



# *Samson and Delilah*



*by Camille Saint-Saëns*

**LEARNING GUIDE**

# TOC

## Table of Contents

<b>Pre-Performance Activity</b>	<b>pg. 2-7</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introducing the Opera</li><li>• Synopsis + Listening Links</li><li>• Who's Who in the Opera</li></ul>	
<b>Performance-Day Activity</b>	<b>pg. 8-9</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• About the Opera</li><li>• Camille Saint-Saëns</li></ul>	
<b>Classroom Extensions</b>	<b>pg.10</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Activate with Arts: Act it Out!</li><li>• Reflecting on the Opera Experience</li></ul>	
<b>General Information</b>	<b>pg. 11-12</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• About The Belk Theater</li><li>• About Opera Carolina</li></ul>	

### *Pre-Performance*

## INTRODUCING THE OPERA

### What is a Grand Opera?



Degas (1871): Ballet of the Nuns from Meyerbeer's Robert le diable (1831); one of the earliest sensations of grand opera

Samson and Delilah is a grand opera in three acts and four scenes by Camille Saint-Saëns and is the only opera by Saint-Saëns that is regularly performed. The second act love scene in Delilah's tent is one of the set pieces that define French opera. In the middle of the 19th century, a revival of interest in choral music swept France, and Saint-Saëns, an admirer of the oratorios, made plans to compose an oratorio on the subject of Samson and Delilah. But what does this all mean?

Grand opera is a genre of 19th-century opera generally in four or five acts, characterized by large-scale casts and orchestras, and (in their original productions) lavish and spectacular design and stage effects, normally with plots based on or around dramatic historic events. The term is sometimes specifically used to denote certain productions of the Paris Opéra from the late 1820s to around 1860, and has sometimes been used to denote the Paris Opéra itself as a whole.

### Let's Talk About It

#### Consider these discussion questions:

Camille Saint-Saëns wrote 13 operas, but only one of them are regularly performed. Can you name other artists, writers, or musicians that are also known for just one of their works?

What other great works of art and music are based on dramatic historic events?

# INTRODUCING THE OPERA

## Grandiose set designs, instrumentation, and ballet

Paris at the turn of the 19th century drew in many composers, both French and foreign, and especially those with a keen interest in opera. Several Italians working during this period, including Luigi Cherubini, demonstrated that the use of recitative (a style of singing where the soloist adopts the rhythm and delivery of ordinary speech to move the plot forward) was suited for the powerful dramas that were being written. Others, such as Gaspare Spontini, wrote works to glorify Napoleon. These operas were composed on a suitably grand scale for the Emperor. Other factors which led to Parisian supremacy at



Set design by Francesco Bagnara for act 1 of *Il crociato in Egitto* by Meyerbeer



operatic spectacle was the ability of the large Paris Opéra to stage sizeable works and recruit leading stage-painters, designers and technicians, and the long tradition of French ballet and stagecraft.

Grand opera came on the artistic scene in 1828. The first opera of the grand opera canon is, by common consent, *La muette de Portici* (1828) by Daniel François Auber. This tale of revolution set in Naples in 1647 (and ending with an eruption of Mount Vesuvius into which the heroine precipitates herself), embodied the musical and scenic sensationalism which were to be grand opera's hallmark. This soon heralded in the golden age for Grand Opera.

A notable feature of grand opera as it developed in Paris through the 1830s was the presence of a lavish ballet, to appear at or near the beginning of its second act. This was required, not for aesthetic reasons, but to satisfy the demands of the Opera's wealthy and aristocratic patrons, many of whom were more interested in the dancers themselves than in the opera, and did not want their regular meal-times disturbed. The ballet therefore became an important element in the social prestige of the Opéra. Composers who did not comply with this tradition might suffer as a consequence, as did Richard Wagner with his attempt to stage a revised *Tannhäuser* as a grand opera in Paris in 1861.

## Let's Talk About It

What other works of art exemplify the grand and lavish style of Grand Opera?

