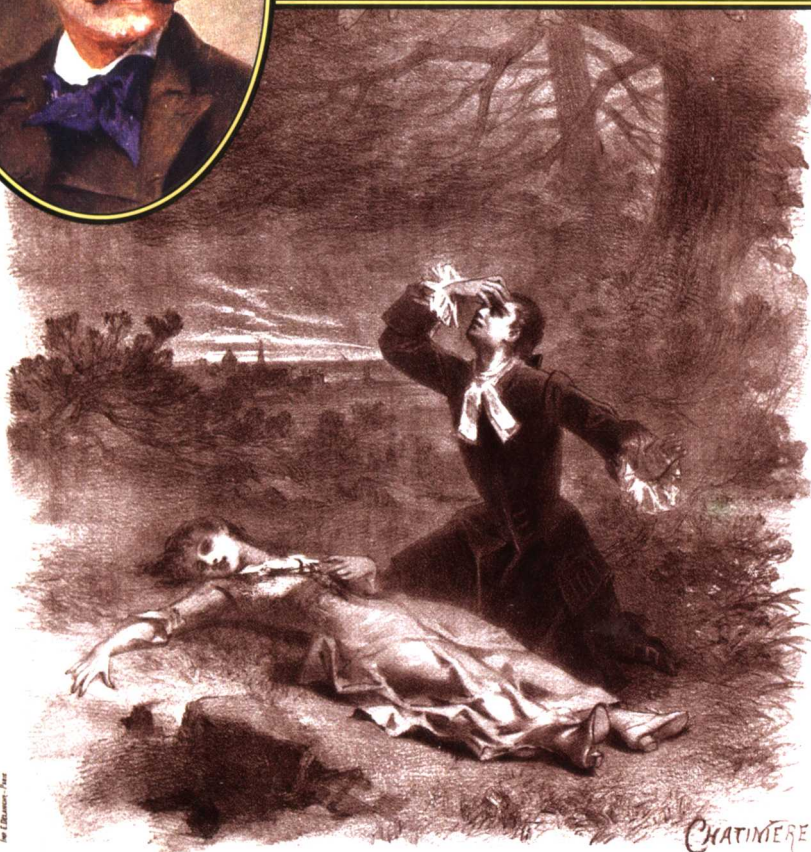


MASSENET

A CHRONICLE OF
HIS LIFE AND TIMES

Demar Irvine



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Musique de
J. MASSENET

MASSENET

A CHRONICLE OF HIS LIFE AND TIMES



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Foreword

DEMAR IRVINE'S MAJOR STUDY of Massenet came to my attention in an unusual way. It had occurred to me that Massenet's memoirs, *Mes souvenirs*, should be available to English-speaking readers. In checking the Massenet literature, I soon discovered that an English translation had indeed been published many years ago under the title *My Recollections* (Boston, 1919). Further investigation led me to the new French edition of *Mes souvenirs* (Paris, 1992), annotated with great care by Gérard Condé, a scholar in his own right and music editor for *Le Monde*. In Condé's bibliography, I found a surprising entry:

Demar Irvine, *Massenet: A Chronicle of His Life and Times* (Seattle, 1974).

Typewritten by the author but never published, this erudite study is the most reliable source of information about Massenet.

A surprise indeed! Irvine and I, both members and at various times officers of the American Musicological Society, have known each other for many years; yet with his characteristic modesty, he never mentioned his magnum opus to me. After locating and reading one of the precious copies he had distributed to libraries, I concluded that the time had come to publish this work, which is aptly termed a chronicle of the composer's life and times.

The audience for Massenet's operas is larger now than it was a generation ago. Moreover, many of today's readers have a keen appreciation of history, including music history, when presented in a broad cultural context, as Demar Irvine does here with consummate skill. I am delighted that this fascinating study is finally reaching a public who can give it the recognition it deserves.

