Piety and sensuality in Massenet's operas *Manon and Thaïs*

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DEDICATION

To my mother Tina.

Without her vision, love and

support I would not have been a

musician today.

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SUMMARY

This study explores the manifestation of piety and sensuality in the operas *Manon* and *Thaïs* by Jules Massenet. These two themes are prevalent in Massenet's operas as well as his oratorios, although it is not clear why this is so. His admiration and love for the human voice and his ability to compose beautiful melodies are reflected in the fact that he composed primarily for the lyric theatre. Piety and sensuality in *Manon* and *Thaïs* are articulated predominantly by the eponymous female characters. In order to understand the characters and the motivations that steer their lives, it was necessary to gain an understanding of the socio-historical context of piety and sensuality. This understanding was reached through means of a traditional literature review, which also shed light on the nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist* and its influence on Massenet and his work.

This is a hermeneutic study conducted in light of an interpretive paradigm. The libretti of *Manon* and *Thaïs* were explored by means of a close reading to identify sections dominated by piety and sensuality. Following the example of Lawrence Kramer, a combination of close reading and analysis was used to look at the ways in which piety and sensuality are articulated in the music.

It became clear that Massenet used various compositional techniques to differentiate between piety and sensuality in his music scores. These techniques were applied with such skill that a listener can identify these two themes through close listening.

Keywords: Massenet, opera, *Zeitgeist*, nineteenth century, *Manon*, *Thaïs*, piety, sensuality, close reading, analysis.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie ondersoek die uitbeelding van piëteit en sensualiteit in Jules Massenet se operas *Manon* en *Thaïs*. Hierdie twee temas kom algemeen voor in Massenet se operas sowel as sy oratoriums, alhoewel die redes hiervoor nie duidelik is nie. Sy bewondering en liefde vir die menslike stem, asook sy vermoë om pragtige melodieë te komponeer word weerspieël in die feit dat hy hoofsaaklik vir die liriese teater gekomponeer het. Piëteit en sensualiteit word hoofsaaklik verwoord deur die twee gelyknamige vroulike karakters. Met die doel om die karakters te verstaan asook die motiverings vir hulle aksies, was dit nodig om ‘n begrip te verkry vir die sosio-geskiedkundige konteks van piëteit en sensualiteit. Hierdie insig was verkry deur middel van ‘n tradisionele literatuurstudie, wat ook insig gegee het in die 19e-eeuse *Zeitgeist* en die invloed daarvan op Massenet en sy werk.

Hierdie navorsingsprojek is ‘n hermeneutiese studie, gebaseer op ‘n interpretatiewe paradigma. Die libretti van *Manon* en *Thaïs* was ondersoek deur middel van noukeurige lesing vir die identifisering van gedeeltes wat gekenmerk word deur piëteit en sensualiteit. Gebaseer op die voorbeeld van Lawrence Kramer se werk is ‘n kombinasie van noukeurige lesing en analise gebruik om te kyk hoe piëteit en sensualiteit in die musiek vergestalt word.

Dit is duidelik dat Massenet ‘n verskeidenheid van komposisionele tegnieke gebruik het om ‘n verskil te maak tussen piëteit en sensualiteit in sy musiekpartiture. Hierdie tegnieke is met soveel vaardigheid aangewend dat ‘n luisteraar hierdie twee temas deur middel van noukeurige beluistering kan identifiseer.

Sleutelwoorde: Massenet, opera, *Zeitgeist*, 19e eeu, *Manon*, *Thaïs*, piëteit, sensualiteit, noukeurige lesing an analise.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

My introduction to Jules Massenet's music was in 1999 when I performed the female lead in a lavish production of *Manon* (1882) at the State Theatre in Pretoria, during the demise of PACT.[1] While the music – sometimes frivolous and at other times deeply touching – enchanted me, I was fascinated by the undercurrent of piety and sensuality that permeated the libretto throughout the opera. Years later, as I studied *Thaïs* (1893), I was once again struck by the same undercurrent in the libretto and this prompted further investigation. I found these two themes emphasised, in varying degrees, in several of his other works, even in the oratorios, such as *Marie-Magdeleine* (1872) and *La Vierge* (1878).

This study is also influenced to a large extent by Hurst's (2007) dissertation on Richard Strauss's song cycle *Der Krämerspiegel*, in which he explores the subtext so strongly present in the cycle, as well as the way in which Strauss's treatment of both the vocal line and piano accompaniment highlight the words.

Although piety and sensuality can be found in other works by Massenet, the research in this study is limited to *Thaïs* and *Manon.* In his psycho-analytical study on sensual salvation in Massenet, Jones (2009:135–136) argues that Massenet's operas and oratorios deal with the attainment of spiritual salvation through being the object of another's desire. He is of the opinion that *Thaïs* in particular was part of a nineteenth-century discussion about the use of religious dogma to suppress sexuality (Jones, 2010:31).

1.2 Contextualisation

Massenet was a man of the theatre, which is reflected in the fact that the main body of his work was composed for the lyric theatre. His music possesses a distinct melodic style (Irvine, 1997:xiii) and he had a great admiration and love for the human voice (Lécuyer, 2010:31). During his lifetime he composed a prolific number of operas as well as ballets, oratorios and incidental music. The prevalence of the conflict between piety and sensuality is striking in his operas and even in some of

[1] Performing Arts Council of the Transvaal.

his oratorios, such as *Marie-Magdeleine* (1872) and *La Vierge* (1878). Some of Massenet's other operas that clearly illustrate both connection and struggle between piety and sensuality are *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame* (1902), *Sapho* (1897)*, Werther* (1892), *Esclarmonde* (1889) and *Hérodiade* (1881). This theme played out against the backdrop of several different religions, without an obvious pattern or specific preference for any single one.

In both *Manon* and *Thaïs* piety and sensuality are articulated predominantly by the eponymous female characters. In an attempt to understand the characters and the motivations that steer their actions, it is essential to gain insight into the meaning of piety and sensuality,[2] both of which are – to a great extent – culturally and historically influenced; piety and sensuality mean different things within different social, temporal and spatial contexts.[3]

The early Christians believed that sensual desire should be subdued so that one could be governed by divine love and not by lust (Price, 1996:16). The women who are portrayed by the female leads in both these operas are *courtesans*. The *courtesan* character has often been used in literary works and visual arts to epitomise overt sensuality. It is thus clear why both the characters, Manon and Thaïs, were viewed as sinful women who were best removed from society.

If we read Massenet's version of the events surrounding the conception of *Manon* (Massenet, 1919:136–137) and *Thaïs* (Massenet, 1919:189), it seems as if the operas were based on a random choice of stories that appealed to him. Furthermore, Massenet was very much part of the French intellectual life of this era and it is highly likely that his work was influenced by the "spiritualised eroticism [that] was quite common in French artistic and intellectual circles of this time" (Jones, 2010:1).

For this reason it is necessary to explore the tumultuous events that took place in France during the nineteenth century, as well as some of the social consequences that resulted from the upheaval. The Catholic Church, whose authority was

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2 These concepts will be explained in detail in Chapter 3 of this mini-dissertation.

3 The contexts in which *Manon* is set features the Catholic sensibilities of eighteenth-century France while those of *Thaïs* offer perspectives on paganism and coenobitic asceticism in fourth-century Egypt.

threatened and which gradually diminished during this period, started to increasingly focus on moral dogma, mainly by exerting control over women's bodies and sexuality (Jones, 2010:23). The result was a backlash from the artistic community; first realist and later impressionist artists started to portray nudity, while writers resorted to visual descriptions of sexuality in literature (Brooks, 1993:16–18, 159). Both state and Church demonized female sexuality, as they feared that the liberated woman, who was viewed as promiscuous, "might bring down the social order, a major concern for those who feared a return of the chaos of the terror"[4] (Jones, 2010:27). These views and events would all have informed Massenet's beliefs and philosophies, and would therefore be reflected in his work.

1.3 Research Questions

The main question of concern in this study is: how are piety and sensuality articulated in Massenet's *Manon* and *Thaïs*?

Several sub-questions emanate from this main question, namely:

- What is the cultural-historical context of piety and sensuality?
- How did the nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist* in France influence Massenet and his work?
- How are piety and sensuality articulated in the libretto and music of the opera *Manon*, with special reference to the character Manon*?*
- How are piety and sensuality articulated in the libretto and music of the opera *Thaïs*, with special reference to the character Thaïs*?*

1.4 Aims

The main aim of this study is to determine how piety and sensuality are articulated in Massenet's *Manon* and *Thaïs*.

Several secondary aims emanate from this main aim, namely:

- To determine the socio-historical context of piety and sensuality;

[4] The Reign of Terror, or *La Terreur*, was a period of violence after the start of the French Revolution, when mass executions took place.

- To determine how the nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist* in France influenced Massenet and his work;
- To determine how piety and sensuality are articulated in the libretto and music of the opera *Manon*, with special reference to the character Manon;
- To determine how piety and sensuality are articulated in the libretto and music of the opera *Thaïs*, with special reference to the character Thaïs.

1.5 Central theoretical argument

My assumption is that Massenet's treatment of the musical aspects of *Manon* and *Thaïs* was informed by the emotions inherent in piety and sensuality and is such that the difference between piety and sensuality is as clearly distinguishable in the music as it is in the libretto.

1.6 Limitations and delimitations

The existing literature considers aspects of Massenet's life and works, including his operas. Ahern (1996) conducts a comparative analysis of Massenet's *Manon* and Puccini's *Manon Lescaut,* while Straughn (2004) offers an analysis of the ensemble forms in Massenet's operas, but no study as yet has been conducted on the musical expression of piety and sensuality in Massenet's operas. Massenet's autobiography, *Mes souvenirs* (1919) and Bruneau's biography of Massenet (1935), give insight into the composer's personality and *raison d'être*, while Irvine's definitive work, *Massenet: a chronicle of his life and times* (1997) is the result of the author's comprehensive study of Massenet's letters, speeches and other historical documents. Through the writings of Charlton (1992 & 2003), Warrack & West (1992) and Cannon (2012) about opera in France during the nineteenth century, we are provided with a picture of the world in which Massenet applied his craft.

As this is not a biographical study, limited biographical information will serve to contextualise and substantiate statements. As noted above, only two of Massenet's operas, *Manon* and *Thaïs* will be considered for the analysis, even though the theme of piety and sensuality is prevalent in many of his other compositions. The analyses will further be limited to piety and sensuality in the lives of the two eponymous female characters. The purpose of the analysis will be to identify

compositional elements and also elements in the libretto employed by Massenet by which piety and sensuality are articulated.

1.7 Research design and methods

The proposed hermeneutic study will follow a qualitative research design and will be conducted in the context of an interpretative paradigm. Data collection will be done by conducting a traditional literature review, followed by a close reading of the primary texts, a strategy closely related to textual analysis. The research design and methods will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

The textual analysis will involve the libretti, but not the books on which they were based, as well as an analysis of the music scores. However, although the music analysis will concentrate mainly on the shape of the vocal line, it has to be viewed as part of a musical whole, as the orchestra is an integral part of the storytelling in Massenet's music (Lécuyer, 2010:32). Therefore, the full orchestral score will be used for the purpose of the music analysis.

1.8 Ethical aspects

I undertake that this study and all of its contents will be a reflection of my own work and that I shall, at all times, acknowledge all sources used and strive to do justice to the topic. By addressing a gap in the body of knowledge in the field, I shall endeavour to add value to both the scientific and performance communities in an objective and truthful way, adhering to the principles and standards of both.

1.9 Narrative design of the assignment

Chapter 1 is introductory and includes the rationale, contextualisation, research questions and aims.

Chapter 2 contains an outline of the methodological procedures used for this study and includes information regarding the research design, paradigm, literature review, data collection and text analysis.

Chapter 3 comprises an overview of the body of literature that provides the socio-historical context of piety and sensuality, the nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist*, and Massenet and his work.

Chapter 4 consists of an explanation of a close reading of first the libretto and then the music score of *Manon,* with the specific aim of looking at the manifestations of piety and sensuality in Manon's life, as well as the expression thereof in his music.

Chapter 5 follows with a record of a close reading of first the libretto and then the music score of *Thaïs*. The specific aim was to examine the manifestations of piety and sensuality in Thaïs' life, as well as the expression thereof in the music.

Chapter 6 is a summary and an outline of the findings of the research, limitations and recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter the research design and methods used for this particular study are considered. It begins with an explanation of the research design this study follows in order to adequately answer the research question, as well as its context within the realm of qualitative research. This is followed by an explanation of the nature and history of hermeneutics, with particular emphasis on philosophical views on symbolic communication and the importance of taking into consideration the author's world when reading a text. This leads to the contextualisation of the study within the classical music genre. A discussion of the broader meaning of a paradigm then flows into a more specific explanation of the interpretivist paradigm and the way in which it underpins this study. The difference between traditional, systematic and integrative literature reviews is clarified, and the appropriateness of the use of a traditional review for the purposes of this study is explained. The chapter concludes with a comment on the analysis of the text, comprising libretti and music, which is done through a close reading.

2.2 Research design

This hermeneutic study follows a qualitative research design conducted in light of an interpretative paradigm. A research design is the plan, or blueprint, of how a study is conducted. Durrheim (2006:36) describes research design as "a strategic framework, a plan that guides research activity to ensure that sound conclusions are reached". A research project usually originates from a question about a reality that the researcher is looking to answer. The link between the research question and the process of research is the strategic framework called the "research design". Many researchers agree on four dimensions or concepts of decision-making in a research design. Various terminologies are used to describe these dimensions, but this study follows Durrheim's (2006:37) dimensions of research design, namely the purpose of the research, the context in which it is carried out, the paradigm informing it and the techniques[5] used to collect and analyse the data. It is only by

[5] Within the field of academic research, what Durrheim (2006:48) refers to as "techniques" are commonly known as research methods. I shall use this terminology when discussing the methods used to collect and analyse data for this research study.

reflecting on issues related to these dimensions, and how they affect one another in such a way that they have an internal logic, that a coherent research design can be found, that will provide valid and believable answers to the research questions (Durrheim, 2006:37–39). The purpose of the research study has already been stated in Chapter 1 and each of the other dimensions will be discussed in more detail as this chapter develops.

Qualitative researchers are interested in the meaning of a phenomenon for those involved; in other words, their interpretation of and the meaning they attach to their experiences. Long before the term "qualitative research" was coined, anthropologists and sociologists went into communities to study their circumstances and to try to understand why certain things happen as they do. The accounts of their observations were of a descriptive nature, a characteristic that is now closely associated with qualitative research. This type of research gradually spilt over into other disciplines, such as the health services, education and the arts (see Merriam, 2009:5).

Creswell's (2013:44) definition of qualitative research informs this study.

> Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes.

In the case of this research, the assumption is made that Massenet's treatment of the music in his operas *Manon* and *Thaïs* articulates inherent meanings of piety and sensuality. Although traces of these two themes can be found in many of Massenet's works, *Manon* and *Thaïs* were chosen as two exemplary texts. As stated previously, I discovered through my own experience that Massenet used certain compositional techniques through which piety and sensuality can be identified in his music. However, in order to validate my own experiences and discoveries, I needed to explore and identify "variables that cannot be easily measured" (Creswell, 2013:48). The first step towards this exploration was to decide what type of research to conduct.

In the beginning of this section, I stated that this is a hermeneutic study. Therefore, in order to understand why this type of research was chosen for this study, it is necessary to reflect briefly on the nature and history of hermeneutics. According to Porter and Robinson (2011:3)

> […] hermeneutics tries to describe the daily mediation of understanding we all experience in which meaning […] happens by virtue of a "go-between" that bridges the alien with the familiar, connecting cultures, languages, traditions, and perspectives that may be similar or millennia apart.

Ramberg and Gjesdal (2009) describe the term hermeneutics as "both the first order art and the second order theory of understanding and interpretation of linguistic and non-linguistic expressions". They go on to explain that hermeneutics, as a theory of interpretation, had its roots in ancient Greek philosophy and went on to become a branch of biblical studies and, in the hands of the theorists Schleiermacher (1835) and Dilthey (2002) during the German Romanticism period of the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, came to be used to describe symbolic communication as a whole.

Thereafter Heidegger changed the face of hermeneutics with the publication of *Being and time* (1927), in which he postulated that hermeneutics was not purely a matter of linguistic communication, but it was in fact ontology, or man's position in and interaction with the world around him. He used the word *Dasein*: a word encompassing perceptions of who we are, or of the characteristics of being (Heidegger, 1996:10). Although Heidegger's student Gadamer (2010) accepts this ontological paradigm, he believes that it is through language that the world is opened to us in all its facets, as language is our second nature. According to Gadamer (2010:270–274) we can never fully understand the intent of the author of a historical work, or how it was perceived by its contemporaries; our understanding of it will always be influenced by everything we know and everything that has happened since the inception of that work.

As with the interpretation of any text, the performance of a western art music score is a hermeneutic activity. The link between hermeneutics and music is a natural one, as hermeneutics is the art of interpretation and music is interpreted when it is performed (Kramer, 2011:1). Hermeneutic interpretation is an informed act of

creativity, in the same way as an informed performer interprets music. In my view hermeneutics is a regular activity done by any performing artist who is serious about communicating a message to the audience. The way in which hermeneutics is applied by the artist is by doing a close reading of the music throughout the process of preparation. A discussion of close reading will follow later.

According to Agawu (1997:299), music analysts have been accused of formalism because they concerned themselves solely with the structure of and patterns within music, instead of looking at its emotive content within its cultural context. Kramer (2011:146) adds that it is possible to combine the two systems without weakening either and that “hermeneutics is just as ‘scientific’ as analysis, only not in the same way”. He argues that, in the spirit of hermeneutics, when interpretation is guided by both culture and history, the assumption is that an understanding of music as part of the world in which we live has analytic and hermeneutic components. One system does not have to be more important within a study than the other and can be interwoven according to the needs of the study and in support of one another (Kramer, 2004:125).

This study follows these observations by Agawu and Kramer, as this method allows the investigation into the ability of the music to reflect piety and sensuality. With decades of experience as a performing artist and the investment in music analysis required by this profession, I cannot but agree that we do music a disservice if we do not approach a reading thereof with consideration of both form and subjective meaning, as music with the ability to speak to the inner being of the listener inevitably contains both.

Kramer (2004:124) addresses the criticism against hermeneutics that musical meaning is subjective and lacks validity (Kramer, 2004:135), pointing out that everybody is a product of the world in which they live and the events that have impacted their lives (Kramer, 2004:125). He argues that hermeneutic statements should make use of literary techniques such as evocative language, metaphor and irony and tell the ever-present and often hidden “back story” of the music (Kramer, 2004:136). About the criticism directed against the description of musical elements based on feelings, Kramer (2004:138) argues that feelings are signs and symbols

that are used to describe everyday events in our world. Such descriptions lead to a full understanding of music (Kramer, 2004:134).

For the purpose of this study, hermeneutics will be used to explore the symbolic communication (Schleiermacher, 1835:90–94) contained in both libretto and music. I would argue that music is the ultimate form of symbolic communication, with the ability to touch the deepest, most concealed nerve in the human psyche. Forster (2007:33–34) highlights the opinion of Herder (1800) and Schleiermacher (1835) that, although an author's whole body of work must be taken into account to recognise his characteristic style, it is also possible to achieve a great measure of understanding of a whole text by interpreting parts thereof.

As will be detailed in the literature review in Chapter 3, when Massenet's compositions are considered as a whole, piety and sensuality are prominent elements in many of his works, even in his oratorios, where one might least expect it. In accordance with Hegel (1991) and Schleiermacher's (1835) views, the approach to this study is that, by examining the descriptive compositional elements that Massenet implemented to elucidate particular emotions in selected sections of *Manon* and *Thaïs*, it is possible to come to an understanding of his treatment of these emotions throughout his body of work. To this end the meaning of the text needs to be investigated through a close reading in order to find sections in which piety and sensuality are the overriding emotions. Thereafter a close reading of the music scores will be conducted to look at the way in which piety and sensuality are articulated in the music.

To put the study in context, we also have to consider the opera genre, in which libretto, music, drama, costumes and lighting all come together in order to create a theatrical experience. This combination gives opera a unique character within the spectrum of classical music. Obvious perceptions are that the drama in an opera is conveyed by means of the words in the libretto and the acting on stage. What might not be quite so obvious to many is the way in which the music contributes to the drama and could possibly articulate the drama. Several factors often render the libretto difficult to understand. Even so, the audience is touched by what they hear, which can then only be as a result of the experience of the musical dimensions of the work. This argument will also be pursued later in this study.

Scientific studies are guided by the philosophical and theoretical frameworks or perspectives that the researcher brings to the process, which is referred to as a paradigm (Creswell, 2013:18). Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006:2) explain the paradigm as “the background knowledge against which [researchers make] sense of their observations” and which informs their understanding and studying thereof. In other words, it is not possible for a researcher to take action without doing so within a paradigm, as our assumptions always influence our actions. Acting within a particular framework thus also enables us to conduct a coherent study.

The terminology used by researchers when describing the philosophical foundations of studies varies from “theoretical frameworks” to “philosophical foundations” and “paradigms”. For the purposes of this study I shall use the term “paradigm”. Three of the most widely used paradigms are positivism, interpretivism and critical theory (Willis, 2008:257; Creswell, 2013:17). Positivists believe that reality exists, which can be verified by observation or experience, and their research is often called “scientific” (Merriam, 2009:8). Much of the body of qualitative research falls within an interpretive paradigm and the assumption is that each phenomenon can be interpreted in multiple ways, while meaning is constructed by the researcher. Critical research concerns itself with a critical view of social, cultural and political domination that results in various forms of gender, race and class oppression (Nieuwenhuis, 2012:62). A local phenomenon is assumed to reflect in universal human behaviour (Willis, 2008:340). This particular study, however, falls within the interpretivist paradigm.

As mentioned above, the core of the interpretivist paradigm is the way in which every human being perceives his own reality and what that means to him. Merriam (2009:9) claims that there is “no ‘objective’ experience that stands outside its interpretation”, as everything a person has ever experienced will somehow influence his interpretation of an experience. According to Nieuwenhuis (2012:58), “interpretevism has its roots in hermeneutics, the study of the theory and practice of interpretation”. This statement underscores the belief that there is a clear relationship between interpretevism and hermeneutics. He underscores the view of hermeneutic theorists such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey that

“interpreters must attempt to put themselves within the author’s ‘horizon’ in order to reconstruct the intended meaning of the text” (Nieuwenhuis, 2012:59).

The reasoning that our understanding of phenomena will improve by uncovering the way in which meanings are constructed (Nieuwenhuis, 2012:59) has particular bearing on this study. The analyses and interpretations of the libretto and some musical elements in which occurrences of piety and sensuality have been identified in the designated operas will establish whether Massenet managed to construct The reasoning that our understanding of phenomena will improve by uncovering the way in which meanings are constructed (Nieuwenhuis, 2012:59) has particular bearing on this study. The analyses and interpretations of the libretto and some musical elements in which occurrences of piety and sensuality have been identified in the designated operas will establish whether Massenet managed to construct musical meaning. In this case there is a particular concern with the emotive meanings of piety and sensuality.

2.3 Research methods for collecting and analysing data

For the purpose of this study a literature review is used as a method of collecting data. According to Jesson *et al.* (2011:3), the first step in conducting a study is to review the existing literature about the research topic in order to find out what is already known, if and where there are gaps in the existing knowledge and to show that there is a place and need for the study to be done that will make an original contribution to knowledge. In this study the literature review is divided into three parts. Part one concerns itself with the meaning of piety and sensuality in order to establish the general perceptions of these two themes found in fourth-century pagan Egypt, as well as in eighteenth-century Catholic France. The second part consists of a background study of Massenet’s life and times, with the purpose of understanding the effect of the upheavals and many changes in the political, cultural and religious spheres of his time. As I shall explain, to be able to do a close reading the socio-historical context of the text has to be known and understood. The third part is an overview of studies done on Massenet’s work. Of the limited academic output on Massenet and his work, only a few studies could be excluded from the review, as most of the studies refer to either the sensuality of Massenet’s

female characters, or discuss stylistic elements of his music in a manner that has bearing on this study.

Three types of literature reviews are distinguished, namely traditional,[6] systematic and integrative literature reviews (see Jesson *et al*., 2011; Coughlan *et al*., 2013). According to Jesson *et al.* (see 2011:15), a traditional review is a critical assessment of the theories and outcomes of existing studies and concentrates mostly on background and contextual material. The author of this type of literature review has to choose material that he believes to offer original, valuable information and opinions that will lead to a better understanding of his own research problem. A systematic literature review concentrates mostly on the history of these studies, as well as the material focusing on their contexts (see Jesson *et al*, 2011:15). Jesson *et al.* (2011:15) are also of the opinion that this type of review "sit[s] easily in a scientific framework but less so in a more open, interpretative paradigm common in the social sciences".

Integrative reviews are often used in the health sciences. According to Coughlan *et al.* (2013:17) it can be difficult to distinguish between a traditional (narrative) and an integrative review, particularly if the former is visibly structured. An integrative review is often a more systematic approach with a clearly described methodology for the searching and coding of literature, and which aims to formulate a new understanding of a problem within a field of knowledge. It often includes diverse sources such as empirical and theoretical data and studies, which are difficult to compare because of their use of diverse methodologies and research designs.

A traditional literature review is used for this study, as it is, to a great extent, a journey of exploration. The lack of research on specifically piety and sensuality in Massenet's operas necessitated the perusal of all available literature on Massenet, in order to find references related to these two themes in the composer's work and life. Any other, more focused type of review might have led to an oversight of material that offers valuable insight through the process of exclusion required for either a systematic or integrative literature review. In order to gain an understanding

[6] Coughlan *et al.* (2013:14) note that a traditional review is also known as a standard, narrative, or descriptive review, with a narrative review being their preference, as it is the most widely used term in qualitative research.

of the meaning of piety and sensuality, books by authors of some repute (Labouvie-Vief, 1994; Rosenthal, 1992), peer-reviewed articles (Printy, 2005; Pesuit, 1997; McSweeney, 1987; Nochlin, 1978) and documents from ancient texts such as the Laws of Plato (2008), which dates from the fourth century BCE were consulted. Information was collected about the historical events, as well as intellectual and musical developments in France preceding and during Massenet's lifetime. Referring back to the views of Schleiermacher (1835), Ernesti (1822) and Herder (1800), as discussed earlier, it is important to view the composer and his creative output within an historical, geographical and cultural background. A list of material exists about these topics, of which books by renowned scholars (Barzun, 2001; Charlton, 2003, 1992; Irvine, 1997) in the various fields were perused.

As the life and work of Massenet has to a certain extent been neglected in academic writing, it was essential to conduct a broad search to ensure that studies relevant to this one would not be overlooked. Massenet's (1919) own recollections and Irvine's (1997) definitive chronicle of the life and work of the composer, as well as a few peer-reviewed articles (Jones, 2010; Rowden, 2009; Miller, 2002; Blier, 2001; Huebner, 1993) and a handful of master's and doctoral dissertations (Jones, 2009; Straughn, 2004; Goldstrom, 1998; Ahern, 1996) constitute the bulk of the limited available sources.

It was only through textual analysis that the research question of this study could be fully answered. Mouton (2009:167) defines textual analysis as the "analysis of texts […] in order to understand the meaning of such texts". He names the analysis and interpretation of musical compositions as one of the typical applications of textual analysis. Lehtonen (2000:48) describes text as "every kind of human signification practice" and goes on to say that it can be "spoken and written words, images and sounds".

In order to conduct the textual analyses required for this study, material in a variety of formats needed to be reviewed. A review of the two novels on which the libretti of the operas are based was conducted in order to contextualise the analyses. These novels are titled *L'Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* by Abbé Prévost (1731) and *Thaïs* by Anatole France (1890). A close reading of the libretti of *Manon* (Massenet, 2000a) by Henri Meilhac and *Thaïs* (Massenet, 2000b) by

Louis Gallet and Phillippe Gille was done, followed by a close reading of the full orchestral scores of *Manon* (Massenet, 1895) and *Thaïs* (Massenet, 1894).

Beehler (1988:39) describes close reading as the "practice of reading a text 'closely' so as to squeeze every ounce of significance from it". In the same breath she warns against the danger of believing that it is possible to achieve a finite reading with only one "correct" answer. A close reading requires active participation, with the reader rewriting during the process of reading or interpreting, at least one of the potential possibilities contained in the text (Kramer, 2003:10; Beehler, 1988:40). Blum also argues that close reading, or close listening (in music) results in a rereading or rehearing, which increases our understanding that the notion of a supreme answer or outcome is an unrealistic one (Blum, 1993:50).

Suffice it to say here that, with a close reading, the interpreter also conveys the meaning of the music as understood by him. Although this subjective interpretation is more noticeable in instrumental music, the presence of words in vocal music does not prevent an open reading (Kramer, 2011:7). Kramer (1992:10) calls music "the most immediate of all aesthetic experiences" and argues that language does not have the ability to adequately describe the finer nuances, drama and vigour of a musical experience, or for that matter any other significant experience. He does believe, though, that it is the responsibility of cultural musicology to describe musical meaning by way of a critical analysis or close reading, supplementing careful consideration of the music and its history with an intuitive response to the work (Kramer, 2003:7).

As soon as one moves away from the literal meaning of a text, one moves to uncertain and explorative territory. However, Kramer (2003:10) is of the opinion that this process results in a search that brings you closer to and not away from meaning. A reader's response to the text is not so much a result of the inherent meaning of the text, as it is a subjective response provoked by the reading. It is important to recognise that this personal response is just as valid as attempting to find the "message" within the work (Beehler, 1988:40). Therefore, for the purpose of this study I would argue that a close reading has to take interpretation further than Mouton's (2009:167) definition of textual analysis, as cited above. Finding meaning

in the text is not enough; the reader has to analyse his personal response to the text. This premise informs the tone of the close reading in Chapters 4 and 5.

About the connection between interpretation and meaning, Kramer (2003:9) puts it succinctly:

> Meaning arises where interpretation does. It thrives, or not, on what might be termed the *contexture* of interpretation, the capacity to draw together a variety of semantic sources – tropes, tones, phrases, images, ideas – into a sustainable discourse that resembles the way sense is made within a certain social, cultural, or intellectual milieu.

Thus, meaning is not something we attain automatically, without engagement with and input into the process. Just as Barthes (1997:11) muses about the history of Paris when he looks down on the city from the Eiffel Tower, so I believe the thinking person speculates about the who, what and why of the music to which he listens. Who was the person who wrote this music that touches me so? What inspired him to write this specific music? Why did he choose this topic? In the same way that Barthes (1997:13) describes climbing the Tower to experience the view as a journey, so do I see the experience of understanding text as a journey.

The journey of close reading in this study commences with a reading of the libretti in order to establish the identities of Manon and Thaïs and the paths they follow in their lives. Both women experience turning points in their lives that tip the piety-sensuality scales in one direction or the other. This reading is done within the context of the background study on piety and sensuality in Chapter 3. The culmination of the reading is in the identification of sections in the operas which reflect moments of piety and sensuality in the lives of the two women.

A combined close reading of the music, considering both form and subjective meaning in the identified sections follows to investigate Massenet's musical expression of piety and sensuality. Although the vocal line is of primary importance in the reading, it cannot be viewed outside the context of the orchestral accompaniment, as the combination of voice and orchestra creates one narrative. I take the advice of Agawu (1997:301), who urges us to make use of vivid, vibrant language to prevent a dry and colourless reading or description of the music.

