

The visual aspects of *Le Mage*

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The first part of Massenet's career was marked by the composition of several grand operas: *Le Roi de Lahore* (1877), *Hérodiade* (1881), *Le Cid* (1885) and *Le Mage* (1891). The latter, produced at the Paris Opéra, directed at that time by Ritt and Gailhard, was lavishly staged and the number of costumes was extraordinary. Even so, it remained on the bill, between spring and autumn 1891, for just thirty-one performances, from the première on 16 March.

The new work was not received with great enthusiasm in the press. Henry Moreno (pen name of the publisher Henri Heugel) reported in the columns of *Le Ménestrel*:

Pointless cliché: that is what characterises *Le Mage*. [...] Monsieur Massenet is obviously in a difficult period, in which he is no longer able to see clearly the path he had been following so successfully since the beginning. Like his hero Zoroaster, he is badly in need of a spell of contemplation. He would do well to withdraw to the holy mountain to consider the dangers of over-hasty production, and then return to us stronger, fortified, ready to take on new challenges.

(Henri Moreno, 'Semaine Théâtrale, *Le Mage*', *Le Ménestrel*, 22 March 1891, no 12, p. 92.)

Even among those close to Massenet, some appear to have been disappointed in their expectations of *Le Mage*. His friend and pupil Gustave Charpentier wrote to his father from Paris on 18 March 1891:

The day before yesterday I attended the première of *Le Mage* (by Massenet). I had already been to the dress rehearsal. All things considered, the work is neither more nor less creditable than his previous works. It's well done, there are some nice ideas, but it lacks true greatness: it's not a masterpiece.

(Gustave Charpentier, *Mémoires*, typescript, unpublished, p. 84.)

Neither the libretto nor the score received unanimous public acclaim. The staging, on the other hand, was seen – for example by Louis Besson, writing in *L'Événement* (18 March 1891) – as ‘worthy of boundless praise’. The same critic went on:

Beyond any shadow of a doubt, Messieurs Ritt and Gailhard [the directors of the Paris Opéra] have excelled themselves. The sets are true works of art, and the costumes show once again the patient, meticulous style of the designer Bianchini.

Let us therefore take a look at the visual aspect of this production, focusing in particular on the sets and the theatrical devices used at the Opéra to take the audience back in time, to the city of Bakhdi, several centuries BCE.



THE GENESIS OF THE WORK

Massenet tells us in his memoirs (*Mes Souvenirs*) that, while he was still busy working on the music for *Esclarmonde* (1889), Georges Hartmann, his publisher, was already on the lookout for a suitable subject for his next work. Hartmann approached Jean Richepin and requested a libretto based on the latter's recently completed play, *Par le glaive*. That particular proposal did not interest Richepin, but he did not rule out the possibility of working with Massenet:

Since the idea of writing an opera libretto quite appealed to me, I suggested to Hartmann that I work on a subject taken from Eastern, Persian, Arabian or Hindu legends, which contain such a wealth of wonderful heroes and epic situations. [...] Hartmann agreed. Almost immediately I sent him a rough outline of the plot, with indications of the various climaxes.

(Anon., 'Avant *Le Mage*. Une visite à M. Jean Richepin', *Le Matin*, 3 March 1891, p. 1.)

The subject Richepin came up with, inspired by the story of Zoroaster (Zarashtra in his libretto), represented 'the struggle between the spirit of goodness or truth and the spirit of evil or falsehood'. He chose the least known aspect of Zoroaster's life: his past as a warrior, before the founding of Zoroastrianism (also known as Mazdaism, after its one universal god, Ahura Mazda). Apparently, Richepin and Massenet did not meet while the libretto was being prepared, but Hartmann acted as 'go-between' and saw to it that everything ran smoothly. When the scenario was ready, he sent it to Massenet, who indicated the passages that lent themselves to a musical treatment and needed to be brought out accordingly, as distinct from the ones that served above all to move the action along.

'In the course of the summer of 1889', as he tells us in his memoirs, Massenet 'already had several scenes of the work planned out'. In order to immerse himself in the atmosphere of the work, with its symbols and allusions, Massenet sought the advice of his friend, the writer on history, Charles Malherbe. Both librettist and composer later commented on the successful staging of the opera and mentioned the 'uncommon luxury' and the 'innovations' involved (Jules Massenet, *Mes Souvenirs*, preface by Xavier Leroux, Paris, Pierre-Lafitte, 1912, pp. 181-182).



