New Zealand Symphony Orchestra

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Jean Yves Ossonce

Jean Yves Ossonce was born in 1960, took a degree in musicology at the University of Tours, later studying as a conductor with Rafael Kubelik and Jean Fournet. His earlier career was in smaller theatres and in 1982 he was appointed musical director of the Grand Théâtre in Tours. He has conducted many operas by composers ranging from Terrasse and Debussy to Donizetti, Verdi and Rossini and has regularly conducted at the opera-houses of Avignon, Rennes, Metz, Mulhouse, Anger and Marseille, as well as in England, notably for English National Opera North, for which he conducted Chabrier’s opera L’Etoile. La vie parisienne, which he conducted for Opéra de Lyon, was filmed by French television and later issued on laser disc.
Jules Massenet (1842 - 1912)
Héroïade (Ballet Suite)
Suite No. 1
Suite No. 2: Scènes hongroises
Suite No. 3: Scènes dramatiques

Jules Massenet was born on 12th May 1842 at Montaud, near Saint-Etienne, and was given the baptismal names of Jules Emile Frédéric, although he always hated his first name. He was the youngest child of the family and had eleven brothers and sisters, including the children of his father by his first marriage. The latter, a graduate of the Ecole Polytechnique and a staff officer, who had resigned his commission after the defeat of Napoleon, had taken as his second wife Eléonore-Adélaïde Royer de Marancé, daughter of a well-to-do official and known, at least, to the Duchesse d'Angoulême, daughter of Louis XVI. Massenet's family, therefore, belonged to the established provincial bourgeoisie, still attached to the grandiose national ideals of Napoleon. In 1848 Massenet's father, owner of an iron-foundry, lost his fortune, a situation aggravated by his ill-health. In consequence he decided to move to Paris with his whole family. In October 1852, Jules Massenet, now only nine years old, entered the Conservatoire, where he studied with Savard and with Laurent, while continuing his normal schooling. In 1859 he won the first piano prize and went on to study harmony with Henri Reber, who advised him to become a composition pupil of Ambroise Thomas.

Existing now in precarious financial circumstances, Massenet found various means of earning money. He played the piano in cafés, taught music in private schools and even played in various orchestras as a timpanist or triangle-player. He possessed considerable energy, witness his enthusiasm for composition. At each lesson at the Conservatoire he appeared with a new waltz, a fragment of an opera, an overture or part of a symphony. It is said that he never lost a chance to compose, even sketching music on the surface of his orchestral timpani.

In 1863 Massenet won the first prize for fugue and a first Grand Prix de Rome with his cantata David Rizzo. This latter award allowed him to spend two years in Rome at the Villa Medici, according to custom. There he met Liszt, who introduced him to Mme de Sainte-Marie, whose daughter became his piano pupil. Two years later, on 8th October 1866, he married her. During his time abroad Massenet travelled in Italy and also visited Hungary and Germany. These years brought a symphonic Overture, a Requiem and fragments that were later used for the sacred drama Marie-Magdeleine.

From 1866 onwards Massenet's music began to be performed in Paris, notably his suite Pompeï, on 24th February of that year, but it was a year before his work was heard in the theatre. His comic opera La Grand Tante was staged at the Opéra-comique on 3rd April 1867. Its lack of success is seen in the fact that it was only given fourteen performances - Esclarmoule, for example, received a hundred. In 1870, with the outbreak of war with Prussia, the composer joined the Garde nationale, putting aside the unfinished opera Méduse. His comic opera Don César de Bazan was staged after the war but was not well received by the public. On the other hand in 1873 his serious work, the oratorio Marie-Magdeleine, won a lasting success. Three years later Massenet was honoured with the Légion d'honneur. At the age of 36 he became professor of composition at the Conservatoire. A month later, in November 1878, he became a member of the Institut de France, the summit of public recognition.

Massenet's subsequent career brought intense activity as a composer and as a teacher. He always rose early, usually at 5.00 a.m., and was responsible for the training of a generation of French composers that included Gustave Charpentier, Florent Schmitt, Alfred Bruneau, Charles Koechlin, Ernest Chausson, Guy Ropartz and Reynaldo Hahn. At the death of Ambroise Thomas in 1896 he was offered the position of director of the Conservatoire, which he refused, resigning his teaching position in order to devote himself to his own affairs. He was much honoured during this latter part of his life. In
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1888 he became an officer of the Légion d'honneur, in 1895 a commander and in 1899 grand officer. He lived principally in Paris, with summers spent in an old house at Egreville. On 13th August 1912, a date that he would have found ominous, he suddenly died during a visit to Paris to see a doctor.

Massenet had sought success and found it. The price he paid for this is seen in his reputation for writing music that seems at times facile. In fact he boasted a formidable technique, a reflection of his encyclopedic knowledge and incredible facility in writing. His compositions are very varied. Some operas are based on novels - Manon, Werther, Esclarmonde and Don Quichotte - others on stories, such as Cendrillon. Others again are drawn from history, such as Hérodiade. Nevertheless it is the pieces stigmatised as light that are the best known. There is no doubt, however, that Massenet can still surprise us, and if his music for the theatre seems the major part of his output, casting him as one of the great French opera-composers, it should be remembered that he also wrote nearly 200 songs, sacred dramas and oratorios, as well as orchestral works. This last category includes a piano concerto, as well as the very varied orchestral suites.

