

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

Manon Lescaut



Music by
Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by
Luigi Illica and others

Based on the 1731 novel,
*L'histoire du chevalier des Grieux
et de Manon Lescaut* by Abbé Prévost

An opera in Four Acts

Locations:
Amiens, Paris, Le Havre, New Orleans

Time:
Second half of the eighteenth century

Characters

Manon Lescaut (soprano) Kiri Te Kanawa
Chevalier des Grieux (tenor)..... Plácido Domingo
Lescaut, Manon's brother, a sergeant (baritone) Thomas Allen
Geronte di Ravoir, a wealthy Parisian (bass)..... Forbes Robinson
Edmondo, a student (tenor)..... Robin Leggate
Innkeeper (bass) George Macpherson
Madrigal Singer (mezzo-soprano) Anna Cooper
Dancing Master (tenor) John Fryatt
Lamplighter (tenor) Mark Curtis
Sergeant of the Royal Archers (bass)..... Handel Thomas
Naval Captain (bass) Roderick Earle
Sergeant of Soldiers Pascal Allen
Singers, old beaux and abbés, girls, townsfolk, students, courtesans, archers, sailors

Conducted by Giuseppe Sinopoli
Orchestra and Chorus of the Royal Opera House Covent Garden

Première performance: February 1, 1893 at the Teatro Regio in Turin, Italy

Synopsis

Act I

A public square at Amiens, near the Paris Gate

It is evening, and a crowd of male students, women and soldiers are strolling about a public square and along the avenue known for drinking and gaming. Edmondo, a young student, enters with some other students. He sings a song of youthful pleasure. Des Grieux enters, but is melancholy and does not join the other students. They joke with him. The girls, for whom the students have been waiting, enter from their work. They turn away from Des Grieux, and Edmondo begs his friends to leave the upset man alone.

A postillion's horn is heard and a coach arrives, carrying the elderly treasurer-general, Geronte de Ravoire, Lescaut and his sister, Manon. They descend from the coach. Des Grieux is enchanted with Manon's beauty and, when Lescaut goes into the inn, he approaches Manon. Des Grieux overhears the conversation between Geronte and Lescaut. Manon is on her way to a convent, following the instructions of her father. Des Grieux approaches Manon and begs her to meet him later. She reluctantly agrees. The students laugh, pointing at the pair. After Manon leaves, Des Grieux sings of his feelings for her.

Lescaut returns with Geronte, who also is captivated by Manon, saying that his pretty little sister seems unhappy and she will only be wasted in a convent. He invites Lescaut to dine with him, and Lescaut accepts the invitation. Lescaut is attracted by the gamblers and takes part in their gaming.

While Lescaut is playing cards with a group of students, Geronte, arranges to run away with Manon. He tells the innkeeper that he will want horses and a carriage in an hour, and that he must keep silent if he sees a man and a maiden go off. Edmondo overhears their conversation and informs Des Grieux, suggesting that he accompany Manon himself, taking Geronte's place in the carriage.

Manon keeps her meeting with Des Grieux, who declares his love to Manon and persuades her to go off to Paris with him. They leave together, just as Geronte and Lescaut appear on the scene.

Edmondo tells Geronte that Manon has gone off with the young student. In disgusted astonishment, Geronte disturbs Lescaut in his play and tries to prevail upon him to follow the fleeing pair. Lescaut, however, insists on enjoying the dinner promised him, and says he will go after Manon in the morning. The curtain falls to the sound of loud laughter from the students.

Intermezzo: The journey to Le Havre

Des Grieux declares his intention to follow Manon even to the end of the world.



Act II

A room in Geronte's house in Paris

The curtain rises showing a handsomely furnished room in Geronte's house. Manon left Des Grieux when his money ran out, and is now living as Geronte's mistress.

