

# Gounod and the Prix de Rome for composition (1837-1839)

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Created in 1666 on the joint initiative of Colbert and Lebrun, the French Academy in Rome did not admit composers until 1803, when the institution moved to the prestigious Villa Medici acquired by Napoleon. For the musicians of the Paris Conservatoire, winning the Prix de Rome represented the culmination of their studies. The competition was in two stages. In the preliminary test (*concours d'essai*) candidates were required to compose a fugue and a chorus to a set text. The five or six musicians selected to go forward to the *concours définitif* were then expected to compose a *scène lyrique* or 'cantata' based on a subject drawn from history, mythology, the Bible, or a literary source. Lasting about twenty minutes, the librettos aimed to cover the main dramatic situations that could be encountered in operatic writing. Many fine composers, including Halévy, Berlioz, Ambroise Thomas, Gounod, Bizet, Massenet, Debussy and Ravel, competed for the Prix de Rome, leaving altogether hundreds of works that are still little known or yet to be rediscovered.

The history of the Prix de Rome competition, stretching from 1803 to 1968, reflects that of French music in general during those same years. The annual prize-giving ceremony (*séance publique annuelle*) organised by the Académie des Beaux-Arts provided singers with a rare opportunity to display their skills before critics and theatre directors, as well as the artistic and political élite of the day. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that

some of the greatest singers of the time were prepared to forego their fees in order to première the winning compositions. It is worth noting that the instrumentalists who took part in those performances were always badly placed from the acoustic point of view, high up in the dome of the Palais des Quatre-Nations; whence the overwhelming conclusion that all the cantatas were heard in such deplorable conditions that judging them objectively was out of the question.

1830 was undoubtedly a pivotal year in the history of the Prix de Rome. One may try to play down the effect on mentalities of the July Revolution, but over the next ten years it undoubtedly brought about a radical change of attitude, even in the supposedly conservative context of the Prix de Rome competition. Need we recall that the set subject in 1830 was *Sardanapale*, just three years after the controversy of Delacroix's *Mort de Sardanapale* at the Paris Salon? The first significant change came in 1831, when the cantata was no longer for solo voice and orchestra, but for two voices and orchestra, thus introducing the possibility of dialogue. *Bianca Cappello* (1831), then *Hermann et Ketty* (1832) appeared to indicate that the new principle had been accepted; but it was not quite that simple. Between 1831 and 1839 the vocal forces changed constantly. Written for two voices (soprano and tenor) in 1831, 1832, 1833, 1837 and 1838, the cantata returned to the single-voice format (soprano or tenor) in 1834, 1835 and 1836 (for *L'Entrée en loge*, *Achille* and *Velléda*, respectively), before moving in 1839 to a more ambitious combination of three voices (soprano, tenor and bass). This method of trial and error shows up the major issues that were at stake: faced with the formal modernity of Meyerbeerian *grand opéra* and the impetus of a new musical style, 'Romanticism', the cantata was expected to keep abreast of current tastes – quite simply because its sole objective was to test the candidates' ability to compose for the stage. And indeed, from 1839 the three-voice formula became the rule as the best means of evaluating all of the composer's skills, enabling him 'to present successively a soprano, a tenor and a bass, pair the voices for one or two duos, then bring them together for a trio serving as the climax of his work. [...] The contrast between the three characters [...] offers the

composer a wealth of resources, with every desirable opportunity to combine seriousness and gaiety, tenderness and ruthlessness, gentle effects and violent ones, and the soft sighs of the flute with the wild blaring of the trombone' (*L'Illustration*, 26 November 1864). For some, the greater variety in the drama made it easier to accept the possible poetic weakness of the librettos, since the text was no longer 'an obstacle, nor perhaps a disadvantage: indeed the function of the music is to inject into a vocal work the vigorous expression and lively colours that are lacking in the words' (*L'Illustration*, 26 November 1864).

