

Preparation for a Chosen Role – WIAV Dissertation Topic

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Chevalier Renato des Grieux from *Manon Lescaut*: *Dramma Lirico* in quattro atti by Giacomo Puccini

Introduction

Chevalier Renato (René) des Grieux, known simply as Des Grieux, is the tenor lead in the opera *Manon Lescaut* by Giacomo Puccini, his third opera. The libretto was written by five different librettists: Ruggero Leoncavallo (yes, the composer of *Pagliacci*), Marco Praga, Giuseppe Giacosa, Domenico Oliva and Luigi Illica, with Puccini and the publisher, Giulio Ricordi, also contributing to the writing of the libretto. Phillips-Matz, M. J. (2002). *Puccini A Biography* (pp. 76-77). Boston: Northeastern University. Only Praga, Oliva, Ricordi and Illica, however, are credited as librettists in the published score. Puccini, G. (Composer), & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G. (Librettists). (1972). *Manon Lescaut Dramma Lirico in quattro atti* [Vocal score]. Milano: Ricordi. The story of *Manon Lescaut* is based on the French novel *L'Histoire du Chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* written by Antoine François Prévost in 1731, but came to the attention of Massenet and Puccini in 1820 with a dramatic adaption of it by Étienne Gosse in which the “subject’s topical interest lay in its main theme: the eternal clash between vice and virtue.” Girardi, M. (2000). *Puccini His International Art* (p. 65). Chicago: University of Chicago.

French composer Jules Massenet composed his opera *Manon* in 1884, also based on Prévost’s novel. Massenet’s version of the opera has the French opera style which is generally romantic and sweet. Puccini’s version of the opera has more the Italian style with a thick and complex symphonic orchestration, and focuses on different parts of the novel than Massenet’s version. Ricordi and others were worried that Puccini had undertaken the same theme of *Manon* that Massenet had so recently composed and with such beauty and success, however, Puccini did not mind it because Puccini wanted to differentiate his version from that of Massenet’s, specifically saying that he wanted to tell *Manon*’s story “‘like an Italian, with desperate passion.’” Hopkins, K. (6 December, 2016). *Why Manon Lescaut launched Puccini into operatic stardom*. <https://www.roh.org.uk/news/why-manon-lescaut-launched-puccini-into-operatic-stardom>. Puccini may have also seen it as a bit of friendly competition, which he loved judging by when he had a friendly competition with Leoncavallo to compose the most successful *La Bohème* opera version.

That said, Puccini was under a lot of pressure when he composed *Manon Lescaut* because he had just had a failure with his second opera *Edgar* and if he had another failure, his publisher Ricordi would surely have dropped him, and adding to this, Puccini was expected to be Giuseppe Verdi’s successor. This may explain why he changed librettists so much until he had the perfect libretto. This prompted Puccini to deliver his first great masterpiece.

Finding Balance When Studying and Performing A Role, Particularly as Difficult as Des Grieux

In any discipline we undertake, we should strive for harmonious balance between many aspects of our discipline. In sports, for example, a tennis player strives to be a great athlete and a great technician, where being great in both has produced the best players in history, such as Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Rod Laver. In opera, a singer should strive to be a great technician and artist, to simplify given the many different disciplines needed to be a great opera singer. Technique in opera singing allows for ease of production of beautiful sound no matter how difficult the passages one is asked to sing, and it allows for longevity. Artistry in singing means not just good acting, but feeling the music, telling a story with one's singing, communicating all the different emotions to the public that are necessary in the song or opera one is asked to perform, from joy, romance, and humor, to sadness, rage, and desperation. Some of the opera singers who have achieved a harmonious balance between technique and artistry are Enrico Caruso, Aureliano Pertile, Jussi Bjorling, Maria Callas (technique was somewhat sacrificed in her later years), and Leontyne Price. As an opera composer, Puccini achieved harmony in balance with complex orchestration, communication of the drama with great emotional effect, and utmost beauty of melody, particularly in *Manon Lescaut*, which famed critic Bernard Shaw comments upon (Shaw, B. (1978). *The Great Composers* (pp. 308-309). Berkeley: University of California), as does Maestro Pappano (Royal Opera House. (24 June, 2014). *Conductor Antonio Pappano on the emotion in Puccini's Manon Lescaut*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=cjs3E5MmZZo&feature=emb_title).