Robinson (1988:328) warns that the full meaning of an opera cannot be derived only from the libretto, because reading only the libretto is to misread music. I agree when he says that the words represent will – the singer as an individual with thoughts and feelings – while the music expresses emotion (Kramer, 2011:2; Robinson, 1988:345–346). I make use of prior knowledge to add to and change what is already known about the operas. The knowledge that I have gained through the background study of Massenet's life and the events that possibly influenced his thoughts and beliefs inform the reading as much as my technical knowledge of music.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter provides a comprehensive account of the methodological procedures used in this qualitative study. With the intention of understanding Massenet's treatment of piety and sensuality in the operas *Manon* and *Thaïs* (in particular the characters Manon and Thaïs), the study is placed within an interpretive paradigm to identify the variables employed by the composer when setting these two themes to music. As the study involves the interpretation of texts, in this case libretti and music, hermeneutics is the appropriate theory of interpretation to use, supplemented by the limited use of traditional music analysis. Data collection is done through a traditional literature review of the meaning of piety and sensuality, as well as a background study on Massenet and his work, while text analysis are conducted through close readings.

CHAPTER 3: PIETY AND SENSUALITY

3.1 Introduction

Two themes that are often responsible for creating drama in Massenet's theatrical works are piety and sensuality. As explained in the previous chapter, the main question of this study will be answered through a close reading of the libretti and scores of *Manon* and *Thaïs*. As a close reading of a text requires cognisance of the cultural-historical background of the text (Kramer, 2003:7; Krims, 2001:24; Agawu, 1997:299; Barthes, 1997:13), it is necessary in this chapter to look into the meaning of piety and sensuality, as well as the historical events that influenced the stories of *Manon* and *Thaïs*, and people that were likely to have had an influence on Massenet and his work. It is inevitable that a person will be influenced by the culture and history of the time in which he lives, but I would argue that the influences will be augmented if the era in question is of such a turbulent and uncertain nature as that of the nineteenth century, as was the case in France in Massenet's day. It is for this reason that I believe an in-depth background study of this period to be of such importance for this research. The temporal and spatial contexts relevant to the study are fourth-century Egypt, which is the setting of *Thaïs,* as well as eighteenth-century France, the setting of *Manon.* One also needs to take into consideration the nineteenth century, the time during which Massenet collaborated with the librettist Gallet to create *Thaïs* and with Meilhac and Gille to give life to *Manon*.

Centuries of pre-assumptions and perceived meanings accompany the themes of piety and sensuality; meanings which presumably differ not only between cultures and eras, but also from one person to the next. Certain actions, emotions and characteristics are so closely linked to these two attributes that the use of them in a text would suggest either pious or sensuous content. Perceptions of piety and sensuality during the above-mentioned periods will act as a guide through the close reading of the libretti to assist in identifying instances within the roles of Manon and Thaïs that truly reflect these two attributes. Furthermore, an understanding of piety and sensuality is needed to determine whether Massenet truly succeeded in expressing these concepts in the music.

3.2 Piety

According to Empereur (2005:2) piety is the expression of religious beliefs as a result of faith. He pertinently places it within a cultural context, in which a person's behaviour and actions can be observed and judged by society. Rice's (1991:46) description of piety is helpful to come to a better understanding of the term; he describes it as the way in which we live our lives to show obedience and thankfulness to God for all that He has done for us. He goes on to say that everyone is not automatically pious, but that piety is a conscious decision that carries responsibilities (Rice, 1991:46). He names four different ways in which piety manifests: reflective or passionate, in groups or solitary (Rice, 1991:46–47).

According to the teachings of the Catholic Church (Empereur, 2005:46), piety helps people to bear trying situations that they cannot change, in the knowledge and with the assurance that they follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Embracing piety is encouragement for penance, which allows the pious to reconcile with God and establish a closer relationship with Him. Piety leads a person to turn his back on sin and open his being to forgiveness and a charitable life.

Another form of piety is *pietas* or filial piety, which is loyalty and obedience to one's parents (Hegy, 2012:209). The home and family is considered a "domestic sanctuary", where families pray together, the Scriptures are read and piety is taught and encouraged (Empereur, 2005:47). Popular piety originated in various cultures and would, therefore, reflect characteristic elements of the culture, such as the way in which people relate to one another, the way in which they love and care for one another and how they express themselves (Empereur, 2005:52).

It is important to note that piety is not unique to the Christian faith. As *Thaïs* takes place during a time when paganism was still prevalent in Egypt, it is of importance to also take note of pagan piety, discussed in greater depth in the section on Plato's *Laws*. Suffice to mention here that, as in the Catholic faith (Eze, 2010:10), idolatry plays an important role in pagan piety (Stenschke, 1999:198). According to Stenschke (1999:198), pagans believed their way of expressing piety to be loftier than that of the earlier Christians and reflective of their own customs and laws.

Although the fourth century BCE and Greece at first glance seem to be far removed from both the eras and countries in which *Manon* and *Thaïs* are played out, I would argue that a brief consideration of Plato's *Laws* (2008) is relevant to the study, as the influence of many of the directives found in the *Laws* were still reflected in fourth-century Egyptian and nineteenth-century French societies (Pavlac, 2011:64). In the comments that follow I concentrate on the sections of the *Laws* that have direct bearing on the events in *Manon* and *Thaïs*: those that deal directly or indirectly with piety and sensuality.

Plato (2008:90) explains how important it is to believe in the gods and to live a good life, because if you do not, you will have a bad life. This statement shows just how close the link has been in Western thought between virtue and happiness since ancient times. He even proposes imprisonment or even the death penalty for persistent atheism. Eating, drinking and sexual lust are named as the three desires that mostly corrupt men (Plato, 2008:144). According to him "the fire of sexual lust […] kindles in men every species of wantonness and madness" and should be extinguished through fear, law and reason (Plato, 2008:144). He names piety, the love of honour and the desire for a beautiful soul as the three principles that would prevent a corrupt nature to sin (Plato, 2008:192). As we will see in both *Manon* and *Thaïs*, these early beliefs were still reflected in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature.

3.3 Sensuality

Although, as and where applicable, I refer to both sensuality and sexuality in the study, it is the former that is pertinent to this research. Gaudet (2004:245) believes that both sensuality and sexuality are integral to a woman's biological being. Notwithstanding the fact that sensuality and sexuality are connected, each can exist independently of the other. She describes a sensual woman as one who is in touch with and indulges in the pleasures of the senses. Sussman (2011:1, 25) argues that sensuality is a reflection of confidence and warmth, which originates in a woman's inner being and that ignites desire in another person.

Sexuality can refer to different things: procreation, sexual orientation, or the sexual interaction between two people (Marietta, 1997:26). For the purposes of this study it

is important to make the distinction that, whereas sexuality "involves the personhood of two people" (Marietta, 1997:24), sensuality is an attitude radiating from an individual. According to Falk (1994:62), the history of sensuality is directly linked to the historical notion of corporal violation. The description "indulgence in the pleasures of the senses" (Gaudet, 2004:245) might conjure up the image of a prostitute or, a more apt name in this study, the courtesan, whose livelihood usually depends on the cultivation of her sensuality.

According to Pelling (2000:190), it was expected of married women in ancient Athens to stay at home, living their lives in unquestioning obedience to their husbands. During the middle of the fourth century, Apollodorus[7] – in the case against the *hetaira* (courtesan) Neaera – said: "We have *hetairai* for pleasure, concubines (*pallakai*) for meeting our bodily needs day-by-day, but wives for having legitimate children and to be trustworthy guardians of our household." (Demosthenes, 2003:191) In much the same way, respectable eighteenth-century women were expected also to stay at home and had very few opportunities to participate in leisure activities (Horsbrugh-Porter, 2009:2). Under these conditions, life as a *hetaira* was preferable to many women.

3.4 The life of a courtesan

Courtesans were often educated women who were under the protection of a rich man in exchange for sexual favours and intelligent conversation (Feldman & Gordon, 2006:5). These women are often referred to as "fallen women", which ascribes moral vice and sexual behaviour out of wedlock to them. Nochlin (1978:139) points out the huge difference in the understanding of "fallen" when applied to men and women, as a fallen man suggests one killed in war. During the nineteenth century both "vice" and "war" were strong concepts. As we have seen, prostitution is an extremely old profession. From Dewndey's (2010:84, 87) essay on the courtesan, we learn that the tradition started in the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia and Egypt and the last of the great courtesans lived during the early decades of the twentieth century.

[7] Although this speech has traditionally been attributed to the speechwriter Demosthenes as his speech 59, it seems likely that Apollodorus wrote his own speech (Demosthenes, explained by Bers, 2003).

Although not all courtesans were regarded as being of the same class, Pesuit (1997:1–2) describes first class courtesans as highly erudite, sophisticated and beautifully groomed women who often rose from very humble beginnings to being accepted and valued in elite society. Unlike other women of their time, they made their own decisions as to how they wanted to distribute their favours, based either on a man's social or financial status or emotional ties.

Rosenthal (1992:104) describes the life of the beautiful and brilliant sixteenth-century Venetian courtesan, Veronica Franco (1546–1591), who was also a poet and philanthropist and one of the most famous courtesans of all times, and the skill and imagination she required to negotiate and maintain this way of life. The narrative of Franco's inquisition trial (Rosenthal, 1992:153ff.) allows us a glimpse of the fragile existence of these women and the ease with which their lives could fall apart.

Dewndey (2010:84) provides us with a telling poem by a fifth-century prostitute.

> I am she whom you honour and disdain.
> I am the saint and the prostitute.
> I am the virgin and the wife.
> I am knowledge and I am ignorance.
> I am strength and I am fear.
> I am godless and I am the glory of God.

This poem illustrates the ambivalence in society's attitudes towards women whose profession mostly depended on the sensual side of their being. In relation to this poem, Dewndey (2010:85) refers to the "whore/Madonna complex" that many men find attractive: the attraction of lover and mother combined in one person. A small group of courtesans rose to the top of their profession and were highly respected in some circles, such as the Byzantine empress Theodora (c. 500–548), who had been a child prostitute (Dewndey, 2010:85), the Italian courtesans Tullia d'Aragona (1508–1565) and Veronica Franco (mentioned previously), the Parisian Ninon L'Enclos (1620–1705) and Madame de Pompadour (1721–1764). The first-class courtesans were often revered for their beauty and intelligence and Thaïs, who was called a priestess of Venus until her conversion to Christianity, was even canonised by the Roman Catholic Church (Wiltgen, 2008:548). On the other hand, as we learn

from Glocer Fiorini (2008:67), it was all too easy for these women to be degraded and demeaned by society as a result of their choice to live overtly sensual lives.

Blier (2001:16) points out that in 1884, the year of the premiere of *Manon*, more than 600 000 prostitutes plied their trade in Paris. The literature of the period makes it clear that a women's "fall" does not always come about as a result of greed, but often because of financial need. We also see the belief that it is possible for her to turn her life around and be delivered from her sins if she is penitent and goes back to her family (Nochlin, 1978:141). Both this notion and that of the need to evict a fallen woman from her home are reflected in *Thaïs* when Athanaël tells Thaïs to leave her home with him and then burns the home along with all her worldly possessions and takes her to a new family, that of the abbess Albine and the White Sisters. In this way the courtesan can obtain salvation.

Another nineteenth-century belief related to the fallen woman is that she is a prisoner of her own sexuality (Nochlin, 1978:152). We can argue that, in the case of both Manon and Thaïs, this belief holds true, as sexuality is the cause of hardship in both their lives. Thaïs becomes a courtesan mainly as a result of financial need,[8] but Manon's decision (although she is of humble origin) is based on her innate erotic character (Miller, 2002:685).

3.5 Fourth-century Egypt

The end of the relatively short reign of Alexander the Great left a huge Greek-Macedonian Empire, of which Egypt was a part. Greeks left their country in droves to find their fortunes in other parts of the empire, carrying their culture and customs with them. One of the places in which many Greeks settled was Alexandria, the capital of the Ptolemaic Kingdom (332–30 BCE) and the setting of *Thaïs* (Walbank, 1981:14). During this time Greeks and Egyptians intermarried, and the Egyptians learnt Greek and adopted Greek customs (Riggs, 2012:4). Egypt was incorporated into the Roman Empire in 30 BCE when Octavian defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra VII committed suicide (Riggs, 2012:3). The Romans were, in turn, influenced by Egyptian customs and religion (Thompson, 2008:138) which, at this point, had merged to a great extent with Greek customs and beliefs.

[8] This is clear only in France's novel and not in the opera.

Ancient Egyptian society was of a polytheistic, pagan nature; the deity worshipped and looked after by each cult was one specifically close to and beneficial to the lifestyle and occupations of the members of the cult (Dorman, 2013). A reciprocal relationship existed between deities and the living; the living would sacrifice to the gods in order to receive blessings and support in their daily lives and for their specific needs (Assmann & Frankfurter, 2004:155). The deities relevant to this study, and more particularly *Thaïs*, are Aphrodite/Venus,[9] the powerful goddess of love, and her male counterpart Eros/Cupid,[10] who stands as the personification of erotic love (Morford & Lenardon, 1999:116, 129). Other names for Aphrodite are *hetaira* (courtesan) and *porne* (prostitute) (Cyrino, 2010:xii). It is interesting that Gallet uses the Roman version of the name of the goddess when Thaïs talks about and addresses Venus, whereas Eros is referred to by his Greek name. At the end of Act I, Thaïs dedicates her dance to Aphrodite. In her aria in Act II, *Dis-moi que je suis belle,* when she implores the goddess to reassure her of and preserve her beauty, she refers to her as Venus.

Polytheism, or paganism in general, saw a steady decline in Egypt during the fourth century as the Christian faith prospered. Government grants for the temples became increasingly smaller, which caused them to struggle financially. To make matters worse, Emperor Constantius issued a decree against superstition and sacrifice in 341 CE which, towards the end of the century resulted in Christians persecuting pagans (Thompson, 2008:157). By the end of the fourth century this violent persecution of traditional Egyptian worshippers, as well as religious practices, reached fever pitch. Bishops, monks, abbots and the general populace partook in these actions in order to "purify" the country of heathenism (Assmann & Frankfurter, 2004:162–163).

The call to evangelise resulted in people converting to Christianity as early as during the lifetime of John the Baptist (Griggs, 2000:3). In this way Christianity had also spread to Egypt by the middle of the first century (Griggs, 2000:15–16). After

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9 At the end of the third century BCE the Greek Aphrodite was integrated with the Roman goddess Venus, who was worshipped by Romans as their national mother (Cyrino, 2010:128). She is also identified with the Egyptian goddess Isis (Heyob, 1975:43).

10 The representation of Eros as the son of Aphrodite only started during the Hellenistic period, 323–31 BCE (Labouvie-Vief, 1994:30). Eros is the Greek name, whereas Cupid is the Roman name of the god (Morford & Lenardon, 1999:37).

the death of the last of the inner circle of Jesus, the dedication and zeal of the church started to wane. A group of devout followers of Christ retained their fervour though, and from these groups austere religious communities came into being (Coon, 2011:108). Opposed to the eremitical way of life and wishing to live according to the way of the apostolic community in Jerusalem, the fathers of the coenobitic order organised monks into monastic communities, often in the Desert of Thebaid outside Alexandria (as we also see in *Thaïs*), where they spent their lives in work and prayer and learnt to support one another (Maas & O'Donnell, 1990:62). In the opera *Thaïs*, the ascetic monk Athanaël – who makes it his business to save Thaïs from eternal damnation – is part of such a coenobitic community, overseen by the old coenobitic monk Palémon, who warns Athanaël early in the opera not to mingle with worldly people, as that can lead to his ruin.

At this point of the discussion it is necessary to mention the legendary St. Antony of Egypt (251–356 CE) who, as a wealthy Alexandrian youth, received a calling to devote his life to God, sold all his possessions and retreated to the desert where he lived an eremitic life, prayed incessantly and battled demons. The devil showed Antony images of his former life and tortured him with sexual lust, even appearing to him one night in the form of a woman who acted seductively. Antony overcame all of these temptations brought to him by Satan through constant prayer and by focusing on Christ. The message is that the desires of the body decrease as the soul gains in strength (Haase, 2012:22–30). It is easy to make a connection between the life of Antony and that of Athanaël. Stableford (2010:144) asserts that the character Paphnuce (Athanaël in the opera) was based on the legend of the temptation of St. Antony in France's novel. The similarities between the two young men, who give up their comfortable lifestyles to live a life of privation and are then being tempted by sexual lust in the form of dreams in both these texts, are simply too many to ignore.

3.6 The Enlightenment

We now turn to an era in which revolutionary developments in science, politics, philosophy and culture spawned a future world-changing event, namely the French

Revolution. The Enlightenment[11] was a time of great curiosity, during which there was a firm belief that the acquisition of knowledge would lead to freedom and emancipation (Barzun, 2001:359). In Paris, the cultural capital at the time, a *salon* culture emerged, which involved gatherings of intellectuals, such as artists and philosophers, collectively known as *philosophes*, whose work was banned and burned, while they were often exiled.

They were voracious critics of religious fanaticism, ritual, superstition accompanied by fear and the way in which the Church used these devices for enrichment and to its own benefit (Barzun, 2001:360). The *philosophes* argued that the cosmos could regulate itself, which left no role for God to play. In addition, they questioned the divine right of the monarchy, government and the fundamental rights of the people and believed that all people should be equal and free (Barzun, 2001:364–365).

3.7 The nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist*.

3.7.1 Politics

The French Revolution (1789–1799) was one of the most pivotal events in modern history. This watershed uprising was followed by a chaotic time of first the massacre of tens of thousands of people, and then a century of violence, upheaval and instability, with constant changes of regime (Barzun, 2001:425). Napoleon Bonaparte emerged from the French Revolution as a force and, through his genius as an administrator, brought renewed hope and prosperity to France (Ellis, 2013:234). Soon after he came to power though (1799), Napoleon imposed a new type of political oppression on his subjects, this time through law-making and torture, enforced and executed (respectively) by his secret police. Gone were the individual rights for which so much revolutionary blood had been spilt. Outstanding writers were in exile once again and the official press was dull, devoid of the colourful use of language and sparkle that used to characterise French writing (Ellis, 2013:155). At the end of his dictatorship (1814), France was economically and mentally exhausted.

[11] The Enlightenment was a cultural movement roughly stretching from the second half of the seventeenth century through the eighteenth century.

Paris during the 1820s and 1830s was a meeting place for artists and other intellectuals from all over the world (Haine, 1999:188). But at the same time the city was a fairly unsavoury and unsafe place, with narrow, dirty and crowded streets (Barzun, 2001:492). Magraw (1986) provides an in-depth description of the turbulence of nineteenth century in France. Starting in 1830, the country experienced the July Revolution, the devastating cholera pandemic which killed almost 20 000 Parisians (Reid, 1991:23), the 1848 Revolution and another Bonaparte, Louis Napoleon, who declared himself emperor. Possibly the most important legacy of the reign of Napoleon III is the reconstruction of Paris to build the distinctive city it has been ever since. The Franco-Prussian war, which culminated in the siege and bombardment of Paris by Prussian forces in 1870–1871, was followed by the Paris Commune and what is known as the "bloody week", once again leaving at least twenty thousand dead. Massenet (1919:74) describes it as "a long period of trouble and agony" which deprived the city of breath. The Third Republic (1870) started with the execution of a 107 Communards and Paris remained under martial law for five years.

3.7.2 Literature and opera

The Revolution brought more than political and social reforms. The existing academies of the arts were reorganised and the Paris Conservatoire was established to train musicians with state funding (Barzun, 2001:432). New laws allowing anyone to open a theatre saw several new theatres, just in Paris, staging opera (Charlton, 1992:274). Under the patronage of Napoleon Bonaparte, opera flourished, although he used it to further his own goals, as he also did with both the Church and the press, being of the opinion that it attracts tourists and adds glamour, glory and an intellectual image to the city (Cannon, 2012:173). He reduced the number of theatres in Paris, with the Opéra the most important, and put restrictions in place that resulted in each theatre being identified with a certain type of opera, such as *tragédie lyrique*,[12] Italian opera and *opéra-comique*[13] (Charlton, 1992:274). The coarse Italian *commedia dell'arte* players had been expelled by Louis XIV, but Italian opera was once more popular in France, certainly not least

[12] Serious or dramatic opera
[13] Opera with French dialogue

due to the fact that Gaspare Spontini was one of Napoleon's favourite composers (Cannon, 2012:170; Warrack & West, 1992:254).

Composers such as André Grétry (1741–1813) and Nicolas Dalayrac (1753–1809) had already brought new ideas to opera, such as exoticism,[14] naturalism and plots set in different social environments. While the clarity of the text was always a particularly important element in French opera (Warrack & West, 1992:254), we see the influence of Christoph Willibald Gluck's reforms in the work of the composers during and immediately after the Revolution, such as Luigi Cherubini (1760–1842), Étienne Méhul (1763–1817), Jean-François Le Sueur (1763–1837) and François-Adrien Boieldieu (1775–1834), where continuity of action, the role of the orchestra in the drama and the development of motifs[15] now received attention (Warrack & West, 1992:254; Charlton, 1992:273). This motivic development was later also used as a structural element by Massenet in his operas, and increasingly so in his later work. In *Thaïs* we see a more sophisticated development and cross-referencing of motifs than in *Manon*, although in the latter it is already clearly visible. Grétry was often criticised (Cannon, 2012:170), as Massenet was after him (Irvine, 1997:xiv), for his ability to write simple but beautiful and pleasing melodies. Other compositional techniques that these turn-of-the-century composers used for expressive purposes were chromaticism, dissonance and silence, which, combined with the use of expressive melodies, point directly to Romanticism (Barzun, 2001:461) and permeate the music of Massenet.

Barzun (2001:466) describes Romanticism as "[t]he outburst against abstract reason [pursued during the Enlightenment] and the search for order" after the chaos and violence of the Revolution. He argues that it was not a regular movement of like-minded people with one set of goals, but rather a state of mind that evolved into "the spirit of an age", a *Zeitgeist.* Contrary to the popular opinion that Romanticism was all about emotion, it was very much concerned with "telling it like it is" and portraying everyday life (Barzun, 2001:468), but doing so with passion, imagination

[14] In the male-dominated nineteenth-century Western discourse sexual attraction was often represented by the exotic Other, who was mostly female. The East/Orient was perceived as mysterious and embodied by a sensual exotic woman (Dubisch, 2005:25).

[15] This was due to the influence of developments in the symphony (Warrack & West, 1992:254).

and risk (Barzun, 2001:475). At the time passion meant suffering, as is reflected in both *Manon* and *Thaïs*.

Gone was the time when certain words were forbidden because they are not polite or decent. Writing was increasingly done in the first person, showing self-consciousness, and a preoccupation with the writer's own emotions, feelings and state of mind. That state of mind often proved to be troubled by powerful passions without purpose (Barzun, 2001:470,472). The term *mal du siècle*, or illness of the century, describes the disillusionment, distress and melancholy so common during this time of turmoil (Evans & Griffiths, 2008:15). Writers delved into a wide range of subjects, including history and orientalism, both found in France's *Thaïs.*

With the improved fortunes of France and the patronage of Napoleon, French opera flourished and the country attracted foreign musicians and dramatists. Just a few years after the fall of Napoleon, the famous Italian composer Gioacchino Rossini was appointed director of the Théâtre des Italiens, where he composed his last opera, *Guillaume Tell (1829)*, a serious opera on a grand scale (Cannon, 2012:173). This new type of opera was known as *grand opéra* and dominated the French stages well into the 1860s. These were serious operas in historical settings with realist staging enhanced by spectacular stage effects and lighting (Charlton, 1992:274), large casts clothed in sumptuous costumes, big orchestras and ballet (Charlton, 2003:xiii, xiv). Daniel Auber, Fromental Halévy and Giacomo Meyerbeer are the three composers mostly identified with the genre (Cannon, 2012:169). The theme of sensuality was featured in several of these operas, such as *Robert le diable* and *Les Huguenots* (Meyerbeer), as well as *La muette de Portici* (Auber), to create an element of excitement (Cannon, 2012:177). The stage was set for the much more daring combination of pious and sensuous elements so rife in the works of Massenet.

One of the strategies used in operas during the Romantic period was to base libretti on a single work from existing literary works. An example of such a work is Charles Gounod's popular opera *Faust* (1859), based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's eponymous play (Charlton, 2003:4). Massenet was influenced by "[t]he sentimental strain in French opera exploited by Gounod" (Warrack & West, 1992:254), as well as Wagner's use of the leitmotiv (Irvine, 1997:165). The influence of Wagner on

French opera was significant, but not completely course-changing. I agree with Charlton (1992:274), who is of the opinion that an important reason for the lack of Wagnerian influence is because French opera at this time had a strong enough tradition and identity to stand on its own feet. My belief is that the strong nationalist and anti-German sentiments in France after the Franco-Prussian war also contributed to limited influence by particularly a German composer. Nevertheless, Wagner's influence can be seen in Massenet's work, especially in his use of the leitmotiv and the prevalence of sensuality and spirituality in his music dramas.

During the 1850s there was a gradual shift towards realism in reaction against Romanticism. The novel replaced poetry as the most important literary genre, portraying incidents as they happened in real life (Barzun, 2001:557). The Realists wanted to portray life in a more moderate and restrained way than their predecessors. Exoticism was still favoured, but now the descriptions were precise and detailed, instead of passionate. Even more than before, historical writing was the order of the day. An important development during this time was the fact that there was now much more sexual freedom in writing (Barzun, 2001:558–561). As happens so often, literature reflects society and this was no different. The fact that Paris showed one of the highest rates of illegitimacy in the Western world during the nineteenth century (Fuchs, 1992:4) illustrates the sexual freedom practised in Parisian society.

3.7.3 Religion

As a result of the mind-heart connection of the romantics, there was a move back to religion and, more particularly, a revival of a disguised version of organised religion. As a by-product of the need for dependence, the self-searching romantics, suffering from *le mal du siècle,* were often susceptible to the attractions of religion (Barzun, 2001:473). This need was quickly recognised by the Church, which realised that something extra was needed without delay to compete with everything on offer in the new world. Piety needed to be made more attractive and the faithful had to be rewarded for being pious (McSweeney, 1987:204). McSweeney (1987:205) talks about "the politics of piety", as the Catholic Church substituted the centuries-old form of organised religion with new offerings of miracles and apparitions to comfort

their flock in the hostile environment of the nineteenth century (Printy, 2005:438; McSweeney, 1987:204–205).

Secularism nevertheless soon became the new religion in France due to the mistrust of the Church by the Republican government, which reformed the school system. Instead of piety based on religion, filial piety towards the Republic was now instilled in the youth through the education system (Chaitin, 2008:4–5). Between the chaos and constantly changing values of a century, it is no wonder that writers were also divided by this cultural and religious war. There were those who were advocates for sexual freedom and others who castigated the Republicans for a schooling system without God, which they believed inevitably led to vice (Chaitin, 2008:7). Just before the onset of the last decade of the nineteenth century, a new term appeared: *fin-de-siècle*. The popular understanding of the term in France was of sophistication, refinement and often pretence, but also decadence, cynicism and a belief that the country was in moral and cultural decline.

These are the times during which Massenet lived and composed most of his works.

3.8 Jules Massenet (1842–1912): the man and his work

Biographical information about Jules-Émile-Frédéric Massenet is readily available and the most comprehensive study is Irvine's *Massenet, a chronicle of his life and times* (1997). The details that follow are concerned more with the composer's work and choice of subject matter for his stage works than his personal history.

During his own lifetime Massenet was, along with Camille Saint-Saëns, the most performed, popular and famous French composer (Calvocoressi, 1912:565). This fact has been held against him by many people during the past century. It has been said that he was spoilt by his success and increasingly catered to the masses, trying to please and "seduce" his audiences (Calvocoressi, 1912:565). It is widely held that Massenet was a melodist above all, in reference to his ability to write graceful, expressive and well-crafted phrases (Irvine, 1997:xiii). Calvocoressi (1912:565) also criticised him for composing music that all sounded the same, whatever type of stage character he wrote for, and that his compositional style never changed with the times; that there was never any innovation in his work. He

believed that Massenet showed only superficial versatility in his compositions. On the other hand, the conductor Richard Bonynge,[16] who was recognised by the French government for his active role in reviving nineteenth-century French opera, especially those of Massenet, praised the composer's imaginative style. He is of the opinion that Massenet's operas all sound as if they came from the pen of different composers, which – to Bonynge – is proof of the way in which he constantly introduced new ideas into his music (Lécuyer, 2010:31).

Saint-Saëns, who was not a close friend of Massenet's and never quite achieved the same success as Massenet in his own lifetime, defended him by saying that he did not strive to be popular, he merely happened to share the same taste in music as the public and that his music spoke directly to the audience through its feverish passion (Fruewald, 1984:169). Straughn (2004) argues that the perception of Massenet as a "composer of the people" needs revisiting, but I am not convinced that Massenet believed that to be a negative assessment. I would rather say that it is in line with the importance to him of maintaining congenial relationships with all and sundry, as is evident from his correspondence with friends, colleagues and acquaintances, such as the conciliatory note he wrote to Saint-Saëns after he himself was voted into the vacancy at the Académie instead of Saint-Saëns (Irvine, 1997:107). Continuing his defence of Massenet, Saint-Saëns was of the opinion that a composer did not need to be revolutionary in order to be great. According to him, Massenet implemented new ideas while respecting tradition and would have been called a genius if only he was willing to throw everything overboard for the sake of "progress". His biggest tribute to his colleague was: "Massenet had many imitators; he never imitated anyone" (Fruewald, 1984:169).

Massenet was very much a man of his time, not only in his compositional style, as previously discussed, but also as a man born in the mid-nineteenth century, a turbulent era with its wars and violence and its ever-changing politics and moral values. He lived most of his life in Paris, the capital of France, which bore the brunt of the instability, but which was also the city to which numerous intellectuals were drawn from other countries. With the help of both Massenet (1919) himself and

[16] In 1989 the rank of Commandeur de l'Ordre Natioanal des Arts et des Lettres was bestowed upon him.

especially Irvine (1997), we can form a picture of Massenet's network of friends and acquaintances within the intellectual circle of writers, artists and musicians, not only in France, but across Europe. It was at gatherings of these groups that new ideas fermented and were discussed. Massenet was a cultured man and in his choice of literary material for his operas, such as *Manon, Thérèse Thaïs* and *Le jongleur de Notre-Dame*, we can see that he knew and was influenced by the classics (Lécuyer, 2010:31).

The nineteenth-century discourse about spirituality and sexuality was reflected in the violent clashes between the Catholic monarchists and Republican anti-clericalists during the Paris Commune (Jones, 2010:23). Jones (2009:17) postulates that many of Massenet's operas fit into this discourse and Goldstrom (1998:2) is of the opinion that even in his oratorios the principal female characters reflect a strong sexuality. Jones (2009:5) even goes so far as to theorise that Massenet's works show the attainment of spiritual salvation through being the object of another's desire and that he uses eroticism to open the way for spiritual longing (Jones, 2010:23). Jones argues that Massenet's operas principally teach the importance of desire as "an integral part of spirituality" (Jones, 2009:147) and that it is only possible to truly connect with another person by knowing both the spiritual and sexual desire of that person (Jones, 2009:146). Of interest is Rowden's (2009:276–277) reflection on the new psychology of the time, which argued that images and dreams, such as those of Athanaël in *Thaïs*, are "external manifestation[s] of an author's [own] unconscious".

Debussy's remark that Massenet kowtowed to his female admirers (Calvocoressi, 1912:566) hints at another facet of Massenet's life that is often discussed: that of him as a ladies' man. After he met the American soprano Sybil Sanderson, he became her mentor and she his preferred diva and muse, and it is often suggested that she was also his mistress (Rowden, 2009:277). Blier (2001:16) believes that Massenet was so infatuated with Sanderson that both the title roles in *Esclarmonde* and *Thaïs* were created not only for her voice, but also to exhibit her physical charms.

Much of what has been written about Massenet at the very least touches upon the fact that most of his principal female characters, in both opera and oratorio, are

particularly sensuous beings. Although he surprised his audiences when he wrote an opera such as *Le jongleur de Notre-Dame*, in which only two female voices are heard,[17] throughout his body of work some of the most beautiful, sensuous and voluptuous music is written for the female voice.

