

## Preface

Jules Massenet appears to have been personally deeply moved when he inscribed the customary closing formula “fin de l’opéra” below the last measures of *Werther* and supplied the exact place and date of the completion of his autograph score:

Trouville s/m. Samedi 2 Juillet 1887  
11<sup>h</sup>1/4 Matin J. Massenet

Between the date and his signature he added the words “temps splendide,” as a kind of postscript in a smaller hand (due to lack of space) and somewhat differently colored ink. On the left-hand side, below the time of day, Massenet inscribed his address – 11 rue de la chapelle – as well as several names: Ninon, Juliette, M. Léon Bessand. It thus appears that the composer found himself in the company of his closest family upon the completion of his opera: his wife Louise-Constance, called Ninon, his only daughter Juliette (\*1868) and his future son-in-law Léon.

But it was not only at the end of his *opéra lyrique* that Massenet communicated such an intimate observation; throughout the entire manuscript score we can follow a red thread of indications concerning his whereabouts during the writing of the fair copy of the score. Dotted with entries in crayons of various colors, this copy apparently served – or was intended to serve – as the publisher’s model for the preparation of the printed edition (inclusion of the cue numbers). Massenet would thus have begun the conclusive phase on 15 March 1887; Act I was completed on 26 April and followed by Act II on 8 June and the full draft of Act III between 9 June and 2 July 1887.

Although the completion of the work represented a positive phase for Massenet both artistically (termination of a current project) and privately (the imminent wedding of his daughter), these aspects were overshadowed by a public catastrophe that was to affect, and even handicap, Massenet’s professional career: a few weeks earlier, on 25 May 1887, the Salle Favart of the Opéra Comique went up in flames during a performance and cost the lives of more than 100 people. Eleven years were to elapse before a new theater was built. One must bear in mind that the Opéra Comique had been the venue of most of the first performances of Massenet’s works since 1867. Now, several of his manuscripts were also victims of the conflagration – all in all not an opportune moment for an ambitious new project such as *Werther*.

### Genesis of the work

The genesis of the work goes back several years earlier, to 1880 at the least, when the publisher Georges Hartmann and the librettist Paul Milliet – they penned the libretto for Massenet’s *Hérodiade*, which was premiered in 1881 – discussed the possibility of an adaptation of Goethe’s epistolary novel for the opera stage. Already in September 1880, Massenet had confidentially informed Paul Lacombe that he was planning a musical setting of *Werther*.<sup>1</sup> Under Hartmann’s supervision, Paul Milliet set down to work and repeatedly subjected the drafts to far-reaching revisions; he even continued revising them after Massenet had begun composing in summer 1885. Act II was revised in 1886, presumably by a third collaborator, Édouard Blau; he, in turn, was involved in the origin of the libretto to *Le Cid* (premiered in 1885), which was also set to music by Massenet. Work did not progress entirely without friction, however, and in July 1886 – the composer was alone in Paris – his family had to endure his laments over his loneliness and his fear of not making enough headway with the composition.<sup>2</sup> A few weeks later he put his work aside and traveled to the Wagner Festival in Bayreuth.

The following spring, while he was still working on the orchestration, Massenet finally managed to play his new opera to the director of the Opéra Comique, Léon Carvalho, but met with little enthusiasm: “I had hoped that you would bring us a new *Manon*. This sorrowful topic is without charm; it is doomed from the outset.”<sup>3</sup> But before the work could be further discussed, the theater burnt down and Carvalho resigned his post. There was absolutely no point in considering a realization of the project in Paris now. Massenet turned to new works, such as *Esclarmonde* and *Le Mage*. And in the meantime, his opera *Manon* (world premiere in 1884) had already begun its triumphal march across Europe’s stages: whether in Brussels, Amsterdam, Geneva, Prague, St. Petersburg or London, or even New York – vigorous applause greeted the story of the lusty,

passionate *Manon Lescaut* (based on the novel by Abbé Prévost), who ultimately paid for her hedonism with her life.

