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PUCCINI'S *MANON LESCAUT*  
STUDY GUIDE  
FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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## STUDY GUIDE FOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Each opera published in the series “Vox Imago” is a response to a challenge: how to bring young people closer to opera and its special language? The repertoire and language of opera are usually quite different from the musical genres that interest them, so they are rarely very familiar with it.

The purpose of this guide, like the previous ones in the same series, is to offer teachers ideas and suggestions that will help break down the barrier that separates the fans of popular music from appreciating opera. In this case with *Manon Lescaut*, as in previous years with *The Magic Flute*, *Nabucco*, *La traviata*, *Fidelio* and the *Barbiere di Siviglia*.

### A preamble: skills

In planning their work, teachers have long been urged by educationists to direct their work in such a way that students will be equipped not just with knowledge, but also the resources enabling them to find their own way forward creatively in the face of the ever new tasks awaiting them in life. Whenever the Education Minister changes the terminology likewise changes, but the basic principle remains the same.

The keyword launched in the new millennium is *skill*, understood as the ability to jointly use the *knowledge* and *skills* acquired to successfully deal with a new specific task. A physician is *skillful* if, after observing small signs, he or she is capable of predicting the course of the illness in the patient (ability), and knows how to identify the appropriate medicine (knowledge). The plumber knows how a water pipe is made (knowledge) and is capable of dealing with it (ability). The educator knows the possible reactions of a child (knowledge) and is capable of speak-

ing to an obstinate child with the appropriate words (ability).

With one qualification: a *skill* is not absolute. There are as many degrees of skill as each person is able to attain. In everything, even in music.

In music, for example, *knowledge* means knowing that Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* was first performed in Turin in February 1893, where it was a resounding success by the immediacy of its expression and especially its rich melodic vein. The success was all the more deserved if one thinks that others before Puccini had set the same story to music: Halévy, Auber, and above all the composer who surpassed them all with his *Manon*: Jules Massenet.

This volume of “Vox Imago” contains a rich set of materials which, in one way or another, can all be presented educationally, as an opportunity for so many units of scholastic work, so much knowledge that can be used to master skills.

We can start from the novel by the Abbé Prévost, on which the libretto is based, and which enchanted Puccini when he heard the operatic version composed by Jules Massenet in 1884.

Unlike the knowledge which can be achieved by reading a text, *abilities* require participation in listening, active listening (or reading the score in the case of an advanced skill). These are such things as being able to recognize whether the piece you are listening to is in binary or ternary meter; whether the movement is brisk or slow; whether the mode is major or minor; whether the pattern follows an ascending rather than a descending line, and so forth. These are perceptual abilities: they are all the more valuable the higher the

skill that one wishes or is able to attain.

We can speak of *skill* in the case of anyone who, in one way or another, has formed personal ideas about any experience that he has: opera in our case. The opportunity to listen to tunes, even if they are no more than the jingles in commercials, elicits the first glimpse of a connection between a certain kind of music and particular impressions, emotions, or ideas: what is termed in the jargon *common skill*.

A skill that goes beyond this elementary form develops when individuals, whether simple listeners or students of composition, *know* how to apply what they have learned to a specific case that is new to them. In the case of our pupils, this might be listening to Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* for the first time.

A first obvious kind of knowledge concerns the plot. In the volume of "Vox Imago" you can read an account of the hectic composition of the libretto, with at least five writers putting their hands to it, one after the other. And you will find the basic plot described clearly and commented on as it appears in the primary source, the novel by the Abbé Prévost, from which the libretto at times differs markedly.

A literature teacher (if the idea appears useful) could retrace the development from the novel to Puccini's libretto, as well as the libretto by Meilhac and Gille used by Jules Massenet for his own opera, *Manon*, performed nine years earlier. Puccini knew the opera well: in fact it was Massenet's success — naturally as well as the subject, so congenial to him — that prompted him to devise his own personal interpretation of the story. Reducing a literary text to short, concise dialogues could be very helpful in developing a

pupil's literary skills. For instance: you might choose some point of the story as Prévost tells it, let's say the death of Manon. Divide the students into groups, and suggest each group reduces it to a dialogue between the two unfortunate lovers, then compare the dialogue each group produces with that of the Italian and/or French librettists. (There is a rhythmic Italian translation of the latter, to which *Manon* was regularly sung in Italy until a few decades ago.)

In the music classes we are dealing with here, we only need to know the lyrics that Puccini had before his eyes and set to music.

### The story

The opera is divided into four acts, set in so many places. Act I is set outside a coaching inn in Amiens. The youthful Manon gets out of from a carriage together with her brother Lescaut, who is taking her to become a nun. The girl immediately attracts the attention of the bystanders. She receives the overpowering attentions of the aging rake Geronte and a passionate declaration from the young, penniless Chevalier Des Grieux. As soon as he discovers that the old man intends to abduct her and carry her off to Paris, Des Grieux persuades her to give up the plan to enter a convent, which was actually no part of her dreams, and run away with him.

In Act II we find Manon in Paris, not in the arms of Des Grieux but in Geronte's luxurious house. He has ensnared her with the allurements of a life of luxury. But Manon has not forgotten her first love. When her brother brings Des Grieux to visit her while Geronte is momentarily absent, their passion flares up again. The couple decide to escape together, but not before Manon has filled her bag with

jewels stolen from his overflowing coffers. The act is fatal: Geronte discovers them and immediately has Manon arrested, while Des Grieux manages to escape.

In Act III Manon has been condemned to deportation to the New World. She is waiting to embark in the port of Le Havre, together with a group of prostitutes. Lescaut and Des Grieux try to help her escape but fail. In despair Des Grieux begs the captain to be allowed to embark on the same ship sailing for the Louisiana.

And it is here, in the desert where the two lovers have fled for the last time, that in Act IV poor Manon dies of hardship, while Des Grieux desponds, helpless to save her.

Manon was the first woman in a series that in different settings would be embodied as *La bohème*, *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Suor Angelica*, *Turandot* (as Liù in this last opera): the fantastic projection of a chimerical world which seems to offer an escape from everyday banality, presented to the compassion of audiences. The death of the heroines of all his operas is not punishment or a form of misogyny, as some have claimed. Rather it is a chimerical dream projected by the suffering and death of the frailest and most helpless beings, so arousing the audience's sympathy and compassion — the important point as far as Puccini was concerned.

