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The Tenor Voice in French Opera

Lecture by Peter Dundas

Originally given in 2014; updated 2023

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- The subject of my lecture for 2013 was “Parsifal”, prior to the production at the MET, with Jonas Kaufmann singing the title role. He was very good as Parsifal. I was therefore intrigued that Jonas was engaged to sing “Werther” at the MET in 2014 since the vocal requirements for these two operas are so different.
- I have been very fond of the French opera repertoire for the past 40 years. Since we have heard and seen the MET HD productions of “La Fille du Régiment” in 2008 and “Le Comte Ory” in 2011, with the brilliant Leggiero Tenor Juan Diego Florez, in excellent form, I thought I would develop a lecture, reviewing and comparing video performances of French opera, written from 1828 to 1892, ending with a closer look at “Werther”. The video clips I’ve assembled are my favorites and will consume more than half of my allotted two hours.

- French opera flourished in Paris from about 1828. Rossini, born in Pesaro Italy in 1792, came to live in Paris in 1824 and produced his last four operas there, written and sung in French, “Le Siege de Corinthe” in 1826, “Moise” in 1827, “Le Comte Ory” in 1828 and “Guillaume Tell” in 1829.
- This was the era of a tenor craze! Rossini engaged Adolphe Nourrit to debut the role of Arnold in Guillaume Tell, peppered with high Cs (C5), which he was able to sing, employing a vocal technique that used falsetto in the high range.
- However, when Gilbert Duprez made his Opera debut in 1837, in the same role, and sang it entirely in chest voice, Nourrit was unable to compete, had a nervous breakdown, and committed suicide. I quote from an article, “Europe and its 150 tenors”, written August 29, 1841, in “Le Menestrel” Paris;

- So we will start with a video clip from the first Act of the MET performance of “Le Comte Ory”, in 2011, with Juan Diego Florez wooing the ladies with his smiles and his high Cs.
- He spends much of the first act disguised as a hermit and much of the second impersonating a nun, all in an absurd attempt to ensnare a resistant young countess, Adèle.

- As Act I opens, most of the men at court have gone off to fight in the Crusades. The women who are left behind vow to live like widows until their husbands return.
- The cagey Ory, sensing an opportunity, disguises himself as a hermit and is viewed by solitary women as an ascetic, a seer. In one frenetic chorus, they voice their earthly desires to this sympathetic stranger and ply him with gifts.
- **Video Clip 1**

- The Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti, born 1797, also moved to Paris in 1838 where he produced the comic opera “La Fille du Régiment” (The Daughter of the Regiment), which gained enormous popularity over the years through the performances of the leading sopranos of the day, including Jenny Lind, Adelina Patti, Marcella Sembrich and Emma Albani, somewhat overshadowing the tenor role of Tonio.
- Sergeant Sulpice, of the 21st regiment, is joined by Marie, the mascot, or “daughter”, of the regiment, which adopted her as an orphaned child. When Sulpice questions her about a young man she has been seen with, she explains that he is a local Tyrolean who—though an enemy—once saved her life. Troops of the 21st arrive with a prisoner; this same Tyrolean, Tonio, who says he has been looking for Marie. She steps in to save him. Tonio decides to enlist so that he can marry Marie.

- After Tonio has been made a member of the French Grenadiers, he approaches some of the members and explains that he has joined the regiment because he loves the regiment's "daughter" Marie. In the cabaletta "Pour mon âme", after asking the members of the regiment to allow him to marry Marie and receiving an affirmative answer, Tonio sings his joy at finally being united with his one love. He promises to take care of her and protect her forever. The famous cabaletta, "Pour mon âme" will test any Leggiero Tenor, with its nine high Cs, and I am going to play two versions for comparison.
- The first clip is Alfredo Kraus, a Lyric Tenor with a unique and quite controversial vocal technique, at the age of 59, singing at the Paris Opera in 1986, conducted by Bruno Campanella. This is from a VHS tape of a Spanish Television broadcast, with my English subtitles.

Video Clip 2.