THE PLOT

Richepin set *Le Mage* 'in Bactria, at the legendary time of the founding of Mazdaism, about 2500 BCE'. In a camp near Bakhdi, Zarastra, following his victory over the Turanians, is about to make his triumphal entry into the city. Varedha, priestess of Jahi (goddess of lust) and daughter of Amru (high priest of the Daevas – demonic, destructive beings), is in love with Zarastra, but her love is unrequited, for Zarastra is in love with Anahita, the Turanian queen.

Love and rejection feature prominently in the work: the passion between Zarastra and Anahita, Varedha's anger at their love, which causes Anahita to reject Zarastra, with the result that he leaves to devote his life to Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom; meanwhile the king of Persia tries to force Anahita to marry him, but in the end the two protagonists are reunited; Varedha dies in the temple of Jahi, destroyed by fire.

The love between Zarastra and Anahita in this grand opera is heightened by the enmity between their peoples; the reactions of the people in the crowd scenes serve to support and intensify the feelings and emotions of the protagonists. Richepin explained in an interview ('Avant *Le Mage*. Une visite à M. Jean Richepin', *Le Matin*, 3 March 1891) that he wanted the action to be visual, 'understandable in the same way as a pantomime', through the acting, without the audience having necessarily to be able to follow the words of the libretto.

The Persians and the Turanians were differentiated by their costumes (and their beards): the red-bearded Turanians wore animal skins, while the black-bearded Persians were dressed in long, impeccably neat robes. The costume designer, Charles Bianchini, also took great care over the coordination of the colours in the different scenes. He left no fewer than six hundred and seventy-three sketches for the costumes of *Le Mage*. On the second tableau of Act II *La Revue des deux mondes* had this to say:

Prisoners, warriors, maidens, dancing girls, trophies, spoils, dishes, feather fans, weapons, jewellery, heaps of gold and silver, harnesses and

reins, bear and reindeer skins, leathers scaled with metal' – all these are paraded and presented to the king.



THE SETS

Following the practice of associated workshops, set designers often worked in pairs (see table below). The critics found the sets sumptuous. Édouard Noël and Edmond Stoullig, for example, wrote:

The sets seemed each more picturesque and charming than the others. They were ravishing to look at and, taken all together, boasted a sensuous theatricality.

(E. Noël and E. Stoullig, *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique avec une préface par Gustave Larroumet de l'Institut, dix-septième année* [1891], Paris, ed. G. Charpentier and E. Fasquelle, 1892, p. 10.)

Le Mage is in five acts and six tableaux:

TABLEAU	SET DESIGNERS	SETS	INT./EXT.
I (Act I)	Rubé & Jambon	Zarastro's camp, near the city of Bakhdi	Exterior
II (Act II)	Amable & Gardy	Underground passages in the temple of Jahi	Interior
III (Act II)	Amable & Gardy	The royal square in Bakhdi	Exterior
IV (Act III)	Lemeunier	The holy mountain	Exterior
V (Act IV)	Lavastre & Carpezat	The sanctuary in the temple of Jahi	Interior
VI (Act V)	Lavastre & Carpezat	The ruins of the temple of Jahi	Exterior

The alternation of ‘exterior’ and ‘interior’ settings was conventional. We notice, however, two exterior scenes in succession in Act II, which, unlike the other acts, comprises two tableaux. The scene change here took place in full view of the audience.

The first of the two second-act sets, by Amable and Gardy, corresponds to the description given in the libretto:

Underground passages in the temple of Jahi. On the right, steps leading to the floor above; on the left, steps leading down below. In the background, a line of squat pillars with great, dark rooms beyond.

Each of the sets is in perfect correspondence with the dramatic action. In this first tableau, Varedha, lamp in hand, is on her way down into the depths of the temple of Jahi, where, despairing because of her unrequited love, she intends to kill herself; cries of celebration and the sound of the fanfares for Zarastra’s victory reach her ears and she is about to descend into the underground chamber to escape them and accomplish her fatal act, when her father, Amru, arrives. Brutally he tells her of Zarastra’s love for Anahita, thus arousing her jealousy, and goading her into action, to separate the lovers, which had been his aim. The sheer scale of the set for this tableau must have intensified the already disturbing atmosphere. As the sketch by Amable and Gardy that has come down to us shows, the architectural structures are very imposing and oppressive.

For the second tableau the viewer was transported directly to the royal square in Bakhdi, described as follows in the libretto:

On the right, a platform on which stands the throne. On the left, a platform for the priests. At the back, terraces and hanging gardens supported by great pillars. Between the pillars can be seen a crowded public square, and beyond that the houses and the theatre of the city of Bakhdi.

