

Saint-Saëns's Early Experiment with Exoticism in *La Princesse Jaune*

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Abstract

La Princesse Jaune, a one-act opéra-comique by Camille Saint-Saëns with a libretto by Louis Gallet, was composed amid the growing fascination with Japanese art and objects in Paris in 1872. The work represents an early adoption of Japanese-related themes and musical exoticism within French operatic scene, reflecting the broader nineteenth-century Orientalist interests shaped by imperialism.

This article examines how Saint-Saëns sought to evoke a sense of the Far East through a range of musical devices—particularly those associated with Japanese imagery—while acknowledging that his access to authentic Japanese music was limited. In addition, it provides an overview of the cultural and social contexts that informed the opera's narrative inspiration, as well as a brief discussion of audience reception over time, to observe shifting perspectives on exoticism as reflected in this work.

Through theoretical analysis of the score, this study compares Saint-Saëns's compositional techniques with commonly used exotic devices employed by nineteenth-century composers. The use of the pentatonic scale as a signifier of the East is also explored as a European interpretation of the music of another culture. In addition, the social and cultural contexts surrounding the opera are considered through the available literature.

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Japan's first official participation in the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1867 introduced European audiences to Japanese visual arts, woodblock prints, and other cultural objects. This encounter influenced European visual arts, literature, and theater, giving rise to the movement known as *japonisme*. Around the same time, in 1871, Camille Saint-Saëns was commissioned by the Opéra-Comique to compose a light, accessible work, as Paris was beginning to recover from the trauma of the Siege of Paris. Louis Gallet, the librettist, selected a Japanese theme for the opera, reflecting the growing fascination with Japanese art and culture in Paris.

The opera's plot centers on Kornélis, a Dutch scholar obsessed with Japan and captivated by a woman depicted in a Japanese print, named Ming, and his cousin Léna, who is in love with him. After consuming a potent drink, Kornélis hallucinates and is transported to an exoticized vision of Japan with the Japanese princess. The climactic moment occurs when Léna breaks his delusion by presenting herself in place of the Japanese image, prompting Kornélis to recognize the value of real affection over his Orientalist fantasy. This narrative structure is significant: *La Princesse Jaune* does not aim for a realistic portrayal of Japan but instead employs Japanese motifs as a vehicle for Western psychological exploration and comic contrast.

In the Japanese-related context of the opera, Saint-Saëns employed several exotic devices typical of nineteenth-century composers. These include modal inflections in the melodic lines that produce augmented seconds, creating a sense of ambiguity, unfamiliarity, or otherworldliness. He further destabilized traditional Western harmonic progressions through the use of lowered leading tones, pedal points, bass ostinatos, avoidance of clear cadences, and static or simplified rhythmic patterns. Saint-Saëns also incorporated pentatonic writing—possibly inspired by descriptions of Chinese music circulated in Europe at the time. These elements were interpreted through a distinctly Western compositional lens.

The opera received largely negative criticism regarding its music after the premiere, yet productions in the subsequent decades were met with more favorable responses, reflecting a shift in European audiences' tastes and attitudes over time. However, the Orientalist narrative and the racially suggestive title—*La Princesse Jaune* (“The Yellow Princess”)—may raise concerns for contemporary non-European audiences.

Saint-Saëns's *La Princesse Jaune* reflects both Orientalist ideas in music and an effort to expand the Western soundscape in response to shifts in the French operatic landscape. Saint-Saëns employed common exotic compositional techniques and made extended use of the pentatonic scale. Although these devices were not intended to portray specifically Japanese musical idioms, they functioned as Western interpretations of non-Western and “Oriental” music, effectively creating a sense of unfamiliarity for European audiences. His use of the pentatonic scale demonstrates not only a Western perspective on the music of the East but also the limitations of relying on this scale as a representation of Eastern musical cultures.