However the critics interpret Puccini's ideas of the female condition in his works, or the relation between his work and his life, listening to *Manon Lescaut* offers a chance for a group discussion in class of the image of women as it changes in the history of opera. An overview might start from the beginnings of the melodrama in Monteverdi's *Euridice*, then take in operas by Scarlatti or Haendel with

their happy endings, and Beethoven's unique *Fidelio*, followed by a study of the heroines of Bellini, Donizetti and Verdi (all creating precedents for Puccini!). Then, leaving Romantic opera, they could examine the realism of Bizet or Strauss, or the *verismo* of Leoncavallo and Mascagni, leading to the summit represented by Alban Berg's *Lulu* and *Wozzeck*. Although this could only be done by sampling some scenes, such a study would require extensive classroom time. But at least in a high school where the students specialize in music, it would offer strong motivation to study the history of music, removing it from mere *knowledge* and raising it to the possession of *skills*.

### Of flowers and trellises

To fix the pupils' attention on a crucial point of opera — we could call it the issue of issues — a comparison could be useful. Try imagining a carpenter who builds a latticework to set against the wall of a house. Once finished it makes a fine show in itself. Then a skillful gardener grows some wonderful climbing plants that twine around it and cover it in flowers. This is rather like the relationship between the libretto of the opera and its musical setting. The libretto may be a masterpiece, or it may be wretchedly cobbled together, and the same may be true of our trellis. But its workmanship may pass unnoticed or be disregarded when it is buried in the mass of flowers growing over it, meaning the intensity of the musical setting of the words.

This means that opera is *not* the libretto, as we will have to explain to our students. Sometimes music critics themselves seem to confuse the issue when they explain a passage in an opera by drawing information

from the libretto, analyzing what the libretto expresses in words and stage directions. In opera the librettist is not in charge. "The composer is the dramatist," writes a highly respected scholar who is well aware of this outstanding fact.<sup>1</sup> Who in turn quotes another scholar, E. T. Cone: "In any opera we may find that musical and verbal messages seem to reinforce or to contradict one another; but whether the one or the other, we must always rely on the music as our guide towards an understanding of the composer's conception of the text. It is this conception, not the bare text itself, that is authoritative in defining the ultimate meaning of the work."

It is not even true that without a libretto there would be no opera. The musician needs the libretto to give a voice to his inspiration; just as the gardener could not grow his floral jewels without the support of the carpenter. To continue the comparison, one might think that without the support of the libretto the composer would produce purely instrumental music. On the other hand, nothing prevents you from studying the libretto for itself, its forms and contents, or the ways it derives from important works, as in the case of *Manon Lescaut*, set to a libretto taken from the novel by the Abbé Prévost. The study of librettos has an illustrious tradition, which has developed valid analytical and hermeneutic tools. To bring the simile to an end, these are the tools of the craftsman working in wood, not the master gardener.

It is clearly foreseeable that what the two scholars quoted complained about could happen in class: the characters and their actions may be discussed simply by reading the dialogues. Our task will be to shift the focus of our observations from words to music.

### A logic of its own

A third important scholar helps us with some enlightening observations. Music

can and mostly does raise melodrama to a higher plane. It can even turn melodrama into drama or tragedy, as in *Aida*, *Carmen* and *Butterfly*. Music has an ennobling and idealizing power. It can tone down (but also intensify) excess on the stage: It can add emotional and psychological depth to the characters, and because it needs room to assert its lyrical quality it has a retarding effect on rapid action. An opera in which music is no more than the servant of the action would be intolerable. Furthermore, genuine dramatic music has its own logic, it can bridge gaps and camouflage flaws in the dramatic structure and psychological motivation. There are, indeed, precious few operas with a libretto watertight in every respect, least of all where the plot is a melodramatic one; yet fused with the music it appears watertight or its faults seem to matter little, as we shall see in the detailed discussion of Puccini's operas. Melodrama and music in the hands of a born dramatic composer coalesce into an entity which is not only more than the sum of its two constituent parts but indeed different from them. It is in that new entity that musical drama has its being. The majority of audiences have found this entirely acceptable, the proof of which is the undiminished popularity enjoyed by operas based on libretti which with our modern contempt of melodrama and our demands for psychological verisimilitude we should reject out of hand on the spoken stage.<sup>2</sup>

The splendid flowering creeper can grow luxuriantly, even if the trellis supporting it is a shoddy piece of work.

### From experience to novelty

Another basic principle suggested to us by a dynamic teaching method is to guide pupils to assimilate what they do not know yet, a *skill they do not yet possess, by starting from their experience*. An experience familiar to every pupil is the presence of music in movie soundtracks. Exploring the various functions of music in a movie is not only an experience

in itself but can also be a good groundwork for guiding pupils to discover that the same functions are found in opera. In the table below we compare, as a simple example, on the left scenes in classical films with the particular functions of the music. After listening to the film soundtracks, on the right are the passages in *Manon Lescaut* where we can then find similar functions.

Functions of music	Examples in films	<i>Manon Lescaut</i>
At the start of a film, music suggests its overall character: for example, whether we are about to watch a thriller rather than a light comedy or a comic movie rather than a Western...	<i>Trading Places</i>	Introduction
At the end: a sort of moral of the story just told	<i>Saving Private Ryan</i>	Manon's death
Evocations, leitmotifs: music can evoke situations already encountered	<i>Star Wars</i>	Intermezzo
The character's feelings	<i>Cinema Paradiso</i>	Aria "In quelle trine morbide"
Settings: places and times	<i>Barry Lyndon</i>	Minuet
Anticipating the scene: preparing audiences for something that has not yet appeared on screen	<i>The Shining</i>	Introduction to Act IV
Reinforcing the action: at times simply by the rhythm of the music	Cartoons	Manon's and Des Grieux's attempt to escape Geronte's house

### Atmospheres

Comparison with a film helps pupils in their approach to the unfamiliar art of opera. It is useful because it plays on the element in an opera that raises fewest problems: the instrumental music.

