

An Image of the Exotic in the Works of Ernest Reyer: from *Le Sélam* to *Salammbô*

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to present the outstanding figure of the French composer Ernest Reyer. Despite the fact that his works did not receive proper attention, nonetheless his contribution to the evolution of 19th century French music is important. An ardent admirer of Hector Berlioz and Richard Wagner, the music of Reyer distinguishes itself due to the sincerity with which the composer strives to musically represent the true meaning behind words, ideas, emotions. Although unjustly criticized for imitating Félicien David's "Le Désert" in his symphony "Le Sélam", the oriental colouring of Reyer's works was influenced by his prolonged sojourn in Algeria, where his spirit could immerse in the subtle and exotic atmosphere of the Orient. Composer and music critic, through his compositions as well as through his written works Reyer strived to elevate art and raise the quality of the musical compositions of his time, especially those belonging to the genre of opera. Even though he had to wait for his talent to be acknowledged, Reyer was forbearing and chose not to make any compromises with respect to his musical works, staying true to his high and noble ideals. The evolution of the composer from "Le Sélam" to his last opera "Salammbô" is presented, with the purpose of unveiling a vivid portrait of Reyer.*

Keywords: *Reyer, exotic, colour, oriental, truthfulness*

1. Introduction

Ernest Reyer, on his real name Louis-Étienne-Ernest Rey, was born on December 1st 1823 in Marseilles. Although he was allowed to study and practice music, his parents did not wish for their child to pursue a musical career. At the age of sixteen Reyer was sent to Algeria, to live with an uncle who was head of accounting for the Treasury Department in the province of Constantine (also named Kasantina or Quacentina, it is here that the capital of the French department of Constantine was

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located). The young boy displayed an irresistible attraction towards music, and he continued to write various musical works during his stay in Algeria, such as romances, dances and other short compositions (*morceaux*). Of these early compositions perhaps the most representative was a mass, composed in 1847 for the arrival of the Duke of Aumale. The direct contact with the northern region of the African continent and its culture inspired Reyer's love for oriental artistic creations. As Hervey writes: *"It may be that the early influences of the «milieu» in which he was thrown may have had something to do with developing a tendency he exhibited later on of setting Oriental subjects to music"* (Hervey 1894, 208–209).

In 1848 Reyer returned to Paris, where he continued his musical education under the guidance of his aunt M^{me} Louise Farrenc, a celebrated pianist of the epoch who also composed works in the classical style. It is then that the composer became acquainted with distinguished artists, musicians and writers, including Gustave Flaubert and Théophile Gautier, Maxime du Camp (writer and photographer) and Joseph Méry (writer, poet and librettist). They were all fascinated by the mysteries of the Orient, and this fascination was reflected in their oriental inspired works.

Lacombe argues that *"Some composers, including Reyer and Bizet, following in the footsteps of Félicien David, preferred a more boldly defined exoticism, expressed through color, to musical exoticism, which was basically an intellectual exercise that did nothing to adulterate the Parisian style of Auber. Their approach would gradually come to dominate; it would give rise to richly imaginative works based on elements borrowed from the music of other lands. Spectacle, once seen on stage, was now heard in the score"* (Lacombe 2001, 197). Reyer embraced this new attitude regarding the representation of exotic and oriental subjects. Like other composers of the time he gradually realized that the traditional compositional methods and techniques were insufficient for a truthful representation, therefore he was required to choose a different perspective, a new musical language to express exoticism. The years spent in Algeria provided Reyer with musical ideas which he could use, foreign elements that would later be harmoniously blended in his works, leading to a vivid representation of the Orient.

2. Théophile Gautier and *Le Sélam*

Reyer's first important work to be performed was a symphony (*symphonie descriptive*) entitled *Le Sélam*, which was first presented on April 5th 1850. The work was based on a poem written by Théophile Gautier, and despite the composer being accused of trying to imitate Félicien David's earlier work, *Le Désert*, many

musicians of the time considered the work to be valuable.

