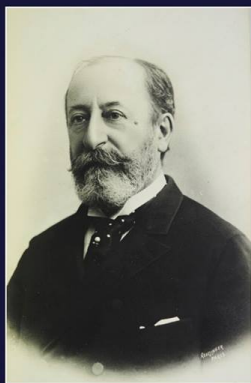


THE MANY FACES OF CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS



EDITED BY
MICHAEL STEGEMANN

BREPOLS

THE MANY FACES OF CAROLINE SAINT-SAËNS

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Preface

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Saint-Saëns the Dramatist

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Henry VIII and *Ascanio* at the Opéra

MARA LACCHIA

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CLAUDE PÉRIAC

Camille Saint-Saëns et l'Opéra de Paris (1913-1945),

le Paradis de la musique française

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Camille Saint-Saëns's *Messe de Requiem*: un nuovo modello

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ON STAGE OPERAS

OFFSTAGE MUSIC

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VOLUME XXXI

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CONTENTS

DAVID CRANMER	A Relation of the ...	141
MITSUYA NAKAMORI	Les Deux Tons avec piano de Camille Saint-Saëns (1864-1892): pour une litanie française	ix
ROBERTO FERRARA	Preface	ix
	ON STAGE – OPERAS	
HUGH MACDONALD	Abstracts	3
	Saint-Saëns the Dramatist	3
ERIN BROOKS	Camille Saint-Saëns and Staging History: <i>Henry VIII</i> and <i>Ascanio</i> at the Opéra	15
MARA LACCHÈ	Saint-Saëns e l'esotismo 'ellenico' di <i>Jeanne</i>	43
CLAIRE PAOLACCI	Camille Saint-Saëns et l'Opéra de Paris (1915-1945): un étendard de la musique française	59
	DOWN THE AISLE – CHURCH MUSIC	
SARA RAMOS CONTOSO	Saint-Saëns's <i>Messe de Requiem</i> : un nuevo modelo religioso en la tradición romántica del género	85
MEGAN SARNO	Saint-Saëns, Criticism, and Catholicism	101
	IN THE CONCERT – INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC	
MICHAEL STEGEMANN	«La chimère de la pureté du style et de la perfection de la forme»: Saint-Saëns und die großen Formen der Instrumentalmusik	123

ELISABETTA RIGHINI	
Fossili e rovine: trattamenti metamorfici nel Quartetto per archi e pianoforte in Mi maggiore Op. Post. di Camille Saint-Saëns	141
JULIE OUSTINOFF	
Les Deux Trios avec piano de Camille Saint-Saëns (1864-1892): pour une filiation française?	157
ROHAN H. STEWART-MACDONALD	
Lisztian Approaches in the Instrumental Works of Camille Saint-Saëns: 'Thematic Transformation' and the Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 78 ('Organ')	175
RÉMY CAMPOS	
Camille Saint-Saëns' Piano Technique: A Retrospectively Constituted Object?	189
GEOFFREY BURLESON	
Saint-Saëns, Proto-Impressionism, and 'le jeu perlé'	213
TEMINA CADI SULUMUNA	
Les Œuvres pour harpe de Camille Saint-Saëns et ses relations professionnelles avec les harpistes à la lumière de la correspondance	227
EN ROUTE – TRAVELLING THROUGH THE WORLD	
ALBERTO MASSAROTTO	
L'esotismo musicale di Saint-Saëns come diario di bordo tra vita e opera	255
STÉPHANE LETEURÉ	
Camille Saint-Saëns en Égypte: les sens du voyage (1890-1914)	269
ORESTE PALMIERO	
Camille Saint-Saëns e l'Italia: analisi di un rapporto (attraverso i carteggi)	291
JOSÉ IGNACIO SUÁREZ GARCÍA	
La primera visita de Saint-Saëns a España en 1880: el descubrimiento del pianista virtuoso	313

DAVID CRANMER

A Relationship Spanning more than 40 Years: The Case of Portugal 345

MITSUYA NAKANISHI

Saint-Saëns et ses œuvres littéraires sur le Japon 361

ANTONIO FERRARA

Saint-Saëns, presidente della Società des instruments anciens 373

A half year after the death of Ludwig van Beethoven — and died on 16 December 1921 in Algiers — eight and a half years after the premiere of Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*. The compositional oeuvre created by Saint-Saëns during this long 383

ABSTRACTS

BIOGRAPHIES

INDEX OF NAMES

includes, in addition to operas and incidental music, oratorios and smaller church works, 391
popular choral works and songs, and more than 300 instrumental works. He 391
his first composition, a piano piece in C major, on 22 March 1839 at the age of just 395
years (in his own hand); his final score, the orchestral setting of his 395
nonchalante Op. 110, was finished at age 86 on 13 December 1921, three days before his death. There may never be another important composer whose output extends over a similarly long period of time and demonstrates a comparable diversity.

But this longevity and variety came with a heavy price tag. Although he remained true to himself, the image that he presented in music history changed first from the child prodigy to the revolutionary, and then from the classicist to the reactionary. There are many divergences in the explanation of these various viewpoints. For example, the dominating opinion attributing Saint-Saëns as a revolutionary in the 1860s and 1870s has its origin to a large degree in his affinity to the so called *neudeutsche Schule* ('New German School') of Franz Liszt and, in a greater sense, Richard Wagner. Their influence in Saint-Saëns' music is reflected in an often deeply chromatic, modulating harmony; the use of 'chromatic technique' (in his song works) and the introduction of the Symphonic Poem genre in France, which Saint-Saëns inaugurated in 1871 with *Le Rouet d'Orphée* Op. 31. At the same time, in support of the autonomy of French instrumental music, for which he was elected on 23 February 1871 the Société Nationale de Musique as the leading institution for concert performances, gained him the attribute of a classicist. The fact that he steered a young course to the aesthetics of *symbolisme* (religiously imposed by Vincent d'Indy and other supporters of the César Franck school) led, as of the 1880s, to the accusation of following a more conservative current. In the end it was Claude Debussy who considered him in the 1890s as a reactionary. Matters were further complicated by the stormy barrage of criticism resulting to the series of *Contemporain* articles written by Saint-Saëns, which began in the journal *Le Figaro* (10 September 1912) and then

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS AND STAGING HISTORY: *HENRY VIII* AND *ASCANIO* AT THE OPÉRA

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IN HIS REVIEW OF CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS'S 1883 opera *Henry VIII*, Henry Fouquier joked that while Saint-Saëns was a leading figure amongst France's younger composers, in France the adjective 'young' merely signaled that a composer's beard had not yet entirely turned white¹. Indeed, in 1883 Saint-Saëns straddled an odd temporal boundary: he was on one hand a leading member of the *jeune école*, yet had already logged a thirty-year performing career and been elected to a seat at the Institut. Simultaneously young and establishment, Saint-Saëns faced immense pressure to offer both regeneration and stability via his first opera staged at France's Académie Nationale de Musique. In a lengthy study of *Henry VIII*, Edmond Hippeau framed this expectation in quasi-messianic language, writing that the regeneration of contemporary opera was coming through a predestined musician, through a long-awaited work of art. Would Saint-Saëns and *Henry VIII* initiate this regeneration of French opera?²

Hippeau's language demonstrates that Saint-Saëns's *Henry VIII* bore more weight than a typical operatic premiere. In the 1880s and 1890s, France's Académie Nationale de Musique was caught between prestige and stagnation — an 1890 reviewer referred to the Opéra as the «lyric necropolis»³. *Henry VIII* premiered in March 1883, just one month after

¹. «La curiosité du public était d'autant plus éveillée que *Henry VIII* était le début, à Paris et sur la scène de l'Opéra, d'un 'jeune', c'est-à-dire d'un musicien qui n'a pas encore tout à fait la barbe blanche. Malgré cette 'jeunesse' à l'usage des compositeurs, M. Saint-Saëns a déjà beaucoup produit. On a joué de lui des symphonies, des oratorios, des suites d'orchestre et, à Lyon, un grand opéra, *Etienne Marcel* [...].» FOUQUIER 1883.

