Camille SAINT-SAËNS

Piano Works, Paraphrases and Transcriptions

Volume 1:

Opera
Ballet
Places

divine art

ANTONY GRAY piano

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 – 1921)

I. Opera and Ballet

1	Javotte – Bourrée	2:13
2	Javotte – Scène et valse lente	4:39
3	Javotte – Pas de deux	1:57
4	Javotte – Allegretto – Allegro non troppo presto	2:44
5	Caprice d'Alceste (after Gluck)	13:22
6	Ascanio – Scène du mendiant	6:00
7	Ascanio – Danse de l'amour	2:49
8	Valse du *Prophète* de Meyerbeer	6:58
9	Henry VIII – Quatuor	7:30
10	Paraphrase sur Mandolinata de Paladilhe	4:37
11	Proserpine – Act II Prelude	1:55
12	Proserpine – Pavane	1:39
13	La Mort de Thaïs (after Massenet)	10:27
14	Scherzo sur Les Pêcheurs de Perles (after Bizet)	10:24
Total duration CD/set 1		**77:18**

II. Places

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2	Suite Algerienne, Op. 60 – Rêverie du Soir	4:29
3	Lola, Op. 116 – Tango	4:47
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6	Bénédiction Nuptiale, Op. 9	5:30
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8	Souvenir d'Italie, Op. 80 – Barcarolle	9:21
9	Paraphrase sur La Islena de Paladilhe	6:56
10	Fantasie sur l'hymne national russe	1:58
11	Africa, Op. 89	12:15
Total duration CD/set 2		**70:58**

The Piano Music of Saint-Saëns

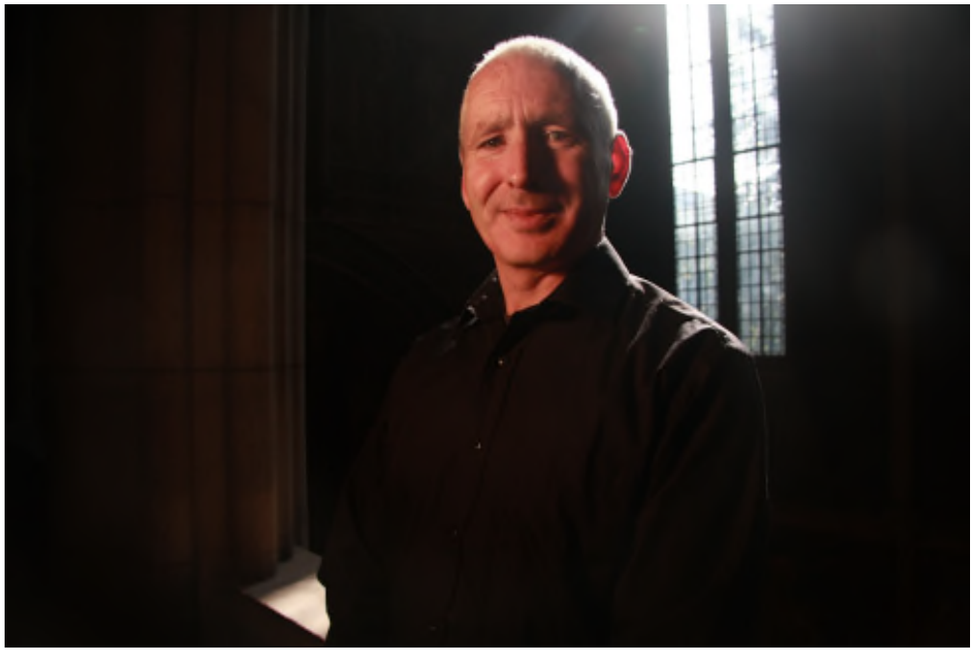
The term 'Renaissance Man' could have easily been coined to describe Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 – 1921). He excelled as composer, pianist, organist and conductor, he wrote poetry, plays and philosophy, he took an active interest, to the point of lecturing, in various sciences, and he was an inveterate traveller. His output is astonishing, with more than 160 opuses, many of which are substantial – 13 operas, ballets, symphonies. But as well as the published works there exists an enormous body of unpublished work, some of which consists of original pieces, (the *Carnival of the Animals*, for example, is without opus number, and was not published in his lifetime) but the majority is a series of arrangements, transcriptions and concert paraphrases that he made of works, or material, by other composers. He was famously generous, supporting many young composers at the start of their careers, and some of these arrangements were probably made to raise the profiles of composers he liked and admired.

