

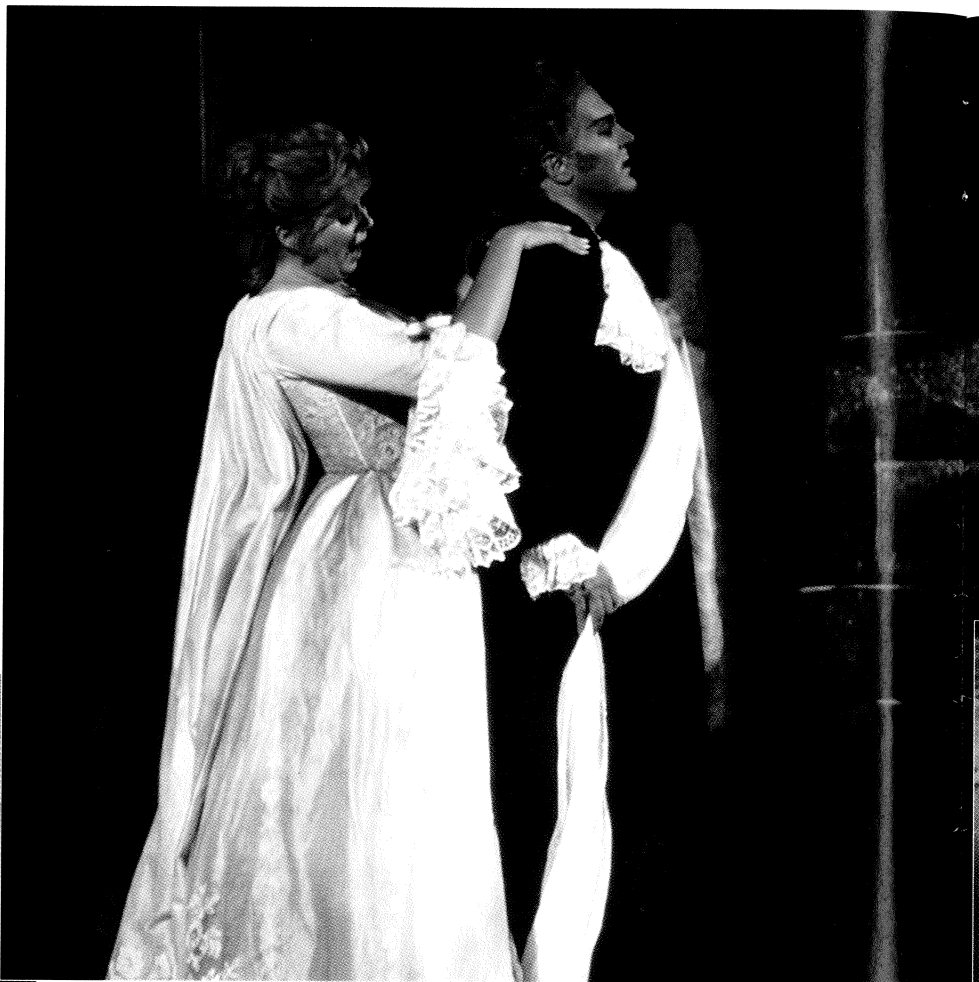
A PORTRAIT OF MANON

BY ROGER PINES

Long before Lulu and Lolita, Manon Lescaut held men in her thrall. Abbé Prévost's heroine has always been a natural candidate for the stage, her appeal among opera composers extending from Auber to Puccini to Henze. Massenet's incarnation, however, has captured greater public affection than any other. He may have sugar-coated the Prévost tale somewhat, but Manon's consuming passion for pleasure and wealth could not be conveyed more vividly.

Manon impresses with its dramatic balance, variety of mood, and sheer elegance. All this, of course, only enhances the opera's *raison d'être*: the extraordinarily complete, rounded characterization of Manon herself. The singer and her audience can rejoice in Manon's consistently ravishing melodic line, while recognizing the singular appropriateness with which vocal virtuosity serves dramatic development.

CARLEN



MORTON



Before and during the *Manon St. Sulpice* scene at San Francisco Opera: (left) 1933: Lucrezia Bori and Dino Borgioli; (top right) 1939: Bidí Sayão; (right) 1934: Richard Crooks; (far right) 1937: Vina Bovy and René Maison; (above) 1971: Beverly Sills and Nicolai Gedda.

