

## The Operas Of Charles Gounod by Nick Fuller

### I. Introduction

Charles Gounod's fame rests on one immortal opera, *Faust*. *Roméo et Juliette* and *Mireille* are regularly performed around the world, but many of his other operas were failures, did not hold the stage, or have been forgotten.

Nevertheless, his music influenced and was admired by later generations of French composers. Debussy believed that Gounod represented an important stage in the evolution of French sensitivity, and that he modelled for an entire generation the principles of clarity, balance and suavity. Ravel held that the musical renaissance of his day began with Gounod. Saint-Saëns, Massenet and Bizet were his protégés and disciples, while Fauré admired him and César Franck considered Gounod his master. Reynaldo Hahn's musical trinity was Mozart, Gounod and Saint-Saëns, and called Gounod the French Schubert and Schumann.

Tellingly, most of these musicians were not primarily opera composers.



It is, to be honest, more difficult to make the case for Gounod as an opera composer than it is for Meyerbeer or Massenet, who ruled the French lyric stage before and after him. Meyerbeer's operas are rich and imaginative, while the quality and individuality of Massenet's operas is astonishing.

Although even his dramatically most feeble operas contain at least one delightful melody, Gounod's operas are often less than the sum of their parts. What makes him a good composer of religious music or of *mélodies* makes him a weaker composer of opera.

The problem, as Steven Huebner suggests, may be that Gounod was fundamentally not a dramatic composer; his tastes were too refined for the opera stage.

'There are three great priesthoods', Gounod proclaimed; 'that of the Good, that of the Truth, and that of the Beautiful. Saints, scholars and artists are the three distinct forms of that substantial unity which is the ideal.'

Many of his finest moments are charming and graceful, delicately melancholy, or skilful depictions of a place, rather than drama. When he wants excitement, he is all too apt to crib from Meyerbeer; the Act III finale of *Roméo et Juliette* is an echo of that in *Les Huguenots*, while the love duets are Gounod's own. If he seldom sets the pulse quickening, however, nor does he stoop to the blatant emotionalism of many Italian composers.

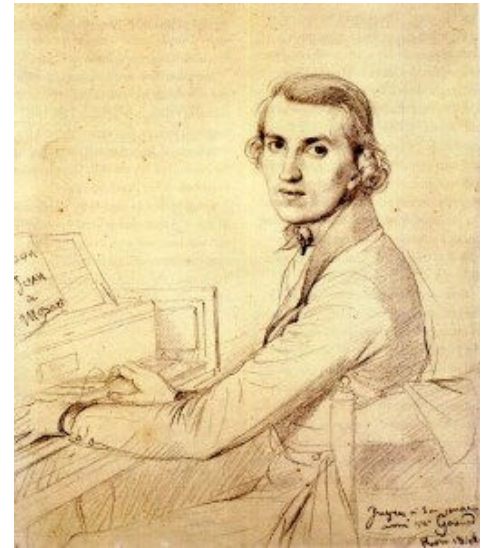
Inadequate recordings don't help Gounod's cause. He wrote his operas for the finest performers in Paris, the musical and cultural capital of the nineteenth century world. Modern recordings of his lesser known operas often feature at best second-rank singers whose native language is not French. This is true of *La nonne sanglante*, *La reine de Saba* and *Polyeucte*, while his last opera, *Le tribut de Zamora*, has never been recorded.

### II. The life

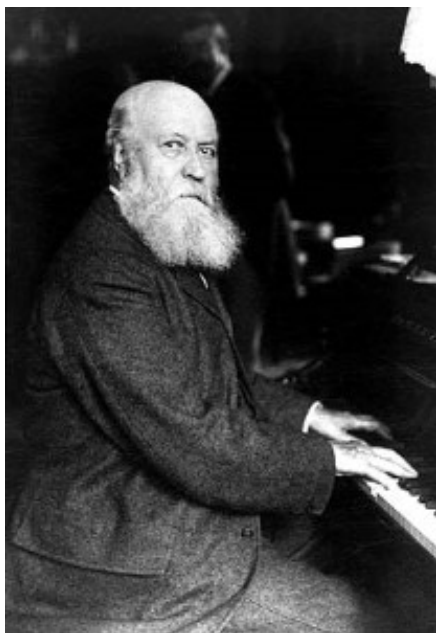
Music came early to Charles-François Gounod (1818–93); he learnt it, he said, suckling at his mother's breast. Gounod remained devoted to his mother throughout his life. After his father, a painter, died in 1823, his mother gave piano and drawing lessons to support the boy and his brother. She had studied piano with the father of Adolphe Adam, composer of the *Postillon de Lonjumeau*, and with Beethoven's friend Hüllmandel. She it was who first took him to the opera – to see *Otello* in 1829 or 1831, with Maria

Malibran singing Desdemona, and to *Don Giovanni* in 1832. From that moment, he wanted no other career than that of a composer.

His mother, however, was against the idea. She asked the director of his lycée to have a word with the boy – but Gounod's setting of a text so impressed the schoolmaster that he embraced him, saying: 'Go, my child, and make music!' When Gounod began his studies at the Conservatoire, his mother asked Anton Reicha, his counterpoint teacher, to make his life hard. 'If you return him to me hating music, I will bless you!' Reicha failed in this task ('Hélas, Madame! ... this child is gifted ...') and Gounod went on to study with Fromental Halévy, Henri-Montan Berton, Jean-François Le Sueur and Ferdinando Paër.