In addition to all that, there are many, many arrangements of Saint-Saëns' own music, much of that work accomplished by the composer himself, but many arrangements were also made by others, and given that every moment of every day in Saint-Saëns' life was thoroughly well filled, it is unsurprising that this work should have been farmed out. Bizet, Fauré and even Debussy were among the most distinguished of these collaborators. It is highly likely that Saint-Saëns would have given approval of these arrangements before publication.

Unusually for a virtuoso pianist/composer, Saint-Saëns' works for solo piano do not make up either a sizeable, or particularly important part of his output. The Etudes are perhaps the best known, and there is a series of lovely Waltzes from quite late in his career, but most of the rest is isolated 'salon' type pieces, not all of absolutely first rank, but, needless to say, perfectly formed and delightful. It is in some of the arrangements and paraphrases that we find some of the most substantial works, however without exception these have all disappeared from the repertoire. It is hard to see why the many transcriptions by Liszt have maintained a place in the standard repertoire and not those of Saint-Saëns. Perhaps the less extravagant showmanship of

Saint-Saëns' works, despite no lack of technical difficulty and virtuosity, did not appeal to the concert pianists of the twentieth century.

Today Saint-Saëns is remembered mostly by a handful of works. Only one of his operas is played regularly, his large scale choral works are rarely, if ever, performed, and a couple of his concertos get regular outings. The *Carnival of the Animals* and *Danse Macabre* are of course ubiquitous. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that the audience for classical music has a limited capacity, but it does mean that many fine works have effectively vanished. This relative neglect started fairly shortly after his death. By then he was being seen in musical circles as anachronistic, set trenchantly in the old ways and very wary of modernism (this can in fact be debated at length!) however he was still hugely loved by the concert going public, and was given a spectacular funeral. However the appetite for all things new gradually eclipsed the 'old-fashioned' to the extent that even the *Organ Symphony* received a very cold and dismissive review in London in 1935. Perhaps things are now changing, with more recordings of less well known works, and these recordings of Saint-Saëns' transcriptions, with a couple of original works, hope to throw some light on a neglected area of an important composer.



Antony Gray

Saint-Saëns: Opera and Ballet

Saint-Saëns' ballet, *Javotte*, was completed in 1896, and first performed in Lyon in December of that year. It was a success, and there was talk, and not just by the composer, of it joining *Coppelia* and *Giselle* in the repertoire. Although it enjoyed a number of further productions in various theatres over the following years, it did not, sadly, attain the lasting popularity of the two aforementioned ballets. The story is slight, revolving around the lives and loves of the French peasantry. Saint-Saëns caused four numbers from the score to be published separately as piano solos, along with the complete score, in 1897.

Perhaps Saint-Saëns' most substantial single piano work is the Caprice on airs from Gluck's ballet, *Alceste*. During the late 1850s and early 1860s he had worked with Berlioz on editing Gluck, and this Caprice duly appeared in 1865 (published without opus number). It was a piece that remained in the composer's repertoire until as late as 1920, when he was 85, an incredible feat given the physical and technical demands made by the work. Interestingly the published score does indicate that the magnificent fugue may be cut, and one can move straight from the extended and rather antique sounding minuet to the coda, which is a brief reprise of the opening. The Caprice also entered the repertoire of many other pianists during the latter half of the nineteenth century, but is rarely played today. The fugue in fact bears comparison to the fugue at the end of Brahms' *Handel Variations*, published a couple of years earlier in 1861. Neither are strictly fugal all the way through, both breaking into more typically pianistic virtuosity, and it could even be suggested that Saint-Saëns ends his fugue more successfully than Brahms. Debussy made a four-hand version of the Caprice, published by Durand in 1891, and praised by Saint-Saëns for its 'delicate ingeniousness'.

