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Augusta Holmès: Les Argonautes and La Montagne Noire

by

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ABSTRACT

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by

Rebecca L. Rockwood

Augusta Holmès (1847-1903) was a popular composer in nineteenth-century France. Throughout her life, Holmès was known for her talent as a musician, charming personality, and beauty. After her death, Holmès’s works were neglected, but this composer deserves to be re-evaluated. As one of the first women in nineteenth-century France to receive any recognition of her talents, her accomplishments as a composer were almost unthinkable. Holmès drew attention to herself by using popular patriotic sentiments when creating her self-image and her music. In this paper I demonstrate this by examining the background, music, and thematic material of Les Argonautes, a dramatic symphony, and La Montagne Noire, her fourth opera. In Les Argonautes, Holmès stressed the sacrifice of romantic love for higher ideals. In La Montagne Noire, Holmès utilized themes of exoticism to juxtapose patriotism against romantic love and reveal tension between genders.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Augusta Mary Anne Holmès (1847-1903) was a composer, poet, and well-known celebrity in nineteenth-century France. Her unusual life and flamboyant personality have inspired many people to write about her. Such writings range from gossipy accounts of her life to speculations about her affairs with various poets and composers, to feminist articles about how she managed to achieve such success as a woman composer in nineteenth-century France.\(^1\) Despite Holmès's immense compositional output and prolific talent, one can, when reading the available literature about her, get a better sense of what shade of blonde her hair was and how it matched her eyes and skin, than about the character and scope of her musical compositions.\(^2\) In fact, until quite recently, Holmès’s name was remembered exclusively in connection with her beauty and charm, and occasionally with a few of her popular tunes reflecting French nationalist sentiment.

Some scholars have actually insisted that an analysis of Holmès’s works would be a waste of time and that she would be better remembered for her beauty and interesting

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\(^1\)George Moore reflects extensively on Holmès’s beauty, charm, and her ability to move people through music in his book, *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (London: Ebury edition, 1936). Rollo Myers attempts to list all the musicians and poets who were in love with her in his article, “Augusta Holmès: A Meteoric Career,” *Musical Quarterly* 53 (1967): 365-76. Recently, several scholars such as Jann Pasler and Karen Henson have produced extremely insightful studies into Holmès’s role as a woman composer in nineteenth-century France.


Villiers de l’Isle-Adam went on to describe Augusta as a young girl “so beautiful beneath her halo of golden hair that she gave the impression of a fairy tale creature. You would think she was inspired by the gods.” Georges Clairin, another regular guest at the salon said, “Tall and strong, majestic and calm, with fine golden hair that fell like a veil down her back and large green eyes that recalled the Irish sea, she was less a woman than a goddess.” Hughes Imbert, one of Holmès’s biographers, likened her to a Rubens beauty and Mme. Alphonse Daudet (Julia Daudet [1844-1950], devoted wife and companion of the writer Alphonse Daudet [she wrote extensively for different magazines under the pseudonym of Karl Steen]), described her as “capable of moving amongst the statues of Versailles without prejudice to her own elegant allure and classic beauty.”
life. Rollo Myers, for example, dedicates an entire article to Holmès, but begins by protesting that its object is not to offer a critical assessment of the music of Augusta Holmès, which could, at best, have only a curiosity value for us today..., but rather to reveal some perhaps little-known facts about her life, her friends... and to show to what extent her reputation largely rested on the sheer exuberance of her dynamic personality and evidently irresistible physical attractions.  

Although the article was published in a reputable journal, *The Musical Quarterly*, one wonders about its relevance to the study of musicology, which usually, in the case of composers, attempts to deal with music. Fortunately, recent years have seen a revival of interest in the music of Holmès. Nancy S. Theeman offers critical analysis in her dissertation on Holmès, 4 and more recent scholars such as Jann Pasler 5 and Ingeborg Feilhauer 6 have also provided some musical analysis. This is just the beginning of what I hope will be a large-scale revival of Holmès's works, which still remain, for the most part, unpublished and obscure. While there is no doubt that Holmès's beauty and reputation helped her achieve fame, they do not serve any useful purpose if compared to her immense musical talent, intelligence, and remarkable drive and perseverance under circumstances that would have greatly intimidated any composer.

This thesis serves as an attempt to reframe Holmès as an important composer and also as a pioneer who helped pave the way for future woman composers in France. In addition, it will reveal that her long neglected works are worthy of musical analysis,

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6Nancy Sarah Theeman, "The Life and Songs of Augusta Holmès" (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland: 1983). 29-41, 94-118, 144-64, 174-98, 216-47. This dissertation contains analysis of the songs of Holmès, but not any of her large-scale orchestral or vocal works.  
especially *La Montagne Noire*, the only opera staged in her lifetime. Since Holmès was a well-known, widely respected, and often controversial figure during her time, the neglect of her works and their impact on French society has rendered our view of the music and culture of *fin-de-siècle* France incomplete. In this thesis I hope to round out our picture of this fascinating period.

**The Life of Augusta Holmès**

Since the beginning of her life, Augusta Mary Anne Holmès had to overcome many obstacles that would have been difficult for any composer or aspiring musician. She was born on December 16, 1847, in Paris to lively and cultured parents who were largely uninterested in music. Her father, Captain Charles William Scott Dalkeith Holmes, was a retired Irish army officer who had fought with the light dragoons in the Battle of Waterloo. His family lived in Ireland for five centuries after emigrating from Denmark (originally called the Holm family). Her mother was Mary Anne Shearer, a woman of Scottish and Irish descent sixteen years younger than her husband. The circumstances surrounding Augusta’s birth were a bit unusual. While in France, the Holmès couple befriended an Englishwoman, Lydia Bunbury, and her husband, the poet Alfred de Vigny (1797-1863). According to rumors at the time, De Vigny and Mme. Holmès fell in love, and as a result, there is much speculation regarding Augusta’s true father. Whatever the case may be, De Vigny served as Augusta’s godfather and influential father figure until his death, when she was fourteen. As a result, Augusta grew up with the equivalent of two fathers who were very different from each other, and she

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7 It should be noted here that Augusta Holmès was Augusta Holmes until she became a naturalized French citizen in 1872. For the sake of uniformity, I use her later name throughout the document.
was exposed to sophisticated literary and cultural influences. This rather unusual family
and upbringing helped shape her strong personality and literary talent.\textsuperscript{8}

The Holmès and their highly cultured circle were knowledgeable enthusiasts
when it came to literature and painting, but none of them had any interest in the study of
music. Although Augusta Holmès displayed remarkable musical inclination from an
early age, she was not encouraged to develop her talent. In fact, her mother, and
godfather, Alfred de Vigny, actively discouraged her from playing the piano or
participating in musical activities of any kind. Mme. Holmès was quoted as saying, “The
painter produces paintings, the writer books, the musician a headache!”\textsuperscript{9} This became a
source of great anger and frustration between the young Augusta and her mother. Mme.
Holmès went so far as to forbid her to play the piano. In response, Augusta frequently
rebelled and once supposedly tried to stab herself with a small dagger. Augusta did not
study music seriously until her mother’s death, when she was eleven years old. Even
after this, godfather de Vigny continued to discourage Holmès from pursuing musical
endeavors. If it were not for Captain Holmès, who liked to indulge and spoil his
daughter, Augusta Holmès might not have succeeded in realizing her musical dreams.\textsuperscript{10}

Despite very little musical training, Holmès progressed rapidly and soon became a
prolific musician. By the age of twelve, she was known as a talented pianist; spoke
French, English, Italian, and German fluently; and soon went on to study voice and
clarinet. It was her voice that won the admiration, and often the love, of most people who
heard her sing. Additionally, she was a talented poet and painter who later wrote all her

\textsuperscript{8}René Pichard du Page, \textit{Une Musicienne Versaillaise: Augusta Holmès} (Paris: Librairie
Fischbacher and Versailles: Librairie M. Dubois, 1921), 4-5.
\textsuperscript{9} Du Page, 8.
\textsuperscript{10} Myers, 365-76.
own texts and librettos, and designed the scenery and costumes for many of her productions. During her teens and early twenties, she began to play and sing her own compositions in the literary salons, attracting several admirers, many of whom were male. Already her reputation as a beauty and seductress had become irrevocably linked with that of her talent. Camille Saint-Saëns, one of her admirers, proclaimed that "we were all in love with her... literary men, savants, painters, musicians; any one of us would have been proud to make her his wife." Dame Ethyl Smyth (1858-1944) speculated that "no wonder she took the art world by storm, this girl... she seems to have been emphatically a man's woman, and, as Madame le Breton would say, it 'spoilt nothing that she was physically entrancing.'" It is remarkable that Holmès was able to perform and compose so freely, with little damage to her reputation, during a time when women who performed were looked upon with disdain. One can perhaps look at Holmès as a skillful manipulator who used her physical charms to get people to pay attention to her and her music.

When Holmès was twenty-two, several events occurred that shaped her life and compositional career. In 1869, she went on a journey with the poet Catulle Mendès (1841-1909) and his wife Judith Gautier (1845-1917), to see Wagner and Das Rheingeld in Tribschen. Holmès fell in love with the opera and Wagner's compositional style, which would affect her own techniques for years to come. She also fell in love with Mendès, and she is reported to have become pregnant with his child. She would be

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11 Theeman, 18-19.
13 Judith Gautier was a French author who wrote about music. After visiting Wagner with her husband several times, she became his secret lover in 1876. She was an inspiration to Wagner during the time that he wrote Parsifal.
his mistress until 1895, bearing four of his children, while pursuing her own career as a composer. Also in 1869, Holmès’s father died, leaving her with a substantial fortune. This financial independence allowed her unusual freedom as a woman to pursue a career. These three events had a profound effect on her life and her work as a composer.  

Holmès’s keen intellect and talent enabled her to mix freely with leading musical and literary figures, and in her twenties she became active in several different literary and artistic circles. One such circle was the Parnassian School of Paris, a group founded by Catulle Mendès that consisted of poets and literary men. This group’s initial purpose was to fight against the censorship of Napoleon III and the Second Empire, giving French poets a place to publish their works. After the Franco-Prussian War, however, its primary goal was to celebrate life, and it changed its name to “Revue moderne et naturaliste.” One of the group’s primary concerns was the tension between worldly pleasures and high aspirations. Augusta’s early exposure to the literary world made her well qualified to participate in this group, in which she was the only female member. She developed close friendships with many poets, including Stephane Mallarmé, who dedicated two poems to her. An unpublished letter of 1871 describes her helping him get the music of one of his friends sold in England. 

At the age of twenty-eight, Holmès, who was largely self-taught in the art of composition, became a pupil of César Franck and a member of his esteemed circle. Although she was one of his older students, and the only woman, Holmès became an

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15 Theeman, 81-85.
important member of the group and one of Franck's favorites. He is said to have developed strong feelings for her, which manifested themselves in his Quintet. When this piece was premiered in 1879, Franck's critics and students were taken aback by its stark contrast to his other works and its supposedly passionate tone. The Quintet is said to have incited the anger of Franck's wife, but nothing improper is known to have happened between Franck and Holmès.  

17 Although Holmès's beauty and charm supposedly captivated Franck once she was already his student, however, her talent and persistence must have been the initial reasons for her acceptance into his circle, since she did not know him previously. She remained friends with Franck for the remainder of his life and was present at his funeral, along with Jean-Baptiste Fauré, Alfred Bruneau, Albert Cahen, Victorin de Joncierès, and Pierre Lalo. It must have taken skill and perseverance to become an accepted member of these male-dominated, artistic circles.  

18 Holmès's decision to join the circle of Franck coincided with her apparent wish to become known as a serious composer. During the 1870s, she stopped composing songs, which had previously comprised the bulk of her repertoire, and began writing large-scale symphonic poems and operas. Although she had previously performed frequently in salons and domestic gatherings, she did not perform much in public. She seemed to think of herself more as a composer than a performer. Her compositions were always ambitious and she seemed to think on a large scale, something for which she was both praised and criticized. Toward 1880, Holmès obtained some success with her symphonic poems, psalms, and cantatas. Contrary to the expectations of most women of the time,

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17 Theeman, 120
Holmès took her career very seriously. The fact that she did not marry allowed her to claim her works as her own (until 1907, women's works legally belonged to their husbands). She composed many large-scale works while bearing and, to some extent, caring for four children. She was described by many friends and critics as being virile, and even said so about herself. "In fact I have the soul of a man in the body of a woman. How could it be otherwise? It was my father who raised me: a rough old soldier."  

Holmès continued to enjoy success as a composer throughout the 1880s. Although she would not have been allowed to compete for the prestigious Prix de Rome, she took part in other competitions. She won Second Prize in the City of Paris Competition in 1878; many said she was unfairly denied first prize. This was a spectacular feat for a woman composer at that time. As more and more of her works were performed, she became very popular and a well-known figure in France despite some negative reviews from critics. Her nationalistic works such as the *Ode Triomphale* (1889) made her a full-fledged celebrity known throughout France and abroad. She even served as an ambassador, sent to Italy in 1890 to bring peace between France and Italy with her composition *Hymne à la Paix*, performed at the Festival of Beatrice and Dante (May 15, 16, and 18, 1890). Holmès's last mighty feat was the composition and performance of an opera, *La Montagne Noire*. Operas by woman composers were generally not performed during this time, and it took ten years of perseverance on her part to get this work staged at the Paris Opéra. When it finally premiered in 1895, it failed

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20 Theeman, 16.
after only eleven performances. This was a huge blow to a composer who had endured so many obstacles and harsh criticisms throughout her life.\textsuperscript{21}

This unfortunate turn of events was merely one of a series of tragic incidents that occurred around the same time. Catulle Mendès left Holmès around 1895, following his long-awaited divorce from Judith Gautier, which had been pending since their separation in 1878. In addition, her son Raphael died in 1896 and her three daughters all married during the 1890s. Holmès had spent her inheritance and was forced to move to a small apartment and teach and compose songs as her only means of support. In this period, she also converted to Catholicism, despite the fact that she had never been particularly religious. She continued to compose, producing about forty songs during the last eight years of her life. She died on January 23, 1905.

Although her life ended tragically, Holmès had accomplished amazing things. Her talent, intelligence, energy, and perseverance allowed her to overcome the odds against her as a woman composer in nineteenth-century France and achieve substantial successes. In fact, at the time of her death, "la Holmès" and her works were well known in France and abroad. Her \textit{Irlande} was performed at the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893 as part of a program conducted by Theodore Thomas that featured two eminent women composers from abroad.\textsuperscript{22} She left her mark on numerous aspects of the culture of France, influencing painters, writers, and even government officials. By the time of her death, Holmès had written over 146 pieces (over 130 songs, twelve symphonic works, and four operas). Her compositions had made a distinct impression on

\textsuperscript{21} Theeman, 164-73.
\textsuperscript{22} A piece by Ingeborg von Brunsart was also featured at the fair. See Ann E. Feldman, "Being Heard: Women Composers and Patrons at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition," \textit{Notes} 47 (1990): 15.
the people of France and on people abroad, and she helped pave the way for further successes by woman composers, as this paper will reveal in greater detail.\textsuperscript{23}

\textbf{Musical Influences and Style}

Learning more about the composers who taught Augusta Holmès or influenced her music in other ways may provide valuable insight into her music. It is difficult to obtain a clear picture of her music because of the poor preservation and lack of reliable, objective critical treatment. Although Augusta Holmès struggled throughout her life to establish herself as a serious composer in a male-dominated field, her music was generally not well preserved after her death. She did apparently teach a few pupils. But because she was not taken seriously, she had no groups of enthusiasts to champion her cause, and her music, therefore, fell into obscurity. Today, although some efforts are underway to revive Holmès’s music, scores and recordings of her compositions are extremely scarce. While some of her simpler works are published or recorded, for example, songs like “Chemin du Ciel,” or small-scale pieces such as “Trois Petite Pieces,” most of her output remains in manuscript form.\textsuperscript{24} Extensive, specialized searching is needed to find manuscripts or printed music by Augusta Holmès (this is often the case with most women composers or male composers whose works have not been consistently performed after their deaths). As a result, it is hard for the scholar to obtain a clear picture of what Holmès’s music is really like.

Reviews can be helpful, but reviews of Holmès’s music seem erratic and contain possible biases. For example, Saint-Saëns, who was an unsuccessful suitor of Holmès,

\textsuperscript{23} Theeman, 206-15.
\textsuperscript{24} Many of her pieces can be found at the Bibliothèque de Versailles. See Denis Herlin, \textit{Fonds Musical de la Bibliothèque de Versailles} (Paris: Publications de la Société Française de Musicologie, Éditions Klincksieck, 1995), 559.
was also a frequent critic of her compositions. While his reviews often praise her works, they are sometimes harsh and condescending.\textsuperscript{25} For example, Saint Saëns's review of \textit{Les Argonautes}, dated March 26, 1881, is very critical:

\begin{quote}
She has a powerful originality, too powerful maybe, because this quality in the extreme pushes her to go beyond conventional paths where she ends up alone, without a guide or help. . . . Like children, women know no obstacles; their will smashes everything, ignoring miserable material obstacles. . . . The brass explodes in her music like boxes of fireworks; tonalities collide, modulations bang together with the noise of a storm; the voices, terrified, lose all sense of their natural register and plunge from the highest notes to the lowest ones at the risk of breaking... She wills it!\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Other reviewers also seem unfairly biased against Holmès because of her gender and her reputation as an ardent Wagnerian. On other occasions, Holmès's music is criticized in an especially harsh manner. Charles Holman Black, a writer with the \textit{London Musical Courier}, noticed this with regard to Holmès's opera, \textit{La Montagne Noire} (April 5 and 12, 1901). He suggested that the negative publicity surrounding the opera could have had much to do with the fact that a woman composed it.

\begin{quote}
One [of the critics] who is on the best known daily in Paris, a journal that has the largest circulation abroad of any newspaper, when remonstrated with for his adverse article on "La Montagne Noire," was acknowledged to the person with whom he was conversing that he really admired the opera and the composer as well; but, he added, "frankly we do not wish to see the doors of our theaters and operas open to women authors."\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

When Edouard Colonne premiered the \textit{Andante Pastoral} movement from her symphony, \textit{Orlando Furioso}, on January 15, 1877, many people objected to the performance, and the work received harsh reviews because it was said to be too Wagnerian. Thus as we see,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[25]{Pasler, 19.}
\footnotetext[26]{Review by Saint-Saëns, as cited in Pasler, 10. This excerpt will be quoted in full on page 58 of this document.}
\footnotetext[27]{Théerman, 201.}
\end{footnotes}
Holmès's works were not received well for a variety of reasons, many of which reflected common assumptions and ideals of the period in which she was composing. It is important, therefore, to re-evaluate her musical works. In the meantime, learning more about the influences upon her music may provide us with valuable insight into her compositions.

Holmès herself was largely self-taught, and she did not receive thorough training in compositional techniques until a relatively late age, when she began to take her role as composer very seriously. Holmès did not spend much time deliberating over her compositions. Rather, she tended to compose them off the top of her head as she improvised at the piano. Composing appeared to come naturally to her, and she engaged in the activity from the beginning of her musical studies at the keyboard. She tended to compose pieces straight through, without making any changes or corrections later. Since Holmès received nothing but praise from admirers early on, she felt no real need to go back and refine. The fact that she was able to compose in such a manner with little training suggests that Holmès had a remarkable gift. It is a shame that she did not refine her talent through additional training and a more disciplined approach to the craft. Several composers and teachers had a profound effect on Holmès, both musically and personally, in particular Richard Wagner and César Franck.²⁸

Holmès began study at the age of eleven, when she was living with her father in Versailles. Although she lived close enough to Paris that she could have received musical training there, she took lessons from local instructors. She studied piano, and some harmony and counterpoint, with Henri Lambert, a local organist in Versailles. She

²⁸ Théeman, 167-69.
took clarinet lessons from Mr. Hyacinth Kloze, principal clarinetist of the Société des Concerts and director of the Versailles regimental band. Such militaristic musical training and her father’s influence greatly affected her compositions, which were often bold and march-like. She also became well known as a singer in the salons of Guillot de Sainbris, who was the founder of the Société Chorale d’Amateurs, an amateur group whose performances were frequently reviewed in nineteenth-century Paris because they often featured the works of modern composers. 29 Many of the most respected and popular composers of the time praised Holmès’s playing, singing, and composing. Among these was Gioachino Rossini, who, upon hearing her sing one of her own songs, said, “Very good, young lady.” He then told the crowd, “Here is a little marvel that you will hear much about. Remember it is old Rossini who says so.” 30 Other admirers of Holmès’s music include Gounod, Liszt, Saint-Saëns, and even Wagner, who warned her not to imitate anyone, especially not him. 31 Augusta did not heed this advice, since she worshipped him as a composer (although she thought him a bad singer and pianist). Clearly, Holmès was a composer whom many people believed showed great promise. 32

As mentioned above, Wagner’s musical style had a profound impact on Holmès. Numerous records indicate that she was a great admirer of the famous composer. So was her partner, Catulle Mendès, who did his best to promote Wagner’s works at a time when French musical culture saw an interesting blend of new and old styles. In response to the Franco-Prussian war, a nationalistic fervor swept through France, resulting in a new

29 Feilhauer, 138-39.
30 Du Page, 21.
31 Holmès disclosed this information in an interview with Jean Bernac in The Strand Musical Magazine, London, 1897, Vol. 5 (January-June): 139. She was discussing Wagner’s reaction to her music during her visit to Triebchen in 1869.
32 Theeman, 20-22.
French style and a renewed interest in instrumental music. This contrasted with the academic values espoused by the Paris Conservatoire. Throughout her life, Holmès seemed to enjoy composing in the “grand French vocal tradition,” which manifests itself in her *Hymn to Apollo*, composed in 1872. Critics accused her of being Wagnerian, but it is important to bear in mind that the term “Wagnerian” was a catchall for a variety of phenomena. These include an opera or program symphony based on folk tales or national epics, fewer formal divisions between aria and recitative or between movements, enriched harmonic language with dissonance and chromaticism, and an expanded use of the orchestra, especially the brass. These techniques can be found in the works of Holmès and are especially prevalent in her program symphony *Lutèce* of 1878, and *Irlande et Pologne* of 1882. When Holmès’s Andante Pastorale from *Orlando Furioso* was performed in 1877, it received boos from the audience, who knew of her reputation as a Wagnerian. Such criticisms also led to the disastrous failure of her opera, *La Montagne Noire*. It is worth studying the validity of such criticisms in detail, (see Chapter 5).

The other major influence on the music of Augusta Holmès is her study with the great organist and composer, César Franck. She was one of his oldest pupils, who, because of her gender, had not previously been exposed to thorough and rigorous musical training. Her decision to study with Franck marked a strong desire to study composition more seriously. Like Gillaume Lekeu (1870-1894), Holmès belonged to the category of

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35 Thecean, 131.
Franck's pupils who were taught on an outside basis. She was known to be one of the most eccentric of Franck's pupils, but one of the least documented of his circle. She was also one of the more steadfast Romantics, as one of the older members of the circle. She was, however, influenced by some of the ideas of her fellow pupils. For example, Arthur Coquard set *Hero et Léandre* to music before Holmès (exact date is uncertain), and this is probably where she got the idea for the piece. Holmès commented that Franck provided direction for his students but did not seem to impose his style on their actual compositions. For this reason, his influence is not said to be great in her works or those of his other students.\(^{36}\)

If one had to describe the works of Holmès, therefore, the greatest influence on her style would probably be that of Wagner. Her early militaristic training and the music of other French composers such as Franck might also be important factors. But in general, Holmès had a bold style all her own. The word "virile" is repeatedly used in the literature, both in a positive and negative sense. She was not afraid to experiment with large forms or even with minor details in some of her songs. As mentioned previously, she wrote her own poetry for her vocal works like Wagner, and she took great pride in this fact. Some critics, notably Saint-Saëns, criticized her work for what they felt was too little inhibition and too much excess in terms of orchestration and dramatic effects. At the same time, others accused her music of exhibiting a lack of "true originality." One could conclude that no matter whose style she could have emulated, Holmès's music would have come under considerable scrutiny, perhaps because of her unusual position as

\(^{36}\) Davies, 7, 140, 251, 175.
a successful woman composer in nineteenth-century France. Saint-Saëns’s remark about *Les Argonautes*, on March 26, 1881, is telling:

Women are curious when they seriously attend to art. Above all they seem preoccupied with making us forget they are women, of showing an overwhelming virility, without dreaming an instant that it is just this preoccupation that reveals the woman.\(^{37}\)

In this case, it would seem that this so-called preoccupation existed mainly on the part of the critic.

