

Synopsis

Act I

A square in Amiens. Edmondo, a songwriter, and his student companions flirt with some girls. His friend, des Grieux, also a student, stays apart from them. A carriage arrives, bringing Geronte, a tax collector, and Lescaut, a soldier, who is accompanying his younger sister, Manon. Des Grieux falls in love with her at first sight, finds out that her father is sending her to a convent, and makes plans to prevent this happening. But Geronte, with Lescaut's connivance, intends to abduct Manon. Edmondo overhears his plans and warns des Grieux, who escapes with Manon to Paris. Lescaut consoles Geronte by telling him that Manon will not stay long with a student and that he will bring her back to him.

Act II

A house in Paris. Manon has left des Grieux and is living a life of luxury with Geronte. She's bored, and her brother promises to arrange for des Grieux to visit her. Some singers serenade Manon with a madrigal written by Geronte. Then she dances and sings for him and his friends. When they leave, she tells Geronte that she will follow shortly, but des Grieux appears, and Manon starts to seduce him. Geronte interrupts their lovemaking, chillingly threatens the two of them, and leaves, telling them he will return soon. Lescaut runs in, warning the lovers that Geronte is going to have Manon arrested and that she must escape. She delays, trying to collect her jewelry, but is arrested before she can get away.

Act III

Outside a prison in Le Havre, by the harbor. Dawn. Des Grieux waits outside the prison where Manon is held. Lescaut bribes a sentry to allow his sister to spend time with des Grieux while he organizes a group to enable her escape. The effort fails, and a shot is fired. Townspeople run in. The soldiers restore order, and the captain of the ship processes Manon and the other prisoners—mostly prostitutes—before they are deported. In desperation, des Grieux grabs Lescaut's weapon and threatens the captain, who faces him down. Des Grieux pleads with the captain to be allowed to sail with them as one of the crew.

Act IV

A wasteland. Des Grieux and Manon are on the run. They are at the end of their strength, collapsing from thirst and exhaustion. Des Grieux leaves Manon, searching for water. When he returns, he finds her dying. In her last breath, she says she loves him.

Giacomo Puccini

Manon Lescaut

Premiere: Teatro Regio, Turin, 1893

Few operas, if any, have surpassed *Manon Lescaut* in the depiction of the urgency of young love—perhaps not even Puccini’s next stage work, *La Bohème*. The French tale of a beautiful young woman destroyed by her conflicting needs for love and luxury had already inspired Jules Massenet’s *Manon* (1884), which was a relatively new and immensely popular work at the time of *Manon Lescaut*’s premiere. Puccini was as yet almost unknown (*Manon Lescaut* would change that), and the idea of taking on an established composer like Massenet was considered folly. The two operas, however, are so different in tone that each stands on its own. Puccini infused the story with a new level of frank emotion and a flood of melody. He made the story, in a word, Italian and created the first of his many archetypal heroines who continue to captivate audiences today.

The Creators

Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924) was immensely popular in his own lifetime, and his mature works remain staples in the repertory of most of the world’s opera companies. His operas are celebrated for their mastery of detail, sensitivity to everyday subjects, copious melody, and economy of expression. *Manon Lescaut* was his first great success, ensuring his international status and leading George Bernard Shaw to name him “the successor to Verdi.” Writing the libretto for *Manon Lescaut* was a laborious process: Domenico Oliva (1860–1917), a journalist and sometime politician, and novelist and playwright Marco Praga (1862–1929) provided much of the raw material. Puccini then turned to playwright Giuseppe Giacosa (1847–1906) and poet Luigi Illica (1857–1919) for revisions. These two would later collaborate with Puccini on his three most successful operas, *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*. Fellow (and eventual rival) composer Ruggero Leoncavallo (1857–1919) worked on the libretto at various points, and even Puccini’s publisher Giulio Ricordi (1840–1912) provided key tweaks. The source material was a novel by the colorful Abbé Prévost (1697–1763), *L’Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1731).

The Setting

The first three acts of the opera take place in various locations in France: the first in the town of Amiens, the second in a magnificent house in Paris, and the third on the waterfront of the port city of Le Havre. The fourth act is set in a desolate location in the New World, an imaginary place described in the libretto as “a vast desert near the outskirts of New Orleans.” The libretto originally places the

action in the second half of the 18th century. The Met's new production sets the opera in German-occupied France in the 1940s.

