

The impact of Saint-Saëns' travels in Tunisia on his creative work

In 1921, Saint-Saëns made a trip to Tunisia to give a piano recital on April 6, 1921 accompanied by the pianist Gaston Régis and the cellist Jean Dela Casa Noceti¹ : the number of spectators was around 1500 people who came to see the famous pianist and composer of 86 years² . This recital was highly acclaimed by the Tunisian and French public, the reputation of Saint-Saëns as a virtuoso pianist and universal composer made this recital a great event in Tunisia³ . The program consisted of works by Saint-Saëns, as well as a sonata by Beethoven (opus 57, called *Appassionata*), *Venezia e Napoli* by Liszt and works by Paganini.



Figure 1 Saint-Saëns in Megrine, southern suburb of Tunis (seated in the middle), surrounded by members of the "Foyer musical" committee, April 9, 1921⁴

¹ LECA, Henri, *La musique à Tunis, Saint-Saëns, le concert Régis-Nocetti*, published in *La Tunisie illustré*, no. 203, Tunis, 15 April 1921, pp. 20-22.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.



Figure 2 Saint-Saëns in Megrine (seated in the middle), southern suburb of Tunis, surrounded by members of the "Foyer musical" delegation, April 9, 1921⁵



Figure 3 Saint-Saëns in a dress brought back from Tunisia⁶

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ MACHART, Renaud, UNGER, David, *Camille Saint-Saëns, l'insaisissable : un monument de la musique et boute-en-train potache*, Arte, https://www.lemonde.fr/televisions-radio/article/2021/12/12/camille-saint-saens-monument-et-potache_6105781 accessed February 5, 2022.

However, Saint-Saëns' first contacts with Tunisia go back to 1890, when he composed the work *Africa*, a fantasy written for piano and orchestra: the slow movement of the work is a reproduction of the Tunisian national anthem of the time known as the beylical anthem: a large part of the theme is reproduced exactly as the original melody of this hymn despite the change in rhythmic signature (3/4 instead of 4/4), the second part is only a harmonization of the main melody in thirds (see figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4 Tunisian Beylical Anthem, bars 1-4



Figure 5 Saint-Saëns, *Africa*, bars 84-88

This passage is not the only Tunisian element in the work: we note, in the first measures of *Africa*, the presence of the Tunisian mode of *Rasd al-Dhil*: by analyzing the theme exposed at the beginning of the work, we notice the dominance of the augmented fourth (C sharp in the case of this work in the key of G minor) and the total absence of C sharp: this note (accentuated in the main theme of this work) is one of the main characteristics of the *Rasd al-Dhil* mode present in its first tetrachord⁷ (see figures 6, 7,8 and 9). The absence of the semibreve third (a B semibreve) is justified by the inability of the piano to reproduce quarter tones. We also note that this mode is played by some Tunisian musicians with a minor third.

⁷ GUETTAT, Mahmoud, *La Tunisie dans les documents du Premier Congrès de Musique Arabe*, in *La musique arabe : le Congrès du Caire - 1932*, Cairo, CEDEJ, 1992, pp. 69-86.