His efforts were rewarded in 1839 with the Prix de Rome, which he won on his third attempt. At the Villa Médicis, he became friends with its director, the painter Ingres, who had known his father. The two bonded over their mutual passion for art and music, and Ingres offered Gounod a place at the Villa if he applied for the Prix de Rome as a painter. He got to know important artists including Fanny Hensel, who later introduced him to her brother Felix Mendelssohn, and Pauline Viardot, Malibran's sister and a remarkable singer in her own right. He composed his first melodies, *Le vallon* and *Le soir*, and his setting of the Mass Ordinary was performed at the church of San Luigi del francese to mark the birthday of Louis-Philippe.



Gounod returned to Paris in May 1843, where he found work as chapel master of the Missions étrangères, where he composed a *Messe brève pour voix d'hommes*, a *Chant du départ des missionnaires* and some cantatas. At this time he seriously considered entering the church. He studied theology and philosophy at the seminary of Saint-Sulpice; was permitted to wear ecclesiastical costume; and signed himself 'Abbé Gounod'. He realized, however, that taking holy orders would be a mistake. 'It would be impossible for me to live without my art, and leaving the habit for which I was not made, I returned to the world.'

In 1848, he resigned his position as chapel master, and left the seminary in 1850. He became reacquainted with Viardot, who asked him why he had not composed an opera. Fresh from her phenomenal success in Meyerbeer's *Prophète*, she used her influence with Nestor Roqueplan, director of the Opéra, to secure Gounod a commission for *Sapho* (1851) – a critical success, but not a popular one.

He married Anna Zimmermann, daughter of a Conservatoire piano teacher, in 1852, and became a father in 1855. He worked as superintendent of instruction in singing to the communal schools in the city of Paris and director of the Orphéon choral society.

More works followed throughout the 1850s: the operas *La Nonne sanglante* (1854), pulled after only a few performances, and *Le médecin malgré lui* (1858), after Molière's play; stage music for François Ponsard's tragedy *Ulysse* (1852), admired by Saint-Saëns and Hugues Imbert; the *Méditation sur la prélude de J.S. Bach* (1853), better known as the *Ave Maria*; his *Messe solennelle de Sainte Cécile* (1855); and 'Vive l'Empereur', the official hymn of the Second Empire.

Success was coming Gounod's way; immortality came with his next opera: *Faust* (1859). Unpopular at first, it was not until the 1862 revision that it entered the repertoire.

Gounod was prolific as an opera composer in the 1860s. He wrote two light opéra-comiques, *Philémon et Baucis* and *La colombe* (both 1860); *La reine de Saba* (1862), a grand opera that failed; and the pastoral

*Mireille* (1864). He was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts and appointed officer of the Légion d'Honneur in 1866. *Roméo et Juliette*, his most enduring success after *Faust*, appeared in 1867.

The Franco-Prussian War and siege of Paris interrupted Gounod's career. In 1870, he moved with his family from Paris to England, where he became involved with the singer Georgina Weldon and her husband Harry. Although Gounod composed the motet *Gallia*, more than 60 songs, two Mass settings, choral pieces and parlour songs in English and French, his sojourn in England was not happy. He lost a legal suit and faced the prospect of prison, while his relationship with Mrs Weldon ended disastrously. Gounod's friends rescued him, and brought him back to France in 1874, but she kept hold of the score of *Polyeucte*, which she claimed to have destroyed. She returned it at last, with her name scrawled on each page. *Polyeucte*, eventually performed in 1878, was not a success, while neither *Cinq-Mars* (1877) nor *Le tribut de Zamora* (1881) held the stage.

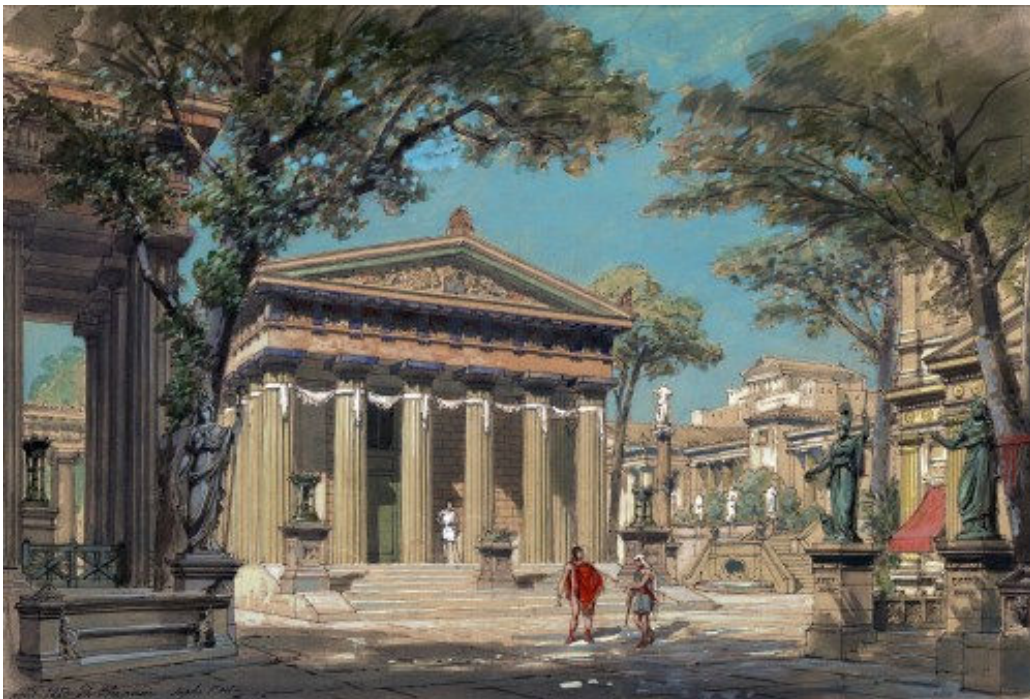
In his final years, Gounod was the grand old man of French music. He was, James Harding writes, regarded from the 1880s until his death as 'the incarnation of modern French music' – and 'the mantle of the patriarch descended upon willing shoulders'. He was made Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur in 1877 and Grand Officier in 1880. Having abandoned the stage, he composed sacred works (*La Rédemption*, performed 1882; *Mors et Vita*, 1885; *Messe à la mémoire de Jeanne d'Arc*, 1887; settings of the Mass), and wrote books on Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1890) and his own memoirs.

