

Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila*

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These study materials are produced for use with the University Opera Association's production of *Samson et Dalila*.

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Saint-Saëns' Enduring Opera

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921) was a versatile French composer of over 150 works as well as a brilliant pianist and organist, a conductor and a writer of poetry, drama and philosophy. *Samson et Dalila* was the second of twelve operas he wrote. He originally planned to compose an oratorio based on the biblical account of Samson and Delilah in chapter 16 of the Old Testament book of Judges and title it *Dalila*. He admired the choral works of Mendelssohn and Handel and intended to use them as English models to establish a new, vibrant choral compositional tradition in France.

About the conception of the work, Saint-Saëns wrote, “The idea for *Samson* came to me at a very early date, when symphony concerts were still being given with orchestra and chorus . . . when sacred and secular oratorios were experiencing a dynamic revival.

After Saint-Saëns had worked on *Samson* for a time, however, he received little encouragement from his friends to complete the oratorio. He also learned that the French public was skeptical about the whole idea of staging biblical texts. Ferdinand Lemaire, a Creole amateur poet from Martinique and the husband of Saint-Saëns' cousin, persuaded the composer to create an opera rather than an oratorio from the subject matter. With Lemaire serving as his librettist, Saint-Saëns began the compositional process with Act II. But when he had a group of musicians sing through the score on more than one occasion, he was discouraged by their lack of enthusiasm for his work.

It was not until 1874 that Saint-Saëns resumed the work he had begun on *Samson* twelve years earlier. On December 2, 1877, the opera premiered, sung in German at Weimar, as a result of Franz Liszt's championship of the French composer. It was another 13 years, however, before *Samson* took the stage in France and 15 years before it appeared at the Paris Opera. In the 25 years that had passed since Saint-Saëns had first conceived of the work, he had come to be regarded as France's foremost composer. The success *Samson et Dalila* enjoyed on that occasion has endured through the centuries. It is the only opera by the great French composer that has remained a staple of operatic repertory well into the 21st century.



Saint-Saëns' original intention to compose an oratorio on the subject of Samson and Delilah was not entirely lost on the opera. The music for the chorus of Israelites in Act I has obvious affinities with the choral works of Handel and Mendelssohn, and the scene is recognized as having one of the greatest prisoners' choruses in all of opera. In Act II, however, the opera becomes a personal drama featuring Samson and Delilah. The Hebrew chorus does not appear onstage again, but it does sing offstage, chiding Samson in the scene in which he grinds at the mill.

Music critic Hugh Macdonald suggests that Saint-Saëns' gifts as a choral composer are even more apparent in the music he composed for the Philistine chorus in the opera's final scene than in Scene 1. As these barbarians sing a hymn to Dagon, “the music becomes more and more vacuous and frivolous, like the worst kind of opera comique, and the tinkling orchestration exactly matches the hollow glitter of their empire.” Just as the Philistines “reach a frenzy of vulgar self-congratulation,” Samson pulls down the pillars of their Temple. The resulting “grand spectacular display of death and destruction” is one of the most dramatic and memorable moments in all of opera literature.

Saint-Saëns continued to compose operas until 1911, when he completed his twelfth opera, *Dejanire*, a lyric tragedy in four acts that depicts the tempestuous love life of the mythological character Hercules. While the composer's symphonic works are still heard in concert halls around the world today, among Saint-Saëns' operas it is only *Samson et Dalila* that has endured in the opera house. Despite its late appearance in France during the composer's own lifetime, it has now been performed 1000 times at the Paris Opera, and it remains a favorite opera in many houses around the world. 🎭

The Plot



Act 1, Gaza (Palestine), 1150 B.C.

A chorus of captive Israelites in Palestine lament their sufferings and pray for God's deliverance. One of the most prominent themes of their song is "We have seen our cities overthrown and the Gentiles profaning Thine altar."

Samson comes to the fore to urge the Hebrews to take courage and trust the God of their fathers to bring them out of bondage. He rebukes them for their lack of faith.



