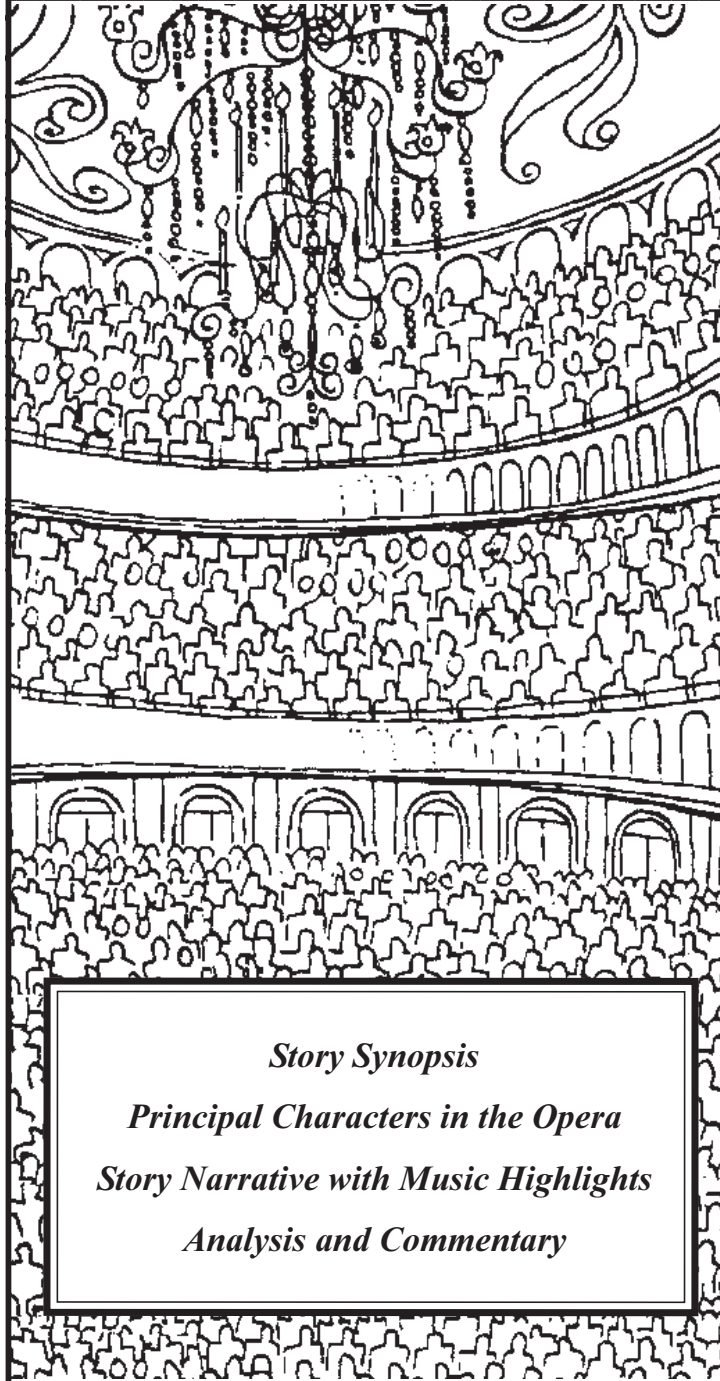


Werther

Opera Journeys Mini Guides Series



Story Synopsis

Principal Characters in the Opera

Story Narrative with Music Highlights

Analysis and Commentary



**Burton D. Fisher, editor,
*Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series***

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Werther

French opera in four acts

Music by Jules Massenet

**Libretto by Édouard Blau, Paul Milliet,
and Georges Hartmann,
after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel
*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers (The
Sorrows of Young Werther)***

Premiere:

Hofoper Theater, Vienna

February 1892

Adapted from the
Opera Journeys Lecture Series
by
Burton D. Fisher

<i>Principal Characters in Werther</i>	<i>Page 4</i>
<i>Brief Story Synopsis</i>	<i>Page 5</i>
<i>Story Narrative with Music Highlights</i>	<i>Page 6</i>
<i>Massenet and Werther</i>	<i>Page 15</i>

Opera Journeys Mini Guide Series

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Principal Characters in Werther

