

The Siamese Composer Eugène Cinda Grassi Bangkok 1881- Paris 1941

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For Anne

As it is well known, the reign of King Chulalongkorn was the era of the opening of Siam (Thailand) to the West – i.e. a time of transfer of a large array of values and concepts from Europe into Siam, in the various concrete fields of political, economical, cultural or intellectual matters. Most surprisingly it was also the time where a transfer in the opposite direction happened, revealed here for the first time, when values of a completely different order, belonging to the less palpable realm of art, myth, and imagination flew from Siam to give shape to an essential aspect of the most important artistic enterprise of the 20th century, the Ballets Russes of Serge Diaghilev. Moreover, the major and involuntary instrument or agent of this strange operation was in Paris known as the “Siamese composer” Eugène Grassi (1881-1941), the son of architect Joachim Grassi (1837-1904), who had been the first to introduce the European style of architecture to Siam.

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1. Prologue: Joachim Grassi (1837-1904), the architect¹

Sometime around 1870 the young architect Joachim Grassi leaves Capodistria, his native town on the Adriatic, to seek his fortune in the Orient. Perhaps enticed by the commercial treaty recently signed between the faraway country and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (to which at this time Capodistria, now in Slovenia belongs) he goes directly to Siam, where two years before King Chulalongkorn has ascended to the throne and is following up the path of modernization initiated by his father King Mongkut.

Being the precursor of the architects, most of them Italians, who will come many years later to work in Siam, Joachim Grassi opens in Bangkok an architectural firm and is rapidly prosperous as he is the first to introduce the classical style of architecture in the kingdom², and therefore receives many commissions from the king and princes for both public and private buildings. Among Grassi's many achievements, the grandest is the imposing Royal Barracks built opposite the Royal Palace in 1882 for the newly re-organised army (known today the Ministry of Army).

At that time it was the largest building in Bangkok, while his strangest is undoubtedly the temple built in 1877 at Bang-Pa-In for King Chulalongkorn, who wanted something unusual. The Wat Nivet Dhamma Prawat is a temple in gothic style with a church tower, stained glass windows, and a gothic altar with the image of the Buddha flanked by two knights in armour! Noteworthy is also the neo-palladian edifice of the Customs House, which is nowadays quite derelict, built in 1888 on the Chao Praya River, next to the French embassy and the Oriental Hotel.

Grassi is joined in Bangkok by two brothers: Giacomo, an engineer who arrives in 1881 and will die of malaria in 1890 while prospecting for gold mines in Siam's peninsula (he is buried in the Christian cemetery on Silom Road), and Antonio, a sculptor, who lived in Siam from 1877 until 1885. Together they comprise the *Grassi Brothers & Co.* Joachim Grassi, an astute businessman, also runs the *Siam River Steamboat Company* operating on the Menam, and with Prince Sai Sanit-wong and Phra Nana Pithpasi he establishes the *Siam Lands, Canal and Irrigation Company* for the development of the Chao Phraya basin. But this is the time of French colonial expansion in Indochina and it is obvious that Siam will not escape for long, the fate that has befallen on its neighbours of Cochinchina, Tonkin, Annam, Cambodia, and Laos. Therefore foreseeing imminent and fruitful business opportunities Joachim Grassi in 1883, who was an Austro-Hungarian subject, becomes a French *protégé*, probably on the advice of the energetic French Consul Jules Harmand who was actively promoting France's role in Siam among the foreigners residing in Bangkok. Unfortunately this clever initiative brings an unexpected result when relations between France and Siam deteriorated ten years later, compelling Grassi to abruptly leave Siam in 1893 during the Paknam incident. He then returns to his

¹ I am very grateful to Pr. Lucio Nalesini, for communicating his very interesting study on the professional career of the architect Gioachino (Joachim) Grassi: "Grassi Brothers & Co: L'architetto capodistriano gioachino grassi e fratelli nella Bangkok di fine secolo XIX", in *Annali di Studi Istriani e mediterranei/Annals for Istran and Mediterranean Studies*, 20/2000), series *historia and sociologia*, 10, 2000,1 ; Koper, 2000.

² The Chakri Maha Prasat, the Throne Hall in the Royal Palace, build in 1876 in the Royal Palace by the British architect from Singapore John Clunish is still a blending of Thai and Western styles, with its three golden *prasat*.

native Capodistria where he re-establishes his Austro-hungarian nationality. Then in 1897, having married (at almost sixty) the sister of an associate, Amalia Stölker, the architect eventually settles in Trieste where he resided until his death on August 19, 1904.

2. Eugène C. Grassi (1881-1941)

Although the public and professional side of the long existence of this architect in Siam is well documented, there is absolutely no information of his personal, private, or familial order regarding his twenty-three years in Bangkok. Although it was hardly likely that these were spent in solitude or celibacy. This lacuna would be filled rather unexpectedly thanks to a chance discovery made in the course of unrelated research, *a priori* not related in any possible way either to Siam nor to an architect who had been working in Siam, but the history of the Ballets Russes in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed it is while studying this subject that one day there appeared a curious document that, after arduous research, would not only allow one to complete the gaps in the biography of Joachim Grassi in Siam, but also lead to a surprising number of conclusions on the more general topic of the relations between Siam and Europe during this time – and yes, with the Ballets Russes.

This document was the advertisement, in a Parisian review of 1913, for a set of musical scores, *Cinq mélodies siamoises* (Five Siamese Melodies), and was quite arresting since, although the name of the composer, “E. Grassi”, was not known to us, the author of the text of the melodies, M. D. Calvocoressi, was no other than the specialist of Russian music who from 1907 to 1910 had served as a secretary for Serge Diaghilev in Paris. While on the other hand, the titles of some melodies: *Death of Phra-Narai*, *Prayer of Nang-Sisuda*, *Song of Nang-Sisuda*, denoted a familiarity with Siam. This was most intriguing, since it was hardly common in Parisian musical circles of that time!

Musical encyclopaedias provide a few details about E. Grassi: “A French composer, born in Bangkok in 1881, who played an important role in the history of French musical exoticism in the first half of the twentieth century”³; “Eugene Cinda Grassi, Bangkok, 5.7.1887 - Paris, 8.6.1941, French composer who studied with Vincent d’Indy and L. Bourgault Ducoudray (1905-1910); he returned to Siam in 1910 to study popular music, the main source of his inspiration, and lived in Paris after 1913”⁴.

Eugène Grassi being born in Bangkok at a time when the architect Joachim Grassi had been living there for ten years or more, it was logical to infer a link between them, yet impossible to establish, however, due to a complete lack of any tangible evidence. Eventually the missing evidence was found in the Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, where copies of all *état-civil* pieces issued by

³ Jean Mongrédien, *Dictionnaire biographique français contemporain*, Paris, 1985.

⁴ Marc Honneger, *Dictionnaire de la musique*, Paris, Bordas, 1970.

French authorities abroad are kept. The *duplicata* of the “Declaration made on March 29, 1889, at the French consulate in Bangkok, by M. Grassi (Joachim), architect and civil engineering contractor, *protégé français*, residing in Bangkok,” and who declares indeed not one, but three sons! Félix Auguste, born in 1880, Eugène César, born in 1881, and Georges Raphael, born in 1884⁵, all declared as his natural children, with no mention whatsoever about their mother. There is no other trace about the identity of his mother than her being mentioned – quite ultimate in the official recording of the death of the composer on June 8, 1941, during the war in a Parisian hospital: “Eugène GRASSI, born at... (Indo-China), on... (sixty years old), son of Joachim GRASSI and of Lucie Nho with no other information known to the informant (matrimonial state of the defunct unknown to the informant)”.

“Lucie Nho”: an Asian name, though not sounding properly Siamese, and a Christian first name. We might suppose that Eugène’s mother was one of the many Siamese subjects of foreign ethnic origin. A Chinese?, an Indochinese?, such as those Catholics who in nineteenth century had fled the persecutions in Annam to settle in Siam, but nothing in E. Grassi background portrays any cultural Vietnamese legacy. A Cambodian?, since the provinces of Batambang and Siam Reap were Siamese at the time. Later Eugène will indeed teach Cambodian as well as Siamese in Paris. A Laotian?, the question remains.

“Through heredity and through culture, he had received the gifts of several skies and of several ages”⁶, a friend of Eugène Grassi wrote later. Assuredly Grassi’s situation was from the start markedly complex, since this young Franco-Siamese boy, born in Siam and half European, was in fact neither really French nor really Siamese. Nevertheless however ambiguous was his personal status, which must have been psychologically quite disturbing at times, the sure and essential fact is that the young Grassi, born in Bangkok, received there a thoroughly Siamese education. It is this legacy that would deeply and indelibly shape the sensibility, the cultural, mental and affective values of the boy. Because the three boys did not leave Siam with their father Joachim when he was compelled to leave in 1893, but remained in Bangkok with their mother where they received an excellent level of education. Eugène planned to become a physician while his brother will get his engineering diploma at the prestigious École Centrale in Paris. He most certainly attended the Assumption College in Bangkok, whose construction had been entrusted in 1887 by the Father Superior Emile Colombet to their father Joachim Grassi. Later Eugène Grassi states in an article about Siam, that there is in Bangkok a private college, run by French missionaries as certainly the most considerable and the most prosperous place of education in the kingdom, and in the same article Grassi mentions a former college classmate who has become an attaché of King Chulalongkorn⁷.