Manon's brother, Lescaut, enters and congratulates his sister on her change of lifestyle. Manon is seated at her toilet-table, waited on by the hairdresser and her two assistants. She is instructing the hairdresser to be careful in the work of doing her hair. When the toilet is finally completed, Manon steps forward to be admired by her brother. In spite of her brother's praise of her beauty and position, Manon is sad at having left Des Grieux. She is always thinking of him. Geronte is old, dreadful and a bore.



Singers enter the room, sent by Geronte to amuse Manon. They sing a madrigal in praise of Manon's beauty. Manon gives her brother money with which to pay the singers, but Lescaut pockets the purse, saying he would not insult them by offering them money. He bids them farewell in the name of glory, and the singers bow themselves out.

Geronte enters, bringing with him a dancing master, musicians, and some old friends. Manon is bored by them all. Under Geronte's instructions a minuet is danced, in which Manon takes part, led by the dancing-master. After dancing, Geronte and the musicians leave the house. Geronte suggests that they take a stroll on the boulevard, and begs Manon to join them there later. He leaves, kissing Manon's hand, and all depart with him.

Lescaut, realizing that his sister is not happy living with Geronte, goes to find Des Grieux in order to bring him to Geronte's house.

Manon is left alone in her room, waiting for the sedan chair Geronte has gone to order. She busies herself arranging her toilet for the promenade. Des Grieux suddenly appears and they renew their vows of love. Geronte returns unexpectedly. They separate hurriedly, in surprise at being discovered. Des Grieux makes a menacing step forward towards Geronte, but Manon places herself between them. Geronte jeers at her and reminds her of all that he has done for her. She answers him by placing a mirror in his hand and bids him look there and he will see why she cannot love him. Geronte controls his anger and leaves the two together, smiling in sarcasm, promising that they will meet again quite soon.

Manon and Des Grieux are overjoyed at being left alone. They make plans to go away together. Manon, however, is reluctant to leave her jewels and pretty dresses. Des Grieux is bitter at her disposition, which can be so easily led by the allurements of pretty things rather than by love. Manon is moved by his despair and begs forgiveness. She swears to be true and faithful to him.

Lescaut enters hurriedly and urges them to leave at once. The vile old scoundrel, as he calls Geronte, has called the guards, and these must be on their way. Manon quickly seizes her jewels, and she and Des Grieux make for the door. They find it locked. Lescaut pushes Manon and Des Grieux into an alcove and follows after them. A scream from Manon is heard, and she rushes out of the alcove, followed by Des Grieux and her brother. From the open curtains of the alcove come soldiers. The door is burst open and soldiers rush in to arrest Manon. In trying to escape, Manon lets the jewels fall to the ground. She is dragged away by the soldiers, who will not permit Des Grieux to go with them.

Des Grieux tries everything to release Manon from the prison, but to no avail. He decides to follow Manon to Le Havre.

Act III

A square near the harbor in Le Havre

It is dawn. Manon is in prison with other courtesans. Des Grieux and Lescaut have come to Le Havre to be near her.

Des Grieux is distraught with grief. Lescaut tells Des Grieux that he has bribed a prison guard to let him speak with Manon.

Lescaut approaches the barracks and, exchanging a sign with the new sentinel, goes up to the barred window and taps cautiously. Manon appears at the window and is overjoyed at seeing Des Grieux. She tells him she is to be deported to Louisiana in America. A lamp lighter passes, singing a song while he extinguishes the lights.



Lescaut and Des Grieux attempt to rescue Manon, but they are interrupted by the firing of shots. They are compelled to leave. A guard appears, escorting a number of courtesans who are to sail to America. Manon is among them, walking pale and sad. The crowd makes brutal comments during the roll call of the courtesans.

As they pass by, Lescaut points out his sister to one of the citizens, who has come to watch the embarkation, and tells him that he knows that she was abducted from her young lover. Des Grieux attempts to walk by Manon's side, but the sergeant of the guard pushes him aside roughly. Des Grieux threatens him, and tells Manon to cling to him. Urged on by Lescaut, the citizens take Des Grieux's part. The captain of the vessel suddenly appears and, hearing what the situation is, takes pity on Des Grieux and permits him to board the ship. Des Grieux is overcome with joy and Manon, realizing that help has come to her, opens her arms to Des Grieux, who embraces her. Lescaut, astonished at the way things have turned out, shakes his head and walks away.

