

Memories of the theatre. *Werther*

Jules Massenet

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In the winter of 1885, I made a trip to the land of Goethe with my publisher of the time, Georges Hartmann. After we had travelled through several German towns and visiting a number of theatres, Hartmann, who had an idea in mind, took me to Wetzlar. In Wetzlar, he had seen *Werther*. We visited the house where Goethe had conceived the unforgettable pages of his immortal novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

I was familiar with the letters of *Werther* and still had poignant memories of them. Finding myself in the very house that Goethe had made famous by having his hero live for love there made a deep impression on me. Hartmann said to me as we left: 'I have something here to complete the beautiful emotion you are clearly experiencing.' And as he said this, he drew from his pocket a book with its binding yellowed by age. It was none other than the French translation of Goethe's novel. 'This translation is perfect,' Hartmann told me, 'in spite of the aphorism *traduttore traditore*, which alleges that a translation must inevitably betray the author's thoughts.'

I had barely got my hands on the book when, eager to look through it, we entered one of those vast beer halls one sees everywhere in Germany. We sat down and ordered glasses of beer as enormous as our neighbours'. Among the many groups were pupils of the military academy that must have been located in the town, and university students, recognisable by their caps, playing cards and various games, almost all of them holding long porcelain pipes in their mouths. Very few women, however.

I need hardly relate what I had to endure in that dense, mephitic atmosphere permeated by the acrid smell of beer. But I could not tear myself

away from those burning letters, from which there sprang sentiments of the most intense passion. What could be more evocative than the following lines, which, among so many others, we remember from the novel's famous moral conflicts, and whose bitter, painful, profound turmoil drives Werther and Charlotte swooning into each other's arms, after that thrilling reading of Ossian's verses:

Why do you awaken me, breath of spring? You caress me and say: I am laden with the dew of heaven, but the time is near when I must wither; the storm that will cut down my leaves is close at hand. Tomorrow the traveller will come; his eye will seek me everywhere, and he will find me no more...

Goethe adds after this:

The unhappy Werther was crushed by the full force of these words; he threw himself down before Charlotte in utter despair.

It seemed to Charlotte that a premonition of the dreadful plan he had formed passed through her soul. Her senses were overwhelmed, she clasped his hands and pressed them to her breast; she leaned towards him tenderly and their burning cheeks touched. He took her in his arms and covered her trembling, stammering lips with wild kisses!

The moving scenes, the exciting tableaux that those words were to inspire! It was *Werther*! It was my third act!

Life and happiness were upon me, in the work I invested in the feverish activity that consumed me, the work I needed and which I had, if possible, to harmonise with those intense and touching passions! As soon as we got back to Paris, we decided to do the opera. This was thanks to my great friend and superb collaborator on *Hérodiade*, Paul Milliet.

To encourage me to work even harder (did I really need such encouragement?), my publisher, who had improvised a scenario, reserved for me a spacious ground floor suite at the Hôtel des Réservoirs in Versailles, opening onto the gardens of the great Le Nôtre. The room I was to oc-

cupy had a high ceiling and eighteenth-century panelling, and was adorned with period furniture. The very table on which I was to write was in the purest Louis XV style. Everything had been chosen by Hartmann from the city's leading antique dealer.

Once the work was finished, I went to see M. Carvalho on 25 May 1887. I had arranged for Mme Rose Caron, then at the Opéra, to help me with the read-through. That admirable artist was by my side, turning the pages of the manuscript and displaying, at times, the most sensitive emotion. I had played through the four acts on my own; when I reached the end, I was exhausted... annihilated! Carvalho then approached me in silence, and said: 'I hoped you were bringing me another *Manon*! This sad subject is unedifying. It is doomed from the start...' As I look back to that occasion today, I can perfectly understand his impression, especially when I think of the years it took for the work to be loved!

Carvalho, who was a tender soul, then offered me some of that exquisite wine, claret, I think, which I had already drunk on a joyous evening, the evening we played through *Manon*... My throat was as dry as my tongue; I left without saying a word.



The next day, *horresco referens*, yes, the very next day – I am still appalled at the thought – the Opéra-Comique no longer existed! A fire had completely destroyed it during the night. I ran to Carvalho. We fell into each other's arms, embracing and weeping... My poor Director was ruined!... Inexorable fate! The work had to wait six years in silence and oblivion. It was to be a foreign theatre, the Imperial Opera in Vienna, that was the first to mount a production. The premiere took place on 16 February 1892 and was sung by the famous artists Marie Renard and Ernest Van Dyck.

Two years earlier, the Vienna Opera had given *Manon*; the hundredth performance was reached and even surpassed there in a very short time. And so the Austrian capital extended a very kind and most enviable wel-

come to me; so much so, in fact, that it gave Van Dyck the idea of asking me for another work. It was then that I proposed *Werther*. The lack of goodwill it had met with on the part of French opera managers had placed me at liberty to use this score.

