

Variations on a Theme #24

for SFPA 236; written in October 2003 by Rich Lynch

The Voice of God, and all of us lesser voices, praise a famous French composer on his birthday

It's October 9th as I'm beginning this SFPazine. Today is the 168th birthday of the French composer Camille Saint-Saëns, and the day is being celebrated by the local classical music station with many of Saint-Saëns' compositions (including the monumental 3rd "Organ" Symphony, which is being played in its entirety as I'm composing this essay). Saint-Saëns may have been the 19th century's closest equivalent to Mozart, in that he was not only a hugely-talented composer and performer, he was also a child prodigy, having learned to play the piano at age three.

Saint-Saëns had been gifted with an amazing memory and a perfect sense of pitch, two essentials for a successful concert performer. This not only helped make him a success in the concert halls of Paris by the age of ten, it allowed him to begin composing classical music before he was even a teenager. At age thirteen he entered the Paris Conservatory, studying organ and composition, and when he was sixteen years old he composed the first of his three numbered symphonies.

While he was alive, Saint-Saëns was best known as a virtuoso pianist and organist, the latter meriting him a position relatively early in his life as Organist at the Madeleine Church in Paris. But he also gained fame as a composer, with more than 300 major works throughout his lifetime (including five wonderful piano concertos and a symphonic poem, "Danse Macabre," that was used in an episode of *Buffy*); there might have been many more yet if time had allowed. Saint-Saëns had the same dilemma that Russian pianist/composer Sergei Rachmaninoff would later face – he eventually decided that a career as a concert performer brought him much more money than composing, and it also allowed him to travel the world. By the time he'd reached his 51th birthday, in 1886, Saint-Saëns had become, in effect, a citizen of the world, extensively touring and giving concerts (to great acclaim) throughout western Europe, Russia, and the Western Hemisphere.

It was in 1886 that Saint-Saëns composed his two most famous works, the "Carnival of the Animals" suite and his 3rd Symphony, and he had totally opposite opinions of the two works. "Carnival" is actually a delightful collection of musical vignettes, but it was held in such light personal regard that he would not allow performances of it as a complete work during his lifetime. The 3rd "Organ" Symphony, on the other hand, he thought represented the summit of his ability; after finishing it, Saint-Saëns wrote, "I have given as much of myself as I could; there is nothing left." It was composed on commission of the London Philharmonic Society, and the debut (with that orchestra) was conducted by Saint-Saëns himself. The reason for its continuing popularity, of course, is the presence of the pipe organ itself. When the organ comes in, full force, at the beginning of the final movement, it's like the Voice of God. Attending a symphony performance of the work (and I've done it twice) only enhances that perception, as you can feel the presence of the organ with more senses than just hearing.

Saint-Saëns died in 1921, in one of his favorite places in the world, northern Africa. His music, for some reason, had fallen out of favor in France by then, perhaps because, as one biographer

wrote of Saint-Saëns, that “beautiful harmonies and chords were more important to him than emotional feeling or technical adventure ... his music [had] therefore been condemned for its superficiality and facility.” Not everybody thought that, though; in the United States and Great Britain, Saint-Saëns was looked on as a musical genius and France’s greatest composer, and his final concert tour of North America, in 1915, brought huge amounts of acclaim. It was proof positive that people around the world had great appreciation of him and his music. We still do.

Mailing Comments, SFPA 235

mike weber

On observational astronomy: “I recall John Campbell mentioning the ‘wobble’ as a method of detecting extrasolar planets.” Yes, it was a visual technique but it never really worked out because the signal-to-noise ratio was just too low for every candidate star being observed, and the observations had to take place over decades. A much better method turned out to be spectroscopic observation of candidate stars, as it is possible to observe Doppler shifts in the star’s light spectrum that represent changes in radial velocity as low as a few miles per hour – easily enough to determine if there are planetary-mass bodies in orbit. The one caveat in this method is that the orbital plane of the suspected extrasolar planets must be fairly flat relative to the observer for this to work, otherwise any gravitational perturbations by unseen planets do not lead to radial velocity changes for the star.

