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A Performer's Guide to:

Saint-Saens' Sonata for Bassoon and Piano

Edition of choice: There are quite a few different editions of this piece available on TrevCo's website. The "Masters Music" editions are the cheapest, but are the exact same engraving as what is available for free on IMSLP. Several more expensive versions are available from Amadeus, Schott, Henle, and TrevCo. Of these, TrevCo's is the least expensive and claims to correct several misprints in the original Durand edition, and has a separately available version of the second movement with more editorial changes. It is also worth noting that the original manuscript is available on IMSLP.

About the Composer-

Camille Saint-Saens was a French composer, organist, and pianist. He was educated at the Paris Conservatory and spent the bulk of his career as a freelance pianist and composer. He is especially well known for his piano concertos, symphonies (especially the third, "Organ Symphony"), Carnival of the Animals, and his opera *Samson and Delilah,* from which the *Danse Bacchanale* is frequently performed. He was a very long-lived composer, born in 1835 most of his life was firmly in the "Romantic Period", but he lived until 1921 so he saw the beginning of twentieth century music, including the music of Debussy, Stravinsky, and Darius Milhaud. His bassoon sonata was his final piece and was composed in the final year of his life, it shows no influence of the turbulent musical experimentation happening in the world while it was composed, it exemplifies the singing lyricism, vibrant characters, and traditional harmonic practices of the 19th century. Because of this, it should be approached as one of the few Romantic bassoon pieces, despite being composed 21 years into the twentieth century.

Movement 1- Allegretto moderato

This movement is fairly short and straightforward but is full of great interplay between the solo bassoon line and the piano. Throughout most of the movement, the right hand of the piano plays sixteenth note arpeggios, mainly adding texture. The left hand, however, is the source of interesting counterpoint to the bassoon line. It is a very useful exercise to slowly play through the movement with just the left hand of the piano (or even another wind instrument) to have the chance to really pay attention to the musical gestures implied by the two parts.

The opening phrase of the bassoon part is repeated three times in this movement, each time Saint-Saens subtly changes it, the lengths of the notes are different each time, as well as where they fall metrically. The dynamic also changes, the phrase begins piano, is fortissimo at the climax of the movement, and pianissimo at the low point.

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The first note should emerge out of the piano texture (the piano plays the same G one sixteenth-note before the bassoon entrance) and expand into the phrase. To achieve this entrance, consider using a breath attack, or at the very least a very light articulation. The entrance always seems to arrive before the bassoonist is ready to make a delicate entrance, so when practicing the entrance, always hear the piano part in your head for a measure and a half and practice breathing early enough to have the embouchure set and support engaged before starting the G.

The dynamics in this movement are essentially one long crescendo to the fortissimo at square 1, and one long diminuendo from square 1 to the end. Of course, each phrase should have some nuanced hairpins inside of it but it is easy to get too loud too soon and have no more volume to give at the climax. To conserve raw volume, look for ways to open and color the sound without relying on dynamics. Opening up the syllable on the first note from an "ee" to an "ay" to an "ah" for instance will create warmth and intensity without necessarily getting louder. Vibrato can also be sped up or slowed down to color the sound in a subtler way than dynamics.

Beginning in measure 16, the accompaniment rhythm in the piano accelerates to sixteenth-note triplets, at measure 20 they return to sixteenth notes but are more disjointed, the arpeggio is passed between both hands; at measure 24 they accelerate to thirty-second-notes to drive into the climax at square 1. The bassoonist can reflect this by phrasing with more urgency, note grouping across entire measures. For instance, in measure 15, the octave B-flats should lead across the bar line to the B-flat on the downbeat of measure 16 which then relaxes somewhat. The two-sixteenth-note-eighth rhythms at the end of measure sixteen lead into the downbeat of measure 17. This pattern continues for several measures until square one, as a general rule of thumb: group small notes as though they lead to the *following* long note, rather than being connected to the preceding long note.

At square 1, I like to think of the repeated Gs in measures 25, 26, and 27 as one long G (in fact I tend to hold the first G over the quarter rest, only lifting long enough for a good breath). I think of the repeated notes as an opportunity to rearticulate with a very firm, very tenuto articulation as if pulling along a somewhat reluctant follower.

