Constructing the Oriental ‘Other’: Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalila*

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Opera is rich in works that construct visions of the non-Western world and its inhabitants: Rameau’s *Les Indes galantes*, Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, Bizet’s *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, Verdi’s *Aida*, Strauss’s *Salome*, Puccini’s *Turandot*. In these operas the representation of what recent critical theory calls ‘the Other’ is most clearly announced in the basic plot, in characters’ names, and in costumes, sets and props. But to what extent do the libretto and the music also participate in this project?

The question easily lends itself to a narrower formulation: to what extent do these operas signal Otherness – Turkishness, Indianness, Chineseness and so on – through musical materials that depart from Western stylistic norms or even reflect specific musical practices of the region in question? Scholars and critics have repeatedly posed the problem in these terms, only to find themselves frustrated by three limitations: general stylistic aberrations are often applied indiscriminately by composers to vastly different geographical settings; borrowed tunes and the like tend to lose distinctive features by being uprooted and transplanted; and whole stretches of these operas are written in an entirely Western idiom. There is more to such styles and ‘borrowings’, some of which prove to be more distinctive – and even more characteristic of the region in question – than a first hearing would suggest.

An earlier and much shorter version of this essay appeared in the Programme Book accompanying the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden performances of *Samson et Dalila* in spring 1991. I am grateful to the following (among others) for helping me clarify my argument and for pointing me to unsuspected sources: Daniel Albright, Gillian Anderson, Mieke Bal, Ali Behdad, Katherine Bergeron, Inge Boer, Philip Carli, Geoffrey Friedley, Stephanie Frontz, Steven Huebner, Hugh Macdonald, Patrick Macey, Joel Margolis, David Pollack, Walid Raad, Don Randel, Sabina Ratner, George Sawa, Grace Seiberling and Gretchen Wheelock.


2 I have attempted to demonstrate this for the largely neglected works of Félicien David, the pioneer figure in French Romantic musical exoticism: ‘Félicien David, compositeur saint-simonien et orientalisant’, in Magali Morsy, ed., *Les Saint-Simoniens et l’Orient: Vers la*
Here, though, I would like to explore a complementary and possibly more fruitful approach: treating these operas as works inscribed with an ideologically driven view of the East, a view now generally known as ‘Orientalism’. By focusing on the larger attitude towards the East in an ‘Oriental’ – indeed, one might say ‘Orientalist’ – opera, rather than starting out from its most striking or anomalous passages, we free ourselves to consider a broader range of operatic techniques, including how individual figures are characterised.3

I would like to focus on a single work, Saint-Saëns’s Samson et Dalila.4 Contemporary with the mature works of Verdi and Wagner, Samson et Dalila (begun in 1868, and in Saint-Saëns’s manuscript called simply Dalila)5 is one of the few French operas of its era to have survived a century of changing taste. It is also an intriguingly atypical example of Orientalism. The paradigmatic plot for Orientalist operas, seen in close to pure form in Meyerbeer’s L’Africaine, Félicien David’s La Perle du Brésil, Aida, Delibes’s Lakmé and Puccini’s Madama Butterfly, could be summarised as follows (and in words that, I hope, capture certain attitudes of the time):


The question of Orientalism in this opera has been briefly examined by Henri Quittard, ‘Saint-Saëns orientaliste’, Revue musicale, 5 (1906), 105-16; Marina Dubcek, ‘L’Orientalisme dans Samson’, in Avant-scène, 86-8; and Collet, who confusingly subsumes under the ‘Oriental’ anything ‘hieratic’ or archaic (e.g., the ‘Hymne de joie’ and the last bars of Act I – pp. 85, 89).

The most detailed account of the opera’s origins, by Sabina Ratner, is printed in the booklet to the recent Colin Davis recording (for Philips) and is based on her article ‘La Genése et la fortune de “Samson et Dalila”’, Cahiers Ivan Tourgueniev, Pauline Viardot, Maria Malibran, no. 9 (1985), 108-21; the Philips essay contains additional quotations from letters but omits Ratner’s endnotes. See also Saint–Säëns’s long letter on the subject, in Collet, Samson, 31–44 and elsewhere; also Avant-scène, 8–13.
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Young, tolerant, brave, possibly naive, white-European tenor-hero intrudes, at risk of disloyalty to his own people and colonialist ethic, into mysterious, dark-skinned, colonised territory represented by alluring dancing girls and deeply affectionate, sensitive lyric soprano, incurring wrath of brutal, intransigent tribal chieftain (bass or bass-baritone) and blindly obedient chorus of male savages.6

Samson, in contrast, is set in the biblical world; its heroine is a ripe mezzo (L’Afrique set the precedent), indeed a vile seductress, rather than a delicate soprano, and the natives are an imperial power holding the West (the Hebrews) captive, an inverted power relationship that is set right by Samson’s God-ordained act of destruction, which would also have been understood as an act of national liberation. The mixture of plots enriches rather than confuses, largely because the added elements (national liberation, Western piety, femme fatale) reinforce rather than contradict the opera’s underlying binary opposition between a morally superior ‘us’ (or ‘collective Self’) and an appealing but dangerous ‘them’ (‘collective Other’) who come close to causing ‘our’ downfall. As we shall see, though, Saint-Saëns at certain points subverted the very binarism that he and his librettist established in the opera’s plot.7 And precisely because Saint-Saëns tugged and pulled at the Orientalist paradigm, it is essential to view the opera in the larger context of the Orientalist world-view that flourished in France at the time.8

**Orientalism in Western culture**

Edward Said defines Orientalism as a ‘corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’.9 The Orientalist world view is articulated in the arts and other forms of ‘discursive practice’: through stereotyped images of ‘Oriental despotism, Oriental

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6 The paradigm can be expanded or altered, sometimes in ways that further heighten the essential binary principle. For example, adding a second female character – virtuous, long-suffering and ‘Western’, as in Carmen – sets the exotic central female character in sharper relief.

7 Saint-Saëns himself drafted the text; it was versified by Ferdinand Lemaire, a Creole from Martinique and a cousin-by-marriage of the composer.


9 Orientalism, 3.
splendor, cruelty, sensuality . . . promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy'.

France was, with England, the most active colonial power in North Africa and the Middle East during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and used all the forces at its command – the military, a powerfully centralised educational system and the whole range of journalistic media – to secure access to the raw materials, geopolitical leverage and other advantages of colonial domination, and to ensure public support for the sacrifices at home and harsh administrative actions abroad necessary to achieve and maintain that domination. Writers and artists in France followed these developments closely, sometimes supporting government policy in directly commissioned works, more often responding spontaneously to what the young Victor Hugo called the 'general preoccupation' with the Orient and its fascinating 'colours'. It is not surprising that some of the most familiar and historically significant instances of Orientalism in the arts are French: the poems of Hugo himself (Les Orientales, 1829), or paintings of harem scenes and scimitar-wielding warriors by Ingres, Delacroix, Renoir and – closer to our own day – Matisse.

In French cultural history, the 'Orient' is thus largely equivalent to North Africa and the Near and Middle East (though of course certain artists and writers, especially the generation around 1900, were fascinated with what we in English are more likely to think of as 'the Orient', namely the Far East). But is the world of the Bible, of Samson, really identifiable with the Middle East? For writers and painters at the time the answer was plainly yes. Believing that much in contemporary Palestine or Egypt (or indeed Algeria or Morocco) was largely unchanged

10 Conflated from two discussions in Said, Orientalism, 4, 119-20.
from biblical times, they freely incorporated what they knew of these areas as historically authenticating detail in religious poems or canvases. Similarly, photographers offered for sale pictures of men on camels and women at wells intended to serve as — to quote the title of one illustrated book — *Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion*; some photographers even costumed and posed Middle Easterners in reenactments of specific biblical stories.

The illusion of Orient

Such acts of appropriation expose the ideological agenda in much Orientalism: the drive to portray, to capture these unfamiliar regions was often motivated, though not always consciously, by Westerners’ needs and desires. Precisely how poetry and especially painting (to focus for the moment on these two forms of ‘discursive practice’) constructed the Orient for the West, though, could vary a great deal, in ways that have illuminating parallels in Saint-Saëns’s opera.

Immediately striking in many Orientalist works are the references to local settings and customs. Poets would often guide the reader’s sense of place by citing easily recognised names and terms: Hugo’s *Les Orientales* includes such titles as ‘Cri de guerre du mufti’, ‘La Douleur du pacha’, ‘La Sultane favorite’, and ‘Le Derviche’. Artists painted opium pipes, Algerian and Moroccan costumes and Turkish wall tiles, items that — precisely because they are rendered with Western precision of detail and roundness of form — are good at creating the illusion that the image is situated in ‘the East’. In the process, such phrases and visual ‘props’ reinforce one’s own sense of being safely situated in ‘the West’.

Painting, more than poetry, offers a particularly helpful analogy to music, in that composers and painters alike practised arts that were widely accepted as being universally true: blessedly unaffected by the barrier of language. Just as painters could mobilise the illusion of a transparent window on to another part of the world, so composers’ attempts to imitate or evoke the musics of the region in question carried great credibility, though for technical reasons they rarely if ever attained the ethnographic precision of, say, Delacroix’s *in situ* sketches of Moroccan street life. (The limitations of Western notation became quickly evident to ethnomusicologists and other musicians travelling in the East.) The main early proponent of Arab-style music was Félicien David, whose much-discussed works were mounted with phenomenal success in major halls and theatres throughout Europe and America. Operas such as *Les Pêcheurs de perles* and Delibes’s *Lakmé*...
might never have been written had David not paved the way with his secular oratorio *Le Désert* (1844) – a work based in part on tunes he had gathered in Egypt – and with his freely exotic operas, notably *La Perle du Brésil* (1851) and *Lalla-Roukh* (1862).

