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Manon (review)

Bruno Forment

Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 624-625 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0286>

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conspirators, an obligatory farewell duet, and even a ballad sung by Froila on the leg-end of the “Cloud Maiden,” a trope on the Lorelei myth. In an interesting departure from Singspiel tradition, Schubert replaces spoken dialogue with accompanied recitatives, imbues the texture with beautiful melodies, borrows intricate Rossinian-inspired ensemble scenes, and intimates a move toward the emerging romantic tradition.

Endrik Wottrich and Luba Orgonasova are charismatic and vocally wonderful in their respective eponymous roles. The role of the deposed King Froila is sung superbly by Thomas Hampson, whose made-up old and feeble look contrasts with his remarkable vocal prowess. Nikolaus Harnoncourt leads an effective performance of the Chamber Orchestra of Europe, an ensemble that was founded in 1981 by young alumni from the European Union Youth Orchestra. Redoubtable director Jürgen Flimm (who will assume the position of artistic director of the Deutsche Staatsoper in Berlin, after his recent resignation from the Salzburg Festival) undertook the extremely challenging task of extracting every bit of dramatic nuance out of this otherwise static libretto. There was very little Flimm could do to enhance scenes of sub-standard dramatic coherence, such as the dramatically unconvincing series of tableaux of Act Three. Florence von Gerkan’s austere cos-

tumes are an appealing mixture of period-inspired and contemporary-looking outfits that complement Erich Wonder’s minimalist and dimly-lit *set*.

It is no wonder the opera received few performances after its 1854 premiere in Weimar by Franz Liszt, and it is thanks to the Schubert bicentennial that this production was filmed at the Theater an der Wien in 1997. The DVD includes a booklet with biographical notes on the performers, a short essay on the opera, and an informative track-by-track synopsis by Richard Lawrence. For Schubert lovers (who have the option of either English or German subtitles), this is a unique opportunity to view a staged production of this opera on DVD, even if it comes with a delay of more than a decade since its filming. General opera goers will probably find it difficult to add *Alfonso und Estrella* on their list of must-see operas. Music scholars, however, may have one more opportunity to lament the fact that, had Schubert been able to collaborate with librettists of a higher caliber, and had he lived longer and under more auspicious circumstances, he might have provided us with the missing link in the great tradition of *romantische Oper* between Weber and Wagner. But these are too many hypotheses for this production to undo.

EFTYCHIA PAPANIKOLAOU
Bowling Green State University

Jules Massenet. *Manon*. DVD. Jesús Lopez-Cobos / Orchestra and Choirs of the Opéra national de Paris. With Renée Fleming, Marcelo Álvarez, Jean-Luc Chaignaud, Alain Vernhes, Michel Sénéchal, Franck Ferrari. Directed by Gilbert Deflo. [Halle (Saale), Germany]: Arthaus Musik, 2008, 2001. 107 003. \$39.99.

One century and a quarter after its premiere, *Manon* (1884) continues to hold the stage, inspiring scores of sopranos to reenact the innocent maiden’s metamorphosis into femme fatale. Speaking to this enduring success is the recent release of no fewer than three DVDs (on Virgin, Deutsche Grammophon, and Arthaus) starring such celebrities as Natalie Dessay, Anna Netrebko, and Renée Fleming. By re-issuing a classic production from the Opéra Bastille—it was premiered in June 1997, taped by France 2 in 2001, and first re-

leased by TDK in 2003—Arthaus perhaps played it safe, yet no opera fan will regret to have an audio-visual souvenir of Renée Fleming sharing the stage with Marcelo Álvarez (Des Grieux), Franck Ferrari (de Brétigny), and even the veteran Michel Sénéchal (Guillot de Morfontaine).

Musically speaking, the Arthaus *Manon* leaves little to be desired. Lopez-Cobos’ conducting may lack the analytic precision of Barenboim’s (on the DG version), still it is colorful throughout and in line with Massenet’s delicate blend of opéra-

comique, grand opéra, and Wagnerism. The singing attains levels appropriate for the first stage of France, with Fleming delivering top renderings of "Adieu, notre petite table" (Act II) and "Je marche sur tous les chemins" (Act III, tableau 1), and Jean-Luc Chaignaud nailing the one highlight after the other with his piqué interpretation of Lescaut. Álvarez' performance is disappointing, though, for while the Argentinean tenor is blessed with a physiognomy akin to Des Grieux' creator, Talazon, his vocal qualities lag far behind, for example, Rolando Villazón's (on Virgin and DG).

Singing *Manon* is one matter, staging it proves another. The mixture of frivolous spectacle and heart-throbbing drama in Meilhac and Gille's libretto calls for a dizzying alternation of lavish tableaux (the "Hôtellerie," "Promenade de Cours-la-Reine," and "Hôtel Transsylvanie"), and solitary scenes (the "Appartement de Des Grieux," "Saint-Sulpice" church, and "Route au Havre"). Deflo and Orlandi appear to have elaborated on this utter discrepancy by combining dark, abstract architectures with brightly colored historic costumes, early dancing, and such anecdotal details as acrobats, *commedia dell'arte*

characters, and Baroque dancers. Little in Orlandi's minimal galleries reminds us of the luxurious salons dear to the Belle Époque, but neither are we saddled with the unified background so endemic to contemporary production budgets. Quite the contrary: the continuous vacillations of Orlandi's sets—do we really need to see the stage shift every ten or so minutes?—can make one long for more unified, less gimmicky backgrounds. All the more odd, and contrasting in this respect, is the static frontality of the singers' direction, as if Deflo intended to read *Manon* back into its historical milieu, the Regency. *Manon*, for instance, is staged as an eighteenth-century prima donna, courting the Parisian "home crowd" with a showy performance that lacks the fourth-wall sophistication of, for example, Vincent Patterson's recent staging for the Los Angeles Opera. In short, the Arthaus *Manon* will no doubt provide meat and drink to the home video spectator, but die-hard Massenet fans may wish to complement this version with an alternative that hinges more on drama.

BRUNO FORMENT
Ghent University

Englebert Humperdinck. *Hänsel und Gretel*. DVD (Widescreen ed.). Markus L. Frank / Anhaltische Philharmonie Dessau. Directed for television and video by Brooks Riley. With Ludmil Kuntschew, Alexandra Petersamer, Sabine Noack, Cornelia Marschall, Viktorija Kaminskaite. [United States]: Arthaus Musik, 2008, 2007. 101321. \$25.99.

Performances of Englebert Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* have generally followed traditional staging and setting; Act I finding the children at home, Act II in the woods, and Act III at the witch's house. Johannes Felsenstein's Dessau production breaks with tradition, choosing to focus on the abject poverty and domestic abuse inherent in the original fairytale. In Felsenstein's version, Hansel and Gretel never leave their home. Hiding under their beds, they bear witness to their mother's wretchedness, their father's drunken abusiveness, and both parents' naïve superstition of things that go bump in the woods. The second act finds the children still under their beds. Leaving the children at home emphasizes their fear of domestic vi-

olence and deprivation. The severity of their situation is underscored in Gretel's text; she sings fearfully, "We cannot just linger here." Her words are all the more tragic because the children aren't in the woods trying to get home; they are *home* trying to get away. The children fall asleep in their own beds and dream of fourteen angels and a loving mother and father. In the third act, Hansel and Gretel awake on a Christmas Eve scene. The confrontation with the witch becomes a game played with their adoring father. The act ends with the "adoption" of the fourteen angels (children representing various nations) from the second act. They gather around a table, now big enough for all of them, as Father sings of placing trust in God.