Few contemporary musicians who are not singers are as familiar with the demands of Massenet's operas on the voice as is Bonynge, not only because of his own in-depth studies of the composer's works, but also because he played such a huge role in coaching his late wife, the world-renowned soprano Joan Sutherland, in her roles. He stresses the extraordinary importance of the singers in Massenet's operas. Massenet's orchestration helps the singers and enhances their sound, but hardly ever covers the voice, which leaves the vocal line very exposed. Bonynge believes that Massenet understood what voices are capable of and how to write for them, but he expected much of singers and his operas therefore immediately expose a mediocre singer. A sound singing technique is required and the voice must be smooth, without a break, from low to very high. In addition, the singer has to understand the style of singing required, as Massenet's music is typically French and the theatrical effect is lost if his music is sung like that of Wagner or Puccini (Lécuyer, 2010:31–33). Musicians who perform Massenet's music should be committed to following all the composer's indications in the score. Massenet was a perfectionist; he constantly corrected his own work and marked everything he wanted in terms of the execution of the music or expression of emotion in the minutest detail (Ahern, 1996:59). He provided options in some places in his scores, in order to accommodate different voices, but his is not music free for the singer to change at will. The flow of his operas is character-driven and, in line with the fact that his female characters have the more satisfying music to sing, they are often stronger and better defined than those of the male characters (Straughn, 2004:4).

A balance between voice and orchestra was very important to Massenet (Huebner, 1993:226). Even when the orchestra is used sparsely, it never simply functions as accompaniment, but is used to create expressive colours in order to tell a story and comment on the singers (Lécuyer, 2010:32). His vocal melodies serve as the point of departure for the orchestral and harmonic texture of the whole work (Ahern,

[17] Two sopranos who are the voices of angels .

1996:57). More than the music of many other composers, I find Massenet's music difficult to perform with piano, as much of the expressive power of the music is lost without the orchestra.

Massenet concentrated his creative powers on composing for the lyric theatre, as did both Verdi and Wagner. He was a compulsive worker and adhered to a strict self-imposed working schedule (Irvine, 1997:xiii). He completed 28 operas, of which 25 have been performed, three of them posthumously, while his four oratorios were all performed during his lifetime. It is mostly *Manon, Werther* and, to a lesser degree, *Thaïs* and *Hérodiade* that have survived on the stage, while a few others are performed occasionally. Massenet wanted his music to be able to convey the drama on stage (Straughn, 2004:67) to such an extent that the audience becomes involved and, as Bonynge (see Lécuyer, 2010:33) asks: who can help but cry when Manon dies and Des Grieux cries out her name in despair?

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter comprises an overview of the body of literature that places piety and sensuality within a socio-historical context. It emerged that, while a "spiritual eroticism" (Jones, 2010:1) was common within nineteenth-century intellectual circles, the Church nevertheless attempted to suppress sexuality through religious dogma (Jones, 2010:23, 31) and that both the connection and the struggle between piety and sensuality are reflected in Massenet's operas. The defining events of the turbulent nineteenth century are outlined, with a particular focus on developments in literature, opera and religion. The chapter concludes with a description of Massenet and his compositional style, showing him as a composer who achieved great success and popularity in his own lifetime. Not only was he a superb melodist, but his talents as an innovator have also become clearer since the mid-twentieth century, when there was a resurgence in the popularity of his music.

CHAPTER 4: MANON: FEMME FATALE

4.1 Introduction

This chapter commences with an account of the genesis of *Manon,* followed by a close reading of the libretto and music, concentrating on Manon and the ways in which piety and sensuality manifest in her life, as well as the expression thereof in the music.

4.2 *Manon* by Jules Massenet

Manon is an *opéra comique* in five acts by Massenet to a libretto by Henri Meilhac (1831–1897) and Philippe Gille (1831–1901), based on the novel *L'histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* by the Abbé Prévost (1697–1763). The first performance was by the Opéra-Comique at the Salle Favart in Paris on 19 January 1884, with Marie Heilbron (1851–1886) in the role of Manon (Massenet, 1963:iii).

4.3 Background

In *Manon* we see the trend of the second half of the eighteenth century to base libretti on a single work from existing literary works. *Manon's* libretto is based on a short novel, *L'Histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut*[18] (1731), by Antoine-François Prévost, popularly known as Abbé Prevost. Massenet was not the only composer to have been inspired by this story. Most notable are *Manon Lescaut* (1856) by Daniel Auber (1782–1871) and *Manon Lescaut* (1893) by Giacomo Puccini (1858–1924). The novel is the seventh and last volume of *Mémoires et aventure d'un homme de qualité,*[19] initially offered to the public in the form of an appendix before eventually becoming Prévost's most famous work, referred to only as *Manon Lescaut*. The novel was an immediate success, but was controversial and initially banned, as it virtually glorifies debauchery by portraying a member of the aristocracy who betrays his class (Prévost, 2004:9).

L'Histoire du chevalier Des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut is a story of the doomed, and eventually fatal, passion of a young nobleman for a girl of humble birth. They

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18 The history of the chevalier Des Grieux and Manon Lescaut.
19 Memories and adventures of a man of quality.

elope to Paris and, because of the dishonour to his family he has no access to the family finances. In order to not only make ends meet, but also to cater for Manon's expensive tastes and desires, she becomes a courtesan. The two of them turn to crime, land in jail and are finally exiled to the Americas.

Prévost's novel was controversial enough to have it banned when it was initially published. In her introduction to the novel, Scholar (Prévost, 2004:15) points to other social changes at the time, such as the fact that money was no longer only in the hands of the aristocracy, as a new, rich working class was emerging. This fact is reflected in the character of Brétigny, the wealthy tax collector who becomes Manon's lover and protector. The lack of moral behaviour of the French court during the libertine Regency period,[20] which is the temporal setting of the novel, is reflected equally well in the story.

The adaptation of Prévost's novel as an opera was Massenet's own, as was the decision to use only the character's first name as the title (Massenet, 1919:137). Although the opera is described as an *opéra comique*, it displays some of the characteristics of *grand opéra*, such as the scale of the work, which has five acts, including ballet. It took Massenet a little more than a year to compose the music for the opera and complete the orchestration (Irvine, 1997:130).

Wagner's influence on Massenet can be seen in his liberal and important use of motifs to identify each character. It is not the premise of this study to elaborate on the way in which the opera is shaped by these motifs, although it is noteworthy that Massenet explained how the opera "turns around and grows from fifteen motifs" (Ahern, 1996:60). He leaves us in no doubt as to Manon's centrality and importance within the opera as he allows her to speak autonomously, with a sparkle and *joie de vivre* that permeates and directs all the action. Each character is identified by one motif. Manon, however, has two: one melancholic and the other happy (Finck, 1976:143).

Massenet used a new technique in place of the typical spoken dialogue of *opéra comique*. What dialogue there is takes place against orchestral interludes and is

[20] The period in France between 1715 and 1723, when Louis XV was a minor and the country was ruled by the Regent, Philippe d'Orléans.

known as *mélodrame* (Milnes, 2000a:17). The opera is filled with melodies that have stood the test of time, such as *Adieu, notre petite table* and *Obéissons quand leur voix appelle.* Manon is among the most fascinating and complex female roles in the operatic repertoire. It calls for a soprano who can not only portray the various facets of the character's personality, but also possesses the vocal ability and skill to express the various emotions and negotiate the vocal difficulties in the score (Milnes, 2000a:18–19). Few roles have attracted such a variety of voice types, from light sopranos to spintos, accommodated by the options allowed by Massenet himself (Blier, 2001:15).

4.4 *Manon*: piety and sensuality in the libretto and music

The close reading of the libretto of *Manon* is aimed at identifying the scenes which deal with manifestations of piety and sensuality in Manon's life and investigating the way in which Massenet expressed these two themes in the music. The full orchestral score is used for this purpose, because Massenet treated the orchestra virtually as an additional character in the opera. Following the example of Robinson (1988:328) when he warns that the full meaning of an opera cannot be derived only from the libretto, the music is probed to unearth emotions, hidden text and intentions that will add meaning to the libretto. As Agawu (1997:299) and Kramer (1992:10) suggest, I shall not look only at structure and patterns within the music, but also describe my response to the drama and the vigour of the musical experience.

As Manon's piety and sensuality are often interwoven, the sections representing piety and sensuality are presented as they follow in the opera.

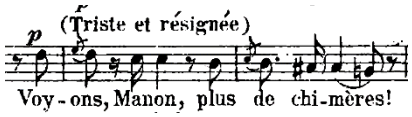
4.4.1 Act I

Manon is a 15-year-old girl who is sent to a convent by her family. The reason for this decision is because she has excessive love of pleasure. Her first aria, *Je suis encore tout étourdie*, in which she describes her coach trip, reveals her emotional nature, moving from one emotion to the next in quick succession. She describes her intense experience as she saw the beauty of the villages, forests and plains and felt the trembling of the trees in the wind. Her emotions jump from feeling herself

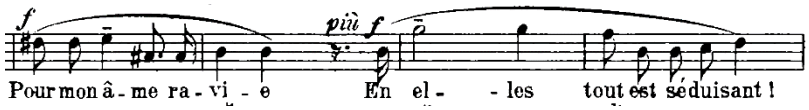
flying to paradise, to crying with sadness and laughing. The scene has been set for the way in which Manon will approach life.

In her next aria, *Restons ici, puisqu'il le faut*, Manon has a glimpse of the fun-filled life she longs for when she sees the three actresses, Poussette, Javotte and Rosette. It is also the only time that she shows filial piety by reminding herself that she is destined for the convent. Manon experiences inner conflict, illustrated in the aria through sections of self-reproach ("Come now, Manon, do not indulge your mind!", Ex. 1) (Massenet, 2000a:54),[21] alternating with sections in which the strong pull from her sensuous nature is more evident ("When I let myself be carried away with feelings of delight", Ex. 2) (Massenet, 2000a:54).

Example 1: *Voyons, Manon, plus de chimère; Manon,* Act I, orchestra no. 48(+4–5)[22]



Example 2: *Pour mon âme ravie; Manon,* Act I, orchestra no. 50(-4–7)



With the entrance of Des Grieux, Manon's life changes irrevocably. They fall in love at first sight and he refuses to allow her to be locked in a convent for the rest of her days. As always, Manon is led by her senses and emotions as she sees his gentle expression, hears his enchanting words and feels the "intoxicating fever of happiness" (Massenet, 2000a:57). The course of her life changes when she promises her life and soul to him.

The downward spiral of their lives starts when they steal a carriage to run off to Paris for a life together. Once again Manon's inner conflict surfaces when she is

[21] The libretto and translation used in the study are from the booklet inserted in the 2000 Decca recording. No translator is mentioned in the source.
[22] As full orchestra scores do not use bar numbers, music examples are identified according to orchestra numbers plus bars, or minus bars.

distracted once more, albeit momentarily, by the fun-filled and seemingly free lives of the three actresses. This is a precursor to her eventual decision to give in to these yearnings and live her life as a courtesan. For the moment she takes a step towards freedom, although she really only runs away from one type of constraint to another.

4.4.2 Act II

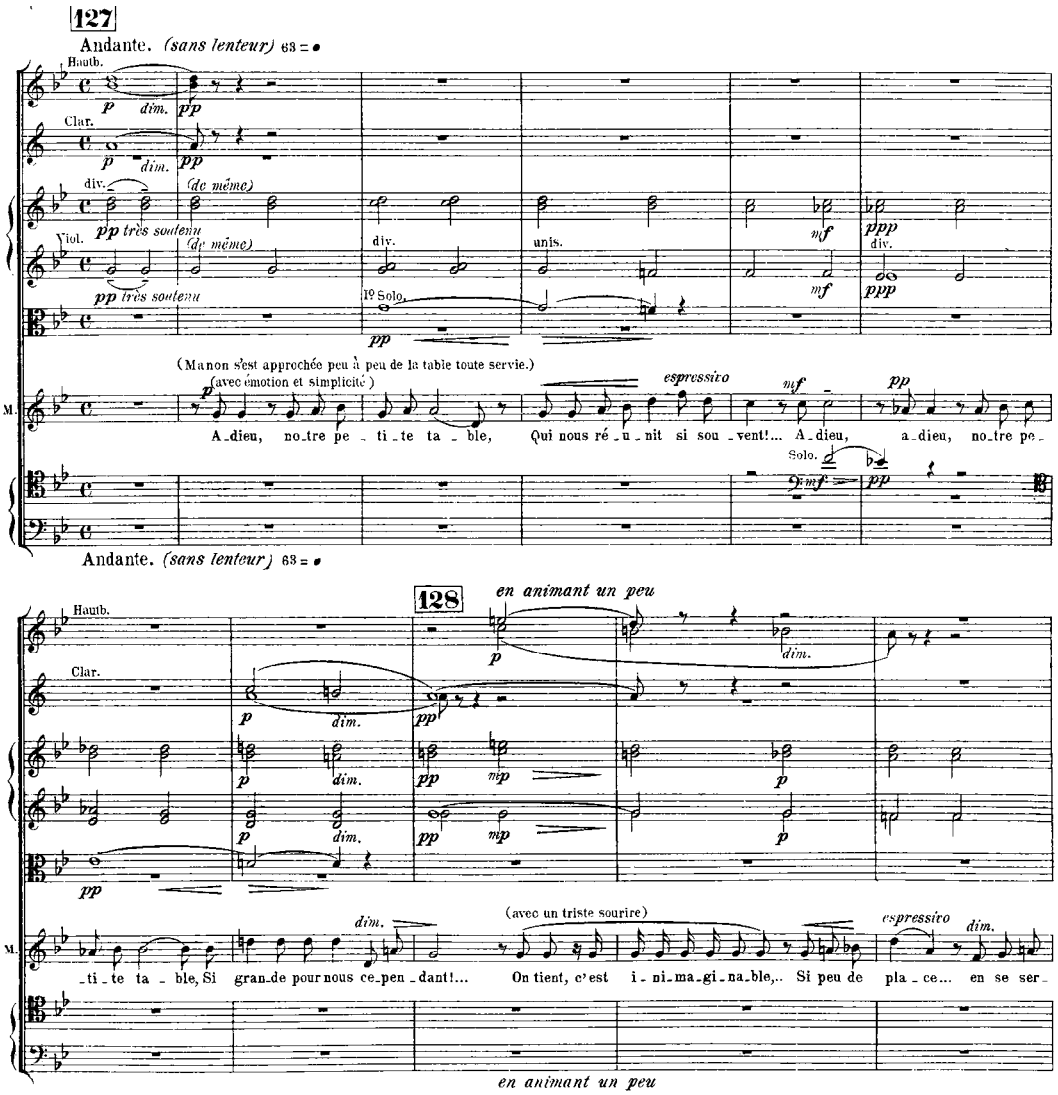
In the conversation between Manon and Des Grieux, which opens Act II, it is clear how Manon's confidence has grown since the two of them eloped to Paris. She is now the stronger and more assertive character. In the letter to his father his adoration for Manon becomes clear through the words "everything about her seduces one" (Massenet, 2000a:68). He describes her beauty, grace and sweet voice, the way she looks at people even the wind is sweetly scented because it caressed her. Des Grieux also reveals something of Manon's fickle nature when he compares her in the letter to a bird that constantly follows springtime.

I would argue that this is one of the moments that displays a glimpse of Manon's own personal version of piety. Empereur (2005:47) maintains that piety can be found in the "domestic sanctuary" which is the home and family. Manon's relationship with Des Grieux is the closest she ever comes to this. If this is a form of piety for Manon, it is also important to note that the piety is infused with sensuality. Even so, at the end of their duet in Act I, we realise that Manon is not as committed to their relationship as Des Grieux is. He passionately declares that he wants to marry her and she suggests that loving one another is enough.

Her cousin Lescaut and the elderly but wealthy tax collector Brétigny turn up at the apartment. During the quartet that follows, Manon and Brétigny huddle together and conduct a whispered conversation, during which Brétigny plays on her weaknesses when he tries to convince her to leave Des Grieux. He informs her that her lover is going to be abducted that very night by order of his father and then reminds her of the wealth that can be hers if she does not warn Des Grieux, but rather becomes his own mistress. He promises her that she will be treated like a queen. Once again Manon experiences conflict between her love for Des Grieux and her desire to lead the kind of life she desires: ("What delirium in my heart") (Massenet, 2000a:80) and

("What strange doubt and torment") (Massenet, 2000a:80). The scene is set for another change in the course of her life.

Example 3: *Adieu, notre petite table; Manon,* Act II, orchestra no. 127–128(+2)



Another glimpse of Manon's interpretation of what constitutes piety can be detected in *Allons! Il le faut*. She tries to convince herself that it is for Des Grieux's own good that she has to leave him, as she is not worthy of him. She calls herself weak and frail because she cannot resist the attractions of wealth and status offered by Brétigny. Her awareness of the consequences of her decisions and instinct about the future emerges when she expresses her doubts that the future could be as charming and happy as her days with Des Grieux. I agree with Miller (2002:64) when he suggests that the character of the music of Manon's aria, *Adieu, notre*

petite table (Ex. 3) expresses a certain religiosity, as this is reflected in the gentle, flowing vocal line and chordal accompaniment of the aria.

Manon addresses the table as a friend and symbol of the love between her and Des Grieux. By saying goodbye to the table, Manon leaves Des Grieux and her old life behind her. This scene is the pivotal moment in the opera, as it is here that Manon decides to pursue the life of a courtesan.

4.4.3 Act III, Scene 1

Manon is now living her life as a courtesan under the protection of the elderly Brétigny. She arrives at a fête on the Cours-la-Reine in Paris, dressed like a queen and in her own, personal carriage. She is living the life which she has always yearned for; adored by men and admired by women. *Je marche sur tous les chemins* illustrates this even in the introduction to the aria, *Suis-je gentile ainsi*.

Je consens vu que je suis bonne,	I'll consent, seeing that I am so good,
à laisser admirer ma charmante	to allow you to admire my charming
personne!	person!

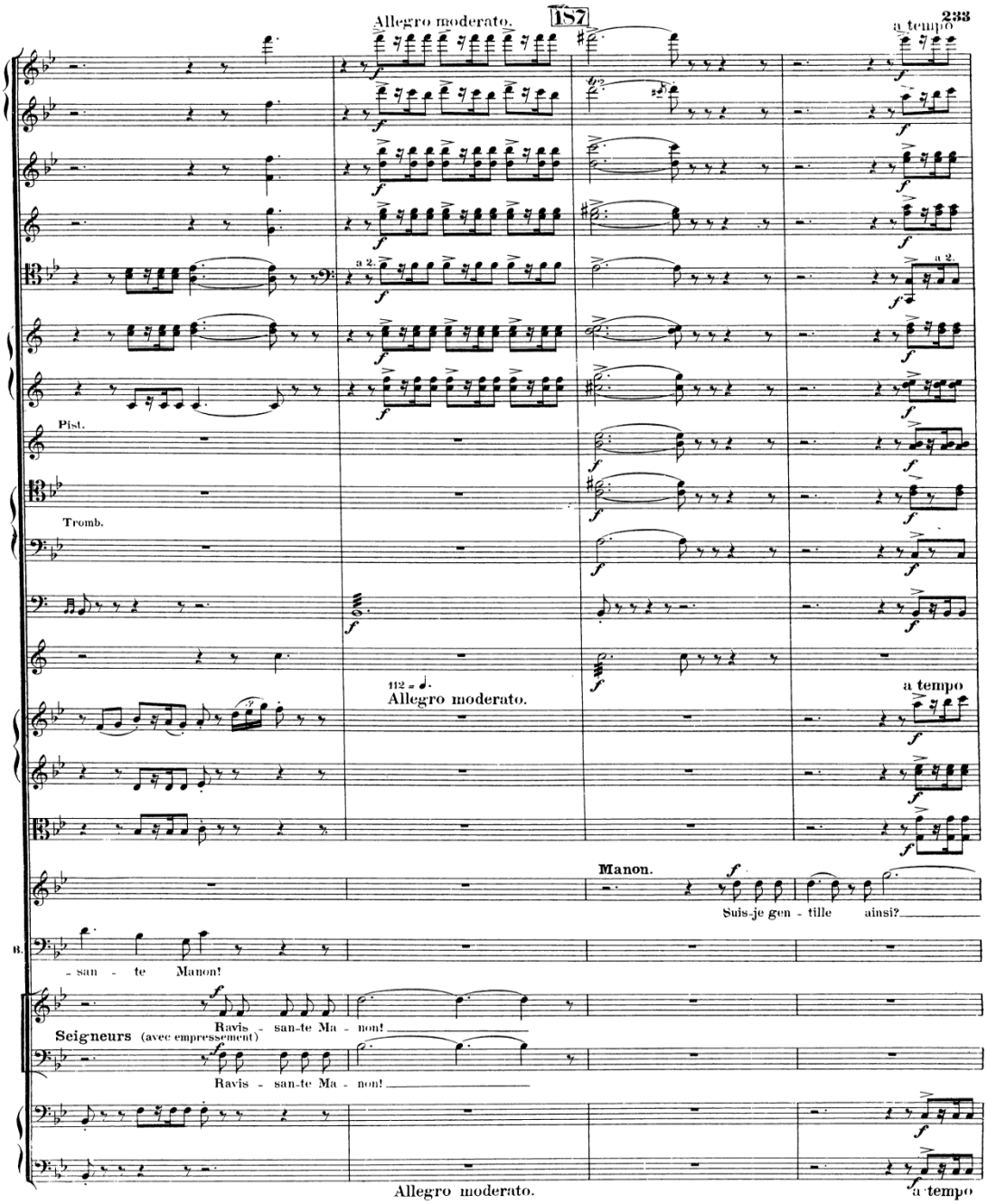
(Massenet, 2000a:98)

The recitative-style of this section is in a brisk compound quadruple meter (12/8). The voice joins the ebullient mood created by the energetic rhythmic pattern played by the orchestra. However, before Manon sings her first words "*Suis-je gentille ainsi?"* (So I am pretty?), all other sound ceases and everybody waits with bated breath to hear what she is going to say. The second syllable of *"ainsi"* is sung on a long, sustained G_5, whereupon the orchestra and male chorus, joined by Brétigny, erupt into a flood of adoration.

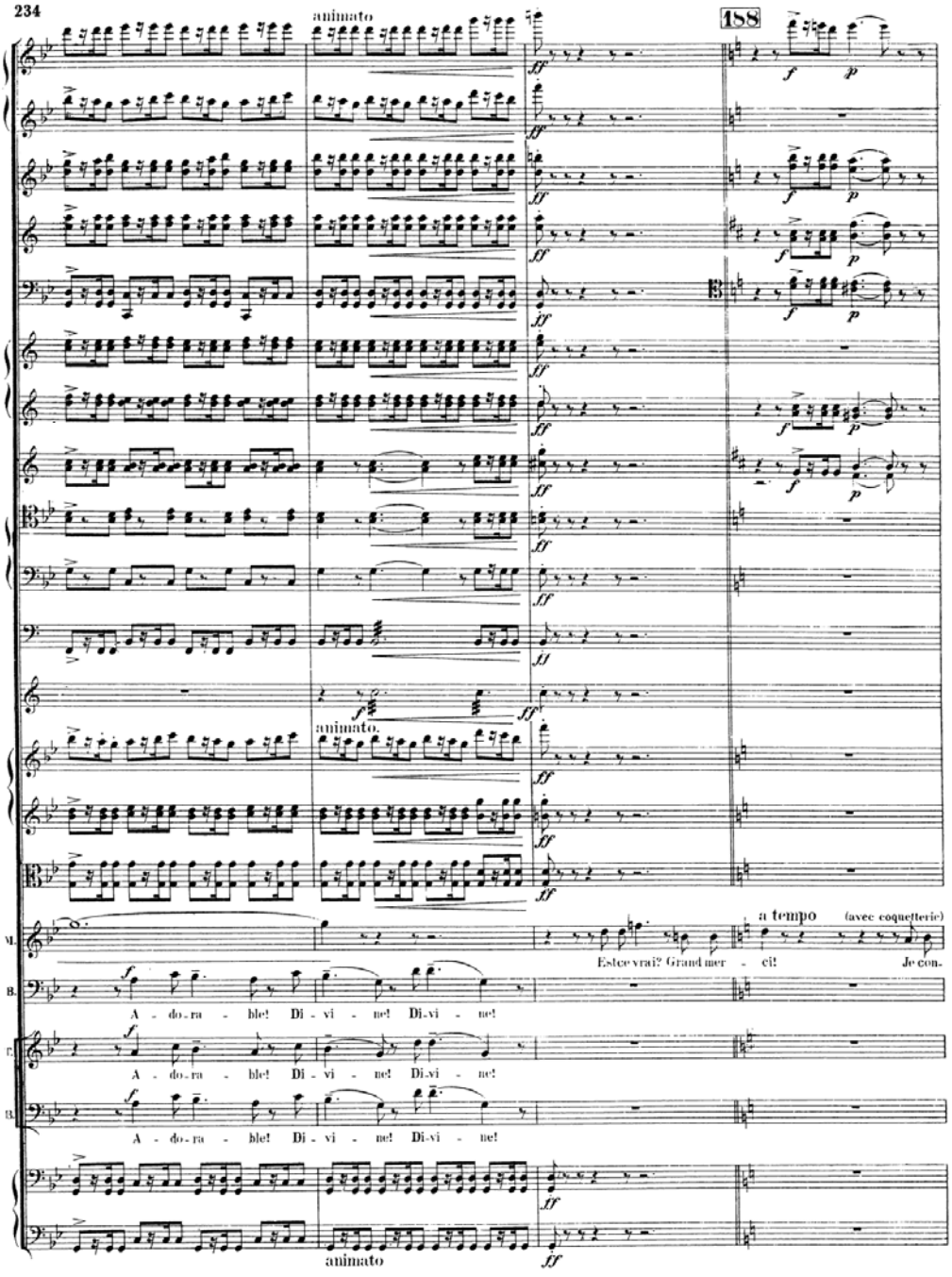
Once Manon starts with *Je marche sur tous les chemins* a soft, shimmering chord sustained by the strings allows Manon's now authoritative voice to soar above the crowds, illustrating the power she holds over her admirers. Her supremacy is confirmed by the *maestoso* indication at the start of this section. The statement-affirmation pattern persists throughout the aria as, at the end of each phrase, the

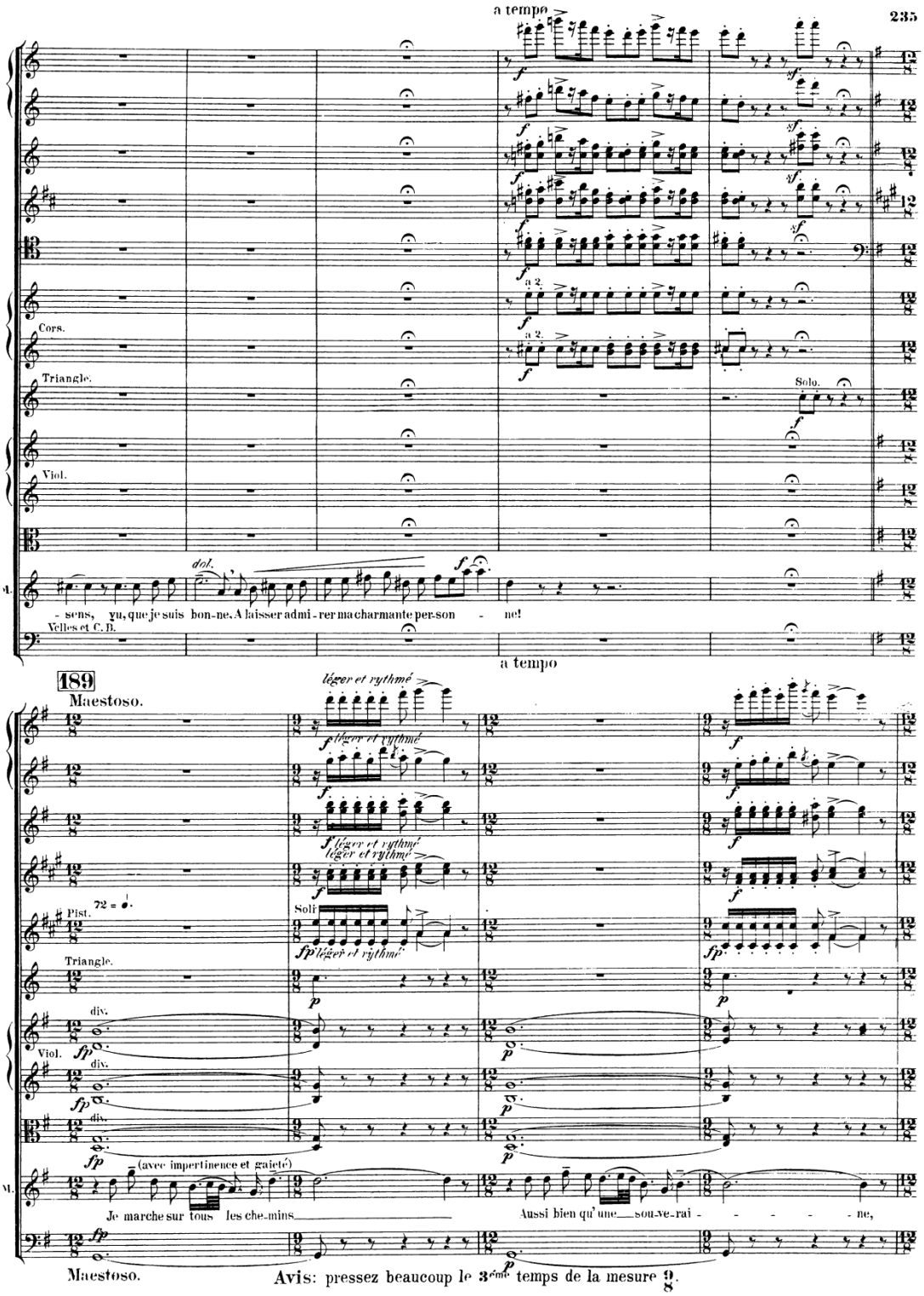
woodwinds and brass burst into a flurry of affirmation of her new status as queen of the world.

