

**The West I Know:  
A Reception History of the Milhaud-Claudé  
Collaborations in the United States.  
(Or, The Coming of Age of *Christophe Colomb*)**

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**I**n the more than twenty two collaborative works created by Paul Claudel and Darius Milhaud, two of them in particular are large-scale multi-media works that show with documented detail the close collaboration of these two artists. The earlier of the works is *L'homme et son désir*, a ballet composed in 1917 and 1918 when Claudel served as French ambassador to Brazil during World War I, with Milhaud as his secretary. The latter work is a full scale opera, *Christophe Colomb*, composed in France in 1928, but premiering in Berlin in 1930.

Although both of these works presented challenges in staging and production, *Christophe Colomb* was by far the larger, more ambitious project. It involved a large choir, two different characters representing two different ages of the main character, flashbacks and reflections, difficult music, and the use of film as background in the scenery. All of this required highly skilled performers, the perfect venue, a lot of money, and compatible collaborators. Although the work had the last ingredient: compatible collaborators, it did not always have the other ingredients for success. Indeed, the premiere took place in Berlin mainly because France offered no ideal setting for the innovative new opera. Berlin also had the money and the way to hold over 100 rehearsals just for the choir alone (Figure 1) You can tell from this stage design by Panos Aravantinos for the 1930 production just how big the cast was. This was an opera truly modeled after French Grand Opera.

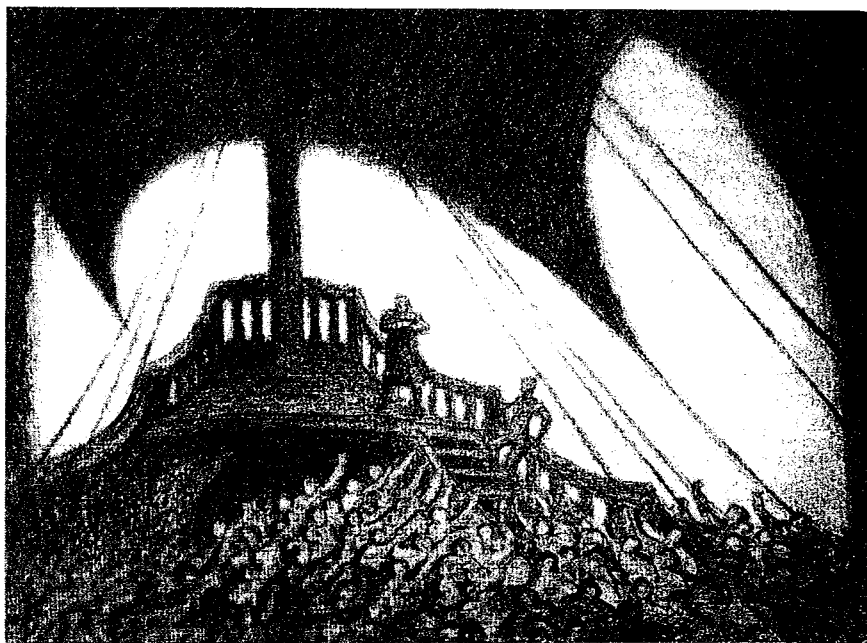


Figure 1: Set design by Panos Aravantinos for the sailors' revolt in *Christophe Colomb* (Berlin 1930). Amanda Holden, ed. *The Viking Opera Guide*. London: Penguin Group, 1993.

The Staatsoper in Berlin did offer a nearly ideal place for the premiere production, whose run lasted two years. Although Claudel and Milhaud were pleased with the success of their opera, they had their hopes set on a US production before the work was even finished. This was, alas, never to be realized in either of the artists' lifetimes. This paper is a study of a history that did not take place; of dreams that were not realized. And in studying a history that was not, we might gain a better understanding of what did happen and why and how.

I have entitled my paper after a common English translation of Claudel's famous work, *The East I Know*. The West, America of course, that Claudel knew included one that involved the business of the stage; of directors of orchestras; of rich patrons and patronesses of the arts; of academia; of artists who could with painterly skills bring his ideas to life. The story of the quest to produce *Christophe Colomb* in the US is enough to give us an idea of

