"Manon, it has to be Manon!"

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

On 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; 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.
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 *Esclamonde* 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 Lescout*, 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 méloïdrame, 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-
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 supplied 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 mastery 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.