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‘Qu’il est loin mon pays’: Staging (Be)longing in Massenet’s *Sapho*

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ABSTRACT

At first glance, Jules Massenet’s opera *Sapho* (1897) might appear to water down its source material, substituting the searing social commentary of Alphonse Daudet’s novel (1884) with idealised tropes of the Midi. This article, however, seeks to complicate this reading, arguing that *Sapho* moves beyond the regionalism of its operatic predecessors, while entirely reimagining Daudet’s novel for a new medium. It highlights how the themes of nostalgia and belonging are established in Henri Cain and Arthur Bernède’s libretto, reiterated by Léon Carvalho’s staging, and intensified in Massenet’s score, thereby nuancing and enriching our understanding of adaptation for the operatic stage.

KEYWORDS

Opera; adaptation; staging and stagecraft; provincial identity; nostalgia; Jules Massenet; Alphonse Daudet

In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, the provinces came to hold a contentious place in the French cultural imagination. While there had been a desire to include the regions in an overarching national narrative since the Revolution of 1789, by the early years of the Third Republic, they were increasingly considered as an idealised rural idyll, at odds with the gritty realities of urban life. This trope was particularly prevalent in the literary sphere: Émile Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* series (1871–93), with its sprawling web of characters across the titular family, capitalised on the tensions arising from this juxtaposition. Similarly, Maurice Barrès’s *Les Déracinés* (1897) portrayed the slow disillusionment of seven ‘uprooted’ young provincials in Paris, all eventually corrupted by the perils of the city. The underlying cultural commentary of such works ultimately decried urban vices, extolling the countryside as a safe haven to which many former provincials longed to return.

The provinces were also a regular sight on the stages of Paris – not least at the opera house. Brittany was a common choice, seen in Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *Dinorah* (1859) and Édouard Lalo’s *Le Roi d’Ys* (1888), as was the Midi, seen in Charles Gounod’s *Mireille* (1864). Among opera scholars, these provincial settings are generally understood to be an extension of opera’s fascination with the Other in the nineteenth century; Hervé Lacombe (2001) has proposed a concept of ‘provincial exoticism’, and Katharine Ellis

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(2012) extended this discussion in her own study of the ‘internal exotic’. More recently, Ellis (2021) has sought to challenge the assumption that Parisian musical practices were in some way ‘national’ ones. In so doing, she teases apart the tensions embedded in wider French musical life, including the representation of the provinces by (and for) the capital.

The aforementioned examples of operas in regional settings are typical of Ellis’s ‘internal exotic’ model, featuring either charming provincial stories or local legends. But, as I will show, themes that were familiar to Zola and Barrès – displacement, nostalgia, and belonging – were also to be found in depictions of the regions on the operatic stage. Whereas the likes of *Le Roi d’Ys* and *Mireille* play out in a single, isolated cultural microcosm, other works vividly portrayed the tensions arising from the contact between Paris and province.

In this article, I will focus on one of these operas: Jules Massenet’s *Sapho* (1897), adapted from Alphonse Daudet’s 1884 novel of the same name. Specifically, while I refer to it as ‘Massenet’s’ opera, I examine the collaborative process of adaptation for the stage of the Opéra-Comique: from the libretto prepared by Henri Cain and Arthur Bernède, to Léon Carvalho’s staging, and, finally, to Massenet’s score.¹ I explore how the opera – which, in translating to a new medium, might have risked oversimplifying Daudet’s story of the tensions between Paris and Provence – actually complicates its subject matter, transforming a tale of a restless youth into a nostalgic reflection on provincial life. In so doing, I argue that *Sapho* might be more comfortably situated among its literary contemporaries than its musical predecessors, and that it can be understood as a part of a much wider trend in *fin-de-siècle* France.

Resituating the Region

In order to place Provence in *fin-de-siècle* literary and artistic life, it is first helpful to explain how the provinces were understood in nineteenth-century France more broadly. Linguistic diversity played a key role in establishing distinct regional identities: Provençal and its fellow Occitan dialects shared many characteristics with Spanish and Italian, while Breton was much closer to Celtic languages such as Welsh, Cornish, and Manx than it was to French. Assembling a sense of ‘national’ identity from this disparate collection of regional communities was no straightforward task, but as the nineteenth century progressed, the provinces (and their cultures) played an increasingly important role in France’s larger political project (Currie 2021).

While the Revolution had championed liberty, equality, and fraternity, it also sought to build a stronger and more united France (Weber 1976, 95; Thiesse 1999, 4). As the following decades continued to be marked by political strain and unrest, there was an increasing drive among the centralised administrative classes to assemble the disparate collection of regions into a unified and stable national narrative (Boswell 2009). By the advent of the Second Empire, those who lived in the provinces proved useful across the political spectrum. To republicans and socialists alike, these ‘peasants’ represented a lost Frenchness that needed to be preserved and protected (Fulcher 1980, 31–32). Regional cultures in turn came to embody a sense of continuous, uninterrupted tradition that was untouched by outside influence (Pasler 2009, 353; Revuluri 2016). As a result, regardless of their perceived distance from Paris, the provinces came to be politically and culturally woven into French national consciousness.

Alongside these renewed political efforts to nurture a unified French identity, the mobility of people around the country was on the rise. Having first begun as small-scale localised projects in the late 1820s, the French rail network expanded rapidly once it came under the jurisdiction of the national government. By 1870, it was possible to travel to all of France's major cities by train (Schwartz, Gregory, and Thévenin 2011, 63–68). As a result, the provinces became accessible and affordable tourist destinations. Travellers from Paris and further afield flocked to the provinces to admire their picturesque landscapes, and local traditions and dress were prized as charming insights into a bygone era apparently left untouched by the homogenising effects of modernisation (Young 2012).²

In turn, the railways facilitated travel to cities, as industrialisation attracted rural migrants to urban centres (especially Paris) in search of work. The spirit of encounter between town and country dwellers, however, took on a new dynamic in the urban environment. While tourists from towns and cities could look upon the provinces with a sense of detached superiority, migrants moving in the opposite direction, as Eugen Weber (1976) has suggested, seemed convinced of their own lesser status.³ Bound up in this dynamic was a heightened consciousness of displacement among these provincial migrants, even if the differing social structures of urban and rural resisted simplistic comparison. Nevertheless, as these encounters became increasingly commonplace – both in Paris and province – there came a new push to reassert and protect regional differences in the face of homogenisation.