One of this work’s early stations on European stages was the Vienna Court Opera (1890), where the role of Des Grieux was sung in German by the Antwerp-born tenor Ernest van Dyck. He had made his stage debut in Paris in 1887 and begun a successful career as Wagner tenor at the Bayreuth Festival only one year later. He was soon appointed ensemble member of the Vienna *Hofoper*. Massenet and van Dyck had met back in the singer’s years of study in Paris in the early 1880s, and the composer was most likely instrumental in fostering the singer’s international success. For example, Massenet recommended van Dyck to one of his composition students as a substitute for the presentation of the student’s Prix de Rome cantata. Subsequently, others took notice of van Dyck who eventually was entrusted with the title role of *Lohengrin* at the work’s Paris premiere in 1887. Van Dyck, in his turn – and after he had won impressive acclaim in Vienna – successfully seized the opportunity to draw the attention of the opera directors to Massenet and *Werther*, which still had yet to reach the stage. With van Dyck in the title role, the work finally was given its world premiere on 16 February 1892 (thus over four and a half years after it was completed), far from Paris and in a German translation by Max Kalbeck. A few weeks before the premiere, Massenet traveled to Vienna where, shortly after his arrival, he presented the entire score at the piano: “All the artists involved with *Werther* had gathered around the piano. As director Jahn and I entered the room, they saw us and rose as one man, bowing in greeting. I reciprocated this touching and respectful gesture with a bow of my own. Our excellent van Dyck embraced me warmly, and then I sat down at the piano, somewhat nervous and visibly trembling. The work was practically ready to be staged. All the singers sang it by heart, and their warm-hearted interpretation repeatedly moved me to such an extent that tears welled up in my eyes. The same happened again at the orchestral rehearsal. The interpretation of the work had reached such a rare perfection, and the orchestra – now delicate, now overwhelming – followed the nuances of the voices so closely that I could not refrain from manifesting my utter delight.”<sup>4</sup> In a letter to his wife Ninon, who had stayed home in France, he reported about the much-applauded Viennese performances of his *Manon* as well as about the early stage of the rehearsals of *Werther* under his direction.<sup>5</sup> But even a few days before the premiere, he was still beset by doubts about the work’s possible reception by the public.<sup>6</sup> His skepticism, however, proved to be unfounded. The performance was a complete success, with the piece itself and the performers garnering equal applause. Wielding the baton at the conductor’s desk was Court Opera Director Wilhelm Jahn, a conductor by profession. Next to Ernest van Dyck in the title role, according to the printed list the cast also included Miss Renard as Lotte, Miss Forster as Sophie and Mr. Neidl as Albert.

The two leading Vienna dailies – the *Neue Freie Presse* and the *Wiener Zeitung* – published detailed assessments and came to a similar overall judgment. Basically, these reviews analyzed the problematic adaptation of a specifically epic source, as represented here by the genre of the epistolary novel; also clearly listed were the alterations and divergences from the literary original that were necessitated by the transformation process. Nevertheless, the work was still greeted with enthusiasm (“the opera libretto [is] structured most skillfully and effectively”).<sup>7</sup> But it was above all the compositional achievement that was most highly commended: “The score is outstandingly well orchestrated; it pulses with every nuance of the sonorities and with the most interesting instrumental colors.”<sup>8</sup> Eduard Hanslick, who was responsible for the second review in the *Neue Freie Presse* – it was also differentiated and contained observations of an aesthetic nature as well – lists exemplary passages with a combination of string sordino and harp, as well as figures highlighted by the flute and clarinet as proof of the “mastery” in the composer’s treatment of the orchestra.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, he classifies the work in the context of the genre and compares it with Wagner’s leitmotif technique: “The orchestral groundwork [...] is not as artful [...], but simpler, more natural and easy to grasp.”<sup>10</sup> Both critics were deeply impressed by Massenet’s ability to convey the atmosphere of the respective scene through characteristic colors and sounds – even if Hanslick maintained a certain distance and occasionally felt that the passion driving the musical idiom sometimes went too far: “*Werther*’s outbursts of roiling passion are, however, not without

a marked theatrical ecstasy [...] which we German listeners must simply accept.”<sup>11</sup> Hanslick could not deny himself the honor of proudly signaling out the achievement of Max Kalbeck, who had translated the French libretto into German. An important part of the premiere’s success was also attributed to the outstanding cast of singers: “The Vienna Court Opera can justifiably boast about its Werther production. Herr Massenet could hardly expect a more stunning performance of his work on any other stage.”<sup>12</sup>

There was also unanimity concerning the extraordinary accomplishment of the lead role, van Dyck, whose brilliant vocal qualities were highlighted by an incomparable stage presence: “His Werther is one of the most grandiose dramatic accents we have ever witnessed on stage; he maintained a uniform balance from beginning to end, filling his role with spirit and suffusing it with temperament. Peerless both in the delicate, lyrical moments as in the dramatic, agitated ones, Herr van Dyck garnered tremendous success for himself and for the composer whose work was newly injected with life yesterday.”<sup>13</sup> The audience loudly proclaimed its gratitude: “The Opera basked in the glow of the work’s spectacular success and, along with the artists on stage, the composer was called forth countless times to the proscenium stage.”<sup>14</sup>