The subject of Hérodiade was under discussion with the Italian publisher Ricordi as early as 1877. A scenario was prepared by the writer Angelo Zanardini and Massenet continued to hope for a first performance of his new opera at La Scala, which in the event mounted the opera three months after the première in Brussels at the Théâtre de la Monnaie, an occasion attended by four hundred enthusiasts who had travelled from Paris. The work had been completed by the end of 1879, while the orchestral scoring occupied Massenet for another eight months. Whatever competition there may have been from other opera-houses for a chance to stage Hérodiade, it had been refused by the Paris Opéra, possibly because of the nature of the subject. In a version markedly different from that of the Bible and that of Oscar Wilde, the opera treats the story of Herod, Hérodiades (Hérodiade), Salome and St John the Baptist. John objects to the marriage of Herod and his brother's widow Herodias. Herod has fallen in love with Salome, apparently motherless, who has followed John to Jerusalem, her love for him openly declared. The priests accuse John of heresy, but Herod wishes to save him, as a possibly useful ally. John, however, is imprisoned and when Salome intercedes for him with Herod, declaring her love, the latter gives up any attempt to save either of them. Vitellius, the Roman pro-consult, and his followers are entertained by Herod with the dances that form the orchestral suite from the opera, interrupted by the news of John's execution and Salome's attempt to kill Herodias, who now reveals that she is her mother. In despair Salome kills herself. The dances that form the divertissement in the final scene of the opera are strongly characterized, with all their eroticism.

Massenet's orchestral suites go back to the mid-1860s. The first suite was written in Venice in 1865 and first performed on 24th March 1867 at a Pasdeloup concert. It was listed as Symphonie en fa in the official report, when it was submitted as a necessary envol from Italy, in fulfilment of the terms of the Prix de Rome. An early work, the suite nevertheless demonstrates the composer's command of sensual richness and dramatic subtlety that would contribute to the fascinating opera Esclarmonde or the brilliant Cendrillon. In 1868 after a further performance of the suite by Pasdeloup the critic Albert Wolff found an opportunity for wit at Massenet's expense, claiming such a poor reception for what he described as a symphony that the wretched little thing had to be carried off to the nearest chemist's to be revived and then taken home again by its composer. Controversy followed, with Massenet himself insisting that the work was a suite, not a symphony, and the eminent Théodore Dubois complaining at the cruel treatment of a young composer by an established critic. The four movements open with a Pastorale leading to a fugue, followed by generally gentle variations, a fine evocation of night in a Nocturne and an energetic final movement that eventually returns to the pastoral theme of the opening.
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The other orchestral suites are generally descriptive, in one way or another. The second, Scènes hongroises, was first performed by Pasdeloup in November 1871 and welcomed by the critic Arthur Pougin in somewhat patronising terms as "picturesque". Massenet explained in a letter to a friend that the suite was in fact an orchestral arrangement of four piano pieces for four hands and something he himself did not value very highly, although he was happy with the orchestration: at this time he still had in mind the composition of a symphony, but he withdrew his only attempt at the form, after hearing a reading under Pasdeloup, who held Tuesday morning rehearsals of new compositions, from which he would choose items for his popular Sunday concerts. The suite is given the programme of a Hungarian wedding: Entrée en forme de danse, Intermède, Adieu à la fiancée, Cortège, Bénédiction nuptiale and Sortie de l'église. (Entry in the form of a dance, Intermezzo, Farewell to the Betrothed, Procession and Nuptial Blessing, Leaving the Church). There is an opening Magyar dance, a gentle Intermède, a forthright farewell to the betrothed and a splendidly orchestrated simulation of the church organ in the wedding procession and blessing, before the couple leave the church.

The third of Massenet's suites, Scènes dramatiques, was written in the summer and early autumn of 1874, based on Shakespeare. It was first performed under Ernest Deldevez at the Concerts du Conservatoire in January 1875 and later formed part of a Pasdeloup programme. The original third movement, Ronde nocturne dans le jardin de Juliette was dropped, to form part of a set of Improvisations for piano. The remaining three movements start with La Tempête (Ariel et les esprits) (The Tempest: Ariel and the Spirits), followed by Le Sommeil de Desdémona (The sleep of Desdemona) and Macbeth (Les sorciers; Le festin; L'apparition; Couronnement du Roi Malcolm; Fanfares) (Macbeth: the witches; the banquet; the ghost; crowning of King Malcolm; fanfares). These original titles were changed by the composer into the less specific Prélude et divertissement, Mélodrame and Scène finale.
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The first movement opens with an impressive storm, reflecting the event that is at the heart of Shakespeare’s play. From this the mercurial Ariel and other spirits of the island emerge. The dream of Desdemona won the most applause at the early performances of the suite, an evocation of the tender innocence of the tragic heroine and of the fate that awaits her at the hands of her jealous husband Othello. The third movement opens dramatically with the thunder, lightning and rain suggested by the witches who meet Macbeth as he comes from battle. The banquet given by Macbeth, who, having murdered the king, has now usurped the throne of Scotland, is presented in grandiose terms, before the appearance of the ghost of the murdered Banquo, visible only to his murderer, Macbeth. The movement ends as Malcolm, son of the old king, is crowned king, after the defeat and death of Macbeth.
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Recorded at Lower Hutt Town Hall, Wellington, New Zealand in July 1994.

Producer: Murray Khouri
Engineer: Frank Douglas
Music Notes: Keith Anderson

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