The 5 pictures (*tableaux*) of the work evoke scenes from the Arab world, the composer striving to represent his own memories from the time spent in Algeria. The structure of the work is the following:

Picture 1 – Introduction — The Goum, Serenade

Picture 2 – I. Razzia, II. Pastorale

Picture 3 – Evocation Of The Djinns

Picture 4 – Evening Song

Picture 5 – The Dhossa

The success of *Le Sélam* can be attributed to the truthful representation of the Orient, a space both the composer and the poet had visited. Gautier himself had travelled to Egypt and Algeria, and his travel-literature is considered among the most accurate of the century. Reyer admired the works written by his friend and praised his musical sensibility, as well as the lyrical expression in his poems. The harmonious union between Gautier's poem and the music composed by Reyer gave birth to a work which enraptures the listener precisely because of its simplicity and accuracy. The musically depicted images create a dreamy atmosphere, which lead Hector Berlioz to express his admiration regarding Reyer's work in the following words: "*Je louerai M. Reyer de n'avoir employé qu'avec réserve les instruments violents et les harmonies violentes et les modulations violentées. Son orchestre est doux, rêveur, berceur autant que simple*" (Jullien 1904, 13).

Although the music composed by Reyer was often regarded as musically ahead of its time, in *Le Sélam* he avoids the use of powerful contrasts or unusual harmonic progressions. The truthful character of the work is emphasized by the authentic oriental themes and rhythmic patterns Reyer strives to employ: "*(...)le «Sélam», oeuvre dans certaines parties de laquelle j'avais essayé de reproduire les rythmes les plus caractéristiques de la musique orientale (...)*" (Reyer 1875, 410).

Despite the fact that Reyer's symphony shows some similarities with David's *Le Désert*, nonetheless the style of the two composers is different. According to Jullien, Ernest Reyer did not have the chance to listen to David's work (Jullien 1904, 12), while Berlioz, in one of his articles published in the *Journal des Débats* supports Reyer and praises the authenticity of his work: "*(...)Mais je louerai bien davantage Félicien David d'avoir eu l'esprit d'écrire son «Désert» le premier, car s'il était venu le second, on l'accuserait à coup sûr d'avoir imité le Sélam*" (Servières 1897, 225). Hector Berlioz played an important role concerning the first representation of *Le Sélam*, and he also encouraged Reyer, guiding his first compositions.

3. From *Le Sélam* to *Salammbô*

Reyer's success came along with his operas, and some consider him a composer of dramatic works *par excellence*: "*Compositeur dramatique par excellence et dont le seul horizon était le théâtre, à l'exclusion des concerts; (...) Reyer vu sa réputation naître, grandir et arriver au pinacle grâce à six ou sept ouvrages dont un, «Sacountalâ», a totalement disparu; dont deux autres: «le Sélam» et «Maître Wolfram», ne donnent guère qu'une indication de ce qu'il pourra devenir par la suite, et dont les quatre derniers constituent les solides assises de la grande célébrité de l'auteur*" (Jullien 1904, 51).

In 1854 his first dramatic work, *Maître Wolfram*, a one-act opera composed on the libretto of Joseph Méry, was performed at the Opéra Comique. The graceful and natural quality of Reyer's composition, superior to the score of *Le Sélam*, was remarked by Berlioz himself, who admired precisely the truthfulness expressed by Reyer's music, the sensitive and touching melodies that speak to the heart. Cited by Jullien the great Berlioz described his younger colleagues's work thus: "*Celle de M. Reyer, au moins, est juste en général et plaît par la naïveté de ses allures, qui n'ont rien de commun avec la démarche tantôt affectée, tantôt dégingandée de la muse parisienne. Ce qui manque à M. Reyer, c'est l'habitude d'écrire, le procédé, le mécanisme, le prix de l'Institut. Mais ses mélodies ont du naturel, elles touchent souvent, il y a du coeur et de l'imagination là-dedans...*" (Jullien 1904, 14).

