LOUIS SCHNEIDER, in the introduction to his golden book of Jules Massenet, says: “There is nobody who does not know the name of Massenet. There is nobody who has not seen a performance of Massenet’s music. His vocal works are not less widely spread. Very few musicians possess such extraordinary popularity. That is because Massenet has created a very characteristic form of music. It is as easily recognized as one recognizes the writing of a friend on the envelope or a letter. This musical form, during the whole of the first period of Massenet’s career, was the standard of the young school tendencies. Later the younger composers began to write Massenet, but the best Massenet is doubtless written by the Master himself.”

Massenet comes of good parentage and inherited his talent from his mother. He was born at Montauban, a village near Saint Etienne, in the department of the Loire, in 1842. His father, who was formerly an officer under Napoleon, left the army to become a manufacturer of steel scythes. His grandfather was a professor of history at the faculty of Strasbourg. His father married twice. Jules being the son of the second wife, a Mlle. Marancourt, and protégé of the Duchess of Angoulème. Mlle. Marancourt had much talent for the piano, and before she married M. Massenet used it for a livelihood. None of the children of the first marriage showed any artistic talent, so it is more than probable that the composer’s gifts were inherited from his mother, while from his father he inherited a sense of punctuality and business ability. The composer himself once said in an interview: “I was born to the sound of heavy hammers.” He was literally rocked by the rhythm of hammers striking on steel, but it also had its influence on the composer’s brain, for it gave him the faculty to think musically amid noise and agitation in places which would appear most unfavorable to composition. The family removed to Paris in 1848, and at the age of ten Jules presented himself at the Conservatoire. He was received unanimously, after an astonishing execution of the finale of Beethoven’s “Opus 19.” His father’s health failed and the family had to leave Paris, leaving Jules alone to pursue his studies. At this time he was very poor. His father gave him no allowance, and as he did not wish to be a burden to his aunt with whom he lived, he secured an engagement to play the triangle in the orchestra of the Gymnase Theatre, receiving for this service the magnificent stipend of 7 francs 50 at the end of each week. In 1862 he carried off the Prix de Rome, which made his way easier. He went to Rome and took up his studies at the Villa Medici, and in 1866 he was married to Mlle. Saint-Marie against the wishes of his parents. Not having the means to support a family, he again found himself in straightened circumstances, and was compelled to give lessons. He also accepted engagements to give concerts in watering places, and in the winter resumed his place in the orchestra of Paris theatres.

“Massenet lived at this time just outside Paris. He had gone to hide his happiness in the country, where he lived surrounded by the affection of his wife and his mother-in-law. It was about this time, too, that the young musician came under the direct influence of the poet, Armand Silvestre, and his first compositions were inspired by Silvestre’s poetry.”

“Massenet now began to make himself known with his first work ‘La Grande Fan,ner,’ a piece in one act, which the Opéra Comique performed in 1867. A few weeks later came the Premiere Suite pour Orchester, which Paskeloup gave at the Popular Concerts. Then work followed work until at last came fame and honors. The Legion of Honor was awarded to him in 1876, and in 1878 he was elected member of the Institute and became professor of composition at the Conservatoire.”

As is well known, the Prix de Rome gives successful candidates the privilege of going to Rome at the expense of the French government and complete their studies surrounded by all the atmosphere and inspiration of old world art. “Candidates,” says M. Schneider, “are given a subject and then locked up, and for a time they are prisoners rather than musicians. A Parisian journalist found in one of the attics of the Institute traces of the two competitions in which Massenet took part, and he tells about it in these words: “In 1862 the subject of the Cantata, upon which Massenet was to exercise his inspiration, was a poem entitled ‘Louise de Mezières.’ It is probable that the theme lent itself to parody, for I read on the walls ‘Heloise la Mercie,’ and underneath the most extravagant drawings worthy of a Caran d’Ache. The young composer entered his cell May 17th in the morning. The three first days ‘Louise de Mezières’ aroused nothing in his imagination. These words I found written with a discouraged pencil: ‘Nothing—absolutely nothing. Still nothing!’ ‘On May 23d appeared another inscription, ‘Impotent. I finished my duet. I have burn my cantabile three times.’ ‘The following days came a breath of inspiration. Massenet jotted down one after the other the duet, the trio, the air of the baritone, the final ensemble.”

“On the second of June is written on the walls ‘I am still pegging away. I am beginning again the introduction.’ ‘Finally on June 10th I saw scribbled in big capitals ‘Got away at eleven o’clock in the morning.’ ‘If Massenet had one bête noire it was criticism. He was very sensitive to criticism—criticism of the press, the criticism of his friends even the criticism of the crowd. He was mortally afraid of it. Directly the day drew near for a public rehearsal of one of his works he fled from Paris irritated and in bad humor.”
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