Werther, a young poet	Tenor
Le Bailli, a Magistrate	Bass
Charlotte, his daughter	Mezzo-soprano
Sophie, Charlotte's sister	Soprano
Albert, Charlotte's fiancé, later her husband	Baritone
Schmidt, a friend of the Bailli	Tenor
Johann, a friend of the Bailli	Baritone
Brühlmann, a young man	Tenor
Käthchen, a young girl	Soprano
Le Bailli's six other children (Hans, Gretel, Karl, Clara, Max, Fritz)	Children's voices
Townpeople of Wetzlar, guests, servants	

TIME:

About 1780 - July to December

PLACE:

Wetzlar, a town outside Frankfurt, Germany

Brief Synopsis

Werther, a young poet, has fallen in love with Charlotte, daughter of the widowed Bailli (a Magistrate). The fulfillment of his love for Charlotte is doomed because she is engaged to marry Albert, the man she promised her dying mother she would marry.

Werther escorts Charlotte to the town ball while Albert is absent on business matters. When Werther and Charlotte return from the ball, Werther makes an impassioned plea for her love, but she invokes her obligations and rejects him. Werther leaves, disappointed and despairing.

In autumn, at a church celebration of the pastor's golden wedding anniversary, Werther encounters Charlotte, apparently happy in her marriage to Albert. But he still yearns for her, regrets that he lost her to Albert, and becomes heartbroken, despairing, and inconsolable. Albert tells Werther how much he respects him for the honorable way in which he renounced his own love for Charlotte. And Charlotte advises him to stifle his passion by leaving Wetzlar for a few months. Werther is unable to cope with his loss and considers suicide.

Three months later, on Christmas Eve, Charlotte reads Werther's letters. She admits for the first time that she truly loves Werther. When Werther returns, they embrace. But Charlotte becomes filled with guilt and remorse; she rushes away and locks herself in her room.

For Werther, death represents the only resolution of his inner turmoil and torment. He borrows Albert's pistols and shoots himself. Charlotte finds him mortally wounded; she confesses her love for him, and they kiss for the first time. Werther hears children singing "Noël," and imagines that he hears angels promising him forgiveness. Consoled that God will redeem him and that he has finally received Charlotte's love, Werther dies.

*Story Narrative with Music Highlights**Act I: The garden of the Magistrate's house*

Even though it is July, the widowed Magistrate is busily rehearsing his unruly younger children in a Christmas carol: “Noël! Noël! Noël! Jésus vient de naître, voici notre divin maître.” (“Rejoice! Rejoice! Rejoice! Unto this day is given Jesus Christ from heaven.”) The Magistrate rebukes his children for singing so loudly and brusquely. When he tells them that their sister Charlotte can hear them, they resume their singing with more seriousness.

Two of the Magistrate's friends, Johann and Schmidt, arrive; they comment that they find it strange that the children are rehearsing a Christmas carol in July. In defense, the Magistrate cynically claims that not all people are born with artistic talent.

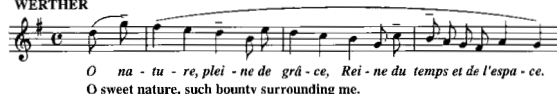
Sophie, the Magistrate's younger daughter, joins them. The men inquire about Charlotte, and learn that she is busy dressing for tonight's ball. Since her fiancé Albert is presently away on business, the young poet Werther has been asked to accompany Charlotte to the ball.

Johann and Schmidt comment that Werther seems to be a melancholy young man, always gloomy and lacking animation. But the Magistrate praises Werther, further indicating that the prince regards him so highly he has even promised him a foreign diplomatic post. As the men leave, they invite the Magistrate to join them at the Golden Grape that evening for dinner and wine. At the same time, they express their anticipation of Albert's return and the forthcoming wedding celebration of Charlotte and Albert.

Werther arrives to escort Charlotte to the ball. He becomes bewitched and enraptured by the tranquil, paradisiacal surroundings.

“O nature, pleine de grâce, Reine du temps et de l'espace”

Très modéré
WERTHER



The children pass by, continuing to sing the Noël. Werther envies them, and comments that adult spirits always seem sad, but those of innocent children seem to be filled with hope and joy. While Werther awaits Charlotte, he rests near a fountain and again contemplates the beautiful natural surroundings.

Charlotte and the Magistrate enter. Since her mother's death, Charlotte has been charged with the household and the children, and she immediately excuses herself to prepare the children's meal.

Werther, seeing Charlotte for the first time, becomes enraptured by her beauty. His yearnings are stirred, and he envisions her as the embodiment of ideal love.