Gounod died on 17 October 1893. At the service in the church of the Madeleine, his disciple Saint-Saëns paid homage to 'the artistic educator of his generation'.

### III. The operas

#### *Sapho*

Opéra in 3 acts. Libretto: Emile Augier. First performance: Théâtre de l'Opéra (salle Le Peletier), 16 April 1851. Reduced to 2 acts 26 July 1858. Revised version in 4 acts and 5 scenes: Palais Garnier, 2 April 1884.



*Act 1 design sketch*



Gounod's first opera, a high-minded neo-Classical work in the line of Gluck, takes place on the isle of Lesbos, where burning Sappho loved and sang. The poetess and the courtesan Glycère are rivals for the love of Phaon, who is plotting to overthrow the tyrant Pittacus. Glycère threatens to betray the conspiracy unless Sappho makes Phaon leave the island without her, convinced of her infidelity. Phaon goes into exile with the triumphant Glycère, and a distraught Sappho throws herself from the Leucadian cliffs.

At this stage, Gounod lacked the theatrical instinct of Verdi or Massenet. In his *Mémoires*, the composer acknowledged that the opera betrayed an inexperience of what is called a sense of theatre, lack of knowledge of stage effects, resources and practice of instrumentation, but had a true sense of dramatic expression, a generally correct instinct for the lyrical side of the subject, and a tendency to nobility of style.

In other words, it's boring but beautiful. Its beauties are undeniable, particularly Sappho's ode 'Héro sur la tour solitaire' and her haunting stances 'O ma lyre immortelle', sung shortly before she flings herself into the sea. That aria has been a concert item for mezzos since Pauline Viardot created the role, but one aria is not enough to give a work a hold on the repertoire.



*Last scene design sketch*

The opera was performed only eight times in its original run. Although intended as a vehicle for Viardot, touring demands meant she could only sing the role six times, and her replacement Elisabeth Masson sang it twice before the production closed. Revisions of the opera in 1858 (in two acts) and 1884 (in four acts) were no more successful, and modern audiences have not warmed to the opera.

Nevertheless, Gounod's fellow musicians admired the opera, particularly the arch-Gluckian Berlioz. After the première, Gounod met Berlioz in the corridors of the Opéra, weeping. 'Oh! my dear Berlioz', said Gounod, 'come and show those eyes to my mother; they are the most beautiful feuilleton she could read about my work.'

In his feuilleton review, which Gounod considered one of the most flattering and elevated of his career, Berlioz lamented that he was neither of his time nor his country.

'For me, Sapho's unhappy love and that other obsessive love of Glycère and Phaon's error, Alcée's unavailing enthusiasm, the dreams of liberty that culminate in exile, the Olympic festival and the worship of art by an entire people, the admirable final scene in which the dying Sapho returns for a moment to life and hears on one side the last distant farewell of Phaon to the Lesbian shore and on another the joyous song of a shepherd awaiting his young mistress, and the bleak wilderness, the deep sea, moaning for its prey, in which that immense love will find a worthy tomb, and then the beautiful Greek scenery, the fine costumes and elegant buildings, the noble ceremonies combining gravity and grace – all this, I confess, touches me to the heart, exalts the mind, excites and disturbs and enchants me more than I can say.'



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

#### *Press illustration*

However, a modern audience cannot see the elegant Greek temples and beautiful beaches or the fine costumes worn by the crowd at the Olympic Games, the guests at the banquet or the conspirators that Berlioz admired, so the work seems static.

#### *Recordings*

Katherine Ciesinki (Sapho), Eliane Lublin (Glycère), Alain Vanzo (Phaon), Frédéric Vassar (Pythéas) & Alain Meunier (Alcée), with the Nouvel Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio-France conducted by Sylvain Cambreling, recorded Paris 1979. Rodolphe RPC 32453-54; Gala GL 100702.

Michèle Command (Sapho), Sharon Coste (Glycère), Christian Papis (Phaon), Lionel Sarrazin (Pythéas) & Eric Faury (Alcée), with the Nouvel Orchestre de Saint-Etienne conducted by Patrick Fournillier, recorded Saint-Etienne 1992. Koch-Schwann 3-1311-2.

