

SAPHO

Music by Jules Massenet

Libretto by Henri Cain & Arthur Bernède

First Performance: Opéra-Comique, Paris, November 27, 1897

A love story of modern Paris. The scene of **Act I** is laid in the reception room of Caoudal, a sculptor, in whose studio a fancy ball is supposed to be in progress to the noisy strains of a make-believe Gypsy band (heard off). Presently Caoudal and his friend La Borderie enter, surrounded by a bevy of guests in merriest humor; La Borderie tries to escape, giving weariness as an excuse, but is finally carried back in triumph to the ball by the girls. Just then the hero of the play, Jean Gaussin, an unsophisticated provincial, comes in from the studio, desirous of retreating from surroundings which he finds uncongenial. He is rallied by his host, Caoudal, hears a rollicking chorus from the studio which only adds to his aversion, and is about to depart when Fanny, the model enters abruptly, pursued by a crowd of artists clamoring for kisses, which she scornfully refuses. With Jean it is a case of love at first sight; and Fanny feels herself so irresistibly drawn to the handsome country boy, that she interrogates him aside, and discovers with joy that he is not an artist but fresh from Provence, knowing nothing of Parisian artist-life. Fearful that he may hear of her past experience and conceive an antipathy to her, she persuades Jean, when the call to supper resounds, to slip away with her unnoticed.

Act II opens in Jean's lodgings in the rue d'Amsterdam. He is at work, in company with Césaire, his father. From song they drop into conversation, from which we gather that father and mother have come to Paris with Jean to settle him, and to take him home with them his cousin and childhood's companion, Irène. Presently Divonne (the mother) and Irène come in, the former out of breath and excited from her experiences in the monstrous city. While the parents go off to make final preparations, the young people indulge in a sentimental duet recalling the happy past and ending with a rather loverlike embrace disturbed by the parents, who laugh good-naturedly at the young folks' embarrassment. There follows a moving scene of parting. Jean is left alone, but not for long - Fanny has only waited for the departure of the rest to pay him a visit, and finds him in a mood to be consoled. Admiring his household arrangements, she suddenly observes a statue of Sapho, done by Caoudal, for which she herself had posed, in her confusion she almost betrays herself, but adroitly turns the conversation and leads Jean on by love-strategy into a delirium of passion.

A year later, the curtain rises for **Act III** on love in a cottage at Ville d'Avray. In this rural retreat Jean's ardor - if anything - augmented, and Fanny is genuinely in love with him, happy in the hope that her former life is left behind. After a passionate love-duet they go off. Caoudal now enters, followed by La Borderie; they find the appearance of the inn (hard by the cottage) to their liking, and call jovially to the artist-band coming after them, who unite in a general call for the landlord. A lively scene ensues; supper is finally ordered, and the guests stroll away. Jean, returning alone, happens upon Caoudal and La Borderie; the former asks him quite casually if he is still with "Sapho," the name by which Fanny is best known among artists. Jean replies at first uncomprehendingly; but as the truth is forced home upon him that his beloved Fanny is the original, with all that the term implies, of the famous statue, an overwhelming revulsion of feeling prompts him to deny his present relations with her; but then, as her former escapades are detailed by Caoudal, and he learns that she has a child living at her father's out of town, his anger and disgust break forth in wild repudiation of her. At this climax Fanny comes back, radiant with happiness, but instantly divines what has occurred; the break with Jean is accomplished, Fanny execrates the cruelty which (as she supposes) aimed at depriving her of the one pure love of her life, and the curtain falls on her bitter, agonized reproaches.

Act IV finds Jean in his old home at Avignon, unhappy, unable to take u0p life anew. His mother and Irène try to comfort him; at last (when his father announces the approach of the temptress) he declares that he could even hace his former love without weakening. When left to himself, however, and Fanny advances in all the seductive charm of beauty in distress, his resolution gives way before her impassioned appeals. Césaire and Divonne arrive in time to prevent a complete surrender; Fanny retreats, crushed by their unspoken reproaches.

Again we are brought in Act IV to the cottage at Ville d'Avray. Fanny is here, solitary, grieving, hopeless save for the thought that she may henceforth devote her life to her child's welfare. Her sad reverie is interrupted by the unawaited entrance of Jean, who, broken by sleeplessness and the conflict of emotion, tells her that he has given up home, parents, even his future career, for her sake. - Yet, when the reconciliation seems complete the mere words "my love!" spoken caressingly by Fanny, but reminding him of Caoudal's vivid description of an earlier love-adventure in which she played a leading part, throw him into a fever of doubt and jealous fury. But weariness claims him - he is worn out, and sinks into troubled slumber. Now, Fanny realizes that her former bliss is indeed gone for ever, that she may never hope for undivided affection, but must expect reproach and insult from him she so dearly loves. And so she tears herself away, and goes out, leaving him asleep.