

Le Mage, a Nietzschean opera?

Laurent Campellone

Published between 1883 and 1885 (Massenet's *Le Mage* was premièreed in 1891), the first three parts of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* present the figure of the prophet Zoroaster in a poetic and philosophical work – a 'fifth gospel' (Nietzsche's description), announcing the advent of the New Man. Although the book received only mild acclaim when it was first published, it was shortly taken up by the more progressive wing of the French intellectual elite, having fired its imagination. But is *Le Mage*, with Zoroaster (Zarastra) as its the central character, to be seen, like Richard Strauss's eponymous tone poem (1896), as a direct tribute to Nietzsche's work? Did Jean Richepin really intend his libretto to be a presentation of the founder of Zoroastrianism and of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*? Is *Le Mage* a Nietzschean opera? Or, for Massenet, did Zarastra symbolise something else, something of a more political nature?



NIETZSCHE'S ZARATHUSTRA

After living as a hermit, Nietzsche's Zarathustra, an epitome of the prophet, decides to leave his mountain retreat in order to pass on the wisdom accumulated during his ten years of reclusion. He announces a change in man, the advent of a New Man (the *Übermensch*); he announces the world to come, and his message is severe: 'God is dead!' – or, to be more precise, the God of the monotheistic religions is doomed. For

Nietzsche, speaking via the prophet, humanity has committed the great mistake, initiated by Socrates and Plato, of splitting the world in two, with, on the one hand, the *transcendent*, i.e. that which is above or beyond the range of normal or merely physical human experience (heaven, God), and on the other, the *immanent*, everything we see around us. Ancient metaphysics splits reality in two, with a hierarchy between those two parts: 'the afterlife' – a perfect place, better by far than Earth and life on Earth – and the 'here below', this life or world, which is imperfect. Nietzsche often identified life itself with 'will to power' – 'der Wille zur Macht', a phrase he coined – which he saw as being the basic drive in all living things. Put more simply: because he is afraid of, or has failed to come to terms with life, man invents an 'afterlife', superior to the real world, which enables him to make that real world coherent, in order to be able to accept the absurd, and no longer fear reality. In Plato, there is a world of Ideas that is in every way superior to the material world. Thus the Idea (today we would say the 'concept') of, say, a table will always be greater than any table we see or make; for the latter will only be an imperfect realisation of the Idea of the table.

However, according to Nietzsche, this scission, this invention of metaphysics, that is to say of a thing above material, physical things ('metaphysics' has, in Nietzsche, the ancient, etymological meaning of what lies outside, beside, above pure matter) then becomes the lever of a terrible power that enslaves man: metaphysics justifies all suffering by promising happiness in the afterlife. In other words, in creating a higher, immaterial world, a mythology above matter, Man has forged the tool of his enslavement: the promise of Paradise. Suffer here and you will be rewarded in the afterlife! Annihilate your life in pain and you will receive everlasting happiness! With the invention of metaphysics, Man has become a beast of burden, a 'camel', says Zarathustra. 'The camel is a beast of burden, and it represents the burdens that the laws and morality of religion place on individuals.'

The invention of metaphysics is a crime against humanity and Zarathustra comes to announce its imminent end ('God is dead!'). This

is why he is a bearer of 'good news' and why Nietzsche presents his book as a 'fifth gospel' ('gospel' meaning 'good news'). If metaphysics is going to die, says Zarathustra, it is because humanity is obliged to ask a question it would otherwise never have had to ask again: *the meaning of pain*, its significance, its material *raison d'être*. Nothing can durably justify pain, nothing can durably withstand pain, not even an inhabited firmament. The phases of spiritual metamorphosis are symbolically represented in Nietzsche's work by the camel, the lion, and the child. Man will leave the state of being a 'camel' the day he revolts against the absurdity of the pain that is inflicted upon him. After being a 'camel', man will become a 'lion'. This 'lion' represents humanity in revolt, violent, in progress, no longer accepting the 'ideal' justifications, those that Nietzsche sees dawning in *nihilistic* values, structured around the conditions of the working classes. The 'lion' of which Zarathustra speaks is humanity no longer wishing to suffer for the promise of an afterlife. 'God is dead' because man no longer accepts the persistent absurdity of suffering. Orphaned by his God and his heaven, the 'lion' is nevertheless only another step towards the New Man, the *Übermensch*. After revolting against and destroying shackles and orders, he must find a morality – without which man cannot live in society. To complete the three metamorphoses of the spirit announced by Zarathustra, Man must become a child.

