

## **Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, Op. 28**

*Composed in 1863. Published in 1870.  
Approximately 9 Minutes.*

## **Violin Concerto No. 1 in A Major, Op. 20**

*Composed in 1859. Premiered in 1867. Published in 1868.  
Approximately 11 Minutes*

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

B. October 9, 1835, Paris

D. 16 December 1921, Algiers

*Both works scored for Solo Violin, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, 2 Clarinets, 2 Bassoons, 2 Horns, 2 Trumpets, Timpani, and Strings.*

Five years after the publication of the *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso*, an opera premiered in Paris at the Opéra Comique to little critical approbation. This opera, *Carmen*, has since achieved a level of popularity rivaling virtually all other contemporary operatic repertoire. The Spanish exoticism of George Bizet's opera in many ways becomes a touchstone for the style, and modern listeners are likely to hear the *Habañera* as a reference point for the chromatically-inflected syncopated descending scale around which the Rondo's A Section is based. It is worthy of note, then, that it was Bizet who undertook the task of reducing the *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* for piano and violin. While it would be a stretch to argue that it was his familiarity with this piece which inspired him to compose *Carmen*, it is nonetheless important to point out that stylistically, pieces composed within a Spanish idiom were already circulating in the period when *Carmen* was written.

The somber opening of the introduction betrays the flirtation and play to follow. Indeed, after two brief phrases, the violin launches into a major-mode animato passage leading directly into the minor-mode dance-like A section of the Rondo. This is followed by a contrasting B section, characterized by a major-mode passage which sheds the exotic chromaticism of the A section. After the return of the A section, the movement departs from a standard Rondo form, ABACABA, and begins to interrupt itself with recalls. For example, the C section begins with fortissimo chords in the orchestra, providing the thickest texture up to this point. After a flourish in the violin, the passage is followed by a tender arioso. After the third statement of the material from the A section, however, the music reverts again to the boisterous C section before recuperating the material from the B section. The final A section features the violin playing broken chords to accompany the melody, which has now been taken up by the orchestra. Finally, the piece shifts to the parallel major for the virtuoso coda which ends the piece.

Whereas the *Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso* was concerned primarily with exotic melody and rhythm on the small scale, it is less concerned with the handling of overall

form. Although the Rondo was characterized by an unusual ordering of thematic entries, the matching of a slow introduction with a faster movement with clearly delineated sections is a typical gambit for a piece composed for virtuoso soloist with orchestral accompaniment.

By contrast, Saint-Saëns's *Violin Concerto No. 1* presents us with relatively normative pitch and harmonic material and experiments with larger scale rhythmic and structural complexities. From the first bars of the piece, the unusual meter of 6/4 complicates the listener's understanding of where the beat falls. Without the benefit of the score, the first two measures are aurally ambiguous: does the orchestral chord opening the piece fall on the beat? Or is this an anacrusis to a downbeat in the violin part? In the second measure, do we hear the violin's scalar ascent from dominant to tonic as landing directly on a downbeat? Or is this a mere anticipation of the *second* tonic note, which actually does fall on the beat? It can be fun to tap silently along with this passage, to attempt to find where the strong beats fall. While the entire piece is in 6/4 time, one of its conceits is the presentation of regular and irregular melodic material within the meter. As complex as the meter is to hear at the beginning of the piece, it nonetheless settles into other patterns which are easier to perceive.

The work is written in three movements, but there are no breaks between them. In fact, in many ways it is tempting to hear this as a single-movement work, in a varied sonata-allegro form, much like Liszt's *Sonata in B Minor*. Each movement is delineated by a trill in the solo violin. The second movement begins after a cadenza, immediately as the violin begins the trill, and the third movement immediately after the next trill, when the tempo changes. The Andante espressivo functions as a slow developmental section. The third movement, Tempo I, can be heard as a varied recapitulation, as it restates the themes from the first section, although not in a predictable Primary Group—Secondary Group pattern we would expect in a normative sonata form. Rather, the movement begins by presenting material from the end of the first movement, and only thereafter restates the concerto's opening passage. However, the restatement of the opening theme clarifies the position of the beat. The solo violin and orchestra have been enunciating octaves on the beat for the previous four measures, so when the theme returns, the chord which was metrically ambiguous at the outset is unambiguously on the downbeat. This time, it is much easier to find the beat by tapping along. As the piece draws to a close, we do not get the virtuosic outburst we might expect. Rather, the final page has a long diminuendo. The themes become more and more understated until finally the orchestra states one bar of the opening theme in a rapid crescendo to the final cadence.

*Program note by Steven M. Reale.*