

## SAINT-SAËNS AND THE STAGE

The stage works of Saint-Saëns range from grand open-air pageants to one-act comic operas, and include the first composed film score. Yet, with the exception of *Samson et Dalila*, his twelve operas have lain in the shadows since the composer's death in 1921. Widely performed in his lifetime, they vanished from the repertory – never played, never recorded – until now. With four twenty-first-century revivals as a backdrop, this timely book is the first study of Saint-Saëns's operas, demonstrating the presence of the same breadth and versatility as in his better-known works. Hugh Macdonald's wide knowledge of French music in the nineteenth century gives a powerful understanding of the different conventions and expectations that governed French opera at the time. The interaction of Saint-Saëns with his contemporaries is a colourful and important part of the story.

HUGH MACDONALD's distinguished career has included appointments at the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford and Glasgow and at Washington University in St Louis. He was General Editor of the New Berlioz Edition (1967–2006) and has published books on Skryabin, Berlioz and Bizet.

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*Hugh Macdonald*

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Camille Saint-Saëns, photograph by Dagron, early 1880s  
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# Saint-Saëns and the Stage

## Operas, Plays, Pageants, a Ballet and a Film

*Hugh Macdonald*

Emeritus, Washington University, St Louis



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For my three lifelong  
*confrères transatlantiques*

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## PREFACE

Audiences attending performances of *Samson et Dalila* must sometimes have wondered if its composer wrote any other operas, especially if they know that he lived to the age of eighty-six. How many are there? What kind of operas are they? What happened to them? Are they any good? Not even the first of these questions can be answered clearly, since between 1864 and 1910 Saint-Saëns composed a dozen operas of a conventional kind, two satirical operettas, a number of incomplete opéras-comiques and half of Ernest Guiraud's unfinished *Frédégonde*. The variety of other dramatic works includes two full-scale open-air pageants, incidental music for half a dozen plays, a ballet and a film. The other questions are more complex, for the many hours of music that all this stage music fills represent a major slice of a composer's œuvre, surely deserving more than a rapid survey, especially when the popularity and high standing of Saint-Saëns in nineteenth-century French music is taken into account.

When I was asked to write the Saint-Saëns entries for the *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, published in 1992, I was astonished to find almost no critical literature devoted to these works (other than *Samson et Dalila*) even though biographies and studies of Saint-Saëns's work as a whole were plentiful in many languages. It was this observation that planted in me the desire to explore Saint-Saëns as a composer for the stage and to give serious attention to an immense body of music which had escaped performance, recording and critical attention for nearly a century.

In other respects Saint-Saëns is not a neglected composer. On the contrary, his name is found frequently on concert programmes, and certain pieces are popular favourites. The *Danse macabre*, the 'Organ' Symphony, the Second Piano Concerto, the *Carnival of the Animals* and *Samson et Dalila* itself are all regularly performed everywhere. Much of his instrumental music has received full scholarly study and has been recorded, and the documentation of his life is gradually appearing in print. Yet it is easy to explain why his operas do not feature in the general consciousness of his life's work. Most of them are full-length works which are expensive and demanding to stage, and if the tradition of performing them is broken, as it was in 1921, then singers and conductors will not carry them in their repertoires. If they are not recorded, those who do not easily read scores will have no access to them. Biographers and critics have been inhibited from writing about these operas since there is no living tradition to judge them by.

Saint-Saëns's high standing among the galaxy of great composers working in France in the *belle époque* is unquestioned, and he is universally acknowledged to have been one of the most formidable musicians of his time. He was composer, virtuoso pianist, organist, conductor, poet, critic, playwright, teacher and impresario, and there was no branch of music in France in the half century between 1870 and 1920 that was not touched in some way by his presence. His vast output includes music in every genre: symphonies, concertos, chamber music, choral music, piano music, organ music, operas, ballet, incidental music, even film music. He wrote abundantly for the musical press. He travelled widely as conductor and pianist, even into his eighties. He made recordings, both live and for piano-rolls. He was a leading editor of French baroque music and a pioneer in the study of ancient music.

An œuvre as extensive as this cannot possibly all be familiar to musicians. Yet the obscurity in which the stage music has lain (always excepting *Samson et Dalila*) is too dark and too deep to be explained as fitting within a statistical norm. It is surely impossible that a composer who created one top-ranking opera and a considerable body of first-class orchestral and chamber works should somehow have failed completely in all the remaining operas. If we take into account his versatility in all genres, his high literary sensibility, his comprehensive technical skill and his close familiarity with all the music of his time, it is impossible to argue that Saint-Saëns was somehow ill-equipped to write for the stage or that he was blind to the essentials of good operatic writing. He believed in his own gifts for opera sufficiently to produce these works at regular intervals over a period of nearly fifty years, and they were all published and staged, some many times over, in his lifetime. In his biography of Saint-Saëns published in 1899, Otto Neitzel gave much more attention to the operas than to other works, assuming that they were the most important.<sup>1</sup>

At the moment Saint-Saëns died in 1921, taste in music (and in the arts in general) had begun to perform a somersault which condemned much of the music of the previous two generations to a spell in outer darkness. In the field of French opera both Massenet and Saint-Saëns were victims of this, and it has taken a long while for Massenet to recover. His operas are gradually re-establishing their place in the repertoire and earning the recognition they deserve, while those of Saint-Saëns have still to be given a chance to be weighed and tested. When they are recorded and revived at least occasionally on stage, I hope there will be many other evaluations besides my own on which his real achievement may be judged.

