



Denyce Graves



Marilyn Horne



Frederica von Stade



Dame Janet Baker



Jennifer Larmore



Anne Sofie von Otter

Middle Voice, Top Billing

High, soaring voices are the signature sounds in many well-known operas, such as *Aïda*, *Manon*, *Salomé*, and *Tosca*, but there are numerous operas in the standard repertoire in which the title role was created for the mezzo-soprano voice. In Pittsburgh Opera's production of Saint-Saëns's *Samson & Dalila*, the self-serving temptress Dalila will be a role debut for the versatile mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe, whose recordings range from Bach to Wagner. Arguably the most famous mezzo role is Bizet's *Carmen*, the bewitching gypsy who seduces men into her arms with a toss of her hair and the curve of her hip. Superstars Denyce Graves and Marilyn Horne, with their unique interpretations, have made the role of *Carmen* a linchpin in their careers.

In addition to fiery females, mezzos are also cast as naughty and often lovelorn young men. The trouser role in Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* is typical of the impish and playful characters available to the mezzo. Hänsel requires different skills and a more lyric mezzo voice than the sultry and seductive *Carmen* and *Dalila*. The famous "Flicka", Frederica von Stade, portrayed the mischievous Hänsel with ease and has been immortalized on recordings.

Other renowned mezzos include Dame Janet Baker, Vivica Genaux, Jennifer Larmore, and Anne Sofie von Otter—all of whom have sung the tragic young hero in *Orpheus and Eurydice*, in operas written by composers as varied as Bertoni, Gluck, Rossi, and Rossini. The extensive list of operas with top-billed mezzo roles also includes *Alcina*, *Béatrice et Bénédict*, *La Cenerentola*, *Cendrillon*, *Dido and Aeneas*, *La Gioconda*, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and *Mignon*.

Mezzos may never sing the stratospheric notes of "The Queen of the Night", but opera lovers who hear talented artists with "middle" voices can easily recognize that the leading lady should get top billing. KG

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Samson & Dalila

by Camille Saint-Saëns

PITTSBURGH OPERA EDUCATION

Study Guide to the Opera



Samson & Dalila Production Photo from Hawaii Opera Theatre

Camille Saint-Saëns: A Boy Prodigy, a Tortured Man

Saint-Saëns was born in Paris and raised by his mother and great-aunt, who introduced him to piano at the age of two. A prodigy, he developed perfect pitch, and could read by age three. By seven he studied composition; by eleven he performed Bach and Mozart for spellbound audiences. Hailed by Franz Liszt as the world's greatest organist, Saint-Saëns was prolific in all styles of music. He cultivated numerous intellectual pursuits. A prolific writer, he penned books, letters, plays, and poems. He travelled the world and was witty, argumentative, and passionate.

His contemporaries included Debussy, Fauré, and Ravel, but Saint-Saëns denounced Impressionism. A *neoclassicist* composer, his later works were polished and refined, if a bit old-fashioned. His enemies called his work *la mauvaise musique bien écrite* (bad music well written). Saint-Saëns composed many religious works, despite his professed lack of faith. His productivity as a composer is stunning; in addition to the familiar *Carnival of the Animals* and *Organ Symphony No. 3*, he created ballets, dramatic choral works, symphonies, and a film score.

Though he wrote 12 operas, only *Samson & Dalila* remains in the standard repertoire. If not for Liszt, *Samson & Dalila* might never have reached the stage. The opera is based on Judges 16, but no French theater was interested in presenting Biblical material on the stage. Saint-Saëns originally conceived the work as an oratorio, but once he was persuaded to create a full opera of three acts and four tableaux, Liszt enthusiastically produced the opera in Weimar in 1877. *Samson & Dalila* finally reached Rouen, France in 1890, and Paris Opéra in 1892.

The tale of a Hebrew hero, Samson, who reveals the secret of his divine strength to a seductive Philistine woman, is an old story of betrayal and ruin. Saint-Saëns drew from personal experience to craft *Dalila*, his seductress of Biblical proportions. The role was dedicated to the composer's close friend, Pauline Viardot, but the convoluted relationships he had with women, including his emotionally abusive mother, Clémence, and his unreciprocated feelings for the scandalous Augusta Holmes, are evident in the provocative *Dalila*. The tortured Samson is the musical manifestation of the tortured composer.



Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

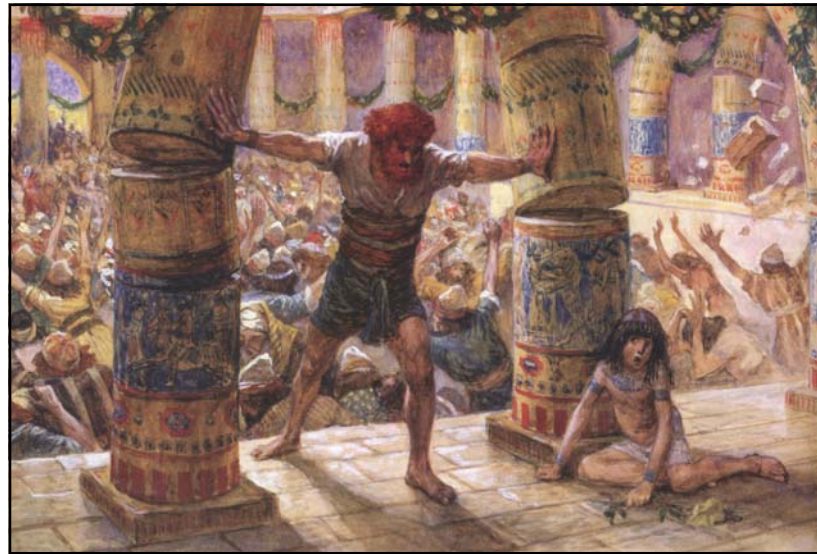
Samson & Dalila Synopsis

The story opens in the city of Gaza, one of the five cities ruled by the Philistines, about 10 centuries BCE.

ACT I, A square in Gaza. A group of Hebrews prays to God for relief from their bondage to the Philistines. Samson stands out from the crowd and encourages them to put their trust in God. The Philistine commander Abimélech overhears Samson's words and denounces the Hebrews and their God. Samson challenges him and urges his people to action, killing Abimélech. Samson leads the mob away. The High Priest of Dagon furiously orders his fearful Philistine soldiers to kill the Hebrews, who are now burning the Philistine fields. He curses Samson, the Hebrews, and their God. Samson, reentering with his joyous people, gives thanks for their victory. When the Philistine priestess Dalila and her attendants appear, they bring flowers to crown the victors. Dalila recalls how Samson once conquered her heart and invites him to return to her. Samson is tempted, despite the Old Hebrew's warning to ignore her wiles. Dalila's words grow more passionate. Her maidens dance seductively, and she tells Samson of the burning love she still feels for him.

Intermission

ACT II, Valley of Sorek. At her home in the valley of Sorek, Dalila calls on her gods to help her entrap Samson and render him powerless. The High Priest unexpectedly enters, telling Dalila of Samson's victories over the Philistines, and requests her help. She promises to defeat him that very night and refuses any reward, explaining that her hatred of Samson has already led her to attempt to learn the secret of his strength three times. Sure of their victory, the priest rushes away. Dalila now fears Samson will not come, but in the gathering storm he appears. He tells Dalila that his passion has driven him to her. When he describes how God calls him to lead Israel, Dalila predicts he will yield to her more powerful god—love. As soon as he surrenders, she demands that he tell her the secret of his strength. When he refuses, she calls him a coward. Samson hears God's warning in the thunder, but follows Dalila into her house. Learning his secret, Dalila calls for the Philistine soldiers.



Samson Pulls Down the Pillars (gouache on board),
James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902),
The Jewish Museum, New York, NY/Art Resource, NY

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Intermission

ACT III, Dungeon at Gaza/Temple of Dagon. Samson, blind and chained to an enormous millwheel, implores God to take pity on his people, and to take his life instead. The Hebrews are heard lamenting in the background.