Saint-Saëns admired David and his music enough to write a thoughtful and appreciative article in his memory, soon after completing *Samson*. More generally, Saint-Saëns was an unusually learned and curious musician, interested in the music of the past and of other cultures: he prepared scholarly editions of works by Rameau and Gluck, composed numerous works in exotic style inspired by frequent and extended winter sojourns in Egypt and Algeria, and contributed a substantial article on the ancient Greek lyre for Lavignac’s renowned music encyclopedia.

The most obviously exotic numbers in the opera are the two ballets. The ‘Dance of the Priestesses of Dagon’ (Act I) gives the fullest glimpse of the Philistine maidens, who wave their garlands and – as the stage directions carefully put it – ‘seem to provoke [i.e., not intentionally] the Hebrew warriors’; Delilah, joining in their ‘voluptuous gestures’, provokes Samson in a more calculating manner, despite his efforts to avert his eyes from ‘the enchantress’. Part of the demure yet intriguing effect comes from the elusive modal language of the music: the opening phrase (see Ex. 1) uses a minor third degree but a major sixth, in addition to a lowered seventh, that single most distinctive sign of temporal or geographical displacement in Western music of recent centuries. Certain orchestral touches reinforce the sense of Easternness or perhaps ‘ancientness’ (e.g., the fourth beat of Ex. 1, lightly graced by a tap on the *tambour de Basque* and flicked notes in the harp). Though it would be hard to claim anything specifically Middle Eastern or biblical here, the music, aptly described by Hervey as ‘mysteriously subdued ... most original and taking’, characterises the pagan priestesses who dance to it as voluptuous yet innocently so.

The music of the even more famous Bacchanale (Act III) gestures more plainly towards local colour, in a quasi-ethnographic sense. In this ballet, the Philistine princes and maidens prolong their debauched revels beyond daybreak, urged on by hypnotic rhythms in the castanets, timpani and low strings (notably an asymmetrical ostinato: $3 + 3 + 2$), and by florid melodies and garish harmonies based on the Arab Hijāz mode, which Saint-Saëns doubtless chose for its strikingly ‘foreign’ augmented second between degrees 2 and 3. (See Ex. 2a and, for compari-

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20 Arthur Hervey, *Saint-Saëns* (London, 1922; rpt. Freeport, N.Y., 1969), 58. Indeed, the priestesses’ lack of overt seductiveness nicely illustrates the psychocultural function of exotic eroticism for the Westerner; the exotic offers, according to Andrew Martin (see n. 14), ‘a prolonged postponement ... perpetually unconsummated (and therefore undiminished) desire’ (p. 66). The somewhat more excited middle section of the dance might be a convincing moment for Delilah to step forward and begin appropriating this otherwise innocent number for her own unsavoury purposes. See Peter Conrad, *A Song of Love and Death: The Meaning of Opera* (New York, 1987), 70.
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Ex. 1. Act I, Dance of the Priestesses.

son, Ex. 2b: a North African muezzin call, likewise in Hijâz.\(^{21}\) The rhapsodic oboe solo that opens the number (see Ex. 3) captures something of the improvisatory freedom that Westerners find so remarkable in much Middle Eastern music, and its opening bears an uncanny resemblance to Ex. 2b and other versions of the muezzin’s call to prayer available in transcription and on disc.\(^{22}\) But the evocation of Hijâz amounts almost to caricature, in that Saint-Saëns presents the augmented second at not one but two places in the scale: between degrees 2 and 3 but also between 6 and 7. This is, to be sure, an option in traditional Arab music (it is called ‘Hijâz Kar’), but one is at least as likely to pair a lower tetrachord in Hijâz with an upper tetrachord from a different mode.\(^{23}\) Saint-Saëns’s repeated insistence on the augmented second in the Bacchanale can be seen as an instance of the standard Orientalist practice (described by anthropologist Francis Affergan) of emphasising the ‘[sedimentary] residues … of what differs most’ from Western practice; such an emphasis ‘reifies’ the Easterner’s ‘difference’, thereby heightening rather than bridging the dichotomous gap between Self and Other.\(^{24}\)

**Point of view: The Other as temptation and threat**

Like the ‘Dance of the Priestesses’, the Bacchanale is sensuously (and, at its close, powerfully) orchestrated, and features many other surprising touches that, however fantastic their origin, add further strangeness – clear instances of the ‘distant Other’ as at once ‘monstrous’ (or ‘frightful’) and ‘attractive’.\(^{25}\) One can understand why both numbers have long maintained an independent existence as pops concert


\(^{22}\) See examples in Oxford University Press’s *History of Music in Sound*, I (American RCA Victor) and *Islamic Liturgy: Song and Dance at a Meeting of Dervishes* (Folkways Records FR 8943); also Rouanet, ‘Musique arabe’, 2820.


\(^{24}\) Affergan (see n. 1), 103–4. The particular features of the Bacchanale may also be related to its origin, separate from the opera, as an uncompleted *Marche turque* (Ratner, ‘Genèse’ [see n. 5], 111).

favourites, as well as why writers attempting to address Orientalism in Samson have focused exclusively on them, leaving the rest of the work undiscussed.

But to stop here would reflect a narrowly positivistic definition of Orientalism. There is far more that links this opera to the Orientalist impulses of the day. As mentioned earlier, the primary aim of nineteenth-century Orientalism was to ‘represent’ the East to the West: precisely how this was done varied a great deal, and did not always involve non-European stylistic means. After all, poets rarely wrote in anything like an Eastern manner, despite some passing fascination with the intellectually challenging form of the Persian ghazal.

Similarly, Delacroix and others – to return briefly to visual art – did not generally
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attempt to make their work resemble Middle Eastern painting. Quite the contrary, they tended to find non-European art stiff and inexpressive. Orientalist painters tried instead to evoke distant scenes in the most up-to-date Western manner, making use of virtuosic brush techniques, recent developments in colour theory, three-dimensional modelling of form and placement of the figures in specific, often theatrical relationships (through glance, gesture and so on). Art historians none the less speak of an Orientalist attitude towards, for example, the nude or scantily dressed female figures in Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*, Horace Vernet’s *Judah and Tamar*, Gérôme’s *Slave Market* and *Moorish Bath*, and Debat-Ponsan’s *The Massage*, even though the canvases are technically indistinguishable from their contemporaries’ (and their own) paintings of Parisian businessmen, grazing cows or scenes from Roman mythology.

These images of woman embody what has been called a *topos obligé* of Western fantasies about the Orient: the female figures are portrayed as objects of desire – primarily as odalisques or concubines who are voluptuous, vulnerable, indolent and sexually available to a (present or implied) Oriental male, himself a displacement of the Western male viewer of the painting. Most relevant for our understanding of Delilah, these women can also be not just desirable but actively and dangerously desiring. Saint-Saëns’s close friend Henri Regnault described his *Salome* (see Fig. 1) as ‘a sort of tame black panther, yet still wild and cruel’, exhibiting a ‘caressing ferocity’; the poet and critic Théophile Gautier agreed, proclaiming her ‘diabolically, irresistibly fascinating’ and ‘bestial’.

It is important to recall how little the issue of carnal desire, especially in women, was openly addressed in European high art of the mid-to late nineteenth century, a direct function (and reinforcement) of male domination in the larger society.

26 For example, Delacroix (diary, 11 March 1850), cited in Rosenthal, *Orientalism* (see n. 15), 33.
29 Henri Cazalis, *Henri Regnault: Sa Vie et son œuvre* (Paris, 1872), 74; Arthur Duparc, ed., *Correspondance de Henri Regnault*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1873), 361–2. Regnault’s *Salome* was originally a study of a young Italian peasant, and early critics noted that she resembled a ‘gypsy’. Painters did not always differentiate between the various dark-haired, dark-eyed peoples of the Mediterranean (Regnault regularly equated Spain with Africa in his letters); furthermore, and confusingly today, their harem pictures often featured conspicuously fair-complexioned odalisques, reflecting the fact that Middle Eastern harems included captive Circassian women.
Fig. 1. Henri Regnault, *Salome* (1870; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George F. Baker, 1916).
This silencing or ‘dismembering’ of women also helps explain the exotic mask, under which much that was otherwise repressed could be smuggled into the art gallery and opera house. Gérôme and the others used ethnographic distance as a way of deflecting criticism from what is primarily an erotic (and at times arguably pornographic) project. Heinrich Heine confessed his delight and sense of complicity when Vernet’s Judah and Tamar (see Fig. 2) was first displayed. The daughter-in-law’s breast, slipping out of her robe, is, he noted, ‘blooming, scented, beckoning, like the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden’, and her dark eyes are ‘seductive’: ‘The woman is at once apple and serpent, and we [male viewers?] should not blame poor Judah’ for yielding to temptation. Feminist art historian Linda Nochlin throws a harsher light on the phenomenon: she imagines Gérôme as explaining, in reference to his various scenes of Arab slave markets (see Fig. 3), ‘I am merely taking careful note of the fact that less enlightened races indulge in the trade in naked women – but isn’t it arousing’.