On orchestra concerts: [I had earlier commented to Toni that in my opinion, the more prestigious the orchestra, the more likely they will play compositions that are apt to leave you cold.] “Because they can get away with it without losing too much money, unlike less ‘prestigious’ and more precariously-funded orchestras?” Pretty much. The London Philharmonic will include relatively obscure works in its programme because it is famous and its concerts sell out at a relatively elevated price structure. The City of Fairfax (Virginia) Orchestra, on the other hand, almost always has a program that features major works by well-known composers – it’s what you’d expect from a mid-level orchestra that is trying to expand its audience and, no doubt, its price structure. (I suspect that technical difficulty also plays a role; some of these more obscure works are most likely included in a major orchestra’s repertoire to show off the skill of that orchestra, despite the fact it is sometimes a challenge for the audience to sit through it all.)

Ned Brooks

On global warming: “Did anyone at the global-warming seminar present any actual data on how human efforts at CO₂ production stand as compared to the historical natural balance between CO₂ produced by [biological and geological sources]? If we are just a flea riding on an elephant’s back we might as well forget about CO₂ and concentrate on environmental poisons.” That seminar did not, but one I attended a month or so later did, with just that conclusion – the presenter (a University of Virginia professor) claimed, from analysis of historical data, that human-caused CO₂ emissions were only a minor contributor to any greenhouse-related global temperature changes. His presentation was actually convincing enough to put me back in the “undecided” category about global warming, though some of what he said needed to be taken on faith (for instance, he said that the amount of atmospheric CO₂ required to initiate a runaway greenhouse effect was way, way higher than anything that was conceivable under any fossil fuel use scenario).

Steve Hughes

On New Zealand: Great photos of what must have been a wonderful month there. Reading this was almost like being there.

Richard Dengrove

On think tank seminars: "Libertarians seem to be very much into free lunches." I suspect that it's because they (at the Cato Institute) want to ensure a reasonable audience for the event they've put together. Other think tanks, notably the conservative Heritage Institute, do the same.

On vested interests: "I caught you in a fallacy. The fact that ExxonMobil is funding the Marshall Institute ... doesn't mean that the Marshall Institute is wrong." True, but I never said that. That was Greenpeace's opinion, which I quoted from the flyer they distributed at the meeting.

On the attacks of September 11th: "Someone finally proved to me that the third plane ... was aimed at the Congress." If, by that, you mean the plane that struck the Pentagon, I'd like to hear the proof. The U.S. Capitol building is prominent and visible for miles, hardly miss-able even when there's bright morning glare. I think the Pentagon plane was originally headed for the White House, which on the other hand, could be hard to locate from the air. My belief is that the plane that went down in Pennsylvania is the one that was headed for the U.S. Capitol.

Guy Lillian

About P.L.: Sad news indeed, when you informed us at Torcon that she had died. Nicki and I had not seen her in years, and I'm not even sure when the last time was that we did – Nolacon maybe? (Or perhaps one of the Tennessee DSCs of the early 1990s.) I do remember that every time we did see her at a convention, her health had incrementally deteriorated from the previous time, and there didn't seem to be any end in sight. Except this. She will be missed.

On the Harry Warner estate situation: "As an attorney, I can't fault the 'jerk' hired by the church to protect its interests to insist on doing so." Ah, but he *wasn't* hired by the church (which had been named in Harry's will as recipient of most of his estate). That lawyer was named by the will as the legal representative of Harry's estate. As such, you'd think he'd be a bit more responsive to Harry's written wishes, even if they were not an official part of the will.

Sheila Strickland

On the DSC: Interesting to hear a bit about Chattanooga, as it's been well over a decade since Nicki and I were last there. The mall you describe as "having its own exit from the Interstate" is most likely Hamilton Place Mall, which when it opened in 1987 was the largest mall in Tennessee. Nicki worked at the coffee shop there for about a year, which led to an article by her in *Mimosa* 5 (later reprinted in *Mimosa* 28) titled "Coffee, Tea and Me."

