Reinventing tragedy 'à l'antique': *Déjanire* at the Béziers Arena

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Around the year 1900, as the centre of geopolitics shifted to the Mediterranean, Greco-Latin culture was revived in every field of artistic creation. This return to the ancient world, the second wave since the Renaissance, was admittedly founded on the research of nineteenth-century archaeologists, geographers and naturalists, but it was also motivated by the interest of representing a Mediterranean entity as the original cradle of Europe. In France, this narrative was instrumentalised all the more eagerly because it provided an opportunity to assert the pre-eminence of Gallic civilisation over that of the 'enemy', Germany, the victor of 1870. In parallel with this, cultural players reinvented the notion of 'open-air theatre' during the Third Republic, in a drive for democratisation and decentralisation from Paris. They were supported by deputies from the Radical Socialist Party, proponents of the secular proselytism that aimed to shape Republican identity on condition it could be made to spread throughout the country. Through summer festival seasons, theatre and opera were now staged in decentralised locations, in front of thousands of spectators massed on terraced seating. In its own way, this configuration interpreted Romain Rolland's precept not to open 'new old theatres' but rather 'to build theatre by and for the people [...], a new art for a new world' (*Le Théâtre du peuple*, 1903). In the south of France, heritage sites such as the Roman theatre (Théâtre Antique) at Orange and the amphitheatres of Nîmes and Arles were used to stage both ancient drama (Sophocles, 'a *cigalier* from Athens', as the *félibre* Mariéton,

director of the Théâtre Antique, put it)[1] and repertory operas such as *Carmen* and *Mireille*. These venues, each having earned in its turn the nickname 'the French Bayreuth', were joined in 1898 by the Arena at Béziers (in the Hérault *département*), which became a pioneer in creating new theatrical and musical works, just as Wagner had done at his Festspielhaus two decades earlier.

MOBILISING OPEN-AIR PERFORMANCE IN A SPIRIT OF CREATIVE PARTNERSHIP

At the confluence of these contingencies, Saint-Saëns – at once composer, republican and Germanophobe – fully played his part in this movement of cultural proselytism, which the press linked with the ideological concept of 'popular education'. Between 1898 and 1902, three of his dramatic creations were designed for open-air theatres: *Déjanire*, *Les Barbares* and *Parysatis*, in collaboration with the playwrights Louis Gallet, Victorien Sardou and Pierre-Barthélemy Gheusi, and Jane Dieulafoy respectively. Although the opera *Les Barbares* was finally premiered at the Paris Opéra (1901) rather than at the Théâtre Antique in Orange, the other two works were created at the 'modern' Arena of Béziers in the hybrid form of spoken tragedy with incidental music. This cycle of stage works was prompted by the patronage of Fernand Castelbon de Beauxhostes (1854-1934). Following a positive experience of hearing a concert in the acoustics of the bullring in Valencia, this prosperous winegrower who was also a musician, took up the challenge of reproducing the phenomenon elsewhere:

[1] Le Félibrige is an association of literary and other cultural figures founded in 1854 to promote the language of southern France, the *langue d'oc*. Its members are known as *félibres*. A sister organisation of southerners living in Paris was called La Cigale (The cicada) and its members were therefore *cigaliers*. (Translator's note)

> It was a revelation for me, or rather the explanation for the success of open-air performances among the Greeks and Romans. Could not such events be revived in France, in our Midi which need fear no comparison with the sun of Athens or Rome, most especially when our Mediterranean populations owe to their illustrious origins their natural taste for beauty in all its forms, the ability to be moved and the precious gift of understanding? I would not rest until a genuine attempt had been made to accomplish this.

From then on, every summer, the Béziers venue, which had a capacity of around 12,000, was diverted from its main function as a bullring to house a short theatrical season, which achieved considerable popularity in terms of attendance, and national importance in terms of creativity and sumptuous staging. The successive commissions included works by Saint-Saëns, Fauré, Levadé and Déodat de Séverac. The unusual economy of these shows relied on contributions at both the national level, with composers, actors, singers and designers from Paris, and the regional, pooling the resources of *harmonies* (bands of wind and percussion instruments) and *orphéons* (choirs of working men) from the Mediterranean basin – for the patron was also the president of the local *harmonie*, La Lyre Biterroise. At the two inaugural performances, the ambitious nature of the project and its realisation immediately aroused the enthusiasm of a socially mixed audience:

> Enthusiasm was at its peak. Joy overflowed from every heart, and that natural phenomenon is the finest testimony of high esteem to which an author can aspire. Yes! the people made their formidable voice heard at the Arena on Monday, and their cheering made M. Gallet weep with joy.
>
> (*Le Petit Méridional*, 31 August 1898)