Grand Operas included a culmination in many different artistic mediums - music, set design, ballet, costumes, etc. Can you name other productions (from any time) that showcase the merging of multiple artforms?

## Pre-Performance

# SYNOPSIS

Note: The listening pieces have been integrated into the synopsis to allow students to listen to the pieces in context of what is happening in the opera.

Make sure you have the "Who's Who in Samson and Delilah" handout (on pg. 6) handy so you can explore it while you read the synopsis!

## The Story in Short

From Chapter 16 of the Book of Judges, this Biblical drama of seduction and betrayal comes to life in a lavish grand opera. Samson, the leader of the Israelites, can be conquered by none – except the Philistine beauty Delilah – servant of the High Priest of Baal.

## Act 1



### Printemps qui commence

Delilah emerges from the temple and is riveted by the sight of the mighty Samson. After her fellow priestesses dance seductively around Samson, Delilah sings this intoxicatingly beautiful melody "Spring is coming."

Set in Gaza 1150 B.C. a group of Hebrews beg Jehovah for relief from their bondage to the Philistines; Samson is their leader. He rebukes them for their lack of faith. Philistine commander, Abimelech, denounces the Hebrews and their God. When this happens, Samson kills him and leads the Hebrews away. The High Priest of Dagon comes from the Philistine temple and curses Samson's remarkable strength. An Old Hebrew praises the returning Samson. The outer walls of the temple disappear and reveal Samson's former lover, a Philistine woman named Dalila, who invites him to come that night to her nearby dwelling. She dances seductively for Samson who becomes deaf to the Old Hebrew's prophecies.

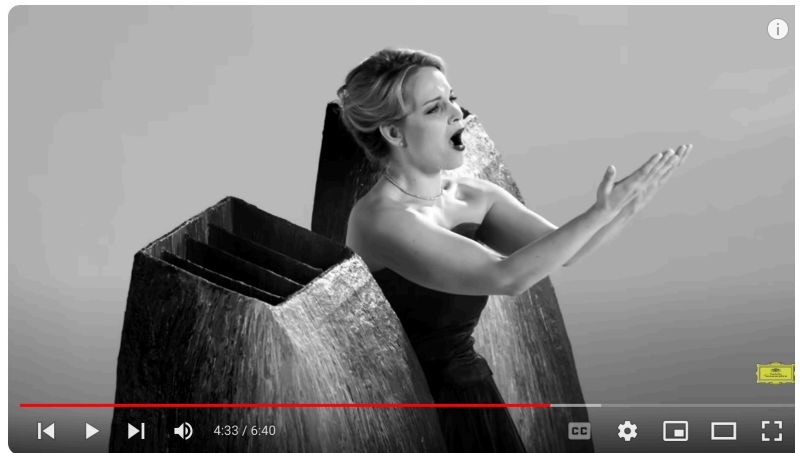
## Act 2

In the vale of Sorek, Dalila calls on her gods to help her ensnare and disarm Samson, promising the High Priest to find a way to render the hero powerless. Samson appears, passionate in spite of himself; when Dalila has him in her power, she feigns disbelief in his constancy and demands that he show his love by confiding in her the secret of his strength, weeping when he refuses. Samson hears thunder as a warning from God but can't resist following Dalila inside. Not long afterward, having finally learned that the secret of Samson's strength is his long hair she calls to hidden Philistine soldiers, who rush into capture and blind Samson.

### Mon coeur s'ouvre a ta voix

Sung by Delilah in Act 2, this mezzo-soprano aria means "my heart opens itself to your voice." Delilah is trying to convince Samson to reveal the secret behind his strength.

Enjoy the lyrical aria that seems to float above the delicately simple accompaniment.

