

Samson et Dalila ('Samson and Delilah')

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Opéra in three acts and four tableaux by Camille Saint-Saëns to a libretto by Ferdinand Lemaire; Weimar, Grossherzogliches Theater, 2 December 1877.

Samson	tenor
Abimélech [Abimelech] <i>satrap of Gaza</i>	bass
The High Priest of Dagon	baritone
First Philistine	tenor
Second Philistine	bass
A Philistine Messenger	tenor
Dalila [Delilah]	mezzo-soprano
An Old Hebrew	bass
Hebrews, Philistines	
<i>Setting</i> Gaza in biblical times	

In 1867, two years after composing his first opera, *Le timbre d'argent*, and with no clear prospect of seeing it staged, Saint-Saëns embarked on an oratorio on the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. The subject was suggested by Voltaire's libretto *Samson* for Rameau. He admired Handel and Mendelssohn and was an enthusiastic supporter of the newly flourishing French choral movement. Saint-Saëns later wrote:

A young relative of mine had married a charming young man who wrote verse on the side. I realized that he was gifted and had in fact real talent. I asked him to work with me on an oratorio on a biblical subject. 'An oratorio!', he said, 'no, let's make it an opera!', and he began to dig through the Bible while I outlined the plan of the work, even sketching scenes, and leaving him only the versification to do. For some reason I began the music with Act 2, and I played it at home to a select audience who could make nothing of it at all.

Despite many precedents, most people expressed alarm at a biblical subject on the stage. After one more hearing of Act 2 Saint-Saëns abandoned his opera. Only after the appearance in 1872 of his third opera, *La princesse jaune*, did he feel sufficiently encouraged to resume *Samson et Dalila*. Act 1 was given a concert performance in Paris in 1875, but it aroused little interest and was severely treated by the critics. The score was finished in 1876, and although no French theatre showed any interest the opera was taken up enthusiastically by Liszt and mounted in Weimar in 1877 with Ferenczy as Samson and von Müller as Delilah; Eduard Lassen conducted.

There was still a long gap before the opera was heard in Paris. A second production in German took place in Hamburg in 1882, and it finally reached France in 1890 when it was given first in Rouen, then soon after in Bordeaux, Geneva, Toulouse, Nantes, Dijon, Montpellier and Monte Carlo, finally reaching the stage of the Paris Opéra in 1892. None of Saint-Saëns' later operas suffered the tribulations endured by *Samson et Dalila*, but none ever enjoyed the same enduring success. It has remained regularly in the repertory ever since and has been a vehicle for such singers as Caruso, Vinay, Vickers and Chauvet in the role of Samson, and Kirkby Lunn, Claussen, Gorr, Bumbry and Obratzsova in the role of Delilah.

Synopsis

ACT 1

Gaza city square with the temple of Dagon to the left, at night While the rest of the Hebrews are bewailing their fate, Samson alone has faith in God's promise of liberty. This first scene gives the clearest signs of the work's origins as an oratorio, with a fine sombre opening for the chorus leading to a fugue on the words 'Nous avons vu nos cités renversées'. Samson steps forward and sings rousingly against a constant choral prayer. The entry of Abimelech, the Philistine satrap, is marked by gross instrumentation (two ophicleides) which Bernard Shaw deplored as too Meyerbeerian, 'with his brusque measures and his grim orchestral clinkings and whistlings'. Abimelech mocks the Hebrews' God, proclaiming the superiority of Dagon, and the Hebrews cower in terror. But Samson's fervour, supported by the sound of the harp, arouses them to defy Abimelech, whereupon the latter attacks Samson with his sword. Samson seizes the sword and strikes him dead. The Hebrews scatter and the High Priest appears, cursing the Hebrews and their leader. When a messenger reports that the Hebrews are ravaging the harvest, the High Priest utters a curse that hints at his plan to use Delilah to overcome Samson's strength: 'Qu'enfin une compagne infâme trahisse son amour!'.

Dawn breaks. The Hebrews return offering a prayer to the Almighty, now in a humble unison, suggesting plainchant. Down the temple steps comes Delilah, supported by her women, who sing of the delights of spring in the delicate style of Gounod. She declares that Samson has conquered her heart and invites him to join her in her retreat in the valley of Sorek. Samson prays for protection from her charms, and an old Hebrew warns him of danger, forming an effective trio. The priestesses dance a voluptuous dance, with a tambourine to give exotic colour and some dark premonition at the end. Delilah sings her charming song 'Printemps qui commence' and the old Hebrew repeats his warning. Samson wrestles with his desire to meet Delilah's glance, a desire to which she knows he will succumb.

