

Jules Massenet

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The Musical Times

AND SINGING-CLASS CIRCULAR.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1912.

JULES MASSENET.

BY M.-D. CALVOCORESSI.

By the death of Jules* Massenet, which occurred on August 14, France loses her most popular and, besides Dr. Saint-Saëns, most famous composer—a composer on whose actual merits, perhaps, exacting critics do not agree, but whose career may well be described as an almost uninterrupted series of successes.

Jules Massenet was born, May 12, 1842, at Montaud, then a suburb of Saint-Etienne, the great manufacturing city of the centre of France—the youngest of twenty-one children. His biographers relate many more or less romantic anecdotes showing his early propensity for music; telling us, for instance, how his keen desire to study the art impelled him to escape from home with the intention of going to Paris and the hope of finding there the suitable teacher whom he had vainly sought for in Saint-Etienne. His father, a manufacturer ruined by the Revolution of 1848, left Montaud for Paris, and there the boy became, in 1851, a pupil of the Conservatoire, studying the pianoforte in Laurent's class and winning the first prize in 1859. He began to learn harmony with Bazin in 1853; but after this master (a poor musician and poor teacher) had discouraged him, he became a pupil of Reber. In 1860 he entered Ambroise Thomas's class of composition, and in 1863 he won the first prize for fugue and the Grand Prix de Rome. His first works were principally songs and short pianoforte-pieces, orchestral suites of facile and unpretentious style, a short opéra-comique in one act, 'La Grand Tante' (produced in Paris, 1867), and a 'Requiem' (unpublished). In 1868 he made the acquaintance of the publisher, Georges Hartmann, who from the very outset had faith in him and greatly assisted him during the first stages of his career.

Massenet's first ambitious work, the opéra-comique in four acts, 'Don César de Bazan' (Paris, 1872), was an absolute failure. But in 1873 the young composer scored two decisive successes with the incidental music to Leconte de Lisle's tragedy, 'Les Erynnies,' and with the dramatic oratorio, 'Marie-Magdeleine,' both of which were performed at the Théâtre de l'Odéon. As early as 1876 he was decorated with the Légion d'Honneur. In 1877, 'Le Roi de Lahore,' one of his best operatic scores (although comparatively little known), was produced at the Paris Opéra; the following year he was elected professor of composition at the Paris Conservatoire and member of the Institut, thus succeeding his former teacher and

* In spite of the composer's known antipathy to the name Jules, we think it best to use the name by which he was widely known. He preferred to be called 'M. Massenet' simply.

vituperator François Bazin.† Since then, and until the end of his life, honours, fame and fortune came to him in profusion. The absolute failure of a comparatively great quantity of his works passed unperceived under the favour of several radiant and protracted triumphs, the most memorable of which are those of 'Manon' (Paris, Opéra-Comique, 1884), 'Werther' (Vienna, 1892; Paris, Opéra-Comique, 1893), and 'Thaïs' (Paris, Opéra, 1894). 'Esclarmonde,' which, when produced in 1889 at the Opéra-Comique, had a very satisfactory run of performances, has never since been revived.

Massenet has certainly been one of the most prolific of French composers. He has written no less than twenty-four operas or opéra-comiques (three of which, 'Panurge,' 'Amadis,' and 'Cléopâtre,' are as yet unknown, but, we are told, are ready for publication), incidental music for several plays, pianoforte pieces, a great quantity of songs, choruses, and a few specimens of church-music. Besides 'Marie-Magdeleine,' he has composed the oratorios 'Eve' (1875), 'La Vierge' (1880), 'La Terre Promise' (1900), and the lyric scenes, 'Narcisse' (1878), and 'Biblis' (1887). His instrumental music is neither very abundant nor very pregnant, consisting chiefly of picturesque suites and other minor works. He never attempted to deal with the more earnest types of instrumental forms except once, and this attempt (a Pianoforte concerto written in 1903) was pronounced a failure even by his most enthusiastic devotees.

The last opera of his performed during his lifetime, 'Roma' (Paris, Opéra, 1911), is also an isolated and not particularly felicitous attempt towards classical severity and grandeur.

'Massenet's prolonged and widespread success,' says Mr. Fuller Maitland in 'Grove's Dictionary,' 'is one of the puzzling phenomena of modern musical history. While those who look a little below the surface find his music inexpressibly monotonous, casual hearers are surprised by his superficial versatility . . . few of the real lovers of music will expect any of his works to remain among the compositions that keep their popularity after the death of the author.'

