

# The reception of *Le Tribut de Zamora*

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## BEFORE THE PREMIERE

The reception history of *Le Tribut de Zamora* begins long before its first performance. The public had already been informed by the newspapers that composition had started on the work in 1879 ('on the night of 16 January' specified the *Journal de la musique*), that Gounod had initially intended to write a new opera on *Le Cid* (*Le Figaro*) and that Verdi had wanted to buy the libretto of *Le Tribut* from d'Ennery, but the latter had refused to give up his copyright against a single lump-sum payment (*Journal de musique*). Several months before the premiere, periodicals like *Le XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle* regaled their readers with behind-the-scenes indiscretions and anecdotes blown up out of all proportion.

The public later learned from *Le XIX<sup>e</sup> Siècle* that the 'stage rehearsals' began on 11 January, that 'airs and duets have been added' and that 'the big duet for M<sup>mes</sup> Krauss and Daram, in which the crazed mother is reunited with her daughter, now a slave [...] is apparently expected to be the climax of the score'. It was also revealed to the reader that the four acts each lasted 'at least an hour', and that for this reason substantial cuts had been made:

In the finale of the first act, a *romance* for M<sup>lle</sup> Daram, which was found overlong. At the beginning of the second act, half of the opening chorus was removed. In the third act, half of a big trio sung by MM. Sellier, Lassalle

and Melchissédec was also cut. These three deletions shorten the piece by forty minutes.

On 29 March, the day of the dress rehearsal, the public learned that 'the artists are not yet in possession of their costumes', and, a few days later, that M<sup>lle</sup> Daram, 'though suffering from a heavy cold these past few days, was able to take part in the dress rehearsal'. The press also revealed that the thoroughbred ('a magnificent Arab beast') originally intended for Ben-Saïd's entrance on horseback in the first act had been replaced, because of the singer's heavy armament, by a 'Percheron which, moreover, has been very Moorishly harnessed' (*Le Gaulois*); that the baritone Lassalle had 'damaged a finger' belonging to the tenor Sellier during the rehearsals for the Act Three duel (*Le Petit Parisien*); and that the arms and armour, and especially Ben-Saïd's helmet ('copied from a genuine Moorish helmet which is in the Madrid Museum'), were made on the basis of photographs sent expressly from Spain (*Le Gaulois*).

But, beyond these anecdotes, the press was staggered by two directives, for which Auguste Vaucorbeil (1821-84), director of the Opéra since 1879, was responsible. First of all, he had agreed to allow Gounod to conduct the first three performances of his work in person. The same privilege had been granted not long before (22 March 1880) to Verdi for *Aida*, but never to a Frenchman until then. Blaze de Bury was indignant:

Composers, members of the Institute or mere mortals are free to go to the Concerts Padeloup and Concerts Colonne to conduct the orchestra as much as they like, but the National Academy does not lend itself to these little family celebrations.

(*Revue des deux mondes*)

Few journalists ventured a favourable opinion on this subject, except for D. Magnus ('Berlioz conducted marvellously; Gounod, Saint-Saëns, Massenet, Delibes, Guiraud and our other young people have proven their abilities; we wish them to be granted the same favour – if indeed it is a

favour’) and Octave Fouque (‘M. Gounod considers it an honour to be at the head of the troops on days like these; he does not hide behind conventions and wishes to assume responsibilities. This is the attitude of a true artist and a brave man’).

Vaucorbeil had also agreed to the dress rehearsal being given behind closed doors, contrary to custom: even – indeed, above all – the press was banned. The day after the premiere, many critics admitted that it was difficult for them to judge a work objectively after a single hearing. But also ‘without the score in front of their eyes’, because, to make things even worse, Choudens, Gounod’s publisher, had not distributed the vocal scores before the premiere, even though they had been printed. Edmond Stoullig complained bitterly of this, deploring the absence of the ‘score that M. Choudens, father and son, have preciousy and ill-advisedly kept in their warehouse until we no longer need it for our work’. Achille de Thémènes devoted a column and a half of his review (out of seven) to this problem!

