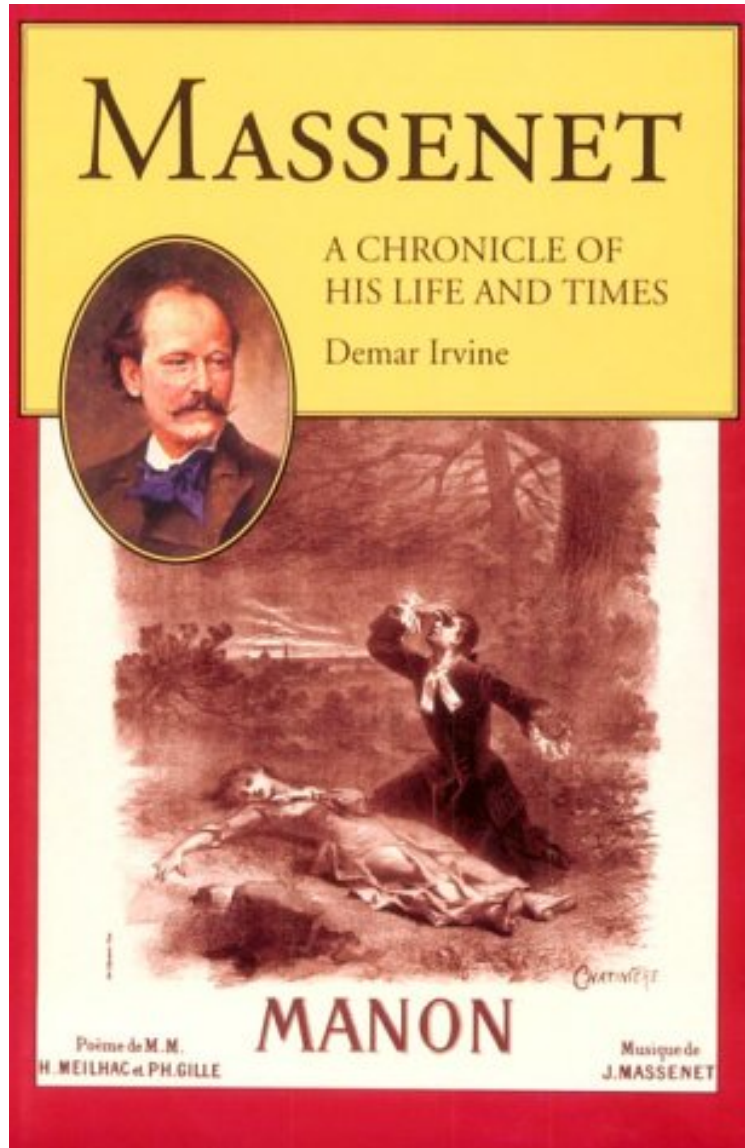


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## Massenet: A Chronicle of His Life and Times

*Demar Irvine*

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**Demar Irvine : Massenet: A Chronicle of His Life and Times** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Massenet: A Chronicle of His Life and Times:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. This is an excellent source of information not only of Massenet but the ...By Agneta D. Borgstedt MDThis is an excellent source of information not only of Massenet but the whole period from 1850 to 1912 when he died.Agneta D. Borgstedt Opera Guild of Rochester12 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Pendantic at Times, But Certainly Extremely UsefulBy Doug - Haydn FanMusicologist Demar Irvine

