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SAINT-SAËNS

Dances and Ballet Music

Étienne Marcel • Henry VIII

Airs de ballet de *Parysatis* • Samson et Dalila

Residentie Orkest The Hague

Jun Märkl

Camille
SAINT-SAËNS
(1835–1921)

Étienne Marcel – Act III: Ballet (1877–78) 19:10

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|---|--|------|
| 1 | I. Entrée des écoliers et des ribaudes: Allegro non troppo | 1:54 |
| 2 | II. Musette guerrière: Allegro moderato | 2:08 |
| 3 | III. Pavane: Allegretto moderato | 1:45 |
| 4 | IV. Valse: Allegro molto | 4:49 |
| 5 | V. Entrée des Bohémiens et Bohémiennes: Allegro maestoso | 5:56 |
| 6 | VI. Final: Allegro | 2:32 |

Henry VIII (1881–82) (selection) 17:44

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| 7 | Prélude: Maestoso | 2:38 |
| 8 | Act II: Entracte: Andante con moto | 3:54 |
| 9 | Act III: Marche du Synode: Moderato maestoso | 6:35 |
| 10 | Act IV, Tableau 1: Allegro moderato | 2:04 |
| 11 | Act IV, Tableau 2: Andante sostenuto | 2:29 |

Airs de ballet de *Parysatis* (1902) 8:30

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| 12 | I. Entrée: Quasi adagio | 0:34 |
| 13 | II. Allegro non troppo | 2:06 |
| 14 | III. Modéré (sans lenteur) | 3:55 |
| 15 | IV. Molto allegro | 1:52 |

Henry VIII – Act II: Fête populaire, Ballet-Divertissement (1881–82) 23:16

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| 16 | I. Introduction. Entrée des Clans: Moderato | 5:08 |
| 17 | II. Idylle écossaise: Moderato maestoso | 5:27 |
| 18 | III. La Fête du houblon: Poco adagio | 4:14 |
| 19 | IV. Danse de la gipsy: Moderato quasi andantino | 2:29 |
| 20 | V. Scherzetto: Moderato | 1:49 |
| 21 | VI. Gigue et finale: Presto | 4:04 |

Samson et Dalila, Op. 47 (1859–77) (selection) 9:32

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| 22 | Act I: Danse des prêtresses de Dagon: Allegretto | 2:23 |
| 23 | Act III: Bacchanale | 7:08 |

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)

Dances and Ballet Music

Born in Paris in 1835, Camille Saint-Saëns is one of the most extraordinary musical prodigies in the history of Western music. As a highly gifted pianist he made his concert debut at the age of ten, at which he announced to the audience that he would happily perform any of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas as an encore. Having studied at the Paris Conservatoire, he followed a conventional path as a church organist, first at Saint-Merri, Paris, and later at La Madeleine, where he remained for some two decades and was praised for his improvisatory prowess. He was much in demand throughout Europe and the Americas, enjoying a successful career as a pianist and composer; however, the perception of Saint-Saëns the composer changed throughout his lifetime, which coincided with a period of revolutionary changes in the arts. During his youth, he championed such progressive figures as Wagner and Liszt, yet in his later years he revealed a much more conservative approach, rooted in traditions established by his French Baroque predecessors, as exemplified in works such as the *Septet* and the left-hand *Études, Op. 135*, not to mention the new editions he prepared of works by Lully and Rameau. For the subjects of the works on this recording, Saint-Saëns turned his gaze back further still: to the monarchs of Tudor England and medieval France; to the ancient Persian queen Parysatis; and to the biblical narrative of Samson and Delilah.

'Because you have been faithful to your art, the future will be faithful to your work' – so claimed Charles Gounod, following the premiere of Saint-Saëns' *Henry VIII*. If this refers to Saint-Saëns' work in general – i.e. his entire compositional output – then Gounod was right, for his fellow composer and compatriot enjoys much success today in the concert hall and on record; but if it refers specifically to the opera *Henry VIII*, his prediction might be considered rather hasty. Indeed, with the sole exception of *Samson et Dalila*, all of Saint-Saëns' operatic ventures have now fallen into obscurity. First performed at the Paris Opera in 1883, *Henry VIII* was one of the works, along with *Étienne Marcel* (1879) and *Ascanio* (1890), with which Saint-Saëns sought to re-establish French *grand opéra* as a form capable of countering the prevailing Wagnerism he had come to distrust. The libretto by Lucien Détroyat and Armand Silvestre is based on Calderón's *La cisma de Inglaterra* ('The Schism in England') and Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. It charts the collapse of the Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, his growing obsession with Anne Boleyn (who, in a completely fabricated, ahistorical part of the plot, is in love with the Spanish ambassador, Don Gomez di Feria), and his establishment of the Church of England.

