

Puccini

Manon Lescaut



Giacomo Puccini's third opera, *Manon Lescaut*, premiered at the Teatro Regio, Turin in 1893 and was the first of his operas to garner international acclaim. Musically the opera showed clear evidence of Puccini's growing mastery of tuneful lyricism and his ability to evoke a sense of place. The story of a doomed heroine was one that Puccini would return to with even greater success in *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900) and *Madama Butterfly* (1904). The New York premiere in 1907 featured Lina Cavalieri, Enrico Caruso and Antonio Scotti in the cast, and Puccini himself in the audience, but fell out of the repertoire in between 1929 and 1949.

When a new Met production of *Manon Lescaut* was mounted in 1949 it featured Swedish tenor Jussi Björling as Des Grieux. Björling learned only two new roles after branching out from his operatic home at the Royal Swedish Opera in the late 1930s. One was Don Carlo, which opened Rudolf Bing's tenure as general manager of the Metropolitan Opera in November 1950, the other was Des Grieux in *Manon Lescaut*. Over ten years, between 1949 and 1959, Björling sang the role just 25 times, but we have no less than four complete recordings of him in this opera: the Met's first ever broadcast of the opera in 1949, a studio recording in 1954, this Met broadcast from 1956, and a bi-lingual broadcast from Stockholm in 1959. Only his Manrico in *Il Trovatore* is better preserved with six complete recordings. The Met broadcast of 1956 is by far the most exciting of Björling's four recordings, capturing the full range of his vocal colours, his resplendent tone, and above all his passion. The opening aria, 'Tra voi, belle' has just the right degree of lightness and frivolity, but by Act 3 'Non! Pazzo son!' is tormented, anguished and replete with as much dramatic tension as anyone could want. The duet in Act 4 allows him to showcase his exceptionally beautiful voice (including a soaring, seemingly effortless, high C).

Björling had a complicated relationship with the Met's management, and one might wish that he had appeared more frequently, particularly in broadcasts. But, on the other hand, this has tended to make the broadcasts that do exist especially precious. Björling appeared only four times at the Met during the 1955-56 season, but he was far from idle. He featured on NBC-TV in an extract from *La Bohème* with Renata Tebaldi on 30 March, and was recording the now legendary *La Bohème* for EMI with Victoria de los Angeles under Sir Thomas Beecham at the Manhattan Studios in the days just before and just after this broadcast.

Licia Albanese sings the role of Manon. The Italian-born lyric soprano's uniquely vulnerable tone made her ideally suited for the most tragic female operatic roles. During her twenty-six seasons at the Met (1940-1966) she was best known for her portrayals of *Madama Butterfly*, *Mimi*, *Violetta*, *Marguerite*, *Micaëla*, and *Manon Lescaut*. Her musical intelligence as well as the pathos she brings to the part of Manon is wonderfully evident. At the same time the fragility conveyed by her voice does not mean she is outdone by her partners, and she readily matches the vocal power of Björling in their duets.

The other parts are sung by versatile Met regulars. Baritone Frank Guarrera (Lescaut) appeared in almost 700 performances at the Met between 1948 and 1976; Fernando Corena (Geronte) was even more prolific, during his Met career spanning 1954 to 1978. There are also early appearances by mezzo-soprano Rosalind Elias at the start of a Met career that lasted more than 40 years, and James McCracken who would later graduate to roles such as *Otello*, *Samson*, and *Tannhäuser*.

While the Met tended to rely on 'house' conductors, who spent the majority of their careers at the Met, the opera house occasionally they employed conductors with extensive symphony orchestra experience. In the 1940s stars such as Bruno Walter and Sir Thomas Beecham featured, and in the 1950s Pierre Monteux and Rudolf Kempe. This broadcast is conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos who would have been best known to the audience as the conductor of the New York Philharmonic. His operatic experience was extensive. He conducted in numerous European opera houses as well as the Met and did concert performances of opera with the New York Philharmonic. He has complete mastery of the lightness required in the early acts of *Manon Lescaut*, while driving the tension forcefully later on. Mitropoulos also very skillfully allows the orchestra to establish the desolation of the final act.



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disc one

1. Act 1 - Ave, sera gentile (4:44)
2. L'amor? l'amor? (0:57)
3. Tra voi, belle, brune e bionde (1:22)
4. Ma bravo! (1:50)
5. Descendono, vediam! Viaggiatori eleganti, galanti! (2:09)
6. Cortese damigella, il priego mio accettate (4:09)
7. Donna non vidi mai simile a questa! (2:59)
8. La tua ventura, ci rassicura (5:38)
9. Vecchietto amabile (2:48)
10. Vedete? Io son fedele alla parola mia (4:02)
11. Non c'è più vino? E che? Vuota è la botte? (1:45)
12. Di sedur la sorellina è il momento! (5:21)
13. Act 2 - Despettosetto questo riccio! (5:30)
14. In quelle trine morbide (2:46)
15. Poiché tu vuoi saper, Des Grieux (2:58)
16. Che ceffi son costor? Ciarlatani o speziali? (2:30)
17. Paga costor! (1:16)
18. Minuetto (8:27)
19. Oh, sarò la più bella! (8:32)
20. Ah! Affè, madamigella (2:28)
21. Senti, di qui partiamo (3:08)
22. Lescaut! Tu qui? (4:32)

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disc two

1. Intermezzo (5:19)
2. Act 3 - Ansia eterna, crudel (4:48)
3. E Kate rispose al Re (2:53)
4. All'armi! All'armi! (1:41)
5. Rosetta! Eh! Che arial! (3:40)
6. Presto! In fila! Marciate! (4:15)
7. Act 4 - Tutta su me ti posa (2:58)
8. Manon, senti, amor mio! (2:11)
9. Sei tu che piangi? (4:52)
10. Sola, perduta, abbandonata (4:04)
11. Fra le tue braccia, amore, l'ultima volta! (6:56)
12. RADIO Closing announcements (2:41)
13. RADIO bonus track - Introduction (7:09)

Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Chorus
conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos

XR remastering by Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a photograph of Jussi Björling as Des Grieux in this production

Live broadcast of 31 March 1956
Metropolitan Opera House, New York

Total duration: 2hr 13:13

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