No naked bodies are put on the auction block in Samson et Dalila, nor is there much emphasis on the inaccessibility of beautiful women ‘hidden away from the world’, as in the many Orientalist works that focus on the harem. None the less, Delilah and the dancing women of Act I mentioned above are explicitly presented as a seductive threat to the righteous, God-fearing Hebrews, especially Samson. Such a portrayal was far less likely to occur in an opera set in, say, Cromwell’s England, the Paris of Henri II or medieval Germany. Indeed, it is hard to think of any nineteenth-century repertoire opera that so systematically sets Woman as a trap for the unwary tenor, except perhaps Carmen and Tannhäuser. The Orientalist point of view thus saturates the work through an essentially binary construction: Samson, the proto-European, is male and favoured by God; Delilah, chief representative of the East, is female and seeks his downfall and that of the God-chosen West. For the most part, Samson and his people are presented as the dramatic ‘subject’, the collective Self of this story, whose point of view the audience is primarily led to adopt.

It is worth pausing to examine how this ‘point of view’ is constructed textually and musically. Even before stepping into the opera house, audiences in Saint-Saëns’s day would clearly have felt in sympathy with the monotheistic Hebrews rather than the idol-worshipping and decadent Philistines. In particular, they would have been prepared to see Samson not only as a divinely inspired Hebrew leader, but

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32 Nochlin, ‘Imaginary Orient’ (see n. 8), 45.

Fig. 2. Horace Vernet, *Judah and Tamar* (1840; Wallace Collection, London).
Fig. 3. Jean-Léon Gérôme, Slave Market (early 1860s; Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts).
also as a prefiguration of Christ and thus of Western civilisation.\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, given the increasingly anti-Semitic outlook of educated Europeans in the late nineteenth century, it may be that an Old Testament story could only be acceptable if presented in a Christian, i.e., ‘universal’, light.\textsuperscript{35}

This partial (in both senses) reading of Samson is strengthened by some basic alterations to the biblical tale. Samson’s earlier, rumbustious exploits in war and love, including his responses to Delilah’s first three attempts to learn his secret, are mentioned only obliquely. In contrast, newly concocted for the libretto (or, rather, as we shall see, recycled from Voltaire’s very free adaption of the Bible story, \textit{Samson [1732]}) are nearly all the events in Act I, including the lament of the captive Hebrews, Samson’s slaying of Abimelech and the Hebrew revolt – all events that emphasise liberation from heathen bondage.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Ex.4a.png}
\caption{Act I, syncopated string accompaniment to the Hebrews’ chorus ‘Dieu d’Israël’.
}
\end{figure}

Saint-Saëns reinforced this privileging of the West (and its males – the Hebrew women have no representative, no separate ‘voice’) through basic musical and structural means. He opened the opera with an extended lament of the captive Hebrews, rich in references to the styles and technique of European sacred music, leading the listener to view the Philistines primarily through Hebrew eyes, namely as oppressors. These references include a churning background melody in the violins (see Ex. 4a) and eventually a fugue (see Ex. 4b) incorporating references to the more solemn aspects of the works of Bach or Handel (or Mendelssohn), reminding us that the work was first conceived as an oratorio.\textsuperscript{36}


\textsuperscript{36} The opening chorus is dated 1859 in the manuscript, several years before Saint-Saëns hatched the plan of a \textit{Samson} work (Ratner, ‘\textit{Genèse}’ [see n. 5], 111).
Ex. 4b. Act I, Hebrews' choral fugue (with unison orchestral accompaniment, omitted here).

Ex. 5. Act I, Hebrews' prayer of thanks after victory over the Philistines.

Similarly, the pious chorus sung by the old Hebrew men in the middle of the act, after the Hebrews have routed the Philistine forces ('Hymne de joie, / Hymne de délivrance'), though presented as archaic chant on a four-note pentatonic fragment, is more reminiscent of Gregorian chant than of anything Middle Eastern (see Ex. 5). The present context does not permit us to discuss further the Hebrews' music, which includes such things as Samson's distinctive, 'heroic' tendency to sing in stentorian, trumpet-like four-bar phrases; but this introduction to the dominating Occidental point of view will be helpful when we turn to Saint-Saëns's sharply opposed image of Oriental religious music.
As in the paintings of Gérôme, the Western view of the Orientals is not entirely reproachful; indeed, in the portrayal of Oriental women, it verges on the admiring, even the voyeuristic. We first meet the Philistine women in the middle of Act I, immediately after the sombre, archaic chorus just mentioned. The young women enter singing with exquisite sweetness and innocence of springtime, rosebuds and love ('aimons toujours!'), while the violins evoke mild breezes, using the women's opening motif in diminution (see Ex. 6). They are thus allied with the beauty of nature, a feature of the Orientalist paradigm that intensifies a standard Romantic preconception (woman is to nature and love as man is to civilisation and war).

Delilah now speaks up and, as she addresses inviting phrases – about her arms,

Peter Conrad (see n. 20), 70, speaks of 'the seditious entreaties of the Philistine women' and claims that their music is 'suggestively whispered'. There is, though, no indication in the stage directions or the sung text that they are directing their words to the Hebrew warriors. Arthur Pougin more accurately captured this number's innocent sweetness: 'plein de fraîcheur et de grâce' (Ménestrel [1890], 355).
her ‘ebony hair’, her kisses, her ‘sweet odour’ — directly to Samson (who has been her lover before the opera begins) and glances provocatively at him, we feel Samson’s anxiety and at the same time want to keep listening ourselves, fascinated by this forthright projection of unpressed sensuality.\(^{39}\) A 1915 photo from the Met (see Fig. 4), gives a nice sense of the dramatic tension: a womanly Delilah seeking to enchain a deeply conflicted Samson with garlands of flowers while the Old Hebrew tries vainly to warn him of her danger. Delilah’s opening phrases command attention by their upward leaps — frequently of a sixth, extending from the fifth degree to the third above (see Ex. 7a) — and looping arpeggios (see Ex. 7b–c). Samson seems troubled by her call: in comparison to his forthright utterances in the first half of Act I, he expresses himself in anguished descending chromatic lines. But, as the trio progresses, he begins to adopt Delilah’s looping figures, as if already yielding to her stronger will or to an echoing desire within himself.\(^{40}\)

Even more evocative, and plainly more effective in breaking Samson’s resistance, is her aria ‘Printemps qui commence’. This aria begins (see Ex. 8a) with eight-bar periods constructed from a simple succession of two-bar phrases, entirely syllabic in declamation and supported by the barest of held-note accompaniments: a syncopated dominant pedal, faintly alluding perhaps to pedal tones in Middle Eastern music. But the intensity soon builds about and below the obstinate (40-bar-long) pedal, ensnaring not only Samson but the listener in the long stretch of seductively melismatic melody reproduced in Ex. 8b: the eight bars are now built of two large phrases that are themselves powerfully asymmetrical (5 + 3).\(^{41}\) The love duet in Act II, not least its opening (see Ex. 13a below), is similarly rich in sinuous and extended phrases that assert Delilah’s mastery of the art of seduction, now set in relief — as were Delilah’s first utterances in Act I — by fragmented, angular responses from Samson.

The listener’s growing fascination with Delilah, I would contend, shifts the point of view maintained elsewhere in the opera, for by the end of Act II we regard Samson rather the way Delilah herself presumably does — as a brave and well-principled, obviously attractive strongman who is pitifully susceptible to sexual domination by a woman. The opera is, in many ways, about a man’s ‘undoing’, \textit{la défaite d’un homme}.\(^{42}\) As we shall see, though, such a reading implies no victory for the woman or for the East she represents.

\(^{39}\) This interest in identifying ‘our’ (or ‘one’s’) response to the Philistine women is not artificially imposed by a present-day reader but has its roots in the opera’s reception history. Hervey, for example, frankly admitted (in 1922) that after the older Hebrews’ ‘rather monotonous psalm . . . one is not sorry to see them go and to welcome the appearance of Delilah . . . [and of the priestesses, the latter singing] strains of the most irresistible charm’; by the end of the act, he adds, Delilah has ‘complete[d] her victory over Samson and, incidentally, of her audience’ (Saint-Saëns [see n. 20], 52–3). Roger Delage, more recently, wrote of Act II that ‘we, too’, nearly ‘succumb’ to Delilah’s ruse (\textit{Avant-scène}, 90).

\(^{40}\) Samson’s yielding here is noted by Baumann, quoted in Collet, \textit{Samson} (see n. 4), 87.

\(^{41}\) Continuity between the two phrases is created by melodic sequence, the near-vocalise on ‘flamme’ being answered a third lower by an almost identical setting of ‘Vient’.

\(^{42}\) I am referring here to Catherine Clément’s controversial \textit{Opera, or the Undoing of Women}, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1988).
Fig. 4. Scene from the end of Act I: Margarete Matzenauer (Delilah), Enrico Caruso (Samson), Léon Rothier (Old Hebrew) - photo by White (1915; Metropolitan Opera Archives).

Ex. 7a. Act I, Delilah’s first words.

Ex. 7b. Act I, Trio: Delilah’s beguiling invitations.
Ex. 7c. Act I trio: Delilah pours it on.

Ex. 8a. Act I, Delilah's aria (opening).

