



**MANON**  
JULES MASSENET

## Opera Guides

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*Geraldine Farrar as Manon, one of her most famous roles in a career at the Met. that spanned from 1906-1922. (Stuart-Liff Collection)*

## **Preface**

This series, published under the auspices of English National Opera and The Royal Opera, aims to prepare audiences to evaluate and enjoy opera performances. Each book contains the complete text, set out in the original language together with a current performing translation. The accompanying essays have been commissioned as general introductions to aspects of interest in each work. As many illustrations and musical examples as possible have been included because the sound and spectacle of opera are clearly central to any sympathetic appreciation of it. We hope that, as companions to the opera should be, they are well-informed, witty and attractive.

The Royal Opera is very grateful to The Baring Foundation for making possible the publication of this Guide to *Manon*.

Nicholas John  
Series Editor

# *Manon*

Jules Massenet

*Opera Guides*  
*Series Editor*  
*Nicholas John*



OVERTURE

Overture Publishing  
an imprint of

ONEWORLD CLASSICS  
London House  
243-253 Lower Mortlake Road  
Richmond  
Surrey TW9 2LL  
United Kingdom

This Opera Guide first published by John Calder (Publishers) Ltd in 1984

This new edition of *Manon* Opera Guide first published by Overture Publishing, an imprint of Oneworld Classics Ltd, in 2011

Articles © the authors

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English translation of the *Manon* libretto © Joseph Weinberger Ltd 1984

ISBN: 978-0-7145-4426-7

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Printed in the United Kingdom

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## Massenet

Gérard Condé

Massenet was precision itself: 'It is an obsession of mine' he was to declare proudly to the director of the Opéra when congratulated on his punctuality. And indeed what is striking about his scores, or rather his manuscripts, is their precision and legibility in spite of a hand that trembled increasingly with age.

This meticulousness is most apparent in his notation of the vocal lines: while, until the beginning of the 20th century, it was traditionally desirable to leave the singer freedom of phrasing and accent, there is scarcely a note in the voice parts which Massenet has left unmarked as to dynamics, staccato or legato, without an accent or indication of expression, in order to fit the natural inflexions of French prosody closely and to make the text as comprehensible as possible. He also indicated metronome readings with the greatest precision and his metronome, inscribed with the titles of the scores for which it was used, is preserved. Is this in case someone should wish to check the exact tempo according to the composer's own metronome — which was perhaps capricious?

Anxious to see his musical thoughts executed without the slightest alteration, Massenet has left nothing that was not definitive. Almost without exception he did away with his sketches and early versions of certain pages so as to leave posterity only orchestral scores without second thoughts. There are several reasons for this clarity: firstly Massenet had obtained from his publisher a very thick paper which could be erased without damage and then, writing as he did only on loose leaves and only on the *recto*, it was little trouble for him to begin a page again if it had started badly, to interpolate one, to take one back or to change it with an afterthought. Lastly, like most opera composers of the 19th century, Massenet composed firstly a sort of piano/vocal reduction and only orchestrated it when the work had found its definitive form.

Although he taught composition at the Paris Conservatoire until 1896, Massenet dedicated his summer holidays to composition properly speaking and orchestrated during the winter, either at home or in hotels — wherever the supervision of the first performances of his works took him. In a sense it was desk work, routinely carried out as a rule, but occasionally relieved by feats of virtuosity such as the orchestration of the 257 pages of *La Navarraise* between November 30 and December 9 1893 . . . This is not to say that Massenet had always found work easy: his first grand opera, *Le Roi de Lahore*, occupied him from 1872 to 1877 and the orchestration of *Manon* took him nearly five months to complete. Yet, with Massenet, a beginner's natural inexperience gave way to a solid craftsmanship perfectly suited to the ends he pursued; it assured him of a sort of technical infallibility even when inspiration, in the modern sense of the word, failed him.

