

Don Quixote: Character and symbol in five musical representations (i): J. Massenet-opera *Don Quichotte*

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Abstract: *As one of the most compelling and rich themes in the history of art, Don Quixote de la Mancha is the central character of the eponymous novel by Miguel de Cervantes. Published in two parts (1605 and 1615), it features one of the most important figures in world literature: the ultimate symbol of boundless idealism. His defining trait is the way he reinterprets reality, absorbing its negative energies and converting them into a light that emanates from his very soul. The Knight of the Sorrowful Face placed supreme value on freedom: the freedom to live his ideal and the freedom to be himself. These noble but unrealistic ideals—which ignore practical consequences and situational absurdity—form the ideological axes that have inspired numerous musical works based on this masterpiece. The paper extensively addresses the investigation of the theme in tonal and modern classical music, but - being only the first part of a more comprehensive study, which goes beyond the scope of this publication - we will focus on analyzing the first of the proposals: opera “Don Quichotte” by Jules Massenet.*

Key-words: *idealism, freedom, nobility, Romanticism, style*

1. Introduction

As one of the most compelling and rich themes in the history of art, Don Quixote de la Mancha is the central character of the eponymous novel by Miguel de Cervantes. Published in two parts (1605 and 1615), it features one of the most important figures in world literature: the ultimate symbol of boundless idealism.

Several distinct elements characterize this figure, whose complexity is heightened by his counter-cultural positioning, completely outside the literary

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models of his time. His real identity is that of Alonso Quijano, an impoverished, gaunt and reclusive country nobleman (hidalgo). Approximately 50 years old, he lived in an anonymous village in the La Mancha region of Spain. His inner transformation—which carries significant external consequences—is triggered by the excessive reading of chivalric romances filled with wandering knights, dragons and sorcerers. Consequently, he suffers a so-called psychological break, deciding to become a knight-errant himself to revive the code of chivalry, protect the weak and the oppressed and achieve immortal glory.

Adopting the new name Don Quixote, he cleans an old suit of armor belonging to his ancestors, mounts his horse, Rocinante, and dedicates his deeds to a peasant woman whom he calls Dulcinea del Toboso, transforming her in his mind into a noble princess. This setup creates a profound conflict between reality and imagination—between the idealism of the imaginary knight and the stark realism of his squire, Sancho Panza. Don Quixote's defining trait is the way he reinterprets reality, absorbing its negative energies and converting them into the light that emanates from his very soul. The Knight of the Sorrowful Face placed supreme value on freedom: the freedom to live his ideal and the freedom to be himself, declaring, *„Freedom is one of the most precious gifts that heaven has bestowed upon men.”* These noble but unrealistic ideals—which completely ignore the practical consequences and the situational absurdity—form the ideological axes that have inspired numerous musical works based on this literary masterpiece.

2. Don Quixote: five Musical Representations

2.1. Research objectives, methodology, criteria for analysis

The paper extensively addresses the investigation of the theme in tonal and modern classical music, but - being only the first part of a more comprehensive study, which goes beyond the scope of this publication - we will focus on analyzing the first of the proposals: opera “Don Quichotte” by Jules Massenet. The analytical method used is stylistic analysis on the eight musical parameters (inspired by Jan la Rue), investigating significant details of a melodic, harmonic, metro-rhythmic, formal, agogic, dynamic, timbral and aesthetic nature. I chose these five works because they are the most well-known masterpieces of tonal music on this subject, being the most present in the current repertoire of major concert/opera institutions. I did not make a comparison between them, this being a project at the end of the analytical investigation of the five musical works. The aim of the research is to analyse the correlation of the literary-philosophical subject with the musical requirements of each style/composer/period, in order to better

understand the hero who has traversed the entire history of humanity, within various arts. Such a subject is difficult to approach, being so worn out throughout the entire history of culture, thus it represents a challenge “the concept of originality, which constitutes today the legal foundation of authors’ rights in music, has undergone a complex evolution throughout European history” (Bogdan and Rucsanda 2025, 49).

