

Singing Technique and Musical Emotion in "Alone, Lost, Abandoned," a Soprano Aria from Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*

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Abstract. "Alone, Lost, Abandoned," the final soprano aria in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut*, requires the singer to connect vocal technique with the heroine's rapidly changing emotions. The discussion begins with breath management across the aria's slow opening, agitated central section, and final climax. It then considers clear diction, coordination between vowels and consonants, and the need to maintain an even vocal position as tempo and dynamics change. Particular attention is given to sustained notes, rapid passages, unaccompanied phrases, and the relationship between breath support and dramatic expression. The analysis shows that a convincing performance depends on more than producing a strong sound. The singer must understand Manon's isolation, anger, fear, and desire to live, and must shape each technical decision around those changes. In this way, breath, diction, and emotional interpretation work together rather than as separate aspects of performance.

Keywords: Giacomo Puccini, *Manon Lescaut*, Soprano Aria, Vocal Technique, Breath Control, Musical Expression.

1. Introduction

Giacomo Puccini was born into a family of musicians and composers in Tuscany, Italy. Encouraged by his mother to attend the Pacini School of Music in Lucca, Puccini was not initially involved in the field of opera composing until he was captivated by Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Aida* and decided to become an opera composer. He later enrolled at the Milan Conservatory in 1880, where he studied composition with Romantic composers Amilcare Ponchielli and Antonio Bazzini. Under the tutelage of his teachers, at the age of 21, Puccini composed his *Mass of Glory*, marking the culmination of his family's long association with church music in his native Lucca. This work not only revealed Puccini's amazing talent for composition but also enabled him to present unprecedented dramatic tension on stage, laying a sound foundation for his future music composition.

In the middle of the 19th century, the Romantic era in France was in decline. The public grew weary of composers' unbridled imaginations and started to crave real-life tales, which led to a boom of "realistic" operas in Italy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. *Manon Lescaut*, an opera of the same name composed by Puccini based on the famous French classic *Manon Lescaut*, was performed in Turin, Italy, in 1983. In *Manon Lescaut*, Puccini devoted himself to the emotions and destinies of ordinary people, revealing the social injustice and harsh reality of the era in a raw and authentic manner. He showed deep empathy for the struggles of ordinary people who experienced tragedies and portrayed the tragic woman in *Manon Lescaut* to the fullest extent, which evoked sympathy and captivated countless viewers. The accomplishment of *Manon Lescaut* made Puccini the most influential opera composer of the Italian Romantic period in the 19th century after Verdi [7].

2. Literature Review

Zhao Yuanxi pointed out in her paper *Exploration of Female Characterization and Its Artistic Value in Puccini's Operas* that Puccini has a unique way of depicting female characters, and his entire opera is imbued with powerful and vibrant feminine elements. The portrayal of women during that time accurately reflects the reality of their life, love, marriage, and other living conditions and social standing. By depicting female characters, it aims to bring awareness to women's issues and encourage contemplation of their well-being and place in society.

In this paper Musical Performance and Singing Analysis of Soprano Aria "Alone, Lost, Abandoned", Li Juan indicated that Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* embodied that while carrying forward the Italian operatic melodies, he also drew on the new developments of European operatic and symphonic music compositions from the 19th century and beyond. Stylistic hallmarks: First, a blend of lyricism and drama in the music; Second, the fusion of the singing and recitative tones in the vocal singing; Third, breaking through the boundaries of recitative and aria; Fourth, highlighting the orchestra's performance and the opera's melodic rendering while reinforcing the vocal lead, enhancing the singer's voice and the orchestra's musical notes with a more complex texture for a seamless blend; Fifth, depicting characters with enchanting melodies to bring them to life; Sixth, the music is brimming with the warmth of sensual charm, exuding a romantic essence, intense tones, lyrical quality, and a melodic style of vibrant energy for potential growth [1].