Before the characters appear on stage, the orchestra usually suffices to give us an eloquent picture of the overall *atmosphere* of the scene. In *Manon Lescaut* it does this at the

start of each of the four acts, each with a different setting.

The first setting is unmistakable: outside an inn where a variety of people of all ages are loafing, drinking, playing cards, or shouting; rather like night life in our own time. This is evoked by the brilliant Allegro that Puccini composed, the use of violins and woodwinds in this lively passage and the “sobbing” of the grace notes:

#### Example 1



Careful listening will soon pick out a less rowdy moment: as if a lens were focusing, in the

midst of the crowd, on a special, more delicate situation:

#### Example 2



The two motifs reappear and are joined by a third. This reveals, right from the start, the inexhaustible richness of Puccini’s melodic vein, a gift that makes him the most popular opera composer, and not just in Italy.

The setting evoked at the opening of the opera is many-sided. It contrasts with the flowing melody of Act I, with the full orchestra, unexpectedly this opens in a minor mode: a short prelude entrusted to the flute

(did Puccini perhaps have in his ears the prelude to Act III of *Carmen*?).

The setting is refined and elegant: a dandy hairdresser is taking care of the young woman’s locks and makeup; but the musical setting remains the same. The minor does not evoke here what we usually associate with the minor, an emotion between melancholy and suffering, but rather a state of boredom. Only after her brother Lescaut appears to boast he has freed her from Des Grieux’s

“little house” does the mode peacefully return to the related major key, with the theme

sung by the violins:

#### Example 3



Act III still again opens in a minor mode. But two other factors place us before a setting very different from both Act I and Act II. This is the timbre and coloring of the music. The rhythm is slow (48 writes Puccini, hence less

than one beat per second). The colors are dull: horns and bass clarinets in the deep region support the pathetic melody sung by the horns and violas with dampers:

#### Example 4



Nothing is obligatory in a composer’s work. The atmosphere Puccini creates at the start of Act III is highly “suitable” for a lover who longs to see and set free his beloved, enclosed in a seedy prison. But “suitable” is a dangerous verb in reading an exegesis: because any other solution would have been “suitable.” Neither the music critic nor the listener can decide what the “suitable” music would be. In fact, we need only listen to

the same moment in the drama as Massenet treats it in his opera to admit a composer’s unlimited choice: a few slow, quiet chords. For ten bars we do not even know if the mode is major or minor, lacking the third degree. As soon as the sinister minor emerges, the drum rolls and the motif prepare us for a setting remote from Puccini’s: it becomes even clearer in the “military” flute and piccolo motif:

#### Example 5



So why would a military atmosphere be “unsuitable” as an introduction to the last act? The fourth setting that the music offers to our imagination, the “boundless land” and the “arid, rolling ground,” is just as radically different from the previous ones. Again a minor key and only slightly more animated, but a full orchestra. A leap from  $F\#_3$  to  $F\#_5$ , with

returns on E, and a dynamic that grows from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* and then returns to *pianissimo* in two beats. It is difficult to say whether in this short instrumental introduction Puccini was thinking of the physical setting or rather of the *deeply sighing* effect that it imitates:

### Example 6



Throughout his career Puccini was sensitive to the settings of his scenes. Often quoted is the opening of the third tableau of *Bohème*, with those “ungrammatical” empty fifths that fall parallel: the violation of the elementary harmonic rule (parallel fifths) has rarely evoked so expressively an “atmospheric” content: snow and frost, “in the uncertain light of early dawn,” as the stage direction in the libretto states.

There is no France, at least on this page of *Bohème*. As there was no France in *Manon Lescaut*. Other geographical allusions are explicit in the three works set in distant land. An abundance of Japanese and Chinese scales respectively in *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*. There are Yankee allusions in *La fanciulla del West*. Not to forget the Florence evoked by “Firenze bella” in *Gianni Schicchi*. (And Mascagni had already elicited the scents of Sicily for audiences of *Cavalleria rusticana* three years before.)

“Technical” observations such as those on melody, tone, mode and so forth, are meant to guide students step by step to achieve one of the most important musical skills: the ability to attribute meaning to the music they are listening to, justifying it by qualities found in the music. This is what is known as *analysis* in the conservatoire’s teaching system: there it is sometimes taken to sophisticated levels, but equally valuable, with the appropriate adaptations, all the way from the primary levels.

### Heuristic method

On the previous pages the teacher will have found simple comments and interpretations. More will be found on the following pages. Here is a suggestion: offer them to the students rather as questions, as problems to which they should try to find likely solutions. To say, for example, that Puccini sets each of his operas in a different coun-

try would probably leave your students indifferent. The hope of enabling them to take an active part and — most importantly — persuade them to listen attentively to the various operatic passages could be frustrated by lack of interest. But things will change if we ask them questions beforehand and independently about what they are going to listen to.

Teachers fully understand the secret of involvement: it means turning information into questions, transforming the answers into questions. Simply the application of a *heuristic* teaching method, by search and discovery.

Consider an approach that experience says is feasible from the first days of secondary school. The objective (*knowledge* to be developed into *skills*) is to understand how an orchestral motif relates to the episode of the work (*Manon Lescaut* in our case) which it introduces. It would be perfectly easy, in just a few sentences, to explain how Puccini deals with the problem and so achieves his purpose. But the students will be more actively involved if the topic is posed as a question and their opinions canvassed.

Simply, we present a list of situations in the opera, play their orchestral introductions in a different order, and ask the students to decide which orchestral music they think is most “suitable” to each of the scenes introduced. Each student will give a different answer. Together we will then discuss the meaning that any introduction, chosen by the students, might project onto the scene that follows it. And then compare it with Puccini’s own choice.

To those who confirm Puccini’s own choice, we will say that they are like Puccini at heart.

To those who make very different choices we will say that they are a “creative”! Because all choices are equally valid. Then, since we are working on *Manon Lescaut* and the expressive world of Puccini, it will prove useful and important to discover how he paired of a certain piece of music with a particular scene.