². «Je crois toujours que la régénération de l'opéra contemporain est prochaine; qu'il y a un musicien prédestiné, une œuvre d'art attendue. Camille Saint-Saëns est-il cet homme; *Henry VIII* est-il cette œuvre?» HIPPEAU 1883, p. 5.

³. This comment came within the context of a positive review of Saint-Saëns's *Ascanio*. «Constatons d'abord, et pour n'y plus revenir, que la nécropole lyrique de M. Garnier n'était pas le cadre qui pouvait faire valoir cette œuvre si fine et si distinguée. Le vaste temple de l'Opéra ne peut convenir qu'aux grandes fresques musicales où sonnent victorieusement les fanfares des cuivres». BLASIS 1890.

Richard Wagner's death; it thus offered one of the first opportunities to suggest potential directions for opera *après* Wagner. As Hippeau noted, this was a *moment psychologique* for the French national school⁴. What was France's musical identity, and what relationships should France maintain with German and Italian musics? What would be Wagner's legacy? Everything was ensnared in these questions — few decisions were neutral. For example, *Henry VIII*'s published score contained no index indicating separate numbers. This was understood by many as a sign that Saint-Saëns had written a Wagnerian *drame lyrique*. Yet critics hastened to note that *Henry VIII* nonetheless contained clear ariosos, duos, quartets, and other numbers. Battle lines erupted: was this blend of «Wagnerian procedures» and French opera a progressive concept, a clever union, a hideous hybrid, or a regressive failure?

Contending with Wagnerian *drame lyrique* in French *fin-de-siècle* music is not a new musicological subject; Steven Huebner's fine study addresses this topic at length, as does scholarship by Manuela Schwartz and others⁵. Rather than revisiting this precise territory, I would like to parse the debate through a slightly different optic. Saint-Saëns's operas *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio* offer a particular *entrée* into French opera of this period. The two works are connected not just by genre and institution — both were written for the Opéra and premiered on its stage — but also via a shared sixteenth century setting and recurrent tropes in their critical reception⁶. This study focuses on *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio* through their Parisian reception, centering not specifically on Wagner, but on how these operas relate to musics of the past.

For French musicians of this era, this was an essential question. Given the presence of Wagnerian *drame lyrique*, what is the French tradition? How is it constructed? What does this tradition value, or, attempt to efface? In this moment of crisis, how might French musicians look to the greatness of the past to feed the greatness of the future? Ernest Renan's celebrated 1882 address *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* — just one year before *Henry VIII*'s

⁴. «Tout est prêt. Wagner est mort, l'épuisement des Allemands et des Italiens laisse la place libre sur toutes les scènes lyriques de l'Europe à la, race française, la seule, suivant le mot profond du grand maître, qui ait la faculté créatrice longtemps alimentées par le répertoire de Rossini et de Meyerbeer. Ces scènes là attendent, c'est le critique viennois Hanslick qui l'a constaté, les œuvres de la jeune école française. Nous ne disons pas qu'*Henry VIII* soit le chef d'oeuvre attendu, mais cela écrase superbement *Françoise* et *le Tribut*, et l'école nationale est assez hautement réhabilitée. C'est là un *moment psychologique* pour elle. Qu'une pareille occasion ne se perde pas, car, avec les deux derniers ouvrages de l'Opéra, nous avions l'air de reculer d'une belle manière. Tout est réparé désormais, et les musiciens français doivent s'associer avec reconnaissance au succès du jeune maître qui nous venge des défaillances des anciens. Courage donc et confiance! Et maintenant, à l'oeuvre, car c'est l'heure de l'action!». HIPPEAU 1883, pp. 16–17.

⁵. HUEBNER 1999; SCHWARTZ 1999.

⁶. The two works premiered under very different administrative regimes at the Opéra, and Saint-Saëns oversaw *Henry VIII*'s rehearsal process with a minute attention to detail, whereas he was famously missing-in-action during *Ascanio*'s rehearsals and première. *Henry VIII* was largely a success, whereas *Ascanio* met with lukewarm reception.

premiere — pondered this precise issue. Renan advocated selective forgetting of certain histories in order to forge a unitary «collective memory». Analyzing nineteenth-century revivals of early music, Katharine Ellis invokes Renan in her discussion of «the terms by which French writers and musicians rehabilitated portions of their own heritage as a model for a 'French' music; how they decided what constituted it; and what motivated them and sometimes divided them in their choices»⁷.

Within Saint-Saëns's operas *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio*, I focus on specific ways in which these works connect to French history and musics of the past. Beginning with a short discussion of the ways in which French opera and historical subject matter were contested ground in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, I then turn to specific critical fissures in the Parisian reception of Saint-Saëns and his operatic style. I focus on how critics and audiences connected certain pieces within these operas to earlier musical styles; such references often assumed a free-floating web of signifiers without a clear connection to 'authentic' sixteenth-century musical styles. Ultimately, I argue that Saint-Saëns's penchant for historical operas placed him in a difficult position. On one hand, he was perhaps the best suited of any French composer of the period to attempt this difficult marriage between the ghosts of *grand opéra*, researched references to the past, nationalist glorification of French history and music, and incorporation of contemporary musical styles. On the other, Saint-Saëns's stylistic idiosyncracies, the musical eclecticism required for these works, and the fiery Wagnerian debates of these decades made such a project unlikely to score a lasting success.

GRAND OPÉRA IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

David Charlton, Anselm Gerhard, Sarah Hibberd, Steven Huebner and others have noted that *grand opéra* lacks specificity as a musical genre — Charlton points out that *grand opéra* perhaps most clearly denotes a work intended for the space and institutional conventions of the Académie Nationale de Musique. Nonetheless, French *grand opéra* in the second quarter of the nineteenth century typically featured a four or five act structure, a historical setting in the Middle Ages or Renaissance, a tragic ending, and organization in *tableaux*. Hibberd also includes constitutive elements of «choruses in conflict, a dramatically integrated ballet, mix of characters from different social backgrounds, impressive orchestral effects, melodramatic situations, and techniques and vocal styles influenced by French, Italian, and German opera»⁸. The core *grand opéra* repertoire — dominated by librettos by Eugène Scribe — spanned Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (1828) through Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* (1849)⁹.

⁷. RENAN 1882; ELLIS 2005, pp. xx, 120, 130.

⁸. GERHARD 1998, p. 9; HIBBERD 2009, p. 2; CHARLTON 2003; HUEBNER 2003.

⁹. For a study of *grand opéra* libretti methods and Scribe, see WHITE 2003.

Beyond the medieval or Renaissance plots, French *grand opéra* also helped construct historical narratives. Hibberd has described *grand opéra* as self-conscious in its depiction of history, a genre «that takes historiography of the period as its starting point». As she analyzes in her monograph on *grand opéra*'s political meanings, French operas of the 1820s through the 1840s were profoundly invested in reshaping the revolutionary past and working through the contemporary cataclysms of the Bourbon Restoration and July Monarchy. Hibberd notes *grand opéra* dominated stages during a concomitant explosion of historical writing; celebrated historians such as Jules Michelet depicted history in spectacular and emotionally captivating ways, sharing both tactics and goals with *grand opéra*. *Grand opéra*'s generic identity, its objectives, its fluid political meanings, and its cultural work for audiences were all intimately bound to history and the French nation's ongoing identity project¹⁰.

Connections between history and *grand opéra* shifted in the mid-nineteenth century in both subject matter and style. Mid-century French operas turned from libretti set in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance to ancient, supernatural, or mythological sources. Anselm Gerhard cites Félicien David's *Herculanum* (1859), Gounod's *Sapho* (1851) and *La Nonne sanglante* (1854), Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (1863), and Thomas's *Hamlet* (1868) as mid-century examples of this shift in subject matter¹¹. *Grand opéra*'s role in constructing national historical narratives was also transforming at mid-century. Peter Mondelli has analyzed the reception of historical elements in Verdi's *Don Carlos* (1867) as evidence of a move from a «soft historicism» of effects in the second quarter of the nineteenth century to a more scientifically inflected «hard» historicism later in the century¹².