Preserving the Provençal

The provinces thus became a cultural battleground. In response to this overarching centralist narrative of a unified French nation, efforts to protect an 'authentic' local identity flourished in the provinces themselves. In the 1820s and 1830s, a new culture of folkloric recovery began to spread across France. Collections of songs and stories – perhaps most famously Henri de la Villemarqué's *Barzaz Breiz* (1832) – sought to preserve these oral histories and prevent them from dying out entirely. As Ellis (2021) notes, these projects were innately problematic in their acquisition and editorial practices; it would later be revealed that de la Villemarqué had embellished and edited much of what he had collected, but this was no obstacle to the *Barzaz Breiz* being accepted as an authoritative 'repository' of Breton culture. As the century wore on, this process evolved: whereas the preservation of regional cultures was prioritised in earlier decades, by the 1850s, new movements began to emerge with a different aim: to promote their continuation.

In the south of France, a group of young poets known as the *Félibrige* spearheaded a significant literary revival, publishing new works in the Provençal tongue in their annual collection, *Armana Provençau*. The Provence portrayed in their works – rural, devoutly Christian, and entirely unaffected by outside influences – was, as Anne Dymond (2012) argues, an idealised version of reality. It was also conspicuously uniform: the region actually encompassed huge cultural variation, including distinct dialects of Occitan, and major cities like Marseille and Toulon disrupted any sense of the Midi as purely rural. As transport infrastructure continued to expand across France, the tranquil country life portrayed in the works of the *Félibrige* was at least partly a nostalgic fiction; it was a Provence rooted in the conservative values of the past, tied to the land and to family bonds.

Frédéric Mistral's epic Provençal poem *Mirèio* (1859) was a particularly notable work prompted by this movement, with its 1864 operatic adaptation by Gounod playing a significant role in bringing the tale to a wider audience. As Rudolf Schenda (1990) has suggested, Mistral's wide-ranging use of Provençal vocabulary was intended to establish *Mirèio* as 'a Provençal encyclopaedia, a Provençal Bible, the universal Provençal text'. For Dymond (2012), however, *Mirèio*'s language was in fact artificially comprehensive in its conscious attempt to incorporate as many unique Provençal words as possible, and thus was ridiculed by those actually living in the south who found the vernacular unrecognisable. Nevertheless, Mistral's passion for preserving local traditions – even if they erased local peculiarities and minimised difference – was culturally influential both within Provence and in France as a whole.

To a lesser extent, music was also co-opted into the movement to preserve Occitan culture. Damase Arbaud's song collection *Chants populaires de la Provence* (1862) contained both the lyrics and melodies of a number of Provençal songs – collected, he claimed, from obliging provincials (Ellis 2021, 281). In the same year, the Félibrige poet François Vidal published *Lou Tambourin* (1862), a treatise on the history of Provençal instruments, featuring several traditional tunes. Mistral had in turn included twelve Provençal songs in an appendix to *Mirèio*, one of which was a transcription by François Seguin of a melody entitled 'Magali'. This song would enjoy a prominent afterlife on and off the operatic stage, appearing not only in Gounod's *Mireille*, but also – as will emerge later – in *Sapho*.

The importance of this collection and conservation work to the preservation of distinct regional identities should not be understated. Nevertheless, as Georgina Boyes (1993) has comprehensively described, such efforts were not without their political pitfalls. Indeed, as Boyes continues, the 'directly interventionist intent' of such projects had its own ideological purpose (1993, 4), in that they posited the possible return of the simplicity and nobility that such folk cultures were deemed to embody. Boyes also notes the uneasy top-down dynamics that usually characterised these collection projects, as well as the distinct class lines drawn between the 'folk' who served as the objects of study and the scholars who wished to document their traditions. Further bound up in this dynamic lay the implication that these cultures, apparently so neglected by the people from whom they originated, were being valiantly rescued from extinction by scholars who actually 'had a clear idea of [their] worth' (Boyes 1993, 53–54, Boyes's emphasis). This song-collecting tradition was therefore a highly appropriative one, ideologically underpinned by the potential of folk culture as a political tool.

With this growing interest in the music of the provinces, then, it is little surprise that it began to appear in opera. The possibility of using purportedly authentic material proved irresistible for many composers: both Meyerbeer's *Dinorah* and Lalo's *Le Roi d'Ys* made use of Breton folk tales and tunes, and Gounod's *Mireille* was an adaptation of Mistral's epic poem.⁴ While in these operas the use of local musics served to anchor the score – and the listener – in the respective regional contexts, these materials perform a different role in *Sapho*'s dual setting.

In *Sapho*, this aspect of the score is not just musical set dressing; as I will demonstrate later, it also performs a leitmotivic function that strengthens the opera's themes of home and belonging. What follows is an investigation of the ways in which these themes emerge and develop throughout the operatic adaptation. In tracing how the libretto

and staging handle these elements, I highlight how Massenet's score both adds an additional layer of complexity and ties everything together. In observing these strands as they combine to create the whole, it is possible to understand the process by which the operatic *Sapho* became a distinct version of Daudet's story.