DÉJANIRE AT THE BÉZIERS ARENA: UPDATING GREEK TRAGEDY

Already a much-admired composer in both concert hall and opera house, Saint-Saëns embarked on new adventures in Orange (*Hymne de Pallas-Athénée*, 1894) and then in Béziers. The latter cooperation appears to have come about fortuitously, even though his cousin Jean Nussy-Verdier, pianist of the Chambre Musicale de Béziers, probably acted as a valuable intermediary:

> I had set out to make a tour of organ recitals, and was encountering difficulties [...] when I received a letter from M. Castelbon de Beauxhostes, whom I did not know at all, promising to obtain for me the organ of Béziers Cathedral. [...] When I arrived in Béziers I was welcomed with open arms, and M. Castelbon immediately told me about the project he held dear; construction work on the Arena was nearly finished: he had noticed its acoustical properties and wanted to use it for artistic purposes. But how? We carried out tests with singing and music, and I was immediately convinced that what had to be done with the Arena was to restore ancient drama. Louis Gallet, my regular collaborator, was working on *Déjanire* at the time, not yet knowing whether he would make a tragedy or an opera out of it; he made it into a tragedy with chorus, and *Déjanire* as we now know it made its appearance in 1898, with such success that it marked the point of departure for all the open-air performances that now succeed each other every summer.
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> (*Le Théâtre, la vie mondaine*, 25 February 1911)

From choice of dramatic genre to production and set design, the aim was to update Greek tragedy with this inaugural *Déjanire* of 1898. The work was subsequently revived in the 1899 and 1903 seasons in Béziers. Communication for these events by means of postcards of the shows reveals how keen the local actors were to publicise them, while the announcement of the productions and their reception were extensively echoed in the regional and national press.

The choice of the Greek heroine Dejanira, drawn from Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, stems from the ideological issues mentioned above, namely the representation of identified mythological figures. It was a proposal that Gallet made to his old friend Saint-Saëns in the summer of 1897 (as they sat on the tiers at Orange); it proved to be the swansong of the playwright, who died shortly after the premiere. The pre-Christian heroine alludes once more to the paganism of which Saint-Saëns had been a devotee since his travels outside Europe: 'And I'm not a pagan for nothing. I hate artificial light, I love only the sun' (letter to Castelbon, 23 January 1898). The amorous entanglements surrounding Déjanire and her husband, Hercule the unvanquished, lead to a tragic outcome at the foot of the pyre originally raised as a sacrifice to Jupiter. The immolation of Hercule upon the pyre, after he has been poisoned, respects the ancient narrative. For the gift of a tunic (a talisman of love from the Centaur Nessus to Déjanire) ultimately brings the hero violent death, as he is burnt by the fatal ointment concealed in the garment.

The two creators of this pioneering production were agreed on the complementarity offered by a spoken tragedy with its 'action shot through with incidental music and a ballet' (to quote Louis Gallet in *Le Petit Méridional* of 9 August 1898). In addition to the spoken roles, the dramaturgy conferred 'operatic' importance on the crowd scenes, making the most of the grandiose open-air setting and... the support of local choristers. For the production of *Déjanire* invented partnerships with a view to coordinating the participation of professionals and amateurs in Béziers. The lavishness of the forces required testifies to the political willpower of the Radical Socialist municipality, which coincided with the public-spirited action of the wine-growing patron. The latter is praised in the verses of the *Prologue*, pompously dispersed between fanfares:

Béziers, noble cité,
Sœur des cités latines,
Salut!
[...]

C'est pourquoi tes fils
Rêvent désormais de victoires nouvelles
Où viendront triompher sous le riant soleil
La Poésie et la Musique, sœurs jumelles![1]

The instrumental forces, a threefold formation at the foot of the tiers of seating (ensemble of harps, *harmonies*, string orchestra) created a kind of stereophony for the audience, being laid out stage left and stage right. The predominant use of *harmonies* may seem odd, but their combination of wind and percussion instruments proved to be well suited to the open air. Although the ensemble of harps came from Paris, the string players were recruited from across the Spanish border (the Liceo de Barcelona), while three of the *harmonies* were local or cross-border formations: the Seventeenth Regiment of Infantry from Béziers, the Second Regiment of Engineers from Montpellier (whose conductor Charles Eustace orchestrated the music for these bands) and the band of the Guàrdia Urbana of Barcelona: a total of 250 performers! The mixed chorus formed an abundant *vox populi*: the women came from Paris and Béziers, the men from the *orphéons* La Lyre Biterroise and Le Rallye Biterrois; all were coached by Nussy-Verdié, who was congratulated for having taken on 'the seemingly impossible task of teaching the choruses, sometimes very difficult, to one hundred and forty men [*sic*], all from Béziers, who knew not a note of music' (Saint-Saëns, *L'Écho de Paris*, 1912). The actors and vocal soloists, by contrast, were imported professionals, respectively artists from the Odéon – Cora Laparcerie (Déjanire), Eugénie Segond-Weber (Iole), Georges Dorival (Hercule) – and the Paris Opéra – the soprano Armande Bourgeois (a regular Brünnhilde at the Palais Garnier) and the tenor Valentin Duc (a native of Béziers). The participation of some sixty female

[1] Béziers, noble city, / Sister of the Latin cities, / Hail! [...]
That is why your children / Dream henceforth of new victories / Which will see the triumph, under the joyous sun, / Of Poetry and Music, the twin sisters!

dancers was in keeping with the traditions of both *tragédie lyrique* and contemporary French opera.

