

Les Barbares: contemporary criticism

Sylvie Douche

The opera by Saint-Saëns was generally very well received in 1901. For Auguste Mangeot (*Le Monde musical*, 31 October) it was ‘un nouveau joyau’, a new jewel: an opinion that was shared by several of his colleagues. Nevertheless, after twenty-eight performances at the Paris Opéra the work left the repertoire. By the time of its première the composer had been reaping the honours for several years and was a respected figure in the music world. *Déjanire*, his ‘tragédie à l’antique’ of 1898, composed for the Béziers arena, was still remembered, and naturally parallels were drawn between the new work and his earlier operas. It is important to bear in mind that those who heard *Les Barbares* in 1901 did not have the overall view of the composer’s *œuvre* that we have today, nor therefore the same possibilities for comparison. Until 1904 Saint-Saëns was to devote himself essentially to vocal music; his film music was unknown, as were his late piano works. In this article we shall be considering some of the salient features of *Les Barbares* and how they were appreciated at the time; for further information, see *Camille Saint-Saëns, ‘Les Barbares’: dossier de presse parisienne (1901)*, ed. Sylvie Douche (Weinsberg: Musik-Edition Lucie Galland, 2005).

Several critics felt uneasy about the form of the work, which defied attempts to label it. Victor Debay, writing in *Le Courrier musical* (1 November), decided that, consisting of successive movements rather than forming a unified whole like *Samson et Dalila*, it must be a suite. For Jules Combarieu (*La Revue musicale*, November issue) it was ‘a juxtaposition of two works belonging to two different genres: a symphonic poem and

an opera'. Naturally, the prologue caused perplexity, and opinions were divided. Louis de Fourcaud (*Le Gaulois*, 24 October) and Camille Bellaigue (*La Revue des deux mondes*, 15 November) showed high admiration; Bellaigue felt that the themes were better and more forcefully expressed than in the rest of the opera. For Combarieu, however, it was too composite (although he recognised its synthetic qualities) and too long, out of proportion with the rest of the work (see also Gaston Carraud, *La Liberté*, 25 October); furthermore it was too independent of the rest of the opera. Some critics disapproved of the narrator's recitative. On the whole, though, the libretto was blamed for these imperfections (the problems encountered in its elaboration had been widely reported in the press in the weeks preceding the première), with one of the most biting remarks coming from Pierre Lalo (*Le Temps*, 30 October), for whom it was like a cantata text for the Prix de Rome competition 'or, worse still, a summary of such a text'. Combarieu (*La Revue musicale* for October) found it inadequate and (quite forgetting that Gheusi was also involved) wondered how a famous writer like Victorien Sardou could have written such a work. Arthur Pougin (*L'Événement*, 24 October) generalised the weakness of the texts set by Saint-Saëns, claiming that 'he has never had any luck with his librettos'. Others, however, such as Charles Carrus in *Le Constitutionnel* (26 October), remarked on its clarity and simplicity, and readily praised its fine craftsmanship, although one or two found difficulty in coming to terms with the 'perfectly mild nature' of the Teuton leader, Marcomir (Arthur Coquard, *La Quinzaine*, October); Arthur Pougin in *L'Événement* (14 October) was tired of such weak characters, longing for 'heroes who are striking, who fire the imagination'. Patrick O'Divy (*Le Soleil*, 24 October) regretted that the libretto precluded any change of scene and kept the same characters between Acts I and II. Almost unanimously admired by those who saw the work in 1901 was the composer's use of orchestral colour to convey the changing climates within the drama.

Hugues Imbert (*Le Guide musical*, 27 October) recognised the composer's hallmark in the 'fine balance and clarity' of the orchestration. Coquard underlined its efficacy and 'perfect chemistry'; Carraud admired

its ‘fluidity’ and ‘colourfulness’. Combarieu was pleased that Saint-Saëns had not been tempted to depict the Teutons by means of music ‘full of fire and brio’, and Lalo felt the composer was right to have opted for the intimacy of ‘salon-type’ orchestration. Imbert agreed, and hoped that young composers would follow his ‘salutary example’ when they came to tackle such works, for, as Raymond Bouyer put it (*La Nouvelle Revue*, November–December), ‘symphonic beauty is the herald of vocal beauty’. Bellaigue too was delighted to find the barbaric aspect expressed only in the libretto and on stage, not at all in the music: Saint-Saëns was ‘too wise to indulge in that genre, or in such stereotypes’! Léon Kerst (*Le Petit Journal*, 24 October) seemed, on the other hand, to be disappointed that the orchestra was relegated to a ‘secondary role’. Many, furthermore, including Emmanuel Arène (*Mercur de France*, November) and Pierre Laroche (*Le Théâtre*, same month) felt that the music accompanying the arrival of the Barbarians and the fighting needed to show more violence. The moments in the opera that were very well received included the prayer to Vesta (see article by Debay) and, especially, the second act, with the ‘sensuous beauty of [its] love duet’ (Bellaigue) – an opinion that was widely shared, by Gustave Larroumet (*Le Figaro*, 22 October), Charles Sarrus (*Le Constitutionnel*, 26 October), Paul Milliet (*Le Monde artiste*, 27 October), who found it beautiful ‘from beginning to end’, and Maxime Gray (*La Presse*, 25 October), who was also enchanted by the previous duet for Livie and Floria. While audiences of today may be a little disconcerted by the length and heterogeneity of the *scènes de ballet*, those of 1901 were delighted, and the swirling farandole (Act III, Scene 1), a dance typical of Provence (although Auguste Mangeot, in *Le Monde musical* of 31 October, heard an ‘Arabian colouring’ in the piece!) was particularly acclaimed. The dances in general were praised highly for their energy and grace; Debay felt, however, that there was some unnecessary repetition. These *scènes de ballet* linked Saint-Saëns directly to the old French lyric tragedy (or lyric drama) tradition, which no one failed to notice.

