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Camille Saint-Saëns

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Mélodies persanes Op 26 Armand Renaud

FRANÇOIS LE ROUX baritone
GRAHAM JOHNSON piano
THERE IS SOMETHING INSCRUTABLE about the composer’s gaze in the celebrated photograph by Nadar, reproduced on page 3. He looks very much a figure of the Establishment (bearing an uncanny resemblance, despite the beard, to the former British Foreign Secretary, Lord Carrington). Here he is at the greatest moment of fame, little dreaming that all too soon he was destined to become a footnote in French music, rather than the major chapter which he clearly thought his due. And somewhere in this expression of a grandee we can detect the heartbreak and sadness of a particularly lonely life. There is also a glint in the eye which suggests he is not to be trifled with: we would not dare to broach the subject of his private affairs with this touchy (and potentially vituperative) maître. His many secrets are his own, and to this day no one knows the real Camille Saint-Saëns. Perhaps as a result of this mask, fewer people today know his music. Obsessive privacy has a way of translating into anonymity, a quality which seeps into the compositions, and can render them all too easy to neglect. Not that all of Saint-Saëns falls into this faceless category, for a great deal of the time he was capable of remarkable individuality. Who else could have written *Le Carnaval des animaux*, *Samson et Dalila*, and the Second Piano Concerto? And there is much else besides which is worthy of performance, including the songs on this disc which will hopefully add a further, if not radical, new dimension to the composer in the listener’s mind and ear. If Fauré is the ‘Master of Charms’, as Debussy called him, Saint-Saëns is the ‘Master of Disguises’, and it is this which may perplex us when the innocent ear encounters these songs on the radio. ‘Who is this composer?’ we ask ourselves, enjoying the music the while, and wondering at its ease and confidence. Saint-Saëns responds so readily to his texts, and fits his music out with such appropriate and clever local colour, that we sometimes forget where, and who, its creator is.

**The life**

There can have been few composers who got off to such an auspicious start. Mozart (to whom he was frequently compared) perhaps? But like Mozart, Saint-Saëns had to struggle for recognition as an adult, and he paid a heavy price for his childhood celebrity. He acquired very early a flawless command of musical ways and means, but his career as an adult, not to mention his personality, suffered as a result. When one thinks how famous he was as an old man at the turn of the Century, it is difficult to realise that after his glittering career as a child prodigy, his progress through the world of music was blighted for many years by indifference and misfortune. For a long time his works were regarded as outré and impossibly ‘academic’, the worst possible epithet in the high-living, carefree (and essentially philistine) Paris of Napoléon III. With dogged application he continued to compose, receiving the sort of bad notices which would have obliterated the confidence of a lesser man. But then there was something absolutely indomitable about Saint-Saëns, and those who have studied his long life in depth are filled with admiration for his gifts, his industry, and his determination to compose only in the way that he wished. He had almost nothing of Massenet’s endless wish to please; indeed there was a side of him which almost relished being at war with anyone and everyone, the musical establishment above all. For many years he was the spokesman of modernism, a voice in the wilderness composing symphonies and chamber music when the French, drunk on Meyerbeer, had no use for such things. But in those years when ardent Wagnerism, and later Debussysim, seemed to be all the rage, he was as implacably opposed to the modems as he had been enthusiastically on their side earlier in his career. Indeed there seems to have been only a brief period at the end of the nineteenth century when his fame coincided with his reputation as an innovator. Even then the main musical agenda had already moved on, for by the 1890s Saint-Saëns’
mortal enemy Claude Debussy was the coming man, and everyone of importance in Paris, except the public at large, knew it.

After many years in the wilderness as far as the Parisian critics were concerned, Saint-Saëns eventually reaped the rewards of a lifetime’s hard work and achieved great celebrity. Little by little, and then with the speed of the Wall Street Crash, his reputation declined. Composers of Poulenc’s generation dismissed him as a ranting old reactionary, and this is more or less what he had become by as early as 1913, his *ex cathedra* pronouncements embittered by loneliness and spleen. His posthumous reputation plummeted to such an extent that it has still not recovered. We await a new catalogue of Saint-Saëns’ works and a biography in depth (both in preparation) which will take into account not only his many writings on music, but also the vast and fascinating correspondence. Whether this will restore him to the level of adored master that he enjoyed at the turn of the century is doubtful, but it should provoke a major reassessment of one of the most interesting musical personalities of the time. Who else could claim to have performed for the Citizen King, Louis-Philippe, at the Tuileries, and yet lived long enough to compose a chorus (*Aux conquérants de l’air*) in honour of ‘those magnificent men in their flying machines’, the brave airmen of the First World War and the Roaring Twenties?

**The ‘Infant prodigy and Wunderkind’ 1835–1853**

Charles-Camille Saint-Saëns was born on 9 October 1835. His father, Victor Saint-Saëns, died only a few months after his birth, and the frail child was brought up by his mother who was the daughter of a carpenter. Despite her lowly background Mme Saint-Saëns was an amateur painter of some ability, and had enormous artistic ambitions for her son. Her aunt Charlotte Masson, who had moved in to help in the upbringing of the boy, gave him piano lessons from the age of two-and-a-half, and it was soon clear that young Camille had absolute pitch and musical gifts of a high order. The composer remembered his fury at this age whenever he was taken away from the piano. His first composition was dated 22 March 1839 when he was three years and five months old. The first song dates from May 1841, a setting of Marceline Desbordes-Valmore entitled *Le Soir* (the composer was five-and-a-half years old). This is a little ditty in A minor with a sparse but surprisingly effective accompaniment noted down in astonishingly
sophisticated calligraphy. (The time signature, for example, is simply 3, not the usual $\frac{3}{4}$—an abbreviation that Saint-Saëns was to use throughout his life.) As a reward for writing another early song he was given a score of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, a gift which remained a talisman for the composer and a work which was a source of almost sacred inspiration for his entire life.

His mother seems to have been rather a severe woman (judging from her portrait) who was determined that Camille was not to be spoiled by the usual adulation surrounding a child prodigy. On the other hand he did not enjoy the freedoms of a normal boyhood; all his teachers came to the house, and his thin build and pale complexion were signs not only of his generally frail health, but of a child raised in a hothouse. In 1843 he was sent to study the piano with Camille Stamaty, pupil of Frédéric Kalkbrenner, who in turn had studied with Haydn. By means of Kalkbrenner’s patented hand-guide, an adjustable horizontal rail parallel to the piano on which the forearm rested, Saint-Saëns was trained to have absolute independence of the fingers. These were astonishingly fleet (as we can hear on the few recordings he made as an old man), even if the playing was lacking in warmth of tone by the standards of the later nineteenth century. It seems to have been masterful and precise, almost free from extraneous rubato, the transparent jeu perlé of an earlier pianistic epoch, and utterly different from that of Liszt who was already an established virtuoso. On this disc, the song Tournoiement (track 15) from the Mélodies persanes perhaps best illustrates the sort of difficult accompaniment which Saint-Saëns wrote from time to time to display his own technical accomplishment. He made his début in 1846 at the Salle Pleyel performing, among other things, Mozart’s Piano Concerto K450, and was duly hailed as a new Mozart.

One of the young Saint-Saëns’ first set-backs was his failure to win the Prix de Rome in 1852. (He tried again, also unsuccessfully, twelve years later.) In December 1853, under the auspices of this society, Saint-Saëns’ Symphony in E flat was announced as the work of an unknown German composer. It was received rapturously, and only then was its creator’s true identity revealed. Gounod, who had watched the young composer’s development for a number of years, wrote Saint-Saëns a generous letter which predicted that he would become a great composer. Rossini was also an admirer of Saint-Saëns’ precocious talents, as was Berlioz who said with typical acuity ‘He knows everything, but he lacks inexperience’. Even at this early stage Saint-Saëns’ formidable ability to manipulate the materials of music was seen to be at odds with the sheer quality of musical invention. Even then people noticed that his facility masked his human vulnerability, that indefinable quality which gives to music an unmistakable provenance.

The Revolutionary 1854–1870
The E flat major Symphony was published in 1855 as Opus 2, the first work by Saint-Saëns to appear in print. In this year he also composed L’Attente (Hugo) [4] which alongside Le pas d’armes du Roi Jean [5] ranks as the composer’s best known work in the field of the mélodie, and which is included in American song albums at the expense of many other delights. A photograph from this period shows the composer to be a rather thin and sickly individual, a pale face hidden by an unimpressive beard, hardly the man-about-town and scarcely a convincing picture of a devout lover.

Another symphony (in F major this time) followed with the subtitle Urbs Roma. All through this period Saint-Saëns was making part of his living by being an organist, first at the church of St Séverin, then St Merry (where his Messe Op 4 was given its first performance, a work which Liszt much admired) and later (from 1857) as organist at the
Madeleine where he remained until 1876. The latter post was the most important of its kind in Paris and earned the composer a handsome 3000 francs a year. Saint-Saëns’ amazing ability to improvise at the organ drew visitors to the Madeleine from all over the world to hear him play: Clara Schumann, Sarasate, Anton Rubinstein and Robert Franz were all pilgrims to this particular shrine. Liszt himself pronounced Saint-Saëns the greatest organist in the world. This position was also something of a social one, and to permit him to entertain luminaries in the appropriate manner the composer bought a new apartment in the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré where he lived in some style together with his mother and great aunt. His weekly Monday salons became a celebrated part of the Parisian music scene.

It was during this period that Saint-Saëns began his career as a teacher at the École Niedermeyer where he met the young Gabriel Fauré. A special bond of friendship was formed between the sixteen-year-old pupil and the professor who, after all, was only a decade older. It was thanks to Saint-Saëns that Fauré first heard the works of Schumann, Liszt and Wagner—not prescribed composers for students at a school which concentrated on church music. Fauré was to remain a lifelong friend, and his family was to be adopted by the older composer as his own in his later, lonely years.

**Ars gallica 1870–1886**

Political upheavals change the artistic climate of any age, and the Franco-Prussian War and the period of the Commune which followed it were a watershed for French art. The opening of the newly-built opera house of the Palais Garnier in 1875 seemed to serve notice on the sort of grand opera which had been so much a part of the Second Empire. Gounod’s successes on the lyric stage were now the model to follow, not the heavy and ornate works of Meyerbeer which had adapted Italian bel canto to the plush French taste. Much of this new mood of optimism in the musical world was to do with the founding of the Société Nationale de la Musique of which Saint-Saëns was vice-president. Also involved were the composers Alexis de Castillon, Henri Duparc, Saint-Saëns’ protégé Gabriel Fauré, César Franck, Edouard Lalo and so on. The motto of this organisation was ‘Ars gallica’. Of course there was still massive opposition to ‘music of the Future’ from the public, a tag which implied German modern madness. But this organisation was truly devoted to defending the home-grown music of France which had been so ignored. This was the period of Saint-Saëns’ tone poems (*Le rouet d’Omphale* [1872], *Phaéton* [1873], *Danse macabre* [1874]), a form which owed much to Liszt. These were not successful with the critics. Another major disappointment for the composer was that, despite the advocacy of the renowned mezzo soprano Pauline Viardot, he was unable to convince the director of the Opéra to stage *Samson et Dalila*. A concert performance of the first act of this work met with critical hostility.

