

# The last opera of Saint-Saëns

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The genesis of *Déjanire* goes back to the spring of 1897, when Saint-Saëns met Fernand Castelbon de Beauxhostes (1859-1934), a prosperous wine-grower and amateur musician from Béziers who had invited him to give a recital on the organ of his native city's cathedral. Castelbon told the composer of his plans to create a festival in Béziers using the huge modern arena then being built (mainly for bullfighting purposes) on the site of an ancient amphitheatre, and suggested that he might inaugurate it the following year with a dramatic work of his own composition. However, after *Phryné* (1893), Saint-Saëns had considered abandoning opera, returning only to complete his friend Guiraud's *Frédégonde*, which was a lamentable failure at the Palais Garnier in 1895. Although initially unenthusiastic about open-air acoustics, which he considered unsuited to a work sung from beginning to end, he was nonetheless attracted by the idea of participating in what he himself called 'the restoration of ancient theatre'. Saint-Saëns possessed substantial knowledge of classical culture and was genuinely passionate about the ancient world; he had given his personal interpretation of musical accompaniment to Greek tragedy in 1893 with his incidental music for Sophocles' *Antigone*, as adapted by Paul Meurice and Auguste Vacquerie for the Comédie-Française. After testing the possibilities of the arena with Castelbon, he called on his favourite collaborator, Louis Gallet, who suggested the subject of the death of Hercules. In formal terms, the work would include sung choruses and orchestral numbers, as well as a ballet in the last act, but the roles in the tragedy proper would be spoken. It was in this guise that the piece, entitled *Déjanire* and subtitled 'tragédie lyrique', was premiered with great success at the Béziers Arena on 28 August 1898. The young Cora Laparcerie of the Théâtre de

l'Odéon (later to become Mme Jacques Richepin) played the title role, with Georges Dorival, also of the Odéon company, as Hercule, and Eugénie Segond-Weber, of the Comédie-Française, as Iole. Saint-Saëns himself conducted the musical sections. *Déjanire* was performed six times at the Odéon in December of the same year, conducted by Édouard Colonne, with the same cast but lighter orchestral and choral scoring. It was revived in Béziers in 1899, then staged in Toulouse in 1901 and Bordeaux the following year.



Although satisfied with the Béziers experience, Saint-Saëns – who had in the meantime grown reconciled to opera – soon considered transforming the *Déjanire* of 1898 into a true *tragédie lyrique*, sung throughout. But at first the task seemed insurmountable, for he had lost his collaborator Gallet, who had died on 16 October 1898. When it came to finding a theatre for the project, he got on poorly with the director of the Paris Opéra (Palais Garnier), Pedro Gailhard, despite the success of *Les Barbares* there in 1901; and his relations were no better with Albert Carré, who in 1898 had succeeded Léon Carvalho as director of the Opéra-Comique. But prospects improved in 1904 when the composer began a new collaboration with the Opéra de Monte-Carlo. This house, built by Charles Garnier and inaugurated in 1879, had been under the direction of Raoul Gunsbourg since 1893. A colourful personality of Romanian birth, he had had an adventurous career before taking up his previous post at the helm of the Grand-Théâtre de Lille. With a substantial budget and the support of Prince Albert I and Princess Alice, a wealthy American whose family was related to the poet Heinrich Heine, Gunsbourg made the principality one of the most important centres for contemporary opera in the first three decades of the century, from Massenet's *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* (1901) to Ravel's *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* (1925). Saint-Saëns's first composition for Monte Carlo was the one-act 'poème lyrique' *Hélène*, for which he himself wrote the libretto from the ancient sources on Helen of Troy; it was

premiered in the principality in February 1904. Having proved to himself that he was up to the task, he could now consider the reworking of *Déjanire* into an opera as a feasible project. However, it was delayed by other works, including a second opera for Monte Carlo, *L'Ancêtre*, first performed in February 1906. He finally got his opportunity thanks to a third favourable factor, the appointment of André Messager and Leimistin Broussan to succeed Gailhard as director of the Paris Opéra in 1908. When both Messager, with whom he had a good personal and professional relationship (the younger composer had composed recitatives for *Phryné* at his request), and the Prince of Monaco and Gunsbourg requested a new opera from him, Saint-Saëns offered to recast *Déjanire*, and the proposal for this joint commission was accepted.