Harsh as it may appear, I believe this verdict to be a sound one. The chief idiosyncrasy of Massenet, as a man and as an artist, was an overwhelming desire to court success. His object was to seduce; and from the time when he found that his music proved effective and became popular he carefully avoided changing his manner. The characteristic melody 'à la Massenet,' graceful and elegant enough, but almost stereotyped, runs through all his scores, doing duty for Manon and Thaïs alike, for Roman Vestal or for gay Spanish lady, for dreamy German maiden and for haughty princess of yore. His early scores are, for the greater part, his best, with the one exception of the very pleasing and chaste 'Jongleur de Nôtre-Dame' (1902). Later, and for the plain reason that he never attempted to renovate his style, he sank into sheer mannerism. Indeed, one can but marvel that so gifted a musician, who lacked neither individuality

† At that election, Dr. Saint-Saëns was his unsuccessful competitor.

nor skill, should have so utterly succeeded in throwing away his gifts. Success spoiled him. As M. Claude Debussy once humorously remarked, 'he fell a victim to the butterfly-play of fascinating lady admirers.' Hence the monotony of works in the greater part of which he sedulously resorts to his favourite never-failing devices. Hence, also, the 'superficial versatility.' For if the actual progress of musical art during the past forty years left Massenet unmoved (and indeed he has taken no part in the evolution of modern music), the success of certain works appears to have influenced him not inconsiderably, inducing him to attempt a number of changes in manner if not in style. Thus, at a time when Wagner's dramas were becoming the order of the day in Paris, he wrote 'Esclarmonde,' in which the example of 'Lohengrin' is easily traceable. The popularity of Italian 'veristic' opera helps to account for the appearance in 1894 of 'La Navarraise,' and in 1897 of 'Sapho'; and Humperdinck's 'Hänsel und Gretel' seems to have prompted him to write 'Cendrillon' (1899).

The earnest ideals, the thirst for progress that are inseparable from genius remained unknown to him. He directed his ambitions towards a less distant goal. He wrote for his time, and his time has repaid his labours well, as appears from the history of his life and deeds. Avoiding arduous roads, well satisfied with what was within his grasp, he remained untormented by doubt or by longing. As a man he was not only kind, but courteous and eager to court favour, lavish in praise upon all young composers or artists who came into contact with him.

He held the position of Professor of Composition at the Paris Conservatoire until 1896, his principal pupils being Alfred Bruneau, Gustave Charpentier, Gabriel Pierné, Xavier Leroux, Paul Vidal, Georges Marty, Lucien Hillemecher, and Augustin Savard.

He can hardly be said to have exercised a wholesome influence as a teacher, and generally speaking, such of his pupils as have displayed more than ordinary merits as composers did not follow his example. In the works of M. Alfred Bruneau, for instance, no trace of Massenet's methods is to be found, except for a few melodic mannerisms. Not even as much remains in those of M. Pierné or M. Savard.

In addition to the works mentioned above, Massenet wrote the following: 'Béangère et Anatole' (1876), 'Hérodiade' (1881; London Opera House, 1911), 'Le Cid' (1885), 'Le Mage' (1891), 'Le Carillon' (1892), 'Grisélidis' (1901), 'Chérubin' (1905), 'Ariane' (1906), 'Bacchus' (1909), 'Don Quichotte' (1910; London Opera House, 1912).

The funeral of M. Massenet took place at Egreville on August 17, and in accordance with the composer's wishes, was simple in character. Only members of the family were invited. Wreaths were sent by the Prince of Monaco, M. Gunsbourg (director of the Monte Carlo Opera), and by M. Carré (for the Opéra-Comique).

'THE MUSIC MAKERS,' BY EDWARD ELGAR.

Elgar's new work, 'The Music Makers'—a setting for contralto solo, chorus and orchestra, of Arthur O'Shaughnessy's* poem 'We are the Music Makers'—is interesting and welcome not only for the fine musical expression that abounds in it, but for certain very effective innovations in the matter of structure.

