

## Saint-Saëns and opera

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From the 1850s until his death in 1921 Saint-Saëns followed opera's progress with keen interest. During his long career he witnessed its evolution as a spectator, but also as a composer. Opera was central to his concerns, as may be seen from his prolific writings (books, articles, prefaces and letters) containing many comments on works old and new, performers, repertoires, styles, aesthetics, institutions and their directors, and so forth. In founding the Société Nationale de Musique in 1871 to promote contemporary French music and its performance, Saint-Saëns became a spokesman for a new generation of French composers; then through his writings, his taste for controversy and his omnipresence in French musical life, he became 'the true conscience of French opera' (Hervé Lacombe, *Les Voies de l'opéra français au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Fayard, 1997, p. 13).

For Saint-Saëns and his colleagues getting an opera accepted for performance was no easy matter. The directors of the official opera houses gave young composers hardly any opportunity to be heard; those institutions had by the mid-century built up a permanent repertoire, which meant that there were many revivals, and very few new works; furthermore, they were governed by strict *cahiers de charges*, or contracts between the State and the director of a theatre specifying the composition of the company, subsidies, the type of works permitted, the scenery, and so on. *Samson et Dalila* was an undoubted success, but we must not forget that this work, which Saint-Saëns had had in mind since 1859, was first given in Weimar under the sponsorship of Liszt in 1877; it did not reach the

Paris Opéra until November 1892. Getting his other works staged also proved difficult.

I was, indeed, able to do something other than work for the theatre, and that is precisely why I was excluded. I was a writer of symphonies, an organist and a pianist, so how could I be capable of writing an opera? To be a pianist was particularly frowned upon in the theatre. Bizet played the piano admirably, but he never dared to play in public for fear of making his position worse. I suggested to Carvalho [director of the Paris Opéra] that I write a *Macbeth* for Madame Viardot. Naturally he preferred to mount Verdi's *Macbeth* at great expense. The result was an utter failure and cost him thirty thousand francs. They tried to interest a certain princess [Princess Mathilde], a patron of the arts, in my behalf. 'What,' she replied, 'isn't he satisfied with his position? He plays the organ at the Madeleine and the piano at my house. Isn't that enough for him?' No, that wasn't enough for me, and to overcome the obstacles I caused a scandal. At the age of twenty-eight I competed for the Prix de Rome. They did not give it to me, on the grounds that I didn't need it.

(Saint-Saëns, 'Histoire d'un opéra-comique', *Écho de Paris*, 19 February 1911.)

His exceptionally long career as a concert artist, from 1835 to 1921 (the year of his death), undoubtedly slowed down his career as a composer. Saint-Saëns, a virtuoso pianist of the highest order and an excellent organist, was regarded by his peers as one of the greatest performers of his time. His instrumental music, such as his very successful symphonic poems, his piano and violin concertos and his Third Symphony ('Organ'), found its way with ease into the concert hall and experienced great success. His operas, on the other hand, had to struggle. Twice he was refused the Prix de Rome, that magic pass which gained its recipients entrance to the Paris Opéra. Some mean spirits wondered why he wasted so much time and energy on writing operas and trying to get them performed, when he was so successful in other fields. But should we give credence

to Debussy, writing as his alter ego Monsieur Croche? ‘Saint-Saëns composed operas with the impenitence of a convinced symphonist. Is that where the future will look for the true reasons for continuing to admire him?’ It is still difficult for us to judge: opportunities to hear those works are rare and some of them have never even been recorded.

Each new work was awaited, dissected, and sometimes judged harshly, as if Saint-Saëns was forbidden to produce anything less than excellence, and obliged at all costs to show boldness and innovation. The following paragraph on the subject of *Les Barbares*, written by the critic Alfred Bruneau sums up a widespread opinion about the composer’s works in the early years of the twentieth century:

But from a man of such superior brilliance we are entitled to expect works beyond compare, works of considerable and undeniable influence, works that are original and serve the furtherance of their art. Undoubtedly, this one does not live up to our expectations. It does not diminish the unassailable greatness of its author’s reputation; it leaves French operatic works exactly where they were before the curious character of Monsieur Camille Saint-Saëns expressed itself once more, with this as the direct result. For all that, the performance of *Les Barbares* was by no means pointless, since it has proved that the admirable author of *Samson et Dalila*, the C minor Symphony, *Phaëton* and *Le Déluge* is still ‘his country’s finest musician’.