Composition of the second *Déjanire* began in December 1909 in Cairo, where the Khedive's brother, Mohammed Ali Pasha, placed at the composer's disposition a wing of his villa on Roda Island. The work was completed in March 1910 in Monte Carlo and Cannes, and the vocal score was published by Durand in September. The libretto was issued by Calmann-Lévy early the following year, at the time of the Monte Carlo performances, and bears the name of Saint-Saëns as co-author with Gallet on the title page. Curiously, the 1911 *Déjanire* is presented there as a 'revival' (*reprise*) although it was a genuinely new work. This confusion has since been repeated in a number of reference works.



Gallet's libretto, of which Saint-Saëns – with one significant exception – modified only formal aspects, was mainly inspired by Sophocles' *Trachiniae* and, to a lesser extent, by *Hercules Oetaeus*, a Roman play of the first century AD whose attribution to Seneca has long been disputed. Gallet preserved the broad outlines of the original myth, which also appears in the ninth book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Dejanira, wife of Hercules, thinks she can win back the love of her husband, who has fallen in love with his young captive Iole, and to that end presents him with a tunic that was once

soaked in the blood of the Centaur Nessus, one of Hercules' many victims. But the blood turns into a poison that burns Hercules once he has put on the garment, causing him to die in agony. Following the example of Rotrou's *Hercule mourant ou la Déjanire* (1634), Gallet did not retain from the ancient sources the character of Hyllus, son of Hercules and Dejanira, whom the expiring hero commanded to marry Iole, thus founding the dynasty of the Heraclids (Heracleidae), from whom the Dorians claimed descent. The operatic adaptations by Cavalli (*Ercole amante*, 1662, libretto by Abbé Buti), Handel (*Hercules*, 1745, libretto by Thomas Broughton) and Dauvergne (*Hercule mourant*, 1761, libretto by Marmontel) went so far as to make Hyllus his father's rival by having him too fall in love with Iole. Gallet introduced a modification of his own by giving this role to Philoctetus, who, although associated with the Hercules myths, appears neither in Sophocles' play nor in *Hercules Oetaeus*, and who, in Rotrou, is simply a confidant of the hero. The plot therefore hinges on a quartet that could be described as Racinian: Déjanire is jealous of Hercule, who loves Iole, who loves Philoctète and is loved by him. A fifth character, invented by Gallet, is Phénice, Déjanire's nurse and confidante (who also has the gift of prophecy). As for the place of the action, Gallet, no doubt familiar with the ancient uncertainties about the geographical location of the cities cited in the sources, does not set it in Trachis as Sophocles does, but in the palace of Oechalia, a city conquered by Hercules and whose king Eurytus, Iole's father, he has just killed. In revising the 1898 text to set it to music, Saint-Saëns altered the ending in one important respect: whereas, in Gallet's play, Déjanire, horrified by her mistake, announces her intention to commit suicide (as in *Trachiniae* and *Hercules Oetaeus*), in the opera, she laments, but nothing more is said of her fate. We may therefore assume that she survives, as was already the case in Cavalli's opera.

The composer's main task was to make a text originally conceived for declamation 'singable'. As he explained in an article published in the journal *Musica* in November 1911, 'a text intended for declamation and a text intended for singing are not the same thing'. The problem was not Gallet's mostly unrhymed blank verse: Saint-Saëns, despite his stated

preference for traditional poetic forms, respected this choice. It was more a question of pruning, condensing and sometimes expanding according to the demands of the vocal line, ‘even modifying the pace of certain scenes’. The example he gives, from which it is sufficient to quote an extract, shows the soundness of his judgment and his taste, for he actually improved on his collaborator’s text in every respect. In the scene between Iole and Déjanire at the beginning of Act Two Gallet had written:

Tu viendras seulement, enchaînée à mon char,  
Captive du héros, c’est-à-dire la mienne,  
Vivre au palais de Calydon.  
Et je m’y souviendrai que tu fus presque reine!  
Toi, tu te souviendras que, moi vivante,  
Hercule ne peut pas connaître une autre épouse!

Saint-Saëns rewrote this as follows:

Mais tu viendras, enchaînée à mon char,  
Désormais ma captive,  
Vivre au palais de Calydon.  
Là, je te ferai voir que, moi vivante,  
Hercule ne peut avoir une autre épouse!



As for the music itself, although some of the changes are merely cosmetic, Saint-Saëns reveals in the same article why he was led to write the role of Hercules – a bass in Handel, a *basse-taille* (baritone) in Cavalli and Dauvergne – for a tenor, once it had been decided to assign him the *Épithalame* in Act Four: the *coryphée* who sang this number in 1898 was the Béziers tenor Valentin Duc (the creator of Paladilhe’s *Patrie!* at the Palais Garnier in 1886) and, even though it was now allotted to the hero, it could not be transposed, given its position in the score. This epithalamium (‘Viens,

ô toi, dont le clair visage’) is the only excerpt from the work recorded at the time – in 1911, and in French, by the famous Puerto Rican tenor Antonio Paoli, who had sung Samson at La Scala – although it is not known whether this recording had any connection with the premiere of the opera that same year.

