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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'Du Paradis Rêvé': Parodies of *Japonisme* in Saint-Saëns's *La princesse jaune*

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Abstract

The debut of a Japanese exhibit at the 1867 Exposition Universelle prompted a new enthusiasm for Japan (dubbed *japonisme*) that soon gripped artistic and literary circles in Paris. Camille Saint-Saëns's one-act opera *La princesse jaune*, which premiered at the Opéra-Comique in 1872, emerged at the height of this fervour. At first glance, it might seem that *La princesse jaune* simply followed the trend. Yet, on closer examination it is possible to understand its story of an infatuated young artist as a playful, subversive commentary on *japonisme*. This article thus poses the question: How might we understand *La princesse jaune* as a parody? To answer this, I begin by considering its protagonist as a mockery of the elitist and exclusive *japoniste* subcultures that emerged in the wake of the Exposition. Borrowing from William Cheng's concept of 'opera *en abyme*', I then consider the opera's dream sequence, examining how its shifting diegesis highlights the fragile and ephemeral nature of the Orientalist dream. Ultimately, I argue that reading *La princesse jaune* as a parody allows us not only to reframe the work within Saint-Saëns's œuvre, but also to reassess its place within the wider contexts of nineteenth-century operatic Orientalism.

Keywords: Saint-Saëns; Opera; *Japonisme*; Orientalism; *La princesse jaune*

The inaugural appearance of a Japanese exhibit at the 1867 Exposition Universelle caused a stir in the Parisian artistic world. Inspired by the prints, ceramics and sculptures on display, a new market emerged for imported prints and *objets d'art*, soon followed by a deluge of mass-produced replicas and *japonaiserie*. Such was the interest that the trend acquired a name: *japonisme*.[1] From this furore emerged the Société du Jing-lar, a small group of devotees who met on a monthly basis from 1868.[2] Alongside activities such as eating with chopsticks, drinking *sake* and wearing kimonos, the Jing-lar's efforts aspired towards the academic: 'diplomas' decorated in woodblock style were awarded to its members (see Figure 1).[3] This quasi-academic status, along with its select, all-male membership,

[1] Philippe Burty, 'Japonisme I', *La renaissance littéraire et artistique* (18 May 1872). This was the first of a series of articles Burty published on the subject, ending in February 1873.

[2] Christopher Reed points out that the very name 'Jing-lar' (sometimes styled 'Jinglar') was a play on words of *ginglard* – a cheap, sour, *sake* wine. Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists* (New York, 2016), 57.

[3] There are three known surviving diplomas of the Jing-lar: Félix Bracquemond (British Museum, London), Henri Fantin-Latour (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and Philippe Burty (New York Public Library).

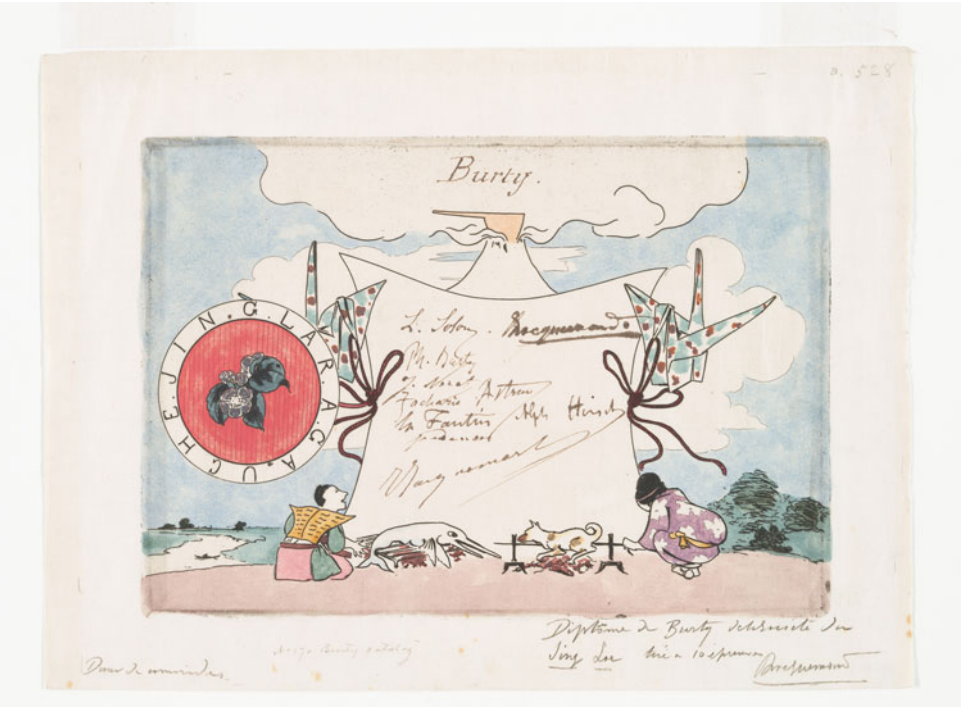

Figure 1. Philippe Burty's diploma, signed by members of the Société du Jing-lar. The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Arts, Prints and Photographs: Print Collection. New York Public Library Digital Collections, NYPG95-F219.

positioned the Société as an exclusionary and highly gendered space of (sometimes imagined) expertise against a perceived tide of new amateur interest. By the early 1870s, then, *japonisme* had evolved from a growing artistic and aesthetic movement into a contentious site of cultural capital.

It was in this atmosphere of specialist interest that Camille Saint-Saëns's one-act opera *La princesse jaune* premiered at the Opéra-Comique on 12 June 1872. Though the influence of *japonisme* in 1870s France has been well studied with regard to visual arts and literature,[4] musicological scholarship has generally focused elsewhere.[5] Dating from Saint-Saëns's earlier forays into the realm of musical exoticism (what Lynne Johnson calls his 'Fantasy' period[6]), *La princesse jaune* – with its story of a lovesick artist's

[4] For discussion of *japonisme* in visual art and its influence on artists in France (including, among many others, Édouard Manet, Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh), see Gabriel P. Weisberg et al., eds, *Japonisme: Japanese Influence on French Art 1854–1910* (Cleveland, OH, 1975). For literature, see Elwood Hartman, '*Japonisme* and Nineteenth-Century French Literature', *Comparative Literature Studies* 18/2 (June 1981), 141–66.

[5] Robert F. Waters's article on musical *japonisme* in France makes brief mention of *La princesse jaune*, but focuses its study on the later influence of Julien Tiersot's writings on, and transcriptions of, Japanese music around the turn of the century. See 'Emulation and Influence: Japonisme and Western Music in Fin de Siècle Paris', *Music Review* 55/3 (August 1994), 214–26. Debussy's relationship with *japonisme* has also been well studied: see Jeremy Day-O'Connell, *Pentatonicism from the Eighteenth Century to Debussy* (Rochester, NY, 2007); and Jann Pasler, 'Revisiting Debussy's Relationships with Otherness: Difference, Vibrations, and the Occult', *Music & Letters* 101/2 (2020), 321–42.

[6] Johnson divides Saint-Saëns's compositional interest in exoticism into three periods: the Fantasy (1861–72), the Travelogue (1873–96) and the Integration (1896–1912). See Lynne Johnson, 'Camille Saint-Saëns's Changing Exoticism and the Interesting Case of *La Foi*', *Journal of Musicological Research* 25/1 (2006), 79–95, at 80–1.

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drug-induced 'trip' to Japan – might at first appear the very pinnacle of *japoniste* fantasy. However, following closer inspection, I suggest that *La princesse jaune* did not simply reproduce or perpetuate the wider interest in Japan, but rather offered a playful – and at times even subversive – commentary that highlighted the more ridiculous elements of 1870s *japonisme*.

Saint-Saëns was not averse to indulging in this kind of intellectual exploration himself. On certain subjects (such as Greco-Roman culture), he would attempt to present himself as a quasi-scholarly authority.[7] Equally, however, he could be highly suspicious of groups whose interests, in his view, bordered on the fanatical: in the decades to come, he would be scathingly critical of the Wagnerists who had come to dominate Parisian musical life.[8] That Saint-Saëns seemed comfortable in holding both these positions – a passionate pursuer of his own academic interests and a stern critic of those who did much the same – was a recurrent pattern throughout his life, and goes some way to explaining his approach to *La princesse jaune*.