In considering *La Princesse Jaune*, it is important to recognize that the work was shaped by the conventions of the opéra-comique genre and by the circumstances of its commission during Paris's postwar recovery. As an early experiment with exoticism, *La Princesse Jaune* may not fully represent Saint-Saëns's later, more nuanced engagement with non-Western musical cultures. Nevertheless, despite the problematic racial stereotypes embedded in the work, the opera remains a valuable cultural artifact: it reflects the attitudes of its era and marks an important moment in the development of French operatic tradition.

Keywords: La Princesse Jaune / Camille Saint-Saëns / French Opera / Exoticism / Japonaiserie

The one-act opéra comique *La Princesse Jaune* (“The Yellow Princess”), composed by Camille Saint-Saëns with a libretto by Louis Gallet in 1872, reflects orientalist ideas shaped by imperialism during a period when Europeans were increasingly exposed to foreign objects and diverse cultures. In the nineteenth century, the rise of exoticism was closely tied to commercial and political interest in foreign nations.¹ *La Princesse Jaune* responds directly to the Parisian trend of *japonaiserie* at the time, reflecting the growing fascination with Japanese art and culture through its adoption of a Japanese theme.

¹ Hervé Lacombe, *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Edward Schneider (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 179–180.

The wave of Japanese influence began to affect European art and culture following the opening of Japan during the Meiji era in 1854, which coincided with the rise of international exhibitions in Europe.² Japan officially participated for the first time in the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1867, where Japanese visual arts, woodblock prints, and other art objects were exhibited. Over 1,300 of these objects remained in France and were circulated among collectors.³ This Japanese movement influenced European visual arts, literature, and theater at various stages and to varying degrees. It began with an early phase known as *japonaiserie*—the use of Japanese art objects to evoke a fantasy of Japan—and later developed into *japonisme*, a more mature appreciation of Japanese aesthetics on a deeper level.⁴

The first known French play influenced by Japanese color prints amid the wave of *japonaiserie* was *L'Île de la Demoiselle* by Zacharie Astruc, written in 1863—a fifteen-act play based directly on a set of Japanese color prints. Although it was never publicly staged, the play was read and admired by enthusiasts of Japanese art. *L'Île de la Demoiselle* subsequently inspired several early French theatrical works with Japanese themes, including Saint-Saëns and Gallet's *La Princesse Jaune*.⁵ In 1871, Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921), then in his mid-thirties, was already a well-known organist and pianist, and was establishing his career as a composer. Along with other young composers of the time, he was commissioned by the Opéra-Comique to write an opera that was light and not overly complex, as Paris was just beginning to recover from the trauma of the Franco-Prussian War and the Siege of Paris during 1870–71.⁶ Louis Gallet, the librettist assigned to the project, chose a Japanese theme for the opera⁷—responding to the growing fascination with Japanese art and culture in Paris at the time.

² Christiane Demeulenaere-Douyère, “Japan at the World’s Fairs: A Reflection,” *Journal of Japonisme* 5, 2 (2020): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24054992-00052P01>.

³ Christiane Demeulenaere-Douyère, 133–134.

⁴ Yoko Chiba, “*Japonisme: East-West Renaissance in the Late 19th Century*,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 31, 2 (1998): 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44029769>.

⁵ Yoko Chiba, 13.

⁶ Hugh Macdonald, *Saint-Saëns and the Stage: Operas, Plays, Pageants, a Ballet and a Film* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 76.

⁷ Hugh Macdonald, 77.

La Princesse Jaune may have been the first French opera to be based on a Japanese theme.⁸ Its music reflects Saint-Saëns's imaginative interpretation of Japan and his use of Western compositional techniques to evoke a sense of exoticism within the opera.

The Story and Orientalist Depictions of Japan

In this one-act opera, set in Holland, the story centers on two main characters: Kornélis and Léna. Léna is in love with Kornélis, but he is fixated on Japan. His fascination is purely aesthetic—his room is filled with Japanese prints and objects, and he is wholly captivated by the image of a beautiful woman named Ming depicted in one of them. Under the influence of a drug, Kornélis hallucinates that he has traveled to Japan with the princess in Japanese costume. Ultimately, he awakens from the dream, recognizes his true feelings for Léna, and the two reconcile with mutual understanding.

