Saint-Saëns and Antiquity

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A 'classical' musician in the fullest sense of the term, Saint-Saëns, more than anyone else of his generation, was profoundly steeped in ancient culture. One might even say that his musical aesthetic was so thoroughly nurtured by that culture as actually to merge with it. If many of his works were inspired by Antiquity, this was only the most visible sign of a predilection that attained the proportions of worship, and never wavered throughout his life. Saint-Saëns was certainly not the only nineteenth-century composer to have a passion for the ancient world, nor was that passion the exclusive preserve of the musical 'classicists': one need only think of Berlioz's love for the *Aeneid*. But the breadth and depth of his knowledge – he was a good Latinist, which was common enough, but also a good Hellenist, which was less so, with a marked interest in archaeology in all its forms, including organology – make Saint-Saëns an exceptional case. Is there any other example of a musician of his standing who published a *Note sur les décors de théâtre dans l'antiquité romaine* (Note on theatrical scenery in Roman Antiquity, 1886) and an *Essai sur les lyres et les cithares antiques* (Essay on ancient lyres and citharas, 1902)?

Looking through his catalogue, including the unrealised projects, it is difficult not to be amazed by the diversity of inspiration Saint-Saëns drew from the ancient world. In addition to the Greco-Roman influence, which may usefully be subdivided between mythology and history (the Trojan War constituting a sort of ambiguous halfway stage between these, as the sensational publicity generated at the time by Heinrich Schliemann's excavations quite clearly demonstrates), a special place should be given

to the biblical sphere (from *Le Déluge* to *The Promised Land*, by way of *Samson et Dalila*), the Gallo-Roman era (from the incidental music for Edmond Cottinet's *Vercingétorix* to *Les Barbares*), and ancient Persia (*Parysatis*) and Egypt (*La Foi*). We can therefore only give a partial and succinct idea of his achievement here, concentrating mainly on his orchestral and theatrical works.

Written in 1856 and premiered in February of the following year, but not published until 1974, *Urbs Roma* is traditionally classified among the early symphonies. But it would appear that in the eyes of its composer, who had just celebrated his twentieth birthday, it was more of a four-movement symphonic poem (rather like Richard Strauss's *Aus Italien*), even if the delightful theme and variations at the end is irresistibly reminiscent of Tchaikovsky's orchestral suites. While we know nothing of the work's programme (if there was one), the choice of a Latin form for the title – which may remind us of both Bizet's *Roma* Symphony, written ten years later, and Massenet's much later opera of the same name (1912) – clearly suggests that ancient Rome is the subject: one commentator has described the third movement as a 'funeral march for the death of an empire'. If we agree to associate this work – Saint-Saëns's longest composition for orchestra – with his symphonic poems rather than his symphonies, the resulting corpus would confirm his status as the master of the symphonic poem on an ancient subject, taking both chronological and quantitative precedence over César Franck's *Les Éolides* (1877) and *Psyché* (1888).

For it was primarily with the triptych *Le Rouet d'Omphale*, *Phaéton* and *La Jeunesse d'Hercule* that Saint-Saëns achieved great popularity with Parisian concert audiences between 1872 and 1877. Quite aside from the intrinsic beauty of each of these three scores, which were once so renowned, that popularity is explained by the skill with which he combined the form invented by Liszt (who himself wrote a *Prometheus* and an *Orpheus*) with mythological characters and situations that immediately 'spoke' to even

moderately cultivated listeners of the early Third Republic. These pieces invited such audiences to bring to the act of listening everything that their familiarity with the myths might suggest to their imagination, without going so far as to seek to impose a more precise narrative framework, as Strauss was to do in his symphonic poems. The sobriety of the musical approach was thus an aesthetic response to the classicism of the inspiration.

