

12-1-2015

## The Power of an Opera

Sarah Sorrentino  
*St. John Fisher College*

### [How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?](#)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum>

 Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Sorrentino, Sarah (2015) "The Power of an Opera," *Verbum*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 9.  
Available at: <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol13/iss1/9>

This document is posted at <http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol13/iss1/9> and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact [fisherpub@sjfc.edu](mailto:fisherpub@sjfc.edu).

---

# The Power of an Opera

## **Abstract**

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

Samson et Dalila, a French opera composed by Camille Saint-Saëns, tells the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, focusing specifically on the final chapters of the story from the Book of Judges—Samson's betrayal and death. After many years of struggle and conflict, Samson et Dalila was finally finished in 1876 as an opera rather than an oratorio. This was the idea of Ferdinand Lemaire, who composed the libretto for the opera. Much conflict and disapproval arose from this decision, as nobody during this time expected a biblical story to be presented as an opera. Despite the disapproval of opera lovers, the opera spread across France and became widely known. Because there are many different components to the opera, I will be dividing my paper into three sections: The Biblical Story, the Libretto, and the Music of Samson and Delilah. The first section will focus on the biblical text, allowing me to incorporate five commentaries about the story. The next section will be centered on the libretto—who composed it, how it was composed, and its quality. In this section, I will compare and contrast the biblical story and the libretto, analyzing if and how faithful Lemaire is to the actual biblical story. The final section is all about the musical world of the opera, such as the voices, lighting, costumes, scenery, and acting apart, of course, from the music itself.

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Selected for the Essays on Religion prize.



*Sarah Sorrentino*

### **\*\*\* The Power of an Opera**

#### *Introduction*

*Samson et Dalila*, a French opera composed by Camille Saint-Saëns, tells the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, focusing specifically on the final chapters of the story from the Book of Judges—Samson’s betrayal and death. After many years of struggle and conflict, *Samson et Dalila* was finally finished in 1876 as an opera rather than an oratorio. This was the idea of Ferdinand Lemaire, who composed the libretto for the opera. Much conflict and disapproval arose from this decision, as nobody during this time expected a biblical story to be presented as an opera. Despite the disapproval of opera lovers, the opera spread across France and became widely known. Because there are many different components to the opera, I will be dividing my paper into three sections: The Biblical Story, the Libretto, and the Music of *Samson and Delilah*. The first section will focus on the biblical text, allowing me to incorporate five commentaries about the story. The next section will be centered on the libretto—who composed it, how it was composed, and its quality. In this section, I will compare and contrast the biblical story and the libretto, analyzing if and how faithful Lemaire is to the actual biblical story. The final section is all about the musical world of the opera, such as the voices, lighting, costumes, scenery, and acting apart, of course, from the music itself.

## 1. *The Biblical Story*

The biblical story of Samson and Delilah explains the journey of a born Nazirite named Samson who was called by God to save the Israelites from the hand of the Philistines. The biblical story is broken down into five sections: the birth of Samson, Samson's marriage, Samson's defeat of the Philistines, Samson and Delilah, and Samson's death. Samson's mother was barren until an angel of the Lord came to her and told her that she would bear a son and he would be a Nazirite to God from birth. This entitled Samson to a Nazirite vow even before he was born—as a Nazirite he could not eat or drink anything pertaining to grapes, he could not cut his hair, and he had to avoid all contact with the dead. Samson grew up with the blessing of the Lord. After going to Timnah, Samson fell in love with a Philistine woman and eventually married her. Because she was a Philistine, Samson's mother and father did not approve. After he found out that his wife had gone to another Philistine man, Samson took revenge on the Philistines by tying the tails of three-hundred foxes together and setting them on fire. He then killed a thousand Philistine men with a jaw-bone. He did all of this through the strength received from God. After going to Gaza, Samson fell in love with another Philistine woman, a prostitute named Delilah. The rulers of the Philistines told Delilah to find out the source of Samson's strength, causing Delilah to ask Samson three times to reveal his secret. After denying her three times, Samson finally gave in and told her that the source of his strength was his hair—if he cut his hair, he would lose his strength. While Samson was asleep, the Philistines cut his hair, seized him, and then gouged his eyes out. He began to weaken and his strength left him. While in the Philistine prison, he prayed to the Lord. After grabbing the pillars of the Philistine temple and crying out to the Lord one final time, Samson pulled down the pillars of the temple, killing himself and all of the Philistine rulers.

