

The misfortunes of *La Princesse jaune*

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It is not possible to discuss Saint-Saëns's opera without alluding to the aftermath of the 'terrible year' that went from the fall of Napoleon III in September 1870 to the crushing of the Paris Commune in the spring of 1871. Invoking the orientalist vein and playing the card of exoticism provided a means of escaping from the tragic situation the country had just lived through. Looking towards distant horizons helped to distance the drama that had just been played out there.

Unfortunately, though, *La Princesse jaune* quickly vanished from the repertory, on account of incomprehension on the part of the public and the disparaging reaction of the press, expressed in arguments pretty similar to those it had trotted out a few weeks earlier for Bizet's *Djamileh*, another one-act opera deliberately playing on exoticism (Egyptian, in this case). Moreover, Saint-Saëns's work had to suffer the same fate as Bizet's *opéra-comique* (and, one might add, Émile Paladilhe's *Le Passant*) – that is to say, it was required to accompany a lighter work that was already a confirmed favourite, since it was performed as the first half of a double bill with Ferdinand Poise's *Bonsoir voisin!*, premiered in the early days of the Second Empire, on 20 September 1853. Hence the same parallelism is immediately established between the emerging generation of musicians, then in their thirties, and the generation of slightly older French composers born in the Restoration period (1815-30). For economic reasons on which the financial wellbeing of the Opéra-Comique depended, the talent of the upcoming dramatic composers and librettists had to be judged against their older colleagues and the tried and trusted musical formulas of the latter.

Although divided, commentators began by attacking the libretto and the plot set to music by Saint-Saëns. In April 1872, the *Revue de France* criticised the lack of dramatic action, while the *Revue savoisienne* pointed out ‘inconsistencies’. The work’s dramaturgical and musical originality only rarely generated a positive response. Among the most laudatory reviews was that of the *Revue britannique*, which hastened to declare:

We find in his score all the qualities that distinguish the extraordinary pianist [...] whom we are pleased to see finally tackling a stage work.

The press mentions the ‘myriad delightful details’ of the orchestration, ‘handled in masterly fashion’. However, in his *Grand Dictionnaire universel*, Pierre Larousse pronounced irrevocable judgment: ‘The premiss of the piece is uninteresting, like everything that is implausible and is not founded on natural sentiment.’ He added that Saint-Saëns ‘has seriously compromised his reputation’ despite ‘skilful instrumentation’ and undoubted compositional ‘learning’. It was unquestionably the case that music critics found it difficult to accept Saint-Saëns in any register other than that to which he had accustomed them. This is what prompted Ludovic Allain to say in *L’Europe artiste* that Saint-Saëns should content himself with ‘composing organ music’. Allain criticised *La Princesse jaune* for its lack of melodies, whereas Ludovic Hans judged the same music to be... ‘powerfully melodic’ in his review in *L’Orchestre* (June 1872). The few positive opinions were overwhelmed by a torrent of reproaches, as instanced by *Le Rappel* (5 June 1872), which observed: ‘It is true that, at the Opéra-Comique, one’s objective is above all to enter what is known there as the “repertory”. So try to enter it, M. C. Saint-Saëns.’ In its edition of 17 June 1872, *Le Moniteur universel* described *La Princesse jaune* as a ‘pretentious little poem in which childishness is combined with obscurity’. The ‘opium-laced score’, it stated, is reduced to ‘a jumble of wandering chords’ with ‘pale colours’ and ‘noises without contours’. According to the same newspaper, Saint-Saëns belongs to ‘the school that erases the rhythm, the idea, the melody, the motif from music, to replace them with a vague and tur-

bid melodic monotony, as tasteless as stagnant water' worthy of 'Wagnerian riddles'. *Le Constitutionnel* of 15 December 1873 included Saint-Saëns in the 'group of the misunderstood' and declared:

In the works of MM. Paladilhe, Bizet and Saint-Saëns there is learning, knowledge, but little or nothing in the way of natural qualities. Melodic inspiration is stifled as soon as it makes an attempt to appear. These thirty-year-old doctors deny themselves poetry in order to address their adoration to musical grammar.

Finally, the critics were sometimes put off their stride by the highly orientalist character of the score. Conversely, this 'strange' or 'indecent' singularity was found convincing by those who, like Georges Servières, saw in it a 'stylistic experiment' or the 'delicacy of inlay work', linked to the *Japonisme* to which the composer subscribed.



The reception of Saint-Saëns's opera was not unanimous, but it did reveal a sense of unease and lack of understanding. Like *Djamileh*, *La Princesse jaune* offered new points of reference and to some extent renewed the genre of *opéra-comique*, thus depriving its two authors of the public's favour and of a large number of potential supporters in the press who were quick to sharpen their knives. If we are to believe Armand de Pontmartin (*Souvenirs d'un vieux critique*, 1886), the critics were merely following the opinion of the mostly disappointed audiences:

An atmosphere of boredom reigned throughout the house. The poem lacked attractive qualities, and this had its effect on the music. Slightly tinged with Wagnerism, it had neither the grace of the French school nor the charm of Italy; it flopped melancholically and silently, as the last autumn leaf flops onto the first carpet of snow.

Saint-Saëns's alleged Wagnerism, which was perceived as an admission of weakness, remained one of the charges most frequently levelled against him in the 1860s and 1870s. However, his piece was not destined for permanent oblivion; it was to enjoy a *succès d'estime* a few decades later when the composer's fame reached an unprecedented level, with a respectable total of fifty-one performances at the Opéra-Comique from 1872 to 1951. *La Princesse jaune* thus testifies both to Saint-Saëns's difficulty in establishing himself on the operatic stage and to his staying power. His trajectory and that of Bizet would confront both men with the same obstacles when they again tried to make their mark with *Carmen* and *Samson et Dalila*, in 1875 and 1877 respectively.

Let us leave the last word to Saint-Saëns. Dismayed by the failure of *Djamileh* (and doubtless by his own), and wielding an anti-bourgeois verve generally little associated with him, he avenged Bizet in a sonnet written in June 1872 and printed by Victor Ronger in the issue of *La France* dated 16 March 1883:

Djamileh, daughter and flower of the sacred Orient,
 Making the string of an exotic *guzla* vibrate
 As she accompanies herself on the shimmering instrument,
 Sings of the extravagant love with which her heart overflows.
 The ruminant bourgeois, in his narrow orchestra stall,
 Pot-bellied, ugly, reluctantly separated from his pack,
 Half-opens a glazed eye, eats a sugar bonbon,
 Then goes back to sleep, thinking the orchestra is still tuning up.
 She, amid scents of rose and sandalwood,
 Pursues her dream of gold, azure and crystal,
 Eternally disdainful of the stupefied crowd.
 And, through the Moorish arches,
 Her loose hair falling in dark streams,
 We see the houri depart, a pearl cast before swine.



Camille Saint-Saëns at the end of his life.
Private collection.

Camille Saint-Saëns à la fin de sa vie.
Collection particulière.