In 1872 the composer had lost the woman who had first brought him to music, his great aunt Charlotte. He now lived alone with his mother, and up until 1875 we know almost nothing about his emotional life and his relationship to women. Madame Saint-Saëns was a difficult character who kept such distractions away from her son. It is all the more strange then that the composer should decide to marry a nineteen-year-old girl, Marie-Laure-Émilie Truffot, the sister of one of his school friends. Nothing is known about the background to this marriage, or why, for example, the ceremony took place far from Paris. Why was it that the composer seemed anxious to avoid the publicity? Was
Madame Saint-Saëns informed, or did he marry the girl without his mother’s knowledge and to escape her influence? In any case, within a short time the married couple was living under the same roof as Madame Saint-Saëns, and the seeds of the destruction for this fragile relationship (the bride was uninterested in music) were sown. The composer’s mother was autocratic and exigent, and not only in personal matters; she seems to have remained Saint-Saëns’ sternest musical critic, and it is known that he composed a new finale to the Cello Sonata in C minor because she was not satisfied with the first. Certainly there is no reason to suppose that she would have made an easy mother-in-law.

The composer had two sons from this marriage (born in 1875 and 1877). In late May 1878 the elder of the little boys, aged two-and-a-half, fell to his death from the balcony of the house in Paris. Six weeks later the second son perished as a result of pneumonia. It seems that Saint-Saëns blamed his wife for both catastrophes. By 1881 the marriage was at an end. The composer simply walked out on his spouse when they were on holiday together; he left her a note saying that he would not return, and moved back to his mother. There is some parallel here with the behaviour of Paul Verlaine who had left his wife in a scandalous fashion a few years earlier, and whose choice of marriage partner had seemed peculiarly cavalier, quite apart from the fact that he was fundamentally unsuited to marriage. Saint-Saëns did not let these events get in the way of his productivity. A great many first performances of new works were given at this time, almost all of them roundly damned by the Parisian critics. In Weimar *Samson et Dalila* (in German translation of course) had a triumphant success under the auspices of Liszt. It is astonishing that this work, certainly the best-known of all Saint-Saëns’ stage works, should have had to wait fifteen years for a performance in Paris.

He was by now a feared critic, able to write polemical articles which seethed with anger and fury, and which recalled the acerbic literary style of Berlioz. He was also a respected scholar and editor, undertaking the preparation of a complete edition of Gluck’s works. Gradually the tide of public opinion in France began to turn in favour of Saint-Saëns’ music. If at long last he was no longer a prophet unappreciated in his own land, the troubling tide of modernity was beginning to wash over the composer just at the moment that his own music was being seriously countenanced by the French public. The Société Nationale was somewhat hijacked by Vincent d’Indy and other Wagnerians who wanted to promote the performance of foreign music—Wagner above all. Saint-Saëns left the society, and this period of ‘*Ars gallica*’ was at an end. From now on, and increasingly, he began to have reservations about the Wagnerian passions of his younger colleagues.

**The Celebrity 1887–1901**

The greatest emotional setback that the composer had to face in his life was the death of his mother in 1888. He had been passionately devoted to her, although there is no doubt that their relationship was far from healthy, and it left Saint-Saëns emotionally stunted in certain respects. The composer decided to turn his back on Paris which had been the scene of so many artistic frustrations and personal tragedies. Between 1890 and 1904 he had no fixed address, astonishing enough for a busy professional pianist, but almost unthinkable for a composer. Nevertheless he continued to write and work unabated, indeed with ever-increasing productivity. In addition to writing his own music he undertook the editing of the complete works of Rameau for Durand. More importantly he at last found success in the world of opera. The first performance in Paris of *Samson et Dalila* in November 1892 (fifteen years after the Weimar
première) was a resounding triumph. From now on the composer could do no wrong, and his participation in various grandiose projects (for example *Déjanire*, an outdoor spectacle at Béziers) was cheered to the rafters and given serious critical approbation.

One might have imagined that this state of affairs would have encouraged the composer to enjoy the fruits of his Parisian success and settle down in some splendour and comfort. But without his mother it seems it was impossible for him to establish a conventionally comfortable household. Without a home of his own he continued to be the most nomadic of all composers, living out of suitcases and composing in railway carnages and ships’ cabins. The extent of this wandering exceeded the composer’s professional need for the itinerant life (to make money as a virtuoso): it became an end in itself, a flight from his memories and from his own ghosts. It is truly astonishing that he continued to write as much as he did, sending manuscripts back to his publishers in Paris. He was always accompanied by his pet dogs (the most famous of these was called Dalila and photographed by Nadar) and by his ever-faithful manservant Gabriel Geslin. Algeria and Egypt were favourite ports of call and this exotic travel is reflected often in the music. The Fifth Piano Concerto (1896) is known as the ‘Egyptian’ and there were two huge works for orchestra, *Suite Algérienne* and *Africa*. Of course Saint-Saëns’ fondness for these sunny destinations (also Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Uruguay) was partly to do with his health. His weak chest made it necessary for him to seek out comfortable climates. But there was no doubt another agenda for his visits to North Africa, and one calls to mind many French visitors to those parts of the world (Pierre Louys, Flaubert, Gide among others) who were drawn there by the beauty of the inhabitants, and the air of sexual freedom so different from a Europe still reeling from the Oscar Wilde trial. In North Africa, compliant girls and boys were readily available to the well-to-do visitor, as well as older, more dominating paramours. It was thus far away from Paris that Saint-Saëns made whatever arrangements were necessary to give him passing moments of happiness, illusions of intimacy, the coming-to-terms with love that had eluded him in the normal channels of life. The composer was said to have been one of Proust’s models for the notorious Baron Charlus in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

**The Reactionary 1901–1914**

It was now the younger composers whom Saint-Saëns had reason to fear. The success of the opera *Les Barbares* (1901) with certain older critics gave rise to a critical review by Claude Debussy, writing as his alter ego ‘Monsieur Croche’. Debussy accused Saint-Saëns of having written a mish-mash. ‘Is there no one who values Saint-Saëns enough’, he wrote, ‘to tell him that he has now written enough operas?’ From now on certain phrases begin to appear which describe the composer’s music as ‘bad, but well-written’. Nadia Boulanger once remarked, late in life, that ‘Saint-Saëns knew his business admirably well. He only lacked what no one could give him’, and of course this perception of the music is familiar because it is a legacy from the epoch of Debussy. Of course the composer carried on regardless, continuing to write operas. *Hélène* was given in Monte Carlo and London and achieved moderate success. The composer even bought a Paris apartment (after fourteen years of using hotels for his visits to the capital) in the Rue de Longchamp. And the travelling continued unabated, though in slightly more grandiose style as the retinue now consisted of a cook, chauffeur and housekeeper as well as the ever faithful Gabriel Geslin. On a personal level the composer’s reputation as a misanthrope continued to grow. It seemed that Fauré and his family were the
composer’s only really close friends in the world of music, and even this relationship was subject to periods of cool withdrawal. Saint-Saëns seems positively to have enjoyed his reputation as a ‘difficult man’ and liked nothing better than to engage critics in polemical debate in various newspapers and journals.

There is no doubt that the composer was slowly winding down, in both his composing and playing. Nevertheless he displayed reserves of energy and will-power that astounded his peers. He occupied himself with turning the outdoor spectacle Déjanire into an opera for Monte Carlo, and travelled to London to play the complete Mozart piano concertos. His name is a footnote in the history of cinema by being the first to compose a score for moving pictures. This was for the silent film L’Assassinat du Duc de Guise made by Henri Lavedan, André Calmette and Charles le Bargy in 1908.

**World War and Death** 1914—1921
The war years were less productive of music. Saint-Saëns became a fiery patriot during this time and turned his considerable wrath on German music in general, Wagner in particular. His book Germanophilie made him many enemies, not only in Germany where he had almost always been well treated as a musician and where he had had some of his best successes, but in France as well. Many people saw it as a sign of senility that the composer should politicise music to this extent. A picture of Saint-Saëns at the age of eighty-five shows someone in remarkably good health, reading a score without the aid of glasses, the beard white but the hair on his head still dark. The final song on this record is a setting of Ronsard and has a demonic energy and humour which do not suggest a composer who had written himself out; indeed it is every bit as effective as young Poulenc’s settings honouring the same poet at about the same time.

Camille Saint-Saëns died in his beloved Algiers where he went on holiday after giving a concert in Dieppe, which he somehow knew would be his last in that town. He contracted pneumonia and was too weak to shake off the infection. He died on 16 December in 1921. His remains were brought back to Paris where there was a service at the Madeleine where he had been organist for so long. After a state funeral he was buried at the cemetery of Montparnasse.
THE MAN AND THE SONGS

It would be idle to pretend that we find in the songs of Saint-Saëns the same chronicle of spiritual development that would unfold in a retrospective exhibition of Fauré mélodies (if it were possible to turn aural pictures into visual ones). In a gallery of that composer’s songs we would walk through a number of rooms marking a gradual evolution from charmer of the salon (when Saint-Saëns was his teacher) to the astounding depths of the late cycles—music which is unlike any other, and sometimes seems to have been conceived on, and for, another planet. At this late stage Fauré, who was ten years younger than Saint-Saëns, seems to be without doubt the older composer—deaf, withdrawn into his own rarefied world. By contrast Saint-Saëns is still witty and sprightly at eighty; there is a type of agelessness about him, and there is not a world of difference between the first song on this disc and the last. Thus he had Peter Pan qualities, the composer who never grew up perhaps—a lost boy. Maybe this is to do with a troubled childhood, and a deep desire ever to remain there, or at least compulsively to return to this infantile world in fleeting visits.

