

Samson et Dalila première in 1877 at the Grand Ducal Theatre in Weimar
 CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS (1835-1921)

Libretto by Ferdinand Lemaire, after the biblical Book of Judges

Running time: 121 minutes

Performed at the San Francisco Opera House in 1981

Dalila	<i>Shirley Verrett</i>	Mezzo
Samson	<i>Plácido Domingo</i>	Tenor
High Priest of Dagon	<i>Wolfgang Brendel</i>	Baritone
Abimélech, Governor of Gaza	<i>Arnold Voketaitis</i>	Bass
An Old Hebrew	<i>Kevin Langan</i>	Bass
Philistine Messenger	<i>Robert Tate</i>	Tenor
Conductor	<i>Julius Rudel</i>	
Stage Director	<i>Nicolas Joel</i>	

Synopsis

Gaza circa 1100 BC

ACT 1 before the temple of Dagon in Gaza: The Hebrews lament their subjugation by the Philistines, and fear that they have been forsaken by their God. Samson attempts to raise their spirits, claiming that God speaks through his mouth. Abimélech rebukes the Hebrews for praying to the wrong deity: Dagon would help them. Samson and the Hebrews are incited into a fervent outburst. Abimélech attacks Samson who slays him.



The Hebrews melt away as the temple gates open, revealing the heavily guarded high priest of Dagon. As he scolds the fear of his Philistine followers, a messenger brings news of a Hebrew uprising. The high priest curses Israel. Pretending to celebrate this news, Dalila and a group of priestesses advance to crown Samson as victor. Claiming that he reigns in her heart, she beseeches him to visit her again in her lowly dwelling.

An old Hebrew warns Samson against Dalila's wiles. As she dances among her priestesses, Samson can't help following her voluptuous movements. She sings provocatively of her nocturnal vigil, waiting for the Israelite hero.

ACT 2 SCENE 1 outside Dalila's house in the valley of Sorek, night is falling and a storm is brewing: Anticipating Samson's perplexity, Dalila calls on Love to help her.

ACT 2 SCENE 2 Her first visitor is the high priest. As the Israelites have now recaptured the city, Samson's downfall has become essential. The priest reminds Dalila that her first encounter with the Hebrew hero didn't result in his complete submission. She admits that she failed to learn the secret of his strength. The high priest persuades Dalila that she's their final hope: through her Samson must be enslaved and die.

[Interval]

ACT 2 SCENE 3: Samson steals in when the coast is clear. He's torn by doubt and irresolution, but determined that this must be the lovers' farewell. Dalila dismisses thoughts of Israel's fate and invokes a more powerful god: Love. Samson dares the lightning to strike him down, as he confesses his love. Dalila demands total surrender (*Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix*), emphasising that he must entrust her with his secret. Assuming that the thunder is the voice of God, Samson initially refuses, but subsequently follows her indoors. Philistine soldiers approach silently, and Dalila encourages them to enter her house.

ACT 3 A prison in Gaza: Blinded and with shorn hair, Samson turns a treadmill while Hebrew voices bewail that a woman's charms have persuaded him to betray God as well as them.



In the temple of Dagon a celebration is underway: the high priest, Dalila and their followers watch a Bacchanale. The high priest mocks Samson's weakness. Dalila reminds him about her success. At the sacrificial table priests invoke their god, and a flame confirms the god's presence. The high priest commands Samson to kneel and worship. While everyone is distracted by intoxicating festivity, Samson asks to be led toward the central marble columns of the temple. Praying to God for his former strength, he pushes the columns outwards, bringing the temple roof crashing down.

***Samson et Dalila* by Saint-Saëns**

Saint-Saëns admired the compositions of Handel and Mendelssohn that were such a pivotal part of the English Oratorio tradition. He intended to adopt Samson as an oratorio subject – as Handel had done previously – but his librettist persuaded him to focus on an operatic alternative.

Liszt offered to produce *Samson et Dalila* in Weimar, a promise that was delayed seven years by the Franco-Prussian War. There was a discouraging lack of interest in France, even after a private performance of Act II, with Pauline Viardot as the heroine. The biblical subject was too

controversial (as Rameau and Voltaire had learnt, when a similar opera was proposed 150 years earlier).

