Negotiating Nationalism: Camille Saint-Saëns, Neoclassicism, and the Early Music Renaissance in France

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NEGOTIATING NATIONALISM: CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS, NEOCLASSICISM, AND THE EARLY MUSIC RENAISSANCE IN FRANCE

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my cats. They have interrupted, distracted, and even besieged (by settling into a pile of papers) my work on this thesis, at every step. I have completed this lengthy and arduous task so that I can get back to feeding, petting, and otherwise serving them. Therefore, I dedicate this thesis to you both, Cassian and Riker, you cute yet manipulative creatures. May you exceed your expected lifetimes in comfort and style, knowing that I will continue to find your insistence endearing and your company sweet, even as I face lengthier and more arduous tasks.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

By the grace of God, I have so far survived the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine. My wife Kellia has offered endless encouragement and endured countless puns, evaluating each Hawthorne-inspired sentence—full of commas, some unneeded; a style which extends the lives of its readers (if only by making them count each second)—for issues of organization, readability, and content. My parents also provided guidance, motivation, and support. Similarly, my brother shared in my frustration over sacrificing nearly all of my free time. Finally, I wish to acknowledge my professors, some of whom are named on the front of this document, for their faithful and diligent efforts to see me succeed. I am indebted to all of you. Thank you.
ABSTRACT

The music of Camille Saint-Saëns hints at modernism. Musicologists have largely avoided describing Saint-Saëns as a neoclassical or modernist composer, since much of his musical output occurred during the Romantic era. However, Saint-Saëns appears to have already been engaging with the nationalist and revivalist concerns which drove later twentieth-century French composers toward neoclassicism and other forms of musical modernism. Revivals of la musique ancienne (‘ancient’ music) and la musique française (“French” music) were well underway when Saint-Saëns began composing, and they continued throughout his career. Scholars have largely pursued these two revivals separately, with early music revival in France following the French Revolution (1789) and a distinctly French style of music being reimagined after the Franco-Prussian War (1870). However, these two revivals are correlated. This thesis therefore advocates for considering Saint-Saëns as an early neoclassical composer, opening the door to wider debates regarding his modernism, and understanding his engagement with the Early Musical Renaissance in France to be both political and complex. At the heart of this thesis rests the composer’s decision to insert sixteenth-century French music into historical grand opera. Ascanio, a mature work, presents unfamiliar yet authentic French music in the ballet, a section traditionally reserved for excess, pastiche, and exoticism. If this borrowing is only viewed in the context of la musique ancienne, it reiterates current historicizing narratives of decline in grand opera. Alternately, viewed only in the context of la musique française, Saint-Saëns’ choice to use French music written by Palestrina’s
contemporaries, Claudin Gervaise and Estienne du Tertre, points to the kind of
mythologizing nationalism which only appeared later in French musical history. Thinking
in terms of both histories and understanding their overlapping influence, we can see
Saint-Saëns negotiating nationalism within these dual revivals, even as hints of his
modernism are derided by his contemporaries and the press as conservative, classical,
German, or even Wagnerian, during the early years of the Third Republic.
PREFACE

I began this study with the intention of connecting Saint-Saëns’ mature works with keyboard and dance music from Rameau, Couperin, and other French composers. Unable to find sufficient evidence (beyond the occasional aural similarity), I have taken the much wider route of connecting Saint-Saëns’ neoclassical (or neobaroque) inclinations to a modernizing and nationalist environment in Paris. By doing so, it is perhaps easier to understand why connections to French composers of the ancien régime could continue to produce interest. It is my hope that returning to the question of keyboard and dance music will yield better results in the future, equipped with an understanding of how Saint-Saëns negotiated nationalism in the early years of the Third Republic. Saint-Saëns’ predilection for traditional forms and stylization differed substantially from his later contemporaries, like Debussy. While considering Saint-Saëns in a modernist light enables important musicological discussions which have so far been frustrated by teleological concerns (i.e., discussion of neoclassicism must be restricted to works from the twentieth century and guiding principles established through accounts by unreliable narrators such as Stravinsky and Schoenberg), further support is still required to establish a definitively modernist framework for Saint-Saëns. It is my hope that I will be able to continue along this path and that others may benefit from thinking along these lines.
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INTRODUCTION

Neoclassical elements began to emerge in the works of Saint-Saëns (carried further by his younger contemporaries), as reviving historical French music became a priority in nineteenth-century France. Nationalism played a role in shaping the musical tastes of a generation; however, boundaries between French and German music were not always clear. The Parisian public, as represented by the press, was unprepared for artistic developments arising from modern engagement with Baroque and Classical works, particularly when German influence was perceived. While Saint-Saëns endeavored to create music that reflected a French past, its historical grounding meant a more international style at a time when this was not acceptable. His reputation thus harmed, Saint-Saëns’ neoclassical and therefore modernist inclinations have gone largely unheard, and later composers have been credited with reestablishing a sense of truly French style.

The Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) has long been viewed as a turning point for French music. Many French intellectuals valued Germanic philosophical and aesthetic ideals prior to the clash between Bismarck and Louis Napoleon. Similarly, Italian opera contributed meaningfully to French conceptions of art. However, as Germany grew, in size and power, culminating in France’s defeat in 1871, a growing anti-German sentiment, particularly in Paris, fueled nationalist agendas and resulted in the pursuit of a uniquely French musical idiom. Or so we have been told. However, where trends like the
Catholic revival of Palestrina’s music in Germany in the early 1800s has been paralleled by French revivalist efforts, changes in institutional support and private patronage significantly altered educational goals, religious practices, and public participation in French music. A search for historical French precedents had already begun. Keyboard and dance music were not always appealing, associated with the aristocracy, but operatic depictions of the past and modified historical works excited the public imagination, particularly grand opera which had waned by the time Saint-Saëns began to write for the stage. Yet, with little regard for potential musical consequences, might the extant plurality of French music have been obfuscated by a suddenly focused, nationalist effort to reject foreign influence? More importantly, might Saint-Saëns have been rejected by the establishment, Debussy, and others as they pursued competing, nationalist agendas? Further, might a narrative that represents the historical landscape by privileging surviving (dominant) musical works be inadequate?

Camille Saint-Saëns’ (1835–1921) negotiation of excavated past and modernizing present can be seen in many of his works. Although he is not normally viewed as a neoclassical composer, contemporary criticism of Saint-Saëns’ “sparseness, economy of means, even coldness” frequently resulted in comparison to Bach, Handel, Mozart, and other Classical masters. These reviews often celebrated his mastery and inventiveness.

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while simultaneously complaining about the staid, cerebral nature of his music. Such observations fit Scott Messing’s list of neoclassical characteristics: “clarity, simplicity, objectivity, purity, refinement, constructive logic, concision, sobriety, and so on,” and, Saint-Saëns also fulfills Messing’s requirement that neoclassical music “employs musical means that borrow from, are modeled on, or allude to a work or composer from an earlier era, often from the eighteenth century…” Thus, a curious pattern emerges when one reconsiders Saint-Saëns’ oeuvre, filled as it is with Baroque referents: the neoclassicism of Stravinsky and Schoenberg becomes less a “back to Bach” movement than a return to late 1800s French (or German) formal and harmonic considerations, with emphasis on coherence and the possibility for humor. (An important question when navigating an appeal to authenticity that “hijacks” or appropriates the past is the one Richard Taruskin slyly asks in a response to Messing and others: “Back to Whom?”)

Saint-Saëns was writing in Paris before and after the Franco-Prussian War. As Michael Stegemann has noted, of 700 works, only a handful survive in the repertoire. Stegemann has also proposed that Saint-Saëns and his music came to be understood as “un-French.” (The trend continues, as revivals of Saint-Saëns’ operas have mostly been staged outside of France.) Saint-Saëns was similarly accused of conservatism, later in his life. If one label might be enough to silence an otherwise prominent voice, might borrowing another be sufficient to revitalize it? Conceding Saint-Saëns’ music to the

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nationalist need for untainted and rallying works mirrors the monarchist forfeiture of Alsace and Lorraine; just as revanche was demanded then, the loss of the composer’s purportedly auxiliary contributions must be reversed. Saint-Saëns’ music offers a nuanced and under-explored perspective on the shifting cultural and political currents in France during the early years of the Third Republic.

Organization and Rationale

Chapter one deals predominantly with Saint-Saëns and neoclassicism. The question of whether the nineteenth century produced neoclassical works in music is important for scholarship to address more clearly. I argue that the answer to this question is particularly important for understanding French music during the period (1850-1890). The chapter therefore highlights frequent references in musicological literature that point to Saint-Saëns’ music as an early example of neoclassical writing. These authors mostly avoid calling Saint-Saëns neoclassical, yet they signal that the twentieth-century, modernist label might correctly be applied to the nineteenth-century composer. Additionally, nationalism complicates such questions. The chapter thus considers the definition of neoclassicism, the term’s connection with nationalism (particularly in French and German contexts), and ultimately examines why these authors prefer not to explicitly call Saint-Saëns a neoclassical composer. As the chapter unravels the scholarly debate surrounding neoclassicism, particularly considering fin-de-siècle concerns, it gradually becomes clear that early music, particularly Baroque music, is a significant historical detail that will be useful, at the very least, for understanding Saint-Saëns’ musical output at this time. I argue that Saint-Saëns should be considered a modernizing force but that the hesitation to identify his music as neoclassical may be well founded.
Chapter two explores Saint-Saëns’ life and early music connections. Part biography and part historical timeline, I reveal my broader argument: reviving early music was a modernist activity. Since Saint-Saëns was active throughout the period under consideration, the chapter focuses on his milestones, personal recollections, and proximal historical events that were significant to the changing musical landscape he experienced. This chapter expounds upon the nationalist concerns broached in chapter one, albeit from a nineteenth-century point of view.

Chapter three delves into the musical world being discussed. Brief analyses are given of works by Saint-Saëns which have been proposed by others for neoclassical consideration. Following these, a more detailed analysis of two lesser-known operas is provided. Saint-Saëns’ historical operas, *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio*, contain instances of musical material borrowed from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. Considering how these works draw heavily from the tradition of grand opera, a failed genre by the 1880s, this music represents multiple returns to the past. This final chapter shows how seemingly contradictory evidence can be understood in a nationalist context and supports leaning into the uncomfortable position of categorizing Saint-Saëns as neoclassical.
CHAPTER 1:
THE NEOCLASSICAL DILEMMA

Introduction

Scholars have disagreed over the exact definition of musical neoclassicism and, to a lesser extent, on a historical timeline for the label. However, the following characteristics are generally accepted: imitating earlier music in style or form, drawing from a limited canon of mostly eighteenth-century works, and having been written after World War I. More generally, neoclassicism reflects something of the late-1700s revival of artistic interest in Greco-Roman antiquity. Archaeological findings at Herculaneum and Pompeii helped to define new works in art and architecture—particularly those which demonstrated simplicity and elegance or those which otherwise aimed at imitating and reinventing the classical past—as neoclassical.\(^{11}\) Although neoclassical movements in art and music are normally understood to be distinct from one another, music historians, analysts, and critics continue to rely on artistic descriptors (simplicity, elegance, etc.), and scholars of both art and music have hypothesized neoclassicism as a reactionary movement to perceived excess.\(^{12}\) In music, Romanticism and Modernism are often viewed in stark contrast (decadence vs. progress). However, like Rococo and Neoclassical art, fixed boundaries between one style and another tend to discount any


overlap. This has implications for our understanding of the interactions that occur between periods and styles. In musicological literature concerned with French cultural history and opera, Camille Saint-Saëns’ connection to neoclassicism is often mentioned or inferred but not fully discussed. Since Saint-Saëns was writing well before the first World War, I propose further exploration of French neoclassical beginnings. Rather than suggest that musical neoclassicism does not have suitable boundaries, I aim to highlight an interesting area of overlap.

**Neoclassical Saint-Saëns?**

Saint-Saëns might seem like an odd choice for drawing connections between French music and neoclassicism since his younger contemporaries (Debussy and others) are more frequently associated with musical modernism. However, scholars of nineteenth-century French music and opera have made this comparison, albeit tentatively. A few examples are instructive. In *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle*, Steven Huebner refers to Saint-Saëns’ “overt allegiance to classical models and aesthetic preferences” and then offers a footnote for neoclassicism.\(^{13}\) In the pages that follow, Huebner distances Saint-Saëns from modernism and sets him up as a second-rate Wagner, particularly while discussing Saint-Saëns’ *Henry VIII*. Huebner seemingly rejects the explanation that neoclassicism could account for the composer’s idiosyncrasies, and instead presents Saint-Saëns as primarily occupied with nationalist concerns. Clearly Saint-Saëns’ music requires a context, but neoclassicism appears to be an unacceptable label. Hervé Lacombe, in *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century*, also references *Henry VIII* while discussing the insertion of eighteenth-century characteristics into operas staged

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after 1850. Again, seeming to propose a neoclassical explanation, Lacombe suggests that “the spread of antique styles as re-created by nineteenth-century composers opened the way for genuine neoclassicism,” but he then immediately walks this back to be understood simply as “a revival of classicism.”\footnote{Hervé Lacombe, \textit{The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 171} Although Lacombe’s discussion is neutral toward Saint-Saëns, a conclusion of neoclassical beginnings is once again carefully avoided. If both Huebner and Lacombe sense an important change in the direction of French music, neither is willing to fully accept a nineteenth-century awareness or desire for neoclassical elements. Even authors presenting a positive view of Saint-Saëns offer conflicted views on his connection to neoclassicism. In the introduction to \textit{Camille Saint-Saëns and His World}, Jann Pasler acknowledges the following: “Though more than one critic has remarked that Saint-Saëns’ focus on abstract beauty was a precursor to Stravinsky’s neoclassicism, this never proved a reason to rethink his legacy.”\footnote{Jann Pasler, \textit{Camille Saint-Saëns and His World} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), xv.} Thus, a collection dedicated to reimagining the composer’s importance to French music simultaneously hints at and rushes past a potential influence on neoclassicism. In fact, this topic is not mentioned further in the text. In the article that concludes Pasler’s collection and comes closest to addressing neoclassicism, Leon Botstein supposes that Saint-Saëns “went against the grain of a reigning but facile early nineteenth-century theatrical romanticism” and, he ultimately hypothesizes a “syncretic and eclectic achievement rooted in a normative tradition…[whereby one might] adapt classicism to the radically changing needs of modernity,” (but not neoclassicism!) to be
the legacy worth rethinking.\textsuperscript{16} Although each of these authors are focused on French music at the end of the nineteenth century (or, in the final example, are concerned primarily with restoring Saint-Saëns’ reputation), the recurrence of neoclassicism is striking. So, what is it about neoclassicism that makes discussing Saint-Saëns and late nineteenth-century French music so difficult? Let us follow Huebner’s footnote to Scott Messing’s work on the subject.

**Current Definition of Neoclassicism**

Scott Messing has done a historical survey of neoclassicism, particularly focused on the turn of the twentieth century in France and Germany, and his work offers valuable insights. In *Neoclassicism in Music*, he provides a cultural history of the term while also attempting to locate its earliest appearance and to define its proper usage. Messing finds specific words were already in use for art and architecture in the 1880s (like *néoclassique*) while others began to be used for music around 1900 (such as *nouveau classicisme* and *neue Klassizität*).\textsuperscript{17} He notes that French and German neoclassicism developed at slightly different times (roughly 1910 and 1920), and he also distinguishes between classicism and neoclassicism. Classicism necessarily preceded neoclassicism and, where classicism imitated late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century music, neoclassicism represented two distinct nationalist agendas: rejection of German romanticism (for the French) and reification of German quality (for the Germans).

