



Saint-Saëns · Poulenc · Widor  
Christopher Jacobson  
Orchestre de la Suisse Romande  
Kazuki Yamada

**Camille Saint-Saëns** (1835-1921)  
**Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 78 ("Organ Symphony")** (1886)

1	Ia. Adagio - Allegro moderato	10. 25
2	Ib. Poco Adagio	9. 55
3	IIa. Allegro moderato - Presto	7. 48
4	IIb. Maestoso - Allegro	8. 16

**Francis Poulenc** (1899-1963)  
**Concerto for Organ, Strings and Timpani in G Minor** (1938)

5	Andante	2. 56
6	Allegro giocoso	2. 14
7	Andante moderato	6. 59
8	Tempo allegro, molto agitato	9. 52

**Charles-Marie Widor** (1844-1937)  
**Symphony for Organ No. 5** (1879)

9	V. Toccata	6. 43
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Total playing time: 65. 31

**Christopher Jacobson**, organ

**Orchestre de la Suisse Romande**  
Conducted by **Kazuki Yamada**



Christopher Jacobson  
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Built as a tribute to England's Queen Victoria, Victoria Hall in Geneva was constructed in 1894 as one of the most prestigious and ornate concert halls in all of Switzerland. Since that time the hall has always had a fine pipe organ built to rival and complement the titanic sounds of a full symphony orchestra. Camille Saint-Saëns' Symphony 3 is famous for featuring the organ in this way where the organ "duels" back and forth with the orchestra in musical conversation. On this album the organ showcases both as an ensemble instrument within the orchestra and as a virtuosic solo instrument which made recording this repertoire at Victoria Hall a joy and delight.

The original organ was constructed by Thomas Kuhn of Zürich and underwent several modifications through the mid-20th century. It was destroyed by fire in 1984 and Dutch organ builders Van den Heuvel built the new organ heard on this recording. To convincingly render solo organ and symphonic literature the instrument was constructed to imitate the style and sounds found on organs built by the great 19th-century French organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll.

Growing up in a musical family Francis Poulenc knew the sounds of Cavaillé-Coll's Parisian organs well. Not trained as an organist himself, Poulenc enlisted the help of Maurice Duruflé in choosing the registrations (or different sounds the organ can make) for his new Organ Concerto. As such the Cavaillé-Coll inspired organ coupled with the fine acoustics of Victoria Hall make this instrument a fitting choice for this album.

Having finished our recording sessions a day early, producer Job Maarse and I decided to record a solo bonus track. French organist Charles-Marie Widor dedicated the original organ in Victoria Hall in 1894, and his "Toccata" from his Organ Symphony 5 seemed a perfect choice, perhaps even a piece Widor played himself during the dedicatory recital.



## Sounds from left-bank Paris

When **Camille Saint-Saëns** (1835-1921) was born, Chopin and Liszt were still young men and Brahms was just two years old. Yet Saint-Saëns lived long enough into the 20<sup>th</sup> century to make several recordings. He began as a child prodigy on par with Mozart. Already performing by age five, he gave an acclaimed public debut at age ten during which he offered to play any of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas from memory. He later held important posts at Parisian cathedrals — notably not at the Conservatory — and was widely acclaimed for his improvisations. It is worth mentioning that, in Liszt's opinion, Saint-Saëns was the greatest organist of the age.

As a composer, Saint-Saëns wrote fluently in almost every genre. Originally drawn to the latest trends in European music, he also showed a reactionary nature that intensified over time. His stance toward Wagner, in particular, evolved from

fascination to revulsion. Relations with many contemporaries were tense. Debussy's "impressionist" manner left Saint-Saëns cold, and the Wagnerism of Franck and D'Indy inspired his vehement scorn. Once he began to teach composition — Gabriel Fauré being his most successful pupil — Saint-Saëns became even more austere and refined, ever more classical in stylistic outlook.

In 1886 Saint-Saëns resigned his post with the *Société Nationale de Musique*, a group he had co-founded but which had lately become overtly pro-Wagnerian. That same year he accepted a commission from London's Philharmonic Society to appear as piano soloist and present a new symphony. This latter work, the remarkable Symphony No. 3 *avec orgue*, enjoyed critical and public acclaim at both its London and Paris premieres. It has since become one of the most beloved of all 19<sup>th</sup>-century symphonies. Saint-Saëns attempts so much in this work that, by the end, it seems to literally burst with sound.

Despite Saint-Saëns' souring toward Wagner, the German's spirit hovers over the slow introduction, which merges soft strings with upwardly striving lines in oboe and flute. The moment is brief, however, and the dominant theme of the movement — central, in fact, to later movements as well — is the ominous C-minor Allegro. Redolent of Schubert's *Unfinished*, this theme begins a series of musical allusions, from Schumann's *Rhenish* to the medieval *Dies irae* to Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, which presages this work's overall grandeur, use of cyclical form, and departure from conventional four-movement structure. Ultimately, it will be the organ that gives this symphony its nickname and lasting fame. The organ first appears without any fanfare, linking the C-minor Allegro to the Poco Adagio in D-flat major. A grander plan for the King of Instruments is in the offing, but for now it simply accompanies a tender, hymn-like theme in strings. The reverie will be interrupted temporarily by a chromatic episode, but these contrasting voices

are quickly absorbed into an amplified restatement of the Adagio.