Act IV

A vast plain near the outskirts of the New Orleans territory



The sky is overcast and night is falling. Manon and Des Grieux, poorly clothed and exhausted, make their way across the desert plain, hoping to find protection in a British settlement. They have no water, and Manon is in the last stages of weakness. She falls, unable to go any further. Des Grieux is beside himself with despair. He finds a comfortable place to her to rest, and goes off to search for water.

While he is gone, Manon recalls her past and her fate in dying. Thinking that Des Grieux has forsaken her entirely, she feels

utter despair, that there is now no hope for her at all. Only death can free her from her burden.

Des Grieux returns, having been unable to find water. Manon bids him a heart-rending farewell and dies in his arms. Overcome by grief, Des Grieux falls unconscious across her body.

Giacomo Puccini

Born: Lucca, December 22, 1858 — Died: Brussels, November 29, 1924



Giacomo Puccini was the fifth generation of a family of professional musicians and composers, living and working in and around Lucca, Tuscany Italy. When he was just five years old his father died.

Puccini eventually took over his father's position of choirmaster and organist at San Martino Church. It was expected that Giacomo follow in the path of his ancestors who were church composers and organists, continuing the long family tradition. All that changed for him one night in 1876 when he and a friend walked thirteen miles to the city of Pisa to see a production of Verdi's *Aida*. From that moment on Giacomo knew that his true passion would be opera.

In 1880, Puccini completed his studies at the Pacini Institute in Lucca. He had just finished composing a mass, *Messa di Gloria*. This encouraged his great-uncle to help support his musical education. A scholarship was also granted from Queen Margherita at Milan's Conservatorio. Milan, with its famous Teatro alla Scala, was the place to be for all young up-and-coming composers.

For three years (1880-1883) Giacomo continued his studies at the Conservatorio. As a graduating exercise he composed an orchestral piece, *Capriccio sinfonico*, which was performed by the student orchestra. It achieved great success at its performance and foretold the gifts that were to be — of operas blending intense emotion and theatricality with tender lyricism, colorful orchestration and a rich vocal line.

Meanwhile, the music-publishing firm of Edoardo Sonzogno announced the first of several competitions for a one-act opera. (Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* was discovered in this way in 1889.) Puccini, then still a pupil of the Conservatorio, decided to take part in it. A young librettist and journalist, Ferninando Fontana, suggested that he compose an opera around the story *Le Villi* (the Witches). Though Puccini didn't win, the opera was produced successfully in 1884 at Milan. As a result, the great Milanese music publisher, Giulio Ricordi, acquired the rights of *Le Villi*, and commissioned Puccini to write a new opera, again with the young Fontana as his librettist. This was the beginning a life-long association of Puccini and Ricordi, in whom he found a fatherly friend and wise guide.

Puccini was a perfectionist, writing just eight full-length operas, compared to Verdi's 28. He set high standards for himself and everyone else involved in his operas. His early works show German influence. Later works show the influence of Debussy, and even a touch of the atonality of Schoenberg. But he never strayed too far from his melodic Italian roots or lost his attachment to his native Tuscany.

He worked tirelessly with the sopranos who played his heroines. Maria Jeritza, Puccini's favorite Tosca, recalled, "Sometimes he would make me so angry I wanted to cry. He would say, 'if ever I wake you at three in the morning and ask you to sing a high C, you will sing a high C.'"

When he was financially able, he bought a villa at Torre del Lago, living there much of his life. He was eventually driven away by the smell of a peat factory built during World War I. Puccini took no interest in politics and thought the war a mistake from the start. His lack of enthusiasm for the war was one reason for his falling out with his fiercely patriotic friend, conductor Arturo Toscanini.

