

Alessandro Baricco

La Carnaval des Animaux

A possible text for the work of the same name by Saint-Saëns

Note. Ideally, the text should be read by one of the musicians (indicated in the text as **M**) rather than by a voice over.

Enter the musicians.

Applause.

The musicians take their places.

M. - Good evening. Tonight's concert was to have been a very special one. As you have already been informed, perhaps, maestro Saint-Saëns was to have been with us tonight. It has been a long time since he last played in public, but he really misses the concert pianist's life... he really misses life, full stop... in any case he had decided to go back to the stage, and had chosen this very evening and this very theatre to mark his return. Unhappily, as you perhaps know, maestro Saint-Saëns finds himself in a rather peculiar, let's say extremely peculiar, situation. He is well... no, honestly, he really likes this place where... I mean everything's fine, there are only a few problems about coming and going... getting in and out... it's a complicated business, so... in the end... in short, it is with profound regret that I have to inform you that maestro Saint-Saëns will not be playing with us here tonight. I must add, however, that the maestro has had the kindness, quite moving really, to write to us. A letter. (*He picks up some sheets of paper*) Here it is. A letter. It's curious because (he shows the sheets to the audience) it has been written on a word processor... I mean to say, they have computers, you know?, up there, I mean, who would have thought that... well...

(he reads, or rather, gives a résumé of, the letter quoting some sections - the ones in inverted commas - verbatim). Right, maestro Saint-Saëns says hello to everyone, he sends his thanks... he says... he says "it's beautiful here", he talks a bit about the people there... lots of musicians, he says they spend the nights playing, "I've learned a lot of music that you all ought to hear, I go to lessons, occasionally, with this really extraordinary chap, I go with Poulenc so we can split the expenses, an exceptional teacher, I don't know if it's his real name but here they all call him Elvis... Elvis the Pelvis to be exact... and with the others too, we play this strange music, you should hear it, it all leads off from these notes ", maestro Saint-Saëns has even written down the notes, it ought to go something like this... (*He plays the notes. They form the bass line of a boogie woogie. The first time he plays the notes slowly, without understanding very well what they are, but one of the two pianists picks up the line at a faster tempo, the boogie beat becomes perceptible, and in quick succession the other musicians take their cue from the base line and launch into a wild boogie. Only the cellist is not playing. He looks around for a bit, then gets up and goes off, offended. A couple of musicians see him and stop playing. He disappears behind the wings, indignant. Everyone has noticed and has stopped playing, except for one of the two pianists who carries on playing undaunted, having lots of fun. They stop him. Silence.*) The **M.** makes a gesture of apology to the audience and goes off behind the

wings. Silence. The musicians are motionless on the stage. Furtively, one plays a few notes of the boogie bass line, but everyone skewers him with a look. The **M.** comes back on stage holding the cellist by the hand. The cellist goes back to his place. The **M.** goes back to his place too).

M. - I'm sorry (*He picks up the sheets again*). Maestro Saint- Saëns says... "the idea of writing a Carnival of the Animals may undoubtedly be considered idiotic. As in fact it is, to a certain extent. On the other hand I could have done worse. For example I could have written a toy symphony." (*he turns over the sheet*) "I thought that everything might begin with a triumphal march, perhaps with a lion leading the parade. It's not a brilliant idea. But it works. If you don't know how to begin, begin with a march. It always works."

(*He immediately strikes up the introduction*)

1. Introduction et Marche Royale du Lion

M. Saint- Saëns says that here, should you wish, you may applaud.

(*Applause*)

Maestro Saint- Saëns says "Thank you". The following piece is dedicated to the cock and the hen. (*He looks at the letter*) **M.** Saint- Saëns says that he has nothing to say in this regard. He restricts himself to begging your pardon.

2. Poules et coqs

"When I wrote the following piece I was thinking of animals that move extremely quickly. And so I wrote it extremely quickly. It should be played extremely quickly. You will forget about it extremely quickly. But afterwards there is a piece I like, it was written while thinking about tortoises. Tortoises, it has to be admitted, are splendid animals. In reality they live for a couple of hours, more or less: but they do it so slowly they pull the wool over Time's eyes and when they die, once the sums are totted up, decades have gone by. One thing I have always wondered about tortoises is how they manage, when need arises, to mate. I mean if you think about all that stuff they carry around on their backs... (*he reads a little to himself, then makes an apologetic expression and puts down the sheet of paper*)

3. Hémiiones

4. Tortues

"As even a dull witted child would understand, the next pieces are dedicated to the elephant and the kangaroo. The third instead ought to be an aquarium, or a place full of fish if you like. The music seems a bit like Debussy, but when I told him this, when I told Debussy I mean, he started to laugh and he hasn't stopped since. Up here Debussy is a highly respected person. He goes around with someone called Jimi Hendrix. They smash guitars and smoke grass. Not the kind that grows on the lawn. Another kind."

