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VOICING HELEN OF TROY:
RETELLING A GREEK MYTH IN POST-WAGNERIAN RHETORIC

A Thesis in

Musicology

by

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ABSTRACT

From her beginnings in Homer’s *Iliad* Helen of Troy was seen as the woman whose beauty caused death and destruction in the Trojan War. A tradition of blame arose that inspired centuries of literary works devoted to the myth of Helen. The nineteenth century saw a profusion of musical interpretations, largely due to the publication of Goethe’s *Faust, Part Two* in 1832. Compositions such as Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène* and Boito’s *Mefistofele*, though hardly masterpieces, offered a different perspective on Helen of Troy by the mere fact that they incorporated the art of music. These works turned a blind eye to the theories of Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche, however, who argued for the necessity of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in order to tell tales such as this one. In Nietzsche’s idealized view, Greek tragedies had used a synthesis of the arts to depict mythic tragedy, fusing the Dionysian and Apollonian elements through a combination of music and language. In the post-classical era the myth remained, yet the rhetoric fragmented, posing great challenges to those who wanted to tell these stories with the same power.

Wagner did not add Helen’s story to his large output, but the twentieth century brought a wave of composers influenced by his approach to music drama and ready to explore subjects that he had ignored. My thesis examines three early twentieth-century works that treat Helen of Troy in neo-Wagnerian ways, each telling a different chapter of the story. Camille Saint-Saëns’s 1903 opera *Hélène* explores Helen’s attempted struggle against her love for Paris, Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannthal’s 1928 opera *Die ägyptische Helena* follows the difficult recovery of Helen and Menelaus’s marriage after the bloodshed at Troy, and Lili Boulanger’s 1913 cantata *Faust et Hélène* considers Faust
as he brings the long deceased Helen back to the world of the living for his brief pleasure.

In all of these musical interpretations of the myth the tradition of blame is rejected and Helen is humanized, becoming someone we can empathize with.

These works use Wagnerian dramatic and musical tools, yet they are not merely epigonic. The influence of Wagner coexists with other elements—modernist perspectives on the philosophical significance of music, Saint-Saëns and Boulanger’s French nationality, and a post-Wagnerian conception of musical genre—in updated examples of Gesamtkunstwerk that blend the Wagnerian and the anti-Wagnerian. This thesis explores how each of these works manipulates a different set of influences to form a new rhetoric of Helen of Troy, a fresh reading unique in the canon of works on her.
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On us the gods have set an evil destiny,

That we should be a singer’s theme

For generations to come.

- Homer, *Iliad* 6.357-58
Introduction

Over twenty-five hundred years ago the ancient Greek poet Homer wrote an epic poem that told the story of the end of the Trojan War, a battle fought because of one woman—Helen of Troy. The label she obtained in this work, as the woman who caused great death and destruction, would stay with her for centuries to come, a tradition of blame evolving that would be hard to remove. Although she is at the center of the *Iliad*, Helen appears in just three episodes out of the twenty-four books, and so she never has a chance to defend herself, her presence lingering between the lines for much of the text, but her voice silent. Over the next centuries Helen reappeared frequently in literature around the world, writers fascinated by her supposedly “indescribable” beauty and Christopher Marlowe eventually coining the now oft-quoted phrase “the face that launched a thousand ships.” Artists and occasionally composers also attempted to portray the ineffable, but despite this praise of Helen’s outer beauty in different mediums, she continued to be viewed by many as a destructive “whore,”1 who had run off with Paris, leaving her husband, and starting the Trojan War that would cause suffering and death for many.2

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s inclusion of Helen in his *Faust, Part Two*, in 1832, encouraged a wave of interpretations of not only the Faust myth, but also Helen of Troy’s story. The popularity of his work and the rise of programmaticism motivated an increase in musical readings of both characters—in operas such as Boito’s *Mephistophele*

and Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène*—yet, while *Faust* did not encourage blame of Helen, it did not attempt to exonerate her either. Thus while these works offered a different perspective of Helen by the mere fact that they incorporated the art of music, they critically accepted the tradition of blame, continuing to ignore her silent plea for a defense.

Nineteenth-century musical treatments also turned a blind eye to the theories of Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche, who argued for the necessity of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in order to tell tales such as this one. Wagner believed that it was not enough just to join music and text; the art forms had to become unified, with the music working completely in conjunction with the drama. Thus in *Oper und Drama* (1851) he argued as follows:

> Let us not forget, however, that the orchestra’s equalizing moments of expression are never to be determined *by the caprice of the musician*, as a random tricking out of sound, but *only by the poet’s aim*. Should these “moments” utter anything not connected with the situation of the dramatis personae, anything superfluous thereto, then the unity of expression is itself disturbed by this departure from the content.3

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was, at first, a supporter of Wagner’s musical aims. In Nietzsche’s idealized view, Greek tragedies had used a synthesis of the arts to depict mythic tragedy, fusing the Dionysian and Apollonian elements through a combination of music and language. He believed that “the intricate relation of the Apollonian and the Dionysian in tragedy may really be symbolized by a fraternal union of two deities: Dionysus speaks the language of Apollo; and Apollo, finally the language of Dionysus;

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and so the highest goal of tragedy and of all art is attained.” Yet Nietzsche never attempted to realize this theory in an actual work of art, and Wagner ignored Helen and ultimately departed from his own theories in his works beginning with *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), prioritizing music due to his beliefs about its metaphysical power.

At the turn of the twentieth century, with the move from romanticism to modernism, a new generation of composers reevaluated Helen of Troy’s tale of love, blame, and suffering. Influenced by Wagner, yet rejecting some of his musical and philosophical views, they wanted to draw upon the successes of the previous century, but depart in new ways that would generate a new post-Wagnerian rhetoric. In 1903 Camille Saint-Saëns wrote an opera, *Hélène*, that explores Helen’s attempted struggle against her love for Paris. A different part of Helen’s story was then portrayed by Lili Boulanger in 1913, in her cantata *Faust et Hélène*, which considers Faust as he brings the long-deceased Helen back to the world of the living for his brief pleasure. Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal were interested in Euripides’s *Helen* and based their 1928 opera *Die ägyptische Helena* on the “phantom Helen” story, focusing their work on the difficult recovery of Helen and Menelaus’s marriage after the bloodshed at Troy. These works blend the influence of Wagner with other elements—modernist perspectives on the philosophical significance of music, Saint-Saëns and Boulanger’s French nationality, and a post-Wagnerian conception of musical genre (opera and cantata)—in updated examples of *Gesamtkunstwerk* that blend the Wagnerian and the anti-Wagnerian.

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The chapters of this thesis are ordered according to the chronology of Helen’s story. In the first chapter, Saint-Saëns’s opera *Hélène* tells the first part of her tale, constructing a defense for her actions that are yet to come, through the excuse of destiny. I examine how music and text join in depicting her struggles against her love for Paris and the destiny that causes her eventually to sail off with him. In the second chapter I explore Hofmannsthal’s and Strauss’s retelling of Helen’s life after the Trojan War, as she transforms from the woman who ran away with Paris to a wife ready to be reunited with her husband Menelaus. While Saint-Saëns’s view of Helen was still somewhat romanticized in the early years of the new century, *Die ägyptische Helena* is firmly rooted in modernism, Helen shown to be a new twentieth-century woman. Finally, the third chapter returns to Helen many years after the Trojan War, her spirit departed from Earth, but called back by Faust’s desire for her, in *Faust et Hélène*. In this chapter I investigate Boulanger’s depiction of Helen through the lens of Boulanger’s own life, examining how her own identity helped her portray Helen’s.

The creators of these three works all had crystal clear views on how to depict Helen of Troy and all used original musical language in their readings of the Greek myth. As will be explored in the next chapters, they are joined by their endeavors to humanize and defend Helen, their use of Wagnerian-influenced music, and their rejections of Wagnerian philosophy. This thesis focuses on how these composers and librettists used the Wagnerian and anti-Wagnerian to provide fresh readings of Helen of Troy. It is ultimately the freedom these artists felt in synthesizing music and text in innovative ways, using great stylistic diversity, that enables such effective retellings of the Greek myth. Norman Austin has observed that in the *Iliad* Helen “understands that her function
is not primarily, or even secondarily, to be a woman, but to be first and foremost a
story.”  

These works attempt to break away from the tradition of exploiting Helen merely
as artistic inspiration and use their idiosyncratic musical languages to give her a voice.

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**Chapter 1**

**The Destiny Defense in Saint-Saëns’s *Hélène***

I have never been able to see Helen simply as a woman in love: she is the slave of Destiny, the victim of Aphrodite sacrificed by the goddess to her glory, the price of the Golden Apple; she is a powerful figure whose sin evokes no sniggering, but rather a kind of holy terror. See her on the ramparts of Troy, of that city upon which her presence visits ruin and disaster: when she passes by, the old men Troy stand up and salute her. Later we find her with her husband, a queen doing the honors of her palace, and no one thinks of reproaching her for her past, her abandonment of Menelaus, the years she spent in Troy, the innumerable Greeks who died for her! The daughter of Zeus finds in her path nothing but honour and respect.6

**Introduction**

Camille Saint-Saëns proclaimed a defense of Helen of Troy that he believed long overdue, rejecting at the turn of the twentieth century a tradition of blame that had evolved over numerous centuries. His 1903 opera *Hélène* stands apart from other musical interpretations of Helen’s story, such as Boito’s *Mefistofele*, Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène*, and Gluck’s *Paride ed Elena*, by its positive attitude toward Helen. Rather than placing her on display, for her beauty to be admired or her actions mocked, the opera serves Helen by providing her with a defense. This is achieved through Saint-Saëns’s idiosyncratic synthesis of music and drama, which elaborates the theme of destiny that he

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describes in his essay on *Hélène* while dramatizing Helen’s struggle against her love for Paris and this destiny.

In setting itself apart from previous musical interpretations of the myth, *Hélène* takes aim particularly at Offenbach’s 1864 operetta *La Belle Hélène*. Offenbach had parodied Helen, using her painful story as a topic for humor. In his essay on *Hélène* Saint-Saëns speaks of the differing view he wished to project, and the damage he felt Offenbach had done to the wider understanding of Helen of Troy:

A long time, a very long time ago I had this vision, of Helen fleeing in the night, arriving desperate and exhausted at the beach, a long way from her palace, and being joined by Paris—then the love scene, resistance finally swept away, the ultimate fight for the two lovers after a despairing struggle…I dreamt then of setting to music the flight of the two lovers: but we know how this has been parodied, and with what sharpness and success. To get an audience to respond seriously to these epic characters who had become laughing stocks was, for a long time, an impossible notion. I put the project off for later, and as time went by, I forgot about it.7

A request in 1902 for an opera for the soprano Dame Nellie Melba, by Raoul Gunsbourg, director of the Monte Carlo Opera, prompted Saint-Saëns to reconsider. However, the large difference between Offenbach’s popular reading and Saint-Saëns’s own view of Helen appears to have left Saint-Saëns wary of collaborating on an artistic interpretation of mythology. If Offenbach could see Helen so utterly differently, there would be a high chance a librettist would view Helen in a different way than Saint-Saëns. He decided not to work with anyone on the opera, instead writing both the music and libretto himself, explaining that, “initially I had the idea (a lazy one, I confess) of finding a collaborator; but then a collaborator would perhaps want to add his ideas to mine and spoil the

simplicity of my conception. I made up my mind to work alone."

Through this act Saint-Saëns emphasized the importance of dramatizing his reading of Helen, and the extent to which it was a unique one, unshared by previous composers and writers. Helen’s story was not just a subject of musical inspiration for him, but a myth that needed to be properly retold in order to finally give Helen a voice, and to refute the accounts that had come before.

While Saint-Saëns turned away from nineteenth-century musical depictions of Helen, his opera is not completely detached from previous interpretations of the myth. Following the nineteenth-century revival of interest in Antiquity, Saint-Saëns turned to Homer, Theocritus, Aeschylus, Virgil and Ovid for help on how to create his own personal reading of Helen of Troy. In explaining his use of these classical models, he asks: “Without Virgil, would I have dared to give the description of Priam’s palace, its gilded roofs, its walls covered with polished shining bronze and decorated with impressive statues, probably multicolored, in an ensemble that almost makes Gustave Moreau’s strange structures seem realistic[?]!” The rhetorical power of these works, through their adherence to the Classical canons of rhetoric and artistic appeals, is great, and some of them—Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen*—even offer defenses of Helen. However there were challenges in how to give Helen a voice with which to tell her own story, for she was not only subjected to blame for the Trojan War, but, perhaps more

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8 Ibid., 37.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 The Greek sophist wrote an epideictic speech, in which he expressed praise for Helen and exonerated her of blame for the war, by examining the reasons why she might have gone to Troy and defending each reason. See Gorgias, “Encomium of Helen,” in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present*, 44-6, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001).
grievously, silenced. The addition of music by Saint-SAëns sought to broaden the rhetorical palette of tools, aiding the fuller dramatization of Helen, through showing her beauty, her love of Paris, and her struggle against it. Rather than her story serving merely as an operatic scenario Hélène becomes the center of the opera.