Ascanio was a further attempt at a Grand Opera. It was based on the novel *Benvenuto Cellini*, but with the title changed to avoid confusion with the Berlioz opera of that name. It was first performed in March 1890, but had a poor reception, George Bernard Shaw, who attended the premiere, writing that he 'need not waste my words on the

music of it. There was not an original phrase from beginning to end.' This should be taken with a grain of salt, and doubtless the opera is still worth performing. In September of 1890 Saint-Saëns made transcriptions of two pieces from the opera for the pianist J.J. Paderewski. Both pieces are quite direct copies from the piano/vocal score, which Saint-Saëns made himself, but invariably they are both tweaked throughout to make them distinctively pianistic. The *Danse de l'amour* in particular, which, even in the piano vocal score, is set as a flute solo with piano accompaniment, is transformed quite magically into a shimmering, high register fantasy.

Simply titled '*Valse du Prophete de Meyerbeer'*, this unpublished transcription from, possibly, 1858 is perhaps one of the most Lisztian of Saint-Saëns' operatic transcriptions. It takes the waltz scene from the beginning of Act II of Meyerbeer's opera (first performed in 1849) and although the outer waltz sections are represented faithfully, but pianistically, the central aria becomes a filigree fantasy, swathed in arpeggios and chromatic scales in thirds – a paragraph of great delicacy and poignancy. It's followed by a quick reminder of the famous March theme, an added extra from Saint-Saëns, which leads back to the opening waltz motive, and a gentle conclusion. There is no record of it having been performed.

Henry VIII was perhaps the only one of Saint-Saëns' thirteen operas, apart from *Samson et Dalilah*, to establish a small place in the operatic repertoire. It is without doubt a good opera, having great initial success and sporadic revivals since, and is based on the episode where King Henry wishes to divorce Katherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn . It was premiered in 1883 and would be revived a number of times subsequently, including a production at Covent Garden in 1889. The final quartet of the opera was generally judged to be a masterpiece, and as was the fashion of the time, a number of versions of the quartet were published. Saint-Saëns published his own transcription of the quartet in 1884, dedicating it to Martha Blanchet. It is yet another instance of the composer producing a work which, although following the original score, becomes a completely convincing and original work for piano.

Mandolinata was the hit song – one of two, the other being *La Islena* – by Emile Paladilhe, a French composer and slightly older contemporary of Saint-Saëns. He is virtually forgotten today, but was a prolific and locally successful composer in his long life. He died in 1926. He was the youngest winner of the *Prix de Rome* and his song, *Mandolinata*, is described as a 'Souvenir de Rome.' Is it in fact based on an Italian folk song? But it is indeed a delightful song, and Saint-Saëns was clearly charmed by it, making his transcription the year after the song was published, in 1869. Paladilhe had himself made an arrangement for solo piano (among the numerous versions that were issued) but Saint-Saëns goes much further, adding an introduction, changing the second tune substantially, and producing a thrillingly quicksilver finale. It is one of the few of his transcriptions to have remained in print.

Another mixed reception greeted *Proserpine* in 1887. The tragic ending did not suit the audience at the Opera Comique, who still wanted a happy end to their entertainments. Saint-Saëns revised the work a few years later, something he rarely did, and it had a few more productions and then disappeared. As with all his operas there is splendid music to be found here. The piano reduction was made by Philippe Bellenot, and from it are taken two pieces; the Pavan, issued initially in many separate arrangements, and the charming Prelude to Act II, describing a convent courtyard.