- The second clip is a young Juan Diego Florez singing the same cabaletta at the Opera House in Lecce, Italy 2003, conducted by Riccardo Frizzi. This is from a tape of a 'Live' Italian Television broadcast.
- Florez never met Alfredo Kraus, who died in 1999, but greatly admired him. He said in an interview in 2001 that he modeled his approach to the French repertoire on Kraus. When asked about singing Werther, which Kraus 'owned' for at least 30 years, he said that, unfortunately, as his voice was too light this was one opera he would never sing!
- **Video Clip 3**

- Now for a big change!
- Fromental Halevy, born in 1799 in Paris, became a pupil of Cherubini and took first prize in the 1819 Prix de Rome competition. He reached his artistic peak with his opera “La Juive”, with a libretto by Eugene Scribe, published and performed in 1835. With this work, Halévy attained not only his first major triumph but gave the world a work that was to be one of the cornerstones of the French repertoire for a century, with the role of Eléazar one of the great favorites of tenors such as Enrico Caruso. The opera's most famous aria is Eléazar's "Rachel, quand du Seigneur". It is probable however that this aria was inserted only at the request of the great tenor Adolphe Nourrit, who premiered the role and may have suggested the aria's text. La Juive is one of the grandest of grand operas.

- The story of “La Juive”, or the Jewess, is set in 1414, the time of the Council of Constance, now in Germany, on the border with Switzerland, and tells of a Jewish merchant named Eléazar, who is forced to watch the execution of his two sons, as a result of religious persecution of Jews by Christians.
- Later, Eléazar witnesses Cardinal de Brogni’s estate being ransacked and burned by invading armies that leave only Brogni’s baby daughter alive. Eléazar saves her from the flames and adopts her as his own, calling her Rachel.
- Now a young woman, Rachel falls in love with a young man who she believes to be a Jewish artist. However, when it turns out that the young man is not only a married Prince but also Christian, the Prince, Rachel, and Eléazar all face the death penalty for breaking the religious laws of that time, which strictly prohibited interracial relationships.

- As Eléazar awaits execution, he is visited by Brogni, who offers him and Rachel their freedom, if they chose to convert to Christianity. But blinded by hate, Eléazar declines the offer. Instead, he informs Brogni that his daughter is still alive but refuses to reveal her identity because he is unable to reconcile his Jewish faith by forcing his daughter to change her faith. Thus, Brogni, unknowingly, orders that his own daughter Rachel be thrown into a cauldron of boiling water, the execution method used at that time.
- The agony of this decision is portrayed in an aria “Rachel, quand du Seigneur”, near the end of the opera. The next video clip is 10 minutes, which shows how a tenor must not only sing the notes, even though they range from Eb3 (E flat below middle C) to C5 (High C, one octave above middle C), but also feel them too. In this aria especially, it is the level of emotion that is paramount.

- Neil Shicoff is Eléazar in this unforgettable performance at the Vienna State Opera in 2003, with orchestra conducted by Vjcekoslav Sutej.
- Neil Shicoff is known as ‘one of those other tenors’. Like Alfredo Kraus, Jose Carreras, Guiseppe Filianoti, and Piotr Bekzala, he is what I call a ‘crying tenor’, one who lives and sings on the edge of emotion, so aptly fitting for much of the French repertoire.
- **Video Clip 4**

- Charles Gounod was born in 1818 in Paris, the son of a pianist mother and an artist father. In 1836 he became a pupil of Fromental Halevy at the Paris Conservatoire. His grand opera, in five acts called “Faust”, premiered in 1859
- The story of “Faust” is well known! Doctor Faust is bored and disappointed. He decides to call on the Devil for further knowledge and magic powers with which to indulge all the pleasure and knowledge of the world.
- In response, the Devil's representative, Mephistopheles, appears. He makes a bargain with Faust: Mephistopheles will serve Faust with his magic powers for a set number of years, but at the end of the term, the Devil will claim Faust's soul and Faust will be eternally damned.

- During the term of the bargain, Faust makes use of Mephistopheles in various ways.
- In many versions of the story, particularly Goethe's drama, Mephistopheles helps him seduce a beautiful and innocent girl, usually Gretchen, whose life is ultimately destroyed. However, Gretchen's innocence ultimately saves her, and she enters Heaven.
- In Goethe's rendition, Faust is saved by God's grace via his constant striving—in combination with Gretchen's pleadings with God in the form of the Eternal Feminine.

- However, in the early tales, Faust is irrevocably corrupted and believes his sins cannot be forgiven; when the term ends, the Devil carries him off to Hell.
- Gounod follows this story quite closely for his grand opera but changes the name of the beautiful and innocent girl to Marguerite, in order to suit the French audience.
- In the next Video Clip, taken from the beginning of Act 3, Faust, now transformed into a gallant and handsome young man is in Marguerite's garden.
- Approaching Marguerite's house, Faust is struck by the purity of the dwelling and the innocence of Marguerite inside goes on to thank Nature for creating the beautiful angelic creature that is Marguerite.