I am not the first to read Saint-Saëns's work as parody – or as its more politically charged cousin satire.[9] Yet despite efforts to frame *La princesse jaune* as a work that was not intended to be taken entirely seriously, no previous study has sought to consider what implication these elements of parody might have for our understanding of Saint-Saëns and of musical Orientalism more generally. This is not to exaggerate his cultural sensitivity: he must after all be understood in the context of the social and political landscape of early Third Republic France. Furthermore, over the course of his long life (1835–1921), Saint-Saëns's views on exoticism evolved, defying any single interpretation of his œuvre in this respect. Ralph Locke's recent uncovering of Saint-Saëns's misgivings about the French colonial project expressed in later life might serve as an invitation to re-evaluate this aspect of his output and, to this end, my study turns to his earlier work.[10]

This article therefore makes the case for *La princesse jaune* as both an insight into its composer and a new lens on the cultural and artistic landscape of *japonisme* in Paris in the 1870s. It argues that the opera can be read not simply as a fantasy typical of the Orientalist model, but more profitably as a parody. In so doing, it exposes the ambivalent relationship between *japonisme* as an aesthetic movement and the more exclusionary subcultures prompted by its widespread appeal. It also reveals the tensions between the established understanding of nineteenth-century Orientalism as a fantastical site of escapism, and the ways in which the likes of the Jing-lar saw themselves as gatekeepers of an expertise that was arguably more imagined than real. With all this in mind, I do not seek to compare Saint-Saëns's imagined Japan with the 'genuine' article, even as it might have been understood by French scholars at the time – after all, Edward Said warns that more often than not the language used throughout the nineteenth century to describe the

[7] Saint-Saëns had encountered Greco-Roman art and architecture at the 1867 Exposition Universelle and would later go on to write two essays on the subject: 'Note sur les décors de théâtre dans l'antiquité romaine' (1886) and 'Essai sur les lyres et cithares antiques' (1902). For further discussion of Saint-Saëns's interest in the classical world, see Timothy S. Flynn, 'The Classical Reverberations in the Music and Life of Camille Saint-Saëns', *Music in Art* 40/1–2 (2015), 255–66.

[8] See, for instance, his 1899 essay 'L'illusion wagnérienne', which appears in Camille Saint-Saëns, *Regards sur mes contemporains*, ed. Yves Gérard (Arles, 1990), and is discussed further in Megan Sarno, 'Saint-Saëns, Criticism, and Catholicism', in *The Many Faces of Camille Saint-Saëns*, ed. Michael Stegemann (Turnhout, 2018), particularly 113–14.

[9] For a notable recent description of *La princesse jaune* as a satire, see Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Berkeley, 2018), 151.

[10] See Locke's inclusion of an excerpt from one of Saint-Saëns's letters, 'Wherever Europe gains a foothold it destroys the land and creates ugliness and misery.' Ralph P. Locke, 'The Exotic in Nineteenth-Century French Opera, Part 2: Plots, Characters, and Musical Devices', *19th-Century Music* 45/3 (2022), 185–203, at 189n8.

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Orient did not even attempt to be accurate.[11] Rather, I propose that to examine *La princesse jaune* in this way is not only to challenge the assumption that nineteenth-century Orientalism might always have been a 'serious' pursuit, but also to reveal the underlying fragility of the *japoniste* movement at the height of its influence.

My discussion begins with an account of *La princesse jaune*'s journey to the stage of the Opéra-Comique, tracing the influence of *japonisme* on the development of the work. I then examine the dream sequence in detail, parsing the plot, music and staging to identify the moments of departure from what might at first seem a straightforward Orientalist fantasy into a more meta-critical view of the work. Finally, I consider the implications of an explicit dream narrative, proposing both a new dimension to our understanding of the wider trend of operatic Orientalism and a fuller contextualisation of *La princesse jaune* in Saint-Saëns's œuvre – particularly his earlier works – than has previously been possible.

Staging *japonisme*

La princesse jaune was the first of Saint-Saëns's operas to be performed, but it was not his first attempt at writing in the genre. He had completed *Le timbre d'argent* in 1865, but plans for its premiere were disrupted first by the Franco-Prussian War, then by the Paris Commune (1870–1).[12] As compensation for the delay, Camille du Locle – who had recently resumed his post as the co-director of the Opéra-Comique alongside Adolphe de Leuven – offered Saint-Saëns a commission for a new opera, for performance alongside two other one-acters the following year. Du Locle also facilitated Saint-Saëns's introduction to the librettist Louis Gallet, leading to a long-term professional collaboration and personal friendship.

Apparently inspired by the current fashion for Japan,[13] Saint-Saëns and Gallet soon proposed a new work to du Locle. However, the original scenario was not met with enthusiasm. In a 1911 article published in the *Écho de Paris*, the composer recounted du Locle's nervous response to their plan:

> Japan was fashionable, people talked of nothing but Japan, it was a furore; the idea came to us to make a Japanese piece. It was submitted to du Locle, but pure Japan, on stage, frightened him; he insisted that we modify it, and it was he, I think, who had the idea of a half-Dutch, half-Japanese setting in which this little work *La princesse jaune* was to take place.[14]

With this suggestion, the two set about writing a new scenario, and Saint-Saëns would complete the score in May 1872. It is not clear from Saint-Saëns's account why du Locle was so uneasy about the prospect of an entirely Japanese setting, but his suggested modification did more than simply add dramatic interest. With the addition of the second

[11] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), 71.

[12] *Le timbre d'argent* would eventually premiere at the Opéra-Comique on 23 February 1877. The difficulties in bringing *Le timbre d'argent* to the stage are discussed in greater detail in Hugh Macdonald, *Saint-Saëns and the Stage: Operas, Plays, Pageants, a Ballet and a Film* (Cambridge, 2019), 76–7.

[13] For a comprehensive discussion of the *japoniste* influences and networks surrounding Saint-Saëns and Gallet at the time of the creation of *La princesse jaune*, see Mitsuya Nakanishi, 'Saint-Saëns et ses œuvres littéraires sur le Japon', in Stegemann, ed., *The Many Faces of Camille Saint-Saëns*, 361–72.

[14] 'Le Japon était à la mode, on ne parlait que du Japon, c'était une fureur; l'idée nous vint de faire une pièce japonaise. Elle fut soumise à du Locle, mais le Japon tout pur, mise à la scène, lui faisait peur; il nous demanda de la mitiger, et ce fut lui, je crois, qui eut l'idée du milieu moitié hollandais, moitié japonais, dans lequel se meut ce petit ouvrage qui s'appelle *La Princesse jaune*.' Camille Saint-Saëns, 'Louis Gallet', *L'Écho de Paris* (12 November 1911), 1. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

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setting in Holland, *La princesse jaune* moved away from straightforward, picturesque exoticism towards a Pygmalionesque[15] narrative of the fragile, ephemeral fantasy of *japonisme*.

Over its six scenes, the plot of *La princesse jaune* – dismissed by Gustave Bertrand in *Le ménestrel* as '*almost* enough for one act'[16] – took full advantage of the opportunities offered by a dual setting. Its protagonist, a Dutch artist named Kornélis, is obsessed with all things Japanese. Alongside his scholarly fascination with art and poetry, he is also infatuated with an image of a woman rendered on a piece of *japonaiserie*, whom he names Ming. His cousin, Léna, herself in love with Kornélis, despairs that he will ever reciprocate her feelings. After a quarrel, Kornélis drinks an opium-laced potion which transports him to an imagined Orient.[17] At first delighted with the Japan of his dreams, he passionately declares his love to a woman he believes to be Ming come to life, but is actually his cousin dressed in a kimono.[18] Returning to reality, he recognises his true love for Léna, and renounces Ming – and Japan – forever.[19]

From the outset, as Brian Rees notes in his account of the premiere, hopes for the work from the Opéra-Comique management were not high. De Leuven, who was more than a little anxious about the new directions taken by his partner in revolutionising the theatre, suggested that a *claque* be engaged, proposing a payment of fifty francs for the premiere and another fifty francs for the twentieth performance.[20] De Leuven's fears would prove to be well-founded: as Rees continues, the second payment was ultimately 'surplus to requirements'. Critics generally panned all three operas performed that night – the other two being Georges Bizet's *Djamileh* (another Gallet libretto on an exoticist theme) and Émile Paladilhe's *Le passant*, both of which had premiered in the preceding months. Despite *La princesse jaune*'s light-hearted storyline and colourful costumes (designed by du Locle himself), it won little favour with the critics.

[15] Several critics at *La princesse jaune*'s premiere noticed this similarity. See, for instance, Gérôme, 'Courrier de Paris', *L'univers illustré* (22 June 1872), 3.

[16] 'Il n'y a d'action que ce qu'on vient d'en lire, et c'est presque assez pour un acte: les vers harmonieux et bien cadencés de M. Gallet sont par surcroît.' Gustave Bertrand, 'Semaine théâtrale', *Le ménestrel* (16 June 1872), 236, my emphasis.