Massenet's opera Thaïs was first produced, with great success, in 1894, and revised in 1898. In between these two versions, Saint-Saëns produced his 'Paraphrase de Concert', based on the final scene of the opera. This scene was considerably revised in Massenet's later version. In the scene, the monk, Athennael, having persuaded Thaïs to enter a convent and convert to Christianity, realises that he is in fact in love with her, so gallops to the convent to declare his love, only to find Thaïs on her deathbed. Saint-Saëns conveys the action in a thrilling and moving fantasy – with the silences particularly specified. He bases the final section on music from the famous 'Meditation', often a rather saccharin thing, but here given real beauty and power. It is extraordinary that this piece has remained out of print since the first publication in 1896. Saint-Saëns dedicated the paraphrase to Massenet's wife, and both were delighted by the work. Saint-Saëns himself performed the paraphrase a number of times.

Saint-Saëns was one of the earliest champions of Bizet's *Carmen*, which famously received an initially cold reception. It's a further sign of Saint-Saëns' generosity that he was able to take pleasure in the success of another composer in a field in which he himself never really succeeded, despite many attempts. It is perhaps surprising then that rather than *Carmen*, Saint-Saëns chose the earlier opera, *Les Pecheurs du Perles* for his tribute to Bizet, who died in 1875 and with whom he had been on very friendly terms. And what a tribute it is! Saint-Saëns takes various themes from the opera, including, of course, the duet, and fashions what really is a masterpiece. It is one of the most technically demanding of his keyboard works, with the left hand repeated notes a challenge for any pianist's wrists, but it weaves the tunes together in a completely convincing way, building to a glorious climax. As usual with Saint-Saëns, the technical skill and craftsmanship is flawless. It is frankly astonishing that this marvellous work has remained unpublished since its one and only appearance in 1886.

Places

The *Suite Algerienne*, Op. 60, was one of Saint-Saëns' most successful and popular works. It was dedicated to *Monsieur le docteur Kopff*, who Saint-Saëns had met in Algeria. Kopff was an excellent pianist, and in fact under the pseudonym of A Benfeld made many arrangements of Saint-Saëns' music. Given the popularity of the Suite, it is unsurprising that it was issued, complete or individual movements, in many different arrangements. Saint-Saëns himself made a version for two pianos, Fauré a version for piano duet, and later Leon Roques made a version for two pianos eight hands. Many other versions, especially of the *Rêverie du Soir,* were published in various instrumental combinations. It was only in 1907 that Saint-Saëns, when asked for something 'masculine' by a female pianist, wrote down the version of the last movement of the Suite, writing to his publisher that he had already played it several times. This suggests that in his own performances he was playing from memory, and not necessarily from a score. This may also be the case for the *Reverie du Soir*, which he mentions performing a number of times, including in one of his final concerts in

Greece in 1920. No score of this transcription seems to have survived, however Saint-Saëns recorded it onto a piano roll in 1905, and that performance has been transcribed for the present recording. The *Reverie* was written a year before the *Suite*, and was originally entitled *Rêverie Oriental*, but in his 1905 recording, and in other sources, it is additionally titled *Rêverie à Blidah*, which is a city in Algeria. It is perhaps odd that he never notated this version. He writes again to his publisher about having found an awful transcription of the piece in an album of his piano works, and being embarrassed that people might think that the transcription had been done by him, and also that they would have a bad impression of the piece. It's possible that there were always more pressing things to do.

On the subject of Saint-Saëns' own piano roll recordings, to which we will return below, they are fascinating documents on a number of levels. Not only do they show Saint-Saëns' astonishingly facile technique, but they also give insights into his ideas about his own music. Everything is fast! However he was known for rushing, and one pianist, rehearsing one of his concertos with the composer playing the orchestral part, remembers stopping in mid rehearsal to say that she can't keep up with him, to which he replies 'was I rushing?' So perhaps his tempos do not in fact represent his real intentions. They are certainly faster than his metronome markings. And while the recordings have a marvellous fluidity and sense of style, there is certainly less emphasis on the importance of every written note being in the right place!

