

From genesis to reception

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Having read and been impressed by *Proserpine*, an early play in verse by the poet and dramatist Auguste Vacquerie (1819-95), written in 1838 and published in 1872 in his collection *Mes premières années de Paris*, Camille Saint-Saëns thought of setting it to music in the form of an ‘Italian opera’, as the locale and plot suggested. In July 1880 he was in England negotiating with the impresario Carl Rosa, who wanted to commission a work from him. Saint-Saëns had him read the play, but Rosa thought it ‘too marked’ in character, and the project came to nothing. The composer nevertheless persisted with his idea and – not without difficulty – obtained Vacquerie’s assent to working up the project of a libretto in Italian. But it was when the two men met at a dinner at Victor Hugo’s house in 1883 that – the idea of an adaptation of the work for the Théâtre-Italien having finally been abandoned – Saint-Saëns persuaded Vacquerie to agree to having his play reworked and convinced him that the librettist Louis Gallet was the ideal collaborator for such a transformation.

Proserpine, composed in 1886 and 1887, is thus a further fruit of the friendship between Saint-Saëns and Gallet. After *La Princesse jaune* in 1872 and *Étienne Marcel* in 1877, this was their third work together.

‘Two young people toy with a woman’s heart, and the woman dies of it’ was how Saint-Saëns summed up the plot. In mid-February 1885, Louis Gallet arranged for the director of the Opéra-Comique, Léon Carvalho, to read the text; he expressed an interest and reserved the piece in advance.

But it was not until early in 1886 that Gallet began to versify the libretto. In the middle of May, he announced to the composer:

Dear Friend, I have conceived and executed the first act of *Proserpine*, adopting the special poetics we agreed on in principle, that is to say, forgetting as far as possible that I was working for a musician. It is highly diverting; it enables one to retain large blocks of the original text. And the truly dramatic music loses nothing by it, quite the contrary!

The first act was completed, versified and approved by Vacquerie. Saint-Saëns then travelled to Florence in the month of July in order to immerse himself in the context of the story and the characters. Enraptured by the subject, he was already imagining sets with marble porticos and staircases and ‘four or five pretty dancers, magnificently costumed in the style of Veronese, who will strike elegant attitudes and chat with the young people’.

He then retired to Berne and later Chaville, where he wrote the music between mid-July and 28 September, and orchestrated the score from November 1886 to January 1887, all the while keeping up an intensive correspondence with Gallet to inform him of progress on the work and request modifications to the text.

Despite a number of interruptions for concert tours, Saint-Saëns was carried along by the subject, and the composition advanced very swiftly and in the atmosphere of hearty camaraderie that had always coloured his relations with Gallet: ‘You have no idea what a joy it is to work between you and Vacquerie; you are two wings – what a pity that between those two wings there is only a gosling!’

As early as the beginning of September 1886, Vacquerie and Carvalho wanted to hear the music. The reaction at the Opéra-Comique was enthusiastic, and everyone was convinced in advance that this new *drame lyrique* in four acts, each of them different in character, would be a masterpiece.



Saint-Saëns and Gallet substantially revised the dramatic sequence of Vacquerie's play. The latter's first scene took place in the street and began abruptly with dialogue between Sabatino and Renzo on the subject of Angiola, Renzo's sister, followed by a passage in which Renzo puts Sabatino to the test by telling him to seduce Proserpine. Saint-Saëns, by contrast, transposes the scene to the gardens of Proserpine's palazzo, 'a poetic reproduction of a court of love' where young lords and ladies stroll as they discuss the courtesan's charms. Thus Proserpine's entrance is 'prepared' according to the standard conventions of opera.

The second act, which takes place in the convent where Angiola is cloistered, does not appear in Vacquerie's play. This was an invention of Louis Gallet, and was paradoxically the act that was found most pleasing.

