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RECORDS

## GOULD PIANO TRIO: SAINT-SAËNS



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## TRACK LISTING

### CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921)

#### PIANO TRIO NO.1 IN F MAJOR OP.18

- |   |                            |       |
|---|----------------------------|-------|
| 1 | <i>i</i> Allegro vivace    | 07'46 |
| 2 | <i>ii</i> Andante          | 08'50 |
| 3 | <i>iii</i> Scherzo: Presto | 03'45 |
| 4 | <i>iv</i> Allegro          | 08'54 |

#### PIANO TRIO NO.2 IN E MINOR OP.92

- |   |                                  |       |
|---|----------------------------------|-------|
| 5 | <i>i</i> Allegro ma non troppo   | 11'25 |
| 6 | <i>ii</i> Allegretto             | 06'09 |
| 7 | <i>iii</i> Andante con moto      | 04'41 |
| 8 | <i>iv</i> Grazioso, poco allegro | 04'39 |
| 9 | <i>v</i> Allegro                 | 07'48 |

- |    |                                   |       |
|----|-----------------------------------|-------|
| 10 | <b>LA MUSE ET LE POÈTE OP.132</b> | 15'48 |
|----|-----------------------------------|-------|

Total playing time: **79'51**

Produced and engineered by Patrick Allen  
Recorded on 23rd-25th November 2016 in the Music Room, Champs Hill, West Sussex, UK

Executive Producer for Champs Hill Records: Alexander Van Ingen  
Label Manager for Champs Hill Records: Joanna Wilson

## FOREWORD

Saint-Saëns' very long life took him through the Romantic period well into the age of Debussy and early Stravinsky. Out of kilter with the latter era, for many years he had the reputation of a musical reactionary. Today, however, we can view him with more historical perspective.

He was ahead of his time in authentic performance practice habits and an understanding of the classical repertoire, far exceeding that of most of his romantic contemporaries.

His piano trios display a sense of proportion and style, while giving vent to his poetry, wit and passion.

Long popular for some of his orchestral works and concertos, Saint-Saëns also wrote a chamber version of "La muse et le poète", which we take great pleasure in including, in an attempt to convey the emotional intimacy of his conception.



Vivaldi, Pachelbel, Albinoni, Bruch, Barber, Humperdinck. While not exactly “one-hit wonders”, they all belong to that pitiable sub-set of composers who have written one work that is vastly more popular than all their others, obscuring appreciation of their broader achievement.

To their number can be added the name of Camille Saint-Saëns, whose “Carnival of the Animals” – a musical depiction of hens, tortoises, fish and (most famously) a swan – remains by far his best-known composition, not least because it is often used to introduce children to the attractions of classical music.

There is irony here: in his lifetime Saint-Saëns never allowed the “Carnival” to be published, viewing it as a piece of harmless fun, but not typical of the more serious work on which he wished to build a lasting reputation. A century before the age of social media soundbites and instantaneous global communication, Saint-Saëns already fully understood the perils of adventitious celebrity, and wished to avoid it.

Among the compositions by Saint-Saëns still clamouring for fuller recognition today – he wrote over 300 works in total – is his substantial body of chamber music. Sonatas for bassoon, oboe, clarinet, cello and violin are part of it, while for larger combinations of instruments there are two string quartets, a piano quartet and quintet, a septet, and the two piano trios featured on this recording.

The first of these, the Piano Trio No.1 in F major, Op.18, dates from 1863. Though still in his twenties, Saint-Saëns already had a sizeable quantity of music behind him, including his first two numbered symphonies and a pair of violin concertos. So it is not surprising to find that the opening movement of the Op.18 trio already has such a feeling of technical assurance and fluidity about it. The blithe, insouciant melody with which the cello makes its initial entry is immediately imitated by the violin, both instruments skipping along lightly, like newborn lambs in a pleasantly open pasture.

It is, though, the piano that soon becomes the most irrepressibly active of the three gambolling partners. Its cascading flourishes of notes have an unstoppably joyful quality, and incidentally provide an insight into Saint-Saëns the pianist: aged 28, he had been a brilliant virtuoso player for years already, and his delight in public performance can be clearly felt in this opening, *Allegro vivace* movement.

Though clouded by minor key colourations and some turbulence in its central section, the mood elsewhere is gracefully ebullient, recalling Mozart (a composer Saint-Saëns idolised) in its elegance. Was it inspired by a trip that Saint-Saëns made to the idyllic countryside of the Auvergne, as biographers have suggested? Possibly: the music has a distinctly al fresco feeling to it.

The second movement has rustic connotations too, in the drone effect created at the outset by the violin and cello intoning single notes, as though emulating a medieval fiddle or a hurdy-gurdy. The gently melancholy tune enunciated first by the cello has a folk-like quality which shows a brighter, more yielding side of its nature in the movement’s middle section. The drone material resurfaces in the coda, somehow deepened and a touch desolate.

Any residue of vulnerable introspection is blown away in the skittering *Scherzo*, a delightfully nimble dance whose steps are marked by fine-tooled *pizzicatos* and dotted rhythms in the piano. The rippling finale is, by comparison, more relaxed in metabolism. A surprising amount of it is marked to be played quietly, or very quietly, with a light, concessive touch from the players. The sense of airy liberation that results is like a freshening breeze in summertime: nothing, it seems, can blot the simple pleasures of the passing moment, or return the happy daydreamer to more mundane reality.

It was nearly three decades before Saint-Saëns returned to the piano trio format, and when he did the results were very different. In the years between, Saint-Saëns

married (abandoning his wife six years later), became an internationally successful composer, and suffered (in 1888) the death of his beloved mother.

