

Power struggles

Marie-Gabrielle Soret

By 1900 several cities in southern France had taken to organising major open-air musical events, following the example of Béziers, whose festival, held in its arena, had proved a great success. Encouraged by the Félibrian movement and supported by the Direction des Beaux-Arts, the City of Orange planned to give regular performances in the fine setting of its Roman theatre, boasting its original stage wall and with a capacity of almost twelve thousand. Several productions had already been mounted there: plays and operas given in the summer by stars of the Parisian companies. This time, however, the idea was to create a 'French Bayreuth', and for that a large-scale operatic work needed be commissioned, one written specifically for the Roman theatre by authors whose reputations would draw the crowds.

The famous playwright Victorien Sardou (1831-1908) was approached to write the libretto to a story outlined by Pierre-Barthélémy Gheusi (1865-1943), who was then to put Sardou's prose text into verse. For the music, Xavier Leroux and Jules Massenet were considered, but in the end Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) was chosen. Bringing together a well-known playwright and a celebrated musician would draw attention to the new work and arouse curiosity.

But Saint-Saëns hesitated. He knew the Roman theatre in Orange and had doubts about its suitability for opera – 'a dismal arena, without sets', acoustics that were not ideal, to say nothing of the possibilities of the infamous Mistral blowing or a storm washing out the performance. But

the Ministerial Commission in charge of the project did not give up. Saint-Saëns was promised everything he wanted: a fine cast, a large orchestra, the creation of special lighting effects, sets to brighten up the stage wall... And in the end he accepted. He was interested in the subject – *Les Barbares*, set at a turbulent time in ancient history – which was right up his street: he had already written three ‘historical’ operas, *Henry VIII*, *Étienne Marcel* and *Ascanio*. He also liked the prospect of working with Victorien Sardou. Later (letter of 10 July 1902) he wrote, of ‘the charm of that collaboration’: ‘It permitted me – an incomparable reward – to get to know Sardou in private and imbibe of that inexhaustible and indescribable source of wit, erudition and good humour.’ Thus, in spring 1900, the three men set to work. Sardou had to write the play, based on the story provided, pass it on to Gheusi, who would put it into verse and send it on to Saint-Saëns. But things did not go quite that smoothly. Sardou was often in poor health or else busy at the same time with a thousand other things. Summer and autumn passed, and Saint-Saëns still had not received the libretto.

It has to be said that devising an opera for the stage at Orange was no easy matter because of the many constraints. There could be no more than one set; the characters could only enter and exit from the sides; furthermore, the work had to be short, over by ten-thirty, so that those staying in Avignon (there being insufficient hotel accommodation in Orange) could catch the last train back. Sardou protested: the time allotted to the music in the first place had left little room for the text, and there was he, expected to shorten it further and simplify the action, thus gradually removing all the abduction scenes, fighting and orgies he had dreamed of including.

Tired of waiting for the texts, Saint-Saëns, who suffered from the cold winters in Paris, left as usual for Algeria at the end of December. Consequently, all those involved in the project – Sardou, Saint-Saëns, Gheusi, the publishers, and the director of the Paris Opéra – were obliged to communicate only by letter until the composer’s return to the capital in April 1901. That precious correspondence enables us to piece together all the different stages in the conception of the work: changes in

the text, verse and music, and the various *desiderata* of those concerned regarding the staging or the casting, with each of them, of course, sticking firmly to his guns.

At the end of March 1901, however, the idea of giving the première in the Roman theatre was finally abandoned. The Commission, much to its regret, was obliged to back down because of the sheer cost of bringing so many artists (singers, dancers and instrumentalists) down from the Paris Opéra – transport, board and lodgings for four hundred for four days! – not to mention the risks of cancellation due to bad weather. Nobody, neither the City of Orange nor the State, nor prospective patrons, was willing to be committed to such a costly production. So in the end *Les Barbares* was première in Paris, at the Opéra (Palais Garnier), on 23 October 1901. The very realistic staging was by Pedro Gailhard and Victorien Sardou, and each evening, much to everyone's delight, a pair of oxen was brought in from a farm near Paris to pull the Barbarians' chariots.