Example 4: *Suis-je gentille ainsi ?...Je marche sur tous les chemins; Manon,* Act III, Scene 1, orchestra no. 187–192(+3)

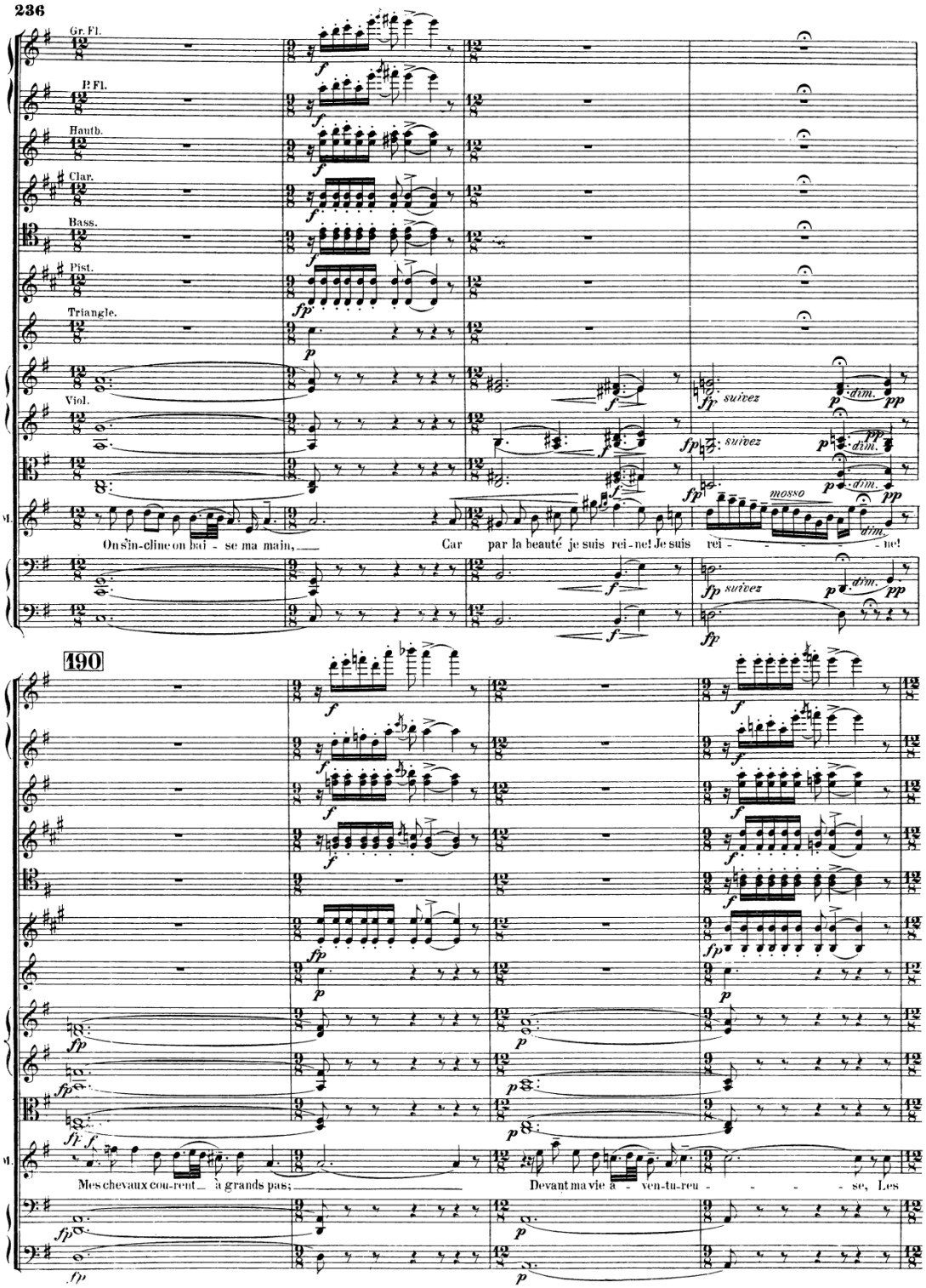


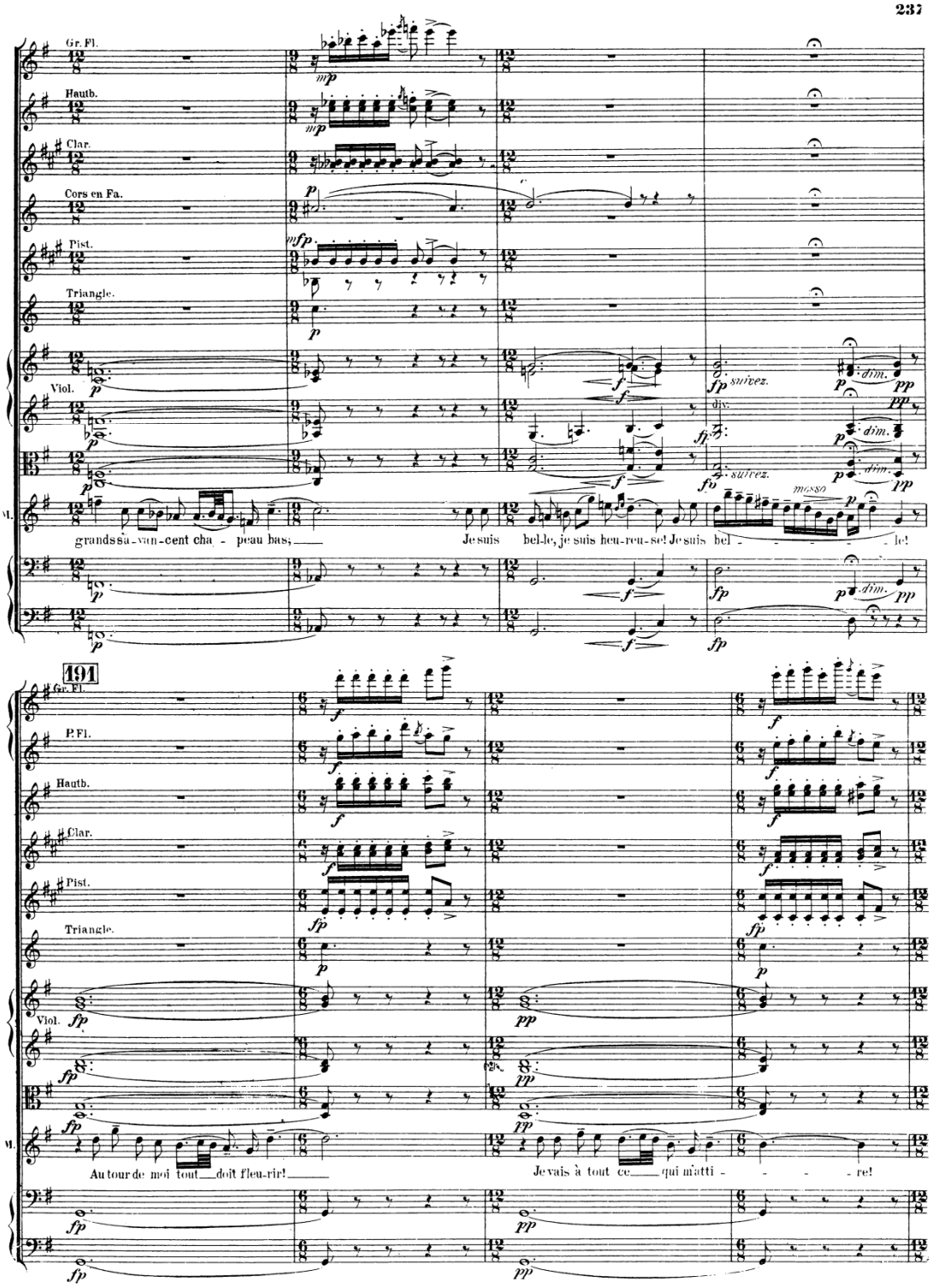
The orchestral interjections are in 9/8, differing from Manon's phrases, which are in 12/8. Massenet indicated in the score that the orchestra should rush through these 9/8 bars, which has the effect of increased anticipation, as if the crowd cannot wait to hear what Manon has to say. These bars feature a twisting vocal line, fast staccato motifs, embellishments and accents, a combination which resembles written out ornamentation and adding to the frivolous atmosphere.

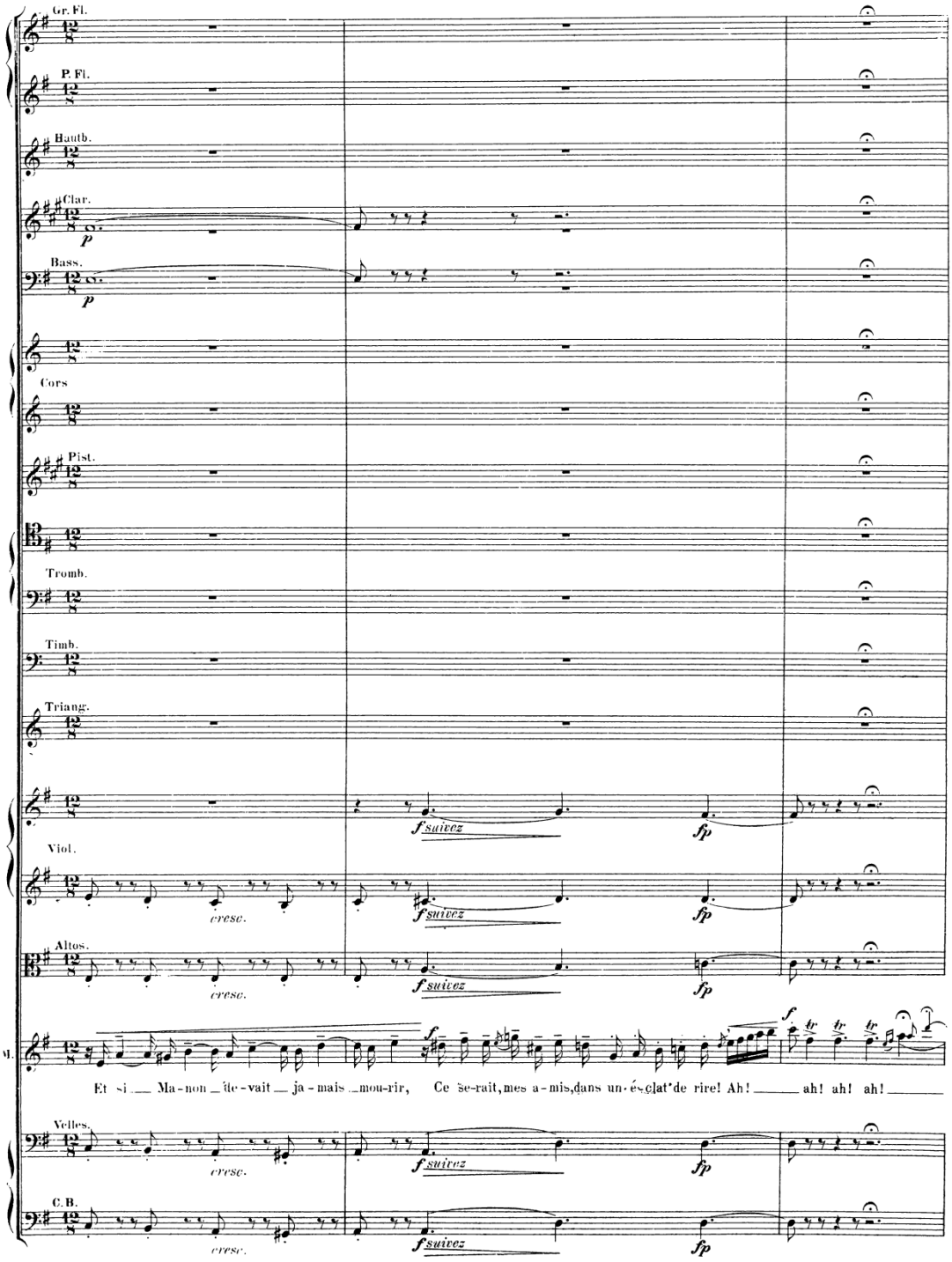


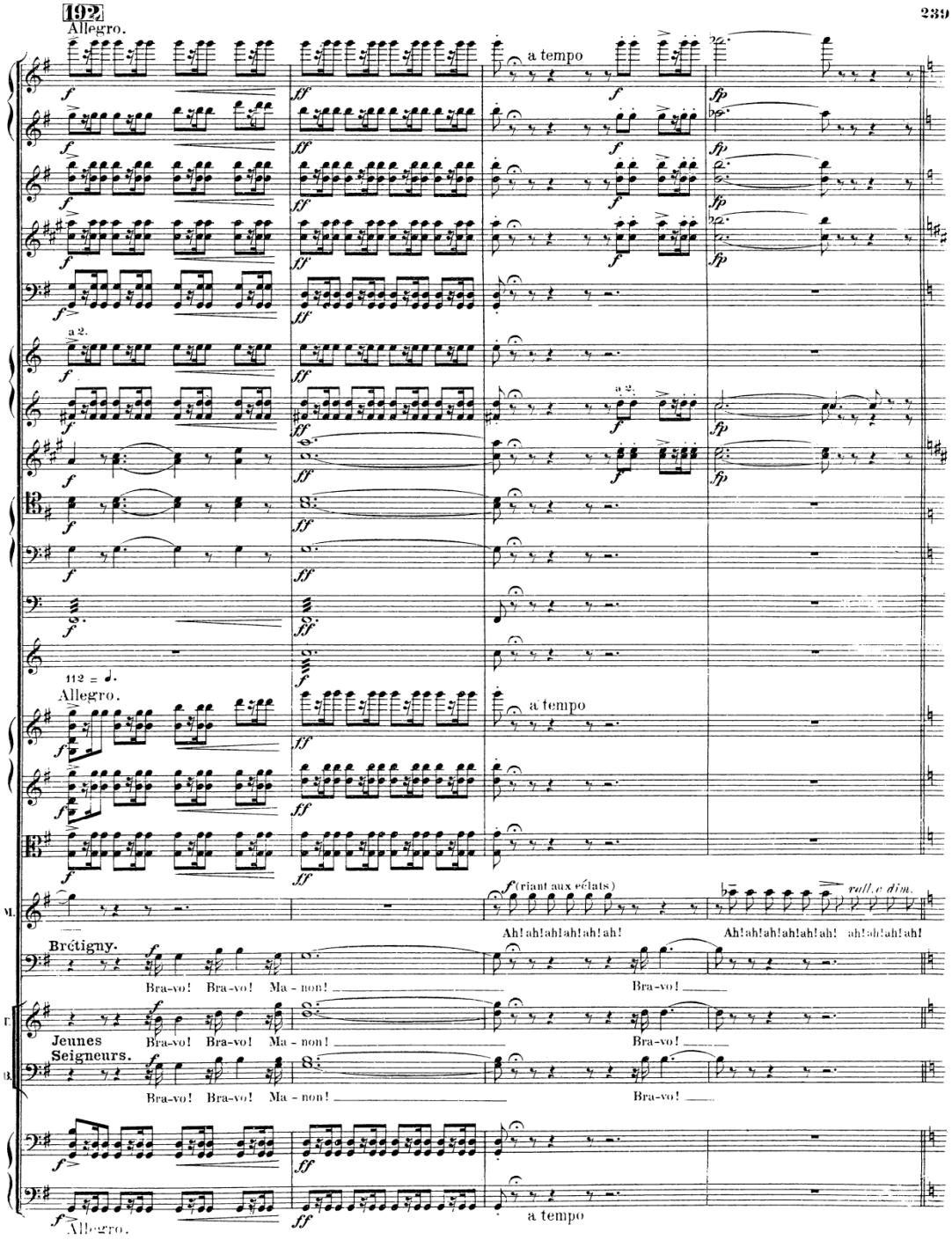


Avis: pressez beaucoup le 3ème temps de la mesure $\frac{9}{8}$.


236
Gr. Fl.
P. Fl.
Hautb.
Clar.
Bass.
Pist.
Triangle.
Viol.
M.
On s'in-cline on bai - se ma main,
Car par la beauté je suis rei-ne! Je suis rei - - - - - ne!
suivez
dim.
mosso
190
Mes chevaux cou-rent à grands pas;
Devant ma vie a - ven-tu-reu - - - - - se, Les


Gr. Fl.
Hautb.
Clar.
Cors en Fa.
Pist.
Triangle.
Viol.
M.
grands sa - van - cent cha - peau bas;
Je suis bel-le, je suis heu-reu-se! Je suis bel
suivez.
suivez.
dim.
mesto
191
P. Fl.
Au tour de moi tout doit fleu-rir!
Je vais à tout ce qui miatti - re!


Gr. Fl.
P. Fl.
Hautb.
Clar.
Bass.
Cors
Pist.
Tromb.
Timb.
Triang.
Viol.
Altos.
Et si Ma-non ût-de-vait ja-mais mou-rir, Ce se-rait, mes a-mis, dans un é-clat de rire! Ah! ah! ah! ah!
Velles.
C. B.
cresc.
f suivez
fp



The vocal line sinuously winds its way through the registers, moving from the sensuous lower middle register of the voice to the brilliance of the upper high register, all the time moving to and fro across the stress point of the *secondo passaggio,*[23] leaving the audience in no doubt as to Manon's sensuous nature. Her

[23] It is essential for a singer to understand the effects of register events, pivotal points, or *passaggi* on tone production. If the appropriate adjustment in breath energy is not made when

short phrases are repetitive, each varying melodically only slightly from the previous one and with even less variation in the rhythmic patterns. In each section she builds the excitement, just to release the tension in a dazzling coloratura passage, as if she is wrapping her fans around her little finger. The vocal line becomes increasingly histrionic towards the end of the aria, until Manon bursts out in hysterical laughter which culminates in a sustained D_6.

This aria is confirmation that Manon has arrived at what she has always believed to be her destiny in life. She now refers to herself as a queen who is so beautiful that everything in her presence should blossom (*"Autour de moi tout doit fleurir!")* (Massenet, 2000a:98). She has been living her new life long enough to have confidence in the power of her sensuality. She has been admired and flattered to the extent that there is no doubt any more about the effect she has on people. Her sensuality has matured into a mighty weapon.

Je marche sur tous les chemins,	I go everywhere,
aussi bien qu'une souveraine;	the equal of any sovereign ;
on s'incline, on baise ma main,	people bow, they kiss my hand,
car par la beauté je suis reine !	because I am a queen by my lovely looks!
Mes chevaux courent à grands pas ;	My horses race me about;
devant ma vie aventureuse,	seeing the boldness of my life,
les grands s'avancent chapeau bas ;	highly placed people come forward with their hats off;
je suis belle, je suis heureuse !	I am beautiful, I am happy!
Autour de moi tout doit fleurir !	All around me everything should flower!
Je vais à tout ce qui m'attire !	I go to everything that attracts me!
Et si Manon devait jamais mourir,	And if ever Manon should die,
ce serait, mes amis, dans un éclat de rire !	she would die, my friends, in a burst of laughter!

(Massenet, 2000a:98)

---

approaching the *passaggio*, it can result in a "weak or unstable" tone (Miller, 2000:15, 116). In this aria, the constant movement can add an exciting edge to the vocal tone.

Manon's fickle nature is reflected in the constantly changing time signature, 12/8 to 9/8 and 6/8, reinforced by the freedom Massenet requires of the execution of the written note values. The beats are stretched and contracted, bringing about a sensual anticipation-release cycle and thereby never allowing the audience to sit back and relax. Massenet already used the technique of a changing time signature to a lesser extent in Manon's first act aria *Restons ici, puisqu'il le faut*, suggesting that the fickleness was still more contained so short after having left her family.

Manon's brazen display of confidence is briefly clouded by a sudden *fp* d minor chord on 190. The dark minor colour returns to G major after six bars to put the listener at ease once again. The comfort does not last long before the vocal line ascends on a syncopated rhythmic pattern (three bars before 192, *Et si Manon devait jamais mourir*), suggesting a breathless, almost anxious reference to Manon's own death. I would suggest that the sombre harmonic colour in the above-mentioned six bars anticipates this reference to her death.

Another aria, *Obéissons quand leur voix appelle,* immediately follows. As if she has now accomplished her goal, the tone of this aria is gentler as she talks about the beauty of youth, love, laughter and singing. A slight cynicism and a note of sadness seeps through the second half of the aria, which suggests that Manon has learnt that living a dream is often not as attractive as the dream itself ("the springtime season, alas, is very short") (Massenet, 2000a:99).

She notices Des Grieux's father, who informs her that her former lover has forgotten her, sealed his heart and is now an abbé who is about to enter a monastery. Piety has become a refuge for Des Grieux; the only way to escape the memories of the overwhelming sensuality of Manon. She orders her carriage driver to take her to Saint-Sulpice, where she knows she will find Des Grieux.

4.4.4 Act III, Scene 2

Manon's confidence is evident when she arrives at the church. After four years of not seeing him,[24] she has the confidence to approach her former lover who is now a man of the cloth, while she has lived the decadent life of a courtesan. When he

[24] In her aria in Act III, Scene 2, *Obéissons quand leur voix appelle,* we learn that she is now twenty years old.

appears, just to send her away, she appeals to his emotions, reminding him of the intensity of their love. She acknowledges her propensity to flee from situations that she views as constraining her freedom, but then turns on the full force of the considerable powers of her sensuality when she starts appealing to his senses.

N'est-ce plus ma main que cette main presse?	Is this no longer my hand which is pressing yours?
N'est-ce plus ma voix?	Is this no longer my voice?
N'est-elle pour toi plus une caresse, tout comme autrefois?	Is it no longer for you like a caress, as it used to be?
Et ces yeux, jadis pour toi pleins de charmes,	And these eyes, once so charming to you,
ne brillent-ils plus à travers mes larmes?	do they no longer sparkle through my tears?
Ne suis-je plus moi?	Am I no longer myself?
N'ai-je plus mon nom?	Do I no longer have my name?
Ah ! regarde-moi ! Regarde-moi!	Ah! Look at me, look at me!
N'est-ce plus Manon?	Is this no longer Manon?

(Massenet, 2000a:119)

This section of the Saint-Sulpice duet is in quadruple meter (4/4), but due to the slow tempo, much of this music is performed as if there were eight beats per bar with exceptional freedom of execution written into the score. Manon starts softly and slowly with a winding melody that descends into the warm low register, often pausing on a *piano*, or even *pianissimo* note in the high register, as if vocally caressing Des Grieux, who stands no chance against Manon's determination.

Throughout these sensuous phrases the orchestra subtly adds to the seductive layers, as if they are helping Manon to break down Des Grieux's resolve. The soft *sostenuto* chords and *pizzicati* in the strings and the sweet and gentle sound of the harp allow the voice to speak with autonomy, supporting but not interfering. After the first two phrases the solo violin, supported by the oboes and clarinets, each time repeats the question ending the preceding phrases, *"N'est-ce plus ma voix?"*

(Is this no longer my voice?) (Massenet, 2000a:119) and *"Tout comme autrefois?"* (Just as it used to be?) (Massenet, 2000a:160), as if reinforcing the question. Massenet uses a rising melodic highpoint (F–G–A) to increase the intensity of Manon's plea, right from her first *N'est-ce plus ma main* through 270.

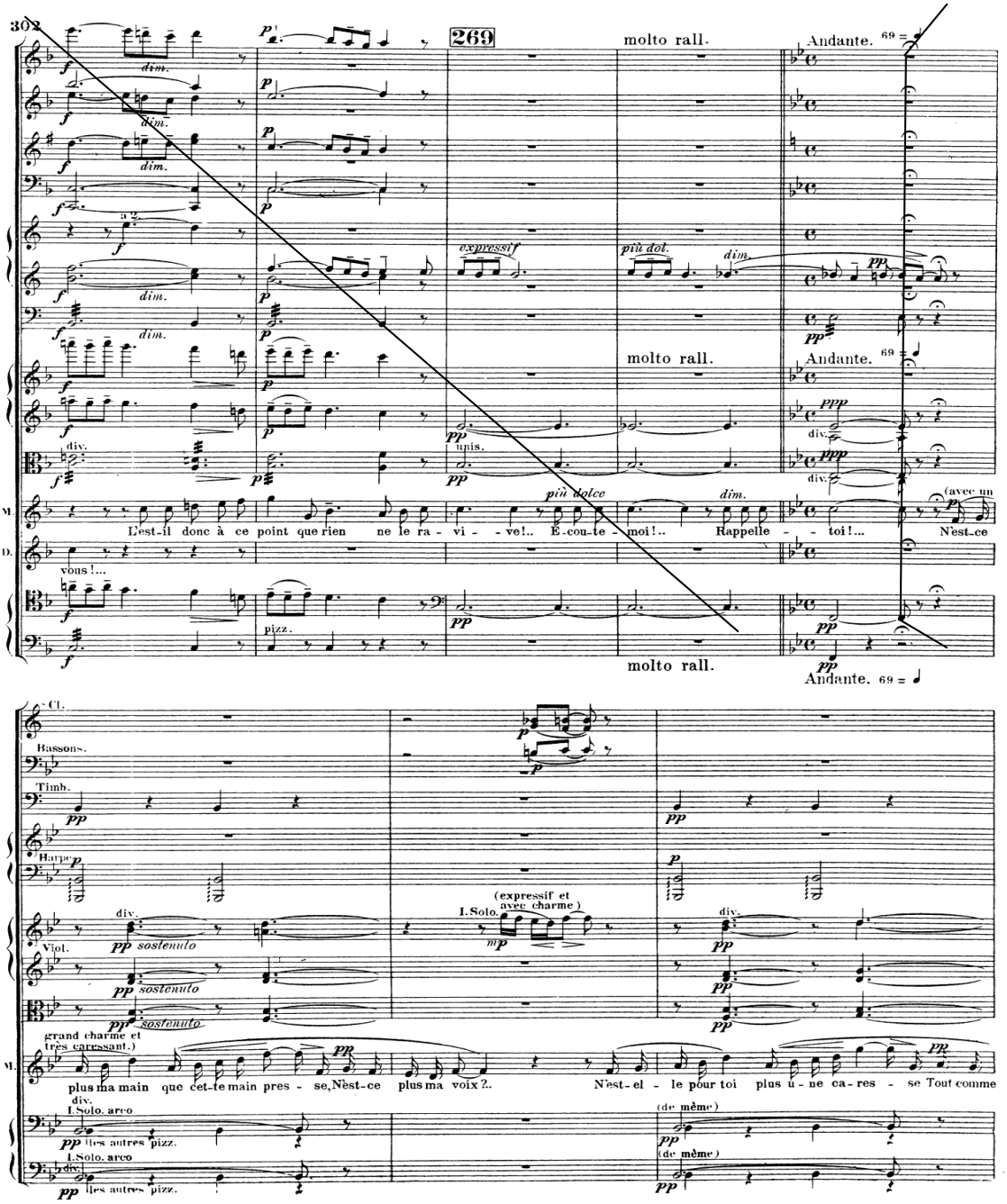
Massenet employs a wide vocal range of almost two octaves in this section, with the voice constantly moving between pitches with a great amount of rhythmic freedom, as required by the composer. The vocal line includes jumps as large as a ninth, always downwards, creating dramatic movement for Manon to hold Des Grieux's attention. In between the graceful, sinuous phrases, Massenet creates tension by alternating short figures consisting of fast, repeated notes, each time on a higher pitch than the previous one, with descending coloratura passages, mirroring the way in which Manon manipulates and confuses Des Grieux. In these sections the voice is either completely alone or with just a whisper from the orchestra, emphasising Manon's own powers of persuasion. With the return of *"N'est-ce plus ma main"*, the noose tightens as both libretto and melody appear in a contracted form, creating the impression that Manon is getting impatient. The fuller orchestration, adding harp and doubling the voice with the cello also increases the emotive effect.

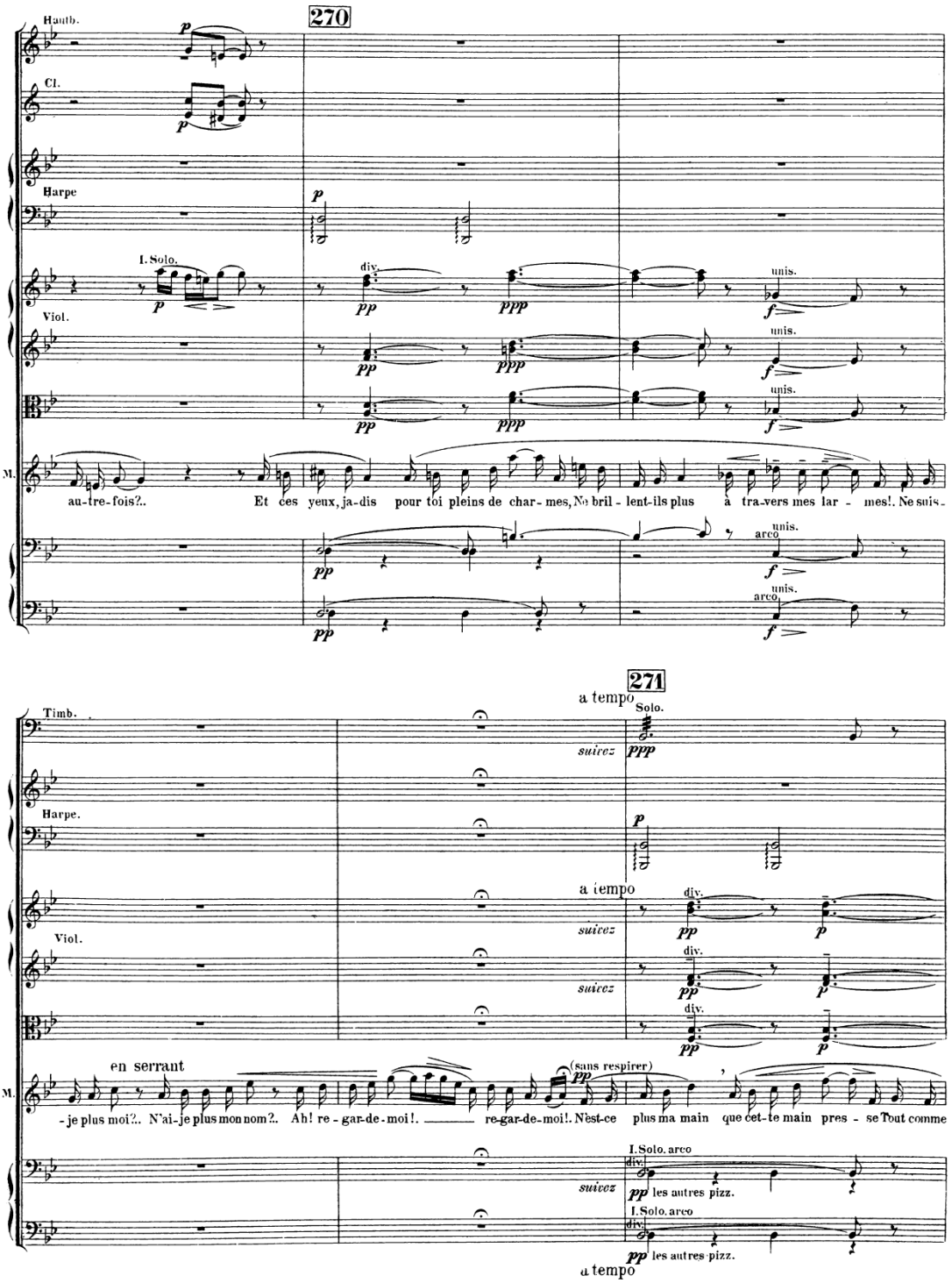
Des Grieux suddenly bursts out in a flood of emotion, after which Manon renews the onslaught through two short eruptions of repeated notes, once again followed by *"N'est-ce plus ma main"*. This time there is less freedom in the execution of the phrases as the voice is driven by the rich orchestration and higher dynamic level. The full chords in the violins and violas are written as a tremolo, the harp plays arpeggios and the vocal line is doubled by the cellos, while the French horns follow the voice and cellos in harmony. The impression is that Manon has gathered the forces to sweep poor Des Grieux off his feet; he does not stand a chance anymore. He has been through a lot of pain and his decision to live a pious live has brought him consolation. Not even his father's pleas and a promise of 30 000 livres could sway his intentions. But this is Manon!

