

Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 78

Camille Saint-Saëns

“Monsieur Saint-Saëns possesses one of the most astonishing musical organizations I know of,” wrote the composer Charles Gounod of his fellow Parisian. “He is a musician armed with every weapon. He is a master of his craft as no one else is.” He might also have noted that Saint-Saëns was a highly accomplished organist (who for two decades reigned in the loft at the Church of the Madeleine), a champion of forgotten earlier music and of contemporary composers, an inspiring teacher (who, as professor at the École Niedermeyer in Paris, did much to shape the raw talents of Gabriel Fauré and André Messager), a gifted writer, a world traveler, and an avid and informed aficionado of such disciplines as Classical languages, astronomy, archaeology, philosophy, and even the occult sciences.

He started piano lessons at the age of two-and-a-half, soon began studying piano with a former pupil of Mendelssohn, and embarked on composition and organ instruction at seven (by which time he was already performing Bach, Handel, and Mozart in public). In 1846, when he was ten, Saint-Saëns made his formal debut in recital at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, with a program that included piano concertos by Mozart and Beethoven. The applause was resounding, so he topped off the event by offering to play any of Beethoven’s piano sonatas from memory, as an encore. “He knows everything, but lacks inexperience,” lamented his friend Hector Berlioz.

The last of Saint-Saëns’s completed symphonies, the Third was composed at the behest of the Philharmonic Society of London, then conducted by Sir Arthur Sullivan (of “Gilbert &” fame). In August 1883 the orchestra’s secretary expressed the wish that Saint-Saëns might come to London the following year,

either to play one of your concertos, or to compose a new one and play it, or to play a concerto by some other master, whichever you prefer; but I need scarcely add, they would prefer you to appear in one of your *own* compositions.

Talk soon turned instead to the possibility of a new symphony, and by March Saint-Saëns was far enough along in his planning to inform the orchestra of the new work’s instrumentation (“there are no harps, happily”), that it would be cast in two movements (in that regard mirroring his coeval Fourth Piano Concerto and Violin Sonata No. 1), that it would be difficult, that “this devil of a symphony” had moved up in his mind by a semi-tone (“it didn’t want to stay in B minor, and is now in C minor”), and that one “aggravation” would be that the piano part would involve one player at first and two later (“Happily, pianists are not rare in our epoch”). On May 18, 1886, Saint-Saëns wrote

IN SHORT

Born: October 9, 1835, in Paris, France

Died: December 16, 1921, in Algiers, Algeria

Work composed: April 1886; dedicated to the memory of Franz Liszt

World premiere: May 19, 1886, at St. James’s Hall in London, at a concert of the Philharmonic Society, with the composer conducting

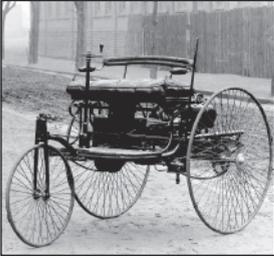
New York Philharmonic premiere: February 19, 1887, Theodore Thomas, conductor, which marked the U.S. Premiere

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: February 10, 2018, Antonio Pappano, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 38 minutes

At the Time

In 1886, as Saint-Saëns is composing his Symphony No. 3, the following are taking place:



- In France, after two years of work, Georges Seurat unveils his painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*; Auguste Mustel invents the celeste, taking its name from the French word for “heavenly.”
- In the United Kingdom, Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is published; Prime Minister W.E. Gladstone introduces a bill allowing home rule for Ireland, but the measure is later defeated in Parliament.
- In the United States, the Statue of Liberty is dedicated in New York Harbor; advertisements begin appearing in Atlanta for a carbonated beverage called Coca-Cola, invented by pharmacist John Stith Pemberton; in the case *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad*, the Supreme Court rules that corporations have the same rights as living persons.
- In Germany, Karl Benz introduces the Benz Patent Motorwagen, the first commercial gas-powered automobile; architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe is born.
- In Italy, former slave Augustus Tolton is ordained in Rome on Easter, the first Catholic priest to identify as African American; he then returns to the United States to serve in the Chicago area.



Counterclockwise from top: an early Coca-Cola advertisement; the Benz Patent Motorwagen; Father Augustus Tolton; Seurat’s *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*

from London to his publisher, Jacques Durand: “We have sight-read the symphony. I was right: it is really *terribly* challenging.” But the premiere went well the next day, and the composer followed up with a glowing report: “The Symphony enjoyed a colossal success, spiced up by just enough opposition to make the success more intense.”

Prominent use of the organ has earned this piece the nickname “Organ Symphony,” a rubric never sanctioned by the composer. It is, in fact, a bit misleading, since French composers of that time introduced a good many pieces that *were* titled “organ symphonies”; these were not orchestral works at all but rather big-boned, multi-movement pieces for solo organ. Saint-Saëns recognized that requiring an organ could limit performance

possibilities, since many concert halls lacked them, but he was perfectly content with the idea of a small organ being brought in for the occasion — and, in fact, suggested specifically that solution for a performance by the Concerts Colonne in Paris. He briefly considered allowing the use of a harmonium as an option, but after hearing the organ at the London premiere he told Durand that such a substitution must be ruled out as insufficient.

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

Sources and Inspirations

From 1858 to 1877 Camille Saint-Saëns was the organist at L’Église Sainte-Marie-Madeleine (also known simply as La Madeleine) in Paris, where he played an impressive pipe organ built and installed in 1845 by Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. The organ maker had wide influence during the 19th century for his innovations in design, voicing, and pipe adjustments, such as the introduction of stops that could replicate the sounds of the bassoon, oboe, and English horn, and a spring-loaded pedal that allowed players to operate the swell shutters and thus incorporate greater emotions into performances. Cavaillé-Coll’s symphonic organ innovations were familiar to composers of the time, as his instruments could be found throughout France and at more than a dozen locations around Paris, including Notre Dame and the Basilica of Sacre Coeur. “Symphonies” for solo organ, in which the instrument was used in all its glory to create orchestral effects, became a popular form among French composers, such as in Franck’s *Grande pièce symphonique* (1860–62), along with symphonies for organ and orchestra, including Saint-Saëns’s Symphony No. 3.

— The Editors

*The organ built by Aristide Cavaillé-Coll
for La Madeleine*

