

Musical Instruments Evocative of the Ancient Orient

Nineteenth-century literature, especially French “exotic” literature, contains many helpful references to the sorts of instruments and sounds that composers of the period were trying to reintroduce or re-create in their own works in the “Ancient Oriental” genre. Gustave Flaubert’s *Salammô* and Hector Berlioz’s epic opera *Les Troyens*, works that are exactly contemporaneous, provide one example of this aesthetic parallel. Later in the century, a similarity may also be demonstrated between the instruments mentioned in Pierre Louÿs’ *Aphrodite* and the delicate sound world which Claude Debussy strove to evoke in his compositions, including the *Prélude à “l’après-midi d’un faune”* and *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, the latter consisting of musical interludes inserted into a sequence of prose poems by Louÿs.

Flaubert, in *Salammô*, makes mention of lyres, flutes, tambourines, castanets, cymbals and crotales. In a typical religious scene set in ancient Carthage, Flaubert describes the priestesses of the goddess Tanit “lined up along the rampart, beating tambourines, plucking lyres, shaking castanets”.¹ In *Aphrodite*, Louÿs establishes the sonic background of an Egyptian coastal metropolis sometime after the birth of Christ, by relating how the courtesan Chrysis “plunged into the alleys of this Alexandrian Suburra, full of voices, of movement and of barbarous music”.²

Musical instruments are often included in nineteenth-century exotic novels for their visual as well as aural impact, being associated with gay festivity or eerie supernatural atmospheres. “Tambourines and cymbals were hung from top to bottom of their cedar columns,” writes Flaubert whilst describing the interior of a gorgeous temple complex in Carthage.³ In a parallel situation where Debussy wishes to paint a gloomy Medieval, rather than exotic, atmosphere – as is the case in his unfinished project from Poe, *La Chute de la maison d’Usher* – we are told that “des instruments anciens” are suspended from the walls.⁴

Nineteenth-century authors usually mention the instruments of the Ancient Oriental world in a religious or secular festive context. Louÿs thus describes six Egyptian dancing women “on a platform with an orchestra of three musicians, of whom the first two tapped skin-covered tambourines with wands, while the third shook a great clanking sistrum of bronze”. A little earlier, the reader is introduced to “twelve dancing girls” who appear one by one, “the first two playing the flute and the last the tambourine, the others clapping crotals”.⁵ As Flaubert’s lavish and bloody Carthaginian revelry gets underway, which leads to the horrifying child sacrifices meant to appease the god Moloch, “cymbals and crotals” play louder and tambourines “thunder”.⁶

Percussive drum and high-pitched clashing or tinkling metallic sounds predominate in such literature. Wooden percussion instruments are not so frequently mentioned. Even when ancient castanets are spoken of, the writer will often be referring to instruments made from metal. James Blades describes Egyptian finger cymbals as “brass castanets”, and also mentions “metal clappers”. Both these instruments are still in use in Egypt today. He also states that, strictly speaking, “crotales are metal castanets, resembling cymbals”.⁷ In certain texts there may exist some doubt as to whether “crotals” or “crotali” are to be thought of as finger cymbals or a type of wooden (or possibly ivory) clapper. Writers may have known in their own minds which sound and instrument they wished to

¹ Gustave Flaubert, *Salammbo*, trans. with an Introduction by A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p.39. First French edition 1862.

² Pierre Louÿs, *Aphrodite {Ancient Manners}*, trans. Willis L. Parker, with illustrations by Frank J. Buttera (New York: Illustrated Editions Company, 1932), p.149. First French edition 1896.

³ *Salammbo*, p.77.

⁴ See Richard Langham Smith, “Debussy and the Pre-Raphaelites”, *19th-Century Music*, vol.V, 2 (1981), 99.

⁵ *Aphrodite*, pp.152, 144.

⁶ *Salammbo*, p.277.

⁷ James Blades, *Percussion Instruments and their History*, rev. edn. (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp.176, 167.

suggest, but there is little consistency in their nomenclature. No doubt this is due to the fact that the instruments of the ancient world, and their names, were still in large degree a mystery to many in the nineteenth century.

In Théophile Gautier's exotic novelette, *Une nuit de Cléopâtre (One of Cleopatra's Nights)* (1838), Queen Cleopatra attaches "golden *crotali* to her alabaster hands" when she rises to dance. "Antique castanets" is nevertheless the term one translator applies in a note to explain what "golden *crotali*" are.⁸ "Crotali" or "crotales" (both plural) may generally be assumed to be made of metal, and yet, to confuse matters still further, there did exist in Ancient Egypt "crotala", made of wood, which functioned and sounded "as if a ritual extension of hand-clapping", at the same time as there existed Oriental finger cymbals "of the Egyptian dancer's kind", often made of brass, "with great loops for index and thumb of each hand".⁹ In the above passage, Gautier probably had a golden version of such brass *crotali* in mind, these being more in keeping with Cleopatra's regal status. The only other alternative is that Gautier was thinking of gilded wood, which might possibly be the case, for we are told that as she danced, Cleopatra's "beautiful arms ... shook out bunches of sparkling notes, and her *crotali* prattled with increasing volubility".¹⁰

Norman Del Mar demonstrates that there exists as much doubt regarding the exact nature of the percussion instruments referred to by composers as by writers working in the Ancient Oriental genre in the nineteenth century. He explains that most standard dictionary definitions of *crotales* refer to a "rattle, or the CASTANETS of the Priestesses of Cybele", and therefore they may "correspond to Saint-Saëns's *castagnettes de fer* played by the priestesses of Dagon in his *Samson and Delilah*, even though *crotales* are never made of iron".¹¹ Such metal "castanets" are today taken to mean ancient cymbals, although the modern *crotales* that are employed for such parts have a more refined and purer tone than those of antiquity, and are often played differently.