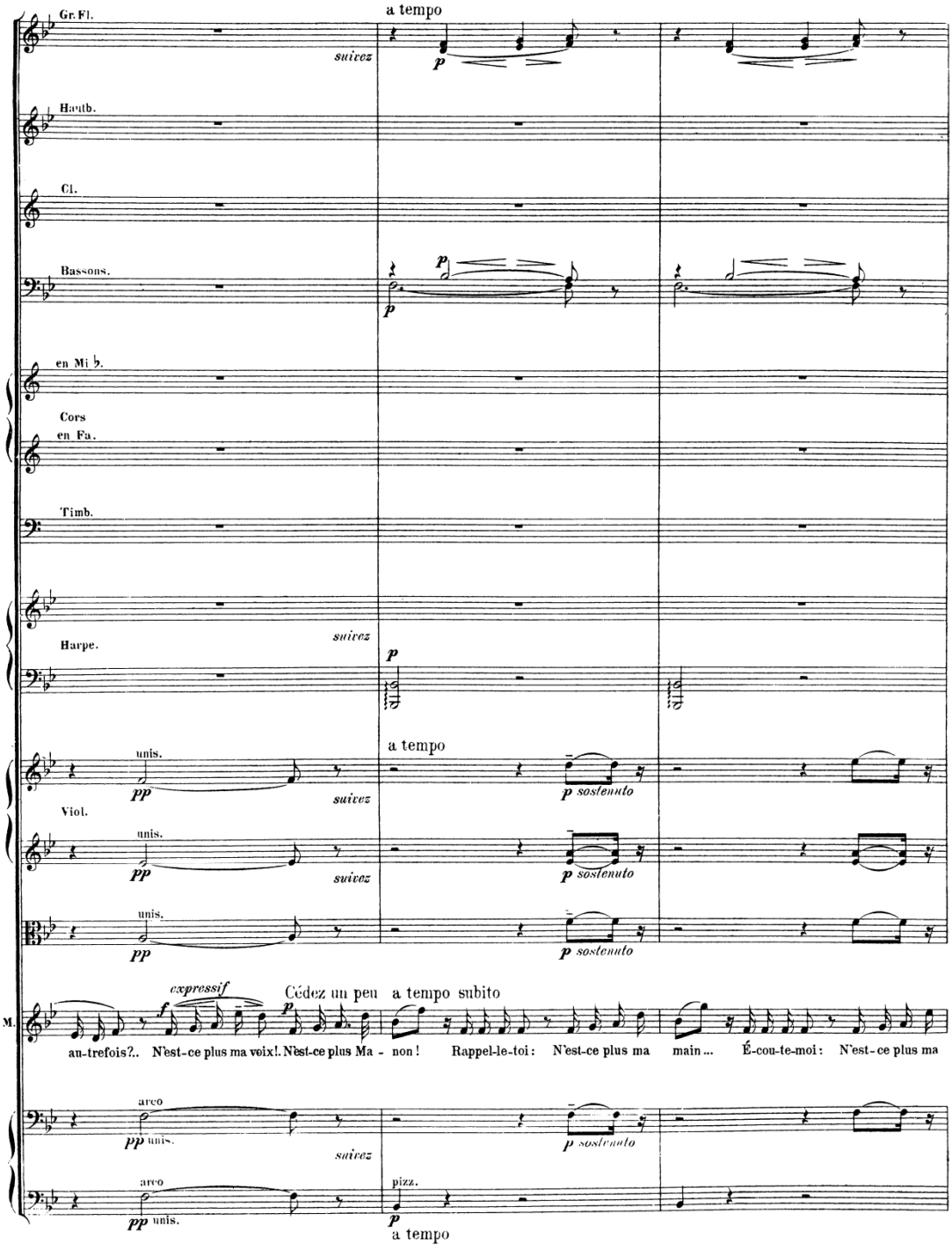
Manon no longer resorts to the relative subtleties of octave jumps down into the subdued lower middle register to get his attention, but throws all caution to the wind and simply continues those phrases on *forte* in the high register. The altered part of

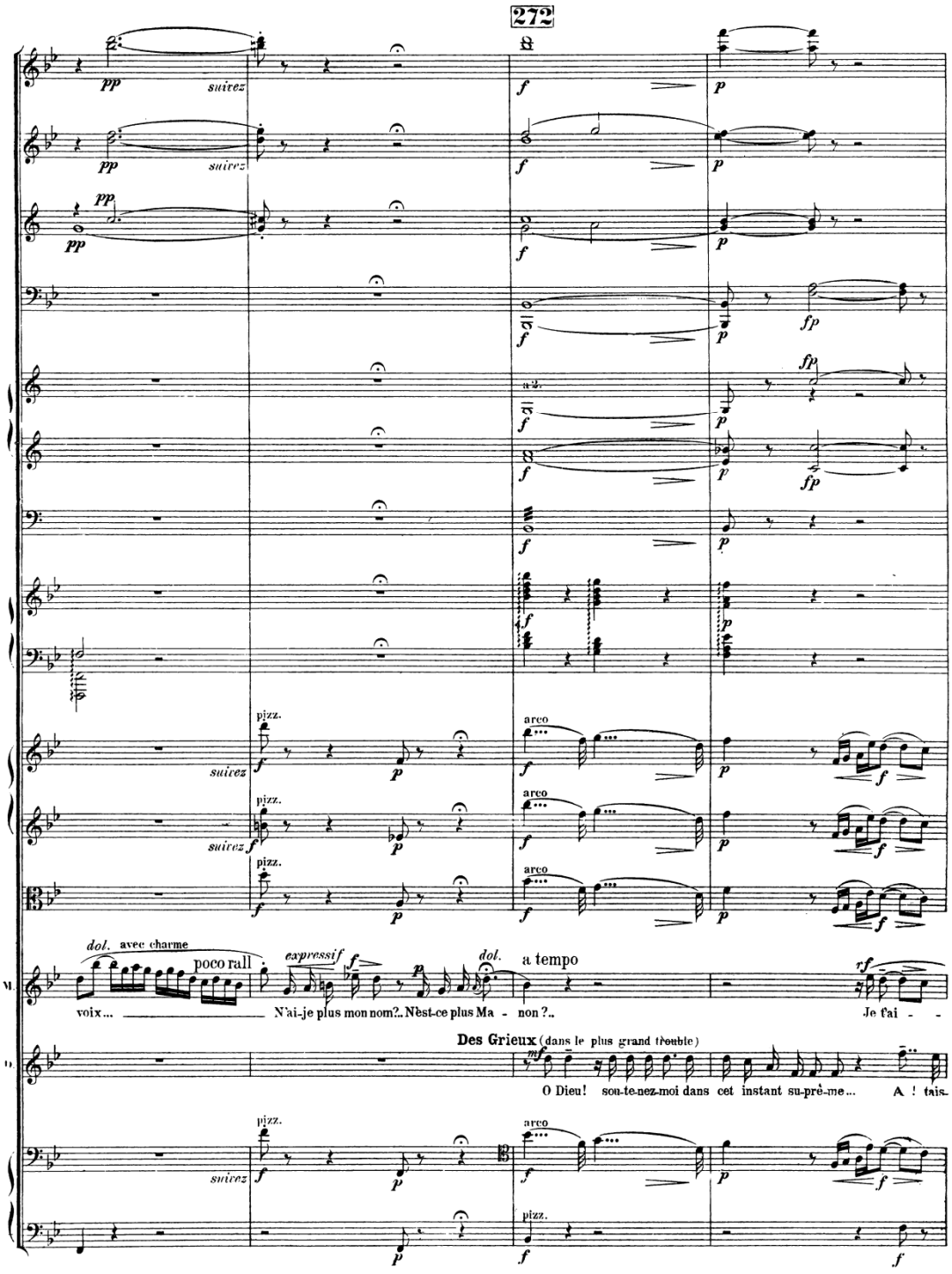
the phrase is repeated by Des Grieux as the violins did in the beginning of the section. Manon has achieved her goal as he echoes her words. After his feeble attempts to stay strong, the young man's defences crumble against Manon's disarming sensuality and he promises his everlasting devotion, whatever happens.

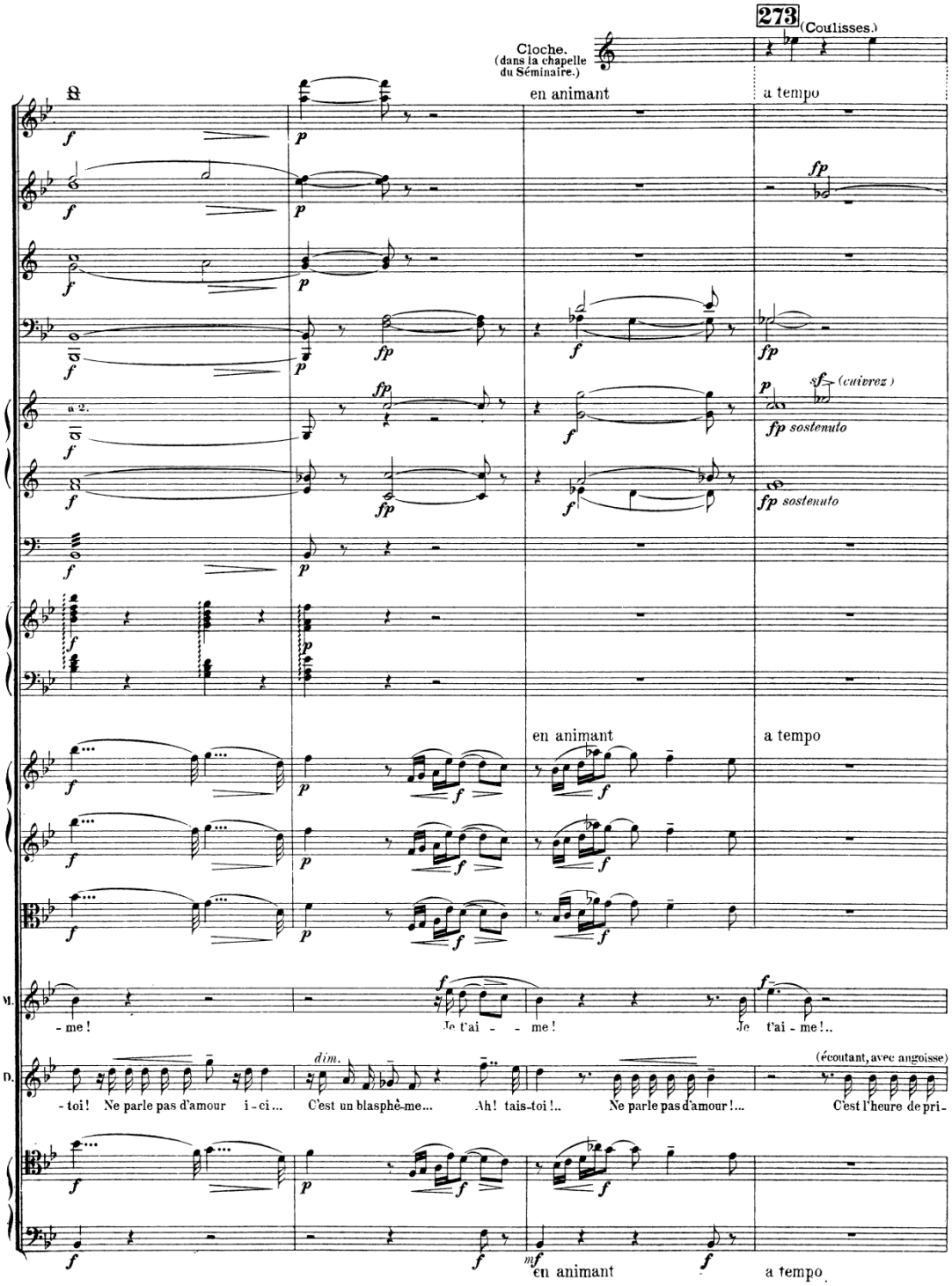
Example 5: *N'est-ce plus ma main que cette main presse,* Manon, Act III, Scene 2, orchestra no. 269(+2)–275

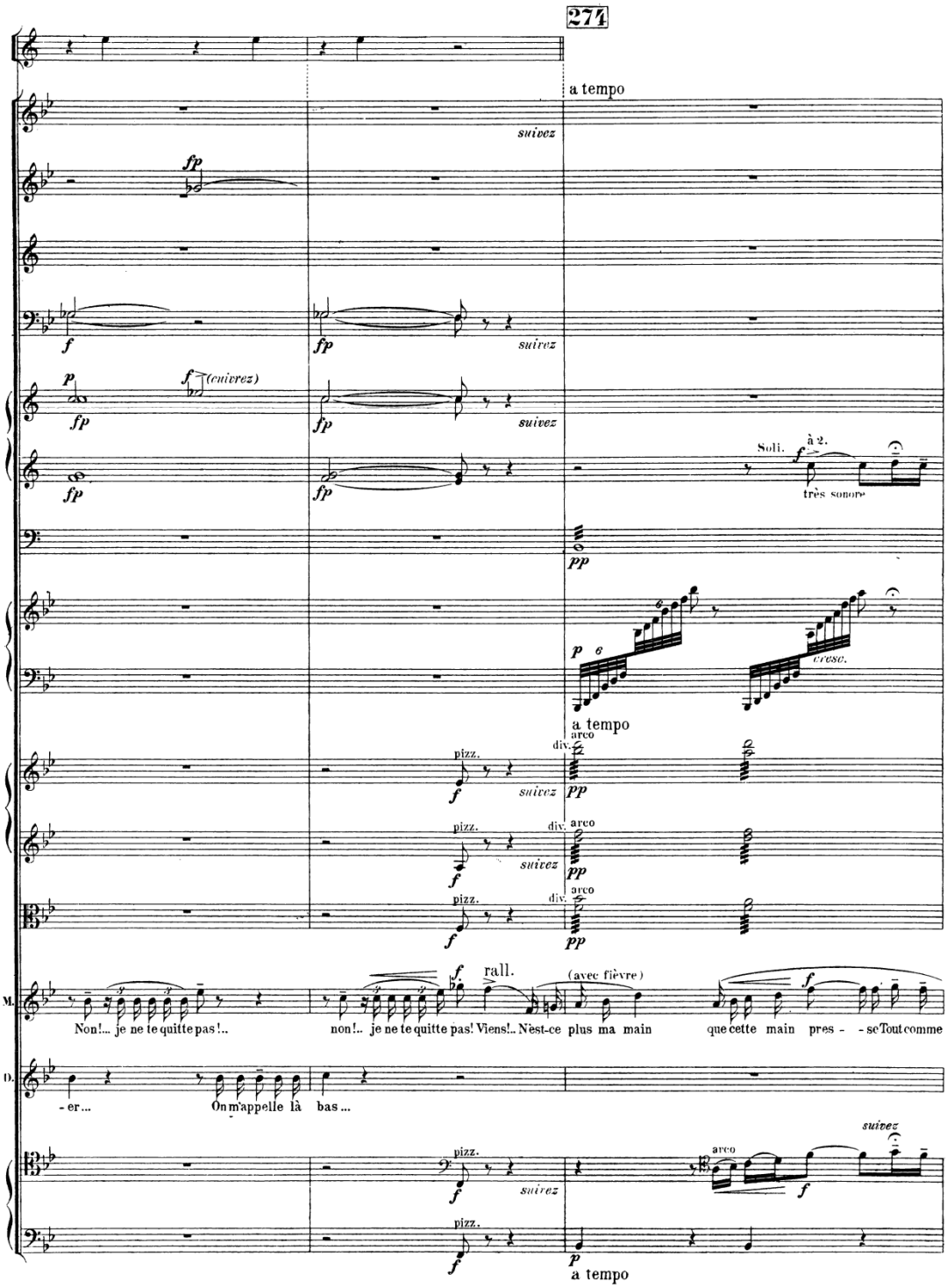


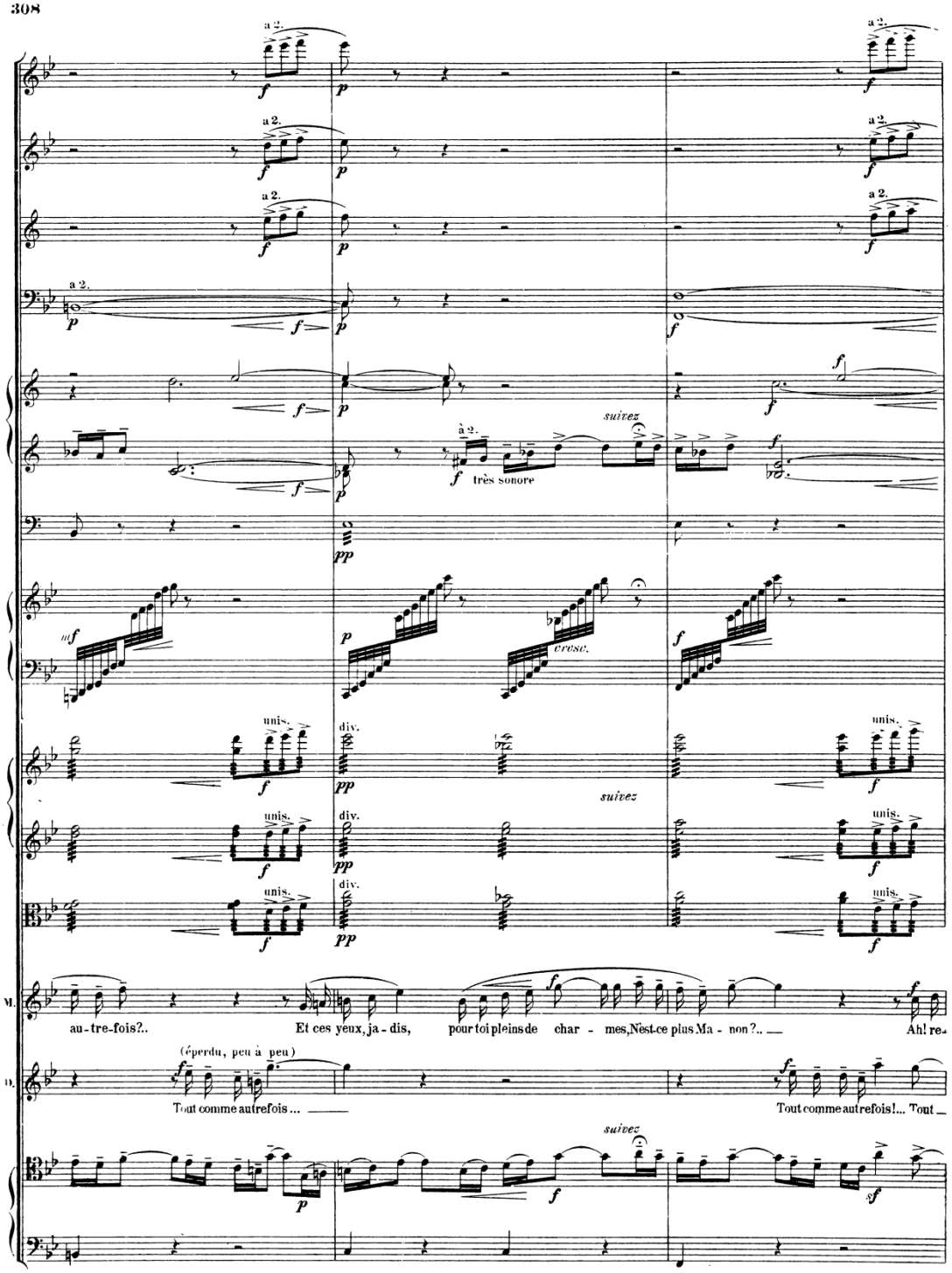

270
Hautb.
Cl.
Harpe
I. Solo.
Viol.
M.
au-tre-fois?.. Et ces yeux, ja-dis pour toi pleins de char-mes, Ne bril-lent-ils plus à tra-vers mes lar-mes!. Ne suis-
271
a tempo
Timb.
Solo.
suivez
Harpe.
Viol.
en serrant
-je plus moi?.. N'ai-je plus mon nom?.. Ah! re-gar-de-moi!. re-gar-de-moi!. N'est-ce plus ma main que cet-te main pres-se Tout comme
(sans respirer)
I. Solo. arco
les autres pizz.
a tempo

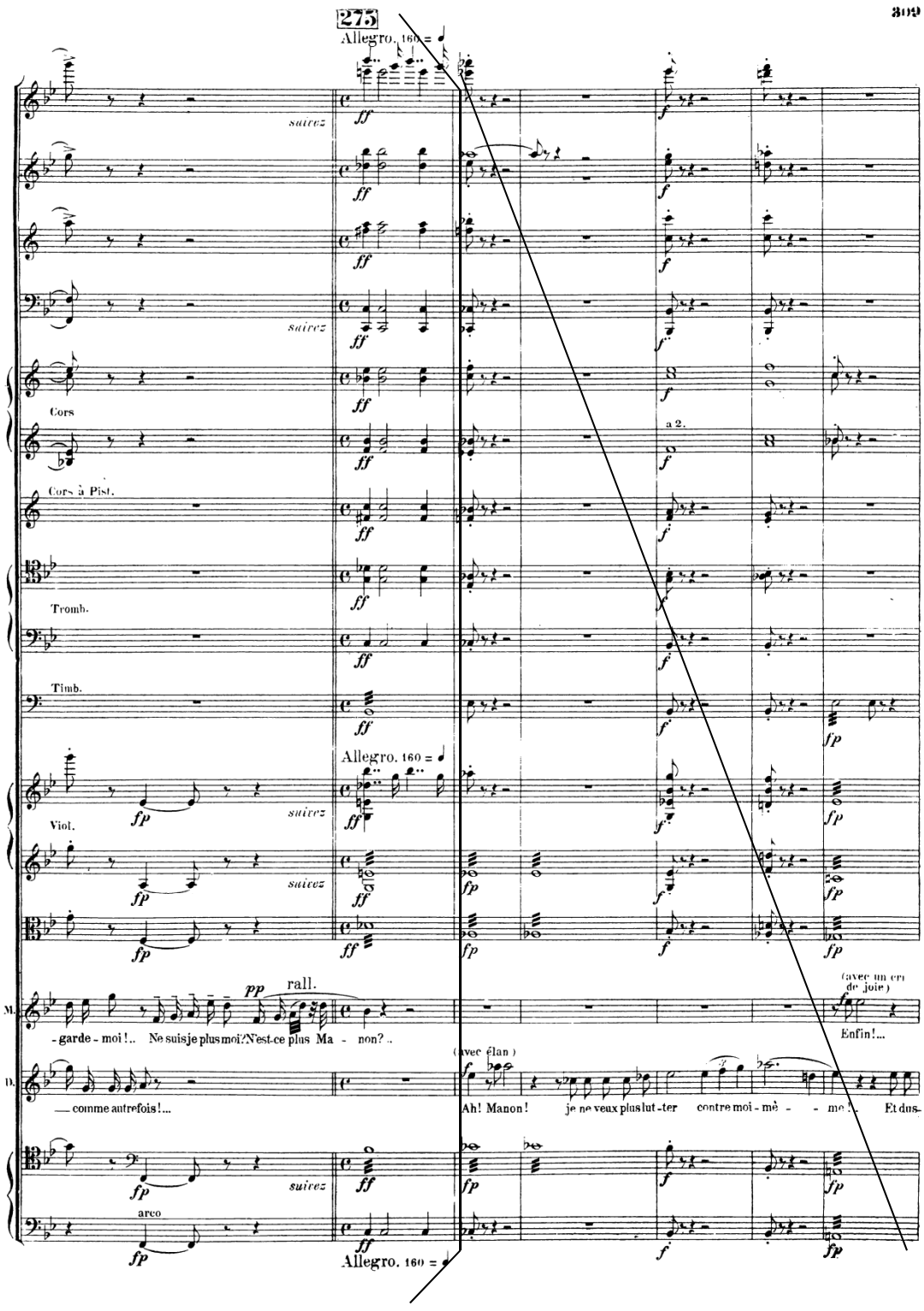

Gr. Fl.
suivez
a tempo
Hautb.
Cl.
Bassons.
en Mi ♭.
Cors
en Fa.
Timb.
Harpe.
suivez
a tempo
unis.
suivez
Viol.
sostenuto
expressif
Cédez un peu
a tempo subito
M.
au-trefois?.. N'est-ce plus ma voix!. N'est-ce plus Ma - non! Rappel-le-toi: N'est-ce plus ma main... É-cou-te-moi: N'est-ce plus ma
arco
unis.
pizz.
a tempo


272
suivez
pizz.
arco
dol. avec charme
poco rall
expressif
dol.
a tempo
voix...
N'ai-je plus mon nom?.. N'est-ce plus Ma - non?..
Je t'ai - -
Des Grieux (dans le plus grand trouble)
O Dieu! sou-te-nez-moi dans cet instant su-prê-me... A ! tais-


273
(Coulisses.)
Cloche.
(dans la chapelle
du Séminaire.)
en animant
a tempo
a 2.
fp sostenuto
(cuivrez)
- me !
Je t'ai - - me !
Je t'ai - me !..
- toi ! Ne parle pas d'amour i - ci ...
C'est un blasphè-me...
Ah ! tais-toi !..
Ne parle pas d'amour !...
C'est l'heure de pri-
(écoutant, avec angoisse)
dim.
en animant
a tempo


274
a tempo
suivez
fp
f
p
(cuivrez)
Soli.
à 2.
très sonore
pp
cresc.
pizz.
arco
div.
rall.
(avec fièvre)
M.
Non!... je ne te quitte pas!..
non!.. je ne te quitte pas! Viens!.. N'est-ce plus ma main
que cette main pres - - se Tout comme
D.
- er...
On m'appelle là bas...


a 2.
très sonore
suivez
cresc.
unis.
div.
M.
au-tre-fois?..
Et ces yeux, ja-dis,
pour toi pleins de char - mes, N'est-ce plus Ma - non?..
Ah! re-
(éperdu, peu à peu)
Tout comme autrefois ...
Tout comme autrefois!... Tout


275
Allegro. 160 =
suivez
Cors
a 2.
Cors à Pist.
Tromb.
Timb.
Allegro. 160 =
Viol.
suivez
rall.
(avec un cri de joie)
M.
- garde - moi !.. Ne suis je plus moi? N'est-ce plus Ma - non? ..
Enfin!...
(avec élan)
D.
— comme autrefois!...
Ah! Manon! je ne veux plus lut-ter contre moi - mê - - me !.. Et dus-
arco
Allegro. 160 =

4.4.5 Act IV

Manon and Des Grieux have no money left and arrive at the Hotel Transylvania, where gambling takes place on a grand scale. She uses emotional blackmail to convince him to gamble. Although Des Grieux exclaims that he both loves and hates her for her extraordinary passion for pleasure and money, he accepts a challenge from Guillot to play against him. Des Grieux provides us with probably the most accurate description of Manon when he calls her an “amazing sphinx, veritable siren”. In the midst of all the euphoria, the recurring theme of death in Manon’s thoughts suddenly surfaces again. She is instinctively aware of the fleeting nature of youth, beauty and life itself, which seems to spur her on to enjoy life, as no one knows if they will be alive tomorrow.

Des Grieux wins a huge amount of money from Guillot, who then accuses him of cheating. He fetches the police, who arrive with Des Grieux’s father to arrest the couple. Manon is to be deported with other women of ill repute and Des Grieux is to be freed soon after. Manon’s perceptive nature brings the realisation that this time they will truly be separated. As they drag her away she utters the poignant words “Ah! It is over! I am dying! Have mercy!” (Massenet, 2000a:143).

As we are about to see, Manon’s imprisonment is indeed her death sentence. The fragile existence of a courtesan, as described by Rosenthal (1992:153ff.), is playing itself out in Manon’s life.

4.4.6 Act V

With the help of Lescaut, Des Grieux manages to speak to the ailing Manon, who is chained to a group of women being marched to the port. Whereas the Court-a-Reine scene (Act III, Scene 1) highlighted the honour sometimes bestowed upon a courtesan (or prostitute), Manon is now a victim of the disdain often felt for these women (Fiorini, 2008:67). For the first time she displays genuine remorse, not in order to gain something, but true repentance for the pain and sorrow she has caused the man she loves. She insists on voicing her regret for being frivolous, fickle and ungrateful.

Manon's sensual nature never forsakes her. Even her expression of piety at the end of her life has a tinge of sensuousness and emotion. It can be argued that Manon turns to piety only because she knows that she has reached the end of the road.

Je me hais et maudis en pensant	I hate and curse myself when I think
à ces douces amours par ma faute brisées,	of our sweet love which I destroyed,
et je ne paierai pas assez de tout mon sang	and I cannot pay enough with all my blood
la moitié des douleurs que je vous ai causées!	even for half the suffering I have caused you!
Pardonnez-moi! Ah! pardonnez-moi!	Forgive me! Ah! forgive me!

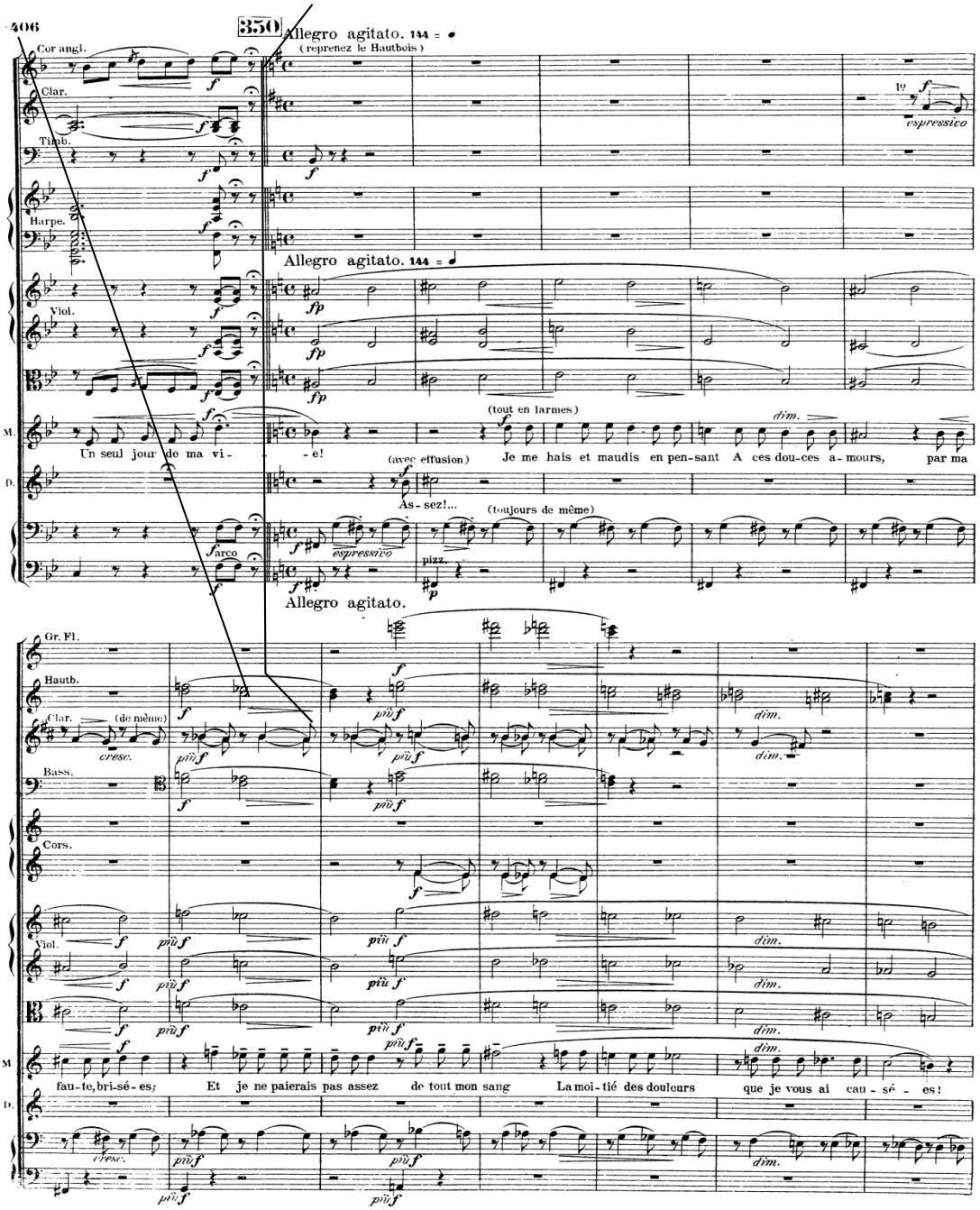
(Massenet, 2000a:155)

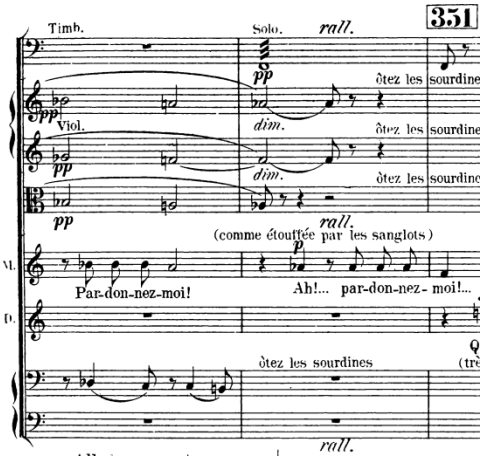
This short section of the finale, in which Manon repents and begs Des Grieux's forgiveness, is built on a combination of shorter and longer phrases written in 4/4, but conducted in duple time, due to the fast tempo. The vocal line is recitative-like, although, unlike most recitative which mainly dwells in the middle register, much of it lies around the *secondo passaggio*, increasing the awareness of her agitated state, strengthened by the *allegro agitato* tempo indication. We are once more reminded that even Manon's piety is filled with emotion. Except for one very short phrase, all the other phrases follow a descending pattern. Without fail the vocal line moves in steps of semitones or whole tones within the phrases. Only between the very last two notes is there an interval of a minor third. Manon has neither energy nor breath left to manage another passing note after the supreme effort of acknowledging the pain she has caused her beloved.

