

Saint-Saëns Violin Concerto No. 3 in B minor, Op. 61

Born in 1835 in Paris, Camille Saint-Saens is the most renowned French composer of the 19th century. His violin compositions are standards of the virtuoso repertoire. His most famous works for the instrument—Havanaise, Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, and the Third Concerto in B minor—were each instant successes, featuring saucy Iberian themes, virtuosic tricks, and powerful climaxes. His third violin concerto was written in 1880, at the age of forty-four, during the period of his most successful works, such as *Samson et Dalila*, the “Organ” Symphony, and the “Carnival of the Animals”.

Dedicated to the Spanish violinist Pablo de Sarasate, the B minor Concerto has elements of French, Spanish, and Italian motives. The first movement, representing an easygoing, Parisian feel, quickly became popular with the audiences due to its “poetic atmosphere and compelling melodiousness” (George Bernard Shaw). Saint-Saëns eschews the traditional orchestral introduction, with the soloist entering emphatically after just a few bars of tremolo in the orchestra. Composed of just four bold strokes, the main theme returns numerous times in the A-B-A-B-A form of the movement, with sentimental phrases sandwiched between pyrotechnical exploits. The end of the movement is signalled by a return to the opening material, with busy virtuoso figures heralding the end.

The gentle, lyrical second movement, based on a Siciliano rhythm, can be described as chamber music between the solo violin and principal winds, as the phrase is handed back and forth between the oboe, flute, clarinet, and solo violin, with the tutti strings providing a lush, undulating foundation. The movement closes with ethereal harmonics in the solo violin, doubled two octaves lower by the solo clarinet.

Saint-Saëns begins the last movement with the soloist playing a dramatic recitative with a rhapsodic, cadenza feeling, leading to the energetic first theme with sensuous Spanish flavours that is reminiscent of the dedicatee’s (Sarasate) own music. The flowing melodic second theme in D major, closes the exposition. The development is distinguished after the orchestra alone introduces a completely new theme in G major. The strings set a lush introduction to this chorale-like theme, followed by the soloist. After figural activity, the recapitulation is introduced by a brief revision of the opening material and first theme. As though heralding the end of the work, a glorious, uplifting chorale led by the brass reestablishes the theme from the middle of the movement in B major. The soloist takes it up, and spirited figurations lead the inevitable rush to the conclusion of this work.