

La Princesse jaune: orientalism and artificial paradises

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La Princesse jaune was the first opera of Saint-Saëns to be presented to the public, but his third in order of composition, coming after *Le Timbre d'argent*, written in 1864-65 but premiered, after many vicissitudes, in 1877, and *Samson et Dalila*, begun in 1859 and staged by Liszt in Weimar, also in 1877. *Samson*, which the Parisian press actually announced as an oratorio, was in fact not quite completed in 1871 when Camille Du Locle, co-director of the Opéra-Comique with Adolphe de Leuven, commissioned Saint-Saëns to write a one-act opera, partly to compensate him for having been unable to stage *Le Timbre d'argent* the previous year because of the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. At thirty-six, Saint-Saëns was anything but a beginner: renowned as a virtuoso pianist and brilliant titular organist of La Madeleine since 1857, he enjoyed no less a reputation as a composer of orchestral, instrumental and sacred music. However, having been denied the Prix de Rome, the standard means of access to the operatic stage, on two occasions – too young in 1852, too old in 1864 – he was already saddled with the image of a composer unsuited to the theatre, the source of a misunderstanding which has still not been completely dispelled a century and a half later.

By contrast, Du Locle had recommended to Saint-Saëns a librettist who really was a virtual novice. Louis Gallet, just a few months older than the composer, had to his credit only the libretto for *La Coupe du roi de Thulé*, written with Édouard Blau for the opera competition organised

by the Académie Impériale de Musique on the occasion of the Universal Exhibition of 1867, and (in collaboration with Charles Nuitter) that of Ernest Guiraud's *Le Kobold*, premiered at the Salle Favart in July 1870. Gallet was a civil servant in the Assistance Publique department, and was at that time financial administrator of the Beaujon Hospital in the rue Saint-Honoré, not far from where Saint-Saëns lived in those days. As Du Locle had foreseen, the two men struck up a warm friendship that was to last until Gallet's death in 1898: indeed, he became Saint-Saëns's most faithful librettist, and the composer paid a vibrant posthumous tribute to the 'assiduous and favourite companion of [his] best years'.

'Japan had recently opened up to Europe', Saint-Saëns would recall almost four decades later. Without indicating whether the work he had originally envisaged would have had a contemporary or legendary setting, the composer reveals that Du Locle, perhaps foreseeing production or even diplomatic difficulties, vetoed it, and suggested instead (though Saint-Saëns is less sure whether this too came from Du Locle) that Japan should feature obliquely, indirectly. Taking this premiss literally, Saint-Saëns and Gallet therefore opted for the current craze for Japan – already known as *Japonisme* – as the subject of their opera. But, perhaps prompted by Gallet's professional interest in medical matters, they made it, not without audacity, the mainspring of a plot dealing with a kind of neurosis, which is coupled with the threat of drug addiction. The denouement can thus be interpreted as a cure or a therapeutic shock. Seen from this angle, the libretto of *La Princesse jaune* is reminiscent of Barbier and Carré's *Le Timbre d'argent*, in which the hero also becomes infatuated with a dangerous fantasy of which he must rid himself in order to marry the woman who is 'naturally' designated for him.

Like Emile Paladilhe's *Le Passant*, another Du Locle commission which had its premiere at the Salle Favart in the same year as Saint-Saëns's work, *La Princesse jaune* is a one-act opera with two characters (the chorus also intervenes in both works, albeit very briefly in the case of Saint-Saëns). For the Opéra-Comique audience of 1872, the prototype of the genre was Victor Massé's *Les Noces de Jeannette* (1853), then nearing

its five hundredth anniversary performance. Although the two works differ greatly in their settings – a French village in Massé, an unidentified Dutch town here – they have one thing in common: *mutatis mutandis*, the protagonists' marriage is delayed by an aberration affecting the male character and forcing the young woman to take the initiative; incidentally, the role of Jeannette was in the repertory of Alice Ducasse, the first Léna. This similarity, however slight, to a familiar work may have contributed to the confusion of the audience and critics at the premiere.