**Augusta Holmès the French Patriot**

In July 1870, Bismarck invaded France. Paris was conquered and the emperor captured. On the evening before the Battle of Buzenval during the Franco-Prussian War, Henri Regnault, a good friend of Holmès, attended one of her soirées and sang a moving song about death and tears. The next day, he died in battle. This shocked and saddened the young composer. In a letter to the poet Émile Deschamps in 1871, she describes how profoundly the shock of war upset her.\(^{38}\) This was to have an enormous impact on her compositions throughout her career, and her patriotic sentiments would eventually propel her to fame.

The war affected Holmès’s style in several ways. In French society at large, the defeat at the hands of the Prussians provoked a wave of nationalism that ushered in “La Belle Époque,” or the Golden Age of the Arts. The combination of Parnassian and Symbolist poets along with a new French musical language resulted in a new French art song, the *mélodie*. This was often Holmès’s genre of choice and she composed many of

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\(^{37}\) Pasler, 1.

\(^{38}\) Theeman, 54.
these so-called *melodies*. She also participated in the founding of the Société Nationale de Musique, an organization that represented a response to Wagner’s nationalism and whose purpose was to let the works of French composers be heard in Paris and the French provinces.

After the defeat of France, Holmès became obsessed with the idea of revenge. This became her topic of choice when composing both songs and large-scale orchestral and choral works. The first instance of this is her song, *Vengeance*, from December 1870, which is characterized by the violence of its music. A forceful bass line accompanies drivingly rhythmic block chords (see Ex. 1). Soon Holmès’s outrage at the plight of the French grew into a sympathetic sentiment for oppressed people throughout the world. *Irlande*, performed in March 1882 at the Concerts Populaires, championed the struggles of the Irish. She composed many songs of mourning for the Irish, which she then translated into French. These include *L’Aubépine de St. Patrick*, and *Noël d’Irlande*. Soon, Holmès’s extreme and outspoken patriotism made her a national icon. *Ludus pro Patria*, of 1888, met largely with success. But her *Ode Triomphale*, commissioned specially for the Paris Exhibition by request of the French government in 1889, made her a full-blown celebrity. After the conclusion of this large choral work, the crowd picked her up, placed her on a small chariot, and carried her through the streets on their shoulders. She became known as “La Grande Holmès,” and her reputation spread throughout France and abroad.

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40 Locke, 174.
41 Davies, 255.
Example 1:

Vengeance!

Augusta Holmes

No. 1. Pour Baryton
December 1870
A Monsieur Jules Lafont

From "Partitions, Songs by Augusta Holmes," courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale.
While Holmès's feelings of patriotism were probably genuine, her reputation as a sort of patriotic muse definitely did not hurt her career as a composer. Her nationalistic rhetoric seemed to make people overlook the fact that she was a woman composer with a shocking personal life according to the standards of the time, and she probably realized this. As Saint Saëns observed:

We needed more than a man to celebrate the centenary; in the absence of a god impossible to encounter, the French Republic has found what it needed; a muse!\footnote{Karen Henson, "In the House of Disillusion: Augusta Holmès and La Montagne Noire," \textit{Cambridge Opera Journal} 9 (1997): 258.} Although this is not an ideal portrayal of a serious composer, it helped Holmès achieve fame and she actively seemed to encourage the image.

The plots of Holmès's works propagate and embrace patriarchal and somewhat racist ideals of French nationalism. In \textit{Les Argonautes} (1880), love between the characters is given up for the greater good of France. \textit{Lutèce} (1879) deals with a Frenchman's sense of duty to the country and compares it with a son's duty to his mother. In her most successful work, \textit{Ode Triomphale} (commissioned in 1882 and performed in 1889), Holmès specified that all the singers had to be white and blond.\footnote{Wagner, who was a well-known advocate of racial purity, also made such stipulations about the performance of his operas. See Barry Millington, \textit{Wagner} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).} She seemed to take nationalistic sentiments to an extreme. She openly admired right-wing figures such as Paul Déroulède, a deputy and founder of the Ligue des Patriotes who was known for his radical political beliefs. Ironically, despite her own desire to have a career of her own, Holmès perpetuated the idea that women were important for the patriotic cause of making sons for the French army. It is hard to say to what extent Holmès believed this extremist rhetoric and how much of it she used for the purpose of
creating an image for herself. But there is no doubt that it worked. Holmès said what people wanted to hear, and greatly profited from doing so. But this image worked only during a specifically patriotic era. Later, when such ideas were out of vogue, the aura of patriotism surrounding Holmès may have contributed to her downfall.\footnote{For a discussion of Holmès’s use of white and blonde characters in her other works, see Pasler. 21-22. Pasler says that Holmès’s use of such racial characteristics to portray ideal French people fit in with the sentiments of Déroulède, who opposed letting immigrants into France in his \textit{Le Livre de la Ligue des Patriotes} (1887).}

**Musical Output**

The output of Augusta Holmès was quite substantial, and would be an impressive feat for any composer. For a complete list, see Table 1. During her lifetime, she composed 130 songs, four operas, and twelve symphonic poems.\footnote{Myers, 366.} Her songs were often composed in the \textit{mélodie} tradition. This new type of song, which succeeded the \textit{romance} and rivaled the \textit{Lied}, usually dealt with patriotic sentiment, romantic love, mysticism, or occasionally religious subjects.\footnote{Pennington, 10.} Her first known composition, from 1861, is \textit{Marche des Zouaves}, a military march for piano based on something taught to her by old soldiers at the garrison. The first of her works to have prestigious public performances were \textit{In Exitu}, performed by the Société Nationale in 1872, and the \textit{Andante Pastorale}, performed by the Concerts Colonne in 1877. Many of her songs were published, especially popular folk songs such as \textit{Noël}, a Christmas song, and \textit{Vengeance}, published by Leduc in 1872.\footnote{Pasler, 9.}

Starting in the year 1877, Holmès began to spend a great deal of time preparing works for competitions. She was content no longer merely to play her works in salons and other small gatherings. She seemed to feel the need to prove her artistic superiority. Since Holmès did not belong to a specific school of composition, she needed something
to work toward that would prove her worth as a composer. This was such an unusual
vocation for a woman, so publicity surrounding her initial attempts was not very good.
Her first opera, *Héro et Léandre* (1875), in which she employed several classical themes
on a grand scale, was not received well when she submitted it to the Opéra Populaire.
Her next attempt, the psalm *In Exitu*, was also not received well when it was played at
one of the concerts of the Société Philharmonique. Not long after this performance she contacted César Franck.  

With the program symphony *Lutèce*, things started to improve for Holmès. She entered the piece in the competition for the City of Paris Prize, strategically choosing a
name based on Lutetia, the name for Paris during Roman Julian times. She won second
prize with this piece, the first prize shared by Théodore Dubois and Benjamin Godard.
The next year, Holmès entered *Les Argonautes* in the competition, but she was only given
an honorable mention, with Victor Alphonse Duvernoy named the winner. In this case,
the musicians on the committee, including Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Franck, and the
conductors Edouard Colonne and Charles Lamoureux, voted for Holmès. The city
officials, who were not knowledgeable about music, voted against Holmès. It seems
likely that these officials did not want to award the prize to a woman.  

In 1882 Holmès wrote *Irlande*, and in 1883 *Pologne*. She soon began composing
songs again. In 1888, the French government commissioned her to write a grand cantata
to be performed at the Paris Exposition of 1889. This turned into the *Ode Triomphale*,
which employed thirteen choruses and 1,200 musicians. She then wrote the *Hymne à la
Paix*, which was received well in Italy, and in 1891 *Au Pays Bleu*, a piece dealing with

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48 Davies, 254-55.
49 Theeman, 135-36.
her impressions of Italy. Her final large-scale composition was *La Montagne Noire*. In subsequent years, her output consisted of some forty songs, divided among patriotic songs, fairy-tale songs, and sacred songs. On January 19, 1905, eight days before her death, Holmès visited her publisher. On January 20, 1905, she signed her last song, *Les Trois Petites Gas* — she was a composer until a week before her death.\(^{50}\)

**Les Argonautes**

*Les Argonautes* was Holmès’s second large-scale work to be performed. After winning second place in the City of Paris Competition of 1878, Holmès composed *Les Argonautes* with the hope of winning first prize the following year. However, she did not attain her goal, and many people felt that her loss was unfair. As mentioned above, Saint-Saëns, Massanet, Franck, and other musicians who sat on the jury voted that her composition should be the winner. The city officials, however, did not. Despite this blow to Holmès and her credibility as a composer, she began to become a celebrity. *Les Argonautes* was reviewed by most critics in Paris as well as by newspapers in other countries. This means that *Les Argonautes* is worth studying in terms of the image of Augusta Holmès and the challenges she faced as a woman trying to become a viable musical competitor. The literature surrounding this symphonic work, which is copious, will provide valuable insight into the reception of music by a woman during the late nineteenth century. In Chapter Three, I hope to gain some insight into this by digging through the literature surrounding the image of Augusta Holmès.\(^{51}\)

*Les Argonautes* is also interesting in terms of its plot and its musical treatment.

This symphonic poem on the theme of heroism and the sacrifice of love for greater ideals

\(^{50}\) Theeman, 174.

\(^{51}\) Theeman, 135-38.
is about Jason’s struggle to obtain the Golden Fleece. On his way, he meets a woman, Medea, who is also strong and heroic. At first he falls in love with her, but by the end proclaims, “I don’t love you. I love only glory!” Throughout Les Argonautes, Holmès uses colorful, some say Wagnerian, techniques to illustrate what is happening in the text. A closer look at this symphonic poem can reveal much about the balance of power between male and female and attitudes toward heroism and glory during the time.52

La Montagne Noire

La Montagne Noire marks Holmès’s largest attempt at composition, and yet tragically also her most unsuccessful venture. After she ended study with Franck, she wanted to achieve the highest possible artistic success—grand opera in the style of Wagner. She began composing the opera in 1883 and completed it by 1885. But it took ten years to find a venue in which to perform it, and the premiere took place at the Opéra in February of 1895. Despite her perseverance and hard work, the opera fared terribly with audiences and critics, folding after only eleven performances. Holmès had been completely confident that the opera would be an enormous success, and she was proved utterly wrong. This, unfortunately, marked the end of what could possibly have been a promising start as an opera composer had circumstances been favorable. Ethel Smyth commented that

I thought the libretto bad… plot conventional, music student’s work… but [it contained] pages upon pages of warm, beautiful music in it, a second opera from her pen might have been a masterpiece.

52 Pasler, 17-18.
Smyth also thought it was amazing that the opera even existed at all, and she was sympathetic to the plight of the female opera composer.\textsuperscript{53} Although many have belittled the worth of \textit{La Montagne Noire}, a thorough study of the opera is interesting and valuable for several reasons. First of all, Holmès’s success in getting the opera performed is an amazing feat, and her accomplishment and the means she used to achieve it can reveal the attitudes and workings of French society during the late nineteenth century. Holmès’s success in getting \textit{La Montagne Noire} performed at the Paris Opéra was a formidable accomplishment for a woman. Her perseverance, reputation, and image probably all contributed to her eventual success.

As mentioned above, ten years elapsed between the completion of the opera and its actual performance. In 1885, the opera was rejected by the Opéra-Comique because it was said to be too complex for such a venue. The director of the Opéra, Pierre Gailhard, initially ignored it but his successor finally agreed to perform the work. Although Gailhard returned and opposed the work, the opera was still performed. Many questions arise regarding Holmès’s initial rejection and eventual success in getting the opera performed. How did the opera really compare to similar operas submitted to these two venues? Were Holmès’s works somehow different from other operas in the French tradition, or was her rejection largely due to her gender? Did Holmès finally achieve success because of her personal contacts and reputation as a composer, or did this hinder her? A study of the struggle for performance can reveal a great deal about gender assumptions in the nineteenth century. In Chapter Three of this thesis, I offer a thorough investigation of the circumstances surrounding \textit{La Montagne Noire}, and why it failed.

\textsuperscript{53} Smyth, 131.
with the critics. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the reception of woman composers in the late nineteenth century, especially in France.

The reception of women in the arts during this period brings to mind the issue of exoticism. This phenomenon, which I will discuss in Chapter 4, swept through European arts during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (and to some extent is still alive and well today). Because of European colonial expansion, painters, writers, poets, and musicians suddenly had new and different subject matter to treat artistically. They were anxious to explore the Far East for a variety of reasons, including its potential for new and interesting material and its links to the Biblical past. Each art form approached exoticism differently. Painters, for example, tended to idealize the beauty of the East, while writers took a more objective approach.  

In plays, as well as in music, the exotic was often portrayed as threatening, destabilizing the established world order of Western European society. In these cases, a female character, usually a femme fatale, is employed to embody the threat of the exotic culture. The title character in Georges Bizet's Carmen (1875) is a good example of this kind of representation. Carmen is an independent, exotic woman who musically and dramatically threatens the structure of the opera and winds up dead because of it. While it may be tempting to hold this character up as a victim and a feminist icon, her character is created by a man, and is therefore nothing but a figment of the male imagination. In La Montagne Noire, Holmès creates a similar character to Carmen, Yamina, who does

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54 James Thompson, The East Imagined, Experienced, Remembered (Dublin: National Gallery of Ireland, 1988).
56 In Mérimée's play, the literary source of the opera, this is even more the case. For more about this, see the first Chapter of McClary, pp. 1-14, by Peter Robinson.
not end up dead, but rather the winner, while the men suffer. Can this heroine created by a woman be held as a viable feminist character, and what does this say about the role of women at the time of the opera's creation? In order to answer these questions, a thorough musical analysis of the opera is necessary, as well as a study of how the story itself differs from similar operas written by men.

In this thesis, I will analyze two large-scale works of Augusta Holmès, *Les Argonautes* and *La Montagne Noire*. Both of these works represent significant accomplishments for the composer, but both received bad publicity because of possible gender biases. They also contain plots and musical techniques that embody important social and musical trends of nineteenth-century France, such as exoticism, heroism, and Wagnerism. Because of the issues surrounding these two works and the content of the works themselves, studying *Les Argonautes* and *La Montagne Noire* will provide some valuable perspectives on the social and musical life of France during the time of Augusta Holmès.
Table 1: Works of Augusta Holmès

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58 n.p. stands for “not published.”
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Chapter Two: An Overview of Large-Scale Vocal Works

Augusta Holmès began her musical life composing songs, which comprised the bulk of her output. Her remarkable success as a composer of large-scale vocal and symphonic works, however, should not be underestimated (see Table 2). In fact, her achievements in this area of composition are amazing given social, political, and cultural conditions in nineteenth-century France. Women were deprived of many rights and privileges that they had previously enjoyed during the eighteenth century under the Ancien Régime and were strongly discouraged from receiving a great deal of education. Attempting to become a professional of any kind, including an artistic one, would have been unthinkable. Women were largely excluded from many artistic competitions, including that for the Prix de Rome, the most cherished of prizes for an aspiring artist. When the French government finally opened the Prix de Rome competition to women in 1903, Holmès was much too old to take part.¹ Although it is sad that Holmès never got to showcase her works in such a prestigious competition, her perseverance and success as a large-scale creator may have helped pave the way for future women composers.

Fin-de-siècle France was a conservative culture that was obsessed with image and the maintenance of patriarchal values. One may wonder, therefore, how Holmès achieved such success as a woman who led a lifestyle that was far from conventional or acceptable. The answer lies in her exploitation of French patriotic sentiment. After some initial failed ventures as a composer of large-scale vocal and instrumental works, she began to perpetuate patriotic and masculine ideals through the structures and plots of her works, and through her own self-image. The failure of her symphony, *Orlando Furioso*,

in 1877, marked a turning point in Holmès’s career. She realized the value of composing works and maintaining a personal self-image that reflected sentiments embraced by the culture in which she lived.

### Table 2: Large-Scale Works of Augusta Holmès

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<td>Astarté</td>
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<td>1878</td>
<td>Piano reduction: Choudens</td>
<td>1880</td>
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<td>Nov. 30, 1884</td>
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<td>1880</td>
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<td>1881</td>
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<td>March 26 and April 24, 1881; Feb. 26, 1882; Jan. 4, 11, 1885</td>
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³ n.p. stands for “not published.”
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<th>Work</th>
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<td>1882</td>
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<td>Concerts Rouge</td>
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<td>Andromède</td>
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<td>1887</td>
<td>Full score: L. Grus</td>
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| Ludus Pro Patria | 1888 | Piano reduction, orchestral score, and arrangement for 2 violins, alto, and cello: L. Grus | 1888 | Société des Concerts du Conservatoire | March 4, 11, 1888
June 6, 1889 at Trocadero; October 25, 1891; Feb. 1893 and 1894 |
| Ludus (cont.) | 1882 | | 1892 | Concerts Colonne | |
| Ode Triomphale | 1889 | Reduction for voice and piano: L. Grus
Arrangement for piano solo without text: V. Durdilly | 1889 | Concerts Colonne | Sept. 11, 12, 14, 18, 21, 1889 |
| Hymne à la Paix | 1890 | Reduction for voice and piano: V. Durdilly | 1890 | n/a | n/a |
| Au Pays Bleu | 1891 | Orchestral score, transcription for piano, transcription for piano, violin, and cello: H. Tellier | 1891 | Concerts Colonne | March 8, 15, 22, 1891; Febrary 21 and March 6, 1892 June 4, 1899 |
| La Montagne Noire | 1895 | Reduction for four voices and piano: Ph. Maquet | 1895 | Opéra de Paris | 1895 Eleven performances |

In the early nineteenth century, women in France lost all civil rights and privileges that they had enjoyed under the previous system, that of the Ancien Régime. Under the Code Napoléon, established in 1804, women lost the right to own property, and receive an education. In fact, shortly before this, in 1793, women of all social classes officially became the legal property of their husband, father, brother, or closest male relative. The rhetoric of the time stated that women’s purpose in life was to raise future
citizens and workers of the French Republic. Only during the 1870s did women begin to lobby for more rights, and in 1880, the French National Assembly voted in favor of a law permitting them to obtain a secondary education. But they still could not study Greek, Latin, philosophy, advanced math, or natural sciences. During this time, the concept of the femme nouvelle, or the individualistic new woman was born. This was a woman concerned with non-domestic matters who, according to stereotype, possessed so-called masculine traits such as drive, perseverance, boldness, and a lack of warmth. Although Holmès had a reputation for being a kind and warm person, the relative success and popularity of her works made her become known as one of these women.

When it came to music, critics of the nineteenth century wrote that women were only capable of writing elegant music suitable for the parlor. During the 1880s, the word “virile” began to come up more and more with regard to works by women, especially Holmès, and could be used in a positive or negative sense. If Holmès had purposely intended to dispel the myths and stereotypes about music by women, she would have had a hard time doing so more effectively. Although some said she and her music were too bold and pretentious, many critics had good things to say. While reviews about her large-scale works were mixed, people did notice these pieces and take them seriously either in a positive or negative sense. Holmès had therefore attracted an unthinkable amount of attention as a professional woman composer in the climate of nineteenth-century France.

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4 Fauser. 88.
5 Paster. 2. 6.
6 Paster. 3.
The Repression of Women Composers in France

A comparison of Holmès with French women composers who were born later and worked under slightly more favorable conditions reveals that her achievements were truly remarkable. As mentioned above, women were not supposed to take art and music seriously but use it solely to entertain husbands and guests, educate children, and otherwise keep themselves occupied during long days confined to the home. So when women started to compete for the Prix de Rome in 1903, members of the artistic and critical establishment felt extremely threatened by what one critic, Emile Vuillermoz, dubbed the "pink peril." After the Franco-Prussian War, the French were concerned about their relative weakness compared to the Germans and were afraid that this had something to do with allowing women more freedom. The Académie des Beaux-Arts, which felt that its duty was to protect and preserve French culture, also felt threatened by these new changes. People were afraid that bringing women into serious artistic competitions, such as that for the Prix de Rome, would corrupt the integrity of the event and cause it to become more concerned with fashion and less concerned with art itself. As Annegret Fauser has shown through her study of women and the Prix de Rome, French society's obsession with the gender and image of a composer made it extremely difficult for women to compete fairly and receive proper acknowledgement for their accomplishments. It was not the women themselves who contributed to the corruption of the Prix de Rome, but the society around them and its preoccupation with images and appearances.  

7 Fauser. 84-85.
According to Fauser, Lili Boulanger’s 1913 victory in the Prix de Rome competition was the result of a carefully crafted self-image, but also the consequence of years of struggle by her female predecessors. As early as the 1830s, Georges Sand had openly questioned the concept of an all-male Académie des Beaux Arts. On June 17 of 1892, Madame Léon Bertaux applied for a vacant seat at the Académie and lost, but provoked debate about women in the arts. In 1889, the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs campaigned for women’s entrance as élèves into the Ecole des Beaux Arts and also for admission to the Prix de Rome. They achieved the first goal in 1896, but women were still denied the opportunity to compete for the Prix de Rome. In 1874, around the same time that Holmès was beginning to establish herself as a serious composer, Maria Isambert petitioned the Académie to be admitted to the competition, but was denied.  

In 1902, the rise of Emile Combes and the radical left wing Bloc party incited change in France. Mlle. Rodenay (a painter), Mlle. Rozet (a sculptor), and Juliette Toutain (a composer), took advantage of this new climate, and the split between the conservative Académie and the new leftist government, by writing to Joseph Chaumié, a radical politician. Because of complex political circumstances involving the personal ambition of Henry Roujon, the Directeur of the Académie, and his desire to minimize conflict, women were allowed to compete for the first time. The Académie was not really notified until after the decision was made, and many of its members were extremely unhappy with the change. One such member of the Académie, Luc Olivier Merson, called the move “an attack on the moral dignity and, in consequence, the very

8 Ibid., 85-86.
existence of the Académie, wherein rest the strength and the honor of French Art."

Although it was a victory for women, they still had to face unfair standards when participating in the actual competition. Juliette Toutain, for example, was constrained by her position as a bourgeois woman; Hélène Fleury, a femme nouvelle, faced a glass ceiling; and Nadia Boulanger was treated with suspicion because she questioned the rules. None of the talents of these women was recognized fairly. Lili Boulanger must have appreciated the importance of image, and she put herself forth as a helpless, child-like figure, which helped her win the prize. Holmès had to work within even tougher constraints than these, working several decades earlier to become a composer of serious large-scale vocal and instrumental works.

**Holmès’s Large-Scale Works: Background, Descriptions, and Reception**

Holmès overcame these circumstances and eventually became a popular composer. Although her talents were not always recognized, a look at musical encyclopedias written around the end of Holmès’s life reveals that she did succeed to some degree as a formidable composer of works on a grand scale. Her reputation around the time of her death seems to be quite different from its later incarnations when there was no one around to defend her memory. For example, *The American History and Encyclopedia of Musical Biographies*, for example, published in 1908, states that it was Holmès’s compositions that made her famous. It goes on to list them, beginning with her first opera, *Héro et Léandre* in 1874, and continuing with a discussion of her other vocal works. It also mentions the fact that *Lutèce*, a dramatic symphony, won second prize in

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9 Minutes of the weekly session of the Académie des Beaux-Arts from 28 February 1903, preserved in the Archives of the Académie des Beaux-Arts at the Institut de France. Paris [AABA]. shelf-mark 2e21, p. 24, as cited by Fauser, 86.

10 Fauser, 89-103.
the City of Paris Competition, and that *Les Argonautes*, performed at the Pasdeloup
Concerts, won an honorable mention.\(^{11}\)

Similarly, Arthur Elson, in his 1904 publication, *Women's Work in Music*,
discusses the works of Augusta Holmès, not her beauty. He quotes Imbert as saying that
"The talent of Augusta Holmès is absolutely virile, and nowhere in her works do you find
the little affectations which too often disfigure the works of women…" Elson quotes
another critic at length, who states, "Whatever Mlle. Holmès may do, or whatever she
may wish, she belongs to the French school by the vigor of her harmony, her clearness,
and the logic of her conception and exposition." This book is remarkable because it
contains numerous sexist biases, yet mentions Holmès favorably within the context of
these biases. In the conclusion Elson says,

> The average sweet girl graduate of the conservatories, who is made up chiefly of
sentiment, and hates mathematics, will hardly make a deep mark in any art. But
there are many who do earnest work, and who lead lives of activity and
production that afford them equal rank with the men in this respect. Augusta
Holmès may be cited in illustration.\(^ {12}\)

Clearly, Augusta Holmès made an impact upon the musical world despite her gender and
the prejudices around her. What was it about her music itself and her image that allowed
her to enjoy such an astonishing degree of success?