In the Temple of Dagon, the Philistines hail this day of celebration of victory over the Hebrews. Led by a child, Samson endures the mockery of the High Priest and Dalila. When the Priest challenges the God of Israel to prove his might by restoring Samson's sight, the hero prays for a return of his strength. The Priest commands the child to lead Samson to the altar between the main pillars of the temple. Samson again prays for strength, and with a mighty effort pushes down the pillars of the temple, crushing everyone.

—freely adapted from *Opera News*

Characters of the Opera

Samson *tenor*
Dalila's former lover. Leader, or Judge, of the Hebrews (Israelites). His long hair symbolizes his physical strength.

Dalila [dah-lee-LAH] *mezzo-soprano*
Samson's ex-lover. The seductive and treacherous Philistine woman declares that her kisses are sweeter than lilies of the valley.

High Priest of Dagon [DAY-gahn] *baritone*
The High Priest curses Samson and the Israelites for the murder of Abimélech.

An Old Hebrew *bass*
A wise old man, the Old Hebrew warns Samson not to fall into Dalila's trap.

Abimélech [ah-BIM-eh-leck] *bass*
Philistine provincial governor, or *satrap*, of Gaza. The commander taunts the Hebrews, reminding them that they have been abandoned by their God, who does not compare to Dagon.

First Philistine *tenor*
Second Philistine *bass*
Philistine Messenger *tenor*

Hebrews
Philistines

Composer and Librettist

Camille Saint-Saëns [ka-mee san-sahns]

Ferdinand Lemaire [fair-dee-naw luh-mare]

The poet Lemaire was married to a cousin of Saint-Saëns's wife. The composer drafted the opera's story, which he intended for an oratorio. The librettist suggested an opera instead, and versified the text.

Musical Highlights: Samson & Dalila Signature Sounds

Saint-Saëns's original intention to write *Samson & Dalila* as an oratorio is clear in the opening of the opera—an orchestral introduction leads directly into sorrowful prayers sung by a **chorus of the oppressed Hebrews**. Later, a fugue erupts.

Prends en pitié ton peuple et sa misère!
Pity your people in their misery!

Samson's entrance is the **first solo voice heard**. His music in E-flat major represents the Holy Spirit part of the Trinity; Samson comforts the Israelites by declaring that the Lord speaks through him. Important musical motifs accompany Samson's rousing music: low strings grumble below a viola fanfare, violins glissando upward two octaves, and low brass descend ominously on a chromatic scale.

After Samson kills Abimélech, Hebrew men alternate a simple hymn of joy with the Old Hebrew singing like a **cantor**.

Philistine women enter with flowers; **Dalila sings to Samson**.
Je viens célébrer la victoire de celui qui règne en mon cœur.
I come to celebrate the victory of he who reigns over my heart.

Priestesses of Dagon dance and **Dalila seduces Samson** with an aria in ABA form. Note the long phrases and large ascending leaps that paint her character in music.

Printemps qui commence, portant l'espérance.
Spring, you arrive, bringing lovers new hope.

In the second act, storm music provides background for **Dalila's second aria**, in which she plots revenge. No chorus interrupts the lovers as they explore their deepest emotions.

Amour! Viens aider ma faiblesse!
Love, come aid me in my weakness.

Samson intends to end his relationship with Dalila, but he still loves her. She casts her spell on him in the **most famous aria in the opera**. Arpeggios in the accompaniment create an unsettling effect. The orchestra again echoes Dalila's melodies, with the exotic sound of the oboe.

Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix.
My heart opens to your voice.

The third act begins with **Samson's grinding music**. Repeated sixteenth notes in the orchestra and offstage chorus accusations depict the Hebrews' disappointment.

Dieu nous confie à ton bras, pour nous guider dans les combats.
God trusted you to lead us in battle.

The victorious Philistines celebrate in a wine-filled **Bacchanale**, full of orchestral colors and Eastern scales.

A repentant Samson calls upon the Lord to restore his strength; listen for **motifs of strength and deliverance in the final scene**.

En les écrasant en ce lieu!
Let me destroy them here in their temple!