

An Atypical Heroine in a Masterpiece: Manon from "Manon Lescaut" by Puccini

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Abstract: *Even if Manon Lescaut was made towards the middle of the last decade of the nineteenth century and even if the literary "model" belongs to Prévost who created it more than a century ago (1731), **Manon** is the image of the woman who finds her place in the reality of any historical moment; not by her story, but by everything that defines her as a woman, both emotionally and morally. Manon is Puccini's first heroine not placed at one extreme or another; she is neither the positive model nor the negative one, she is just a genuine "heroine", genuine in all that is admirable and everything that is doomed in a woman by society, whatever the society. At a careful analysis of the plot, we can not fail to notice that her road to perdition is determined by the unfortunate choices she makes that stem from her inability to renounce one of two things she can not have at the same time: love and wealth.*

Keywords: *character, love, instability, hope, death*

Introduction

Not infrequently, in the studies dealing with Puccini's creations usually starting with *Manon Lescaut*, authors link the success of his protagonists' portrayal with the composer's attachment to the contemporary feminist movement. If in his stage creation Puccini was or not - and to what extent - influenced by the feminist movements of the confluence of the XIXth and XXth centuries - as alleged by many commentators - it is hard to say with certainty; only documents written by him or people close to him, preserved over the years, could confirm or refute such a supposition. But of what help would one certainty or another be? Such an approach is ridiculous. It is obvious that Puccini was anchored in the complex reality of the period in which he lived; we do not need any documents to support this, his music is brilliant enough. And the fact that almost all his works created protagonists as the title name only means that he was a very fine connoisseur of feminine psychology and by virtue of this talent, with unparalleled refinement, he created so many different characters. However, among so many different main characters - not only from his creation, but also from all the opera creation in general - Manon brings the novelty of a very special, unusual status: she is equally hard to define either as a positive character or as a villain; in other words, Manon is just different. ...

It is absolutely fascinating how Puccini creates this character whose psychological data are far from being intuited from its first appearance on stage; they reveal themselves gradually with the progress of his life story, and as a spectator you can have a complete image only after her death.

The approach in Manon's presentation below does not have as a starting point a specific model interpretation of the character, regardless of the celebrity of certain stage achievements, but strictly the score with the composer's notes.

Manon

Manon's entrance onto the stage - accompanied on her way to the inn, by her brother, and a very old and rich fellow traveler - offers the image of a beautiful and very reserved young lady. Manon has no reaction to the atmosphere full of verve around her, there are no signs that she notices the interest she arouses in one young customers of the inn- Des Grieux -

who is charmed by the sight of her; she just keeps waiting for her brother. Her first intervention - not by her own initiative! - happens quite late, so until then it is impossible to guess what she thinks, what she feels, so what kind of female character she is. Manon has a first reaction when Des Grieux, exploiting the lack of companions around her, gets close to her and asks for her name. The answer - "Manon Lescaut mi chiamo" - on a descending melodic completed with a down-quart leap, provides the first clear information (in terms of music) about it: she is sad leaving no impression that she wants a conversation; in fact, all her short answers confirm this. Des Grieux - already in love with her - urges her to say more and thus we find her resigned to the thought of becoming a nun, as a result of her father's wish. Confidence in the idea of changing her destiny, as confessed to Manon by the young man, does not seem to change the mood of the young lady convinced it is only pity that she can inspire ("Tanta Pietà traspare dalle vostre parole! ... Vo 'ricordarvi.. ."), but again Des Grieux's insistence makes her accept - indeed, hastily, being called by a brother whose authority overwhelms and worries her, but also to quickly put an end to the discussion - a future meeting. Manon comes to the meeting with the young man, but she explains her gesture by her habit to honor her word, and from their brief conversation it is clear that the only one in love is Des Grieux.

So, in her precipitated escape with Des Grieux, Manon is not involved affectively at all; she is in a position to take a major decision in a few moments and she does this horrified by old Géronte's company. So, for Manon, in her choice whether to run away or to stay, which she is obliged to make quickly, Des Grieux is only her only alternative.

Of course, her manners of interpretation can create the heroine a pretty wide variety of portraits in psycho-affective terms, by the diversity of mimics and gestures, of the ways she acts, so that, by the end of Act One, the eighteen-year-old Manon is already a well-defined character. But the Puccini's heroine is so reserved and confuse that her choice is rather a mixture of recklessness and defiance (the "Andiam!," said resolutely at the moment of decision). Certainly, nobody could surmise the future intentions of such a Manon, moreover, no one could believe that her mind is set on such an intention.