Throughout these 14 bars the violins double the vocal line. Violins and violas, joined halfway through by the flutes, oboes and bassoons, move in chordal fashion with the voice through modulations and increasing chromaticism, until the last six bars, which consist of a descending chromatic scale spanning an octave. The cellos have a chromatic sighing motif underpinning Manon's distress and the hopelessness of her situation. For most of the section the clarinets sigh with the cellos and the French horns join in just to emphasise the sincerity of her repentance when she

says that not even all her blood is enough to atone for her sins. This short section is dark and desperate.

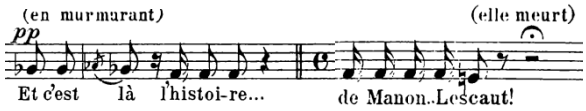
Example 6: *Je me hais et maudis; Manon*, Act V, orchestra no. 350–351





For a brief moment Manon finds new strength as she recalls her meeting with Des Grieux in Saint-Sulpice. Then, drained by emotion, she falters and exclaims that she is dying. She views her early death as predestined, a necessity to bring this tumultuous episode to an end, when she says: *"Il le faut!"* (It must be, or, it is necessary) (Massenet, 2000a:160). Her last sentence, which concludes the opera, also brings it full circle as Manon utters the same words as in her Act I duet with Des Grieux, just before her life started to be ruled by her own sensuality: "*Et s'est la l'histoire de Manon Lescaut*" (Ex. 7) (Massenet, 2000a:160) / And that is the story of Manon Lescaut!

Example 7: *Et c'est là l'histoire de Manon Lescaut; Manon,* Act V, orchestra no. 365(-1)–365



Lowen (1985:75) notes the irreconcilable syllables of the very name "Manon". In French, "Ma" indicates possession, whereas "non" indicates a negative. The juxtaposition of these two words in one name could be interpreted as the embodiment of what ultimately proves to be the inaccessibility of Manon not only to Des Grieux, but even to herself, which necessitates her death.

Plato's cautionary words that those who do not lead a good life will have a bad one (Plato, 2008:90) certainly ring unpleasantly true at the end of Manon's life. Throughout her short life she placed the highest value on beauty, money and

sensuality, all of which Plato (2008:144) warned would kill virtue and corrupt people. On many levels, it seems that a gap of more than 20 centuries had not much changed society's perception of piety and sensuality.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the controversial nature of *L'histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* - the novel about the downfall of a courtesan who dared to corrupt a nobleman - by its equally controversial author, the Abbé Prévost. Manon's centrality in the opera was highlighted, followed by a close reading of the libretto and music, in order to identify instances of piety and sensuality in the life of Manon and the ways in which Massenet expresses these two themes in the music. These findings will later be combined with those concerning *Thaïs* in the next chapter to evaluate if piety and sensuality have identifiable characters in Massenet's music.

CHAPTER 5: THAÏS: HOURGLASS IRONY

5.1 Introduction

This chapter follows the same format as that of the previous chapter, commencing with a description of the events surrounding the genesis of the opera, followed by a close reading of the libretto and music to identify events of piety and sensuality in the life of Thaïs and investigate Massenet's expression of these two themes in the music.

5.2 *Thaïs* by Jules Massenet

Thaïs is a *comédie lyrique* in three acts and seven tableaux by Massenet to a libretto by Louis Gallet (1835–1898), based on the novel *Thaïs* by Anatole France (1844–1924). The first performance was at the Opéra Garnier in Paris on 16 March 1894, with Sibyl Sanderson (1864–1903) in the role of Thaïs (Irvine, 1997:190; Massenet, 1988:n.p.).

5.3 Background

Thaïs, the courtesan and priestess of Venus who became a saint, has widely captured the imagination since the first manuscript about her life appeared in a seventh-century Middle Eastern monastery (Milnes, 2000b:10). It is reported that Thaïs was so beautiful that men sold everything they owned and were prepared to fight one another for her favours (De Voragine, 2012:152). When the monk Paphnutius heard about it, he was so distressed by the loss of virtue of the men, who also abandoned family, responsibilities and religion to be with her, that he disguised himself as a suitor, gained access to her and managed to bring about an almost instant conversion (Chipok, 2013:xiv). The tenth-century canoness and playwright, Hrotswitha of Gandersheim, wrote eight plays about the saints, including her best-known play called *Paphnutius* (Chipok, 2013:xiv, xxi).

Hrotswitha's play made sufficient impact on the author Anatole France to inspire him to write his novel *Thaïs* (1890). France is described as witty, sceptical and a humanist, and someone with an appreciation for antiquity (Warner, 2008:5909). These attributes and his liberal use of irony are all evident in *Thaïs.* Feinberg (2009:166) describes the many contradictions in France: "A poet and a realist

novelist, a cynic and a reformer, an anti-cleric and a mystic dreamer". He made many enemies because of his regular attacks on the Catholic Church and the state, which resulted in his works being listed on the Church's Index of forbidden books for many decades (Bald, 2006:374).

In Thaïs we see a reflection of several trends in the writing of the *fin-de-siècle*: more sexual freedom in writing, as well as the use of historical themes and exoticism (Barzun, 2001:558–561). The exotic literature of the 1890's usually had a sexual overtone (Wenderoth, 2004:2). At the time exotic women were the ultimate symbol of salaciousness and desire (Wenderoth, 2004:66). *Thaïs* illustrates the seemingly inevitable conflict between Christian asceticism and pagan sensuality (Jones, 2009:1). For an opera to be staged by the Opéra or Opéra-Comique, libretti had to conform to the Catholic doctrine of the time which forbade interracial relationships. Interracial sexuality was allowed only in the form of an erotic dream (Wenderoth, 2004:3). Such is also the case in *Thaïs*.

Although the opera created the illusion that Thaïs' conversion was a sudden event, it is important to note that France's (2010:60) novel depicts her as a girl born into poverty and squalor who was baptised in the Christian faith, but forced into prostitution when she was still very young. In the opera the name of the monk, Paphnutius, which is also the title of Hrotswitha's play, is changed to Athanaël. Contrary to Thaïs, he comes from a privileged background as a member of a noble, educated Alexandrian family. After he converts to Christianity, he sells all his possessions and joins a group of coenobites who live in the desert outside Alexandria. As a young man his desire drives him to Thaïs' house, but he leaves without going in (France, 2010:10–12).

Booth (1975:328–329) points out that the story of Thaïs and Athanaël is in the shape of an hourglass: after the pious monk and the sensual courtesan meet, she attains salvation and receives eternal life, whereas he is damned and his soul is doomed to suffer eternal torment. The irony in the brief intersection of these two lives and the consequences thereof is masterfully woven into France's novel and portrayed with poignancy in the opera by Massenet and Gallet.

Controversy has marked the opera from the start. Massenet wrote *Thaïs* for Sibyl Sanderson, who was by then the star of *Manon* and for whom Massenet also wrote *Esclarmonde*. The suggestion that he was smitten by her was only one of the reasons for the gossip generated by the opera. Not only did Sanderson accidentally expose her bust on stage at the premiere (Milnes, 2000b:10), but the press accused Massenet of being "obsessed with an *idée fixe*", the combination of priest and courtesan, as in both *Manon* and *Hérodiade* (Irvine, 1997:192). Massenet was forced to adapt the opera, which was written as an *opéra comique*, by inserting ballet scenes according to the conventions of the Opéra (Milnes, 2000b:10–11). This was necessitated by the fact that Sanderson, who was affiliated to the Opéra-Comique, suddenly left the company for the Opéra. As in *Manon,* Massenet made changes to *Thaïs* after the premiere. The oasis scene, which is central to the opera, was not part of the original score and Massenet also changed the ending.

All the controversy surrounding the opera overshadows the fact that *Thaïs* is a fine tapestry of human psychology in which Massenet manages to reflect the irony of France's story through what Milnes (2000b:13) calls "a web of interconnected musical motifs", much more advanced than anything he managed before. His cross-referencing through motifs is complex, constantly reminding the listener of another person or event in the opera, a form of subtext, often suggestive of unintended actions or unconscious thoughts. In line with the fact that the novel had replaced poetry as the leading genre (Barzun, 2001:557), Gallet substituted the rigour of rhyme and rhythm with *poésie melique,* that is, prose divided into asymmetrical poetic lines which allowed Gallet more freedom to choose specific words according to their colour and expressive power (Huebner, 1999:142).

The style of the libretto allowed Massenet to write the music in a continuous, flowing style, closely linked to the meaning of the words, something at which the composer was particularly good. Milnes (2000b:13) believes that Massenet's greatest contribution to French opera is arguably his talent for word setting. The French language is relatively free of word stresses (Walker, 2001:31) and Massenet uses this feature to achieve musical freedom, without the limitations of regular phrases, for ultimate word painting. Instead he makes use of stress marks on syllables and indications for rubato to achieve a sumptuously textured score that

treats the libretto as an equal partner (Milnes, 2000b:14). This comes as no surprise when we learn that Massenet first memorised libretti and pondered over them for some time before starting the process of setting them, or rather allowed them to set themselves (Massenet, 1919:148–149).

5.4 *Thaïs*: piety and sensuality in the libretto and music

5.4.1 Act I, Scene 1

The ascetic Athanaël returns from Alexandria to his community of coenobites who live in the Desert of Thebaid in prayer and austerity. Even amongst his brethren he is known for his piety. With bitterness and anger he shares with them his dismay about the corrupt influence of the courtesan Thaïs. When he announces his intention to convert her to Christianity, the elderly monk Palémon warns him against mingling with worldly people. That night Athanaël has a vision of Thaïs performing a mime of the loves of Aphrodite. Clearly disturbed by these images as he wakes up, he interprets the vision as a sign to save her soul.

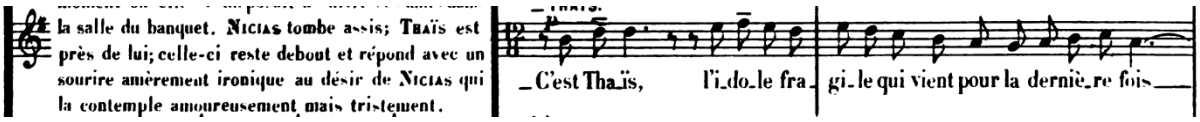
5.4.2 Act I, Scene 2

When Athanaël arrives in Alexandria he goes to the house of his childhood friend, Nicias, to make enquiries about Thaïs. Little does he know that Nicias has sold everything he owns to have Thaïs to himself for a week. Nicias provides us with a glimpse of Thaïs and the life she leads when he tells Athanaël that he could not keep Thaïs, even if he wanted to, as her love is fleeting. Athanaël reveals his intention to convert Thaïs and Nicias warns him against offending Venus, the goddess of love, but nevertheless invites him to a banquet in honour of his last night with Thaïs. While Athanaël is dressed in rich robes and perfumed, Nicias makes good-natured fun of his serious nature, cautioning him that the human soul is fragile.

With the arrival of Thaïs it is immediately clear how venerated she is when the guests praise her and call her “fair”, “desired” and “silent”. Against the background of the idolatrous pagan practices still widely followed in Egypt at the time (Dorman, 2013), the combination of these three words creates an image of Thaïs as a statue to be worshipped. In her short, but sensual private conversation with Nicias she

skilfully guides him to concentrate only on the joy and happiness of their last night together and tells him not to think beyond the night, when she will be only a name to him. In the short space of time since Thaïs' appearance on stage, several words in the libretto and the stage directions by Massenet and Gallet indicated that all is not as rosy as it seems. She is described as silent which, used on its own is not significant, but she "responds to Nicias' desire with a bitterly ironic smile" and refers to herself as a "fragile idol" (Ex. 8) (Massenet, 2000b:79).

Example 8: *C'est Thaïs, l'idole fragile; Thaïs,* Act I, Scene 2, orchestra no. 61(+4–5)



In answer to her enquiry about Athanaël, the "stranger whose fierce look is resting on" her (Massenet, 2000b:81), Nicias tells her that he is a stern and pious hermit with a heart of stone who is there to convert her. A confrontation follows between Thaïs and Athanaël. She tells him to leave, as she believes only in love, whereupon he admonishes her not to blaspheme. The stage directions indicate that Thaïs approaches Athanaël "gently and gracefully" (Massenet, 2000b:85) when she utters the words which return to haunt him in his second vision (Act III, Scene 2).

Qui te fait si sévère, et pourquoi	Why are you so stern, and why
démens-tu la flamme de tes yeux ?	do you deny the fire in your eyes?
Quelle triste folie	What dreary madness
te fait manquer à ton destin ?	has turned you away from your destiny?
Homme fait pour aimer,	A man made for love,
quelle erreur est la tienne !	how mistaken you are!
Homme fait pour savoir,	A man made for knowledge,
qui t'aveugle à ce point !	why are you so blind?
Tu n'as pas effleuré	You have not tasted
la coupe de la vie !	the cup of life!
Tu n'as pas épelé	You have not sought
l'amoureuse sagesse!	the wisdom of love!
(avec charme, avec séduction)	(seductively and with charm)

Assieds-toi près de nous,	Sit down among us,
couronne-toi de roses ;	wreathe yourself in roses;
rien n'est vrai que d'aimer,	the only truth is love,
tends les bras à l'amour !	stretch out your arms to love!

(Massenet, 2000b:85)

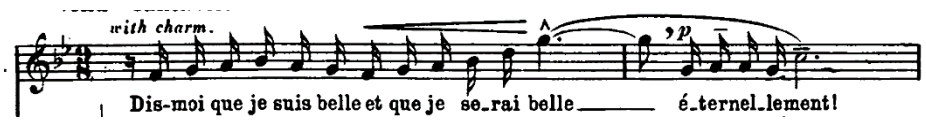
Thaïs understands men and she recognises Athanaël's suppressed sexuality. The courtesan who is at the top of her profession uses her considerable sensual power when she sets out to seduce the severe and unyielding man. He retorts that he will go to her house after the banquet to "conquer hell" and the act ends with Thaïs daring him to defy Venus.

5.4.3 Act II, Scene 1

Thaïs returns to her own house, which is guarded by a statue of Venus. Again the stage directions tell us about her state of mind: "wearily and bitterly" (Massenet, 2000b:85). In the recitative, *Ah! je suis seule,* she expresses her unhappiness with the life that she leads. She is relieved to be home and alone at last and reveals her distaste in the "unfeeling and gross" men and "spiteful" women. She is clearly longing for deeper meaning to her life when she talks to herself in the mirror, lamenting her empty soul and wondering how she will find rest and happiness.

In the aria, *Dis-moi que je suis belle,* she seeks assurance from her own image in the mirror that her beauty will be preserved forever. Thaïs' beauty is legendary and an integral part of her sensual being, without which she would not be able to maintain her allure and her standing as a courtesan.

Example 9: *Dis-moi que je suis belle; Thaïs,* Act II, Scene 1, orchestra no. 79–79(+1)



In the middle section of the aria Thaïs hears a taunting voice, telling her that she will grow old and that there will come a time when *"Thaïs ne serait plus Thaïs"*

("Thaïs will be Thaïs no longer") (Massenet, 2000b:93). She then turns to Venus for assurance.

Athanaël, who has arrived at her house, asks God to protect him against the charms of Thaïs. He praises her reputation and tells her how "glorious it would be for [him] to conquer [her]" (Massenet, 2000b:95), whereupon she warns him against his own pride and loving her. His reply, that he brings her a love as yet unknown to her is met with cynicism. It is when he talks about eternal life that his words strike a chord. She utters the word *éternellement* 10 times in her aria. Thus we know that the concept of eternal life weighs heavily on her mind and her fears about her own mortality make her receptive to his words for the first time.

Thaïs becomes fearful when Athanaël tears off the rich robe to reveal his monk's tunic and curses the sin in her ("the death which is in you") (Massenet, 2000b:101). Upon hearing from Athanaël that she will live "in eternal life […] as the beloved and the bride of Christ" (Massenet, 2000b:101, 103), she describes a feeling of peace ("coolness in my delighted soul") (Massenet, 2000b:103). They are interrupted by the voice of Nicias, who is calling Thaïs, who bursts out in defiance of both her current life ("I hate all wealthy and happy people") (Massenet, 2000b:105) and the life that Athanaël offers her ("I shall remain Thaïs! […] I no longer want anything: neither him, nor you, nor your God!") (Massenet, 2000b:105). Thaïs bursts into hysterical laughter, mixed with tears and sobs.

This scene is followed by the orchestral interlude known as *Méditation religieuse*, the best-known music in the whole opera and often programmed for concerts. Within the context of the opera this music describes the conversion of Thaïs (Milnes, 2006:598).

5.4.4 Act II, Scene 2

The audience is not privy to the inner conflict that Thaïs must have experienced during the rest of the night, except as expressed by the *Méditation*. Act II, Scene 2 commences before daybreak, when Thaïs wakes the sleeping Athanaël. The struggle she has been through is expressed only through her words "I have prayed,

I have wept". She has made up her mind to follow Athanaël after realising how hollow her life is and has decided to turn to piety.

Père, Dieu m'a parlé	Father, God has spoken to me
par ta voix!	through your voice.
Me voici!	Here I am.
Ta parole est restée en mon cœur	Your words lodged in my heart
comme un baume divin ;	like a heavenly balsam;
j'ai pré, j'ai pleuré!	I have prayed, I have wept!
Il s'est fait en mon âme	A great light
une grande lumière ;	has dawned in my soul;
ayant vu le néant de toute volupté,	After seeing the emptiness of all
vers toi je viens ainsi que tu l'as	pleasures,
commandé.	I have come to you as you ordered.

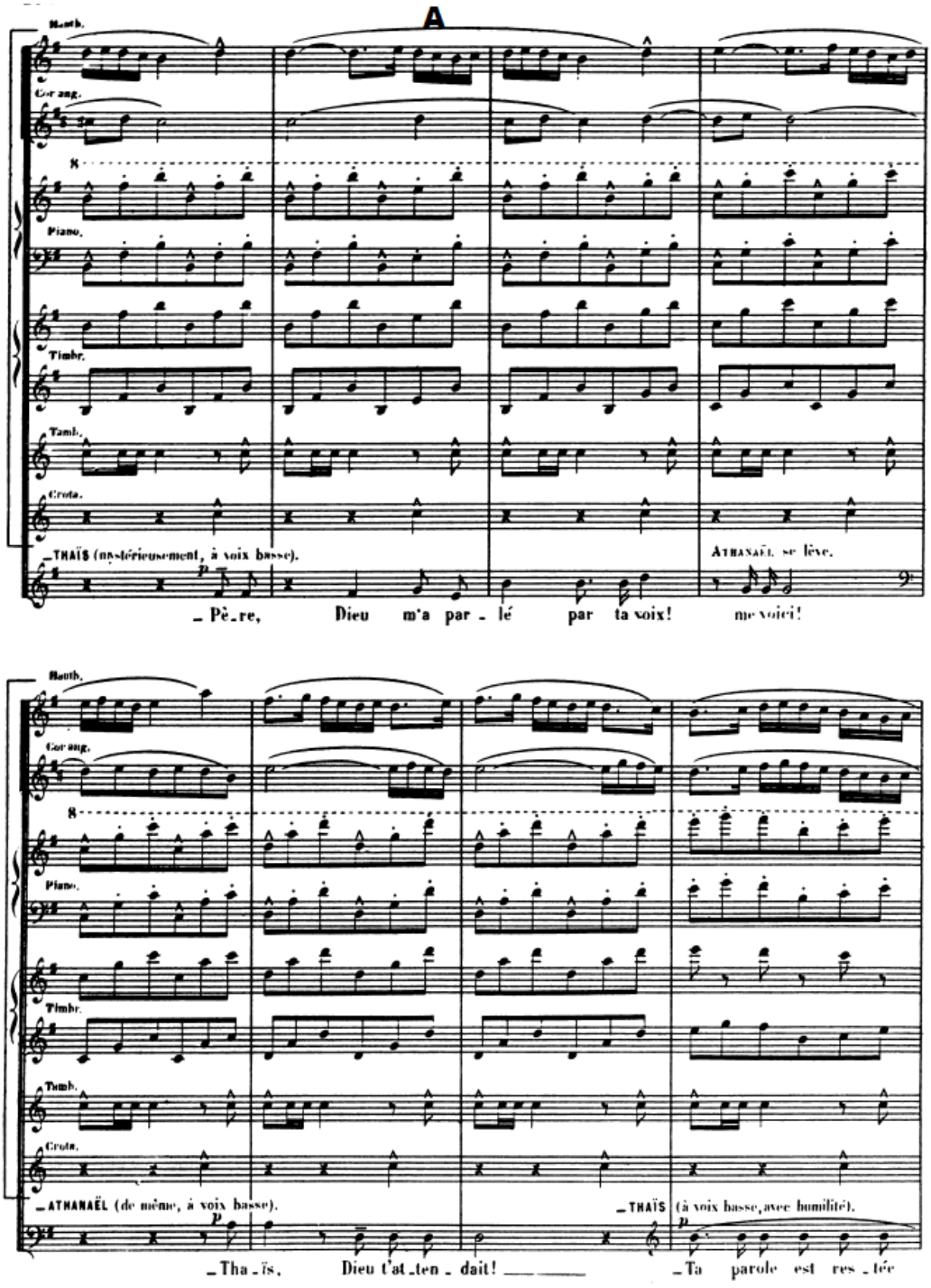
(Massenet, 2000b:107, 109)

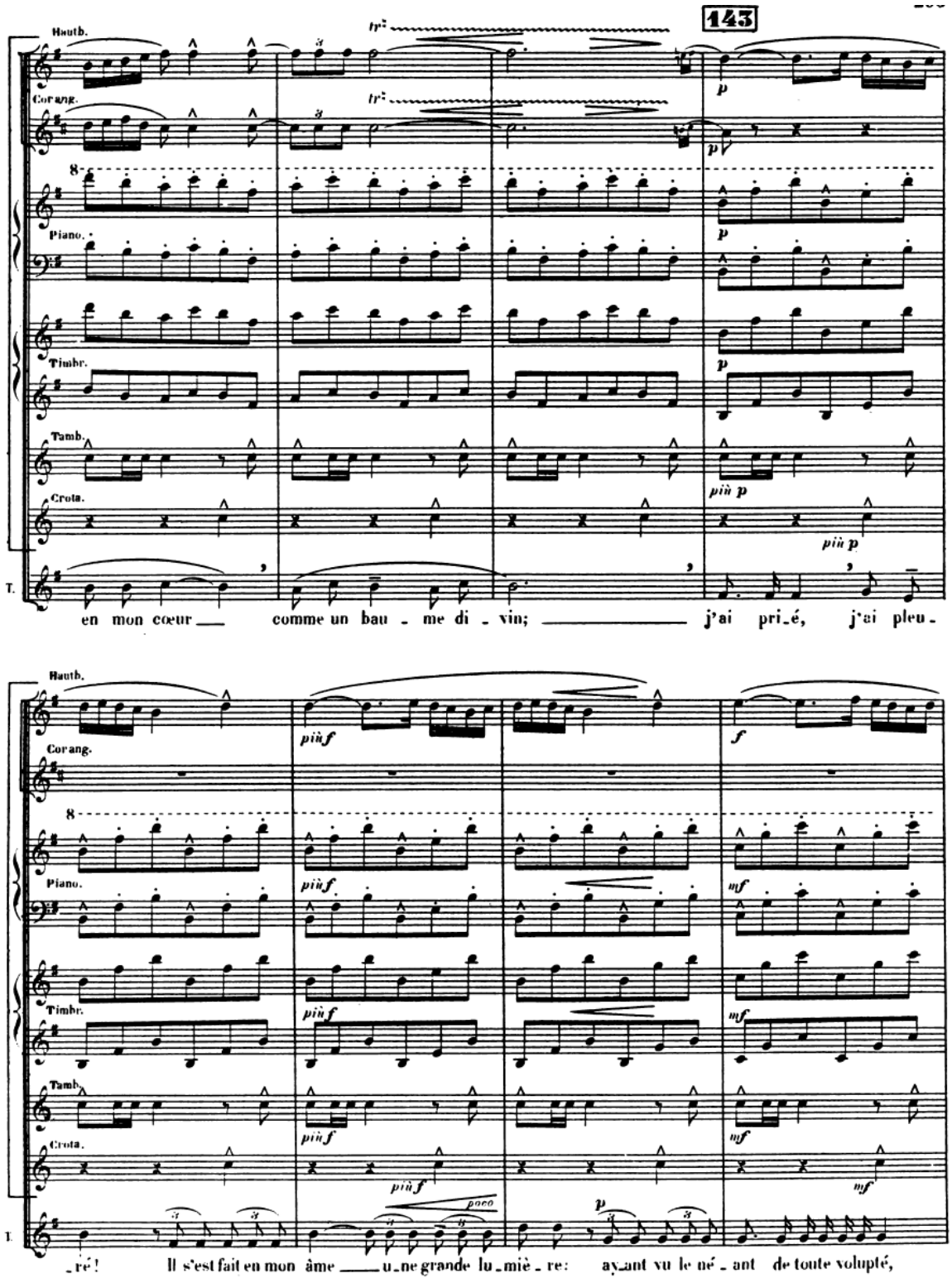
These words are set to music based on the Phrygian mode which results in a distinctly oriental sound. Wenderoth (2004:108–109) names the Phrygian mode as one of the modes favoured by the late nineteenth-century opera composers to express exoticism or "a generic Otherness". Similarly, the two-beat ostinato figure (figure A, beat 3 and beat 1 across the bar line), based on a simple rhythmic pattern, which is repeated throughout the section, was another one of the compositional techniques used for an oriental sound at the time (Wenderoth, 2004:110). The atmosphere of mysterious "otherness" is emphasised by the fact that the ostinato figure is shared by the plaintive sound of the oboe and cor anglais. The oriental music language represents the exotic Other; the pagan Egyptian courtesan as she approaches the monk, who represents Western religion. As mentioned previously, the exotic Other in the nineteenth century discourse implied mysterious sexual temptation (Dubisch, 2005:25). The intertwining of the oboe and cor anglais lines emphasise the inherent sensuousness of Thaïs's piety.

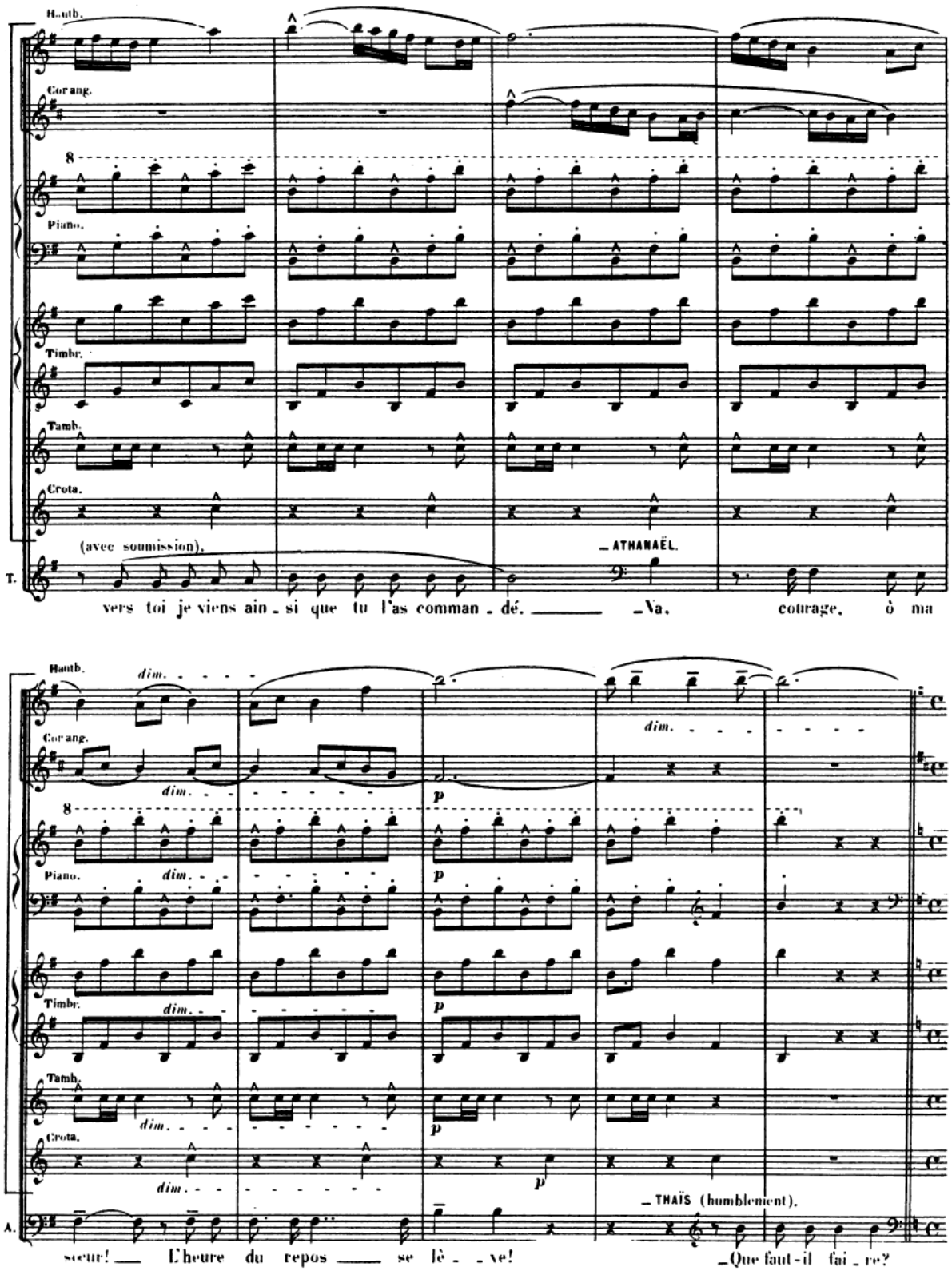
The section is in triple time (3/4) and the voice stays in the medium to lower middle register, at a low dynamic level. Unlike the oboe and cor anglais melody, the vocal line hardly contains any passing notes, which often suggests a calm and contented

atmosphere. Massenet uses other elements though, to reflect uncertainty and confusion, such as the short phrases in the vocal line, creating the impression of shortness of breath and exhaustion.

Example 10*: Père, Dieu m'a parlé* ; *Thaïs*, Act II, Scene 2, orchestra no. 142(+9–13)




143
Hautb.
Cor ang.
Piano.
Timbr.
Tamb.
Crota.
T.
tr
p
più p
en mon cœur comme un bau - me di - vin; j'ai pri_é, j'ai pleu -
più f
f
mf
poco
_ré! Il s'est fait en mon âme u_ne grande lu_miè_re: ay_ant vu le né_ant de toute volupté,



Initially the voice moves in small intervals, but as Thaïs describes her struggle during the night, she does so mainly in repeated note figures. With *"Il s'est fait en mon âme une grande lumière*" ("A great light has dawned in my soul") (Massenet, 2000b:109) the rhythm changes to triplets, adding an element of exaltation. The

section as a whole has the character of *recitativo accompagnato*. The polyrhythmic texture due to the accents in the piano and *clavier de timbres* parts suggests that Thaïs's struggle between piety and sensuality is not fully over yet.

Athanaël then explains to Thaïs that he will take her to a group of women, "poor", "modest" and "chaste" and led by the pious Albine, where he will lock her in a small cell until "Jesus comes to deliver" her. Before they leave, Thaïs is to burn all her possessions in order to erase her past.