In the period immediately prior to the publication of his *Chansons de Bilitis* (1894), Pierre Louÿs had fallen under the spell of a young Oriental woman – his Algerian mistress, Meriem ben Atala – who became the model for Bilitis. According to Louÿs' Preface, Bilitis was supposedly a native of Pamphylia and a friend of Sappho in the sixth century B.C.. In this particular case, Louÿs constructed his "Orient" outwards from Greece, which is why it is a more delicate and refined "type" than that found in other imaginative versions of the Orient, such as those centred around the noise and bustle of the *Arabian Nights* bazaar. When these prose poems were recited in Paris on 7th February, 1901, with incidental music by Debussy, the composer carefully matched Louÿs' sentiments by providing music of an ethereal, archaic quality. Debussy employed two flutes, two harps and celeste to achieve an effect of absolute delicacy, seemingly far removed from the Wagnerian sound-world towards which he felt such ambivalence. Likewise, when Berlioz wrote an Oriental dance for *L'Enfance du Christ* (1850-54), he employed two flutes and a harp, "the instruments he believed best conjured up the East".¹² Berlioz borrowed his idea from Gounod's *Sappho* (1851), an opera about the classical Lesbian poetess who suicides for love by diving from the famous promontory into the sea. In Flaubert's short story, *Hérodias*, Salome dances "like the priestesses of India, like the Nubians of the cataracts, or like the Bacchantes of Lydia", not to any especially wild, exuberant music, but to the strains of the harp, "the plaintive notes of the gingras, a small flute of Phoenician origin", and "a pair of Indian bells". During her exquisite "undulating" dance, the swiftness of Salome's movements make the colours "of her exquisite draperies appear to run into one another", and her final mad whirl is made, surprisingly, to the soft and pleasing music of dulcimers.¹³ When musicians appear on stage in the fourth scene of

⁸ Théophile Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin and One of Cleopatra's Nights*, no named translator (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), pp.330-31.

⁹ Anthony Baines, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.65, 88.

¹⁰ *Mademoiselle de Maupin and One of Cleopatra's Nights*, p.331. Gautier, as an Hispanophile, would have been quite familiar with Spanish castanets, but less so with Middle-Eastern instruments.

¹¹ Norman Del Mar, *A Companion to the Orchestra* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987), p.74.

¹² Elaine Brody, *Paris: The Musical Kaleidoscope 1870-1925* (London: Robson Books, 1988), p.72.

¹³ Gustave Flaubert, *Salammbô: A Romance of Ancient Carthage*, with a Critical Study on Flaubert by Guy de Maupassant, a Preface and an Appendix Containing Notes of the Controversy over the Romance, bound together with two short stories, *Herodias* and *A Simple Soul*, trans. M. Walter Dunne [vols. 3 and 4 of the works of Flaubert] (Akron, Ohio: St. Dunstan Society, 1904), vol.4, pp.46-48.

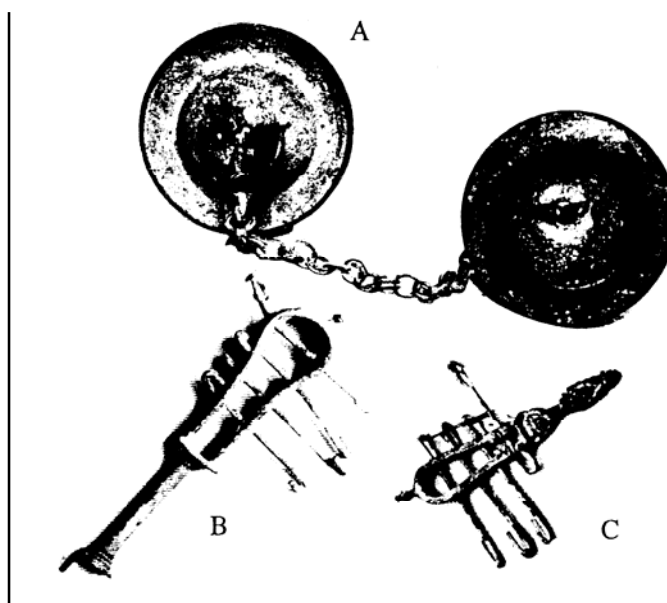
Richard Strauss's ballet, *Josephslegende*, set in much earlier biblical times, they are described as "players of harp, flute, and cymbals". Here again, it is the sweet sound of miniature "antique cymbals", rather than the brash sound of large "Turkish" cymbals, which is implied in this context.

Throughout his life, Debussy remained especially sensitive to the written and spoken word, and appreciated the atmospheres they could generate. Debussy's music gives no hint of the turbulence of the Middle-Eastern dancing of Strauss's *Salome*, for Debussy employs the utmost subtlety in order to reveal the exact savour of Louÿs' exquisitely luscious and dainty pagan sensuality.