⁵ Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris, Microfilm, Duplicata des Actes de l’Etat Civil, 1889, envoyés le 2 janvier 1890 par E. Lorgeou du Consulat Général de France à Bangkok.

⁶ Maurice Boucher, E. C. Grassi, *Le Ménestrel*, August 17, 1928. Paris, Bordas, 1970.

⁷ Eugène Grassi, “Au pays de Chulalongkorn, le roi - la cour - le gouvernement”, *Le Correspondant*, Paris, July 1907.

In 1897 Eugène is sent in France to pursue his studies, in Rennes, Brittany, no doubt in a catholic college affiliated with the Congregation of the Frères de Saint Gabriel from which depends the Assumption college. He gets his baccalaureate in 1901, and the following year his certificate of studies in physics, chemistry and natural sciences at the Faculty of Sciences of Rennes, since at this time Eugène is considering a medical career. However in 1903 when he moves to Paris, his plans radically change when he decides to start musical studies. From 1905 until 1910 he studies musical composition at the Schola Cantorum, the progressive musical school founded in 1896 by Vincent d'Indy in the Latin Quarter. A teacher there is the composer Albert Roussel who will soon author several works of exotic character, while another student is no other than the eccentric Erik Satie who at forty has decided to resume his musical instruction! Grassi also attends the Conservatoire de Musique, where his teacher is L. A. Bourgault-Ducoudray (1840-1910). Nowadays the rather unknown, Bourgault-Ducoudray's teaching was actually extremely influential over a whole generation of musicians. He stressed the need for a rejuvenation of musical expression and exhorted his pupils to consider the most diverse forms of musical modes and languages, such as popular, religious or exotic music. "No element of expression to be found in any tune, he declared, however ancient or remote in origin, should be banished from our musical idiom. All that may help to rejuvenate this idiom should be welcome. The question is not one of giving up any previous acquisition, but on the contrary of adding to them⁸." Putting in practice his precepts into his own compositions, Bourgault-Ducoudray wrote for instance a number of pieces inspired by Greek or Breton folklores, or a *Rhapsodie cambodgienne* after he saw plaster reproductions of Angkor Thom at the Universal Exhibition in Paris in 1878. However, as no kind of music from Cambodia had actually been played at the Exhibition, the musician Florent Schmitt would later remark that, although not lacking flavour nor pictoresqueness, the *Rhapsodie cambodgienne*, was as well as Cambodian "could as well be said to be Californian, Afgan, from Limousin or from Groënland without really insulting our ethnographic conceptions. This, for that matter, having no importance whatsoever"⁹. But this is precisely where Grassi's own compositions radically differ from that of his master and from all of those others "exotic" composers of his time.

In 1910 Grassi shows to Bourgault-Ducoudray his first musical compositions inspired by popular musical themes he remembered from his childhood in Siam, *Nuit tropicale* and *Five Siamese melodies*, and his teacher immediately advises him to return to Siam to study more thoroughly the native musical idiom. Consequently, in the company of his brother who is now an engineer, Eugène Grassi leaves for Siam in May 1910, where he remains three years, until April 1913. In Siam however Grassi "does not study the music scientifically as his teacher has suggested, as a musicologist or an archaeologist, but lets himself get impregnated by the soul of his native land, absorbing certain inflexions and processes of fundamental combinations. He listens to the little groups of indigenous musicians and their

⁸ L. A. Bourgault-Ducoudray, quoted in M.D. Calvocoressi, *Musicians Gallery, Music and Ballet in Paris and London*, Londres, 1933, p. 137.

⁹ Florent Schmitt, "Concerts Lamoureux, February 20, 1921", *Courrier musical et théâtral*, 15 mars 1921.

traditional instruments, the small orchestras of the theatre”¹⁰. Perhaps he goes as far as peninsular Siam, where such traditions are very active with the little itinerant groups of the peculiar musical and theatrical forms of the *lakorn chattri*, or *manohra*.

Not composing anything during his stay in Siam and it is quite a while after his return to Paris that Grassi’s musical production slowly resumes¹¹. A trickling out of short pieces, most of them vocals, all inspired in subjects and in musical themes by Siam. This exotic material however is always handled according to the modern and sophisticated formalism acquired in Paris at the Schola and at the Conservatoire, as critics state: “a thoroughly European and modern technique, enriched with exotic rhythms and modes, is expertly put at the service of a thoroughly oriental sensitivity”¹²; “a sharp far-eastern note in line and colour confers its true personality” to “the sure and assured craftsmanship of pages exuding classicism in the general meaning of the word”, to the precise and fine writing of “a true musician who notes the line with the precision of a Ravel and treats the orchestra with the research of timbre of a Debussy”¹³. Another critic explains that though extremely concise, Grassi’s music seems at first glance of an irreducible complexity, its clarity, and its organization appearing only with the means of expression of a full orchestra. “even enriched with unusual or exotic instruments, singing or bubbling at every heights, piling up colours that do not mix but enhance one another by their richness and contrast... The colouring is not a superfluous ornament, but an inseparable part of the intention itself, following it, meticulously adjusting to it, dressing it with an almost obsessive care... Knowing how to give in a few pages the impression of a world of sounds, organised in its tiniest particles by a meticulous and lucid will, activating all colours and all timbres, giving an expressive force even to noises, evoking the soul of the East thanks to the lucid enchantments of Western science, while keeping a strict balance, an exact and simple measure”¹⁴.

An important concern of Grassi is his desire to transfer in his music the system of the “defective scales with movable tonic”¹⁵ of Siamese music, and which, in an article in 1922 and a short musical treatise in 1926 he extols as a way to solve the dilemma of tonality versus atonality by the use of mixed mode. “With tonality more or less attenuated, that can be either formed by harmonics of a single series (all issued from the same fundamental note) or of several series (issued from different fundamentals)”. He gives as an example of “mixed mode based on the augmented fourth G-C sharp, or the diminished fifth C sharp-G”, the *mélopée* he heard in Bangkok on the occasion of King Chulalongkon’s funeral, and which he used later in his melody *La Procession*. In his essay Grassi suggests that Western composers should turn towards the Far East, “where the most unexpected and

¹⁰ Maurice Boucher, “E. C. Grassi”, *Le Ménestrel*, August 17, 1928, p. 357.

¹¹ After re-orchestrating his *Cinq mélodies siamoises* (*La Mort de Pra-Narai*, *Prière de Nang Sisuda*, *Chanson de Nang Sisuda*, *L’Espigle*, *Le Lac maudit*), Grassi composes *Trois Poèmes bouddhiques* (*Les Oiseaux inspiré*, *La Procession*, *Le Réveil des Bouddhas*), 1917-1919, *Mélopée thaïe*, 1923, *les Sanctuaires* (*Mosquée*, *Eglise*, *Pagode*) 1923-25, *Complainte Laotienne*, 1926, etc.

¹² Henri Prunières, *Revue Musicale* 1 mars 1924, p. 254; the remark is about *La Procession*.

¹³ G. Migot, *La Revue Musicale*, 1 mars 1921, about *Mélodies Siamoises*.

¹⁴ Maurice Boucher, “E. C. Grassi”, *Le Ménestrel*, August 17 & 24, 1928, p. 357-358 & p. 365-367.

¹⁵ “Gammas déficientes siamoises aux toniques mobiles”, Marcelle Soulage, “Notes about Eugène C. Grassi”, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale-musique, juillet 1960.

the most varied modes reign, where chromaticism is thriving and, even better, the quartertone. In all likeliness, the rejuvenation of Western Europe will therefore be obtained through the transfusion of Asiatic blood”¹⁶.

Besides this purely musical aspect, emotionally the work of Grassi is ultimately based on the memories of his Siamese past as two examples will further demonstrate. It is for this reason they are imbued with a deep sense of nostalgia. Sometimes its explicit as caused by the sad personal situation of the exiled composer. (*Voile qui fuit*, 1926; *Sukhanimitra*, 1926, of which Grassi explains that the title comes from the Sanskrit *sukha*, happiness, and *nimitra*, dream, and the three pieces are *Happiness seen in dream*, *The Vision vanishes*, *Awakening and return to reality*; or the draft of a lyric drama, *L'Apsara lointaine*, *Far-away Apsara*, 1924, etc.). Sometimes emerging from the deep layers of his Buddhist upbringing and imbued then with a subtle sense of resignation: *Nuit Tropicale*, his first piece and for a critic evokes “the voluptuous anguish and the thought of the beyond that, more than the heavy smell of the sleep of the forest, weigh upon the intoxicated soul”¹⁷, or *Chanson Nostalgique*, *Nostalgic Song*, 1922, “not about the vague and unexplained nostalgia that can devastate the Western soul that possess no more than her own past. But feeling of the hidden sources – beginning of the journey back to previous lives – capture of shadows that once were ours and of felicities that belonged to us when we were not ourselves”¹⁸.

