

Phryné in the press

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Wagner's *Die Walküre* triumphed at the Opéra a few days before the premiere of *Phryné* in May 1893. Its success prompted the mischievous composer and critic Ernest Reyer to remark: 'All that remains for French composers is to fail gracefully.' But, almost as if Camille Saint-Saëns had wanted to cock a snook at the German school, *Phryné* immediately proved to be a flamboyant refutation of that witticism.

Phryné belongs, in several different respects, to the context of the operatic debate in *fin-de-siècle* France, tormented by the spectre of Wagner. First of all, because the work harks back to the true spirit and the traditional form of *opéra-comique*: an alternation of witty dialogue and clear-cut vocal numbers. Hence *Le Matin* congratulated M. Carvalho – the director of the Opéra-Comique – 'for having returned to the true path of the theatre he manages, from which he has sometimes strayed too far'. Secondly, the choice of a subject drawn from Greek Antiquity also offers a 'Mediterranean' response to the Nordic myths of the master of Bayreuth, whom many Frenchmen were currently imitating, among them Chausson (*Le Roi Arthus*), Chabrier (*Gwendoline*) and Franck (*Hulda*). Finally, the theme of Phryne reminded the French spectator of a seminal picture produced in 1861 by Jean-Léon Gérôme, a leading light of academic history painting. His *Phryne before the Areopagus* depicts the moment when the young hetaera, proclaiming herself more beautiful than Venus, appears before the court. Her lawyer, in an unexpected gesture, snatches away her veils and vouchsafes the proof of her claims before the astonished eyes of the judges. The press wondered how the librettist was going to stage this erotic episode in a theatre where 'families in search of husbands bring

their daughters. [...] Let us hasten to say that the heroine of the piece is presented, insofar as her moral situation is concerned, with commendable discretion' (*Le Figaro*). The critic of *Le Journal* observed:

No one is unfamiliar with Gérôme's famous painting. It was not easy for MM de Lassus and Saint-Saëns to conjure up such a scene before our dazzled eyes. It is not that the radiant beauty of Mlle Sibyl Sanderson would have paled in comparison with our aesthetic recollections, awakened by the bold inspiration of the painter; but, alas, our prejudices, more than our administrative regulations, erect barriers against the absolute freedom of the theatre. Phryné, compelled to appear before the archon Dicéphile, who represents the Areopagus, dodges the crucial moment by substituting, for the splendours of her unveiled body, the slightly colder beauties of the statue of Aphrodite modelled upon herself by the genius of Praxiteles.

(*Le Journal*, 25 May 1893)

Le Matin ironised: 'If M. Saint-Saëns met with nothing but praise last night, his librettist, M. de Lassus, provoked a great deal of anger. People were angry at him for cheating with his subject. In vain did all those who have a literary education, as much as a Télémaque-Dupuy, await the appearance of Phryné-Sanderson before the famous court in the classic costume. The connoisseurs were offered no more than the sight of a naked statue.' It is worth mentioning that, some time before Gérôme, the sculptor James Pradier had created a sensation at the 1845 Salon with a *Phryne* noteworthy for her mixture of classical drapery and Romantic sensuality.



THE LIBRETTO

The choice of a subject such as *Phryné* came as no surprise to admirers of Saint-Saëns, who had already shown his predilection for the ancient world in *Le Rouet d'Omphale*, *La Jeunesse d'Hercule*, *Phaëton* and the

Spartacus Overture. But the fact that this libretto was comical in nature was utterly unexpected.

Funny, Camille Saint-Saëns? You must be joking! Funny, that Hoffmannesque character, with his puny, unhealthy appearance, with something ascetic and sullen about him; whose sad lips seem refractory to smiling, as if they should only open for sarcasm; whose willow-like beard and hair look as if they are weeping over lost illusions [...] Funny, Camille Saint-Saëns? Don't be absurd! Yet it is as I say. The Saint-Saëns you have just sketched in outline is the exterior Saint-Saëns; but there is another one, well-known only to those who have seen him in an intimate setting, *en déshabillé*, in his dressing gown. Only they know what that chilly, forbidding carapace conceals, his sincere warmth, robust good humour, overflowing gaiety, Gallic verve and, let us say it, earthy Parisian banter. But, as there are indelible affinities between physique and mentality, between the man one is and the man one appears to be, Saint-Saëns belongs to the category of those expansive and joyful characters whom we call deadpan wits.