Crotales, or "antique cymbals" (sometimes "ancient cymbals"), are, in fact, "a departure from the original Greek sense of the word as a clapper".¹⁴ Discoveries made during the excavations at Pompeii led Berlioz to ask for a re-creation of the sound of small bronze cymbals, approximately 9-11 cms. in diameter, for the delicate "Queen Mab Scherzo" in *Roméo et Juliette* (1839): "the same size as the largest of the Pompeian cymbals; that is to say, rather less than the size of the hand, and tuned the one a fifth from the other" (in B \flat and F).¹⁵ (These are therefore larger than Egyptian finger cymbals - see **Fig.1A.**) In *Les Troyens*, Berlioz requires "2 Pairs of little antique cymbals in E and F". Later composers followed Berlioz's lead whenever they wished to make either a nostalgic, "ancient" or exotic appeal to the senses. Massenet employed a pair of crotales at the fifth (E \flat and B \flat) in *Hérodiade* (1881), and Delibes employed two crotales "in A" (thus A and E) in his score for *Lakmé* (1888), a work in which he called for both wooden *and* metal castanets ("castagnettes de bois - et de fer"), following the precedent set by Saint-Saëns in *Samson et Dalila* (1877). Another such use of crotales (in E and B) occurs at the end of Debussy's *Prélude à "l'après-midi d'un faune"*, the work which first made Debussy's reputation as a composer. This *Prélude*, an introductory musical set-piece, was once again designed to establish a sympathetic "aesthetic atmosphere", prior to the reading of the archaic pastoral Symbolist poem by Stéphane Mallarmé - a versifier who was, according to Remy de Gourmont, a "redoubtable Aladdin", and prince of "la Décadence".¹⁶ Blades regards Debussy's flute and crotales combination as "a reminder of the aulos and ancient cymbals", such sounds helping to capture "the mystic atmosphere of a dream".¹⁷

Figure 1:

- A) Pair of small bronze cymbals (cymbalum).
Diameter: 11 cms.
Naples Museum, inv.76943.
- B) Bronze sistrum.
Length: 22.3 cms.
Naples Museum, inv.76944.
- C) Bronze sistrum.
Length: 19 cms.
Naples Museum, inv.194/80.
All found at Pompeii.



¹⁴ *The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments*, p.88.

¹⁵ Hector Berlioz, *A Treatise on Modern Instrumentation and Orchestration ... to which is appended The Chef d'Orchestre*, trans. Mary Cowden Clarke, new edn., rev. and ed. Joseph Bennett (London and New York: Novello, Ewer and Co., n.d.), p.225. First published in 1843 as *Grand traité de l'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes*. (The English translation is taken from the second [revised] edition of 1855.)

¹⁶ Remy de Gourmont, *Selected Writings* [1896-1912], trans. and ed. with an Introduction by Glenn S. Burne (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p.67.

¹⁷ *Percussion Instruments and their History*, p.323. The "aulos" is another name for the ancient "double flute": a dual-pipe reed instrument blown by a single player. Thus the modern flute does *not* approximate its sound.

II

As so often with other categories of nineteenth-century aesthetic inspiration, such as Primitivism and Medievalism, the vogue for the Orient became so intermingled with the enthusiasm for the ancient world as a whole, and feelings of general nostalgia, that it is now impossible to speak of them entirely separately. Elements of many different “aesthetic categories” may permeate the same Romantic work. It must also be borne in mind that when Berlioz was inspired by Pompeii, he was not only inspired by the glory of the vanished Roman Empire, but more especially by the “Oriental” cult of Isis and its associated music. This cult was originally imported from Egypt, for the Romans were brilliant assimilators of the culture of different ages and places, much as nineteenth-century artists strove to be. Indeed, Roman eclecticism finds a direct parallel in nineteenth-century French and British imperial eclecticism, with all their consequent cross-currents of influence. And if Isis was an important deity in Pompeii, so Pompeii was also a major centre for worship of the Persian sun god, Mithras, among many other “foreign” gods and goddesses. It is in just such a context that one must consider Norman Del Mar’s interpretation of the meaning of “2 Tavolette” in Respighi’s *Feste Romane*. This indication most likely corresponds to small Oriental hand drums of a type which the composer may well “have believed to have been in use amongst the Arab community in Ancient Rome”.¹⁸

A number of bronze crotales were discovered in the nineteenth century, though referred to as “cymbalum” by the Romans. These were often portrayed in conjunction with tambourines (*tympana*) of two feet or more in diameter, as well as “double flutes”, or other piped woodwind. Such instruments were played both at religious and social occasions. Bronze “tintinnabula” - tinkling bells frequently used by dancing girls - were found at Herculaneum, and many bronze rattles or “sistra” were excavated in Pompeii. These particular sistra were approximately 20 cms. in length (**Figs.1B** and **1C**).¹⁹ (For more information on the **sistrum**, see **FoMRHI Comms.1673** and **1689**.)

