

French Romantic Operas

Mary McNamara

Opera Theatre Guild of Rochester

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 19th 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 Carré 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.

2nd 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.

3rd 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

4th 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 4th 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
5th 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.

6th 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 Carre 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.

7th a. music selection Act 1 Overture

Mignon's Song 7th 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.

8th 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!