

6 : IN THE WRONG MARRIAGE

A. THE POET

1. Class title 1 (*Werther* at the Champs-Élysées)
2. Section title A (Kaufmann at the Met)

That was **Jonas Kaufmann** at the Met in 2010. This being an even-numbered class, I am not going to jump around all over the place, but play substantial excerpts from a single opera in a single performance. The opera is *Werther* (1892) by **Jules Massenet** (1842–1912), based on the novel of 1774 by **Wolfgang von Goethe** (1749–1832).

3. Covers of *The Sorrows of Young Werther*

I called this section THE POET. Really, though, it is *two* poets. One is Goethe, writing this novel in his mid-twenties while still a young man. The other is his hero, **Werther**, another young man, who comes to a new town, falls in love with a girl who turns out to be engaged to someone else, then kills himself some months after she marries him. Apart from the suicide, it is pretty much autobiographical. The sorrows Goethe is mainly interested in are those of the young poet himself. Goethe was a Romantic ahead of his time, but his Romanticism takes place in a well-ordered, *gemütlich*, domestic world, where duty and decorum are ranked much higher than passion. **Charlotte**, the subject of the young poet's love, is the eldest girl in a large family of children whose mother has died, leaving her in charge. When we first see her, she is making a meal for her younger siblings. Hence **Thackeray's** marvelous parody of 1853:

4. Thackeray's *Werther*

Of course this is gross exaggeration, but in Goethe's original, the bread-and-butter image still hits home. But **Massenet** wrote his *Werther* opera in 1892, more than a century later. By this time, much had changed. The high Romantic period had come and gone. So had the epic dramas of Verdi and Wagner. We were now entering the *verismo* period of **Puccini** and others, characterized by a focus on the individual (generally female), in the grip of intense passions revealed by almost X-Ray penetration. So although the *Sorrows of Young Werther* are still very much present in Massenet's work, the deepest character-study is that of Charlotte, torn as you might say between her bread-and-butter duty and her inner emotions. It is she, not Werther, who will be my main subject, as an example of that other kind of truth-to-life, as with *Carmen* and *Così*, though even more so: psychological truth.

5. Massenet and images of *Werther*

Here are four pictures of the opera: an older one from Paris, one from the Met, a newer one from Paris at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées, and one from Zurich. I would show the Met version if I could, but can't get hold of it. So I will be showing yet another one from Paris instead, a 2010 production at the

Opéra Bastille. Two points to notice. Though it is accompanied by a large romantic orchestra, *Werther* is essentially a *chamber opera*, without a chorus, and featuring only the two main characters, plus a couple of subsidiary ones. And also, though it derives from an 18th-century story, its psychological realism makes it essentially modern; the period setting just feels wrong; all these other productions, including the one I am going to show, involve some stylization of design, if not outright modernization.

6. Jonas Kaufmann and Sophie Koch as Werther and Charlotte

Charlotte will be the subject of my second section, *THE WIFE*, but first I need to set it up. Act One of the opera takes place outside the modest house where Charlotte looks after her younger siblings and widowed father. Werther arrives to take Charlotte to a small local ball. While they are away, **Albert** arrives—the man her mother wanted her to marry. Night falls, and we have the exquisitely simple musical interlude that we always used to call the *Moonlight Sonata*. I'll play the very end of it, and then the re-entrance of the couple; I have always been struck by the way Charlotte's first words, *Il faut nous séparer* (we have to part) sounds like an ending, not a beginning. But she doesn't really want to part, and neither does Werther, who sings what amounts to the start of a love duet. I will cut out the passage in the middle where Charlotte says that her care for the younger children is merely the fulfilment of a vow she made at her mother's deathbed; it is less interesting musically, although the idea of her being bound by duty is significant. This launches Werther into another expression to love—listen for the Moonlight theme again at the climax—to which Charlotte responds. Then her father calls from the house to say that Albert has arrived. Charlotte tells Werther that she had also sworn to her mother that she would marry him. Werther—a *moral man*, as Thackeray put it—tells her that she must keep her oath, but he is nonetheless devastated when she leaves. Here are the two sections back-to-back.

7. Massenet: *Werther*, Act I, start of the love duet

8. Massenet: *Werther*, Act I, ending

9. Goethe and Charlotte Buff, from the film *Young Goethe in Love* (2010)

Here is a film representation of the real-life situation on which Goethe's novel was based: his love for a young woman in **Wetzlar** called **Charlotte Buff**, who, like the fictional Charlotte, also went off and married someone else. Anyway, what did you think of the scene you just saw?