Maître Wolfram was followed in 1858 by the ballet *Sacountalâ*, with a story by Gautier, based on the work of Kālidāsa, Indian poet and dramatist of great importance who wrote in the Sanskrit language. The mysterious world of the Orient opened once again in this work, noteworthy for the instrumental colours employed by the composer in order to musically depict his chosen subject. The innovative sonority of Reyer's music, as well as his treatment of the orchestra were praised by Berlioz: "*Ce ballet avait pour nous le charme de la musique de M. Reyer. (...) On y trouve, au contraire, un coloris de style particulier, une sonorité nouvelle. (...) en l'écoutant, on se dit de prime-abord: Ah! Enfin, voici un autre orchestre; ce n'est pas de l'instrumentation officielle, les timbres divers y sont ingénieusement mariés entre eux (...) Puis, voilà de piquantes hardiesses d'harmonie, de fraîches mélodies bien trouvées et bien développées.*" (Servièrès 1897, 229)

The succes of this ballet was followed in 1861 by the opera *La Statue*, a work which contributed greatly to the acknowledgment of Reyer's name. Hervey writes that "*it was this last work which brought the composer's name in a prominent manner before the public*" (Hervey 1894, 209). The libretto written by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier was inspired by the *One Thousand and One Nights* (or *Arabian Nights*), while the music composed by Reyer was considered outstanding due to its

subtle oriental colouring as well as its orchestration. Berlioz expressed his appreciation regarding *La statue*: “*C’est un musicien amoureux du style et de l’expression vraie... On trouve partout un sentiment profond, une originalité naturelle de mélodie, une harmonie colorée et une instrumentation énergique sans brutalités ni violences (...)*” (Jullien 1904, 19), while Bizet, a close friend of Reyer, considered the opera to be “*the most remarkable opera that had been given in France for twenty years*” (Hervey 1894, 211–212). An important feature of this opera is the composer’s attempt to ensure the continuity of the plot, which is why he ultimately decided to set to music the dialogues which were spoken at the first representation of the opera.

Reyer’s following operas were performed in 1862 at Baden-Baden (*Érostrate*) and in Brussels, at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie (*Sigurd*). The latter work, *Sigurd* was based on the same source Wagner chose for his Ring cycle, the Scandinavian legend from the Edda Volsunga saga, nonetheless Reyer’s work was composed before Wagner completed his masterpiece. The French composer was acquainted with and he expressed his admiration for Wagner’s work, but despite the fact that he sought to underline the meaning of the words through his music and even employed *leitmotifs*, Reyer’s music is not similar to the work of the German composer.

The last opera composed by Reyer was *Salammô*, performed for the first time in Brussels in 1890. As in his previous works, here also the composer strives for a strict interpretation of the dramatic subject.

4. Exoticism in *Salammô*

The image of the Orient and its fascination accompanied Reyer throughout his entire life, colouring his compositions. The majority of his works were based on oriental subjects: “*Ainsi qu’à Félicien David, l’amour de l’Orient, ses souvenirs de voyage, l’Algérie d’abord, l’Égypte ensuite, la connaissance approfondie de la musique arabe, ont inspiré à E. Reyer une prédilection particulière pour les sujets orientaux. Le Sélam, Sacountalâ, Érostrate, la Statue, Salammô, témoignent de cette prédilection. D’ailleurs, elle a exercé sur son talent la plus heureuse influence. Cet amour du pittoresque le distingue particulièrement des musiciens modernes qui ont presque tous un air de famille*” (Servières 1897, 270–271).

