



CHARLES GOUNOD (1818-1893) RELIGIOUS AND ROMANTIC SENSIBILITY

Gounod’s father was a painter, his mother a pianist, who gave him his first lessons and recognized his talent. He attended the Paris Conservatory; then at the young age of 20 he won the Prix de Rome. This gave him the opportunity to study extensively in Italy, and he also spent time in Vienna, studying Bach and counterpoint, and in Berlin and Leipzig. When he returned to Paris, he was appointed the musical director of the Church of the Foreign Missions. He had always been attracted to the Church and church music, and during this period he entered the seminary and seriously considered taking orders. He ultimately decided to make music his career, although he remained close to the church and composed a great deal of religious music, including his famous “*Ave Maria*.” (This beautiful piece is Gounod’s melody sung or played over a Bach prelude.) In fact, the first composition that brought him significant recognition was the *Messe solennelle Saint-Cecile* in 1845. On the other hand, he also wrote the *Funeral March for a Marionette* (1872), which became the theme for the TV series “Alfred Hitchcock Presents.”

Gounod’s first successful opera was *Faust* (1859), in which he and his librettists concentrated on that part of Goethe’s story concerning Faust’s love affair with Marguerite. In distinguishing him from earlier French opera composers, his writing was described as follows: “It was, however, reserved for Gounod to introduce *la note tendre*, to sing the tender passion in accents soft and languorous. The musical language employed in *Faust* was new and fascinating...” And in regard to *Romeo et Juliet*: “Here, indeed, was a subject particularly well calculated to appeal to a composer who had so eminently qualified himself to be considered the musician of the tender passion.” (1911 Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

Romeo et Juliet has four tenor-soprano love duets, believed to be a record up to that time. Among other highlights is Juliet’s waltz song in the first act, “*Je veux vivre*” (“I want to live in my dream”). Also in Act I is Mercutio’s tale “*Mab, la reine des mensonges*” (“Mab, the queen of my lies”), an attempt to distract Romeo from dark thoughts. For Romeo, it is love at first sight, and the act naturally proceeds to the first love duet.

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Act II opens with the balcony scene, in which Romeo sings his famous aria “*Ah! Leve-toi, soleil*” (“Rise, sun! Make the stars turn pale”). In this piece, as in many places throughout the opera, the libretto uses Shakespearean imagery; also the fading of the evening star in the French text is reflected in the music by a chromatic descent against a bass pedal note, just one example of Gounod’s talent for orchestration. There follows the second love duet.

The Act IV duet is introduced by a sensuous cello passage described as “a small tone poem about the wedding night” [The New Penguin Opera Guide, Amanda Holden, ed., 2001, p. 340].

The Act V duet takes place in the tomb. The opera has followed Shakespeare’s play very closely, though pruned of episodes not directly involving the lovers, except in one particular. In the play, Romeo is dead from the poison he has taken before Juliet awakens in the tomb. In the opera he is not, providing the occasion for (what else?) the fourth love duet.

Aside from *Faust* and *Romeo et Juliet*, Gounod’s operas did not meet with much success. This may have been because he sought recognition for operas with a loftier tone, and broader subject matter, for which he did not have a dramatic gift. At the end of his life he returned to writing sacred music after three failures in a row. He remained faithful to his religious musical mission, but in choosing to sensuously celebrate the young lovers, Gounod also proved faithful to the renown of his nationality in celebrating passion of a more earthly kind.

- Carol Crocca, for the Opera Guild of Rochester