For there was indeed something disconcerting about the libretto of this opera, starting with its provocative title, which is certainly unpleasant to today's ears, but which ought to be placed in inverted commas, since in fact it repeats a contemptuous remark of the heroine's in the first scene. The action takes place in a combined study and artist's studio, shared by the young doctor and orientalist Kornélis and his cousin Léna, who spends her free time painting vases. Léna's family has taken in Kornélis, orphaned by the death of his parents, and Léna has secretly fallen in love with her cousin, but she suspects that he is infatuated with the Japanese woman whose portrait is seen on a panel in the studio. Her suspicions are confirmed when she discovers a Japanese love poem. Confronted by Léna, Kornélis defends himself, then grows impatient when she questions him about the contents of a phial he has brought home with him, which the audience has already learnt from an aside contains cocaine. Left alone, the young woman gives vent to her despair. When Kornélis returns, he takes the drug and, in his hallucination, sees the Japan of his dreams appear to him. Invoking his beloved Ming, he does not realise that the Japanese woman he thinks he sees and to whom he makes a passionate declaration is actually Léna. At first uncertain, then disabused, she confronts her cousin again. Recovering from his temporary state of exaltation, he abjures his misguided behaviour, and Léna is convinced by his protestations of love.



The choice of Holland as the setting for the plot was not in itself surprising, since the Netherlands had for a long time been the sole point of contact between Japan and the Western world. As Hugh Macdonald has pointed out, the fact that the period in which the narrative takes place is not specified might even leave some doubt as to whether it is set in the world of its contemporaries. There are, however, several clues to confirm that this is the case, quite aside from the fact that 'Time: the present' is often implied in the theatre. First of all, Kornélis's unhealthy obsession with Japan can only be understood with reference to the 'Japonaiserie' that took hold of Western countries from the mid-1860s onwards: in particular, the enthusiasm aroused by the Japanese Pavilion at the 1867 Universal Exhibition was still fresh in everyone's memory. An equally convincing argument is the allusion to coca (written *khoka*, possibly a slip of the pen for *kkoka*, an Aymara etymology cited in the fourth volume, published in 1869, of Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle*), the alkaloid of which had only been isolated in 1855 by the German chemist Friedrich Gaedcke: the potent brew consumed by Kornélis would therefore have been impossible before that date. Its effects, however, as far as we can tell from the libretto, resemble those of hashish and opium as described by Baudelaire in *Les Paradis artificiels*, a volume published in 1860 and which it is difficult to believe could have escaped Gallet's attention, or even that of Saint-Saëns. In his highly favourable review of *La Princesse jaune* for the *Journal des débats*, Ernest Reyer, who was familiar with the Orient and had even been to Japan (or so he claimed, though perhaps only in jest), defined coca (which he spelt 'kokha') as 'a variety of hashish'. Kornélis's hallucination is reminiscent of certain passages in 'Le Poème du haschisch', the first part of *Les Paradis artificiels*, where Baudelaire associates the effects experienced by takers of the drug with the idea of travelling to distant countries, as he himself transposed them in 'L'invitation au voyage' from *Les Fleurs du mal* (and its prose double in *Le Spleen de Paris*). One might be tempted to see a further allusion to Baudelaire in the word 'paradis' which occurs twice in the libretto. The 'dreamt-of paradise' that opens up to Kornélis at the

onset of the hallucination is contrasted with the ‘Paradise lost’ and regained that the final duet celebrates. Anyone who has read *Les Fleurs du mal* will not fail to see here an echo of ‘Moesta et errabunda’:

Mais le vert paradis des amours enfantines,
L’innocent paradis, plein de plaisirs furtifs,
Est-il déjà plus loin que l’Inde et que la Chine?¹

Although Gallet was given sole credit for the libretto, Saint-Saëns’s close involvement in its development is evidenced by the two men’s decision to use the music of the *mélodie* *Désir de l’orient* in *La Princesse jaune*: in its original key of G minor, it constitutes the initial Andantino of the Overture, and, with a new text and transposed into A minor, it becomes the air ‘Oui, j’aime en son lointain mystère’, in which Kornélis gives his cousin the ‘respectable’ version of his passion for Japan. Saint-Saëns’s song is almost exactly contemporary with the *opéra-comique*, since its manuscript bears the date 12 May 1871; the composer wrote it during a stay in England, to words of his own devising. Although the poem evokes China and Turkey rather than Japan, *Désir de l’orient* is nonetheless a preliminary text to the opera already in progress. As inserted in *La Princesse jaune*, this striking and subtly orchestrated piece, in which the chromatic vocal line suggests monotonous oriental melodies in stylised fashion over an ostinato accompaniment supported by harp arpeggios, is one of the most memorable numbers in the score.

