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Massenet and Wagner: Bridling the influence

STEVEN HUEBNER

By a stroke of coincidence the critic Théodore de Wyzewa found himself sitting next to Jules Massenet during a performance of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth in August 1886. Massenet's behaviour made a deep enough impression on Wyzewa for him to share it with readers of *Le Figaro* several years later. 'He quivered feverishly, became short-breathed, and his large, sombre eyes sparkled in the dark. And when the opera was over, I heard him say to someone in the corridors of the theatre "Ah! I am anxious to return to Paris to burn my *Werther!*"'¹ Wyzewa published his piece on the day of *Werther's* Paris première. In a city where Wagner stagings had recently become all the rage, this was hardly a ringing endorsement; but Wyzewa had a more important point. Massenet provided a prime example of an ill that had descended on French composers, all too many of whom had sacrificed native qualities in vain, sterile imitations of Wagner. Pale beside the 'enchanted treasure of dream and fantasy' ('le trésor enchanté du rêve et de la fantaisie') in Wagner's textures, such imitations had taken on a merely formulaic character.

The *Werther* subject may in some ways have encouraged Wyzewa's apprehensions. According to Paul Milliet, one of the three librettists of Massenet's opera, the idea for *Werther* was initially his, around the time he had finished a draft of the composer's *Hérodiade* in 1878.² On the train to Milan with Massenet's publisher Georges Hartmann – a trip undertaken to read *Hérodiade* to Giulio Ricordi, who had commissioned the work – Milliet freely expounded on his libretto-writing ideals: musicians should not look for plots with multiple twists and turns but rather for those that developed passions irrespective of external events. Goethe's epistolary novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was perfect. 'But what about the pistol shot?' Hartmann interjected, betraying more prosaic preoccupations. 'I won't stop at the pistol shot', Milliet remembers having replied. 'The denouement of *Werther* is deliverance. ... When Christmas night descends on him, when it envelops his heart with blessed anxiety, the clarity of forgiveness breaks through the shadows where the world disappears; and for Werther, as for Tristan, the music of spirits begins to sing in the vacuum created by mortal voices that have become muted.' Instead of Goethe's laconic last line following

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¹ 'M. Jules Massenet', *Le Figaro*, 16 January 1893.

² 'Werther', *L'Art du théâtre*, 31 (July 1903), 106–8.

Werther's burial – 'There was no priest in attendance' – Milliet preferred a celebration of Werther's redemption.

Milliet's account of the genesis suggests that the libretto he had first written corresponded more closely to the ideals he had articulated to Hartmann than the final version produced after 'many cuts and arbitrary additions'. In the end, conventional opéra-comique accoutrements were rather brutally drawn out from the Goethe source: an expanded role for Charlotte's sister Sophie – a vestige of the opéra-comique *chanteuse légère* tradition who seems to become slightly taken with Werther herself – as well as the enlarged parts for Johann and Schmidt. Nevertheless, when Massenet began extended work on *Werther* in the period 1885–7,³ it was far more intensely concentrated on interior action between the soprano and tenor – at the expense of secondary foils – than any text he had set previously, and most he would use afterwards. For the first time in his career, and like Wagner in *Tristan*, he avoided ensemble singing and chorus almost entirely.

Among the multiple readings that the opera's conclusion invites, one laying emphasis on a musical projection of redemption, consonant with Milliet's *Tristan* esque vision, is particularly persuasive. When Charlotte rushes to Werther after he has shot himself – a scene not in the novel – the very finality of his suicide frees her to confess her love for the first and only time. 'Crois-tu donc / Qu'en cet instant ma vie est achevée? / Elle commence, vois-tu bien' (Do you think that my life has now come to an end? It is beginning, don't you see?), he soon responds. In the distance children sing the Noël heard earlier in the scene and at the outset of the opera. Massenet's Werther says (following Goethe) that the priest will avoid his grave, but when he dies, the Noël returns, as does the music for the famous Ossian *air* 'Pourquoi me réveiller' sung for, and then with, Charlotte in the previous tableau. There the *air* had marked the peak of Werther's earthly malaise. During a spinning out of its main motif, Werther drew Charlotte into a brief passage of ensemble singing, the most extended one for them in the work, only to have her beg the Lord for protection and run off.⁴ As Werther expires, the orchestra recalls the initial motif of the *air*, now transformed to span a tritone. Melodic similarity between the children's Noël and the pessimistic 'Pourquoi me réveiller' is brought into clear focus through juxtaposition (see Ex. 1). A simulta-

³ In a letter of 25 September 1880 to his friend Paul Lacombe (Massenet-Lacombe correspondence, Bibliothèque municipale de Carcassonne), Massenet announced that he was about to begin work on *Werther*: 'that very special work is meant above all to satisfy me' ('cet ouvrage tout spécial est destiné à me satisfaire d'abord'). In December 1880, the Opéra Comique announced a cast to the papers, but Massenet seems to have dropped the project around that time. The account that Massenet gives in *Mes Souvenirs* (Paris, 1912; new edition annotated by Gérard Condé, Paris, 1992) about having been inspired by a visit to Wetzlar in 1886 to write a *Werther* cannot be true; it illustrates how unreliable a source the composer's book often is. *Werther* was not premiered until 16 February 1892 at the Vienna Court Opera.

