

# *Carnival of the Animals* by Camille Saint-Saens

## **About the Composer**

Camille Saint-Saens (1835-1921) was a celebrated French composer, conductor, teacher, pianist, and organist. Like Mozart, he was a child prodigy. By age 3, he began to study piano, and before his fifth birthday he performed publicly before a Paris salon. By age 7 he had begun to compose and at 11 made his public concert debut playing concertos by Mozart and Beethoven in the Salle Pleyel. He attended the Paris Conservatory, was organist for many years at the Church of the Madeleine, and taught piano at Ecole Niedermeyer. He was a man of many interests, including poetry, foreign travel, archeology, astronomy, and mathematics. His most famous musical works included an opera *Sampson and Delilah*, orchestral poems such as *Danse Macabre*, symphonies, concertos for violin, cello and piano, and numerous chamber works. While he was a serious and dedicated composer, his music reflected his French wit and charm. As you will see in *Carnival of the Animals*, he loved a good musical joke, and he had a talent for musical characterization, or bringing to life the animals that he wrote about.

## **About the Music**

*Carnival of the Animals* is a suite of pieces written for chamber orchestra about animals, intended as a musical joke for Shrove Tuesday. This is the day Carnival is celebrated in Paris (like Mardi Gras in New Orleans), as the last big party before Lent, when the party-goers dressed in elaborate costumes, animal masks, outlandish hats and more. St.-Saens never allowed this composition to be published during his lifetime, though he shared it with his friends and students in private performances. It was written for 2 pianos, violins, viola, cello, double bass, piccolo, flute, clarinet, xylophone, and glockenspiel. This work is an excellent example of program music, or music written to convey an idea, an image, or a character. Program music is the opposite of absolute or pure music where the composer has no descriptive intent or specific meaning to convey in his music. In *Carnival of the Animals*, St.-Saens brings alive the character, movement, and sounds of the animals with such wit and clarity that this work has become one of the greatest of children's classics.

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