Ex. 8b. Act I, Delilah's aria (more extended phrases).
Oriental despots

In contrast to these voluptuous creatures, the Philistine men are agents of an oppressive government and a cruel, superstitious religion, thus consistent with Orientalist stereotypes of Middle Eastern males as smug, single-minded, intolerant, power-mad despots and fanatics, impulsive and prone to violence (when they aren’t ogling their women in a drugged haze). The Orientalist paintings of the period overwhelmingly present men as engaging in such pursuits as stabbing a lion at close range (Delacroix’s Lion Hunt), collecting taxes at rifle point, performing military exercises on horseback, or going into a wild, disordered dance of religious fanaticism. In Regnault’s famous Summary Execution under the Moorish Kings of Grenada (see Fig. 5), a caliph – coolly absent from the painting – has an exquisitely healthy servant hew off the head of an infidel or enemy. When the painting was displayed in 1872, Théophile Gautier explained with titillating authority that a caliph could command fourteen killings daily without trial or public account.

In reality, the political leaders of the Middle East and their fighting troops – however fanatical, however bloodthirsty, however highly skilled with horse and rifle – proved nearly powerless against the gunboats of Western imperialism. But Orientalist art works, by insistently assigning enormous power to the archetypal Arab leaders (or their ancient stand-ins), made them easier to hate, the viewer being led to side with the innocent victims of these dangerous egomaniacs. In the present instance, the audience may gradually come to identify with Delilah’s point of view towards the end of Act II (without abandoning its primary identification with the Hebrews – hence the great sense of dramatic tension), but is never given the least cause to sympathise with the Philistine males.

Abimelech (the satrap of Gaza) and the High Priest of Dagon are important figures; taken together with the Old Hebrew, their approximate counterpart on the ‘other side’, they complete the cast of main singing characters in Samson and make an interesting group for comparison. All three are basses or baritones, and sing music that is somewhat stentorian or declamatory. The Old Hebrew, indeed, is little more than a sententious basso comprimario, a symbolic, rather ineffectual reminder of the Divine mission that Samson is on the brink of neglecting. The portrayal lacks Orientalising features (consistent with Saint-Saëns’s approach to the Hebrews), but also commands little presence, especially if one compares it to Meyerbeer’s Bertram or Marcel, or Verdi’s Monterone, Fiesco and Grand Inquisitor. Perhaps there is some authorial intention here: a dramatically lightweight and old-fashioned? voice of moral reminder, deprived of choral support, makes it easier for the audience to participate vicariously in, even look forward to, Samson’s transgression in the next act.

44 Quoted in Duparc (see n. 29), 387–8.
45 The Hebrew men and women stand on the stage with mouths shut from the Philistines’ entrance to the end of the act.
Fig. 5. Regnault, *Summary Execution under the Moorish Kings of Grenada* (1870; Musée d'Orsay, Paris – photo courtesy of Musées Nationaux, Paris).
In contrast, the High Priest of Dagon commands an intense high-baritone and carries out his dramatic function with correspondingly greater effect. Although he acts as the evil motor of the plot, he is no generic operatic villain. His genocidal intentions are made explicit in his Act I curse of the Hebrew people:

Maudite à jamais soit la race
Des enfants d'Israël!
Je veux en effacer la trace,
Les abreuver de fiel!
Maudit soit celui qui les guide!
J'écraserai du pied
Ses os brisés,
Sa gorge aride,
Sans frémir de pitié!

[Accursed forever be the race of the children of Israel! I will wipe them out without trace, drench them in bitterness! A curse on him who leads them! I will pitilessly crush underfoot his broken bones, his parched throat.]

The words are reinforced by a striking, militaristic figure that will become one of the most memorable, and most stomach-churning, of the opera’s many recurring motifs (see Ex. 9). Here Saint-Saëns, as Rodney Milnes has suggested, seems to take a public position against the increasingly virulent anti-Semitism of Gobineau and others. If so, though, the moral force of Saint-Saëns’s statement is weakened by his willingness elsewhere in the opera simply to shift the burden of cursed Orientalness from Hebrews to Philistines: by turning the Hebrews into proto-Christians, and Samson into a proto-Christ, he risks casting the Philistine leaders and people in the role of Herod and the Christ-rejecting Jews.

This denigration of the Philistines becomes particularly clear in the portrayal, in Act I, of the hateful satrap Abimelech. Abimelech makes only one appearance — long enough to blaspheme the Hebrew religion, lurch at Samson with a sword and be murdered by the enraged hero — but the characterisation is strikingly imaginative and specific. This is a mocker trapped in the rigidity of his own mocking: his taunts about the ‘deaf’ and ‘timorous’ god of the Hebrews hammer away in crotchets (he lacks rhythmic suppleness, suggesting a basic deficiency in intelligence or civilisation), and he seems to hold primitive ideas about how to put short phrases together to make longer ones (see Ex. 10). These noxious pronouncements are largely unaccompanied (except, towards the end of his solo, by two cornets playing oily chromatic lines), but they are uniformly doubled by two ophicleides, the same raspy instruments that Saint-Saëns’s friend Berlioz...
had used (with bassoons) for a sardonic parody of the *Dies irae* plainchant in the *Symphonie fantastique*.

As if this were not enough to damn the satrap in our eyes, Saint-Saëns has each of Abimelech's remarks call forth a trivial, sarcastic reply in the high winds and trumpets, with little taps on the cymbal (see the end of Ex. 10); Collet sees these ritornelli as 'similar to invectives'. I take the resulting portrait, though, not just as villainous but as diabolic: one is put in mind less of various Meyerbeerian religious fanatics (George Bernard Shaw's claim here) than of Méphistophélès in Berlioz's * Damnation de Faust* or Bertram, another Devil-figure, in Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable*, both of whom likewise summon memorably trivial dancings in the orchestra, or orchestra and chorus, to aid their cause. The diabolical edge to Saint-Saëns's portrait of Abimelech thus makes it something of a setup, preparing us to feel untroubled when Samson slays the man. Yet Saint-Saëns has weighted the emotional scales so artfully that we do not feel manipulated, just as we are not aware of the calculated nastiness of putting racist words, to a determined beat, into the mouth of the Philistine High Priest.

One might press the point further and state that the musically 'diabolical' Abimelech is an almost literal example in music of the West's oft-noted public 'demonisation' of political figures in the Islamic Middle East, a tendency widespread in the nineteenth century and still at work today. Indeed, there is hardly a positive feature in any male Philistine in this opera: even the minor characters (the soldier-messengers) are at best cowards. In certain other Orientalist operas – *Die Entführung*, *Aida*, *Madama Butterfly* – villainy and goodness are not so strictly assigned to national groups. Here the opera's origin in a biblical tale of the chosen people triumphing over the ungodly oppressor has imposed a schema of moral certainty and national superiority that is perhaps unsurpassed in the repertoire and may today seem particularly offensive. What is arguably acceptable in an oratorio may take on a more concrete viciousness when enacted by costumed characters on the stage.

One might argue, though, for a very different yet not completely incompatible political reading of both Abimelech and the High Priest, in which the Oriental exterior of these despotic characters is (as we noted of the sensuous priestesses)

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48 *Samson* (see n. 4), 83–4. Saint-Saëns, while composing this scene, admitted to friends that he was having some difficulty finding a way to 'entrer dans la peau d'Abimélech'.

49 Review of 4 October 1893 (the inadequate British first performance), reprinted in Lewis Crompton's Shaw anthology, _The Great Composers: Reviews and Bombardments_ (Berkeley, 1978), 291. Hervey likewise speaks of Abimelech's 'quaint solo' (*Saint-Saëns* [see n. 20], 52). The archaic awkwardness of phrase structure was thus clearly vivid to listeners at the turn of the century, if not today (see _Avant-scène_, 81, 84).

50 The dance-like replies to these two characters represent offstage or invisible spirits that assist in the devilish work. Saint-Saëns possibly had something similar in mind, the orchestra serving as a supportive 'chorus' to Abimelech, a function it more clearly fulfils in the High Priest's solo.
Le double plus lent ($\frac{d}{2} = 92$)

High Priest

Mau-dite à ja-mais soit la ra-ce Des en-fants d'Is-ra-

Ex. 9. Act I, aria of the Philistine High Priest (opening).

Allegro

Abimelech

Ce Dieu que vo-tre voix im-plo-re Est de-meu-ré sourd

Ex. 10. Act I, Abimelech's aria (opening).
a mask or deflection rather than a primary characteristic. Seen this way, the two characters can be taken as symbols of morally corrupt authority, much as the oppressive Egyptian priesthood in Act IV of Aida might stand for everything Verdi detested in the politics and religion of his native Italy. If we seriously entertain this reading, we face the possibility of leaving the Orientalist paradigm behind, or at least of enriching it with other, non-Orientalist concerns.\textsuperscript{51} There was, after all, a long tradition of allegorical uses of the Orient; the \textit{Lettres persanes} (1721) of Montesquieu, for example, demand to be read as an Orientalist fantasy but also as a commentary on despotism and dissolute court life in France, just as Delacroix’s \textit{Sardanapalus} (1828) seems to be primarily ‘about’ not a cruel Eastern tyrant but the Romantic artist’s relationship to, and heartless exploitation of, the people around him.

To emphasise thus the ‘endotic’ subtext beneath overt ‘exoticism’ is not to deny that a given work reflects the unequal distribution of power among the nations of the world; furthermore, the very appropriation of the Other for the West’s own purposes of self-criticism (or whatever) has probably contributed, however inadvertently, to the continued propagation of racial and ethnic stereotypes. None the less, the realisation that European subjectivity may persist behind these dark-skinned masks, that – to change the metaphor – the Orient may often be a blank screen for projecting Western concerns about itself, can change in important ways the listener’s or critic’s response to the work.