Antoine-François Prévost d'Exiles (1697–1763) introduced Manon to the world in 1731. Jesuit-educated, Prévost had originally anticipated a military career, but chose instead to become a Benedictine monk. Longing for adventure, he left the order in 1728, after eight years, but felt obliged to exile himself, first in Holland and later in England. He produced his first novel as early as 1722, but did not take up writing professionally until forced by financial need, six years

later. Prévost interrupted the writing of an epic novel to dash off the final book of the seven-volume *Memoires et aventures d'un homme de qualité*. This brief tale, *L'Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, earned immediate success, its popularity eventually surpassing anything else Prévost turned out. Only in 1734 did he return to France, where he spent his remaining 29 years.

The novel is narrated by Des Grieux, recalling Manon two years after her death. He retraces their path from the first meeting in Amiens through fleeting bliss in Paris and various harrowing misadventures, brought on by Manon's addiction to the high life. She is kept by

several different men, but invariably she pines for Des Grieux and is rescued by her hopelessly devoted *chevalier*. Massenet's Manon dies before she can be deported, unlike Prévost's, who journeys with Des Grieux to faraway Louisiana. With Manon about to be forced into an unwanted marriage, Des Grieux wounds the prospective bridegroom in a duel. The couple flees to the desert, where Manon expires and is buried by Des Grieux.

The Prévost authority Jean Sgard notes that "betrayed love, impossible happiness, and mourning without end are the kernel of the Prévostian novel." He adds that *Manon Lescaut* achieves something more, for its tragedy communicates a reality and intensity not found



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retrospect: "It was no crime on Manon's part that people fell in love with her, and everything seemed to point to her being unaware of the conquest she had made." Later Manon becomes rather devious, although never maliciously so. In any case, she fails to register genuine self-knowledge until her New Orleans sojourn, when she finally admits to Des Grieux that "I know full well that I have never been worthy of the wonderful affection you have for me." Alas, at this point one hardly cares.

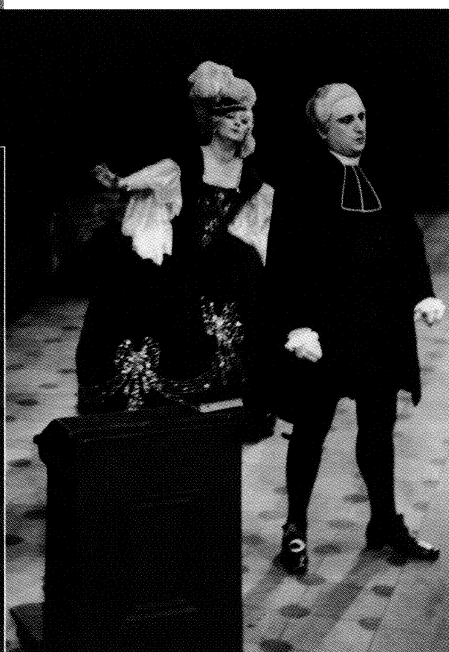
Love for Manon governs Des Grieux's every move and thought. After her ingratitude and capriciousness, one feels like cheering when the *chevalier's* painful



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in his previous works. Not unexpectedly, some critics responded negatively to it; one notorious condemnation came three years after publication, when Montesquieu wrote of his refusal to feel anything for a novel "whose hero is a rogue and whose heroine a trollop who is led off to [the prison reserved for prostitutes]."

Montesquieu has a point where the amoral heroine is concerned, even if, like Lulu, she cannot change what she is and exerts her appeal quite unconsciously. Des Grieux recognizes this himself in



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disappointment in her bursts forth at long last ("Now I can see more clearly than ever that you are nothing but a liar and a whore"). Still, Manon does no more than gaze lovingly at him for Des Grieux to make a complete about-face ("[I] admitted that I was a brute and unworthy of the happiness of being loved by a woman like her"). If Manon's behavior can be justified, it is solely due to her being a girl with no prospects, and her consequent need to survive in a society inevitably stacked against her.