As an opera singer, to achieve this harmony it helps to be flexible and open-minded. Like martial arts great and philosopher Bruce Lee said, "Don't set into one form, adapt it and build your own, and let it grow, be like water. Empty your mind, be formless, shapeless – like water. Now you put water in a cup, it becomes the cup; You put water into a bottle it becomes the bottle; you put it in a teapot it becomes the teapot. Now water can flow or it can crash. Be water my friend." Ennis, C., Lee, T., & Little, J. (Producers), & Little, J. (Director). (2000). *Bruce Lee: A Warrior's Journey* [Motion Picture]. United States: Warner Home Video. By being flexible and open-minded, you can improve your technique and grow as a singer, artist and musician. Rigidity and close-mindedness will not allow the opera singer to attempt or learn new things that may help the artist improve and grow. For example, if a voice teacher, coach, stage director, or conductor tells you to try a phrase in an aria or scene in a certain way, try it as long as it is not damaging to your instrument. If it works, great, if it does not, then you learned from it either way. If you see a performer portraying a character or interpreting an aria or scene a certain way, then be open to it, and take what works for you and for the role you are working on.

One can even learn from everyday life events. Famed American opera bass and opera writer Jerome Hines, wrote that he learned how to act for the mad-scene from *Boris Godunov* when he "storms at Prince Shuiski", a very dramatic part of a role, from observing one of his three dogs, "an eight pound toy poodle": "Perhaps the strangest learning experience I had of drama was when I studied with our toy poodle, Lulu"[, where my other dog] "Boris, a nasty, sixty-five pound mixed breed that had chewed up everybody in the family, the hired help, and the neighbors as well" were "terrified of Lulu... Boris would try to sneak by Lulu's bed, Lulu's spine would suddenly coil up and tense like a rattlesnake about to strike, her body frozen in a

terrible tension, eyes bugging and fixed on Boris. There she sat, rigid, with bared fangs—until she struck—Like lightning! Now, if you were to watch me in the mad scene... you would see Lulu about to strike as my spine stiffens and coils like a rattlesnake. Yes, I studied *Boris Godunov* with an eight pound toy poodle and she was a mighty good teacher.” Hines, J. (1997) *The Four Voices of Man* (pp. 128-129). New York: Limelight. This is a good lesson that one not rule out the simple things that you observe in everyday life when preparing for Des Grieux or any role. You may learn from almost anything, even in the most unexpected. To quote Bruce Lee again, “Use only that which works, and take it from any place you can find it.” Thomas, B. (1994) *Bruce Lee: Fighting Spirit* (p. 44). Berkeley: Frog.

One must always seek to improve and grow as it is a never-ending process in any profession. This is crucial to succeed in learning a role as demanding as Des Grieux.

Character of Des Grieux

To prepare for an opera role one should perform background research of the role. This includes reading the work or works on which the opera is based, in this case read Prévost’s novel, read the libretto with English translation and/or make one’s own translation of the libretto, conduct some general historical research on the time period and location in which the opera takes place, and if the production one gets hired for requests that the opera take place in a different location or time period, then one should also perform some general research on that location and time period. One should also listen to audio recordings, attend live productions if possible, and watch video productions of the opera, of various singers and conductors of whom one likes. Des Grieux is a young student in Amiens, France near Paris. One can research Amiens to see what it looks like, on websites such as Wikipedia or other travel websites or books, where one can see that it has plazas with colorful buildings and cobblestone streets, that it is a cultural city, where its Cathedral is a World Heritage Site, and author Jules Verne lived there, and that its largest population group is people between the ages 15-29 which is where De Grieux and the other students fall. Amiens. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved January 29, 2020, from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amiens>). What can do the same for the other locations in the opera, such as Geronte’s apartment in Paris, the prison in La Havre, and the dessert in America near Louisiana.

One can ask different questions to prepare, such as, what did students look like in Amiens in the 1700s. Is he a college student? What does he study? What are his career goals? Answering these questions will help ground the singer/actor and better understand the role, however, there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer to these questions. Knowing whether the stage director wants a different time period or theme will help answer these questions.

To better understand Des Grieux’s character, one can look at his qualities and defects. Here is a list of some of his qualities and defects:

Qualities:

Romantic
Optimistic

Passionate
Dreamer
Protector
Gentleman
Adventurous

Defects:

Obsessive
Unrealistic
Impulsive
Gullible
Lustful

An interesting note is that when looking at just these potential qualities and defects of Des Grieux, they are actually similar to those of the character of Rodolfo from La Boheme by Puccini.

General Characteristics of Puccini Tenor Roles

Puccini operas have a perfect marriage of the music and the drama, and they flow from beginning to end like if you are watching a film. There are no pauses or “iumpapa iumpapa” moments like in bel canto operas, and there are hardly any strophe repetitions like in bel canto. This continuity of Puccini operas are a challenge for the performers in that they must always be on their feet and ready to act and sing, or to be on stand by for the next moment. His operas are not “stand and sing” operas by any means.