Success in Paris had to wait 15 years after the Weimar première, and even then it was rather overshadowed by the progressive vogue for Wagner. Further afield *Samson et Dalila* became hugely popular. The librettist Ferdinand Lemaire compressed a formulaic Meyerbeer five act opera into three acts, with ballets and other spectacle forming a logical part of the action. The clash between austere Hebrews and hedonistic Philistines is prominent throughout.

The orchestration is masterly, especially in the second act, where the dramatic tension is heightened by the sultry atmosphere of a summer storm. The character of Dalila is carefully drawn to reflect changing circumstances as they unfold.

Camille Saint-Saëns

His 86 year life covered a momentous span of musical history. He was born one year before the première of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, and died when Berg had nearly completed *Wozzeck*, and Britten was a schoolboy. At the age of ten Saint-Saëns made his début as a Concerto pianist, and his last concert appearance took place in Dieppe 75 years later. His compositional career was nearly as long, from an 18-year old symphony, to sonatas written during his final year.



Saint-Saëns wrote five symphonies, choral works, orchestral music, together with a quantity of chamber music and songs. He regretted that other operas – excluding *Samson et Dalila* – failed to win the success he achieved in other fields (that were sometimes classified as less prestigious). Altogether he wrote 13 operas, including two opéras comiques as well as one collaboration. There were also one ballet, incidental music for plays, and – reflecting his longevity – one film score.

Saint-Saëns understood what was the theatre needed, but with all his competence and experience (compared to Massenet, for example) he lacked a fully developed theatrical instinct. His facility is often memorable, if rarely profound. Saint-Saëns' workmanship is impeccable, even if his invention may sometimes be thin, and short of emotive warmth.

In other musical spheres Saint-Saëns was a successful organist (notably at the Madeleine church in Paris), and he also helped to popularise Mozart's music in France.

Other Operas derived from the Bible (excluding Oratorios)

<i>Bible</i>	<i>Opera</i>	<i>Composer</i>
Genesis	Noye's Fludde	Britten
Exodus	Mosè in Egitto	Rossini
Exodus	Moses und Aron	Schoenberg
Old Testament [Conquest & Babylonian Exile]	Nabucco	Verdi
Daniel	The Burning Fiery Furnace	Britten
Matthew & Mark	Salome	Richard Strauss
Luke	The Prodigal Son	Britten

Saint-Saëns' enthusiasm for English Oratorio

The composer was known to admire oratorios in English. His large scale choral works include: *Oratorio de Noël* (1858), *Le déluge* (1875) as well as *Requiem* (1878). In 1913 he visited the Three Choirs Festival in Gloucester, where he played a Mozart Piano Concerto. The main reason for his visit however was to attend the première of his *Promised Land* oratorio. Some have suggested that Saint-Saëns' Oratorios could have been more adventurous, and less constrained by his respect for Handel and Mendelssohn's achievements.

At Gloucester Saint-Saëns spent time with Elgar, and regaled visitors with his famous impersonation of Cosima Wagner. *At the same Cathedral a more celebrated première took place at the preceding Three Choirs Festival in 1910: Vaughan Williams' Fantasia on a theme of Thomas Tallis.*

Selected Musical Biography

DALILA: SHIRLEY VERRETT (1931-2010) was an American mezzo-soprano, who also tackled soprano roles from the late 1970s. She sang at the 1973 Met première of Berlioz's complete *Les Troyens* opera, where she sang Cassandra as well as Didon. In a 2003 memoir Verrett wrote frankly about racism encountered as a black American singing classical music. An invitation from Leopold Stokowski in the early 1960s had to be cancelled, when the Houston Symphony Orchestra refused to accompany her. Stokowski tried to make amends offering a prestigious date with his Philadelphia Orchestra.

SAMSON: PLÀCIDO DOMINGO (born 1941) grew up working in his parents' Zarzuela company in Mexico, and has since regularly promoted these Spanish operettas. He's recorded more than one hundred complete operas, and performed over 150 roles in more than five different languages. From 1990, he performed as one of *The Three Tenors* with Luciano Pavarotti and José Carreras (and recorded the best-selling classical album of all time). In the early 2010s, he completed a transition from tenor repertoire to baritone parts (such as *Simon Boccanegra*). Increasingly he also conducts operas and concerts.