

Karen Gomyo Plays Mozart

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Samy Moussa *Nocturne*

Canadian-born Samy Moussa enjoys equal success as composer and conductor. Conductor Kent Nagano has commissioned five works from him. *Nocturne*, the most recent, is dedicated to Moussa's principal composition teacher at the Université de Montréal, José Evangelista. Moussa writes: "This could well be the composition in which I have maximized to the fullest economy of means in harmonic terms. The work is based on four chords, the most important of which is a major-seventh chord, which gives rise to nearly everything in the score. The melodic unfolding of this chord is heard in the opening 'theme' played by the solo horn, which returns throughout *Nocturne*, sometimes in inversion, but hopefully always recognizable. The overall color is rather grave, due to the use of the low register of most instruments. Three times the music attempts to rise from the depths; each time it falls back."

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Violin Concerto No. 3 in G Major, K. 216

Simplicity and elegance are watchwords in this concerto, one of four for violin that Mozart composed in 1775. Its tunefulness and modestly proportioned orchestra suggest that thoughtful music making is more important than technical fireworks. Listen for beauty of sound, clarity of structure and gorgeous melodies. All three movements are delightful, but the central Adagio—a rare tempo designation in Mozart—is particularly engaging. The metric changes in the finale are a quirky touch, adding folk-like charm.

Camille Saint-Saëns Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 78, "Organ"

Pianist, composer, organist—Camille Saint-Saëns was prodigiously gifted as all three. While organ gets top billing in this symphony, orchestral piano also has an unusual and significant role. Structurally it is unusual, with two large halves each consisting of two parts. The work is cyclic, introducing material in the restless opening measures that recurs in transformation in various places throughout the symphony. Listen for the organ's quieter moments, which will surprise you with delicacy and subtlety. Especially in the symphony's first

half, those quieter passages are subtle, rewarding careful listening. The organ does not play a solo role, but instead is integrated into the sonic fabric of the orchestra. That stated, you will definitely know when the organ joins the fray for Saint-Saëns' triumphant finale!

Samy Moussa *Nocturne*

Samy Moussa

Born: June 1, 1984, in Montreal, Canada

Currently residing in Paris and Rome

Composed: 2014

World Premiere: 15 February 2015 in Montreal. Kent Nagano conducted

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: These performances are the New Jersey Symphony premiere.

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, celeste and strings.

Duration: 10 minutes

Canadian-born Samy Moussa grew up in his native Montreal and earned his undergraduate degree at Université de Montréal. He subsequently pursued postgraduate composition study in Munich with Matthias Pintscher and Pascal Dusapin. Moussa was based in Germany for more than 10 years, participating in conducting masterclasses with major maestros, including Pierre Boulez and Péter Eötvös. Moussa has conducted orchestras in Munich, Vienna, Leipzig, Halle and Zurich.

Today, he enjoys equal success as composer and conductor. Currently artist-in-residence with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, Moussa has retained strong ties to l'Orchestre Symphonique de Montréal, whose music director, Kent Nagano, has commissioned five works from him. He has also been commissioned by the Dallas Symphony, Brussels Philharmonic and Bavarian Radio Symphony, among others. Moussa is currently working on new works for the Vienna Philharmonic and the Dutch National Opera and Bellet.

Nocturne, the most recent of Nagano's commissions for Montréal, is dedicated to Moussa's principal

composition teacher at the Université de Montréal, José Evangelista. The composer writes:

This could well be the composition in which I have maximized to the fullest economy of means in harmonic terms. The work is based on four chords, the most important of which is a major-seventh chord, which gives rise to nearly everything in the score. The melodic unfolding of this chord is heard in the opening ‘theme’ played by the solo horn, which returns throughout *Nocturne*, sometimes in inversion, but hopefully always recognizable. The overall color is rather grave, due to the use of the low register of most instruments. Three times the music attempts to rise from the depths; each time it falls back.

Applied to art forms, the term nocturne refers to the night: a painting of a moonlit scene; or a musical composition thought to be evocative of the hours between sunset and dawn. Don’t expect a Chopinesque nocturne from Moussa. He takes a dark view of the night, shrouded in mystery at the start and escalating with sinister determination to those three surges mentioned in his composer’s note. Each one seems almost apocalyptic. The dynamic level eventually dissipates; however, the tension remains, sustained by long pedal points and timpani rumbles that leave the listener uneasy and questioning. *Nocturne* is a powerful piece.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Violin Concerto No. 3 in G Major, K. 216

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: September 1775

World Premiere: Undocumented, but probably in Salzburg in September 1775

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1977–78 season. Edith Peinemann was the soloist; Walter Susskind conducted.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two horns, solo violin, and strings. The oboes play in the outer movements, replaced by flutes in the slow movement. In Mozart’s day, oboists would have also played flute.

Duration: 24 minutes

We all know that Mozart was a terrific pianist. He was also an excellent violinist.

