Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) was one of the most important composers of organ music in France in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet his organ compositions and his career as an organist have been virtually unexamined by scholars. It has also been frequently claimed that he was a composer who wrote in one, consistent style throughout his life, with his music showing no development over time.

This dissertation first discusses Saint-Saëns’s career as an organist and organ composer, summarizing material that is available elsewhere and presenting new information gained from an examination of the records of the Conservatoire National de Musique in Paris, the three churches where Saint-Saëns was an organist (Saint-Merry, the Madeleine, and Saint-Severin), and the composer’s correspondence, including a very large volume of unpublished correspondence from Saint-Saëns to his music publishers Auguste and Jacques Durand. This correspondence, from the archives of the present Durand Company, covers the period 1875-1921.

Following the biography, three chapters present detailed stylistic analyses of music for solo organ and harmonium from the three periods of time during which Saint-Saëns wrote music for these instruments (1850-1870, the 1890s, and the twentieth century), with particular attention to changes in the composer’s style. Unpublished music (primarily but not exclusively from the early period) and, in an effort to gain insight into the composer’s compositional process, sketches and drafts of published music (primarily from the middle period) are included in the analysis.

The final chapter summarizes stylistic developments in Saint-Saëns’s organ and harmonium works over time, assessing his contributions as a composer of organ music, achievements for which he has not been given the credit rightfully his. Saint-Saëns initiated a virtuosic organ technique in the 1850s that led the way to the French symphonic school, introduced the Prelude and Fugue, a genre largely unknown in French organ music, and experimented with harmonic innovations abreast of his times in his organ music throughout his life. Finally, the last chapter attempts to explain why Saint-Saëns’s organ music and career have been so neglected and misunderstood in the past.