REINHARD G. PAULY

Preface

WHEN *WERTHER* OPENED IN PARIS in 1893 (Massenet was not yet fifty-one), Alfred Bruneau could write in *Gil Blas*: “The composer of *Werther* is presently the most performed of French composers, hence the best known and most famous musician of our epoch. His works, so numerous and so lustrous, are in the repertoire of all the opera houses, adorn the music racks of every piano, are fixed in the memories of even the most unyielding dilettantes.” Massenet had seemingly reached the pinnacle of his fame; and yet, after *Werther*, another sixteen operas would reach the stage!

The principal ingredient in Massenet’s success, besides talent, was compulsive hard work. If one waited for inspiration, he contended, it would never come. Requiring but little sleep, he regularly arose at the crack of dawn to devote five or six hours to composition before turning to his voluminous correspondence and other routine matters of a normally action-packed day. Even on his many travels, he took his work along so as not to waste time in hotel rooms.

After *Marie-Magdeleine* and *Les Érinnyes* projected him to fame in 1873, Massenet had pushed on with *Le Roi de Lahore*, *Hérodiade*, *Manon*, *Le Cid*, and for the Exposition of 1889, *Esclarmonde*. By the time he was seventy he had completed twenty-eight operas and seen twenty-two of them produced on the stage. Another three were produced within the decade following his death—an impressive showing for a composer devoted to the lyric theater, as was Massenet.

To his contemporaries Massenet was above all a melodist who charmed his hearers with his astonishing faculty for invention and with the novelty, attractiveness, and expressive power he knew how to breathe into a musical phrase, all under the control of well-schooled craftsmanship. The accompanying harmonies were considered very elegant, very new, and often very piquant. That he had many imitators was quite apparent to those of his generation; but for his part, while Massenet assimilated, he imitated no one. Ultimately it is his orchestration that attracts attention: fresh and varied, it subserves admirably all the nuances of dramatic intent and bears the hallmark of a master.

Two months after Massenet's death in 1912, his arch rival, Saint-Saëns, penned an appraisal that was both hard and fair:

Others speak lightly of his [Massenet's] works as "pleasing," as though this were a deprecation. But is it so reprehensible to please? . . . We admire the art of the Greeks: it was not profound. Their marble goddesses were beautiful, and their beauty suffices. . . . A master of his craft, knowing all the secrets of his art, Massenet eschewed those contortions and exaggerations which the naïve confuse with musical science. . . . He pursued the path which he himself laid out, profiting from new forms of expression imported from abroad which, moreover, he assimilated perfectly as an artist who remained completely French.¹

That Massenet's music suited his times ought not to be held against him. No more so his financial rewards, which in the realm of serious music, have been bracketed with those of Verdi and Puccini.² If Massenet avoided the symphony as not suited to his particular talent, he succeeded in delighting concert audiences with descriptive orchestral suites and enhancing popular plays of the day with his incidental music. In addition, he wrote ballets, piano pieces, choral works, and well over two hundred songs.

For the present chronicle I have attempted to preserve some of the more useful (and more accurate!) elements from the Massenet literature, discounting heavily the pretty anecdotes and legends, and relying instead upon primary sources for additional factual information, some of which is here made reliably accessible for the first time. My objective, simply put, was to follow the composer around and observe how he spent the days and years of his life. The results should at least furnish a firm basis for further research.

In a broader sense, Massenet is here but the central theme for reanimating an era. Other personalities and events long since forgotten, or only half-remembered, have also been recalled and lined up onstage to play their contributory rôles. I have thus included (and tabulated in the index) the names of many singers, composers, conductors, poets, critics, and others, each of whom under more favorable circumstances might merit his or her own biography. These few clues may be of incidental use to future students of a fascinating epoch.

The present work was conceived in the summer of 1964, when my late good friend Hans Moldenhauer, of Spokane, Washington, loaned me seventy-two Massenet letters from his rich collection of composer autographs. That got me started. Seven years and two trips to Europe later, my Massenet typescript was complete. In 1974, after no publisher had expressed interest in the book, I had a hundred copies of the typescript made and bound for libraries, then put the whole matter out of mind. To my delight, it was resurrected in 1992 by Amadeus Press of Portland, Oregon.

