

OPERAS FOR DECEMBER 2024

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Stories of the operas

L’Africaine Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864).

L’Africaine – Vasco da Gama (from *Le Prophète* to L’Africaine) Naxos recording

Meyerbeer was conscious that the epic drama of *Les Huguenots* had pushed the boundaries of what was possible within the framework of 19th-century operatic convention to the limit: in the printed score of the Paris version, not even the central character Valentine has an aria to herself. Shortly after the premiere, Meyerbeer was already intending to place his ‘dramatic system on indestructible pillars with a third work’ (letter dated 20 May 1836), but he encountered considerable difficulties. Although he looked into a whole variety of alternative subjects, he eventually singled out two projects as being practicable: L’Africaine and *Le Prophète*.

The genesis of the two works is closely intertwined. Meyerbeer started off by tackling L’Africaine, but shelved work on it on 1 August 1838 after Marie-Cornélie Falcon, whom he had chosen to sing the title role, lost her voice. An initial version of *Le Prophète* was lodged with a Parisian notary on 25 March 1841, but casting issues prevented a production being mounted quickly. Meyerbeer had earmarked Gilbert Duprez, the first tenor to use chest voice in the upper register, to sing the eccentric religious zealot of the title. In December 1843, when Duprez was no longer equal to the demands of the role, Meyerbeer put the opera on the back burner. In the four years that followed, he pursued fruitless negotiations with the Opéra regarding alternative singers. No agreement was reached until Nestor Roqueplan and Edmund Duponchel took over the management of the Opéra on 1 July 1847.

In Pauline Viardot-García, Meyerbeer had found a voice for which he reimagined the part of Fidès. It is a remarkable coloratura role requiring a singer whose voice spans both the mezzo and the soprano range. The tenor part, on the other hand, was simplified for Gustave Roger. These changes also meant revising the original dramatic concept. By the time the opera reached the rehearsal stage, Meyerbeer was essentially just making cuts. It was in this form that *Le Prophète* premiered on 16 April 1849.

Between 1851 and 1853, Meyerbeer resumed work on the first version of L’Africaine (the ‘vecchia Africana’), which had been lying untouched since 1843. Acts I and II were radically revised; Acts IV and V were relocated from Central Africa to India, and in light of this, the opera was given the title *Vasco da Gama*. After a short burst of work in 1857, the score was left dormant until 1860. In spite of a further hiatus caused by the death of librettist Eugène Scribe on 20 February 1861, Meyerbeer completed his rehearsal score on 29 November 1863 but his death a few weeks into rehearsals prevented him from finalising the work. François-Joseph Fétis prepared a performing version from the extensive score material, retaining the title L’Africaine, and this was premiered on 28 April 1865.

The dramatic parallels between the two operas are obvious. In both, the historical action is presented from the viewpoint of one representative individual. Both focus on a charismatic leader – John of Leiden, a leader of the Anabaptist movement during the Reformation, and the navigator Vasco da Gama. In both operas, the watershed moment is highlighted by a spectacular stage effect. In *Le Prophète* it was the dazzling effect of the first successful theatrical use of an electric spotlight, which Meyerbeer had custom-built by the physicist Léon Foucault. In *L'Africaine*, a fully revolving set was used for the first time to show the ship of Vasco's rival changing course. The stage effects each mark the turning point in the historical plot: the final culpable involvement of Jean (John) in the historical process and the premature failure of Vasco's colonising mission. There are also parallels between the scenes in which these turning points take place: Sélika saves Vasco by forcing Nélusko to testify that she and Vasco are married (which they aren't), while in the coronation scene, Jean forces his mother to disown him.

There are also similarities between the hero's respective antagonists. As someone who puts forward certain ideas, Nélusko is most readily comparable to Marcel in *Les Huguenots*. He stands for his people's unequivocal rescue from colonisation and therefore opposes Vasco's divinely mandated and metaphysically based mission. Jean's mother Fidès likewise opposes Jean's mission as an Anabaptist prophet; in forcing him to abandon his blasphemous ambition she embodies divine 'providence'.