Daudet and Massenet: From Page to Stage

It is often necessary for operatic adaptations to transform their source material to suit stage conventions, and indeed, *Sapho* is by no means unique in this regard. Nevertheless, it is valuable at this point to trace the archaeology of the *Sapho* story from Daudet's own biography to the premiere at the Opéra-Comique. Born to a bourgeois family in Nîmes in 1840, Daudet was a man of the Midi, and based many of his works on his own life. Intended as a cautionary, partly autobiographical, tale for his sons, *Sapho*'s timely story of urban migration, displacement, and provincial identity was no exception.

Sapho (or 'Moeurs parisiennes') first appeared as a daily serial in the *Écho de Paris*, running from 16 April to 28 May 1884. Shortly after the series concluded, it was published as a novel. *Sapho*'s gritty, realistic subject matter was central to its appeal. Marcel Proust reportedly mused: 'Do you know of any novel that causes a more incurable wound than *Sapho*?' (as quoted, uncited, in Harding 1970, 122). Such was its popularity among readers and critics that by the following year, Daudet had joined forces with playwright Adolphe Belot to bring *Sapho* to the stage, at the Théâtre du Gymnase in Paris in December 1885. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that *Sapho* would be considered an appropriate basis for an opera. It was Cain who instigated the idea, and he soon recruited Bernède to collaborate on a libretto. Massenet then set about working on the score. In the autumn of 1896, he reportedly played a completed version of *Sapho* to Cain, as well as to the celebrated soprano Emma Calvé (who would fill the title role); in the months that followed, he continued to refine the orchestration (Condé 2003, 7–8). Its premiere at the Opéra-Comique in November 1897 was a great commercial success. Indeed, the opera would benefit from the huge existing public interest in Daudet's story; in its first twenty performances, the takings for *Sapho* amounted to almost 150,000 francs.⁵

The novel begins with Jean Gaussin, a young man from an old and once-wealthy Provençal family, arriving in Paris so that he, like many first sons in his family before him, can study to join the French consular service. He attends a masked ball where he meets a captivating older woman named Fanny Legrand. They begin an affair, but Jean soon discovers that she has a notorious past life with a long history of lovers, working as an artists' model under the pseudonym 'Sapho'.⁶ Jean remains with Fanny after this revelation, raising an adopted son with her (not realising at first that he is Fanny's child) – but is never able to come entirely to terms with the illicit nature of their affair. He briefly returns to his family home in Avignon, but is repulsed by his boorish uncle Césaire and his conflicted feelings for his aunt Divonne. He returns to Paris, becoming briefly engaged to a young woman named Irène, but soon breaks it off and returns to Fanny. He receives his first consular assignment abroad, and pleads with Fanny to join him; however, just a day before their planned departure, Jean receives a letter from her ending their relationship for good. The novel ends with her promise to him: 'Te voilà libre, tu n'entendras plus jamais parler de moi ...' (Daudet 1884, 337).

Daudet's play made only a few changes to its source material. It opens at Jean's lodgings and the festivities at the ball are instead recounted as a memory; Irène is now a cousin, adopted by Césaire and Divonne in the hope that she and Jean might rekindle their childhood friendship and one day marry. Where the novel ends with Fanny's letter, the play makes their final separation into a dramatic scene in its own right: Jean comes to their former home in Ville d'Avray to take her with him on his mission, only for her to write the farewell letter while he sleeps, stealing away to reunite with her young son.

The opera, however, did not set Daudet's play to music. Instead, it offers its own interpretation of the *Sapho* story. The masked ball is reinstated in Act I – a spectacular (and typically 'operatic') crowd scene praised by Arthur Pougin in his review for *Le Ménestrel* as 'un tourbillon qui éblouit les yeux et enivre l'oreille' (1897, 2). Act II introduces Césaire and Divonne, now recast as Jean's parents, along with Irène – who remains his cousin and possible future bride. Fanny's son is briefly mentioned, but he never appears on stage.⁷ After the revelation of Fanny's past in Act III, Jean is more decisive than his counterpart in Daudet's works, and resolves to leave her immediately. By Act IV, he has sought refuge at the family home back in Avignon. Fanny comes to Provence in an attempt at reconciliation, and is initially rebuffed. In Act V, the opera borrows the play's ending; Jean's visit to Ville d'Avray and Fanny's emotional retreat, leaving the letter, are identical.

While its plot largely follows the novel's overarching story, the opera ultimately strengthens the emphasis on Provence as an idyllic refuge from urban life. The Gaussins of Daudet are an old, established family with clear connections to the national government, but in the opera they are of decidedly humbler origins. Césaire and Divonne are recast as Jean's wholesome, loving parents, and Irène becomes a demure foil to the *femme fatale*. The ending, too, transforms the character of Fanny; the emotional scene that concludes the opera presents her far more sympathetically than as the writer of the cold and distant letter that closes the novel. By way of these changes, the opera sharpens the distinctions between Paris and Provence; its Provence is more unambiguously admirable – an idealised haven of heightened simplicity and purity – and the Gaussins are less ambivalent.

Yet perhaps the most significant change of all is in the characterisation of Jean himself. Told almost entirely from his perspective, the novel reveals Jean's deep discomfort about his relationship with Fanny. He describes their life together as 'une existence qui lui semblait odieuse et malsaine' (Daudet 1884, 133), and he frequently convinces himself to leave her, only to falter at the last moment. Without the ebb and flow of this internal monologue, the conflicting attractions of Paris and Provence are defined more starkly in the opera, and Jean's inner dilemma is far less fraught. While the finer details of a written source are inevitably lost in the transition from page to stage, there is ultimately something larger at work in *Sapho*'s adaptation. The novel's subtitle, 'Moeurs parisiennes', placed Daudet outside the capital looking in, but in its adaptation for the Opéra-Comique, *Sapho*'s authorial perspective shifts away from its source material. Like Jean, then, the opera's metatextual place in this fluid Parisian-Provençal context was not entirely straightforward.

