

AN OPERA GUIDE TO

MANON LESCAUT

ANDREA BOCELLI
LE OPERE

by Giorgio De Martino

WHAT IT IS

It is an Opera in four acts: a romantic story, overflowing with musicality and passion, focused on the eternal **struggle between vice and virtue**. It is a bitter tale that opens onto a love at first sight between two young people (blossomed with a thousand difficulties) that ends in a tragedy, in the desolation of a desert overseas.

It is an Opera full of **sensuality**, that “speaks Italian” but that also looks at experiences on the other side of the Alps, to **Wagner** above all, but also to Skrjabin and De Falla.

The main character is a girl who is only eighteen, **Manon Lescaut**. A *sinner without malice*, (as described by its creator, the French writer **Antoine François Prévost**, (whom we will discuss), unaware and irresponsible incarnation of evil, whose charm inevitably leads to ruin those who approach her.

WHAT IT TELLS

In the eighteenth-century France, the student Des Grieux falls in love with Manon, who has arrived in Amiens from the country along with her brother Lescaut, and is on her way to a convent in Paris. The old and wealthy Geronte is struck by the beauty of Manon and plans to abduct her. But she escapes to Paris with Des Grieux.

In the 2° act we see how Manon has preferred the comfortable life that Geronte can offer her. But the arrival of Des Grieux rekindles their passion. Geronte takes revenge by denouncing Manon and has her arrested for theft and prostitution.

In the 3° act we find her imprisoned, ready to be deported to America. All the attempts made by her brother and her fiancé to free her, have no success. Des Grieux anyway manages to follow his lover, by embarking as a hub.

In the 4° act the two lovers, are once again fugitives. They are in a desert American land and Manon exhausted, dies in the arms of her beloved.

WHO WROTE THE MUSIC

It is **Giacomo Puccini** (1858 – 1924), the heir of Verdi, the Tuscan composer who has been able to portray the late romantic spirit of the ‘800 but also the new stimuli of the first ‘900. Puccini has been able to conceive melodies of unspeakable beauty, always paying much attention to the changes in his public’s tastes, even to the new trends, constantly trying to renew his way of writing music. Curious, practical, ingenious, he performed research on the musical culture of the countries (or periods) where he was setting his operas.

Manon Lescaut is the **third opera of Puccini**, his first real masterpiece. The Tuscan composer was 35 years of age when the opera made its triumphant debut at the **teatro Regio di Torino, on February 1st 1893**. A few days later (February 9th) at the Scala in Milano was staged Falstaff, Verdi’s last Opera. A coincidence, but also a symbolic passing of the baton, that closes the nineteenth-century parable of Verdi and consecrates the genius of Puccini. A composer from Lucca who only in part accepts the end of the century musical outbursts of **Verismo**, creating **an original style of his own** (which we will find in other masterpieces like La Bohème, Tosca, Madama Butterfly, Turandot ...).

Through music he manages to capture us, telling us the complex sensitivity, the multi-faceted personality of the young passionate and frivolous Manon. Puccini deeply loves women and writes for them his most beautiful melodies. All the heroines of his operas deeply love, and live great love stories. And almost always end badly. Just like it happens in the last act of Manon Lescaut, full of melodies that we have already heard in the first three acts: a **“music of the memory”** that helps us to remember the past feelings of our heroes, making us participate, even more emotionally, to their final drama.



WHO HAS “INVENTED” MANON

“This is the best tale ever written, just like Madame Bovary is the best novel ever written.” This way, a writer described the “**Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut**”, a tale written by the abbot **Prevost** (1697-1763) between 1728 and 1731.

A fascinating and scandalous story for the times, probably the result of an experience of **lived life**. In fact, the biographical adventures of Prévost and the ones of his hero Des Grieux show obvious similarities: both of them torn between religious vocation and the desire of living life at its fullest. They were both involved in scandals, but in the end re-approached Church. (The writer became a member of the clergy and ended his life as an abbot).