The instrumentation of the two works is also similar. Differentiating the woodwind in *tuttis* is now the norm. In the autograph score of *Le Prophète*, Meyerbeer generally starts off with dense writing in the middle register (for horns and clarinets) and doesn't thin this out until a later stage. On top of a children's chorus (with soloists) and two mixed choruses, the coronation scene (Act IV, Nos. 23–24) calls for a complete family of saxhorns and has an organ part for four hands. The only addition in *L'Africaine* is a few touches of exoticism required by the subject matter. The Grand Air (Act IV, No. 15) also includes saxophone, which Meyerbeer was already planning to use in *Le Prophète*. There is also three-part writing for strings in combination with three flutes (Act V, No. 22).

The way the dramas are handled is quite different, however, being tailored to the ideas. *Le Prophète* combines *Les Huguenots*' philosophical message about history with the metaphysical view of humanity in *Robert le diable*. To evoke the historical colour of the Anabaptist rebellion, Meyerbeer composed the chorale *Ad nos, ad salutarem undam*. Like the chorale in *Les Huguenots*, this is quoted repeatedly throughout the opera. When it is sung by the trio of Anabaptist preachers, the sacred colouration becomes unctuous, grotesque and alienating. In *Le Prophète*, suspense is generated not by time running out as in similar scenes in the earlier works, but by the extreme volatility of the situation. Berthe could discover at any moment that her lover and the hated prophet are one and the same person. He is unmasked due to a casual remark by a random secondary character. The plot of *Le Prophète* culminates in a heightened version of the shock ending familiar from *Les Huguenots*. Horrified by her discovery, Berthe stabs herself, rather than killing the prophet as she had set out to. This strand of the action was subjected to substantial cuts during rehearsals, but despite them Berthe is far more sharply drawn as a proactive female character than her predecessor Valentine. Her character develops from simple country girl to avenging angel. If Fidès embodies the principle of divine forgiveness, Berthe is driven by an almost biblical

anger that ultimately destroys her. Meyerbeer created a blend of these two female characters in the heroine of *L'Africaine*, who drives the plot throughout.

The final scene of *Le Prophète* carries the topos of the interrupted feast to apocalyptic extremes. Throughout it, the music evokes the bacchanalian feast, while the spectacular explosion in the palace is only depicted onstage. The text of the drinking song, which continues to be sung, identifies this apocalypse with the fires of Hell or Purgatory. As in *Les Huguenots*, both sides are destroyed – Anabaptists and imperial forces. This philosophico-historical dimension is not appropriate for the final scene of *L'Africaine*. Sélika's death under the manchineel tree because of her love remains a private tragedy that does not point beyond itself, though it does pave the way for Vasco's historical mission, colonisation.

L'Africaine is the more progressive opera. The final scene in particular is already within touching distance of the dramatic techniques employed in the *drame lyrique* during the second half of the 19th century. *L'Africaine* reverts to conveying its message exclusively through the actions of its characters. From an early-21st-century perspective, now that our viewing habits are shaped by media art and video clips, these solutions inevitably appear a retrograde step aesthetically speaking compared with the multimedia concepts of the mature Meyerbeer.

The premiere of *Le Prophète* was a theatrical triumph which was undoubtedly amplified by its unintentional political topicality in the immediate aftermath of the revolutions of 1848. Eugène Scribe took personal responsibility for directing the production, and the orchestra was conducted by Narcisse Girard. Like all Meyerbeer's other operas, *Le Prophète* remained in the international repertoire for decades. At the Opéra, it was programmed until 1912. The spectacular Paris premiere of *L'Africaine* featured Marie-Constance Sass (Sélika), Marie Battu (Inès), Emilio Naudin (Vasco) and Jean-Baptiste Faure (Nélusko). The stage director was Alexis Colleuille and the conductor François Hainl (known as Georges Hainl). Because of its soloist-oriented conception, *L'Africaine* became Meyerbeer's most frequently performed opera in the 20th century, though overall his star was beginning to wane. Whenever suitable singers were available, the opera was performed, though generally with disfiguring cuts during the 20th century.

