

AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN OPERA AND ORATORIO: BIBLICAL THEMES AND 19TH CENTURY FRENCH OPERA

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SUMMARY. The present study aims to investigate the delicate border between oratorios and operas based on biblical subjects, focusing on French music. A brief analysis of the period prior to the 19th century reveals that the oratorio was not one of the most popular genres in France, allowing the genesis of various genres inspired by biblical subjects. The oratorio enjoyed a brief revival in the 18th century, leading in the 19th century to the composition of biblical operas and the dawn of genres that are at the crossroads between opera and oratorio: *mystère*, *drame sacré*, or *légende sacrée*, represented by works of Jules Massenet. Although traditionally referred to as oratorios, these works allowed for staged representation, due to the dramatic qualities of the librettos, which in turn allowed for the musical discourse to depart from the sobriety of the oratorio and to include certain features that are characteristic for opera. Gradually, biblical subjects began to be tackled in operas as well, as will be seen in the works of Camille Saint-Saëns and Jules Massenet, the two composers on whose works the present study mainly focuses. At the same time, biblical themes can be related to musical orientalism, but also to the *fin de siècle* decadent aesthetic (through their exploration of such themes as the opposition between sacred and erotic love), serving as mirror for the political, social, and religious context of the Third Republic.

Keywords: opera, oratorio, Bible, orientalism, *fin de siècle*

Introduction

The present study is concerned with the way biblical subjects served as sources of inspiration for French musical works from the 19th century. To understand the controversial nature regarding the use of biblical subjects in

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certain instances and the criticism composers often faced in such situations, it is important to follow the evolution of the oratorio and other genres concerned with biblical subjects, and the gradual acceptance of biblical operas in France.

Even though the stage was viewed with disapprobation by the Church, certain Catholic communities, such as the Jesuits, considered that there may be a way to reconcile Church and theater since the latter could be used to ingrain moral and sacred values to the audiences. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the use of biblical topics was mainly reserved to sacred music (with certain exceptions, as will be explained later), while the composition of operas with sacred themes was carefully supervised by the Church and its authorities. What was performed on stage was also controlled by the Church, and the authority of this institution will carry on well into the 19th century, despite the strained relation between Church and State.

The fact that biblical subjects were reserved for sacred music led to the genesis of various genres in France, apart from the *oratorio* which was less fortunate there and was rather associated with Italian and German composers in the 17th and 18th centuries. During the 18th century interest in oratorios was revived, while the dawn of the 19th century (following the French Revolution and Napoleon's campaign to Egypt) marked a growing interest in the Bible and the representation of biblical subjects in arts, literature, and music alike.

The portrayal of religious subjects in 19th century operas had to obey the standards of censorship, however by the *fin de siècle* certain composers, such as Jules Massenet will break the rules and unspoken conventions regarding the representation of biblical characters in oratorios and on the operatic stage alike. It is also during this period that the border between oratorio and operas based on biblical themes is gradually washed away, with certain oratorios being staged as operas, or the employment in oratorios of certain elements that are rather particular to opera (such as the duets between biblical characters, that rather resemble operatic love duets).

Biblical subjects also offered composers the possibility to explore musical devices associated with orientalism and to represent the East in their works. At the same time, this shift in the manner in which biblical themes and subjects were employed in the works of such composers as Camille Saint-Saëns and Jules Massenet (with the works of whom the present research is concerned), reflects the decadent aesthetic of the *fin de siècle*, the permanent conflict between the religious and the erotic, the artists' interest in diving deep into the realms of the subconscious and representing topics that were considered controversial or delicate to tackle (sexuality, politics). Given the limits imposed by the present research, the authors focus mainly on the works of Camille Saint-Saëns and Jules Massenet, only briefly analyzing other works – which offers the authors further possibilities for elaboration in future studies.

Histoires sacrées, opéra sacré, and oratorio in the 18th century

The end of the 17th century marked the rupture between the Church and the stage³, and despite the attempt of certain French composers to write sacred works inspired by the Italian *oratorio*, this endeavor remained almost fruitless after the death of Marc-Antoine Charpentier's in 1704. Inspired by the works he heard during his stay in Rome, Charpentier composed *histoires sacrées*, aiming to recreate the style of the Italian oratorio and to assimilate it in his sacred compositions, as well as in his stage works.