Various other earlier influences were perceived in the opera. That of Rameau, first of all. Bouyer felt that Saint-Saëns’s appellation ‘*tragédie*

lyrique' was justified by the very French treatment of the work, particularly noticeable, according to Fourcaud, in the structure of the libretto. Fourcaud borrowed Alfred Bruneau's term 'tranquille maîtrise' ('tranquil mastery') to describe the moderation of the composer's style, and Paul Milliet wrote: 'Never was Saint-Saëns more of a master than in *Les Barbares*; he has gained breadth, serenity, a sort of grandiose tranquillity.' Both Bouyer (further on in the same article) and Adolphe Jullien (*Le Journal des débats*, 27 October) were pleased to hear none of the characteristic features of Wagner's music, such as the leitmotif, but Pougin (*Le Ménestrel*, 27 October) criticised the composer's use of 'the detestable system of continuous declamation'. Focusing next on the orchestral palette, the same critic went on to remark on Saint-Saëns's gifts 'as a colourist, taking after Méhul the wise and Berlioz the wizard'. Gluck's influence was also discussed, notably because of the important part played in the opera by the choruses. Despite a few attempts to compare *Les Barbares* with the earlier operas of Saint-Saëns, the critics failed to situate *Les Barbares*, which, as Mangeot pointed out, stands alone in the composer's output. Jullien detected vocal lines that reminded him of Massenet. Obviously, given the subject, there were references to antiquity. Many mentioned the influence of the prologue of Greek tragedy; Coquard, on the other hand, compared its poetry to that of Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*. It was generally agreed that there was very little allusion to antiquity in the music, with the composer clearly steering clear of modal clichés. Some, such as Larroumet, nevertheless spotted Greek influences in the choreography, but they were fleeting and, according to Bellaigue, the ballet continued 'in modes that were simply graceful or joyous'. Finally, the press did not fail to compare the opera to other works performed in 1901, especially Xavier Leroux's *Astarté* and Jules Massenet's *Grisélidis*, both premièred that year.

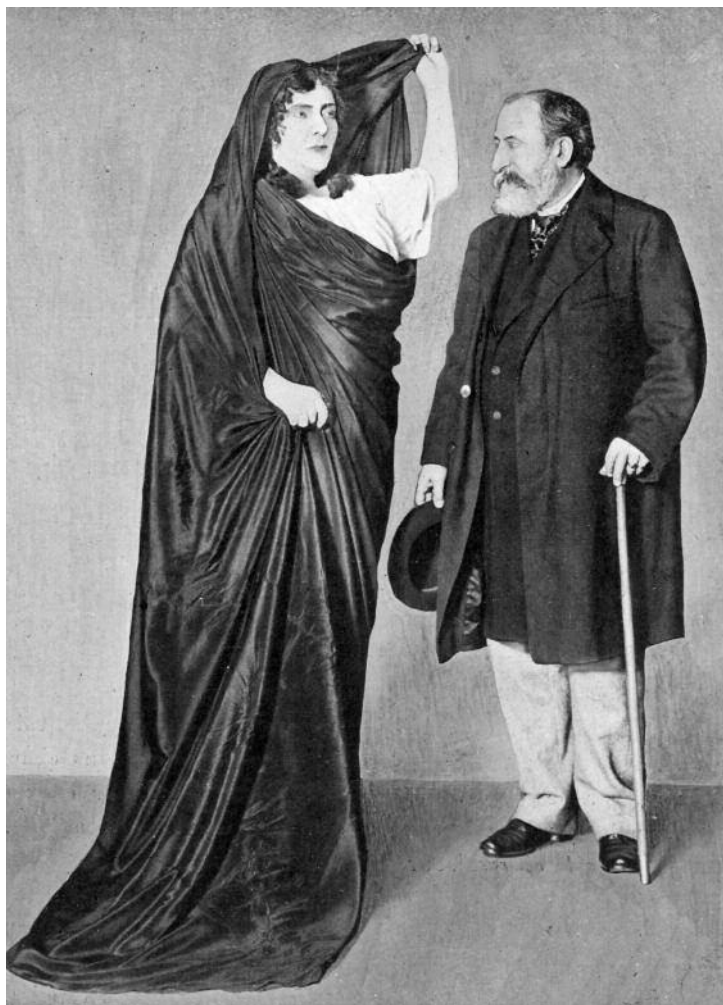
Often described (e.g. by Debay) as a fine exponent of the French school of composers, Camille Saint-Saëns could rightly be proud of having added a new, dramatically effective piece to the French operatic repertoire. Audiences of the time no doubt expected more realism than we do today, but the critics in 1901 nevertheless perceived the possible psycho-

logical weaknesses in the play. The work was however a success, thanks largely to its skilful composition and also to its talented performance. There were some reservations about the choice of contralto Meyriane Héglon as Livie, but praise was unanimous for the young soprano Jeanne Hatto as Floria. The bass Albert Vaguet was not generally regarded as ideal for the part of Marcomir, but the baritone Jean Riddez was commended as Hildibrath, while the tenor Charles Rousselière, as the watchman, was hailed as a revelation. The psychology of the main characters (more complex than it appears) was brought out admirably by the fine acting and the effective (and lavish) *mise-en-scène*.



The two oxen emerging from the hoist at the Paris Opéra.
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Sortie d'un char à bœufs du monte-charge de l'Opéra.
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Saint-Saëns and Madame Hégлон during rehearsals.
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Saint-Saëns et M^{me} Hégлон pendant les répétitions.
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