2.2. Jules Massenet's *Don Quichotte* opera:

Composed in 1910 toward the end of his career, this late, mature comédie héroïque in five acts, set to a libretto by Henri Cain, stands as one of the most moving works in the late French Romantic repertoire. Contrary to expectations, the opera was not directly inspired by Cervantes' masterpiece, but rather by the play *Le Chevalier de la Longue Figure* by Jacques Le Lorrain. Ailing and elderly, Massenet experienced the very emotions of his title character while composing the score. He was deeply infatuated with the soprano Lucy Arbell, who would incarnate the role of Dulcinée—an educated young lady. This instance beautifully illustrates a broader truth about the composer's style: “Massenet was not just an architect of smooth melodies; he was, above all, a dramatist of intimacy. His music does not seek to overwhelm through force, but to seduce through nuance, transforming every hesitation of the heart into a harmonic cell that breathes along with his characters” (Smith 2025, 482–484).

Unlike his earlier masterpieces such as *Manon*, *Werther*, where the melody is explosive and passionate, in *Don Quichotte* Massenet prevails sobriety, sparseness, and the suspension of dynamics in favor of a fully lived idealism. The composer's choice of a bass voice – Feodor Chaliapin being the one who performed the premiere (in a context where most authors portrayed the character with a tenor voice) – consecrates the nostalgic nobility and gentleness of the character that he drew from the French musical traditions, in contrast with the temperamental joy and realism of the Spanish influences.

Some of the great musical moments of the opera are the Windmill Fight scene (which is treated as a moment of tragicomedy) and the final segment, of Quichotte's death (Act V): this is one of the most shocking in the history of opera, embodying the extinguishing of an ideal. J. Massenet ignored M. de Cervantes' ending, the hero remaining faithful to his own noble illusions. Don Quichotte (-embodied throughout the opera by the instrumental voice of the cello- dies sick and disappointed. The music illustrating this is transparent and deeply melancholic, leaving to Sancho Panza the only 'island' he can give: the Unreal Island of Dreams

— a sacred place where suffering does not exist and where the human ideals remain pure.

Serving as a profound tribute to friendship and spiritual purity, this *finale* marks the hero's transition from tragic idealism into eternity by portraying the knight's final moments. Rejected by Dulcinée, Don Quichotte remains in the depths of a dark forest, with his physical strength entirely spent. In a moment of exquisite sensitivity, Sancho expresses deep devotion to his master, offering consolation through an unwavering loyalty that is uniquely highlighted in this musical-dramatic adaptation. Don Quichotte apologizes to Sancho for failing to deliver the castles and islands promised throughout their journeys—an idealism frequently marked in the score by march rhythms performed somehow with subtle irony. Finally, a fleeting echo of Dulcinée's voice accompanies the knight's soul on its journey to eternity:

The image shows a page of a musical score. At the top, there is a harp part with a treble clef and a series of descending eighth-note chords. Below it is a vocal line for Dulcinée, also in treble clef, with the lyrics 'Ahl... le temps d'a - mour a fui!...'. The score is marked 'très au loin. p'. The bottom part of the page shows a bass line with a bass clef and a series of eighth notes.

Ex. 1. J. Massenet – “Don Quichotte” opera, act V, “La voix de Dulcinee”, p. 375, before rehearsal mark 162

Four terrifying chords in orchestral unison open Act V (measures 1–8), setting a somber tone for the final act. This dramatic opening is followed by a polyphonically accompanied melody, featuring layered textures that reveal flashes of sweet, modal, legatissimo lines (marked *pianissimo sostenuto* at rehearsal number 177). These motifs accompany the heavenly ascent of a soul that longed for heaven even while on earth: “where everything you have dreamed of becomes reality.” This musical discourse is periodically interrupted by the anguished interjections of the knight's squire, shouting “*Mon maître, mon maître!*”—cries that Massenet captures through monotonously repeated, funereal notes. Rehearsal number 183 of the score highlights a serene, major-key melodic statement in the high registers of the clarinet and flutes. This passage evokes nostalgic memories of the title character's

childhood village, driven predominantly by ascending phrases that suggest his lifelong aspiration toward the ideal. However, this lyricism is pointedly punctuated by wide octave or fifth leaps, structurally reaffirming his noble dignity as the “*Knight of the Sorrowful Face*.”

