

Gounod's last opera

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It was the very last thing he should have done, but Gounod unhesitatingly did it! On 1 April 1881, at the premiere of *Le Tribut de Zamora* at the Paris Opéra, the patriotic resonance of an air performed by Gabrielle Krauss ('Debout! enfants de l'Ibérie') roused a storm of applause, and the grateful soprano extended her hand to the composer who, as was the custom in those days, was conducting the singers at the foot of the stage with the orchestra behind his back. The gesture was already woefully out of place at a time when, as performances at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus had just shown (the covered pit, the singers reincarnated in their characters), the spectator was supposed to forget the personality of the performers, but Gounod then added insult to injury by actually shaking hands with Krauss. From that point on – so the disciples of the 'total work of art' (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) grumbled – how could one lend any credence to what was happening on stage if the dramatic illusion was broken by such misdemeanours?

The misunderstanding arose from the fact that the subject belonged to the Naturalist aesthetic (which had been firmly established by *Les Soirées de Médan*, published a year earlier,* but Gounod's treatment of it remained true to his own (more Parnassian) ideals, with the implicit

* *Les Soirées de Médan* was a collection of six short stories by six different writers (including Zola's *L'Attaque du moulin* and, most famously, Maupassant's *Boule de suif*) which dealt with the events of the Franco-Prussian war in a realistic ('Naturalistic') rather than idealistic manner. (Translator's note.)

aim of demonstrating that authentic artistic realism did not result from a recreation of nature by means of a necessarily illusory copy, but from an inspired interpretation of reality, that ‘added value’ which distinguishes creation from imitation (as he was to argue in 1884, in his article ‘La Nature et l’Art’). Truth must be placed in the custody of Beauty, that is, of clear and balanced form, with Mozart’s operas as the model of equilibrium. If *Polyeucte* was a manifesto of Christian art, *Le Tribut* aimed to be an aesthetic manifesto swimming against the tide.

This represented, on Gounod’s part, a moralising arrogance that did not escape the Wagnerian Edmond Hippeau. In *La Renaissance musicale* dated 10 and 17 April 1881, he concluded an analysis of *Le Tribut de Zamora* – very precise, pedantic, often but not exclusively critical – with the following observation:

It would be pointless henceforth to seek dramatic truth in a work which is obviously inspired only by a standpoint of mystification or aggression with respect to the young French school.

One may legitimately wonder whether *Le Tribut de Zamora* was an appropriate subject for the composer of *Faust*, *Mireille* and *Roméo et Juliette*. Why not, in a sense, if one remembers that his first operatic project in 1840, when he was resident at the Villa Medici, was an expansion of his second essay for the Prix de Rome (1838), the cantata *La Vendetta* whose subject, like its music, anticipated Naturalism? However, given his subsequent development, such grim drama, of the kind to which Verdi (the intended recipient of the libretto) held the secret, was no longer Gounod’s line of country. By that time, like Schubert, he was inspired more by the intimate lyricism of mingled sentiments than by the manifestation and the clash of dramatic passions heightened by music, an alchemy that required qualities foreign to his convictions.

Moreover, he did not choose the subject himself. In August 1878, while *Polyeucte* was in rehearsal and he was preparing, in collaboration with Louis Gallet, to bring to the stage another metaphysical subject, the story of

Abelard and Heloise, Gounod had *Le Tribut de Zamora* pressed on him by Halanzier, then director of the Opéra. Having accepted the job, he wrote to Gallet on 30 August 1878:

It's Brésil who wrote the verse for the libretto. Ah, for sure, he is not you, nor Augier, not Barbier, but at least it's done! And I will change a lot of things in it. I have even rearranged several passages and made cuts. The subject is beautiful and colourful.

This meant that their current project, *Maître Pierre* [Abeillard], was suspended; but Gounod knew that Halanzier had no interest in it.

He had undertaken to deliver his opera for the autumn of 1879; an examination of the libretto he had to hand, which was long preserved by his descendants, reveals, in the number of lines he deleted or rewrote, that the poem proved a tough nut to crack. But he got to the end and, on 9 July 1879, his publisher Choudens signed the agreement: 50,000 francs on receipt of the manuscript of the orchestral score, 25,000 on the day of the fiftieth performance, 25,000 on the day of the seventy-fifth at the Opéra within a period of four years, these sums to be shared out in the usual fashion (two-thirds for the composer, one third for the librettists). On 14 July Gounod asked his friend Camille Saint-Saëns to come and run through *Le Tribut de Zamora* at the piano for Choudens, who was to start engraving the vocal score on 18 July. The publisher, who had had his fortune made by *Faust*, had no doubts as to the work's success, if one is to believe what Gounod wrote to his wife:

I said, 'And what about changes, if there are any?' He said, 'We don't care! Even if it were to cost 100, 200, 300 francs! That's not *real money*!' All right, it's their business, they know what they're doing, and they're delighted; amen.

