

Art-Nouveau and the portrait of the *Fin de Siècle* woman in Jules Massenet's *Cléopâtre*

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Abstract: *The present paper strives to evoke the context in which one of Jules Massenet's last operas, "Cléopâtre" was created: the Belle Époque period with its various stylistic orientations. Among the numerous art movements of the fin de siècle, Art Nouveau establishes itself as one of the most important styles, gradually becoming an international style often associated with the Belle Époque. Characterized by curving forms and undulating lines, Art Nouveau was used in architecture, fine and applied arts. One of the aims of this style was to dissolve the distinction between the various forms of art. Art Nouveau representations gave birth to a particular feminine type, also represented in Massenet's "Cléopâtre", an opera inspired by the vocal and dramatic endowments of French singer Lucy Arbell. The analysis focuses on the vocal characterization of Cléopâtre as sonorous representation of the fin de siècle woman, highlighting some of the musical innovations employed by Massenet in this final work.*

Key-words: *Art Nouveau, Belle Époque, fin de siècle, feminine, Massenet, Cléopâtre*

1. Introduction

The end of the Franco-Prussian War (1871) and the emergence of the French Third Republic (1870-1940) marked the dawn of a new era in the history of France, a period of stability, optimism, colonial expansion, technological and cultural innovations. The French Colonial Empire extended its influence over regions in Asia, Africa and also established colonies in the South Pacific. The time span between the 1880s and the outbreak of the First World War, a period of political stability and prosperity especially in western and central Europe, is generally remembered as the *Belle Époque*, the Beautiful Epoch, the golden age of arts. The atmosphere

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was favourable for the genesis of numerous artworks belonging to the domain of visual arts, music, theater, and literature.

Despite the fact that the pedantic style of the Parisian Academy of Art was the most respected and acclaimed, several other art movements began to gain popularity, such as Impressionism and post-Impressionist movements like the one promoted by the Nabis, as well as Symbolism, Fauvism, and movements which announced early modernism. Oriental influences continued to impregnate the works of French artists, but the fascination of exotic places was further increased by the influence of Japanese art and that of African tribal art.

One of the most popular art movements associated with the Belle Époque is the largely decorative style Art Nouveau. The main objective of this art movement is to establish unity among the various forms of art, to relinquish the separation which exists between fine arts and applied arts. At the same time, Art Nouveau gave birth to a particular image of the fin de siècle woman, often associated with the sensual and otherworldly figures depicted by the Pre-Raphaelite painters. Art historian Tschudi-Madsen argues that this image of the Art Nouveau woman originated in the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Tschudi-Madsen 1977, 46). This image can be discovered in the illustrations, posters, and paintings of several artists of the Belle Époque, such as Aubrey Beardsley, Alfons Mucha or Eugène Grasset.

French composer Jules Massenet, an ardent admirer of visual art and artists, worked together with Grasset to design the poster of the opera *Esclarmonde* (1889), the illustrations of the score and also the scenic design. The feminine characters evoked by Massenet in his operas closely resemble the image of the women portrayed in works related to the Art Nouveau. Massenet's heroines are beautiful and delicate, surrounded by an air of melancholy they reflect the decadence often associated with the fin de siècle and the early 20th century. The musical language employed by Massenet, his generous and ample phrases permeated with emotion, the lush orchestration of his works, are traits that resemble the dynamism, movement and asymmetry of Art Nouveau. One of his last operas, *Cléopâtre* (1914) is a complex work, a sonorous painting which combines the exoticism of oriental influences with a novel manner of musical expression, thus anticipating the works of early 20th century French composers.

2. Art Nouveau and the aspiration for a *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Praised and criticized at the same time, Art Nouveau is a style that originated at the confluence of various other art movements and styles, such as the Baroque and

Rococo, the Arts and Crafts movement, or the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Traces of the neo-Baroque and neo-Rococo can also be discovered at a closer analysis. The works of William Blake had a considerable influence on the blossoming of Art Nouveau, as well as the exotic influences of Islamic or Japanese Art. However, an important source of inspiration was the natural world, especially the image of plants and flowers, abundant in Art Nouveau works.