⁴ As initially composed, the opera had a much longer passage of ensemble singing for Charlotte and Werther. In a pre-publication print of the piano-vocal score once owned by Milliet and dated by him 8 May 1888 (B.O. & 2117(2)), Charlotte and Werther sing together in the last tableau following her 'Ton baiser du moins je te l'aurai rendu!' In the first and subsequent editions, the musical text is substantially the same, but rendered initially by the orchestra alone and then by Charlotte.

neous Noël and suicide certainly encourages an ironic reading, perhaps even a charge of excessive melodrama. But the conclusion is surely richer than that. The common motif linking suffering and saving grace (embodied in the birth of Christ) stands for Werther's regeneration beyond the material world, where his very existence has become impossible. The last harmonic progression has something open-ended about it as well: wavering between C minor and G major chords before the curtain, the music finally settles upon the latter, readily heard as dominant harmony.

Werther

Pour - quoi me ré - veil - ler, Ô souf - fle du prin - temps

Ex. 1a *Werther*, Act III, 1st tableau

Charlotte

Ah!...

Children's voices (in the distance)

Jé - sus vient de naî - tre. Voi - ci no - tre di - vin maî - tre;

dim.

Ex. 1b *Werther*, Act III, conclusion

Wyzewa's testimony is not the only evidence of Massenet's admiration for Wagner's music in the 1880s. In a letter written in early 1883 to an unspecified correspondent, Massenet brimmed over with enthusiasm for a production of

Rheingold he had seen at the Théâtre de la Monnaie the previous evening: ‘what a spectacle of magic! what music! what *softness* [underlined four times] in the orchestration!’ He concluded by sounding a note of self-doubt analogous to that reported by Wyzewa: ‘what is one to become with *Hérodiade*, *Manon* and ... *Montalte*???’ [a project for the Opéra that was abandoned]; what fake goods!’⁵ With distance, delirium of the moment gave way to more controlled assessment. Massenet is said to have confessed to one salon gathering that ‘the power of Wagner is such that upon leaving a performance of one of his works, one vows never to compose again ... but then one forgets a bit and starts again’.⁶

In an important interview given to *Le Figaro* shortly before the première of *Manon* in 1884, Massenet was even more sober. Admitting that his enthusiasm for Wagner had once been fanatical, he was now a professor at the Conservatoire where some students were ‘even more ardent, more progressive, more *wagnérien*’. He viewed his role as one of a restrainer, of keeping them ‘bridled up to the point when, through a slow initiation to taste, tact and measure, which are the distinctive characteristics of French genius, they may venture without risk into those new worlds, full of real seductions, but also of deceiving mirages’.⁷ Whereas contemporary Italian opera was burdened with too exclusive a concern with the voice, Wagnerian opera relied too much on the orchestra. Though the latter was closer to dramatic truth, Massenet’s ideal was a ‘harmonious fusion of the two systems’. In implicitly advancing a blend of North and South, he joined the ranks of a venerable tradition in the understanding and promotion of French culture.

Unlike Paul Milliet, Massenet never drew a parallel between *Werther* and *Tristan*. And there is much in the opera that is not Wagnerian in a post-*Lobengrin* sense, including its adherence to short set pieces and its spinning out of referential melodies and motifs that begin with four-bar phrases or, when two bars long, are often assimilated into quadratic phrase structure. On the other hand, Massenet’s verbal witness does invite assessment of Wagnerian influence on his work written in the 1880s. Does it extend to encompass an understanding of *Werther*’s conclusion or the opera’s avoidance of ensembles as obliquely *Tristanesque*? Once the Wagnerian invitation is accepted as credible, the listener’s spirit of intertextual play is free to produce interpretations within the fuzzy borders of stylistic, syntactic and semantic sense. Perhaps as a legacy of the heated polemic in the critical press of the period, there has been a tendency to characterise works by French opera composers of the period in black and white terms, as either Wagnerian (D’Indy’s *Fervaal*, Chausson’s *Le Roi Arthur*) or non-Wagnerian (Massenet’s *Manon* or

⁵ ‘quelle féerie! quelle musique! quelle *douceur* dans l’orchestration!’ and later in the letter ‘que devenir avec *Hérodiade*, *Manon*, et ... *Montalte*???’ c’est d’un toc!’ Letter of 24 January (B.N., Mus., 1.a. Massenet 208). A guess at the recipient of this letter as either Adolphe D’Ennery or Louis Gallet comes from its contents – which make clear that Massenet is writing to a friend and collaborator – as well as the way *Montalte* (a libretto by D’Ennery and Gallet, unlike *Hérodiade* and *Manon*) is set off in the list of operas. Massenet must have dropped the *Montalte* project by the end of 1883 because *Le Ménestrel* announced in its issue of 30 December that Ernest Guiraud would set the text.

