

A look through the score

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It would be easy to make a detailed analysis of *Proserpine*, to show how, by means of multiple *themes*, incessantly modified and intertwined in myriad ways, the composer has sought to convey the unexpressed sentiments of the characters. The composer has little taste for this sort of dissection, even though it is highly fashionable; in his view, it is up to his listeners to perform this task, if they have a taste for it, and if the work seems to them worth studying; otherwise, it seems to him preferable to listen naïvely, to let oneself be borne along by the musical stream, just as the boatman runs with the current, without worrying about the chemical composition of the water that carries him, the creatures and things it may contain. However it is created, music must be capable above all of being listened to musically; if such were not the case, it would no longer be music.

(Camille Saint-Saëns, *Quelques mots sur Proserpine*, pamphlet printed by the Théâtre Zizinia of Alexandria, 1902)

It may be that Saint-Saëns, who intertwines and modifies (though rather less than he claims) a dozen or so motifs whose dramatic effectiveness does not yield to musical necessities, examined the study published by Étienne Destranges in 1895 hoping that justice would be done to ‘this work, by turns charming and passionate ... the most accomplished, after *Samson et Dalila*, in the series of Saint-Saëns operas [... in which] the passages that were most criticised in 1887 would, rightly, be the most admired now’ (Étienne Destranges, *Une partition méconnue, Proserpine de Camille Saint-Saëns. Étude analytique*, 1895).

Already, before Destranges, Gounod had pointed out the abundance of ‘details of the keenest interest with respect to the expression of characters and the aptness of the dramatic intention’, underlining Saint-Saëns’s qualities as a symphonist, which a section of the French public regarded as incompatible with operatic composition: ‘His understanding of the resources of the orchestra suggests to him, indeed I would say imposes on him, the continual use of them as a means of bringing out a colour or an expression in the depiction of sentiments or characters. But if he follows the subtlest twists of the drama step by step and with the most scrupulous fidelity, he does so with a constant concern for the specific and intrinsic value of the musical idea and form, and does not serve up the music as food for the drama: always and everywhere he remains a musician’ (*La France*, 23 March 1887). A cursory examination of the most significant details of the score of *Proserpine* will corroborate Gounod’s masterly synthesis of the basic elements that give the work its great value.



Act One

Rising up from the orchestra pit, a wandering threnody installs a mood of uncertainty. Played by the unison strings, given a shimmering quality by woodwind doublings, it snakes around an elusive centre: this is the *Proserpine* motif. Four ample, brassy chords, featuring chromaticisms that are no less painful, attempt to resolve the motif; this has been seen as *Aspiration to Love*.

♥ Scene I. A total contrast appears as the curtain rises: in counterpoint to the ironical words of the young lords (and a small chorus that echoes them) as they tell each other of Proserpine’s whims, the orchestral texture advances, piquant and polychromatic, with a hint of vulgarity; the tone is playful, diatonic, but the part-writing as strict as in a Bach invention or prelude; the music carries the words that energise it.

☞ Scene II. Glimpsed in her two aspects, intimate and worldly, sombre and brilliant, the heroine may now appear. An oboe develops her motif, then a viola as she sighs ‘Sabatino n’est pas venu’ (Sabatino has not come). Blind or deaf to what she is saying, her lovers close this parenthesis and continue in the tone of the preceding scene. Proserpine does not reply, but the orchestra does it for her: an ample *pianissimo*, *Sadness* (a variant of the *Aspiration to Love* motif) haunts her silence. Since Proserpine does not sing the expected aria (a necessary stage in operatic logic), Orlando and then Ercole improvise a *galant siciliana*: flute and harp accompany the former, oboe and violins the latter. Insensible to such delicacy – which itself is enough to underline her malaise – Proserpine returns with her mystery (‘Sabatino n’est pas venu’) and her worshippers. If it does not make Proserpine’s indifference more evident, if it is not perceived as a point of attraction at the centre of the modulatory conversations, the *siciliana* will remain an irrelevance.

☞ Scene III. At this point Sabatino and his friend Renzo enter. The unity and the tone of this scene of musical conversation, somewhat tense in spite of the complicity between the two men, are assured by the recurrence of an arpeggiated triplet motif on the degrees of the triad with added sixth (G-E-A/G-E-C/G-C-E/G etc.), an ardent, juvenile motif associated with *Sabatino*. The latter protagonist, having run out of arguments, ends up sketching out an arioso, ‘Ne crains plus que mon âme change’ (Have no fear that my soul will change again), the melody of which will remain attached to *Conjugal Love*, but which does not convince Renzo despite the splendour of the high Gs.

