

Thérèse, from the Couvent des Carmes to the Opéra-Comique

Étienne Jardin

In his memoirs, *Mes souvenirs*, Jules Massenet relates the sequence of events, from the summer of 1905 onwards, that led to the composition of *Thérèse*: a visit to the Couvent des Carmes (a Carmelite convent in the rue de Vaugirard in Paris) during which the singer Lucy Arbell was moved to tears by the fate of Lucile Desmoulins (guillotined at the age of twenty-four, shortly after her husband, a French revolutionary and journalist); the touching story, told a few days later by Countess Tornielli over dinner at the Italian Embassy, of the faithful servant who prevented the spoliation of the Gallifet family home and later returned it to its owners; then a walk in the Bois de la Cambre (Brussels) in November of the same year, when the music first came to him. While the subject was forming in his mind, the composer, fascinated by ‘the horrible times of the Terror’, eagerly sought out documents that would provide him with information on that period, before setting to work on the score. His ‘drame musical’ in two acts, completed in summer 1906, was written with the librettist Jules Claretie. The fact that the exchanges between Massenet and his librettist took place mainly by telephone (an instrument that was still relatively rare in France at that time) was used in reviews of the première of *Thérèse* to show just how modern the composer was.

Although *Thérèse* was possibly originally intended for the stage of the Opéra-Comique (Salle Favart) in Paris, it was first performed in Monte

Carlo on 7 February 1907. That was the time of the golden age of music in the Principality of Monaco, a period that had begun with the accession of Prince Albert I in 1889 and the appointment in 1892 of Raoul Gunsbourg as director of the Monte Carlo Opera House. Aiming to bring his theatre international renown, the latter scheduled many new and hitherto unpublished works by major French composers: César Franck (*Hulda* in 1894, *Ghiselle* in 1896), then Camille Saint-Saëns and Jules Massenet, both of whom became personal friends of the Prince of Monaco. *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* (1902) and *Chérubin* (1905) had thus been premièred at the opera house before *Thérèse* (1907), which was followed by *Don Quichotte* (1910) and *Roma* (1912). Massenet's associations with Monte Carlo also benefited his students: a few months before the première of *Thérèse*, Alfred Bruneau's *Naïs Micoulin*, for instance, had been premièred there. And even after his death the theatre continued to present his works: *Cléopâtre* and *Amadis* were premièred there in 1914 and 1922, respectively.

Exceptionally, the fact that *Thérèse* had its first performance outside Paris did not make it into a minor event in French musical life. Indeed, early in 1907 *Le Ménestrel* – the influential music journal directed by Heugel, who also happened to be Massenet's publisher – announced the composition of *Thérèse* amidst a blaze of publicity, and the piano reduction (along with numerous transcriptions aimed at amateur musicians of the 'Menuet d'amour') was available even before the first performance took place. Lucy Arbell (*Thérèse*), Hector Dufranne (*André Thorel*) and Edmond Clément (*Armand de Clerval*) took the principal roles at the première, which, although it was not reported in detail by the musical press, was unanimously hailed as a success. Its impact was such that in May 1907 the wife of Arthur Meyer (editor of the conservative newspaper *Le Gaulois*) had the work performed privately at her home in Paris:

Yesterday both the author and the artists triumphed again, as in Monte Carlo. It was unprecedented to see M. Massenet accompanying, relating and commenting on his work with a verve, youthfulness, *maestria* and bon-

homie that were matched only by his genius. He was marvellously supported by the artists who performed the work. (*Le Gaulois*, 8 May 1907.)

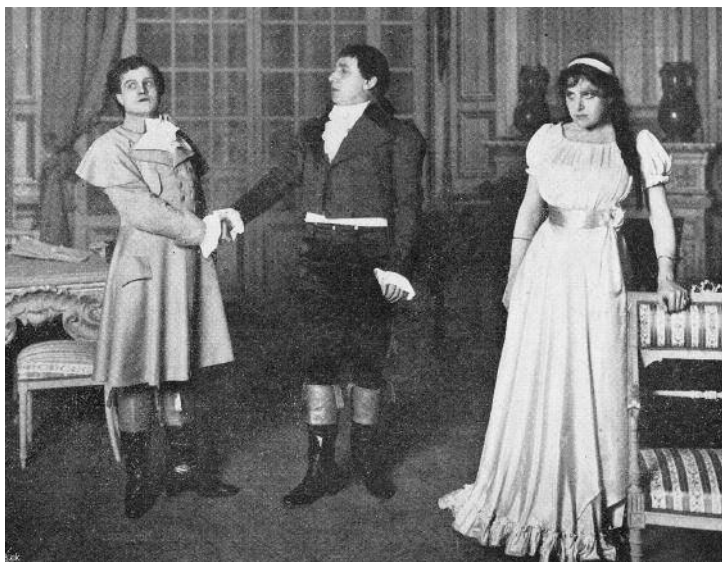
Although the piano reduction was played in the salons and short excerpts from the work were heard in the concert halls of the capital from 1907, *Thérèse* was not staged in Paris until after it had been seen in many other places: *Le Ménestrel* tells us that it was presented in Aix-les-Bains, Vichy, Lyon, Berlin and Reims in 1907, Geneva, Vienna, Algiers, Marseille, Tunis, Nancy and Lille in 1908, and Nice, Antwerp, Dunkirk, Rouen, Lisbon, Tournai and Avignon in 1909. Although the casts were not always of the highest excellence, the opera appears to have been a real success everywhere. Among those various performances, the revival of the work in Monte Carlo in 1910 was of particular importance to Jules Massenet: *Thérèse* was presented at a gala evening for the inauguration of the Oceanographic Museum and was heard by members of the Institut de France (including Saint-Saëns) and most importantly by the director of the Opéra-Comique:

Raoul Gunsbourg's *Le Vieil Aigle* had been performed, in which M^{me} Marguerite Carré, the wife of the director of the Opéra-Comique, had been acclaimed. *Thérèse* was on the same bill. Albert Carré attended the performance and, having met one of his friends from Paris in the stalls, declared that he would be presenting *Thérèse* at the Opéra-Comique with the very dramatic creator of the title role. (Jules Massenet, *Mes souvenirs*.)

Rehearsals began early in 1911 and the opera was presented on stage at the Salle Favart on 19 May. Lucy Arbell and Edmond Clément retained their original roles as Thérèse and Armand de Clerval. Henri Albers took over the role of André Thorel from Hector Dufranne, who was singing the part of Don Gomez in Maurice Ravel's *L'Heure espagnole* on the same stage the same evening. One cannot help thinking that the decision to present those two works together on a double bill was intended to stir up controversy: in part one, the first performance of an in some ways risqué one-act 'comédie musicale', written by a young man of thirty-two who

was one of the rising figures of modernity and a declared foe of academicism; in part two, a 'drame musical' composed by an almost septuagenarian member of the Institut de France. But there was no such reaction and when the two works were compared in the newspapers, it was to Massenet's advantage. On the first act of *Thérèse*, Camille Bellaigue of the *Revue des deux mondes*, wrote:

After the so-called 'Spanish hour', oh, what pleasure for the next half-hour – and so very French! The whole of this piece is arranged and composed *à la française*: with restraint and good taste, and a pleasing harmony that gives this short work consistency and diversity, regularity and freedom, all at the same time.



Thérèse at Monte Carlo; the three principal characters.
Musica, September 1912.

Les trois créateurs principaux de *Thérèse* à Monte-Carlo.
Musica, septembre 1912.