Denied a dress rehearsal, some defied Vaucorbeil’s orders. It was not without pride that the reporter from *Le Gaulois* confessed:

We were there anyway. Where? M. Vaucorbeil will never know. Perhaps under the coat of mail of a Moorish soldier among the extras... And we saw, listened and remembered.

The same ‘scoop’ was provided by *Le Figaro*, which ‘in this hunt for indiscretions, will be no less well informed than its colleagues. So we will relate to our readers, act by act, *Le Tribut de Zamora*’. There follow details of the plot and a description of the sets, which were reprinted verbatim by *Le National* and *Le Ménestrel*. In the same article, *Le Figaro* took it upon itself to be a prophet – and a premature cheerleader – by writing of the third act:

The account of the capture of Zamora [...] will prove extremely effective. It is here that she [M<sup>me</sup> Krauss] recalls and reprises the national song that

we heard in the first act [...] Offstage, it is referred to call as 'the Marseillaise of *Le Tribut de Zamora*'.

This designation of the 'Marseillaise' was taken up by no fewer than twenty newspapers...



### THE OPENING NIGHT

A double round of applause greeted M. Gounod's installation at the conductor's desk. He responded with two very sober bows, imitating Verdi's modesty in the same situation. Then he sat down, took in his orchestra with a circular gaze, struck the traditional two blows on his desk, and *Le Tribut de Zamora* began.

(*Le Gaulois*)

A detail of some importance: 'the subscribers seemed perfectly happy' with the ballet in the third act. But it was in that same act that the incident occurred which was considered, after Vaucorbeil's two authoritarian directives, to be the 'third scandal' of *Le Tribut*. 'M<sup>lle</sup> Krauss, who was lying on the ground, had risen to shake the maestro's hand, and then resumed the horizontal position required by the role' (*Le Gaulois*). Edmond Stoullig was the first – but not the only – journalist to regret this behaviour:

Why does the comic element have to interfere everywhere? We laughed when, having fallen to the ground, M<sup>lle</sup> Krauss then stood up to go and shake hands with M. Gounod, after which she went back to lying down at her full length... M<sup>lle</sup> Daram, not wishing to be outdone in politeness, also cordially pressed the composer's hand as he stood at his conductor's desk... When, oh when, will we be serious, and when will we be done with these typically Italian ways?

(*Le National*)

In response to this public criticism, Gabrielle Krauss made amends through the intermediary of a newspaper:

Paris, 4 April.

Dear M. Stoullig,

I do not know how to express my gratitude to you...

I can only say a huge *thank you* for all the praise you heaped on me in your fine article on *Le Tribut de Zamora*.

You are right to have reproached me for getting up to give Gounod my hand in the middle of the duet. But what can I say? I was intoxicated by the success and happy to be able to tell the Maestro how happy I was *for him*. I know I should have waited, to express my satisfaction, until the curtain had fallen. I hope that will not happen to me again.

Do not be angry, dear M. Stoullig, about this little incident, and please believe me to be,

Your most grateful servant,

Gabrielle Krauss.

(*La Renaissance musicale*)

The vast majority of the audience could not care less about this anecdote. For *La Patrie*, M<sup>me</sup> Krauss ‘produced such fine surges of lyricism, in her patriotic song, that the whole house, electrified by her warm-hearted singing, roared with enthusiasm and burst into a triple salvo of applause’. And, according to *Le Siècle*, ‘the bravos, the cheers, the curtain calls in honour of the artist and the composer lasted five minutes. It was beautiful beyond description’.

Several newspapers, including *Le Rappel*, deemed that the work had enjoyed a reception that was ‘lukewarm in the first two acts, [...] warm at the end of the third, and which the fourth cooled only to a certain extent’. Achille de Thémènes explained why the spectators behaved in this way:

The audience remained reserved during the first two acts. At times it would have thrown off that reserve if a clumsy claque had not tried to force its

hand, thus deterring its cheers by depriving them of all spontaneity.

(*La Patrie*)

Less intransigent, *Le Petit Parisien* applauded 'this very great, this very legitimate success'.