Once Massenet’s work had so grandly passed its baptism of fire far beyond the borders of France, the director of the Opéra Comique, Carvalho, who had returned to his former post at the head of the institution, began to show interest in the work. He “repatriated” it on the same day 11 months after the world premiere in Vienna (French premiere at the Opéra Comique on 16 January 1893). The lead role was first interpreted there by Guillaume Ibos. The Viennese triumph could not be replicated in Paris, however; it was not until 1903 that the work began to make its breakthrough in the French capital.<sup>15</sup>

The first performance in Germany in fact took place in Weimar, Goethe’s home of many years, in 1892. Dresden’s Royal Opera produced the work eight years later, which was followed by Berlin in 1907. A production had already been mounted in Prague in 1901. At first, there was no recurring, continuous reception of *Werther* in Germany; the opera has only been enjoying greater popularity since the 1970s. At the Opéra Comique, however, it remained continuously in the repertoire ever since its belated first performance.

Contrary to the positive Viennese reviews of the world premiere of *Werther*, the reports of the correspondent of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* clearly expressed more critical views; they ranged from blatant indignation over the treatment of the original Goethe text (“rubbish of the lowest order”<sup>16</sup>) to comparatively cool detachment<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, one was witnessing the repetition of a constellation that had already sparked heated discussions among German opera critics over 30 years previously. With Gounod’s *Faust*, the work of the great German literary giant had made its debut on the opera stage (incidentally, it was none other than Jules Massenet who played the timpani part in the orchestra at the work’s world premiere in Paris in 1859) – an unimaginable sacrilege wrought by a Frenchman, whereas the poet’s fellow countrymen, such as Schumann and Liszt, were still at best experimenting in musical retellings or personal interpretations of the Faust topic. Seen from the opposite perspective, however, this situation could be understood in a different way, and the greater the distance to Goethe meant a more relaxed approach to his work. That the wave of indignation that swept over the stage production of *Werther* did not gather the same force as back in the days of *Faust*, is the result of the nuanced view taken by the critics – paradigmatically represented by Eduard Hanslick – as well as of an amazingly skillful transposition by the librettist on the one hand, and by Massenet’s compositional achievement on the other.

#### A novel as opera

Nevertheless, and in spite of how a literary subject may be borrowed as an epic model with additional heightening of the perspective through monologues from the epistolary novel on the one hand, and dramatic musical theater on the other, it is still possible to discern deeper similarities. To put it more precisely: what separates the opera adaptation at first sight from the original novel and the original profile that identifies it, will be retrieved in a different manner. It was obvious to the librettists of *Werther* that a late 19th-century opera could not be conceived as a gigantic monologue and without the classical constellation of lovers (that was to happen about 20 years later in Schoenberg’s monodrama *Erwartung*). They envisioned no fewer than four encounters between Charlotte and

Werther. The fact that the hapless lover could still be understood as outcast is due above all to Massenet’s music. Also reinforcing this situation is the theatrical convention that always calls for the male protagonist to be alone on stage at the end of a duet and to end an act or a scene with a monologue. Werther’s dramaturgical outsidership is also supported by a precisely adjusted use of harmonic and instrumental means: the orchestral idiom assigned to the protagonist, often with full forces by using brass instruments, and frequently doubly scored melodies, has to be factored in, along with specific harmonies in, for example, the form of diminished chords with which Werther is separated from his surroundings.

Even within the duets, Massenet finds various ways of allowing the listener to musically experience the discrepancy between the two lovers: for example, the writing in the first duet shifts between recitative-like restraint in Charlotte’s passages, whereas Werther yields to melodious rhapsodizing. Loneliness and separation can be experienced in the duet as well, in the sense of an unrelated co-existence of the two protagonists. In the duet of Act III, it is the motivic material that underlines Charlotte’s escape from Werther’s sphere of influence: it is based on the motif that had accompanied her in Act I, even before Werther had made his entrance into her circle.