This gradual change in the vocal forces went hand in hand with a thorough re-examination of the *concours d'essai* (outlined since 1824) and it led to a general revision of the regulations. 1839 was the year of the first cantata for three voices but also, more importantly, the year a new official text was drafted, keeping the Académie busy for several sessions. It is not possible to give an account here of all the proposals that were put forward by the members of the music section, but a few particularly ambitious projects do deserve mention. There was the idea, for instance, of 'including in the cantata a *cantabile* for five or six unaccompanied voices'. But very soon, given 'the difficulties involved in performing a *cantabile* for five or six voices, requiring the presence of as many singers for the public performance, and even more for the adjudication, the Académie has decided [...] that a *cantabile* for three unaccompanied voices shall be included in the cantata, which, by virtue of this provision, will inevitably become a *scène lyrique* for three voices'. This 'scène lyrique' also required new skills for its orchestration. Consisting henceforth of a set of scenes ('une réunion de scènes'), like the act of an opera, it needed likewise to be introduced by a substantially developed instrumental prelude. The Académie wished thereby to give greater importance to instrumental music, hitherto undervalued in the curriculum of the pensionnaires in Rome. Article 9 of the new regulations stipulated that the prelude was to be 'in two movements, a *largo* or *andante* and an *allegro*', and that the contestants were to use it 'as best befits the subject'. Thus it should 'express the different passions [emotions] that they will have to deal with in the work

itself or the situation in which the characters find themselves at the beginning of the action, or else the minor or material circumstances of the place where the scene is set or the activity chosen by the librettist'. The contestants were to 'take great care over the composition of this piece and make full use of all the instrumental resources' (*Procès-verbaux de l'Académie des beaux-arts*, t. VI, 1835-1839, pp. 376-377).

Thus, with the change in the set librettos, the musical style of the *scène lyrique* also changed. It was no mere coincidence that the 'modern' two-voice format was chosen the same year as a less outdated subject than Didon or Alcyone. The authors of the texts for *Bianca Cappello* (1831), *Hermann et Ketty* (1832), *Le Contrebandier espagnol* (1833) and *La Vendetta* (1838) turned readily to novels or legends for their inspiration, at a time when the *mélodrame* was at the height of its popularity on the minor stages of the capital. In 1839 alone, the texts put forward for the Prix de Rome competition bore the titles *Armide*, *Mozart*, *Médée*, *Judith*, *Les Abencérages* and *Fernand*, thus representing every possible inspiration: legend, romantic fiction, and ancient, historical, biblical and Moorish subjects. It has often been claimed that the cantata for the Prix de Rome was interested only in ancient history. And indeed, in its early days, the competition did show a predilection for such subjects, in a neo-Classical spirit. But from 1808, the tone changed: *Marie Stuart* turned to more recent history and *Agar dans le désert* (1809) looked to the Bible. In the end the subjects were drawn from all kinds of sources. A panoramic look at all the librettos that were distributed between 1803 and 1914 (the tone changed markedly after the First World War) demolishes the received idea that the literary themes were standardised.

Paradoxically, in the 1830s, just when librettists were given the widest choice of subject, there was a shortage of texts that on several occasions put the competition in jeopardy. For 'a good cantata is still a prodigiously difficult thing both to produce and to find. When one has an idea, how can one make up one's mind to waste it on a work that will be heard on just one day, and will it be noticed? How can one sell for five hundred francs a subject that as an opera libretto could yield a hundred times more?'

(*Revue et Gazette musicale*, 18 October 1846). Furthermore the new ambitions of the cantata for three voices complicated the librettist's task. Thus *Le Figaro* of 11 October 1840 considered that *Loÿse de Montfort*, the set cantata in 1840, 'is better than a scene; it is a whole act'. All too often though the jury felt that there was not enough choice for them to be able to single out one libretto that was, if not brilliant, at least acceptable. And so in 1845 a 'concours de poésie' was created, with the winner receiving a very valuable medal. Its success was immediate: in the following months, the Institut de France was inundated with librettos submitted from all over France. In 1848 sixty-two were received; in 1851, ninety-eight. Since quantity rarely goes hand in hand with quality, it became customary to mock the poets' lines, just as it had become usual to minimise the musical value of the scores.