Accordingly, Stravinsky’s and Schoenberg’s neoclassical works, despite any personal reasons for writing in this manner, have come to archetypically represent French and German postwar, nationalist styles. Messing generally notes that French nationalist

\textsuperscript{16} Pasler, *Camille Saint-Saëns and His World*, 376, 399-400.
\textsuperscript{17} Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*, 12, 35, 83.
neoclassicism involves the derogatory use of the term while German nationalist neoclassicism spins the term more positively. Interestingly, much like authors hinting that Saint-Saëns might represent an early neoclassical thread, Messing also points to Saint-Saëns without defining the composer’s role. He comes closest when referring to Saint-Saëns as “a transmitter, rather than a legatee of [classicism],” but this observation still suggests an important developmental aspect of neoclassicism.\(^\text{18}\) Rather than a style predicated on postwar expediencies or a reaction to prewar aesthetics, might neoclassicism simply be Botstein’s adapted, modernized classicism?

Richard Taruskin hints (somewhat facetiously) at the impossibility of a neoclassical movement. In his review titled: “Back to Whom?” Taruskin considers Messing’s work (among others) and argues that neoclassicism “was an intransigent thing, neither a refuge in the past nor a maintenance of a nervous status quo…it was a tendentious journey back to where we have never been.”\(^\text{19}\) However, rather than imagining that the word neoclassicism historically meant nothing or that stylistic changes in music were merely haphazard, Taruskin joins Messing in pointing to nationalism. Since a “retour à Bach was an attempt to hijack the Father, to wrest the old contrapuntist \textit{from} his errant countrymen…,” the use of such an expression signaled appropriation—‘back to Bach’ was coined by Charles Koechlin, a French composer and critic.\(^\text{20}\) Similarly, in Germany, Bach’s influence could be manipulated to authorize German compositional superiority. To describe this conflict at the simplest level, Taruskin sets out the following list of commonly argued perspectives: “France/Germany,

\(^\text{19}\) Taruskin, “Neoclassicism as Ideology,” 287.
\(^\text{20}\) Taruskin, “Neoclassicism as Ideology,” 293.
youthful/decadent, Classic/Romantic, objective/subjective, authority/identification, reactionary/modernist, Stravinsky/Schoenberg.”21 Such labels, he argues, are largely unhelpful when trying to understand neoclassicism, particularly since they are all politically shaded concepts. Taruskin rejects the definition of neoclassicism by “retrospectivism and stylistic allusion, pastiche or parody of eighteenth-century styles and forms” and points instead to “the futility of trying to gauge the difference between the neo and the real thing.”22 For Taruskin, Messing’s work provides a historical context that is beneficial because it can reorient conversations involving national and political influences on music.

Explaining away the political complication of an inadequately defined term seems too easy. If a canon of classical composers was established over time through shared musical goals, both France and Germany would need to assert their dominance to avoid the appearance of mutual admiration. Bach is an excellent example, however, since French and German composers found his music compelling. Perhaps this is reason enough to invent an imaginary retour—a means of discussing a well-understood (and perhaps decades-old) problem. Mendelssohn is well known for popularizing Bach in the early 1800s, but similar discovery, modification, and appropriation of older music was also consistent with late vestiges of France’s early music revival, circa 1900.

Mendelssohn was only one of several teachers, performers, and would-be historians of early music whose curation of Baroque and Classical works had consequences. (More in

21 Taruskin, “Neoclassicism as Ideology,” 294. (Along these lines, although I will later use the term “authentic” to mean borrowed from an existing source, the use of such material—authentic though it may be—to imbue a new work with authenticity, to authenticate it, must be regarded critically as a power claim. This has implications for Saint-Saëns’ music which go beyond a potential neoclassical label and which I only briefly discuss in connection to appropriation of early music, in Chapter 3.)

22 Taruskin, “Neoclassicism as Ideology,” 286-287.
Chapter 2.) For the French, claiming Bach as a universal master (instead of a German one) allowed musical styles which had developed concomitantly with Germany to retain their purely French character. This is particularly important considering the French defeat in 1871 and Saint-Saëns’ haste, along with other French composers, in creating a society for explicitly French music (a detail Taruskin considers ironic since both classicist and modernist works formed the basis of this new performance venture).

Since boundaries between periods and styles are imaginary lenses applied to the past, reevaluation of neoclassicism has been an ongoing project. As previously stated, I am less concerned with creating a new definition for neoclassicism so much as understanding where and how Saint-Saëns’ music fits. Messing’s historical perspective offers a way to judge how much of an outlier Saint-Saëns may have been, and Taruskin’s attempt to provide political context, to push beyond stale issues, also represents a useful tool. However, neither of these approaches appear to have greatly changed current conceptions of neoclassicism, modernism, or the perceived importance of Bach to the conversation. While Messing challenges the historical timeline, he refrains from reexamining the fundamental argument that Stravinsky and Schoenberg represent the primary figures of neoclassicism. Likewise, where Taruskin reveals established views to be politically biased, he avoids too much consideration of how this bias might have informed the presumed leaders of a neoclassical movement. Although the two composers explicitly coded their work as neoclassical, it is less obvious how they arrived at their new practice. Maintaining the Western canon, or at least reiterating the importance of Stravinsky and Schoenberg, appears to dramatically complicate scholarship in this area. Fortunately, both Messing and Taruskin recognize nationalism as a key component.
German (Viennese) Neoclassicism

The definition of neoclassicism currently appearing in *Grove Music Online*, leans toward the German nationalist point of view. Arnold Whittall offers 1920-1950 as rough start and end dates and describes neoclassicism as an interwar compositional approach to rejecting Romanticism. He also proposes a model for neoclassicism which involves “extended tonality, modality or even atonality… [rather than] true (Viennese) Classicism.” Whittall indicates that neoclassical music focused on a return to balanced formal and thematic processes while also considering new possibilities offered via the emancipation of dissonance. Further, he finds “parody, or distortion, of truly Classical traits” to be important signifiers of neoclassical style. Although Whittall recognizes Messing’s historical contribution, he prefers Taruskin’s voiced opinion that the terms classicism and neoclassicism amount to differing claims of authenticity (the authority/identification binary from above). Ultimately, Whittall suspects neoclassicism is not a helpful tool for analysis but that it may persist in ‘literary’ (presumably less rigorous) discussions regarding music.

Despite this negative opinion of neoclassicism (or frustration about resolving the conflicts which appear to be inherent in using this term), Whittall identifies a few additional hallmarks of the style. While considering these identifiers to be overly broad, he finds compositions that “relate to the Baroque and Classical periods in their texture and formal outlines,” particularly in the works of Stravinsky, Hindemith, and Schoenberg, to be a second wave of creative output which follows expressionism. Once

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24 Whittall, “Neo-Classicism,” *Grove Music Online*. 

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again, the formal boundaries separating romanticism, expressionism, neoclassicism, and modernism seem to cause undue consternation. Although Stravinsky and Schoenberg were particularly vocal about how what they were doing was new and different, many others came first.

**French (Debussyist) Neoclassicism**

Thinking about neoclassicism as a response to Debussy, Marianne Wheeldon has pushed neoclassicism slightly closer to the nineteenth century. Wheeldon finds critics engaged in “postwar commentary on the prewar avant-garde” and thinks about how the press has informed our historical view. In addition to drawing sides for and against Debussy, Wheeldon shows composers choosing sides over vertical or horizontal harmony, and increasingly focusing on counterpoint. She provides a table that contrasts the views of Stravinsky and Schoenberg and then offers another for Debussy vs. Schoenberg. With characteristics like: “anti-Wagnerian, anti-\textit{Tristan}, classicism, neoclassicism; sonorous language conveys a system of sounds, purely musical affinities; absolute music” vs. “Wagnerism, \textit{Tristan}-esque, expressionism, Romanticism, neo-Romanticism; sonorous language conveys emotions, feelings, psychological experiences; extramusical ideas and images,” it would be easy to replace Stravinsky or Debussy with Saint-Saëns. In other words, the French school is alive and well following Saint-Saëns’ and Debussy’s dismissal from the canon.

**Theoretical Neoclassicism**

Martha M. Hyde’s 1996 article, in Music Theory Spectrum: “Neoclassic and Anachronistic Impulses in Twentieth-Century Music,” offers an analytical approach to

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navigating the twentieth-century neoclassical complex. Hyde theorizes four categories of music which aim in some way to imitate the past. Her reading of commonly accepted neoclassical works as “reverential, eclectic, heuristic, and dialectical [imitations]” provides another significant puzzle piece: neoclassical composers were motivated by something other than faithful reproduction.26 Hyde eloquently describes these composers reinscribing instead of replicating, since “mere borrowing of stylistic features, however successful, does not make a neoclassic, [and] because mere borrowing does not involve an effort to resume or revive an out-of-date tradition.”27 Hyde shares Messing’s view that neoclassicism references older works, but she does not insist that those references be dominant or easily recognized. Identifying neoclassical impulses in Saint-SAëns’ work, therefore, need not rely strictly on direct parallels but may be understood through the concept of indirect causality. Without claiming to know Saint-SAëns’ specific intentions, considering historical details, biographical information, and documented interaction with older sources can certainly suggest some possibilities. Reference becomes an essential means for recognizing and describing neoclassical works of art. Critically, Hyde offers tools for identifying and categorizing points of imitation (a contrapuntal synthesis of old and new, if you will). Of course, even she admits that this broadening conceptualization makes maintaining a narrow definition of neoclassicism increasingly difficult.

Retro-classicism?

27 Hyde, “Neoclassic and Anachronistic Impulses,” 201.
Finn Egeland Hansen, who considers Saint-Saëns and others to be neoclassical precedents, has opted for the term “retro-classical.” This is a particularly useful term for connecting early music revival and appropriation, since retro conveys out-of-date and nostalgic sensations. Hansen lists several of Saint-Saëns’ works when identifying pieces which would be better understood as “retro-classicistic”: *Suite pour orchestre* (op. 49), fugues within *Prélude et Fugue* (op. 52) and *Prélude et Fugue* (op. 111), *Six études* (op. 135), *Septuor* (op. 65), *Sonata No. 2* (op. 123), and three additional *Sonatas* (op. 166, 167, 168). Briefly analyzing each work, Hansen ultimately relies on a sixth sense to label each work. This suggests that looking for specific musical elements may not offer the best means of approaching retro-classical works. Additionally, Hansen is mainly theorizing a secondary classical-romantic trajectory. Simultaneously developing classical and romantic strategies does seem to fit French music, broadly, especially since these works were often defined in comparison to foreign, Baroque masters during the nineteenth century.

**Concluding Thoughts**

Was France responding to implications that their history was enmeshed in the history of German music? Were Wagner, nationalism, and Viennese classics perceived differently in France? Might the French have engaged more than one of Hyde’s imitative approaches to revive a separate past, perhaps a history belonging more fully to France? The French certainly experienced a postwar reappraisal of their own musical output following the Franco-Prussian War. The multiple strands of neoclassicism that Messing

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divides along national borders have also been further demarcated (by studies on other significant events, social hierarchies, gendered associations, and so on). Could Saint-Saëns have straddled some of these boundaries? Did he lay groundwork for building a neoclassical future or was he already involved in a retro-classical trend? These questions (and others to which they might lead) suggest that our current labels for late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century musical works, particularly in France, may be inadequate.

Michael Stegemann has written a book about Saint-Saëns’ classicizing tendencies in the genre of the solo concerto but does little to connect such development to neoclassicism in the succeeding generation of French composers. In his introduction, he mourns:

Saint-Saëns commitment to a national French style of music was soon forgotten, and when Claude Debussy called for a revival of the music of the old masters of the harpsichord around the turn of the century, no one remembered that 50 years earlier Saint-Saëns had spoken up not only for Gluck but also for Rameau and Couperin, and that he had edited their works.  

This statement, although largely divorced from the analysis Stegemann presents, highlights my interest: how was the revival that Debussy participated in different from the one (or multiple ones) that Saint-Saëns experienced? Like Messing and others, Stegemann hints that Debussy reinvented the work Saint-Saëns was already doing. With highly detailed analyses of Saint-Saëns works, classical characteristics emerge. Still, Stegemann ultimately claims that Saint-Saëns has been forgotten and his music has been undervalued. Perhaps reevaluation, along neoclassical lines, would be valuable.

In her book concerning the Dreyfuss Affair (1894-1906) and nationalism at the turn of the century, Jane Fulcher’s concluding remarks contain a brief analysis of prewar classicism and postwar neoclassicism:

Well before the First World War, the turn to the “classic” had already begun, stimulated by the political mythology of those nationalists who now held power. There was thus no break between the cultural politics practiced before the war and the wartime turn to the neoclassical ideals as the “official” French style.\(^{31}\)

Fulcher is focused on the period immediately preceding the war, with particular attention to the politicization of d’Indy and his Schola Cantorum, in the context of redefining French style through cultural power (some rooted in Palestrina and mythologizing French figures from the past, like Jeanne d’Arc). Even so, an image of consistent development from classicism to neoclassicism emerges; the interruption of World War I creates an imaginary barrier.

Pursuing this thread, it appears a revival of early music during the Romantic era encouraged previously untested musical combinations. These sounds, conflated with personal beliefs, lead composers increasingly toward modernism. Katharine Ellis writes about a “reverential neo-classicism that developed in the final quarter of the [nineteenth] century,” pointing to a significantly earlier interest in reviving eighteenth-century forms and styles.\(^{32}\) Elsewhere, Ellis points to the French discovery of Mozart as the beginning of classicism in France.\(^{33}\) These views, analogous to retro-classicism, help to further my argument in the following chapter: reviving early music was a modernist activity.

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\(^{32}\) Ellis, *Interpreting the Musical Past*, 79.

CHAPTER 2:
EARLY MUSIC RENAISSANCE: DUAL REVIVALS AND NATIONALISM

Introduction

To say there was an Early Music Renaissance in nineteenth-century France is slightly inaccurate. At the time, la musique ancienne (ancient music) consisted largely of Baroque music but could ostensibly include everything from Gregorian chant to J. S. Bach’s keyboard works—essentially, any known, notated music from before the last half of the eighteenth century. Additionally, around 1800, French revivalist efforts mainly included, according to Katharine Ellis, “a small number of works between 25 and 65 years old—by Pergolesi, Durante, Jommelli, Rousseau, and Rameau;” these barely had a chance to be forgotten before they were rediscovered.34 However, the concept of rediscovery is important when considering this period of French music. As the nineteenth century continued, there was a renaissance in the sense that the French reconsidered their musical heritage. This reconsideration would become a strongly felt need following the Franco-Prussian War, in 1870, and thus, la musique ancienne came to represent far more than a “reverential” past.

