

A Famous French Composer



Camille Saint-Saens was a Frenchman who lived a long and useful life. Many times during his life he traveled to all parts of Europe, Africa, and the United States, where he not only gave piano recitals but also conducted great symphony orchestras.

Like many other great musicians, Saint-Saens began to show a liking for music when he was very young. Many of his relatives were musicians, and the little boy would sit for hours listening to them play or sing. His uncle who was an artist was so fond of music that he built a small organ in his home with his own hands. Upon this instrument, the young musician often played, his first music lessons having been given him by his mother and his aunt.

In writing about his love for music, Saint-Saens said: “Not only did I love music, but every sound that was to be heard. I would, when I was very little, listen to every noise. I would open and close doors to make them creak and would often “plant” myself in front of clocks to hear them strike. When they had struck, I could then name the pitch they had sounded and would hurry and play the corresponding key on my little piano.”

It was Saint-Saens who wrote the very popular little classic called “The Swan.” This short piece, which has been arranged as a solo for almost every instrument of the orchestra, as well as for duet and trio, was one of a set of short pieces called *The Carnival of the Animals*. Each short piece from this suite is a musical description of some animal, but “The Swan” is, in all ways, the most beautiful of the pieces. When played as a solo, “The Swan” has a beautiful singing melody and rippling harp-like accompaniment that suggests the rippling of waters.

Of the many compositions by Saint-Saens, a great favorite with many people is the “Bacchanale,” a wild Oriental dance which is a part of the last act of his opera, *Samson and Delila*. This opera tells in music the story of Samson, the strong man. Samson had been captured by the Philistines who were enemies of his people. For many days after they had taken him prisoner, the Philistines tried in many ways to learn the secret of

his great strength. At last, he foolishly told Delila, whom he loved, that if his long hair were cut off he would become as weak as other men. She told Samson's secret to the Philistines. When he had fallen asleep, the Philistines crept in and cut off his long locks of hair, and when Samson awoke his strength was gone. Then his enemies put out his eyes.

One day the Philistines held a great festival in their heathen temple. The great building was filled with people, and as a further insult to Samson they brought him into the temple and tormented him. He was chained to two of the great pillars of the temple. While his enemies were taking part in a wild pagan dance, Samson prayed for a return of his strength so that he might avenge himself on the Philistines. His request was granted. Samson exerted his strength “and the house fell upon all the people that were therein.”

Thus Samson and all his enemies were destroyed at one stroke. The “Bacchanale” which tells of the wild dance in the temple has for its theme a real oriental melody and ends in a wild frenzy of sound as the temple is destroyed.

—H. G. K.

Music to Hear:

“The Swan” from *The Carnival of the Animals* — Saint-Saens

“Bacchanale” from the opera *Samson and Delila* — Saint- Saens

QUESTIONS

1. Name a suite of pieces by this French composer, and describe one of the compositions which is a part of the suite.
2. Tell of an opera by Saint-Saens. From what source did the composer take the story upon which the opera is founded?
3. How does the composer bring the opera to a close?

-From *Tales of Olden Days* by Hazel Gertrude Kinscella