The run in measure 30 is problematic for many bassoonists, it helps to recognize that is really an embellished version of the eighth-note figure in measure 5, and that it is really an eighth-note figure itself: B, E, G, B, E, F-sharp, G, each with a chromatic lower neighbor. It is essential to practice it without the lower neighbors, this not only teaches you to emphasize the function of the gesture, but it also lays the framework for being able to recover from a finger slip. Some bassoonists take time at the beginning of the gesture and accelerate through it, this is an option because the piano rests during those beats. However, I prefer to play it in time for two reasons: first, Saint-Saens did not mark to take time there, secondly, the figure occurs shortly after the climax of the movement, while things are just beginning to slow down. Coming to a complete stop interrupts the flow of the movement for me, I prefer to use it as a final catalyst of forward motion before the tempo relaxes in earnest.

Measure 32 also presents difficulty, navigating from the high B to the lower one in a way that feels organic. The seven sixteenth-notes from F-sharp to B function as a pick up to the B on beat three, but this is hard to show with the octave leap. Practice the phrasing by taking beats three, and four up an octave to make the connection, then lower them back to as printed and try to maintain the gesture.

The eighth-notes in the bassoon line in measures 33, 34, and 35 should connect to the right hand of the piano in those same measures and measure 36. It's really one melody, just split between two instruments. Try practicing from the score, playing the piano part and the bassoon part at the same time.

Then play only the bassoon part but imagine playing the piano part. When you get together with a pianist, practice handing the melody back and forth to one another smoothly.

The coda of the movement and final statement of the main theme in measure 45 should be played very lightly and very lifted. Each of the main notes falls on an upbeat, so the effect is like lightly tapping a falling balloon to keep it airborne, rebound from the chords in the piano.

In some editions, measure 49 is marked with an "8va", this is a misprint. It should be played as marked, beginning on the lowest D on the instrument and floating the final high B from the lower G.

The last note tends to be sharp for almost everyone, unfortunately it is the third of the chord (which is not doubled in the piano part) and so should actually be placed quite a bit lower than "in tune". To combat this, try to maintain the lower voicing of the previous measure, thinking an "ah" or "ooh" syllable, this will also give the note great warmth. If the note still tends to be high you can try playing it without the E-flat/Resonance key, or by using the thumb F-sharp key instead of the B-flat key (this fingering is so low it is usually necessary to use the E-flat/Resonance key to stop it from being too flat).

Movement 2- Allegro scherzando

Starting this movement immediately sets a challenge that is repeated on nearly every entrance after a rest in the bassoon part: entering on the second eighth-note of the beat in fast six-eight time. The tendency is almost always to be late and to start without a deep breath or setting the embouchure. When practicing a section, always breathe and set as though you are continuing the previous music, whether you actually are or not. This will ensure that the habit of breathing and setting the embouchure early is deeply ingrained in your playing of the piece.

To start the very beginning of the piece, there are two options, both requiring trust and communication between the bassoonist and the pianist. The simplest is for the bassoonist to breathe and cue as though they were going to play the downbeat—being sure to give adequate prep for the pianist to fit in their grace notes. The other option depends on a line of sight between the bassoonist and pianist, in this case the pianist has the freedom to start the piece how they choose and must breathe and cue clearly enough for the bassoon to breathe and set the embouchure.

The first two measures of the bassoon part tend to be executed to vertically. When the pitches are examined out of the meter, they're just an E minor arpeggio with each note repeated an octave higher. Because of this, it is natural to emphasize each lower note and transform the meter to simple time. To combat this, practice separating each beat by its note group instead of how it's beamed so the inner parts of the beat are always leading forward. (See Ex. 1)

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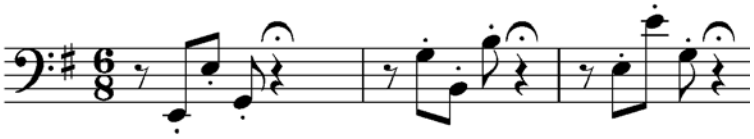
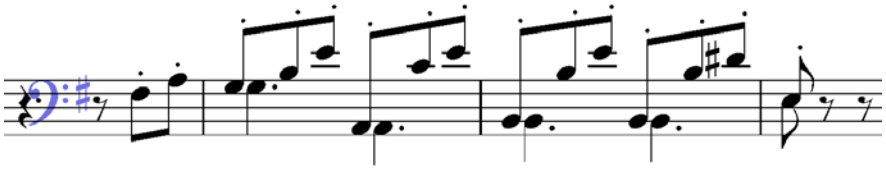