Although certain authorities of the Church expressed their disapproval regarding the stage, the Jesuit community viewed theatre as means of representing and instilling moral values, striving to reconcile Church and theatre.⁴ Nonetheless, during the regime of Louis XIV, the genre of *opéra sacré* gained little popularity among French composers. One of these sacred operas was Charpentier's *David et Jonathas* (1688), a *tragédie biblique* situated at the border between opera and oratorio, despite the fact that it refused both labels at the time.⁵ In the Jesuit sacred works most often only one gender was displayed on stage, as women were not permitted to portray characters in these works. Another famous sacred opera (*opéra sacré*) was Michel Pignolet de Montéclair's *Jephté* (1732), on the libretto by Abbé Pellegrin.

In 1725 the *Concerts spirituels* were established, the aim of which was to make musical representations possible during the forty days of Lent, when theatres and concert halls were closed. Within these, concert genres such as the *cantate spirituelle*, *cantate sacrée*, or the *parodies spirituelles* were performed, in which the musical language characteristic for the opera was subordinated to the gravity of the biblical subjects. It was also during this period that oratorios were composed anew, inspired by Mondonville's *Les Israélites à la montagne d'Horeb* (1758). Understanding the dramatic limitations of such genres as the *grand motet*, Mondonville designed a large-scale work, with the libretto based on a biblical story, that was to be performed by soloists, chorus, and orchestra in concert.⁶ His work paved the way for other French composers who composed works in this genre between 1760 and 1790.

³ McManners, John. *Abbés and Actresses: The Church and the Theatrical Profession in Eighteenth-Century France*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982, p. 1.

⁴ Idem, p. 14-18.

⁵ Dratwitcki, Benoît. *Oratorio and opéra sacré in France (1700-1830): experimental genres?*, from the CD-Book *La Mort d'Abel de Kretezer*, 2012, p. 84. Available at: <http://www.bruzanemediabase.com/eng/layout/set/print/Musical-scholarship-online/Articles/Dratwicki-Benoit-Oratorio-and-opera-sacre-in-France-1700-1830-experimental-genres> (page accessed on 21 august 2023).

⁶ Idem, p. 84.

Christian drama in the 19th century

Following the French Revolution and the anticlerical repression, interest in biblical tales and their geographical placement was stimulated by Napoleon's campaign to Egypt and encouraged by the Concordat signed in 1801, which sought to reconcile the Catholic Church and the revolutionaries. In 1802, Chateaubriand published his influential work that would have a great impact on the evolution of the Romantic movement, *Le Génie du christianisme, ou Beautés de la religion chrétienne*. In this work the author strives to defend Christianity against the criticism of the French Enlightenment philosophers, praising such sources of inspiration as Gothic architecture and Mediaeval literature. These ideas influenced Romantic artists and writers, but also contributed to the restoration of sacred music and the representation of scenes inspired by the Old Testament. According to Rowden, the representation of Christ, or scenes from the New Testament were out of the question at this time, due to ideological reasons and censorship.⁷

In 1803 Christian Kalkbrenner and Ludwig Wenzel Lachnith presented the staged oratorio (*oratorio mis en action*) *Saul*, in which the authors compiled the music of several composers that were popular at the time (Mozart, Haydn, Cimarosa). An important work from the beginning of the 19th century is Méhul's *opéra comique*, *Joseph* (or *Joseph en Égypte*), premiered by the company of Opéra Comique in 1807 at the Théâtre Feydeau. The work reflects the contemporary interest in religious themes, which also enabled the artists to represent oriental landscapes and motifs in their works. The musical style of the opera is austere, simple, and touching, the composer striving to reflect the piety and pure faith of the Hebrew characters.⁸ The composer included *a cappella* sections, along with homophonic textures, offering the chorus an important role in the unfolding of the story. The simple musical depiction of the Hebrew characters and the vocal writing of the choral parts anticipates Saint-Saëns's choral pages in his opera *Samson et Dalila* (1877). In the latter work, Saint-Saëns employs similar hymn-like, homophonic and fugato sections, typical for the Western compositional-style, thus representing the West through the Hebrew characters, as opposed to the Orient, embodied by the Philistines.⁹ Méhul's portrayal of a religious subject

⁷ Rowden, Clair. *Massenet, Marianne and Mary: Republican morality and Catholic tradition at the opera*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis, City University London, 2001, p. 94. Available at: <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/7611/> (page accessed on 9 September 2023).

