

Massenet's *Manon* - A survey of the major recordings
by Ralph Moore

Manon was a huge success: by the time of the composer's death in 1912, it had notched up seven hundred performances at the Opéra Comique and by 1950 that number had risen to 2000. Beecham famously declared – albeit perhaps mischievously – “I would give the whole of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos for Massenet's *Manon* and would think that I had profited by the exchange”, but despite having held its secure place in the repertoire since its premiere in 1884, it has received relatively few studio recordings: in total, only eight, two pre-war and six post – one of which, conducted by Laforge in 1974, has not, to my knowledge, been made available on CD.

As Wiki says, *Manon* “is the quintessential example of the charm and vitality of the music and culture of the Parisian *Belle Époque*.” It is generally retrospective in musical style, yet also innovative in its use of spoken dialogue over orchestral accompaniment; it also demonstrates the composer's range and versatility, as the perfumed elegance and 18C classical pastiche of *Manon* could hardly be more removed from the noisy bombast and *verismo* clout of, for example, *La Navarraise*, first presented ten years later in London, although there is an element of *verismo* in its depiction of almost universal greed and selfishness. I personally prefer *Werther* above all Massenet's many operas, but there is no denying the enduring charm and appeal of *Manon*; it is replete with melody and several of its arias have a permanent place in the concert and recital album repertoire. Masterful delivery of the following five highlights, which sustain musical interest by being evenly distributed throughout the opera, is key to any successful performance or recording:

Act 1 – Manon: "Je suis encore tout étourdie"

Act 2 – des Grieux: "En fermant les yeux"

Act 2 – Manon: "Adieu, notre petite table"

Act 3 – Manon: "Obéissons quand leur voix appelle"

Act 3 – des Grieux: "Ah, fuyez douce image"

As an *opéra-comique*, the drama unfolds via a combination of music, speech and action, so idiomatic French and good vocal acting are required. One challenge is that none of the four main characters is particularly admirable or attractive: Manon is giddy, vain and selfish, des Grieux rash and immature; Lescaut, initially at least, before a belated change of heart, horribly venal in his readiness to sell his sister to the highest bidder and the elder des Grieux primarily concerned with how his son's behaviour affects the family's reputation (echoes of *La Traviata*). The trick is to use vocal means to render them more sympathetic. A singer particularly associated with the lead tenor role of des Grieux was Alfredo Kraus, who may be heard in half a dozen live recordings and the studio version conducted by Plasson. I have never been a great admirer of his reedy, plaintive timbre but must acknowledge that others are and I recognise his artistry; I review two of his recordings below.

However, the opera stands or falls according to the performance by the lead soprano, who is almost continuously on stage, has five arias and must display very different aspects of her character in each of the five acts, from naivety to romantic passion to sensuality to coquettishness to repentance and despair. I have especially cherished memories of Valerie Masterson's *Manon* at the ENO in the 70's, accompanied by the excellent tenor John Brecknock. It is available on CD but is sung in English; I nonetheless recommend it for the chance to hear a great lyric soprano in her favourite role. As she performed it frequently in the earlier part of her career, I would like to have included an assessment of one of Montserrat Caballé's live performances, preferably the one from New Orleans in 1967 which is on the VAI label in fair mono sound, but have not been able to obtain a reasonably priced copy. There is a clip on YouTube of the Saint-Sulpice scene from that production, but in any case, I think she sounds too grand and mature, despite the beauty of her voice, and her French is not flawless - although tenor John Alexander sounds superb. (Opera Passion/House of Opera offers a very cheap issue but their postage costs to the UK from the US - starting from \$16 - are much higher than the cost of the

discs themselves.) There are two, very early, complete recordings made in the 1920s, which feature fine voices but can be of interest only to historical buffs, not the general listener seeking a recording in modern sound. I review both below, as they provide a window on to a lost performing tradition. How I would have liked to be present at the New York Metropolitan premiere on 16 January 1895, presented by the ideal cast of Massenet's beloved Sibyl Sanderson as Manon, Jean de Reszke as des Grieux, and Pol Plançon as his father.

As usual, I consider here only those using more or less the complete score and sung in the original French, and in addition to seven studio versions I review a small but, I hope, judicious, sampling of live performances and radio broadcasts, making eleven recordings in all.