My study of Massenet arose from the thought that he was being unduly neglected. That has changed somewhat. For example, there have been revivals of *Esclarmonde* and *Le Roi de Lahore* by Dame Joan Sutherland and Richard Bonyng, who is

an expert on Massenet source materials; the Opera Theater of St. Louis presented nine very successful performances of *Cendrillon* in May and June of 1993; the Massenet Association, founded by the composer's descendant Anne Bessand-Massenet and housed at his Château Égreville (Maison de Massenet, 77620 Égreville, France), is advancing the composer's music through meetings, research, and performances; and the Massenet Society in New Jersey is planning to publish, in five volumes, new English translations of the libretti for all twenty-five of Massenet's operas. Still, to my surprise, very little has been published about this eminent and prolific composer.

Grateful acknowledgment is hereby extended to the following institutions for access to sources: Bibliothèque Nationale; Bibliothèque de l'Opéra; Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal; Archives Nationales; Archives de la Ville de Paris; Archives du Palais de Monaco; Archives de la Ville de Nice; Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, Strasbourg; Badisches Generallandarchiv; University of Washington Library; Music Division, Library of Congress; the Newberry Library; the Boston Public Library; the New York Public Library; Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie; Haags Gemeentemuseum; Heugel et Cie; G. Ricordi & C.; the Moldenhauer Archive; Mairie, 9^e Arrondissement. The University of Washington Library, with assistance from the University of Washington Graduate School Research Fund, was able to acquire 128 autograph letters.

Of all the persons who have helped in one way or another, I wish to thank in particular for their kindly interest and generous assistance: General Robert Massenet de Marancour; Yves L. Massenet; Pierre Bessand-Massenet; François Heugel; Signora L. Pestalozza; Franck Banchieri; Henriette Boschot; Mme M. Lang; Mme Felkay; Mlle A. Royer; Dr. I. Kecskeméti; Winfried Transfeld; Roland Chantepie; Jean Leloup; Dr. Hans Moldenhauer; F. Gerald Borch; Peter Demery; Dr. Edward N. Waters; Dr. Dallas D. Irvine; Rev. Ari Roest Crollius, S.J.; Gerri Benedikt; and Bob Salmon.

With this edition at long last in print, my special gratitude goes to Robert B. Conklin and Reinhard Pauly of the lively and forward-looking Amadeus Press for their encouragement, to Carol Odum for her excellent contribution as editor, and to Paul Jackson for his generous loan of more than thirty vintage photographs and other memorabilia.

DEMAR IRVINE
SEATTLE, 1993

Massenet in the 1990s— A Fresh Appraisal

OVER THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, Massenet's image has undergone a considerable transformation in the minds of music lovers, performers, and critics alike. Perhaps it was inevitable for those works that have contributed most toward his fame—*Manon*, *Werther*, and *Thaïs*—to be somewhat slighted before it became impossible not to recognize in them that element of indestructibility common to all masterpieces. Their music seemed fragile, and their success was deemed ephemeral, like the enchantment of the feminine listeners who—sin of sins!—enjoyed them so much. We are now starting to notice that this music does hold up and is far richer and more varied (and consequently more thoroughly misunderstood) than was once believed. As we make discovery after discovery—some of them unexpected—we are beginning to realize that it is time to stop confusing the “Massenet style” with its caricature, which stemmed from distorted traditions and the routines of the theater.

Certainly Massenet's style is distinctive enough to be identified by its melodic contours. Yet its very unity displays a diversity which was cultivated by the composer and which fueled the flame of his inspiration. Now, since even the part of his output that was thought to have passed forever into eclipse has begun to be revived and recorded, it has become possible to consider the whole from a chronological standpoint and to revise certain judgments that have sprung from often biased contemporary appraisals. Until rather recently, scarcely anything except *Manon*, *Werther*, and portions of *Thaïs*, *Hérodiade*, and *Le jongleur de Notre-Dame* seemed worthy of attention; the works that preceded them were said to be awkward endeavors, and those that followed (or intervened) merely repetitive.