France was not alone in its efforts to revive the musical past. However, other European nations had already begun experiencing a series of ‘ancient’ music revivals, beginning as early as the 1700s. In The Early Music Revival: A History, Harry Haskell

34 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 3.
explains that catch and glee clubs, along with madrigal societies, sprouted up in eighteenth-century England; “the choral music of Bach, Palestrina, Marcello, Pergolesi, the Scarlattis, and other early composers” was increasingly performed in Vienna around 1800; Mendelssohn famously conducted, and rekindled interest in, Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin (1829); and, in France, Alexandre-Étienne Choron, François-Joseph Fétis, and Louis Niedermeyer embarked on educational programs that privileged early music, mostly Bach, Handel, and Palestrina.\(^{35}\) Seen in this order, the French revival followed after revivals in England and major cities in what would later become Austria and Germany. However, this increased interaction with older music did not necessarily amount to increased appreciation. Haskell indicates that while “historical concerts were all the rage in the musical capitals of Europe… [these lecture recitals] ultimately reinforced the very prejudices they were designed to combat.”\(^{36}\) It was common for concerts to combine ‘ancient’ and contemporary music, but the program was often chronological, implying the superiority of newer works. Haskell links this prejudice to Darwinism and, more broadly, Enlightenment thinking.\(^{37}\) So, while certain pieces persisted in the repertoire, they were often seen merely as evolutionary stepping-stones. Although ‘ancient’ music was reemerging in amateur societies, public performances, and educational programs, this old music carried new significance, adding to its history of entanglement with royalty, religion, and patronage.

In France, this significance derived from two separate revivals. First, a revival of *la musique ancienne* occurred, beginning in the early nineteenth century, much like the

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other European revivals already described. Second, a nationalist revival of a subset of la
musique ancienne took place (slightly later in the century), predominantly made up of
works by pre-seventeenth-century composers. Rooted in Palestrina yet focused on French
qualities, the nationalism of this secondary revival can be seen through the way in which
pieces with French roots, having been written by French composers or in a representative
“French” style, could become music which belonged to the French and, in some sense,
symbolized France. Further, this music could signal cultural superiority by expressing
French identity through such coding. Although this second revival has previously been
understood to have begun around 1870, with the Franco-Prussian War providing a
compelling context, recent scholarship reveals an earlier connection. In Interpreting the
Musical Past: Early Music in Nineteenth-Century France, Katharine Ellis has done much
work in showing how closely the two revivals were intertwined; by exploring how
“nationalist thinking, educational idealism, and perceptions of French musical inferiority
influenced the progress and dissemination of early music,” Ellis links the European
interest in the past to a French nation-building project which began much earlier in the
nineteenth century. Thus, a growing interest in the musical past can also be understood,
in France, as a growing interest in an exclusively French musical past.

Camille Saint-Saëns’ life offers a rare perspective on these interconnected
revivals. He was born in 1835, in Paris, and quickly became known as a child prodigy on
piano, performing in high society as early as 1844. He was trained in music at a secular
institution, the Conservatoire, between 1848-1852, and taught at a religious school, École

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39 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 4.
Niedermeyer from 1861-1865. After training at the Conservatoire and continuing beyond his years teaching at the École Niedermeyer, Saint-Saëns worked as an organist at some of the most prestigious churches in Paris (1853-1877). He was also active in the military during the Franco-Prussian War. In 1871, he co-founded a society for French musicians, the Société nationale de musique, and his career benefitted from induction into the Institut de France, in 1881. The Institut granted him several honors throughout the remainder of his life, and he was even given a state-sponsored funeral when he died in 1921.

Saint-Saëns lived through much of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Toward the end of his life Saint-Saëns was disparaged by younger musicians and, perhaps as a result, his work was largely ignored by scholars for the fifty years following his death. However, academic interest in his life and works has grown significantly since the 1970s. Recent scholarly interest in the composer perhaps derives from new revivalist impulses and increasing nationalism globally. By considering how Saint-Saëns in particular, and France in general, participated in a revival of *la musique ancienne*, especially as some attributed a distinctly “French” characterization, we can how a composer at this time negotiated nationalism while operating in the environment of early music revival. The peculiar nature of rediscovering “French” music at this time was simultaneously to offer a glimpse of the past and also to make demands on the present. I

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41 This interest can be seen through Sabina Teller Ratner’s thematic catalogues of Saint-Saëns’ works (2002-2012), Jann Pasler’s edited collection of articles for the Bard Music Festival (*Camille Saint-Saëns and His World*, 2012), Hugh Macdonald’s advocacy for revivals of the composer’s operas (in *Opera News*, 2014), and international conferences held in Italy (2016) and England (2022) on “The Many Faces of Camille Saint-Saëns” and “Saint-Saëns Across Borders,” respectively.
will now show how such demands were significant in Saint-Saëns’ life and, more broadly, in France.

**Early Life in Paris**

In his biography, *Camille Saint-Saëns: A Life*, Brian Rees emphasizes Saint-Saëns’ geographical and ancestral connection to France. The composer “regarded himself, rightly, as a true Parisian… [and had] family roots in Normandy and Champagne;” in his own words, Saint-Saëns was “from the soil of France.” 42 If we take these assertions to mean be signifiers of Frenchness, Saint-Saëns likely considered himself undeniably French. This could mean he would also have conceived of his oeuvre as French, regardless of any international influence. A true heritage and a sense of belonging (or justification) were important to many besides Saint-Saëns. These details increasingly mattered in nineteenth-century Paris. During his life, Saint-Saëns was accused of being too friendly with Germany; he was decried for lacking expressive, emotive musical preferences (qualities of Romanticism); and he was rumored to be Jewish, largely in connection with the Dreyfus Affair. 43 (Alfred Dreyfus, a French military officer, was falsely accused of treason in 1894 and prejudice against his Jewish ancestry conflated religion with nationality. Since the legal proceedings against him and public division of opinion on his innocence lasted nearly a decade, antisemitism gained

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42 Brian Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns: a Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), 22. (Rees emphasizes French soil as an essentialist part of Saint-Saëns’ dismissal of César Franck from the French canon. Franck was Belgian by birth but spent his entire career in Paris. Saint-Saëns was presumably ennobled by his own Parisian roots, although I suspect his nationalist attack on Franck’s heritage may simply have been Saint-Saëns’ rationalization of hard feelings toward the Franckiste circle. The Franckistes ousted Saint-Saëns from the Société nationale de musique when he insisted that older and foreign works not be performed by the society.)

prominence in French political circles. Calling Saint-Saëns Jewish would therefore have been an attack on his character and his patriotism.44) However, Saint-Saëns’ French identity could only ever be attacked on superficial grounds. He had been born a few blocks down from Charles Gounod.45

Saint-Saëns began his career by performing in the elite circles of the day. Rees suggests that Saint-Saëns’ mother, Françoise-Clémence, selectively curated his performances and managed his social connections in a shrewd manner.46 When he performed a Beethoven sonata in 1840, at age four, Le Moniteur Universel remembered a similarly precocious Mozart.47 In 1844, La Revue et Gazette Musicale reported that Saint-Saëns was born to play the piano and had been nourished by the masters (Bach, Handel, Mozart), having memorized their works for a performance under the tutelage of his well-known teacher, Camille Stamaty.48 A brief blurb appeared in Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung describing the eight-year-old’s appearance in private performances in Paris, where he played Mozart’s concertos and Bach’s fugues masterfully.49 A couple of years later, Saint-Saëns was once again recognized for performing, “sans effort,” Handel, Bach,

44 Fulcher’s French Cultural Politics provides further details on the collision of French nationalism and music.
46 Rees, Camille Saint-Saëns, 24, 32.
Mozart, and Beethoven, alongside modern works, at Salle Pleyel.\(^5\) (Vienna again covered Saint-Saëns’ activities and Leipzig also mentioned him that year.\(^5\) After a performance of Bach, Beethoven, and Handel at the Tuileries for the Duchess of Orleans in 1847, he nearly performed Mozart with the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire; however, the society complained that he was too young to appear with them.\(^5\) Thus, scarcely a decade into his life, with the help of his mother, Saint-Saëns had already successfully entered the inner musical life of Paris. Curiously, that space was also inhabited by the ghosts of Baroque and Classical composers who were not French, but decidedly Austro-German.

Beginning in 1848, Saint-Saëns attended the Conservatoire. Connected, but not wealthy, he gained entry as a French citizen with talent. According to D. Kern Holoman, attending the school was a privilege reserved for French nationals and the foreign elite.

Matriculation at the Conservatoire was so highly valued that families of gifted children would move to Paris and sometimes, like César Franck’s family, change citizenship, since admission required French nationality. In the early years even the best foreign students were routinely turned away, including Franz Liszt in 1823; though by the 1880s, a quota of 15% foreign students was deemed acceptable.\(^5\)

France effectively required a change of allegiance for outsiders to pursue the Conservatoire’s prestigious musical education. It is interesting that Liszt, who was a


\(^{51}\) The Retrospective Index to Music Periodicals (RIPM) points to articles in Allgemeine Wiener Musik-Zeitung and Neue Zeitschrift für Musik in 1846.

\(^{52}\) Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, 38.

lifelong friend of Saint-Saëns, was denied admission. It seems foreign musicians, though welcome to perform in Paris, may not have been as welcome to study. Founded in 1795, the Conservatoire was intended to be used by the people of France. Ellis explains that “the idea of the musical museum came from Bernard Sarrette, first director of the Republican-inspired Conservatoire,” in collaboration with the French government. 54 Revolutionary ideals and a library which would house “works of masters of all ages and all nations” were Sarrette’s goals for the newly instituted museum. 55 Half a century later, Saint-Saëns’ education was likely built on similar intentions.

Although the French government had been repeatedly overhauled, Jann Pasler offers an 1886 perspective as evidence of the durability of the school’s charter:

[As] one of the most substantial legacies of the Revolution, Third Republic administrators found the “best arguments” for [the Conservatoire’s] continuing “utility.” Not only had this institution proven that the French were as “apt at learning this art and profiting from it as anyone else,” for a century, it had served as “the peaceful sanctuary of French art” and contributed to the country’s glory. With its library and instrument collection, it also laid the foundations for the invention of a French musical tradition. 56

Clearly, many years after Saint-Saëns attended, the Conservatoire remained an insular establishment whose value could be understood in terms of French revolutionary history, public usefulness (“utility,” as defined by the government when doling out grants), and nationalism. Concerning this last element, the project of reimagining French music was pursued at this august institution through its holdings. In the Conservatoire’s capacity as a museum, imagined as the Louvre of music, “the library was not simply a collection of exemplary works…it was an educational venture that illustrated the good and the bad.” 57

54 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 4.
55 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 4.
56 Pasler, Composing the Citizen, 141-146.
57 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 5.
With the power to amplify or silence voices, the Conservatoire could authoritatively label and dictate the past. History even became a required subject when the state hoped to secularize education.  

58 Interestingly, according to Saint-Saëns’ memoire, a bust of the composer was displayed in the Conservatoire library, “where [his real] education happened.” 59 The composer’s will directed that his works be donated to the library and a discovery in 1984 hints that some pieces may have been overlooked when they were received. 60)

Due to its influence in raising the future musicians of Paris, the Conservatoire participated substantially in reviving an invented past, pursued in concert with musique ancienne. This agenda can most clearly be seen in the repertoire of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, which predominantly performed musical “classics” (in much the same way that “classical” music is performed today).

58 Pasler, Composing the Citizen, 185, 317-320.
persisted in this environment hints at lingering, generational power. The “public” represented here was not the idealized audience of the school’s revolutionary charter. Yet, it was likely a similarly constituted group for whom Saint-Saëns performed, in private.

Seeing the repertoire of the Société des Concerts in 1828, considering potential narratives espoused at the Conservatoire between 1795-1848 (perhaps not unlike Western music in today’s classrooms), and hearing reports of Saint-Saëns’ early performances in the 1840s and 1850s, it is hard to miss the emphasis on European masters from the past. It was perhaps easier to remember and celebrate “classic” composers from other nations. These may even have been safe choices for a country still divided over its own history, in the years leading to the February revolution (1848), when the Republic was reinstated, albeit briefly. Yet, alongside this established foreign repertoire, some French music remained viable in certain settings (the “few remnants of ancien régime” music found in Société des Concerts performances, for example). Based on the reports surrounding Saint-Saëns’ early piano performances, it seems modern music was largely neglected. If any of the works he presented as a young musician were by French composers, their names apparently did not merit placement in the press next to the litany of foreign masters.

Given Haskell’s assertion that older music was often paired with newer works to support a kind of evolutionary development, it may seem odd that modern music was absent or underreported. Fortunately, Ellis offers some clarification through her analysis of Saint-Saëns’ brief commentary in *Le Voltaire* (1879). She writes:

> When Saint-Saëns came to analyze the ‘problem’ of French opera in 1879, he laid all the blame for anti-French sentiment on Stendhal’s *Vies de Haydn, Mozart, et
Métastase (1814). By this stage, Stendhal was, in his denigration of French “music” in general and Rameau in particular, merely following a trajectory that had already been outlined in the late eighteenth century. Nevertheless, he gave fresh impetus to an aesthetic code whose ramifications dogged the French musical intelligentsia for the rest of the century, first in relation to Italy and, soon, to Germany: a deep-seated sense of national backwardness, combined with bewilderment as to whether any feature of “French” music could legitimately be celebrated, especially if it was connected to the ancien régime.62

The music of the ancien régime did not fit Republican idealism. France already had a musical past, but it was tethered to wealth and status. Yet, contrary to Ellis’ analysis, Saint-Saëns’ commentary, which was originally printed in the press and later published as the first chapter of his book, Harmonie et Mélodie (1885), offers more than a critique of French opera and curiously carves out space for ancien régime music.63 In the course of his argument, Saint-Saëns suggests that modern, European music was still in its early stages, having only seriously begun in the sixteenth century. He goes on to claim that Rameau was the greatest composer France had produced. Finally, and most interestingly, Saint-Saëns concludes that the war between French, German, and Italian schools of music had ended, just like the war between Classicism and Romanticism. In such a context, did Ellis’ description of French “national backwardness” need to be corrected? If the wars had ended, had concessions been made? Did Saint-Saëns truly consider these old conflicts resolved?

Since Saint-Saëns’ printed ideas were somewhat moderate, viewing tensions between France and her neighbors or between ancien régime music and Republican politics as past concerns, Ellis digs deeper to describe how these dissonances resulted in a new, historicist pursuit:

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62 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 18.
To find a French music worthy of the name, musicians with historical sensitivity had to look further back than the eighteenth century—to a past during which the French had, alongside their Flemish cousins, been trend-setters in both musical composition and music theory… Choron and the Conservatoire’s librarian Bottée de Toulmon each contributed to a line of thinking which placed the “golden age” of French music in what we would call the late Medieval and Renaissance periods, culminating, as they thought, in the role of Goudimel as Palestrina’s Roman teacher… Neglecting the French Revolutionary repertory, Choron went back to Josquin (the Déploration sur la mort de Jehan Ockeghem) and Clément Janequin (La bataille de Marignan and Les cries de Paris). His reasons were overtly nationalistic, forming the counterweight to his deprecation of seventeenth-century composers. French and French-trained musicians had led European music all the way from Tinctoris to Goudimel…

These were the foundations for the newly “French” music. Sixteenth-century music and its precedents would inform the musical nationalism of nineteenth-century Paris. Chant and counterpoint became significant. Yet, though he argued that melody was not superior to harmony, that Bach was not educated in Rome, and that Palestrina was not the “creator of modern melody,” Saint-Saëns’ was wrong on at least one point; the war between France and Germany was being waged by critics, few of whom were musicians, with terminology. Ellis highlights many of these terms below:

In helping redefine the Frenchness of la musique française as a positive quality… a vocabulary of Frenchness was built up [starting around 1850], centring on the perceived attributes of the dance and keyboard music of the French Baroque. Some such vocabulary appears designed to counter established prejudices, revealing the other side of familiar coins: “short-windedness” became “concision”; “heaviness,” “nobility”; “pomposity,” “grandeur”; “naive inanity,” “charming naivety”; “simplistic” music, “fresh, direct, youthful” music. These and other descriptors also had valuable anti-German properties: “clarity,” “concision,” “directness,” and “balance” were not perceived as part of Wagner’s stock-in-trade. Grace, alertness, exquisite feeling, and elegance became key signifiers, alongside tenderness and vivacity.

