24. Politics, Biblical Debates, and French Dramatic Music on Judith after 1870

Jann Pasler

In late-nineteenth-century France, composers were drawn to exploring musical images of female strength. In the visual arts, painters depicted Judith as predatory femme fatale, associating her with feminine evil. In French dramatic music of the 1870s, however, it was not her hateful betrayals that appealed. Indeed, in the wake of French defeat by Prussia, Judith emerged as a model to emulate both for her faith in God and her willingness to risk her life for her country, an allegory for a new political identity based on agency and courage. The frightening qualities of Judith were less important than her individual strength, charm, and, for some, her potential to reignite French fervor for a return to war. When Judith returned to French stages in the 1890s, however, an emerging hostility toward the "new woman" and renewed strength from the Franco-Russian alliance contributed to a radically different reception, one that was fearful and almost misogynist.

Music and public reception of works about Judith, particularly as understood in response to ongoing conflicts in politics and biblical studies, suggest the different ways in which Judith was understood. They argue that Judith's voice is as crucial to her identity and the accomplishment of her mission as her faith and beauty, and offer important clues to the shifting meaning invested in her symbolism over the years.

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Political Struggles and New Biblical Translations

Saddled with five billion francs in war reparations and the loss of Alsace and Lorraine, then horrified by the destruction of Paris and the brutal repression of the Commune, France craved order in the 1870s and needed to reinvent itself. Its people were fiercely divided. Most French were Catholics, and those who believed in a close relationship between church and state looked to the pope for guidance and for the most part supported a return to monarchy. Sharing an interest in maintaining the strength of the Church as a force for social order, legitimist and Orleanist monarchists as well as Bonapartists nostalgic for empire saw a revival of Christianity as "the first condition of the recovery of France."[1] In contrast, republicans, led by rationalist and pragmatic freemasons and open to Protestants and Jews, wished to get the Church out of their classrooms and teach a secularized notion of critical judgment instead of religious doctrine as a way to prepare people to become citizens. Although the monarchist coalition controlled the government until the end of the century, installing what they called the "moral order," republican strength grew steadily. In 1875, they pushed through a new constitution, and in 1876 became the majority party in parliament. In 1878 they took control of the Senate and, in January 1879, the presidency.

Amid these political struggles, biblical scholars published new French translations of the Bible with critical commentaries, some supporting a Catholic monarchist agenda, others a Protestant or republican one. Edouard Reuss, professor of theology at the University of Strasbourg – the center for Protestant studies in France – based his sixteen volumes (1874–79) on the Septuagint version, which he believed to be the oldest. One volume, entitled "Political and Polemical Literature," included the books of Judith, Ruth, Esther, and Maccabeus. Reuss here argues that the story of Judith was "absolutely fictional"; she was a "moral allegory." The Hebrew name "Ieehoudit" means "La Juive," not an individual person but a collective designation, as she simply represents the nation. Similarly, the Greek word "Bet-Eloah" means "house of God," a reference to Jerusalem. Reuss saw the book's purpose as "teaching," inspiring patriotism. Since Christian morality did not approve of Judith's actions, he points to a Jewish perspective which renders Judith "less inexcusable" because her people were "reduced to weakness without any other forms of resistance than those that could

1 Gabriel Hanotaux, *Contemporary France* (New York: Putnam, 1905–12), II, pp. 35, 46–47.

arise from trickery and be employed in the shadow of the night." As such, she is "the expression of concentrated national hatred." While portraying her as an emblem for the nation and pointing to her "aspirations for vengeance," Reuss alludes to the role such an allegory might play in contemporary France, its people seething for revenge against the Germans.[2] Moreover, Holofernes, a proud and arrogant tyrant, could offer a warning to those who might want to return to monarchy.

In the late 1870s, as anti-clerical republicans threatened to marginalize the role of the Church in French society, Catholic biblical scholars made new translations of the Vulgate version of the Bible that had long dominated French Catholicism. The Archbishop of Paris commissioned *La Sainte Bible* (1873–85), forty volumes edited by Fulcran Vigoureux, professor of the Bible at Saint-Sulpice (1868–90), and many collaborators. Building on new archaeological evidence, they sought to support the authenticity of its stories and characters and argued forcefully against Reuss's conclusions and hermeneutical methods that reduced exegesis to "literary history."[3] In 1879, Abbé Gillet, a priest from the diocese of Versailles, translated and wrote a critical commentary on Tobit, Judith, and Esther. While he mentions in the text "vengeance against the proud foreigners aiming to destroy Israel," he contextualizes this with Judith's request for God's strength. Carefully rebutting the arguments and opinions of predecessors and Protestants, he insists on the book's "historical reality." Recently discovered Assyrian documents, he argues, document the "spirit of revolt" in Asia Minor, mentioned in the first chapter of Judith, and a people who "refused obedience and absolute submission" to a general who resembled Holofernes. In his closing, he refers to the "infallible decision" of the Council of Trent in accepting the canonicity of the book, reminding readers of Catholics' belief in the infallibility of the Church and the pope, dogmatically defined by the First Vatican Council of 1870.[4]

For all their differences, some of which related to the long-debated question of whether the Bible was divinely inspired or not, Judith brought

2 Edouard Reuss, Introduction (to the Book of Judith), *La Bible. Traduction nouvelle avec Introductions et Commentaires. Ancien Testament*, vol. 7: *Littérature politique et polémique* (Paris: Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1879), pp. 326–30.

3 Charles Tronchon, *La Sainte Bible, Introduction générale*, vol. 1, p. 577, as discussed in François Laplanche, *La Bible en France entre mythe et critique, XVIe–XIXe siècles* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994), pp. 169–70.

4 Abbé Gillet, Preface, *La Sainte Bible, Texte de la Vulgate; Tobi, Judith, et Esther, Introduction critique, Traduction française et Commentaires* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1879), pp. 69, 71–82, 88.

to the forefront concerns shared by clericals and anti-clericals, Catholics and Protestants, monarchists and republicans. Whether she was real or imaginary, by her example she preached self-sacrifice and duty to forces larger than herself. If she shared this with Judas Maccabeus and certain other women in the Bible, she also resembled the heroines in Corneille and the music of Gluck and Lully. While compared to Holofernes her lifestyle of pious asceticism, chastity, and humility seemed weak, she showed what strength can be achieved through faith, and without the assistance of angels. Republicans and Catholics alike saw Judith as capable of inspiring a renewal of moral strength in the French people as well as patriotism and pride in their nation.