This musical intertextuality is matched by an element of literary intertextuality. For the sake of authenticity, Gallet included in his libretto an excerpt from the famous anthology of the *Man’yōshū* or ‘Collection of Ten Thousand Leaves’, a vast anthology of poems dating from the seventh and eighth centuries CE. The poem quoted appears in the first num-

¹ But the green paradise of childish loves, / The innocent paradise, full of furtive pleasures, / Is it already farther away than India and China?

ber of the score, Léna's recitative and *ariette*, in which she alternately reads the lines in Japanese (on a pentatonic scale, ascending or descending) and in translation (*recto tono*). A few words in Japanese are also sung by the female chorus heard offstage in Kornélis's Vision (no.5 of the score), this time to banal words that Hugh Macdonald assumes must have come from a language manual. They are set to the pentatonic theme already heard in the middle section of the Allegro giocoso (in G major) of the Overture.



Crudely summarised, the intention of the piece might be to show that 'East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet', to quote Kipling's famous formula in 'The Ballad of East and West'. That Kornélis's *Japonisme* should lead him in a potentially dangerous direction, prompting him to use drugs, reinforces this unquestionably anti-decadent, if not anti-modern, message, since it could imply a condemnation of what, two years later, would be referred to as Impressionism, to which Léna's vase painting would represent the polar opposite, or indeed the antidote. Yet, paradoxically, it is necessary for the purposes of the demonstration that East and West should meet musically, in order to be set against each other throughout the work. From the very first number, the conventional personality of Léna, whose far from cosmopolitan imagination contrasts with her cousin's wanderlust, is expressed in the triple-time dance rhythm – in this case a bolero – of which Salle Favart audiences were so fond (as Reyer points out), and which is heard again briefly at the start of the final duet. Kornélis's renunciation of the exotic, and his reconquest by Léna, are first signified musically by the reassuring oompahs of a fair-ground waltz. And when the two fiancés combine their voices in the Allegro moderato that ends the work, their rediscovered harmony is conveyed, as Reyer rightly perceived, as 'a tribute paid [...] to the eminently French genre of *opéra-comique*'. These solidly diatonic reminders of tradition are deliberately conventional and contrast with the more inward beauty of the D minor air (no.3 in the score), in which Léna allows her heart to

speak; here the expressive oboe solo that serves as peroration is particularly worthy of note. The climax of the work, opposing East and West dramatically and musically, is of course the long hallucination scene (no.5) in which Kornélis (and the audience) suddenly see the dreary snow-covered landscape in the picture window replaced by a Japanese town *en fête*, to the joyful strains of the pentatonic theme in G major already heard in the second part of the Overture; and this substitution is soon followed by a second one when Léna appears as a Japanese woman, just as Kornélis sees her, a magical effect which nevertheless prepares the way for the final reconciliation once the magic has subsided. ‘One of the best things I have done in the theatre’, Saint-Saëns wrote to his publisher in 1896, when most of his operatic output was already behind him.

Saint-Saëns was a composer of considerable musical culture and curiosity, and this was by no means his first attempt at musical orientalism, of which his cycle of six *Mémoires persanes* of 1870, published in the year of the premiere of *La Princesse jaune*, is a particularly accomplished example. But here he was breaking new ground, for in 1872 musical orientalism had barely ventured to the Far East (Weber’s 1809 incidental music for Schiller’s *Turandot* being a notable exception). Although *La Princesse jaune* has few predecessors in the operatic repertory, it opens the way to a brilliant tradition, from W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan’s *The Mikado* (1878) and Mascagni’s *Iris* (1898) to Puccini’s *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and *Turandot* (1926), and, nearer our own time, Stephen Sondheim’s *Pacific Overtures* (1978). And is the pentatonism of Ravel’s *Laideronnette, impératrice des pagodes* (in *Ma mère l’Oye*, 1910) not a discreet homage to Saint-Saëns’s *Princesse*?