Puccini’s scores are thorough, he writes everything he specifically wants on the score, not just musically, such as tempi and dynamics, but he also writes some of the actions he wants the actor or singer to perform. Antonio Pappano says that Puccini should be performed as precise as possible because Puccini “is so specific in how he writes; his scores are absolutely perfect; what he wants to happen, where, how.” Royal Opera House (June 24, 2014). *Jonas Kaufmann and Kristine Opolais rehearse Manon Lescaut*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKOydqDf3wU>
The orchestration of Puccini operas is complex and thick, particularly when under the tenor voice. Verdi on Puccini: “he is a symphonist”, the orchestra parts are “Wagnerian” in a way, as he had a great influence on Puccini. Royal Opera House. (June 11, 2014). *Antonio Pappano introduces the music of Manon Lescaut*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMxfQC-mXX8>.

Puccini really understands the drama and his characters, he worked closely with his librettists and loved his stories. When Puccini writes a high note in a phrase, like an A natural, b flat for, b natural or high for a tenor, there is a reason for it. It usually means a more intense emotion or reaction by the character in the drama, such as excitement, exuberance, romantic passion, rage, or desperation. Same with the dynamics and time descriptors which he meticulously writes on the score. When Puccini has a pause, it may mean hesitation by the character, or that the character is thinking of what to say. If Puccini holds a note considerably longer than another on a certain word, it may mean tender romance, or anger. Bottom line is,

always look for meaning in every part of the score. Most of the time Puccini writes it on the score, probably like no other or like very few other composers have done. Other times you have to search and find it in the score. Not just in Des Grieux's part, but in all the parts and in the orchestra as well. Maestro Serafin advised Maria Callas "When one wants to find a gesture or how to move on stage... all you have to do is search for it in the score; the composer has already put it into his music." Edwards, A. (2003). *Maria Callas: An Intimate Biography*. New York: St. Martin's.

There is even a little of Puccini's life in some of his characters, like you can argue that Puccini was like Des Grieux when he was composing it because his wife separated, "driven apart again by poverty and family pressure", just like Manon left Des Grieux for a while for the riches of Geronte when he ran out of money (Phillips-Matz, 2002, pp. 70-72).

Characteristics of the Role of Des Grieux

This is a very difficult role in that one must sing many arias and duets that are so different in vocal range, in emotions, in weight, in color, and in acting requirements. It has some of the most beautiful and sweetest parts, but at the same time some of the most dramatic and tragic parts in opera. The role must be sung with passion, virility, but always with the bel canto freedom. It's really a verismo opera with bel canto beauty and line, and at the same time you are dealing with a complex and sizable orchestra accompaniment similar to a Germanic symphony that is almost Wagnerian.

The range of Des Grieux goes up to an optional high C and several B flats and B naturals, and could be sung by either a full lyric, a spinto or a young dramatic tenor. It is not for a light lyric or leggero tenor as the role requires more weight and volume than they sing with; however, the tenor role of Edmondo, Des Grieux's student friend who opens the opera with a beautiful aria, is more appropriately suited for a leggero tenor or a young full lyric tenor. The role of Des Grieux is also not as well suited for a mature dramatic tenor because arguably he will not sound as youthful as the role requires, and will not have the flexibility for the beauty, sweetness, and agility the role requires.

In his book *Singer's Repertoire Part III Lyric and Dramatic Tenor*, Berton Coffin classifies Des Grieux's arias "Ah Manon, mi tradisce", "Donna non vidi mai", "Guardate, pazzo son, guardate" and "Tra voi belle" as "Arias from Italian Operas" for "Lyric Tenor". Berton, C. (1960) *Singer's Repertoire Part III Lyric and Dramatic Tenor* (p. 112). New York: Scarecrow Press. His classification makes sense because Puccini's full title for the opera is *Manon Lescaut - Drame Lirico in Quattro Atti*, which is translated as "lyric drama in four acts". (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972). Although the story and the music is dramatic in the second, third and fourth acts, the music is so beautiful, lyrical and romantic through most of the opera, and the role requires demanding flexibility in pitch, so much so that it makes sense that Berton classifies Des Grieux as a lyric tenor in his book, as opposed to a dramatic tenor.

Placido Domingo very aptly summarizes the role of Des Grieux as follows: "Every one of the opera's four Acts contains some of the most beautiful and difficult music ever written for

the tenor. In Act I you have two arias ‘Tra voi, belle, brune e bionde’ and ‘Donna non vidi mai’ and two duets with Manon, ‘Cortese damigella’ and ‘O come gravi le vostre parole’, which goes up to A In the second Act you have the big duet ‘Ah, Manon’ and the trio. In the third Act you have two big duets – One with Lescaut and one with Manon – a big ensemble and then the fabulous aria ‘Guardate, pazzo son’. He says he wants to fight the guards, fight Geronte, it’s very, very powerful. In the last act, you have the very extended scene between Manon and the end of a long evening of very hard singing. Yet these have to be delivered with maximum temperament, feeling and passion. All this makes Des Grieux not only the most difficult Puccini role – even more than Calaf – But one of the most difficult in the tenor repertoire.”

