

Prometheus Recharged, in Post-1900 Classical Music and Opera

The landmark Parisian *Exposition Universelle* of 1900 monumentalized the triumph of science and electricity at the dawn of a new century that promised and, in retrospect, would witness the rapid development of science, technology, and engineering. (Woodward 1900), These themes were symbolized in different ways by the spectacularly illuminated *Palais d'Electricité* and the featured inaugural cantata composed by Camille Saint-Saëns. Utilizing his appointment as president of the *Commission des Grandes Auditions Musicales*, Saint-Saëns composed the music for *Le Feu Céleste* (Op. 115: provisionally *Le Feu du ciel*), as his artistic contribution to “the glorification of electricity,” purporting to imitate musically the flashes and sparking arcs of electricity.

Armand Sylvestre’s libretto notably addressed the modern harnessing of electricity as the scientific avenger of the ancient mythological celestial catastrophes suffered by Phaethon, Icarus, and Prometheus. Silvestre emphasizes the fact that after the passage of so many centuries, Zeus’/Jupiter’s mistreatment of Prometheus was now avenged by the latter’s human scions who now have finally harnessed divine fire for the benefit of modernity: (Silvestre and Saint-Saëns 1900)

O grand voleur du feu, sublime Prométhée,

Sous l’outrage des temps relève enfin ton front!

La race de tes fils, aux vents précipitée,

Renaît dans l’air vengeur et lave ton affront.

[“O great thief of fire, sublime Prometheus,

After the ravages of time, at long last lift your brow!

The race of your sons, like precipitous winds,
Is reborn in vengeful air to redress your insult.”]

Both Silvestre and Saint-Saëns were well versed in the Greco-Roman legacy. The Parnassian poet Silvestre had written within the previous decade or so such stage works as *Sapho* (1889), *Salomé* (1895), and *Messaline* (1899). Going back several more decades, Saint-Saëns had composed such orchestral and choral works as *Le Rouet d’Omphale* (1872), *Phaethon*, *La jeunesse d’Hercule* (1877), and a hymn to *Pallas Athéné* (1894), not to mention *Les Noces des Prométhée* (1867), based on a libretto by Romain Cornut. He had also prepared music for such stage works as *Déjanire* (1892), *Phryné* (1893), and *Antigone* (1893), with such works as *Parysatis* (1902), *Andromaque* (1902), and *Hélène* (1902/1903) following soon after the *Exposition Universelle*. Notably, he would thereafter be the first major Western composer to visit Athens.

The association of Prometheus with the development and progress of humankind had important nineteenth-century musical predecessors. These include Beethoven’s ballet, *Die Menschen des Prometheus* (1801), Op. 43, (a.k.a. *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus*), and then Liszt’s adaptation of Johann Gottfried Herder’s *Der entfesseltem Prometheus*, a project that Liszt would revise several times in the 1850s to produce an overture, choruses, and ultimately a symphonic poem. (Bertagnolli 2002) Beyond the musical sphere, the most studied work in which Prometheus represents the Enlightenment’s secular alternative to the Biblical creation and response to human suffering at the hand of Zeus was Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound* (1820).

Demonstrating the clustered impact of Prometheus at the outset of the twentieth century, contemporary with the *Exposition Universelle* during the summer of 1900, was the massive production of *Prométhée* at the southern French outdoor theater at Béziers. (Nectoux 2004)

However, the Lorrain/Hérold libretto set by Gabriel Fauré, featured Pandora as much as it did the suffering of Prometheus, and the final fifth-act chorus exalts Zeus and Olympian clemency with the refrain, *Dieux forts, Dieux cléments, nous vous adorons!* [“Powerful gods, Merciful gods, we worship you!”]

In contrast, Saint-Saëns’ re-energized and redirected the twentieth-century Prometheus. Whereas Fauré’s protagonist was guarded by the Aeschylean personifications of Power and Force, Saint-Saëns featured the technological harnessing and generation of electricity.

Making an impractical suggestion, in his February 18 letter to the cantata’s dedicatee, conductor Paul Taffanel, Saint-Saëns contemplated placing electrical wires under the listeners’ seats “to give them a violent shock at each stroke of the tam-tam.” (Blakeman 1982) Devising a less painful and more synaesthetic alternative, Alexander Scriabin in 1910 included in the instrumentation for his symphonic *Prométhée, Le poème du feu* (Op. 60) Preston Millar’s chromola, a *clavier à lumieres*, and indicated specifically in his own handwriting in the score that its purpose was to create electrically the illusion of lightning.

Hopefully this paper can incorporate *The Fire Of Olympus, or, On Sticking It To The Man*, Anthony Peter’s and Tim Benjamin’s new Prometheus opera which will be premiering in the U.K. during the fall of 2019.

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