

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Samson et Dalila



Music by
Camille Saint-Saëns

Libretto in French by
Ferdinand Lemaire

Opera in Three Acts

After the Old Testament story
(Judges 13-16)

Setting: Palestine
Time: 1150 BC

Characters

Samson (tenor)..... Plácido Domingo
Dalila (mezzo-soprano)..... Olga Borodina
High Priest of Dagon (baritone)..... Sergei Leiferkus
Abimélech (Satrap of Gaza) (bass)..... Richard Paul Fink
An Old Hebrew (bass);René Pape
A Messenger of the Philistines (tenor)..... Charles Anthony
First Philistine (tenor)..... Bernard Fitch
Second Philistine (baritone)..... Alfred Walker

Conducted by James Levine
Metropolitan Opera Chorus and Ballet

This performance celebrates the 30th anniversary
of Plácido Domingo's Metropolitan Opera debut

Première performance, December 2, 1877 at the Court Theatre in Weimar, Germany

Synopsis

Act I A square in Gaza

Background: Samson is a Herculean figure, who is granted tremendous strength by God to combat his enemies and perform heroic feats unachievable by ordinary humans — wrestling a lion, slaying an entire army with nothing more than the jawbone of an ass and destroying a temple. He is believed to be buried in Tel Tzora in Israel overlooking the Sorek valley, between the cities of Zorah and Eshtaol.

As the opera begins, the Hebrews bemoan their enslavement by the Philistines. Huddled near the temple of the Philistines god, Dagon, they beg their god, Jehovah, to end their suffering. Samson emerges, and the Hebrews' entreaties heighten in pitch. Abimélech, the despotic ruler of Gaza, remarks that the Hebrews would be better off if they prayed to the Philistine god, Dagon, instead. Enraged, the Hebrew leader, Samson, kills the despot and calls on his brethren, the Hebrews, to cast off their oppressors' chains. Hearing of this rebellion, the Philistines High Priest flees, cursing the Hebrews.

The outer walls of the temple disappear, revealing beautiful Philistine girls. Among them is Samson's former lover, Dalila. The women dance seductively and adorn the victorious Samson with garlands. Dalila seduces Samson by singing of spring and love. She then invites him to come to her nearby dwelling later that night. An old Hebrew warns Samson to avoid Dalila's temptations, but the warning goes unheeded. The enamored hero gladly agrees to follow Dalila to her home in the valley of Sorek.

Act II In the valley of Sorek

Dusk falls over the valley where Dalila awaits the leader of the Israelites. She knows that the hour of vengeance has arrived. The High Priest arrives and tells Dalila that the Hebrews have secured Gaza. He orders her to discover the source of Samson's secret strength. Only Samson's destruction will break their resolve. Dalila promises the High Priest that she will find a way to render the hero powerless. She calls on her gods to give her the strength to carry out the Philistines' revenge against Samson.

At last Samson arrives, hesitant and agitated. Thunder is heard in the distance. Samson appears as though under the compulsion of a spell. He has tried in vain to escape from Dalila's seductive fascination, and declares that, even if a thunderbolt were to strike him down, he would die declaring his love for Dalila. She welcomes him as her beloved. In her famous aria, "Mon coeur s'ouvre a ta voix," Dalila begs him to repeat his sweet declaration. Samson acquiesces. She then asks that him to tell her the secret of his strength as proof of his love, but Samson resists. With a passionate declaration of love for Samson she succeeds in overcoming his last scruples. A violent thunderclap interrupts their reverie. Samson, intoxicated with happiness, finally reveals the secret of his great strength — if his hair were cut off he would be as weak as other men. Once Samson has fallen asleep, Dalila cuts off his hair. She then calls out to the Philistine soldiers who have been lying in wait. They rush in and easily overpower Samson.

Act III

A dungeon at Gaza

In the prison at Gaza Samson is in chains. His enemies have blinded him and fettered him to a grist mill. Deeply penitent, he calls on Jehovah to witness his misery and his distress and to forgive his people, who will suffer for his sin. Outside, Samson hears the Hebrews, oppressed by the Philistines once more, asking why he betrayed them and Jehovah for a woman.