Setting Judith to Music

Dramatic music was an ideal domain in which to explore the binary oppositions characterizing the Judith story: not only two peoples (Hebrews versus the Assyrians) and two religions (Judaism versus paganism), but also two principles (the weak versus the strong, the humble versus the proud, the chaste versus the lustful) mapped onto the female and male characters. Before the Franco-Prussian War, dramatic works reflected on problematic issues raised by Judith – her lies, her trickery, her threat to betray her people, and especially her killing of another human being. In his 1868 "biblical drama in verse," a five-act play called *Judith*, Gustave Gilles portrays her as extremely troubled. "Is it a crime?" she asks repeatedly of her wise elder and God. Only when she has a vision of her deceased husband does she embrace the task ahead. The husband's approval diffuses anxiety about her actions. In marginal notes to his translation of the Vulgate, Gillet directly addresses hesitations of Catholics regarding Judith's actions. "The Bible does not present Judith as impeccable," he explains, "but as a model of energy and courage, the only arm she had being trickery, also a weapon of war." If Moses and Aaron could use it against the Pharaoh, he suggests, we should not criticize Judith for doing the same.[5]

Given the need for what Judith could inspire after the war and particularly as republicans became more powerful, the official musical world and French composers embraced Judith as a woman willing to put duty to country over personal interests. In 1876, the Académie des Beaux-Arts chose *Judith* as the libretto that young composers would set to music in the

5 Gillet, *Judith*, p. 129.

annual Prix de Rome cantata competition. The same year, the Paris Opéra put on Charles Lefebvre's three-act opera, *Judith*, begun in 1873. To the extent that Judith was a "moral allegory," the exploits of similar heroines were also set to music. Camille Saint-Saëns composed *Samson et Dalila* (1868–77), inspired by the Book of Judges, and Ernest Reyer, *Salammbô* (1870s), based on Flaubert's novel. There were also works about Judith for schoolchildren, such as a "drame scolaire" with music (1876), and lighthearted secular parodies, such as Edouard Deransart's *Judick et Halonferme* (1878). All of these focus on chapters 8–16 of the Book of Judith. The historical parts of the story are thus of little interest, the strength of Holofernes and his conquests recounted but not shown, while the strength of Judith and her conquest are enacted and experienced by Holofernes, particularly in their duet.

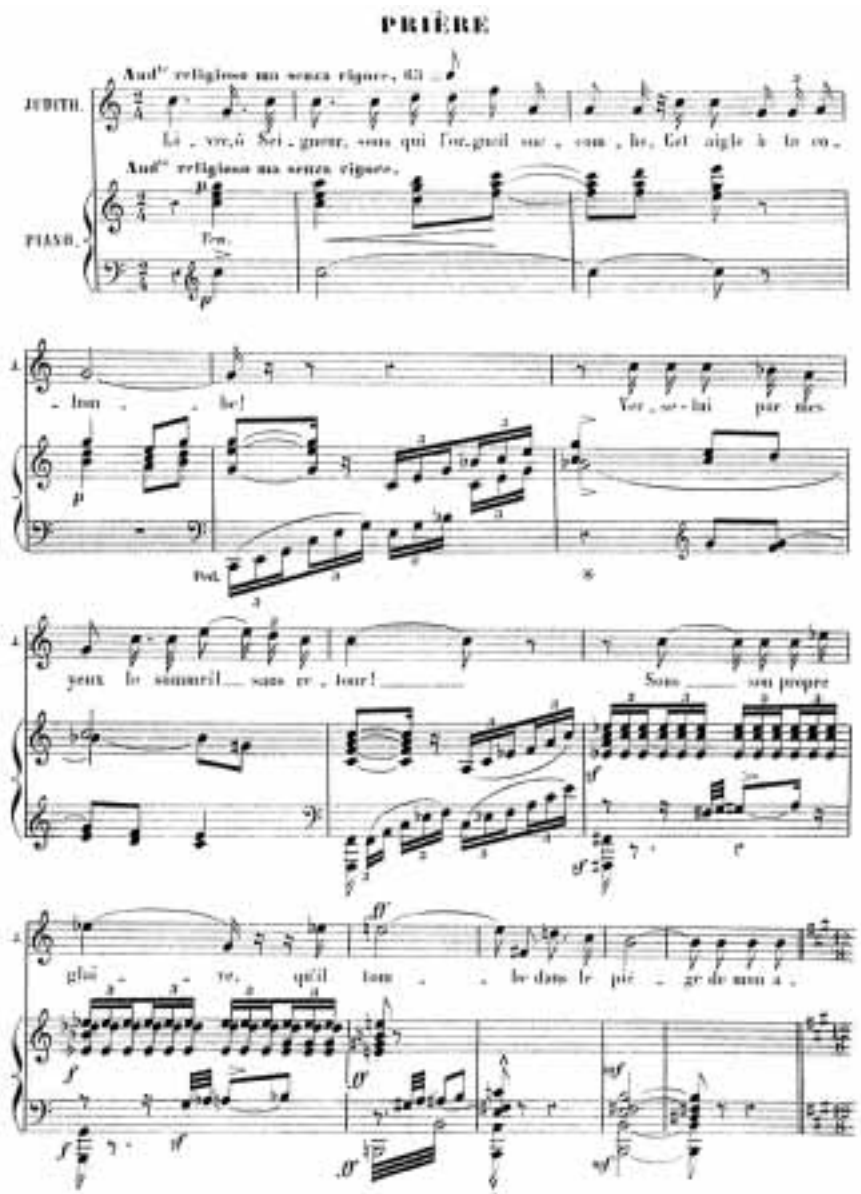
Not surprisingly, such works emphasized religious faith – an important component of national regeneration, as Alexandre Lhâa has suggested on the topic of Risorgimento Italy.[6] Most begin and end in religious sentiment. Audiences familiar with the Vulgate Bible would have known that God always listened to the "prayer of the humble"; in the Septuagint Bible, Judith also calls Him "the God of the humble, the patron of the small, the support of the weak, the protector of the scorned, the savior of the hopeless."[7] In Paul Delair's libretto for the 1875 cantata competition, Judith's nurse tells her to pray that the "strength of God descend into her breast!" Like Joan of Arc, also popular at the time, through prayer Judith calls on God's strength to overcome her natural weakness.

The manner in which Prix competitors set this text, however, suggests different attitudes toward religion. In Paul Hillemacher's winning score, after an ominous introduction with passionate waves of chromatic sixteenth notes comes a "prayer," andante religioso, based loosely on chapter 9. Its first verse climaxes on "let him fall in my trap," with Judith's vocal line rising to E, fortissimo, before descending abruptly a major seventh to F-sharp (Example 24.1). Veronge de la Nux's rendition begins similarly but is followed by an "invocation." In it, he gives no musical emphasis to Holofernes falling into Judith's trap, but instead, and throughout, reiterates the word "Seigneur" (Lord), which appears only once in the libretto. Moreover, he chooses "Seigneur," also frequently used in the Vulgate Judith, rather than "Jehovah" from the cantata's second stanza.[8] With this repetition and

6 See his essay in this volume (Chap. 23).

7 Reuss, "Judith," p. 349.

8 The libretto's first stanza is inspired by Jdt 9:12–13, as translated by Gillet, *Judith*, p. 122, except that "le piège de son regard sur moi" is replaced in the cantata with



