

Werther, or ‘poetic reality’

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Although it is now a pillar of the repertory, *Werther* had a notably tumultuous genesis. In November 1879, the press published several reports on the subject. Massenet was about to embark on ‘a lyric drama in three acts and five tableaux, intended for the Opéra-Comique. Title: *Werther*’. Paul Milliet (1848-1924), the librettist of *Hérodiade*, is said to have suggested the idea of adapting Goethe’s epistolary novel to his collaborator Georges Hartmann (1843-1900), himself both a friend of Massenet’s and his publisher. The following year, the composer told his friend Paul Lacombe just how much this project meant to him: ‘I am resting and gaining new strength to write *Werther*, a lyric drama in four tableaux – this very special work is intended to satisfy me in the first place; if it develops well, we’ll see.’ However, he did not begin work on the opera until 1885, following a series of setbacks. In the first place, the process of writing the libretto was a source of acute tensions between Massenet and Milliet, whose verse did not suit the composer. One of the librettists of *Le Cid*, Édouard Blau (1836-1906), was called to the rescue around 1885 by Hartmann, who participated in the tailoring of the scenario. Armed with a libretto that met his expectations better, Massenet began composing his work in the winter of 1885 and completed it the following year. But while he was orchestrating it in the spring of 1887, the director of the Opéra-Comique, Carvalho, judged the libretto incompatible with his audience because of the hero’s suicide and the excessively ‘sombre’ tone of the love story of Werther and Charlotte. Moreover, contrary to contemporary usage, Massenet wanted to direct the staging himself. In any

case, the premiere was deferred indefinitely when the Opéra-Comique was destroyed by a terrible fire in May 1887.



Massenet clearly attached great importance to the scenic and musical realisation of his opera. *Werther* was first and foremost a response to his need to move away from the splendours of *grand-opéra*, which had hitherto provided his chief means of expression in *Le Roi de Lahore* (1877), *Hérodiade* (1881) and *Le Cid* (1885). *Manon* (1884) had already signalled a wish to give more intimate utterance to the passions of love. *Werther* marks a new stage in this quest by eliminating all elements external to the plot: 'It will be a very simple lyric drama, with no chorus, no staging, for just two characters', Massenet wrote in 1886. '[...] And I am particularly fond of it because I have achieved here what has always been my dream in music: truth. [...] I have sought the greatest simplicity, because I believe that it is through simplicity alone that we can attain truth, reality. And not brutal, naturalist reality, but poetic reality, the flight into the ideal, into the blue, while remaining human.' Influenced by Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, the action of *Werther* focuses on two characters crushed by social conventions: Charlotte (mezzo-soprano) is not free to love Werther (tenor) because of the promise she made to her late mother to marry Albert (baritone). Yet, tragic though it is, Werther's death constitutes an example. As the musicologist Michele Girardi has observed, it is accompanied by a form of Christian palingenesis that is already present in Goethe's novel. Werther dies, like Christ or a martyr, to save humanity, which, as embodied here by Charlotte, rejects him even as it loves him.

The musical conception of the work reflects this ambition: 'I don't want it to resemble anything I've done before', Massenet said during the process of composition. 'It will be freed from all the ordinary rules of opera and will be one long dramatic love duet.' And it is true that *Werther* includes several duets around which the plot is woven. But the orchestra plays a decisive role in the narrative, allowing the music to express the

inner feelings of the characters through an extensive network of reminiscence motifs (*motifs de rappel*), often associated with emotions. The most telling example can be found in the prelude linking Act Three to Act Four, 'La Nuit de Noël', which depicts both the inner turmoil of Charlotte, who has rushed out of the house to find Werther, and the snowstorm that accompanies it. Massenet seems here to be in phase with the Wagnerian revolution, which gave the orchestra preeminence over the voice.

