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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Massenet?s Manon - Masterpiece Reborn

Vienna State Opera, 18.01.2026 [ENA]

In January 2026 the famous Vienna State Opera presented a luminous and deeply moving performance of Jules Massenet's Manon, a cornerstone of French lyric drama that continues to captivate audiences with its blend of passion, elegance, and psychological nuance. This production was under the poised direction of Andrei Serban and the musical leadership of Bertrand de Billy.

This production revealed anew the emotional richness and timeless relevance of Massenet's score, while a superlative cast delivered one of the most compelling evenings of vocal drama in this season's repertoire cycle. Celebrated for its beguiling melodies and richly expressive orchestration, Manon is the epitome of Belle Époque opera — simultaneously opulent and intimate in its portrayal of youthful desire, moral conflict, and tragic consequence. This particular staging at the Vienna State Opera struck just the right balance between refined musicality and theatrical immediacy, affirming the work's rightful place not just as a period gem but as a living, breathing drama for the modern stage.

Massenet's Manon tells the story of a young woman whose life teeters between love and luxury, between the ardent devotion of the young chevalier and the seductive allure of wealth and status. Based on the 18th-century novel by Abbé Prévost, the opera tracks Manon's journey from a convent-bound innocent to a woman torn by conflicting desires, culminating in a heartrending finale that underscores both her agency and her vulnerability.

The narrative unfolds across a richly varied musical landscape: from spirited ensemble numbers and tender duets to moments of profoundly introspective lyricism. Central to its impact are two figures whose voices and destinies are inextricably intertwined — Manon Lescaut herself and her devoted lover, Le Chevalier des Grieux. This evening's performance brought these roles to life with extraordinary dramatic insight and vocal artistry.

At the heart of this production was the performance of Kristina Mkhitaryan as Manon. Her portrayal was nothing short of revelatory — a seamless fusion of vocal brilliance, emotional candor, and theatrical flair that captured Manon in all her complexity. From her first appearance, Mkhitaryan's voice commanded attention: poised between youthful freshness and expressive maturity, her soprano embodied the charm, wit, and fragility that define Manon's character. In her Act I scenes, where Manon first encounters Des Grieux and the glittering temptations of high society, Mkhitaryan's phrasing was radiant, agile, and intimately

Redaktioneller Programmdienst:
European News Agency

Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
Email: contact@european-news-agency.com
Internet: european-news-agency.com

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colored — conveying both the character's innate allure and her restless curiosity about the world beyond convention.

What set this performance apart was not simply vocal beauty, but dramatic intelligence. Mkhitaryan invested each phrase with purpose, so that even the subtlest inflection hinted at the internal conflicts roiling beneath Manon's surface. Her ability to shift effortlessly between flirtation and introspection, between spirited bravura and poignant vulnerability, lent the character a rare psychological immediacy.

Perhaps the most memorable aspect of her portrayal was the way Mkhitaryan balanced Manon's dual impulses — the yearning for love and the temptation of wealth — without reducing the character to stereotype. Even as her Manon succumbed to Brétigny's gilded world, there was never a sense of simple moral collapse; instead, Mkhitaryan illuminated the painful humanity of her choices, making the eventual tragedy all the more affecting.

If Manon's presence was the emotional core of the evening, then Benjamin Bernheim's portrayal of Le Chevalier des Grieux was its abiding heartbeat. Bernheim, a tenor of international renown, brought to the role a richness of tone, a fluid line, and a level of engagement that transcended mere vocal splendour. From his tender initial exchanges with Manon to his later confrontations with heartbreak and moral disillusion, Bernheim's Des Grieux was magnificent in its lyric ardour and spiritual depth. His phrasing was exquisitely calibrated: ardent yet never unmoored, expressive yet never indulgent.

In his duets with Mkhitaryan, the emotional chemistry between the two voices was palpably electric, each line reinforcing the narrative's sense of passionate, fateful attachment.
Bernheim's Act III monologue — where Des Grieux resolves to win back Manon's love by any means necessary — was a highlight of the evening. Here, his focus and control allowed the music's emotional arc to unfold with striking clarity, enabling the listener to hear not just a beautifully sung line, but the character's inner turmoil laid bare. It was a performance that married technical refinement with profound expressive force, reminding us why Des Grieux remains one of French opera's most rewarding dramatic roles.

While the evening belonged principally to Mkhitaryan and Bernheim, the supporting ensemble contributed significantly to the production's overall success. Stefan Astakhov as Lescaut brought a richly textured baritone and a nuanced sense of comic-dramatic presence, creating a vivid foil to both Manon and Des Grieux. Matheus França's Count des Grieux offered a stately contrast in timbre and temperament, while the roles of Brétigny, Poussette, Javotte, and Rosette were imbued with characterful ensemble work that added color and texture to the narrative tapestry.

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The Vienna State Opera Orchestra, led by Bertrand de Billy, was exemplary in its responsiveness and stylistic precision. De Billy shaped Massenet's sweeping score with a blend of lyrical warmth and rhythmic clarity, allowing the hall's acoustics and the singers' voices to shine without ever diminishing the score's dramatic undercurrents. In passages of celebration, longing, and lament, the orchestra's playing was richly expressive, yet always attentive to the singers' phrasing and pacing.

Director Andrei Serban's interpretation was both respectful of the opera's classic roots and refreshingly attuned to its psychological core. Rather than rely on overly literal sets or conventional period trappings, his staging emphasized the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the characters' journeys, allowing the production to unfold as a living drama rather than a static tableau.

The visual design, thoughtfully executed by set and costume designer Peter Pabst, offered a framework that was evocative without being indulgent. Costumes and settings suggested the shifting worlds of Manon — from provincial innocence to Parisian sophistication — but always served to foreground the characters' inner transformations rather than overshadow them. The lighting and movement cues supported the score's shifting moods, guiding the audience seamlessly through moments of celebration, conflict, and ultimate tragedy.

A performance such as this produces many unforgettable moments, which stood out for their emotional and musical resonance:
Act I's opening scenes, where the youthful vibrancy of the score was matched by Mkhitaryan and Bernheim's impassioned interplay.
The tender duets, where intimacy and conflict intertwined in beautifully balanced vocal lines.
Des Grieux's Act III resolve, delivered with striking vocal focus and dramatic commitment by Bernheim.
The tragic final tableau, where Mkhitaryan's Manon met her fate, evoking both sorrow and admiration for the character's complex human arc.
Each of these moments was shaped not merely by vocal excellence, but by interpretive depth — a sign of a production and cast wholly invested in the opera.

This was a triumph of musical and dramatic artistry. With a captivating central performance by Kristina Mkhitaryan and an ardent, lyrically radiant portrayal by Benjamin Bernheim, this production reaffirmed Manon's place as one of opera's most enduring and emotionally layered masterpieces. The collaboration of conductor Bertrand de Billy, director Andrei Serban, and a stellar ensemble ensured that every nuance of Massenet's score and Prévost's story was brought to life with clarity, passion, and subtlety. For aficionados of French opera and lovers of dramatic vocal theatre alike, this performance will be remembered as a definitively luminous interpretation — one that celebrated the art of opera at its most expressive and humane.

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https://culture.en-a.eu/kunst_kultur_und_musik/massenets_manon_masterpiece_reborn-92838/

Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:
V.i.S.d.P. und gem. § 6 MDStV: Dr. Nadejda Komendantova

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
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