Although many librettos were criticised for the poor quality of their writing, several works were unexpectedly successful outside the institutional framework of the Académie. Since the cantatas were now conceived as dramatic works, often close in subject to operas of the time, someone had the idea of staging them with costumes. The first one thus to be honoured was *Loÿse de Monfort*, composed by François Bazin, which in 1840 was performed several times at the Paris Opéra. It was followed on the same stage by Louis-Aimé Maillart's *Lionel Foscari* (13 October 1841), Émile Paladilhe's *Le Czar Ivan IV* (7 December 1860), Victor Sieg's *Ivanhoé* (20 November 1864), Émile Pessard's *Dalila* (24 February 1867) and *Jeanne d'Arc* by Gaston Serpette (26 November 1871). Similar performances were presented around the same time at the Opéra-Comique and the Théâtre-Lyrique. But they were not necessarily a success. The musicologist and librarian of the Paris Opéra, Théodore de Lajarte, expressed the opinion that it was 'downright impossible' and 'nonsensical' to stage such works, since the libretto was too 'composite' and too short to be truly dramatic. How did Gounod tackle that difficulty?



1837: *MARIE STUART ET RIZZIO*

Under the direction of Halévy, I went over the whole course of counterpoint and fugue again; but despite my work, with which my master was well satisfied, I never obtained a prize at the Conservatoire. My single aim was the Grand Prix de Rome, which I was determined to win at all costs. I was going on nineteen years of age when I competed for the first time. I won the second prize.

(Gounod, *Mémoires d'un artiste*)

The libretto of *Marie Stuart et Rizzio*, the set text for 1837, was in keeping with the current vogue for 'style gothique' (Troubadour style), particularly associated during the Restoration period with Marie-Caroline de Bourbon-Sicile, duchesse de Berry. The translations of Walter Scott's Waverley Novels had an immense impact in France (and indeed all over Europe), capturing popular imagination with their very Romantic and poetic evocations of Scotland and the expressive atmospheres of their vignettes. This probably explains why the set text that year, written by Léon Halévy, dwelled with such lyricism and at such length on Mary Stuart's memories of France and her love for a country which she longs to see once more. The *Revue et Gazette musicale* underlined the poetic qualities of the libretto:

Recently, on the occasion of the latest music competition, the Académie des Beaux-Arts made an innovation that was good not only in principle, but also in its application to a distinguished writer. M. Léon Halévy, the author of *Démétrius*, *Luther*, *Les Poésies européennes*, and several other works, had agreed to provide the libretto intended to exercise the young contestants' verve. He had had, first of all, the prime merit of choosing an eminently dramatic and musical text, *Marie Stuart et David Rizzio*; furthermore, departing from the usual formal poetry of the cantatas and *scènes lyriques*, he had written a piece that was remarkable in its natural expression of emotion, its skilful contrasts and its charming prosody. The Académie

felt therefore that such an *exception* deserved an *exceptional* measure in return, and therefore awarded M. Léon Halévy an honorary medal.

(*Revue et Gazette musicale*, 22 October 1837)

Whenever the opportunity for an extended vocal piece arises, Gounod develops Halévy's poetic vein in a very Italianate style. We must remember that at that time the modern *opera seria* was displaying its lush *cantabile*, with its incomparable *legato*, in the very heart of Paris, at the Théâtre-Italien, where the singers included great names such as Henriette Sontag, Giuditta Pasta, Maria Malibran and Giulia Grisi, and Luigi Lablache, Giovanni Battista Rubini and Antonio Tamburini. Gounod may have attended the triumphant première there a few months previously (January 1835) of Bellini's *I Puritani*.