☞ Scene IV. Once past the intense flash of (melodico-harmonic) emotion when Proserpine catches sight of Sabatino, the polite formulas (taken up by the instruments) and the archaistic Pavane (offstage flute, viola, cello, harp and organ) hark back to the amiably urbane tone of the *siciliana*.

☞ Scene V. By contrast, the *Sadness* motif (on the strings) of Proserpine alone on stage and the religious sincerity of her confession ‘Amour vrai, source pure où j’aurais voulu boire’ (True love, pure source from which

I would fain have drunk), illuminated by four solo violins, take on remarkable expressive relief.

¶ Scene VI. The starting point of the drama, the interview between Sabatino and Proserpine, pushes ambiguity to extremes, for if the deceiver must sing ‘while impertinently affecting humility’ (*avec une affectation d’humilité impertinente*), his precious tones would not be out of place in the mouth of Gounod’s Roméo. There seems to be some truth when he sings ‘J’ai souffert maintes fois’ (I have suffered many a time) and also some falsehood – for the triplet arpeggios of his motif here trace out the fatal scale of the diminished seventh, culminating in the clarinet run underlining ‘horrible’. The orchestra, on the other hand, tells us much more about the courtesan, whose sorrowful motif threads in and out of the music; she almost gives herself away in the vehemence of her tense vocal line. Sabatino is frightened by it, and the only way he can find to back down is to have recourse to formulas whose detachment grows insulting. When he goes back to Renzo, the flute, followed by the clarinet, sings a luminous motif whose significance, revealed in Act Two, is – not without irony – *The Triumph of [Angiola’s] Grace over Hell ...*

¶ Scene VII. Proserpine’s paradoxical conclusion ‘Tu me paieras l’affront que je viens de te faire!’ (You will pay me back for the affront I have just done you) must not be sung *forte*; it leads to her moment of depression (‘Il n’a pas compris! / ... si Dieu ne me protège, / Oui, j’ai peur de finir par une lâcheté’ – He did not understand! ... if God does not protect me, I fear this will end in some cowardly act), after which the broad progression of the *Aspiration to Love*, replacing the anxiety-provoking tremolos, restores her energy. ‘But she is deceiving herself in wishing for pure love; she belongs to the race of the great lovers; what she needs is the passionate love that Sabatino would be incapable of giving her’ (Saint-Saëns, *Quelques mots sur Proserpine*).

¶ Scene VIII. Heaven sends her the beggar she wished for to free her from the curse of money: Squarocca, caught trying to burgle her house during the feast, the motifs of which return without any genuine necessity. More appropriately and amusingly, mocking bassoons and clarinets in their low register skilfully depict this old thief.

☞ Scene IX. The tone has abruptly switched back to the badinage of the opening scenes for Proserpine's probing interrogation of the beggar. Saint-Saëns's quicksilver humour sparkles here (harp, triangle and piccolo) in the whimsical distribution of the rejoinders of a 6/8 scherzo written at needlepoint. One's only regret (shared with *Le Figaro's* critic Le Monsieur de l'Orchestre) is that, from the premiere onwards, 'Finirez-vous? Madame!' (Will you get to the point, Madam?) replaced the line 'Vous m'embêtez, Madame!' (You are annoying me, Madam!), which was retained in the libretto and the score.

☞ Scene X. After this, the return of the young noblemen in search of Proserpine seems more mannered in its gaiety, culminating in Squarocca's show-stealing arietta ('Sans être un avare', Without being a miser). The announcement of Sabatino's marriage, mingling mockery and anguish, is treated with great economy. The ground opens up beneath Proserpine's feet (sombre canon in the violas and violins), then she turns to Squarocca: the same music, the same interplay as in Scene VIII, but in different mode. The act might have ended here, were it not that Saint-Saëns enjoyed grappling with the conventions: Proserpine calls for the orgy to commence.