### *La nonne sanglante*

Opéra in 5 acts. Libretto: Eugène Scribe & German Delavigne, after Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. First performance: Théâtre de l'Opéra (salle Le Peletier), 18 October 1854.

Gounod's second opera was a failure; commissioned by one director of the Opéra and taken off after eleven performances by his successor, it was not restaged or recorded until 2008.

Partly Eugène Scribe's uncharacteristically bad libretto is to blame. The bloody nun is the ghost of a murdered woman. The tenor hero, Rodolphe, mistakes her for his lover and proposes to her – to his horror, when he discovers his error. The only way of breaking the cursed betrothal is to kill the man who murdered her – who is, of course, his father.

The opera passed through the hands of Meyerbeer, Halévy, Verdi and Berlioz (who wrote two acts before abandoning it) before ending with the hapless Gounod, an unsuitable choice for this mishmash of Hammer Horror and pseudo-mediaeval romance.

Nevertheless, Gounod was well aware of the opera's shortcomings.

'I don't know whether *la Nonne sanglante* was capable of a lasting success; I don't think so; not that it was an opera without effect (there were several arresting ones); but the subject was too uniformly dark. It had, moreover, the inconvenience of being more than imaginative, more than unlikely; it was beyond the possible, it rested on a purely fantastic situation, without reality, and therefore without dramatic interest, since interest was impossible outside the true or, at least, the likely.'



Source gallica.bnf.fr | Bibliothèque nationale de France

*Agnès, daughter of the Baron of Moldaw*

Faced with such a weak plot, Gounod's score is uninspired. 'Of all my scores, it's the least good,' he wrote. 'It lacks sincerity, so it can't touch the "naïf".'

The better numbers are the overture, halfway between Mendelssohn and Sullivan; Rodolphe's aria 'Voici l'heure' (Act II); the travesti page's couplets 'Un page de ma sorte'; 'Un jour plus pur' (which Berlioz thought the finest number in the score); and the impressive multi-segment finale based on Donizetti's *Favorite*.

The rest of the score, like so many of Gounod's operas, is halfway between French grand opera and Sullivan. The crusading chorus at the start is straight out of Halévy. When he wants to be creepy, Gounod serves up a reminiscence of Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* or Weber's *Freischütz*. Other numbers are jolly or pretty without being either memorable or dramatic. Like many of his works, it lacks conflict and drama. The characters sing solo arias about their emotions, but they don't confront each other. There are a few duos, but no ensembles.

Gounod, however, thought his handling of the orchestra was more accomplished and experienced than in *Sapho*, and was pleased with the chant de la Croisade in the first act; the symphonic prelude of the Ruins, and the march of the zombies in the second act; and the tenor's cavatina and his duo with the Nun in the third act.

The sole recording could be better. Although the orchestra plays well, the lead tenor bleats, Peter the Hermit is woolly, and few in the cast can pronounce French.

#### *Recording*

Marco Vassalli (Le Comte de Luddorf), Genadijus Bergorulko (Le Baron de Moldow), Yoonki Baek (Rodolphe), Natalia Atmanchuk (Agnès), Iris Marie Kotzian (Arthur), Franck Fäber (Pierre l'Hermitte), Eva Schneiderit (Agnès, la Nonne sanglante), with the Osnabrücker Symphonieorchester conducted by Hermann Bäumer, recorded Osnabrück 2008. CPO 777 388-2.

[http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2010/Aug10/Gounod\\_Sanglante\\_7773882.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2010/Aug10/Gounod_Sanglante_7773882.htm)

#### ***Le médecin malgré lui***

Opéra-comique in 3 acts. Libretto: Jules Barbier & Michel Carré, after Molière's 1666 comedy. First performance: Théâtre-Lyrique (boulevard du Temple), 15 January 1858.

*Le médecin* was Gounod's first success, marred only by the death of his beloved mother on the day after it opened. First performed on the anniversary of Molière's death, the adaptation of a play about a woodcutter whose wife, tired of his drunkenness and his beatings, persuades a rich man's servants that he is a doctor, reached a hundred performances in its first run.

'This score,' wrote Gounod, 'my first in the opéra-comique genre, is almost as easy and light as an Italian opera buffo. I tried to recall in certain passages the style of Lully, but most of the work belongs to the modern French school.'

Berlioz admired the pastiche of Lully, and compared the orchestra to Mozart's *Figaro* and Rossini's *Barbieri*. 'Gounod is at his best ... – an excellent musician, with a charming lyrical gift, a genuine instinct for what may be called "chamber" drama, and a discreet and well-balanced sense of the orchestra.' Saint-Saëns thought the music a masterpiece, and compared it to Mozart.

Stravinsky played the opera to Diaghilev 'with as much pleasure as he had in hearing it' in the 1920s (Stravinsky, *The Atlantic Monthly*; November 1953; "The Diaghilev I Knew"; Volume 192, No. 5; pages 33 - 36). Diaghilev unsuccessfully tried to resurrect this opera and the later opéra-comique *Philémon et Baucis* in Monte Carlo but, Stravinsky wrote, 'his dream of a Gounod "revival" failed in the face of an indifferent and snobbish public who did not dare applaud the music of a composer not accepted by the avant-garde'.

