



Jules Massenet

MANON

Beverly Sills

Nicolai Gedda

Gérard Souzay

Gabriel Bacquier

New Philharmonia

Orchestra

Julius Rudel



APPENDICE / APPENDIX

Scène et Fabliau (Acte III, Premier Tableau)

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|----|---|--------|-----|
| 8 | «Voici les élégantes!» – «Suis-je gentille ainsi?»
(<i>promeneurs, marchands, Brétigny, jeunes seigneurs, Manon</i>) | [2'34] | 125 |
| 9 | «Je marche sur tous les chemins»
(<i>Manon</i>) | [2'49] | 126 |
| 10 | «Ah! vous êtes vraiment la reine des amours»
(<i>Brétigny, Manon</i>)
Fabliau: «Oui, dans les bois et dans la plaine»
(<i>Manon, la foule</i>) | [4'56] | 126 |

Beverly Sills & Nicolai Gedda, with Gérard Souzay in the background



BEVERLY SILLS IN MASSENET'S "MANON"

Roger Pines

For a generation of American operagoers, Beverly Sills and *Manon* were synonymous. Massenet's heroine played to all of the soprano's vocal, musical and dramatic strengths. She realized this herself, stating in her autobiography that she felt *Manon* was a role in which she accomplished everything she set out to do. Her affection for this opera projected itself to audiences through her emotional involvement and her irresistible sense of delight in both the music and the characterization.

Sills's operatic career was launched in French repertoire: she was not yet 20 when her Frasquita graced a Philadelphia production of *Carmin*. In her autobiography, *Bubbles: A Self-Portrait*, she recalls hearing *Thaïs* in the same city, and it aroused her interest in pursuing French roles. She was to sing more than ten of them, encompassing music by Donizetti, Meyerbeer, Gounod, Bizet, Offenbach, Massenet and Charpentier. Renowned for her dazzling upper register and extraordinary flexibility, Sills also possessed the gift of vivid textual communication that is the hallmark of all great French singing.

In reading *Bubbles* one learns of Sills's remarkable education in French opera. It began at the Metropolitan Opera with Lily Pons in *Lakmé*, the first opera the eight-year-old Sills heard in a theatre. Her early years in the profession included work with several formidable stage directors who embodied the traditions of French style. Additional coaching came from the legendary Mary Garden, a living link to the composers of certain French operas that Sills would eventually perform. A summer studying in Paris helped the young American singer to develop an ease with the French language that sustained her through nearly three decades in this repertoire.

Having sung her first *Manon* in 1953 at Baltimore Opera, Sills brought her portrayal to the Opera Company of Boston nine years later, to her home company, the New York City Opera, in 1968, and to San Francisco Opera in 1971. From the start she had a very specific idea of the character:

I played her in the early scenes as though she were a little girl from the countryside who had got caught in the hayloft a few times too many by her parents and as a result was being rushed off to a convent, a girl with a

voluptuous figure who had not yet learned how to show it off, who exuded a lot of sex appeal but no polish... Not till later in the opera did I turn Manon into the graceful, beautiful courtesan.

Swedish tenor Nicolai Gedda has had a similarly broad-based association with French roles and a similar affinity for them. Whether onstage, in concert or on disc, he has performed virtually every leading French lyric-tenor role, setting new vocal and interpretive standards. In 1971 he and Sills starred at San Francisco Opera in *Manon*, widely acknowledged as one of the company's most treasurable performances. The year before that production, the two artists recorded Massenet's opera in London. Considering that their joint stage appearances were comparatively rare, it is indeed fortunate that ABC Records was able to document their *Manon* partnership (their ABC recording of *I Puritani*, made in London two years later, was reissued by DG/Westminster in 2001).

The supporting cast is led by two of the post-war period's most stylish and intelligent French baritones, Gérard Souzay and Gabriel Bacquier. Joining them are Nico Castel, the brilliant Portuguese character tenor, and Michel Trempont, who would later become one of France's foremost exponents of comic baritone roles. Presiding over the performance is the versatile Austrian-American conductor Julius Rudel, whose vast repertoire encompasses an enormous range of French operas.

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Manon is based on a 1731 novel by the Abbé Prévost (1697-1763). Leaving the Benedictine order after eight years, Prévost turned to writing in order to make ends meet, and *L'Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* is the sole work for which he is remembered. Des Grieux himself narrates the sad tale of his relationship with a selfish young woman who does comparatively little to earn the reader's affection. That one responds quite differently to the operatic *Manon* is one of Massenet's greatest achievements.

The novel had long been familiar to the composer, who returned to it in 1882 when considering possible subjects for a new opera. Once he had a libretto in hand (courtesy of Philippe Gille and the more famous Henri Meilhac), he completed *Manon* in little more than a year. He even composed a portion of the score at The Hague in a room occupied years before by the Abbé Prévost himself.

Perhaps the only major struggle surrounding *Manon*'s genesis came in Massenet's search for his leading lady. He finally found her in Marie Heilbronn (1851-1886), the Belgian soprano who had premiered his first staged work, *La Grand-Tante*. Although she sang the Mozart soubrettes, Heilbronn's light soprano seems to have offered enough power for at least two "heavy lyric" parts, Marguerite and Violetta (both of which were also to become central roles in Beverly Sills's reper-

toire). A touching anecdote in Massenet's autobiography is his unexpected encounter with Heilbronn, who had retired after marrying well. She was contemplating a comeback, however, and insisted on immediately having Massenet play through the *Manon* score for her. "That is my life!" she exclaimed, overwhelmed. An improbable statement, certainly, but she was awarded the role, singing the world premiere on 19 January 1884 at the Opéra-Comique. Following her tragic death, Massenet forbade that theatre from performing the work until 1891, when his protégée, Sybil Sanderson, assumed the title role.

Like his soprano partner, French tenor Jean-Alexandre Talazac, the first des Grieux, was sadly short-lived (1851-1896). He also earned his niche in operatic history as creator of the heroes in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, *Lakmé* and *Le Roi d'Ys*. Much of a tenor's success in these parts depends on his ability to "float" the voice, an art at which Talazac must have excelled, just as Nicolai Gedda would do when, many decades later, most of Talazac's French roles also became his province. The Swede had power to spare in the most dramatic pages of these parts, but perhaps Talazac boasted even more; six years after his des Grieux he starred in *Samson et Dalila*, which was never part of Gedda's repertoire.

In listening to this recording, one concludes that Heilbronn and Talazac would have heartily approved of their 20th-century successors. One hears all the vocal niceties beautifully executed, whether the often unheard trills of Manon's "A nous les amours" or the infamously difficult opening attack of des Grieux's "Ah! fuyez, douce image." Both Sills and Gedda sing and act with an extraordinary sweetness and intimacy, so that their exchanges emerge as natural, sincere conversations in song.

With portrayals of this stature (matched by Souzay, Bacquier *et al*) the listener gratefully welcomes the performance's completeness. It is, in fact, *more* than complete since, as appendix, Sills performs an alternative to the third-act Gavotte. Massenet composed the "Fabliau" for Georgette Bréjean-Silver, a prominent Manon of the 1890s. Even more than in the Gavotte, this piece affords Manon an opportunity to look into herself, showing that for her all is not as joyous as it might outwardly appear. The entrancing florid passages and their reprise frame a quiet middle section, in which Sills bares the heroine's inner feelings as few other singers have done. How satisfying it is to hear a soprano - one utterly at ease with the glitter and flamboyance of this role - so memorably exposing its heart and soul.

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