The enemy

The problem of how to ‘read’ the Philistines – whether as the ‘Other’ or as an aspect of ‘us’ – arises more insistently in Act III, where we finally encounter the Philistine customs and religion in full dress. As in the Abimelech scene in Act I, much of the music is given a mocking edge. The chorus of Philistines taunts the blinded strongman in a manner reminiscent of the Bach Passions, though Saint-Saëns denies his crowd any dignity. We seem, indeed, to have been thrown into a comic opera: ‘Prends garde à tes pas! Samson! Samson! Sa colère est plaisante! Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah!’ (Watch your step! Samson! Samson! His anger is ludicrous!). Delilah adds her own insults, in music that is largely a brittle, sarcastic rewriting of her supposedly sincere love music in Act II, a blast of abusiveness that stirs Samson’s vengeful wrath and that, no less important, may cause opera-goers – trained to trust words and music of love – to feel disgust for this subversive harridan. The High Priest now has his one and only confrontation with Samson, and proves how shallow he is by calling on Samson to ‘amuse us by singing again to your lover the sweet offers’ that brought his downfall (‘Divertis-nous, / En redisant à ton amante / Les doux propos’), and by ridiculing the impotent ‘anger’ of Samson’s God.

Just what the Philistines as a whole are worth is further revealed in the glitzy,

slimy Bacchanale discussed above (here a talented costume designer and lighting director can appropriately suggest the excesses seen in Orientalist paintings)\(^{52}\) and most of all in the triumphal hymn (‘Gloire à Dagon vainqueur’), a fascinating mix of Bach and Offenbach. This number, the last in the opera except for Samson’s brief prayer for strength and the act of destruction itself, begins with a hearty, major-mode turn-plus-scalar-descent figure presented in unison by the strings and suggesting festive music of the Baroque; any sacred implications, though, are immediately distanced when the High Priest and Delilah enter singing, against the orchestra’s Baroque figure, an over-simple cantus firmus in exact canon (see Ex. 11), suggesting archaic rigidity and perhaps also banality or lack of ethical substance.\(^{53}\)

The instrumental forces become more shrill as the hymn proceeds (extensive melodic passages for glockenspiel!), and – at the singers’ words ‘Dagon se révèle’ (Dagon reveals himself), when the sacred fire flares up – the music changes into a con brio dance, something between a quick polka and a cancan.\(^{54}\) Delilah eventually adds some coloratura swoops (see Ex. 12) and (with the High Priest) fifteen bars of chromatic vocalising that Collet reads as ecstatic, though the swoops at least might be heard as vulgarly theatrical – or perhaps simply as Italian-operatic.\(^{55}\)

Saint-Saëns has been accused of yielding to the Parisian taste for music of the dance hall and comic opera in certain movements of the Second and Third Piano Concertos. Here the choice of a trite hopping dance – music that is utterly philistine (with a small ‘p’) – for a moment of supposed religious exaltation seems, on one level, clearly conscious, a final castigation of the degenerate Philistines and their ungodly religion. Just as Abimelech’s smug, merciless sarcasm prepared us to accept and even desire his death, so the portrayal of the Philistines as mocking and profane, despite their outward show of piety, anticipates their burial under the tumbling stones of the temple. Again, though, an ‘endotic’ reading is possible: that Saint-Saëns, under the guise of castigating some safely distant other time and place, was in fact reproaching his European contemporaries. Indeed, Peter Conrad sees the whole opera as a struggle between the ideal (spiritual) and the

\(^{52}\) The stage directions mention a statue of Dagon and a sacrificial table, but do not call for these to be used in a ritual manner until the hymn at the end of the act. The Bacchanale thus should not be turned into a mini-Sacre du printemps (as in the Covent Garden videotape: Thorn EMI/HBO video), but should display, as the word ‘bacchanale’ suggests, the ‘excess of sexual expenditure’ typical of the Orientalist fantasy (Behdad, ‘The Eroticized Orient’, [see n. 33], 109). Pougin described the dancing as ‘charmante’ and ‘gracieuse’ (Le Ménestrel 58, no. 48 [27 November 1892], 279–80). Admittedly, that production may have ignored the brutal elements in Saint-Saëns’s ballet music; but some productions today go to the other extreme.

\(^{53}\) See Baumann, Grandes formes, 418, cited in Collet, Samson (see n. 4), 110: ‘the scholastic form, the quick decorations, the perpetual back-and-forth of the two voices in imitation portray marvelously an oriental rite, delirious and rigid’.

\(^{54}\) Baumann and Collet consider it a manifestation of the Philistine people’s growing ‘dementia’ (Samson, 110, 117).

\(^{55}\) Collet, Samson, 117; Conrad (see n. 20); Pougin (see n. 37), 356. Delilah’s only other instances of coloratura are in two vengeful moments, alone and with the High Priest (Act II). Florid singing thus seems to be an expression of her pagan fervour, her hatred and revenge, roughly the same function it performs for the Queen of the Night (in Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte) and some of Verdi’s strong heroines (Abigaille in Nabucco and Violetta in her cabaletta of excess, ‘Sempre libera’, La traviata, Act I).
Ex. 11. Act III, Hymn to Dagon (from the opening section).

vulgar (fleshly), expressed precisely through contrasting and irreconcilable musical styles: 'When [Samson] destroys the infidel theatre which poses as a temple, oratorio renders its last judgment on opera.' Such a critique could be read as implicating the repressive French government and Catholic clergy: Saint-Saëns was throughout his life an outspoken republican and anticlericalist.

I would suggest a third reading of the Hymn to Dagon, more positive than those just discussed, but not incompatible with them. Perhaps Saint-Saëns felt free here to give expression to a more joyful, populist view of religious celebration than was considered acceptable in the official, often sanctimonious high culture of the day. Realms of joyful feeling, even dance-like impulses – major elements in certain sacred works of Bach, Handel or Haydn – had in nineteenth-century sacred music largely been repressed as unseemly. (We regularly encounter them again in our own century, e.g., in choral works of Mahler, Stravinsky, Honegger, Orff, Poulenc and Bernstein.) If Saint-Saëns – a confirmed atheist – at times felt hemmed in by the proprieties of bourgeois religiosity, represented for example by the choral festivals of England (for which he composed several now forgotten works, including a major one that explicitly contrasts paganism and Christianity: \textit{La Lyre et la harpe}), he may have welcomed, or at least unconsciously responded to, the possibility of giving voice to a more sensual and unbuttoned strain of religious feeling. That, at least, is a view consistent with the favourable comments on this scene made by early writers: ‘highly original and inspiriting’, admirably ‘grandiose’. ‘The composer’, opined the \textit{London Times}, ‘has surpassed himself in the brilliant and highly-coloured music of the Philistine festival.’

Such straightforward appreciation of the hymn leads us to a final interpretative possibility, one that reads the number as both positive and negative: perhaps Saint-Saëns intended the very grandeur and spirit of this music to form an ironic contrast to the cruelty of the Philistines’ behaviour and the barbarity of their religion. Such a ‘double message’ about the Oriental world was commonplace. Regnault’s aforementioned \textit{Summary Execution} (see Fig. 5), for example, deals with a more recent (fifteenth-century) yet still chronologically distant episode in the history of ‘the Orient’. In this picture, Regnault admitted, he aimed to place the high degree of ‘their civilisation’ and ‘the artistic elegance’ enjoyed by the Moorish kings of Spain (represented in the background by the elaborate and delicate wall decorations of the Alhambra) in stark contrast to ‘their cruelty’, their ‘disdain’ and the ‘Mohammedan despotism and indifference’ of their actions (represented by the severed head on the stairs, the splatters of blood against the white marble and the executioner’s composure as he wipes clean his scimitar).

Regnault’s comment, by invoking Islam, points forward as well as backward, suggesting a simultaneous attack on modern-day North Africans. Opera goers,

56 Conrad (see n. 20), 70.
57 Hervey, Saint-Saëns (see n. 20), 54; Pougin (see n. 52).
59 From a letter to Henri Cazalis (22 May 1870), discussing an early version of this (or a very similar, never completed) project, in Duparc (see n. 29), 368–72.
similarly, may have imagined the double message in the Dagon scene as targeting not just the Philistines themselves but also the present-day inheritors of the Philistines’ territory (and, etymologically, of their name): the Palestinians. Westerners have often emphasised the achievements of ancient Middle Eastern peoples, precisely in order to set in relief what they see as the near-total lack of contemporary achievement and culture in the region. ‘These beautiful structures’, ran a quotation accompanying some mid-nineteenth-century lithographs of the ruined temple at Baalbek (an analogous image is given in Fig. 6), ‘though replete with interest and delight, carry with them a mingled feeling of humiliation [i.e., humility] at the transitory greatness of all human conceptions, and regret that such proud relics of genius should be in the hands of a people incapable of appreciating their merits and consequently heedless of their complete destruction.’ Émile Baumann seems to be pointing in this direction when he argues that the musical richness of Saint-Saëns’s hymn scene ‘will turn to the profit of the drama’: Samson calling out to God his ‘invocation of vengeance’ amid something that, to Baumann, sounds like ‘the passing sword of the exterminating angel’ (‘a hissing scale’ in the violins, ‘followed by the descending fracas of the trombones’), at which point the heathen temple collapses. We are presumably all the more impressed and edified by the Philistines’ sudden downfall, and their demotion from imperial rulers to uncivilised tribesmen wandering among ruins, because their religious music so successfully combined ‘the grandeur of a page of Handel with something more lively and colourful’. But such an interpretation does not foreclose the possibility that the cause of their downfall, namely the hollowness of their souls, is audible in the very hymn that ‘humbled’ the listener with its ‘transitory greatness’.