This chapter examines Saint-SAëns’s separation of the aesthetic from the ethical in Wagner, a critical strategy that enabled him to use Wagnerian musical materials (alongside non-Wagnerian music) while abandoning the Wagnerian idea of redemption, thus providing a new reading of Helen of Troy. By employing the defense of destiny for Hélène, exonerating her of blame, Saint-SAëns removed any need for Wagnerian redemption at the end of the opera. Through an effective synthesis of varied influences, and some carefully considered rejections, Saint-SAëns created a new rhetoric for this defense, humanizing Hélène, creating sympathy for her by dramatizing her forced submission, and portraying her as embodying goodness in the physical beauty that was the source of her fame.

The Wagnerian/Anti-Wagnerian Saint-SAëns

Saint-SAëns’s dual use of, and departure from, Classical literature in his libretto manifests itself in a dual acceptance and rejection of Wagnerian influence in the music of Hélène. While Saint-SAëns’s own relationship to Wagner in his music is idiosyncratic, he was one of a number of French composers at that time that were influenced by the German master. The mid-nineteenth century saw an explosion of Wagnerism in France, particularly Paris. At first, when Wagner came to Paris in September 1839, he was praised more for his
theoretical writings than for his music, though the latter enjoyed some popularity. The 1850s saw an explosion of controversy surrounding the composer. Originally the French premiere of Tannhäuser was unsuccessful, but “as Wagner left Paris in apparent defeat in 1861, a Wagnerian movement began to emerge in France,” arguably spurred in part by Charles Baudelaire’s article “Richard Wagner,” published in the Revue européenne on April 1, 1861.¹²

The 1860s were spent in a wave of Parisian Wagnerism for many, but the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 changed everything. Wagner himself did not help his case by writing that year a farce entitled “A Capitulation.” This work mocked France, further upsetting many of his followers, though he seemed never to understand why they took it so seriously, asking Saint-Saëns the last time they met if he was holding a grudge against him just “because of a bad joke?”¹³ It was perhaps in part to a growing sense of nationalism in France, due to the war, that many turned (or at least tried to turn) away from the composer. Yet his popularity eventually grew again, and even with his death in 1883 Paris could not be completely purged of him, with such acts as the creation of a new journal, the Revue wagnérienne (1885-88), taking place in the subsequent years.

Thirty years later, on March 4, 1917 the New York Times proclaimed that

In a book which he entitles ‘Germanophilie,’ Saint-Saëns warns his fellow-countrymen that the Wagner music-dramas are amongst the most insidious and dangerous of the weapons used by Germany for the enslavement of France, and he calls upon the French to cease pretending that they like the Wagner operas and to lavish their admiration on the works of French composers instead.¹⁴

Saint-Saëns had originally been a member of Wagner’s Parisian inner circle during his 1859-61 stay in the city, with the German composer talking in his autobiography about “a highly gifted young French musician, Camille Saint-Saëns…[who] was not only able to play my scores, including Tristan, by heart, but could also reproduce their several parts, whether they were leading or minor themes.” Nonetheless, whatever his enthusiasm for Wagner’s works in the 1860s, Saint-Saëns founded the Société Nationale de Musique with Romain Bussine on February 25, 1871, in order to give performances of works exclusively by living French composers. A variety of factors seem to have influenced this change of heart, from the larger issue of the Franco-Prussian war to Wagner’s excessive German patriotism, both fueling Saint-Saëns’s own display of support for his country and its musicians. In the end, however, Saint-Saëns would take a more detached stand, as neither a rabid antagonist nor an ardent Wagnerian.

Saint-Saëns’s defense of Hélène finds its power in this separation, which allowed him the freedom to use different musical and dramatic styles according to what best suited his depiction of Helen of Troy. His artistic philosophy was characterized by a focus on freedom, which he proclaimed throughout his writings, stating that “I stand for the freedom of art and genius before all things,” and “I am passionately in love with freedom.” Despite Saint-Saëns’s changing views on Wagner himself, Saint-Saëns had little respect for those who let their personal views of Wagner affect the extent to which they accepted or rejected the influence of the composer, and he voiced criticism of those

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16 For a discussion of Saint-Saëns and Wagnerism, see Steven Huebner, French Opera at the “Fin De Siècle”: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
18 Ibid., 9.
who “blindly” proclaimed Wagner as a god, or dismissed him due to nationalistic vendettas against a German anti-Semite. He felt that such actions were restricting for composers, and it was important for him to base his musical judgments on close analyses of the music, allowing him an unclouded view of the advantages to following Wagner and the areas in which he had to diverge. Most famously he proclaimed, “ultimately it is not Bach, or Beethoven, or Wagner, that I love, it is art,” demonstrating an unusually fierce rejection of the common nineteenth-century problems of “anxiety of influence” and hero worship.

Saint-Saëns’s writings present his developed views on Wagner’s music from about 1885, which came, first from admiring and then studying Wagner’s works in depth. His early days as a composer were spent playing Tannhäuser on the piano, studying Tristan und Isolde, and attending a performance of the Ring Cycle at Bayreuth. Saint-Saëns himself explained that “I studied Wagner’s works at some length. I took the greatest pleasure in doing so and the performances of his works I have attended have made a profound impression on me, which not all the theories in the world will force me to forget or deny.” Saint-Saëns’s analyses of Wagner’s music were effective partly because he looked at the music from a variety of different viewpoints, examining the relationship between his music and his philosophy, and never failing to relate this to aesthetic effectiveness.

19 Ibid.
Saint-Saëns’s theory of opera grew from the belief that the music and text should be synthesized in a way that made the plot as clear as possible, with the music aiding the depiction of the story but never obscuring the text. Wagner’s theory of Gesamtkunstwerk certainly grounded this idea, yet Saint-Saëns did not believe that Wagner’s music dramas had adequately fulfilled this aim—an observation he was able to make in part through his objective analysis of the music, without his judgment being blinded by the Wagnerian metaphysics he rejected. Thus in his analysis of Wagnerian music drama, Saint-Saëns recognizes both Wagner’s productive (in his view) contributions to the genre and the areas in which a departure would be necessary. In his praise of Wagnerian music drama Saint-Saëns tells of how:

A man arrived on the scene recently who realized that modern opera, for all its grandeur and beauty, was built on a concept “contrary to the aims we should be setting for ourselves”; and that this concept was in opposition to the developments in poetry, music and drama. This man thought that a new form of opera, in which the music would not do violence to the words and would not hold up the action, in which the orchestra with all its modern developments would restore to music what it might have lost and would give up a part of its prerogatives for the benefit of the drama, that this form would be worthier of an intelligent and enlightened public than the one currently in use…

Saint-Saëns then explains the problems that this “solution” brings, particularly with respect to the plot’s coherence:

In time past, audiences were happy to forget about the drama and to concentrate on the voices, and if the orchestra showed signs of being too interesting, then they complained and accused it of stealing the limelight. Nowadays audiences listen to the orchestra and try and follow the myriad of the intertwining parts and the seductive play of sonorities. At the same time they forget to listen to what the actors are saying and lose track of the plot.

22 Ibid., 104.
The new system annihilates the art of singing almost completely, and is proud of the fact. So it is that the instrument par excellence, the only instrument that is ever truly alive, will never again be given the task of producing melodic phrases; it is the others, the instruments made by human hands, pale, clumsy imitations of the human voice, which will sing in its place. Surely there is something wrong here?23

Saint-Saëns recognized that Wagner’s focus on multiple orchestral melodies and thick orchestration led to dense polyphony, which obscured the vocal lines, drawing the attention away from the text to a problematic extent.

There was therefore a need for operatic writing to diverge in a third direction, building on previous principles that had worked, and finding even newer solutions to the problem of how to create the ideal of unity, with the arts working together to incorporate what they brought to the effective depiction of a story, without overpowering one another. Saint-Saëns did not believe that the theory of Gesamtkunstwerk could be perfectly realized, but he aimed in his operas to move music closer to that ideal. In his operas Saint-Saëns retains the size and instrumental variety of the Wagnerian orchestra, yet diverges from his overpoweringly dense and leitmotivically based polyphony, due to this view that it both obscured the text sung, and was generally monochromatic. His conviction that this textural density was a function of Wagner’s metaphysical ideology of music meant that in freeing himself from Wagnerian philosophy, Saint-Saëns allowed himself a greater equality between the artistic mediums, using the orchestra to support the text, and applying a lighter style of orchestration to the opera’s different themes. In some cases, however, Wagner’s tendency toward the monumental served as an effective tool that Saint-Saëns used without undermining his own innovations.

From Goddess to Woman

Saint-Saëns’s endeavor to create greater clarity in opera serves not only to aid the telling of the story, but to portray a humanized Hélène. By bringing her down to earth, rather than showing her as the typical goddess, he sought to encourage the audience’s sympathy for her—a woman not so different from them. It was Saint-Saëns’s anti-metaphysical philosophy that enabled him to recognize the advantages of this approach: “Womankind in Wagnerian drama, initially loving and tender like Elsa or passionate like Isolde, becomes sublime with Brünnhilde who, in her love and sorrow, progresses from divinity to humanity—a bold idea, indeed a truly modern and philosophical one.”24 In its higher regard for Brünnhilde’s progression toward humanity, this reading suggests an implicit rejection of Wagnerian metaphysics, notwithstanding the character’s embodiment of a “sublime” feminine.

Saint-Saëns uses anti-metaphysical music—music self-consciously removed from the chromatic richness of Tristan—as one tool in portraying his humanized protagonist, returning to the ancient classical concept of mimesis in order to achieve this. Sparse textures, simpler melodies and unambiguous harmonies imitate the human world, while Wagnerian harmonic and textural complexity render, on a more limited basis, Hélène’s dramatic struggle. Through his analytical understanding of Wagner’s music, Saint-Saëns was able to remove the metaphysical content from the music, taking from it instead just those musical techniques that he needed.

The basis of Saint-Saëns’s achievement of mimesis and creation of greater clarity is his belief that harmony, not melody, was the foundation of musical language, melody having dominated previous operatic efforts. This contention is made directly in one of Saint-Saëns’s best-known texts, *Harmonie et Melodie*. In his essay “Wagner: The Ring of the Nibelung and the Bayreuth Premiere, August 1876,” he calls melody “the weapon that is still being wielded by [Rameau and Gluck’s] descendants.”25 Roger Nichols observes that Saint-Saëns’s “operas lack the Italian emphasis on melody and stress the orchestra in depicting a character’s moods.”26 While Saint-Saëns diverged from Wagner’s focus on melody, he did follow the master’s use of chromaticism and harmonic ambiguity—only he juxtaposed this with passages of clear diatonicism, creating harmonic variety to dramatize the different characters and situations.

Hélène’s world is introduced as a human one from the start, in a scene that clearly prioritizes harmony over melody. Sung by the Spartans, this opening places the opera in a historical context. We are not aware of gods, or other supernatural characters or events yet; indeed their proclamations of “Praise the King” do not seem dissimilar to Saint-Saëns’s earlier *Henry VIII*. Wagnerian innovations in staging are used through the addition of instruments from a second orchestra here,27 which are placed onstage, aiding the depiction of a royal court rooted in the mortal world.

Despite the Wagnerian orchestra, we are tonally and texturally still in a pre-Wagnerian era, the simple repetitive diatonic music continuing the destiny imagery it

27 Offstage musicians were not uncommon at this time, but the degree of variety with which differing combinations of instruments from the second orchestra (consisting of two piccolos, an English horn, a clarinet, a trumpet, a tambourine, a harp, and an organ) are used throughout *Hélène* recalls this forward-looking Wagnerian tendency.
introduced in the prelude, and the people’s blissful ignorance of what is to come being depicted by light staccati, 12/8 meter, and a tambourine. Hélène’s name then elicits some chromaticism, but the ostinato rhythm remains, serving more as a warning of the destruction she will bring to the human world, than as a portrayal of her as different. However, we learn of this fate strictly through the music—the Spartans praise Hélène in their song, creating an important first image of Hélène as loved queen, and placing her early on in the audience’s minds as a “good” character, so that when her actions appear to contrast it, it is easier to believe that they are due to some external factor, such as destiny, rather than to Hélène’s own fatal flaw. In addition to the use of pre-Wagnerian music, the tactic of humanization is an anti-Wagnerian technique, rejecting Wagner’s prioritization of deity over humanity.

