



C. Saint-Saëns: Complete Piano Concertos

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I apologize for the absurdly long delay since I reviewed Vol. II of this two-disc set back in 2005, and for reviewing the second volume before the first. I'm trying to set matters right herewith. This volume covers the other three concertos; the first two are three-movement works but No. 4 is only two movement. The Op. 17 was composed when the composer was just 23 and he had a great time showing off to the hilt. The section where the pianist continually runs all the way up and down the keyboard for some minutes while the orchestra strings play the melody brings at first a smile and finally laughter when it is carried on a bit too long. Only in the center Andante movement does Saint-Saens become more serious and thoughtful.

The Second Piano Concerto is the most-played of the five, and has become the most-performed French piano concerto. It gives the piano an even more prominent role in the proceedings than the First Concerto had. It has some big openings and plays extended cadenzas. If you haven't heard this work for awhile, the outstanding melodies will quickly remind you of its familiarity. The center movement scherzo is in the style of Berlioz and Mendelssohn; it may even remind you of some of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Saint-Saens followed some of the structural approaches of Liszt in writing his Fourth Concerto. The Allegro first movement has a march-like first subject and the concluding Allegro section has ten virtuoso variations for piano and orchestra on a folk song melody.

The clean 5.0 surround makes this a most involving listen. You might want to raise the center channel a tad to make the piano more centered, but it is still too wide, like most piano recordings today. This volume makes a fine pairing with Vol. II - don't wait three years to put them together!