Matheopoulos, H. (2000) *PLACIDO DOMINGO My Operatic Roles* (pp. 122-124). Domingo goes on to compare Des Grieux characters from the Puccini version with the Massenet version as the “Puccini character has much more temperament and ‘abandon’, both musically and dramatically. Massenet’s Des Grieux is more naïve, more of an innocent boy (Matheopoulos, 2000, 123).

To prepare for this role, it would help to attempt some other roles that share the challenges of Des Grieux. The role of Rodolfo from *La Boheme* is a good stepping stone for this role in that Rodolfo sits higher and is an even longer role than Des Grieux, but it is not as relentlessly heavy or dramatic as Des Grieux, although Rodolfo does have some moments of passion with heavy orchestration underneath that match Des Grieux, like in the third act when Rodolfo sings that it is best that leave Mimi because it tortures him to live with Mimi when he cannot help her recover from her ailments and because he knows she is about to die, from “Marcello finalmente” to “Che Mimi, tu qui?!” Puccini, G. (Composer), & Giacosa, G. & Illica, L. (Librettists) (1897) *La Boheme* (pp. 191-202). Milano: Ricordi. There are other dramatic moments in *La Boheme* in the fourth act from when Mimi comes in until the end of the opera (Puccini & Giacosa & Illica, 1897, pp. 276). So one can learn to pace oneself from singing the role of Rodolfo, which is crucial for a more dramatic role like Des Grieux.

Another role that may be helpful to prepare for Des Grieux is Pinkerton from *Madama Butterfly* because it is considerably shorter than Des Grieux, but it has several short arias, and it has moments of passion, sweetness, beauty and difficulty that match Des Grieux, particularly the duet in act I with Butterfly, from “Viene la sera” to the end of Act I, and in the final act in the scene with Sharpless and Suzuki, from “Io so che alle sue pene” to the end of the duet with Sharpless, “Addio fiorito asil”. Puccini, G. (Composer), & Giacosa, G. & Illica, L. (Librettists) (1907) *Madama Butterfly* (pp. 149-186; pp. 349-363). Milano: Ricordi. Both the roles of Rodolfo and Pinkerton are great preparation to get used to the highly descriptive scores of Puccini, the continuity and flow in the drama and music, and to the complexity and size of the Puccini orchestra. They can build mental, emotional, and physical conditioning for the length, power, continuity, and drama of Des Grieux.

Another role that may be helpful to prepare for Des Grieux is Alfredo from *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi as it sits similarly to Des Grieux, but is not as long and the orchestra is not as complex or thick. Alfredo also has moments of sweetness and romantic beauty with the duet with Violetta in act I, “Un di felice”, in which he confesses his attraction to Violetta that he has had for a while. Verdi, G. (Composer) & Piave, F. M. (Librettist) (1853) *La Traviata* (pp. 43-47). Milano: Ricordi. The role of Alfredo also has moments of rage, such as in Act II, Scene 2 at

Flora's party when Alfredo sings "Questa donna conoscete?", in which he scolds and humiliates Violetta for leaving him for his rival, Barone Douphol, in front of everyone at the party. (Verdi & Piave, 1853, pp. 178-181). Other bel canto operas are excellent training for Puccini operas in general, including *Manon Lescaut*, to get the ease and beauty and flexibility while singing with a smaller orchestra under you; however, one must bear in mind that these operas do not have the same flow and continuity that Puccini's operas have. It is a different type of conditioning for the voice and actor.

Music and Text of the Role of Des Grieux

ACT I

The beginning of the opera, composed as an "allegro brillante" in *ff*, expresses youth and excitement and it immediately resembles the score of the very beginning of a film, like when one sees the opening credits on the screen (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, pp. 1-3). This is not a typical bel canto overture where it is only the orchestra by itself for over 3 minutes, like in a Rossini or earlier Verdi overture. The action starts immediately with students and townspeople strolling through the square and avenue, while others stand in groups, chatting, and others gambling and drinking at tables, and is an introduction to Edmondo's aria (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, pp. 1-4). Edmondo sings his aria accompanied by a chorus of the other students, singing of the joys of being young and in love, with beautiful melodic lines and words such as "Giovinezza è il nostro nome, la speranza è nostra Iddia" which means "youth is our name, hope is our goddess". (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, pp. 7-8). Even though Des Grieux has not appeared yet, one must also know what everyone in the opera is saying and when, even if it occurs when one's role is not on stage.