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64 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 19.
66 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 142.
A purportedly French canon emerged, carrying familiar stylistic preferences. Here we can see hallmarks of neoclassicism—meshing neatly with Scott Messing’s descriptors—being simultaneously positive and negative due to their linkage with each nation. These terms also carried undertones of religion and femininity (additional views which contributed to this period but are largely beyond the scope of this thesis).

It seems likely that this mentality—a belief in purity, clarity, and other easily co-opted terms as signifiers of Frenchness—formed the basis of the instruction Saint-Saëns received at the Conservatoire in 1848, since Republican ideals were once again coming to the fore. Describing this moment in the young composer’s life, Rees explains how the Opéra became the “Theatre of the Nation” while the Conservatoire was reinscribed as a “National” and therefore no longer a “Royal” school. If this rebranding was lost on the 13-year-old composer, we can see that terminology at this time was critical. Further, the emphasis on Palestrina (indeed, the conflation of music and religion) was not unique to the French. However, if Palestrina might as well have been French, having been taught by Goudimel, another important aspect of Saint-Saëns’ life, and these dual French revivals, is the German Cecilian movement.

**German Cecilianism**

In nineteenth-century Germany, many composers joined the Cecilian movement. Taking their name from St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, Cecilians “regarded ‘true, genuine church music’ as being subservient to the liturgy, and intelligibility of words and music as more important than artistic individuality.” Several societies existed which

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67 Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, 49.
sought to emulate Palestrina’s contrapuntal style, and Gregorian chant was upheld as a model. Although similar ideas had been circulating for centuries, the industrial revolution engendered “a longing for simplicity, unworldliness and the past” which helped to solidify the movement.\(^6\) Parisians may have been aware of these trends in Germany and certainly experienced similar societal anxieties.

Scholars have begun to explore how Cecilianism might have affected those outside of the movement. In an article for *The Choral Journal*, Patrick Liebergen suggests that the influence of Cecilian societies reached beyond the registered membership. He further hypothesizes that non-members, Bruckner and Liszt in particular (but also Verdi, Wagner and Mahler), were successful in writing music that conformed to a “Cecilian ideal,” despite their tendency to deviate slightly from the Cecilians’ stated goals.\(^7\) Interestingly, he finds these non-members to be more successful in writing viable music than those who adhered strictly to the society’s standards. In 1868, those rules had been codified by Franz Xavier Witt in *Musica Sacra* (a Cecilian publication), as follows:

- first, the use of chant in the liturgy;
- second, a renewed interest in the contrapuntal technique of Palestrina in newly composed choral works;
- third, the use of wind instruments for accompaniment; and
- fourth, the singing of hymns in the vernacular.\(^8\)

Along these lines, Cecilianism forms an interesting parallel with Parisian efforts to imitate Palestrina and revive music from before 1600. Since the movement “sought to restore the musical principles of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,” the impetus for

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\(^{6}\) Gmeinwieser, “Cecilian Movement,” *Grove Music Online*.

\(^{7}\) Liebergen, “The Cecilian Movement,” 16.

doing so may have extended beyond Germany. In any event, the two countries concurrently pursued a similar style.

Some of Saint-Saëns’ music might also be considered successful in this vein if partial deviation from the Cecilian rules were allowed. In his dissertation, titled: “An Analysis of Musical Style and Cecilian Idealism in the Latin-Texted Motets of Camille Saint-Saëns,” Scott Glysson has compared Liebergen’s criteria with six of Saint-Saëns’ pieces that use Latin texts, including Tantum Ergo (1856), Ave Verum (1860), Tantum Ergo (1860), Ave Verum (1878), Deus Abraham (1885), and Ave Maria (1914).

Examining Saint-Saëns’ writings about church music, Glysson also presents a secondary rubric. He writes:

I have established four key principles which I believe reflect the composer’s concept of ideal church music. These principles are as follows: 1. Musical choices that either support or enhance the natural stress and meaning of the Latin text 2. Music that does not distract from the solemn character of the mass 3. Use of prominent and expressive melody 4. Use of modern and expressive harmony.

Although Glysson considers pieces from later in the composer’s life (1878-1916), some of these guiding principles are evident in motets Saint-Saëns wrote in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Further, his “Ode à sainte-Cécile,” though written to a modern, French text, could also be favorably compared to such guidelines.

The Ode was composed for the Société Sainte-Cécile, in Paris. For its annual competition in 1852, the society placed an advertisement in Le Ménestrel encouraging the creation of new compositions for solo voice, choir, and orchestra, to be set to modern,

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French poetry. Sharing space in the newspaper alongside the results of the Prix de Rome, the Conservatoire’s annual competition, it seems students at the school were meant apply. In fact, the society’s competition was judged by prominent musicians who were also connected to the Conservatoire, such as Halévy (Saint-Saëns’ teacher), Gounod (Saint-Saëns’ mentor) and Seghers (from the Société des Concerts). Additionally, the Prix de Rome required a cantata as part of its composition competition, using a text written by a living poet. Thus, for the Cécile-inspired work, the competition may have been seeking similar sounds as those espoused by the Conservatoire. Alongside others, Rees considers the fact that Saint-Saëns entered and won this competition to be something of a consolation prize, after he failed to obtain the Prix de Rome. Interestingly, requesting a newly composed choral work that emphasized a text and would be accompanied by winds (perhaps desiring declamation to exceed the accompaniment) seems strangely aligned with Cecilianism.

It is important to note, however, that German Cecilianism and the Société Sainte-Cécile were not connected. (At least, I have not been able to establish a link.) Saint-Saëns may have heard the first heard excerpts of Wagner’s Tannhäuser performed in 1850, at the society. Additionally, Ellis highlights an 1887 effort “toward founding a French branch of the Cecilian movement,” decades after Saint-Saëns won the Société Sainte-Cécile’s 1852 prize, but it is not clear what motivated the decision or whether any

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76 Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, 61.
previous attempts had taken place.\textsuperscript{78} Besides being named after St. Cecilia, a common moniker for musical societies throughout Europe and America, stretching back centuries, the French society and the German movement likely sprang from different roots. Gmeinwieser’s \textit{Grove Music Online} entry does hint at reasons to consider parallels, however:

Like the Nazarenes in the visual arts, the Cecilians took the old masters of the 15th and 16th centuries as models for their own compositions. They viewed Palestrina as the leading figure in church music (a complete edition of his works, under the general editorship of Haberl, was published between 1862 and 1903), and based their criteria on the music performed in the chapels of Rome rather than on the more emotional 18th-century repertory. Exaggeratedly graphic word-painting was to be avoided; expansive modulations and chromaticism—in fact all characteristics of theatrical music—were anathema.\textsuperscript{79}

Theatricality (and the industrial revolution, as cited previously) emphasized excess. Thus, a return to principles, or the imagined principles of old masters, would be increasingly appealing to Parisians who disdained decadence. The emphasis on Palestrina and church music is also important. Although the rejection of emotionalism, exaggeration, and wild modulation might be grounds to definitively disconnect the Conservatoire (which trained its students in theatrical writing and performance, a pool of talent from which the Opéra could draw), the connection to the visual arts and Rome was significant. As mentioned previously, archeology and a revival in the arts may have inspired musicians to uncover and reimagine the past. Further, the French connection to Rome goes back to Catherine de Medici, Queen of France, who laid the groundwork for collecting and publishing

\textsuperscript{78} Ellis, \textit{Interpreting the Musical Past}, 83.
\textsuperscript{79} Gmeinwieser, “Cecilian Movement,” \textit{Grove Music Online}. 
French music in the 1500s.\textsuperscript{80} (Some additional connections are discussed in Chapter 3, but here is another avenue for exploration not covered in this thesis.)

German fascination with Palestrina somewhat united Catholics and Protestants. E.T.A. Hoffmann and other Protestants advocated for Palestrina’s music and, while they “experienced this revival in the concert hall or in private homes, the Catholics wanted the old music for worship.”\textsuperscript{81} In other words, in Germany, secular and sacred spaces were attuned to the revivallist impulse for early music, and organized religion was a site for reform. In France, church music was also gaining importance in the nineteenth century, as the centralized Parisian government sought to strip the provincial (largely Catholic) population of its political power.\textsuperscript{82} But, secularization would further propel early music.

Once again, Saint-Saëns’ life offers a prime example of involvement in these ongoing concerns. Instead of immediately establishing his reputation as a composer (which was the desired outcome for prominent Prix de Rome participants), he played organ for church services at Saint-Merri and La Madeleine, and he became involved with another St. Cecilia society, in Bordeaux. Saint-Saëns also went on to teach at the École Niedermeyer, a religious music school.

**École Niedermeyer and Church Music**

The influence of Alexandre-Étienne Choron and François-Joseph Fétis is useful for contextualizing another piece of Saint-Saëns’ connections to early music and nationalism, through Louis Niedermeyer’s school for church music. Ellis traces Choron’s


\textsuperscript{81} Liebergen, “The Cecilian Movement,” 13.

educational efforts in the early 1800s, by demonstrating the “close relationship between ‘sacred’ and ‘classic,’ but also the secularizing power of museum terminology.” Like the Conservatoire, Choron’s school survived shifting political ideologies by adopting a variety of names: École Primaire de Chant (1817), Institution Royale de Musique Religieuse (1825), and Institution Royale de Musique Classique (1830). Choron was responsible for much of the emphasis on reviving Palestrina in the 1820s. As the funding situation fluctuated (due to politics), so did the rhetorical positioning of Palestrina; shifting from chant to religion and religious to classical. Enter Fétis. As a historian, and early musicologist even, Fétis’ role was to shape how early music was understood in France, beginning in the 1830s. Offering “a crash course in the art of separating the stylistic wheat (largely Italian and German music after 1600) and the chaff (largely French music, of any era),” he popularized the notion of progress in music. Thus, progress became another banner under which some music was celebrated. (Saint-Saëns pushed back against this notion, many years later, perhaps to defend French style.) Fétis was critical of religious music, including Palestrina, because it failed to meet his standards of progress. Perhaps as an indirect result of this philosophy, Niedermeyer’s École de Musique Classique et Religieuse would eventually change its name to avoid persecution, as secularization efforts strengthened in the 1880s. Saint-Saëns may also have found himself treading carefully, in the 1850s and 1860s.

83 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 6.
84 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 187.
85 Ellis, Interpreting the Musical Past, 23.
86 Nichols, On Music and Musicians, 9, 10, 105.
87 Pasler, Composing the Citizen, 310.
When Saint-Saëns left the Conservatoire in 1852, the political landscape had shifted once again. Louis Napoleon came to power as Saint-Saëns completed his studies, and “during the Second Empire, as in the Ancien Régime, the Catholic Church dominated education.” Music would be reframed by religion. Louis Niedermeyer’s school, opening in 1853, “regarded Catholicism as alone capable of barring the road to revolution and attempted to re-establish church music in its traditional forms.” Thus, the school aimed to realign music and politics. Intending to “train young organists and choir masters who could then be employed as diocesan bishops,” the school hired Saint-Saëns to teach, in 1861. Already employed at Saint-Merri and La Madeleine, Saint-Saëns was certainly known as an exceptional organist. However, his approaches to playing in church and teaching at school might have been cause for concern.

Reflecting on his duties as organist, Saint-Saëns offers an amusing and complicating view of performing church music:

I was young, and had been organist at the church of the Madeleine for a short time. … One of the vicars of the parish sent a request that I should visit him. … [The vicar said:] “Do not misunderstand me. The parishioners of the Madeleine are for the most part persons of wealth, who frequently go to the theatre of the Opéra-Comique, where they have become accustomed to a style of music to which you are expected to conform.” “Monsieur l’abbé,” I replied, “whenever I shall hear the dialogue of the Opéra-Comique spoken in the pulpit, I will play music appropriate to it; until then, I shall continue as hitherto.”

Playing organ for a church that was attended by the elite of Parisian society came with expectations. Whether Saint-Saëns subverted these and whether the vicar explicitly told him to incorporate themes from the Opéra-Comique in the service avoids the larger point:

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88 Pasler, Composing the Citizen, 98.
89 Rees, Camille Saint-Saëns, 107-108.
wealthy members had a vested interest in what was played by the organist. The service may have been a site for spectacle, perhaps especially at the Madeleine. In his memoire, École Buissonière (Skipping School), Saint-Saëns presents this story in the larger context of improvising at the organ. He explains that many French organs lacked the necessary pedals to play Bach and that improvisation had suffered in France since Bach’s music was considered better than anything that could be improvised. Prior to attending the Conservatoire, Saint-Saëns had been taught by Alexandre Boëly, a prominent church organist in Paris. Interestingly, Boëly lost his job “because his austere and serious tastes conflicted with those of the clergy and people.” It seems Saint-Saëns shared Boëly’s opinion that serious music should be played in church. Slightly later in his memoire, Saint-Saëns describes joyfully improvising for twenty years at the Madeleine. Perhaps what he taught at École Niedermeyer was improvisation, not necessarily disrespect for clergy or parishioners, as a kind of serious endeavor worthy of church organists.

Another view of Saint-Saëns’ activities at the school, recounted by his student Gabriel Fauré (who Rees cites), were the unauthorized lessons he taught.

[Saint-Saëns’] advocacy of ‘advanced’ views [was] regarded as subversive by the authorities. He turned the piano class into the most exciting seminars, playing and discussing Liszt, Schumann, Wagner, and all others excluded from the official syllabus, and referring to his friendships with Berlioz, Wagner, and Gounod. … Saint-Saëns was not paid to teach composition [but did anyway] … He would also discuss with his class his own processes of composition [and]… would encourage [students to write] frivolous compositions such as incidental music for charades and farces.”

Again, indicative of the conditions under which Saint-Saëns plied his trade, we can see the conflict between what he believed was beneficial to his students and what the school

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93 Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, 40.
expected from him. Although the students were “subjected to much church-going and lengthy sermons [and] Romantic composers such as Chopin and Schumann were considered unsuitable,” it appears they received a very different education from Saint-Saëns. Further, the school was funded by wealthy patrons, possibly the same group influencing church music selections. Pasler points to Saint-Saëns uncharacteristically writing motets, teaching at the school, and “participat[ing] in concerts organized there under the Comtesse de Paris (the wife of the Orléanist pretender to the throne), the archbishop of Paris, and other royalist aristocrats,” and concludes that “the reality of republican anticlericalism was thus full of paradox.” In trying to reconcile the composer’s activities with the nationalist expectations put upon him, it becomes clear that performing early music, like Bach, and discussing popular music aligned with aristocratic interests, perhaps Berlioz or Rossini, could create a space where modern German and French composers could be better understood as doing “serious” work. Saint-Saëns’ unofficial classes appear to have navigated divisions of religious and secular or serious and popular through modernization. His “advanced views” influenced a new generation of composers, including Fauré, by appreciation for aspects of both old and new music. “Serious” music, perhaps the kind Boëly was fired for, and perhaps not the kind desired in church or by an indulgent elite, would become even more important as Saint-Saëns established his reputation in France.