The brief *Prélude* is dominated by a single melodic idea, presented right at the outset and instantly evoking a sense of regal solemnity. In fact, the composer found this theme in the library of Buckingham Palace when, in 1871, his popularity led to an invitation to Britain to play for Queen Victoria and to study some of Handel's manuscripts. The *Act II Entracte* opens with balletic, quasi-Tchaikovskian shimmering strings and fluttering flutes, before the solo flute takes up the main theme, supported by gently strumming harps. A fanfare announces the start of the *Marche du Synode* from *Act III*, followed by a wonderfully noble theme, first emerging rather tentatively in the cellos but then given full voice as the upper strings enter. At this point in the drama, Henry has married Anne and the annulment to Catherine has been assured – but of course this never came to pass, and later on in the act the Papal Legate arrives, explaining that the marriage to Catherine is not annulled, resulting in Henry declaring himself the head of the Church of England.

Immediately following the dramatic events of the 'Synod act' comes the premier tableau of *Act IV*, where Saint-Saëns maintains the tension with a dramatic opening chord and plenty of pedal notes in the lower-register winds, strings and timpani. There's a sense of uneasiness here, with the music never being allowed to settle, achieved in part by the brief series of chromatically shifting chords between the winds and brass which, if the composer will forgive me, bear a certain Wagnerian stamp (such as, for example, the 'Tarnhelm' leitmotif from *Das Rheingold*). A contemplative mood prevails at the start of the second tableau, followed by a more animated theme which again nods to Tchaikovsky in its melodic phrasing and its scoring, not least its passionate, heart-on-sleeve string writing.

The substantial *Act II Ballet-Divertissement* of *Henry VIII* presents a rather Gallic interpretation of British musical offerings (although the unison all-string writing at the opening of the *Introduction* seems to anticipate Stravinsky's *Apollon musagète*). The *Scottish Idyll* emulates the nation's iconic instrument with its use of bagpipe-like drones, while *La Fête du houblon* portrays a celebration of the hop-picking season – not with riotous beery music but with a slow, elegant melody. A gypsy dance brings a touch of exoticism to this otherwise British affair, succeeded by a conspicuously restrained (English?) *Scherzetto* that sounds anything but playful until the end, and finally an Irish jig which, by contrast, isn't afraid to let its hair down.

Several decades after *Henry VIII*, Saint-Saëns turned his attention to another controversial monarch. The play *Parysatis*, described as 'a spectacular drama based on the life of the bloodthirsty Queen of ancient Persia', was premiered 17 August 1902 at the southern French resort of Béziers, near the Spanish border. Four years previously, a rich impresario had acquired an enormous bullring there and converted it into an amphitheatre, to be the centre of attraction at a regular music festival. Although Saint-Saëns loathed blood-sports, the acoustics of the open-air theatre were so good that he was persuaded to write the lyric tragedy *Déjanire* for the Béziers Festival's inauguration. Subsequently, the annual festival regularly focused on his music, with the town itself honouring the composer with the 'Avenue Saint-Saëns'. The incidental music to Jane Dieulafoy's drama *Parysatis* called for a large orchestra, vocal soloists and a chorus, and was received with tumultuous acclaim. The tuneful *Airs de ballet*, which consists of a brief introduction and three exotic dances, was published separately and employs harps and crotales (antique finger-cymbals) as well as unusual groupings of winds and strings to produce striking and sensual effects.

While Saint-Saëns was delighted with *Parysatis* being performed at the Béziers Festival, he was less fortunate with the venue for the fourth of his thirteen operas, *Étienne Marcel*, which was first staged in Lyon on 8 February 1879, but failed to reach the Paris Opera. This came as a rather bitter disappointment to both composer and librettist (Louis Gallet), not least because they had chosen a subject that they thought would be particularly topical, after the end of the Commune. The plot deals with the heroic Étienne Marcel, a leading figure in the popular rebellion of 1358 during the regency of the Dauphin Charles, the eventual victor. The subject allowed a large element of spectacle as well as the customary ballet, which includes a strong sense of pastiche to suit the period. After the *Introduction* and a dance for students, the gentle *Musette* makes use of another grounding drone (this time of the French bagpipe), leading to a more spritely *Pavane*. The suite continues with an anachronistic *Waltz* and a rhythmic Bohemian dance, before the energetic *Finale*.

