SYMPOSIUM RECORDS CD 1305

THREE FRENCH PIANISTS

CÉCILE CHAMINADE (Paris 1857-Monte Carlo 1944) was already composing at the age of eight; her first pieces to be performed being church music. Bizet encouraged her to study music. She studied piano with Le Coupey and theory with Savart, teacher of Saint-Saëns and Massenet, and had lessons from Godard and Marsick. She gave her first concert at eighteen. Through her recitals of her own compositions, in England from 1892, in France and in the United States, she and her music achieved great popularity, and in 1914 she became a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour. Her compositions cover many genre: piano miniatures, songs, piano trios, a ballet *Callirhöe*, an opéra-comique *La Sevillane*, several orchestral suites, a 'symphonie lyrique' with chorus and orchestra *Les Amazones*, and a Concertstück for piano and orchestra, which she played in the Queen's Hall in 1895. But the vogue for her music passed, indeed, as Grove's *Dictionary* remarked as early as 1927, "Notwithstanding the real charm and clever writing of many of (her) productions, they do not rise above the level of agreeable salon music." Her records, however, as Harold Schonberg [*The Great Pianists*] wrote, "show her to have been an assured, competent pianist with a good technique, grace, a high degree of rhythmic drive and a good deal of pianistic finesse."
Chaminade's records are amongst the earliest 10"/25cm discs. The recording machine was close to the piano and the sound is astonishingly vivid. They are also of such rarity that some wear in copies available for transfer is to be forgiven.

LOUIS DIÉMER (Paris 1843-Paris 1919) was a pupil at the Conservatoire of Antoine-François Marmontel (1816-1898) for piano, Emmanuel Bazin (1816-1878) for harmony and Ambroise Thomas (1811-1896) for composition. Marmontel had been taught by Zimmermann and succeeded to his position. Although Marmontel had won a *premier prix* he never became a successful virtuoso. In his teaching he laid great emphasis on technique. His pupils included Albéniz, Bizet, Debussy, d'Indy, Dubois, A. and E. Duvernoy, Guiraud, MacDowell, Paladilhe and Pierné. Diémer won a *premier prix* for piano at 13 and another for fugue at 16. He was excused military service, reportedly for 7 years, being bought out with money raised by the wife of Rossini. In 1888 he succeeded to Marmontel's position at the Conservatoire. Amongst others he taught Robert Casadesus, Marcel Ciampi, Alfred Cortot, Marcel Dupré, Lazare Lévy, Robert Lortat, Yves Nat, Édouard Risler, E. Robert Schmitz and Jean Verd. He became interested in 18th century French clavecinistes, particularly Couperin and Rameau. His playing of works by them at the Paris Exhibition of 1889 was especially acclaimed and led to the foundation of the Société des Instruments Anciens. His publications include a 'Concertstück' for piano and orchestra, another for violin and orchestra, a piano concerto, various chamber works, many piano solos and a collection of 'Clavecinistes français'. However, even within his own lifetime his music had all

but ceased to be played, being replaced by works of more substance. Despite the lightness of his own compositions, he was in demand for the first performances of a number of French works, most significant, perhaps, Franck's *Variations symphoniques*.

In Diémer were good and bad characteristics of the Parisian school of the time. In his youth he heard Chopin's pupils and his own programmes contained plenty of his music. In the 'Nocturne' the right hand is often before the left, but musically and never with affectation. The text is followed with precision, though to fit within the time available the end is cut; luckily all the principle material is present. He was known as a dry player, but in this 'Nocturne' there is commitment and expression in plenty and 'La Fileuse' is not lacking in excitement. His *Valse de concert* (dedicated to Mme. Ambroise Thomas) may be banal in the extreme, and it is dryly played, but it is remarkable for 'impeccable finger work, gliding over long pianissimo scale passages with incredible feathery ease.' [Schonberg, ibid.] Likewise, Godard's *Valse chromatique* (dedicated to Diémer) is remarkable for clean, tidy playing, but for little else. Technically he may have been sans pareil, but one understands how his students, having acquired from him finely honed techniques, followed the times in turning to more solid fare.

As his wife was wealthy, his teaching and his concerts were free.

For Hanslick Diémer was a 'delicate and graceful artist.' For Mark Hambourg he was 'a dry-as-dust player with a hard, rattling tone.' In France he was 'the king of the scale and the trill.' For Shaw he was, 'a remarkably clever, self reliant, and brilliant pianist, artistically rather stale... using the works of the great composers as stalking horses for his own powers.' [*The World*, May 24th 1893] As always in such matters, it is for the reader to judge whether Diémer's playing was variable or whether the critics were unreliable.

There are also records of Diémer accompanying the violinist Jules Boucherit. It is hoped to include these in a future anthology. Diémer's records are all very rare.

