

When the thread breaks...

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Massenet met with virtually unrivalled success throughout the period of the Third Republic. If Offenbach had been the leading composer of the Second Empire, the creator of *Werther* and *Manon* was the triumphal hero of the 1890s. Yet, even though some of his works never left the repertoire of French opera houses, the post-1945 generation gradually came to despise him as a paragon of alleged Romantic superficiality. Consigning to the flames *grands-opéras* and *opéras-comiques* alike, they denied the merits of a corpus of unquestionable variety for some thirty years. Then history and posterity began to reclaim the works, and today *Werther*, *Manon* and indeed *Thaïs*, *Don Quichotte* and *Cendrillon* are among the most frequently performed French operas in the world today, staged in the most prestigious theatres from New York to Paris, London to Milan.

But that does not mean all of Massenet's catalogue has returned to the limelight: the works set in the ancient world, in particular, appeal less readily to audiences than librettos with emotions closer to their everyday experience. *Roma*, *Cléopâtre*, *Hérodiade* are given only rarely, and what can one say of the diptych of *Ariane* (1906) and *Bacchus* (1909), both of them mature scores created with the grandiose resources earmarked for productions at the Paris Opéra? While *Bacchus* was composed with reluctance, in order to respect a contract that Massenet would have preferred to break, *Ariane* prompted him to remark: 'It would be difficult to find a simpler and more poignant subject.' Though it scored a genuine success at the premiere, the composer's death, the upheavals of the First World War and the aesthetic rupture that ensued thrust *Ariane* into the Underworld (even though its eponymous heroine returns victorious from thence in Act Four of the libretto).

Time passed, and the taste for musical exploration, initially limited to the Baroque era, provided a chance to revisit the work on stage, at the Opéra de Saint-Étienne in November 2007 under the baton of Laurent Campellone. For all that the press spoke of a masterpiece and a thoroughly deserved rehabilitation, it took almost twenty more years for a recording – again conducted by Laurent Campellone – to provide convenient access to an opera that has visibly suffered neglect, probably because it was too demanding to be easily programmed.

This is because the very strength of *Ariane* is also its chief weakness: a movie epic before its time, the libretto requires no less than the presence of a ship on stage – and in the midst of a storm, for good measure! – and the recreation of Persephone’s realm in the scene where we find her enthroned in the Underworld. The narration of the combat with the Minotaur or the grandiose procession that greets Theseus in the first act seem like small beer in comparison, but even they would have been enough to make the staging of scenes on such a large canvas a complicated business for the modest theatres of the French regions. And in fact, even though an alternative production was devised for Nice, the work was barely seen outside Paris.

The concert given in Munich on 29 January 2023 by the Munich Radio Orchestra and the Bavarian Radio Chorus dispensed with this scenic pomp and circumstance and concentrated attention on the music itself, performed by artists from all over the world: American, Dutch, German, Egyptian and French. In this context, public and press fully grasped the scope of what Massenet had conceived at his desk: the apotheosis of his characteristic Romanticism, nourished by a moderate serving of well-assimilated Wagnerism, and a prefiguration of the future of operatic music, more particularly in the hands of Richard Strauss – sonorities typical of the latter can be heard in the diaphanous song with which the Sirens attempt to seduce the sailors. The warm welcome given to the artists recalled the success *Ariane* had originally enjoyed. The thread thereby extended from 1906 to 2023 demonstrates that patience and persistence can reveal treasures thought to have been buried for ever.



Ariane at the Opéra: scene from Act Two.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Ariane à l'Opéra : scène du deuxième acte.
Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.