

= Jules Massenet =

Jules Émile Frédéric Massenet ( French : [ ʒyl emil fʁedeʁik masnɛ ] ; 12 May 1842 ? 13 August 1912 ) was a French composer of the Romantic era best known for his operas , of which he wrote more than thirty . The two most frequently staged are *Manon* ( 1884 ) and *Werther* ( 1892 ) . He also composed oratorios , ballets , orchestral works , incidental music , piano pieces , songs and other music .

While still a schoolboy , Massenet was admitted to France 's principal music college , the Paris Conservatoire . There he studied under Ambroise Thomas , whom he greatly admired . After winning the country 's top musical prize , the Prix de Rome , in 1863 , he composed prolifically in many genres , but quickly became best known for his operas . Between 1867 and his death forty @-@ five years later he wrote more than forty stage works in a wide variety of styles , from opéra @-@ comique to grand @-@ scale depictions of classical myths , romantic comedies , lyric dramas , as well as oratorios , cantatas and ballets . Massenet had a good sense of the theatre and of what would succeed with the Parisian public . Despite some miscalculations , he produced a series of successes that made him the leading composer of opera in France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries .

Like many prominent French composers of the period , Massenet became a professor at the Conservatoire . He taught composition there from 1878 until 1896 , when he resigned after the death of the director , Ambroise Thomas . Among his students were Gustave Charpentier , Ernest Chausson , Reynaldo Hahn and Gabriel Pierné .

By the time of his death , Massenet was regarded by many critics as old @-@ fashioned and unadventurous although his two best @-@ known operas remained popular in France and abroad . After a few decades of neglect , his works began to be favourably reassessed during the mid @-@ 20th century , and many of them have since been staged and recorded . Although critics do not rank him among the handful of outstanding operatic geniuses such as Mozart , Verdi and Wagner , his operas are now widely accepted as well @-@ crafted and intelligent products of the Belle Époque .

= = Biography = =

= = = Early years = = =

Massenet was born at Montaud , then an outlying hamlet and now a part of the city of Saint @-@ Étienne , in the Loire . He was the youngest of the four children of Alexis Massenet ( 1788 ? 1863 ) and his second wife Eléonore @-@ Adelaïde née Royer de Marancour ( 1809 ? 1875 ) ; the elder children were Julie , Léon and Edmond . Massenet senior was a prosperous ironmonger ; his wife was a talented amateur musician who gave Jules his first piano lessons . By early 1848 the family had moved to Paris , where they settled in a flat in Saint @-@ Germain @-@ des @-@ Prés . Massenet was educated at the Lycée Saint @-@ Louis and , from either 1851 or 1853 , the Paris Conservatoire . According to his colourful but unreliable memoirs , Massenet auditioned in October 1851 , when he was nine , before a judging panel comprising Daniel Auber , Fromental Halévy , Ambroise Thomas and Michele Carafa , and was admitted at once . His biographer Demar Irvine dates the audition and admission as January 1853 . Both sources agree that Massenet continued his general education at the lycée in tandem with his musical studies .

At the Conservatoire Massenet studied solfège with Augustin Savard and the piano with François Laurent . He pursued his studies , with modest distinction , until the beginning of 1855 , when family concerns disrupted his education . Alexis Massenet 's health was poor , and on medical advice he moved from Paris to Chambéry in the south of France ; the family , including Massenet , moved with him . Again , Massenet 's own memoirs and the researches of his biographers are at variance : the composer recalled his exile in Chambéry as lasting for two years ; Henry Finck and Irvine record that the young man returned to Paris and the Conservatoire in October 1855 . On his return he lodged with relations in Montmartre and resumed his studies ; by 1859 he had progressed so far as to win

the Conservatoire 's top prize for pianists . The family 's finances were no longer comfortable , and to support himself Massenet took private piano students and played as a percussionist in theatre orchestras . His work in the orchestra pit gave him a good working knowledge of the operas of Gounod and other composers , classic and contemporary . Traditionally , many students at the Conservatoire went on to substantial careers as church organists ; with that in mind Massenet enrolled for organ classes , but they were not a success and he quickly abandoned the instrument . He gained some work as a piano accompanist , in the course of which he met Wagner who , along with Berlioz , was one of his two musical heroes .