At the time, such critics as Camille Bellaigue insisted, sometimes overzealously, on the connection between Saint-Saëns's inspiration, rooted in Antiquity, and the classicism of the Grand Siècle. The aim was to reinforce the image of the famous national composer, who could thus be presented as the antithesis of the German genius, the anti-Wagner par excellence. Saint-Saëns gave this propaganda a helping hand in his own writings, particularly when he expressed his preference for 'Latin' or Mediterranean legendary or historical subjects and his lack of interest in German-Scandinavian 'mists'. This explains, for example, his attraction to the character of Hercules, the subject of two symphonic poems and two works for the stage. In addition to recalling the biblical Samson, Hercules is, along with Orpheus, one of the Greek heroes that the Renaissance adopted most enthusiastically, from Michelangelo and Pollaiuolo to Veronese, right down to the Abbé Buti's libretto for Cavalli's *Ercole amante*, commissioned for the wedding of Louis XIV and Maria Theresa of Spain. In France, he inspired, among others, Rotrou's play *Hercule mourant* (1634) and Dauvergne's opera of the same name (1761), not to mention the role he plays in Lully and Quinault's *Alceste* (1674). But the figure of Hercules – contradictory, capricious and unpredictable, with both hypermasculine and effeminate sides – in essence corresponds more to Baroque ideals than to those of seventeenth-century French classicism, and is certainly closer to Hugo than to Racine. And it so happens that it was not Racine but Hugo that Saint-Saëns designated as the only French creative artist who could be set against Wagner. It is therefore necessary, as it were, to reframe the 'ancient/classical' side of Saint-Saëns's inspiration through reference to his deep attachment to Romantic, and more particularly Hugolian, dramaturgy, which is so perceptible in

his contribution to the stage repertory. As Erin Brooks has noted, despite Saint-Saëns's undeniable interest in the most up-to-date archaeological and scientific questions, his conception of the ancient world remained, as a true contemporary of Schliemann, incorrigibly Romantic.

Saint-Saëns's interest in the dramatic representation of Antiquity began very early. For his theatrical debut, he wrote incidental music for *Le Martyre de Vivia*, a 'mystery play in verse' by the Nîmes author Jean Reboul, set in early Christian Carthage and staged at the Odéon in 1850 with Marie Laurent in the leading role. But his unfinished youthful projects include *Antigone*, a pastoral entitled *Églé* (perhaps a reference to Phaeton's sister Aegle), and two works featuring Cleopatra, one of them based on Gautier's short story *Une nuit de Cléopâtre*. The concert overture *Spartacus* (1863), written (like *Urbs Roma*) for a competition organised by the Société Sainte-Cécile in Bordeaux, is contemporary with his second failure to win the Prix de Rome. Its dimensions are reminiscent of Berlioz's programmatic overtures, which means it too may be classified with the symphonic poems. According to Jean Bonnerot, his authorised biographer, the overture was inspired by a tragedy which has remained unpublished and, it seems, was never performed, even though its author, Alphonse Pagès, was the son-in-law of Charles de La Rounat, director of the Théâtre de l'Odéon. Saint-Saëns must have known the playwright and admired the work, and there can be no doubt that he was fascinated by its subject matter, since he is even said to have considered using it as the basis for an opera, which would have been a sort of counterpart to Ernest Reyer's *Salammbô*; the parallel is all the more alluring since the same source informs us that, Reyer, in a moment of discouragement, proposed to turn his libretto over to Saint-Saëns.

Two cantatas on an ancient theme date from the same period. The first is *Scène d'Horace*, for soprano, baritone and orchestra, which takes its text from Corneille's tragedy (Act Four, Scene 5); written in 1860, it

was premiered in 1866 under the direction of Pasdeloup, with Anne Charton-Demeur, the first Didon in Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, as Camille. The second cantata, *Les Noces de Prométhée*, for soloists, chorus and an extremely large orchestra, was composed in 1867 for a competition at the Exposition Universelle. The text was by Romain Cornut, a student at the Lycée Bonaparte (now Condorcet) who had himself won the libretto competition; but although Saint-Saëns was declared the winner by the jury under the presidency of Berlioz, his cantata was not performed. Since he had begun sketches for *Samson et Dalila* in 1859, its conception was contemporary with the various projects just described, and so it is natural to link it with this period of interest in ancient subjects. Another noteworthy point in the opera is the contrast between musical orientalism, specifically associated with the evocation of the Philistines (including the famous *Bacchanale*), and the classical choral writing, redolent of Handel, which is reserved for the Hebrews: this device is reminiscent of the ode for soloists, choir and orchestra *La Lyre et la Harpe* (premiered at the Birmingham Festival in 1879), a setting of Victor Hugo that juxtaposes the pagan lyre with the Christian harp. Aside from *Samson*, however, Saint-Saëns's operatic output might have seemed to lean towards other types of subject: fantasy in the Hoffmannesque tradition with *Le Timbre d'argent*; large-scale historical tableaux in the manner of French *grand-opéra* with *Étienne Marcel*, *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio*; Romantic drama in the Hugolian tradition with *Proserpine*, where only a passing allusion associates the heroine with the ancient divinity.