Bai Yi stated in her paper *Artistic Characteristics of Puccini's Opera Soprano Aria and Its Singing Treatment* that in Puccini's opera, the recitative phrases and sections blend seamlessly, creating a picturesque and melodic conception. This makes the aria more intimate and natural, bringing a heightened sense of reality and emotion to the play.

This paper will analyze the breath of singing, the enunciation of lyrics, and the expression of musical emotions of the aria "Alone, Lost, Abandoned" from Puccini's opera *Manon Lescaut*.

3. Study of Singing Methods from the Perspective of Breath

Puccini's works feature soprano arias with a powerful melodic flow that is both lyrical and highly dramatic. It is extremely demanding for sopranos, particularly lyric sopranos, who must possess not only musical aptitude and thorough understanding but also a great lung capacity and exceptional breath control to sustain their singing and deliver a perfect interpretation of the work. Therefore, we will delve into the aspect of breath as we begin our detailed analysis [2].

At the beginning of bar 2 of the vocal, the composer uses six consecutive sustaining marks to highlight the despair of Manon, who has just awakened from the darkness. Here, attention should be paid to the vocal fullness and timing, building up emotions during solo accompaniment and giving yourself ample time to breathe between notes. Going forward, perfect coordination between the singing position and breath is crucial to achieve a full and rich singing tone (see Figure 1).

The figure displays a musical score excerpt for the Soprano Aria "Alone, Lost, Abandoned" from Puccini's opera *Manon Lescaut*. It consists of four staves. The first staff is the vocal line, labeled "VOICE", with the instruction "Moving" above it. The second staff is the piano accompaniment, labeled "PIANO", with the instruction "Moving" above it. The third staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "Alone, lost, abandoned." and the instruction "Broadly (in 2), quarter note = 92". The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment with the lyrics "In a desolate land!" and the instruction "accompaniment always very soft". The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *pp* (pianissimo).

Figure 1. Complete score excerpt at bar 2 with English lyrics and directions

The next bars, 16-17, span ten degrees from a2 to f1, leading to the first emotional climax of the heroine. Therefore, when performing a2, it is necessary to engage abdominal muscles and waist tension without overextending the mouth, maintaining a uniform singing position supported by breath, followed by seamlessly transitioning to f1. It should be noted that active engagement is still required at f1, with the chest voice sustained by proper breath for a full tone. Take a breath before singing "The sky is growing dark; alas, I am alone!", and you can also introduce a touch of true voice to c1 at bar 18 (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Complete score excerpt in bars 16-18 with English text

At bar 32, Manon, weak and in pain, is breaking down emotionally and starts to get agitated. She cries, "Ah, I do not want to die!" with all her strength; the melody ascends to bb2 and is held. The high notes here need to be delivered with sufficient power to create a strong impact. Therefore, you need to take a full breath, loosen the jaw, and sing the opening words of the English translation solidly. Attention should also be paid to the consistency of your breath when singing the descending scales, keeping your singing position uniform (see Figure 3).

Sustained strained hurrying slowing

I, the abandoned woman! Ah! I do not want to die. No, I do not want to die!

Sustained strained hurrying

always diminishing *ff* *diminishing*

with dejection *p*

So everything is over. Land of peace ...

p *pp* *p* *very sweetly*

Figure 3. Complete score excerpt at bar 32 with English text

From bar 45, the music moves into an angry, fast tempo, where Manon starts to get angry, and her heart is filled with resentment. Here, we should pay attention to the timing of augmentation dots in the meter and avoid rushing. To express Manon's emotional agitation, we should take deep breaths; when the tempo is fast, we need to draw breaths into the diaphragm. It is crucial to refrain from rushing due to the fast tempo and to bring out Manon's anger and agitation thoroughly (see Figure 4).

Lively and fast

Ah! My fatal beauty kindles fresh anger ...