In 1861 Massenet 's music was published for the first time , the Grande Fantasia de Concert sur le Pardon de Ploërmel de Meyerbeer , a virtuoso piano work in nine sections . Having graduated to the composition class under Ambroise Thomas , Massenet was entered for the Conservatoire 's top musical honour , the Prix de Rome , previous winners of which included Berlioz , Thomas , Gounod and Bizet . The first two of these were on the judging panel for the 1863 competition . All the competitors had to set the same text by Gustave Chouquet , a cantata about David Rizzio ; after all the settings had been performed Massenet came face to face with the judges . He recalled :

Ambroise Thomas , my beloved master , came towards me and said , " Embrace Berlioz , you owe him a great deal for your prize . " " The prize , " I cried , bewildered , my face shining with joy . " I have the prize ! ! ! " I was deeply moved and I embraced Berlioz , then my master , and finally Monsieur Auber . Monsieur Auber comforted me . Did I need comforting ? Then he said to Berlioz pointing to me , " He 'll go far , the young rascal , when he 's had less experience ! "

The prize brought a well @-@ subsidised three @-@ year period of study , two @-@ thirds of which was spent at the French Academy in Rome , based at the Villa Medici . At that time the academy was dominated by painters rather than musicians ; Massenet enjoyed his time there , and made lifelong friendships with , among others , the sculptor Alexandre Falguière and the painter Carolus @-@ Duran , but the musical benefit he derived was largely self @-@ taught . He absorbed the music at St Peter 's , and closely studied the works of the great German masters , from Handel and Bach to contemporary composers . During his time in Rome , Massenet met Franz Liszt , at whose request he gave piano lessons to Louise @-@ Constance " Ninon " de Gressy , the daughter of one of Liszt 's rich patrons . Massenet and Ninon fell in love , but marriage was out of the question while he was a student with modest means .

= = = Early works = = =

Massenet returned to Paris in 1866 . He made a living by teaching the piano and publishing songs , piano pieces and orchestral suites , all in the popular style of the day . Prix de Rome winners were sometimes invited by the Opéra @-@ Comique in Paris to compose a work for performance there . At Thomas 's instigation , Massenet was commissioned to write a one @-@ act opéra comique , La grand 'tante , presented in April 1867 . At around the same time he composed a Requiem , which has not survived . In 1868 he met Georges Hartmann , who became his publisher and was his mentor for twenty @-@ five years ; Hartmann 's journalistic contacts did much to promote his protégé 's reputation .

In October 1866 Massenet and Ninon were married ; their only child , Juliette , was born in 1868 . Massenet 's musical career was briefly interrupted by the Franco @-@ Prussian War of 1870 ? 71 , during which he served as a volunteer in the National Guard alongside his friend Bizet . He found the war so " utterly terrible " that he refused to write about it in his memoirs . He and his family were trapped in the Siege of Paris but managed to get out before the horrors of the Paris Commune began ; the family stayed for some months in Bayonne , in southwestern France .

After order was restored , Massenet returned to Paris where he completed his first large @-@ scale stage work , an opéra comique in four acts , Don César de Bazan ( Paris , 1872 ) . It was a failure , but in 1873 he succeeded with his incidental music to Leconte de Lisle 's tragedy Les Érinnyes and with the dramatic oratorio , Marie @-@ Magdeleine , both of which were performed at the Théâtre de l 'Odéon . His reputation as a composer was growing , but at this stage he earned most of his income from teaching , giving lessons for six hours a day .