In 1915 Grassi becomes a *répétiteur* of Siamese and Cambodian at the Ecole des Langues Orientales in Paris, recommended for the post by the titular professor of Siamese at the school, Edouard Lorgeou (1848-1925), who attested to Grassi's competence in his “knowledge, aptitude of oral teaching, as well as of his perfect honorability”¹⁹: it is Lorgeou who years before was a translator at the French consulate in Bangkok, who had registered the official reconnaissance of the three sons of the architect Joachim Grassi in 1889!

Simultaneously to his post of *répétiteur* that he held until 1927, Eugène Grassi leads his career as composer and of director of the symphonic orchestra that he founded in 1924. Convinced “of the importance for the renewal of musical art through a better knowledge of far-eastern music”²⁰, twice a month the concerts Grassi gives at the theatre of the Gaité-Lyrique are pieces from classical and modern composers more or less inspired by exoticism, Debussy, Roussel, Ravel, Florent Schmitt, etc. and of course, Grassi. The originality of the formula is that dance

¹⁶ Eugène Grassi, “L’orient et la Musique de l’Avenir”, *Le Ménestrel*, 12 mai 1922, p. 213-214, 19 mai 1922, p. 225-226; Eugène Grassi, *D’une Musique nouvelle-Reconstruire*, Paris, Heugel, 1926.

¹⁷ Pierre de Lapommeraye, *Le Ménestrel*, samedi 5 mars 1921.

¹⁸ Joseph Baruzi, *Le Ménestrel*, 29 décembre 1922. It is also to his Siamese background that is indebted *La Fête de Zakmoukou*, Grassi's stage music for *Judith*, 1922, a play by Henry Bernstein after the biblical episode. A critic praised the “motives of Assyrian and Jewish origin” of the music, but this was later given under the title *Fête khmère*, clearly revealing its true inspiration! (*Judith*, decors by Serguei Soudeïkine, costumes by Léon Bakst, mise en scène André Antoine, Mme Simone playing Judith; première at the Théâtre du Gymnase, October 13, 1922, and Concerts Padeloup, December, 23, 1922.) Similarly the opera (never played), *Amour et magie*, set in a legendary Persepolis with characters such as Képhren, Zéhar or Niloum, but the scenario, involving a malevolent dwarf, magical operations over the Three World, an heroine immolating herself on a pyre, quite reminiscent of Hindu and Buddhist notions. (*Amour et Magie*, text by Victor Emile-Michelet and Jacques Trèves (alias Louise Ducot), who are both heavily involved with esoterism and hermeticism, so it is possible that at this time Grassi was involved too.)

¹⁹ Lettre of the Administrator, archives of the Ecole des Langues Orientales, Paris, Dossier Grassi: “the designation of M. E. Grassi as a tutor of Siamese and Cambodian languages would represent a precious acquisition for the School.”

²⁰ Henri Prunières, *La Revue Musicale*, 1 mars 1924.

is associated with music, as it is in Siam or in Java. While the orchestra plays in the darkness, the music is interpreted plastically on a platform by ballerinas of the Opéra or by “exotic” dancers, Alice and Juliette Bourgat, Yvonne Daunt, Mado Minty, Vanah Yami, Nyota Inyoka, etc.²¹. The concerts are given until 1929. In 1933, together with the composers Paul Le Flem and Charles Koechlin, Grassi founds “La Musique survivante”, whose aim is to play “pieces of music which has survived and that may hope to survive”²². Then later in the thirties, Grassi’s career appears to fade.

3. Eugène Grassi and King Chulalongkorn

In 1907, when King Chulalongkorn visits Europe for the second time (stopping twice in Paris), Eugène Grassi solicits an audience with His Majesty, which he relates at the beginning of a long (almost ten pages) and very well documented article about Siam, in the review *Le Correspondant*:

The King of Siam will soon be in Paris where he plans to spend two or three weeks. When two months ago he already made here a short apparition, I had solicited from him the permission to present him my respects. [...] As I was waiting for the time of the audience, an attaché, my former classmate, was very agreeably keeping me company. At two o’clock I am introduced into the vast salon of the legation where His Majesty, standing and holding a cup of coffee, exclaims in English: “Ah ! Here you are! You sent me a request for an audience written in Siamese, and well written. Did you write it yourself? - Yes, Sire. - You speak Siamese, then? asks the King in the language of his country. - Sire, I answer in the same idiom, I can speak Siamese but not very well, I am afraid... - You can write it though, he insists. - Ten years have passed since I have left Siam, hence some difficulty of elocution, but this difficulty does not exists when I am writing, as I have the time to search for my words.” Satisfied to hear me speaking in a tongue that he is allowed to prefer to any others, the King is smiling, while savoring his coffee. He is kind enough to inquire about my family, to speak benevolently of my father who was fifteen years at his service. Then after ten minutes of conversation where he expresses his desire to visit Paris as a tourist and without being constrained by minute details of protocol, the King dismisses me. I can then hear him saying gaily to himself “He speaks Siamese! One speaks Siamese in Paris!”²³

4. Three “exotic cocktails” of E. C. Grassi

In a recent study of Parisian musical exoticism at the beginning of the twentieth century, Eugène Grassi is briefly mentioned after the ballerina Cléo de Mérode and her exhibitions of Cambodian Dances in 1900, and an obscure theoretician of exoticism: “...A few years later, the French composer Eugène Grassi leads adepts of cultural pluralism even further. [...] In this perspective he prepares all kinds of

²¹ Cf. for instance André Levinson, “Yvonne Daunt interprète Evocations de Roussel aux concerts orientalistes de M. Grassi”, *La danse d’aujourd’hui*, 1929.

²² The Musical Times, vol 74, n. 1082, April 1933, p. 366-69.

²³ Eugène Grassi, “Au pays de Chulalongkorn: le roi – la cour – le gouvernement”, *Le Correspondant*, July 1, 1907, Paris, pp. 491-503. Perhaps it is no coincidence that it is in the same review that M. D Calvocoressi publishes in April an article to introduce Diaghilev’s season of concerts of Russian music, M.D. Calvocoressi, “La Musique russe”, *Le Correspondant*, avril-juin 1907, p 462-488.

exotic cocktails that he calls *Réveil des Bouddhas*, *Méodies siamoises*, *Nuit tropicale ou Fête Khmère*²⁴. With the three examples of *La Procession*, *Les Oiseaux inspirés* and *Pagode*, we will examine which ingredients exactly entered what the eminent musicologist considers as exotic cocktails.

a. *La Procession*

When King Chulalongkorn dies on October 23, 1910, Eugène Grassi is already back in Siam and he attends the two funerary ceremonies that followed: the first procession bringing the Great Golden Urn with the royal remains to the Dusit Maha Prasat, and then, after it has been exposed there for six months, the second procession, on March 16, 1911, that brings the Great Urn to the funeral pyre for the cremation. This is the last stage of the long funerary process – the ultimate of the complex rituals punctuating the whole life of the sovereign, according to the ideological system inherited through the Khmers from ancient Vedic and Hindu tradition: the apotheosis transforming the defunct king, incarnation of Vishnu during his life on earth, into a real divinity, sitting forever in the celestial abodes at the sides of Indra, the Sovereign of the gods²⁵. Grassi is among the crowd watching the slow progression of the Chariot of the Great Victory, pulled by 220 men and carrying the Great Golden Urn, to the sound of a special orchestra consisting of 4 Metal Drums, 160 Red Drums of the Victory, 20 Silver Drums of the Victory, 20 Gold Drums of the Victory, 2 Chiefs of the Flute, 2 Chiefs of the Drum of War, 20 Blowers of Foreign Bugles, 28 Blowers of Siamese Bugle, and 4 Conch Blowers²⁵. One can easily imagine the emotion of Grassi when he sees the impressive cortege passing the Royal Palace and the Royal Barracks, the imposing edifice in the classical order built close to the year he was born, by his father for the new army of King Chulalongkorn. In Paris, a few years later, during the war, Grassi writes the melody *La Procession*, one of the *Three Buddhist Poems*²⁶, inspired by the memory of that glorious day and reproducing the “intense poignancy²⁷” of the peculiar music he had heard then. As Grassi explains in a notice to his score: “During both processions, the music of the palace plays a traditional and ritual *mélopée* entrusted to a rather special oboe, whose song, deeply and poignantly expressive, is accompanied by an continuous roll of gongs and punctuated with tambourines and drums. We have reproduced here this *mélopée* as accurately as possible, with its characteristic accompaniment, completing the piece and introducing a vocal part.”²⁸

The vocal text of *La Procession* consists of lyrical stanzas in Siamese for a soprano; the author, whose name appears on the score, is “Naï Thim, Parien”. Could this

²⁴ Manfred Kelkel “Roussel et l’exotisme musical”, in Roussel, *Musique et esthétique*, (dir. M. Kelkel), Paris, Vrin, 1989, p. 73-74.

²⁵ Cf. Quaritch H.G Wales (formerly belonging to the Chancery of the Siamese Court, and with information given by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab et Prince Dhani Niwat), *Siamese State Ceremonies, their history and function*, London, 1931.

