

Ancient Greece revived

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From Claudio Monteverdi to Richard Strauss and Albert Roussel, a number of composers have taken up the myth of the lover abandoned by Theseus, as developed by Ovid and Thomas Corneille or merely evoked by Racine, whose Phèdre exclaims:

Ariane, ma sœur, de quel amour blessée
Vous mourûtes aux bords où vous fustes laissée!¹

It so happens that these three authors appear one after the other in the epigraph of a libretto written by Catulle Mendès (1841-1909) specifically for Massenet, who wished in his turn to produce a musical portrait of a character who had haunted him for some years. But whereas the *Lamento d'Arianna*, *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Bacchus et Ariane* have withstood the ravages of time, *Ariane*, an opera in five acts premiered at the Palais Garnier on 31 October 1906, has long since left the repertory, despite a brilliant revival in that same theatre in 1937, with Georges Thill among the cast. Massenet's score nevertheless deserves to be reconsidered within its composer's oeuvre, because, despite some dramaturgical weaknesses, it is perfectly worthy of taking its place alongside those works retained by posterity. It also provides an original and convincing answer to a recurring

¹ Ariadne, my sister, wounded by what love / You died on the shore where you were abandoned! (*Phèdre* (1677), Act One, Scene 3)

question in the early years of the twentieth century: what operatic form was appropriate for presentation after the Wagnerian revolution?

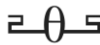


Massenet read the libretto in July 1904. On his advice, it was revised and then swiftly completed during the summer. The precise changes he wanted are difficult to discern today, but they concern among other things the presence or absence of a scene with the goddess of the Underworld, Persephone. The libretto transforms the traditional elements of the mythological subject in the last two acts. Driven by compassion, Ariane, like Orpheus, descends into the Underworld (Act Four) to bring back Phèdre, who has died because she revolted against her love for Thésée (end of Act Three). Then she lets her sister leave with Thésée before yielding to the call of the Sirens (Act Five). By contrast, the first two acts are more in keeping with the usual course of the myth, essentially relating the combat between Thésée and the Minotaur (Act One), then Phèdre's budding love for Thésée and the protagonists' arrival on Naxos (Act Two). Similarly, Act Three explores the psychological development of Ariane: conscious that Thésée is avoiding her, she discovers the mutual passion of Phèdre and Thésée with horror followed by resignation, since she forgives their betrayal.

Working from this scenario, Massenet composed his opera rapidly and finished the vocal score in October 1904. However, while he was enthusiastically orchestrating the work in the summer of 1905, he asked for the Underworld scene to be expanded (or reinstated) so as to make it a full act. This major modification stemmed from his wish to assign the more substantial role of Perséphone to the young contralto Lucy Arbell, who was originally supposed to sing only the brief interventions of the goddess Cypris, better known as Aphrodite or Venus. The influence of the young singer, who was to occupy a considerable place in his subsequent output, was already very great. Arbell encouraged Massenet to use a motif sung by Ariane, celebrating the virtues of Thésée in Act One ('La fine

grâce...'), as the basis for an instrumental interlude, 'La Douleur d'Ariane' (Ariadne's Sorrow), which accompanies the forlorn lover's footsteps as she goes to implore Cypris to restore Phèdre to life in Act Three. The composition of the remaining tasks – the new act and the orchestration – was successfully completed on 30 October 1905. We know that Lucienne Bréval had already been cast in the title role by then, since she placed her signature on the last sheet of the orchestral score alongside the composer, as Sibyl Sanderson had done for *Esclarmonde*.

A year later almost to the day, the premiere took place before a prestigious audience including such composers as Giordano, Puccini, Dubois, Fauré, Widor, Leroux and Bruneau. The press as a whole expressed reservations about the staging, but had nothing but praise for a cast that included, in addition to Bréval and Arbell, Louise Grandjean (Phèdre), Lucien Muratore (Thésée) and Jean-François Delmas (Pirithoüs, Thésée's friend), with Paul Vidal conducting. The libretto and the score, on the other hand, received rather more mixed reviews, despite the favourable audience reception. Some commentators, such as Louis Laloy, who was more inclined to celebrate the concurrent revival of *Pelléas et Mélisande* at the Opéra-Comique, were particularly hard on both text and music, which they deemed regressive, while others, including Fauré, extolled the merits of a work displaying the aesthetic imprint of a composer who was then at the peak of his art, but also in search of renewal.