But the Philistine commander Abimelech appears and mocks the Hebrews' God as weak and helpless, inferior to the Philistine god Dagon. Samson again takes the lead in affirming God's power as Israel's strong hope for victory over her enemies. Their spirits thus lifted, Samson's compatriots respond with religious fervor and a spirit of defiance. Samson urges them to rise up and break their chains. When Abimelech continues to taunt the captives and attacks Samson with a sword, Samson slays him and hastily leads the Hebrews away to forge their own freedom.

Immediately the High Priest of Dagon comes upon the scene, where a messenger reports to him that the Israelites, led by Samson, have revolted against the Philistines. The priest curses Samson's strength and flees with Abimelech's corpse. An Old Hebrew praises Samson.

At dawn Samson returns with the victorious Hebrews, who raise a hymn of praise to God. Delilah, a Philistine courtesan, and the priestesses of Dagon are among those who greet the triumphant Samson and sing of the pleasures of spring. Delilah begins to exercise her charms upon Samson, whom she wishes to coax away from the Hebrew uprising. Unable to resist her flirtations, he agrees to meet her at her dwelling that very night and then prays that God will protect him in her presence. The Old Hebrew warns him to turn aside in fear from this alien woman.



Act 2, Delilah's Dwelling in the Valley of Sorek

Sumptuously attired outside her retreat, Delilah anticipates Samson's arrival and prepares to set a trap for him, musing, "This is the hour of vengeance which must satisfy our gods!" The High Priest of the Philistines enters and promises her great reward if she can deliver Samson over to his enemies. Delilah reveals that she and Samson have already had an illicit affair, and she has tried and failed three times to uncover the secret of the source of Samson's strength. She vows that for the cause of her people, not for gold, she will take vengeance upon the proud Hebrew leader, whom she abhors. She exults in her own power to entice Samson and points out that his physical might is inadequate to resist her womanly powers.

Samson arrives in a state of agitation because he has succumbed to Delilah's invitation rather than remaining with the rebel Hebrews. He tells Delilah that as a servant of God, he can no longer submit to her will but must deliver his brethren out of captivity. She replies that the god of love is far greater than Samson's God. When she accuses Samson of wounding her by his unfaithfulness, he impetuously vows to return to her and flies into her arms.

Once Samson has come under Delilah's complete control, she feigns doubts about his love for her as a means of manipulating him into revealing the source of his legendary strength. Although Samson hears the rolling thunder, as if God Himself were warning him to flee, he is unable to resist Delilah's bidding. He reveals to Delilah that his strength resides in his long hair.

Delilah lulls Samson to sleep, cuts off his hair and then calls in Philistine soldiers who have been hiding outside her dwelling. They easily overpower Samson and put out his eyes. Once Samson has entered Delilah's dwelling, the only word he speaks is "Betrayed!"

Act 3, Scene 1, A Prison in Gaza

The blind Samson is imprisoned at a mill, where he labors to turn the great mill stone, a task more suited to a beast of burden than to the former leader of the captive Hebrews. He is filled with remorse at having betrayed his own people, who now suffer because of his sin. Their angry reproaches from afar fill him with self-loathing. He prays for them and offers God his life for theirs. The Philistines drag Samson away from the mill to display him as a prize captive in their triumphal procession.

Act 3, Scene 2, The Temple of Dagon

At dawn the Philistines prepare to celebrate their victory over the Israelites. A child leads the blind Samson into the Temple, where he prays that Jehovah will restore to him his former strength. In their drunken revelry the High Priest and Delilah along with a crowd of Philistines humiliate and mock Samson as they praise their chief god Dagon for having delivered the enemy into their hands. Delilah boasts, "Love served my plan. To satisfy my vengeance, I wrested your secret from you." The Philistines carry out their ritual sacrifices to



All photos taken from the Bob Jones University Opera Association's 1993 production of *Samson et Dalila*.

