

Opera Australia's Manon at the Opera House

By [Victor Kline](#) ArtsHub | Monday, January 18, 2010



SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE: Five stars out of five for music. Five for singing. Four for production values. Three for directing and acting.

In other words, if you came to the opening night of *Manon*, and like most opera goers you were only concerned about the singing and the music, then you would certainly have had a wonderful night. Indeed, concerned as I am with the dramatic components of Opera, I still had a wonderful night. The direction and acting were ordinary, but the singing and the music were superb and so carried the night.

Emmanuel Plasson's conducting was crisp, assured and subtle. The orchestra seemed to enjoy every moment of their work, and the audience was able to relax in the knowledge that the underpinning was secure and beautiful.

The singing was superb across the board. Amelia Farrugia as Manon was a delight, as were the other principals Kanen Breen as Guillot de Morfontaine, Richard Anderson as De Brétigny, José Carbó as Lescault, along with Taryn Fiebig, Amy Wilkinson, Jacqueline Dark and Stephen Bennett.

The chorus too was strong, unified and confident, and ensured the choral parts were all sparkle and verve.

With such great singing and such superb choral and ensemble work from everyone it seems slightly wrong to single out any one performer for special praise. Nonetheless one can't resist doing so. Julian Gavin as Le Chevalier Des Grieux gave one of the most flawless singing performances this writer has ever seen. It takes a lot these days to get the hairs standing up on the back of my neck, but listening to Gavin, I promise they were erect at all times.

I was amazed at the power and yet simultaneous sweetness of Gavin's voice. And I was especially impressed by his unerring sense of timing and projection. Every note was just as loud

and just as soft as the moment demanded, no more, no less. His range was assured, his pitch perfect. I think he has an amazing future ahead of him.

Designer Roger Kirk and Lighting Designer Trudy Dalglish created a beautiful, if somewhat conservative ambience, although I would suspect that any innovations they wished to present would have had difficulty getting past Director Stuart Maunder. It was here that I was disappointed. It was not a bad directing job, because the singing and the music in Opera, if done well, can cover a multitude of directorial sins.

Had this been a straight play however, the audience would have been asleep in no time. From the start Maunder had Kanen Breen playing Morfontaine to a ridiculously high camp degree. It makes no sense that a man obsessed with women would behave like that, and it shows that the director has thought very little about logical and natural characterisation.

More importantly, the Manon story has captured the imaginations of readers and opera goers ever since the Abbé Provost's novel first appeared in 1731 and Massenet's opera was first seen in 1884, and it has done so because the character of Manon is, or should be, such an enigmatic presence. Is she good or is she bad or is she somewhere in between? The interpretation has changed over the centuries as society has changed, but Manon has remained a vehicle, a touchstone for society's debates on sexuality, marriage and morals. Maunder addressed none of this and the character opportunities of Manon were missed.

Overall there was no attempt at characterisation or creative blocking. José Carbó put in some good acting despite the direction (or lack thereof) he would have been given, but the others did not emerge as real characters.

I realise that blocking and directorial concerns are more difficult in opera than in straight theatre for the simple reason that it is harder to manage huge casts and to get people being 'real' when they are trying for huge projection and difficult notes. But it is by no means impossible, and has been done countless times. After all these performers are professionals, and most have had extensive actor training. It would be perfectly plausible to have them think through their characters, and to place those characters on the stage in interesting ways, not just allow them to wander at random, till they found a spot to 'park and bark'.

Opera Australia's production of Manon by Jules Massenet is showing at the Opera Theatre at the Sydney Opera House

Dates: 15, 21, 23, 28 January, 3, 6 (matinee), 10, 13 February 2010.

Bookings: www.sydneyoperahouse.com

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Victor Kline started his working life as Sydney's youngest barrister. He is now Editor of the Federal Court Reports, and an award winning playwright, director and actor who has worked extensively in theatre in Sydney and off Broadway in New York. He is also author of the novel 'Rough Justice'.

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