Between 1870 and 1876, as Holmès set out to become a serious composer on a
grand scale, she limited her output to large-scale works that contained voices and
orchestra. The greatest influence on her style was that of Wagner, since she was fresh
from a trip to Bayreuth where she saw his works performed and where Wagner


enthusiasts surrounded her.\textsuperscript{13} Her first attempts at such compositions met with an encouraging degree of success. In 1871-72, three of her choral works were performed publicly. \textit{Un Choeur Nuptial} was presented in a Concert du Châtelet in Paris, directed by Edouard Colonne, in December 1871.\textsuperscript{14} The work was generally received well by critics from the \textit{Gazette de Paris}, and a newspaper column entitled “Théâtres et Beaux-Arts,” in 1871, which praised the originality of its orchestration and the shape of the melodies.\textsuperscript{15}

After these initial successes, Holmès met with a series of rejections and disappointments. In August 1872, two more of her works, \textit{Ave Maris Stella} and \textit{In Exitu Israel}, were featured at a concert at the palace chapel in Versailles. The concert utilized an amateur choir, a cellist, an organist, and Holmès herself as a pianist. Initially, critics responded favorably to \textit{In Exitu Israel}, but a second performance at a concert presented by the Société Nationale de Musique\textsuperscript{16} was not well received. She then composed three operas, which were never performed or printed: \textit{Héro et Léandre} (around 1875), \textit{Astarte} (October, 1871), and \textit{Lancelot du Lac} (around 1875).\textsuperscript{17} Her symphonic poem, \textit{Hymn to Apollo}, which she also composed around the same time as \textit{Héro et Léandre}, similarly revealed an attraction to the “grand French vocal tradition.”\textsuperscript{18} She submitted \textit{Héro et Léandre} to the Opéra Populaire, where it was not met graciously, and was ultimately rejected. In general, opera houses during this time had no interest in performing works by minor composers, let alone women composers.

\textsuperscript{13} Pasler, 127
\textsuperscript{14} The manuscript for this piece is no longer extant according to Theeman.
\textsuperscript{15} Theeman, 127-29.
\textsuperscript{16} The Société Nationale de Musique was a group founded by Saint-Saëns to promote French music.
\textsuperscript{17} These three operas may survive in manuscript form somewhere in the depths of the Bibliothèque Nationale, but I have been unable to locate them.
Holmès must have felt some frustration with her unsuccessful ventures composing in the vocal tradition and decided to make some changes. She seemed to realize that getting people to acknowledge and recognize such works composed by a woman would be a very difficult task. She soon began creating more pieces that were exclusively instrumental. These large-scale works for instruments met with more success than her operas. One of her earlier works, *Ouverture pour une Comédie*, was composed around the same time as *Astarté* and reveals a great deal about Holmès's earlier style. Although the piece has a relatively simple structure, its beauty lies in the succulent blending of woodwind timbres at the beginning, while its lilting melodies remind one of Brahms. This opening section is followed by a dramatic series of frantic melodies that build chromatically. *Andromède*, composed in 1883, is a vibrant and colorful work, containing some beautiful melodic lines and opening fanfares that seem stylistically similar to the early works of Mahler. It was published in 1902, after receiving a fine performance by Edouard Colonne in 1900.19

Between 1877 and 1882, Holmès seemed to be on a quest to frame herself as a serious and respected composer. She soon contacted César Franck about serious compositional study. This lasted from sometime between 1872 and 1875 until 1890, and she produced at least six major works, among them *Lutèce, Les Argonautes, Irlande*, and *Pologne*. Holmès also began to strive for formal recognition through competition against other composers. Her goal became to win the City of Paris Prize, which unfortunately

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caused some of the same problems for her that the Prix de Rome would later give her female French followers. 20

Before entering any competitions, however, Holmès learned an important lesson about the images she projected through her music. After the completion of In Exitu Israel, she composed a symphony, Andante Pastorale, which was played at the Concerts Colonne on January 15, 1877 and reflected her study with Franck and her admiration of Wagner. The latter characteristic was her downfall, since Parisians, devastated by the Franco-Prussian War, did not think well of Wagner, who was seen as being closely allied with Austria.21 This had become apparent years earlier at the scandalous premiere of Tannhäuser at the Opéra. Angry protesters disrupted this performance, on March 13, 1861, and the three others that followed, with noisy shouting, laughing, and even dog whistles. These demonstrators despised the fact that Wagner was supposedly allied with the Austrian princess, Pauline Metternich, who had played a major role in getting Tannhäuser performed at the Opéra. This woman was the wife of the Austrian ambassador in Paris and was supposed to serve as an intermediary between the French and Austrians. The French looked upon the princess and the Austrians in general with distrust and hostility. After the third performance of Tannhäuser, Wagner withdrew the work from the Opéra, but despite negative reviews, he believed strongly in the artistic

20 Davies, 253. It is difficult to determine the exact dates that Holmès studied with Franck. This relationship was well known, but not well documented. Many sources disagree on the dates of study, but all speculated that Franck was attracted to Holmès. This is a good example of the excess of mythology and lack of detail surrounding Holmès.

21 Pasler. 9.
merit of his work. He felt that the bad reception was "the result of intrigues and not real judgment."\textsuperscript{22}

Holmès had a similar experience at the premiere of her \textit{Andante Pastorale} when some audience members expressed intense dissatisfaction by booing and hissing. This was probably a reaction to Holmès's reputation as a fervent Wagnerian, rather than negativity toward the music itself. One critic, Octave Mirbeau, stated on January 16, 1877, that people in France would boo anything they thought might be Wagnerian, regardless of whether they knew if it really had anything to do with Wagner or not.\textsuperscript{23} Other reviews of the work were somewhat mixed, but generally praised Holmès's skillful use of orchestration and crafting of melodies. They all agreed that she showed a great deal of promise as a composer.\textsuperscript{24} But coming after a series of failures with public and the critics, this experience must have been devastating to Holmès. She seemed to want to avoid repeating this traumatic event, since her compositions after \textit{Andante Pastorale} all contain messages geared toward the glorification of the French nation.\textsuperscript{25}

In 1878, more determined than ever to prove herself as a composer, Holmès wrote \textit{Lutèce}, another large-scale vocal and instrumental work, which she entered in the City of Paris Competition. \textit{Lutèce}, a three-part dramatic symphony, is an intensely patriotic work that contains a program set during a time in ancient Parisian history when the city was known as "Lutetia." The plot centers around an incident in which the city was being attacked by the Romans and French soldiers were called to arms. The work utilizes an

\textsuperscript{22} Barry Millington, \textit{Wagner} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 68-70
\textsuperscript{23} Octave Mirbeau, "A Bas Wagner!" \textit{L'ordre} (January 16, 1877), as cited by Theeman, 133.
\textsuperscript{24} Reviews in \textit{Le Gaulois} (January 16, 1877), and \textit{L'Echo} (January 18, 1877), as cited by Theeman, 134.
\textsuperscript{25} Theeman, 131-32.
ambitious array of performing forces, almost on the scale of an opera. The story calls for five vocalists who sing the roles of a Gaulois, a Gauloise, a messenger of war, an old man, and a narrator, as well as a full chorus and orchestra. The message of its plot, which is reinforced by bold and dramatic music, is that the love of one's country should come before everything else, even before passionate or romantic love. The Frenchman's sense of duty toward the country, the work proclaims, should be like that of a son to his mother. This symphony brought Holmès second prize in the City of Paris Competition, her first major success. Although the first prize went to Theodore Dubois and Benjamin Godard, Holmès's achievement, and positive reviews from critics, brought her a great deal of publicity and prestige. One critic wrote, "Her score for Lutèce... full of patriotic enthusiasm and for which she wrote the words, is altogether virile...."26 This time, people felt so comfortable with the message behind Holmès's work that they were able to appreciate the value of her music despite the fact that she was a woman composer. With this truly exceptional victory, Holmès was on the way to fame and success.27

Lutèce is an extremely dramatic piece. It is in the key of D major and begins with a rather scattered texture, as all the parts vie with each other to be heard in contrasting triplet and sixteenth-note runs. With increasing chromaticism, the Gauloise mourns the fact that her beloved must be called off to fight in the war. Finally, everyone comes together at the end as they realize that sending off these soldiers is the right thing to do for their country and through them they will achieve salvation. The words of this movement are highly dramatic and graphic. For example, one section reads "Red blood

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27 Pasler. 9-15.
flowing over the plain... head for an eye and a heart for a nail... away, away to kill!

To kill and slay!" The second section, "Le Champ de Bataille," is comprised of a large
and mournful instrumental introduction followed by a prayer-like section that talks about
weeping, dying, and despair. This section is in C major, and features strong dissonances
(for example D against E flat). Perhaps this represents the contrast between the soldiers’
internal anguish and their outward bravery and glory. The third, Largo, section in G
major addresses the glory of the patriots and the victims. This section is strongly
homophonic and begins with the tenors followed by the basses, altos, and sopranos.
Throughout the piece, unity regarding love of country prevails.

With her next major work, Les Argonautes (1880), Holmès employed similar
tactics. This symphonic poem, about Jason’s journey in search of the Golden Fleece,
again tells of love sacrificed for a greater ideal. The work also takes advantage of
another major plot type: the attraction to and conquering of the exotic woman.

Although this work is not explicitly patriotic, people still enjoyed it and it won an
honorable mention in the City of Paris Competition of 1880. This brought Holmès a
great deal of fame and international publicity. After the competition, she happened by
chance to find a publisher for the piece, M. Grus, who submitted it to Jules Pasdeloup
(1819-1887) who performed it in several of his Concerts Populaires in 1881 and 1882.
Four thousand people attended the premiere of this work on March 26, 1881, and no one
protested. Holmès had managed to create an image for herself and her work with which

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28 Pasler, 17.
29 I will discuss the role of the exotic woman in more detail, and in relation to La Montagne Noire
in Chapter 5.
the public could find favor. The reception of this work will be discussed in Chapter Three of this document, while the work itself will be treated in detail in Chapter Four.

Between 1882 and 1891, Holmès composed songs as well as orchestral works. Holmès had exploited sentiments of patriotism and sympathy for France in her previous large-scale works. In the ensuing years, she extended these ideas to championing the cause of oppressed people everywhere. This is evident in her symphonic poem *Irlande*, of 1882, and *Pologne*, also written in 1882. These later symphonic works of Holmès also make use of large formal structures, thick textures, innovative orchestration, and flowing melodic lines. Loud driving fanfares alternate with warm, gentle melodies. Holmès was becoming quite a skilled orchestral composer, deploying many techniques associated with “masculine music” during that time.

*Irlande* and *Pologne* both contain lively folk tunes and bold fanfares that alternate with nostalgic, wistful passages. After viewing a painting by Robert Fleury (1837-1911), *Les Massacres de Varsovie (The Warsaw Massacres)*, dating from 1866, Holmès composed *Pologne*. This piece was performed for the first time at Angers, in 1883. It was also successfully featured in a Pasdeloup concert in Paris. Common traits of all these symphonic works are the dramatic brass fanfares, the frequently changing textures, and constant transformation of melodies and themes. In addition, these works reveal Holmès’s gift for creating memorable melodic lines and interesting orchestration. For example, she utilizes the English horn, creating some beautiful solos that fit the

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30 Theeman, 136-37.
instrument well. Such features make the instrumental music of Holmès lively and interesting.\textsuperscript{31}

Shortly after \textit{Pologne} Holmès composed another vocal and instrumental work, \textit{Ludus Pro Patria} (see Ex. 2). This piece contains five major sections. The first movement, \textit{Largo Maestoso}, is in D major and is characterized by slow, stable, block chords. It is strongly tonal, moving between D major and B-flat major. The second section of the movement, the \textit{Allegro} section, is in G major with some initial underlying chromaticism. The text is very patriotic, and the voices tend to follow each other in patterns of strict imitation, making the words clear. The accompanying texture, however, tends to be unstable and swirls around the vocal lines. The piece also contains an \textit{Andante} movement, entitled \textit{La Nuit et L'Amour}, which is in E-flat major, and has an ethereal quality with frequent trills in the instrumental parts. Next comes an \textit{Andantino} movement, featuring only the sopranos and tenors in E flat minor; an \textit{Allegro pesante} movement in E flat major; and a \textit{Largo Maestoso} section in E major, which contains a homophonic vocal texture and a rippling instrumental accompaniment. This piece is very lengthy and would be a huge feat for any composer.\textsuperscript{32}

In 1889, Holmès was given the opportunity to maximize her reputation as a composer and as a patriot. In 1888, the French government sponsored a musical and literary contest for a Grand Cantata to be performed at the Paris Exposition of 1889.


Example 2:

Ludus Pro Patria

Augusta Holmes

Holmès wrote and submitted the text and music for a cantata about French cultural life, in a style that supposedly celebrated ancient festivals. Each performing force represents a different segment of traditional French society, for example, wine makers, farmers, soldiers, naval forces, workers, and artists. This *Ode Triomphele* was her most ambitious work yet, requiring thirteen choirs and 1,200 instrumentalists. The performance cost 300,000 francs, the modern equivalent of about ten million francs. Holmès also designed the sets and costumes for this lavish spectacle.\(^{33}\) She was so thrilled to have been

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\(^{33}\) Ingeborg Feilhauer, "Augusta Holmès und die Französische Revolution," *Musica* 43 (February 1989), 140.
selected to write the work that she asked for no personal reimbursement. In a patriotic
gesture, she requested only that the doors of the Palace of Industry be open to the public
during the three days in which the work was performed. Her commanding presence and
control over the huge group of performers were amazing. On one particular occasion,
when the orchestra was playing and acting badly, she gave a stirring patriotic speech,
telling them that they were a reflection upon France, which kept them focused and
motivated.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{Ode Triumphale} is sectionalized, intricate, and grandiose at the same time. The
sheer volume of operatic music composed by Holmès is mind-boggling. March-like
passages, light bouncy lines, and a great deal of imitation among choruses and individual
vocal parts characterize this piece. It is divided into nine sections, each depicting a
different group in French society. The first section is a prelude featuring a \textit{March}
\textit{Triumphale}, the second section portrays “Les Vignerons,” and the third section “Les
Moissonneurs.” Succeeding sections are “Les Soldats,” “Les Marins,” “Les
Travailleurs,” “Les Arts” (see Ex. 3), “Les Sciences,” and “Jeunes filles et Gents.” Each
section is characterized by distinctive music. For example, heavy triplets and thirty-
second note runs characterize \textit{Les Arts}, while \textit{Les Sciences} contains mostly long vocal
melodies with short punctuated accompaniments. While this piece did not receive
terribly good reviews, one must admit that it is an interesting and clever work.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{34} Theeman, 142.
\textsuperscript{35} Augusta Mary Anne Holmès, \textit{Ode Triumphale}. The Woman Composers Collection
Example 3:

Les Arts from Ode Triomphale

Augusta Holmes

Taken from the Women Composers Collection (microform) from the holdings of the Women Composers Collection, the Music Library, University of Michigan. Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1998.

Largo.
With the success of *Ode Triumphale*, Holmès had finally achieved fame and respect as a composer after a long, difficult struggle. The differing reactions from the public and the press, however, suggest that Holmès had invested too much energy in creating a favorable image as a French patriot at the expense of the music itself. Holmès now acted out the role of the celebrity and muse quite successfully. After the conclusion of *Ode Triumphale*, Holmès was lifted onto a cart and carried through the streets on the shoulders of the crowd. She gained fame worldwide and the love and respect of the French people. Many critics, however, disliked the piece, deeming it *too* bold and forceful. For example, Hughes Imbert (1842-1905), after hearing *Ode Triumphale* played in concert, declared that it contained “excessive sound, almost brutal in its intensity.”

In this case, the piece’s virility seemed to alienate critics and fellow musicians. Ironically, this scenario quite the opposite of the one that Holmès faced when she submitted *Les Argonautes* for the City of Paris Competition. If critics did have anything positive to say about the *Ode Triumphale*, it concerned feelings about the French Republic and not the music itself. For example, in September of 1889, one critic, Minotoro, writing in *La Nation*, commented on the use of unisons and the repetition of phrases by calling the music “simple and beautiful like a marble statue.”

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36 Davies, 255.
38 Theeman, 143-44.
39 In that case, all the musicians on the committee voted her work the best and the city officials were the ones who seemed to have problems with it.
40 Minotoro, writing in *La Nation*, excerpted in *Fêtes du Centenaire, Ode Triomphale Exisée au Palais des Champs-Élysées le 11, 12, 14, 18, 21 September, 1889, Opinion de la Presse* (Paris: Durilly, 1889), as cited in Pasler, 23.
herself was described as a statuesque figure, a goddess, and a muse for the French Republic.\textsuperscript{41}

Now that she had become a celebrity in France and abroad, Holmès was given opportunities to compose unlike that of any woman composer before her. Although she never had the chance to compete for the Prix de Rome, Holmès was commissioned to compose in Italy and did so successfully. Only eight months after the Paris Exposition, the Italian government asked Holmès to write a \textit{Hymne à la Paix} for the Festival of Beatrice and Dante in Florence, which took place from May 15-18, 1890. The purpose of this work was to promote peace between France and Italy, making Holmès a sort of international muse. Like \textit{Ode Triumphale}, \textit{Hymne à la Paix} was received well by the people of Italy. After the first performance, the Florentine people reputedly tossed roses at her feet and cried, “Vive la France.”\textsuperscript{42} Her next major work, the symphony \textit{Au Pays Bleu}, in three movements, was written in 1891 and inspired by her sojourn in Italy.\textsuperscript{43} This piece marked the end of a prolific and extraordinarily successful period in the life of Holmès.

\textit{La Montagne Noire}, as mentioned in Chapter One, led to the downfall of Augusta Holmès. After she ended her study with César Franck in 1890, Holmès wanted to achieve the highest artistic success for a composer—a grand Wagnerian style opera.\textsuperscript{44} Still glowing from all her previous successes, Holmès apparently had acquired quite a bit of confidence in her abilities. Unlike her previous operas, she was absolutely convinced

\textsuperscript{41} Pasler, 22.
\textsuperscript{43} Theeman, 164-65.
\textsuperscript{44} Davies, 256.
that *La Montagne Noire* would be a success, and that she alone knew how to make it so. Although the theme of the opera was rooted in popular sentiments, like those of her other large-scale successful works, Holmès had grown more stubborn and self-assured during the ten years that elapsed between the time it was written and the time it was actually performed. For example, she was advised to cut parts of the opera so that a ballet could end the evening and cater to public taste, as the public did not have the attention span to deal with a long and intense opera such as hers. She refused to even consider this suggestion, however, or make any changes that might make the opera more acceptable to the public. This was normal and typical behavior for a famous and established opera composer, but Holmès did not have the support and esteem that her male contemporaries might have had. Instead, critics and audiences alike immediately pronounced her a failure because her work did not fit the popular molds on one hand, and was seen as being outdated and not modern enough on the other. Obviously, the opera world must have been tough to placate. Holmès had gotten people to notice her other large-scale vocal and instrumental works through the perpetuation of patriotic ideals and the manipulation of her own self-image. Since these works were very close to being operas themselves, and they were successful, the opera world must have been very narrow minded and relatively exclusive. Although Holmès never found true success as an opera composer, her brave attempts to do so helped pave the way for future women composers, such as Dame Ethel Smyth (1858-1944), whose operas, *Fantasio, Der Wald,*
The Wreckers, Entente Cordiale, and the Prison were performed throughout Europe, while the Royal Choral Society performed her Mass in D in 1893.\textsuperscript{45}

*La Montagne Noire* is a lively, energetic opera in four acts. It recalls the symphonies of Holmès in terms of motivic development and defies the norms of the typical French opera tradition (yet another way that Holmès seemed to be rebelling from the conventions of the time with this opera). Instead of moving from the opening chorus to an increased dramatic pace or introduction of important characters, the beginning shifts from a scene of mourning for the country to a patriotic celebration. This is vaguely reminiscent of the musical and dramatic techniques utilized in *Ode Triumphale*.\textsuperscript{46} The music of this opera is violent and rhythmic, which some critics found excessive, but which the modern listener may find exciting and somewhat different from the norm. The music is also highly appropriate to the subject matter at hand, which is war and violence.\textsuperscript{47} The score offers many beautiful moments, in which the music reflects the moods of the characters, such as the shift to C major in the first act when the characters are rhapsodizing about their homeland. The orchestra often reacts to the feelings of the characters such as Dara, on several different occasions. The music of this opera is generally changeable and exciting, and contributes to the plot a great deal.\textsuperscript{48}

In summary, therefore, Augusta Holmès was a clever woman. She realized that if she and her compositions were to be noticed favorably, they must convey an ideal or

\textsuperscript{45} Fantasio was performed in Weimar, *Der Wald* in Berlin, *The Wreckers* in Leipzig, and *Entente Cordiale* and *The Prison* were performed in London. Smyth greatly admired and respected Holmès's attempts to have her operas staged. She wanted to put on a concert in London devoted to the music of Holmès, but it never worked out and Holmès died the next year. See Eric Walter White, *A History of English Opera* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 355.

\textsuperscript{46} Henson, 244.

\textsuperscript{47} Davies, 256-57.

\textsuperscript{48} Henson, 244.
sentiment highly valued by her culture. Many of her large-scale vocal and instrumental works contained stylistic features considered masculine or "virile," while the plots of such works reflected nationalistic or popular sentiment. At the same time, Holmès’s own self-image was that of an objectified goddess or muse. Through such concern with image on many different levels, Holmès seemed like less of a threat to society than most women composers. While this helped bring her music to the public, it presented problems for the composer. The abundance of rhetoric about Holmès the woman tended to obscure her music and did so even more as the twentieth century progressed. In addition, Holmès had to worry constantly about her image, altering it to change with the times. Toward the end of her life, she seemed to stop caring as much about this and wanted to be taken as seriously as her male contemporaries. She even began to look and dress like the important male composers of the day. But this parity could not happen in her time, and so she ultimately met with failure toward the end of her life.49

**Modern Availability of Holmès’s Works**

The literature available about Holmès and her life vastly exceeds the existing amount of scores and recordings of her music. Few of her large-scale works were recorded or published in the twentieth century, although a recent surge in interest about women composers has resulted in more collections and publications of her works.50 The manuscripts themselves of many of her works are difficult to find. For example, I have

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50 A substantial collection of her works is available in microform version as part of *The Women Composers Collection: From the Holdings of the Women Composers Collection, the Music Library, University of Michigan* (Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1998). It features music, principally by European and North American women composers, originally published between ca. 1780 and 1950.
been unable to locate an orchestral score of Les Argonautes or the scores to her first three operas. Pieces by Holmès that are published are mostly songs and small-scale instrumental pieces. For example, the library at my institution, Rice University, holds three of her smaller works - Tzigane Rêverie: für Klavier, Three Short Pieces: for Flute and Piano; and Fantaisie for B-flat Clarinet and Piano. It also holds an original publication of the piano reduction of La Montagne Noire, which is rare. A collection of selected songs was published by Da Capo Press in 1984, but is now out of print.  

Although recordings are scarce, one can generally hear some of Holmès’s songs and symphonic works on collections of recorded works by women composers, or in one case, as part of a recording featuring the repertoire of the well-known baritone, Maurice Renaud. Also, the Rheinland-Pfalz Philharmonic has recently come out with a CD featuring Holmès’s orchestral works. But generally speaking, publishers and performers have long neglected works by Holmès. Thus trying to formulate ideas about her musical style is like trying to analyze a painting covered in mud. There is still much to be done to bring back the music of this prolific composer, and the colorful and dramatic nature of her works would make such efforts well worthwhile.

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Chapter Three: *Les Argonautes*: Genesis and Reception

As mentioned previously, many biographies of Holmès say a great deal about her beauty, popularity, and reputation among a well-known community of male poets, artists, and musicians. Those who write about her music usually focus on her reputation as a song composer, and also frequently engage in a discussion of *La Montagne Noire* and its immediate failure, which marked the end of Holmès’s career.¹ From these accounts, one might infer that Holmès was only competent as a song composer, and a failure when she tried to compose works of greater proportions. But Holmès did succeed as a composer of purely instrumental works, as well as one of large-scale pieces that utilized a variety of performing forces, both instrumental and vocal. During the middle period of her life, from about 1875 to 1895, she earned a significant amount of praise for composing in several different styles.