⁶ This anecdote is told by Hugues Imbert in ‘Jules Massenet’, *Profils d’artistes contemporains* (Paris, 1897), 226.

⁷ ‘Paris’ [psdn. Emile Blavet], ‘La Vie Parisienne’, *Le Figaro*, 19 January 1884.

even *Werther*). As in most analogous matters of musical style and influence in whatever period, the distinction is often not rigid.⁸

None the less, Wagner casts a longer shadow over some works than others. With Massenet, it is not *Werther* where that shadow is most clearly perceived, but his next opera, *Esclarmonde*, composed rapidly between the end of 1887 and October 1888, and actually premièred before *Werther* on 15 May 1889. Commissioned as the Opéra Comique's showpiece for the international exposition of 1889, *Esclarmonde* is quite different from its forerunner in its requirements for spectacle and its highly eventful plot.⁹ Working from the medieval romance *Partonopeus de Blois*, Alfred Blau and Louis de Gramont produced an East-meets-West libretto, one consonant with the real-life frame of an exposition with exhibits from non-Western European cultures conspicuously lining the Champ de Mars.¹⁰ The Emperor Phorcas abdicates the throne of Byzantium in favour of his daughter Esclarmonde. She has learned the art of magic from him on condition that her face and identity remain veiled to all men until the age of twenty, when a tournament will be held for her hand. Esclarmonde loves the French knight Roland. She draws him to an enchanted island and promises continued nocturnal visits filled with carnal bliss, on condition that he not seek to discover her name or lift her veil. Roland's native city of Blois is besieged by implacable Norsemen, and he goes off to defend it armed with a magical sword supplied him by his lover. He is victorious, but when the old King Cléomer offers him the hand of his daughter (with the rather unfetching name of Bathilde), Roland refuses. The Archbishop of Blois vows to get to the bottom of this puzzling ignominy and, in the guise of a confession, is able to extract from Roland the secret of Esclarmonde's nightly visits. On their next assignation the two lovers are surprised by the archbishop and priests. Esclarmonde's veil is torn off. The sword crumbles. In the end, following an additional episode in which Esclarmonde renounces her lover at the request of her father, Roland participates in the tournament at Byzantium and emerges victorious.

Figures from the French operatic tradition resonate from this eclectic concat-

⁸ A fine article by Annegret Fauser on the same subject as this essay, but written from a different perspective and with a different purpose, is entitled: 'Esclarmonde: un opéra wagnérien?', *L'Avant-Scène Opéra: Esclarmonde, Grisélidis*, 148 (1992), 68–73. The author sensibly concludes by suggesting that the answer hinges on how one understands *wagnérisme*. I would go a step further and propose that the question posed in the title – which encourages a 'yes, no or perhaps' answer – is not the only angle from which to view this work or any other *fin-de-siècle* French opera. In place of an apportionment into two camps, however one defines them, one may simply attempt to assess Wagnerian influence in a wide variety of works.

⁹ For a reliable account of the genesis of *Esclarmonde*, see Patrick Gillis, 'Genèse d'*Esclarmonde*', *L'Avant-Scène ... Esclarmonde, Grisélidis*, 22–33.

¹⁰ For an accessible summary of *Partonopeus*, see *Histoire littéraire de la France* (Nendeln/Lichtenstein: Kraus repr., 1971, of original 1838 edition), xix, 632–48. The most likely source of the complete text in modern French for the librettists and Massenet would have been by Legrand d'Aussy, *Fabliaux ou Contes* (Paris, 1829), V, 203–318. Ernest Reyer's review of the opera (*Le Journal des débats*, 19 May 1889) mentions the Legrand d'Aussy translation; since he was well acquainted with Alfred Blau as one of the librettists for his own *Sigurd*, Reyer's observation is particularly valuable.

enation. Armide-like, Esclarmonde draws her lover to an island; the archbishop behaves with the dubious moral suasion of the Grand Inquisitor in *Don Carlos*; and like Raoul in *Les Huguenots*, Roland refuses the hand offered him, much to the consternation of assembled masses. But there is also a supernatural sword redolent of *Notung* and love for an unknown stranger à la *Lohengrin*.

