

JULES MASSENET

THAÏS

CONDUCTOR

Emmanuel Villaume

PRODUCTION

John Cox

COSTUMES FOR THE ROLE

OF THAÏS DESIGNED BY

Christian Lacroix

LIGHTING DESIGNER

Duane Schuler

CHOREOGRAPHER

Sara Jo Slate

GENERAL MANAGER

Peter Gelb

MUSIC DIRECTOR EMERITUS

James Levine

MUSIC DIRECTOR DESIGNATE

Yannick Nézet-Séguin

Opera in three acts

Libretto by Louis Gallet, based on the
novel by Anatole France

Tuesday, November 28, 2017

7:30–10:50PM

The production of *Thaïs* was made possible by a
generous gift from **Mercedes and Sid Bass**

This production of *Thaïs* was originally created
by Lyric Opera of Chicago

The Metropolitan Opera

2017-18 SEASON

The 79th Metropolitan Opera performance of
JULES MASSENET'S

THAÏS

CONDUCTOR
Emmanuel Villaume

IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

CENOBITE MONKS
Daniel Clark Smith
Patrick Miller
Marco Antonio Jordão
Edward Hanlon
Mark Sullivan

PALÉMON
David Pittsinger

ATHANAËL
Gerald Finley

GUARD
Jeongcheol Cha

CROBYLE
France Bellemare

MYRTALE
Megan Marino

NICIAS
Jean-François Borras

THAÏS
Ailyn Pérez

LA CHARMEUSE
Deanna Breiwick

ALBINE
Sara Couden*

SOLO DANCER
Syrena Nikole

VIOLIN SOLO
David Chan

Tuesday, November 28, 2017, 7:30-10:50PM



Gerald Finley as Athanaël and Ailyn Pérez in the title role of Massenet's *Thaïs*

Chorus Master **Donald Palumbo**
 Associate Director **Bruno Ravella**
 Musical Preparation **Donna Racik, Howard Watkins*, J. David Jackson, and Liora Maurer**
 Assistant Stage Directors **Gregory Keller and Kathleen Smith Belcher**
 Stage Band Conductor **Gregory Buchalter**
 Prompter **Donna Racik**
 Met Titles **Kelley Rourke**
 French Coach **Denise Massé**
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Synopsis

Act I

Alexandria and the Thebaid desert in Egypt, fourth century C.E. At a Cenobite settlement, Athanaël, a monk, returns from Alexandria with news that the city is in a state of sin. The people are besotted by Thaïs, a courtesan and actress, whose performances are causing a sensation. Athanaël admits to his fellow monks that once, in his youth, he fell under her spell. Now he considers her behavior an affront to God and is determined to convert her to a Christian life. Palémon, leader of the order, reminds him that it is against his vows to interfere with the secular world, but after dreaming of Thaïs, Athanaël defiantly returns to Alexandria to save her soul.

Athanaël goes to the house of his old school friend Nicias, now a leading Alexandrian of extreme wealth. Nicias is skeptical of Athanaël's chances in converting Thaïs but offers to introduce him. She is, after all, his current lover—a service he purchased at a great price but which he cannot afford to renew. That night, at the farewell party, a very public confrontation occurs between the two adversaries. Thaïs rejects Athanaël's impertinent demands that she change her way of life and warns him against suppressing his human nature. He vows to continue his campaign for her soul. She dares him to do so and submits him to a humiliating ceremony in the name of Venus.

Intermission (AT APPROXIMATELY 8:20PM)

Act II

Alone in her bedroom, Thaïs wearily considers the worthlessness of her life and seeks assurance both from her mirror and from Venus that her beauty will be eternal. Athanaël visits her unannounced. Her routine seduction has no apparent effect on him, but when he claims that the love he offers her will bring eternity, it resonates with her. The voice of Nicias outside reminds her of the nature of her current life. She sends Athanaël to dismiss Nicias, but, left alone, she collapses in perplexity and fear.