Massenet was a prolific composer ; he put this down to his way of working , rising early and composing from four o'clock in the morning until midday , a practice he maintained all his life . In general he worked fluently , seldom revising , although *Le roi de Lahore* , his nearest approach to a traditional grand opera , took him several years to complete to his own satisfaction . It was finished in 1877 and was one of the first new works to be staged at the Palais Garnier , opened two years previously . The opera , with a story taken from the Mahabharata , was an immense success and was quickly taken up by the opera houses of eight Italian cities . It was also performed at the Hungarian State Opera House , the Bavarian State Opera , the Semperoper , Dresden , the Teatro Real in Madrid , and the Royal Opera House , Covent Garden , in London . After the first Covent Garden performance , The Times summed the piece up in a way that was frequently to be applied to the composer 's operas : " M. Massenet 's opera , although not a work of genius proper , is one of more than common merit , and contains all the elements of at least temporary success . "

This period was an early high point in Massenet 's career . He had been made a chevalier of the Legion of Honour in 1876 , and in 1878 he was appointed professor of counterpoint , fugue and composition at the Conservatoire under Thomas , who was now the director . In the same year he was elected to the Institut de France , a prestigious honour , rare for a man in his thirties . Camille Saint - Saëns , whom Massenet beat in the election for the vacancy , was resentful at being passed over for a younger composer . When the result of the election was announced , Massenet sent Saint - Saëns a courteous telegram : " My dear colleague : the Institut has just committed a great injustice " . Saint - Saëns cabled back , " I quite agree . " He was elected three years later , but his relations with Massenet remained cool .

Massenet was a popular and respected teacher at the Conservatoire . His pupils included Bruneau , Charpentier , Chausson , Hahn , Leroux , Pierné , Rabaud and Vidal . He was known for the care he took in drawing out his pupils ' ideas , never trying to impose his own . One of his last students , Charles Koechlin , recalled Massenet as a voluble professor , dispensing " a teaching active , living , vibrant , and moreover comprehensive " . According to some writers , Massenet 's influence extended beyond his own students . In the view of the critic Rodney Milnes , " In word - setting alone , all French musicians profited from the freedom he won from earlier restrictions . " Romain Rolland and Francis Poulenc have both considered Massenet an influence on Debussy 's *Pelléas et Mélisande* ; Debussy was a student at the Conservatoire during Massenet 's professorship but did not study under him .

== Operatic successes and failures , 1879 ? 96 ==

Massenet 's growing reputation did not prevent a contretemps with the Paris Opéra in 1879 . Auguste Vaucorbeil , director of the Opéra , refused to stage the composer 's new piece , *Hérodiade* , judging the libretto either improper or inadequate . Édouard - Fortuné Calabresi , joint director of the Théâtre de la Monnaie , Brussels , immediately offered to present the work , and its première , lavishly staged , was given in December 1881 . It ran for fifty - five performances in Brussels , and had its Italian première two months later at La Scala . The work finally reached Paris in February 1884 , by which time Massenet had established himself as the leading French opera composer of his generation .

*Manon* , first given at the Opéra - Comique in January 1884 , was a prodigious success and was followed by productions at major opera houses in Europe and the United States . Together with Gounod 's *Faust* and Bizet 's *Carmen* it became , and has remained , one of the cornerstones of the French operatic repertoire . After the intimate drama of *Manon* , Massenet once more turned to opera on the grand scale with *Le Cid* in 1885 , which marked his return to the Opéra . The Paris correspondent of The New York Times wrote that with this new work Massenet " has resolutely declared himself a melodist of undoubted consistency and of remarkable inspiration . " After these two triumphs , Massenet entered a period of mixed fortunes . He worked on *Werther* intermittently for several years , but it was rejected by the Opéra - Comique as too gloomy . In 1887 he met the American soprano Sibyl Sanderson . He developed passionate feelings for her , which remained platonic , although it was widely believed in Paris that she was his mistress , as caricatures in the

journals hinted with varying degrees of subtlety . For her , the composer revised *Manon* and wrote *Esclarmonde* ( 1889 ) . The latter was a success , but it was followed by *Le mage* ( 1891 ) , which failed . Massenet did not complete his next project , *Amadis* , and it was not until 1892 that he recovered his earlier successful form . *Werther* finally received its first performance in February 1892 , when the Vienna Hofoper asked for a new piece , following the enthusiastic reception of the Austrian premiere of *Manon* .