Suggestive musical references draw particular attention to these Wagnerian echoes. In an Act I duet with her sister and confidante Parséis, Esclarmonde laments that her beloved is far away in France and unattainable. 'Mais vous songez à lui!' (But you are thinking of him!) Parséis responds (see Ex. 2), hinting that this is reason enough to use her powers. Parséis's answer, settling on the *Tristan* chord, looks beyond the fantasy-world of the opera. Raymond de Rigné, a fanatical admirer and acquaintance of the composer, once noted in connection with a putative Wagnerian hint in *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* that Massenet delighted in distributing 'de petites malices', mischievous references to others, throughout his work.¹¹ The dependability of de Rigné, who usually cast his testimony in the form of a novel or short story, remains to be fully evaluated, but the simultaneous sounding of the *Tristan* chord and 'Mais vous songez à lui!' is consonant with his account. In the next bar, one of two leitmotifs signifying magical power in the opera are brought into the texture. Remembering that Massenet's own immediate reaction to Wagner performances seems to have been of a man possessed, and that he was also concerned to shield his students from 'dangerous mirages', the passage may be read either as a cautionary sign or as a subtle homage. Other echoes are not difficult to hear. Like *Die Meistersinger*, *Esclarmonde* opens in a basilica to organ chords in C major. Before meeting Esclarmonde in Act II, Roland is surrounded by waltzing spirits, scantily clad seductive emissaries who, like *Blumenmädchen*, prepare the ground for the ensuing seduction. 'Je suis belle et désirable' (I am beautiful and desirable), Esclarmonde soon languidly promises, to a melody strongly reminiscent of the leitmotif representing the attraction of Siegmund to Sieglinde in *Die Walküre* (see Ex. 3; the bracketed portion of 3b is, of course, often used independently in Wagner's opera).

The name Esclarmonde in the opera is not drawn from *Partonopeus de Blois*, where the analogous character is Melior, nor was it invented by Blau and Gramont. It comes from a *chanson de geste* of the thirteenth century, *The Adventures of Huon de Bordeaux*.¹² After a series of fantastic episodes Huon is thrown into prison by the Babylonian admiral Gaudise, whose daughter Esclarmonde becomes enamoured of him. The two escape – not before Huon succeeds in extracting four of Gaudise's teeth and his beard as a trophy – and find themselves shipwrecked

¹¹ 'Souvenirs sur Massenet', *Mercure de France*, 1 March 1921. The passage in *Le Jongleur* that de Rigné cites is the phrase 'Voix de l'inexprimable' in G flat major sung by 'le moine musicien' in Act II; the harmonies are said to recall the language of *Tannhäuser*. This music certainly has a modal flavour appropriate to the setting, but it must be admitted that, in this case, it is difficult to hear Wagner's work – say the Pilgrims' chorus – behind Massenet's application of *couleur locale*.

¹² Henri Céard noted the derivation of the name in his review of the first production in *Le Siècle*, 16 May 1889. A summary of *Huon* with citations is given in *Histoire littéraire de la France*, 41–93.

Parséis

Mais... vous son-gez à lui! Vers By-zan - ce vous

'magic' pp

Ex. 2 *Esclarmonde*, Act I

Esclarmonde

Va... je suis belle et dé - si - ra - ble!

Ex. 3a *Esclarmonde*, Act II

Ex. 3b *Die Walküre*, Act I

and alone on an island. They fear that their end is near. 'Let us lie together for a more tender death', Huon beseeches Esclarmonde, 'just as Tristan died for the beautiful Isolde, so too shall we in the name of God'.¹³ From *Huon* the allusion may be spun out to Wagner. Massenet's *Esclarmonde* and Roland, isolated on their own island in the second act, sing of their love. It is night. A large section of their duet is in A flat major, the key of the centre of the second act duet in *Tristan*, 'O sink hernieder'. The Wagner passage ends at the famous moment where Tristan and Isolde sink into a bed of flowers and the *Tristan* chord sounds *pianissimo* in the winds before Brangäne's first warning (see Ex. 4). Massenet concludes his section with an afterthought following its final cadence, the same sonority under the word 'Hymen' as Esclarmonde and Roland themselves are covered in petals.¹⁴

The next morning Esclarmonde informs Roland that Blois is under siege and pushes him to pursue *la Gloire*. Instead of the mere advice that Melior offers Partonopeus at this point in the source, Esclarmonde gives Roland a sword. His

¹³ In the original: 'Acolons-nous, si morrons plus soef / Tristans morut por bele Iseut amer / Si ferons nous, moi et vous, en non Dé.' *Histoire littéraire de la France*, 71.

¹⁴ The two voice-leading situations are, of course, entirely different, with Massenet's fundamental conservatism highlighted against the Wagner example.

Isolde *ersterbend*
wahn - los hold be - wuß - ter Wunsch.

