

Massenet and opera: richness and diversity

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Massenet (1842-1912) is known above all for two works, *Manon* and *Werther*, and to these have been added another four: *Hérodiade*, *Thaïs*, *Don Quichotte* and *Cendrillon*, which are now enjoying renewed popularity. However, his output was much larger than that: twenty-five complete operatic works have come down to us (not counting *Marie-Magdeleine*, an oratorio written in 1873 and staged in 1903). But his output has been largely neglected because of its singularity: few people realise that Massenet experimented with opera far more than most other composers, thus creating a multi-faceted world all of his own.

It was in Massenet's temperament, no doubt, to feel a constant need for change and renewal, diversity and challenge, and he was generally encouraged in that direction by his publishers and librettists and those close to him. In 1896 he told the periodical *Le Temps*:

You will notice [...] that my works are taken from very diverse sources. I try to vary their subjects. *Manon* came after *Hérodiade*, *Esclarmonde* followed *Le Cid*. I tear myself away from one world to immerse myself immediately in another one that is very different, in order to change the course of my ideas. That is the best way to avoid monotony.

Massenet thus approached every genre and every register. While *Le Roi de Lahore* (1877), *Hérodiade* (1881), *Le Cid* (1885) and *Le Mage* (1891) are

unquestionably grand operas à la Meyerbeer (including the inevitable ballet), *Ariane* (1906), *Bacchus* (1909), *Roma* (1912) and *Cléopâtre* (posthumous, 1914) belong rather to an important neo-Gluckist movement, showing a keen interest in Greek and Roman antiquity. Then *Esclarmonde* (1889) and *Amadis* (posthumous, 1922) are in a legendary vein, while *Manon* (1884), *Werther* (1892), *Le Portrait de Manon* (1894), *Cendrillon* (1899), *Grisélidis* (1901), *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* (1902), *Chérubin* (1906), *Thérèse* (1907), *Don Quichotte* (1910) and *Panurge* (posthumous, 1913) bear the imprint of *opéra-comique* in all its diversity, ranging from fairy tale with *Cendrillon* (Cinderella) to a tragic *drame lyrique* set at the time of the Revolution, *Thérèse*. The latter, in its concision and dramatic density, could also be included – with *La Navarraise* (1894) and *Sapho* (1897) – among the works that reveal a naturalist tendency. For indeed his operas often belong to several genres simultaneously and show various influences at once; this explains the diversity of the generic titles adopted from *Manon* onwards. In *Manon* he upset the foundations of *opéra-comique*, to which he had paid allegiance in two early works, *La Grand'Tante* (1867) and *Don César de Bazan* (1872). *Esclarmonde* then bears the description 'opéra Romanesque', *Werther* is a 'drame lyrique', *La Navarraise* an 'épisode lyrique', *Cendrillon* an 'opéra féerique', *Sapho* a 'pièce lyrique', *Grisélidis* a 'conte lyrique', *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* a 'miracle', *Chérubin* a 'comédie chantée' and *Thérèse* a 'drame musical' – to mention only the works that were performed at some time in Paris at the Salle Favart.

Several factors nevertheless ensure the unity of what seems on the face of it to be a disparate set of works. Firstly, all of Massenet's works show conceptual affinities – a recurring principle that guided his creative gesture. His musical language is the direct result of the libretto. Action set in the eighteenth century (*Manon*, *Werther*, *Chérubin*, *Le Portrait de Manon*, *Thérèse*) is accompanied by harmonic or formal episodes specific to that period (one that particularly appealed to Massenet); an essentially Wagnerian libretto (*Esclarmonde*, *Ariane*) gave rise to an appropriately Wagnerian musical style. But very often several styles coexist within the same work. Thus, in *Manon*, for instance, we find, in Act III, when a ballet is presented in

the Cours-La-Reine in Paris, echoes of Rameau, while Italian forms and colours are in evidence at the end of Act IV, in which the situation is similar to that of Verdi's *La Traviata*. Similarly, *Ariane* (Ariadne), with a libretto inspired both by ancient tragedy and by the author of the *Ring* cycle, combines the styles of Gluck and Wagner. This singular compositional gesture is in fact in keeping with the philosopher Victor Cousin's system of eclecticism: Massenet drew his inspiration from many models that had been consecrated by history – outstanding works or genres that he was sometimes able to pastiche or which sometimes he quoted verbatim. Thus Massenet established a lively and often quite subtle interplay between his audiences and his works, with the former needing to possess a very refined culture and a keen perception if they were to understand all the references.