Des Grieux first enters the opera just after the students sing "È questa l'ora delle fantasie che fra le spemi lottano e le malinconie" which translates as "this is the hour of dreams when hopes and sadness struggle with one another", specifically, at the very last syllable "e" of the word "malinconie" which means sadness, and which is right at the end of the "dim. sempre" (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 13). Des Grieux waves at the students but does not join them, disinterested in their company and about their banter, and the students see him and say "Ecco Des Grieux!", or here is Des Grieux (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 13). Edmondo then insists that Des Grieux join them, and when Des Grieux continues to show disinterest, Edmondo says "Non rispondi? Perché? Forse di dama inaccessible acuto amor ti morse?" which translates as "You don't answer? Why? Perhaps you have been love-struck by an intense love for an unapproachable lady?" (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, pp. 14-15). To which Des Grieux interrupts him "alzando le spalle" which means "shrugging his shoulders", with the role's first words, "L'amor? L'amor? Questa tragedia, ovver commedia io non conosco!", which means, "Love? Love? This tragedy, or rather comedy, I don't know of it!". (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 15).

"L'amor? L'amor?", a repetition in which Des Grieux must give it different meaning and expression, as in speech, and reflect it not only in the voice but in the acting. The music between

the first and second “L’amor?” allows for this expression to build up. Furthermore, the second “L’amor?” has higher notes than the first, all of which allows the character to sing the first “L’amor” with indifference, and during the rests in between to shrug his shoulders, a specific instruction by Puccini, and shake his head, and to sing the second “L’amor”, leading to say that he does not know of such tragedy or rather comedy, with higher notes and accents on both of the syllables “nos-co” of “conosco”, which shows impatience and cynicism. Des Grieux’s reaction here to the lovey dovey playfulness of Edmondo and the student chorus is pessimistic and cynical with a tad of frustration, which leads one to believe that Des Grieux has not had luck in love, where maybe he had a recent falling out with a lady, or maybe he has yet to find somebody he truly loves. Des Grieux is clearly a romantic and you can tell from the outset he has had issues with love with women. The chorus even comments “Per Bacco, indoviniam, amico... Ti crucci d’uno scacco...” which means “by Bacchus, friend, you’re upset about an amorous setback.” (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, pp. 16-17). Des Grieux, however, uses humor to get through it. This already bears so much similarity to Rodolfo from *La Boheme* at the start of the opera when Rodolfo and Marcello speak about their frustrations with love, also with almost humorous mockery between mates, like when Rodolfo says “L’amor è un caminetto che sciupa troppo” which means “love is a fireplace that burns too much” (Puccini, & Giacosa & Illica, 1897, p. 7).

This conversation between Edmondo and the student chorus and Des Grieux leads him to sing his first aria, Tra Voi Belle, in which he uses humor and charm to appease his friends, and try to forget about his pessimistic mood. Des Grieux sings “Tra voi, belle, brune e bionde si nasconde giovinetta vaga e vezzosa, dal labbro rosa che m’aspetta? Sei tu bionda stella? Dillo a me! Palesatemi il destino e il divinoviso ardente che m’innamori, ch’io vegga e adori eternamente! Sei tu bruna snella? Dillo a me!”, which means “among you, fair ones, brunettes and blondes is there hiding a young a girl graceful and charming, with lips rosy who awaits me? Is it you blonde star? Tell it to me! Show me my fate and the divine face ardent with which I might fall in love, which I might gaze upon and adore forever! Is it you dark slender one? Tell me!”.... (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, pp. 18-21). Puccini instructs Des Grieux to get close to the group of women students and with gallantry tell them the words of the aria, and it begins in *p* and “con grazia” which means “gracefully” (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 18). The aria is a lyric piece that is light and charming, “light and mocking, almost like an operetta song” as Maestro Antonio Pappano describes it. Royal Opera House. (June 11, 2014). *Antonio Pappano Introduces the Music of Manon Lescaut* [Video file]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AMxfQC-mXX8>). In this aria, Des Grieux interacts with the women students, and flirts with them. The music is as though he is laughing at Edmondo and the other students, for instance when he sings *ritenendo* in *pp* on the words “nasconde giovenetta vaga e vezzosa”, which allows the singer to flirt with some of the women students in the chorus, and then right after goes back to *a tempo* in *f* with quavers and semiquavers with the words “sei tu bionda snella? Dillo a me!”, which allows the singer to be very playful and flirty. (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 18). Then right after, *più mosso ma poco* in *p* starting with the words “Palesatemi il destino...” and with a *rall.* starting with the syllable “vi” of the word “divino”, and eventually a *molto rit.* On the syllables “ter-na” of “eternamente” with the syllables “men-te” in *a tempo*, which again allows the singer to be playfully sarcastic when he directs the words at different women in the student chorus, and shows a sort of eccentricity that Des Grieux has, and prompts