And so to the one work here that has triumphantly stood the test of time, *Samson et Dalila*. This Old Testament story tells of Samson, the would-be liberator of the Israelites from the snares of the Philistines. As dawn breaks the Hebrews lift up a humble prayer to God in a style reminiscent of plainchant. Out of the temple of Dagon emerges the beautiful Philistine maiden Dalila, along with several priestesses of Dagon. They sing of the pleasures of spring and perform the sexually charged *Danse des prêtresses de Dagon* in front of Samson. Despite her charms, Dalila is rejected by Samson and swears vengeance on him. She discovers that the secret to his strength lies in his hair and manages to practice her barbering skills on him, rendering him helpless. He is blinded and put on display in the Philistine temple. His prayer for one last surge of strength is granted and he pulls down the temple pillars, bringing the roof down on the godless multitude. Moments earlier that crowd had gathered to witness Samson's humiliation and had delighted in the *Danse Bacchanale*. Taking its name from Bacchus, the god of wine and fertility, this dance opens with a twisting melody that sounds as if it might charm a snake from its basket, while much of the music that follows would fit seamlessly into classic film score. Although his other operatic works have unarguably suffered from neglect, this adrenaline-fuelled piece, packed full of catchy melodies, remains one of Saint-Saëns' greatest hits.

Dominic Wells

Residentie Orkest The Hague



Photo: Eduardus Lee

The Residentie Orkest plays a strong role in supporting The Hague's wider profile, and since 2021 has been located in the Amare, the new performing arts centre of the city. The orchestra can also be frequently heard at the Royal Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, TivoliVredenburg in Utrecht and De Doelen in Rotterdam, and often collaborates with Dutch classical radio and the Dutch National Opera. Since its first concert in 1904, the Residentie Orkest has developed into one of the most prominent symphony orchestras in the Netherlands. Founded by Dr Henri Viotta, it attracted composers such as Strauss, Stravinsky, Reger, Ravel, Hindemith and d'Indy. Guest conductors have included Arturo Toscanini, Leonard Bernstein and Hans Knappertsbusch. Willem van Otterloo was chief conductor from 1949 to 1973, and he was succeeded by Jean Martinon, Ferdinand Leitner, Hans Vonk, Evgeny Svetlanov, Jaap van Zweden, Neeme Järvi and Nicholas Collon. The orchestra has built up a rich discography with labels such as BIS, Chandos, Challenge Records, Deutsche Grammophon and Naxos, and has toured internationally. Anja Bihlmaier is currently chief conductor, with Richard Egarr and Jun Märkl acting as principal guest conductors. www.residentieorkest.nl

Jun Märkl



Photo: Christiane Höhne

Jun Märkl is a highly respected interpreter of core Germanic repertoire, and is known for his refined and idiomatic explorations of the French Impressionists. He serves as music director of the Taiwan National Symphony Orchestra, and principal guest conductor of the Residentie Orkest The Hague as well as the Oregon Symphony. He was also recently appointed artistic advisor of the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra. His long-standing relationships with the state operas of Vienna, Berlin, Munich, Semperoper Dresden and the Metropolitan Opera have been complemented by his music directorships of the Orchestre National de Lyon, MDR Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Basque National Orchestra. He also guest conducts leading orchestras in North and South America, Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Europe. Among the over 50 albums in his discography are the complete Schumann symphonies with the NHK Symphony Orchestra and Mendelssohn and Wagner with the MDR Leipzig Radio Symphony Orchestra. He also recorded works by Ravel, Messiaen, and a highly acclaimed Debussy series with the Orchestre National de Lyon for Naxos. He is currently working on a cycle of works by Saint-Saëns, R. Strauss and Toshio Hosokawa. Born in Munich, Märkl won the Deutscher Musikrat conducting competition in 1986 and studied at Tanglewood with Leonard Bernstein and Seiji Ozawa. Soon after he appeared in opera houses throughout Europe, followed by his first music directorships at the Staatstheater Saarbrücken and the Nationaltheater Mannheim. He was awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2012 by the French government.

www.junmarkl.com

This album presents a selection of Saint-Saëns' incidental music and music from his operas. From *Samson et Dalila* – the only one of Saint-Saëns' operas to remain in the repertory – we hear two memorable and adrenalin-fuelled dances including the famous *Bacchanale*. *Henry VIII* drew from the composer music of regal solemnity with plenty of colourful scoring, praised by Gounod. The lukewarm reception to *Étienne Marcel* came as a bitter disappointment to Saint-Saëns but the customary ballet includes a strong element of delightful 14th-century pastiche. The incidental music to the play *Parysatis* received tumultuous acclaim at its premiere in 1902 and includes the delightful *Airs de ballet* flecked by the use of crotales (antique finger-cymbals).

Camille
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(1835–1921)

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| 7–11 | Henry VIII (1881–82) (selection) | 17:44 |
| 12–15 | Airs de ballet de <i>Parysatis</i> (1902) | 8:30 |
| 16–21 | Henry VIII – Act II:
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| 22–23 | Samson et Dalila, Op. 47 (1859–77) (selection) | 9:32 |

Residentie Orkest The Hague • Jun Märkl

A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

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