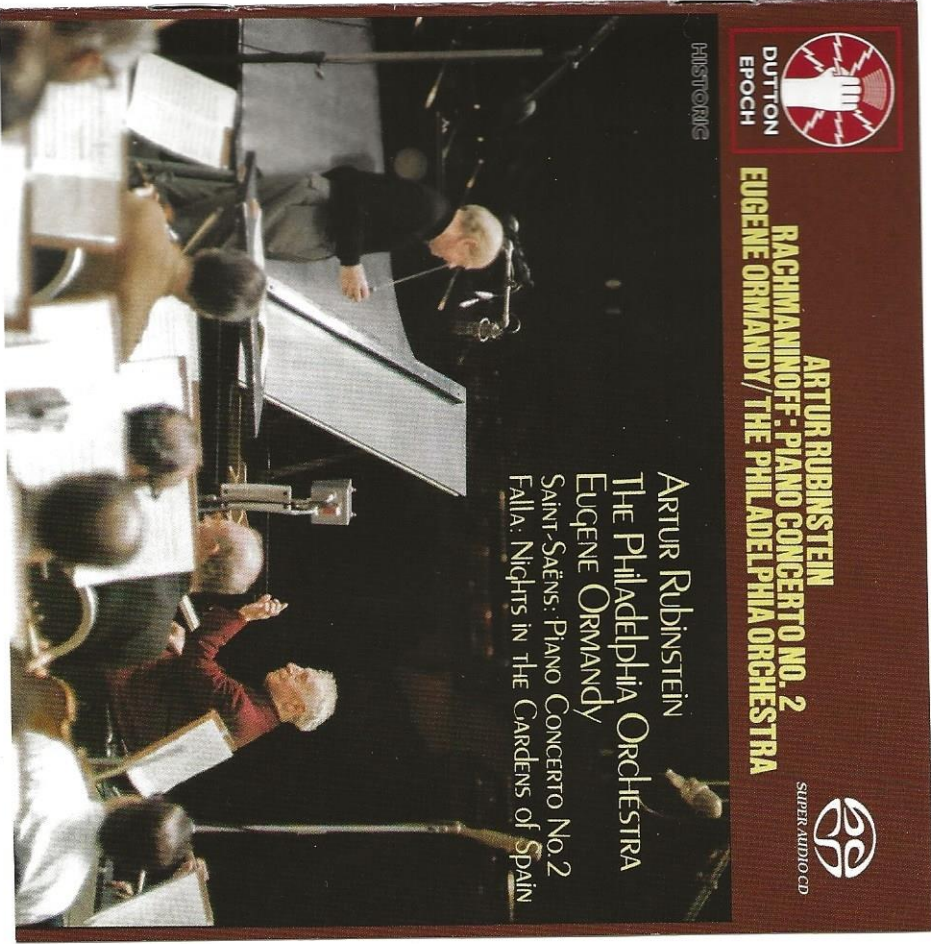




RUBINSTEIN
 Falla: Nights in the Gardens of Spain
 Saint-Saëns: Piano Concerto No. 2
 Eugène Ormandy
 The Philadelphia Orchestra

British version of the original album artwork



ARTUR RUBINSTEIN
RACHMANINOFF: PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2
EUGENE ORMANDY / THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA

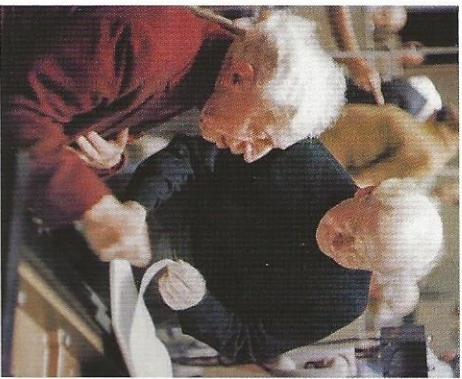


SUPER AUDIO CD

ARTUR RUBINSTEIN
 THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA
 EUGENE ORMANDY
 SAINT-SAËNS: PIANO CONCERTO NO. 2
 FALLA: NIGHTS IN THE GARDENS OF SPAIN

PHILADELPHIA

Arthur Rubinstein – Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 2



Arthur Rubinstein with Eugene Ormandy

concerto happens to be one of the best-loved works in the pianistic repertory – if, indeed, a couple of its tunes have been found worthy to be re-fashioned into Hit Parade songs – this has been achieved at no cost whatever to subtlety and a masterful marshalling of the highest level of compositional craft. The very fact that Arthur Rubinstein, like several other pianists, has chosen to record the work more than once is proof of this fact; any great work of art, musical or otherwise, constantly reveals new facets of itself to its listeners and its interpreters over the years.