Feminine *faiblesse et fragilité* were Massenet's operatic stock in trade, but no other heroine (not even Thaïs and Charlotte) would demand of him the

varied artistic assets he brought to Manon. With her he finally entered his operatic maturity, although in 1884 the composer was already in his late forties. He had launched himself in Parisian theatrical life in 1867, aged 24, with *La grand' tante* at the Opéra-Comique. Four more stage works were produced during 1872–1881, with a turning point in the last of these, *Hérodiade*, which had its premiere in Brussels. *Manon* followed, and its excellence would rarely be repeated in Massenet's more than 20 operas written prior to his death in 1912. Among them was a one-act *opéra comique*, *Le portrait de Manon* (1894), in which the aging Des Grieux consents to his nephew's marriage with a peasant after she appears dressed as Manon.

Manon's genesis is recalled with much emotion in Massenet's extravagantly written memoirs. The novel had fascinated him for some time before a now-legendary episode *chez* Henri Meilhac, brilliant co-librettist of *Carmen* and many Offenbach *opérettes*. Massenet was calling to announce his decision not to set *Phoebé*, a new Meilhac libretto. In the writer's library Massenet's eye fell on *Manon Lescaut*. "*Manon! Manon just Manon!*," he exulted, "*it is Manon!*" According to the composer, he found two acts of the libretto under his napkin when lunching with Meilhac the following day. (Jeremy Commons, in a persuasive essay on *Manon*, believes it must have been a scenario rather than two completed acts.) Meilhac adapted Prévost with the collaboration of Philippe Gille — "that fine, delightful mind, a tender-hearted and charming man," as Massenet called him.

Generally delighted with the *Manon* text, Massenet still insisted on adding the gambling scene, feeling the need for contrast with the St. Sulpice scene that preceded it. Work on *Manon* included a stay in The Hague, where he composed in a room once occupied by Prévost himself. On February 12, 1883, having finished the piano score, Massenet played it for a distinguished group: Meilhac, Gille, Opéra-Comique director Léon Carvalho, and Carvalho's wife Marie-Caroline, creator of three Gounod heroines and at that time nearing the end of her career. Madame was supposedly moved to exclaim, "If only I were 20 years younger!" Perhaps she felt com-

forted when the composer dedicated the score to her.

After completing the orchestration in mid-1883, Massenet set about casting the premiere, becoming frustrated only with the title role. His most intriguing possibility, Marguerite Vaillant Couturier, could not be released from a production at the Nouveautés theater. In one of the many fortunate coincidences strewn throughout his memoirs, Massenet remembered that upon leaving the Nouveautés, he had run into Marie Heilbronn, whose debut had taken place at age 15 in his own *La grand' tante*. (Heilbronn had later triumphed throughout Europe, then curtailed her career after marriage to a viscount.) Still young, she was now eager to make a comeback. That very evening, so he tells it, Massenet played her the *Manon* score. As he finished, Heilbronn sobbed, "That is my life!" The role was hers.

Never one to leave anything to chance, Massenet lavished attention on the rehearsals. His susceptibility to first-night nerves caused him to skip the Opéra-Comique's premiere on January 19, 1884. Especially hearty applause greeted "Le Rêve" and the St. Sulpice scene, and Manon's "À nous les amours" was encored. While the singers earned raves, the score came in for some brickbats, especially for Massenet's use of *mélodrame* — dialogue spoken over music (the composer actually classified the work as an *opéra comique*, not an *opéra*). This technique was integral to every scene, and many listeners used to either pure speech or pure song took some time to accustom themselves to it.

Most probably Heilbronn's premature death in 1885 effected Massenet's decision to withdraw *Manon* from the Opéra-Comique, where it had already been given 88 times. It did arouse excitement in French provincial houses and in Britain, first in Liverpool and later in London (where Massenet added the Gavotte for French soprano Marie Roze). *Manon* also made it to New York with the American soprano Minnie Hauk, who had earned fame earlier as Carmen.

Meanwhile, in its "home" city of Paris, *Manon* had to wait for the Opéra-Comique to be rebuilt, following the fire of 1887. It also awaited the celebrated Sibyl Sanderson; the Californian's youth and beauty, matched by a voice that



Sheri Greenawald as Manon at the San Francisco Opera in 1986.

"astounded, stupefied, and subjugated" Massenet, inspired the composer to bring *Manon* back to the Opéra-Comique in 1891. Sanderson's success launched the work on the road to a popularity exceeded in that theater only by *Carmen* and *Faust*. Today, with several thousand Paris performances behind it, *Manon* also retains its popularity worldwide. Fortunately, there are still numerous singers who can excel in it vocally. Stylistically, however, it remains elusive; one longs for a resurgence of French singing to restore to *Manon* the ineffable charm

displayed in records of Féraldy, Helly, Clément, Friant, and other great interpreters from earlier in this century.