Athanaël waits outside for Thaïs's decision. In due course, she appears with the news that she has made up her mind to follow him. Athanaël is overjoyed but makes it clear that the road will be hard. He demands that she destroy her home and everything in it. As they are making plans, Nicias brings a happy crowd to her door in the hope of reclaiming her for the night's revels, but all hope of that vanishes when she and Athanaël appear at the threshold of the burning house. The citizens try violently to keep their idol, but when her determination becomes clear to Nicias, he helps Thaïs and Athanaël escape the angry crowd.

Intermission (AT APPROXIMATELY 9:35PM)

Act III

Thaïs and Athanaël are in the desert on their way to the convent of Mother Albine. Thaïs is exhausted and broken, but Athanaël ruthlessly demands that she push on. Only when he sees her bleeding feet does he feel pity. Thaïs thanks him for having brought her to salvation. At the convent the nuns welcome her. When the door closes, Athanaël suddenly realizes what it will mean to him never to see her again.

Athanaël has been back with the Cenobites for three months. In spite of prayer, fasting, and flagellation, he is unable to drive the physical image of Thaïs from his spirit. He attempts to confess to Palémon but even here fails, and Palémon realizes that he is probably lost. That night, Athanaël has a violently erotic dream of Thaïs, and voices tell him she is dying. He decides to return to the convent to steal her away from God.

After three months of penance, Thaïs is at the end of her strength and rests in the convent garden. Her virtue and purity have been such that the nuns have already declared her a saint. Athanaël arrives too late. Thaïs is already out of his grasp, and she dies in a vision of angels.

—John Cox

Jules Massenet

Thaïs

Premiere: Opéra, Paris, 1894

Jules Massenet's opera about the power of feminine allure and the desperation of male obsession has served as a showcase for a variety of great artists in the lead roles. *Thaïs* is an Egyptian courtesan and actress whom the Christian monk Athanaël seeks to reform. While she ultimately achieves salvation, he falls prey to his growing lust for her. Although Massenet composed *Thaïs* for the Paris Opéra, where spectacle was often the order of the day, he wisely concentrated on the inner lives of the two lead roles. The result is an opera as seductive as its heroine, a fascinating story of two people locked in an opposing yet parallel metamorphosis. Massenet's contemporaries sometimes accused the composer of indulging in musical sensuality, but his genius soared in works such as this, where sensuality itself is the core issue. He was well aided by a strong libretto, in unrhymed free verse modeled on classical Greek poetry that can be appreciated even without knowing French.

The Creators

Jules Massenet (1842–1912), a French composer wildly popular in his day, was noted for his operas, songs, and oratorios. His somewhat sentimental style lost popularity in the early 20th century, with only his romantic treasure *Manon* (1884) maintaining a steady place in the repertory. Many of his other operas, especially *Werther* (1892) and *Thaïs*, have found places for themselves in the repertory in the last few decades. The libretto for *Thaïs* was written by Louis Gallet (1835–1898), a prolific writer who provided other theatrical adaptations for composers such as Bizet and Saint-Saëns. The opera is based on a novel, considered scandalous in its day, by Anatole France (1844–1924), an influential French author and wit whose works epitomized his era's sophistication and sense of irony.

The Setting

The opera takes place in the city of Alexandria, Egypt, and in the surrounding desert, in the fourth century CE. Alexandria was a cosmopolitan city, while the harsh desert was the birthplace of the severe traditions of hermits and monks. The setting reflects the conflict between human passion and religious fervor at the core of the drama.