(Of course, a decade after Massenet's version, Puccini wrote his own successful opera based on the same novel by Abbé Prévost, which [I survey here](#); Massenet omits the concluding Louisiana scene with which Puccini concludes.)

The recordings:

Henri Busser - 1923 (studio; mono) Malibran; Marston; Aura
 Orchestra & Chorus - L'Opéra Comique de Paris
 Manon - Fanny Heldy
 Poussette - Marthe Coiffier
 Javotte - Madeleine Sibille
 Rosette - Lucienne Estève
 Le Chevalier des Grieux - Jean Marny
 Lescaut - Léon Ponzio
 Le Compte des Grieux - Pierre Dupré
 Guillot de Morfontaine - Louis Mesmaecker
 De Brétigny - Maurice Sauvagent
 L'Hôtelier - Louis Morturier
 La Servante - Marguerite Julliot

The Malibran issue of this classic recording was very [positively reviewed](#) back in 2004 by my MusicWeb colleague Jonathan Woolf.

It was the first complete recording, made by Pathé on no fewer than 24 double-sided, shellac, 78 rpm records only a few years before the company ceased operating. The fact that it is just short of a hundred years old must bring us up short; we are listening an all-French account recorded in a vanished age directed by a conductor who knew Massenet well and had been congratulated by the composer when he first conducted *Manon* in 1903.

Fanny Heldy's voice has a light, high timbre and must have carried well; she was a star soprano in Paris for two decades. Perhaps the recording emphasises a certain piercing quality and she is not as characterful a singer as later exponents, but she clearly has some lower register development, her sense of style is impeccable and she sounds like a spoilt teenager. Jean Marny might not be much remembered today but like Heldy he had a long career and is the epitome of a style of French singing rarely if ever heard today, in the school of Clément, Friant, Vezzani and Thill: lean, precise, nuanced and always with the words "on the breath". Ponzio's baritone clearly has a tremolo beat which can weary the ear but he is otherwise a compelling performer.

Busser often conducts rather fast, presumably the result of the time restraints upon recording onto 78's in that era. Ward Marston's transfer brings out its best but its very primitive acoustic sound with a lot of swish and crackle obviously renders this appealing only to the specialist listener, so this is one

only for historical buffs but there are a number of good reasons to hear it as a supplement to one on modern sound. The miracle is that we can hear so clearly as much as we do.

This issue includes as a bonus appendix "Oui, dans les bois," the 'Fabliau' aria Massenet wrote ten years after the premiere for Georgette Brejean-Silver as an alternative to the 'Gavotte' in Act 3. It is impressive as coloratura but not as charming or memorable as the 'Gavotte', I think; you may also hear Brejean-Silver sing "Oui, dans les bois," on [YouTube](#).

Elie Cohen - 1928/29 (studio; mono) Naxos; Malibran; Melodram; Cantus; Arkadia; IMC
 Orchestra & Chorus - L'Opéra-Comique de Paris
 Manon - Germaine Féraldy
 Poussette - Andrée Vavon
 Javotte - Mme. Rambert/Mlle. Ravery
 Rosette - Andrée Bernadet/MarINETTE Fenoyer
 Le Chevalier des Grieux - Joseph Rogatchewsky
 Lescaut - Georges Villier
 Le Compte des Grieux - Louis Guénot
 Guillot de Morfontaine - Eugène de Creus
 De Brétigny - André Gaudin/Jean Vieuille

Back in 2003, two MWI colleagues reviewed the Naxos issue of this classic, vintage version ([review](#) ~ [review](#)). They were of course enthusiastic about both the standard of performance and the quality of sound for so venerable a recording, but Jonathan expressed reservations regarding Ward Marston's application of "artificial reverberation to attempt to counter the rather dead acoustic of the Columbia studios in Paris." He suggested that those for whom this was too much should try another issue, such as are currently available on the Melodram, Cantus, Arkadia and Malibran labels, but this 1996 one under review, from IMC, an Italian company which for all I know no longer exists, might also suit. There is occasionally some obtrusive swish from the old 78's, especially, unfortunately, at the quiet start of des Grieux's Dream Song, "En fermant les yeux", but for the most part the exceptional clarity and minimal distortion achieved by the original recording shine through as a source of wonder to the modern listener.