Puccini does not "say" anything about Manon at the time of fleeing Amiens and the one we discover installed in Paris (at the beginning of the second act), in Géronte's luxurious residence. The period of euphoria that the heroine lives with Des Grieux exists only in Prévost's novel; the composer, with his genius, ignores it, creating a new dilemma about the heroine and the circumstances that brought her, surprisingly, into the company of the man whom she had fled in horror. And the surprise is even greater, as we discover a new Manon, escort with a landlady's airs, flirtatious and arrogant, enjoying all the amenities of a luxury life in the treasurer's home. Her brother's visit does not seem to impress her, their conversation begining to bind only when Lescaut brings into question the person of Des Grieux and the fact that she left him "per un palazzo aurato" in which he managed to install thanks to her intervention to Géronte. At that moment, Manon's safety and arrogance crumble when she remembers the beautiful memories of her love story alongside the young student; she becomes sad and pensive (area "In quelle trine morbide ...") and for the first time meant she confesses how much that love story love, compared to her the present life, meant to her. For the first time, Manon feels pain when she discovers the details about the misery and compromises Des Grieux lent himself to in order to get money and get back together again. There are moments when the heroine reveals one side of her feelings not known before. Only a brief look into the mirror is sufficient to take her back to reality of the advantages of a life with Géronte, for these thoughts instantly leave her to let her continue to enjoy the wealth; and even if Géronte's exaggerated attentions often bored her, Manon works diligently to please him from her position of a lady from high society (arieta "L'ora, a Tirsi" is such an example).

Manon's emotional instability, her behavioral inconsistency is reconfirmed by her reaction to Des Grieux's unexpected appearance in the salon after the withdrawal of all guests and G ronste. The scene between the two is tense, even tough, but Manon is sufficiently versed to make him see things in a manner most favorable to her, without giving herself the time to weigh how much of what she is saying is true or not. Her only concern is to persuade and her life experiences had armed her with the ability to mask her inconsistency and to achieve her goal. Yet, this scene with Des Grieux revives old feelings in Manon and this and her folly give her the courage to confront and ridicule him G ronste. But when she is forced to leave G ronste's house i, she realizes that she can not be separated from "Tutti questi splendori! Tutti questi tesori! ..." that fulfilled her uncontrollable need, desire for wealth; not even at the threat of denunciation followed by arrest and then deportation, Manon can not stop trying to collect and take all her valuables from the salon. But this folly costs her freedom. In such a situation, the following question inevitably arises: Did Manon really love Des Grieux, or what she meant by love could only resist in a situation of considerable wealth?

In Le Havre prison, Manon's situation resembles surprisingly to the one in the inn from Amiens. Then, at 18, "the dangers" were either becoming a nun or old G ronste's horrifying company, now the danger is deportation. Then, her brother was around to protect her; now she knows him nearby with the same purpose. In Amiens, Des Grieux, in love with her from the moment he saw her, was her salvation. In Le Havre, it was still Des Grieux who was always there at the window with bars, encouraging her, full of love and promising her liberation at any cost. There is nobody else by her side, as there was none in Amiens. So, Manon sees in Des Grieux, for the second time, the only alternative for her rescue, although this time her hopes are minimal ("Ah! Una minaccia funebre io sento! / Tremo a un periglio che ignoto m' !"). A chance to take a decision to settle somehow her fate in one direction or another in Amiens - with the unconsciousness and rebelliousness of her 18 years old that led her to flee Amiens with Des Grieux - and that she still has, in some way, now: when the alarm sounds and she realizes that Des Grieux's life is in real danger, Manon gives him proof of her feelings anxiously urging him through the bars to go ("Se m'ami, in nome di Dio, t'invola, amor mio!...").

The end puts us in front of a Manon tired of walking through the desert, sick, thirsty, worried to obsession by the idea of death, which she is obstinately rejects. It is only Des Grieux, who sacrificed everything to be with her, that she still has by her side, who would do anything to be able to help her, who, feeling her helplessness in the harsh conditions, helps her move and encourages her with his endless love and hope. In moments of consciousness, Manon cherishes his support, assures him of her love, but thought that he withstands those harsh conditions creates in her resentment she can not avoid to express at one point: "Tu sei forte, t'invidio; donna, debole, cedo!" But maybe this is what makes her resist, to stubbornly fight against death (" Sola, perduta, abbandonata ... "). However, almost feeling her end, Manon increasingly needs evidence of Des Grieux's love, of the memories of the beautiful moments lived together and she finally dies saying "Le mie cople... travolger  l'oblio... ma ... l'amor mio ... non muore..."

Conclusions

As we have noted, Manon Lescaut in Puccini's work created a female main character totally different – from both the previous and subsequent ones (to focus solely on his works) - by her terrible credibility. Tracked throughout the action, its growth is plausible in all respects, this assertion does not mean that Manon would represent a sort of pattern that could "mould" emotionally and morally all the women, but a pattern in which many women, in any moment in history , could find themselves because that "model" is real. It involves a lot of

trivial or surprising components that support or contradict each other, that can be explained logically or that are absolutely incomprehensible.

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A copy of the full original score - general and the reduction (Ed. Ricordi) of *Manon Lescaut* Personal Sound Archive, UOC Faculty of Arts Archive, TNOB Constanta Archive, Youtube