Figure 6 Rasd-al-Dhil mode in C⁸

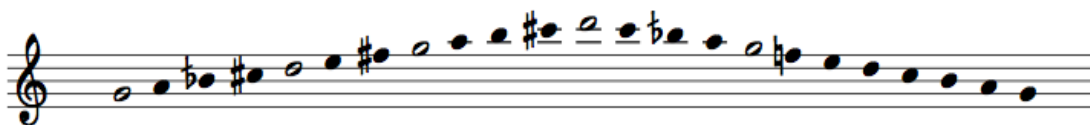


Figure 7 Rasd-al-Dhil mode in G

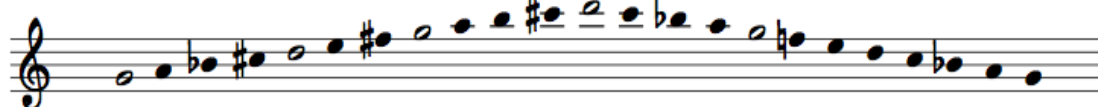


Figure 8 Scale used by Saint-Saëns in Africa⁹



Figure 9 Saint-Saëns, Africa, bars 6-11

Another intriguing element in the work *Africa*, is the use of octaves: in Tunisian and Arabic music, the writing is generally monodic¹⁰. The instruments present all play the same melody, each in its own register, with the absence of a vertical harmony; for the piano, the same melody is played at the octave (the left hand doubles the right hand)¹¹. We note that at the beginning of the work, the piano plays the melody in octave

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The only difference between the *Rasd-al-Dhil* mode and the scale used by Saint-Saëns is the note B half-flat because of the non-playability of these intervals are not playable on the piano.

¹⁰ BOUZAR-KASBADJI, Nadya, *Francisco Salvador-Daniel. Pilgrim of the ancient Mediterranean musics*, Revista De Musicología, vol. 16, no. 4, 1993, pp. 1998-2016.

¹¹ In our research work to obtain the Master's degree in musicology in 2019, we studied the works of Mustapha Skandrani, pianist and master of *Châa'bi* music from Algiers, as well as other Maghrebian pianists specializing in popular music from the region. One of the greatest characteristics of Arab piano playing is the doubling of the melodies of the right hand by the left hand.

by keeping the same chord creating a kind of harmonic stability (no change in the chord) harmonic despite the presence of several modulating notes such as C # and E flat).

During our analysis of the work *Africa*, we noticed the presence of another element of Tunisian music: Saint-Saëns, a great admirer of Salvador-Daniel's work, used a rhythmic ostinato in the work *Africa* (see figure 10).

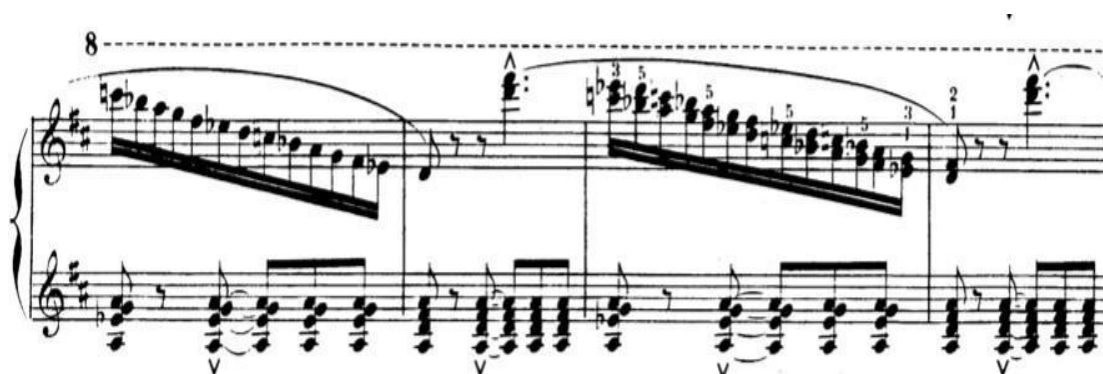


Figure 10 Saint-Saëns, *Africa*, bars 143-146

The rhythmic ostinato used in this movement is reminiscent of a popular Tunisian rhythm, the *Ghayta* (see Figure 11).

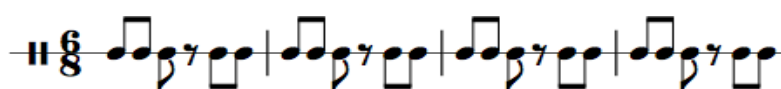


Figure 11 Structure of the Tunisian *Ghayta* rhythm¹²

By aligning Saint-Saëns' rhythmic ostinato in the work *Africa* with the structure of the *Ghayta* with an offset of two eighth notes (where Saint-Saëns indicates the accent of his ostinato), we can see the similarity between the two structures with the exception of the fourth-beat linkage, which is usually played as an appoggiatura (see



Figure 12).