(*Le Figaro*, 25 May 1893)

Some writers noted that the collaboration between the librettist – Augé de Lassus – and Saint-Saëns combined two complementary approaches to comedy. Where the text has recourse to contemporary bourgeois humour, the music conjures up an archaism whose picturesqueness is in itself droll. The critic of *Le Journal* observed:

The cut of the airs certainly offers nothing revolutionary, but how much interest and humour there is in the care M. Saint-Saëns takes to serve us a dish whose taste is not entirely unknown to us! It is a pleasure to study, in this respect, Dicéphile's song 'L'homme n'est pas sans défaut', again written in a rhythm after the fashion of the airs from our old repertory.

(*Le Journal*, 25 May 1893)

La Justice also underlined 'discreet parodic intentions' that revealed 'beneath the established formulas, a rejuvenating learning and skill'. It should be noted that 'this deliberately retrograde score' (*Le Monde illustré*) was not performed all by itself on the evening of the premiere. Being too short to fill a whole evening, *Phryné* was coupled with Paer's *Le Maître de chapelle* which – although followed 'with sustained inattention' (*Gil Blas*, 26 May 1893) – ensured the new score would not be compared with a modern composition whose overly advanced style would have made Saint-Saëns's music seem pale. On the contrary, an amusing trifle from the 1820s, the work of an Italian converted to the French style, was a perfect appetiser, enabling *Phryné* to reveal herself without blushing.

The composer's humour, which he frequently colours with tongue-in-cheek neoclassicism, requires great erudition to be fully appreciated. The critic of *Gil Blas* wondered whether this 'highly individual gaiety of M. Camille Saint-Saëns' was 'accessible to an audience unprepared for it'. For, he continued, it 'has none of the gaiety of a Chabrier or an Offenbach: while the former makes the orchestra thunder and the voices roar in moments of exuberance that shake the walls of the theatre, while the latter titillates our nerves more discreetly and shakes our wits more gently with the rhythmic ease of the songs that we hum to ourselves, M. Saint-Saëns preserves in the midst of his joyous developments a cool, deadpan dignity that I find highly amusing and refined, but whose effect on the spectators in question remained doubtful for me'. And yet the work hit the bullseye, and *Le Gaulois* congratulated the composer, who 'quite simply claims the right, for the artist, to kick over the traces when he feels like it, to enjoy himself, to follow his imagination, and that is already quite something'.

When the commentators set Saint-Saëns's witty verve to one side in order to analyse the libretto of Augé de Lassus in isolation, the conclusions were less unanimous. For *Le Matin*, it 'lacks neither charm nor wit. If the plot is rather light, if the verses are sometimes a little prosaic, the action is well handled and some comic situations are skilfully contrived'. *Le Rappel* was also pleased by these 'amusing scenes, with ingenious details'. On the other hand, *Le Gaulois* denounced a farce that it found 'shoddy, old-fash-

ioned and heavy-handed in style' and *Le Monde artiste* considered the plot so 'thin' that the reviewer concluded:

I do not see that the librettist, in using them, has sought to breathe new life into somewhat hackneyed devices. Several parts betray inexperience, and the language generally lacks the poetic touch.

(*Le Monde artiste*, 28 May 1893)



THE MUSIC

Whereas Augé de Lassus laid himself open to criticism, Saint-Saëns's music compensated for his collaborator's literary weaknesses. The score was judged to be simple, fluid and – a great quality – modest. Let us pick out at random some of the phrases used to describe it: 'free of affectation and fresh in flavour' (*Le Journal*), 'a graceful, coquettish, cheeky interlude, with a pleasant irregu-larity' (*Le Gaulois*), 'unpretentious, light, flowing music' (*Le Figaro*), 'a subtle, witty burst of laughter' (*Le Monde artiste*).

