At all times, in all places

Gérard Condé

The premiere of *Faust* at the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1859 marked the end of twenty years of maturation. To what Gounod wrote of the work's genesis in his *Mémoires d'un artiste*, we may add that a 'pensée pour piano' entitled *À la lune* (dated May 1840 and never published) features the melody of the future duet from *Faust* 'Ô nuit d'amour, ciel radieux'. A year later he told his brother:

> I am cooking up in advance certain effects for an opera on *Faust* that I hope to get written for me with the help of old Mélesville [one of the librettists of Herold's *Zampa*], whom his son is to introduce to me in Paris.

When Gounod resumed his artistic career after having envisaged taking holy orders, he thought of the theatre and thus, naturally, of *Faust*. Proof of this may be found in the sketches for the Walpurgis Night scene ('Au Brocken les sorcières vont'), using the translation by Blaze de Bury published in 1847, and a score dated 1849, entitled *Marguerite à l'église*, a 'scène de *Faust*' whose music has no direct connection with the 'church scene' that we know today. One can imagine that this fragment was intended to be performed before the director of the Opéra in order to convince him of Gounod's qualities as a dramatic composer; as a result he was finally offered the libretto of *Sapho*, thanks to Pauline Viardot, who undertook to create the work in 1851. In the spring of 1852, on the occasion of Gounod's wedding, the *Signale für die musikalische Welt* of Leipzig

announced (with a touch of irony?) that the fiancé was working on a *Faust*. The information must have had some basis in fact, because at the end of December 1851, Gounod was indeed thinking of such a project, which Émile Augier (the librettist of *Sapho*) had promised to work on after 20 January. The composer observed:

> *Faust* never ceases to be close to my heart; I am quite sure that it will be a great pleasure for me to perform this task, to which I feel drawn in many respects and which meets many of my needs.

Gounod eventually caught up with this elusive spectre and imprisoned it within the covers of a score. But after fighting hard to conquer the difficulties of the task, he found it had conquered him, and the signature of the contract with a small publisher (Antoine de Choudens), whose fortune it made, resembles the one signed by his hero. The composer of *Faust*, like Marguerite's lover, could not be satisfied with what he had...

'*Faust* [...] is my greatest success in the theatre so far. Does that mean it is my finest work?' This question, which, for the reader of *Mémoires d'un artiste*, presents itself as the conclusion of that autobiographical fragment, should only have been the end of Chapter IV. Gounod still had before him the prospect of relating the unhappy fate of *Mireille*, and that of *Roméo et Juliette*, initially more glorious than *Faust*. But his main concern, in the summer of 1877 when he broke off his narrative, was anticipating the premiere of *Polyeucte*, whose publisher Lemoine, convinced it would be a success, had just bought the score from him for 100,000 francs, ten times what Choudens had offered for Faust...

Yet *Polyeucte*, the work in which Gounod had implicated himself most personally, which should have celebrated and shared the virtues of Christianity each evening, never completely convinced the composer's most faithful admirers, while his detractors sighed 'too many Masses!' The ever-increasing success of *Faust* – that work in which, as Gounod (almost) regretted, 'the Garden Act has been the cause of many a sin' – ended up seeming an insult to him: ' "Let my work perish, let even *Faust*

perish," – so he told his entourage a few months before his death – "but let *Polyeucte* be revived and live on!" ', we read in the Hillemacher brothers' monograph on him.

THE INFERNAL MACHINE

Gounod might well feel persecuted by his work: if he had carried it in him twenty years, for the third of a century that followed, whether he wanted to or not, he heard it everywhere. In Paris, at the Théâtre-Lyrique, then at the Opéra, but also, reduced to the Soldiers' Chorus, bellowed out each spring by the massed voices of the Orphéonistes* (with whom the audience gradually joined in), and soon in the provincial opera houses. Starting with Strasbourg, which had the privilege of premiering the version with recitatives on 28 February 1860. This was an exemplary production in both staging and interpretation: Gounod, who attended it on 17 March, was acclaimed as soon as he appeared in his box and was impressed by the medallions affixed around the second balcony, bearing the titles of his five operas in letters of gold. He was called onto the stage after the Garden Act, to be presented with a gold crown by the conductor. The following month, in Rouen, the performance was followed by a banquet, at the end of which Gounod sat down at the piano to play certain passages in his own style. His publisher, perceiving the drawing power of the composer's presence, arranged for him to travel around, with a commercial acumen that Gounod admired until the day when, having made no profit out of it himself, he railed at being exploited.

In Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, where he had gone to soak up local colour for *Mireille*, it was the municipal brass band which, after punctuating Mass

* The Orphéons were large-scale male choral societies whose members were drawn from the popular classes. The Paris branch gave an annual concert at the Trocadéro. (Translator's note)

with its oompahs, marched to the strains of the March from *Faust*. Two years later, stopping off in Toulon on the way to Saint-Raphaël, the 'Italy of France' that inspired *Roméo et Juliette*, he had his curiosity aroused by the announcement of a performance of *Faust*. Alas, the fugal introduction to the church scene played by two fingers on an out-of-tune harmonium drove him from the theatre before the end.

For *Faust*'s entry into the repertory of the Académie Impériale de Musique (prompted by the bankruptcy of the Théâtre-Lyrique), on 3 March 1869, Gounod, then in the midst of a creative crisis, at first tried to get himself out of the obligation to compose a ballet by proposing to Saint-Saëns that he should write it in his place... Then inspiration suddenly came to him, and proved particularly happy. Conversely, the additional air for Méphistophélès ('Minuit'), originally designed to fill the larger space in which the work was to be heard, remains a mere curiosity.

The success of *Faust* at the Opéra boosted the box office for Hervé's *Le Petit Faust* (premiered on 23 April), on the whole rather respectful of the 'big brother' it gently parodies. Its 'Idylle des Quatre Saisons' is a little masterpiece of sensitivity and concision; Duprato is said to have given it as a model to his harmony students at the Conservatoire. Gounod never went to see what he considered a desecration of Marguerite; rightly so if it is true that, according to police reports, Blanche d'Antigny* 'never took less than 500 francs' for her favours, the same sum that the Opéra paid the composer for each performance of *Faust*.

Brought forward a few days to coincide with St Charles's Day, the celebration of *Faust*'s five hundredth performance at the Opéra on 4 November 1887 gave Gounod the opportunity to conduct his own score, in which he sometimes took unexpected tempos (the Jewel Song faster, the Serenade slower) that Paul Taffanel scrupulously noted down. Jules Barbier, who had planned to declaim a dithyramb in six stanzas, at Gounod's insistence

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* Blanche d'Antigny (1840-74), the actress and singer who created the role of Marguerite in Hervé's parody and was the model for Zola's *Nana*. (Translator's note)

had to content himself with publishing them in *Le Ménestrel*... A very Parisian evening, to be sure, but in honour of a work which, right from its publication, had leapfrogged borders.

A EUROPEAN SUCCESS

Germany was particularly keen on *Faust*. If the premiere took place in Darmstadt on 15 February 1861, it was probably thanks to the friendly initiative of Comte Gustave de Reiset: he had met Gounod at the French Embassy in Rome in 1840 and was now at the head of the French Legation in Darmstadt, so it was very likely he who suggested the idea to the Grand Duke. In order to forestall the critics, Gounod had set to music two strophes of the Song of the King of Thule which the French librettists had dispensed with. The Kapellmeisters of some thirty theatres came to see the performance. Gounod was full of praise for a singer so committed to her role that she no longer distinguished between herself and Gretchen. The sets by Carl Brandt, a master illusionist whom Wagner later called upon to create the *Ring* in Bayreuth, played their part in the success of the work, which soon spread to all the German opera houses.

The Hamburg Opera escaped bankruptcy thanks to eighteen performances of *Faust* in a row. In order to maintain and reinforce its success, the manager had a large luminous transparency installed on the façade of his theatre, where France and Germany were seen every evening symbolised by two women, draped in the antique style and holding hands. The 2,300-seat house was still full for the fifty-second performance, which Gounod conducted for Mademoiselle Spohr, the composer's niece, who sang Marguerite. Her uncle's *Faust* opera still enjoyed sufficient esteem in Germany to explain the array of titles under which Gounod's work was sometimes performed to avoid confusion: *Margaräthe* in Dresden in August 1861, *Gretchen* in Stuttgart in September.