As they go into the house, Nicias and his friends appear outside. Nicias has won back his money at gambling and summons the dancers to entertain them. Five *divertissiments*[25] follow. Athanaël appears followed by Thaïs, dressed in simple clothes, unlike the famous courtesan known by the Alexandrians. It is obvious that they have set the house on fire, as the stage directions indicate smoke rising and flames appearing. When Athanaël announces that he is taking Thaïs away from the city, the crowd becomes threatening and they start to throw stones at Athanaël and Thaïs, shouting *"À mort!"* ("Kill him!") (Massenet, 2000b:129). Nicias throws gold coins on the ground to distract the crowd and urges Thaïs and Athanaël to flee. As they do so, Thaïs's burning palace collapses.

5.4.5 Act III, Scene 1

Thaïs and Athanaël are at an oasis in the desert, not far from Albine's hermitage. An exhausted Thaïs asks Athanaël to stop for a short while. He harshly refuses, telling her to "shatter [her] body, destroy the flesh", (Massenet, 2000b:133) as she can be purified only through penitence. Although she accepts all he says and tries to continue, Thaïs is too weak and almost faints. When he notices how her feet are bleeding, Athanaël softens for the first time. He uses language such as "my sister" and "most holy Thaïs" (Massenet, 2000b:137), but the stage directions reveal the feelings he is not yet aware of; they indicate that he speaks in an adoring tone.

Athanaël fetches water and fruit and for the first and only time during the opera, in the duet *Baigne d'eau mes mains* Thaïs and Athanaël sing together in complete

[25] During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term *divertissiments* implied musical entertainment that involved singing or dancing (or both), which often formed part of the plot and linked sections of the opera.

harmony and express the same thoughts, as if with one voice, creating an atmosphere of agreement and peace.

Baigne d'eau mes mains et mes lèvres,	Bathe my hands and lips with water,
donne ces fruits, donne ces fruits,	give me this fruit, give me this fruit,
baigne d'eau mes mains et mes lèvres.	bathe my hands and lips with water.
Ma vie est à toi, Dieu te la confie.	My life is yours, God has entrusted it to you.
Je t'appartiens, ma vie est à toi,	I belong to you, my life is yours,
Dieu te la confie.	God has entrusted it to you.

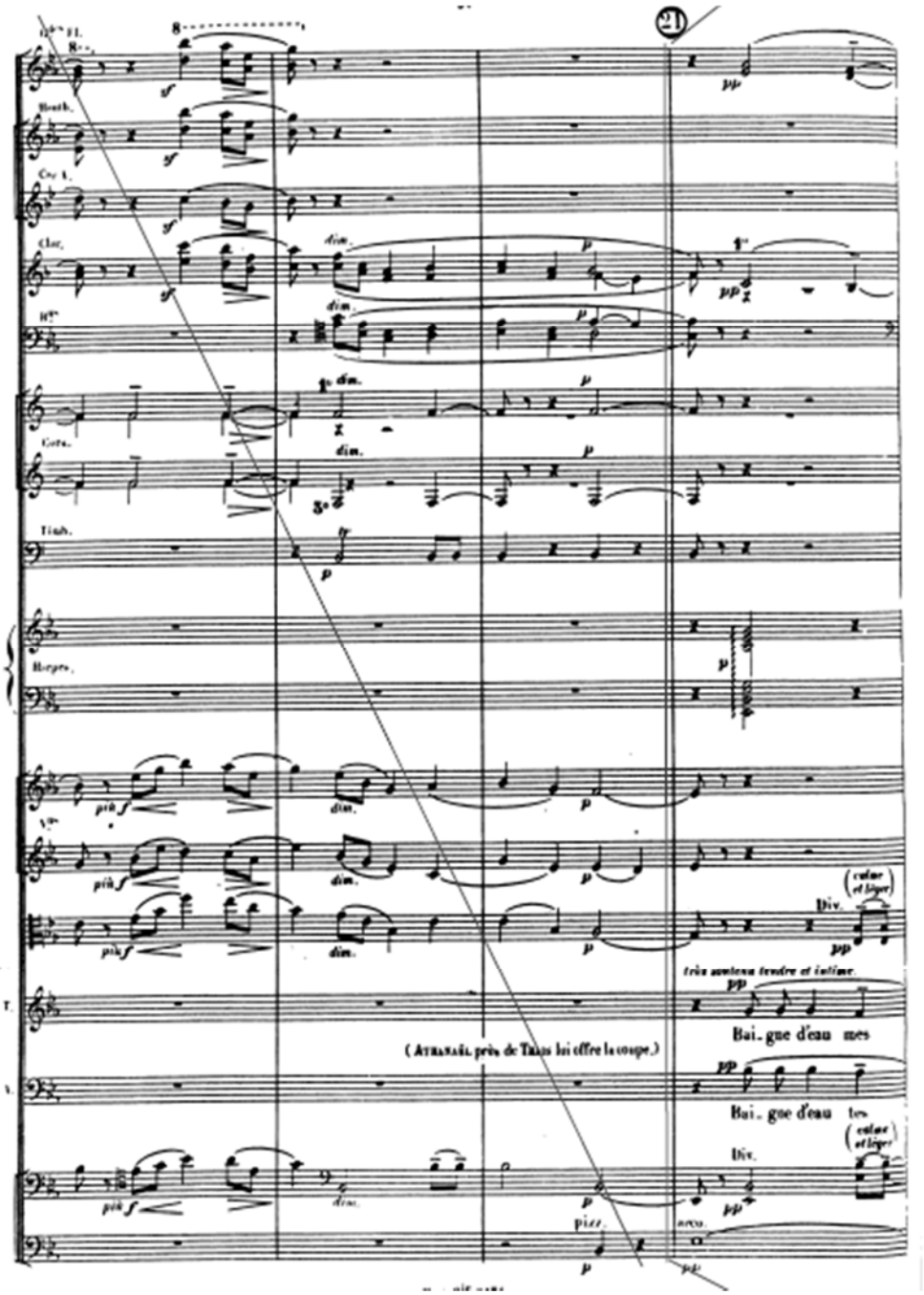
(Massenet, 2000b:139)

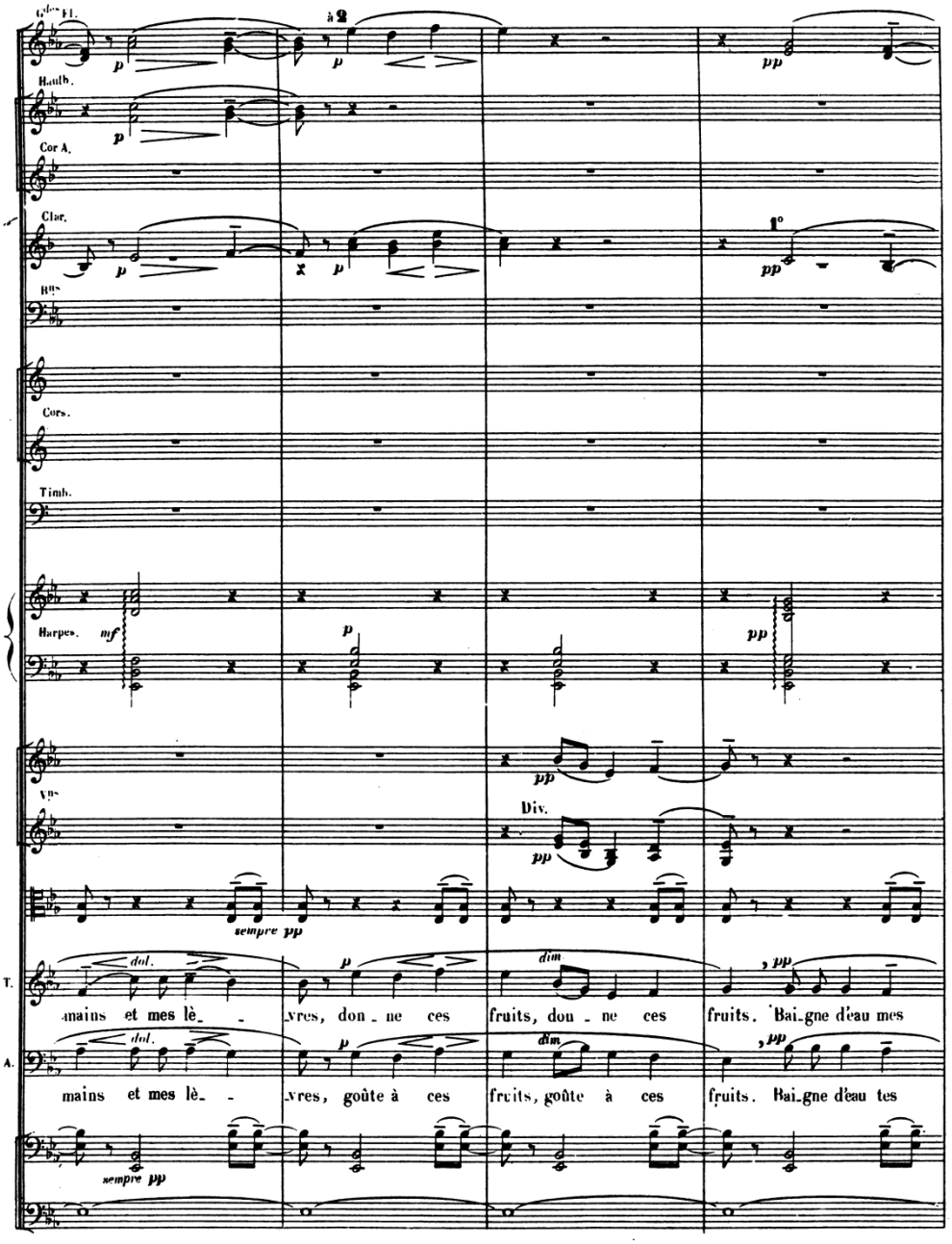
The section is in E♭ major and in a moderate tempo in quadruple meter (4/4). The range of the soprano line mainly stays in the middle register and only occasionally ventures marginally beyond that. The dynamic level is soft, with two brief exceptions that are marked *forte*: *"Ma vie est à toi"* ("My life is yours") and "*Je t'appartiens"* ("I belong to you") (Massenet, 2000b:139). The duet is a test in legato singing for both singers.

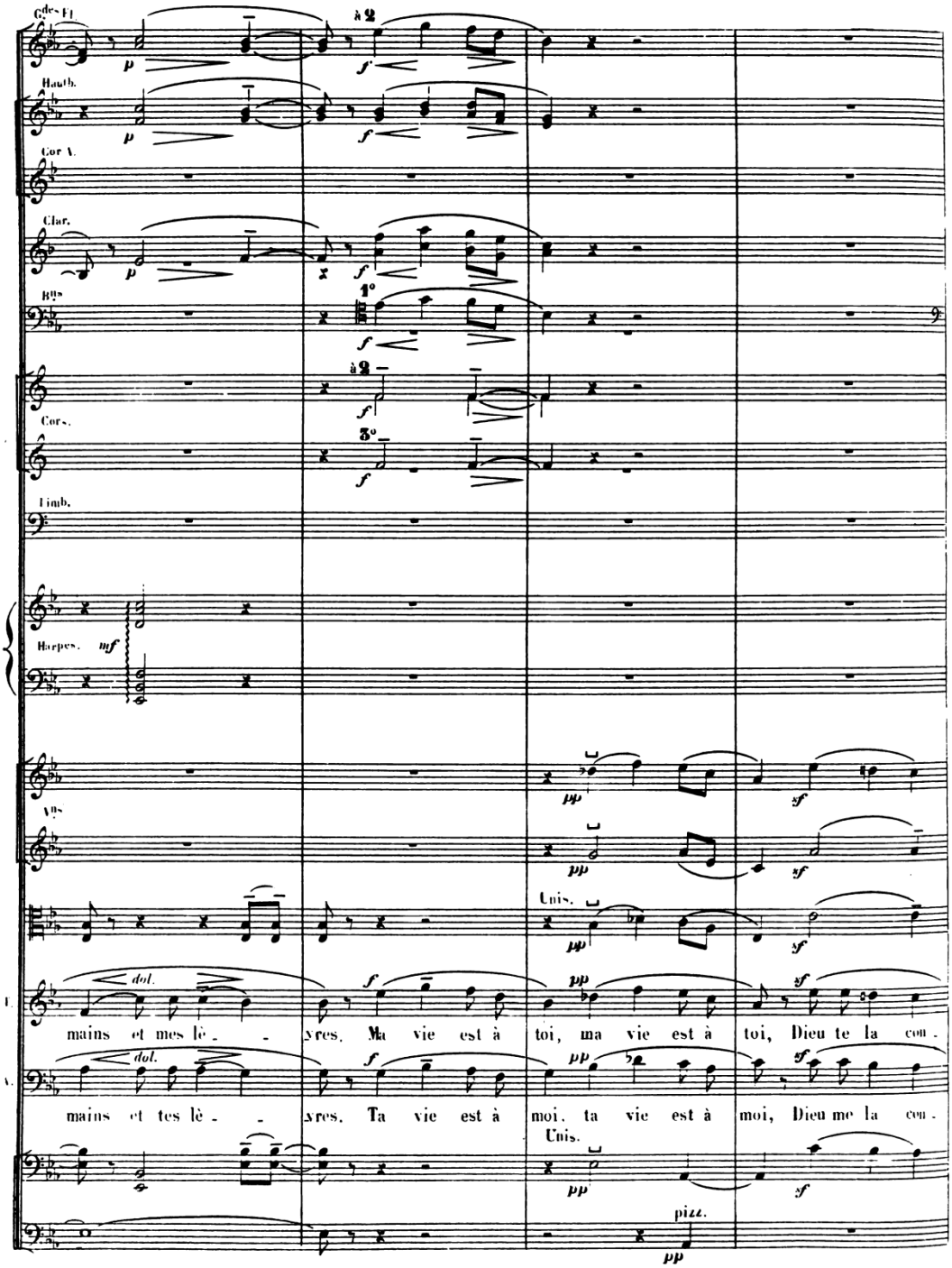
Albine and the White Sisters arrive, upon which Athanaël entrusts Thaïs to the abbess, reminding her to "live in seclusion", "do penance" and "pray for [him] at all hours" (Massenet, 2000b:145). As Thaïs bids him a final farewell, he realises that he will never see her again (he repeats the words several times to himself). The stage directions here use words such as "crushed", "agony" and "feverish" (Massenet, 2000b:147) as he watches her disappear with the White Sisters.

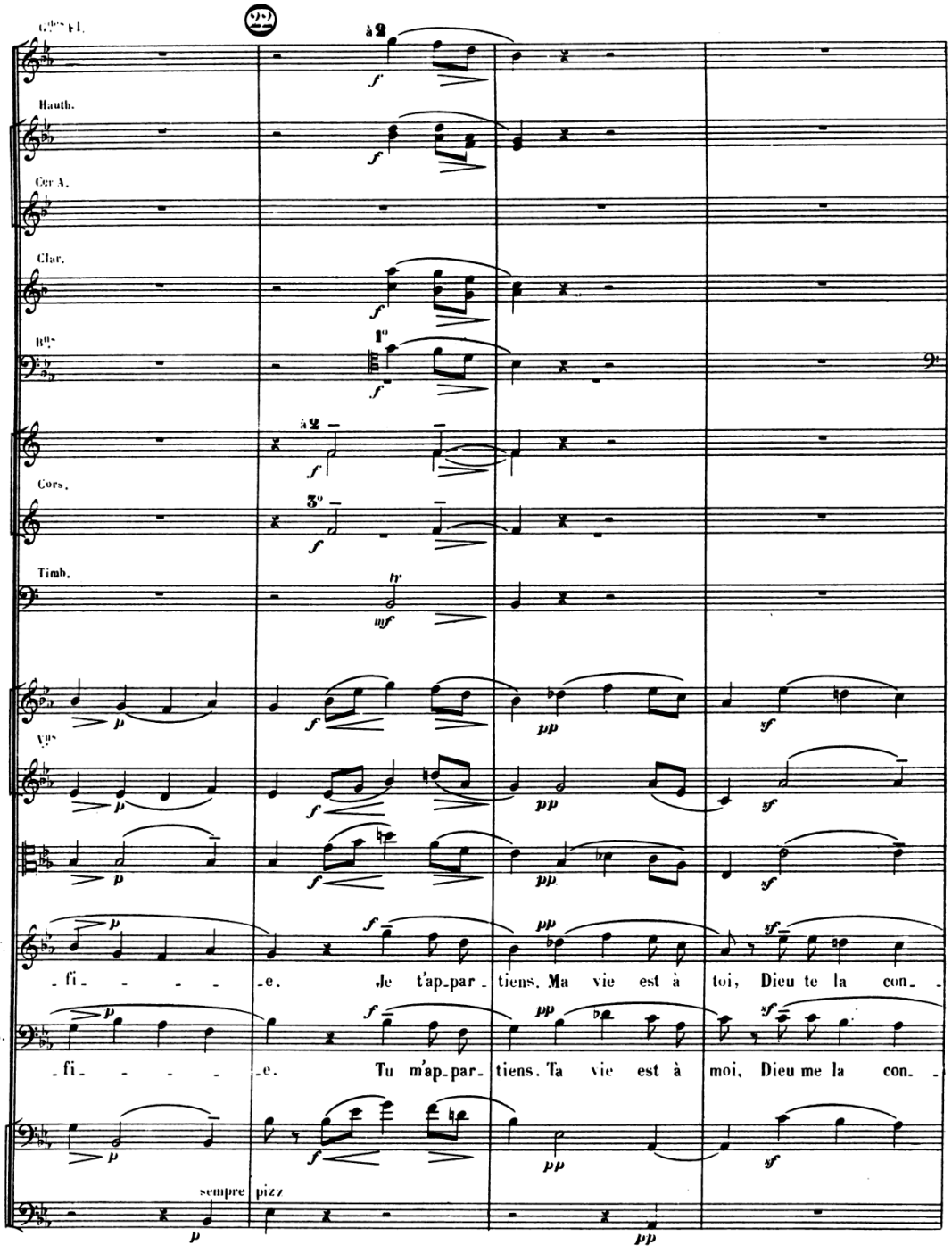
Both Thaïs and Athanaël are changed people: the sensual courtesan has turned to piety and the pious, fervently religious monk is experiencing the effects of worldly passion. Their disparate lives intersected briefly in the desert duet, as if in the neck of an hourglass, and now they both carry on in different directions as changed people. Nicias' warning not to offend Venus has come back to haunt Athanaël.

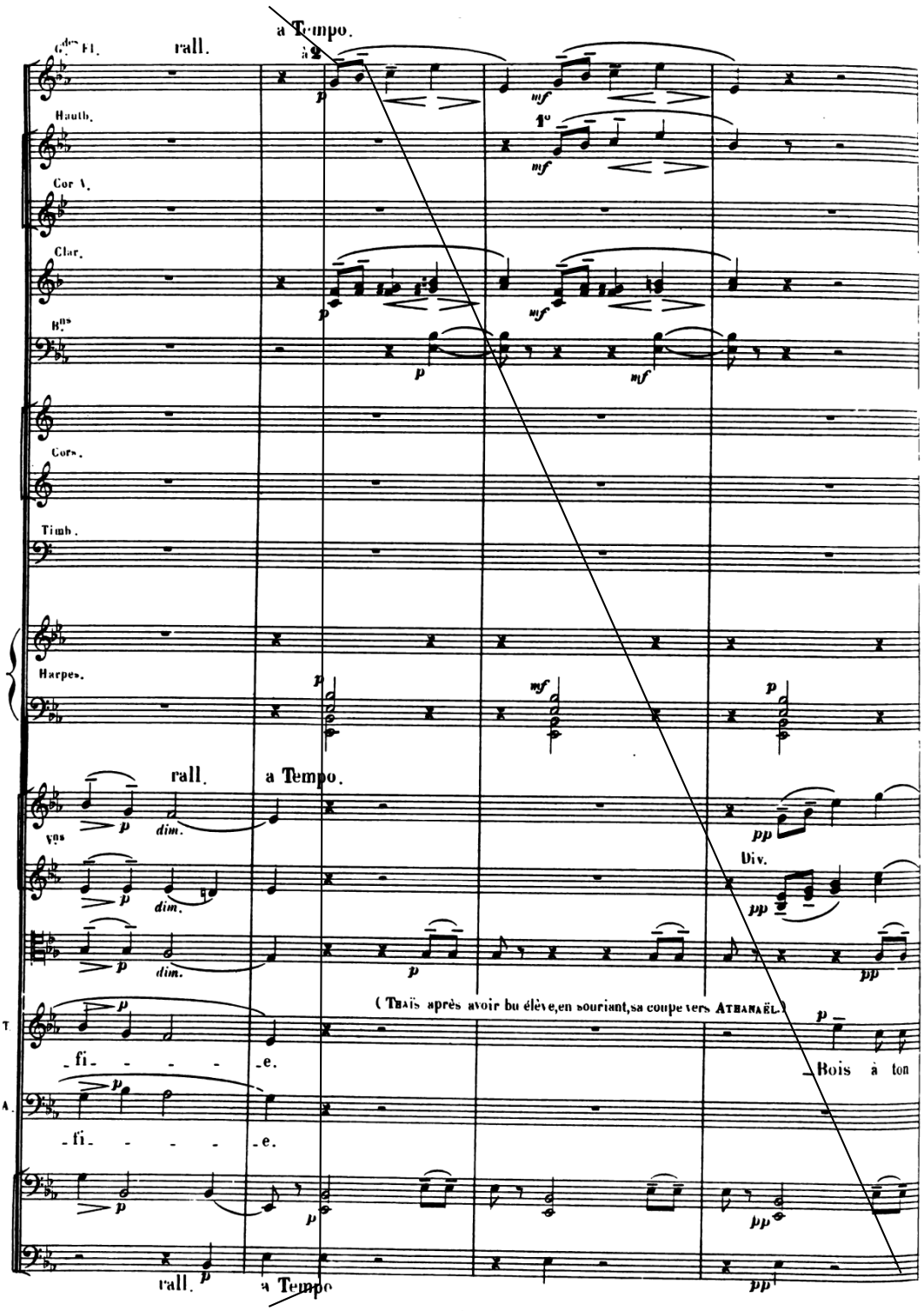
Example 11: *Baigne d'eau mes mains et mes lèvres*; Act III, Scene 1, orchestra number 21–23(-4)




Gdes Fl.
à 2
Haulb.
Cor A.
Clar.
Bns
Cors.
Timb.
Harpes.
mf
Vns
Div.
sempre pp
dol.
T.
mains et mes lè_ _ vres, don_ne ces fruits, dou_ne ces fruits. Bai_gne d'eau mes
A.
mains et mes lè_ _ vres, goûte à ces fruits, goûte à ces fruits. Bai_gne d'eau tes


Gdes Fl.
Hauth.
Cor A.
Clar.
Bns
Cors.
Timb.
Harpes.
Vns
Unis.
dol.
mains et mes lè - - vres. Ma vie est à toi, ma vie est à toi, Dieu te la con -
mains et tes lè - - vres. Ta vie est à moi, ta vie est à moi, Dieu me la con -
Unis.
pizz.


Hauth.
Cor A.
Clar.
Cors.
Timb.
fi - - - - - e. Je t'ap-par - tiens. Ma vie est à toi, Dieu te la con - -
fi - - - - - e. Tu m'ap-par- tiens. Ta vie est à moi, Dieu me la con - -
sempre pizz



5.4.6 Act III, Scene 2

Athanaël is back with his community of monks, who have noticed how haggard and broken he looks and that he neither eats nor drinks. When they are alone he confesses to Palémon that he has no peace anymore and that he is tormented, not

only by the beauty of Thaïs, but by visions of sensual pleasure. Palémon realises that they have lost Athanaël and sadly bids him farewell, but not before reminding him of his own warning at the start of this journey not to mix with worldly people.

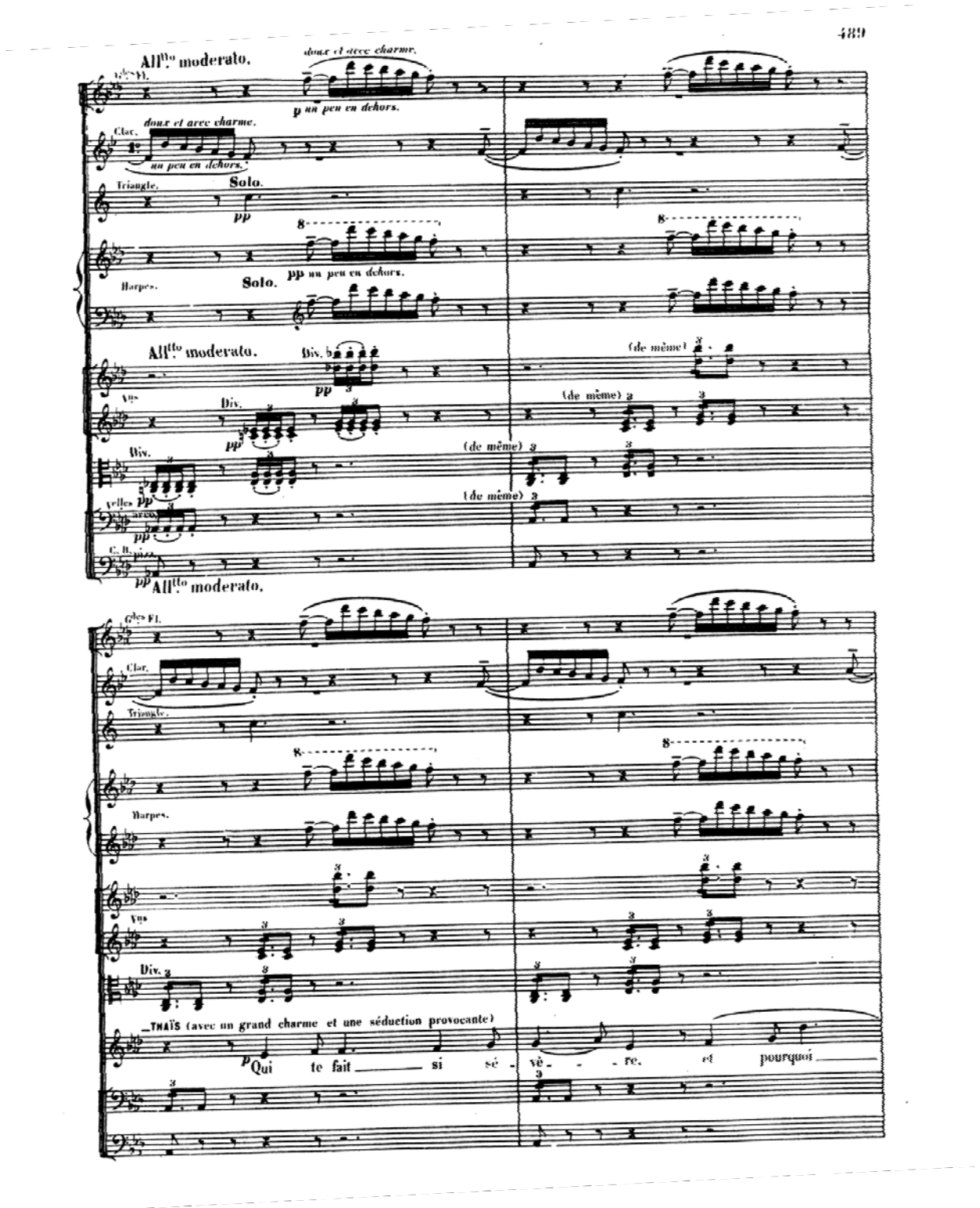
That night Athanaël has another vision. During the first part of the vision Thaïs appears to him in all her sensual glory, singing the same music, *Qui te fait si sévère* (Why are you so stern), in a slightly extended format, which she sang at the banquet in Act I, scene 2.

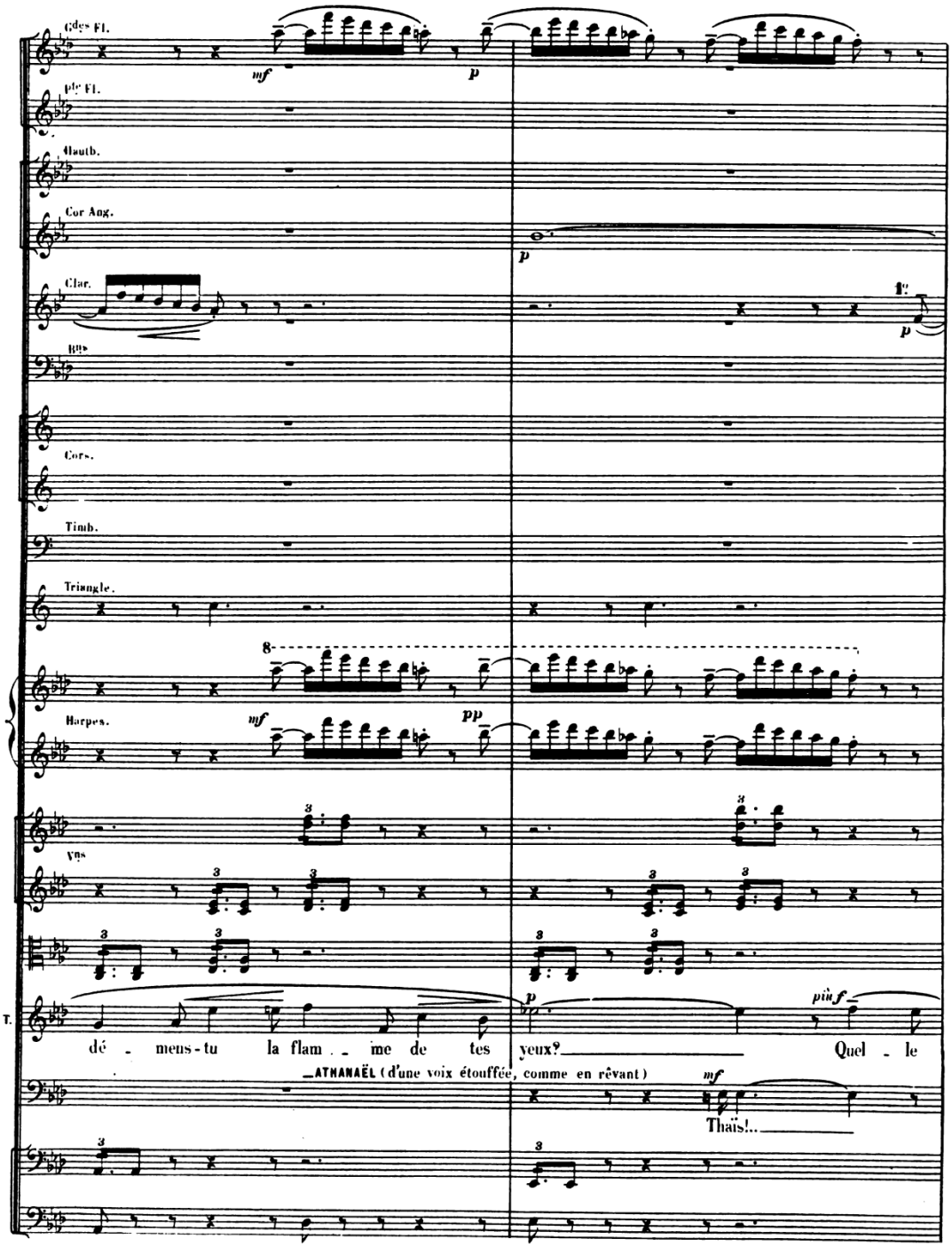
This first section of Athanaël's second vision is in a flowing compound quadruple meter (12/8). The vision is introduced through a lively descending semiquaver motif, shared between the sweet sound of the flute, doubled by the harp, and the warmer tone of the clarinet, each time repeating the motif an octave lower. The impression it creates is that of two people, possibly a woman and a man, calling one another to a game. This motif accompanies the winding, legato vocal line throughout, until Thaïs is interrupted by Athanaël's "*Ah! Satan!"*

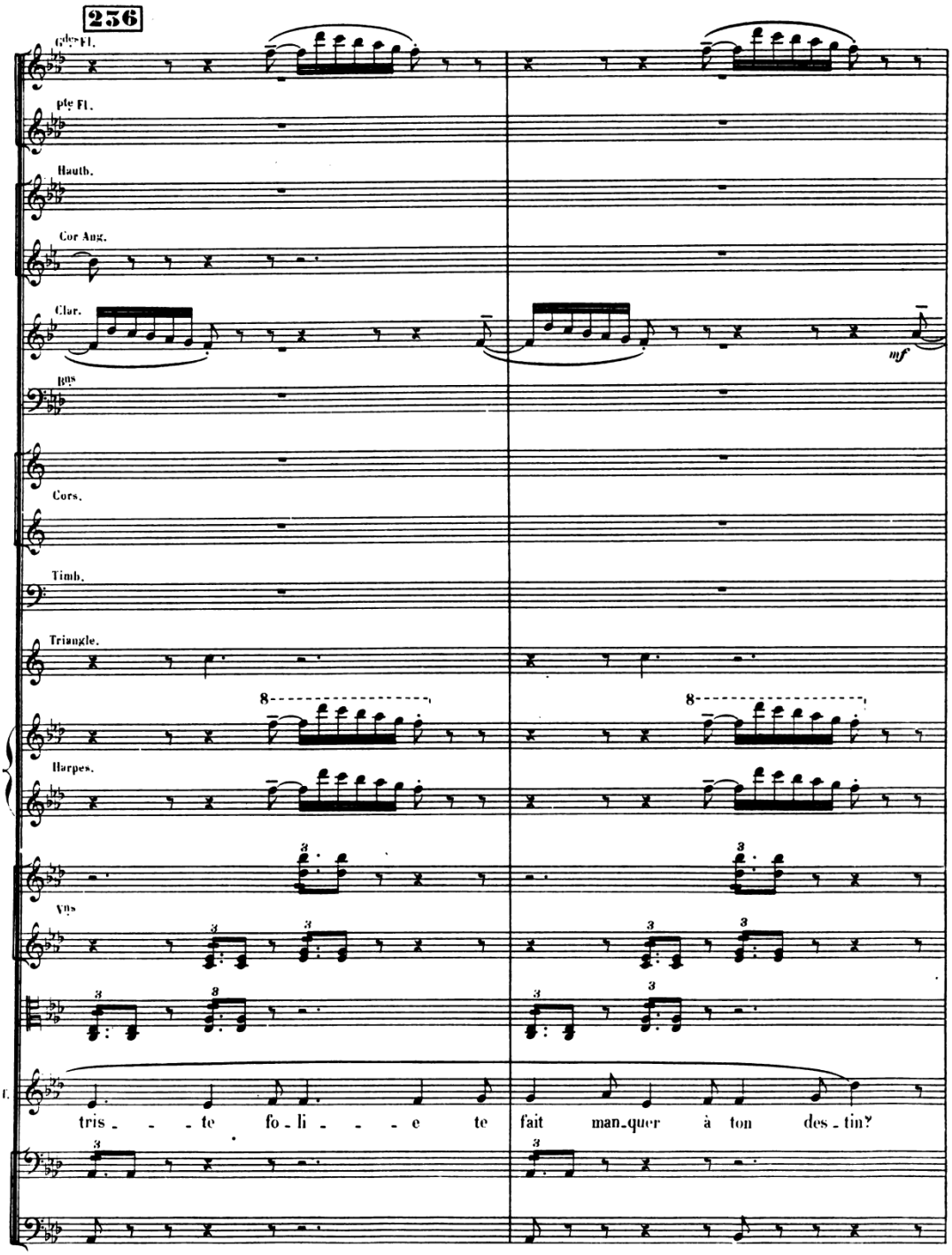
The score indication when the soprano starts is *"avec un grand charme et une seduction provocante"* and the charm is reflected by the swaying melody. Here the soprano sings relatively long phrases, alternating phrases that ascend stepwise with those that wind their way up and down, including several large jumps of up to an octave. Within the stepwise movement, Massenet creates excitement by anticipating, on the third quaver of the beat, each upward movement which happens on the beat.