ACT 2

The Valley of Sorek The introduction paints a musical picture of the luxuriant foliage that decks Delilah's retreat. She sits on a rock outside the entrance, rejoicing in her power over Samson and certain that he will fall for her malevolent enticement ('Amour! viens aider ma faiblesse!'). Distant lightning is seen. The High Priest arrives, to the accompaniment of his energetic motif in the bass. He reports that Samson and the Hebrews have defeated the Philistines. He offers her gold for Samson's capture, but she refuses it, being inspired purely by hatred and by loyalty to her gods. They sing an energetic duet of hatred, propelled by a strong symphonic accompaniment, and she promises to unlock the secret of Samson's strength.

Left alone, Delilah wonders if she can succeed, against a highly imaginative orchestral background. Samson soon appears. Distant lightning is still seen. He has come to say his last farewell, knowing that duty calls him to lead the Hebrews to victory. Inevitably he is drawn by Delilah's protestations of love to acknowledge that he loves her too. His admission 'Je t'aime!' introduces her main aria 'Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix', the best-known piece in the opera. At the end of the second verse Samson joins in to make it a duet. There follows a scene of tremendous power in which Delilah pretends to doubt his love and begs him to reveal the secret of his strength, but he refuses. The thunder seems to Samson to be God's wrath. She scorns him and runs into her dwelling. Samson hesitates, but soon follows her. At that moment some Philistine soldiers emerge from hiding. Delilah gives them the signal, and Samson cries out that he has been betrayed.

ACT 3.i

A prison in Gaza Samson, blinded and bound, his hair shorn, turns a mill-wheel, graphically portrayed by the orchestra. Echoes of the Hebrews' lament from Act 1 are heard. Overcome with remorse, Samson offers his life in sacrifice, while the Hebrews are heard in the distance bewailing his fall.

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Inside the Temple of Dagon Music covers the scene-change to the temple, where the Philistines are preparing a sacrifice to celebrate their triumph. At first they sing in the gentle tones of their song to spring from Act 1, but when the Bacchanale begins a more savage atmosphere develops. This well-known ballet sequence is a fine specimen of the kind of *divertissement* favoured by Meyerbeer and most French opera composers, with prominent augmented 2nds to suggest a Near-Eastern locale and much use of percussion to evoke the barbarism of the Philistines; there is a voluptuous episode also. After the dance Samson is led in, guided by a boy, to be mocked by the High Priest and the crowd, and also, to a trivialized variant of her love song, by Delilah, who reveals that she had sold his secret in advance and had pretended to love him out of hatred and a desire for vengeance. Samson is remorseful. Her treachery is now plain. The crowd's mockery is enhanced by more and more trivial music, with a tinkling triangle and bells, the Philistines' vacuous frivolity laid bare. Samson prays to recover his strength. The Philistines pour sacrificial libations in honour of Dagon. The High Priest tells the boy to lead Samson to the middle of the temple where all can see him; Samson whispers to the boy

to guide him to the two marble pillars that support the building. As the festivities reach their climax Samson calls on God for vengeance, and with a supreme effort 'bows himself with all his might', bringing down the pillars and the whole temple upon the assembled Philistines and upon himself. The score allows little more than five seconds between Samson's mighty exertion and the descent of the curtain.

The libretto of *Samson et Dalila*, based on Chapter 16 of the *Book of Judges*, omits Samson's mighty deeds such as the slaughter of a lion and the slaying of one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of an ass which earned his fame and his leadership of the Hebrews. It concentrates instead on the story of Delilah, presenting Samson as an inspiring leader whose heart can be touched by love of a woman and Delilah as a scheming, merciless avenger. The death of Abimelech in Act 1 is an invention. Although the chorus are prominent at the beginning the Hebrews are not seen on stage again, and Saint-Saëns was right not to make an oratorio of this material.

His technique is unmistakably operatic, both in the skilful deployment of a large orchestra and in the application of motifs. At the time of *Samson et Dalila* Saint-Saëns still admired Wagner enormously, and the influence of *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Lohengrin* can be heard in the strong closing scene of Act 2. Echoes of Berlioz's *L'enfance du Christ* and *Les Troyens* are also to be heard, and the work treads paths marked out by Meyerbeer and Gounod too. The French were wrong to believe that Saint-Saëns was an 'algébriste', since this score is far from the calculated contrivance that this implies. It is certainly his most imaginative opera score, and it reveals an instinct for theatrical emotion that any opera composer would be proud of. It allows us to savour some of the brilliance and intellectual vigour that even his enemies admired.