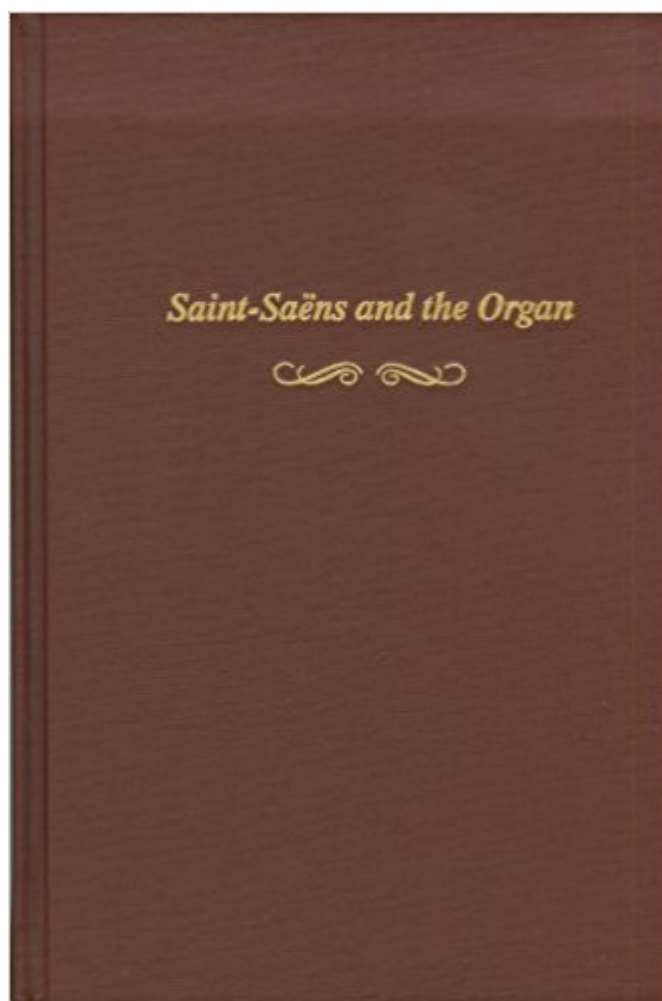


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Saint-Saens And The Organ (Complete Organ)



Synopsis

Hailed by Franz Liszt as the world's greatest organist, Camille Saint-Saëns was revered by his contemporaries for his ingenious improvisations, his mastery of the art of registration, his virtuosity, and his eclectic organ compositions. Saint-Saëns's technique and style developed out of what remained of the French classic tradition that survived into 19th century use, bridged the entire career of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, and continued well into the 20th century. Rollin Smith, author of *The Organ Works of César Franck*, provides an insightful biographical view of Saint-Saëns as organist and composer, including detailed chapters on the construction and settings of instruments he played (the harmonium, the Aeolian organ, and the Cavaillé-Coll organs, among others). Within the eleven appendices are essays by and about Saint-Saëns; recordings of his performances; specifications of selected organs that he played; and a thematic catalogue of his works for harmonium and organ.

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Customer Reviews

...meticulously researched, well written, and carefully edited. ...a piece of first-rate scholarship that is at the same time accessible and absorbing. --John Ogasapian, *The Tracker*, vol. 37 no. 2. A truly impressive tome that should be on every organ music lovers bookshelves. Rollin Smith has set a gold standard for writing in this subject area. --David Baker in *The Organ*, No. 327. Highly recommended for libraries at all levels. --K. Thomerson, *Choice*, June 1993.

I had a wonderful experience reading this book. Rollin Smith offers it as a supplement to the standard biographies of Saint-Saëns. These books do not treat the composer's work as an organist or his compositions for the instrument deeply enough. I was enthralled by the book not only because of what it told me directly about the subject, but because of the way it opened up my understanding of what French sacred music making was like during the second half of the 19th Century and how organs were built, installed, and used during those decades. Smith also introduced me to a variety of other instruments. We learn the relationship between what was called the Harmonium and the Reed Organ, the Pleyel Pédalier, and an amazing thing called the Harmonicorde. Have you ever heard of it? I had not. It is essentially a combination reed organ combined with an upright piano that had only a single string per note. The player could play just the organ or the piano or both together. People said it sounded like a wind instrument accompanied by a harp. Fascinating. The book's seven chapters take us from his early training and how it was conducted, to his career at the Church of Saint-Merry, then to his work at the more prestigious church Madeleine from 1858-1877. He left that post to devote himself full time to concertizing and composing. We then get a discussion of his late compositions for organ, and his final years. The last chapter evaluates what we know about Saint-Saëns as an organist including a description of his technique and how his style compared to the other big name organists of his day. The role of improvisation in not only the standard Catholic church service of the time, but in the culture also interests me a great deal and this is a topic I want to investigate more deeply. I also enjoyed the story the composer tells about a priest of a very fashionable church who complained that his congregation were wealthy and attended the comic opera and they expected to hear such music. Saint-Saëns replied that when he heard the dialogue of the comic opera spoken from the pulpit he would provide suitable music, until then he would continue with his current style. Saint-Saëns was also very much against music that would distract from the service, but wanted a much wider range of music than Rome was comfortable with at the time. But he did not want virtuoso pieces, but music that would support meditation, mystery, and the spirit of the service. One of the strengths of Smith's writing is the way he allows us to see a great musician as a regular person in so many ways. He is peevish at times and generous at others. He has high musical standards and is willing to fight for them while still dealing with practical realities. I love his definition of a perfect organist as a virtuoso hardened to every difficulty as well as an ingenious improviser. I think that is right. There are five essays by the composer in one of the appendices that provide fascinating insights into his views on the controversies of his day surrounding music in Church, the way Latin was to be pronounced in France, and the lack of training of the priests in

music or the arts. He also discusses the history and development of the organ in a helpful and informative way. The other appendices include an essay by Louis Vierne on Saint-Saëns' sacred music, a list of the prize winners at the Nidermeyer school from 1859-1865, an examination of the organs played by the composer. The most important organs are given with full specifications in another appendix. The composer recorded about 15 sides of disks late in life and those are also listed, as are the advertising endorsements he gave for Harmoniums and Pianos. Even though some of this may seem trivial, its very everydayness (quotidian nature?) is so revealing because it is so distant from our time (and yet the commercial aspect is so familiar). If you are interested in this period in music history, especially French music history, and especially Saint-Saëns' role in it, I can't imagine you not wanting to read this book. And I hope you enjoy it as much as I did. Reviewed by Craig Matteson, Ann Arbor, MI

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