(Alfred Bruneau, *Musiques de Russie et musiciens de France*, Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1903, p. 86.)

Saint-Saëns’s solitary path was not generally well understood by the critics, and at a time when Wagnerism, symbolism and naturalism had the wind in their sails, and aesthetics were so closely linked to politics, he was constantly obliged to justify his choices. An opera libretto, he felt, should be ‘visually understandable, like a ballet’; the main difficulty was ‘to create highly dramatic situations by very simple means’. With historical subjects he was clearly in his element: it was taken for granted that audiences

were familiar with the events related, which left him free to concentrate on the various aspects of human nature that those events revealed (felony, cruelty and duplicity, for example, in *Henry VIII*). Such librettos suited him perfectly, 'The supernatural lends itself admirably to expression in music and music finds in the supernatural a wealth of resources. But what music must have above all are emotions and passions laid bare and set in action by what we term the situation. And where can one find more or better situations than in history?' (Camille Saint-Saëns, *École buissonnière: notes et souvenirs*, Paris, 1913.) In the articles he wrote over a period of some fifty years, Saint-Saëns returned regularly to a subject that was dear to his heart. Here are a few eloquent examples:

I believe, like Richard Wagner, that musical drama [also known as lyric drama: opera in which the musical and dramatic elements are equally important; the music is appropriate to the action] is the complete form of drama, and it is foolish to sacrifice that beautiful form for the pleasure of hearing cavatinas. Wagner has many other ideas that I do not share. While recognising, for instance, the advantage of using legendary subjects, I see no clear reason why one should do so systematically. I once decided to take a legendary subject, and rather than use a local legend, which might be incomprehensible abroad, I took a biblical subject, resulting in the opera *Samson et Dalila*. But my ambition would be to create a series of depictions of the history of France; I began with *Étienne Marcel*, and I have every intention of continuing, in spite of obstacles.

('Causerie musicale', *Nouvelle Revue*, October-November 1879.)

My theory as regards theatre is this: I think drama is moving towards a synthesis of different styles, with the singing, the declamation, the orchestra brought together in an equilibrium which enables the creator to use all the resources of his art, and the listener to satisfy every legitimate appetite. That equilibrium is what I am seeking, and others will surely find it. My nature and my reason also drive me in that quest; I have to do it. For that reason I am rejected, now by Wagnerists, who despise the melodic style

and the art of singing, now by the reactionaries who, on the contrary, cling to those features, and regard declamation and the orchestra's part as being only of secondary importance.

(*Proserpine*: une lettre de M. Camille Saint-Saëns', *Le Ménestrel*, 17 April 1887.)

To think that for years I had it dinned into me that *Samson* was impossible *because of its subject!* I received letters trying to prove to me that my work was unplayable. And now all of a sudden it's the only one with a good subject, because it's a success. [...] So the texts should have been dramatic, when the music wasn't; and now it is striving to be so, the drama shouldn't be dramatic! But *Ascanio*, *Proserpine*, *Henry VIII* are, at least in my view, true *lyric dramas*, because they are dramatic and lyrical. It would never occur to me to write a musical drama that has no drama. Of course, some subjects are more musical than others. But one only ever finds that out afterwards. Then it depends a great deal on the quality of the composer's inspiration. But since any dramatic situation worth its name either engenders or is the result of a clash of feelings, and feelings are musical, it seems to me that any truly dramatic situation is necessarily musical, and much more appropriate for treatment in a lyric drama than in an opera of the old type. I patiently await someone to prove the contrary...

(*À propos du Drame lyrique*: une lettre de M. Camille Saint-Saëns' [letter in answer to the critic Jacques du Tillet], *Revue politique et littéraire - Revue Bleue*, 3 July 1897.)