The Music

The work that thrust Puccini onto the international stage as Italy's foremost opera composer, *Manon Lescaut* is built on lessons learned from Richard Wagner, translated into a thoroughly Italian, full-blooded thrill ride. The orchestra plays a prominent role in propelling the action—the waves of sound during the powerful Act II love duet are among the most blatantly erotic in opera. The tenor's entrance aria, "Tra voi, belle," is a pleasant, bouncy tune appropriate to the youth's frivolous outlook on love. Shortly after, when he has met the woman whose love transforms him, he sings the meatier "Donna non vidi mai." The fullest expression of his growth occurs at the end of Act III in a brief but explosive cry of despair. Similarly, the title character grows from a bored and pouty youth in Act II's elegant and self-pitying "In quelle trine morbide" into a fully realized adult facing untimely death in Act IV's shatteringly dramatic "Sola, perduta, abbandonata." The use of the chorus in Act III is one of the most striking moments in this opera. The tone is hypnotic, persistent, rolling like the ship that awaits the prisoners, and pulsating like a sad mockery of the earlier love duet.

Met History

Manon Lescaut premiered at the Met in 1907, with Lina Cavalieri and Enrico Caruso in the leading roles. Puccini was in the audience, on his first trip to New York. The Met also gave the Paris premiere of the opera on tour in 1910, with Arturo Toscanini conducting Caruso and the Spanish diva Lucrezia Bori in her first appearance with the company. More revivals through the 1920s followed, with New Zealand soprano Frances Alda taking on the title role opposite Beniamino Gigli. The opera fell out of the repertory in 1930 until a historic 1949 revival with Dorothy Kirsten and Jussi Björling. The following years saw notable performances of the title role from Licia Albanese (1949–1966), Renata Tebaldi (1958–1968), and Mirella Freni (1984–1990). Richard Tucker sang des Grieux between 1949 and 1968. A new staging in 1980, by Gian Carlo Menotti, featured James Levine conducting Renata Scotto and Plácido Domingo. It was most recently revived in 2008 with Karita Mattila and Marcello Giordani. Richard Eyre's new production opened February 12, 2016, with Kristine Opolais in the title role, Roberto Alagna as des Grieux, and Fabio Luisi on the podium.

Program Note

Following the world premiere of *Manon Lescaut* on February 1, 1893, the chorus of critical praise included the observation that, with his new opera, “Puccini stands revealed for what he is: one of the strongest, if not the strongest, of the young Italian opera composers.”

It was a moment of unparalleled excitement and tension in Puccini’s career. The 34-year-old composer’s artistic future hinged on the success of *Manon Lescaut*. Although he had gained prominent and influential supporters, Puccini had written only one full-scale opera to date: the *Tannhäuser*-scented *Edgar* (1888), a concoction set in the Middle Ages that failed to impress on its first outing, when it closed after a mere three performances. Prior to that had come *Le Villi* (1883), an “opera-ballet” that set the legend familiar from the ballet *Giselle*. *Le Villi* lost the one-act opera competition to which it was submitted in 1883, but it did win the admiration of Giulio Ricordi—the mighty music publisher and legendary champion of Verdi—who signed the ambitious young Puccini and began commissioning him to write operas.

With *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini needed to prove that he could live up to the promise invested in him. Yet by the time of its premiere, the sensational triumph of *Cavalleria Rusticana* (in 1890) by Pietro Mascagni, Puccini’s younger classmate at the Milan Conservatory, heralded the gritty, fast-paced aesthetic of verismo as the fashionable way forward. Mascagni seemed to have found a viable answer to the fundamental question—whither Italian opera?—that had been hanging over Puccini and his peers ever since they embarked on their careers in the last decades of the 19th century.

The tension was between a vision of opera centered on traditional Italianate qualities of the primacy of the voice and melody, and a vision of a more tightly integrated *dramma per musica*—reflecting the increasingly powerful influence of Wagner—in which the orchestra should play a more prominent role and the musical components should be linked more seamlessly. What Puccini achieved with *Manon Lescaut*, and demonstrated as another possible path forward to his doubters, went well beyond enjoying the first undiluted triumph of his career—a triumph that made his name internationally. (Indeed, no subsequent Puccini opera met with such combined critical and popular acclaim at its premiere.) More fundamentally, he arrived at a synthesis of influences from Wagner and Verdi, but one unmistakably rooted in the aesthetic values of the Italian opera tradition. Much of the excitement and passion that fuel *Manon Lescaut*’s music derives from the sense that Puccini is beginning to discover his full powers here.

When *Manon Lescaut* was produced at Covent Garden in 1894, George Bernard Shaw—then employed as a music critic—declared, “Puccini looks to me more like the heir of Verdi than any of his rivals.” That claim—to be the legitimate successor to Verdi—had indeed been the real prize Puccini coveted and the image for which Ricordi had been grooming his young protégé. It was certainly no coincidence that Ricordi orchestrated the premiere of *Falstaff* (at La Scala) to occur a week after that of *Manon Lescaut*, which was secured for

the Teatro Regio in Turin. Even more, the publisher encouraged companies (by means of a huge discount) to rent *Falstaff* contingent on also producing Puccini's new opera.