Lively and fast

slowing; moderately

I wished to tear myself from him; now all my past ...

slowing; moderately *p*

Figure 4. Complete score excerpt from bar 45 with English text

From bar 56, the heroine's emotions become increasingly agitated, and her anxiety and anger are mainly conveyed through ascending half-tones with augmentation dots in the meter. Therefore, you should sing at a relatively fast pace, adjust the breath properly, maintain a strong core by keeping the pivot point at the waist and abdomen, make reasonable use of the diaphragm power, and breathe more actively and stable simultaneously. By bar 64, the music becomes increasingly urgent, and Manon's emotions have gradually reached a climax, which should be sung with a fuller breath (see Figure 5).

The image displays a musical score excerpt for bars 56-64. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo/mood markings are 'slowing; moderately' and 'increasingly urgent'. The English text is: 'It kindles fresh anger; I was to be torn from him: now all my past', 'My dreadful past rises again, alive before my eyes.', and 'It rests before me. Ah! It is stained with blood ...'. The piano accompaniment includes triplets and a forte (ff) section. The vocal line includes a five-beat a2 at bar 69.

slowing; moderately

It kindles fresh anger; I was to be torn from him: now all my past

slowing; moderately

increasingly urgent

My dreadful past rises again, alive before my eyes.

increasingly urgent

increasingly urgent

It rests before me. Ah! It is stained with blood ...

ff increasingly urgent

Figure 5. Complete score excerpt in bars 56-64 with English text

The five-beat a2 at bar 69 unleashes a torrent of the heroine's emotions. When performing this section, make sure to use strong breaths and refrain from relying too heavily on the pharyngeal wall; sustain the breath without straining the pharyngeal cavity wall excessively (see Figure 6).

The musical score excerpt consists of four systems of music. The first system shows a vocal line with the instruction "increasingly urgent" above it. The second system shows a piano accompaniment with a "ff" (fortissimo) dynamic and the instruction "increasingly urgent" above it, and a vocal line with the lyrics "It rests before me. Ah! It is stained with blood." above it. The third system shows a vocal line with the instruction "broaden slightly" above it, followed by a long note with the instruction "very broad and sustained" above it, and then a triplet with the instruction "speech-like" above it. The fourth system shows a piano accompaniment with the instruction "growing louder" above it, followed by a long note with the instruction "held" above it, and then a triplet with the instruction "pp" (pianissimo) above it. The lyrics "Ah! Everything is over!" are written below the vocal line in the third system.

Figure 6. Complete score excerpt at bar 69 with English text

Bar 74 begins with the heroine's final struggle at the end of her life. This bar is unaccompanied and recitative, which should be sung with a highly uniform breath; otherwise, the intonation will be relatively low. The singer can take an additional breath after the "no" in "No, I do not want to die" to bring out more sense of the tone. In bar 76, the composer uses the "ff" treatment to enhance the emotion. When singing, you need to take a full breath with support from the diaphragm, relax the jaw, maintain a consistent vocal position, and convey the heroine Manon's desire for life and despair and pain of the status quo with greater impact and depth (see Figure 7).

The image displays a musical score excerpt for bars 74-76. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "As a refuge of peace, now I call upon the tomb", "No, I do not want to die, I do not want to die! No! No! I do not want to die!", and "I do not want to die... Love, help me!". The score includes various performance instructions: "softly, holding back", "slowing", "holding back", "ratt.", "sofly and slowly", "loudly, rapidly", "very sustained, strained", "original speed", "slowing and diminshing", and "pppp". The piano part includes markings for "6", "3", and "p".

Figure 7. Complete score excerpt in bars 74-76 with English text

4. Enunciation of Lyrics

Enunciating the lyrics when singing is crucial for singers, and the singer's ability to clearly pronounce the lyrics greatly impacts the delivery of the musical message.

As this aria is sung mostly in a despairing, weeping, and sorrowful narrative style, it is essential to enunciate the lyrics. The range of this part stays in the middle register. Therefore, keep in mind not to mumble while singing; sustain your voice with your breath and the words with your voice, enunciating each word from your vocal cavity. From bar 45, the emotions get more stirred up as the tempo picks up. When singing, remember not to pronounce the lyrics more and more vaguely but to align accurately with the rhythm and deliver them one by one. The lyrics should be enunciated fully to convey the depth of pain and anger in Manon's heart.

