

Saint-Saens

Violin Concerto No. 3

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Abstract

The present study discusses the Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, by Camille Saint-Saëns, focusing on the first and second movements. The purpose is to help performers in their understanding of the concerto by providing context and an analysis of the composer's musical style. Saint-Saëns was a prolific French composer, pianist, organist, and writer with a unique understanding of music. After the Franco-Prussian War in the 1870s, a movement to revive the tradition of national music emerged. In 1871, Saint-Saëns and his friends established the Société Nationale de Musique in Paris with the aim of introducing new French classical work and promoting the revival of the nation through art. One such piece was Saint-Saens' own Third Violin Concerto. As well as providing the historical and cultural context to his composition, the present study examines the musical structure of the work and appropriate playing styles. The study of the literature and the analysis of the genealogical examples revealed that the structure of the work is classical in style and the tone is romantic.

Keywords: Saint-Saëns, Société Nationale de Musique, Neo-classicism, violin concerto

1. Introduction

In the study of instrumental music, different musical works have different musical styles. How should violin students understand the style of playing this Concerto in B minor by Saint-Saëns? This study adopts a qualitative approach both to the literature and the music itself to provide the performer with a better understanding of the background of Saint-Saëns and his style. A performer can prepare for a new work by understanding its context and analyzing it. The paper will focus on two questions: 1. How can the artistic value of Saint-Saëns' violin works be better explored? The study will analyse the context and style of Saint-Saëns' compositions through documentary summaries, exploring the personal and Société Nationale de Musique and Neo-classicism perspectives of Saint-Saëns. 2. How can Saint-Saëns' Violin Concerto in B minor be best performed? In this paper, the music will be interpreted through textual descriptions, and its techniques will be analysed in terms of melody, rhythm, harmony, tonality and orchestration. In addition, the author will summarise the style of the different pieces through the recording of separate musicians and previous literature.

In the present case, this means knowing something of the background of the composer, the development of his work, his contribution to the period in which he lived, and so on. Armed with this knowledge, the performance will be better equipped to interpret the piece in question.

2. Background

2.1 Saint-Saëns

The renowned French composer, pianist, organist, and writer Camille Saint-Saëns was born in Paris in 1835 (Fallon & Harding, 2001). His father was born into a poor agricultural family and died only three months after his son's birth. Saint-Saens' musical contributions ranged across every genre of French music, and he became a prominent figure in the musical revival of the 1870s. He was raised by his mother and great-aunt, who was also a musician, and who gave him piano lessons when he was only three years of age. As a child, he displayed incredible talent and began to play officially staged performances such as Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, op. 37 and Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 15 in B flat, K450 from the age of 10 (Fallon and Harding 2001). He also wrote his own cadenzas for these pieces and played them from memory, an ability considered to be extraordinary at the time. Later on, Saint-Saëns started studying composition under Pierre Maleden and, in

1848, was admitted to the Paris Conservatory of Music where he started studying the organ. In 1852, he won the Premier Prix and, in the same year, started studying composition and orchestral arrangement. Following this, he began composing a number of pieces. He was made the organist of St Merry in 1853, where he first performed his Mass, op. 4, dedicated to the Abbé Gabriel in 1857. He was also nominated as an organist to the Cathedral of the Madeleine in the same year and kept this position until 1877. Liszt heard Saint-Saëns improvising there and praised him as the most talented organist in the world. Saint-Saëns subsequently became the first person in France to perform Liszt's symphonic poems (Fallon & Harding, 2001).

In 1870, during the Franco-Prussian War, Saint-Saëns suffered a great deal of hardship, and his situation worsened when the German forces began to surround Paris. During this period, he lost his friend, the painter Henri Regnault. Saint-Saëns composed *Marche Heroique*, dedicating it to the people he had lost in the war. During this time, Saint-Saëns, along with Romain Bussin, founded the Société Nationale de Musique, with the goal of encouraging more performances of contemporary French composers' music. Saint-Saëns made a debut performance at the Royal Philharmonic Society concert in London in 1874, where he performed the solo part of Beethoven's Concerto No. 4 in G major. Saint-Saëns married in 1875, but the union was not a success, and two of his sons died within six months of each other. Despite this, from 1871 to 1881—a period regarded as his creative prime—Saint-Saëns continued performing and produced a large number of famous works, including three violin concertos, the last of which was completed in 1880. It was dedicated to Spanish violinist Pablo de Sarasati (1844–1908), who first performed it at a private concert held at Saint-Saëns' home.