Tristan *ersterbend*
wahn - los hold be - wuß - ter Wunsch.

più p - - - - *ppp*

Ex. 4a *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II

Chorus (offstage) Hy -

Hy -

p

f - men! - - - Hy - men! - - - *f*

f - men! - - - Hy - men! - - - *f*

f *p* *f* *p*

Ex. 4b *Esclarmonde*, Act II

virility is validated by the sexualised heroine after a night she has arranged to assuage her desire, a dissonance with the patriarchal order that is 'corrected' later when this sword crumbles after the intervention of the archbishop, spokesman for the established moral order. In the end, Esclarmonde has been chastened by her father for misuse of her magical powers and Roland wins her using his own weapon. The sword Esclarmonde causes to appear in Act II is no ordinary one, but 'l'immortel rélique' used by St George, slayer of the dragon. This librettistic initiative is part of a long tradition in which the legend of St George and the dragon is understood as the victory of Christian over pagan: Roland does have heathen Norsemen to overcome. Swords and dragons (and attendant allegorical interpretations: Freudian/feminist or not) again bring Wagner's world into view. Enter sword-bearing virgins, to a march of vaguely Wagnerian vintage, *année Tannhäuser* or *Lohengrin*, with its ornamental turns and chromatic passing notes assimilated into the melody (see Ex. 5a). The first bar seems a free play on the sword motif in the *Ring*, the home key of which is also C major and which likewise spans a tenth (see Ex. 5b). Esclarmonde invokes St George, and the pommel becomes illuminated, like its analogue in the first act of *Die Walküre*.

The invitation to seek Wagnerian 'petites malices' in *Esclarmonde* comes in the main from a mixture of medieval subject with the most extensive web of

Tempo di marcia

Ex. 5a *Esclarmonde*, Act II

Ex. 5b *Die Walküre* (Nothung)

leitmotifs Massenet ever used. In his *Notice sur Esclarmonde*, published in 1890, Charles Malherbe set himself the ostensibly unmusical task of actually counting the number of leitmotivic recurrences in *Esclarmonde*, with the implied conviction that quantity would help confirm the work's pedigree as progressive.¹⁵ The appearances of Charlotte's motif in *Werther*, or any motif in the earlier *Manon*, are certainly dwarfed by the 111 times that the magic motif cited in Example 1 surfaces in *Esclarmonde*. Seen in historical context, Malherbe's point is not as trivial as it may first seem. Not only does it serve to distinguish *Esclarmonde* from Massenet's earlier operas, but also, where textures were largely un-Wagnerian (post-*Lohengrin*), quantification was vital to his effort to uphold Massenet's position in the French *avant-garde*, secure in the 1870s and early 1880s but already suspect in some quarters by later in that decade.

The *Notice* is both important and curious. Known today mainly as a collector who bequeathed his rich library of autographs to the Conservatoire, Malherbe was also a critic and composer who, as an intimate of Massenet, arranged some of his operas for solo piano and helped with the preparation of autograph full scores and proofreading. In this period, he was one of the main reviewers for the weekly journal *Le Monde artiste*, bought up shortly before the *Esclarmonde* première by Massenet's publisher Hartmann. Though with currently available evidence it is not possible to ascribe any of what Malherbe wrote about *Esclarmonde* directly to Massenet, his association with the composer's circle does give the book special status. This is not to say that Malherbe's credibility as a critic is unblemished. To defend Massenet's choice of plot by arguing forcefully on behalf of the simplicity of action afforded by legend (bolstered with citations from Wagner) can only be construed as something of a tactical error with *Esclarmonde*. After establishing the very useful distinction (especially for his contemporaries) between the short leitmotif and longer thematic reminiscence, Malherbe goes on to group the D flat melody 'Divin moment' in Act II as a leitmotif when, by the very criteria he outlines, it is used mainly as a reminiscence.

Massenet devised a relatively small number of leitmotifs for *Esclarmonde* – a good case can be made for only six – and, following his practice in *Werther*, rarely combined them contrapuntally or developed them in tonally open-ended passages. The number divisions are often clear; more than *Werther*, the work contains conventional tripartite *airs*, *concertatos* and *strettas*. Even when a leitmotif is spun out – as in the Act IV passage where the triadic motif associated with magical powers (see Ex. 6a) sounds repeatedly as *Esclarmonde*'s father reprimands her in Act IV ('Non! Le Ciel a parlé') – the music, with a few exceptions, is analogous more to quadratic *parlante* texture than to Wagner's later style. Massenet's use of that motif, the second of two associated with the supernatural, is eloquent testimony of his strategy. It is the basis for one of the most tonally discursive passages in the opera, the final scene in Act I, in which *Esclarmonde* draws Roland to the boat that will take him to the island. After setting off on

¹⁵ Malherbe's book was published by Fischbacher in Paris. He also wrote a feature on *Esclarmonde* shortly before the première entitled 'Légende et Opéra', *Le Monde artiste*, 5 May 1889.

the dominant of A major, the motif is reiterated orchestrally in various tonalities and in non-symmetrical phrase groups until a weakly articulated A major cadence finally gives way to a much stronger one in C. By contrast, the same motif also generates two conventional, voice-dominated, tonally closed and quadratic sections: its rhythm is heard in the love duet ensemble 'Chaque nuit' (see Ex. 6b), and its melody at the beginning of the poignant *air* that Esclarmonde sings after her veil has been forcibly removed, 'Regarde les ces yeux' (see Ex. 6c). Magic produces bliss, magic leads to deception – to pin a semantic understanding on the musical connections shown in Example 6. Or, to wring a metaphor out of syntax, the appearances of the same leitmotif within different kinds of numbers – relatively progressive and relatively conservative – serve as a structural emblem for a meeting of two stylistic worlds.