It should not be forgotten, however, that the success of *Werther* was far from the overnight variety. The score, completed in 1887, lay dormant for five years before it was first performed in Vienna, in German; after the 1893 French première at the Opéra-Comique, it took ten years for audiences to warm up to its somber drama. *Thaïs*, initially a failure, had to wait thirteen years for the success that it finally

achieved. Without the talent and beauty that Lina Cavalieri brought to the title role in 1907, *Thaïs* would perhaps be as little known today as *Le Mage* or *Ariane*. Replaying these forgotten scores in our time does more than merely satisfy the curiosity of a few musicologists; it gives the public a chance to experience operas that were genuinely successful when first performed, works of unquestionable quality that still hold appeal for audiences—ultimately leading, perhaps, to their return to the repertoire.

Indeed, thanks to the performances at Saint-Étienne's 1990 Massenet Festival, we now know that his last opera, *Cléopâtre*, contains some beautifully novel effects and that, at the time of its composition (1912), those who accused Massenet of stylistic complacency were reproaching him for having an individual style, the one thing he was incapable of changing. Instead of noting the remarkable variations within the style they knew so well, they chose merely to dwell upon its persistence.

In fact, it can be affirmed that as early as *Marie-Magdeleine*, his first oratorio (premiered in 1873), Massenet found the lush lyricism and cajoling sweetness that were to bring him success. He would subsequently exploit it on occasion (*La Vierge*), though more often he tried to free himself from it in order to avoid lapsing into petrified mannerism and, indeed, to broaden his range of expression. Still, the development of Massenet's musical language was marked by reactionary stages; it alternately advanced and receded as it evolved—surprising at first consideration, but logical upon analysis. It could be said, for example, that the elegant neoclassicism of *Manon* (1884) provided the antidote to the grand-opera virus to which the composer had succumbed in *Le roi de Lahore* (1877) or *Hérodiade* (1881), though, paradoxically, what followed *Manon* was *Le Cid*, a work whose brilliance rings a bit hollow. After the latter's plethora of brass and stage heroics, Massenet was able to immerse himself in the psychological intimacy of *Werther*. Then came the spectacular but uneven *Esclarmonde*, that blend of Wagnerian and Meyerbeerian influences composed for the Universal Exhibition of 1889. And so the evolution continued.

With each new opera, Massenet seemed to reach a point of no return. By choosing subjects as antithetical as possible to the ones immediately preceding them, he kept himself on a jagged course, continually casting aside solutions that had become outmoded: those of *Manon* were inconceivable in *Le Cid*, those of *Le Cid* impossible in *Werther*, and so on. Amazingly, he never lost his own personality along the way—and that essential personality is what remains, in large part, to be discovered.

It is surprising to note the extent to which reliable sources for even the most basic facts about Massenet's life and works are still lacking. There are a few biographies, of course. Louis Schneider's account, written mainly during the composer's lifetime, is a veritable compendium of information, but unfortunately it brims with inaccuracies. In the autobiographical *Mes souvenirs* (My Recollections), which was written during the final months of his life, Massenet naturally presented the image of himself he wished to leave for posterity—the elusive, idealized image of a creator

whose truest self was revealed in his music. Alfred Bruneau offered his *Massenet*, and there are a few other biographies; but the more recent the book, the more apt it is to mislead with secondhand information.

Though it probably adds little to our appreciation of, say, *Chérubin* to know whether its composer was the youngest in a family of eight, twelve, twenty-one, twenty-two, or twenty-three children (all figures appearing in one book or another), future biographers must sift out the truth. The same goes for most major events in Massenet's life, whether it be the year he entered the Conservatoire (1851 or 1853?); the duration of his "exile" in Chambéry, which interrupted his studies at the Conservatoire (six months or two years?); or the composition dates of his works, such as that of *Amadis* (1891, 1902, or 1910?). The answers to such questions will not affect the general public's understanding of the music, but many members of the listening audience are eager for significant information. Moreover, to combat the prejudices that sometimes prevent legitimate appreciation, and even the widespread performance, of certain works, it is necessary to examine their genesis in a critically objective manner.