“O spectacle idéal d’amour et d’innocence”



As Werther and Charlotte leave for the ball, Sophie encourages the Magistrate to join his friends at the inn.

Charlotte's fiancé, Albert, unexpectedly returns, and Sophie cordially greets him. Cynically, Albert asks if he is still remembered after his six-month absence. Sophie reassures him, and adds that the family is indeed continuing its preparation for his marriage to Charlotte. Albert bids Sophie goodnight, urging her not to reveal that he has returned because he wants to surprise Charlotte in the morning. As he muses about Charlotte he becomes filled with emotion. He is gladdened to know that even after his long departure she still loves him and they will soon be married.

“Oh! comme à l'heure du retour”



In an intermezzo, music of the evening ball is heard. At the ball, Werther's passion for Charlotte becomes ever more inflamed.

Later that evening, Werther and Charlotte return from the ball. Charlotte initiates their farewell: "Il faut nous séparer" ("We must part"). However, Werther has become overwhelmed by his passion for Charlotte and explodes into a declaration of his love for her; he praises her as a divine creation and concludes that their souls must be united.

Charlotte seemingly shares Werther's passion but she is evasive about exposing her true feelings for him. She avoids talking of love by recalling her recently departed mother; she is still grieving and is unable to understand why death separates love. Charlotte's sensitivity further inflames Werther's passion for her, and he announces that he would surrender his life to possess her.

Charlotte tells Werther that he must leave, but he vows that they will meet again. Suddenly the Magistrate intervenes to announce to Charlotte that Albert has returned. Charlotte turns sadly to Werther and tells him that Albert is her fiancé, the man she promised her dying mother she would marry.

Werther becomes brokenhearted and despairing, prophesying that if Charlotte weds Albert he will die.

Act II: The church in the town square of Wetzlar

Albert and Charlotte have been married for three months. It is Sunday, and the townspeople have gathered at the church to celebrate their pastor's golden wedding anniversary. Albert asks Charlotte if she has any regrets about her marriage, and she reassures him that she is happy because she is married to a noble and truly loving husband.

Werther appears, watches Albert and Charlotte enter the church, and explodes into an agitated outburst of jealous fury. He despairs and expresses his torment, convinced that he should have been Charlotte's one and only love.

“J’aurais sur ma poitrine”

Albert emerges from the church and converses with his friend Werther. Albert notes Werther's melancholy and reveals that he is not blind to the cause of his agony and suffering. He is aware that Werther met Charlotte before they married and suspects that he fell in love with her. Albert tries to console Werther by forgiving him for his dreams.

Werther admits that Albert speaks the truth, and that he had indeed yearned for Charlotte. But Werther assures him the storm has passed and his heart has forgotten the pain of a lost dream. Werther agonizes, however, and admits to himself that he is lying to Albert.

Sophie urges Werther to be joyful on this festive day, and as she enters the church she tells him that she has reserved the first dance for him. Alone, Werther becomes sorrowful and self-pitying, agonizing that his search for happiness has become futile.

He muses that his love for Charlotte has been pure and worthy. But he has lied to Albert and he feels shame. He vacillates about his future. He realizes that he must leave Charlotte's presence, but his inner yearnings force him to be near to her.

Charlotte emerges from the church, approaches Werther, and remarks that prayers provide strength and resolve. She asks if Werther plans to join the pastor's celebration. Werther replies with bitterness, admitting that he is unable to bear seeing her with Albert.

Werther nostalgically reminisces about their first meeting; it was a day in which they shared intimacy and joy. Charlotte reminds Werther not to be indiscreet because she is now Albert's wife and no longer free. Charlotte resolutely and gravely affirms that fate has decreed their destiny. She reminds him that she had to honor her duty to her mother. Likewise, it is his duty to leave her.

Werther becomes violent, unable to face the bitter truth that he must leave. Charlotte tries to convince him that through absence, regret grows less bitter. Werther refutes her, declaring that he can never forget her. Nevertheless, Charlotte succeeds in persuading him to leave Wetzlar, at least until Christmas.

Werther feels discouraged and defeated. In his anguish and torment, he contemplates suicide—a way to find peace in heaven and an escape from foiled desires. He begs God to summon him like the Prodigal Son and welcome him from the misery of his life's journey.

“Ton fils! Devinant ton sourire au travers des étoiles”

WERATHER

The musical notation shows a single staff with a treble clef. It begins with a quarter rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note Bb4. A slur covers the next four notes: a quarter note C5, an eighth note Bb4, an eighth note A4, and a quarter note G4. This is followed by another quarter rest, then a half note F#4, a quarter note E4, and a half note D4.

