

The genesis of *Le Timbre d'argent*

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Within Camille Saint-Saëns's operatic output, *Le Timbre d'argent* occupies a special place and deserves special attention. It is a thoroughly neglected work today, but there are many reasons to plead its cause and to rejoice at its resurrection. Already during the composer's lifetime, ill fate pursued the opera relentlessly, for its complicated genesis and a path strewn with obstacles perturbed its creation and reception. These multiple vicissitudes exemplified both the problems encountered by young composers when they attempted timid innovations and the difficulty the new generation of composers active at the pivotal era between the Second Empire and the Third Republic faced in gaining access to the operatic stage.

From the outset, *Le Timbre d'argent* was regarded by its contemporaries as an atypical work, so many mutations and changes of genre and venue did it suffer before and even after its premiere in 1877. As the music critic Adolphe Jullien said:

Never has an opera undergone more transformations, encountered more obstacles, been attempted by more composers and been offered to more theatres than this unfortunate *Timbre d'argent*.

To gain a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding its realisation, it is necessary to go back thirteen years. In 1864 Saint-Saëns was twenty-eight years old and his career as a virtuoso pianist and organist was booming. His list of works was already long and his reputation as an

'advanced' composer continued to grow. However, he had yet to prove himself on the operatic stage, and he absolutely wished to do so. To compose an opera and see it well received – especially on the stage of the Paris Opéra – was a crucial step in gaining recognition as a fully-fledged composer and rising above a reputation as a 'pianist-composer'. But such recognition was very difficult to acquire when, like Saint-Saëns, one had not received the Prix de Rome.

Saint-Saëns had already competed for this prize that opened all doors in 1852 but, at the age of only sixteen, the jury found him too young. In 1864, he made a second attempt, but this time he was not awarded it either, on the pretext that he was too old... and that he did not need it. However, Auber, who was on the jury and had voted for Saint-Saëns, found the young man's failure to win particularly unfair; and, as a 'consolation prize' for the unfortunate candidate, he asked the director of the Théâtre-Lyrique, Léon Carvalho, for an *opéra-comique* libretto that he had in reserve, and made him promise to stage the setting of it that Saint-Saëns would compose. This provided a means of bypassing the institutions and finally giving the composer his chance. Saint-Saëns would always be grateful to Auber for this generous initiative.

The gift was not quite as glittering as it might seem, however, because this libretto entitled *Le Timbre d'argent*, although produced by two well-known librettists, Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, was not without defects. It had already been offered to and refused by three composers – Xavier Boisselot, Henri Litolff and Charles Gounod – and it was said that 'as in the game of pass-the-parcel', it had already 'circulated from hand to hand and from desk to piano' for a good ten years. Saint-Saëns nevertheless took up the challenge. He requested significant changes to the text, which Barbier and Carré easily granted, and he wrote a score in five acts very quickly, in just two months. Then... nothing happened. Léon Carvalho took two years before he agreed to hear the score. Once he had finally done so, he declared himself quite entranced by the music and decided to have it scheduled for study in his theatre as soon as possible. But, according to Saint-Saëns, he had the 'compulsive habit' (*manie*) of intervening

in the works he staged. He wanted to force the composer to put wild animals on the stage, to cut all the music save for the choruses and dances, and then to introduce a leading role in which he would cast his wife, the singer Marie-Caroline Carvalho. However, in the libretto of *Le Timbre d'argent*, the main female part is assigned to a dancer and is a mute role, while the second female lead, the role of Hélène, has rather a low profile. Carvalho also wanted to install an aquarium on stage, into which the singer in question would have to dive to retrieve the bell. Saint-Saëns confessed that he was reduced to despondency by all the director's whims: 'Moreover, since the piece, except for the prologue and the epilogue, takes place in a dream, he took that as his excuse for inventing the strangest tricks.' 'These inanities' took up another two years.



But the rumour gradually got about in the musical world that Saint-Saëns was engaged in a work for the stage. Georges Bizet, who had just produced the vocal score of *Le Timbre d'argent* for Choudens, was under its spell, as he told his friend Ernest Guiraud:

I've just reduced *Le Timbre d'argent*; it's vintage Auber! – It's charming! Genuine *opéra-comique* with a slight sprinkling of Verdi. What imagination! What inspired melodies! Absolutely nothing of Wagner, of Berlioz, nothing! Nothing! This Saint-Saëns doesn't give a f... ig for us with his opinions. You'll be amazed! Two or three numbers are a bit vulgar in their ideas, but they fit the situation very well, and then they are saved by the immense talent of the musician. It's a real work and he's a real man, that fellow!

