



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

aud 97.728

EAN: 4022143977281



[Fanfare](#) (Jerry Dubins - 2017.03.01)

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It's quite surprising, really, how few ensembles have taken up these two chamber works by Saint-Saëns. Currently there are fewer than half a dozen listings for each. In the case of the quintet, however, I don't believe that any of them can be held up in comparison to this new recording of the work by the Quartetto di Cremona, for as you probably noticed in the above headnote, in addition to pianist Andrea Lucchesini joining the ensemble as the fifth member, double bassist Andrea Lumachi is a sixth participant. Admittedly, I did not know until I received this release that Saint-Saëns included an ad libitum part for double bass in the score's third movement (Presto), thereby making the work, if only for one movement, a sextet.

Composed in 1855, the quintet is Saint-Saëns's first attempt at a chamber work in any form, yet it already displays the composer's complete confidence in writing for the medium and his recognizable stylistic fingerprints. The aforementioned Presto movement is a wild orage, with hairpin crescendos and diminuendos on single notes, the likes of which are familiar from the second movement of Shostakovich's Piano Trio in E Minor, which wouldn't be written for another 89 years. I've compared this new performance to the one by the Nash Ensemble on Hyperion which does not include the double bass, and I can report that including it, as the Quartetto di Cremona does here, really makes a difference. It turns the movement from a Category 3 hurricane into at least a Category 4. Batten down the hatches and take cover for this one!

Whatever the reason—perhaps it was awe of Beethoven—Saint-Saëns did not attempt to compose a string quartet until 1899, when he was 64 and already older than Beethoven when the latter died; and Saint-Saëns would only approach the genre once more, in 1918 at the age of 83, three years before his own death. The awe of Beethoven might not be a far-fetched theory, for between 1858 and 1859, Saint-Saëns made a study of Beethoven's string quartets, transcribing movements from three of them for piano: the Adagio from op. 18/6, the scherzo from op. 59/1, and the finale from op. 59/3. He knew what he was up against.

I've had over five years to repent my sin of describing Saint-Saëns's E-Minor String Quartet as "a tornado in a thimble," when I reviewed a recording of it by the Fine Arts Quartet in 35:1. I've tried in that time to find the work's redeeming qualities, but my sense of it is that in writing the piece Saint-Saëns was not true to himself and to his innate musical instincts. He took himself and the medium too seriously, as if, somehow, composing a string quartet meant having to assume the mantle of Beethoven. Daniel Morrison took exception to my assessment of Saint-Saëns's

quartet in a 37:1 review of the Modigliani Quartet's recording of the work, referring to an earlier review in 21:6 by Robert McColley who felt the quartet possessed the "subtlety and complexity of musical and spiritual depth ... perhaps as close to the masterworks of late Beethoven as anything written since."

But that's precisely my point. I keep coming back to Ned Rorem's apothegm that "everything German is superficially profound; everything French is profoundly superficial." It may sound simplistic and even politically incorrect, but it contains a kernel of truth, as apothegms usually do. Saint-Saëns was at his best when he was superficial, and I don't mean that in a disparaging way. The best aspects of his music are in its surfaces, in the intuitive naturalness of its melodies and harmonies that never feel forced or "composed." We admire the spontaneity and effortlessness of the music's beauty for its own sake. It doesn't demand of us that we look for subtlety, complexity, or spiritual depth. In composing his first string quartet, Saint-Saëns seems to have felt the need to seek those things to be worthy of contributing to Beethoven's great legacy. To my ear, the result is a work that doesn't really sound like Saint-Saëns, any more than another quartet in the same key sounds like its composer, Verdi. Sometimes I make terse statements in reviews—like Saint-Saëns's E-Minor String Quartet being "a tornado in a thimble," without expounding on the reasoning by which I arrived at my conclusion. I hope the foregoing at least explains my thinking, even if you don't agree with it.

All of that aside, the performances here of both the quartet and the quintet by the Quartetto di Cremona, joined in the latter by Andrea Lucchesini and Andrea Lumachi, are thrilling. The players are on fire, delivering some of the most electrifying and exhilarating chamber music-making I've heard. And I will conclude by saying that they make even this listener re-evaluate his opinion of Saint-Saëns's E-Minor String Quartet, though I still maintain that it sounds more like Beethoven than it does Saint-Saëns. And speaking of Beethoven, I see that in 37:1 and again in 37:5, I could barely contain my enthusiasm for the Quartetto di Cremona's Volumes 1 and 2 of a new Beethoven quartet cycle. I see from the ensemble's web site that the cycle is complete on six volumes, but I don't believe we have received any of them beyond the first two. Someone, please send them posthaste.

Anyway, this Saint-Saëns release is going on my 2017 Want List; it's that good. Urgently recommended.