The facts surrounding the creation of this concerto are well known: Rachmaninoff, in 1900, up against a compositional block, went to a Dr. Nikolai Dahl, a psychiatrist specialising in autosuggestion, was virtually hypnotised into overcoming his hang-up, and then created in almost a single burst of energy both this concerto and the second two-piano suite. If this story, which the composer recounted in his memoirs, is, indeed, true, then Doctor Dahl must be one of the major figures in the history of music, because the stylistic change from Rachmaninoff's pre-1900 music to the string of masterpieces that began with this concerto and the suite is truly remarkable. Attractive as are such early works as the First Concerto, some songs and choruses and the opera

Alëko, they show none of the striking originality, both of form and of substance, that permeated the composer's major works from 1900 on.

One of the subtleties in the Second Concerto, for example, is the layout of musical events at the beginning of each movement. Each begins with a harmonic journey that runs from here to the middle of next week: the sonorous, mysterious progression of modulating chords that opens the first movement, the haunting, gloomy orchestral passage that ushers in the Adagio; the brusque argument among the instruments, dispelled by the soloist's impetuous outburst that triggers the finale. Schubert and Brahms, among others, had pulled this sort of trick on their listeners occasionally – beginning a movement in the "wrong" key – but it is no less startling here, where it becomes almost a unifying device for the entire work.

Another striking aspect of this concerto is the long arch of melody, almost a single breath of endless song that forms the basis of the slow movement. The melody itself is a great deal more elusive than it sounds on casual hearing; it hovers with great flexibility, its time signature constantly shifting between 4/4 and 3/2. That is, for its time, interesting in itself. What is even more interesting is the great skill and insight with which Rachmaninoff draws an entire long movement out of this one melodic line, constantly reversing the relationship between piano and orchestra and, at the end, gradually letting the melody sink and break apart until only a final skeleton of itself remains, ravishingly harmonised so that it sounds like a new idea.

Such are the qualities that establish the true stature of this remarkable and original piece of music, qualities that the incidental fact of the superlative winningness of the broad tunes in the first movement and the finale should not obscure. These very tunes, in fact, are important elements in Rachmaninoff's own taut, personal view of musical structure; they flood our senses with their immediate beauty, but they also undergo constant alteration and re-examination by this master of the compositional craft.

Rachmaninoff is said to have remarked at one time that his view of heaven is a place where his other notoriously popular work, the Prelude in C sharp minor, would not be heard. He grew to loathe that little piece, and the reasons may be easily discerned. But he had no such problems with the Second Piano Concerto, even though he lived to hear *Full Moon and Empty Arms* (a popular song based on the work). He could, as we can, see the work for its full complement of glory – the power it retains to move and uplift its listeners, not only in those couple of isolated "highlights" but from first note to last.

Alan Rich
sleeve note from the original LP Rachmaninoff: Piano Concerto No. 2 (1973)

Artur Rubinstein – Saint-Saëns: Piano Concerto No. 2 de Falla: Nights in the Gardens of Spain

People who knew Saint-Saëns personally seldom fail to mention his wit, which tended to be ironic, dry and sometimes waspish. In Frenchmen this kind of deflationary humour is often a stylistic device for maintaining equilibrium under pressure, and it is possible that if Saint-Saëns had lacked it, he might well have been a kind of over-informed intellectual monster.

It seems likely that Saint-Saëns knew as much *about* music as any man who ever lived, and I have always suspected that he probably knew more than most. He was a child prodigy in the preternatural Mozartean sense and was in fact reading *Don Giovanni* from the orchestral score with pleasure at the age of six. While he was still in his early thirties Berlioz flatly called him "one of the greatest musicians of our epoch," and Gounod remarked that he could "write at will in the style of Rossini, Verdi, Schumann or Wagner."