²⁶ *Trois poèmes bouddhiques*, “À mon interprète Madame Germaine Lubin, de l’Opéra”: *Les Oiseaux inspirés*, poésie de Marguerite Combes, première at the Concerts Alexanian, February 1919 ; *La Procession* (chant en siamois ou en français), Stances de Naï Thim, Parien, première Concerts Pasdeloup, February 1921, Paris Opéra, dir. Rhené-Baton, sang by Mme Malnory-Marseillac; *Le Réveil des Bouddhas*, texte de E.C. Grassi, Concerts Colonne, 22 February 1920, Théâtre du Châtelet, dir. Gabriel Pierné. (Germaine Lubin sang the alternative choice of the French translation).

²⁷ Louis Durey, *Le Courrier musical et théâtral*, 1 avril 1921.

²⁸ *Trois poèmes bouddhiques*, “À mon interprète Madame Germaine Lubin, de l’Opéra”: *Les Oiseaux inspirés*, poésie de Marguerite Combes, première at the Concerts Alexanian, February 1919; *La Procession* (chant en siamois ou en français), Stances de Naï Thim, Parien, première Concerts Pasdeloup, February 1921, Paris Opéra, dir. Rhené-Baton (Germaine Lubin sang the alternative choice of the French translation); *Le Réveil des Bouddhas*, texte de E.C. Grassi, Concerts Colonne, 22 February 1920, Théâtre du Châtelet, dir. Gabriel Pierné. (Germaine Lubin sang the alternative choice of the French translation).

Nai Thim be the same playwright once hired by Chao Phraya Mahin to adapt the *Dalang* of King Rama I and the *Sepha Khun Chang Khun Phaen*²⁹? But what is particularly remarkable is the term, “Parien”, added to the name of the author – an enigmatic word that actually refers to a specific trait of Siamese Buddhism. At the beginning of their monastic education the novices first study for three years the principles of Dhamma in their own language, Siamese. Then in a second stage of six years or more, the monks study the texts of the Theravada canon in the ancient sacred language from India, Pali. Then when they have completed this cursus, they receive the honorary title of *Parien* (from the Pali *pariñña*, “wisdom, knowledge”³⁰). Therefore “Nai Thim, Parien” approximately means “Mr. Thim, holder of a diploma-es-Pali”: the author of the stanzas of *La Procession* had the qualification of a learned Siamese monk. It is tempting to imagine that when he comes back to Siam in 1910, Grassi, then in his early thirties, would have carried out the monastic retreat that was customary for any Siamese young man to undertake and actually that it would be very surprising that the high-minded young man would not have undertaken it and that he may have met Nai Thim during this retreat.

La Procession, Stances de NAÏ THIM, Parien, Musique de E. C. Grassi.

Fang eui, fang trê ! mùa pao hê prakôt chôt chuang, sanan sôt ô t uuan sathuân suâng,
cha pãi yang wàng luang, monthien thong. Sayanaha wéla Suriya cha làb khao,
pleng, ratsami phrao dutcha la klanlãi chôn: preb duếi pra Paramintharapin pra chakon,
su suang sathaphon. Tê pranam yang ruangsi. Athit tha at sadôngkhata khôngcha
khunmi; Tê chom narùbodi rùchakhùn hãi khôn hen? Fang eui, fang trê! mùa pao
hê prakôt chôt chuang, sanan sôt ô t uuan sathuân suâng, cha pãi yang wàng luang,
monthien thong.

Carry the golden Urn to the palace of the illustrious ancestors! Heralds, proclaim to the Thai people the departure of a glorious prince! In the radiant sunset of a beautiful day, in the horizon the Sun bids us farewell by sending up in the sky his gentlest fires: thus, radiating with the pure brightness of a summer evening, He whom we are mourning is disappearing from our eyes. Sun, another dawn will bring again your warm rays; however he what human eyes will ever see him again? Carry the golden Urn to the palace of the illustrious ancestors! Heralds, proclaim to the Thai people the departure of a glorious prince!

b. Pagode (Les Sanctuaires)

A few years later Grassi composes a symphonic trilogy, *Les Sanctuaires*, 1923-25, and the three parts, *Mosquée*, *Eglise*, *Pagode* to evoke the spirit of three religions:

The first of the three visions, *Mosquée*, is the earthiest. It is the rejoicing of the people after the deprivations of Ramadan, the calls of the Muezzin and the ritual dances announcing a paradise where the body will get his share of happiness. To this motley tumult *Église* opposes sober gravity and meditative fervor; plain-chant modes develop

²⁹ Cf. Mattani Moj dara Rutnin, *Dance, Drama, and Theatre in Thailand*, 1993, (1996), p. 103. It is the ballet troupe of Chao Phraya Mahin (Mahintharasakdithamrong) that the Tsarévitch Nicolas saw in Bangkok in April 1891, and that performed in Berlin and Saint-Petersburg in 1900-1901.

³⁰ According to a personal communication from Phra Dhammanando, Bangkok: “Parien refers to the 9th grade course of Pali study that most Thai scholar monks undertake. The Parien syllabus was created by the 19th century Sangharaja Somdet Vajiranavarorasa. Sometimes the word is used as a title for those monks who have reached grade 3 or higher in the syllabus: “phra maha parien” or “pra maha” for short.

like a monumental architecture in which contre-chant introduce more flexible lines, like the prayer of the anxious soul searching appeasement in the beyond. The third poem of this trilogy is *Pagode*, sanctuary of Buddhism. After a brief introduction in twelve times where harmonies are searching and seeking themselves, alongside others hostile to them, coming with delay or ahead of those resembling them, begins a sad call sung by the English horn, voice of everlasting desire; with a firmer tone the oboe answers, affirmation of the will posing itself as master and twice repeating its warning: renunciation is necessary. However the fever burst that was already quivering in the depth of the orchestra carried forth Man, who will devote himself to action³¹.

The texts of *Pagode* consist of a melody in French written by Grassi for a soprano, and of verses in Pali, for two baritones, evoking never ending migrations, rebirth and the happiness of the chosen reaching to the beyond of life. It is taken from two sacred books of Theravada Buddhism, the *Dhammapada*, “Verses on the Law”, belonging to the Khuddaka Nikāya, an ancient collection of popular stanzas of high literary value, and the *Mahavagga*, a section of the Vinaya Pitaka, “Basket of Discipline,” telling of the hesitation of the Buddha about divulging his doctrine after the Illumination.

Pagode reveals the knowledge and the deep attachment of Grassi to the religion of his childhood, but also the psychological tensions and antagonisms at work in a character whose status was from the beginning so ambivalent. French and not French and Siamese and not Siamese, the resigned dialectic of the exiled into a world of so utterly different values and ways, but to which he nonetheless entirely belongs too: “But we care for the flimsy life even more for all its pains. Brief light of our eyes, rapturous light, thou shine for one day. Shine, but already comes the darkness of the night, its veils covering the azure of the sky. The night immense and sublime!”

Ôm! Ôm! Ôm! I have traveled along the whole cycle and I have found nothing but immense distress and immense grief. Ah! Who will vanquish this world of death! Ko imampathavim vijessati, Yamalokam vijessati? Long is the night for who is not asleep, long is the road for who is walking, long are the countless lives for who is suffering. Few are those who will cross the river and reach the other bank. Digha jagarato ratti, digham santassa yo ja nam: Digho balanam samsaro. Appaka te manussesu ye janai paragamino. In the expectancy of the joys that soothe our hearts to the fancy of our desires, we are fond of this life, distressing and soft. But we care for the flimsy life even more for all its pains. Brief light of our eyes, rapturous light, thou shine for one day. Shine, but already comes the darkness of the night, its veils covering the azure of the sky. The night immense and sublime! Konu annatramariyehi padam sambuddham arahati? Yam padam sammadannaya Parinibbanti anasava.

c. Les Oiseaux inspirés

Les Oiseaux inspirés (Inspired birds) is one of the *Trois Poèmes bouddhiques* (the others are *La Procession* and *Réveil des Bouddhas*, about the birth of Maya, the mother of Çakya-Mouni). The text is a poem in French by Marguerite Combes, after a

³¹ Maurice Boucher, art. cit.

Buddhist legend where at night an hermit sees birds flying in front of the disk of the full moon, actually an opening in the dome of the sky, through which the bird eventually disappears. This vision evokes the hermit to nirvana, and he dreams “of the happiness of entering free and alive into the depth opened by such a brightness, alike to the sublime nothingness where the Buddha sleeps.”

In fact no such legend exists in Buddhism, neither in canonical texts nor in popular tales, such as the *Jatakas*. It was invented by Grassi and his friend Marguerite Combes. However, far from a groundless and fanciful invention, it relies on a highly complex set of references to Siamese culture and Siamese history woven together by Grassi, referring also to his personal situation concerning his native country. Paradoxically this invented story provides a far deeper insight into Siamese culture and beliefs, its real and imaginary worlds, than would have an authentic Buddhist legend being simply reproduced.