Figure 12 Rhythmic ostinato in *Africa* and *Ghayta* shifts by two eighth notes

We note in this work the use of other Tunisian modes. After the *Rasd-al-Dhil* mode used at the beginning, another mode appears in the fourth sequence of the work: the *Nawa* mode. Generally exposed in the key of D minor, we find it

¹² GUETTAT, Mahmoud, *La Tunisie dans les documents du Premier Congrès de Musique Arabe*, in *La musique arabe : le Congrès du Caire - 1932*, Cairo, CEDEJ, 1992, pp. 69-86.

in this sequence in the key of E minor. The weave is that of the D major scale, but the passage is modal in nature. This pentatonic mode is exposed in the part played by the piano in the same traditional Tunisian musical language (see figure 13,14 and 15).



Figure 13, the Nawa mode in E¹³



Figure 14, Saint-Saëns, Africa, sequence 4, Nawa mode exposure



Figure 15, Saint-Saëns, Africa, sequence 4, Nawa mode exposure

In this work, we also note a remarkable passage in the sequence whose mode used is a mode of Tunisian music. We note the use of the mode *Asba Ayn* exposed at the beginning by the strings then taken again by the piano. This passage is played in unison, by several instruments (see figure below). We also note the use of syncopations, the playing of the The piano is at the octave and a light harmony that highlights the modal nature of the motif used, resulting in a distinguished exotic sound. This part of exotic and glorious character is undoubtedly a good witness of the influence of Tunisian music on the work of Saint- Saëns: he describes through this passage which is repeated several times until the end of the work the great influence of the southern basin of the Mediterranean on his creations by amplifying this "modal" motive by the play of the orchestra supported by unisons and percussions (timpani, cymbals) and repeating it with the piano in octaves or thirds played by the two

¹³ Ibid.

hands in an indication of *Fortissimo* and which brings us later to the finale of the work as glorious and imposing as this motif.

The existence of augmented seconds and the resolution of the cadences on the fifth degree has in no way a relationship with the harmonic minor scale often used in European music, nor with the *Hijaz* mode often found in so-called oriental music, nor with an "orientalist" approach; this passage is a direct illustration of the *'Asba Ayn* mode, which comes directly from the influence of Tunisian music on the work of Camille Saint- Saëns¹⁴ . This passage is - like the passage in the fourth sequence - made up of a melodic movement that is based on the Tunisian musical tradition. These traditions are found not only in the modes chosen (such as the beginning in *Rasd-al-Dhil*, the *Nawa* or the beylical hymn set in the middle of the work in *Mezmoum*) but in the nature of the playing itself. Saint-Saëns respects the features of Tunisian music by using accents, ornaments, appoggiaturas and rhythmic movements often found in this music. The musical language used is particularly similar to the traditional Tunisian songs as well as to the playing of the instruments



that double the singers and reinforce the melodies exposed in the middle octaves.

Figure 16 Saint-Saëns, Africa, sequence 11

In the case of the concerto for piano and orchestra number 5 opus 103, known as "*the Egyptian*", we think that this name (coming from the fact that it was composed during Saint-Saëns' stay in Luxor in 1895¹⁵) does not reflect the true identity of the elements

The "oriental" name used in this work, especially as the Egyptian name was given to the work by its publisher; this name is due to the existence of a Nubian love song that Saint-Saëns used the *andante* part of the second movement of the concerto and heard it during his stay

¹⁴ THEOLEYRE, Malcolm, *Arab music, folklore of France? Music, politics and musical communities in contact in Algiers during the colonial period (1862-1962)* Thesis directed by Emmanuelle Loyer, Paris, Institute of Political Studies of Paris, 2016, p321.