The Music

With *Thaïs*, Massenet wrote one of his most sinuously beautiful and psychologically perceptive scores. None of the captivating musical effects are gratuitous. Athanaël's Act I aria "Voilà donc la terrible cité" is a stentorian denunciation of the city of Alexandria and everything associated with corrupt urban life. The broad phrases of the monk's vocal lines make his righteous anger apparent, but the lavish orchestration before and underneath the singing suggest a latent attraction to everything against which he is ranting. The heroine's showpiece aria, Act II's "Dis-moi que je suis belle," is a glittering occasion for vocal display, but this quality perfectly suits the particular moment in the drama, as Thaïs revels in her glitzy, superficial lifestyle. Her evolution is marvelously depicted in the famous "Méditation" between Scenes 1 and 2 of Act II, an orchestral interlude carried by a solo violin whose seductive delicacy is emblematic of this refined work. Thaïs's growth and maturity become apparent in the next act's duet with the baritone: She now sings measured, stately phrases, while his disjointed lines parallel his psychological unraveling. It is one of opera's most interesting depictions of two people at cross-purposes.

Met History

The opera's 1917 Met premiere starred the immensely popular Geraldine Farrar and Pasquale Amato. When Maria Jeritza, the diva sensation of the post-war period, took on the title role, the company mounted an entirely new, first-rate production, designed by Joseph Urban, for her in 1922. After seven more performances in 1939, split between the American Helen Jepson and the Australian Marjorie Lawrence, the opera disappeared from the stage for almost four decades. It returned to the Met in 1978 for 17 memorable performances with Beverly Sills and Sherrill Milnes, directed by Tito Capobianco. When the current production by John Cox opened in 2008, Jesús López-Cobos conducted a cast led by Renée Fleming in the title role and Thomas Hampson as Athanaël.

Program Note

“**Y**ou have lifted my poor Thaïs to the first rank of operatic heroines.” In his memoirs, Jules Massenet recalls receiving this praise from Anatole France, whose novel provided the basis for the opera, the day after *Thaïs* had its premiere at the Paris Opéra on March 16, 1894. “I am happy and proud,” France continued, “to have furnished you with the theme on which you have developed the most inspiring phrases.”

Massenet’s music apparently won France over, despite the strenuous objections the author voiced concerning the libretto prepared by Louis Gallet. A highly experienced man of the stage who also collaborated with Ambroise Thomas, Bizet, and Saint-Saëns, Gallet fundamentally transformed the tone of France’s novel—originally a satirical attack on piety—into a straightforward dramatic conflict more suitable for operatic treatment. *Thaïs* is hardly an isolated case of this sort of revisionism: Wagner bleached the satire from the Heinrich Heine tale on which he drew for *Der Fliegende Holländer*, while Tchaikovsky set Pushkin’s ironic *Eugene Onegin* with heart-on-sleeve emotionalism.

France was not the originator of the Thaïs story, and he, too, radically altered the source that first triggered his interest. The apocryphal legend of Saint Thaïs—a supremely beautiful courtesan who gives up the way of all flesh and becomes an ascetic to purge her sins—emerged during the period of the early Christian monks, in Roman Egypt in the fourth century. In the Middle Ages, it gained popularity as a morally uplifting parable about the power of divine forgiveness. An extraordinary tenth-century Benedictine nun and writer by the name of Hrotsvitha of Gandersheim composed a philosophical drama based on Saint Thaïs. It came to France’s attention when, as a young critic, he was assigned to review a puppet version of her play. The story fascinated France and inspired his own literary response: first in the form of a poem and then, over two decades later, in a novel that was serialized before being published in 1890.

The novel became a succès de scandale thanks to its wickedly anticlerical point of view. Indeed, France’s writings were consigned to the Church’s Index of Forbidden Books in the 1920s—shortly after he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. With his signature irony, France parodies the monastic movement that sprang up in the waning days of the Roman Empire. His focus transforms the monk, whose project is to redeem Thaïs, into the central character. The real sin, in France’s retelling, is the ascetic rejection of the world and of Thaïs’s physical love. The monk stands revealed in the end as a repulsive vampire: “Passing his hand across his face,” the novel ends, “he felt his own hideousness.”

