

Manon Lescaut première 1893

GIACOMO PUCCINI (1858-1924)

Libretto by Leoncavallo etc, based on the Abbé Prévost novel

Running time: 2 hours 4 mins

Performed by FLEMISH OPERA in 1991

Manon Lescaut	<i>Miriam Gauci</i>	Soprano
Chevalier des Grieux	<i>Antonio Ordóñez</i>	Tenor
Lescaut, sergeant of the King's Guards	<i>Jan Danckaert</i>	Baritone
Geronte di Ravoir, Treasurer-General	<i>Jules Bastin</i>	Bass
Edmondo, a student [etc]	<i>Barry Ryan</i>	Tenor
Conductor	<i>Silvio Varviso</i>	
Director	<i>Robert Carsen</i>	

France, plus a Louisiana desert during the 18th century

SynopsisACT 1: A square in Amiens.

A student Edmondo and his companions are interrupted by Des Grieux who mocks love before joining the others in praise of carefree pleasure. When a coach arrives, Geronte – a rich elderly adventurer – alights with Manon and her brother Lescaut. Des Grieux is captivated by Manon, and soon contrives an encounter in which he discovers that she has to enter a convent the next day. As Lescaut calls Manon into the inn, Des Grieux persuades her to meet him later. Left alone, the young man muses over Manon's beauty and his awakening love for her.

Geronte admits to Lescaut that he too is interested in Manon, and he plans to take her off to Paris – with Lescaut's blessing. Edmondo overhears the plot to abduct Manon, and warns Des Grieux who convinces Manon of his love, and also persuades her to use Geronte's waiting carriage to run off to Paris. Geronte is furious that his own plot has been foiled, but Lescaut calms him, assuring him that Manon will again be available once Des Grieux's money runs out.

ACT 2: A luxurious boudoir in Geronte's Parisian house.

Manon has now left Des Grieux, tempted away by Geronte's money. Although she relishes her new-found wealth, she nostalgically recounts to Lescaut the simple joys of her humble life with Des Grieux. After a dancing lesson, Manon is left alone. Des Grieux then appears – having finally located Manon's whereabouts – and angrily reproaches her for her desertion. In an extended love duet, she gradually reawakens Des Grieux's love for her, but they are discovered by Geronte. When Manon taunts the old man, he retires with a vague threat.

Des Grieux urges her to run away with him, but she lingers reluctantly over her jewels, causing him to despair over her foolishness. As they at last prepare to depart, Lescaut appears, warning that Geronte has denounced Manon, so the police are on their way to arrest her. Manon again delays, attempting to gather up some of her treasures, and in a hectic climax Geronte bursts in and triumphantly sends her off in the hands of the police.

[REFRESHMENTS]

ACT 3: The port of Le Havre (preceded by an orchestral intermezzo).

Manon is about to be deported. Lescaut and Des Grieux are waiting for their dawn rescue attempt. Des Grieux locates the room where Manon is imprisoned, and tells her about their plan through a window. But their attempt quickly fails. The convicted women are brought out one at a time, and the crowd comments on them individually. Manon and Des Grieux sing a

bitter farewell. At the last moment, as the women are led towards the Louisiana-bound convict ship, Des Grieux attempts a final desperate rescue, and then flings himself at the feet of the captain, pleading to be allowed to accompany his beloved. The captain takes pity on him, lets him come aboard, and gives orders for departure.



ACT 4: The Louisiana desert as night is falling.

Manon and Des Grieux are again on the run. Manon – in the last stages of exhaustion – faints, and Des Grieux tries frantically to revive her. He goes off to look for water, while Manon bemoans her fate. Soon after Des Grieux returns empty-handed, she falls dead at his feet, singing until the end that her love will never die.



Operatic Context

Manon Lescaut became Puccini's first international success. He'd written earlier works during the previous six years. This was coincidentally exactly the period that had elapsed since Massenet completed his own opera *Manon*, based on the same source. [Daniel Auber's earlier *Manon Lescaut* was premièreed 28 years before Massenet's work, in the same Opéra-Comique venue.] One of the libretto challenges was to make Puccini's work sufficiently distinctive, to avoid any charge of plagiarism. Puccini's sponsor Ricordi exploited his Prévost publishing rights to delay the first Italian performance of Massenet's *Manon* until Puccini's rival work was ready to be staged!

Influences that helped to form Puccini's mature style are revealed within his *Manon Lescaut*. Some of the Act Two love duet, for example, recalls Wagner's harmonic language (particularly in *Tristan*), and the close of this act is strongly reminiscent of middle-period Verdi. Elsewhere the slightly more recent Italian influence of Ponchielli can also be detected. However most of the music demonstrates Puccini's emerging mature style. *Manon Lescaut* additionally shows how the composer could carefully shape individual acts, as well as his growing awareness of large-scale musical structures.

Act One establishes a precedent which he repeated in subsequent operas: hectic action alternated with moments of lyrical repose. Act Two on the other hand contains two sharply contrasting ambiances: a nostalgic 18th century recreation is followed by a sudden plunge into the torridly expressive world of Manon and her rejected lover.

In Act Three Puccini successfully achieves a large structure within which an original ensemble – while Manon and fellow prisoners are paraded before the public – is framed by two action sequences. The dramatic pacing of Act Four is less assured than previous movements, but this doesn't appreciably undermine a conclusion that Puccini first found his authentic voice as a musical dramatist in *Manon Lescaut*.

Manon has some of the suffering martyred characteristics of Puccini's subsequent heroines: Mimi, Tosca, Butterfly, Angelica and Liú. Curiously the Turin première of *Manon Lescaut* coincided with the initial La Scala performance of Verdi's final masterpiece *Falstaff*. *Manon Lescaut* has become the fifth most recorded of all Puccini's operas.

Who wrote *L'Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*?

Abbé Prévost, as he's generally become known, was born in 1697. After two brief spells in the army - as well as a love affair - he began eight years of vocational life in 1720. Prévost began to write during this period, before he left the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés without permission. While in London he acquired a wide knowledge of English history and literature.

After one year Prévost moved to the Netherlands, where his works included the famous Manon Lescaut story that was eventually published as *Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*. This book was eagerly read – chiefly in pirated copies – as it was originally forbidden inside France. In 1733 he left the Hague for London in the company of a lady (who was of doubtful character, according to Prévost's enemies).



In the autumn of 1734 Prévost was reconciled with the Benedictines, and he was received into the monastery of La Croix-Saint-Leufroy in the diocese of Évreux. One year later he became almoner to the Prince de Conti, and in 1754 he obtained the priory of St Georges de Gesnes. He continued to produce novels and – apart from a brief one year exile in Brussels and Frankfurt – he generally lived at Chantilly, until his sudden death in 1763.

Selected Musical Biographies

MANON: MIRIAM GAUCI is a Maltese soprano who studied in Italy. After a La Scala début she begun her international career singing several roles in western USA.

DES GRIEUX: ANTONIO ORDÓÑEZ was born in Madrid, and first won international fame as Pinkerton in *Madam Butterfly*.

GERONTE: JULES BASTIN from Belgium performed at the main European and American venues during the early 1970s. He died in 1996.

CONDUCTOR: SILVIO VARVISO studied in Vienna, and made his début in 1944 in St.Gallen. By the 1960s this Swiss conductor already had an exceptional reputation, regularly working with world class singers in major European venues.