¹⁵ CARON Jean-Luc, DENIZEAU Gérard, *Camille Saint-Saëns*, Paris, Bleu nuit éditeur, collection "Horizons " (no 38), 2013, p. 82.

in Egypt¹⁶. As already mentioned, the so-called oriental or Arabic music was known for a long time by the augmented second between the sixth and the seventh of the minor scale starting from the dominant, a characteristic of the mode called *Hijâz* often leaving this orientalist impression; this impression is the first one to be had when listening to the second movement of the concerto of Saint-Saëns which does not use these intervals in a form. The music is not "superficial" but rather in very precise movements in accordance with the Tunisian musical tradition.

This "emblematic" mode of "Arab" music exists under different names in the countries of North Africa; it is played on the same notes of the '*Asba Ayn* mode, hence, this scale does not confirm in any way the Egyptian identity of the 5^{ème} concerto of Saint-Saëns.



Figure 17 illustration of the '*Asba Ayn* mode in D¹⁷

By analyzing the concerto, we notice in the first movement the use of a Tunisian rhythm called *Khatim*, usually played at the end of the *Nûba*¹⁸ (see figures 18 and 19).



Figure 18 Structure of the *Khatim*¹⁹



Figure 19 Saint-Saëns, *Piano Concerto No. 5, 1^{er} movement, bars 9-17*

The sigh in the third beat of each measure as well as the indication of the dynamics of the playing between the first two beats of each measure (creating an effect of

¹⁶ WOO YOO, Seung, *Camille Saint-Saens' Piano Concerto No. 5 In F Major, Opus 103: An Analytical Study Of Form, Composition Techniques, And A Performance Perspective*, Texas, University of North Texas, 2004, p.20.

¹⁷ Baron d'Erlanger Archives. <https://ennejma.tn/archives/fr/2014/04/17/062-10-01-10-62/> accessed September 8, 2021.

¹⁸ CHERIF, Rashid, *Tunisian classical music and the dimension of authenticity*, NEMO-Online Volume 3, No. 4, 2015, p.20.

¹⁹ Ibid.

strong-low, equivalent to the *Dûm-Têq*²⁰ for Arabic percussion) are only a simulation of the Tunisian rhythm especially if one takes into account the multiple stays of Saint-Saëns in Algeria, a country neighboring Tunisia from 1873 until his death in 1921: one also notes that the existence of the Tunisian rhythm called *Ghaita* in the work *Africa*, composed five years before the concerto number 5 confirms the borrowing of Tunisian rhythms in the first movement of the concerto. We note that this structure is repeated throughout the first movement of the concerto. In the same hypothesis, we think that the second movement of this concerto, called *Egyptian*, contains musical phrases from Tunisian modes: as we said, the existence of intervals "characteristic" of "Arab" or "Oriental" music does not automatically imply the *Hijaz* mode - belonging to the East rather than North Africa - especially with the existence of similar modes in Tunisia and Algeria. We note that this confusion is the result of lack of information and especially the popularity of the exotic cliché of the second augmented²¹.

This stereotype of an augmented second in the minor mode has prevented the "Discovery" of the differences between the different modes of the Middle East and North Africa region. The modes used by Saint-Saëns are really Tunisian modes: the *Mhayersîkâh*²², the *Mezmoum*²³ and the *Rasd-al-Dhil* (see figures 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24).



Figure 20 Mhayar Sikah mode in Re²⁴



Figure 21 Mezmoum mode in C

²⁰ These two words designate the strong and weak beats in the "Arabic" rhythms. In the rhythms "In our study example, we note that the French composer did the same, creating not only the same rhythmic loop, but also the same percussive play.

²¹ BARTOLI, Jean-Pierre. *L'orientalisme dans la musique française du XIXe siècle : La ponctuation, la seconde augmentée et l'apparition de la modalité dans les procédures exotiques*, *Revue Belge de Musicologie / Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Muziekwetenschap* 51, 1997 : pp. 137-170.

²² CHERIF, Rashid, *Tunisian classical music and the dimension of authenticity*, *NEMO-Online* Volume 3, No. 4, 2015, p.20.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ GUETTAT, Mahmoud, *La Tunisie dans les documents du Premier Congrès de Musique Arabe*, in *La musique arabe : le Congrès du Caire - 1932*, Cairo, CEDEJ, 1992, pp. 69-86.