When the focus does shift to the melody, the simpler melodic lines aid Saint-Saëns’s interpretation of a more humane Hélène; the important words she speaks can be clearly understood and are never overshadowed by the orchestra. Hélène’s first words are unaccompanied and sung in a recitative style, highlighting this important text: “Where can I flee to escape Love?”28 Yet, throughout the opera, these passages rarely last more than a measure or two, and in general Saint-Saëns uses simpler melodic lines for Hélène. This tendency reflects what Nichols calls the composer’s belief “in balance, in proportion, in the Delphic motto of ‘nothing too much.’”29 For the most part, Saint-Saëns rejects earlier operatic ornamental singing, with its focus on the melodic line to such an

28 Camille Saint-Saëns, libretto in notes to Hélène, by Saint-Saëns, translated by Patricia Clancy, performed by Guillaume Tourniaire, Belle Époque Chorus and Orchestra Victoria, Melba 301114-2 (CD) 2008. (All quotations of the libretto are from this translation.)
extent that the words are obscured. However, he uses some melisma for the character of Venus to clarify the distance between Hélène and the goddess. Additionally, the second orchestra is placed behind the set when it is used during the scene with Venus, so that unseen music accompanies the supernatural nymphs, and a further contrast is created to Hélène’s mortal world, with its visible musicians.

The Destiny Defense

Saint-Saëns’s humanized portrayal of Hélène, and his use of the defense of destiny to exonerate her of blame, are his most important divergences from traditional tellings of Helen’s story. The two themes complement each other, as it is easier to believe that a human Hélène might be controlled by destiny. Saint-Saëns’s explanation in his essay on Hélène—that “I have never been able to see Helen simply as a woman in love: she is the slave of Destiny, the victim of Aphrodite sacrificed by the goddess to her glory”—places Hélène in a position of forced submission to the gods, paralleling the Judeo-Christian hierarchical belief concerning God and man. While Hélène’s destiny is referred to by the gods in the opera, it is primarily dramatized through the music. Saint-Saëns uses Wagnerian tools, specifically his leitmotivic technique, and departs from them, through diatonicism, in order to convey the duality of this destiny. For the Trojan people, Hélène’s destiny is a guarantee of tragedy and destruction, yet it does not seem to be a poor one for her. Saint-Saëns fully acknowledges the devastation of the Trojan War in the opera (“Look at the palaces and the towers ablaze; Look at the terrible slaughter!”), yet his description of Helen’s life after the war, in his essay, is favorable: “See her on the
ramparts of Troy, of that city upon which her presence visits ruin and disaster: when she passes by, the old men Troy stand up and salute her.”\(^{30}\)

The work both begins and ends in major keys, with harmonically challenging music depicting Hélène’s struggles confined to the middle sections, and non-Wagnerian diatonicism therefore framing the work. The prelude begins with a strong establishment of E major, as persistent tonic harmonies in the strings accompany simple melodic ideas (see Example 1.1).\(^{31}\) Classically influenced music of this same sort is used throughout, in longer sections, with few contrasts and stable tonalities. Repeated sixteenth notes are also often employed, which helps drive the music forward, reflecting the forward drive of unstoppable destiny. This rhythmic tendency subsides when Hélène begins to question her destiny, believing in the existence of free will. Wagnerian chromaticism, thicker textures and unstable tonalities then intrude, but stability always returns, a reminder of her fixed unavoidable destiny.

The dominance of the gods and the destiny they force upon Hélène control the scenes in which Venus and Pallas speak to Hélène, both through verbal imperatives, and the musical presentation of the diatonic destiny theme. When Venus admonishes Hélène not to resist her destiny, the music returns to the original key of E major, with unison woodwinds driving forward with sixteenth notes as Venus states “Woman! It is madness / To resist the goddess Kypris.” Hélène argues briefly with Venus, yet she is quickly silenced and calmer music carries through the rest of the scene, as Venus and her nymphs tell Hélène to “Submit yourself and bow the knee / To love’s cruel will.” By the end of

\(^{30}\) Saint-Saëns, “Hélène,” 36.

\(^{31}\) Examples referred to in the text are found in the appendix.
the scene, the rejection of dramatic tension in favor of lighter music, together with Venus’s seeming power over Hélène, suggests the inevitability of destiny and begs the question of whether submission would in fact be preferable to constant struggle. In the later scene with Pallas, Hélène is entirely silent as Pallas and Pâris discuss the issue of destiny without her, highlighting her gradual acceptance of her lack of control.

Saint-Saëns uses leitmotifs to underscore the theme of destiny and to give greater insight into Hélène’s gradual acceptance of her love for Pâris. He voiced his admiration for this aspect of Wagner’s compositional technique, explaining:

> With his ingenious system of leitmotifs (ghastly word!), Wagner has further extended the field of musical expression by letting us know the character’s most secret thoughts beneath what they are actually saying. This system had already been foreseen and attempted, but no one paid it any attention until these works appeared in which it became fully developed.  

Saint-Saëns’s leitmotifs thus additionally promoted his general philosophy of clarity, through illuminating textual meanings. In his essay on Hélène, Saint-Saëns refers to his use of this technique, emphasizing the importance of this leitmotif by explaining that “I could not say how, before any text was written, I came by the first musical phrase, to which I subsequently set the line: Des astres de la nuit tes yeux ont la clarté! (Your eyes shine brightly like the stars at night!)” This musical phrase becomes an integral leitmotif, recurrent at various pivotal moments throughout the opera. Saint-Saëns’s own relation of this particular line to the leitmotif (it is not the only line that is sung to that phrase) establishes the musical connection to Pâris’s love for Hélène. The recurrence of the leitmotif thus captures their ever-present “destined” love, which first appears in the

prelude before we meet the characters, returns at the end of the opera, and is repeated multiple times in the final scene as the lovers give in to their destiny. The first statement of “Pâris’s love” leitmotif appears in the first clarinet,

Example 1.2. Saint-Saëns, *Hélène*, reh. 1, mm. 12-16.

which comes after the opening, classically influenced music.

The previous music pushes forward, driven by the sixteenth notes, moving closely to the dominant key of B major. While none of the opening music lacks clarity, the first statement of this leitmotif, accompanied by a sole rumbling timpani holding the tonic note, is clearly introduced. The presentation of this leitmotif, without text at first and then with text later, displays Saint-Saëns’s use of an advanced Wagnerian technique, following the leitmotivic techniques of *Tristan und Isolde* rather than *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*.

The varied usages of this leitmotif show the progression of Hélène’s struggle against Pâris’s love—from denial, with the first utterance unpaired with her voice, to eventual acceptance. The leitmotif is first associated with text in the second scene, when the clarinet reiterates it while Hélène sings of how Pâris tells her that “The love of Menelaus fails, in comparison to mine! I will give you ecstasy!” Saint-Saëns again reduces the accompaniment of the leitmotif and Hélène’s part to homophony in the strings, ensuring the audible comprehension of both, and aiding the comprehension of the
association of the leitmotif to Pâris’s love. A new leitmotif is introduced by a solo violin, and Hélène begins to sing with it, identifying it perhaps as a declaration of Hélène’s love (see Example 1.3). The contrast between the polyphony created by the instrumental statement of “Pâris’s love” leitmotif and Hélène’s non-leitmotivic vocal part, with the unison created by the instrumental and vocal presentation of the second “Hélène’s love” leitmotif, conveys both her struggle against Pâris’s love and her unconscious acceptance of her own. In the final scene the “Pâris’s love” leitmotif returns thrice, followed by Hélène and Pâris singing the leitmotif of “Hélène’s love,” answering his final declaration of love with confirmation of her now-accepted love.

The Multi-Defense Strategy

Gorgias defended Helen on several grounds in his Encomium of Helen, and Saint-Saëns followed suit in Hélène. While Saint-Saëns uses destiny as Hélène’s primary defense, he also highlights Pâris’s persuasive powers, portraying Helen as an innocent woman swept away by his manly charm. Pâris spends scene four, his duet with Hélène, trying to persuade her to give in to her love for him, which he eventually succeeds in doing, Hélène proclaiming “I believe in love.” He first shows his torment as she shuns him, through chromatic harmonic movement, syncopation and a swift tempo, asking her “Why do you flee / So far from my heart, so far from my arms?” This moves to more lyrical melodies, contrasting the jagged music depicting Hélène’s struggle. Calmer music finally takes over, with sparser textures, and gentle woodwind, Pâris hiding his dominance and telling her sweetly of his love and how beautiful she is. The harmonic stability displayed
earlier is missing, however, implying that Pâris’s recollection of when “I first saw you among the flowers…I loved you from that moment on” perhaps only appears to be pure. As Hélène persists in her claim of love for Menelaus, brass represents the royal marriage, but then more prominent heralding brass repeats when Pâris speaks of the palace she could have in Troy—Pâris changing his persuasion tactics. Finally, however, Pâris chooses to use dominance to force Hélène into submission to her love for him.

While the depiction of the other characters’ dominance and Hélène’s human weakness helps generate sympathy for her plight, a portrayal of Hélène’s beauty helps accentuate this sympathy. Saint-Saëns recognized that through music he could capture the power of Helen’s beauty in a new way, and so it was logical for him to emphasize this quality in order to shape audiences’ sympathy for her. At the beginning of the scene in which she enters, we hear divisi strings, softly swelling and contracting amidst a constant tremolo of swift chord changes of broken ninths, contrasting the previous classically influenced music with its simple harmonies and melodies proclaiming Menelaus and Hélène. The lush harmonies and gentle nature of the music are the first instance of this type of music in the opera thus far, and highlight Hélène’s inner and outer beauty.

The depiction of her outer beauty is particularly important in moments where Hélène’s inner beauty seems to disappear later in the opera, such as when Hélène rejoices in amazement of Pâris’s offer of sacrifice, asking “Can it be that you will give your life for me?” At this point the listener is still thinking of the previous scene’s imagery of the Trojan people who will burn and suffer after she leaves with Pâris, making Hélène’s question seem self-centered, which complicates the positive image that Saint-Saëns has thus far created for Hélène. The portrayal of Hélène’s outer beauty through the “pure”
tonic and dominant harmonies in C major, and a violin solo, reaching to the upper notes of its range prior to Hélène’s entry, helps detract from these thoughts of her inner selfishness. It is perhaps Hélène’s destined love that has clouded her, the love that we cannot blame her for, therefore exonerating her also of blame for her insensitivity.

Amidst portrayals of Hélène’s beauty, music with a stronger dramatic quality is used to dramatize her struggle and win the audience’s sympathy. After the first musical representation of her beauty, dramatic tension begins with her first monologue. This opening verbal entry is one of the most striking recitative-like moments in the work. The silence accompanying her in the first measure mimics the loneliness of her struggle against love, draws attention to her important first line “Where can I flee to escape love?”, and creates an unsettling feel, as until now the audience has heard continuous music. Homophonic strings accompany her next lines, with intensifying moments of dissonance leading to polyphony and tempo fluctuations. The increasingly aggressive music culminates in Wagnerian chromaticism in hurried sixteenth notes. This is not a woman at peace with her destiny; echoes of classicism no longer suffice to depict her torment.

**Rejecting Redemption**

Although Saint-Saëns’s separation of art from morality allowed him great stylistic freedom, his audiences were accustomed to the Wagnerian promise of spiritual enlightenment through music. Saint-Saëns did not completely reject morality in choosing the subject of Helen of Troy—her immoral actions are given a valid defense and she is
exonerated of blame—yet Saint-Saëns’s practical sensibility would have probably realized that the use of a ‘destiny’ defense, and even his creation of sympathy, would not have convinced all audiences to embrace Hélène. A strong aesthetic appeal was therefore a necessary part of persuading audiences that redemption was unnecessary, and Saint-Saëns’s ability to separate the “ethical” component from the “aesthetical” in Wagner’s music aided him in making use of Wagnerian tools, while still rejecting the philosophical themes:

I read somewhere that the appearance of the Parsifal text was an event not only of the aesthetic type, but also ethical, marking a new era in the moral development of mankind. This is quite possible, and I am quite prepared to believe it once someone has provided me with some solid proof. Until that time I shall content myself with considering Wagner’s works from an aesthetic point of view, which is quite sufficient for works of art.34

Saint-Saëns’s philosophy of “art for art’s sake”35 is clearest at the end of the opera, where there is little speech and no drama, just Pâris and Hélène rejoicing in their love. Instead of portraying Hélène’s dramatic struggle, Wagnerian music depicts her final acceptance of her destiny. The music of Wagnerian redemption does not transform the characters, but rather transforms any doubt in audiences’ minds as to whether the immoral love should be celebrated—it is not possible that such beautiful music could represent immorality.

Hélène’s final acceptance of her destiny and proclamation of her love appears in the sixth scene, primarily through Wagnerian chromaticism, the gradual employment of more instruments and louder dynamics as the scene moves towards a climax, and a

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greater use of leitmotifs. In this scene Pâris declares his endless love for Hélène with a gathering together of the earlier leitmotifs (see Example 1.4). In this iteration, Pâris’s part, not the orchestra, presents the leitmotifs, reflecting the final accentuation of his love. Hélène eventually adopts the leitmotifs, following more struggles. There is two-part polyphony at first between the lovers, yet their lines gradually become closer, with imitation, and finally unison (see Example 1.5). This joining of the lovers is accompanied by string and harp arpeggios, iterations of the leitmotifs by the woodwinds, and the use of brass to thicken the texture, the music pushing forward and gradually becoming more homophonic as Hélène and Pâris unite. The thicker texture that then follows, played by the orchestra is effective, as it celebrates the acceptance of their love, without text, so there is no issue of it overpowering the words.

