



Thaïs

Music by Jules Massenet
Libretto by Louis Gallet
From the Novel by Anatole France

Study Guide



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Welcome to Pacific Opera Victoria!



This Study Guide has been created primarily to assist teachers in preparing students for their visit to the opera. It is our hope that teachers will be able to add this to the existing curriculum in order to expand students' understanding of opera, literature, history, and the fine arts.

Materials in the Study Guide may be copied and distributed to students. Some students may wish to go over the information at home if there is not enough time to discuss in class. The opera experience can be made more meaningful and enjoyable when students have the opportunity to learn about the opera before they attend the performance.

Please visit <http://www.pov.bc.ca> to download this study guide or to find more information about *Thaïs*, including musical selections from POV's Best of YouTube and artist biographies. POV Study Guides for other operas are also available for download.

Teachers: Your comments and suggestions would be greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out the questionnaire at the end of this study guide.

Please Note: The Dress Rehearsal is the last opportunity the singers will have on stage to work with the orchestra before Opening Night. Since vocal demands are so great on opera singers, some singers choose not to sing in full voice during the Dress Rehearsal in order to preserve their voice for opening night.

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Thaïs

Music by Jules Massenet
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First Performance March 16, 1894, Paris Opéra

Dress Rehearsal October 14, 2008, 7:30 pm
Performances October 16, 18, 21, 23, 25, 2008, 8 pm
Royal Theatre, Victoria, BC

Sung in French with English surtitles

CAST & CREATIVE TEAM

Cast in order of vocal appearance

Palémon, an old Cenobite monk	Chad Louwerse
Athanaël, a Cenobite monk	Aaron St.Clair Nicholson
Servant of Nicias	Andrew Buckley
Crobyle, slave of Nicias	Julie Daoust
Myrtale, slave of Nicias	Mireille Lebel
Nicias, a wealthy philosopher	Luc Robert
Thaïs, actress & courtesan	Monica Whicher
La charmeuse, a dancer	Charlene Santoni
Albine, an abbess	Rebecca Hass

Monks, actors, dancers, philosophers, friends of Nicias, citizens of Alexandria, nuns

Conductor	Timothy Vernon
Director & Choreographer	Renaud Doucet
Set & Costume Designer	André Barbe
Lighting Designer	Guy Simard
Assistant Director	Oriol Tomas
Resident Stage Manager	Jackie Adamthwaite
Assistant Stage Managers	Steve Barker
	Melissa Rood
Chorus Master & Répétiteur	Michael Drislane

With the Victoria Symphony and the Pacific Opera Victoria Chorus

Cast and programme are subject to change.

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Synopsis

Act 1, Scene 1

The scene is the Thebaid, a desert region of Egypt on the banks of the Nile near the site of the ancient Egyptian capital of Thebes. During the time of the opera, in the fourth century, A.D., the Thebaid was a place of retreat for many Christian hermits and Cenobite monks (monks who set up communities in which they lived, prayed, and did penance).

The monk Athanaël returns to his Cenobite community after a visit to Alexandria, his childhood home, and tells his brothers of the shocking sinfulness of the city and the immoral influence of an actress and courtesan named Thaïs. That night he has a disturbing, erotic vision of Thaïs and resolves to go back to the city and save her soul – despite the misgivings of the elderly cenobite Palémon, who advises him not to get involved with these people.

Act 1, Scene 2

As he arrives at the home of his old friend Nicias, Athanaël contemplates the terrible beauty of the city where he was born in sin. He proclaims his hatred for its riches, its science, and its beauty. Nicias welcomes him, and Athanaël asks for an introduction to Thaïs. Nicias, who has sold his vineyards and his land for a brief week with the courtesan, is amused at Athanaël's intention to lead Thaïs to God and warns his friend that Venus is a powerful, vengeful goddess. Nevertheless he hospitably provides Athanaël with appropriate clothes. His slaves, Myrtale and Crobyle, flirt with the monk as they help make him presentable for the evening's banquet.

Thaïs arrives from the theatre amid a crowd of admirers, performers, and philosopher friends of Nicias. She and Nicias affectionately anticipate the last night of their week of love together. When Thaïs notices Athanaël, Nicias explains that he has come to convert her. Thaïs says she believes only in love and asks Athanaël what makes him so severe; *What sad folly makes you fail in your destiny? Man made for love, what a mistake you've made. Man made for knowledge, who has blinded you? You haven't yet tasted the cup of life ... Without love, nothing is true.*

Athanaël vows to come to her palace to bring her salvation. As she begins to undress for her mime performance, he flees.

Act II, Scene 1

Alone in her room, Thaïs feels the emptiness of her life. Dreading death and fearing the loss of her beauty, she sings to her mirror: *Tell me that I am beautiful and that I shall be beautiful till the end of time! (Dis-moi que je suis belle!)*. Athanaël enters and tells her he brings her a love she doesn't understand – a spiritual love that will prepare her soul for everlasting life. Thaïs is intrigued. Even as he preaches to her, Athanaël prays ardently to God to protect him from the force of her beauty. Nicias' voice is heard asking Thaïs to join him for one last time. Athanaël leaves, promising to wait on her doorstep until dawn. She collapses, sobbing in confusion and despair.

Interlude.

Through the night, to the strains of the instrumental Meditation, Thaïs searches her soul.

Act II, Scene 2

Just before dawn, Athanaël is asleep in front of Thaïs' house as Nicias and his fellow revelers continue to party. Thaïs appears, telling Athanaël she has seen the light and is ready to go with him. He promises to take her to the convent of Mother Albine, but insists that she first destroy her palace and all her ill-gotten possessions. She agrees, but asks to keep a statue of Eros, explaining, *Love is a rare virtue; I have sinned, not by him, but against him.* However, when she says that the statue was a gift from Nicias, Athanaël smashes it.

Nicias enters with his friends. He has gambled and won back many times what he paid for Thaïs. Drunk and happy, he calls for more partying, more wine, more dancing. La charmeuse dances as Myrtale and Crobyle sing.

Thaïs and Athanaël reappear from the palace, from which smoke is beginning to emerge. Furious that the monk is taking Thaïs away, the people threaten to kill him. Nicias distracts them by throwing money into the crowd. Athanaël and Thaïs escape as her palace burns.

Act III, Scene 1

Near an oasis in the desert. Athanaël goads Thaïs to keep walking, to destroy the sinful body that she gave to so many. She humbly obeys, but collapses in exhaustion. Seeing her bloody feet, Athanaël is overcome with remorse. He brings fruit and water and tenderly attends to her. *Bathe your hands and*

lips with this water, taste of this fruit. Your life is mine. God has entrusted it to me. (Baigne d'eau tes mains et tes lèvres). Albine and her nuns approach, saying the Lord's Prayer. Athanaël entrusts Thaïs to their care. Only when Thaïs says *farewell forever* does Athanaël realize he will never see her again. *And the days and the years will pass without her appearing to me again. I shall see her no more!*

Act III, Scene 2

The Thebaïd. The monks express anxiety that since his return three weeks previously, Athanaël has seemed like a broken man. Athanaël confesses to Palémon that in spite of all his fasting and prayer, he is haunted by Thaïs. Palémon reminds him of his warning not to mingle with the outside world. In his sleep, Athanaël has an erotic vision of Thaïs, followed by a dream that she is dying. He cries out in anguish, *Thais must die!... Then, why Heaven,*

human beings, light? Of what good is the universe? Oh, to see her again. To see her, hold her, keep her!... I must have her. Yes, fool that I was, not to have understood that she alone was all, that one of her caresses was worth more than Heaven! Oh I would kill all those who have loved her! Distraught, he rushes out into a storm to be with her.

Act III, Scene 3

In the convent, the nuns pray over the dying Thaïs. They welcome Athanaël, who calls Thaïs' name in anguish. Thaïs gratefully remembers her journey with Athanaël, the calm hours in the oasis, his holy words. She is oblivious of his replies as he tells her he remembers only her beauty and his thirst for her: *When I spoke I lied to you. ... nothing is true but life and the love of beings.* Thaïs has a rapturous vision of the saints welcoming her into heaven, and she dies joyfully as Athanaël collapses in despair.

The Music of *Thaïs*

To listen to selected musical examples on POV's Best of YouTube, just go to www.pov.bc.ca, click on "*Thaïs*", and then click on "Musical Selections."

Critic David Benedict called the music of Thaïs "lush, plush, and dangerous to know." Indeed, the melodies, the orchestration, and the texture of the opera are wonderfully sensual, deliciously exotic, and sublimely voluptuous –this is music to swoon to!

Henry T. Finck, in *Massenet and his Operas*, says of *Thaïs*, *Undoubtedly, for musical treatment, this is one of the best plots ever borrowed from a novel ... This story of the courtesan who turned from the god of love to the Love of God was one that enlisted all [Massenet's] sentimental and artistic sympathies, the consequence being that he penned for it some of his most inspired pages. ... Atmospherically the music is admirable and follows the plot in all its emotional colour from the characteristic monotony of the Thébaïde pictured by the plaintive chant of the monks, to the scenes of luxury in Alexandria.*

Conductor Timothy Vernon also has glowing comments on the music of *Thaïs*:

In a score which contrasts some traditional 'devotional', even ecclesiastical idioms with the exotically decadent, the composer's great successes are with the inner dramas of the two main characters. There is real emotional focus in both these roles; sensuality vs spirituality is the inner conflict for both of them, though from opposite points of view, and with drastically disparate results.... The gleaming gorgeousness of the Meditation radiates through the finale, but it is matched by some fine intensity in the duets – the first a sort of French verismo – much more than merely inspired atmospheric (not unknown in other Massenet scores....), the whole with a characteristic fluidity.....