The prelude comes as a surprise with its sparing orchestration (strings in unison and timpani, with a few clashes from the horn) and also the vehemence of its very striking initial motif. Following a brief recitative for Marie, the meeting between Marie and Rizzio provides an ideal opportunity to rekindle memories of the past through the use of remarkable harmonic colours (we hear in succession the keys of D flat major, F sharp minor, A flat major, etc.) and the rhythms of melancholy songs. The voices intertwine and exchange their short vocalisations. But once Rizzio has left, Marie embarks on a recitative in the purest tragic style, which the death of her lover later transforms into a heroic bravura air inherited from the old *tragédie lyrique* and transformed through the prism of modern *grand opéra*. Quoting Prod'homme and Dandelot, Gérard Condé (*Gounod, sa vie et ses œuvres*, 1911) says that excerpts from this cantata were performed on 23 November 1837 for the reopening of the Athénée Musical in Paris. But an article in *Le Ménestrel* of 3 December 1837 states simply that 'M. Gounod, winner of the second prize, presented a symphonic piece of his composition, the *Scherzo* of which promises real talent in that elevated genre'. *Marie Stuart* was therefore in all likelihood an absolutely new work, and since Gounod did not win first prize, he never heard any of it played by an orchestra.

1838: *LA VENDETTA*

Le Sueur having died, I became a pupil of Paer, who had replaced him as teacher of composition. I competed again the following year. My mother was torn between hope and fear: this time it had to be either the Grand Prix or failure!

(Gounod, *Mémoires d'un artiste*)

Quite different in its literary inspiration from the previous year's cantata, *La Vendetta*, a short *scène lyrique* by Amédée de Pastore, set in Corsica, is based on the brief narration of a murder and the ensuing desire for revenge. On his return from a long voyage, Lucien is greeted by his grieving mother, Marcella, who tells him of his father's death at the hands of an enemy. The story ends with Lucien swearing vengeance on his father's killer. As Gérard Condé has pointed out, the subject was in the spirit of the times: *La Vendetta*, an unpublished *scène* by Henri de Ruolz to a libretto by Émilien Pacini, had been premièreed on 8 December 1837 during a concert given at the Paris Opéra. A little later, in 1840, Mérimée was to publish his novella, *Colomba*, on the same theme, and it in turn inspired Giovanni Pacini's opera *La Fidanzata corsa*, premièreed in 1842. The press welcomed the choice of a modern subject:

The subject of the cantata was *La Vendetta*; the title alone tells us that it is set in Corsica, the classic land of vengeance. [...] The situation is dramatic; and apart from a few imperfections which could easily have been amended, the *scène* is one of the best that young musicians have received in a long time.

(*Revue et Gazette musicale*, 10 June 1838)

Gounod exercised his creativity with real talent on a plot that is almost naturalistic and very close to the subjects of the contemporary French *mélodrame*. The orchestral prelude, with its augmented fourth degree, hesitates between a pastoral tone and a presage of the mother's anguish. The



long scene for Marcella, a lyric soprano, regularly calls upon the singer's high notes and requires acting skills as well as musicality and vocal agility. In keeping with the French tradition, the declamation follows the words closely, and the musical rhythm is not interrupted by vain repetitions of the text. Lucien enters in the distance (an effect that has to be simulated, since the cantata is not intended to be staged). His mother ('front of stage') hears him approaching and comments on the popular song he is singing. In duet they sing a lovely hymn, showing already Gounod's aptitude for the setting of prayers. Amongst other things, the effects from the brass and the nervousness we notice in the scoring for the strings also show real progress in the young composer's skills as an orchestrator. The final duo corresponds to the most modern aesthetic of Romantic opera with its crossing vocal lines, its superlative heroism and its agogic progression leading to a final *presto*. Everything about this setting seemed to point to success... But no!

It was a failure! I was twenty, the age for conscription! But my second prize of the previous year gave me a year's deferment. I had one more chance: I could enter the competition for the third and last time.

(Gounod, *Mémoires d'un artiste*)



### 1839: *FERNAND*

To make up for my disappointment, my mother took me to Switzerland for a month. At the age of fifty-eight, she had all the vitality of a woman of thirty. As I had never been outside Paris, except to Versailles, Rouen, and Le Havre, that tour was nothing but a series of delights to me: from Geneva, via Chamonix, the Oberland, Mount Rigi, the lakes, then the journey home via Basel, I was constantly filled with admiration. We travelled all over Switzerland on mule-back, setting out very early, retiring late to rest; my mother was always up first and ready before she woke me. I returned

to Paris full of fresh zeal for my work, and quite determined this time to carry off the Grand Prix de Rome. At last the competition period came round. I entered, and I won the prize. My poor mother wept at first for joy, but afterwards at the thought that my winning meant that we would be separated for three years, two in Rome and one in Germany. We had never been parted before, and now each day she was going to be reminded of the fable of ‘The Two Pigeons’.