In the final scene Hélène and Pâris are only accompanied by harp and organ when they speak, the placement of these instruments from the second orchestra onstage preventing the final declamatory music from being interpreted metaphysically because the musicians are in plain sight, the music coming from mortals rather than the heavens. However, before this, a full orchestra restates the leitmotifs, accompanied by percussion and divisi strings, and the work ends with proclamatory brass. The large Wagnerian orchestra used for this work, which included a variety of percussion, harps, a number of brass, and triple winds, is most useful here in helping Saint-Saëns to depict the passion and enormity of Hélène and Pâris’s love.

\[36\] Most notably alto and contrabass clarinets are called for, which have been rarely used in orchestral music before or since.
Conclusion

With hardly any performances by Dame Nellie Melba of the opera that was written for her and only a few performances at all in the early years of the twentieth century, Saint-Saëns’s *Hélène* has not remained in the operatic canon.\(^{37}\) The opera lay largely forgotten for decades, before the recovery of the orchestral score in 2007.\(^{38}\) It is perhaps Saint-Saëns’s wish to let Hélène speak her side of the story, rather than using the myth of the Trojan War as purely an interesting subject for an opera that caused the problems. Melba’s rejection appears to have been due to the lack of a complex, substantial role for Hélène, yet such an approach would have contradicted Saint-Saëns’s views on clarity, and risked portraying Hélène as too dominant. The general lack of popularity is perhaps not due to any aesthetic failure, but rather confusion amongst early twentieth-century audiences as to the unusual heterogeneity of this work. It is not an epigonic Wagnerian work, nor does it fall neatly into the category of French opera. There are not empty displays of virtuosity, but at the same time, simplicity is used periodically, but not exclusively, to depict a humanized Helen. Saint-Saëns’s combining of different styles and unique synthesis of music and drama was perhaps *too* modern a concept for the audiences of the twentieth century, who were becoming used to seeing innovation in certain ways, but perhaps not in this way. However, Saint-Saëns succeeded in offering a new reading of Helen of Troy, and it is hopefully in revival now that his original approach can be appreciated.

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\(^{37}\) The first performance was given on 18 February 1904 at the Théâtre de Monte-Carlo.

\(^{38}\) By Maria Van Damme, executive director of Melbourne’s Melba Foundation, in the archives of the Monte Carlo Opera, while she was searching for materials regarding Dame Nellie Melba.
Chapter 2

Transformation and Domesticity in Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s

Die ägyptische Helena

What it is all about is one of the straightforward and stupendous problems of life: fidelity; whether to hold fast to that which is lost, to cling to it even in death—or to live, to live on, to get over with it, to transform oneself, to sacrifice the integrity of the soul and yet in this transmutation to preserve one's essence, to remain a human being and not to sink to the level of beast, which is without recollection.¹

Introduction

Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal explored the idea of transformation, a concept integral to their own personal philosophies, throughout their operatic collaboration.² In the above quotation, from a letter to Strauss of mid-July 1911, Hofmannsthal theorized a transformation that preserved one’s essence—a reconciliation of being and becoming—that would apply not just in Ariadne auf Naxos but in many of their works. Both men were influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, with the philosopher’s Also sprach Zarathustra providing a guide on a particular kind of transformation, from human to Übermensch—a being who is able to reject metaphysics and the constraints of false higher powers, through embracing the affirmation of the will. But Nietzsche’s

vision was largely critical, rather than productive; as the inspiration of a worldview and a creative oeuvre it fell short.

For Strauss, who had rejected religious gods and then Schopenhauer, Nietzsché’s idea of transformation provided a welcome justification. Yet, the “eternal recurrence” proved a stumbling block, for transformation, though continually sought, is never fully achieved. Nietzschean cycles of overcoming and disgust form the topic in his tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra* where, in the words of Charles Youmans, Strauss “struggled privately to mediate between strong antimetaphysical convictions and recurring doubts, his music not surprisingly becoming a way of thinking about, if not thinking through, the philosophical dilemma.”3 This use of composition to think through philosophical dilemmas would continue for much of his creative life. As the philosopher died at the turn of the new century, Strauss moved beyond the dilemma Nietzsche had failed to solve by means of a new focus on redemptive domesticity. He explored this idea through works such as *Symphonia domestica*,4 in which he used Nietzsche’s ideology about the will to form a new philosophy where sexuality and family served as an answer to the problem of transformation.

Nietzsche saw the rejection of metaphysics as possible through affirmation of the will, rebelling against Schopenhauer’s denial of the will, and instead embracing it: “Life is not the adaption of inner circumstances to outer ones, but will to power, which, working from within, incorporates and subdues more and more of that which is

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‘outside.’”\(^5\) Strauss strongly believed in this affirmation, stating that “I affirm consciously, that is my happiness,” and specifically located this affirmation in the human need for physicality, stating in his diary that “Affirmation of the will must properly be called affirmation of the body.”\(^6\) In the private domain, Strauss applied this philosophy through the physical and human nature of his marriage in 1894 to Pauline de Ahna. For Strauss, domesticity offered a permanence not found in Nietzsche’s philosophy of the eternal recurrence, providing not only a way to affirm the will, through sex, but enabling the ultimate dedication to physicality—the creation of human life. Creation was a central concept in Nietzsche’s idea of transformation, the philosopher having claimed in *Zarathustra* that “Creation[...]is the great redemption from all suffering.”\(^7\) Yet Zarathustra did not create life; he failed to reach what Nietzsche saw as the highest goal of the individual: “The tremendous importance the individual accords to the sexual instinct is not a result of its importance for the species, but arises because procreation is the real achievement of the individual and consequently his highest interest, his highest expression of power (not judged from the consciousness but from the center of the whole individuation).”\(^8\) Strauss would take the step that Zarathustra avoided.

Hofmannsthal too married and had children, and as with Strauss this choice can be read as a manifestation of a philosophy of transformation. Bryan Gilliam has described the poet’s views on the important connection between producing life and the process of self-realization, discussing how “the Empress and the Dyer’s Wife learned...that in order

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\(^8\) Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 360.
to attain humanity one must admit a responsibility to the past, present, and future of that humanity. Such an accountability, according to Hofmannsthal, can happen through marriage and the creation of a new generation.”

Hofmannsthal viewed marriage and procreation as a means of realizing the philosophy of transformation that was central to his worldview: “Transformation is the life of life itself,” Hofmannsthal declared, “the real mystery of nature as creative force. Permanence is numbness and death. Whoever wants to live must surpass himself, must transform himself: he has to forget. And yet all human merit is linked with permanence, unforgetfulness, constancy.”

Hofmannsthal thus seems to have evolved in a direction similar to Strauss’s, independently, although the habitually tight-lipped composer preferred to explore his thoughts in music. With their similar ideas on transformation and the personal sphere, their collaboration spawned multiple operas that dealt with these issues, giving Hofmannsthal a venue to communicate his views and Strauss a medium in which to investigate his own.

Strauss examined his post-Nietzschean ideas on the transforming properties of marriage in many works (both with and without Hofmannsthal), most notably a triptych of three domestic operas—Die ägyptische Helena, Die Frau ohne Schatten, and Intermezzo.

Gilliam has shown that in the theme of transformation that runs through Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s collaborations, they routinely abandon the standard male hero in favor of a female protagonist, “who must make a vital choice putting her at risk…and in doing so… is transformed.”

Strauss and Hofmannsthal collaborated on Die ägyptische Helena between 1923-8, using the myth of Helen of Troy to investigate this

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10 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, quoted in ibid.
12 Ibid.
idea of female transformation. Gilliam’s discussion of Helena’s transformation diverges from Norman Del Mar’s earlier interpretation of this work, which suggests that it is instead “the gradual transformation in the mind of Menelas, from his self-appointed task of slaying Helena in retribution for those who fell in the Trojan Wars on her account, to the moment when he drops the sword at her feet and conducts her back to join him on the throne of Sparta.”13 Strauss himself referred to “Menelas’s transformation,”14 but Gilliam argues convincingly that this change in Menelas happens through Helena. It is Helena who rejects the defense of supernatural beings, thus achieving the ultimate rejection of metaphysics, in addition to repairing her marriage through her embracing of the truth. It is Helena who enables Menelas to embrace physicality, through sex. Most importantly, it is Helena who produces a daughter for Menelas, enabling the ultimate act of creation and “the real achievement of the individual.”15

The “vital choice” that Helena makes is found in Hofmannsthal’s divergence from his main source, Euripides’s story of Helen of Troy, which in turn had borrowed from the ancient Greek poet Stesichorus. When Stesichorus was blinded after speaking ill of Helen of Troy, he invented a defense in which a phantom Helen was to blame for the war, while the real Helen lay peacefully in Sparta for ten years.16 Stesichorus’s palinode was taken up by Euripides and became the “alternative” Helen story. In Die ägyptische Helena, Helena is stranded on a desert island with her husband Menelas, who is ready to kill her.

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15 Nietzsche, The Will to Power, 360.
16 This palinode was lost, but is reported in Plato, “Phaedrus” in The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present, ed. Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 147.
The sorceress Aithra offers the phantom defense, duping Menelas through the use of a potion, and saving Helena’s life. Husband and wife are joined again—but through deceit, which lessens the transforming abilities of their physical union, and Helena cannot long stand the deception. Hofmannsthal here rejects Euripides’ phantom defense, replacing it with an act of bravery: Helena makes a “vital choice” and gives Menelas a potion of remembrance. In this act she is transformed through the recovery of her marriage, and transforms Menelas alongside her, by enabling him to forgive her due to her honesty, changing him from a jealous, bitter man, to a loving husband. Their child Hermione appears for the first time in the opera, completing the transformation, through a display of Helena and Menelas’s creation of new life. The opera ends with the promise of the permanence of this transformation, through the security of ongoing marriage.

This chapter will examine how Hofmannsthal and Strauss continued their investigation of the transforming properties of domesticity, through the infusion of twentieth century issues into a well-known myth. Their idiosyncratic synthesis of music and drama plays an essential part in depicting this transformation, and they importantly stress its linear nature, separating it from previous cyclical works, where transformation is continually attempted, but never achieved. In order to succeed in their modernist rendering of female transformation, Helen of Troy is portrayed in an innovative way, rejecting traditional readings of the Greek myth. This original dramatization of Helen’s story incorporates a number of new symbolic devices into the myth, using stylistic diversity to highlight the complexities of her transformation. The opera has been criticized for its own complexities, yet I hope to show the necessity of the various
elements in a work that artistically realizes Hofmannsthal and Strauss’s post-Nietzschean philosophies.

**A Post-Wagnerian Rhetoric of Transformation**

Music and libretto work together to drive the process of transformation forward in *Die ägyptische Helena*, presenting it as a constantly active endeavor by Helena, highlighting its gradual and directional nature, and rejecting any notion of cyclicity. In developing a technique for dramatizing this transformation in music, Strauss could have elected to follow Wagner’s methods of “transfiguration,” which are most evident in the “Liebstod” of *Tristan und Isolde*, yet he instead chose to use *Stilkunst* to create a non-Wagnerian musical rendering of transformation. Morten Kristiansen, who coined the term *Stilkunst* to describe Strauss’s use of multiple styles within individual works, has labeled it as an “aesthetic of constant change,” thus making this technique perfect for creating an image of Helena’s own “constant change” throughout the opera. Wagner is not completely rejected, however; the technique of continuous music, in a Wagnerian vein, is used to dramatize the continuous action of transformation. This is coupled with simpler musical styles to create textual clarity, and a variety of other styles are used to dramatize the action and various characters, in Strauss’s typical pictorial way.

The correspondence between composer and librettist during the creation of this work divulges the stylistic dilemma that plagued both men in the initial years of the opera’s development. Strauss had originally intended *Die ägyptische Helena* to be a light

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operetta, and while it quickly departed from this initial idea, both collaborators persistently attempted to write scenes that were “partly entirely without music, partly melodramatic, partly punctuated only by short musical flourishes.” Straus was anxious that the work include dialogue, because he thought that “the purely spoken word is better understood,” demonstrating his prioritization of a coherent drama. He was aware of the problems Wagner’s focus on orchestral melody and creation of dense polyphony had caused, with the vocal lines becoming obscured and the audience too focused on following the dramatic imagery that the orchestra created to comprehend the text fully.

Through rejecting the elements of Wagnerian style that hindered textual comprehension, extracting instead those Wagnerian principles he found useful, Strauss succeeded in adding Wagner’s influence to his palette of stylistic tools, to be used if and when necessary.

