

# French Romantic Operas

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## Introduction

- 19th Century Grand French Opera
- Opera as a reflection of the issues of daily life.
- National Unity, Monarchy, Nobility, Church, People.
- Italian Opera versus French Opera
- The beginning of French librettists and Composer

## **French Romantic Composers of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

- **Charles Gounod 1818-1893**
- **Hector Berlioz 1803-1869**
- **Georges Bizet 1838-1875**
- **Jules Massenet 1842-1912**
- **Jacques Offenbach 1819-1880**
- **Ambroise Thomas 1811-1896**
- **Leo Delibes 1836-1891**

## **Modernization of French Opera**

- Modernization of the orchestra
- Pacing
- Expressive range
- Chromatic Harmony
- Melody
- Wagner's influence on the scoring of the orchestral score of the opera

## Thais

Composer Jules Massenet Paris March 1894  
LIBRETTO Louis Gallet after a novel by Anatole  
France

In old Alexandria Athanael, a Cenobite monk feels obligated to rescue Thais, a beautiful courtesan, from her life of physical pleasure. His friend Nicias introduces him to her at a banquet. He attempts to convert her and she agrees to enter a convent, but to his horror Athanael falls in love with her. He tells her of his love as she dies.

The first music selection is the interlude of the meditation between Act 2 and Act 3, famous violin solo piece.

## Faust

Composer Charles Gounod Paris March 1859  
Libretto Barbier and Carre after Goethe's Faust I

Faust, an aging philosopher sells his soul to Mephistopheles, the devil, for a return to his youth and the love of Marguerite. He wins her love with jewels. He abandons her. She bears his illegitimate child and kills it and is jailed. Faust duels with her brother Valentin and kills him. Faust repents and tries to rescue her but she recognizes the evil of his companion Mephistopheles and rejects him. The devil condemns her, but angels carry her to heaven.

2<sup>nd</sup> music selection: The jewel song

# The Jewel Song

## Marguerite Cecilia Gasdia

### *Marguerite:*

A bouquet? It's from Siebel, I'm certain. He is a good lad.

But what is that? Can this beautiful case be meant for me? I hardly dare touch it. But perhaps.. I see the key to it. What can be in it? I am frightened.

But why? I won't do any harm if I open the cover.

Ah no! I can't be true! Is it real or a vision that I see, or am I dreaming? I never seen such jewels so precious and gleaming! If I dared only once to find out how I look in these two lovely earrings?

Here is just the thing! There even is a mirror in the case. Who can resist such a temptation?

## Jewel Song continued

Ah! To be suddenly so beautiful to see! Is it you, Marguerite? Is it true? Is it true? Is it really Marguerite? No, no this is not you.. It is a princess or a queen passing by in her glory!

How happy I would be if he could look at me!

Now if I were to meet him, smiling I would greet him, ah!

Then he would bow to me in all my royal splendor. Now I try all the other jewels! All I have to do is put on the pretty bracelet and the pearls. Ah! It is like a hand heavenly weighing upon me! Ah so beautiful to see! Is it you Marguerite? Is it true? Is it really Marguerite?

That's a princess of a story! Yes it's a princess or a queen passing by in her glory!

**Les Pecheurs de Perles**  
Composer Georges Bizet Paris Sept. 1863  
Libretto by Carre and Carmon

In Ceylon two fisherman love the same woman Leila. They swear eternal friendship. Zurga is elected leader and Nadir returns to the village. He and the priestess Leila profess their love and are discovered together and condemned to death. Zurga realizes that Leila has saved his life in the past and causes a diversion in the village. Leila and Nadir flee to safety.

3<sup>rd</sup> music selection: duet Zurga/Nadir Act 1

**Friendship Duet**

*Nadir*

At the back of the holy temple, decorated with flowers and gold, a woman appears!

*Zurga*

A woman appears!

*Nadir*

I can still see her!

*Zurga*

I can still see her

*Nadir*

The prostrate crowd looks at her amazed and murmurs under its breath: look this is the goddess

## Friendship Duet continued

Looming up in the shadow and holding out her arms  
to us.

*Zurga*

Her veil parts slightly. What a vision! What a dream!  
The crowd is kneeling.