**Société Nationale de Musique**

While continuing to write music, Saint-Saëns fought in the Franco-Prussian War. Rees explains that French music, particularly stage music, suffered during the war and

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95 Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, 108.
96 Pasler, *Composing the Citizen*, 292.
that, since “the frivolities of the Empire were in disfavour... there was a feeling that French music had for too long been subservient to foreign lands.” In line with this sentiment, Saint-Saëns and other French composers founded the Société nationale de musique in 1871. The society aimed to help living French composers get their music performed, and was a step toward modernization. Although Michael Strasser’s dissertation suggests that the society’s goal may not have been overtly nationalist or anti-German, the motto “Ars Gallica” does suggest a commitment to French art. When the society was founded, many of the members struggled to see their works performed in concert societies or in the theater, particularly since early music and music by nonliving composers (which could guarantee revenue) was preferred. The society was successful in promoting many young French artists, including women. However, Saint-Saëns resigned in 1886, along with his co-founder Romain Bussine, since Vincent D’Indy and other members who had been influenced by César Franck forced him out. The reason for this departure is critical. Foreign works by living composers and music by nonliving composers (including early music) were being programmed and D’Indy along with the Franckistes wanted to make this change official. A majority vote changed the society’s regulations and older and foreign works increasingly began to fill its repertoire. It appears that this is one context where Saint-Saëns began to be viewed as a conservative voice in French music, one who was opposed to progress and feigned opposition to foreign works, despite appearing to be heavily influenced by them.

97 Rees, Camille Saint-Saëns, 160.
100 Strasser, “Ars Gallica,” 6.
Institut de France

Another sign of Saint-Saëns’ supposed conservatism came in 1881, when he was inducted into the Institut de France. Henri Reber had died, vacating his seat in the music section of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, and Léo Delibes, rumored to be a “dangerous Wagnerian,” did not win as many votes as Saint-Saëns.\(^{102}\) If the Institut was a nationalist group, it was also a conservative one. Pasler explains further:

Whereas the Opéra-Comique was becoming increasingly open to new approaches to musical form and beauty… the Opéra maintained its conservatism as well as its ties to traditional elites, including members of the Académie. … From 1881 to 1884, the Opéra put on only one new opera annually, which was invariably by an academician (Gounod, Thomas, Saint-Saëns).\(^{103}\)

Saint-Saëns officially joined the ranks of the musical elite by election to the Institut. He also received additional honors form the Académie. He became “an officer of the Légion d’honneur” in 1884 (and would later receive the grand-croix, in 1913), signaling further recognition by the establishment.\(^{104}\) Once associated with these older composers, and producing works for the Opéra, it would be increasingly difficult for him to remain relevant to the new French school or to modernism. It seems critics were also ready to find his music objectionable, even as he continued to innovate (more in the next chapter).

Saint-Saëns’ view of music history, late in life, is revealing. As a member of the Institut, he gave lecture on ‘ancient’ music in 1915, in the United States.\(^{105}\) According to Saint-Saëns, the history of music began with the invention of plainsong. Two centuries later, Palestrina created counterpoint, and harmony spread across Europe. The

\(^{102}\) Rees, Camille Saint-Saëns, 236.

\(^{103}\) Pasler, Composing the Citizen, 361.

\(^{104}\) Stegemann, in Pasler, Saint-Saëns and his World, 154.

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries resulted in musical masters (Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven) and, in the nineteenth-century, Palestrina was revived in Paris. Clearly Saint-Saëns had joined the Palestrina cult at some point.

Martin Cooper’s thoughts on the early music renaissance in France allow for further, critical insights. Writing in 1947, he considered Gounod, Franck, and Saint-Saëns to be instrumental in reviving French music during the nineteenth century. In Franck’s music, a “harmonic lusciousness was a real advance on the rum-tum-tum of Auber’s tonic and dominant,” and Gounod’s interests took on an air of “high seriousness” after he was exposed to the philosophy of Goethe and had learned of Bach and Beethoven through Fanny Mendelssohn.  

Although Cooper considered 1870-1895 to be the starting point for a new French movement, he felt the presumably stagnant years of the Second Empire and the fallout from the Franco-Prussian War had made room for new ideas, particularly those espoused by Saint-Saëns and his collaborators through the creation of the Société nationale de musique. Cooper’s analysis, essentially, was that an increase in chromaticism, a desire for composition to reflect something sacred or supernatural (perhaps influenced by German taste), and an insistence on performing music written by disenfranchised, living French composers (Ars Gallica) was only the beginning. Cooper’s writes:

It would be quite wrong to suppose that under the motto Ars Gallica Saint-Saëns and his friends understood anything like the conscious return to an older French musical tradition as was advocated later by Debussy. Ars Gallica meant music by French composers—which was all that it could mean in 1871, when it was impossible to speak of a French style without meaning either Auber or something which only musical archaeology could disinter. What was to happen during the next 25-30 years was the gradual instinctive return to an individual French style,

which was only afterwards discovered to correspond in many ways with the instinctive French approach to music in earlier centuries.\textsuperscript{107}

This is an appealing narrative and undoubtedly holds some truth, but as shown, more recent studies have offered convincing evidence that the shift in French cultural consciousness was already well underway. What is interesting, however, are the conclusions this view allowed Cooper to draw, particularly on subjects which still frustrate scholars of this period. The combination of international travel and nationalist rhetoric strengthening a particularly French style; rediscovery and/or reconsideration of old works from a canon of religious and often foreign sources reinforcing notions of national quality and progress; and an openness to cultural influence (either from the past or from contemporary sparring between nations) modernizing French music. Ultimately, Cooper thought Gounod, Franck, and Saint-Saëns saw the fruits of their labors. By suggesting that Debussy, Fauré, and the Schola Cantorum witnessed the “French musical renaissance, in the sense of \textit{rebirth}… [since French music] had not flourished since the sixteenth century,” Cooper highlights the appearance of this change but not the cause of it.\textsuperscript{108} Even now, the 1889 Exposition Universelle lingers in the minds of many scholars as a kind of visual (and aural) cue for change, and the sense that a French musical quality might be “instinctive,” despite somehow lying dormant for a period of 300 years, is tantalizing. However, I believe looking at Saint-Saëns’ music can help us to dispel this notion, particularly his 1890 opera, \textit{Ascanio}.

\textbf{The Death of Tradition?}

\textsuperscript{107} Cooper, “Nineteenth Century Musical Renaissance in France,” 15.
\textsuperscript{108} Cooper, “Nineteenth Century Musical Renaissance in France,” 23.
Saint-Saëns’ waning relevance and stigmatization on the grounds of conservatism, perhaps compounded by his break with the younger generation when he left the Société nationale, was made painfully clear in some of the comments that followed his death. Since Saint-Saëns had also received the Légion d’honneur’s grand-croix, he was given a state-sponsored funeral in Paris, in 1921. Saint-Saëns’ reputation had been declining but was ruined in the press after he died. Publishing numerous remembrances of the composer, many involved a kind of false praise. At the funeral, Alfred Bruneau said: “Tradition captivated him more than innovation.” I would now like to demonstrate the opposite.

CHAPTER 3:
PAST, PASTICHE, AND PROGRESS: SOLVING THE NEOCLASSICAL DILEMMA THROUGH SAINT-SAËNS’ MUSICAL BORROWING IN *HENRY VIII* AND *ASCANIO*

Introduction

As shown in Chapter 1, scholars have long hinted at neoclassical impulses in Saint-Saëns’ music. However, when performing musical analysis with the goal of highlighting neoclassical characteristics, researchers fail to offer strong evidence. Existing analyses of Saint-Saëns’ Suite for Orchestra, op. 49 (1863) and his Septet in E-flat Major (1880) by Finn Egeland Hansen, Daniel Martin Fallon, Allan Scott Morris, and Elizabeth Harkins have thus been underwhelming. Since the term neoclassicism remains generally ill-defined, particularly in the case of any nineteenth-century precursors, weak conclusions arising from considering the musical contents of potentially neoclassical works should not be surprising. Additionally, Saint-Saëns’ Gavotte, op. 23 (1871), is rarely discussed from an analytical point of view but, particularly seen in reference to Sabina Ratner Teller’s remarks, offers further support for potential neoclassicism. To illustrate, I will present my own brief analysis for the first movement of the Suite, to suggest that a combination of old and new musical components may help to mark neoclassical inclinations in Saint-Saëns’ works. However, I will then argue that these three pieces (and potentially many others) can be better understood as neoclassical
through other means—specifically, through their connection with the Early Musical Renaissance in France.

The revivalism described in the last chapter is key to the success of my argument. Saint-Saëns was affected by the rebirth of early music in France, and he himself contributed to its progress. The dual nature of this revival involved both nationalism and modernization, two elements which are found in neoclassical works of the twentieth century. Although Saint-Saëns was often characterized as overly traditional, his music suggests otherwise. Neoclassicism may simply be the best term we have for describing the kind of difference that began to appear (arguably before the twentieth century) as interaction with the past generated new musical ideas. While this difference may be audible in Saint-Saëns’ music, it is more easily grasped by understanding the environment in which the music was created.

The three pieces mentioned above are all connected to the genre of the Baroque instrumental suite. As such, they can be understood to be products of the revival and, therefore, potentially neoclassical works. However, the strongest evidence for neoclassicism through a connection to revival can be found in two of Saint-Saëns’ mature operas: *Henry VIII* (1883) and *Ascanio* (1890). Saint-Saëns borrowed sixteenth-century English and French music for each work, intending to enhance the meaning of the music through various uses of the authentic material, and these operas therefore help to establish nationalism and modernism as important aspects of his compositional process. Further, critical responses to these works offer deeper insights into his reception, lending support to the conclusion that Saint-Saëns was doing something new and different: carrying on an early music tradition but with modern sensibilities. While the Suite, the Gavotte, and the
Septet jointly suggest engagement with revival, *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio* reveal nationalist and modernizing concerns associated with neoclassicism.

**Arguing for Modernism**

Many of Saint-Saëns’ compositions reflect an interest in traditional forms. Among his earlier works, the Suite for Orchestra (1863) has been considered by scholars as a reasonable place to look for elements of neoclassical potential. The movements of the Suite have titles that seem ripe for comparison to the past while also hinting that they may deviate slightly from older models: Prélude, Sarabande, Gavotte, Romance, and Final. Brian Rees even suggests that the Romance movement is a cleverly disguised minuet.\(^{111}\) Yet, the question of whether mid-to-late nineteenth-century music shows signs of modernism is not new, and musical analysis comparing Saint-Saëns’ music with Classical (or Baroque) works does just that—it compares his music to earlier periods instead of listening for innovation.

If nothing else, the Suite hints at neoclassicism. In *Harbingers of Neoclassicism*, Finn Egeland Hansen considers the Suite to be “retro-classicistic,” noting that it could have been written by a Viennese master.\(^{112}\) However, as a result, his analysis of the work is sparse, pointing to general details like imitation, pedals, dance rhythms, homophonic textures, counterpoint, and symmetrical phrasing. Daniel Martin Fallon’s offhand appraisal of the Suite as being “among the composer’s neo-classic works,” similarly points only to the use of Baroque dance forms as sufficient evidence.\(^{113}\) Although, in his

\(^{111}\) Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, 117.
\(^{112}\) Hansen, *Harbingers*, 67.
dissertation, Fallon merely separates the Suite from Saint-Saëns’ symphonic works, he concludes with an interesting picture of the composer’s style:

[Saint-Saëns’] early symphonies include the extensive use of sequence and “filler” accompaniments, periodic melodies and strong dominant-tonic relationships. In his more mature works… [he uses] appoggiaturas, repeated rhythmic patterns, modulation by thirds, semitone relationships, dominant pedals and a propensity for canon and fugue.¹¹⁴

Fallon presents this list of characteristics as evidence of conservatism and a lack of personal style. However, his casual assertion that the Suite (and other works) might be neoclassical would seem to offset such conclusions. Perhaps Saint-Saëns was using these old tools in new ways. Still, the quest for definitive, analytical proof of modernism in Saint-Saëns’ music remains incomplete. Allan Scott Morris’ dissertation, concerning “wellsprings of neoclassicism,” offers the following attempt to defend the Suite against being classified as a traditional or conventional work:

Each movement is concise except for the Romance, which is long, chromatic, and expressive. Some of the movements try to capture the spirit of the eighteenth-century dances after which they are named; the Sarabande, for example, has accents on the second beat of the bar in an archaic 3/2 metre. The suite combines movements in older styles and characters with the newer style expressed in the Romance, so [the suite] is an attempt to reproduce an old form with modern elements.¹¹⁵

Concision, naming conventions, archaicism, and innovation are all reasonable descriptors for the Suite, but this analysis also does not bring us much closer to understanding if, and more importantly why, neoclassicism might be a good label. However, the idea that Saint-Saëns might be combining older and newer styles is valuable. Recalling Jane Fulcher’s assertion that classicism and neoclassicism might form an unbroken thread,

excepting World War I, seeing old and new together may be an acceptable rationale for describing a piece as neoclassical. (Or pre-neoclassical, as Hansen and Morris have been willing to say.)

**An Irregular Analysis**

Several features suggest the combination of old and new in the first movement of Saint-Saëns’ Suite for Orchestra, the Prélude. Periodic, four-bar phrases make up much of the movement. However, phrasing is subtly varied at times. From the beginning of the movement to rehearsal A, there are only 14 measures, despite the sense that equally balanced, four-bar question-and-answer sections have occurred (suggesting 16 measures). This pattern occurs again between rehearsals A and B, where a balanced set of eight measures is stretched to nine in order to facilitate a transition to new material. This extra measure helps to add back some of the missing time from the first section but is noticeably incomplete without an additional measure to bring the total count to 24 bars. From rehearsals B to D, four-bar phrases occur normally, again with a slight exception. Although these measures are grouped evenly, the final two bars deviate from the eighth-note pulse which has been consistent throughout the piece and a chorale-like texture in half-notes slows to a cadence, altering the sense of time. A similar rhythmic illusion occurs in the final section, from rehearsal D to the end of the piece, where nine measures instead of eight cause the final resolution to sound incomplete.

Clarity is a prominent feature too, but in a slightly unusual way. Simple melodic ideas consist of a single measure or even just two beats. These fragments effectively create an expanding melody, with each gesture building on the last. Although driven by a constant eighth-note pulse, ornamental sixteenth notes are mixed in as well. Continuity is
further reinforced by imitation, transposition, and inversion of these basic building blocks (not unlike twentieth-century approaches to serial composition). These can most clearly be heard in the second violin and viola parts starting at rehearsal B. Although drones and scalar passages help to ground the key and communicate harmonic changes, these are somewhat different than a continuo part. For the majority of the piece, even a triadic structure to undergird the melody is lacking. Instead, a kind of echo, sometimes distorted and always delayed by two beats, acts as a secondary melody, yet not quite a countermelody (simultaneously reminiscent of fugues from Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier* and phase-shifting experiments by composers like Steve Reich). Adding to the sense of a neoclassical work, as the music begins to wander toward a more romantic, even pastoral moment in measures 32-41, restraint can be seen in the two-bar chorale texture which follows (measures 42-43), and this refocusing gesture acts as a kind of natural *ritard* (almost a slow-motion effect).