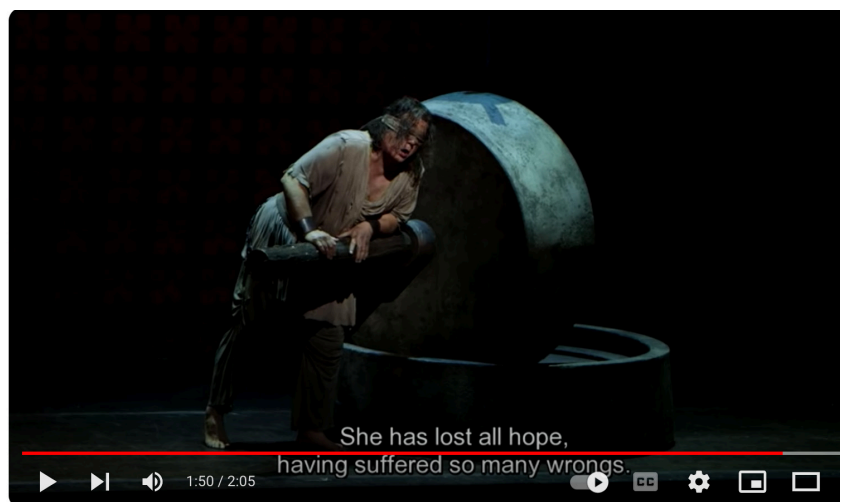


## Act 3

In a dungeon at Gaza, the sightless Samson pushes a grist mill in a circle, praying for his people who will suffer for his sin. He hears their voices castigating him. In the Temple of Dagon, Dalila and the High Priest taunt Samson. When they force him to kneel to Dagon he asks a boy to lead him to the two main pillars of the temple. Samson prays to Jehovah to restore his strength, and with a mighty effort he pulls down the pillars and the temple, crushing himself and his foes.

### Vois ma misere helas

"See my misery" is an iconic moment in this opera. In this tenor aria, Samson is imprisoned and cries out in agony. Listen closely as the chorus responds.



*Pre-Performance*

## WHO'S WHO IN SAMSON & DELILAH

Directions: As you read the Synopsis, draw and label lines between characters to illustrate the relationships between them.

*Samson*



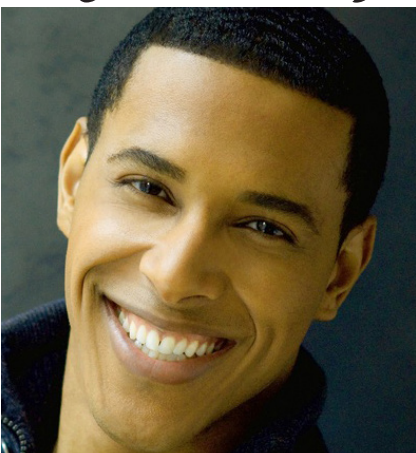
Kyle Van Schoonhoven, tenor

*Delilah*



Martina Belli, mezzo-soprano

*High Priest of Baal*



Donovan Singletary, bass-baritone

*Old Hebrew*



Jordan Bisch, bass

# ABOUT THE OPERA

Relay or review the following information:

Opera is a drama (play), that is sung!  
Opera uses many different art forms to tell stories.

## What to listen for/look for in *Samson & Delilah*

How could each of these art forms help to tell the story in an opera?

*Music   Lyrics   Dialogues   Costumes   Sets*

Look out for each of the above elements in the performance.

## Opera vocabulary to know for *Samson & Delilah*

**Aria** - opera song for one singer that has melody and usually gives insight on the character's feelings

**Baritone** - traditionally the middle male voice

**Bass** - traditionally the lowest male voice

**Chorus** - a large group of singers who typically portray townspeople, servants, military, etc.

**Duet** - a song written for two voices

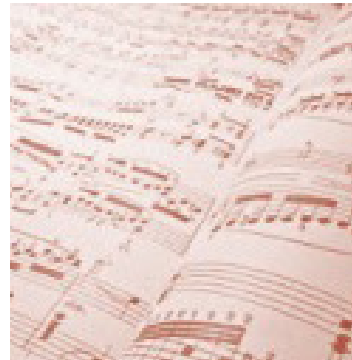
**Ensemble** - a group of singers (smaller than a chorus)

**Recitative** - a style of singing where the soloist adopts the rhythm and delivery of ordinary speech to move the plot forward

**Soprano** - traditionally the highest female voice

**Tenor** - traditionally the highest male voice

Don't forget to check out the composer Camille Saint-Saëns on the next page!