Highlights include a charming tenor serenade 'Est-on sage dans le bel âge', and a sextet in the second act, where the woodcutter Sganarelle examines his patient, a young woman shamming dumb to get out of a marriage.

The recommended recording is the 1972 ORTF recording conducted by Jean-Claude Hartemann; highlights are on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLFIgTx6k-U>



### *Recordings*

Scipio Colombo (Sganarelle), Luisella Ciaffi Ricagno (Martine), Paolo Montarsolo (Valère), Antonio Pietrino (Lucas), Eric Tappy (Léandre), Miti Truccato Pace (Jacqueline), Andrée Aubéry Lucchini (Lucinde), Italo Tajo (Geronte) & Roberto Bera (Recitante), with the RAI Roma orchestra conducted by Nino Sanzognò, recorded Rome 1962. Walhall Eternity Series.

Marcello Cortis (Sganarelle), Freda Betti (Martine), Jean-Christophe Benoît (Valère), Philippe Prince (Monsieur Robert), Michel Hamel (Lucas), Luigi Alva (Léandre), Denise Benoît (Jacqueline), Christiane Harbell (Lucinde) and André Vessières (Géronte), with the Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire conducted by Serge Baudo. Broadcast on the RTF 15 July 1960.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9J0FXFABwJE>

Jean-Christophe Benoit (Sganarelle), Janine Capdérrou (Martine), Jean Martin (Valère), Joseph Peyron (Lucas), Michel Hamel (Léandre), Lina Dachary (Jacqueline), Monique Stiôt (Lucinde), Jean-Louis Soumagnas (Géronte), with the Orchestre Lyrique de l'O.R.T.F. conducted by Jean-Claude Hartemann, recorded Paris 1972. Musidisc "Gaieté Lyrique" 20232-2.

Boris Grappe (Sganarelle), Ahlima Mhamdi (Martine), Nicolas Carré (Valère), José Pazos (Lucas), Stanislas de Barbeyrac (Léandre), Doris Lamprecht (Jacqueline), Clémence Tilquin (Lucinde), Franck Leguérinel (Géronte) and Romaric Braun (Monsieur Robert), with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande conducted by Sébastien Rouland, recorded Geneva, 2016.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niYNFGeAQHc>

### ***Faust***

Opéra in 5 acts. Libretto: Jules Barbier & Michel Carré, after *Faust I* by Goethe. First performance: Théâtre-Lyrique (boulevard du Temple), 19 March 1859 (57 performances). First performance in Brussels: Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, 25 February 1861, in the original version; restaged 7 September 1862 as a grand opéra. Revised: Théâtre-Lyrique de la place du Châtelet, 18 December 1862 (249 performances). Revised as a grand opéra with ballet: Théâtre de l'Opéra (salle Le Peletier), 3 March 1869.

Gounod had wanted to set Goethe's play to music ever since he read it in his student days in Rome. Berlioz had turned it into a *légende dramatique*, Wagner into an overture, Liszt into a symphony and Boito would later turn it into an opera. It may lack the imagination of Berlioz or the philosophic depth of Goethe's masterpiece – to the ire of Wagner and Ernest Newman, who complained of its sentimentality and 'Catholicism sucré' – but Gounod's opera is immortal.

In Paris alone, it was performed 2,000 times by 1934, while it inaugurated the New York Met in 1883. Even today, despite misguided attempts to stage the work in brothels, with the devil in fishnet stockings and Faust a junkie, it is the 39<sup>th</sup> most performed opera in the world (Operabase.com) and has been translated into 25 different languages.

It is the first opera in which Gounod is definitively himself, and the opera in which he most combines a theatrically effective story with his devout religiosity and memorable tunes. Its mixture of black magic, religious piety, sentimentality, wit, tavern scenes, sword fights and love duets mean there is something in it for everyone, making it a perfect introduction to opera. It was the first I saw live and the first I owned on CD.

And yet the first audiences did not take to it.

Two famous publishers, both devotees of the Italian school, claimed that it wouldn't last a fortnight. Sceptics claimed that the opera lacked tunes; the music was souvenirs reassembled by a scholar. The only scenes the public liked were the Kermesse scene and the Soldiers' chorus. Otherwise, said the sceptics, the Garden Scene should be cut, because it held up the action. It was boring, it was long, it was cold.





Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

*Act I, tableau I – sketch*

A century and a half later, this seems bizarre. No tunes in *Faust*? The Jewel Song, so ubiquitous that it was apparently the only song Bianca Castafiore knew; Méphistophèles's sinister 'Veau d'or'; Faust's 'Salut! demeure chaste et pure'; the quartet in the garden scene; the trio that closes the opera. (Valentin's 'Avant de quitter ces lieux', a popular baritone concert piece, was written for a later production.)



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

*The garden scene, 1859*

Although it was Gounod's biggest theatrical success to that point, not until he revised it as a grand opéra in 1862, replacing the original spoken dialogues with sung recitatives, did it become successful in France. It was first performed at the Opéra in 1869, where it became the most frequently performed opera.