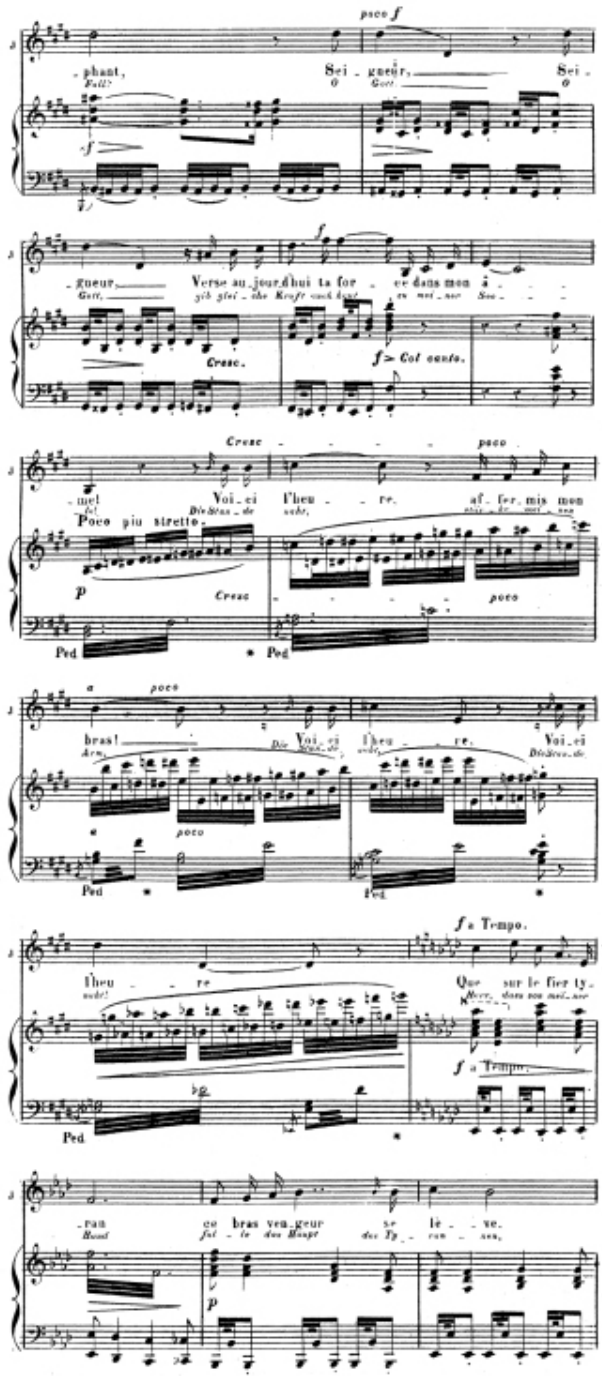
24.1. Paul Hillemacher, *Judith* (1876). Paris: H. Lemoine. Photo credit: Jann Pasler.

a recurring one-measure pattern in the accompaniment, the music coheres around the subject of God. To reinforce the invocation's importance in the cantata as a whole, Nux repeats a whole section. How a composer treats a libretto thus could be as important as the text itself in communicating Judith's relationship to God, whether she is praying to Him for the success of her cause (in Hillemacher), or invoking God's help for who He is (in Nux).

As in the cantata, both Lefebvre's *Judith* and Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* begin and end with entreaties to God. In Lefebvre's opera, the suffering Hebrews ask God to "heed our prayer." Judith later prays to God that His "strength" enter her soul. But just before her duet with Holofernes, she addresses God passionately, with sweeping melodies and leaping intervals, and the music becomes passionate. When she refers to how God helped David against Goliath, the music suddenly modulates from A-flat major to E major. After the drive up in Judith's melody to a high F-sharp on "strength," followed by the lower B on "in my soul," a huge leap down a twelfth, intensity builds as rising thirty-second-note chromatic octaves, one series after another, accompany Judith as she cries, "this is the hour, that the vengeful arm rises up" (Example 24.2). The prayer culminates on her leap up of a major seventh to a high A-flat as she pleads for strengthening her "arm," a note to which she later returns in the duet with Holofernes when singing of "striking" him. In writing *Samson et Dalila*, Louis Gallet amended the biblical story to make Dalila resemble Judith, that is, motivated by religion and disinterested hatred (rather than money).[9] However in this opera, it is Samson who prays to the Hebrew God (Dalila implores "love" to reinforce her "weakness"). At the end, while God grants Samson strength to destroy the temple of Dagon, in Lefebvre's opera Judith's people praise His glory. Of interest here is that Lefebvre wrote two conclusions (based on Judith's "cantique" from 16:2, 5, 7), with the second one reducing the song of praise from eleven to four pages, shifting the emphasis to honoring Judith whom God blessed, cutting completely the exuberant final "Glory to God," and ending instead with "Let us sing our triumphal hymns." This suggests that Lefebvre was sensitive to multiple meanings the story could conjure for various audiences, and wanted alternative endings, one reinforcing God's actions through Judith and another Judith's actions, aided by God.

"le piège de mon amour." The second stanza is based on the last lines of Judith's final song, referring to the "curse" (Jdt 16:20–21).

9 Henri Collet, *Samson et Dalila de C. Saint-Saëns, Etude historique et critique, Analyse musicale* (Paris: Mellottée, 1922), pp. 45–51.



24.2. Charles Lefebvre, *Judith* (1877). Paris: F. Makar. Photo credit: Jann Pasler.

If religious sentiment frames such works, it nevertheless often has political undertones. Judith embodied the warrior spirit while bringing an end to war.[10] The 1876 cantata begins and ends with Judith's warning, "Curses on anyone who threatens your holy temple or your race!" Audiences may have heard this as an explicit effort to inflame French feelings about the Prussians, especially since the Vulgate explicitly refers to God's vengeance and his "curse" of any "nation that might turn against them."[11] Act I of Lefebvre's opera culminates in Judith's exhortation to her people, "Have you forgotten Moses' hymn of deliverance?" "Seized by a sudden inspiration," which the tremoli accompaniment suggests is the voice of God speaking through her, she tells them, echoing Samson from Voltaire's famous opera, "People of God, awake, don't remain oppressed, beloved Nation, pray for me. ... " In Saint-Saëns's opera, Samson similarly sings, "Let Israel be free, Let us rise once again." After 1870, Judith's virtue and faith in God may have pleased Catholics, but it was her agency that appealed to republicans and Protestants, an agency that called upon religious faith for the sake of the nation. The biblical translations would have supported this difference, as the Vulgate refers to God's promise to raise up Jerusalem, while the Septuagint emphasizes what Judith's "hands are going to do for the glory of Jerusalem."[12] Moreover, Judith, a woman who took part in the public sphere, represented the active citizenship promoted by republicans.

Voice, Desire, and Charm

Besides giving expression to religious and political narratives, these music dramas also explore a perspective downplayed in the Bible: the importance of the voice. In chapter 9, Judith prays that Holofernes is "taken in by [her] beauty" and "the sweetness of [her] lips."[13] But in her final "cantique," which she asks to be accompanied by drums and cymbals, she asserts that it was her "beauty" (S) / or the "beauty of [her] face" (V) as well as her clothes and perfumes that "captured" Holofernes. In the Vulgate

10 "Le Seigneur est un dieu qui met fin aux guerres" (Reuss, "Judith," p. 360); "Le Seigneur termine les guerres," Jdt 16:3 (Gillet, *Judith*, p. 145).

11 "Malheur à la nation … car le Seigneur, le Tout-Puissant, se vengera d'elle," Jdt 16:20 (Gillet, *Judith*, p. 147).

12 "Mes mains vont faire pour la gloire de Jérusalem" (Reuss, "Judith," p. 355); "tu relèves comme tu l'as promis Jérusalem ta ville" (Gillet, *Judith*, p. 134).