It is believed that the style originated in 19th century England, where ideas on the equality of arts and crafts were expressed by the promoters of the Arts and Crafts movement. Nonetheless, this new style will mature in other regions of Europe, such as Germany (named *Jugendstil*) and France, the latter perceived to be the international center of this artistic phenomenon, where it was named *Art Nouveau*. The style inspired Italian artists as well, where it assumed the form of *Stile Liberty*, while in Austria it gave birth to the *Vienna Secession*. However, the Austrian alternative of Art Nouveau gradually departed from the French ideal, anticipating the modern art forms of the early 20th century. While the French form of the style is more refined and sensual, promoting the use of asymmetrical and undulating lines, the Vienna Secession prefers the clarity of geometrical forms and straight lines. Art historian Tschudi-Madsen argues that the French Art Nouveau is the most distinguished manifestation of this international style: "*Encompassing the best French traditions, the style gains, in French applied arts, a more refined and elegant expression than anywhere else*" (Tschudi-Madsen 1977, 22).

The name of the style was inspired by the *Maison de l'Art Nouveau*, opened in 1895 in Paris by the art dealer Samuel Siegfried Bing, on Rue de Provence 22. Bing also played an important part in promoting Japanese art and culture in the Western world. Major French artists who promoted the Art Nouveau style were the architect Henri Guimard, glass designer René Lalique, or industrial designer Eugène Gaillard, to name only a few. Art Nouveau was highly expressive in architecture, furniture, glassware, ceramics, jewellery, metalwork, sculpture, painting, and graphic arts. Among the most popular forms of Art Nouveau were posters, advertisements, and illustration, these types of graphic art reaching the height of expression and artistic value due to the works of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Eugène Grasset or Jules Chéret.

The undulating and curving lines associated with Art Nouveau seem to evoke the beauty of the female form, while at the same time the style gave birth to a particular representation of the feminine and a certain attitude towards women. The women represented in Art Nouveau masterpieces resemble the beauty ideal depicted by the Pre-Raphaelites. Melancholic figures, often portrayed with flowing tresses and with their eyes half-closed, these women seem to belong to the world of myths and legends evoked by the artists of the Brotherhood. Tschudi-Madsen

argues that closely linked to the general impression that the *fin de siècle* was a period of decadence and decay, the figure of the feminine was also depicted as unpredictable, sensual and dangerous, almost demonic (Tschudi-Madsen 1977, 46). This is suggested by numerous representations, such as those of *La Belle Dame sans Merci* or *Salomé*. At the end of the 19th century, the works of Art Nouveau artists Aubrey Beardsley and Alfons Mucha evoke this type of woman.

Despite the fact that Art Nouveau is most often associated with the visual arts, as well as decorative and applied arts, the particular features of this style, which promoted the equal importance of all arts, can be traced in the music of *fin de siècle* French composers as well. The music of the Belle Époque echoes the tumultuous sound of the Romantic Era and the delicate works of the Parisian Music Salons, while at the same time anticipating the innovations of the early 20th century. Abandoning an idealistic point of view, composers most often chose to musically depict the reality which surrounded them, a choice that gave birth to a distinct musical language. The works of Jules Massenet, in particular, reflect a specific attitude towards life, as musicologist Grigore Constantinescu observes, depicting the French composer as a poet of sounds: “(...) *the melodrama mirrors the way of thinking of the French fin de siècle, evoked in a brilliant manner by Massenet in his works. Where does this sensitive poet of the quotidian come from, this creator of fugitive images in which the dimension of great struggles withdraws before nuances and pastels?*” (Constantinescu 1979, 244). Massenet’s musical expression, with its ample phrases resembling arches and sinuous lines, sensual timbres and the tempestuous expression of profound emotions is perfectly integrated into the atmosphere of the Belle Époque, his works mirroring the stylistic traits of the Art Nouveau.

3. Jules Massenet’s *Cléopâtre* (1914)

One of Massenet’s final works, *Cléopâtre*, an opera in four acts on the libretto of Louis Payen was represented posthumously at the Opéra de Monte Carlo on 23 February 1914. Compared to the composer’s earlier works, *Cléopâtre* indicates the dawn of an innovative musical language and a new manner of representing the Orient in French music. The musical orientalism of the early 20th century gradually relinquished stereotypes, such as the use of augmented seconds, the incorporation of modal fragments or the rhythmic ostinato, to mention only a few of the melodic and rhythmic formulae associated with the fascinating world of the Other. Instead, composers focused on creating a truthful musical discourse, which could be connected to a certain place and time. However, this does not necessarily imply

that the use of the aforementioned melodic or rhythmic elements ceased: the final goal went beyond creating music that sounded exotic or oriental, focusing rather on creating the impression of truthful evocations.