My desire to study these works in depth has not been motivated by any particular ambition to see the operas revived on stage and to claim that they are 'unjustly neglected'. Opera companies do not normally have the resources to devote to revivals of this kind. I am more specifically curious to observe the application of the composer's

<sup>1</sup> NEITZEL 1899.

high craftsmanship in a variety of dramatic genres: grand opera, comedy, fantasy, verismo, and so on, and to give these forgotten works the critical examination they have hitherto been denied. The standard critical opinion may be taken to be the summary judgment of *Grove Music Online*, the most widely read scholarly resource in English: ‘Although the operas contain much agreeable and skilfully shaped music, they are deficient in theatrical effect’, a judgment made without the experience of hearing them in the theatre or even, in most cases, from recording.<sup>2</sup>

Although my main focus is on the operas, it was impossible not to take into account the composer’s lifelong interest in the spoken theatre, writing music for many stage productions of plays and even writing a handful of plays himself. His ballet *Javotte* is a gem that should never be overlooked, and his exploration of other dramatic formulæ, particularly the open-air pageants played in the arena at Béziers, was an important manifestation of his search for an ideal antique drama. His single film score, on the other hand, was no declaration of interest in a new art form, but simply a response – and a strikingly successful response – to the knock of opportunity.

My aim in this book is to provide a historical and critical account of each work with a record of its performance history, such as it is. I also raise the question of whether these works are neglected because of inherent failures in the libretto and music, or because of a lack of sympathy or comprehension on the part of those audiences and critics who have been in a position to judge them. This will be based on an assessment of the operas against the background of the complex theatrical and operatic culture of their time. If I seem to undervalue the opinions of the contemporary press, it is because, as I point out in the first chapter, I have doubts about the qualifications and reliability of critics who came, as they mostly did, from the ranks of men of letters rather than musicians. *Rezeptionsgeschichte* has the worthy aim of establishing the expectations which a composer might have to face at any time, but it cannot use contemporary criticism to replace the exercise of our own critical faculties, and I have myself long avoided reading contemporary reviews when attempting to assess the value of a French opera of this period.

The history of performances of the operas since the composer’s death is in every case except that of *Samson et Dalila* a slim chronicle which can only show a better record in the next hundred years than in the last. The 2007 Australian recording of the one-act opera *Hélène* met with astonishment from many who found unexpected power and beauty in this 1904 score. A similar reaction was observed at the Bard Festival in 2012, when *Henry VIII* was heard in a fine concert performance with first-class singers. And since I began work on this book there have been, thanks to the patronage of the Palazzetto Bru Zane, first-class recordings of *Les Barbares*, *Proserpine* and *Le Timbre d’argent*, which have contributed enormously to a new understanding of these works.

<sup>2</sup> oxfordmusiconline.com, article ‘Saint-Saëns, Camille’, consulted 1.1.2018.

In 2017 alone the latter opera received an enterprising revival on the stage of the Opéra-Comique, *Frédégonde* was staged in Ho Chi Minh City and *Ascanio* was heard in concert performance in Geneva. This encourages me to believe that things are moving in the right direction.

A strong spur to my work was the Bard Festival, at Bard College, New York, in 2012, devoted entirely to Saint-Saëns's music, and in the same year there appeared two essential publications which have enormously facilitated the task. The first is the second volume of Sabina Teller Ratner's *Thematic Catalogue* of Saint-Saëns's works, devoted to the stage works.<sup>3</sup> She gives a full bibliographical and archival record of each work, together with copious relevant correspondence. The second is Marie-Gabrielle Soret's superbly edited collection of Saint-Saëns's voluminous writings on music.<sup>4</sup> To both of these scholars I acknowledge a profound debt. The documentation of Saint-Saëns's life and work is nonetheless far from complete. Most of his life he kept all correspondence he received and for many years he had a secretary who kept copies of correspondence he sent. For any active individual who lived to be over eighty in Third Republic France, this amounted to a vast exchange of letters, and in Saint-Saëns's case his fondness for travel and for staying for long periods away from Paris required a constant exchange of letters with his collaborators, associates and friends. The Médiathèque Jean-Renoir in Dieppe holds over 15,000 letters from and to Saint-Saëns, and a similar number must exist in public and private collections elsewhere, without counting the composer's constant mentions in the press: trawling the daily papers and the music journals for references to his activities in many fields would produce many more thousands of texts. In due time perhaps they will all be accessible on the internet or in print, but even then it will impose superhuman demands on scholars and researchers. I freely acknowledge that I have been able to consult only a fraction of this hoard, so there will be gaps in my discussion of the operas that other scholars will fill if, as I hope, these works come to attract more detailed critical attention than what I have attempted here. For many works, in addition, there is a variety of sketches and drafts that deserve closer scrutiny. This will be the task one day for the editors of a critical edition of the music for the stage.

Lisa Etheridge has given me essential help with the illustrations. I am further indebted to many friends and colleagues who have provided me with information and help of many kinds. Chief among them are Gunther Braam, Jeanice Brooks, David Cairns, Andrea Cawelti, Alexandre Dratwicky, Warwick Edwards, Jim Farrington, Bruno Forment, Matthew Franke, Matthieu Gerbault, Vincent Giroud, Monika

<sup>3</sup> RATNER 2012. The first volume of this publication (RATNER 2002) covers the instrumental works and the third volume, forthcoming, will cover vocal and choral music.

<sup>4</sup> SORET 2012.

Hennemann, Richard Langham Smith, Arnaud Laster, Gregory S. MacAyeal, Mitsuya Nakanishi, Bernard Peyrotte, José Pons, Marjorie Rycroft, Bradley Short, Marie-Gabrielle Soret, Michael Stegemann, Sabina Teller Ratner, and Tamara Thompson. I have enjoyed the continued support of Washington University, St Louis, throughout my researches. To all of these I extend my sincere thanks.

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