The success of her two entries for the City of Paris prize, *Lutèce* and *Les Argonautes*, marked a turning point in Holmès’s career. But the popularity of *Les Argonautes* was a mixed victory. It received wide acclaim and boosted Holmès’s reputation, but was only awarded an honorable mention in the City of Paris Competition. This occurred even though the musicians on the committee agreed that it deserved first prize. Nevertheless, the fact that a work by a woman won any kind of honor in nineteenth-century France is an amazing phenomenon.² Holmès went to a great deal of trouble to emphasize her patriotism and align the subject of her music with the ideals and

¹ For example, many biographies of Holmès devote an entire chapter to the premiere and failure of *La Montagne Noire*, setting aside only a small subsection for a discussion of *Les Argonautes*. I suppose this is mostly because of the immense scale of *La Montagne Noire*, but *Les Argonautes* is also a substantial and impressive work that can be discussed in detail. See Gérard Gefen, *Augusta Holmès, l'Outrancière* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1987); and Nancy S. Theeman, *The Life and Times of Augusta Holmès*. PhD dissertation (College Park: University of Maryland, 1980).
² For a thorough discussion, see Chapter 2.
values of nineteenth-century France. But the success of Les Argonautes could not have been possible if it were a second-rate work. Baffled critics tried to come to terms with the gender of its composer by referring to it as a “virile” piece of music. Musicians, officials, and critics of Les Argonautes generally reacted with astonishment and discomfort toward the idea of a woman composing seriously on such a huge scale, and many writers criticized her for utilizing excessive performing forces. But the originality and quality of Holmès’s work allowed her to overcome such barriers and become known among many people as a gifted composer.

The Genesis of Les Argonautes

Les Argonautes is important because it brought Holmès unprecedented fame and prestige. This piece was the culmination of a great deal of hard work during a busy and productive period of her life. After beginning serious compositional study with César Franck, in 1875, Holmès spent a great deal of time, especially between 1877 and 1880, focusing on competing for the City of Paris Prize. The quest for this prize reveals that Holmès possessed a strong drive for success. Striving for recognition as a woman composer during the nineteenth century was a difficult goal that was sure to provoke controversy. Holmès’s remarkable perseverance while composing under difficult circumstances allowed her to pave the way for future women composers.

The premiere of Les Argonautes was not the first time that a major work by Holmès had been performed. Between 1871 and 1872, three of her choral works were presented in concert. The most successful of these was her psalm, In Exitu Israel.\(^3\) After this, she felt encouraged to compose operas, but none of her three operatic works (Héro

et Léandre, Lancelot du Lac, and Astarté) met with success. As a result, Holmès seems to have given up on vocal writing temporarily, turning to the composition of instrumental works and beginning her studies with César Franck, in 1875. She also achieved some success as a composer of instrumental works. For example, Jules Pasdeloup, a well-known conductor, performed the Andante movement of her symphony, Orlando Furioso, in 1877. It was only natural that Holmès, as a student of Franck, would prepare for competitions, since many of his students occupied themselves in this manner. Many of his most noted pupils, including Vincent d’Indy, competed favorably for the City of Paris Prize. Also, it is likely that Holmès felt competitive with the males around her and felt the need to prove herself their equal or superior as a composer.4

Whatever the reason, Holmès vigorously threw herself into the task of competing for the City of Paris Prize. Lutèce, a blatant appeal to French national pride, was her first entry in the competition, and it met with instant success. The name of the piece comes from Lutetia, which is the original Gallo-Roman name for Paris, until the third century A.D., when it was called “Parisii.” Many considered this work a “dramatic symphony,” which implied the use of vocal and instrumental forces. It is comprised of three parts, and its plot involves a Gaulois and a Gauloise (male and female French people), their love, and their sacrifice of this love for their country. Its dramatically violent character and frequent references to war brought about the first associations of “virility” with Holmès’s name. The work was quite successful for a first competition – it was awarded second place and performed at Angers in 1884. The joint first-place winners were Théodore Dubois (1827-1934) and Benjamin Godard (1849-1895). Dubois was ten years

older and more experienced than Holmès. Godard was a great violinist whose music seemed to have a special appeal, and his style of composition earned him the nickname, the "musical Alfred de Musset." The results of this competition seemed to bode well for the future, since Holmès lost to two men who had more experience and more established reputations than she did.

During the 1870s, when Holmès was working hard and achieving much success as a composer, she also had quite a busy and turbulent personal life. She met Catulle Mendès around 1869, and they fell in love despite the fact that he was already married to Judith Gautier. From about 1869 through the early 1890s, Holmès became Mendès's mistress and bore at least four children. The only reason that this is significant is that Holmès probably gave birth to three of these children during the 1870s, around the time she was working so hard to establish herself as a serious composer. In fact, her daughter Helyonne was born on September 12, 1879, right between the premières of Lutèce and Les Argonautes. It must have been especially difficult to balance career and small children during the nineteenth century. The fact that the children were born out of wedlock must have caused considerable anxiety as well, since this would normally have caused quite a scandal. Somehow, Holmès managed to keep her life together and maintain a decent reputation as a woman and composer.

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5 Alfred de Musset (1810–1857) was a French writer who studied music as a child and had a great appreciation for its emotional effects. Music plays an important role in his works, and his texts were often conducive to musical settings. See Martin Cooper and Christopher Smith, "Musset, Alfred de," in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 6th ed.
6 Davic, 255.
7 Details concerning Holmès's children are extremely sketchy. Some sources say she had as many as five children, but birth dates are unknown except for that of her daughter, Helyonne. See Theeman. 137-38.
8 Theeman, 70-74.
Les Argonautes was Holmès’s second entry for the City of Paris Competition and she continued writing in a similar manner to Lutèce. Les Argonautes was also considered a dramatic symphony, although some people claimed that it could be considered a grand cantata. This seemed to be the genre in which Holmes could work most successfully. She could compose something larger than mere songs or purely instrumental works, but she did not have to deal with all the traditions and expectations of a full-fledged opera. Like Lutèce, Les Argonautes contains a theme about sacrificing love for glory, although this time Holmès chooses ancient Greek mythology instead of ancient French legend. The work entails a large number of performing forces, including choirs, soloists, and a full palette of orchestral instruments. Les Argonautes was definitely a viable candidate for the City of Paris Prize.

Controversy Over the City of Paris Prize

Only a year after winning second prize for Lutèce, Augusta Holmès entered Les Argonautes in the same competition and was only awarded an honorable mention, losing to Victor Duvernoy (1842–1907), another pupil of Franck. The City of Paris Prize, also referred to as the “Paris Municipal Competition,”9 was a fairly prestigious competition for young composers in France. It was not nearly as prestigious as the Prix de Rome, but many competitors went on to become famous composers. At the time Holmès was competing for the prize, the winner of the competition would receive 10,000 francs and a premiere performance of his or her work by Edouard Colonne and his orchestra. Unlike

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other competitions, however, the committee of judges was not comprised solely of musicians, but also of city officials, who were not necessarily musically trained.\textsuperscript{10}

During Holmès's involvement in the competition of 1880, there were sixty-six entries in the competition. Holmès did not win the competition, receiving merely an honorable mention. But this outcome seemed to be flawed, and a look at the identities and professions of the judges is revealing. All but one of the musicians in the group, which included several well-known composers and two noted conductors, Eduard Colonne and Henri Lamoureux, voted that Holmès should have won first prize.\textsuperscript{11} The fact that all of these musicians voted in favor of Holmès's work says a lot about the quality of her work. Although it is possible that some of these men were swayed by personal feelings toward the composer, it is highly unlikely that they would all have been so. It would have been quite easy for any of them to vote in favor of another contestant if they thought Holmès's work was flawed. Every vote against Holmès on the jury was that of a city official, such as M. Hérold, the Préfet de la Seine, and other municipal councilors. Since these men did not know much about music, other issues probably swayed their votes. It is quite possible that gender biases caused them to vote against the only female composer to enter the contest. Holmès realized the unfairness of the situation and did her best to maintain a positive attitude. In her diary she wrote,

\begin{quote}
I collected nine votes against eleven. The first prize was decreed to \textit{La Tempête}, by Alphonse Duvernoy, and the ex-acquis\textsuperscript{12} was allotted to Guiraud for "The Lost Paradise." Two votes debarred me from acquiring the first distinction, and a single one for the "ex-acquis" prize. I comforted myself for this failure by
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} Theeman, 137.
\textsuperscript{11} Ambroise Thomas, the composer who voted against Holmès, was an admitted enemy of her teacher, César Franck. He also sought to defend French music from any German influence. See the entry for Ambroise Thomas in the \textit{New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians}, 2001.
\textsuperscript{12} The ex-acquis prize was the second prize equivalent.
flattering my soul with the fact that Saint-Saëns, César Franck, Massenet, Octave Fouque, Lascoux, Benjamin Godard, Lamoureux, Colonne, and Emile Perrin had voted in my favor. I had against me Mr. Hérold, prefect of the Seine, Ambroise Thomas, and the city councilmen.\(^\text{13}\)

Although Holmès did not win the City of Paris Prize, many on the jury seemed to realize the unfairness of the situation and Holmès was subsequently given an honorable mention. This was important. Although she did not win the competition, as she would have liked, Holmès and her work received a great deal of valuable public exposure, causing her to receive well-deserved recognition. She became an instant celebrity at home and abroad, but this did not end her difficulties. One of her biggest problems was finding anyone who was willing to perform or publish the work. She says about her struggle for recognition,

> These were not the only tribulations that lay in wait for my unfortunate score. After having asked for a subsidy to carry out a performance in public, which was refused to me, I ran up against the rebuffs of many editors. One day, having almost given up the idea to publish it, I passed in front of the house of M. Grus, whom I hardly knew. I seized nevertheless the chance and prepared to ask him, without preamble, if he would be ready to publish my work. What was my surprise when he answered me simply: Why not? He then took my symphony, published it, and, moreover, submitted it to Pasdeloup who liked it as soon as he had read it through. The latter had it performed at his concert, April 24, 1881 and it achieved, I may say without false modesty, an immense success.\(^\text{14}\)

The performances of *Les Argo\textsc{n}autes* were indeed extremely successful. Four thousand people attended the premiere of the work, and it was widely reviewed. Holmès kept a scrapbook that contained clippings of reviews of all her works. It appears from this scrapbook that *Les Argo\textsc{n}autes* was written about by every music reviewer in Paris, and

\(^{13}\) This entry is cited in the biography of Holmès by Gérard Gefen. See Gefen, 164.

\(^{14}\) Gefen, 164.
also some in London and Angers. Camille Saint-Saëns said (among other things) in his review of the work, "Of its importance and artistic value there can be no doubt at all." Although Holmès had to struggle against considerable odds, she had finally been given the exposure and recognition she deserved.

Pasdeloup himself seemed to believe strongly in the merit of the work. In a letter to the editor of *L'Art Musical*, he expressed his opinion of the piece in a plea for financial support for a second performance.

Monsieur the préfet: After having become acquainted with the score of *Les Argonautes*, of Miss Holmès, I have been convinced that my duty was to allow the public to hear it, because if some parts show the inexperience of its author, the work as a whole denotes the highest melodic and dramatic qualities. The success of the first hearing of Argonautes, proved that I have done well. Unfortunately, the public, always being wary of a new name, has not answered my call. The receipt, which, with the same price for the seats, had produced 10,700 francs with Faure, singing Christmas of Adam, was only 2,700 francs with Argonautes. The expenses of executing the work are 10,000 francs; the loss is thus 7,300 francs.

My financial standing does not enable me to give a second hearing. I thus ask you, Monsieur the préfet, to give me your support to obtain from the town council a sum of 5,000 francs, which will enable me to give a second essential hearing devoted to the successful work of Miss Holmès. I support my request by pointing out the words of the reporter of the town of Paris, Mr. Perrin: The score of Argonautes had obtained nine votes for the prize; an honorable mention was granted to it by 17 votes out of 20 voters. I am the interpreter of the jury, Monsieur the prefect, by bringing the merit of this work to your attention, and its execution in public would be well desired. Approved, etc. Signed Pasdeloup.

His letter is disturbingly revealing of the lack of funding for performances of works by women. If Holmès had not possessed a considerable fortune inherited from her father,

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15 Even today, if one searches for reviews of Holmès's major works, he or she will be more likely to find writings about *Les Argonautes* or *Ode Triomphe* than her other works. I conducted a search using RILM index to nineteenth-century music periodicals, and found several reviews of *Les Argonautes* and none about *La Montagne Noire*. Yet biographies and articles of Holmès written in the twentieth century contain a great deal of information on *La Montagne Noire* and relatively little on *Les Argonautes*.

16 Meyers, 371.

17 Theeman, 135-37.

she probably would not have made it very far as a composer. But Pasdeloup’s letter shows that Holmès’s musical abilities were much appreciated and supported by some musicians.

*Les Argonautes* was successfully performed twice. One reviewer, writing for *L’Art Musical*, said about the premiere: “All musical Paris was there. We will quote haphazardly from memory, Messieurs Ambroise Thomas, Reyer, Guiraud, Delibes, Litolff, Joncières, Lamoureux, etc, etc.”¹⁹ With the creation of *Les Argonautes*, therefore, Holmès managed to become a composer who was beginning to be noticed by important people and to be taken seriously. After this experience, Holmès did not enter the competition for the City of Paris prize again, but moved on to bigger goals.

**Gender and Excess in Critical Reception**

In his biography of Augusta Holmès, Gérard Gefen writes that,

After the triumph of *Les Argonautes*, it was out of the question to confuse Augusta Holmès with these other musicians of the weaker sex, who restricted themselves to write pretty parts for the voice, piano, or choral society of the parish.²⁰

While this is a highly problematic discussion of the musical capabilities of women, it is an accurate description of how people saw Augusta Holmès. Her music became known for its “virility,” characterized by musical and dramatic excess. While many critics, like Gefen, saw this as a positive change from the norm, others reacted with ambivalence, or were harshly critical of this “virility” in a work by a woman. Holmès’s heavy use of orchestral instruments, especially brass and percussion, and extreme registers throughout

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²⁰ It is striking that this quote comes from a relatively modern source. Gérard Géfen. *Augusta Holmès, l’Outrancière* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1987), 168. Holmès, her talents, and her accomplishments seem to be targets for gender stereotyping even today.
instrumental and vocal parts were all traits seen as "virile," and were the most frequent targets of criticism. Many writers also associated these characteristics with Wagner, and, of course, used this as a reason to complain about Holmès's music. Above all, it seemed that people felt puzzled by, and sometimes uncomfortable with, Holmès's musical style and her heavy use of supposedly masculine musical traits.  

A widely quoted review of Les Argonautes by Camille Saint-Saëns embodies the ambivalent feelings shared by many people concerning virility in music associated with Holmès and other women.

Women are curious when they attempt art seriously: they seem preoccupied above all to making us forget that they are women and to show an overflowing virility, without thinking that it is precisely this preoccupation which reveals the woman. Like children, the women do not know of obstacles; and their will breaks all. Miss Holmès does well for a woman, but she is an extremist. In her music, the brass explodes like fireworks, tonalities clash, the voices forget all about their natural registers and are strained to the breaking point, while every possible effect is extracted from the various instruments, and side-drums, cymbals, and harps engage in a mad dance in which even the ophicleide joins in! ... Warmest congratulations, ... but next time, for heaven's sake, not quite so much trumpet!  

It should be noted that Saint-Saëns was one of Holmès's greatest personal admirers. He was said to be in love with her and even asked her to marry him. It is logical, therefore, to assume that his personal feelings may have prevented him from making an unbiased assessment of the work. Nevertheless, his feelings about women and excess in music were typical for the time. Like many other male musicians and critics, he seems to be obsessed with the question of gender. He also stated that in most poetic works everything is sacrificed for love, but in Les Argonautes the opposite is true. It must have been

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21 Pasler, 19.
extremely difficult for a composer such as Holmès to have to deal with rejected or would-be lovers judging and reviewing her musical works. Since it was said that many other noted musicians were in love with Holmès, she probably dealt with this problem quite frequently. Male composers never really had to face this obstacle, since there were no powerful female music critics or judges with whom to contend.

But many other people found Holmès's use of excessive orchestration and range problematic. Writers who were not personally biased often criticized her work for the same kinds of things as Saint-Saëns. P. Henri, a reviewer writing for *L'Art Musical*, criticized the fact that the heavy orchestration tended to drown out the voices of the singers.

It should also be said that the orchestration crushed the singing and the listener seizes the direction of the words with difficulty. We must formulate the truth before being critical. A considerable number of musicians have also noticed these faults. We will add that they have unanimously declared the orchestration rich and brilliant.\(^{23}\)

When discussing a performance of *Les Argonautes* given by the Concerts Populaires, Philibert de Chalarieu, another writer for *L'Art Musical*, found the vocal parts problematic.

This music, Wagnerian of form, is extremely difficult to sing, not only because of that, but because Holmès runs through the complete singer's register in a short period of time, with most serious intensity; there is, moreover, the continual jumps of octaves.\(^{24}\)

It seems that Holmès was utilizing a style that was somewhat different from what people were used to hearing. She was a dynamic and creative composer who enjoyed exploiting the orchestra and singers to their full potentials. One could probably argue that these

\(^{23}\) Henri, 129.  
techniques were influenced by her admiration for Wagner, but this is only a small part of why she composed the way she did. Since her earliest days as a composer (and as a person), Holmès had always been a dramatic person who threw herself into various causes. Her works and songs were dramatic from the beginning, and she had a taste for bellicose, violent music. One of the best examples of this is her song, "Vengeance," written during the 1870s, when she was emotionally involved in the Franco Prussian War (see Ex. 1). The violent rhythms and huge range of the chords in the song perfectly characterize the turbulence and anger incited by war. Many people loved Holmès for her dramatic personality and ability to create interest and excitement. These personal characteristics were probably carried over into her large-scale works, where they were exaggerated by the plethora of performing forces made available.

Some writers seemed eager to find a male figure for whom to credit the production of Les Argonautes. Perhaps they felt uncomfortable with the idea of a woman producing such wild and violent music. Or maybe the idea of a woman being responsible for a dramatic production in general was a strange thought. One reviewer for L'Art Musical writes,

The conscientious and hard working Mlle. Holmès ardently wished to make her score heard with the public. She has achieved this through will and patience. Mr. Pasdeloup agreed to produce a work by this young composer. He could not have ended his concert season better. One thus owes him thanks.²⁵

Many people praised the work, however. Their criticisms of its forceful and dense orchestration and part writing are often the only negative things they have to say about the work. The same critic, after providing a detailed summary of the work praising it, offers his general opinion.

²⁵ Henri, 130.
In short, *Les Argonautes* forms a very homogeneous work. It is a brilliant beginning. Miss Holmès has the right to be satisfied with this deserved success. He also goes on to praise the originality and dramatic nature of the work, while criticizing the performers, which seemed to be a frequent complaint among reviewers.

It is true that the work was not lacking in originality. *Les Argonautes* has excited a sharp curiosity in the listeners before they hear it. Sunday’s audience was greatly interested, and this première representation has all the clarity that Miss Holmès could desire. Its goal is thus reached.

We regret only that the execution could have been better. We still regret that Paris does not have more theaters where promising young composers can be judged: the concert alone is not enough.\(^{26}\)

In general, people found Holmès’s music interesting and exciting, especially after hearing *Les Argonautes*. The work did not fail to make an impression on anyone. Holmès’s bold style and original use of range and orchestration had different effects on different people. Some found it Wagnerian, while others found it strange and possibly even offensive coming from the pen of a woman. Despite all this, most people seemed to find the work new and exciting. It was received enthusiastically at its premiere, unlike some of Holmès’s previous works. Despite all the problems and controversy surrounding the competition and reception of the work, it was a success. *Les Argonautes* was a promising beginning for a young composer like Holmès and seemed to bode well for a successful career.

\(^{26}\) Henri, 129-30.
Chapter Four: Les Argonautes: Power, Conquest, and Love

Les Argonautes was one of the most well received and successful pieces written by Augusta Holmès. It became internationally acclaimed because of its bold, original orchestral and vocal writing, and its interesting subject matter. Les Argonautes was based on the popular Greek myth of Jason, Medea and the Argonauts, which, since its inception, had been frequently rewritten and used as the subject of a wide range of operatic and theatrical works. The subject of Les Argonautes was one of an interesting variety of topics and stories that Augusta Holmès used when she composed her large-scale vocal works. Beneath such seeming variance, however, lies common thematic material. This will become obvious if one compares the subject matter of this work with that of her opera, La Montagne Noire. Both works deal with the desire to fight for one’s homeland and achieve glory in battle, as well as with the power of romantic love. The narrative scheme of these two pieces both fit into the category of the so-called “soldier and the exotic,”¹ in which a man on a quest comes across a lovely woman from a strange local, and cannot help but fall in love with her. Dramatically and musically, the plot of Les Argonautes involves a conflict between the so-called “masculine and feminine spheres.”² In the original story of Jason and the Argonauts, Jason cannot complete his heroic mission without the help of Medea, in the work by Holmès, he cannot seem to achieve his goals with her around. In Les Argonautes, Holmès took away some of her heroine’s power (and also her cruel side), making Medea less of a complex character, and

augmenting the importance of Jason and his heroic deeds. By doing so Holmès perpetuated masculine values, and was therefore able to augment her own power as a woman composer.

**Part I: The Legacy of Jason, Medea, and the Golden Fleece**

By utilizing the story of Jason and the Argonautes, Holmès showed herself to be a courageous woman who was not afraid to align herself with one of the oldest and most enduring legends known to the Western world. The story of Jason, the Argonauts, and Medea has inspired writers, authors, and composers for hundreds of years. Since the seventeenth century, for example, there have been twenty operas based upon this story.\(^3\) The twentieth century especially saw a resurgence of interest in this ancient myth. But Jason’s quest and the heroic deeds of the Argonauts were not really the inspirations for revivals of the tale. Rather, it was the complex and double-sided character of Medea that people found fascinating – an aspect of the story that Holmès glossed over altogether in *Les Argonautes*. A look at other treatments of the myth will make it obvious that Holmès had a much different agenda from most people when she set out to rework Jason and the Golden Fleece.

The story of Jason and the Argonauts appealed to a great many writers from a very early date. The first known writer of the story was Pindar, in the sixth century B.C. The next, and most famous version was that written by Apollonius of Rhodes, who wrote the *Argonautica* in approximately the third century B.C.\(^4\) Artists from ancient times also frequently depicted Medea on vases, Roman gemstones, and wall murals among other

\(^3\) Philip Mayerson, *Classical Mythology in Literature, Art, and Music* (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman and Company, 1971), 354

items. One can even find pictures of Medea killing her children on Roman funerary monuments. Ancient writers were especially fascinated with the character of Medea. Her complex, multi-sided personality was conducive to a great deal of literary freedom and her character can be found in many different dramas and writings. For example, Sophocles and Seneca portray her as an evil witch living among snakes. Ibycus and Simonides, on the other hand, see her as a sort of victim who marries Achilles after her death and rests in the Elysian Plain.  

Euripides, whose play *Medea* was performed in Athens in 431 B.C., dwells on Medea’s revenge and goes into quite a bit of detail about how she killed Glauce and King Creon with a poisoned robe, and later murdered her own children. Ovid offers two contrasting accounts of Medea. In *Metamorphoses*, he writes that she is more of a witch than a woman, whereas she is more of a human being in *Heriodes*, which is a set of fictitious letters from mythological women to their husbands and lovers. In this work, Medea pleads her case as an unfortunate wife who has been abandoned by her husband, Jason. (There is also another such letter from Hypsipyle to Jason in this collection.) This work influenced Chaucer’s *Legend of a Good Woman*, in which he portrays Jason as a sort of devourer of women and Medea and as a martyr.  

The fact that Medea was so widely portrayed may have meant that her character had special significance to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Her multi-dimensional character with its semi-heroic and destructive sides may have been representative of the society’s view of women.