There was a great deal about Saint-Saëns which remained a big baby, childish despite his white beard and lofty air of a grand maître. His rages and petulant outbursts (both in the press and in his private life) were probably little different to his fury when his great aunt attempted to remove him from the piano at three-and-a-half. It is unlikely that he ever had a mature love affair, and at times he seems to have been utterly impervious to the misfortunes that befell him (particularly in terms of his failure, for years on end, with the French critics). It is all as if he was safely protected in the fortress of a mother’s love where no one ever ages but where one runs the risk of perishing in other ways. After the death of his sons he returned to his mother, abandoning his wife as if she had never existed. If we accept that there was a part of his psyche that lived in Never Never Land and that we should not attempt to look in his work for the insights of those who submit to the ageing processes of the real world, there is much to recommend this music. Indeed the boyishness of Saint-Saëns is one of his special strengths. There are many things worse than the imaginative fantasy of a child, the energy of perpetual youth, and the ability to dress up in brilliant fancy dress at the drop of a hat. And of course the mastery of the medium of song is astonishing, where everything is so well written for the voice, and where the accompaniments (demanding though some of them are) are always interesting and grateful. In this respect he was the seasoned professional, merciless in his attitude to the slipshod, anything but child-like.

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1 Chanson (Nouvelle chanson sur un vieil air)
S’il est un charmant gazon
Que le ciel arrose,
Où brille en toute saison
Quelque fleur éclore,
Où l’on cueille à pleine main
Lys, chèvre-feuille et jasmin,
J’en veux faire le chemin
Où ton pied se pose!
S’il est un sein bien aimant
Dont l’honneur dispose,
Dont le ferme dévouement
N’ait rien de morose,

---

A new song to an old tune
If there be a lovely lawn
Watered by the sky,
Where gleaming all year round
Blossoming flowers are seen,
Where lily, woodbine and jasmine
Can be gathered liberally,
I would strew the way with them
For your feet to tread!
If there be a loving breast
Wherein honour dwells,
Whose tender devotion
Never is morose,
Si toujours ce noble sein
Bat pour un digne dessein,
J’en veux faire le coussin
Où ton front se pose !
S’il est un rêve d’amour,
Parfumé de rose,
Où l’on trouve chaque jour
Quelque douce chose,
Un rêve que Dieu bénit,
Où l’âme à l’âme s’unit,
Oh ! j’en veux faire le nid
Où ton cœur se pose !

If this noble breast always,
Beats with worthy intent,
I would make of it a pillow
Where your head can rest!
If there be a dream of love
With the scent of roses,
Where each day may be found
Some sweet new delight,
A dream blessed by the Lord
Where soul unites with soul,
Oh! I would make of it the nest
Where your heart will rest!

VICTOR HUGO (1807–1885) No 22 of Les Chants du Crépuscule (1834)

A charming bit of fun this, devilishly difficult to play with its leaping basses and chords which take unexpected harmonic directions. The song has not been published and is one of the undated pieces of the composer’s juvenilia in the Bibliothèque Nationale. (It is titled simply as Chanson on the manuscript.) Both César Franck and Liszt set this poem to music with a greater sense of tenderness and romance. A certain sanctimonious quality (some of Hugo’s lyrics brought this out in his composers) sets in with both these masters’ work, but it is mercifully lacking here. The idea of ‘soul uniting with soul’ has not touched Saint-Saëns to any great degree, but the music is fun, having the feeling of a galop, with more than a touch of Offenbach to it. If anything, one is reminded of the deliberately iconoclastic setting of Poulenc’s Air Vif where the lofty Parnassian poetry of Moréas is wickedly sent up to delicious effect. Saint-Saëns means nothing so disrespectful here, but the ‘charmant gazon’ is certainly transferred from the Elysian Fields of the spirit to the Champs Elysées.

**Guitare**

Comment, disaient-ils,
Avec nos nacelles,
Fuir les alguazils ?
—Ramez, disaient-elles.
Comment, disaient-ils,
Oublier querelles,
Misère et périls ?
—Dormez, disaient-elles.
Comment, disaient-ils,
Enchanter les belles
Sans philtres subtils ?
—Aimez, disaient-elles.

**Guitar**

How, said the men,
With our skiffs
Can we flee the alguazils?
—Row, said the women.

How, said the men,
Can we forget feuds,
Poverty and peril?
—Sleep, said the women.

How, said the men,
Can we bewitch the fair
Without subtle philtres?
—Love, said the women.

VICTOR HUGO (1807–1885) No 23 of Les Rayons et les Ombres (1838)
This is another poem set by Liszt (under the title *Comment disaient-ils*) although the song by Bizet (also *Guitare*) is probably more famous; there is also an estimable setting of the words by Lalo. In 1851 the sixteen-year-old Saint-Saëns shows a great deal of flair: interesting points are the accelerando for the pianist in the opening bars that gives the song an air of improvisation, and a wide-ranging vocal line which climbs the stave impetuously, covering the distance of a tenth in a single dramatic gesture at ‘Fuir les alguazils’.

The song is dedicated to the composer Augusta Holmès to whom it was said that the composer was attracted, although one can scarcely imagine this celebrated Amazon in conjunction with the frail long-nosed youth.

### Rêverie

Puisqu’ici-bas toute âme
Donne à quelqu’un
Sa musique, sa flamme,
Ou son parfum;

Puisqu’ici toute chose
Donne toujours
Son épine ou sa rose
A ses amours;

Puisque l’air à la branche
Donne l’oiseau;
Que l’aube à la pervenche
Donne un peu d’eau;

Puisque, lorsqu’elle arrive
S’y reposer,
L’onde arrière à la rive
Donne un baiser;

Je te donne à cette heure,
Penché sur toi
La chose la meilleure
Que j’aie en moi!

Reçois donc ma pensée,
Triste d’ailleurs,
Qui, comme une rosée,
T’arrive en pleurs!

Reçois mes veux sans nombre,
Ô mes amours!
Reçois la flamme ou l’ombre
De tous mes jours!

Mes transports pleins d’ivresses,
Purs de soupçons!
Et toutes les caresses
De mes chansons!

### Reverie

*Since here earth each soul*
*Gives someone*
*Its music, its ardour,*
*Or its perfume;*

*Since here all things*
*Will always give*
*Their thorns or roses*
*To those they love;*

*Since the breeze gives*
*To the branch the bird;*
*And dawn to the periwinkle*
*Gives its dew;*

*Since when they come*
*To settle there,*
*The briny waves*
*Give the shore a kiss;*

*I give to you, at this hour,*
*Inclining over you,*
*The finest things*
*I have in me!*

*Accept, then, my thoughts,*
*Sad though they be,*
*Which like drops of dew*
*Come to you as tears!*

*Accept my countless vows,*
*O my loves!*
*Accept the flame and the shade*
*Of all my days!*

*My frenzied rapture,*
*Devoid of all distrust,*
*And all the caresses*
*Of my songs!*
Mon esprit qui sans voile
Vogue au hasard,
Et qui n’a pour étoile
Que ton regard!
Reçois mon bien céleste,
Ô ma beauté,
Mon cœur dont rien ne reste,
L’amour ôté!

VICTOR HUGO (1807–1885) No 11 of Les Voix Intérieures (1837) (without title)

Another youthful song (1851) with a touch of real inspiration about it. It has a delicacy and a feeling which suggest that Saint-Saëns knew some of the Schumann songs at this early stage of his life. Indeed many of his early mélodies seem to have been influenced by Lieder. At the same time there is a family resemblance to those songs of Gounod where an exquisite melodic line unfolds on a background of gently throbbing quavers, seemingly anonymous but in reality gently steering the song in whatever harmonic direction the composer chooses. There is a certain stiffness here as well as faults in prosody which betray the hand of a youngster, but otherwise this is a distinguished effort.

L’Attente
Monte, écureuil, monte au grand chêne,
Sur la branche des cieux prochaine,
Qui plie et tremble comme un jonc.
Cigogne, aux vieilles tours fidèle,
Oh ! vole ! et monte à tire-d’aile
De l’église à la citadelle,
Du haut clocher au grand donjon.

Vieux aigle, monte de ton aire
À la montagne centenaire
Que blanchit l’hiver éternel;
Et toi qu’en ta couche inquiète
Jamais l’aube ne vit muette,
Monte, monte, vive alouette,
Vive alouette, monte au ciel !

Et maintenant, du haut de l’arbre,
Des flèches de la tour de marbre,
Du grand mont, du ciel enflammé,
A l’horizon, parmi la brume,
Voyez-vous flotter une plume,
Et courir un cheval qui fume,
Et revenir ma bien-aimée?

VICTOR HUGO (1807–1885) No 20 of Les Orientales (1828)

Anticipation
Squirrel, ascend the towering oak,
To the branch right next to the sky
Bending and trembling like a reed.
Stork, faithful to the ancient towers,
Swiftly ascend and wing your way
From the church to the citadel,
From lofty steeple to mighty keep.

Old eagle, ascend from your eyrie
To the age-old mountain peak,
Whitened by eternal winter.
And you, whom in your unquiet nest,
Dawn never once saw silent—
Joyous lark, ascend, ascend,
Ascend into the sky!

And now, from the high tree-top,
From the spires of the marble tower,
From the great mountain, from the flaming sky,
On the sky-line, in the mist,
Can you see a bobbing plume,
A hurtling, steaming horse—and then
My beloved once again?
This song gives the satisfying impression of a perfectly planned scherzo movement from a piece of chamber music. This and the ballad *Le pas d’armes du Roi Jean* are quintessential Hugo songs. They display to the best advantage the broad sweep and energy of the poet, and Saint-Saëns rises magnificently to the occasion with a *moto perpetuo* that suggests that he might have known the music of Mendelssohn (the Octet, for instance) or even some of the songs like *Hexenlied* or *Neue Liebe*. Wagner set this poem as early as 1842 and there is a possibility that in 1855 the twenty-year-old composer modelled his song on the master’s (titled *Attente*). Wagner, a composer whom Saint-Saëns venerated as a young man, also writes a stirring *moto perpetuo* with throbbing right-hand chords suggestive of the horse-ride which brings together two lovers after an unbearable absence.

5

**Le Chant de ceux qui s’en vont sur la mer**
Adieu, patrie !
L’onde est en furie.
   Adieu, patrie,
   Azur !
Adieu, maison, treille au fruit mûr,
Adieu, les fleurs d’or du vieux mur !
   Adieu, patrie !
Ciel, forêt, prairie !
   Adieu, patrie,
   Azur !
Adieu, fiancée au front pur,
Le ciel est noir, le vent est dur.
   Adieu, patrie !
Lise, Anna, Marie !
   Adieu, patrie,
   Azur !
Notre œil, que voile un deuil futur,
Va du flot sombre au sort obscur !
   Adieu, patrie !
Pour toi mon cœur prie.
   Adieu, patrie !
   Azur !

