

The composer who disappeared (twice)

Unlike others who merit rediscovery, Saint-Saëns really did go missing. Steven Isserlis, director of a festival in his honour, tells Jessica Duchen how he hopes to rehabilitate the grand old man of French music

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"What's wrong with Saint-Saëns? We love it!" That was the retort that the cellist Steven Isserlis and four musician friends offered with one voice when their dining companion, a manager, declared Saint-Saëns "a second-rate composer". The incident has sparked off an entire festival masterminded by Isserlis: 13 concerts, and related events at the Wigmore Hall, Barbican and Royal Academy of Music, devoted to this 19th-century French colossus, who, if not exactly neglected, is certainly too little appreciated beyond his delicious *Carnival of the Animals*.

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) may not have written music that probes the extremities of human emotion, but he had a special genius all his own, one that embraced flair, clarity, an unerring dramatic sense and a streetwise, *boulevardier* wit. His works, which number more than 200, encompass every genre from 13 operas, including *Samson et Dalila*, and the first film score by a well-known composer (*L'Assassinat du duc de Guise*, 1908), down to a virtually unknown mini-extravaganza for a band of toy instruments entitled *Les odeurs de Paris*.

"Saint-Saëns is exactly the sort of composer who needs a festival to himself," Isserlis asserts. "Although he's a famous name, most people only know a handful of the works - and there are Masses, all of which are interesting. I've played all his cello music and there isn't one bad piece. His works are rewarding in every way. And he's an endlessly fascinating figure."

Raised by his mother and great-aunt, his father having died when he was a baby, Saint-Saëns was desperately precocious, composing his first piece at the age of three. Despite a meteoric performing career as a child prodigy - he once offered to play as an encore, from memory, any one of the 32 Beethoven sonatas - he set his sights from an early age on becoming a composer. Nor was music enough to satisfy his mental agility: an expert mathematician, zoologist, botanist and fossil hunter, he added astronomy to that list and once used the proceeds of some duos for harmonium and piano to commission a telescope constructed to his own specifications.

He was also an excellent writer, and his short play *Writer's Cramp* features in Isserlis's festival. It is translated and directed by Simon Callow, who describes

this 13-minute farce as "a bon-bon - a slight satire on the modern school of novel writing and theatre, a game of art and life".

Callow has long counted Saint-Saëns as a favourite composer. "I love his music most of all for its extraordinary elegance and individual variety of wit," he enthuses. 'As he said himself, he wrote music "as an apple tree grows apples". His craft is elevated to a pitch of such strength and confidence that he's able to produce things of beauty to order. I like to think of Saint-Saëns as a wonderful chef. Nothing is ever too heavy; and always there's some fresh, original ingredient, some spice that he's found in the Orient or picked up on the Nile to create an excellent new culinary sensation. He's the Escoffier of music!"

But what was *wrong* with Saint-Saëns? His music's debonair exterior has little to do with the composer's inner self. "Art is intended to create beauty and character," he wrote. "Feeling only comes afterwards and art can very well do without it. In fact, it is very much better off when it does." All the fluidity, flamboyance and sparkle was effectively a mask for a troubled man who preferred not to betray the darker side of his soul. As with many great comedians, his art concealed an existence that contained more than its fair share of tragedy.

It's generally thought today that Saint-Saëns was homosexual, but tried for years to live a "normal" life. Aged 40, he married Marie Truffot, some 20 years his junior; they settled, together with Saint-Saëns's ever-dominant mother, in a fourth-floor apartment in Paris, and soon had two infant sons. But in 1878, two-year-old André fell out of a window and was instantly killed. Overcome with grief, Marie was unable to feed the six-month-old baby; he was sent to her mother for care, but failed to thrive and died soon afterwards.

Saint-Saëns - who, in a stroke of horrible irony, had been writing his Requiem just beforehand - never recovered from the loss of his children and felt that his wife was to blame. His marriage hung by a thread for three years, until, while the couple were on holiday, he went out one day - and never went back. He never saw Marie again. She turned up, heavily veiled, at his state funeral.