Act Two

The libretto of the first act followed Vacquerie's play, sometimes literally. The second was an initiative of Louis Gallet and Saint-Saëns himself, delighted to be able to write an ideally luminous prelude that Gounod could have penned. Integrated into this is the subtle offstage *Ave Maria* for three voices and organ whose presence would be missed from any *opéra-comique* worthy of the name. In the same register, in Scene I, three girls, then three novices alternately address Angiola to predict the fine marriage which she confesses she no longer believes in; they subsequently sing together. This is an introductory section of a quality that very nearly assured the success of the work as a whole, and which sets the scene for what follows.

‡ Scene II. The regular pealing of a bell (a conclusive pedal effect) has dismissed the excitable young girls, except for Angiola, who welcomes Renzo. They do not speak of Sabatino, but his ardent motif (triplet arpeggios) comes and goes in the violins.

‡ Scene III. Introduced somewhat hastily as the heroes come back from Hell (with the flute recalling the garlands associated with the festivities of the previous act, then celebrating the *Triumph of Grace*) by Renzo – who places himself at one remove in this act through the use of *recitativo secco* – Sabatino addresses Angiola in an impromptu sonnet. Bothered by the solemnity of the alexandrines, Saint-Saëns rearranged the text in decasyllables. Gallet's ire made him revert to the original for the two tercets, which thus become heavier and flow less well. Nevertheless, the aria is gracefully turned in its slightly forced progression. Angiola answers it timidly. This was Saint-Saëns's intention, at the risk of exaggeration: 'The chaste love of the saint appears all too puny alongside the infernal passions of the courtesan' (*Quelques mots sur Proserpine*). 'Ô joie immense!' exclaims Sabatino, in counterpoint with *Conjugal Love* set above breathless syncopations (violas and cellos), a possible echo of the dialogue with Proserpine. Renzo, much moved, waxes lyrical and introduces an exquisite waltz duet ('Effeuillons en riant la fleur de la jeunesse', Let us laughingly pick the petals from the flower of youth) in which he subsequently joins. The voices intersect graciously but Sabatino's, in a higher tessitura, dominates the ensemble.

‡ Scene IV. They take leave of one another when pilgrims swarm into the cloister to receive alms – and to fulfil the requirement for a finale, which was encored at the premiere. For Destranges, this is 'a sheer masterpiece ... the grouping of the voices, the arrangement of the parts, the distinction of the melodic idea, the fine sonority of the ensembles, everything combines to make this last scene one of the most accomplished pieces of Camille Saint-Saëns'. The diversity of the recurrences of 'Bonnes gens, prenez ce que Dieu vous donne' (Good people, take what God gives you) was much admired. The episode of Squarocca's spying mission is inserted into the ensemble, by means of an aside, in masterly fashion.

Act Three

‡ Scene I. The definitive edition of the revised score adds here a Tarantella and a scene with chorus. Destranges deplores the fact that the Tarantella ‘has nothing remarkable to offer’. Saint-Saëns, who does not mention it (nor does he mention the new Scene III), knew what he was doing: this flamboyant, saltatory number gives the orchestra a chance to unleash its power and offers the dancers a picturesque note. The gypsies’ greeting to Squarocca bestows an unexpected but necessary authority on the character, whose shuddering motif reappears. The chief merit of the chorus, in the style of 1840s *opéra-comique*, is its subtle convergence towards the Tarantella, which it ushers in once more.

‡ Scene II. The act began at this point when the work was premiered, and Squarocca was a less dominant figure; his preponderance in the final version underlines the weakness of Proserpine, whose triplet arpeggios on the flute reveal its cause without naming him: Sabatino. Then Squarocca makes a meal of his description of Angiola, extolling her ‘enchanted smile’ (on her motif, which the woodwind treat with relish) and itemising her charms to his heart’s content. Proserpine grows impatient (dotted motif in the basses); the new version simplifies the detail of the ambush.

‡ Scene III. In the version of the premiere, Proserpine expressed her despair that her discovery of the sufferings of love had given way to the experience of ‘burning jealousy’. Now – to the same music – she realises that she is powerless to gain Sabatino’s heart. After this, the rage that had roused her to invoke the infernal goddess is replaced by a moving lament in B major, ‘Ah! s’il m’avait aimée’ (Ah, if he had loved me). The dramatic progression profits from this, as does that humanisation (not to say betrayal) of the character, who, losing all her arrogance, will deserve the description of ‘Pauvre femme’ at the dénouement. But, for the moment, she speaks on equal terms with the Queen of the Underworld, deprived of sunlight as Proserpine is of love. This episode prompted Saint-Saëns to offer an overall analysis of the underlying meaning of the work: ‘Angiola is day, and Proserpine is night ... the night that is fairer than

day.' He continues by making a distinction: 'Tristan is hatred of day and love of night ... love of death, which is absolute night. Proserpine, on the contrary, identifies light with love' (*Quelques mots sur Proserpine*).