More than a minor shift in public tastes, French *grand opéra* was assailed by criticism throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, eventually ceding nearly all of its capital in European musical culture. The backlash against *grand opéra* came from various voices, including many German musicians and critics. Both Schumann and Wagner launched ferocious (anti-semitically charged) attacks on Meyerbeer and French *grand opéra*¹³. Gerhard notes the progression from the Opéra's international (or cosmopolitan) attitude early in the nineteenth century to the house's more narrowly focused French nationalism by the end of the century¹⁴. Wagner's aesthetic theories were of tantamount importance in both the shift from cosmopolitanism to nationalism and from historically-based libretti to

¹⁰. HIBBERD 2009, pp. 2, 13, 183. Hibberd notes that in 1825 alone, 40 million pages of history were printed. For additional commentary on *grand opéra* and Michelet, see MONDELLI 2013.

¹¹. GERHARD 1998, pp. 388–408.

¹². MONDELLI 2013.

¹³. For more on Schumann's 1837 article 'Fragmente aus Leipzig' (originally published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*) see APPLEGATE 2011. For Wagner's remarks, see *Das Judenthum in der Musik*, also originally published in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* then expanded in 1869. For a brief essay on Wagner's complex debts to *grand opéra* practices, see GREY 2003.

¹⁴. GERHARD 1998, pp. 388–408.

mythological subject matter. In a complex stew mixing politicized interpretations of myth, inspiration from Greek tragedy, and folk traditions, Wagner's copious writings convinced some French intellectuals, critics, and audiences that both *grand opéra* and historical opera were dead ends.

Despite periods of interest in Wagner's music, Camille Saint-Saëns envisioned a markedly different operatic path. In a 1913 essay, Saint-Saëns defended Meyerbeerian *grand opéra* at length. Amazed by *grand opéra*'s profound reversal of fortune, Saint-Saëns praised Meyerbeer's theatrical instincts and individual blend of national styles. After cataloguing the merits of each Meyerbeer opera, Saint-Saëns argued that «if we fail to recognize Meyerbeer's genius, we are not only unjust but also ungrateful [...] and this ingratitude is double on the part of France, for he loved her»¹⁵. While Saint-Saëns did not title any of his works *grand opéra*, several of his compositions share generic affinities with the core *grand opéra* repertoire¹⁶. For Saint-Saëns, rejecting either *grand opéra* or *opéra-comique* was a loss of French national heritage¹⁷.

Likewise, Saint-Saëns did not share Wagner's predilection for mythological subject matter. Rather, beginning with *Étienne Marcel* (1879), he planned to write a series of operas drawn from French history¹⁸. *Henry VIII* (1883) was slightly outside the project's scope, focusing on the sixteenth-century English narrative of King Henry VIII's divorce and rupture with the Catholic Church. The opera's four-act libretto by Léonce Détroyat and Armand Silvestre incorporated elements from Pedro Caldéron's play *La cisma in Inghilterra* (1782)¹⁹. *Ascanio* (1890) fit more squarely within Saint-Saëns's projected series of French historical operas. Sharing a mid-sixteenth-century setting with *Henry VIII*, *Ascanio* explored Benvenuto Cellini's exploits at the French court of François I. Louis Gallet's five-act libretto was based on Paul Meurice's 1852 play, itself drawn from Alexandre Dumas père's 1843 novel²⁰.

In an article written nearly twenty years after the premiere of *Henry VIII*, Saint-Saëns argued that emotions are the focal point of opera, and that historical subjects offer ample

¹⁵. «La méconnaissance du génie de Meyerbeer n'est pas seulement une injustice, c'est une ingratitude [...] cette ingratitude est double pour la France, car il l'aimait». SAINT-SAËNS 1913B, pp. 283, 299.

¹⁶. For more on Saint-Saëns's relation to *grand opéra*, see HUEBNER 2003.

¹⁷. Saint-Saëns's views on *opéra-comique* were markedly different than *grand opéra*: he saw the genre as a nationally specific analogue to *opera buffa* and *Singspiel*. See SAINT-SAËNS 1898.

¹⁸. «Wagner a bien d'autres idées que je ne partage pas. Tout en reconnaissant, par exemple, l'avantage des sujets légendaires, je ne vois pas clairement la nécessité de n'en pas sortir [...] Mais mon ambition aurait été de faire une suite de tableaux de l'histoire de France; j'ai commencé avec *Étienne Marcel*, et j'ai bien l'intention, malgré les obstacles, de continuer». SAINT-SAËNS 1879, p. 642.

¹⁹. The libretto was initially destined for Gounod and was heavily revised during the compositional process; many critics also compared the end result to Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*.

²⁰. *Proserpine*, which premiered at the Opéra-Comique in 1887 — midway between *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio* — likewise had a sixteenth-century setting, this time in Italy.

situations to demonstrate the interaction of such emotions²¹. Moreover, argued Saint-Saëns, history and myth are intertwined: mythology was merely an older form of history, rooted in a kind of truth, whereas history itself can be mythological. Historians tell tales based on their own preconceived notions, and in any case, no historian reaches the truth of the soul. Irrked by the dominance of mythological Wagnerian plots, Saint-Saëns was also patently annoyed by criticisms about *Henry VIII*'s emotional substance. He defended his opera, arguing that its historical plot *did* show the soul and interiority of the English king, albeit via the musical setting²².

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Saint-Saëns's project of operas based on French history was both buoyed and bogged down by the history of French opera itself. Reviewers constantly weighed how *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio* engaged with French operatic tradition versus the Wagnerian *drame lyrique*. A short notice on *Ascanio*, for example, referenced Meyerbeer while noting Saint-Saëns's opera was written according to the 'old formula' (as opposed to the *drame lyrique*) and contained the expected historical, anecdotal, choreographic, and dramatic bits typical of the style²³. Many Parisian critics were unconvinced by Saint-Saëns's position on historical libretti. Victor Wilder noted in his review of *Ascanio* that 'Wagner believes myth is the clear headwater from which a composer should take his inspiration, whereas Saint-Saëns (and others with him) prefer to lap up the muddy waters of history'²⁴. *Ascanio* attracted particular criticism due to its origins as a 'pseudo-historical' play from the Théâtre Porte Saint-Martin, a boulevard

²¹. «Ce qu'il faut avant tout, ce sont des sentiments et des passions, mis en jeu par ce qu'on appelle des situations; et où peut-elle en rencontrer plus ou mieux que dans l'histoire?». SAINT-SAËNS 1913A, pp. 109-120. For a discussion of Saint-Saëns's views on historical opera see HUEBNER 1999, pp. 213-214.

²². Saint-Saëns's defense of *Henry VIII* in this article came more than two decades after the Parisian premiere, yet he was clearly still annoyed by the reception of his opera: «[...] quand, un peu plus tard, le roi donne en souriant de l'eau bénite de cour à l'ambassadeur qu'il reçoit, l'orchestre, reprenant sous ses paroles toute la musique de la scène précédente, éclaire l'intérieur de son âme [...] pas un mot, pas une scène, a-t-on dit, ne nous ouvre l'âme d'*Henry VIII*. — Comment! [...] Dans tout cela, est-ce que les passions et les sentiments ne sont pas en jeu?». SAINT-SAËNS 1913A, pp. 117-118.

²³. «Le nouvel opéra de M. Camille Saint-Saëns a été tiré par M. Gallet du drame de M. Paul Meurice, Benvenuto Cellini. C'est bien, cette fois, un opéra, selon la vieille formule, et non un drame lyrique. On y voit, comme dans tout opéra qui se respecte, une partie historique, représentée par François I^{er} et Charles-Quint; une partie anecdotique (Benvenuto dans son atelier), une partie chorégraphique, et, enfin, une partie dramatique avec la double intrigue de rigueur. C'est bien des choses; Meyerbeer n'y eût peut-être pas suffi». JOURNAL DES DÉBATS 1890.