At daybreak the Philistines celebrate their triumph in the Temple of Dagon with a hedonistic celebration to the delirious music of a bacchanal. As their unbridled indulgence winds down, a boy leads Samson in. The High Priest greets him with mockery and tells Dalila to pour some wine for him. With biting scorn Dalila repeats the feigned vows of love uttered on that ominous night in the valley of Sorek — she has had her revenge! The tormented Samson begs Jehovah to restore his strength. The Philistines ridicule his faith and invoke their god, Dagon.

Dalila and the High Priest make an offering to Dagon, and the people give thanks for their victory over Israel. Meanwhile, Samson, unnoticed, has clasped the pillars supporting the temple. God had answered his prayer. From the King James version: *“Let me die with the Philistines.” And he bowed himself with all his might; and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.* (Judges 16:30)



Samson and Delilah Baroque by Peter Paul Rubens ca. (1610). Rubens depicts a candlelit interior. The Philistines wait at the door. One of their number cuts Samson's hair, while an elderly woman provides extra light. In a niche behind is a statue of the goddess of love, Venus, with Cupid — a reference to the cause of Samson's fate.

Camille Saint-Saëns

Born: October 9, 1835 in Paris, France; died December 16, 1921 in Algiers



Charles Camille Saint-Saëns was a French composer, organist, pianist and writer of novels, criticisms poetry, and essays on astronomy, Roman Theatre scenery, antique lyres and zithers, animals, plants and several plays. He was one of the leaders of the French musical renaissance of the 1870's. Like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, with whom he was often compared, he was a brilliant artisan, versatile, prolific and destined to contribute significantly to every genre of the nineteenth-century French music throughout his very long life-span.

Saint-Saëns was a child prodigy — two years after his birth he could already read and write and began piano lessons, then almost immediately began composing. His first piano recital was at age five. At ten years of age he gave public recitals of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. At the age of sixteen, he wrote his first symphony.

In 1871 Saint-Saëns co-founded the Société Nationale de Musique. He wrote dramatic works, including four symphonic poems, and 13 operas, of which *Samson et Dalila* and the symphonic poem, *Danse Macabre*, are among his most famous. In all, he composed over three hundred works and was the first major composer to write music specifically for the cinema.

In 1875, Saint-Saëns married Marie Truffot and fathered two children who, in 1881, died within six weeks of each other. Saint-Saëns left his wife the same year. The two never divorced, but lived the rest of their lives apart from one another. At that point he gave free rein to his love for young men. On being accused of homosexuality at a social occasion, he is reported to have countered, “Je ne suis pas homosexuel, je suis pédéraste (I am not a homosexual, I am a pedophile)!”

In 1886 Saint-Saëns wrote his Symphony No. 3 “avec orgue” (with organ), perhaps the most famous of all his works. Aided by monumental symphonic organs built in France, by Mr. Aristide Cavaillé-Coll, at that time the world's greatest organ builder, this work in particular is immersed in the spirit of “gigantism” of the dying XIX century, along with the Eiffel Tower, the Universal Exposition at Paris and the beginning of the “belle époque.” The Maestoso of the second movement is clearly an expression of the confidence of the European man in himself, in his technology, his science, his “age of reason” (somewhat ironically, the melody was later used as the basis for the theme music of the immensely popular film, *Babe*). Saint-Saëns was frequently named as “the most German composer of all the French composers,” perhaps due to his fantastic skills exhibited in the construction of melodic passages.

Also in 1886, Saint-Saëns completed *The Carnival of the Animals*, which was first performed on March 9th. Despite being very popular today, Saint-Saëns forbade complete performances of it shortly after its première, only allowing one movement, *The Swan*, a piece for cello and piano, to be published in his lifetime. Saint-Saëns also wrote six preludes and fugues for organ, three in op. 99 and three in op. 109, the most performed of which is the *Prelude and Fugue in E flat major*, op. 99, no. 3.

