



## For whom the bell tolls: Saint-Saëns' *Le Timbre d'argent* chimes again at the Opéra Comique

\*\*\*11

Par Mark Pullinger, 10 juin 2017

Asked to name an opera by Camille [Saint-Saëns](#), the chances are that *Samson et Dalila* is the first answer to trip from your tongue. Now name a second! In recent years Palazzetto Bru Zane has continued its quest to come to your aid, resurrecting *Les Barbares* and *Proserpine*. Now, spurred on by the zealous advocacy of conductor [François-Xavier Roth](#) and co-produced with the Opéra Comique, it has turned to Saint-Saëns' very first opera, *Le Timbre d'argent*. Given a full production at Paris' exquisite [Opéra Comique](#), directed by Guillaume Vincent, this was the perfect opportunity to assess the work's qualities.



Edgaras Montvidas (Conrad), Raphaëlle Delaunay (Fiammetta) and Tassis Christoyannis (Spiridion)

© Pierre Grosbois

First operas can be tricky. It can take time for a composer to hit his stride and the temptation is to pack in too much. Saint-Saëns composed his *opéra fantastique* in 1865, yet it wasn't premiered until 1877, by which time the composer had tinkered with it many times. His librettists were Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, who had collaborated on Gounod's *Faust*.

There's certainly something Faustian about the plot. Conrad is an artist, impoverished and deeply infatuated by the famous dancer, Circè, whose portrait he has painted. One Christmas Eve, in a delirium, he is treated by a mysterious Dr Spiridion, who becomes his nemesis, dogging his footsteps. He gives Conrad a silver bell, the kind found on reception desks. Whenever he strikes it, he will be showered in riches, but there is a price – each time the silver bell is struck, an innocent person will die. Conrad needs to satisfy his lust for gold in order to pursue the dancer of his dreams, competing with Spiridion for her affections, but how far will he go?



Edgaras Montvidas (Conrad) and Hélène Guilmette (Hélène)

© Pierre Grosbois

As well as *Faust*, the plot of *Le Timbre d'argent* has shades of Offenbach's fantastical (and yet to be composed) *Tales of Hoffmann*, for which Barbier and Carré would also pen the libretto. Saint-Saëns' voluptuous score is a fascinating link between the two, with pretty melodies and a dash of Wagnerian chromaticism thrown in. Bizet declared "It is charming! A real *opéra comique* with a sprinkling of Verdi." The effervescent overture outstays its welcome and there are occasional longeurs, but there's much interesting material and imaginative orchestration. Roth, drawing big circular shapes with a pencil in the pit, garnered typically silky playing from the period instruments of Les Siècles, with the oboe

standing out for its piquant tone, as well as the violas buzzing angrily in the Dance of the Bumble-Bee.

Vincent resists the temptation to revive *Le Timbre d'argent* as some kind of operatic relic, but provides a contemporary, occasionally tacky, setting for the opera's first staging since 1914. Christmas trees dangle over the stage and an inebriated Santa Claus stumbles homewards as the curtain rises. Budget limitations dictate that the set is simple, with much use of videography – of the Comique auditorium itself, for example – and a few old-fashioned magic tricks. A key player in the cast is choreographer Raphaëlle Delaunay who dances the roles of Circè and her embodiment in Conrad's fantasy, Fiammetta. From her cabaret dancer gyrations to her stamping gypsy and the ghoulish temptress of Act 4, Delaunay performs with an aloof air, as if truly beyond Conrad's grasp.



Jodie Devos (Rosa) and Yu Shao (Bénédict)

© Pierre Grosbois

With one exception, the singing was unremarkable. There is no glamour to Edgaras Montvidas' voice – the role of Conrad requires extrovert colour and heroic top notes which the tenor does not possess. He contrasted well, though, with Yu Shao as the painter's best friend, Bénédict; a lovely, light tenor, albeit a little reedy. Tassis Christoyannis sang the Méphistophélèan Spiridion with cape-twirling glee, but there was little disguising his baritone lacked ease in its upper range. His cabaret song and dance number in Act 2 was carried off with panache though.

Hélène Guilmette sang with great sincerity as Conrad's betrothed, but it was Belgian soprano [Jodie Devos](#), singing Hélène's sister, Rosa, who shone brightest, with bell-like clarity and sunshine in her voice. The members of the choir Accentus are not all natural stage animals and their sopranos sounded distinctly underpowered compared with standard opera choruses.

It's certainly worth resurrecting Saint-Saëns' score and François-Xavier Roth made a good case for its merits, even if they weren't always realised by the singers or the production.