5. L'Eléphant

6. Kangourous

7. Aquarium

Maestro Saint-Saëns asks if there are any music critics in the audience. (*Pause*) If there are, maestro Saint-Saëns would like to apologize sincerely. The next piece is called "Wild Asses".

8. Personnages à longues oreilles.

"The next two pieces are dedicated to birds. You have to be light as a bird, not as a feather. Paul Valéry said that. If you are short of memorable sentences, you can have this one. Another one I like is: it wasn't raining the day Noah began building the Ark. Three or four sentences

of this kind, and you've got enough wisdom to get you through to the end, and die an easy death. When Pancho Villa was dying he came up with some unforgettable last words: "Tell the people I said something really beautiful. Pancho Villa is a Mexican and a revolutionary. But the cuckoo is a very punctual bird, originally from Switzerland, like the banks with holes".

9. Le coucou au fond des bois.

10. Volière.

"Pianists and fossils have a lot of things in common. It's just that I cannot recall so much as one of them. The fact remains that the next two pieces are dedicated to them. You will recognize the one for the pianists because of the extremely complex arrangement, my own personal tribute to (*the names of the two pianists follow*), the only ones today able, probably, to execute this page with the necessary clarity, speed, intensity, and accuracy. I thank them as of now. I know that their performance will be memorable. Ladies and Gentlemen, (*the names of the two pianists follow*)."

11. Pianiste

12. Fossiles

M. - "If you are still here, you have finally come to the only really famous page in this carnival of mine. The Swan. This came out well. Every so often melodies like this one chance to come to mind, and when that happens all you have to do is take care not to spoil anything, to write down the music just as you found it without breaking anything. I recall that this was the way things went with The Swan. A touch of piano to keep things on their feet, and then it's the cello's turn to sing. When you hit on melodies like this it doesn't even matter that much anymore who plays them. The Swan can be played by a mediocre musician, or a drunken cellist, or a perfect idiot, it doesn't matter. The Swan is like certain songs that... (*The cellist gets up and goes off, offended. The M. notices this, breaks off his reading, makes an apologetic gesture in the direction of the audience and follows the cellist behind the scenes. The other musicians remain on stage. Motionless. Then, suddenly, they strike up the boogie we heard at the beginning. Apparently spontaneously, without even so much as a gesture of complicity. As if it were a tic. They break off when they see the cellist and the M. coming back to their places. The M. picks up the pages of Saint-Saëns's letter.*)

M. - Sorry. (*He pauses briefly, reads under his breath, as if he were skipping a bit and trying to start again from a point farther on. Then, reading, he smiles. He looks up at the audience.*) Maestro Saint-Saëns says that, joking apart, The Swan really did come out well for him. He says that (he lowers his eyes to read) "If you are sitting beside someone you have always wanted to kiss but never dared, well, I feel that this would be a good time to do it." That's what he says.

13. Le Cygne

M. - Maestro Saint-Saëns asks how it went. Not the music: the business of the kiss. (*Pause*) Voilà. Then there are the farewells, he thanks everybody... he says that he'll make it to come to play with us, sometime or another, or maybe we can go to play at his place. (*Pause*) But come to think of it, it might be better if he came here, objectively speaking, it would be more practical. There is also a postscript. Maestro Saint-Saëns says... "I know that, since I came here all those years ago, they have invented bags of things. I wonder if you might be able to send me some of them. Just like that, out of curiosity, I'd like to see them, keep them here." Maestro Saint-Saëns has enclosed a list (*he opens up a sheet that unfolds like an accordion: it is two yards long. The M. starts reading*). "A green walkman, an electric guitar, a toaster, three packets of soluble aspirin, a poster of Marilyn Monroe, an answering machine, a mountain bike with 36 gears, a shampoo with balsam for added highlights, a touch of air conditioning, twelve frankfurters, and the 1984 Madonna calendar... (*the musicians strike up the finale, he carries on reading for a bit in a steadily lower voice and then he falls in with the performance*)

14 Final

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