Ancient Egyptian instruments which resembled the harp, flute, trumpet, drums and cymbals were documented in hieroglyphic references and were also to be seen in wall paintings. Nevertheless, it was still impossible for anyone to tell exactly how these instruments would have sounded - especially as few well-preserved remains of them had yet been found. Imaginative speculation abounded. In *Thaïs* (1890), Anatole France mentions a brightly-coloured tomb painting in which “women danced to the sounds of viols, flutes and harp” and “a young girl played the theorbo”.²⁰ This is a dreadful anachronism, for the lute-like theorbo did not come into use until the end of the sixteenth century, and fell out of use in the mid eighteenth century. Yet if allowance is made for this misnomer, it must be admitted that instruments resembling the theorbo existed in the Middle East long ago, as indeed they still do today. During the orgy in the final scene of *One of Cleopatra’s Nights*, Gautier introduces musicians playing “upon the sistrum, the tympanum, the sambuke, and the harp with one-and-twenty strings”. These musicians “filled all the upper galleries, and mingled their harmonies with the tempest of sound that hovered over the feast”.²¹ Gautier takes pains to suggest to his readers firstly the exotic nature of Oriental instruments, and, secondly, their characteristically bright timbre. “Tympanum” refers to the large Egyptian species of tambourine, which his readers were unlikely to have known, but it is even less likely they had any idea at all what a “sambuke” was. Little matter, Gautier might well have thought, for the word “sambuke” has a truly exotic, Middle-Eastern ring to it.²² In another of

¹⁸ Norman Del Mar, *Anatomy of the Orchestra* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983), p.414.

¹⁹ Amanda Claridge and John Ward-Perkins, *Pompeii AD 79* [exhibition catalogue of treasures from the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, and the Pompeii Antiquarium, Italy] (Sydney: Australian Gallery Directors Council Ltd., 1980), notes to plates 180, 195, 177.

²⁰ Anatole France, *Thaïs*, trans. Robert B. Douglas (London: The Bodley Head, 1924), p.213.

²¹ *Mademoiselle de Maupin and One of Cleopatra’s Nights*, pp.330-31.

²² Regarding the “sambuke” or “sambuka”, *Stainer and Barrett’s Dictionary of Musical Terms*, which was first published in the latter part of the nineteenth century (1876; rev.1898), notes:

This word, though applied sometimes to several musical instruments of different kinds, such as a lyre, a dulcimer, a triangular harp or trigon, and a large Asiatic harp, seems to have been chiefly used as a term for the last-named instrument. By some authors it has been identified with the large Egyptian harp ... It has been suggested that “sambuka” was used as a general

Gautier's famous Oriental short stories, *Le Roman de la momie (The Mummy's Romance)* (1857), the Egyptian musicians appear as "a small army themselves . . . composed of players upon drums, tambourines, trumpets, sistrums and triangles".²³ The task of these musicians is to accompany a "College of Priests".

Music was almost a monopoly for the priests in Ancient Egypt, a point certainly not lost on Gautier, nor indeed Verdi, when he came to write *Aïda*. Such an association naturally and conveniently brought in that religious, mystical element which so fascinated creative artists and their audiences. (Even the Dervish dances of Turkey and Egypt, which one might presume to be purely secular affairs, have religious connotations.) In Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), attention is focussed on the "bizarrerie" of the instruments. In one religious procession, the master of ceremonies makes way for numerous women scattering perfumes, who are themselves

succeeded by a company of musicians, piping and twanging, on instruments the strangest Marius had ever beheld, the notes of a hymn, narrating the first origin of this votive rite to a choir of youths, who marched behind them singing it.

In addition to many "initiates" to the worship of Isis shaking their sistra, in the train of this procession come

priests in long white vestments, close from head to foot, distributed into various groups, each bearing, exposed aloft, one of the sacred symbols of Isis—the corn-fan, the golden asp, the ivory hand of equity, and among them the votive ship itself, carved and gilt, and adorned with flags flying.

This religious celebration, which takes place on one of the first hot days in March – a day of "physical heat and light" for Marius – is held to honour the "*Ship of Isis*", which is annually launched into the Mediterranean. The vessel is devoted to the goddess Isis, "that new rival, or "double", of ancient Venus, and like her a favourite patroness of sailors".²⁴ Typically, a link is here established between the concept of fertility, and the necessity of water (in this case, the sea) in Oriental religious rites.

Imitation of the twittering of birds is a sound frequently mentioned by writers of "exotic" novels. This, and a virtual catalogue of other exotic and Oriental elements, are all to be found between the covers of *Salammbô*. Indeed, soon after its publication, Saint-Beuve characterized *Salammbô* as a "lexicon" of Orientalia.²⁵ In the following passage, bird noises are made by priestesses dressed in the "Egyptian" colours of yellow and black. They dance after the Middle-Eastern fashion, which involves "writhing" or "twirling". As part of his description of this magnificent Carthaginian religious procession, Flaubert relates how the priests of a certain ancient college of

the Rabetna went forward proudly, with lyres in their hands; the priestesses followed them in black or yellow or transparent robes, making bird noises, writhing like serpents; or, to the sound of flutes, they twirled in imitation of the dance of the stars, and their light dresses sent through the streets gusts of sensuous perfume.²⁶

The sounds which fill the air are thus of lyres, bird noises, and omnipresent flutes.

term for instruments made of elderwood (*sambucus*); but the best authorities will not allow any relationship between the two words. (p.392.)

It must remain a matter of contention whether or not Gautier thought of the sambuke as a "large Egyptian harp", since he mentions it in the same breath as "the harp with one-and-twenty strings".

²³ Théophile Gautier, *The Mummy's Romance*, trans. G. F. Monkshood (London: Greening & Co., 1908), p.53. Monkshood dedicates this translation to Rider Haggard, whose *Cleopatra* he acclaims as "the greatest romance of Egypt ever written by an Englishman".

²⁴ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (London: Macmillan, 1927), pp.77-79.