An unusual, and now forgotten, piece by Saint-Saëns is the dramatic scena *Lola*, written in 1900. He wrote to his publisher that he had written 'two Spanish songs… whose exaggerated Spanishness will amuse you'. The piece had an orchestral prelude and postlude, and at its centre a *Tango*, to be danced by the two characters! The tango had barely arrived in Europe, so here Saint-Saëns was ahead of his times, although the famous example by Albeniz had appeared in 1890. The tango from *Lola* was published as a piano solo in 1901, and Charles Koechlin made the orchestration of the complete work the same year.

The composer Alexis de Castillon died in 1873 at the age of 35. He had already produced a sizeable body of fine chamber and piano music and was highly regarded. He was a close friend of Saint-Saëns, who premiered his piano concerto, and saw a great future ahead of him. In 1920, the year before his own death, Saint-Saëns wrote an *Elégie* for violin and piano, in memory of Castillon. On the first page, he wrote: '*Alexis de Castillon used to often play these few bars* (from A to B in the score) *of which he was very fond, but never used. As they now exist only in my memory I didn't want this relic of a very dear friend to be lost, so I have here framed them to the best of my ability in order to preserve them*.' The theme is indeed beautiful, and makes a passionate return towards the end of the *Elégie*. At the same time as the version with violin, Saint-Saëns made a version for solo piano, which was, as he wrote to Philippe Bellenot, '*quite different from the original*.' For the most part the differences are largely in terms of more brilliant pianism, however the ending is considerably extended in the piano version, and perhaps is more effective than the violin version. As well, the return of the Castillon theme in the piano version is marked *Allegro*, while in the original it is *Largamente*.

The *Rhapsodie d'Auvergne* was written in 1884, perhaps initially as a work for piano solo, although always intended to exist in a version with orchestra. Saint-Saëns himself gave the first performance in early December of 1884 – whether with or without orchestra is not clear – and the dedicatee, Louis Diemer, played the work with orchestra later the same month. The piece, self-evidently, is based on tunes that Saint-Saëns picked up in the Auvergne region of France, the first tune being, apparently a washer-women's song. The interesting aspect to this piece, which it shares with the later *Africa*, is which, if any, of the published versions was the primary. The publication of the three versions was A: piano solo; B: two pianos, the second being a reduction of the orchestral score, but the piano part being the 'solo' version, and C: the version for piano and orchestra – the last to be published. Tellingly, Saint-Saëns made two piano roll recordings of the solo version of the *Rhapsodie*, in 1905 and 1908, the latter being even faster than the 1905 performance. So much for the idea that composers necessarily play their own music at the right speed! But perhaps the more interesting

aspect of the recordings is that neither of them bears more than a passing resemblance to the printed score of the solo version, and both are drastically different from each other. This, of course, is a composers' prerogative, but raises the question of how much a printed score from this period needs to be respected. If the composer is allowed to make free with what they've written, does the same principle apply to the rest of us? Probably, basically 'No'. However it would seem that the composer is here giving future performers some discretion as to whether to follow the printed score, or follow Saint-Saëns' own recorded divagations… The orchestra, despite its size, adds relatively little to the piece apart from colour, with the piano playing almost continually. So the transfer to the solo version (or was it the other way round?) requires scant modification.

Saint-Saëns' Op. 9 was a work for organ, the *Bénédiction Nuptiale*. Initially published in 1866, and dedicated to Madame la Marquise de Mornay, née de Villers, It was subsequently issued in 1880 in a version for piano four hands, arranged by the composer, and finally in a version for piano solo. What is interesting here is that Saint-Saëns retained an interest in what was essentially an occasional piece of limited importance throughout his life. The final solo piano version by him (there was a later one, in 1915 by M. Hure, of which he approved) was issued as late as 1903. Once again, as with all Saint-Saëns' transcriptions, the version for solo piano is entirely characteristic, differing in minor, but important details from the original.