As with Naxos, there is no libretto, nor does IMC provide even a synopsis, but anyone purchasing this is probably doing so as a historical supplement and will already have or want a more modern recording with a libretto. Furthermore, there are no timings at all, just track titles and some nice photos and biographies of the singers. Nor does the cast list reflect the fact that changes in personnel were necessitated by gap of several month between the two recording dates; I refer you again to Jonathan's review for details.

The recording comes across here as supremely, Gallic-authentic; there is a lightness of touch and a naturalness of delivery which never cloy or obtrude; it helps that the entire cast is French with the exception of Josef Rogatchewsky, a tenor Ukrainian-born but French by adoption and French in all but name. Everyone else, conductor, orchestra and singers alike, are clearly steeped in the *opéra-comique* tradition. A performance like this helps you to understand Beecham's quip; the sound really is no great barrier to appreciating its charms when it is this well sung; I thoroughly enjoy it all, with one, minor reservation.

Rogatchewsky is a fine singer, even throughout his range and with a sure command of *diminuendi* to lend sensitivity and sensibility to his portrayal of des Grieux. However, he has one, besetting vocal tic which can irritate on repetition: a persistent little glottal break or catch at the end of higher-lying phrases. Jonas Kaufmann increasingly does it, too, and apparently it irks me more than it does others.

Germaine Féraldy has a light, pure soprano with a fast vibrato and perfect intonation. She encompasses the coloratura with ease, sings “off the text”, and her words are crystal clear. There is nothing overt or applied about her characterisation or vocalisation, but everything she does smacks of sincerity, encompassing the teenage Manon’s naivety without being mawkish or arch, and easily rising to the big moments without forcing or over-emoting. She is also genuinely charming and moving, giving an object lesson in how less is more when you know just how to sing this music. The highlight is the Cours-la-Reine scene; she is captivating yet the voice always admits of latent sadness beneath the triumphant bravado.

The rest of the cast is more than adequate without being especially distinguished: the Lescaut and des Grieux senior were stalwarts of the company, wholly idiomatic and attractive, if rather light of tone, and the supporting singers sound as if they are enjoying what they are singing.

The conductor Elie Cohen is no slouch but does not rush and his tempi always sound right in a performance where verve and momentum prevail. Unlike some historical recordings, the orchestra is perfectly audible and balances are very good. Even the ballet music, which can pall, entertains. There are some traditional cuts but nothing serious.

Don’t be put off by the age of the recording; every lover of Massenet at his best will enjoy it, whether it be in the Naxos transfer or on one of the labels I mention above.

This is adapted from the [review](#) which first appeared in the MWI website in 2018.

Fausto Cleva – 1951 (live; mono) Myto; Walhall
 Orchestra & Chorus - Metropolitan Opera
 Manon - Licia Albanese
 Poussette - Paula Lenchner
 Javotte - Margaret Roggero
 Rosette - Hertha Glaz
 Le Chevalier des Grieux - Giuseppe di Stefano
 Lescaut - Martial Singher
 Le Compte des Grieux - Jerome Hines
 Guillot de Morfontaine - Alessio De Paolis
 De Brétigny - George Cehanovsky

In decent, if rather distant, mono sound, with just a little fuzzy distortion, this features an excellent cast headed by Albanese and Di Stefano. Both are in good voice; despite a touch of the glottal catch and matronliness which increasingly crept into her voice, she is steady and vibrant and sometimes digs into her lower register dramatically, even if I never find her wholly credible as an ingénue. He is in his element in a role for which he was famed and does not unduly stretch his essentially lyrical tenor as later roles did, allowing him to execute some of the soft singing and exquisite, high pianissimi for which he was celebrated as well as indulge in some passionate, Italianate belting. His “En fermant les yeux” is a lovely piece of singing. Jerome Hines sounds too grand and hieratic for des Grieux senior but sings beautifully and Singher is the genuine French baritone article, elegant and pointed. Some of the French accents are too Latinate - Di Stefano, like so many Italian singers, cannot seem to sing a nasal “mon” without concluding the word by sounding what should be a silent “n” – and Albanese is rather coy-sounding in the dialogue and does not pronounce words like “bien” or “Adieu” properly - but by and large this is a lively, pleasing performance conducted by Cleva with a light touch.