Puccini was convinced that with *Edgar* his efforts had been hamstrung by a defective libretto. Following the sour experience of that collaboration, he determined to play an active part in shaping *Manon Lescaut*'s libretto, beginning a pattern of interventionism (and resulting strife) with his librettists that he would follow from that point on. Ricordi, an inveterate artistic matchmaker who had shepherded the productive pairing of the "retired" Verdi with Arrigo Boito, wanted to encourage a partnership between his young composer and the distinguished playwright Giuseppe Giacosa, but Puccini was uninterested in the original story, set in Russia, that Giacosa began working on. Ricordi in turn tried in vain to dissuade Puccini from his sudden enthusiasm for taking up *Manon Lescaut* because of the popularity and hence potential rivalry of *Manon*, Jules Massenet's French opera of 1884 based on the same source. The riposte attributed to Puccini is often quoted: "Why shouldn't there be two operas about her? A woman like Manon can have more than one lover."

It's not surprising that he recognized so much potential in the source, *L'Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*, a scandalous and hugely popular novel published in 1731 by the Abbé Prévost (1697–1763), who spent part of his life as a priest and Benedictine monk. The motivating force of Eros in this material, mixed with Puccini's recent, excited discoveries of Wagner, promised a potent musico-dramatic synergy. To stimulate the composer's imagination from another direction, Ricordi had paid for Puccini to make several pilgrimages in the 1880s to the new Wagnerian temple in Bayreuth; one mission was to observe the production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, since Ricordi's house had acquired the rights in Italy and was looking ahead to the Italian premiere.

Nowhere in Puccini's operas is the influence of Wagner more palpable than in *Manon Lescaut*: in his distinctive adaptation of the leitmotif technique, his harmonic language (in the Intermezzo between the second and third acts in particular), and in both the fevered passion and desperation of the love music, with its echoes of *Tristan und Isolde*. Puccini was convinced that he had something fresh to say with this material: Massenet, he told one of his librettists working on the project, "feels it as a Frenchman, with powder and minuets. I will feel it as an Italian, with desperate passion."

Manon Lescaut underwent a remarkably complicated genesis of several years, though Puccini would later say that it was "the only one of my operas that never caused me any worry." Initially, a librettist team was put together comprising Marco Praga, who had written a successful play for the actress Eleanora Duse (though he had no opera experience), and the poet Domenico Oliva. Puccini insisted on micro-managing their work, continually changing his mind and demanding rewrites, and he eventually alienated Praga. Ricordi then gingerly asked Giacosa to consult (although the playwright's original idea

for a collaboration had been rejected by Puccini) and even enlisted help from Ruggero Leoncavallo, the composer and librettist of *Pagliacci*. At a later stage, the writer Luigi Illica was brought on board to rework the libretto-in-progress.

Manon Lescaut thus marks the first time Puccini worked on an opera with both Giacosa and Illica, the team that would be responsible for the libretti for his three biggest hits (*La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*). Even Puccini and Ricordi crafted some verses for the final libretto; in the end, so many contributions had gone into and been dropped from the heavily rewritten text that it was decided to list no one as the libretto's official author.

One key challenge any staging of *Manon Lescaut* faces is to make theatrical sense of the abrupt transitions from one act to the next, each of which calls for a striking change of setting. The desert of the last act, remarks Richard Eyre, the director of the Met's new production, evokes "a metaphorical desert, a world of desolation." Also crucial to any interpretation is how to make psychological and emotional sense of the glaring inconsistencies of the title character. While all the others revolve around and react to Manon, she herself is the most contradictory and mutable of Puccini's creations—as well as the first in the gallery of his unforgettable heroines.

Each of the four acts presents Manon in a different light as we witness her suddenly shift—rather than develop—from an unsophisticated country girl who is ready to be swept away by true love and who becomes "dazzled by the big city," as Eyre puts it. Manon's subsequent incarnations show her as a pleasure-addicted courtesan, a degraded outcast, and, finally and too late, a tragically aware woman. It is precisely in this extended scene—a scene essentially lacking in external action—that Puccini lavishes his powerful technique of musical reminiscence. Motifs heard earlier in the opera come back in painful replay as Manon assesses what has brought her to this extremity.

At this point, Puccini has taken us furthest from where the love between Manon and des Grieux started: the "new enchantment" the Chevalier promised in his first duet with Manon has become inescapable nightmare. All of the social contexts presented with considerable musico-dramatic detail up until now vanish in the final act. In this impossible landscape, Manon cries out that she has come to understand at last a love that "will not die," expiring in a Liebestod that offers no comforting transcendence. Love at the breaking point: portraying this, Puccini found the inspiration for an intensity of expression that set the course of his entire career.

—Thomas May

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