- The Lyric Tenor Alfredo Kraus sings the famous cavatina "Salut, demeure chaste et pure" from a 1977 performance at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, London, with Orchestra conducted by Peter Maag. For me, this is magical. Kraus just floats that High C, a measure of his unbelievable vocal technique.
- **Video Clip 5**

- Gounod's opera “Faust” had become popular at the Théâtre Lyrique since its premiere in 1859 (it was performed over 300 times between 1859 and 1868) and this led to a further commission from the director Carvalho, resulting in “Roméo et Juliette”.
- Behind the scenes, there were difficulties in casting the lead tenor, and Gounod was said to have composed the last act twice, but after the public general rehearsal and the first night, on April 27, 1867, it was hailed as a major success for the composer.
- Its success was aided by the presence of dignitaries in Paris for the International Exhibition, several of whom attended performances.

- In the next Video Clip, Romeo anticipates meeting Juliette. Romeo is sung beautifully by a young Roberto Alagna, a Lyric Tenor, at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, in 1994, with Orchestra conducted by Charles Mackerras.
- Romeo has escaped from his companions in search of Juliette's room. He finally spies her on her balcony and sings of her beauty which is like the sun, “Ah! lève-toi, Soleil!”. The words of the aria are almost exactly translated from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. Roberto Alagna was born in Paris, in 1963, to immigrant parents from Sicily. He is loved by French audiences, not only for his singing but because he grew up in Paris and speaks with a pure French accent. **Clip 6**

- Now we turn to Georges Bizet, born in 1838 in Paris. After a brilliant beginning, winning prizes at the Paris Conservatoire and, in 1857, the first prize in the Prix de Rome competition, Bizet, who considered himself destined for the lyric stage, faced major difficulties. His style, rich in color and harmony, was disconcerting, and his aesthetic vision inherited from Gounod, resulted in an ‘operatic poetry’ and depth of expression that the French were slow to understand.
- “Les Pêcheurs de Perles”, (The Pearl Fishers), first performed at the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1863, perplexed audiences. While acknowledging the young composer’s skill, they were unable to pigeonhole the work into any of the usual categories.
- Modern critical opinion has been kinder than that of Bizet's day.

- Commentators describe the quality of the music as uneven and at times unoriginal but acknowledge the opera as a work of promise in which Bizet's gifts for melody and evocative instrumentation are clearly evident.
- They have identified clear foreshadowings of the composer's genius which would culminate, 10 years later, in “Carmen”. Since 1950 “Les Pecheurs de Perles” has been recorded on numerous occasions, in both the amended and original versions.
- This opera is famous for a duet, "Au fond du temple saint", sung by a tenor and baritone. However, I have chosen the tenor aria "Je crois entendre encore" for the next Video Clip.
- In the past, Nadir had fallen in love with a beautiful Brahman priestess named Léïla at a Brahman temple.
- Now, a veiled priestess has come to his village and he recognizes her as Léïla. He sings of his love for her which has not been diminished by the time they have spent apart.

- Alfredo Kraus sang the role of Nadir in a lauded performance at the Gran Teatro Lyceo Barcelona, Spain, in 1970, with Orchestra conducted by Carlo Felice Cillario, before the days of live opera productions on television. Later that year, Spanish Television made a film on the rocky coast of Gran Canaria, a Spanish island off the coast of Morocco, where Kraus was born in 1927. The singer, Alfredo Kraus is in the film, lip-syncing the actual audio recording made in the Lyceo opera house earlier that year.
- **Video Clip 7**

- In 1875 Bizet hit the jackpot! “Carmen” premiered in Paris, at the Opéra-Comique, on March 3, 1875. Although it had a ‘rocky’ start, especially in Paris, it soon became very popular. After its London debut for the summer season of 1878, an ‘extra season’ was required.
- Bizet’s “Carmen” has become the third most popular opera performed at the MET, only surpassed by Puccini’s “La Boheme” and Verdi’s “Aida”.
- It is a story about love, passion jealousy, and death, all essential ingredients for a French opera.
- Don Jose, a corporal in the army, is beguiled by Carmen, a gypsy. When Carmen is thrown into jail for knifing another gypsy, she uses her charms on him, now her jailer, to gain her release. He lets her go and is promptly arrested.