The qualities of *Phryné*'s orchestration were seen as one of its chief assets. The 'absolute mastery' shown by Saint-Saëns (*Le Rappel*), the 'colours, so vivid, so brilliant' (*Le Matin*) and 'piquant sonorities and new effects' (*Le Figaro*) with which he adorned his work were like 'touches of light sattered in profusion on the harmonic background, sometimes with the aid of combinations of timbre, sometimes through the characteristic use of a few solo instruments, underlining the traits or the ridiculous foibles of the characters' (*Le Journal*). This last remark was widely developed by many of the journalists. They praised the pertinence of an unexpected instrumental jest – for example 'the comical leaps of the bassoon [...] when Nicias addresses the bust, shaking his fist at it threateningly before covering it with the wineskin' (*Le Journal*) – as readily as atmospheric textures such as 'the caressing phrases of the orchestra when Phryné wants to keep Nicias by her side in order to confess her love' or 'the arpeggios

of the harps in the lower register of the instrument [which] give a delightful poetic tinge to the invocation to Venus' (*Journal des débats*). These long discussions of questions of timbre and sonority provided an opportunity to address the question of the French style to which the work asserts its loyalty.

No, the French school, the school of clarity and finesse in the orchestration, of forthrightness in the rhythms, of wit in the melodies and of theatrical good sense, has nothing to fear from contact with Wagner's works; the proof of this lies in the dazzling success that Camille Saint-Saëns's adorable *opéra-comique* obtained shortly after the premiere of *Die Walküre*.

(*L'Événement*, 24 May 1893)

While *L'Intransigeant* deemed that 'the little gem that we applauded last night is a genuine masterpiece', *Le Ménestrel* waxed passionate on the subject of the French national school:

When one emerges from the depths of *Die Walküre* and finds oneself in the presence of an amiable little work such as the *Phryné* of M. Camille Saint-Saëns given at the Opéra-Comique the other evening, one is quite astonished to see that the German ogre has not devoured anything at all. Lively French song still has its place alongside the nebulous lied and the new art forms imported from Bayreuth. [...] M. Saint-Saëns has just given us conclusive proof of this. Did he have some mischief in mind? The fact remains that he made himself as small as he could, and that there is nothing more alien to Wagnerian theories than the score of his *Phryné*. The verse song [*couplet*] flourishes here, alongside new *romances* and titivated duets; the choruses sparkle and the ensembles retain their symmetry; better still, there are two well-paced finales that would not be out of place in the finest operettas of the minor masters of the day. In sum, it is somewhat in the style of the worst *opéra-comique* of Auber or even of Ferdinand Poise, neither of whom ever produced anything more accomplished. Only M. Saint-Saëns could not help adding some sauce to the orchestra and

sprinkling it with spices of a special flavour. Oh, that bassoon which imitates the baritone so pleasingly during the virtuous declarations of Dicéphile! Oh, that horn, oh, that clarinet which dialogue here and there with such wit! All of this comes from a highly expert and refined hand. Did anyone get bored? No, not for a minute! So it is still possible to make French music in France.

(*Le Ménestrel*, 28 May 1893)

The ‘finest operettas’ mentioned in this article are an obvious reference to Offenbach’s masterpieces, especially *Orphée aux Enfers* and *La Belle Hélène*, which also manhandle ancient Greece to amusing effect. The press enjoyed seeing Saint-Saëns – one of its national gods – slumming it a bit, but wondered where the line should be drawn in matters of ribaldry. *Le Gaulois* encouraged the composer to

smash the pedestals, [...] overthrow the gods and [...] gird his handsome brow with myrtle. Weary of grand opera, oratorio and music drama, he quietly set about composing an operetta, and that is how, last night at the Opéra-Comique, we applauded a light, witty, graceful work, in which there are verse songs (horror!) that were even encored (abomination!). An operetta, you read me aright; and what is more, a Greek operetta, like *La Belle Hélène*. Of course, the muse of M. Saint-Saëns does not quite cohabit with the muse of Offenbach, but they have a little family resemblance that is not at all disagreeable.

