Class 10: Manon's Rival Lovers

A. Jules Massenet

1. Title Slide 1 (Fragonard: *The Bolt*)
2. *Abbé* Antoine François Prévost (1697–1763)

With this class, we begin a series of three classics of French literature (*Manon Lescaut, Scènes de la vie de Bohème,* and *Carmen*) that have been given settings by more than one composer. We start with the *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et Manon Lescaut* (usually just called *Manon Lescaut*) by the 18th-century writer ***Abbé* Antoine François Prévost** (1697–1763). Both the settings we shall be sampling come from the late 19th-century, by **Massenet** in 1884 and **Puccini** in 1893. My title comes from Puccini, who famously said that "a woman like Manon could have more than one lover." In fact, she has several in Prévost's story, and there have been other composers and choreographers drawn to her story beside these two.

Prévost first published *Manon Lescaut* in 1731. Due to its scandalous nature—it contains multiple sexual liasons 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. Not surprisingly, neither composer we will hear today includes any of the moralizing at all!

3. Summary of episodes in *Manon Lescaut* (novel)

I hope you have all ready the summary of the novel that I posted. It opens in Le Havre with an unnamed narrator seeing a number of fallen women on their way to deportation in Louisiana. Two year later, he runs into the young man he saw getting onto the ship with him; this is the **Chevalier des Grieux**, and the rest of the book is the story of his involvement with one of these women, **Manon Lescaut**, from their first meeting in Amiens to her death in America.

When their story begins, they are both teenagers; he is a divinity student and she is a year or two younger, on her way to a convent because her family cannot manage her unruly behavior. The couple steal a coach and move in together to a **small apartment** in Paris. But Des Grieux's money runs out, and she colludes in a plot to have him abducted and returned to his father, while she becomes the mistress of a much richer gentleman. A year or so passes. Bored of her new life, she goes to see Des Grieux present a public dissertation at the **Church of Saint Sulpice**, and manages to seduce him away from his pursuit of holy orders. Like the couple in *La traviata*, they move to a place in the country, but now **Lescaut**, Manon's unscrupulous brother, enters the picture, training Des Grieux to cheat at cards and acting as a pimp for her. Eventually they are arrested and thrown in jail, but he manages to arrange their escape. They plunge into the same life again, and are jailed again. He is bailed out by his father, the

Comte des Grieux, but she is sentenced to deportation. After a failed rescue attempt at **Le Havre**, he goes to America with her, and is present when she dies in the "**desert of Louisiana**."

4. Chart of Massenet's scene breakdown

Eighteenth-century writers were more interested in sudden changes of fortune and piling event upon event; we see much the same thing in Voltaire's *Candide* (1759). Nineteenth-century romantics, on the other hand, wanted to know the *process* through which these changes happened, to follow the emotional psychology. So Massenet concentrates on the events in the first part of the story, taking more time on each, and omitting all the repetitions in the later chapters. He shows the lovers' meeting, of course. He spends a whole act in their **Paris love nest**. He shows Manon **on the town** at the height of her success, then goes to **Saint Sulpice** for the seduction right on the heels of his own success. There is a scene in a **casino**, where he is accused (perhaps unjustly) of cheating, and the couple are arrested. He ends with Manon dying on the road to **Le Havre**; he sees no reason to take them to America at all. It is an excellent scenario: six scenes, logical and compact.

5. Chart of Massenet's characters

Massenet reduces the cast to a central group of four. There are **Manon** and **Des Grieux**, obviously: the soprano and tenor. He gives **Lescaut** (baritone) a larger role than in the book, but makes him a cousin and less obviously evil. He gives a smaller but significant role to the Des Grieux's father, the **Count** (bass). And in smaller but nonetheless important parts, he has **M. de Brétigny**, who presumably keeps Manon as his mistress, and a **trio of other courtesans** who multiply the female voices in three of the six scenes. He has no time for the Narrator or the moralizing friend Tilberge.

6. Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun: *Self Portrait* (1771)

Agency. It is something of a buzz word, but an important one here. The moralist in *Abbé* Prévost is certainly aware of the number of bad decisions made by the principal characters in his novel, and he piles up the steps on the road to perdition that come from making them. But Massenet, with almost a century of Romantic thought behind him, and on the verge of the Freudian revolution, is interested in the *process* though which decisions are made, and the painful conflicts of emotion they involve. Though in a larger sense, Manon is a victim of society, she does have some agency in the decisions she makes. I am going to play three excerpts, all from the middle scenes of the opera, in which those decisions play a crucial role.

7. Rolando Villazón and Anna Netrebko in Act II of Massenet's *Manon* (Berlin, 2007)

The first takes place in the couple's Paris love-nest—though the updated 2007 production by Vincent Paterson from Berlin makes it into a chic studio apartment with a view to die for! Anyway, **Manon** (Anna Netrebko) 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, then her lovely aria of farewell to their plain wooden table—an aria whose emotional content comes entirely from her efforts to rein her feelings in. Then **Des Grieux** (Rolando Villazón) returns to share the dream he has had of moving to a whitewashed cottage in the country—another exquisitely

simple aria, one that takes its text almost literally from Prévost. It is a moving moment, because we know it is already too late. There is a knock on the door; he goes to open it, and is siezed offstage.