Within an admirably straightforward structure, Massenet built a surprisingly compact work (five acts notwithstanding!), with only the ballet seeming expendable. He explained his use of motifs:

The whole work moves and develops upon some 15 motifs which typ-

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ify my characters. To each character a motif. Manon alone, who is a mixture of sadness and gaiety, has two, the better to emphasize her alternate moods. These motifs run the length and breadth of the opera and are reproduced from act to act, shading off or coming into prominence, like the play of light in a picture, according to the situations. In this way my characters keep their personalities distinct until the end.

While not exploited in Wagnerian depth, Massenet's motifs are unfailingly apposite. Think of Des Grieux's 9/8 love theme, first heard in the solo violin before he addresses Manon ("Mademoiselle?") and first voiced by the hero himself a few pages later ("Enchanteresse"). Manon has a quicksilver 12/8 figure denoting her coquettish nature, as well as the plaintive 3/4 motif that begins her "Voyons, Manon," later affectingly reprised as she dies.

Massenet constantly compels his soprano to discover new vocal colors. Manon's emotional journey can be traced vocally, beginning with the dizzy creature who merrily greets Lescaut in Act One. The first aria is aptly demure ("Je suis.. encor.. étourdie") and impulsive ("Pardonnez à mon bavardage"), the girlishness punctuated by a burst of coloratura laughter. Her first moments alone find Massenet already asking for passion of a sort: Upon noticing Guillot's chattering companions, Manon explodes with a longing to live like those rich-looking young women. Here, directly and unashamedly expressed, is the initial glimpse into Manon's own fatal desire to live in glamour and luxury.

Act Two brings a telling transition from loving young girl to potential courtesan. When Lescaut appears with the wealthy Brétigny, the latter offers Manon everything she craves. Alone with her conflicting emotions, a soul emerges; the magnificent recitative and heartbroken "Adieu" inspire a sympathy inconceivable in regarding Prévost's Manon at this point. In Massenet's second-act finale, the agitation brings to mind Violetta before "Amami, Alfredo": the heroine, having determined to leave her lover, struggling to keep her decision from him.

The *tour de force* of Act Three begins at the Cours-la-Reine, where the requisite range and flexibility do not necessarily ensure a soprano's success.

Rather, technical polish must serve *character*: this flamboyant goddess of beauty, the hard shell barely masking vulnerability below the surface. In the interview with Count des Grieux, the actress in Manon emerges. Massenet handles this little scene sensitively, especially when Manon asks if the Count's son has banished cruel memories from his heart; initially calm, singing in monotone 16th-notes, she betrays her distress in sudden leaps of a fifth, then a sixth.

Manon's arrival at St. Sulpice reveals her emotional turmoil to devastating effect. In fact, the spoken lines ("Ces murs silencieux, etc.") seem as moving as anything she actually *sings*. To project Manon's desperation here, and then seconds later pour on still *more* emotion in the prayer "Pardonnez-moi," would be intimidating enough for a singer, were it not for the confrontation that follows! When Des Grieux appears, Manon's repeated "C'est moi!"s can reveal much of how the singer will approach this scene, whether sensuous, contrite, or defiant. "N'est-ce plus ma main," the sexiest of all Massenet tunes, is expertly calculated for maximum intoxication of Des Grieux *and* the audience. Massenet's comment regarding Reynaldo Hahn's music certainly applies to his own: "What a gift he has of wrapping us in warm caresses."

Massenet just manages to keep his heroine from alienating us completely in Act Four, where her appetite for riches is at its most voracious. Her hunger for pleasure, first heard back at Amiens, has become vehement, even manic. Now, however, she colors it with the thrill of sexual passion: When her lover asks her what he will get should he win at the gaming tables, she proclaims, "Mon être tout entier, ma vie, et mon amour!" ("My whole being, my life, and my love!") The music through most of this act calls for real thrust in the voice and a hard edge, of which there had been no trace in the convent-bound Manon.