Carvalho finally renounced the idea of having his wife sing, the role of Hélène was assigned to Mlle Schroeder, and rehearsals began at the Théâtre-Lyrique in January 1868. They were interrupted... by the theatre's bankruptcy and the departure of its director.

Shortly afterwards, Émile Perrin, then in charge of the Opéra, asked to have *Le Timbre d'argent* for Paris's premier opera house. But to adapt the work to the larger dimensions of that stage required substantial alterations; in particular, all the dialogue had to be transformed into recitative and then set to music. So librettists and composer got back to work again, especially as Perrin also asked for adjustments to certain roles. Relations between the director and the authors then grew complicated, and composer and librettists soon realised that the chances of seeing their work performed at the Opéra one day were dwindling fast.

In the meantime, Camille Du Locle had taken over the management of the Opéra-Comique and persuaded Perrin to hand *Le Timbre d'argent* over to him. The work, originally conceived as an *opéra-comique*, then reworked into a full-blown opera, was now to be turned back into an *opéra-comique*. It is not a question here of two co-existing versions – one with spoken dialogue and the other wholly sung – but of a modification of the same version. So the piece underwent further metamorphoses, and another few months were spent modifying the libretto. Saint-Saëns later recounted, in an article published in 1911:

We thought we were close to achieving our goal. Du Locle had discovered in Italy a beautiful dancer on whom he counted a great deal; but, alas, the dancer was not one at all; she was a *mime*; she didn't dance. [...] Finally, a real dancer was hired; nothing now seemed to stand in the way of the appearance of this unfortunate *Timbre*. 'It's unbelievable,' I said, 'some catastrophe will happen to get in the way.' What happened was the war [of 1870].

Le Timbre d'argent was therefore stopped in its tracks by the political upheavals linked to the fall of the Second Empire and the installation of the new regime. Du Locle eventually lost interest in the work and, having been unable to find a suitable dancer and corps de ballet, abandoned the idea of producing it. Meanwhile, Saint-Saëns had offered his opera to Stoumon, the director of La Monnaie in Brussels, but without success.

Then came the collapse of the Opéra-Comique, whose director resigned on the grounds of ill health, leaving it in great financial difficulties. Thirteen years after the initial commission, Saint-Saëns found himself back at square one, the composer of a score transformed several times which finally nobody wanted.

However, the Théâtre-Lyrique was taken over by Albert Vizentini, and the Ministry of Fine Arts, casting a kindly eye on the composer's misfortunes, gave the new director a small subsidy to produce the work. *Le Timbre d'argent* thus changed theatres once again and finally began rehearsals, in very unfavourable conditions, as Saint-Saëns himself related in 1911:

I found myself, as it were, between the Devil and the deep blue sea, and I soon saw the drawbacks of the situation. First it was the hunt for the soprano, the hunt for the tenor; several were tried without success. [...] Each day brought new vexations: cuts were made against my will; I was left at the mercy of the revolts, even the uncouth remarks of the director and the ballet master, who could not bear the most timid observation from me. To get some instruments to play off stage, I had to pay for them. Stage action I requested for the prologue was declared impossible. Moreover, the orchestra was very poor; it was necessary to arrange many rehearsals, which were not refused me, but advantage was taken of this to spread among the public the view that my music was unperformable.

The press had followed the tribulations of *Le Timbre d'argent* throughout all these years of procrastination, and journalists reported the mutilations of the score and the libretto, and the humiliations that Saint-Saëns had to undergo, to the point 'that he wept in the wings'. The work had become 'legendary', and to tell the truth, no one believed in it any more, so often had announcements been made that it was coming soon, that it was postponed, that it had been altered. Arnold Mortier in *Le Figaro* even stated that

people showed an interest in it as they would in an invalid, to the point where, when the opera of Saint-Saëns was discussed, it was sometimes referred to as 'Le Timbre au nez d'argent' [The Bell with a silver nose]!

