



The Swan
Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)
for Cello and Piano
Various Collections

Instrumentation: Originally two pianos and cello, as written in the 13th movement of Saint-Saëns's suite *Carnival of the Animals*. The second piano part offers primarily rolled chords on the first and fourth beats, as well as some reinforcement of moving harmonic lines, but when the piece is performed as an independent solo, it is usually accompanied by the first piano only.

Background Information on Le Carnaval des Animaux (The Carnival of the Animals), subtitled Grande Fantaisie Zoologique (Grand Zoological Fantasy): A suite of fourteen movements by the French Romantic composer Camille Saint-Saëns, composed in a few days in February 1886 while Saint-Saëns was vacationing in Austria. It was originally scored for a chamber group of flute/piccolo, clarinet (B flat and C), two pianos, glass armonica, xylophone, two violins, viola, cello and double bass, but is usually performed today with a full orchestra of strings, and with a glockenspiel substituting for the rare glass armonica.

Saint-Saëns suppressed performances of Carnival while he was alive. It is speculated that he was concerned the piece was too frivolous and likely to harm his reputation as a serious composer. The only movement he allowed published in 1887 was *The Swan*. After his death in 1921, Saint-Saëns had given permission in his will to publish the piece in its entirety, and it became one of his most popular and frequently performed pieces. It has been the inspiration for all kinds of performances, costumes, dances. The Ballet "The Dying Swan" (performed to the music of *The Swan*) was choreographed by Anna Pavlova in 1905. The American poet Ogden Nash wrote a verse for each movement of the suite in 1949, and these have been frequently read at performances of *Carnival of the Animals* ever since.

ANALYSIS

Elements of Music

- **Form**—Ternary (ABA) 1bar intro | A: 8 bars 4+4 | B: 8 bars 4+4 | A 4 bars recap + 5 + 2 coda bars
- **Rhythm**—In 6/4 meter; Graceful, slow moving quarter notes, stately eighth note runs in melody; accompaniment has undulating eighths in left hand, rippling 16ths in right hand. In closing bars of piece, the rhythm between the "swan" and the "water" takes turns pausing, one moving while the other rests in half-bar sections.
- **Melody**—The opening 2 bars of the melody literally depict the outline of a swan, and the contour creates a very elegant line. § The primarily descending melody is balanced by the upward glide of the second 2 measures. The B section begins by utilizing fragments of the descending melodic shape; again the 2nd pair of measures have more upward direction in shape. The suspension on

the high B creates the peak of the melody, since the vast majority of the melody is created with continuous movement. The descent from the high B is extended by an extra bar, and then offers three more suspended melodic moments, the final one bringing the piece back to the G where it began, to float away, out of sight.

- **Harmony**—Key: G Major

Intro: m. 1 - GM

A section: 1st phrase (mm. 2-5): I - ii - V⁷ - I | 2nd phrase (mm. 6-9): I - dim⁷ - Bm - F#M⁷ - Bm

B section: (mm. 10-13) G: I₆ - dim⁷ - DM⁷ (susp. G/ F# res.) | FM₆ - dim⁷ - C⁷ (susp. F/E res.) | (mm. 14-17) FM⁷ - A min - D min - A min - half dim AM - Dm⁷ - DM⁷

A section return (mm. 18-20): GM I - ii - V⁷ - (m.21 under held B) I⁷ - B dim - EM⁷ |

(mm. 22-23) A min - FM - GM - A min⁷ | (mm. 24-25) GM - E min⁷ - DM |

Close: (mm. 26-28 under held G) vi - I - vi - I - vi - I - vi - I - I - I

The harmonies never veer far from “home”, though offer enough interest through diminished chords and suspensions to keep the listener interested, and resolutions for satisfaction and rest. The bass line moves in a natural progression, formed by inversions, and are especially interesting and prominent when the harmonic rhythm speeds up (especially near the return of the A section). The V - I resolution is offered at the end of the solo line, but the piano finishes the piece with a vi - I alternation as the swan glides away on the high G, giving the ending a weightless feel.

- **Timbre**—The piece uses the upper and middle register of the cello, never dropping below an E on the D string; the piano’s rippling right hand notes are usually on top of or higher than the cello line, but the open spacing of the arpeggiated figure gives it a light quality.

- **Texture**—Long, arching, slow moving melody over rippling accompaniment.

Expression—Dynamic changes notated after opening *piano* are gradual hair-pins up and down, with the loudest dynamic (*mf*) after the long held B in the cello and the softest (*pp*) on the last note.

Music Selection— Although *The Swan* is in many ways not technically difficult, the cellist is challenged to create elegant shapes and impeccable tone in the effortless manner of a graceful and utterly unselfconscious swan. Cello student should have some workable vibrato at his/her disposal, as well as developing bow control and good tone. This piece helps develop ease in upper register playing, and can be played by a young student, though cello size and strength of a young player tends to diminish the results now matter how well the student performs.