The critics were very pleased with the performance, 'beyond all praise'. *Le Gaulois* thought it 'remarkable', detailing how 'M<sup>lle</sup> Krauss is a great tragedienne and an outstanding singer; M<sup>lle</sup> Daram is delightful; M. Lasalle is an admirable replacement for M. Faure, and M. Sellier draws admirable tenor notes from his throat'. The press agreed to refer to Gabrielle Krauss as the 'Rachel of Operatic Drama',\* believing that she had 'perhaps encountered in *Hermosa* the most moving role of her career'. The costumes, sets and staging were also unanimously praised ('the finest one might see') and there was satisfaction that the management had 'not spared the horses'... What could be more natural, then, than that, at the end of the evening, 'the whole house, on its feet, clapped its hands frantically'? And yet, right from the first 'overnight' reviews, a more reserved view of the work made its presence felt. Louis de Fourcaud's article is a good example:

If one thinks back to the enthusiastic cheers that greeted the fall of the curtain, the work's success was brilliant. But that success remains doubtful, if one takes into account the coldness with which the audience listened to the first acts. I fear, for my part, that there was in the final ovations a feeling of deep respect for M. Gounod's lofty personality and a mark of public esteem for the artists – notably M<sup>lle</sup> Krauss and M. Lasalle – rather than sincere admiration for *Le Tribut de Zamora*.

(*Le Gaulois*)



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\* The reference is to 'Mademoiselle Rachel' (Elisabeth Félix, 1821-58), the great French classical tragedienne. (Translator's note.)

## CRITICISMS OF THE LIBRETTO AND SCORE

It is necessary to take a broader view in order to understand the attacks levelled at Gounod by a number of journalists. As is often the case in the history of music – especially French music – the issue of the different stylistic ‘schools’ was raised. Adrien Laroque (the pseudonym of Émile Abraham) declared:

We are at a decisive moment in the history of music. Between what was and what will be, the line of demarcation is as clearly drawn as between the Romantics and the Classicists half a century ago.

(*Le Petit Journal*)

In the eyes of the purists, there were two operatic traditions in Paris in 1881: that of the *grand opéra* of Auber, Halévy and Meyerbeer, and that of the Italian repertory of Rossini, Donizetti and Verdi. But a third way had been carved out by Gounod himself ever since his *Faust*. Some young composers, led by Bizet and Massenet, followed the example of this ‘illustrious head of the French musical school’ (*Le Constitutionnel*), while Wagner’s harmonies resonated in the distance, a threatening presence for some, a prophetic one for others. After the war of 1870, Wagnerism took on a political hue that considerably tainted artistic discussions. Nevertheless, the fundamental question of the future of art remained. This omnipresent debate enables us to understand the harsh comments with regard to *Le Tribut* and its composer. Louis de Fourcaud (*Le Gaulois*) raged:

The eminent composer, who opened up such new horizons for our lyric drama, seems to be committing himself more and more to a path of musical reaction. [...] *Le Tribut de Zamora* is, strictly speaking, an opera in the old style. The new school did not yet exist when he [Gounod] established his reputation, and now he joins the old school when it is no longer in existence!

Jacques Hermann (*Le Constitutionnel*) went one better:

[*Le Tribut de Zamora*] is the third to appear, in a manner so different – what am I saying? – so *opposed* to the two manners which preceded it, that one is tempted to believe in a deliberate choice, in a new conviction. It is, however, impossible to suppose that M. Gounod believes he was mistaken in *Faust*, in *Roméo et Juliette*, in *Philémon et Baucis*. And yet *Cinq-Mars*, *Polyeucte*, *Le Tribut de Zamora* are a throwback to the school whose platitudes and errors were driven out of French music by M. Gounod himself. The composer of *Faust* was thus the first in France to inspire the desire for lyrical, expressive, true, human works; all of us, musicians and audiences, owe him first-rate artistic satisfactions. We ask him for more of the same, and he becomes miserly.

Johannès Weber (*Le Temps*) saw this as a deliberate step:

If M. Gounod had written *Le Tribut de Zamora* with the intention of denying any alliance with Wagner, he could not have done better; he has unquestionably taken a step away from the German school and towards the Italian, from which he even borrows quite frequently. [...] There are people who will praise him, others who will blame him; it is enough for me to note the fact.