Albert Wolff – 1951 (studio; mono) Decca; Preiser
Orchestra & Chorus - L'Opéra-Comique de Paris
Manon - Janine Micheau
Poussette - Claudine Collart
Javotte - Jacqueline Cauchard
Rosette - Agnès Disney
Le Chevalier des Grieux - Libero De Luca
Lescaut - Roger Bourdin
Le Compte des Grieux - Julien Giovannetti
Guillot de Morfontaine - Jean-Christophe Benoit
De Brétigny - Guy Gondin
L'Hôtelier - Pierre Germain
1er Garde - Serge Rallier
2e Garde - Serge Rallier

The refined Swiss tenor Libero De Luca specialised in French roles, for which he had just the right, beautiful voice and pellucid diction; paired with the crystalline soprano of Janine Micheau they make a very attractive pair of lovers, entirely authentic and idiomatic. She sounds every bit the naïve, ambitious teenager in the first act, rising to the in the Cours-la-Reine scene, where she sings the later “Oui, dans les bois” option rather than the ‘Gavotte’ – which makes a nice change, especially as she does its sparkling coloratura so well, concluding with a prolonged high D. The Saint-Sulpice reconciliation scene is as impassioned as any on record, with “N'est-ce plus ma main” eliciting some exquisite singing from both principals.

The all-French supporting cast is entirely immersed in the right performance idiom and the dialogue is accordingly lively.

Wolff shapes phrases lovingly in a taut, dramatic performance recorded in clean mono sound of considerable depth and no discernible distortion. Voices are quite closely miked but the tangy French orchestra is perfectly audible.

This was the surprise of my survey – there is always at least one; it has the same kind of indefinable Gallic spirit as the much more famous Monteux recording reviewed next.

If you cannot find a copy of the recording, there is an hour of highlights on [YouTube](#).

Pierre Monteux – 1955 (studio; mono) EMI; Documents
Orchestra & Chorus - L'Opéra-Comique de Paris
Manon - Victoria de los Ángeles
Poussette - Liliane Berton
Javotte - Raymonde Notti
Rosette - Marthe Serres
Le Chevalier des Grieux - Henri Legay
Lescaut - Michel Dens
Le Compte des Grieux - Jean Borthayre
Guillot de Morfontaine - René Hérent
De Brétigny - Jean Vieuille

I returned to this set after an interval of many years and was delighted to discover that it was even better than I had remembered it from my LP's. The authentic performing idiom of this quintessentially French opera has been gradually diluted by the influence of the more homogenised, "international" style which inevitably characterises modern opera, giving us all the more reason to prize this performance as wholly representative of the Opéra Comique in the mid-50's.

Much ink has been expended extolling its virtues of this; it is as close to perfect as the technology and performing practice of the era would permit. I do not pretend to maintain an unqualified admiration for everything Victoria de los Ángeles recorded; indeed, I have never quite "got" the adulation accorded her by the generation previous to mine. In some quarters, to criticise her is to invite the same kind of opprobrium vented by fanatical fans of Callas whenever you say a word to suggest that La Divina occasionally had feet of clay, but just as Callas was unbeatable in certain roles, de los Ángeles is here at her peak, in her best role as the delectable tart-with-a-heart Manon. Her French is excellent, her affect perfect and her ability to caress Massenet's sinuous melodies unparalleled. The plaintive, girlish quality of her tone, which I sometimes find sentimental, is here ideal. Her coloratura is more than serviceable and the top D in the Cours-la-Reine scene is pretty impressive, too, for a singer who never used it in a live performance.

Henri Legay is the kind of French tenor whose last representative was the late Alain Vanzo. There is no reason, when he sings as elegantly as this, to regret his lack of heft - nor the fact that no less a tenor than Jussi Björling turned down the invitation to record des Grieux. He is certainly passionate when required even if the outbursts of the St Sulpice scene push him to his vocal limits. The tenderness of his conversations with Manon is entirely convincing; he is always the callow, slightly ineffectual romantic, out of his depth in Lescaut's world of gambling, roistering and intrigue.