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6 Mayerson, 350-53.
Eugène Delacroix

Medea\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{7} Painting copied from Huyghe René, Delacroix, 56 Color Plates, 405 Black and White Illustrations, translated by Johathan Griffin (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1963) 165.
During the centuries that followed, Jason, the Argonauts, and Medea were portrayed in the visual, literary, and musical arts. Although there were relatively few depictions in the visual arts, the myth was painted by a widely varying group. Pesellino, a fifteenth-century Florentine, painted the tale of the Argonauts in a "continuous style," with the same character repeated over and over again in the picture. (Such techniques were often used in paintings of fairy tales.) The most famous painting of Medea was by Eugène Delacroix, a French Romantic painter, who painted a canvas of Medea and her children inspired by the Euripides story of the murder of her children.\textsuperscript{8} Other painters who dealt with this story were Anselm Feuerbach, a German academician; F.A. Sandys, a pre-Raphaelite painter; and Eduardo Paolozzy, whose 1964 abstract art sculpture of metal tubes and wires was entitled "Medea."\textsuperscript{9}

The story of Jason and the Golden Fleece has appealed to many dramatic and musical writers since ancient times. In 1635, the story was dramatized for the first time by Pierre Corneille, and in 1693, Gustave Charpentier wrote an opera based upon Corneille’s libretto.\textsuperscript{10} Between this time and the twentieth century, however, there was not much interest in the myth. Franz Grillparzer, a renowned Austrian dramatist, wrote a version of the myth in 1822 entitled Die Goldene Vlies. Shakespeare alludes to this story in a number of his works. For example, in the Merchant of Venice he compares Portia’s hair to the golden fleece, which "makes many Jasons come in quest of her." Even in the twentieth century, many authors made use of the tale for creative material. In 1946, two different writers came up with interesting versions of the story. The American

\textsuperscript{8}Wechsler, 69.
\textsuperscript{9}Clauss, 5.
\textsuperscript{10}Clauss, 2.
writer Robinson Jeffers used the myth as a basis for his poem, *Solstice* (1935), in which he modifies the story to take place in a deserted coast of California. Here a woman named Madrone Bothwell murders her children so that her former husband cannot obtain custody of them. The modern version by the French writer, Jean Anouilh, takes up the story after Jason and Medea have been together for ten years. The middle-aged Jason wants a calm life, and to him Creon's daughter represents purity and simplicity. Medea is portrayed as a gypsy figure in this story, and she leads an exotic life in a caravan. These writings all provide interesting versions of the myth but most seem to be interested more in Medea and her relationship with Jason than with Jason’s heroic journey.¹¹

Medea's story has been used in many other interesting ways in the twentieth century, especially in theater and film. Euripides's version of the myth has been recreated on stage several times during the past hundred years. "A Dream of Passion," a film from 1978, directed by Jules Dassin, is an interesting commentary on society, using the story of Medea as its foundation. In the film, an actress playing Euripides' version of Medea confronts another woman who has been convicted of killing her children. The story of Medea has also been used to embody the struggles and sufferings of several cultures and groups. In 1988, Brendan Kennelly's *Medea* used the story to explore conflicts between the English and the Irish. In 1933, actress Agnes Straub uses the story to make a statement about Nazi politics. The most interesting example of a manipulation of the story to suit modern agendas was its use by a homosexual theater group in Seattle in 1991. In this version of the play, a man played Medea and a woman played Jason.

¹¹ Mayerson, 353.
Clearly this story is flexible enough to fit the agenda of many different societies and cultural sub-groups.\textsuperscript{12}

The story of Medea has been a particularly popular musical subject for centuries. The myth has been the subject of at least thirty operas, twelve from the twentieth century. The most famous twentieth-century operatic version of the story was \textit{Médée}, written in 1938 by Darius Milhaud. Numerous ballet productions have been based upon this story as well. In 1763, choreographer Jean Georges Noverre, the "Father of the Modern Ballet," became famous because of his ballet \textit{Médée et Jason}. In the twentieth century, the most famous version of this tale was Samuel Barber's \textit{Medea: Cave of the Heart}. This was later titled \textit{Medea's Meditation and Dance of Vengeance} and was danced by Martha Graham in 1946. The story of Medea and Jason is one that inspired many composers from the Baroque to the twentieth century. It was a versatile and fascinating topic that Holmès, among others, must have felt would inspire interesting compositional techniques. The fact that Holmès neglects to portray the evil side of Medea's personality sets her apart from other writers, composers, and artists.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Part II: Temptation and Sacrifice: Holmès's Transformation of a Myth}

Some scholars, such as Marcia Citron and Suzanne Cusick, have revealed that women composers encounter considerable difficulties when working within a musical tradition defined by males. Over the course of hundreds of years, male composers have created plot structures and character types in their works that became established

\textsuperscript{12} Clauss, 4
\textsuperscript{13} Clauss, 4.
tradi\-tions.\textsuperscript{14} Because of this, a woman composer must either utilize characterizations of females created by men, or create her own separate tradition, in which she defines her character types against those by men. Whether she internalizes these stereotypes or rejects them, she is forced to deal with them in some way.\textsuperscript{15} Augusta Holmèes is one such woman composer who was forced to negotiate with such issues in her works.

As Holmèes created the libretto for \textit{Les Argonautes}, she took considerable liberties with the plot and major characters of the myth. Many adventures and significant events are omitted or mentioned only in passing in Holmèes’s musical work. The only remaining elements of the original plot are an encounter with the “sirens” (the women of Lemnos in the original story), and the fact that Jason and Medea meet and fall in love. In other words, Holmèes omits all the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts except for those having to do with the temptations of women and the struggle to overcome them.

Holmèes’s version of this myth becomes primarily concerned with the struggle between the conquest of glory and higher ideals, and the temptation of women and romantic love.

As the dramatic symphony opens, the Argonauts are preparing to leave Iolkos to begin their long and difficult journey. The people of Iolkos praise the Argo and its sailors, shouting, “Glory... Here Castor! Pollux! Orphée! Hercules!” and especially Jason, whom they declare to be the “most heroic of all.” Jason serves as a kind of motivational speaker for his group of Argonauts, urging them to head out to find the Golden Fleece and all the glory it carries with it. In the original story, Jason is the rightful heir to the throne of Iolkos, but his uncle, Pelias, will not acknowledge this fact.

\textsuperscript{14} For a detailed discussion of gender characterizations within Mozart’s operas, see Marcia Citron, \textit{Gender and the Musical Canon}, rev. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 71-74.

\textsuperscript{15} For an astute discussion of female authorship, see Suzanne Cusick, “Thinking from Women’s Lives: Francesca Caccini after 1627,” \textit{Musical Quarterly} 77 (1993), 484.
Pelias was supposed to rule the kingdom only until Jason was old enough to assume the position, but when Jason tries to claim his rightful title, his uncle orders him to undertake an epic journey to prove his worth. At this point, he assembles a ship and a crew, which includes Argos, the builder of the ship, hence the name “Argonauts.”

The second part of the piece, “The Voyage,” begins with some allusion to adventures at sea, but soon moves into a description of an encounter with the “sirens.” In the original myth, however, a great deal of writing is devoted to the many strange and interesting adventures of Jason and his crew. The movement of Holmès’s piece opens with rumbling thunder, flashing lightening, “shrill, piercing cries” of marine birds, and “skies full of fires.” Instead of an evil creature lurking in the background, however, the sirens soon emerge, singing about oblivion, urging the Argonauts to forget their troubles. These “sirens” are a direct allusion to the women of Lemnos, who, in the original story, inhabit an island without men, and attempt with some success to get the men of the Argos to stay with them. In the story, Jason succumbs to temptation and will only leave after much prodding from Hercules. But in the opera, Jason does not have an affair with the sirens’ leader. Rather, he stands strong in the face of temptation, urging his fellow Argonauts to remember what they had originally set out to do. “Do not listen!” he cries. “Do not fall for the charms of women! Oh weak human hearts!” Although the sirens try to convince him otherwise, Jason persists with his arguments and it is he, not Hercules, who eventually persuades the other men to continue in search of the Golden Fleece. This

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part of the work portrays Jason as a man of strong character who values honor and glory above all else.  

In the third part of Holmès’s work, Jason is sorely tested when he encounters Medea. When he arrives in Colchis, the story is severely altered and he does not meet the king at all but another group of women. The movement begins with a lyrical dance-like tune, and the women soon enter and sing a sort of mystical incantation while dancing. “Mingle the amber with the water! Dance! Tear off the transparent flax! And without veils in the night, in the brown night under the blade the moon turns! Throw in the magical flames, the basket the incense, the powerful perfumes!” These lyrics suggest an aura of mystery surrounding the land of Medea. This atmosphere provides a strong contrast from the world of Jason and the Argonauts, in which everyone is focused on concrete goals and lofty ideals. Soon Medea enters, singing a prayer to the witch, Hécate. Although the text of this work implies that Medea has some sort of dealings with magic and sorcery, we never see her use such powers in the musical work. Although she tells Jason of the challenges that he must overcome in order to obtain the fleece, her main power over Jason seems to be that of seduction. He exults over the “sublime gold lights” in her hair, and her “figure profound and pure …” Medea is a much more sympathetic character in this work by Holmès. After agreeing to flee with Jason, she cries, “Oh infamous treason! Cheap cowardice of the woman, who frees any honor for one hour of love! My father in white hair! Ocolchos! My fatherland!”

Jason is also portrayed more sympathetically in this work than in the myth. In Part 4, his abandonment of Medea is seen as the sacrifice of romantic love for supposedly

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17 Mayerson, 344-45
higher ideals. He begs the gods to help him get over Medea, while spilling forth a substantial résumé of his accomplishments as a hero. At the end of this, he declares to Medea, “I don’t love you. I love only glory!” Medea whines that she has given up her life and left her homeland for Jason, but he does not listen, as a chorus invites him to come and be king once he has conquered the Golden Fleece. Jason seems truly happy at the end of the work, exclaiming, “Ah! What an unutterable light fills up the summer sky!” Jason is one of the only heroes in a major nineteenth-century musical works to escape from the clutches of an exotic woman without any bloodshed involved. Mirko, Don José, and others would certainly envy Jason. Meanwhile, Medea too can escape unharmed.

In the Greek myth, however, Jason treats Medea atrociously. Upon arriving in Colchis, Jason discovered that he had a series of impossible obstacles from which to escape. The king, Aeetes, said that before Jason could have the Golden Fleece, he had to yoke two bronze-footed, fire-breathing bulls to a plow and sow the teeth of a dragon. These teeth would, when sown, turn into armed men who would try and attack him. At this point, Medea, the daughter of King Aeetes and a talented sorceress, met Jason. She was quite taken with him and wanted to be his wife. Jason agreed to marry her if she promised to help him obtain the Golden Fleece. Through a series of magic ointments and strategies, she helped Jason successfully defeat all obstacles placed before him. When

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18 Mirko from La Montagne Noire, Don José from Carmen, and others like them were victims of the femme fatele character. For a detailed discussion of women in exoticism, see Chapter 6 of this document. For more details about women and exoticism, see Mary Ann Smart, Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); Naomi André, “Veiled Messages and Encoded Meanings: Exoticism, Verdi, and Women’s Lower voices,” Ars Lyrica 11 (2000), 2-8; James Parakilas, “The Soldier and the Exotic: Operatic Variations on a Theme of Racial Encounter,” Opera Quarterly 3 (1994); and Susan McClary, Georges Bizet: Carmen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
Medea’s father became angry at Jason’s accomplishment, Medea again came to the rescue, helping Jason make a quick getaway.\(^{19}\)

Medea continued to rescue Jason and help him attain his goals on the journey back from Colchis and also upon their arrival in Iolkos. One can safely assume that without Medea, Jason would never have returned from his epic journey in search of the Golden Fleece. She even saw to the death of Jason’s uncle upon their return. After the death of Pelias, Jason and Medea escaped to Corinth where they had two children and lived a relatively happy life for about ten years. When Jason decided to leave Medea for Glauke, the daughter of the king of Corinth, Medea became consumed by wrath and jealousy. She sent Glauke a robe that would eat away her skin and kill her. When the king tried to help her free herself from the robe, he too was killed. Medea then murdered her own children to avenge herself and, some sources say, escaped into the sky in a fiery chariot.\(^{20}\)

It is interesting that Holmès chose to alter the myth of Jason and Medea in such an unusual manner. Most depictions of this story seem to involve a fascination with the character of Medea and her bipolar personality disorder. But Holmès seemed to know that writing controversial or morbid subject matter would not help her achieve prestige and popularity as a composer. Rather, she exploited the heroic aspects of the tale to create a work that would go over well with audiences and critics. The subversion of the feminine sphere and the sacrifice of one’s own personal relationship for one’s country or

\(^{19}\) Burns, 61.
\(^{20}\) Burns, 61-61.
for a greater good were themes that would have been well-received during Holmès’s time.\textsuperscript{21}

**Part III: Musical Portrayals of Jason, the Argonautes, and Medea**

*Les Argonautes* is comprised of four parts, which contain highly contrasting music and a great deal of tonal shifting and chromaticism. Different sections do not always have clearly defined boundaries, but seem to flow loosely together most of the time. Despite this somewhat chaotic and changeable structure, the work as a whole is unified by certain tonal structures and motivic material. It seems significant that the work begins and ends in C major. During the course of the work, keys shift drastically and chromaticism often takes over the tonal language of the piece, but it is somehow comforting to know that the music will eventually arrive back in C major. This return at the end seems to represent Jason’s mental return to his previous honor and moral values.\textsuperscript{22}

Several unifying motives can be heard throughout the dramatic symphony, and many of the individual movements contain formal structures that are somewhat cohesive. For example, the fanfare motives at the beginning of the piece return in the third movement when Jason, who has fallen for Medea, remembers the real purpose of his journey (see Ex. 4). The first and second movements of the piece have loosely defined AAB structures in which several motives are well developed, while an overall sense of

\textsuperscript{21} For a more thorough discussion of nineteenth-century France and the reception of various kinds of works, see Chapters Two, Three, and Five of this document.

\textsuperscript{22} I was unable to locate an orchestral score of *Les Argonautes*. Although some sources say that such a score can be found at the Bibliothèque Nationale, the librarians there could not find one in their holdings. I based my musical analysis upon a version of *Les Argonautes* for chorus with piano accompaniment in *The Women Composers Collection* (microform) from the holdings of the Women Composers Collection, the Music Library, University of Michigan (Woodbridge Connecticut: Research Publications, 1998), reel 07.
stability prevails. This may represent the fact that Jason is still in his right mind during these two movements, and can steer his crew in the right direction, even when the Sirens tempt them. The third movement contains two main sections, and the fourth movement a somewhat chaotic assortment of motivic material from the other three movements. One can easily imagine why this piece, with its loosely defined structures and heavily chromatic melodic and harmonic material might have been called Wagnerian.

The music of *Les Argonautes* reinforces and heightens contrasts between male and female characters in the opera, and also between the “masculine and feminine spheres” in which they operate. *Les Argonautes* is described as a “Dramatic Symphony”
by a majority of scholars and commentators. It consists of four major parts that utilize both soloists and chorus. Holmès composed the work on such a large scale that some called it almost a grand cantata. It employs a huge number of performing forces, extremely wide registers within the instrumental and vocal parts, heavy chromaticism, and a loosely flowing formal structure. In general, the first and fourth parts of the work, which deal with the glory and triumph of Jason and the Argonauts, contain music that is extremely different from that of the middle two movements, which deal with various temptresses.

The opening movement, entitled "Jason," is a dynamic, constantly changing movement, in which Jason and the Argonauts are to depart from Iolcos to the cheers of an enthusiastic crowd. The movement starts with a fanfare-like passage on a b-flat diminished chord, which is followed by rippling chromatic runs in the bass parts. Although the key signature is technically C major, the diminished chords and the chromaticism make the tonality seem very unstable. Throughout the movement, the key signature is unreliable and harmonies constantly shift. The chorus enters for the first time singing "Eia!" on a staggered series of minor thirds, with a turbulent bass line that either trills or plays chromatic runs. Soon these cries are uttered closer together and hover on f-sharp diminished chords, heightening the expectation that something is about to happen. After more chromatic riffs, the mood shifts as the key moves to A major, the time signature to 9/8 time, and the chorus begins to sing homophonically about breaking the ropes and pulling up the anchor. The shift in the time signature and key give the listener the feel of a rocking sea. As the tenors urge the crew to navigate toward beautiful faraway shores, the music becomes simple and lilting, like a sailor's dance, in A-flat
major. During this relatively calm section, however, sporadic chromatic runs in the lower parts maintain a feeling of tension and excitement as the Argonautes prepare for their long journey.

As the men stop singing and a young woman takes over, it is interesting to note that the music changes suddenly. Although frequently diminished chords are still utilized, the key has shifted to d minor and the musical mood has changed. The woman has leaping, trilling parts that are relatively stable compared to the previous music. Her part leaps up the span of an octave and is decorated with appoggiaturas and trills. While the instrumental accompaniment in the rest of the movement is wild, scattered, and heavily chromatic, the instruments accompanying the soprano have calm passages that utilize more traditional voice-leading techniques. Gradually, the woman's melody line slips into triplet patterns – another characteristic that differentiates it from the rest of the movement. This slippery triplet movement contains some resemblances to Yamina's music in *La Montagne Noire*.23 As the chorus returns, the music changes sharply, moving back into 12/8 time with G-major fanfare-like passages in the voices, as they announce the arrival of the Argonautes. The key constantly shifts as the arrival of the heroes is anticipated. It is clear in this section that Holmès distinguishes the voices of the women from those of the men.

As the movement continues, it is characterized mostly by quick, running bass accompaniment, rapid key and meter changes, and more fanfare-like vocal parts, especially when the names of the heroes are announced. As the arrival of Jason is anticipated, the key of D major is established. Although there is a great deal of

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23 For an example of Yamina’s music, see Chapter 6, page 17.
chromaticism used right before Jason enters, his lines are established firmly in the key of D major, soon moving to G minor, but very stable nonetheless. His entrance also brings about a time signature of 4/4, and his lines are long, regular, flowing. As he describes his heroic deeds, the instrumental parts underneath frequently shift and change character with each line. Sometimes they play chromatic runs, sometimes trills, sometimes harmonically shifting arpeggios. After he announces that the quest is for the Golden Fleece, the chorus comes in again briefly before a long sustained passage of instrumental trills in C major. Over this thirty-second-note accompaniment, Jason returns again, with whole- and half-notes, as he sings about the Golden Fleece. His voice is a source of stability in a chaotic musical passage. He continues to sing in this style, effectively establishing his character, until the chorus comes in again. They return to music much like that of the beginning of the movement, with a dazzling chromatic finish.

The second part of the symphony, "Le Voyage," establishes a strong contrast between Jason and the Argonauts, and the Sirens. It begins in A major with simple, wave-like sixteenth-note passages that are often staggered between upper and lower instrumental voices. As the introduction progresses, the harmonies land on diminished chords and arpeggiations, and the texture becomes more and more chaotic as a storm approaches. Before Jason's entrance, the time signature changes every two measures and the harmonies remain stagnant with the upper parts holding long trilled notes. Jason orders them ahead in a solemn, declamatory phrase, and they answer as the music becomes increasingly chromatic. Short, separated, descending runs in the instruments punctuate the verses of the chorus. The singers had been singing homophonically but suddenly have staggered entrances that outline a G diminished chord as each of their lines
moves down chromatically. As Jason urges them ahead, the music moves back to C major as he talks about the Golden Fleece. One might say that Jason is a stabilizing musical influence, just as he is upon his crew.

Jason is suddenly interrupted by the sound of more diminished chords and thirty-second note sextuplets signifying the entrance of the sirens. The song of the first siren is distinguished by its shifting harmonies and the quirky rhythms of its motive (an eighth note followed by a dotted eighth note and a sixteenth note leading to a dotted half note in 6/8 time). Her lines are languorous and are accompanied by slithering descending runs in the instruments. The chorus of sirens that briefly accompanies her sings lines that do not move either in terms of range or rhythm. As the siren continues with her song, she is accompanied by chords in voices and instruments that are short and simple. The melody of the siren consists of only a couple of motives that continuously change key. When the Argonauts come in, they sing in imitation of the style of the sirens. Their lines have become much longer and constricted, without much instrumental accompaniment. One can hear, as it were, the brain activity of the Argonauts grinding to a halt.

Suddenly Jason enters in a series of agitated sixteenth notes that strongly contrast with the music of the sirens. The sirens continue to sing their lulling tune, moving through to the key of A-flat major. Their lines have become more condensed, however, and employ quite a few leaps. When Jason comes in again, it is an even more agitated passage, which seems out of character for him. He moves down chromatically in a series of unaccompanied sixteenth notes, triplets, and eighth notes that seem chaotic. The siren responds by breaking into a graceful waltz-like theme. Beautifully lyrical passages such as these allow Holmès to show off her skill as a composer of songs. The sirens answer
homophonically and the Argonautes answer with lines like Jason’s that ascend. They have been convinced to stay with the sirens.

But Jason now enters again, reminding them of their duty and the quest at hand. His lines here are more cajoling and persuasive, as if he has learned how to convince people from the sirens. He sings a series of lyrical, mellifluous lines with simple accompaniment, like those of the sirens. He employs a loose meter, alternating between triple and duple meter, and holds notes out for longer durations. Underneath his long lines, however, are choppy, spaced chromatic passages that belie the urgency of his words. The Argonauts realize their mistake and sing “oh god, oh god,” in a similar fashion. Jason brings things back to the stable key of E-flat major and all is well again. The Argonauts sing of their journey and the glory that is to come, while sixteenth notes in the bass parts spur them along.

The third part of Les Argonautes, “Médée,” can be subdivided into three main sections. The first is a “Danse Magique,” or “Magic Dance” (see Ex. 5). This is a smooth and elegant section, containing more of Holmès’s fabulously crafted melodic lines. It begins with a simple accompaniment figure in the bass, followed by a descending sixteenth-note melody line. This melody is characterized by frequent trills and grace notes that, like the young girl’s melody in the first part of the piece, make it feel quaint and reminiscent of an earlier era. The sixteenth-note runs outline a harmonic minor scale with the augmented-second interval emphasized. This also gives the passage a subtly exotic feel, especially since the interval is played by the first grace note and first
Example 5:

Danse Magique                        Auguste Holmes

Taken from The Woman Composers Collection (microform): from the holdings of the Woman Composers Collection, the Music Library, University of Michigan. Woodbridge, CT: Research Publications, 1998.

Un poco ritenuto

Piano

note of the passage. Later in this section, the intervals between notes of a tritone are similarly emphasized. By utilizing these harmonic intervals, Holmès is subtly setting an exotic atmosphere. This section of the piece is constantly shifting. The listener is often surprised when he or she figures out where the harmonies are leading. For example, starting in measure 27, the harmonies move from an A-minor chord to a B-flat-major chord to a D-sharp-minor chord back to A minor. This constant harmonic shifting makes up for the fact that the texture is very simple. Rhythmic patterns shift as well, and the rhythms of the dance seem to be constantly changing. Unexpected trills and rolled

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24 For a discussion of exoticism, see Chapter 4 on La Montagne Noire.
chords also provide subtle diversion from the norm. This dance section sets up an aura of stateliness and at the same time instability.

The second section is an introduction to Medea. She begins with a prayer to Hécate. Her vocal lines start up in a high register and plunge down in a graceful and lyrical manner. She begins singing with a tremolo accompaniment that occasionally breaks off unexpectedly. At one point the bass line doubles her line in major seconds. As in the first section, one frequently does not quite know where the lines are moving harmonically. Her lines are often decorated by ornaments and trills, and when she sings of dancing, the chorus comes in again to sing in a whirling manner. Medea's lines are much less constricted than those of the chorus. While her parts leap and smoothly flow up and down through the registers, the dancing chorus often hovers on the same few notes. Medea is therefore portrayed musically as a strong and interesting character (see Ex. 6).

Suddenly, the meter changes to 6/8 time, and Jason and the Argonauts make an appearance into the scene, singing "Eiao" to a simple accompaniment. When Jason enters, he does so on a dominant-seventh chord in C major, heightening expectation in a calm and stable key. His vocal lines are longer and more flowing than they have been so far, as he leaps up entire octaves to a high G, which he holds for an entire measure. Their love duet combines many themes and techniques utilized in previous movements. In this section, Holmès's talent as a composer of songs becomes obvious. The duet between the two lovers is interesting and engaging, providing ample melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic twists and turns.
Example 6: 
Medea's Song from Les Argonautes

The fourth movement signifies a return to stability and order. It begins squarely in the key of E-flat with dense chords and quick descending runs in the instruments. Lavish fanfare passages alternate with chromatic runs as Jason fights against his love for Medea. As he comes closer to resolving the dilemma, his vocal lines again become wide and flowing, and short, punctuated eighth and sixteenth notes and chromatic pedals reveal underlying turbulence. Jason and Medea modulate through a variety of keys, finally landing on C major as Jason recalls all his past glories. A return to a C-major tonality after a progression through a series of keys often represented a peaceful resolution to a problem in eighteenth-century operas of Gluck and others. Holmès ends the piece in a stable and triumphant manner to match the victory of its hero.25

The music Holmès created for Les Argonautes is among her finest, and it deserves the recognition it received from critics and audiences. Holmès was able to make her characters interesting through diverse and colorful compositional techniques. In this work, Holmès proves that she could masterfully utilize large-scale performing forces as well as popular Greek myths. Her reworking of the tale of Jason and the Golden Fleece successfully exploits the sentiments and tastes of her time, when such works were praised for being “virile.” Holmès did not choose to provide an account of Medea’s magical powers or complex personality, but instead focused on the heroic deeds of Jason. By lessening the power and interest of her heroine, Holmès was able to augment her own fame and prestige as a woman composer.