Selected Musical Highlights

Voilà donc la terrible cité (Act 1. Scene 2)

Poor Athanaël really is a conflicted, mixed-up mess of a soul, and if we don't realize this as he goes off on his quixotic quest to snag the soul of Thaïs for God, it becomes clear here. This love-hate song to his hometown of Alexandria splendidly reveals his warring emotions. It's an irresistibly melodic and rhythmic piece with wonderfully heroic brass and woodwind orchestration.

Behold the terrible city – Alexandria, where I was born in sin.

The brilliant air where I breathed the frightful perfume of luxury

There is the voluptuous sea where I listened to the song of the golden eyed siren...

Alexandria! O, my country, my cradle! From your love I have turned my heart!

For your riches I hate you, for your science and your beauty.

Qui te fait si sévère (Act 1. Scene 2).

Thaïs flirts with Athanaël in this delightful seduction scene. Against a shivery little figure in the orchestra, Thaïs vamps the hapless monk with a slow, alluring tune that, despite its charm, pinpoints what is wrong with the monk:

Who makes you so severe and why do you deny the flame of your eyes? What sad folly makes you fail in your destiny? Man made for love, what a mistake you've made.

Dis-moi que je suis belle (Act 2. Scene 1)

The opera's most intimate portrait of Thaïs is this scene in which she sings to her mirror: *Tell me that I am beautiful and that I shall be beautiful to the end of time.*

A mirror scene is always a charming device for exposing the inner thoughts, fears, and vanity of a woman – whether it's Yum-Yum's delightfully innocent narcissism in *The Mikado* or Semele's gullible self-adoration in Handel's opera *Semele* (to be presented by POV in February 2009).

But the mirror scene in *Thaïs* is altogether more intense as, terrified she will lose her youth and beauty, Thaïs desperately seeks assurance of eternal life. The music alternates between rapid syllables that impart a breathless sense of panic and terror and slower, more lyrical phrases evocative of intense longing.

No sooner has she finished than her answer arrives in the person of Athanaël and his words that promise her exactly what she wants. Thaïs' rapid conversion is a missionary's dream – made believable simply because of this scene that shows how vulnerable she is.

Méditation Religieuse (Act 2. Scene 1)

The most famous bit of music from Thaïs is the well-loved Meditation theme, which has taken on a life of its own as a concert piece for solo violin (not to mention what Massenet biographer James Harding calls *a terrifying variety of transcriptions for every sort of instrument, including ocarina and harmonium, and once, even, reborn as a fox-trot.*)

One of the world's great encore pieces, The Meditation has found its way into numerous compilations of favourite classics for romance, relaxation and chilling out. Here are just a few actual titles of CD collections featuring the Meditation:

Chardonnay Classics - Wine Country Collection;
The Most Relaxing Classical Album in the World...Ever!
Nocturne - The Ultimate Classical Chillout Album;
HGTV: Dinner Party;
The Ultimate Most Relaxing Music for Strings In The Universe.

Like many really, really popular themes, the Meditation is played so often that it's easy to forget what a lovely piece it is, as seductive as the opera's heroine, as reverent as a prayer, as tender as the love she seeks.

How wonderful to have the chance to encounter this sublime music in its original context, woven through the texture of the opera like a blessing.

The theme first appears as Thaïs spends the night searching her soul and coming to a decision to renounce her life of worldly pleasure. It reappears in the oasis scene and again in the death scene of Thaïs.

In the morning, after her long night of prayer and reflection, Thaïs tells Athanaël of her decision:

Your word has remained in my heart as a balm divine I prayed, I wept. . . . There came into my soul a great light. Having seen the nothingness of all passion, to you I come as you have commanded.

Baigne d'eau mes mains et mes lèvres (Act 3. Scene 1)

The oasis scene provides the closest thing to a love duet in the opera. Here for once we see the compassionate and tender human that Athanaël might have become. Thaïs and Athanaël achieve their most sublime connection in this gentle scene. The words they sing – like their feelings – mirror one another for this moment.

He sings, *Bathe your hands and lips with this water, taste of this fruit. Your life is mine. God has entrusted it to me.*

She sings, *Bathe my hands and lips with this water, give me this fruit. My life is yours. God has entrusted it to you.*

Part love duet, part hymn, it is haunting in its simplicity and beauty.

C'est toi, mon père! (Act 3. Scene 3)

The final duet and the death of Thaïs are another very moving duet between Thaïs and Athanaël. The Meditation theme returns as Thaïs welcomes the monk and recalls their journey, the calm hours in the oasis, and his holy words.

This is a different duet than *Baigne d'eau*, where the two were perfectly attuned to one another. Here they are irrevocably on different paths. Thaïs, caught in a rapturous vision of heaven, does not even hear Athanaël as he desperately tells her: *I remember only your earthly beauty and the burning thirst that only you can quench. When I spoke I lied to you. ... nothing is true but life and the love of beings. I love you!*

Pacific Opera Victoria's Production of *Thaïs*

Director Renaud Doucet and Designer André Barbe first created *Thaïs* as a co-production between Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (June 2003) and l'Opéra de Montréal (November 2003). They subsequently staged productions at Kentucky Opera (November 2004), Boston Lyric Opera (April 2006) and Palm Beach Opera (January 2007).

For its October 2008 production of *Thaïs*, Pacific Opera Victoria is building André Barbe's stunning sets on a scale to fit Victoria's intimate Royal Theatre – and introducing a brilliant cast, all of whom are performing their roles in this opera for the very first time.



Act 1, Scene 2, Alexandria. Photo: l'Opéra de Montréal

The Set Design

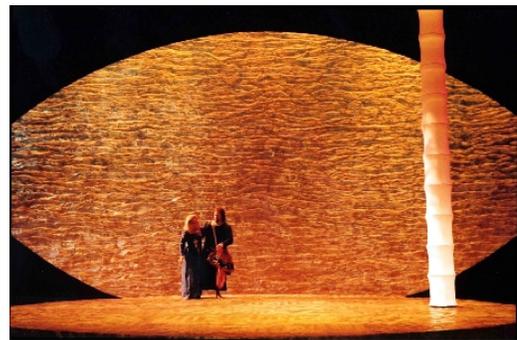
On the set of *Thaïs*, the great oval shape of an eye overlooks both the austere desert home of the monks and the brilliant decadence of sin-filled Alexandria.

As André and Renaud conceive the design, *The way the outside world looks at Thaïs, the way Athanaël looks at both Thaïs and God, the way Thaïs looks at herself and the way God looks at her, seems ... best represented by an eye ... that sees and judges all. On the floor an oval platform represents different strata of civilizations, in the style of the Greek bas-reliefs and Egyptian hieroglyphics. The sacred eye of Osiris symbolizes eternal life, it is a counterpoint to the inner eye which allows Thaïs to lift her spirit and yield to peace. It seemed important to us first of all to present the symbolism of the work in a minimalist style without betraying the spirit of the piece.*

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Act 2, Scene 2, Dance of la charmeuse
Photo: l'Opéra de Montréal



Act 3, Scene 1, the desert.
Photo: l'Opéra de Montréal

The Costume Design

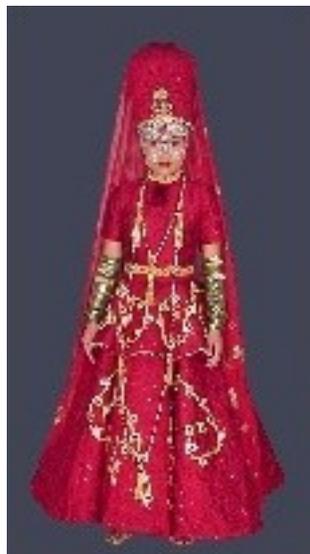
The rift between the two worlds of the opera is evoked through the colours and styles of the costumes; like the set the costumes cover a wide and vivid range, from warm, contemplative shades of brown and grey for the monks and nuns to the flamboyant hues worn by the denizens of pagan Alexandria.

The costumes represent the spirit of the characters, whether they are the monks and nuns who are physically and spiritually grounded in their environment, or the actors and philosophers who represent the energy of a life "without any tomorrow". It was also extremely important to us to maintain the orientalist themes which so enchanted the original audiences at the Paris Opera without in any way betraying the work itself.

Top: Costume for Thaïs.

Below, left to right: Athanaël, Nicias, La Charmeuse, a nun

Photos: l'Opéra de Montréal



There is a brief moment at the end of Act 1 when Thaïs begins to dance and, to Athanaël's horror, exposes her breasts.

The costume for this production is designed so that the character will appear partially nude –what will be seen is a costume, not the kind of wardrobe malfunction that happened at the 1894 premiere (see the section on the Composition and Premiere of the Opera for more information).