The story, shortly after being published, was banned by censors, thus growing in popularity. This story of the **two young people who are rebelling against social conventions and abandon themselves to their feelings**, bursts into literature, marking a point of no return, thus foreshadowing atmospheres and themes of romanticism.

The text also contains modern features, from the **fast-paced narrative** to a particular psychological subtlety, to the realism of the setting. The success was such that Prévost, shortly before dying, issued a new version of it. In 1765 the story of Manon became a theater play. And the influence of the tale spread well beyond the eighteenth century.

THE “MOTHER” OF ALL BAD GIRLS

With Manon, Prévost inaugurates a generation of ambiguous heroines, very different from the models of virtue described in the novels of the first ‘700. Among the feminine literary characters that followed her we can include **Marguerite Gautier** the main character of the *La Dame aux camélias* by Dumas Son, but also **Carmen** by Prosper Mérimée and **Lulu** by Frank Wedekind...All of them are attractive women who, though not exactly bad, not literally vicious, bring social and moral ruin to their lovers.

The link between the masterpiece by Prévost and the *Dama delle Camelie* (and therefore *La traviata* by Verdi, which has been taken from the latter) is explicitly revealed by Dumas himself... Armand (the main character), in a dramatic moment of the story, finds a book left on the table by his beloved Marguerite...it is right the tale by Prévost, his eyes fall on the passage where Manon says: *“I swear to you my dear Cavalier, that you are the idol of my heart, and that in this world there is nobody else I could love the way I love you; but don’t you see, my poor soul, that, in our conditions fidelity is a foolish virtue”?*

To complete the picture, one more quote from the tale: *“never there was a woman less venal than her, but the fear of being without money made her feel restless. She needed leisure and entertainment. She would have not even touched money, if she could have had fun without spending any. But amusement was so essential for her that, without it you could not rely on her mood or on her intentions”.*

FIRST ACT

On the square in front of the Post Office in the town of **Amiens** (in **Picardy**, Northern France), next to an inn, we come to know a group of young cheerful students. Among them, **Edmondo** (tenore), who is joking – among the others – with his friend **Renato Des Grieux** (tenore), who is being mocked for his apparent indifference towards feelings of love. Also Des Grieux takes part in the merriment, responding to tone and ironically on the theme of love. But when comes the diligence to change horses, **Manon Lescaut** (soprano), the eighteen years old sister of **Lescaut** (baritono), a sergeant of the Royal Guard who is escorting her to Paris where the girl – considered too exuberant – will be closed in a convent as requested by her parents. Between Manon and Des Grieux it is *“love at first sight”*. She immediately accepts the appointment that the student gives her for the same evening. Meanwhile Edmondo discovers the secret project of the elderly **Geronte de Ravoire** (basso), who is also traveling on the same diligence: he has set his eyes on Manon and he is plotting with the host to have a diligence coming and secretly abduct the girl. Des Grieux foils their sinister plan and during a passionate conversation with Manon



succeeds in convincing her to escape with him. While Lescaut is at the gaming table, the two lovers jump into the carriage headed to Paris. Geronte is furious and feels cheated, but Lescaut invites him not to lose his temper: it will be easy to find Manon, in Paris. And it will be just as easy to convince her to leave a penniless young man who certainly cannot satisfy the love she feels for a life of ease and luxury.