The libretto, therefore, constitutes a significant transformation of Daudet's source material. Gone is the conflicted civil servant, replaced by a guileless provincial youth led

astray by city temptations in his seemingly fruitless quest to belong. These pervasive tensions between Paris and province do not stop with the libretto, however; the staging, costuming and music also work to emphasise and highlight these elements of the narrative.

Provence Moves to Centre-Stage

The Provence depicted onstage at the Opéra-Comique – an idealised rural haven, distant from the pitfalls of Paris – was very different from that of Daudet. Although only one Act of Massenet’s *Sapho* takes place in Provence, its set (designed by regular collaborators Auguste Rubé and Marcel Moisson) made the greatest impact among the critics. In the days following the premiere, the anonymous critic for *L’Autorité* admired:

Les décors sont des mieux réussis [...] mais il faut surtout réserver nos éloges pour le décor de 4e acte, qui montre, au premier plan, la villa des parents de Gaussin, au second plan le Rhône aux eaux bleues, entrecoupées de petits îlots et, au fond, dans le lointain, la ville d’Avignon, tout [*sic*] ensoleillée. (1897, 3)

This review was not alone in singling out the set of Act IV for its picturesque rendering of Provence. A few weeks later, Auguste Boisard of *Le Monde Illustré* praised its visual impact:

À l’horizon se profile la robuste silhouette du château des Papes [the Fort Saint-André, Villeneuve-lès-Avignon], que l’on dirait cuite par le soleil, “le beau soleil de la Provence” [...] on découvre la maison de famille où Jean Gaussin est sagement venu se mettre au vert. (1897, 467)

Thanks to a series of photographs taken by Paul Boyer – a photographer well known to the Parisian theatre scene – it is possible to appreciate for ourselves what the critics were describing (Figures 1 and 2). Among their other plaudits, critics sought to liken the work of Rubé and Moisson to that of other esteemed artists; the *Journal des débats* described it as ‘un décor à rendre Monténard jaloux’ (F-G 1897, 3). This was an auspicious comparison: Frédéric Monténard was a landscape and seascape artist, renowned for his paintings of the Provençal countryside. This allusion to Monténard was not only a compliment to Rubé and Moisson, it also situated *Sapho*’s onstage Provence among the well-worn visual tropes of the region.

The specifics of the set design had not been left to chance. Rubé and Moisson worked from the ample instructions in Carvalho’s staging manual (or *mise en scène*) (1897, F-Po RES-2570). An annotated stage diagram determined the precise positioning of the various elements, and the descriptive detail indulged in the same highly romanticised language that would later flow from the pens of the critics (Figure 3):

En scène: Coté Cour: un puits pittoresque enguirlandé de fleurs et de feuillage, surtout sur les cotés, où les feuillages et les roses seront en fleurs artificielles (et pas en peinture dans le décor). Au près du puits, un rocher sur lequel on peut s’asseoir – la margelle du puits est en épaisseur. Près de la draperie, des arbres, des verdure, mêlées de fleurs de laurier. En scène: Coté Jardin: Un toit en paille, très rustique, très pittoresque – ne pas oublier de suspendre au 1er pilier un paquet de tomate, avec feuilles presque séchées [*sic*] (fleurs artificielles) – aux places indiquées deux grosses jarres en terre jaune clair (jarre à huile) qui servent de caisse à des lauriers – roses en fleurs (artificiel). Au fond, des oliviers, des lauriers-roses, des silhouettes de toits de maisons de la verdure – puis, le Rhône avec ses bancs de sable – et à l’horizon l’admirable une de Villeneuve-lès-Avignon dans un rayonnement de soleil. Le ciel est d’un bleu intense (pas de nuages). (Carvalho 1897, 43–44)



Figure 1. Paul Boyer, '*Sapho*, 4e Acte, En Avignon, Scène 1'. Left to Right: Julia Guiraudon as Irène; Charlotte Wyns as Divonne; Julien Leprestre as Jean; André Gresse as Césaire. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, 2-TEP-0047.



Figure 2. Paul Boyer, '*Sapho*, 4e Acte, En Avignon, Scène Finale'. Left to Right: Julien Leprestre as Jean; André Gresse as Césaire; Charlotte Wyns as Divonne; Emma Calvé as Fanny. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris, 2-TEP-0050.

This painting is, however, more than just set dressing, and is accorded further importance in the short musical passage, 'Notre Maison'. Jean sings of his home, and how this keepsake will inspire and comfort him now that he is far away, ensuring that the painting cannot escape the audience's attention:

Notre maison ... avec ses bois de myrtes dans la plaine
 Et ses vignes à l'horizon;
 Maman Divonne est sur la porte,
 En la voyant toujours, toujours devant mes yeux,
 Je travaillerai mieux; sa présence me reconforte.

This elision of familial contentment with the rural is consistent throughout *Sapho*. Similarly, the call of home – at least as symbolised in this painting and via 'Notre Maison' – is gendered by its association with the reassuring maternal figure of Divonne. In turn, this conflates a nostalgia for the perceived simplicity of rural life with the innocence of childhood. However much Jean strives to find a new independent life in Paris, he ultimately still clings to his family. While other mementos around Jean's lodgings are broadly evocative of Provence, this prop comes to symbolise a more acute sense of displacement, and a heightened consciousness of the home and people that he has left behind. Unlike the youths of Barrès, he refuses to become 'uprooted' – while he pursues a new life in the city, the painting becomes a sort of talisman, enshrining his values and anchoring his sense of self.

