

Much more than a trial run...

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The error would doubtless be to expect the score of *Le Timbre d'argent*, Camille Saint-Saëns's trial run in the field of opera, to present the aspect of a work planned, matured and set down on paper without any concern for the general audience to whom, by definition, delicate pleasures are a closed book. The truth is quite different, as is explained elsewhere in the present volume, and Saint-Saëns himself detailed the vicissitudes which succeeded one another from the commission, in 1864, until the premiere, at the Théâtre National Lyrique on 23 February 1877.

We will not seek to disentangle what this fanciful imbroglio, undertaken to cock a snook at academicism and the Prix de Rome he had been unjustly denied, finally gained or lost in becoming a 'fantastic-oneiric lyric drama' in the course of its metamorphoses. Its initial state no longer exists, except in the form of a vocal score, and we will hear only what still found favour when judged by the rigorous standards of an eighty-year-old creator and critic. And what a critic! For, in his activity as an operatic composer, Saint-Saëns seems to have felt a kind of condescending pride in complying with the requirements most antipathetic to his style. A task he performed shamelessly, considering that 'opera is to music what brothels are to love', to use the expression of his mentor and friend Hector Berlioz.

Generally speaking, Saint-Saëns, who likes to pretend to be an academician, is fond of conventions, which offer the ideal opportunity to assert his originality, indeed his superiority. He also excels in genre pieces such as the rustic dance (in Act Three) with solo oboe over a pedal point in

ostinato rhythm, the height of blithely accepted cliché. He invests greater finesse in pastiches: 'Le bonheur est chose légère', introduced at the request of Caroline Miolan-Carvalho to flesh out an almost non-existent role, is one. The title 'Romance' does not lie, but, already so out of fashion as to constitute a provocation in the years 1860s and 1870s, it was maintained right up to the last edition, even though there the work is divided into scenes and no longer into numbers, an opportunistic concession of Saint-Saëns to the prevailing Wagnerism while feigning to revert to the structure of the operas of Lully and Rameau.

At the time of its creation in 1877, this *romance* in G major with a middle section in G minor (A-B-A') respected the conventions of the genre, adding only a few harmonic coquetties unknown to Monsigny or Dalayrac. The model should rather be sought in Rameau, Campra or Destouches – who did not write *romances*, but 'airs tendres' (the performance marking 'Tendrement' probably refers to this). For later revivals, Saint-Saëns added a second 'middle section' (B') and modified the last reprise (A''), so that the supposed *romance* becomes almost an 'air en rondeau' (A-B-A'-B'-A''): one more step towards the 'retrospective style' as it was then called, confirmed by the addition, for A'', of some embellishments of the vocal line in obedience to the outmoded practice of varying the repeats. The presence of an onstage violinist was not rare in the theatre (and was always touching, according to George Sand); but in the opera house, the orchestra had probably never been seen to remain silent for so long!

One could multiply such examples, for the declared purism of the composer of *Danse macabre* and *Le Carnaval des animaux* is nourished by an intimate knowledge of the resources of impurity. While declaring to lovers of expression, 'Art is form. The artist who does not feel fully satisfied with elegant lines, harmonious colours, a fine chord progression does not understand art', he had, with the same pen, defended the principle of Liszt's symphonic poems: 'I can see very well what art gains from them; it is impossible for me to see what it loses.' If ever we find faults in *Le Timbre d'argent*, we can be sure that he saw them first, but that he endorsed, signed, proofread and approved them!

Saint-Saëns must even have slipped in a few nods to Auber, who obtained the commission from him as compensation for the unspeakable way in which he had been refused the Prix de Rome: the *Pas de l'abeille*, for example, in which the somewhat grating tremolos on the bridge of a solo viola explicitly imitate the buzzing of the bee; but also the vivacity of tone and a playful detachment. Finally – even if we do not know the original destination of the libretto, if it was deliberately chosen by Auber, and whether it was offered to or imposed upon the composer – would not the mute role of Fiametta be well suited to performers of the part of Fenella in *La Muette de Portici*? Like Auber in that hallowed work, Saint-Saëns has the instruments ‘speak’ in such a way that they inspire the movements of a pantomime corresponding to a text that will not be uttered: ‘I love you! I love you! No! It is not a dream and I am not lying to you! I love you, come, let us go!’ Over caressing harp arpeggios, the violins spin out a long melody that turns voluptuously in on itself. Inexpressive, Saint-Saëns? Certainly, when he intends to be...

If not everything in *Le Timbre d'argent* has the same value, or the same dramatic necessity, as in *Samson et Dalila* or *Henry VIII*, the score contains enough remarkable and/or inspired pages to ensure that the attention does not flag: Bénédic’s tender *Mélodie* ‘Demande à l’oiseau’; Conrad’s agitated *Air* ‘Dans le silence et l’ombre’, so original even to its accompaniment of muted strings (even at the *forte* ‘À vous, Rois de la terre’ where one might rather expect trombones!); Conrad’s *Cavatine* ‘Nature souriante’ and the ensuing duet with Héléne, charming in its vivacity and delightfully written, as if at needlepoint; Spiridon’s *Ballade* and waltz ‘Sur le sable brille’.

One might mention other entire numbers (the Entr’acte that precedes the second raising of the curtain, scored for woodwind only – like the Prelude to Berlioz’s *Les Troyens* – with the addition of a harp) or specific passages but, however incomplete it may be, this selection is addressed only to music lovers capable of embracing a fairly wide aesthetic spectrum, because, as Saint-Saëns admitted at the time of the premiere of the revised version at La Monnaie in 1914: ‘There is a bit of everything

in this work, which ranges from symphony to operetta by way of lyric drama and ballet.'

