

# “Manon, *it has to be* Manon!”

Jules Massenet’s romantic tragedy  
has all the marks of immortality

**O**n January 19, 1884, when Jules Massenet’s *Manon* was heard for the first time on the stage of Paris’ Opéra-Comique, there were no other French composers in contention for leadership of the lyric stage. Charles Gounod had not had a success since *Roméo et Juliette* in 1867; Ambroise Thomas’ glory, with *Mignon* and *Hamlet*, was nearly 20 years behind him; Georges Bizet was dead; Camille Saint-Saëns had had a recent success with *Henry VIII* but was still hoping to see *Samson et Dalila* staged in France; Édouard Lalo had two operas, *Fiesque* and *Le Roi d’Ys*, awaiting performance; Claude Debussy was still a student at the Conservatoire.

Massenet, on the other hand, was already launched, at the age of 41, on a brilliant career. He was obviously both versatile and thoroughly professional. He had proved himself in swift-moving comedy (*Don César de Bazan* at the Opéra-Comique in 1872) and in traditionally massive grand opera (*Le Roi de Lahore* at the Palais Garnier in 1877 and *Hérodiade* in Brussels in 1881). He was already admired for his instinctive feeling for the voice, his skill as an orchestrator (he had earned his living as a timpanist in his early years), and his ability to evoke exotic times and places. What Massenet had not yet shown to the world was the intensity of feeling that floods the stage in *Manon*. In many ways, this was the perfect subject for him. It allowed him to evoke an 18th-century world with delicately recreated *galanteries*; it contained comic and absurd figures, to be characterized with a few deft strokes of the pen; it was based on the sentimental novel by Abbé Prévost that everybody had read; and it portrayed its principal characters, Manon and Des Grieux, with a vitality that transcended traditional operatic stiffness and brought an unusually real emotional tension straight to the hearts of the audience.

“*Manon!*” I cried, pointing to the book.

“*Manon Lescaut* do you mean?”

“No! *Manon*, just *Manon*; *Manon*, it has to be *Manon*.”

This exchange, related by Massenet in his book of reminiscences, recalls a conversation with the librettist Henri Meilhac, who, after working for many years with Ludovic Halévy on such works as *Carmen* and some of Jacques Offenbach’s operettas, was now collaborating with Philippe Gille. After *Hérodiade*, Massenet was looking for his next work. The subject of *Manon* was agreed upon. A contract was signed with the Opéra-Comique in February 1882 and the task of composition occupied him that summer, his winter months being taken up with his duties as composition professor at the Conservatoire. The vocal score was finished in October. At one point he sought inspiration in the very house in The Hague, Holland where Prévost had lived. This came about because he had a concert to conduct in Brussels on August 8, and the bandmaster at The Hague seized the opportunity to invite him to stay. But he found it hard to write there and merely absorbed what impressions he could.

With a sense of certainty that many composers would envy, Massenet sent the vocal score to be printed before embarking on the orchestration, which filled the summer months of the following year,

1883. As he scored his opera, he filled his manuscript with dates and notes, like a journal. The opera was ready for production that fall, and the premiere, with Marie Heilbronn as Manon and Talazac as Des Grieux, took place in January 1884, with 77 more performances that year, an unprecedented success. When *Manon* was performed at The Hague in 1881, the title role was taken over by Sacramento-born Sybil Sanderson, who so bewitched Massenet that he later wrote two leading roles for her in *Esclarmonde* and *Thaïs*. *Manon* remained continuously in the repertoire of the Opéra-Comique until 1959.

*Manon* is, of course, a tragic, not a comic, opera, and its appearance was a milestone in the steady elevation of the “comique” repertoire in the second half of the century, a process precipitated in 1856, as it happens, by Daniel Auber’s now forgotten opera *Manon Lescaut*, in which the death of Manon “in the forests of Louisiana” disturbed the habitués of the Opéra-Comique just as the more violent death of Carmen on the same stage was to later outrage them. *Manon* is not a shocker, but it drew on the more stressful emotions that Verdi had made his own, as well as the touching sentiment familiar from Gounod and Thomas. The spoken dialogue that had been a standard requirement of *opéra-comique* here takes the form of *mélodrame*, speech over music which either deals with perfunctory business in a perfunctory way or throws a *frisson* into the action in such scenes as the arrival of the police in the gambling scene in Act IV. Every character has lines to speak at some point, and speech is used for comic relief as well as emotional tension. There is never any feeling of experiment on these occasions, for Massenet’s judgment in such matters was impeccable.