But the principal modification concerns the work's dénouement. In Vacquerie's play, Proserpine kills Angiola and Sabatino kills Proserpine: that made two murderers and two corpses, something rather unseemly on the stage of the Opéra-Comique. In the first version of the libretto (1887), Proserpine stabs Angiola and Sabatino kills Proserpine, but it is possible to read the action as implying that Angiola, though gravely wounded, will finally survive. Louis Gallet was still uncomfortable with this ending and wanted to spell it out more clearly, as he told the composer:

And then I regret that there isn't a word to inform the audience that Angiola *is not done for*, a 'You will live!' or something of that kind, banal if you like, but very useful for sending the public home joyful at heart after this terrifying butchery.

In the second version (1899), Gallet watered down the action to make it more acceptable: Proserpine tries to kill Angiola, but Sabatino wards off the blow; she then turns the stiletto on herself and commits suicide. Hence there is only one dead body and no murderer on the stage. The transformation of this conclusion in order to 'tone Proserpine down', was the subject of animated discussions between composer, librettist

and playwright, and it was finally Auguste Vacquerie who had the idea of her suicide.



Right from the start, Saint-Saëns had a very precise conception of the character of Proserpine, ‘a strange and mysterious woman’, but one who must not appear too repellent or enigmatic – something Vacquerie was already afraid of when he thought up the play. And yet, after Carmen and Violetta (in *La traviata*), here was a courtesan on the stage of the Salle Favart once again; and this was a high-powered member of the species, an ‘universelle’, as the libretto specifies (that is, one who will sleep with anybody), yet who needed to be instilled with sentiments that would touch the spectator.

All the tension of the libretto lies in the contrast and the ambiguity of these two female roles: the radiance, the candour and the purity, but perhaps also the insignificance of Angiola are set against the passion, the darkness, the incandescence and in the end the damnation of Proserpine.

It was Caroline Salla who was assigned the daunting task of creating the role of Proserpine, which requires equal skills as tragedienne and singer. The critics called the role ‘ungrateful’ as conceived in its first version, for it contained no bravura number intended to show off the soloist’s qualities (Saint-Saëns added a fine *cantabile* for her to the third act of the second version).



Proserpine was premiered at the Opéra-Comique on 14 March 1887, under the direction of Jules Danbé, in a production by Charles Ponchard with sets by Jean-Baptiste Lavastre and costumes by Théophile Thomas. There were ten performances in the run, and the new creation was greeted by a colossal battery of reviews which would in itself justify a detailed study,

so revealing is it of the evolution of tastes, the mobility of opinions, and the underlying political and aesthetic assumptions of its period. One can see from these reviews that many critics judged the work to be 'composite'. Louis Gallet himself noted the diversity of musical inspiration that Saint-Saëns displayed in his score by presenting four acts of quite distinct characters, respectively 'symphonic, melodic, picturesque, dramatic'.

The first two acts corresponded to audience expectations, with clearly differentiated arias and melodies. The second act especially, the one set in the convent, was unanimously admired. The wedding choruses were found delightful, and the act's finale was encoored on the first night. The last two acts, on the other hand, disconcerted press and public. Camille Bellaigue, for example, considered that the drama began in the third act – the very place where the music finished and slid downhill. Saint-Saëns was accused of having applied the 'Wagnerian model' here by using continuous declamation, by wishing to bring about a fusion of drama and music, but above all by abusing the device of leitmotifs. This utilisation of recurring motifs, the intentions and subtleties of which many commentators failed to grasp, was deemed to be an annoying stylistic facility, a way of using up 'leftovers', a system tacked onto the work and cold-bloodedly applied. The principal criticism was the one that was customarily meted out to the composer: he was reproached with allowing the 'symphonist' to dominate the dramatic author, in other words with presenting a score that was too elaborate to be easily understood by the public, or with investing all his imagination in the orchestra to the detriment of the voice parts.