Photo: David Levy, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.
Marie Dunleavy as Thaïs



Hommage à Massenet

By Robert Holliston

“Now that he is dead, they will not perform his works so frequently.” Thus reflected Jules Massenet as he anticipated the effect of his own death in the final chapter of his memoirs, *Mes souvenirs*, written not long before his actual death in 1912. And even in the world of opera, so dependent for its livelihood on the ever-changing tastes of the public, there can be few more sobering falls from grace than Massenet’s. His works so successfully appealed to public and performers alike that they took their composer from poverty to wealth and international renown. Apart from *Manon* and, to a lesser degree *Werther*, 20th-century audiences have remembered Massenet mostly through the odd aria or song and the once-ubiquitous “Meditation” from *Thaïs*, 20th-century critics doing even less well. The more adventurous spirit of recent decades has brought us recordings and productions of operas such as *Cendrillon* and *Don Quichotte*, and recent recordings of *Thaïs*, along with new productions at the Met and elsewhere indicate it is no longer merely a curiosity with one good tune for weddings.

Throughout his career, Massenet was highly sensitive not only to changes in popular taste, but to the evolving musical styles of his restlessly experimental age. His choice of subject matter was as wide-ranging as Verdi’s, ranging from the biblical (*Hérodiade*) to the realistic (*La Navarraise*); from the exotic (*Le Roi de Lahore*) to the whimsical (*Cendrillon*); from the grand (*Le Cid*) to the relatively intimate (*Werther*). He was able to absorb into his own music some of the devices and innovations of his contemporaries, but only insofar as they proved appropriate and congenial; his own suave and gracious compositional voice is never far from the forefront. All of this has led to charges of eclecticism and pandering to the public, although why he shouldn’t be permitted to share these qualities with other artists such as Shakespeare and Rossini is anybody’s guess. Massenet was not only a professional composer for the theatre – and therefore a bit of an entrepreneur – he was a man who had known poverty – and therefore determined to be a *successful* entrepreneur.

The world in which Massenet lived, studied, and worked – the world of *Thaïs* – was a turbulent one, not least in the realm of music, which was host to a bewildering array of frequently contradictory styles, rapidly evolving and full of experimental fervor. As the Grand Opera of Meyerbeer (himself a casualty of changing fashion, and a more thorough one than Massenet) seemed more and more bloated, it yielded to the more intimate Opéra-Lyrique, into which category

we can place virtually all of Massenet’s works, despite their very different natures. At the same time the trend of the French opera libretto was steadily toward prose. Louis Gallet, the librettist of *Thaïs*, referred to this new style as *poésie mélodique*, and also accused most composers of being thoroughly ignorant of poetry in the first place (Massenet’s name was tactfully omitted). This impulse towards a kinder, gentler music theatre was also in response to an almost oppressive hysteria for the grand Teutonic passions of Richard Wagner: the composer who couldn’t get himself arrested in Paris in 1839 returned only a few decades later to find artistic France at his feet. There was even a *Revue Wagnérienne* founded in 1885. Some French composers – notably Emmanuel Chabrier – were so enthralled by Wagner’s massive music drama that their own voices were stifled; others – most famously Claude Debussy – turned their backs on it decisively. Massenet managed a middle ground, producing in 1889 one opera that had Wagnerian attributes (*Esclarmonde*) but otherwise keeping his own counsel.

The Impressionist exhibits of 1874-1886 had created a seismic shift in attitudes toward painting, and a parallel movement in music challenged classical tonality by using unfamiliar scale patterns and exploiting chords for the beauty of their “colour” rather than their linear function. Debussy, smitten by the paintings of Claude Monet and Paul Cézanne and sharing café tables with Symbolist poets Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, was able to assert his right as a creative artist to observe only his own rules.

Many musical experiments were fuelled by an interest in the exotic. The importation of one or another aspect of a foreign culture was nothing new, but it was unusually widespread in Europe during the second half of the 19th century. The Paris Universal Exhibition in 1889 was a revelation to at least one French composer (it helped inspire Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, a work which has been considered profoundly revolutionary ever since its première in 1894).

If there is one feature most prominent in Massenet’s music it is melody. In quality as well as variety Massenet’s melodies are unfailingly musical, captivating, and unerringly right: for the character, for the text, for the singer. And, without ever being ostentatious about it, for the dramatic situation. Long, arched, and flowing as required (usually by the romantic leads), they can also be simple and folk-like when appropriate (as they often are for comic or ingénue roles). These qualities made Massenet’s tunes beloved by the “star” singers of the day, much as

Handel's had been a century and a half earlier. While there are those "set pieces" beloved by singers, there is also variety of structure, so that arias are frequently part of scenes whose tempo and meter may change in response to the story. Few composers are as skilful or inventive as Massenet when it comes to the musical representation of dialogue. There are of course those passages of heightened sung speech known as *recitative*: these are very fluid and perfectly apt to the cadences of French speech patterns. The melodies are enriched by a harmonic sense that is surprisingly flexible and that identifies him as a colleague of Fauré, Chausson, Hahn (who admired him unreservedly) and, yes, Debussy.

Among my fondest POV recollections is our 1998 production of *Werther*, and I remember feeling during rehearsals as if I were playing a long, exquisite French *mélodie*. But this ignores another aspect of Massenet's art, one admired even by his detractors: his orchestration. In Massenet's case, this can be described

as an art that conceals art; as with the melodies, the orchestration doesn't draw attention to itself, so we don't always notice how lushly beautiful it is, how masterly, how absolutely "right." Or how innovative: during one of Massenet's most emotional scenes (Charlotte's in Act 2 of *Werther*) he is able to exploit the expressive qualities of the saxophone in a way that is not quirky but that still never fails to impress. In *Thaïs* there are many passages – including the famous "Meditation" – that haunt us precisely because their beauty is made to sound unusual.

If Wagner's influence on subsequent generations of composers has always been acknowledged, Massenet's own, if slighter, is as undeniable. Despite Debussy's fatigue with the older composer's *longeurs* and *parfums*, there are undeniable parallels between *Werther* and *Pelléas et Mélisande*, between *Thaïs* and *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*. And one wonders if Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites* could have been born into a world that had never seen Massenet.

A popular public speaker, Robert has given pre-performance lectures for Pacific Opera Victoria since 1993 and was Chorus Master for many years.

Composition and Premiere of the Opera

In his memoirs, Massenet recalled that when his librettist Louis Gallet suggested an opera based on Anatole France's 1890 novel *Thaïs*, *I was immediately carried away by the idea. I could see Sanderson in the role of Thaïs.*

Massenet had met Sibyl Sanderson in 1887 when he was 45 and she was a dazzlingly beautiful 22-year-old wannabe-diva. In his memoirs, Massenet recalled their first encounter at a dinner party:

Two ladies dressed in black, one young, the other older, came in... The younger was extraordinarily lovely; the other was her mother, also beautiful, with that thoroughly American beauty which the Starry Republic often sends to us.

"Dear Master," said the younger woman with a slight accent, "I have been asked to come to this friendly house ... to have the honor of seeing you and to let you hear my voice. I am the daughter of a supreme court judge in America and I have lost my father. He left my mother, my sisters, and me a fortune, but I want to go on the stage." Without further preamble I granted her desire ... her voice sounded magically, dazzlingly, in the aria, "Queen of the Night" from The Magic Flute. What a fascinating voice! It ranged from low G to the

counter G – three octaves – in full strength and in pianissimo.

I was astounded, stupefied, subjugated!... I recognized in that future artiste ... intelligence, a flame, a personality which were reflected luminously in her admirable face.

The next day Massenet's publisher asked him to write a new opera, *Esclarmonde*. Massenet decided Sibyl was perfect for the role and immediately persuaded the director of the Opéra-Comique to engage her. Massenet revised his great hit *Manon* for Sanderson in 1887, and created the title role of *Thaïs* for her.

When Louis Gallet converted Anatole France's novel into an opera libretto, of necessity he shortened and simplified it. The danger of adapting the work of a living author is, of course, that the author is around to see and comment on the result. And Anatole France was rather appalled at what Gallet did to his novel. The novel meanders over a much longer period than the opera and adds story lines, layers of characterization, vivid descriptions, involved philosophical discussions, and subtly ironic commentaries that are not possible in the brief space of the opera.

For example, the novel invents a back story for Thaïs, which we don't learn in the opera. A child of an idle father and a greedy, neglectful mother, she has but one friend, a Christian slave named Ahmes, who takes her secretly to meetings of the outlawed sect; she is eventually baptized. After Ahmes is martyred, Thaïs falls into prostitution and the path that will lead her to her life as the leading actress and courtesan of Alexandria.

As well, in the novel Athanaël has a stint as a pillar sitter in the fashion of Symeon the Stylite: After leaving Thaïs at the convent, the monk returns to his community in the desert, but, disturbed by visions of her, resolves to go deep into the desert to *practice unheard-of austerities, strange labours, and fresh works of grace*. Eventually he comes across a ruined temple and has a ladder made so that he can climb one of the pillars and remain on top to do penance. Villagers bring him food, and word spreads: monks, curiosity seekers and pilgrims arrive. They are joined by innkeepers and merchants who cater to the numerous sick and dying people who come in search of miracles. Anatole France paints a wryly amusing picture of the city that sprouts up almost overnight to cash in on the tourist potential of the monk's feat.