Esclarmonde

Es - prits de l'air! Es - prits de l'on - de!

Ex. 6a *Esclarmonde*, Act I

Esclarmonde

Cha - que nuit cher a-mant près de toi tu me re-trou-ve-ras!

Ex. 6b *Esclarmonde*, Act II

Esclarmonde

Re - gar - de les ces yeux plus purs que les é - toi - les,

Ex. 6c *Esclarmonde*, Act III

Malherbe's *Notice* is coloured by a nationalist programme in harmony with the temper of the times, and this leads him to uphold compromise as the score's main strength. Massenet took what he needed from the 'système wagnérien' and was able to combine this 'with the simplicity and clarity that are, and that must remain, in spite of all foreign importations, a property of French genius'.¹⁶ Writing in *Le Monde artiste*, Malherbe held *Esclarmonde* to be a worthy counterpart to *Tristan*, 'that strange and strong work'. In practice, this meant that Massenet had unfolded his leitmotifs clearly, in uncomplicated textures, and had preserved audible formal outlines with many local-level reprises. For Malherbe, there was also didactic value in this approach, an argument that turns nationalism into something of a double-edged sword. The composer had met his full responsibility to

¹⁶ *Notice*, 57.

the French public as a progressive artist by initiating it gently into leitmotivic writing. He had 'known how to measure, in a way, the amount of effort and reflection that could be expected of French listeners, how to calculate their point of resistance, which is very inferior to that of the Germans'¹⁷ – an unambiguous musical *Realpolitik* not exactly flattering to his compatriots. Nevertheless, Malherbe's approach does remind us of Massenet's own concern to initiate his students slowly to Wagnerian seductions; to keep them – or, inversely, Wagner's influence – 'bridled'.

Two numbers illustrate both the interaction of leitmotif with larger forms in *Esclarmonde*, as well as an inclination towards organic writing characteristic of Massenet in this period. The first is the *air*/duet for Esclarmonde and Parséis at the beginning of Act I. Subsections based upon leitmotifs alternate with resolutely non-leitmotivic ones. The number begins with an orchestral passage and recitative built on the motifs associated with Roland and Esclarmonde. Nevertheless, although giving at least a superficial impression of modernity by being made up of leitmotifs and surface chromaticism, most of the passage functions harmonically in a way conventional to nineteenth-century French opera. It proceeds from tonic to a long preparation for the first voice-dominated music through prolongation of the dominant and evaded tonic cadences. Furthermore, Esclarmonde's two-bar motif is actually broken off from the melody of the 'O divine Esclarmonde' chorus in the Prologue; though that motif is treated independently in the course of the *air*/duet, it appears in the orchestral introduction attached to a much longer citation from the music of the chorus; in short, the long-standing operatic procedure of melodic reprise. The ensuing *air* for Esclarmonde finally brings a return to root position tonic. It is a ternary *cavatine*-type, free of leitmotifs and with an applause point worked in at the conclusion. Esclarmonde dreams of Roland. When Parséis enters after the cadence she spills out her desire.

The duet begins with through-composed music dominated by leitmotifs that succeed one another freely in the orchestra, first 'Esclarmonde', then the 'tournament', 'magic' (in its demi-semiquaver note turn manifestation) and, eventually, after an eleven bar voice-dominated period for Parséis ('Parmi les rois regnant'), 'Roland'. This is one of the most Wagnerian stretches in the opera, containing a sequence of unresolved seventh chords ('Sort plus cruel encor'), contrapuntal development of the Esclarmonde motif ('Les décrets du sort inexorable'), and a seamless interchange of motifs. Indeed, it stands out so much that it has the flavour of pastiche rather than of Massenet's own language, much like the minuet in the third act of *Manon*. And in its course, Parséis emits her 'Mais vous songez à lui!' with accompanying *Tristan* chord. The general style here has something of the air of a 'petite malice' about it.

Leitmotifs drop away once again when Esclarmonde launches the next section, with the melody from the middle section of her *air* jacked-up a semitone and underpinned by dominant harmony of C major. Transposed melodic reprise was stock in trade of French composers since 'Ange purs, ange radieux!' in *Faust*

¹⁷ *Notice*, 45.

(itself perhaps modelled on the *Steigerung* of 'Dir Töne Lob' in *Tannhäuser*), and, typically, it is here synchronous with lyrical intensification: Roland is so near (through magical powers), yet so far (through paternal interdict).¹⁸ The music following the arrival on the tonic of C major is efflorescence: in its re-enforcement of that cadence through text repetition and parallel singing, the passage is akin to conventional codas in French and Italian opera at mid-century.