Ton fils! *Devinant ton sou-ri-re au travers des é - toiles*

Your son! He will discover Your smile through the stars.

Sophie finds Werther lingering about and urges him to join the festivities. But Werther tells her he must take the honorable course and leave forever, never to return. Sophie becomes disquieted and troubled. Since Charlotte married Albert she had been harboring dreams of marrying Werther, but with Werther's departure, those dreams became shattered.

Sophie, in tears, announces that Werther has gone forever. Charlotte becomes agitated, prompting Albert to become uncomfortable and suspicious of his wife's dismay; he senses that Charlotte's feelings seem to be warmer than those of pure friendship.

The golden wedding procession emerges from the church.

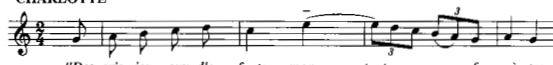
Act III: A room in the Magistrate's house

A prelude suggests Werther's aimless wandering during the past three months, his agonizing as he tries to subdue and forget his yearning for Charlotte's love.

It is Christmas Eve. Charlotte reads letters she has received from Werther. Werther's loneliness and his reminiscences of the children evoke her true feelings for him; she regrets that she sent him away.

"Des cris joyeux d'enfants montent sous ma fenêtre"

Assez animé
CHARLOTTE



"Des cris joyeux d'enfants montent sous ma fenêtre."
"Joyous cries of the children rise through my window."

But it is Werther's last letter that frightens Charlotte; he has told her that if he should fail to return on Christmas, "Ne m'accuse pas, pleure moi!" ("Do not reproach me, but weep for me.")

Sophie arrives and notices her sister's distress. She urges Charlotte not to cry, and tries to cheer her up by suggesting that she recapture her spirits and indulge in joys and laughter.

"Ah! Le rire est béni"

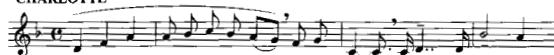
Animé
SOPHIE



Ah! le rire est béni, joyeux, léger, so - no - re!
Ah, all give way to the joy of laughter!

Sophie reveals her suspicions as to why her sister is so tearful and melancholy: it is because Werther has gone away. But then Sophie becomes remorseful that she mentioned Werther to Charlotte.

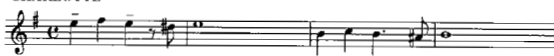
Charlotte grieves, her tears expressing the agony in her heart.

“Les larmes qu’on ne pleure pas”Affectueux
CHARLOTTE

Les lar - mes qu'on ne pleure pas, dans notre â - me re - tom - bent tou - tes,
 The rising tears not shed are again returning to our souls.

Sophie urges Charlotte to join the family at Christmas. But the mention of Christmas fills Charlotte with misgivings and apprehension. Fearfully, her thoughts return to the ominous words in Werther’s last letter, the suggestion that something disastrous had happened to him if he did not return: “Do not reproach me, but weep for me!” Charlotte reveals the truth—that she deeply loves Werther, and that since his departure she has genuinely yearned for him.

Sophie’s persistence succeeds, and Charlotte agrees to join the family to celebrate Christmas. After Sophie leaves, Charlotte prays to God to instill her with strength to combat her illicit feelings of love for Werther.

“Seigneur Dieu!”Allegro vivo avec agitation
CHARLOTTE

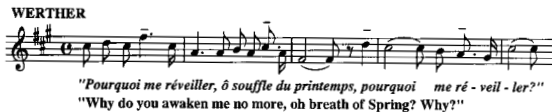
Seigneur Dieu! Seigneur! J'ai sui - vi ta loi,
 Lord of Lords! I have obeyed Thy law,

Werther suddenly appears before Charlotte, disheveled and bedraggled. He boldly admits that his passion for her has become so profound that he cannot remain away from her. Charlotte tells him that her father and the children have been saddened by his absence and they will welcome his return. But Werther is more concerned to know if Charlotte has missed him. Charlotte is evasive and urges him to look around and see that nothing has changed.

Werther reminds her how they used to sit side by side in this very same room and read and translate books together. She compliments him as a noble poet. Werther points to a volume of Ossian and comments that in those verses lie his true soul:

“Why do you awaken me no more, oh breath of Spring? Why? For the storm clouds bring grief, sorrow, and sadness. There are no more glories, just woe and desolation.”