⁸ Meyer, Stephen C. *Carl Maria von Weber and the Search for a German Opera*. Indiana University Press, 2003, p. 60.

⁹ Locke, Ralph P. *Constructing the Oriental 'Other': Saint-Saëns' "Samson et Dalila"* in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 3, Nov. 1991 (pp. 261-302), p. 271-274.

in the opera *Joseph*, obeys the standards of censorship, regarding the representation of biblical subjects. However, the opera still lacks the dramatic possibilities exploited later in the works of Meyerbeer or Halévy, composers who strove to provide strong portrayals based on religious themes.

In the second half of the 19th century, the portrayal of Old and New Testament stories on the stage of the opera was possible with minimal censorship, as compared to realist drama, which faced harsher criticism, due to the fact that in the latter religious ideas were at the forefront, as compared to opera, where the religious topic provided only the background for the plot (thus avoiding to disturb anyone).¹⁰

Positivist philosophy and the concern for geographical and cultural accuracy (an accurate representation of the environment where the biblical scenes take place, the dress, and customs of these peoples), were other aspects which encouraged the representation of biblical subjects in 19th century French art and music.

Massenet's *drame sacré*, *mystère*, and *légende sacré*

During the Third Republic (1870-1940), a period also referred to as *La Belle Époque*, Jules Massenet achieved recognition within French artistic circles with two works that dealt with biblical stories (but presented from a different perspective): the *drame sacré Marie-Magdeleine* (1873) and the *mystère Ève* (1875). Even though these works are often referred to as oratorios, there are certain features that distinguish them from this genre.

Writing opera was natural for Massenet, it reflected his temperament and offered him the perfect environment and tools for expressing human emotions in a more expansive, unconfined manner than the sobriety of the oratorio would allow. Apart from the personal way the composer structured his instrumental and vocal discourse, in his works he also gives certain indications regarding the setting of certain scenes and the interactions between characters. This can aid the performers in the construction of the musical phrases, their choice of vocal colors, and the way they convey the emotions of the character their voice embodies. Apart from offering precise musical or vocal indications, Massenet was deeply involved in the scenic presentation of his operas, helping design posters, costumes, or the decoration of his sets.

¹⁰ Hallays-Dabot, Victor. *La Censure dramatique et le théâtre, histoire des vingt dernières années (1850-1870)*. Paris: E. Dentu, 1871, p. 91-92.

Love and Christian faith are presented in *Marie-Magdeleine* and *Ève* alike, the composer suggesting a humanist portrayal of the biblical characters, an idea that also brings these works closer to the opera than the oratorio.

The *drame sacré* in three acts and four parts, *Marie-Magdeleine* was first performed in 1873, on Good Friday, with the celebrated singer Pauline Viardot in the title role. Even though the work was considered an oratorio, the dramatic possibilities of the work eventually led to the staged performance of *Marie-Magdeleine* in Nice in 1903. The sober libretto written by Louis Gallet recounts the last days of Jesus and his encounter with Mary Magdalene, offering the composer the possibility for composing a balanced but at the same time emotional musical discourse.

The libretto alters the biblical story in certain aspects. The first act evokes the image of Méryem (Mary-Magdalene) who expresses her desire to give up on all earthly things prompted by her first encounter with Jesus (*Ô mes sœurs, je veux fuir loin des bruits de la terre*); this scene is followed by the appearance of Judas, who advises Méryem to give up on these thoughts and enjoy the beauties of life; the people insult her, but Jesus appears, who defends her, then promises to visit Méryem in her home. The second act begins with a duet between Marthé (referred to as the sister of Mary-Magdalene) and Judas, alluding to the approaching betrayal of Jesus; the arrival of Jesus leads to a beautiful duet between Jesus and Méryem; the disciples arrive, with Judas among them and the scene concludes with a prayer sung by Jesus and his disciples. The libretto skips the scenes of the passion, and the third act opens with the image of the crucified Jesus on the Golgotha, mocked by the staring crowd; these agitated choral and instrumental movements are followed by the painfully beautiful phrases of Méryem weeping before the cross; the final scene depicts the tomb of Jesus and the Resurrection.

