

JULES MASSENET – His Life and Works

By Nick Fuller

I. Introduction

Jules Massenet's operas made him one of the most popular composers of the late nineteenth century, his works performed throughout Europe, the Americas and North Africa. After



Figure 1 Jules Massenet, drawing by Ernesto Fontana (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/personnages/Massenet%20Jules.html>)

World War I, he was seen as old-fashioned, and nearly all of his operas, apart from *Werther* and *Manon*, vanished from the mainstream repertoire.

The opera-going public still know Massenet best for *Manon*, *Werther*, and the *Méditation* from *Thaïs*, but to believe, as *The Grove Dictionary of Opera* wrote in 1954, that 'to have heard *Manon* is to have heard all of him' is to do the composer a gross disservice.

Massenet wrote twenty-seven operas, many of which are at least as good as *Manon* and *Werther*. Nearly all are theatrically effective, boast beautiful music and display insightful characterisation and an instinct for dramatic and psychological truth.

In recent decades, Massenet's work has regained popularity. Although he is not the household name he once was, and many of his operas remain little known, he has been winning

new audiences.

Conductors like Richard Bonyngne, Julius Rudel and Patrick Fournillier have championed Massenet, while since 1990 a biennial Massenet festival has been held in his birthplace, Saint-Étienne, in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, its mission to rediscover Massenet's operas.

His work has been performed in the world's major opera houses under the baton of conductors Thomas Beecham, Colin Davis, Charles Mackerras, Michel Plasson, Riccardo Chailly and Antonio Pappano, and sung by Joan Sutherland, José van Dam, Frederica von Stade, Nicolai Gedda, Roberto Alagna, Renée Fleming, Thomas Hampson and Plácido Domingo.

In 2014/15, according to [Operabase](#), he was the 21st most performed opera composer around the world. This year (2016), 38 productions of his operas – *La Navarraise*, *Cendrillon*,

Werther, *Don Quichotte*, *Manon*, *Le portrait de Manon*, *Thaïs*, *Hérodiade*, *Cléopâtre* and *Le Cid* – will take place around the world, at locations as far apart as Russia and Brazil, Australia and Japan. In April 2016, one of his most obscure operas, *Don César de Bazan*, was performed for the first time in nearly a century.

Massenet is still too often dismissed as a decadent sentimentalist, a sensuous composer of salon music painted in pastel colours. This is facile. While his music has the power to move, charm and please, it is also dramatic, robust and high-spirited.

He is the most versatile of all opera composers, and his operas among the most varied of any composer. They include *grand opéras* full of historical pageantry and exotic local colour; austere neo-Classical opera in the tradition of Gluck; Rabelaisian *haulte farce*; intimate, psychologically acute bourgeois tragedies; mediaeval dramas of Wagnerian scale; intensely dramatic *verismo* operas; and delicately melancholy fairy tales. The range of his oeuvre doesn't weaken its quality; each new and different work was both an artistic challenge and a source of inspiration.



Figure 2 Massenet rehearsing *Manon* with Sybil Sanderson in Pierre Loti's salon (Albert Aublet)

‘My operas are based on very diverse sources’, Massenet told *Le Temps* in 1896. ‘I try to vary the subjects. I tear myself away from one setting — and immediately immerse myself in a completely different one, to change the course of my ideas. It’s the best way of avoiding monotony.’

His operas are set in powdered eighteenth century boudoirs, late 19th century artists’ studios and Bohemian cafés, gemütlich German villages, ancient Persia and Pakistan, monasteries in the burning deserts outside Alexandria, mediaeval cathedrals and amidst the gunshot and cannonade of a Spanish battlefield.

As well as opera, he wrote oratorios, [ballets](#), religious music, music for the stage, [symphonic suites](#), [concertos](#),

mélodies ([review review review](#)) and music for [piano](#) or organ.

Many of his works are unfamiliar and poorly represented on CD. Several operas need new studio quality recordings, ideally with a cast that can sing idiomatic French: *Don César de Bazan*; *Le Roi de Lahore*; *Le Cid*; *Le Portrait de Manon*; *Sapho*; *Ariane*; *Roma* and *Panurge*.

The biggest gap in the discography is *Bacchus*, which has never been recorded. It was written in the middle of one of Massenet's most creatively fertile phases, and was arguably the victim of critical prejudice.

These rare operas and Massenet's most popular works all show that he was one of opera's great melodists. His arias are theatrically effective, musically beautiful and illuminate the corners of his characters' souls.

One thinks of Chimène's "Pleurez mes yeux" and Grisélidis's "Il partit au printemps", moving depictions of grief; of Werther's rapturous hymn to nature "Ô nature pleine de grâce"; of Cléopâtre's cruelly, languorously erotic "J'ai versé du poison"; of Chérubin's youthfully exuberant "Je suis gris", giddily drunk on simply being alive; of Ariane's "Chère Cypris", Hérodiade's "Venge-moi d'une suprême offense", Panurge's "Touraine est un pays", and Athanaël's "Voilà donc la terrible cité".



Figure 3 Jules Massenet, by Lemaire (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/personnages/Massenet%20Jules.html>)

'Massenet,' wrote Reynaldo Hahn, 'gave to the melodic expression of love a vigour and vivacity, a languor and a strange grace it never had before him.' He had, as Georges Auric wrote in 1961, 'the extraordinary gift of melodic invention, which resists time because it captivates the audience, which is elegant and graceful, which evokes the tender or dramatic emotion and which truly expresses human feelings, all the better in that it is supported by an adroit, elegant and noble orchestration.'

Each of his operas has its own atmosphere, its own distinct sound-world. He could evoke a long dead or distant place, or cleverly

paint an external event with as much insight and ingenuity as he depicted a character's emotions. Listen, if you will, to the opening of *Hérodiade*, to the windmills scene in *Don Quichotte*, to the entr'actes in *Thérèse* and *Roma*, or to the Méditation from *Thaïs*.

Massenet unites the free-flowing Wagnerian music-drama with the French opéra-comique, grand opéra and opéra lyrique styles to create his own idiom — one that would influence a whole generation of French composers, Richard Strauss in Germany and Puccini and the

verismists in Italy. Massenet could move seamlessly between recit, song and orchestra, without the symphonic element overwhelming the singers.

‘I do not think that there exists a suppler and more varied composer than Massenet,’ wrote his early biographer Louis Schneider. ‘He has created so many characters, invented such a large universe of sound and colour, that he seems to have nothing new to say, no new songs to sing. And yet each of his creations that we owe to his dream, his imagination or his vision, appear to us with an astonishing ease of evocation.

‘Nobody has more sense of the dramatic situation, nobody knows better how to adapt the orchestral material to dramatic or sentimental episodes.

‘What one must praise above all in his theatrical works is the balance between the vocal and instrumental elements. His works, while they are music and lovely music, are at the same time theatre.’

II. Early Years

Massenet was born in Montaud, Hérault (now part of Saint-Étienne), on 12 May 1842, the son of a wealthy ironmonger. His mother, an amateur musician, taught him to play the piano. At the age of nine (1852), he entered the Conservatoire, with a piano performance of Beethoven that earned Auber’s admiration. He received the premier prix de piano in 1859, the second prix de fugue in 1862, and, in 1863, the coveted Grand Prix de Rome for his cantata *David Rizzio*. He spent three happy years in Italy, where he met Liszt’s pupil Louise-Constance ‘Ninon’ de Gressy, whom he married in 1866. During this time, he supplemented his income by teaching music.

Massenet’s operatic career began with four light works:

- ***La Grand’Tante***. Opéra-comique in 1 act. Libretto: Jules Adenis & Charles Grandvallet. First performance: Opéra-Comique (2^e Salle Favart), 3 April 1867.
- ***Don César de Bazan***. Opéra-comique in 3 acts and 4 tableaux. Libretto: Adolphe D’Ennery & Jules Chantepie, after Dennery & Dumanoir’s play *Don César de Bazan* (1844), inspired by Victor Hugo’s character in *Ruy Blas* (1838). First performance: Opéra-Comique (2^e Salle Favart), 30 November 1876. Revised 1888, in 4 acts.
- ***L’Adorable Bel’-Boul’***. Opérette in 1 act. Libretto: Louis Gallet. First performance: Cercle des Mirlitons, Paris, 17 April 1874.
- ***Bérangère et Anatole***. Sainete in 1 act. Libretto: Henri Meilhac & Paul Poirson. First performance: Cercle de l’Union artistique, February 1876.



Figure 4 Frédéric Lemaître in *Don César de Bazan* (source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Don%20Cesar%20de%20Bazan.html>)

None of these operas has been recorded in full, although Richard Bonyngé recorded the vibrant Entr'acte Sevillana from *Don César de Bazan*, and several sopranos, including Nellie Melba, Amelita Galli-Curci and Sumi Jo, performed the Sevillana itself. The opera was performed earlier in 2016 in full for the first time in a century. At the time of writing, it is not known whether a recording will follow.

Massenet's first musical successes came with the oratorios *Marie-Magdeleine* (1873) and *Ève* (1875), and the stage music to *Les Erinnyes* (1873). In 1876, he was made a chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. The next year his career as an opera composer truly began.

Le Roi de Lahore. Opéra in 5 acts and 7 tableaux. Libretto: Louis Gallet. First performance: Théâtre de l'Opéra (Palais Garnier), 27 April 1877.



'The première of *Le Roi de Lahore* marked a truly glorious date in my life,' Massenet wrote in his *Souvenirs*. *Le Roi* was Massenet's breakthrough opera.

The opera, in the grandiose exotic tradition of the mid-19th century, tells of an Indian king murdered on his wedding day, and whose love for the beautiful Sitâ is so strong that he reincarnates as a beggar.

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

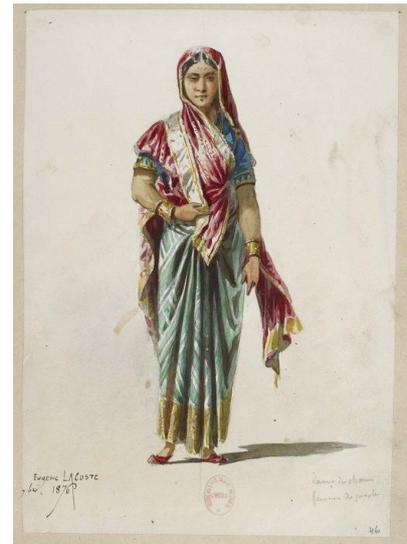
Sets and costumes were, wrote Ernest Reyer, composer of *Sigurd* (1884) and Berlioz's successor as music critic of the *Journal des débats*, of an unsurpassed magnificence. The sets depicted temple interiors, deserts, the Paradise of Indra and the streets of Lahore, while the hundreds of costumes cost 200,000 francs alone.

Gustave Flaubert, whose *Salammbô* is a classic of French exoticism, sent Massenet a note on the morning of the first performance: 'I pity you this morning. I will envy you tonight!'

The opera was a hit. Tchaikovsky was captivated 'by its rare beauty of form, its simplicity and freshness of ideas and style, as well as by its wealth of melody and distinction of harmony'. Within five years, the opera had been performed in Turin, Budapest, Munich, London, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, St Petersburg, Prague and Madrid.

‘The grandiose and slightly hyperbolic character of the libretto, which is turn by turn violent and paradisiacal,’ wrote Félix Clément, musicologist and author of the *Dictionnaire des opéras*, ‘suits the composer’s natural tendencies which, as his previous works have shown, are both impetuous and religious.’

Highlights of the score include the impressive overture; Scindia’s air “Je veux croire à son innocence”; the Act I finale in E flat; the ballet with saxophone; and the arioso “Promesse de mon avenir”, once a favourite of French baritones. (Arthur Endrèze’s 1929 performance is best: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/son/Odeon%20123021%20-%20Endreze%20-%20Roi%20de%20Lahore.mp3>.)



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Although there are two commercial recordings — a 1979 London recording featuring Joan Sutherland, Luis Lima, Sherrill Milnes, Nicolai Ghiaurov and Huguette Tourangeau, conducted by Richard Bonyngé; and a 2004 Italian production from Venice — the most idiomatic is an unofficial recording of the 1999 performance at Saint-Etienne, with a Francophone cast headed by Luca Lombardo and Michèle Lagrange.

Recordings include:

- Joan Sutherland, Luis Lima, Sherrill Milnes, Nicolai Ghiaurov, James Morris and Huguette Tourangeau, with the National Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Richard Bonyngé. Decca 433 852-3, recorded London 1979.
- Michèle Lagrange, Luca Lombardo and Jean-Marc Ivaldi with the Nouvel Orchestre de Saint-Etienne conducted by Patrick Fournillier. House of Opera CD 532; Fiori FI-1371, recorded Saint-Etienne 1999.
- Ana Maria Sanchez, Giuseppe Gipali and Vladimir Stoyanov with the Teatro la Fenice di Venezia Orchestra conducted by Marcello Viotti. Dynamic CDS 407/1–2 and [Dynamic 33487](#) (DVD), recorded Venice 2004.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

In 1878, Massenet was appointed professor of composition at the Conservatoire de Paris, and in November became the youngest member of the Institut de France. The list of his pupils is a who’s who of fin de siècle French musicians: Ernest Chausson, Gustave Charpentier, Reynaldo Hahn, Charles Koechlin, Alfred Bruneau, Gabriel Pierné, Paul Vidal, Xavier Leroux, Henri Rabaud, Georges Enesco and Florent Schmitt.