For Nietzsche, the New Man, the *Übermensch*, was to be 'the Child', whose coming is announced by Zarathustra in pages of exuberant poetry and poignant beauty, founding a morality entirely devoid of metaphysical considerations. The New Man, 'the Child', will have succeeded, so to speak, in recovering his innocence, in bringing heaven down to earth, in reintegrating the promise of happiness represented by the afterlife into the here and now, on this earth, in re-injecting the *transcendent* into the *immanent*. In other words, he will have created a morality that depends on our world alone: he no longer needs the afterlife in order to act. Zarathustra replaces the dying metaphysical myths of the monotheistic religions with the myth of 'eternal recurrence'. Judeo-Christian morality said: 'Suffer and you will be rewarded in another world, an afterlife

that is superior!' Kant had already tried to evacuate the afterlife in one of his moral precepts: 'May you live your life as if the maxim of your actions were to become universal law.' But Zarathustra goes further: 'Act always so that you may want to relive your action an infinite number of times.' This is the doctrine of the 'eternal recurrence': we should aim to live aware of the fact that each moment will be repeated infinitely, and we should feel only supreme joy at that prospect. Monotheistic religions projected the value of the action into the hereafter. Kant projects it onto humanity. Nietzsche re-centres it on the individual: 'Act in such a way that you want to relive every second of your life an infinite number of times.'

Nietzsche's Zarathustra is thus the prophet of a New Man, 'the Child', freed from metaphysics and reconciled with the present, life as it is here on earth, here and now. The *Übermensch* will act as if he had to relive each of his actions and all of their consequences an infinite number of times. In other words, each passing moment is not fleeting but rather it echoes for all eternity. Infinity is no longer outside this world, nor does it exist in embryonic form in the idea of humanity; it is within reach of every move I must be able to desire an infinite number of times. Zarathustra does not *kill* God, he simply notes that God is dead and proposes a new perspective in which to base morality.



ZARASTRA FOR RICHEPIN AND MASSENET

Nietzsche's physical and mental collapse, in a street in Turin on 3 January 1889, after trying to protect a horse from being violently flogged by its owner, made a final contribution to spreading throughout Europe the fame of this iconoclastic, demonic, almost insane philosopher, who had been a friend of Wagner, then, from 1888, his sworn enemy, accusing him of 'slobbering at the foot of the cross' in his final opus, *Parsifal*, written that year. Indeed, from 1888 the works of Nietzsche were read increasingly and Richepin, a man of letters, who travelled extensively all over Europe,

was certainly aware of Nietzsche's writings, especially *Also sprach Zarathustra*. In 1884 Richepin had discovered and admired the nihilistic and materialistic writings that were also, later, to inspire the works of Nietzsche. Richepin's volume of verse entitled *Les Blasphèmes* (1884) was criticised by conservatives, who mocked its 'cheap philosophy'. In the dedication of the latter, to his friend and fellow poet Maurice Bouchor, Richepin expressed his iconoclasm, drawn directly from nihilism and materialism:

Above all, I am going to shock the devotees, the adherents of any form of organised religion, and in their eyes I am committing nothing less than sacrilege in disembowelling their idols in order to show their inanity. The next ones to take exception will be all those who are more or less openly Deists, the religious-ish as the others are religious, worshippers of a Supreme Being, a Universal Consciousness, some sort of Great Whole, from the Free Thinkers, who cling only to the trimurti of Truth, Beauty and Goodness, to the Pantheists who, by constantly blowing up the balloon of that impersonal God, cause it to burst.

(Jean Richepin, *Les Blasphèmes* [1884], dedication to Maurice Bouchor.)

For all that, Richepin's libretto, *Le Mage*, written seven years later, was not Nietzschean. The bold and politically committed author of *La Chanson des gueux* (The Beggars' Song, 1876) had gradually settled down. When he came to write for the Paris Opéra, he realised that he was entering a pantheon hitherto unknown to him: the first step on a long and paradoxical path to ideological repentance, which, in the end, was to lead him – the declared enemy of the bourgeois spirit – to the Académie Française in 1909.

Thus, although we may assume that Richepin rediscovered the heroic figure of Zoroaster (Zarashtra) through the work by Nietzsche (we might say that Nietzsche re-created a 'vogue' for Zarathustra) and was struck by the sheer power of the book, he retained only the more theatrical aspects of the prophet's life, relegating the philosophical message to a lower lev-

el. What interested the playwright was not so much the prophet as the man of flesh and emotion: the man capable of being in love with another human being. Only in the first part of Act III does Zarastro briefly remind us of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: the hermit on the mountain, delivering to his disciples a philosophical-prophetic-esoteric message. But we are far here from the revolutionary conceptual machine of Nietzsche: in Richepin what we have is at most a vague, almost biblical message of peace and love. In fact the words Richepin puts into the prophet's mouth in Act III do not come from Nietzsche, but rather from the semantics of Freemasonry ('brotherhood', 'light', 'truth' and so on) and when he calls upon the god Mazda, that god is reminiscent of the 'Supreme Being' of the lodges. Yet there is no evidence at all that Richepin had anything to do with Freemasonry. This barely concealed reference is a very clear and opportunistic Republican message, in a Third Republic that was struggling violently against the Church.