This second set for Act II, also by Amable and Gardy, was also very rich. A print by Henri Dochy that appeared in *Le Théâtre illustré* shows that it

follows the description in the libretto closely, capturing well, for instance, the crowded public square. But the Paris Opéra Library-Museum possesses another sketch of a set for the same episode, signed by Lemeunier (who designed the 'holy mountain' set for Act III). This design moves away from the librettist's description: no terraces and hanging gardens, but instead, a wooden bridge running across in the centre, with several *torii*-like structures (the traditional Japanese gates commonly associated with Shinto shrines) along its length and a more imposing portal at the end, on the right. The river crossed by the bridge can be seen, and a balustrade on this side of it. We do not know the reasons for the directors' preference for Amable and Gardy's set, but we may suppose that Lemeunier's non-compliance with the stage directions had something to do with it.



STAGING AND SPECIAL EFFECTS

For a production on such a large scale that was to enable Ritt and Gailhard to see their privilege at the Opéra renewed for another term, the staging was entrusted to Alexandre Lapissida (1839-1907). Trained as an operatic tenor, in 1871 he had become a *régisseur* at the Théâtre de La Monnaie in Brussels, then co-director there, with violinist Joseph Dupont from 1886-88. Around 1890 he was engaged at the Paris Opéra as *régisseur général* and producer. *Le Mage* was the first of a series of major productions by Lapissida for France's foremost national opera house, which included Gounod's *Faust* in 1893, Verdi's *Otello* in 1894 and Donizetti's *La Favorite* in 1896.

Unfortunately, no documents relating to the original staging of *Le Mage* have come to light: no staging manual, no annotated scores or libretti. We may nevertheless assume that the articles that appeared in the press (which always showed a keen interest in new techniques in the field of theatre performance) reflect certain episodes in the opera quite accurately, especially the climax of Act V.

Stage machinery – devices for the production of special effects, such as storms, rain, wind, fire, etc. – became indispensable to an opera’s success, especially after the introduction of electric lighting. The first Paris theatre to adopt electricity (the Jablachkoff candle) in place of gaslight was the Hippodrome in 1878. Five years later the Paris Opéra (Palais Garnier) – which in 1846 had used the first electric carbon arcs (as both follow-spots and floodlights), but these had proved too costly – commenced the changeover from gas-lighting to electricity (incandescent bulbs), beginning with the grand foyer, the grand staircase, the auditorium and the footlights; it was completed in 1886 (stage and public areas).

Used initially for bells and special lighting effects (battery-operated electrical carbon-arc lights), by March 1887 there was electric lighting everywhere, thanks to a distribution network with its source in the electrical power room in the cellar of the Opéra.

(Rémy Campos, Aurélien Poidevin, *La Scène lyrique autour de 1900*, Paris, L’Œil d’or, 2012, p. 101.)

Of course, *Le Mage*, in 1891, made the most of all the new facilities. The critic Chrysale (Théodore Avonde), writing in *La Liberté* on 18 March, commented:

The very impressive [second-act] storm, with its great flashes of lightning, obtained by electricity, is quite novel in its theatrical effect.

Lightning is also required in the third act. In an interview, Jean Richepin pointed out:

The [set representing the] holy mountain by the light of the setting sun in Act III is by Lemeunier: it is to be illuminated by ‘lightning’ purchased in London; this takes the form of real zigzags of fire, which in the future will replace the process of intermittent light hitherto employed. The stage lighting was one of our greatest concerns; how much care and time we

put into it! And every evening, with electricity, the settings have to be re-adjusted.

(Anon., 'Avant *Le Mage*. Une visite à M. Jean Richepin', *Le Matin*, 3 March 1891, p. 2.)

The destruction of the temple of Jahi in the final tableau, Act V, represents a most important climax in the opera.

At the end of the act, red lights turn the statue crimson, and it becomes incandescent and collapses, opening up a huge chasm emitting flames. [...] The public is becoming more demanding. It wants 'reality' at all costs. But one cannot set fire to the auditorium of the Académie de Musique [i.e. the Paris Opéra] whenever an opera is billed. So a chemical and mechanical process had to be found, to create an illusion of reality.

(*Le Mage*, 'Dossier d'œuvre', Paris Opéra Library and Museum, press cutting, unsigned, *La Liberté*, 15 March 1891.)

For the end of the opera it was necessary to find a means of creating the illusion of a real fire. Alexandre Lapissida took inspiration from the staging, at the Opéra in 1885, of Ernest Reyer's *Sigurd*, which had also included a great blaze, and for which steam had been used to represent smoke.