Matthias Brzoska English translation: Susan Baxter

Roles

Vasco da Gama	Tenor	Michael Spyres,
Selika	Mezzo-soprano	Claudia Mahnke,
Ines ,	Soprano	Kirsten MacKinnon,
Nelusko	Baritone	Brian Mulligan,
Don Pedro	Bass	Andreas Bauer Kanabas,
Don Diego , ,	Bass	Thomas Faulkner,
Anna	Mezzo-soprano	Bianca Andrew,
Don Alvar	Tenor	Michael McCown,
The Grand Inquisitor of Lisbon/High Priest of Brahma..	Bass	Magnus Baldvinsson,
Sailors	Tenor	Isaac Lee, Patrick Menckens*,
Bass	Thomas Charrois*, Hyeonjoon Kwon*,	
Apparitor ,.	Tenor	Hyun Ouk Cho, *
A Priest	Tenor	Hyung Kwon Lee, *

*Members of Chor der Oper Frankfurt

Chor der Oper Frankfurt Tilman Michael, Chorus master

Frankfurter Opern- und Museumsorchester Conductor : Antonello Manacorda

Synopsis

Act I

Vasco da Gama, one of the discoverer Bernardo Diaz's officers, has been travelling to new horizons for more than two years. Vasco's girlfriend, Inès, is waiting, full of longing, for her lover's return. When rumours spread that the expedition has failed, and Vasco was killed, Inès' father puts pressure on her to marry Don Pédro, a very influential man. Inès turns his proposal down.

The council, chaired by Don Pédro, meet to discuss the consequences of the failed mission. News reaches them that there was a survivor: it is Vasco da Gama. Vasco makes use of his audience before the council to ask to lead a new voyage of discovery.

To substantiate his objectives, he presents two people of unknown descent to the council, whom he has brought back as slaves: Sélika and Nélusko. The council regard them with fear and distrust and have them taken away. Vasco's claims are dismissed, after controversial consultation. He insults his superiors and is accused of high treason.

Act II

Vasco meets Sélika and Nélusko again, in prison. He still dreams of 'glory' and 'immortality'. Sélika prevents Nélusko from killing Vasco in his sleep as revenge for their enslavement; he saved them both from a greater danger. Nélusko suspects that Sélika is in love with Vasco, but bows to her wishes. She is 'the daughter of kings', he, her escort. Sélika and Vasco become closer. She betrays the secret route to her native land to him.

When Inès and Don Pédro come to set Vasco free, he thinks he has achieved his goal. But his freedom has come at a bitter price. Inès seems reserved. Thinking that she is jealous of Sélika, Vasco denies any relationship with his slave – and gives her to Inès as a present. He only gradually discovers the real reason: Inès married Don Pédro in return for Vasco's release from prison. Don Pédro has been named as the new commander of the very mission that Vasco was refused: to find Sélika's native land. Nélusko warns Don Pédro about the perilous journey and offers to be his guide. Don Pédro takes Sélika and Nélusko with him. Vasco remains behind, defeated.

Act III

Don Pédro's ship is on its way to unknown territory. The mission is dangerous, but the crew feel reassured by the comforting words of the women, the routine on board and wine. But Nélusko is two-timing them. The course he has set Don Pédro on leads to hazardous regions. But Don Pédro, trusting his advisor, throws all caution to the wind. Nélusko's plan seems to be working. He prophesies the destruction of the crew and, with it, the whole of 'old Europe'. A sailor reports the approach of an unknown ship. It is Vasco, who comes on board. He tries, in vain, to persuade Don Pédro to change course. Jealousy over Inès escalates their argument – but Don Pédro avoids having to fight a duel by making use of his rights as captain and ordering Vasco's execution.