Nevertheless, *Werther* is not a Wagnerian drama, for the music assimilates the German composer's principles subtly and in moderation. This 'drame lyrique' is first and foremost an *opéra-comique*, but a modernised variety of *opéra-comique* in which dramatic episodes alternate with scenes of comedy. Hence Massenet pursued the transformations of a typically French genre that he had already carried out in *Manon*. Mindful of the need for stylistic cohesion of libretto and music, he applied the principle that the nature of the subject should dictate the musical form. Following on from *Manon*, set in the eighteenth century, Massenet paid tribute to *opéra-comique* while writing a score that blended the most diverse influences. He sought an ideal that, in his view, would be found in a harmonious fusion of the German, French and Italian schools. This ambition was inspired by Victor Cousin's eclectic philosophy of the 'juste milieu', which maintained that France, by virtue of its geographical position, was a land of synthesis. Such a notion is manifest above all in the presence of closed forms (airs, duets) and of vocal lines inherited from a Franco-Italian tradition, linked by more declamatory episodes, supported by an expressive and meaningful use of the orchestra deriving from a French tradition. The treatment of the reminiscence motifs, which caused a stir at the premiere, differs from that of Wagner. The motifs in *Werther* may be divided into three relatively distinct categories, unlike the more uniform motifs of the Bayreuth master. Situational motifs (*motifs de situation*) ensure the unity of a scene or tableau, like the ball motif in Act One, and confer an underlying unity on the protagonists' conversation, while characteristic motifs (*motifs caractéristiques*), linked with emotions or characters, permeate the entire opera; the most prominent of these, stated in the very

first bars, is associated with Werther. At the same time, key themes – fairly long melodic phrases derived from an air or duet – reappear from time to time. For example, the famous 'Clair de Lune' (Moonlight), which underpins the first duet for Werther and Charlotte in Act One, recurs in abbreviated form in Act Two when Werther rekindles memories of their first encounter. Then it reappears at the very end when Charlotte returns the young man's kiss just before he dies. This structural principle was not new. Grétry and Méhul, two major creators in the history of *opéra-comique*, already conferred unity on their works with motifs of this type, and they were followed by Auber, Meyerbeer and, above all, Gounod and Bizet. Massenet thus took a similar path to that of Wagner, who, in numbering Méhul among his 'teachers', acknowledged his debt to the French composer. But Massenet was developing a French tradition, one that Wagner assimilated to create his own personal art, rooted in the contrapuntal heritage of German music.



The recurring motifs in *Werther* in fact obey a fundamental principle: the musical language must reflect the subject and its period, which Massenet and his collaborators deliberately displaced from the time in which the novel is set. In a letter to the tenor Van Dyck, the composer insisted on this point: 'The date of 178... was INTENTIONAL. It was to *avoid* LOUIS XV costumes! Hence, if we do not take this detail into account, we will create a contradiction between the musical expression and the costumes. *You are quite right to insist on the LOUIS XVI period...*' Consequently, the generic title 'drame lyrique' refers to a sense far removed from Wagner's dramaturgy, but specific to the *opéra-comique* of the 1780s and 1790s, and more particularly to Grétry's librettist Barnabé-Farmian de Rozoi. In his *Dissertation sur le drame lyrique* (1775), he defined 'an intermediate genre between opera proper and *opéra bouffon*' which, in its combination of dramatic and light-hearted situations, prefigured the dramaturgy of *Werther*. It is also worth noting that Massenet's librettists were inspired

by the first operatic adaptation of Goethe's masterpiece, *Werther et Charlotte* (1792), a one-act *drame lyrique* by Rodolphe Kreutzer, some scenes from which are reproduced in Massenet's opera.

With *Manon* and *Werther*, Massenet played his part in a wider movement. After the war of 1870, the intellectuals of the Third Republic held up eighteenth-century French opera, particularly that of the Revolutionary era, as a model, in the hope of regaining the glory lost during the Second Empire. Numerous writers studied this domain of the musical heritage, while composers, eager for forms of expression opposed to Wagnerian theatre, explored its resources. In the case of *opéra-comique*, this meant reviving the characteristics of a genre whose widespread influence in Europe, notably on Beethoven, Weber, Schumann and Wagner, reflected France's past greatness. More specifically, *Werther* pays homage to Méhul, whom Massenet praised shortly before the Paris premiere of his *drame lyrique*. In a speech given in tribute to his predecessor, he observed that the latter 'was to accomplish in the form of *opéra-comique* the same revolution that Gluck had effected in opera'. He then went on to celebrate what he saw as a decisive period: 'I like to refer to those heroic days in music when modern opera [...] was emerging from its swaddling clothes, served by a host of artists named Cherubini, Lesueur, Spontini, Grétry, Berton; and I say "modern" quite deliberately, for it was these men who opened up the paths we are still following.' Massenet further asserted this filiation when he declared: 'In the score of *Werther*, the orchestra symbolically represents the leading character.' In so doing, he was merely appropriating Méhul's words: 'In any dramatic musical work, the orchestra must be the principal character.'

