



Camille Saint-Saëns: Piano Quintet & String Quartet No. 1

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MUSIC
Although Saint-Saëns is often called a youthful prodigy, as such he wasn't really of the calibre of Mozart or Mendelssohn. His Piano Quintet, written when he was 20, certainly gives hope of fine things to come, glowing as it does with enthusiasm and a determination to show off the pianist's technique. It also has its playful moments, but as time goes on, despite a fluent performance from the pianist, we begin to tire of the overuse of sequences and would relish a more equal partnership with the strings: as Poulenc was quick to admit, being a fine pianist can have drawbacks for a composer, fingers too readily taking the place of ears and mind.

We might therefore hope that Saint-Saëns's first chamber work without piano might offer something special. Sadly it doesn't. In 1906 he declared his ambition to write 'a really beautiful string quartet', thereby implicitly criticising his first attempt at the genre, made seven years earlier. It gives me no pleasure to agree. Although the very opening is highly imaginative, from here on duty seems to call, with the weight of tradition sitting heavily on his shoulders. Quite simply, the material is rather dull and predictable, and playfulness is out. Matters are not improved by the close recording, which amplifies the impact of bows on strings with results that can be aurally fairly uncomfortable above mezzo forte; and I'm puzzled by the advertised contribution to the Quintet's scherzo of a double bass, not present in the score nor mentioned in the liner notes...