Gounod did not have the good fortune to be able to conduct his score wherever Choudens's Mephistophelean zeal led him. In January 1863, he received an urgent invitation from the intendant of the Berlin Royal Opera, where *Faust* had just entered the repertory. On reaching the theatre after sixteen hours of railway travel, he discovered that the orchestra could not rehearse... Having taken up his position at the piano, he set out to indicate to the singers the highly personal manner in which he intended to conduct. Feeling a wave of panic rising, however, he thought it wiser to renounce the idea, and contented himself with attending the performance and accepting the King's invitation to return to conduct the work. But Gounod was not destined to revisit Berlin; on the other hand it was said that the Prussians marched on Paris in 1871 to the accents of the *Faust* March, something that is neither verifiable nor implausible. More embarrassing was the letter that someone suggested Gounod should address to the Kaiser through a highly placed contact. After recalling his admiration for the Germanic genius, he expressed the hope that the chalet of Montretout (his summer residence) would be spared from the advancing troops. The inscription on the door 'Here resides Charles Gounod, the composer of *Faust*' did not prevent the place being looted and set on fire, but the affair created quite a scandal after the war.

Eager to assert his patriotism in the face of those who had criticised him for living in London since the autumn of 1870, Gounod wanted to donate to the Nation the 500 gold francs that each performance of *Faust* earned him from the Opéra, until such time as the war indemnity imposed by Prussia was paid off. His wife, who had remained in Paris and whose principal resource was this fee, naturally opposed the idea.

Belgium would have staged *Faust* before Germany had it not been for rivalry between the two companies of the Théâtre de la Monnaie: the *opéra-comique* troupe insisted on the original version with spoken dialogue, while their *grand-opéra* counterparts wanted the revision with recitatives, on the basis that the score was, from the outset, entitled 'opéra' because of the vocal stature it required of its performers. It was

finally the opera troupe that won the day, with a premiere on 7 September 1862. Ten years later, when Gounod came to take the waters at Spa, he was surprised to find writing paper for sale that was lined like music paper and bore the letterhead 'Faites-lui mes aveux'. But this was nothing compared to the emotion he must have felt in Liège, where he had gone to hear the baritone Maurice Devriès, on 4 March 1877: the Soldiers' Chorus was interpolated in the middle of a performance of Meyerbeer's *L'Africaine*, followed by a public ovation!

Faust's Italian career was not as brilliant as the forty-six performances at La Scala in Milan might have suggested. Gounod, who had high hopes of the orchestra's imposing string section, was finally disappointed at the premiere on 11 November 1862, after fulminating (in a letter to his wife) against the translation by Achille de Lauzières:

> Shameful negligence! There are not two words in the right place... I wouldn't like to earn my money like that, and I have earned him twenty-nine pages of his money through the work I have just done [by revising the translation]. It's shameful, *shameful*!

Gounod had more trivial reasons to complain about *Faust*'s dazzling career on the other side of the Channel. The first performance (in Italian, 11 June 1863) took place at the instigation of the impresario Mapleson, who managed Her Majesty's Theatre. To ensure the house was full, he had spread the rumour that there were already no seats left for the fourth performance! Gounod arrived just in time to attend the premiere. The first piano rehearsal of *Faust* with the singers at Covent Garden the next day proved so promising that someone predicted Gounod would earn a fortune from these competing performances in two theatres. To which he replied that he would receive nothing, since the English publisher Chappell had bought the score outright from the authors for 3,000 francs. As for royalties, the management of Covent Garden did not want to pay any, considering that it had already disbursed enough for the orchestral material. This second production of *Faust* in London (again in Italian) enjoyed a

brilliant success on 2 July 1863 with Madame Carvalho, Tamberlick, Faure and Madame Nantier-Didiée (Siebel), for whom Gounod composed a new aria ('Quando a te lieta'). The conductor (Michael Costa) only allowed the composer to attend the rehearsal 'at the back of the auditorium, without the right to make the slightest remark'.

Finally, on 23 January 1864, *Faust* appeared in English on the stage of Her Majesty's Theatre in London, augmented by Gounod with a 'Cavatina (added to the role of Valentine) for Mr Santley'. This was the air 'Even bravest heart may swell' (now sung in French to the words 'Avant de quitter ces lieux'), which, by borrowing from the orchestral prelude a melody prefiguring Marguerite's apotheosis, ruins its significance. It should never have been inserted in the work and French editions long ignored it. Since it turned out that the English publisher had not registered the score of *Faust* within the legally prescribed period, the work had entered the public domain in Great Britain even before being staged there. The absence of royalties to pay made the theatres a fortune and therefore ensured multiple performances of the opera...

A SECOND *FAUST*?