[17] The deployment of opium as a plot device was a conspicuous one. The conflation of the Orient with drug use was not itself new in wider French culture, as seen in Théophile Gautier's *La pipe d'opium* (1838), *Le haschich* (1843) and *Le club des hachichins* (1846). Additionally, however, opium was associated with Romantic narratives of artistic inspiration. This trope could easily be found in literature – Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821) was an overt influence on Charles Baudelaire's works, particularly *Les paradis artificiels* (1860) – as well as in music, most famously Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (1830). That Saint-Saëns's young artist would also dabble with the substance, then, is not entirely surprising.

[18] The theatrical mechanics of this transformation are somewhat unclear. In the unpublished libretto held in the Archives Nationales (F-Pan F/18/699), it simply notes that 'Léna appears in Ming's clothing' ('Léna paraît avec le vêtement de Ming'). In another version of the libretto held in the online resources of the Centre de musique romantique française at the Palazetto Bru Zane (I-Vpbz Bru Zane Mediabase), more detail is provided: 'At this moment, his eyes rest on Léna whose costume has also changed [like the scenery] and appears in Japanese dress in the same pose and with the same clothes as those of Ming. In the place of the image attached to the wall, we see another which represents a Dutch woman dressed like Léna in the first part of her role'. ('À ce moment, ses yeux s'arrêtent sur Léna; dont le costume s'est aussi transformé et qui paraît vêtue en japonaise, dans la même pose et avec les mêmes habits que ceux de Ming. À la place de l'image attachée à la muraille, on en voit une autre qui représente une Hollandaise habillée comme Léna dans la première partie de son rôle.') In Léna's spoken dialogue when Kornélis returns from the dream – she questions his new proclamations of love – it seems that the two women have become one only in his imagination, and that she has not deliberately donned a kimono to win his affections.

[19] The opera's key themes – the emphasis on male artistic obsession, the importance of dreams, and the confusion of women characters with artworks – were deployed by Saint-Saëns on a number of occasions. *Le timbre d'argent* (composed before *La princesse jaune* but premiered after it) followed a similar narrative, and his 1893 opera *Phryné* also blurred the line between women and art.

[20] Brian Rees, *Camille Saint-Saëns: A Life* (London, 1999), 169.

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Reviewers attacked Saint-Saëns's score with what the composer would later describe as 'ferocious hostility'.[21] In *Le radical*, Eugène Jacquet remarked that 'M. Saint-Saëns's music is pretentious and affected. Melodic idea is rare here, that is to say absent.'[22] Harsher still, Albert de Lasalle wrote in *Le monde illustré*, 'As for us, we would rather they cut off both our hands than have to applaud these reckless attempts at dramatic music.'[23] Gallet's libretto fared little better: the reviewer for *Le pays* lamented 'It is gloomy, this work, not a flash of gaiety, not a poor little ray of good humour.'[24] Perhaps most damningly, Paul Foucher wrote in *L'opinion nationale*:

> The young man gets tipsy, falls asleep, sees his cousin in a dream … and when he wakes up, marries the Japanese woman – not his cousin – who seems to have been informed of his dream. How? Having understood absolutely nothing, I wanted to consult my colleagues: the first told me that the young girl had heard her cousin dreaming; the second, that she had guessed; third, a columnist, who had given up, imagined that she had been able to reach an agreement with the directors of the local theatre to have a costume, a set and extras. It was therefore impossible for me to know how Kornélis returned to his cousin Léna, because in the dream the *Princesse jaune* looked like her. If Léna already looked like the image, why did [Kornélis] not love the first one – before drinking? If it is that the apparition looks like Léna, whom Kornélis did not like, why isn't he sobered from his dream? Mystery![25]

From this, it appears that Foucher had been unable to follow the plot, resorting to asking his fellow critics for their interpretations. But if his report is to be believed, none of them seems to have fully understood what had happened on stage.

Intriguingly, despite the widespread cultural fascination with Japan, some critics appeared puzzled by Saint-Saëns's musical intervention in the trend. Paul Bernard, writing in *La gazette musicale*, commented in apparent exasperation:

> Do you notice that since the Japanese embassies, everything related to this funny country is in vogue? The Japanese-made eclipses the Paris-made, our shops are full of its products, at the painting exhibition we find Japanese pictures in every room; finally, regarding the strongly felt need that music should pay its due, the Opéra-Comique has taken care of this.[26]

[21] Saint-Saëns, 'Louis Gallet', 1.

[22] 'La musique de M. Saint-Saëns est prétentieuse et maniérée. L'idée mélodique y est rare, pour ainsi dire absente.' Eugène Jacquet, 'Théâtres', *Le radical* (20 June 1872), 3.

[23] 'Quant à nous, on nous couperait plutôt les deux mains que de nous faire applaudir à ces téméraires essais de musique dramatique.' Albert de Lasalle, 'Chronique musicale', *Le monde illustré* (22 June 1872), 14.

[24] 'Il est lugubre, ce livret, pas un éclair de gaité, pas un pauvre petit rayon de bonne humeur. Dans ce long *duo* de deux jeunes gens épris, le poëte [*sic*] n'a pas trouvé place pour un sourire.' XBT, 'Théâtres', *Le pays* (14 June 1872), 3.

[25] 'Le jeune homme se grise, s'endort, voit en rêve sa cousine … et à son réveil, épouse la Japonaise, non sa cousine, – qui paraît avoir été instruite de son rêve. Comment? N'y comprenant absolument rien, j'ai voulu consulter mes confrères: 1e l'on m'a dit que la jeune fille avait entendu son cousin rêver; 2e qu'elle l'avait deviné; 3e un chroniqueur donnant sa langue aux chiens a imaginé qu'elle avait pu s'entendre avec les directeurs du théâtre de la localité pour avoir un costume, un décor et de la figuration. Il m'a donc été impossible de savoir comment Kornélis revenait à sa cousine Léna, parce qu'en rêve la *princesse jaune* lui ressemblait. Si Léna ressemblait déjà à l'image, pourquoi ne pas aimer la première – avant boire? Si c'est l'apparition qui ressemble à Léna, que Kornélis n'aimant pas, pourquoi n'est-il pas dégrisé de son rêve? Mystère!' Paul Foucher, 'Théâtres', *L'opinion nationale* (17 June 1872), 1.

[26] 'Remarquez-vous que depuis les ambassades japonaise [*sic*], tout ce qui se rapporte à ce pays cocasse est en grande vogue? Le fait-Japon éclipse le fait-Paris, nos boutiques regorgent de ses produits, à l'exposition de

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For him, *La princesse jaune* was yet another tiresome rendition of a charming (if superficial) Japanese theme; the possibility of reading it as a commentary on *japonisme* seems to have eluded him. The lukewarm critical reception did not improve, and the initial run of *La princesse jaune* closed after just five performances. Though it received a foreign showing in Stuttgart in 1880, and would be revived relatively frequently in France until the First World War, the status of this one-act *opera comique* has since waned.

The work's lack of popularity in performance has largely been mirrored by musicological scholarship. Indeed, while *La princesse jaune* might be understood as an important precursor to better-known works set in Japan, such as Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* (1885) and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904), it is conspicuously absent from many early assessments of the composer's œuvre.[27] In recent years, however, its prospects have changed significantly. Hugh Macdonald's book on Saint-Saëns and the stage has shone light on much previously neglected music, and his chapter on *La princesse jaune* constitutes the opera's first extended analytical study in English.[28] Within francophone scholarship, Mitsuya Nakanishi's writings on Saint-Saëns and Japan have in turn provided many valuable insights into *La princesse jaune*'s inspirations and influences.[29] Furthermore, the centenary commemorations of the composer's death in 1921 have injected new momentum into the study of Saint-Saëns's œuvre, including lesser-known works such as *La princesse jaune*.[30]

My interpretation of *La princesse jaune* as a playful engagement with the themes of *japonisme* is not a denial of Saint-Saëns's relationship with exoticism. Indeed, he remained invested in the phenomenon in myriad ways throughout his life; even when he had travelled extensively, he continued to view his subject through a lens of nineteenth-century French colonialism. Furthermore, his writings on music from this era, which give an uncompromising insight into his views on the musics of non-Western cultures, dissuade an overly generous reading of his position on the topic.[31] Nevertheless, *La princesse jaune* offers a new facet to our understanding of the composer's early relationship with

peinture on se heurte dans toutes les salles à des tableaux japonais; enfin le besoin se faisant fortement sentir que la musique lui payât son tribut, c'est l'Opéra-Comique qui s'est chargé de ce soin.' Paul Bernard, 'Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique', *La gazette musicale* (16 June 1872), 1.

[27] For instance, there is no mention of *La princesse jaune* in D.C. Parker's overview of Saint-Saëns's œuvre, which focuses instead on *Samson et Dalila*. See 'Saint-Saëns: A Critical Estimate', *Musical Quarterly* 5/4 (1919), 561–77.

[28] Macdonald, *Saint-Saëns and the Stage*, 76–91.