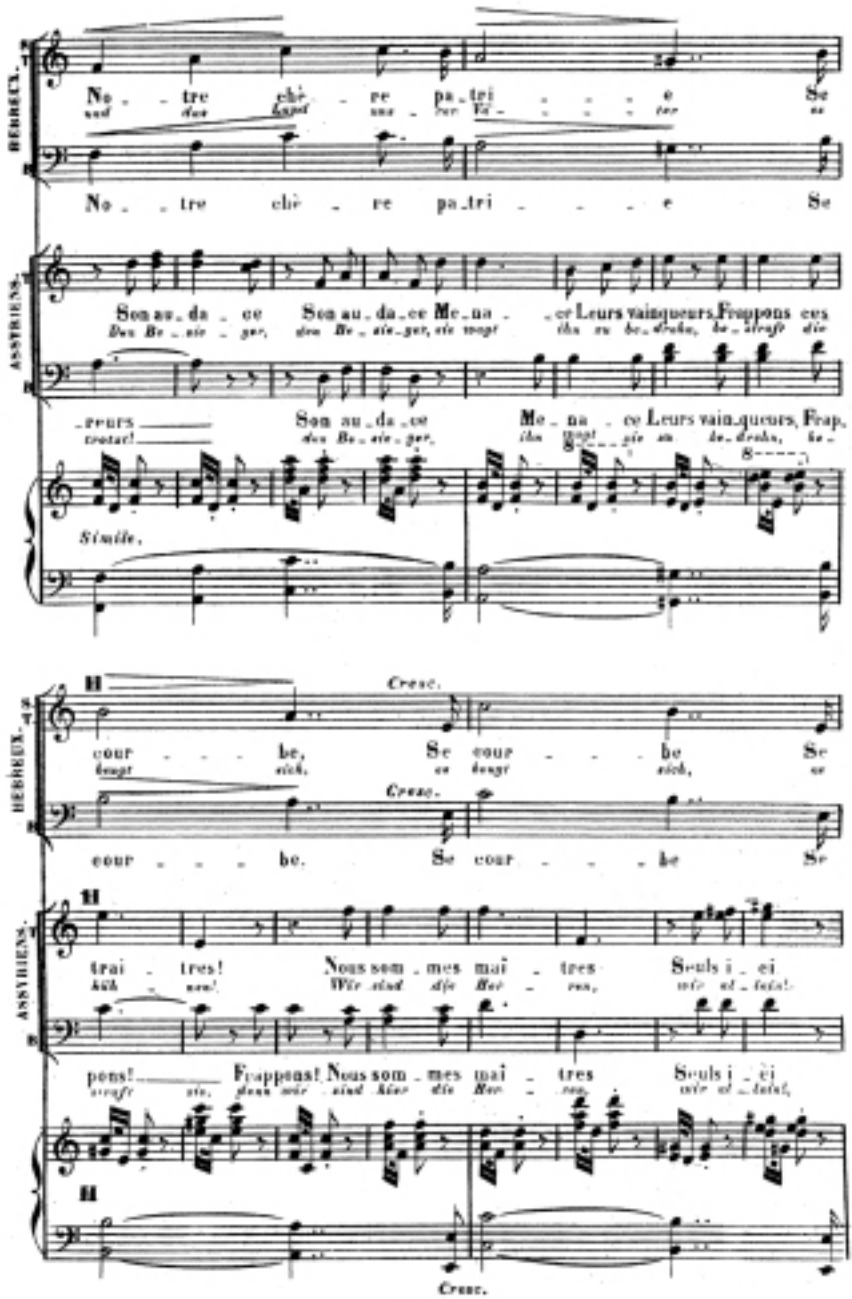
13 "Quand je les aurai trompés par mes discours …" (Reuss, "Judith," p. 349); "Qu'il soit pris par le piège de son regard sur moi: et frappe-le par la suavité de mes lèvres," Jdt 9:13.

it is his "soul" (âme) that she desires, his "senses" (sens).[14] Such a claim shifts attention away from Judith's flattery, lies, false promises, and deception, so problematic to Christians. At the same time it denies what Holofernes himself experienced: "her discourse" (S) / "all these words (V) which "brought him pleasure," her "beauty as well as good sense" (S) / "beauty as well as the meaning of her words" (V).[15] In musical renditions of the story in 1870s France, the voice is front and center of the story, and for important reasons.

Choruses bring to life the voice of the people, their suffering and their triumphs, and enact the conflict between enemies. In the opening of Lefebvre's opera, a women's chorus laments the Hebrews' despair. Their hesitating, "almost spoken" lines, the notes off the beat, suggest that they can barely speak. "Dying … of thirst … ," one group utters, "my lips burn," responds another. The groups come together, fortissimo, again on off-beats and on a dissonant E-flat over a low F in the orchestra, "There is no more hope." The insistent "We must give in," repeated over and over by individual voices and larger and larger groups with the orchestra moving chromatically up, climaxes in their unified sentiment, "We are dying of hunger." The final chorus of Act 1, "Go, Judith … save us," elicited particular praise in its first performances. In the operas on Judith figures, composers use choruses to give praise and to comment on the characters and their actions, as might a chorus in a Greek tragedy. A double chorus of Assyrians and Hebrews in Lefebvre's *Judith* engage in a battle of wills over their differences, with the Assyrians accusing the Hebrews of being an "enslaved race" while the Hebrews admit, "our dear country bends under your laws." Even if it is replete with dissonances between the two choruses (the Hebrews hold a long B and then C as they sing of bending to Assyrian laws, as the Assyrians hold a C and then D as they assert themselves as "masters"), the music, however, suggests irony (Example 24.3). The Hebrews, singing in a unified voice, homophonically, with long phrases and long notes in a march-like 4/4, seem proud. Their music maintains its intensity over the Assyrians' lively but oppressive rhythms in 3/8, numerous short phrases such as "hit them, hit them, without remorse," and divided voices.

14 "Sa beauté captiva ses sens" (Reuss, "Judith," pp. 360–61); "sa beauté a rendu son âme captive," Jdt 16:8–11 (Gillet, *Judith*, pp. 145–46).

15 "Ces discours firent plaisir à Olophernes … pour la beauté et le bon sens" (Reuss, "Judith," p. 353); "Toutes ces paroles plurent à Holoferne; par sa beauté et par le sens de ses paroles," Jdt 11:18–19 (Gillet, *Judith*, p. 129).



24.3. Charles Lefebvre, *Judith* (1877). Paris: F. Makar. Photo credit: Jann Pasler.

Such choruses also underline national/racial differences. In *Samson et Dalila*, Saint-Saëns suggests the strength and unity of the Hebrews with tonal harmonies and four-square rhythms, inspired by Bach's cantatas and Handel's oratorios. The Philistines sing in sinuous arabesques and dance to music with exotic scales and timbres. In the 1870s, if choruses in Lefebvre's and Saint-Saëns's operas were criticized for resembling oratorio more than music drama, then with its references to German musical traditions, audiences may have likened the Hebrew choruses and their brute sonic force to a united Germany after 1871, especially when coordinated and under the control of a conductor the likes of Bismarck.