Aside from the scandalous associations France’s novel might have provoked, the opera *Thaïs* came handily equipped with controversial elements when it was first brought before the Paris public. Massenet had written the title role for Sybil Sanderson, the alluring young soprano from California reputed to have a solid range of three octaves, whose interpretation of Manon became a sensation. Her

rapport with the married composer was a lively topic of gossip. The ambitious diva's behavior nearly derailed the production when she secretly changed allegiance from the Opéra-Comique (which had been promised the premiere) to the Opéra, forcing Massenet to go along with her defection. On opening night, Sanderson had a notorious "wardrobe malfunction" that exposed her breasts at the end of the first act.

Sanderson's debut at the formidable Opéra marked a personal triumph over the prevailingly skeptical attitude toward her skills—"absolute perfection, unexpectedly so," as one review put it. But *Thaïs* itself failed to win over the public, and in 1897, Massenet revised the score, adding the superbly effective oasis scene in Act III (but suppressing a more shockingly dissonant ending). For the most part, the critics were ill-disposed toward the opera, accusing it of immorality, attacking Gallet for misunderstanding France's novel, or chastising Massenet for "vulgar paltriness, with the seedy rhythms of a dance hall composition." This sort of critique has been plentifully echoed, albeit in more recent formulations, by those who tend to dismiss *Thaïs* as hokum, another "tart with a heart" story. They regard the opera merely as part of a pattern of fin-de-siècle "Orientalism," a titillating indulgence in religious eroticism that would reach its fevered extremity in Richard Strauss's *Salome*.

Stories centered on the conflict between spiritual and erotic desire were something of a specialty for Massenet. His first success as a composer was an oratorio based on the Mary Magdalene story, to a libretto by Gallet. Massenet had himself tackled the topic of Salome and John the Baptist—though from a markedly different angle—in the Flaubert-inspired 1881 opera *Hérodiade*. But the sensationalism surrounding *Thaïs* has tended to distract from serious engagement with its considerable merits.

Consider the *Méditation* from the middle of the second act—the wordless interlude featuring a solo violin that accompanies the heroine's overnight conversion. This excerpt has come to represent the opera but also serves as an emblem for the misunderstanding of *Thaïs* as wholly shallow. On the surface, it seems the epitome of pleasing but saccharine melodiousness. Yet as Ernest Newman shrewdly observes, the *Méditation* suggests Massenet projecting outward from his character's point of view: "It is precisely in some such silken, caressing terms as these that a *Thaïs* would embrace a new faith."

What's more, the melody unspooled by the violin contains a hint of yearning as it stretches into distant keys. This yearning takes an overtly anguished turn in the (often overlooked) middle section of the *Méditation*. In fact, it's the same music to which Athanaël voices his own conversion at the end of the opera, as he tries to convince the dying *Thaïs* that his promise of heaven was a lie and that the only truth is "life and the love between human beings." What seems like a tear-jerking recap of the score's signature tune turns out to represent a catastrophic

reversal that destroys Athanaël's faith. At the opera's close, the Méditation's radiant D major is replaced by harsh D minor chords.

Massenet's psychological interest in his characters guides his musical choices. The sharp distinctions that France's prose draws between the punishing austerity of the monastic huts on the Nile and Alexandria's pagan opulence might have suggested a schematic (and predictable) musical vocabulary to delineate these polar extremes. Instead, Massenet first conjures the city's luxury from Athanaël's point of view, expressed in the ardent aria "Voilà donc la terrible cité." He develops a web of musical images that make it clear how much of his "worldly" youth Athanaël has internalized and provides clues to the monk's final about-face. The ambiguous laughter, for example, with which Thaïs dismisses him on the eve of her conversion returns in demented cascades in Athanaël's vision of Thaïs in Act III. His conflicted nature gains from Massenet's treatment a humanity and dimension pointedly lacking in the contemptuous portrayal by France.