²⁴. «Ce livret, qui sent le mélodrame, et met en mouvement les rouages rouillés de la vieille machine romantique, pose encore une fois le problème souvent débattu: Où faut-il prendre la matière du drame lyrique? Dans l'histoire ou dans la légende? Richard Wagner croit que le mythe est la source claire où le compositeur doit puiser son inspiration. M. Saint-Saëns — et d'autres avec lui — préfèrent s'abreuver dans les flots bourbeux de l'histoire ou, pour mieux dire, du roman historique. Entre les deux opinions, mon choix est fait depuis longtemps. Pour des raisons déduites ici même et que je n'ai pas le loisir de formuler de nouveau, je me range à l'avis de Wagner». WILDER 1890.

venue. Despite Saint-Saëns's advocacy, historical subject matter and historical opera were often deprecated due to Wagnerism and shades of Meyerbeer. In writing *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio*, it was impossible to escape history at every turn, both within and beyond the operatic texts themselves. As he composed the music for these performances of the past, in some ways Saint-Saëns could not have set himself a more difficult task.

COMPOSING THE MUSICAL PAST

In addition to specific connections between *Henry VIII*, *Ascanio*, and musics of the past, Parisian critics and audiences also parsed larger questions regarding Saint-Saëns's compositional style. As Wagnerian debates exploded throughout the French musical establishment, Saint-Saëns's style was appraised as archetypically French in its clarity, sobriety, and lightness. Jacques Hermann of *Le Constitutionnel* described Saint-Saëns's artistic temperament as «an almost austere sincerity, an almost geometric precision, an implacable will to do what he wants and a sort of instinctive repulsion for hackneyed procedures»²⁵. Saint-Saëns was equally interested in promoting his image as an erudite *homme de lettres*, particularly after his 1881 election to the Institut. Captivated by musics from antiquity through the eighteenth century, Saint-Saëns expounded his knowledge to audiences in France and abroad via countless *feuilletons*, articles, and speeches²⁶. For critics who constructed Saint-Saëns as intellectual, austere, calculated — were these desirable qualities in the French music of the future?

In 1883, reacting to the long-awaited *Henry VIII*, many Parisian critics pondered Saint-Saëns's place amongst the pantheon of great composers. Most located him within a lineage of classicists such as Mozart and Gluck — Auguste Vitu of *Le Figaro*, for example, described Saint-Saëns's style as «la pure tradition classique [...] Mozart is his God»²⁷. In addition to Mozart and Gluck, Hippeau and other critics noted the early influences of Bach, Handel, and Beethoven. Saint-Saëns's affinity for counterpoint elicited a complex web of connections with both musics of the past and German styles. As Katharine Ellis analyzed in regard to early music revival movements, nineteenth-century French listeners had a mixed reaction to Bach. French Bach reception of this era vacillated wildly between unrestrained praise and rehashed Rousseauian criticisms of counterpoint as a dry, overly

²⁵ «Dans les détails, dans ce qu'on pourrait appeler l'attitude, la manière d'être de ses œuvres, M. Saint-Saëns découvre une science profonde et une variété de procédés qui va jusqu'à l'habileté la plus affinée, mais ne descend jamais jusqu'à la ruse. Une sincérité presque austère, une précision presque géométrique, une volonté implacable de faire que ce qu'il voit, enfin une sorte de répulsion instinctive pour tout ce qu'en art on a appelé des ficelles. Tel nous apparaît l'auteur d'*Henry VIII*». HERMANN 1883.

²⁶ For more on Saint-Saëns as a writer, see SOROT 2012. For Saint-Saëns's particularly affinity for antiquity, see BROOKS 2008.

²⁷ «L'auteur de *Samson et Dalila*, du *Déluge* et de la *Danse macabre* appartient, il s'en fait gloire, la pure tradition classique. Mozart est son Dieu [...]». VITU 1883.

learned technique that demonstrated «the triumph of calculation over inspiration». In 1888, French scholar and critic Camille Bellaigue alluded to Bach's algebra, geometry, and interminable fugues. Bellaigue classed Bach as one of the greatest of all musicians, but also «the most tedious. Handel comes only afterwards»²⁸. In *Henry VIII*, many critics appreciated Saint-Saëns's contrapuntal skill. Hermann described the counterpoint as bright, virile, and sober, praising the lines as an admirable local color. But Saint-Saëns was also damned with familiar contrapuntal criticisms: his music was cold, severe, and privileged intellect or technique over passion.

Saint-Saëns's unparalleled skill as an orchestrator, a nearly universal point of agreement amongst critics of *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio*, likewise generated surprisingly contentious debates. Léon Kerst of *Le Petit Journal* noted many had doubts whether Saint-Saëns the «remarquable symphoniste» — who had earned his seat at the Institut based on his orchestral skill — was capable of writing dramatic music²⁹. Some wondered whether the sparkling ballets and other orchestral numbers from *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio* were tailor-made for the Opéra, or just intended for eventual performance on the Sunday orchestral concerts³⁰. If these works represented a future path for French opera, what did it signify that many of most marvelous numbers renounced the voice entirely?

Saint-Saëns's symphonic mastery also insinuated another potential Wagnerian colonization of French music. Saint-Saëns himself noted Wagner's influence on the orchestration of *Henry VIII*, namely that he expanded the Opéra's woodwind section to three flutes, three oboes, and three clarinets³¹. Louis Gallet, who wrote several libretti for Saint-Saëns, defended his sometime collaborator's gift for symphonic composition. In Gallet's opinion, Saint-Saëns's «double courant d'inspiration», a predilection for both

²⁸ Ellis notes that French critiques of counterpoint as lacking expression and overly intellectual date back to Rousseau's *Lettre sur la musique française* (1753). She contextualizes Bellaigue's commentary within the major Bach revival of the late 1880s. ELLIS 2005, pp. 34, 60, 102.

²⁹ «On doutait beaucoup, je dois le dire. On tenait le futur auteur d'*Henry VIII* pour un remarquable symphoniste, on l'avait maintes fois acclamé dans les concerts classiques du dimanche, on savait que sa réputation de manieur d'orchestre lui avait ouvert les portes de l'Institut. Mais, était-ce un homme de théâtre? Pourrait-il assouplir suffisamment sa profonde science harmonique pour laisser aux chanteurs le rôle important qu'ils doivent jouer dans tout opéra écrit en vue d'un auditoire français? Saurait-il, selon la pittoresque expression de Gluck, laisser la statue sur la scène et reléguer le piédestal dans l'orchestre? Aujourd'hui, la preuve est établie, triomphale dans certaines parties d'*Henry VIII*, douteuse dans certaines autres, mais, — balance faite, — concluante en somme». KERST 1883.

³⁰ Colonne did play excerpts from both *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio* for decades. *Morceaux détachée* from the operas were also programmed on many international concert series throughout the 1880s and 1890s.

³¹ *Le Figaro*'s 'Un monsieur de l'orchestre' claimed to hear Saint-Saëns discussing at intermission: «Avez-vous remarqué mon orchestre? demande-t-il à ceux qui le complimentent. En effet, Saint-Saëns, a emprunté Wagner un de ses procédés. Au lieu de deux flûtes, deux hautbois et deux clarinettes qui ont jusqu'à présent suffi à tous les ouvrages de l'Opéra, le compositeur d'*Henry VIII* a tenu à avoir trois flûtes, trois hautbois et trois clarinettes, réservant les cuivres pour les effets de sonorité plus accentués». *LE FIGARO* 1883.

the concert hall and the theatre, left him vulnerable to antithetical criticism³². Saint-Saëns was simultaneously too Italianate and too Wagnerian, too progressive and too prone to making concessions. Indeed, nearly all of Saint-Saëns's prodigious compositional gifts were deployed against him during the critical reception of *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio*. This constantly contradictory critical morass emanated from the confluence of Wagnerian partisans, French nationalist rhetoric, and the complicated role of history within these debates.

HENRY VIII (1883)

Henry VIII's sixteenth-century English setting offered Saint-Saëns a relatively blank canvas at the Opéra; no conventions governed staging this era of English history. Musically, the sixteenth century presented quite a challenge in terms of source material. French early music revivals struggled to unearth attractive, authentically French works from this era. Moreover, English musics occupied a peculiarly liminal space with regard to French nationalist discourse. English music did not elicit the powerful anti-hegemonic diatribes aimed at Italian and German repertoires, yet also offered little in the way of constructive possibilities for French nationalist projects.