Another short, occasional piece is the Barcarolle Op. 63, *Une Nuit à Lisbonne*, dedicated to *His Majesty, Don Luiz, King of Portuga*l who had attended a concert given by Saint-Saëns in Lisbon. The king was known for his interest in and support for the Arts. It was in fact first published in the version for piano solo in 1881, with a version for small orchestra being published a month later. Several other arrangements were published subsequently. In 1915, from San Francisco, the composer wrote to Durand mentioning the success of the piece, but saying 'I am in the habit of playing it much too slowly. But it's a little piece that can be played everywhere, especially in casinos and such places.'

Another barcarolle appears in *the Souvenir d'Italie*, Op. 80, written in a couple of days in August 1887, and surely one of his most charming and delightful piano pieces. The barcarolle section encloses a lively 2/4 section which has an unusual feel due to its 3-bar structure. The barcarolle then returns in a shortened version before vanishing in a puff of smoke. Are the tunes genuine Italian folk tunes? They certainly sound like it, but then Saint-Saëns was more than capable of writing his own 'folk' tunes. The work was taken up particularly by the pianist Marie Jaëll who had earlier studied composition with Saint-Saëns.

Two years after making his transcription of Paladilhe's song *Mandolinata*, Saint-Saëns returned to Paladilhe, making a virtuoso arrangement of his 1869 song *La Islena*, also known as *Havanaise*. It was published in 1871 and dedicated to the Venezuelan pianist Teresa Carreño. As with *Mandolinata*, the tune is one that one recognises without being able to place where from, and it is extraordinary that a composer who had (at least) two such successful hits should be totally forgotten today. Saint-Saëns brings his fertile imagination to the song, making the work a bravura show-piece, and ending quietly with what must be one of the longest single phrases (and diminuendos) in all music – sixty four bars!

A curiosity is Saint-Saëns' setting of the Russian national anthem, which he called *Fantaisie sur l'Hymne National Russe, d'après A. Lwoff.* It was written in 1904 presumably at the request of the publisher Leduc, who was compiling a collection of pieces by celebrated composers of the day, and publishing them in facsimiles of the composers' manuscripts. It is a straightforward setting simply adding broken chord octaves in the left hand on the repeat of each half of the hymn.

At the end of 1888 Saint-Saëns' mother died. It had been an intense and complicated relationship which others may not have tolerated. She was a powerful and controlling woman, and analysts would doubtless have much to say regarding the effect this level of domineering control had on his character and development. His failed marriage, supervised by mother, was possibly a further link (aside from the ballets they danced together) with Tchaikovsky.

Following his mother's death Saint-Saëns was distraught, retreating into himself and unable to compose. He took refuge in travel, first to the Canaries, and then to Sri Lanka, where he stayed for three months.

Finally achieving a degree of equilibrium, he began the return voyage to France, stopping off in Cairo. It was here that he began *Africa* (Op. 89), a *Fantaisie* for piano and orchestra which he had promised several years earlier to Mme Marie-Aimée Roger-Miclos. She gave the first performance at a Châtelet concert in October 1891 which was a triumph, and Saint-Saëns himself subsequently performed it with great success. The piece is based on a number of tunes collected by Saint-Saëns in various North African countries, with the finale being based on the Tunisian national anthem. (It is curious that he chose the English version 'Africa' for the title rather than the French 'L'Afrique'!) Once again, as with the *Rapsodie d'Auvergne*, the piece was published almost simultaneously in three versions – Version A: piano solo; Version B: two pianos; Version C: orchestral score. Whether this meant anything in terms of any version's importance is debatable, especially as Saint-Saëns on a number of occasions begged that the work not be judged solely on the piano part, as the orchestra 'adds a lot'. However the version for solo piano differs in significant aspects from the orchestral version. Parts of it were constructed by cutting and pasting (literally!) sections from a printed score into the new version, but other sections were modified to accommodate the change from orchestra to solo piano.