The libretto focuses rather on the portrayal of the main characters and their feelings, while the action itself and accuracy in the presentation of the events are of secondary importance in this instance. Mirroring the religious understanding of the period, Massenet humanizes the biblical characters, a feature that may be observed in the oratorio *Ève* as well.

In accordance with the practices of his period, through his music Massenet strives for an accurate representation of the oriental landscape where the biblical tale takes place. He achieves this through the incorporation of certain oriental stereotypes, such as the use of wind instruments, tambourine, and marked instrumental figurations (act II no. 7, instrumental introduction – E.g.1), in constructions with modal inflexions. The modal sound of the repeated motifs (instrumental figurations) shown in E.g.1 can be related to the intervals of seventh as well as the melodic embellishment.

E.g. 1

A Allegretto. (108 = ♩)

**Jules Massenet: *Marie Magdeleine*
Act II No. 7, instrumental introduction (excerpt)**

As will be the case with the opera *Hérodiade*, the duet between Méryem and Jésus in act II lacks the sobriety of the oratorio, rather suggesting the emotionally charged operatic love duets. This mingling of the sacred and the sensual would become one of the features of Massenet's music, as proven by his following works, the oratorio *Ève* (1875), and later his operas, most notably *Hérodiade* (1881) and *Thaïs* (1894).

Ève explores the story of Adam and Eve but proposes a new interpretation of the biblical tale. The work is set for orchestra, chorus, and three soloists (*Ève* – soprano, Adam – baritone, Le Récitant – tenor). The deviations from the original story influence the meaning of the work: the serpent is replaced by the voices of the night (*voix de la nuit*), while the tree of knowledge becomes the tree of science. The chorus is present throughout the entire work, representing both good and evil.

Massenet's series of works based on the lives of female characters from the bible is continued with the *drame sacré* *La Vierge*, premiered in 1880. This oratorio recounts the main events in the life of the Virgin Mary, from the visit of Archangel Gabriel until her death. The final scene evokes the Assumption of the Virgin into heaven.

Massenet's particular musical language can easily be identified in these works, while the way the composer evokes his characters through music or emphasizes certain features points to the decadent and sensual atmosphere of the *fin de siècle*. The decadent aesthetic may be associated with the unexpected representation of the biblical characters, transgressing the unspoken conventions regarding their evocation through music (or on stage). These rules are further broken in the opera *Hérodiade*, in which the composer and librettist chose to evoke the image of a saint that drifted away from the righteous path.

Massenet was often criticized for writing music that was fashionable, reflecting the shallowness of the *fin de siècle* social circles¹¹, but at the same time it may be argued that his music reached his audiences because men and women alike found they could easily identify themselves with the characters on stage (biblical or profane). The faults and emotions of ordinary people were embodied by these characters in scenes carefully constructed by the composer and librettist.

Biblical opera and orientalism: *Samson et Dalila* (1877)

Operas with biblical subject were performed in France during the 19th century. Among these are such as titles as the *grand opéra L'enfant prodigue* (1850) by Daniel Auber (based on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, in the Gospel of Luke), or *Moïse et Pharaon, ou Le passage de la Mer Rouge* (1827; the French version of the Italian *Mosè in Egitto*) by Gioachino Rossini). However, the genre did not enjoy popularity in the second half of the 19th century.

Initially conceived as an oratorio, Saint-Saëns' *Samson et Dalila* was first performed in 1877 at the Grand Ducal Theater (now the Staatskapelle) in Weimar. The work was performed in France only in 1890, at the Théâtre des Arts in Rouen. The libretto was written by Ferdinand Lemaire, based on Voltaire's play, *Samson*. The biblical story naturally suggested the composer to write an oratorio, however the dramaturgical possibilities of the biblical episode and of the libretto prompted the composer to alter his initial intentions and write an opera instead. Hervey considers that *Samson et Dalila* is Saint-Saëns' best opera, but also one of the finest operas produced by any French composer in the second half of the 19th century.¹²

¹¹ Heugel, Henri. *Semaine Théâtrale* in *Le Ménestrel*, 52/6, Sunday, 10 January 1886, (pp. 42-43), p. 43.