It was in fact a largely new score that Saint-Saëns prepared for the second incarnation of *Déjanire*, since even the orchestral and choral passages taken over from 1898 (around a quarter of the music, according to Hugh Macdonald) were reorchestrated, and sometimes transposed to a different key. The prelude is different, even though, like its predecessor, it quotes the opening theme of Saint-Saëns’s symphonic poem *La Jeunesse d’Hercule*, premiered by Colonne in 1877 – the coda of which also puts in an appearance in the apotheosis that ends the opera. Nor is the danced chorus in the fourth act identical to that given in Béziers.



The premiere of *Déjanire*, at the Grand-Théâtre de Monte-Carlo on 14 March 1911, was an event commensurate with the composer’s reputation, and the audience reaction appears to have been enthusiastic. It was directed by Gunsbourg himself, and conducted by Léon Jehin, whose wife, Blanche Deschamps-Jehin, had been the first Dalila at the Palais Garnier in 1892. The title role was sung by Félicia Litvinne, herself a renowned Dalila, whose voice, usually described as a dramatic soprano, more likely corresponded to the ‘Falcon’ type of soprano; born in St Petersburg and a pupil of Pauline Viardot, she had also sung the role of Catherine d’Aragon in the revival of *Henry VIII* at the Opéra in 1909 and taken part in the premiere of *L’Ancêtre* at Monte Carlo. Hercule was the tenor Lucien Muratore, a native of Marseille who since his 1902 debut at the Opéra-Comique in Reynaldo Hahn’s *La Carmélite* had become the Opéra’s leading tenor. The Rennes-born lyric soprano Yvonne Dubel played Iole, the baritone Henri Dangès sang Philoctète, and the mezzo-soprano Germaine Bailac was Phénice.

Litvinne, Muratore and Dangès kept their roles for the Paris premiere at the Palais Garnier on 22 November of the same year, this time with Yvonne Gall as Iole and Phénice taken by the contralto Lyse Charny, a performer Saint-Saëns held in especially high esteem. In private, the composer, who seems to have been pleased with the stage presentation and musical performance in Monte Carlo, made no secret of his dissatisfaction with what he had seen and heard in Paris, and in particular with the excessively static tempi adopted by Messager (which Saint-Saëns endeavoured to correct on the only evening he took to the podium). *Déjanire* was given five times in Monte Carlo, with two additional performances the following year, but only seventeen times at the Palais Garnier between 1911 and 1913. However, it would be wrong to conclude that the work was shunned by opera houses. First performed in Brussels in December 1912 (with Claire Friche in the title role), it was staged the following year in Lyon, Dessau (Durand had also published a German-language version), Algiers, Cairo, Marseille, Bordeaux, Enghien and Aix-les-Bains, and Cannes in 1914. The Marseille performances, which gave Muratore the opportunity to reprise his role on home ground, were the ones that afforded Saint-Saëns the greatest satisfaction. The Chicago Opera Association gave the North American premiere on 9 December 1915, under the baton of its musical director Cleofonte Campanini and again with Muratore, seconded on this occasion by the Sardinian soprano Carmen Melis as *Déjanire* and the baritone Alfred Maguenat as *Philoctète*; some sources mention performances in New York, perhaps by the same artists, but it is difficult to find any trace of these. The war, and the absence of an Italian-language score, explain why the work's career, though apparently successfully launched, proved so short-lived. Only one modern performance is known, at the Montpellier-Radio France Festival in 1985, conducted by Serge Baudo and featuring the Croatian soprano Dunja Vejzović in the title role.