The movement begins and ends in the key of D-major. Half of the cellos and all of the basses maintain a pedal on D throughout measures 1-23. Then, the woodwinds and high strings (flutes, clarinets, oboes, bassoons, horns, and the first violins) begin their own brief drone, on A and E. Although the key change to A-major spans measures 24-43, the drone in the upper voices lasts for only four measures while the melody is played in A-major, in the bass (also an unusual feature). Then, the D-major melody from the beginning of the movement returns to the upper voices. Beginning at measure 32, the lower strings shift to pedals on F-sharp, then descend from D-sharp to D-natural, and from C down to A, maintaining a structurally dominant section through measure 43. The resolution of the two-bar chorale section is an elided cadence, and the melody resumes in
a kind of coda which gives this movement a quasi-ternary form. However, despite
landing on the tonic where the piece should supposedly end, the final D-major chord
sounds dominant. A number of F-sharps linger in the first and second violins before
resolving to D, as though a few additional measures (perhaps compounded by the slightly
irregular phrasing already described) might bring us to G-major.

While I could continue to offer insights for each movement, the Suite is mostly a
pleasant piece of music with some strange moments. Yet, if subversion of expectations is
the standard for neoclassicism, Saint-Saëns offers humor of an unassuming variety. My
analytical conclusion is thus quite close to Fallon’s assessment of Saint-Saëns’
symphonies: there is potential for neoclassicism in the Suite, but the evidence could just
as easily point to classicism.

Additional Hints

So, why bring up the Suite for Orchestra? What interests me about the Suite is
that it was composed around the same time that Saint-Saëns published an assortment of
J.S. Bach arrangements in a sheet music collection called *Classiques et Romantiques*, in
1862. Saint-Saëns adapts six of Bach’s cantatas and sonatas, and renames the
excerpts: *Ouverture*, *Adagio*, *Andantino*, *Gavotte*, *Andante*, and *Final*. Each of these
arrangements is dedicated to one of the students Saint-Saëns was teaching at École
Niedermeyer: Gabriel Fauré, Eugène Gigout, Adolphe Dietrich, Adam Laussel, Emile

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116 Camille Saint-Saëns, “Transcriptions pour piano [après J.S. Bach],” *Collection: Classiques et
and, except for a typo, correspond to: Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir, BWV 29; Ach Gott, wie
manches Herzleid, BWV 3; Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben, BWV 8; Partita No. 1, Tempo di borea,
BWV 1002; Partita No. 2, Andante, BWV 1003; and Geist und Seele wird verwirrt, BWV 35.)
Lehman, and Albert Périlhou.\textsuperscript{117} These were the students who would have been attending Saint-Saëns’ unofficial composition classes. This perhaps signifies that there was more personal investment in these transcriptions than a few masterworks quickly rewritten to turn a profit. Yet, the genre appears to have been popular. The catalogue that these works were sold in advertises \textit{morceaux} (morsels, or short musical works) that include piano transcriptions and arrangements by prominent French musicians, of works by Haydn, Beethoven, Schumann, and others. Saint-Saëns seems to have formed a suite out of Bach’s choral and violin works, despite specific attributions to the master’s works nestled between the titles and the music itself.

Also interesting are moments where the music in Saint-Saëns’ Suite for Orchestra seems like it might draw from this curated list of Bach’s works. For instance, in the Sarabande movement of Saint-Saëns’ Suite, the secondary, contrasting section is structurally similar to Bach’s \textit{Wenn Sorgen auf mich dringen}, from BWV 3. A generative figure is the shared feature, with a succession of leaping intervals reinforcing a sequential passage. This results in a cyclical, melodic phrase. In the Suite, the violins and then the flute perform this operation in a short-lived call and response manner, beginning three measures before rehearsal B and trailing off by rehearsal C. In Bach’s duet, multiple entries in the harpsichord, oboe, and strings, which are repeated shortly in the vocal parts, follow a similar pattern, alternating leaping fourths and sets of thirds which outline a fifth. The cyclical nature of this call and response effect, along with the emphasis on sequence seems to tie these two works together. Though it is difficult to say whether

Saint-Saëns directly referred to Bach’s music when writing the Suite, an interest in the Baroque suite can clearly be seen through these coinciding projects.

The connection to the Baroque suite and Bach becomes clearer when considering Saint-Saëns’ Gavotte, op. 23 (1871). To my knowledge, this piece has not been analyzed for neoclassical characteristics. However, Sabina Ratner Teller offers a few insights, in her dissertation “The Piano Works of Camille Saint-Saëns,” into what Saint-Saëns may have had in mind when he wrote it. She links the French gavotte to Thoinot Arbeau’s *Orchésographie*, a 1588 music and dance manual; to Lully’s operas and ballets; to d’Anglebert and Couperin’s *ordres* (dance suites); and to suites written by Pachelbel, J.K.F Fischer, and Bach. Briefly analyzing the piece, mostly from a performance perspective, Teller writes:

Saint-Saëns’ Gavotte… follows the traditional practice of beginning and ending its phrases in the middle of the measure. In ternary form, each section is also in tripartite design. …Saint-Saëns favors the parallel major key, C major, for the middle section. Although the composition presents no technical difficulty, the latter half of the middle section is written on three staves as the music extends over a range of six octaves. Block chords over tonic and dominant bass pedals lend a static quality to the musette-like middle section. It contrasts with the quicker harmonic rhythm of the opening and closing sections whose bass line consists solely of octaves.

By pointing to Saint-Saëns’ use of the parallel major, the six-octave range, static block chords and bass pedals, and alluding to the extreme contrast of the middle section, Teller essentially outlines the unusual aspects of the piece, while simultaneously matching an established explanation of nineteenth-century engagement with the gavotte style.

Meredith Ellis Little’s entry on the gavotte in *Grove Music Online*, explains that “gavottes were often cast in ternary form, with a pastoral musette serving as material in a

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contrasting middle section.” By identifying this work as a typical nineteenth-century gavotte that carried forward French traditions stretching back to the sixteenth century (perhaps including Bach in that national history), Teller unknowingly provides an analysis consistent with the kind of neoclassicism I am suggesting. Saint-Saëns’ work straddles past and present, offering old and new in combination.

A final example of the potential for neoclassicism in Saint-Saëns’ revival-adjacent and suite-inspired works, is his Septet, op. 65 (1880). In the manuscript (MS 536), on the title page, “Suite” has been crossed out and replaced with “Septet,” a natural trumpet has been drawn (presumably by Saint-Saëns, who was fond of doodling), and an anecdotal note written by the dedicatee (who delivered the manuscript to the Conservatoire for preservation) indicates Saint-Saëns had threatened to do something especially unusual when he was initially approached for the work: a piece for guitar and thirteen trombones. Although the Septet features movement titles appropriate for a suite, a more modern name was chosen to reflect its instrumentation. A natural trumpet drawn beside the threat of entirely unconventional orchestration starkly underlines my point: the combination of old and new was something Saint-Saëns was actively pursuing.

Analysis of this piece further supports the conclusion that Saint-Saëns was engaging with tradition in unusual ways. Hansen once again describes this work as “retro-classical,” citing liner notes where Teller describes the piece as neoclassical, but this time offers an example of “one truly neo-neoclassical rhythmic trick” that is worthy

of comparison with Stravinsky. \(^{122}\) This trick is similar to the rhythmic illusion I described in the Suite for Orchestra, where regular phrases are surreptitiously interrupted by addition or subtraction of measures. In the Septet, the trick in the rhythm is seen on a more refined level, where “the quadruple meter is disturbed by a bar in 5/4 metre” in the Gavotte section of the Septet. \(^{123}\) Hansen reinforces this curious detail with an assessment of a similar pattern being foreshadowed in the earlier Menuet movement by the careful placement of articulation; the staccato downbeat presented in a single voice is deemphasized on beat four by a stronger accent on a block chord presented by the entire ensemble, in measures 42-45. Harkins notes that Saint-Saëns singled out the Menuet and Gavotte movements for piano transcription, performing two-piano versions and attempting to get them published. \(^{124}\) Although this would be shaky evidence for arguing that Saint-Saëns valued these movements more highly, especially on account of their unusual moments, it is clear that he enjoyed arranging and performing these movements separately, anticipating publication.

As I have demonstrated throughout, Saint-Saëns undoubtedly valued tradition. Yet, his relationship with innovation has been somewhat obscured by analysis and the passage of time. Scholars struggle to categorize Saint-Saëns’ music as classical, romantic, or modern because of perceived formal and historiographical boundaries. Adding biographical details reveals nuance. Although Saint-Saëns was raised on Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and other ‘traditional’ figures, many of these individuals were once considered innovative. If Saint-Saëns’ education followed the standard path of talented


musicians—taking lessons, performing, composing, attending and teaching school—he also bent the rules by teaching himself in the library, sneaking into Société des Concerts performances, snubbing his church audiences, and giving unauthorized composition lessons involving modern composers to students who were supposed to be learning religion and sixteenth-century polyphony.\textsuperscript{125} When he founded the Société nationale de musique, there were hardly any other societies where young French composers (not to mention women) could be recognized. (The Conservatoire only admitted Nadia Boulanger to the Prix de Rome competition under duress in 1908, and only awarded the prize to her younger sister, Lili, in 1913.\textsuperscript{126}) By the time Saint-Saëns was forced out of the Société, for his supposedly conservative views, he was 51 years old. Perhaps a new generation sought to supplant him, as he was increasingly aligned with the Institut and the Opéra. However, within the context of opera and institutional visibility, Saint-Saëns’ continuing innovation can be seen through musical borrowing in \textit{Henry VIII} and \textit{Ascanio}.

\textbf{Musical Borrowing}

Musical borrowing, in its simplest form, is taking music from one place and using it in another. J. Peter Burkholder’s recent article, “Musical Borrowing or Curious Coincidence?: Testing the Evidence,” describes multiple ways that this can be accomplished: direct quotation, variations, paraphrase, modeling, and allusion are the mechanisms he describes which produce borrowed music.\textsuperscript{127} These methods are

\textsuperscript{125} In addition to studying music scores in the Conservatoire library, Saint-Saëns’ memoire recounts his desire to hear that music performed. Being young, Saint-Saëns was not allowed into Société des Concerts performances, but his frequent eavesdropping eventually earned him access through a patron. (See Camille Saint-Saëns, \textit{Musical Memories}, Chapter II: The Old Conservatoire.)


presented in order from most to least obvious. According to Burkholder, “similarity, access, and motive” are essential when determining whether musical borrowing has occurred, and these can be determined through musical analysis, historical documentation, and a judgment concerning the rationale behind a composer’s actions.128 My suspicion that Saint-Saëns borrowed from Bach when writing the Suite for Orchestra is largely speculative (potentially utilizing modeling or allusion, with clear access, but lacking much evidence of motive). However, borrowing definitively occurred in Saint-Saëns’ two operas.

Camille Saint-Saëns borrowed sixteenth-century music for two of his historical operas: Henry VIII (1883) and Ascanio (1890). The operas were set in sixteenth-century England and France, but audiences at the time were largely unaware of the composer’s use of authentic material. Scholars have located much of the borrowed music for Henry VIII, but the specific borrowings for the ballet portion of Ascanio have previously been misattributed or overlooked. Further, it appears that Saint-Saëns treated England and France differently in his compositional approach, excising perceived clutter from English sources while preserving French sources through verbatim quotation and elevating them through elaboration of the quoted themes.

Access and Motive

On June 26, 1882, Le Figaro announced that Saint-Saëns had been searching English music libraries for inspiration and suggested that he had found some Anglican liturgical pieces to use for his upcoming opera, Henry VIII.129 The plot of the opera

128 Burkholder, “Musical Borrowing,” 224, 266.
revolves around the history of King Henry’s infatuation with Anne Boleyn and his need
to divorce Catherine of Aragon, but, the requisite love triangle of opera unites Anne
Boleyn and her lover, Don Gomez de Feria (a Spanish duke), in their plan to usurp the
throne through Anne’s marriage to Henry. Henry’s humanity is revealed, Anne’s
deception is nearly discovered, and Catherine burns the evidence. The author of the 1882
*Le Figaro* article ventured that King Henry’s new status in 1534 as the self-appointed
leader of the Church of England would have generated wonderful music. However, what
Saint-Saëns copied during his visit to Buckingham Palace were, according to Hugh
Macdonald, arrangements from seventeenth-century virginal books of works by Thomas
Tallis, William Byrd, and Elway—of the three composers, Saint-Saëns drew the material
for *Henry VIII* from Byrd.\(^\text{130}\) An arrangement of Byrd’s music may not have been the best
choice for inspiration (since Byrd was a Catholic and had been born around the year that
King Henry died). Additionally, Saint-Saëns was working with previously borrowed
materials, since these sixteenth-century works had been rewritten by seventeenth-century
compilers. Their notation of these popular songs—songs which may have been
reinscribed from memory or altered over over time—may not have had a scholarly or
preserving intent.). However, for Parisian audiences, as represented by critics following
the premiere on March 5\(^\text{th}\), 1883, “The New Medley” and “Carman’s Whistle” were
perfectly period. Years later, Saint-Saëns described scouring the royal library for source
material while visiting Buckingham Palace:

> [Queen Victoria] asked me about Henri VIII, which was being given for the
> second time at Covent Garden, and I explained to her that in my desire to give the
> piece the local color of its times I had been ferreting about in the royal library at
> Buckingham Palace, to which my friend, the librarian, had given me access. And I

also told how I had found in a great collection of manuscripts of the Sixteenth Century an exquisitely fine theme arranged for the harpsichord, which served as the framework for the opera…\footnote{Saint-Saëns, \textit{Musical Memories}, Chapter XXII: Their Majesties.} Saint-Saëns’ motive, if this narrative can be trusted, was a “desire to give the piece the local color of its times” (\textit{couleur locale/historique}). Similarly, the “exquisitely fine theme” that supports the entire work, conveys a sense of exoticism. In addition to the sixteenth-century pieces, eighteenth-century Scottish and English pieces found in the ballet were even farther removed. Saint-Saëns copied these songs from “an old collection of Irish and Scottish music” that one of his fellow collaborator’s wives owned, and his sketches are catalogued along with the manuscript for \textit{Henry VIII}.\footnote{Macdonald, \textit{Saint-Saëns and the Stage}, 130.} Clearly, Saint-Saëns had access to archival materials and a songbook, and there is evidence that he intentionally took notes.