Finally, the splendour of the visual aspect was the work of Parisian designers and the choreographer of the Théâtre du Capitole de Toulouse (Van Hamme). The ancient-style costumes, made in the capital, 'revealed the graceful contours of Déjanire and Iole' when the wind rose during the performance. As for the imposing scenography, it was coordinated by two directors (d'Herbilly from the Odéon and Baudu from La Monnaie in Brussels) and created *in situ* just two weeks beforehand. Having worked on their scripts at the Odéon, the actors rehearsed for only two days before the premiere... as soon as they got off the special train of the P. L. M. Company. Saint-Saëns conducted the premiere of *Déjanire* in the afternoon sun, 'wearing light-coloured trousers and frock coat but a colonial helmet; the composer was armed with a long bamboo cane covered in white paper to serve him as a baton'. At the 1899 revival, his former student Gabriel Fauré took over conducting duties from him; he was himself to compose *Prométhée* and premiere it in Béziers the following year.

The second challenge tackled by the work's creators was to combine spoken drama, singing and scenography by embracing the triple dimension of open-air theatre. Saint-Saëns had already had experience with outdoor acoustics when he transferred his incidental music for *Antigone* to the Théâtre Antique d'Orange (at the Chorégies (festival) of 1897), and had initiated research into performance archaeology which he published under the title *Notes sur les décors de théâtre de l'Antiquité moderne* (1886). And indeed, in the circular configuration of the Arena, the spatialisation of sound and scenography was revived in accordance with the Greco-Latin heritage. Marcel Jambon and Alexandre Bailly used an entire segment of the circle to construct the stage area in height and depth, from arena level to the top of the tiers. Immense painted canvases evoked the acropolis of Hercules' palace and 'a mountainous perspective of astonishing realism' (*La Vie théâtrale*, September 1898). As in Sophocles' time, the *orchestra* (the arena floor or ring) was occupied by choristers and dancers

alternately. Moreover, the creators dared to allow the chariot (a recurring element in Greek vases) to move within that area and to link the performance spaces:

> At the Béziers Arena, in *Déjanire* et *Parysatis*, when we had choristers and dancers in the ring, and moving chariots, we were following in the tradition of the Greek tragedians. The arrival of Déjanire on a chariot from the top of which she apostrophised Juno, and from which she then descended to climb the steps of the palace, was stunning.
>
> (Saint-Saëns, *Causerie sur l'art du théâtre*, 1905)

Moreover, the open-air setting meant that Hercule's pyre could really be set ablaze, a spectacular climax that was reported by the press.

The performing forces were also spread out, from the *orchestra* – the three instrumental formations mentioned above – to the various levels of the stage, reserved for the roles of the tragedy, who declaimed in speech, or song in the case of the two *coryphées*. The composer of *La Jeunesse d'Hercule* (his symphonic poem, partly recycled here) deployed his mosaic of musical numbers from the powerful *Prologue* to the concluding chorus commemorating the death of Hercules, adopting an unabashedly fragmentary aesthetic. To be sure, this procedure turns its back on Wagner's continuous setting of words and music at Bayreuth, but it prefigures the place accorded to music in cinematic epics to come. Nevertheless, the musical episodes are unified by the grandiloquence of the sublime, through a conscious simplification of texture that makes the interposed lines of verse completely audible. From the bronzed tone of the massed harps (*Prologue*) to the rhythmic punctuations of the onstage trumpets (*Entrée d'Hercule*, Act Two) and the imprecations of Déjanire superimposed on the accompaniment (Act Three), the fresco comes to life. The rhythmic savagery of the dances (Act Four) sits alongside the archaic severity of the choral masses, often used antiphonally, women (*Hymne à Éros*) against men, obviously commenting on the action. As valiant as the sublime actors already mentioned, the tenor Valentin Duc donned his buskins

to launch into a full-throated *Épithalame* (Act Four). Before the era of amplified music, these musical devices invented procedures commensurate with the ambitions of open-air theatre, while not neglecting the need to bring the *vox populi* to the fore.