Just as the biblical story is divided into sections, commentaries about Samson's story are also divided into sections. I analyzed five commentaries and each of the five authors divided his or her commentary in different ways. The author who divided his commentary most similarly to the division found within the biblical story is John A. Grindel, the author of *Judges* in the Colledgeville Bible Commentary Series. Grindel divides his commentary into four stages: the birth of Samson, the marriage of Samson, Samson's defeat of the Philistines, and the capture and death of Samson. Throughout these four sections, Grindel analyzes Samson's journey and points out themes and ideas that he believes the story presents. One major theme that Grindel focuses on is the theme of barrenness, as Samson's mother is barren before she gives birth to him. Grindel expresses that "barrenness is a common theme in the Old Testament and is used as an occasion for a miraculous divine intervention whereby a child is born to

undertake a unique mission” (260). Grindel then comments on the importance of God’s strength within Samson, by analyzing two key moments when the strength of God is upon Samson—when Samson kills the lion and the incident with the foxes. Grindel interprets these moments to be key to the freedom of the Israelites as he explains that, when the spirit of the Lord comes upon Samson, “the Lord begins to deliver Israel from the Philistines” (261). Grindel refers to Samson’s strength as a gift from God. This idea of the direct connection between God and Samson’s strength ties to the concept that Grindel portrays in his final section, as he analyzes what happens to Samson after the cutting of his hair. Because Samson loses all of his strength, Grindel states that “Samson is unable to escape after his hair has been cut off because the Lord has left him” (261).

Although the other four commentaries don’t follow the exact division of Grindel’s commentary, the one out of the four that is most similar to both Grindel’s commentary and the biblical story is the one from the New Bible Commentary written by G.J. Wenham and J.A. Motyer. They divide their commentary into five sections: Samson’s miraculous birth, Samson’s wedding, growing conflict with the Philistines, Samson and Delilah, and death and triumph at Gaza. They too analyze the biblical story of Samson and Delilah and express some interesting interpretations. Wenham and Motyer connect the actions of Samson to the actions of the Israelites. For example, Wenham and Motyer state that “as Israel went after foreign gods, Samson went after foreign women. And as Israel in desperation called on the Lord, so did Samson at both climaxes of the story” (279). They continue to prove this claim through Samson’s interaction with Delilah, as they acknowledge that “Samson’s struggle against his calling was like the struggle of Israel as a whole” (281). Just as Samson breaks his calling to God by falling for a Philistine woman and admitting to her his secret, the Israelites break their commitment to God by continually turning away from him and worshipping false gods. Another point that Wenham and Motyer emphasize is the same point that Grindel emphasizes — that Samson accomplishes all that he does through the spirit of the Lord. Wenham and Motyer express this idea by stating that the story of Samson “is a story of God’s power bringing victory out of defeat and subduing the enemies of his people” (280). Overall, although both commentaries have slightly different structures, they are similar to the pattern expressed in the biblical story—Samson’s birth, marriage, defeat of the Philistines, encounter with Delilah, and death. Both authors give similar, yet different analyses of Samson’s story, allowing the story to be viewed from multiple angles.

The other three commentaries do not focus as much on the pattern expressed in the biblical story, but rather on key moments that the biblical story highlights. First, in the Oxford Bible Commentary Series’ *Judges*, Robert G.