Saint-Saëns himself worried about the effect *Déjanire* would have on the audience. 'It will be a strange score, unlike anything else, so far as I know', he wrote to his publisher Jacques Durand; 'people will either not like it at all, or will like it enormously; there is no intermediate position.' The premiere of *Déjanire*, particularly at the Palais Garnier, obviously attracted a great deal of press coverage, as the composer's status demanded, but the reviews are not very illuminating at first sight. Once one has taken into account the respect due to the doyen of French composers, one realises that the critics were more disconcerted than seduced by the new work. Hailing Saint-Saëns as the modern incarnation of the 'classical' composer, they emphasised above all the opera's retrospective dimension, as Saint-Saëns himself invited them to do with the self-quotations from *La Jeunesse d'Hercule*. At least one critic (Louis Vuillemin in *Comœdia*) made a promising attempt to draw a parallel between the hero of *Déjanire* and his counterpart in *Samson et Dalila*, the 'Jewish Hercules', but then failed to follow it up. For his farewell to opera, did Saint-Saëns, who admired Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben*, wish to suggest personal identification with his protagonist – who, like Samson, is a fallen hero, one whose amorous misadventures he had already illustrated in *Le Rouet d'Omphale* (1871)?

References to Gluck abound in almost all the notices, but they are superficial and as it were imposed by the opera's subtitle 'tragédie lyrique'. Now, while Saint-Saëns does indeed lay claim to a Gluckian heritage ('without any premeditation on my part, led in that direction by the archaic character of the subject'), there was room for misunderstanding here. In his writings, he never ceased to rail against the bad performing traditions, such as the 'ample diction du récitatif' advocated by Duprez, from which Gluck's operas suffered in France: 'Gluck is neither broad, nor pompous, nor solemn; Gluck is life, passion, dramatic feeling at its most intense', he wrote in 1908 in response to an article by Arthur Pougin in *Le Ménestrel*. In similar fashion, he had conceived *Déjanire* as essentially a drama of lovers' jealousy, full of life and amorous rage. The words 'nobility' and 'purity' that recur from one review to the next leave us fearing that 'those stupid speeds that would put an anthill to sleep', as the composer described



Messenger's tempi in a letter to his friend Philippe Bellenot, had indeed dragged the opera in the direction of *ennui distingué*.

Premiered the same year as *Petrouchka*, and cohabiting at the Palais Garnier with a run of *Salome* (which Saint-Saëns detested), *Déjanire* was admittedly a work that turned its back on fashion. The review by Jean Chantavoine, himself a supporter of Strauss, explicitly contrasted the opera with *Elektra*. Arthur Pougin's notice, without mentioning Strauss, implicitly and not unironically compliments Saint-Saëns on having produced a sort of anti-*Salome*:

Music that is tonal, rhythmic, without awkward or wild intervals, in which the ear is not jarred and confused by unexpected encounters and clashes of notes, where the voices are not engulfed by the din of the orchestra, which allows them to articulate the words freely, as Mme Litvinne demonstrates so well, is something one does not often come across nowadays.

However, this openly 'anti-modernist' description gives a false image of a score that bears no resemblance to any of Saint-Saëns's previous operas, and which must have been somewhat disconcerting to its first listeners. For pleasant, decorative numbers such as the *Épithalame* in Act Four – which comes from the 1898 *Déjanire* but was nonetheless the hit of the evening in 1911 – sit cheek by jowl with powerfully dramatic scenes which, following the Racinian model, are above all confrontations, some of them violent: between Hercule and Phénice, then Iole and Philoctète in Act One; between *Déjanire* and Iole, *Déjanire* and Hercule, then Iole, Philoctète and Hercule in Act Two; and between the four characters, under the troubled gaze of Phénice, in Act Three. Musically, there is a sharp contrast between the choral and ceremonial passages of 1898, with their more or less assertive modal colouring, and the unusually chromatic character of the writing in the newly composed scenes. Hence Saint-Saëns was right to wonder about how audiences would react to what is still (along with *L'Ancêtre*) his least-known opera, and certainly his most surprising:

These consonant harmonies, these Greek modes, are not at all in keeping with the taste of the day; yet I hope that listeners will be taken with the beautiful melodic declamation that I have tried to achieve by harking back to our old French opera.

In this respect, in addition to Gluck and the Gounod of *Sapho* and *Polyeucte*, we must not forget the Berlioz of *Les Troyens*, a work Saint-Saëns admired profoundly. But if *Déjanire* clearly takes its place within the tradition of French *tragédie lyrique*, the pre-war critics were naturally unable to perceive its hidden modernity. Without going so far as to risk a comparison with Honegger's *Antigone* (1927), can we not see in this classicism swimming against the tide of fashion an anticipation of the neo-classicism of the 1920s?

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Muratore as Hercule. Théâtre National de l'Opéra.  
*Le Théâtre*, 16 December 1911.  
Bibliothèque du Conservatoire de Genève.

Muratore en Hercule. Théâtre national de l'Opéra.  
*Le Théâtre*, 16 décembre 1911.  
Bibliothèque du conservatoire de Genève.

