

Oriental cultures represented in the opera *Samson et Dalila* by Camille Saint-Saëns

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Abstract: *The present paper focuses on the manner in which foreign cultures belonging to the Oriental world are represented in the opera "Samson et Dalila" composed by Camille Saint-Saëns. Orientalist art strives for the representation of the exotic and unknown, but at the same time it may point to those aspects of the "self" that need to be changed. In Saint-Saëns' opera two Oriental, but altogether different cultures are portrayed, the Hebrews and the Philistines, the contrast between which could as well mirror the differences between East and West. Yet, the representation of the Orient is achieved mainly through the use of traditional Western compositing techniques and alterity is suggested in a very subtle manner, often through stereotypes. With "Samson et Dalila" Camille Saint-Saëns created an opera which anticipates the path of his successors, the harmonious union between music and dramatic action offering numerous possibilities of interpretation.*

Key-words: *Orient, West, Hebrews, Philistines, contrast*

1. Introduction

The main purpose of the artistic creations of the 19th century inspired by the Orient and its culture was to represent the Orient for the Western public. The means by which this was accomplished did not always involve the use of Oriental artistic techniques. Rather a specific, "Oriental" attitude may be perceived in the manner in which these works were conceived, and also in the representation of the stereotypes related to the Orient (the picture and condition of the woman; the Oriental tyrant; cruelty etc). The Orient embodies the exotic, a place where anything is possible, but at the same time the unknown, the mysterious which causes our fear because we associate it with danger. Thus, the Orient gradually becomes the image of alterity and delusory separation between worlds, entities etc. Finally, the representations of the Orient may serve as criticism or self-criticism, the acceptance of which is eased by the fact that it is not directed towards the self, the familiar.

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The attraction of the Western artists of the 19th century towards the mirage of the Orient led in some cases to voyages to Oriental countries and to artistic creations inspired by these places. Camille Saint-Saëns travelled to numerous European countries, but during the winters, because of health problems, he chose to leave Paris for the mild climate of Egypt or Algeria. His long sojourns in these regions inspired him to compose exotic works such as *Mélodies persanes*, composed in 1870 or the *Piano Concerto No. 5 in F major* (Op. 103), composed in 1896 during his stay in Luxor (the ancient Thebes), also known as *The Egyptian* because of the Egyptian and Oriental themes used in this work. Saint-Saëns' love for the African continent was manifested in his fantasy for piano and orchestra *Africa* (Op. 89).

The music and the libretto of the opera *Samson et Dalila* is reminiscent of the Orient: the plot of the opera takes place in a foreign, exotic place, while Samson, the main hero who embodies the West, is placed in opposition to a different culture.

2. The opera *Samson et Dalila*

Creating the opera *Samson et Dalila*, which was first performed in Weimar at the Grossherzogliches Theater (today the Staatskapelle Weimar) on 2 December 1877, Camille Saint-Saëns was inspired by the libretto of the French poet and librettist Ferdinand Lemaire, which is based on the biblical story of the Old Testament. Desiring to write a music that could mirror the deepest meanings and emotions of the spoken word, the composer himself contributed to the shaping of this libretto: while Lemaire was busy analyzing the biblical text, the composer devised the plan of his opera, highlighting those scenes from the biblical story which he wanted expressed in verse.

The biblical story should have brought into being an oratorio, but at the suggestion of Lemaire the composer transformed his work into an opera. The libretto was inspired by Voltaire's *Samson* (1732), a free adaptation of the story from the Old Testament, which was written for Rameau, but due to censorship his opera was never performed and later Voltaire published the written text. Chapters 13-16 from the *Book of Judges* recount the story of Samson, but inspired by Voltaire the author of the libretto will solely refer to the events narrated in Chapter 16. Saint-Saëns' genius could appear in a new light: his previous opera, *Le timbre d'argent* (1865), because of the low quality of its libretto, made it difficult for the composer to make use of his brilliant compositional ideas, whereas the subject and the libretto of his new work, *Samson et Dalila*, made it possible for his talent to be revealed.