*Zurga and Nadir*

Yes it is she! It is the goddess, more charming and  
more beautiful. Yes, it is she! It is the goddess  
Who has come down among us. Her veil has parted  
and the crowd is kneeling.

## Friendship Duet continued

*Nadir*

But through the crowd she makes her way.

*Zurga*

Al ready her long veil hides her face from us.

*Nadir*

My eyes, alas! Seek her in vain!

*Zurga*

She flees!

*Nadir*

She flees! But what is this strange flame which is suddenly  
kindled in my soul!

## Friendship Duet continued

*Zurga*

What unknown fire is destroying me?

*Nadir*

Your hand pushes mine away!

*Zurga*

Your hand pushes mine away!

*Nadir*

Love takes our hearts by storm and turns us into enemies!

*Zurga*

No, let nothing part us!

*Nadir*

No, nothing!

## Friendship Duet continued

*Zurga and Nadir*

Let us swear to remain friends!

Oh yes, let us swear to remain friends! Yes, it is her, the goddess, who comes to unite us this day. And faithful to my promise, I wish to cherish you like a brother ! It is her, the goddess, who comes to unite us this day! Yes, let us share the same fate, let us be united until death!

# Lakme

Composer Leo Delibes Paris February 1856  
Libretto by Gondinet and Gille after Loti's *Le Mariage de Loti*

Gerard, a British officer in India, loves Lakme, the daughter of a Brahmin priest. She returns his love, but her father vows revenge on the violator of the temple. In the market place he forces her to sing, so as to identify the guilty party. Lakme faints when Gerard appears. Her father Nilakantha, stabs him but she nurses him back to health in a secret place in the forest. Gerald's fellow officer finds him and persuades him to return to duty. Lakme returns and knows what has happened. She kills herself by eating the deadly datura leaf

4<sup>th</sup> a music selection Duet Lakme and her servant Mallika Act.1

## Duet Lakme with Mallika

### *Lakme*

A dense dome of jasmine and roses clings together, flowery waterside and fresh morning together call us. Ah! Let us glide as we follow the fleeting current among the trembling waves. Blithely steering, let us gain the shore, where a bird is singing. The dense dome, the white jasmine together call us!

### *Mallika*

Under the dense dome where white jasmine and roses cling together, on to the flowering waterside, smiling in the morning, come, let us descend together. Let us glide softly: on its charming swell let us follow the current among the trembling waves. Blithely steering, come let us reach the



## Duet Lakme and Mallika continued

The shore, where the spring sleeps and a bird is singing.  
Beneath the dense dome, under the white jasmine, ah! Let  
us descend together!

*Lakme*

But a strange fear suddenly grips me; when my father goes  
alone into their accursed town, I tremble, I tremble with  
fright!

*Mallika*

So that the god Ganesh my protect him, let us go down to the  
pool where the swans splash joyfully, their wings white as  
snow, to gather blue lotus blossoms.

## Duet Lakme and Mallika continued

*Lakme*

Yes, down near the swans with their snow-white  
wings, let us go to gather blue lotus blossoms..

Dense dome, jasmine, etc

*Mallika*

Beneath the dense dome, where the whit jasmine,  
etc.

## **Lakme Bell Song Act 2 4<sup>th</sup> b music selection**

### *Lakme*

Where is the young Hindu girl going, daughter of the Pariahs,  
as the moon plays among the mimosas? As the moon plays.

She runs through the moss and does not recall that  
everywhere they rebuff the child of the Pariahs.

She runs through the moss, the child of the Pariahs; all  
through the oleanders, dreaming of sweet things, ah, she  
passes silently, laughing into the night Ah!

Down in the darkest depths of the forest, who is the stranger?  
All around him, eyes shine in the shadows. He presses on at  
random, headlong! The wild beasts roar with joy as they  
launch themselves at their prey. The young girl rushes up  
and braves their fury;

## **Bell Song continued**

She has in her hand the wand on which tinkles the  
bell of the magicians. Ah, ah, ah!..