III. The 1880s

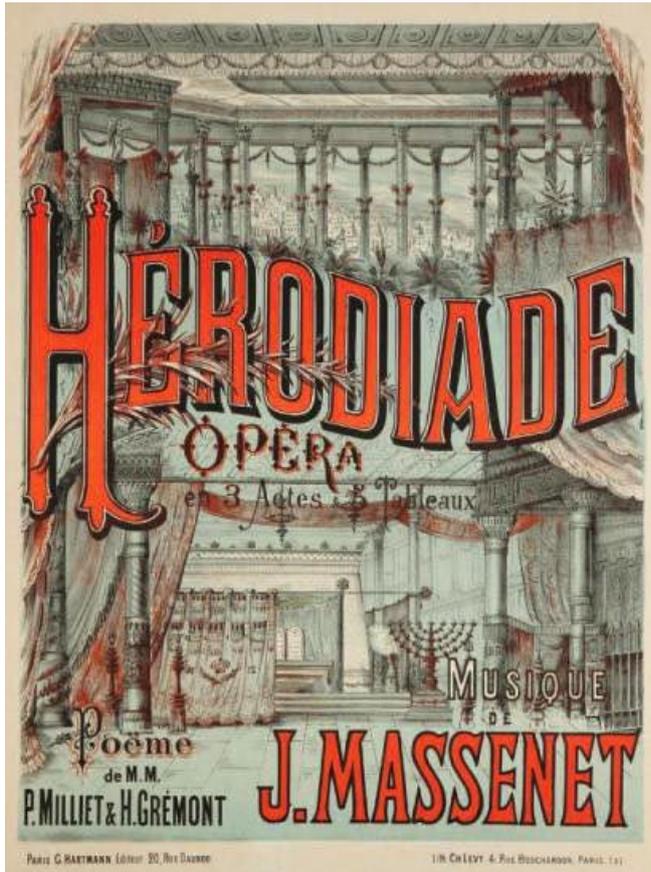


Figure 5 *Hérodiade* poster by Charles Lévy (1881) (source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Heroiade.html>)

Hérodiade. Opéra in 4 acts and 7 tableaux. Libretto: Paul Milliet & Henri Grémont (pseudonym of Georges Hartmann), after Gustave Flaubert's story *Hérodiade* (1877). First performance: Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brussels, 19 December 1881, in the original version of 3 actes and 6 tableaux. First performance in France: Nantes, 29 March 1883. First performance in Paris (in Italian): Théâtre des Italiens (Salle du Théâtre des Nations), 1 February 1884, in the revised version of 4 actes & 7 tableaux. First performance in Paris (in French): Théâtre Lyrique de la Gaîté, 18 October 1903.

Hundreds of Parisian artists, journalists and music-lovers headed north to Brussels for the première of *Hérodiade*. The Parisian critics, the Brussels press and the foreign journals, Schneider wrote, consecrated dithyrambic articles

to Massenet and his music. Yet the work had to wait until 1903 to be performed in Paris, in French. Its first Parisian performance was in 1884 — in Italian.

Indeed, although the work was performed in French in Brussels, it was originally written in Italian for the Milanese stage. After the success of *Il re di Lahore*, Giulio Ricordi, the Italian music publisher, commissioned a new score from Massenet, with the promise of a première at La Scala. Massenet completed the score of *Erodiade* in 1880, but Ricordi changed his mind and postponed the La Scala première, which took place in February 1882, three months after the Brussels production. Nevertheless, the Brussels production was a triumph.

A triumph, that is, with all except Cardinal Caverot, Archbishop of Lyon, who excommunicated Massenet and his librettist. The Archbishop objected to showing John the Baptist onstage — and a Baptist who falls in love with Salomé! She is a sweet innocent, almost a flower child of the '60s sitting at the feet of her guru, not Strauss's feral princess who does a striptease for her stepfather and makes love to the severed head of John the Baptist. One dreads to think what the Archbishop would have made of Strauss's opera.

Like Strauss's opera and Massenet's own later *Thaïs*, Massenet's version is a hothouse of Middle Eastern exoticism, eroticism and religious fervour. His characters are neurotics. *Hérodiade*, Salomé's mother who abandoned her daughter to follow Hérode, sings an extraordinary aria, "Venge-moi, ne me refuse pas", that alternates seductiveness, wheedling,

frenzied insistence and the fear of being abandoned; in one of the opera's most famous arias, "Vision fugitive", Hérode lies on a couch and feverishly fantasises about Salomé; and Jean bursts onto the scene with a cry of "Jézabel!"

The score is musically rich, starting with the lush, exotic Introduction (scored for strings and trombones) and chorus of merchants, a French Orientalist piece in the line of David or Reyer. Highlights include Salomé's "Il est doux, il est bon"; Jean and Salomé's two duets; Jean's "Ne pouvant réprimer", which was memorably recorded by Georges Thill; and the archaic, oratorio-like Act III finale.

The plot, however, is weak; much of the action of the Brussels version was obscure, and not clarified until Massenet's revision for Paris. In both versions, Salomé's suicide is unconvincingly abrupt, and her relationship with her mother Hérodiade undeveloped.

The recommended CD is Michel Plasson's 1995 Toulouse recording, featuring Cheryl Studer, Nadine Denize, Ben Heppner, Thomas Hampson and José van Dam. Georges Prêtre's 1963 recording has a largely Francophone cast — Régine Crespin, Rita Gorr, Albert Lance, Michel Dens and Jacques Mars — but offers highlights rather than the complete work.

Recordings include:

1. Andrea Guiot, Mimi Aarden, Guy Fouché, Charles Cambon and Germain Ghislain, with the Radio Netherlands Orchestra conducted by Albert Wolff. Malibran Music MR 691, recorded 1957?
2. Michèle Le Bris, Denise Scharley, Guy Chauvet, Robert Massard and Adrien Legros, with the Orchestre Lyrique de Paris conducted by Jésus Etcheverry. Accord 204 272, recorded Paris 1960?
3. Régine Crespin, Rita Gorr, Guy Chauvet and Robert Massard, conducted by Alain Lombard. The Opera Lovers HER 196301, recorded New York 1963.
4. Suzanne Sarocca, Lucienne Delvaux, Paul Finel, Robert Massard and Jacques Mars, with the Orchestre National de la R.T.F. conducted by Pierre Dervaux. Audio Encyclopedia AE 202 – Opera in Paris, recorded Paris 1963.
5. Régine Crespin, Rita Gorr, Albert Lance, Michel Dens and Jacques Mars, with the Théâtre National de l'Opéra de Paris conducted by Georges Prêtre. EMI 5 73089-2, recorded Paris 1963. (excerpts)
6. Muriel De Channes, Nadine Denize, Jean Brazzi, Ernest Blanc and Pierre Thau, with the Orchestre National de la R.T.F. conducted by David Lloyd-Jones. Rodolphe RPC 32450-51, Rodolphe RPV 32661.62, Phoenix 514.2, and Opera d'Oro OPD 1336, recorded Paris 1974.
7. Cheryl Studer, Nadine Denize, Ben Heppner, Thomas Hampson and José van Dam, with the Chœur et Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse conducted by Michel Plasson. EMI 5 55378-2, recorded Toulouse 1995.
8. Renée Fleming, Dolora Zajick, Plácido Domingo, Juan Pons and Kenneth Cox, with the San Francisco Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Valery Gergiev. Sony Classical S2K 66847, recorded San Francisco 1995.

9. Alexia Cousin, Béatrice Uria-Monzon, Luca Lombardo, Alain Fondary and Eric Martin-Bonnet, with the Nouvel Orchestre de Saint-Etienne conducted by Patrick Fournillier. Encore DVD 3182 (DVD), recorded Saint-Étienne 2001.

Manon. Opéra-comique in 5 acts and 6 tableaux, in free verse. Libretto: Henri Meilhac & Philippe Gille, after the abbé Prévost's novel *Histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1731). First performance: Opéra-Comique (2^e Salle Favart), 19 January 1884.



Figure 6 Sibyl Sanderson as Manon (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Manon.html>)

Manon is Massenet's most popular work. 'The score of *Manon* is truly charming, full of youth and freshness, sometimes full of verve and mad gaiety, at others most touchingly tender, or even violently and disorderly passionate,' wrote Arthur Pougin, the musical critic who continued Félix Clément's *Dictionnaire des opéras*. 'The score of *Manon* is certainly one of the most remarkable that has been produced at the Opéra-Comique for a quarter century.'

The opera received its thousandth performance in Paris in 1919. *Manon* was performed in Geneva, New York and Nantes in 1885, Vienna in 1890, Hamburg in 1892, and Milan in 1895.

The opera adapts the Abbé Prévost's 18th century story of a girl who falls in love with the young Chevalier Des Grieux, becomes a courtesan, and is sentenced to be transported to Louisiana. The story's combination of eighteenth century elegance, passion, scandal and the death of a 'sinful' but good-hearted woman in her lover's

arms made it a popular choice for musicians; Halévy composed a ballet in 1830, Auber an opéra-comique in 1856, and Puccini an opera in 1893.

'Massenet feels it as a Frenchman, with powder and minuets,' said the composer of *Tosca*. 'I shall feel it as an Italian, with a desperate passion.' Whether Prévost's work calls for desperate Italianate passion is debatable.

Massenet's elegant and gracious *Manon*, despite some departures from Prévost's text (the omission of the Louisiana scenes), is a more touching, tender depiction of young love than either Auber's or Puccini's. Among the most inspired passages are the four principal duets for Manon and des Grieux: "Et je sais votre nom" (Act I); the Duo de la Lettre: "On l'appelle Manon" (Act II); the Duo du Séminaire: "Oui! je fus cruelle et coupable" (Act III); and the final duet which ends with the death of Manon. Des Grieux's "Ah! fuyez, douce image" and Manon's "Adieu, notre petite table" have also been much recorded.

Recordings from 1923, 1937 and 1951 carry on the tradition of the Opéra-Comique. The classic recording is the 1955 Opéra-Comique recording starring Victoria de los Ángeles, conducted by [Pierre Monteux](#). The best recent recording is the 1999 La Monnaie, conducted by Antonio Pappano, featuring Angela Gheorghiu, Roberto Alagna, Earle Patriarco and José van Dam.

Recordings include:

- Fanny Helder, Jean Marny, Léon Ponzio and Pierre Dupe, with the Orchestre et Chœur de l'Opéra-Comique conducted by Henri Büsser. Marston 52003-2, Aura LRC 1901 and [Malibran Music MR 558](#), recorded Paris 1923.
- Germaine Féraldy, Joseph Rogatchewsky, Georges Villier and Louis Guénot, with the Orchestre et Chœur de l'Opéra-Comique, conducted by Elie Cohen. The Classical Collector FDC C 22001, Italian Music Company IMC 202006, Malibran Music CDRG 118, and [Naxos Historical 8.110203-04](#), recorded Paris 1928–29.
- Bidu Sayão, Sydney Rayner, Richard Bonelli and Chase Baromeo, with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra conducted by Maurice Abravanel. Naxos Historical 8.110003-5, recorded New York 1937.
- Janine Micheau, Libero de Luca, Roger Bourdin and Julien Giovanetti, with the Orchestre et Chœur de l'Opéra-Comique conducted by Albert Wolff. Preiser Records 20013, recorded Paris 1951.
- Victoria de los Ángeles, Henri Legay, Michel Dens and Jean Borthayre, with the Orchestre et Chœur de l'Opéra-Comique conducted by Pierre Monteux. EMI CMS 7 63549-2; Angel CDMC-63549 Testament SBT 3203; Urania URN 22.282; and [Naxos Historical 8.111268-70](#), recorded Paris 1955.
- Renée Doria, Alain Vanzo and Adrien Legros, with the Orchestre Symphonique conducted by Jesús Etcheverry. Philips 456 601-2, recorded Paris 1956.
- Mirella Freni, Luciano Pavarotti, Rolando Panerai and Antonio Zerbini, with the Teatro alla Scala di Milano conducted by Peter Maag. Melodram MEL 27046; Verona 27052/53; Legato Classics LCD 132-2 Opera d'Oro OPD 5005; Premiere Opera Ltd. CDNO 162-2 [Opera d'Oro](#) OPD-1270, recorded Milan 1969.
- Beverly Sills, Nicolai Gedda, Renato Cesari and Victor De Narké, with the Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires) orchestra conducted by Peter Maag. Premiere Opera Ltd. CDNO 1379-2; Omega Opera Archive; 2128, recorded Buenos Aires 1970.
- Beverly Sills, Nicolai Gedda, Gérard Souzay and Gabriel Bacquier, with the New Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Julius Rudel. Angel CDMC 69831-2 and Deutsche Grammophon 474-950-2, recorded London 1970.
- Ileana Cotrubas, Alfredo Kraus, Gino Quilico and José van Dam, with the Chœur et Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse conducted by Michel Plasson. EMI CDS 7 49610 2 and Angel 49610, recorded Toulouse 1982.

- Edita Gruberova, Francisco Araiza, Hans Helm and Pierre Than, with the Wiener Staatsoper orchestra conducted by Adám Fischer. House of Opera DVDM 632 (2005)^a; Encore DVD 2325 (2006)^a; DG 073 4207 (DVD), recorded Vienna 1985.
- Angela Gheorghiu, Roberto Alagna, Earle Patriarco and José van Dam, with the Chœur et Orchestre du Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie conducted by [Antonio Pappano](#). [EMI Classics](#) CDS 5 57005-2; [EMI](#) 81842, recorded Brussels 1999.
- Renée Fleming, Marcelo Álvarez, Jean-Luc Chaignaud and Alain Vernhes, with the Chœur et Orchestre de l'Opéra National de Paris Bastille conducted by Jesús López-Cobos. Sony S3K90458 (CD) and TDK 'Mediactive' [DVOPMANON](#) (DVD), recorded Paris 2001.
- Anna Netrebko, Rolando Villazón, Hyung Yun and David Pittsinger, with the Los Angeles Opera orchestra conducted by Plácido Domingo. Live Opera Heaven C 3050; Celestial Audio CA 805, recorded Los Angeles 2006.
- Anna Netrebko, Rolando Villazón, Alfredo Daza and Christoff Fescher, with the Staatskapelle Berlin conducted by Daniel Barenboim. rare-live-opera (unnumbered) (hyperlink in CLORLINK.HTM (CD)); Deutsche Grammophon 073 4431 (DVD), recorded Berlin 2007.
- Natalie Dessay, Rolando Villazón, Manuel Lanza and Samuel Ramey, with the Symphony Orchestra of the Gran Teatre del Liceu, Barcelona, conducted by Victor Pablo Pérez. [Virgin Classics](#) 5050689 7 (DVD), recorded Barcelona 2007.