The opera has three acts and four scenes, and the characters are: Dalila (mezzo-soprano); Samson (tenor); the High Priest of Dagon (baritone); Abimelech, satrap of Gaza (bas); Philistines and a Philistine messenger (tenor and bas); old Hebrew (bas); Hebrews and Philistines. The action takes place at Gaza, around 1150 BC.

Samson and the people of Israel represent the Western spectator's point of view. A common trait between these characters and the spectator could be their faith: Samson and the Israelites are monotheistic, while the Philistines are perceived as decadent and idolater (a fact which is emphasized in the scene of the banquet from Act 3). In his article *Constructing the Oriental 'Other': Saint-Saëns's "Samson et Dalila"* musicologist Ralph P. Locke accentuates that the characters in this opera represent the contrast between two worlds, the West (embodied by Samson and the people of Israel) and the East (embodied by the Philistines), but alterity and criticism might as well be pointed towards the *self*: *"None the less, the realisation that European subjectivity may persist behind these dark-skinned masks, that – to change the metaphor – the Orient may often be a blank screen for projecting Western concerns about itself, can change in important ways the listener's or critic's response to the work"* (Locke 1991, 285).

The composer and music critic Arthur Hervey writes about Saint-Saëns' work: *"When «Samson and Delilah» was first produced, it was considered by some to be musically in advance of its time"* (Hervey 1921, 51). The composer will discard the standard practice of dividing an opera into separate musical movements, arias, duets, ensembles etc, and instead will use acts and scenes in order to ensure the unity and continuity of the dramatic action, an unusual practice for that era. The arias and duets in *Samson et Dalila* are harmoniously merged in the structure of the work, thus contributing to the flow of the action and intensifying the dramatism of certain moments. The unity and equilibrium of the opera is ensured by recurring motifs and themes: *"In his Samson et Dalila, Saint-Saëns retained a classic musical architecture, modeled at times on that of eighteenth-century works, while at the same time making use of motifs, of which some twenty are found in the opera"* (Lacombe 2001, 142).

The composer makes use of traditional compositional techniques and elements, some of these reminiscent of Gregorian chant or of the oratorios composed by Bach or Händel, yet at the same time he employs sensual melodies, Oriental dances, thus proving his great erudition, as well as his grace and subtlety. French musicologist Hervé Lacombe believes that with *Samson et Dalila* Saint-Saëns created a new genre: *"With «Samson and Delilah» —originally conceived as an oratorio—Saint-Saëns saw in its biblical subject an opportunity to use choral*

polyphony and to show off his enormous compositional mastery; he was so skillful at integrating choral writing with dramatic musical forms that he virtually created a new genre, the choral opera” (Lacombe 2001, 166).

3. The representation of Samson and the people of Israel in the opera

The characters of the opera, the Hebrews and the Philistines, both belong to the Oriental civilization. The differences between these two cultures are marked by the composer through the use of different sonorities, specific instruments, melodic intervals or rhythmic patterns and formulae. Despite the desire to emphasize this contrast, the musical portrayal of the Hebrew people is realized using the traditional Western musical language.

Saint-Saëns’ thorough knowledge regarding the art of musical composition and also the works of such composers as Bach, Liszt or Wagner can be observed in the manner in which he conceived this opera. The voice of the people of Israel is represented by the chorus and each of these choral intervention is characteristic for the great works of Western sacred music. The opera is not prefaced by an overture, the musical introduction in the tonality of B minor is grave and solemn, the syncopated figural motif accentuates the melancholy and gloom of the people of Israel. (Fig. 1)



Fig. 1

This melodic and rhythmic motif of the introduction will accompany the first choral intervention, the hopeless and mournful *lamento* of the people of Israel, *Dieu, d'Israël*. The imploration is followed by a fugue (*Nous avons vu nos cités renversées*), during which the accompaniment doubles the voices. The manner in which these parts were composed reminds us of the oratorios of Bach and Händel and these alone could stand as proof for the fact that originally the work was created as an oratorio.

