

The ‘baritone’ Werther: why awaken him?

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Werther is one of those works that came into their own after a difficult start. Rejected by the Opéra-Comique and initially presented at the Vienna Court Opera, far from its native soil, this jewel of French opera went on to become one of the most frequently performed scores in France and abroad. So much so that, by 2023, there were more than twenty complete recordings, mainly in French, but also in Russian, Italian and English, spanning the period from 1931 (with Ninon Vallin and Georges Thill) to 2023. Their female protagonists include Rita Gorr, Victoria de los Ángeles, Brigitte Fassbaender, Tatiana Troyanos, Elena Obraztsova, Frederica von Stade, Vesselina Kasarova, Janet Baker, Anne Sofie von Otter, Angela Gheorghiu, Elina Garanča, Susan Graham, Béatrice Uria-Monzon and Sophie Koch, who have yielded to the seductions of Albert Lance, Nicolai Gedda, Plácido Domingo, Alfredo Kraus, José Carreras, Ramón Vargas, Roberto Alagna, Marcelo Álvarez, Thomas Hampson, Jonas Kaufmann, Rolando Villazón and Juan Diego Flórez, among others.

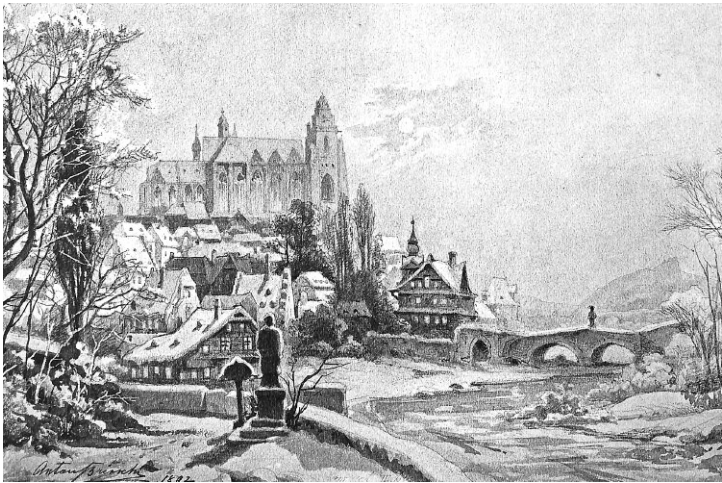
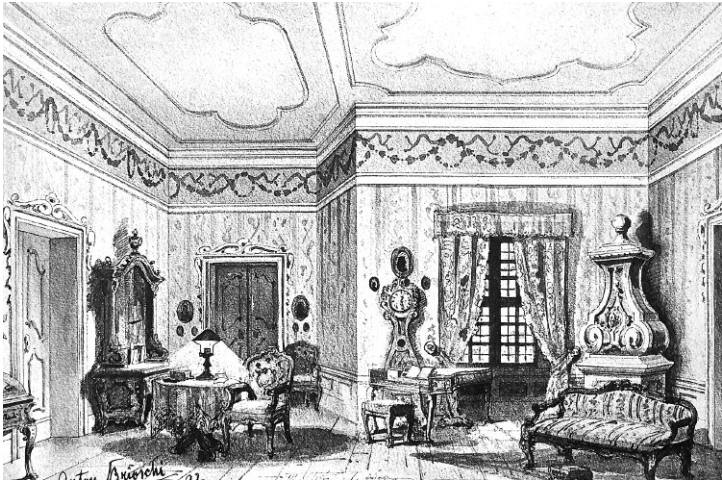
Does the fact that it is possible to list a plethora of international artists mean that *Werther's* recording potential has been exhausted? That is not so sure, when we learn of the existence of a version for baritone that Massenet approved during his lifetime, even if there is no evidence to confirm that he committed a definitive formulation to writing. It was at the request of Mattia Battistini that the composer agreed to a rewrite of the vocal line of the title role – a task already done in outline by Massenet for Victor Maurel, who in the end did not sing Werther, and which appears

to have been completed by the Italian baritone himself for performances in St Petersburg in 1902. Although no autograph manuscript of this exists in Massenet's hand, there are extant sketches by him in which the role of Albert is revised for tenor, doubtless in order to allow provincial theatres in France to assign the hero of the work to the company's leading baritone while giving Albert to their principal tenor. But the adaptation was never completed. Nevertheless, the firm of Heugel did publish a vocal score, probably following Massenet's death and produced in conditions of urgency which are betrayed by numerous misprints. The few excerpts from *Werther* recorded by Battistini differ markedly from this score, which is probably the work of an 'in-house' arranger aiming to expand the opera's commercial potential. Since then, baritones performing the role have frequently tailored it to their own vocal resources.

The present recording – only the third of the baritone version to be released commercially – aims to contribute to the posterity of *Werther* by exploring two aspects that the music places in the foreground: the words, and the question of vocal colour. Is there a more 'spoken' opera than this? The first two acts, with a few exceptions, seem to be little more than a dialogue – or, more accurately, a lively discussion – between characters preoccupied with everyday issues. It is from this feigned simplicity that the drama and its rising emotional temperature will gradually emerge. Hence the words are the sole focus of the 'Letter Scene' in the third act, during which Charlotte reads through Werther's letters, commenting on them with less and less restraint as she proceeds. Similarly, the 'Ossian Song' ('Pourquoi me réveiller, ô souffle du printemps') grants the text the importance it would possess in a *romance* with harp of the late eighteenth century – the period in which *Werther* is set – but envelops it in a vocal-ity and emotion whose supremely Romantic intensity makes it one of the peaks of the work. Without wishing to denigrate some of the sublime artists of the past, it must be admitted that *Werther* does not easily withstand the linguistic deformation to which the internationalisation of the twentieth century has sometimes subjected it in the interests of a vocal opulence that is out of place here.

But sung French is of interest and emotional value only when it takes on the colours that each word calls for in its context. It is perhaps in this respect that the baritone version offers an interesting and credible proposition, at least when the artist to whom the title role is allotted has the resources to use the timbre of the *voix mixte* in myriad ways, alternating the colours of melancholy and introspection with those of anger and despair. The exact contrary of the monolithic incarnation that the use of certain Verdi baritone techniques is likely to produce. Opposite a Werther of this type, what could be more interesting than a Charlotte with the vocal colour of a soprano, overindulging neither an excessively meaty, occluded timbre, nor a chest voice whose bulkiness would make the daughter seem like the mother? Is she not twenty years old, according to the list of characters at the head of the score? Sophie, on the other hand, has often been assigned to very light sopranos, with pert, almost immature tones. A more lyrical voice makes her more credible in the exchanges with her sister, especially if we conjecture that the amorous conflict that weighs on Charlotte's mind does not entirely escape the younger girl's notice. For the first time on this recording, the role of Schmidt is presented in its version for high tenor, which the vocal score offers in optional small notes. This enables an artist with a fine voice to get away from the caricature of 'character' interpretations and thereby reveal a few musical phrases that are all the more enjoyable on record when the dimension of stage performance is missing.

We hope this new *Werther* will convince listeners that the baritone version possesses indisputable charms and that the power of a language subtly handled by the singers adds substantially to the interest and merits of French operas of the long nineteenth century.



Anton Brioschi, set designs for *Werther*: Acts Three (Charlotte's room) and Four (First tableau, view of Wetzlar on Christmas Eve), 1892. Palazzetto Bru Zane.

Anton Brioschi, décors de *Werther* : actes III (la chambre de Charlotte) et IV (1^{er} tableau, le panorama de Wetzlar, la nuit de Noël), 1892. Palazzetto Bru Zane.