The stranger looks at her, she stands in amazement.  
He is more beautiful than the rajahs! He will blush  
if he knows he owes his life to the daughter of the  
Pariahs! But, putting her to sleep in a dream, he  
raise her up to heaven, telling her: "Your place is  
there!" It was Vishnu, son of Brahma! Since that  
day, deep in the woods, the traveler sometimes  
hears the faint sound of the wand on which the  
bell of the magicians tinkles. Ah!..

## Werther

Composer Jules Massenet Vienna Feb. 1892  
Libretto by Blau, Milliet and Hartman after  
Goethe's novel

The melancholy poet Werther meets Charlotte and falls in love with her, but learns that she is engaged to Albert. Obsessed with Charlotte, he decides to travel, but writes impassioned letters to her. He returns to Frankfurt and extracts from Charlotte an admission of love, but she insists that he leave. He borrows Albert's pistols and shoots himself. He dies in Charlotte's arms  
5<sup>th</sup> music selection Finale Werther's death 4. Act

## Duet Werther/ Charlotte

*Charlotte*

Werther! ..Werther!.. Nothing!..

O God Blood! No! No! It's impossible! He cannot be dead! Werther!  
Werther! Come to yourself again! Answer me! O how dreadful!

*Werther*

Who is speaking? Charlotte, O it's you! Forgive me!

*Charlotte*

Forgive you, when it was I that struck you, when the blood that is  
flowing from your wound, it was I that shed it..

*Werther*

No! You have done naught else save what is good and right! My heart  
blesses you for this death which maintains your innocence and  
spare me remorse!

## Duet Charlotte/ Werther continued

*Charlotte*

But we need help! Help!

Ah!

*Werther*

No, do not call anybody.. All help would be in vain! Only give me your hand.. You see!.. I need no other help save yours!..And now, nobody must come here to separate us..It is good for us like this. At this supreme moment, I am happy, for I die as I say to you that I adore you!

*Charlotte*

And I, Werther, I love you! Yes from the very day when you appeared before my eyes, I felt that a chain that was

## Duet Werther/Charlotte continued

Impossible to break bound the two of us together! To the neglect of duty, I preferred your suffering, and in order not to endure perdition, alas I lost you!..

*Werther*

Keep on speaking, I beg you!

*Charlotte*

But even if death is approaching, before it takes you..Ah! Your kiss! Your kiss! At least, I shall have returned it! May your soul into mine entirely melt itself! With this kiss, may it forget for ever sorrow, all grief, may it forget all pain!

*Werther/ Charlotte*

Everything, let us forget everything!

## Duet Werther/Charlotte continued

*Werther/Charlotte*

Let us forget everything! Everything!

*Voices of the children*

Noel! Noel!

*Charlotte*

O God! Those joyful cries, that laughter at this cruel moment!

*Voices of the children*

Jesus is born! Our divine master is come, kings and shepherds  
of Israel!

*Werther*

Ah! The children.. The angels..

## Duet Werther/Charlotte continued

*Voices of the children*

Noel! Noel!

*Werther*

Yes Noel, it is the song of deliverance! It is the hymn of  
forgiveness, sung by innocence!

*Charlotte*

Werther!

*Werther*

Why these tears? Do you think that at this moment, my life is  
over? It is just beginning, you must see that!

*Sophie's voice*

Joy in the air!

## Duet Werther/Charlotte continued

*Sophie's voice*

God lets us be happy! Everybody is joyful! God lets us be happy!

*Charlotte*

Ah! His eyes are closing..his hand is frozen! He is going to die.. To die! Ah! Mercy upon us! I do not want this! I do not want this! Werther! Answer me! You can still hear me! From my arms, death will not dare to take you! You will live ! You see! I fear nothing any more!

*Weather*

No!.. Charlotte!.. I am dying.. Yes.. But.. Listen closely! Over there, on the edge of the cemetery, there are two tall lime-trees! It is there that for ever I should like to rest.

## Duet Werther/Charlotte continued

*Charlotte*

Do not speak like that! Have pity!

*Werther*

Should that be refused me, if Christian earth should be refused to the body of a hapless wretch, near the path, or in the lonely valley, there put my grave!..And turning his eyes away, the priest will pass by..

*Charlotte*

!.. Werther Have pity on me!

*Werther*

But secretly some woman will come to visit the exile, and a gentle tear fallen upon his shade, the dead man, the poor dead man, will feel that he is blessed..