Gallet delivered the finished libretto on 19 September 1871. Saint-Saëns, who had just completed his symphonic poem *Le Rouet d’Omphale*, then embarked on the composition. The short score is dated 5 February 1872, but it still lacks the Overture, written last – it bears the date 22 May 1872 –

when the orchestration of the rest was ready and the work had gone into rehearsal. The cast was of high quality. The soprano Alice Ducasse (1841-1923), born in Valparaíso, had been trained by Caroline Miolan-Carvalho and Caroline Duprez, and had sung at the Théâtre-Lyrique (notably creating the role of Mab in Bizet's *La Jolie Fille de Perth*) before being engaged in 1871 at the Opéra-Comique, where, four years later, she would be the first Frasquita in *Carmen*. Saint-Saëns greatly admired her. Her partner as Kornélis, the Parisian Paul Lhérie (1844-1937), from a French Jewish family (the original name was Lévy), had studied at the Conservatoire with Morin and Obin and had sung at the Opéra-Comique from 1866 to 1868, then in Marseille and at La Monnaie, before returning in 1872 to the Opéra-Comique, where he was to sing the first Don José in *Carmen* in 1875. In 1882 he became a baritone, a switch that allowed him to move from José to Escamillo, to sing Iago alongside Tamagno, to participate as Posa in the Milanese premiere of the revised version of *Don Carlos*, and to create the role of Rabbi David in Mascagni's *L'amico Fritz* in 1891 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome, alongside Emma Calvé and Fernando De Lucia. In other words, Saint-Saëns had the best possible cast at his disposal. The set design was by Auguste Rubé and Philippe Chaperon, and the orchestra was in the capable hands of Adolphe Deloffre (1817-76), who had begun his career at the Théâtre-Lyrique. With the libretto published by Calmann Lévy and the vocal score by Hartmann (both with a dedication to Frédéric Villot, formerly a long-serving curator of paintings at the Louvre), all appeared set fair for Saint-Saëns's operatic debut.

At the premiere, on 12 June 1872, the work was one half of a double bill with another *opéra-comique* for two characters, *Bonsoir voisin!* by Ferdinand Poise on a libretto by Brunswick (Paul Lhérie's uncle) and Arthur de Beauplan, first given at the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1853 but never previously presented at the Salle Favart. Did this juxtaposition with a backward- rather than forward-looking opera add another nail to the coffin of *La Princesse jaune*? Savaged by the press in a veritable catalogue of critical ineptitudes (to which we must add the entry in Félix Clément's *Dictionnaire des opéras*), it was taken off after five performances. This innocent little work', Saint-

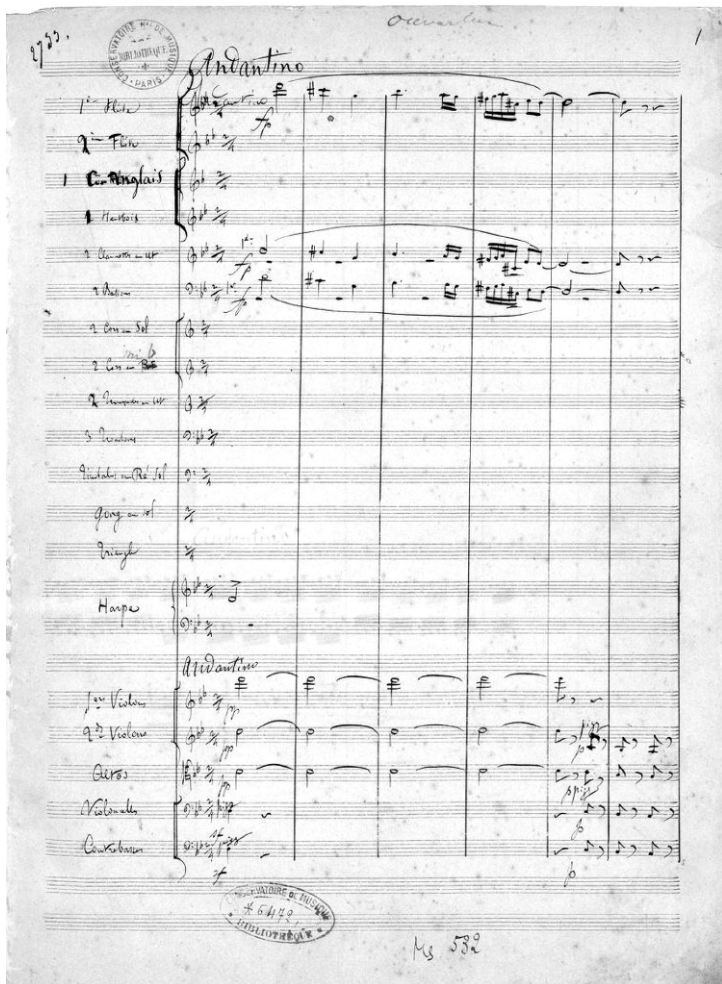
Saëns noted soberly many years later, ‘was greeted with the most ferocious hostility’. It was the biggest flop in the composer’s career.