²⁵ See André Lagarde and Laurent Michard, *Les Grands Auteurs Français du Programme*, vol.V: *XIXe Siècle* (Paris: Bordas, 1961), p.469.

²⁶ *Salammbô*, p.276.

Flute sounds are usually introduced into the works of writers and musicians whenever a note of reminiscence or gently melancholy is required. As A. E. Coppard has written, there is something “nostalgically primitive about woodwind instruments”. This statement may go some way to explaining the prominence of the meandering solo flute (soon joined by a harp glissando) at the beginning of Debussy’s *Prélude à “l’après-midi d’un faune”* - a use which Nietzsche would probably have disparaged, having spoken in 1872 of “how self-consciously and mawkishly the modern dallies with his tender, fluting shepherd!”²⁷ This type of pseudo-Classical Greek pastoral music is frequently mentioned in the writings of Pierre Louÿs. In *Aphrodite*, a girl stands on the jetty in Alexandria, singing of satyrs, oreads and water nymphs (“Hot forms, wet-eyed, with flying hair”), to the accompaniment of two flute-players who sigh “into their doubled reeds”. At the refrain, “Eros! Eros!”, “shrill cries” leap from the flutes.

It is also worth remarking on the fascination that both Berlioz and Debussy felt for the legendary, almost mythical sound of the Æolian harp, a sound they were inspired to try to recall in their “Classical” and “Ancient Oriental” works. This harp, set in harmonic motion by the wind (corresponding to the “æolian bows” hung in trees in the Far East²⁸), became fashionable in Europe in the early nineteenth century (as indeed did the more modern form of the harp as a domestic instrument). Coleridge, Shelley and the London-based poet/manufacturer Robert Bloomfield wrote of the Æolian harp, and were entranced by what it represented. Indeed, it generated so much interest that Georges Kastner, an authority on ancient and modern instruments, was moved in 1848 to write a lengthy monograph on the subject.²⁹ The sound that the Æolian harp was supposed to produce fascinated the Romantics before all other “Ancient Oriental” sounds: it was for practical purposes inimitable, and thus was only ever really heard in their imaginations. It became so idealised in the nineteenth century as to seem to have sprung from Paradise itself. Pierre Loti did, however, write in *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) of that special type of novelty ornament popularly referred to as the Æolian harp, common in Japan. Two of these “little Aeolian harps” were hung beneath a verandah of the Oriental heroine’s house, and “at the least ruffle of the breeze running through their blades of grass”, they emitted “a gentle tinkling sound, like the harmonious murmur of a brook”.³⁰

III

Berlioz must be accorded pride of place when it comes to the employment of new and unusual instruments to suggest sounds of an ancient or exotic nature. The extent of his experiments with such instruments and sounds were of an order hitherto unprecedented. The monumental opera *Les Troyens*, never performed in full in Berlioz’s lifetime, is particularly worthy of examination in this regard. Berlioz called its composition a “Phrygian task”: a “great construction” to be built like “the palaces of Nineveh”.³¹ Berlioz’s command of the orchestra throughout the opera is exemplary for its restraint and sensitivity, and yet the dramatic intensity he felt able to generate in the work led him, on completion of the score in 1858, to designate it his greatest work - “immense”, “noble”, “grand and powerful”. Some commentators have seen *Les Troyens* as a French “Oriental” equivalent and predecessor to Wagner’s “Northern” *Ring* cycle. Frederick Martens called *Les Troyens à Carthage* – the latter part of the opera which was produced in 1863 as an independent opera in its own right – “the greatest operatic work dealing with ancient Carthage”.³²

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), p.22.

²⁸ In 1908, Arthur C. Moule described one of many varieties of Chinese “kite bows and harps” (flown from kites in springtime) which could make loud humming sounds over vast distances. The Shanghai kite harp consisted of a bamboo pear-shaped frame with seven straight cross-pieces, onto which were stretched peg-tensioned “strings” of narrow ribbon. See *A list of the musical ... instruments of the Chinese* (Shanghai, 1908), pp.105-6, and pl.X,1.

²⁹ Kastner’s monograph was entitled *La harpe d’Eole*: see *The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments*, p.4.

³⁰ Pierre Loti, *Madame Chrysanthème*, trans. Laura Ensor, With designs by Rossi and Myrbach (London, Manchester and New York: George Routledge and Sons, 1897), p.142.

³¹ Cited in Ian Kemp, ed., *Les Troyens* [Cambridge Opera Handbooks series] (Cambridge, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne and Sydney: CUP, 1988), pp.48, 52.

³² Frederick H. Martens, *A Thousand and One Nights of Opera* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1926), p.18.

Les Troyens partakes of the same spirit as Flaubert's Carthaginian epic, *Salammô*, and emerged from a fusion of ancient "Oriental" subject matter with the tradition of Meyerbeerian grand opera. In 1892, the critic Julien Tiersot recognised this affinity between Flaubert's static, descriptive, "cinematographic" views of the "Orient", and the character of *Les Troyens*, when he explained that Berlioz's work was a great series "of tableaux and distinct impressions rather than action in the true sense". Berlioz wished to evoke an atmosphere rife with the fragmentary remains of sweet, delicious memories, which might have drifted into the present on some warm, fragrant breeze originating in the Orient of long ago. Both history and literature are, in fact, the assumed background, the aesthetic *sine qua non* of the nineteenth century, and key to a true appreciation of Berlioz's opera.³³

If Lafcadio Hearn introduced *Salammô* to the English-reading public on 18th October, 1885, by heading his appreciation of the forthcoming translation of the book, "An Archaeological Novel", Julien Tiersot might equally have bestowed the appellation, "An Archaeological Opera", upon Berlioz's *Les Troyens*. Indeed, just as some critics denounced Flaubert's continual focus on matters of seemingly excessive and pedantic "archaeological" detail, so, in 1870, Georges de Massoungnes took to task those critics who were unable to grasp Berlioz's opera in its entirety and who dismissed much of it as "an immense jumble of senseless laboriousness".³⁴ Hearn, however, defended such archaeological minutiae as never lacking in "artistic puissance".