The libretto, initially written for Orange, needed however to be revised for the Paris Opéra, and that proved to be a not entirely painless process. Since both Sardou and Saint-Saëns had strong personalities, there were many clashes. Sardou was known for his intransigence and his almost pnickety attention to detail, while for Saint-Saëns, who was notoriously bad-tempered, everything had to be discussed: plot, action, prosody, dialogues, the length of the piece, to which a prologue and a ballet had to be added. Bitter negotiations ensued, with Gheusi doing his utmost to reconcile their demands, while trying to preserve his own work. Saint-Saëns surreptitiously altered some of the lines when he came to set them to music, and Gheusi complained to Sardou, who in turn tried to reason with Saint-Saëns, who stood his ground: 'Am I so unreasonable? I want to cover every eventuality, so that I won't need to do any touching-up once the work has been staged. It's not as easy writing a libretto, with just a couple of strokes of the pen. Obviously you have misunderstood my meaning; you can't possibly disagree.' When Saint-Saëns announced that he had made considerable cuts in the second act duet for Marcomir and Floria, Sardou lost his patience; he told Gheusi: 'I'm going to write to that

madman! – I don't know what he is trying to say with that duo, I don't understand a single note of it, and of course he has removed everything that gave it its subtlety and interest. – This isn't a collaboration, it's a battle! Sardou and Gheusi had indeed intended the libretto to be more action-packed, with more episodes for the Barbarians, while Saint-Saëns, on the contrary, felt as the work progressed that the plot needed to be pared down and simplified, in order to focus more on the tragedy of the characters and leave room for the music.

The librettists 'arranged' the chronology of events to suit their purpose: the Cimbrian invasion and the Battle of Arausio indeed took place in 105 BCE, but Orange did not yet bear that name, and its theatre was built under the reign of the Emperor Augustus in the first century of the Common Era. They were not so much interested in historical veracity as in creating a symbolical framework and setting for their tragedy. The idea was also to stage a confrontation between the Germanic and Roman worlds, between 'barbarism' and the civilisation of the Romanised culture of Gaul under the rule of the Roman Empire. And although the audience at the première was expecting more noise and fury, as the title and the plot seemed to suggest, the drama nevertheless centred on the romance between Floria and Marcomir, and on Livia's vow for revenge and its accomplishment, with the battle itself used simply as a backdrop. The work is a *tragédie lyrique*, in which the characters' feelings and emotions, their inner conflicts, take precedence over the historical context. Saint-Saëns succeeded admirably in conveying this through music of great clarity, written in a style that flows and sparkles, with the orchestra never allowed to drown the voices. Moreover the parts of Floria and Livie – women tormented by love (Floria) and death (Livie) – are among the finest he ever wrote for opera.

LES BARBARES

1



Poème de
VICTORIEN SARDOU et P. B. GHEUSI

Musique de
C. SAINT-SAËNS

PROLOGUE



The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system is for the vocalists, labeled 'PRIMA' and 'SECONDA'. Both parts are marked 'All^o moderato' and are in 2/4 time. The Prima part has a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. The Secunda part has a bass clef and the same key signature. The piano accompaniment is in the bass clef, featuring a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. The second system continues the vocal and piano parts, with the Prima part having a treble clef and the piano accompaniment having a bass clef. The piano part includes a 'p' (piano) dynamic marking and a fermata over a final chord.

U.S.A. Copyright by A. Durand et Fils 1901

5927 A. Durand & Fils, Éditeurs.

Paris, 4, Place de la Madeleine.

Piano reduction of *Les Barbares*.
Éditions Durand. Private collection.

Réduction pour chant et piano des *Barbares*.
Éditions Durand. Collection particulière.