Saint-Saëns was aware of course that the version for piano solo was a considerable challenge, and wrote to his publisher Durand; '*Having recognised from trying it that the work so arranged for solo piano is terribly exhausting, I have indicated a vast cut, which permits persons energetic, but not athletic, to play this horror, and to avoid for others the sad spectacle of a human being, sweating and dishevelled, battling fruitlessly against a piano.*' The cut is not countenanced in the present recording.

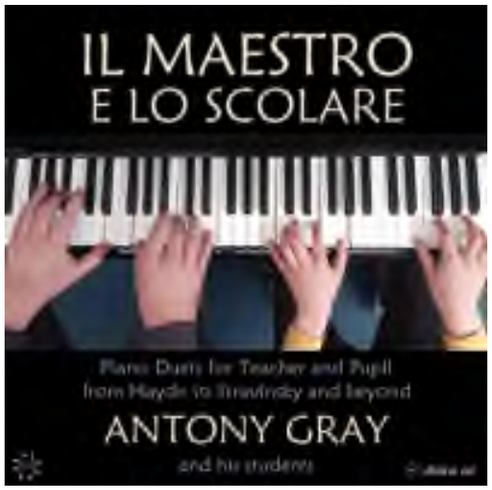
The Pianist

Antony Gray was born and educated in Victoria, Australia. He graduated from the Victorian College of Arts where he studied with Roy Shepherd and Stephen McIntyre, winning several awards and prizes, including the Allans Keyboard Award two years running. In 1982 he received a scholarship from the Astra foundation to continue his studies in London with Joyce Rathbone and Geoffrey Parsons.

Antony based now for many years in London, has long been regarded as one of the most interesting and communicative performers of his generation. His career to date has encompassed solo and chamber music performances around the world, as well as regular recordings for CD and radio. He has been a (selective) champion of contemporary music and has premiered many pieces written for him. He has also championed many neglected composers such as Enescu, Dussek and Martinů. Since his time at college he has been a champion of many living composers, and his work with Australian composers Malcolm Williamson and John Carmichael has been particularly productive.

Antony Gray is one of ABC Classics' most prolific recording artists, having recorded fourteen discs of solo piano music for the label, as well as featuring on a recital disc for KNS Classical and a number of other recording projects. Recordings already released include the complete solo piano works of Eugene Goossens, Malcolm Williamson and John Carmichael, as well as the late piano pieces of Johannes Brahms, on ABC Classics. He also features in a performance of the John Carmichael piano quartet on the highly successful disc 'Sea Changes'.

He has also made a 3-disc set of Bach transcriptions, including several written specially for the recording, and a 5-disc set of the complete piano works of Francis Poulenc, including a number of works recorded for the first time, both again on ABC Classics. On joining Divine Art his most recent release (July, 2021) is a fascinating double album of rare works written for piano teacher and pupil entitled ‘Il Maestro e lo Scolare’. Companion to this present disc, to be released early in 2022, is volume 2 of the Saint-Saëns piano transcriptions.



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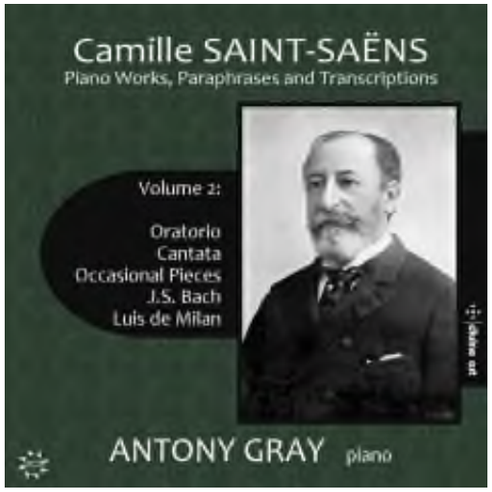