[29] Mitsuya Nakanishi, 'Saint-Saëns et le Japon: Considerations sur le japonisme dans l'œuvre du compositeur' (Doctoral thesis, Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2016); and 'Saint-Saëns et ses œuvres littéraires sur le Japon'.

[30] The Royal Northern College of Music's 'Saint-Saëns Across Borders' conference (3–5 February 2022), postponed from the composer's centenary year by the COVID-19 pandemic, featured a panel dedicated entirely to *La princesse jaune*.

[31] His 1873 essay 'Harmonie et mélodie' proclaimed: 'Melody alone, with the aid of rhythm, is capable of appealing to a certain kind of audience. Who are these listeners? They are firstly all those people who, thanks to their inferior capacities, cannot rise to an appreciation of harmony; that is beyond dispute. They include the peoples of ancient times and also Orientals and African negroes. The music of Africa is childlike and without interest. The Orientals have made detailed studies into melody and rhythm, but know nothing of harmony … harmony came with Western civilisation, with the development of the human spirit … The development of harmony marks a new step in the march of humanity.' ('La mélodie seule, aidée simplement du rythme, est capable de charmer un certain public. De quoi se compose ce public? Il se compose d'abord de tous les peuples qui, par leur organisation inférieure, ne peuvent s'élever jusqu'à la conception de l'harmonie; cela est d'une évidence incontestable. Tels étaient les peuples antiques, tels sont les Orientaux et les nègres de l'Afrique. Ces derniers ont une musique enfantine et sans intérêt. Les Orientaux ont poussé très loin la recherche de la mélodie et du rythme, mais l'harmonie leur est inconnue; … l'harmonie est vernie avec le développement de la civilisation occidentale, avec le développement de l'esprit humain … Le développement de l'harmonie marque une nouvelle étape dans la marche de l'humanité.') Camille Saint-Saëns, *Harmonie et mélodie* (Paris, 1885), 13–15.

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exoticism, and can be understood as his operatic reflection upon it. The Orient as appears in *La princesse jaune* is an entirely imagined locale – Kornélis and Léna never leave the comfort of their home in the Netherlands – and the dream sequence instead presents it as an explicit narrative of fantasy. By this means, *La princesse jaune*'s representation of *japonisme* is both distanced and reflective, allowing for a perspective on the artistic craze that was markedly different from other *japoniste* cultural products of the time.

Kornélis and the *japonistes*

Having established the cultural contexts in which *La princesse jaune* emerged and was first performed, we will now turn to its protagonist, Kornélis. When it comes to the phenomenon of *japonisme*, the Société du Jing-lar offered plentiful material for parody. The select membership of the Jing-lar included the most illustrious of Japanese art enthusiasts. Among them were Philippe Burty, who had coined the term '*japonisme*' in an 1872 article in *La renaissance littéraire et artistique*,[32] the painter Félix Bracquemond, who had been one of the first to discover Hokusai's sketchbooks,[33] and Zacharie Astruc, an early writer on Japanese art who would become the group's leader.[34] The absence of women from this membership roster is worthy of note. Indeed, as Christopher Reed has observed, the self-selecting, homosocial inner circles of *japonisme* were highly unreceptive to women – except, of course, when it was the silent, mystical figure of the geisha.[35] Furthermore, Elizabeth Emery has highlighted that the Jing-lar were all too ready to dismiss the knowledge and influence of women (many of whom were recognised authorities) within the *japoniste* movement; their lack of (formal) education, Burty asserted, was likely to have left them ill-equipped to produce meaningful insights into the topic.[36]

Moreover, Emery emphasises that the so-called 'expertise' of some members of the Jing-lar was only assumed. Burty, for instance, freely admitted that he could not speak Japanese, and that he relied largely on intuition to interpret his objects of study.[37] In his writings, however, he assumed the mantle of authority, reminding his readers insistently that it was he, after all, who had coined the term '*japonisme*'.[38] By the early 1870s, then, there was a significant difference between the wider cultural trend of *japonisme* and those who, seeking to defend their clique, closed ranks to exclude those they considered uninitiated or amateur. While the commentary of *La princesse jaune* has been understood as a response to the former, there is compelling evidence to suggest that we might instead read it as a critique of the latter.

While he might not be as brazen as Burty, the *japoniste* in Kornélis is only a thinly veiled portrait – and it is not difficult to imagine him keeping company with the Jing-lar. Not only is he an avid collector of Japanese art, but his interest is also an

[32] Burty, 'Japonisme I'.

[33] The influence of Hokusai on Bracquemond was recounted in Léonce Bénédite's article 'Félix Bracquemond: L'animalier', *Art et décoration* (1905).

[34] Astruc's early articles on *japonisme* include: 'Beaux-Arts: L'empire du soleil levant: I', *L'étendard* (27 February 1867); 'Beaux-Arts: l'empire du soleil levant: II', *L'étendard* (23 March 1867); and 'Le Japon chez nous', *L'étendard* (26 May 1868). These writings are discussed in further detail in the chapter 'Astruc and Japonism' in Sharon Flescher, 'Zacharie Astruc: Critic, Artist, and Japoniste (1833–1907)' (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1977), 328–404.

[35] Reed, *Bachelor Japanists*, 57–9.

[36] Elizabeth Emery, *Reframing Japonisme: Women and the Asian Art Market in Nineteenth-Century France, 1853–1914* (New York, 2020), 2.

[37] Emery, *Reframing Japonisme*, 3.

[38] See Philippe Burty, 'Japonism', *The Academy* (7 August 1875), 150.

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academic one. This fascination is evident from the very first scene of *La princesse jaune*: Léna reads one of his poems aloud, deciphering the alternating lines of Japanese and French text (Example 1). The latter lines would seem to be Kornélis's own translation, standing in, presumably, for Dutch.

As Macdonald reveals, the Japanese lines are lifted from the 1871 edition of the *Man'yōshū*, a notable collection of Japanese poetry compiled, transliterated and translated by the renowned specialist Léon de Rosny.[39] More specifically, they are taken from a piece entitled 'Vers composés par une femme à l'occasion de la mort de l'Empereur'.[40] The French lines in the libretto, however, are not the same as de Rosny's translation; rather, as Nakanishi observes, they are more general encapsulations of the themes of the text.[41]

Kornélis is not the only *japoniste* in *La princesse jaune*, however. As Reed notes, Léna shares her cousin's interest in Japan, although – much like the women who threatened the mystical male-only space of the Société du Jing-lar – she is precluded from entering Kornélis's fantasy.[42] Indeed, it would seem that she is quite mystified by his infatuation with Ming's image, and dumbfounded when his affections have transferred to her upon his return from the dream world. The intensity of Kornélis's captivation by Ming mirrors the Jing-lar's fascination with the geisha, contributing to a highly gendered vision of Japan that existed only within the male imagination.

This characterisation of Kornélis as a slavish devotee to a distant fantasy was met with suspicion at the opera's premiere. In his write-up for the *Gazette musicale*, Bernard complained that he was weak, impressionable and far too easily 'conquered by his madness'.[43] Furthermore, critics also tended to conflate the insipidity of Kornélis with the performance abilities of Jean Lhérie. For instance, Simon Boubée wrote in the *Gazette de France*:

> we will allow ourselves to make a slight observation of M. Léhrie [*sic*]. This observation does not relate to his talent as a singer; we are intimately convinced that he would sing very well if he had a voice; but there is a side of his role that seems to have escaped him completely … The decent little gentleman we see at the Opéra-Comique is able to have a vanilla ice cream at Imoda's, but he will never go looking for delirium in an opiate potion.[44]

While Lhérie's characterisation divided critical opinion, Boubée's description of his lacklustre performance was emblematic of a wider trend to dismiss Kornélis. In his

[39] De Rosny taught Japanese at the École spéciale des langues orientales in Paris (now the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales) and wrote extensively on East Asian languages and cultures. His pioneering *Anthologie japonaise* included the *Man'yōshū* (styled *Man-yô-siû*) alongside the texts of numerous other poems and 'chansons populaires'. Léon de Rosny, ed., *Anthologie japonaise: poésies anciennes et modernes des insulaires du Nippon* (Paris, 1871), 19.

[40] Hugh Macdonald discusses this poem in greater detail in his study of *La princesse jaune*. See Macdonald, *Saint-Saëns and the Stage*, 82.

[41] Nakanishi, 'Saint-Saëns et ses œuvres littéraires sur le Japon', 363.

[42] Reed, *Bachelor Japanists*, 63–4.

[43] 'Vaincu par sa folie, il [Kornélis] se décide à prendre un breuvage qui doit, par un magique pouvoir, le transport auprès de son idole jaune.' Bernard, 'Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique', 1.

