

Class 8: Manon

A. First Meeting

1. Title 1 (website title)

Manon (1884) by **Jules Massenet** (1842–1912) is the best-known of at least six operas based on the 1731 novel by the **Abbé Prévost** (1697–1763). The title picture, from a production at the Met that I can't show, indicates one of the things that make it so juicy: a woman seducing a young man on the verge of taking his vows for the priesthood! This comes at the end of Act III. But actually the idea had been prefigured right from Act I. Manon, a teenage girl who has become rather too much for her family to handle, is on the way to a convent. There, she meets the Chavalier des Grieux, who himself a theology student on the way to the seminary. They elope together and set up a love-nest in a Paris garret. Here are **Anna Netrebko** and **Rolando Villazón** in an updated production from Berlin. [I have no idea what the people are doing with the spotlights!]

2. Act I meeting and elopement (Berlin 2007)

3. Opera synopsis

I find the character dynamics there pretty much perfect. However, their idyll cannot last. Des Grieux has no money of his own, and his father, the Count, though no friend of the Church, does not want to see his son throw his life away. So he sends men to kidnap him and bring him home by force. Manon is told that this is to happen, but is offered a way out: to become the mistress of a much richer man. Reluctantly, she accepts, and does not intervene when the Count's men come to the bottom of the stairs. Fast forward a few years. Manon is now the talk of the town, but bored. Accidentally meeting the Count, she learns that his son has resumed his divinity studies and is about to preach his graduation sermon that night. So she goes to the church to reclaim him and succeeds. The next act will show them gambling in a casino. A rich dupe accuses them of stealing his money and both are arrested. Des Grieux has the connections to get out of jail, but she is condemned to transportation to a prison colony in Louisiana. Des Grieux follows her to the port, and attempts to arrange an escape, but she is sick and dies in his arms.

B. Realignment

4. Act III, with photos of both productions

The section I wanted to choose as my **Bleeding Hunk** for the day is the remarkable Act III, which is divided into two scenes that, between them, contain almost every possible texture you can find in an opera. But I have two problems: the same production will not work for both halves, and it is a little too long. For reasons that should become clear, I felt it absolutely required a period setting, so I have turned to an older production in Paris with **Renée Fleming** in the title role. But she and her tenor have nothing of the sexuality of the **Netrebko/Villazón** pairing, so I have gone back to them for the church scene.

5. Breakdown of Act III, scene 1

Although I want you to think of the two scenes of Act III as a continuous unit, the change of cast makes it more sensible for me to introduce and play them separately. The *Cours de la Reine* scene begins with festive crowds, much like you get in *Carmen*. But this is all very much in 18th-century style. When **Manon** appears, the aria she sings is a *Gavotte*, preceded by a virtuoso introduction. But the passage I really admire is the one that follows. You have to imagine a square with various cafés or dance halls around the edge. The pit orchestra stops playing, but you hear offstage music from one of these, now even more in period style. Against this, in what the French call *mélodrama*, you get speech with music in the background. When Manon approaches the **Count**, it is still a conversation with period music in the background, but their lines are sung, which gives an extraordinary flexibility and emotional depth to their exchange. I'll have to cut the moment when Manon's rich admirer **Guillot** tries to impress her by paying dancers from the *Opéra* to perform outdoors, but I'll jump to the very end. Ballet had been a staple of French opera ever since **Meyerbeer**. By using it here, Massenet takes a further opportunity to establish period, but he also gives Manon an opportunity to compare her artificial life as a pampered mistress to the raw passion she had once felt for Des Grieux,

6. Massenet: *Manon*, Act III, scene 1, main scene

7. Massenet: *Manon*, Act III, scene 1, ending

8. Breakdown of Act III, scene 1 (repeat)

Let's start the discussion with two questions: What do you think Massenet achieved by emphasizing the period musical style? And what was the effect of the exchange between Manon and the Count?

C. The Return

9. Breakdown of Act III, scene 2

The Saint Sulpice scene is more conventional, with three famous arias leading to an extraordinary duet. Or at least the first aria is conventional: **the Count's** "*Épousez quelque brave fille*" as he tries to persuade his son to get married and settle down. When he leaves, however, things get quite extraordinary. First **Des Grieux's** impassioned prayer "*Ah fuyez, douce image,*" as we realize that he is still tormented by memories of Manon. He leaves and she comes in, and we get **her sacrilegious prayer** "*Pardonnez-moi, Dieu de toute puissance,*" as she asks God's forgiveness for what she is about to do. And then goes ahead and does it.

10. Words of the duet

The duet is one of the most sensual moments I know in opera, because it is absolutely about the power of touch. Look at her words; they are virtually stage directions. He rejects her once, but she recognises his vulnerability and tries again. This time her words are quiet, almost whispered. And he succumbs. [Netrebko and Villazón were marketed as a romantic couple at the time, incidentally, but their chemistry appears to have been only, or at least mainly, professional.]

11. Massenet: *Manon*, Act III, scene 2

12. Breakdown of Act III, scene 2 (repeat)

Let's discuss in whatever time we have left. What especially affected you there? Which Manon did you prefer, and why? Which production did you prefer, and why?