‡ Scene IV. The orchestral colouring grows sombre and muted. Squarocca enters, tells Proserpine of the current situation and strikes up a Bacchic song to attract the travellers' attention. A mere pretext for acting the drunkard, an irrelevant set piece in the *opéra-comique* tradition? No, the song is in Vacquerie's play. The strings imitate the guitar, the woodwind punctuates the discourse with its grimaces, and the baritone shows off his qualities of diction and invention: he is given ample scope for this by the droll versification, the syllables placed on the weak beat, the imitations and the echoes.

‡ Scene V. Once the brief exchange of courtesies is over, Squarocca offers his services, and Saint-Saëns took the initiative of having him reprise the melody of his drinking song, suggesting that he is brazenly lying, like someone who hums while he is being spoken to. The farcical tone extends to the mocking instruments when Angiola agrees to stay with Proserpine.

‡ Scene VI. While Proserpine is making her sham predictions, Angiola is unsettled by the strange effect of an unusual harmonic progression (assigned to the low registers of the flutes and clarinets, then of the violins and violas, in alternation) prolonged by a timpani roll. But, against all expectations, as the threats increase, the girl's fear arms her against the courtesan, whom she destabilises by proclaiming 'I am not afraid of you, he loves me!' The reiteration of rhythmic or contrapuntal figures fuels the tension; the same economy presides over the incursions of the voices into the top register: A flat, A natural, B flat.

‡ Scene VII. This is very short, just giving Proserpine time to entrust Squarocca with the task of guarding Angiola (who has fainted) and to speed back to Florence. The intervention of Renzo and the soldiers is played out in pantomime over an animated orchestral coda. In the version of the premiere, Squarocca, after his arrest by the soldiers, continued boasting, then warned Angiola to beware, denouncing 'The purest

beauty and the blackest heart ... Proserpine!' before making good his escape. This was an addition on Gallet's part.

Act Four

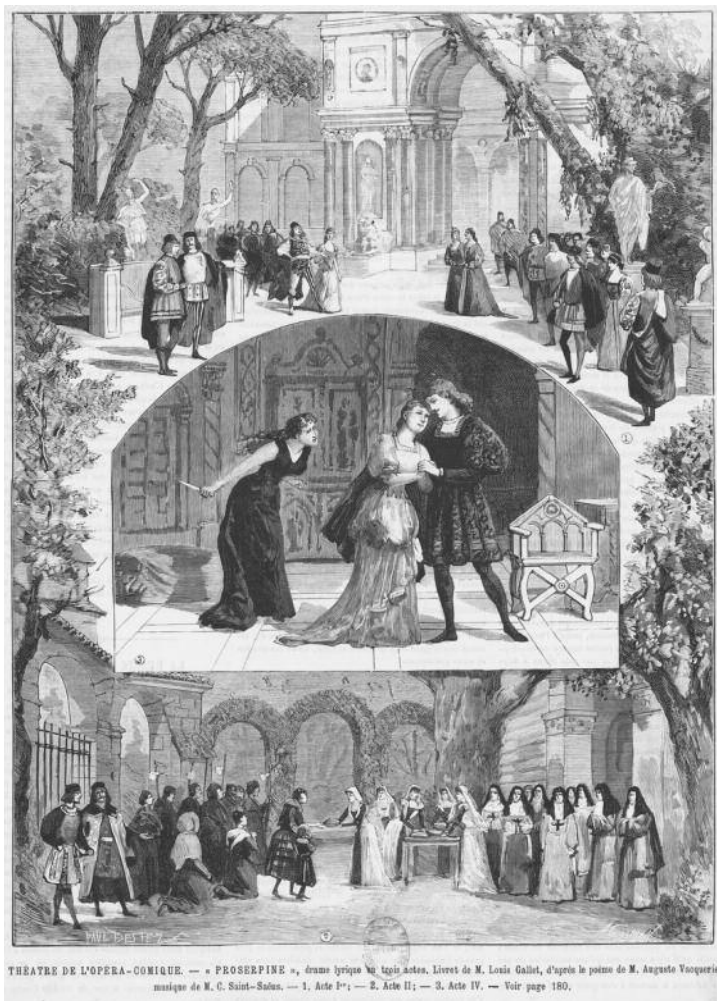
‡ Entr'acte. This number, doubtless conceived to allow the orchestra to show its paces rather than to link Acts Three and Four, was cut from the second edition in favour of the Tarantella of the preceding act. It has been restored in the present version. The piece is a genuine symphonic poem centring on Proserpine. Initially it suggests her breathless race back to Florence. Then the repetitive formulas subside, making way for more flexible thematic cells dominated by the courtesan's tormented motif, alternating with her arioso from Act One, 'Amour vrai, source pure où j'aurais voulu boire', here very elegantly scored. Finally a syncopated pattern, now chromaticised, reintroduces the headlong gallop, which ends on a triple *forte*. The obvious parallel here is with the 'Christmas Eve' entr'acte from Massenet's *Werther*.