Likewise, the fundamental principle of bracketing is also suited to the epic source as well as to the opera; what differs is only the direction of its impact. Whereas the novel chiefly employs anticipation – in that the tragic end is conjured up metaphorically at a relatively early stage –, the opera functions “from back to front,” in a way, through the use of reminiscent motifs. The tragedy can be experienced all the more intensively the stronger the gap is between the concrete situation on stage that introduces the catastrophe and the simultaneously heard motif from an allegedly happy and promising past (at least from Werther’s perspective, such as the Claire de lune motif). Even Charlotte’s aria at the beginning of Act III only seems to completely leave the original Goethe text behind it: Charlotte is reading Werther’s letter which the composer, in his turn, additionally underscores through a corresponding motivic underlay of the scene; though physically absent, Werther is fully present both in content matter and music.

#### Massenet – a man of the theater

Seen from the perspective of posterity, the genesis of works in which all persons involved live and work in the same place is generally not very fruitful, which is so deplorable because they leave no written traces in the form of, say, occasionally highly revealing correspondence from the “workshop.” The testimonies are sparing in the case of *Werther*’s origins as well. It is only thanks to van Dyck’s stay in Vienna on account of his engagement at the Court Opera that we owe several letters exchanged between him and the composer. On Massenet’s side, a number of letters have been transmitted in which one finds very interesting statements that provide tips from Massenet for both the interpretation of the individual roles as well as dramaturgical and, finally, performance-practical insights. Thus, for example, the composer strongly insisted on the casting of a particular singer for the part of Sophie: “I absolutely want Mlle Forster. Because ‘Sophie’ should look like a 15-year-old. She’s a young girl who wears her hair in plaits. If this is not the way she will be coiffed, then at least it is an indication of how Sophie’s physiognomy is to be described. This is Charlotte’s little sister. Mlle Forster’s physical appearance is perfect for this role; her voice, too.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the composer took an active, intensive interest in the stage production as well; the year 178x meant a great deal to him and was to be reflected in the costumes: “You are absolutely right to insist on the era of Louis XVI ... – I beg you to insist on it! – Let us now come closer to modern times. Let us also recall Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, in France, was preaching liberty and the love of nature, which I feel are in harmony with Werther’s IMPULSES! ... For Werther is not only a dreamer, an idealist, a poet, but also, and frequently, NERVOUS, ILL, POSSESSED BY LOVE! Reread the letters 14 (the beginning), 26, 46, 53, 56, 61, etc.”<sup>19</sup>

As to the performance of the children’s choral passages, Massenet also knew exactly what he wanted: six singers are mentioned by name, and only these six children are to be entrusted with the passage in Act I. From far-away Paris the composer also sent the recommendation to choose several intelligent boys from the *Carmen* production and to supplement them with little girls, or perhaps have all six parts sung only by girls.<sup>20</sup> At the end of the final act, however, the Christmas carol was to be sung from

the wings, now with all the children and with the additional support of the women's voices from the chorus.<sup>21</sup>

Particularly important to Massenet was the transition from Charlotte's residence to Werther's room in the final act, which was to be effected with a musical accompaniment: "The music covers the transformation of the two sets, which is carried out behind the curtain [...]. The two scenes and the curtain form one single scene. There is no silence in the musical part."<sup>22</sup> This statement assumes considerable significance above all in view of the subsequently effected separation and articulation into two independent scenes: the composer himself saw the large-scale connection and wanted the two stage areas to be understood as one dramaturgical unit.

On the present edition

The present edition restores for the first time – and in conjunction with the autograph and the early printed editions – the original disposition of the acts and scenes as envisioned by Massenet. It is based on the three-volume fair copy of the composer's score preserved at the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra in Paris.<sup>23</sup> This means that the work now comprises only three acts instead of four, since the two final scenes in Charlotte's home and Werther's room are not cast into one independent (and disproportionately short) act, but are linked together to constitute the second scene of Act III.

The restitution of the original layout has no influence whatsoever on the scenes themselves or their length.

The closing duet between Werther and Charlotte in the final scene (Act III, Scene 2) was also fashioned after the autograph and reproduced for the first time in this form. Apparently out of thoughtfulness for the singer of the Werther role, the passage from measure 262 to 277 – it was originally conceived as a continuous dialogue with dominant simultaneous passages – was later "thinned out": for the first five measures, only the orchestra played (due to the doublings between the vocal and orchestral parts, such an eschewal of the vocal parts was compositionally perfectly possible); the following six measures were devoted to a solo by Charlotte, then the two measures 273 and 274, originally designed as a genuine unison, were initially subdivided into one measure for Werther and one for Charlotte; it was only in the last three, simultaneously led measures that a minimal parallel voice-leading (unison) of the two protagonists still managed to occur.