The libretto severely disappointed a whole section of the critics: 'very mediocre and outdated in the highest degree' (*Le Gaulois*), 'puerile [...] action, lame [...] passions, [...] negative characters' (*Le Gaulois*), 'false drama [...] coming straight out of the stock repertoire of boulevard theatre' (*Le Constitutionnel*), 'gross, hackneyed melodrama, vulgar and full of improbabilities' (*Paris moderne*). These journalists harped on 'the deplorable style of the verse and the endless naiveties' (*Revue littéraire et artistique*). Their colleagues who looked kindly on the work were D. Magnus in *Gil Blas* ('a well-structured piece of drama'), Achille Denis in *L'Entr'acte* ('[M. d'Ennery] is tackling opera for the first time and his first attempt



is crowned by a victory'), Louis Gallet in *La Nouvelle Revue* ('of fine quality, calculated to inspire confidence in the public after having inspired it in the directors') and Charles Pigot in *L'Artiste* ('The libretto, it must be acknowledged, is constructed by the hand of a skilled craftsman; dramatic scenes abound; originality, colour are not lacking'). Saint-Saëns, in his article in *Le Voltaire*, pointed out in particular the unattractive character of Manoël. Ernest Reyer agreed with him: 'I found [Ben-Saïd] extremely sympathetic, and I confess that between Manoël and him, in Xaïma's place, I might have hesitated' (*Journal des débats*).

And the genuinely musical verdict? Opinions diverged even more strongly. On the side of reprobation, we read: 'Where did [Gounod] get this grey, colourless orchestration, careless of the local colour that exerts such a powerful attraction on modern composers?' (*Le Constitutionnel*); 'A prelude followed by two acts of *opéra-comique*, the second ending with a rather too familiar finale in the Italian style' (*Le National*); 'An uneven work [...], a reactionary work' (*Le Petit Journal*); 'The music [...] lacks originality, and one has the impression, in certain passages, that one is not hearing it for the first time' (*La Lanterne*); 'Gounod is the man for the hymn, the ode, the idyll, the elegy; do not ask him for the epic' (*La Patrie*); 'The great reproach that we will level at M. Gounod is the way he abuses certain formulas; it is true that they are his, and it is perhaps because so many others have appropriated them that they seem more threadbare to us today' (*La Presse*); 'The score, taken as a whole, seemed cold' (*L'Illustration*).

Ears that were more attentive or better educated, or which had had the opportunity to hear the work several times, were not so categorical. And it is notable that they did not insist on the conventional wisdom that only the third act had both dramatic and musical value. Among the set-piece numbers, the choral epithalamion of Act One ('Entendez-vous la cloche ailée') immediately reminds today's ears of the carillon from Bizet's *L'Arlésienne*. Probably because it was less well known at the time, only two journalists (out of nearly forty) noticed this kinship: Hippeau in *La Renaissance musicale* ('This is as interesting as the famous carillon in

*L'Arlésienne*') and Weber in *Le Temps* ('In *L'Arlésienne*, Bizet also wrote entr'acte music on a three-note carillon'). Although we do not have space here to list all the favourite numbers in detail, it is legitimate to agree with one critic for whom '*Le Tribut de Zamora* is rich, all things considered, in first-rate pieces. This work will count among those on which M. Gounod has expended the most effort; he has put his soul and his heart into it' (*L'Union*).

The reader is recommended, as a fine example of a balanced and well-argued article, to consult the review by Camille Saint-Saëns published in *Le Voltaire* of 4 April 1881. The composer is not afraid to season his criticism with humorous remarks, whether to evoke the King '(something of an old duffer, just between ourselves)' or to describe the setting of the third act ('high Moorish arches overlooking the countryside; one of them opens onto a precipice at the bottom of which rolls a torrent, as is the case at the bottom of any self-respecting precipice'). He adds, in the same tone: 'Ben-Saïd, out of courtesy for the subscribers of the Opéra, gives a party for his mistress. It has always been so, and will always be so until the end of time.' Another witticism: 'No matter, Xaïma still loves [Manoël]. She abhors Ben-Saïd! Pleas, threats, nothing does the trick for him. What do you expect? Manoël is a tenor and Ben-Saïd is merely a baritone!'