For the opera, Gallet condensed the action of the novel and left out most of the irony. He treated the monk with greater compassion and changed his name from Paphnuce to the more mellifluous and singable Athanaël. In the opera the tragedy unfolds rapidly in a headlong, implacable line: at its simplest, the sinner becomes a saint and the saint a sinner.

Thaïs premiered at the Paris Opéra on March 16, 1894. As usual with his opera premieres, Massenet was out of town. He recalled the evening in his memoirs:

The evening of the dress rehearsal of Thaïs I escaped from Paris and went to Dieppe and Pourville, with the sole purpose of being alone and free from the excitements of the great city ... I always tear myself away in this fashion from the feverish uncertainties which hover over every work

when it faces the public for the first time. No one can tell beforehand the feeling that will move the public, whether its prejudices or sympathies will draw it towards a work or turn it against it ...

Perhaps it was as well that he missed the premiere. On opening night Sanderson's dress became unhooked, giving the audience an unexpected view of *Mademoiselle Seinderson naked to the waist*, as the acerbic critic Willy (Henri Gauthier Villars) put it, punning cruelly on the young soprano's name (sein is French for "breast"). It is uncertain whether or not this wardrobe malfunction was an accident.

In any case, people buzzed about the immorality of the piece, and the directors of the Opéra were positively glum. Massenet recalls their consternation: *The day after my return to Paris ... the two directors of the Opera called on me. They appeared to be down at the mouth. I could only get sighs from them or a word or two, which in their laconicism spoke volumes, "The press! Immoral subject! It's done for!" These words were so many indications of what the performance must have been.*

Massenet made some revisions, adding a new ballet and creating the oasis scene, now considered one of the finest parts of the opera. Gradually, *Thaïs* grew more successful. Massenet was eventually able to say in his memoirs, *Seventeen years have gone and the piece is still on the bills, and has been played in the provinces and abroad, while at the Opera itself Thaïs has long since passed its hundredth performance.*

Despite his initial dismay at the libretto's vast simplification of his novel, Anatole France was gracious in expressing his admiration of the opera, writing to Massenet immediately after the first performance:

You have lifted my poor Thaïs to the first rank of operatic heroines. You are my sweetest glory. I am delighted ... "Assieds-toi près de nous" the aria to Love, the final duet, is charmingly beautiful. I am happy and proud at having furnished you with the theme on which you have developed the most inspiring phrases. I grasp your hand with joy.

Jules Massenet: the Composer

Jules Emile Frédéric Massenet was born May 12, 1842. He detested his first name, calling himself Monsieur Massenet or simply Massenet. His father was a scythe-manufacturer and his mother was a gifted pianist who gave her son lessons until he was accepted into the Paris conservatory at the age of 11. The chief examiner, Daniel-François-Esprit Auber, commented on the excellent instruction Massenet had been given by his mother. Auber would later write an opera based on the story of Manon Lescaut – an opera which would subsequently be eclipsed by versions composed by Massenet and, later, Puccini).

Shortly after, economic conditions forced Massenet's parents to move out of Paris; young Jules chafed under the exile to the countryside and eventually ran away to Paris where he stayed with a sister supported himself by teaching piano, and by playing percussion in various orchestras. He continued his studies and in 1863 he won the Prix de Rome, which paid for four years of study and cultural experience in Italy. This award was *the prize of prizes, the official recognition of exceptional ability, the opportunity to travel, to see the world, to study in the great capitals of Europe all at the expense of the state!* (Henry Finck)

While in Italy, he met the great pianist and composer Franz Liszt, who was getting old and passing some of his students on to younger teachers. Liszt was sufficiently impressed by Massenet to suggest him as a teacher for Louise-Constance de Gressy (Ninon), who would become Massenet's wife in 1866; Juliette, their only child, was born two years later.

Massenet served as a soldier in the Franco-Prussian War, but returned to his art after the end of the conflict in 1871. On his return to Paris, Massenet hung out with the up and coming young musicians of the time, including Vincent d'Indy, Georges Bizet, and Camille Saint-Saëns (an extremely outspoken and opinionated composer, who was a rival, rather than a friend of Massenet).

Massenet's first opera, a one-act work entitled *La Grand' Tante* (*The Great Aunt*), had been produced at the Opéra-Comique in 1867. But it was his later oratorios (*Marie-Magdeleine*, 1873, and *Eve*, 1875) which brought him to notice as a rising talent.

In 1878 he was appointed professor of composition at the Paris Conservatory where his pupils included

Gustave Charpentier, Reynaldo Hahn, and Alfred Bruneau.

In 1877 Massenet's exotic opera *Le Roi de Lahore* (*The King of Lahore*) had a successful premiere at the Paris Opera, and he was on his way to becoming France's most prolific and celebrated operatic composer. The operas that followed included *Hérodiade* (1881), *Manon* (1884), *Le Cid* (1885), *Esclarmonde* (1889), *Werther* (1892), *Thaïs* (1894), and *Don Quichotte* (1910) – along with many lesser known operas. In all he composed 25 operas, 4 oratorios, some 250 songs, ballets, orchestral and choral music, incidental music for plays, and a piano concerto.

Despite some ups and downs, he became wealthy and famous, and his best known operas, *Manon* and *Werther*, remain cornerstones of the French operatic repertoire.

Massenet was a disciplined, hard-working composer with a sense of theatre and a gift for melody and orchestration. He followed a rigorous daily routine, waking at 4 am to begin composing, keeping at it until at least noon and sometimes longer. Afternoons were usually devoted to teaching or attending rehearsals – Massenet closely supervised the productions of his operas. Evenings were spent auditioning singers, being interviewed by journalists, and meeting visitors.

A surprisingly shy and sensitive person, Massenet did his best to neither give nor receive criticism. Despite his presence at rehearsals, he avoided the opening nights of his operas – terrified of booing and bad reviews. And if he could find a tactful way to phrase a comment he did. His biographer James Harding tells of a tenor who once set Massenet's teeth on edge with his singing in *Manon*. When the luckless fellow approached Massenet, eager for compliments, he was not disappointed; the master suavely told him, *You sang like a composer*.

Massenet wrote his music on thick, luxurious paper and as he composed, he added notes in the margins about the dates and times when he began or stopped work, the weather that day, his mood, appointments, family events such as his daughter's first Communion, and the number of performances his other operas had reached.

He also numbered the pages of his manuscripts, but instead of writing page 13 on the scores he would write "12 bis" (bis is an Old Latin word meaning

“repeat”. It is also a musical term instructing the performer to repeat a passage.). This is because Massenet was triskaidekaphobic: he had a superstitious fear of the number 13. Biographer James Harding speculates that the failure of his second opera *Don César de Bazan*, which ran for just 13 nights, may have inspired this dread. Harding also notes that Massenet also never worked or started a journey on the 13th of a month, nor did he allow his operas to premiere on the 13th. Perhaps his fear was wise. He died on August 13th, 1912.

He had foreseen his death in the last chapter of his memoirs, *Mes souvenirs*, of which biographer James Harding says, *he chose to see his past life in the gentlest of colours. None of those whom he knew is described as anything but loyal, kind, charming and wholly delightful. Even his enemies appear to be lovable folk whom he really adores ... Mes souvenirs, with their frequent omissions and impenetrable gloss, comprise what may well be the least informative memoirs ever written.*

In 1911 Massenet’s memoirs were published in instalments by the *Écho de Paris*. The music editor

had actually intended to publish the memoirs of Massenet’s old rival Saint-Saëns. When Massenet found out and eagerly proffered his own autobiographical recollections, the editor printed instalments on alternate weekends – first a chapter by Saint-Saëns, then a chapter from Massenet.

But Massenet didn’t consider his memoirs finished until he wrote the final chapter on his death. That chapter, called *Pensées posthumes*, is an extended imagining of his death and the effect on all those around him – how the news spread, the comments, the weeping of his family and his publisher – the sort of melancholic drama many people may imagine about themselves from time to time, but rarely write down and publish!

I have departed from this planet and I have left behind my poor earthly ones with their occupations which are as many as they are useless; at last I am living in the scintillating splendor of the stars, each of which used to seem to me as large as millions of suns. Of old I was never able to get such lighting for my scenery on the great stage at the Opera where the backdrops were too often in darkness... .

Louis Gallet: the Librettist

Louis Marie Alexandre Gallet (1835–1898) is best known as the writer behind a number of operas by such composers as Ambroise Thomas, Georges Bizet, Camille Saint-Saëns and Jules Massenet. He also wrote plays, romances, memoirs, and treatises on hospital administration. Gallet’s day jobs included a civil service post in the Department of Public Assistance and work as a hospital administrator.

In 1871 he was asked to collaborate with Camille Saint-Saëns on the libretto for *La Princesse jaune*. Saint-Saëns thought so highly of Gallet that he recommended him as music critic for the *Nouvelle Revue*, explaining, *He is an accomplished man of letters. He is not a musician in the sense that he has studied music, but he has the soul of a musician, which is worth much more.*

Massenet called Gallet *my faithful and precious collaborator*. Their collaborations included the oratorios *Marie Magdeleine* (1873) and *Eve* (1875), the opera *Le roi de Lahore* (1877), *Le cid* (1885, with Henri Meilhac and Philippe Gille), and *Thaïs* (1894).