“Pourquoi me réveiller”



Werther's reading stirs Charlotte's emotions and she urges him to stop reciting the poetry. Werther believes that her tears and trembling are confessions of her love for him. He explodes into an impassioned outburst and begs Charlotte to end her torture, her deception, and her delusions; she must admit that she loves him. Impetuously, he begs Charlotte for a kiss. She tries to stop him from continuing and reminds him that she is a married woman.

Charlotte prays to God for strength and mercy, but her restraint and resistance fail her: she surrenders and falls into Werther's arms.

Charlotte quickly recovers and tells Werther that they must say farewell to each other and never meet again. Werther has been rejected again. He becomes shattered. As he rushes off, he concludes that she has condemned him to death, and he must die in order to end his torment and torture.

Albert enters, suspicious after learning that Werther has returned. He calls for Charlotte and finds her uneasy and distressed as he interrogates her. A servant delivers a letter from Werther announcing that he is going on a long journey and asking to borrow Albert's pistols. Coldly and without further thought, Albert orders Charlotte to give Werther the weapons.

Charlotte realizes the significance of Werther's request for the pistols. She dashes from the house, desperately hoping that she is not too late to save the man she truly loves.

Act IV: Werther's study

It is midnight on Christmas Eve. Charlotte arrives to find Werther alive, but bleeding from a self-inflicted bullet wound. He prevents her from summoning help, preferring not to be separated from her in this first moment of happiness with her.

Tenderly and passionately, Charlotte confesses to Werther that she has loved him from the day they first met. She reveals that she had no choice but to spurn Werther's love, even though she knew it would wound his heart. They embrace and momentarily forget the pain and sorrow that has intervened in their lives; Werther and Charlotte kiss for the first time.

From outside, children's voices are heard singing carols celebrating Christ's birth. Werther tells Charlotte that he feels reborn and redeemed, and if she comes to his grave to shed her tears, it will be his greatest blessing.

Werther dies. In agony and anguish Charlotte cries out in desperation: "Werther! Tout est fini!" ("Werther! All is ended!")

Massenet and Werther
Commentary and Analysis

Jules Massenet (1842–1912) dominated the French lyric theater during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He composed twenty-six extremely popular and successful operas, and in the process became rich and famous.

Massenet's mother gave her young son piano lessons when he was six years old. He displayed exceptional talent, earned admission to the Paris Conservatoire, and in 1859, at the age of seventeen, won the *premier prix* after a successful piano recital. Afterwards, he pursued music studies in harmony and composition under the sympathetic guidance of the director of the Paris Conservatoire, Ambroise Thomas, renowned for his opera *Mignon* (1866). At the age of twenty-one, Massenet's exceptional piano virtuosity won him the *Grand Prix de Rome*. But Massenet's compulsive ambition was to become an opera composer, and he pursued his dream in earnest after receiving enthusiastic encouragement from Berlioz and Liszt.

Eventually, Massenet's operas became the rage in France as well as internationally: *La Grande-tante* (1867), *Don César de Bazan* (1872), *Le Roi de Lahore* (1877), *Hérodiade* (1891), *Manon* (1884), *Le Cid* (1885), *Esclarmonde* (1889), *Le Mage* (1891), *Werther* (1892), *Thaïs* (1894), *La Navarraise* (1894), *Sapho* (1897), *Cendrillon* (1899), *Grisélidis* (1901), *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame* (1902), *Chérubin* (1905), *Ariane* (1906), *Thérèse* (1907), *Bacchus* (1909), *Don Quichotte* (1910), *Roma* (1912), *Panurge* (1913), *Cléopâtre* (1914), and *Amadis* (1922).

Massenet's operas became so popular in France that contemporary opera composers had difficulty competing with him; Massenet's style became the accepted standard, and every other composer's lyric stage works were compared to those of Massenet. Alfred Bruneau's *La Rève* (1891) had a short run, then was dropped and never returned; Camille Saint-Saëns wrote several operas, but only *Samson et Dalila* (1877) was a

success; Gustave Charpentier wrote several operas, but only *Louise* (1900) succeeded.