Gounod was one of Saint-Saëns's models for opera. In 1897 he devoted a long article to him, in which he also outlined the theories he had adopted:

Melody, declamation and the orchestra are resources that the artist has a right to employ as he wishes and which he would do well to keep in the best equilibrium he can. This equilibrium seems to have been one of Gounod's main concerns; he achieved it in his own way; others will achieve

it differently, but the principle will remain the same; it is the sacred Trimurti, the god three-in-one, Creator of the Lyric Drama. And if one of the elements is to be more important than the others, there should be no hesitation: the vocal element must predominate. It is not in the orchestra, it is not in the Text that the Word of the Lyric Drama subsists: it is in the Song!

(‘Charles Gounod’, *Revue de Paris*, 15 June 1897.)

The superiority of the voice over the orchestra is also a recurrent theme in his articles. He took it up again when *Henry VIII* was about to be revived at the Paris Opéra in 1917:

And I am curious to find out whether I shall be once again accused, as in the past, of lacking conviction because, to the distaste of my detractors, I follow my own ideas instead of adopting those of others. Arias, duets, quartet, ensembles, what an abomination! ‘Conviction’ is a dirty word. ‘Method’ would be more accurate. Mine has not changed since I began writing for the theatre: I believe singers are there to sing and the orchestra is there to support, not smother, the singers. I try to bring the characters to life on stage, but I do not believe that necessarily means having to use declamation. What am I saying, declamation? Some have gone so far as to use whispering; one step further and we’re at a pantomime or a cinema! I think the voice is the most beautiful of instruments, and it has over musical instruments the same superiority as living things over inanimate objects; the melody must be given principally to the voice, not to the orchestra; this does not prevent the orchestra from commenting on the drama, depicting inner feelings, expressing the inexpressible. Is there one spectator in a hundred who understands that orchestral language?

(‘Henry VIII’, *Le Figaro*, 30 November 1917.)

Opera was always at the centre of his concerns and he never missed an opportunity to take part in discussions on a wide of variety of subjects, including the quality of librettos – furthermore, he strongly defended the

use of verse against modern prose – and foreign operas in translation, which he felt to be an adulteration: people would do well to go and hear the original works *in situ*. For how can one appreciate Wagner if one does not understand German? ‘It’s like seeing a light show without the light’ (‘Germanophilie’, *Écho de Paris*, 19 September 1914). He also criticised theatre directors who interfere with the staging, conductors who pay no heed to the indications in the score and, the main culprits, singers, who are the first to fail to respect the author’s wishes. He also had strong views on the performance of both contemporary music and early music – he had worked on the latter while he was actively involved in editorial projects for the works of Gluck and Rameau. He considered himself as the ‘relayer’ of a whole repertoire and felt it his duty to maintain a performance tradition that he feared might otherwise gradually disappear completely.

For it is with operas as it is with ships. We know that ships that have sailed the oceans, Atlantic, Pacific, Arctic or Antarctic, return in a deplorable state, their hulls covered with an unwanted growth of seaweeds and with clinging barnacles, the drag of all which hampers their progress. So they have to be withdrawn from service and put into dry dock, to be scraped clean and restored insofar as possible to their original state. It is the same with operas.

As they ply the ocean of success under full sail, singers, instrumentalists, conductors, *chefs de chant* and stage directors all make fast to their sides, so that their progress is first hampered, then completely impeded. So there is no other alternative but to free them from what is encumbering them and set them afloat again.

The public attends the performance of an opera in the naive belief that it is hearing the work as it was written; it does not realise that most of the time the author’s ideas are seen only in veiled and unrecognisable form, and sometimes not at all, as when (as happens all too often), severe cuts have been made, veritable mutilations which should be forbidden by law. ‘What is cut can never be booed!’ they say as they proceed, without stopping to think that what is cut can never be applauded either.