It was thus almost by accident, or at least by chance, that Saint-Saëns's interest in the ancient world was reawakened with *Phryné*, at a time when he had no plans for a new operatic project. Nevertheless, it was in the 1890s that he participated in the complete edition of Rameau's operas, following his involvement in the edition of Gluck's French operas over the previous two decades. This led to a renewed interest in the relation-

ship between opera and ancient culture. Eager to respond to the invitation of Léonce Detroyat, his collaborator on *Henry VIII*, who was about to take over the reins of the Théâtre de la Renaissance and suggested that he create a new opera there, he recalled the libretto on the theme of Phryne that the apprentice playwright Lucien Augé de Lassus had submitted to him a few years earlier. Its author was an archaeologist by training, and had written a monograph on entertainments in the ancient world (*Les Spectacles antiques*) published in 1888 with a dedication to Saint-Saëns; his only credits as librettist were two Prix de Rome cantatas, both on classical subjects, *Endymion* (1885) and *Didon* (1887). In the book he published on Saint-Saëns in 1914, the year of his own death, Augé de Lassus charmingly recalled the exceptionally rapid genesis of the work, the music of which was written in Algiers early in 1893 and orchestrated with the collaboration of André Messager for Act One. When Detroyat had to withdraw from the theatrical business just after opening his season with Messager's *Madame Chrysanthème* and Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, *Phryné* was immediately taken up by Léon Carvalho for the Opéra-Comique, which had been installed in the former Théâtre-Lyrique on the Place du Châtelet since the fire that had destroyed its home, the second Salle Favart, in 1887. Well served by a first-rate cast, *Phryné* had a highly successful premiere on 24 May 1893.

Although, as Pierre Sérié explains elsewhere in this volume, audience and critics came to see *Phryné* with Gérôme's painting in mind, neither Saint-Saëns nor his librettist, both of whom were keenly interested in ancient culture, needed this stimulus, and it is revealing that the accounts of Augé de Lassus and Bonnerot do not even mention the picture. As Hugh Macdonald observes, Saint-Saëns, before being approached by Léonce Detroyat, had considered turning the story into a ballet: after all, the last number of the divertissement in *Faust*, which Gounod had thought of asking Saint-Saëns to write in 1869, is entitled 'Danse de Phryné'. The critics of 1893 were admiringly surprised, and in some cases even alarmed, at the ease with which Saint-Saëns fitted his music into the traditional mould of the *opéra-comique à morceaux* (that is, in a

succession of discrete numbers). Aside from Gounod's *Philémon et Baucis*, with which these writers found certain similarities, the prototype of the operatic comedy on a classical subject was Victor Massé's *Galathée*, from a libretto by Barbier and Carré, first performed at the Salle Favart in 1852 with Delphine Ugalde in the leading role. For Saint-Saëns, an enemy of bawdy humour in art, these two works could represent, if not models, at least points of reference in a certain tradition of tasteful comedy that was for him the antithesis of Offenbach's *opéra-bouffe*. The choice of subject can therefore be interpreted as a quiet manifesto: it was possible to choose the archetypal ancient courtesan as a heroine without making fun of Antiquity. But not only did Saint-Saëns not make fun of Antiquity, he was also keen to introduce discreet allusions to ancient Greek music into his score. These references – the Dorian mode in the chorus of homage to Phryne heard at the beginning and reprised in the Apparition scene, the unison voices in the hymn to Aphrodite in the second act – are not necessarily the last word in authenticity, nor were they easily perceptible to most listeners in 1893. They are nonetheless the sign of a conscious effort towards musical contextualisation: an attempt at Greek 'colour' comparable, *mutatis mutandis*, to the English colour he had sought in *Henry VIII*.