Saint-Saëns scoured period sources for inspiration, rummaging through English manuscripts for musical material. *Le Figaro* speculated Saint-Saëns borrowed English liturgical chants; the Archbishop's melody in the Act III synod scene seemed to be inspired by a chant for the feast of the Holy Trinity³³. Saint-Saëns undoubtedly adopted the theme for *Henry VIII*'s prelude and Act III chorus 'C'en est donc fait' from a manuscript in the British Royal Library at Windsor [Ex. 1]³⁴. Tellingly, Saint-Saëns seemed to view his role in remaking these historical sounds through an archaeological metaphor. Writing to his editor Durand,

EX. 1: SAINT-SAËNS 1883, Prelude to Act I.



³² Gallet, quoted in HIPPEAU 1883, p. 71.

³³ See *LE FIGARO* 1883 and HIPPEAU 1883, p. 30. This reference is to the opening of the synod and the melody 'Toi qui veilles'.

³⁴ «Vous savez que M. Eugène Lacoste a été envoyé à Londres en mission artistique, pour étudier à Londres en mission artistique, pour étudier et collectionner les costumes de l'*Henri VIII* qui sera joué à l'Opéra. M. Saint-Saëns, auteur de la partition, a, de son côté, fouillé les bibliothèques musicales anglicanes, afin de s'inspirer notamment de quelques beaux chants liturgiques». *LE FIGARO* 1882. For a reference to the Royal Library at Windsor, see *LE FIGARO* 1883.

Saint-Saëns noted the borrowed prelude theme «had almost disappeared beneath *fioritura* and conventional ornamentation, from which I extracted it like a small statue that one might find covered with sprouting fungus»³⁵. Saint-Saëns's metaphor reveals a vision of the composer as savior of the past, revitalizing the precious materials of history through a return to unadorned, pure art. Hermann of *Le Constitutionnel* noted that in writing this «grand tableau d'histoire», Saint-Saëns had simply been a *musical historian*, blessed with qualities useful to historians: clarity, simplicity, and brevity³⁶. Within Hermann's overwhelmingly positive review, this was certainly intended as a compliment, yet at this moment in French music, the past was both a treasure jealously defended and a dead end denigrated by more progressive forces. To be a historian — rather than a genius — was a dubious accolade.

Critics heard manifold echoes of the past in *Henry VIII* and compared Saint-Saëns to composers from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries (TABLE 1). Reviewers searched for sounds reminiscent of madrigals in several *morceaux*, including the Act I, scene I encounter between Don Gomez and the Duke of Norfolk and the Act II, scene III women's chorus 'Noble dame, pour vous plaire'³⁷. King Henry's Act I *romance*, 'Qui donc commande', a hit that charmed Parisian audiences, also struck critics as archaic [Ex. 2]. Hippeau noted this arioso's imitative sequences on the phrase «Espérer et craindre à la fois», the concluding plagal cadence, and the ambiguous oscillation between major and minor, deeming these features reminiscent of a «madrigal» of the period³⁸. While critics often agreed which pieces sounded archaic, precise comparisons were free-floating. Rather than madrigals, Vitu of *Le Figaro* heard Henry's arioso as «beautifully redolent of Lully or his successors» and «Noble dame» as reminiscent of Rameau's choruses³⁹.

³⁵ Letter to Durand, 27 February 1888, Saint-Saëns-Durand correspondence, Library of Médiathèque Musicale Mahler, Paris. Cited in HUEBNER 1999, p. 218. For the chorus, see SAINT-SAËNS 1883, p. 298. The melody is also present throughout the opera's prelude.

³⁶ «Le drame d'*Henry VIII* est un grand tableau d'histoire, et l'on peut, en deux mots, caractériser l'inspiration de M. Saint-Saëns en disant qu'il a été simplement l'historien musical de cette belle et terrible page du *xvi^e* siècle anglais... En examinant, en effet, le tempérament de l'artiste, en prenant, pour ainsi dire, le signalement musical de l'homme — à l'heure où nous sommes de sa carrière — deux traits fortement accentués nous frappent dans cette original physionomie, deux qualités précisément nécessaires à l'historien: la netteté et la clarté, la simplicité et la brièveté». HERMANN 1883.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ «Rien ne me séduit plus délicieusement, en revanche, quel le *largo* de Henry, d'autant mieux que cette scène n'est traversée par aucune reprise en duo je trouve cet arioso admirablement en situation et, de plus, d'un tour archaïque-bien caractérisé. On dirait quelque madrigal du temps; rien n'y manque, le style d'imitation sur la phrase «Espérer et craindre à la fois» la cadence plagale de la conclusion, et jusqu'à cette suspension du violon solo sur la dominante, au début et à la rentrée, laissant l'oreille incertaine entre le majeur et le mineur». HIPPEAU 1883, pp. 47–48.

³⁹ «Ce sont les deux couplets d'une ariette, comme auraient dit nos pères; et le mot convient d'autant mieux ici qu'il exhale, sans archaïsme cherché, le parfum d'une mélodie de Lully ou de quelqu'un de ses successeurs [...] De même le chœur de femmes en si bémol «Noble dame, pour vous plaire» se rapproche, par son allure à la fois aisée et régulière, d'un des plus jolis chœurs de Rameau». VITU 1883.

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS AND STAGING HISTORY: *HENRY VIII* AND *ASCANIO* AT THE OPÉRA

EX. 2: SAINT-SAËNS 1883, Act 1, scene 4.

Larghetto

pp

Henry

Qui donc com-man-de quand il ai-me, Et quel em-pi-re reste au

Piano

pp

H.

poco cresc.

cœur Où l'a-mour met son pied vain-queur!

Qui donc com-

poco f

dim.

rit.

man-de quand il ai-me? Et quel em-pi-re reste au cœur Où l'a-mour met son pied vain-

mf

p

pp

Allegro agitato

H.

queur!

molto cresc.

f

f

Ah! c'est la tor-tu-re su-pré-me

fp

cresc.

ERIN BROOKS

H. *El-le veut et puis ne veut plus*

ff

H. *El - le me cherche et puis m'é - vi - te Le sou - ve -*

H. *nir de Mar - gue - ri - te Fait - il mes dé -*

H. *sirs su-per - flus Ah! c'est la tor - tu - re su-prè - me.*

cresc. *f*

H. *Es - pé - rer et craindre à la fois Et vivre ex - i -*

p *più marcato*

H. 

TABLE 1: HISTORICAL RESONANCES IN SAINT-SAËNS'S *HENRY VIII* (1883)

ACT/SCENE	NUMBER	CRITICAL DESCRIPTION(S) OR COMPARISON:
Act I	Prélude	Handel
Act I	Dialogue of Gomez and Feria	'madrigalesque'
Act I	King Henry ('Qui donc commande')	madrigal; Lully or other 17 th -century successors
Act I	Anne Boleyn's entrance (<i>Andante grazioso</i> , <i>quasi minuetto</i>) Minuet motifs recalled in: Act II (especially 'Entr'acte') Act III Act IV (especially Scene 1 <i>Tempo di minuetto</i>)	
Act II	Chœur des femmes ('Noble dame, pour vous plaire')	'chœur madrigal'; Lambert, Lully, Rameau
Act II	Duet for King Henry and Anne Boleyn	18 th century
Act II	Fête populaire: No. 1: Introduction, Entrée des Clans No. 2: Idylle écossaise No. 3: La Fête du Houblon No. 4: Danse de la Gypsy No. 5: Scherzetto No. 6: Gigue et Finale	
Act III	Marche du synod	Handel, Bach
Act III	Archbishop's prayer ('Toi qui veilles')	Chant from feast of the Holy Trinity

The influence of antique dances pervaded critical commentary on *Henry VIII*'s historical references. Anne Boleyn's main motif was a menuet, first heard upon her entrance in Act I, Scene VI (*Andante grazioso*, *quasi minuetto*). As Hippeau detailed in his analysis of *Henry VIII*, Anne's menuet motives reoccurred throughout the opera, notably in the entr'acte to Act II. A full-fledged menuet, danced by Anne's ladies in waiting, opened the first tableau of Act IV — Hermann described this menuet as a true jewel of the style⁴⁰. While Saint-Saëns's elegant menuet à la Lully or Purcell suggested both an archaic sound and the aristocratic milieu of the English court, it did encourage a certain historical looseness via its references to seventeenth or early eighteenth-century styles.