The second movement opens with a vigorous, *agitato* theme similar to the Allegro heard earlier. Saint-Saëns' string writing again shows a close study of his musical idols, here suggesting the spirit of Mendelssohn. The pace of musical activity quickens from here to the end, and Saint-Saëns seems unwilling to hold back any possible idea. To wit, fugue largely governs the symphony's latter portions. The first fugue subject evokes Bach (the E major fugue from *Well-Tempered Clavier II* comes to mind). This idea gradually fades away, replaced by the ever-recurring C-minor Allegro. But even that strategic signpost is obliterated by a blast of full organ chords — in radiant *C major* — that follows. In a sense, it is this single moment that has earned the symphony its place in the pantheon. Saint-Saëns continues to unleash new ideas, bringing in rippling four-hand piano arpeggios (a sound effect

used in the *Carnival of the Animals*, also composed in 1886) and massive orchestral textures. He may at times get sidetracked exploring sheer novelty, but the expressive arc toward a resounding, roof-raising coda will not be denied. And where bombast in, for instance, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* seems out of proportion in a 15-minute work, the majestic conclusion to Saint-Saëns' Symphony No. 3 feels more genuine, more organic, and fully earned.

Allusions may add interest to Saint-Saëns Symphony No. 3, but they seem even more germane in the works of **Francis Poulenc** (1899-1963). Poulenc wrote five keyboard concertos, several of which paraphrase Mozart, Rachmaninoff, Gershwin, American Jazz standards, and more. Growing up in affluent surroundings — his father was head of France's largest chemical corporation — Poulenc could easily have been a mere dilettante. Musical talent passed to Francis from his mother, and by his late teens he was already making a name in Parisian

circles of new music. Even before receiving his first formal composition lessons, Poulenc was associated with a loose-knit group of composers known as *Les Six* who admired Satie, Cocteau, and trends ranging from Neoclassicism to Dadaism. But in 1936 Poulenc experienced a mystical breakthrough while mourning the death of a colleague. From then onward, his renewed devotion to Catholicism stimulated an outpouring of more introverted compositions.

Among the first fruits of this new direction was the Organ Concerto, written between 1936 and 1938. It was commissioned by Winnaretta Singer, Princesse Edmond de Polignac, host of a highly influential Parisian salon that inspired no less a figure than Marcel Proust. The princess was a talented organist, and Poulenc originally planned to feature her as soloist, scoring the concerto for a reduced string orchestra that would fit into Polignac's private music hall, complete with 1892 Cavaillé-Coll organ. As the







composition took shape, however, Maurice Duruflé was engaged to assist Poulenc with issues of registration and give the premiere in December 1938. In gratitude, Poulenc dedicated the concerto to Duruflé.

In the Organ Concerto Poulenc wrestled with two competing musical impulses as the radiant, urbane style of his younger years was being gradually supplanted by newfound religious sobriety. Cast in a single movement, the Concerto opens with powerful G-minor harmonies. These striking chords clearly mimic a Bach fantasia, although their dissonant continuation is pure left-bank *esprit*. The opening section continues in quiet exploration between organ and timpani, soon joined by strings. This understated style reflects the composer's new interest in sacred music. It gradually builds to a towering dominant-ninth chord on D (with added F-natural and B-flat!), which resolves into a lively Allegro giocoso — Poulenc at his captivating best. The Allegro takes on the guise of a

sonata-form development before stalling on two massive plateaus of sound in C major and G major. We depart this world as quickly as we entered it, turning instead to a polyphonic organ solo. Vast stretches of lyrical themes unfold until we meet the resurrected Allegro, and the work closes with a circular glance back at the opening G minor fantasia. Taken as a whole, the *bon vivant* of Poulenc's youth makes only brief appearances. Instead, a more sober Poulenc holds our attention — perhaps sitting in a side parlor of Polignac's salon, his eyes sadly surveying a scene of Paris' faded *belle époque*.

**Charles-Marie Widor** (1844-1937) was born into a family of organists and organ builders and was thus perfectly positioned to benefit from generations of experience with the instrument. He also had the good fortune to have fantastic teachers and, at age 24, to be made assistant to Saint-Saëns at La Madeleine in Paris. Two years later Widor was given a temporary post at

Kazuki Yamada  
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St. Sulpice in 1870 — which he held for the next 63 years! This did not hinder him from maintaining a busy international schedule of appearances. Indeed, Widor himself dedicated the original organ installed at Geneva's Victoria Hall, site of the present recording, in 1894.

Widor is best remembered today for his ten Organ Symphonies that define the French Romantic organ school's grand ambitions. The Organ Symphony No. 5 was composed in 1879, though he continued to revise portions of it for many years. Rarely is the five-movement work heard in its entirety. Instead, we associate Widor's name with the glittering finale from this symphony, a toccata that rivals any work in the genre. The origins of the toccata, from the Italian word *toccare* or "touch," extend back into the late 1500s. Madrigal composers such as Merulo and Pasquini had used the term for highly figured keyboard works. It referenced the physicality of the music: sampling numerous textures all the way

from lyric, legato passages to virtuosic, rapid figuration across the full keyboard.

Widor's Toccata stays true to the genre. Beneath the stunning surface lies a simple structure: a pattern of arpeggios in the treble, above a harmonic foundation that modulates gradually around the circle of fifth-related keys (F, C, G, D, etc.). Additional interest is maintained by punctuated left-hand chords and resonant pedal notes. F major functions as an anchor to the whole experience, frequently reappearing at internal cadence points to articulate arrival points in the tonal journey. Lasting just over six minutes, it is a favored work for ceremonial occasions. In particular, Widor's Toccata is a popular choice as recessional music for weddings, church services, and — of course — it makes a spectacular encore to any virtuoso organ recital.

**Jason Stell**

Van den Heuvel Organ  
Victoria Hall  
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## Acknowledgments

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