The magnificent ensemble at the beginning of the second-act finale of *Les Huguenots* [Meyerbeer] is disfigured by the removal of the fourteen bars of a quartet for male voices that lasts just *half a minute*; that quartet is the soul of the piece; without it, it is nothing more than a shapeless bit of debris, without beauty or effect. That cut suddenly appeared necessary one day when the composer was away sick – and that's that; in the theatre, what is cut is cut. And when a work is performed in full, do you think you are being given what the author intended? Not at all!

Performers are ever and everywhere possessed by an *idée fixe*: to make changes, as many as possible, in order to make the work their own creation instead of that of the author. The most illustrious artists have set an example. One great singer [Gilbert Duprez] gives this precept, as regards dynamics: 'Always follow the impulsion of the musical phrase.' And as an example he takes the following sentence from *Les Huguenots*: 'Le danger presse et le temps vole: Laisse-moi, laisse-moi, laisse-moi partir!' (Danger presses and time flies; let me, let me, let me depart!) The phrase begins with the voice in its medium range, gradually rising to the high A flat, which it reaches on the third 'laisse-moi!' True to his principle, the teacher indicates a long *crescendo*, leading to a *fortissimo* on the A flat. However, the composer indicates precisely the opposite: the first two 'laisse-moi' require a vigorous attack, then he marks a *piano* on the third one. That dynamic was a brainwave, the most eloquent expression of Raoul's hesitations and the distress he feels on realising, as he pronounces the words 'laisse-moi partir', that he does not have the strength to depart.

Thus the author's intentions are disfigured from beginning to end of the great works of the repertoire; the text is replaced by a gloss. The public trusts in the honesty of the performers and is so used to falsification that it would now be quite shocked if a tenor did not sing 'Tu l'as dit, oui, tu m'aimes!' at the top of his voice, even though the score clearly indicates the contrast between the desperate cries of Valentine and the loving entreaties of Raoul. Yet there must be people in the audience who have said such things at some time in their lives and know what tone of voice should be used.



They change not only the dynamics (which in some cases changes everything), they also change the rhythms; and they do not stop at rhythm, which is the backbone of the music: they change the notes as well. What does it matter! The author will shoulder the responsibility.

And thus operas age, fade, and fall into decrepitude and finally obsolescence.

None of this would happen if the opera houses were run by musicians, convinced of the absolute need to respect the author's intentions and protect them from the sudden whims of the performers. Fortunately, a musician [Vaucorbeil] is currently at the head of our Académie Nationale de Musique [Paris Opéra]. He must have the courage to take the works out of the repertoire one by one, allow them to be forgotten, have them studied again and re-establish the true traditions.

(‘Musique’, *Le Voltaire*, 29 September 1879.)

But throughout his career Saint-Saëns also had to put up with having his works compared to those of Richard Wagner; until the end of his life he had to justify himself and reject the man who was ‘always under his feet’. As he told Jacques Durand a month before he died:

I differ from R. Wagner in that, with very few exceptions, I always use the orchestra as accompanist to the singing, however rich the singing; Wagner, on the other hand, sets the principle that the orchestra must take the melody, and opts to give the voice a secondary role. [...] Incidentally, in his early works, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, Wagner had not yet sacrificed the voice as he did in his later works; and there is still singing even in *Die Meistersinger*, and to a small extent in *Tristan...* Only in *Parsifal* is there no singing at all, except, paradoxically, in the choruses. But how annoying it is that people cannot speak about me without mentioning Wagner. In fact, it's more than annoying: it's intolerable! My works are not like his, the principle behind them is completely different; they are alike only in that the music is free, moulded on the situation, rather than conforming to conventional moulds. Mozart had already begun to do

that. So why forever bring up Wagner when speaking about me? There is no justification.

(Letter to Jacques Durand, 2 November 1921.)

His reasoning was often contested by an increasingly influential avant-garde, which led to his being classified, at the turn of the century, among those composers who were regarded as conservative and retrograde. But the evidence needs to be re-examined; the publication of Saint-Saëns's writings, including his correspondence, will no doubt enable us to re-examine his operas, review the judgements passed on them at the time, and be curious to hear them again.



Photograph of Camille Saint-Saëns.  
*Musica*, June 1907.

Camille Saint-Saëns.  
*Musica*, juin 1907.