The attack and oppression of the Hebrews by other peoples is a repeated action during the writings of the Old Testament. *“In these military and political events of serious consequence the prophet sees the will of Yahweh in history”*, and in this case the Philistines are nothing but *“the instrument of His will (...), divine revenge.”* (Eliade 1981, 366)

The story of Samson is narrated in Chapters 13–16 of the *Book of Judges* from the Old Testament. Samson was a member of the Tribe of Dan and his birth, alike the birth of Isaac, Samuel, John the Baptist or Jesus, was foretold by the Angel of the Lord. The Angel appeared to Samson’s mother and spoke these words: *“You will become pregnant and have a son whose head is never to be touched by a razor because the boy is to be a Nazirite, dedicated to God from the womb. He will take the lead in delivering Israel from the hands of the Philistines”* (Judges 13, 5).

The word *Nazirite* defines a person who is consecrated to God, and the fact that the Spirit of the Lord was with Samson is stated several times in the Bible: *“the Spirit of the Lord began to stir him”* (Judges 13, 25), *“the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon him”* (Judges 14, 19). The name Samson may signify the sun or a powerful, masculine human being. The qualities of the biblical hero are reflected in the music of the opera as well, emphasized by a musical discourse in which minims and crochets (occasionally quavers) prevail and chromatic writing is kept at a minimum. The phrases sung by Samson are heroic, indicating nobility and bravery. (Fig. 2)



Fig. 2

Another significant moment in the opera is the prayer through which the Hebrews express their gratitude, *Hymne de joie, hymne de délivrance*. The differences between the cultures represented in the opera (and at the same time the differences between East and West) are musically depicted in this prayer. The pentatonic fragment is reminiscent of Gregorian chant and of the sacred music of the West, without any traces that might evoke the faraway Orient.

4. The Philistines – the representation of alterity in Saint-Saëns' opera

In the 12th century BC, during the reign of pharaoh Ramesses III, an ethnic group of uncertain, probably Aegean origin, colonized the land close to the north-eastern border of Egypt. In the beginning they were under the rule of the Egyptian kings, and it is possible that the Egyptian domination inspired them later to implement a law which prohibited the use of iron (Daniel 1976, 13). Because of political and social reasons they forced this interdiction upon the Hebrew people, subjects of the Philistine domination, defeated in 1080 BC. Yet, this interdiction could not be extended to the use of agricultural tools, despite the fact that these could have been used as weapons in the case of an uprising, which according to the work *Orientalia Mirabilia* “explains why the Philistines were eventually defeated by the Hebrews in 1030 BC, regardless of the interdiction of iron weapons and blacksmiths” (Daniel 1976, 29).

In Chapters 13-16 of the *Book of Judges* there are numerous remarks about the Philistines. The cause of the Philistine oppression seems to have been the inappropriate behaviour of the people of Israel: “*Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines for forty years.*” (Judges, 13. 1) The non-semitic origin of the Philistines is also stated in the Old Testament: “*...the uncircumcised Philistines...*” (Judges, 14, 3). In Chapter 16 the religion of the Philistines is mentioned: “*Now the rulers of the Philistines assembled to offer a great sacrifice to Dagon their god and to celebrate, saying, «Our god has delivered Samson, our enemy, into our hands.»*” (Judges 16, 23).

In the first volume of his work *A History of Religious Ideas* Mircea Eliade writes about the god *Dagan*, “*whose name signifies «grain»*” and who “*was venerated in the third millennium in the Upper and Middle Euphrates regions*” (Eliade 1981, 159). Yet, despite this fact, the god *Dagan* does not play any significant role in the mythology of Ugarit.