Reading Delilah

The problem of how to read the binary opposition of West and East in this opera is most intense in the case of Delilah. The portrait is, in the main, misogynistic, a point that needs to be stated explicitly. The current tendency is to rewrite the heroines of opera in a supposedly feminist mode: one finds it in public comments of singers anxious to defend the heroines they portray, in staging decisions of major productions and in the elaborate arguments of scholarly commentators. But a truly critical feminism may need to face the fact that an opera from 1877,

60 Clifford, ‘On Orientalism’ (see n. 8), 258.
62 Baumann, Grandes Formes, 419, cited in Collet, Samson (see n. 4), 110–11.
64 Saint-Saëns’s painful relationships with women (and, more generally, his conflicted sexual identity) are discussed, though not sensitively, in James Harding, Saint-Saëns and bis Circle (London, 1963), 57–8, 124, 129, 133–4, 154–6, 177, 198–202, and Michel Faure, Musique et société, du second empire aux années vingt: Autour de Saint-Saëns, Fauré, Debussy et Ravel ([Paris], 1985), 45–52.
Fig. 6. Charles Gleyre, *Interior of the Palace, Karnak* (watercolour, 1835; The Lowell Institute. Photo courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).
Constructing the Oriental 'Other': Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*

set in biblical times, cannot be fully recuperated into a modern conception of how a self-respecting woman should conduct herself.

The biblical Delilah is at once a concrete and shadowy figure. As Mieke Bal has pointed out, she is at least given the dignity of a name (unlike the previous women involved with Samson) and 'seems well-to-do', for 'she possesses her own house, and she is in contact with the Philistine chiefs'. Her national origin is unstated: she is, the Bible says, a 'woman from the valley of Soreck', leaving it unclear whether she is an Israelite or a Philistine. The biblical text suggests that her main reason for betraying Samson is the money that the Philistine chiefs promise her, leaving open the possibility, especially if she is Philistine, that she is also motivated by patriotism.

The libretto resolves the ambiguity about Delilah's nationality from the start: Delilah is first seen heading the Philistine maidens as they emerge from the Temple of Dagon; the Old Hebrew warns Samson to fear 'cette fille étrangère' and Delilah soon joins in the dance of the priestesses of Dagon. The libretto also has Delilah spurn the offered bribe. Commentators, going back at least to the 1890s, have concurred that taking the money would have imputed a base motive to Delilah. Instead, she declares to the High Priest that she has, for patriotic reasons, pretended to love Samson in hopes of learning the secret of his strength and bringing him low. What she does not say is that she is also deeply attracted to Samson. In her soliloquy just before the duet with the High Priest ('Amour, viens aider ma faiblesse'), she pleads with the pagan god of love to help her 'poison' her way into Samson's heart and enslave him: 'Samson soit enchâiné demain! ... Il est à moi! c'est mon esclave!' The image of 'chains' was surely intended to be ambiguous, pointing in part to her wish, not explicit until the subsequent duet, for him to be captured by her Philistine 'brothers'. But the music of the aria, and the introductory orchestral evocation of the evening breezes in the 'sweet valley', emphasise love and carnal desire - the desire to 'enchain' Samson to herself, for herself - that drive Delilah, though she herself may not fully admit them.

Delilah's desire and jealous love for Samson is indeed a central theme in literary portrayals. It is explicit in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (lines 790–818) and further emphasised in the Milton-derived libretto for Handel's *Samson*: 'T was jealousy did prompt to keep you there / Both day and night, Love's pris'ner, / wholly mine.' In both Milton and Handel, Delilah is Samson's wife and claims later - perhaps sincerely - that she had no idea the Philistines would harm him beyond cutting his strength-giving hair.

One can of course respond, as Samson does in Milton, that these claims of

65 Bal, *Lethal Love* (see n. 34), 50.
love and ignorance are 'feigned'. But that is not possible in another work that is clearly – though scholars have not noticed it – the most important source for Saint-Saëns’s libretto: Voltaire’s Samson, a libretto written for Rameau, and set by him, but never staged because of objections from the censors. Delilah seeks to catch Samson in a ‘lovely trap’ (piège aimable), mainly as a way of ‘disarming’ him and ending the ‘bloody war’ between their two nations; but she is soon lovestruck: ‘J’ai voulu l’enchaîner, il enchaîne mon cœur’ (I wanted to enchain him, but he enchains my heart). After her beloved has been seized, she curses the ‘horrid tyrants, cruel gods … and criminal peoples’ who have deprived her and especially berates the goddess of love: ‘Vous m’avez fait aimer le plus grand des humains / Pour hâter sa mort et la mienne’ (You made me love the greatest of humans, only to hasten his death and my own). That Saint-Saëns (and his poet-cousin Lemaire) did not retain such statements does not mean that hints of Delilah’s longing do not remain, as in the equivocal word ‘enchains’. Moreover, what was repressed in the libretto reasserts itself glowingly in Saint-Saëns’s music. The operatic Delilah, in short, is a woman who loves, or at least lusts and yearns and seeks to dominate; as we have seen, she may well continue on some unconscious level, more in the music than the libretto, to lust and yearn for Samson even after being spurned by him. But she also becomes vengeful, plainly considering her failure with Samson an affront to her beauty and to the womanly arts of which she is so proud. Furthermore, she is a patriot who ‘abhors’ and ‘hates’ the enemy leader (words finally uttered during the course of her duet with the High Priest). Thus the word ‘love’, if applicable at all to Delilah, must imply not Gilda-like tenderness and devotion but something hotter and scarier, the kind of love-hate seen to varying extents in Donizetti’s calculating queens, Verdi’s Count di Luna, Eboli and Amneris, and Puccini’s Baron Scarpia. Yet, even in this colourful gallery, Saint-Saëns’ Delilah is special, so overt and preening

68 And even there, one does not have to agree with Samson; as William Empson argues, Milton took care ‘to work up an interesting case for Delilah … the temptations are meant to be pitched staggeringly high’ – Milton’s God, rev. edn (Cambridge, 1965), 228. Anthony Low agrees that Samson may do her some ‘injustice’ in refusing to recognise ‘how much she has become the prisoner of her own love and lust’ and notes that she grows out of a long tradition of selfish, possessive, imprisoning lovers, including (of interest to opera) Dido, Alcina and Armida (The Blaze of Noon: A Reading of ‘Samson Agonistes’ [New York and London, 1974], 144–58).

69 The relationship between the two librettos can be seen in certain key phrases, in a dramatic structure that is largely identical (and totally unlike Milton’s and Handel’s), and in analogous invented (non-biblical) characters and dramatic confrontations. Some examples: Samson exhorts the Israelites to awake and break their chains after a Philistine leader ridicules the impotence of the Hebrews’ God; the chorus of priestesses bedecks the Hebrew warrior with flowers; a Philistine priestess sings of chirping birds, flowers and love; Delilah sings an aria invoking (and beginning with the word) ‘Amour’; Delilah regrets her ‘faiblessé’; Samson repeatedly declares his allegiance to the ‘Dieu des combats’; several scenes chart Samson’s growing passion for Delilah, ending with his revealing the secret to her, and his arrest; and the last act begins with Samson lamenting his own weakness and his blinded state.

are her voluptuousness, her seductive wiles. Of the other operatic characters mentioned, Amneris perhaps comes closest to resembling Delilah in this respect (and still falls well short); this may help us see how unlikely it would have been for Saint-Saëns to create such a character and not make her a Philistine, Egyptian or something else similarly exotic. Delilah’s potent mixture of irreconcilable motives, especially in a work that guides the audience to identify primarily with the Hebrews, makes her a chief example of the ‘dangerous Other’ – at once femme fatale and devious Oriental.71 She is also very complex, and may not always be saying what she means, even when speaking to the High Priest and especially when speaking to Samson.

A performer may simplify Delilah in the interests of consistency: Elena Obraztsova’s recorded interpretation, despite her protests in the accompanying essay, presents an imperious, implacable heroine, with little of the warmth and volatility that make Delilah so fascinating and dangerous.72 Or she may revel in the sudden shifts and even add a few, as Shirley Verrett does on videotape – in the Covent Garden production, for example, she is seen grinning (aside) maliciously as Samson begins to yield just before ‘Mon cœur’, but then sings with an unreadable, flickering mixture of glee, passion and anguish through to the end of the act. After betraying him, she steals out of her house and averts her gaze, in pain, exhaustion and, it seems, Amneris-like remorse (perhaps also in horror that the soldiers have gouged out his eyes). Obraztsova is simpler and truer to the immediate implications of the libretto: she stands over Samson and raises her arms in brazen triumph.73 The ambiguities cannot be resolved; the operatic Delilah (as in Milton) may not completely understand what motivates her, any more than Samson does, though she thinks she does.74 The conspiratorial duet with the High Priest may seem to tell us what she intends, but its primary dramatic function is rather to displace the impending act of treachery from Delilah – a mere woman – to a figure of male authority, so that the audience can relieve her, at least for a time, of responsibility for her actions.75 All this allows us to identify with her and to take more seriously her attraction to Samson.

