

Massenet, Jules (1842-1912): Overview of his Writings

A rather secretive person, Massenet rarely revealed himself in writing, "I have no illusion of believing myself an 'interesting figure' or in interesting the public; I just have a sense of distance—I believe in it, and I am right," he confided in 1903 to Adolphe Brisson, who had asked him to publish his memoirs (Letter to Adolphe Brisson, 14 April 1903, cited in Jules Massenet, *Mes souvenirs et autres écrits*, Jean-Christophe Branger, ed., Paris: Vrin, 2017, p. 30). These memoirs had already been written but, according to the composer, were destined only for his family. Similarly, although Massenet produced a great amount of music, he never showed much taste for theoretical reflection. His texts are rare and his correspondence, although abundant, is often laconic and careless, in contrast to the letters of Berlioz and Gounod. In 1908, four years before Massenet's death, his biographer Louis Schneider observed that, "It is rare that a prominent musician has not sought to explain his theories other than by example. Massenet, it is curious to note, never explained them in writing. Writings by him are rare" (*Massenet*, Paris: Carteret, 1908, p. 370).

The author of *Manon* also offered little in the way of remarks on his contemporaries, his own thoughts, or his personal development. This was perhaps out of modesty or to avoid publicly displaying his opinions. His writings are limited to five relatively long articles, written between 1888 and 1909, twelve speeches, mostly given after 1910, and *Mes souvenirs*, an important volume of memoirs written in 1911-1912, which, though it is much longer than the others, raises a number of questions in terms of the authenticity of its content. To this corpus should be added Massenet's responses to surveys, the development and form of which sometimes makes them comparable to articles. In terms of chronology, Massenet was more active as a writer in the last years of his life, during a period when he occupied important official functions at the Institute and felt the need to write his memoirs. His written production, dominated by *Mes souvenirs*, is in fact part of a longer French tradition, one which it seems to close after Grétry, Gounod, or, to a certain degree, Berlioz, whose *Mémoires* are a monument of high literary standing and are voluntarily controversial, whereas Massenet's *Mes souvenirs* rarely ventures onto such terrain.

Massenet nevertheless participated in the debates that animated the artistic trends of his time, offering his views in response to surveys or in his speeches. His first articles contain aesthetic reflections, unlike the later writings which are given over to the personal recollections that were later developed in *Mes souvenirs*. Thus, in "[[Le Conservatoire](#)]," published in *Galvani's Messenger* in 1888, (no copies survive, to our knowledge, but several excerpts were published in the press), Massenet unhesitatingly praises the diversity and particular qualities of French

music (“clearness and precision”), without rejecting foreign traditions. He congratulates himself on the varied education received by composers at the Conservatoire which nevertheless perpetuated a French tradition to which he was particularly attached. In the second article, “[Comment je suis devenu compositeur](#),” written in 1890 and first published in [English](#), Massenet praised the Prix de Rome and residence in the Villa Médicis, a perpetual source of enrichment, according to him. But he supports his words with his own memories in residence, themselves of limited interest. Translated to French and republished on several occasions, this article reveals something of the personality of a man who was otherwise little given to revealing himself. Indeed, Massenet tended to prefer personal and nostalgic anecdotes to aesthetic reflections. In “[Souvenirs d’une première](#),” Massenet recalls his meeting, fictitious or real, with an American who had come to follow him on the eve of the Milan premier of *Hérodiade*, whereas “[Hommage à Verdi](#)” (*Le Gaulois du dimanche*, 9-10 October 1897), offers a bland account of one of his rare meetings with the Italian composer. In contrast, in his short, final article of 1909, Massenet celebrates the fifty years of Gounod’s *Mireille*, praising the work’s Mediterranean colors and simplicity in comparison to “certain scores with their accumulations of rhythms and harmonies” (*Mes souvenirs et autres écrits*, p. 236).

Massenet’s furtive commitment to different causes can also be found in his replies to surveys, offering his opinions on [the use of prose in libretti](#), [the new Salle Favart](#), [himself](#), [Russian music](#), or [the future of music](#), be it [French](#) or otherwise. The reader often discovers a composer who is tolerant, generous, curious, attentive above all else to the development of individual personalities, but also the victim of doubts when, at the end of his life, he seems reserved on the evolution of music. A similar feeling is present in his speeches given between 1903 and 1910, most of which benefitted from the near total intervention of Massenet’s publisher Henri Heugel, without necessarily deforming Massenet’s thought, with which Heugel was perfectly familiar. In 1903, Massenet showered Berlioz and his “genius” in praise (*Mes souvenirs et autres écrits*, p. 274) or, a few years earlier (1893), Méhul and his peers, to whom he felt indebted for opening paths “that we continue to follow” (*Ibid.*, p. 271). He also celebrates the tradition of the prix de Rome and the benefits of living in Italy, as well as figures like Lalo, Guiraud, Massé, Thomas, or Reyer whom, in reality, he personally appreciated to varying degrees; but this is to be expected, given that many of his speeches were given in an official capacity for institutions (the Conservatoire, the SACD, or the Institute).

Massenet’s writings deserve to be better-known, however, because they offer abundant information on an important period and figure in the history of opera. Often reduced to *Mes souvenirs*, with a few speeches reprinted in 1912 by Lafitte shortly after the composer’s death, they are now collected in a critical edition ([Mes souvenirs et autres écrits](#), *op. cit.*) which also contains his articles, all of his speeches and the composer’s responses to surveys, certain of which may still be waiting to be discovered.

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