Despite a gradual decline in influence after 1890, Saint-Saëns continued to create highly significant work. He also enjoyed traveling, and in his later years, he wrote books and scripts as well as music. However, on December 16, 1921, while traveling in Algeria, he fell ill and subsequently died. Saint-Saëns made a huge contribution to the development of French music culture both as a composer and as a teacher of French music (Fallon & Harding, 2001).

2.2 Société Nationale de Musique

A movement to revive the tradition of national music emerged after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. As an advocate and organizer, Saint-Saëns, along with his friends Romain Bussine, Alexis de Castillon, and several other French musicians established the Société Nationale de Musique (National Musical Association) in Paris. The Société Nationale became the cradle of French music in the new era. “[T]he goal of the society was to further the production and popularization of all serious musical works, to encourage music to and to bring light, all music endeavors, in whatever form they may reveal, on condition that they elevated and artistic aspirations on the part of the author” (qtd. in Strasser, 2012, p. 109). In addition, the society's founders saw it as a way of encouraging the revival of the French nation through art.

For the first 15 years, Bussin acted as president and Saint-Saëns vice-president, and they worked closely together to build the society. Throughout the 1870s and beyond, they promoted the music of young French composers and gained much praise, though they were criticized by conservative critics, such as those who wrote in the journal *L'art musicals*. Saint-Saëns often railed against their accusation, declaring that they were wrong to regard the new association as a “coterie of intolerance and mutual admiration” (Pasler, 2012, p. 111).

The Société Nationale held eleven chamber music concerts every year at the Salle Pleyel for 10 years. From 1874, it staged two orchestral concerts every year. From 1871 to 1881, Saint-Saëns' works appeared on Société Nationale programs 99 times, which was more than any other composer (Michael, 2012, p. 112), so he was clearly the most popular.

At end of the 1880–81 season, a French Wagnerite faction, including Vincent d'Indy and César Franck, took control of the society's committee, and Saint-Saëns began to limit his involvement. In November 1886, he became concerned that d'Indy and his colleagues had changed the regulations to allow the performance of chamber music by foreign composers (although orchestral music was still restricted to those of French birth). Saint-Saëns' philosophy was to support artistic freedom and openness, but as the 1880s progressed, Saint-Saëns became over more disturbed by the growing arrogance and self-righteousness of the Wagnerians (Pasler, 1970, p. 115), who indeed managed to promote foreign composers' works at Société National concerts. After 1880, Saint-Saëns' work was only occasionally featured. He did not attend the premiere of an old friend's piano quartet on January 21, 1887 because he was no longer prepared to attend Société National concerts. He resigned from the society in 1886. It has been suggested that the conflict between him and several of his fellow musicians has obscured his contribution to the country's music (Fallon & Harding, 2001), but he had actively defended the music of young French composers in the face of opposition from his critics, and the society he had helped found was responsible for the fostering of a particularly Gallic musical style.

Saint-Saëns was one of the founders of the French National Music Association. He was actively engaged in a range of musical activities, and he performed in various countries as a pianist and conductor. The Third Violin Concerto was composed in 1880, during the peak period of Saint-Saëns' involvement in the Société Nationale. It fully demonstrates the "neoclassical" style of Saint-Saëns. The concerto has a clear structure, simple themes and melodies, and a regular formal design. At the same time, from the perspective of the performer, the solo sections are full of power and demand unique and dazzling skills as well as close cooperation with the orchestra. In terms of harmony, orchestration, and melodic contours, the concerto has a romantic style. The violin part covers a wide pitch range and is full of passionate expression. From the second movement, the music becomes more relaxed. The solo part contains many ligatures and the rhythm is relatively slow. The music is full of singing melodies. On balance, the concerto reveals both classical and Romantic qualities.

2.3 Neo-classicism

Between the two world wars, some 20th-century composers began to pursue a balanced and clear musical style to replace the late, exaggerated Romantic style, often called neo-classicism. "As a generic term for specific stylistic principles, 'neo-classical' is notably imprecise and has never been understood to refer solely to a revival of the techniques and forms of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Insofar as the movement had a slogan, it was 'back to Bach'" (Whittall 2001). However, the idea of a return to classical styles came as early as the late-19th century. "In France, neo-classicism was at first a pejorative term, implying an unimaginative copying; According to Scott Messing, French critics at the turn of the century loved to deride Mendelssohn and Brahms, indeed the whole "nineteenth-century German lineage [of symphonists]" as "neoclassic chloroform" (qtd. in Taruskin, 1993, p. 289). After the end of the Franco-Prussian War, however, the first group to call for a "return to classics" was the Société Nationale de Musique. This organization was responsible for the first significant neoclassical movement and produced a large number of works, for example, those by Saint-Saëns and D'Indy. The influence of traditional French music meant that Saint-Saëns' musical creations were not based solely on classical forms. "In 1871, the Société Nationale de Musique founded by Saint-Saëns in Paris, supported French national music and encouraged local composers to create and perform a large number of their works. In these works, there are two characteristics of 'pure music' and French national music" (Whittall, 2001). The form, shape, and design of Saint-Saëns' pieces are classical in style, but in terms of content, meaning and program, they belong to Romanticism.