When it came to Judith and Holofernes, the voice allowed for both depiction of these figures as mediums for powerful forces – Dalila and Samson each claim that their god "speaks through me" and that strength comes from "listening to His voice." Their voices also enabled exploration of their character and feelings. To suggest a mature woman who was capable of heroism, composers set Judith for a mezzo-soprano. Moreover, Saint-Saëns conceived Dalila for Pauline Viardot, whose voice he considered "of enormous power and prodigious range ... made for tragedy," lending "incomparable grandeur" to whatever she performed. Lefebvre, whose chorus praises Judith for her "intrepid voice," dedicated his *Judith* to Viardot. And Reyer claimed that he would not have *Salammbô* performed in Paris without the diva for whom he conceived it, Rose Caron: "Tall, superb, at once haughty and likable, she communicates from her first appearance that an inexorable destiny weighed on her." Although Samson had physical strength of mythic proportions, Saint-Saëns wrote the character for a tenor and wanted his voice to suggest something other than the stereotypical male hero. In the "exquisite" voice of Henri Regnault, a painter friend who sang the role of Samson in the private premiere, Saint-Saëns appreciated an "enchanting timbre" with "an irresistible seduction," a certain feminine-like charm he found in "his whole personality." With performers who would draw attention to the complexities of gender in the story, Saint-Saëns could de-essentialize conventional notions of who is strong and who is weak, who speaks through them and what they represent. As such, music drama fleshed out the biblical story by humanizing its characters, encouraging empathy from audiences.

France had a tradition of humanizing biblical characters, most notably evident in Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863). In his three oratorios based on the Bible, *Marie-Magdeleine* (1871–72), *Eve* (1874), and *La Vierge* (1877–78),

Massenet brought together the sacred and the secular in these females whom he portrayed as erotically charged. But with the Judith story, three forces contributed to the extensive attention these operas give to the characters' desires and passions: the story (especially in the Septuagint Bible), musical convention, and republican ideology.

Crucial to the musical representation of the Judith story in nineteenth-century France is the seduction. This is treated very differently in the Vulgate and Septuagint Bibles. The Vulgate mentions explicitly that Judith "put on new clothes to seduce him" (16:10). However, while Holofernes tells his eunuch of his intention to "live with" Judith, there is no actual seduction – his heart is "moved," he "burns with lust," and he "was transported with joy." As Gillet points out, he does not say anything openly and he passes out, drunk. In contrast, the Septuagint Bible states not only that Holofernes sought to "have her company" but that "she would mock us if we did not caress her."[16] In the Septuagint, moreover, Judith asks God to "permit her words to seduce the Assyrians," a line absent in the Vulgate.[17] The Septuagint also notes that Holofernes was looking for an occasion to "seduce her" since they met.[18] And, perhaps most importantly, in this version he flatters Judith: "You are beautiful in shape and you know how to speak well," also not in the Vulgate.[19] Because Judith is represented as a "moral allegory" in the Septuagint Bible, rather than as an authentic person who actually lived, the seduction too can be read allegorically as a conquest as challenging as that of armies over nations, rather than as a tale about a woman's moral weakness.

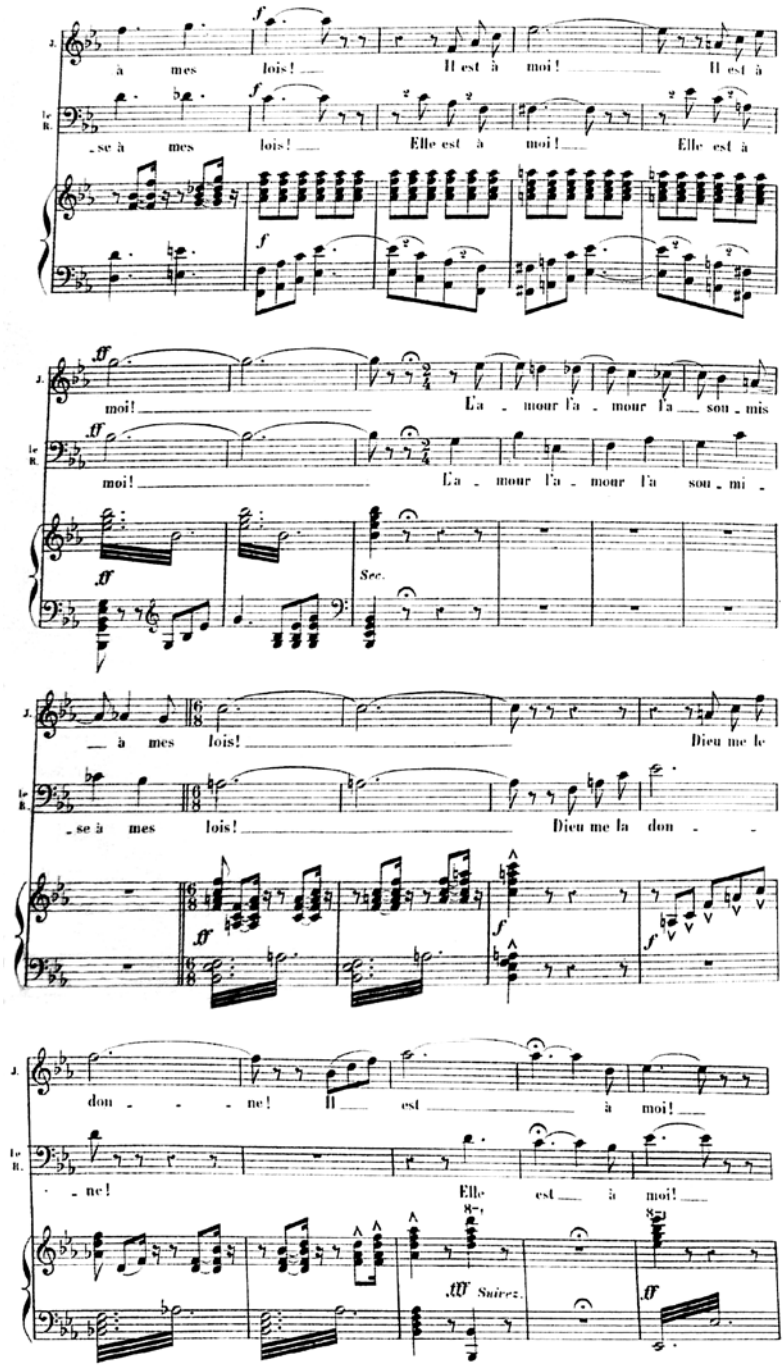
Arguably the greatest role music could play in such dramas was to give expression to the unspoken as well as spoken exchanges characterizing seduction. To unsettle conventional relationships between the weak and the strong – how can the weak become strong? how can weakness triumph over strength? – the answer was charm. These works delve into the voice as both the initiation of charm and its most profound expression. In Lefebvre's opera, with flattery of all sorts, Judith tempts the king with her voice, which he says he cannot resist. In *Samson et Dalila*, charm is associated with

16 In *The Anchor Bible Judith* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), Carey Moore translates "avoir sa compagnie" (Reuss) and "habiter avec moi" (Gillet) as "having" her, or "making" her, which she takes to mean sexual intercourse. She notes that Holofernes was "a man of direct and blunt speech" (pp. 221, 223).

17 "Permits que ma parole les séduise [the Assyrians] pour leur perte et ruine" (Reuss, "Judith," pp. xi, 349).