was repeatedly turned down in 1974 when he tried to publish his biography of French opera composer Jules Massenet. When no publisher would consider it, Irvine finally sent out a hundred typed copies to various places and assumed that was that. But Amadeus Press decided to offer his magnum opus, and here it is. There being no other recent book in English on Massenet, and precious little in French on the composer, it will have to do. Irvine is conscientious about his subject to a fault, one of those writers who often does not seem to be able or willing to differentiate between what belongs in the main text, what belongs in the footnotes, and what is best left out altogether. Although the title warns us this is not merely a bio of Massenet, but one of his "Life and Times", things frequently can become a bit much. For example, whole paragraphs are taken up sorting out the locations of Parisian buildings in the last century. Endless minor artists and figures receive the luxury of short bios. At times these notes on Massenet's contemporaries threaten to overwhelm the central character! The result is a book that at 400 pages might easily be cut by scores of pages. I have no idea how much Carol Odlum, the editor, trimmed from the original typescript, but it most certainly wasn't near enough. Despite these serious reservations, Irvine's work does offer an outstanding review of the life and works of Massenet. The operas are discussed in detail, with Irvine's incessant detailing paying dividends when it comes to the initial performances and casts, the public reaction, and so forth. I was most impressed with how remarkable an array of contemporary criticism is given on many works, and how sharp an eye some of the critics show - the writing on "Esclarmonde" has any number of apt phrases. Devotees of 19th Century opera will be happily served, for Irvine merrily relates for their delectation all the innumerable adventures and pitfalls of the Parisian stage of the Belle poque. Massenet the man emerges clearly - an extremely hard-working fellow with considerable talent. After a few tries he wins the Prix de Rome, comes back to France and marries well, survives the Franco-Prussian War, and has a Legion d'Honneur by July 1876: Throughout his life Massenet finds success and honor. An early admirer of Wagner, Massenet even at an early age shows himself to be a quick study and an artist at heart, listening to Wagner playing at the keyboard from Tannhuser in 1860, the young Frenchman notes approvingly how Wagner plays "like a musician, not at all like a pianist". Such charming moments - often taken from Massenet's own Memoirs, My Recollections are frequently found, delightful anecdotal oases in a larger sea of general facts. Perhaps the most vital picture of the composer the book reveals is that of someone never satisfied, restless, willing to shift directions in a continuing almost radical path. In preparing the young American soprano Sibyl Sanderson for the title role in "Esclarmonde" Massenet worked with her every evening, while orchestrating the score mornings. At one point he pushed her so hard she quit in an uproar, returning however the next day. The same work received "twenty-two rehearsals over two months at the Opra Comique, then a full fifty-seven stage rehearsals (including ten with orchestra)" over a period of another three months! Massenet scholar Grard Cond points out how Massenet gives us large grand operas such as "le Roi de Lahore" or "Hrodiade", only to be followed up by the utterly different style and tone with "Manon". "With each new opera, Massenet seemed to reach a point of no return. By choosing subjects as antithetical as possible to the ones preceding them, he kept himself on a jagged course, continually casting aside solutions that had become outmoded." And it's so true - Massenet composes the overblown "Le Cid" after "Manon", then reverses himself completely yet again with the intimacy of "Werther" - only to create the wildly showy "Esclarmonde", a super-spectacular quasi-Wagnerian work composed for the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. Readers today, most curious about all those 'other' unknown operas, should be very pleased with the author's efforts on their behalf, with all manner of contemporary reviews and talk. Some of Irvine's chapters, the best ones, overflow with so much activity and events the author's generally flat prose dazzles in reflection. Chapter 8 chronicles a historical record of such a superabundance of personal and cultural events - for once a reader might almost dare the author give more attention to details! And as the book precedes other winning chapters emerge, chapters abounding with interest, balancing and assuaging the author's tendency to wallow in numbing minutiae. All in all a very slow read, but an extremely useful work, perhaps to be faulted for giving us too much, sins of excess. For now Irvine's effort is surely the best introduction to Massenet. The author's enormous historical erudition does have its pluses along with its obvious tedium, and any reader wishing to put in the effort comes away with an excellent understanding of not only Massenet, but the entire Age his operas adorned. Amadeus includes a raft of photos of other composers and the many artists who appeared and premiered Massenet's works. There are also original posters, some of these latter quite fabulous creations. As befits such a book, a large very inclusive 32 page index offers tremendous browsing and research opportunities. A bibliographical section, with notes and references covers the field. Finally, a short discography, several appendixes, including one listing all the performances of Massenet operas in Paris from 1867-1915, and an appendix giving the composer's works, with all the songs listed in chronological groups.