In his famous appreciation, Hearn called Flaubert's *Salammô* perhaps "the grandest archaeological novel ever written". He pointed out that Flaubert could rely on no ready-made story of antique life, but depended solely upon his "vast research" and "immense labour" to resurrect Carthage, a city "so utterly blotted out long before the Christian era". "The war of Rome against Carthage," Hearn wrote, signified the "extinction of a race, the obliteration of site, the destruction of a language, and the abolition of a memory".³⁵ Both Berlioz and Flaubert sought to restore such awe-inspiring memories to nineteenth-century consciousness, but it was Berlioz alone who found a human scale in the midst of his vast canvasses, infusing the historical Dido with genuine passion and "living blood". Early critics recognised this fact, among them Auguste de Gasperin, who praised Berlioz for his ability to remain "entirely and profoundly human". This trait of achieving intimacy within epic subjects, and thus adding to the emotional breadth and depth of grand "Oriental" works, likewise contributes to the effectiveness of Verdi's *Aida*. The finale of *Les Troyens* has indeed been interpreted as illustrating how "history tramples on the supremely human".³⁶

Berlioz's most interesting brand of "archaeological detail" consists in his scrupulous attempts to incorporate into *Les Troyens* both the appearance and sound of ancient "Oriental" instruments. It may even be claimed that he wished to "improve" upon the sound of the originals, especially in respect of the metallic unpitched percussion.

In his *Grand traité de l'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (1843), Berlioz relates how he has examined some ancient cymbals in the Pompeian Museum in Naples "which were no larger than a dollar", but observes that the "sound of those is so high, and so weak, that it could hardly be distinguished without the complete silence of the other instruments". He believes that these cymbals "served, in ancient times, to mark the rhythm of certain dances,—like our modern *castanets*, doubtless". Berlioz knew exactly how his modernised replicas were to be made, and by what method the best sound was produced. He writes:

To make them vibrate well, the player should—instead of striking the cymbals full one against the other—strike them merely by one of their edges. All bell-founders can manufacture these small cymbals; which are first cast in brass or copper, and then turned, to bring them into the desired key. They should be of at least three lines and a half in thickness.³⁷

³³ Ian Kemp, ed., *Les Troyens*, pp.190, 194-95.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p.189.

³⁵ Lafcadio Hearn, *Essays in European and Oriental Literature*, ed. Albert Mordell (London: Heinemann, 1923), pp.78, 75. The editorials gathered together for the first time in this volume were written between 1883 and 1887.

³⁶ Ian Kemp, ed., *Les Troyens*, pp.189, 44, 92. Berlioz, in fact, enlisted Flaubert's help to design the costumes for *Les Troyens*.

³⁷ *A Treatise on Modern Instrumentation and Orchestration*, pp.243, 225.

Berlioz wished to “improve” upon genuine antique cymbals by desiring pitched instruments, which consequently allows them to be better and more delicately integrated into the rich orchestral fabric and harmonic structure of Western music.

For the “Dance of the Nubian Slaves” (no.33c), Berlioz brings in one of the most exotic instruments ever used in an operatic score. This the composer calls “tarbuka”, although it is known around the Mediterranean by a variety of other names, most commonly as *darabuka* or *tarabuka* (and variants), and in Turkey as *dumbek* or *dumbelik* (and variants), being related to the Egyptian *tabla* and Iranian *zarb*. The *darabuka* (“dar’abook’heh”), still in use throughout the Near and Middle East, is a hollow, goblet-shaped, pot drum made of earthenware, wood or brass, with a skin glued or laced over the wider end, which forms the top (see **FoMRHI Comm.1690: Fig.1**). Like the sistrum, the *darabuka* is an instrument of great antiquity, its use recorded in Babylon and Sumeria in the second millennium B.C. - and likely existing long before. Berlioz may have known the *darabuka* in its North African form. It is played with a variety of different hand and finger strokes, allowing the production of sounds which may be “deep and drum-like, or hollow-sounding knocks”, but “sometimes high and metallic”.³⁸ Berlioz wanted his “tarbuka” on the stage, where it could be played, though its sound could be imitated in the pit by the orchestral “tambourin”. The “tambourin” – a long drum with one head and no snare – is today better known for its use in the Farandole of Bizet’s incidental music to *L’Arlésienne* - another work of definite “Oriental” flavour. There is a literary reference to the “tarbuka” (Berlioz’s spelling being unique) in Gérard de Nerval’s classic travel volume, *Voyage en Orient* (definitive version 1851). This occurs within the section headed “Les Femmes du Caire”, in which he describes attending a performance by Nubian dancers who are accompanied by almas, singing and playing “tarabouki”. Almas, according to Nerval, are a special type of Egyptian dancing girl, their name deriving “from the Arabic *almah*”, meaning “learned (in music and dancing)”.³⁹