18 Ibid., pp. 354–55.

19 "Tu es belle de figure et tu sais bien parler" (ibid., p. 353).



24.4. Paul Hillemacher, *Judith* (1876). Paris: H. Lemoine. Photo credit: Jann Pasler.

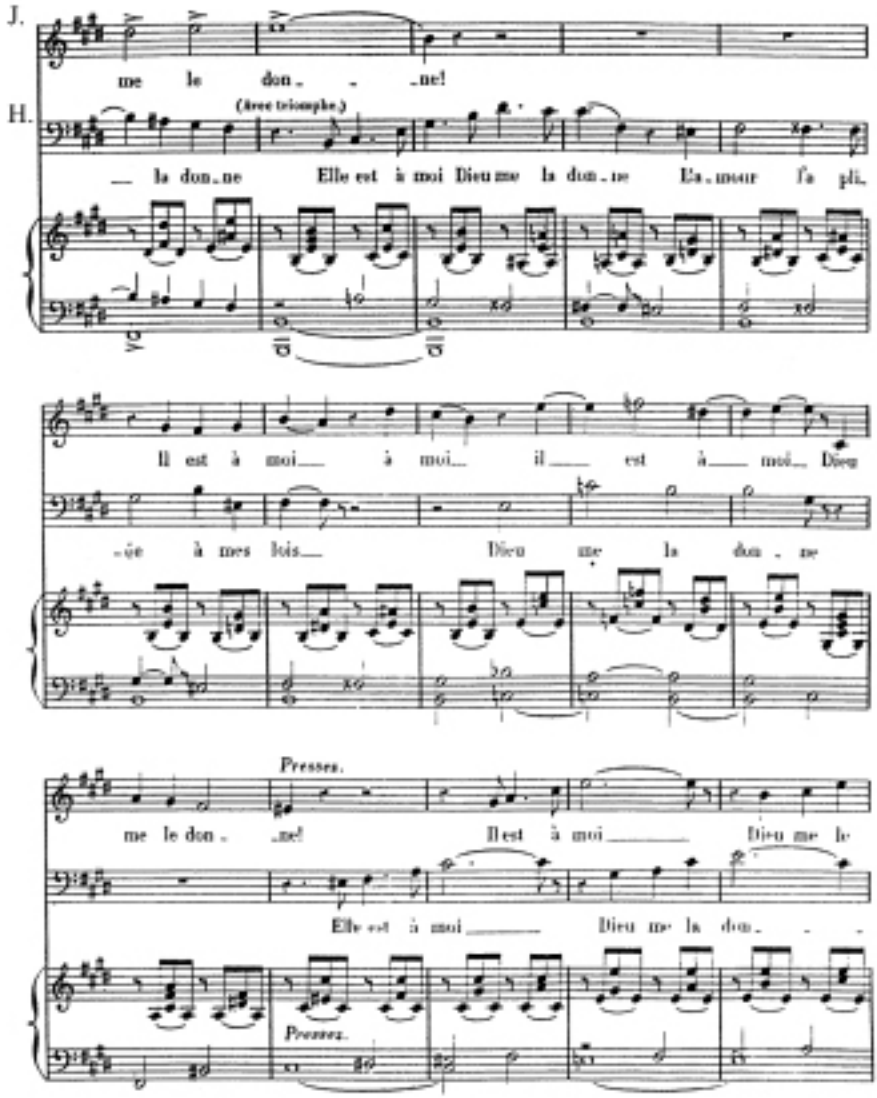
Dalila, her people, and their music, which excited listeners. The Bacchanale and the Dance of the Priestesses were transcribed for many instruments and grew popular in orchestral concerts long before the opera was performed in France.[20] Such excerpts were juxtaposed with German music in concerts to foreground charm as crucial to French musical distinction.

In dramatic music, seduction takes place conventionally in duets, but in these duets the nature of charm comes across as ambiguous and sometimes ironic, as in the Book of Judith.[21] In the 1876 cantata libretto, as Judith and Holofernes begin to sing together – the conventional moment when feelings become aligned – they speak in asides, Judith to her God and Holofernes to himself. One voice drowns out the other. When they use almost the same words – "She is mine / He is mine [Elle est à moi / Il est à moi]. ... Who resists kings? / who resists God?" – Hillemacher sets these in imitative arpeggios in both parts in the same key. Judith here echoes Holofernes. The irony of their different intentions remains hidden until the arpeggios move in contrary motion (Example 24.4). Then, as Judith and the king seduce one another, their pitches slowly move toward one another until they touch and intertwine. Judith's chromatically descends E-flat to G in counterpoint with the king's rising thirds and fourths, rather than in unison or parallel thirds as in the climactic moments of most duets in French opera. Musically, the superimposition of E-flat over F-sharp on the two *moi*'s suggests the inherent dissonance of the situation, although by the end they do come together on E-flat. Veronge de la Nux also sets "She is mine / he is mine" in contrary motion, which points to their conflicting purposes. However, they soon begin to sing these words together in parallel thirds and alternate imitative rhythmic patterns – musically emblematic of sexual play. The largo, forte, that they reach together slowly repeating the same E's and moving up to G-sharp, is the musical equivalent of sexual ecstasy, which they here experience as "given by God," despite whatever else they might say (Example 24.5).

In the analogous duet in Lefebvre's opera, the music also suggests attraction. They touch on the same pitches and eventually sing in parallel thirds passages such as "It is love that beckons / In my veins a fire burns."

20 See Jann Pasler, "Contingencies of Meaning in Transcriptions and Excerpts: Popularizing *Samson et Dalila*," in Byron Almén and Edward Pearsall (eds.), *Approaches to Meaning in Music* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 170–213.

21 As Carey Moore notes in *The Anchor Bible Judith*, few books of the Bible are as "quintessentially ironic as Judith." He gives many examples of the characters meaning the opposite of what they say (pp. 78–85). I am grateful to Deborah Gera for pointing me to this book and its discussion of irony.