[44] 'Nous nous permettrons cependant de faire une légère observation à M. Léhrie [*sic*]. Cette observation n'a pas trait à son talent de chanteur; nous sommes intiment convaincu qu'il chanterait très bien s'il avait de la voix; mais il est un côté de son rôle qui nous paraît lui avoir échappé complétement [*sic*] … Le petit monsieur correct que nous voyons à l'Opéra-Comique est capable de prendre une glace à la vanille chez Imoda, mais il n'ira jamais chercher le délire dans une potion opiacée.' Simon Boubée, 'Chronique musicale: *La princesse jaune* à l'Opéra-Comique', *La gazette de France* (20 June 1872), 1. The Maison Imoda was a famous ice cream shop on the rue Royale, between place de la Concorde and La Madeleine.

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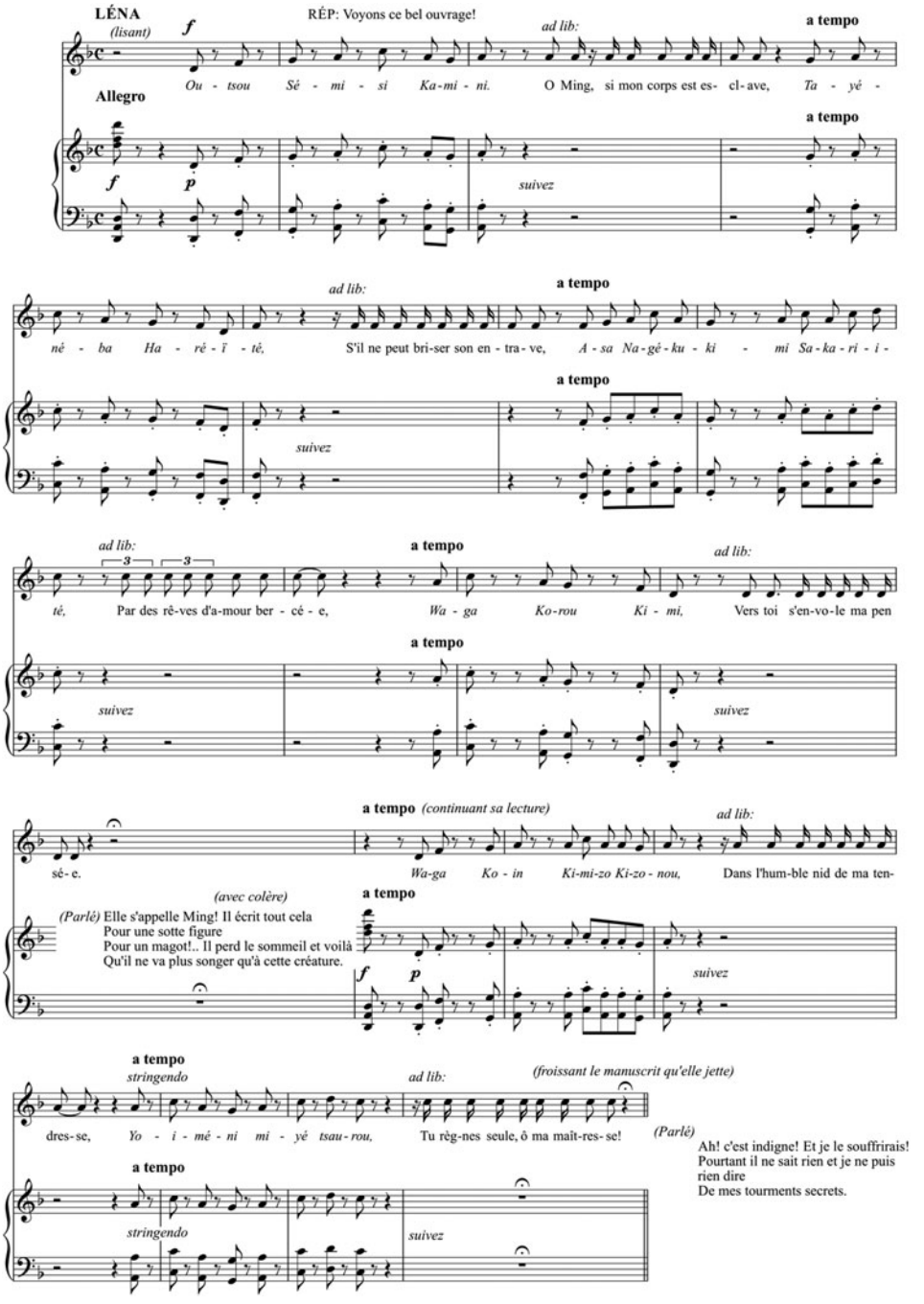

Example 1. Camille Saint-Saëns, *La princesse jaune*, no. 1: Récit et ariette.

own study, Reed suggests that critics' anxieties about *La princesse jaune* were prompted by the work's 'failure to sustain the homosocial fictions of *japonisme*'; that is, that Kornélis's awakening from the dreamed paradise of Japan, and his eventual renunciation of

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japonisme, destroys its escapist appeal altogether.[45] However, if Bernard and Boubée are typical, it would seem that critics were not altogether impressed with the idea of a passive, idle *japoniste* either.

Yet if it is the fanatical Société du Jing-lar that is being mocked by Kornélis's brand of *japonisme*, a question then emerges: why is *La princesse jaune* set in Holland, rather than France?[46] At first glance a Dutch setting for the European portion of the story might seem, as Nakanishi proposes, a straightforward gesture towards the unique trading relationship the Netherlands had maintained with the Japanese throughout the *Sakoku* period.[47] However, the continued contact with Japan meant that the Dutch did not share the rest of Europe's fervour for 'discovering' it once the borders opened in the 1850s. It seems, then, that Kornélis's engagement with *japonisme* – characterised by obsessive collection and study – was more French than Dutch. From this perspective, a further question arises: Why does the opera *not* use Paris as its European setting?[48] There is little archival evidence to explain this, beyond the composer's account of du Locle's reaction to the first draft of the opera's scenario, but we might entertain the possibility that a Parisian setting was too close for comfort. Perhaps a Dutch backdrop allowed *La princesse jaune* to make a playful poke at French *japonisme* (and the likes of the Jing-lar) while avoiding many of the potential pitfalls of a direct parody.

Fantasies of *japonisme*

While the preceding discussion has established the work's engagement with Japan and its culture (particularly with key texts such as the *Man'yōshū*), the dream sequence is far less reliant on pre-existing sources. Instead, it favours a more generalised evocation of a homogenised 'Far East'. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the score. Pentatonicism had appeared in earlier scenes to signal references to Japan. For instance, Léna's vocal line (and the mirroring orchestral accompaniment) in Example 1 alternates between an arpeggiated pentatonic melody when she reads Kornélis's poem in Japanese and recitative on a single note when she returns to French. However, it is in the dream sequence that Saint-Saëns makes fullest use of typical Orientalist musical vocabulary, when Kornélis's fantasy 'comes to life'.[49] As the dream world appears, an offstage chorus sings (Example 2). Accompanied by delicate bells, this pentatonic melody floats from the wings to create an ethereal, other-worldly effect. The text is genuine Japanese, but – as Macdonald suggests – its content betrays its prosaic origin: phrases include 'How are you today? Good afternoon, today is a fine day' ('Anata wadô nasaï masita!'), presumably lifted from a Japanese phrasebook.[50]

This combination of pentatonicism and instrumental effect drew from the usual bank of musical signifiers of the Orient common in nineteenth-century Western musical practice. Although printed transcriptions of Japanese melodies were circulating in France in

[45] Reed, *Bachelor Japanists*, 63–4.

[46] This was a question asked by several of the critics at the opera's first performance. See, for instance, Daniel Bernard, 'Théâtres', *L'union* (17 June 1872); and the anonymous review, 'Les premières', *L'ordre de Paris* (14 June 1872), 3.

[47] Nakanishi, 'Saint-Saëns et le Japon', 82.

[48] The production at the 35th Buxton Festival (July 2013), directed by Francis Matthews, did in fact alter the setting of the opera so that it took place in the French capital.

[49] A fuller analysis of Saint-Saëns's use of pentatonicism can be found in Day-O'Connell, *Pentatonicism from the Eighteenth Century to Debussy*; in relation to Saint-Saëns's use of timbre and its potential influence on later impressionist composers, see Thomas Cooper, 'Nineteenth-Century Spectacle', in *French Music Since Berlioz*, ed. Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter (Aldershot, 2006), 19–52, at 27–8.

[50] Macdonald, *Saint-Saëns and the Stage*, 85–6.