Delibes subsequently found a use for the “darabuka” in *Lakmé*, but it was quite a few years later before another Frenchman, Jacques Ibert, was to employ this same instrument in an orchestral composition, describing it as a “darboukka” in his *Suite symphonique* of 1932. Ibert features the “darboukka” in the third movement entitled “La Mosquée de Paris” (“The Paris Mosque”). He evokes the atmosphere of this building, situated in the exotic North African quarter of the city, by presenting a languid, melismatic oboe solo (“a steady, monotonous Arabian chant,” according to the composer’s programme note at the head of the score) against a background texture consisting of timpani, the “deep beat” of a “darboukka”, woodwind syncopation and gentle pizzicato strings. By the time Ibert completed his *Suite symphonique*, which was intended to illustrate scenes of Parisian life, an “Orient” no longer imaginary was beginning to conquer the West from within. “The Paris Mosque” was written nearly a century after Félicien David had first boldly thought to introduce both an imitation of the sound of the “tarabouka drum”, as well as the Muslim call to prayer, into his seminal Oriental musical classic, *Le Désert*. When performed in 1844, these sounds were a complete novelty to almost all his audience. It was only a year after this première that Gautier made his (as he then thought) jocular remark about France gradually turning “Mahometan”, wishing he might live to see the day when, in France, “the white domes of mosques” mingled with church steeples.⁴⁰ What an irony it is then, that in order to inject some sense of historical destiny into the ending of his Trojan opera, Berlioz’s “first plan had been a prophecy on the lips of the dying Dido of French dominion in North Africa”. But Berlioz soon rejected this allusion as nothing more than “pure childish chauvinism” on his part.⁴¹

“Double flûtes antiques”, being obviously too complex to reconstruct and play, are nevertheless to be represented on stage in Berlioz’s opera. Both the Egyptians and Greeks used “double flutes”, it being suggested in J. G. Wilkinson’s *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1837) that the left pipe provided a bass, over which the right would assume the melody. The “double flute” thus resembled the “arghool” which E. W. Lane had seen in Egypt in the early 1830s. Berlioz employs an

³⁸ *The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments*, p.89.

³⁹ Gérard de Nerval (Gérard Labrunie), *Journey to the Orient*, selected, translated and with an Introduction by Norman Glass (London: Michael Haag, 1984), p.215.

⁴⁰ Cited in Joanna Richardson, *Théophile Gautier: His Life and Times* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1958), p.76.

⁴¹ In Ian Kemp, ed., *Les Troyens*, p.63.

ensemble of three oboes to “re-create” the sound of “double flutes”, both the lower ones playing a drone (a sound much imitated by composers of “Middle-Eastern” music), while the upper instrument sings forth with short, repetitive, undulatory melodic figures. In Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the “double flute” is associated with “the orgiastic rites of Cybele”, and it is known from other sources that antique cymbals were also used by the priestesses of Cybele.⁴²

There is one other unusual instrument worthy of especial note in Berlioz’s score for *Les Troyens*, for its employment demonstrates that the composer was more than happy to use little-known, ultra-modern instruments to evoke bizarre “Oriental” sounds. The instrument is the saxhorn, previously used at the Paris Opéra in Verdi’s *Jérusalem* (1847), Meyerbeer’s *Le Prophète* (1849) and Halévy’s *Le Juif errant* (1852), all works which include “Oriental” elements. Berlioz used his saxhorns sparingly so that their strange “retentissant” (resounding) tone would have added effect, being employed in Acts I and V of *Les Troyens* to represent “phrygian trumpets”.⁴³

Further investigation into the “Oriental” contexts in which these unusual instruments occur reveals that they provide an aural background against which an assortment of different “types” of exotic peoples may shine with added splendour. During the Act I finale or “Marche troyenne” (no.11), while a huge procession crosses the plain towards Troy we hear the above-mentioned “Phrygian trumpets”, as well as “Trojan lyres” and the “flutes of Dindyma”. In the Second Tableau of Act IV, Iopas sings soothing music against a background provided by the Egyptian harp, which calms the atmosphere after the more vigorous and sensual performance of three groups of Oriental dancers.

Berlioz appears to have conceived his three Oriental ballets quite independently from the rest of Act IV, concentrating upon them in order to display his talents at evoking the flavour of the “East” more emphatically in these purely programmatic numbers. These ballets were published in separate offprints by Choudens in 1863. The first, “Pas des almées”, opens with a languorous, tortuous melody of drooping phrases: that characteristic type of “Middle-Eastern” melody which so many Western composers strove to emulate. Berlioz intended to fashion his almas after those “bayadères” (Hindu dancers) which he saw in Auber’s “Indian” opera-ballet, *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* (1830). He wrote of his initial idea to set “some verses by Hafiz, the Persian poet”, and intended them to be “sung in Persian by the singing almas, as the Indian women used to. There is no anachronism, I have gone into it; Dido could easily have had Egyptian dancers at her court who had earlier come from India”.⁴⁴ Thus we can see that Berlioz, like Flaubert, conducted his own “research” into the background of the times before fashioning his most colourful Oriental scenes. However, Leray’s poster for the 1863 Paris production of *Les Troyens à Carthage* at the Théâtre Lyrique did not display so much attention to historical detail: it somewhat incongruously incorporated a small Egyptian stone sphinx in the bottom left hand corner. This sphinx seems to have been added for no other reason than that it was one of the few universally recognisable symbols capable of indicating that *Les Troyens* was an “exotic” opera.