Figure 7 Lucien Fugère (Des Grieux) (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Portrait%20de%20Manon.html>)

Le Portrait de Manon. Opéra-comique in 1 act and in free verse. Libretto: Georges Boyer. First performance: Opéra-Comique (Salle du Châtelet), 8 May 1894.

Ten years later, Massenet composed *Le portrait de Manon*, a one act pendant to the earlier opera. This sequel is one of Massenet's slightest works, showing what happens to des Grieux after Manon's death. Several phrases from *Manon* appear in the score, because, Massenet wrote in his *Souvenirs*, 'they represent des Grieux, at 40, and a very poetic memory of the long dead Manon'. 'The sentiment ... is tender not tragic, touching not wrenching,' Hugh Macdonald wrote, 'for it remains a *divertissement*, a diversion for today's audiences as it was a diversion for the composer.' Nevertheless, the work was popular in its day; it was performed in Geneva, Brussels and Naples in 1894, Antwerp and Prague in 1895, and New York in 1897. Arthur Pougin thought it 'charming, full of grace and poetry, with happy and frequent reminders of the work of which it is only a sort of continuation and which most piquantly underline and

illuminate certain situations.’ The only commercial recording is Opera Rara’s, which has the company’s usual high production standards but suffers from a non-Francophone cast.

- ZhengZhong Zhou, Hanna Hipp, Pablo Bensch and Susana Gaspar, with the Southbank Sinfonia conducted by Geoffrey Paterson. Opera Rara ORC47, recorded London 2011.

Le Cid. Opéra in 4 acts and 10 tableaux. Libretto: Louis Gallet, Adolphe D’Ennery & Edouard Blau, after Pierre Corneille’s play *Le Cid* (1636) and Guilhen de Castro’s work (1618). First performance: Théâtre National de l’Opéra (Palais Garnier), 30 November 1885.

Le Cid is opera on a grand scale, with processions, ballets and battles — a contrast to the eighteenth century charm and intimacy of *Manon*. It is based on Corneille’s play about Don Rodrigue (the Cid), an eleventh century Spanish knight who kills his lady’s father to avenge an insult to his own. The score is magnificent: heroic and noble, often touching and beautiful. Highlights include the impressive overture; Chimène’s “Pleurez mes yeux”, one of the most beautiful arias Massenet wrote; and Rodrigue’s two arias “Ô noble lame étincelante” and “Ô souverain, ô juge, ô père” (both memorably sung by Georges Thill). The work was a triumph. It remained in the Opéra’s principal repertoire until 1891, and was occasionally given up to 1919, reaching its 100th performance in 1900.

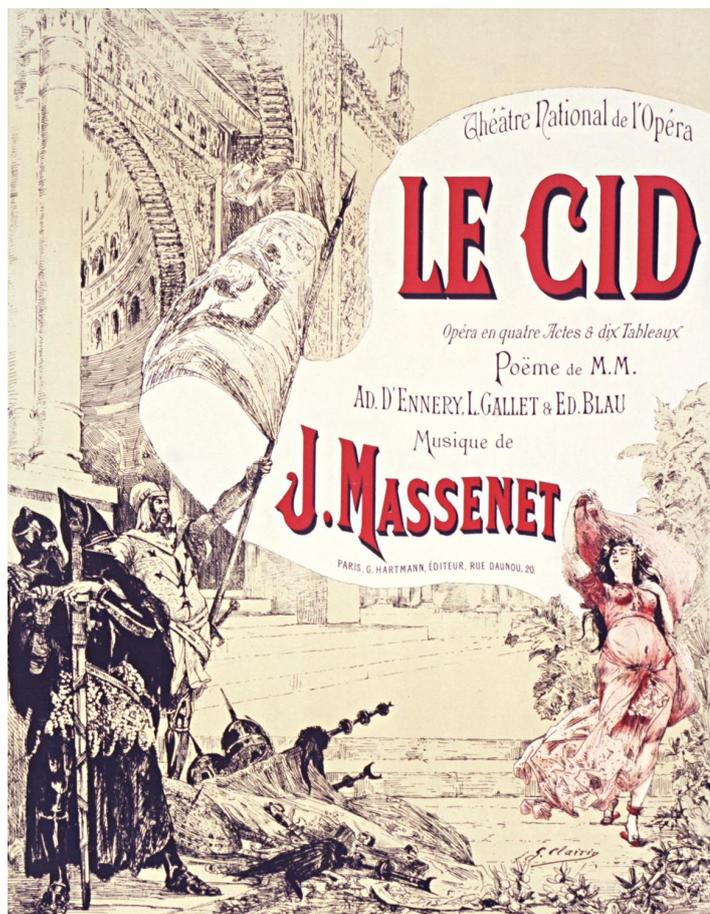


Figure 8 *Le Cid* poster
(Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Cid.html>)

Yet for all its popularity, critics were divided. Some thought the work was impressive but old-fashioned, and that Massenet ran the risk of becoming the young head of the old school of music. Johannes Weber (who had been Meyerbeer’s secretary in Paris) and Reyer both admired the work. Arthur Pougin thought it uneven, but ‘full of charm, poetry, tenderness and passion, even vigour, and sometimes truly grandiose’. Schneider thought it would have been the masterpiece of a lesser composer. ‘The Maestro realised with his so individual temperament the amorous side of Corneille’s tragedy; with his sense of the picturesque, he brought eleventh century Spain to life and made it shine ... His score is lustrous, tender and heroic: the proper characteristics of music for *Le Cid*.’

It is difficult to find a good recording. The best — an unofficial release with Roberto Alagna and a Francophone cast — is cut by half an hour. The only commercial recording suffers from Eve Queler’s heavy-handed conducting and Plácido Domingo in the title role. Domingo’s French accent leaves much to be desired (“ô noble larme entendcelante” indeed!), and most of the cast sing with strong American accents. Like *Le roi de Lahore*, this gives a false impression of the work. The Saint-Etienne CD is the most complete, but the sound quality is poor, and Chris Merritt is not ideal in the title role.



Figure 9 Act II, tableau 2: Boabdil's envoy declares war on the King of Castile (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Cid.html>)

Recordings include:

- Plácido Domingo, Grace Bumbry, Eleanor Bergquist, Paul Plishka and Arnold Voketaitis, with the Opera Orchestra of New York conducted by Eve Queler. CBS Masterworks 79300; Sony M2K 79.300, recorded New York 1976.
- Chris Merritt, Michèle Command, Maryse Castets, Jean-Philippe Courtis and Gabriel Bacquier, conducted by Patrick Fournillier. House of Opera CD7417, recorded Saint-Etienne 1994.
- Roberto Alagna, Béatrice Uria-Monzon, Kimy McLaren, Francesco Ellera D’Artegna and Jean-Marie Frémeau, with the Orchestre de l’Opéra de Marseille, conducted by Jacques Lacombe. House of Opera CD89957; CD401800; CD89984, recorded Marseille 2011.

In 1888, Massenet was made an officier de la Légion d’Honneur.

IV. The 1890s

Esclarmonde. Opéra romanesque in a prologue, 4 acts, an epilogue and 8 tableaux. Libretto: Alfred Blau & Louis de Gramont, after the chivalrous romance *Partonopeus de Blois* (end of 12th century). First performance: Théâtre National de l'Opéra-Comique (salle du Châtelet), 15 May 1889.



Figure 10 *Esclarmonde* poster (Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esclarmonde#/media/File:Esclarmonde.jpg>)

and spirits of air, water and fire.

Written for the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889, the spectacular opera was a huge success, reaching 100 performances within a year. It was Massenet's own favourite — perhaps because of the American soprano Sibyl Sanderson, whose stratospheric top G was nicknamed the 'sol Eiffel', after the then newly erected tower. The role, one of the most difficult in all opera, gave her ample scope to demonstrate her voice, particularly in the famous 'Esprits de l'air, esprits de l'onde'.

Massenet continued in the heroic vein with *Esclarmonde*, his most Wagnerian work. Camille Bellaigue, music critic of the *Revue des deux mondes*, called it a combination of a small French *Tristan* and a small French *Parsifal*; others compared the teenage sorceress who veils her face and whose lover cannot know who she is or whence she comes to Lohengrin.

Esclarmonde becomes empress of Byzantium when her father abdicates to devote himself to sorcery; she uses her magical powers to bring Roland, son of the (imaginary) French king Cléomer, to her enchanted island for a night of passion, and gives him the sword of St George to defeat the Saracens who attack Blois. There are beautiful veiled princesses, chariots pulled by griffins, magical palaces, knights in shining armour, magic swords,



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

The eroticism of the score was daring. ‘Of all Massenet’s works,’ wrote the admiring Schneider, ‘it is the one most overflowing with frantic tenderness, feeling and sensuality.’ Other critics complained that the extended love scene between Esclarmonde and Roland, influenced by Wagner’s *Liebesnacht*, the great Act II love duet in *Tristan und Isolde*, depicted in music the physical act of love. Arthur Pougin was unimpressed with the whole opera. ‘This arbitrary confusion of fable and history — a history that is itself fabulous — this invention of an imaginary king of France, this mixture of the supernatural and a semblance of reality, this abandonment of any apparent logic, all this troubles the spirit and considerably weakens the interest which such a strange

plot could excite.’ Moreover, he thought, the score relied too much on Wagnerian formulae, and the over-use of timpani, cymbals and the bass drum was hilarious.

The work was performed in Brussels in 1889, Saint-Petersburg in 1892, New Orleans in 1893, and Geneva in 1897. Despite its popularity, Massenet retired the work after Sanderson’s death from pneumonia in 1903. There are two commercial recordings: one, featuring Joan Sutherland at the height of her powers, conducted by Richard Bonyngé, and one from the Saint-Etienne festival featuring Denia Mazzola-Gavazzeni.

Recordings include:

- Joan Sutherland, Huguette Tourangeau, Clifford Grant and Giacomo Aragall, with the National Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Richard Bonyngé. Decca 475-7914, recorded London 1975.
- Denia Mazzola-Gavazzeni, Hélène Perraquin, Jean-Philippe Courtis and José Sempere, with the Orchestre Symphonique Franz Liszt, Budapest, conducted by Patrick Fournillier. Koch-Swann 3-1269-2 H1, recorded Saint-Étienne 1992.

Le Mage. Opéra in 5 acts and 6 tableaux. Libretto: Jules Richepin. First performance: Théâtre de l'Opéra (Palais Garnier), 16 March 1891.

Le mage is one of Massenet's least known operas. It is the last of his exotic grand opéras, full of crowd scenes and historical pageantry. To its librettist, Jean Richepin, this story of how Zoroaster founded Mazdaism represented 'the struggle between the spirit of goodness or truth and the spirit of evil or falsehood' and 'the pre-eminence of the idea of truth succeeding in subjugating the heart and conquering the mind'. The opera failed to capture the public's

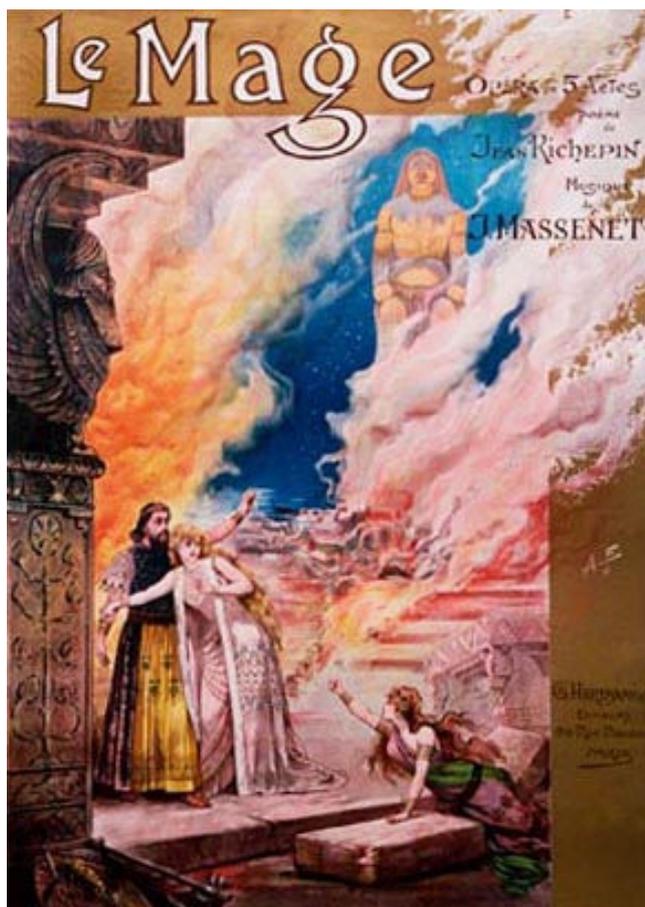


Figure 11 *Le Mage* poster (Source: www.gallica.bnf.fr)



Figure 12 Act II, 2nd tableau, décor by Amable and Gardy (source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Mage.html>)

imagination, despite impressive stage sets and a giant statue breathing green fire. Arthur Pougin thought the work uninspired and unlikely to hold the stage. 'The work is cold, and its passion lacks both focus and sincerity. It would be difficult for a musician's imagination to be inspired by such a sombre drama, without variety, without true emotion.'

The opera closed after only thirty-one performances. Apart from a production in The Hague in 1896 and the occasional recording of the tenor aria "Ah, paradis!", it vanished without trace until a concert performance at Saint-Etienne in 2012, released as part of the Palazzetto Bru Zane's series of obscure French operas. The work does not deserve this neglect; although the plot is conventional, much of the music is, as one expects from Massenet, well composed. There are several fine duets, a dramatic aria for the wicked priestess Varedha, "Ah! Comme ils déchirent mon cœur", and a haunting prayer scene, "Sur la montagne sacrée".

