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Manon

Vienna State Opera, 28.05.2026 [ENA]

At the Vienna State Opera, Kenneth MacMillan's Manon is a ballet of extraordinary emotional intelligence, and this production confirms why it remains one of the great masterpieces of the 20th-century repertory. Few ballets combine narrative clarity, psychological depth, and choreographic richness with such confidence. MacMillan does not simply tell a tragic love story.

He reveals a whole social world in which desire, money, vanity, and tenderness collide. The result is a work that feels both sumptuous and merciless, and yet, in the right hands, deeply human. What gives Manon its particular power is the way it balances glamour and ruin. From the very beginning, the ballet is caught between beauty and corruption, pleasure and danger. Manon herself is not just a coquettish heroine or a doomed romantic figure; she is a young woman pulled between emotional attachment and the seductions of wealth and status. MacMillan makes that conflict legible in movement. Every glance, every hesitation, every shift of weight becomes part of the drama.

In a strong performance, the audience feels that Manon's tragedy is not simply a matter of fate, but of irresistible human weakness and longing. The choreography demands not only technical brilliance but also a rare dramatic instinct. The pas de deux with Des Grieux are central to the ballet's architecture, and they require exceptional trust between the partners. These are not decorative duets; they are emotional negotiations. Manon and Des Grieux must seem genuinely in love, but also trapped in a relationship that is constantly threatened by circumstance and inner contradiction.

When danced well, these scenes generate an intensity that is almost operatic in scale, yet they remain unmistakably balletic in their fluidity and physical eloquence. The role of Manon is especially demanding because it requires the ballerina to move from sensual charm to vulnerability to tragic exhaustion without ever losing coherence. A successful interpreter must combine secure classical line with a highly responsive dramatic presence.

Manon must appear aware of the world's luxuries, yet never reduced to vanity; she must be alluring, but also frightened, emotionally open, and finally shattered. That emotional trajectory is one of the great tests in ballet, and it is precisely why the role can be so unforgettable when performed with conviction. Des Grieux, too, is a richly drawn role, and the best performances make him more than a passive lover. He is a man whose idealism is tested by desire and humiliation, and MacMillan gives him the kind of physical

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vocabulary that can express inner conflict without words. His variation and partnering scenes demand nobility, ardor, and desperation in equal measure.

One of the great strengths of Manon is its dramatic variety. The ballet moves from opulence to brutality, from social satire to lyrical intimacy, from the glitter of high society to the raw exposure of despair. That breadth gives the work an unusual richness. The crowd scenes, the cards game, the prison world, and the final swamp scene each belong to a different emotional climate, yet MacMillan binds them together with a strong theatrical logic. This makes the ballet feel not episodic but inexorable, as if each scene were drawing the characters closer to their destiny.

Musically, the ballet benefits enormously from Massenet's score, arranged and assembled to support the choreography with elegance and expressive color. The music is not just background; it acts as emotional commentary. Its lyricism, elegance, and occasional undercurrents of melancholy mirror the ballet's shifting moods beautifully. At the Vienna State Opera, where orchestral and theatrical standards are so high, Manon can achieve a particularly vivid marriage of sound and movement.

What makes this ballet so rewarding is its refusal to simplify its characters. Manon is sympathetic, but not innocent; Des Grieux is devoted, but not untouched by self-deception; the world around them is seductive, but also ruthless. That moral ambiguity is part of the ballet's greatness. It speaks to the complexity of love in a world shaped by money and power. When the final tragedy arrives, it does not feel imposed. It feels earned, devastating, and strangely beautiful. In the Vienna State Opera's hands, Manon becomes what the finest narrative ballet should be: emotionally exact, visually sumptuous, and unforgettable in its human truth.

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