The opera begins with jagged, dissonant melodic fragments that reflect the broken state of Menelas and Helena’s marriage:

![Example 2.2. Hofmannsthal and Strauss, Die ägyptische Helena, mm.1-2.](image)

The allusion to twentieth-century atonality is not due to an attempt at adherence to conventional modernism; rather, Strauss uses this style to show the severity of the problems between the couple, and the degree of improvement required if they are to be

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19 Ibid., 369.
reunited. This level of dissonance never recurs in the opera; instead, a variety of styles dramatizes the different stages through which Helena passes in her constantly linear transformation. The opera ends with a unison duet between Helena and Menelas, and a final statement of their newfound harmony, through the concluding tonic chords in D major, described as the key of “Victory” and “Joy” by Wachten.20 The tonal movement from beginning to end is important in the symbolic change from harmonic ambiguity to secure diatonicism, but also through the specific movement from D# at the beginning of the opera to D at the end. The interval of a semitone played a very important part in Strauss’s works—many of them end a semitone apart from where the opera began.

Gilliam has observed that “the semitone may well be the closest interval in Western tonal music, but Strauss recognized them as ‘die zwei entferntesten Tonarten’ (the two most distant tonalities), as he discussed the relationship between nature (C) and humanity (B) in Also sprach Zarathustra (1896). Strauss continued to articulate powerful semitone dualities in his music, even in the operas.”21 Gilliam further applied this technique to the theme of transformation: “The most important common musical element between Ariadne and Daphne is Strauss's decision to signify transformation by harmonic movement of a semitone.”22 In Die ägyptische Helena, the opera opens with a D# whole tone scale and a melodic fragment that begins on D# and then rises to this held pitch, and ends with D major tonic chords. While variety within one style would have been possible, Strauss’s use of Stilkunst and this important symbolic harmonic movement served to

22 Ibid., 78.
accentuate strongly the difference between Helena at the beginning of the opera and the end.

The focus on transformation in this opera is aided by the libretto’s emphasis on looking forward to the future, rather than back to the past. The Trojan War is largely ignored, while the future of Menelas and Helena’s marriage becomes a central theme. Joanna Bottenberg discusses cuts in the first act, observing that “Both of these omitted passages were concerned with remembering the past—a theme that was given more importance in Hofmannsthal’s original plan than in the final form of the opera.”

Through a conscious avoidance of the Trojan War and the past in general, the opera ignores the moral implications of the war as well as the question of retribution for Helena, prioritizing instead future domesticity. Yet, the past cannot be completely ignored, or we would not perceive what a transformed Helena will leave behind. Reminiscences of the past—Hofmannsthal’s use of verse, Strauss’s periodic return to older styles, and allusions to past musical works—thus highlight what Helena used to be.

While the motion is linear throughout the opera, there is a reminiscence of cyclical form in the first act, albeit one still essentially part of a through-composed work. Scenes with Aithra, the omnipotent sea shell, and elves serve as both prelude and conclusion to Act 1, with the dramatic recovery of Helena and Menelas’s marriage forming the main body of the act. The recollection of cyclical form looks back wistfully on the attempt to follow Wagnerian metaphysics—Helena and Menelas are reunited through the potion of forgetfulness, with Menelas then forgiving her and re-consummating their marriage. The opera could end with Helena’s redemption for her sins.

through the help of the sorceress Aithra, and Menelas’s kindness. The imaginary conversation between Hofmannsthal and Strauss in the librettist’s essay highlights this intention of a seemingly closed form for the first act:

“And surely, this must be the end of the play? What could happen after this in the second act?”
“Yes, this could be the end of the play. In this case, it would be a short frivolous comedy, in which a husband after some terrifying adventures is fooled by two women. But this is hardly the way these characters were intended, don't you agree? This Menelaus and this Helen did not look, did they, as if this could be the end?”

Divine intervention is no longer enough, nor is Menelas a heroic man who can save his wife. Helena must make her own transformation to save her marriage, and thus the opera must continue, in its through-composed form—a modern replacement for a cyclical form no longer adequate to the post-Nietzschean philosophy of a new age.

**The Twentieth-Century Helena**

Gilliam has recognized the value of Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s contribution to the oeuvre of modernist works reflecting female empowerment at the turn of the twentieth century:

*Salome* can be seen as part of a new century’s sea change toward the *femme nouvelle*, and Strauss was hardly oblivious to the huge marketing potential in composing operas with such strong, central female characters as Salome and Elektra. But there were also important psychological implications, rich literary allusions, and another opportunity for an open artistic response to Wagner, whose worldview focused more on male heroes with the woman serving as a redeeming force.

24 Hofmannsthal wrote an essay on the opera, published prior to the premiere, to aid the audience’s comprehension of the work – an issue both he and Strauss were concerned with. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Egyptian Helen*, trans. Hilde D. Cohn, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15/2 (December 1956), 211.

Of course, the dramatization of female transformation in the operas would have met some resistance in 1928, as not everyone welcomed the changing role of women in society. Strauss and Hofmannsthal evidently understood this, and thus while they portrayed Helena as a strong woman, one capable of enacting her own transformation, they also carefully maintained a degree of equality between her and Menelas, to create a sense of balance in the marriage.

The equilibrium between Helena and Menelas is created gradually, the initial step being a rejection of portraying Menelas as a stereotypical dominant male. At the beginning of the opera, Menelas’s lack of power is established, thus accentuating Helena’s contrasting later displays of dominance. In the prelude he prepares to kill his wife, yet a storm prevents him (incidentally one that is created by Aithra, who is driven to save Helena because of her beauty), and he saves her from drowning. Menelas’s intention portrays him in a negative light, and his inability to carry out what he wants to do suggests ineptitude from the start. The first scene then opens with Helena and Menelas stranded upon the island, Menelas appearing confused, asking multiple questions: “Where am I? To whose house have we come?....Great Gods! What awaits me? My mind is clouded!”

26 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Die Ägyptische Helena, op.75*, composed by Richard Strauss, trans. Alfred Kalisch (Berlin: Adolphe Fuhrstner 1928). (All quotations of the libretto are from this translation.)
her knowledge was an integral part of her power: “she knows everything that goes on within [Menelas]–this is her strength–yet she remains in control of the situation, otherwise, she would not be Helen.”

Helena’s power resides largely in her beauty, a seductive and dangerous quality that Strauss and Hofmannsthal clearly wished to emphasize in the opera. Bottenberg observes that “in Hofmannsthal’s exposition of Act II, as in the act itself, the threatened and actual killing of Da-ud is merely ‘ein Detail,’ serving the sole purpose of demonstrating the extent of Menelas’s delusion and Helena’s absolute power over men.”

As with operas such as Salome, Elektra, and Der Rosenkavalier, Strauss was evidently very capable of depicting powerful women. Helena’s power embodies her capacity for self realization and subsequent action, and the change in how she uses her power highlights the different person she has become by the end of the opera. Prior to the opera she used this power to obtain many men—one aspect of her past that is acknowledged. Yet when she has the opportunity to leave Menelas for Altair or Da-ud, she refuses. Helena is so focused on being faithful to Menelas and recovering their marriage, that she is completely uninterested in anyone else. Her rejection of her previous identity as a goddess whose beauty holds an unyielding power, in favor of a new identity as a wife content with simple domesticity, delineates the progress in her transformation.

By the same token, Helena’s beauty is transformed at the end of the opera from a destructive force into an innocent purity. Hermione specifies “Where is my beautiful mother?” when she asks for Helena, her soprano voice sparsely accompanied by a solo violin, other strings, harp and celeste. This moment contrasts powerfully with the initial

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27 Hofmannsthal, The Egyptian Helen, 209.
mention of Helena’s beauty, discussed by the sorceress Aithra with melodic leaps in a polyphonic texture, accompanied by tense drum rolls. Helena’s beauty no longer functions as a curse that seduces men and the supernatural, but instead becomes a simple characteristic recognized by her innocent daughter.

Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s audience in 1928 would likely have had a general familiarity with ancient Greek texts, so that the divergence from Euripides would have been particularly apparent. This new reading flouted a popular tradition of blaming Helen of Troy and portraying her as a “whore,” weak woman, and figure of amusement that ran through centuries of artistic works inspired by the myth. Rejecting both this tradition and Euripides’ s phantom story accentuated the image of Helena as a strong woman and as a suitable wife. The choice of a strong Helena also answers the primary criticism of the phantom defense—Austin has observed that in order to stop Helen of Troy from being blamed, she was removed from existence, rather than truly being exonerated of blame: “The Palinode’s project, to remove the dishonor from the traditional story by ascribing all Helen’s ambiguity to her simulacrum, far from resolving Helen’s ambivalences, had the unwitting effect of making Helen into a ghost of her own ghost, the negative of a negative.”

This opera thus succeeds in not only solving the problem of the “negative Helen,” but also enables Helen to defend herself even as she emerges as a good wife, a strong woman who embraces important aspects of marriage—most of all, honesty.

Helena’s rejection of Aithra’s defense is particularly important because of Aithra’s supernatural identity. The placement of Helena and Menelas in a setting full of supernatural creatures, such as the omniscient sea shell, elves, and Aithra the sorceress,

29 Austin, Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom, 10.
superficially appears to contradict the theme of domesticity. However, the creation of a defense for Helena by the supernatural creatures, which are clearly on Helena’s side throughout, with Aithra conceiving of the phantom Helen defense and the elves distracting Menelas, proves to be important. That it is Helena herself who finally saves her own life, rather than the powerful supernatural characters, accentuates her power—she is so self-sufficient that she has no need of help from mere mortals, or even the supernatural. The implicit claim that human power exceeds the divine is a blatant rejection of Wagner’s prioritization of the metaphysical over the physical.

The Physicality of Domesticity

The importance of the physicality of Helena and Menelas’s marriage, as a rejection of metaphysics and means of Helena’s transformation, finds expression in Strauss’s Stilkunst and Hofmannsthal’s symbolism. Composer and librettist use these artistic tools to merge the mythical world of Helen of Troy with an earthly domesticity. Hofmannsthal roots his idea of transformation in the mortal world, clarifying it in his essay, where he rejects magic in favor of nature and focuses on Helena and Menelas’s identities as husband and wife, rather than Helen of Troy and Menelas of Sparta:

my imagination kept circling around the episode of husband and wife returning together, and around the question what terrible and eventually redeeming experiences the two might have gone through together. The whole thing seemed so mysterious to me as to be resolved practically only through magic; but magic resolves nothing to our way of feeling. The elements of nature must have had their share in this, the atmosphere of those active elemental beings, who are indifferent and yet helpful at the same time.\(^{30}\)

\(^{30}\) Hofmannsthal, The Egyptian Helen, 208.
His belief in the incapability of magic serves to highlight the capabilities of the
domesticity, a state that he saw as humans’ closest possible connection to nature.

The physicality created by Strauss and Hofmannsthal has a Nietzschean
resonance. One of the initial elements that Strauss and Hofmannsthal discussed was the
inclusion of a chorus of laughing and dancing elves, seemingly quite appropriate for the
original conception of a light comedy. Yet Hofmannsthal was insistent that the elves
should not appear light in a Mendelssohnian manner, but rather more akin to Berlioz’s
witches’s Sabbath,31 with a “sneering hatred of man.”32 The elves laugh, and while the
original dancing element was excluded from the final version, their laughter is sung to a
dance rhythm:

Example 2.3. Hofmannsthal and Strauss, *Die ägyptische Helena*, reh. 203, mm. 4-5.

Bottenberg has associated this with “the first movement of Beethoven’s Seventh
Symphony, known as the apotheosis of dance.”33 This laughter and dancing operate in
Nietzschean fashion, to mock man rather than to celebrate lightheartedness or innocent
Mendelssohnian humor.

The elves appear primarily in the first act, playing their most important role at the
day of the act. After taking the potion of forgetfulness, Menelas forgives Helena and they
move toward the bedroom. The stage cue dictates that “Helena goes to the threshold of

31 Hofmannsthal to Strauss, Rodaun, 18 January 1924, in *A Working Friendship: The Correspondence
Between Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, 379.
32 Ibid.
the sleeping chamber and turns round towards Menelas” (see Example 2.4), and triumphant music sounds in the brass in E major (m. 5 of reh. 199), the key associated with Eros in Strauss’s works. After some falling chromaticism in the woodwinds and strings (reh. 201), a pedal E major chord is held by the organ (reh. 202), and Menelas’s heroic motif is played (reh. 203). There is no doubt that Helena and Menelas are re-consummating their marriage, but the concurrent reappearance of the elves laughing (m. 4 of reh. 203) while the music is still in E major is confusing. While Menelas is sure he has taken charge, forgiving his wife whom he has recovered, and the audience are shown a happy joining of the couple, the elves mock the ignorant believers who think that Helena might be redeemed through love—a love that is rooted in lies, through the false phantom defense. It is a characteristic moment at which Strauss speaks to a certain part of the audience, the rest blissfully unaware, and ready to be shocked by the events of the second act.

Hofmannsthal evidently saw the elves as akin to a Greek chorus, describing how “the elves represent the criticism of the unconscious,” and further clarifying their purpose in his essay:

The elves are not of the opinion either that the play could be over. These elves are present all the time as an invisible chorus. They watch the whole thing like a show. And this ending seems too cheap to them. They do not think that one should get off so easily after such a tangled involvement. They mock invisibly, though audibly, throughout the action. “This must not be,” they hiss, “you won't get away that cheaply.”