At the same time, Massenet is fond of slipping in intertextual musical quotations that bear witness at once to the eclecticism mentioned above and to a marked taste for history. Above all, they contribute to the musical characterisation of the protagonists. In Act Two, for example, when Werther meditates on death ('Ô Dieu! qui m'a créé, serais-tu moins clément?'), echoes of Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* (1846) are heard in the orchestra, in a joint homage to another Goethean hero and to France's

most illustrious Romantic composer. Similarly, the famous 'Ossian Song', performed by Werther in Act Three, quotes verbatim several bars from Halévy's *La Juive* (1835) in which Éléazar has a premonition of the martyrdom with which that opera ends ('Je vois s'ouvrir la tombe'), musically foreshadowing Werther's tragic destiny and the words he utters shortly afterwards: 'Ma tombe peut s'ouvrir!' The Wagnerian colours, drawn from *Tristan* in particular, also have obvious symbolic significance: Massenet underlines the impossible nature of Werther's love for Charlotte, which, like that of Tristan and Isolde, inevitably ends in death.

Thus, despite its generic title 'drame lyrique' (which, at this period, was inevitably taken as an allusion to Wagner's operas, whose French admirers gave them this name), its Germanic references and its dense network of recurring motifs, Werther cannot be assimilated with the Wagnerian aesthetic. The day after the Austrian premiere, Carvalho was not mistaken when he wrote to Massenet: 'Come back to us [...] and repatriate this *Werther* which, musically, you have made into a French work.'



A BARITONE WERTHER

After several abortive attempts both in France and abroad, *Werther* was finally given in Vienna on 16 February 1892, with the tenor Ernest Van Dyck in the title role. Against all expectations, the premiere was a memorable triumph. The work was revived regularly during the season and then performed in Weimar the same year. But it struggled to establish itself in France and elsewhere, as no tenor was capable of taking on a role that made such vocal and dramatic demands.

The Paris premiere at the Opéra-Comique illustrated these difficulties. In the autumn of 1892, Étienne Gibert, the creator of Roland in *Esclarmonde*, rehearsed with the young Marie Delna. However, exasperated by Massenet's demands and recurrent dissatisfaction with him, the tenor finally gave up his role. It was then assigned to Charles Delmas –

who promptly fell ill. Faced with these multiple difficulties, Massenet composed a version of the title role for baritone, which he intended for Victor Maurel, an admired interpreter of Verdi. But this project, planned for the Opéra-Comique, soon miscarried when the tenor Guillaume Ibos asked Massenet if he could take up the challenge. Ibos even claimed to have contacted Massenet after being informed of the project with Maurel. However, his performance did not convince the critics. *Werther* was not to find its niche in France until 1903, thanks to the talent of the young Léon Beyle.

In the meantime, the baritone version resurfaced when Mattia Battistini (1856-1928) asked Massenet if he could sing *Werther*. A shrewd strategist, the composer offered him the score arranged for Maurel, claiming that it had been conceived for him, as he wrote to his publisher Heugel: 'You are well aware that the work has been done – it is ready – but I want it to be known, when I give my answer, that I arranged the role in this way for Battistini.' After studying the part with Massenet, the Italian baritone sang it in Warsaw in November 1901 and in St Petersburg and Odessa the following year, a decade before recording some excerpts in 1911. Yet Massenet's autograph of this version has not yet been located and was never published. All the same, it was probably disseminated, and even amended by the composer – or indeed by others, since the French baritone Vanni Marcoux owned a copy of *Werther* dating from 1918 in which the – handwritten – vocal line sometimes differs from what we hear in Battistini's recordings. The baritone version eventually fell into oblivion because of the growing success enjoyed by tenors in an opera that had in the meantime entered the canon. Following Dale Duesing in Seattle in 1989, Thomas Hampson revived it in 1999, a sign of the appeal exerted on singers by a role and an opera whose dramatic power is now universally appreciated.



Ludek Marold, 'Werther at the Vienna Court Opera. The children's tea, Act One'.
Le Monde illustré, 27 February 1892. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Ludek Marold, « Werther à l'Opéra impérial de Vienne. Scène du goûter, 1^{er} acte ».
Le Monde illustré, 27 février 1892. Bibliothèque nationale de France.