When he adapted Anatole France’s novel *Thaïs*, Gallet wrote what he called *poésie mélodique*: instead of traditional rhyming couplets, he created a kind of unrhymed free verse that was more musical and rhythmic than plain prose, but that left the field open for the composer to interpose his music without shredding the poetic elements in the words. In a preface to the libretto of *Thaïs*, Gallet dryly explained his reasons: *A libretto is work in verse that is handed over to a musician so that he may convert it into prose - a succinct comment on the ways the most carefully constructed poetry can lose its impact once a composer gets hold of it, messes with the rhythms and ignores the rhymes. So why even bother going to all the trouble of handing over a verse in strict metre and rhyme? Why not give the composer something closer to a blank slate?*

The language of Gallet’s libretto for *Thaïs* is still eminently poetic and lyrical, but its prose structure allows Massenet’s music to more closely follow the text, the rhythms of speech, and the flow of the characters’ emotions. Of Gallet’s work for *Thaïs* Saint-Saëns said, *The blank verse he used in “Thaïs” with admirable regard for color and harmony, counting on the music to take the place of*

the rhyme, was ... free from assonance and the banalities which it draws into operatic works, but it kept the rhythm and sonorous sound which is far removed from prose.

Saint-Saëns, for whom Gallet wrote several libretti, respected and admired him, calling him *My friend and collaborator ... the diligent and chosen companion of my best years, whose support was so dear and precious to me. Gallet was not a musician, but he enjoyed and understood music, and he criticised with rare good taste ... Outside of our work, too, our relations were delightful. We wrote to each other constantly in both prose and verse; we bombarded each other with sonnets; his letters were*

sometimes ornamented with water colors, for he drew very well and one of his joys was to cover white paper with color ...

Louis Gallet devoted a large part of his time to administrative duties, for he was successively treasurer and manager of hospitals. Nevertheless he produced works in abundance. He left a record of no less than forty operatic librettos, plays, romances, memoirs, pamphlets, and innumerable articles. I wish I knew what to say about the man himself, his unwearying goodness, his loyalty, his scrupulousness, his good humor, his originality, his continual common sense, and his intellect, alert to everything unusual and interesting.

Sybil Sanderson: the First Thaïs

Sybil Sanderson! I cannot remember that artiste without feeling deep emotion, cut down as she was in her full beauty, in the glorious bloom of her talent by pitiless Death. She was an ideal Manon at the Opéra-Comique, and a never to be forgotten Thaïs at the Opera. These roles identified themselves with her temperament, the choicest spirit of that nature which was one of the most magnificently endowed I have ever known.

An unconquerable vocation had driven her to the stage, where she became the ardent interpreter of several of my works. But for our part what an inspiring joy it is to write works and parts for artists who realize our very dreams!

Jules Massenet

Sybil (or Sibyl) Sanderson was a kind of 19th-century Marilyn Monroe – a candle-in-the-wind character, who was celebrated for her beauty and talent and who burned out far too early. Born in Sacramento, California, on December 7, 1865, she was only 37 when she died on May 15, 1903.

Her father had been a gold miner and later the Chief Justice of California; his death left Sybil and her mother very wealthy. Sanderson was briefly engaged to William Randolph Hearst, the almost mythical newspaper magnate who inspired the Orson Welles movie *Citizen Kane* (In fact, Welles had originally wanted to use the mirror scene from *Thaïs* for an operatic scene in the movie.)

The engagement with Hearst was ended by their families, and Sybil was packed off to study at the Paris Conservatoire, where she took voice lessons from Giovanni Sbriglia and later with Mathilde Marchesi.

In 1887 Sybil had her fateful meeting with Jules Massenet, who was so taken by her beauty and her



Sybil Sanderson as Thaïs and Jean François Delmas as Athanaël, 1894.

extraordinary vocal range that he composed his opera *Esclarmonde* for her. He worked on the opera while holidaying in Switzerland with Sanderson and her mother; his wife and daughter remained at home. Rumours swirled about the composer's obsession with the young soprano. Although it is not certain whether they actually became lovers, Massenet affirmed all his life that *Esclarmonde* was his favourite opera – most likely because of Sanderson's part in it and his deep affection and pride in her.

Esclarmonde had its premiere as part of the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris. The opera opened just a week after the opening of the Eiffel Tower, and Sanderson's spectacular high G was quickly dubbed her *Eiffel Tower note*.

Sanderson began to appear on the stages of both the Opéra and Opéra-Comique in Paris. Massenet continued to encourage her career; she became his favourite Manon, and he wrote *Thaïs* for her. Massenet's old rival Camille Saint-Saëns wrote the

title role in *Phryné* for her (this was another opera with a courtesan as heroine) . She was wooed by princes and showered with jewels. But although she was a hit in Paris and Russia, her career began to fizzle when she attempted to win over the audiences and critics in London and New York.

In 1895 she debuted in her native land as Manon in a performance at the Metropolitan Opera. The *New York Times* review was lukewarm:

And now for Miss Sanderson. In the first place, the American public will not be disappointed in her appearance. She has lost none of the beauty which fascinated Paris when she made her appearance as Esclarmonde at the Opera Comique in 1889. She has plenty of handsome garments, and she wears them with distinction. She has jewels, too, which she should not wear in the first scene. Her voice is a very light and colorless soprano of great range. It is known that she sings the high G, which the Parisians call her Eiffel Tower note, but it has been remarked frequently that high notes are not art. Miss Sanderson's voice lacks warmth and emotional character. It is pretty, but it is much too small for the Metropolitan. It frequently runs to the quality called white, and this characteristic is increased by faulty placing at times. Her high notes are thin and strident, but the upper part of her middle register is good. Her staccati are extremely sharp and wooden. Of course, she has a good comprehension of the rôle of Manon, and at the end of the third scene, in the duet with Des Grieux, she sang with a good deal of feeling. Her acting is graceful, but it is not convincing.

New York Times - January 17, 1895
Manon Lescaut at the Opera:
Debut of Miss Sibyl Sanderson in her Native Land.

Thais in Literature

Early Christian manuscripts talk of a beautiful courtesan, St. Thais (Thaisis, Taisia, or Thaisia) who was converted by a monk, variously named St. Paphnutius, St. Bessarion, or St. Serapion.

Obedient to a vision, the hermit leaves the desert, and seeks out Thais in Alexandria. She repents and, renouncing her evil life, enters a convent where she is walled up in a cell and does penance for three years. The monk then learns from a vision granted to St. Anthony's disciple Paul that God has forgiven her. She is allowed to join the other nuns, but dies within days.

Many versions of this story exist in Greek, Syriac, and Latin texts, including literature on the lives of

In 1897 Sybil married Antonio Terry, a Cuban millionaire who died shortly after. Sybil developed an addiction to drugs and alcohol, and fell into a steady slide downward, although she continued to sing professionally in Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Paris. She even returned to the Met in 1901 to sing Manon and Juliette in Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*. These productions went on tour; In October 1901 Sanderson sang *Manon* at a matinee at Montreal's Westmount Arena. Another performance in Rochester was distinguished by the fact that the door receipts of \$332 were the lowest in the history of the Metropolitan Opera. The tour also took her to New Orleans, San Francisco and Philadelphia.

Sybil Sanderson died in 1903 in Paris. Massenet recalled her funeral:

A large, silent, meditative crowd gathered at the passing of the cortège which bore Sibyl Sanderson to her last resting place. A veil of sorrow seemed to be over them all.

Albert Carré and I followed the coffin. We were the first behind all that remained of her beauty, grace, goodness, and talent with all its appeal. As we noted the universal sorrow, Albert Carre interpreted the feeling of the crowd towards the beautiful departed, and said in these words, eloquent in their conciseness and which will survive, "She was loved!"

What more simple, more touching, and more just homage could be paid to the memory of her who was no more?

the saints. The feast day of St. Thais is celebrated on October 8.

The basis for later medieval versions is the *Vita Thaisis*, a sixth- or seventh-century translation from Greek to Latin by Dionysius Exiguus (aka Dennis the Little or Dennis the Short). This Dennis was a sixth century monk best known as the inventor of the Anno Domini era, the system of numbering years based on whether they occur before (B.C.) or after (A.D.) the birth of Christ.

The direct source for Massenet's opera was the novel *Thais* by Anatole France, which in turn was inspired by a 10th century play called *Pafnutius* (*Paphnutius*), which was written by Hrotswitha of

Gandersheim (her name is also spelled Hrotsvit, Hrotsvitha, Hroswitha, and Roswitha). Hrotswitha, who lived from about 935 to 1002 AD, was a nun, a poet, and a playwright. A niece of the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto I, and clearly a well educated woman, she became canoness of a Benedictine nunnery in Gandersheim, in northern Germany.

Hrotswitha wrote poems, histories, and religious legends – all in Latin. She is best known for her plays, which were inspirational portrayals of chaste and virtuous women. Hrotswitha has been called the first German poet, the first female playwright, and the first person since antiquity to compose drama in the western world.