There is an essential rightness about Monteux's expert handling of the score - everything is perfectly paced, even if he does permit a small cut at the end of the first act, which allows the act to end with the lovers' duet but obscures the sense of the plot. The French cast knows exactly how to inflect and time the quick-fire exchanges. The sharpness of their enunciation is a delight; what a pleasure it is to hear perfect French when so many more modern recordings of French operas are compromised by singers unable to encompass the subtleties of its pronunciation. The clean mono sound is oddly atmospheric; it is almost as if too lush or rich a stereo sound would rob the performance of its period charm.

As long as you don't demand a modern stereo recording, this mono one is special and virtually perfect: furthermore, it's a slice of history which demands almost no forbearance on the part of the listener with regard to sound quality, whereas some previous historical recordings inevitably sound ...well, historical.

Jésus Etchéverry – 1964 (live; mono) Premiere; Malibran;

Orchestra & Chorus - L'Opéra de Monte-Carlo

Manon - Anna Moffo

Poussette - Antoniette Rosseau

Javotte - Sylvie Hamel

Rosette - Amanda Cassini

Le Chevalier des Grieux - Alain Vanzo

Lescaut - Peter Gottlieb

Le Compte des Grieux - Adrien Legros

Guillot de Morfontaine - Michel Hamel

De Brétigny - Étienne Arnaud

L'Hôtelier - Daniel Maime

La Servante - Vivianne Dunoyer

Anna Moffo's voice in its prime had the kind of special allure and timbre which makes it unmistakable and she is under the direction of a conductor whose pedigree in French opera was impeccable. Furthermore, she is paired with the last great French lyric tenor, Alain Vanzo, whose impeccable diction, sweetness of tone and seamless legato always afford the listener pleasure. His "En fermant les

yeux" is a highlight; his pianissimi are enchanting. Adrien Legros is too light-voiced as the Count but is a stylish singer; the rest of the cast are serviceable.

Unfortunately, whatever its merits – and there are many - this recording is in poor mono sound: it is over-resonant and crumbly with a tinny underlay, but listenable with a will. If you are a fan of Moffo and/or Vanzo and want to hear their partnership, try it, but it cannot be a prime recommendation.

You can sample a compilation of Moffo singing all five of Manon's arias on [YouTube](#): she is in great form, singing divinely.

Julius Rudel – 1970 (studio; stereo) DG

Orchestra - New Philharmonia Orchestra; Chorus - Ambrosian Singers

Manon - Beverly Sills

Poussette - Michèle Raynaud

Javotte - Hélià T'Hézan

Rosette - Patricia Kern

Le Chevalier des Grieux - Nicolai Gedda

Lescaut - Gérard Souzay

Le Compte des Grieux - Gabriel Bacquier

Guillot de Morfontaine - Nico Castel

De Brétigny - Michel Trempont

Rudel directs the superb New Philharmonia in a big, beefy-sounding performance with a rumbustious Ambrosian chorus rhubarbing away in the background when necessary to create ambience and everything highlighted in best DG sound. It's not as subtle as Monteux, but brilliant and exciting.

The cast is largely French-speaking; in any case, Gedda was an extraordinary linguist and Sills had already been singing Manon since 1953, refining her delivery over the years, and both her French and her singing are superb. Nonetheless, she gives us a rather brittle, flashy Manon, characteristics perhaps inherent in her voice. It can also be argued that this is appropriate for depicting her shallow character but Cotrubas and de los Ángeles portray a rounder, warmer, more sympathetic Manon. Regardless of such carping, Sills sings with enormous verve and aplomb, easily encompassing the high D flats and E's and presents the very picture of teenage insouciance, bringing out many verbal and musical nuances and details. Her ecstatic, repeated "À Paris!" in the duet which concludes Act 1 is just such an example of the care she brings to inflecting the words.

Souzay was still in fine voice and Bacquier as expected, delivers an authoritative, if slightly dry-voiced, des Grieux père. Nico Castel enjoys himself as the elderly roué Guillot and the trio of filles de joie is splendidly lively.

For me, the potential flaw in the otherwise superlative casting is the tight-voiced Gedda; I have never responded very positively to his constricted vocal production and in that regard I find him similar to Kraus, whom, at a pinch (as it were), I prefer, but he is in his best, youthful voice here, even if at times in their duets Sills and, in his solos, even the orchestra, drown him out.

