

(full version of abridged article in The Independent early May, as published in Jessica's blog)

Goethe and Werther

By Jessica Duchon

It's been a week here of French Opera Based On Goethe, with Covent Garden's Werther and ENO's The Damnation of Faust opening within 24 hours of each other. I'll post a link as soon as my review of the latter is available on the website. Meanwhile here's the feature-length version of my 'Observations' piece about Werther. Plus a little sample of Massenet at his dusky, sexy best.

I'll be at the performance on Wednesday night. The question everyone's too scared to ask is 'Can Villazon still sing?' Ed Seckerson says he can and does. But the only samples of him in Werther on Youtube date back a few years and are kind of distressing at times, so for now here is, uh, someone else.

Jules Massenet's opera Werther is opening at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. And, looking at its origins, it seems amazing that this morbid, sugary and really rather French creation should be the chief stage version of Goethe's searing novella The Sorrows of Young Werther. The book was written when the great German poet was only 24 and it was first published as early as 1774. Mozart was 18 at the time, Beethoven a toddler and Schubert not yet born. Goethe revised the book in 1787. But Massenet's opera did not appear until over a century later, in 1892.

I've been hunting for earlier operatic adaptations of Goethe's story and so far have drawn a blank. It's possible that the novella, which was based on Goethe's own experience of unrequited love and bore an uncanny parallel with the suicide of a friend, may have scared composers away. It was a scandal-ridden bestseller that sparked a fashion craze, revolutionary concerns and a spate of copycat suicides; several authorities banned it. Perhaps it was just too famous, too dangerous, too enticing. It could no more have been turned into an opera in its own time than could Lady Chatterley's Lover.

Goethe's tale describes the passion of a young poet for the pragmatic Charlotte. His love seems unrequited; she marries another man; finally Werther shoots himself. The book is terse and spare; its most emotional passages are swathes of translated poetry supposedly by Ossian, mirroring Werther's turbulent feelings as he reads it aloud to Charlotte. He resolves to die not because Charlotte does not love him, but because it turns out, too late, that she does.

The story looks perfect for adaptation by a German romantic – Schubert, Schumann, Weber or Mendelssohn; and Brahms requested that his Piano Quartet in C minor should be published with an illustration of Werther on its cover. Yet all these composers missed the chance to create an opera that did justice to the author.

Massenet (1842-1912) finally muscled in where his peers feared to tread. Beside Goethe's original, his version can look desperately sentimental: Werther dies by inches in Charlotte's arms while the tragedy is offset by anodyne Christmas scenes for kiddiwinks. Nevertheless, parts of Werther remain peculiarly magical. Massenet was famed for his expert orchestration, and the opera owes much to this: the hero has his own soundworld, darkly translucent, replete with harp and low strings, and his aria 'Pourquoi me reveiller?' is a serious showstopper.

Highly successful in his day, Massenet wrote as many as 25 operas; aged 36, he became the youngest member ever elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts. He knew exactly how to pander to the public. Debussy described his situation pithily: "His brethren could not easily forgive Massenet this power of pleasing which, strictly speaking, is a gift. His is a delightful kind of fame, the secret envy of many of those great artists who can only warm their hands at the somewhat pallid flame provided by the approbation of the elect."

As a professor of composition at the Paris Conservatoire, Massenet coached fine youngsters including Ernest Chausson and Charles Koechlin. But eventually, with the rise of more forward-thinking musicians including Debussy himself, Ravel and ultimately Messiaen, the sepia glow of such romanticism faded substantially from view.

Werther, though, has a secret weapon: it is a glorious vehicle for a star tenor. Recently, new high-profile performers have aided its resuscitation, notably Jonas Kaufmann. Now, at the ROH, Rolando Villazón is to take the title role, after a chequered period of vocal problems that has seen him testing an alternative career as TV presenter and talent show judge. The Mexican singer is a passionate performer who pours heart and soul into music and acting alike. All eyes will be on him in the hope he can rise to the challenge of this mysteriously mesmerising work.

Werther opens at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, on 5 May. Box office: 020 7304 4000