MASTERPIECE

A Joyful, Melodic Menagerie

Camille Saint-Saëns's 'Carnival of the Animals' is a musical safari, complete with roaring lions, giant elephants and very persistent donkeys.

PHOTO: RYAN INZANA

By
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April 24, 2020 2:25 pm ET

Musicians across the ages have toyed with the idea of depicting the animal kingdom in their works. An early keyboard canon by Bach attempts to replicate the sounds of a hen and a cuckoo. Telemann produced a bizarre orchestral portrayal of frogs and crows in concert. Mozart was smitten by the song of his pet starling, a theme singularly close to that of his Piano Concerto in G, K. 453. But perhaps the most famous example is Camille Saint-Saëns's whimsical "Carnival of the Animals," a suite of 14 movements for two pianos, two violins, viola, cello, double bass, flute, piccolo, clarinet, glass harmonica, and xylophone, composed in 1886.

Saint-Saëns (1835-1921), one of the leading French composers of his time, was engaged in writing his Third Symphony when, as he confessed to his Parisian publisher, Durand, he had become distracted by this musical/zoological project, which he found to be "such fun." Yet, fearing that the work would undermine his reputation as a serious composer, he refused to allow its publication until after his death, with the exception of the penultimate movement, "The Swan"—a ravishing meditation on the graceful bird, which is represented musically by the melancholy cello. (That piece was so compelling to choreographer Michel Fokine that he created a classic ballet interpretation, first danced by Anna Pavlova in 1905, which became an immediate hit.)

Saint-Saëns had conceived the entire suite for Shrove Tuesday—the lighthearted celebration that precedes Ash Wednesday on the Catholic calendar—and "Carnival of the Animals" had its premiere at a small, private concert given by cellist Charles Lebouc on Tuesday, March 9, 1886, followed by a second performance at the home of Chopin's friend, singer Pauline Viardot, with Franz Liszt in attendance. Despite those scant beginnings, once the music was published in 1922 it became the composer's most famous and enduring work—especially after 1950, when the humorous verses for each movement added by Ogden Nash were first recorded by Noël Coward. It has since joined Prokofiev's "Peter and the Wolf" and Britten's "Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra" as school-age favorites.

The truly delightful collection opens with an "Introduction and Royal March of the Lion," in which a stately processional is interrupted by "roaring" chromatic passages in the lower piano part, imitated by the strings, suggesting the fierce growl of the king of beasts. Next come "Hens and Roosters," busily pecking and crowing—based on the theme of Jean-Philippe Rameau's harpsichord piece "The Hen"—followed by "Wild Donkeys (Swift Animals)," as loud, feverish scales from both pianos race by.

"Tortoises" stays true to the lumbering image of the shelled reptile by rendering Offenbach's lively "Can-Can" ("Galop infernal") in agonizingly slow motion. The suite continues in cartoonish territory with "The Elephant," marked "Allegro pomposo." It emphasizes the creature's gargantuan proportions by adapting both the Scherzo

from Mendelssohn's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and Berlioz's "Dance of the Sylphs"—both originally set for high, light instruments—for the deep, heavy tones of the double bass. Then, for an emotional lift, the composer treats us to the lurching, grace-note-peppered, hopping chords of "Kangaroos."

"Aquarium" so perfectly captures the idea of a dreamy world, with its ethereal surface and impressionist arpeggios, that composer Alan Menken admittedly stole from it for the soundtrack of the Disney film "Beauty and the Beast." This is followed by the "hee-haw" of braying donkeys in "Characters With Long Ears"; the familiar call of "The Cuckoo in the Depths of the Woods"; and the chirping of forest birds in "Aviary."

With "Pianists," Saint-Saëns turns his gaze, with a jaundiced eye, to the human species, poking fun at amateur pianists who can't quite manage to pull off the well-worn exercises of Hanon or Czerny. Without pause, the music continues into "Fossils," where the composer mimics his own "Danse macabre," in which the xylophone conjures up the clacking bones of skeletons, along with several nursery rhymes, and an aria from "The Barber of Seville." Leonard Bernstein suggested that the composer viewed all these pieces as the fossils of his time.

After "The Swan"—a spellbinding highlight of the work—the full ensemble joins together for a dazzling "Finale," quoting earlier movements, and finishing with six "Hee-Haws" from the donkeys. What is the meaning of that final chuckle? Perhaps, in the end, the composer simply regarded the entire enterprise as a joke. But the implicit message throughout is that we are all—musicians, critics, and music lovers alike—rich targets for a musical satirist.

—Mr. Isacoff's most recent book is "When the World Stopped to Listen: Van Cliburn's Cold War Triumph and Its Aftermath" (Knopf).