Demar Irvine was the first to accomplish this important task, in the definitive study of Massenet that now, at last, appears in print. On a more modest scale, in my critical edition of *Mes souvenirs*, I too sought to elucidate the composer's life and thought. And that same elusive goal—historical truth—is currently being pursued by Patrick Gillis, whose *Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre de Massenet* (Catalogue of the Works of Massenet)—slated for publication in 1994—will probably challenge many details, and even the most firmly established convictions. Thus the revision of history marches on.

GÉRARD CONDÉ
PARIS, 1993

Translated by E. Thomas Glasow



Jules Massenet as a young man. Collection Lim M. Lai.

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Parentage and Early Life

JULES-ÉMILE-FRÉDÉRIC MASSENET was born on 12 May 1842, in the township of Montaud, near Saint-Étienne (Loire), France. His father was Alexis Massenet (1788–1863), and his mother was Éléonore-Adélaïde Royer de Marancour (1809–1875), whom Alexis had married at Albi on 9 May 1830 after the death of his first wife. The four children of this second union were Julie, Léon, Edmond, and Jules. In accordance with custom they had the right to bear the name Massenet de Marancour, or indeed Massenet Royer de Marancour. Jules, unlike his brothers, never used the matronymic; in his later public life he even preferred “Massenet” without the prenomens.

Saint-Étienne lies thirty-six miles by rail southwest of Lyon, on the Furan river, a tributary of the Loire. Sitting in the midst of the second largest coalfield in France, the city underwent a phenomenal growth in the nineteenth century. The chief industries were iron and steel, the manufacture of small arms, hardware, and ribbons. The first railway in France was built in 1829 from Saint-Étienne to Andrézieux, and a second in 1831 to Lyon.

Adjoining Saint-Étienne on the east was the township of Montaud, including the quarter near the Furan river known as La Terrasse, where the Massenets were living. Schneider published a photograph of the house as it appeared in 1908: a large stone structure of four stories, still surrounded by park and open country and not yet swallowed up by the city.¹

At this point in his career Alexis Massenet was director of a manufactory of scythes situated at La Terrasse. His products were shown at the Paris Exposition of 1844 and won for him the decoration of Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur. In an autobiographical sketch published in 1892, the composer recounted how his father “became an iron-master, and was the inventor of those huge hammers which, crushing steel with extraordinary power by a single blow, change bars of metal into sickles and scythes. So it was that, to the sound of heavy hammers of brass, as the ancient poet says, I was born.”²

Beside the factory was an orchard where flowers grew in abundance. Here Jules's older brother Léon would go to play on Sundays with his school comrade Jules

Vallès. When these two met again in Paris, around 1856, Vallès came to know the younger brother Jules, and years later set down his impressions.

About 1844, the Massenet family moved into the city of Saint-Étienne, occupying for the next four years a *premier étage* apartment at No. 4 Place Marengo. Alexis entered into partnership with Messrs. Dumaine and Dorian to set up a branch factory at Pont-Salomon, near Saint-Étienne. This new enterprise did not prosper very well. By February of 1848 the family was installed in the Rue de Beaune in Paris, and Massenet père seems no longer to have been very active.

Massenet's *Souvenirs* begin, dramatically enough, with 24 February 1848—date of the abdication of Louis-Philippe as well as of little Jules's first piano lesson from his mother. That will be an appropriate point to resume the story in the next chapter. Meanwhile, a regression is in order to uncover the family background.