A similar concern for authenticity is to be found in the incidental music Saint-Saëns wrote that same year, 1893, for the first staging of Sophocles' *Antigone* at the Comédie-Française, in a new translation by Paul Meurice and Auguste Vacquerie. The composer was well acquainted with these two leading members of France's premier theatre company: his *Proserpine* was adapted from a play by the latter, and *Ascanio* from a drama by the former. In his preface to the edition of his score, which comprises some fifteen numbers, he explains that he aimed for 'extreme simplicity' in preference to the 'glittering effects of modern music', his aim being to 'reproduce as far as possible the effect of the ancient choruses'. Informed

by contemporary studies of music in the ancient world by the Belgian musicologist and composer François-Auguste Gevaert and the ethnomusicological research of Louis Bourgault-Ducoudray, the ten choruses are written in unison and in the ancient Greek modes (mostly Dorian). However, while the Pindaric hymn quoted in the final chorus is authentic, as is a borrowing from a recently discovered fragment then associated with Euripides, the use of a Greek folk melody from Bourgault-Ducoudray's collection reveals the limits of the 'archaeological' approach, since it assumes, in the words of Erin Brooks, that 'folk music is immutable and eternal'. In point of fact, it is this folk-inspired piece that seems to have been the best-received at the premiere. The few well-informed critics, such as Julien Tiersot, did not fail to point out the illusory nature of any attempt to reconstitute ancient Greek prosody: one cannot impose on French, from which vowel quantities are virtually absent, a system based on a language to which they are crucial. But, as Hugh Macdonald has recently shown, the intention was not so much to reconstitute a lost musical Antiquity as to find a sonic equivalent of it perceptible to modern ears, and from this point of view, Macdonald argues, Saint-Saëns was no less radical than the Stravinsky of *Oedipus Rex*. This makes it all the more understandable that he was proud to have been able to impose his openly scholarly (rather than hedonistic) approach to music suitable for a classical Greek play – the opposite, one might say, of Massenet's *Les Érinnyes*; and indeed, his incidental music for *Antigon*e, after the initial disorientation, enjoyed a successful career. For its 1894 premiere at the Théâtre Antique in Orange, he composed the anthem for voice and orchestra *Pallas Athénée*, sung on that occasion by Lucienne Bréval. The poem by Jean-Louis Croze, godson of Louis Gallet, celebrates Provence, 'sister of Greece', and the Provençal people, 'new Hellenes', in terms that would have gone straight to Darius Milhaud's heart.

This sense of cultural proximity between the south of France and ancient Greece was further illustrated in 1897 when Saint-Saëns received a commission from a dynamic Languedoc winegrower, Fernand Castelbon de Beauxhostes, who wished to establish a festival housed at the new Béziers

arena, which was then in the process of construction. Saint-Saëns had reservations about the acoustics of the open-air arena, but was attracted by what was presented to him as an attempt to restore ancient theatre. He therefore called on Gallet, his favourite collaborator, for what was to be their last joint project, and it was the writer who, knowing his friend's interest in Hercules, proposed the mythological hero's death as the subject. Based on Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* and the *Hercules Oetaeus* traditionally attributed to Seneca, *Déjanire* enjoyed a triumphant premiere in Béziers on 28 August 1898, with Saint-Saëns himself conducting the enormous forces assembled for the two performances. A less lavish version was given at the Théâtre de l'Odéon in November of the same year, under the direction of Édouard Colonne.

Subtitled 'tragédie lyrique', *Déjanire* differs from what is usually understood by that term. But neither is it, as Loewenberg's *Annals of Opera* and the latest edition of Grove's Dictionary would have us believe, simply incidental music; it represents what Erin Brooks has called a 'hybrid genre', or, let us say, an 'intermediate genre', because music is so central to it. Gallet's play contains both spoken and sung passages, in addition to choruses, divertissements and orchestral interludes; however, the sung interventions do not involve any of the characters in the play, but two coryphaei (soprano and tenor). Like the *Prométhée* commissioned from Fauré for the 1900 festival, and premiered with comparable success (including a prologue for wind band, strings and harps composed by Saint-Saëns), this first *Déjanire* project was an important milestone in the history of the open-air performances that considerably modified the French musical landscape in the twentieth century and contributed to the creation of a new 'epic theatre', to borrow the Brechtian expression. Going even further, Joël-Marie Fauquet sees in it a prefiguration, contemporary with the first cinematographic presentations by the Lumière brothers, of the great Italian and Hollywood sword-and-sandal epics to come.