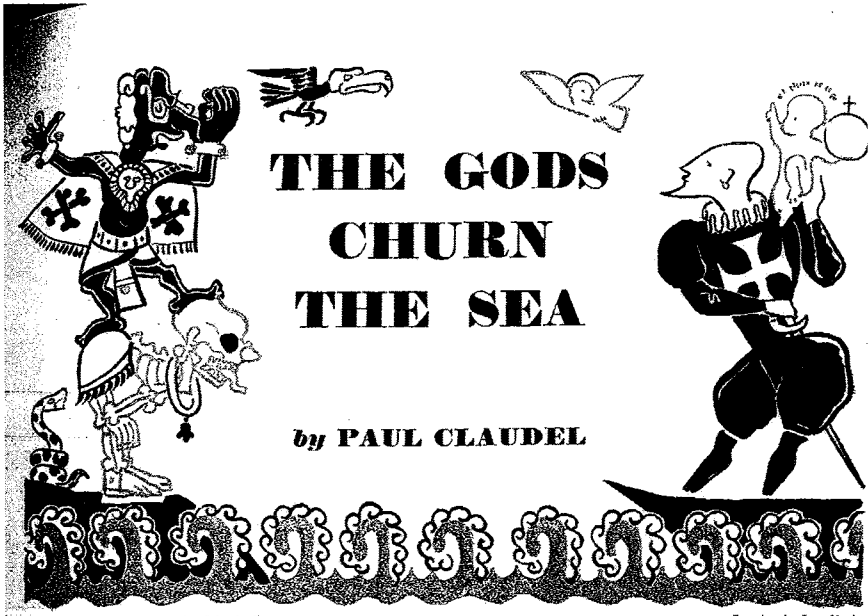


Figure 2: Jean Charlot, illustration from Paul Claudel, "The Gods Churn the Sea," *The Forum* 82 (1929): 95.

the artistic world of the United States that Claudel came to know, mostly through the disappointments of unfulfilled expectations.

After Claudel and Milhaud began to collaborate on the opera, Claudel left France to serve as the French ambassador in Washington D.C. He received his commission on Dec. 1, 1926, leaving Milhaud to finish the opera score by 1928. It was in the US that he began his search for a US production of *Christophe Colomb*.

Before any musical possibilities materialized, Claudel made the acquaintance with a French painter then living in Mexico, painting renditions of Mayan deities at Chichen Itza. Claudel liked his work very much and asked Jean Charlot to create illustrations for a book version of *Christophe Colomb*. Before the book was published, however, Claudel published one tableau of the opera in a 1929 issue of *The Forum*. (Figure 2) Tableau XVI, "The Gods Churn the Sea," appeared in English, complete with Charlot's paintings on every page.

The following year, 1930, *The Book of Christopher Columbus*, was published by Yale University Press, complete with Charlot's illustrations. (Figure 3 and 4) The French illustrated edition was not published until 1933, by Gallimard in Paris. It seems that Claudel's urgency to bring *Christophe Colomb* to the attention of Americans was shown in the deliberate English publications. 1930 was also the year of the premiere of the opera in Berlin. Both Milhaud and Claudel watched for favorable reviews, hoping that the US press would pick up the interest in their collaborative work.

In addition to the publication of *The Book of Christopher Columbus*, Claudel spoke on the relationship between drama and music at a conference given by Yale University in March 1930. In this talk, Claudel used *Christophe Colomb* as an example numerous times. Again, this seemed to be Claudel's way of bringing attention to this work.

Concurrently with these activities, Claudel sought to open a dialogue with Leopold Stokowski, director of the Philadelphia Philharmonic Orchestra, with Otto Kahn of the Metropolitan Opera, with the Chicago Opera, and with the Knights of Columbus regarding possible sponsorship and performance. After a few years of closed doors, both Claudel and Milhaud began to discuss other possibilities. Given the fact that the work was large and long with complicated staging requirements, they realized that their work might have to be modified. First, an oratorio or concert version would allow all of the music to be heard at a much lower cost, avoiding the staging aspect. Second, a play-only version would avoid the complications of coordinating text and music. And third, the possibility of performing an abridged version would appease time constraints. The collaboration would necessarily suffer by taking any of these routes. The oratorio or concert version would showcase Milhaud but minimize Claudel. The play-only version would elevate the playwright and minimize, or eliminate, the composer. Fortunately for these men, their friendship was so strong that they were able to compromise and keep the work alive. Claudel did produce *Christophe Colomb* as a play, asking Milhaud to

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provide incidental music for it. This he did grudgingly, yet he did it for friendship's sake. Toward the end of Claudé's life in 1955, Milhaud asked him about the possibility of revising *Christophe Colomb* by switching the two acts, so that the more energetic and exciting half comes second, providing a strong finale to the opera.

