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Proto-Impressionism in Piano Works of Camille Saint-Saëns

ABSTRACT

Background

The legacy of Camille Saint-Saëns as a composer is widely misunderstood, crystallized in part because of the reputation of a few works that enjoy very few of the same qualities as the more successful ones.

introduction for the main body of the work, with fast, liquid sextuplets in the right hand (difficult because the first two notes of each figure are repeated) containing the melodic notes at the beginning of each sextuplet, and slow, haunting, sometimes quite dissonant chords in the left hand. This is followed by a more dissonant harmonic variation of all the preceding material, and a melancholy coda exploiting the same textures.

The harmonic ambiguity of *Les Cloches de las Palmas* is such that no clear key is established until the 49th measure of a 67 measure work. Before that point, modality and tonal chromaticism intermingle, and bell-like textural effects anticipating Ravel's *La vallée des cloches* (written five years later) are used to strong and striking effect. Most of the first 49 measures are not possible to analyze functionally, save for a few chord sequences that very weakly hint at a tonal framework.

The Fifth Piano Concerto (1896) was composed in Luxor, and includes Javanese as well as Egyptian influences. The 2nd movement, which the composer said was based on a "Nubian" song intoned by dahabiah boatmen, includes ingenious coloristic effects, including cadenza passages featuring "ghost overtones" (my label), produced by playing a line at an almost imperceptible dynamic in parallel major 6ths and 10ths, set several octaves above a principal line. While the "ghost overtones" themselves are subliminal as discreet parallel lines to the listener, when produced with the right balance, they color the principal piano line so that a timbral effect far removed from a typical piano sound is produced. Furthermore, the consistency of these parallel major 6ths and 10ths, contained in florid lines, result in pitch collections within single gestures and tonal motion that reside outside of tonal systems found in any other European music of the late 19th century.

In summary, Saint-Saëns's role as a harmonic and textural innovator presaging and sometimes going beyond impressionist idioms is little explored and underappreciated in reception history, as these and other examples should manifest.

Keywords

Impressionism, Texture, Modality, Saint-Saëns, Debussy, Ravel, Overtones, Piano Technique, Jeu Perlé.

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