He was fond of hunting and smoking, and was fascinated with the mechanical marvels of his day. He owned a wireless and a phonograph and corresponded with Thomas Edison. He also owned several automobiles and motor yachts. He barely survived one of the first car crashes in Italy. Puccini once described himself as a "mighty hunter of wild fowl, operatic librettos and attractive women."

Puccini was a notorious lady's man, but he was innocent of the scandal that most shook his marriage. Convinced he was having an affair with a maidservant, his wife, Elvira, drove the young girl from the

house and publicly denounced her. The girl was so shaken that she committed suicide, whereupon it was determined that she was in fact a virgin.

Near the end of his life, Puccini was still striving for greatness with his last opera, *Turandot*. Marek wrote, “He became a frightening taskmaster, not only with his librettists but, above all, with himself. He was bent on doing something new, determined to write music of much larger scope, of legendary stature and philosophic implication.” In the opinion of some critics, he nearly succeeded. Only death by throat cancer in 1924 prevented him from finishing and polishing the opera. At the first performance of *Turandot* at Milan’s La Scala in 1926, the conductor, Toscanini, ended the performance in the middle of the third act (after Liù’s death), turning to the audience, “At this point the Maestro laid down his pen.”

Manon Lescaut

Before the premiere of *Manon Lescaut* in 1893, Puccini was a struggling composer who had disappointed all the expectations his first opera excited. While his friends were hailed as the saviors of Italian opera, Puccini toiled endlessly over a project that many observers considered doomed: *Manon Lescaut*. Yet, despite its difficult gestation, *Manon Lescaut* would be Puccini’s greatest triumph, launching his incredible career and setting the stage for his later masterpieces.

Puccini’s publisher, Ricordi, had been against any project based on Prévost’s story, because Massenet had already made it into a successful opera, *Manon*, in 1884. While Puccini and Ricordi may not have known it, the French composer, Daniel Auber, had also already written an opera on the same subject with the title, *Manon Lescaut*, in 1856.

Despite all the warnings, Puccini proceeded with his opera. “Manon is a heroine I believe in and therefore she cannot fail to win the hearts of the public. Why shouldn’t there be two operas about Manon? A woman like Manon can have more than one lover. Massenet feels it as a Frenchman, with powder and minuets. I shall feel it as an Italian, with a desperate passion.”

Puccini took some musical elements in *Manon Lescaut* from earlier works he had written. The libretto was somehow patched together by five librettists whom Puccini employed (or went through). One was Ruggero Leoncavallo, composer of *Pagliacci*. Another was Luigi Illica who also became Puccini’s librettist for *La Bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*. The publisher, Giulio Ricordi, and even Puccini himself also contributed to the libretto. So confused was the authorship of the libretto that no one was credited on the title page of the original score.

The premier performance of *Manon Lescaut* took place in the Teatro Regio in Turin in 1893. *Manon Lescaut* was Puccini’s third opera and his first great success.

Manon Lescaut: The Video (1984)

Starring Plácido Domingo and Tiri Tekanawa; Royal Opera Covent Garden



An extraordinary night at Covent Garden. It is sheer ecstasy to watch these two gifted singing-actors on stage together. Puccini’s rapturous score is in able hands with a young Sinopoli in the pit, and the stars are well-complemented by a great supporting cast. Picture and sound may not be state-of-the art, but when you have such magic on stage it matters little.

Kiri Te Kanawa and Plácido Domingo hit it off the instant they enter the stage. Domingo is perfect as Des Grieux — one of his greatest roles. He uses his emotion and powerful voice to portray a helpless, in love and at the same time, moving, Des Grieux. Kiri Te Kanawa is the greatest Manon there ever was. She moves through the opera seamlessly displaying a gorgeous voice (regardless of a reported head cold at the time) and breathtaking acting ability. This production is a model of what a good opera on DVD should be. *Manon* is set in the appropriate costumes for its period, 18th century France.