34 Hofmannsthal, The Egyptian Helen, 213.
35 Ibid., 210-11.
While the elves are the supernatural creatures, their laughing and dancing serve to emphasize their physicality and thus their implicit relationship to Helena and Menelas’s earthly marriage. This physicality contrasts the falseness of Helena and Menelas’s joining, which is based upon the lie of the magic potion. The chromaticism that creates a feeling of unrest, after the initial proclamation of their union, reflects the suppression of truth from their consciousnesses. Redemption through sex, a theme that goes back to Feuersnot in Strauss’s oeuvre, does not find a place here due to the conflicts between body and mind, truth and lies. Helena and Menelas cannot recover their marriage through deception, potions, and mere false forgiveness. Rather, Helena’s gradual self-realization and then transformation is the only way to a permanent domesticity.

While Nietzschean philosophy was popular at the turn of the twentieth century for those looking for an alternative to the Judeo-Christian tradition, not everyone would have related to a tale of feminine self-transformation. Through explaining Helena’s will for self-improvement by her love for Menelas, Strauss and Hofmannsthal rooted the theme of transformation in domesticity. The motivational drive a desire for domestic bliss could create was certainly a theme audiences could relate to, and so the dramatization of Helena’s love takes a central role in the opera. Her climactic declaration of love, which occurs in her aria in the beginning of act two, has been praised for its lyricism and is a passage where Strauss acknowledged that a light style, or speech, would certainly not be sufficient. The act opens with a man and woman blissfully happy again, their marriage seemingly restored. While the aftermath of taking a potion and Wagnerian influence

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polyphony bring connotations of Tristan und Isolde, the music is pure Strauss physicality when Helena sings her “Second bride’s / Magical night.” Strings soar, woodwinds hold high pitches and Helena’s lyrical melodies are spotlighted by a rhythmically augmented vocal line and a move to sparser polyphony. The few chromatic inflections do not taint the translucent diatonicism, now clearly in B major.

Helena’s blissful state does not last long, however, as the lovers’ duet unravels, and Menelas’s drug-induced confusion brings darker music and a denser texture. Menelas’s interrupting questions during Helena’s aria, such as “Where is the house?,” again show his lack of control, though this time we sympathize with Menelas’s confusion. Helena’s declaration of love is in part due to a deceitful potion, and through embracing it she reminds us that she has not yet managed to overcome her dependence upon metaphysics.

When Helena finally makes her “vital choice,” offering to sacrifice herself, then being saved as Menelas throws away his sword, the music of Helena’s aria returns as he sings of how they are “Wedded anew.” After an interlude where Altair returns to take Helena, the couple are finally joined, an appearance by their daughter Hermione serving to complete their marriage. Hermione is a young girl, not a new creation, yet Hofmannsthal’s avoidance of any mention of her throughout the rest of the opera enables her to serve as an important symbol at this point. She is a creation of Helena and Menelas’s marriage; only through their domesticity can they demonstrate their “highest expression of power” and reject any metaphysical “higher powers.” Helena has been transformed, and through her act of bravery she recovers her marriage and child. Hermione’s question to Menelas, “Father, where is my beautiful mother?” joins the three
members of the family together, with a final unison duet between Menelas and Helena completing their union.

Lush harmonies and lyrical melodies in the strings accompany the duet in unison by the husband and wife. This music is far-removed from the tonal harshness and separate themes of the beginning of the opera, where Menelas and Helena are together as man and wife, yet separated by anger and blame. The music is different also from the end of act one, where the lovers are together through the power of the potion they have drunk, celebrating their union in rapturous E major, yet mocked by the elves who know it will not last. Instead their voices move in perfect harmony, as they celebrate the transformation that has reunited them: “Favoring breezes, carry us home. Guide us, ye blessed stars hence through the air, Loftiest dwelling, thy portals fling wide, Joyfully greeting the e’erlasting pair!” In a Wagnerian music drama such a moment would celebrate a spiritual union, possibly after death. In Strauss’s opera the music acknowledges the physical joining of man and wife, together again, to the earthly nature of their reunion being highlighted by the horses that then carry them offstage. Helena and Menelas have left behind the supernatural world—the world that we see at the beginning of the opera in the omniscient mussel and sorceress—exchanging the spiritual for the physical.

**Conclusion**

This opera has not been one of the public’s favorites among the lengthy collaboration between Hofmannsthal and Strauss, yet the poet and composer considered it one of their
greatest successes. Through their use of a well-known myth, they were able to examine their thoughts about domesticity and the important role it can play. Yet this work does not function purely as a medium for Hofmannsthal and Strauss’s philosophizing, nor as effective entertainment; it is a much-needed modernist reading of Helen of Troy, contributing in an important way to the canon of works about her story. After over two thousand years of negative depictions of Helen and defenses that portrayed her as a weak woman needing another to exonerate her of blame, she takes charge of her own story. At the end of the opera, one could view Helena’s defense as being transformed from that which Aithra offers—the defense of the phantom Helen—to her own defense of natural human error. Yet when one considers Helen at the end of the opera, one does not see a woman who needs exoneration from blame; rather, through the course of the work, Helena has metamorphosed into someone different. Helen of Troy no longer exists, not because her very existence has been negated through a phantom, but rather because Helen of Troy has become Helen of Egypt, Die ägyptische Helena.
Chapter 3

Ideology and Realism in Boulanger’s *Faust et Hélène*

Introduction

Lili Boulanger was just nineteen years old when she became the first woman to win the *Prix de Rome*, on 5 July 1913, with her cantata *Faust et Hélène*. That it was frail Lili and not her older sister Nadia making this first step for women, made the surprise more acceptable. Nadia had won the *Deuxième Grand Prix* five years earlier, yet her identity as a *femme nouvelle* was not popular in the tense years of the early twentieth century. Women’s place in French society was definitely changing, yet there were varying levels of acceptance of these changes. Lili Boulanger was seen as a *femme fragile*, a view aided by her ill health and early death at twenty-four. The young female protagonists in works such as her mostly lost opera *La princesse Maleine* were held up in comparison, with the view that “Boulanger was a real-life femme fragile born to give to a play which was a literary icon of symbolist drama its true voice, a voice which according to symbolist aesthetics could only be musical.”¹ The playwright-poet Maurice Maeterlinck and others saw her as a “child-genius” whose tragic weakness enabled her to have a type of “divine” vision into a literary work’s fictional characters.² Boulanger was considered a sacred gift

² The strongest display of this view is contained in a letter Maeterlinck wrote to Boulanger, where he tells her that “the child-genius who must give a voice to *La princesse Maleine* cannot pass away before having accomplished her work, which seems fused with her destiny”; quoted in ibid., 68.
to the artistic world, placed on the earth for a short time to breathe life into these characters so similar to herself.

In a study of *La princesse Maleine*, Annegret Fauser argues against reading the opera as a strongly autobiographical work, largely because she views the *femme fragile* persona as one Boulanger encouraged, not as a true expression of her identity, but rather as a way to improve her chances of success as a composer. It was a persona cultivated during her short period as a composer and exploited by Nadia and others following her early death. However, despite the help this persona gave Boulanger in gaining public acceptance, after her death it encouraged critics to deify her, undermining her achievements by emphasizing God-given talents over her own hard work.

Notwithstanding the dangers of an autobiographical reading of her work generally, viewing *Faust et Hélène* in light of certain biographical information about Boulanger can be useful. The work itself enables us to understand the hidden sides of Boulanger, refuting the threadbare view of her as a *femme fragile*. Moreover, information about Boulanger’s life helps give insight into how a woman might offer a fresh dramatization of Helen of Troy through a realistic reading of the “goddess.” Regrettably, critics have focused on the work’s significance as the piece that enabled the first woman to win the *Prix de Rome*, rather than analyzing its broader musical value. One critic demeaned the success that Boulanger gained with winning the prize, acknowledging in a concert review that the cantata was “wildly applauded,” but then claiming that “it is, however, a cleverly executed task rather than the outcome of artistic imagination; and the success should be interpreted as a natural meed of praise to the
young laureate, the first of her sex.” In this cantata Boulanger offered new insight into Helen of Troy’s human qualities and sexual desire, helping give Helen a voice, and also composed a work that displays great stylistic diversity and overcomes the restrictions of the cantata genre.

In comparison to other musical depictions of Helen of Troy, such as Saint-Saëns’s and Strauss’s, this work is short, focusing on just a brief moment in her story. However, the swift action successfully summarizes Hélène’s struggles and desires, and demonstrates clearly her power over men. The work begins with Mephistopheles singing of the dreaming Faust and Mephistopheles’s duty to obey the scholar. Faust awakes, enraptured with Helen of Troy, who has plagued his dreams. He desires her, and so Mephistopheles must summon Hélène from the dead for Faust’s brief pleasure. She resists Faust, her desires suppressed by her remorse for her actions that led to the Trojan War. Hélène views herself as a danger—to love her means death and destruction. Yet, despite her good intentions, desire wins and Faust’s pleas are answered. They have a brief time together, proclaiming their love for each other and giving in to their physical desires. However, Hélène’s warnings come true and the spirits of the dead soldiers of Troy come with Paris to reclaim her. She begs Faust not to let her go, but the spirits are too powerful and drag her away from earth, as Faust waits for the wrath of God to descend upon him.

In this chapter I examine Boulanger’s dramatization of Helen of Troy, within the constraints of the cantata’s genesis—having a set text by Eugène Adénis, a specified

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4 A French poet and playwright, also known as Eugène Adénis-Colombeau (1854-1923), whose texts were used for multiple Prix de Rome competitions.
amount of time to complete the work, and secluded working conditions. In this work Hélène is again exonerated of blame for the war and appears to be attempting to be a better person, demonstrating remorse for her actions and rejecting Faust at first, yet Boulanger rejects the idealized Goethean Helen in favor of a humanized depiction. Hélène does not save Faust; she appears for the sake of a brief physical union, thus making a commentary on desire rather than morality. The duality of Wagnerian and French (Massenet, Debussy, Fauré) styles in this work dramatizes the contrast between the ideal beautiful Hélène that Faust desires and the real, more human woman that she actually is. In view of these dichotomies, Boulanger’s own duality—what the public saw and who she really was—must inform the analysis of the work.

Winning the Prix de Rome

Lili Boulanger’s attainment of the coveted Prix de Rome Premier Grand Prix in 1913 was acknowledged as a climactic moment in the Paris Conservatoire’s history, by those who celebrated and those who deplored her victory. Observers who accepted the changes of the twentieth century, calling the admission of women into the Prix de Rome competition in 1903 a “great victory of feminism,”7 saw Boulanger’s success as yet another step in the difficult war of equality. However, a number of critics begrudged

5 Candidates were to complete piano and orchestral scores for a cantata during one month of seclusion at the Palace of Compiègne.
6 Ironically one of Boulanger’s other compositions has been included on a recording entitled “The Eternal Feminine”—a telling example of reception of Boulanger’s works.
Boulanger’s success, viewing her as unfairly taking a prize away from more deserving men. One critic, Emile Vuillermoz, wrote:

A few months ago, in these columns, I warned musicians of the imminence of the “pink peril”: events have not been slow to prove me right. A young suffragette, Mademoiselle Lili Boulanger, has just triumphed in the last competition of the Prix de Rome over all her male competitors and has won on her first attempt the first Premier Grand Prix, with such authority, speed, and ease as to cause great anxiety to those candidates who have for long years sweated blood and tears in striving for this goal. ⁸

This response offers a clue as to why, despite the participation of other women in previous competitions (including Nadia Boulanger), it was not until the femme fragile Lili Boulanger entered in 1913 that they would succeed in proving their equal worth.

In fact Boulanger had previously entered the Prix de Rome competition, in 1912, but withdrew prior to the final round due to ill health. This was effectively her first attempt at winning the competition. Her rivals were not only male, they were all more than six years older and many had entered the competition at least four times previously. However, her young age and inexperience did not prevent the specialist jury from giving her five votes out of eight in the first round and then thirty-one out of thirty-six jury members of the Académie des Beaux Arts from awarding her the top prize. ⁹ Newspapers from around the world covered the story, many with photos of the nineteen-year-old who had impressed not only Paris. These images and stories paint an emotive picture of Boulanger as a femme fragile. As late as 1972, Nadia Boulanger was still advertising her sister to the public, describing her to Lili’s biographer, Léonie Rosenstiel, as “standing near the piano, a slim shadow in a white dress, so simple, so calm, serious and smiling.