Towards the end of his life, still haunted by Faust, Gounod devised the plot of a 'Second *Faust*', though he nevertheless avoided setting it to music, contenting himself with summarising the elements:

> The Second *Faust*, as I conceive it, is both the consequence and the antithesis of the first: having died in a state of repentance and grace, Marguerite must, by her past sufferings and her present intercession, become Faust's saviour; she is *the Victim redeeming her Murderer*. But that redemption supposes and implies a new drama, that is, a series of situations and trials through which Faust must pass to purify himself in struggle and victory. However, since he has drained the cup of vulgar sensuality, temptation

must present itself to him in a new form that both awakens and conceals it: this will be *supernatural and monastic life*.

Mephisto exploits Faust's sorrow: at the beginning of the new drama, the serpent pushes Faust towards religious fervour; the new witches will be *nuns*... The seductress of Faust will have to be a kind of infernal Beatrice, a *female* Antichrist: this influence, dominating the play, must place Faust in a perpetual struggle between desire and the terror of religious life, until finally the victorious cry is the louder, and Faust, dying of divine love, reaches his end with the last scene of Goethe's *Faust Part Two*. (We would introduce, as a secondary character, a conventional rival – whether in love with the nun or not – whom she and Mephisto would use to fan Faust's jealousy and increase his chances of abandoning religion and falling into sin.)

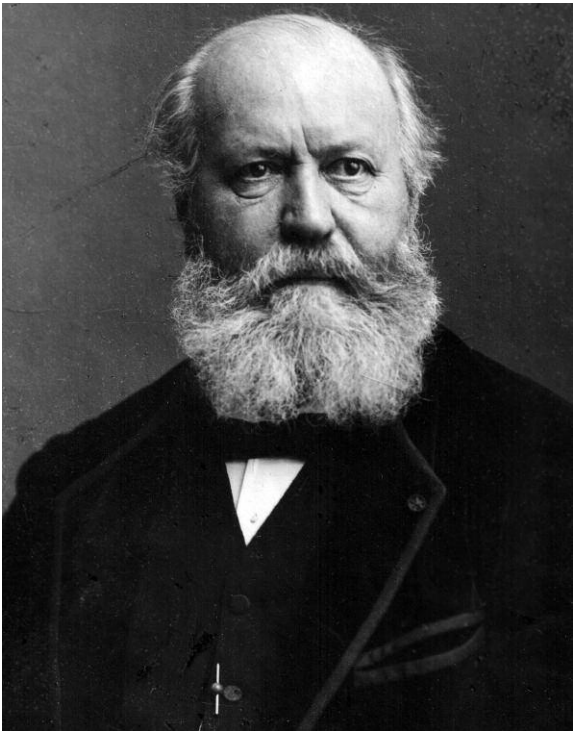
At the beginning of the drama, Faust is plunged into deep sorrow. Marguerite's death, his memories and his remorse for the sufferings he has caused, torment him night and day, and he seeks consolation and atonement in faith and repentance. A nun comes to his door and begs charity for orphans. Faust thinks of Marguerite's poor child. He is both moved by this memory and attracted by the sister's angelic beauty: an unknown feeling, earthly and divine, sensual and mystical, takes hold of him.

Mephisto, in the form of a pious doctor, encourages this ardent passion and stimulates Faust's fervour. It he who will reveal to the listener that this nun is in fact Helen [of Troy], whose supreme beauty has taken on her features and habit, and who will play for this new ascetic the role of an infernal Beatrice. Such would be the substance of the Prologue.

The final scene of *Faust* (the apotheosis) must be introduced by a scene similar to the concluding trio of *Robert le Diable*, but on a higher level. Faust has seen the infernal Nun, for whom he burns with sublime ardour, torn from the embraces of mystical passion: this disappointment, a trick of Mephisto's, plunges Faust into an outburst of despair and cursing which must lead into the ensuing and penultimate scene, an *ensemble*: 1º Chorus of invisible monks (or nuns) in a nearby convent; 2º Chorus of demons, roused by Mephisto's incantations, and whispering curses of

blasphemy at Faust; 3º Faust caught between these two opposing influences, and hearing in the distance the voice of Marguerite who intercedes for him in Heaven.

Who could doubt, after this, that Gounod, even more than Berlioz or Liszt, had projected himself onto the character of Faust?



Charles Gounod around 1870.
Leduc Archives.

Charles Gounod vers 1870.
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