

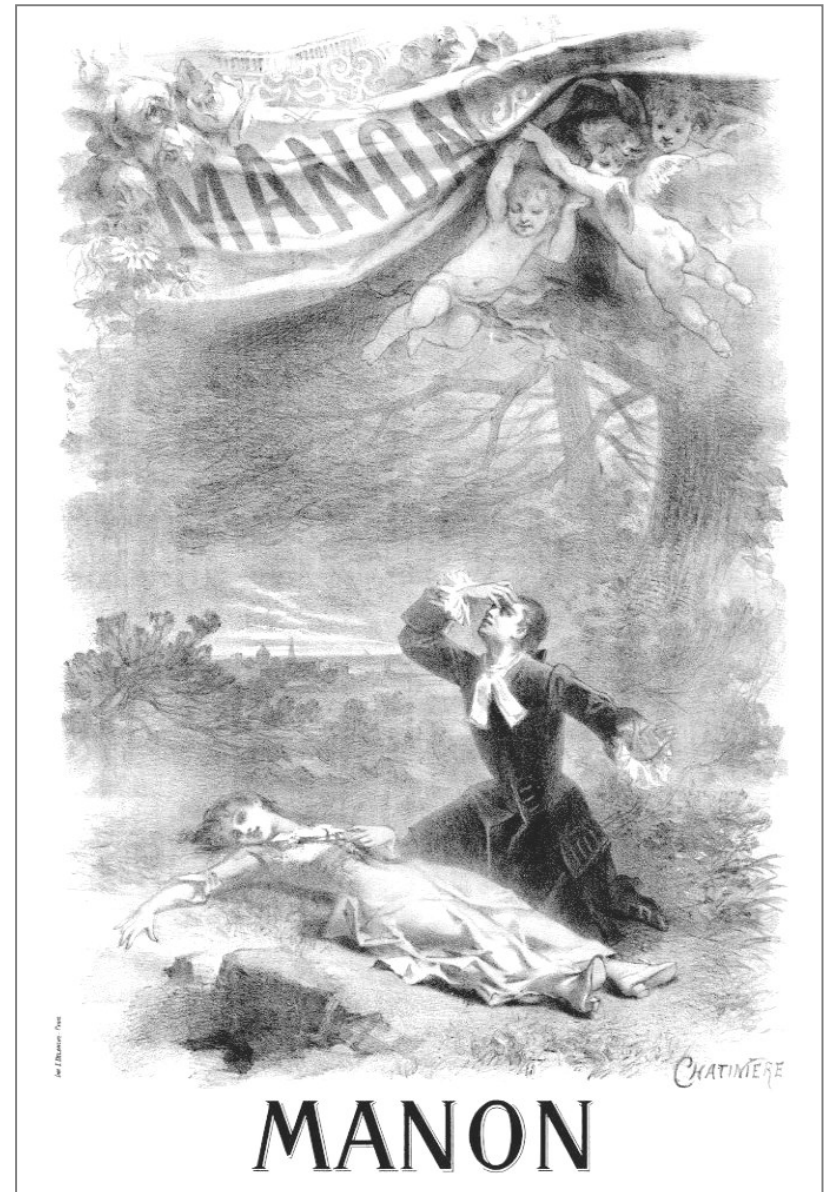
to expunge the memory of Manon. He goes out and Manon is shown in. She kneels and prays that God will forgive the sacrilege she is about to commit. She goes through with it anyway, ultimately seducing Des Grieux and fleeing with him into the night.

Massenet: *Manon*, Act III scene 2, complete (Berlin 2007 as above; Netrebko/Villazón with Christof Fischesser, *Comte des Grieux*)

For more detail and lots of color, see the class website:
<http://www.brunyate.com/RenInstOpera/>

I will always answer eMail to:
rogerbrunyate@gmail.com

Great Scenes in Opera



8. Manon

April 2, 2026

8. Manon

MANON IS THE UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER in the 1731 novel by **Abbé Prévost** (1697–1763), which is told through the eyes of her lover, the Chevalier des Grieux. The 1884 opera by **Jules Massenet** (1842–1912) is the probably the best-known of at least six musical works based on the book, although Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1893) comes a close second. In French *grand-opéra* fashion, Massenet divides the story into five acts: (1) the first meeting of the teenaged lovers in Amiens, (2) the break-up of their love-nest in Paris as Manon goes to a richer lover, (3) their reunion some years later just as Des Grieux is about to enter the priesthood, (4) their life in the world of casinos, and (5) Manon's death at Le Havre on the way to a prison colony in Louisiana.

Although we shall watch a brief clip of their first meeting, the featured section for the day is the third act. Played without a break, it is divided into two scenes which we shall watch in different productions. Between them, they contain a remarkable range of musical texture, from a full-blown virtuoso aria to spoken conversation against music played offstage—all culminating in a duet that is the *ne plus ultra* of sensuality, even for a French romantic opera. *rb.*

A. First Meeting

[A coach-yard in Amiens. **Manon Lescaut**, a young teenager, is met off the coach by her cousin Lescaut. She is all excited by her first trip—which is also her last, as her family are sending her to a convent. Lescaut goes indoors to play cards, leaving Manon alone.]

So she is alone when she catches the eye of the **Chevalier des Grieux**, an almost equally young theology student. They feel an instant attraction and escape to Paris, using the coach of an elderly man, **Guillot**, who is there with his three lady friends.

Massenet: *Manon*, end of Act I (Berlin 2007; Vincent Paterson, *director*; Daniel Barenboim, *conductor*; Anna Netrebko, *Manon*; Rolando Villazón, *Des Grieux*)

B. Reconfiguration

[Manon and Des Grieux are living in a Paris garret. Lescaut introduces **De Brétigny**, a wealthy man who has his eye on Manon. He tells her that the Count des Grieux is sending men to bring his son home by force, but that she will shift from squalor to splendor if she agrees to become his mistress. Reluctantly, she accepts and does not intervene when the Count's men come to the house.]

Act III takes place some years later in a square known as the *Cours de la Reine*. Manon, still on the arm of De Brétigny is the talk of the town. In a chance meeting with the **Comte des Grieux**, she learns that his son is about to become a priest and is to preach his graduation sermon that night. Although the wealthy Guillot puts on a ballet performance in an effort to steal her from De Brétigny, she dashes off to Des Grieux's church before it is too late.

Massenet: *Manon*, Act III, scene 1, slightly cut (Paris 2001; Gilbert Deflo, *director*; José Lopez Cobos, *conductor*; Renée Fleming, *Manon*; Alain Vernhes, *Comte des Grieux*)

C. The Return

The church of Saint Sulpice. A group of women are impressed by Des Grieux's sermon and by the handsome young man who delivered it. The Count tries to persuade his son instead to marry some girl of good family and settle down. Des Grieux rejects the suggestion, but it is immediately clear that his main motive for entering the priesthood is