Boling focuses on the pattern of the Israelites' behavior that leads to the calling of Samson by God to lift the Israelites from the hands of the Philistines. This pattern is: unfaithful actions by the Israelites, the punishment of the Israelites by God who abandons them into the hands of their enemies, the repentance of the Israelites, and finally the sending of a savior in the form of a judge. This pattern is evident throughout the first thirteen chapters of Judges. Boling comments on this pattern by saying, "This segment describes a pattern of apostasy, hardship, moaning, and rescue, a pattern to be illustrated for various segments of Israel..., where Yahweh is represented as the great saving administrator of the realm" (74). The next commentary on *Judges*, from the Oxford Bible Commentary, written by John Barton and John Muddiman divides Samson's story into three segments, all surrounding Samson's encounter with the Philistines. These segments are: Samson and the Philistines episode one, Samson and the Philistines episode two, and Samson and the Philistines episode three. Barton and Muddiman note a pattern that emerges with Samson. This pattern is "encounter with a Philistine woman; attempted entrapment or trickery; counter-trickery or escape" (187). This pattern is evident both times that Samson comes in contact with a Philistine woman. Lastly, the International Bible Commentary on *Judges*, written by Temba L. Mafico focuses on the overall message of Samson's story. Mafico expresses two conclusions, one that positively portrays Samson and one that negatively portrays Samson. Negatively, Mafico concludes that Samson is self-centered, as all of his actions are motivated by self-interest. This idea is expressed when she states that Samson "used divine power more for personal control of the Philistines than for leading the Israelites in battles of liberation" (563). However, Mafico also praises Samson by explaining that his actions are a good example of the benefits of loyalty to God. Mafico states that "Samson became an example to the Israelites of later generations of how loyalty to YHWH could bring success" (563). Overall, all three of these later commentaries focus on different parts of the story of Samson and Delilah, exemplifying that different authors have different outlooks.

There is one piece of information that is stated in all five commentaries—Samson's Nazirite vow. They all emphasize that Samson is dedicated to God before birth through a Nazirite vow of his mother. Wenham and Motyer define a Nazirite thus: "A Nazirite was a person who had consecrated himself to the Lord by taking a special vow" (279) and then apply this definition to the life of Samson saying, "Samson was made a life-long Nazirite by God, even before he was born" (279). Grindel also exemplifies Samson's predetermined commitment observing, "Samson is consecrated from his conception...and the regulations that he will live under are: abstaining from wine and strong drink, not shaving his head, and avoiding all contact with the dead" (260). Overall, Samson's Nazirite vow is

mentioned in all five commentaries to stress its importance. Because the importance of the vow is made known, the significance of Samson's hair getting cut, an act that breaks the vow, is also made known. The vow signifies his devotion to God, so by breaking the vow, Samson has betrayed God. The weakness that overcomes him symbolizes the broken vow, as God's strength is no longer with him.

## 2. *The Libretto*

The Libretto of *Samson et Dalila* was composed by Ferdinand Lemaire, a distant relative of Camille Saint-Saëns. Although Saint-Saëns originally intended for the story of Samson of Delilah to be an oratorio, Nicolas Reveles expresses that "Lemaire was convinced that the subject and the text were worthy of operatic treatment" (no p.n.). This was a bold move, as during this time, no one expected a biblical story to be treated as an opera. With the guidance of Saint-Saëns, Lemaire composed a libretto that had aspects of both opera and oratorio. The libretto focuses on chapter sixteen of Judges, which tells the story of Samson and Delilah. Reveles comments on the decision to make the story an opera rather than an oratorio saying, "unlike the biblical Delilah our operatic character turns down the monetary rewards offered by the Philistines out of sheer patriotism and simply to prove the superiority of her seductive charms. This makes Delilah, along with her music, closer to the world of opera than to the world of oratorio" (no p.n.). The opera took many years to compose and was eventually finished in 1876, after years of struggle and uncertainty; it was performed in 1877 under the direction of Eduard Lassen and then again in 1892 at the Paris Opéra in France. The opera is divided into three acts. The success of the opera was good, but not sustained.

There is much conflict about whether or not the libretto is faithful to the biblical text. Two people that voice their opinions on this topic are Dan Clanton Jr. and Peter J. Leithhart. Clanton believes that Saint-Saëns portrays the story as a religious conflict, creating contrasts between the biblical text and the opera. According to Clanton, "the characters and situations in Saint-Saëns three-act opera have been expanded and changed dramatically from their compact biblical source" (14). Clanton gives numerous examples that prove this statement. He first argues that Samson is portrayed as a ladies man in the Bible. Samson is easily pleased by two Philistine women and ends up falling in love with one of them, causing him to disclose to her the secret of his strength. Clanton then acknowledges that Samson displays different characteristics in Saint-Saëns' opera, as Samson "is no foolhardy

ladies' man weakened by love, but instead is a prophet, a military champion and a priest with great depth and dignity" (15). This is evident in Act 1 of the opera, as Samson addresses the Hebrews and tells them to not lose faith in the Lord.