To this general professional capacity, which already seems a bit much, Saint-Saëns added almost any special musical accomplishment you might care to name. As a sight-reader he was so awesome as to be a legend in the shop talk of his peers. In orchestration his mastery was acknowledged to be second only to that of Berlioz. He was a virtuoso organist in that peculiarly Gallic tradition that manages to combine the elegance of classical geometry with a stirring theatricalism. He was also a virtuoso pianist of major rank – one who began his concert appearances in the Paris of Chopin and was still cheerfully performing his own grandly scaled and technically dazzling concertos half a century later, on the gloomy threshold of the atonal era. He once remarked of himself that he produced music "as an apple tree produces apples" – and this breezy confession of professional ease was the last straw for the kind of musicologist whose deepest suspicions are mobilised by any apparently painless superfluity of talent.

Although I am not aware that anybody has ever cared to initiate a real debate on the subject of Saint-Saëns' innate musicality, few modern critics have been able to forego grudging references to his "eclecticism" or his "facility." One feels a certain sympathy for them on learning that his versatility did not end with music. The august members of the Institut, for example, had to listen to him in formal session, and at length, on such unexpected subjects as the physical sciences and philosophy. Toward the end of the century Paderewski knew Saint-Saëns well (he invaded America, in fact, with Saint-Saëns' Second Concerto, which was for years the vehicle of choice for many Edwardian virtuosos), and in his memoirs the Polish pianist gives an amusing snapshot of the composer bearding the Academy's assorted immortals in their home dens. He recalls that Saint-Saëns had of course been elected as a musician, but that "he used very often to go to sittings in any department – to the department of archaeology, for example, where he would read an interesting memorandum on that subject, or to the department of mathematics, where he would read something about astronomy. A most erudite and unusual man..."

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In brief, Saint-Saëns was obviously a belated post-Renaissance polymath of the most flagrant sort – the exact opposite of the hard-shelled, one-subject specialist that academic insularity has made fashionable today. Such being the case, I can think of no question more interesting in relation to him than this one: what sort of *music* would an honest-to-god modern polymath be apt to come up with?

For openers, there is probably no better answer than the Second Piano Concerto. It was composed in 1868 (seven years before Tchaikovsky's B flat minor concerto), and, leaving aside the confessional and introspective elements the Late Romantic concerto acquired in Russian hands, it may justly be considered the prototype of the genre. It is big; it is a public, not a private, event; it calls for a virtuoso pianist and a virtuoso orchestra. It knows all about the concertos of Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin and Schumann, and without descending to imitation it pays its respects handsomely to several of them. Considering that Saint-Saëns wrote it in the gilded shallows of the Second Empire for the mass audiences of the post-Meyerbeer epoch, we are surprised to find that what he actually produced was a concerted dialogue of the most sophisticated sort about the greatness of his predecessors, beginning with Bach.

The work announces its historic context in the opening statement of the first movement. Any number of concertos open with arresting proclamations for solo piano, but who other than Saint-Saëns has asked this instrument to usher in the orchestra by piling up tremendous suspensions in the style of the Bach organ toccatas? Moreover, one immediately wonders what further use, in a cyclic work, Saint-Saëns can possibly find for a device that Bach himself restricted to more or less free-form fantasias. It sounds grand indeed, but isn't it also gratuitous – a luxurious, non-organic addition to a structure that has no logical need for it?

The answer comes just at the close of the movement, when we hear the suspensions again, but this time sotto voce, a dynamic transformation that gives them the poetic quality of something remembered from the depths of the past. Within this great Bachian parenthesis, meanwhile, Saint-Saëns has given us a marvellous evocation not of French but of German Romanticism – a kind of apotheosized Schumannesque love letter – and the structural and the emotional logic of his piece become clear simultaneously. The movement is in fact a *tour de force* of stylistic dialectic carried off with perfect grace in Saint-Saëns' own language, and if this kind of virtuoso composing can be called eclectic in a pejorative sense, then we must find another word for the architecture of, let us say, the Paris Opéra.