When it was announced that the work was going into rehearsal, mentions in the press became more frequent but not any kinder. It was claimed that the roles had been distributed one after the other 'to all the outstanding artists in Paris' and that certain choristers who had followed the work through all its peregrinations had had to learn it four times from its successive scores, which, moreover, 'could not penetrate the narrow throats of the tenors or the memory of the baritones'. It was also said that:

M. CSS's pages were the graveyard of such voices as would take the risk of conquering their difficulties; they were the musical equivalent of the quicksand of Mont Saint-Michel. [...] Then it was the orchestra's turn. At the fifteenth rehearsal, the master instrumentalists, conducted by M. Danbé, were still lost in the maze of rhythms and harmonies, in pursuit of elusive sonorities.

But, as Louis de Fourcaud testifies in *Le Gaulois*,

these rumours, if truth be told, were not of the kind to dampen curiosity, which was whetted more and more as we approached the announced date for this supposedly impossible revelation. I have rarely seen more animated corridors than those of the Théâtre-Lyrique before the curtain rose [...]. There was an incredible to and fro of conversations, a constant exchange of ironical or enthusiastic remarks before anyone had actually seen anything.



Le Timbre d'argent was finally premiered at the Théâtre National Lyrique on 23 February 1877, in its fourth version. The score announces a 'drame lyrique en 4 actes' and the libretto an 'opéra fantastique en 4 actes et 8

tableaux'. The subject in itself is neither very original nor very complicated, and the narrative thread – in the same vein as that of *Faust*, and from the pens of the same librettists – was already well known. In addition to a central character, Conrad – rather unsympathetic and ready to sacrifice everything, even the lives of his loved ones, to obtain the gold that will serve to conquer the dancer with whom he is in love – the libretto also features a 'mute' leading role that is danced throughout, Fiametta; two fairly substantial male roles, Spiridion (who undergoes several metamorphoses) and Conrad's friend Bénédicte; and two less developed female characters, Hélène (Conrad's fiancée, whom he abandons for Fiametta) and her sister Rosa (Bénédicte's fiancée).

The alternation between dream and reality presented by the libretto lent itself well to staging in that it offered a great diversity of tableaux, providing scope for the deployment of stage machinery and multiple costumes and sets, two of which caused a sensation at the premiere: one represented the auditorium of the Vienna Court Opera viewed by spectators on stage, as in a mirror effect; the other was the interior of a rich Florentine palace, where a magnificently laid and illuminated table emerged from the ground as if by magic.

Everyone who was anyone in Paris musical circles thronged to the premiere; spectators of particular note were Gounod, who led the applause, and Massenet, whose warm letter of congratulations to the composer was reproduced in the press: 'You are the master of us all and once again you prove it in brilliant fashion.' The reception of the work gave rise to an abundant literature, since no fewer than seventy articles were published in the press between 26 February and 6 March 1877.

If the critics were unanimous in praising the lavishness of the staging, on which the management of the Théâtre-Lyrique had not skimped, they were equally agreed in acknowledging that the cast was not commensurate with the quality of the score and left a great deal to be desired: only the baritone Léon Melchissédec, who played the role of Spiridion, and the tenor Caisso, who sang Bénédicte, were singled out for praise. The tenor Blum was inadequate in the role of Conrad, as were the two women,

whose voices were not found appealing. Moreover, the part of Héléne, written for a soprano, was sung by a mezzo making her debut, Caroline Salla, whose voice was insecure in this higher tessitura. Naturally, the press concluded that Saint-Saëns could not write for voices. On the other hand, the performance of the dancer, Adeline Théodore, was a great success. The orchestra conducted by Jules Danbé also received plaudits for having surmounted this 'difficult score'. As for the libretto, the critics were favourable on the whole, but they noted that the audience did not always follow the transitions between dream and reality very well.

Opinions differed widely, however, when it came to the music itself. Some writers observed that it had been composed thirteen years previously and that the composer's style had evolved in the meantime. Others saw the influence of Gounod, Auber, Weber, Beethoven or Wagner. Some heard melodies in the piece, which provoked sarcastic comments since Saint-Saëns, who had been placed in the category of the 'algebraists' and 'harmonists', was supposed a priori to be incapable of producing such a thing. Others heard nothing, and accused the composer of drowning the voices in a fog of confusion.

This being the case, one may wonder if the work was perceived as being so 'modern', strange, divergent, as finally to become disturbing? Saint-Saëns had conceived the idea of adjusting his musical style to suit the dramatic situations, and this, in any case, was misunderstood. For example, in the first scene, which takes place in the painter's studio, Conrad is sick and feverish, and hears coming from outside a Carnival chorus whose noise he finds unbearable. Saint-Saëns deliberately composed unpleasant music, a chorus in bad taste with clumsy word-setting, in order to translate Conrad's delirium into musical terms, and thus to convey music distorted by fever; but the audience did not grasp this subtlety and only heard a poorly written chorus.