In fact, *Ariane* harks back to *Esclarmonde*, which constituted a sort of French response to Wagnerian drama: a dense network of leitmotifs, a brassy orchestral texture and a predominantly declamatory vocal style. But whereas he abdicated his personality to some extent in that *opéra romanesque* of 1889, Massenet manages to remain himself in *Ariane* while giving his score a Wagnerian colour. This highly successful balance can be explained first of all by the nature of the libretto and the personality of Catulle Mendès, which bears strong similarities to that of the

composer. The famous Parnassian poet, a rare admirer of Wagner in France, pursued a career as a librettist in the shadow of the Bayreuth master while contributing to the advent of a specifically French operatic drama. While he initially wrote librettos – *Gwendoline*, for example – which resemble skilful copies of a Wagnerian drama, other, later efforts, such as *Briséis* and *Ariane*, still teem with references to the German composer. Yet they diverge from Wagner by dint of their subjects drawn from ancient Greece, the radiant protagonists of which contrast with the darker figures of Norse mythology. This means, in a sense, rejecting the pessimism of Wagner’s philosophy in order to celebrate the optimistic virtues of life and draw on the Mediterranean sources of French culture. Set against the demonic figures of Venus, Kundry or the Flower Maidens, the image of an uninhibited Eros, present in *Ariane* in the guise of Cypris, stems from that same desire to oppose Wagner and to revive a typically French art, that of Watteau, Fragonard and the *poètes libertins* in particular. In the same vein, the libretto of *Ariane* is inspired by the great models of French classical tragedy, but also by the most famous exponent of *tragédie lyrique*. Shortly before the premiere, Mendès told *L’Écho de Paris*:

As to the form I have given my work, I have attempted – while not renouncing the resources of modern lyricism and verse, that goes without saying – to revive the tradition of the French musical romance of which Quinault left us such delightful examples.

Given Mendès’s way of thinking, collaboration with Massenet was only natural. Even setting aside the cult of Eros, omnipresent in their respective works, a pronounced taste for verse libretti despite the recent challenge to this old-fashioned style mounted by Bruneau and Debussy, and a supposedly ‘feminine’ expression of thought and form, the two artists shared many convictions. Both were fascinated by Wagner and hoped to escape his influence by rereading the glorious pages of that French art whose ultimate sources were thought at the time to lie in ancient Greece. Hence no one was better qualified to set the libretto of *Ariane* to music

than Massenet. The composer of *Manon* and *Werther* had already demonstrated his ability to assimilate the stylistic characteristics of an era – the eighteenth century – as a means of creating an art of his own. Immediately after the passage quoted above, Mendès expressed in eloquent terms his satisfaction at having been able to collaborate with the composer:

I experienced the perfect joy of finding in Massenet – without his renouncing his personality and modern technique either, that too goes without saying – a wonderful Lully, a perfect Rameau and a quite perfect Gluck.

The omission of Wagner's name, often noted at the time, of course betrays a desire to anchor the work in a French tradition. Nevertheless, examination of the score leaves no doubt: the shade of the German master is omnipresent, but in conjunction with those of Rameau, Gluck and... Massenet.



The Wagnerian influence can be detected essentially in the thematic construction, founded on some twenty 'reminiscence motifs' (*motifs de rappel*), and in the orchestration (string doublings, the regular use of a bass trumpet and a bass trombone in the episodes of the Minotaur and the storm preceding the landing on Naxos). It is also perceptible in a certain strenuous quality to the vocal writing – Bréval and Grandjean were great interpreters of Brünnhilde and Isolde – and the construction of a number of scenes whose music intensifies the Wagnerian elements in the libretto, especially the beginning of the opera, depicting sailors resisting the call of the Sirens, which is nothing other than, as the critic Willy put it, 'a curious Parisian transposition of *The Rhinegold* [...] only lighter and more elegant'. Similarly, the majestic strains of the 'Entrance of the Gods into Valhalla' resound at the end of Act One to underpin the procession accompanying the departure of Thésée and Ariane on a vessel which, in Act Two, is reminiscent of the ship in *Tristan und Isolde*. Finally, the theme

of the Minotaur evokes that of Fafner, while the rhythmic motif of Phèdre, the huntress, recalls those of the Valkyries, as well as that of the Huntresses (*Les Chasseresses*) in Delibes's *Sylvia*. As for Rameau, his influence seems to be vague and confined to the use of ostinato rhythmic basses that may also suggest Handel, notably in the airs of Pirithoüs (Act One) and Thésée (Act Five). On the other hand, the style of Gluck is clearly to be heard in the declamation or in the 'Duel des Furies contre les Grâces', in the Underworld act, which appear to be directly derived from the dance scenes in *Orphée et Eurydice*. The Berlioz of *Les Troyens* also occupies a major place among these tutelary figures. In addition to some specific turns of phrase in the word-setting, the episode in which Eunoé tries to console Ariane while accompanying herself on a lyre indisputably alludes to the song of Iopas, who hopes in vain to distract Didon.