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- Carmen meets the bullfighter Escamillo, who flirts with her, but she tells him that she's involved with another man.
- Don Jose is released from jail and Carmen teases him about Escamillo, causing Don Jose to be jealous. She mocks him and he tries to prove his true love for her in the following Video Clip.
- Jonas Kaufmann is Don Jose, at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden London, conducted by Antonio Pappano, in December 2006. Carmen is Anna Caterina Antonacci.
- Here is a role made for Jonas, one that fits his voice admirably.
- **Video Clip 8**

- “Les contes d'Hoffmann” is an opéra fantastique by Jacques Offenbach, born 1819. It had its première in Paris, February 10, 1881.
- The action of the opera begins in Luther’s Tavern, next to an opera house where Stella, Hoffmann’s latest love, is performing in Don Giovanni. Hoffmann’s Muse, in the guise of Hoffmann’s closest friend Nicklausse, has witnessed a string of Hoffmann’s disastrous affairs.
- She announces to the audience that she will try to get Hoffmann to give up women and concentrate on being a poet. Hoffmann enters the tavern, distressed at not hearing from Stella. Her affirming letter has been intercepted by a rival, Councilor Lindorf, who is also present and is determined to take Hoffmann’s place with Stella. Lindorf goads Hoffmann in an exchange of sarcastic insults.

- Nicklausse finally interrupts, breaking the tension, yet the encounter leaves Hoffmann with a sense of foreboding. When the students tease him about his current infatuation with Stella, he offers to tell the story of three past loves, all disasters.
- This occupies the next three Acts;
- We are now back at Luther's tavern for the Epilog of this opera,
- Hoffmann concludes his tales, as voices in the theater next door hail Stella, his present love. Nicklausse recognizes the allegory of the three tales - Stella is all three women in one.
- Hoffmann proposes they drown their sorrows in another bowl of punch. Stella appears but the drunk Hoffmann, lost in thought, does not respond to her.

- Seeing him in this condition Stella leaves the tavern on the arm of the triumphant Lindorf. Nicklausse, reverting to her true identity as the Muse, persuades Hoffmann to devote himself to his art.
- The Video Clip I've chosen is the Epilog of this fantastic opera, from the MET production in 1988, conducted by Charles Dutoit. Neil Shicoff is Hoffmann, James Morris is Lindorf and Susan Quittmeyer is Nicklausse and Hoffmann's Muse.
- Since 1975 Hoffmann has been sung by the best of all the tenors, including Alfredo Kraus, Placido Domingo, Marcelo Alvarez, Rolando Villazon, Ramon Vargas, Joseph Calleja, and Giuseppe Filianoti, and Neil Shicoff.
- In preparing for this lecture, I listened to all these tenors singing Hoffmann, in available video opera performances. It is my opinion that Neil Shicoff is the best of the best. **V Clip 9**



- Jules Massenet, born in 1842 in the Loire valley, moved to Paris with his parents when he was 6 years old. In 1862 he won the Grand Prix de Rome and produced his first opera in 1867. His greatest successes were “Manon” in 1884 and “Werther” in 1892.
- “Werther” is based on “Die Leiden des jungen Werthers“ (The Sorrows of Young Werther), the first novel written by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in 1774.
- Goethe's novel is largely autobiographic, reflecting something of his own experiences and those of people he knew. It had a strong influence on his contemporaries.
- It is written in the form of letters to a fictitious friend, Wilhelm, starting on May 4, 1771, and ending on December 24, 1772, with the actual dates matching the days, as if extracted from his very own diary for those years.



- In these letters, Werther gives a very intimate account of his stay in the fictional village of Wahlheim.
- He is enchanted by the simple ways of the peasants there. He meets Charlotte, a beautiful young girl who is taking care of her siblings following the death of their mother. Despite knowing beforehand that Charlotte is already engaged to a man named Albert, who is 11 years her senior, Werther falls in love with her.
- Although this causes Werther great pain, he spends the next few months cultivating a close friendship with both of them. His pain eventually becomes so great that he is forced to leave and go to Weimar.
- He returns to Wahlheim after six months, where he suffers more than he did before, partially because Charlotte and Albert are now married.

- Every day serves as a torturous reminder that Charlotte will never be able to requite his love. Out of pity for her friend and respect for her husband, Charlotte comes to the decision that Werther must not visit her so frequently.
- He visits her one final time, and they are both overcome with emotion after Werther's recitation of a portion of "Ossian".
- Charlotte realizes she loves Werther but cannot yield to him because of Albert. She locks herself in her room and sends Werther away.
- Werther sees no other choice but to take his own life. After composing a farewell letter to be found after his suicide, he writes to Albert asking for his two pistols, under the pretense that he is going "on a journey". Charlotte receives the request with great emotion and sends the pistols. Werther then shoots himself in the head but does not expire until 12 hours after he has shot himself.
- His funeral is not attended by clergymen, Albert, or his beloved Charlotte.