(Gounod, *Mémoires d'un artiste*)

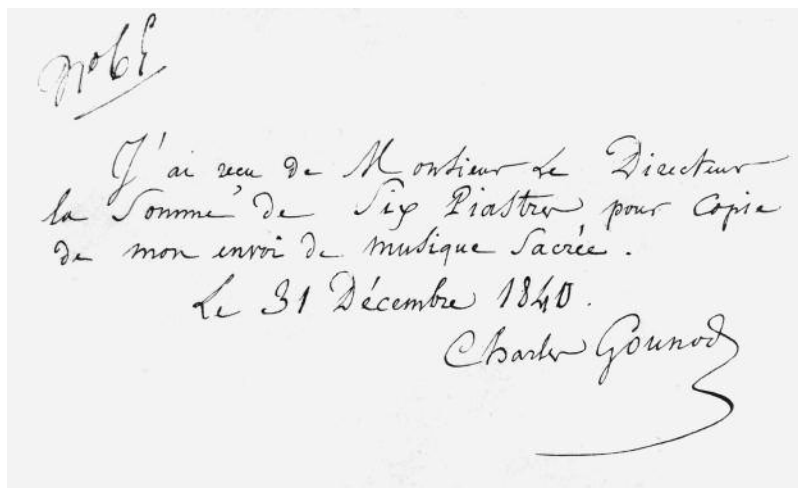
As we have already mentioned, *Fernand* was the first cantata to apply the new rules, following the amendment of 1839. The work is on a much larger scale than earlier ones, notably because of the introduction of a third character (the bass part here being that of Fernand), thus multiplying the dramatic possibilities and making the cantata much longer: it lasts more than twenty minutes, whereas some of the scores of the 1830s were much shorter.

Whereas *Marie Stuart* looked to Scotland for exoticism, *Fernand* looks in the direction of Spain. Amédée de Pastoret, again the author of the libretto, gave candidates an opportunity to use colourful rhythms and orchestration. Gounod introduced some hitherto rarely used percussion instruments but did not succumb to any of the clichés associated with Spain. Only the trio *agitato*, ‘La route est ouverte’, seems to inspire some exoticism in his writing, but even then it remains subtle and discreet.

After becoming a student of Ferdinando Paer, the young composer Italianised his musical style more than ever, and here we notice several changes: he lengthens the vocal lines and strips the orchestra of potentially oppressive countermelodies; having gained much from Donizetti’s latest creations at the Théâtre-Italien, he keeps a much tighter rein on his dramatic inventiveness; the recitatives – like the ensembles – no longer go off suddenly and unexpectedly at a tangent, without any preparation; the transitions are smoother, and the melodies keep to a regular phrase structure. Like Berlioz, disappointed in 1830 after three unsuccessful attempts in a row, Gounod curbed his originality, biding by the rules to

write in an academic style sanctioned by the jury. But the work is by no means lacking in charm or modernity. The soprano part (Zelmire) in particular is less tense than in the previous two cantatas, and it contains several moments of sweet and endearing sentimentality.

On Saturday 5 October 1839, Gounod received the Premier Grand Prix de Rome and *Fernand* was performed by the eminent soloists Julie Dorus-Gras (soprano), Alexis Dupont (tenor) and Louis Alizard (bass), with the orchestra conducted by Habeneck. Gounod was presented as a pupil of Lesueur, Reicha, Paer, and Halévy for counterpoint (the only one of the four still alive). A new chapter in his life was about to begin. Rome was beckoning.



*nobl*  
J'ai reçu de Monsieur le Directeur  
la somme de Six Piastres pour copie  
de mon envoi de musique sacrée.  
Le 31 Décembre 1840.  
Charles Gounod

Receipt in Gounod's hand for payment of the copy of one of his despatches from Rome. Académie de France, Rome.

Reçu de la main de Gounod pour le paiement de la copie d'un de ses Envois de Rome.  
Académie de France à Rome.