Apparatus for producing the smoke of a conflagration is more complicated than that for producing lightning. Steam is largely used for producing smoke, and is conducted to a place where the smoke is to appear, by means of rubber hose; but this is apt to cause considerable noise when it escapes into the air. This difficulty has been surmounted in *Le Mage*, the opera of Massenet. It was particularly necessary in this case to have the smoke produced as noiselessly as possible, because the orchestral music at the moment of the fire is relatively soft and low. The difficulty was surmounted as follows: The steam generated by a boiler in the Paris Opera House, was led to special devices, the steam being admitted to triangular

boxes at the apex opposite the base of the triangle. The boxes at the point of attachment with the steam pipe have a considerable thickness, which gradually diminishes as the base of the triangle is approached, so that the steam, which is distributed throughout the whole extent of the box, escapes without any noise through a narrow orifice between the two faces of the apparatus. In the interior of the boxes there are pieces of felt, the principal object of which is to absorb the drops of water, which are carried along mechanically or which may condense. The advantage of this arrangement is that it permits of the disengagement of the steam everywhere where it is necessary. The boxes are easily manipulated, and hooks fastened to them permit of their being attached to the scenery with ease. After a simple coupling pipe has been connected with a steam pipe, the apparatus is ready to operate. In the opera we have referred to, nineteen double boxes are employed; seven are distributed over the stage at different points, and nearly up to the pipe of the soffit curtains. The twelve others are beneath the stage, and the orifices through which the steam escapes are flush with the floor. The fire proper consists of chemical red fire and powdered lycopodium used separately, the former to give a red glow and the latter to represent flames. Various coloured electric lights and small pieces of fireworks simulate the leaping of the sparks.

(*Magic: Stage Illusions and Scientific Diversions*, compiled and edited by A.A. Hopkins, New York, 1898; Book 3, *Stage Effects*, Ch. 3, p. 306; this information appears to have been based on an article that appeared in Paris on 15 March 1891 in the newspaper *La Liberté*.)

Not surprisingly, the final tableau greatly impressed both critics and audiences. Chrysale wrote in *La Liberté* of 18 March 1891:

The sets are very beautiful. The camp near the city of Bakhti and the burning of the temple of Jahi, are both superb. The latter is particularly striking, with shattered columns lying around the statue of Jahi, silhouetted against a sky twinkling with more stars than have ever been seen before in an opera; the bodies of slain Turanians lie pell-mell amidst the rubble.

This grim scene is seen by moonlight. [...] It is impossible to convey to anyone who has not seen it the impressive fire at the end. It is terrifyingly realistic: the theatre seems to be ablaze right up to the sky border. (Press cutting included in *Le Mage*, 'Dossier d'œuvre', Paris Opéra Library and Museum.)

And in *La Revue des deux mondes* (March-April 1891) we read:

The fifth act is a marvel, but only in its scenery. In the shadows of a blue night lit by a myriad of stars, the likes of which have never been seen before in an operatic sky, the temple, having been torn apart, lies open to the azure. A huge overhanging section of wall stands precariously; bodies lie here and there; only the enormous statue of the goddess is left standing, intact, in the background, before the still-smoking altar.

(Anonymous article: 'Théâtre de l'Opéra: *Le Mage* ...', p. 705.)



Although *Le Mage* did not have a very long run at the Paris Opéra, the machinery used for its staging helped to pave the way for creative, artistic uses of electric lighting, as illustrated a year later, at the Folies Bergère (1892) by Loie Fuller, one of the earliest American practitioners of what was to become known as 'modern dance' and a pioneer in the use of modern lighting effects.

Finally, for a change of perspective, let us imagine ourselves onstage at the Paris Opéra at the time of *Le Mage*, looking out into the auditorium, where, at the same time, another show was taking place:

When *Le Mage* was premièreed at the Opéra, there was no great spirit of contrition amongst the audience. Oh, the elegant outfits! The diamonds! The bold new hairstyles! Never are diamonds more prominent than at the Opéra. They are worn in the hair and right down to the shoes, and especially on the corsage, where sparkling jewels outshine all the passions sung

on stage. The Duchesse de La Rochefoucauld-Doudeauville lit up the whole of her loge with her gleaming gemstones. Madame de Rothschild was also well emblazed. [...] I do not need to judge the music of Monsieur Massenet, or the poetry of Monsieur Richepin, but if there was entertainment in the auditorium, the opera was not to be thanked.

(*Le Mage*, 'Dossier d'œuvre', Paris Opéra Library and Museum; press cutting, untitled, no indication of author or source.)



Act IV : The temple of Jahi, lithograph published in *L'Illustration*, 21 March 1891. Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Acte IV : Le temple de la Djahi, lithographie publiée dans *L'Illustration* du 21 mars 1891. Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.