25 Pasler, 18.
Chapter Five: *La Montagne Noire: Genesis and Reception*

After ten years of hard work and persistence, Holmès managed to convince the musical authorities in Paris that a performance of her opera, *La Montagne Noire*, would be worthwhile. Performances of operas by women composers were extremely rare in France and operatic venues were not eager to stage such works. Holmès wrote *La Montagne Noire* in 1885 and then threw all her energy into attempting to get it performed. The premiere, in 1895, caused quite a sensation, but the opera was not well received by critics or audience members, for several reasons. The libretto and plot were thought to be trite and outdated, and the musical setting too heavy and musical techniques too Wagnerian. Unlike other operas that failed initially, *La Montagne Noire* was never resurrected nor performed again, leaving Holmès to fall into relative obscurity.¹

It is a shame that these few performances of *La Montagne Noire* had to determine the rest of Holmès’s career. As Ethel Smyth states in her book, *A Final Burning of the Boats*, “another opera from her pen might have been a masterpiece.”² If Holmès did not manage to create an operatic masterpiece, it probably had something to do with the fact that she was forced to spread her energy in too many different directions. Not only did she write the libretto and music for the production (a formidable challenge for any composer), but she also had to spend a great deal of effort trying to get the work

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¹ For example, Georges Bizet’s *Carmen* was initially a failure when it was first performed at the Opéra Comique in 1875, and was attacked by critics for being both too Wagnerian and not Wagnerian enough. See Susan McClary. Chapter 6. “The Reception of *Carmen*,” in Georges Bizet: *Carmen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992. I will be referring to *Carmen* throughout this Chapter and the next, since there are many striking parallels between the two works. Not only are the plots alike, but the initial reception and circumstances surrounding the performances and premieres of the two works are similar as well.

performed and overseeing the logistics of the performance. By the time the opera was performed, the musical and thematic material was out of date and seemed boring to audiences. Furthermore, when critics leveled their usual accusations of Wagnerism at the work, Holmès could not recover. The reception and treatment of *La Montagne Noire*, therefore, is revealing. It tells us a great deal about conditions for opera composers, and especially women opera composers, in nineteenth-century France. This society was extremely self-conscious about its own operatic image in relation to Wagner and the Germans, and also in relation to women, and would rather squash the talents of a well-known, successful woman composer, such as Holmès, than acknowledge her efforts as an opera composer.

**Opera Reception in Nineteenth-Century France**

By choosing to compose a major opera in nineteenth-century France, Holmès attempted to accomplish a difficult goal for any French composer. During the nineteenth century, circumstances were extremely unfavorable and difficult for French composers. No musical work was completely safe from loaded criticisms and comparisons to other composers, especially to Germans. During the heyday of Grand Opera, French composers had to compete with Meyerbeer, who dominated the operatic scene. During the late nineteenth century, they found it difficult to compete with and exist next to Wagner, who was a revolutionary figure in the operatic world. He incited strong feeling among many, which were both positive and negative, and other composers were either compared unfavorably with him, or they were scorned for attempting to sound too much like him. Even at the turn of the century, when Holmès’s opera was performed, the music of Wagner was still in the ears of critics and audience members alike. Although
Holmès was extremely successful in getting her work performed, she fared no better than any other French opera composer in terms of the sharp criticisms leveled at her work.

An opera in France in the nineteenth century could only be performed with any degree of success and publicity in two main venues. These were the Académie Nationale de Musique, more commonly known as the Opéra, and the Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique. Composers could also choose to premiere their works in a few other venues outside of Paris in hopes that the publicity would lead to performances in one of the two major venues. One of the most noteworthy of these opera theaters was the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, which many composers used to launch their pieces. Because of efficient railway links to Brussels from France, many French critics attended such premieres, providing composers with well-needed publicity.³

The fact that Holmès managed to get her work performed at the Opéra, and not the Opéra-Comique, was especially unusual and remarkable. Although the French government subsidized both of these establishments, there were major differences between the two. The Opéra was known as a venue that sponsored performances of more established works, almost becoming a canonical force. New composers, even those that were French, found it extremely difficult to find success at the Opéra. Many famous French composers, such as Gounod, failed to secure performances there. The Opéra-Comique, on the other hand, was a relatively open establishment that would often

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sponsor works by newer composers. But a performance at the Opéra was more likely to guarantee success. The Opéra-Comique introduced many works, but few of them caught on with the public. This was probably due to the cheap manner of staging and performing the works at this venue. The Opéra, however, was quite the opposite, and the struggle for a performance there was worthwhile. The administration of the Opéra ensured that works were staged and performed on a lavish scale. No expense was spared in terms of scenery, costumes, and all other aspects of the opera. Often, the best singers and conductors would be utilized in such a production. Initially, therefore, it appeared as if Holmès had conquered the brutally competitive world of opera in France, and managed to secure what others did not. But while she may have succeeded initially, she was not so lucky when it came to the difficult world of criticism in France.5

Ironically, Holmès’s initial success, and her acceptance to the Opéra, may have had something to do with the fact that she and her compositional style were considered Wagnerian. Despite bad feelings about Wagner in France, he steadily became more and more popular during the later half of the nineteenth century. Many French people undertook pilgrimages to Wagner’s special theater in Bayreuth, just as Holmès had done many years earlier. In 1876, fifty-two French people attended the first festival there and 114 traveled to the second one in 1882. The numbers increased steadily, until by 1896, 720 French people undertook the journey to Bayreuth, signifying an increasing fascination with Wagner. After 1890, Wagner was the composer whose works were most frequently performed at the Opéra, with the next most popular choice being so-called

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4 The main criteria for a piece to be accepted at the Opéra-Comique was that it be "family oriented."
5 Huebner. 4-5.
“drames lyriques,” by French composers. These were operas that had formal
structures and stylistic characteristics most clearly resembling the operas of Wagner, such
as Emmanuel Chabrier’s *Gwendoline* (1893)⁶ and Alfred Bruneau’s *Messidor* (1897).⁷
This has been explained by at least one author as the reason that the Opéra accepted *La
Montagne Noire*.⁸

Perhaps this trend toward increasing popularity of Wagner in France served as a
trigger for critics to react strongly against Wagner and his music. They must have felt
that they had to defend the musical and artistic integrity of their country from the
encroachment of the Germans. During the first few decades of the nineteenth century,
certain trends developed in the writings of music critics in France that would continue for
the rest of the century. Later in the century, after Wagner became a well-known figure,
his music was one such important theme with which writers seemed to be obsessed.
Even before the Franco-Prussian War, there was much debate in the Second Empire
concerning the value of Wagner in France. Many leveled aesthetic charges at Wagner,
saying that his musical system “crushed spontaneity and natural genius.” But it was
Wagner’s writings that especially damaged his reputation in France. His “German Art
and German Politics,” of 1867, was an abrasive treatise that held up France as an
example of what Germans should not become. This incurred the wrath of many French
critics, such as Camille Bellaigue (1858-1930) and Arthur Pougin (1834-1921), who
became noted for their anti-Wagnerian writings. But there were also some pro-

⁶ Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-1894) was a French composer whose works strongly influenced
French composers of the twentieth century.
⁷ Alfred Bruneau (1857-1934) was a French composer who admired Wagner, who he thought
liberated nineteenth-century music.
⁸ See Huebner, 21. This author cites the performance of *La Montagne Noire* as being part of a
trend toward acceptance of such “drames lyriques” such as Emmanuel Chabrier’s *Gwendoline* in 1893, and
Alfred Bruneau’s *Messidor* in 1897.
Wagnerites, such as the poet Charles Baudelaire, who wrote *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris* (1861). But finding pro-Wagnerian critics was rare, and the defeat of Napoleon III exacerbated the situation.⁹

During the 1850s through the 1870s and beyond, the press developed precise definitions as to which musical characteristics made a work Wagnerian. They generally described the use of passages that contained no distinct melody, excessive recitation, harmonic harshness, and any orchestral music that was too loud and overpowered the vocal parts. Specifically, they charged such Wagnerian works with “atrociously harsh dissonances, misuse of violent modulations and of laboriously achieved stunts, harmonic eccentricities, and melodic recitative.”¹⁰ Any work that contained too much loud and complex music that overpowered the voices was not looked upon with favor, but was often described as being affected and hard to discern. As mentioned previously, Georges Bizet’s *Carmen* was one opera at which critics leveled strong accusations of being too Wagnerian. They cited musical characteristics such as “learnedness, obscurity, grayness, and endless melodies,” as evidence that Bizet was really a Wagnerian, “one of the most ferociously intransigent of our young Wagnerian school.” During the later part of the nineteenth century, critics felt the need to criticize many French composers as being too Wagnerian. Holmès was not the only target of such accusations.¹¹

French composers conceived their works within a different tradition than their German counterparts. The French generally struck a balance between the bel-canto tradition of Italy, and the romantic style from Germany. The purpose of French opera

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was mainly to entertain, and it often utilized visual devices such as ballets to provide
diversion between musical numbers or at the conclusion of the opera.\textsuperscript{12} Some have
speculated that \textit{La Montagne Noire} is an opera that tries to construct a compromise
between this convention that utilized the light ballet and the heavier demands of the lyric
drama. If this was Holmès's intention, she failed miserably as far as the critics were
concerned. They dismissed the opera immediately because they found it too heavy, and
pointed to Wagnerian characteristics. But Holmès had two strikes against her. Both the
fact that she was a woman and supposedly a Wagnerian did not bode well for the
reception of her work in the highly conservative Napoleonic Empire.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{Background and Premiere of \textit{La Montagne Noire}}

Fresh from the overwhelming success of \textit{Au Pays Bleu}, composed in Italy around
1880, Holmès took a break from composing in the "grand epic style" for some time.
During the next four years, she turned her attention once again to the composition of
songs, which she had not done for some time. She wrote almost fifty from 1882 to 1895,
several of which were highly successful. But she also began to prepare for the boldest
and brightest conquest by a woman—the Opéra of Paris. Her compositional studies with
Franck had come to an end, and she now felt free to plunge into the composition of grand
operas in the Wagnerian manner, hoping to achieve the high acclaim afforded to few
composers.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Lacombe, 1-2.
\textsuperscript{13} Huebner, 409-10.
\textsuperscript{14} Laurence Davies, \textit{César Franck and his Circle} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970),
256. The language utilized in these two sources may seem overblown and exaggerated, but they reveal the
enormity of the challenge that Holmès faced.
Trying to get an opera performed in France as a woman composer was especially difficult. As mentioned in Chapter One of this document, women contributed to productions at the Opéra only sixteen times since 1693. Many of these women were librettists or only made minor contributions to the conception or production of operas staged in that venue. The only two noteworthy examples of women composing works that premiered at the Opéra are Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, in 1694, and Louise Bertin, in 1836. Jacquet de la Guerre was an extremely successful and well-known composer in seventeenth-century France, whose five-act opera, Céphale and Procris, was accepted by the Opéra. Louise Bertin's opera, Esmeralda, was also accepted, but only performed six times in 1836. Her success probably had something to do with the fact that she was the daughter of the owner of the Journal des Débats, an extremely influential musical journal in France. To this day, La Montagne Noire still remains one of the few works by women ever performed at the Opéra. One other notable example is Gabrielle Ferrari's Cobzar, which was also given only six performances.\footnote{Nancy Sarah Theeman, "The Life and Songs of Augusta Holmès," (PhD. diss: University of Maryland, 1983), 201.}

Holmès is not clear about the exact dates she conceived the libretto and musical score for La Montagne Noire. But it seems safe to say that she completed the libretto between 1881 and 1882, and the music between 1883 and 1885.\footnote{Gefen. 42-44.} Whatever the case may have been, she began submitting the opera to various venues in 1885, trying those first that seemed the most likely to accept the work. First she submitted the opera to the Opéra-Comique, which traditionally accepted works by composers who were not yet famous. They rejected the work, however, stating that it was too complex. Next, she

\footnote{Gefen. 41.}
submitted it to La Monnaie in Brussels,\textsuperscript{18} where it was accepted but later rejected when the institution changed directors. Her last hope seemed to be the Opéra, where Pierre Gailhard (1848-1918), the director at the time, ignored it. But when Émile Campo-Casso, who was sympathetic toward Holmès and her works, replaced Gailhard in 1893, the opera was accepted. Campo-Casso was subsequently fired from the position of director and replaced in 1894 by Gailhard, who “grimaced a little” and was reluctant to stage a performance of the work, but had to honor the contract already in place.\textsuperscript{19}

Holmès was lucky to have had her opera accepted at such a prominent venue. \textit{La Montagne Noire} was afforded the best possible production with the best possible singers and crew. Albert Alvarez, a new operatic star, sang the role of Mirko; Maurice Renaud, the well-known baritone, sang the role of Aslar; and Lucienne Bréval, a moving tragic actress, the role of Yamina.\textsuperscript{20} The visual aspects of the opera were carefully and superbly designed. The Académie Nationale de Musique designed the sets, while Paul Taffanel (1844-1908), a prestigious conductor, led the orchestra. After ten years of struggling and planning, Holmès had seemingly triumphed, and everything was lined up for a successful performance.

\textbf{Reception of \textit{La Montagne Noire}}

To Holmès’s great disappointment, \textit{La Montagne Noire} was not a success by any means. French critics seemed totally against the work, and they criticized it for a variety of reasons, most pointing to elements of Wagnerism they perceived in the opera. Since

\textsuperscript{18} See the first section of this chapter for a more thorough discussion of operatic venues.
\textsuperscript{19} Paula Barillon-Bauché. \textit{Augusta Holmès et la Femme Compositeur} (Paris: Librairie Fischbacher, 1912), 40-41.
\textsuperscript{20} Maurice Renaud later made a recording of popular operatic arias which includes two versions of Holmès’s song, “Le Chemin du Ciel.”
The opera had been conceived nearly ten years earlier, many considered the plot, subject material, and libretto outdated. The conflict of love versus duty had been done too many times, and no one was really interested in hearing about it again. Those critics who did not find the music Wagnerian thought it old fashioned, influenced too heavily by Massenet, Gounod, and Meyerbeer. They no longer pointed to virile part writing as they had in her other works, but highlighted the strength of her melodies, and other characteristics that were seen as feminine. On the one hand, therefore, Holmès was attacked for being too Wagnerian, and on the other, she was deemed too feminine, or a typical woman composer. Her compositional style and her gender had triggered widespread disapproval and criticism.²¹

Adolph Jullien, a writer for the Journal des Débats, referred to the opera as “retrograde,” and said that he felt “deceived” by a plot created out of Holmès’s desire to become popular with the public.²² Another reviewer, writing for Le Figaro, thought that there was “little modernity in her ideas.”²³ Hughes Imbert, writing for Le Guide Musical, was greatly disappointed with the work, saying that he expected something better from Augusta Holmès.

A victory was expected; it was wished upon no one more highly than Miss A. Holmès, who is a valiant and courageous artist, who never ceases devoting herself to a ceaseless labor . . . .The quality of the pages of La Montagne Noire is much lower than her works that we know already. The ensemble is especially defectve: the orchestration misinterpreted, the quartet of singers being choked by the instruments of brass and percussion; the register of the voices is generally written too low, in particular for the roles of Yamina (Miss Bréval) and of Aslar (Mr. Renaud). There is an abuse of triple rhythms, which gives the work the pace of a perpetual waltz.

²² Adolphe Jullien in Journal des Débats 16 (February, 1895), as cited in Pasler. 23.
He goes on to talk about the outdated style of the opera and wonders why the Opéra would produce such a work and why Holmês did not make any changes.

And however, we must note a certain strength, pointing out Meyerbeer, and a certain lyricism proceeding from the style of Gounod, that it would be difficult to note a relationship with Richard Wagner, who is the god of the author (Holmès). Many will say that La Montagne Noire dates from the years 1881 and 1882, and time has passed. But then, why has the artist contented herself with the work and not taken the time to revise it or create something new?

Imbert does try to say something positive about the work, and though he seems like a fair reviewer, he is, like many others, obsessed with Meyerbeer and Wagner.

Of the four acts, the best is without question the second, whose pages, are comparable with the gracious Lieder emanating from the pen of Miss Augusta Holmês. We are referring to the pretty Larghetto sung by Yamine... the duet between Hélêna and Mirko, recalling Gounod, the Andante appassionato in ¾ time.²⁴

Those few critics that found favorable things to say about the work cited its melodic characteristics, or “feminine qualities.” Such critics said her melodies contained a “natural clarity and healthy sharpness... (that) have nothing cloudy or convoluted about them.”²⁵ Holmês, who was normally known for composing in a bold and virile manner, was suddenly praised for being just the opposite. This new perception of her as a woman composer did not bode well for her future.

While reception of the opera in France was not favorable, some perceptive voices from abroad provided fresh insight into the situation. Englishman Charles Holman-

²⁵ Henri de Curzon in La Gazette, 9 (February, 1895), as cited in Pasler. 24.
Black, for instance, enjoyed the piece and described the initial reception of the performance as being favorable.

_La Montagne Noire_ is a drame-lyrique in four acts and five scenes. It had to wait ten years for its production . . . . In 1893, after numberless complications and trouble, the work was received at the Opéra. In spite of the most violent cabales, in spite of jealousies, openly declared or secretly promulgated, thanks to her intrepid courage, Augusta Holmès succeeded in overcoming all resistance. On February 8, 1895, Monsieurs Bertrand and Gailhard, then directors of the National Theatre of Music, produced “La Montagne Noire” in a manner worthy of this famous house. The cast comprised Madame Alvarez, Renaud, and Gresse, Mmes. Breval, Berthet, and Heglom. I remember well the first representation. The President of the Republic occupied the President’s box, and he congratulated the composer with more than the usual cordiality.

The enthusiasm at the first representation was genuine, spontaneous, and in no way controlled by the claque. Returning later to hear again the work, I found it improved upon a re-hearing. The applause was just as spontaneous, and even more general, and there never was a doubt of its success with the public—but Mlle. Holmès had to struggle against a cabale, instituted by a well-known critic here; in fact, the success with the public seemed to incense the critics. One of them who is on the best known daily in Paris, a journal that probably has the largest circulation abroad of any newspaper, when remonstrated with for his adverse article on “La Montagne Noire,” acknowledged to the person with whom he was conversing that he really admired the opera and the composer as well; but, he added, “frankly we do not wish to see the doors of our theatres and operas open to women authors.”26

Another critic, from the _Musical Times_, described the unfavorable critical reception of the work. He personally saw the opera as being somewhat bland and uninteresting, but not really Wagnerian. In fact, he claimed that people had false expectations for the work due to Holmès’s reputation as an admirer of Wagner.

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26 Charles Holman-Black, “La Montagne Noire,” _The London Musical Courier_ (April 5 and 12, 1901). This particular periodical (at least from 1901) is housed at the British library, where it is in such bad shape that access to it is prohibited. Photocopying is out of the question, but the librarians at the British Library hope to come up with a microform version in a few years. Because of this situation, I have taken this quotation from Nancy S. Theeman’s dissertation, which was written long enough ago that the article was still available for use.
The most important musical event of the past month has been the production at the Opéra, on the 15th ult., of Mlle. Augusta Holmès’s lyric drama in four acts, “La Montagne Noire.” Criticism has dealt somewhat severely with this work, probably on account of disappointed expectations. Mlle. Holmès was known to have Wagnerian predilections, and some successful works had given her the reputation of possessing considerable individuality. This led to expectations being greater than the realization. One must, however, recognize that here is life and movement in the opening of the first act, and that Mlle. Holmès has dealt successfully with certain parts that required charm. Apart from a few thematic reminiscences, the work has no affinity with the Wagnerian method. The plot, which is not novel or worth describing in detail, is a tragic story of the struggle between love and duty. In order to preserve interest during four acts with this subject — little new from the passion point of view — a musical intensity and powerful orchestration would have been necessary; but this Mlle. Holmès has not been able to give us.27

Later in the article, he alludes to the fact that the initial reception of a piece can be misleading.

As far as the critics are concerned the work was certainly not a success; but we must wait until some more representations have been given in order to know what attitude the public will take.28

Holmès must have realized that her opera did not accord with some of the standards of the time. But like a typical opera composer, she was stubborn and egotistical. According to Paula Barillon-Bauché, Holmès did not structure La Montagne Noire in order to fit into operatic conventions. When people suggested that Holmès change her opera to remedy this situation, she was extremely reluctant.

Indeed, La Montagne Noire was not . . . what Holmès had hoped . . . . She had such great confidence in its merit! — confidence that the performers shared when, with her expressive piano playing, her vibrant singing, and her ardent and expressive mimicry, she adorned her work brilliantly.

In the theater, in the orchestra stalls, the impression was totally different. Written fifteen years earlier than it was performed, and written according to the old

formula aggravated by Wagnerian imitations, the score already seemed outdated, old-fashioned, full of pretensions. In addition, its four acts formed such a heavy spectacle, given their lack of interest and their faults. "Intelligently lightened up," one of the most admirable interpreters of *La Montagne Noire* told me, and shortened so as to permit a ballet to round off the evening—something very much to the taste of the public of that period—the work would have held up better. But when one spoke of cuts to Holmès, she would not hear of it. She was inflexible. A few wise hints as to the advisability of seeking sane advice from a Master\(^{29}\) on her orchestration were just as badly received.\(^{30}\)

Although Barillon-Bauché sees Holmès's stubbornness as a character flaw, one cannot help admiring Holmès for this personality trait. Although it eventually led to her professional demise, such extreme confidence in her abilities was unusual for a woman composer, and was the part of Holmès's character that led her to success in the first place. Many other opera composers were adamant about aspects of their works that others thought should be changed. For example, Bizet met with considerable opposition when he proposed putting together an opera based upon a racy exotic character in *Carmen*. His insistence on the content of the opera and about the manner in which it was presented caused the resignation of the director of the Opéra-Comique, Camille du Locle. Holmès was acting like a typical composer, but was not ultimately afforded the same respect as her male counterparts.

In conclusion, there were many reasons for the failure of *La Montagne Noire*. The biggest of these were the biases of French critics against Wagnerians and women composers. But many later writers criticized the opera for being too heavy, containing awkward part writing and music that sounds too "rhythmic and martial." Laurence Davies, for example, says the opera contains too much action and loud orchestration that

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\(^{29}\) It is striking that Holmès was considered subservient to a "Master" of orchestration. It is not surprising that she reacted the way she did. This terminology reminds one of a review of *Les Argonautes* in which a male conductor is credited with the success of the work. See Chapter 3, page 72 of this document.

\(^{30}\) Barillon-Bauché, 42-43.
can become a bit chaotic at times.\textsuperscript{31} It should not come as a surprise, however, that Holmès had little time to devote herself to musical perfection. Compared to other opera composers, she had to concern herself more with issues of logistics and reception. Her determination allowed her to achieve an almost unthinkable goal for a woman composer in nineteenth-century France. But unfortunately, her work itself and its reception suffered.

\textsuperscript{31} Davies. 257.
Chapter Six: La Montagne Noire: Women and Exoticism

The role of the so-called “exotic” woman in operas of the nineteenth century is complex and controversial. Operas such as Carmen often spark debates or ambivalent feelings about whether the heroine is the victim or the aggressor. The exotic woman often embodies values that are very different from the dominant culture within the opera. Yamina, the heroine of La Montagne Noire, functions as such a woman. She is a Turkish slave held prisoner in Montenegro during a time when the Turks are attempting to take over the small country. Yamina is definitely seen as threatening because she is a Turk, and her ways of life directly oppose the male-dominated, highly religious Montenegrin society that values fraternal love and sacrifice for one’s country above all else. But a close look at Yamina’s physical appearance and music, as well as her speeches and interactions with other characters, reveals that she is not really a very exotic character.

In fact, the main differences between Yamina and the Montenegrins are her feminine beauty and charm, her use of seduction, and her need to feel free, self-sufficient, and powerful. Yamina seems to come from a culture where women wield considerable power, and she is shocked to find herself a slave in Montenegrin society. She soon becomes involved in a struggle for power with the other characters in the opera, most notably Aslar, one of the chief Montenegrin warriors and the so-called “brother” of the man she is trying to seduce. It becomes obvious, as the opera progresses, that this is not a work concerned mainly with racial differences. Rather, the battles between the Turks and the Montenegrins serve as a backdrop for a struggle between brotherly love and erotic love that ultimately results in death. While Holmès’s heroine has often been dismissed from qualifying as a feminist character, I would argue that her actions and words reveal a
hunger for freedom and power that makes her a very sympathetic feminist character. ¹

Since La Montagne Noire offers a rare and drastically different variation on the theme of the exotic woman from that of operas by male contemporaries, it would be a mistake to gloss over the feminist implications of this opera.