An image opposed to the Western world, embodied by the people of Israel in Saint-Saëns' opera, the Philistines personify the Orient, alterity represented in this case through stereotypes: the cruelty of the Oriental tyrant and the image of the Oriental woman who embodies mystery, temptation and danger. Abimelech, the satrap of Gaza and the Great Priest of Dagon are portrayed in a manner which resembles the oriental paintings of the 19th century, for example Henri Regnault's *Exécution sans jugement sous les rois maures de Grenade*.

The composer's attitude towards the Philistine characters, the symbol of oppression and tyranny (in this case), is mirrored by Abimelech's (bas) apparition, a short appearance which lacks any trace of grandeur: Abimelech speaks mocking words about the faith of the people of Israel, but when he dares to approach Samson with a sword in his hand, he is slain by the biblical hero. In the musical intervention of Abimelech „*Ce Dieu que votre voix implore*”, as well as in his declamatory phrases, the voice is subject to a componistic manner which suggests rigidity, lack of civilisation and a primitive intelligence. Abimelech's entrance is marked by a melodic and rhythmic motif which is repeated during his declamatory phrases, emphasizing the approach of something unpleasant and menacing.

The lack of rhythmic agility and elegance can be observed, his discourse is constructed using mainly minims and crotchets, short musical phrases often interrupted by the sardonic intervention of wind instruments, while the melodic line is doubled by two ophicleides. The use of wind instruments is one of the means for representing the exotic, the oriental through music.

The second scene in Act 3 takes place in the temple of Dagon, where the Philistines celebrate their victory. Saint-Saëns brilliantly characterizes the Philistines through the music he composed for this scene. One of the most popular pages of the work is the famous *Bacchanale*, an instrumental movement (ballet) depicting the drunken revel and wild dance of the Philistines. The *Bacchanale* is introduced by an oboe solo, which evokes the freedom and improvisatory character of Oriental music, at the same time echoing the muezzin call to prayer (Locke 1991, 268).



Fig. 3

The oriental spirit of this ballet is emphasized by the syncopated rhythmic pattern and the accents on the upbeats.



Fig. 4

Musical critic Ralph P. Locke suggests that the music of the *Bacchanale* was inspired by the *Hijaz* Arab mode, chosen by the composer for its exotic sound, owed to the augmented second between degrees 2 and 3 (Locke 1991, 266). In his work *Saint-Saëns* uses the *Hijaz* mode building a scale from the tone *E*, and adding not one, but instead two augmented seconds to this scale: between degrees 2 and 3, respectively between degrees 6 and 7, thus emphasizing the idea of exoticism and the Oriental character (Fig. 5). The augmented second can be considered a stereotype, alike many other images associated with the Orient. However, in this case the composer's intention may have been that of highlighting the frivolity and devaluation of the Philistines, relating these traits to the image of the orgiastic banquet. This is emphasized by the use of the wind instruments.

The choral part at the end of Act 3, the triumphant hymn the Philistines sing to their god, "*Gloire a Dagon*" is remarkable in its complexity. The figural accompaniment which supports the canon sung by the Great Priest and Dalila evokes the glimmer and shallowness of a culture about which Eliade states that they "*completely forgot their own religion very soon after they arrived to the land of Canaan*" (Eliade 1981, 169).



Fig. 5

5. Conclusions

Eliade writes that "*this struggle between Yahweh and Baal continued for a very long time and that, despite certain compromises and many infidelities, it concluded with the victory of Yahwism*" (Eliade 1981, 169). This is anticipated by the conclusion of Samson's story as well: the Philistines are defeated by the biblical hero, who crumbles the temple crushing his enemies and himself within. Although the representation of the Orient, embodied by the Philistines, is not accomplished using Oriental musical elements, the composer achieves a skilfull musical depiction of these two cultures and the differences between them. Alterity is musically represented through the use of percussion and wind instrument, syncopated rhythms and accents on the upbeats, the use of ornaments, augmented seconds and upward leaps of sixth or seventh followed by descending motifs, all of which create an exotic sound and an equally sensual atmosphere.

6. References

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