Massenet's phenomenal success was attributed to a unique lyric emotionalism in his music. Georges Bizet recognized Massenet's unusual musical signature and uncannily predicted, "That little fellow is about to walk over us." The public could not get enough of Massenet's lyricism, and his melodic style was heard in the music of such iconoclasts as Debussy; it was said that in the heart of every French composer there was a slumbering Massenet. Massenet became one of those rare businessman-musicians who prospered and made enormous amounts of money from his art. Nevertheless, his colleagues condemned his success and smugness, and contemptuously accused him of being an opportunist who pandered to public taste.

After Massenet's death, an obituary notice in the *Musical Courier* attempted to explain his extraordinary popularity: "It is pretty sure that if Massenet had not lived just when he did, when the world was thirsting for a little melody, and when few composers were attempting to write melody, Massenet would have been a failure. But it just so happens that Massenet wrote melody, combined with a little modernism and just a touch of Wagnerism, at a time when most composers were trying to get beyond the old school. Therefore, Massenet was appreciated. We welcome his poor melodies because we have no others."

Many of the details of Massenet's life emanate from his autobiography, *Mes Souvenirs* ("My Memories"), dictated to a journalist just before his death in 1912. Like Richard Wagner's infamous *Mein Leben* ("My Life"), Massenet's autobiography has aroused much skepticism; it has been viewed as revisionist history that is self-serving and contains questionable factual reliability. His autobiography is a retrospective that documents his career, although it is impossible to distinguish reinvented facts from fiction. Much of its content represents an efficient and conscious attempt to weaken past controversy and create positive images of the composer for posterity; as

an artist, he praises himself as a meticulous perfectionist, and in the end he proclaims himself a colossus. He also attempts to settle many old scores by attacking a long list of adversaries, posturing himself as a person who above all else sought to please rather than to provoke.

Massenet also defends his exploits in affairs of the heart. He had a reputation as a romantic adventurer, so he counters that accusation in his autobiography by praising and elevating his self-image: he claims that women sought him with a passion; he was always the hunted, not the hunter. Indeed, Massenet was a courtly and elegant-looking man who turned ladies' heads. He was also a raconteur who charmed women with his stories. He admitted that women preoccupied him, that he understood them, and that they reciprocated in kind. An opera singer commented, "He could make women so happy with his adroit verbal petting that one could listen to him forever. He had a pretty way of telling his fair companion that she suggested a melody, and he would go to the piano and improvise some honey-sweet strain that really did suit the personality of the one so highly complimented."

Women do indeed dominate his operas. His central figures—Charlotte in *Werther*, Thaïs, and Manon—are usually heroines expressing unfulfilled amorous passions; perhaps this is a subconscious revelation of the composer's own yearning for love's fulfillment. Werther, a suicidal male, is a thought-provoking rarity in Massenet's usual cast of characters.

Massenet's opera stage is filled with heavily flawed, decadent characters; their portrayal on his stage is a mirror of the spiritually unsettled *fin de siècle*, a time in which self-questioning man became conscious of society's cultural and spiritual decadence. Nietzsche, the quintessential cultural pessimist of the era, identified the era as "the transvaluation of values," and pessimistically condemned society's loss of its moral and ethical foundations and its virtues.

Most of Massenet's operas reflect the anxieties that preoccupied his late nineteenth-century

bourgeois audiences, and his opera themes tend to tease and provoke to consciousness the era's conflicting moral values. In *Don Quichotte*, the hero attempts to uphold traditions in a changing world; in *Manon* the tragic story explores flawed human character that becomes contaminated and corrupted by materialism. Although *Werther*'s underlying roots are in the previous century's German Romanticism, its story appealed to Massenet's contemporary audience; in that sense, the audience related to the soul-searching agony that Werther and Charlotte experience in their incapability to challenge bourgeois restrictions and conventions. As such, Massenet's operatic themes held a mirror up to his audience; in a moralistic sense, his themes represented his attempt to help his audience peer into their inner souls and question their values.

Massenet brought intense human drama to the stage with the subtlety and refinement typical of the French opera style. His music contains a deep poetic feeling, together with graceful, tender, charming, and flowery melodies. Vincent d'Indy described Massenet's sugared eroticism as an "érotisme discret et quasi-religieux" ("discreet and semi-religious eroticism").

French and Italian opera originate from similar Latin roots, and both are most often dominated by fiery emotions and passions—those great primal conflicts involving love, lust, greed, betrayal, jealousy, hate, revenge, and murder. French and Italian opera styles and traditions may vary, but both deliver the same underlying dramatic intensity. Italian opera seduces its listeners into its conflicts and tensions directly and often with declamation; it is relentless as it bares its passions. French opera is generally more circuitous and subtler, and even at times overly refined and sophisticated. Massenet was one of French opera's quintessential exponents.