*Manon Lescaut* contains numerous, brief instrumental introductions. They are tabled here, each with its scenic situation. The teacher will choose the four to five that most appropriate ones to present in the interplay of associations between music and setting:

Score	Music	Situations
Act I. Opening	<i>Allegro brillante</i> , violins and woodwinds	A lively public square
Act I. No. 49	<i>Allegro vivo, con fuoco</i> , full orchestra	Lescaut and students playing cards
Act I. No. 52	The opening <i>vivo</i> like the above, then <i>andantino</i> and becoming ever more <i>cantabile</i>	Manon enters
Act II. Opening	<i>Allegretto moderato</i> . Motif for flute only. In B minor	Manon in Geronte's house
Act II. No. 13	Minuet. Only strings with dampers	A ball in Geronte's house
Act II. No. 54	<i>Vivacissimo</i> and <i>fortissimo</i> . Full orchestra	Manon's arrest
Act III. No. 15	<i>Andante animato</i> . <i>Dolcissimo</i> . Theme for violins, harp arpeggios	Des Grieux waits for Manon's release
Act III. No. 28	<i>Andante sostenuto</i> . <i>Fortissimo</i> with full orchestra	Des Grieux persuades the captain to let him on board with the deportees
Act IV. Opening	<i>Andante sostenuto</i> . Moments from <i>pp</i> to <i>ff</i> to <i>pp</i>	A boundless desert
Act IV. No. 7	<i>Allegro</i> , very energetic. <i>Tutta forza, con violenza e stringendo</i>	In the desert. Des Grieux runs in search of water
Act IV. No. 9	<i>Lento</i> , very calm	Des Grieux assists Manon

The heuristic method has a second advantage: it stimulates young people's creativity. Being asked to imagine how the composer would deal with a dramatic situation encourages them to think for themselves. It hardly

matters if their answers differ from the solutions adopted by Puccini. It is much more important for them to show they understand the various formal principles that guide a composer.

Another *heuristic* application. Recount the plot until the end of Act III and ask them to imagine how it ends: not just the story of the two lovers (provided they do not already know this, of course) but also with what musical choices, what phrasing (agogics), instruments, melodies...

### Instruments and song

The previous studies have all dealt with purely instrumental sections of the opera. So, apart from introducing the sung parts, how will the instruments relate to the them? They can do this in several ways. The most elementary is to double the song line, or even simply to support it harmoniously (with chords). Opera composers of previous generations had accustomed listeners to a musical setting that only backed the song line. Puccini often doubles his most beautiful melodies in this way, but he always does something more. If the students have already played the game of associations described above, we can invite them to display the degree of *skill* acquired by giving them the task of discovering how Puccini uses the instruments in some of its finest arias. Firstly he does not use his instruments at random, but carefully chooses those that feel best suited to the expressive climate of the melody. We

can take the two exits of Des Grieux in Act I:

1. "Tra voi belle, brune e bionde": only the strings support the melody at the opening of the song, but in counter time, and in pizzicato; Puccini replaces them in the second section (*Poco più mosso* on "Palesatemi il destino") with woodwinds and harp. He then reprises the instrumentation of the opening at the return to "Tra voi belle..."
2. "Donna non vidi mai": here the violins double the song to the letter, in the top octave. But the whole passage is a refined interweaving of chromatic arrangements: opening with the chords for harp, again the syncopations of the woodwinds, leading to the fullness of the whole orchestra, where the violins abandon the direct line of the song and then make it emerge from the interweaving of chords (rather as the Romantic composers had accustomed us to hearing in their piano works, or let's say the polyphonists of the eighteenth century, with Bach at their head).

It hardly needs saying that it would be in vain to seek in Puccini for the elemental *oom-pah-pah* that simply represented the pitch of the melody. In the attack of the aria "In quelle trine morbide," the flutes, clarinets, bassoon and then oboes accompany the song in counter time:

### Example 7

Moderato con moto

Flauti

*pp*

*p*

In que-le tri-ne mor-bi-de

An anxious sighing effect, which is appeased only by the sweet memories of the “dimora umile,” when piccolo, oboe and violin take the main part:

### Example 8

Example 8 shows two staves of music in 3/4 time. The top staff is marked *pp dolce* and the bottom staff is marked *p*. The lyrics are "O mia di-mo-ra u-mi-le".

Instrumentation is only one of the structural factors or expressive means which the composer selects and manipulates to express the meaning. Compare the finale of Act III with a

moment in Act IV (*Lento espressivo*). There it was the whole orchestra burst *fortissimo* into the theme of what I called, for the sake of convenience, falling in love:

### Example 9

Example 9 shows a single staff of music in 3/4 time. The tempo is marked *Andante sostenuto* and the dynamic is marked *ff tutta forza*.

Now the same theme is entrusted only to the muted violins (this is another touch that affects the timbre) and the harp. The music is no longer *fortissimo* but *pianissimo*; no longer *Andante sostenuto* but *Lento*, and the meaning changes radically. Des Grieux's enthusiasm for the captain's concession gives way to an unmistakable, fatal sorrow.

#### From instruments to song

The greatest merit the critics attribute to Puccini, and *Manon Lescaut* in particular, is his rich vein of melody, the continuous

flow of *cantabile* tunes that haunt the mind. Each conveys certain narrative-expressive situations, as might be done by a particular brushstroke (straight, curved, upward, continuous, broken...) in a painting. But while the student's eye can easily pick out the interweaving of lines in a picture, an inadequate musical education can make it difficult to grasp the melodic pattern. Here is an example of how a lack of perceptual *ability* prevents the development of a *skill*: mastering the fundamental contribution of the *melos* to the expressive result of a piece of music.

We can hear this in any instrumental piece; but now it is time to set aside the instruments and consider the second dimension of opera, the singing. That music that pieces the words and guides their meaning, leading them wherever the composer chooses as he shapes them with that melodic pattern. Tell me how you sing, we might almost ask the operatic character, and we will tell you what you have in your mind.