On Torcon: "I went to the Baen Books party..." We'd intended to, but never made it; we had settled into another party that evening and after a long-unseen friend appeared, inertia set in and we didn't get to any of the other parties on our list that evening. Did we miss anything?

David Schlosser

On the scarcity of computer-related jobs: "A friend of mine lives near Portland and was let go

about a year ago in an out-sourcing move. So far barely an interview and hardly any vaguely fitting jobs being advertised.” Yeah, that sucks. Outsourcing is eventually going to be a hot button that legislators are going to react to, I think.

Eve Ackerman

On the highlights of Torcon: “Afternoon tea at the Royal York ... where they served *real* tea loose in the pot, scones, berries and cream...” Wish we’d known about that, as it sounds like a very nice interlude in the middle of a busy convention. On the other hand, it seems like we rarely had much, if any, of a lunch on most days, and when we did, it was usually in the convention’s Green Room.

On contagious diseases: Your description of Micah coming down with Mononucleosis was pretty much of what I went through back in 1972 during my second year of grad school, but mine put me in the infirmary for two weeks. It wasn’t a 100% rotten experience, though, as it gave me an excuse to drop out of a class I was having big trouble with.

Gary Brown

On globalization: “The people who speak for globalization and the anti-globalists both have some very good and necessary points.” I’m only somewhat in favor of globalization, I guess. Free trade is a good thing, but I have great trouble with the way large numbers of jobs are being outsourced to places like India when there’s a recession going on. If that has to happen, there ought to be a greater urgency than there’s been so far in creating more jobs comparable in salary to those lost.

Toni & Hank Reinhardt

On holy wars: [Hank wrote] “Why don’t people understand that we are not in a cultural war with Islam, but a religious one?” I wasn’t aware that we were in *any* kind of war with Islam. When was this declared?

On profitable occupations: [Hank again, in response to Toni’s question about what industry made more in revenues than Microsoft, Intel, or Coca-Cola]: “Trial lawyers, Inc!” Nice try, Hank, but this kind of hobbyhorse flogging is only too obviously transparent. Skipping the fact that lawyers are not incorporated into a single entity, the same “truth” you’re decrying about lawyers is also most likely true about many other professions, such as teaching or practicing medicine, for instance.

On the purpose of taxes: [Toni wrote] “Taxes are not levied to run the government; they are levied by politicians to buy votes.” You’re equating taxing with spending. If it were actually a one-for-one equivalency, I’d somewhat agree with you, but since there’s no constitutional directive for a balanced federal budget, it’s possible to buy votes with pork barrel without increasing taxes. Indeed, just the opposite is happening, with the result of a huge federal budget deficit.

On folk-inspired classical music: [Toni wrote] “I usually like classical music inspired and informed by folk music (particular favorites [include] Copland’s *Appalachian Spring* and Dvorák’s *Slavonic Dances*).” Folk music-inspired classical is, by nature, very melodic and usually very pleasant to listen to, and you’ve picked some good ones as favorites. Besides those,

I can recommend some of Brahms' Hungarian Dances, Ionescu's Romanian Rhapsody, and even Mozart's German Dances. There are lots of other examples to choose from, too.

Gary Robe

On seeing redwood trees: "I picked [Crescent City, California as a place to visit] because it was smack in the middle of the Redwoods National Forest and because it was right on the coast." Many other places in northern California also qualify for that description, though, without requiring nearly as long a drive to get there from where you were in Yosemite. One I can recommend is in Marin County, not too far from San Francisco – the Earthquake Trail at Olema, which you get to by driving about 20 miles (starting at San Rafael, home of LucasFilms) through a redwood forest along the Sir Francis Drake highway. The Earthquake Trail is where the epicenter of the 1906 quake was located, and there are some amazing artifacts that still exist there, including a rail fence with a 16-foot discontinuity. The Point Reyes National Seashore isn't too far from Olema, and it even has a neat lighthouse (though the nearby beach is posted for dangerous riptides). The trees at Point Reyes are in effect huge versions of bonsai, as their growth pattern has been greatly influenced by the coastal winds. It's quite a place!