He vanished for a second time not long after his mother's death in 1888 - apparently without trace, until he turned up in Las Palmas, living under an assumed name. For the rest of his life, he travelled extensively, particularly in North Africa; and his wanderings helped to inspire such works as his *Africa Fantasy* and his Fifth Piano Concerto, which depicts his impressions of Egypt. Whether his disappearances and restlessness were an attempt to escape his harsh memories, or the pursuit of a life in lands where he could more easily and anonymously fulfil his predilections, remains a moot point among scholars. So, too, does the possibility that the unrequited love of his life might have been his pupil and protégé, the handsome and rampantly heterosexual Gabriel Fauré, who owed much of his career directly to Saint-Saëns.

In his last years, despite the favour of Queen Victoria (who personally, and fruitlessly, begged Covent Garden to stage one of his operas) and the award of Grand Croix de Légion d'honneur, France's highest mark of acclaim, Saint-Saëns was a solitary, embittered individual, his days brightened only by his poodle, Dalila. He had grown to prefer animals to human beings. That affection

shines through the glittering frippery of *The Carnival of the Animals*, which he prevented from being published in his lifetime, suspecting, rightly, that it would become too popular for his own good.

His philosophical tract, *Problemes et Mystères*, was perhaps the closest Saint-Saëns came to revealing his state of mind. "People have always been disappointed in their search for final causes," he wrote. "It may be simply that there are no such things. At any rate, whether they do exist or not, it does not make the slightest bit of difference to us... The joys which nature gives to us and does not withhold entirely from even the most abandoned among us - the discovery of new truths, the enjoyment of art, the spectacle of suffering eased and attempts to cure it as far as possible - all these are enough for the happiness of life. One is inclined to fear that everything else is madness and illusion."

But why is Saint-Saëns still so underrated? Isserlis suggests the composer's vitriolic personality didn't do him any favours: "He made a great many enemies during his lifetime." Sir Thomas Beecham, who had conducted Saint-Saëns in the composer's own piano concertos, described him as "a most irritable man". And once the composer rebuffed a dinner invitation from an enthusiastic fan who begged him, "But could you not be very nice, just for me?" by saying: "I don't want to be nice to you."

Nor was he gentle with young composers he considered too experimental, notably Debussy. Although in his youth Saint-Saëns had championed advanced musicians such as Liszt, Schumann and Mendelssohn, and in 1871 founded the Société Nationale de Musique to promote the music of young French composers, he later morphed into a hardline musical conservative, engendering plenty of grudges along the way.

Isserlis feels, however, that Saint-Saëns's cranky image has been overstated: "He has a bad reputation and I think it's unfair. He was a lonely man, but not a bad person and not unkind. I've heard people say that he was anti-Semitic, but apparently he gave money for the defence in the Dreyfus trial. And all his life he was extremely good to Fauré, who I think became virtually a substitute son for him."

Isserlis has assembled a galaxy of musical luminaries for his festival, among them the violinists Joshua Bell and Renaud Capuçon, the pianists Pascal Devoyon and Graham Johnson, the Florestan Trio, the baritone François le Roux and many more. The opening concert on 21 April features an all-star line-up in - naturally - *The Carnival of the Animals*; the grand finale on 18 May presents music from the Parisian salons, including three UK premieres and ending with *Les odeurs de Paris*.

"In that concert, everyone is playing without a fee," says Isserlis, "and I hope we'll raise enough money to start a Saint-Saëns Society. He deserves one. The festival isn't going to change the world, but for a short time it could make it a slightly better place."

Saint-Saëns Festival, directed by Steven Isserlis: Wigmore Hall, London WC1 (020-7935 2141), 21, 27 April, 8, 9 14, 16, 17 & 18 May; Barbican, London EC2 (020-7638 8891), 22 April; Royal Academy of Music (020-7873 7300), 14 May