B. THE WIFE

10. Section title B (Sophie Koch)

11. Act III breakdown

That was **Sophie Koch** at the Met, singing the climax of one of her three great arias in Act III. For this act, which I shall play complete other than the orchestral prelude, is nothing but an extended character study of Charlotte, who gets three big arias almost back to back, shown here in buff, in between two duets and a brief closing scene. The situation is this. After attending Charlotte's early-summer wedding in Act II, Werther tells her that he is going away until Christmas, but he will keep in touch by letter. Act III opens on **Christmas Eve**, with Charlotte some months into her marriage to Albert. She is well-off, but (in this production at least) in rather cold, formal surroundings, like Albert himself. In the first aria, the longest of the three, she takes out Werther's letters, which she has hidden from her husband. Most of them, although bright and newsy on the surface, reveal his intense loneliness. But it is the last letter that really scares her; it includes the phrase "*Mais si je ne dois reparaître au jour fixé, devant toi, ne m'accuse pas, pleure moi!*" ("But if I don't reappear before you on the appointed day, do not blame me—mourn for me"). Not surprisingly, she takes this as a threat of suicide.

12. Masset: Werther, Act III, *air des lettres*

13. Act III breakdown, repeat

We now get a duet with Charlotte's teenage sister, **Sophie**, arms laden with Christmas presents, bubbling away, and completely ignorant of Charlotte's anguish (at least at first). Charlotte begins to cry, and explains to Sophie that tears are necessary if the soul is not to be crushed completely. This is the shortest of the three arias, and the most famous. Two musical points to notice. Massenet, for the first (and pretty much the only) time in classical music, uses the saxophone to accompany it. And the minor-key aria ends unexpectedly in a *major* chord. You might expect this to lighten the atmosphere, but for some reason that I have never completely understood, it only adds to the pain. Anyway, Sophie bounces off, and Charlotte is left with the third of these arias, "*Seigneur Dieu, Seigneur, j'ai suivi ta loi*" ("Lord God, I have followed your law"); it is the most intense of the three, but also fortunately quite short.

14. Masset: Werther, Act III, Scene with Sophie

15. Act III breakdown, repeat

Werther does come back, and the next 15 minutes are his duet scene with Charlotte. It includes his most famous aria, "*Pourquoi me réveiller, ô souffle du printemps?*"—Why do you wake me, breath of Spring, if only to mock me? It of course reflects Werther's feelings of coming back into a domestic intimacy that he can never share. But it is also a translation of a real English-language poem translated by Werther himself. I say "real English-language," though in fact it is neither of these things. The poem comes from **James Macpherson's** reputed translation of Gaelic poetry by the ancient bard **Ossian**, which was wildly popular at the time Goethe was writing, though it was later shown to be a forgery: Macpherson's own work and not a translation from the Gaelic at all. Anyway it leads to a second love scene. Charlotte almost submits, but then drives him away. The act might well have ended here (but it doesn't).

16. Masset: Werther, Act III, Scene with Werther

17. Act III breakdown, repeat

There is one short scene remaining. **Albert** returns, no longer the Mister Nice Guy we saw in the first two acts, but cold, possessive, and jealous that Werther has been in his house. Werther sends a messenger with a request for a loan of Albert's pistols; Albert tells Charlotte to give them to him. When we did this years ago at Glyndebourne, the stage manager came on, a lean saturnine figure clad entirely in black. I wish this director, **Benoit Jacquot**, had done so also; it does not have the same effect to use an unseen figure in the wings. But still, the scene, and the cold, cold music following upon so much passion, does have an effect. Albert leaves the room and Charlotte dashes off, hoping desperately to reach Werther in time.

18. Masset: Werther, Act III, closing scene

19. Act III breakdown, repeat

So let's discuss what we have watched. What did you learn about Charlotte? How did her character develop over the course of the act? How much of this was conveyed in the music, whether of the solo arias, or the duet scenes in between?

20. Class title 2 ("All for Love")

Naturally, Charlotte does *not* arrive in time. A gunshot is heard behind the curtain, which rises to show Werther already fatally wounded. He survives long enough to join her in one more duet, in which she finally declares her love. Then he dies and the curtain falls. I often wonder what happens to Charlotte's marriage after that...!