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⁹ Ibid., 78.
such an unforgettable image.”\textsuperscript{10} However, the degree to which images and accounts appear to be advertisements for Boulanger, rather than descriptions, suggests that this persona was one constructed by Lili and continued by Nadia as a tool in winning the \textit{Prix de Rome}, rather than a true account of her personality.\textsuperscript{11}

Why Boulanger felt the need to create a “public persona” is hinted at by what is known about Nadia in the first years of the twentieth century. Nadia failed to win the competition in 1909, yet reports praise the musical success of her cantata, thus strengthening the argument that Boulanger self consciously made herself the very opposite of her older sister. Leslie Thayer Piper claims that Lili was aware that Nadia’s refusal to comply with certain social conventions—all based in the contemporary suspicion of the \textit{femme nouvelle}—had turned the judges against her. Lili was determined to do whatever she could to win the prize for herself, and therefore prepared thoroughly and assiduously for the competition.\textsuperscript{12}

The pinnacle of Boulanger’s deception appears to have come in an interview that she and her mother gave after her success in the \textit{Prix de Rome} competition. Boulanger was asked if she could sleep after her success, and she replied: “‘Oh yes, indeed. I dreamed that—didn’t I, Mother?’ ‘That what?’ ‘Well, that I was a little child and was teaching my little doll to play the piano.’ ‘You see,’ said her mother, smiling, ‘she is still only a child.’”\textsuperscript{13}

At the age of nineteen with her education completed and a new world as a professional composer ahead, Boulanger was entering the adult world, yet she saw her child-like beauty and innocence as her ticket to success, and so adulthood would have to wait.

\textsuperscript{10} Nadia Boulanger to Léonie Rosenstiel, June 8, 1972; quoted in ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{11} Fauser has documented this view in “\textit{La Guerre en dentelles}: Women and the \textit{Prix de Rome} in French Cultural Politics,” 122-7.
\textsuperscript{12} Leslie Thayer Piper, “Creating a Context for Lili Boulanger’s \textit{Faust et Hélène},” M.A. Thesis (Smith College, 1996), 95.
\textsuperscript{13} “Young French Women Winning Honors,” \textit{The Musical Leader} 26 (1913); quoted in Fauser, “\textit{La Guerre en dentelles}: Women and the \textit{Prix de Rome} in French Cultural Politics,” 124.
Ultimately her death at twenty-four years of age would immortalize her as a child-genius. Boulanger’s successful step forward for women paved the way for others to enter and win the Prix de Rome, yet the image of the femme fragile “had damaging and long lasting ramifications for the reception of her works and for the endurance of her reputation as a professional composer.”

Against a Feminine Rhetoric

Boulanger learned to give Helen of Troy a voice through a gradual understanding of how to create her own idiosyncratic musical language. While some believed that Boulanger’s success in the Prix de Rome competition was due to her gender, other more open-minded listeners acknowledged the high quality of her musical language. Debussy himself reviewed the cantata and praised Boulanger, announcing:

Lili Boulanger...is only nineteen years old. Her experience of the techniques of writing music is far greater, however! Certainly, here and there we hear these little strings with which one knots the ends of phrases in this type of work, but Mlle. L. Boulanger adds fine workmanship to them. The entry of Hélène, on otherworldly pulsations of divided strings, sways gracefully. But as soon as she comes on the scene, Hélène has the timbre of a daughter of Zeus, overwhelmed by so many conflicting destinies.

The contrasting music Debussy speaks of reflects Boulanger’s gift for stylistic diversity. The lack of these skills amongst Boulanger’s female peers would have enhanced Debussy’s admiration of Boulanger. At the time when Boulanger was developing her own creative voice, “feminine and masculine qualities in music were constantly discussed

in French fin-de-siècle music criticism, these categories being attributed to different nations, genres, composers and musical elements.”¹⁶ Women composers particularly suffered from the separation of “feminine” and “masculine” music. A feminine musical language was assumed to be less diverse than Boulanger’s, perhaps due to the generally poor musical education of women and in particular the unequal opportunities for female students at the Paris Conservatoire. Some women attempted to break free of gender stereotypes and restrictions, using what were seen as “masculine” qualities in music, yet this was often criticized by composers such as Saint-Saëns, who complained that “women are strange when they seriously interfere with art; they seem to be preoccupied with making us forget that they are women and with showing an overflowing virility without realizing that it is just this preoccupation which betrays the woman.”¹⁷

Boulanger managed to avoid the constraints of composing solely “feminine” music, as well as the criticisms of composing “masculine” music, through her unique brand of stylistic diversity. Her works mix polytonality and lyrical motives, which Fauser has described as masculine and feminine qualities. Early descriptions of Boulanger suggest someone with a high degree of natural musical talent, but the wide range of music studied at the Paris Conservatoire would have also played an integral part in the development of her varied musical language, as would the musical environment at home. Boulanger benefitted greatly from a close family friend’s position as director of the Paris Conservatoire—Gabriel Fauré. As Leslie Thayer Piper has observed:

¹⁶ Fauser, “Lili Boulanger's La princesse Maleine,” 100.
Fauré and his progressive views had a significant influence not only on Lili’s desire to become a composer, but also on the music she would eventually use as a model and inspiration for her own works. One of the composers whom Fauré strongly advocated in his reforms of the Conservatoire’s repertoire was Richard Wagner; this enthusiasm for Wagner was almost certainly communicated to Lili during her childhood through the informal sightreading sessions held at the Boulanger home, with Fauré as guest.  

Lili learned to sight-read Wagner’s works on the piano during this time, and her music displays her continued enthusiasm for the composer in her use of leitmotifs, allusions to his works, and sometimes dense polyphony, synthesizing Wagnerian-influence with the more delicate style of Parisian composers. The duality of styles proved essential in *Faust et Hélène*.

Boulanger’s use of *Tristan*-influenced material is particularly prominent in the cantata. The *Tristan* chord was a favorite among fin-de-siècle French composers, with Boulanger using it in more than one of her works. The opening of *Tristan und Isolde* in Boulanger’s own opening of *Faust et Hélène* (see Example 3.1) is glaringly obvious. Like Wagner, Boulanger begins with an A in the celli (in her work the basses double) and a descending motive follows that will become a prominent leitmotif in the work. Instead of winds, violas then play rising notes. The celli leitmotif is repeated and passed to the violins. Finally at reh.1 four rising chromatic notes answer the leitmotif, directly quoting Wagner’s motif at the beginning of *Tristan und Isolde*. Boulanger’s allusion to Wagner’s dramatization of the dangers of love serves as a warning for what will come in this work, and Wagner’s influence plays an important part throughout. The masculine power of Wagner’s music not only expanded the variety of Boulanger’s musical language, it aided

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Boulanger in creating a strong voice for Hélène. We have seen that Helen of Troy was often silenced in literary interpretations of the myth. Boulanger fought against that tradition, while making sure that she herself was also heard, through using a broad palette of compositional tools, particularly Wagnerian-influenced music, to protest loudly against that silencing.

**Defending Helen of Troy**

Hélène progresses through three stages in the cantata, an evolution that aids the portrayal of her as a rounded woman, humanizing her and thus helping the audience empathize with her trials. Like everyone, she has made mistakes, yet she endeavors to be a better person. First she rejects Faust’s desire for her, chastising herself for the destruction she has caused and endeavoring to enforce a self-imposed isolation so as to not hurt others. She eventually gives in to his love when Faust embraces her and they consummate their love through sex. Finally, the ghosts of the fallen from Troy appear and she pleads with Faust not to leave her, worried they will scare him away. Faust’s love for her is too great for ghosts to deter him from keeping her, but they take her away from him anyway.

Hélène’s conflicting emotions contrast with Faust’s. He does not waver from his desire for her throughout the whole cantata and she appears to be all he can think of. The power of desire serves as the focal point of the text—first Faust’s desire for Hélène and then hers for him—yet her resistance plays a prominent part in the work. The focus on her remorse is essential in providing a brief depiction of Hélène as morally good; although she caused destruction at Troy, she acknowledges her mistakes and regrets her actions.
Thus when she gives in to desire again, this time with Faust instead of Paris, we can understand that it is due to the power of desire, rather than her disregard for the others she might harm in the process.

Boulanger exploited her mastery of a diverse range of styles to contrast Hélène and Faust, enabling her to characterize Hélène’s endeavors as virtuous, in comparison to Faust’s immediate surrender to desire. She further used different compositional techniques to portray Hélène positively in a variety of different ways. Hélène appears for the first time after Faust makes a prolonged declaration of his desire for her, the words she sings contrasting Faust’s fervor. She shows initial confusion over why she has been brought back from the dead, yet in just her second line she warns him of her danger: “Fatal beauty that unleashes on the earthly dwelling! Hate!”

A sparse texture of ominous chromaticism warns of what will come, the reduction in instrumentation and change from the passionate music of Faust drawing attention to the warning and reflecting Hélène’s clear mind. She makes an even clearer warning in her next line: “Yes, he who loves me shows himself to be without pity for others or for himself!” The first nine notes of this phrase consist of repeated A-flats and then A-naturals, the chromatic scale subsequently continuing to C-flat. Boulanger repeatedly uses recitative-like melodies repeating single pitches in this work, to aid comprehension of the text and contrast with the moments of heightened passion. Hélène might have given into desire once before, but she has learned from its consequences and after death has become wiser. Hélène’s proclamation that “I have suffered and I have caused suffering” captures her

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20 Eugène Adénis, libretto in notes to *Faust et Hélène*, by Boulanger, trans. Mark Valencia, performed by Yan Pascal Tortelier, City of Birmingham Symphony Chorus and BBC Philharmonic, Chandos 9745 (CD) 1999. (All quotations of the libretto are from this translation.)
remorse and need for forgiveness. Despite the brevity of the text, Boulanger only repeated certain key phrases in her libretto, most importantly this one. The music is \textit{lento} and \textit{pianissimo}, with dark diminished harmonies, as Hélène mourns the destruction she caused. An ominous descending bass line accompanies Hélène’s subsequent plea, “Do not force me to reopen my closed eyes,” yet Faust continues to ignore her, returning to his contrasting major harmonies and moving to the E major key that will accompany their love scene in a distinctly Straussian way.

Faust’s lack of concern for the consequences of a union with Hélène, as he continually ignores her warnings of the destruction it will cause, portrays him in a negative light. Just as Paris showed no consideration for the Trojans who were killed after he united with Hélène, Faust does not care who might suffer due to his affair with her. This self-centeredness emphasizes Hélène’s own remorse, Faust’s blind desire accentuating the positive light in which the now “virtuous” Hélène is shown. Hélène’s warnings additionally crush any sympathy for Faust when they prove to be true at the end of the cantata. Mephistopheles’s cries of “Woe to us! We have tempted the wrath of God!” as Hélène is dragged away from them merely incite the audience to remember her warning. It may have been Hélène’s beauty that tempted Faust into risking the wrath of God, but he was the one who persuaded her to give in to desire. While Hélène speaks of the danger of loving her, Faust uses lyrical swooping melodies to seduce her. She is not an innocent victim conned by Faust and the devil, yet like a mortal woman, she is not immune to seduction, and through her response to Faust we can understand why she might have fled Sparta with Paris all those years ago.
Lili, Hélène, and Sexual Desire

While Boulanger was likened to the princess Maleine, the real and fictional young women being seen as one person—the “pure and saintly child-genius Maleine-Lili”—no such comparisons were made between her and Helen of Troy. In his 1968 article on Boulanger, Christopher Palmer talks of how “she had never known…the devouring intensity of passion; yet [it is] vividly recreated in…Faust et Hélène.”21 However, Palmer criticizes Boulanger’s dramatization of the moments of passion in the work as being unbelievable, saying that “the score is heavily saturated with Wagnerisms, and the love-duet for Faust and Hélène is stylized and lacking in spontaneity.”22 He asserts that “the composer’s best work is to be found in the three psalm-settings,”23 works that complemented the publicized view of Boulanger as a saintly martyr.24

The persona of not only a femme fragile, but a tragic saint-like young girl, distanced Boulanger from her characters in Faust et Hélène, yet possible points of identification with Helen of Troy can be re-evaluated if the rose-colored glasses are removed. Despite Boulanger’s illness, Caroline Potter reveals that in the year before she won the Prix de Rome she “went out to concerts and dinners frequently” and mentions a ball she attended at which she “danced with several young men” and arrived home late—not quite the behavior of an invalid confined to the house.25 The frequent mentions in Boulanger’s 1915 diary of Jean Bouwens, strongly implying a relationship with him and

22 Ibid., 227.
23 Ibid., 228
24 According to Fauser, Boulanger could be seen to have sacrificed the last two years of her life to finish *La princesse Maleine*, a view fitting with the idea of Boulanger as a divine creator, whose main purpose was to give voices to characters she supposedly identified with.
possibly engagement, further reject the innocent, child-like persona. Boulanger might well have had a better understanding of passion than the saintly-martyr the public knew.