*Charlotte*

Werther ! Ah! All is finished!

# Romeo and Juliette

Composer Charles Gounod Paris 1867

Libretto by Barbier and Carre after Shakespeare

In Verona Juliette meets and falls in love with Romeo at a ball given by her father. The Capulets and Montagues are rival families. The lovers are married in secret by Frere Laurent. To avoid a marriage arranged by her father, Juliette drinks a potion that simulates death. Romeo, unaware of the plan, finds her in the tomb and poisons himself. She wakes and the dying Romeo tells her, he has taken poison. She stabs herself and the lovers die in each other's arms.

6<sup>th</sup> music selection Act 5 Finale The lover's death duet

## Romeo and Juliette Death Duet

*Romeo*

Console yourself, poor heart, the dream was too beautiful!  
Love, a celestial flame, survives even this tomb! It raises the  
stone and by the angels blest, like a wave of light loses  
itself in the infinite.

*Juliette*

O anguish! O torture!

*Romeo*

O Juliette, listen! Already the lark is telling us it's morn! No!  
No, it is not day, 'tis not the lark! It is the gentle  
nightingale, love's confidant!

## Death Duet continued

*Juliette*

Ah, cruel husband! You have not left me my share of this poison. Ah, happy dagger your help remains!

*Romeo*

God! What have you done?

*Juliette*

Ah! This moment is sweet! O infinite, supreme joy of dying with you! Come One kiss! I love you!

*Juliette/Romeo*

Lord, Lord, forgive us!

## Mignon

Composer Ambroise Thomas Paris Nov. 1866

Libretto by Barbier and Carré after Goethe

Wilhelm buys Mignon from a Gypsy band which has abducted her as a child. She was mistreated by the gypsy leader. She serves Wilhelm as a page and falls in love with him, but is jealous of his interest in Philine, an actress. Mignon has befriended an elderly, deranged minstrel Lothario, who really is her father. He has been wandering all over, searching for his lost child. They arrive at a castle where Philine's troupe is acting and discover it was the home of Lothario and Mignon. Philine starts a fire and Wilhelm rescues Mignon and realizes he loves her.

7<sup>th</sup> a. music selection Act 1 Overture



## **Mignon's Song 7<sup>th</sup> b music selection**

### *Mignon*

**Do you know the land where the orange tree blossoms? The land of golden fruit and red roses, where the breeze gentler and the birds lighter, where in every season the bees forage, where shines and smiles like a gift from God an eternal spring under an ever blue sky! Alas, that I may not follow you toward that happy land from which fate drove me. It is there! It is there! That I wish to live, to love and to die! Yes it is there!**

**Do you know the house that awaits me there? The hall with golden furnishings, where marble statues call me in the night and hold out their arms to me! And the courtyard where one dances in the shade of a great tree,**

## **Mignon's Song continued**

**And the clear lake on whose waters glide a thousand light boats just like birds.**

**Alas, that I may not follow you toward that happy land from which fate drove me.**

**It is there! It is there that I wish to live, to love and to die!**

**Yes ,it is there!**

**Manon**  
**Composer Jules Massenet**  
**Libretto by Meilhac and Gille after a story by**  
**Abbe Prevost**

Manon, a high spirited girl, arrives at an inn to meet her cousin Lescaut who is to escort her to a convent. She meets Chevalier des Grieux and falls in love and runs away with him. All relatives disapprove and take steps to separate them. Manon is drawn into the life of luxury by the wealthy nobleman de Britigny. She learns that des Grieux has entered a seminary and they reunite. They are arrested. Des Grieux is released after his father intercedes, but Manon is condemned as a prostitute and is to be deported. On the road to Le Havre des Grieux attempts to rescue her, but she has no strength left and dies in his arms.

8<sup>th</sup> music selection Act 5 Finale

**Manon Finale**

*Manon*

Ah! The lovely diamond! You see I am still a coquette!

*Des Grieux*

Someone is coming! Lets go Manon!

*Manon*

I love you... and this kiss is a final goodbye!

*Des Grieux*

No! I cannot believe it! Listen to me! Remember! Is this not my hand pressing against yours?

*Manon*

Don't wake me up!