The second difference has to do with Delilah's motivation to know Samson's secret. The Bible never expresses why Delilah agrees to betray Samson and tell the Philistines his secret, but it can be inferred that money is the motive, as the lord of the Philistines tells Delilah that he will give her "eleven hundred pieces of silver" (16:5). Oppositely, in the opera, it is made known that Delilah wants to take revenge on Samson to please the High Priest. This discussion between Delilah and the High Priest takes place in Act 2 of the opera. The motive of religion is made known as Delilah proclaims: "This is the hour of vengeance which must satisfy our gods" (Act 2). Clanton suggests another key difference between the opera and the biblical story by noting that the Bible has the lord of the Philistines command Delilah, while in the opera, a High Priest commands Delilah. The lord of the Philistines is a political leader, while the High Priest is a religious leader, again showing how the opera is focused more around religious themes.

The third difference between the opera and the biblical text occurs in Act 1, when Abimelech compares the power of Dagon with the power of God. Abimelech says to Samson, "Do you think this god can compare with Dagon, greatest of the gods, who with his mighty arm guides our victorious warriors?" (Act 1) Clanton expresses that this scene again reiterates that the opera is more focused on religious conflict. Abimelech is not mentioned in the biblical text.

The last argument made by Clanton focuses on the final scene of the opera, when Samson is in the temple in Gaza. While Samson is being mocked, the High Priest makes a reference to Samson's God saying, "Come, Delilah, let us give thanks to our gods, who make Jehovah tremble in the skies" (Act 3), again making a reference to the conflict between religions. The High Priest even tells Samson that if he gets his sight back, he will "worship this mighty God" (Act 3). Overall, Clanton argues that "the opera recasts the biblical narrative as a story of rival religions and a conflict between faith and passion" (14).

Peter Leithhart responds directly to Clanton's argument, stating that he does not agree with the argument that Clanton presents. Leithhart states: "On nearly every point, I find myself in agreement with Saint-Saëns against Clanton. Saint-Saëns was not changing the Samson story, but offering a compelling reading of the text" (no p.n.).

Overall, Clanton argues that the libretto is not faithful to the biblical story, while Leithhart disagrees with this argument and instead claims that the opera is faithful to the biblical story.

Having heard the arguments of both Clanton and Leithhart, I agree with Clanton's argument the most, as he provides the better evidence to support his point of view. Clanton compares the biblical story and the opera, pointing out the noticeable differences between the two, such as: Delilah's motive for knowing Samson's secret, the difference in meaning between the lord of the Philistines and the High Priest, and the scene involving Abimelech, which is not even mentioned in the biblical text. After reading the opera and the biblical text, it is evident to me that the opera has many more references to religious conflict compared to the few references made in the biblical text. Overall, I think the theme is different in both the opera and the biblical text, as the opera expresses a theme of religious conflict, while the Bible expresses a theme of commitment, portraying how Samson breaks his commitment to God, but then reconnects to God in the last moments of his life. Samson's relationship with God is not focused on as much in the opera as it is in the Bible

### 3. *The Music*

There are many different elements in the musical composition of *Samson et Dalila*, such as: scenery, acting, voices, and lighting. These individual elements combine together to form the final product—the opera. Before I expand upon each of these elements, I am first going to talk about the musical influences that inspired Camille Saint-Saëns. A major view that influenced the construction of *Samson et Dalila* was Orientalism. Orientalism was the study of Asian or Eastern history, culture, and people, from a Western perspective. This had a major impact on the characterization of individual figures in the opera. According to Ralph P. Locke, Orientalist operas can be summarized as follows: “[Y]oung, tolerant, brave, possibly naïve, white-European tenor-hero intrudes, at risk of disloyalty to his own people and colonialist ethic, into mysterious, dark-skinned, colonized territory represented by alluring dancing girls and deeply affectionate, sensitive lyric soprano, incurring wrath of brutal, intransigent tribal chieftain and blindly obedient chorus of male savages” (263). Saint-Saëns adds a few different elements to his opera. For example, Delilah is portrayed as a seductive mezzo-soprano, rather than a delicate soprano. This change is prominent in the opera, as the character of Delilah plays a fatal role in the transformation of the opera from an oratorio to an opera. Nicolas Reveles explains that “the very choice of the mezzo timbre for her depiction sets her aside from her old German and Italian oratorio counterparts like Judith, Esther, or Mary Magdalene and communicates a certain eroticism that would only be at home on the opera stage” (no p.n.).

