

Le Timbre d'argent and its transformations

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In 1880 Saint-Saëns was asked to make some revisions in *Le Timbre d'argent* which had then been staged once in Paris and once in Brussels. There was a possibility of a third staging in St Petersburg. 'Do you realise that this would be the *sixth* version of this opera?' he replied. 'It's not an opera any more, it's a nightmare.'

In fact the St Petersburg performances did not take place, but it was far from the end of the story, since he worked on it in 1894, again in 1903, and again in 1913. Of all Saint-Saëns's operas, *Le Timbre d'argent* underwent more revision and alteration than any of the others, which is a good reason why it should be revived and studied today. Another good reason is that its libretto is an exceptionally lively example of the work of Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, the leading pair of librettists of their day, who supplied texts for Halévy, Meyerbeer, Bizet, Reyer, Gounod (*Faust*, *Mireille*, *Roméo et Juliette* and others), Thomas (*Mignon* and *Hamlet*), in other words all the major French composers of their time.

The vocal score was first published in 1877 at the time of the first performance by Choudens, who was assiduous in meeting the needs of his customers by attempting to purvey whatever version of the opera they were likely to have seen in the theatre. He was more willing than any other Parisian publisher to issue revised versions of his operas, while Durand, who published all of Saint-Saëns's later operas, was reluctant to reissue vocal and

orchestral scores of operas unless it was really necessary. Thus for *Le Timbre d'argent* there are no fewer than six different versions of the vocal score reflecting the various states of the opera between 1877 and 1913. When Saint-Saëns counted six versions in 1880 only two had appeared in print, the other four being lodged in his memory from all that had happened to the opera between 1864, when it was composed, and its first performance.



Even that does not take into account the history of the libretto before it fell into Saint-Saëns's hands. It started life as a play intended for the Théâtre de l'Odéon in about 1852. At that early stage in their career Barbier and Carré were writing plays, not operas, some of which became operas in later years. The best-known of these were *Faust et Marguerite* (by Carré alone) in 1850 and *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (by both of them) in 1851, later to bring glory to Gounod and Offenbach respectively. The three plays share the theme of a mysterious figure who preys upon the weaknesses of his victim by adopting different disguises and demanding a heavy price for providing whatever female or financial satisfactions the poor victim asks for. In *Le Timbre d'argent* the equivalent of Méphistophélès and Councillor Lindorf is Spiridion, a 'doctor', who reappears in each act in a different disguise. In their operatic form, these manipulative bass-baritones enter on a diminished seventh and lure their tenor victims into a fatal pact. The equivalent of Faust and Hoffmann is the painter Conrad, an unhappy soul in love with the dancer Fiametta who was his model for a painting of Circe, while he is supposed to be engaged to the blameless Hélène.

For some reason *Le Timbre d'argent* was not played, so its authors rewrote it as an 'opéra fantastique' and offered it in turn to Xavier Boisselot and Henry Litolff. Boisselot was a lazy composer who produced only three operas in a long life, and Litolff was probably too busy to take it on. So it then passed to Halévy, composer of *La Juive* and Permanent Secretary of the Institute, France's most eminent musician, who was probably too busy or too ill to compose another opera.

When Halévy died in 1862 the libretto ended up in the hands of Léon Carvalho, director of the Théâtre-Lyrique and a leading arbiter of operatic developments in the 1860s. In 1863 he put on Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de perles* and Berlioz's *Les Troyens à Carthage*, and his dictatorial and eccentric management led him to take on impossible projects, present new composers, revive foreign classics, and keep his public constantly on their toes, since he was not obliged by government regulation to restrict his repertoire in the way that both the Opéra and the Opéra-Comique were. He stumbled from one financial precipice to another, but always provided a hopeful arena for young French composers, even if he treated his artists and his staff with disdain and little tact. *Le Timbre d'argent* was still among his collection of unassigned operas in the summer of 1864 when Auber, Director of the Conservatoire, asked Carvalho if he had a libretto he could offer Saint-Saëns as compensation for not winning the Prix de Rome that year.



Eager to establish himself in opera, Saint-Saëns accepted the libretto and secured a few changes from Barbier and Carré, probably the names of characters, since an early draft of the libretto has the principal character named Wolfram in the clutches of someone named Argur, who transforms himself into various disguises: José, then Malhmann, then the Baron de Frohsdorf. Argur gives Wolfram a magic talisman in the form of a silver bell (*timbre d'argent*) which brings untold wealth to whoever strikes it, but always at the price of someone's life. (This may be derived from Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*, an immensely popular novel in which the ass's skin fulfils its possessor's wishes but only at the price of his gradual physical decline.)