Recording:

- Luca Lombardo, Catherine Hunold, Kate Aldrich and Jean-François Lapointe, with the Opéra-Théâtre de Saint-Étienne conducted by Laurent Campellone. Palazzetto Bru Zane Ediciones Singulares, recorded Saint-Étienne 2012.

Werther. Drame lyrique in 4 act and 5 tableaux. Libretto: Edouard Blau, Paul Milliet & Georges Hartmann, after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774). First performance (in German): Imperial Theatre Hofoper, Vienna, 16 February 1892. First performance in French: Geneva, 27 December 1892. First performance in France: Opéra-Comique (Salle du Châtelet), 16 January 1893.

Werther is one of Massenet's most popular works — but the Opéra-Comique rejected it because it was too gloomy. The opera is based on Goethe's *Leiden des jungen Werthers*, the story of an overly idealistic young man who falls in love with a married woman and commits suicide. With this small-scale and intimate work, Massenet opened a new vein of naturalistic opera.

It is a bourgeois tragedy of well-intentioned people. The first act shows one of the warmest, most loving families in opera, and contrasts those who are wise and enjoy life with the unhappy young people. Charlotte sacrifices her happiness to her sense of duty; she marries Albert to fulfil a promise to her dying mother. The poet Werther is cursed with a too-sensitive nature; he is enraptured by the beauties of nature, high-minded and idealistic — but also immature and highly strung. He lacks the wisdom of Charlotte's father and his cronies who enjoy life and wine, or Charlotte's good-hearted sister Sophie, who loves Werther, but, knowing her love is not returned, decides to be happy ("Ce qu'il faut est rire, rire encore, comme autre fois"). The situation, the characters, the emotions, all ring true. And of course the tragedy of Werther is something that happens every day: young people with so much potential end their lives — as happened in Goethe's day, when the novel caused a series of imitation suicides.



Figure 13 Werther poster (Source: www.gallica.bnf.fr)

It was first performed at the Vienna Hofoper in February 1892, in German, and first performed in French in Geneva in December that year. It received its first Parisian performance at the Opéra-Comique in 1893, but did not become part of the repertoire until 1903. It was performed twice in 1894 and withdrawn, and eleven performances in 1897. Nevertheless, the work was critically admired from the start. Arthur Pougin called it ‘a superior work, of exquisite art and profound feeling, which could only have been conceived and executed by a musical genius’.

Highlights of the score include Werther’s “Ô Nature, pleine de grâce” and “Pourquoi me réveiller, ô soufflé du printemps?”, accompanied by cello, oboe and harp; Charlotte’s Air des Lettres; and the charming scene between Charlotte and Sophie in Act III.

The classic recording is the 1931 Opéra-Comique recording starring Georges Thill and Ninon Vallin, which has some minor cuts but shows the proper Massenet style of the old Opéra-Comique. The 1969 recording featuring Nicolai Gedda and Victoria de los Ángeles and the 1979 recording with Alfredo Kraus and Tatiana Troyanos are also excellent.

Recordings include:

- Charles Friant, Germaine Cernay, Henriette Labard and Roger Bourdin, conducted by Gustav Cloéz. The Vintage Music Company VM 1003, recorded 1927–30.
- Georges Thill, Ninon Vallin, Germaine Féraldy and Marcel Roque, with the Orchestre et Chœur de l’Opéra-Comique conducted by Élie Cohen. EMI CHS 7 63195-2; Arkadia 78034; Grammofono 2000 AB78742/73; [Naxos Historical](#) 8.110061-02; Opera d’Oro OPD 1366, recorded Paris 1931.
- Georges Noré, Suzanne Joyol, Jane Rolland and Roger Bussonet, with the Orchestre Radio-Lyrique conducted by Jules Gressier. Malibran MR 524, recorded Paris 1948.
- Charles Richard, Suzanne Juyol, Agnès Léger and Roger Bourdin, with the Opéra-Comique de Paris orchestra conducted by Georges Sébastian. Urania 22.242; Andromeda ANDRCD 5073, recorded Paris 1952.
- Ferruccio Tagliavini, Pia Tassinari, Vittoria Neviani and Marcello Cortis, with the Orchestra Sinfonico di Torino conducted by Francesco Molinari-Pradelli. Fonit Cetra CD 015; [Warner-Fonit](#) 8573 87494-2, recorded Turin 1953.
- Ferruccio Tagliavini, Leyla Gencer, Giuliana Tivolaccini and Mario Borriello, with the Coro di Teatro Verdi di Trieste Orchestra e Coro conducted by Carlo Felice Cillario. Memories HR 4554-55; Arkadia CDHP 599.2; Opera d’Oro 1234; Premiere Opera Ltd. CDNO 1230-2; Walhall Eternity Series WLCD 0259, recorded Trieste 1959. (in Italian)
- Albert Lance, Rita Gorr, Mady Mesplé and Gabriel Bacquier, with the Orchestre de l’O.R.T.F. conducted by Jésus Etcheverry. Adès 203 772; Adès 14083-2; Accord 472 917-2, recorded Paris 1964.
- Nicolai Gedda, Victoria de los Ángeles, Mady Mesplé and Roger Soyer, with the Orchestre de Paris conducted by Georges Prêtre. EMI CMS 7 63973-2; [EMI Classics](#) Great Recordings of the Century 562 6272, recorded Paris 1968–69.

- John Brecknock, Janet Baker, Joy Roberts and Patrick Wheatley, with the English National Opera orchestra conducted by Charles Mackerras. Oriol Music Society OMS 002/3; [Chandos](#) CHAN 3033, recorded London 1977. (in English)
- Plácido Domingo, Elena Obraztsova, Arleen Auger and Franz Grundheber, with the Radio-Sinfonie-Orchester Köln conducted by Riccardo Chailly. DG 413 304-2; DG 449 384-2; Lyrica LRC 1058/1059 (DG 447 271/2-2), recorded 1979.
- Alfredo Kraus, Tatiana Troyanos, Christine Barbaux and Matteo Manuguerra, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Michel Plasson. EMI CMS 7 69573-2; EMI CDS 7 49610-2; EMI TOCE 9491/2, recorded London 1979.
- José Carreras, Frederica von Stade, Isobel Buchanan and Thomas Allen, with the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, conducted by Sir Colin Davis. Philips 416 654-2; Philips 475 496-2, recorded London 1980.
- Peter Dvorský, Brigitte Fassbaender, MagdÉna Hajóssyová and Hans Helm, with the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra conducted by Libor Pešek. Amadeo PHLK 7503 (laser disc) and Supraphon 11 1547-2 632 (CD), television film directed by Petr Weigl, 1985.
- Jerry Hadley, Anne Sofie von Otter, Dawn Upshaw and Gérard ThérueL, with L'Opéra National de Lyon orchestra conducted by Kent Nagano. Erato 0630-17790-2, recorded Lyon 1996.
- Ramón Vargas, Vesselina Kasarova, Dawn Kotoski and Christopher Schaldenbrand, with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin conducted by Wladimir Jurowski. RCA Red Seal Victor 74321 58224-2, recorded Berlin 1998.
- Roberto Alagna, Angela Georghiou, Patricia Petibon and Thomas Hampson, with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antonio Pappano. [EMI](#) CDS 5 56820-2; [EMI](#) 81849, recorded London 1998.
- Marcus Haddock, Béatrice Uria-Monzon, Jaél Azzaretti and René Massis, with the Orchestre National de Lille-Région Nord/Pas-de-Calais conducted by Jean-Claude Casadesus. [Naxos 8.660072](#), recorded Lille 1999.
- Luca Grassi, Eufemia Tufano, Rosita Ramini and Gabriele Spina, with the Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia conducted by Jean-Luc Tingaud. Dynamic CDS 443/1-2, recorded Martina Franca 2003.
- Thomas Hampson, Susan Graham, Sandrine Piau and Stéphane Degout, with the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse conducted by Michel Plasson. Virgin Classics 359257-9 (DVD), recorded Toulouse 2004.
- Andrea Bocelli, Julia Gertseva, Magali Léger and Natale de Carolis, with the Teatro Comunale di Bologna orchestra conducted by Yves Abel. [Philips \(Decca\) 475 6557](#); Decca 4078, recorded Bologna 2004.

- Marcelo Álvarez, Elīna Garanča, Ileana Tonca and Adrian Eröd, with the Wiener Staatsoper orchestra conducted by Philippe Jordan. [TDK DVWW-OPWER](#) (DVD), recorded Vienna 2005.
- Roberto Alagna, Kate Aldrich, Nathalie Manfrino and Marc Barrard, with the Orchestre du Teatro Regio di Torino conducted by Alain Guingal. Deutsche Grammophon DVD0762883 (DVD), recorded Torino 2005.
- Keith Ikaia-Purdy, Silvia Hablowetz, Ina Schlingensiefen and Armin Kolarczyk, with the Badische Staatskapelle orchestra conducted by Daniel Carlberg. [ArtHaus](#) 101 317 (DVD), recorded Karlsruhe 2007.
- Jonas Kaufmann, Sophie Koch, Anne-Catherine Gillet and Ludovic Tézier, with the Opéra National de Paris conducted by Michel Plasson. Decca B0014794-09 (DVD), recorded Paris 2010.
- Rolando Villazón, Sophie Koch, Eri Nakamura and Audun Iversen, with the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House conducted by Antonio Pappano. [Deutsche Grammophon](#) 0289 477 9340 3, recorded London 2012.

Thaïs. Comédie lyrique in 3 acts and 7 tableaux.
 Libretto: Louis Gallet, after Anatole France's novel *Thaïs* (1890). First performance: Théâtre de l'Opéra (Palais Garnier), 16 March 1894. Revised version: 13 April 1898.

Massenet's most famous piece of music is the *Méditation* from *Thaïs*, a dreamy violin solo with orchestra, which Schneider called 'one of those melodic, coaxing, infinitely prolonged phrases of which Massenet had the secret, and which could be considered one of his most perfect pieces of this type'. Although it has a life of its own in the concert hall and television commercials, in context the *Méditation* shows an Alexandrian courtesan's long night of wrestling with her soul.

The work is a heady mixture of mysticism, exoticism and eroticism, but on a smaller, more intimate scale than *Hérodiade*. It is an intimate psychological study of a courtesan who gets



Figure 14 *Thaïs* poster (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Thais.html>)

religion, and a religious fanatic who doesn't get sex (but would really like some). The beautiful, worldly, notorious Thaïs, the toast of Alexandria, is unsatisfied with her life; like the Marschallin in Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, she is terrified of growing old and losing her beauty, because she believes that her beauty is all she has. On the other hand, the Coenobite monk Athanaël is one of these young men who get religion at an early, impressionable age, and end up sexually repressed and neurotic. He renounces the sins of the flesh, goes into retreat in the desert, and thinks that his desire to save Thaïs is a divine mission — and not sex rearing its ugly head. He converts Thaïs to Christianity, but realises that he is in love with her. As she dies, in a vision of religious ecstasy, he loses his faith.

The opera, an adaptation of Anatole France's story, starred Sibyl Sanderson in the title role. On the first night, thanks to a wardrobe malfunction, a titillated audience saw 'Mlle Seinderson naked to the waist'. (Sein = breast.) Nevertheless, like both *Manon* and *Werther*, the work was not a success at first. A revised version, with the Oasis scene and a new ballet,



Figure 15 Sibyl Sanderson (Thaïs) & Francisque Delmas (Athanaël) in Act II

(Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Thais.html>)

appeared in 1898, but it was not until Lina Cavalieri sang the role in Milan in 1903 and Paris in 1907 that it entered the repertoire, where it remained for the next half century.

‘The Maestro found so many occasions to deploy his gifts as a symphonist, colourist and man of the theatre,’ wrote Schneider. ‘The music describes the characters of Thaïs, creature of love and ingenuous tenderness, a trait which persists after the change in the young woman’s soul; Athanaël, and the conflict that shreds his soul; and the elegant, cordial and carefree Nicias. It expresses the voluptuous atmosphere of Alexandria and the collected peace of the monasteries with the same happiness.’

Apart from the *Méditation*, the score includes Athanaël’s aria “Voilà donc la terrible cité”, in which the bigoted monk curses Alexandria as a whited sepulchre; Thaïs’s *Air du Miroir*: “Dis-moi que je suis belle”, which shows Thaïs’s fear of losing her beauty; and the *Duo de l’Oasis*.

The best CD is the 1997 Decca recording starring Renée Fleming and Thomas Hampson, conducted by Yves Abel. A DVD is available of the same singers’ 2010 Met Live in HD broadcast. The ballet music Massenet composed for the original Act III, showing Athanaël tempted by nocturnal erotic fantasies, is on Patrick Gallois’s CD of Massenet’s ballets.

Recordings include:

- Géori Boué, Roger Bourdin and Jean Giraudeau, with the Orchestre de l'Opéra de Paris conducted by Georges Sébastian. Urania URN 22.209; Preiser Records 20014; Andromeda ANDRCD 5025; The Opera Lovers THA 195201, recorded Paris 1952. (Abridged)
- Andrée Esposito, Robert Massard and Jean Mollien, with the Orchestre Lyrique de l'O.R.T.F. conducted by Albert Wolff. Chant du Monde LDC 278 895-896 (+Andrée Esposito recital); Opera d'Oro OPD 1409, recorded Paris 1959.
- Renée Doria, Robert Massard and Michel Sénéchal, with the Orchestre de Radio France conducted by Jésus Etcheverry. Accord 149179; Accord 476 142-2, recorded Paris 1961.
- Jacqueline Brumaire and Michel Dens, with L'Opéra de Paris orchestra conducted by Pierre Dervaux. EMI CMS 7 69855-2 (+ *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*); EMI 5 73089-2 (collection), recorded Paris 1964.
- Anna Moffo, Gabriel Bacquier and José Carreras, with the New Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Julius Rudel. Premiere Opera Ltd. CDNO 2551-2, recorded London 1974.
- Beverly Sills, Sherrill Milnes and Nicolai Gedda, with the New Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Lorin Maazel. EMI CMS 5 65479-2, recorded London 1976.
- Renée Fleming, Thomas Hampson and Giuseppe Sabbatini, with the Orchestre national de Bordeaux Aquitaine, conducted by Yves Abel. [Decca](#) 466 766-2; Decca POCL 1931-2, recorded Bordeaux 1997.
- Eva Mei, Michele Pertusi and William Joyner, with the Teatro La Fenice di Venezia orchestra conducted by Marcello Viotti. Premiere Opera Ltd. CDNO 739 1-2; [Dynamic CDS](#) 427/1-2 (CD), [Dynamic](#) 33427 (DVD), recorded Venice 2004.
- Barbara Frittoli, Lado Ataneli and Stefano Poda, with the Orchestra and Chorus of the Teatro Regio Torino conducted by Gianandrea Noseda. [ArtHaus](#) B002ED6UXW (DVD), recorded Turin 2009.
- Renée Fleming, Thomas Hampson and John Cox, with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra conducted by Jesus-Lopez Cobos. [Decca](#) B002Y5FKZ4 (DVD), recorded New York 2009.