Hrotswitha's play *Paphnutius* is a celebration of the power of penance and has many charming moments. One can see why, when Anatole France saw a marionette performance of the play in Paris, he was intrigued by the story and characters.

Here are some moments which show the flavour of this work:

Paphnutius, entrusting Thaïs to the care of the abbess: *Oh, Abbess, I have brought you a little wild gazelle who has been snatched half dead from the jaws of wolves. Show it compassion, nurse it with all your tenderness, until it has shed its rough goatskin and put on the soft fleece of a lamb.*

Thaïs, praising God on learning that she is forgiven and will soon be in Paradise: *For this let the choirs of heaven praise Him, and all the little twigs and fresh green leaves on earth, all animals, and the great waters. He is patient with us when we fall ! He is generous in His gifts when we repent.*

Many elements of Hrotswitha's play reappear in both Anatole France's novel and Massenet's opera. Both the novel and the opera, while titled *Thaïs*, focus on the story of the monk (Paphnuce / Paphnutius in the novel, Athanaël in the opera), telling the story from the monk's perspective; indeed, France's book was originally entitled *Paphnuce*.

But there is a major difference. Anatole France took this instructive little story from the annals of early Christianity and added an ironic twist: in his zeal to save Thaïs, the monk falls passionately in love with her. There are very subtle hints in Hroswitha's play that the monk was tempted, if not to lust, at least to a tenderness he deplored; it is perhaps not such a

great leap for Anatole France to envision the monk succumbing to temptation.

In the novel, Paphnuce falls into single-minded fanaticism and self-righteous dogmatism. He yearns to follow in the holy footsteps of St. Anthony (famous for his temptation in the desert, which has been represented in many works of art and in a major novel by Gustave Flaubert). But, absorbed in a kind of arrogant innocence, Paphnuce does not recognize his own temptation when it comes; his jealousy of Nicias finds expression as self-righteous wrath, his lust for Thaïs as ascetic rigour. And eventually, destroyed by his lust, he loses his faith.

At the end of France's novel, Paphnuce finally recognizes his love, but denies his God. When he learns that Thaïs is dying, he is stunned:

"Thaïs is dying!" Then why the sun, the flowers, the brooks, and all creation? "Thaïs is dying!" What good was all the universe?... "Fool, fool, that I was, not to have possessed Thaïs whilst there was yet time! Fool to have believed that there was anything else in the world but her! Oh, madness! I dreamed of God, of the salvation of my soul, of life eternal--as if all that counted for anything when I had seen Thaïs! Why did I not feel that blessed eternity was in a single kiss of that woman, and that without her life was senseless, and no more than an evil dream? ... Oh, miserable, senseless fool, who sought divine goodness elsewhere than on the lips of Thaïs! ... Thou couldst have bought, at the price of thy damnation, one moment of her love, and thou hast not done it! ... Oh, regrets! Oh, remorse! Oh, despair! Not to have the joy to carry to hell the memory of that never-to-be-forgotten hour, and to cry to God, 'Burn my flesh, dry up all the blood in my veins, break all my bones, thou canst not take from me the remembrance which sweetens and refreshes me for ever and ever!' . . . Thaïs is dying! Preposterous God, if thou knewest how I laugh at Thy hell! Thaïs is dying, and she will never be mine – never! never!"

This anguish, this loss of faith is echoed in the opera:

Thaïs must die!... Then, why Heaven, human beings, light?—Of what good is the universe?—Thaïs must die. Oh, to see her again. To see her, hold her, keep her!... I must have her. Yes, fool that I was, not to have understood—that she alone was all, that one of her caresses was worth more than Heaven ! Oh I would kill all those who have loved her!

Anatole France: the Novelist

Jacques Anatole François Thibault, (April 16, 1844 to October 12, 1924) is best known by his pseudonym, Anatole France. A French poet, journalist, and novelist, he was one of the most important figures in French literature during the 19th and 20th century.

His novel *Thaïs* was published in 1890, although he had written a poem on the subject in 1867.

Of France's novel *Thaïs*, critic Andrew Porter says, *His work is enjoyable on many levels: for its precise, carefully balanced prose; for the pleasure of watching a polished Parisian mind play over Christian, Stoic, and Sceptic philosophies; and -- these are two aspects most relevant to the opera -- for its picturesque evocations of Alexandrian and Thebaid life and the extraordinary grace and charm of a heroine, beautiful in body and in spirit.*

Anatole France was awarded the 1921 Nobel Prize in Literature "in recognition of his brilliant literary achievements, characterized as they are by a nobility of style, a profound human sympathy, grace, and a true Gallic temperament".

The following year his complete works were put on the papal Index (Index Librorum Prohibitorum – the List of Books prohibited by the Catholic Church).

What were the books that so shocked the church that it became a sin to read them? Among France's numerous works are the following:

The Mummy of Thaïs

There was to be yet another chapter in the improbable life and death of Thaïs – a macabre and controversial archeological discovery.

Between 1898 and 1910 a French archeologist named Albert Gayet carried out a series of excavations at Antinoë (Antinopolis), a town on the east bank of the Nile that was founded by the Roman emperor Hadrian (who was also responsible for Hadrian's Wall in Britain). When Hadrian's companion, a Greek youth named Antinous, drowned in the Nile in 130 AD, the grief-stricken emperor proclaimed the youth a god and founded the city in his name. Antinoë became the capital of the Thebaid.

Le Jongleur de Notre dame (Our Lady's Juggler, 1892) in which a simple juggler is accepted into a monastery and seeks a way to glorify the Virgin Mary. Massenet based his 1902 opera of the same name on this story.

Balthazar (1889), a fanciful version of the story of one of the Magi

Thaïs (1890), with its satirical examination of a dogmatic monk who saves the soul of a courtesan only to lose his own.

La vie de Jeanne D'Arc (The Life of Joan of Arc, 1908)

L'Île des pingouins (Penguin Island, 1908) which satirizes human nature by depicting the transformation of penguins into humans – after the animals have been baptized in error by a nearsighted Abbot.

Les Sept Femmes de la Barbe-Bleue et Autres Contes Merveilleux (The Seven Wives of Bluebeard, and Other Marvelous Stories, 1909): the title story in this collection twists the story of Bluebeard, transforming the fairy-tale villain into a genuinely nice guy who is really badly treated by his succession of wives.

Les Dieux ont soif (The Gods Are Athirst, 1912). Set during the French Revolution, the book portrays the development of a young artist into a bloodthirsty fanatic.

La Revolte des Anges (The Revolt of the Angels, 1914), in which a group of angels attempt to free themselves from divine despotism.

The ruins of the city include temples and tombs dating from the civilizations of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, as well as remains of Christian churches and monasteries.

At the 1900 Exposition Universelle de Paris, Gayet held a very successful exhibition of textiles from his excavations at Antinoë.

He then resumed his digging and in 1901 announced a stunning discovery: the mummified remains of the courtesan and the monk – of Thaïs and Sérapion (St. Sérapion was one of the several names given to the monk who converted Thaïs).

By now of course, both Anatole France's novel and Massenet's opera had brought the romance of Thaïs squarely to the attention of the French public, and the discovery and subsequent display of the remains at the Musée Guimet in Paris created a sensation. The public and the press were enthralled; his scientific peers were more skeptical.

In *Antinoë et les sépultures de Thaïs et Sérapion*, his 1902 book about the discovery, Gayet attempts to sound suitably detached about the controversy, saying

I have no convincing document that would allow me to identify the bodies exhumed from the necropolis with the historical Serapion and Thaïs. Neither do I have any authorizing me to claim the opposite; under these circumstances, loyalty forbids me to pronounce.

(Je n'ai aucun document probant, me permettant d'identifier les deux corps exhumés de la nécropole d'Antinoë au Sérapion et à la Thaïs historiques. Je n'en ai aucun non plus, m'autorisant à attester le contraire; et, dans ces conditions, la loyauté m'interdit de me prononcer.)

Gayet based his conclusions on an inscription in the woman's tomb, which he translated *Here rests the blessed Thaïs*, and on another inscription which appeared to identify the occupant of a neighbouring tomb as Sérapion.

Although he claimed to be sitting firmly on the fence about the identity of the remains, there is no question where Gayet's heart lay. In his book he went on to explain in poetic detail why the costumes and artifacts found with the bodies indicated that these were indeed the two fourth century saints.

Fellow archeologists were less convinced, and an essay published in 1903 by Pierre Battifol tried to debunk Gayet's find, in part by claiming that the legend of Thaïs was exactly that – a legend, nothing more than a morality tale intended to make sinners behave.

A contemporary American writer, Evangeline Wilbour Blashfield, clearly believed the remains were genuine, and in her 1917 book *Portraits and Backgrounds*, condemned Anatole France for transforming the monk into an *erotomaniac* and

smirching the reputation of an irreproachable saint, to whom many churches and monasteries are dedicated, and whose intercession is daily sought by thousands of Eastern Christians. She viewed France's book as a rude trampling of an exquisite flower of asceticism under satyr's hoofs.