Though in the view of some writers *Werther* is the composer 's masterpiece , it was not immediately taken up with the same keenness as *Manon* . The first performance in Paris was in January 1893 by the Opéra @-@ Comique company at the Théâtre Lyrique , and there were performances in the United States , Italy and Britain , but it met with a muted response . The New York Times said of it , " If M. Massenet 's opera does not have lasting success it will be because it has no genuine depth . Perhaps M. Massenet is not capable of achieving profound depths of tragic passion ; but certainly he will never do so in a work like *Werther* " . It was not until a revival by the Opéra @-@ Comique in 1903 that the work became an established favourite .

*Thaïs* ( 1894 ) , composed for Sanderson , was moderately received . Like *Werther* , it did not gain widespread popularity among French opera @-@ goes until its first revival , which was four years after the premiere , by when the composer 's association with Sanderson was over . In the same year he had a modest success in Paris with the one @-@ act *Le portrait de Manon* at the Opéra @-@ Comique , and a much greater one in London with *La Navarraise* at Covent Garden . The Times commented that in this piece Massenet had adopted the verismo style of such works as Mascagni 's *Cavalleria rusticana* to great effect . The audience clamoured for the composer to acknowledge the applause , but Massenet , always a shy man , declined to take even a single curtain call .

= = = Later years , 1896 ? 1912 = = =

The death of Ambroise Thomas in February 1896 made vacant the post of director of the Conservatoire . The French government announced on 6 May that Massenet had been offered the position and had refused it . The following day it was announced that another faculty member , Théodore Dubois , had been appointed director , and Massenet had resigned as professor of composition . Two explanations have been advanced for this sequence of events . Massenet wrote in 1910 that he had remained in post as professor out of loyalty to Thomas , and was eager to abandon all academic work in favour of composing , a statement repeated by his biographers Hugh Macdonald and Demar Irvine . Other writers on French music have written that Massenet was intensely ambitious to succeed Thomas , but resigned in pique after three months of manoeuvring , once the authorities finally rejected his insistence on being appointed director for life , as Thomas had been . He was succeeded as professor by Gabriel Fauré , who was doubtful of Massenet 's credentials , considering his popular style to be " based on a generally cynical view of art " .

With *Griséidis* and *Cendrillon* complete , though still awaiting performance , Massenet began work on *Sapho* , based on a novel by Daudet about the love of an innocent young man from the country for a worldly @-@ wise Parisienne . It was given at the Opéra @-@ Comique in November 1897 , with great success , though it has been neglected since the composer 's death . His next work staged there was *Cendrillon* , his version of the Cinderella story , which was well received in May 1899 .

Macdonald comments that at the start of the 20th century Massenet was in the enviable position of having his works included in every season of the Opéra and the Opéra @-@ Comique , and in opera houses around the world . From 1900 to his death he led a life of steady work and , generally , success . According to his memoirs , he declined a second offer of the directorship of the Conservatoire in 1905 . Apart from composition , his main concern was his home life in the rue de Vaugirard , Paris , and at his country house in Égreville . He was uninterested in Parisian society , and so shunned the limelight that in later life he preferred not to attend his own first nights . He described himself as " a fireside man , a bourgeois artist " . The main biographical detail of note of his latter years was his second *amitié amoureuse* with one of his leading ladies , Lucy Arbell , who

created roles in his last operas . Milnes describes Arbell as " gold @-@ digging " : her blatant exploitation of the composer 's honourable affections caused his wife considerable distress and even strained Massenet 's devotion ( or infatuation as Milnes characterises it ) . After the composer 's death Arbell pursued his widow and publishers through the law courts , seeking to secure herself a monopoly of the leading roles in several of his late operas .