Japan functions not as a geographical or cultural reality but as a romanticized projection of Kornélis's imagination. The opera's exoticism is thus framed as an internal mental construct, ultimately dismissed in favor of European reality. The setting in Holland is significant, as the Dutch were the only Europeans with a long-standing trading relationship with Japan,⁹ lending the plot a faint historical plausibility. The character of Ming, the Japanese woman depicted in the print, embodies a European fantasy of the exotic feminine and reflects the Orientalist ideals of the era. This dynamic aligns with the early, predominantly visual phase of *japonisme* in France, when the collection and aesthetic appreciation of Japanese art preceded any deeper sociological or musical understanding.

Gallet incorporated Japanese text into the opera. A classical Japanese poem from *The Anthology of Ten Thousand Leaves* (*Manyoshuu*) appears at the beginning scene, where Léna read the Japanese text from a piece of paper.¹⁰ Later in the opera, during Kornéli's hallucination, he hears fragmented Japanese phrases sung by an offstage chorus. These phrases were drawn from a traveler's phrasebook and include expressions such as "Today is

⁸ Ury Eppstein, "From Torture to Fascination: Changing Western Attitudes to Japanese Music," *Japan Forum* 19, 2 (2007): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555800701419411>.

⁹ Hugh Macdonald, 79.

¹⁰ Hugh Macdonald, 82.

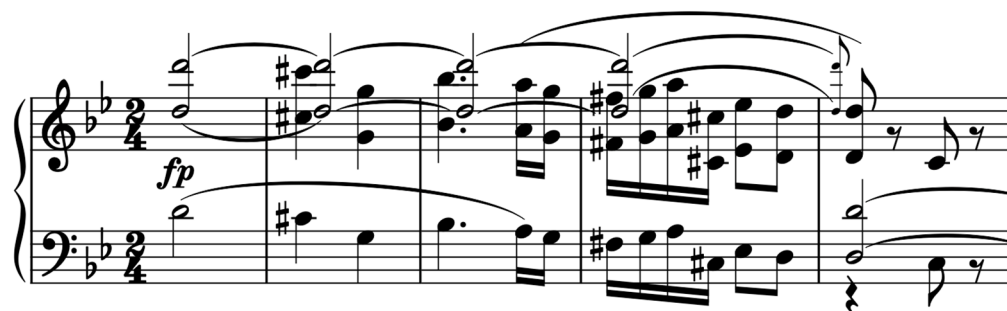
a fine day” and “Good afternoon.”¹¹ However, the use of Japanese text in these instances is largely decorative and not directly connected to the narrative of the opera.

Saint-Saëns’s Exotic Devices

Up to this point, Saint-Saëns had never traveled outside Europe, yet the East had already captured his imagination. He reused his earlier composition *Désir de l’Orient* (“Longing for the East,” 1871), which was originally set to his own poem expressing a romanticized vision of the East. This music was rearranged for the opera’s overture and later appeared in scene no. 2 as the aria “J’aime, dans son lointain mystère” (“I love, in its distant mystery”).

At the beginning of the overture, Saint-Saëns employed a harmonic minor scale with a raised fourth degree, creating augmented seconds between the third and fourth degrees as well as between the sixth and seventh degrees (see Example 1). The frequent use of the augmented second highlights a non-normative tonal pattern and evokes a sense of foreignness—one of the common techniques of musical exoticism in the nineteenth century.

Example 1 Saint-Saëns, *La Princesse Jaune*, Overture, mm. 1–5



Example 2 G Harmonic Minor Scale with a Raised Fourth Degree



¹¹ Hugh Macdonald, 85–86.

Saint-Saëns also constructed a melody using a melodic minor scale with a raised fourth degree, which retains the characteristic augmented second (see Example 3). While he did not highlight the augmented intervals through direct scalar motion, they are embedded within the scale and contribute subtly to the evocation of an exotic atmosphere.