Additional Considerations/Reasons to Perform this Composition: *The Swan* and the Prelude of the first Bach Suite are the two most widely identifiable pieces written for the cello, and the cellist will receive many requests to play it. With every repeat performance throughout a cellist’s life, he or she discovers one more level of perfection to be attained through performing this very perfect composition.

The Heart Statement: With a melody of exquisite shape, grace and balance floating across a rippling, transparent accompaniment, and inspired imagery to be discovered at every level, *The Swan* is a miniature masterpiece.

LESSON PLAN

Introducing the Piece: Think of your favorite animal or an interesting, colorful person you know. Think of an instrument that suits the characteristics of that animal or person—either physically, psychologically, what they are known to do or be like, how their voice sounds, or some combination of those characteristics. What kind of music would come out of that instrument that would suit this creature? High, low, short, long, fast, slow, repeated pitches, scale pitches, crazy mixed up pitches? Explain why.

Skill Outcome: Student will develop a single, free vibrato motion that works in all registers on the cello, and discover ways to make it fluid and continuous.

1) Strategies

- a) Learn and reinforce “shaking the can” movement with and without cello. Feel how slippery neck of cello is, and let hand drop and slide down neck, keeping elbow relaxed as possible.
- b) Observe how arm moves more side-to-side when in upper positions. Place 1st, 2nd, and 3rd fingers between strings in upper positions and experiment with free arm “shake”.
- c) Explore how arm weight applied to cello does not translate into tightening the arm.
- d) Explore sound of finger pad “squish” on string (assisted by a generous, connected sound of bow)
- e) Learn and practice Vibrato Transfer Exercise to keep vibrato continuous from note to note.
- f) Learn from personal best: Apply best vibrato finger/movement to another nearby note; teach other fingers how to make same sound by having fingers “listen” to each other.

2) Assessment

- a) Student demonstrates ability to keep arm free while applying weight with fingers (no need to squeeze thumb)
- b) Student creates a warm, rich sounding vibrato on most if not all notes of “The Swan”

Knowledge Outcome: Student will increase his/her understanding of intervals and how the sizes of the intervals relate to the distances between the notes on the cello, whether measuring or shifting.

1) Strategies

- a) Learn/review intervals of half-step (minor 2nd), whole step (major 2nd), minor 3rd, major 3rd, 4th, tritone, and 5th. Student finds examples of each kind of interval in the score, both in cello and piano parts.
- b) Student identifies all intervals in cello part. Discuss the frequency of certain intervals—which are found the most? Sing and play the intervals.
- c) Discuss measurements/intervals in the standard and extended cello hand position. Explore how the measurements change from 1st position up to high D in the piece by finding same intervals in lower octave and upper octave. Listen for similarities between intervals. Practice left hand measurements. Practice shifting the same intervals.
- d) Discover how big the “big shifts” actually are in *The Swan*. Is it possible to make the shift sound really dramatic while relaxing in the realization that perhaps they aren’t so big after all?

2) Assessment

- a) Student identifies commonly used intervals in the piece, sings them, and plays them in tune, by measurement or shift.
- b) Student shifts with the awareness that no shift is too far for the hand to find gracefully.

Affective Outcome: Student will make connections between a composer’s creativity, imagery and a sense of humor and its effect on his/her music, performers, listeners, and other artists.

1) Strategies:

- a) Explore various ways the cello is well-suited to embody a swan. How did Saint-Saens compose the music to depict a swan swimming across the water, both in sound and imagery?
- b) Ogden Nash wrote a poem for each of the 14 movements of this piece. Student listens to *Carnival of the Animals* and reads the poems—choose favorite and talk about why.
- c) Imagine that Camille Saint-Saens asked your advice about what other animal to include. What suggestions would you make, what instrument would you have suggested he use, or how might it have been composed? (OR use *Introducing the Piece* strategy, above.)
- d) Have you ever played a piece besides *The Swan* that depicted a scene, or that had a musical joke in it? Think back on your previous pieces...
- e) It is said that Saint-Saens was worried about what people would think of him for writing a humorous work, yet the *Carnival of the Animals* is extremely clever, since all the movements have imbedded jokes and symbolism, besides being fun to listen to—and its his most popular composition now. Has there ever been a time when you have held back something special you created because you were worried about what others might think? If so, would you consider not holding back next time? Discuss or respond in journal.

2) Assessment

- a) Student approaches performance embodying the elegance and quiet grace of the swan.
- b) Student writes program notes expressing how the music (or learning the music) has made a difference to him/her. OR student can create a poem, painting, drawing, or other depiction of the swan or one of the other animals depicted in “*Carnival*” OR student creates short composition of own depicting the animal or person imagined in the introduction to the piece or in another Ogden Nash poem.
- c) *Carnival of the Animals* has inspired Ballets, “plays”, poems by Ogden Nash. Does playing the role as “the swan” inspire you as a performer? What ways would it be technically and musically to your advantage to embody the strength, grace and elegance of the swan while playing this piece? What about what we can’t see (the paddling feet)—how might that apply to your performance?