Jean's nostalgia for Provence – however complicated it might be by his desire to strike out on his own – was emblematic of a wider cultural fascination with the regions as a site of a lost past. In contrast to Paris, a dark and threatening place where young people could be corrupted, the provinces were seen as a safe haven from this site of 'crisis' (Micale 2008). The operatic *Sapho* certainly capitalised on this nostalgia in its visual design. Act IV's epic backdrop of the Fort Saint-André is tempered by the domesticity and intimacy of the Gaussin family home. In an unsettled world of relentless change, the constancy of the provinces – even if it is imagined – becomes something to value.

In its journey to the operatic stage, then, *Sapho* moved away from an ambivalent portrayal of Provence towards one that was far closer to the romanticised fantasies in currency at the time. Yet, its costuming and music (re)introduce ambiguities and tensions, revealing the deep-seated nostalgia at work both on and off the operatic stage.

Dressed to Impress?

In the absence of the novel's inner monologue and the play's spoken dialogue, costume was used in the opera as a visual device to reinforce characterisation. Indeed, Carvalho's *mise en scène* provided as much detail on costuming as it had on staging. Analysis of these instructions offers a means of exploring how tensions between Parisian and provincial were navigated onstage, inviting larger questions about how stagecraft might mitigate some of the simplification brought about in the process of adaptation.

In *Sapho*, costume makes visible the social (and, to some extent, economic) differences between the Parisian and Provençal characters. However, in the opening scene – set at a masked ball – this straightforward categorisation is impossible. Dressed all in black as a Basque countryman (surely a playful nod to his Mediterranean roots), Jean's fancy dress costume is no more unusual than Fanny's own attire (the *mise en scène* specifies that she wears a coral blue Egyptian-style dress, with 'bagues: à tous les doigts' and 'bijoux: en

quantité!’ [Carvalho 1897, 68]), or the outfits of the other guests. Notably, this is the only point where Jean dresses in provincial garb; for the rest of the opera, his wardrobe avoids country styles, in favour of the fashionable clothing of the capital. Jean’s costume, then, is a performance. It becomes a visual paradox: he dresses as a provincial – his true identity – but he wears it as a disguise. It is not, however, an entirely successful one; a short conversation with Fanny, lifted from Daudet’s novel, reveals that his accent is recognisably Provençal.

From Jean’s costuming, it seems that his feelings about his Provençal roots might be more complex than just youthful pining and homesickness. His internal struggles with his Mediterranean identity are now visible to the audience. On the one hand, he is embarrassed at being Provençal; on the other, he clearly recognises its charm. At the masked ball, then, Jean occupies a liminal space, avoiding neat categorisation as either Parisian or provincial.

But in Act II, the social and cultural divisions between the opera’s characters become far more obvious. Carvalho’s costume descriptions for this Act emphasise the provincial character of Césaire and Divonne’s dress, particularly in contrast to their son. Jean, now out of fancy dress and in everyday clothes, has adopted a more Parisian style, wearing a grey suit, a ‘chemise de ville’ and black shoes (Carvalho 1897, 70). His desire to assimilate as a Parisian is clear. His parents, meanwhile, are markedly Provençal, and look somewhat out of place. Divonne, for example, wears:

[une] robe soie noire. Jupe très ample. Taille bien prise et recouverte d’un fichu en crêpe de chine blanc, frangé blanc. Bonnet d’Arlésienne, avec rubans de velours. Quelques vieux bijoux de famille avec caractère du pays. Costume Arlésienne, aisée, d’un certain âge. Souliers noirs. Bas blancs. (Carvalho 1897, 69)

The *mise en scène* also describes Césaire, ‘s’est bien endimanché pour venir à Paris’ (Carvalho 1897, 70). This over-formal clothing, then, suggests the social significance of this trip to the capital for this provincial family:

Perruque blanche, découvrant bien le front. Pattes de lapin, prolongées. Redingote noire, très ample, à coupe démodée. Pantalon gris fer avec rayures noires. Gilet mais à fleures bleu-tées. [...] Cravate noire, à double tour. Gros souliers noirs. Chapeau haute-forme à larges bords, très évasé du fond. (Son chapeau de mariage!) (Carvalho 1897, 70)

These costumes therefore present many intersecting identities of province and class. Despite the specific mention of their clothing as old-fashioned, the fine materials such as silk, velvet and *crêpe de chine* reveal that Césaire and Divonne are not provincial ‘peasants’, but a well-to-do, mature Provençal couple who have dressed up to go to town. If anything, they are overdressed in their keenness to impress in the capital. While the provincial styling might have reinforced many of the stereotypes of the regions in the urban imagination, the sartorial register of these costumes ultimately gesture to the a more complex status for the provinces in Third Republic France.

In Act IV, however, the Provençal costumes, while still identifiably provincial, are less exaggerated. No longer in their Sunday best, the characters are now presented as a family at home, rather than as awkward visitors to an unfamiliar city. Divonne wears a brown poplin dress, an Arlésienne bonnet, and a Jeannette cross around her neck (Carvalho 1897, 71). Irène wears a simple white dress in *crêpe de chine* and a straw hat covered

in wildflowers: her costume (in a mirroring of Jean) reveals her new identity as a country woman (Carvalho 1897, 71). Césaire is described as wearing no cravat, with a very tanned neck. He also wears ‘souliers de paysan, très poussiéreux’ and carries a ‘baton noueux’ (Carvalho 1897, 72, Carvalho’s emphasis).

These costumes attracted particular praise from B. Marcel, the critic at *L’Aurore*, who wholeheartedly indulged in the stereotypes of country-dwellers. He extolled Divonne as:

la paysanne vaillante, créature d’intelligence et de bonté, délicieuse sous son fichu d’artisanne, sous sa petite coiffe de Provence ... (Marcel 1897, 1)

Marcel’s comments reveal the tendency of the urban gaze not only to exoticise but also to valorise those from the provinces, painting them as simple, gentle creatures of the past, rather than complex beings in their own right. In Marcel’s review, then, the Othering of the provinces prevalent in wider culture is made explicit.