She called Gayet's refusal to state unequivocally that the mummies were the original Thaïs and Sérapion a *declaration of unfaith* and went on to state her own position in quite passionate and colourful prose:

The articles found with the body favor the hypothesis that in the Musée Guimet lies the blackened husk of the bewitching mime who inflamed the youth of Alexandria, listened to the preaching of Paphnutius, burned her treasures, and followed the hermit into the Thebaid to save her soul. Those who would play the devil's advocate and unsaint this poor shell argue that the dress, the coquettish wreath-like hood, ... the rich-toned draperies that warm the eye like the tints of sun-soaked nectarines, is that of a child of the world, provoking rather than repelling glances. To this objection M. Gayet replies that saints were often buried in rich clothing and hoarded their festal garments to enter the Presence bravely.

A few others had another opinion on the whole outrageous display. In his introduction to a 1929 edition of France's *Thaïs*, Professor Raymond Weaver commented sadly about the dubious immortality bestowed on Thaïs as a kind of circus display:

Her mortal flesh was to undergo its ultimate degradation, and to be resurrected after less than two millenniums as a museum exhibit. This mummy that is labeled as hers was exhumed in 1900 – ten years after Anatole France had resurrected her in more radiant glory. History has bequeathed to her, and with no deliberate malice, a destiny of exclusive and almost perfect irony...Immortality it was that Thaïs craved, and immortality in beauty and through compassion; and this, it may be devoutly hoped, God in a better world has granted her. Be this as it must, Anatole France has done for Thaïs in this world what her Master has promised her in the next.

Undoubtedly France took liberties with the original of the monk Paphnutius, but he gave to

Thaïs an immortality with more of mercy in it than that which history has given her – resurrection, after two millenniums, as a museum exhibit.

Even Massenet waded in: In his memoirs he recalls the rehearsals and the premiere of *Thaïs*:

As I listened to the final rehearsals in the depths of the empty theater, I lived over again my ecstatic moments before the remains of Thaïs of Antinoë, beside the anchorite, who had been bewitched by her grace and charm. We owed this impressive spectacle which was so well calculated to impress the imagination to a glass case in the Guimet Museum.



Watercolour entitled *L'ensevelissement de Thaïs (the burial / shroud of Thaïs)*. From Gayet's book *Antinoë et les sépultures de Thaïs et Sérapion*, Paris, Société française d'éditions d'art, 1902.

Massenet's memoirs have been called "notoriously unreliable" and "delightfully misleading," and this is one instance in which he seems to have shifted timelines in the service of artistic aptness. The final rehearsals of *Thaïs* were in 1894; the so-called mummy of *Thaïs* was not discovered until 1901, so the picture of the composer drawing inspiration from the mortal remains of his heroine is deliciously impossible.

Whether the mummified remains discovered by M. Gayet were actually of a couple named *Thaïs* and *Sérapion* – and whether they were THE *Thaïs* and THE *Sérapion* – we are likely never to know. However, this archeological episode adds yet another tantalizing layer to the intricate and irresistible story of *Thaïs*.

Watercolour entitled *Thaïs Orante (praying)*. The Orante is a figure with arms extended in prayer, a symbol of the soul at peace in paradise. From Gayet's book *Antinoë et les sépultures de Thaïs et Sérapion*, Paris, Société française d'éditions d'art, 1902.



Links

Massenet and his Opera *Thaïs*

http://www.karadar.com/Librettos/massenet_thais.html Libretto in French

<http://www.archive.org/details/thaslyriccomed00massrich> Libretto in French and English, English translation by Charles Alfred Byrne. Charles Burden / Steinway Hall, 1907.

<http://imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/7/73/IMSLP20437-PMLP10664-Massenet-ThaisVSfe.pdf> Complete score in French, with English translation by Hermann Klein. Heugel & cie, Paris, 1907. (25 MB PDF)

<http://www.bobsuniverse.com/BWJM/index.htm> An exhaustive site devoted to Massenet

<http://www.archive.org/details/myrecollectionsb00barniala> English text of Massenet's *My Recollections (Mes Souvenirs)*

<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Agora/1985/act1.html> Synopsis with brief sound samples

Anatole France's Novel *Thaïs*

<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/6377> Original French text

Two different English translations of the novel

<http://www.archive.org/details/thaisfranceanato00frania> Ernest Tristan, Translator. Brentano's, New York, 1911.

<http://www.archive.org/details/thaisfrance00frania> Robert B. Douglas, Translator. John Lane Company, 1920.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/browse/authors/f#a755> Works by Anatole France at Project Gutenberg

<http://www.archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%28france%2C%20anatole%29%20-contributor%3Agutenberg%20AND%20mediatype%3Atexts> Works by Anatole France at Internet Archive

Ancient Sources

<http://www.archive.org/details/playsofroswitha00hrotuoft> The Plays of Roswitha, including Paphnutius (English translation)

<http://www.archive.org/details/antinoetless00gaye> *Antinoë et les sépultures de Thaïs et Sérapion* : Albert Gayet's book about his discovery (in French), with sketches of the area and the artifacts.

The Papal Index and Censorship of Anatole France's works

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/indexlibrorum.html> Information about the Papal Index, including a list of some of the books banned.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03519d.htm> Censorship of Books: Historical Overview from the Catholic Encyclopedia

http://www.beaconforfreedom.org/about_database/index_librorum.html Historical overview of censorship, the Index, and a link to the final 1948 edition of *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. You may also click on "Censored Publications" to access an extensive database that can be searched by title, author, language, year of censorship, reason for the censorship, and censoring country (the Catholic Church's Index is found by searching on "Holy See").

Directions for Further Learning

For Elementary and Middle School Students

Egypt: Geography

On a map, locate the Thebaid and Alexandria, the places where the action of the opera takes place.

Estimate the distance that Athanaël had to walk from his community in the desert of the Thebaid to the city of Alexandria.

How long might it have taken for him to walk that distance?

What might the landscape and the weather have been like?

Kid-friendly web sites on Egyptian culture and history

<http://www.horus.ics.org/en/History/History.aspx>

Little Horus, a sky god, son of Osiris & Isis, takes children on a tour of Egyptian history, tourist attractions, games, recipes, and more

<http://www.rom.on.ca/schools/egypt/learn/index.php>

The Royal Ontario Museum's site on Egypt

<http://www.mos.org/quest/index.php>

The Museum of Science in Boston: Meet a mummy – and much more.

Vocabulary: *Phobias, Philias, and Manias*

Jules Massenet, the composer of *Thaïs*, had a superstitious fear of the number 13. The fancy word for this type of fear is “triskaidekaphobia” (pronounced trisk-eye-dek-e-FObia”). The word comes from the Greek words “treiskaideka” meaning “thirteen” and “phobia” meaning “fear.” A phobia is a persistent, irrational fear that causes a person to feel very anxious and uncomfortable.

The Greek and Latin languages have given us some wonderful words for many kinds of fear. Here are some examples: xenophobia (fear of strangers or foreigners); agoraphobia (fear of open spaces); claustrophobia (fear of enclosed spaces); acrophobia (fear of heights); arachnophobia (fear of spiders); aquaphobia (fear of water).

Activities

1. Investigate some “phobia” words. Discover how each word was put together (for example, aquaphobia comes from the Latin word “aqua” meaning “water” and “phobia” meaning fear). Think of other related words that come from the same roots. For example, “aquatic” means “related to water; growing in or living near water” – as in an aquatic plant.
2. Make up some new phobia words. Fear of worms? Fear of homework? Fear of missing your favourite tv show?
3. Besides phobias, root words can be put together to create “manias” (obsessions) and “philias” (strong love). Examples are kleptomania (an uncontrollable impulse to steal); pyromania (an uncontrollable impulse to set fires) and, more recently, Beatlemania (a craze for the rock group the Beatles). “Philia” words include bibliophile (a person who loves books); francophile (someone who admires France or the French people or culture); arctophile (someone who collects teddy bears).
4. Open-ended discussion: There are many “phobia” words that express fear of certain groups of people. Sometimes fear of a certain group is expressed through conflict or through persecution or hatred of that group. Here are just a few examples of phobia words for particular groups of people: Xenophobia (fear of foreigners or strangers); Francophobia (fear of French people); Hispanophobia (Spanish people); Russophobia (Russians); Anglophobia (England or English people). There are phobia terms

for women (gynophobia), homosexuals (homophobia) and for many religions, including Islamophobia, Judeophobia, and Christophobia. Discuss some of these kinds of fear and hatred, how they have been expressed in history, what their effect is, how people can deal with them.

Resources

Teachers may wish to select appropriate words for class discussion and analysis from the very comprehensive lists of words and definitions on these web sites:

http://www.wordinfo.info/words/index/info/view_unit/2723 “phobia” words

http://www.wordinfo.info/words/index/info/view_unit/2726 “philia” words

http://www.wordinfo.info/words/index/info/view_unit/2735 “mania” words

<http://www.worldwidewords.org/articles/phobias.htm> A more in-depth discussion of “phobia” words, including standard ones, and new ones that people have made up.

For Middle School and High School Students

Egypt: Culture and History

Nomadic hunter-gatherers began living in Egypt some 1.8 million years ago. About 3150 BC, the first pharaohs established the Egyptian state. Over the next millennia, under a series of kingdoms, Egypt made impressive achievements in art, architecture, technology, medicine, agriculture, and mathematics.

