

Gustave III (1834-35) -- or the Lisztian heroics of the soloist locked in combat with the orchestra are left behind in the Variations symphoniques in favor of the deft dovetailing of piano and orchestra. This use of the piano as a concertante instrument would be taken up by Vincent d'Indy in his *Symphonie sur un chant montagnard française* (1886) and in turn, be adopted as far afield as Ferruccio Busoni's massive five-movement Piano Concerto (1904).

The strings open with a menacing dotted figure in unison, answered by the piano with a plaintively drooping phrase whose dialogue gives way to a second theme introduced by pizzicato woodwinds and strings. An appassionato development leads shortly to six seamless variations on the second theme through which the piano decorates, comments, alludes, and accompanies, as the mood shifts from triumphant assertion to mystical absorption and languishing, muted sighs. A sudden trill in both hands, two octaves apart, prompts the orchestra to begin the extensive, rhapsodic finale in which the thematic material of the preceding is wrought to an incandescent apotheosis. Without doubt, the irresistible, surefire breeziness of this finish has insured the Variations symphoniques first place in popularity among Franck's works.

Curiously, the première, at the annual orchestral concert of the Société Nationale de Musique, May 1, 1886, with Diémer at the piano, passed almost without mention. At the second performance, an all-Franck concert on January 30 of the following year -- again featuring Diémer -- the surefire misfired as the aging conductor, Jules Pasdeloup, miscued the orchestra's entrance.



# Saint-Saëns Piano Concerto No. 2

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# Franck Symphonic Variations

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Arthur Rubinstein, piano

Alfred Wallenstein  
Symphony Of The Air

Saint-Saëns composed and first played this work in 1868. It is scored for pairs of winds, horns and trumpets, plus timpani and strings. During his long and prodigiously creative life -- first as a child prodigy, then as a "Futurist," then as a conservative, and finally as a vituperating fossil -- Saint-Saëns composed five piano concertos between the ages of 20 and 61. The Second (and enduringly most popular) was created hurriedly in the spring of 1868 after the Russian pianist/composer/conductor Anton Rubinstein asked him to arrange a Paris concert. Because the Salle Pleyel was solidly booked and therefore not available for three more weeks, Saint-Saëns proposed that he himself write a new piece for the occasion. On May 6, with Rubinstein conducting, he introduced the Second Concerto, although not with much success. There had not been time to practice it sufficiently, and a portion of the audience was put off by the work's stylistic swings ("from Bach to Offenbach" was pianist Sigismond Stojowski's bon mot of the month).

Gabriel Fauré, a pupil of Saint-Saëns at the time, remembered years later that he had shown his teacher a *Tantum ergo* setting. Saint-Saëns glanced at it hurriedly, then said, "Give this to me. I can make something of it!" What emerged was the main theme of the first movement (*Andante sostenuto*) of the new G minor Piano Concerto, following a solo improvisation in the manner of Bach to get things started. A gentler sub-theme (the composer's own) has a Chopinesque flavor, especially in its keyboard embroidery in thirds.

Like Saint-Saëns' opening movement and finale, an *Allegro scherzando* in between is written in sonata form. The spirit is nonetheless elfin, in the Mendelssohn manner -- much as the Frenchman's long-finished but not-yet-published Second Symphony had been -- although the second theme in the second movement of the concerto anticipates the Carnival

des animaux, still two decades down the road.

The finale is a *Presto tarantella* in 2/2 time, whose G minor tonality reminds us that Mendelssohn ended his "Italian" Symphony 35 years earlier with a minor-key tarantella. If Saint-Saëns' premiere audience was not immediately cordial -- Parisians had become as exasperatingly superficial as the Viennese -- Franz Liszt praised the Second Concerto without stint, saying that it pleased him "singularly." Not for the first time, nor for the last, was his praise prescient. Later on, of course, Parisian audiences let everyone believe they'd loved it from the start.

One of the glitterati of the French music scene, Louis Diémer (1843-1919) had taken the piano part in Franck's Victor Hugo-inspired *Les Djinns*, for piano and orchestra, on March 15, 1885; he earned for the composer a rare plaudit from the press: "interesting work... for the direct originality of its thought and the admirable polish of its style." The *Ménestral's* critic continued: "As I listened to the fine logic of these developments and the arresting effects of the blending of the piano with the orchestra, I was struck by the thought of how sad it is that the name of this eminent musician is so rarely seen on programs, too little honored at a time when he is one of the masters of our epoch, and will indubitably remain one."

This proved prophetic. Franck was delighted and credited his success to Diémer's brilliant playing -- *sec, léger*, and articulated with lightning precision -- which he promised to reward with "a little something." Good to his word, Franck dedicated his orchestration of the *Variations symphoniques* to Diémer. He began work in the summer of 1885, and completed it on December 12. In his ultimate, old master phase, Franck transformed everything he touched. The orchestral highlighting of pianistic virtuosity -- heard in such works of his youth as the *Variations brillantes sur l'air du Pré aux clercs* (1834) or the *Variations brillantes sur le ronde favorite de*

# Saint-Saëns Piano Concerto No. 2

## Franck Symphonic Variations

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Saint-Saëns Concerto No. 2 (23:24)

1 Andante Sostenuto 11:08

2 Allegro Scherzando 5:56

3 Presto 6:20

Franck Symphonic Variations (13:25)

4 Poco Allegro 9:33

5 Allegro Non Troppo 3:52

Tracks 1-3 : Recorded January 14 1958, Manhattan Center, New York City

Tracks 4-5 : Recorded January 15 1958, Manhattan Center, New York City

Recorded by RCA -Engineer – Lewis Layton      Producer – John Pfeifer



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