According to Lan, "Saint-Saëns' works convey the budding of the 'neo-classical style.' The combination of its factors and nationality is a musical style full of artistic creativity, which not only influenced the development of French music in the 20th century, but also the 20th century. A prelude to the 'neoclassical style' spread in early world music" (Lan, 2007, p. 5). For Scott, "Saint Saëns viewed art as a special entity that responded to a certain sense which is peculiar to human beings. Rather than calling it the 'aesthetic sense,' he preferred 'sense of style,' because aesthetic sense signifies a sense of the beautiful and what is esthetic is not necessarily beautiful. Saint-Saëns considered music a means of putting this sense in vibration" (Scott, 1984, p. 159). This view of Saint-Saëns was deeply influenced by the "Art for Art" movement, the major tenet of this school of thought being that "art need not be moralistic, didactic, or utilitarian, but can exist purely for its own sake" (Scott 1984, 160). Saint-Saëns was a proponent of French traditional music, and his work bears many of its characteristics. The structure of the music is organized and balanced, and the harmonic texture is clear. At the same time, it is innovative in the way that it builds on the traditional French style. "Traditional French music, from the perspective of emotional communication, is consistent with the moderate, rational, and universal emotions advocated by 'neo-classicism,' so it focuses on the combination of rational control and perfect form" (Lan, 2007, p. 6). This attitude of "art for art's sake" defines much of the music of Saint-Saëns. "Contrary to those Romantic musicians who emphasize imagination, Saint-Saëns emphasized the power of music to imitate, which he considered as part of aesthetics. Saint Saëns declared that most people do not realize that the essence of music lies in form and therefore do not understand music. He condemned those who think that music is a kind of sensation art out of consideration of form. He agreed that feeling exists, but he believed that feeling itself is not art" (Scott, 1984, p. 161).

In sum, Saint-Saëns paid attention to the traditional music of France itself and played a vital role in its revival. An analysis of his instrumental works reveals both a "neo-classical" style and the traditional French musical sensibility. In the first allegro movement of the Third Violin Concerto, the solo violin is powerful, solemn, and orderly. It is constructed around a clear main theme and has a solid structure. In the second movement, the tempo turns to the adagio, and the A-B-AB three-stage form reflects the traditional French temperament. The music combines a simple organizational logic with the aesthetics of neoclassical music.

3. Analysis of the Score

Saint-Saëns described this work as “two mountains and a lake, the first and third movements are high mountains of excitement/emotion, and the second movement is a peaceful lake. The second movement is wonderful, and the song’s melody is quiet and peaceful” (qtd. in “Brief Analysis,” 2012). The work provides an excellent example of Saint-Saëns’s talent. The melody is bright, prominent, gorgeous, and full of poetry. The whole work is an encapsulation the French instrumental music tradition. The rhythms are rich and lively, the orchestral colors are typically French, and numerous technical sections allow the solo violin to demonstrate its expressive potential.

The Concerto is divided into three movements. The first is characterized by vigor and enthusiasm. The solo violin part is deep and strong in tone. The passionate melody is outlined clearly and the rhythm is solid. The first movement is written in sonata form (Table 1).

Table 1. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3 in B minor, op. 61, first movement

Bar	Theme	Key	Comment
Exposition			
5–20	Main theme	B	The main motif; the solo violin plays a continuous quarter note, which is the core of the whole piece and runs throughout.
21–97	Transition	B	Connecting the main part and the sub-part, the concerto continues to enrich.
98–121	Secondary theme	E	Solo violin with long notes, motifs constantly appearing, and melody torturous
Development			
130–185	Development	A–F	The constant change of motif highlights the color and melodiousness of the music and the solo violin has more room
Recapitulation			
186–229	Secondary theme	B	Echo of the theme
229–245	Main theme	B	Theme reproduction, ends with the main theme

The main theme, a dynamic melody, starts in the violin solo with the tempo *allegro non troppo*, with a powerful and expressive accent (Guțanu, 2015, p. 266). The first four quarter-notes of the solo are dynamic and form the main musical motive, which runs through the first movement. The violin solo and the orchestra cooperate closely with each other. After the main solo melody finishes, the theme reappears in the orchestra. This is followed by a series of triplets and chords that are full of vitality and are completed in one go. I think that Saint-Saëns wanted the theme to be played on the G string, with its darker sound, to embody passionate emotions. As the interval becomes higher, the music becomes very heroic and dramatic (see Ex. 1).