A rare excursion from the opera house came in 1903 with Massenet 's only piano concerto , on which he had begun work while still a student . The work was performed by Louis Diémer at the Conservatoire , but made little impression compared with his operas . In 1905 Massenet composed Chérubin , a light comedy about the later career of the sex @-@ mad pageboy Cherubino from Mozart 's The Marriage of Figaro . Then came two serious operas , Ariane , on the Greek legend of Theseus and Ariadne , and Thérèse , a terse drama set in the French Revolution . His last major success was Don Quichotte ( 1910 ) , which L 'Etoile called " a very Parisian evening and , naturally , a very Parisian triumph " . Even with his creative powers seemingly in decline he wrote four other operas in his later years ? Bacchus , Roma , Panurge and Cléopâtre . The last two , like Amadis , which he had been unable to finish in the 1890s , were premiered after the composer 's death and then lapsed into oblivion .

In August 1912 Massenet went to Paris from his house at Égreville to see his doctor . The composer had been suffering from abdominal cancer for some months , but his symptoms did not seem imminently life @-@ threatening . Within a few days his condition deteriorated sharply . His wife and family hastened to Paris , and were with him when he died , aged seventy . By his own wish his funeral , with no music , was held privately at Égreville , where he is buried in the churchyard .

= = Music = =

= = = Background = = =

In the view of his biographer Hugh Macdonald , Massenet 's main influences were Gounod and Thomas , with Meyerbeer and Berlioz also important to his style . From beyond France he absorbed some traits from Verdi , and possibly Mascagni , and above all Wagner . Unlike some other French composers of the period , Massenet never fell fully under Wagner 's spell , but he took from the earlier composer a richness of orchestration and a fluency in treatment of musical themes .

Although when he chose Massenet could write noisy and dissonant scenes ? in 1885 Bernard Shaw called him " one of the loudest of modern composers " ? much of his music is soft and delicate . Hostile critics have seized on this characteristic , but the article on Massenet in the 2001 edition of Grove 's Dictionary of Music and Musicians observes that in the best of his operas this sensual side " is balanced by strong dramatic tension ( as in Werther ) , theatrical action ( as in Thérèse ) , scenic diversion ( as in Esclarmonde ) , or humour ( as in Le portrait de Manon ) . "

Massenet 's Parisian audiences were greatly attracted by the exotic in music , and Massenet willingly obliged , with musical evocations of far @-@ flung places or times long past . Macdonald lists a great number of locales depicted in the operas , from ancient Egypt , mythical Greece and biblical Galilee to Renaissance Spain , India and Revolutionary Paris . Massenet 's practical experience in orchestra pits as a young man and his careful training at the Conservatoire equipped him to make such effects without much recourse to unusual instruments . He understood the capabilities of his singers , and composed with close , detailed regard for their voices .

= = = Operas = = =

Massenet wrote more than thirty operas . Authorities differ on the exact total because some of the works , particularly from his early years , are lost and others were left incomplete . Still others , such as Don César de Bazan and Le roi de Lahore , were substantially recomposed after their first productions and exist in two or more versions . Grove 's Dictionary of Music and Musicians lists forty

Massenet operas in all , of which nine are shown as lost or destroyed . The " OperaGlass " website of Stanford University shows revised versions as premieres , and The New Grove Dictionary of Opera , does not : their totals are forty @-@ four and thirty @-@ six respectively .

Having honed his personal style as a young man , and sticking broadly with it for the rest of his career , Massenet does not , as some other composers do , lend himself to classification into clearly defined early , middle and late periods . Moreover , his versatility means that there is no plot or locale that can be regarded as typical Massenet . Another respect in which he differed from many opera composers is that he did not work regularly with the same librettists : Grove lists more than thirty writers who provided him with librettos .

The 1954 ( fifth ) edition of Grove said of Massenet , " to have heard Manon is to have heard the whole of him " . In 1994 Andrew Porter called this view preposterous . He countered , " Who knows Manon , Werther and Don Quichotte knows the best of Massenet , but not his range from heroic romance to steamy verismo . " Massenet 's output covered most of the different subgenres of opera , from opérette ( L 'adorable Bel ' -Boul and L 'écureuil du déshonneur ? both early , lost pieces ) and opéra @-@ comique such as Manon , to grand opera ? Grove categorises Le roi de Lahore as " the last grand opera to have a great and widespread success " . Many of the elements of traditional grand opera are written into later large @-@ scale works such as Le mage and Hérodiade . Massenet 's operas consist of anything from one to five acts , and although many of them are described on the title pages of their scores as " opéra " or " opéra comique " , others have carefully nuanced descriptions such as " comédie chantée " , " comédie lyrique " , " comédie @-@ héroïque " , " conte de fées " , " drame passionnel " , " haute farce musicale " , " opéra légendaire " , " opéra romanesque " and " opéra tragique " .