(*Le Gaulois*, 25 May 1893)

The *Revue hebdomadaire*, in particular, distinguished the shift from *opéra-comique* to operetta in the first-act finale, pointing out the Offenbachian tone of its frenzied cavalcade, but adding: ‘one has the impression, in any case, that the composer of *La Belle Hélène* would not have written the scene between Phryné and Nicias which appears in this finale and which contains such a charming phrase. At least, Offenbach would not have treated it with such elegance of pen’. Other newspapers were more severe:

Le Matin felt that *Phryné* 'degenerated' into operetta; for *Le Figaro* it even 'lost its way' in the genre. Conversely, Victorin Joncières deemed that, if operetta there was, it was 'written in an irreproachable language' (*La Liberté*) and Pierre Lalo noted, for his part, that 'it is a purely comic work, and a little *bouffe*, which is not synonymous with buffoonish [*bouffon*]' (*Le Temps*). When *Phryné*, according to *La Justice*, 'races nimbly to the frontiers of operetta, we feel that it is supported by remarkable orchestration. One could not laugh in better taste'. The second review published by the *Journal des débats* sought to pronounce a definitive verdict:

Those who, in speaking of M. Saint-Saëns's new score, have pronounced the word 'operetta' have been strangely mistaken. To be sure, the work is not written from beginning to end in florid counterpoint and the fugal style would have been out of place. But, set against a few light rhythms, a few perky motifs and a few antiquated cadences ('archaic' would perhaps be a more respectful term), what elegant harmonies and what pleasant surprises in the instrumentation! The colouring, be it ancient or modern, is quite charming, and although there is not the slightest manifestation of the Apollonian hymn or the Pindaric ode, one is no less beguiled by the poetic fragrance this pretty little score exudes. No, this is not operetta as conceived by the masters of the genre; it is at most, as the Germans say of Auber's operas, little music written by a great musician.

(*Journal des débats*, 27 May 1893)

Act Two was generally thought better than Act One, being more lyrical in the view of some commentators. The situations obviously lend themselves to more sustained melodic development, especially the love duet for Phryné and Nicias and the trio that follows. Between these numbers, an air for Phryné was particularly applauded for its crescendo of intensity, which culminates in some novel effects of orchestration. Nevertheless, the most admired number was unquestionably the seduction scene between Phryné and Dicéphile, a passage all the more closely examined because it corresponds to the erotic painting by Gérôme: here Augé de Lassus

cleverly gets round the elements of the original that were taboo on the theatrical stage. According to *Le Matin*, ‘the composer, seeming to forget the rule he has imposed on himself, indulges his dramatic temperament’ in this duet: ‘it is the biggest number in the score and also the best’. *Le Figaro* admired the ‘most interesting’ workmanship and the ‘lively and witty’ details; *Gil Blas* marvelled at this ‘delicious sensuality’, not knowing ‘whether eye or ear is the more ravished. Enchanting coquetties, trills that flow like cascades of pearls or shoot up like multicoloured rockets. Dicéphile loses his head. And so do we! The audience frenziedly clamours for an encore’. Finally, *Le Monde artiste* tried to give a better insight into the workings of so skilful a construction:

I have already said that the seduction scene between Phryné and her judge is of capital importance in the work. If I were not afraid of going into excessive technical detail, I would show you how witty the sleight of hand is, how skilful the workmanship. Without aiming at full-blown opera [*comédie lyrique*] any more than in the other parts of his score, it can be argued that, here more than anywhere else, Saint-Saëns has followed the situation step by step. How seductive is Phryne’s coloratura, and how well the offbeat accents of the orchestral accompaniment mark the innuendos that hover in the air! This scene on its own would have been enough to ensure the success of the work.

(*Le Monde artiste*, 28 May 1893)



AN IRREPROACHABLE CAST

Only rarely did the press get a chance to salute so exemplary an array of soloists as those at Saint-Saëns’s disposal. Very often, either because the roles were poorly cast or because the artists were not yet sufficiently familiar with their parts, nineteenth-century premieres suffered from singers who were incompetent or unsuitable to varying degrees. Indeed, many works

never recovered from this initial problem. But here the opposite is true: the success of *Phryné* can be credited in large part to its performers.

