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Saint-Saëns's Views on the Performance of Early Music

Robert Stevenson

An even less known product of Saint-Saëns's San Francisco stay than *Hail! California*, but one certainly no less worth discovering, is the English translation of a lecture that he gave at the French Pavilion on June 1, 1915, eleven days after arrival. Published with the title, *On the Execution of Music, and principally of ancient Music. A Lecture by M. Camille Saint-Saëns Delivered at the "Salon de la Pensée Française" Panama-Pacific International Exposition, San Francisco, June First, Nineteen Hundred & Fifteen, Done into English with explanatory notes by Henry P. Bowie* (San Francisco: The Blair-Murdock Company, 1915; 21pp.),¹ the lecture escapes listing in the catalogues of even such large music collections as those in the New York Public and Boston Public Libraries (see Example 1, Title Page). Not only because it is a bibliographic rarity, but because of the acuity of some of his observations, the lecture deserves attention that it has not hitherto received.

Despite his admiration of avant-garde Liszt, Saint-Saëns comes closer to conservative, backward-looking Brahms — so far as his zeal for the music from earlier centuries and its historically correct interpretation

1. Two reproductions are included as illustrations, examples 1 and 2 (following). Photos were provided by the kind permission of the San Francisco Public Library. I am indebted to Ms. Mary Ashe for her assistance.

Example 1. Title Page of Saint-Saëns's *Lecture*

ON THE EXECUTION OF
MUSIC, AND PRINCIPALLY
OF ANCIENT MUSIC

A Lecture

BY

M. CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

Delivered at the
"Salon de la Pensée Française"
Panama-Pacific International Exposition
San Francisco, June First
Nineteen Hundred
& Fifteen

DONE INTO ENGLISH
WITH EXPLANATORY NOTES BY
HENRY P. BOWIE

SAN FRANCISCO:
THE BLAIR-MURDOCK COMPANY
1915

are concerned. His remarks on how the works of such composers as Palestrina, Rameau, J.S. Bach, and Mozart should be performed merit especially close attention. According to him:

At Paris the first attempts to execute the music of Palestrina were made in the time of Louis Philippe, by the Prince of Moscow [Joseph-Napoléon Ney (1803-1857)]. He had founded a choral society of amateurs, all titled, but gifted with good voices and a certain musical talent (*Société de musique vocale, religieuse et classique*, founded in 1843). The society executed many of the works of Palestrina and particularly the famous *Missa Papae Marcelli*. They adopted at that time the method of singing most of these pieces very softly and with extreme slowness, so that in the long-sustained notes the singers were forced to divide their task by some taking up the sound when others were out of breath. Consonant chords thus presented evidently produced music which was very agreeable to the ear, but unquestionably the author could not recognize his work in such rendering. Quite different was the method of the singers of the Sistine Chapel, which I heard for the first time in Rome in 1855, when they sang the *Sicut Cervus* of Palestrina. They roared in a head-splitting way without the least regard for the pleasure of the listener, or for the meaning of the words they sang. It is difficult to believe that this music was ever composed to be executed in such a barbarous manner.

Remarking on the Tridentine ban against incorporating melodies of secular origin in sacred works, Saint-Saëns illustrated how the notes of such a popular French ditty as "I have some good tobacco in my snuffbox" (*J'ai du bon tabac dans ma tabatière*) could be disguised by lengthening them to semibreves in the tenor part — meanwhile the other three voice parts pursuing their independent course with smaller-value notes.

Example 2. Saint-Saëns's illustration of how to turn a French ditty into a sacred work

Le Chantons Paix: l'air du bon tabac dans ma tabatière

Sop.
Contr.
Ten.
Bass

chant

*Comme on voit la patrie est devenue incensurable, on le confie au
tabac, à lui est devenu son pays. on peut l'acheter pour l'acheter
chacun licencier, c'est pourquoi le pays n'est pas à l'école
de mettre fin à cette méthode.*

Concerning the interpretation of Rameau's works (which he began editing for Durand in 1895), Saint-Saëns had this to say:

In Rameau's music, certain signs defy intelligibility. Musical treatises of that time say that it is impossible to describe them, and that to understand them it was necessary to have heard them interpreted by a professor of singing.

With the clavecinists, the multiplicity of grace notes is extreme. As a rule they give the explanation of these at the head of their works, just as Rameau did. I note a curious sign which indicates that the right hand should arrive upon the keys a little after the left. This shows that there was not then that frightful habit of playing one hand after the other as is often done nowadays.

This prolixity of grace notes indulged by players upon the clavecin is rather terrifying at first, but one need not be detained by them, for they are not indispensable. The published methods of those times inform us in fact that pupils were first taught to play the piece without these grace notes, and that they were added by degrees. Besides, Rameau in transcribing for the clavecin fragments of his operas, has indicated those grace notes which the original did not contain.