In some of his operas , such as Esclarmonde and Le mage , Massenet moved away from the traditional French pattern of free @-@ standing arias and duets . Solos meld from declamatory passages into more melodic form , in a way that many contemporary critics thought Wagnerian . Shaw was not among them : in 1885 he wrote of Manon :

Of Wagnerism there is not the faintest suggestion . A phrase which occurs in the first love duet breaks out once or twice in subsequent amorous episodes , and has been seized on by a few unwary critics as a Wagnerian leit motif . But if Wagner had never existed , Manon would have been composed much as it stands now , whereas if Meyerbeer and Gounod had not made a path for M. Massenet , it is impossible to say whither he might have wandered , or how far he could have pushed his way .

The 21st @-@ century critic Anne Feeney comments , " Massenet rarely repeated musical phrases , let alone used recurrent themes , so the resemblance [ to Wagner ] lies solely in the declamatory lyricism and enthusiastic use of the brass and percussion . " Massenet enjoyed introducing comedy into his serious works , and writing some mainly comic operas . In Macdonald 's view of the comic works , Cendrillon and Don Quichotte succeed , but Don César de Bazan and Panurge are less satisfying than " the more delicately tuned operas such as Manon , Le portrait de Manon and Le jongleur de Notre @-@ Dame , where comedy serves a more complex purpose . "

According to Operabase , analysis of productions around the world in 2012 ? 13 shows Massenet as the twentieth most popular of all opera composers , and the fourth most popular French one , after Bizet , Offenbach and Gounod . The most often performed of his operas in the period are shown as Werther ( 63 productions in all countries ) , followed by Manon ( 47 ) , Don Quichotte ( 22 ) , Thaïs ( 21 ) , Cendrillon ( 17 ) , La Navarraise ( 4 ) , Cléopâtre ( 3 ) , Thérèse ( 2 ) , Le Cid ( 2 ) , Hérodiade ( 2 ) , Esclarmonde ( 2 ) , Chérubin ( 2 ) and Le mage ( 1 ) .

= = = Other vocal music = = =

Between 1862 and 1900 Massenet composed eight oratorios and cantatas , mostly on religious subjects . There is a degree of overlap between his operatic style and his choral works for church or concert hall performance . Vincent d 'Indy wrote that there was " a discreet and semi @-@ religious eroticism " in Massenet 's music . The religious element was a regular theme in his secular as well as sacred works : this derived not from any strong personal faith , but from his response to the

dramatic aspects of Roman Catholic ritual . The mingling of operatic and religious elements in his works was such that one of his oratorios , *Marie @-@ Magdeleine* , was staged as an opera during the composer 's lifetime . Elements of the erotic and some implicit sympathy for sinners were controversial , and may have prevented his church works establishing themselves more securely . Arthur Hervey , a contemporary critic not unsympathetic to Massenet , commented that *Marie @-@ Magdeleine* and the later oratorio *Ève* ( 1875 ) were " the Bible doctored up in a manner suitable to the taste of impressionable Parisian ladies ? utterly inadequate for the theme , at the same time very charming and effective . " Of the four works categorised by Irvine and Grove as oratorios , only one , *La terre promise* ( 1900 ) , was written for church performance . Massenet used the term " oratorio " for that work , but he called *Marie @-@ Magdeleine* a " *drame sacré* " , *Ève* a " *mystère* " , and *La Vierge* ( 1880 ) a " *légende sacrée* " .