The Roman theatre in Orange, where the famous Chorégies festival had been held, at the instigation of the Félibrige, since 1869, could only look on with concern at the rise in status of Béziers, which was beginning to be hailed, rather misleadingly, as a 'French Bayreuth'. Hence the rival institution hatched the idea of commissioning an opera combining the prestigious signature of Victorien Sardou with that of a great operatic composer; once Massenet, then Xavier Leroux had been approached and had withdrawn in their turn, Saint-Saëns accepted the challenge. Still wary of the acoustics of outside performance, he was no doubt relieved when the idea of staging the new work at Orange was abandoned for practical reasons. The scenario of *Les Barbares*, prepared for Sardou by Pierre-Barthélémy Gheusi, is set in the ancient theatre itself (more or less reconfigured as the Temple of Vesta) and takes as its backdrop the most dramatic event in ancient history connected with the city of Orange, the Battle of Arausio, at which the Roman armies were crushed by the Cimbri and the Teutons (the 'barbarians' of the opera's title) in 105 BCE. Admittedly, the theatre in Orange was built at least a century later, but historical opera is well used to this kind of compromise with history, and it must be acknowledged that the plot of *Les Barbares* is concise and clear and that its implicit theme – is a reconciliation possible between the 'Germans' and the 'Gallo-Romans', in other words Germany and France? – was a topical one. Despite the difficulties of working with Sardou and especially Gheusi ('That fellow really is good for nothing...', Saint-Saëns wrote to his publisher), the opera was staged in excellent artistic conditions and the premiere, on 23 October 1901, was highly acclaimed. The recent rediscovery of this work has revealed, once more, just how much the inspiration of the ancient world, even when mixed with more modern Provençal touches, could stimulate Saint-Saëns's musical imagination.

Parysatis, the second work he gave Béziers for the 1902 festival, again shows the diversity of Saint-Saëns's interests. His choice lighted on the historical novel of the same name published in 1890 by the archaeologist Jane Dieulafoy, a colourful figure who dressed as a man and described herself as an 'amazon'. She and her husband Marcel Dieulafoy had made

three expeditions to Persia in the 1880s, going as far as ancient Susa, from which they returned with no less a booty than the Lion Frieze from the palace of Darius, now in the Louvre; she was later to contribute to the founding of the Femina literary prize in 1904. The three-act drama, which she adapted from her own novel at the invitation of Saint-Saëns, is set in Susa in the fifth and early fourth centuries BC and depicts Queen Parysatis, wife of Darius II and mother of Artaxerxes II and Cyrus the Younger; Cyrus' defeat and death are evoked in the orchestral prologue. As in *Déjanire*, the sung parts do not involve any of the main characters and are limited to the choruses and the frequent interventions of three coryphaei, including the famous vocalise 'Le Rossignol et la Rose', which has since entered the repertory of coloratura sopranos. In addition to the usual 'orientalist effects' in the writing, Saint-Saëns coloured his score with a substantial percussion section.

Having set Corneille in the 1860s in the *Scène d'Horace*, Saint-Saëns now turned to Racine, as Massenet had done for *Phèdre*, writing (purely orchestral) incidental music for a revival of *Andromaque* in early 1903, in which Sarah Bernhardt appeared successively in the title role and as Hermione, at her own theatre on the Place du Châtelet. Here he made no more attempt than Massenet to achieve a 'Grand Siècle' colour, but opted rather to convey the violence and passion expressed in the tragedy through expressive effects in the Beethovenian and Romantic tradition.

