A Treasury of
French Opera Arias
Richard Tucker

Carmen—Flower Song
Manon—Ah fuyez, douce image
L'Africaine—O Paradis
Joseph—Champs paternels
Hérodiade—Ne pouvant reprimer
Le Cid—Prayer
The Pearl Fishers—Romance
La Juive—Rachel! Quand du Seigneur
Werther—Pourquoi me reveiller
Un autre est son époux

The Vienna State Opera Orchestra
Pierre Dervaux, Conductor
French opera in the 19th century developed during two distinct periods, each fostering its own style: the first half of the century favored grand opera, while the three decades after the end of the Franco-Prussian War, in 1871, brought back the French lyric style.

During the first period, Paris became the operatic capital of Europe, owing partly to the influence of the Napoleonic Empire. In 1807, Gaspare Spontini (1774-1851), an Italian who had arrived in Paris in 1803 and was Napoleon's favorite musician, triumphed at the Académie Impériale with his opera La Vestale. As a forerunner of later grand operas, this work combined some of the principal themes of the late 18th-century style, which had been called the “vendange” style, with popular elements of the French Revolution. Aside from the standard solos and ensembles, the score is noteworthy for its massive choral numbers and for its elaboration of choral writing. La Vestale was also the first opera to use the “salon” style of the period, La Jouve (The Jove). Premiered in 1835, this work uses all the characteristic devices of the style—large ensembles, crowd scenes, processions, and ballets—and is based on the theme of religious intolerance. The tenor aria “Rachel qui du Seigneur” is sung by the father Elzéar, who is so moved that he must sacrifice his daughter to save her from Christianity. Halévy emphasizes the religious topic with effects such as organ music for a Te Deum and a final choral prayer.

Bizet’s earlier opera, Les Pêcheurs de perles (The Pearl Fishers), first performed in 1863, also has a strain of exotism: it is set on the shores of Ceylon, and the musical style and orchestration frequently reflect a colouristic effect. A group of pearl fishermen has just elected a king, Zurga, who contends with Nadir, the hero, for the love of Leïla, a Brahman priestess. Unbeknownst to both men, she has been chosen to become the virgin who will pray for the fishermen at sea. Nadir suddenly recognizes her behind her veil and sings “Je crois entendre encore,” reflecting on his love for her, in one of the opera’s most famous arias.

The composer most representative of the last part of the 19th century is Jules Massenet (1842-1912), whose operas typify the classic French tradition of the time. Simplicity and reserve became the creed, with a movement away from the dramatic and grandiose. Massenet’s melodies are lyrical and tender, sentimental and charming, and they determine the fabric of the whole work. His operas are eclectic, for they draw on elements of past styles and eras and are not confined to one distinct path of development. Their subjects were obviously chosen to accommodate popular taste, yet they are varied—ranging from the biblical Héroïde to Goethe’s Werther.

Héroïde (1883) derives from the story of Héro and John the Baptist. The latter sings “Ne pouvons réveiller,” just before his death, as an affirmation of his faith. Manon (1884), on the other hand, is based on the theme of passionate love, relates the episodes of the Chevalier des Grieux’s love affair with the fickle Marie Lescot. The Chevalier sings “Ah fuyez, douce image” in an impassioned effort to rid himself of the memory of his beloved Manon.

Cornelle’s version of the life of the 11th-century Spanish warrior Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (El Cid) serves as the plot for Massenet’s Le Cid (1885). In a duel, El Cid kills the Governor of Burgos, father of his fiancée Chimène. When she refuses to forgive him, he goes off to war. Alone in his tent at night, he sings the aria “Ô Souverain, ô Juge, ô Père,” submitting himself to the will of God. Werther, based on Goethe’s novel of the same name, was premiered in a German version at the Vienna Opera a year before its Paris performance of 1893. When Werther, who is deeply in love with Charlotte, discovers her love for a true man, he becomes her fiancé; he responds desperately with “Un autre est son époux.” Later, while visiting Charlotte after her marriage to Albert, Werther remembers their happy days together and sings the aria “Pouvoir te revivre,” a song of tragic love.
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RICHARD TUCKER
VIENNA STATE OPERA ORCHESTRA
PIERRE DERVAUX, Conductor

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1. ROMANCE -- JE CROIS ENTENDRE - Bizet -
2. AH FUYEZ, DOUCE IMAGE - Massenet -
3. POURQUOI ME REVEILLER - Massenet -
4. NE POUVANT REPRIER - Massenet -
5. PRAYER -- O SOUVERAIN,
   O JUGE, O PERE - Massenet -