### **OPERA IN CONCERT FORM**



**Mack Harrell, who will sing the title role in Milhaud's "Christophe Colomb" with the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra this week. Behind him stands Norman Scott, who sings Columbus' conscience.**

*Figure 5: Opera in concert form at Carnegie Hall. New York Times Photograph. Nov. 2, 1952: X7. Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2005).*

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**Bruno Walter:** MAHLER, SYMPHONY NO. 4 with Ingegard Sæviestad  
"DAS LIED VON DER ERDE" with Elena Nikolaidi and Set Svahnholm

**George Szell:** STRAUSS, "SALOME," 2nd half of opera in concert form, with  
Astrid Varnay, Blanche Thebom, Set Svahnholm

**PIANISTS:** Claude Arrau, Paul Badura-Skoda, Clifford Curzon, Rudolf Firsirotu, Vera Franceschi, Lella Gousseau, Friedrich Gulda, Myra Hess, William Kapell, Marcella Meyer, Gulomar Novacek, Rudolf Serkin, Anna Kydis; **VIOLINISTS:** John Corigliano, Mischa Elman, Zino Francescatti, Arthur Grumiaux, Louis Kraemer, Tebaldi Manahim, Nathan Milstein, Jeanne Mitchell, Erica Morini, Joseph Szigeti, Camilla Wicks; **CELLISTS:** Pierre Fournier, Edmund Korte, Leslie Varze.

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Figure 6: New York Times. Display Ad. Sept. 3, 1952: 26. ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851-2005).

Claudel reportedly answered the request by declaring, "Christophe Colomb is yours! Do with it what you want!"

Following the initial flurry of interest in *Christophe Colomb*, the work seemed destined to stay in Europe. It was not until 1952 that the work would have a US premiere, and that only in a concert version. (Figure 5) It did appear, however, in Carnegie Hall under the direction of Dimitri Mitropoulos. It was billed with two other works, (Figure 6), Moussorgsky's *Boris Godunoff*, and Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. Madeleine Milhaud, Milhaud's widow, participated in this version.

*Christophe Colomb* seemingly went underground again, at least in the US. After Claudel's death and the promise that Milhaud could reverse the two parts of the opera, a seemingly long time transpired. Milhaud, since 1941, had been teaching at Mills College in Oakland CA, dividing his time between the Conservatoire in Paris and the West Coast. Now he was in a position to negotiate for an opera production. In 1968, the centennial

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of the birth of Claudel, San Francisco Opera, under the direction of Kurt Adler, wanted to stage half of the opera, the more action-packed "Discovery of America." Milhaud agreed to that and thus the opera was mounted at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco in late 1968. (Figure 7 and 8) Although Claudel was no longer alive, Milhaud had the pleasure of watching his work, albeit in part, performed by the San Francisco Opera. Like the 1952 concert version, this was part of a triple bill for the evening. In this case, however, all three were premieres: Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and Weill's *Royal Palace*. *Christophe Colomb* appeared last on the bill, ending a very long evening for the Opera.

While these two productions had their flaws and fell prey to scathing reviews, it seemed that the work might not get another chance. A full length, fully staged production had yet to be produced in the US. Would the West that Claudel knew ever come around? A possibility might be with the upcoming quincentennial of Columbus, who had in 1492 sailed the ocean blue. Americans love anniversaries and centennials. If ever *Christophe Colomb* might get an offer, chances are it would be 1992. Indeed, there were two prominent productions scheduled for that year; one on the West Coast



Figure 7: Thomas Tipton as Columbus I. San Francisco Examiner. Photograph. Oct. 7, 1968: 33.



Figure 8: In 1968, San Francisco Opera gave the first US premiere of Darius Milhaud's *Christopher Columbus*. MD. Photograph. Sept. 1992: 112-113.

and one on the East. How fitting for the man credited with the discovery of America.

By 1992, Columbus the heroic discoverer of America had fallen out of favor with many Native American activists, something Claudel and Milhaud would have never experienced. Celebrations planned in Columbus's honor for 1992 were met with frequent protests of his detrimental effect on Native American people and culture. To many, he was no longer the hero he had been to previous generations. Alfred Crosby had published a recent book, entitled *The Colombian Exchange*, suggesting a different model for understanding the significance of Columbus's voyages. Acknowledging the fact that Columbus's contact with America caused an irreversible exchange of plants, animals, microbes, and ideas, he minimized the hero-aspect of Columbus but looking at the long-term changes in Europe, Africa, and America, as a result of this contact. This model has since become the prevailing and preferred one that appears in world history textbooks. Thus, by 1992, who would want to hear anything that would glorify Columbus? But we did. Perhaps due to Claudel's keen understanding of human nature, the Claudel-Milhaud opera had an important message about Columbus that resonated in 1992. Columbus struggles with a multitude of problems in the opera and he is not the hero