Much discussion of the opera centers on the problematic suddenness of Thaïs's conversion. Yet where France relies on a lengthy backstory about her troubled childhood to provide motivation, Massenet begins to prepare the way from his heroine's first entrance. Her love music with Nicias is among the score's most beautiful passages, marked by a bittersweet melancholy over the sense of time passing that is the explicit subject of her aria at the beginning of Act II. And just after the conversion, we realize that Thaïs, like Athanaël, maintains elements of the personality she has supposedly overcome. Along with the inherent sensuality of the Méditation, her invocation of Eros betrays her very human perspective of divine love as "a rare virtue."

—Thomas May

Thomas May is a writer, critic, educator, and translator. His books include Decoding Wagner and The John Adams Reader, and he blogs at memeteria.com.



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The Cast



Emmanuel Villaume

CONDUCTOR (STRASBOURG, FRANCE)

THIS SEASON *Thaïs* at the Met; *Samson et Dalila*, Korngold's *Der Ring des Polykrates*, and *Don Giovanni* at the Dallas Opera; *Faust* at Lyric Opera of Chicago; *Manon Lescaut* in Barcelona; and concerts with the Prague Philharmonia.

MET APPEARANCES *Roméo et Juliette*, *Manon*, *Carmen*, *Samson et Dalila*, and *Madama Butterfly* (debut, 2004).

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS He is in his fifth season as music director of the Dallas Opera, where he has conducted *Norma*, Jake Heggie's *Moby Dick*, *Eugene Onegin*, *Tosca*, and *Iolanta*, among others, and his third season as music director and chief conductor of the Prague Philharmonia. Recent performances include Prokofiev's *The Golden Cockerel* and *La Fanciulla del West* at the Santa Fe Opera, *Roméo et Juliette* at Lyric Opera of Chicago, and *Tosca* at Covent Garden. He has also led *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Samson et Dalila* in concert at St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre, *Iolanta* in concert in Monte Carlo, *Carmen* in Rome, *Manon* at Covent Garden, Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine* in Venice, and Offenbach's *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* at the Santa Fe Opera. He has also appeared at the Paris Opera, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Washington National Opera, San Francisco Opera, and LA Opera.



Ailyn Pérez

SOPRANO (CHICAGO, ILLINOIS)

THIS SEASON The title role of *Thaïs*, the Countess in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and Juliette in *Roméo et Juliette* at the Met; Violetta in *La Traviata* at Staatsoper Berlin and in Hamburg and Zurich; and Micaëla in *Carmen* at the Bavarian State Opera.

MET APPEARANCES Mimi and Musetta in *La Bohème*, and Micaëla (debut, 2015).

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS Recent performances include Mimi and Violetta at La Scala; Juliette at the Santa Fe Opera; the title role of *Manon* and Tatyana Bakst in the world premiere of Jake Heggie's *Great Scott* at the Dallas Opera; and the Countess at Houston Grand Opera. She has also sung Violetta at Covent Garden, San Francisco Opera, the Bavarian State Opera, and Deutsche Oper Berlin; Adina in *L'Elisir d'Amore* at the Bavarian State Opera, Vienna State Opera, and Washington National Opera; Mimi at LA Opera and Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre; Desdemona in *Otello* at Houston Grand Opera; Marguerite in *Faust* and the Countess in Hamburg; Alice Ford in *Falstaff* at the Glyndebourne Festival; and Liù in *Turandot* and *Manon* at Covent Garden. She was the 2016 recipient of the Met's Beverly Sills Artist Award, established by Agnes Varis and Karl Leichtman.



Jean-François Borras

TENOR (GRENOBLE, FRANCE)

THIS SEASON Nicias in *Thaïs* and Rodolfo in *La Bohème* at the Met, Alfredo in *La Traviata* and Rodolfo at the Vienna State Opera, Rodolfo in Naples, Riccardo in *Un Ballo in Maschera* at the Bavarian State Opera, and the title role of *Faust* in Hamburg and in concert in Paris.

