

ESCLARMONDE

Opera in 4 acts (with prologue & Epilogue)

Music by Jules Massenet

Libretto by Alfred Blau & Louis de Gramont

First Performance: Opéra, Paris, May 14, 1889

Prologue. There is no overture or prelude. the curtain rises abruptly on the Basilica in Byzantium, before the closed doors of the sanctuary. The court of the Emperor Phorcias, who is both ruler and magician, is gathered to witness his abdication in favor of his daughter Esclarmonde. Phorcias reveals that he has instructed Esclarmonde in the mysteries of his magical powers, but he imposes the condition that if she is to retain these powers and her throne, she must remain veiled to all men until she reaches the age of twenty. Then a tournament will be held, and the winner will be awarded her hand in marriage and will share her power as ruler of Byzantium. The doors of the sanctuary open. the veiled, richly garbed and bejewelled. Esclarmonde appears, accompanied by her sister Parséis to act as the guardian of her sister, and then, bidding farewell to all, he hands over his crown and scepter to Esclarmonde amid the acclamations of the assembled court.

Act I. A terrace of the palace, Esclarmonde is musing on her feelings for Roland, a French knight when she once saw and fell in love with, unbeknown to him. When Parséis joins her and remarks on her tears, she confesses that she feels her father's conditions have condemned her to a life of loneliness. Parséis suggests that with her magic powers she can choose her eventual husband; then, learning that she is in love with Roland, suggests that she uses her powers to bring him to her. Énéas, the knight-errant of Parséis, enters, and in recounting his adventures reveals that the gallant Roland, the only knight who has ever overcome him in combat, is soon to marry the daughter of Cléomer, King of France. The news of Roland's proposed marriage greatly disturbs Esclarmonde, and, as soon as Parséis has dismissed Énéas, she invokes the spirits of air, water, and fire to lead Roland to an enchanted island where she may join him. She conjures before her the image of Roland, boar-hunting in the forests of the Ardennes, and sees him pursue a white stag to the shore of the ocean, where he boards a ship to be drawn to the island. Joyously Esclarmonde takes leave of her sister, and, mounting a chariot drawn by two griffons, departs to join her lover.

Act II, Scene 1. The enchanted island. Spirits dance on the shore and beckon Roland to the land. He is bemused at such a greeting, and scarcely can tell where he is. Dancing round him, the spirits lead him to a flowery bank, where he sings down and falls asleep. Esclarmonde enters, rejoicing in the powers that have made this meeting possible. She awakens him with a kiss, confesses that she has used magic to bring him hither, and declares her love. She promises him all the happiness and glory if he will love her in return, but warns that he must never seek to raise her veil and know her identity. Roland rapidly yields to her charms and accedes to her wishes. Surrounded by the attendant spirits, the couple are joined in a mystical union. An orchestral interlude suggests the ardor and ecstasy of their night of love.

Scene 2. A room in an enchanted palace on the island. Roland regrets that their night of rapture is at an end, and, at Esclarmonde's bidding, repeats his vow to keep their union a secret. Esclarmonde then tells him that he must leave her to rescue his country from the Saracens and their savage leader, Sarvégur, who has laid siege to Cléomer's capital, Blois. She assures him that, wherever he may be, she will join him each night. White-clad virgins brings forward the sword of St. George, and Esclarmonde presents it to Roland, telling him that it will render him invincible so long as he keeps his vows to her, but will shatter should he break his vow. As he

reverently receives it, the guard round the hilt, in the form of a cross, becomes luminous and lights up the chamber. With a final admonition to remember his oath of secrecy. Esclarmonde bids him farewell.

Act III, Scene 1. A square in the city of Blois, with the ruins of burning towers in the distance. All is desolation and misery as the despairing populace entreat King Cléomer for aid. The King has little comfort to give them, for, old and defeated, he is awaiting the arrival of an envoy from Sarwégur, coming to exact a tribute of one hundred virgins. The Bishop of Blois approaches, accompanied by monks and choir-boys chanting "Kyrie eleison!" As he bids the people put their trust in God, he is interrupted by the arrival of the Saracen envoy. King Cléomer is about to submit to the demands made upon him, when Roland appears from the crowd and challenges Sarwégur to single combat. The soldiers of Blois rally, and accompany Roland to his encounter, followed by the cheers of the people. While the combat is taking place off-stage, the Bishop exhorts the people to prayer. Roland returns victorious, and the King, to reward him, offers him the hand of his daughter Bathilde. To the crowd's consternation, Roland rejects this honor, and adds insult to injury by refusing to give any reason for doing so. The King pardons his temerity, but the Bishop determines to discover his secret. Saracen prisoners are led past on their way to captivity, and as the people acclaim Roland as their deliverer, the treasures of Sarwégur are laid at his feet.