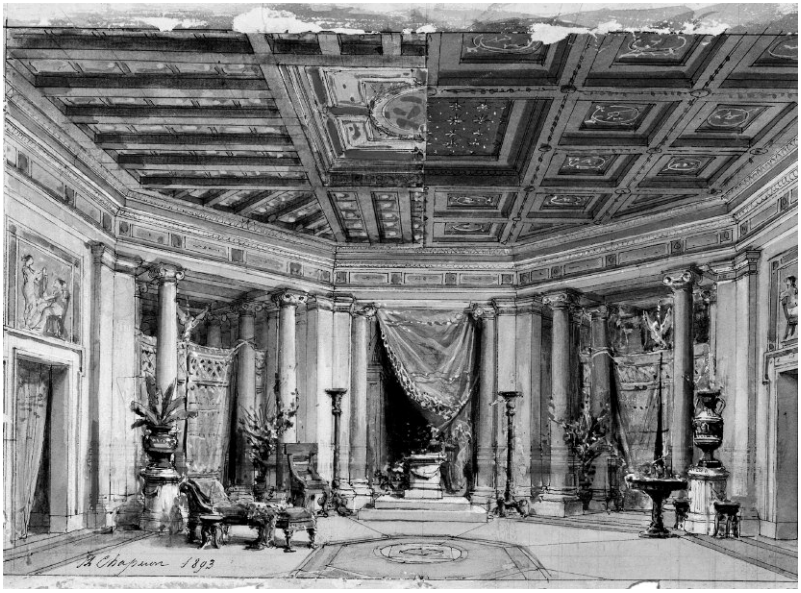
Commissioned by Raoul Gunsbourg for the Monte Carlo Opera at a time when Saint-Saëns was once again considering giving up opera, *Hélène* lasts just an hour, a format that seems to foreshadow Strauss's later *Salome* and *Elektra*. According to the composer's own account, however, it was an old project: to offer an artistic response to Offenbach's 'caricature' of *La Belle Hélène* by treating the same subject in his own way. Rather than employing a professional librettist, he undertook to write the text himself, drawing on various ancient sources, including Virgil for the description of the fall of Troy given by Pallas (that is, Athena), who appears to the two lovers in an attempt to dissuade them from fleeing together. The fact that this appearance was compared at the time to

Brünnhilde's warning to Siegmund in *Die Walküre* shows how hard it was for the critics of the time to free themselves from the Wagnerian straitjacket, even in a work so aesthetically remote from the *Ring*. On the other hand, the opulent vocal writing of the three main roles – sung by Melba, Alvarez and Héglon at the Monaco premiere in February 1904, with Massenet's *La Navarraise* forming the first part of the double bill – and the no less opulent orchestration can, by anticipation, make one think of Strauss, but, as Hugh Macdonald (who considers the work to be one of the jewels in the crown of its composer's operatic output) has emphasised, with an extra delicacy and clarity.

The imposing incidental music for Eugène Brieux's play *La Foi*, set in Middle Kingdom Egypt and originally intended for the Odéon, was also performed in Monte Carlo in April 1909. Having drafted his score in Luxor and consulted the Egyptologist Georges Legrain, Saint-Saëns sought to obtain an Egyptian colour both through modal effects and in the orchestration, which, in addition to two harps, gong and celesta, also calls for crotales, sistra, castanets and bells.

It should come as no surprise, at the end of this trajectory, that Saint-Saëns's last operatic project too was classical in inspiration. Flushed by the success of *Déjanire*, he had immediately envisaged transforming it into an opera, but was discouraged by the death of his faithful collaborator Gallet in the very year of its premiere. The presence of the enterprising Gunsbourg in Monte Carlo and Messager's appointment to the Paris Opéra revived the project thanks to a joint commission, and the new work was premiered in the principality on 14 March 1911 and staged at the Palais Garnier on 22 November. For it was indeed a new work, with a libretto largely rewritten by Saint-Saëns himself, and most of the music had never been heard previously. According to Hugh Macdonald's detailed study, only a quarter of the 1911 score is taken from the 1898 *Déjanire*, and even that part has been considerably revised. Like its predecessor, but in

a different sense, the new *Déjanire* can thus be described as a hybrid work, looking at once to the past and to the future: in dramatic terms, it marks a return to Racine, contrary to its creator's stated preference for the Hugolian model; musically, it may evoke Gluck or Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, with an emphasis on the 'belle déclamation mélodique' dear to Saint-Saëns, yet not without recalling his own early efforts, since it includes two borrowings from the symphonic poem *La Jeunesse d'Hercule*. But this 'return to order', to use Cocteau's phrase, also seems to anticipate certain aspects of the neoclassicism of the 1920s, conferring on its very hybridity a resolutely modern aspect.



Set design for Act Two of *Phryné*.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Esquisse de décor pour l'acte II de *Phryné*.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Mme Daffety as Phryné in a revival at the Opéra-Comique.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

M^me^ Daffety en Phryné pour un reprise à l'Opéra-Comique.
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