La Navarraise. Episode lyrique in 2 acts. Libretto: Jules Claretie & Henri Cain, after Jules Claretie's short story *La Cigarette* (1890). First performance: Covent Garden, London, 20 June 1894. First performance in France: Bordeaux, 27 March 1895. First performance in Paris: Opéra-Comique (Salle du Châtelet), 3 October 1895.

Massenet, always eager to experiment, turned to verismo for the one-act *La Navarraise*. The opera was performed at Covent Garden, in the presence of the future Edward VII, as part of a double bill with a Mascagni opera also based on Claretie's *Cigarette*.

The opera is set in Spain at the time of the Carlist War (1874); Anita the Navarrese girl is in love with a soldier, and kills the enemy commander to get enough money to marry. Things go badly. Schneider called the final scene 'one of the most terrible moments in dramatic art; a totally realistic emotional moment, but which overpowers the least susceptible of auditors'. Anita goes mad over her lover's corpse. 'It hardly lasts a few seconds, and yet it is interminable, such is the great intensity of the scene. When the curtain falls, one feels a true sense of relief.'

The opera's directness and dramatic intensity impressed audiences. 'The plot, which the music follows step by step,' wrote Pougin, 'is fast, one might almost say as brutal as lightning; it strikes with a singular dramatic power; it is, as they say, "a love drama which is born, grows and dies in two skirmishes".' Thirty years after its first performance, Antoine Banès, Administrateur de la Bibliothèque, des Archives et du Musée de l'Opéra (*le Correspondant*, 25 Sept. 1923), called it a work of incomparable mastery. 'There is not a useless harmony, nor any padding. Emotions clatter as rapidly as swords. This is a wonderful art.'

Although hugely successful in its time — performed in Budapest, Brussels and The Hague by the end of 1894, in Nuremberg, Hamburg, Bordeaux, Stockholm, Paris, Vienna, Moscow and New York in 1895, and Milan in 1896, often as part of a double bill with *Cav* or *Pag* — the opera has lost much of its popularity. The best recordings are Geneviève Moizan and Alain Vanzo conducted by Jean-Claude Hartemann; Lucia Popp and Alain Vanzo conducted by Antonio de Almeida; Marilyn Horne and Plácido Domingo conducted by Henry Lewis.

Recordings include:

- Geneviève Moizan, Alain Vanzo, Jacques Mars, Lucien Lovano, Marcel Vigneron and Joseph Peyron, with the orchestra of the Radio Television Française conducted by Jean-Claude Hartemann. *Le Chant du Monde* LDC 278 911/2 (+ *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*); Audio Encyclopedia AE 202 - Opera in Paris (A Mike Richter CD-ROM); Gala GL 100.747 (+ *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame* + excerpts), recorded Paris 1963.



Figure 16 *La Navarraise* poster (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Navarraise.html>)

- Marilyn Horne, Plácido Domingo, Sherrill Milnes, Nicola Zaccaria, Gabriel Bacquier and Ryland Davies, with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Henry Lewis. BMG RCA 74321 50167-2, recorded London 1974.
- Lucia Popp, Alain Vanzo, Vincenzo Sardinero, Gérard Souzay, Claude Méloni and Michel Sénéchal, with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Antonio de Almeida. Columbia M-33506, CBS 76403 and CBS "Masterworks" DC 40134, recorded London 1975.
- Denia Mazzola(-Gavazzeni), Gérard Garino, Philippe Duminy, Luca Gallo, Federico Sacchi and Francesco Arile, with the Teatro Verdi di Sassari orchestra conducted by Eric Hull. Kicco Classics KC 083-2 (+ *La Voix humaine*), recorded Sassari 2001.

In 1895, Massenet was made a Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur and retired from his post as professor of composition at the Conservatoire.

Sapho. Pièce lyrique in 5 acts. Libretto: Henri Cain & Arthur Bernède, after Alphonse Daudet's novel *Sapho* (1884). First performance: Opéra-Comique (Salle du Châtelet), 27 November 1897. Revised version in 6 tableaux: Opéra-Comique (3^e Salle Favart), 22 January 1909.



Figure 17 *Sapho* poster (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Sapho%20-%20Massenet.html>)

Massenet continued in the naturalistic vein with *Sapho*, based on Alphonse Daudet's 1884 novel about an idealistic young man who falls in love with an artist's model. Jean Gaussin's family ask Fanny (nicknamed 'Sapho') to leave him, and, like Verdi's *Violetta*, she does so, leaving him heartbroken. The plot echoes both *Manon* and *Werther*: the sensitive youth in love with a courtesan; the goodness and simplicity of the old Provençal folk contrasted with the liveliness and vulgarity of the artists making whoopee and living large. Throughout the opera, Massenet skilfully contrasts pastoral innocence with the Parisian demi-monde.

The work seems to have been more of a *succès d'estime* than a popular hit. It was first performed at the Opéra-Comique, 27 November 1897, and performed 42 times in 1897–98, but then taken off and not revived until 1909. It was staged at Milan and Algiers in 1898, and New

York in 1909.

However, the opera was critically acclaimed. Arthur Pougin thought it inspired, and Schneider thought that of all Massenet's libretti, it was the one most suited to music.

Massenet himself considered it one of the four works he most enjoyed writing, with the oratorio *Marie-Magdeleine*, *Werther* and *Thérèse*. Free from teaching at the Conservatoire, he felt twenty years younger, and wrote *Sapho* with a zest he had rarely known.

Highlights of the work include Jean's 'Qu'il est loin, mon pays'; Les Adieux de Divonne 'Petit, voici ta lampe'; and the arias for Sapho, 'Ce que j'appelle beau, c'est d'avoir tes vingt ans' and 'Pendant que tu travaillerais' (Act II) and 'Demain je partirai'. Emma Calvé, who created the role of Fanny, recorded 'Pendant un an je fus ta femme'.

Recordings include:

- Genéviève Moizan, Jean Mollien, Lucien Lovano, Christiane Jacquin and Solange Michel, with the Orchestre Lyrique de l'O.R.T.F. (Paris) conducted by Pierre-Michel Le Conte. E.J. Smith The Golden Age of Opera EJS 326 (LP), recorded Paris 1961. (Abridged)
- Milla Andrew, Alexander Oliver, George MacPherson, Jenny Hill and Laura Sarti, with the BBC Orchestra & Chorus conducted by Bernard Keefe. Memories HR 4601/4602; Opera d'Oro OPD7015, recorded London 1973.
- Renée Doria, Ginès Sirera, Adrien Legros, Elya Waisman and Gisele Ory, with the Orchestre Symphonique de la Garde Républicaine conducted by Roger Boutry. Bourg BGC 78-79; [Malibrán Music](#) CDRG 103, recorded Paris 1978.
- Giuseppina Piunti, Brandon Jovanovich, Massimiliano Gagliardo, Ermonela Jaho and Agata Binkowska, with the National Philharmonic Orchestra of Belarus conducted by Jean-Pierre Tingaud. Fonè CD/SACD 023, recorded Wexford 2001.

Cendrillon. Conte de fées in 4 acts and 6 tableaux. Libretto: Henri Cain, after Charles Perrault's tale *Cendrillon ou la Petite Pantoufle de verre* (1697). First performance: Opéra-Comique (3^e Salle Favart), 24 May 1899.

Cendrillon was originally scheduled for the Opéra-Comique in 1897, but its director, Léon Carvalho, asked Massenet to postpone the work in favour of *Sapho* as a vehicle for Calvé. Carvalho's death delayed *Cendrillon* till 1899.

Massenet's fairy tale opera *Cendrillon* is something special. The old magician once again casts a spell on his audience. Like Cinderella's fairy godmother, he weaves enchantments from the unlikeliest of ingredients: eighteenth century gavottes and minuets, nineteenth century social satire, and rapturous Wagnerian love duets spun out like moonbeams. Yet it all coheres.

‘One sometimes distinguishes a comic sentiment new to the musician,’ wrote Arthur Pougin (*le Menestrel*, 28 May 1899), ‘sometimes grace and tenderness, joined to a sincere and infectious emotion, sometimes a delicate and penetrating poetry.’

Rossini had already turned Perrault’s fairy story into an opera. His *Cenerentola* (1817) is delightful; an extroverted work full of exhilarating ensembles and that Rossinian *brio* and *joie de vivre*.

Massenet’s version is more elegant and elegiac. His Lucette is a more pathetic character than Rossini’s Angelina, who asks to go to the ball and, once given the confidence of a new costume, flirts with the prince. Lucette dreams by the fireside, and thinks the party is not for her. The fairy gives her the gown while she sleeps (unlike the fairy story, where she prays at her mother’s grave), and she collapses when she returns from the ball.

Her Prince is catatonic, lovesick but not in love with anyone, dying of having nobody to love.

“Vous êtes mon Prince Charmant” is the backbone of the wonderful Act II love duet, which slowly develops into something akin to the Liebesnacht from *Tristan*. It is warm and calm, a lyrical moment of privacy and inwardness in the middle of the ball. The rapturous love duet is, like that in *Les Huguenots*, interrupted by the striking of the bell; it does not reach its climax until the end of Act III, in a magical scene at the fairy godmother’s oak tree. The duet between Lucette and her father Pandolfe in Act III is equally tender. Her stepmother, the snobbish Mme de la Haltière, provides comic relief; she is, she proudly informs her family, descended from a cardinal, six abbesses and three nuns, two or three kings’ mistresses, and several Capuchin monks!

The work was, Pougin wrote, ‘a brilliant and uncontested success’. It was given 49 times in 1899 and 20 times in 1900 in Paris. It was performed in Brussels, Geneva and Milan in 1899, Algiers and The Hague in 1900, New Orleans in 1902, Cairo, Buenos Aires and Philadelphia in 1911 and New York and Montreal in 1912.

The only commercial CD is imperfect; Frederica von Stade is excellent as Lucette, the principals, including Jules Bastin and Jane Berbié, are French, but the role of her Prince — written for a Falcon soprano — is taken by an elderly Nicolai Gedda: not the effect Massenet wanted. There is a DVD of a Royal Opera House production starring Joyce DiDonato as Lucette and Ewa Podleś as Mme de la Haltière; Laurent Pelly has controlled his directorial excesses, and for once the result is charming.



Figure 18 Cendrillon poster (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Cendrillon%20-%20Massenet.html>)

Recordings include:

- Simone Blain, Jean Guilhem, Mireille Berthon, Lucien Lovano and Paule Touzet, with the Orchestre Radio-Lyrique conducted by Jules Gressier. Malibran Music MR 503; Cantus Classics 500732, recorded Paris 1943. (Abridged)
- Frederica von Stade, Nicolai Gedda, Jane Berbié, Jules Bastin and Ruth Welting, with the Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Julius Rudel. CBS Masterworks CD 79323; Sony Classical Masterworks M2K 79323; [Sony Classical](#) SM2K 91178, recorded London 1978.
- Joyce DiDonato, Alice Coote, Ewa Podleś and Jean-Philippe Lafont, with the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House conducted by Bertrand de Billy. [Virgin Classics](#) 6025099, recorded London 2011 (DVD).

V. Final Years

Grisélidis. Conte lyrique in a prologue and 3 acts. Libretto: Armand Silvestre & Eugène Morand, after their play *Grisélidis* (1891), inspired by a mediaeval legend from the late 12th century. First performance: Opéra-Comique (3e salle Favart), 20 November 1901.

‘I loved ***Grisélidis***. Everything in it pleased me,’ wrote Massenet in his *Souvenirs*. ‘The proud and chivalrous allure of the haughty lord leaving for the crusades, the fantastic aspect of the green devil, who seemed to have escaped from the stained glass window of a mediaeval cathedral, the simplicity of young Alain and the delightful little figure of *Grisélidis*’s child — all converged in a very touching way.’

The original legend, found in Boccaccio, Chaucer, Petrarch and Perrault, is both cruel and ludicrous. Gualtier, marquis of Saluzzo, marries *Griselda*. To test her fidelity, he makes her think that her two children are dead; he publicly renounces her; and he forces her to work for a lady who treats



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

her harshly. Throughout all this, she remains devoted to her husband. Satisfied, he tells her that all this was a joke, and they live happily ever after.

Fortunately, very little of this appears in the libretto Armand Silvestre and Eugène Morace wrote for Massenet after their play of 1891.

Grisélidis, a beautiful shepherdess, marries the Marquis de Saluces; one day, the Devil overhears him praising Grisélidis, and vows to ruin the marriage by tempting Grisélidis. The Devil is a comic figure — “un diable très bon enfant” — and not the sinister figure of Meyerbeer, Berlioz or Gounod; he is unhappily married, and decides to revenge himself by practising and encouraging adultery!

This mixture of mediaeval romance, lyricism and comedy is one of Massenet’s finest operas. ‘Is the score a masterpiece?’ Arthur Pougin wondered (*Dictionnaire des opéras*). ‘I don’t know. But it’s exquisite, and wholly captivating.’