Although there is a difference in the tone of Delilah, the influence of Orientalism is evident in the portrayal of Delilah, as western Orientalists depicted women as objects of desire. In the opera, Delilah is a seductive woman who lures Samson to her with lust and romance. Her provocative behavior is evident in the opera's two ballets: The Dance of the Priestesses of Dagon (Act one) and The Bacchanal (Act three). In The Dance of the Priestesses of Dagon, she emerges accompanied by her maidens, who are waving floral garlands and attracting the attention of the Hebrew warriors. Delilah, also participating in these gestures, provokes Samson, preventing him from taking his eyes off of her despite his efforts. Locke explains that "part of the demure yet intriguing effect comes from the elusive modal language of the music" (266). Similarly, in The Bacchanal, Delilah leads a provocative dance to taunt Samson while he is captive in the Philistine temple. It is a very powerfully orchestrated composition, as it opens with an oboe solo and then develops into an orchestra over a steady pulse. Locke describes the different components involved in The Bacchanal: "hypnotic rhythms in the castanets, timpani and low strings...and florid melodies and garish harmonies" (266). The influence of Orientalism is evident throughout both pieces.

Just as Delilah's dominance is portrayed through the two ballets, Mary Louise Roberts, who discusses women's fashion during the 1920s, also comments on this idea of female control. Roberts expresses that women during the 1920s decided to cut their hair very short, symbolizing the independence and autonomy of women from men. Women during that time believed that short hair was a symbol of female liberation. Roberts connects this idea to the story of Samson and Delilah, as she explains that Samson loses his strength when his hair is cut—the exact opposite result. She then illustrates the power that women felt with short hair, saying that "[w]omen themselves became "virilized" Samson's [sic] rather than shearing Delilah's [sic]" (664). Women felt empowered with shorter hair.

Similarly, Locke also comments on the power of women, as he analyzes the character of Delilah. "The operatic Delilah, in short, is a woman who loves, or at least lusts and yearns and seeks to dominate" (Locke 292). She uses her beauty and seductive attitude to take control of and manipulate Samson, forcing him into telling her his secret. The influence of Orientalism is again evident as Locke discusses the scene when Delilah is alone with Samson in the end of Act two. The lighting and evolving storm are a symbol of the tension growing between Samson and Delilah, they also represent "the close link between the Oriental scene and the alternately beckoning and threatening forces of nature" (Locke 294).

Overall, Orientalism influenced the composition of the opera. The influence of Orientalism is evident through the portrayal of Delilah, as well as through some of the music, such as The Dance of the Priestesses of Dagon and

The Bacchanale. However, Orientalism is not evident throughout all of the parts of the opera, as Saint-Saëns added some elements that were different from Orientalism. Locke comments on this: “Because Saint-Saëns tugged and pulled at the Orientalist paradigm, it is essential to view the opera in the larger connect of the Orientalist world-view that flourished in France at the time” (263).

Now that I have explained the influence that Orientalism had on the composition of *Samson et Dalila*, I am going to discuss the individual components of the opera. The first component that I will discuss is scenery. Scenery is important to the opera because a tone is created by the environment that the scenery portrays. For example, Act Two takes place in Delilah’s home. When the scene first begins, Delilah is sitting on a rock near the porch of her house holding a sword in her hand while her maids brush her hair. Immediately a sense of dominance is felt, as Delilah is in the comfort on her own home, being tended to by maids. She is in full control of her current situation. The sword in her hand foreshadows the cutting of Samson’s hair, as well as the tension that exists between Samson and Delilah. When Act Three begins, the scenery also plays an important role, as everything is dark and we see Samson in the Philistine prison, pushing a giant wheel. A sense of defeat and weakness is portrayed through the scenery, setting the tone for the rest of the Act. Within the last moments of the Act, Samson pulls down the pillars of the Philistine temple. This is another example when scenery portrays an important message, as God allows his strength to be exhibited through Samson one last time. Before Samson pulls down the pillars, all of the Philistine people are chanting and celebrating with wine glasses in their hands. As the strength of the Lord comes upon Samson one final time, Samson pulls the pillars down on himself and the Philistine people. Through the scenery, this destruction of the Philistine people is made evident, as we see the pillars crash down, people running and trying to escape, chunks of the building flying everywhere, and then darkness.