The name Masson is fairly common in France; a derivative—Massenet, with *o* softened to *e*—is associated with the region of the Loire. Masson is generally not equated with the occupation of stonemason (*maçon*), but evolved from Thomas, for which the hypocoristic form Thomasson suffered an aphaeresis, or dropping of the first syllable. One could say, then, that Massenet and his revered teacher Ambroise Thomas were remotely related etymologically. By a meaningless coincidence, there is a town of Masseney near Waldheim in Saxony, a few miles from Freiberg, where Massenet's father completed his training in metallurgical engineering.

The history of this particular Massenet family begins with the composer's grandfather, Jean-Pierre Massenet, who was born on 25 February 1748 at Gravelotte, in the diocese of Metz (Lorraine), and died on 28 October 1824 at Strasbourg. His papers turned up sixty-six years later in a notary's office and were deposited in the Strasbourg municipal library. Here Rodolphe Reuss examined the dossier and, in 1897, published a biography entitled *Souvenirs Alsatiques; Jean-Pierre Massenet: Cultivateur à Heiligenstein, Député du Bas-Rhin, Professeur à l'Académie de Strasbourg*. In a footnote on page 144, Reuss confessed that, although many of his readers will doubtless wonder whether the illustrious composer is a descendant of this Massenet, he has been unable to find any information on the subject.

The dossier of Jean-Pierre Massenet, the grandfather, contains a copy of his birth record but no other information until 1774, when he would have been twenty-six. He was the son of one Jean Massenet, whose occupation is given as *manoeuvre*, and of Marie-Anne Warin (who died at Metz in November 1788). To translate *manoeuvre* literally as "day laborer" seems unkind. In view of the notable achievements of many descendants (Jules Massenet was the only professional musician), perhaps the great-grandfather was a skilled mechanic.

Jean-Pierre had two brothers and a sister. His brother Joseph emigrated to Germany, respelled his name as Massenez, and founded a distinguished collateral branch of the family.* His other brother Jean, or Jacques, was for a time at Brest, probably as a carpenter or shipwright, but returned to Metz in 1786 with two crushed fingers.

* See Appendix 1: The Massenet Family.

Jean-Pierre obtained for him a position as driver of artillery carriages. His sister, Jeanne, married one Nicolas Campion in 1781 and moved to Le Havre.

We can only surmise how Jean-Pierre Massenet obtained an education culminating in the degrees of Doctor of Philosophy and Docteur-ès-Lettres.³ His qualities of intellect and personality no doubt attracted influential support, as from the Mathieu family in Metz and their relatives in Strasbourg. In pre-Napoleonic times, the aristocratic families of Russia and the Baltic lands often entrusted the education of their sons and daughters to French or German preceptors and governesses. This was Jean-Pierre's occupation from sometime prior to 1774 until 1787. We pick up his trail in St. Petersburg in 1774, when he may have been preceptor for the Igelstroem family. Then, from the autumn of 1775 until 1778, Massenet was companion-tutor to Ernst Otto von Vietinghoff (1757–1780), son of a Livonian baron. The two spent some time in Strasbourg, Spa, Paris, London, and Berlin, where they parted company when Ernst Otto came of age and joined the military.

Jean-Pierre next visited the Vietinghoff family in Riga and was in St. Petersburg in 1779, but then we lose sight of him until February 1783 when he was back in Strasbourg. His dossier contains correspondence relating to a preceptorship for the youngest Vietinghoff son, Christoph Burkhard (1767–1829). The terms discussed were a five-year contract with an annual salary of two thousand francs, all expenses paid, and a gratuity of six thousand francs at the end of the tutelage. For some reason the negotiations fell through.

In 1784, Massenet was at Turin and Venice, in which latter city he met his future wife, Françoise-Hélène Mathieu. At this time, Barbara Juliana von Vietinghoff, the sister of his former charge, would have been in Venice with her husband, Baron Alexis von Krüdener. This Baroness Krüdener (1764–1824), who had literary pretensions in the Paris salons, later wandered about as a religious mystic, always welcomed because of her great wealth, and died in the Crimea when about to set up a colony for repentant sinners.

