

Massenet, Jules : Mes Souvenirs (1912)

Between 12 February and 13 May 1911, six “Souvenirs de théâtre” appeared under Massenet’s name in the newspaper *L’Écho de Paris*. In them the composer retraces the genesis and fortunes of [Manon](#) (12 February), [Werther](#) (26 February), [Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame](#) (12 March), [Esclarmonde](#) (26 March), [Hérodiade](#) (9 April), and finally, on the occasion of its Parisian premiere, [Thérèse](#) (13 May). Published more or less in alternation with articles by Saint-Saëns, this series met with such success that the paper asked Massenet to write a more complete series of 29 chapters, which appeared a few months later, from 19 November 1911 to 11 July 1912 (shortly before the composer’s death on 13 August). In these articles, as in the previous ones, Massenet has little to say on the aesthetic of his works, or those of his peers, preferring to recount the turning points of his artistic career and the main events and encounters that had marked his life. From beneath the discourse’s worldly surface, which dissimulates the bitterness of an artist’s career and the constant denigration he had endured, there emerges the human and artistic personality of an author who, reflecting *in fine* on the fate of his work, shows himself to be attached to an era and a French tradition that, in his eyes, seem to be disappearing.

Entitled *Mes souvenirs (pour mes petits-enfants)*, this second series formed the nucleus of the book *Mes souvenirs* that appeared shortly after (Paris: Lafitte, 1912, 352 pp), subsequently translated into English with the composer’s consent ([My Recollections](#), trans. Harry Villiers Barnett, Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1919, 304 pp). In 1992, a first critical edition of *Mes Souvenirs* was published by Gérard Condé with Éditions Plume. Preceded by an introduction, the chapters are annotated, indexed, and followed by a biographical chronology, discography, and selective bibliography by Patrick Gillis. The contents therefore differ from those of the 1912 edition, which is preceded by a “Préface” by Xavier Leroux, written after the composer’s death, and an “Avant-propos” by Massenet himself; finally, testimonies of students and performers and a selection of the composer’s speeches were included in an “Appendix” to give the volume the character of an artistic and literary testament. In writing *Mes souvenirs*, Massenet evidently took a fancy to writing and reflection since in June 1912 he signed a contract to produce, by 1 January 1914, a substantial work to be entitled *L’Initiation musicale*, which was to give “an overview of music, able to be read and understood by anyone” ([Mes souvenirs et autres écrits](#), ed. Jean-Christophe Branger, Paris: Vrin, 2017, pg. 42).

The value of *Mes souvenirs* is however immediately thrown into question by its constantly benevolent tone and various inaccuracies, which compromise it to the point that some, invoking family tradition, have doubted the authenticity of the text, suggesting that Massenet dictated it to a ghost-writer. Today, numerous sources, including the autograph manuscript of the “Souvenirs de théâtres”, rule out this position. Massenet did indeed write his memoirs, and supervised their publication

in feuilleton and then volume format. A number of years later, two journalists from *L'Écho de Paris*, Adolphe Boschot and Gérard Bauer, signed articles affirming that they had read and corrected the composer's manuscripts, but in no way contesting their authorship. Moreover, the work's jovial tone, and its stated objective of "charming and informing" (Jean-Louis Jeannelle, *Écrire ses mémoires au xx^e siècle : déclin et renouveau*, Paris: Gallimard, 2008, pg. 56), reflect both the conventions of memoir-writing of the time and the side-effects of the sizeable doses of morphine that Massenet was taking to control the pain of the illness that would soon get the better of him.

These new sources therefore called for a new critical edition (*Mes souvenirs et autres écrits*, op. cit.), all the more so as the composer's rehabilitation in recent years had led to a new publication of *Mes souvenirs* without critical apparatus (Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2006) and two new translations, one German (*Mein Leben*, trans. Eva Zimmermann and ed. Reiner Zimmermann, Wilhemshaven: Heinrichshofen, 1982, 350 pp.) and one Italian (*I Miei ricordi*, trans. and ed. Riccardo Viagrande, [Monza:] Casa musicale Eco, 2015, 228 pp.), neither of which concern themselves with the genesis of the text.

Jean-Christophe BRANGER

14/06/2017

Trans. Tadgh Sauvey

To quote this article: Jean-Christophe Branger, "Massenet, Jules : Mes Souvenirs (1912)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dicterco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 16/01/2023, <https://dicteco.huma-num.fr/book/2156>.