

## **Concerto for Cello • Camille Saint-Saëns**

SCORED FOR: TWO FLUTES, TWO OBOES, TWO CLARINETS, TWO BASSOONS, TWO HORNS, TWO TRUMPETS, TIMPANI, AND STRINGS.

"Music is something besides a source of sensuous pleasure and keen emotion, and this resource, precious as it is, is only a chance corner in the wide realm of musical art. He who does not get absolute pleasure from a simple series of well-constructed chords, beautiful only in their arrangement, is not really fond of music." Written in his memoirs, these words of Camille Saint-Saëns summarize his life long passion for musical simplicity, clarity in expression and logic in formal construction. Though he lived during the height of the romantic movement in Europe, his compositional tendencies and musical preferences always leaned towards the conservative classical models: symphonies, concertos and sonatas.

Saint-Saëns was a child prodigy, composing small works before his fourth birthday and performing full-length solo recitals by the age of ten. However, his caretakers realized the freak-show circus-life that he was headed towards and pulled him out of the public spotlight until he matured. His intellectual capacity was inexhaustible; while most would have been content with composing and a career as a virtuoso, Saint-Saëns was enamored with mathematics, astronomy, archeology, wrote continuously about these and musical topics, and traveled widely. Indeed, he was a restless man.

Sensing that France was well behind the general trends of European composition in the mid eighteenth century, (there was no living symphonic tradition and the preferred music was light, many would say frivolous, opera and operetta) Saint-Saëns felt a growing challenge to call for a rebirth of French culture. Inspired and humiliated by the collapse of the Second Empire at the hands of Prussia, Saint-Saëns, with the backing of a large group of individuals anxious to support a renewal of serious French music, founded the National Music Society. Over the next half-century this institution was one of the most influential in French musical life. The Society encouraged new compositions and sponsored performances of new works by such notable French composers as Franck, Chausson, Chabrier, d'Indy, Lalo, Debussy, Ravel and Saint-Saëns himself. Not only was French musical culture rejuvenated in France, but the world began to take notice of French fine art music, and it was increasingly admired and performed in other countries. By the beginning of the twentieth century France had completely transformed its musical status: moving from perennial, insignificant follower to a leader in the European musical avant-garde.

One of the earliest contributions that Saint-Saëns made to the cause was his Cello Concerto No. 1 in A Minor. The work was completed in 1872 and first performed on January 19, 1873 by the Paris Conservatory Orchestra with August Tolbecque as soloist. The work, dedicated to Tolbecque, is modest in scope and is typical of Saint-Saëns desire to maintain classical sensibilities in his compositions. From the beginning, it is evident that he has solved the problem of most cello

concertos: making making the low-pitched solo instrument easily audible against the background of the entire orchestra. He achieves this through exceptionally delicate scoring, reserving the full orchestra only for punctuation or transitional passages when the soloist is not playing.

The opening movement, *Allegro non troppo*, is unusually passionate in character beginning with a sharp chord from the orchestra that immediately introduces the solo instrument; no time is wasted on orchestral introductions here. The opening theme, a downward sweeping, two-octave, triplet laden musical motive, will come to dominate the entire composition. This theme is repeated, sometimes in its original form, but more often with greater and greater variation, until sometimes all that is recognizable of the original are the rolling triplet rhythms. Gradually the rhythmic drive relaxes and the first movement passes imperceptibly to the second without the traditional pause. The second movement, *Allegretto con moto*, is a delicate interlude in the character of a minuet, perhaps even a waltz, that is introduced by the muted strings alone. The movement concludes with a cadenza for the solo cello that finishes with a series of rising trills, and is seamlessly linked to the finale with a transition based again on the principal motives of the opening movement. The finale, *Allegro non troppo*, subtly combines elements from each of the first two movements and continually grows in virtuosic display. Swift scales, octaves, rapid arpeggios, and a dizzying ascent in to the tonal stratosphere with precariously high harmonics are dashed off as the tempo increases with the excitement of the music, all leading to a brilliant finish in A major.