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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 frequent performance, such as *Le carnaval des animaux*, the Piano Concerto No. 2, Symphony No. 3, and the opera *Samson et Delilah*. Largely due to these works, and his birth and death dates (1835-1921, encompassing a period of Chopin through Stravinsky as leading avant-garde lights), he is often perceived as a figure who was initially quite innovative, but was ultimately a “conservative” Romantic composer, as his style did not evolve towards atonality or any approaches that would be deemed cutting-edge towards the end of his life. However, when one considers the entirety of his output, Saint-Saëns was a truly eclectic composer, developing a multiplicity of genres throughout his œuvre, including neo-Baroque and proto-impressionist idioms.

Saint-Saëns’s contributions to the realm of piano literature are copious and significant. His prolific catalog includes a significant body of solo piano works, 5 piano concerti, and several concertante works featuring the piano. Several of these pieces foreshadow later developments by so-called impressionist composers, exhibiting harmonic ambiguities, use of modality, oblique tonal relationships, and textures idiomatic to musical impressionism.

In various stages of his compositional output, Saint-Saëns also wrote piano music exploiting and advancing the French piano technique that is often referred to as *le jeu perlé*, employing a palette of touches that is largely unweighted and produced instead by definition of finger motion, in contrast to the weighted/rotation-oriented Austro-German schools of technique. Furthermore, this technical school had a strong role in catalyzing and advancing new textural idioms in piano music, which further amplifies the aforementioned “proto-impressionistic” idiom that can be affixed to numerous pieces and passages in Saint-Saëns’s output (the lighter action of Érard and Pleyel pianos, when compared with piano makes and models prevalent in Austria and Germany in the 19th century, was also symbiotic in forging proto-impressionistic piano textures pioneered by Saint-Saëns and others.)

Aims and repertoire studied

The developments in Saint-Saëns’ piano writing are most resolutely exemplified by the three sets of piano études he wrote (*Six Études*, Op. 52, in 1877; *Six Études*, Op. 111 in 1892; and *Six Études pour la main gauche seule*, Op. 135, in 1912.) Several of the études incorporate technical and textural idioms found in specific Chopin études, but end up exploiting similar materials in quite different ways, creating goals for the pianist that are distinctive from Chopin’s. Other études foreshadow later developments by Claude Debussy, and Saint-Saëns’s pupil Isidor Philipp. Additional avant-garde coloristic

and textural elements that are even more far-reaching, and arguably *sui generis*, can be found in the 2nd movement of the composer’s *5e Concerto pour Piano et Orchestre*, Op. 103. This presentation will highlight innovative and leading edge technical areas, textural idioms and harmonic invention explored in these works. As noted, special attention will also be given to the *jeu perlé* style in French piano music and performance, its usefulness both technically and musically within these works, its role in catalyzing new piano textures, and its limitations.

Methods

Harmonic and textural analysis of specific elements in the aforementioned pieces, which foreshadow defining features of music by Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel, will serve as the central methodological approach. In addition, distinctions will be made between examples that serve as prototypes for so-called impressionistic harmonic or textural idioms, versus those that, while suggesting musical impressionism generally, contain highly original combinations of elements that really find no further manifestations in works by French composers of the next generation. Via detailed analysis, the iconoclasm of the most audacious of these passages will be highlighted.

Implications

A particularly strong example of harmonic tendencies that can be labeled proto-impressionistic, and even arguably iconoclastic, can be found in the *Prélude* from Saint-Saëns’s *Étude in A Major*, Op. 52, No. 5 (1877), which features very difficult undulating parallel sixths within each hand, creating a constant shimmering texture redolent of musical impressionism. An arching melody develops against this texture, with the hands periodically switching roles, until finally both are relegated to the otherworldly parallel 6th textures, requiring great stamina to pull off a steady projection of diffuse mystery, as well as an illusion of ease. There are also passages of great harmonic ambiguity, including a lengthy series of unrelated major and minor triads, very audacious for its time, and unanalyzable via the tenets of functional harmony. An ostensible move to the Neapolitan of the piece’s key center (BbM) is followed at one point by a G#m-F#M-EM-DM succession, completely disorienting any sense of key center, amplified by the constant whole step root progression. In a later passage, alternating A Major and F minor triads (the latter spelled G#-B#-F as if it were a kind of altered 7th chord to justify its linear harmonic construct) are equally audacious harmonically.

Saint-Saëns’ *Étude* Op. 111, No 4 (*Les Cloches de las Palmas*) [1899] is both haunting and extremely forward-looking, anticipating impressionistic textures and effects that do not otherwise really appear in the literature until Ravel’s *Jeux d’eau*, published two years later (Liszt’s *Les jeux d’eaux à la Villa d’Este* can be seen as a kind of forerunner of both works, however). The étude begins with a right-hand repeated figure, soon accompanied by slow sonorities in the left hand, projecting an initial carillon-like tintinnabulation. This passage serves as an

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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