

Letters from Madame Victoire Gounod to her son (1839-1842)

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'All yours in heart and soul'

'Ta mère et meilleure amie', 'Ta mère et *soi-disant* amie', 'Amie et mere'... this is how Madame Victoire Gounod signed the many letters she sent to her son Charles during his stay at the Villa Medici in Rome. Between 8 December 1839 and 7 May 1842 she wrote to him just over a hundred times, occasionally enclosing letters from other people, particularly his older brother, Urbain.

There was between the mother and her sons a strong bond of friendship, as well as of maternal love:

My great, tender, lasting affection for you and our Urbain, for our Urbain and you; despite the 10 years between you, you are nevertheless like twins in my heart.

(Letter 53)

She claimed the status of friend in the name of their mutual trust: (Letter 24) 'You will also have realised that I was and always will be your most devoted friend. If I have judged your heart aright, I will lose none of your trust by showing myself to you: so I want [your trust] always; it is almost the only possession I have left. You know how precious it is to me; I think I prove that by giving you all of mine.' And that was her justification for

involving herself in every aspect of her son's life: professional, social, spiritual and even private. For apart from giving him news of family, friends, former fellows at the Conservatoire, the parish, and cultural life in Paris, Victoire Gounod was unstinting in her advice on good manners, strategy, morality, and even music – though not without occasional self-deprecation. Unfortunately, none of Gounod's ninety or so letters to her appear have survived, so we can only guess their content from Victoire's replies. Sometimes – a kind gesture that she found touching – he enclosed small flowers when he wrote to her.

Victoire Gounod was methodical: she numbered her letters in case one went astray, and marked with crosses the points in her letters requiring a response. After the death of her husband (4 May 1823), she raised her two sons, then aged fifteen and almost five, single-handed, which explains the influence she had over Charles and the fact that, at the age of twenty-one, the thought of moving to Rome filled him with apprehension. Victoire had received training in painting and music, and to support the family she began to teach the latter (it was she who had given Charles his early training). She shared her son's emotions, questioned him about what he saw and heard, encouraged him to seize every opportunity to travel and discover new places, urged him to visit libraries, and advised him to keep company with distinguished personalities. In return she shared with him her own impressions of what she saw and heard in Paris.

The correspondence is loving: clearly mother and son were bound by strong affection and a remarkable complicity. Victoire speaks openly about herself and about everything to do with Charles. And Urbain is included in that close relationship; the family was clearly close-knit: (Letter 28) 'So much the better, dear child: you are sure of having in me and in your brother the best friends you could ever find: you will never be disappointed there.' A conviction that she reiterates at the end of his stay in Rome: (Letter 97) 'I am happy at the thought that we shall be friends: that on your return we shall be able to chat as a family, the three of us, about whatever may interest you.' Their letters were shared, as were those addressed to or written by other people, which she had no qualms about

unsealing (or else, when Charles sent them via her as requested, she asked him to leave them open): (Letter 63) ‘You won’t mind our family curiosity in this instance.’

She lavishes advice on every subject, without being in the least condescending in her attitude, but doing so with great tact and concern, and claiming the right to do so as a friend rather than as his mother. In the latter role, she speaks only of practical matters, health, budget, dress, administrative formalities, and the order and method to be adopted in all circumstances. Sometimes she teasingly addresses him as if he were still a child (Letter 57, ‘Mark your mother’s opinion, my good boy!’ and Letter 56, ‘I hope I’m being firm: it seems that I am the one who wears the trousers.’) But most of her letters are punctuated by the usual ‘*cher ami*’.

The subjects that crop up most often are music, of course, but also religion and her son’s social relationships – with his fellows at the Villa Medici, but also with persons of influence. The latter, she says, are to be treated with consideration and even flattered with a view to improving one’s future prospects: (Letter 62) ‘Try to find yourself some good, dedicated benefactors: artists need that, especially when they are not engaged in commerce.’ These included not only personalities such as the Duc de Crillon, the Comte de Pastoret and the painter Jean-Dominique Ingres, whose good favour, once obtained, was to be cultivated, but also musician-members of the Institut de France, including Fromental Halévy and Michele Enrico Carafa, who had the task of assessing the compositions that the pensionnaires were required to send periodically to Paris, and people in Rome who could be of assistance to him (Giuseppe Baini, for instance, who worked at the Sistine Chapel, and opera singers who happened to be passing through). Sometimes, she pointed out, he would have to set aside his personal feelings. Referring to Carafa, she wrote: (Letter 45) ‘It strikes me – even if you don’t think much of the man and don’t care one way or the other whether he is interested in you – that it would not be a bad idea nevertheless to try to remain in his good books.’ She even gives him advice (Letter 69) on paper quality, handwriting and the presentation of his correspondence.

Victoire Gounod, who was very well informed, acted like a true business-woman, concerned only for the furtherance of Charles's career. She followed the Institut's assessments closely, sometimes showing alarm (Letter 81 especially) or reminding him of the regulations (and even copying them out). In the management of her son's compositional output too, she confirms that status, refusing to lend anything with a view to possible publication, or even to hand over the works sent to her for their dedicatees: (Letter 64) 'Your *Cantique* for Madame Pouquet pleases me no end. It is youthful, simple, and pleasing in its harmony. I shall give it to her with regret, for a set of pieces of this kind would be worth publishing and would earn you something. I'll show it to her, I'll tell her that her name will appear on it, but I won't give it to her unless you insist on my doing so. She doesn't sing and it would be a waste of good music.' She also warns him against being too generous: (Letter 45) 'I think you should have kept the manuscript score of your march and presented a copy instead; you act too much as if you were rich; you will lose many of your early compositions if you are not careful.'