Example 3 Saint-Saëns, *La Princesse Jaune*, Overture, mm. 17–25



Example 4 G Melodic Minor Scale with the Raised 4th Degree



Another exotic device used by Saint-Saëns is the application of the Mixolydian mode with a lowered sixth degree. This mode, which also features a lowered seventh, avoids the presence of a leading tone, giving the melody a more open and non-Western character (see Example 5). He further emphasized this effect by using simple, repetitive, and static rhythms, and by limiting harmonic movement to allow the exotic melodic lines to stand out. The use

of arabesque-like gestures and repetitive rhythms may suggest associations with the “Near East”—specifically Arab countries in North Africa—rather than the “Far East,” such as Japan; nevertheless, it effectively conveys the opera’s exotic atmosphere.¹²

Example 5 Saint-Saëns, *La Princesse Jaune*, No. 2, mm. 20–27

8
Là, dans les on - des i - ri - sé - es Se joue, en nageant Au -
-tour des jon - ques pa - voi - sé - es, Le dra - gon d'argent.

Example 6 C Mixolydian with Lowered 6th Degree

C, D, E, F, G, A^b, B, C

¹² Lynne Johnson, “Exoticism, Imperialism, and the Music of Camille Saint-Saëns” (MA thesis, University of Hawai’i at Manoa, 2001), 98–99.

The use of pedal tones and open fifths in the bass is a common compositional device for evoking exoticism, and Saint-Saëns employs this technique in the opera. He had previously used similar devices in his earlier exotic work *Mélodies Persanes*, Op. 26 (*Persian Songs*) (Example 7). This song cycle, based on the poem *Les Nuits Persanes* (*Persian Nights*), evokes imagery of the exotic Orient, specifically referencing the Near East or Middle East.

Example 7 Saint-Saëns, *Mélodies persanes*, Op. 26, “La brise,” mm. 1–5.



Avoiding clear harmonic progression is another technique used to obscure the characteristics of Western music. For instance, in Example 8, Saint-Saëns avoids the expected sound of a conventional cadence by using the fifth (B) in the bass instead of the root (E), thereby concealing the expected Western tonal resolution.

Example 8 Saint-Saëns, *La Princesse Jaune*, No. 2, mm. 28–29



The Pentatonic Scale

There is no clear evidence that Saint-Saëns had any direct exposure to Japanese music. However, European awareness of pentatonicism can be traced back to the eighteenth century, through missionaries' detailed accounts of China and the subsequent European fascination with Chinese music.¹³ The presence of pentatonic thus easily resonated with the growing trend of exoticism during the nineteenth century.¹⁴ The pentatonic scale appears in multiple sections throughout the opera, particularly when Saint-Saëns seeks to portray the “other” world.

In scene no. 5, the aria “Sur l’eau claire et sans ride” (“On the clear and unruffled water,”) sung by Kornélis, features pentatonic melodies beginning in F major (see Example 9, mm. 282–285).

Although the harmonic progression moves toward the dominant key area, Saint-Saëns employs pedal notes to obscure clear harmonic shifts in the bass. For instance, a G pedal appears subtly in m. 295, even as the music remains in D minor. This reduces the strong sense of an anticipated cadence from G7 to C major, which occurs a few measures later in mm. 297–298 (see Example 10).

Example 9 Saint-Saëns, *La Princesse Jaune*, No. 5, mm. 282–285

«Sur l'eau claire et sans ri - de Glisse mon ba teau _____

¹³ Jeremy Day-O'Connell, *Pentatonicism from the Eighteenth Century to Debussy* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 49–50.

¹⁴ Jeremy Day-O'Connell, 92.

Example 10 Saint-Saëns, *La Princesse Jaune*, No. 5, mm. 293–299

Est le grand ciel ar gen - té Oû, dans sa sé - ré - ni -
 - té La lu - ne plane, im - mo - bi - - le

Example 11 Saint-Saëns, *La Princesse Jaune*, No. 1, mm. 1–4

(lissant) *f* *ad lib.* *a tempo*
 Allegro «Ou-tsou Sé - mi - si Ka-mi - ni. O Ming, si mon corps est es - cla ve, Ta - yé
f *p* *a tempo*

In some passages, Saint-Saëns chose to maintain the pentatonic scale within a single key area and kept the musical texture intentionally simple. For example, at the beginning of

scene no. 1, where the Japanese text is introduced alongside alternating French text, the entire section from mm. 1–20 is based on five notes from the D minor pentatonic scale. Following the initial D minor chord, the melody in both the vocal line and the accompaniment is presented in unison, without harmonic treatment, creating a static and sparse texture (see Example 11).