Saint-Saëns's true ambition in creating this score was nothing less than to develop further, to remodel, the very form of *opéra-comique*. Deeming that his work had been badly received, he felt it necessary to explain his intentions, and did so in three articles published in 1879 (*La*

Nouvelle Revue), in 1911 (*L'Écho de Paris*) and finally, in 1914, in a brochure issued by Choudens et fils for the revival of the work in a revised version at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels.

... this work, which was at that time an *opéra-comique* mixed with dialogue, nevertheless appeared as revolutionary and prodigiously 'advanced'. In those days [1864], operas were not divided into scenes, but into 'numbers', almost all cast in the same mould that musicians meekly adopted. The composer of *Le Timbre d'argent*, who, long before he knew the works of Richard Wagner, dreamed of operas divided into scenes of various forms and not into numbers of a uniform cut, had broken the moulds that his librettists had given him, and constructed his numbers with complete freedom. Add to this the considerable role assigned to the orchestra, the characteristic motifs circulating throughout the work like blood in the veins and changing according to circumstances, and you will not be surprised that the composer was regarded as dangerous and even 'Wagnerian', which was then almost an insult.

With *Le Timbre d'argent*, his official debut on the operatic stage in a major work, Saint-Saëns was playing for high stakes. It will be recalled that *Samson et Dalila* had already been written several years previously and no opera manager wished to produce the work (it was only thanks to Franz Liszt's support that it had its premiere in Weimar on 2 December 1877). If *Le Timbre d'argent* was a failure, the theatres would probably be inaccessible to him for a long time to come, and that is why he showed such genuine commitment to this score. The libretto was not ideal, but the diversity of the situations it depicted allowed him to display all his skills. *Le Timbre d'argent* was thus to serve him as a testing ground. Saint-Saëns had ideas about opera, ideas for innovations, and he wanted to apply them in this specific work, to prove himself, to demonstrate that a performer could also be a composer, and that a 'symphoniste' could also write for the theatre. It was a first attempt, yet it had to be a masterpiece. He found it difficult to live through these thirteen years of preparation, frustrated by

the caprices of opera managements, by the bankruptcies of theatres, by the unwillingness of singers, by political events, and finally by a press very often ill-disposed towards him both aesthetically and politically, which took full advantage of a chance to make him pay both directly for his admiration for the works of Wagner – of which he was at the time a fierce defender – and indirectly for his republican sympathies.



The work was given eighteen times at the Théâtre-Lyrique, after which it enjoyed a chequered career. It was revived in 1879 at the Théâtre de la Monnaie for twenty performances, and should also have been performed at the Théâtre-Italien in St Petersburg, where Albert Vinentini had the intention of producing it. Saint-Saëns wrote to him on 12 November 1880:

You ask me to do *Le Timbre d'argent* again. Do you realise that this would be the *sixth* version? It's not an opera any more, it's a nightmare. Well, all the same, I won't say no. I have boxes full of music written for this damned work; we'll fix it up the way you want it.

But it was not until 1904-05 that the opera reappeared, in Germany and in a revised version. Then it was seen in Monte Carlo in 1907, for three performances, in a version truncated by a whole act but with a very fine cast. *Le Ménestrel* noted on that occasion the great success obtained by 'a remarkable score whose first performance in Paris dates back some thirty years and whose subsequent neglect musicians have never been able to account for'. The last performance during the composer's lifetime was given in Brussels in March 1914. Saint-Saëns was obviously very keen to see his work resurrected in a form that could guarantee its posterity more effectively, since, fifty years after starting to write the score, he was still working on it. As a preamble to this new version with recitatives, he informed the listener that the opera had been completely revised, that he had deleted some passages and added a great deal of new music. *Le*

Timbre d'argent had changed shape once more, and what had been an *opéra-comique* had become a *grand opéra*:

There is a bit of everything in this work, which ranges from symphony to operetta by way of lyric drama and ballet. The composer has nonetheless striven to give it a certain unity: only the public can judge whether he has succeeded.



Waltz by Métra on themes from *Le Timbre d'argent*.
Private collection.

Valse de Métra sur *Le Timbre d'argent*.
Collection particulière.