24.5. Veronge de la Nux, *Judith* (1876). Paris: H. Lemoine.
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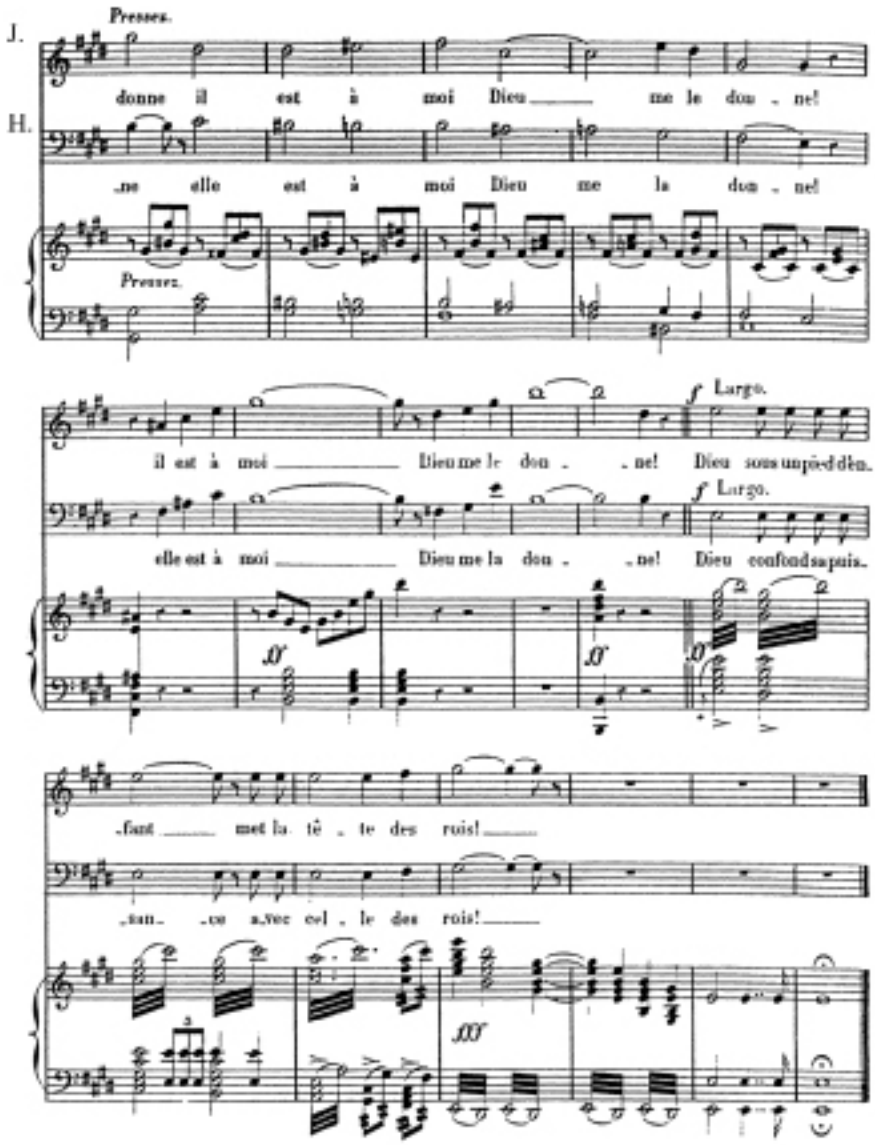


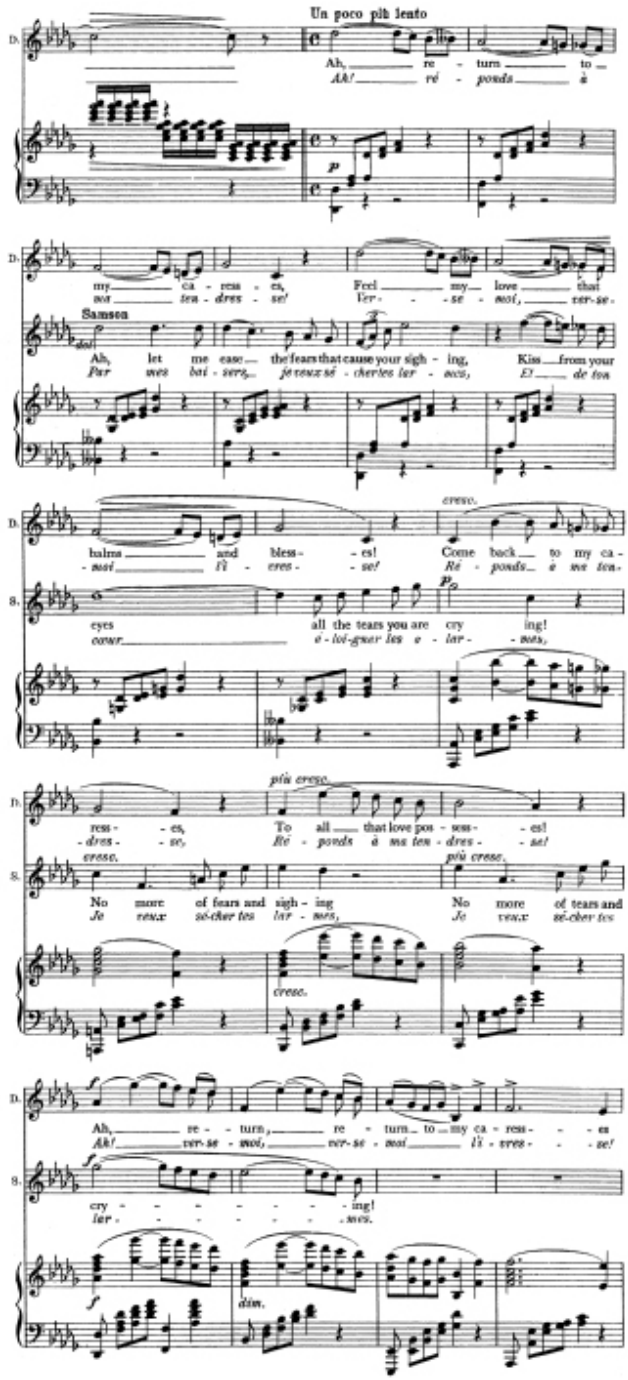
24.5. *(cont.)* Veronge de la Nux, *Judith* (1876). Paris: H. Lemoine.
Photo credit: Jann Pasler.

As Judith sings of "death coming," they touch on octaves, as if attaining the ecstasy of sexual union. However, before they reach a musical climax in unison, Holofernes feels weak and collapses, the momentum grinding to a halt. This suggests that to the extent that the seduction is merely aural, the woman can remain chaste.[22] Judith then stabs him, accompanied by three shrill eleventh chords on A, fortissimo, off the beat.

Music thus adds playfulness to the deceit, and encourages listeners to consider a close relationship between deceit and seduction. The duets imply that, for these to work, the attraction must be mutual. Judith needed to desire Holofernes as he desired her. The cantata libretto makes this explicit from the beginning. Judith finds Holofernes a "sublime warrior" who "resplendit comme une *tour*." She hesitates before killing him, singing slowly, "How handsome he is," and, painfully, "He said he loved me," to which her nurse responds in fortissimo outbursts. Only after he momentarily awakes and boasts of his "thirty campaigns" does Judith's anger return and she takes up the sword.

Love duets not only create dramatic tension, but also lend an air of tragedy to the works, especially in *Samson et Dalila* and *Salammbô*. With curves and chromaticisms carefully manipulated in their every nuance, Dalila gives voice to desire in one of the most powerful moments of musical charm. Soaring up to E-flat over and over, she musically links the memory of his "caresses" with her idea of "love." Then, "to enslave him," to "enchain" him to herself, she starts on the pitch (A-flat) on which he left off singing "I love you" and goes on to entreat him, "respond to my tenderness, give me ecstasy [*ivresse*]," symbolized musically by three interlocking chains of chromatically descending lines that end on the tritone G-flat–C. In exchange for her song and "in hopes of learning the secret of his strength," she asks to possess not his body, but his voice, it being the key to his power: "My heart opens to your voice ... let your voice speak again." Her charms do not have to be entirely sincere to take effect. In the duet that follows, he echoes her descending chromaticisms and sings with her a third lower. Finally, at the end of the stanza, he moves into unison with her as she pleads for ecstasy (Example 24.6). Musically, this is the surrender that love calls for; Samson's music follows Dalila's; the man loses his will to the woman's. Love has rendered the Other in a sense powerless, but in this case the Other is male. Having given her his "voice," even if only briefly, we understand why the Philistines come and why he returns in

22 Mastrangelo (Chap. 8) and Llewellyn (Chap. 11) have found this preoccupation in other Judith narratives.



24.6. Camille Saint-Saëns, *Samson et Dalila* (1868–77, 1890, 1892). Paris : Durand, Schœnewerk & cie. Photo credit: Jann Pasler.