In Example 12, during the moment when Kornélis believes he has been transported to Japan and hears Japanese text, the music is sung by an offstage chorus in the E major pentatonic scale. This section remains entirely within the pentatonic collection, with no harmonic progression, throughout mm. 18–56.

The simplicity of the choral writing aligns with a common nineteenth-century French operatic convention in which “exotic” settings were represented through simplified musical textures.¹⁵ The avoidance of harmonic development and the blurred sense of tonal direction mirror contemporary Western discourses that framed non-European music as lacking tonality or harmonic complexity. Static harmonies based on one or two chords, along with sparse textures such as unharmonized unison writing and pedal points, were commonly employed as devices to evoke exoticism within the nineteenth-century French operatic tradition.¹⁶

Example 12 Saint-Saëns, *La Princesse Jaune*, No. 5, mm. 20–28

f Dans la coulisse

A - na - ta wa dô na - sa - i ma - si - ta!

¹⁵ Ralph P. Locke, “The Exotic in Nineteenth-Century French Opera, Part 2: Plots, Characters, and Musical Devices,” *19th-Century Music* 45, 3 (2022): 196, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncm.2022.45.3.185>.

¹⁶ Ralph P. Locke, 195.

When considering the pentatonic scale in the context of Japanese music, the intervallic structure of the Western major pentatonic scale closely resembles the Japanese *ryo* scale, which itself incorporates elements of classical Chinese musical theory.¹⁷ Although these scales may appear similar when transcribed in Western notation, Japanese, Chinese, and other Asian musical traditions employ distinct tuning systems that cannot be accurately represented within the Western framework. Moreover, these traditions often extend beyond the core five pitches, resulting in a musical language more complex than a simple pentatonic model. Within the limitation of nineteenth-century Western understandings of non-Western music, Saint-Saëns drew upon the intervallic qualities of the pentatonic scale but reinterpreted them through the lens of Western compositional practice.

People's Perception of *La Princesse Jaune* and Saint-Saëns's Exoticism the Opera

After the opera's unsuccessful premiere in 1872, critics offered notable observations on the Parisian audience's reaction to its exotic musical elements. Some remarked that it was "impossible to tell in what key or in what time the music was written,"¹⁸ while others wondered whether it should be regarded as the "incomprehensible music of the future."¹⁹ These responses reflect the expectations of Parisian opera audiences, who were generally well-versed in musical and operatic traditions. The French opera scene at the time was deeply rooted in its own conventions, and music critics were often particularly harsh toward young composers.²⁰ In contrast, composers responded quite differently—Gabriel Fauré, for instance, praised the opera and even arranged its overture for two pianos.²¹

Although the opera was considered unsuccessful after its premiere, Saint-Saëns succeeded in creating an unfamiliar musical experience for his audience. While his music follows conventional harmonic progression, he employed various techniques to obscure

¹⁷ William P. Malm, "Japanese Music," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed November 5, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/art/Japanese-music>.

¹⁸ Stephen Studd, *Saint-Saëns: A Critical Biography* (London: Cygnus Arts, 1999), 89.

¹⁹ Hugh Macdonald, 80.

²⁰ Hugh Macdonald, 80.

²¹ Hugh Macdonald, 89.

them. Notably, *La Princesse Jaune* marked the first use of the pentatonic scale by a French composer in opera,²² offering Parisian audiences their first encounter with this scale in a French operatic context.

Interestingly, performances of the opera after the 1880s and later in Saint-Saëns's life were much more successful, reflecting a shift in societal musical tastes. Audiences had become more open-minded toward exotic music and new sounds within the musical tradition. As *japonisme* continued to influence composers more deeply over time, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*—which prominently features the pentatonic scale—achieved great success in 1904.