The works of Grassi contains many evocations of the nocturnal sky, always tinged with a deep mystical or nostalgic connotation. The resigned meditation of *Pagode* (1923) ends with the evocation of “the darkness of night. The night immense and sublime!”, and it is the proper theme of *Death of Phra Narai*, one of the *Mémoires Siameses* (1910): Phra Narai understands his fate when seeing a star falling in the night sky. “Narai” is the Thai name for Vishnu but also that of the King of Siam who first opened his country to the West and exchanged embassies with Louis XIV, the Sun King:

Pra Narai, while one evening he was dreaming, saw a beautiful star of fire falling.
His star! Yes, it was his star that was falling! “It is over, he exclaimed, my life, like a dream, alas is growing dim and fades. My wandering mind, alone in the azure, will rejoin his fate, faraway, to live a new life”. Appeased, Pra Narai the Wise bows and smiles at the darkened sky where never any more the dazzling Star will shine.

Curiously, when Grassi in 1915 applies for the post of *repétiteur* of Siamese at the Ecole des Langues Orientales in Paris, one of the few items of personal information he gives in his *curriculum vitae*, which is hardly relevant to the matter, is that “for one year I have been a member of the Société Astronomique de France³².” As one knows, astrology plays a prevalent role in Siam, from the decisions of everyday life to the determination of the most solemn rituals of monarchical life and of religion. The Moon also plays also a non-negligible role in Buddhist creeds. It is during the night of the full moon (of May) that Siddharta Gautama in meditation under a tree in Bodhgaya, reached *nirvana* and became the Buddha; it is at the full moon (of July) that he delivered his first Sermon in Sarnath and set in motion the Wheel of the Dhamma; it is at the full moon (of February or March) that twelve hundred disciples gathered in a forest where they were ordained by the Buddha, a miracle commemorated by the celebration of Magha Puja, when people carry candles in procession around temples.

But there is also another particular motive for Grassi’s emulating an interest in astronomy: the prestigious example of king Mongkut, the very religious sovereign who had spent most of his life in a monastery and who then opened his country

³² Eugène Grassi, manuscript letter, Archives of Ecole des Langues orientales, Paris, Dossier-Grassi.

to the West had also for all his life held a keen, devoted interest in the scientific study of astronomy. Moreover it was precisely this interest in astronomy that was to determine the King's fate. He got infected with malaria while leading a group of foreign observers and scientists to watch the solar eclipse he had predicted in peninsular Siam on August 18, 1868 and died soon after. Then indeed, it was almost at the same insalubrious spot that twenty years later, in 1890, Eugène Grassi's uncle Giacomo died of malaria while prospecting for gold in Bang Ta Pan.

Moreover, it is quite significant that Grassi should belong to the French Astronomical Society: founded in 1887 by the astronomer Camille Flammarion (1842-1925), who although a great scientist, has the peculiarity of blending the rigorous exigencies of science with the irrational conceptions of spiritualism. He considered this not a mere creed but a true science and was so preoccupied by the question of the afterlife and communication with the dead that in 1862 Flammarion was expelled from his official post at the Observatoire in Paris after the publication of *La Pluralité des mondes habités* (Plurality of Inhabited Worlds). This is a book where he "scientifically" examines the possibility for the souls of the dead to inhabit the planets of the solar system. (as a convincing argument he cites the ancient Hindu beliefs consigned in the Vedas, which "proclaim the doctrine of the plurality of the sojourns of the human soul in the stars, following their terrestrial incarnation. According to these conceptions, the soul goes to the realm to which its deeds belong³³."). It is therefore not difficult to understand the appeal of such conceptions for Grassi: how in his astronomical contemplation of the starry night, besides being a solace for the bleak realities and roughness of the difficult life, could be reconciled with the incompatibilities and other irreconcilables of his rational mind as a Westerner with the soft mysticism left in his soul by his upbringing in Siam. And of the antagonism of the simplicity of Theravada Buddhism with the harsh sophistication of Parisian life, and to escape the primeval ambiguity of his double Siamese and French heredity.³⁴

As for the theme: "Birds flying before the disk of the moon", was not to be found in figurative or literary representations in the West more than in Siam. It is fairly common in the representations of the Far East. For instance in many of the well known Japanese prints of Hiroshige, *Panorama of Eight Views of Kanazawa under the Full Moon*, *Full Moon at Takanawa*, *Full Moon at Sumida River*, with flock of birds flying in front of the moon. On the other hand, birds actually play a role in everyday devotion in Siam, as it does in every Buddhist country, with the popular custom of freeing birds from cages near the temples being a pious gesture allowing the acquisition of merits by practicing the cardinal Buddhist virtue of compassion for all creatures. However, it can also be seen metaphorically as the image of the soul

³³ Camille Flammarion, *La pluralité des mondes habités*, Paris, 1862, p. 17. In another book of vulgarisation of scientific notions, *Clairs de Lune* (Moon Lights, 1894), the savant is led to considerations about "the contemplation of eternal truths": "At this moment the voices of nature let themselves be heard to my thinking under a meaning that until then had remained concealed to me" – when hearing the murmur of the cricket at night, "the genuine perpetual song of that evening", and explain that "anterior by several million years to the first creatures who sang upon the earth, the cricket seems to be the first living thing who made itself heard. It is like an echo of vanished ages, a remote memory of the past. This primitive insect tells us the whole story of nature. It was successively the witness of every epoch of the progressive evolution of the world".

³⁴ Besides, the notion of the stars and the moon seen as opening in the dome of the firmament through which passes the light, is not at all an Indian astronomical conception, but was emitted in the sixth century BC by the Greek philosopher Anaximandre, and much reused by Flammarion.

liberated by the teaching of the Buddha, escaping the world of the illusions and the prison of *kharmā* to eventually reach the awakening, the *nirvana*.

Lastly, and extremely interesting is the fact that Grassi entrusted the writing of the poem *Les Oiseaux Inspirés* to his friend Marguerite Combes. Belonging to a distinguished lineage and family of savants, philosophers, biologists and botanist, Marguerite Combes is herself a scientist who studies animal socio-psychological behaviour, with careful experiences on the comportment of ants, especially the *Formica rufa* species. Her observations lead her well in imagining the tale *The Princess and the Ant* as a book for children³⁵. As for the publication of her scientific research, in 1920 for instance, in the *Bulletin de l'Institut général psychologique*, the description of her study "Experimental suppression of enmity between ants"³⁶, or in the *Journal de la psychologie normale et pathologique* she describes how a colony of *Formica rufa* organizes itself to put out a fire set on their nest, and how "often the first confronting the flame perish, victim of their devotion"³⁷. These experiences are mentioned by Maurice Maeterlinck in his famous *La Vie des Fourmis* (1930). Later, Marguerite Combes also publishes *Le Rêve et la personnalité* (Dream and Personality)³⁸. So it is not difficult to understand why Eugène Grassi had asked her to write the poem where a sage is brought to lofty considerations while observing animals and birds.

Les Oiseaux inspirés, poem by Marguerite Combes

When through the night still and sacred, alone shone the nacreous flame of the moon. A disciple of the holy founder Gautama was dreaming, eyes towards the sky to the master he loved. While gazing at this lofty light, He sees beautiful birds with their familiar wings skimming across the star; they were rising, the pure birds, out of the turbid night and the dark sleep. They were flying up gently, slowly, far from the earth. Their swarm was quivering like a mild mystery. And the hermit thought: "Those birds are blessed! For their wings lift them towards the light. Whereas I lay in the lugubrious and pitiful night". However the birds, in one long ineffable group were passing and passing again, flying always higher. The hermit, ecstatic and trembling, soon sees them turning across the moon and getting lost in the shadow. Only to reappear yet higher all in their great number. Before the pale face where their flight was rushing into the light! And discovering their secret. He was watching them escape through the odd window, which inspiration had revealed to them. Under the

³⁵ Marguerite Bonnier-Combes, *Six magiques histoires*, Illustrations par Hélène Costantin, Paris, Delachaux et Niestlé, collection Pâquerette (Charmante collection de volumes pour enfants, garçons et filles, de 7 à 12 ans), 1922.; première histoire : "La Princesse et la fourmi" ; Histoire du Roi-chasseur et de son beau-frère le rossignol, (conte), Paris, Berger Levrault, 1921: "Once upon a time there was a young princess who understood the language of ants, I do not know who had taught it to her..." Princess Rosefeuille and her best friend the Ant go on an expedition to liberate the imprisoned princess' little brothers, Livin and Florimar, and the ant's little sisters, Gomme-de-Résine and Parfum-de-l'Herbe".

³⁶ Marguerite Combes, "Suppression expérimentale de l'inimitié entre Fourmis", *Bulletin de l'Institut général psychologique*, XX, 4-6, 1920, p. 201-215. The experience is quoted by Henri Piéron, "Bibliographie", *L'Année psychologique*, 1920, vol 22, N. 1, p. 291. Marguerite Combes "Choses vues chez les fourmis", *Mercure de France*, 15 décembre 1935 p 527. She also collaborates with Colette and Edmond Jaloux, to *Le Mystère animal*, Paris, 1939. Later Marguerite Combes publishes in the *Journal de la psychologie normale et pathologique* an article describing how a colony of *Formica rufa* organises itself to put out a fire set on their nest, and how "often the first confronting the flame perish, victim of their devotion

³⁷ Also published in the magazine *La Nature*, n° 2778, 1 January 1928, Marguerite Combes, "Extinction méthodique du feu par une fourmilière de *Formica rufa*".

