

Charles Camille Saint-Saëns

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) composed five piano concertos in his long career. Numbers two, four, and five have proved to be the most popular with concert audiences over the years, as well as with recording companies. Some noted pianists have traversed the complete set, while others have put to record the second and fourth. Regardless, Saint-Saëns' piano concertos have stood the test of time and are established works in the keyboard literature of any reputable pianist.

Keyboard instruments were central to Saint-Saëns life as a composer and performer. He was a master of the organ, so much so that Franz Liszt, a formidable organist in his own right, declared Saint-Saëns the 'greatest organist in the world.' In 1854, he became chief organist at the Church of St. Merry's in Paris, and three years later, he assumed the same position at L'église de la Madeleine, a post he retained for twenty years. The organ is a key element in his third, last and most dazzling symphony, and is so designated in the title, *Symphony No 3 in C minor, 'Organ.'*

The piano, not the organ, however, was Saint-Saëns instrument of choice for his tours and his compositions. It was his instrument at his debut at age five, and it was the instrument on which he gave his last public performance in 1921. He composed his first piano concerto in 1858. During his tours at home and abroad in the 1860s, this concerto garnered him a fair amount of success. He revised it in 1868 at about the time he was spurred to write a new piano concerto for a visiting dignitary.

In the spring of 1868, the great Russian pianist, composer, and conductor, **Anton Rubinstein** came to Paris for a series of concerto performances with Saint-Saëns as conductor for the occasion, Saint-Saëns set out to compose a new work within three weeks. He had the work ready for performance in seventeen days. The premiere performance took place on May 13, 1868, in Paris, with Rubinstein conducting and Saint-Saëns playing the ***Piano Concerto No 2 in G minor, Op 22***. The performance was quite successful, and the concerto has been in the active repertoire since.

Like the Piano Concerto No 2, the ***Piano Concerto No 4 in C minor*** was composed in relative short order and premièred on October 31, 1875, at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, with the composer as soloist. It is one of Saint-Saëns' most popular piano concertos, second only to the Piano Concerto No. 2.

The Concerto No. 4 is based on fragments of an unfinished symphony which the composer wrote and then abandoned in his late teens. Why did he abandon the

symphony idea, yet use the material for a piano concerto? A noted scholar, Daniel M. Fallon, offers several reasons. One, the material lacked the dramatic quality usually associated with a symphony; two, the lyrical theme of the second movement is “beautifully poetic, a quality that is best captured by the intimacy of the solo instrument”; and, three, the composer may have felt that by “transforming themes, he would be able to spin out a *Finale* from the germinal ideas in the draft.”

The formal layout of the Concerto is one that Saint-Saëns used again a decade later with his *Symphony No 3 in C minor, “Organ”*. The two movements of the Concerto, as in the Symphony, are in fact four movements, joined at notable junctions. Additionally, both compositions begin in C minor and end in C major and rely on thematic transformation to progress the music along. Regardless of its original source, the ***Piano Concerto No 4 in C minor, Op 44***, “is a unique example of the piano concerto in the late nineteenth century.”