

Le Mage: a justified revival

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Le Mage is one of the least known of Massenet's operas. The fate of this work, forgotten by opera houses and hitherto unrecorded, is all the more curious since, despite generally adverse criticism from the press following its première at the Paris Opéra – Palais Garnier – on 16 March 1891, the work was a public success, and went on to have a run of over thirty performances, until it was suddenly taken off in October of that year. Revived in The Hague in 1896, the opera nevertheless faded into oblivion.

Adverse circumstances are to be blamed in the first place for that unexpected and unjust fate. A few months before the première, voices had been raised in vain, demanding the première in Paris of Reyer's *Salammô* instead of *Le Mage*, and the resulting controversy must have influenced the view of some of the critics. Then, shortly after the première, the music publisher Georges Hartmann, a loyal supporter of Massenet, was declared bankrupt, while the directors of the Opéra, Ritt and Gailhard, who counted heavily on the composer's reputation to overcome hostility towards them, were not reappointed. Their successor, Eugène Bertrand, was to obtain changes to his managerial obligations that enabled him to introduce the works of Wagner into the repertoire. And *Le Mage* was not really in keeping with the criteria of Wagnerian theatre, then an absolute reference. Indeed, without rejecting those criteria, Massenet went to great lengths to avoid following too closely in the footsteps of the German composer: he did this by presenting works

in which he constantly renewed his many sources of inspiration. This objective had been clear since *Manon*, and it was verifiable once more in *Le Mage*.



Massenet probably came up with the project of composing a new work for the Paris Opéra in 1887. He had recently finished *Werther* and was about to compose *Esclarmonde* for the Opéra-Comique, while at the same time seeking a new libretto. Initial exchanges with Victorien Sardou concerning a plot centred on Mexico and the Spanish Conquest came to nothing, but Massenet retained the idea of using an 'exotic' subject. On the advice of the directors of the Opéra and his publisher, he teamed up in 1888 with Jean Richepin (1849-1926), for whose play, *Nana-Sahib*, he had provided the incidental music in 1883. The project was all the more attractive in that it brought together a composer and a confirmed writer, thus prefiguring the collaborative work of Bruneau and Zola, Maeterlinck and Debussy.

Richepin proposed a work set in Bactria (a region now spread over several countries, including Iran) at the legendary time of the founding of Zoroastrianism, around 2500 BCE. Zoroaster was to develop Mazdaism, with its two opposing forces: Good, represented by fire and light, and Evil, with deception as its worst incarnation. Taking his inspiration from that religion, Richepin, as he later stated, aimed 'to show the pre-eminence of the idea of truth succeeding in subjugating the heart and conquering the mind'. While containing a wealth of (sometimes commonplace) lyrical formulas, his libretto, nevertheless remains dependent on a certain tradition and on conventional dramatic situations, combining various influences including those of works such as Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* or Verdi's *Aïda* – of which Massenet was particularly fond. So the composer was bound to be charmed by an exotic subject, also dealing with the psychological hold of religions and with passionate love – the latter already the subject of *Le Roi de Lahore*, and later to be that of *Hérodiade*.

Massenet composed his opera between March and December 1889. In March 1890 he then changed the ending: the burning of the temple of Jahi replaced a more intimate scene in which Varedha, before dying, had obtained the forgiveness of Anahita and Zarastra. He then worked hard on the orchestration, completing it in August, shortly before the first rehearsals.



Composing for the Paris Opéra meant complying with a number of rules, especially since the libretto had to include several set scenes. Massenet submitted without any qualms to the criteria of grand opera, the dramatic workings and structural principles of which might have seemed outdated at the time of Wagnerism. Using a libretto in five acts dominated by intensely dramatic action, *Le Mage* includes the traditional ballet, vast ensemble pieces (of the *concertato* type in Act II) and important parts for the chorus, supported by an orchestra with larger than usual brass and percussion sections (with some of the latter adding exotic touches that are particularly noticeable in the dances).

The opera also required first-rate singers with good high registers (often solicited). The title role, probably intended for Jean de Reszké, calls for a strong tenor, of the type capable of singing roles such as *Le Cid* or *Samson*. The parts of Anahita and Varedha require, respectively, a dramatic coloratura soprano and a grand soprano (or a mezzo with strong high notes). Written for the American soprano Sybil Sanderson, for whom Massenet had recently composed the title role in *Esclarmonde* and was later to write that of *Thaïs*, the part of Anahita requires a voice with an ample mid-range and crystal-clear high notes (the model here might have been Halévy's Princess Eudoxie in *La Juive*, a role in which Marie-Lureau-Escalais excelled, although in the end she took the part of Anahita). For Varedha the most immediate references are those of *Hérodiade*, but also *Ortrud* (*Lohengrin*), *Kundry* (*Parsifal*), *Lady Macbeth* or, in the French repertoire, *Margared* (*Le Roi d'Ys*) and *Eboli* (*Don Carlos*) – characters marked by the same devastating evilness. Massenet also remained faithful to the closed

vocal forms, such as the aria and duet, some of which, e.g. the duo for Varedha and Amru in Act II, adopt an Italian pattern and style worthy of Verdi. Zarastro is naturally favoured, with two important solos: the first one comes in Act II, with the aria 'Soulève l'ombre de ces voiles', a piece that calls to mind Gounod, and the second at the beginning of Act III, where Zarastro and the chorus come together in a great mystical scene punctuated by richly coloured harmonic and orchestral effects (the musical material for this section comes from the cantata for tenor and orchestra, *Apollon aux Muses*, which had been premièreed in England, at the Norwich Festival, in 1884). This impressive passage has its counterpart at the end of the opera, when the statue of Jahi bursts into flames following Varedha's invocation. Some were quick to compare it to the finale of *Die Walküre*, but they could quite as easily have seen it as a tribute to the ending of Auber's *La Muette de Portici* or Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète*. *Le Mage* is thus the work by Massenet that fits most perfectly into the mould of the typically French grand opera genre.



The influence of Wagner is not to be ruled out, however, for, in addition to some bold harmonic or orchestral effects, the opera is finely structured by recurring motifs. Nevertheless Massenet was following a French tradition, to which Wagner also referred, in structuring his opera by means of key themes that are more localised, taken from arias or duos, and by shorter motifs that are constantly renewed, but without being subjected to vast symphonic developments as in the works of Wagner. (Debussy was to do likewise in *Pelléas et Mélisande*.) In the latter category, two motifs play a fundamental role: the first one, firm and powerful, often taken by the wind instruments, is associated with Amru or the Daevas, while the second one, more energetic, unstable and given to the strings, accompanies evocations of Varedha or the goddess Jahi. The opening bars of Zarastro's aria 'Soulève l'ombre de ces voiles' also play an important part in the thematic cohesion of the work.

Le Mage is thus an opera written in a composite style reflecting Massenet's eclecticism, which was the touchstone of his aesthetic. But it also bears the personal stamp of its author, whose melodic idiom is instantly recognisable, especially in the love scenes: the vocal lines, sinuous and conjunct, keep very closely to the inflections of the French language, but without excluding lyrical effusion when necessary. And in that respect *Le Mage* contains some inspired episodes that undoubtedly put it on a par with other, better-known works by Massenet. Its revival is therefore necessary in that it enables us to gain a better understanding of his works as a whole.



Act II, second tableau : the underground passages of the temple of Jahi.
Paris Opéra Library and Museum.

Acte II, second tableau : les souterrains du temple de la Djahi.
Bibliothèque-Musée de l'Opéra de Paris.