The darkness that ends the play connects to the next component of the opera—lighting. Just like scenery, lighting also plays a vital role in the opera, as it establishes a tone. For example, if there is little to no lighting and everything is dark, a tone of sadness, defeat, or tragedy or allurement is portrayed. On the contrary, if a scene is filled with bright lights, a tone of happiness or success is portrayed. The most prominent example of this is the ending of the opera. The absolute darkness exhibited in the final moments of the opera symbolizes the end, both literally and figuratively. Literally, the opera has ended, but figuratively, the lives of both the Philistines and Samson have also ended. It also symbolizes the end of the relationship between God and Samson, as Samson is no longer

able to serve God. Because of the darkness, a tone of defeat is shown, signifying the defeat of the Philistines through Samson's strength.

Another example that portrays the importance of lighting is the end of Act Two—when Samson's hair is cut off by the Philistines. Within the last moments before Samson's hair gets cut, darkness fills the stage, as lighting and thunder fill the sky. Immediately, it becomes evident that something bad is about to occur. The stage is almost pitch-black as we see Delilah approach Samson with a sword, ready to cut his hair off. Instantly after his hair is cut, Samson knows that he has been betrayed. This feeling of defeat and betrayal is portrayed through the darkness. Samson knows that he has betrayed God, just as Delilah has betrayed him, which is why the dark lighting is a key component to this scene. If the lights were bright during this scene, the message would not have been portrayed as strongly, as a different tone would have been given off.

The third component of the opera that I will discuss is acting. As I mentioned earlier, the character of Delilah plays a vital role in the opera. Reveles expresses the importance of Delilah's character saying, "But it is Delilah and her alone that moves this work to be seriously considered an opera. She is three-dimensional, a character of depth whose motivations are more psychological than an oratorio-bound biblical character would normally be allowed" (no p.n.). Therefore, it was important to find the right actress to fill the role of Delilah for the particular performance of the opera I chose to analyze. Shirley Verrett plays the role of Delilah. Her strong female presence, as well as her powerful stage presence, fulfills the role perfectly. Her voice is powerful in moments when it needs to be powerful, and quiet in moments when it needs to be quiet. Her seductive and independent attitude exhibits female power and dominance—a theme that is important in the opera.

Even though the character of Delilah is believed to be the most important in the opera, the character of Samson also has significance. This role is fulfilled by Plácido Domingo, who does a wonderful representation of Samson. He is able to portray numerous emotions throughout the opera, capturing the true identity of Samson. In the beginning of the opera, a positive and uplifting attitude is portrayed, as he is trying to motivate the Hebrew people. He is then able to display vulnerability and desperation, showing how he cannot deny Delilah's seductive nature. Finally, defeat and agony are exhibited throughout the final Act, as he is locked in the Philistine temple overcome by weakness. These powerful emotions capture the story of Samson and Delilah, as well as help portray the multiple different tones of the opera. Overall, acting is one of the major components of the opera. One important

characteristic that is considered when choosing the actors and actresses is their voice, the next component of the opera.

As I stated earlier, the actress that played Delilah, a mezzo-soprano, does a very good job controlling the tone of her voice. During the dark and authoritative scenes, her voice gets powerful and loud, creating an atmosphere of tension and anger. On the other hand, a softer and more seductive tone emerges in the scenes when she is talking to Samson. The most prominent example of this occurs in Act Two, when Delilah is trying to seduce Samson. In French, this part is known as “*Mon coeur s’ouvre á ta voix*,” which in English translates to “My heart opens itself to your voice.” Throughout it, multiple different tones are portrayed, as in some parts Delilah’s tone is passionate and powerful, but in other parts loving and gentle. A begging tone is also exhibited throughout it, as a sense of desperation and vulnerability is evident as Delilah is singing to Samson.

