

LE JONGLEUR DE NOTRE DAME

Jules Massenet

The story of "Le Jongleur de Notre Dame" (The Juggler of Notre Dame) is based upon the old medieval Miracle plays that flourished up to the middle of the Sixteenth Century and which consisted of a quaint admixture of the purely mundane, with the supernatural.

Act I

The people of one of the suburbs of Paris--Cluny, are celebrating May Day on the Square in front of the Monks' Abbey. An itinerant Juggler, --Jean arrives. The crowd is not impressed and they laugh at Jean's old, worn out tricks. The crowd demands a drinking song and, as it is the only way Jean can earn a penny, he agrees. First, Jean asks for the pardon of the Holy Virgin for the song he is about to sing, then leads the crowd in a rousing chorus singing the glories of wine! The Prior interrupts the merriment and singing, scattering the crowd of revelers and sternly threatens Juggler Jean with hell-fire if he does not mend his ways. The Prior questions the juggler and asks him to consider becoming a monk instead of a juggling vagabond. Jean pleads for his liberty. Just then, Boniface, the cook of the Abbey comes by with his donkey laden with provisions and mounds of food. An empty stomach gnawed with hunger by the sight of so much good food makes Jean come to a sudden resolution. For the sake of food and security Jean decides to follow in the religious life of a monk and enters the abbey.

Act II

Inside the abbey each Monk is working at their avocations. The Musician Monk is rehearsing a new Cantata for the Feast of the Virgin. Jean regrets that he cannot praise the Virgin, too, because he doesn't know Latin and she wouldn't understand him in his vulgar French. The monks get in a disagreement over the comparative superiority of their respective arts. The Sculptor Monk says his is the greatest art. The painter contends his is the noblest of arts. The Poet and the Musician join in the dispute and nearly come to blows when the Prior orders them all to the chapel to practise humility. Jean deplors his ignorance to the abbey cook Boniface complaining that he can do nothing artistic to please the Virgin. Boniface tells him a story how once the most humble of flowers, sage, saved the life of Jesus when pursued by the King child-killer. Boniface also confides that his cooking is his offering to the Virgin. Jean is convinced, at last, that his humble prayers--even in French--may reach as high as those of the proudest.

Act III

The Painter Monk is taking a satisfied glance at his picture of the Virgin, over the high altar, when he sees Jean enter dressed in his juggler's costume. Puzzled, the monk goes to notify the Prior. Jean tells the Virgin that, as he know nothing else, he will go through his whole performance in her honor. Now and then he interrupts himself to tell her that some of his songs are hardly appropriate for her ears, but that he means to be entirely respectful. The Prior comes in unseen by Jean and watches his performance. He is greatly scandalized but is restrained from interfering by Boniface. The other monks come in and, when they See Jean going through his dance, cry Sacrilege! Just as they can contain themselves no longer the face of the Virgin in the painting is seen to grow animated and her arms are extended toward Jean, now deep in prayer. Miracle! They all cry and as the kneel about Jean a great light envelops the figure of the Virgin, angels surround her and celestial voices are heard. Jean, murmuring that, at last he understands Latin, dies in the Prior's arms.