**Part I: Opera, Imperialism, and the Femme Fatale**

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as various European countries expanded their territories, their imaginations were captured by distant lands and foreign people. Roger Célestin describes their perception of these places.

Exoticism may constitute a potential means of leaving or escaping Home and, as such, it does create a rift between individual and culture. Yet it is also a mode of representation. This is why the subject who would practice exoticism can never really leave Home, since Home is also audience, just as the subject can never really go home again once the exotic has become part of his (self-constituting) experience.²

Exoticism, or Orientalism, involves the portrayal or influence of non-Western cultures in various forms of Western European art. It influenced the artistic, literary, and musical worlds of Western European countries as they began to become imperialist entities, extending their territories to Eastern lands such as Africa and India. Exoticism in the arts was present as early as the sixteenth century, when there was a surge of interest in representing the so-called “Orientals,” particularly the Turks. The discovery of America ushered in a wide range of representations of new and interesting landscapes and of people all over the world. Exoticism reached its height during the late nineteenth century.

¹ For example, James Parakilas asserts that Yamina is not much of a feminist heroine, while Carmen can be. I hope to show that this is incorrect. While Carmen represents nothing more than a man’s idea of what a woman in touch with her sexuality is like, Yamina has real wishes and desires that make her more of a real, human character. See James Parakilas, “The Soldier and the Exotic: Operatic Variations on a Theme of Racial Encounter, Part II” Opera Quarterly 3 (1994), 45.

century, when it became very fashionable in France, and the term was officially coined in the French language. Exoticism continued to influence art in the twentieth century and is still utilized today to some degree. So-called “Oriental” or Eastern cultures portrayed in the arts included Spanish, Egyptian, Turkish, Indian, African, and so on. If one closely examines the exotic influences in the arts, it becomes increasingly obvious that they reveal more about the Western cultures in which they are created than the other cultures they are supposed to represent.

The term “Orientalist Art” often refers to a specific group of nineteenth-century artists who were mostly French and who painted scenes from North Africa and the Middle East. Their techniques came under attack in the 1870s but became popular again during the 1880s and 90s, remaining so until the First World War. Many attribute the beginnings of French Orientalist art to Napoleon’s Egyptian expedition of 1798. During his rule, Napoleon cultivated art that celebrated the empire’s imperialist exploits. He collected historical paintings about the Egyptian and Syrian campaigns, and the artistic community — artists, critics, and patrons alike — helped to perpetuate the celebration of the empire and the French involvement in the east. Painters such as Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835) and Anne-Louis Girodet (1767-1824) helped to glorify the Egyptian campaign by using “historical models” and “moral contrasts” in their paintings.

“Historical models” make visual comparisons between the French nation and the great conquering societies of the past, such as the Egyptians, Romans, and Christians. “Moral contrasts” make the French look rational, scientific, and moral as compared to fanatical,

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cruel, and irrational easterners. One well-known example is the *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) by Delacroix, a painting which depicts Sardanapalus before his suicide and the destruction of his harem, slaves, and possessions. The painting employs bold color combinations and loose formal structures that violate rules and techniques of the time. This all contributed to making it look chaotic and sharply different from other contemporary artistic works. The painting shocked and offended everyone at its premiere at the salon in 1827-28. It effectively portrays the supposed irrationality and destructiveness of its subject. In general, Orientalist paintings often perpetuate racist views about the cultures they are depicting by making them seem primitive and backwards due to an absence of Western influences. These pictures are painted from the point of view of the European, who is absent from the picture and looks on with an “all seeing” gaze.

Exoticism, or Orientalism, also affected the literary arts. French literature, in particular, contains many stories about foreign people or countries. The most popular settings for French novels between 1670 and 1784 are Greece, Turkey, Persia, Peru, and Tahiti. During the eighteenth century, literary critics began to demand that historical writings pay more attention to the realistic appearances, speeches, and actions of so-called “exotic” people, in order to make them less like French people. Later, such emphases on cultural difference spread to the portrayals of customs and political systems of foreign nations. Details about the physical surroundings of exotic locales were not

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Eugène Delacroix
La Mort de Sardanapale
Réplique Réduite 1844
Philadelphia Museum of Art
McIlherry Collection⁶

utilized until the later eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, some critics believed that exoticism functioned as a kind of sentimental nostalgia. It provided a way for the modern individual to recapture old or lost ways of life in new and exotic locations. This became less important during the last decades of the nineteenth century, however, as the age of exploration drew to a close (around 1880). Others speculate that the Exoticist movement arose as a rebellion against mass uniformity and as an attempt to rekindle individualism that had culminated in the French Revolution. In 1840, Alexis de Tocqueville stated that

> Everything was different in the old societies. There unity and uniformity were nowhere to be found. In our day, everything threatens to become so much alike that the particular features of each individual may soon be entirely lost in the common physiognomy.

This sentiment seems to be conveyed in *La Montagne Noire*, with Yamina acting as an individual struggling for freedom against a society that promotes the loss of individuality.

The notion of the exotic woman in literature dates all the way back to the *ancien régime* in France. Novels during this time usually contain an exotic hero or heroine who came to France, which to him or her was strange unknown territory. Some try to fit in, some try to maintain their identity, some survive, and others are destroyed. Some women writers during this time utilized such plot structures to discuss gender politics. One example of this is Marie-Madeleine Pioche de la Vergne Lafayette, who, in her novel *Zaïde*, allows her exotic heroine to elevate her status and power in society through

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9 This makes sense in *La Montagne Noire* since Yamina’s quest for independence is in direct opposition to the highly uniform society of the Montenegrins.
10 Bongie, 18-19
education and literacy. Writers Françoise-Paule d’Issembourg d’Happoncourt de Graffigny and Marie-Josephine de Lescun de Monbart used the story of the exotic heroine to represent their own feelings of isolation and alienation from society.\textsuperscript{11} Women writers had marginal status in eighteenth-century France. It was said that it was inappropriate for a woman to write, yet it was one of the few ways she could make a living and achieve some degree of fame and respect. Access to education for women was also difficult. Women were mostly educated in the domestic arts so as to avoid becoming a “femme savante” (learned woman), a literary stereotype that was satirized by Molière, for example, in 1663. It is not surprising, therefore, that obtaining literacy skills is the biggest problem for many of the exotic women in the novels written by women. Such stories that involve a foreign woman in a strange country were variations on highly popular plot structures involving the debut or “coming out” of young women in Parisian society. Both types of plot reveal the injustices of marriages brought about by familial financial considerations. Exotic heroines also appeared in novels by men during this time, representing the beginning of the \textit{femme fatale} characters that would become so popular later. Such heroines, created by writers such as Montesquieu and Prévost, were dangerous, irrational, threatening to social order. Heroines created by female writers, in contrast, displayed positive characteristics such as loyalty, intelligence, and moral decency. Often they were rewarded after long struggle and sacrifice. The exotic or foreign woman character, therefore, was not always seen as morally deviant.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} Both of these writers spent their lives in exile from their native France.
\textsuperscript{12} Douthwaite, 12-18.
"Turkish Music," or any music representing countries such as Egypt, India, and Turkey, had been popular at least since the time of Mozart. During the Classical era, loud percussive effects, quick rhythms, simple harmonies, and frequent shifts between major and minor characterized this music. It was used in instrumental music as well as opera, and provided a welcome diversion from the established Classical traditions of the time. Orientalist music reached its peak in the late nineteenth century, but it was quite different in character from earlier music. During Mozart's time, "Turkish" music was extremely loud and harshly militaristic music, representing bellicose men from these foreign lands. But by the late nineteenth century, it had become passive and sensual, with emphasis on the female exotic. This was the result of a change in attitude toward exotic cultures due to increasing domination over exotic territories. Such cultures were now seen as being sensual and feminine.

Orientalism was particularly prevalent in opera during the late nineteenth century. Opera (and ballet as well) was well suited to making the audience want to experience non-European cultures through the simultaneous use of visual and aural stimuli. It was the perfect venue for one to become interested in other cultures. In nineteenth-century Europe, opera was the most popular form of entertainment for the bourgeois classes and was often a celebration of imperialism. The public actually had quite a bit of say over which operas lasted and which did not, since there was no set operatic canon. Rather, in most European cities, there were a variety of operas performed on any given night from

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13 One example is Mozart's Die Entführung aus dem Serail (1782), which deals with the conflict between Christian and Islamic interests, and utilizes a great deal of so-called "Turkish Music" for effect.
14 For example, the last movement of Mozart's A major Piano Sonata, K. 331 is marked "alla Turca."
which the public could choose. As a result, opera, like modern films or television programs, reflected and perpetuated societal and cultural ideals and shaped them. Therefore, opera, like painting, had a large role in reinforcing imperialist ideologies.\textsuperscript{16}

Unfortunately, such ideologies also relied on racist and sexist portrayals of women in many operas. Female characters had always been martyrs in opera. Sopranos, especially, were frequently killed by others or by themselves, as seen in the roles of Violetta, Sieglinde, Lucia, Brünnhilde, Aida, Norma, Butterfly, and Isolde. Mezzo-sopranos, such as Azucena, Eboli, Dalila, and Carmen, usually represented some type of resistance to social order, such as witchcraft or treason. Since the Orient itself was frequently described in feminine terms, the connection between racial and gendered otherness seemed natural. Making women exotic heightened their role as victims or as dangerous people. For example, Salome, a typical \textit{femme fatale}, was considered extremely dangerous because she expressed her own personal desires. Her dance of the seven veils uncovers her pathological character and reveals her sensual powers at the same time.\textsuperscript{17}

Oriental women (such as Carmen and Yamina) frequently performed erotic dances that were associated with sensuousness and with the body.\textsuperscript{18} Dance was seen as the most bodily of all the art forms and also was associated with hysteria, making these women all seem sensual and unstable. Composers such as Verdi employed

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\textsuperscript{16} Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, \textit{Opera: Desire, Disease, Death} (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 4-5.  \\
\textsuperscript{18} For example, Carmen’s “Habanera” and “Seguidilla.”
\end{flushright}
chromaticism, meter shifts, and special orchestration to portray these exotic women.\(^{19}\) The presence of the *femme fatale* in such operas revealed boredom with convention on the part of the audience. While orientalist musical techniques marked a way for Western Europeans to escape from stagnating traditional classical styles, the use of oriental women in operas allowed Western European men to explore and destroy their repressed desires through transference to another culture.\(^{20}\)

**Part II: The Turks and the Fictionalized Montenegrins**

While Europeans considered Eastern cultures subservient and ripe for exploitation, they feared some Eastern cultures as well. The Turks had long been the most ominous and threatening enemies of Western Europeans since their attack on Vienna in 1527. As historian R.R. Palmer observes, “To the Christian world, the Turks were a mystery as well as a terror, not only merciless fighters but fanatics of a wicked religion sunk in polygamy and fornication.”\(^{21}\) By the late eighteenth century, the Turks still occupied southeastern Europe, but had become a weak power and did not pose an immediate threat except for their frequent pirating.\(^{22}\) Holmès’s opera, set in the seventeenth century, takes place at a time when the Montenegrin community was fighting against Turkish occupation. Although Montenegro achieved its independence in 1878, the Turks occupied other Balkan states, so the issue was still somewhat of a hot topic in France. As stated previously, *La Montagne Noire* is only one of a series of works Holmès wrote about small European nations under foreign occupation. In this opera, Holmès varies the

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\(^{20}\) Lindenberger, 190.


\(^{22}\) Lindenberger, 169.
typical Western imperialist plot to one concerning the struggle against Eastern
imperialism. Yamina, the Turkish *femme fatale*, represents the Eastern aggressors.\(^{23}\)

In order to understand the role of the exotic character Yamina in *La Montagne Noire*,
one must first study the (fictionalized) culture of the Montenegrins, as portrayed in the
opera. This small but bellicose group of people value love of one’s God and country
above everything in life. They lead a life of sacrifice and hard work, and are greatly
dependent upon each other. Religion plays a large role, governing every action taken. In
addition, the society is very much male-oriented, valuing fraternal love above all other
types of love. Women are largely subservient and have little power, but they are
expected to work hard to ensure that everything runs smoothly on the domestic side.
Although this society can be seen as embodying Western European values, it is also a
society steeped in primitive rituals and fraternal extremism. In fact, there are many hints
throughout the opera that this society is seen from the French vantage point as being
exotic itself, but in a different way from the Turks.

The Montenegrins are introduced in the beginning of the opera as being a very old
and deeply religious culture. In the scenery description before Act I, the Montenegrins’
homeland is described as “fortified ruins in the black mountain.”\(^{24}\) The central visual
image of the scene is a statue of the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus in her arms. This
scene emphasizes the centrality of the Christian religion, and the ancient and primitive
nature of a society torn by war and turbulence. The prelude to the opera begins with an
ominous rumbling C played by a huge collection of instruments, including a full brass

\(^{23}\) Parakilas, 44.

All subsequent translations of the libretto are by this author and Dr. Larry L. Rockwood.
chorale, in C minor. Although the prelude ends in G major, the music resumes in C
minor, with more rumbling lower notes and diminished chords, signifying the grave
conflict facing the country.25

Religion figures prominently throughout the opera. In Act I, when the men return
victoriously from battle and praise each other for conquering the Turks, Father Sava
passionately proclaims, "The only conqueror of armies is God! You have not suffered
like the country where your sacred name was always venerated." He sings this over
rumbling D-flat octaves in lower strings and brass instruments, making his voice
authoritative as he reminds the men of their duty to God and country. He then begins a
long prayer in short two-line stanzas that are echoed by the chorus. This section is
striking because of the contrast between Father Sava's music and that of the other
Montenegrins. He sings his part on an unaccompanied scale passage in B-flat minor,
creating an ominous and unstable mood (see Ex. 7). The chorus enters in unison over
stable, diatonic C-major (and later B-flat-major) accompaniment. This section seems to
represent the importance of the prayer and the comfort that it brings to the people, and
recalls the elaborate prayer scene of the Egyptian priests and priestesses in Aïda. Like the
Egyptians in Aida, the Montenegrins are a mildly exotic culture (from the French
perspective) fighting off the advances of a more extremely exotic culture.

Despite the Montenegrins' profound sense of honor and duty, their culture may
have seemed strange and primitive to French audiences. The words of some characters
reveal a dedication that is extreme and carries with it some morbidity. For example, in
the beginning of the opera, as Dara watches the battle with the Turks, she states that she

25 Augusta Holmès, La Montagne Noire, (Orchestral score, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale
MS16765), prelude, 1-2.
would prefer to see her son die in battle than see him become a slave. (These words, spoken in anger and dejection, will come back to haunt her at the end of the opera.) As the Montenegrins head off to battle in Act II, they display an almost comic vengeance as Aslar shouts, “The cries of the eagles of the river? Do you hear this savage howling? It is the dance of the wolves! They come down like the storm. With what do they nourish us?” The soldiers cry, “With blood! With blood! Begin heroes! Enough of tears! We must spill blood!”

Brotherly love and honor are also taken to an extreme in the world of the Montenegrins. After returning victoriously from battle in Act I, Aslar and Mirko decide to take a solemn oath of brotherhood. In order to do so, they must undergo a ceremony with a priest that is oddly similar to a wedding ceremony.  

Their vows sound a great deal like wedding vows. Together they state, “I swear before God to love you like a brother. In life or death, in peace or war, and safeguard your honor as a Christian, be it the price of my blood, or be it the price of yours.” Then, in place of exchanging wedding

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26 This is similar to the oath between Carlo and Posa in Don Carlo, or between Otello and Iago in Otello.
rings, they exchange swords, together, and the other men, in a movingly macho moment, raise their shiny new swords in an arch above Aslar and Mirko. Then the priest blesses the warriors, who share a handshake and express their love for one another. “In destitution or wealth,” they sing, “I will not abandon you… then two hearts burn of your flames… chained souls, brotherhood, united for the liberty! This touching and slightly frightening display of affection reveals that male bonding takes top priority in the world of the Montenegrins.

When the brotherhood between Aslar and Mirko is disturbed, it is like the dissolution of a marriage. When Mirko abandons the Montenegrins in order to run away with Yamina, Aslar cries, “My brother is vile! My brother has broken his vows! My soul is forever half empty. Ah! I cry like a woman that has lost her child!” When Aslar later finds Mirko with Yamina, Mirko tries to release him from his vows of brotherhood, believing that his crime is too great to forgive. But Aslar is broken hearted and devastated, crying, “Can he release me from the love, suppliant and tender? For pity sake, if you love me, listen to me!” Later, in scene V of Act III, Aslar makes a huge sacrifice to save Mirko, who has stabbed him. Aslar tells approaching Montenegrin soldiers that the Turks attacked him and Mirko saved him. Aslar continues to make hefty sacrifices to protect the honor of his brother, until the end of the opera, when he can no longer save him. The bonds between these two male characters are like those shared between lovers and stand in direct opposition to the love between Mirko and Yamina. Clearly, this brotherly love is the most important value shared in Montenegrin society. The love between Mirko and his fiancé, Hélena, pales in comparison to his relationship with Aslar.
As seen in the opera, women have very little power or significance in Montenegrin society. Their only job seems to be helping the men. Dara is the only female character who has any sort of power. It is she who saves Yamina from death. Her musical numbers often bring calm and stability to otherwise wild and chromatic sections of the opera. For example, in the beginning of Act I, while the other women are crying in a series of diminished chords, Dara sings a song to the black mountain in C major. She is accompanied by long held flute passages and harp. Later, when singing to her son, she sings an allegretto, folk-like tune in F-sharp minor that offers diversion from the previous music, which is thickly textured and turbulent. But when the men return from battle, Dara must stand in the background and keep the women busy working for the men. After the battle has been won, she orders the women to “prepare the tables” after the men’s “formidable labors.” In other words, gender roles are clearly demarcated in the world of the Montenegrins.27

Aslar and Mirko reinforce these roles in Act I, when Aslar proclaims, “Men, it is your duty to live!” and Mirko follows with “Women! It is your duty to honor them!” Mirko’s own fiancée, Héléna, honors him and worships him. She says she cannot live without him. When he is lost in battle in Act I, she declares, “If he dies, it is necessary that I die!” Later, when she believes that Mirko no longer loves her, she states, “If you no longer love me, I should die! If the kiss withers, our springtime so beautiful, I shall soon fall.” It is taken for granted among the other characters that Héléna really will die if Mirko does not return to her. When Aslar sees Mirko in Act III, he states that Héléna will die in the spring.

The Montenegrin society is conservative and primitive. Much of the music and choruses employed for this group of people is stable and almost boring. All the characters sing in unison most of the time, and rhythmic and harmonic patterns are fairly regular. An example of this is the opening chorus, in which the Montenegrins watch the battle with the Turks with fear. One wonders if this simplicity is intentional on the part of the composer. By the end of Act I, the listener welcomes the entrance of Yamina, who provides interest and diversion. The roles of women and men are very sharply defined in this society, and male bonding, and the love of God and patriarchy are central to the existence of the community.

**Part III: The Escape of the Femme Fatale and the Destruction of the Weak Soldier**

Yamina, the *femme fatale* of the opera, differs from most exotic women in that she does not appear to be of an oriental or exotic race. She is frequently described as being white and blond. Yamina’s background is strange and unique. As she explains in her first aria, she has lived in a variety of exotic regions, where she has acquired various cultural traits. She has been taught a variety of sensual arts and techniques which she supposedly learned from a number of exotic places. These are completely alien to the Montenegrin women, as is Yamina’s way of life in general. She comes from a land of languor and sensuousness, and knows nothing of self-sacrifice or love of a greater good or ideal. She comes from a world where women rule and wield power: a feminine sphere. While the Montenegrins represent religious and fraternal extremism, and patriarchy, Yamina is the manifestation of the power of feminine seduction and sensual love.
Descriptions of Yamina throughout the opera reveal that she is not ethnically
or racially much different from the Montenegrins. As she dances in Act II, scene II, she
is described as raising her white arms. Later, Mirko looks at her and speaks of her
"somber eyes, white arms, rosy lips! Yamina, tender sister of roses, to the country of the
sun!" While seducing Mirko in Act II, scene V, she says of herself, "Haven't you seen
my shoulder? White, under my tawny hair?" Mirko replies, rhapsodizing over her thick
blond hair. One wonders why Holmès decided that her heroine should be white and
blond. Perhaps she felt that these characteristics would make her heroine beautiful.

Since Yamina is a slave of the Turks, we can assume that she is not really of Turkish
ethnicity. The trait that really distinguishes Yamina from the Montenegrins is the way
she dresses. As she makes her first entrance, she is "dressed as a harem woman, covered
with veils of gauze traversed with brilliant ornaments of gold." In Act II, Mirko
describes her as having "rings of gold ringing on her naked arms!" Even when Yamina
is forced to work as a slave with the women, she is dressed poorly but keeps her head
bare and hair undone. Dress and body language are the main physical differences
between Yamina and the other women, which indicates that the difference between them
is cultural, not racial.

Yamina, a person of mixed origins, has a variety of oriental characteristics and
knows many seductive dances. She was abandoned as a baby and therefore is of
unknown origins, but she lived most of her life "free, with the wandering tribes, under the
tents." Here is what she says in her introductory song:

The women of the green caravan taught me their slow dances. The Tréibizonde
dance and the Delhi dance, And in the white Alger, I have danced, carrying on my
hip, the belt of polished silver, and I adorn myself with satin, broach of gold and
of gauze, pearl, I have ruled in the cool gardens of the Hassans and the
Noureddins Where the crimson rose opens. Then in this country, I have followed
the men of the prophet... the black Timariots and the red Spahis.28

The music of Yamina’s first descriptive song is mildly exotic and provides some
diversion from the heavy music of the Montenegrins (see Ex. 8). She sings in a lilting,
rhythmically varying manner, moving from triple to duple note groups in each measure.
While her first entrance is in the key of C major, the harmonies continuously shift,
moving through diminished chords and heavy chromaticism. When she tells of her
origins, she sings a waltz-like tune with lilting triplets on the first beat and heavy,
ornamented chords on beats two and three. A slim group of instruments play along with
her, mostly accompanying except for the bassoon, which has slow, languid triplet
melodies. The tune displays simple, yet imaginative and memorable writing on the part
of the composer. Juxtaposed with the beautifully written text, the music here is very
effective. But this music is as exotic as Yamina will ever get during the course of the
opera. If one listened only to Yamina’s music, one might not get the sense that she is a
distinctly different sort of character. Rather, she blends in quite nicely for most of the
opera.29

One thing of which Yamina is certain is her power as a seductress and her ability
to win the love of Mirko. In Act II, scene V, when Yamina sees Mirko and Hélëna taking
their vows, she states positively that Mirko will change his mind and leave Hélëna for

28 Holmès, 76-82.
29 Augusta Holmès, La Montagne Noire, (Orchestral score, Bibliothèque Nationale MS16765 ),
158-175.
her. "Ah!" she cries. "You think you can escape the charming conqueror but already your soul is lost and delighted! No, you will not forget me! Your body, your heart, your soul, will burn with the same flame..." She knows that Mirko will leave duty, country, and so on for her. She proclaims that she is fleeing this savage land "Where I have been subjected to shame and slavery, I will see again the sweet shore, Where ripens the cedars
in the perfumed air." Here, in one of the rare instances of the opera, she reveals her true motivations. One cannot help but be reminded of Aida during this scene. Like Yamina, Aida pines for her homeland but needs the help of her father or lover to get there. Unlike Aida, however, Yamina is ruthless and determined to accomplish her goal. It is also worth mentioning, in this context, the similarity of Holmès's heroine to Holmès herself. While it would be impossible to prove whether or not Holmès identified with her heroine, the similarities between the women are striking. Both are blond and known for their beauty, and both feel confident in their abilities to interact with men. Although Holmès does not make Yamina a particularly sympathetic character, one wonders if she did not personally identify with her in some way.

In Act II, scene II, Yamina reveals her discontent with Montenegrin society and her role in it, as she wails, "Oh shame to be a slave!" Later, she further criticizes the society as she sarcastically comments on the role of women.

Yes, it is the woman here that wears burdens, reddens her hands, strains her back, and tames the game in the sun! And the husband, the master, that irritates me. If the wine is not clear, if the bread is not good; If he finds his way, he turns and avoids it, and says to the foreigner, "It is my woman... pardon!!" 30

When the women answer that one obeys the husband like Jesus, Yamina replies that in her home country, "it is we who reign/rule over souls, we who give to the pale front the pleasure and he is oblivious." Yamina describes an existence where women have more power and an easier life. When she performs her dance of seduction, the women of Montenegro are confused. "A dance of love?" they ask "It tells (us) things that (we) do not understand!" Thus the difference between the two worlds is revealed.