laughter from the students. (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 19). This again is similar to Rodolfo's eccentricity, like when he goes off on a rant and introduces Mimi to his friends with "questa è Mimi, gaia fioraia... nasce l'amor, nasce l'amor", prompting laughter from his friends. (Puccini, & Giacosa & Illica, 1897, pp. 102-104). Des Grieux ends the aria with the same playful, charming "sei tu bruna snella? Dillo a me!" in *a tempo* and quavers and semiquavers after singing a fermata high A natural on the last syllable of the word "aspetta". (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 20).

Des Grieux meets Manon for the first time

One must know that Manon's name when sung in Puccini's opera is not pronounced in French like it is in Massenet's *Manon* as Mah-noh, but instead it is pronounced Mah-nohn, like if it were Italian phonetic pronunciation. Manon first appears in the opera when she comes off the coach after her brother Lescaut and Geronte, who gallantly helps her off the coach, which traditionally is from a horse coach because it is supposed to take place in the 1700s, but modern productions have used a vehicle, such as the 2014 ROH production that is the subject of the YouTube videos cited here, with Jonathan Kent as stage director and Pappano conducting. (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 36). The moment when Manon appears, the music sort of stops after a *precipitato* or precipitated run with a chord held on a fermata, and she immediately gets the attention of Edmondo and the other students, who comment on her beauty in *dolce, ammirando Manon* so admiring her (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 36). Des Grieux looks at Manon, and observes her, also per Puccini's instruction, and finally the first time in the opera where we see something genuinely getting Des Grieux's attention, prompting him to sing "Dio! Quanto è bella!" to himself. (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 38). This is like when you see your loved one or a superstar, no matter how you feel, you are attracted to this person and you cannot take your eyes off of her. And from here on, the orchestra turns from fast and exciting mostly in *f* to slower and dreamy mostly in *p*, and becomes romantic. Like when in a romantic comedy film, the main character sees his romantic interest for the first time. The music builds up to the most magical and beautiful chords in the *Moderatamente* section that go from *rall* to *rit. molto*, and then to five crotchets in tenuto to introduce the *Lento Espressivo* in which Des Grieux introduces himself to Manon (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 41). During this whole time, while the others are dispersing, Des Grieux cannot take his eyes off her and is approaching her, where the 5 crotchets in tenuto are like his heart beating with love electricity as he finally makes it close enough to speak to her. (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 41). You have to wonder that there must be some of Puccini's life experiences and personality in Des Grieux, just as in Rodolfo from *La Bohème*, where perhaps Puccini was a romantic who struggled to find love, and was impatient and a cynic at times, but then after a very romantic and magical moment, found true love and was infatuated with "the one". We then for the first time hear the love theme of the opera, which will be heard again throughout the opera, including in the second aria *Donna non vidi mai*.

This in-depth analysis must be made of the whole role, but for purposes of this paper, we continue with a brief synopsis of the rest of the role.

There is almost no break when Des Grieux has to sing his second aria, “Donna non Vidi Mai”. Puccini gets the main melody from this aria, which is the love theme also used in the first duet with Manon from a beautiful song called “Mentia L’avviso” which he composed for tenor and piano in 1883 while at the Milan Conservatory. Fairtile, L. (1999). *Giacomo Puccini: A Guide to Research* (pp. 5, 68). London: Garland. The love theme of *Manon Lescaut* which appears Donna non vidi mai, first appears in this song at the *Lento* section of the song. Puccini, G. (1988). *Songs for voice and piano* (p. 28). Oxford: Oxford University.

In Donna Non Vidi Mai, Des Grieux sings an intimate aria in that he is thinking these words after meeting Manon for the first time. He is so inspired that he says: “I have never seen a woman before like this one, a new life”. The aria has an exotic sounding introduction by the orchestra, and is romantic throughout. It is bel canto lyric beauty but has excitement at moments, like with a sudden a natural and b flat in the beginning of the aria, and at “deh non cessar!” with the b flat at the end. With moments like “profumare” which means, and “susurro gentil, deh, non cessar”, which means, “whisper gentle, oh, don’t stop”, particularly the last one, the way Puccini writes the music, when you sing it it’s as if you feel that internal excitement that forces you to smile, shake your head in disbelief, or close your eyes and imagine that the girl you just met is there with you. The last “Deh, non cessar!”, which means “Oh, don’t stop!” has a b flat again, which is all the built up excitement and happiness of meeting Manon, and the anticipation of meeting her again soon. Manon keeps her promise and returns to Des Grieux, who finds out from Edmondo that Geronte is planning on taking Manon to live with him, so Des Grieux tells Manon and they both flee to Paris.