Paradoxical as it may seem to those who are satisfied with the picture of a sentimental composer, an inexhaustible melodist, Massenet was the complete opposite of instinctive. He had little experience of composition when he won the Prix de Rome at the age of 22 and, as he gradually learnt his craft, he derived increasingly substantial inspiration from it. Once appointed professor of composition, at the age of 36, he only wrote model scores which lent





*Marie Heilbronn and Jean-Alexandre Talazac who created the roles of Manon and Des Grieux (Stuart-Liff Collection)*

themselves willingly to analysis. When his operas are examined from this angle, it might be said that Massenet approached each dramatic situation as a problem to solve: the musical solution is born from the acuteness of the analysis. Unfortunately the ease with which he found coherent musical solutions to artificial situations or badly constructed dramas must have forced him more than once to put up with clumsy librettos which ruined whole scores, or which are, at least, responsible for unsuccessful scenes and weak acts.

One cannot say that Massenet, from his infancy, had a particularly strong vocation to be a composer. Born in Montaud (near Saint-Etienne) in 1842, Massenet was the youngest of a family of twelve; he hated his first name so much that he would only tolerate the initial. He first trained as a pianist when his parents had moved to Paris and even performed several times as a soloist in 1858; in the following year he won first prize at the Paris Conservatoire. With his parents now installed at Chambéry, Massenet had to support his needs by accompanying singers or playing the triangle in the orchestra at the Gymnase, or the kettledrum at the Café Charles or the Théâtre Lyrique. Thus it was that he gained direct experience of the theatre: he was in the pit, for instance, at the première of Gounod's *Faust*.

He studied composition under Ambroise Thomas, and won the Prix de Rome in 1863. Four years later he owed his Opéra Comique debut to a new disposition instituted in favour of the prize-winners: although the 'curtain raiser' *La Grand-tante* enjoyed a certain success, it did not do much to open the doors of other theatres for him. He had to wait another five years before the withdrawal of a colleague saw him entrusted with the libretto of an opéra-comique, *Don César de Bazan*, for which he composed the music in record time. From this period date the *Overture for Phèdre* and the stage music for *Les Erinnyes*, both of which found immediate favour, but it was the production at the Odéon, in April 1873, of the oratorio *Marie-Magdeleine* which assured his true repute. Although remodelled, this youthful work had been completed several years before and is not only remarkable on account of the personal inspiration it demonstrates, but also because Massenet was not to rediscover this language — already so much his own — until *Manon*.

*Eve (Mystère en trois parties)*, composed in the following year, 1874, enjoyed as lively a success but, apart from a few pages, it does not show notable progress. At the same time, having conceived *Les Templiers* and written a couple of acts which seemed to him to be too reminiscent of Meyerbeer, Massenet concentrated his efforts on a grand opera in five acts, *Le Roi de Lahore*. After the brilliant success of this opera, given at the Paris Opéra in April 1877, Massenet would have expected a warmer welcome from the new director when, in 1881, he proposed the first performance of *Hérodiade*<sup>1</sup>. But Vaucorbeil refused and, since he had several other operatic projects in mind (notably *Robert de France* and *Les Girondins*), it is understandable that Massenet eagerly accepted a proposal from Carvalho, the director of the Opéra Comique; for his part, Carvalho wished to see Henri Meilhac's *Phoebé* set to music and naturally turned to the most highly regarded of young composers.

Massenet had already collaborated with Meilhac on a small comic piece: *Bérangère et Anatole* was given at the Cercle de l'Union Artistique in February 1876 but the composer, heedful of his reputation as a serious musician, has let nothing survive from it. It is probable that the subject of *Phoebé* did not correspond to his current aspirations because he later returned

<sup>1</sup> It was eventually produced in Brussels in 1883.