**The song of those who set sail on the sea**
*Fatherland, farewell!*
*Waves surge and swell.*
*Fatherland, farewell!*
*Blue sky!*
*House, farewell, and vine of ripened fruit,*
*Gold flowers, farewell, on the ancient wall!*
*Fatherland, farewell!*
*Sky, forest, meadow!*
*Fatherland, farewell,*
*Blue sky!*
*Farewell, betrothed with the pure brow,*
*The sky is black, harsh winds blow.*
*Fatherland, farewell!*
*Lisa, Anna, Marie!*
*Fatherland, farewell,*
*Blue sky!*
*Our eyes, veiled by future sorrow,*
*Leave the dark waves for an unknown fate!*
*Fatherland, farewell!*
*My heart is praying for thee.*
*Fatherland, farewell,*
*Blue sky!*

VICTOR HUGO (1807–1885) from *Les Châtiments* (1852)

It is rare indeed for a song composer to find something to set from *Les Châtiments*, Hugo’s magnificent tirade about the betrayal of the ideals of Republican France, and the catastrophe (as he saw it) of the *coup d’état* in 1851 which brought Napoléon III to power. There is a grandeur and desperation about this section of the poem which would not have suited everybody; indeed Fauré’s *L’Absente*, which is also to do with the exiled Hugo, is singularly unconvincing. But Saint-Saëns in 1860 somehow manages to convey the heartbreak and pathos of this farewell by treating it in an openly operatic manner. The piano part is a big one which thunders and rumbles with cascades of falling arpeggios,
and the voice part goes for broke by striking an attitude of almost crazed grandiloquence which would have seemed ridiculous in later years. Taken in the context of its own time, it remains effective. The dedicatee was Pauline Viardot, and as the song lies in her range (she was a mezzo-soprano) one can imagine what she would have made of it.

**Le pas d’armes du Roi Jean**

Par saint Gille,
Viens nous-en,
Mon agile
Alezan;
Viens, écoute,
Par la route,
Voir la joute
Du Roi Jean.

Qu’un gros carme
Chartrier
Ait pour arme
L’encrier;
Qu’une fille,
Sous la grille,
S’égosille
A prier.

Nous qui sommes,
De par Dieu,
Gentilshommes
De haut lieu,
Il faut faire
Bruit sur terre,
Et la guerre
N’est qu’un jeu.

Cette ville
Aux longs cris,
Qui profile
Son front gris,
Des toits frêles,
Cent tourelles,
C’est Paris!

Los aux dames!
Au roi los!
Vois les flammes
Des champs-clos,
Où la foule,
Qui s’écriole,
Hurl et roule
A longs flots!

Sans attendre,
Çà piquons!
L’œil bien tendre,
Attaquons
De nos selles,
Les donzelles,
Roses, belles,
Aux balcon.

Là-haut brille,
Sur ce mur,
Yseult, fille
Au front pur;
Là-bas, seules,
Force âeules
Portant gueules
Sur azur.

On commence!
Le beffroi!
Coups de lance,
Cris d’effroi!
On se forge,
On s’égorge,
Par Saint George!
Par le Roi!

Dans l’orage,
Lys courbé,
Un beau page
Est tombé,
Il se pâme,
Il rend l’âme;
Il réclame
Un abbé.

**The Tournament of King John**

By Saint Giles,
Let us set out,
My nimble
Chestnut;
Come, bear me:
We’re off
To see King John’s
Jousting contest.

Let a portly Carmelite
Custodian of charters
Be armed
With an ink-well;
Let the maiden
In her convent parlour
Pray
Till she’s hoarse;
We who are,
By the grace of God,
Noble men
Of high rank
Must cause
A stir on earth,
And war
Is but a game.

This town,
Ringing with cries,
With its grey
Silhouette
Of delicate roofs,
Of a hundred turrets,
Of slender steeples,
Is Paris!

Hooray for the ladies!
Hooray for the King!

See the banners
In the ring,

Where the seething
Crowd
Roars and surges
Like breakers!

Without delay
Let’s gallop off!
With amorous gaze,
Let us assail
From our saddles
The damsels,
Rosy-cheeked and lovely
On their balconies.

Gleaming up there
On that wall
Is the maiden Isolde
With her unsullied brow;
Down there, on their own,
Thronges of old ladies
Are dressed in red
And blue.

Battle begins!
The alarm-bell rings!
Crash of lances,
Cries of fear!
Horses over-reach,
Throats are slit,
In the name of Saint George!
In the name of the King!

In the battle,
Like a wilted lily,
A handsome page
Has fallen,
He faints,
He breathes his last;
He begs for
A priest.
Moines, vierges,  
Porteront  
De grands cierges  
Sur son front;  
Et dans l’ombre  
Du lieu sombre,  
Deux yeux d’ombre  
Pleureront.

Car madame  
Isabeau  
Suit son âme  
Au tombeau.

Çà, mon frère,  
Viens, rentrons  
Dans notre aire  
De barons;  
Va plus vite,  
Car au gîte  
Qui t’invite,  
Trouverons,  
Toi, l’avoine  
Du matin,  
Moi, le moine  
Augustin,

Monks, virgins  
Will hold  
Tall candles  
Over his head;  
And in the shadow  
Of that dismal place,  
Two dark eyes  
Will weep.

For Lady  
Isabeau  
Follows bis soul  
To the grave.

Well, my brother  
Come, let’s return  
To our baronial  
Hall.  
Make baste,  
For at home  
Where we’re awaited  
We shall find  
Oats  
For your breakfast,  
And Friar Augustin  
Waiting for me.

Ce saint homme,  
Suivant Rome,  
Qui m’assomme  
De latin,  
Et rédige  
En roman  
Tout prodige  
De ma main,  
Qu’à ma charge  
Il émerge  
Sur un large  
Parchemin.

Le vrai sire  
Châtelain  
Laisse écrire  
Le vilain;  
Sa main digne,  
Quand il signe,  
Égratigne  
Le vélin.

VICTOR HUGO (1807–1885)  
Ballade No 12 from Odes et Ballades (1828)

It seems amazing that Saint-Saëns wrote this ballad in 1852 at the age of seventeen, for it is certain that he never managed anything better, or more popular with the general public. It is one of the first songs in the French repertoire which uses deliberate archaisms (now familiar as film-music clichés) and suggestions of modal harmony to evoke a world-gone-by of troubadours and brave knights. All it needs is Erroll Flynn to stride across the sound-stage to set the seal on the bluff camaraderie which evokes a Hollywood historical romance, for this song’s narrator is something of a wag, and the song has long been used as a vehicle for every amateur French baritone who fancies himself as Jack the Lad in tights. Like L’Attente this is the music of horse-ride, and we feel the excitement as the narrator approaches the capital city, the hub of the world. The overjoyed cry of ‘C’est Paris’ (and the clever build-up before it) is worthy of Poulenc who placed that city on the pedestal of his affections. Saint-Saëns’ devices and treatment of the various episodes are simple throughout, and highly telling: at mention of the fair Isolde, sweeping downward arpeggios as if painting the flow of her tresses; the fanfares of the joust and the excited stamping of the horses as they thunder in the lists; the outrageously sanctimonious appearance of monks and virgins to quasi-modal chords. All these things seem natural and unforced, and we realise that the composer himself was young enough to take this stirring evocation at face value. The song ends with an elegant flourish of a quill pen where staccati in voice and piano scratch the parchment (and the surface of the stave) with gallant nonchalance. In signing off in this manner the singer seems to
shrug, as if such excitement and spilling of blood is all in a day’s work in old France. In 1903 Debussy humorously added the first four lines of this poem as a motto to his own song *Chevaux de bois* as an ironic comment on Verlaine’s wooden horses.

La Coccinelle

Elle me dit : « Quelque chose
Me tourmente. » Et j’aperçus
Son cou de neige, et, dessus,
Un petit insecte rose.
J’aurais dû,—mais, sage ou fou,
A seize ans, on est farouche,—
Voir le baiser sur sa bouche
Plus que l’insecte à son cou.
On eût dit un coquillage ;
Dos rose et taché de noir.
Les fauvettes pour nous voir
Se penchaient dans le feuillage.
Sa bouche fraîche était là ;
Je me courba sur la belle,
Et je pris la coccinelle ;
Mais le baiser s’envola.

« Fils, apprends comme on me nomme »,
Dit l’insecte du ciel bleu,
« Les bêtes sont au bon Dieu ;
Mais la bêtise est à l’homme. »

VICTOR HUGO (1807–1885) from *Les Contemplations* (1854)

Both Saint-Saëns and Bizet set this poem in 1868, but it is Bizet’s setting which is famous (in as much as *mélodies* by Bizet could ever claim to be well known, more’s the pity). Bizet feels very sorry for the young man and gives him a role to play which makes him as sympathetic as Vašek in *The Bartered Bride*. Saint-Saëns on the other hand cannot suffer fools gladly. He is happy to see the young man utterly at a loss, and he gives some of the most piquant music to the scornful insect. It would not take a great psychiatrist to work out which of the two composers was more sympathetic to the world of romance and courtship. But what is delightful about the Saint-Saëns song is its economy, and how it tells the story simply and amusingly. The accompaniment is a model of clarity in a manner which is utterly suitable for a little fable-cum-parable of this sort. The expression ‘Bête au bon dieu’ is another name for a ladybird, and one suspects that Hugo has set-up the whole of this incident to make a somewhat laboured pun on this fact.

À quoi bon entendre les oiseaux des bois ?
À quoi bon entendre
Les oiseaux des bois ?
L’oiseau le plus tendre
Chante dans ta voix.

Why ever listen to the birds of the forest?
Why ever listen
To the birds of the forest?
The most loving bird
Sings in your voice.
Si vous n’avez rien à me dire
Si vous n’avez rien à me dire,
Pourquoi venir auprès de moi ?
Pourquoi me faire ce sourire
Qui tournerait la tête au roi ?
Si vous n’avez rien à me dire,
Pourquoi venir auprès de moi ?
Si vous n’avez rien à m’apprendre,
Pourquoi me pressez-vous la main ?
Sur le rêve angélique et tendre,
Auquel vous songiez en chemin,
Si vous n’avez rien à m’apprendre,
Pourquoi me pressez-vous la main ?
Si vous voulez que je m’en aille,
Pourquoi passez-vous par ici ?
Lorsque je vous vois, je tressaille :
C’est ma joie et c’est mon souci.
Si vous voulez que je m’en aille,
Pourquoi passez-vous par ici ?

Si vous n’avez rien à me dire,
Pourquoi me faire ce sourire
Qui tournerait la tête au roi ?
Si vous n’avez rien à m’apprendre,
Pourquoi me pressez-vous la main ?
Si vous voulez que je m’en aille,
Pourquoi passez-vous par ici ?
Lorsque je vous vois, je tressaille :
C’est ma joie et c’est mon souci.
Si vous voulez que je m’en aille,
Pourquoi passez-vous par ici ?