Ex. 2. J. Massenet – « *Don Quichotte* » opera, rehearsal mark 183

In the *Andante sostenuto* section (rehearsal number 185), the main character expresses his ideals as a direct reflection of his lifelong struggle, justifying his crusade through his unyielding faith. Massenet discreetly identified with his hero, crafting this musical testament with the profound sense that he was expressing his own inner life—oscillating between archaic nobility and serene fragility. The musical discourse gains vital energy from the proud remembrance of these ideals, culminating in his declaration: “*J’ai lutté pour le bien, j’ai fait la bonne guerre!*”

Ex. 3. J. Massenet – “*Don Quichotte*” opera, *Andante sostenuto*, rehearsal mark 185

The death sequence is rendered through a harrowing, ternary structure, set in *Molto lento sostenuto*. Following rehearsal number 189, the orchestral accompaniment recedes into a secondary tier, creating space—through transparent and delicate orchestration—for the uninhibited expression of melodic grief and the declamation of the text. Modalism serves as another distinctive post-Romantic characteristic of Massenet's expressive language; by incorporating scales such as the Dorian and Phrygian modes, the composer imbues Don Quichotte's music with an intimate character of reflection and prayer.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the opera "Don Quichotte" by J. Massenet, rehearsal mark 189. The score is for voice and piano. The tempo is "Più lento" and the dynamics are "Soli" and "pp". The text is in French: "DON QUICHOTTE ...réclant le geste de Sancho et de grave, très pitoyablement doux. Je meurs... Fais ta prière et dis ton père, n'oublie pas... Il baisse la tête. Saucha avec gravité et défilé. Je suis contre l'arbre." The score is for voice and piano. The tempo is "Più lento" and the dynamics are "Soli" and "pp". The text is in French: "DON QUICHOTTE ...réclant le geste de Sancho et de grave, très pitoyablement doux. Je meurs... Fais ta prière et dis ton père, n'oublie pas... Il baisse la tête. Saucha avec gravité et défilé. Je suis contre l'arbre." The score is for voice and piano. The tempo is "Più lento" and the dynamics are "Soli" and "pp". The text is in French: "DON QUICHOTTE ...réclant le geste de Sancho et de grave, très pitoyablement doux. Je meurs... Fais ta prière et dis ton père, n'oublie pas... Il baisse la tête. Saucha avec gravité et défilé. Je suis contre l'arbre."

Ex. 4. J. Massenet – “Don Quichotte” opera, *Molto lento sostenuto*, rehearsal mark 189

The protagonist's departure to the eternal realm is musically articulated in the *Più mosso, appassionato* segment, intoned in *fortississimo* (*fff*) and *marcato*, with voices grouped in striking instrumental unisons that dramatically segment the sonic utterance. The characteristic Massenet-like melodicism—typically defined by long, fluid, and sensual phrases that meticulously trace the natural inflections of the French language—is here elevated into a highly dramatic stance typical of the French *grand opéra* style. Ultimately, the death of the hero achieves a profound sense of intimacy and an ethereal spirit, culminating in the serene hope of salvation in eternity.

Ex.5. J. Massenet – “Don Quixotte” opera, “Piu mosso, appassionato”, p. 421, only the voices below *Più Mosso*

The simplicity of the Massenet’s “mystical introspection” (Pipaş, Oarcea 2025, 101) reflects human fragility in the face of life's ultimate challenges—such as love, solitude, and the unattained ideal—thereby articulating a thoroughly atypical ending for a Romantic work. Representative of the Belle Époque style while straddling the boundaries of modernism and Spanish exoticism, the opera is defined by a dense melodic vocality and the expressive force of its lyrical declamation, which is deeply rooted in the specificities of French recitative. This Spanish exoticism is prominently manifested through a vibrant rhythmic architecture, an orchestration that brings the guitar, the harp and the castanets to the forefront, with cadential harmonizations in the Phrygian mode and traditional dance genres such as the alborada, habanera, fandango, and seguidilla. Furthermore, Massenet demonstrates a masterful capacity for melodic characterization, distinctively individualizing each protagonist.

