of woodwind sonatas that are marked by neoclassical transparency.

By the time he composed his Cello Concerto No. 1, in November 1872 at the age of 37, Saint-Saëns was highly regarded in French musical circles but had not yet written the works for which he is most famous today. His first opera had been produced that June (*La Princesse jaune*, unveiled to little acclaim) and he had set aside another opera that seemed to be leading nowhere (*Samson et Dalila*, which he would pick up again with refreshed insights in 1873). His first two symphonies and his unnumbered symphony *Urbs Roma* were behind him — all are broadly ignored today — and his famous Third Symphony lay far in the future. Of his symphonic poems, he had achieved only *Le Rouet d’Omphale* (*Omphale’s Spinning Wheel*); his *Danse Macabre* would

In Short

Born: October 9, 1835, in Paris, France

Died: December 16, 1921, in Algiers, Algeria

Work composed: November 1872

World premiere: January 19, 1873, at the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire de Paris, Édouard Deldevez, conductor, Auguste Tolbecque, the work’s dedicatee, as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 15, 1890, with Leopold Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which merged with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), Adolphe Fischer, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: August 3, 2002, at a Concert in the Park in Valhalla, New York, Asher Fisch, conductor, Alisa Weilerstein, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 18 minutes

emerge in 1874. He was a bit farther along in the genre of the concerto, having completed the first three of his five piano concertos and two of his three violin concertos, as well as the popular Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso for Violin and Orchestra. (A Second Cello Concerto would follow in 1902.) With colleague Romain Bussine he had co-founded the Société Nationale de Musique, established to counter the French predilection for vocal over instrumental music and to promote music by French composers in their own land, which at the time was more respectful of Germanic scores.

The Saint-Saëns biographer Stephen Studd suggests that the composer's sudden interest in the cello — this concerto was immediately preceded by a sonata for the instrument — resulted from his mourning a recently departed great-aunt. "His feeling

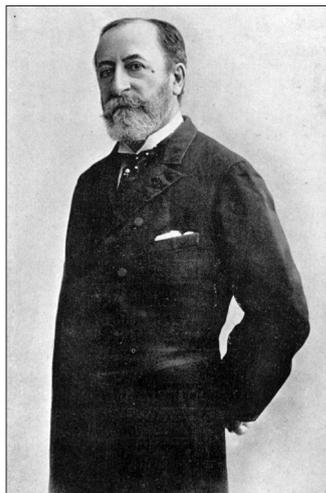
for the cello," writes Studd, "with its deep, dark tone and capacity for both dignified and impassioned utterance, was now re-kindled by the melancholy that set in after his bereavement." While dependably fervid, this concerto is elegiac only in a short Tchaikovsky-esque interlude in the finale. Still, the second movement — a minuet introduced by strings, muted and staccato — may underscore his relative's connection to the music of an earlier time.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo cello.

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Views and Reviews

Immediately following the premiere of Saint-Saëns's Cello Concerto No. 1, the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* reported:



If Mr. Saint-Saëns should decide to continue in this vein, which is consistent with his violin concerto, the Trio in F, and other works of lesser significance, he is certain to recover many of the votes that he lost with his all-too-obvious divergence from classicism and the tendencies in a number of his recent works. ... We must say that the Cello Concerto seems to us to be a beautiful and good work of excellent sentiment and perfect cohesiveness, and as usual the form is of greatest interest.

It should be clarified that this is in reality a Concertstück, since the three relatively short movements run together. The orchestra plays such a major role that it gives the work symphonic character, a tendency present in every concerto of any significance since Beethoven.

Saint-Saëns, ca. 1880