To the extent that we begin to care about Delilah and her feelings, the simple binary point of view sustained elsewhere in the opera becomes untenable. That is precisely what happens in the opera’s most famous and most ambiguous scene.

72 On Deutsche Grammophon (see n. 47). See Alan Blyth, ed., Opera on Record, II (London, 1986), 208–18; Conrad (see n. 20), 70, 257, 258, 343, 349; and the many performance photos in Avant-scène.
73 Covent Garden: video (see n. 52). Obraztsova: photo on the cover of the Deutsche Grammophon recording. Verrett strikes a similar pose in the San Francisco Opera production (available on videotape).
74 As also in Milton – see Low (n. 68), 157.
75 Philippe-Joseph Salazar misses this point when he flatly states that ‘Delilah is the man of this opera’ (Avant-scène, 74).
The love (or seduction?) scene

As soon as the High Priest leaves, lascivious breezes start up again; they will eventually be joined by musical evocations of lightning and a gathering storm, a dramatic analogue to the growing tension between Delilah and Samson, but also an indication of the close link between the Oriental scene (Delilah’s valley, with its ‘Asiatic plants and luxurious creepers’) and the alternately beckoning and threatening forces of nature. Delilah, alone again and waiting for Samson, moans resignedly, ‘Hélas, il ne vient pas!’ Samson does finally arrive ‘hesitantly’, to bid her a ‘last farewell’; she of course plans to put his passion to the test once more – at night, on her own territory. But for us who have not seen them alone together, this scene, which makes up the whole second half of Act II, provides an opportunity to experience the full extent of their mutual attraction and the dynamic of their difference.

That difference is made immediately clear in the opening periods. Delilah leads off, greeting Samson with liquid phrases of beguiling length: six bars, sung dolce, in stable B flat major (see Ex. 13a). Revealingly, she does not have the tune entirely to herself; it is presented instead by the orchestra, an operatic convention that recalls the ingratiating manner of many scenes of superficial ‘sociability’ or diplomatic courtesy. An alert listener will also notice that her music derives from minor-mode material – Collet and Jean de Solliers call it the theme of Desire – that derives from music announcing the High Priest’s entrance at the beginning of the act (which in turn grew out of his ‘curse’ motif, see Ex. 9); she is thus acting as an agent of the High Priest even in her music, and her sudden move into major – the first bars of Ex. 13a – seems just one more sign of untrustworthiness. The naive Samson defends himself in characteristically stolid four-bar phrases, four in a row, made melodically and harmonically intense through erratic declamation and, in both the voice and the bass line, descending chromatic motion (see Ex. 13b).

The source of their mutual attraction is most fully revealed in the middle section of the duet: an extended lyrical movement for Delilah that allows us finally to feel both the depth of her obsession with Samson and the source of her power over him. ‘Mon cœur s’ouvre à ta voix, / Comme s’ouvrent les fleurs / Aux baisers de l’aurore!’ (My heart opens at your voice, as flowers open at the kisses...

76 On the association of woman’s power and night, see Clément (n. 42), e.g., 37–8, 88–92, 96–117; on the Orient as night, see Martin (n. 14).
77 For example, certain party scenes in Rigoletto, La traviata and Un ballo in maschera, and the first encounter between Posa and Elisabeth in Don Carlos (Act II). In the present case the six-bar melody is rounded off by the orchestra, a single long phrase of eight asymmetrical bars (3 + 3 + 2).
78 This seems an interesting counter-example to the association between chromaticism and dangerous, slippery femininity asserted by Catherine Clément (see n. 42) and Susan McClary, Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality (Minneapolis, 1991), 56–67. Of course, one might argue that the structural chromaticism in Samson’s part shows the disturbing effect of Delilah’s feminine subversion. But chromatic progression as a signal of distress and anxiety is too widespread in Western music to permit an easy semiotic equivalence between chromaticism and woman (see Ellen Rosand’s review of Clément: ‘Criticism and the Undoing of Opera’, 19th-Century Music, 14 (1990–91), 80–1).
of dawn), she sings flatteringly to her tenor lover, begging him to repeat the love songs he once sang to her; the Freudian flower image evokes the blossoming ripeness of her body, reinforcing the link between woman and nature.

This number has understandably been referred to as an aria; to be accurate, though, Samson has a few echoing phrases, including a long, high B flat that, sung piano, reduces the hero to a state of smitten helplessness. In the climactic phrases, Delilah leaps beyond the sixth used in Act I, expanding to a seventh

79 Few tenors sing it softly, which is difficult when the tempo is taken too slow; but Jon Vickers achieves something of the intended sense of distress on the recording for EMI/Angel.
that is stated four times, the first two in a rising sequence, and then – in a broad cadential gesture, with the voice doubled by the winds – the second two (marked x and y in Ex. 14) in a descending sequence that describes the progression I–vi, a deepening shift of harmony that adds a pang just before the moment of resolution. Even Delilah, supposedly manipulating Samson at every moment (it is really her voice that is prying at his heart), seems lost in truer feelings and, by the end of this passionate passage, must call herself back to duty: ‘Mais! ... non! que dis-je? hélas!’ (But, no! Alas, what am I saying?). Franz Liszt, who generally disliked love duets in biblical works, argued that this scene was the rule-proving exception, being ‘perfectly to the point, for Samson and Delilah needed to go to their doom through loving’ (devaient s’endiabler amoureusement).

Writers have repeatedly described this aria as a ‘feigned’ or ‘counterfeited’ pro-

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**Ex. 14. Act II, from Delilah’s ‘Mon cœur s’ouvre à ta voix’ (slow section of the duet).**

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80 This expansion from sixth to seventh – 5 to upper 3 (as in Ex. 7a), then 5 to upper 4 (Ex. 14) – was already enacted by Delilah in successive phrases of Ex. 13a, bb. 2 and 4. Saint-Saëns had reminded us of this same sixth leap to 3 in the opening notes of Delilah’s Act II soliloquy (‘Amour, viens aider ma faiblesses’).

81 Liszt to Malwine Tardieu, 20 January 1882; cited in *Avant-scène*, 47.
testation of love, thereby reading Delilah’s closing ‘hèlas!’ as calculated and unfelt. De Solliers states outright: ‘Delilah does not love’. But such a reading misses the essential ambiguity of Delilah, who seems at once heroically strong and deeply needful, a character who might be a worthy match and perhaps mate for Samson were she not twisted and de-humanised by her role as agent of the oppressor. It has been argued that the return of the breeze music in Delilah’s second strophe proves – ‘warns’ the audience – that she is employing a ‘ruse’; without question, that figure is primarily a response to her cajoling words to Samson (‘My heart trembles at your dear voice as the stalks of wheat in the field undulate in the light breeze’). But it also creates an orchestral environment that enwraps not just Samson but also Delilah, as it did in her moments alone at the beginning of the act, suggesting here as there unconfessed sexual longings. Had Saint-Saëns wanted to give the audience a musical clue of her insincerity in this powerful passage, the master ironist could have done so (see Ex. 13a); but he did not.

Towards the end of the opera, it is true, the sincerity of Delilah’s love music will be called into question. This was an artful, somewhat chilling move on Saint-Saëns’s part; it was also a startlingly modern one (especially for a composer long deemed an arch-conservative), as Saint-Saëns dismantled the illusion of sincere feeling that he had created in the central number of the opera. But opera lives by its strongest, most convincing moments, and it would take a curious act of will to insist on hearing Delilah as ‘feigning love’ and shedding false tears throughout the second half of Act II. The aria further reinforces Saint-Saëns’s daring portrayal of Delilah as a woman who is sexually demanding, physically expressive, emotionally unrepressed. Even among the more overtly passionate operatic heroines of the nineteenth century, she is exceptional, there being no hint of the self-laceration of Verdi’s Violetta, nor the self-mocking, distancing playfulness or fatalistic passivity of Bizet’s Carmen.

Perhaps Saint-Saëns felt compelled to undo in Act III the positive aspects of this portrait; he could, especially if he had carried the work through as an oratorio, have kept Delilah absent from, or silent in, the last act, as the biblical narrative does, or he could have given her an Amneris-like solo of loss and regret (basing it on her final speech in Voltaire). Instead, he chose to demonise her, perhaps lest we regret her imminent death when the temple collapses. But music lovers

82 ‘Her feigned passion is expressed in strains of the most ardent nature’ (Hervey, Saint-Saëns [see n. 20], 53); ‘a calculated show’ (Conrad, [see n. 20], 70).
83 Jean de Solliers, echoed by Philippe-Joseph Salazar and Roger Delage (in Avant-scène, respectively: 47-9, 72-5, 90).
84 Delage calls it, tendentiously, a ‘serpent’-like chromatic theme, ‘crawling and hissing’ (Avant-scène, 90); de Solliers (ibid., 49) misleadingly labels the breeze theme ‘Storm’; it does not become transformed into storm music until after ‘Mon cœur’ ends.
85 Michael Stegemann goes to the other extreme, arguing that the ‘sensuality’ of Delilah’s musical lines ‘is too convincing in effect to be hypocritical’ and suggesting that the love duet could ‘almost cause the listener’ to anticipate a sort of tragic dénouement: a joint love-death à la Tristan’ (‘Camille Saint-Saëns und die Krise der französischen Oper’, essay in the booklet to the Barenboim recording; see n. 47). The structural passivity and dependency of Samson in this duet resist any such sentimental reading.
86 Voltaire (see nn. 69-70) avoids the problem by having her die – or commit suicide – in the interval between the last two acts.
for decades after made their own choice of what aspect of Delilah to hold on to. This pleading, pulsing aria soon sailed off on a life of its own, being performed by ‘vocalists good, bad, and indifferent’, and in arrangements for every conceivable instrument, including – as I once witnessed in a collection of automata in rural Illinois – a turn-of-the-century mechanical violin, the necessary ripe vibrato being provided by plungers jiggling on the strings. For many people, ‘My Heart at thy Sweet Voice’, as it has long been known to the English-speaking world, may even have lost its association with Delilah.