Freshly returned from the capital, Jean, by contrast, still clings to his adopted city identity. He continues to dress like a Parisian, wearing a dark blue suit with white shirt and black bow tie (Carvalho 1897, 71). When Fanny arrives seeking reconciliation, she is dressed in a purple dress and coat; while they are described as ‘très simple’ (Carvalho 1897, 71), she certainly stands out among the other characters. Césaire and Divonne are dressed in brown, earthy tones, signifying simplicity and connection to the land – a common stereotype of provincial life in the urban imagination. Purple, however, had long signified opulence and luxury, although its symbolism had changed to one of decadent excess as developments in the creation of synthetic dyes made it increasingly abundant.⁸ Through colour, therefore, the contrast between provincial simplicity and Parisian artifice is further emphasised. In many ways, Jean’s dark blue ensemble is more akin to Fanny’s costume than it is to his family’s, symbolising his reluctance to leave his Parisian life entirely behind him.

The opera’s costumes, therefore, not only highlight the origins and context of the characters, but also betray their more concealed feelings. While he might regard his home with affection, Jean’s preference for city fashions, and reluctance to dress in an overtly provincial style (except when he is in fancy-dress) suggests that he also yearns for a certain separation from Provence. Such a reading complicates any understanding of the ‘distant’ provinces as a site of escapist fantasy; Jean clearly relishes the opportunities the city offers, and even when he returns home, has not entirely abandoned his cosmopolitan dreams. Where the adaptation from novel to opera might have risked losing the complexity of Jean’s inner dilemma, the costuming ensures that this important dynamic is preserved. As a result, his change of heart and attempts to reconcile with Fanny are not such a surprise after all.

Musical (Be)longings

The complication of the simplistic categories of centre and periphery also extended to the orchestra pit. Massenet was, as Steven Huebner (1999) notes, a great writer of stage music, with a particular sensitivity for the need for synergy between onstage action and the score. His compositional approach owed much to Richard Wagner, particularly in its treatment of leitmotiv to establish and heighten dramatic tension. Massenet’s understanding of the affinity between stage and score – and the ways in which one might serve to augment and intensify the other – can be clearly seen throughout *Sapho*.

In its juxtaposition of urban and rural, the opera needed a musical idiom that both distinguished between characters and situated them in their context. A motif for Provence is quickly established for Jean with ‘Qu’il est loin mon pays’ in Act I, using vivid and colourful descriptions to evoke the idyllic Provençal countryside:

Ah! qu’il est loin mon pays de clarté, de soleil
 Qu’il est loin mon pays!
 Là! mille fleurs odorantes
 Dans le couchant vermeil
 Exhalent par les airs leurs senteurs pénétrantes;
 Ah! qu’il est loin mon pays! Mon pays de soleil ...
 Où le Rhône bondit et roule impétueux,
 Ses flots couleur d’azur que jaloussent les cieux!
 Mon pays ... où le soir, dans la verte oseraie,
 L’on peut aller rêver sans que rien vous effraie;
 Où l’on entend passer dans les grands arbres verts,
 Le vent, chantant plus fort, durant les courts hivers ... mon pays!
 Mon pays! Mon pays où tout dit l’amour et l’espérance!
 Ah! qu’il est loin de mes yeux! qu’elle est loin ma Provence! qu’elle est loin!
 Hélas! qu’elle est loin!

The romanticised (and deliberately picturesque) imagery is reinforced by the nocturne-like musical accompaniment. Flutes undulate on gentle semiquavers, accompanied by a rising lyrical line in the strings, as Jean sings of his beloved Provence (Figure 4).

The melody of ‘Qu’il est loin mon pays’ returns in another guise in Act II as ‘Chers parents’. The arpeggiated accompaniment exactly mirrors that of its previous iteration. The vocal line, too, follows this pattern; after a few *sotto voce* measures of quasi-recitative the melody returns. In dramatic terms, this might be read as a moment of heightened intimacy between Jean and Irène as he ‘shares’ this musical idea – and his love for his home – with her. The reprise of ‘Qu’il est loin mon pays’, as James Harding (1970) points out, only strengthens the connection between these musical ideas and the sense of home. This number’s title, ‘Chers parents’, emphasises that, for Jean, his love for his family and his home are indivisible. The gentle undulating accompaniment returns at the opening of Act IV, when the action moves to Provence proper, further fixing a musical sense of place and, by extension, of home.

Beyond the more generalised evocation of *couleur locale* in ‘Qu’il est loin mon pays’, *Sapho*’s score also works to represent these musical longings in more complex ways. On three occasions in *Sapho*, Massenet’s score makes use of a traditional Provençal tune, drawn from the appendix of Mistral’s *Mirèio*: ‘O Magali’. While, as mentioned earlier, Massenet was by no means the first to incorporate traditional melodies into an opera score, the connection of the ‘Magali’ song to the *Sapho* story pre-dated the opera.

In Daudet and Belot’s stage adaptation, Fanny sings to Jean in Provençal in order to win his heart – he exclaims in amazement that she can sing in his language, but she reminds him that he taught her the song when they first met. While the play’s text does not specify the song, critics at the premiere announced triumphantly that it was ‘la vraie chanson de Magali, celle qui se trouve à la fin du volume de *Mirèio* et qui n’a pas été écrite par Gounod’ (Durranc 1885, 1).⁹ In this comment lay an explicit and uncompromising criticism of Gounod’s *Mireille*, which had used only a textual quotation

(in French translation) of the song set to a different melody. That Daudet's play should have used the tune from Mistral's appendix, then, can easily be read as a musical reassertion of Provençal identity.