Outside France, however, it was a hit from the start. The Belgians, the Germans, the Italians all liked it. (Verdi intervened to have it performed in Rome, just as Gounod had persuaded Hugo and Dumas *filis* to have *Rigoletto*, *Ernani* and *Traviata* staged.) The Americans first heard it in 1862, the British a year later – where it fell into the public domain from the start, thanks to a delay in lodging the work.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

#### *Marguerite – Mme Miolan-Carvalho*

The five recommended recordings are the 1912 Léon Beyle set and the 1930 Vezzani/Journet set, for the authentic French style; Beecham's 1947–8 set with Georges Noré, Roger Rico and Géori Boué; Cluytens' classic 1958 recording with Nicolai Gedda, Victoria de los Ángeles and Boris Christoff; and Michel Plasson's 1991 recording, which has an appendix of hitherto unrecorded numbers.

For more information on recordings of *Faust*:

[http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/July04/Gounod\\_Faust\\_comparative.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/July04/Gounod_Faust_comparative.htm).

#### *Selected recordings*

Léon Beyle (Faust), André Gresse (Méphistophélès), Jeanne Camredon (Marguerite), Jean Noté (Valentin), Marguerite D'Elty (Siébel), Jeanne Goulancourt (Marthe) & Pierre Dupré (Wagner), with L'Opéra Comique de Paris orchestra conducted by François Ruhlmann, recorded Paris 1912. Marston 53007.

[http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2006/Feb06/Gounod\\_Faust\\_530072.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2006/Feb06/Gounod_Faust_530072.htm)

Georges Thill (Faust), Fred Bordon (Méphistophélès) & Marthe Nespoulos (Marguerite), conducted by Eugène Bigot recorded 1929–31. Extracts: EMI CZS 7 67103-2 (Collection).

César Vezzani (Faust), Marcel Journet (Méphistophèles) and Mireille Berthon (Marguerite), with L'Opéra de Paris Orchestra conducted by Henri Büsser, recorded Paris 1930. Pearl B000000WYH and Membran 231136.

Richard Crooks (Faust), Ezio Pinza (Méphistophélès), Helen Jepson (Marguerite), Leonard Warren (Valentin), Helen Olheim (Siébel), Thelma Votipka (Marthe) & Wilfred Engelman (Wagner), with the Metropolitan Opera orchestra conducted by Wilfred Pelletier, recorded New York 1940. NAXOS "Historical" 8.110016-7.

Georges Noré (Faust), Roger Rico (Méphistophélès), Géori Boué (Marguerite), Roger Bourdin (Valentin), Huguette Saint-Arnaud (Siébel), Betty Bannerman (Marthe) & Ernest Frank (Wagner), with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Thomas Beecham, recorded London 1947-8. Preiser Records 90355; Malibran Music CDRG 153; Naxos "Historical" 8.110117-18.

Jussi Björling (Faust), Cesare Siepi (Méphistophélès), Dorothy Kirsten (Marguerite), Frank Guarrera (Valentin), Anne Bollinger (Siébel), Thelma Votipka (Marthe) & Lawrence Davidson (Wagner), with the Metropolitan Opera orchestra conducted by Fausto Cleva, recorded New York 1950. Myto 2MCD 906 33; Myto 2MCD 922 58; Myto "Historical" 003 H046; Rodolphe 32702/3; Naxos "Historical" 8.11083-85.

Nicolai Gedda (Faust), Boris Christoff (Méphistophélès), Victoria de los Ángeles (Marguerite), Jean Borthayre (Valentin), Martha Angelici (Siébel), Solange Michel (Marthe) & Robert Jeantet (Wagner), with L'Opéra de Paris orchestra conducted by André Cluytens, recorded Paris 1953. EMI CMS 5 65256-2; Urania 306; Malibran MR 681.

Nicolai Gedda (Faust), Boris Christoff (Méphistophélès), Victoria de los Ángeles (Marguerite), Ernest Blanc (Valentin), Liliane Berton (Siébel), Rita Gorr (Marthe) & Victor Autran (Wagner), with L'Opéra de Paris orchestra conducted by André Cluytens, recorded Paris 1958. EMI CMS 7 69983 2; EMI TOCE WPCC 8142-4; EMI "Great Recordings of the Century" 567 967-2.

Franco Corelli (Faust), Nicolai Ghiaurov (Méphistophélès), Joan Sutherland (Marguerite), Robert Massard (Valentin), Margreta Elkins (Siébel), Monica Sinclair (Marthe) & Raymond Myers (Wagner), with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Richard Bonyngé, recorded London 1966. Decca 421 240-2; London POCL 3962-4; Decca "Rouge Opéra" 467 059-2; Decca 470 563-2.

Plácido Domingo (Faust), Nicolai Ghiaurov (Méphistophélès), Mirella Freni (Marguerite), Thomas Allen (Valentin), Michèle Command (Siébel), Jocelyne Taillon (Marthe) & Marc Vento (Wagner), with L'Opéra de Paris orchestra conducted by Georges Prêtre, recorded Paris 1978. EMI CDS 7 47493-8; Angel TOCE 6449-51; EMI 5 09166.

Francisco Araiza (Faust), Ruggero Raimondi (Méphistophélès), Gabriela Benacková (Marguerite), Walton Grönroos (Valentin), Gabriele Sima (Siébel), Gertrude Jahn (Marthe) & Alfred Sramek (Wagner), with the Wiener Staatsoper conducted by Erich Binder, recorded Vienna 1985. DVD: DG 073 4108; DG 5829; DG 073 4130.

