



SAINT-SAËNS

Organ Music, Volume 2

Andrew-John Smith o

Hyperion CDA67815

★★★★☆

Saint-Saëns's output for solo organ remains so little-known that during a decade's weekly attendance at Melbourne recitals, I have not once heard any of it performed. Emphatic congratulations, then, to Hyperion upon the present well-filled, admirably recorded, lavishly annotated CD, sequel to a 2008 production. Both volumes benefit from a most appropriate instrument, built by the great Aristide Cavallé-Coll for Paris's Madeleine church, where the composer officiated from 1857 to 1877. Its dark, rich, rather Germanic timbres make it ideal for repertoire far more dignified, on the whole, than what typical French organ lofts exuded during Saint-Saëns's youth. (When a priest urged Saint-Saëns to model his organ solos upon the Opéra-Comique's frivolous musical style, he grimly retorted: "Monsieur l'Abbé, when I hear sermons delivered from the pulpit in the style of the dialogue at the Opéra-Comique, I shall play music that is appropriate – but not before.")

Three miniatures, from circa 1855, prove neat but forgettable. Much more striking are the later pieces: three Preludes and Fugues (1898) and seven Improvisations (1916-17). With the former collection, Baroque influences dominate (numerous passages hint at Bach, others at Buxtehude), while the Improvisations – several based on Gregorian chant – reveal their octogenarian creator's undiminished ability to surprise. The set's first composition makes such audacious use of whole-tone scales, piercing flutes, and unresolved dissonances as to foreshadow Vierne or even Messiaen. English-trained Andrew-John Smith plays as if he were Saint-Saëns himself. There can be no higher compliment to his interpretations. **R. J. Stove**

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