He came by his talent as a string player naturally: his father Leopold was a violinist, composer and writer on music. The year Mozart was born, his father published a violin method called *Versuch einer gründliche Violinschule (Essay on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing)*. The book was well received and established Leopold’s authority and reputation as a string pedagogue. Today it is one of our most valuable

documents about the perception and performance of music in the mid-18th century. By 1763, when young Wolfgang was seven, Leopold had advanced to become Vice-Kapellmeister (a bit like associate concertmaster) of the Salzburg court orchestra.

As difficult as it is for us to place this information in context, to some extent Wolfgang grew up identified through his father's fame. He became an expert performer on violin and viola as well as piano, and by age 14 had been named first violinist in the Salzburg Court Orchestra. For a while, he contemplated a career as a concert violinist.

That helps to explain why, between April and December, 1775, 19-year-old Wolfgang composed four (!) concertos for violin and orchestra. We will never know for certain whether he composed these works for himself or for the concertmaster of the Archbishop's Salzburg orchestra. Regardless, his concerto reflects his own string technique and musical style in the mid-1770s. The fact that a teenager composed this glorious piece is humbling.

The G-major concerto, K.216, was the second to be completed that year; the autograph score is dated 12 September 1775. More self-assured than its two predecessors, the Third Concerto shows a convincing command of form and interaction between soloist and orchestra. It borrows its main theme for the *Allegro* from an aria in Mozart's opera *Il rè pastore* (*The Shepherd King*), K. 208, which Mozart had just completed a few months before writing the concerto. Mozart gives the oboes and horns a more significant role than in earlier concerted works.

His biographer Philip Radcliffe compares the sustained, vocal melody of the slow movement to the famous "Elvira Madigan" movement in the later Piano Concerto No. 21 in C Major, K. 467. Pizzicato basses, muted strings, and a duet of flutes (replacing oboes) provide gentle support to the elegant solo line, which resembles an Italian opera aria. The finale is more French in style—right down to the spelling of 'rondo' as Rondeau. Mozart composed a bubbling movement in 3/8, interrupting it twice for episodes in duple time.

The biggest surprise is a quiet, unassuming conclusion to this graceful movement. Rather than giving us bravura writing, Mozart emphasizes the beauty of melody, warm tone quality, and surpassing musicianship.

Mozart left no cadenzas for this concerto. For these performances, Karen Gomyo plays cadenzas by the American fortepianist and Mozart specialist Robert Levin.

Camille Saint-Saëns: Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 78, "Organ"

Born: October 9, 1835, in Paris, France

Died: December 16, 1921, in Algiers, Algeria

Composed: 1886

World Premiere: May 19, 1886, in London's St. James Hall. The composer conducted.

New Jersey Symphony Premiere: 1936–37 season. Rene Pollain conducted.

Instrumentation: three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, triangle, bass drum, organ, piano, and strings

Duration: 36 minutes

Camille Saint-Saëns enjoyed that rare luxury for composers: enormous success during his lifetime. (Hector Berlioz famously observed of his younger colleague, “He knows everything, but he lacks inexperience.”) Saint-Saëns’ music has suffered some of the “Mendelssohn syndrome” from critics who claim that his inspiration slacked. They contend that a lack of obstacles and major crises in his lifetime prevented him from bringing his undeniable talent to fullest bloom. That assessment has undergone reassessment, and Saint-Saëns’ chamber music is appearing more frequently on concert programs, finding new enthusiasts.

The Symphony in C Minor never relinquished those audiences. It found champions at its premiere and has remained steadily in favor ever since. Its success is all the more remarkable when one considers that it was his first symphony in 27 years.

Saint-Saëns took a number of structural and other liberties in this work. It consists of two large parts, each of which is subdivided into two sections played without pause. Thus, the whole is an adaptation of four-movement symphonic form. Another unconventional feature of the symphony is the inclusion of organ and piano in the scoring. The composer uses the organ to evoke the spirituality and reverence associated with church organs, and to dramatize his musical climaxes with the sheer mass of sound an organ can produce with all its stops pulled. He uses the piano in the scherzo for punctuation, with rapid scales and arpeggios.

Liszt and Saint-Saëns: an unlikely friendship

The Symphony was composed when Saint-Saëns was 50. It bears a dedication to the memory of Franz Liszt, who had died in July 1886 at the age of 75. The two men had admired each other greatly, and Saint-Saëns knew he had lost a great ally outside France when Liszt died. He was otherwise embroiled in a major mid-life crisis: his children had died, and his marriage had failed. These factors may account for the frank emotional character of the Third Symphony. From a more strictly musical standpoint, Saint-Saëns’ inclusion of the important role for organ is likely an imitation of Liszt’s similar scoring in the symphonic poem *Hunnenschlacht* (1877).