SECOND ACT

We are in **Paris**, in the sumptuous palace of Geronte; Manon is making herself beautiful, among many servants: just like as her brother had predicted, she has soon got bored of misery and has become the lover of the rich cashier Geronte. But also luxury does not satisfy her completely; this spoilt soul in, fact, secretly regrets the poor but happy life she spent next to the student Des Grieux. Her brother Lescaut comes to visit her. Manon would like to have news of the young love she had left: so she comes to know that - because of his desire to conquer her back - he has started to attend equivocal environments, and to try his luck at the gaming tables. The living room is full of courtiers, guided by Geronte, who attend the dance lesson of Manon. After having danced a few minuets and having sung a pastoral song, Manon says good bye to the guests asking them to wait for her outside, as she has to make up herself. Once alone, Des Grieux arrives; he has finally succeeded in finding Manon. At the beginning he is furious, but the girl manages to reconquer him with her charm; and passion bursts once again between the two. Geronte returns and finds the two lovers embracing. Manon insults him mockingly, (she shows him a mirror, with embarrassing sincerity), and he goes out threatening retaliation. Lescaut bursts on the scene, warning the couple that the old man has denounced Manon. Then the situation deteriorates: the girl wastes time collecting her jewels, the police block the exits and finally arrest her.

THIRD ACT

After an instrumental piece, an orchestral interlude full of sadness, the curtain opens on the port of **Le Havre**, in Upper Normandy. Manon is imprisoned and about to be embarked as a prostitute on a ship bound for the Americas; Lescaut tells Des Grieux he has bribed a guard to free his sister. But the plot is discovered and fails. The crowd rushes into the square and watches with cruelty the the roll call of the women condemned to exile. When the deportees have to get on the ship, Des Grieux draws his sword to defend Manon, but at the sight of the Captain he throws the weapon and begs to be embarked with her. The commander, moved by the pain of the young man, enlists him as a hub. Anyhow, the two lovers can leave together.

FOURTH ACT

We are in a desert territory on the borders of the region of **New Orleans**. Also in the American town Manon's beauty and her claims have caused troubles with the Law. Again on the run, the two drag themselves, to the limit of their forces. In vain Des Grieux goes off looking for help: left alone Manon thinks to herself that death may be the only solution. But soon she recovers, giving an idea of her desperate desire to live, shouting "I do not want to die" and invoking the help of her man. To her lover, who has returned, and is next to her, asks forgiveness for all the harm she has caused to him. Manon embraces DesGrieux and she dies hugging and kissing him while whispering: "*Oblivion will overwhelm my faults...But my love will never die*".

HOW MANY MANON ON THE PENTAGRAM?

Puccini's choice to set to music the eighteenth-century work by Prévost was a brave one. After having tried in vain to get the rights to set to music the drama "Tosca" by Sardou, which was staged in 1887 (he will have to wait a dozen years to realize his project) the composer chose Manon.

But the story had already been set to music by two French composers: by **Daniel Auber** in **1856** (*Opéra-comique* on a libretto by Eugène Scribe) and above all by **Jules Massenet** in **1884**, on a libretto by Henri Meilhac e Philippe Gille. A very important score which was having a great success, in all European



leading Opera houses. Some friends of Puccini and the publisher Ricordi himself tried to dissuade him, but the answer of the composer was: *“Massenet feels her as a Frenchman, with powder and minuets. I will feel her as an Italian, with a desperate passion.”*

FOR THE LIBRETTO OF PUCCINI’S OPERA, ALMOST A COOPERATIVE

The libretto of “Manon Lescaut” by Puccini this time does not bear the signature of its author. Not because it is devoid of a “father” but rather because it has too many of them! The text in verse is handed around, among colleagues and scholars, aiming at making it original, different from the one used by Massenet. The libretto was the result of the efforts of **Marco Praga**, a playwright (of the Scapigliatura current) of **Giulio Ricordi**, of the composer **Ruggero Leoncavallo** (still hesitating between the vocations of composer and playwright), of the scholars **Domenico Oliva**, **Giuseppe Giacosa**, **Luigi Illica** ...And **Puccini** himself. Praga’s original script, written in verse by Oliva, was closer to the story as it had been dealt with by the French librettists of Massenet. But then very soon it was substantially changed because of Puccini’s requests.

In the “Italian” version, the character of DesGrioux’s father is missing, and the young man does not become an abbot. Massenet stops the Opera in Le Havre, while Puccini’s Opera has a sort of appendix, the “American” fourth act, where Manon tragically closes her life parable.

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