Salammô, an opera in five acts, is based on Gustave Flaubert’s homonymous novel, with a libretto by Camille du Locle. The opera was first represented in 1890 at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, while its Parisian premiere took place in 1892. The title role of the opera was performed at

both premieres by Rose Caron, celebrated singer of her epoch, much admired by Reyer and her contemporaries for her singing as well as her stage presence. The plot of the opera takes place in Carthage, around 240 BC, right after the First Punic War. The libretto of the opera focuses on the title character, Salammbô, priestess and daughter of the Carthaginian general Hamilcar Barca. Despite the fact that in his novel Flaubert did not offer Salammbô a central role, the choice of Camille du Locle and Reyer to focus more on the main female character is a most fortunate one, as is the alteration of some of the events described in the novel in order to enhance the dramatic tension.

The love story between Matho, a Lybian mercenary and Salammbô is recounted, the events take place in a religious atmosphere guarded by the lunar deity Tanit and disturbed by the cries of rage and war. The statue of the goddess Tanit is draped in the Zaïmph, an ornate veil which also guards the city. Touching this veil will bring death upon the one who commits this deed. In the revolt of the mercenaries this veil is stolen by Matho and eventually Salammbô will go to Matho's tent in order to take the veil back. Touching the sacred veil ultimately brings death to both of them: Matho must be sacrificed to the goddess by Salammbô herself, but instead she stabs herself, followed in death by the mercenary.

Reyer's advanced musical views are clearly expressed in the music of this work. As in his previous operas, the composer seeks for dramatic unity, for truthfulness and for the exact representation of the text. The sung lines of each character express their thoughts and feelings, the music strives for dramatic truth. Reyer avoids determined musical moments, such as duets, trios or arias, the form of his opera, as well as the ideas expressed are new. This is how the composer himself spoke about his last opera: "*Vous verrez «Salammbô» et vous serez étonné. Cela ne ressemble à rien de ce que j'ai fait et j'ai donné une note absolument nouvelle. Vous ne me reconnaîtrez pas*" (Servièrès 1897, 262).

Musical exoticism was represented in the works of 19th century composers also through the timbres employed: "*Some timbres, such as those of the piccolo and the tambourine, unfailingly created a sense of local color; these were much used by David and by Reyer (...)*" (Lacombe 2001, 202). The colours employed by Reyer in *Salammbô*, as well as the orchestration are admirable, there is his music a certain kind of sweetness and emotion which was not heard in his previous works. The orchestra evokes the events unfolding on stage, while the timbres chosen by Reyer mirror the characters, their emotions and their actions. Of oriental inspiration is the subject of the work, as well as several features employed by the composer: the use of wind instruments, particular rhythmic patterns and formulae, the latter used especially in the ballet at the beginning of the fourth act (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Excerpt from the opera *Salammbô* – Act IV, Scene I: Danse (p.247)

In order to ensure dramatic unity, the composer uses recurrent themes (leitmotifs), such as the theme of *Salammbô*, the theme of the *Zaïmph* or the themes which accompany the characters, *Matho*, the nubian *Narr-Havâs*, *Hamilcar*, etc. The various cultures involved in the plot are also represented in a manner specific for each of these. *Servières* argues that *Reyer's* use of recurring themes only slightly resembles *Wagner's* compositional technique, *Salammbô* following the tradition of the French *tragédie lyrique* represented in the works of *Gluck*, *Spontini* and other illustrious French composers (*Servières* 1897, 262). Outstanding is the homogeneous structure of this work, the veridical nature of the declamations.

Servières speaks of the three main recurrent themes first presented in the short prelude of the opera: “*Le prélude, très court du reste, expose trois thèmes principaux (...)*” (*Servières* 1897, 263). The opera is united by these leitmotifs, that of the *Zaïmph*, that of the goddess *Tanit* and that of *Salammbô*. The lunar character of the goddess *Tanit* who guards *Carthage* is ever present throughout the plot, a presence which gives the work a mysterious character, a certain lunar ambience revealed also in the music. The theme of the *Zaïmph*, is evoked for the first time in the prelude and it will reoccur during the unfolding of the events, the descending movement along with the rhythmic formulae employed emphasizing the sacred character of the veil and its importance in the evolution of the human destinies.