When reunited with Des Grieux in Act Five, Manon, while physically spent, has still not left her old frivolous self behind. Such is the sympathy Massenet has built up for her, however, that her pathetic delight in "le beau diamant" provokes sad smiles in us rather than annoyance. But this is indeed a changed

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Manon, clearly aware that her time has come and totally ready to leave the world. Thus the opera's emotional climax occurs not with Des Grieux's pleading reprise of "N'est-ce plus ma main?" but earlier, with the heroine's exquisite "Ah! je sens une pure flamme." Here she is already transfigured (Massenet's word for it). Of all passages in the score, this one finds Massenet transcending the shallowness of Prévost's creation, rendering her worthy of pity and tears.

As with *La Traviata*, no other character approaches this sort of development and dimension. Des Grieux, of course, offers immense musical and vocal rewards. It is revealing to consider the repertoire of the role's first interpreter, Jean-Alexandre Talazac. In addition to creating leading roles in *Hoffmann* and *Lakmé*, his repertoire ranged from Tamino and Fernand (*La Favorite*) to Samson — clearly a lyric voice, but with heroic quality in reserve. That precisely defines Des Grieux, whose "Rêve" floats a *mesa di voce* on high A but who also pours forth heftily in "Ah! fuyez" and the final scenes. In spite of the depth of his passion, the obsession and tortured guilt of Prévost's protagonist do not emerge clearly. Perhaps that is intentional on Massenet's part; Prévost's tale may be Des Grieux's, but the opera belongs to Manon.

In the novel, Lescaut is Manon's brother, not her cousin, and is, as described by Des Grieux, a "coarse, unprincipled scoundrel." Massenet presents instead an uncomplicatedly boisterous, hail-fellow-well-met type — a gambler, certainly, but also honestly concerned with his family's honor ("Voulez-vous épouser Manon?"). Massenet builds tremendous vigor and rhythmic crispness into the character's every utterance. Surprisingly, along with Lescaut's machismo comes a certain grace, beginning with "Ne bronchez pas" in Act One, where the sustained top E's are marked "dolce."

Guillot conceals the venom beneath a veneer of good breeding. With comparatively little to sing but much *mélodrame*, the role is a gift to a dramatically astute character singer, one who stops short of caricature. Brétigny and Count des Grieux, in contrast, require the utmost in velvet tone. The former, too often undercast, must seduce Manon through sheer vocal class, revealed in even a phrase as brief as "Ravissante Manon!" at Cours-la-Reine. Massenet imparts palpa-

ble dignity and gravity to the Count's "Épouse quelque brave fille," which hardly suits the awesome, forbiddingly authoritative figure who causes his son such misery in Prévost. Much more in keeping with *that* Count des Grieux is the intervention in *Manon's* Act-Four finale.

This opera demonstrates Massenet's usual eagerness to impart vocal color through extensive choral opportunities. Each group is characterized precisely: the Amiens villagers, whose bustling style would suit Gilbert and Sullivan; hawking vendors, dainty *élégantes*, and "pick-a-little-talk-a-little" church ladies; secretive gamblers; and lusty soldiers.

Manon amply demonstrates Massenet's skill not only in vocal writing, but also orchestrally. This is clear as early as the Act-One prelude, with its mixture of brisk inn music, military themes, and Des Grieux's lovesick "Manon, sphinx étonnant." How marvelously, yet unobtrusively, the orchestra supports the proceedings onstage. In each act felicitous details are innumerable, whether pompous (the trills before the waiters bring out the trays, Act One); ethereal (the lulling strings cushioning Des Grieux's "Rêve"); suitably raucous (the opening of the Cours-la-Reine); sinister and ominous (the dotted figure for the winds, pervading the Hôtel Transylvanie scene); or tenderly nostalgic (the solitary oboe recalling Des Grieux's "Enchanteresse" theme, Act Five). However one views the dramatic content, Massenet's craft is undeniable. Not for nothing was he admired by Ravel, who asserted that examining Debussy's *Pelléas* or his own *L'enfant et les sortilèges* would reveal numerous pages that paid tribute to Massenet's sensitivity and technical expertise.

A conductor miraculously attuned to French opera, Sir Thomas Beecham, once declared, "I would give the whole of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos for Massenet's *Manon* and would think I had vastly profited by the exchange." While not going as far as Sir Thomas, we can cherish *Manon* today as the elegant zenith of late 19th-century opera, graced by a heroine whose youth, sparkle, and zest for life remain utterly irresistible. □

Roger Pines, program editor for Lyric Opera of Chicago, contributes regularly to Opera News, The Opera Quarterly, and opera company programs nationwide.