VICTOR HUGO (1807–1885) from the play Ruy Blas, Act 2, Scene 1 (1838)

This delightful little serenade from 1868 is a good example of what makes Saint-Saëns such a sympathetic composer of songs. As a great virtuoso and pianist he could so easily have swamped this gentle little lyric with trills and frills and other excrescences. Instead he matched the words with exquisite probity, running the semiquavers between the hands as if he envisaged the tender outdoor warblings of a flute. It was Saint-Saëns in this mood which engraved itself on the imagination of the young Fauré when he began to write in his so-called ‘madrigal’ style (e.g. Chanson d’amour). Like his pupil, and like his grand-pupil Ravel, Saint-Saëns is part of that noble French tradition which realises that what is not said is as potent as the greatest oration. Although not important in itself, this song from the time when Duparc was beginning to compose mélodies in quite another manner, raises the banner of classicism.

9

If you have nothing to tell me
If you have nothing to tell me,
Why do you draw near?
Why give me that smile
That would turn a monarch’s head?
If you have nothing to tell me,
Why do you draw near?
If you have nothing to tell me
Why are you taking my hand?
About this tender, angelic dream
You dreamt on your journey here,
If you have nothing to tell me,
Why are you taking my hand?
If you wish me to go away,
Why do you pass by here?
When I catch sight of you, I tremble:
That both gladdens and troubles me.
If you wish me to go away
Why do you pass by here?

VICTOR HUGO (1807–1885) from Les Contemplations
This *L’Indifférent* of 1870 (for the poem’s theme is prophetic of Ravel’s song) finds Saint-Saëns in salon mode, but astonishingly it prophesies the salon of the future. In 1870, five years before the birth of Reynaldo Hahn, most salon songs were much more melodic than this, determined to keep the attention of their audiences with vocal display, local colour, or at least winning charm. By these standards there is something minimalist about this song which could easily pass for one of Hahn’s, and it could have been sung by him with a cigarette between his lips at a party *circa* 1899 without anyone doubting that it was his. It has all the signs of the Reynaldo touch: an accompaniment made up of a hypnotic little ostinato, not distinguished in itself, but something which bit by bit imingles on our memory; and then a vocal line which languidly suggests speech, and tugs at the heartstrings by its self-effacing tact as it describes the sweet masochism of impossible, perhaps forbidden, love.

10 *Dans ton cœur*

Dans ton cœur dort un clair de lune,
Un doux clair de lune d’été,
Et pour fuir la vie importune,
Je me noierai dans ta clarté.

J’oublierai les douleurs passées,
Mon amour, quand tu berceras
Mon triste cœur et mes pensées
Dans le calme aimant de tes bras.

Tu prendras ma tête malade,
Oh! quelquefois, sur tes genoux,
Et lui diras une ballade
Qui semblera parler de nous ;

Et dans tes yeux pleins de tristesse,
Dans tes yeux alors je boirai
Tant de baisers et de tendresse
Que peut-être je guérirai.

*‘JEAN LAHOR’ [HENRI CAZALIS] (1840–1909) from *L’Illusion* (PUBLISHED 1875)*

Here is another song, this time from 1872, which suggests the salon, although this time it is more of its own epoch. It is as if Saint-Saëns has glanced at the *Cinq Mélodies* published by Duparc in 1868 (the fourth of these, *Chanson triste*, uses the same text and was destined to become one of the most famous of songs) and decided to be different as a matter of principle. (Duparc, by the way, attributes the poem to Jean Lahor, the pen-name for the writer whom Saint-Saëns acknowledges on his title-page as Henri Cazalis.) How masterfully Duparc weaves these words into a silken thread of running semiquavers and a vocal line of infinite grace. On the other hand Saint-Saëns opts for a more static approach, admirably economical and telling, with much of the text sung beneath held chords, a tactic which gives the singer a certain freedom to tell the story untrammeled by the piano. Much of the song’s effectiveness comes from a chain of exquisite modulations; indeed at times the song seems unanchored in any key. In a strange way, and exactly contrary to the historical facts, there is more of a Franckian feeling to this song than we find in Duparc’s masterpiece.

**Moonlight slumbers in your heart**

*Moonlight slumbers in your heart,*
*A gentle summer moonlight,*
*And to escape the cares of life*
*I shall drown myself in your light.*

*I shall forget past sorrows,*
*My sweet, when you cradle*
*My sad heart and my thoughts*
*In the loving calm of your arms.*

*You will rest my poor head,*
*Ah! sometimes on your lap,*
*And recite to it a ballad*
*That will seem to speak of us ;*

*And from your eyes full of sorrow,*
*From your eyes I shall then drink*
*So many kisses and so much love*
*That perhaps I shall be healed.*
**Danse macabre**

Zig et zig et zig, la mort cri en cadence  
Frappant une tombe avec son talon,  
La mort à minuit joue un air de danse,  
Zig et zig et zag, sur son violon.

Le vent d’hiver souffle, et la nuit est sombre,  
Des gémissements sortent des tilleuls;  
Les squelettes blancs vont à travers l’ombre  
Courant et sautant sous leurs grands linceuls,

Zig et zig et zig, chacun se trémousse,  
On entend claquer les os des danseurs,  
Un couple lascif s’assoit sur la mousse  
Comme pour goûter d’anciennes douceurs.

Zig et zig et zag, la mort continue  
De racler sans fin son aigre instrument.  
Un voile est tombé! La danseuse est nue!  
Son danseur la serre amoureusement.

La dame est, dit-on, marquise ou baronne.  
Et le vert galant un pauvre charron—  
Horreur! Et voilà qu’elle s’abandonne  
Comme si le rustre était un baron!

Zig et zig et zig, quelle sarabande!  
Quels cercles de morts se donnant la main!  
Zig et zig et zag, on voit dans la bande  
Le roi gambader auprès du vilain!

Mais psit! tout à coup on quitte la ronde,  
On se pousse, on fuit, le coq a chanté…  
Oh! La belle nuit pour le pauvre monde!  
Et vive la mort et l’égalité!

‘JEAN LAHOR’ [HÉRNI CAZALIS] (1840–1909)

This is another Cazalis (or Jean Lahor) setting which dates from 1873. Although the song is not well known, the tune is familiar because it was the basis of Saint-Saëns’ tone poem of the same name written in 1874. And we also hear a quotation from it in the Fossils section of *Le Carnaval des animaux*, a delightful instance of wry self-quotation. No one could claim that this was a great *mélodie*, but it is certainly amusing. Any song which contains the words ‘Zig et zig et zag’ and the conspiratorial ‘Mais psit!’ suggests a deliberate, indeed a flagrant, lapse of taste as the composer lets his hair down in a manner which our times could only describe as ‘camp’. From the very first strident tritones (the *intervalus diabolus*) twanging in the piano we are in for a Disneyland ride through the Haunted House (apart, that is, from the unacceptable-to-Disney descriptions of copulation, where the class barrier is forgotten between cartwright and marchioness—Lady Chatterley’s Lover encapsulated in a few bars of song). All this is great fun for the
audience in a recital programme. For the performers there are problems: with diction because of the speed of the words (particularly for a non-French singer), and with the challenging octaves in the piano part (particularly for a pianist with less than Saint-Saëns’ own dazzling virtuosity).

MÉLODIES PERSANES Op 26

12 La Brise

Comme des chevreaux piqués par un taon
Dansent les beautés du Zaboulistan.
D’un rose léger sont teintés leurs ongles ;
Nul ne peut les voir, hormis leur sultan.
Aux mains de chacune un sistre résonne ;
Sabre au poing se tient l’eunuque en turban.
Mais du fleuve pâle où le lys sommeille
Sort le vent nocturne ainsi qu’un forban.
Il s’en va charmer leurs cœurs et leurs lèvres,
Sous l’œil du jaloux, malgré le firman.
Ô rêveur, sois fier ! Elle a, cette brise,
Pris tes vers d’amour pour son talisman !

13 Sabre en main

J’ai mis à mon cheval sa bride
Sa bride et sa selle d’or.
Tous les deux, par le monde aride,
Nous allons prendre l’essor.
J’ai le cœur froid, l’œil sans vertige,
Je n’aime et je ne crains rien.
Au fourreau mon sabre s’afflige,
Qu’il sorte et qu’il frappe bien !
Le turban autour de la tête,
Sur mon dos le manteau blanc,
Je veux m’en aller à la fête
Où la mort danse en hurlant.
Où, la nuit, on brûle les villes
Tandis que l’habitant dort.
Où, pour les multitudes viles,
On est grand quand on est fort.
Je veux qu’à mon nom les monarques
Tienent leur tête à deux mains,
Que mon sabre enlève les marques
Du joug au front des humains !

PERSIAN MELODIES

The Breeze

When the beautiful girls of Zaboulistan dance,
They dance like kid goats stung by a cleg.
Their nails are coloured a delicate pink,
None but the Sultan may gaze on them.
In each hand they hold a ringing sistrum;
And the turbaned eunuch clenches his sabre.
But from the river where the lilies slumber,
The breeze starts up like a buccaneer.
Off he goes to bewitch their hearts and their lips,
Under the jealous man’s eyes, despite the law.
O dreamer, be proud! The breeze has mistaken
Your love-song for its talisman!

Sword in hand

I have bridled my horse
And put on his saddle of gold.
Through this arid world
We’ll sally forth together.
My heart is cool, my gaze steady,
I love nothing and I fear nothing.
My sword languishes in its sheath:
May it be drawn and may it strike true!
With the turban wound about my head
And the white cloak on my back,
I wish to set out for the feast
Where Death dances its screaming dance,
Where towns are put to the torch at night
While the inhabitants still sleep,
And where the common rabbie think
That you are glorious when you are strong.
I wish that kings, when they hear my name,
Would hold their head in their hands,
And that my sabre night remove
All traces of human servitude!
Je veux que l’essaim de mes tentes,
De mes chevaux aux longs crins,
Que mes bannières éclatantes,
Mes piques, mes tambourins,
Soient sans nombre, comme la horde
Des mouches quand il fait chaud,
Qu’à mes pieds l’univers se torde,
Comprenant le peu qu’il vaut!

**Au cimetière**
Assis sur cette blanche tombe
Ouvrons notre cœur !
Du marbre, sous la nuit qui tombe,
Le charme est vainqueur.
Au murmure de nos paroles,
Le mort vibrera ;
Nous effeuillerons des corolles
Sur son Sahara.
S’il eut, avant sa dernière heure,
L’amour de quelqu’un,
Il croira, du passé qu’il pleure,
Sentir le parfum.
S’il vécut, sans avoir envie
D’un cœur pour le sien,
Il dira : J’ai perdu ma vie,
N’ayant aimé rien.
Toi, tu feras sonner, ma belle,
Tes ornement d’or,
Pour que mon désir ouvre l’aile
Quand l’oiseau s’endort.
Et sans nous tourmenter des choses
Pour mourir après,
Nous dirons : Aujourd’hui les roses,
Demain les cyprès !