It would be an understatement to say that the score of *Proserpine* unsettled commentators. Henri Moreno of *Le Ménestrel* saw it as a compromise between old and new operatic styles, resulting in an impression of unease and 'a sort of malaria that reigns over the entire score'. Others, such as Félicien Champsaur and Raoul d'Harville, could not resist witticisms at the composer's expense: 'Cinq sens, mais pas d'âme' (Five senses but no soul); 'no one understood a word of this hodgepodge of notes

hurled at random into the first, second, third and fourth acts by M. Camille Saint-Science'.*

These criticisms, sometimes cruel, often heated, may also be explained in part by interferences that troubled objective reception of the work. First of all, on 9 January of that same year, Paris discovered the powerful Third ('Organ') Symphony, which was performed at the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire. The reputation of Saint-Saëns the 'symphonist' was then at its zenith, crowned by this masterpiece destined for the glorious career with which we are all familiar. Moreover, a Germanic breeze was currently wafting over Paris by way of Belgium; the Théâtre de la Monnaie had just performed *Die Walküre* in French, on 6 March 1887, the week before the premiere of *Proserpine* (*Die Walküre* was not given complete at the Opéra de Paris until 12 March 1893). Here was a windfall for the music critics, not one of whom failed to compare the two works, sometimes in aesthetic terms, sometimes in political, at this period when it was thought appropriate for composers to fly a flag.

Charles Gounod stood up for Saint-Saëns, publicly manifesting his support and friendship and publishing a long article on the front page of the daily newspaper *La France* on 18 March 1887, four days after the premiere. And if he judged that his support was needed, it was also because he had sensed that the work would not be properly understood. The anti-Wagnerians saw in *Proserpine* the buttress of a rampart to be erected against German hegemony; but the affair was not as simple as that, for the musical language used by Saint-Saëns had once again sowed doubts as to his 'Frenchness'. It was said that he had 'been considerably influenced by the Master of Bayreuth'; worse still, it was alleged that he applied in his works what he rejected in his writings.

In 1876, Saint-Saëns had been an ardent champion of Wagner's output; but in 1886, following the publication of an anthology of his articles

* Both jokes depend on homophony for their effect: 'Cinq sens' is heard as 'Saint-Saëns'; 'Saint-Science' might be translated as 'Holy Learning', the noun understood in its sense of pedantic academicism. (Translator's note.)

entitled *Harmonie et Mélodie* – in the preface of which he attacked, not Wagnerian principles in themselves, but Wagnerism and its emulators – the composer had to face violent attacks from the press during a concert tour in Germany, a campaign that led to a boycott of his works in German concert halls and opera houses. Hence the reception of *Proserpine* was coloured by this polemical background and influenced by its composer's public pronouncements.

Nevertheless, there were other and no less numerous commentators who praised the composer's stylistic mastery, the richness of his orchestral textures and the subtle way he blended timbres and filled the sonic space, his sense of proportion in developments and structure; an orchestration that is always sober, varied and expressive, without excess weight or padding, in which the timbres contrast and intermingle with unfailing skill, in sonorities invariably appropriate to the situation. But this too was the art of the 'symphonist'.

In order to put a stop to the controversies, Saint-Saëns felt obliged to take up his pen, which he did initially by publishing a letter in *Le Ménestrel* dated 17 April 1887.

My theory, in matters theatrical, is as follows: I believe that drama is moving towards a synthesis of different styles, singing, declamation, orchestral music [*symphonie*] held together in an equilibrium that enables the creator to use all the resources of the art, and the listener to satisfy all his legitimate appetites. It is this equilibrium that I seek, and which others will certainly find. My nature and my intellect stimulate me equally to pursue that quest, and I cannot shirk it. That is why I am rejected, now by the Wagnerites, who scorn the melodic style and the art of singing, now by the reactionaries, who on the contrary cling to that tradition and regard declamation and orchestral writing as accessory.

When the opera was revived in 1899, however, the public had heard *Lohengrin*, *Samson et Dalila*, Alfred Bruneau's *Le Rêve* and *Die Walküre* in the meantime, and tastes had changed. A critic judiciously remarked

that *Proserpine* would be favourably received today, and the passages that were most criticised in 1887 would, rightly, be the most admired now'. But this time the work was reproached with the 'late Romanticism' of the libretto, which was now decidedly out of fashion. In any case, as he told Jacques Durand in 1910, Saint-Saëns could never fathom his opera's lack of success:

I wonder what the reasons are for the ostracism it suffers, and I can't understand it. The piece has passion, grace, picturesqueness; and the second act is enchanting. Moreover, it is a literary work, whose text has nothing in common with the 'words' of ordinary operas or the gobbledygook of translations ...