30 Holmès. 150.
Unlike other *femme fatale* heroines such as Carmen, Yamina is frank and bold about her feelings. She declares twice that she loves Mirko outright. In Act IV she seems genuinely concerned about keeping Aslar in her country. As he is lying beside her, she looks at him and smiles. When he starts to become stressed about leaving his country and betraying his friends, she seems concerned and asks the other women in the garden for help. They get up and dance for him, entreat him to partake of the pleasures of the garden. Yamina is also confident that he will return her love. In Act III, scene III, she declares, “You love me! Nothing but the sound of my voice thrills you.” Yamina is also cruel and unsympathetic at times. At the end of Act III, she stabs Aslar, laughs when Mirko is getting ready to fight with him, and declares, “Go! Blood makes the roses red!” In this act, she also hurls vile curses at Aslar, calling him a “Christian dog.”

It becomes clear as the opera progresses that Yamina is a powerful character who threatens Mirko’s honor, and his duty to his mother, fiancé, and most importantly, his brother, Aslar. As soon as Mirko sets eyes upon Yamina, the plot becomes a power struggle between Yamina and Aslar, between brotherly love and erotic love. Aslar senses Yamina’s power at the end of Act I and says, “Brother, it would be the best thing to kill her very soon!” Her effect upon Mirko is something with which he is not familiar, and therefore, something with which he cannot deal. At the beginning of Act II, he ponders, “I do not hear but one voice; I burn and tremble at the same time! What is therefore this pain that I ignore?” Héléna, Mirko’s fiancé, is apparently no match for Yamina, for he tosses her aside with barely any second thoughts. Yamina continuously asserts her authority over Mirko verbally throughout the opera, with statements such as “Oh my
master, obey!” Yamina has managed to reverse the power dynamics of a typical opera and of Montenegrin society with very little effort.\(^\text{31}\) When Aslar confronts Mirko, he tells him of the strange power that Yamina has over him. “Aslar, you do not know, you do not understand, desire, that ought to make the dead cry.” When Aslar comes to the rescue of Mirko, he and Yamina become fully engaged in a struggle for power, with Mirko as the prize. He declares, “I am a man of honor.” She responds, “I am a woman of love! Your body, your soul all belong to me!” They engage in almost a physical fight before she finally stabs him.

Act IV is the final showdown between Aslar and Yamina. At first, she seems to have won. Mirko has fled with her and they are enjoying food and wine in her garden in Turkey. Only women are in the garden in Act IV and they sing to Mirko, “Come, we are the turtledoves of desire, that which is felt under our wings, it is pleasure! Unite the daughters of the sun... Be happy! I will be more beautiful and my kisses will be sweeter!” As Mirko is about to give himself up to the pleasures of wine and women, Aslar appears and tries to reclaim Mirko. The Montenegrins are about to conquer the Turkish city, and Aslar tries to persuade Mirko to come fight. But Mirko declares that he has changed completely. It is almost as if by succumbing to Yamina, Mirko has become transformed into one of her people. “Damned be the woman and damned be the love! My arms have deserted their heroic task; my eyes have forgotten the light of day.” If this were a typical nineteenth-century opera, Mirko and Aslar would probably kill the femme fatale, as the approaching Montenegrin army conquered the Turks, and everyone would

live happily ever after. But this does not happen. Yamina escapes with gold and
ejewels, leaving the men to their own devices.

As Mirko tries to follow Yamina, he seems to take on the role of the *femme fatale*.
The fight between Aslar and the weakened, drunk Mirko bears striking similarity to the
final scene between Carmen and Don José at the end of *Carmen*. Mirko tries to escape,
and Aslar, like a jealous lover, follows him, muttering, "Do this at the price of my blood,
or do this at the price of your own." He continues to try and get Mirko to fight and
finally stabs him in the heart. Somehow both men end up dying: a fate usually reserved
for the lead woman of the opera. The opera ends on a cynical note, with a prayer for
brotherhood led by Father Sava.

The fact that Yamina is able to escape does not necessarily mean that Holmès was
a feminist. In fact, as other scholars have pointed out, Yamina is not always a
sympathetic character.\(^{32}\) But her speeches and actions make her much more of a feminist
heroine than someone like Carmen. Yamina wants to be a powerful woman who controls
her own destiny. She is not simply playing games for her own amusement, like Carmen,
but rather is preserving herself in a dangerous situation. She also embodies the struggle
of the individual for freedom against an overbearing society. Yamina is more than just a
figment of the male imagination. She is a real character, whose opinions and strategies
are thought out well, like those of her creator, Augusta Holmès.

\(^{32}\) Parakilas, 44, and Henson, 235.
Albert Alvarez
Danced and sang the role of Mirko in the production of *La Montagne Noire*  

Lucienne Bréval
Danced and sang the role of Yamina from *La Montagne Noire*  

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34 Ibid., 38.
Mlle Torri (a Turkish woman) with M. Alvarez (Mirko)
Scene from Act Four of *La Montagne Noire*[^13]

[^13]: Ibid., 43.
Chapter 7: Conclusions

The story of Augusta Holmès is one of a shrewd, gifted, and determined woman, who sought to guarantee herself a place among the great composers of the Western European art music tradition. She succeeded, to some extent, but her biographers and other scholars have traditionally focused on her beauty, charming personality, and affairs with famous men, to the exclusion of her musical accomplishments. I hope that this document will shift the focus of scholarship to the true talents and achievements of this exceptional woman. Her life and struggles, as well as the musical and dramatic elements she utilized in her works, reveal a great deal about nineteenth-century French culture. The events leading up to the performances and publications of her works, as well as the reception of these works, illustrate the types of barriers that composers faced in fin-de-siècle France, especially if they happened to be women. Her musical works themselves, such as those discussed in this document provide insight into characterizations of women and the exotic in the arts during the nineteenth century. After studying Holmès’s works and her struggle for recognition, one can conclude that it was possible for a woman to succeed as a composer in nineteenth-century France, but only if she embraced the right kinds of sentiments both through her personal image and through her works themselves.

As I have mentioned many times throughout this document, Holmès’s achievements as a composer were incredible, considering the cultural climate in which she was working. She competed in the City of Paris Competitions of 1880 and 1881, with some success; she enjoyed popular acclaim and celebrity status as a composer both in her own country and abroad; and she managed to get her opera, La Montagne Noire,
performed at the Paris Opéra (1895), something which many of her male contemporaries failed to do. These accomplishments would normally have been considered unthinkable for a woman composing in nineteenth-century France. Women were not even allowed to enter the Prix de Rome Competition until 1903, and even then, they were not treated fairly. It was not until ten years later, in 1913, that a woman (Lili Boulanger) won the competition. Holmes tackled such problems decades before these other women, and as the first real “femme nouvelle,”¹ she was the first to learn successfully how to perpetuate a self-image that would please the establishment. Her success helped pave the way for future women composers in a society where gender roles were sharply defined.

Indeed, the spheres in which men and women operated were strictly divided in France throughout the nineteenth century. The public realm was open to males only, while women were restricted to the private and domestic. While the Ancien Régime had traditionally allowed women more creative freedom, the advent of the Code Napoléon brought a loss of civil rights for women. After 1793, they lived completely under the control and tutelage of male relatives. It was not until the 1870s and 80s that women started to gain back some of the rights they had lost, such as access to education. The Franco-Prussian War did not help matters. The French became increasingly preoccupied with what they perceived to be weakness on their part that caused the defeat at the hands of the Germans. They thought their society’s limitations might have something to do

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¹ This was the term for an individualistic “new woman” who was concerned with things outside the domestic sphere.
with flexibility regarding gender roles. Such conditions would have made it difficult for women to succeed in any professional area of activity.²

These trends were heavily reflected in artistic organizations, such as the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Members of this organization were afraid that women would feminize the artistic world, thereby corrupting it. They expressed fear that fashion rather than merit would determine the value of works of art. Ironically, when women began competing in such artistic competitions, fashion did seem to become a factor because of such negative views about professional women. Female competitors had to spend considerable time worrying about whether their style of dress, demeanor, and other aspects of their physical appearance would create an acceptable image for the public, judges, and critics. Juliette Toutain, who competed in 1903, failed mostly because of her bourgeois image, while Nadia Boulanger, competing in 1908-1909, was seen as aristocratic and demanding. All of the women who entered the competition were intensely scrutinized. Lili Boulanger overcame such hardships successfully in 1913, when she created the image of a frail and passive childlike figure. It took cunning and deliberate planning to overcome negative attitudes toward women in music.³

Holmès attained success through gender negotiations and patriotic propaganda. It took some adjustment for her to maintain an image that would be pleasing to the public and her male contemporaries. Throughout her life, she experimented with various guises, trying to find an identity that would make her acceptable as a composer.⁴ Her physical appearance, which changed drastically throughout her life, is the most blatant example of

² Fauser, 85-88.
³ Fauser, 83-93.
⁴ To some degree, she succeeded, but at the end of her life, she did not keep up with popular sentiment quickly enough.
This. As a young woman, Holmès used her beauty to get attention and support. Her extremely feminine appearance entranced many and did not make her look like much of a threat, allowing her to do as she wished. Her music was often seen as shockingly bold for a woman, but she could get away with this since she seemed to be the embodiment of femininity. “In fact,” she declared, “I have the soul of a man in the body of a woman. How could it be otherwise?” Later in life, when she was trying to establish herself as a serious composer, her appearance became strikingly masculine. She adopted the pseudonym “Herman Zenta,” without much success, and in 1885 she cut her hair and changed her appearance. Photographs taken of the composer later in her life suggest the appearance of a male composer, such as Wagner. It is clear that Holmès realized the importance of gender issues in her society.

Holmès was also keenly aware of the importance of popular sentiment and support. After the failure of the Andante movement of her symphony, Orlando Furioso (January 15, 1877), she realized the danger of appearing too closely connected with Wagner and the Germans. As some critics, such as Octave Mirabeau, pointed out, the poor reception of her work probably had nothing to do with the quality of the piece itself. Holmès wanted people to listen to and appreciate her music, and after this incident, she changed her approach to plot material and increasingly emphasized patriotism. When she premiered Lutèce in 1880, she became an instant success and eventually a sort of patriotic muse for France. It seemed that she created this dramatic symphony with this purpose in mind, since its message was that one should love one’s country above all else. This work also implies that women’s main roles should be as

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5 Pasler, 7.
6 Octave Mirabeau, “A bas Wagner!” L’Ordre, January 16, 1877, as cited in Theeman, 133.
mothers for future French soldiers and citizens. Since Holmès’s work reflected the values of the patriarchal society in which she lived, it is not surprising that critics suddenly recognized the true merit of her work. *Lutèce* could not have been composed in drastically different style from her previous works, but suddenly, many people praised her.⁷

Starting in the early 1880s, Holmès had become objectified as a nationalistic muse and a symbol of patriotism. This culminated in the commission to compose *Ode Triomphale* for the Paris Exposition of 1889. One critic, writing for *La Nation*, in 1889, proclaimed that, “Augusta Holmès is simple, beautiful and nude like one of those marble goddesses whose radiant features the centuries have not succeeded in wearing away.”⁸ Such idealized portrayals of Holmès may have discouraged people from looking at her works objectively, but they also helped her gain recognition as a composer, and distract the public from her somewhat scandalous private life, which probably would not have helped her career. Holmès also portrayed herself as a patriotic woman through her words and actions, not just her music. As noted earlier, when Holmès was leading a rehearsal for *Ode Triomphale* and the orchestra started to grumble, she gave them a rousing patriotic speech, reminding them that their performance was a reflection of France itself. Through her music and personal actions, therefore, Holmès worked hard to perpetuate a patriotic image at a time when national loyalty was a delicate issue of great importance.⁹

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⁷ Pasler, 7, 14.
⁹ Theeman, 142.
Holmès maintained this image throughout her career, later extending her fervent political zeal to champion the causes of other countries besides France. She wrote many songs and large-scale works, such as *Irlande* (1882), about the struggles of the Celtic people. She also spoke out in favor of Italian unity, and the rights of the Polish and Slavic people. *La Montagne Noire* can be placed in this category, since it focuses on the enslaved people of Montenegro, who were repressed by the Sultan of Turkey.\(^{10}\) When Holmès first wrote this opera, the subject of Montenegro was a hot topic of debate in France, and she exploited popular sentiment beautifully. Such works, of which sympathized with oppressed people and nations, made Holmès seem even more sympathetic and angelic, furthering her image as a muse.\(^{11}\) Holmès also spent considerable time strategizing about where to have her works performed. She strove to get works premiered at Pasdeloup’s Cirque d’Hiver, the Théâtre du Châtelet, and the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, which were all popular venues. Holmès’s music became widely accepted and acclaimed, therefore, because she said what people wanted to hear, and did so as loudly and boldly as possible.\(^{12}\)

Holmès became known for her use of dramatic effects and large-scale forms, and was often praised for doing so. But sometimes, as in the case of both *Les Argonautes* and *La Montagne Noire*, she was criticized for this as well. *Les Argonautes* was a mixed victory for Holmès. Both her gender and her use of bold, supposedly Wagnerian musical characteristics caused trouble for her. Although she won an honorable mention in the City of Paris Competition, for *Les Argonautes*, most of the musicians on the jury thought

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\(^{10}\) Davies, 255-56

\(^{11}\) Henson, 242.

\(^{12}\) Pasler, 3-4.
she should have won first prize. But none of the other jury members was able to
bestow this honor upon her and later they gave her an honorable mention out of guilt.
Clearly, the merit of her work could not have been at fault, or the musicians' votes would
have been split. Rather, one can conclude that the city officials were hesitant to give the
first prize to a woman. This does not seem surprising, given the cultural climate in which
they were working, but it is a shame that composers like Holmès were not treated fairly.

The compositional style of *Les Argonautes* sparked issues of gender and
Wagnerism with the critics. Holmès was most widely criticized for utilizing too many
loud instruments in too bold a fashion. Many complained that the voices of the singers
were lost amid all the noise. More often than not, these complaints mentioned her gender
in relation to the characteristics of her music. Many found it odd and shocking for a
woman to compose music of this sort, and said so in no uncertain terms. Although
Wagner is not mentioned frequently in connection with this work, one can hear
connections with his name implied in its critical reception. Despite these problems,
however, the reception of *Les Argonautes* was generally positive and brought Holmès
fame and recognition. The criticisms leveled at the work reveal more about the culture
itself than the musical merit of *Les Argonautes*. While this provides us with valuable
insight into the cultural and musical world of nineteenth-century France, it also renders
necessary a major re-evaluation of *Les Argonautes* and Holmès's other works.

Although *La Montagne Noire* was an unequivocal failure with the critics, there
are many factors to take into account when studying the reception of this work. Again,
one can hear rumblings about Wagner and the gender of the composer in the reviews of
this work. But there were other problems with the work as well. The subject matter and
the musical material both seemed outdated since Holmès composed the work at least ten years before its performance. It also did not fit into the prescribed formula for an opera that was to be performed at the Opéra, and Holmès refused to concede to people who condescendingly tried to force her to change the work. Also, Holmès had to devote so much time to getting the work performed, that she seemed to have little left to devote to refining her composition itself. The music of La Montagne Noire shows great promise, but at times can be repetitive and underdeveloped. If Holmès had initially been given the opportunity to perform the work, and the time and space to develop her style more fully, the opera might have held greater artistic merit, though it still would not be guaranteed to succeed with the critics. The real success that Holmès achieved with La Montagne Noire is the fact that she got it performed at the Opéra. As mentioned in Chapter Five, this was something that very few French composers could claim. Holmès came amazingly close to being accepted as one of the great composers of the nineteenth century, but societal issues eventually overwhelmed her.

The operas and vocal works of Augusta Holmès are particularly significant in terms of how a woman composer treats female characters in her works. As Marcia Citron points out in her insightful book, Gender and the Musical Canon, female composers and creators must deal with the problem of “their own portrayal in works by men.” In art, literature, and music, women have traditionally been treated as objects, or portrayed as types rather than complex characters, which makes it difficult for female creators to come to terms with artistic traditions. For example, women artists must come to terms with the tradition of the objectified female nude, while writers must overcome images of themselves in literature. Citron cites the “bogey” in John Milton’s Paradise Lost, and the
"angel of the house" in Romantic literature. In fact, problematic depictions of women persisted through the twentieth century and can still be found in movies and television today. One must look no farther than a soap opera or most television commercials to find disturbing characterizations of women.

In opera and other musical works with plots, women have traditionally been stereotyped as either simplistically angelic, or evil and dangerous. One work that contains a particularly apt example of this is Bizet's Carmen, which juxtaposes the corrupt exotic woman against the virtuous saintly woman. The character Carmen is a distorted and exaggerated version of a woman, who represents male fear of female sexuality. Regardless of character type, most leading female roles in nineteenth-century opera ended up dead by the end of their particular opera. It is easy to see why a woman composer such as Holmès might have trouble coming to terms with such images. A close look at two of Holmès's most substantial and well-known works, Les Argoantes and La Montagne Noire, has revealed that she created strong women characters. In the case of Les Argoantes, she sacrificed the interests of her female character, Medée, whereas some feminist implications can be found in her treatment of Yamina, an exotic woman, in La Montagne Noire. While it may be overly simplistic to read too much into her treatment of these characters, one cannot deny that the deviation of her characterizations from the norm is striking, as are certain likenesses of her characters to her own personality.

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14 Examples of this are abundant. Bizet's Carmen (1875), Verdi's Rigoletto (1851), Otello (1816), and La Traviata (1853), and Wagner's Tannhäuser (1845), are some earlier examples; and Strauss's Elektra (1909), and Alban Berg's Wozzeck (1925), are some examples from the twentieth century. See Catherine Clément's Opera, or the Undoing of Women (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
*Les Argonautes* is a tale of love, honor, and sacrifice, which does not end well for all of those involved. Medée, the main female character, is a powerful and somewhat sympathetic woman, whose interests are ultimately sacrificed. She is portrayed musically as a mysterious, yet strong woman. After meeting Jason, however, loving him seems to be her only purpose in life. Jason reciprocates her passion, and, it seems, will succumb completely to her will. But after remembering his heroic quest for glory and honor, he leaves Medée behind and revokes love. Clearly, the message of this dramatic symphony is that one should put honor and higher ideals before personal love and fulfillment. But this seems to be a strange message coming from Holmès, who wrote most of her songs about romantic love and led a life that would have been considered indulgent and passionately romantic. It seems that this is yet another example of Holmès writing about what she thought people wanted to hear. Or it could be that it is a reflection of her own feelings that as a woman in the nineteenth century, her interests came last. While an attempt to figure out Holmès's exact motivations would be too speculative, it is clear that her message promoting honor and glory was received well both by critics and audiences.

Holmès's version of Medée's story is also significant because it differs greatly from the treatment of the character in the original story. The traditional Greek legend, Jason and the Argonauts, resembles something from a bad soap opera. Jason exploits Medée for her magical powers in order to obtain power and glory. After he is no longer in need of her help, he abandons her and their children for another woman, making her extremely angry. She eventually sacrifices the children and also kills his new wife. While it may be easy to read too much into Holmès's treatment of the myth, one cannot deny the striking changes that she made to the story. In writing *Les Argonautes*, Holmès
treats her female character with dignity, but at the same time weakens her and lessens Jason’s dependence on her powers. While in the original Greek myth Medea is a stronger character than Jason, in Holmès’s version she becomes the weaker and less honorable character.

Yamina, the strong female character of *La Montagne Noire*, ultimately triumphs over everyone else in the story. Like Holmès herself, Yamina is the embodiment of a powerful woman. She is loosely treated as an exotic character in the opera, but a closer look at her physical and personal traits reveals that she is different from the women around her mainly because of her desire for freedom and her ability to control men such as Mirko. Yamina frequently expresses a wish to be in control of her own destiny throughout the opera. She is openly critical of the Montenegrin culture in which women are treated like slaves. Yamina knows how to get what she wants, and does so. She is an experienced temptress and realizes the value of having Mirko, an enemy soldier, on her side. She eventually triumphs, escaping alone from the turmoil around her, while Mirko and Aslar are sacrificed in place of the traditional killing of the *femme fatale*. Yamina is not portrayed sympathetically, however, and the ending of the opera is meant to be ironically tragic. Nevertheless, the differences between the plot of *La Montagne Noire* and that of most other operas is striking. Strong and outspoken female characters like Yamina almost never escape from an opera alive and well. Perhaps Holmès uses the exotic guise of her heroine to express her own views about gender.

In conclusion, a revival of Holmès’s large-scale works is badly needed. Despite Holmès’s numerous efforts to build her reputation as a composer, her works have not been performed or analyzed in detail. But pieces like *Les Argonautes* and *La Montagne*
*Noire* would bring a breath of fresh air into the standard repertoire. Their musical content is often lively and innovative, while the subject matter of the works is interesting, and offers some different perspectives about the culture in which they were created. As I have suggested, we cannot form judgments about Holmès’s music based on reviews and analyses from her time. These frequently reflect cultural, rather than musical issues, and, for the most part, are not objective. As I have worked on this document, I have noticed that many other French composers from the nineteenth century, who were once successful, have been neglected.\(^\text{15}\) This is also the case for women composers who were given even fewer opportunities to succeed. I hope that musicologists and musicians will give Holmès and other gifted women composers a second chance.

\(^{15}\) For example, Alfred Bruneau and Emmanuel Chabrier, as well as students of Franck mentioned in Davies’ biography of Franck. Even figures such as Gounod and Jules Massenet are relatively obscure compared to their German counterparts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Biographical Event</th>
<th>Cultural Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td></td>
<td>Augusta Holmes is born on December 16.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Uprisings in Paris after publication of Communist Manifesto.</td>
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<td>1851</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Coup d’état of Louis-Napoleon (December 2). Signifies the beginning of the Second Empire in France.</td>
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<td>1858</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Madame Holmes dies (May 10).</td>
<td>Premi`ere of Gounod’s Faust at the Theatre Lyrique in Paris (March 19).</td>
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<td>1859</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>1861</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>Premiere and scandal of Wagner’s Tannhäuser at the Paris Opéra.</td>
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<td>1863</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Death of the poet Alfred de Vigny, godfather and possible father of Augusta Holmes.</td>
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<td>1869</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Captain Holmes dies.</td>
<td>Augusta travels to Triebchen to meet Wagner along with Saint-Saëns, Catulle Mendès, Judith Gautier, and others. Also goes to see first performance of Das Rheingold in Munich. Augusta and Catulle Mendès probably met and began their affair during their stay in Triebchen.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
<td>Franco Prussian War begins (July through September).</td>
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<td>1871</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Paris surrenders to the Prussians.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1872</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Augusta Holmes becomes a naturalized French citizen and changes her last name officially from “Holmes” to “Holmès.”</td>
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<td>1875</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Augusta Holmès begins study with César Franck.</td>
<td>Premiere of Bizet’s <em>Carmen</em> (March 3).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>30</td>
<td><em>Andante Pastoral</em> from <em>Orlando Furioso</em> premiered by Edouard Colonne on January 15. Received a poor response from audience members.</td>
<td>Premiere of <em>Samson et Dalila</em> by Camille Saint-Saëns (Dec. 2) in Weimar at the Grossherzogliches Theater.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1878</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Holmès wins second place in the City of Paris Competition with <em>Lutèce</em>.</td>
<td>Catulle Mendès and wife Judith Gautier become legally separated. Gautier begins affair with Richard Wagner.</td>
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<td>1879</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Helyonne Mendès, Augusta’s youngest female child, is born on Sept. 12. (This child is the only one whose birth is well documented.)</td>
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<td>1880</td>
<td>33</td>
<td><em>Les Argonautes</em> receives an honorable mention in the City of Paris Competition.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1882</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Holmès begins work on <em>La Montagne Noire</em>.</td>
<td>Premiere of Wagner’s <em>Parsifal</em> (July 26) at Festspielhaus.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Libretto and orchestration for <em>La Montagne Noire</em> complete.</td>
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<td>1889</td>
<td>42</td>
<td><em>Ode Triomphale</em> premiered at the Paris Exposition (one of first world’s fairs).</td>
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<td>1890</td>
<td>43</td>
<td><em>Au Pays Bleu</em> premiered at the festival of Beatrice and Dante in Florence (May 15, 16, and 18).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>48</td>
<td><em>La Montagne Noire</em> is premiered at the Opéra. It closed after only 11 performances.</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<tr>
<td>1896</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Mendès and Holmès separate sometime around this year.</td>
<td>Catulle Mendès and Judith Gautier were officially divorced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Holmès dies on January 28.</td>
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Bibliography


“Music in Paris (From our Own Correspondent),” *The Musical Times* (March 1, 1895): 185-86.