Massenet's *Manon* became one of the most popular French operas and one of the most characteristic. Its score contains lush yet sophisticated lyricism, grace and refinement; it has been said that only a Frenchman could have written its delicate lyrical phrases and elegant

orchestration. Massenet was given the sobriquet *Le fils de Gounod* (“Gounod’s son”)—a tribute to his delicate lyricism, his soothing and sensuous orchestral sounds, and the powerful effects from his climactic melodic expositions. It has even been suggested that much of *Werther*’s elegant and sophisticated music was inspired by Gounod’s renowned aria from *Faust*, “Salut! demeure chaste et pure!” (“Hail! This pure and beautiful dwelling!”)

In the annals of opera history there is no doubt that Massenet was the unchallenged master of the French lyric theater during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, he did indeed have a legion of envious and jealous critics. One of their favorite criticisms was to accuse him of using leitmotifs à la Wagner. Camille Saint-Saëns’ *Samson et Dalila* and Georges Bizet’s *Carmen* were also victims of that same criticism: Germanophiles were not too popular in France after the country’s defeat by Germany in the Franco-Prussian War (1871).

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) was one of the most powerful and versatile figures in the cultural and intellectual history of Western civilization. He was indeed a colossus of literature, and his literary humanism was considered by many to be an entire culture in itself. Two of his literary masterpieces became the inspiration for French operas: *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) (1774), which became Massenet’s *Werther*, and *Faust, Part I* (1808), which became Gounod’s *Faust*.

Germany’s golden age of literature, which occurred in the eighteenth century, was spearheaded by Goethe and his noted contemporaries Schiller, Herder and Schlegel. Their revolution was called “Sturm und Drang” (“Storm and Stress”), an emotion-centered ideology that challenged the values of German society. “Sturm und Drang” is synonymous with the German Romanticist movement.

German Romanticism represented a backlash to the fundamental Enlightenment ideals of rationalism; in German Romanticism,

subjectivism opposed the rational. As such, it rejected conventionality, defied authority, promoted greater naturalness of expression, and praised the irrational side of human experience. Imagination was paramount; as such, many themes were dreamy, fantastic and melancholy. Aesthetic sensibility was considered a religious experience, a spiritual ecstasy that purely expressed complex emotions.

In German Romantic literature, longing (“Sehnsucht”) became the common ground for both spiritual elevation and love. The central focus of Goethe’s *Sorrows* is longing and yearning for love. The novel was written at a time when Germans were dissatisfied with the material and spiritual conditions of existence. It mirrors a generation of people living before the French Revolution who yearned to escape from their perception of an antiquated social structure.

The German Romantics yearned for an idealized spiritualism that replaced mundane or material values. Specifically, they worried that the onslaught of European industrialization would displace the cultural core of their society, those farmers, artisans, and peasants whose ennobled “volk” (“the people”) spirit was manifested by their fierce cultural pride, a glory they preserved by awakening their past cultural heritage.

German Romanticists sought alternatives to what had become their failed notions of human progress; they were seeking a panacea to their loss of confidence in the present as well as the future. Romanticists became preoccupied with the preservation of nature. Industrialization and modern commerce had destroyed the natural world, so natural man, uncorrupted by commercialism, was ennobled. Romanticism sought escapes from civilization’s horrible realities: it appealed to strong emotions, the bizarre and the irrational, and in many instances glorified instincts of self-gratification, the search for pleasure and sensual delights. Ultimately Romanticism’s ideologically posed the antithesis of material values by striving to raise consciousness to higher emotions and aesthetic

sensibilities. For the Romantics, the spiritual path to salvation was fulfilled through idealized human love and freedom.

Goethe was one of the powerful forces of German Romanticism. His first novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, is an intimate romantic tragedy in which emotions and passions overcome reason and thus lead to tragic consequences. To some, *Sorrows* may be the first psychological novel, since it is Werther's psyche from which his world emanates; he constantly projects his subjective states into his surrounding world, and those projections affect his mood swings.