Ornaments are much less numerous in the writings of Sebastian Bach. I will cite in connection with the subject of the "appoggiatura" — which "should always be long, the different ways in which it may be written having no influence upon its length" — the beautiful duo with chorus of the *Passion According to St. Matthew*. At the same time, I would point out the error committed in making of this passion a most grandiose performance with grand choral and instrumental masses. One is deceived by its noble character, by its two choruses, by its two orchestras, and one forgets that it was destined for the Church of St. Thomas in Leipzig, where Sebastian Bach was cantor. While in certain cantatas that composer employed horns, trumpets, and trombones, for the *Passion According to St. Matthew* he only used in each of the orchestras two flutes, and two oboes, changing from the ordinary oboes to the *oboi d'amore* and the *oboi da caccia*. These two orchestras and two choruses were certainly reduced to a very small number of performers.

In the time of Bach and Handel the bow truly merited its Italian name of *arco*. It was curved like an arc — the hairs of the bow

allowing the strings of the instrument to be enveloped and to be played simultaneously. Nowadays the form of the bow is completely changed. The execution of the music is based upon the detached bow, and although it is easy to keep the bow upon the strings just as they did at the commencement of the nineteenth century, performers have lost the habit of it. The result is that they give to early music a character of perpetually jumping, which completely destroys its nature.

The very opposite movement has been produced in instruments of the key or piano type. The precise indications of Mozart show that "non-legato," which doesn't mean at all "staccato," was the ordinary way of playing the instrument, and that the veritable "legato" was played only where the author especially indicated it.

As an illustration drawn from Mozart's most familiar piano sonata, K. 331, Saint-Saëns then drew attention to measures 40-43 in the Rondo alla turca, and to passages in a Mozart piano concerto and a Beethoven violin and piano sonata during which the piano should articulate non-legato and legato in exact imitation of what the composers prescribed for flute and violin in parallel preceding passages. He blamed Frédéric Kalkbrenner (1785-1849) for the tyranny of the perpetual legato in performing piano works of the Viennese classicists.

The house of Breitkopf, which until lately had the best editions of the German classics, has substituted in their places new editions where professors have eagerly striven to perfect in their own manner the music of the masters. When this great house wished to make a complete edition of the works of Mozart, which are so prodigiously numerous, it appealed to all who possessed manuscripts of Mozart, and then having gathered these most precious documents, instead of reproducing them faithfully, that house believed it was doing well to leave the professors full liberty of treatment and change. Thus, that admirable series of concertos for piano has been ornamented by Carl Reinecke with a series of joined notes, tied notes, legato, molto legato, and sempre legato, which are the very opposite of what the composer intended. Worse still, in a piece which Mozart had the genial idea of terminating suddenly with a delicately shaded phrase, they have taken out such nuances and terminated the piece with a *forte* passage of the most commonplace character.

One other plague in modern editions is the abuse of the pedal. Mozart never indicated the pedal. As purity of taste is one of his

great qualities, it is probable that he made no abuse of the pedal. When Beethoven wanted the pedal, he wrote "senza sordini," which means without dampers; his "con sordini," means with dampers. The soft pedal he indicated "una corda." Telling the player to take it off he wrote "tre corde."

Concerning the use of the damper pedal in Chopin's works, Saint-Saëns maintained that "Chopin detested the abuse of the pedal." Because editors of Saint-Saëns's day wished to improve on Chopin, late nineteenth-century editions often prescribed pedal through a change of chord, such as the shift from tonic to dominant-seventh in each measure of the *Berceuse* — thus mixing the chords "which the composer was so careful to avoid." Chopin's *tempo rubato* also has come in the minds of many to indicate "that the time is to be dislocated."

When to this disorder is joined the abuse of the pedal, there results that vicious execution, which, passing muster, is generally accepted in the salons and often elsewhere. Another plague in the modern execution of music is the abuse of the tremolo by both singers and instrumental performers. Not all singers, fortunately, have this defect, but it has taken possession of violinists and 'cello players. That was not the way Auguste Franchomme [1808-1884], the 'cello player and collaborator of Chopin, played, nor was it the way Sarasate, Sivori, or Joachim played.

Saint-Saëns concludes his lecture with a discussion of *reprises*, that is to say, repeats. Kalkbrenner when executing Mozart's "great" C Major Piano Concerto (K. 503) rewrote all its repeats in a radically "different manner from the author." Saint-Saëns disallows such trampling on Mozart's intentions. But when Saint-Saëns himself "played at the Conservatoire in Paris Mozart's magnificent Concerto in C Minor [K. 491], I would have thought I was committing a crime in executing literally the piano part of the Adagio."

There as elsewhere the letter kills, the spirit vivifies. But in a case like that, one must know Mozart and assimilate his style, which demands a long study.