Janice Gelb

On Torcon: "Progress Report 6 was mailed so late that most people didn't receive it before they left [for the convention]." Ours arrived the day before we left home, but by then I'd downloaded driving directions from the Torcon web site. Those directions never mentioned the presence of the Crowne Plaza Hotel (where we were staying), much less how to get there once in Toronto. Luckily, I knew it was attached to the convention centre, so we didn't get lost.

More on Torcon: "Torcon 3 was the worst organized worldcon in a very long time, possibly ever." Not sure I'd agree with the "possibly ever" part – I've read reports of some of the worldcons from the 1960s and earlier; these would take quite a lot of mismanagement to surpass. And let's not forget that Gold Standard of modern era worldcons, the 1978 Iguanacon. The true test of legendry is time, so let's see how we think of Torcon a few years from now. And despite the lapses and screw-ups, there really *was* a lot of effort expended to put on a big convention. I'm hoping that something positive comes out of it for the Toronto fans (and others) who planned the event. "As for me, I had a fine time." Me too, for many of the same reasons you did. It's the only place I get to see many of my friends each year.

Jeff Copeland

On not asking hard questions to politicians: "'How do you plan on paying for it?' [etc.] has all turned out to be only too true. Except for the media who only asked their question once." Not sure even that many times. The news media doesn't seem able to ask anything but softball questions anymore, and I've seen that first hand from some of the luncheon seminars I attended earlier this year.

The Big Storm

As I mentioned in my previous SFPazine, much of Washington, D.C. closed down the afternoon of September 18th in preparation for the arrival of Hurricane Isabel. Metrorail quit

running because it was feared that high wind gusts would make the system unsafe (the trains run aboveground, for the most part, once they're out of the city) and many of the commuters, especially U.S. Government workers, take the Metro to get to work. This was probably a bit of an overreaction by Metrorail, to shut down so early, as there wasn't any significant wind or rain until well after dark. But when it did finally arrive...!

The next morning was the storm aftermath. We live in an area where the power and all other utilities comes in underground, and as a result, we were not among the thousands of homes in the county that lost power. The main culprit for those who did was all the damage to the trees, and it was terrible to see. There are ornamental pear trees planted all along our street; they don't bear fruit but they do have thousands of white flowers that transform the street into a tunnel of white during the week or two they bloom in the spring. The limbs of those trees tend to grow into a tangle, though, and that makes the tree canopy act like a sail whenever there's a strong wind. Worse, the branches and trunks also do not have very much flex in them. I looked out the upstairs window to the street the morning after the storm and saw that our driveway was blocked by a pear tree that used to grow across the street; the trunk (probably eight inches in diameter) had broken in two as if it were a twig. There was carnage all up and down the street – in one stretch, near the middle school, three or four trees in a row had suffered that fate. Many other trees had been badly damaged when large lower limbs had broken off. The next few days were filled with the sound of chainsaws as city crews came to take away the broken trees; there will be far fewer blossoms next spring.

It took several days for many of the areas of the county to get their power turned back on, as it turned out. One of them was in Germantown, where one of the strip malls has a Dutch Market with specialty food stores owned by the Pennsylvania Amish who come down to Maryland on the weekend to do business. We stopped by there two days after the storm, and as we thought, the lights were out and the place was closed. Except...

Some of the Amish food vendors were in there taking stock of their losses. We arrived just in time to be recipient of two large containers of ice cream that had gone soft (but not melted). But they were just fine after we found room for them in our freezer. One (a gallon of chocolate chip cookie dough) we forced ourselves to consume over the next week or so; the other (two gallons of cookies and cream) was just too much of a good thing so we took it to a WSFA meeting where we could share the wealth.

I guess the old adages are true – it really *is* an ill wind that doesn't blow somebody any good. And the dark clouds of this storm did have a silver lining – or at least a frozen one.

More next time! Stay safe, stay well.