Much of Goethe's *Sorrows* is autobiographical and is based partly on historical fact. In 1771, Goethe was practicing law in Frankfurt, but his passion for literature superseded everything else. His primary job was editor of the "Frankfurt Scholarly Reviews." A year later, the 23-year-old writer felt that he had become caught up in a whirl of activities, so to relieve personal pressures he decided to escape to Wetzlar, a town fifty kilometers from Frankfurt. His sudden new passion became Charlotte Buff, daughter of the Magistrate of Wetzlar. However, Charlotte had a prior commitment, and Goethe's dream of love with her was doomed from its very beginning. At the same time, Goethe's friend, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, was spurned by a married woman, and in his despair he shot himself. The rejected young Goethe vented his anguish differently and wrote his first novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a writing that combined his personal torment at being rejected by Charlotte with the suicide of his friend Jerusalem.

The publication of Goethe's *Sorrows* caused a sensation. Critics interpreted it as implicitly condoning suicide; likewise, it was immediately suppressed by church powers. Nevertheless, the novel achieved overwhelming popularity. Thomas Carlyle claimed that its success was attributable to "the nameless unrest and longing discontent which was then agitating every bosom."

The primary focus of *Sorrows* is disappointed love. Like so many other Romantic period

inspirations, the story deals with the fatal consequences when passions of love overpower reason. Goethe cast his novel in the form of a letter, with Goethe intervening as narrator to describe the protagonist's suicide.

Massenet's opera story varies slightly from Goethe's novel. In the novel, as in Goethe's real-life experience, Charlotte did not promise her dying mother that she would marry Albert, but married him by choice. Also, Albert has no idea why Werther demands the pistols. In Goethe, Werther has a lonely death, never regaining consciousness after his fatal act. In the opera, a final duet between Charlotte and Werther serves to intensify the music drama.

In *Sorrows*, Goethe was exploring spiritual meanings in life; this was a life's quest that he would also address in his monumental *Faust*. The author implies that Werther's torment shares that expressed in the Passion of Christ; in that sense, the generally accepted translation of the title as "Sorrows" would more appropriately be "Sufferings."

Werther was Massenet's fifteenth opera. According to the composer's often-unreliable *Mes souvenirs*, the seeds of the opera began in 1886, when the composer and his publisher, Georges Hartmann, were returning from a Bayreuth performance of *Parsifal* and stopped at Wetzlar. Hartmann gave Massenet a copy of Goethe's novel, and the composer became inspired by Goethe's quotations from Ossian, a legendary Irish bard. Ossian's words would become Werther's aria "Pourquoi me réveiller"—one of the opera's emotional highlights. Massenet would later comment: "Such rapturous and ecstatic passion brought tears to my eyes."

Édoard Blau and Paul Milliet, both renowned for their theatrical and literary achievements, were chosen as librettists. Georges Hartmann's name was added as a participating librettist—this was perhaps a generous gift from Massenet to Hartmann after the recent bankruptcy of the latter's publishing firm. The opera was completed a year later. However, Léon Carvalho, director of the

Opéra-Comique, considered the *Werther* story too gloomy for his audience and refused to produce it. Shortly thereafter the theater burned down and the opera remained in the composer's drawer while he busied himself with *Esclarmonde*.

Five years later, *Werther*, sung in German, premiered at the Hofoper in Vienna. A year later it was produced in Paris to a French text. In 1902 Massenet added an option to the score, transposing the music for the principal role to a baritone instead of a tenor, but that version is rarely performed.

Massenet decided to bring Goethe's *Sorrows* to the opera stage a century after its sensation had long passed. One could speculate that perhaps he envisioned it as a companion piece to *Manon*, since both deal with amorous conflicts in an eighteenth-century setting. Nevertheless, *Werther's* libretto, in contrast to *Manon's*, is extremely concentrated and focused: unnecessary details are eliminated, and there are no choruses, ballets, or spectacular tableaux.

Massenet's *Werther* is a romantic tragedy with profound intimacy and sentiment. Many consider it to be Massenet's most melodic opera. Like *Manon's*, *Werther's* music seems to flow seamlessly; it is a through-composed piece with many rich, melodic inspirations that possess operatic power and assault the emotions by alternating between extremes of ecstasy and despair.

Werther is a fresh inspiration from Massenet. His music underscores the emotional intensity of this romantic drama. Werther's passions magnify as he realizes that his love for Charlotte is doomed, and Charlotte struggles with conflicts and tensions in her inability to release Werther from his amorous enslavement.

On the surface, *Werther* is a simple, almost commonplace story of love and its disappointments that lead to death. In *Werther*, Massenet composed a heartfelt music score, considered by many to be his greatest operatic achievement.