Act III with his hair shorn. The *deus ex machina* at the end of the story – saving Samson's integrity and the patriarchal power he signifies – does not deny what has already transpired. In some ways it validates Dalila's strength for having warded off such a move earlier. But it does revive the vicious circle of fear and desire and suggests there is no end to it.

Love duets were crucial to these works' allegorical meaning, particularly for republicans. Love was essential in republican, freemason-based ideology, the family a model for the nation. In conflicts, the strength of love makes the choice of duty to country feel all the more significant. To the extent that Judith and Holofernes represented different countries, they also expressed the complex relationship of France to Germany at the time. Many French felt great attraction to German culture, envy of their army's strength, their schools, and their music. They were also aware that the French had been lax, like women during the Second Empire, fleeing combat and allowing the Germans an easy victory in their own land. Women like Judith suggested that the weak (the French after their defeat) could triumph over the strong (the Prussians) to the extent that their feminine attributes, their charm, could be turned to their advantage. That is, metaphors that drew attention to their weakness as a people, their "hearts of women," and the "enslavement" they endured under the Germans, may have embarrassed the French, at the same time as they, ironically, elevated as their saviors strong, powerful women who, unlike them (it is presumed), are not afraid to act. To the extent that their charm works and audiences are seduced into the illusion, listeners are given the opportunity to explore what these existentially weak women call on to survive, learn about the nature of their charm, its uses, and the limits of its power. Judith thus helped audiences to consider what it means to be the weaker in a dyad, what kind of relationship is possible with stronger Others, and how they might appropriate these tactics (like the composers do) as a way to empower themselves.

In 1878, with the success of the Paris Universal Exhibition and as republicans became more secure in their power, a light-hearted comedy performed in a café-concert took on these lofty associations with Judith. In Edouard de Deransart's *Judick et Halonferme*, a "Roman general full of adventure," just back from war in Palestine, sings of his exploits, accompanied by drums and fanfare, "Sim-ba-la-boum! Ba-la-boum. V'la guerre!" After he falls asleep to a lullaby,[23] Judick arrives – his wife. In her "nocturnal

23 Possibly a reference to the lullaby that put Holofernes to sleep in Vivaldi's *Judith triumphans*.

march," she contemplates her husband's betrayal with other women, learned from a friend, and takes his sword while he snores. As she moves to "take revenge," she waxes lyrical about how handsome he is, how she wants to hug him once more, how she loves him still. Nevertheless, "vengeance above all," and, one, two, three, off goes his head.

But the story does not end there. A "grand duo" follows the decapitation. That is, Judick unwittingly cut off the top of the box Halonferme painted to sleep under (presumably as a decoy for potential aggressors). After he awakens, he hides under the table, lending his voice to the "speaking decapitated head." He explains he'd been an innocent victim and, in a waltz tempo, declares his love for Judick. She cries as he laughs, touching on the same notes, and later, both laughing, they come together in long unison passages as in operatic duos. Eventually, Halonferme reveals himself and they celebrate their reconciliation by "decapitating" a bottle of champagne. Their singing in thirds culminates on an octave. Trickery, the threat of betrayal, the mutual attraction of a proud warrior and an angry woman, vengeful but still attracted to him, their duet, and a decapitation – the conventions of the story as set to music are all present. But here allegorical meaning is deconstructed, discarded, and replaced with a banal happy ending.

New Context, New Meaning

Judith did not return to French stages in any significant way until the 1890s. With the advent of the new independent woman and a military alliance with Russia, signed in 1891, French interest in Judith soared even as her reception changed significantly. Between December 1891 and November 1892, the Opéra finally produced *Samson et Dalila* and, in 1892, *Salammbô*, preceding these with a new opera on a Judith-like heroine, Bourgault-Ducoudray's *Thamara*. The latter revisits the thematic treatment of Judith given in these other works. The struggle between paganism and Christianity is represented by choruses in contrasting musical meters and Orientalist dances. Thamara, this time a pious virgin, is intent on killing the enemy to deliver her besieged homeland. She listens to the voice of God, but also falls for the sultan, his "voice like a caress," and in the end, devastated, also kills herself. In reviews, unlike in the 1870s, critics focused on these operas as representations of strength and masculine virility. Thamara, Salammbô, and Dalila are strong because they listen to the voice of authority whose voices they "obey" without question. Pougin considers Dalila "a ferocious fanatic" who stands for religion,

not women.[24] Salammbô is more complicated because when she kills herself, one wonders whether this is the price of not only love, but also racial mixture, she being white and her lover a "young barbarian." In spite of their courage, the dependence of these women on others underlines the role of patriarchy. Reyer explains that *Samson et Dalila* is not just about an exotic seductress. He focuses entirely on the "Jewish Hercules" and how he resists Dalila's charms, "always master of his secret."[25] Misogynist sentiment could grow when France no longer needed strong women to inspire their renewal.[26]

If Judith's actions helped audiences to feel more than carnal desire, perhaps catharsis, albeit an ambiguous one if she dies, such figures also teach self-sacrifice for the greater order, one of the principal values of the Republic. But if, with the new focus on Samson and the male choruses, the Hebrews could be viewed and thus identified with as proto-Christians, then Samson's God-ordained destruction of the temple after Dalila's betrayal "would have been understood as an act of liberation."[27] By the work's one-hundredth performance at the Opéra in 1897, one critic could only write of Dalila as "treacherous," her voice "hypocritically affectionate, adding charm to the troubling song of the seductive courtesan."[28] Judith's meaning in music thus was hardly static. The very different reception given to works based on the Judith story in the 1890s suggests not only how powerful such stories can be, but also how malleable and contingent on context.

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24 Arthur Pougin, "Semaine théâtrale: *Samson*," *Ménestrel* (9 November 1890), pp. 354–56.

25 Ernest Reyer, "*Samson et Dalila*," *Journal des débats* (9 November 1890).

26 A review of *Samson et Dalila* at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, published in *Gazetta di Lombardia* (18 January 1895), acknowledged the connection between Dalila and Judith, "a prophetess of patriotism," but objected to the librettist's changes in the biblical character, preferring "the feminine perversity of the biblical Dalila" which, he felt, "rendered her personality stronger and more interesting." I am grateful to Alexandre Lhâa for sharing this. For a major study of this topic, see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), especially pp. 375–80.

27 Ralph Locke, "Constructing the Oriental 'Other': Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*," *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 3 (1991), pp. 263, 282. Locke also addresses the problem of whether to read the Philistines and Dalila as "Other" or "us" (pp. 285–93) and suggests that the music sometimes subverts these binary paradigms.

28 Victorin Joncières, "Revue musicale," *La Liberté* (21 June 1897). On the importance of charm and the reception of this opera in the 1890s, see my *Composing the Citizen: Music as Public Utility in Third Republic France* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).