Inès' and Sélika's pleas to spare Vasco fall on deaf ears. Sélika takes the last possible course of action. She takes Inès hostage, forcing Vasco's release. Don Pédro orders Nélusko to whip Sélika as punishment. Nélusko openly confronts his oppressor, just as a sailor reports the

approach of a terrible storm. The mission is wrecked, not far from their destination. Nélusko and Sélíka's people board the ship and massacre the crew.

Act IV

Sélíka returns to her native land. She is reinstated as queen in front of her people, and must swear that 'no foreigner desecrate the sacred soil of our land'. Inès, and a few other women who survived the massacre, are led towards the poisonous manchineel tree, to die from the fragrance of its flowers.

Vasco da Gama is the only male survivor. Although his life is in danger, he can't help but be fascinated by the wonders of this new world. Only Sélíka's intervention prevents her people from killing Vasco as a foreign intruder. To save him, she maintains that he is married to her, and therefore not a foreigner. Consumed by inner turmoil, Nélusko pays witness to Sélíka's lies, in public. Sélíka and Vasco's marriage is sealed with a love potion. They get closer to one another. Although Vasco, as the husband of the Queen, is free to leave, he promises her to stay with her for ever.

Act V

Inès eludes death under the manchineel tree. She meets Vasco, who thought she was dead and admits to her that he is now Sélíka's husband. Sélíka catches them. She sends him away, telling him she will exact revenge. Sélíka's rage and desperation is now directed at Inès. When she offers to die for Vasco, both women recognise themselves in each other. Mistrust and jealousy give way to understanding. Sélíka makes a lonely decision. She orders Nélusko to allow Vasco and Inès to go home.

Sélíka takes her leave from Vasco. She goes beneath the manchineel tree, to die. Intoxicated by the fragrance of the tree's poisonous flowers, she sees herself reunited with Vasco again – 'far from the Earth' and 'rewarded by Heaven'. Nélusko brings Sélíka back to reality: 'can you see their ship?'. Dying, Sélíka realises that her sacrifice will bring death to others, too.

Tobias Kratzer

NOTE: Since the historical background of Meyerbeer's opera, which is critical of colonialism, is not very coherent – and also due to the complicated genesis of the work – Tobias Kratzer's stage production portrays the "beautiful land" that Vasco is so enchanted by neither in Africa nor in India, but on another planet in outer space.

Salomé: Richard Strauss

Based on a play by Oscar Wilde written in French and translated into German by Hedwig Lachmann.

Oscar Wilde originally wrote his Salomé in French. Strauss saw the Lachmann version of the play in Max Reinhardt's production at the Kleines Theater in Berlin on 15 November 1902, and immediately set to work on an opera. The play's formal structure was well-suited to musical adaptation. Wilde himself described Salomé as containing "refrains whose recurring motifs make it so like a piece of music and bind it together as a ballad". Strauss pared down Lachmann's German text to what he saw as its essentials, and in the process reduced it by nearly half, which included removing some of Wilde's recurring motifs.

Performance history

The combination of the Christian biblical theme, the erotic and the murderous, which so attracted Wilde to the tale, shocked opera audiences from its first appearance. Some of the original performers were very reluctant to handle the material as written and the Salome, Marie Wittich, "refused to perform the 'Dance of the Seven Veils'", thus creating a situation where a dancer stood in for her. This precedent has been largely followed, one early notable exception being that of Aino Ackté, whom Strauss himself dubbed "the one and only Salome".

Salome was first performed at the Königliches Opernhaus in Dresden on 9 December 1905, and within two years, it had been given in 50 other opera houses.