‡ Scene I. In absolute contrast with what has gone before, Angiola's motif, heard first in the cellos, moves into the violins, then the woodwind. Sabatino looks forward to his future happiness: *Conjugal Love*, murmur the cellos, while he cries 'Ô joie, elle sera ma femme' (Oh joy, she will be my wife) on the motif *Angiola*, the starting point of an informal arioso. This has been mistakenly criticised by commentators for lacking context: in fact, it is carefully planned, for it culminates in the assertive evocation of the 'Voluptés d'autrefois que maintenant je hais' (The sensuous delights of old, which now I hate) on the motif from Proserpine's entrance in Act One. Destranges interprets this as *Jealousy*, but it is rather *Fatal Love* that Sabatino rejects, as the fox in the fable disdains the scarlet grapes.

‡ Scene II. Proserpine now enters, with the solo cello playing her sorrowful theme; all she needs to do is add words to it, then reprise with different ones ('J'ai voulu t'arracher de mon âme insensée', I wanted to wrench you from my frantic soul) the arioso 'Amour vrai, source pure' from the first act. This whole scene, the most gripping in the work (Saint-Saëns

subsequently shortened it, wrongly in Destranges's view), pleads in favour of Proserpine, whose outbursts, skilfully husbanded in vocal terms, hardly rise above the top line of the stave, thus favouring verbal articulation. Sabatino has no better argument than 'J'épouse une vierge adorable et céleste' (I am marrying an adorable, celestial virgin). Against the 'rêves fous' (wild dreams) of Proserpine he sets his own dream, *Conjugal Love*; or so, at least, the orchestra asserts. Proserpine's proposal that he should end his bachelor existence by spending the week before his wedding with her has disappeared. There remains the sorrowing motif of *Rejected Love*; it seemed fake in Act One ('J'ai souffert maintes fois vos refus') but Proserpine has taken it up here ('J'ai longtemps résisté, j'ai souffert le martyre!' – I long resisted, I suffered torments) and now Sabatino returns to it too, with 'L'accablement où vous êtes m'accable' (Your dejection dejects me too). Saint-Saëns clearly wanted this reference – since the words do not fit the music very well – in order to suggest an unavowed bond between the two protagonists. Once Sabatino has left, *Fatal Love* roars out in the orchestra.

♥ Scene III. The lovers' reunion pales beside this, with Angiola's simpering 'Il me reste deux jours pour dire non!' (I still have two days to say no) when Sabatino wants to anticipate the wedding night. At least they will improvise a duet in which their voices quickly come together in unison, unaware of the counterpoints hissed at them by the concealed Proserpine, whose vehemence increases with theirs. The swift dénouement was sadly watered down: originally, Proserpine stabbed Angiola before receiving the fatal blow from Sabatino. She then thanked him for killing her, vainly begged a word of pity, and, to absolve him of blame, claimed to have committed suicide. In the final version, she stabs only herself and the couple pities the 'poor woman' ... But we are left with the powerful pathos of the orchestral commentary, the love themes stated one after the other. 'A fearsome problem!', wrote Saint-Saëns. 'Satan, the rebel, the eternally accursed, crushes the faithful angels with his superior force!' (*Quelques mots sur Proserpine.*)



Scenes from *Proserpine* by Destez and Gusman.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

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Bibliothèque nationale de France.