



CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS, ORATORIO DE NOËL, Op. 12. Bärenreiter. Full orchestral score, BA 11304; vocal score with piano reduction, BA 11304-90; vocal score, BA 11304-91. “Bärenreiter Urtext is a seal of quality assigned only to scholarly-critical editions. It guarantees that the musical text represents the current state of research, prepared in accordance with clearly defined editorial guidelines. Bärenreiter Urtext: the last word in authentic text—the musicians’ choice.” Bärenreiter’s claim is certainly borne out in this fine edition of Saint-Saëns’s *Christmas Oratorio*. The composer had just turned 23 and had spent one year as organist of the most prestigious church in Paris, the Madeleine. He wrote the original six movements within twelve days and within the next five years had added another four, one of which was the popular trio for soprano, tenor, and baritone “*Tecum principium*.”

Saint-Saëns later wrote that he made the solos difficult and the choir parts very simple because of an amateur choir recruited for the occasion. Since the church had a choir of men and boys, his claim of the amateur choir is suspect. What is believable is that after a few years he gave up performing it because of the expense; the pastor would not contribute anything for the performance, and Saint-Saëns had to pay for everything himself. France was notoriously lacking in any Christmas music

other than collections of noëls, so the *Oratorio de Noël* was the first major Christmas choral work after Berlioz’s *L’Enfance du Christ*, premiered just five years before.

The present edition by Christina M. Stahl relies not only on the first edition of 1863 (a vocal score with piano accompaniment prepared by the composer’s pupil Eugène Gigout) but also later publications, as well as the composer’s manuscripts and those of various copyists. The text is in Latin only, and there is considerable discussion given to the French pronunciation of Latin that was common up to the 1903 *motu proprio* (which insisted on Italian pronunciation) and that persisted into the 1940s. Much of Saint-Saëns’s text gives the accent on the last syllable of each word, although he did make revisions to the words in 1888. If you are looking for an interesting masterwork of no more than moderate difficulty for the Christmas season, do investigate this superb edition. It has everything to recommend it, including a charming pastorella, an easy choral finale (“*Tollite hostias*”), and most of the work performed by the three soloists.

ROLLIN SMITH