Did some of Saint-Saëns' personal feelings and tribulations seep into the Piano Trio No.2 in E minor, Op.92 (1892), an altogether more serious-sounding work than its Op.18 predecessor? Perhaps, although Saint-Saëns himself cautioned strongly against the incorporation of subjective emotions into music. "Art is intended to create beauty and character", he wrote. "Feeling only comes afterwards and art can very well do without it. In fact, it is very much better off when it does".

These comments notwithstanding, it is virtually impossible not to hear disquiet and agitation in the E minor Trio's opening movement, with its swirling piano part and churning development section. Vestiges of instability persist in the second movement *Allegretto*, whose attempts to set a carefree dance in motion are undermined by the jittery five-in-a-bar time signature, and a piano part that shoots off nervously in unpredictable directions, at one point provoking the violin and cello to behave in similar fashion.

The emotional temperature abates to gently wistful in the central *Andante con moto*, a movement often compared to Schumann, whose music Saint-Saëns strongly advocated. The short, waltz-time movement that follows marks a blithe-spirited return to the world of the Op.18 Trio, its nimble playfulness intended as an opportunity for the listener to catch a moment of relaxation before the renewed seriousness of the finale.

The mood of that concluding movement is immediately more austere. All three instruments toy with contrapuntal material, as though seeking a balanced accommodation between the disparate strands of feeling expressed earlier in the Trio. A jittery, hyperactive fugal episode launched on violin dominates the middle section, eventually generating a roiling climax, underpinned by pummelling chord-work on the piano. A brief interlude of calm and respite follows, like sunshine after

a heavy shower of rain, before the turbulence recommences. All three instruments join in driving the Trio to a truculent, uncompromising ending.

"Feeling only comes afterwards". Is it possible to listen to the E minor Trio without concluding that Saint-Saëns has broken his own rules about keeping private emotions out of music? Does it not clearly communicate states of mind and spirit that are all too human in their mingling of delight, trouble and trepidation?

These are difficult questions to answer. Further clues about the enigmatic relationship between Saint-Saëns' personal life and his music are, though, offered in *La Muse et le poète*, a work that is little known, especially in the original version for piano trio heard in this recording.

It is a partly whimsical piece, expressing – perhaps – nostalgia for the past (the work was almost embarrassingly out of date stylistically by 1909, the year of its composition). Are there also, in the sweetly melancholy, impassioned, eventually optimistic exchanges between the violin and cello, elements of something deeper and more personal, simmering underneath without ever fully breaking the surface?

It is certainly possible. An aborted marriage, the death of two infant children, and the passing of his mother – these traumatic events all shook Saint-Saëns deeply. Scholars have also argued that for much of his adult life he suppressed feelings of homosexuality, perhaps seeking a clandestine outlet for them on his trips to North Africa.

Beneath the typically spry, elegant surfaces of his music darker thoughts and impulses do often seem to loiter. As the music writer Jessica Duchen aptly puts it: "All the fluidity, flamboyance and sparkle was effectively a mask for a troubled man who preferred not to betray the darker side of his soul. As with many great comedians, his art concealed an existence that contained more than its fair share of tragedy."

## I THE GOULD PIANO TRIO

The Gould Piano Trio, directly compared to the great Beaux Arts Trio for their “musical fire” and “dedication to the genre” in the *Washington Post*, have remained at the forefront of the international chamber music scene for a quarter of a century. Launched by their first prize at the Melbourne Chamber Music Competition and subsequently selected as YCAT Artists, they were “Rising Stars”, making a highly successful debut at New York’s Weill Recital Hall, described by *Strad Magazine* as “Pure Gould”. Their many appearances at London’s Wigmore Hall have included the complete piano trios of Dvorak, Mendelssohn and Schubert – plus in the 2017–18 season, a Beethoven cycle, to celebrate 25 years since their first appearance at this iconic venue.

The trio’s diverse discography includes the main masterpieces of the repertoire, but also many neglected gems, often rediscovered through artistic collaboration. Cycles of Brahms and Dvorak (Champs Hill), Hummel (Naxos) and Beethoven (Somm) –



recorded “live” at St. George’s, Bristol – are complemented by single-composer discs of the late romantic British repertoire with clarinetist, Robert Plane. The complete Stanford, Ireland, York Bowen, Robin Milford and Cyril Scott were followed by an entirely contemporary disc containing the piano trios of Sir James MacMillan, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies and Sally Beamish.

Commissioning and performing new works is an important part of the trio’s philosophy of staying creative and freshly inspired. MacMillan’s 2nd Piano Trio was commissioned by them and premiered at the Bath International Festival in 2014. In 2016, Simon Roland Jones graced the Goulds with his new trio, entitled “Eidford” (premiered at the North Norfolk Festival) and the following year saw them featured in the Hull “City of Culture”, performing former BBC Young Musician, Mark Simpson’s graphically inspired piece for them, “After Avedon”, as part of the PRS’ “New Music Biennial”.

The trio and Robert Plane’s festival in Corbridge, now in its third decade, is celebrated by a performance of Huw Watkins’ new work for Clarinet and Piano Trio. This perennially popular event provides scope for the performance of many forms of chamber music and the opportunity to explore this repertoire with choice musical partners. Similarly, in “The Venue” at Leeds during 2017–18 the trio have curated a whole season of six concerts entitled, “Russia in Revolution”, a multifaceted delve into this exciting period.

The Goulds have made extensive tours of North America, the Far East, New Zealand and Sweden, with concerts throughout Europe. When not concertising, they find master-classes and coaching a revitalising part of their schedule, particularly as Artists in Residence at the Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, where they each hold a Fellowship.

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