2.3. Ludwig Minkus's *Don Quixote* ballet

Composed in 1869 to a libretto and choreography by Marius Petipa, this ballet remains one of the longest-running and most frequently staged choreographic works in the international theater repertoire. The narrative, though inspired by Cervantes' masterpiece, pivots to focus primarily on the love story between the two central characters: Kitri and Basilio. Spanish stylization defines the score, which is replete with virtuosic instrumental color and the sonic personification of

exuberant Iberian dances, including the seguidilla, moreno, and various toreador dances. Peak moments of the score include the couple's wedding (*Grand Pas de Deux*) at the conclusion of Act III and the celebrated Dream scene, which offers a delicate, ethereal portrayal of the female heroine through highly transparent and sensitive orchestration.

2.4. Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote*, Op. 35: composed in 1897, this masterpiece stands as one of the composer's most celebrated symphonic poems. Structured with an introduction, a theme, ten variations and a finale that expands the original form by integrating concertante elements, giving the solo cello a primary role.

2.5. Manuel de Falla's *El retablo de Maese Pedro*: composed in 1923 as a one-act chamber opera, this masterpiece -a puppet show- was commissioned for the private theater. The opera features three vocal roles: Don Quixote (bass-baritone), Master Pedro (tenor), and the Narrator (boy soprano). De Falla's commitment to historical authenticity and Neoclassicism is manifested in his unique inclusion of the harpsichord within the orchestration, as well as his strict adherence to the author's original text, from which the score extracts a vivid medieval and chivalric atmosphere.

2.6. Maurice Ravel's *Don Quichotte à Dulcinée*

Composed as a cycle of three songs for voice and piano (dances represented in an orchestrated version including piano and voice), this work originated from a film project centered on the great Russian bass Feodor Chaliapin in the role of Don Quixote. Incorporating traditional Spanish dance rhythms was a core creative priority for the French composer, who was in quite poor health at the time. Far from advancing toward madness, in Ravel's vision, Don Quixote represents the inner elegance of a man who firmly believes in his values.

3. Conclusions

A review of the diverse musical adaptations inspired by Cervantes' globally renowned masterpiece highlights the unique position of Jules Massenet's *Don Quichotte*. Reflecting on its initial reception, contemporary critics immediately recognized how the score elevated the narrative above mere comedy: "*Massenet succeeded in putting into music not only the knight's adventures but above all his incurable idealism. In this opera, Don Quichotte is not a mere madman, but a symbol of spiritual purity in a world that has lost the ability to dream*" (L'Avant-

Scène Opéra). Even though Massenet's creation fell into obscurity after his death, “the decades of the 1970s–1980s brought a revival of interest in his opera, with new interpretations being proposed. Claude Debussy paid tribute to him after his death” (Irvine, 1994). Compelling historical assessments have further underscored the magnitude of his output: “This work, indeed, is gigantic. If Massenet experienced triumph and glory, he well deserved both through his fruitful labor” (Leroux, 1912, 3).

“Cervantes must have felt that the ongoing transformation to a culture dominated by the written verse had significant drawbacks, at least when it came to music and poetry” (Gasta 2013, 87). “Structure coexist to generate meaning” (Chifu 2025, 81), “emotional expression is a fundamental aspect of human communication and psychological health” (Pomăzan, 2025, 113) and, although the work is profane, it includes deep elements of Christian thought: “the terms SACRED and PROFANE, referring to an immense and valuable path in the history of music, are (...) defining essential aspects of the art of sound” (Soporán, 2025, 2015, 71). Ultimately, the legacy of his opera *Don Quichotte*—one of the most widely discussed figures in human history—reveals not only a musical masterpiece but also an alternative, profoundly melancholic portrait of the legendary knight.

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