**Tournoiement (Songe d’opium)**
Sans que nulle part je séjourne,
Sur la pointe du gros orteil,
Je tourne, je tourne, je tourne,
À la feuille morte pareil.
Comme à l’instant où l’on trépasse,
La terre, l’océan, l’espace,
I wish for the seething mass of my tents,
Of my horses with flowing manes,
I wish for the mass of my dazzling banners
And pikes and tambourines
To be endless, like a swarm
Of flies in warm weather—
So that at my feet the world might writhe,
Aware of bow little it’s worth!

**At the cemetery**
Seated on this white tomb
Let us pour out our hearts!
As night falls,
This marble’s spell conquers all.
As we whisper to each other,
The deceased shall quiver;
We shall pick the corollas
From his Sahara.
If, before his final hour;
He was loved by someone,
He’ll think he smells the fragrance
Of the past be mourns.
If he lived without wishing
To share his heart with another;
He will say: I have wasted my life,
Without having loved at all.
You, my pretty one, shall jingle
Your jewellery of gold,
So that desire takes wing
When birds fall asleep.
And without fretting—
Only to die in the end—
We shall say: Roses today,
And cypresses tomorrow!

**Delerium**
Without so much as a pause,
I pirouette on my toe,
Spinning, spinning, spinning,
Like a withered leaf.
As at the moment of death,
The earth, the ocean and space
Devant mes yeux troublés tout passe,
Jetant une même lueur.
Et ce mouvement circulaire,
Toujours, toujours je l’accélère,
Sans plaisir comme sans colère,
Frissonnant malgré ma sueur.
Dans les antres où l’eau s’enfourne,
Sur les inaccessibles rocs,
Je tourne, je tourne, je tourne,
Sans le moindre souci des chocs.
Dans les forêts, sur les rivages;
A travers les bêtes sauvages
Et leurs émules en ravages,
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.
Soumis aux lois que rien n’ajourne,
Aux lois que suit l’astre en son vol,
Je tourne, je tourne, je tourne,
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,
Et je m’abîme au gouffre morne
De la nuit complète et sans borne
Où je tourne éternellement.

Pass before my clouded eyes,
Radiating the same light.
And as I rotate round and round,
I accelerate,
Devoid of pleasure as of anger,
Shivering despite my sweat.
In caves aflood with foaming waves,
Standing on inaccessible rocks,
Spinning, spinning, spinning
I’ve not the slightest fear of collision.
In the forests and along the coasts,
Surrounded by savage beasts
And their havoc-wreaking rivals,
Soldiers brandishing their swords,
In the centre of slave-markets,
On volcano slopes awash with lava,
In the land of Slats and Mogols,
I spin and spin unflaggingly.
Adhering to laws that none can defer,
The laws that the sun obeys in its course,
Spinning, spinning, spinning,
My feet no longer touch the ground.
I soar aloft to the starry sky,
I flit right past the silent moon,
Past Jupiter and Saturn,
Whirring on my way,
And I shoot past Capricorn,
And plunge into the dismal abyss
Of absolute and boundless night,
Where I spin and spin eternally.

ARMAND RENAUD (1836–1895) from Les nuits persanes (published 1870)

There are six songs in this cycle of settings of poems by Armand Renaud. Without denigrating them (at least one is a masterpiece) it is here that we realise what a fortune Saint-Saëns might have made if he had been a composer of film music in our own time. His stop-watch professionalism and ability to conjure atmosphere at the drop of a hat would have made him a dream candidate for Hollywood. The sultry dance in dotted rhythm which is La Brise is hypnotically repetitive and an antecedent to Ravel’s Bolero. It slinkily suggests the sort of music to which one surrenders in a haze of hashish. Sabre en main gives us a glimpse of the warlike Saint-Saëns, the man who was to be so formidable a patriot during the First World War. In that part of his life he brandished his musical and literary fists at the enemy, and would have been willing to brandish a sabre given half a chance, for there is more sheer rage in Saint-Saëns’ personality (and sometimes in the music) than in almost any other composer one could name. Here he wreaks his revenge in Islamic guise. It is all a little over the top. The word ‘camp’ comes to mind (however unintentionally the
composer invokes our smiles); Saint-Saëns appears here as Lawrence (or perhaps Florence) of Arabia in the flowing robes of the desert. It is difficult to think of another French composer who might have written this piano part (by the standards of accompaniments of the time, bristling with difficulties) which is pompously, almost ridiculously, grandiloquent as well as strangely stirring.

*Au cimetière* is one of Saint-Saëns’ experiments in a noble minimalism where the accompaniment strums minstrel-like in the background, and the song is carried, or almost carried, by the interest of the vocal line. This soulful plaint might have been sung by Rudolf Valentino in *The Sheik*, for the public taste for this type of glamorised orientalism was to last at least another fifty years.

The last song in the cycle, *Tournoiement*, is without doubt the most interesting; indeed it is one of Saint-Saëns’ truly great songs. Whether or not he ever experienced the joys, or otherwise, of opium on his many travels, we shall probably never know, but the composer provides us with a dizzy ride through the firmament of drug-enhanced perception. It is a marvel that the weave of this magic carpet is so light that there is never a danger of suffocating the voice in the endless strands of silken semiquavers. The difficulty of this, purely as a piano piece, is as good an indication as is to be found in the songs of the composer’s own keyboard virtuosity—fleet, agile, and able to paint minute detail with the delicacy and evenness of his touch. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine another French composer writing a *mélodie* like this, so abandoned and exotic at the same time as so classically restrained. Those who have taken drugs testify to a greater clarity of vision as a result of some of them, not the swirling uncertainties of alcoholic stupor. If this is so, Saint-Saëns has admirably conveyed this paradoxical clarity at the heart of his evocation.

**Marquise, vous souvenez-vous ?**

Marquise, vous souvenez-vous  
Du menuet que nous dansâmes ?  
Il était discret, noble et doux  
Comme l’accord de nos deux âmes.

Rayonnante, vous surpreniez  
Tous les cœurs et tous les hommages,  
Dans votre robe à grands paniers,  
Dans votre robe à grands ramage.

Vous leviez de vos doigts gantés  
Et selon la cadence douce,  
Votre jupe des deux côtés  
Prise entre l’index et le pouce.

Plus d’une belle, à Trianon,  
Enviait, parmi vos émules,  
Le travail exquis et mignon  
De vos deux petits pieds à mules.

---

**Marchioness, do you remember?**

Marchioness, do you remember  
The minuet that we danced?  
It was discreet, noble and sweet,  
Like our harmonious souls.

Radiantly, you won over  
All our hearts and homages,  
Wearing your broad pannier dress  
With its daring floral pattern.

With your gloved fingers you lifted  
In time with the music’s sweet rhythm,  
Your skirts on either side  
Between index finger and thumb.

More than one beauty at the Trianon  
Envied, amongst your rivals,  
The sweet, exquisite movement  
Of your tiny slippered feet.
Mais, distraite par le bonheur
De leur causer cette souffrance,
À la reprise en la mineur
Vous manquâtes la révérence.

But distracted by the bliss
Of causing them this pain,
At the return of the minor key
You forgot to curtsy.

FRANÇOIS COPPÉE (1842–1908) ‘Menuet’ from Le Cabier rouge (1873)

This is one of the many pastiche songs of former times that almost every composer of the mélodie has written at some time or another, including Ravel in his Marot settings, and Poulenc in his À sa guitare and Priez pour paix. This is an early (1869) essay in minuet music from the times of Louis XV—the sort of thing that Massenet also did well, although this song predates Manon by nearly twenty years. The accompaniment here is scrupulously kept in three parts as if it were conceived for a small group of instrumentalists providing background music for a fête champêtre.

La Cigale et la Fourmi
La Cigale, ayant chanté tout l’été,
Se trouva fort dépourvue
Quand la bise fut venue.
Pas un seul petit morceau
De mouche ou de vermisseau.
Elle alla crier famine
Chez la Fourmi sa voisine,
La priant de lui prêter
Quelque grain pour subsister
Jusqu’à la saison nouvelle.
Je vous paierai, lui dit-elle,
Avant l’aout, foi d’animal,
Intéret et principal.
La Fourmi n’est pas prêteuse ;
C’est là son moindre défaut.
Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud?
Dit-elle à cette emprunteuse.
Nuit et jour à tout venant
Je chantais, ne vous déplaise.
Vous chantiez? j’en suis fort aise:
Et bien! dansez maintenant.

Jean de la Fontaine (1621–1695) No 1 from Fables, Livre 1 (1667)

It is not known when exactly this was composed, but as the listener to this disc may have already noticed, the dates of these songs are not of prime importance in understanding them. For all we know, it may come from the very beginning of the composer’s career, it may date from the 1860s, or it may just as easily be contemporary with Suzette et Suzon from the 1880s. The important thing is that it is a perfect little setting of La Fontaine, and it entirely fits the pithy and acerbic nature of the words. The schadenfreude which was so much part of Saint-Saëns’ personality is here given glorious reign with the malicious tone of the dressing-down by the ant coming straight from the composer’s
heart. There are numerous felicitous details: the scurrying motif for the busy, industrious ant (Saint-Saëns himself, always prudent and hard-working); the pathetic little appoggiatura on the word ‘famine’; the little self-indulgent cantilena for the cicada, and the triumphant quotation of ‘j’ai du bon tabac’ in the accompaniment at the end.

18 Chanson à boire du vieux temps
Philosophes rêveurs qui pensez tout savoir,
Ennemis de Bacchus, rentrez dans le devoir :
Vos esprits s’en font trop accroître.
Allez, vieux fous, allez apprendre à boire !
On est savant quand on boit bien :
Qui ne sait boire ne sait rien !
S’il faut rire ou chanter au milieu d’un festin,
Un docteur est alors au bout de son latin,
Un goinfre en a toute la gloire.
Allez, vieux fous, allez apprendre à boire !
On est savant quand on boit bien :
Qui ne sait boire ne sait rien !

NICOLAS BOILEAU (1636–1711)

Another pastiche this—music suitable for a film or a stage play, an honourable forereunner of Ravel’s Chanson à boire from the Don Quichotte set, and of Poulenc’s from the Chansons Gaillardes. Determinedly hearty music such as this, with a hint of the dance (the ducking and weaving of inebriated cavaliers), is a simple thing for this composer, merely grist to Camille. It is a more ponderous re-write of Marquise from sixteen years earlier, but a good character piece for a gallant baritone.