Saint-Saëns's borrowed melody from the British Royal Library manuscript — heard in *Henry VIII*'s prelude and Act III chorus «C'en est donc fait» — likewise suggested antique dances yet prompted imaginative historical references from critics. Huebner describes the borrowed melody as «pavane-like», noting the manuscript source was likely a virginal

⁴⁰. «Au milieu de cette scène de cour, prétexte pour le musicien à un menuet dans le plus pur style du temps, qui est un véritable bijou». HERMANN 1883.

book⁴¹. Despite the appropriately stately character of this dance and the acknowledged «authentic» source material, Saint-Saëns's treatment of this motif in both the prelude and Act III reminded many critics not of Renaissance styles but of late Baroque music. Critics from Louis Fourcaud to Raoul de Saint-Arroman to Hermann found that the contrapuntal style of the overture and the « Marche du synod » reminded them of Handel or Bach⁴².

In the requisite ballet, designed as a *fête populaire* and an obvious place for inserting period dances or *couleur locale*, Saint-Saëns oddly included a series of 'Scottish' pieces for his English opera. Surprisingly, given Saint-Saëns's interest in historical erudition and that costume designer Eugène Lacoste had traveled to England to study historical attire, *Henry VIII*'s Scottish dances were both anachronistic and not clearly derived from period sources⁴³. While one critic suggested Saint-Saëns borrowed his Scottish tunes from the Windsor researches, Saint-Saëns may have taken inspiration from a manuscript belonging to Madame Detroyat. The composer later noted that at least one of the *Henry VIII* dances was repurposed from the finale of an earlier *opéra-comique*⁴⁴. Nonetheless, most Parisian critics enjoyed the ballet music, impressed by the skillful orchestration. Adverse reviews focused on the visual and gestural elements of the ballet — Louis Mérante's choreography was harshly criticized — on dislike for English dance styles, or on continual debates concerning the relevance of ballet in contemporary opera.

Musical references to period dances blended seamlessly with the historical subject matter, yet *Henry VIII*'s reception also prompted competing discourses on the value of dance. For some (German-influenced) critics, dance was decorative/feminized in comparison to symphonic music. Ellis has analyzed the gendered problems for French revivalists in constructing national icons from *ancien-régime* dances by Lully or Rameau⁴⁵. In addition, the emerging concept of *Werktreue* elevated the notes of a (German) symphonic score above visual spectacle or performers⁴⁶. On the other hand, the French predilection for dance, pantomime, and spectacular sets and costumes was still a subject for national pride — the Opéra remained without equal in the science and art of staging⁴⁷. Yet was emphasis on the visual really progressive, or a distraction from musically barren *fin-de-siècle* French operas? Much as Saint-Saëns himself had compared his borrowed sixteenth-century melody to a beautiful statue covered in fungus, some critics worried that the *couleur locale*, costumes, and sets merely diverted attention from operas unable to chart new paths based on musical merit alone. In a supportive review, Mark de Thémènes of *La Patrie* argued the opposite:

⁴¹ HUEBNER 1999, p. 218.

⁴² FOURCAUD 1883; SAINT-ARROMAN 1883; HERMANN 1883.

⁴³ Scotland was not under English control during Henry VIII's reign.

⁴⁴ For reference to Windsor, see *LE FIGARO* 1883. For reference to self-borrowing, see SAINT-SAËNS 1913b, p. 288.

⁴⁵ ELLIS 2005, pp. 142–146.

⁴⁶ See GOEHR 1992 or LEVINE 1990 on the work concept and the sacralization of music.

⁴⁷ *LE FIGARO* 1883.

underneath all the draperies, gold lamé, lace, jewels, and flowers was a functional new style of French opera⁴⁸. *Henry VIII*'s dances occupied uneven ground at this nexus of dance, gendered metaphors, and nationalist rhetoric.

While much of the praise for *Henry VIII*'s references to the musical past was imaginative or generically positive, interesting critical fractures emerged. Tiersot lauded Saint-Saëns for borrowing from «authentic and truly serious sources», not resorting to pastiche, and not limiting his borrowings to the ballet. Conversely, in his praise for «Qui donc commande», Vitu commended Saint-Saëns for succeeding without trying too hard for researched archaic sounds. Although less a contrapuntal device than a metrical ploy, several critics complained about the constantly shifting meters in Catherine of Aragon's heartfelt farewell in Act IV, noting that it was «clever» but distracting. Thus, while the erudite embrace of history was an important source for artistic inspiration, there were obviously wrong ways to blend the new and the old. For Parisian audiences and critics, there seemed to be little space between tacky ahistorical pastiche and overly learned or intellectual styles, particularly if those sounds bored the audience.

ASCANIO (1890)

The second of the projected series of operas on French historical subjects, *Ascanio* (1890) shared *Henry VIII*'s mid-sixteenth century setting, but presented additional problems given the French locale. Saint-Saëns needed to represent sixteenth-century French musical styles in a manner that made a strong case for French musical superiority. Beloved French musics from the sixteenth century were relatively rare, unlike music of the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. As Ellis has analyzed, championing sixteenth-century French music necessitated creative curation of the past. One such strain rehabilitated Franco-Flemish polyphony via revivals of composers such as Claude Goudimel (d. 1572) and Orlande de Lassus (d. 1594). Another stream elevated the French *chansons populaires* of Clément Janequin (d. after 1558), whose music represented a healthy nationalist ethos of «earthiness, esprit, and rich color». During the same decade as *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio*, Charles Bordes and the Schola Cantorum promoted Franco-Flemish polyphony, while Julien Tiersot's *Histoire de la chanson populaire* (1885) advocated for the importance of secular song⁴⁹. It was not clear, however, how exactly Saint-Saëns might transplant such sounds to the operatic stage, particularly within the demands of late-nineteenth century operatic style.

⁴⁸. «On sent qu'il y a un corps, un être vivant, sous les draperies lamées d'or, les flots de dentelles, les joyaux et les fleurs». Thémines, *La Patrie*, cited in HIPPEAU 1883, p. 68.

⁴⁹. ELLIS 2005, pp. 19, 115, 158.

Saint-Saëns's opera invoked shades of the French operatic past as well. While *Ascanio*'s plot unfolds in 1539, more than three decades before the 1572 St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, sixteenth-century France was nonetheless amongst the most well-trodden eras on the operatic stage. *Les Huguenots* had appeared at the Opéra nearly 1,000 times by the end of the nineteenth century, with new stagings still premiering in the century's last decade. Although *Ascanio*'s plot focused on Benvenuto Cellini's French sojourn — offering fantastic opportunities to stage François I's court and the Château de Fontainebleau — the subject matter also summoned memories of Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* (1838).

Within *Ascanio*, critics heard seven segments as archaic or overtly influenced by musics of the past [TABLE 2]. After his Act I entrance accompanied by a pavane from flute and harp, King François's Act II *Andantino* 'Adieu, beauté, ma mie' was encored the night of the premiere and universally applauded for its lovely archaic color [Ex. 3]. Most critics called it a madrigal, or generically commented that it had the *chevaleresque* aura of the sixteenth century — Stoullig compared it to Ronsard⁵⁰.

TABLE 2: HISTORICAL RESONANCES IN SAINT-SAËNS'S *ASCANIO* (1890)

ACT/SCENE	NUMBER	CRITICAL DESCRIPTION(S), COMPARISONS, OR SOURCE ACCORDING TO TIERSOT:
Act I, tableau 1, scene IV	Entrance of King Francis I	Pavane, menuet, Renaissance arabesque
Act I, tableau 2, scene II	Air d'Ascanio	Madrigal; <i>chansons de plein air</i>
Act I, tableau 2, scene X	Duchess and Benvenuto, chorus	<i>Chansons de plein air</i>
Act II, tableau I, scene I	Scozzzone, 'Chanson Florentine'	'd'après une chanson du xvie siècle'; <i>archaïque</i>
Act II, tableau I, scene III	Colombe, 'Mon cœur est sous la pierre'	'exquise ballade archaïque', modal melody, <i>chansons de plein air</i>
Act II, tableau I, scene V	Ascanio, 'Un divin mais fol amour'	'agréable parfum archaïques'
Act II, tableau I, scene I	King Francis, 'Adieu, beauté, ma mie'	Madrigal, <i>archaïque</i> , Ronsard, pastiche

⁵⁰. STOULLIG 1890, p. 11.