Massenet composed many other smaller @-@ scale choral works , and more than two hundred songs . His early collections of songs were particularly popular and helped establish his reputation . His choice of lyrics ranged widely . Most were verses by poets such as Musset , Maupassant , Hugo , Gautier and many lesser @-@ known French writers , with occasional poems from overseas , including Tennyson in English and Shelley in French translation . Grove comments that Massenet 's songs , though pleasing and impeccable in craftsmanship , are less inventive than those of Bizet and less distinctive than those of Duparc and Fauré .

= = = Orchestral and chamber music = = =

Massenet was a fluent and skilful orchestrator , and willingly provided ballet episodes for his operas , incidental music for plays , and a one @-@ act stand @-@ alone ballet for Vienna ( *Le carillon* , 1892 ) . Macdonald remarks that Massenet 's orchestral style resembled that of Delibes , " with its graceful movement and bewitching colour " , which was highly suited to classical French ballet . The *Méditation* for solo violin and orchestra , from *Thaïs* , is possibly the best known non @-@ vocal piece by Massenet , and appears on many recordings . Another popular stand @-@ alone orchestral piece from the operas is *Le dernier sommeil de la Vierge* from *La Vierge* , which has featured on numerous discs since the middle of the 20th century .

A Parisian critic , after seeing *La grande tante* , declared that Massenet was a symphonist rather than a theatre composer . At the time of the British premiere of *Manon* in 1885 , the critic in *The Manchester Guardian* , reviewing the work enthusiastically , nevertheless echoed his French confrère 's view that the composer was really a symphonist , whose music was at its best when purely orchestral . Massenet took a wholly opposite view of his talents . He was temperamentally unsuited to writing symphonically : the constraints of sonata form bored him . He wrote , in the early 1870s , " What I have to say , musically , I have to say rapidly , forcefully , concisely ; my discourse is tight and nervous , and if I wanted to express myself otherwise I would not be myself . " His efforts in the concertante field made little mark , but his orchestral suites , colourful and picturesque according to Grove , have survived on the fringes of the repertoire . Other works for orchestra are a symphonic poem , *Visions* ( 1891 ) , an *Ouverture de Concert* ( 1863 ) and *Ouverture de Phèdre* ( 1873 ) . After early attempts at chamber music as a student , he wrote little more in the genre . Most of his early chamber pieces are now lost ; three pieces for cello and piano survive .

= = = Recordings = = =

The only known recording made by Massenet is an excerpt from *Sapho* , " *Pendant un an je fus ta femme* " , in which he plays a piano accompaniment for the soprano Georgette Leblanc . It was recorded in 1903 , and was not intended for publication . It has been released on compact disc ( 2008 ) , together with contemporary recordings by Grieg , Saint @-@ Saëns , Debussy and others .

In Massenet 's later years , and in the decade after his death , many of his songs and opera extracts were recorded . Some of the performers were the original creators of the roles , such as Ernest van Dyck ( *Werther* ) , Emma Calvé ( *Sapho* ) , Hector Dufranne ( *Grisélidis* ) , and Vanni Marcoux ( *Panurge* ) . Complete French recordings of *Manon* and *Werther* , conducted by Élie

Cohen , were issued in 1932 and 1933 and have been republished on CD . The critic Alan Blyth comments that they embody the original , intimate Opéra @-@ Comique style of performing Massenet .

Of Massenet 's operas , the two best known , Manon and Werther , have been recorded many times , and studio or live recordings have been issued of many of the others , including Cendrillon , Le Cid , Don Quichotte , Esclarmonde , Hérodiade , Le jongleur de Notre @-@ Dame , Le mage , La Navarraise and Thaïs . Conductors on these discs include Sir Thomas Beecham , Richard Bonyngé , Riccardo Chailly , Sir Colin Davis , Patrick Fournillier , Sir Charles Mackerras , Pierre Monteux , Sir Antonio Pappano and Michel Plasson . Among the sopranos and mezzos are Dame Janet Baker , Victoria de los Ángeles , Natalie Dessay , Renée Fleming , Angela Gheorghiu and Dame Joan Sutherland . Leading men in recordings of Massenet operas include Roberto Alagna , Gabriel Bacquier , Plácido Domingo , Thomas Hampson , José van Dam , Alain Vanzo and Rolando Villazón .

