Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

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Bacchanale, from *Samson et Dalila*

Camille Saint-Saëns

"Monsieur Saint-Saëns possesses one of the most astonishing musical organizations I know of. He is a musician armed with every weapon. He is a master of his craft as no one else is. … He plays, and plays with the orchestra as he does the piano. One can say no more."

So observed Charles Gounod of his fellow French composer, and in marveling over his talents, he might have noted that Camille Saint-Saëns was also a highly accomplished organist (who for two decades reigned in the loft at the Church of the Madeleine in Paris), a champion of forgotten earlier music and of contemporary composers, an inspiring teacher (who, as professor of the École Niedermeier, did much to shape the raw talents of Gabriel Fauré and André Messager), a gifted writer, a world traveler, and an avid and informed aficionado of such disciplines as Classical languages, astronomy, archaeology, philosophy, and even the occult sciences. "He knows everything, but lacks inexperience," quipped Hector Berlioz of his young friend.

Highly respected by his contemporaries, Saint-Saëns enjoyed the combination of musical and political clout needed to make a success of the Société Nationale de Musique, which he co-founded in 1871 to provide a forum in which contemporary French works might be heard. At that time, French composers had scant hope of having their pieces premiered at any prominent venue in their own country, so much did the German classics dominate the Parisian concert scene.

Saint-Saëns lived to the advanced age of 86; it's astonishing to think that he was born when Beethoven was still being mourned and died when Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* was already being assimilated into the repertoire. Saint-Saëns remained generally respected by musicians to the end; some viewed him as a curious relic of antiquity, to be sure, but those with open ears could hardly overlook that his style continued to develop practically until the day he died, while on vacation in Algiers, in the midst of composing a series of woodwind sonatas marked by Classical transparency.

Saint-Saëns embarked on *Samson et Dalila* in 1867, thinking he was writing an oratorio; his librettist, however, convinced him that the material would work better as an opera. But when Saint-Saëns presented the work-in-progress to a private circle of listeners, many expressed alarm at the thought of an overtly Biblical subject being paraded across the

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IN SHORT

Born: October 9, 1835, in Paris, France

Died: December 16, 1921, in Algiers, Algeria

Work composed: the opera *Samson et Dalila*, from 1867 to 1876

World premiere: the opera, December 2, 1877, at the Grossherzogliches Theater in Weimar, Germany, Eduard Lassen, conductor

New York Philharmonic premiere: Bacchanale, July 9, 1922, Henry Hadley, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: Bacchanale, July 29, 2009, at Bravo! Vail in Colorado, Bramwell Tovey, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 7 minutes

operatic stage. (It is based on an episode involving a conflict between the Hebrews and the Philistines in Gaza, recounted in the Book of Judges, chapters 14–16.) The work was tabled until 1875, when Saint-Saëns presented Act I in a concert performance that was poorly received by Parisian critics. Still, he couldn't bear to give up his project and eventually completed it. Franz Liszt endorsed it enthusiastically, and it was on his urging that the court theater of the Grand Duke of Weimar undertook its premiere. Parisians remained cool to the work, and the Opéra de Paris didn't mount a production until 1892; finally they warmed to it, and it became the most enduring success among the composer's 13 operas.

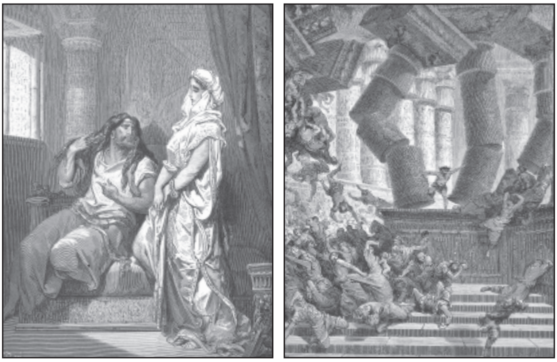
The Bacchanale falls near the beginning of Act Three. In the temple of Dagon in Gaza, the Philistines are preparing a sacrifice in gratitude for their recent conquest of Samson, the leader of the rival Hebrews; they have imprisoned him, after Dalila had shorn his hair (which was the key to his power). The Philistines work themselves into a frenzy in this ballet sequence. Samson's hair has grown to its former length and he will shortly call on God to restore his strength, which he uses to bring the temple crashing down. For the time being, however, the Philistines have the upper hand. Saint-Saëns fills their celebratory dance with sinuous melodic lines infused with such touches of "oriental exoticism" as the wide interval of the augmented second, as well as a particularly exuberant percussion section.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, castanets, bass drum, harp, and strings.

Not a Fan

Before George Bernard Shaw gained fame as a playwright, he was an accomplished music critic in London. His column attacking Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*, published October 4, 1893, in *The World*, is deliciously wicked, if at least even-handed in its cynicism:

> Who wants to hear *Samson et Dalila?* I respectfully suggest, Nobody. In Paris that is not a reason for not producing it, because Saint-Saëns is an illustrious French composer, and the Opera a national institution; consequently, Saint-Saëns must occasionally compose an opera, and the director produce it, for the satisfaction of the taxpayers. In the same way, we produce specially composed oratorios at our English festivals. We cannot sit them out without wishing we had never been born; but we do sit them out for all that. … Now I am strongly of the opinion that each nation should bear its own weight in this department of life. We do not ask the Parisians to share the weight of Job with us; then let them not foist on us the load of *Samson*.



Engravings by Gustave Doret, 1860, depicting Samson (with hair) and Dalila; Samson destroying the temple