A vast network of references thus permeates a score that nonetheless unquestionably bears the stamp of its composer. Massenet's style can be observed, among other details, in the melodic contours of certain themes, the small 'fin-de-siècle' instrumental ensembles (flutes, celesta, harp, violins, harmonium, triangle) accompanying the Sirens, and the fidelity to a vocal form, the air, a priori obsolete since Wagner and Debussy. Massenet also makes subtle play with his own works. In Act Five he judiciously quotes one of the finest motifs from his *Ouverture de 'Phèdre'* (1874), when Thésée and Phèdre come face to face and unconsciously decide that their future will be together. *Werther* also forms a perhaps less immediate but equally pervasive point of reference, especially in certain chromaticisms. Moreover, the duet between Phèdre and Ariane in Act Three is reminiscent of the duet between Charlotte and Sophie (the same expression of emotions, a similar melodic-rhythmic formula supporting the sung conversation) and the syncopated motif preceding the first and last words of Ariane, who is then in the throes of severe psychological suffering, is identical to the one that accompanies Werther on the point of death.

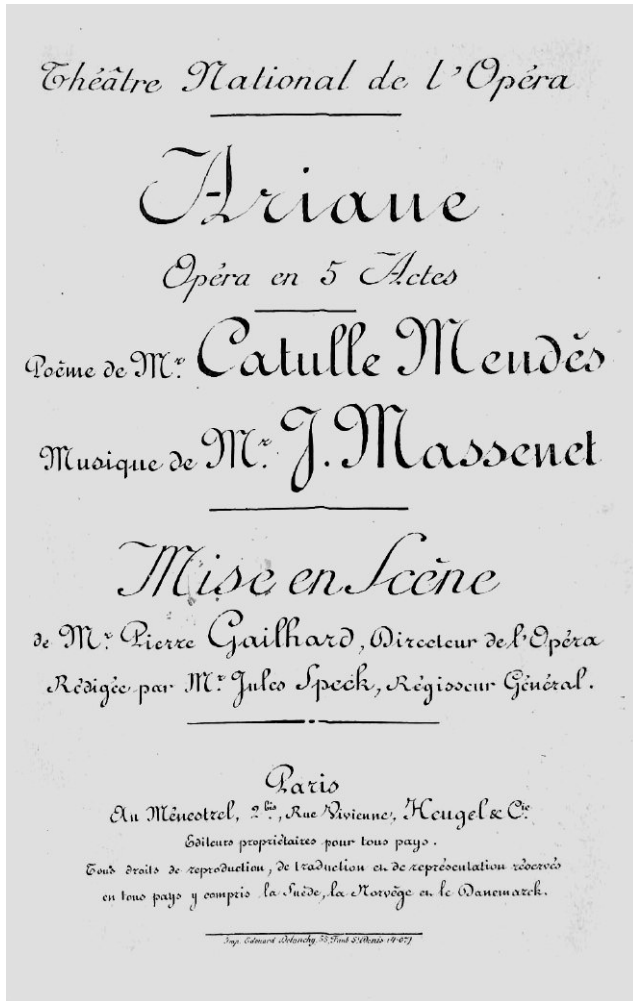
This intertextual play and this eclecticism, both eminently typical of Massenet's oeuvre, are what confers on *Ariane* so valuable and so specific a character. Beyond its stylistic combinations, it perpetuates an art that

seemed to belong to a bygone age, but which it transgresses to prefigure the great neoclassical works of Stravinsky. Even at the premiere, Willy, whose judgments are often biting, expressed his admiration, tinged with a certain irritation, for a work that revived ancient Greece ‘after the manner of the Grand Siècle’. But he sagaciously grasped the original and innovative ambition of the authors:

In just a few years, we have drained the cup of the symbolist ‘musical action’, exhausted the enormous common bowl of the Wagnerian drama and emptied the little beaker of the realist lyric comedy. [...] It is this moment of fever and heightened sensibility that Catulle Mendès and Massenet have chosen to mock the seekers after a new operatic ideal, and, renewing a three-hundred-year-old tradition, to restore to us, in a loftily regressive stance, the old formula of the opera of our ancestors.

And he concludes his review: ‘The famous ship built by M. Jambon [...] will remain the symbol of the triumph achieved by the authors of *Ariane*; as seasoned navigators on the ocean of success, they knew very well what they were going to do in this galley.’ On the strength of this favourable reception, Mendès and Massenet quickly conceived a sequel to *Ariane* in the shape of *Bacchus*, which was premiered at the Palais Garnier in 1909, but proved to be one of the bitterest failures of the composer’s career.





Staging manual for *Ariane*.
Palazzetto Bru Zane Collection.

Livret de mise en scène d'*Ariane*.
Collection Palazzetto Bru Zane.