CHARLES CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (Paris 1835-Algiers 1921) displayed very early strong leanings towards music and every quality to succeed in it. He was first taught by his mother. At five he played a Beethoven violin sonata with the Belgian violinist Antoine Bessems. At seven, already composing, he became a pupil of Camille Stamaty for piano and Pierre Maledin for harmony. At eleven he made his début at the Salle Pleyel. The programme, played from memory, included a Mozart concerto, Beethoven's C minor concerto, a prelude and fugue of Bach, a sonata of Hummel and shorter pieces by Handel and Kalkbrenner. At thirteen he entered the Conservatoire to be taught organ by Eugène Benoit, winning a second prize at fourteen and a first at sixteen. He then studied composition with Halévy. Around then he met and was much influenced by Liszt. In 1852 he failed to win the Prix de Rome, but his *Ode à Sainte Cécile* won first prize of the Société Sainte-Cécile of Paris and was performed. In 1853 he became organist at the Church of Saint Merry, moving to the Madeleine in 1857. He remained there for twenty years, becoming widely known as an organist. In 1856 the Société Sainte-Cécile of Bordeaux awarded its prize to his second symphony, and it too was performed.

From 1861 to 1865 he taught composition at the École Niedermeyer, his only period of teaching. His pupils included Fauré and Messager. Not only was he achieving recognition as a composer, but also as a virtuoso pianist; his playing remarkable for fluency and purity, though a lack of depth was noted. He now evinced a desire to write for the stage. At first in vain, but after a while the Théâtre Lyrique offered him a libretto, *Le Timbre d'argent*, which he set in 1864 and 1865. However, it remained for some years unperformed as he joined a protest against neglect of modern French composers, thus making himself politically unacceptable. Nevertheless his instrumental compositions were performed; by 1875 a trio, a quartet and a quintet, four tone poems, the first four piano concerti (the composer as soloist) and two violin concerti (the first with de Sarasate, the second with Marsick). *Samson et Dalila* was first performed in Weimar, but from 1883 a whole stream of his operas received their premières in Paris. As well as compositions throughout the spectrum of musical genre, he wrote on music, and also wrote poetry, farces and on scientific matters. In 1874 he foresaw that the breakdown of the major-minor distinction would lead into a new era, but, abiding faithfully with the ideals and forms of his upbringing, he never entered it.

Of Saint-Saëns' numerous compositions, the list of those still widely known is short: one opera, *Samson et Dalila*, and sufficient for one concert: *Le Carnaval des animaux*, *Havanaise*, the 'Organ' Symphony, the 4th piano concerto, *Le Rouet d'Omphale* and *Danse macabre*.

Of his abilities as a pianist, he played the piano throughout his life, but was never a travelling virtuoso, we have considerable evidence. It is, however, entirely of his own compositions and slanted towards the lighter pieces. He is the earliest born pianist of whom there are records. [Strictly, since piano-rolls are generically records, the distinction should be accorded to Carl Reinecke (1824-1910) of whom there is a roll of Mozart's Sonata in F major K.332.] In the extremely rare 1904 series the piano is well back from the recording machine, nevertheless there are serious overloads; perhaps in the excitement he failed to heed instructions on the machine's capabilities. The two 'Valse' derive from his *Suite Algérienne.* The first movement of the concerto, with its homage to Bach, is played very fast. As it is well within the limit of time recordable, we must ask whether he normally played it so. Certainly Harold Bauer remembered him for fast tempi. Claudio Arrau remembered him 'playing... with incredible ease... the most even scales... and great power in the fingers.' His playing is remarkably fleet and fluent, and there is power, but it was frequently termed dry; he is a more exciting and powerful player than Diémer, but we can hear similarities. Wagner had no time for Saint-Saëns as a composer, but he was immensely impressed by his playing and his powers of sight-reading and memory, and von Bülow recalled Saint-Saëns playing from the full score manuscript of *Siegfried* prima vista and conveying the feel and structure of the work. Even after the first world war Saint-Saëns retained his powers; for Arthur Rubinstein, "It was touching to hear these two fine artists [the other was Francis Planté] playing with a technical perfection seldom obtained by younger pianists." [*My Many Years*]

MEYRIANE HÉGLON (1867-1942) was born in Belgium of Danish descent, the family name being Willemsen. After studying in Paris under Rosine Laborde, Louis-Henri Obin and Marie Sass she sang at the Théâtre la Monnaie. In 1890 she began an illustrious career at the Grand Opéra, where she was in the French premières of *Otello* (Emilia) and *Siegfried* (Erda) and in the premières of various minor French works. She sang frequently in Monte Carlo, where she was in the premières of de Lara's *Messaline* with Tamagno (1899) and Saint-Saëns' *Hélène* (1904) dedicated to Melba. She also sang in Berlin, London and Zurich. She was married to the composer Xavier Leroux. In retirement she taught in Paris, her pupils including Ninon Vallin.

Notes:

Cover Portrait: Cécile Chaminade

Dedications are:

Track 1 à Madame G. COSTALLAT
Track 2 à Madamoiselle MARGUERITE BALUTET
Track 4 à mon Amie GABRIELLE TURPIN
Track 5 à ma Nièce Antoinette CHAMINADE
Track 7 à Monsieur ANDRÉ GRESSE

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