8. Massenet: *Manon*, ending of Act II
9. Anna Netrebko in Act III, scene 1, of Massenet's *Manon* (Berlin, 2007)

Act III takes us to a fashionable space in the center of Paris, the *Cours de la Reine*. **Manon** is at the height of her fame, and shares her *carpe diem* philosophy to the admiring crowd. In one of his few acknowledgements that he is working from an 18th-century source, Massenet writes this aria as a *Gavotte*. This is followed by what I consider the most extraordinary scene in the opera, though you won't find it on any disc of favorite excerpts. It is an accidental encounter between Manon and the **Comte des Grieux**. It takes place almost in natural speech, accompanied only by the sound of the café orchestras around the square; their 18th-century rhythms and distant perspective add to the sense of decorum pervading the scene. He is curious to meet her; she wants to know more about his son; but both pretend that this is no more than the passing of ships in the night. But it is enough to trigger her decision to give up the life of luxury and go in pursuit of her former lover.

10. Massenet: *Manon*, excerpt from Act III, scene 1
11. Rolando Villazón in Act III, scene 2, of Massenet's *Manon* (Berlin, 2007)

The second scene of Act III takes place in the Church of Saint Sulpice. After delivering his homily to great acclaim, Des Grieux is met by his father, who urges him to give up the priesthood and come home to marry some girl of good family. At the point where our excerpt starts, the Count has gone, Des Grieux is determined to continue on the path towards ordination, but is tormented by memories of Manon. He throws himself on his knees and prays God to erase her from his memory. He leaves, and Manon comes in, throwing herself to her knees in virtually the opposite prayer: asking God to forgive her firm intention to win the young *Abbé* back to her bed! Of course, in what must be the sexiest music ever to be set in a church, she succeeds!

12. Massenet: *Manon*, ending of Act III, scene 2
13. Class title 2

B. Giacomo Puccini

14. Massenet and Puccini

When **Giacomo Puccini** (1858–1924) proposed *Manon Lescaut* as his third opera in 1893—it was his first big success—he was asked if he was not worried about the success of Massenet's version less than a decade before, he replied with the famous remark shown here: "A woman like Manon can have more than one lover. Massenet feels it as a Frenchman, with powder and minuets. I shall feel it as an Italian, with a desperate passion." Watching that last scene, I think you'll agree that there was plenty of passion in Massenet. And as for "powder and minuets," Puccini inserts his share. Since the production I am mainly going to play is also updated, let me show you a brief clip from the one video I can find online to

maintain a traditional sense of period. It comes from Act II (which I'll play complete in a moment). Manon is the kept mistress of an older man, Geronte de Ravoir, who in this scene supervises a dancing lesson to which he has invited some of his fellow *roués*. Powder and minuets galore!

15. Puccini: *Manon Lescaut*, dancing lesson (Torino)
16. Character breakdown in the Puccini

Although he has a host of *comprimario* parts, like that Dancing Master, Puccini cuts the main cast down to four, three of whom are Manon, Des Grieux, and Lescaut as in the Massenet. The Count des Grieux never appears, but the role of the sugar daddy Geronte is much larger.

17. Scene breakdown in the Puccini

His scene breakdown is a lot more radical, though. He sets the opening Act in Amiens, much as Massenet had. But instead of the love-nest she temporarily shares with Des Grieux, he moves Manon directly to the luxury apartment maintained for her by Geronte, and elements of all the middle parts of the story either take place or are referred to there. But then, after managing such a magnificent feat of compression, he goes the other way and devotes *two* more acts to Manon's transportation and death. I must say I don't understand this at all, as both acts are essentially extended duets for the same two people, but audiences love duets, so there you are.

18. Expansion of Puccini's Act II

But I must say that Puccini's big Act II is a blockbuster. Here's how it breaks down. The sections in pale green are Puccini's nods to the 18th century, very much like **Richard Strauss** would do in the first act of *Der Rosenkavalier.* Manon's scene with her brother (a much more unscrupulous character than in the Massenet) is strong as it is, and it contains her great aria "*In quelle trine morbide*," in which you will hear how Puccini uses the same passage from Prévost about the whitewashed cottage. There is more pretty 18th-century stuff, then Des Grieux arrives and you hear exactly what Puccini meant by "a desperate passion." This production comes from **Covent Garden** in 2014, conducted by **Antonio Pappano**. The singers are **Kristine Opolais** as Manon, **Jonas Kaufmann** as Des Grieux, and **Christopher Maltman** as Lescaut. The director is **Jonathan Kent**, who staged the Glyndebourne *Turn of the Screw* that we watched a few weeks ago. Rather than trying to be literal, he uses a theatrical metaphor, showing all the stage machinery around the set. What I like most, though, is the clarity with which he treats the relationship between Manon and her elderly protector, who is probably incapable in intercourse, but gets off on displaying his property to other voyeurs.

19. Puccini: *Manon Lescaut*, Act II complete
20. Title Slide 3 (*Burial of Manon*)