In addition to the operas , recordings have been issued of several orchestral works , including the ballet Le carillon , the piano concerto in E ? , the Fantaisie for cello and orchestra , and orchestral suites . Many individual mélodies by Massenet were included in mixed recitals on record during the 20th century , and more have been committed to disc since then , including , for the first time , a CD in 2012 , exclusively devoted to his songs for soprano and piano .

= = Reputation = =

By the time of the composer 's death in 1912 his reputation had declined , especially outside his native country . In the second edition ( 1907 ) of Grove , J A Fuller Maitland accused the composer of pandering to the fashionable Parisian taste of the moment , and disguising a uniformly " weak and sugary " style with superficial effects . Fuller Maitland contended that to discerning music lovers such as himself the operas of Massenet were " inexpressibly monotonous " , and he predicted that they would all be forgotten after the composer 's death . Similar views were expressed in an obituary in The Musical Times

His early scores are , for the greater part , his best ... Later , and for the plain reason that he never attempted to renovate his style , he sank into sheer mannerism . Indeed , one can but marvel that so gifted a musician , who lacked neither individuality nor skill , should have so utterly succeeded in throwing away his gifts . Success spoiled him ... the actual progress of musical art during the past forty years left Massenet unmoved ... he has taken no part in the evolution of modern music .

Massenet was never entirely without supporters . In the 1930s Sir Thomas Beecham told the critic Neville Cardus , " I would give the whole of Bach 's Brandenburg Concertos for Massenet 's Manon , and would think I had vastly profited by the exchange . " By the 1950s critics were reappraising Massenet 's works . In 1951 Martin Cooper of The Daily Telegraph wrote that Massenet 's detractors , including some fellow composers , were on the whole idealistic , even puritanical , " but few of them have in practice achieved anything so near perfection in any genre , however humble , as Massenet achieved in his best works . " In 1955 Edward Sackville @-@ West and Desmond Shawe @-@ Taylor commented in The Record Guide that , although usually dismissed as an inferior Gounod , Massenet wrote music with a distinct flavour of its own . " He had a gift for melody of a suave , voluptuous and eminently singable kind , and the intelligence and dramatic sense to make the most of it . " The writers called for revivals of Grisélidis , Le jongleur de Notre @-@ Dame , Don Quichotte and Cendrillon , all then neglected . By the 1990s , Massenet 's reputation had been considerably rehabilitated . In The Penguin Opera Guide ( 1993 ) , Hugh Macdonald wrote that though Massenet 's operas never equalled the grandeur of Berlioz 's Les Troyens , the genius of Bizet 's Carmen or the profundity of Debussy 's Pelléas et Mélisande , from the 1860s until the years before the First World War , the composer gave the French lyric stage a remarkable series of works , two of which ? Manon and Werther ? are " masterpieces that will always grace the repertoire " . In Macdonald 's view , Massenet " embodies many enduring aspects of the belle époque , one of the richest cultural periods in history " . In France , Massenet 's 20th @-@ century eclipse was less complete than elsewhere , but his oeuvre has been revalued in recent years . In 2003 Piotr



Kaminsky wrote in *Mille et un opéras* of Massenet 's skill in translating French text into flexible melodic phrases , his exceptional orchestral virtuosity , combining sparkle and clarity , and his unerring theatrical instinct .

Rodney Milnes , in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* ( 1992 ) , agrees that *Manon* and *Werther* have a secure place in the international repertoire ; he counts three others as " re @-@ establishing a toehold " ( *Cendrillon* , *Thaïs* and *Don Quichotte* ) , with many more due for re @-@ evaluation or rediscovery . He concludes that comparing Massenet with the handful of composers of great genius , " It would be absurd to claim that he was anything more than a second @-@ rate composer ; he nevertheless deserves to be seen , like Richard Strauss , at least as a first @-@ class second @-@ rate one . "