MET APPEARANCES The title role of *Werther* (debut, 2014) and the Duke in *Rigoletto*.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS Recent performances include *Werther* in Valencia; *Faust*, des Grieux in *Manon*, and *Werther* at the Vienna State Opera; des Grieux in Monte Carlo; Rodolfo in Hamburg; Verdi's *Requiem* in Paris; Edgardo in *Lucia di Lammermoor* in Avignon, Palermo, Florence, and Tours, France; Roméo in *Roméo et Juliette* in Muscat; Ismaele in *Nabucco* at Covent Garden; Bénédict in Berlioz's *Béatrice et Bénédict* at Japan's Seiji Ozawa Matsumoto Festival; Nicias in São Paulo; Riccardo in Metz, France; and Macduff in *Macbeth* in Paris. He has also sung Rodolfo in Verona, São Paulo, and Graz, Austria; Gérald in *Lakmé* in Toulon; Alfredo in Monte Carlo, Mannheim, and at the Israeli Opera; des Grieux in Rome and Valencia; Roméo in Verona and Genoa; and the Duke in Athens, Rouen, Rome, Genoa, and at the Israeli Opera.



Gerald Finley

BARITONE (MONTREAL, CANADA)

THIS SEASON Athanaël in *Thaïs* at the Met, Scarpia in *Tosca* at Covent Garden and Staatsoper Berlin, Amfortas in *Parsifal* in Baden-Baden, Forester in *The Cunning Little Vixen* with the Berlin Philharmonic, and Kaija Saariaho's *True Fire* with the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra.

MET APPEARANCES The title role of *Guillaume Tell*, Nick Shadow in *The Rake's Progress*, the Count in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, the title role of *Don Giovanni*, Golaud in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Marcello in *La Bohème*, J. Robert Oppenheimer in John Adams's *Doctor Atomic*, and Papageno in *Die Zauberflöte* (debut, 1998).

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS Recent performances include the title role of Aribert Reimann's *Lear* at the Salzburg Festival, *Guillaume Tell* at the Bavarian State Opera and Covent Garden, Amfortas at the Vienna State Opera, the Count in Wiesbaden, Michonnet in *Adriana Lecouvreur* at Covent Garden, J. Robert Oppenheimer in concert in London, Hans Sachs in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* at the Glyndebourne Festival and the Paris Opera, and Golaud with the London Symphony Orchestra. He has appeared in multiple world premieres, including in the title role of Tobias Picker's *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* at LA Opera and as J. Robert Oppenheimer at San Francisco Opera.



David Pittsinger

BASS-BARITONE (CLINTON, CONNECTICUT)

THIS SEASON Palémon in *Thaïs* at the Met and Trulove in *The Rake's Progress* in Amsterdam.

MET APPEARANCES Le Bret in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Luther/Crespel in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, the Marquis de la Force in *Dialogues des Carmélites*, Count des Grieux in *Manon*, Angelotti in *Tosca*, the Speaker in *Die Zauberflöte*, the Ghost in *Hamlet*, Achilla in *Giulio Cesare*, Colline in *La Bohème*, Trulove (debut, 1997), and the Friar in *Don Carlo*.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS Recent performances include Trulove in Aix-en-Provence, Fred Graham/Petruccio in *Kiss Me, Kate* in Luxembourg and Paris, Reverend John Hale in Ward's *The Crucible* at the Glimmerglass Festival, the title role of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* at Portland Opera, and Nick Shadow in *The Rake's Progress* at Pittsburgh Opera. He has also sung General Robert E. Lee/Edgar Ray Killen in Philip Glass's *Appomattox* and Capitán in Catán's *Florencia en el Amazonas* at Washington National Opera; Nick Shadow, the Count in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and Jochanaan in *Salome* at Portland Opera; King Arthur in *Camelot* at the Glimmerglass Festival; the title role of *Don Giovanni* and Scarpia in *Tosca* at Florida Grand Opera, and Escamillo in *Carmen* at the Santa Fe Opera.

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