

Inside/Outside

The Christof Loy production of *Werther*
Barcelona, 2026

Christof Loy's production of Massenet's *Werther* is a lot more interesting than I might have imagined from seeing the stills. The one thing that made me wonder if I was seeing the production that Loy approved is that the video comes from a recent performance in Barcelona, with a largely-local cast. The tenor, Xabier Anduaga, is clearly a local favorite (his big aria was encored), but a rather wooden actor—more on this in a moment; I would have liked to have seen Benjamin Bernheim in the part in the Paris or Milan incarnations of this production as a comparison.

Werther is in effect a chamber opera with a grand-opera orchestration. Loy acknowledged this, I think, by playing all the important action in a shallow area downstage in front of a plain interior wall with sliding semi-opaque glass doors. The downstage space had the minimum of furniture required for each scene, seldom more than a few chairs and, in a couple of scenes, a table. From time to time, the glass doors were opened to put the action into context without filling the main stage; we saw the Pastor's anniversary dinner in Act II, for instance. At other times, we could just see shadows through it, as at the suicide of Werther. The downstage set was helpful musically, but it did mean a continual blurring of the distinction between inside and outside. A more conventional production usually sets the early acts outdoors, with the children having their supper at a table outside the house in Act I, or the stage in Act II periodically filling with people going to or from church; the increase in focus in Loy's approach to the second act, especially, was a distinct advantage.



Given the chamber space of the forestage, you might have expected Loy to restrict it to people who actually had singing to do, but not so—and I thought this the strongest and most original aspect of his production. For the final scene, which theoretically takes place in Werther's attic room, Werther walked onto the main stage, with one hand covered in blood, and collapsed. Not only was Charlotte already there, but so were Albert and Sophie, and they remained onstage through the very end, as silent yet tormented observers. This was set up early on with Loy's treatment of Sophie who, so far being the teenage airhead of traditional productions, prowled like a malevolent force, clearly jealous of her sainted elder sister, and strongly attracted to Werther in her own right. Albert takes longer to develop in this respect, but he hovers in the background for much of Act II, and at the end of Act III he appears violent and almost evil (I put a link to this on the website). Two smaller examples: Sophie watches almost a minute of the moonlight love scene until she decides to break it up, and Werther's excesses of passion in Act II are comically offset by the amused observation and silent comments of the Bailli's two drinking companions.

Where this production gave me the most trouble was in the character arc of its two major figures. Charlotte seemed to age remarkably quickly between Act I and Act III, but then the speed of the transition of some German women between *Fraülein* and *Hausfrau* is legendary; Goethe's Wetzlar was reputedly a very conservative environment where *Hausfrau* values reigned supreme. I was less convinced by Loy's decision to bring her in at the top of Act III obviously drunk. All right, it makes a certain kind of sense: she has been deserted by her husband on Christmas Eve, and surely the emotional roller-coaster of her three arias are a liberty she would never have allowed herself as the sober wife. But it did cloud the clarity of the inner turmoil which Massenet reveals with such psychological perception.

But I was totally nonplussed by the character arc that Loy gave his title character. Take the matter of costume alone. Werther appeared in Act II more or less normal, in a well fitting suit and tie. But in Act I, the same suit barely fits him, with collar and cardigan disheveled, and trousers ending about 4 inches above the ankles. In Act III, he is immaculate in a perfectly-tailored tux and bow-tie, with not a hair out of place. His behavior in this scene is of a piece with this appearance: cold, almost aggressive, with no sign of the pleading ex-lover in the story. But he did at least look at Charlotte; in Act One, I was struck by how seldom he actually did, even when singing of her eyes. I got the sense that he was less interested in Charlotte as a person than in the opportunity she gave him for poetizing. I could certainly understand this approach, though I feel it takes the heart out of the relationship. But I can't explain at all how it leads to Loy's presentation of Werther in the later acts.