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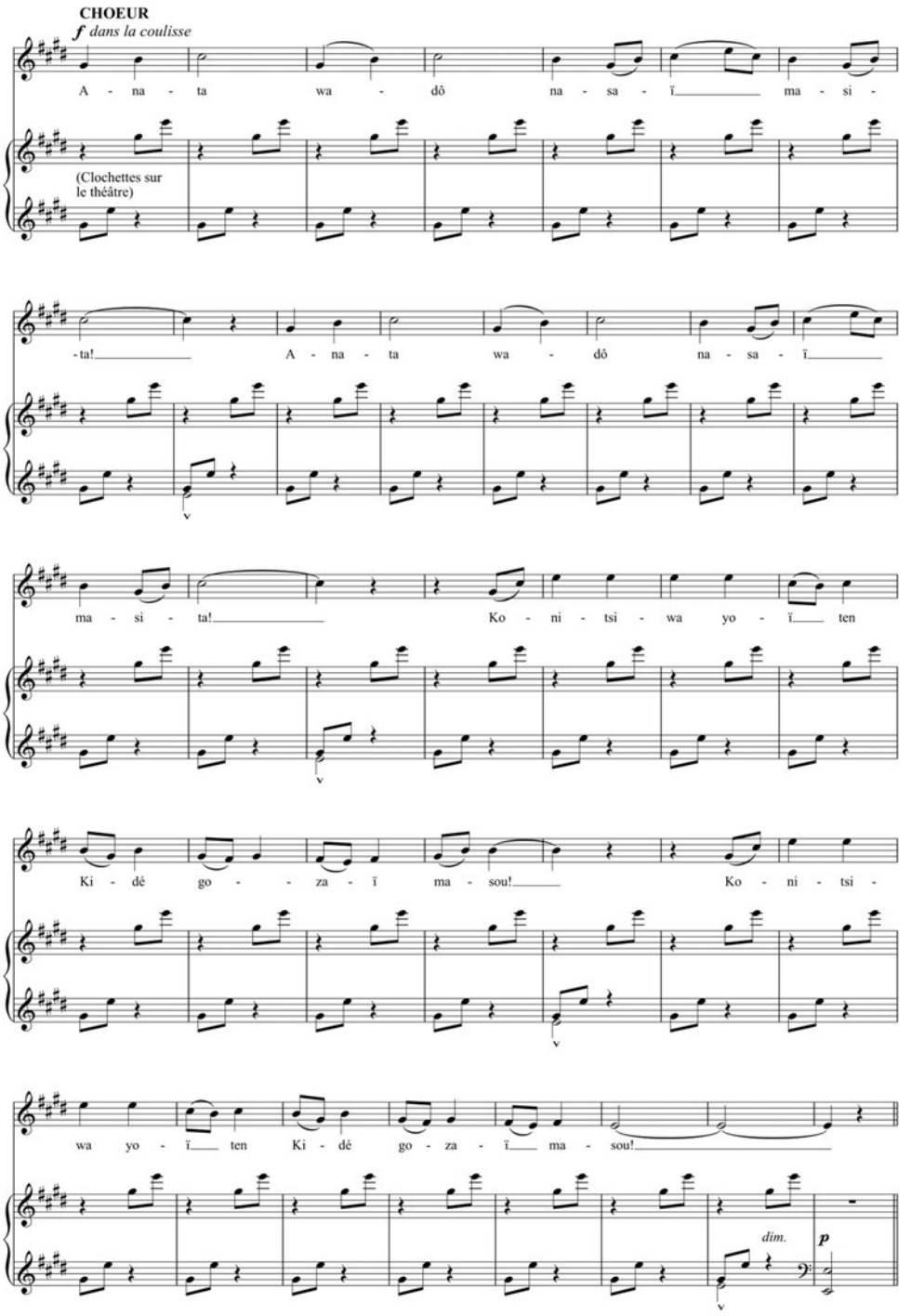

Example 2. Camille Saint-Saëns, *La princess jaune*, no. 5: Scène, chœur, chanson et duo.

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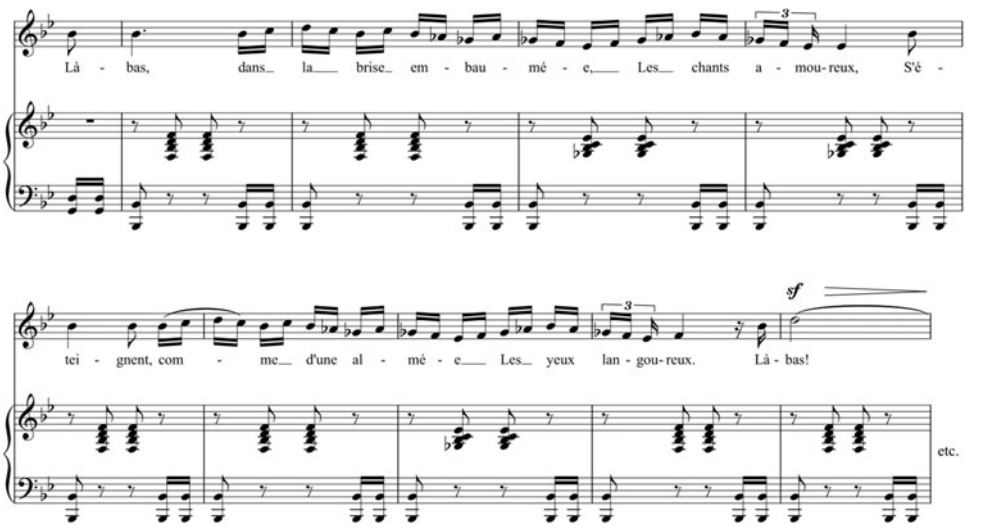
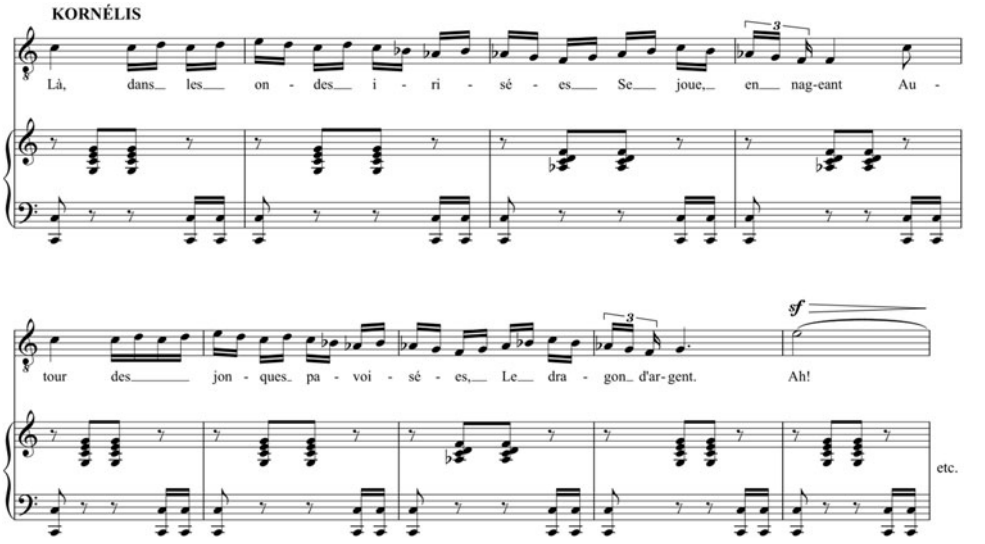


Example 3. Camille Saint-Saëns, *Le désir de l'orient*.



Example 4. Camille Saint-Saëns, *La princesse jaune*, no. 2: Air.

the 1860s and 1870s,[51] these bear no resemblance to anything in *La princesse jaune*'s score.[52] In fact, it seems that the only wholesale musical borrowing was from

[51] The second volume of *Le Japon illustré*, published in 1870, included four transcribed melodies, and reported that 'Japanese melodies are something strange and unknowable to European ears. The musical system on which they rest is not yet known.' ('Les mélodies japonaises ont quelque chose d'étrange et d'insaisissable pour l'oreille des Européens. Le système musical sur lequel elles reposent n'est pas encore connu.')

[52] Yayoi Uno Everett has suggested that Julien Tiersot's transcriptions of Japanese melodies in the music journal *Le ménestrel* might have influenced the composition of *La princesse jaune*, although these transcriptions were only published in 1900, some twenty-eight years after the opera's premiere. See Yayoi Uno Everett, 'Intercultural

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Saint-Saëns's own *Désir de l'orient* (1871) (Example 3), elements of which appear in both the overture and in Scene 2 (Example 4). In this re-use of melodies from the earlier work, it is as if, as Nakanishi describes, the composer's 'Désir de l'orient' and Kornélis's 'Désir du Japon' are one and the same.[53]

While Saint-Saëns made no claim to using Japanese melodies or music as inspiration, critics at the premiere nonetheless seemed keen to ascribe a sense of cultural authenticity to the score, albeit with little authority. Adolphe Jullien wrote in *Le français*, 'imitative music plays a big role here: having never been to Yeddo, I gladly take all this for authentic Japanese'.[54] Other reviewers fell into the trap of conflating Japan with a homogenous 'Far East'. Octave Fouque, for instance, appeared to miss the Japanese allusions entirely, declaring 'China is the source of these strange sounds'.[55] Such commentary reveals a certain yearning for the 'genuine' article – a desire for authenticity that was not, in itself, a new trend in music criticism – although in the end, Saint-Saëns's reliance on pentatonicism suggests that generalised 'exotic' effect ultimately took precedence.