Richepin's Zarastro is in fact essentially a hero of Classical tragedy: deeply in love but rejected, caught up in a perfect Racinian contradiction between feelings and duties, as defined by Barthes. He loves a woman who, out of family (and/or patriotic) duty, rejects him; at the same time he is loved by a woman he does not love, and who henceforth is bent on revenge. The spring of the tragedy is wound up tight and is now ready to uncoil itself, and it is the converted Zarastro, who, summoning up supernatural forces, deflects the course of events at the last moment, thus providing an ending in which pure love triumphs over occult forces, white magic triumphs over black magic, and light over darkness (another obvious Masonic reference, as well as a tribute to Mozart's *Magic Flute*). The philosophical dimension of Zarastro is, for Richepin, only a pretext, enabling him to send out a clear political message of revolt against the established order, against the Church.



LE MAGE, A REPUBLICAN OPERA?

When Napoleon III was captured at the Battle of Sedan on 2 September 1870, the Second French Empire collapsed and the Prussians marched on Paris. The bloody months that followed were to be among the darkest in the history of modern France, from the loss of the territories of Alsace and part of Lorraine to the terrible Siege of Paris, and not forgetting the huge war indemnity imposed on defeated France by the victors or the bloodbath that came during the ‘Semaine sanglante’ at the end of the Paris Commune, leaving a deeply symbolic social scar on the country.

The Third Republic, proclaimed on 4 September 1870, was to last until 1940, interrupted by another war. After a long period of constitutional procrastination, succeeding an Empire flamboyant with symbols, the Republic was urgently in need of creating its own symbols. Artists were immediately called upon to contribute, and opera became an effective vehicle for new mythologies. Indeed, Massenet’s important works were all composed after 1871, and several of them celebrate the legendary struggles of the Revolution and the Republic – *Les Girondins* of 1881, for instance, and *Thérèse* of 1907. Although Massenet cannot be regarded as a political composer, he was, like all artists of his generation, committed to the history of his time and obliged to choose his position: to defend a style and a tradition of ‘French’ music against the landslide of Wagnerism, glorify the heroes of 1789, contribute towards the creation of a great national Republican novel by rewriting the history of France through great historical panoramas, meant to build up magnificent statues.

And from that point of view, his choice of librettos shows his eclecticism, his curiosity and his constant desire to renew both his style and his ideological options. With *Le Mage* he had a perfectly balanced drama: heroism plus exoticism plus Republican values. The Zarathustra of Massenet and Richepin is a Republican prophet: he combats religions, defies corrupt kings (the contradictory, harsh, ruthless figure of the king of Persia) and wishes to establish a new order of truth, liberty, equality and fraternity. Even the term ‘mage’ (magus) in the title of the work – a complex,

archaic term – harks back to a time before the Catholic era, a time before the monotheistic religions, an almost mythical time. It is as if the prophecy, addressing us from before the Christian era, expressing itself above Christendom, delivering a message that is much higher than the Church – a mystery, a founding revelation.

As we have to see in Homer's Ulysses – tied to the mast of his ship and listening to the singing of the sirens, while his crew members, their ears stopped with beeswax, row to move the vessel away from the coast – the prophetic image of Greek reason fleeing the ancestral world of myths, we must see in Zarathustra, cursing the deceitful, untruthful gods, a figure of the new Republic, denying the Catholic Church, some fourteen years before the adoption of the French law on the separation of the Church and the State (9 December 1905).



A TRIBUTE TO THE 'PURE FOOL'

In fact, it is not, as one might imagine, in its libretto and via Nietzsche that *Le Mage* bears the mark of the German culture of its time, but in its music, in its obsessive reference to another opera. Massenet, as we know, breached his patriotic and Republican duty only as regards the composition of the music, having been dumbfounded by his visit to Bayreuth in August 1886, when he had heard *Parsifal*. Deeply affected by that experience, impressed by the very nature of that 'Bühnenweihfestspiel' (Festival Play for the Consecration of the Stage) – Wagner's description of his last dramatic work – it is likely that Massenet made his opera into a direct tribute to Wagner's ultimate opus.

No doubt, in composing the third act of *Le Mage*, a sort of Mass and pastoral communion, he had in mind the two great rituals that occur in *Parsifal*. No doubt, when he has the walls of fire part at a gesture from his hero in the final act, he was thinking of the dove descending and hovering above Parsifal – the ultimate miracle. No doubt, in composing the

great duet for Varedha and Zarasthra in Act III (second tableau), he had Kundry in the second act of *Parsifal* in mind.

The references are in fact so numerous that the character of Parsifal, the 'pure fool', resonates throughout the symbolic matrix of *Le Mage*: he is, in turn, Zarasthra (pure, ignorant, saving humanity), Nietzsche himself through the borrowing from Zarathustra ('pure and foolish'), the biblical figure on the mountain (Moses conversing with the Almighty), the parturient of a new model of pagan ritual, or the innocent following an irrevocable journey of initiation in his physical battle with the dark forces ...



Le Mage is not a Nietzschean opera. It is a work that can be read in two ways; it is a pseudo-philosophical work that is both political *and* aesthetic. As a contribution to the creation of the new secular Republican Pantheon-to-be *and* an emphatic tribute to Wagner's final opera, his philosophical and musical testament, *Le Mage* was to be seen, admired and to a large extent copied six years later by Vincent d'Indy, when he came to compose *Fervaal*, an immense work, immediately hailed by the critics as the French *Parsifal*.