By emphasising the symphonic dimension of *Le Timbre d'argent*, whereas he was still obliged to deny it in 1877 when it seemed established wisdom that a 'symphonist' could not write a valid work for the opera house, Saint-Saëns takes a well-deserved revenge and positions himself in the direction of the wind that was blowing from Bayreuth. When he says 'symphony,' he is probably referring to the overture. In its original state, in 1877, this resembled a series of waltzes (after all, the action takes place in Vienna!) in different characters, colours and keys rather than the sonata structure that the tonal and thematic progression hinted at. After the premiere, Saint-Saëns realised that he had not made sufficient use of a rather gawky transitional motif and he added a development in which the confrontation of the themes confers on them the life that was lacking in their well-ordered succession of waltzes. But he refrained from ossifying this brilliant, agile movement by giving it a regular recapitulation, and instead an unexpected coda brings it to a close without warning.

On the other hand, it is difficult to follow Saint-Saëns when, in the same article, he underlines 'the characteristic motifs circulating throughout the work like blood in the veins and changing according to circumstances'. This vain desire to present himself as a modern composer verges on imposture. For the most salient themes, those of 'the Picture' and 'Fiametta' (both heard in the overture), 'Circé', 'the Bell', 'Conrad's Daydreams' and 'Conrad's Anger', belong to the very French tradition of 'reminiscence motifs', introduced as circumstances dictate, rather than leitmotifs on which the orchestral texture is based. It is true that the recitatives, composed after the event to replace the spoken dialogue, are garnished with more or less prominent quotations from some of the motifs mentioned above or others that were added later, such as 'the Tiara', which might also be called more broadly 'Love of Luxury' – 'love' because of the melodic sensuality of the motif and 'luxury' conceived as the antithesis of unselfish and authentic art: the luxury object is intended only for outward appearance, it is a chimera, whereas the art object is indifferent

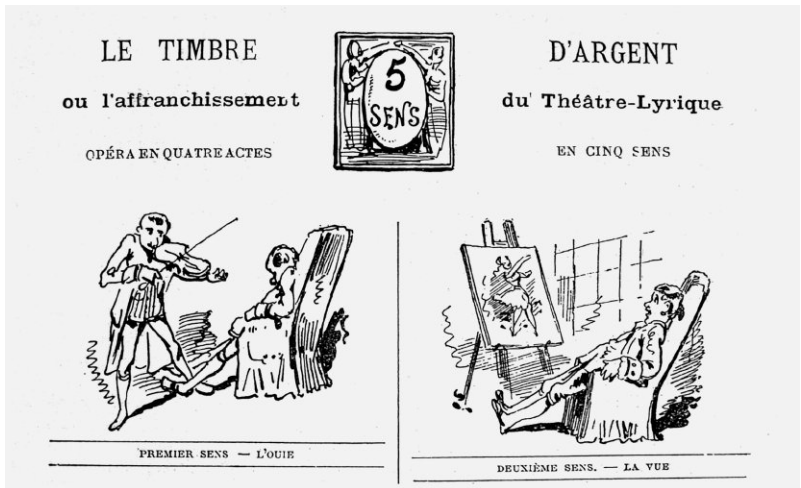
to appearance; it 'is', beauty is its *raison d'être*, while that of the luxury object is merely to 'appear'.

A detail, indeed perhaps only a hypothesis, but one that would back up Saint-Saëns's concern to give the subject of his work a deeper meaning than it may superficially possess; a meaning a little heavy for its frail shoulders to bear, but better justifying the subtitle 'Drame lyrique'. Writing in 1914, he claimed:

Indeed, there is no intrigue, and the piece would have little meaning if one did not perceive that its true subject is nothing else than the struggle of an artist's soul against the vulgarities of life, his inability to live and think like everyone else, however much he may want to. The ideal of the artist lies in art; his human nature prompts him to seek it elsewhere and he will never find it, because art, though based on Nature, is not Nature, and the artist, if he imprudently seeks his ideal in Nature, can only encounter illusions there.

In support of this, Saint-Saëns gives the example of the chorus 'Carnaval! Carnaval!', sung offstage in Act One and 'written in a style whose vulgarity, odious to the artist, is destined to infuriate him: it is in bad taste and the words are badly set'. But one would have to look twice to be as categorical as that. He might have done better to cite Spiridion's *Chanson napolitaine* 'De Naples à Florence' or the drinking song 'Vivat! Vivat! Vive le vin'... This would be to forget the coquetry of Saint-Saëns, who, highly conscious of his superiority, admitted as defects only such as would pass for qualities in so many others. Are the words really badly set in this chorus? All right, let us concede the point. But *deliberately* badly set? That is less sure, because he was not heavy-handed enough in carrying out his intention, and there would lie the real flaw: the effect does not come off. An unpublished early *romance*, *Lamento* (1850) on Gautier's poem ('Ma belle amie est morte'), would suffice to reveal his bad faith here: wishing to write a 'real' fisherman's song, the sort one hums without excessive emotion because the tune is running through one's head and one has no

bereavement to lament, Saint-Saëns was not content to write a simple melody; he placed strong syllables on weak beats, as in folk style, but, so that the singer would not mistake his intention, he wrote an accent above them. There is nothing like this here. As for the 'true subject' of *Le Timbre d'argent* ('the struggle of an artist's soul against the vulgarities of life'), fortunately one does not have to believe in it to fall under the spell of a score that simply begs us to do so.



Caricatures of *Le Timbre d'argent* in the illustrated press.
Private collection.

Caricatures du *Timbre d'argent* dans la presse illustrée.
Collection particulière.