These clichés of the Orient were not confined to the score: the use of an opiate potion (supposedly from Japan) to transport Kornélis to his dream world is particularly conspicuous. While opium had been regularly prescribed for medicinal purposes throughout Europe in the nineteenth century, the Opium Wars of the 1840s and 1850s meant that the drug became inextricably associated with pejorative stereotypes of Oriental decadence and addiction.[56] That opium was a substance more associated with China than with Japan seems to have been of little import.

The opera's treatment of Ming also reveals a certain blurring of cultures. As Nakanishi stresses, her name, reminiscent of the Chinese Ming Dynasty, is not drawn from the likes of the *Japon illustré* or the *Anthologie japonaise*.[57] Indeed, it is a linguistic impossibility in Japanese, the 'ng' sound never being found at the end of a word. Ming is in many ways an elusive character; it is never established exactly who or what she is. This in itself requires careful consideration. On the one hand, Reed suggests that the lack of detail regarding Ming's precise form – whether as a painting or a sculpture – could be seen to underline the trivial nature of her role, and thus to indicate the fundamental 'interchangeability of *japonaiseries*'.[58] On the other, this lack of cultural specificity might also be contextualised within the larger landscape of operatic Orientalism. Studies of the relationship between gender and race abound in opera studies, particularly in relation to exoticised female characters[59] – although the representation of Ming departs from the seductive *femme fatale* formula seen elsewhere in the repertoire: she seems more in keeping with the submissive geisha stereotype that pervaded the nineteenth-century cultural imagination.[60]

Synthesis in Postwar Western Art Music: Historical Contexts, Perspectives, and Taxonomy', in *Locating East Asia in Western Art Music*, ed. Yayoi Uno Everett and Frederick Lau (Middletown, CN, 2004), 223n3.

[53] Nakanishi, 'Saint-Saëns et le Japon', 105.

[54] 'La musique imitative y joue un grand rôle: n'ayant jamais été à Yeddo, je prends volontiers tout cela pour du japonais authentique.' Ad. Jullien, 'Revue musicale', *Le français* (24 June 1872), 2. 'Yeddo' was the French romanisation of 江戸, known in English as Edo. However, even by 1872, this nomenclature was outdated, as the city had adopted the new name of Tokyo in 1868 with the Meiji Restoration.

[55] 'La Chine est le vrai pays de ces sonorités étranges.' Octave Fouque, 'Théâtre & spectacles', *Le corsaire* (15 June 1872), 4.

[56] Mike Jay, *Emperors of Dreams: Drugs in the Nineteenth Century* (Sawtry, 2000), 29, 44.

[57] Nakanishi, 'Saint-Saëns et le Japon', 90–2.

[58] Reed, *Bachelor Japanists*, 62.

[59] For some of the earliest and most influential work on this topic, see Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1989); and Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet:* Carmen (Cambridge, 1992).

[60] For an extended discussion of perceptions of Japanese women in the West, see Yoko Kawaguchi, *Butterfly's Sisters: The Geisha in Western Culture* (New Haven, 2010), particularly chapters 1 and 2.

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This broad-strokes musical evocation of Japan, combined with the culturally indistinct elements of the plot, might first seem to be at odds with the opera's precise quoting of original texts (such as the *Man'yōshū*) in earlier scenes. Despite his academic interest in its literature and culture, Kornélis's experience of Japan never moves beyond that of his own drug-altered consciousness, and nobody but he – and the offstage chorus – can speak or sing within it. However, the dream sequence should not be treated uncritically. While it is difficult (and impractical) to tease apart where Kornélis's fantasies end and those of the opera begin, a closer examination of the dream offers a new possibility for reading *La princesse jaune* as a part of the wider Orientalist tradition. Through Kornélis's dream of Japan, the escapism of nineteenth-century *japonisme* moves to centre-stage. It is no longer an implied fantasy of the sort that underpins much Orientalist opera; it instead becomes an explicit part of the narrative.

Orient *en abyme*

The use of framing devices was not uncommon in literary and cultural examples of nineteenth-century Orientalism. This technique served both to create distance between the reader and the narrative, and to 'contain' the Orientalised Other through the (re) imposition of a Western lens on the story. Such devices owed much to the relatively new phenomenon of travel writing. For example, in the framing of his novella *Carmen*, Prosper Mérimée assumed the persona of an anonymous writer – who serves as a moralising force as much as a narrative one – reporting his encounters with Don José on his travels through Spain.[61] Dream narratives also achieved this distancing effect, with the additional benefit that their heightened fantasy existed only ephemerally, and consequently did not pose a threat to the status quo.

La princesse jaune's dream sequence introduces an additional layer of complexity to its plot, with most of the latter half of the work taking place in a mediated reality far from its first Dutch setting. William Cheng's concept of 'opera *en abyme*' in Korngold's *Die tote Stadt* (1920) – itself borrowing from André Gide, then Lucien Dällenbach – provides a useful aesthetic starting point for analysing these layers of 'nested diegesis' on stage.[62] Basing his approach on the artistic technique of placing a copy of an image within itself, Cheng identifies four separate layers of diegesis within Korngold's work.[63] *La princesse jaune* is admittedly less complex than *Die tote Stadt* in this regard, with only two layers of diegesis: the opera's 'real' world in the Netherlands, and the drug-induced dream world of Kornélis's Japan. Nevertheless, these layers of reality put the nineteenth-century Orientalist dream itself on stage, and they complicate our understanding of how the fantasy operates and what it represents.

Staging the dream sequence presents a dramaturgical challenge. While it would be feasible for the Orient to remain unseen as a figment of Kornélis's imagination, such an approach would sacrifice many of the advantages of the operatic form as a vehicle for visual spectacle. At the premiere, at least, it seems that the production took every opportunity to stage a dream that was, as de Lasalle describes, as 'visible to the spectator' as it was to Kornélis.[64] A pair of set designs dating from the years following the 1872 premiere give some indication as to how this effect was achieved, as the stage transforms

[61] Prosper Mérimée, *Carmen* (Paris, 1846).

[62] See André Gide, *Journal, 1889–1939* (Paris, 1948); and Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire: essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris, 1977).

[63] William Cheng, 'Opera *en abyme*: The Prodigious Ritual of Korngold's *Die tote Stadt*', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 22/2 (2011), 115–46.

[64] 'Ce rêve, visible pour le spectateur, est très-adroitement mis en scène et se déroule au milieu d'un décor vraiment magique.' De Lasalle, 'Chronique musicale', 14.

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from a snowy Dutch townscape to a Japanese harbour scene (Figures 2 and 3). In this imagining, Kornélis's vision of Japan is just a version of his own hometown rendered 'Oriental' – a harbour being an apt choice for a narrative of encounter. This transition

Figure 2. Philippe Chaperon, *La princesse jaune* set design, dated 1873–4 and 1876. Bibliothèque nationale de France, F-Po MAQ.A.441.

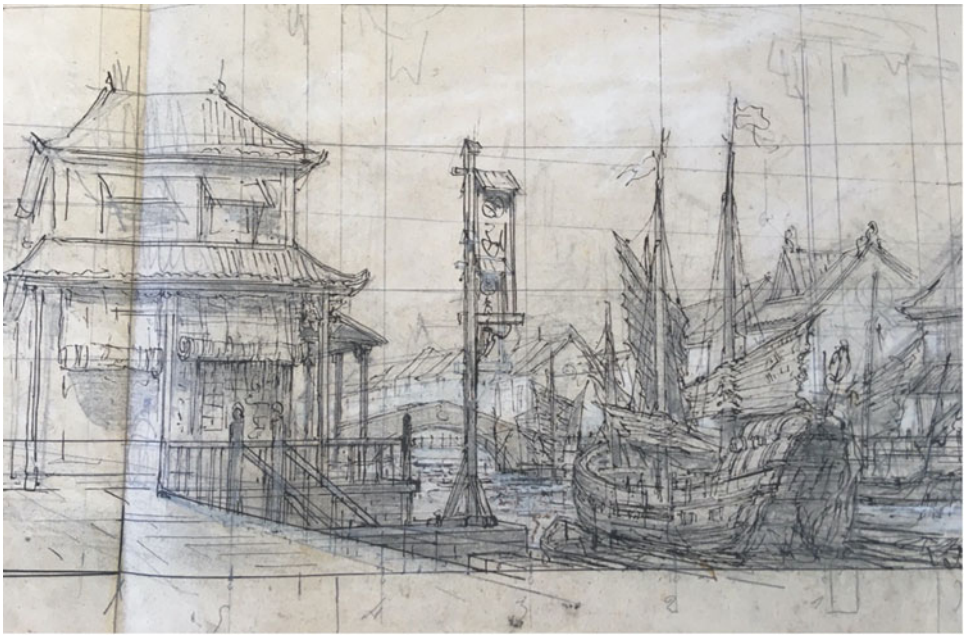

Figure 3. Philippe Chaperon, *La princesse jaune* set design, dated 1873–4 and 1876. Bibliothèque nationale de France, F-Po MAQ.A.441.