Gustav Mahler could not gain the consent of the Vienna censor to have it performed; therefore it was not given at the Vienna State Opera until 1918. The Austrian premiere was given at the Graz Opera in 1906 under the composer, with Arnold Schoenberg, Giacomo Puccini, Alban Berg, and Gustav Mahler in the audience.

Salome was banned in London by the Lord Chamberlain's office until 1907. When it was given its premiere performance at Covent Garden in London under Thomas Beecham on 8 December 1910, it was modified, much to Beecham's annoyance and later amusement. In his autobiography, *A Mingled Chime*, Beecham disclosed that some of the performers had ignored the amended text, but nobody noticed. He went on to observe that "Salome served the useful purpose of filling the house every night it was played."

The United States premiere took place at a special performance by the Metropolitan Opera with Olive Fremstad in the title role with the dance performed by Bianca Froehlich on 22 January 1907. The mixed reviews were summarized "that musicians were impressed by the power displayed by the composer" but "the story is repugnant to Anglo-Saxon minds." Afterwards, under pressure from wealthy patrons, "further performances were cancelled" and it was not performed there again until 1934. These patrons entreated the visiting Edward Elgar to lead the objections to the work, but he refused point-blank, stating that Strauss was "the greatest genius of the age".

Mary Garden's performance of the French version of Salome took place at the Oscar Hammerstein Opera in New York in 1909, in direct competition with the Met.

Today, Salome is a well-established part of the operatic repertoire; there are numerous recordings. It has a typical duration of 100 minutes.

Roles

Herodes	Horst Hiestermann
Herodias	Leonie Rysanek
Salome	Cheryl Studer
Jochanaan	Bryn Terfel
Narraboth	Clemens Bieber
Page of Herodias	Marianne Rørholm
First Jew	Uwe Peper
Second Jew	Karl-Ernst Mercker
Third Jew	Peter Maus
Fourth Jew	Warren Mok
Fifth Jew	Manfred Rohrl

First Nazarene	Friedrich Moisberger
Second Nazarene	Ralf Lukas
First soldier	William Murray
Second soldier	Klaus Lang
A slave	Aimée Willis
Orchestra of the German Opera Berlin Conductor Giuseppe Sinopoli	

Time: A.D. Place: 30Judea.

The opera is in one Act of four scenes.

From the moonlit terrace of King Herod's palace, Narraboth, captain of the guard, gazes rapturously inside at the Princess Salome, who is feasting with her stepfather and his court. The voice of the prophet Jochanaan echoes from a deep cistern, where he is imprisoned by the king, who fears him. Salome, bored with Herod's lechery and his coarse guests, rushes out for fresh air and becomes curious when she hears Jochanaan curse Herodias, her mother. When the soldiers refuse to bring Jochanaan to her, Salome turns her wiles on Narraboth, who orders that Jochanaan be summoned. Salome is fascinated by the prophet's deathly pallor and pours out her uncontrollable desire to touch him. The prophet rejects her, speaking of the Son of God who will come to save mankind. When Salome continues to beg for Jochanaan's kiss, Narraboth stabs himself in horror, and the prophet descends into the cistern, urging her to seek salvation in the Messiah. The girl collapses in frustration and longing.

Herod appears, followed by his court. When he slips in Narraboth's blood, he becomes unnerved and begins to experience hallucinations, which Herodias scorns. Herod's thoughts turn to Salome, who spurns his attentions. Renewed abuse from Jochanaan's subterranean voice harasses Herodias, who demands that Herod turn the prophet over to the Jews. Herod's refusal incurs an argument among several Jews concerning the nature of God, and a narrative of Christ's miracles by two Nazarenes.

Herod begs Salome to divert him by dancing and offers her anything she might wish in return. Salome makes him swear he will live up to his promise, then dances, slowly shedding seven veils and finishing her performance at his feet. Salome demands the head of Jochanaan on a silver platter, ignoring Herod's desperate alternatives - jewels, rare birds, a sacred veil. The terrified king finally gives in. After a tense pause, the arm of the executioner rises from the cistern, offering the head to Salome. As clouds obscure the moon, Salome seizes her reward passionately, addressing Jochanaan as if he lived and triumphantly kissing his lips. Overcome with revulsion, Herod orders the soldiers to kill Salome.