Fortunately, however, the story of *La Princesse jaune* does not end there. Far from being a passing fad, the craze for all things Japanese was to prove long-lasting, confirmed in the visual arts by the triumph of Impressionism and, in literature, by the no less phenomenal success in 1887 of Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème* (brought to the operatic stage by André Messager in 1893). Fulfilling Léna’s prophecy in the final duet, the fantasy of the ‘mousmé’ began to supplant that of the bayadère in the Western imagination: the eponymous portrait painted by Van Gogh in Arles in 1888 makes one think of some Provençal Léna appearing to Kornélis in the guise of Ming. This renewed interest, as Saint-Saëns’s fame grew, made it possible for the work to rise from the ashes. The Overture appeared more and more frequently on concert programmes in the following decades, a sure sign of its popularity, as are the two transcriptions made by Gabriel Fauré for two pianos in 1880 and for piano four hands in 1887; a number of other arrangements followed in the early twentieth century. In January 1880 a private performance of *La Princesse jaune* was given in German at the court of Stuttgart. Angers presented the work in 1885, Boulogne-sur-Mer in 1890. Saint-Saëns wrote to his publisher, Auguste Durand, that he found the music ‘ravishing’. The composer’s correspondence suggests that the work was frequently programmed ‘in the salons and casinos’ and that the tenor Pierre-Émile Engel frequently performed it there, but deplores the fact that these unsophisticated presentations did only partial justice to the work. Although a planned premiere at La Monnaie in 1896 did not take place, the Opéra-Comique finally revived *La Princesse jaune* in October 1906 with David Devriès as Kornélis. A letter from Saint-Saëns to an unknown correspondent (not Louis Gallet, who died in 1898) reveals that the word ‘koka’ had been censored: what might have seemed harmless under Du Locle in 1872 apparently aroused the alarm of Albert

Carré at the third Salle Favart thirty-five years later. For this revival, preceded by the Dieppe premiere the same year, Saint-Saëns revised the score slightly, modifying Léna's air and moving it to no.5; Durand duly published a new edition. The 1909 revival, with Lucy Vauthrin as Léna and the tenor Coulomb making his debut, was even more successful. *La Princesse jaune* reached a total of forty-four performances in 1914. After that, like a sizeable part of its composer's output, it sank into undeserved oblivion, from which it was not rescued until 1935 for five performances under the baton of Albert Wolff, followed by two under Eugène Bigot in 1946.

Gradually rediscovered at the turn of the twenty-first century and regularly staged since then, notably at the Opéra Comique in 2004 with Jean-Luc Tingaud conducting, *La Princesse jaune* was, in fact, too subtle and ambiguous a work to stand any chance of success in 1872. The recent defeat and the Paris Commune, coupled with the uncertain beginnings of the infant Third Republic, were not conducive to a mood of ironic detachment, which the triumphant modernity of the following century scarcely encouraged either. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the post-modern era has given the opera a much more enthusiastic welcome.



First page of the autograph manuscript of *La Princesse jaune*.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Première page autographe de la partition de *La Princesse jaune*.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.