Figure 22 Saint-Saëns, Piano Concerto No. 5, 2^{ème} movement, bars 17-20, illustration of the Mhayar Sikah mode in D



Figure 23 Saint-Saëns, Piano Concerto No. 5, 2nd movement, bars 30-32, Mezmoum modulation in C



Figure 24 Saint-Saëns, Piano Concerto No. 5, 2nd movement, bars 53-55, illustration of the Rasd-al-Dhil mode in D in the concerto

Another element that refers to Tunisian music is the exposition of the themes in octaves, a technique, as we have already mentioned, used by Tunisian and Algerian pianists²⁵. Based on these analyses, we can confirm that Saint-Saëns borrowed elements from Tunisian music in the composition of his concerto known as *Egyptian*. Despite the work of Salvador-Daniel, concerning Arab music, the reception of works of "orientalist and exotic" sounds has - for a long time - disfigured or

²⁵ As mentioned earlier, our research work has previously led us to this characteristic (*piano techniques in Algerian Châa'bi music*, edited by Mohamed Ali Kammoun, 2019), also deduced by Mehdi Trabelsi in his research work entitled "*The piano in Arab music*", published in 1995 and edited by Saïf Allah Ben Abderrazak and Mahmoud Guettat. An important note of the origin of this technique is that the piano only took place in Egypt during the 1920s, as an instrument played only by women from aristocratic families (it first appeared in Egypt in 1824 by young people who tried to modernize Egyptian music, an attempt that failed and led to the disappearance of this instrument from the scene).^{ème}In the Maghreb, the Tunisian Mohamed Lasram was already a confirmed pianist during the last twenty years of the 19th century, specializing in Arabic music, which confirms that this technique of playing in octave has arrived in the concerto of Saint-Saëns from the Maghreb. TRABELSI, Mehdi, *Le piano dans la musique arabe*, dir. Saïf Allah Ben Abderrazak et Mahmoud Guettat Tunis, Université de Tunis, 1995, p.27.

neglected the differences and peculiarities of each "oriental" music²⁶ for lack of information, as in the case of this concerto - which as we have already shown - was the fruit of Saint-Saëns' stays in the Maghreb and was strongly inspired by the local music of Tunisia and not of Egypt.

Camille Saint-Saëns traveled to Tunisia to discover a new country and its culture and also to give concerts. But the impact of this trip is much more important: after this analysis of *Africa* and the fifth concerto for piano and orchestra, known as the *Egyptian*, we note that these trips to Tunisia have strongly marked the music of the French composer. These two works remain among the most important and best known of Saint-Saëns' repertoire, qualified as the best examples of his musical identity; we can conclude in this section that the creative work of Camille Saint-Saëns who achieved fame with these two pieces for piano and orchestra owes its fame in large part to Tunisian music which had - as already mentioned - a strong influence on the composer's work.

We can conclude from this analysis that the work of Saint-Saëns had nothing "orientalist" but rather a use of modes, rhythms and musical traditions Tunisian as material for composition: Unlike composers who composed so-called orientalist works such as Bizet in his opera *Les pêcheurs de perle*, Saint-Saëns dug perfectly into Tunisian music through his travels and the study of Salvador-Daniel's work to the point of composing great concert works of Tunisian character such as the two examples already analyzed. This is remarkable despite the existence of a rich orchestration and the total absence of all kinds of local instruments as well as the use of vertical harmony in a large part of the works especially in *Africa*. But these works are far from being considered orientalist works because of the presence of the elements mentioned above.

²⁶ BARTOLI, Jean-Pierre. *L'orientalisme dans la musique française du XIXe siècle : La ponctuation, la seconde augmentée et l'apparition de la modalité dans les procédures exotiques*, *Revue Belge de Musicologie / Belgisch Tijdschrift Voor Muziekwetenschap* 51, 1997 : pp. 137-170.

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