At the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century, composers searched for means of expressing their fascination with the Egyptian world. Jean-Pierre Bartoli observes two means of representing Egypt: an oriental Egypt, musically depicted through the use of fragments borrowed from Arab music, and the image of an Ancient Egypt evoked through the use of Greek and Roman music modes, believed to derive from more ancient musical practices (Bartoli 1996, 496). Massenet incorporates certain modes in *Cléopâtre* in order to emphasize the exotic sound of his work.

ESCLAVES ÉGYPTIENNES. (Tous les Contraltos)

Daigne ac - cep - ter le cin - name et la myr - rhe.

Gri - se - toi des par - fums les plus ra - res.

Fig. 1. Jules Massenet – “*Cléopâtre*”
Act I: Entry of the Egyptian Slaves

For example, in the first act of the opera, the entry of the Egyptian slaves (Figure 1) is evoked through the use of an ascending progression (hexachord) starting from *c*#, which resembles the Phrygian mode: however, the composer places the second interval of a minor second between the 4th and the 5th scale degrees and not between the 5th and the 6th, as is the case with the Phrygian scale. This is followed

by a second ascending progression which consists of seven notes this time: again the ascension begins with a minor second between $a\#-b$, however, this time minor second intervals are formed between the 3rd and the 4th, respectively between the 6th and the 7th scale degrees as well. Nonetheless, the minor second $c\#-d$, and $a\#-b$, which open the two ascending progressions, evoke the exotic sound of the Phrygian scale.

Bartoli argues that Massenet's opera is a perfect example regarding the use of certain musical elements in order to enhance the idea of temporal and geographical "displacement": *"La «Cléopâtre» de Massenet nous offre par ailleurs l'occasion d'examiner un nouvel élément de dépaysement musical qui vient s'ajouter à la distanciation géographique. (...) Ainsi, profitant de la diffusion de travaux musicologiques sur la musique de l'Antiquité, Massenet emploie ici des formules musicales pseudo antiques en utilisant ce que l'on croyait alors être les modes grecs anciens (et qui ne sont que des échelles théoriques fondées sur une interprétation fautive de la théorie musicale grecque)"* (Bartoli 1996, 496).

Massenet often employs wind instruments and percussion, which further emphasise exoticism. The rich timbres, sinuous phrases, and ample arches of the musical discourse seem to mirror the sensuous and curving lines, and the luxuriant ornaments of the Art Nouveau style, at the same time reflecting the mentality of the Belle Époque period. The role of Cléopâtre is musically depicted in a manner which resembles the fascinating and beautiful women featured in the Art Nouveau works: the fascination, mystery, and sensuality of Massenet's character can be perceived in the sinuous vocal lines written by the composer and is further increased by the composer's choice to dedicate the role to the velvety and dusky timbre of the contralto or mezzo-soprano voice.

4. Cléopâtre as the representation of the Art-Nouveau feminine type

The women evoked in Art Nouveau representations embody the features of the *fin de siècle* women, thus described by Tshudi-Madsen: *"(...) melancholic women, depicted with heavy eyelids and eyes almost closed, with plump and sensual lips. This type of woman, with narrow shoulders, was revived in the last decade of the 19th century, with the addition of a morbid, demonic touch, as represented in Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for «Morte d'Arthur», 1892, and «Salomé», 1893. In Scotland, this feminine type received its honours. However, it became more sophisticated, although at the same time a melancholic mood crept through its waves of linear tears. Parisian girls, with their black cancan stockings, certainly had their even sadder sisters in other countries as well"* (Tschudi-Madsen 1977, 46). The

image of this *fin de siècle* woman can be discovered among Massenet's heroines as well. In his operas, the French composer chooses to portray life in all its facets, with its light and shadow aspects as well, and in a manner similar to Verdi in *La Traviata* his genius is fully revealed through a personal representation of the feminine, as Christophe Ghristi observes: "*Comme Verdi avec «La Traviata», Massenet va découvrir la quintessence de son génie avec Manon, première héroïne typiquement Massenet, portrait de femme magnifiquement vivant, vibrant, charnel. Manon, «sphinx étonnant», réunissant toutes les femmes en une seule, comme dit Des Grieux*" (Ghristi in Auclari Ghristi 2011, 9).

Massenet's feminine characters are real, the music attributed to them is filled with emotion. Yet, this emotion is not entirely pure and sublime, as could be the case with the heroines of Gounod. Instead, Massenet chooses to mingle the flawless with the impure. *Cléopâtre* continues this line of feminine characters, a perfect embodiment of the *fin de siècle* type of woman, as the score of the opera indicates.