³⁸ Marguerite Combes, *Le Rêve et la personnalité*, Paris, 1932. In the foreword by André Lalande, we are told that Marguerite Combes "has contributed to the progress of zoological psychology with her observations at the same time new, patient and precise".

balmy night perfumed by the wind then. He dreamt of the happiness of entering free and alive into the depth opened by such a brightness, alike to the sublime nothingness where the Buddha sleeps.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that music historians and musicians would consider that the *Three Japanese Lyrics* composed by Stravinsky in 1913 (never having heard Japanese music nor visited Japan), or the opéra-ballet *Padmavati* composed in 1914 by Albert Roussel (after a one month long honeymoon trip in India), should be greater musically than any music ever composed by Eugène Grassi, but could one contend that Grassi's exotic cocktails contained slightly more than a dose of authenticity?

5. E. C. Grassi and the *Thai Dance of Prince Damrong*

In 1925, prompted by a recent actuality at the Paris Opéra, Grassi writes a series of four articles about Siamese dance in a musical newspaper: *The class of rhythmic dance*, introduced a few years earlier at the Paris Opéra to enlarge dance vocabulary and technique. It is eventually dissolved by the director Jacques Rouché, who realizes that, lacking any serious technical basis, this teaching could not lead to any satisfactory result. Grassi wonders then in *Le Guide du concert* if the praiseworthy experience could not be resumed “on a new basis presenting better guarantees”: “Does not plastic interpretation in modern ballet require this new effort? And, for lack of documents that would restore the Greek choreography, in essence certainly rhythmic, couldn't we find in countries where danced pantomime is still practised, meticulously codified and perfected for a long time, some suggestions for the creation of a new plastic art?³⁹”

Moreover the country where such dance tradition and practice exists, with pantomime meticulously codified and perfected for a long time is Siam. Therefore Grassi explains some principles of Siamese dance in a series of article based on the book *Tamran fon ram* (Lessons of Thai dance), published in Bangkok in 1923 by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, brother of King Chulalongkorn and historian of Siamese culture and arts⁴⁰. E. Grassi translates and comments on parts of the book, selecting a dozen photographs among the sixty reproductions of the basic postures of Siamese dance, carefully describing these attitudes and analysing their structure. See two examples further down. Evidently “the attitudes, immobilized in the pictures, barely allows one to guess the movements, which have brought them forth, and which constitute the essential part of dance”. His articles also contain extremely interesting remarks about issues never considered elsewhere. Explaining for instance, by which process sacred, ritual dance as practised in India, has evolved to become a very different form of dramatic and theatrical art in Cambodia and Siam, and again in Cambodia through Siam in the 19th century:

“Why choreographic art of Siam and Cambodia, of religious origin, has now become almost entirely secular? Buddhism, austere religion and philosophy rather than religion,

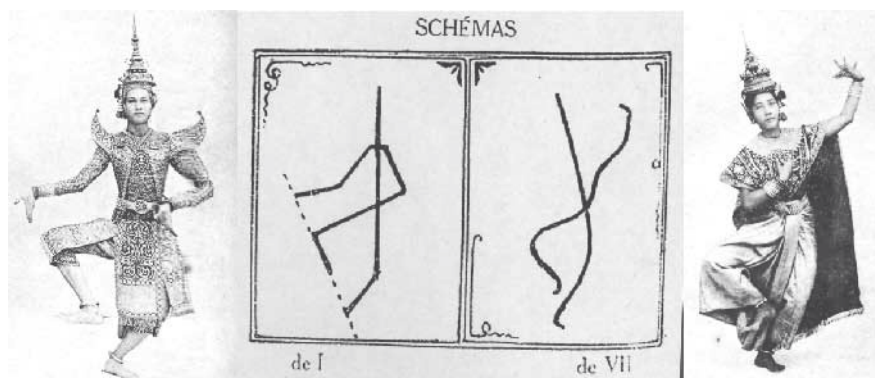
³⁹ E. C. Grassi, “La Danse Classique Siamoise”, *Le Guide du Concert*, 11 décembre 1925, pp. 263-4; 1 janvier 1926, pp. 327-9; 15 janvier 1926, p. 391-395. Grassi also publishes the article “Le Ramayana”, *Le Ménestrel*, 14 janvier 1927.

⁴⁰ H.R.H. Prince Damrong Rajanubhap, *Tamran fon ram* (The Lessons of Thai dance), published on the occasion of the cremation of H.R.H. Prince Chuthathutchadilok, Bangkok, 1923.

has no pompous rites through which to exteriorize symbols in the cults where still survive and dominate theocratic traditions... While retaining their sacred character, brahmanic dances, as soon as they were imported in Buddhist countries, were excluded from the religious ceremony itself. But an important place was reserved for them in the celebrations taking place around the temples, on the ground surrounding the pagodas. Thus freed from the strict requirement to meet only the needs of worship, they could gradually evolve. They were subjected to the influence of environment in their transformation. They were slowly perfected until they found, it seems, their definitive forms in which they crystallized."

Two of the Twelve Postures Described in the Article by Grassi

The King spread his largesse from the top of his chariot. Figures of this kind are better realized by men than by women. Moreover his dress, high tiara, fins raising in point on the shoulders, leotards, etc., also contributes to the sharpness of lines that the curved shape and soft folds of the women's dress cannot provide. By analyzing the attitude of the dancer, we notice first a long straight and vertical line, descending from the top of the tiara, crossing without deviation the whole bust and reaching the left knee, slightly bent, and so breaking the line preserves the figure of all stiffness. Another line, twice broken, rises obliquely from the right foot, once broken at the knee to form an acute angle, is inverted to go on rising obliquely, passing through the belt and the extended left forearm, again broken at the elbow in a similar angle as the first, eventually reaching the left shoulder by following a direction exactly parallel to the lower right leg. This long broken line, with the parallelism and the equivalence of the two angles, made very elegant by its obliquity, realizes a symmetry, reversed but perfect. Finally the right arm, that defines the meaning of the figure (here the gesture that provides gifts), that does not fail to complete the general outline of the design: the arms slightly bent as the leg and also forming an obtuse angle, realizes thus a new symmetry, the hand in exact extension of the straight line (in dotted line on the diagram) passing through the feet, lower part and knee of the right leg. This figure is a marvel of design and construction. The expression of greatness and nobility are due, we cannot repeat it too often, to the straight lines offset by ruptures, to the equal angles, to the parallels and symmetries. Moreover, these completely avoid the banality of bilateral symmetry: felt at once, they are understood only after analysis. And a global symmetry produced by the oblique intersection of two main lines, successfully stresses the symmetries of details. The movement can be guessed: it consists of a slow progression, each step interrupted by the attitude.



The block of wood on the chest, as is very romantically the figure of the photograph, or if you want “From this height you dropped a hard word on my heart.” Perhaps indeed a little precious and even mawkish, but so nice! The ballerina manages through subtle and indescribable nuances of interpretation to keep the just measure, making absolutely charming this figure. Besides, the costume of the woman, quite soft and with no angles, allows her to draw with her attitude the graceful curves that are imperative here. A first bent line, barely curved at first, comes down from the top of the crown, runs through the body, bends more strongly to the third quarter of its length, to reach, so deflected, the left foot. A second line starts at the right foot, meanders along the leg, passes obliquely through the waist, follows the rim of the mantle, reaches the left arm and continues its sinuous course through the arm lifted up to the left hand. The shapes of both lines and their respective positions create a delicate and elegant harmony, complemented by the right forearm and the right hand more specifically expressing the meaning of the gesture. Eventually, nothing being left to chance, the arrangement of the fingers brings to the design the ultimate detail, the finish that makes the masterpiece.

6. From Siam to the Ballets Russes

In the first decade of the 20th century there exists in Paris a group of musicians, more or less gravitating around Maurice Ravel, who has been greatly influenced by the teaching of L. A. Bourgault-Ducoudray in particular regarding exoticism: The composers Florent Schmitt (1870-1958, authored in 1898 a symphonic poem, *Combat des Raksasas et délivrance de Sitâ*, adapted from the *Ramayana*⁴¹); Albert Roussel (1869-1937, a former naval officer who had travelled in the Far-East, composes *Evocations*, his impressions at Ellora, Jaipur and Bénarès during his honeymoon journey to India in 1909, and soon after he begins *Padmavati*⁴²); Maurice Delage (1879-1961, who writes *Quatre poèmes hindous* and *Ragamalika*, 1912-1922, after a trip to India in 1912⁴³). One can easily guess that whatever their intrinsic musical merits, the exoticism of their compositions remained hypothetical and superficial⁴⁴.

To this group of musicians the critic Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi also belongs. He is a specialist in Russian music, in particular of Moussorgsky. He works as a secretary for Serge Diaghilev from 1906 until 1910 and was very much involved in

⁴¹ *Combat des Raksasas et délivrance de Sitâ*, of which the manuscript was destroyed during the 1910's flooding of Paris, is mentioned in the list of Florent Schmitt's works, given in *Revue Musicale*, 1 avril 1924, Maybe they were influenced too by the publication in 1890 by the great Indian specialist Sylvain Lévy of his thesis *Le Théâtre Indien*, very influential over European theatrical conceptions: for instance Lugné-Poe staged in 1895 the ancient Hindou play of Sudraka, *Le Chariot de terre cuite* (The Little Clay Cart), with decors by Toulouse-Lautrec and a prologue read by the anarchist Félix Fénéon, where Buddha appears as a kind a revolutionary hero.