#### Ear training

All the knowledge that we can make available to our students fails in the task of providing them with skills, if the perceptual abilities are not sufficiently developed. The teacher knows how important it is in the syllabus to cultivate these abilities with proper *ear training*, to use the jargon current in teaching method, so as to fix attention on this ancient need (which is not just British). The first elementary ability is to recognize, while listening, the direction of an interval and a melodic passage, whether ascending, descending or horizontal. This already enables one to grasp the expressive meaning of a musical passage and hence to grasp the meaning of the episode, the state of mind of the singer, and so forth. It is a case of relaunching a specific set of exercises by exploiting Puccini's melodies.

For example:

1. We alternate two sounds chosen at will. The students move their right hand when they hear the higher sound played, and the left when they hear the lower. Whenever the two sounds coincide: the students should move both hands.
2. We sing or play some melodic intervals; for example the following, from Act I:

### Example 10a

Example 10a shows a single staff of music in 3/4 time. The lyrics are "L'a - mor".

### Example 10b

Example 10b shows a single staff of music in 3/4 time. The lyrics are "Ba - ie".

### Example 10c

Example 10c shows a single staff of music in 3/4 time. The lyrics are "La spe - ran - za."

Accompany the music with a hand gesture: upward if the interval is ascending, downward if it is descending. The students repeat the song and the gesture.

3. Sing other intervals, without any hand gesture. The students repeat the song, but together they perform the correct hand movement each time.
4. Very slowly play "Donna non vidi mai simile a questa." The students raise or lower their hands following the sound pattern.
5. The opposite of the previous one. Move your hand up and down. In turn, each student will sing the sounds he or she wants, while respecting the direction indicated by the hand.
6. Two students will freely improvise, one following the movement of your right hand, the other the movement of your left. Never mind if the result is not much like Puccini.
7. The teacher or a student performs a short melody two or three times. For example (again from Act I): "Tra voi belle, brune e bionde." At the end, another member of the class repeats it, moving his hand at the same time.

### From perception to skill

These are just some examples of exercises to consolidate the perception of the melodic direction of arias: a skill essential to understanding the particular expressive value of passages from Puccini.

An elementary and intuitive rule: the more intense the emotion of the character, the more the voice ranges between the low and high notes, the intensity becomes greater, or more variable, the timbre becomes harsh and strained, and so on. At the other extreme, a monotone, always kept at a level between the *piano* and the *mezzo piano*, with a steady rhythm and clear timbre, is indicative of emotional restraint, or indifference, coldness, insensitivity, and so forth. The pupils can check this not only in singing but in everyday talk: we can clearly tell by the *tone of voice* alone whether our neighbors are arguing or inviting each other to help themselves to this delicious cake. And as in everyday talk, the young people can easily grasp the same concept in songs.

The song *I giardini di marzo* begins: “Il carretto passava e quell'uomo gridava gelatili!” Lucio Battisti continues the story in a monotone: “E la sera al telefono tu mi chiedevi: perché non parli?” And then comes the outburst: “Che anno è, che giorno è? Questo è il tempo di vivere con te. Le mie mani, come vedi, non tremano più. E ho nell'anima... In fondo all'anima cieli immensi, e immenso amore...” There is no need to have taken a course in ear training to grasp the psychological difference between the first and second part of Battisti's *I giardini di marzo*. In opera this same mechanism extends from the glow of a melody lasting a few bars to the whole film in which a host of characters

love, hate, flatter, wound, exalt, humiliate... So many moments of an often complex plot. How many songs could be sung in the same time that a whole opera lasts? Such simple topics might overcome any reserves of hostility to opera in students.

The zero degree of the melodic movement is therefore the song in *monotone*, which reveals a switched off, detached, emotionally inert mood. This is the *tonus rectus*, or *tonus communis*, in which prayers used to be introduced: “Dominus vobiscum”; “Et cum spiritu tuo”; “Oremus”... When praying, the Church Fathers said, one should leave the emotions outside the church to focus on the eternal and unchanging reality of the creator of the universe.

In *Manon Lescaut* Puccini uses monotone singing only in a few marginal situations. We naturally expect to find them highly suited to the last act, when Manon spends her last energies walking into the desert. “Erra le brezza nella gran pianura e muore il giorno! Innanzi! Innanzi!” (“In a weaker voice,” writes Puccini). And even more monotonous are her last words, a few moments before the curtain suddenly falls: “ma l'amor mio non muore.” Even Des Grieux gave up shortly before, in the monotone lament: “Gelo di morte.” He had many other moments to let us know of his despair, as when he sang “O amore, o Manon”: and his voice rises to C<sub>5</sub>:

### Example 11

Andante espressivo con moto

O a - mo - re! O Ma - non!

But it is not new for Des Grieux to express himself with such a movement of the voice. When, at the end of Act III, he is begging the

captain of the ship to let him aboard, he begins with two almost monochord bars, then bursts into the exasperated plea:

### Example 12

Largo sostenuto

V'im-plo - ro, vi chie - do pie-tà vi chie-do pie - tà Ah! pie - tà.

### Dying in song

It may seem strange that a woman dying of hardship in a burning desert can get her voice up to C<sub>5</sub>. Yet the example is useful as a way to refute the naive realism of the student who might find it ridiculous. The concept the students have to grasp is that the composer submits expression to a clear, precise rule: in a case like this, he pushes the voice towards the very edge of its range to make us under-

stand not the outward situation but take us right inside the character's mind.

The situation is striking and should not be lost. When Manon sings “Erra la brezza...,” violins and violas accompany this ascending chromatic design up until it rests on the tonic: a dramatic motif, which continues to express the uselessness of Manon's extreme physical effort as she collapses in exhaustion:

### Example 13

Andante sostenuto *poco rit.*

Er - ra la brez - za nel - la gran pia - nu - ra

Violini *tr*

A few years later, Puccini made a more complex and dramatically exemplary choice in the finale of *Bohème*. As Mimi sings her last words (in the inevitable degree zero of melody), “Qui... amor... sempre con te! Le mani... al caldo... e... dormire,” the orchestra repeats the motifs from Act I, taking the thoughts of the two lovers and the audience — inevitably moved to tears — back to the happy time of their early love.