More substantial is Saint-Saëns's opinion on the score:

The music is written throughout with the elegant and impeccable pen to which M. Gounod has long accustomed us. The voices are admirably handled, and supported by a velvety orchestra that dresses them up richly without stifling them. One could hardly imagine better-blended sonorities. [...] Perhaps this music will be criticised for its continuous charm, its lack of harshness, the absence of that turbulence so much in fashion today. M. Gounod – and this is his strength – has always remained himself; nourished on the marrow of lions by thorough study of the great masters, he has dug his own furrow and opened up a road along which a whole generation of musicians has passed; then he has stayed his ground, more

inclined to run counter to fashion than to follow it, or, to express it better, frankly disdainful of fashion. [...] I always admire the Olympian calm, the contempt for the opinion of the vulgar mob, the respect for his own conscience that characterise the composer of *Le Tribut de Zamora*.

(*Le Voltaire*)

Let us end this panorama of the reception in the Parisian press with a little-known fact: *Le Tribut de Zamora* was the first opera in history to be transmitted to another building via telephone wires. The day after the fifteenth performance, *Le Ménestrel* dated 22 May 1881 reported:

[The telephone] was connected with the auditorium of the Opéra at the very time of the performance. A complete success! The voices of M<sup>mes</sup> Krauss, Dufrane and Janvier and those of MM. Sellier, Melchissédec and Lorrain in *Le Tribut de Zamora* could be heard perfectly on rue Richer [in the Opéra's scenery warehouse].



#### *LE TRIBUT DE ZAMORA* OUTSIDE PARIS

Although it is true that the work's career at the Opéra was of short duration (forty-seven performances in 1881 and 1882 and three in 1885), the Gounod literature has so far failed to mention that it nevertheless travelled to almost thirty cities in the years up to 1905. On the basis of local newspaper reports and the numerous annotations in the orchestral parts hired out by Choudens, the following – non-exhaustive – list can be drawn up: Paris (1881, 1882, 1885), Turin (1882), Lyon (1882), Antwerp (1882), Vienna (1883, 1884, 1885, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1891), The Hague (1883, 1884), Hamburg (1884), Marseille (1884), Béziers (1885, 1886, 1889, 1893), Avignon (1885, 1896), Narbonne (1885), Geneva (1885), Liège (1885/86, 1901), Brussels (1887/88), New Orleans (1888), Nîmes (1888), Amiens (1889), Montpellier (1889, 1890, 1894), Pau (1889/90), Carcassonne (1890),

Prague (1892), Cette (1893), Limoges (1893), Constantine (1893/94), Douai (1895), Cambrai (1895), Agen (1900), Tournai (1905).

The performance in Turin on 5 March 1882 seems to have been the first production of *Le Tribut* outside Paris. It inaugurated a run of five performances. In Lyon, illness delayed the premiere until 17 March of the same year. Gounod went to Antwerp to conduct the rehearsals and the local premiere on 16 November 1882.

The series of twenty-three performances in Vienna is the most remarkable: as with Gabrielle Krauss in Paris, it was Pauline Lucca who guaranteed the success of the work in the Austrian capital for six years. Every time she stayed there, Gounod's opera appeared on the programme. One notes that the twenty-third performance was the first attempt to give it without her – and also the last.

We will conclude with a quotation that would surely have pleased the composer of *Le Tribut de Zamora*, who was also the creator of... *Mireille*. It comes from an article published on the occasion of one of the eight performances in Montpellier (where it was premiered on 28 November 1889). The review appeared in *La Cigalo d'or* on 1 December 1889 – in the Occitan language!

Per tout dire, lou *Tribut de Zamora* es estat un succès. En desirant à Moussu Miral qu'aquel succès siègue duradis, la *Cigalo d'or* pago soun tribut... à Zamora.

[In sum, *Le Tribut de Zamora* was a success. Hoping for Monsieur Miral's sake that this success will be a lasting one, *La Cigalo d'or* pays its tribute... to Zamora.]





Above: The slave auction in Act Two. *L'Illustration*, 9 April 1881.

Below: *L'Univers illustré* of 9 April 1881.

Braam Collection.

En haut : La vente des esclaves à l'acte II. *L'Illustration*, 9 avril 1881.

En bas : *L'Univers illustré* du 9 avril 1881.

Collection Braam.