

B. Giacomo Puccini

Puccini sets Prévost's scene of the couple's meeting in Amiens much as Massenet had done; it is his first act. His third and fourth acts jump ahead to Manon on the way to deportation and her death in Louisiana. Both are essentially love duets with little other action, but Puccini knew his audience. So this leaves a single act, the second, to hold all the rest of the story. Puccini has no equivalent of Massenet's scenes in the love nest, the church, or the casino, but instead works references to all three into his extended scene in the luxurious boudoir that Geronte de Ravoire, Manon's patron, has provided for her.

Scene (Geronte, Manon, Dancing Master), Torino 2017

The act begins with a number of episodes intended to reflect the 18th-century setting of the original: a scene with the hairdresser, a madrigal sung to her as a proxy serenade, and a longer scene with a dancing master. These are framed by a scene in which Manon confesses her boredom to her unscrupulous brother, and another in which Des Grieux appears, and is once more seduced to her side.

Aria: "In quelle trine morbide" (Manon)

Scene and duet (Manon and Lescaut)

Scene and duet (Manon and Des Grieux)

The Massenet is seen in a 2007 performance from the **Berlin Staatsoper** with Anna Netrebko as Manon and Rolando Villazón as Des Grieux; Vincent Paterson (dir), Daniel Barenboim (cond).

The Puccini is a 2014 performance from the **Royal Opera House, Covent Garden**: Kristine Opolais (Manon), Jonas Kaufmann (Des Grieux), Christopher Maltman (Lescaut), Maurizio Muraro (Geronte); Jonathan Kent (dir), Antonio Pappano (cond).

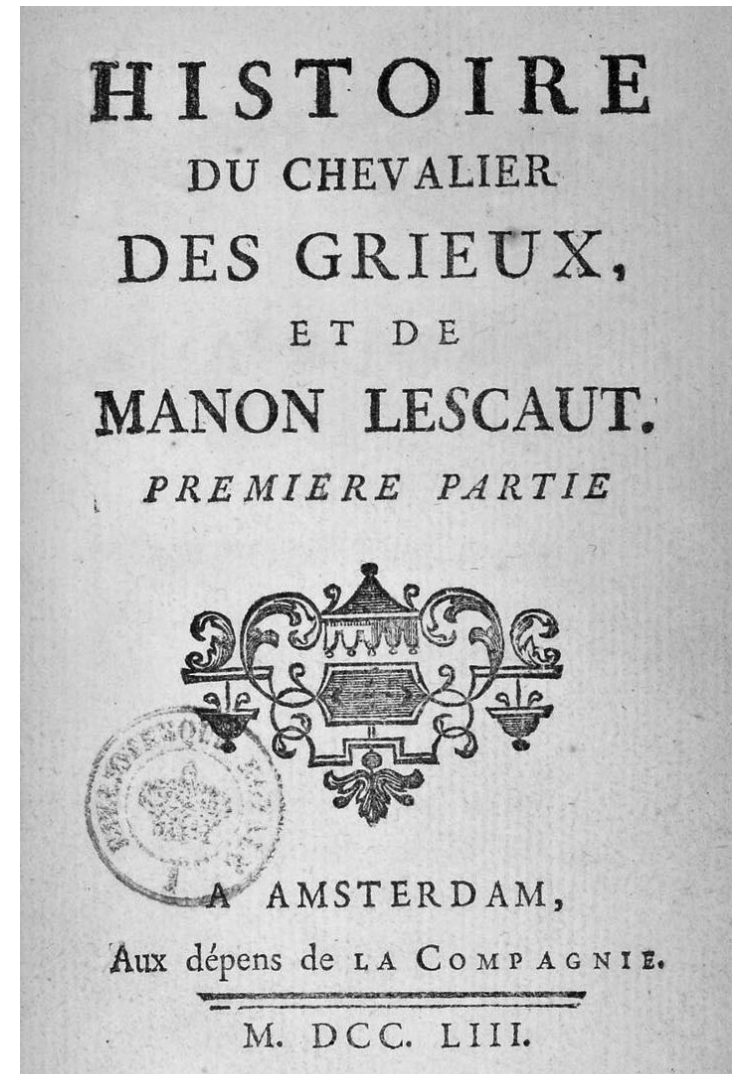
For materials used in each class, see the instructor's website:

<http://www.brunyate.com/novel-opera/>

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Novel into *Opera*

10. Manon's Rival Lovers



Thursday, December 1, 2022

Manon's Rival Lovers

THE ABBÉ ANTOINE FRANÇOIS PRÉVOST (1697-1763) first published the *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et Manon Lescaut* (usually just called *Manon Lescaut*) in 1731. Due to its scandalous nature—it contains multiple sexual liaisons and various kinds of criminal behavior—it was officially banned, but continued to circulate under the counter. Eventually, by toning some episodes down and giving it a more specific moral tone—warning against sin rather than wallowing in it—Prévost obtained sanctioned publication in 1753. It now stands as the most republished novel in France.

And it has inspired many retellings in other media, not just the two operas we shall be sampling today. **Jules Massenet** (1842–1912) scored a lasting success with his version in 1884. Nothing daunted, **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924) had his first big success with a quite different version in 1890. Asked if he were not daunted by following so closely in the footsteps of Massenet, Puccini famously remarked that "a woman like Manon could have more than one lover."

The 18th-century Prévost wrote a precautionary tale with numerous episodes following and sometimes duplicating each other; he was interested in sudden changes of fortune that come about through bad luck or bad decisions. Writing at the end of the Romantic era, however, Massenet and Puccini were more interested in the *process* through which these decisions were made, and the emotional trajectory within the minds of the two main characters. In order to do this, they had to compress Prévost's original scenario, omitting much, but deciding which of his scenes to expand for their purposes. Their two approaches are fascinatingly different. *rb.*

A. Jules Massenet

Massenet's reworking of Prévost's scenario is both simple and logical. He picks out five episodes from the first five chapters, devoting a scene to each, then jumps past all Prévost's later repetitions to show Manon's death before boarding the ship that is to transport her to Louisiana as a convicted criminal. We shall sample the second, third, and fourth scenes in this arrangement, each of which represents a clear moment of decision for one or other of the leading characters.

ACT II is set in the lovers' Paris apartment. We pick it up at the point where Manon has been told that Des Grieux is to be abducted that night, but that she can come out well herself by moving to a wealthier lover. So we hear the recitative in which she struggles with the decision, her farewell to their simple wooden table, and the pathos of the finale where he shares his dream of an idyllic future, even as his abductors are gathering outside the door.

Aria: "Adieu, nôtre petite table" (Manon)

Aria: "En fermant les yeux" (Des Grieux)

ACT III, scene 1 takes place on the fashionable *Cours de la Reine*. Manon is at the height of her fame. She shares her *carpe diem* philosophy with the crowd in the celebrated *Gavotte*, then has a brief conversation with the Comte des Grieux, the father of her former lover—a remarkable scene, accompanied by the sound of baroque dance music coming from a distant café.

Aria: "Obéissons quand leur voix appelle" (Manon)

Dialogue (Manon and the Comte Des Grieux)

ACT III, scene 2 is in the Church of Saint Sulpice, where Des Grieux has just delivered a formal dissertation. But he is still tormented by thoughts of Manon. We see his prayer to be delivered from them, then Manon's equally fervent prayer to be forgiven for her intent to seduce the young *abbé* back to her bed. And of course she succeeds.

Aria: "Ah fuyez, douce image!" (Manon)

Aria: "Pardonnez moi, Dieu de toute puissance (Manon)

Scene and duet (Manon and Des Grieux)