Des Grieux’s melodic leaps are remote from this degree zero of intonation: an unmistakable sign of his passion. It breaks out at Manon’s first appearance (if not before, when he is joking with “le belle brune e bionde” at the inn). And it is exhausted only after it has to yield to the monotone “Gelo di morte!” But “l’amor mio non muore,” Manon declares at the end. And just as in so many of Verdi’s finales, Puccini’s unhappy couple raise the last celebration of their love to the heaven of the scale with “tu fiamma d’amore eterna.”

Monotone as against soaring: an elementary dialectic that can be cultivated even outside opera, as we saw in the case of Lucio Battisti. A different case, a repertoire even further from the public’s taste, and worth linking to opera, is offered by Schubert in one of his most famous lieder, *Der Tod und Das Maedchen*, *Death and the Maiden* (“Death” is grammatically masculine in German). Mr. Death invites the girl into his arms, and she politely turns him down. It is easy to imagine that one of the two characters is very agitated, the other calm. We can ask our students to predict which Schubert’s chooses, or simply express their personal preferences. Depending on the two choices (Death agitated, the Maiden calm, or vice versa), the singing

places a radically different scene before us (Schubert made the second choice, giving Mr. Death a glacial monotone).

Introducing Schubert in an approach to *Manon Lescaut*, as before Mimi or even Battisti, is not meant as a divagation, but a further example of the teaching method exemplified when we spoke of the cinema: reaching the result from what already our pupils already know.

### The heir of Verdi

Not all the music critics noticed the extraordinary contribution Puccini made to opera. His harshest detractor, the severe musicologist Fausto Torrefranca, devoted a whole pamphlet to showing his radical inability to grasp the values that even a scholar without much sympathy for Puccini could hardly help acknowledging: “the almost inexhaustible stream of his melodic inspiration, sensuous warmth and passionate eloquence of his lyrical invention, and the comparative modernity of his harmonic language.”<sup>3</sup>

Many years before him, the playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote a regular column on music in London with a skill and wit that still elicit admiration in the almost 3000 pages of his collected reviews. At the London premiere of *Manon Lescaut*, he showed he already understood what our musicologist was deaf to: the place Puccini would hold in the history of opera:

In *Cavalleria* and *Pagliacci* I can find nothing but Donizettian opera rationalized, condensed, filled in, and thoroughly brought up to date; but in *Manon Lescaut* the domain of Italian opera is enlarged by an annexation of German territory. The first act, which is as gay and effective and romantic as the opening of any version of *Manon* need be, is also unmistakably symphonic in its treatment. There is genuine symphonic modification, development, and occasionally combination of the thematic material, all in a dramatic way, but also in a musically homogeneous way, so that the act is really a single movement with episodes instead of being a succession of separate numbers, linked together, to conform to the modern fashion ...

And again:

Further, the experiments in harmony and syncopation, reminding one often of the intellectual curiosities which abound in Schumann’s less popular pianoforte works, show a strong technical interest which is, in Italian music, a most refreshing symptom of mental vigor, even when it is not strictly to the real artistic point. ... Puccini, at least, shows no signs of atrophy of the melodic faculty: he breaks out into catching melodies quite in the vein of Verdi: for example, “Tra voi, belle,” in the first act of *Manon*, has all the charm of the tunes beloved by the old operatic guard. On that and other accounts, Puccini looks to me more like the heir of Verdi than any of his rivals.<sup>4</sup>

And Shaw wrote this impeccable prophecy when *Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Butterfly* and the others were still to come!

### Portraits. Des Grieux

In a previous paragraph, we tried to make it clear how a composer uses special musical means to create atmospheres and settings. But Puccini’s music is particularly attentive to the setting (not being confined to brief opening passages of instrumental music, but encompassing pretty well the whole act in its mood). But while the setting is one of the expressive possibilities of music, the *portrait* is a much more crucial point, and an audience will focus on this in particular. Music has the power to convey the personalities of the characters, their moods and purposes.

The prodigious wealth of Puccini’s melodic resources means that he can devote long scenes of the opera to each of the characters. We can play just the most memorable ones to our students, beginning with Des Grieux, who is, in a sense, the simpler of the two. We see him come on stage almost immediately in Act I in the bustling scene with the students. He indulges in a little unconvincing flirting with the young women present: we realize it is pure gallantry, to which he is playfully spurred by the group of students to a graceful waltz step on the pizzicato strings. This is not the Des Grieux who emerges in the rest of the opera. Then as soon as Manon appears: “Donna non vidi mai simile a questa!” It is a classic case of love at first sight. The passion kindled here is never extinguished. It continues to burn brightly through all the different situations that arise. In the aria “Donna non vidi mai simile a questa!” Puccini expresses his innermost thoughts. The tempo is *Lento*: the young man is still rapt. The words “Manon Lescaut mi chiamo” have numbed his faculty of comprehension, but not his will. What he wants is elementary: the young woman’s

exclusive love. He tells her this, as soon as she reappears, not in words, but in the motif with which he start his aria, performed by cello, *cor anglais*, French horn and bass clarinet:

### Example 14



The fire burning in Des Grieux's heart takes two forms. We feel them both towards the end of Act I when he is trying to persuade Manon to elope with him. The first form is the fluttering swirling we recognize by the *fortissimo* and *accelerando* of the whole orchestra. The second, immediately after, is a hopeless

pleading, in the silence of the orchestra. Burning passion and despair are the two poles between which his soul wavers.

He is still complaining when he recounts to Manon the "giornate buie e desolate" that fell upon him when he was forsaken:

### Example 15



The last act mingles overwhelming despair and passion, as we could easily foresee, without allowing a moment's respite. It is wholly frozen by Manon's agony, while Des

Grieux attends her helplessly. "Con passione infinita," Puccini writes in the score, as if projecting the song above the lines of the staff, literally:

### Example 16



The high notes are repeated shortly after on: "O immensa delizia mia tu fiamma d'amore eterna."

The passion burning in Des Grieux emerges clearly from these high notes, something that no one would hazard in real life while assisting a dying person. Once again: the music *speaks*, revealing a feeling that goes far beyond the concrete situation: it penetrates to the heart of the character as no other art can do.