Dagon. As Samson again calls on God for vengeance, he grasps the two pillars that support the Temple. At first the pillars bend. Then Samson pushes them over, causing the Temple to fall and crush both his enemies and himself. ☞





An Interview with the Producer

An opera producer plays an enormous behind-the-scenes role in any production. Dr. Darren Lawson, the producer for University Opera Association, began his work on *Samson et Dalila* years ago when he was planning the long-range schedule of operas for the University. As a producer, Dr. Lawson selects the works to be performed at BJU; oversees all the financial business associated with the production; auditions and hires the singers; assigns university faculty, staff members and students to various roles in the production; approves the development of the production at various stages; and keeps the whole endeavor on schedule and on budget. For *Samson*, Dr. Lawson also serves as the stage director.

In a recent interview with Janie McCauley, Dr. Lawson gives a glimpse at what goes on behind the scenes at a BJU opera

JM: How many years ago did you begin work on the production of *Samson et Dalila*?

DL: I began my work on *Samson et Dalila* two years ago. Early in the process, I did extensive research on the biblical text on which the opera is based as well as historical research for the time period (1150 B.C.). I spent time at the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library to examine materials about the Hebrews and Philistines of the time period. My research there was invaluable in influencing design choices for sets and costumes, which have been done for this production by Jeffrey Stegall.

JM: How long does it usually take to prepare an opera for production?

DL: If the opera has new set and costume designs, it's generally two years in advance that the director and designers begin working on it. For a production with old designs, the director usually starts at least one year in advance.

As far as planning, my job as producer is to plan the calendar years in advance. As of this interview, I have the opera productions planned through 2024. As we get two years away from a particular production, I begin making directing and design assignments. As we approach one year from an opera, the entire creative staff kicks into high gear to get ready for the production.

JM: Where have you seen *Samson* produced or performed in concert?

DL: I have seen live productions at the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, San Diego Opera and Nashville Opera. I also benchmarked recorded DVDs from the Royal Opera House in London's Covent Garden, Metropolitan Opera and San Francisco Opera. I was also in attendance at BJU's production in 1993.

JM: How have these productions influenced your development of the Opera Association's production of *Samson*?

DL: Each production emphasizes different aspects of character, musical interpretation and technical choices. Individual decisions by other directors inform my thinking as a stage director. In some cases, directorial choices in other productions influence me to make opposite choices. For example, when Abimelech is killed, the Philistines enter and remove his body. If the removal is timed during a particular section of music, as it often is in other productions, the audience feels great sympathy because of the emotional mood of the music behind the action. In my opinion, Abimelech is not a sympathetic character; therefore, I have chosen to have his body removed during the frenzied music immediately prior to the other section.

JM: What is the proportion of musical tasks associated with the production to tasks that are performed by non-musicians?

DL: From my perspective, it's really an equal share of the production load. While the non-musical aspects of the opera are in process, the musical staff members are working hard behind the scenes preparing soloists, choruses and instrumentalists. Opera truly is a collaborative art form that brings together artists from various fields.

JM: When and how did you become an opera fan?

DL: I was first introduced to opera as a student at Bob Jones University. As a freshman my first production was *Tosca* in 1983. During my sophomore year, I auditioned and made the chorus for Gounod's *Faust*. Participating in that production and watching the behind-the-scenes aspects of the art form made me a life-long fan of opera.

JM: As a producer and an educator, how do you go about encouraging college students to develop an interest in opera and classical music?

DL: I would encourage students to get involved as a singer or in a walk-on role in an opera production. As you get to know the music more during the rehearsal process, you'll find that your appreciation for the art form will expand. You'll also have a much deeper understanding of the massive amount of work that goes into making a successful production. You'll never attend another performance without more fully appreciating the work behind it.

JM: What do you enjoy most about your job as opera producer?

DL: My favorite part of being opera producer is working with the amazingly talented and creative staff at Rodeheaver Auditorium. The Lord has assembled here a wonderful group of artisans who are committed to mounting each production in a way that honors our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

DL: Do you have any favorite anecdotes from your years of working with students on opera productions?

DL: I remember a huge set piece that fell and nearly hit a group on stage. I also recall the fun of having Dr. Isaak of the science faculty do a walk-on role in *Andrea Chenier*. It was a genuine marriage of science and the arts!

In each production the cast becomes like a family. I cherish the friendships that I've forged with students during long rehearsals on stage. 🌟

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