Massenet's subsequent inclusion of 'Magali' in the opera's score therefore capitalised on this pre-existing association of the song with the *Sapho* tale. In Act II, the singing seduction scene appears largely unchanged, complete with 'Magali' (Figure 5):

O Magali, ma tant amado
 Mete la tèsto au fenestroun.
 Escouto un pau questo aubado
 De tambourin et de viouloun.

O Magali, my beloved
 Come to the window.
 Listen to this sunrise serenade
 Of tambourines and violins.

Es plen d'estello, aperamount!
 L'auro es toumbado;
 Mai lis estello paliran,
 Quand te veiran!

The sky is full of stars!
 The wind blows softly;
 But the stars will fade,
 When they see you!¹⁰



très doux et égal

pp

2 Ped.

poco

Ah!

qu'il est loin mon pa-ys de clar-té, de so-

(s'attendrissant)

f

pp

a Tempo.

rall.

più f

pp

mf

a Tempo.

pp

Figure 4. Massenet, *Sapho*, Act I. 'Qu'il est loin mon pays'.

* 60 = ♩ . FANNY.
à volonté. (d'abord inconsciemment) *cresc.*

O Ma-ga-li, ma tant a - ma - do, Me te la testo au fe - nes - trou.

JEAN (à part) (écoutant comme fasciné) FANNY.
p Le vieil air du pa-ys!... *più f* Es.coute un pau a questo au - ba - do De tambou -

più f
 .rin e de - viou - loun. Ei plen d'es - tello a - pera - mount! L'auro es toum.

Plus vite. **avec élan.**
 .ba - do; Mai lis es - tel - lo - pa - li - ran, - quand te - vei - ran!

Lent. **très retenu.** **rall.** **pp** **$\hat{2}$.**
 Mai lis es - tel - lo - pa - li - ran, - quand te - vei - ran!..



Figure 5. Massenet, *Sapho*, Act II, 'O Magali'.

With this performance, Fanny's enchantment of Jean is complete. However, the appearance of 'Magali' here is not simply reproducing the scene from the play. Indeed, Fanny's rendition of the song is the continuation of a musical thread from earlier in Act II, when it is sung by Jean and Césaire. After the dazzling party that opens the opera, complete with the nostalgic longing of 'Qu'il est loin mon pays', the contrast of the more intimate and humble surroundings of Jean's new Parisian lodgings is stark. In this duet of father and son, 'Magali' is established as a musical idea representing familial unity and home.

The use of the original *patois* in 'Magali' – the only number in the opera to do so – holds great dramatic significance, acting as a linguistic anchoring point for Jean's sense of identity. Where Gounod had quoted 'Magali' in French translation in *Mireille*, thus collapsing the division between the opera's Provençal characters and its Parisian audiences, *Sapho*'s retention of Mistral's text preserves (and even emphasises) this difference. The effect of the 'Magali' theme, therefore, is simultaneously diegetic and non-diegetic. It ties Jean to his Provençal roots and his family, but also marks him out as different – in a way that was legible to both the other characters and the audience at the Opéra-Comique. The reprise of the 'Magali' theme later in Act II, now sung by Fanny, therefore complicates its symbolism. From her lips, the call of home in 'Magali' becomes an ambivalent one, twisted against Jean as a means of emotional manipulation.

Fanny's ulterior motives are no secret. The stage directions in the vocal score indicate that she should be struck, 'comme assombrie par une soudaine pensée', just before she sings (Massenet, 1897, 167). Her choice of 'Magali', then, is intentional, exploiting Jean's vulnerability in the immediate aftermath of his parents' departure. The emotional

and dramatic impact of ‘Magali’ in this scene emerges directly from its pre-established connection to Césaire, the Gaussins, and Provence. By appropriating something that is musically ‘his’, Fanny dons this Provençal musical disguise to great effect. Through this melody, Jean is seduced not by Fanny’s beauty or personality, but rather by her self-constructed association with the home and family he has left behind. In new lodgings in a new city, to Jean, she sounds like belonging.

These musical elements build to a climax in Act IV, when ‘Qu’il est loin mon pays’ and ‘Magali’ return to heighten the drama as Jean flees broken-hearted to the family home in Provence. The Act opens with a few bars of the arpeggiated nocturne-style accompaniment in the pianissimo violins; the lower strings begin the refrain of ‘Qu’il est loin mon pays’, but it is only a fragment of the original, its ‘incomplete’ melodic line resisting any

ACTE IV

—

En Avignon.

Lent. 50=♩

PIANO.

p *f* *pp*

bien chanté.

p *p*

RIDEAU. *rall.*

p *mf* *dim.* *pp*

Figure 6. Massenet, *Sapho*, Act IV, En Avignon.

167

Très lent. VOIX D'HOMMES ET DE FEMMES.
(dans le très lointain) *ppp*

Très lent. 40=♩. O ma-ga - li, ma tant ai - ma - do,

(JEAN rêve, pensif, triste) *dim.*
me - te la testo au fe - nes - trou!

Très modéré. 50=♩
(presque le mouvt précédent) *ppp*
Au loin - joueurs de flageolets et tambourinaires.

Figure 6 Continued

sense of resolution. The orchestra swells as the curtain rises, and the 'Magali' theme emerges at last, sung by a chorus 'dans le très lointain' (Massenet, 1897, 167) (Figure 6).

As with the 'Qu'il est loin' fragments, the 'Magali' theme – now over an unsettled orchestral accompaniment playing a chromatically altered ii⁷-V-I cadence – is transformed. Jean is no longer the innocent southerner he was before he went to Paris and met Fanny, and the music expresses some of his inner turmoil. As he reels from his heart-break, the established Provençal musical idiom is destabilised. It only regains secure footing in a new theme played by a distant (presumably diegetic) band of traditional Provençal instruments of flageolet flutes, galoubet pipes, and tambourin drums.¹¹ Unsettled and unresolved, in its final appearance, 'Magali' musically mirrors Jean's own uprooting.