The Vienna Opera is an imperial theatre. The management had asked His Majesty the Emperor to make an apartment available to me – this was very graciously offered to me at the excellent and renowned Hotel Sacher, situated next to the Opera House. My first visit on arriving was to the Director, Jahn. That gentle and eminent master took me to the rehearsal room. This is a spacious salon, lit by huge windows and furnished with majestic armchairs. A full-length portrait of Emperor Franz Joseph adorned one of the panels; in the centre was a grand piano.

All the *Werther* artists were gathered around the piano when Director Jahn and I entered the room. On seeing us, the artists rose to their feet as one and bowed to us. To this expression of touching and most respectful sympathy – to which dear Van Dyck added the most affectionate embrace – I responded by bowing in my turn; and, somewhat nervous and all atremble, I went over to the piano. The opera was absolutely ready for performance. All the artists sang it from memory. The warm demonstrations with which they overwhelmed me on this occasion moved me to tears several times.

That same emotion was to be repeated at the rehearsal with orchestra. The execution of the work had attained such rare perfection; the orchestra, by turns gentle and powerful, followed the nuances of the voices so closely that I could not get over my enchantment [...].

The dress rehearsal took place on 15 February, from nine in the morning until midday, and (ineffable and sweet surprise!) I saw sitting in the stalls my dear and eminent publisher Henri Heugel, my precious collaborator Paul Milliet, and a few friends from Paris. They had come from so far away to join me in the Austrian capital in the midst of my intense joys – for I really had been received there in the most flattering and unique manner. The performances that followed were to confirm the success of that fine premiere.

In that same year, 1892, Carvalho had once again become Director of the Opéra-Comique, then located in the Place du Châtelet. He asked me for *Werther*, and in such emotional tones that I did not hesitate to entrust it to him.

In the same week as my interview with Carvalho, Mme Massenet and I dined at the home of M. and Mme Alphonse Daudet. We were joined by Edmond de Goncourt and the publisher Charpentier. Once dinner was over, Daudet announced that he was going to let me hear a young artist whom he described as 'Music itself'. That young lady was none other than Marie Delna! At the first bars she sang (the air from *La Reine de Saba*, by the great Gounod) I turned to her and took her hands: 'Be Charlotte! Our Charlotte!' I said to her, transported.

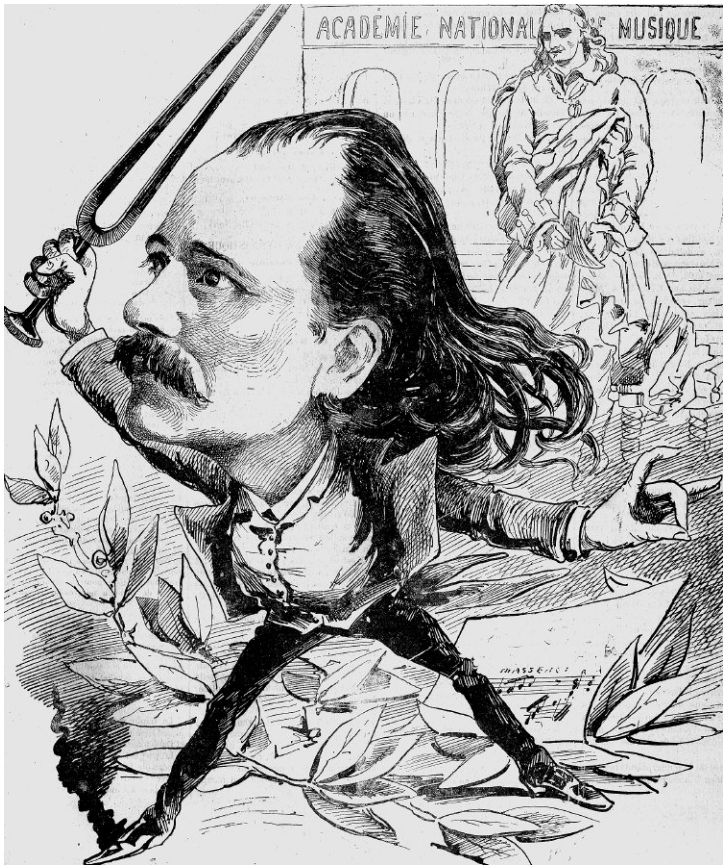


In 1903, after nine years of ostracism, M. Albert Carré revived the forgotten work. With his incomparable talent, his marvellous taste and his exquisite, cultivated artistry, he understood how to present this opera to the public, and it was a true revelation.

Many acclaimed artists have sung the role since then: Mlle Marié de l'Isle, who was the first Charlotte in the revival and who created the work with such beautiful and personal talent; then Milles Lamare, Cesbron, Wvyns, Raveau, Mme de Nuovina, Mlles Vix, Hatto, Brohly, and... others whose names I will write in the future.

At the revival, directed by M. Albert Carré, *Werther* enjoyed the great fortune of having Léon Beyle to create the title role; later, Edmond Clément and Salignac were equally superb and vibrant interpreters of the work.

Werther is now well on its way to its three hundredth performance in Paris.



Coll-Toc, caricature of Jules Massenet. *La Nouvelle Lune*, 21 June 1891.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

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