

May 12, 2022 – Jules Massenet's *Manon*

On this week's *Thursday Night Opera House*, we're presenting Massenet's five-act opera comique *Manon*, which was based on the 1731 novel *L'histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (*The Story of the Chevalier des Grieux and Manon Lescaut*) by the Abbé (Abbot) Antoine François Prévost. It was first performed at the Opéra-Comique in Paris on January 19, 1884. Earlier, in 1856, Daniel-François-Esprit Auber had composed an opera comique entitled *Manon Lescaut*. In 1893, an opera by the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini also entitled *Manon Lescaut* and based on the same novel was premiered. A year later, Massenet wrote a one-act sequel, *Le portrait de Manon* (*The Portrait of Manon*), involving the Chevalier des Grieux as an older man.

The task of the opera's protagonist is daunting. Manon is the only female protagonist and almost everything revolves around her. She sings five arias, many duets and ensembles. The diversity of the portrayal presents the leading lady with a difficult task. Although Manon is a simple person in the positive sense, she has to show a different facet in each of the five acts.

In 1721 France, the high-spirited Manon (soprano **Ileana Cotrubas**) arrives at a country inn to meet her cousin Lescaut (baritone **Gino Quilico**), who's been charged with escorting her to a convent. There, she encounters the Chevalier des Grieux (tenor **Alfredo Kraus**), with whom she immediately falls in love, and they run away to Paris. Lescaut disapproves of the liaison but the Chevalier assures him of his honorable intentions; however, his father, Comte (Count) des Grieux (bass-baritone **José Van Dam**), also disapproves and has his son abducted.

Manon allows herself to be tempted by a life of luxury with the wealthy Monsieur de Brétigny (baritone **Jean-Marie Fremau**), but when she learns that Chevalier de Grieux has entered a seminary, she rushes to him and wins him back. He's accused of cheating at cards and the two are arrested. The Chevalier is released after his father's intercession but Manon is condemned to deportation as a prostitute. On the road to the port city of Le Havre, the Chevalier attempts to rescue her, but Manon's strength fails and she dies in his arms.

Michel Plasson conducts the Capitole de Toulouse Orchestra and Chorus in this 1983 EMI Classics recording, CD number 749610.