Saint-Saëns wrote on musical, scientific and historical topics, frequently traveling around Europe, North Africa, and South America. He chose to end his days in Algeria, where he was able to freely indulge his tastes for young Arabs. In recognition of his accomplishments, the government of France awarded him the Legion of Honor. In the last two decades of his life, he remained attached to his dogs and was largely a loner. He died in Algeria on December 16, 1921, at the age of 86. His body was brought back to Paris for a state funeral and he was buried in the Cimetière du Montparnasse, in Paris.

Samson et Dalila

The opera is based on the Biblical tale of Samson and Delilah as recounted in the Old Testament's Book of Judges, chapters 16. It is the only opera by Saint-Saëns that is regularly performed. The second act, the love scene in Delilah's tent, is one of the set pieces that define French opera. Two of Delilah's arias are particularly well known: "Printemps qui commence" and "Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix" ("My heart opens itself to your voice," the latter of which is one of the most popular recital pieces in the mezzo-soprano repertoire.

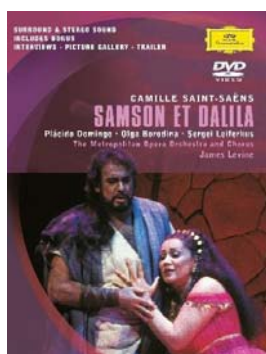
Saint-Saëns originally conceived *Samson et Dalila* as an oratorio. His librettist, Ferdinand Lemaire, however, a distant American relative of the composer, convinced him that the dramatic situations of the plot were far better exploited in a staged opera. Unfortunately, biblical settings as subjects for diversion in an opera house were frowned upon, and, consequently, the finished opera found no takers among French impresarios. Even the Dalila of Pauline Viardot (to whom the work is dedicated), who staged the second act in 1874 in a garden at Croissy, failed to persuade the director of the Paris Opéra — one of the guests at this event — to perform the opera at his house.

Franz Liszt, a friend and mentor, had encouraged Saint-Saëns before the completion of the work and, through his intervention, the opera was premiered in German, at the Hoftheater in Weimar in December 1877. However, it took another 13 years before *Samson et Dalila* was produced in France, at Rouen, and later that same year, 1890, in Paris at one of the smaller opera houses. The success of these performances finally led the Paris Opéra to bring out its own production in November 1892.

New York saw a concert performance, in French, also in 1892, and a single concert performance was given in 1893, in English, at London's Covent Garden. The opera was subsequently banned by the Lord Chamberlain, on religious grounds. Thus, the first actual staging at Covent Garden took place after the ban was lifted in 1909, on order of King Edward VII who, it is said, rather enjoyed the Bacchanale.

***Samson et Dalila*: The Video**

Starring Plácido Domingo and Olga Borodina; James Levine conductor (1998)



This performance of *Samson et Dalila* was performed on September 28, 1998, celebrating Domingo's 30-year anniversary with the Metropolitan Opera. The same date also equaled the record of 17 consecutive Met opening nights set by Caruso back at the beginning of the century.

The role and the opera itself number among Domingo's favorites. For him, Samson symbolizes how "a great man can crumble; in operatic terms, he is one of the more interesting character studies." It is no surprise that such scrupulous singers as Plácido Domingo and Olga Borodina have specialized in the roles, and Domingo has spoken of the purely vocal enjoyment he derives from the part.

Reviews at the performance made much of the beauty of the singing of the principals. *The New York Times* commented on Borodina's "musical elegance, fineness of diction and absence of excess," and describe the Spanish tenor's Samson as "at once reckless in its flat-out devotion and skillfully managed," the very definition of a Domingo performance.

Amid the flurry of tributes that crowned the evening, a visibly moved Domingo paid tribute to his Dalila, Olga Borodina, who had made her first appearance opposite Domingo at her Covent Garden debut in 1992. Their partnership in Saint-Saëns' opera has since become firmly established, heard in Hamburg, Milan, Salzburg and on the 2001 Met tour to Japan.

But, this particular evening belonged to Domingo, as all present acknowledge, from the Met dignitaries and the mayor of New York, to the crowds in the auditorium and the massed singers and dancers on stage, showering ovations on this heroic achiever of the opera world.