19 Nocturne
Ô Nuit ! que j’aime ton mystère,
Quand tu répands sur nous ton ombre et ta fraîcheur !
Dans tes bras s’endort la douleur,
C’est le calme des cieux qui descend sur la terre.
Un Dieu, sous l’abri de tes voiles,
Vient nous soumettre tous à ses égales lois.
Il prête aux bergers comme au rois
L’azur de ton manteau tout parsemé d’étoiles.

PHILIPPE QUINAULT (1635–1688) probably from an opera libretto written for Lully

In the course of his researches into eighteenth-century opera (he was an expert particularly on the works of Rameau) Saint-Saëns probably unearthed this text from the libretto of a little-known opera. It seems a curious choice for a song composed in 1900, and unlike various other settings of seventeenth-century poets there is no attempt here to colour the harmonie language with a suggestion of archaic old-world charm. This is rather an experimental song, seemingly conservative, but containing certain harmonie twists which show that the composer has acknowledged, however
unwillingly, that he has entered the twentieth century. Saint-Saëns was a champion of Richard Strauss in this period of his life, and in 1899, a year before this song appeared, Strauss had published a group of songs which included the celebrated Wiegenlied. The pianist, once he has thought of this connection, is on familiar ground, for this seems to be a homage to Strauss, modelled on the rippling demisemiquavers in $\frac{3}{4}$ of Wiegenlied, with a similarly sumptuous seraphic vocal line afloat above the piano. If this song is not quite as memorable as its famous model, it has a flavour that one will not find elsewhere in the mélodie. It is a genuine attempt by Saint-Saëns to write a song in Lieder fashion where an incessantly repetitive figuration binds the work together—the calm and spacious melody all the more hypnotic because of the gentle undulations in the accompaniment beneath it.

**20 Violons dans le soir**

Quand le soir est venu, que tout est calme enfin
Dans la chaude nature,
Voici que naît sous l’arbre et sous le ciel divin
La plus vive torture.

Sur les graviors d’argent, dans les bois apaisés,
Des violons s’exaltent.
Ce sont des jets de cris, de sanglots, de baisers,
Sans contrainte et sans halte.

Il semble que l’archet se cabre, qu’il se tord
Sur les luisantes cordes,
Tant ce sont des appels de plaisir et de mort
Et de miséricorde.

Et le brûlant archet enroulé de langueur
Gémit, souffre, caresses,
Poignard voluptueux qui pénètre le cœur
D’une épuisante ivresse.

Archets, soyez maudits pour vos brûlants accords,
Pour votre âme explosive,
Fers rouges qui dans l’ombre arrachez à nos corps
Des lambeaux de chair vive!

*COMTESSE ANNA DE NOAILLES (1876–1933) from the book Les Eblouissements (1907)*

It is inevitable that Saint-Saëns should have enjoyed joining the worlds of chamber music and the mélodie. Violons dans le soir (1907) is one of a number of songs with instrumental obbligato and the violin here is deployed to bewitching effect to enhance the atmosphere of Anna de Noailles’ text. As always, one is full of admiration for the composer’s professionalism: the violin has a certain amount of bravura display, and yet it is never in danger of obscuring the voice. The interludes for violin and piano never arrest the progress of the song as a whole, and there is a real sense of dialogue between the two protagonists. The piano writing is gently supportive (standing back to allow the two stars to pirouette around each other). It is as if Debussy’s Le jet d’eau has seeped into the composer’s consciousness against his will, and there are hints that he might well have known another great nocturne, Roussel’s Le jardin mouillé.
We continue this section of the disc devoted to Saint-Saëns’ evocations of different musical instruments with a song to his own text. *Guitares et mandolines* was written in 1890 and is one of the most effective of the many French songs which evoke Spain. It is true that the poem is not a masterpiece in itself, but it gives the composer ample opportunity to paint pictures. The repeated notes in the right hand of the accompaniment, an effect which suggests the plectrum at work, are the mark of a piano virtuoso who knows the tricks of the trade (the fingers have to alternate quickly on these repetitions). There is also a teasing use of hemiola, and when sharps and naturals are mentioned in the text (‘dièses, bécarres’) the composer pointedly writes an extra sharp sign above the word ‘dièses’, and takes care that all the melismatic notes of ‘bécarres’ are naturals.

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**Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)**

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**Victor Hugo (1807–1885) from *Les Contemplations* (1846)**

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**21 Guitares et mandolines**

Guitares et mandolines
Ont des sons qui font aimer.
Tout en croquant des pralines
Pépa se laisse charmer
Quand, jetant dièses, bécarres,
Mandolines et guitares
Vibrent pour la désarmer.

**Guitar and Mandolin**

Guitar and mandolin
Cause you to fall in love.
While crunching pralines,
Pepe lets herself be charmed
When, sounding sharps and flats,
Mandolin and guitar
Resound to disarm her.

**22 Une flûte invisible**

Viens !—une flûte invisible
Soupire dans les vergers.—
La chanson la plus paisible
Est la chanson des bergers.
Le vent ride, sous l'yeuse,
Le sombre miroir des eaux.—
La chanson la plus joyeuse
Est la chanson des oiseaux.
Que nul soin ne te tourmente.
Aimons-nous ! aimons toujours !—
La chanson la plus charmante
Est la chanson des amours.

**An Unseen Flute**

Come! An unseen flute
Sighs among the orchards.
The most peaceful song
Is the song that shepherds sing.
The wind ruffles beneath the ilex
The waters’ sombre mirror.
The most joyous song
Is the song the birds sing.

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**Victor Hugo (1807–1885) from *Les Contemplations* (1846)**

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This is the simplest and earliest (1885) of the instrumental evocations on this disc. It also marks a return to Victor Hugo, a poet who is much more associated with Saint-Saëns’ earlier career. This charming pastorale provides a gracious opportunity for a skilled flautist, and the vocal line is ingratiating and not particularly demanding. Accordingly it has stayed in the repertoire as a useful piece for shared concerts. The greatest setting of this poem is probably that of André Caplet, although Saint-Saëns’ enchanting little duettino entitled *Viens* (1855) which uses the same text should not be forgotten.

### **Suzette et Suzon**

Suzette and Suzon

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>J’adore Suzette,</td>
<td>I adore Suzette,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mais j’aime Suzon.</td>
<td>But I love Suzon.</td>
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<td>Suzette en toilette,</td>
<td>Suzette dressed up,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suzon sans façon.</td>
<td>Suzon as she is.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ah! Suzon, Suzette!</td>
<td>Ah! Suzon, Suzette!</td>
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Rimons pour Suzettet, Suzon,
L’une est ma musette,
L’autre est ma chanson.
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

La main de Suzette,
La jambe à Suzon,
Quelle main bien faite!
Quel petit chausson!
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

Tapis pour Suzette,
Jardin pour Suzon,
Foin de la moquette,
Vive le gazon!
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

Despite this song’s relatively late date of 1888, this is another example of a return to an earlier style. It is astonishing to realise that it dates from the same time as Debussy’s *Ariettes oubliées*, not to mention Wolf’s *Mörike Lieder*, for it cheerfully ignores the *Zeitgeist* in the interests of entertaining us. After forty years of song-writing the van of fashionable modernity has lost its allure for Saint-Saëns. The catalyst for this boyish romp is the poetry of Victor Hugo of course, and very teasingly charming the result is. There is a pastoral frame about this music as if the choice between Suzette and Suzon were to be made in Arcadia. In actual fact this song was destined for the salon, and the home. It was designed to sell well, and it has all the marks of a set-piece for a dapper amateur baritone. The accompaniment consists of alternating notes in the left and right hands, a perfect means of conveying the ‘either/or’ alternatives, and the prevaricating poet’s state of mind.

Je rêve à Suzette,
J’embrasse Suzon,
L’une est bien coquette,
L’autre est bon garçon.
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

S’il faut fuir Suzette
Ou quitter Suzon,
Et que je n’en mette
Qu’une en ma maison,
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

La main de Suzette,
La jambe à Suzon,
Quelle main bien faite!
Quel petit chausson!
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

A carpet for Suzette,
The garden for Suzon,
To bell with moquettes,
Three cheers for lawns!
Ah! Suzon, Suzette!
Suzette, Suzon!

**VICTOR HUGO** (1807–1885) from *Toute la lyre* (1853/4)
Aimons-nous
Aimons-nous et dormons
Sans songer au reste du monde!
Ni le flot de la mer, ni l’ouragan des monts
Tant que nous nous aimons
Ne courbera ta tête blonde,
Car l’amour est plus fort
Que les Dieux et la Mort!
Le soleil s’éteindrait
Pour laisser ta blancheur plus pure,
Le vent qui jusqu’à terre incline la forêt,
En passant n’oserait
Jouer avec ta chevelure,
Tant que tu cacheras
Ta tête entre mes bras!
Et lorsque nos deux cœurs
S’en iront aux sphères heureuses
Où les célestes lys écloront sous nos pleurs,
Alors, comme deux fleurs,
Joignons nos lèvres amoureuses,
Et tâchons d’épuiser
La mort dans un baiser!

Let us love
Let us love and sleep
Without a care for the rest of the world!
Neither ocean waves nor mountain storms,
While we still love each other,
Can bow your golden head,
For love is more powerful
Than gods and death!
The sun would extinguish its rays
To make your purity more pure,
The wind which inclines to earth the forest
Would not in passing dare
To frolic with your hair
While you nestle
You bead in my arms.
And when our two hearts
Shall ascend to paradise,
Where celestial lilies shall open beneath our tears,
Then, like flowers,
Let us join our loving lips
And strive to exhaust
Death in a kiss!

Temps nouveau
Le temps a laissé son manteau
De vent de froideur et de pluie,
Et s’est vêtu de broderie,
De soleil luisant clair et beau.

A New Season
The season has laid its mantle by
Of wind and cold and rain
And donned embroidered garments
Of radiant sunshine, clear and fair.
Il n’y a bête ni oiseau
Qu’en son jargon ne chante ou crie :
« Le temps a laissé son manteau
De vent de froideur et de pluie ».
Rivière, fontaine et ruisseau
Portent en livrée jolie
Gouttes d’argent d’orfèvrerie
Chacun s’habille de nouveau.
Le temps a laissé son manteau
De vent de froideur et de pluie,
Et s’est vêtu de broderie,
De soleil luisant clair et beau.


This is one of a set of three songs entitled Vieilles Chansons (1921). This poem by Charles d’Orléans was set by Debussy as part of his Trois Chansons de France in 1904. Here we have Saint-Saëns, in the last years of his life, setting the same words seventeen years later. He probably knew Debussy’s song, but whether he would ever care to admit it is another matter. In any case the musical effect is completely different—a song of springtime written in the winter of the composer’s life. It is a strange effort from an 86-year-old, as translucently clear and elegant as ever in texture, but with a harmonic sense of organisation that is reeling from head-on collision with the twentieth century. At the third verse, at mention of ‘Rivière, fontaine et ruisseau’, the piano breaks into water music in Straussian arpeggios which glisten with strangely unanchored and modern harmonic inflections; at the same time the voice is made to trill for three beats on an unlikely syllable in the word ‘orfèvrerie’. It is as if late Fauré were mingling with Offenbach in a weird melding of past, present and future.