Saint-Saëns composed the score quickly. The first revision brought about the composition of Hélène's air 'Le bonheur est chose légère' at the end of the second act because Carvalho's wife, who was also his leading soprano, was unhappy that the leading female role was to be a dancer. This at least boosted the soprano role. Carvalho had some other sugges-

tions: two dancers, not one; some animals on stage, on the grounds that the action of the opera takes place in a dream; and to revert to its form as a play with a dancer and chorus. Saint-Saëns was hardly likely to accede to this last suggestion.

When the opera went into rehearsal in January 1868 Carvalho heard a rumour (actually false) that Christine Nilsson was to play Ophélie's death scene in Thomas's *Hamlet*, then in rehearsal at the Opéra, under water. He immediately persuaded Saint-Saëns to add an underwater scene to *Le Timbre d'argent*. *Le Figaro* was able to announce that the forthcoming production would include a Neapolitan song, a dance accompanied by a fantastic bagpipe, a village waltz, a chorus of beggars, a carnival scene, and an underwater ballet, 'that is to say *swum*'.

Not for the first or last time, Carvalho ran out of money and the production was cancelled. Perrin, director of the Opéra, offered to mount *Le Timbre d'argent* on his larger stage, provided the dialogue was set to music, which Saint-Saëns was willing to do. Perrin's offer was never serious, however, so his nephew, Camille Du Locle, director of the Opéra-Comique, stepped in and undertook to mount the opera there. Dialogue was restored and some singers and a dancer were engaged. But the outbreak of war in September 1870 put an end to that plan, marking *Le Timbre d'argent* as perhaps the only opera ever to be accepted by the three main opera houses in Paris and performed at none of them.

One more company took an interest: the 'Troisième Théâtre-Lyrique Français', in 1875, but this too ran out of money. Finally a fifth company, a new version of the Théâtre-Lyrique, playing at the Théâtre de la Gaîté, opened in May 1876 and put on *Le Timbre d'argent* in January 1877. The manager, the violinist Vizontini, was sympathetic to Saint-Saëns but he was forced to cut corners, so that the singers and chorus were weak and there was not enough rehearsal. But the opera had finally reached the stage. Like others before him, Vizontini ran out of money before the public had stopped lining up for tickets, so the run came to an end after eighteen performances.



The original plan was an *opéra-comique* in four acts with prologue and epilogue, like the original plan of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. The prologue would have consisted of the present Act One. Similarly, the epilogue would have begun half way through the present no.24, when the scene changes back to Conrad's atelier. When the opera was in rehearsal at the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1868 the overture was to be played after the prologue and before Act One. The underwater scene proposed by Carvalho and the recitatives required by Perrin were written in the 1860s, although they were not adopted until 1913.

The 1877 version put the overture at the beginning and divided the opera into four acts, the prologue and epilogue being absorbed into the first and last acts. Some passages originally intended as dialogue (printed as prose in the libretto) were set to music as recitative. Dialogue and *parlé* over music were retained for a revival in Brussels in 1879, but a number of revisions were applied and the vocal score was issued in its new form. Substantial cuts were made in the overture and elsewhere in the opera, including the second verse of 'Le bonheur est chose légère'. In the final scene the great confrontation between Hélène and Fiametta was cut short, abandoning the remarkable exchanges of song and mime between a singer and a dancer and going directly to Conrad's abrupt change of heart. There is now no illusion of a happy ending. Spiridion's 'Il est à moi!' is now sung, not spoken (or shouted).

In 1894 Saint-Saëns reported being hard at work revising the opera, perhaps for the next edition to appear from Choudens, although no performances are known at that time. With some prospect of a revival at the Opéra-Comique, a new edition of the vocal score was issued in 1903 at the same time as a full score. That revival did not take place, but the opera was taken up in Germany, with productions in Elberfeld in February 1904, in Berlin in January 1905, also in Cologne. Choudens therefore issued a German vocal score too. 'I have restored certain things that had been cut without my approval, and cut some others which I no longer liked', Saint-Saëns wrote. He restored some of the cuts in the overture but kept others. Many cuts made in 1879 were restored. The two main removals were the

thirty-five bars in no.7, the gaming scene, in which Spiridion boasts somewhat vacuously before the game begins, and the whole of no.14, the *Duo* for Hélène and Rosa, which is a pity if only because Rosa's part is already small.

This version was given three performances in Monte Carlo in 1907 with Marguerite Carré, the librettist's daughter-in-law, singing Hélène and Maggie Teyte as Rosa. A final overhaul was yet to be imposed and this occupied Saint-Saëns in 1913 in response to a proposal by La Monnaie in Brussels to stage it as an all-sung opera, dialogue being already unpopular with singers and perhaps with audiences too. In fact at least one line of *parlé* was retained for Spiridion's shouted warning in Act Three that Conrad is holding the silver bell. Saint-Saëns returned to his copious workings from the 1860s, namely his settings of all the dialogue as recitative, and also the underwater scene at the beginning of Act Four which had seemed so far-fetched when first suggested. He had help with the versification from Barbier's son Pierre, and much of the music needed orchestrating. The performances took place in March 1914 and a final vocal score appeared from Choudens.