The 'motif' of O'Shaughnessy's poem is the idea that the poets—the music makers and dreamers—are really the creators and inspirers of men and their deeds, and the true makers of history and of human societies. Their dreams and their visions are the foreshadowings of what the rest of mankind are predestined to work out in endless conflict: to-day is the realisation of a dream of the generations past; to-morrow will bring into being the dream of to-day:

We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams,
Wandering by lone sea-breakers,
And sitting by desolate streams;—
World-losers and world-forsakers,
On whom the pale moon gleams:
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems.

Cities and empires, and the death of empires, are their work: Nineveh was built with their sighing, and Babel with their mirth:

For each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth.

Soldier, king, and peasant are their instruments 'working together in one':

Till our dream shall become their present,
And their work in the world be done.

These have no knowledge of the work they are doing; it lies alone in some man's dream, whose words kindle flame in men's hearts. The poet conceives and shapes: the busy, striving multitudes merely bring to pass:

But we, with our dreaming and singing,
Ceaseless and sorrowless we!
The glory about us clinging
Of the glorious futures we see,
Our souls with high music ringing:
O men! it must ever be
That we dwell, in our dreaming and singing,
A little apart from ye.

For we are afar with the dawning,
And the suns that are not yet high,
And out of the infinite morning
Intrepid you hear us cry—
How, spite of your human scorning,
Once more God's future draws nigh,
And already goes forth the warning
That ye of the past must die.

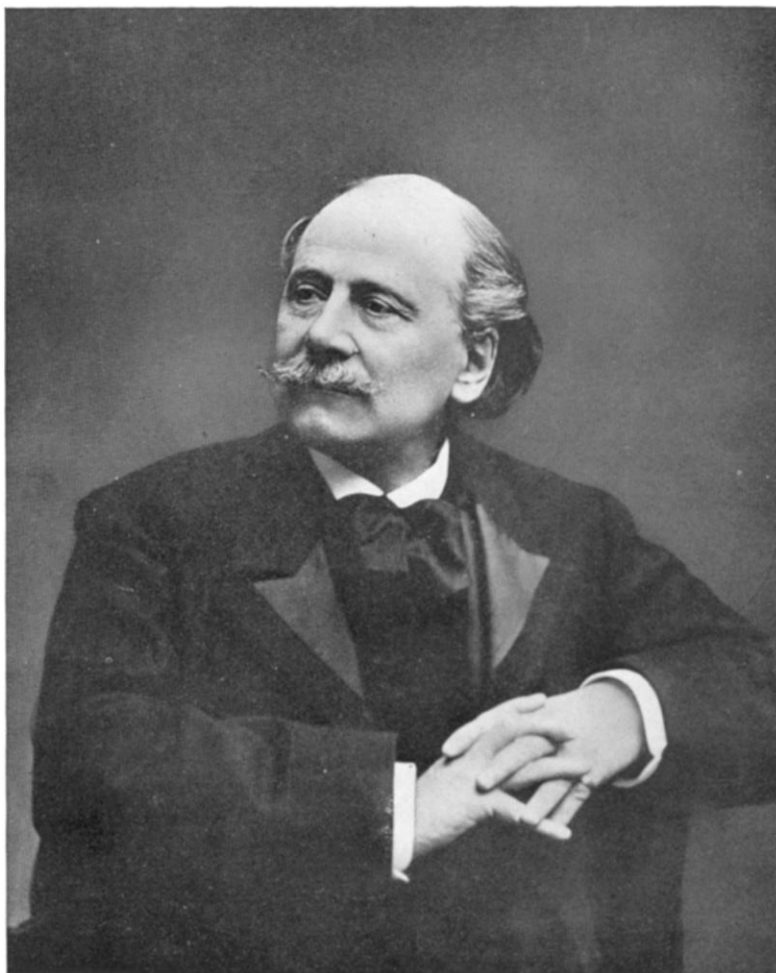
The poet hails the 'comers from the dazzling unknown shore,' bidding them renew the old world with the dreams of what is to be:

* Arthur O'Shaughnessy (14 March, 1844—30 Jan., 1881) spent the outer portion of his short life, from the age of seventeen, in the service of the Library and the Natural History Department of the British Museum. His inner life is expressed in four volumes of verse—the 'Epic of Woman' (1870), 'Lays of France' (1872), 'Music and Moonlight' (1874), and 'Songs of a Worker' (published posthumously in 1881). For a critical appraisal of him the reader may be referred to the article in the new edition of the 'Encyclopædia Britannica.'

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1842-1912.