Another scene that portrays the power of Delilah’s voice is her encounter with the High Priest in Act Two, before Samson enters the stage. As Delilah responds to the High Priest, an expression of anger fills her voice. She is not pleased that the High Priest expresses doubt about her, as she is adamant that Samson will not be able to resist her tears. As both of them unite and say “Death! Death to the leader of the Hebrews”, power and passion fill the stage. Because of the powerful stage atmosphere at this moment, it is evident that something bad is about to occur—the cutting of Samson’s hair. After watching this scene, I was blown away at how dominant the character of Delilah is. Her voice is so sharp and dynamic, as it takes over the entire stage. That moment exemplifies the importance of the voice component in the opera.

Now that I have discussed the four major components of the opera, I will present the result of combining all of the components together—the opera itself. The opera wouldn’t be able to exist without all of the individual components. The overall opera is divided into three Acts. Act One is titled “A square in Gaza at night,” Act Two is titled “Delilah’s retreat in the Valley of Sorek,” and Act Three is titled “The city of Gaza.” Act Three is broken down into two separate sections. The first section takes place in the dungeon at Gaza and the second section takes place in the temple of Dagon. Overall, the opera is one-hundred and twenty-five minutes and thirty-three seconds long.

Act One begins in a square in the city of Gaza. A group of Hebrews is begging God to release them from the hand of the Philistines. Samson emerges, trying to revive their faith in the Lord. Samson proclaims to them that “it is the voice of the Lord who speaks through my mouth.” After Abimelech tells the Israelites that their God has

abandoned them, something that his God, Dagon, would not do, Samson kills Abimelech with a sword. Samson then yells out: “Rise up, ye people...the Lord is within me.” A messenger informs the High Priest of Samson’s actions, causing him to concoct a plan to defeat Samson. This plan is to use Delilah’s beauty to seduce Samson, which would allow them to figure out the secret of Samson’s strength. Scene six begins with the entrance of Delilah, who is followed by a group of Philistine women waving garlands of flowers. Samson is unable to take his eyes off of her, despite being warned by an old Hebrew man. The man says to Samson, “Turn aside, my son, from her path...close your ears to her lying tongue and avoid the serpent’s venom.” The Act ends with Delilah gazing provocatively at Samson, who is unable to resist her seductive attitude.

Act Two takes place in Delilah’s dwelling. When the Act begins, Delilah is sitting on a rock, near the porch of her house. A little while later, the High Priest arrives. He tells Delilah that it is crucial that she finds out Samson’s secret. Delilah expresses confidence, telling him that “for this final encounter I have prepared my weapons; Samson will not be able to resist my tears.” The High Priest leaves and Samson enters. Throughout all of this, the stage has been getting darker and darker, foreshadowing the event that occurs at the end of act — the cutting of Samson’s hair. After proclaiming her love to him, Delilah sings “Mon coeur s’ouvre á ta voix,” putting Samson in her power. She demands him to tell her his secret and, after numerous claps of thunder, Samson reveals his secret to her. The second Act ends with Philistine soldiers rushing in and taking Samson captive.

The first section of Act Three begins with Samson pushing a giant wheel in the prison at Gaza. He is in chains and blinded, with no strength left. Samson cries out to the Lord saying, “Have pity, Lord, pity on my weakness.” Samson is filled with remorse. The second section of the Act portrays the celebration that the Philistines take part in as a reward for their victory. All of the Philistines are drinking wine and dancing. Samson is led to the celebration by a young boy, where he receives ridicule and mocking from the High Priest. Delilah also takes part in the mocking of Samson saying, “Glory to Dagon the conqueror! He aided your weakness, inspiring your heart.” Samson takes hold of the two main pillars of the temple, and prays to God one final time, asking him to give him strength once again. “Deign for one moment, Lord, to give me back my former strength, that I may avenge myself along with Thee, O God, by crushing them in the place.” God answers Samson’s prayer, allowing him to pull down the pillars of the temple, killing both himself and the Philistine people.

Overall, the music of *Samson et Dalila* has many different components to it. Scenery, lighting, acting and voices all play a vital role in the composition of the opera, as each component fulfills a specific role. Aspects of

Orientalism are evident in most of these components, proving to be a significant influence on Saint-Saëns. D.C. Parker comments on the brilliance of Saint-Saëns saying, “Saint-Saëns’s right to the title of a great musician is justified by reason of his thorough knowledge of the classics, a knowledge which constantly makes itself felt in his music” (563).