Ballet	i. Entrée du Maître des Jeux	à la Handel (Tiersot)
	ii. Vénus, Junon et Pallas	<i>Tordion</i> (ancien dance) (Malherbe)
	iii. Diane, Dryades et Naiades	<i>Pastiche of Ballet de la Roynie</i> (1582) (Tiersot)
	iv. Bacchus et Les Bacchantes	Danses modernes et originales (Tiersot)
	v. Apparition de Phœbus et des neuf Muses	Air de basse-danse from <i>Orchésographie</i> (1589) — Clément Marot's 'Jouissance vous donnerai' (Tiersot)
	vi. Phœbus prend la lyre et invoque L'amour	Danses modernes et originales (Tiersot)
	vii. L'amour fait apparaître Psyché	Danses modernes et originales (Tiersot)
	viii. Ensemble (des Phœbus, etc)	Danses modernes et originales (Tiersot)
	ix. Variation de L'amour	Danses modernes et originales (Tiersot)
	x. Le Dragon des Hespérides apporte la pomme d'or	Danses modernes et originales (Tiersot)
	xi. Finale, les Déesses, Bacchantes, Naiades	<i>composées d'après des airs anciens</i> (Tiersot)
	xii. Apothéose	<i>pastiche; valse; chanson populaire?</i>

A complex of vocal solos in Act II demonstrates both the breadth of historical references in *Ascanio* as well as the diversity of critical reaction to such allusions. Critics heard Colombe's unaccompanied Act II ballad 'Mon cœur est sous la pierre' as exquisitely archaic, with a graceful and charming naïveté. *Ascanio*'s subsequent air 'O douce Héb' prompted similar critical raptures⁵¹. Yet the 'archaic' number which opened Act II, an aria for the Italian mezzo-soprano character Scozzone, was much more divisive [Ex. 4]. According to Tiersot, Saint-Saëns was tempted to borrow Palestrina's 4-voice madrigal 'Alla riva del Tebro' — well-known in France since the 1820s — for Scozzone. Stymied by problems inherent in reducing a polyphonic madrigal to a single voice and perhaps hesitant to revise Palestrina, Saint-Saëns instead composed a Neapolitan-inspired 6/8 rhythm, indicating in the score that this aria was «d'après une chanson du 16^e siècle». Tiersot wasn't sure of a precise sixteenth-century provenance for Scozzone's aria, noting it was likely a book of *frottola* or *canzone* or a collection of lute songs. In his analysis of *Ascanio*, Charles Malherbe suggested that the tonality of Scozzone's song seemed archaic, perhaps indicating «the seventh tone of plainchant». But, Malherbe concluded, all the aria's development, modulations, and reprises were not antique in the least — the middle section seemed more like a modern *tarantella*⁵². Although the song was encored, many Parisian

⁵¹. For Colombe and *Ascanio*'s numbers, see SAINT-SAËNS 1890A, pp. 165–169. For reviews of Colombe's song, see (among many) *LE TEMPS* 1890; *LE PETIT PARISIEN* 1890; FOURNEL 1890. For comments on *Ascanio*'s air, see MORENO 1890.

⁵². For more on Palestrina and 'Sulle rive del Tebro', see ELLIS 2005, pp. 28, 39. For Tiersot's commentary, see TIERSOT 1890. Malherbe noted «Saint-Saëns a pris soin d'avertir que cette mélodie était composée 'd'après une chanson du XVI^e siècle. L'emprunt demeure discret. Peut-être se borne-t-il, en somme, à l'entrée de l'air «Fiorentinelle! ah! qui m'appelle?»; la tonalité y semble archaïque, en effet, et rappelle le septième ton du plain-chant avec son *si* bémol introduit dans la gamme d'*ut* majeur; mais tous les développements,

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS AND STAGING HISTORY: *HENRY VIII* AND *ASCANIO* AT THE OPÉRA

Ex. 3: SAINT-SAËNS 1890A, Act II, second tableau.

Andantino (sans lenteur)

Le Roi

A-dieu, beau-té, ma mi - e, Ma vi - el

Piano

Quand je suis près de vous L'au-ro-re fraîche é - clo - se, Plus ro - se,

A des ra-yons plus doux! Et s'il faut que je quit - te Le gi - te

Où Vé - nus m'a con - duit Je vois sur moi des - cen - dre, S'é - ten - dre

La noir-ceur de la nuit! Je souf-fre mort cru - el - le, Ma bel - le,

cresc.

ERIN BROOKS

Quand je suis loin de vous! Mais! gai, je res-su - ci - te, Bien vi - te,

De mon tré - sor ja - loux! A-mour à la res - cous - se Me

pous - se Quand je suis près de vous!

critics found it vulgar — an unsigned review in *La lanterne* described it as capricious, contorted, and too full of *fioritura*⁵³.

Like *Henry VIII*, *Ascanio* provided the expected ballet, here in the guise of an extended fête at Fontainebleau. The twelve numbers comprising *Ascanio's divertissement* featured the most concentrated allusions to music of the past. In *Le Menestrel*, Tiersot analyzed the provenance of each of the numbers [TABLE 2], noting that Saint-Saëns employed a number of methods ranging from *pastiche* to imitation of ancient rhythmic patterns to newly composed melodies. For Tiersot, Saint-Saëns could not have constantly imitated sixteenth-century *airs de danse*, because the effect would have been heavy and lacking enthusiasm. While critical of vulgar *pastiche*, Tiersot praised Saint-Saëns's method. Analyzing the third number of the ballet, «Diane, Dryades, and Naiades», Tiersot noted that Saint-Saëns harvested all the elements from the first instrumental ballet in the *Ballet de la Roynne* (1582).

modulations et rentrées ne doivent rien à l'antique, et le divertissement du milieu «Fier galant à barbe grise» prend même l'aspect voulu d'une tarentelle moderne». MALHERBE 1890, p. 46.

⁵³, «Au deuxième acte, Scozzzone chante une mélodie: Bella Fiorentina, imitée du seizième siècle, trop contorsionnée, trop fantasque, trop surchargée de fioritures, à notre avis, — quoiqu'on l'ait bissée». *LE LANTERNE* 1890.

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS AND STAGING HISTORY: *HENRY VIII* AND *ASCANIO* AT THE OPÉRA

Ex. 4: SAINT-SAËNS 1890A, Act II, first tableau — version performed at the Opéra.

Allegro vivo
Scorzono

p

rit.

La la la la la la la la la la la la la la la la

f *p* *pp*

a tempo

la

«Fio-ren-ti - nelle!» Ah! qui m'ap-pel-le? En sen-ti-

a tempo

rit. *a tempo*

nel - le Qui donc est là? En sen-ti - nel - le Qui donc est là?

rit.

Nez en l'air en-tre deux bor-nes, C'est le sei-gneur po-des - tat! La lu - ne lui fait les

ERIN BROOKS

cor - nes A le voir en tel é - tat, A le voir en tel é - tat; Les yeux en bou - le Il me rou -

cou - le U - ne chan - son De sa fa - çon «Ah! bel - le, bel - le Fio - ren - ti - nel - le, Bel - la, bel - la Fio - ren -

ti - na Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! Ah! ah! ah!

espress.

pp

cresc.

f

Borrowing pitches, frequent use of cadences in the relative minor or on the second scale degree, and absolute avoidance of dominant cadences, Saint-Saëns created a homogenous, accurate-sounding reconstitution of the period. Tiersot concluded the ballet «is doubly interesting, comprising an artistic and historic element as well as an archaeological one»⁵⁴. Not everyone concurred with Tiersot; Malherbe recalled Fourcaud's earlier critique that «this never-ending mix of ancient and new forms leads, above all else, to monotony»⁵⁵.