Ex. 1



Ex. 2

Measures 5 through 8 present another situation to consider. The figuration in the bassoon's arpeggios in these measures, one lower note followed by two rising notes, suggests two voices. One bass voice (emphasized by the piano chords) mentally continues throughout the whole beat, and the two upper notes rebound off of it. This can be executed by playing each lower note louder and with a stronger articulation, and then articulating the upper notes more softly while diminuendoing. (See Ex. 2)

Measure 17 introduces a figure that returns at various points in the movement: a rising arpeggio of four sixteenth-notes on the second eighth of a measure followed by three rising eighth-notes, marked leggero. Each time this pattern occurs, the piano plays an eighth-note chord on the downbeat of the measure. I choose to interpret this gesture to be a rebound from the piano chord, each time diminuendoing through the measure, until the final time (in this case measure 21) where Saint-Saens adds a crescendo marking, at this one I begin to drive forward to the cadence.

In measure 31, the bassoon has a trill on scale degree 5 with two nachschläge, this strong authentic cadence in the key of B minor is weakened by the bassoon not actually playing the resolution note, instead the piano plays the implied B. When practicing, the bassoonist should resolve the trill on the downbeat in time, playing the resolution note and driving toward it. Once this habit is ingrained, the B can be removed but the habit of preparing should hopefully remain.

Measures 66 and 67 are repeated B major chords which will become the dominant and pedal point after the key change at square 2. Other than a forte marking in measure 64, Saint-Saens doesn't provide any interpretive markings, many bassoonists choose to decay across these measures with a subito fortissimo in the piano in measure 68. I choose to stay strong and even grow, preparing the fortissimo which becomes a diminuendo after square 2. One provides contrast, the other continuity. You can experiment with your pianist and decide what suits you better.

The melody introduced in measure 71 by the piano and repeated in the bassoon in measure 73 is the first lyrical passage in this movement. It's also the first major section. As such, it should be played as smoothly as possible for maximum contrast. It should also remain in tempo, not only does Saint-Saens not mark a slowdown, but the driving B eighth-notes in the left hand of the piano suggest forward momentum.

Measures 83 through 86 can be tricky to play at tempo, I choose to play them quite staccato to contrast the lyricism of the preceding measures, and to diminuendo each set of two eighth-notes, rebounding from the piano downbeats instead of driving into the next beat.

The sixteenth-note runs in measures 89 through 91 can be very difficult when the movement is taken at a fast tempo. I cheat here and use trill fingerings: for the G-sharp at the end of measure 89 I use the trill fingering from F-sharp (finger normal pinky F-sharp and lift RH 1 & 2 for the G-

sharp), and for the F-sharp at the end of measure 90, I use the trill fingering from E (regular E fingering, lift RH 2 & 3 for the F-sharp), for the rest I use normal fingerings. For myself, these fingerings are more consistently fluid at fast tempos than full fingerings and sound the same. Bassoonists are blessed and cursed with a truly ridiculous number of fingerings, many problems of technique, pitch, and color can be solved or mitigated by finding the perfect fingering.

Measures 129 and 130 (square 4) are a high point in the movement, after modulating through several keys the movement returns to its original tonic, and it is marked dynamically loud and accented. From this point the piece should diminuendo as soft as possible for a low point in measures 144 and 145 before driving for a climax in 158 on the high C.

For the final chromatic scale up to the high E, I begin to use breath attacks on the downbeat of measure 166, the tongue tends to make notes more likely to crack. I also use the "old fingerings" for D-sharp and E, (D-sharp: LH 2 3 Thumb C-sharp RH 2 and Thumb F-sharp, E: LH ½ 2 3 Thumb C-sharp, RH 1 2 3), these work better for my instrument for articulated notes, if you don't have a high E key, this is your best option. Some people slowdown for the last beat and slur the last two notes together. Keeping in mind this piece was composed for the French bassoon system which is much more reliable in the extreme high register, we should do what is necessary to cleanly execute the movement. When deciding whether to slur or articulate, also keep in mind that it is always harder to cleanly articulate the E at the end of a long and tiring movement in front of an audience than it is to do it isolated in a practice room.

Movement 3- Molto adagio, Allegro moderato

The opening thirteen measures of this movement are exhausting! Look for opportunities (and notate in your part) to not only inhale, but to exhale, and to reset the embouchure to stave off fatigue.