It must also be acknowledged that *Proserpine* had more than its share of bad luck. Throughout its performances, whether in France or abroad, there was a constant stream of accidents to its singers, who lost their voices, broke their legs, fell off horses, quarrelled with managers or forsook them for more lucrative contracts. As the composer himself said, 'the list of pitfalls placed on the path of this unfortunate work is a long one', starting with the fire at the Salle Favart on 25 May 1887, which – though it spared the orchestral score – reduced the orchestral and choral parts and the decors to ashes, thus dashing all hopes of a rapid revival of the work after its first run.



Another obstacle, and not the least of them, was the fact that *Proserpine* is a heavy role, written for a low voice of the kind Saint-Saëns was fond of, a 'Falcon' calling for the same vocal resources as Valentine in *Les Huguenots*, which was not easy to find, since this voice type was used much less frequently by the late nineteenth century. As with the role of Dalila, Saint-Saëns spent a long time searching for a singer who could embody his heroine, who would be capable of carrying off this dark,

highly dramatic character, at once immoral and pathetic, this woman courted without love, sister to the Proserpine of the Underworld ('You far from day, I far from love: the same bereavement!'). The quest was arduous indeed.

There were plans to revive the work from 1891 onwards, but these hung on the goodwill of the director of the Opéra-Comique and the appearance of a gifted exponent of the title role, and Saint-Saëns shared his hesitations with Louis Gallet and Auguste Durand: 'All I need to do now is wait for a Proserpine. I can't see one anywhere at the moment. Even M^{me} Caron seems too skinny to me, and her corsets are much too extravagant. We would need Adiny's physique coupled with the talent of M^{me} Caron.' 'What we have to do is discover a Proserpine. We need something unprecedented, suggestive, with a stentorian voice and a great deal of talent. Where can we find such a rare bird?' 'For Proserpine, we must demand the Falcon of Grand Opera; it's a role that calls for large resources, that demands them, even.'

Saint-Saëns wanted Emma Calvé for the part, but that did not fit in with the plans of the director of the Opéra-Comique, Albert Carré, and finally he found that she 'gesticulates too much' and was rather afraid of 'her eccentricities, which are impossible to hold in check'. 'What I need is a *grande coquette* combined with a great tragic actress. Alas! I don't see where I can get one.' The composer then made concessions and 'sopranised' the role to some extent, in the hope that it would be taken up by other stars such as Marthe Chenal, Marie Delna, Meyrienne Héglon, Georgette Leblanc or Marie Bréma, all of whom could have made a plausible Proserpine at the time.

He was convinced that the work was misunderstood, and that one of its chances of success was to have performers impose it on opera houses, 'for the role of Proserpine is admirable: the singer can use it to display her talents as both comedienne and tragedienne, she can smile and be terrible, while showing off varied costumes that bring out her beauty in three different ways. Add to that the fact that now it suits both sopranos and contraltos!'

When the opera enjoyed a brilliant revival in Alexandria at the end of 1902 Cairo early in 1903, Saint-Saëns felt the need to specify his intentions yet again. He published a ten-page pamphlet entitled 'Quelques mots sur *Proserpine*' (Alexandria: Théâtre Zizinia, 1902) and advised Auguste Durand as follows:

It will be useful to circulate this in Paris when *Proserpine* is given there again; for, after relating the subject of the piece, I have formulated a thorough explanation of what *lies behind* the subject and what I aimed to do when I wrote the music. Since people in Paris have doggedly persisted in deliberately misunderstanding the opera and asking why I conceived the idea of setting 'that bad Romantic drama' to music, it won't be a bad thing to enlighten them.

Right from the start, as in the case of *Samson et Dalila* which also had great difficulty in establishing itself in the repertory, Saint-Saëns always believed his opera was destined to last, and none of the obstacles that were set in its way made him change his views: 'I persist in finding *Proserpine* excellent. The future will show I was right.'