ACT II

In Act II, it starts after Manon has left Des Grieux for the riches of Geronte, without giving him any warning of where she would go, this after Manon and Des Grieux were living together in Paris in bliss, and therefore this caused Des Grieux to be devastated. Des Grieux surprises Manon at Geronte’s after Manon sings her beautiful aria, In quelle trine morbide, and after she sees the dance. Des Grieux has to sing a demanding duet with Manon as his very first part in act II known as “Tu, tu amore tu”. Des Grieux has to come in with a rage with “O tentatrice! O tentatrice!” and sing with jealousy and anger, which then turns to lust and passion, when Manon very powerfully convinces him that she loves him.

In his third aria, “Ah Manon, Mi Tradisce” sung *con Intesa passione* or with intense passion, Des Grieux almost has a Don Jose moment from *Carmen* in that he basically gives in to Manon’s beauty and sexual attraction, as like the crucial moment when Don Jose sings the Flower Song, specifically “Et j’etais une chose a toi”, which means “and that I meant something to you”, with the chords that show Don Jose is psycho-obsessive (Bizet, G. (Composer) & Meilhac, H. & Halevy, L. (Librettists). (1958). *Carmen* (p. 203). New York: Schirmer) with words such as “Io? Tuo schiavo e tua vittima discendo la scala dell’infamia!” which means “I? Your slave and your victim descend the steps of infamy!”, with the melody almost like a laboring prison song which climaxes at this moment a b flat *ff*, all this while they are making love. (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 170-173). Thereafter, Geronte interrupts them and threatens Manon, Lescaut appears warning her that Geronte is going

to get her arrested, but Manon is arrested because she stops to pack jewelry that Geronte gave her.

ACT III

In act III, Manon is imprisoned at La Havre and is about to be deported to Louisiana in America. Des Grieux and Lescaut have a plan to rescue Manon from prison, but they get caught and are not able to rescue her. The other women prisoners are called to walk towards the boat taking them to America. When Manon is called to go to the boat, Des Grieux is so overtaken by emotion that he goes forward and sings his fourth aria “No, pazzo son”, in which he is fighting to get Manon to stay. It is such passion in pleading for his love to not be taken away, that the prison guard allows him to board the ship to America. Aureliano Pertile sings it with incredible passion and ease, you can’t help but be moved by his singing. Puccini, G. (1995) No, pazzon son. (Recorded by Pertile, A.) [from *Lebendige Vergangenheit*, Vol. 2]. Vienna: Preiser. Swedish tenor Jussi Bjorling sings this aria with such passion and emotion that his colleague, baritone Cornell MacNeil, when singing Lescaut to Bjorling’s Des Grieux at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, that he was so astounded that he was unable to sing his own lines, “he just staggered me with his vocalism”. (<http://www.operavivra.com/artists/tenors/jussi-bjorling/>)

ACT IV

Des Grieux and Manon flee New Orleans, and make their way across a desert to seek refuge in a British settlement, whereupon Manon, exhausted, passes out, prompting Des Grieux to sing his fifth and final aria, “Vedi, vedi son io che piango”, in attempting to revive her, which translates as “look, look it is I who cries”, with gorgeous long lines despairing over Manon’s condition. Manon finally wakes and sings to him, “Sei tu che piangi”, which means “Is it you who is crying?”, to which Des Grieux responds with an optional high C in unison with Manon, “O Manon!” to show his extreme desperation and excitement that she is conscious and speaking to him after she was passed out from dehydration and exhaustion. (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, pp. 239-243). These are great moments of verismo. The orchestra part is so gorgeous even in these moments that it is so difficult for the actor/singer not to be moved, but one must stay in character and use the beauty and power of the music by channeling it towards the drama of the actions.

Des Grieux is unable to find help, water or food and Manon dies, after which, per Puccini’s indication, Des Grieux finishes the opera mad with grief, and by falling unconscious over Manon’s body, as if he dies with her. (Puccini & Praga, M., Oliva, D., Illica, L., & Ricordi, G., 1972, p. 263).

A Brief History of Tenors and the Role of Des Grieux

When studying a role it is important to listen to and watch performances of the opera and to read about performers to learn what is useful to you, as there is information you may obtain that has been passed on from Puccini and from great conductors and coaches.

Giuseppe Cremonini: First ever Des Grieux, premiered *Manon Lescaut* at the Teatro Regio in Turin, he did not make any recordings, but was a versatile full lyric tenor who performed all types of roles, from lyric to Wagner. Giuseppe Cremonini (n.d.). Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giuseppe_Cremonini#cite_note-operissimo-2.