The libretto suited him well since it allowed him to incorporate the variety of scenes and settings that his audience adored. The church scene at Saint-Sulpice with its pious tone contrasts vividly with the gambling scene that follows, and the intimacy of Manon’s apartment in the Rue Vivienne in Act II gives way to the bustle of the Cours-la-Reine scene at the opening of Act III. Evoking 18th-century France with recurrent baroque stylizations appealed greatly to Massenet’s taste for pastiche, for it heightened the effect of the passionate modern style all the more forcefully. When Des Grieux bursts out with his desperate plea for Manon’s love in the antechapel of Saint-Sulpice, the orchestra’s urgency displaces the organ’s solemn intonings with shocking suddenness. Massenet learned this kind of theatrical sleight-of-hand from Bizet, and more especially from Giuseppe Verdi, with whom Massenet shared a thoroughly professional and business-like approach to the craft of writing operas. The Comte des Grieux bears a striking resemblance to Verdi’s Giorgio Ger-

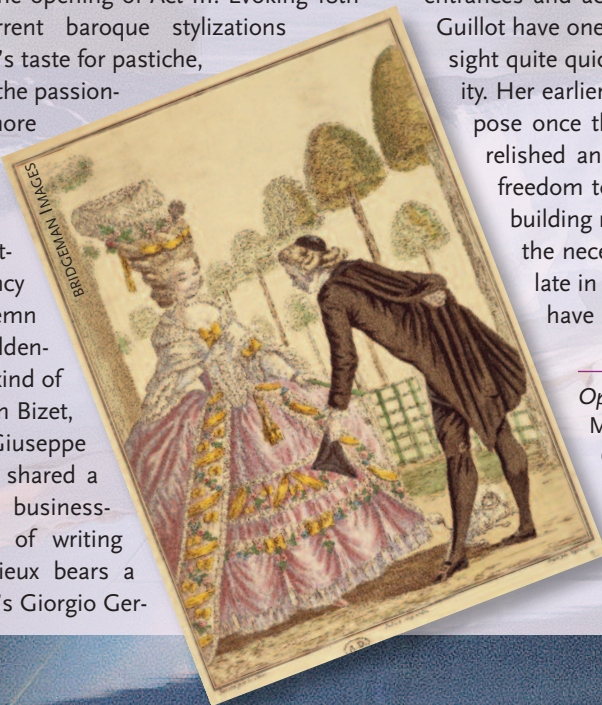
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mont in *La Traviata* with the intervention of both fathers in gambling scenes acting, as they think, in their sons’ best interests.

Like Verdi, Massenet had an acute sense of the single scene as a musical unit in which themes and motives can be deployed to represent mood or character and to provide musical unity. The craftsmanship that controls these 5–15-minute units is exemplary, coupled with a prudent use of motives to delineate characters and ideas. Like all advanced composers in the later 19th century, Massenet was accused of borrowing from Richard Wagner, whose impact on the French was coming to a frenzy just when *Manon*, that most un-Wagnerian of operas, was first performed. But Massenet scarcely needed to refute the charge, since the attachment of motives to ideas and characters was a well-established operatic principle long before Wagner hijacked it. It was a natural outcome of the universal belief that music in opera must reflect the mood and meaning of the libretto, as Massenet’s music always does.

Massenet’s use of motives is in any case not systematic, but he gives most of his characters distinctive motives that mark their entrances and actions. Lescaut has two motives; Brétigny and Guillot have one each. Manon has two, which both pass out of sight quite quickly, since she grows up with frightening rapidity. Her earlier motives, suggesting innocence, serve no purpose once that innocence is past. Massenet undoubtedly relished and exploited the great flexibility offered by the freedom to draw on earlier motives and to use them as building material in later scenes, but he also understood the necessity and effect of new ideas introduced quite late in the drama when circumstances and characters have changed. Des Grieux’s complex characteriza-



Opposite and top: Vincent Boussard’s production of *Manon* premiered at the Lithuanian National Opera and Ballet Theatre in Vilnius in September 2015.