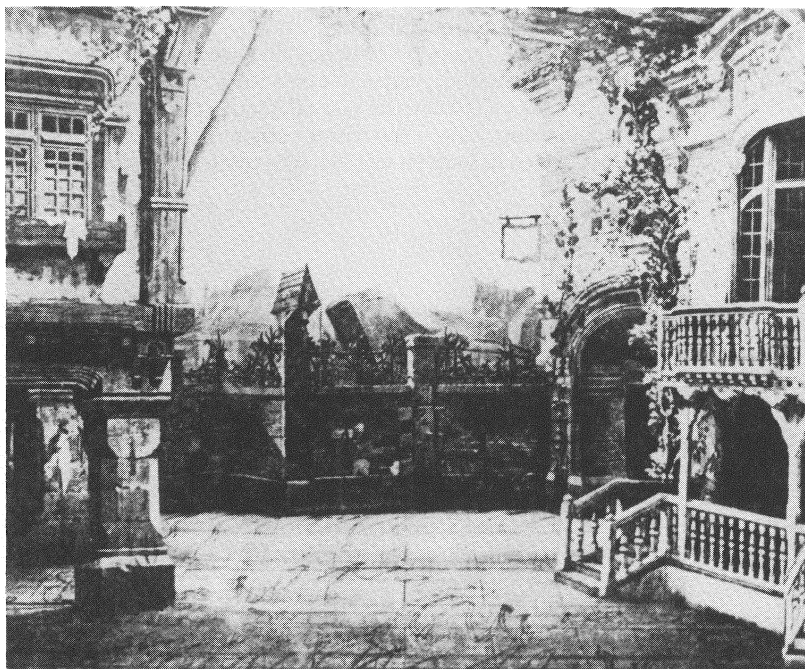


*Massenet's own  
favourite photograph  
of himself  
(Stuart-Liff Collection)*

the libretto to Meilhac and, opéra-comique for opéra-comique, Massenet replied by proposing *Manon* after the celebrated book by the abbé Prévost. As early as the following day, if *Mes souvenirs* are to be believed (although they were not actually collected by Massenet), Meilhac had made out the outline of the first two acts; the others followed shortly afterwards. But the libretto only reached its definitive form as the opera was composed, between May and October 1882. Massenet made frequent and fruitful visits to his librettist (who had a collaborator in Philippe Gille); he himself suggested the scene in Saint-Sulpice and, most importantly, obtained a text that suited his own ideas — for, while he accepted opéra-comique in principle, he had no intention of following the conventions of a genre that was exhausted dramatically.

When Massenet presented his score in the autumn of 1883 it had already been engraved so as to prevent any alterations: Carvalho was notorious for his mania for 'remodelling' the works he produced. Besides, Massenet had premonitions about the cuts that people would be tempted to make in order to condense the action or to place *Manon* and *Des Grieux* systematically in the foreground. Such cuts entirely destroy the overlapping effect desired by the authors and the contrast between the personal drama and the general rejoicing<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Some time after the first performance, Massenet himself made some changes to the score. Firstly for the sake of Sybil Sanderson: the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra de Paris possesses a copy of the original version with the composer's manuscript alterations of details. Then Massenet introduced a Gavotte ('Obéissons quand leur voix appelle') for the prima donna Marie-Roze; and then, for the sake of Mme. Bréjeau-Silver, he proposed that a *Fabliau* with more virtuosos vocal writing should replace the Gavotte.



*The original set for Act One at the Opéra-Comique in 1884 (Stuart-Liff Collection)*

With *Le Cid* (1884-1885), Massenet again demonstrated that the demands of grand opera inspired him above all to write formulas, if not commonplaces. Although the subject of *Werther* (1885-1887) at first seems to have excited him less than *Le Cid*, it offered him an intimate setting in which he could better rediscover his creative powers. Created in Vienna in 1892, in German, *Werther* was given in Paris in 1893 with limited success. The chromaticism of the new work might lead one to think that Massenet, who had been at Bayreuth in 1886, had been influenced by the composer of *Tristan*; to be precise, however, Massenet had by then been an informed admirer of Wagner for almost thirty years. The Wagnerian model was much stronger — too strong perhaps — in *Esclarmonde* (1887-1888); the performances, which took place in the context of the Exposition Universelle, enjoyed a considerable success which reflected on Sybil Sanderson, for whom Massenet wrote the title role. In comparison with the preceding works, there is a noticeable expansion of the melodic line, but the dramatic action does not maintain the same intensity up to the end.

In *Le Mage* (1889) Massenet fell again into the trap of grand opera, which the complexity of the plot further worsened. It was well received but the work was not revived. The same year saw the composition of *Amadis*, a legendary opera which, through a combination of circumstances, was not produced until after his death. It was reworked in 1910 and first performed in 1922 in Monte Carlo (as were the majority of his operas after 1900). The work may be uneven but it has the distinction of a prologue which contains writing of an audacious