Armida is an opera by Antonín Dvořák in four acts, set to a libretto by Jaroslav Vrchlický that was originally based on Torquato Tasso's epic *La Gerusalemme liberata*. Dvořák's opera was first performed at Prague's National Theatre on 25 March 1904; the score was published as opus 115 in 1941.

In terms of genre, *Armida* represents the culmination of Dvořák's experimentation with a Wagnerian style of opera composition, though much of the music belongs to Dvořák's own

genre. Vrchlický's libretto parallels the one that Philippe Quinault wrote for Jean-Baptiste Lully in their opera of the same name.

Roles

King Hydraot of Damascus	bass	Pavel Daniluk
Armida, his daughter	soprano	Joana Borowska
Ismen, a prince and magician	baritone	George Fortune
Petr, a hermit	bass	Miroslav Podskalsky
Bohumir, commander of the Franks	baritone	Vratislav Kriz
Rinald, a crusader	tenor	Wieslaw Ochman
Dudo	tenor	Richard Sparka
Sven	tenor	Jan Markvart
Roger	tenor	Vladimir Nechazel
Gernand	bass	Milan Burger
Ubald	bass	Zdenek Harvanek
Muezin	baritone	Roman Janal
Siren	soprano	Monika Brychtova

Choruses of Demons, Nymphs, Sirens, Sprites, Knights etc

Prague Chamber Chorus

Czech Philharmonic Orchestra; Gerd Albrecht, conductor

Synopsis

The story is set in the 11th century during the time of the First Crusade

Act 1: In the royal gardens of Damascus the magician Ismen informs King Hidraot that an army of Frankish crusaders is heading straight for Damascus with the ultimate aim, under the pretext of liberating the Holy Sepulchre, of taking control of the East. Clearly this huge army cannot be stopped with weapons; the Damascenes will have to use subterfuge. They plan to send Hidraot's daughter Armida into the enemy camp in order to bewitch their leader and sow dissent and hatred among the warriors. Ismen hopes that, afterwards, he will win Armida's heart and her hand in marriage. Armida initially refuses to embark upon this difficult task yet, when she is shown a magical image of the camp and sees the knight Rinald among the soldiers, whom she had glimpsed during a gazelle hunt, she sets out for the enemy encampment – not out of love for her country or for her father, but out of love for a stranger.

Act 2: Armida enters the Frankish camp and requests to be taken to the leader Bohumír. Peter the Hermit foresees the ruse she is attempting, and tries to expel her from the camp, but the knight Armida loves, Rinald, comes to her defence. He mediates an audience with Bohumír for her and Armida tells a fabricated story of how enemies had blinded and imprisoned her father and had then killed her brother. She asks the Franks to avenge her brother's death and liberate the king and, in return, Damascus will surrender to them. Bohumír rejects this request, determined first to fulfil his mission and conquer Jerusalem. Rinald defies his will

and decides to flee with Armida. When Peter tries to stop him escaping, Ismen appears on a chariot pulled by dragons, and takes the lovers away with him.

Act 3: Rinald lies in Armida's arms in a beautiful garden in the middle of the desert. He has completely forgotten about his mission. Ismen calls on Armida to destroy Rinald, but then he hears her professing that she loves Rinald and that she is prepared to use her sorcery against Ismen's magic. Her magical powers are stronger than his, and the wonderful castle and gardens devastated by Ismen's spells rise up once more in all their splendour. Ismen vows revenge and is aided in this by two knights who have lost their way in the desert. The knights, Ubald and Sven, are searching for Rinald. Ismen tells them that St Michael's diamond shield is hidden in the castle dungeons and that anyone who sets eyes on it must follow it. The knights take possession of the shield and, unable to tear his eyes away from its brilliance, Rinald staggers after it; Armida vainly tries to prevent him from leaving.