Massenet was an eminent musical dramatist with many years of experience in the theater. This emerges not only in the passionate tone of his letters, with which he communicated important instructions from Paris, but also in the examination of the psychologically dense effect of the final scene with the focus on Werther dying in Charlotte's arms while from behind the stage the children are singing the Christmas carol that had been rehearsed in the opening scene. The same applies to his instruction at the end of the score, where he expresses his wish that the curtain should be lowered during the final measures of music. He also added the reminder that the warning signals given when the curtain was lowered – and which were customary at that time – should obviously not be activated.

In spite of all the artistic intensity of the compositional act, Massenet remained a practician: although he scored a number of passages for alto saxophone – an instrument that was still very unusual for an opera score in the 1880s – he nevertheless provided alternatives for a number of the relevant passages (those in which the saxophone had a soloistic role and not just doubling by at least one and often several other instruments) in the event that no player should be available. Both the clarinet and the bassoon then play the saxophone's measures in alternation. Realities of the late 19th-century theater world claimed their tribute from Massenet as well.

The new full transcript of the score also follows the score in the passages where the composer was very obviously concerned about a particularly intensive visualization of musical moments, even when this allegedly stands in contrast to modern engraving rules. Only in this manner can Massenet's intentions be fully grasped. This concerns the occasional beaming of eighth notes beyond the bar-line, with which Massenet wanted to clarify the shared unity of motifs and the course of the motion. And it also concerns sporadic cautionary accidentals which would actually be unnecessary, but were additionally provided by the composer to make things absolutely clear.

Repeats of accidentals at held notes, which are superfluous according to present-day rules, have been omitted.

Diverging from Massenet's listing of the instruments (he notes the vocal parts at the bottom of the score between violas and violoncelli / double basses), the stringed parts are notated in one block in the present edition, while the vocal parts are placed immediately above them.

Wiesbaden, Summer 2014

Martha Werner  
(translation: Roger Clement)

- 1 Anne Massenet, *Jules Massenet en toutes lettres*, Paris, 2001, [= A. Massenet, *Lettres*], p. 78. The divergent statement in his Memoirs, according to which the fascination for the Werther subject and the impulse for the composition are connected with the trip to Germany and the visit to the Bayreuth Festival in the mid 1880s (this journey ascertainably did not take place until 1886, long after Massenet had taken up work on the opera), must be corrected accordingly.
- 2 6 July 1886: "You know how lonely I would be here if I didn't have my occupations and my Werther ...," 10 July 1886: "... I have never seen Paris so sullen, so unhealthy, so depressing – I don't know if my third act will be successful in these conditions." *Ibid.*, p. 90.
- 3 Jules Massenet, *Mes Souvenirs*, edited by Gerhard Condé, Paris, 1992, p. 178.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 5 "Yesterday evening they played Manon at the Imperial Theater and the hall was full. Ah! If only these were the rights of the Opéra Comique! Excellent performance! [...] Today we're starting the Werther rehearsals under my direction – it seems that there was a run-through with the orchestra and it was said to be a work of the finest quality." Based on A. Massenet, *Lettres*, p. 96.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 7 *Wiener Abendpost* (supplement to the *Wiener Zeitung*) of 17 February 1892, p. 2.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 9 *Neue Freie Presse*, 18 February 1896, p. 2.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 13 *Wiener Abendpost*, 17 February 1892, p. 4.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 15 Schmidl, Stefan, *Jules Massenet. Sein Leben, sein Werk, seine Zeit*, Mainz, 2012, p. 69.
- 16 *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 67 (1900), no. 10 of 7 March, p. 113.
- 17 *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 68 (1901), no. 7 of 13 February, p. 100.
- 18 Letter of 17 December 1891, Henri de Curzon (ed.), *19 Lettres inédites de Massenet à Ernest Van Dyck*, [= *19 Lettres inédites*], part 1. In: *Le Ménestrel* 89 (1927), 4 February, p. 46.
- 19 Letter of 17 January 1892, *19 Lettres inédites*, part 2. In: *Le Ménestrel* 89 (1927), 11 February, p. 57.
- 20 Letter of 17 December 1891, *19 Lettres inédites*, part 1. In: *Le Ménestrel* 89 (1927), 4 February, p. 46.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 22 Letter of 17 January 1892, *19 Lettres inédites*, part 2. In: *Le Ménestrel* 89 (1927), 11 February, p. 57.
- 23 Paris, Bibliothèque de l'Opéra, *Res. 542-1-3*.