Saint-Saëns boldly presented the borrowed music in the two opening scenes of Acts I and IV, essentially bookending the historical drama. Macdonald indicates that the excerpts from Will Forster’s compilation (along with unused sketches from Benjamin Cosyn’s collection), had been “reduced to the basic outline” by the composer.\footnote{Macdonald, \textit{Saint-Saëns and the Stage}, 130. (Macdonald lists F-Pn MS 823(7) as the source for his appraisal.)} Saint-Saëns’ own recollections of how he found and worked with his English sources support a narrative of simplification. In a letter to his publisher, in 1888, Saint-Saëns described his engagement with the music he discovered: “[the theme] almost disappeared beneath fioritura and conventional ornamentation from which I extracted it like a small statue that one might find covered with sprouting fungus.”\footnote{Huebner, \textit{French Opera at the Fin de Siècle}, 218.}
Saëns’ recollections involve a few key differences. Saint-Saëns said: “wishing to give my work the appearance of its period…in a thick manuscript collection dating from the sixteenth century, I found, arranged for harpsichord and buried in a thicket of useless arabesques, the lovely theme that is to some extent the opera’s skeleton.”\textsuperscript{135} “The New Medley” is initially presented in the prelude of Act I, but can be heard throughout the opera, suggesting this is the piece to which Saint-Saëns was referring. The composer’s adjustment of “Carman’s Whistle” for the beginning of Act IV also involved removing some ornamentation. Was Saint-Saëns restoring artworks “covered with sprouting fungus,” or was he only interested in the “appearance” of history, stripped of the decorative ornamentation that belonged to another time or place?

Erin Brooks has surveyed the critical reception of Henry VIII (and compared it with that of Ascanio), noting that Saint-Saëns’ style “reminded many critics not of Renaissance styles but of late Baroque music.”\textsuperscript{136} The list of impressions included: Bach, Handel, Lambert, Lully, Purcell, and Rameau, as well as madrigals, minuets, and a chant melody.\textsuperscript{137} With Le Figaro’s hint of liturgical source material and an expectation for the kinds of pastiche that normally accompanied historical operas, nineteenth-century music critics listened to how Saint-Saëns portrayed the past. Jacques Hermann’s review in L’Art Moderne depicted Saint-Saëns as a musical historian of sixteenth-century England, attributing temporal and geographical accuracy to the music of Henry VIII, but also describing the opening lines as “pure Handel.”\textsuperscript{138} Raoul de Saint-Arroman may also have conflated sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, explaining in La Presse how “the sets

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{135} Lacombe, The Keys to French Opera, 263.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Brooks, “Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History,” 29.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Brooks, “Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History,” 28.
\item \textsuperscript{138} Brooks, “Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History,” 28.
\end{itemize}
were] in perfect taste and the costumes [were] rigorously exact” while still hearing a Handelian style unifying the entire work.\textsuperscript{139} Of course, set design, costuming, and choreography played important roles in establishing the appearance of another place and time. Julien Tiersot engaged with Saint-Saëns’ use of couleur locale by attributing authenticity to borrowed music while Auguste Vitu celebrated the composer’s ability to easily write convincing pastiche.\textsuperscript{140} Despite any disagreement on Saint-Saëns’ methods or his influences, critics clearly heard England, even if the music suggested a later century, and the opera was well-received.

An important detail for understanding the reception of Henry VIII shaded critics’ interest in and commentary on the opera: Richard Wagner had died a month before the premiere. As a result, Charles Gounod and Edmund Hippeau both had a vested interest in praising the work. Steven Huebner describes the interesting tension which developed between their extensive writings on the subject. Essentially, Hippeau saw the possibility for a new, French Wagner to emerge while Gounod felt “Henry VIII represented the direction he wished French grand opera to take.”\textsuperscript{141} Saint-Saëns, whose biographers remembered him as the French Beethoven (or sometimes the French Mozart), may not have fit into either mold.\textsuperscript{142} Huebner tracks “how much [Saint-Saëns’] position shifted” from defending Wagnerian innovations in the 1870s, through middling acceptance for Wagner’s contributions to music following his death in 1883, and onto a more

\textsuperscript{139} Raoul de Saint-Arroman, “La Semaine Musicale,” \textit{La Presse}, March 13, 1883, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5444056/f2.item.zoom
\textsuperscript{140} Brooks, “Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History,” 28. (For Tiersot, “borrowing from ‘authentic and truly serious sources’, not resorting to pastiche, and not limiting his borrowings to the ballet” were admirable choices. For Vitu, “succeeding without trying too hard for researched archaic sounds” was praiseworthy.)
\textsuperscript{141} Huebner, \textit{French Opera at the Fin de Siècle}, 226.
\textsuperscript{142} Rees, \textit{Camille Saint-Saëns}, 265.
conservative attempt around the turn of the century to undo Wagner’s influence in some French spheres, such as defending the importance of spoken dialogue in comic opera.\footnote{143} Huebner links Saint-Saëns’ concern that Wagnerism “led to disdain for older, supposedly less developed, kinds of music” with the composer’s frustration, later in life, that younger French composers, like Debussy, “had thrown out [the] rules altogether.”\footnote{144} Saint-Saëns had hoped for a serious renewal of French music when he founded the Société nationale de musique in 1871 and seeing his younger contemporaries’ disregard for the classical training that he and Wagner shared, despite their differences, was probably a sore point.\footnote{145} So, in addition to \textit{Henry VIII} being Saint-Saëns’ first major production following his election to the Institut de France in 1881 (having already attempted to stage four other operas), critics likely hoped for a composer whose stature would bring France into the modern era.\footnote{146}

I believe Saint-Saëns was engaged in precisely this kind of innovative work. The ballet in \textit{Ascanio} directly quotes and develops upon works by Claudin Gervaise and Estienne du Tertre, found in Pierre Attaingnant’s printed collections of dance music.\footnote{147} \textit{Ascanio} was originally planned to coincide with the Parisian world’s fair in 1889.\footnote{148} So, this work might have been expected to show further signs of French innovation.

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{143} Huebner, \textit{French Opera at the Fin de Siècle}, 197-198.
\item \footnote{144} Huebner, \textit{French Opera at the Fin de Siècle}, 204.
\item \footnote{145} Strasser, “Ars Gallica,” 6.
\item \footnote{146} Macdonald, \textit{Saint-Saëns and the Stage}, 124-127.
\item \footnote{147} Pierre Attaingnant, ed., “Second livre contenant trois Gaillardes, trois pavanes, vingt trois branles, tant gays, simples, que doubles, douze basses dances, & neuf tordions, en somme Cinquante, le tout ordonne selon les huit tons.” (Paris, 1547); “Troisieme livre de danceries a quatre et cinq parties...” (Paris, 1556); \textit{Sixième livre de danceries, mis en musique a quatre parties...}” (Paris, 1555); “Septieme livre de danceries, mis en musique a quatre parties...” (Paris, 1557).
\item \footnote{148} Macdonald, \textit{Saint-Saëns and the Stage}, 190.
\end{itemize}
The plot itself is ambitious. Based on Paul Meurice’s ghostwriting for Alexandre Dumas’ 1844 novel, *Ascanio*, the plot is set in François I’s court, in 1540, around the time that Benvenuto Cellini, a historical sculptor and writer (and maybe a killer), would have been working there.¹⁴⁹ Saint-Saëns’ *Ascanio*, not to be confused with Berlioz’s *Benvenuto Cellini*, involves Benvenuto Cellini and Ascanio, the Italian sculptor and his apprentice, who have been commissioned to construct a massive sculpture of the Roman god Jupiter (even though the real Cellini sculpted Perseus).¹⁵⁰ The sculpture requires a massive workspace, which can only be accomplished within the home of a prominent French noble: d’Estourville. The king’s mistress, Duchesse d’Éstampes, chases after Ascanio, Ascanio and d’Estourville’s daughter Colombe fall for one another, Colombe attracts the attention of Benvenuto who prevents her marriage to the Comte d’Orbec which was orchestrated by d’Éstampes to free up Ascanio, and Colombe’s half-sister Scozzone is taken with Benvenuto. D’Estourville tries to keep his daughter from the sculptor duo, but Benvenuto circumvents his plans by intending to sneak her out in an ornate casket. When d’Éstampes learns of this plan, she intends the casket to be a tomb, still wanting Ascanio for herself. Colombe’s half-sister Scozzone hides inside instead and is killed, and Cellini is sent back to Italy when the king is saddened by her death.

If the plot is twisted, the opera’s debut was also complicated. Due to multiple postponements, the opera was not staged in 1889, but was delayed until the next season.¹⁵¹ The opera finally opened on March 21, 1890, but the composer had been absent from rehearsals, since his mother had died, and Saint-Saëns did not show for the

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premiere.\textsuperscript{152} Some international newspapers reported that Saint-Saëns had died\textsuperscript{153} and, after the initial contract expired and the sets accidentally burned down, \textit{Ascanio} was shelved for nearly the rest of the composer’s life.\textsuperscript{154} Following a few performances shortly before he died, in 1921, \textit{Ascanio} has only been revived through a concert recording in 2017, and not in France.\textsuperscript{155} If Saint-Saëns’ work was modernizing French grand opera, critics at the 1890 premiere missed it.

Saint-Saëns offered fewer clues to his compositional process for \textit{Ascanio}, but it seems to have been much like \textit{Henry VIII}. In the preface to a 1905 annual review of music and theater, Saint-Saëns described his visit to the Bibliothèque nationale to find sources for \textit{Ascanio}:

\begin{quote}
When I was writing the score for Ascanio, I had the idea of introducing music of the time into the ballet. I searched the national library archives, and I found a whole world of music, an embarrassment of choices. The music, in manuscript form, is in separate parts and made for difficult reading; instruments are not indicated, so it didn’t matter how I arranged them.\textsuperscript{156}
\end{quote}

Once again, Saint-Saëns’ motive appears to be “introducing music of the time into the ballet.” Hugh Macdonald supposes that Saint-Saëns borrowed from a choral collection, since the next lines of the composer’s prefatory statement read:

\begin{quote}
[I discovered] a little printed collection, very rare and luminously printed, with ornamental decorations. It was a collection of choral pieces with amorous words… One would hardly utter such rude words in male company, and these are choruses for mixed voices in four parts, for men and women!\textsuperscript{157}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{152} Macdonald, \textit{Saint-Saëns and the Stage}, 192, 196.
\textsuperscript{153} Our Special Correspondent, \textit{The Musical Times (1890:566)}, London, April 1, 1890. ProQuest. (Citing the \textit{New York Herald} March 24, 1890.)
\textsuperscript{154} Macdonald, \textit{Saint-Saëns and the Stage}, 196, 217.
\textsuperscript{155} Macdonald, “Lost Legacy,” 32-35.
\textsuperscript{157} Macdonald, \textit{Saint-Saëns and the Stage}, 211.
However, it seems likely these two statements were about separate artifacts and that the “embarrassment of choices” Saint-Saëns found included multiple options printed by Attaingnant. (It is also possible that Saint-Saëns borrowed from a different printing, one including text and decorations, but I have yet to find a choral arrangement for the pieces by Gervaise and du Tertre, and one of these pieces has five parts.)

In the press, there were also a few clues about critics’ motives when Ascanio premiered. Erin Brooks’ analysis of the critical reception of Ascanio shows the press once again listening for local color and speculating on how it was achieved. Critics once again connected the opera’s main themes to madrigal and minuet styles but also heard Handel at the beginning of the ballet, despite the opera’s sixteenth-century, French setting.\footnote{Brooks, “Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History,” 31-32.} For Ascanio, however, they also added chanson, pavane, ballade, and valse to their descriptions of the music.\footnote{Brooks, “Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History,” 31-32.} Reviewers frequently attached the term archaïque to these song and dance forms, with the understanding that pastiche in these familiar styles was an attempt to evoke the Renaissance, and, as Brooks notes, “beloved French musics from the sixteenth century were rare.”\footnote{Brooks, “Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History,” 31-32.} Julien Tiersot once again emphasized Saint-Saëns’ use of authentic sources (naming the tourdion, “Jouissance vous donneray,” from the 1588 dance manual Orchésographie), while Charles Malherbe heard creative modernisms creeping into otherwise modal and historically-inspired passages.\footnote{Brooks, “Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History,” 31-32.} Responding to Tiersot, Malherbe reported Saint-Saëns’ confirmation of a sixteenth-century song outside of the ballet.\footnote{Charles Malherbe, \textit{Notice sur Ascanio}, (Paris: Fischbacher, 1890), 46.} (I have not been able to find this piece.) Malherbe also claimed to have...
pressed Saint-Saëns for information regarding which of the ballet numbers were original, coming away with the impression that “4, 6, 7, 8, 9, [and] 10” were not borrowed.\(^{163}\) Once again, there is evidence that Saint-Saëns had access to musical materials and wrote with them in mind. With Ascanio, critics were bored by what seemed like overused tropes and a lack of innovation, particularly in the ballet.\(^{164}\) Instead, Saint-Saëns had done something far more interesting: where many reviewers saw the potential for modern art languishing in the throes of technically skilled imitation, the composer had cleverly inserted the past.

**Similarity**

Having considered Saint-Saëns’ access and motive, two of Burkholder’s criteria for borrowing, similarity, then, remains to be established. Hugh Macdonald has done much of the work for *Henry VIII*. What Saint-Saëns copied during his visit to Buckingham Palace were harpsichord arrangements called “The New Medley” and “Carman’s Whistle;” attributed to William Byrd in Will Forster’s Virginal Book, these were likely popular songs from the sixteenth century.\(^{165}\) “The New Medley” appears at the beginning of the opera, in the prelude, and “Carman’s Whistle” can be heard at the beginning of Act IV. Although Saint-Saëns’ assertion that this music supported the entire work is accurate, these are the main locations within the opera where the borrowings are most easily heard. The Act II ballet divertissements also borrowed at least five folk songs. Macdonald lists these as: “The Miller of Dee” and “For lack of gold she left me,” forming the melodic material for the “Entrée des clans;” “Auld Rob Morris,” appearing


\(^{164}\) Brooks, “Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History,” 31-32.

\(^{165}\) Macdonald, *Saint-Saëns and the Stage*, 128-130.
in the “Idylle écossaise;” “Peggy, I must love thee” and “Duke of Richmond’s March,” bookending the “Pas des Highlanders;” and two additional, unknown, potentially Irish tunes in the “Sarabande.”166 Regarding these pieces, Saint-Saëns was reportedly at odds with his collaborators, and complained that “In Henry VIII’s time they danced passepedies, gigues, gavottes, and sarabandes. I don’t know what they want at the Opéra but I don’t think there is any point racking our brains about it; they will just get what ‘they’ get.”167 Saint-Saëns’ collaborators were also interested in connecting the opera to Shakespeare, perhaps not the type of historical drama the composer wanted to write.

While the Byrd pieces might be said to have already been borrowed, since the popular tunes were arranged by Will Forster for harpsichord, Macdonald notes that Saint-Saëns simplified the arrangements by stripping away ornamentation and supplying harmony.168 Thus, they are not strictly direct quotation, but many of the notes are shared and in the correct sequence. Paraphrase is perhaps a better category for the borrowed selections from Byrd. The folk songs from the ballet are, by contrast, presented in a largely direct manner (again, allowing for slight variations in the tune since they are folk songs, with potential for being modified through transmission or changing over time). Although Macdonald does not analyze the exact way in which they are borrowed, and although the “Pas Des Highlanders” and the “Sarabande” are not in the printed score, Saint-Saëns’ approach with these works seems to have been a single statement of the borrowed tune, largely unadorned. This initial statement is often played as a solo or a sectional unison (trumpet, violins and violas, oboe, etc.) and accompanied by a drone.

166 Macdonald, Saint-Saëns and the Stage, 148.
167 Macdonald, Saint-Saëns and the Stage, 130.
168 Macdonald, Saint-Saëns and the Stage, 129.
Following the clearly quoted material, Saint-Saëns then employs variations, development, and unrelated secondary material to flesh out each movement. This is similar to his treatment of Ascanio’s ballet themes, which I will now describe in more detail.