Francisco Araiza (Faust), Evgeny Nesterenko (Méphistophélès), Kiri Te Kanawa (Marguerite), Andreas Schmidt (Valentin), Pamela Coburn (Siébel), Marjana Lipovsek (Marthe) & Gilles Cachemaille (Wagner), with the Sinfonieorchester des Bayerischen Rundfunks conducted by Colin Davis, recorded 1986. Philips 420 164-2; Philips 475 7769.

Richard Leech (Faust), José van Dam (Méphistophélès), Cheryl Studer (Marguerite), Thomas Hampson (Valentin), Martine Mahé (Siébel), Nadine Denize (Marthe) & Marc Barrard (Wagner), with the Orchestre du Capitale de Toulouse conducted by Michel Plasson, recorded Toulouse 1991. EMI CDS 7 54228-2; EMI CDS 5 56224-2.



Roberto Alagna (Faust), Bryn Terfel (Méphistophèles), Angela Gheorghiu (Marguerite), Simon Keenlyside (Valentin) and Sophie Koch (Siébel), with the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House conducted by Antonio Pappano, recorded London 2004. DVD: Warner Classics B003Y58CKI.

Jonas Kaufmann (Faust), René Pape (Méphistophèles) and Marina Poplavskaya (Marguerite), with the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin, recorded New York 2011. DVD: Decca B00DPMFE6U.

Gounod followed *Faust* with two opéras-comiques based on fables of La Fontaine. Like the *Médecin malgré lui*, they are lightweight, undemanding fare, not in the same class as Boieldieu, Auber or Offenbach.

### ***Philémon et Baucis***

Opéra-comique in 2 acts. Libretto: Michel Carré & Jules Barbier. Created during the summer of 1859 in Baden-Baden in a 1 act version. First performed at Théâtre-Lyrique (Boulevard du Temple), 18 February 1860, in a 3 act version. First performed at the Opéra-Comique (2e salle Favart): 16 May 1876, in the definitive 2-act version.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

#### *Act 1 – Philémon & Baucis's hut*

The opera is based on Ovid's fable (via La Fontaine) about the devoted elderly couple who unwittingly entertain the gods. They are the only people who have shown hospitality and piety, and so are saved when the gods destroy the village. (In the original production, the second act showed an orgy in the temple of Jupiter, a scene modelled on Couture's painting *Les Romains de la decadence*. This was cut in its Opéra-Comique revision.) In the myth, Philémon and Baucis become trees when they die; in the opera, the gods restore their youth – which Berlioz thought must be more agreeable than being turned into a tree, whether laurel, cedar or orange. Neither he nor the *Revue musicale's* Pierre Scudo were impressed by the librettists' decision to have Jupiter infatuated with the young Baucis or to make Vulcan the butt of jokes about his cuckoldry.





Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

### *Estampe*

The highlights of the score include the pastoral overture with oboe and Vulcan's energetic 'Au bruit des lourds marteaux d'airain'. The piece was indifferently received; Pierre Scudo (*Revue musicale*) and Albert de Lasalle (*Mémorial du Théâtre-Lyrique*, 1877) thought it cold and boring, without a story or musical inspiration.

Diaghilev's attempt to resurrect the opera in the 1920s was, as mentioned above, a failure, and it has not re-entered the repertoire.

### *Recordings*

Pierre Gianotti (Philémon), Claudine Collart (Baucis), Heinz Rehfuss (Jupiter) & Diego Ochsenbein (Vulcain), with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande conducted by Isidore Karr, recorded 1951. Malibran Music CDRG 180.

Alvino Misciano (Philémon), Renata Scotto (Baucis), Rolando Panerai (Jupiter) & Paolo Montarsolo (Vulcain), with the RAI Milano orchestra conducted by Nino Sanzogno, recorded Milan 1961. Foyer 2-CF2016.

Jean-Claude Orliac (Philémon), Anne-Marie Rodde (Baucis), Pierre Néquecaue (Jupiter) & Felix Giband (Vulcain), with the Orchestre Lyrique de l'O.R.T.F. conducted by Henri Gallois, recorded Paris 1975. Musidisc "Gaieté Lyrique" 20234-2.

### *La colombe*

Opéra-comique in 2 acts. Libretto: Jules Barbier & Michel Carré, after Jean de La Fontaine's tale *Le Faucon*. First performance: Baden-Baden, 3 August 1860, in a 3 act version. First performance at the Opéra-Comique (2e salle Favart), 7 June 1866.

The opera is based on La Fontaine's fable about a young man who kills his pet bird to feed his mistress. In the original story, the bird is a falcon; this was changed to a dove in the opera, and the work ends happily. The dove is saved; the bird that was killed is really a parrot that belongs to the mistress's enemy.

Although the plot is trivial, the music has charm. The best pieces are the overture, which starts off as Mozart and ends somewhere near Rossini's 'ranz des vaches' in the *Guillaume Tell* overture; the duet as Horace and his godson Mazet prepare the table to entertain the guests – Horace rues his poverty (the pathetic note!) and sadly orders Mazet to kill his bird; and the soprano's contrasting aria and romance, which show how Gounod uses musical style for characterisation. In her aria, Sylvie says she'll use love as a weapon, and the song is full of bel canto runs and trills designed to show off Mme Miolan-Carvalho's voice. The romance, in which she rues her cruelty and realises that of all her admirers only Horace never lied, is simpler and without ornamentation.