Left: A circa 18th-century illustration from the Abbé Prévost book that was later adapted into Massenet’s opera.

tion explodes the belief, often repeated, that Massenet could portray only female characters with true feeling, and once Manon has been lured into the social world, it is difficult to believe in her attachment to him as wholly as in his for her. Yet because Manon is the only female character (apart from the puppet-like trio of Poussette, Javotte, and Rosette) against five males with various claims on her, she cannot fail to hold our attention when she is on stage. Her plight is no less touching because she appears at times both fickle and shallow. Massenet's sense of her impudence and gaiety makes this image of the eternal feminine perfectly sympathetic.

After *Manon*, Massenet continued to supply the French stage with a varied series of works for almost 30 years, rarely repeating himself. *Werther*, perhaps his masterpiece, appeared in 1892, presenting an even greater sense of tragic destiny against an 18th-century background. Even in his humorous operas, such as *Cendrillon* and *Don Quichotte*, he can draw a sentimental tear. In *Le Portrait de Manon*, a one-act *opéra-comique* composed a year after *Werther*, an older Des Grieux is given over to a life of sorrow; his nephew is in love with Manon's niece, a circumstance that touchingly recalls his lost passion. Massenet could equally set the stage ablaze with raw passion and political violence worthy of any exponent of Italian verismo. *La Navarraise* is set in the murderous Spanish Carlist War of 1874, and *Thérèse* recounts a grim episode from the French Revolution. Coptic Egypt, the Byzantine court, medieval Cluny, Hindu India, biblical Galilee, contemporary Provence, ancient Rome—all these offered Massenet opportunities to display his abundant powers of evocation and his gift for exotic color. Whatever the setting, his precise methods of work, his meticulous concern for the human voice, and his masterly control of theatrical timing and movement never failed him. Many of his works have vanished, perhaps irretrievably, from the repertoire, but his half-dozen finest operas, from which surely no one would ever exclude *Manon*, show all the signs of immortality. ❁

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## A Chat with Director Vincent Boussard

**Similar to your staging of Bellini's *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* here in 2012, this production of *Manon* isn't situated in a specific period in time—certainly not the 1721 setting that composer Jules Massenet had in mind. Why is that?**

As a director, I try to create bridges between periods of time to make the story seem more immediate. I am led by the quality of the music and the singing. So we're playing here with the idea that the opera's characters aren't stuck in an actual historical context. We're trying to build bridges between the time of the story (the beginning of the 18th century) and the time of Massenet (1884) and now. I'm trying to give the character of Manon a chance to be imagined and received by the audience as if she could also be a lady of today.

It's not because of her time that Manon behaves the way that she does; she should appear without any filter. Certainly, we can't forget where she's originally coming from and the time of the composer. That's why I'm trying to mix up these three different dimensions and periods.

### **Who is Manon?**

She's a character that we find in any society and time. She is young, struggling for life, a woman full of desires and passions—and, from the beginning, she's totally frustrated and punished because of that. People have told her, "Don't dream, don't be the one who enjoys pleasure." And then she discovers very quickly what kind of power she can have over men. For sure, it's a double game of manipulation, because men think of women as objects. She's a victim of it. At the beginning, she's the prey and then the prey becomes the predator.

Her problem will be that she can't ever stop. Once she has something, she wants something more. Her passion has no limits. This is what makes the character extremely fascinating. I have no sympathy for the way she is behaving, but I'm fascinated and want to know more about her and her processes.

### **Does Manon really love Des Grieux?**

As far as she can love a man, yes. She is deeply touched by the quality of his love, the way he tells it, and the way he offers himself. At the end of the second act, she says, "I love him. But..." She has no choice: she knows they're going to capture Des Grieux anyway.

### **How is Manon different from Violetta in *La Traviata*?**

For sure, these two characters are, in a way, sisters. But Violetta wants to invent a new life towards redemption. Manon is running and running, always for more. Until the end, she remains naïve. She can find her way out of any mess; she has instinct and the right intuition for tricky situations. But she's not planning anything. Never. She's always surprised by herself and extraordinarily aware of who she is, which makes her character very complex.

### **How do you walk the line between tragedy and lightness? The music of *Manon* has such a champagne-like effervescence.**

Absolutely. This is what makes the piece fantastic. But what's even more interesting is that the lightness is often covering some kind of tragic aspect—or something dangerous. The lightness comes not only just to have fun. The style is very French and elegant, and there are lots of quotations of French Baroque music, but it's always like a mask.

*From Act III of Boussard's original staging of Manon.*