The duality between the persona that Boulanger encouraged and the real woman she was aided her in depicting Hélène’s duality. In artistic interpretations of the myth, when she is not being chastised as the whore who caused the Trojan War, Helen of Troy is portrayed as a goddess whose beauty transforms her into the ideal woman that all men desire. In Goethe’s Faust Part II she represents the eternal feminine, which saves Faust. Adénis departs from this portrayal in his text, through Hélène’s proclamations of her desire for Faust and disregard at the end of the work for his safety, yet the opening theme of the poem is still Hélène’s beauty. In Faust et Hélène, Boulanger dramatizes the idealized beautiful woman whom Faust believes he can summon for his pleasure and then contrasts this with the more realistic, humanized character of Helen of Troy, who has her own desires, which come with a price. The text tells the story of these two different Helens—the ideal and the human—but the music brings this duality clearly into focus.

After the initial Wagnerian prelude, the music shifts to a Debussyian haze of beauty. Shimmering violin arpeggios and then harp flourishes accompany Mephistopheles as he tells us that Faust sleeps and we learn when Faust eventually speaks that it is Helen of Troy that has pervaded his unconscious. The music does not seem fitting for Mephistopheles, but serves well as a dramatization of Faust’s dream, before he wakes. The delicate, beautiful B-major music recalls the end of Isolde’s Liebestod and depicts an idealized Helen of Troy; Faust sees only her beauty, believing he can easily summon the submissive woman for himself. In contrast to the Tristan music

26 Ibid., 18-19.
of the opening, the oboe (and then the clarinet part) allude to Prélude à l'après-midi d’un faune, leading up to and at reh. 5 (see Example 3.2), emphasizing the reverie of Faust as Mephistopheles speaks of his dreaming.

After he awakes and makes Mephistopheles summon Hélène from the dead, Faust implores her to be with him. His lyrical lines, with simple eighth-note accompaniment, sound like a love song. She determinedly resists, but eventually concedes her love for him when Faust tells her to “Remember the time / You were stirred by an ardent kiss!” It is ultimately her physical desires that Faust appeals to and manages to stir, as she finally gives in when he kisses her. The Debussyian delicate strings, quieted to pppp, return for a short while, as Faust believes he has finally obtained Hélène’s heart, yet it is not innocent love they share, but sexual desire.

The text blatantly refers to the growing intimacy, as Hélène sings of how “Such fire consumes me” and “Love once more stires my flesh with an ardent kiss.” The music of a sexual fervor overpowers the lighter woodwind and string texture, building up as Faust and Hélène’s lines in their duet weave around each other. They finally sing in unison as forte très expressif music accompanies them, many of the orchestral parts in unison with their melodic leaps, and a timpani note and brass reflecting the strength of their love. A held unison “Ah!” reaches a peak fortissimo of passion, which remains as they sing closely imitated parts, both repeating the words “Join our lips to kindle them!” (see Example 3.3). The music drops greatly in dynamic level and moves to a sparser texture after these lines, painting a vivid picture of calm post-coital bliss.

The loose connection of Adénis’s text to Goethe’s Faust has been commented upon by multiple critics of the poem, who chastised the poet for taking the “allegory
concerning the eternal feminine in Goethe” and transforming it into “an episode in a soap opera.” This was not an unusual action for a modernist poet, thus the criticism implies Boulanger’s works were being judged as remnants from Romanticism, rather than original modernist pieces. The text is undeniably not of the standard of the symbolist poets the French intellectuals were used to and certainly is far removed from Goethe’s Faust, yet the drama of Hélène’s struggle, Faust’s desire, and their joining is important in its rejection of Helen of Troy as merely a moral creature used to save Faust. She is a spirit risen from the dead in the cantata, yet her remorse, struggles, and physical desires are very human.

**Hélène as femme nouvelle**

Hélène’s sexual passion not only distances her from the idealized “pure” woman, but it serves to create equality between men and women in Faust et Hélène. Hélène’s desire is just as strong as Faust’s, she can manipulate him more effectively than he can persuade her, and she is clearly not intimidated by Mephistopheles. She is the opposite of the femme fragile persona Boulanger trapped herself in. To some degree, Adénis’s text rejected interpretations as Helen of Troy as a weaker character, yet Boulanger’s musical choices intensify that move, by dramatizing the feminine idol of women at the beginning of the twentieth century sought to be—the femme nouvelle—while vanquishing the problems this title brought women like Nadia Boulanger.

Lili Boulanger most effectively shows Hélène’s identity as a strong woman through her construction of the vocal parts for all three characters in the work. When
Faust and Hélène sing their duet they not only display their physical union through a unison texture, but they also imitate each other in the same pitch range, the closeness of their voices reflecting a degree of equality. Boulanger enables this technique by her choice of a mezzo-soprano singer for the role of Hélène; the lower voice-type valuably aids the rejection of a fragile Helen of Troy, in favor of an older woman who has gone through war and destruction and is moved by sexual desire, rather than love. Her equality to all the men is shown in the interweaving lines as Hélène, Faust, and Mephistopheles argue about the ghosts who have come to reclaim Hélène. The overlapping dialogue between the three characters creates a Wagnerian dense polyphony that restricts easy comprehension of the multiple texts. However, this density is necessary in depicting the equality of the struggle—Hélène will not submit to Mephistopheles or Faust. In a display of concern for the audience’s understanding of what is happening, Boulanger repeats the texts they all sing. The musical complexity further helps convey the chaos of war and love, reflecting the impossible nature of the situation: Hélène must return with the soldiers of Troy, yet desire prevents her and Faust from ending their affair voluntarily.

Although Hélène is dragged away by the ghosts of the fallen Trojan soldiers at the end of the cantata, she does not lose Faust, who risks his life to keep her. Her effective control of him is accentuated by Mephistopheles’s concurrent demands that Faust break away from her. Hélène’s power is such that she can even beat the devil in manipulation. This control was not far removed from Boulanger’s own skills in manipulation—“Lili in particular had a winning personality which easily persuaded everyone to assist her in any venture she undertook.”27 When Hélène is finally taken away, it is not due to any

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27 Potter, Nadia and Lili Boulanger, 18.
weakness on her part; she cannot resist a whole army of soldiers. Death is not a sign of weakness, but the natural progression in a story, whether it be Hélène’s or Boulanger’s own passing just five years later.

Conclusion

*Faust et Hélène* stands as Boulanger’s best known work, in large part due to its fame as the piece that won her the *Prix de Rome*, rather than the work’s own contribution to musical depictions of Faust and Helen of Troy. Criticisms of the work have been based upon Adénis’s text, rather than the music, with the music being praised for improving the flawed libretto, by scholars such as Potter: “Any composer who could create convincing characters and real drama and emotion from this sorry text surely deserves a prize.” However, the music’s virtues do not lie solely in “improving” the text, and in fact, the text’s “soap opera” qualities and the simple plot enable a different reading of the myth of Helen of Troy. Though the ghosts of Troy eventually come to reclaim her, Hélène is free for a while of her complex past, and able to enjoy simple bliss with a man, Faust. Hélène is not so different from the audience members she sings to in the work. For Boulanger, trapped in the façade of a *femme fragile* at the time, the character of Hélène appears to have been an opportunity for her to speak freely. In her original, down-to-earth depiction of Helen of Troy, we can glimpse Boulanger’s true identity.

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28 Ibid., 61-2. 
29 Ibid.
Conclusion

Many more musical and literary depictions of Helen of Troy followed Strauss and Hofmannsthal’s dramatization as the twentieth century progressed through modernism into postmodernism. Helen travelled from Saint-Saëns’s France and Strauss’s Germany to the New World, inspiring countless artists in a growing variety of mediums. There is no one common thread that joins later works together; rather, pluralism has been embraced, the myth of Helen of Troy being read in very different ways. The very nature of mythology has aided this process, the freedom of interpretation it offers exploited so that multiple Helens might be seen.

The three works examined in this thesis demonstrate the value of this pluralism. Helen’s story is not only too long to be covered in one work, its complexities necessitate different works, focusing on different issues and contradictions in her tale, so that the whole story might be told in all its richness. Hélène, Die ägyptische Helena, and Faust et Hélène were written by composers in different decades and countries, each set of influences contributing to the particular reading of Helen of Troy. Saint-Saëns’s opera provides an invaluable defense for Helen, one that was long overdue, but seemingly not possible until he developed his post-Wagnerian musical language. He explains the important instant in her story prior to her flight to Troy—a whole opera needed for these brief moments so that the defense of destiny might be fully constructed. Strauss and Hofmannsthal seemingly contradict the French composer. In their work Helen does not need a defense, but rather an opportunity to reject the protection from others, look
realistically at her life, transform from the Trojan goddess she was, and take control of her destiny. This middle chapter investigates what seems to be the climax of Helen’s story, the days that need to be explained so that Helen of Troy can be viewed under a new lens. Boulanger finally takes a brief moment of desire that comes after what seems like the end of Helen’s story, a moment that is not climactic, but is essential in its dialogue with the traditional myth. In order to look at Helen in a new way, the traditional eternal feminine must be shown. Boulanger’s juxtaposition of the two Helens thus actively connects with the myth of Helen of Troy and rejects it, the myth becoming a biography that must be told.

By examining these multiple readings of Helen of Troy, connections can be made that offer a glimpse into the rhetoric needed to construct a new interpretation. Saint-Saëns’s defense of destiny is an example of the multiple layers required to construct a defense. The Wagnerian techniques he uses, such as leitmotifs, are essential in creating a subtle undercurrent of Helen’s destiny. The classically-influenced music is also invaluable in humanizing Helen, so that the audience might better relate to her and understand her struggle. Yet, amidst this musical storytelling, the importance of the text is never forgotten. The music gives layers to the story, but the tradition of verbal storytelling is reclaimed, leaving no doubt in the audience’s minds what Saint-Saëns’s reading of the myth was. Strauss and Hofmannsthal expand the use of a stylistically diverse musical language and effective text setting, not using their rhetoric to focus on one theme, but rather creating an active movement of transformation. In this work the music is constantly evolving and dramatic tension is never truly released until the end, when the transformed woman is shown. Music and text join to dramatize the extreme
complexities of this transformation, the two mediums detailing clearly every moment of Helen’s story at this point. Boulanger’s cantata uses influences differently, French and Wagnerian music being juxtaposed, rather than synthesized, to create the dualities that depict the two Helens. Allusions to well-known works such as *Tristan und Isolde* and *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* create immediate images in audiences’ minds, the atmospheric music vividly painting a picture of the ideal and real Helen, and the text setting moving between clarity and density to depict the dualities of rationality and desire.

Ultimately, these three works are most strongly joined by their rejections of late Romanticism and the era’s fascination with the supernatural, favoring instead endeavors to humanize Helen. They depict a woman not so different from the public for which these works were written—a woman who makes mistakes, who struggles against destiny and love, yet who sometimes fails, like everyone else. After the nineteenth-century interest in classical culture, these works continue that tradition, while making the myth of Troy relevant to the dramatically changing twentieth century.

In joining music and text, these composers and librettists did not seek to elevate their listeners, nor to imply a weakness of music or words when used alone. Rather, they exploited the available artistic mediums to expand their palette of rhetorical tools. The texts directly provide the tale of Helen of Troy at three major points in her story and then the music and words work together to portray Helen as the creators saw her. The post-Wagnerian rhetoric used by Saint-Saëns, Strauss and Hofmannsthal, and Boulanger ultimately gave these artists a freedom characteristic of the new twentieth century, a freedom of speech Helen never had until these works sought to give her a voice.
Appendix


Des astres de la nuit tes yeux ont la clarité; Mon coeur est parfumé des fleurs de ta beauté.

Les Dieux ont mis sur toi la splendour ton déché le Vé-

Ton corps à la blancheur des jours! Fill le de
Example 1.5. Saint-Saëns, *Hélène*, reh. 65, mm. 6 – reh. 66, mm. 4 (Piano Reduction).
Example 2.4. Hofmannsthal and Strauss, *Die ägyptische Helena*, reh. 199, mm. 1 – reh. 203, mm. 4 (Piano Reduction).
(Im Hauptgemach ist lautlos die Dienarin eingetreten.)

Rehig (tranquillamente) M.M. \( \frac{4}{4} = 72 \)

Allzu weit hat die Lüster zu hinüber
leise, aber hocht

Ellenbogen (einzeln)

Auf die Zeit! -

Ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha ha

(Der Verhang zum Schlafgemach entzieht sie den Blicken)
Example 3.1. Boulanger, *Faust et Hélène*, mm. 1-14

\[ \text{Lent } \sim 50 \]

L'inquiétude de Faust

La moitié

1er. Violons

2mes. Violons

Alors

Violoncelles

Contrebasses

\[ \text{1 a Tempo } (\sim 58) \]

2 Grandes Flûtes

2 Hautbois

Cor Anglais

2 Clarinettes en Si

Clarinette Basse en Si

2 Bassons

Sarrusophones

1er. et 2me. Corps en Fd

3me. et 4me. Corps en Fd

Timbales

\[ \text{Tempo } (\sim 58) \]

\[ \text{very} \]
Example 3.2. Boulanger, *Faust et Hélène*, reh. 4, mm.5-6.
Example 3.3. Boulanger, *Faust et Hélène*, reh. 35, mm. 7 – reh. 36, mm. 4.
Bibliography