FROM CATERPILLAR TO BUTTERFLY: EXPORTING *DÉJANIRE* TO THE OPERA HOUSE

At the request of Paul Ginisty, director of the Odéon, who attended the Béziers premiere, Saint-Saëns revised the orchestration of *Déjanire* for its transfer to the indoor acoustics of his theatre (November 1898). However, the composer now seemed to miss the initial conditions of open-air performance:

> Where is the great stage area of the Béziers Arena, in which the sun itself seemed to be part of the piece, shining its rays on Hercule's pyre? [...] Where are the fifteen harps in the orchestra? – At the Odéon we only have two: fortunately, they are excellent.
>
> (*Le Figaro*, 11 November 1898)

Finally, after the decisive experience of *Les Barbares*, Saint-Saëns set about rewriting *Déjanire* as an opera, both music and verse, for

> we are not talking about a mere reworking. With the exception of a few choruses [...] the work is entirely new, since all the roles that were spoken are now sung. [...] I have spent the whole winter working on this new score.
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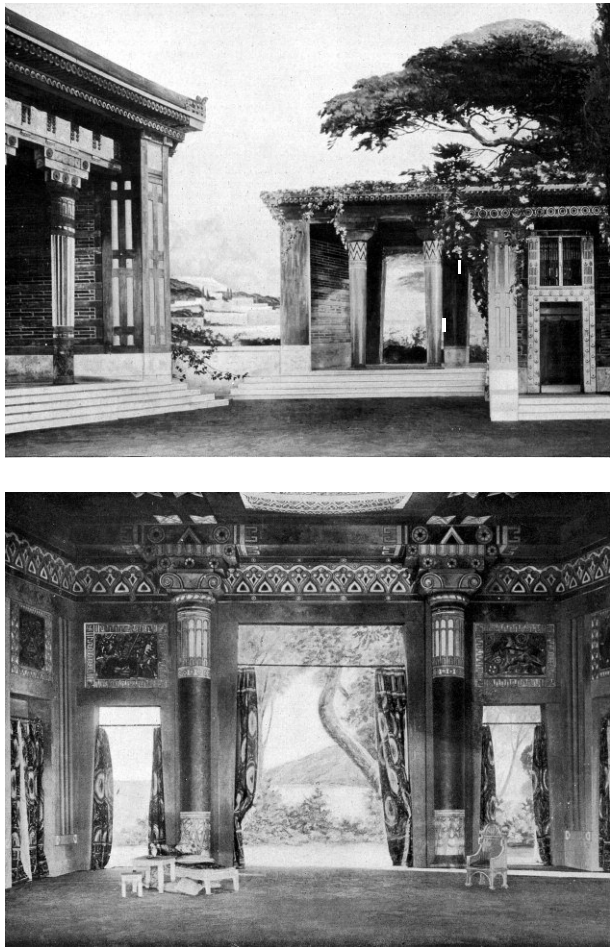
> (*Comœdia*, 24 March 1910)

In 1898, the Parisian public did not grant *Déjanire* the fervent reception it had enjoyed from audiences in Béziers. Nevertheless, Alfred Bruneau, a member of the Naturalist school, appreciated the mosaic of 'preludes,

sometimes extended choruses, frequently very brief scraps of music – a single chord from the orchestra, a few bars of fanfare – all [of which] serve to set the characters of the play in the atmosphere that befit them, to explain their actions, to clarify their gestures, to punctuate their speeches' (*Le Figaro*, 12 November 1898). This transfer of the music from the ambient environment in which it was conceived seems to have damaged the reputation of the ageing composer, now that he was pitted against the modernity of *Pelléas et Mélisande*:

> M. Saint-Saëns's *Déjanire* is the target at which the Debussyan snipers will take aim. – Was not *Déjanire* first mooted in Orange? – Nothing remains of it. The old *Déjanire* was a caterpillar, the new one will be a butterfly.
>
> (*La Revue musicale*, 1 September 1910)

Under the Ancien Régime, Lully and his collaborators invented the *tragédie lyrique* in order to glorify the Sun King and his court. Two centuries later, the Béziers *Déjanire* is in many respects a modern tragedy on an ancient subject, addressing the citizens of the Third Republic with an ideological ambition that roots it in Greco-Latin culture. Thanks to the project of its creators and organisers, it ushered in the era of decentralised spectacle, democratised by the diversity of the participants and the mass of spectators, while projecting into the arena what one might call a sound system... 'à l'antique'!



Sets for *Déjanire* at the Paris Opéra: Act One (above), Acts Two and Three (below). *Le Théâtre*, 16 December 1911. Bibliothèque du Conservatoire de Genève.

Décors de l'acte I (haut) et des actes II et III (bas) de *Déjanire* à l'Opéra de Paris. *Le Théâtre*, 16 décembre 1911. Bibliothèque du conservatoire de Genève.