5 of 7 people found the following review helpful. A good start.....but a long way to go! By Michael R. Butcher Having just finished Demar Irvine's biography of Jules Massenet, I am obliged to echo some of the previous reviewers comments. The book was overly long and could have been trimmed considerably. As a chronicle of Massenet's travels around Europe supervising his staged work productions it was meticulous, however did I get a "feel" for the man himself, not really. It did not help that Massenet was such a private person and seemed to be away from his family for considerable periods of time either composing or supervising. Nonetheless, if anybody reading this book is looking for an insight into the man's thinking, or his compositional methods, to wit: what made him tick..... you will be out of luck. Page 188 quotes a comment made by Massenet to Henri Busser

concerning his manner of composing and that's as far as we seem to go. In fair to Mr. Irvine, Massenet did not help matters by clearly writing his journals with the mentality of letting others know what he wanted them to know, sometimes a fraction romanticized. I am not aware if Mr. Irvine had the opportunity to examine correspondence of Massenet's music publishers, artists, librettists, and fellow composers, as well as others mentioned. Presumably if he had the book would have been significantly longer but undoubtedly more interesting reading. For those of us that have read De La Grange's biography of Mahler, Brown's Tchaikovsky, or Phillips-Matz's Verdi, Mr. Irvine's Massenet was left wanting. Unquestionably, further research will enlighten us more on a man (Massenet) who deserves comparison with the aforementioned.

This superbly detailed biography examines the life of Jules Massenet (1842--1912), who was at the heart of Parisian musical life during a period of extraordinary artistic vitality.

From Library Journal French composer Massenet (1842-1912) was a versatile and prolific composer whose output ranged from opera to chamber, ballet, orchestral, piano, and vocal music. He diligently wielded his gift for unusual melodic structure into lush compositions, gaining tremendous fame and wealth during his lifetime. Nonetheless, after his death his popularity waned. Irvine writes with scholarly ease, presenting intimate yet objective details of a highly visible member of an elegant society who at the same time enjoyed and jealously guarded his satisfying family life. An important contribution to music literature; highly recommended for serious music collections.- Kathleen Sparkman, Baylor Univ., Waco, Tex. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Kirkus sAll critical cavil (a surfeit of detail, less than elegant writing, etc.) is swept away by the fact that this book addresses a pressing and long-standing need: a full, well-researched, carefully structured biography--in English--of one of the most underrated, unfairly patronized composers of the past 150 years. While there are many good studies of Puccini in English, Massenet - arguably his superior--has received nothing approaching his due. Author Irvine (School of Music/Univ. of Washington) rectifies this situation with an opera-by-opera discussion interspersed among the facts of Massenet's life; he also illuminates the French social and artistic world at the end of the last century of which Massenet was an important (and popular) adornment. (Sixty-four bw photos--not seen) -- Copyright 1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. From the Back Cover This is a meticulously researched and superbly detailed biography of composer Jules Massenet, a musical prodigy who entered the Paris Conservatory at the age of ten in 1853 and was at the heart of Parisian musical life until his death in 1912. During his lifetime Massenet was one of the best known and most highly regarded musicians in all Europe. Although his works fell out of vogue for several decades after his death, the 1970s and 80s brought a renewal of interest in his work and a welcome series of new performances. Relying on primary sources for firsthand information, Irvine profiles the composer and draws a rich portrait of the fascinating era in which Massenet lived. The narrative begins in 1748 with the birth of Massenet's grandfather, details the composer's early years and family life, traces his educational career, and highlights important events in his life. This carefully documented biography of Massenet and his milieu is lively and readable, conveying a vivid sense of the life of a successful musician in the late nineteenth century. Along the way one meets numerous composers, conductors, singers, publishers, artists, writers, and critics - everyone who contributed to the exciting cultural ferment of the time. Massenet's Paris was the city of expositions, a magnet for artistic talent and innovative ideas. As Massenet composed his first operas, Cezanne, Degas, Monet, Renoir, and their compatriots were unveiling the new Impressionism; Bizet, Faure, Wagner, Offenbach, Debussy, and Saint-Saens were his musical contemporaries. Great operatic performers such as Sibyl Sanderson, Emma Calve, Mary Garden, Geraldine Farrar, and Feodor Chaliapin were eager to star in the premier of any new work by Massenet. The composer had many eminent students, including Gustave Charpentier, Lucien Hillemaicher, and Reynaldo Hahn. In this period of extraordinary artistic vitality, Massenet was applauded by his arch-rival Saint-Saens as a "sparkling diamond" of French music. Alfred Bruneau and Claude Debussy penned tributes upon his death, and Saint-Saens memorably commented, "Massenet has been much imitated; he imitated no one".