However, listening is made easier by the extremely effective dramatic qualities of the librettos, the writing and conception of which Massenet supervised personally and with the greatest of care. Indeed, his librettos are often based on proven methods. On the musician's death, George Spitzmüller, author of the text for *Panurge*, commented:

More than to produce music [...] he wanted to provide effective stage works, and I have seen him sacrifice delightful things, already in their definitive form, without the slightest regret, simply because, once he had read through the work as a whole, he felt they shifted the emphasis. 'To move audiences,' he would say, 'you have to be direct.'

This desire for immediate effect also shows through in his vocal writing, with its great diversity, ranging from singing to shouting, from *bel canto* virtuosity to spoken declamation, has an almost physical hold on the listener. Massenet grasped all the expressive and emotional force of declamation – particularly well illustrated by the impressive final scene

of *Thérèse* – long before Alban Berg. Nevertheless, despite all the variety there is in the vocal expression, an eminently personal – and therefore instantly recognisable – style predominates. Some of the vocal lines, sinuous and proceeding by stepwise motion, follow the inflections of the French language very closely, while allowing for the occasional lyrical outpouring. Thus the subtle variations in amorous feeling are admirably conveyed. Reynaldo Hahn gave a perfect definition of the nature of this style of writing, which was to influence him, as it did Charpentier, Debussy, Poulenc, Puccini and others:

Massenet gave the *melodic expression* of love a vigour and vivacity, a languor and a strange grace that it never had before.

Massenet created this very personal vocal style early on in his career. Drawn to subjects in which women play a prominent role, he depicted those female characters with great diversity. Thus, Cendrillon (Cinderella) is a young woman just awakening to love, Varedha is rejected and jealous, Charlotte is inhibited by conventions; Manon and Thaïs are repentant courtesans, Grisélidis (Griselda) is a mother personifying patience and obedience, Ariane (Ariadne) has been abandoned, Thérèse is torn between two loves, Esclarmonde has been betrayed, Anita (in *La Navarraise*) and Sappho (Sappho) have been humiliated, the former because of her social condition, the latter because of her sulphurous past. On the eve of the première of *Ariane* in 1906, Massenet told an interviewer from *Le Figaro*:

Yes, I wanted to depict another female character, or rather, three female characters – Ariane, Perséphone, Phèdre. And I'll be bringing another one to the stage this winter in Monte Carlo, with *Thérèse*. What else is there in life? Are not [women] the be all and end all of everything, the finest beauty that illuminates our existence? I do not pursue my idol, from Eve to Sappho, out of some 'affected feminism'; it is just that a sort of overriding reason compels me to see no more natural and more worthy subject for my art.

Several singers in turn became Massenet's muse, for whom, often in close collaboration, he produced roles tailor-made to suit their skills. The American Sibyl Sanderson was the first; her stage presence and very high soprano voice were ideally suited to the title roles in *Esclarmonde* and *Thaïs*. And the last, towards the end of his life, was the *tragédienne* and contralto Lucy Arbell, whose temperament was his inspiration for the roles of Perséphone (*Ariane*), Thérèse and Cléopâtre. In between came Emma Calvé, who triumphed in *La Navarraise* and *Sapho*, whose title roles were written specially for her in the 1890s.

Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame, with its almost exclusively male cast, is often cited as the exception that proves the rule. But Massenet had his favourite male singers too. They included the baritone Jean Lassalle, the original Scindia in *Le Roi de Lahore*, for whom he also wrote the part of Herod in *Hérodiad*. He encouraged the tenor Jean de Reszké, for whom he wrote the title roles in *Le Cid* and *Le Mage*, and he had boundless admiration for the baritone-bass Lucien Fugère, a singer noted for his comic verve, who premièred the role of Pandolfe in *Cendrillon*, and was Boniface in *Le Jongleur* and the Devil in *Grisélidis*. Finally, he wrote one of the finest bass roles – the title role in *Don Quichotte* – for the famous Russian singer Feodor Chaliapin. The role was later taken over by Vanni Marcoux, whose subtle acting and fine diction Massenet preferred.

Massenet thus appears as a composer who refused to fit neatly into a mould, and who (much more than is generally realised) could not to be 'typecast' or pigeonholed. His operas are many and varied, and in some cases we have yet to find the key that will permit full appreciation of all their subtleties.