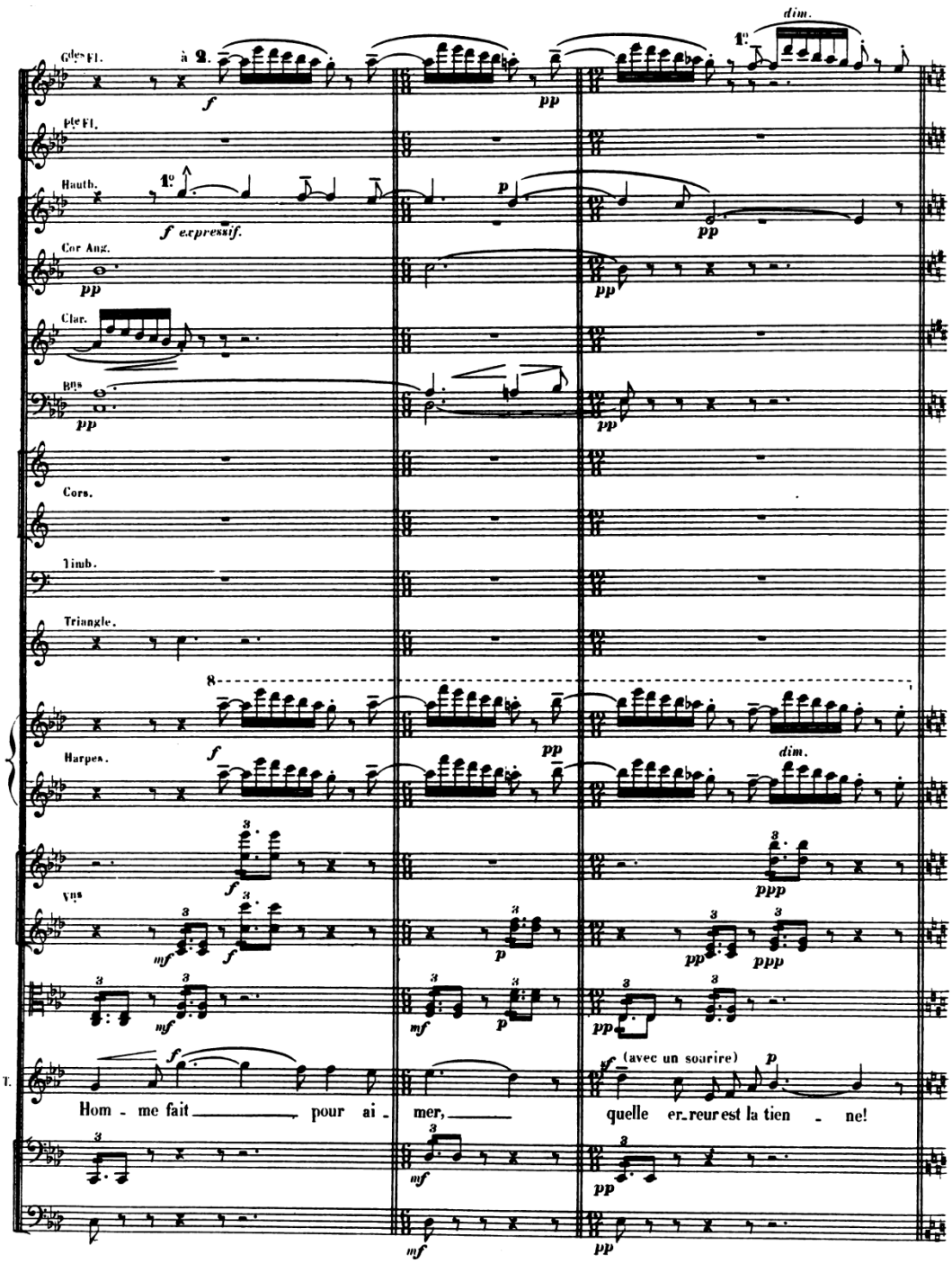
When Athanaël calls out to exorcise Satan, his agitation is reflected in the chromatic harmony and dissonance in the orchestra. After this interjection there is nothing gentle in Thaïs' incitement of the monk anymore. The meter is simple quadruple (4/4) and the tempo has quickened to *Allegro* as Thaïs calls on him to obey Venus. Her voice rises to the extremities of the soprano range, when Thaïs bursts out laughing. Massenet did not simply add a score indication for a laugh; he wants each renewed burst of laughter to increase in pitch. The pitch indication is a challenge for most sopranos, resulting in a disturbing, almost ominous sound. The soprano line in this section stretches across a challenging range of two octaves.

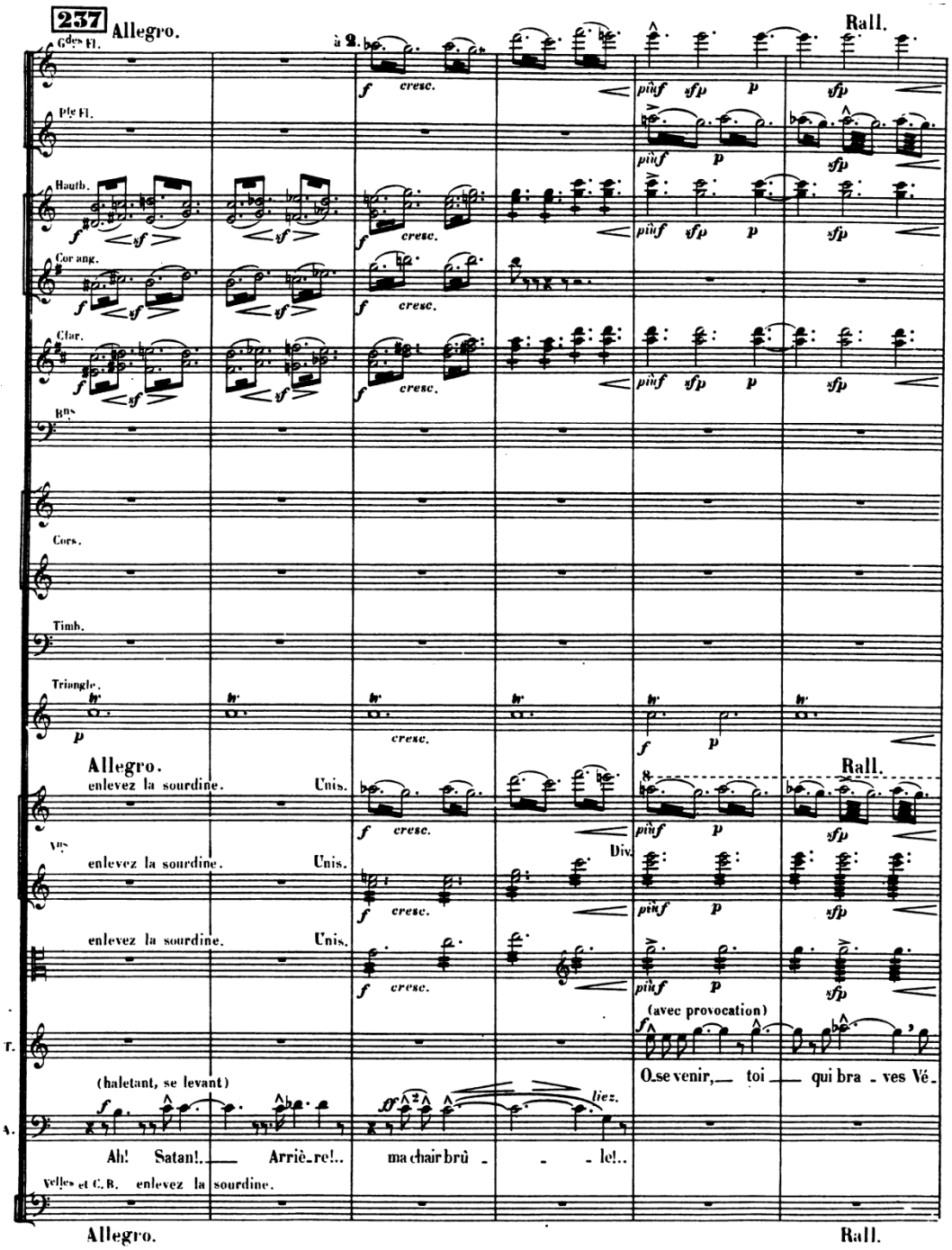
Example 12: *Qui te fait si sévère*; Act III, Scene 2, orchestra no. 236(-4)–238

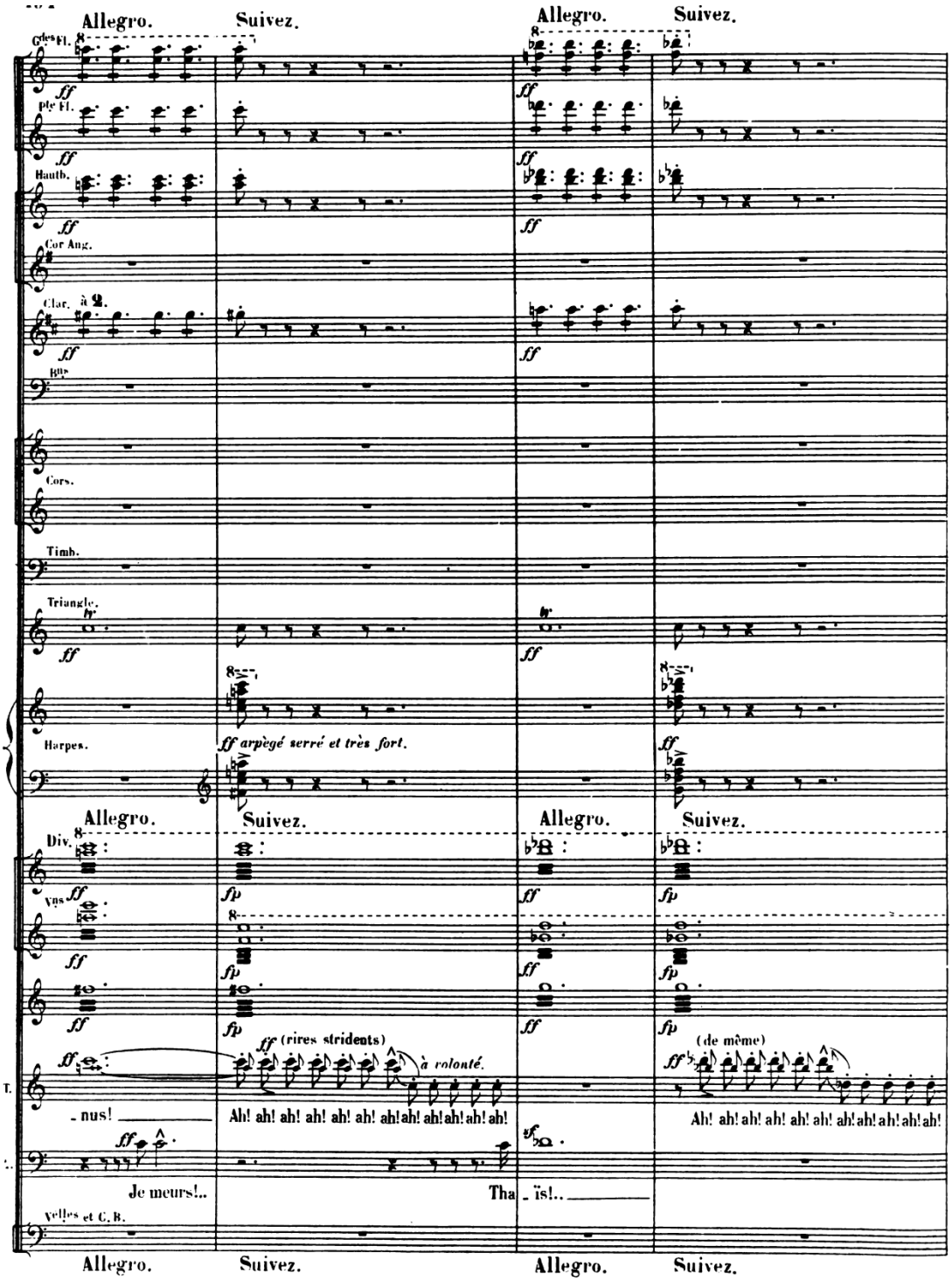


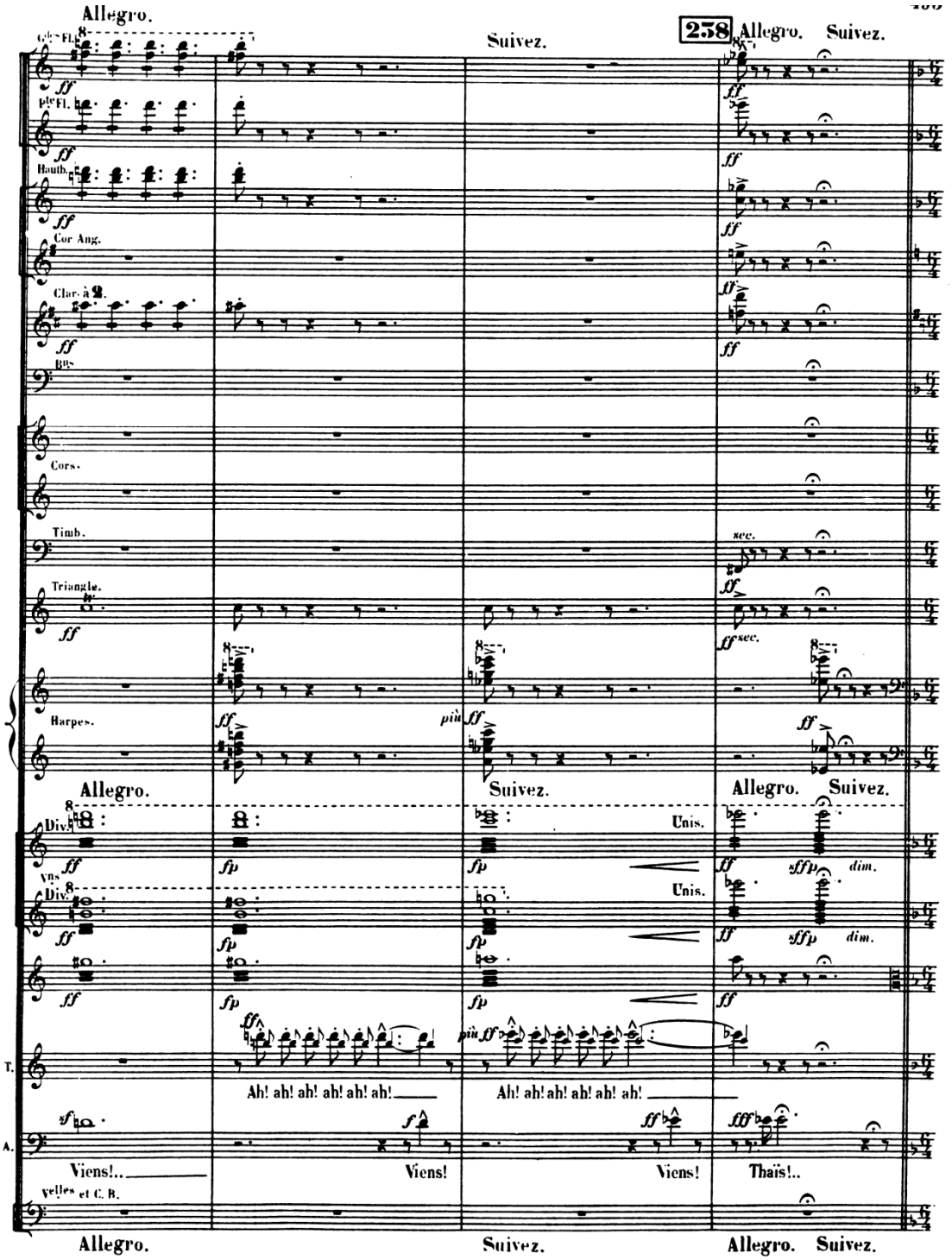

Gdes Fl.
Ptes Fl.
Hautb.
Cor Ang.
Clar.
Bns
Cors.
Timb.
Triangle.
Harpes.
Vns
T.
mf
p
pp
più f
dé - mens-tu la flam - me de tes yeux? Quel - le
ATHANAËL (d'une voix étouffée, comme en rêvant)
Thaïs!...


256
Gde Fl.
pte Fl.
Hauth.
Cor Ang.
Clar.
mf
Bns
Cors.
Timb.
Triangle.
Harpes.
Vns
tris - - - te fo - li - - - e te fait man-quer à ton des - tin?


Grdes Fl.
à 2.
dim.
Ptes Fl.
Hauth.
1°
f expressif.
p
pp
Cor Ang.
Clar.
Bns
Cors.
Timb.
Triangle.
Harpes.
dim.
Vns
ppp
(avec un soarire)
T.
Hom - me fait pour ai - mer,
quelle er-reur est la tien - ne!


237
Allegro.
Rall.
Gdes Fl.
Pte Fl.
Hautb.
Cor ang.
Clar.
Bns
Cors.
Timb.
Triangle.
Allegro.
enlevez la sourdine.
Unis.
Vns
Div.
(avec provocation)
T.
(haletant, se levant)
Ah! Satan!.. Arriè-re!..
ma chair brû - - le!..
O.se venir, toi qui bra - ves Vé-
liez.
Velles et C.B. enlevez la sourdine.
Allegro.
Rall.


Allegro.
Suivez.
Allegro.
Suivez.
Grdes Fl.
Pte Fl.
Hautb.
Cor Ang.
Clar. à 2.
Bns
Cors.
Timb.
Triangle.
Harpes.
ff arpègé serré et très fort.
Allegro.
Suivez.
Allegro.
Suivez.
Div.
Vns
ff (rires stridents)
à volonté.
(de même)
- nus!
Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah!
Ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah! ah!
Je meurs!..
Tha - ïs!..
Violles et C. B.
Allegro.
Suivez.
Allegro.
Suivez.



Then the vision changes, showing her as she lies in the shade of a tree, surrounded by the White Sisters who are proclaiming that she is dying. Athanaël is distraught and questions his religion and everything he believed in. It is only when he believes that Thaïs is dying that he realises he cannot live without her.

5.4.7 Act III, Scene 3

Albine and the White Sisters are kneeling around a motionless Thaïs. The abbess reveals how Thaïs constantly kept vigil, prayed and wept to the extent that her penitence has weakened her body and is killing her. Her body is indeed now "shattered", seemingly in fulfilment of Nathanaël's harsh injunction at the oasis that this was a requirement to rid her of sin. Thaïs' broken body also refers back to her description of herself as a "fragile idol" (act I, scene 2). After all the hardship she has now been purified and heaven is waiting for her. Athanaël arrives and, "overcome with grief" (Massenet, 2000b:163), confesses his love to the dying Thaïs, telling her that he has lied about the existence of heaven – only the love of human beings is real. Thaïs hears nothing. She is ecstatic and already sees angels, prophets and saints and hears the sound of heavenly voices as she dies and is transported to heaven, leaving Athanaël distraught. The sinner has attained salvation and the pious monk has lost his faith.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter describes Thaïs the historical figure, as described by Hrotswitha of Gandersheim and Anatole France. Trends in *fin-de-siècle* writing, which is when France wrote his novel, included sexual freedom, the use of historical themes and exoticism, which often had sexual overtones, as is seen in *Thaïs*. In the opera, as in the novel we see the intersection of piety and sensuality with, on the one hand, the sensual courtesan attaining salvation and on the other, the pious monk damned to suffer eternal torment. The opera merges a tale of human psychology with complex, innovative music which arguably does not receive due recognition from the public. The close readings of libretto and score investigated the ways in which Massenet articulates piety and sensuality and these findings, along with those in Chapter 4 will determine if Massenet used characteristic compositional techniques to express these two themes.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This research study set out to explore the expression of piety and sensuality in the music of the operas *Manon* and *Thaïs* by Jules Massenet. Chapter 1 was an introduction to the research, and included the rationale, contextualisation and aims of the research, as well as the research questions to be answered. In Chapter 2 the research design and methods used to adequately answer the research questions were explained. Chapter 3 consisted of an exploration of the socio-historical context of piety and sensuality, the *Zeitgeist* of nineteenth-century France, and Massenet and his music. Chapter 4 comprises of a description of a close reading of the libretto and music of *Manon*, while in Chapter 5 a close reading of the libretto and music of *Thaïs* is explained. Chapter 6 will comprise a summary and the conclusions of the study.

6.2 Piety, sensuality and Massenet

A review of the existing literature revealed piety as characterised by dedication and obedience to God or the gods, and parents. According to the Christian faith, embracing piety allows for reconciliation with God and forgiveness of sins. A sensual person is described as someone who is in touch with and indulges in matters related to the senses: touch, sight, sound, smell and taste. Sensuality is described as warmth and confidence radiating from an individual that resonates with someone else to the extent that it ignites desire within that person. Courtesans are often viewed as the epitome of sensuality.

The turbulence of the nineteenth century brought about a particular state of mind, or *Zeitgeist*. Emotions were portrayed with passion and passion meant suffering. Popular literary topics that made their way into opera included secularism and sexual freedom. These are reflected in Massenet's work and often serve as a backdrop to the themes of piety and sensuality that are prevalent in his stage works. It is not clear why this is so and it might simply be due to his reputed love for and appreciation of women.

6.3 Piety and sensuality in the libretti of *Manon* and *Thaïs*.

An inverse relationship exists between the lives of Manon and Thaïs. The 15-year-old Manon is on her way to a convent when she runs away with a man and a year later she becomes a courtesan, while Thaïs is a courtesan at the height of her powers when she converts to Christianity and spends the rest of her days in complete isolation, doing penance for her sins.

Manon is arguably one of the most sensual characters in opera: sensuality rules her life and she lives for pleasure. It soon became clear that, even her rare moments of piety, or pseudo-piety, are infused with sensuality. As a priestess of Venus, goddess of love, Thaïs is a confident and poised woman who does not doubt her sensual powers – she is used to the desire that she ignites in men and their adoration of her wherever she goes. Her insecurities surface only when she is alone in her own home. When she turns to piety it is pure and complete.

The exploration of the themes of piety and sensuality presented in Chapter 3 informed the identification of these two attributes in the libretti. The acts and expressions that point to piety in the lives of Manon and Thaïs are a commitment to God, sincere prayer, showing remorse for wrongdoing, asking for forgiveness and penitence. Manon never makes a commitment to God, but before she dies, she admits to the pain she has caused Des Grieux and begs his forgiveness. Thaïs makes a decision to turn from sin and commits her life to God. She then spends the rest of her days in prayer and penitence.

6.4 Piety and sensuality in the music of *Manon* and *Thaïs*.

The close reading of the music of *Manon* and *Thaïs* revealed that Massenet used certain identifiable compositional techniques to express piety and sensuality in his music. Variation in the musical treatment of the two themes are found when they are embedded within one another, as is evident in Manon's apologies to Des Grieux in both the Saint-Sulpice duet and *Je me hais et* maudis, illustrating the passionate and emotional nature of Manon's piety. This connection between piety and sensuality can also be heard in the use of an "oriental" sound in sections of Thaïs's music, such as in *Père, Dieu m'a parlé*, where the orchestral accompaniment has a distinct oriental and sensual character. Thirdly, *Baigne d'eau mes mains et mes*

lèvres is akin to a pious love duet for Thaïs and Athanaël and therefore it has some sensual characteristics.

For the expression of piety, Massenet set the music in simple triple or quadruple meter without fail. These sections are usually in a moderate tempo, but the passionate nature of Manon's piety is portrayed through the use of a faster tempo.

Recitative-style singing, which is closer to normal speech, is used in various ways, but most often relating to *recitativo accompagnato*. In accordance with the style, the vocal line stays within a limited range of more or less an octave. Only in *Je me hais et maudis* is the tessitura higher than that of most recitatives, which is indicative of Manon's anxiety. Staying within the character of recitative, the vocal line either moves stepwise, or in relatively small intervals.

A warm orchestral sound is attained by using mainly woodwind instruments and string instruments, creating a comforting, mellow atmosphere, enhanced by a dynamic level that varies between very soft and medium. In order to create the 'oriental' sound he envisioned for *Thaïs*, Massenet occasionally made use of unusual instruments, such as a clavier de timbre and a tambourine (*Père, Dieu m'a parlé*).

The orchestra often progresses in a chordal fashion and regularly doubles the vocal line. This movement results in a sound which often resembles church music, thereby emphasising the religious tone in the libretto. Within this structure Massenet often places a sighing motif which lends a sad character to the music.

A wider variety of techniques are used to express sensuality. Massenet uses compound meter in these sections, which lends a certain flexibility and swing to the music. Compound duple, triple and quadruple meter are all used and he sometimes switches between these three within a musical number. Only in *N'est-ce plus ma main* did he use 4/4, although the tempo is so slow that the effect is that of 8 in the bar. This leisurely 8 in combination with a great amount of rhythmic freedom also present in some of the other sections, lends the same sensual and playful character to the music as does the use of compound meter.

The vocal range in these sections is often quite extensive, as the vocal line winds its way up and down, constantly changing pitch and jumping across large intervals. Coloratura passages, embellishments and trills bring excitement and represent the confidence of the sensual being. Massenet often adds laughter to these sections, writing it out in musical notation in order to achieve the required result. A wide dynamic range from *pianissimo* - *fortissimo* is used for expressive purposes.

The orchestral accompaniment in these sections often exists of soft, sustained chords over which the voice soars autonomously and freely, roaming without constraint. Massenet regularly makes use of tremolos in the string section, as well as energetic rhythms to add excitement to the music. He also uses a technique in which the orchestra comments on a motif or figure which was just heard in the voice, acting as affirmation and reinforcement of the prose.

Ultimately it became clear that Massenet used a variety of compositional techniques specific to either piety or sensuality. These techniques can be identified through an analysis or reading of the music. It is also possible for a listener, especially one with a trained ear, to recognise piety and sensuality in the music. This is due to the fact that Massenet had the skill to combine these techniques in a way that results in a sound that is recognisably linked to a feeling such as joy, sadness or fear, or the attributes of piety and sensuality.

6.5 Limitations of the study

As the study progressed, a few limitations came to light. It became increasingly clear that Manon never fully turns to piety. There are glimpses in the opera of piety in her life, but it turned out that the way in which piety manifests in her life is always passionate, emotional and infused with sensuality. It also seems that, to her, domestic life has a certain religious meaning and that could be the closest that she ever comes to true piety. This could be the topic of a future research project.

Manon speaks autonomously in her own voice throughout the opera. She is an open book and her emotions and actions all play out in front of the audience. This is not the case with Thaïs, whose struggles happen offstage. Athanaël is in many

ways Thaïs' mouthpiece and we learn a lot about her and her life through him, a secondary source.

Within the scope of this study it was possible to use only a select number of sections from the score for the music reading. Both scores contain many more nuanced and interconnected references to piety and sensuality that warrant closer investigation.

6.6 Recommendations for future research

Firstly, as *Manon* and *Thaïs* could very well be two roles in the repertoire of one soprano, it would be valuable to compare the vocal challenges posed by the music that is specifically composed to reflect piety and sensuality within the roles.

Secondly, during this study it came to the fore that Manon has a distinct narcissistic side to her personality and that it plays a big role in her ultimate downfall. It would be of interest to investigate the implications of Manon's narcissism in her own life and on the lives of those close to her.

Thirdly, this study focuses on the manifestation of piety and sensuality in the lives of the eponymous characters. During the reading of the libretto it became clear that Des Grieux has a lot to add to the piety discourse, while the monk Athanaël is a frustrated and angry man who has a passionate and sensual nature. It would be of interest to explore the difference in Massenet's treatment of piety and sensuality between the male and female characters.

Finally, an in-depth study into the cross-referencing in *Thaïs* through the use of motifs would uncover the complex back story of the opera, which is not evident without thorough investigation. Massenet was influenced by Wagner in the use of motifs, but developed his own innovative ways of using them to enhance his operas.

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