26 Le vent dans la plaine
C’est l’extase langoureuse,
C’est la fatigue amoureuse,
C’est tous les frissons des bois
Parmi l’étreinte des brises,
C’est vers les ramures grises,
Le cheur des petites voix.
Ô le frêle et frais murmure!
Cela gazouille et susurre,
Cela ressemble au cri doux
Que l’herbe agitée expire . . .
Tu dirais, sous l’eau qui vire,
Le roulis sourd des cailloux.

PAUL VERLAINE (1844–1896) from Romances sans paroles : Ariettes oubliées (1872)
This is a far more convincing piece of ‘modern’ Saint-Saëns, perhaps because it dates from 1912 when the composer was in full command of his faculties and was, whether he liked it or not, influenced by his pupil Fauré. It is the one setting that we have from this composer of a lyric by Paul Verlaine, so much the poet of Debussy and Fauré. The title almost perversely disguises the fact that this is a setting of the celebrated ‘C’est l’extase langoureuse’. Debussy wrote a song to this poem which stands at the opening of his *Ariettes oubliées*. A few years later Fauré, in a completely different manner, used the poem to close his cycle entitled *Cinq Mélodies de Venise*. Both songs are masterpieces, and we would not be without either. When Saint-Saëns comes to set the poem he takes its title from the motto phrase by Favart which Verlaine prints above the poem: ‘Le vent dans la plaine / Suspend son haleine’. He then proceeds to cut the text to eradicate the embarrassing references to the poet’s post-coital disquiet in the arms of Rimbaud. Perhaps these were too near the bone. The incessant semiquavers passing through a series of harmonic complexities are reminiscent of *Nell*, though here and there are also strong echoes of the inscrutable composer of *La Chanson d’Ève* and *Le jardin clos*. In any case what we have here is a genuinely new type of song for Saint-Saëns, without a trace of stylisation and pastiche, and courting no easy public.

### 27 Grasselette et Maigrelette

*Une jeune pucelette,*  
*Pucelette grassoulette,*  
*Qu’esperdement j’aime mieux*  
*Que mon cœur ny que mes yeux,*  
*A la moitié de ma vie*  
*Esperdument asservie*  
*A son grasset en-bon-point ;*  
*Mais fasché je ne suis point*  
*D’estre serf pour l’amour d’elle,*  
*Pour l’en-bon-point de la belle*  
*Qu’esperdument j’aime mieux*  
*Que mon cœur ny que mes yeux.*

*Las! une autre pucelette,*  
*Pucelette maigrelette,*  
*Qu’esperdement j’aime mieux*  
*Que mon cœur ny que mes yeux,*  
*Esperdument a ravie*  
*L’autre moitié de ma vie*  
*De son maigret en-bon-point.*  
*Mais fasché je ne suis point*  
*D’estre serf pour l’amour d’elle,*  
*Pour la maigreur de la belle,*  
*Qu’esperdement j’aime mieux*  
*Que mon cœur ny que mes yeux.*

### Fleshy and Skinny

*A young damsel,*  
*Young and fleshy,*  
*Whom I love distractedly*  
*More than my heart and eyes,*  
*Has distractedly enslaved*  
*Half of my life*  
*With her fleshy perfection;*  
*But in no way am I sorry*  
*To be enslaved by her,*  
*By the fair damsel’s fleshiness*  
*Whom I love distractedly*  
*More than my heart and eyes.*

*Alas! Another young damsel,*  
*Young and skinny,*  
*Whom I love distractedly*  
*More than my heart and eyes,*  
*Has distractedly laid siege*  
*To the other half of my life*  
*With her skinny perfection;*  
*But in no way am I sorry*  
*To be enslaved by her,*  
*By the fair damsel’s skinniness*  
*Whom I love distractedly*  
*More than my heart and eyes.*
Autant me plaist la grassette
Autant me plaist la maigrette,
Et l’une à son tour autant
Que l’autre me rend contant.

Ny le temps ny son effort
Ny violence de mort,
Ny les mutines injures,
Ny les mesdans parjures,
Ny les outrageux brocars
De vos voisins babillars,
Ny la trop soigneuse garde
D’une cousine bavarde,
Ny le soupçon des passans,
Ny les maris menaçans,
Ny les audaces des frères,
Ny les preschemens des meres
Ny les oncles sourcilleux,
Ny les dangers périlleux
Qui l’amour peuvent desfaire,
N’auront puissance de faire
Que jamais je n’aime mieux
Que mon cœur ny que mes yeux
L’une et l’autre pucelette,
Grasselette et maigrelette.

PIERRE DE RONSARD (1524–1585) No 4 of Gayetez (1553)

Just when one might imagines that Saint-Saëns had written himself out, and had become tongue-tied in his efforts to reconcile his old habits with the modern world, he writes a joyous song like this which shows the hand of the master still at work. Only a French singer could cope with this dazzling patter song, a type of faster and racier version of Suzette et Suzon where the virtues of two very different women are apostrophised. Here we can detect a delightful glimpse of the old rogue and roué that was undoubtedly a side of this composer. And the music, in the manner of a chanson-scie at a café concert links hands with the modern generation of Les Six in a way that it is very unlikely that either Saint-Saëns or his racy juniors suspected. It is as if the old boy has come full circle. He was alive when this type of ditty was all the rage in the cancan age of the Second Empire, and now he had lived long enough to encounter the phenomenon of frivolity enshrined as modernity, simplicity and economy praised as an antidote to ‘boring old Duparc’, artful banality praised to the skies as profundity under another guise. One almost weeps that he could not have his time all over again. Without the burdensome baggage of his long and unhappy past he might have astounded us all by re-emerging with greater force, reborn as a deft and glittering composer of a less sentimental century. It is doubtful whether he would have achieved the same fame, but he would almost certainly have had a happier time.

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MÉLODIES DE Camille Saint-Saëns

SAG Fauré est, pour reprendre l’expression de Debussy, le « maître des charmes », Saint-Saëns est le « maître des déguisements ». Nous nous demandons qui est ce compositeur, dont nous goûtons la musique, merveilleuse d’aisance et d’assurance. Mais le créateur Saint-Saëns fait si aisément écho aux textes de ses chants que nous oublions parfois qui il est. Peut-être nous faut-il un peu mieux le connaître avant de pouvoir le discerner dans son numéro.


Après des années de traversée du désert, du moins pour les critiques parisiens, Saint-Saëns récolta les récompenses d’une vie de laboureur et connut une grande célébrité. Après tout, il possédait un vaste catalogue de compositions, dans presque toutes les formes, et ses voyages incessants de par le monde lui avaient acquis une réputation à l’étranger peut-être supérieure à celle de tout autre musicien français. Qui d’autre pourrait se targuer d’avoir joué pour le « roi-citoyen » Louis-Philippe aux Tuileries, mais aussi d’avoir vécu assez longtemps pour composer un chœur (Aux conquérants de l’air) en l’honneur de ‘ces hommes magnifiques dans leurs machines volantes’, ces courageux aviateurs de la Première Guerre mondiale et des Années folles ? Il est désormais temps de se livrer à un réexamen majeur du rôle considérable de Saint-Saëns dans l’histoire de la musique française.

Il serait vain de prétendre trouver dans les chants de Saint-Saëns une chronique du développement spirituel identique à celle qui se dégagerait d’une rétrospective des mélodies de Fauré. À quatre-vingts ans, Saint-Saëns demeurait alerte et plein d’esprit, comme touché par une sorte d’intemporalité, et rien ne sépare le tout premier du tout dernier chant du présent enregistrement. Être aux qualités d’un Peter Pan, il fut le compositeur qui ne grandit jamais—un garçon perdu, qui n’eût probablement aucune liaison amoureuse mature et semble avoir été parfois totalement insensible aux infortunes qui lui échurent (surtout pour ce qui concerne ses années d’échec auprès des critiques français). Pourtant, sa maîtrise du chant est stupéfiante : tout est tellement bien écrit pour la voix, avec des accompagnements (très exigents dans certains cas) toujours intéressants et sincères. À cet égard, il était un professionnel chevronné, impitoyable dans son attitude envers le style négligé, tout sauf enfantin.

Le présent enregistrement s’ouvre sur neuf chants de Victor Hugo, poète que Saint-Saëns fut un des premiers à mettre en musique. L’on pourrait d’ailleurs arguer qu’il réussit mieux qu’aucun de ses successeurs, en tout cas mieux que Fauré, à trouver une musique pour ces poèmes lyriques. Les chants de la période moyenne reflètent un amour du voyage tant ils sont surtout l’œuvre d’un homme qui a visité des lieux éloignés et est parvenu, grâce à ses découvertes musicologiques, à une grande compréhension des styles antérieurs. Quant aux chants des dernières
années, ils présentent un classicisme chaste et baigné de lune, signe d’un individu qui se défait des ornements de velours d’un vieux siècle élimé. Fauré et lui sont en harmonie dans leur méfiance vis-à-vis du profond ou du sublime : ils ne s’autorisent pas à être dominés par l’esthétique du cercle de Franck, et leurs chants saisissent le lied allemand sans le considérer comme un principe vital. L’art de Saint-Saëns suit la même direction que, plus tard, sa vie de nomade : toujours en avant, toujours en mouvement, sans jamais se laisser déborder par des choses qui fouilleront trop profond et poseront trop de questions. Nous touchons là à une des qualités les plus séduisantes pour l’auditeur moderne : presque tous ces chants sont dépouvrus de sentimentalité et débarrassés d’un manque de goût spéculaire. (Sur ce disque, seul le chant *Aimons-nous* frise la sublimité.) Si les mélodies de Saint-Saëns nous semblent simples comparées à celles de son élève Fauré et de son « petit-élève » Ravel, rappelons-nous que son esthétique influença énormément ces maîtres plus jeunes. Ses chants surpassent sans peine les nombreux personnages moindres qui s’imaginaient beaucoup plus profonds que le pauvre vieux Saint-Saëns, qu’ils traitaient avec condescendance. Un regard sur le vaste catalogue de son œuvre et sur l’ampleur de ses réalisations aurait pourtant suffi à les stopper net. Car Saint-Saëns n’est pas à traiter avec condescendance, et il mérite mieux du monde moderne que le semi-oublie dans lequel sa réputation décrépit désormais.