¹² Hervey, Arthur. *Masters of French Music*. London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1894, p. 143.

Two ethnic groups are confronted in the work: the Hebrews and the Philistines. Despite the fact that both groups belong to the Orient, the Western listener of the 19th century could identify oneself as belonging to the Hebrews, who represent the West, while the Philistines embody the Orient, the entire oriental background of the opera representing a *blank screen for projecting Western concerns about itself*, as Locke observes.¹³

The West is evoked using Western compositional patterns and a musical discourse that suggests the influence of the oratorios of Bach and Händel¹⁴. In the first act of the opera, for example, in the scenes that evoke Hebrew characters, the composer introduces fugato sections alongside homophonic textures, as well as a tetratonic scale that suggests Gregorian chant (E.g.2), which further emphasizes the idea that these characters represent the West. It is interesting to observe the intervallic patterns employed by the composer in this intonation, as well as the way the declamation follows the structure of the words:

E.g. 2

VIEILLARDS HÉBREUX
Bassos du Chœur

p Hym-ne de joi - e, Hym-ne de dé-li - vran - ce, Mon-tez vers l'E-ter -
- nell Il a dai - gné dans sa tou-te-puis-san - ce
Se-cou - rir Is - ra - ïl Par lui le faible

Camille Saint-Saëns: *Samson et Dalila*
Act I scene 5, *Hymne de joie* (Un Vieillard Hébreux) - Excerpt

¹³ Locke, Ralph P. 1991. *Op. cit.*, p. 285.

¹⁴ Hervey, Arthur. 1894. *Op. cit.*, p. 143.

The Philistine characters, representing the Orient, are evoked through a more “exotic” musical discourse, which distinguishes itself through the modal scales, timbres, and sonorities employed by the composer. Analyzing the evolution of musical orientalism in the works of 19th century French composers, Bartoli speaks of certain effects that suggest the desire to create distance from familiar surroundings, evoking places away from the immediate proximity of the observer.¹⁵ In the first act of *Samson et Dalila*, Saint-Saëns employs modal sequences and particular music intervals, such as the minor third and major sixth, along with the lowered seventh, the latter considered one of the most effective signs of temporal or geographical displacement in Western music, according to Locke¹⁶ (E.g. 3).

E.g. 3

Timb. en MI ♯ LA
Tambour de Basque
Triangle *sempre pp*

sempre pp

F Allegretto (104 = ♩)
pp sempre
Div.
pp pizz.
pp sempre
pp pizz.
pp sempre
Velles Tuia

**Camille Saint-Saëns: *Samson et Dalila*
Act I scene 6, *Danse des Prêtresses de Dagon* (excerpt)
The modal sound of the scale, along with the percussion instruments
emphasize the exoticism of the scene**

Exoticism is further suggested and emphasized in the well-known *Bacchanale* from act III scene 2, where Saint-Saëns employs a modal scale that suggests the Hijaz scale in Arab music¹⁷, as well as scales that contain

¹⁵ Bartoli, Jean-Pierre. 1997. *L'orientalisme dans la musique française du XIXe siècle : la ponctuation, la seconde augmentée et l'apparition de la modalité dans les procédures exotiques* in *Revue belge de Musicologie* (Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Muziekwetenschap), Vol. 51 (1997), (pp. 137-170), pp. 138-139.

¹⁶ Locke, Ralph P. 1991. *Op. cit.*, p. 266.