On 30 July Gounod played the baritone Victor Maurel the passages featuring the role of Ben-Saïd, which he intended for him. The future creator of Iago and Falstaff seemed delighted, as the composer told his wife: 'He

got all worked up, saying: How proud and haughty it is! And how happy one must be to sing words like that!’ But, following an incident of which we know nothing, Maurel abandoned the role...

Only the ballet music remained to be written when, on 18 September 1879, for some reason that remains unclear (the critics, or the baritone’s withdrawal?), Gounod asked for a six-month extension ‘to give [his] work a musical development that it seems to lack’. The new director, Vaucorbeil, with no choice but to accept his pretext, elegantly replied:

Whatever the serious inconvenience that the temporary withdrawal of your score of *Le Tribut de Zamora* will cause me, the perfection of the work above all: I grant you the extension you request.

The delivery date was postponed to 1 May 1880 on penalty of a forfeit of 25,000 francs, which was to apply the other way round if the work had not been performed by 1 October 1881. The affair is reported in detail in *Les Annales du Théâtre et de la Musique* (Fifth Year). In April 1880, the Leipzig newspaper *Signale für die musikalische Welt* suggested it was due to the poor effect produced by a play-through with the composer at the piano, but this was not the practice at the Opéra. When summer came, Gounod set to work on his opera once more during the month he spent at Nieuwpoort in Belgium, ‘in the interest of the piece and its performance’, as he wrote to Émile Perrin. Some of the revisions concerned the role of Hermosa: ‘I have written two excellent numbers for Krauss; the second one, which is tragic, gave those gentlemen *shivers down their spine*... They now believe it will be a genuine success’, wrote Gounod to his wife on 25 August 1880, the day after a decisive ‘conference’ with the management of the Opera to judge *Le Tribut*. He added:

Those gentlemen were *all delighted* with my new changes: Vaucorbeil was enchanted; D’Ennery and Régnier [de la Brière, the director] moved and charmed.

He then orchestrated the modifications (ninety-six pages of full score), added a solo for Ben-Saïd in the first act and finally buckled down to the ballet, announcing to his daughter, 'I have found some good ballet numbers; it remains to be seen how things will work out with the demands of terpsichorean virtuosity I shall have to face', and to his son: 'I am impatient for *Zamora* to let me get back to [his oratorio] *Rédemption*, where my whole musical life is now and which will fill up my next year.' Judging by the 450 pages of manuscript paper containing rejected or modified passages – sometimes whole airs – that have been preserved, Gounod had not taken his task lightly:

I console myself by thinking that after this work I shall bid farewell to the theatre for good.

The read-through of the libretto in front of the performers took place on 28 September 1880; although it was not the custom in Paris (as it was in Italy), Gounod also performed excerpts from his work, accompanying himself on the piano, and it was decided to put it into rehearsal immediately in place of Ambroise Thomas's *Françoise de Rimini*. The first full rehearsal, on 19 March, which lasted from 7.20 in the evening to midnight, revealed the need to cut thirty-five minutes... The premiere was set for 1 April 1881. Gounod obtained the right to conduct the orchestra himself, a special dispensation that had previously been granted only to Verdi, the previous year, for *Aida*. He was equally warmly applauded by the audience. The cast consisted of Gabrielle Krauss (Hermosa, soprano), Joséphine Daram (Xaïma, soprano), Élisabeth Janvier (Iglésia, mezzo-soprano), Henri Sellier (Manoël, tenor), Jean-Louis Lassalle (Ben-Saïd, baritone), Léon Melchissédec (Hadjar, bass-baritone), Alfred-Auguste Giraudet (Ramire II), Sapin (Le Cadi), Mermant (L'Alcade Maïor), Lambert (Un Soldat maure), Bonnefoy (Un Vieillard). The staging was by Régnier and Lacoste designed what Prod'homme and Dandelot called 'the sumptuous and picturesque costumes'.

Although the success of *Le Tribut de Zamora* did not outlast two seasons, its forty-seven performances were a bitter compensation to Gounod

for the failure of *Polyeucte*, whose three leading singers were the same: Gabrielle Krauss, the tenor Sellier and the baritone Lassalle. The three performances of 1885 were put on only to ensure the publisher would pay the bonus due to the authors for the fiftieth performance. The oblivion into which the work has since fallen is due largely to the libretto, which accumulates artificial plot twists and plays on the compassion inspired by the auctioning of pretty Spanish girls destined for the slavery of the harem.

The encounter between Xaïma and Hermosa at the end of the third act made a powerful impression, as Louis Pagnerre reported in his study of the composer:

M^{me} Krauss, at once a tragedian and singer, sang the National Anthem with varied inflections. Sometimes her voice was brilliant, sometimes it assumed a dull and gloomy tone.