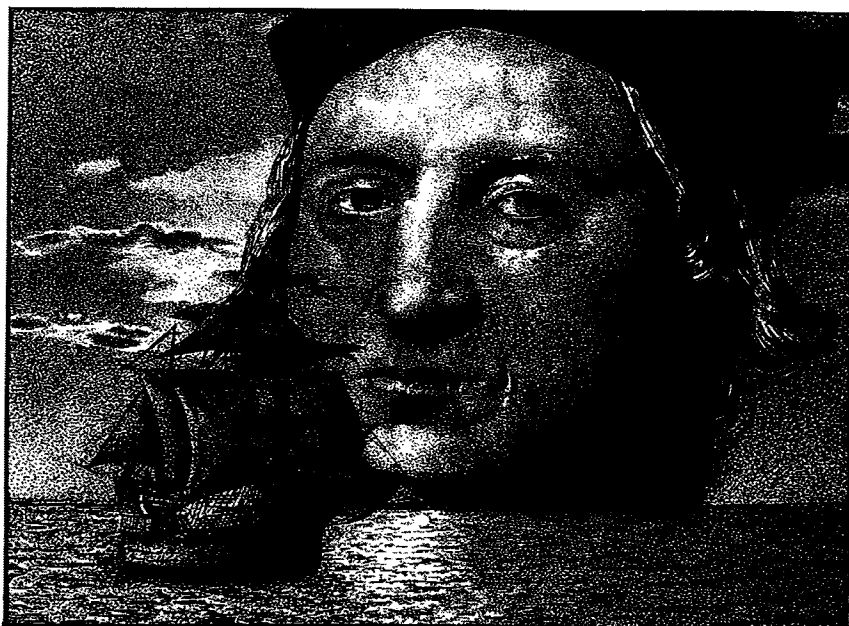
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that schoolchildren learn about. This realism was appealing in 1992. Furthermore, those gods who churn up the sea are Aztec gods, full of anger at this European who will come and destroy their civilizations. Many in 1992 sympathized with the plight of the Native Americans ever since European culture arrived; in the opera the gods have their voice. Richard Barrett, conductor of the East Coast 1992 production noted that, [quote] “Claudel’s idea of Columbus was prophetic for its time.... There was at one time a movement to make Columbus a saint. This opera includes Aztecs who mourn the destruction of their world by the European wave that followed his discoveries.” [end quote] (Holland, n.p.)

For all these reasons, plus the fact of the quincentennial AND the centennial of the birth of Milhaud in 1892, *Christophe Colomb* was produced. The San Francisco Opera mounted an all-new production; yet still it was not fully staged. Billed as a “staged concert version” it was a semi-staged production, somewhere between an oratorio and a full scale operatic production. This was performed in December 1992. (Figure 9) The east coast production was an all out, fully staged production occurring in October 1992, a little earlier than the San Francisco one. Milhaud had passed away in 1976, so was unable to enjoy his dream finally coming true,



Figure 9: 1992 December Staged Concert Version San Francisco Opera. Jean-Philippe Lafont as Columbus with defenders in back. San Francisco Examiner. Photograph. Dec. 12, 1992: C-1.



**BROOKLYN COLLEGE OPERA THEATER**

Richard Barrett, Director

Stage Direction by Edward Berkeley  
Set & Costume Design by John Schaffer

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**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4, 1992 2PM**  
**KITTY CARLISLE HART THEATER**  
Empire Center at the Egg, Albany, NY

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1992 7:30PM**  
**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 11, 1992 2PM**  
**WALT WHITMAN HALL**  
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**MILHAUD'S**  
**Christophe**  
**Colomb**

**U.S. STAGED PREMIERE**

celebrating the Columbus quinqucentennial  
and the Milhaud centennial

Figure 10: Brooklyn College Opera Theater. Program cover for Milhaud's *Christophe Colomb*, October 2, 4, 10, and 11, 1992.

but Madeleine Milhaud was honored at these performances, and she was in attendance.

Ironically for all its complexity, and for all the reasons that large professional houses balked at staging such a work, it was a college theater group that took the challenge to produce the work in its entirety. In the face of a premiere by Philip Glass at the Metropolitan Opera, *The Voyage*, also about Christopher

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Columbus, The Brooklyn College Opera Theater bravely, quietly accomplished what no one else in America had ever done: produce a full length stage production of the opera, *Christophe Colomb*. For this they truly hold the distinction of presenting an important US staged premiere on American soil.

There is much more to this story; the good and bad reviews, the costs, the choices for multiple billings, how much to stage a semi-staged production; all the personalities involved; it goes on and on. Understanding the history that didn't happen can be an important tool for getting at a deeper understanding of how mundane, small, ordinary decisions and turns can be the most influential aspects of our history.

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