Saint-Saëns's views on exoticism evolved over time. Until *La Princesse Jaune*, he had never traveled outside Europe. However, following his subsequent travels abroad, his interest in exotic music deepened. As his exposure to non-European cultures expanded, his use of exotic elements became increasingly nuanced, reflecting a growing sensitivity to the integration of different musical traditions. This development is evident in later works such as the Piano Concerto No. 5 in F major (“Egyptian”) (1896) and *Trois Tableaux symphoniques d’après “La foi”* (1912).²³

Meanwhile, Saint-Saëns's engagement with Japan continued, though it was expressed primarily through his literary works, including *Rimes familières*, published in 1891. He did not compose any further music on Japanese themes—likely due to the limited availability of authentic Japanese musical materials.

Conclusion

Saint-Saëns's experiment with exoticism in *La Princesse Jaune* reflects common nineteenth-century techniques of musical exoticism, including the use of modal inflections, ornamental arabesque-like gestures, destabilization of conventional Western tonal expectations, and static rhythmic patterns. Together, these elements create a coherent exotic soundscape that evokes a generalized image of the “East,” rather than an authentic musical

²² Jann Pasler, “Introduction: Deconstructing Saint-Saëns,” in *Camille Saint-Saëns and His World*, ed. Jann Pasler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), xiv.

²³ Lynne Johnson, “Camille Saint-Saëns's Changing Exoticism and the Interesting Case of *La Foi*,” *Journal of Musicological Research*, 25 1 (2006): 80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411890500477083>.

depiction of Japan. While his use of the pentatonic scale suggests an association with East Asian musical concepts, it ultimately reveals the limitations of the period's understanding of non-Western music.

The story of *La Princesse Jaune* may be considered problematic for contemporary audiences. The title, which translates as *The Yellow Princess*, likely alludes to both the skin color and perceived exoticism of the female character, raising concerns about the objectification and racialization of Asian women. To contextualize the opera, it is important to consider nineteenth-century Orientalist perspectives. During this period, travel to distant regions was rare, and idealized images of women from the East became widespread in European society. Acknowledging these historical perspectives is crucial when analyzing the work today. In recognition of the title's problematic connotations, Melbourne's Lyric Opera renamed the opera "*The Japanese Princess*" for its 2017 production²⁴ to avoid the racial implications associated with the original title.

Another point to consider is that the content and context of *La Princesse Jaune* may have been constrained by the conventions of *opéra comique*, a genre typically associated with light, accessible entertainment rather than deep or complex narratives. Given that the opera was composed quickly following the war, it is likely that Louis Gallet chose a subject that would readily capture the attention of Parisian audiences at the time, favoring topical appeal over cultural authenticity or thematic depth.

Unlike Japanese visual art objects, which were more easily imported and appreciated in Europe, Japanese music—lacking technological means of transmission—took much longer to reach Western audiences. Despite the absence of authentic Japanese musical materials and the wide cultural gap between East and West, Saint-Saëns's attempt to evoke an exotic sound in *La Princesse Jaune* represents a significant step in the Western musical imagination. It marks an early phase in which Western composers began to experiment with and interpret sonic concepts associated with the Far East.

²⁴ Lyric Opera of Melbourne, "The Japanese Princess," accessed November 5, 2025, <https://www.lyricopera.com.au/the-japanese-princess>.

With an awareness of French society and the operatic scene in nineteenth-century Paris, *La Princesse Jaune* remains a work worth hearing, watching, and studying. It reflects a cultural moment of transition—when distant lands remained largely inaccessible, and people in the West could “travel” to the other side of the world primarily through imported art objects and musical imagination.

Declaration of Generative Artificial Intelligence in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT-4.0 (OpenAI) and Gemini 2.5 (Google) solely to improve language clarity and grammar. All scientific content, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions were developed by the author. The author reviewed and edited the AI-generated output as necessary and takes full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the manuscript.

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