

“Tarantella” for Flute, Clarinet, and Orchestra, Op. 6

Camille Saint-Saëns 1835-1921

“He was a restless man,” is Phillip Hale’s comment on Saint-Saëns, and then he goes on to enumerate the interests of this extraordinary French composer: “organist, pianist, caricaturist, dabbler in science; [a man] enamored of mathematics and astronomy, amateur comedian.” (He forgot “poet” and “playwright”). As a composer there was no field of music he left untouched, and, as to musical style he was a chameleon. “I live in music like a fish in water,” he once remarked. His great contribution to French music was to urge a turning away from the frivolous taste of the Second Empire and to encourage in his countrymen a revival of interest in instrumental music, and in the symphonic tradition in particular, by founding the Societe Nationale de Musique.

The “Tarantelle” for Flute and Clarinet is an early work in a career that was to span almost 70 years and produce almost 200 works. It was written in 1857, an eventful year for the 22-year-old composer, who was already amazing all of Paris with his virtuosity at the organ console. In December he was awarded the coveted appointment as organist at Paris’ famous church of the Madeline – the committee had passed over the heads of many distinguished applicants in making the choice. At the same time, Saint-Saëns did not fail to give unflagging attention to his creative drive. In that year the Parisian public had heard performances of his First Symphony and his prize-winning Second Symphony. He had also composed a number of songs, choruses, a mass and several pieces for organ. The “Tarantelle” would be the first in a series for solo instruments with orchestra. A polished work, it wears that aura of elegance that makes it typically French.

By Margery Derdeyn