13  
operas written

He was one of the first pianists to experiment with recordings, and was in fact the earliest-born pianist to ever make a recording!



## Charles-Camille Saint-Saëns (1835 – 1921)

# *Musical Genius*

Charles-Camille Saint-Saëns was a French composer, organist, conductor and pianist of the Romantic era. His best-known works include Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, the Second Piano Concerto, the First Cello Concerto, Danse macabre, The Carnival of the Animals, and the opera Samson and Delilah.

Saint-Saëns was a musical prodigy; he made his concert debut at the age of ten. After studying at the Paris Conservatoire he followed a conventional career as a church organist, first at Saint-Merri, Paris and, from 1858, La Madeleine, the official church of the French Empire. After leaving the post twenty years later, he was a successful freelance pianist and composer, in demand in Europe and the Americas.

As a young man, Saint-Saëns was enthusiastic for the most modern music of the day, particularly that of Schumann, Liszt and Wagner, although his own compositions were generally within a conventional clas-

sical tradition. He was a scholar of musical history, and remained committed to the structures worked out by earlier French composers. This brought him into conflict in his later years with composers of the impressionist and expressionist schools of music; although there were neoclassical elements in his music, foreshadowing works by Stravinsky and Les Six, he was often regarded as a reactionary in the decades around the time of his death.

Saint-Saëns held only one teaching post, at the École de Musique Classique et Religieuse in Paris, and remained there for less than five years. It was nevertheless important in the development of French music: his students included Gabriel Fauré, among whose own later pupils was Maurice Ravel. Both of them were strongly influenced by Saint-Saëns, whom they revered as a genius.

# CLASSROOM EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

The following standards-linked exercises have been designed as a classroom supplement for teachers of upper grades classrooms and/or homeschool groups.

## *Pre-Performance*

### HISTORICAL SETTING + CONTEXT

Students may read the information on pages 2-3 and either discuss the questions that follow in groups or answer the questions in written form individually, depending on the needs of the class. (CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1)

## *Pre-Performance*

### ACTIVATE WITH ARTS: ACT IT OUT!

Teachers are encouraged to use this activity in place of reading the synopsis and filling out the "Who's Who" worksheet. Activate with the Arts activities enhance student engagement and learning through arts-based skills, giving teachers more "bang for their buck" for their instruction time. (CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.7; CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.6)

#### **Samson & Delilah in Three Minutes**

Student volunteers silently act out an abbreviated plot.

1. Students should be placed in small groups (we suggest groups of 7).
2. Students read the provided synopsis and distill it into an 8 sentence or less "speed-synopsis."
3. Each group's narrator reads their script while the rest of the group silently acts it out for the rest of the class.
4. Remind student actors to think about the following as they act out the scene:
  - their body position in relation to the other actors
  - their facial expressions

## *Post-Performance*

### REFLECTING ON THE OPERA EXPERIENCE

The following questions may be used for classroom discussion or written reflection after the performance. (CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.3; CCSA.ELA-LITERACY.RL.1.1)

1. What is one thing you learned about opera or this time period in history that you didn't know before?
2. What do you think were the main themes from Samson & Delilah? Use examples from the opera to support your answer.
3. Can you think of ways the opera expressed dramatic history through the music? What evidence from the story or background on the opera can you use to support your thoughts?
4. The following questions from the Pre-performance section could be revisited or answered for the first time after the performance:
  - What other great works of art and music are based on dramatic historic events?
  - What other works of art exemplify the grand and lavish style of Grand Opera?
  - Grand Operas included a culmination in many different artistic mediums - music, set design, ballet, costumes, etc. Can you name other productions (from any time) that showcase the merging of multiple artforms?