English commission

The work was commissioned by the London Philharmonic Society in conjunction with a piano solo appearance by Saint-Saëns. The English audience loved the new work, erupting into an uncharacteristic ovation. It is easy to understand their enthusiasm. This is music of immediate, poignant appeal that verges on but never descends to the sentimental. The opening string theme, which bears a passing resemblance to the *Dies Irae*

chant, introduces much of the material that will recur later in the symphony. It has an agitated quality similar to the string background in Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony.

A Lisztian imprint is evident in Saint-Saëns' adaptation of thematic transformation, which unifies the symphony. The familiar scherzo, opening part II, exudes a rough masculine vigor that serves as an auditory appetizer for the no-holds-barred thrills of Saint-Saëns' finale. The French critic Augé de Lassus described the climax "like Napoleon hurling in the Imperial Guard at Waterloo." This triumphant conclusion falls clearly within the tradition established by Beethoven in his Fifth Symphony and continued by Brahms in his First Symphony, whereby victory prevails after a lengthy struggle. Such a progression, while familiar in Germany and Austria, was new to France. Saint-Saëns was an innovator in that respect as well.

A French debut for program notes

Seven months after the English première, Jules Garcin led the Conservatoire Orchestra in a performance of the Third Symphony in Paris, introducing the work to French audiences. The London program notes were translated for that performance, marking the first time that notes were provided to the audience in a French concert hall.

French symphonic tradition: a work in progress

When we think about symphonies, we don't think of French composers right off the bat. Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven come to mind. So do Brahms and Schubert, perhaps Mendelssohn and Schumann, definitely Bruckner and Mahler. If we break away from the Austro-German symphonists, Dvořák, Tchaikovsky, Sibelius and Shostakovich get a good deal of exposure in our concert halls. These dozen composers probably account for 80 percent of the symphonies performed in any given season—and there's not a Frenchman among them.

For centuries, opera has dominated French musical life. Instrumental music has had its proponents, however, and beginning with the works of François-Joseph Gossec (1734–1829), France has boasted a modest symphonic tradition of its own. While German influence dominated, it is worth noting that Beethoven thought highly of Étienne-Nicolas Méhul's (1763–1817) symphonies. France's first great 19th-century symphonist, Hector Berlioz, exerted a strong influence on his contemporaries in Germany, Austria and Russia. Ironically, his music remained largely misunderstood in his native land.

A concert series established by the conductor Jules-Étienne Padeloup in 1861 at Paris' Cirque d'Hiver did much to bring instrumental music to a wider audience. Although Padeloup favored the Viennese symphonic classics, his introduction of Richard Wagner's music had far-reaching impact on contemporary French composers. Padeloup's series was continued by the conductors Charles Lamoureux and Édouard Colonne, who enabled some local composers to have their works performed.

During the 1880s, French composers (and Belgians who had settled in Paris) produced a rich harvest of symphonies, including a little-known Symphony in D Minor by Gabriel Fauré (1884), Vincent d'Indy's *Symphonie sur un chant montagnard français* (*Symphony on a French Mountain Air*), 1885, the Symphony in G Minor by Édouard Lalo (1886), Franck's Symphony in D Minor (1886–88), Chausson's Symphony in B flat, Op. 20 (1889–90), and of course the Saint-Saëns Symphony No. 3 (1886) that we hear at these performances.

These works have had uneven fates. The Franck and Saint-Saëns receive more performances than all the others combined, and for similar reasons. Both works work recognizably within the symphonic tradition but impose bold structural ideas. Each adds a degree of chromaticism that shows an expanding harmonic palette. And both symphonies use principles of thematic transformation and development to provide a cyclic unity to a large structure. That stated, the Saint-Saëns is the more popular favorite, surely because of its gorgeous slow movement and splendid finale, both incorporating *obbligato* organ.

Origins of a unique name

The surname Saint-Saëns is surely one of the most problematic in all music. The family name dates to pre-medieval times, probably the sixth century A.D., and is a contraction and corruption of Sanctus Sidonius, Latin for St. Sidonius.

A native of Lyon, Apollinaris Sidonius (full name Caius Sollius Apollinaris Sidonius) lived from 430 to *ca.* 489 AD. After serving as senator and Roman prefect in the Imperial Capital, he retired to Gaul. Eventually, he became a respected bishop in Clermont and sustained a reputation as a classical scholar, orator and poet. Apollinaris Sidonius remains an important example of late Roman Christianized classical culture. His unsuccessful leadership of the French against the invading Goths led to his subsequent canonization by the Catholic Church.

In the name's modern guise, all three S's are pronounced and the 'Saint' takes the French pronunciation, with the 't' silent and the compound vowel more like "can't" than "ain't." A rough approximation is "Sanh-Sahnz." (Maybe it's easier to write it!)

Fortunately, Saint-Saëns' music is much easier to listen to than his name is to spell or pronounce.