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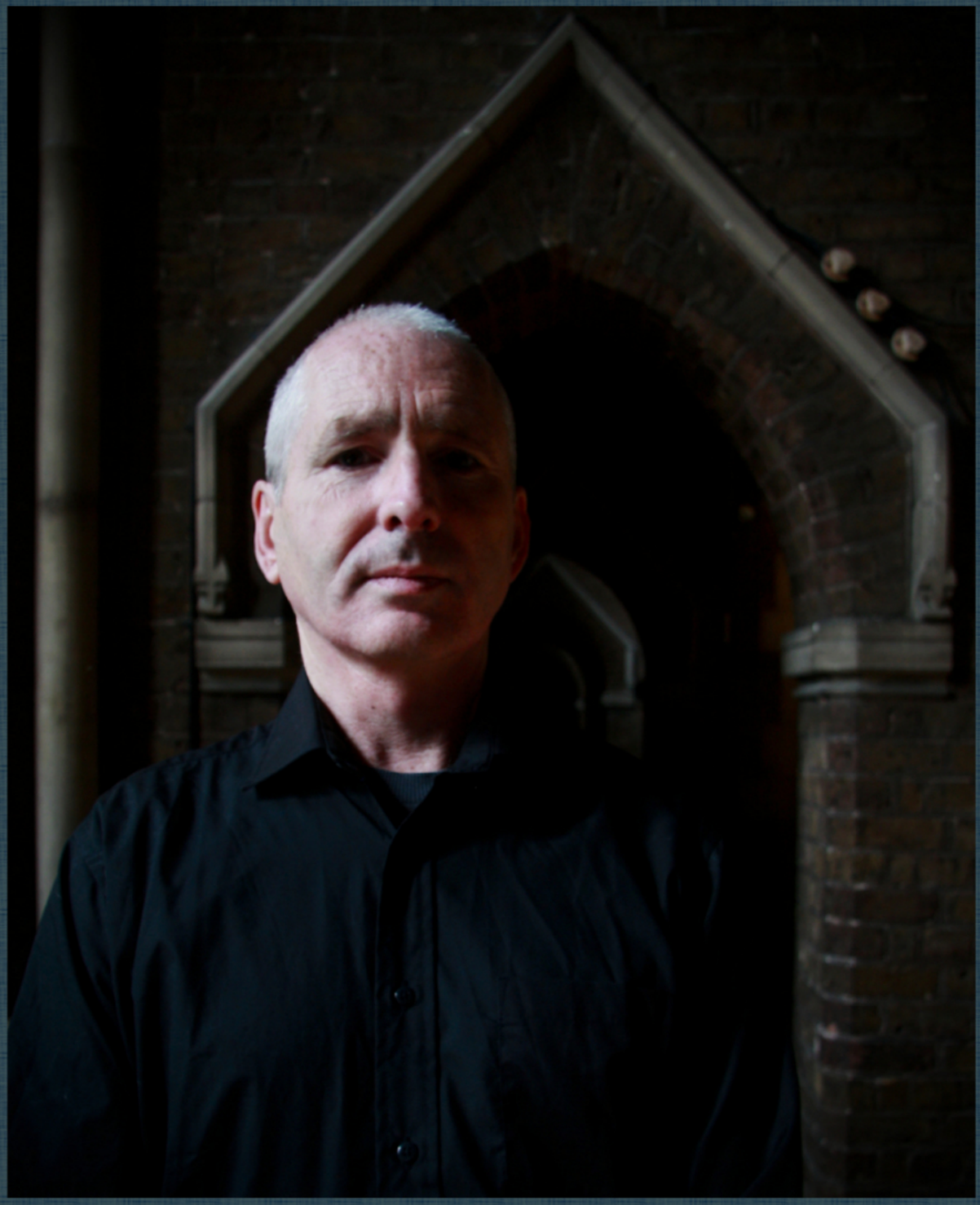

ANTONY GRAY

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