The role of *Cléopâtre* was written for the French singer Lucy Arbell, on her real name Georgette Wallace, whose dramatic and vocal abilities inspired and influenced Massenet's vocal writing, as Branger observes: "*Lors de la composition de cet opéra (n.a. opera Ariane), le musicien a rencontré sa nouvelle égérie, la contralto Lucy Arbell, pour laquelle il semble avoir éprouvé un sentiment affectueux (...). Massenet lui écrit, outre un singulier cycle de mélodies avec déclamation parlée (...), les rôles principaux (...) ou secondaires (...) de ses ouvrages suivants où il valorise ses qualités dramatiques*" (Branger in Auclair – Ghristi 2011, 26). Massenet composed several notable works for Arbell, such as the lead role in the opera *Thérèse* (1907), *Perséphone* in *Ariane* (1906) or *Dulcinée* in *Don Quichotte* (1910), as well as the cycle *Expressions lyriques* (the *mélodies* sung with rhythmic declamation), the latter composed between 1902 and 1912, and published in 1913. The works Massenet composed for Arbell are outstanding due to the composer's use of spoken parts and accompanied declamation. The role of *Cléopâtre* contains free or rhythmic spoken passages in the second and fourth act of the opera (Figure 2), and her vocal line is placed in the middle register of the singing voice for the most part of the work in order to ensure the clarity of the text and to emphasize the intensity of the emotions conveyed through a seemingly "sung speech". An example for this type of vocal expression can be observed in *Cléopâtre*'s earliest intervention in the first act of the opera (Figure 3).

Cléopâtre, montrant Adamos à Spakos, avec une admiration émue.

Ci. N'est-ce pas qu'il est beau?.. Si la Reine d'Égypte voyait ce corps charmant

Fig. 2. Jules Massenet – “Cléopâtre”
Act II, Second Tableau: free spoken passage

au Mouvt! CLÉOPÂTRE, qui s'est avancée, seule, vers Marc-Antoine, devant lequel elle s'incline.

mf Je suis ve.nue _____ quit. tant mes pa.lais en.chantés... _____ je

au Mouvt!

pp

Ci. *mf* suis ve.nue... _____ J'ai fui mon Égypte et mes cieux tout parfu.més d'amour... _____ tout bai.

Fig. 3. Jules Massenet – “Cléopâtre, Act I”

Prior to Arbell, Massenet was inspired to write several of his masterpieces due to his collaboration with praised singers of the era, like Sibyl Sanderson or Emma Calvé. The voice of Arbell stimulated the composer to turn his attention to a vocal range which had been rather neglected by 19th century French composers, as Jean-Christophe Branger observes, at the same time pointing out to the possibility that Massenet’s choice was dictated rather by emotional reasons than the urge to

introduce new timbres in his works: “*Massenet’s final muse allowed him to explore a vocal register that had not received much attention from nineteenth-century composers of French opera, apart from Meyerbeer (Fidès in Le Prophète), Donizetti (Léonor in La Favorite) and Saint-Saëns (Dalila in Samson et Dalila). The boundary between roles for mezzo-sopranos and contraltos is often unclear: many performers, such as Rosine Stoltz (1815–1903), Pauline Viardot (1821–1910), Marie Delna (1875–1932) and Ketty Lapeyrette (1884–1960), who created the title role in Rousset’s Padmâvati, possessed a wide vocal range that allowed them to take on roles demanding not only solid low notes but also agility in the higher register. Massenet’s turn towards the contralto register was motivated primarily by particular circumstances and emotional considerations rather than by a conscious move to explore a new vocal range*” (Branger 2019, 186-187).

Whatever the explanation could be for Massenet’s choice, the use of the contralto voice and the particular vocal writing dedicated to this range can be associated with the feminine type evoked in the fin de siècle Art Nouveau works. The composer’s belief that the contralto or mezzo-soprano voice should possess a beautiful lower and middle register, as well as a firm upper register, is proven by the vocal writing of *Cléopâtre*, which requires equality of registers and expressive rendition of the phrases. The sensuality and mystery of the character is emphasized by Massenet’s choice to place the vocal discourse in the middle and upper-middle register of the singing voice, with occasional leaps in the upper register, dictated by the dramatic situation.