### *Conclusion*

With the help of Ferdinand Lemaire, as well as the influence of Orientalism, Camille Saint-Saëns composed an opera that depicted chapter sixteen of the Book of Judges—the story of Samson and Delilah. Although Saint-Saëns originally intended for the story to be an oratorio, Lemaire convinced him to make it an opera—a decision that was shocking, as many people during that time didn’t expect a biblical story to be treated as an opera. However, many scholarly authors agree that the role of Delilah is better fit for an opera rather than an oratorio, an idea that is expressed in the third section of the paper. The character of Delilah is powerful, dominant, and seductive—traits that are better conveyed in an opera.

Because the opera is built around the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, I incorporated five commentaries into the first section of the paper in order to analyze the biblical story. Each commentary is different, allowing the story to be viewed through multiple perspectives. Some of the commentators divide their commentaries by event, while others divide theirs by pattern. All five commentators mention Samson’s Nazirite vow, expressing the importance of Samson’s devotion to God—a devotion that is broken when his hair is cut. This idea that the biblical story is centered on Samson’s commitment to God creates contrasts between the biblical story and the opera, as it is evident that the opera focuses more on religious conflict between two peoples rather than the relationship between God and Samson. The two main authors that voice their opinions regarding how faithful the opera is to the Bible are Dan Clanton Jr. and Peter Leithhart. Their arguments are discussed in the second section of the paper.

Despite this disagreement about whether or not the opera is faithful to the biblical story, the work still became successful, as it spread across France and “achieve[d] a repertory status throughout the world as an excellent example of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century French Romanticism” (Reveles no p.n.). I believe that because the opera still achieves success despite the many challenges that it encountered, such as the many difficult years of its composition or its transformation from an oratorio to an opera, it should be considered a masterpiece. Although the success was short-lived, the musical brilliance of Saint-Saëns is exhibited throughout the opera, compelling the interest of many.

Overall, Saint-Saëns portrayal of Delilah as a sensuous and intricate mezzo-soprano, along with his use of many different musical components, proves *Samson et Dalila* to be the work of a musical genius.

### Bibliography

- Barton, John and John Muddiman. *Judges- The Oxford Bible Commentary*. New York, N. Y.: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Boling, Robert G. *Judges- Oxford Bible Commentary Series*. Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1975.
- Clanton, Dan W. Jr. "Samson et Dalila". *Bible Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (June 2004), no p.n.
- De Staelen, Caroline. "Rubens's Samson and Delilah in the National Gallery: New Facts Relating to Its Provenance". *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 146, No. 1216 (Jul. 2004), p.467-469.
- Grindel, John A. *Judges- The Collegeville Bible Commentary*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1989.
- Leithhart, Peter J. "Samson and Delilah". *Bible- OT- Judges, leithart.com* (June 2004), no p.n.  
<http://www.leithart.com/archives/000707.php>
- Locke, Ralph P. "Constructing the Oriental Other: Saint-Saëns' Samson et Dalila". *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Nov. 1991), p.261-302.
- Mafico, Temba L. *Judges- The International Bible Commentary*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998.
- Parker, D.C. "Camille Saint-Saëns: A Critical Estimate". *The Musical Times*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (Oct, 1919), p. 561-577.
- Plotkin, Fred. *Opera 101*. New York: Hachette Books, 1994.
- Reveles, Nicolas. "Camille Saint-Saëns and Samson and Delilah". *Operapaedia*, n.d.  
<http://www.sdopera.com/Operapaedia/SamsonandDelilah>
- Reveles, Nicolas. "The Libretto and Source of Saint-Saëns Samson and Delilah". *Operapaedia*, n.d.  
<http://www.sdopera.com/Operapaedia/SamsonandDelilah>
- Reveles, Nicolas. "The Music of Saint-Saëns Samson and Delilah". *Operapaedia*, n.d.  
<http://www.sdopera.com/Operapaedia/SamsonandDelilah>
- Roberts, Mary Louise. "Samson and Delilah Revisited: The Politics of Women's Fashion in 1920s France." *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (1993), p. 657-84.
- Smith, Carol. "Samson and Delilah: A Parable of Power?" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol. 76 (1997), p. 45-57.
- Wenham, G.J. and J.A. Motyer. *Judges- New Bible Commentary*. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1953.

