

Saint-Saens - CONCERTO NO. 3 IN B MINOR FOR VIOLIN AND ORCHESTRA

Born: October 9, 1835

Died: December 16, 1921

One day in 1859, a young man of fifteen years of age called upon Camille Saint-Saëns at his house on the Rue du Faubourg St. Honore in Paris and asked the composer to write a violin concerto for him.

Under ordinary circumstances, this might have been looked upon as an impertinence and not seriously considered; however, this was not an ordinary circumstance. The young man happened to be Pablo de Sarasate, the brilliant Spanish prodigy who, having won first prize in violin at the Paris Conservatoire two years before, was already regarded, despite his age, as one of the foremost violinists of that time.

Saint-Saëns, who himself had been a prodigy (he made his concert debut at the age of ten, playing concertos of Mozart and Beethoven and, for an encore, was prepared to play from memory anyone of Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas), remembered the visit fondly. "It was a long time ago that Pablo de Sarasate first called at my house," the composer recalled. "Fresh and young as spring itself, the faint shadow of a moustache scarcely visible on his upper lip, he was already a famous virtuoso. As if it were the easiest thing in the world, he had come quite simply to ask me to write a concerto for him.

Flattered and charmed to the highest degree, I promised that I would, and I kept my word with the Concerto in A Major..." that visit was the start of a long and fruitful friendship between the two musicians. In addition to the Violin Concerto No.1 in A Major, this friendship also produced the Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso and the present work, the Violin Concerto No.3 in B Minor.

The B Minor Violin Concerto, the final work which Saint-Saëns composed in that genre, was written in 1880, some twenty-one years after the A Major Concerto. Sarasate, to whom the work was dedicated, gave the first performance of the concerto at a private concert that same year. The B Minor Concerto is, by far, the most successful and the most frequently performed of Saint-Saëns' three violin concertos.

The composer was forty-five when he wrote the work, and he had already accumulated an impressive catalogue of compositions in almost every musical form. This concerto reveals the composer at his best in the handling of the solo instrument. A pianist and organist by training and profession, Saint-Saëns obviously benefited from his long association with Sarasate by gaining from him some of the technical knowledge which enabled him to write effectively for the violin and to exploit its possibilities to the fullest. As one anonymous commentator noted, Saint-Saëns' B Minor Violin Concerto is a work "which hesitates not in the slightest to turn over the stage to the solo instrument, and from the very onset it is

clear that the orchestra has no intention of competing or arguing. The violin reigns, free to do all the things it does best."

The concerto opens with a dramatic background of tremolo strings and timpani over which the solo violin enters almost immediately, playing the vigorous and passionate first theme of the movement.

After the possibilities of this theme are explored, the violin introduces the second theme, a tender and wistful song. The first theme figures prominently in the development section, in the brief recapitulation, and in the brilliant coda which ends the movement. Cast in simple ternary form, the second movement is a graceful and languid barcarolle in which the gentle, rocking melody sung by the violin is supported by delicate accompaniment from the woodwinds.

The movement ends in a haze of violin harmonics--high, thin, flute-like tones which are produced by lightly touching the string with the finger rather than pressing it down firmly against the fingerboard. A fiery, gypsy-sounding cadenza, which is punctuated with orchestral thunder, serves as the introduction to the final movement. The principal theme of the finale is a prancing, dance-like melody which Saint-Saëns contrasts with lyrical episodes and a chorale.

Toward the end of the recapitulation, the chorale theme emerges in its full glory as sung by the brasses against agitated string figures, then is taken up briefly by the solo violin. A short coda brings the concerto to a close.

-Kenneth C. Viant