Although the work was not conceived in the traditional manner and the flow of the dramatic action is not hindered by the constant interruption of arias, duets or ensembles, certain musical moments are reminiscent of the traditional aria. One such moment is *Cléopâtre’s “J’ai versé le poison dans cette coupé d’or”*, in the third act of the opera. The sinuous musical phrases resemble the curving and undulating lines which characterize the Art Nouveau, emphasizing *Cléopâtre’s* sensuality. The music echoes the tender dialogue between two lovers: the vocal discourse is accompanied by sustained and prolonged chords which blossom into undulating ornaments inspired by the patterns previously sung by the voice, while the singer now takes on the role of the accompaniment through the sustained tones (Figure 4). The use of minor seconds and steps convey an exotic flavour to the discourse, while at the same time emphasizing the sensuality and otherness of the feminine character.

Modéré. (sans lenteur)

Cl. *mf*

Quiconque ef.fleure - ra ses bords, en la vi - - dant... boi - ra la mort!

Modéré. (sans lenteur) 104 = ♩

pp

mf

Cl. *p*

Mais à ce - lui qui la pren - dra mon - bai -

*

Fig. 4. Jules Massenet – *Cléopâtre*
Act IV: “J’ai versé le poison dans cette coupé d’or” (excerpt)

Although the role was written for Lucy Arbelle, whose voice was considered to be situated between the contralto and mezzo-soprano registers (some publications refer to her as contralto, while others as mezzo-soprano), the premiere was sung by soprano Maria Kuznetsova. This implied that the score had to be adapted to the voice of the soprano, thus robbing the character the expressive power of the contralto or mezzo-soprano timbre. Later performances sung by Arbelle returned to the original version of the score, devised by Massenet in order to highlight the beauty of this singer’s voice. Despite the fact that throughout her life Arbelle received mixed reviews, perhaps because of the close relationship she had with Massenet, numerous critics praised her physique and abilities as an actress, as well as her singing voice, built on a solid vocal technique. Branger analyzes the two-sided nature of the relationship between Arbelle and Massenet, and highlights the important role Arbelle played in inspiring the composer to introduce new means of expression in his works: “Massenet knew how to bring out her best qualities, as he had done previously with Sanderson and Calvé, with roles that allowed her to fully assume her position as a ‘tragédienne lyrique’ and included the musical and dramatic use of the spoken voice. Conversely, Arbelle gave Massenet the opportunity to develop an approach that he had already tested (in *Manon*, for example), despite

the reservations of both critics and singers at the time. Indeed, exploration of the spoken voice would become an important feature of opera on account of its manifest expressive power, stemming in part from the sudden intrusion of spoken declamation into a sung work” (Branger 2019, 211).

5. Conclusions

The Monte Carlo premiere of the opera *Cléopâtre* was directed by Raoul Gunsbourg, whose artistic vision, along with the décors of Visconti and the costumes designed by Maison Boyer, created a new image of Egypt, closely related to the stylistic traits of the Art Nouveau, as is the music of Jules Massenet. With its ample arches, sinuous phrases and sensual timbres, the edifice of sound created by Massenet resembles the artistic masterpieces of this unique international style.

Cléopâtre herself is represented in a distinctive manner: her vocal line emphasizes the mystery and sensuality of the character. As opposed to his earlier works, in this opera Massenet turns his attention from vocal virtuosity and an extended vocal range to a more expressive vocal discourse, preferring to use the rich middle-register of the singing voice, supported by sumptuous orchestral writing. *Cléopâtre*'s representation as Art Nouveau feminine type becomes more clear when compared to the vocal characterization of the Roman Octavie, which is accomplished in a more balanced, almost classical manner. The contrast between Egypt and Rome is also discernible throughout the work due to the timbres, rhythmic and melodic patterns preferred by the composer to represent these two seemingly opposed worlds.

Cléopâtre is not the first work in which Massenet alternates spoken declamation (free or rhythmic) with sung phrases and music. In certain instances, the composer included actors in his works or wrote music to accompany the declamation in stage works (Branger 2019, 209-210), which further deepened his desire to discover and reveal the hidden meaning of the words and the relationship between words and music. The spoken lines in *Cléopâtre*, as well as the almost declaimed sung parts, can be compared to the flourishing lines in Art Nouveau creations, to the stems which are continued by burgeons, and buds which develop into flowers. The close relationship between words and music, as well as the curving, ample phrases and rich timbres which constitute the vocal characterization of *Cléopâtre* contribute to the musical depiction of the Art Nouveau feminine type, which embodies the sensuality and beauty of the fin de siècle.

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