Acting as his 'manager', she takes the liberty of advising him on the types of composition that are likely to appeal to the public. While acknowledging his present interest in serious, religious subjects (Letter 85), she suggests that he should try his hand at 'several genres', in order to prove his eclecticism and create future opportunities. In Letter 87 she writes: 'I think it is just shrewd common sense, my dear good friend, to win people over by giving them only the kind of music that makes them well-disposed towards one: by which I mean, of course, good, austere music for some, or pretty, jolly music for the others.' The same idea is expressed in Letter 88 too:

I would find it auspicious for your future if you were to be recognised not only for your aptitude in the serious genre, but also for your skill at composing music of a distinguished comic nature: so many people are inclined to turn their backs on thoughts that are serious, sad or melancholy that you must first try to win them over by amusing them, while reserving the right to captivate them afterwards by making them think.

Not wishing to neglect anything that could be an obstacle to Charles's success, she comments on or even questions in detail various aspects of his works: plan, vocal ranges, accompaniment, dynamics, certain harmonies. She does this in particular for the *Messe à grand orchestre* (CG 55), first performed in Rome on 1 May 1841. Her comments are by no means critical; they simply express the opinions of a fellow professional and potential listener, and too bad if that means being reproved for appearing old-fashioned:

Possibly, dear child, you will exclaim: 'Oh, mother dear!' But I will not be the least bit angry. So say whatever you like; at least I will have had my say.

(Letter 63)

Her humility is even more obvious when she submits her own compositions to him – in this case a short hymn that she wishes to have published in order to help an impecunious protégé of hers:

I dare not submit it without your having given me your opinion; I'm so old-fashioned that I can't help thinking that everything that comes from me must suffer as a result. I am sending it for you to tell me honestly: 'My dear good mother, tear it up!' Kindly be frank and I shall be grateful.

(Letter 63)

The fact that her son's professional success is constantly at the back of her mind is particularly clear in her comments on his new religious fervour. Knowing him to be excitable and easily swayed, and feeling worried after reading his (apparently very impassioned) words on the subject, she warns him, tactfully, and without openly criticising his commitment, against coming under any influence that could be detrimental to his career. But her target – the person she fears – is in fact the extremely persuasive Père Lacordaire, 'a man of great talent and education'. She writes emphatically:

Be on your guard and make it known *most openly* that you are an artist with religious feelings, but not a religious man of multiple practices who takes it upon himself to be an artist: *in that case an absolute power would bear on you that would stop your career.*

(Letter 23)

Not only is the position of the artist unfavourable to intense religious practice, but any ostentatious demonstration or commitment could be harmful to him in the future (bigotry was not particularly appreciated in that milieu):

One must be careful therefore, I believe, not to preach, especially to young people; you would make enemies who would deride you and have no hesitation in harming your future career.

(Letter 20)

Generally speaking, she is wary of his fellow musicians; she fears rivalry and pettiness, especially from the composer François Bazin (winner of the Prix de Rome the year after Charles Gounod): ‘What can one do, when wolves or thieves are on the prowl, other than make sure one’s doors are securely locked?’ But she has qualms about saying such things – ‘You will say, my dear friend, that for a Christian I am not very charitable’ – while nevertheless justifying herself:

There are days when I adhere to the proverb ‘Charity begins at home’: I adopt that attitude where my children are concerned.

(Letter 96)

She shows in fact that she is prepared to make every concession when her son’s happiness is at stake. Particularly telling in that respect is her reaction to the news that he has been secretly engaged, since before he left for Italy, to Thérésine Bousquet (the sister of Georges Bousquet, also a pensionnaire at the Villa Medici, having won the Prix de Rome in 1837),

but that he now wants to break off that relationship (letter of 11 February 1842, lost). In her reply (Letter 95), she does not upbraid him and barely touches on the fact that she is hurt by his apparent lack of trust: ‘What I felt about your keeping quiet for so long about something that it was most important for me to know enables me to understand how difficult that time was for you too, knowing as you did that your heart was keeping something from mine, which has always been so completely devoted to you.’ She leaves the moralising to his brother, Urbain. Then she takes it upon herself to end the relationship for him. She goes to see Thérésine and her mother and informs them that she is against a marriage that will bring no happiness on either side. Charles will also be upset, she tells them, pretending that she found out the news by chance... which explains why she then asks her son to act appropriately, and show no undue gaiety in his behaviour in Rome or in any letters he may write. Madame Gounod was a very moral person and it is not hard to imagine how painful such a mission must have been for her. She hints at this, but without making any reproach:

I won’t dwell on all the pain I have experienced today, my poor Charles; only the unceasing desire to do what is right for your future could give me the strength I needed on this occasion [...]; I don’t think I would find the courage to play such a role twice in my life.

Showing no resentment, she congratulates herself only on having achieved a favourable outcome, and the next letter (96) ends as lovingly as ever:

Soon we shall be together again: I shall await that moment more calmly now that, having given me back your trust, you will let me read into your good heart and mind. Goodbye, Charles. All yours from the heart, Your mother.

Charles Gounod later paid a vibrant tribute to this extraordinary woman by dedicating to her his autobiography, *Mémoires d’un artiste*, written in

1877 and published posthumously in 1896, which ends with the following words:

If, by my existence or by word or deed, I have done any good in this life, however little, I owe it to my mother, and to her I give the praise. She nursed me, she brought me up, she *formed* me: not in her own image, unfortunately – that would have been too glorious! However the fault of what is lacking lies not with her, but with me.



Medal presented to the winner of the Premier Grand Prix in the competition.
Private collection.

Médaille décernée au premier grand prix de Rome.
Collection particulière.