Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 – 1921)
Concerto No. 2 in G minor for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 22

Written: 1868
Movements: Three
Style: Romantic
Duration: 24 minutes

The biographer James Harding tells the story of a devout French peasant who bought a packet of chocolate that also contained a picture of a saint – one of a series of pictures of famous people given free with the confections – sort of like baseball trading cards. The peasant's son was seriously ill, and since all of her previous prayers had gone unanswered, she decided to try this particular saint, vowing to always wear his picture. The boy recovered and ever afterwards, "she carried reverently attached to her bosom the yellowing likeness of Camille Saint-Saëns."

Such was the fame of this prolific composer. Born only 7 years after the death of Beethoven, Saint-Saëns lived through most of the shaping revolutions in European classical music and lived long enough to be the first established composer to write for films (1908)! A true child prodigy, he composed his first piano composition at the age of three. His debut piano recital, given when he was ten, included a concerto by Mozart, solos by Handel, Kalkbrenner, Hummel, and Bach, and the third concerto by Beethoven, all performed from memory. For an encore, he offered to play any of Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas from memory.

"I live in music like a fish in water," he stated. For him, composing music came as naturally and easily "as an apple tree produces apples." He composed his first symphony at the age 13. Over a very long and productive life, he wrote nearly 200 works in almost every genre: operas, ballets, sacred works, songs, symphonies, chamber music, and lots of music

for solo piano. He wrote five concertos for the piano, three for the violin and two for the cellos. The music he wrote exhibited characteristics of both the classical and romantic tradition.

In 1868, the great Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein was in Paris giving a series of eight concerts. On his third concert, he performed one of his own concertos with Saint-Saëns as the conductor. Rubinstein was also a conductor and lamented to Saint-Saëns that Paris had yet to hear him conduct. He proposed that Saint-Saëns write a concerto for himself to play and Rubinstein conduct. The problem was that the proposed concert was only three weeks away! Amazingly, Saint-Saëns dashed off a piano concerto in just seventeen days, leaving just enough time to write out the parts and rehearse the orchestra. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough time for the composer to actually practice the music he wrote for himself! The first performance didn't go very well. The audience and critics were none too pleased. Nevertheless, Franz Liszt soon became a champion of the piece and it quickly became a favorite of pianists and audiences alike.

The first movement begins with the piano alone, sounding like an improvised fantasia by Bach. It leads into the main theme, a tune that Saint-Saëns "borrowed" from Gabriel Faure, one of his students. "Give it to me, I can make something of this," Saint-Saëns reportedly said. This whole movement sounds more like the slow movement of a concerto and ends with a short return to the opening material. The second movement is a lighthearted scherzo, full of Saint-Saëns typical wit. The last movement is even faster and lighter, giving the pianist all sorts of opportunity for a display of bravura. Someone once remarked that this concerto "begins with Bach and ends with Offenbach."

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