Setting aside the Tourdion from Orchésographie, which was familiar enough for contemporary audiences to recognize it, five themes in the ballet in Act III of Ascanio are directly quoted by Saint-Saëns in a similar manner to the Henry VIII ballet. The first of these, Claudin Gervaise’s “Galliarde” is heard in Saint-Saëns’ “Entrée du Maître des Jeux,” the opening divertissement. Although Saint-Saëns adds accents and percussion, modifies note values slightly and fills out the orchestration (by duplicating notes found in the original), the first phrase of the “Entrée” is nearly identical to Gervaise’s full “Galliarde.” Using Burkholder’s criterion of the number of correct notes in sequence, 44 notes match the Superius part of Attaingnant’s printing and, after three non-borrowed notes are added to round out the uneven 89-beat phrase to 92-beats, the remaining 10 notes from Gervaise are also presented verbatim. The remaining parts (Contratenor, Tenor, Bassus, ii. Bassus) are also highly similar, with only slight modifications for harmony, and orchestration. Saint-Saëns does not follow the repeats indicated in Gervaise’s score, but his insertion of three extra beats is placed in between the two sections intended to be repeated. After these first eight measures in the score for Ascanio, Saint-Saëns adds a brief tail with three measures of unrelated music to close. This first

169 Interspersing past and present, Saint-Saëns’ combination of old and new materials is similar in Henry VIII and Ascanio, in the sense that they both quote and develop older themes. However, the treatment in Henry VIII is closer to Walter Frisch’s consideration of Max Reger’s Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Bach (op. 81) than is Saint-Saëns’ engagement with themes for Ascanio. Where the musical content in the Henry VIII ballet does not match the period in question, perhaps incrementally distinguishing past from present through variation, the themes used in the ballet for Ascanio are, if not seamlessly integrated, carefully calculated to equally balance past and present. (See: Walter Frisch, “Reger’s Bach and Historicist Modernism,” 19th Century Music 25, no. 2-3 (2001): 296–312.)
divertissement continues with two additional sections, but they are not related to Gervaise’s work and seem much more modern. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 are provided for comparison below.

The second quotation taken from Gervaise’s *Tourdion*, to create Saint-Saëns’ “*Vénus, Junon, et Pallas*,” is less exact. This time, Saint-Saëns inserts repeats that are not found in Attainignant’s printing (and ignores some that are), again adding notes to square the measures and sprucing up the harmony. In this way, measures 1-8 in *Ascanio* directly quote Gervaise’s initial melody twice. Measures 9-12, along with the downbeat of measure 13, repeat the next portion of Gervaise’s music twice, and Saint-Saëns adds a few additional beats which are not related in measures 13 and 14. Measures 15-18 again contain authentic material, but measures 19 and 20 extend the authentic music in a novel way by sequence and prepare a return to Gervaise’s initial motive. The return in measures 21-24 is a repetition of half of measures 1-8 (the original length dictated by Gervaise’s score) and this is cleverly recombined with the material from measures 15-18, as a single repetition in measures 25 and 26. The final two measures of the piece are again developed from Gervaise’s style, but they are Saint-Saëns’ craftsmanship. To compare the first nine measures, See figures 3.3 and 3.4 below.

The third instance of borrowing presents Gervaise’s “*Bransle VII*” in the middle of Saint-Saëns’ “*Diane, Dryades et Naïades*.” Rather than immediately quoting the sixteenth-century music, Saint-Saëns first offers an extended introduction, perhaps to get dancers into position, and begins with Gervaise’s material in measure 15. Like the folk songs in the *Henry VIII* ballet, Gervaise’s theme is played through once authentically and then a second, similar variation is presented to incorporate the original elements into a
more modern conclusion, balancing the modern introduction. The second, modified iteration begins at measure 37 and continues to the end of this divertissement.

The fourth theme, Gervaise’s “Bransle Gay I” and Saint-Saëns’ “Final. Les Déesses, Bachantes, Dryades et Naïades,” clearly states authentic material—again, the melody is the main borrowed feature, with orchestration and ornamental touches added by Saint-Saëns in mostly unobtrusive ways or via development of Gervaise’s music, drawn from the other parts. This movement showcases Saint-Saëns’ abilities as an arranger. Taking liberties with the borrowed material, he creates a more decidedly nineteenth-century work of art. Multiple repetitions of the theme are each given different orchestration until they eventually transform into another, unrelated theme. Significantly, Saint-Saëns returns to the borrowed theme near the end of the piece, to generate even more new material.

The final borrowed theme is from Estienne du Tertre’s “Pavane Premier” and appears as the last divertissement, “Pavane—Apotéose.” Like the opening movement, the Superius line is foregrounded and played verbatim, ignoring repeats. The harmony follows the melody, but the orchestration is dense, as this pavane acts as a fanfare and finale. Like the folk songs, again, a second repetition of the borrowed theme is modified and eventually spun into a new idea. Curiously, the piece concludes very similarly to Handel’s “Hallelujah” chorus, from his Messiah. Thus, it is not difficult to see how Handel might have crossed critic’s minds. Figures 3.5 and 3.6 below again help to show how the sixteenth-century material was borrowed.

Innovation
While borrowing clearly occurred in these operas, Saint-Saëns may have intended additional references. Borrowing was not new for grand opera. Katharine Ellis has indicated that using borrowed music to reference the past was uncommon in the 1830s; however, Saint-Saëns would have been familiar with Meyerbeer’s use of ‘Ein Feste Burg’ in *Les Huguenots*. According to Hervé Lacombe, Gounod’s use of pastiche in the 1850s involved “coloristic” references to the past without direct quotation. Of course, real or imagined Spanish dances in Bizet’s *Carmen*, of 1875, clearly show the interplay of *couleur locale* and exoticism, something which Kerry Murphy and Ralph Locke have considered at length. Further complicating matters, French audience members who had attended concerts featuring *musique ancienne et moderne* would have recognized Massenet’s use of Baroque music in the ballet for *Manon* in 1884. (If Saint-Saëns was heir to Gounod’s style, as Huebner has suggested, Paris still preferred Massenet.) So, where do Saint-Saëns’ borrowings fit in? Are they references to the past or a more historically sensitive form of pastiche? Are they appropriation or an experiment in what the public wanted to hear? Do they participate in the kinds of political re-imaginings that Sarah Hibberd has suggested charged grand opera in its heyday? Or might they best be described as neoclassical?

Saint-Saëns borrowed note-for-note from authentically French, sixteenth-century sources. He developed those sources with classical training and modernist flair. Perhaps

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174 Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle*, 225. (Huebner asserts Saint-Saëns was a more direct heir to Gounod’s style.)
he would have been celebrated for his revival of unfamiliar French music if he had revealed his sources or if the circumstances surrounding the premiere of *Ascanio* had been different. Saint-Saëns also generated material from English manuscripts. Treating *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio* differently, especially in the way he remembered culling or cultivating his sources for each, suggests nationalism and exoticism simultaneously; English sources were unruly while French sources were latent with possibility. Saint-Saëns’ classical leanings prevented him from being crowned the French Wagner, and his compositional style kept critics from hearing his work as innovative. But, do we have to continue to hear his music as traditional, derivative, or dull?

**A Few Final Thoughts**

I think Saint-Saëns was pursuing a more honest interaction with French cultural objects than some of his contemporaries. He was persistent in pursuing French historical opera settings (wanting to do an entire series over the course of his life). I see his work focusing on the same kinds of French national goals as his founding principles for the Société nationale de musique: to make room for young French composers and to lionize ‘*Ars Gallica*.’ Critics at the time were not looking for this. Criticism today, I would argue, is far more interested in the politicization of the French past, by examining the ways people like Fétis and Debussy—at either ends of a gap, it seems, in our understanding of the musical renaissance in Paris—attempted to position themselves as champions of that past. (Fetis’ notorious Stradella fake and Debussy's interactions with medieval music, for instance.) What I find interesting is that Saint-Saëns does not specify his sources. He states his mode of research, obscures his mode of composition, and

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ignores the frenzy in the press over determining what references he might be making. So, was he doing cultural work? Or was he using the French past as a kind of exotic location from which to bring back souvenirs? In other words, does he fit in with the appropriation of, say, Charles Bordes or d'Indy, or is Saint-Saëns quietly attempting to tilt the scales toward a more authentic renaissance of French music? The decision to borrow for each opera strikes me as a kind of signature, especially since it references previous attempts at couleur locale/historique and, depending on the opera selected for comparison, draws contrast. Determining what references, if any, Saint-Saëns may have been making to other operatic works may also be profitable. I have only covered a small portion of each opera here.

To sum up, some of Saint-Saëns’ music may be neoclassical. Much of it is based on classical forms and some of it directly borrows from the past. Analysis can only be taken so far, and it might be useful to ask what it would mean if we just decided to consider Saint-Saëns’ work as neoclassical. That is, what new meaning might we uncover? As I have shown with only a few examples, there are moments in his works which might be better explained if we understood them as related to modernism.

Similarly, the historical context of revival offers a method for investigating neoclassical elements of nationalism and modernization. Saint-Saëns approach to grand opera, after the genre had largely died out, suggests renewal even as it reevaluates the past. The neoclassical dilemma can be solved by understanding how Saint-Saëns negotiated nationalism: through modernization.
Figure 3.1. Claudin Gervaise: Galliard (fol. 32v)\textsuperscript{177}

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{177} From Pierre Attaingnant’s \textit{Second livre contenant trois Gaillardes, trois pavanes, vingt trois branles, tant gays, simples, que doubles, douze basses dances, & neuf tourdions, en somme Cinquante, le tout ordonne selon les huit tons…} (1547) Public domain. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Musique, RES VM7-376 (1). \url{https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4500339w/f70.item}. 
Figure 3.2. Camille Saint-Saëns: *Ascanio*, Act III, Ballet, *Entrée du Maîtres des Jeux*\textsuperscript{178}

\textsuperscript{178} From “*Ascanio: opéra en 5 actes et 6 tableaux,*” France: Durand et Schœnewerk, 1891. Public Domain. IMSLP/Petrucci Music Library.
Figure 3.3. Claudin Gervaise: *Tourdion* (fol. 26v)

179 From Pierre Attaingnant’s *Second livre contenant trois Gaillardes, trois pavanes, vingt trois branles, tant gays, simples, que doubles, douze basses dances, & neuf tourdions, en somme Cinquante, le tout ordonne selon les huit tons*… (1547). Public domain. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Musique, RES VM7-376 (1). [https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4500339w/f58.item](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4500339w/f58.item).
Figure 3.4. Camille Saint-Saëns: Ascanio, Act III, Ballet, Venus, Junon et Pallas\textsuperscript{180}

Figure 3.5. Éstienne Du Tertre: *Tourdion* (fol. 1v)\textsuperscript{181}

Figure 3.6. Camille Saint-Saëns: *Ascanio*, Act III, Ballet, *Pavane Apotheose*[^182]

CONCLUSION

Since scholars differ on its meaning, musical neoclassicism remains a somewhat nebulous term. For some, neoclassicism does not adequately separate classicism from modernism. Instead, a kind of continuum exists where both classical and modern characteristics can be observed (and thus a piece may be classified as more classical or less modern but must fundamentally lean more strongly toward only one style). For this first group, works by a few composers (Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Hindemith), who are considered modern and therefore not classical, are designated as neoclassical, narrowly defining a particular brand of modernism that incorporates classical elements (often as parody). For others, neoclassicism identifies modernization to be an aurally perceptible occurrence or process, where the distinguishing feature is the central activity within the classical-modern continuum and where the focus within a piece of music is on the coexistence of both classical and modernist impulses. For this second group, a frustratingly large body of work could be considered neoclassical. Neoclassicism is therefore not always useful for identifying and defining stylistic parameters for music analysis, particularly when scholars seek to be authoritative. Perhaps sensing this inadequacy, those studying Saint-Saëns appear to uniformly hint at neoclassicism (tendencies, characteristics, harbingers, precursors) but refrain from siding too closely with either camp. To unreservedly proclaim Saint-Saëns to be a neoclassicist simultaneously risks criticism from those adhering to the narrow perspective and dilutes the value of such an observation for those holding an expansive view. As a result (but not
solely on account of Saint-Saëns), enough consensus in music scholarship exists to perpetuate the use of the term (for its specific, narrow usage and for its unencumbered, broad usage), but the term is not used with the same amount of certainty as in the other arts, where definitions are agreed upon.

Musical neoclassicism is understood through the lens of nationalism. In the case of Germany and France in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, neoclassicism has both positive and negative connotations. Within this nationalist framework, Saint-Saëns’ music can be considered either positively German or negatively French. That is, his work can be praised for qualities which further notions of German musical superiority (hearing German classics as essential influences, for instance) or it can be denigrated for the failure of those same characteristics to support French ideals (a national style or French purity). The implications for Saint-Saëns’ reception are thus two-fold, and some balance is required to objectively address his work. Since nationalist concerns are largely linked to the twentieth century, Saint-Saëns may be supposed to have been ahead of his time. However, if Saint-Saëns was “a transmitter, rather than a legatee,” his modernism appears largely subconscious. Thus, nationalism may be understood as an abstract force affecting the composer’s work but may not be an essential aspect of personal motivation for his writing. Saint-Saëns’ music does not have to be reactionary (prewar) or pragmatic (postwar) to be tied to nationalism, yet both forces were present in French politics prior to the twentieth century and came to a head in 1870-1871. Further, nationalism may continue to undermine scholarship on this subject, as Bach and other members of the Western canon are still understood in nationalist terms. Negotiating nationalism is therefore a way of describing the shifting popularity and
perceived value of Saint-Saëns work. Similarly, negotiating nationalism remains an important task for music historians.

Examining Saint-Saëns and his music in a historical context, the composer himself can be said to have negotiated nationalism. The shifting demands of French culture, including France’s international standing, freighted his musical output (among other interests). Even if his performance repertoire, compositions, and personal recollections developed without conscious engagement in the changes occurring around him, Saint-Saëns’ successes and failures were shaped by his environment. Recognized as a child prodigy and put on display, he gained access to the elite Parisian world. Failing to obtain the Prix de Rome, his path was diverted toward similar but perhaps more German-influenced music-making. Playing in churches and teaching in a religious school, his musical proclivities steered his responses toward church officials and rules regarding student outcomes. Founding and then exiting the Société nationale de musique, his negotiation is made exceedingly clear; “Ars Gallica” was designed to support living, French composers and could not admit older, foreign works. Election to the Institut de France came with a positive appraisal of Saint-Saëns’ contributions by the musical elite. Inversely, a negative opinion of the composer grew among those who sought greater change in music. Saint-Saëns’ state-sponsored funeral served to manipulate his presence in French, nationalist politics; he was remembered as a great musician, but a lousy composer. By understanding Saint-Saëns’ positioning, throughout his life, we are thus better able to evaluate his music and to consider its continuing “utility” (to borrow the French concept).
Where conventional methods for uncovering neoclassical impulses in nineteenth-century works have been tried, it may be time for a more gestalt approach. Hearing the past through borrowed themes, pastiche through audience expectations, and progress through revival, we can see Saint-Saëns was doing more than recycling old music.
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