Highpoints of the score include the lyrical prologue, which contains the tenor’s “Ouvrez-vous sur mon front, portes du paradis!”, a rapturous hymn to the beauty of Grisélidis; the Devil’s buffo aria “Loin de sa femme qu’on est bien!”; Grisélidis’s mournful “Il partit au printemps”, sung as she waits for her husband to return from the Crusades; and “L’oiselet est tombé du nid”, scored for violin and harp. ‘Massenet has illuminated this mediaeval stained glass window, this naïvely charming legend, with music,’ wrote Schneider.

Massenet wrote the first draft in 1894, edited it in 1898, wrote a new version in 1900 and the definitive score in 1901. After a successful run in Paris, the work was performed in Nice, Lyon, Brussels and Milan in 1902, and in New York in 1910. The commercial recording is a 1992 concert performance from Saint-Etienne, featuring Michèle Command in the title role and conducted by Patrick Fournillier.

Recordings include:

- Géneviève Moizan, Claude Genty, Xavier Depraz, Fréda Betti and André Mallabrera, with the Orchestre de l’O.R.T.F. conducted by Robert Alpess. E.J. Smith The Golden Age of Opera EJS 304 (+ *La Navarraise*), recorded Paris 1963. (Abridged)
- Rosemarie Landry, Sergei Leiferkus, Günter von Kannen, Rosanne Creffield and Howard Haskin, with the Radio Telefis Eireann Symphony Orchestra conducted by Robin Stapleton. Gala GL 100 724, recorded Wexford 1982.
- Hélène Garretti, Rene Massis, Michel Trempont, Chantal Dubarry and Tibere Rafalli, with the Orchestre de l’Opéra du Rhin conducted by Claude Schnitzler. Fiori Fl-1376, recorded Strassbourg 1986.
- Michèle Command, Didier Henry, Jean-Philippe Courtis, Claire Larcher and Jean-Luc Viala, with the Franz Liszt Symphony Orchestra conducted by Patrick Fournillier. Koch-Schwann 3-1270-2; Brilliant Classics 99544, recorded Saint-Étienne 1992.

Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame. Miracle in 3 acts. Libretto: Maurice Léna, after a tale by Anatole France, inspired by a mediaeval legend. First performance: Théâtre de Monte-Carlo, 18 February 1902.

Massenet, ‘le musicien de la femme et de l’amour’, as Schneider called him, composed an opera without either — except, the composer said, the most sublime of all women: the Virgin. *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* is a mediaeval ‘miracle’, taken from the *Miracles de Notre-Dame* collected by Gautier de Coincy in the 13th century, and based, like *Thaïs*, on an Anatole France story. The wandering minstrel of the title is the simple Jean, devoted to Mary. After he sings a blasphemous *Alléluia du vin* to entertain a crowd, the monk Boniface persuades him to join the monastery. There, everyone glorifies God in their own way; some sing, one paints, another sculpts. What shall Jean do? He juggles before the statue of the Virgin, who comes to life and blesses him. Jean, crowned with an aureole, dies; and the monks exclaim that he is a saint. The plot is simple, naïve even, but the music is, as Félicien Grétry, Arthur Pougin and Louis Schneider recognised, that of a

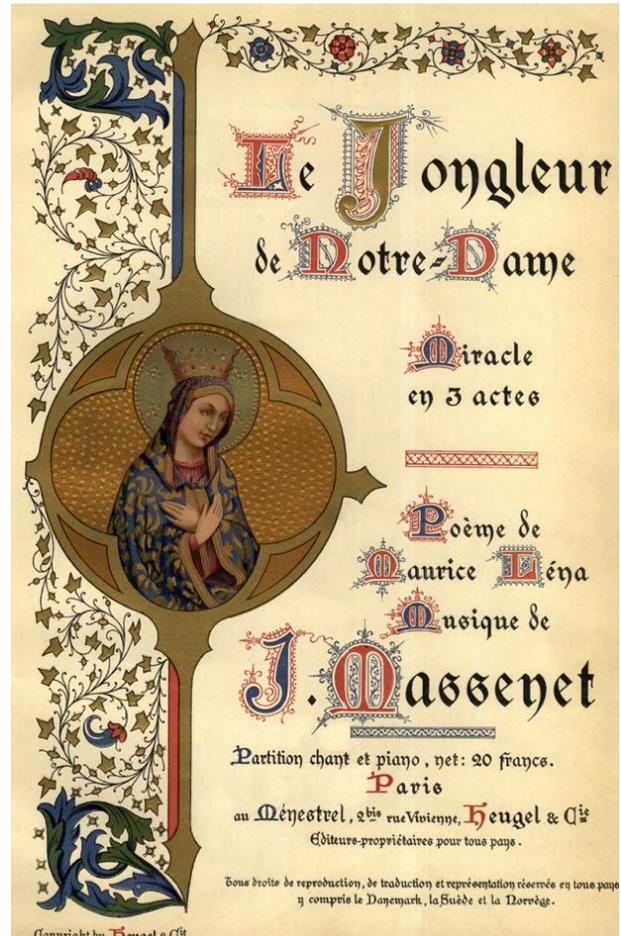


Figure 19 Score of the *Jongleur* (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Jongleur%20de%20Notre-Dame.html>)

master. Indeed, that simplicity is the point; “Heureux les simples, car ils verront Dieu,” sings the Prior as the curtain falls. The most famous aria, Boniface’s *Légende de la Sauge*, taken from a mediaeval song-cycle, tells how the simple sage opened its leaves to shelter Mary and the infant Jesus, while the haughty rose refused. Jean may not be a great painter or sculptor, but his juggling and minstrelsy are worthy in the Virgin’s eyes.

Where, though, would an opera without women or romance be performed? The Parisian theatres were uninterested. To Massenet’s rescue came Raoul Gunsbourg, director of the Théâtre de Monte-Carlo, acting on behalf of Prince Albert I of Monaco.

Starting with *Jongleur*, seven of Massenet’s last ten operas would be premiered in Monte-Carlo. The *Jongleur*, first performed in Monte-Carlo on 18 February 1902, was a success. At the end of the last act, the Prince awarded Massenet the Grand-Croix de l’Ordre de Saint-Charles, while the audience cried ‘Vive le prince! Vive Massenet!’

‘The true value of the score,’ wrote Schneider, ‘is that it comments with astonishing fidelity, with a rare choice of musical expression, on all the events of this pretty legend. *Le Jongleur* is a fabliau sung in music, — in a music alternately moving, witty, ingenious, excitable, serene, always of an astonishing candour. Massenet’s music in this work has half-colours; it smacks of mystery; deliciously veiled, it sounds like dim light shining quietly through stained glass.’

The work opened in Paris in May 1904, and received its hundredth performance at the Paris Opéra-Comique in 1908. The work was performed in Milan in 1905, London in 1906, and New York in 1908 — where the soprano Mary Garden sang the role of Jean, much to Massenet’s horror. ‘I was appalled, I confess it, to see this monk discard his robes, after the performance, and put on an elegant gown from the Rue de la Paix. Nevertheless, before the artist’s triumph, I bow and applaud.’ Of two commercial recordings, the best is the 1978 recording with Alain Vanzo and Jules Bastin.

Recordings include:

- Alain Vanzo, Jules Bastin and Marc Vento, with L’Opéra de Monte-Carlo orchestra conducted by Roger Boutry. EMI CMS 7 69855-2 (+ *Thaïs* - excerpts - Dervaux); EMI 5 75297-2, recorded Monte-Carlo 1978.
- Jésus Garcia, Lionel Lhote and Fernand Bernardi, with the Orchestre symphonique de Saint-Étienne, conducted by Laurent Campellone. Saint-Etienne 2005, no commercial recording.
- Roberto Alagna, Stefano Antonucci and Francesco Ellero d’Artegna, with the Orchestre National de Montpellier conducted by Enrique Diemecke. Deutsche-Grammophon 480-187-0, recorded Montpellier 2007.



Figure 20 Final scene of the *Jongleur* (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Jongleur%20de%20Notre-Dame.html>)

Chérubin. Comédie chantée in 3 acts. Libretto: Francis de Croisset & Henri Cain, after de Croisset’s play. First performance: Théâtre de Monte-Carlo, 14 February 1905. First performance in France: Opéra-Comique (3^e Salle Favart), 23 May 1905.

Massenet turned from the simple tale of religious piety to a sophisticated Mozartean comedy of manners. ***Chérubin*** continues the story of Mozart’s randy young Cherubino, now an amorous, headstrong youth of seventeen. ‘The title, the setting, the plot, everything about this delightful *Chérubin* charmed me,’ wrote Massenet in his *Souvenirs*.



Figure 21 Chérubin poster (Source: http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media/collection_images/3/343.1986%23%23S.jpg)

Massenet depicts Chérubin's love affairs with both tenderness and worldly shrewdness, particularly his infatuation with Ensoleillad, which culminates in a languorous, erotic love duet. The inexperienced adolescent thinks that their night of passion is forever, and is heartbroken when the older woman tells him it was only a one-night stand. He eventually settles on the sweet Nina, but it is doubtful whether the relationship will last; as his elders wryly comment, "C'est Don Juan", "C'est Elvire".

'This score is like a Watteau browned under the Andalusian sky,' wrote Schneider. There are gracious eighteenth century touches: Chérubin fights a duel with a rose between his lips, to the tune of a gavotte. Elsewhere, the

Act II entr'acte and the Manola show Massenet's skill at composing 'Spanish' music, which appeared throughout his

career from the early *Don César de Bazan* and *Le Cid* to the late *Don Quichotte*. The Chérubin / Ensoleillad duo is a *tour de force*, showing the sheer flexibility of Massenet's music. It depicts the tenderness of a first love affair on a warm night in Spain, but weaves interjections by three jealous men, comic scenes and ends in an ensemble.

The work was well received; Arthur Pougin, writing in *le Ménestrel* (28 May 1905), called it 'charming, lively and alert, and full of elegance and grace'. Performances in Antwerp and Brussels followed the Monégasque and French performances by the end of the year.

The recommended recording is the 1991 performance, featuring Frederica von Stade, Samuel Ramey, June Anderson and Dawn Upshaw, conducted by Julius Rudel.

- Frederica von Stade, Samuel Ramey, Dawn Upshaw and June Anderson, with the Münchner Rundfunkorchester conducted by Pinchas Steinberg. RCA Victor Red Seal 09026 60593-2, recorded Munich 1991.
- Michelle Breedt, Giorgio Surjan, Patrizia Ciofi and Carmela Remigio, with the Orchestra and Chorus Teatro Lirico di Cagliari conducted by Emmanuel Villaume. Dynamic CDS 508/1-2 and Dynamic B000M06U5W (DVD), recorded Cagliari 2006.

Ariane. Opéra in 5 acts. Libretto: Catulle Mendès, after Thomas Corneille's tragedy (1672). First performance: Théâtre de l'Opéra (Palais Garnier), 31 October 1906.

After mediaeval mystery plays and Mozartean comedies of manners, Massenet turned to myth. The graceful, Grecian *Ariane* retells the legend of Ariadne's abandonment by Theseus. In this version, based on Corneille's 1672 play, Theseus falls in love with Ariane's sister Phèdre. When Phèdre dies, Ariane descends into Hades to plead for her soul; but Theseus again chooses Phèdre over Ariane. In despair, Ariane drowns herself.

The work was Massenet's first opera for the Palais Garnier since *Thaïs*, twelve years before. The fruit of an unhappy collaboration with the poet Catulle Mendès, it received 61 performances into 1908 and was then dropped; it was revived with 14 performances for the reopening of the Opéra in February 1937.

The opera deserves better than to vanish into obscurity; it is, as Fauré — the composer of *Pénélope*, another operatic version of a Greek legend — called it, 'a noble, great and moving work'. It is as full of light and air as a Greek temple, and contains much that is beautiful: Ariane's "Prière à Cypris"; the barcarolle on Thésée's ship; Perséphone's "Air des Roses".

There are no commercial recordings; the only recording, easily found online, is an unofficial recording of a 2007 performance at [Saint-Etienne](#), with Cecile Perrin in the title role:

- Cécile Perrin, Barbara Ducret, Anne Pareuil, Luca Lombardo and Cyril Roverly, with the Orchestre Symphonique de Saint-Etienne conducted by Laurent Campellone. No commercial recording; recorded Saint-Étienne 2007.

Thérèse. Drame musical in 2 acts. Libretto: Jules Claretie. First performance: Opéra de Monte-Carlo, 7 February 1907. First performance in France: Théâtre des Arts, Rouen, 10 November 1909. First performance in Paris: Opéra-Comique (3e salle Favart), 19 May 1911, with the first performance of Ravel's *L'heure espagnole*.

