

OPERA AND REAL LIFE

tries to cheer up her older sister, but Charlotte is not to be consoled. Suddenly Werther appears, and while he reads to her his translation of some poetry of Ossian, he realizes that she does indeed return his love. They embrace for a moment, but she quickly bids him farewell. Albert returns home to find his wife distraught. A messenger arrives from Werther with a request to Albert to borrow his pistols, explaining he is going on an extended trip. After the servant has taken them, Charlotte has a terrible premonition and hurries to find Werther. [An orchestral intermezzo leads without a break into the final Act.]

Massenet: *Werther*, Act Three complete (Paris 2010; cast as above, plus Anne-Catherine Gillet, *Sophie*, and Ludovic Tézier, *Albert*)

[Charlotte arrives at Werther's apartment too late to stop him from shooting himself; he is dying. She consoles him by declaring her own love. He asks for forgiveness. As he dies, children are heard outside singing the Christmas carol.]

Johann Wolfgang von **Goethe** (1749–1832, *German poet and polymath*), Jules **Massenet** (1842–1912, *French composer*).

For more detail and different images, see the class website:

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6. IN THE WRONG MARRIAGE

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IN THE WRONG MARRIAGE

GOETHE WAS A YOUNG MAN OF 23 WHEN HE FELL IN LOVE with Charlotte Buff, a young woman he met when he arrived in Wetzlar. When she married somebody else, he accepted the situation with good grace, but parlayed the experience into a best-selling work of fiction, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). His eponymous poet-protagonist, however, is less sanguine about the loss of his Charlotte, and shoots himself with a gun borrowed from his rival.

The Charlotte of Goethe's novel is a creature bound by moral duty—her deathbed oath to her mother—unable to cope with an access of poetic passion. But by the time Jules Massenet made the story into an opera in 1892, the high Romantic era had come and gone, and so had the heroic melodrama of Verdi and Wagner. With Puccini already on the horizon, Massenet was writing an intimate X-ray study of intense emotion, and his focus was firmly on the *heroine*—especially in the third act, where she has three soul-searching arias back to back. While the situation as a whole may have little to do with modern life, the reality of truth-to-character most certainly has. *rb.*

A. THE POET

This first section of the class introduces the opera, the young poet who features as its title character, and the scene at the end of Act I when he and Charlotte return from a ball, and he declares his love for her. The synopses that follow are adapted from Wikipedia; [passages in square brackets will not be played in class.]

[Wetzlar, July 1772. The widowed **Bailli** (or Magistrate) is teaching his six youngest children a Christmas carol. Meanwhile his eldest daughter, **Charlotte**, is dressing for a ball. Since her fiancé **Albert** is away, she is to be escorted by **Werther**, whom the Bailli considers gloomy. Werther arrives and watches as Charlotte prepares her young siblings' supper, just as her mother had before she died. After they leave for the ball, Albert returns unexpectedly after a six-month trip. He is unsure of Charlotte's intentions and disappointed not to find her at home, but is reassured and consoled by Charlotte's younger sister **Sophie**. He leaves after promising to return in the morning.] After an orchestral interlude descriptive of moonlight, Werther and Charlotte return; he is already enamored of her. His declaration of love is interrupted by the announcement of Albert's return. Charlotte exclaims that she momentarily forgot her promise to her dying mother that she would marry Albert. Werther respects her vow, but is heartbroken nonetheless.

Massenet: *Werther*, scenes from the end of Act One (Paris 2010; Benoît Jacquot, *director*; Michel Plasseon, *conductor*; Sophie Koch, *Charlotte*; Jonas Kaufmann, *Werther*)

[Act Two takes place three months later, and Charlotte and Albert are now married. They walk happily to church to celebrate the minister's 50th wedding anniversary, followed by the disconsolate Werther. First Albert and then Sophie try to cheer him up. When Charlotte exits the church, he speaks to her of their first meeting. Charlotte begs Werther to leave the town, though she indicates that she would be willing to receive him again on Christmas Day. Werther contemplates suicide. He encounters Sophie but the tearful girl does not understand his distressing behavior. But Albert now realizes that Werther loves Charlotte.]

B. THE WIFE

Act Three, which we shall play complete, opens with Charlotte at home alone on Christmas Eve. She re-reads the letters that she has received from Werther, wondering how she had the strength to send him away and disturbed by the suicidal implications of the last of them. Sophie comes in and