The audience encored Ben-Saïd's Romance in the fourth act. 'The act is very good from start to finish: genuine Gounod!' Such was the view of *Les Annales du Théâtre et de la Musique*, which otherwise was on the severe side: 'By dint of wishing to be clear and simple, the composer of *Le Tribut de Zamora* manages to be grey and monotonous and often succeeds only in being banal.'

In *La Liberté* (4 and 11 April), Victorin Joncières wrote:

Gounod's score is clear, limpid, melodious, with great unity of style. It contains charming passages of grace and feeling, like the exquisite Aubade of the first act, Iglésia's touching phrase... [and] Ben-Saïd's highly expressive *couplets* in the last act. These stand alongside numbers of rare power, such as the finale of the first act, so theatrically eventful; that of the second act, grandiose in character and superb in sonority; and, above all, the dramatic duet of the two women in the third act, which roused transports of enthusiasm.

Louis de Fourcaud, in *Le Gaulois* of 2 April, regretted that Gounod was 'setting off along a musical path of reaction on which I will not follow him. I admire Gluck, Mozart and the old masters as much as anyone; only the world has moved on since these geniuses died, and it is no more logical to retrace their steps than it would be to dress up in their clothes.' Reyer, in the *Journal des débats* dated 4 April, pretended not to know what he had guessed:

I really do not know if, as has been said, the new work of M. Gounod, in which each number bears its own label, in which everything leads on from everything else and everything may be detached, indicates an intention on the composer's part to protest against the tendencies, principles and formulas of the Modern School [Wagner] which influenced him a little bit in the past, and which he would repudiate today.

The article in *Le Temps* dated 14 April said much the same thing:

If M. Gounod had written *Le Tribut de Zamora* with the intention of renouncing any alliance with Wagner, he could not have done it any better; he has unquestionably taken a step away from the German school and towards the Italian school, even to the extent of deliberately borrowing from the latter.

Only Oscar Comettant, in *Le Siècle* of 4 April, praised his friend for playing 'that devilish old game which consists in being dramatic without ceasing to be melodic'. He had more clearly perceived that which gives the work its true value.

Twentieth-century commentators, relying only on the dominant opinion, sought in the documents of the time the causes of a (relative) failure instead of going to find out from the score itself what is beautiful and lasting. Indeed, the work could hardly begin more auspiciously: the chromatic fugato of the *Prélude* has nothing to fear from comparison with that of *Faust*; the *Aubade* for Manoël and Xaïma is graceful; the account

of the sack of Zamora is full of impetuosity; and Ben-Saïd's ardent character, as expressed in his Cavatine ('Quel accent! Quel regard! Quelle âme'), so original in its inspiration, equitably disposes the audience in his favour. From the duet for Manoël and Xaïma, posterity has rightly retained the arioso 'Ce Sarrasin disait', which is in the same vein of tender melancholy as 'Nuit resplendissante' from *Cinq-Mars*. Finally, the climax of the finale, 'Debout! enfants de l'Ibérie', which was capable of stirring the patriotic fibre (the Marseillaise had once again become the French national anthem in 1879), must not obliterate the moment of grace in the solo for Iglésia (whose name, symbolically, means 'church'), drawn by lot to be a captive but whose loss, since she is an orphan, no one will mourn... except for the King; his vibrant farewell in answer to her lament is very 'modern' in its austerity.

In the second act, the meeting of Xaïma and Hermosa, after beginning in the darkest of moods (an old madwoman wants to buy a slave in order to abuse her), changes registers with surprising swiftness, given its potential for a scene of violence. Did Gounod perhaps not get the verse he needed? It seems that he preferred to renounce dramatic facility in favour of the ideal power of attraction which, at first glance, unites mother and daughter. The auction scene has movement and the development of the septet with chorus, which might have broken its momentum, on the contrary only adds to it.

In the third act, the Barcarolle sung by a slave and then the Danse grecque, with its heady harmonies, tower above the rest of the 'Ballet of the Nations'. Ben-Saïd's air, which evoked his experiences with women from all countries, was finally not incorporated in the opera ... The Romance he sings instead is not very original, but its harmony is appealing and, at the end, the minor/major ambiguity is curious. The power of the recognition duet (with its radiant reprise of the 'Hymne national') brings the dramatic tension to its peak and captivates the audience like no other part of the work.

After a rich orchestral introduction and Manoël's moving Cavatine ('Que puis-je à présent regretter?'), attention is concentrated on Ben-Saïd's

declaration to Xaïma that he wishes to seduce her through gentleness – in the original version he literally rolled at her feet – followed by his confession (to Hermosa) of the violence of his love: the last words of this unhappy lover inspired Gounod to produce the most pathos-laden music in his entire score.



Gabrielle Krauss and Joséphine Daram in the duet from Act Three.
Private collection.

Gabrielle Krauss et Joséphine Daram dans le duo de l'acte III.
Collection particulière.