### Portraits. Manon

A structure rather similar to Des Grieux's un-

derlies Manon's psychological development. The young man appears on stage provoked into flirting with the "belle brune e bionde." He is not yet the passionate lover revealed soon after. Even Manon is far from what we will know when she supplies the mumbled information "Domani all'alba io parto. Un chiostro m'attende... La mia stella tramonta." Instead, her star has not yet risen. And it continues to remain concealed at Des Grieux's first urging to escape. The melodic line of the reply is equally humble and unassuming:

### Example 17



Though her response to Des Grieux's insistence is so subdued, she gives him a glimpse of her vibrant emotional sensitivity: it is difficult to say whether this appears more in the

song that begins to break out soon after, or in the loving *Andante amoroso* of the tender flute melody:

### Example 18



The answer comes from Des Grieux: that behind the outward appearance of Manon's song, in the melody of the flute, he grasps her emotional world, far more sincere and long-

ing for love. He grasps it in the musically simplest way: for this reason he sings his declaration of love: "Date all'onde del nuovo incanto il dolce labbro e il cor." In other words, the flute

expresses Manon's innermost feelings, her need for love. The fact that Des Grieux addresses his pleas to her on this same melody shows that he is well aware of what she feels in the secret of her heart.

Manon's star is starting to shine brightly at Des Grieux's passionate insistence: trembling in "Una fanciulla povera son io..." anxious at the idea of eloping, and finally resolute in unison with Des Grieux.

The second act unfolds in the profound contrast between the state of the two lovers. Manon is bored and weary, contrasting with the desperation with which Des Grieux forces his way into Geronte's luxurious house to cry out his fury at being forsaken. The song that reveals Manon's feelings is bare, a worn thread in the continuous greyness of an accompaniment that almost never emerges from the submissive B flat minor of the orchestra. This continues until her thoughts turn to comparing her debased present with the past moments spent with her beloved. Then everything changes: it takes only a brief chromatic passage, and we find she has shifted into the key of B flat major. Here the orchestra of the woodwinds alone with their continual syncopation heightens the intensity of the melody (we saw this in example 7). From the first part of the aria, Puccini takes us to the second with a leap to the key of G flat major. "The transposition is psychologically sound: [Manon] begins to contrast the chilling present with the warmth of the past. In this aria the phrase lengths are more regular and balanced than those of Des Grieux's aria *Donna non vidi mai*, but Puccini creates the effect of spontaneity by shifts in tone and scoring."<sup>5</sup> The parallel between the expression of the two lovers becomes predictable in the devel-

opment of the acts after the first, where the protagonists relate directly to each other in so many duets.

The unexpected appearance of Des Grieux in Manon's home immediately reveals the passion Manon is capable of, all the more intense the more depressing the situation in Geronte's house. She allows only a few bars to the overwhelmed Des Grieux before she pours out the torrent of her feelings. As Manon grows increasingly ecstatic, Des Grieux continues his violent recriminations, until the inevitable unison, interrupted only by the entry of Geronte. Here the frivolous side of Manon's personality reappears. It may sound like a euphemism to term Manon's avidity frivolous, and we might easily agree to this if we limited ourselves to reading the libretto. Once again it is the music that has to speak. And Puccini's music here depicts not a vulgar opportunist, but simply a woman, little more than an adolescent, unable to experience the slightest anxiety about the dangerous situation in which, as we know from the libretto, she has placed herself in.

The psychological relationship between Manon and Des Grieux in the later acts reveals a different affinity between them. Their passion turns to despair. Des Grieux's is vehement; Manon's feelings are more muted. At the first encounter between the two, Manon also expresses herself with "immensa passione," writes Puccini, directing the stage direction, naturally, more at the singer than the public, for whom the music suffices to grasp her "immensa passione."

The music equally suffices to convey Manon's fear and anxiety when we see the line of her song dramatically descending through the scale:

### Example 19

**Allegretto moderato**

Ah! u - na mi - nac - cia fu - ne - bre! io sen - to! Tre - mo a un pe - ri - glio che i - gno - to m'è.

Or the desperate cry at the top of her register, drowned only by the heaving crowd on the quayside:

### Example 20

**Largo sostenuto**

Ad - di - o! Ad - di - o!

However superficially we listen, we understand the emotional state of the two lovers in the last act. Their desperation is harrowing. It is not just their dying state that prevents flights across the scale and narrows the range of the aria to a few narrow intervals.

### The other Manon

To convince ourselves and our students — to whom the remarks in previous pages are addressed — that other treatments are possible, we need only listen to most of Verdi's finales, where the dying characters raise their voices to heaven. Think of the dying moments of Aida and Radamès.

But we have a more interesting comparison at hand: the last moments of the dying Manon in Massenet's opera. To remind us and our students that Puccini felt impelled to compose his work after hearing Massenet's version, here is another exceptional music

critic after George Bernard Shaw: Eugenio Montale. This is what the poet wrote in his review of *Manon Lescaut*:

This work, we have seen, presents the first of the series of female figures to whom Puccini owes his greatest reputation. And it is clear that in the series Manon is a portrait that stands for a kind of restrained musical closure, for a reserve and a repressive simplicity that we will hardly find in her sisters. Perhaps it was the awareness of Massenet's Manon that conferred on the figure created by Puccini this last touch of a woman not yet wholly revealed. . . . [Puccini] turned his back from the start on that eighteenth-century music that adorns Massenet's opera. Puccini gave an interpretation of the story created by the Abbé Prévost that was far closer to the spirit of nineteenth-century Romanticism, and even in this *Manon Lescaut* represents, in the master's career, an approach that was not repeated: the ex-

perience of a very restrained opera, almost incapable of being resolved into episodes and notes of color, which are not wholly absent but immediately absorbed into the whole. So Massenet's *Manon* can die to a waltz tempo, ending with a fade-out, while Puccini's *Manon* dies on a desolate moor, dominated by high cliffs, in a landscape out of *Tristan und Isolde*; and Des Grieux's sorrow expands into a fullness of vocal accents that Massenet certainly never allowed his young chevalier.<sup>6</sup>

a classic duet, which he does not hesitate to develop into several reprises at  $A_4$  in unison. Only the closing high note is missing! But Massenet is not Italian. And the Italian Puccini closes with the harrowing monotone singing in the central register: a song that gradually crumbles realistically, while the flutes keep alive for a moment the memory of their happy time (Puccini later developed this device even more elaborately in *La bohème*):