- I've turned to the knowledgeable lecturer and writer Thomson Smillie to describe his feelings about Massenet's "Werther", to which I concur.
- "Werther is regarded by many as Massenet's masterpiece. The source of the plot is a novel, usually translated as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, by the great German Romantic poet Johann Wolfgang Goethe.
- It involves the unrequited love of an ardent young man for the lovely Charlotte. She is pledged to marry another, and when she does so Werther, after much anguishing, commits suicide
- So great was the impact of this novel on early nineteenth-century sensibilities that the work was banned by church authorities – suicide was seen as the ultimate blasphemy, showing a lack of faith in God's purpose – yet fashionably depressed young men were known to have taken their lives in imitation of its hero.

- The attractions of Massenet's work are not difficult to appreciate. The story is straightforward and deeply touching, and as it combines rustic simplicity – the home life of Charlotte, her sister Sophie and her father, with great passion and internal anguish, it offers excellent opportunities for rich characterization and melodic invention.
- In fusing affecting melody with vivid orchestration, Massenet excels. Jealous musicians are much given to coining insulting nicknames for their more successful colleagues, and Massenet himself was labeled with two.



- The last really successful MET production of “Werther” was in 1988, with Alfredo Kraus singing Werther and Frederica von Stade singing Charlotte. The New York Times reviewer, Will Crutchfield, wrote
- “Mr. Kraus gave a really fine performance as Werther, and it is hard to imagine that any other tenor still singing the part would be preferable in it.
- He commands the range of dynamics to make the intimate sections work in the big Met auditorium and he rides the orchestra easily in the climaxes. He sounds and looks the part, and he gives his lines sincere, heartfelt expression.”
- There were three later productions; in 1989, with Neil Shicoff, in 1999, with Thomas Hampson, in a role transformed for baritone, and in 2004, with Roberto Alagna.



- The New York Times reviewer, Anthony Tommasini, wrote on January 5, 2004,
- “Though Massenet's operas, hugely popular in their day, can seem musically thin and dramatically cloying to modern audiences, "Werther”, based on the Goethe novel, is his strongest and most involving work.
- But only if you have the right tenor in the title role of an aimless courtier, a dabbler in poetry, intoxicated with his own perceptions of life who is seeking refuge in the country from emotional entanglements and the loss of a loved one.”
- I’m going to use the last 15 minutes of this lecture to play two comparative versions of the same portion of Act 3.



- Werther, trying to deal with the ‘enforced’ marriage of Charlotte to Albert, has exiled himself. Many months have passed and Charlotte, now lonely in her room, read his letters and begins to realize that she loves him. Werther suddenly appears and begins a conversation with her, which leads to the famous aria ‘**Pourquoi me réveiller**’.
- In the first example, Alfredo Kraus is Werther and Frederica von Stade is Charlotte, from a live performance made on April 16, 1988, at the MET with the Orchestra conducted by Jean Fournet.
- This is the performance I referred to earlier.
- There was no official video made; only an audio recording, which is now available on the MET Player.



- However, I have used an amateur video which was made at the ‘dress rehearsal’, on March 29, 1988, and is available from the “House of Opera” website, for ‘educational purposes’.
www.operapassion.com
- The audio on this DVD is not very good so I’ve dubbed in the audio recording from the actual Saturday matinée performance and added subtitles.
- Since the timings between the two performances were slightly different, you will notice that the video and audio are a little out of synchronization. However, I thought it worthwhile, just to hear the beautiful singing.
- This is Werther sung and acted by the master!
- Alfredo Kraus was 60 at the time of this performance.
- **Video Clip 10**

- In the second example, Jonas Kaufmann is Werther and Sophie Koch is Charlotte, from the recent MET performance on Saturday March 15, 2014, produced by Richard Eyre and conducted by Alain Altinoglu.
- The timings are slower than the previous example, with Kaufmann considerably darker in tone.
- Alfredo Kraus, with his superior ‘lyric’ tenor technique and an ability to traverse the required ‘spinto’ demands of Werther, ‘owned’ this role for more than 30 years.
- However, Jonas Kaufmann is a ‘spinto’ tenor who can control his beautiful voice in a most pleasing ‘lyric’ manner. He sings Werther with a different technique and the direct comparison is therefore both intriguing and satisfying.
- **Video Clip 11**

