

Naturalism and Massenet's *Thérèse*

Alexandre Dratwiski

As often with the terminology that is used to classify various aesthetic movements, the term 'naturalism' has different meanings within the arts, while those arts that apply the term nevertheless share a common ideal. That is not true of Neoclassicism, for instance, in which the ideal of the painter Jacques-Louis David diverges from that of the composer Francis Poulenc, or of Classicism, in which the poet and playwright Philippe Quinault has little in common with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Although the naturalistic theory is on the whole based on ethical foundations that give higher moral value to those precepts which follow the rules of nature, it is expressed in different ways in different arts. Taking inspiration from the experimental sciences, naturalism in literature traces a rigorously and precisely studied reality. Naturalism in fine art gives primacy to a true-to-life style, a depiction of nature avoiding distortion or interpretation. In opera (and in plays), naturalism implies natural expression by realistic characters; the artificiality of spouting poetry in that context is rejected, as is the convention of lending the work structure by means of arias, duos, trios, scenes, tableaux and so on.

Naturalism in French music – which appeared at the same time as *verismo* in Italy, represented by Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Giordano and Puccini – is often reduced to the fruits of the work of the writer Émile Zola and the composer Alfred Bruneau, a fraternal and artistic friendship that gave rise first of all to *Le Rêve* (1891) and *L'Attaque du Moulin* (1893), set in verse by Louis Gallet. Encouraged by the relative success of

those two operas, they decided henceforth to make even fewer concessions to tradition (and therefore to public taste), and from *Messidor* (1897) and *L'Ouragan* (1901), the librettos were in prose – a decisive step, providing the master key that opened the doors leading to formal freedom.

We would be wrong, however, to consider that naturalism in French opera is confined to the works of Alfred Bruneau, along with Gustave Charpentier's *Louise*, of course – a work premièred in 1900, depicting working-class life in Montmartre – which is also readily cited as an example. The body of naturalist operas is in fact much larger than that, but it has been completely neglected by programme organisers, hence record companies. Indeed, some of the masterpieces of this repertoire, works both strikingly modern and highly original in the musical and poetic reforms they brought about, have lain dormant for a hundred years or so. *Le Cheminot* by Xavier Leroux, *La Glu* by Gabriel Dupont, *Le Pays* by Guy Ropartz and *Le Juif polonais* by Camille Erlanger are just a few examples. Their historical interest lies at least in their distance from the prevailing Wagnerism of the time, which had found strong support in France among the members of the Franckist school and also in Vincent d'Indy (*Fervaal*, *L'Étranger*), before composers such as Ernest Chausson (*Le Roi Arthus*) and Albéric Magnard (*Guerceœur*, *Bérénice*). The works of Bruneau, Leroux and the others show harmonic density, as well as opacity in some of their orchestrations, while renouncing none of the features that were typical of French style: they simply reflect a perfectly natural development of post-Romanticism.



It may seem strange to refer to Massenet in this context. Indeed, to the author of *Le Cid*, *Manon* and *Werther*, who composed his opera *Cendrillon* just as Leoncavallo was completing his *verismo* masterpiece *Pagliacci*, modernity – or, at least, that type of modernity – appears to have been of little importance. But we must not forget that Massenet was not only the teacher at the Conservatoire of Alfred Bruneau and Gustave

Charpentier; he was also, for a time at least, their mentor. Nor must we forget that the first great opera to a libretto written in prose had been *Thaïs* (1894), a text Massenet had set with the greatest of ease and with supreme musical inventiveness. Nor, finally – and most importantly – must we forget that in 1894 he had written *La Navarraise*, a tragic love story, set against a backdrop of murder and financial intrigue in Navarre, northern Spain. Once again – and before Bruneau and Zola worked together on *Messidor* and *L'Ouragan* – Jules Claretie and Henri Cain had provided Massenet with a libretto written in prose. This perfectly naturalist opera, a striking work in a single act, with music that is extremely intense at times, left the critics perplexed. Massenet was accused of plagiarising Mascagni. But he set to work again, this time on a five-act opera that, in keeping with its subject, was more sensually lyrical: *Sapho* (1897), an openly naturalist opera, based on the novel of the same name by Alphonse Daudet, was a triumphant success when it was presented at Covent Garden.

Some accused Massenet of opportunism. For others, he was simply out to prove, for the sheer fun of it, that he could outdo the composers of the young *verismo* school. Some felt that, aware of having exhausted the resources of a style that had become academic, he was about to enter a new creative period in his life, in which, with no turning back, he was to follow the path that led to modernity. Others still had sensed that the plurality of Massenet's artistic approaches and his ability to renew his art continually as he encountered new ideas were bound to bring him, for a time at least, face to face with such progressive concerns. Bruneau wrote, very aptly, of Massenet's 'capacity for self-transformation while remaining himself'.

This brings us to *Thérèse*, which has often been presented as a late avatar of the *Navarraise-Sapho* binomial, forming a trilogy that seems rather artificial when we look more closely at this opera set at the time of the French Revolution. In many ways it reminds us of the more or less decorative historicism of *Manon* and *Werther* and, apart from its small dimensions (but *Le Portrait de Manon* was already a miniature of the same type, though without the concern for naturalism) and the heroine's melo-

dramatic declamation at the end of the work, it weaves a dramatic love story in which the heroes are little concerned about appearing 'realistic'. *Thérèse* could therefore be compared to some much older historical works, such as Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* (1836), in which the intimate psychological dramas are brought to the fore in a sumptuous historical setting. In that sense, *Thérèse* could be regarded as a 'small-scale grand opera', with its processions, promises and sacrifices, all in a miniaturised form. But there are elements of realism in the work, which, in a refined way, further complexify its tangle of historicism and naturalism, and make it into the prototype of the 'pluralist genre' that is so typical of Massenet. Take for instance the sporadic use of the harpsichord, providing a very meaningful musical statement, but which is anti-realistic in the extreme. How could a harpsichord possibly be heard at such a point in the plot?

Massenet's use of 'sound effects', carefully indicated throughout the score, is very modern, of course, but these cannot be regarded as being of more than secondary importance. The noise of rifle butts being violently struck on the ground at the beginning of Act I ('taper très brutalement la crosse du fusil contre terre'), the noisy laughter as the curtain rises ('rires très bruyants, très énergiques pendant trois mesures'), the drum rolls, the yelling of the crowd and its cries for the prisoners to be put to death as the work nears its end, are ultimately only subsidiary material, possibly providing structure but never really crucial to the dramatic progression of the work. And, indeed, the naturalistic elements play no vital part in the unfolding of the relationship between Thérèse, Armand and André. Doubt, devotion and sacrifice are much more conventional tragic resources in operatic works.

There remains the intensely melodramatic final scene – probably the only unquestionably naturalistic moment in the whole of the opera. The specifications that pepper this sort of Berliozian 'march to the scaffold' – 'with dismay', 'distraught', 'with despair', 'wildly', 'with determination', 'beside herself', and so on – show a keen understanding of human emotions.

Alfred Bruneau wrote (*Monographie de Massenet*, Paris, Delagrave, 1935): 'Music can accommodate itself perfectly well to a topical subject, but there has to be an important human element running through the work to expand the subject and make it more universal and much more than simply an exceptional anecdote.' Is the subject of *Thérèse* a 'topical' one, but with harpsichord accompaniment? One has only to look at the depiction of love in the work to be convinced of that. So, yes, *Thérèse* does embody a naturalism that is in keeping with historical fact, and is timeless in its resources.



Jules Massenet towards the end of his life.

Musica, April 1912.

Jules Massenet à la fin de sa vie.

Musica, avril 1912.