## GET THERE

Visiting Center City doesn't have to be a tough trip.

Blumenthal Performing Arts Center  
130 N. Tryon St  
Charlotte, NC 28202

**Ride.** Hop on the Lynx Lightrail. Check out the options [here](#).

**Drive.** Directions from door to door [here](#).

**Park.** Participating garages are just \$10. Find details [here](#).

## THE BELK THEATER

**MAKE ANY SEAT IN THE HOUSE THE BEST ONE**

Attending an opera in the Belk Theater is an experience not to be forgotten. The performance you are attending is the final dress rehearsal in which the cast performs one last full run through of the opera before opening night. Just like a regular performance, there will be an intermission(s) between acts.

Upon entering the theater, notice the production crew's station in the orchestra level seating (the lowest level of seating). The crew is set up with computers and headsets to allow them to communicate with people backstage to ensure that the performance runs smoothly. During this final rehearsal they will be making sure all cues and technical features of the performance are in place. Also notice the supertitles

(English translations of the lyrics being sung) that are projected onto a screen above the stage.

Please remember that this is a working performance and the performers on stage are very aware of their audience, especially a distracting audience. The polite audience member should always refrain from talking and stay seated during a performance. Nothing shows more respect and appreciation for the performers on stage than giving them your full attention.

### Shout Out

Give a shout out to the cast after a beautiful aria or at the end of the evening – literally! Shout **"Bravi!"** for a job well done to the whole cast, **"Brava!"** to the diva who aced it, or **"Bravo!"** to the guy who left it all on the stage.

# Opera Carolina

INVESTED IN OUR COMMUNITY AND ITS LIFE



## Then, now, & years from now

Let's take a journey back to 1948: the Charlotte Music Club is formed by a handful of arts enthusiasts who realize that Charlotte's artistic landscape –but more importantly, cultural community– would be enhanced by opera performances. Fast forward to today: Opera Carolina is a 73 year-old company that's still blossoming, hitting new highs with each season of glorious music, drama, and all that encompasses the operatic art form. Your resident Opera continues to bring high-quality standards of the operatic repertoire to stages near you, but is also continually striving to perform lesser-known gems.

What does our future hold? A rich commitment to our community –which we take seriously– to continue enriching the lives of citizens from all walks of life; a continual quest to produce excellent opera from all eras on our stage; and, most importantly, to connect our community.

## The people

In the early days of Opera Carolina, volunteers designed the sets, built costumes, sang in the chorus, filled leading roles and, of course, sold tickets and held fundraisers to support the company.

Now a fully professional company that not only produces Opera performances on a big scale but also travels programs into local schools and community venues, we never forget the legacy of the original volunteers who made this company the what it is today. Opera Carolina is rooted

in the Carolinas; 90% of our company live and work right here in our region, complementing the international artists who join the resident company to perform on our mainstage. We guess you can say we've got Carolina on our mind.

## The House

If the paragraphs before didn't sell you on our commitment to our community, maybe information on the Opera Center will. Opera Carolina now resides in the historic Biberstein house, in the Elizabeth neighborhood. The last remaining historic home in the Uptown radius, Opera Carolina's digs are as much a part of the community as is the company.

Built in 1906, the Biberstein House was designed and lived in by R. C. Biberstein, one of the noted mill architects of the Southeast. Mr. Biberstein is credited with building many of the mills in the Charlotte region, including the Highland Park #3 mill. Mr. Biberstein eventually moved his business into this house, his talents and self-designed home playing a role in the New South Industrial movement. Today, the home is registered as a Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Landmark.

The house has since been adapted into offices and is now the proud home of Opera Carolina. The Opera Center hosts the company's administrative offices but also serves as space for auditions, recitals, and more. **Our doors are always open.**