Certainly these pieces employed the particular talents of Saint-Saëns as well as attracting certain audience constituencies — Henri Moreno noted that the archaic manner

⁵⁴. «Ouvrez la partition du *Ballet de la Roynie* (1582), et, dans le premier ballet instrumental, vous trouverez, épars et délayés au milieu d'un fatras de notes, tous les éléments dont M. Saint-Saëns a formé son pastiche, très habilement réussi. Le retour fréquent des cadences au relatif mineur ou au second degré, et l'absence absolue de toute cadence à la dominante qui pourrait donner une impression de tonalité moderne, ne contribuent pas peu à l'exactitude de la reconstitution [...] Une œuvre ainsi conçue est donc du ressort de l'érudition aussi bien que de la critique pure: elle est doublement intéressante, comportant à la fois l'élément et historique ou archéologique». TIERSOT 1890.

⁵⁵. «[...] ce mélange perpétuel des formes anciennes et nouvelles engendre, malgré tout, la monotonie». FOURCAUD 1883, cited in MALHERBE 1890, p. 94.

of Ascanio's air would not fail to please the «amateur antiquity lovers» in the crowd. Yet a tension once again emerged between the production's splendid visual components — many critics noted François I's costume had been copied from paintings by Titian — and the representation of historical sounds. An unsigned review in *Le Matin* asked:

Well, all this science leaves us cold and seems to particularly impede the artists who are obsessed with it. We see François I in his costume, but his soul — where is it? These old paintings walk before us, but they are frozen and stiff. When François I sang his antique romance to the Duchesse d'Etampes, it wasn't the gallant king who hummed these forgotten melodies, it was an old man in Titian tints from four hundred years ago. We have the representation of art, not the illusion of life. I really fear that archaeology is the antithesis of dramatic art — and lyric art in particular!

Punning that Saint-Saëns and the Opera's costume designers and ballet master seemed to all be competing for a seat at the Institut, *Le Matin's* reviewer wondered whether all this research contributed anything at all to dramatic sensibility⁵⁶.

The question of intellect and research is an *idée fixe* in the reception of Saint-Saëns's historical operas. Like *Henry VIII*, *Ascanio's* reviewers questioned whether Saint-Saëns's compositional style was overly intellectualized and lacked emotional depth. *Ascanio's* particular firestorm originated from a letter Saint-Saëns wrote to librettist Louis Gallet. Published in *Le Figaro*, this letter boasted that Saint-Saëns signaled a change in character motivation through the use of an inverted motif⁵⁷. Several critics quoted this letter in their reviews, torn between admiration for Saint-Saëns's cleverness and irritation that this artifice was lost on the public — Tiersot even felt compelled to defend Saint-Saëns on this particular issue⁵⁸.

For other critics, *Ascanio's* mix of styles revived longstanding debates about style, cohesion, and homogeneity. Stoullig seemed puzzled by *Ascanio*, pondering the personality of a work which «floats between archaic *pastiche* and imitation of Gounod, between the

⁵⁶. «Eh bien! cette science nous laisse froids, et elle semble singulièrement gêner les artistes qui en sont obsédés. Nous voyons bien le costume de François Ier et sa figure; mais son âme, où est-elle? De vieilles peintures défilent devant nous, mais ce ne sont que des peintures glacées, compassées! Quand François Ier débite sa romance antique à la duchesse d'Etampes, ce n'est pas le roi galant, c'est un vieillard de quatre cents ans, empêtré dans les couleurs du Titian, qui fredonne des refrains oubliés. Nous avons la représentation de l'art, pas l'illusion de la vie. Je crains bien que l'archéologie ne soit l'antipode de l'art dramatique et surtout lyrique!», *LE MATIN* 1890.

⁵⁷. Saint-Saëns to Gallet: «ça commence, dit-il en parlant de la première scène de son opéra, par la peinture d'une activité dévorante qui se calme à l'entrée du héros. Il parle sur un ton demi-léger. Quand il arrive au dessin du Pagolo, l'orchestre joue à l'envers le motif du travail pour montrer que Pagolo a travaillé en dépit du bon sens. C'est drôle comme tout», SAINT-SAËNS 1890b.

⁵⁸. TIERSOT 1890.

leitmotifs of Wagner and a kind of Italianate style»⁵⁹. While reviews of *Henry VIII* had worked to place Saint-Saëns within the pantheon of classical masters, *Ascanio*'s critics focused more on identifying specific numbers which reminded them of Meyerbeer, Wagner (*Die Meistersinger* in particular), Gounod, Verdi, or Massenet. Albert Soubies was even more pointed in the *Revue d'art dramatique*. First praising Saint-Saëns's ability to orchestrate and add modern touches to airs à la *ancien*, Soubies then argued that good composers of *dramas lyriques* hadn't embraced this puerile attempt at local color. If an opera is to be logical (homogenous), the use of temporally accurate sounds must continue throughout the entire opera. If a composer did utilize such a monotonous palate of older sounds, Soubies predicted «a terrible boredom will quickly overtake the auditorium. *Drame lyrique* composers have written music of their own time, and frankly I think they were right to do so. With an artist such as Saint-Saëns the drawbacks of this method are hardly noticeable, but it wouldn't do for him to be imitated by many»⁶⁰.

By and large, specifically archaic pieces within *Henry VIII* and *Ascanio* were successful with critics and the public, as reflected in reviews, requests for encores, and performances by the major Parisian concert societies. Yet within their original operatic settings, these pieces seemed to strain the boundaries of what Parisian critics and the public demanded from new French opera in the 1880s and 1890s. Could looking to music history really advance operatic progress and please audiences? Parisian reviews reveal a tension between interests in historical reconstruction and allusion on one hand, and dislike of heterogeneity, pastiche, and styles which seemed «too researched and intellectual» on the other. This double bind was particularly problematic for Saint-Saëns. Reception of both Saint-Saëns's performance style and compositional aesthetic repeatedly invoke sparseness, economy of means, even coldness. If historicism and learnedness both attracted and repelled, Saint-Saëns seemed unusually bound up in

⁵⁹. «Mais où est la personnalité dans cette œuvre, qui flotte entre le pastiche archaïque et d'imitation de Gounod, entre les leit-motives à la Wagner et l'italianisme — témoin la cantilène de Benvenuto 'Beauté, quatrième acte, qui commence par la phrase textuelle de la *prière de Moïse*, de Rossini?». STOUILLIG 1890, p. 5.

⁶⁰. «Personne ne l'égale dans l'art si délicat d'instrumenter, d'habiller (si l'on peut parler ainsi) à la phrase de flûte qui souligne la première entrée du roi. Ce goût pour l'archaïsme musical se manifeste en maints passages de la nouvelle partition de M. Saint-Saëns: dans le madrigal déjà cité du roi, dans le ballet prévu tout entier, etc. Les grands maîtres du drame lyrique n'avaient pas ce souci au fond un peu puéril de la soi-disant couleur locale, car, pour être logique, il faudrait soutenir ce ton durant l'œuvre entière et un terrible ennui pèserait vite sur l'auditoire. Il sont écrit la musique de leur temps et, à mon avis, ils ont été sagement inspirés. Avec un artiste tel que M. Saint-Saëns les inconvénients de la méthode contraire ne sont guère sensibles; il serait fâcheux que cette méthode trouvât beaucoup d'imitateurs». SOUBIES 1890.

CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS AND STAGING HISTORY: *HENRY VIII* AND *ASCANIO* AT THE OPÉRA

such debates. In his review of *Ascanio*, Henri Moreno noted it was often said of Saint-Saëns that music is made with the brain and not with the heart. Ultimately, these historical operas dazzled audiences with their technique and their references to the past, but such sections seemed to pale in comparison with the response to numbers such as the full-throated final quartet from *Henry VIII*. If historicism offered a potential path out of the Wagnerian morass, it was a path with significant challenges, particularly for Camille Saint-Saëns.

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