Jean-Pierre's next documented assignment was as tutor-companion to Prince Michael, son of major general Prince André Galitzin and Princess Elisabeth Yousouppoff. The Galitzins were a numerous, powerful, and distinguished Russian family. An uncle of Massenet's young charge, Prince Dmitri Galitzin, was ambassador at Vienna, dying there in 1793. To still another member of the family, Prince Nikolai Galitzin (1794–1866), Beethoven dedicated the late quartets Opp. 127, 130, and 132.

The new preceptorial duties began in Italy on 27 June 1784, and the association lasted for three years. On 10 September, Prince Michael was matriculated at the University of Leyden, together with "Pierre Jean Massenet, ex Gallicae provincia Lorraine, annos academicos habent, ephorus principis Galitzin."⁴ Shortly thereafter, Massenet sent the family a bill for expenses from 27 June to 15 September amounting to 5068 florins.*

* Reuss, Jean-Pierre's biographer, calculated that 5068 florins would have had the purchasing power of 20,000 francs in 1897.

A year and a half later (March 1786), Massenet and Prince Michael were apparently still at Leyden. That summer the noted Dr. Cabanis, then at Geneva, cured Prince Michael of a troublesome tapeworm. Pupil and preceptor then proceeded to Lyon for several months' study of letters and art. Mesmerism engaged their attention, and they were introduced to the mysteries of a Masonic lodge. By the summer of 1787 they were in Moscow, where the prince purchased for Massenet a *calèche* and provided a French-speaking servant.

On 20 July 1787, Jean-Pierre Massenet and Françoise-Hélène Mathieu signed their marriage contract at Mitau, Courland. Massenet thereby acquired a distinguished collection of in-laws, mainly active as jurists, magistrates, or in branches of government.* He got on splendidly with his new relatives even though, as time wore on, his relations with his wife deteriorated. Indeed, in some family arguments the brothers-in-law took Jean-Pierre's side rather than Hélène's. The youngest of Massenet's new brothers-in-law was Philippe-Gaëtan Mathieu de Faviers (1761–1833), who made a brilliant career in the military service of supply—a fact of no small importance in the lives of future Massenets. He was *commissaire général* for the Army of Helvetia under General Masséna and for the Army of the Rhine under General Moreau. After the campaigns of 1805–07, Napoleon made him *ordonnateur en chef de la Grande Armée*. From 1809 he was in Spain as *intendant général* (chief commissary) for the Armée du Midi, but was retired at the Restoration when regular members of the military took over the services of supply. He was created a baron by Louis XVIII in 1817, and a peer of France by Louis-Philippe in 1832.

After their marriage at Mitau, the Massenets returned to Alsace. Jean-Pierre, now nearing forty, declined further offers for tutoring. The time had come to settle down. A new contract drawn up some months after their arrival specified what each had brought to the community property: Jean-Pierre's thirty thousand francs, and Hélène Mathieu's ten thousand francs.

On 25 June 1788, a son was born at Strasbourg and given the name Pierre-Michel-Nicolas-Alexis. At the baptism, Prince Galitzin was godfather, represented by Jacques-Christoph Jacquin, of Otrott, as proxy. It was this Alexis who, nearly fifty-four years later, was to become the father of the composer Jules Massenet.

In December 1788 the Massenets took possession of a property at Heiligenstein, which lies at the foot of the Vosges mountains near Barr, Alsace. There, on 23 August 1790, a second son was born and christened Auguste-Pierre-Charles. This time the godfather was Pierre-Charles Mathieu, *avocat* of the Parlement de Metz, represented by the same Monsieur Jacquin as proxy. In the sequel, Auguste Massenet entered the service of the grand duke of Baden, in 1809, as lieutenant of the grenadiers of the guard. He was gravely wounded before Strasbourg on 5 July 1815 and died four days later.

Jean-Pierre Massenet apparently lived through the Revolution and the Terror quietly enough. In August 1791 he was elected as one of nine deputies to represent

* See Appendix 1: The Massenet Family.