⁴² The historic story he heard in Chitoragh, Rajasthan, was given a completely non-Hindu psychological turn in Roussel's libretto. Roussel complained that he heard barely any Indian music during his trip (barely more than one month long) in India.

⁴³ Based on music of India, interpreted on a prepared piano with pieces of cardboard under the strings to imitate the sound of an Indian drum.

⁴⁴ Cf. Allan Kozinn, “Music Review: Festival of Song, French Composer's' Variations on East meets West”, *The New York Times*, 14 février 1995: “Depending on one's point of view, the exoticism that flourished in early 20th century French music was either an egregious example of European cultural appropriation or multiculturalism long before it was in vogue.[...] The festival's directors presented several solutions to the problem of combining East and West. Maurice Delage struck a tenuous but fascinating balance in his *Poèmes Hindous* (1912). The accompaniments sometimes approximated the sounds of an Indian ensemble [...] but the vocal melodies were unmistakably Gallic. Eugene Cinda Grassi, by contrast, notated traditional Thai melodies in his *Poèmes Bouddhiques*.”

the preparation of the concerts of Russian music in 1907, and with Boris Godounov at the Opéra in 1908, and the two first seasons of the ballet in 1909-10. Partaking in the group's interest for exoticism, in 1909, Calvocoressi has the idea of a "Hindu ballet" for Diaghilev, *Urvasi*, a play of Kalidasa, for which Florent Schmitt should compose the music. The project denotes an unusual curiosity, since contrary to the famous *Sakuntala*, Kalidasa's other play is quite unknown. It is a story of the celestial nymph Urvasi exiled on earth where she introduces theatre. The project is eventually abandoned to be replaced by Jean Cocteau's inept "Hindu ballet", *Le Dieu bleu* (1912). Calvocoressi had also arranged some passages of a translation of Kalidasa's works into short prose poems, which he deemed suitable for musical settings and three of them are used by Albert Roussel in *Evocations*.

Never is the exotic Eugène Grassi mentioned in relation to this group of musicians. Then only once, when unexpectedly Calvocoressi tells in his *Memoirs* that five of his adaptations of Kalidasa "more or less remodelled for the purpose, had been used by Eugene Grassi, the Siamese composer, in his lovely *Chansons Populaires Siamoises*⁴⁵". Grassi did indeed quite "remodel" the texts provided by Calvocoressi, since nowhere in Kalidasa appeared Phra-Naraï, Nang Sisuda, nor the Lake Thalé Sab of *Le Lac maudit*, the last of the five songs of Grassi⁴⁶.

The *Five Siamese melodies* are given for the first time in a concert at the Salle Gaveau on January 16, 1911. Grassi is not present since he has already left Paris for Siam. Not any banal concert, but the first of a new organization of a group of progressive musicians, the *Société Musicale Indépendante*, headed by Ravel who has himself selected the program: The first audition of Debussy's *Rhapsody for clarinet and piano*, three pieces of Erik Satie (*Deuxième Sarabande*, *Prelude du Fils des Etoiles*, *Troisième Gymnopédie* played on piano by Ravel himself; it is the first time that the music of Satie is heard at a serious occasion. This concert being Satie's "real emergence from deep obscurity – an obscurity which had lasted twenty five years!"⁴⁷). Additional works by promising young artists, among them the *Siamese Melodies*: "three very interesting melodies where the *oriental* seems to me superior to the scholastic – I mean that the craftsmanship is less original than that of the themes and of the rhythms. The nice voice of the singer, Miss Sorga, a Javanese, stressed their exoticism with delightful inexperience and a most sympathetic stage-fright⁴⁸."

However, for the critic M. D. Calvocoressi and his Parisian friends, Eugène Grassi probably did not represent much more than a type of weird character and author of "lovely" exotic melodies. However, utterly different will his case appear to the eyes of the painter Léon Bakst, the main artisan of the productions of the Ballets Russes until the war, since he has seen in 1900-1901 the performances in Saint

⁴⁵ M. D. Calvocoressi, *Musicians Gallery: Music and Ballet in Paris and London*, Londres, 1933."

⁴⁶ The theme of *Le Lac Maudit*, a hermit living in a submarine palace in the Thalé Sab at Angkor, where celestial nymphs are singing, recalls the subject of the Russian operas *Sadko* and *Kiteje engloutie* of Rimsky-Korsakov.

⁴⁷ Carl van Vechten, «Erik Satie, Master of the Rigolo: A French Extremist in Modernist Music», *Vanity Fair*, March 1918.

⁴⁸ F. Gaiffe, "Les Concerts (la S.M.I.; une symphonie de Mahler)", *Revue française de musique*, 29 janvier 1911, p. 482-83; cf. also M.D. Calvocoressi, "Aux concerts de la société indépendante", *Comœdia illustré*, February 15, 1911.

⁴⁹ Cf. Mattani Moj dara Rutnin, *Dance, drama and theatre in Thailand. The process of development and modernization*, Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 1996, p. 102; Anake Nawigamune, *Nathakam Chao Sayam (Siamese Dramatists)*, Bangkok, 2003, p. 203-216; Nicoletta Misler, "Siamese Dancing and the Ballets Russes", in *The Art of enchantment: Diaghilev's Ballets russes (1909-1929)*, San Francisco, Fine Arts Museums, 1988, p. 78-83; Anake Nawigamune, *Nathakam Chao Sayam (Siamese Dramatists)*, Bangkok, 2003, p. 203-216.

Petersburg of the Siamese troupe of Chao Mun Waiworanat (Boosra Mahin)⁴⁹. This was twenty ballerinas and ten musicians at a superb artistic level. Bakst is fascinated by Siam, and immediately after he painted *A Siamese Sacred Dance* (1902, Moscou, Galerie Tretiakov) representing the Lanterns Dance. Bakst is well aware of the link existing between King Chulalongkorn and his own sovereign, Nicolas II, and that the preferred son of the king, Prince Chakrapongse, had been the host of the emperor for seven years. He knows that in 1891, the young Nicolas had visited Siam and Bakst knows all the more about it as he married the widow of the young painter, Nicolas Gritsenko, who had accompanied the Tsarevitch during the entire long expedition to the Far East and in particular Siam!

Moreover with Eugène Grassi, Léon Bakst finds an occasion that he does not miss⁵⁰! An extraordinary opportunity to get invaluable and highly reliable information about the country that fascinates him – Siam. A “fairy-tale land, fairy-tale kingdom⁵¹” as it was defined by the chronicler of the trip. From some time around 1906 until Grassi’s departure for Siam in May 1910, for three years, Bakst can get from Grassi an almost unlimited amount of information about the mythology, the customs, the arts, the theatre, and the religion of the most fascinating and the most mysterious country of the Far-East. This serves to feed his taste for exoticism and he will transpose this with his powerful fantasies in most of the Ballets Russes’ productions of the period preceding the war. It is Siam and its magic – perfectly *real*, contrary to the phantasmal visions of Orientalism inspired by fantasized India, Persia, or Arabia – that confers to these ballets their bewitching appeal and their irresistible seduction, in almost every register, definitively not limited to that of exoticism, as we will see.

Two examples show the range of information provided by Grassi to Bakst. In several drawings for the Firebird, Bakst adds bizarre appendices on the shoulders: replica of the *inthanu*, the epaulette in the shape of a moon crescent that adorns the theatrical (and royal) costumes in Siam. In the other example, of a completely different order, during the preparation of *Shéhérazade*, Bakst comes one day with a strange suggestion: When the Shah discovers “his wives in the embrace of their Ethiopian lovers, he orders to have them sewn in bags and thrown into the sea”⁵². This bizarre idea, nowhere to be found in *The Thousand and one nights* is of course vehemently rejected by his collaborators, who wonder how it could have come to the mind of Bakst? – it came from Siam: “an amorous intrigue with the Queen, a royal concubine or a princess are crimes of *lèse-majesté*. The unfaithful queen or concubine is sewn with a large stone into a bag of leather, and then thrown alive in the middle of the river.”⁵³

⁵⁰ There are reasons to believe that Bakst and Grassi’s relationship extends from around 1907 until the death of Léon Bakst in Paris in 1924. In 1922 Grassi is asked to compose the music for the play *Judith*, for which Bakst designs the costumes. During the war, Grassi teaches English in the Lycée Carnot, exactly opposite Léon Bakst’s studio on Boulevard Malesherbes, and in June 1918, Grassi opens English class for “ten or fifteen Russian ladies, wishing to take a few lesson of English” (Grassi letter to the administrator de l’Ecole des Langues orientales), when many feminine members of Bakst’s family and friends have taken refuge in Paris from the Revolution in Russia.