The tonal plan of the *air*/duet, then, describes a course from A to C major. The two tonalities are actually interlocked in the duet on a more local level. For example, it begins on the dominant of C, articulates that tonality more forcefully when Esclarmonde's motif is sounded ('Les décrets du sort'), but then modulates to A major before a return to the dominant of C. This tonal detail contributes to the musical unity of the first act. The next number, a trio for Esclarmonde, Parséis and the minor character Enéas, is in E major (dominant of A), but a cadence in C major arrives *fortissimo* before one in the tonic is ever heard. A weak cadence in A major sounds near the end of the last number in the act, described earlier, only to give way to C major at the curtain. Such double-tonic procedure suggests a Wagnerian parallel – as it happens the keys are the same as those in the double-tonic complex of *Tristan* – but differences in harmonic language and in how closely the keys rub shoulders (not very with Massenet, at least compared to *Tristan*) also invite caution about drawing the parallel.¹⁹ The matter does serve to raise a general style-critical problem in the work of Massenet and his French contemporaries, who were well versed in the German symphonic tradition and the work of Berlioz and Liszt, not to mention Gounod and Bizet: where may one draw a line between Wagnerian influence and general language that could be expected from a composer writing at the end of the 1880s?

Our second example is the Act II duet for Esclarmonde and Roland. With over thirty minutes of music it makes for a very long 'number' – a love duet of Wagnerian proportions, if not form. It even stretches across a change of scene from the island to a 'room in a magic palace', a transformation executed following an extended orchestral interlude. The duet begins with the kind of *parlante* texture in slow tempo that found much favour earlier with Gounod: Roland declaims above a nearly complete orchestral rendition of the 'O divine Esclarmonde' chorus from the Prologue, now in E flat. Esclarmonde responds in A major with the melody reminiscent of *Die Walküre* cited in Example 3, which she soon reiterates on the dominant of A flat ('Va je suis belle') to prepare an ensemble in that key ('Voici le divin moment'). The first two bars of the ensemble have already come in for leitmotivic treatment in the opera, but here the form is as conventional

¹⁸ On *Steigerung* in Gounod see Steven Huebner, *The Operas of Charles Gounod* (Oxford, 1990), 254. Other examples in amorous or erotic contexts in the work of Massenet include: *Eve*, Troisième partie, Eve–Adam duet at 'Aimons nous!'; *Le Roi de Lahore*, Act II, Sita–Alim duet, at 'Restons unis'; *Hérodiade*, Act I, Salomé–Jean duet at 'Dans la mystique ardeur'; *Manon*, Act I, Poussette–Javotte–Rosette intervention 'Revenez Guillot' in the Manon–Des Grieux duet; *Thaïs*, Act I, finale, 'Qui te fait si sévère'; *Grisélidis*, Act I, Introduction, 'Les grands cieus sont comme un miroir'.

¹⁹ The classic study on the double-tonic complex in *Tristan* is Robert Bailey's *Richard Wagner: Prelude and Transfiguration from 'Tristan and Isolde'* (New York, 1985).

as can be, a ternary subsection with quadratic phrases and contrasting middle that carries the music further flatward to D flat.

Executed as the lovers are enshrouded by vapours and flowers, the orchestral interlude that follows is more developmental. With throbbing accompaniment chords in iambic rhythm and a dynamic climax lasciviously achieved through carefully graded crescendo and accelerando, it occasioned a flurry of excitement in the contemporary press, and was encored at the première. The critic of *La Patrie* made note of 'maliciously expressive music, if not actually erotically imitative'; Camille Bellaigue in the *Revue des deux mondes* held that 'never before, I believe, has such a close and detailed musical description of the physical manifestation of human affection been made (you see I am trying to express myself decently)'.²⁰ *Steigerung* finds a natural home in this steamy environment: the main strain of the 'Voici le divin moment' ensemble is carried from A flat to A major, B major and C major. Before this melody reaches C major, the melody from the middle section of 'Voici le divin moment' is also heard in that key, that is, down a semitone from its initial presentation. Two musical elements first exposed separately, and in different keys, arrive at the same key from both above and below: the tonal strategy in the interlude stands as a metaphor for the obvious. Though from an architectural point of view the 'Voici le divin moment' ensemble, taken by itself, would not have appeared out of place in a grand opera written forty years before, the real end of this part of the duet is in the subsequent orchestral passage with which it is integrated musically. To use an orchestral passage to delineate operatic action between change of sets was more modern, but strictly speaking this music is not transitional in the manner of scene changes in *Rheingold*, *Parsifal* or the last act of Massenet's own *Werther*. It functions, rather, as a musical peroration to the preceding ensemble, a significant enlargement of the orchestral conclusion used by Gounod at the end of Act III in *Faust*.

A change of set brings morning and a solo *cavatine*-type for Roland ('Chère épouse'), with ensemble cadential phrases. The long duet, then, continues to unfold as a mosaic of small, clearly articulated sections. From a purely musical point of view, sporadic appearances of leitmotifs serve more to bind the whole piece with the rest of the opera than to provide a sense of unity within the duet. A sense of cohesion, however, is not entirely absent: at 'Chère épouse' not only does E flat major re-emerge, but the melody is also carved out of the 'O divine Esclarmonde' music with which the duet began (see Ex. 7). A new ensemble, 'Chaque nuit' in E flat, followed by the march episode in C major where Roland receives the sword and a reprise of 'Chaque nuit', bring the end of the duet.