*Des Grieux*

Is this no longer a caress for you?

*Manon*

Cradle me in your arms!

## Manon Finale continued

*Des Grieux*

Recognize my voice through my tears!

*Manon*

Let us forget the past!

*Des Grieux*

Memories full of charm!

*Manon*

O cruel remorse!

*Des Grieux*

I have forgiven you!

*Manon*

Ah! Can I forget the sad days in our love?

## Manon Finale continued

Yes, it is his hand pressing against mine! Ah! It is really his voice! Yes, and really his heart! This is truly the tenderness of past days! Soon the past joy will be reborn!

*Des Grieux*

Everything is forgotten! Is this not my hand pressing yours? Is this not my voice? Is this no longer a caress for you? Just as it used to be?

*Manon*

Ah! I am dying!

*Des Grieux*

Manon!

*Manon*

It must be! And there you have the story of Manon Lescaut!

**Playlist**  
**French Romantic Operas**  
**Mary McNamara**

**1. Jules Massenet: *Thais***

Decca 289 466 766 2, 2000  
Orchestre National Bordeaux Aquitaine  
Yves Abel, Conductor  
Renee Fleming Soprano, Thomas Hampson Baritone, Renaud Capucon Solo  
Violin for the meditation.  
[01] Disc 1, Act two, track 24 Meditation Interlude 5'46"

**2. Charles Gounod: *Faust***

Teldec Classical 1994 4509-90872-2  
Orchestra of Welsh National Opera  
Carlo Rizzi, Conductor  
Cecilia Gasdia Soprano, Jerry Hadley Tenor, Samuel Ramey Bass-Baritone  
[02] Disc 1, Track 3 "Un Bouquet" (Marguerite) 5'34" (The Jewel song)

**3. Georges Bizet: *Les Pecheurs de perles (The Pearlfishers)***

Teldec Classics Digital recording D 134 755 1993  
Orchestra of Welsh Opera  
Carlo Rizzi, Conductor  
Jerry Hadley Tenor, Thomas Hampson Baritone  
[03] Act 1, Track 5 "Au fond du temple saint", Duet Zurga and Nadir, 7'34"

**4. Leo Delibes: *Lakme***

EMI France CDCB 556569 1998  
Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse  
Michel Plasson, Conductor  
Natalie Dessay Coloraturo-soprano, Gregory Kunde Tenor, Jose Van Dam  
Baritone  
[04] a. Disc 1, Act 1, Track 5 Duet Lakme/Mallika, 5'54"  
[05] b. Disc 2, Act 2, Track 2 "Bell song" Lakme/Nilakantha/choir, 8'31"

**5. Jules Massenet: *Werther***

Erato 0630-17790-2 1997  
Orchestre De l'Opera Nationale De Lyon  
Kent Nagano, Conductor  
Jerry Hadley Tenor, Anne Sofie von Otter Mezzo-Soprano  
[06] Disc 2, Act 4, Track 12, Duet "Werther! Rien!" 5'12"  
[07] Disc 2, Act 4, Track 13, Duet "Et moi, Werther, je t'aime" 3'51"

**6. Charles Gounod: *Romeo et Juliette***

EMI Classics 7243 5 65290 21 1969, digital remastering 1994

Orchestre National De l'Opera De Paris

Alain Lombard, Conductor

Mirella Freni Soprano, Franco Corfelli Tenor

[08] Disc 2, Track 18 Death duet: "Console-toi, pauvre ame" 5'16"

**7. Ambroise Thomas: *Mignon***

Sony Classics SM3K 34590 1978

Philharmonia Orchestra

Antonio De Almeida, Conductor

Marilyn Horne Mezzo-Soprano

[09] a. Disc 1, Act 1, Track 1 Ouverture 8'03"

[10] b. Disc 1, Act 1, Track 16 "Connais-tu le pays", Mignon's song, 6'07"

**8. Jules Massenet: *Manon***

Sony Classical S3K 90458 2001

Orchestre De National De Paris

Jesus Lopes-Cobos , Conductor

Renee Fleming Soprano, Marcello Alvarez Tenor

[11] Disc 3, Act 5, Tracks 16 and 17, Duet "Ah! Le beau diamant" 4'15"