It was Sybil Sanderson (who was to be Massenet's muse in *Thaïs* the following year and had been an impeccable Esclarmonde in 1889) that the press acclaimed. 'Rarely indeed do we have the opportunity to encounter an artist [...] who combines her virtuoso talent with an admirable physique' (*Le Journal*). According to *Le Figaro*, 'the radiant beauty of Miss Sybil Sanderson caused a sensation; the voice and skill of the singer were no less appreciated; as for the actress, while remaining irresistibly seductive in the scabrous scene at the end, she evinced a tact and moderation that cannot be too highly praised'. The journalist of *Le Rappel* was probably not mistaken in thinking that the artist 'would have been more at ease in a coloratura role, [since] she vocalises with great agility', but the *Journal des débats* preferred to observe 'that she sings to perfection with a voice whose volume she does not seek to emphasise at the expense of quality'.

The baritone Lucien Fugère had been assigned the role of the old archon who is the butt of the joke. There could have been no a happier choice, for he proved to be 'superior in the role of Dicéphile, none of whose effects escaped him; it is even likely that he found more than one in places where the author had not dreamed of them. M. Fugère is, moreover, an excellent singer, gifted with a good voice, and he served the composer no less well than the poet. His success was total' (*Le Figaro*). *Le Journal* underlined 'the fine intrinsic originality of his talent, which sometimes displays a gift for classic farce worthy of the home of Molière [the Comédie-Française]'. And *Le Gaulois* added: 'Fugère is excellent as ever – very witty, very subtle, very *bouffe* in the best sense of the word.'

Two exposed roles were given to less experienced singers. First of all Nicias, the amorous tenor, who found in Clément 'a spirited and often poetic interpreter' (*Le Journal*). If *Le Matin* had great faith in his potential ('M. Clément's appealing voice grows more consistent and authoritative every day. [...] This young tenor could soon have no rival at the Opéra-Comique'), *Le Figaro* nevertheless warned 'against a tendency to flatness, which he has not been able to overcome sufficiently'. Mademoiselle

Buhl, in the role of the slave Lampito, did not unleash a torrent of enthusiasm but at least managed to pass unnoticed and not to spoil the triumph of Sanderson and Fugère.



THE MERITS OF THE STAGING

Although, in comparison with many of the great Romantic operas, the success of *Phryné* was not founded solely on the splendours of the staging, the production by the director of the Opéra-Comique, Léon Carvalho, ‘impressed the public very favourably’ (*Le Figaro*). ‘It is subtle and genuinely charming. Almost all the costumes are new and in impeccable taste’ (*Le Ménestrel*). *Gil Blas* tells us more:

The curtain rises to show us layered perspectives on the city of Athens, with its temples, its porticoes, its illuminated colonnades; the square is invaded by a crowd bearing olive branches; the men in multicoloured togas, the women with their hair adorned with ribbons. [...] *Act Two*. This time we are in Phryne’s chamber. Recollect, if you will, the pretty set for the second act of *La Belle Hélène*. Frescoes, large green plants; seated at an ivory table, Phryné is dressed in a pink lamé tulle dress, cut away at the side, as she looks at herself in the mirror. [...] And now Phryné reappears, even more seductive than when we first saw her. A diaphanous white tunic over pink underwear, tightened immediately beneath the bosom by a gold belt, and then falling in straight folds of tulle. The tunic, raised over the right shoulder, leaves the left shoulder completely bare, and is held up on that side by no more than a thin gold chain.

(*Gil Blas*, 26 May 1893)

The only stumbling block in this irreproachable production seems to have been the choice of costumes. While *Le Journal* was amused by the ‘archaeological fantasy which the genre of *opéra-comique* accommodates with

ease' and commented ironically on Mlle Sanderson's 'little hat with roses, which is eminently Athenian, but also eminently Parisian' (adding: 'Is this little hat really accurate?'), *Le Matin* was disconsolate:

It is the costume designer of the Opéra-Comique who has taken it upon himself to cast a pall over this cheerful picture: his costumes reveal an art that is truly too decadent. They clash strangely with the immaculate scenery and in the midst of this production to which M. Carvalho has brought all his artistic taste. One is almost tempted to regret that the choristers of the Opéra-Comique – and heaven knows, that must be an artist's dream – do not appear in the simple attire of Phryne.

(*Le Matin*, 25 May 1893)



Act Two of *Phryné*. Illustration published in *Le Monde artiste*.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Acte II de *Phryné*. Illustration parue dans *Le Monde artiste*.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.