C major is the principal secondary key in the duet, used for the main internal cadence in the number at the end of the orchestral interlude, as well as for the sword episode. Through a lens with a much wider angle, looking across the whole opera, the dynamic between E flat and C major may be understood as emblematic for the love of Esclarmonde and Roland. The four acts of *Esclarmonde* are framed by a prologue, where the dramatic knot is prepared, and an epilogue, where it

²⁰ M. de Thémènes, review of *Esclarmonde*, *La Patrie*, 21 May 1889 and Camille Bellaigue, review of *Esclarmonde*, *Revue des deux mondes*, 1 June 1889.

Ex. 7a *Esclarmonde*, Act II

Roland

Chè - re é - pou - se, Ô chè - re maî - tres - se!

Ex. 7b *Esclarmonde*, Act II

is undone following Roland's victory in the tournament. Both prologue and epilogue take place in the same basilica and contain significant choral passages for the Byzantine populace. Both also take the listener rather mechanically through the same music, with some important additions in the case of the epilogue. The prologue begins in C major and progresses through choral renditions of 'O divine Esclarmonde' in D flat and D major, at which point it ends. *Steigerung* also governs the course of the epilogue, which modulates from C major, through D flat, D, and, finally, to E flat just before the curtain. Esclarmonde and Roland live happily ever after and the world of the love duet is explicitly brought back through a reprise of the *cavatine*-like 'Chère épouse'. In short, the series of modulations from C major to E flat with which the opera closes, and whose meaning is intimated by the prominence of those keys in the love duet of Act II, is initiated, but not followed through, in the prologue. Something musical and dramatic launched and left unfinished at the beginning, leaving a mark on the course of the opera, and 'completed' at the end: though the musical language, materials and plot are different, the analogy to *Tristan* is palpable.

Esclarmonde, its recurring motifs teeming in and around small closed forms, succeeded in alienating both progressives and conservatives in the Parisian musical press.²¹ For others less concerned to grind a Wagnerian or anti-Wagnerian axe, like Henri Céard of *Le Siècle*, the work smacked of an intellectual exercise in eclecticism devoid of real passion. Biguet of *Le Radical* questioned Massenet's sincerity, a view that harmonised with many later assessments of the composer's career.²² *Esclarmonde* was seen as a brief Wagnerian phase in his output, just as in *La Navarraise* he had dabbled in *versimo*, hoping to tap the vein of success mined by Leoncavallo, and in *Cendrillon* he had followed in the footsteps of

²¹ Progressive critics who were staunch supporters of Wagner's music, such as Louis de Fourcaud (*Le Gaulois*, 16 May 1889) and Victor Wilder (*Gil Blas*, 17 May 1889), attacked *Esclarmonde* not only for its musical concessions to the gallery but also for an over-complicated plot. Conservative writers such as Arthur Pougin (*Le Ménestrel*, 19 May 1889) and Camille Bellaigue (see n. 20) were not much happier with the libretto, and argued that Massenet leaned excessively on Wagner.

²² A. Biguet, review of *Esclarmonde*, *Le Radical*, 17 May 1889.

Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel*.²³ 'As an attentive man, Massenet judged the moment

propitious to borrow certain procedures from Wagner', noted Servières in the context of a hostile study that emphasised the composer's supposed opportunism.²⁴ Judicious assessments of Massenet's motives in a less partisan atmosphere than when Servières was writing must await a new biography, for which there is some need. The questionable assumption that artistic integrity and pragmatism were poor bedfellows underlay much of the rhetoric surrounding Massenet in his own day and later. It is worth serious review.

According to Wyzewa's *Figaro* report, friends of the composer had assured him that Massenet at the work-table was not the besotted listener at the Bayreuth performances. Tellingly, Wyzewa expressed disbelief. Servières was even more extreme in attacking *Esclarmonde* with the epithet 'wagnérisme éffeminée', the work of a composer infatuated with Wagner but with insufficient artistic (and manly) fibre fully to embrace the implications of his work. But Malherbe's tract and Massenet's *Figaro* interview lend credence to Massenet's friends. The scores of *Werther* and *Esclarmonde* are unequivocally amenable to an elaboration of a critical position that highlights his objective manipulation of Wagnerian elements to suit an agenda built on the manifestly non-Wagnerian premiss that local level musical reprise did not necessarily need to be sacrificed to achieve musical cohesion across acts and even entire works. In this light, the 'petites malices' turn into winks tinged with irony.

²³ René de Récy makes this point in his review of Massenet's *Thaïs*, *Revue politique et littéraire*, 24 March 1894.

²⁴ Georges Servières, 'Jules Massenet', *La Musique française moderne* (Paris, 1897), 174.