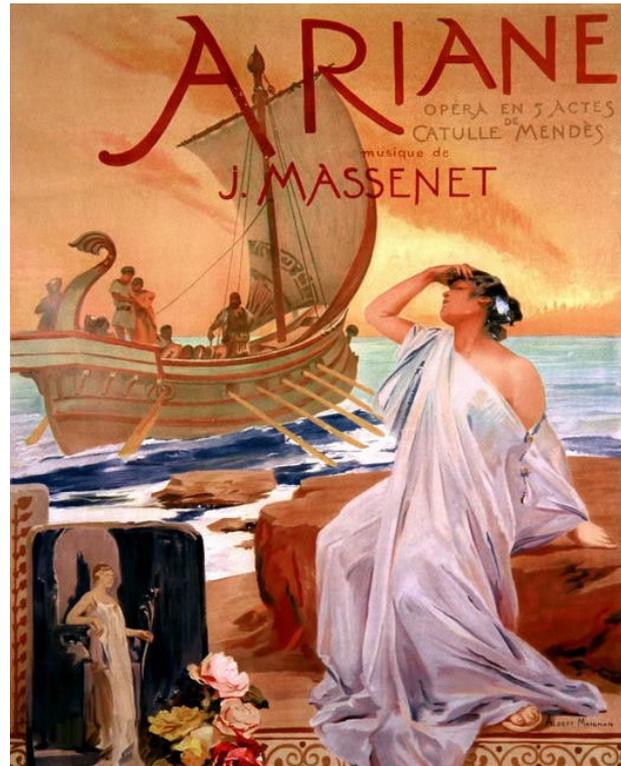


Figure 22 Ariane poster (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Ariane%20-%20Massenet.html>)

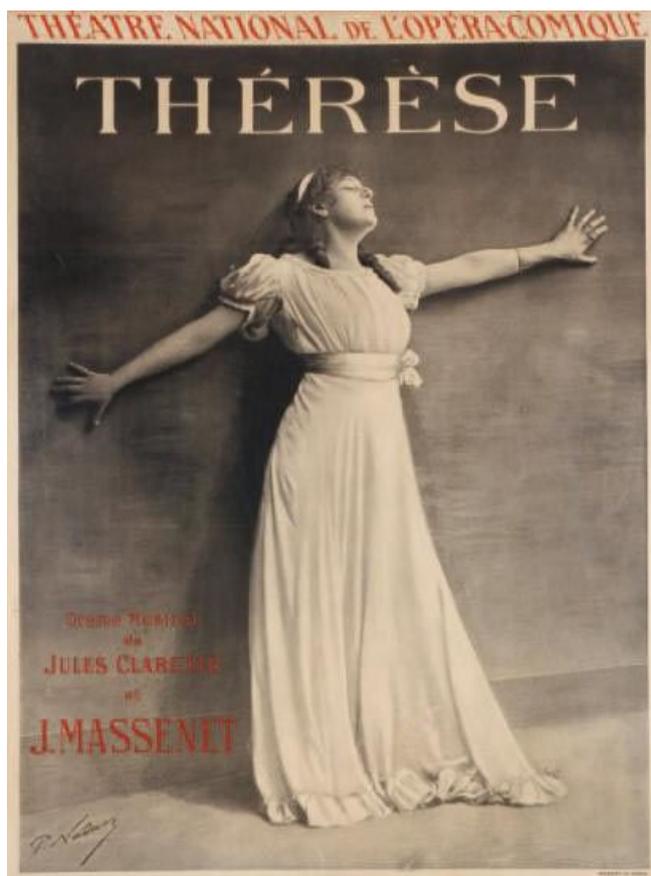


Figure 23 Thérèse poster (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Therese%20-%20Massenet.html>)

then, however, it was performed in provincial France and Berlin (1907), Geneva, Vienna, Algiers and Tunis (1908) and Lisbon (1909).

When it opened in Paris, Arthur Pougin (*le Ménestrel*, 27 May 1911) called it ‘powerful, tender, melancholy, with a feeling of exalted youth in its first part, impassioned, pathetic and dolorous in the second, with poignant accents and a sincere and deep emotion. Never perhaps, thanks to that dramatic feeling which is one of Massenet’s greatest qualities and which the listener admires without quite being aware of it, never has he given a greater demonstration of his dramatic power and the skill with which he produces and compels emotion.’

While the opera has been recorded with Huguette Tourangeau and Agnes Baltsa in the title role, the recommended recording is the Palazzetto Bru Zane recording of 2012, featuring Nora Gubisch, Charles Castronovo and Étienne Dupuis.

Recordings include:

- Huguette Tourangeau, Ryland Davies and Louis Quilico, with the New Philharmonia Orchestra conducted by Richard Bonyngue. Decca 448 173-2, recorded London 1973.
- Agnes Baltsa, Francisco Araiza and George Fortune, with the RAI Roma orchestra conducted by Gerd Albrecht. Orfeo C 387 961, recorded Rome 1981. (In Italian)

Massenet followed a grand opéra of Classical theme and proportion with one of his most concentrated, intensely dramatic scores, in the verismo line of *La Navarraise* or *Sapho*. *Thérèse* lasts just over an hour, and focuses on three characters. The setting is Revolutionary France; the heroine loves both her husband, André Thoral, a Girondist, and her former lover, Armand de Clerval, a nobleman. In a final powerful scene, Thérèse sees from her window her husband being carried off to the guillotine, and resolves to join him in death. Like so many of Massenet’s heroines, the part calls for considerable acting ability.

Paul-Emile Chevalier (*le Ménestrel*, 16 February 1907) thought it ‘would take its place among the very best of Massenet’s fruitful and marvellous output.’

Thérèse did not reach Paris until 1911, when it was performed in a double bill with Ravel’s *L’heure espagnole*. Before

- Jeanne Pilaud, Howard Haskin and Charles van Tassel, with the North Holland Philharmonic orchestra conducted by Lucas Vis. - Canal Grande CG-9220, recorded 19??
- Nora Gubisch, Charles Castronovo and Étienne Dupuis, with the Orchestra of the Opéra national de Montpellier conducted by Alain Altinoglu. [Palazzetto Bru Zane Ediciones Singulares](#), recorded Montpellier 2012.

Bacchus. Opéra in 4 acts and 7 tableaux. First performance: Théâtre de l'Opéra (Palais Garnier), 5 May 1909.

Bacchus, a companion piece to *Ariane* in which the tragic heroine meets the god of wine and theatre in the Himalayas, was a flop. It closed after only five performances.

The opera was, Massenet wrote in his *Souvenirs*, prejudiced from the start. Firstly, the directorship of the Opéra had changed, and the public and press were unsure about the new regime's merits. 'To put on a new work in such conditions was to face peril. I only realised this too late, because the work itself, despite its flaws, did not deserve such indignities.'



Figure 24 Bacchus - costume design (Source: www.gallica.bnf.fr)

Secondly, the critics used the opera to vent their anger at the librettist Catulle Mendès, a hot-tempered critic who fell out of a railway carriage and was killed shortly before the première.

Certainly, they attacked the libretto more than the music, for which they felt pity rather than censure. The story mixes Greek and Indian mythology in a quasi-Nietzschean and Wagnerian imbroglio. The libretto was 'obscure and ambiguous; it lacks action and is imbued with a metaphysical philosophy that hides symbols difficult to unravel,' wrote Stan Golestan (*Larousse mensuel illustré*, July 1909). 'One can guess what difficulties the composer faced in writing a score on such an abstruse poem ... Massenet does not seem to have been able to find his usual characteristic and irresistibly charming inspiration.'

Nevertheless, Massenet believed the public would have warmed to the work had it not been for these disasters. They enthusiastically greeted the entrance of Bacchus in his chariot; the ballet in an Indian forest; the first scene of Act III, set on a terrace of the Palace of the

Sakias; Kéleyi's song; the arias "Zeus immortel" and "Ne me faites pas de grâce"; and the orchestral interlude depicting the battle of the monkeys against Bacchus's heroic army (later published as a piano arrangement).

To compose this piece, Massenet studied the monkeys in the Jardin des Plantes. 'I amused myself by depicting, amidst the symphonic developments, the cries of the terrible chimpanzees as they hurled boulders from the peaks.'

Of all Massenet's operas, this is the one most in need of recording. The complete opera has never been recorded, but some of the ballet music is available on CD:

- Massenet: *Ballet Music*. Barcelona Symphony and Catalonia National Orchestra, conducted by Patrick Gallois. Naxos 8.573123, recorded Barcelona 2012.

After the failure of *Bacchus*, Massenet found comfort in his appointment in 1910 to Presidency of the Académie des Beaux-Arts et l'Institut de France, and from the enthusiastic reception given his next opera.

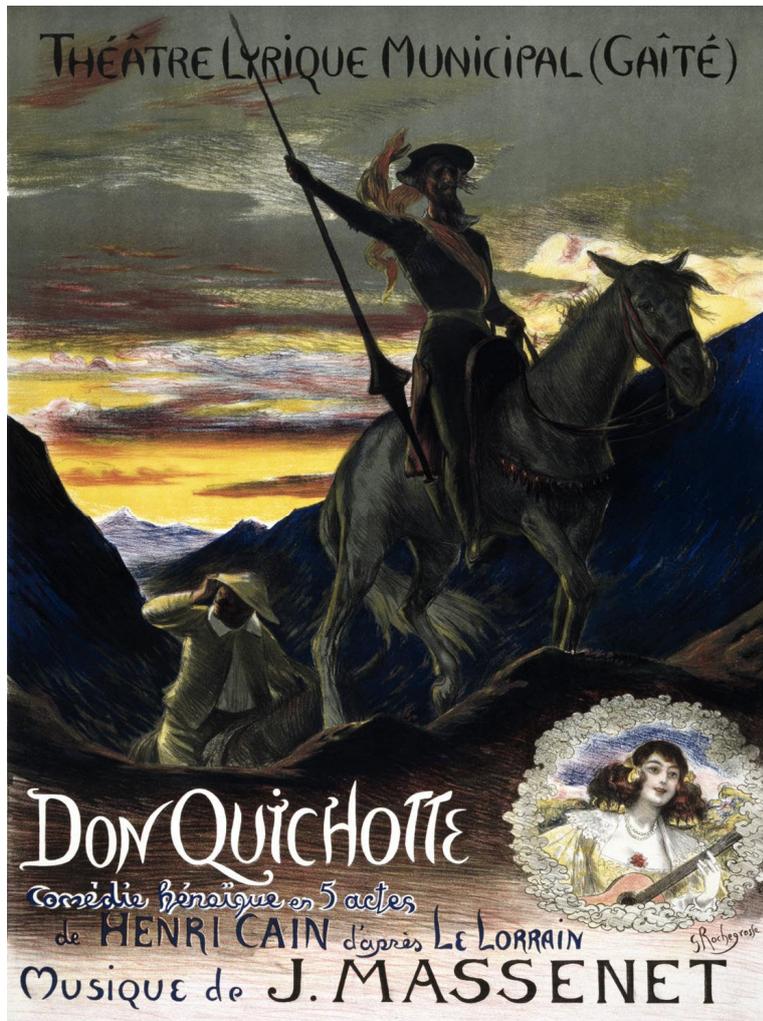


Figure 25 Don Quichotte poster (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Don%20Quichotte%20-%20Massenet.html>)

Don Quichotte. Comédie héroïque in 5 acts. Libretto: Henri Cain, after Jacques Leloirain's play *Le Chevalier de la Longue-Figure* (1904), inspired by Miguel de Cervantes's novel. First performance: Opéra de Monte-Carlo, 19 February 1910. First performance in France: Marseilles, 17 December 1910. First performance in Paris: Théâtre Lyrique de la Gaîté, 29 December 1910.

Don Quichotte, he wrote in his *Souvenirs*, 'came as a healing balm in my life. I had great need of it. Since the previous September, I had suffered acute rheumatism and I spent more of my time in bed than up and about.'

The opera showed little of the composer's illness. 'To describe the charm, the life, the

variety, the gaiety and the emotion which M. Massenet lavished once more on this new work is impossible,' wrote Paul-Emile Chevalier (*le Ménestrel*, 26 February 1910). 'One stands amazed before such eternal youth, such fresh ideas, such delicate sensitivity, such always new, always renewed inspiration, such stunning mastery and elegant sureness.'

The opera is a musical adaptation of Jacques Lelorain's play *Le Chevalier de la Longue-Figure*, itself based on Cervantes' tale of the knight errant too idealistic for the world. Massenet's Don Quichotte (first played by Chaliapin) is a holy fool, a man of simple goodness, who by sheer charisma persuades a gang of bandits to return the necklace they stole. 'Oui, peut-être est-il fou, mais c'est un fou sublime!'

The score is one of Massenet's finest. The scene where Don Quichotte thinks the windmills are giants is musically inventive; and the Spanish setting lets Massenet write the local colour at which he excelled, such as Dulcinée's arias in Acts I and IV. The Don Quichotte / Dulcinée duet and Sanche's "Riez, allez, riez du pauvre fou!", where the loyal servant upbraids those who mock at his master, are among Massenet's most tender and affecting scenes.

The work was a success, and was soon performed in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, Geneva, Antwerp and Lisbon. It has never quite fallen out of the repertoire. There are three commercial CDs, all good, featuring Nicolai Ghiaurov, Ferruccio Furlanetto and (arguably the best) José van Dam, who later chose the opera for his farewell performance at La Monnaie. Although this production is available on DVD, it is a bizarre and alienating concept production directed by Laurent Pelly.

Recordings include:

1. André Pernet, Lucien Lovano and Solange Michel, with the Radio-Lyrique orchestra conducted by Jules Gressier. Malibran-Music CDRG 120, recorded 1947. (abridged)
2. Nicolai Ghiaurov, Gabriel Bacquier and Régine Crespin, with L'Orchestre de la Suisse Romande conducted by Kazimierz Kord. Decca 430 636-2 (+ *Scènes alsaciennes*); Decca Rouge Opéra 455 853-2, recorded 1978.
3. José van Dam, Alain Fondary and Teresa Berganza, with the Orchestre National du Capitole de Toulouse conducted by Michel Plasson. [EMI](#) CDS7 54767-2, recorded Toulouse 1992.
4. Giacomo Prestia, Alessandro Corbelli and Laura Polverelli, with the Teatro Verdi di Trieste orchestra conducted by Dwight Bennett. Bongiovanni AB 20007 (DVD), recorded Trieste 2006.
5. Ferruccio Furlanetto, Andrei Serov and Anna Kiknadze, with the Mariinsky Orchestra conducted by Valery Gergiev. Mariinsky B006UM0570, recorded St Petersburg 2011.
6. Orlin Anastasov, Venteslav Anastasov and Tsveta Sarambelieva, with the Sofia National Orchestra conducted by Francesco Rosa. [Dynamic](#) 33733 (DVD), recorded Sofia 2009.
7. José van Dam, Werner Van Mechelen and Silvia Tro Santafé, with the Orchestre Symphonique de la Monnaie conducted by Marc Minkowski. [Naïve](#) B005IIA996, recorded Brussels 2010.