¹⁷ Idem, p. 267.

augmented seconds. Lacombe argues that in *Samson et Dalila* Saint-Saëns retains a classic musical architecture, often in the fashion of 18th century works, while at the same time employing motifs that recur throughout the opera.¹⁸

Religious mysticism and the *fin-du-siècle*

The genesis of the opera *Hérodiade*, composed by Jules Massenet is controversial. Following the triumph of the opera *Le Roi de Lahore* (1876) in Italy, editor Giulio Ricordi requested Massenet to compose an opera based on the libretto of Angelo Zanardini, inspired by Flaubert's short story *Hérodias* (1877). In response, Massenet composed the opera *Hérodiade*, which was supposed to be premiered at the Teatro alla Scala at the beginning of 1881. However, the premiere was canceled at the last minute, and instead of Massenet's work another opera on a biblical subject, Amilcare Ponchielli's *Il Figliuol prodigo* (1880) was staged. Massenet's opera was instead first performed on 19 December 1881 at the Théâtre de la Monnaie, in Brussels, in its French version. The original libretto was adapted to French by Paul Milliet and Henri Grémont, which implied that the score as well had to undergo important modifications. It is unclear whether the first version of the work was originally composed to the Italian libretto. The Italian premiere of the work eventually took place in Milan on 23 February 1882, followed by another Italian version in Paris at the Théâtre des Italiens on 1 February 1884. Despite its success in Brussels, the French premiere of *Hérodiade* in Paris would take place only on 18 October 1893, at the Théâtre de la Gaîté. Meanwhile, the opera enjoyed popularity in Lyon.

One of the possible reasons why the French theatres postponed the representation of this opera was its biblical subject. Biblical subjects could be presented in oratorios, but for them to serve as sources of inspiration for operas, and furthermore to have the original story altered, was too controversial. Some Catholic sources even condemned the opera's libretto as sacrilegious.¹⁹ On the other hand, Walker believes that what caused controversy was not as much the fact that the biblical subject and characters were altered in the libretto, nor their decadent portrayal, but rather what these transformations represented in the context of the strained political situation of the *fin de siècle*.²⁰

¹⁸ Lacombe, Hervé. *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001, p. 142.

¹⁹ Cère, Emile. *L'Excommunication de Massenet* in *La France*, 5 January 1886.

²⁰ Walker, Jennifer. *Church, State and an Operatic Outlaw: Jules Massenet's Hérodiade* in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 2020, 31 (2-3), (pp. 211–236), p. 211.

It was not the sensual nature of the biblical subject presented in the libretto, as one might think, but rather the symbolic representations of Church and State, that enraged critics: a Catholic and Republic Christ, embodied by the character of Jean-Baptiste, as opposed to the State, embodied by the Vitellius and the Roman characters.²¹

Flaubert's short story *Hérodias* corresponds to the growing interest in the 19th century regarding the representation of biblical subjects in arts, literature, and music alike. The representation of these subjects gave rise to a dispute between artists that supported the realistic representation of such subjects, as opposed to those who considered that an idealistic evocation is better suited, since it can preserve the mysticism and spiritual nature of the Christian faith reflected in these stories. The interest in biblical subjects is also relatable to the evolution of exoticism and orientalism, offering artists the possibility to evoke the image of an idealized elsewhere in their works.

In the context of scientific contextualization and realistic representation, philosopher Joseph Ernest Renan wrote *La Vie de Jésus*, striving to evoke the figure of a human that lived and moved, instead of the image of an abstract being. The work had a great influence on his contemporaries, and it could be argued that Massenet's representation of Jean in the opera *Hérodiade* was inspired by the image of Jesus in Renan's work. Massenet merged the character of John the Baptist (Jean) with the figure of Christ, going even further and transforming the prophet to lover, when the spiritual love between him and Salomé (who recalls the figure of Mary Magdalene) is transformed into physical love by the end of the opera.²² The similarity between Christ and Jean is evident from the first appearance of the latter in Act II scene 7 of the opera: Jean arrives into the public square accompanied by a crowd that is swaying branches and singing *Hosannah! Gloire à celui qui vient au nom du Seigneur!* – a moment which alludes to Christ's entrance into Jerusalem. Jean's aria in act III scene 1, *Adieu donc, vains objets* is preceded by a short declamation, also suggesting the figure of Christ, as he submits to the Lord's will: "*Ne pouvant réprimer les élans de la foi/Leur impuissante rage a frappé ton prophète, /Seigneur! ta volonté soit faite, Je me repose en toi!*"

The feminine characters (Salomé and Hérodiade) may be associated with the image of the decadent Art Nouveau women of the *fin de siècle*, whose figure originated in the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.²³

²¹ Idem, p. 235-236.

²² Koechlin, Charles. *Souvenirs de la classe Massenet (1894–1895)* in *Le ménestrel*, 8 March 1935, p. 82.