The Egyptians also established a polytheistic religion (a religion with many gods) with hundreds of gods. The Egyptian pharaohs were also believed to be both kings and gods. Perhaps the best known aspect of the religion of the ancient Egyptians is their belief in the need to preserve the physical body in preparation for the afterlife. Mummification and the construction of large tombs (the pyramids) for the pharaohs were expressions of this belief.

Over some 2,400 years of its history, Egypt was governed by a series of foreign powers, including the Nubians, Persians, Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans, French, and British. The Romans established their rule in 30 B.C., and continued to hold Egypt for some 700 years.

St. Mark is said to have brought Christianity to Egypt in A.D. 37. The Egyptian Christians are called Copts, a word derived from the Greek word for the country, *Aegyptos*. By the middle of the fourth century, Egypt was largely a Christian country.

Christian monasticism (from the Greek *monos*, meaning "single" or "alone") began in the deserts of Egypt and Syria in the 4th century AD. There are two main types of Christian monasticism: Eremitical or solitary monks (hermits) and Cenobites (monks who live in communities; the word Cenobite comes from the Greek words *koinos* and *bios*, meaning "common" and "life"). Athanaël and the other monks in the opera *Thaïs* are Cenobites.

Although it is impossible to do more than dip your toe into the vast world of Egyptian culture, which evolved over several thousand years, it is a fascinating topic to explore. Here are a few internet resources to get started.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egypt>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coptic_monasticism

<http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk/menu.html> (The British Museum’s web site on ancient Egypt. ‘Staff Room’ pages have been developed to help teachers get the most out of the web site for themselves and for their class.)

The Most Famous Library in the World

In the opera *Thaïs*, when Athanaël sings his song of love and hate to the city of Alexandria, *Voilà donc la terrible cité*, he says, *For your riches I hate you, for your science and your beauty*. Alexandria, the most important centre of learning in the ancient world, was once the home of the largest library in the world.

This library was part of a temple or house of Muses, called a Museum (!) – a complex that included lecture areas, gardens, a zoo, and the Library itself. It is thought to have been founded in about 283 BC and was intended to collect and house all the books in the world. It has been estimated that at one time the Library of Alexandria held over half a million documents from Assyria, Greece, Persia, Egypt, India and many other nations.

Sometime between 48 BC and 642 AD, the Library was destroyed, and the loss to literature, history, and culture is incalculable.

To this day the details of the destruction remains a source of controversy. There are just too many suspects, including Julius Caesar, who in 48 BC invaded Egypt and was forced to burn his own ships, in turn setting fire to the docks and then the Library.

If the library or a portion survived Julius Caesar's invasion, it may have been destroyed in the 3rd century AD by the Emperor Aurelian. Or perhaps the death knell for the library took place in 391, when Christian Emperor Theodosius I ordered the destruction of all pagan temples, including the library – or perhaps in 642 when the Muslims sacked the city and burned the books to heat bathwater for the soldiers.

There is now a new Library of Alexandria, built with the support of the Egyptian government and UNESCO and officially inaugurated in 2002. It is an attempt both to commemorate the great original Library of Alexandria and to re-create something of its magnificence and importance.



The New Library of Alexandria.
Photo credits: Paul Dilliot (top)
Renée & Jake Geluk (bottom)

More resources about the Library of Alexandria and the controversy about its destruction.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Alexandria

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bibliotheca_Alexandrina

<http://www.bede.org.uk/library.htm>

<http://www.greece.org/Alexandria/Library/>

<http://ehistory.osu.edu/world/articles/ArticleView.cfm?AID=9>

Character analysis

Read the synopsis of *Thaïs* and, if possible, Anatole France's novel and the online libretto.

Create a character sketch for one of the main characters. Consider the following questions:

- What can be assumed about this person?
- What is the character's relationship with the other characters?
- Why does the character make the choices he or she does?
- Include evidence from the opera to support your claims.

Include information about the following:

- Character's Name
- Physical Characteristics (style and physical attributes)
- Psychological Characteristics (mental aspects of character, how does he/she think?)
- Emotional Characteristics (is he/she generally cheerful, sad, snobbish, "off-balance" etc.?)
- Family background
- How the events in the opera have affected the character
- Other interesting facts

After seeing the opera, look at your character sketch again. Does any aspect of the performance or the music you heard change your view of the character you have profiled? Why? Do the emotions conveyed through the music fit the character sketch?

Create a journal or blog from the point of view of your character: Choose a point of conflict for the character you chose for your character sketch, and write a journal or blog of those events from the character's point of view, using the character profile for assistance. Take on the persona of that character and refer to the character in the first person. Remember to express only information that your character would know.

For High School and Post-Secondary Students

Translation from French to English

Look at the two translations of **Anatole France's novel *Thaïs*** which are available online (See Links section above). Select a passage and examine the differences. Compare with the French original. Why do you think the translators made the choices they made? Consider how they dealt with the meaning and the sound and rhythm of the words. Would you make different choices? Try creating your own translation of the same passage.

Look at the two English translations of **Massenet's opera *Thaïs*** that are available online. Select a passage and examine the differences. Compare with the French original. Why do you think the translators made the choices they made? Consider meaning, how the words would be sung, and how they would sound when sung. You might consult the vocal score that is available online so that you know what notes need to be sung with the words. Try creating your own translation of the same passage.

Here are some online articles that talk about the challenges of translating operas into another language.

http://www.translatingtoday.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=42&Itemid=31

Low fidelity: opera in translation by Lucile Desblache

Opera translation, just like opera, is mostly about unfaithfulness.

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/the-magazine/cartoons/10311/unsung-heroes-operas-translators.shtml>

Unsung heroes: opera's translators, by Henrietta Bredin

The author recalls trying to translate one simple song (*Il Bacio / The Kiss*) from Italian to English:

I started by making a completely literal translation, word for word. Then I started again, trying to weave in internal rhyme schemes where they occurred in the original, attempting to keep its jaunty, flirtatious tone, striving for open vowel sounds at the ends of lines, agonising over how far I could stray from the sense while still within the spirit of what was intended. I sang it over and over again, relentlessly, until it nearly drove me mad. Eventually I thought I'd bludgeoned the words enough to be singable.

For Anyone

A Review of the Opera

Before you see the opera, you might read a few examples of reviews for fine arts events from the newspaper, or have a look at some online reviews of opera. Here are a few examples of reviews of *Thaïs* from the Internet:

<http://www.mvdaily.com/articles/2006/06/thais1.htm>

Robert Hugill (Music Vision) reviews a 2006 production by Grange Park Opera.

<http://www.musicweb-international.com/sandh/2002/Aug02/thais.htm>

Harvey Steiman (Classical Music Web) reviews Lyric Opera of Chicago's production (December 2002-January 2003).

http://www.classicalvoice.org/articles/RV_loc17jan2003_thais_trav.htm

Truman C. Wang (Classical Voice) reviews Lyric Opera of Chicago's production (December 2002-January 2003).

<http://media.www.hlrecord.org/media/storage/paper609/news/2006/04/27/ArtsAndCulture/Opera.Review.Thais-1996896.shtml>

Anna Brook (Harvard Law Record) reviews Boston Lyric Opera's 2006 production.

After seeing *Thaïs*, **make some notes in point form**, answering the following questions:

What did you like about the opera? What did you dislike?

What did you think about the sets, props and costumes?

What did you think of the singers' portrayal of their characters?

Would you have done something differently? Why?

What were you expecting? Did it live up to your expectations?

Discuss your reactions with your fellow students. Feel free to go beyond the questions listed above.

Then begin to **outline your review**. Keep in mind that a review should contain the following:

A clearly stated purpose (why are you writing this and who is your audience?)

A brief plot synopsis (including who sang what role, etc.)

A coherent series of paragraphs comparing and contrasting things you liked or didn't like

A summary / closing paragraph

Your review should capture the interest of the reader.

Once your outline has been completed, write your **rough draft**.

Exchange reviews with other students to critique and edit. Focus on effective and logical expression of ideas and correct grammar and punctuation.

Edit and revise your review until you have a polished final version.

Students might submit their writing for publication such as a school newspaper. Students are also welcome to send the reviews to Pacific Opera. We would love to hear your thoughts!

Teacher's Comments

Your comments and suggestions are greatly appreciated. Please take a few minutes to fill out this questionnaire and return it to the address below. Thank you for your comments and suggestions.

Name: _____ School: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____ Fax: _____ Grade(s) you teach: _____

Email: _____ Subjects: _____

Have you attended other arts events with your students in the past year? Yes No

If yes, what were they? _____

Were you able to use the Teacher's Study Guide in your classroom activities before attending the opera?
 Yes No

If not, please elaborate: _____

If so, which sections of the Study Guide did you find most useful?

How appropriate was the information provided in the Study Guide? _____

What would you add/delete?

Did you spend classroom time discussing the performance after your students attended the opera?
 Yes No

Do you have any comments about the performance itself?

Would you like to receive information on our future Student Dress Rehearsals? Yes No

How would you like to receive information? Fax Email Letters Other _____

Further comments and suggestions _____

Please return this form to:

Pacific Opera, 1815 Blanshard Street, Suite 500, Victoria, BC V8T 5A4 Fax: 250.382.4944

Or scan and email to mwoodall@pov.bc.ca