Roma. Opéra tragique in 5 acts. Libretto: Henri Cain, after Alexandre Parodi's play *Rome vaincue* (1876). First performance: Opéra de Monte-Carlo, 17 February 1912. First performance in Paris: Théâtre de l'Opéra (Palais Garnier), 24 April 1912.

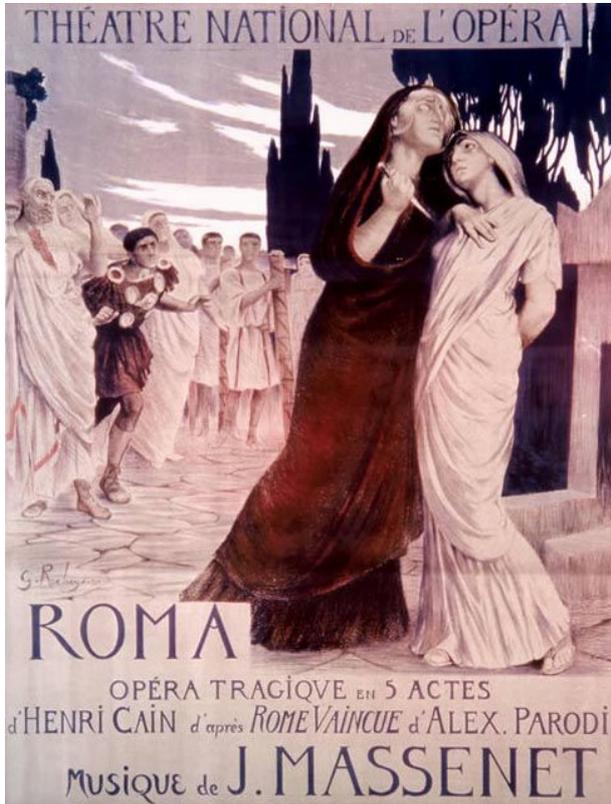


Figure 26 *Roma* poster (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Roma.html>)

The neo-Classical *Roma* is a masterwork. At the first performance in Monte-Carlo on 17 February 1912, it received standing ovations and the Prince embraced Massenet.

‘Grandeur, breadth, nobility, with that familiar intensity of life and richness of ideas, are the characteristics of the new score that will now take its place among the most beautiful and important of the maestro’s works,’ wrote Paul-Émile Chevalier (*Le Ménestrel*, 24 Feb 1912).

Arthur Pougin (*Le Ménestrel*, 27 April 1912) raved about the beauties and the power of the score. ‘Impassioned, romantic, fanciful as we have alternately known him over the course of his glorious career, the composer has made himself as austere as he should, he has become classic in the best sense of the word, and he drew, from the poem which he had to translate, the nobility of his inspiration.’

That poem is based on a play which starred Sarah Bernhardt. Although the opera is set in Ancient Rome, and tells the old story of the Vestal Virgin who meets a lover and lets the sacred flame die out, there is nothing marmoreal about the work; it is immediate and affecting. The Vestal condemned to die by her uncle; her decision to do her duty to her country and family, uphold her honour and die, rather than run away with her lover and live, is more human and convincing than, for instance, Donizetti’s *L’esule di Roma* or Spontini’s *La vestale*. The scene in Act IV where the blind Posthumia learns that her granddaughter Fausta has been condemned to death, begs for mercy and then curses the Senate; the final



Figure 27 Posthumia (Lucy Arbell) Source: <http://artlyrique.fr/fr/oeuvres/Roma.html>

scene where Posthumia stabs Fausta to save her from being buried alive and then descends into the tomb — these are powerful, emotionally moving dramatic episodes.

The score is noble and sober, and boasts fine lyrical passages alongside Gluckian declamation. Highlights include the overture, one

of Massenet's most beautiful; the once famous arias "Le soleil se couchait" and "Soir admirable", which Sergio Segalini ranks with the great tenor arias in *Le Cid*; the duet "Vesta, c'est la patrie!"; the Fausta/Lentulus duet, which Segalini considers as good as anything in *Werther*, *Manon* or *Thaïs*; and the ensemble in the last act.

There are, however, only two recordings: an inadequate Italian commercial recording, and an unofficial recording from Saint-Etienne:

1. Iano Tamar, Svetlana Arginbaeva, Warren Mok, Nicolas Rivenq and Jean Vendassi, with the Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia conducted by Marco Guidarini. Dynamic CDS 267, recorded Martina Franca 1999.
2. Anne Marguerite Werster, Valerie Marestin, Carlo Guido, Jean-Marc Salzman and Olivier Grand, with the Nouvel Orchestre de Saint-Etienne conducted by Patrick Fournillier. Fiori FI-1380, recorded Saint-Etienne 2001.

Roma was the last Massenet opera performed in the composer's lifetime. On 13 August 1912, at the age of seventy, he died from abdominal cancer.

'French music,' wrote Paul Locard (*Larousse mensuel*, November 1912), 'has suffered one of its greatest losses in a long time. ... For the public, the great public, from the admiring ladies whose elegant and impassioned adulation has not ceased to form a cortège, to the artisans who hum *Manon* and *Werther*, it seemed that Massenet should never die, because his name evoked a vision of eternally amorous youth.'

VI. Posthumous Works

Although Massenet was dead, he had three operas in reserve.

Panurge. Haulte farce musicale in 3 acts. Libretto: Georges Spitzmüller & Maurice Boukay, after François Rabelais. First performance: Théâtre-Lyrique de la Gaîté, 25 April 1913.

Like many of Massenet's late operas, ***Panurge*** is little known. The work, which opened in Monte-Carlo on 25 April 1913, is a gracious comic adaptation of Rabelais. *Panurge* pretends to be dead to escape from his wife, who pursues him to the Isle of Lanterns, where all ends happily.

It may not be the most tightly plotted of Massenet's works, but the music is a delight, mixing Belle Époque elegance with Mozartean grace. The most famous number is the cantilena "Touraine est un pays", which [Vanni Marcoux sang in 1930](#).

Act II, set at the Abbey of Thélème, is joyous; Pantagruel's description of the abbey, Ribaude's rondel "Le Temps a laissé son manteau", and the scène du festin are delightful.

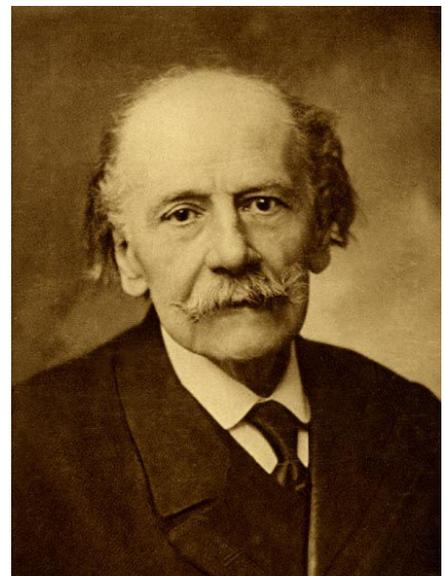


Figure 28 Massenet, photo by Nadar
(Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/personnages/Massenet%20Jules.html>)



Figure 29 Panurge poster (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Panurge%20-%20Massenet.html>)

l'Opéra de Saint-Etienne conducted by Patrick Fournillier. Fiori FI-1400; House of Opera CD7530, recorded Saint-Étienne 1994.

The work has never been commercially recorded, but it has its admirers. Arthur Pougin (*Le Ménestrel*, 3 May 1913) praised the 'verve, élan, excitable vivacity and comic sentiment' of the score.

David LeMarrec at the [Carnets sur Sol](#) blog thinks it is not merely one of Massenet's finest works, but one of the most artistically successful operas. The protean Massenet, he writes, imitates archaic, vaguely Baroque, forms; the score is witty and mischievous; and there are little touches of Rabelais's flowery prose. 'This work is a gem of good humour and dramatic élan. To my belief, no composer has ever done better in terms of urgency. Add to this a perfectly entertaining libretto, and a surprising, charming score that winks at the audience.'

There is only one unofficial recording:

- Jean-Philippe Courtis, Hélène Perraguin, Antoine Normand, Desmond Byrne and Maryse Castets, with the Orchestre de

Cléopâtre. Drame passionnel in 4 acts and 5 tableaux. Libretto: Louis Payen. First performance: Opéra de Monte-Carlo, 23 February 1914. First performance in Paris: Théâtre Lyrique du Vaudeville, 29 October 1919.

Cléopâtre was first performed at the Monte-Carlo on 23 February 1914. That morning, the Prince unveiled a bust of Massenet in the theatre. The opera, which concerns the doomed love of Cleopatra and Antony, provides a fine starring role for a soprano or mezzo. Massenet originally intended the role for the mezzo-soprano Lucy Arbell, but after his death, the role was changed to fit the voice of the soprano Maria Kuznetsova, requiring 288 changes. Although the soprano Montserrat Caballé and the mezzo Sophie Koch have both sung the role in recent years, the best performance is the soprano Kathryn Harries.

The score is less exotic and burnished than Massenet's earlier scores; the music is often heightened recitative and declamation, with trumpets.

'This is the musician's last manner,' wrote Condé, 'distinguished by a sobriety that does not exclude invention, an infallible sense of the essential, or a neatness of conception and execution that reconnect it to classical lyrical tragedy.'

The most famous number is Cléopâtre's sensual "J'ai versé le poison"; other highpoints include the music in the tavern, which with its bright metallic sound, percussion, trumpets and strong rhythms, anticipates the scores John Barry wrote for the James Bond movies, and the whole of Act IV showing the lovers' death. 'A true swan song, Massenet ended his career on a sublime page of emotion and restraint,' Gérard Condé wrote.

The opera was admired. 'The libretto of *Cléopâtre* calls for music at each page, at each line; it calls for it with variety, tenderness, fancy, toughness, passion,' wrote Paul-Emile Chevalier (*Le Ménestrel*, 28 February 1914).

'And Massenet (who avoided opening nights) is in the theatre, with all his vitality, all his mastery, all his colour, all his richness of inspiration; poetic, vigorous, exquisite, passionate, surprising, charming, novel, irresistible in his impulses as in his bewitching musical phrases; the great maestro is in the theatre, as he never was in his glorious and tireless career.'

Recordings include:

- Kathryn Harries, Didier Henry, Jean-Luc Maurette and Danielle Streiff, with the Nouvel Orchestre de Saint-Etienne conducted by Patrick Fournillier. Koch-Schwann 3-1032-2, recorded Saint-Étienne 1990.
- Montserrat Caballé, Filippo Bettoschi, Nikolay Baskov and Montserrat Marti, with the Orquesta Mediterraneo Unito conducted by Miquel Ortega. Kultur Video B001RPZDZE (DVD), recorded Barcelona 2004.
- Sophie Koch, Ludovic Tézier and Véronique Gens, with the Mozarteumorchester conducted by Vladimir Fedoseyev. No commercial release; recorded Salzburg 2012. Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zl3cEiektY>



Figure 30 Maria Kuznetsova as Cléopâtre (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/oeuvres/Cleopatre%20-%20Massenet.html>)

Amadis. Opéra légendaire in 4 acts including prologue. Libretto: Jules Claretie, after Garcia Ardenez de Montalvo's chivalrous romance *Amadis de Gaule* (15th century). First performance: Opéra de Monte-Carlo, 1 April 1922. First performance in France: Grand-Théâtre de Bordeaux, 19 December 1922.

Amadis is a coda to Massenet's work. It was not performed until nearly a decade after Massenet's death and eight years after *Cléopâtre*. The opera itself goes back thirty years; the first draft was completed in 1889–90, between *Esclarmonde* and *Werther*, and the score finished in 1910 (according to Massenet's *Souvenirs*) or 1902 (according to Schneider's biography).

Massenet, Jacques Bourgeois believes, intended the work as his musical testament, but by 1922, Massenet seemed old-fashioned.

'*Amadis!* What a pretty poem I had there!' wrote Massenet in his *Souvenirs*. 'What a truly new aspect! The poetic and touching allure of the *Chevalier du lys*, emblem of the constant and respectful lover! What enchantment in the situations! What an endearing resurrection, *enfin*, of those noble heroes of mediaeval chivalry, of those *preux chevaliers*, so brave and so bold!'

The work is set in the Middle Ages of Burne-Jones, an age of chivalry, fairies and beautiful maidens. The score is enchanted and enchanting; beautiful, mysterious and often mournful. It has the same exalting effect as Wagner, and, like Rimsky-Korsakoff's operas, draws on legend.

The opera adapts the fifteenth century chivalrous romance *Amadis de Gaule*. Two brothers, the Knight of the Rose and the Knight of the Lily, are separated as babies and fall in love with the same woman; one slays the other. 'Enfants nés de l'amour et de la douleur, la douleur et l'amour les suivront dans la vie.'

The opera only lasts an hour and a half; the first act is a ballet with narration; there are impressive choruses and several fine arias, notably "Ô Madone du Ciel, écoute les accents d'un malheureux", "Si! J'entends ... une lointaine voix", and "Ils chantent leurs Noël's".

The only commercial recording is of the 1988 Saint-Etienne production:

- Hélène Perraguin, Denise Streiff, Didier Henry and Antoine Garcin, with the Orchestre du Théâtre National de l'Opéra de Paris orchestra conducted by Patrick Fournillier. Forlane UCD 16578/9, recorded Saint-Étienne 1988.

Bibliography

The following sources were invaluable in writing this article:

Association l'Art Lyrique Français. < <http://artlyriquefr.fr/>> Unquestionably the best resource for French opera. Apart from the *Dictionnaire des oeuvres lyriques françaises*, with critiques of nearly every opera performed in Paris in the nineteenth century, it also provides libretti, photos and reviews for some operas, including all of Massenet's. The section on Massenet (<http://artlyriquefr.fr/personnages/Massenet%20Jules.html>) also includes photographs, a list of all his works, fifteen books about Massenet and recordings. (French only)

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Figure 31 Massenet at his estate in Égreville (Source: <http://artlyriquefr.fr/dicos/Massenet%20par%20Schneider.html>)