²³ Tschudi-Madsen, Stephane. *Art Nouveau*. București: Editura Meridiane [Bucharest: Meridiane Publishing House], 1977, p.46.

This image of the feminine, as well as the biblical story which inspired Massenet, were often represented in the works of French artists of the period: Mallarmé wrote the dramatic poem *Hérodiade* (1864-1869), while Gustave Moreau depicted Salomé dancing before Herod Antipas in the painting *L'Apparition* (1874-1876). The feminine characters evoked in these works embody temptation and decline (ideas that are also linked to the representation of the Orient, personified by the feminine and perceived to be weak and dangerous at the same time). These features may be observed when analyzing the musical discourse Massenet attributed to his feminine characters, Salomé and Hérodiade, in his opera. Through her deeds (incestuous marriage and abandonment of her child), Hérodiade represents the antithesis to the Catholic and Republican female²⁴, her vocal line, due to its high *tessitura*, invests the musical discourse with a certain harshness, that contrasts with the sweetness and purity of Salomé's lines. Although most often associated with the idea of sensuality and mystery, due to its smoky and velvety timbre, in Massenet's opera the mezzosoprano timbre, chosen to embody the character of Hérodiade, suggests a morally corrupt character, who fails to repent her wrongdoings and thus cannot be forgiven – as suggested by Jean's criticism of her. In contrast, Salomé has the potential to be granted eternal life, even though she confesses her profane love for Jean. The duets sung by the two characters, Salomé and Jean, in act I scene 4 and act IV scene 13 (E.g.4), in which the composer couples the soprano and tenor timbres, evoke the conventional operatic love duets.

E.g. 4

The image shows a musical score for a duet. It consists of three systems of staves. The top two systems are for the vocal parts: Soprano (S.) and Tenor (T.). The bottom system is for the piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Poco più mosso' with the instruction '(avec enthousiasme)'. The dynamics are marked 'ff'. The lyrics are 'est beau de mourir, de mou...'. The piano part includes triplets and a pedal point.

²⁴ Walker, Jennifer. 2020. *Op. cit.*, p. 224.

The image shows a musical score for a duet. It consists of three staves: two for voices and one for piano accompaniment. The top two staves are for Soprano and Alto, respectively, and they sing in unison. The lyrics are: "rir en s'aimant, ma chère à me!.. Quand nos jours". The piano accompaniment features a descending chromatic line in the right hand and a more active bass line. There are dynamic markings like 'p' and 'f' and some performance instructions like '3' and '6' above the notes.

**Jules Massenet: *Hérodiade*
Act IV scene 13
Excerpt from the duet between Salomé and Jean**

In the duet from act IV scene 13 (E.g. 4) the idea of erotic love is further emphasized through the composer's choice of placing the two voices in unison, as well as by the descending phrases and chromaticism, which endow the musical discourse with sensuality.

Along with such concepts as decadence, the *fin de siècle* is often associated with the idea of mysticism, the rise of new esoteric cults, and a growing interest in the human unconscious in relation to the erotic. These ideas are also mirrored in Massenet's portrayal of Hérode, particularly in his act II aria, *Vision fugitive*. Obsessed with Salomé, Hérode fantasizes about her, his musical ecstasy culminating in images of erotic intensity. In similar fashion to 19th century artists, who consumed certain drugs to flee reality and dive in the subconscious, Hérode consumes a substance that induces hallucinations, causing him to have erotic visions of Salomé.

In Massenet's opera the spectator is offered a different image of Salomé, as suggested by Hérode's aria: although her name is traditionally associated with the dance of the seven veils, Salomé is not shown dancing in the opera, her frivolous character being instead replaced with the figure of a sensitive and wounded young woman who was abandoned by her mother and who confesses her love for Jean, the Prophet. The sensual dance of the seven veils is omitted here, the composer choosing instead to evoke the desire aroused in Hérode by the visions of Salomé, and not the dance itself.