The full, ten-minute 'Fabliau' (see the first review above), including the 'Gavotte' as is normally sung alone, followed by "Oui, dans les bois," is given as an appendix and permits Sills to give Manon a more sober reflective character, compensating for what some regard as perfunctoriness in her portrayal but the later addition is essentially a coloratura display-piece.

If I liked Gedda more and could forego the tenderness of warmer-voiced Manons, this could be my first choice. It could still be yours, depending on your taste.

Jean Fournet – 1973 (live; mono) Gala
 Orchestra & Chorus - Chicago Lyric Opera
 Manon - Teresa Zylis-Gara
 Poussette - Miwako Matsumoto
 Javotte - Patricia Guthrie
 Rosette - Nicoletta Ciliento
 Le Chevalier des Grieux - Alfredo Kraus
 Lescaut - Julian Patrick
 Le Compte des Grieux - Donald Gramm
 Guillot de Morfontaine - Norman Paige
 De Brétigny - Giorgio Giorgetti
 L'Hôtelier - Richard Sutliff

I am always irritated when a recording from as relatively late as this is in cruddy mono sound, especially when the conducting and singing are so good. The coughing is prominent and the tape is wavery, so I must immediately alert any potential listener to the failings of the crumbly sound here and have to say that it cannot possibly be among my prime recommendations.

That is a pity: Kraus is in more youthful voice than for his studio recording, Zylis-Gara is one of the best, most under-recorded sopranos of her era and her big, creamy, seductive soprano is a delight. Her duets with Kraus' elegant des Grieux are highlights. She also sings in very good French. Their supporting cast, headed by a strong-voiced Julian Patrick, is very fine; Donald Gramm gives as pleasingly vocalised Count as any on disc. Fournet directs a spritely, propulsive performance but is also able to lean persuasively into Massenet's swooning melodies. He also has a first-rate orchestra at his disposal.

It is clear from their response that the audience are clearly enjoying this live *Manon* very much but much, such as the beginning of Kraus' "En fermant les yeux" is dim and distant. Somewhere in the background he is singing beautifully. What a pity this wasn't better recorded and we cannot hear it as they did; I was hoping for so much better. If this cast had been given a studio recording it would be a leader.

Michel Plasson – 1982 (studio; digital) EMI
 Orchestra & Chorus - Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse
 Manon - Ileana Cotrubas
 Poussette - Ghyslaine Raphanel
 Javotte - Colette Alliot-Lugaz
 Rosette - Martine Mahé
 Le Chevalier des Grieux - Alfredo Kraus
 Lescaut - Gino Quilico
 Le Compte des Grieux - José van Dam
 Guillot de Morfontaine - Charles Burles
 De Brétigny - Jean-Marie Frémeau
 L'Hôtelier - Jacques Loreau
 La Servante - Malvina de Courcelles

Michel Plasson, directing the Toulouse orchestra and chorus, has produced more than a dozen fine recordings of French operas for EMI and here is yet another in that category of excellence. Ileana Cotrubas has a special quality of sweetness and vulnerability in her plangent, plaintive soprano which suits Manon ideally, just as it did her Violetta for Giulini – a somewhat similar character. She even turns her slight technical deficiencies to her advantage here and is always captivating. Her shy, tentative questioning of the Count in Act 3 to divine whether des Grieux still loves her against the background of the courtly dance music is infinitely touching and a good example of how Cotrubas makes Manon likeable.

I invariably express the same reservations about Kraus' rather thin, nasal timbre whenever he crops up in one of my surveys but I must equally acknowledge that he brings the same elegance and artistry to des Grieux as he did to his Werther for Plasson; the lyricism of Massenet's tenor roles suits his gifts. He sings "En fermant les yeux" very tenderly with great dynamic and tonal control.

An otherwise all-French-speaking cast headed by the equally elegant Canadian Gino Quilico as a young, seductive Lescaut completes a first-class line-up. José van Dam is luxury casting as the elder des Grieux.