That it never returns in any guise after Act IV is perhaps symbolic of Jean's own lack of resolution.

The role that 'Magali' plays in Massenet's *Sapho* is multifaceted, developing the musical idea introduced by the play to imbue it with far greater significance. Its leitmotivic function is fragile and unstable, gathering varied meanings as it punctuates the drama. Between Jean and Césaire, it is a moment of familial unity before a fond farewell. From Fanny Legrand, it is a powerful means of seduction. In the distant unseen chorus, it is not only a generalised evocation of Provence itself, but a musical expression of Jean's inner turmoil. 'Magali', therefore, has grown far beyond an evocative musical interlude (as it is used in the play), and represents much more than typical regionalist *couleur locale*. Instead, it becomes a powerful dramatic device, representing the uprooting and nostalgic longing of *Sapho*'s protagonist.

Conclusions

At first glance, *Sapho*'s intertextual journey to the operatic stage might appear to have stripped away the essence of Daudet's story; the novel's ambivalent depiction of Provence is supplanted by the well-worn tropes of the urban imagination. Seemingly simplified, too, is Jean; the tortured self-loathing that characterised the novel is gone, replaced by his pining for the comfort of home. While it is tempting to justify such changes as a necessary consequence of adaptation for the operatic stage, there is also the reverse consideration: of what this process has added. Indeed, the operatic *Sapho* moves beyond its source material, revealing a deep-seated nostalgia for the imagined simplicity of rural life. Such narratives were increasingly present in literature, but were less prevalent in opera. Studying these changes as the result of the adaptation process, then, highlights that the operatic *Sapho* is not simply a reflection, but an active participant in these trends.

Musicologists and cultural scholars alike have long grappled with music's intrinsic polysemy and subjectivity, and its influence remains difficult to define with any certainty. This might go some way towards explaining why opera has remained a relatively under-explored space in the field of adaptation studies more broadly.¹² Nevertheless, as this article has demonstrated, it is precisely this potential for multiplicity of meaning that renders opera such a compelling site of intertextualities.

Massenet's *Sapho* cannot be easily reconciled with previous operatic representations of the provinces as distant and isolated microcosms of local culture. Its dual setting in Paris and Provence instead invites comparison with literary portrayals of the ongoing tensions between centre and periphery. The opera's costumes and staging further highlight that the differences between characters go far beyond the immediately geographical. The most slippery form of this dramatic complexity, however, is introduced through music. While the use of the traditional melody 'Magali' as a musical device to evoke the setting might have much in common with the regionalist operas of the earlier nineteenth century, in *Sapho* it also plays a sophisticated dramatic role. Where the play had included 'Magali' as a one-off musical moment, in the opera it becomes a recurring symbol for Jean's inner turmoil and his longing for home. While some of the ambivalence of Daudet's novel is lost in the streamlining for the stage, Massenet's music introduces texture and complexity resulting in a work that reimagines the themes of its source material for a new medium.

The operatic *Sapho* is therefore not that of Daudet. It is instead a new artistic product that existed in response to (and in conversation with) contemporary trends in *fin-de-siècle* cultural life. The operatic rendering of this story of an uprooted young provincial searching for his place in the world thus spoke to a wider yearning that was easily recognisable across *fin-de-siècle* cultural life: the desire, ultimately, to belong.

Notes

1. It is worth noting at this point that *Sapho* is not a stable operatic text. A revised version appeared in 1909, which restored a scene that had been cut from the initial run twelve years prior. For the purposes of this article, I shall be focusing on the version that premiered in 1897.
2. More recent scholarship has sought to emphasise the ambivalent nature of this romanticised conception of rural life. Daniel Grimley, for instance, has argued that nineteenth-century travellers might equally have conceived of the countryside as culturally static and socially conservative. See Grimley 2018.
3. More recently, the work of Leslie Page Moch has further highlighted the tensions within provincial migration to cities. See Moch 1992, 2012.
4. The dynamics of appropriation were still very much at work in these operas, however. In *Le Roi d'Ys*, Lalo made use of three 'Breton themes', which were marked as such in the score. However, he explicitly denied using any published collection as a source for these tunes, instead citing his Breton wife's influence. See Fauquet 1984. It is also worth noting, while Mistral's *Mirèio* was published with a side-by-side French translation, the libretto of Gounod's *Mireille* uses a different one.
5. James Harding notes that such takings placed *Sapho* among the greatest of box-office hits, citing that Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly* had made less under similar circumstances. See Harding 1970.
6. The nickname 'Sapho' is not a reference to the Greek poet, but rather to the name of the disease that haunted not only the pages of the novel, but also Daudet's own life: syphilis.
7. Massenet's original version had included a second scene in Act III, the 'Tableau des Lettres', where Jean, prompted by the revelation of Fanny's past, finds a box of her love letters and forces her to burn them. This scene was cut from the original 1897 production, but would eventually be restored by the composer for the 1909 revival. For a more complete discussion of this scene, see Giroud 2004.
8. For further discussion of the symbolism of purple and the nineteenth-century developments in manufacturing purple dyes, see Fox 2021.
9. As Katharine Ellis has described, an 1899 production of *Mireille* in Arles 'reclaimed' the 'Magali' tune, as Jane Marignan in the title role broke character to replace Gounod's score with the original *patois* and tune. There was, however, no recognition within the local press of the precedent set by Massenet's opera. See Ellis 2021.
10. This is an adaptation of Harriet Waters Preston's 1874 English translation. See Mistral 1859.
11. This theme is notated in a smaller font in the vocal score, which is consistent with other occurrences of diegetic music in the opera.
12. There have been several studies of the afterlives of opera on film, but less has been said about opera itself as an adaptational product of an earlier literary source. See, for instance, Hutcheon and Hutcheon 2017.

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