### Example 21

Puccini himself was well aware of the substantial difference between Massenet's musical language and his own, and he expressed it frankly, though inevitably in reductive terms. Massenet would "feel it as a Frenchman, with powder and minuets. I will feel it in the Italian way, as desperate passion."<sup>7</sup> Puccini likewise introduces "powder and minuets" in Act II of his opera, and one can suppose that this was an acknowledgment of his predecessor's

work. But certainly the heart of his inspiration lies in the vibrant passion in the chords of the two central figures. This can easily be shown by the different atmospheres in the opening and development of the nighttime scene with Des Grieux and Lescaut outside *Manon's* prison. Recall the gloomy mood, foreboding tragedy, at the start of Puccini's Act III. There is nothing of the kind in Massenet's corresponding scene,

which has a drum roll and military music. Where Puccini broods over the couple's fate, Massenet offers us a humdrum picture of his couple: he takes a photograph of the setting, while Puccini enters into his characters' state of mind.

Massenet's melody must have appear different to Puccini from his own firstly because of the refinement of the design, and the harmonies that support it. Then, in the classical construction of the many arias that Massenet loved to bend in ABA form, reprising the opening section at the end. (Des Grieux's first aria is likewise in ABA form, but significantly it is a playful moment of flirtation in a public square.)

This is how *Manon* appears on stage with the aria, "Je suis... encore... tout étourdie." This is how Massenet depicts the inner drama of his lover: the lover who in the French opera (as in Prévost's novel) shuts herself up in a convent: "Ah, fuyez douce image."

Puccini, by contrast, responded to what Wagner had taught: the use of recurrent themes, essentially evocative of situations and places previously experienced. Wagner had made this continuous reprising of motifs an almost obsessive technique, systematically associating them with characters, situations, events, abstract concepts, and much else.

In the 1890s, all composers were familiar with the technique, and adopted it to some extent, showing themselves capable of using it when needed. Puccini was well acquainted with Wagner's work, and appreciated it at its true value. He had not the least fear of appearing an imitator if he used the master's elementary device. Elementary but fertile as are few others. René Leibowitz wrote that "the genius of the great musicians is explained both by what they owe to the tradition of their art and what they give to it. And there is no exception to the rule that the great artists always begin by adopting and assimilating in the simplest way the tradition in which they make their debut, to enrich it with ever bolder innovations. This is the case of Puccini": he was capable of using recurrent thematic motifs as one more color in his compositional palette.

The motifs that return through the four acts are always adapted to the new situations created by the drama.<sup>8</sup> We can look at some examples that will be clear to our students, calling them by the name of the character or situation they are first associated with. The theme we can call "Des Grieux," sung to the words "Donna non vidi mai simile a questa," is heard just before on the violins, as he asks *Manon* her name: "Gentile damigella, il prego mio accettate"

### Example 22

Manon also has her motif:

### Example 23



This likewise has a precedent: the tune of the woodwinds on the arrival of the carriage:

### Example 24



We will find it, or rather motifs developed from it, in many situations, until the tragic chromatic descent in the final act:

### Example 25



The theme of exaltation:

### Example 26



If we remember, this is the same theme that breaks out at the close of Act III, and then returns, slow and desolate, at the opening of Act IV.

### An extension: comparison

Asking students to compare how two composers have dealt with the same subject is an extremely fruitful way to increase their skill. The great art historian Heinrich Wölfflin knew this well and was capable of doing it extremely adroitly. In the early twentieth century, he not only built his analytical principles on opposing pairs — linear/painterly, multiplicity/unity, open/closed form, and others — but he systematically based his lectures on comparisons. He would project two slides with the images that interested him onto the same screen, contrasting them to train the eyes of the viewers to grasp their differences and, through differences, the identity of each. Wise musicologists clearly understand this approach to research and have used it in enlightening writings, as have serious historians in other fields.

To clarify the principle, we can add to the cases considered here an example unconnected with opera, with a piece of music very popular in secondary education. Respighi's *Pines of Rome* contains a reminiscence of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. They both evoke scenes of children playing in a park, moonlit nights, catacombs

and triumphal monuments. But what a difference there is between them! To name just one, think of the contrast between the broken and asymmetrical development of the Russian and the fluent melody of the Italian. Listening simultaneously to two DVD players, just as Wölfflin projected his two projectors! It would be a brilliant idea if only... it was possible. This shows the different ways of enjoying a painting compared to a piece of music. When I compare two paintings reproduced on the page of an art book, my eye can switch continually and rapidly from one to the other. When I want to compare two pieces of music I have to rely on memory, recalling the music I have just heard so as to compare it with another piece.

But this is another fascinating subject, which a secondary-school teacher might use to help the students take their first steps: exploring the powers and limits of each of the two art forms, figurative and musical, the art of space and the art of time. Music requires memory training, and the longer the musical work the greater the training required. This is yet another reason to put an experience of opera at the center of the school curriculum.

## NOTES

1. JOSEPH KERMAN, *Opera as Drama* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 21.
2. MOSCO CARNER, *Giacomo Puccini* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1959), 237-238.
3. MOSCO CARNER, *Major and Minor* (London: Duckworth, 1980), 138.
4. GEORGE BERNARD SHAW, *Shaw's Music. The Complete Music Criticism*, III (London: The Bodley Head, 1981), 216-217.
5. WILLIAM ASHBROOK, *The Operas of Puccini* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 40.
6. EUGENIO MONTALE, *Prime alla Scala* (Milan: Mondadori, 1981), 211. Remember that, apart from the two composers mentioned here, others had set the story of Manon to music: William Balfe, Daniel Auber, Richard Kleinmichel, Fromental Halévy had turned it into a ballet.
7. Quoted by MICHELE GIRARDI, *Giacomo Puccini. L'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano* (Venice: Marsilio, 2000), 81.
8. Teachers in extending study of the themes of *Manon Lescaut* will find full analyses in the books cited by Mosco Carner (442-449), William Ashbrook (38-45), and above all Michele Girardi (83-107). I wish to thank Andrea Grassi for his bibliographic advice.