According to *Lacombe*, the use of recurrent motifs in the works of 19th century French opera composers was essential to the construction of the plot and each composer could choose to use this technique in a manner corresponding to his own approach: “*Gounod, Thomas, Reyer, and Bizet each used recurrent motifs in accordance with his own style, and the practice ultimately became a reflex, especially in the last quarter of the century. At mid-century, motifs were not so well developed and were rarely combined. (...)*” (*Lacombe* 2001, 142).

The image shows a musical score excerpt for piano. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system includes a vocal line at the top and a piano accompaniment below. The tempo is marked 'Andante mosso.' and the metronome is set to 80 (quarter note). The key signature has two flats (B-flat major). The piano part features a right-hand melody with trills and a left-hand accompaniment with triplets and chords. The second system continues the piano accompaniment, showing a transition to a different key signature (one flat, F major) and a dynamic marking of 'p' (piano).

Fig. 2. Excerpt from the opera *Salammbô* – Introduction (p.3)

The first appearance of Salammbô is introduced by a beautiful, undulating theme, prolonged through more than fourteen bars. The beauty of the delicate priestess is evoked, her femininity is expressed through these phrases which seem so closely linked to the hymns sung to the goddess Tanit. The atmosphere thus evoked by the music is mysterious and lunar, resembling the characteristics of this deity. Despite the fact that the composer does not employ distinct oriental features, the theme nonetheless evokes the fascination of a faraway, exotic and unknown world.

Remarkable is the scene when Salammbô goes to Matho's tent to recover the sacred veil, the dialogue between the two interrupted by the shouts of the warriors in the camp. The traditional duet is replaced by a dramatic dialogue, the scene thus contributing to the innovative character of Reyer's work. The opera concludes with a final evocation of the recurrent themes which define the main symbols of the opera: the leitmotif of the sacred veil which envelops the tragedy, the theme of Tanit, the hymns sung to the goddess.

(SALAMMBÔ paraît).
Espressivo molto.



The image shows a musical score for piano, consisting of three systems of staves. The top system includes the title '(SALAMMBÔ paraît). Espressivo molto.' and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The music is in 6/8 time. The right hand features a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the left hand provides a rhythmic accompaniment with slurs and accents. The score is marked 'Espressivo molto' and includes dynamic markings like 'p' and 'f'.

Fig. 3. Excerpt from the opera *Salammbô* – Act I, Scene V (p. 50)

5. Conclusions

Composer and critic at the *Journal des Débats* from 1866 to 1898, Ernest Reyer gazed with respect at his forerunners, but was also kind and encouraging to his younger colleagues. Considered "a follower of Félicien David and an exponent of musical exoticism" (Lacombe 2001, 347), Reyer admired the works of David and Berlioz, but also the creations of Gluck and Weber. The influence of these composers, as well as the shadow of Wagner are discernible in his works, but nonetheless his style is unique and distinctive. It is his admiration of these composers that is imprinted on his works, and not the imitation of any of them.

Reyer was a close friend of Berlioz, whom he valued and he is considered one of the first French composers to recognize and appreciate the brilliance of Wagner. Speaking about these two great composers and about the influence of Wagner in his opera *Sigurd* (an influence which Reyer considered derived from the libretto written for him by Camille du Locle) he affirmed: “*Oui, mon ami du Locle, c’est vous qui avez fait de moi un wagnérien. Wagner, est-ce Dieu possible! Wagner pas plus que Berlioz. Je les admire trop tous les deux dans les manifestations très différentes de leur génie, pour avoir l’audace de les imiter*” (Reyer 1909, 25).

To those who considered that his compositions resemble the manner of Wagner, he replied that despite his admiration for the latter he is not a wagnerian, a feature he greatly disliked, for the only one who can compose wagnerian music was, according to Reyer, Wagner alone. Hervey quotes Reyer thus: “*We are practically all affected with Wagnerism, perhaps at different degrees; but we have drunk and we will drink at the same source, and the sole precaution for us to take is not to drown our own personality*” (Hervey 1894, 221).

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