We may also begin to suspect that this vision of fleshly love’s power to debase a well-intentioned religious leader had some part in keeping Samson et Dalila from entering the world’s operatic repertory for many years after its première in Weimar in 1877. In England, the usual justification was that biblical scenes were inappropriate to the (morally suspect) world of the stage, the work was thus performed as a concert-hall oratorio instead. Similar objections were heard in France, despite clear French precedents in Méhul’s Joseph and Rossini’s Moïse et Pharaon (not to mention Verdi’s Nabucco). To Saint-Saëns’s distress, Samson did not reach the Paris Opéra until 1892. Once it arrived in Paris, though, it stayed, achieving two hundred performances at the Opéra alone in its first ten years, and five hundred by 1922. Splendid performances were enjoyed by the peripatetic composer in places as far flung as Philadelphia and Cairo, not to mention, of course, the omnipresence of Delilah’s ‘Mon coeur’ on recital platforms and in drawing rooms throughout the Western world.

Since Delilah

Delilah’s aria, and especially its crowning phrase, have remained peculiarly vital in our musical culture, a perennial symbol of romantic passion and the thrill of the operatic voice. Sometimes the uses are plainly recognisable (though not necessarily straightforward!), as in Spike Jones’s dixieland version (stuck in the middle of his soap-opera parody ‘None but the Lonely Heart’) or the soundtrack of Claude Chabrol’s film Landru (1962). Thomas Mann’s fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn and his friends even share several pages of favourable opinions about the sensual beauty of this aria of Delilah’s – and make no reference to her duplicity – as they listen to it on the phonograph.

Interesting in a different way are echoes that are not, presumably, intended to be recognised (and were probably not conscious allusions on the composer’s part), such as the one sung by Sophie – in the same key of D flat – upon meeting

87 Hervey, Saint-Saëns, 54; Shaw (see n. 49), 291: ‘already hackneyed by concert use’ (1893).

88 This is stated plainly in the Times review (4 December 1896, p. 10; presumably by Joseph Bennett) of the first adequate London (concert) performance.

89 Spike Jones and his City Slickers (ca. 1950; now on RCA CD3235). Chabrol film: a charming opera buff, during World War I, lures women to his country house and kills them – see Christian Blanchet, Claude Chabrol (Paris, 1989), 34–6, 149–51.

Constructing the Oriental ‘Other’: Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalila*

Ex. 15. Strauss, *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), Act II: Sophie’s first meeting with Octavian.

Octavian in Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911); the melodic line dropping to the lower third is the striking point of resemblance, though the first leap is stretched to an octave (thus placing the next few notes a step higher than in Saint-Saëns) and there is no second leap (see Ex. 15). The text is full of the ecstasy of love: ‘Where before was I so happy? Thither must I return’ (Dahin muß ich zurück).

Even more complete are two (similarly unannounced) recollections from the middle of this century, a time when the opera that once encased Delilah’s phrase was no longer being staged frequently outside France. In 1950, the young tenor Mario Lanza produced his first million-selling recording with ‘Be My Love’, by Sammy Cahn and Nicholas Brodszky (drawn from the film *The Toast of New Orleans*). The oft-repeated opening strain is little more than a flatfooted expansion of Delilah’s phrase (see Ex. 16), just as the words carry the same message of unquenchable, lustful yearning. And seven years later on Broadway, Leonard Bernstein turned to the same melody, now condensed to its descending sequence of rising sevenths, when Maria and Anita join their voices in operatically conceived praise of the irresistible force that drives humankind – or at least the show’s plot – onward: ‘When love comes so strong, / There is no right or wrong’, they sing, repeating the passage for emphasis, with slight melodic variation (see Ex. 17).

It is not by chance, I suspect, that the single most renowned phrase from one of the most prominent Orientalist operas should show up in *West Side Story*, for Bernstein’s musical – well known as a Romeo-and-Juliet tale – is closely related to this tradition, indeed enacts the paradigmatic plot (‘white tenor-hero’, etc.) more completely than does *Samson*. And just as seeing *West Side Story* through an Orientalist lens will reveal features long ignored (for example, that the Puerto

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91 ‘The smell of the rose draws one’, Sophie says in the preceding bars, ‘as if there were cords around one’s heart’. The striking resemblance of this image to the biblical Delilah’s attempts to bind Samson may conceivably have guided Strauss’s associations toward Saint-Saëns’s ‘Mon coeur’.

92 Brodszky turns the tonality-blurring sequence-down-a-third into something platitudinous through more explicit harmonic action. The song, which was an international hit (recordings by Fritz Wunderlich and others), is the title cut on a recent compact disc by Plácido Domingo; Lanza’s recording has been rereleased on CD, and the music is still widely available in sheet music form and in several song anthologies.

93 See Larry Stempel, ‘Broadway’s Mozartean Moment, or An Amadeus in Amber’, in Steven Ledbetter, ed., *Sonnets and Tuckets: A Bernstein Celebration* (Boston, 1988), 49–50. By hovering back and forth between the tonic and submediant, Bernstein emphasises tonal ambiguity in somewhat pandiatonic fashion, the opposite of Brodszky’s over-explicit tonal clarity.

94 For a fuller discussion, see my ‘*West Side Story* and Tales of the Orient’, in progress.
Ricans, unlike the Capulets, are more appealing and 'foreign' than their opposites), so a glance at *West Side Story* may help us see something that has been missed in discussions of *Samson*. The Broadway show deals with the search for a place of peace, of reconciliation, especially in the 'Somewhere' dance sequence and the final, sorrowful tableau, in which the two gangs carry Tony's body out together. Is there not in *Samson*, too, some suggestion of the need for restoring wholeness: in the luminous softness of the 'Dance of the Priestesses', in Delilah's aching 'Amour, viens aider ma faiblesse' and surging 'Mon cœur', and in the thrilling Bacchanale and frankly brilliant and joyously superficial 'Gloire à Dagon vainqueur'? Do we not increasingly come to feel that this vitality is lacking among the Hebrews, despite their eloquent invocations of oratorio tradition, just as the Philistines clearly lack moral dignity?95 Do we not also sense that a way must be found to transcend the antagonism between these rival tribes?

95 Saint-Saëns liked to express his admiration for various aspects of North African and Asian civilisation (including its food, its architecture and its cultural 'immobility', i.e., cultivation of rich traditions) as a way of twitting the West, its claims to superiority and 'its mania for seeking novelty at all cost'. See *Portraits et souvenirs*, cited in Collet, *Samson* (see n. 4), 74; also Saint-Saëns, *Au courant de la vie* (Paris, [1914]), 73–4, 81–2, 110–11, and Faure, *Musique* (see n. 64), 63.
The Romeo and Juliet story is useful here as an archetype of love denied or destroyed through internecine warfare: internecine in that the Montagues and Capulets are warring factions of a single people. Once we accept that all humanity is one family, cleft by various artificial, culturally generated distinctions – Black (or Puerto Rican) and white, Jewish and Christian, Philistine (Palestinian) and Western, racially ‘impure’ and ‘pure’ – this may begin to seem like the story of our whole history, our present, our lives. Perhaps it is no surprise that we pick up hints of this – yet another mythic paradigm, added to those discussed earlier – in Samson, the work of one of music’s most devoted cosmopolitans, writing in an age of increasingly acrid nationalism. I contend that we cannot miss hearing the message of regret and transcendence in this opera, though we may not be conscious of it, and may even resist it, as earlier critics have done. Rather like the helpless Hebrew strongman during the ‘Dance of the Priestesses’, we listen, assuring ourselves all the while that this is just an evening’s entertainment, that we are watching but not touching, that these images of sensuality and joy are bad, foreign, not for us.

In short, the characteristically Orientalist binarism of this opera’s plot is partly, and in places almost entirely, subverted by Saint-Saëns’s music. Samson et Dalila, despite its polished, confident surface, despite its dramatically satisfying (and, to Western viewers, culturally flattering) final tableau of triumph and obliteration,

96 Besides his wide-ranging musical tastes, we may refer to his political views, including his refusal to indulge in chauvinist rhetoric in regard to World War I – for him, a pointless instance of imperial nations ‘exterminating’ each other (see Faure, Musique [n. 64], 64–5).
leaves much unresolved and so, finally, disturbs. That, and not just its film-music exoticisms, is what keeps it alive today. Perhaps something similar may be said for many other cultural products of Orientalism: they may be hopelessly outdated as any kind of statement about the non-Western regions they ostensibly portray, but what they have to tell us about the West’s uneasy relationship to the larger world – and about the West’s many internal dissymmetries: of race, religion, gender, social class – still rings hauntingly true.