Enrico Caruso: First Des Grieux at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1907. Opera News (3 December, 2016). *Metropolitan Opera Radio Broadcast: Manon Lescaut*. https://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2016/12/Departments/Broadcast_Manon_Lescaut.html. He only recorded the aria “Donna non vidi mai”. It is a major shame he did not record the whole opera. Caruso had the perfect blend of ease and power, and sweetness and drama for this lyric dramatic opera, and was one of the best actors ever in opera.

Aureliano Pertile: He was arguably Puccini’s favorite Des Grieux. Puccini was so moved by Toscanini’s Des Grieux choice for opening *Manon Lescaut* at La Scala in 1922, where Puccini attended many of the rehearsals, that he “sent his congratulations to the great tenor, the best Des Grieux ‘I could ever wish for.’” (Phillips-Matz, 2002, p. 278). Another shame that Pertile did not record this opera in full, although he did record the arias Tra voi belle, Donna non vidi mai, Ah Manon, mi tradisce, and No! pazzo son. He sings with such melancholy and beautiful colors and tone, breathtaking genuine passion, but with such ease and flexibility. It is no surprise that so many tenors, including Mario del Monaco, learned a great deal from Pertile’s performances and recordings (Phillips-Matz, 2002, p. 278).

Beniamino Gigli: The great lyric tenor Beniamino Gigli played Des Grieux in a studio recording which was the world premiere of *Manon Lescaut* on CD. Puccini, G. (1950). *Manon Lescaut Highlights*. Istituto Discografico Italiano. He sings Tra Voi Belle and Donna non vidi mai with charm and some of the most utmost beauty and ease, but lacks the thunder and passion required for certain parts, such as for No, pazzo son and for the duet Tu, tu amore tu. There is a video of Gigli singing Donna non vidi mai on Youtube where he appears on a stage that is wonderful to see and hear, a prime example of true bel canto singing with immaculate legato. Calaf2006. (August 9, 2006). *Gigli sings Donna non vidi mai*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrCxfMAGuec>.

Mario del Monaco: Virile and dramatic singing like no other, and also sings with sweetness passion in the recording with Renata Tebaldi and Molinari-Pradelli conducting, but maybe not as much ease and flexibility as some other tenors at times, particularly in pianissimo moments. Puccini, G. (1954). *Manon Lescaut* [CD]. Rome: Decca. His dramatic moments are thrilling.

Richard Tucker: American spinto tenor with an Italian sound, who not only had an impeccable technique which allowed ease of singing, but was a great actor and artist. Des Grieux was his favorite role. Jellinek, G. (2007) *My Road to Radio and the Vocal Scene: Memoir of an Opera Commentator* (pg. 149). Jefferson: McFarland. Despite performing Des Grieux at 65 years old in Rome, in “regards to his acting in the part of the youthful Des Grieux, the consensus was that he could scarcely have been bettered.. Among four of the major critics then writing in the Rome newspapers, not one of them had anything but the highest praise for his technique.” Drake, J. A. (1984). *Richard Tucker: a biography* (pp. 230-231). New York: Dutton.

Franco Corelli: Corelli is another great tenor who unfortunately never recorded or performed the whole opera, only recording *Donna non vidi mai*, which sounds perfect for his voice. Puccini, G. (1997). *Donna non vidi mai* [Recorded by F. Corelli]. On *Opera Heroes* [CD]. Paris: Warner Classics. An inexplicable and great shame.

Placido Domingo: One of the roles he loves most, regrets not performing it more often, and believes it to be “the most difficult of all the Puccini parts, chiefly because of its length – Des Grieux has more to sing than any other Puccini tenor character – and the tessitura, which is demanding. (Matheopoulos, 2000, p. 121). He performed and recorded the role many times, with the best Manons throughout history, including Renata Tebaldi, Magda Olivero, Monserrat Caballe, Mirella Freni, and Renata Scotto (Matheopoulos, 2000, p. 120). It is a role that Domingo understood and embodied so well that former Metropolitan Opera of New York assistant conductor Richard Morrison told me that he witnessed Domingo at the Met several times sing the fast section from the Act II duet and he would use them as vocal exercises to warm up for his performances or rehearsals at the Met even though he was singing a completely different role. This is the same duet that Domingo sang with Spanish soprano Monserrat Caballe at the Metropolitan Opera of New York’s 30th Anniversary Gala under Rudolf Bing (Matheopoulos, 2000, pp. 120-121).

Conclusion

Des Grieux is a long and relentless role that requires an extreme variety of colors, emotions, passion, and acting with moments of great sweetness, beauty and power, all of which must be sung with enough ease so as to allow for the demanding musical and acting requirements. The tenor should be thoroughly prepared vocally, musically, theatrically before attempting this role.