Ex. 1. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, first movement, bars 5–24 (violin part)

The main theme is followed by the transition, which connects the main part and the secondary theme; here, the violin is displayed in a legato tone, so it should be played with a warm tone and delicate emotions (see Ex. 2).



Ex. 2. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, first movement, bars 67–82 (violin part)

The next section is the subordinate theme in the key of E major. The solo violin is given a series of long notes and long bows. The greater number of large leaps adds expressive richness to the melody. The main melody is composed of continuous triplets. The way of playing here should be beautiful, smooth, and lyrical. The important things here are emotional quality, delicate processing of the tone, and evenness (see Ex. 3).



Ex. 3. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, first movement, bars 82–101 (violin part)

The next section is the development, which modulates from A major to F minor, bringing the music to a climax. The rhythm is similar to the first part, but the pitch changes (see Ex. 4).



Ex. 4. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, first movement, bars 115–122 (violin part)

This is followed by the secondary theme, which should be played with passion (see Ex. 5).



Ex. 5. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, first movement, bars 149–160 (violin part)

In the following passage, where the melody is repeated an octave higher, the performance should be beautiful and gentle, emotional, like sweet memories, and full of imagination. The performer's heart should be full of passion and romance when playing. They should pay attention to colorful features of the music here (see Ex. 6).



Ex. 6. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, first movement, bars 164–175 (violin part)

The second movement, Andantino quasi Allegretto, is in B-flat major. It is in a modified ternary form in which the C section combines material from the previous sections (A and B; Table 2).

Table 2. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, first movement

Bar	Theme	Key	Comment
A 4–55	First theme	B flat	Plays the soft first movement with the 6/8 tempo of the boat song.
B 56–89	Second theme	F	Full of exotic features
C 90–144	The first and second themes change, diminish, then reappear	B flat	The ending is presented as a violin overtone

According to Saint-Saëns, this movement “is like the echo of a song, wafted across the expanse of a peaceful lake, from a little boat drifting idly, with its freight of youth, towards the setting sun” (Lyle, 1970, 98). It is a bright, natural, and quiet movement, with strong references to the neo-classical style. The violin part is mostly legato. The first two bars of the main theme run through the whole movement in different forms. The rhythm is slow, and the steady rhythm is like the movement of water across a surface. The violin and wind parts continuously exchange ideas contrapuntally (see Ex. 7).



Ex. 7. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, second movement, bars 1-33(violin part)

In the middle section, the melody lines are constantly undulating. The tone should be broad and sublime. The main theme is played by the orchestra and the violin plays a supplementary role (see Ex. 8).



Ex. 8. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, second movement, bars 56–70 (violin part)

At the end, the timbre of the violin lingers in the high range, and the weak overtones gradually disappear (see Ex. 9).



Ex. 9. Saint-Saëns, Violin Concerto No. 3, in B minor, op. 61, second movement, bars 133-144 (violin part)

4. Conclusion

The present study has examined Saint-Saëns' Third Violin Concerto. The first part investigated the composer's background, SN, and neoclassicism. Knowing the context is highly relevant to the performance of this concerto, as it forms part of its foundations. Saint-Saëns was somewhat conservative in his musical style. The literature suggests that this may have been the consequence of his life experiences, the great joy that music brought him, and the harsh realities of his life. Investigating the background to the concerto and examining the score makes it possible to grasp why the first two movements are very different in style. The first movement is impassioned, with the solo violin sounding particularly poignant. The virtuosity required here also becomes apparent, as emotion is emphasized through the sustained and powerful accents and the fast tempo. In addition, the coordination between the violin and the accompaniment is very dramatic, and the structure is clear.

In sum, the structure of the work is classical in style and the tone is romantic. The second movement gives the effect of slow-moving water and it is very lyrical, which contrasts with the closing section of the first movement where the series of overtones are spare and solitary. The style of the second movement reflects Saint-Saëns' lifelong passion for travel, as it evokes a journey full of beauty and joy. This was an important work composed in his creative prime. The dedication to Sarasate was symbolic of their similar life experiences. They were both born into peasant families and grew up with musical ambitions, and their lives followed similar paths. Apart from the technique required to play this piece, the feeling is easy to grasp. The music is natural and can be played by following its spirit. Learning about the background to the piece, and having analyzed the score, the performer will be able to bring out its wonderful musicality.

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