Act 4: After an attack by the Moors, Rinald is lying wounded by a small oasis in the desert, bitterly regretting his betrayal. His companions and Peter come upon him and assure him that, through repentance, he has been redeemed for his sins, and when he touches the holy shield, his wounds are healed. Rinald sets off to fight Ismen, whom he kills, but then faces a duel with another knight who stands in his way. At the latter's mention of Armida's name, Rinald replies by stating that the best that could befall her is death. At that moment, the knight lowers his sword arm and Rinald stabs him. It is only now that he recognises Armida, who has brought about her own death at the hands of Rinald. Armida dies in his arms.

Samson et Dalila Op. 47, is a grand opera in three acts and four scenes by Camille Saint-Saëns to a French libretto by Ferdinand Lemaire. It was first performed in Weimar at the Grossherzogliches (Grand Ducal) Theatre (now the Staatskapelle Weimar) on 2 December 1877 in a German translation.

The opera is based on the Biblical tale of Samson and Delilah found in Chapter 16 of the Book of Judges in the Old Testament. It is the only opera by Saint-Saëns that is regularly performed. The second act love scene in Delilah's tent is one of the set pieces that define French opera. Two of Delilah's arias are particularly well known: "Printemps qui commence" ("Spring begins") and "Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix" ("My heart opens itself to your voice", also known as "Softly awakes my heart"), the latter of which is one of the most popular recital pieces in the mezzo-soprano/contralto repertoire.

Roles

Dalila	mezzo-soprano	Christa Ludwig
Samson	tenor	James King
High Priest of Dagon	baritone	Bernd Weikl
Abimelech	bass	Alexander Malta
Old Hebrew	bass	Richard Kogel
Messenger	tenor	Heinrich Weber
1 st Philistine	tenor	Albert Gassner

2nd Philistine

tenor

Peter Schraner

Munich Radio Orchestra; Bavarian Radio Choir;

Conductor Giuseppe Patané

Synopsis

Act I: Gaza, 1150 B.C. In a square in Gaza, a group of Hebrews beg Jehovah for relief from their bondage to the Philistines; Samson, their leader, rebukes them for their lack of faith. When the Philistine commander, Abimélech, denounces the Hebrews and their God, Samson kills him and leads the Hebrews away. The High Priest of Dagon comes from the Philistine temple and curses Samson's prodigious strength, leaving with the slain man's bier. An Old Hebrew praises the returning Samson. The outer walls of the temple disappear to reveal Samson's former lover, the Philistine woman Dalila, who invites him to come that night to her nearby dwelling. She and her maidens dance seductively for Samson, who becomes deaf to the Old Hebrew's dour prophecies.

Act 2: In the vale of Sorek, Dalila calls on her gods to help her ensnare and disarm Samson, promising the High Priest to find a way to render the hero powerless. Samson appears, passionate in spite of himself; when Dalila has him in her power, she feigns disbelief in his constancy and demands that he show his love by confiding in her the secret of his strength, weeping when he refuses. Samson hears rolling thunder as a warning from God but cannot resist following Dalila inside. Not long afterward, having finally learned that the secret of Samson's strength is his long hair, she calls to hidden Philistine soldiers, who rush in to capture and blind Samson.

Act 3: In a dungeon at Gaza, the sightless Samson pushes a grist mill in a circle, praying for his people, who will suffer for his sin. He hears their voices castigating him.

During a bacchanal in the Temple of Dagon, Dalila and the High Priest taunt Samson. When they force him to kneel to Dagon, he asks a boy to lead him to the two main pillars of the temple. Samson prays to Jehovah to restore his strength, and with a mighty effort he pulls down the pillars and the temple, crushing himself and his foes.