The orchestral playing is fine, if not distinctively French. There is one sonic peculiarity in the otherwise well-engineered digital sound: on the two occasions at the start of Act 3 when the offstage promenade orchestra plays, it is first confined to the right channel then there is an abrupt and jarring switch to both channels after a few seconds – odd.

Antonio Pappano – 1999 (studio; digital) EMI

Orchestra & Chorus - Théâtre de la Monnaie, Bruxelles

Manon - Angela Gheorghiu

Poussette - Anne Maria Panzarella

Javotte - Sophie Koch

Rosette - Susanne Schimmack

Le Chevalier des Grieux - Roberto Alagna

Lescaut - Earle Patriarco

Le Comte des Grieux - José van Dam

Guillot de Morfontaine - Gilles Ragon

De Brétigny - Nicolas Rivenq

L'Hôtelier - Nicolas Cavallier

I have read some ungenerous criticisms of this studio recording, particularly regarding the supposed coarseness of Alagna's des Grieux, but so much about it – in retrospect, an example of the kind of production no longer being recorded – is meritorious that I find that carping to be absurd. I particularly revel in the shimmering beauty of the young Gheorghiu's Manon and Pappano's sympathetic conducting. She works very hard to inject every phrase with meaning and he supports her sensitively. Her French might not be flawless but she is as good as Cotrubas and other non-native sopranos who sing Manon. Her singing in the crucial Cours-la-Reine scene is simply gorgeous, infused with sparkle, vivacity and virtuosity.

I am baffled by complaints about Alagna's tenor and French. He is a native singer and inflects the language expertly. Nor, at this stage of his career, had he over-stretched his intrinsically attractive voice. He begins "En fermant les yeux" in a mesmerising half voice, then deploys a sweet falsetto, yet evinces full-voiced passion in such passages as "Manon, Sphinx étonnant, véritable sirène!", which is sung without evidence of much strain; he and Gheorghiu inspire each other. In many ways his performance here reminds me of that of the young Carreras in his very successful recording of *Werther*. The supporting cast, headed by Earle Patriarco's vivid Lescaut and José van Dam's seasoned Count is virtually ideal.

The sound is impeccable. Reacquaintance with this recording reminded me what a gem it is.

Jesús López Cobos – 2001 (live; digital) Sony

Orchestra & Chorus - L'Opéra National de Paris Bastille

Manon - Renée Fleming

Poussette - Jaël Azzaretti

Javotte - Isabelle Cals

Rosette - Delphine Haidan

Le Chevalier des Grieux - Marcelo Álvarez

Lescaut - Jean-Luc Chaignaud
Le Compte des Grioux - Alain Vernhes
Guillot de Morfontaine - Michel Sénéchal
De Brétigny - Franck Ferrari
L'Hôtelier - Christoph Fel
La Servante - Sandrine Seubille
1er Garde - Josep Miquel Ribot
2e Garde - Nigel Smith

In rich, digital sound this live recording immediately has the advantage over the many preceding, beautifully sung but sonically compromised recordings reviewed above and the late Jesús López Cobos could almost always be relied upon to deliver a fine performance; his affection for the score is evident from the opening Prelude.

However, like, Montserrat Caballé, Renée Fleming has rather too lush a timbre and too knowing a manner to portray Manon credibly and she tends to overdo the breathy emotion, but of course also produces some lovely singing – yet that counts for nothing if the object of her attentions is less than winningly sung, and Álvarez' Hispanic French, lachrymose, bleating manner and coarse tone simply will not cut it. He positively gulps some phrases and continually breaks his line; there is little French elegance of timbre or phrasing in his singing, and that's that.

Alain Vernhes is a very ordinary Count compared with some distinguished predecessors; grainy and lacking resonance.

The sound and the conducting notwithstanding, there is much, much better to be had.

Recommendations:

There might not be too many recordings but as a result of re-listening for this survey I felt obliged to revise upward my assessment of several in order to acknowledge their excellence. Best Manon of all is Angela Gheorghiu with a regretful glance towards Cotrubas and de los Ángeles, and I prefer Alagna in his prime to the reedier Kraus. Wolff provides a glimpse of a vanished age in very tolerable sound.

Studio mono: Pierre Monteux – 1955; Albert Wolff – 1951

Studio stereo/digital: Antonio Pappano – 1999*

*First choice

Ralph Moore