Scene 2. A room in the palace of King Cléomer. The people can still be heard rejoicing outside, but Roland's thoughts are now absorbed by the approach of night and the prospect of reunion with Esclarmonde. The Bishop of Blois appears, and commands him to reveal the reason for his refusal of Bathilde's hand. Roland answers that he is sworn to silence and must abide by his oath. While pretending to honor such a binding vow, the Bishop nevertheless insists that no secret can be kept from God. He urges Roland to confess, threatening that if such a confession is not made, he is condemned to eternal damnation. Roland is forced to reveal his union with the beautiful, mysterious woman who comes to him each night, her face veiled and her identity unknown. The Bishop horrified, warns that he is bewitched - that he is guilty of sacrilegious possession by a demon. Withholding absolution, he exhorts him to beg God's forgiveness. As the Bishop withdraws, Esclarmonde's voice is heard, and Roland, disturbed that he may have broken his vows, hastens to meet her as she materializes before him. In the very same moment the door busts open, and the Bishop reappears, accompanied by monks, torchbearers and executioners. Thinking Esclarmonde to be a creature of the devil, he haunches into the rites of exorcism and tears the veil from her face. Roland is overcome by her beauty, but she is heart-broken, and can only reproach him for his betrayal. As the Bishop orders his attendants to seize her, she summons her spirits of fire to protect her. Roland attempts to confront the Bishop and draws the sword of St. George, but it splinters in his hand. Esclarmonde, cursing him for his faithlessness, disappears in a bust of flames.

Act IV. A pastoral interlude introduces us to the forests of the Ardennes. Nymphs and forest-spirits dance in front of the cave where Phorcas lives as an anchorite. They are interrupted by four heralds and a standard-bearer, mounted on horseback, and to an accompaniment of trumpets, the leading heralds announces the approaching tournament in Byzantium for the hand of the princess Esclarmonde. As the heralds depart and the sound of their trumpets fades in the distance. Parséis and Énéas make their appearance, lost and bewildered. Parséis thanks Énéas for accompanying her in her quest. The spirits point out the cave of Phorcas to them, and they stand aside as the ex-Emperor enters. He is in somber mood, lost in meditation and afflicted by evil presentiments. Parséis reveals the whole course of her sister's love for Roland. Phorcas reproves her for not guarding her sister better, but the full force of his anger descends on

Esclarmonde. Reassuming his magic powers, he commands his spirits to bring her to him. Through thunder and lightning Esclarmonde appears, surrounded by flames. at first she seems deeply entranced, but as she gradually remembers her betrayal at Blois, so she awakens. Phorcas and the spirits decree that because of her disobedience she will lose her throne and power forever, and that Roland must die unless she renounces him. to save the life of her beloved, she submits. She is left alone to face Roland, who within moments appears, haggard but overjoyed to see her. He begs and is granted forgiveness, but she insists that henceforth he must forget her. When he learns that through his fault she has lost her magic powers, he implores her to flee with him. Momentarily she yields, but rolling thunderclaps remind her of her father's threat. Phorcas reappears, urging her to fulfill her duty. Beside herself with despair, she declares that she will love Roland no more. With these words her crime is expiated, and she and Phorcas disappear in a magic cloud. The skies immediately clear, and Roland, now wishing only for death, is left to join the heralds and a band of knights who cross the back of the stage on their way to the tournament in Byzantium.

Epilogue. The Basilica in Byzantium, exactly as in the Prologue. The doors of the sanctuary are closed. The Emperor Phorcas, mounted on his throne and surrounded by his court, commands the presence of Esclarmonde so that she may be presented to the victor of the tournament. As in the Prologue, the sanctuary doors open, and Esclarmonde appears, veiled, bejeweled like a Byzantine icon; and shimmering in a cloud of incense. the champion knight is led in; he is clad in black armor. The visor is lowered. When Phorcas asks his name, he replies that it is Despair. He had come to the tournament in search of death, and consequently refuses his prize, the hand of the Emperor's daughter. but Esclarmonde has already recognized him at the sound of his voice. Phorcas commands her to unveil, and Roland, in his turn, now recognizes her with delight. As they are united, all join in singing the praises of the beautiful Empress Esclarmonde and her valiant consort.