Throughout the aria (and in the short section of sung declamation that precedes it) the idea of carnal desire is suggested using sinuously descending phrases and chromaticism, while the fugitive nature of the

hallucination is supported musically through the use of unresolved and prolonged harmonies (as shown in the fragment below – E.g. 5). In the first section of the aria, the musical discourse has an ascending course, the phrases leading to a culmination on F2 – the entire construction suggesting the gradual effect of the *philtre* that Hérode has consumed. The following section evokes Hérode’s fantasies of holding Salomé in his arms, while the musical discourse is more passionate as suggested by the sinuosity of the phrases and the composer’s choice for placing the vocal line in a higher register, with another climax on G-flat 2 (E.g. 5). In the last section, the composer reiterates the motif first presented at the beginning of the aria, the discourse finally leading to the long awaited and sought after conclusion on D-flat.

The sensuality of the pieces is further intensified through Massenet’s use of the saxophone: the melodic material developed in the aria is first introduced by the saxophone in the first six bars (instrumental introduction), and gradually taken over by the strings and baritone.

Three versions of the opera *Hérodiade* exist: the first French version in three acts (1881), the Italian version of 1882, and the final, definitive French version of 1884. In the final score Massenet recasts certain musical pages from the first version, as is the case with act II of the opera, in which the scenes dedicated to Hérode comprise musical material previously used in different scenes. The song of the young Babylonian slave, who prepares a love potion to Hérode, is drawn from the Temple scene in the first version of the score – thus Massenet succeeds in mingling the sacred with the profane.²⁵ Mysticism, of love and religion alike, is mirrored throughout the entire opera and echoed by the musical discourse devised by Massenet.

E.g. 5

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in bass clef and includes the lyrics "pour cet-te flam-me, Ah! sans remords et sans". The piano accompaniment is also in bass clef and features dynamics such as *f*, *animando.*, *cresc.*, and *ff*. The score is in 2/4 time and shows complex harmonic structures with unresolved chords.

²⁵ Rowden, Clair. 2001. *Op. cit.*, p. 106-108.

plai - te Je donnerais mon â - me Pour toi mon amour!

Animato. -

mon es - poir! Vi - si - on fu - gi - ve! c'est

a Tempo 1º: 48 = ♩.

a Tempo 1º.

**Jules Massenet: *Hérodiade* (1884), Act II, scene 5: *Vision fugitive*
(Excerpt from Hérode's aria: the second section
leading to the first beats of the third section)**

Conclusions

Biblical themes had an interesting evolution throughout the history of French music, from the 17th century and until the final decades of the 19th century, the period the present research is concerned with. From *histoires sacrées* and *opéra sacré* to other genres based on biblical subjects, the oratorio (often referred to as *mystère*, *drame sacré*, or *légende sacrée*) gradually allowed for operas with biblical subjects to be devised and presented on stage. Operas on religious themes gained in popularity during the final decades of the 19th century, even though their representation was still subject to the harsh criticism of the Church.

From mere representations of biblical stories set in the Orient (which allowed for orientalist devices to be explored), religiously themed operas gradually offered the possibility for composers to evoke the philosophical or political context of their period, and to represent certain aspects of 19th century Western civilization through oriental characters and subjects

(as in *Samson et Dalila*). Thus, apart from controversies related to the representation of the biblical subject, operas such as Massenet's *Hérodiade* enraged certain critics because of the way the current political situation was represented. Parisian audiences also valued these works because they reflected the struggles against religious doctrines (see the relation between the Third Republic and Church).²⁶

Despite the fact that the libretto often drifted from the biblical story, and that composers such as Massenet presented certain characters in a profane manner, emphasizing the idea of erotic as opposed to sacred love, according to researches such as Walker the true problem was not the sexualization of the New Testament, but rather the fact that the instability of the Third Republic and the strained relation between Church and State were further threatened through the changes of the original biblical story.²⁷

Finally, biblical subjects and the gradual transition from oratorio to opera, allowed composers to explore the conflict between religion and eroticism.

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²⁶ Branger, Jean-Christophe; Ramaut, Alban. *Opéra et religion sous la III^e République* [actes du colloque des 10 et 11 novembre 2005 organisé dans le cadre du 8^e Festival Massenet de l'Opéra Théâtre de Saint-Etienne]. Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, Saint-Étienne, 2006.

²⁷ Walker, Jennifer. 2020. *Op. cit.*, p. 229- 236.

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