The second movement contains one of those stunning tunes – half dance, half chorale – whose combination of shapeliness and inexhaustible verve was Saint-Saëns' special secret. It is perhaps not quite as noble as the famous tune that concludes the Fourth Concerto, but it is of the same family, and one can readily believe the reports of the early critics that this movement was a vast hit from its first performance. The last movement is a breakneck tarantella and the only movement of the three that sounds at all like a period piece. For some reason practically everybody decided

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around 1868 to write a taramtella – including Saint-Saëns' boyhood friend, the American composer Louis Gottschalk, who in that year composed his *Grande Taramtelle* for piano and orchestra. Comparison of the two pieces is instructive. Gottschalk wrote a forthright and perfectly good taramtella full of Neapolitan brio. Saint-Saëns wrote an equally lively but much more sophisticated piece *about* the taramtella, and although nobody will ever mistake it for a work by Brahms, it is anything but a simplistic adventure in Neapolitan folklore.

Among his other gifts, Saint-Saëns knew how to tell a good story, and his account of the genesis of the Second Concerto, in addition to being characteristic, may even be true. Anton Rubinstein came to him complaining that he had not yet conducted an orchestra in Paris and asking that he arrange a concert for him. Saint-Saëns made inquiry, found that the Salle Pleyel would be free in three weeks and told Rubinstein, "It's all right, I'll write a concerto for the occasion." He then produced the Concerto in G Minor – "which was thus introduced under illustrious patronage." With Rubinstein conducting and Saint-Saëns as soloist, it was first performed on 6 May 1868.

It was the Paris-oriented composers of the Romantic midstream (those who were dominant during Saint-Saëns' boyhood) who first presented Europe and the Americas with Spanish folklore in modern concert dress. What can only be called the Spanish musical tourism of the Romantics began between 1845 and 1852, when Liszt, Glinka and Gottschalk all composed highly popular versions of *La Jota Aragonesa*. Among those musical tourists, Gottschalk was the earliest to zero in (1851-52) on the characteristic music of Andalusia and the related forms of La Mancha, producing remarkably authentic and convincing versions of the fandango, caña, jaleo, tango (the tango had reached Cádiz along with West Indian commerce) and even some interesting references to the Andalusian gitanas styles.

It is illuminating to compare Gottschalk's pieces with the apotheosis of Andalusian music as we find it in Manuel de Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*. Gottschalk's Andalusian statements are not to be faulted as to their ethnic veracity, and they are in fact rather more faithful to their folk sources in a photographic sense than Falla's are. But whereas Gottschalk's *Minuit à Séville* is a trenchantly told sentimental anecdote, complete with castanet effects and guitar figurations, the brooding Andalusian night evoked by Falla in his three big and moodily intense nocturnes is too deep, too dark, too ambiguous to be explained solely in terms of the geography of folklore.

The difference is probably due less to the fact that Falla was a native Andalusian (born in Cádiz in 1876) than to his exposure to the enormously increased sophistication of French composing techniques after the turn of the century – a development summarised in Falla's case by the names of Debussy, Ravel and Dukas, all of whom befriended him upon his arrival in Paris in 1907. Although Falla does not really imitate them, it is impossible to hear *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* without realising that by his awareness of their procedures he was liberated from the German methodology of the Late Romantics. From its mysterious opening measures to its melancholy and equivocal close, this work is impressionistic, giving us not a single folk-tune statement of the Gottschalkian kind. The Spanishness

of *In the Generalife* (the Generalife was an ancient summer palace built by the Moors in the Alhambra) is primarily a matter of atmosphere, even the brief melodic reference to its Oriental past being allusive rather than explicit. *Distant Dance* begins as a kind of dream or recollection, and although it becomes more insistent and vivid as it passes without pause into the final nocturne (*In the Gardens of the Sierra de Córdoba*), even its most tempestuous moments do not suggest the physical reality of the "Spanish dance" as reported by the 19th-century musical tourists noted above. It is significant that although Diaghilev wanted to produce this work as a ballet, the plan never got off the ground – mainly perhaps because Falla was less happy about Diaghilev's notions for a realistic libretto, which included a grand fiesta in the Generalife with ladies in shawls and men in evening dress.

The work was begun in Paris in 1911 and completed in Spain in 1915. Originally Falla planned it on a smaller scale, for piano solo. Albéniz advised him to enlarge its scale, and Ricardo Viñes suggested its ultimate form for piano and orchestra. But Falla seems at no point to have considered it a concerto in the ordinary sense, and it is in fact subtitled *Symphonic Impressions for Piano and Orchestra in Three Parts*.

Robert Offergeld
steve note from the original LP 'Saint-Saëns: Piano Concerto No. 2/de Falla: Nights in the Gardens of Spain' (1970)

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