E. W. Lane had contested the use of the term “Alméh” (or “Almah”) to describe Egyptian dancing girls. Almas were properly professional singers, he reported in 1836; dancing girls were called “Ghawázee”. Nevertheless, it is almas who perform the voluptuous dances of *Les Troyens*, their dress including “little bells”. The sound of the bells attached to these Egyptian dancing girls is indicated by semiquaver triplets in Berlioz’s wind parts, and not by the percussion as one might imagine. (Delibes employed the keyed glockenspiel for a similar part – the famous Indian Bell Song – in his opera telling the story of the Hindu girl, Lakmé, daughter of a fanatical Brahmin priest.) Berlioz’s “Pas des almées” (no.33a) is followed by a “Danse des esclaves” (no.33b), and then comes the “Pas d’esclaves nubiennes” (no.33c), an especially exotically flavoured dance which includes parts for four contraltos who sing in a suitably “Oriental” language. It was, therefore, not his Egyptian almas who were to sing in the completed score of these three Oriental ballets, but his Nubians, one of the blackest of African peoples.⁴⁵ The words they chant are neither by Hafiz, nor even Persian, but pure invention on Berlioz’s part:

⁴² *ibid.*, p.204.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.209, and see especially Appendix B (pp.204-12) for details and plates of “Antique and obsolete instruments”.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, pp.36, 55.

⁴⁵ Ancient Nubia is now incorporated into modern Egypt, having been annexed by Mehemet Ali in 1820.

Ha! Ha!
Amaloué
Midonaé
Faï caraïmé
Deï beraïmbé
Ha! Ha!

There are no “authentic” Eastern verses here, and complete fantasy is allowed to replace “research”. Thus, not only does Berlioz idealise Oriental instruments and melodies, but also Oriental text.

The “Dance of the Nubian Slaves” is particularly noteworthy for its use of unusual instruments, as well as the several typical “Oriental” timbres which are to be heard in this number. The flute and piccolo are employed for their shrill quality, the cor anglais for its “Oriental” reed effect, while the antique cymbals, tarbuka and “tambourin” supposedly evoke the percussive sounds of the Ancient East. Violins are used in unison to impart strength to the melodic line, while the lower strings have a characteristic pizzicato passage which gives the dance added drive and fervour by keeping the bass line supple and rhythmical.

The inescapable tendency to romanticise history in art, music and literature was emotionally reinforced by creative artists such as Berlioz and Flaubert, until it took deep root in the nineteenth-century psyche. Yet through their diligence and absolute integrity, such artists helped to restore to nineteenth-century consciousness an important part of the grand panorama of human life and history, reclaiming, almost from oblivion, memories which it had proved impossible “for man to destroy forever”. Their peculiar ideas of the past were branded into the memory through different means of idealistic popularisation. Berlioz employed poignant melodies and cultivated the art of evoking “Oriental” atmospheres by orchestral means in order to bring his Ancient East to life. Flaubert himself favoured epic pictures often “so frightful that they can be no more erased from the memory than the recollection of some horrible personal experience”.⁴⁶ Nineteenth-century artists had indeed found an inspiring mission. They whole-heartedly embraced their task of “re-orchestrating the past”, compensating humankind for a past seemingly denuded, void of life and colour, almost forgotten. The Orient, “as image or as thought”,⁴⁷ remained to inspire, and its grip on the imagination was strengthened by every new tale of the East that was told. Artists filled in all the gaps left by history and archaeology. As Lafcadio Hearn wrote in 1885:

We knew until within very late years much more of Troy than we knew of Carthage; since the phantom of the city gleams still for us over the sea-like song of Homer. But if Carthage had also a Homer, his songs have been as eternally lost as are the sounds of that nameless sea which once rolled its billows above the sands of the African desert.⁴⁸



⁴⁶ *Essays in European and Oriental Literature*, pp.76, 78.

⁴⁷ This is a famous phrase from the Preface to Victor Hugo's influential collection of lyrics, *Les Orientales* (1829), in which the author describes the new nineteenth-century preoccupation with the "Orient". In what amounts to the seminal manifesto of Orientalism, Hugo speaks of how the "dreams and thoughts" of the age are gradually turning to China, Egypt, the ancient Hebrew lands, Turkey, Greece, Persia, Arabia, and even Spain:

Jamais tant d'intelligences n'ont fouillé à la fois ce grand abîme de l'Asie. Nous avons aujourd'hui un savant cantonné dans chacun des idioms de l'Orient, depuis la Chine jusqu'à l'Égypte.

Il résulte de toute cela que l'Orient, soit comme image, soit comme pensée, est devenu, pour les intelligences autant que pour les imaginations, une sorte de préoccupation générale à laquelle l'auteur de ce livre a obéi peut-être à son insu. Les couleurs orientales sont venues comme d'elles-mêmes empreindre toutes ses pensées, toutes ses rêveries; et ses rêveries et ses pensées se sont trouvées tour à tour, et presque sans l'avoir voulu, hébraïques, turques, grecques, persanes, arabes, espagnoles même, car l'Espagne c'est encore l'Orient; l'Espagne est à demi africaine, l'Afrique est à demi asiatique.

⁴⁸ *Essays in European and Oriental Literature*, p.76.