These measures feature a simple melody in the bassoon, long eighth tied to a thirty-second followed by three thirty-second-notes and repeated, over very sparse piano accompaniment. Because the motivic material of the bassoon melody is so repetitive, it is essential for the bassoonist to add interest by shading with vibrato and voicing for varied colors, as well as simply keeping the phrase moving.

Not every "long note" in the melody is equal, some of the suspended notes are chord tones, others are suspensions. For instance, the first two Ds are chord tones (the entire first two measures are a I chord in G major), but the F-sharp, D, B, and G in the third measure are suspensions over a C major IV chord on beats one and two and a D major V chord on beats three and four. I choose to reflect this in my phrasing by diminuendoing over the chord tones with the thirty-second-notes leading forward into the next tone, and by crescendoing over the suspended notes to lean into the dissonance and continuing to push through the thirty-second-notes. This should be kept fairly subtle, the opening is marked piano, so all dynamic shading should remain in the context, but the espressivo marking gives the bassoonist license to have hairpins inside of each phrase.

The F-sharp at the beginning of measure 6 tends to be sharp for most bassoonists, this is compounded by the soft dynamic and the fatigue of the section. This particular F-sharp is the third of a major chord so should be on the low side anyway. Depending on how flexible my reed is, I sometimes

use a muted fingering which makes it easier to play softly and is usually more flexible. In this case I add the LH pinky E-flat/resonance key and the low D key to my normal pinky F-sharp fingering.

Following that pesky F-sharp is a long stretch without any clear place to breathe, I like to wait until after the long A in measure 8 and after the D quarter note in measure 11. Some people breathe after the F-natural in measure 11, but this is a 4-3 suspension to the E that I don't want to interrupt. When choosing when to break a phrase to breathe, always try to find a place that disrupts neither a motive nor a tendency tone.

Many bassoonists choose to speed up in measure 26, but Saint-Saens didn't mark an accelerando. I think it is more effective to stay in tempo and derive drama from the dissonance and jagged dotted rhythms. Instead of letting them slip into being triplets, veer closer to double dotting and sustain the dotted note at full intensity, phrasing across the measure rather than fading in and out on every pitch.

There is a misprint in the bassoon part of measure 33 in many editions. The Ds at the beginning of the pick-up gesture should be thirty-second-notes following a dotted sixteenth rest. Some editions print an eighth rest followed by a sixteenth note. The rhythm is printed correctly in the score.

The brief cadenza in measure 34 should stay fairly simple, it serves to transition from a dark, dissonant passage to the bright and simple opening. Note that the ritardando is not marked until beat three of the measure, the first part of the slowdown is built into the rhythm.

The section from measure 44 to 47 subverts the "expected" nice ending of the movement in G major. Half cadences in B-flat major rarely occur in G major. This is a dramatic, ambiguous gesture that should come as a surprise to the audience, leaving them anticipating what will come next. The eighth note C minor arpeggio in measure 44 is unaccompanied and heavily accented. When the piano rejoins in measure 45, keep the volume and intensity strong through the chromatic gestures, the diminuendo isn't marked to begin until beat two of 46, so at that point it should still be forte so the diminuendo can be apparent, and the bassoonist isn't left trying to play the low F more softly than they can well.

After a dramatic pause, the final part of the piece begins. Whether it's movement three and a half, movement four, or one long coda it should not be introduced with a page turn. Copy your final page and ask the pianist to do the same so the suspense is not dispelled.

The final section of the piece should come across as jaunty, it's marked Allegro moderato (not molto vivace frenetico) and the contrast between the heavily accented forte quarter notes and the light piano sixteenths should be the main focus.

The long trill in measures 85 to 90 is not the most interesting part of the texture, the shifting harmony in the piano is! I like to articulate it strongly (but in a tenuto sort of way) and trilling slowly, as I diminuendo to let the piano come through, I speed up the trill somewhat, and then really speed up the trill as I crescendo to the resolution.

The triplets in measure 91 are another great note grouping example, the five notes in measure 91 clearly lead to the downbeat of 92, then imagine a string player retaking their bow to crescendo and group to the C on the downbeat of measure 93.

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Available Recordings-

Bram van Sambeek on "Bassoon Kaleidoscope"

Michel Bettez with Pierre-Richard Aubin on "Le Basson Romantique"

Milan Turkovic with Naoko Yoshino on "Bassoon Extravaganza" (arranged for harp)