This work is in Italian, which contains 5 vowels (a, e, i, o, and u) and 15 consonants (c, p, b, f, d, g, l, m, n, q, r, s, t, v, and z). Different combinations of these letters produce different pronunciations. We must enunciate both vowels and consonants without slurring and comply with the regularity of clear articulation and full tune [3].

5. Expression of Musical Emotions

The aria "Alone, Lost, Abandoned" is the final outcry of the heroine Manon at the end of her life. The injustice and tease of destiny, the anger and inner remorse, the despair of dying, and the desire

for life are all part of Manon's complex state of mind. One must empathize with this desperate situation to truly convey the despair and pain in singing [4, 5, 6].

In this aria, excluding the one-bar prelude, we can break down the singing emotions into three parts. Bars 2-44 are the first part, where the tempo is broad and slow, and the singing expression is "with the greatest expression and anguish", which describes Manon's awakening from the darkness to find no one around her and think that her lover has abandoned her. In this part, Manon is desperate and painfully helpless. So when singing, we must convey the crushing weight of loneliness and the deep despair, as if being abandoned by the whole world. The accompaniment here allows for ample creativity for singers, who can fully immerse themselves in the emotions and present the heroine's spirit at that moment.

Bars 45-70 are the second part, where the tempo becomes fast and energetic and the dynamic is "f". Manon's emotions change from despair to agitation and anger. The lyrics "Ah, my fatal beauty ignites fresh anger" indicate that Manon starts to loathe herself, blaming her own beauty for the predicament she finds herself in. The singer should be emotionally involved in this part but avoid rushing; maintain an accurate rhythm while effectively conveying Manon's inner rage and heart-wrenching pain.

Bars 71-79 are the third part, where the dynamic is "p". In stark contrast to the agitated and angry Manon earlier, she regains her composure, with the lyrics "I do not want to die!" at the triplet of bar 74. Here, the vocal is unaccompanied; the singer needs to express the heroine's strong desire for life, with increasingly intense emotions. Moreover, the dynamic contrast between the two bars should be sufficient to be ready for the emotional climax at the end of the piece. At bar 76, the dynamic is changed to "ff" and the expression becomes strained and slowing, culminating in Manon's final cry as she exhausts the last ounce of her strength (see Figure 8).

The musical score excerpt consists of three systems of staves. The first system shows the soprano line with lyrics "As a refuge of peace, now I call upon the tomb" and piano accompaniment. The second system shows the soprano line with lyrics "No, I do not want to die, I do not want to die! No! No! I do not want to die!" and piano accompaniment. The third system shows the soprano line with lyrics "I do not want to die... Love, help me!" and piano accompaniment. The score includes various performance instructions such as "softly, holding back", "holding back", "ratt.", "softly and slowly", "loudly, rapidly", "very sustained, strained", "original speed", "slowing and diminishing", and "pppp".

Figure 8. Complete score excerpt in bars 71-79 with English text

6. Conclusion

Manon Lescaut is one of the most representative works in Puccini's operas, and the completion of this work also marks the accomplishment of Puccini's unique creative style. This paper analyzed in detail the use of breath, enunciation of lyrics, and expression of musical emotions in the famous soprano aria "Alone, Lost, Abandoned" from this work. Through thorough analysis, I came to understand that interpreting a character perfectly requires going beyond singing and delving into a deeper level of understanding the character's thoughts, emotions, personality traits, and musical features embedded in the composer's works. The charm of this opera is simply irresistible, with "Alone, Lost, Abandoned" perfectly capturing the dramatic and lyrical essence of music. Only by analyzing and understanding the character more thoroughly can singers interpret the personality traits, emotional turns, and musical connotations of the work more vividly on the stage.

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