

## WERTHER

Jules Massenet

**Act I.** Wetzlar, near Frankfurt, 1780s. Though it is July, the widowed Bailiff teaches his younger children a Christmas carol in the garden of their house. Their progress is watched with amusement by two neighbors, Schmidt and Johann. They ask for Charlotte, the eldest daughter, who is engaged to Albert. In his absence, the Bailiff tells them, she will be escorted to the local ball that night by a young visiting poet, Werther, whom they find uncongenial. As the friends go off to supper and the Bailiff goes into the house, Werther arrives. He rhapsodizes on the beauty of the evening and watches unseen as Charlotte cuts bread and butter for the children's supper. When the party has left for the ball and the Bailiff has gone to join his friends at the tavern, Albert returns unexpectedly. Disappointed at not finding Charlotte, he promises her sister Sophie he will return in the morning. As the moon rises, Werther and Charlotte return. He has fallen in love with her, but his declaration is cut short when the Bailiff passes by, observing that Albert has returned. Despite his despair, Werther urges Charlotte not to break her promise to marry Albert.

**Act II.** Three months later, Charlotte and Albert, now married, walk contentedly across the town square on their way to church, followed by Werther. Albert tries to comfort the youth, and Sophie also attempts to cheer him up, but when Charlotte comes out of the church, he speaks of their first meeting; disturbed, she tells him he must leave Wetzlar until Christmas. Werther contemplates suicide, and when Sophie interrupts him, he rushes away. As Charlotte consoles the tearful girl, Albert realizes that Werther must be in love with his wife.

**Act III.** Alone at home on Christmas Eve, Charlotte rereads the dejected letters written to her by Werther. While she prays for strength, he suddenly appears. Charlotte tries to remain calm and asks him to read to her from his translation of Ossian. Werther chooses a passage where the poet foresees his own death, and when Charlotte begs him to stop, he realizes she returns his love. But she runs from his embrace with a final farewell, and Werther leaves, resolved to die. Albert enters, surprised to find Charlotte distraught, and when a message arrives from Werther asking to borrow Albert's pistols, her reaction convinces him of her love for Werther. He makes her give the pistols to the servant herself, but when Albert has gone she hurries off, praying she may reach Werther in time.

**Act IV.** Charlotte arrives at Werther's quarters to find him mortally wounded. She declares her love, and he begs forgiveness. As he dies, the voices of the children outside are heard singing their Christmas carol.