

When the hour of rediscovery strikes

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Exploration of Saint-Saëns's *Le Timbre d'argent* presents a splendid opportunity to reflect on missed appointments with fame. There is perhaps no other operatic work of the nineteenth century that was given so many opportunities to reveal the originality of its composer yet so unerringly missed its chance each time. Composed in 1864, premiered in a considerably modified version in 1877 and revived – after interminable negotiations – in 1914, Saint-Saëns's sparkling score fell victim to both journalistic cabals and theatrical bankruptcies, and ended its career just before the cannon of the First World War began to roar. Yet it seemed to have everything to appeal to the public: the popular vein of the *Chanson napolitaine*, the symphonic developments of the longest overture he ever wrote, and the fantastical plot of a subject close to Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. To crown it all, the protagonist of this tortuous plot was played by a ballerina, the very embodiment of the tastes of Romantic Paris since the early days of the Empire. And Saint-Saëns, over a period of exactly fifty years, could never bring himself to abandon his work, which he considered deserving of a better fate and still artistically valid despite the decisive musical advances of Debussy and Ravel.

Yet it should come as no surprise that *Le Timbre d'argent* has had to wait until 2017 for its first modern stage revival and until 2020 to receive its first recording – for, oddly enough, the operatic oeuvre of Saint-Saëns remains astonishingly neglected. While his name now circulates in every country in the world thanks to *Le Carnaval des animaux*, the *Danse macabre*, the 'Organ' Symphony and the piano and cello concertos, there is still

little or no trace to be found of *Déjanire*, *Phryné*, *Frédégonde* or *L'Ancêtre*. At a time when Massenet seems to have emerged from his purgatory, and rare works by Gounod are gradually being rehabilitated (*Cinq-Mars* and *La Nonne sanglante*, in particular), everything remains to be done in the case of Saint-Saëns. Clearly, just as *Carmen* obscures the rest of Bizet's operatic output, *Samson et Dalila* seems to cast a fatal shadow over the other operas of Saint-Saëns.

A resurrection of *Le Timbre d'argent* of course raises the question of which version to choose. As the authors of the following articles explain, each formulation of the work has its justification and its own specific dramaturgy. The Palazzetto Bru Zane, in consultation with the director of the Opéra Comique, Olivier Mantei, and the conductor François-Xavier Roth, decided to opt for the final version, as revised for the Théâtre de la Monnaie in 1913. This is the form of the work that contains the most music, since it replaces the spoken dialogue with recitatives, which are a more alluring proposition in a recording. Only one number had to be cut for theatrical reasons and could not be reinstated on the discs: this was the waltz for orchestra in the last act, whose theme also appears at other points in the score. But that gap will soon be filled, since there are already plans to record the waltz in an orchestral anthology for future release.

We hope that the enthusiasm and commitment of the performers in the June 2017 production, directed by Guillaume Vincent, is fully captured in this recording. If so, they will convince home listeners, as they did the audience at the Opéra Comique, of the exceptional character of *Le Timbre d'argent*, a thrilling piece with a flamboyant score and a testimony to the dramatic genius of Saint-Saëns.

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