

## Death and transfiguration

*Alexandre Dratwicki (Palazzetto Bru Zane)*

Exactly ten years ago – in February 2014 – the Palazzetto Bru Zane embarked on a project to resurrect all of Saint-Saëns’s neglected operas. Was it possible to believe that, of the fifteen or so titles he composed, only three or four had been recorded? The venture, a collaborative effort between musicologists and musicians, relied in part on the existence of two festivals devoted to the composer in 2016 and 2021. This is the moment to pay warm tribute to the partners of each episode in the series: the Opéra de Saint-Étienne (*Les Barbares*, 2014), the Münchner Rundfunkorchester (*Proserpine*, 2017), the Opéra Comique and Les Siècles (*Le Timbre d’argent*, 2020), the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse (*La Princesse jaune*, 2021) and the Orchestre de l’Opéra de Rouen Normandie (*Phryné*, 2022). Today it is the Orchestre Philharmonique de Monte-Carlo that offers listeners a chance to discover *Déjanire*, only a few excerpts from which were revealed by the Radio France Festival in Montpellier in 1985.

This work, like nearly all Saint-Saëns’s operas, went through a complex creative process. In the present case, it was so radical as to be rare in the development of an opera, for Saint-Saëns ended up turning a play, spoken in verse and accompanied by incidental music scored for the open air, into a wholly sung *tragédie lyrique* designed for performing spaces of more modest dimensions. The subject, it has to be said, called more for one-on-one confrontations in the vein of Racine than for collective tableaux, apart from the final apotheosis when Hercule throws himself onto the pyre. This recording demonstrates that the transformation into an opera admirably enhances the original tragedy of Gallet, who died just after *Déjanire* was premiered in Béziers and so never knew this new version.

The role of *Déjanire* requires a powerful soprano with a brassy ring to her low notes, capable of standing up to a thunderous orchestra from the moment she comes on stage. The role of *Hercule*, on the other hand, is written in a more ambiguous tessitura, characteristic of the tenor Muratore, who had defected from the lighter repertory of the Opéra-Comique and developed a voice suited to grand opera. And finally, *Iole* is not such a common vocal type either, since the character's hieratic nature is reflected in numerous *pianissimo* high notes, yet she is not a traditional light soprano *d'agilité*, as she is given no virtuosic coloratura.

Commentators have seen *Déjanire* as a direct descendant of the Gluckian aesthetic. Saint-Saëns made no secret of the fact, openly stating he had adopted the theatrical, lively, natural and unaffected French declamation of his predecessor. Moreover, he encouraged conductors to perform Gluck and Spontini swiftly and energetically, which is why, even though the two men were friends, he held André Messager responsible for the lukewarm reception of *Déjanire* at the Palais Garnier, criticising him for 'stupid speeds that would put an anthill to sleep'.

The fact remains that the score did not really find its audience, at a time when the shift from Romanticism to Modernism was further precipitated by the First World War, which reshuffled the cards in terms of the attractiveness of aesthetic models and international artistic centres. Saint-Saëns went on to spend the last years of his life promoting revivals of *Henry VIII* and, to a lesser extent, *Le Timbre d'argent*, abandoning *Déjanire* whose vocal templates made assembling first-rate casts a utopian proposition. But at a time when audiences are becoming increasingly impatient, fascinated by the extraordinary and fond of epic canvases, it is a safe bet that the concision of this score and its exceptional surges of lyricism will find new admirers. We will then be able to conclude, paraphrasing the enchantress Phénice in Act One: 'How you now love what you so hated once!'





Mlle Yvonne Dubel as Iole. Opéra de Monte-Carlo.  
*Le Théâtre*, 1 October 1912.  
Bibliothèque du Conservatoire de Genève.

Mlle Yvonne Dubel en Iole. Opéra de Monte-Carlo.  
*Le Théâtre*, 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 1912.  
Bibliothèque du conservatoire de Genève.