⁵¹ Prince E. E. Ouchtomskij, *Extracts of the Voyage en orient de S.A.I. le Césarvitch en 1890-91*, translated and introduced by Walter E.J. Tips, after the German (1894) and French (1898) versions, White Lotus, Bangkok, 1999.

⁵² Michel Fokine, *Memoirs of a ballet master*, traduction par Vitale Fokine, édition par Anatole Chujoy, Boston, Toronto, Little Brown, 1961, p. 150-151.

⁵³ Monseigneur Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix, *Description du royaume Thai ou Siam*, Paris, au profit de la mission de Siam, 1854, 2 vol.

Furthermore it is what Eugène Grassi told to Bakst that has led to the most stunning of Ballets Russes' productions – or rather, one should say, the most extraordinary *fabrication* in the proper sense of forgery in that of *Firebird*. It is indeed the detailed accounts given by Grassi about the *Ramayana* (the story as well as its relation to monarchical ideology) and about the Garuda, the mount of Vishnu. Garuda is the invincible mythological bird also closely associated with monarchical power that will allow the transformation of the almost quasi non-existent and insignificant Bird of Fire, *zjar ptitsa*, of Russian lore, into the powerful creature who appeared for the first time ever on the stage of the Paris Opéra, on June 25, 1910 in the ballet *Firebird*. *Firebird* is an opportunistic and ideological creation conceived only to come to the assistance of the imperial two-headed eagle who was poorly battered after the disaster of the Russo-Japanese war and the Revolution of 1905.

It is because of this forgery that the existence of Grassi would be completely obliterated from Ballets Russes' history – as well as that of Siam. Because the same evening of *Firebird* a few minutes later at the Opéra, Vaslav Nijinsky interprets two solos in *Les Orientales*. In one of them, he is wearing a glittering costume closely designed by Bakst after the theatrical Siamese costume, and he performs adapted movements of Siamese dance. Some of them with a stunning accuracy, like the fundamental and difficult *djeep* gesture, for which no doubt Eugène Grassi had secured information completing what Bakst could remember of the performances of the Siamese troupe of Butr Mahin ten years earlier⁵⁴. Performed on the stage of the Mariinsky in February 1910, this solo was called *Siamese Dance*, quite logically in view of the good relations between Siam and Russia. Transported on the stage of the Opéra – where appears the *Firebird* – it becomes an anonymous *Oriental Dance*.

Photographs of the studio of Léon Bakst in Paris surprisingly reveal no less than four images of the Buddha: One Japanese bronze, one from Laos, a little Chinese statuette, and a large Siamese painting representing a *Jataka* (a very rare object in Europe at the time and never secured by the dealers of Oriental art. How did it find its way to the painter's studio?). In any case, the presence of all these images should perhaps be considered as something more than the simple mania of a collector of *orientalia*. It is in this perspective that two ballets should be understood with subjects a priori far removed from Siam, Siamese dance and Buddhism: *Spectre de la rose* in 1911, and *Thamar* in 1912.

Not only Nijinsky's hand movements as the *Spectre of the Rose* displayed an hypnotic grace that can be explained only by his acquaintance the year before with the subtlety of the hand movements of Siamese dance, transfiguring the banal gestures indicated by the choreographer Michel Fokine ("It is impossible to describe the fascination exerted by Nijinsky as the Rose", his sister Bronislava Nijinska later wrote, "I have never seen more beautiful gestures of hands and arms – the arms above the head that seem to open like petals."), but it is the very subject of the ballet, a girl in crinoline falling asleep after a ball and dreaming she

⁵⁴ It is wrong that Michel Fokine is credited for the choreography of Nijinsky's *Siamese Dance*: it is the work of Bakst and Nijinsky. If Fokine saw the Siamese dancers in 1900, he never says, and less is said leading to suppose he was interested – contrary to Bakst. It is the reconstruction solo that has inspired the *Khon* dancer Pichet Klunchun in his piece *Nijinsky-Siam* (1910).

dances with a flower or rather, with the *spirit* of a flower, that is submitted to an ineffable metamorphosis by Bakst. It is Bakst that invested the insipid romantic theme with a mysterious gravity, a compelling spell that made of it the most magical of the ballets ever interpreted by Nijinsky, and that led some spectators to speak of the “mystic image of the Rose”, of “disillusion of the young dreamer”, and of “the illusion of flying in the infinite” about the famous final jump of Nijinsky, disappearing in the night through a window – above which is hanging a *birdcage*, which Bakst was adamant that it was *indispensable* to the meaning of his ballet. The Spirit who disappears into *nirvana*, like in the melody of Grassi a few years later, a hermit “in the balmy night perfumed by the wind”, watches birds disappearing “into the depth opened by such a brightness, alike to the sublime nothingness where the Buddha sleeps.”

Additionally it is the opposite Buddhist concept of *kharmā* that Bakst illustrates the following year with *Thamar* (1912). It portrays the perpetual orgy of perverted desire of the Queen Thamar, replicating itself endlessly in her castle in the Caucasus (Bakst’s libretto ends *exactly* how it begins, all will be repeated again and again), allegory of the inescapable and everlasting round of the self locked in the world of illusions. The *wheel of dhamma* is omnipresent in the décor, and also is almost unnoticeable at the end of a long zigzagging path, a tiny opening allowing the escape through *nirvana*.

Such were some notions, well beyond matters of decoration or mere exoticism that could be explained to Bakst by Eugène Cinda Grassi, the young Siamese who had changed the second name given by his father, “César”, for “Cinda”, the Siamese word for “imagination”. *Jindana*, from *jit*, the mind, hence *jiddrakon*, *jindakawi*, and *jindamani*, artist, poet, and precious stone respectively. However the most wondrous aspect of this extraordinary story, is that in all likelihood the young Siamese was never aware that the information he was providing were put to such use by the most secretive of all Ballets Russes’ artisans, Léon Bakst, and of the magical operations they allowed. Grassi had gone back to Siam in May 1910, one month before Siam would appear on the stage of the Opéra in the guise of *Firebird* and Nijinsky’s *Siamese Dance*. He remained away for three years, immersing himself in his native land, watching the little orchestras in the countryside and studying the sacred texts in the monastery. Curiously, on the year of his return, 1913, Bakst makes a bizarre new drawing for the *Firebird*, displaying the long metallic nails and the jerky characteristics of the *manohra* dance, the dance of the celestial bird Manohra.

In June 1941 during the Occupation⁵⁵ Eugène Grassi entertains the hope that his opéra *Amour et Magie* can be given at the Académie Nationale de Musique; the director of the Opéra, Jacques Rouché has promised to listen to an audition of the work and Grassi is actively searching for singers. Falling suddenly ill, he attends,

⁵⁵ Raymond Deiss, whose musical editions published most of Grassi’s scores and were the social seat of the Concerts Grassi, has entered the Resistance immediately after the beginning of the German Occupation. He publishes the first clandestine newspaper and is arrested in October 1941; he is decapitated (with an axe) a few months later. He is honoured as a hero of the Resistance.

deathly pale, a concert where two symphonic fragments of *Amour et Magie* are given. Hospitalized the day after, he dies three days later, on June 8, 1941. The concierge and the proprietor of his modest home hastened to sell his meagre belongings to liquidate some debts. His grave in a suburban cemetery, is paid for by Sacem, the society for rights of composers and writers⁵⁶. Curiously, the death of Grassi was mentioned in New York: “Leader of French Modern School, Who was Born in Siam, Dies – wireless to *The New York Times*, July 17. Vichy, France, July 16 – The death of Eugène Cinda Grassi, who although born in Siam, was considered a leading French composer of the modern school, was learned today from Paris. He died in penury in a small flat in the Boulevard Saint Germain. His age was 54. Mr. Grassi’s father was an architect to the royal court. The son was educated in Paris, where he remained the greater part of his life. At the age of 24, he composed “Siamese Mélodies,” which he submitted in manuscript form to various musicians. Their advice was that he return to Siam, and study the native rhythms. Mr. Grassi went home for three years and on his return re-scored his melodies, which the Pas de Loup Orchestra played for the first time in 1919 with great success. They remain the most popular of his works. Others are “Buddhic Poems,” incidental music for Henry Bernstein’s “Judith,” a trilogy titled “Sanctuaries” and an opera as yet unnamed and unplayed.”⁵⁷

There is only one testimony about Eugène Grassi’s personal aspect and character from Maurice Boucher: “Almost ten years ago I was attracted by what the works of Grassi betrayed of ardent and strong thinking, as well by the originality of their technique. Perhaps eventually a personal sympathy close to friendship made me particularly receptive. However, I do not think I delude myself if I say that Grassi reveals himself more through his music than through his words. One senses him always haunted by a silent determination, assiduous to a task of which no one will know anything until it is completed, solitary with stubbornness, even with harshness.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Marcelle Soulage, notes on “Eugène C. Grassi”, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale-musique, juillet 1960, bn-musique.

⁵⁷ “Obituaries: Eugene C. Grassi, 54, Parisian composer”, *The New York Times*, July 17, 1941, p. 19. Grassi was actually 60: in the twenties he began to give as birthdate 1887 instead of 1881.

⁵⁸ Maurice Boucher, “E.C. Grassi”, *Le Ménestrel*, August 17, 1928.