The absence of dialogue substantially alters the character of the opera, which had always been a potpourri of theatrical devices, not purely an opera in any sense. The recitatives are skilfully done, of course, sometimes expanding into lyricism, and the underwater scene is an interesting challenge for the production on top of all the in-sight transformations. More recitative was needed after Bénédict's first song, in which Conrad rapturously expands the portrait motif, carried away by thoughts of the model Fiametta, a great passage that anyone would prefer to dialogue. The bell motif also appears for the first time, since Conrad asks Bénédict to pay off the hated doctor not with his last florin, as in the dialogue version, but with a silver bell given him by his father on his deathbed. Thus Spiridion later returns the bell to Conrad with its magic properties, which perhaps it had always possessed, if his father had caused his own death by ringing it.

In Act Two a long recitative precedes Bénédict's violin *Romance* (no. 8). Conrad gradually warms to Bénédict's evocation of the country

cottage (to be the setting for Act Three) where he and Rosa are to be married. The new scene at the start of Act Four is set by moonlight beside a lake. Seeking to recover the silver bell which he has thrown into the water, Conrad encounters a group of Sirens who tease him with pre-echoes of 'Sur le sable brille', Spiridion's *Ballade*, yet to be heard, with its derivation from the bell's motto theme. Lured by their seductiveness, he is about to plunge into the depths when he recovers his senses and runs off. Saint-Saëns was perfectly aware that the scene closely resembles the opening scene of *Das Rheingold*, but he wrote it before he had heard that opera and no doubt felt in 1913 that he was no longer afraid of the competition. He was also concerned that yet another scene-change would require an entr'acte; in fact the music runs directly into the return of 'Carnaval!' which has a good stretch of music before the curtain has to rise. The ending preserved the shorter version worked out for the first Brussels performances in 1879. The three performances in Brussels in March 1914 were a great success and a source of great satisfaction to Saint-Saëns. He wrote a brochure about the opera to accompany the performances.



If this opera was repeatedly transformed by revision, it is ironic that transformation is itself a central feature of the action. An obsession with anthropomorphism is found in a great number of librettos by Barbier and Carré, who liked to base operas on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with portraits coming to life, humans transformed into animals, magic talismans, and so on. The classic case of an artist falling in love with his work, as Conrad does in *Le Timbre d'argent*, is the story of Pygmalion and Galatea, which, it so happens, was rendered as a libretto by Barbier and Carré in 1852, the same year as their first *Timbre d'argent*. The composer was Victor Massé, and his *Galatée* was one of his leading successes. In *Le Timbre d'argent* Spiridion becomes in turn a doctor from the *Commedia dell'arte*, the Marquis de Polycastro, Pippo the coachman, an Italian balladeer, and the

Devil himself. Clearly he is none other than Hoffmann's Councillor Lindorf reinventing himself as Coppélius, Miracle and Dapertutto. The model Fiametta's *alter ego* as Circé is another shifting personality like Stella-Olympia-Antonia-Giulietta in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*.

Barbier and Carré liked to transform the stage as well as their dramatic characters. One of their early plays, *Les Marionnettes du docteur* (1851), has yet another doctor manipulating his victims, this time his country-house guests, by showing marionettes which play out their fantasies and fears. For this purpose the real proscenium becomes the proscenium of the marionette theatre. *Le Timbre d'argent* requires the greatest number of scene-changes of any of these plays, including the view of a theatre from the back of the stage with the audience in the distance. In Act One the scene of Conrad's atelier dissolves into a nymph-filled landscape and back again. In Act Two the first tableau shows Fiametta's dressing-room at the theatre, with a scene-change to the stage itself, seen from the back. This transforms into a banquet scene, which in turn is dissolved into a Florentine palace. The third act is set outside a country cottage, without any scene-changes, and the fourth opens underwater (in the final version) and changes to a street scene that dissolves back to the opening scene in Conrad's atelier. With all this to devise, the stage crew at any theatre would face an unusual challenge; indeed its ambitious stagecraft may have been the reason why the original play was not performed.

The complexity of its staging and of its different versions makes *Le Timbre d'argent* the most absorbing of all Saint-Saëns's operas. The Brussels performances in 1914 were the last time he heard the opera, in fact the last time anyone heard the opera before the present revival, which is long overdue. If any of it has been performed at all in the last hundred years, it has been the two lovely airs 'Demande à l'oiseau qui s'éveille' and 'Le bonheur est chose légère', which have enjoyed some currency as solo numbers recorded by well-known singers.



Scenes from *Le Timbre d'argent* in the illustrated press.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Scènes du *Timbre d'argent* parues dans la presse.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.