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from one setting to another is emphasised by ethereal pentatonic melodies from the offstage chorus (seen previously in Example 2).

The layers of diegesis and the distance created by the dream are not stable in themselves, however. They exist both separately, as two distinct settings, and simultaneously, as it is only Kornélis who is transported by the potion. While the opera begins and ends in the 'real' world, the dream sequence complicates our understanding of what actually constitutes the 'real'. Kornélis drinks the potion and is conveyed to the Orient in his imagination, but Léna – sometimes herself, sometimes Ming – blurs the distinction between these diegetic layers. From the libretto, Léna's own position is clear. When Kornélis, believing that she is Ming come alive, declares his love, Léna responds with confusion; despite her intrusion into his consciousness, she has no awareness of the dream world. Yet her transformation into the living Ming makes it difficult to discern what is dream and what is reality.

Despite the visual and musical anchoring points, then, the mediated 'reality' of the dream sequence becomes unstable with the addition of performers, and staging this shifting dual diegesis would have been a challenging task. While *opéra comique* conventions imply a neat ending with a happy couple, the conclusion of *La princesse jaune* might well have felt contrived. If Foucher's account of his fruitless search for plot clarifications from fellow critics is to be believed, one might conclude that the success of this one-act opera was at least partly hampered by its convoluted plot.

The heightened fantasy of the dream sequence ultimately complicates any consideration of *La princesse jaune*. Thomas Cooper has previously argued that the work's emphasis on the 'essentially fictive nature of Orientalism' might alter our understanding of how Orientalism functions in opera more broadly.[65] But I propose that the potential for subversion in *La princesse jaune* lies not just within the dream sequence, but also in *who* is dreaming. Kornélis considers himself a scholar of Japan, only for his interest to be quickly dispelled on encountering his fantasy first-hand. While none of the contemporary criticism likened him to the Jing-lar, it is certainly not hard to picture him among their ranks. Although the humorous potential of this work appears to have been largely missed by both contemporary critics and subsequent scholars, pursuing this potential reading allows us to move away from an understanding of the cultural phenomenon of nineteenth-century *japonisme* as a fantasy that has been recognised only subsequently. It is clear from *La princesse jaune* that the tenuous, fragile nature of the *japonistes*' dream was acknowledged from the movement's earliest days.

'Paradis rêvé' to 'Paradis perdu'

Indeed, the *japoniste* dream was not to last. In 1882, the *Revue des arts décoratifs* published an article titled 'L'art japonais', addressed to the director of the *Gazette des beaux-arts*, Louis Gonse. In this piece, its author, a 'M. Josse' (actually the Parisian jeweller Lucien Falize), recounted his fascination with the art of Japan in the wake of the 1867 Exposition Universelle. Intriguingly, however, he also noted the subsequent cooling of his initial fervour, reflecting:

> now, my love is not extinguished, but it is calmer, as happens when the fever of possession has subsided and one looks upon one's mistress of the day before in broad daylight: she is still beautiful, smiling and full of grace, but one hesitates to take

[65] Cooper, 'Nineteenth-Century Spectacle', 27.

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> her for a wife. The comparison appears strange or brutal to you, but haven't we all, us artists, to some extent cohabited with the Japanese *fée*?[66]

Given that some fifteen years had passed between the 1867 Exposition and the publication of this piece, it is perhaps not surprising that Falize had sensed a shift in his interests. By the 1880s *japonisme* had taken on a different guise, and Falize's account thus reflects the more established influence of Japan on French cultural life. Nevertheless, his narrative of obsessive fascination with the study of Japan to the point of 'cohabitation', only for that curiosity to fade, is not dissimilar to the plot of *La princesse jaune*. After all, Léna eventually supplants Ming in Kornélis's affections – although she is convinced that he has truly renounced his dreams of the Orient only when he declares 'to the devil with Japan!' ('Au diable le japon!').

With this resolution, however, comes the end of Ming. While the traditional conventions of *opéra comique* at the time might have denied her the dramatic, tragic death of exoticised heroines elsewhere in the repertoire (which are, so often, linked to their essential Otherness[67]), Ming's fate only serves to diminish her narrative importance. After all, she does not die – she is not even a cast role deserving of a death aria. She simply vanishes, along with Kornélis's fantasy of Japan. If she does not exist in Kornélis's imagination, then she does not exist at all. Without Ming, his *japoniste* dream is dispelled; he has no fellow enthusiasts – no Société du Jing-lar – to hold his interest now.

The ease with which Ming entirely disappears from the narrative serves only to highlight further the fleeting, intangible dream of *japonisme*. In this case, Japan is not a real place inhabited by real people, but an escapist fantasy existing only within the confines of the male imagination. While critics at the time of *La princesse jaune*'s premiere might not have used the term '*japoniste*' to describe Kornélis, they made no effort to disguise their contempt for this young artist entirely overcome by his obsession with a faraway land. While it might be tempting to follow in the critics' footsteps in highlighting the characters and plot of *La princesse jaune* as worthy of ridicule, it is also possible, as this study has shown, to understand the work as a deliberate attempt to make fun of the cultures of *japonisme* of the early 1870s.

To understand *La princesse jaune* as a parody on the furore of *japonisme* is to find it an entirely new place in the wider context of the aftermath of the 1867 Exposition Universelle. It is not simply a light, humorous rendition of a Japanese theme in response to current trends, but rather it offers a playful poke at the soft underbelly of *japonisme* and some of its most fanatical devotees. Such a reading is also an opportunity to reorient the work within Saint-Saëns's compositional œuvre; while Johnson has previously categorised *La princesse jaune* as part of his 'Fantasy' period, there is clearly something more complex operating beneath the surface. The composer's strident writings on non-Western music from this period should not be ignored – nor should his subsequent exoticist output, such as *Samson et Dalila* – but the Orientalist fantasy of *La princesse jaune* is not entirely uncritical. We might, then, reassess this work as both a precursor to other musical

[66] 'maintenant mon amour ne s'est pas éteint, mais il est plus calme, comme il advient quand la fièvre de possession s'est calmée et qu'on regarde au grand jour sa maîtresse de la veille: elle est belle toujours, souriante et toute pleine de grâce, mais on hésite à la prendre pour femme. La comparaison vous paraît étrange ou brutale, mais n'avons-nous pas, nous tous, artistes, cohabités plus ou moins avec la fée japonaise?' Josse, 'L'Art japonais: À propos de l'exposition organisée par M. Gonse', *Revue des arts décoratifs* (1882–83), 330. Quoted in Christopher Reed, 'Bachelor Quarters: Spaces of *Japonisme* in Nineteenth-Century Paris', in *Oriental Interiors: Design, Identity, Space*, ed. John Potvin (London, 2015), 111–26, at 112. The translation is my own.

[67] To name but a few examples, Carmen is murdered by a jealous ex-lover at the bullring, Lakmé eats a poisonous native flower, and Butterfly dies by *seppuku*.

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works set in Japan, and a new means of understanding Saint-Saëns prior to his first travels outside of Europe.

Moreover, such a reading opens up a new place for *La princesse jaune* in the larger canon of nineteenth-century Orientalism. It offers an alternative perspective to the dominant one of composers (and other creatives) reproducing the Orientalist paradigm without any critical engagement with the subject. By framing its Orient in the context of a dream sequence – heightening the fantasy still further – *La princesse jaune* foregrounds a larger truth about the Orientalist cultural project: that it is, in the end, based on nothing but dreams.

La princesse jaune is not a work that has found long-lasting success on the operatic stage, and its topical commentary on *japoniste* trends was likely a contributing factor to its lack of longevity. Nevertheless, re-situating this opera in the landscape of artistic *japonisme* illustrates the often playful interactions between music and wider cultural life in 1870s Paris, while also complicating our notion of how works of art engaged critically with the contexts in which they were created. With this new perspective, we can perhaps find a new home for *La princesse jaune*, both within our understanding of Saint-Saëns's œuvre, and as part of the canon of nineteenth-century Orientalist opera.

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