Diaghilev found the work charming, and seduced by its lightness, staged it in Monte Carlo with additional music by François Poulenc. Philippe Jourdan used this version as the basis for his production at Compiègne, which is the standard DVD version.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

### Recordings

Janine Micheau (Sylvie), Pierre Lenoty (Horace), Lucien Lovano (Mazet) & Joseph Peyron (Jean), conducted by Tony Aubin, recorded 1947. Malibran Records CDRG 161. (review)

Ghyslaine Raphanel (La Comtesse), Sylvie François-Nicolas Geslot (Le Comte Horace), Jean-Philippe Courtis (Maître Jean) and Antoine Normand (Mazet), with the Orchestre Symphonique de la Radio et de la Télévision de Cracovie conducted by Michel Swierczewski, recorded Compiègne, 1994. DVD: DOM DVD 11018.

Erin Morley (Sylvie), Javier Camarena (Horace), Michèle Losier (Mazet) and Laurent Naouri (Maître Jean), with The Hallé conducted by Sir Mark Elder, recorded Manchester 2015. Opera Rara ORC53. (review)



## *La reine de Saba*

Opéra in 4 or 5 acts. Libretto: Michel Carré & Jules Barbier. First performance: Théâtre de l'Opéra (salle Le Peletier), 28 February 1862.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

This is the sort of work that gives French grand opéra a bad name.

Meyerbeer, the master of the genre, had the impression of ‘a bad libretto, gifted music, an ingenious interpretation of the text, harmonically interesting, but it has a leaden heaviness about it, and is without thematic invention, without melody’ (*The Diaries of Giacomo Meyerbeer: The Last Years 1857–1864* Translated, edited and annotated by Robert Ignatius LetellierMadison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, p. 314.).

The ‘bad’ libretto shows by contrast just how good were Eugène Scribe’s for Meyerbeer – and for Halévy, Auber and others (the fiasco of *la Nonne* aside). They are well constructed, the situation is clear from the start, the first act establishes the characters and their relationships, and the action moves with inevitable logic through a series of dramatic twists to a surprising but inevitable end that ties all the threads together. The audience is given information whose significance they don’t realise until the cunning author reveals the secret. What a writer of detective stories Scribe would have made!

Barbier and Carré’s libretto is a mess. There are two poorly connected plots: Adoniram, a sculptor and architect, is killed by three unhappy workmen in an industrial dispute that has nothing to do with his affair with Queen Balkis of Sheba, betrothed to King Soliman. His death feels arbitrary.

The characters remain sketchy throughout, making it impossible for the audience to give a damn about them. Balkis doesn’t appear on her own until Act III, and doesn’t talk to Adoniram until the end of that act. Until then, their interactions are in crowd scenes, and the only character who’s sung a song to or about Balkis is Adoniram’s apprentice. Adoniram’s aria ‘Inspirez-moi, race divine!’ at the start of Act II is one of Gounod’s finest inspirations and a popular tenor warhorse – but has little to do with love. He thinks distractedly of Balkis in the following recitative, but his mind is on his work; in the aria, he asks the ancestral spirits to inspire him. Unlike Berlioz’s *Benvenuto Cellini* or Wagner’s *Meistersinger*, the



successfully completed artwork lets him win the girl. By the end of Act II, what are Balkis and Adoniram to each other?



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

### Act I Scene 2

Soliman doesn't make any impression; thanks to pre-opening cuts, he has no aria to sing until the end of Act IV. In the first two acts, he appears with an ensemble, while he doesn't appear at all in Act III. The trio of villainous workmen who act almost in unison are lifted straight from Meyerbeer's *Prophète*.

As always with Gounod, there is some attractive music. The prelude is Gounod's finest; the copper instruments play a passage from the melting of the sea of bronze (*Fonte de la mer d'airain*), an impressive ensemble piece in Act II. The opera ends on an aria for Balkis, 'Adoniram n'est plus!', whose writing for strings and noble pathos recall Gluck.

The work was poorly received. Partly it was politics. The Emperor and Empress thought the work was dangerously Socialist, so Gounod fell into disgrace. (Before then, the Empress had suggested writing a ballet together, which she tired of after sitting at the piano together for an hour.) Partly it was the work itself. The opera's big stage effect, the melting of the sea of bronze, wasn't performed, while Bénédict Jouvin (*Le Figaro*) and Pierre Scudo (*Revue musicale*) accused Gounod of Wagnerism. If *Faust* was Gounod's Austerlitz, wrote Léon Escudier, then this was his Waterloo.

Berlioz was equally dismissive. In a letter to his friend the composer Auguste Morel, he wrote: 'I'm trying to support this wretched Gounod ... there is nothing in his score, absolutely nothing. How to support what has neither bones nor muscles?' In his review for the *Journal des débats*, he damned it with faint praise and concluded:

'This work seems to me difficult to put into music and must have made the composer's task very arduous. M. Gounod is such a skilful musician that he could nevertheless depict the main situations of the drama. It's not his fault if he couldn't always avoid monotony ...





Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

### *Act III - A hall in Salomon's summer palace*

'In sum, this new score is the work of a conscientious and knowledgeable musician who has all the resources of his art, a just feeling for dramatic conventions, the instinct for expression, and youth, that charming defect which one corrects so quickly. That's why we think he was wrong to write quickly; nothing pressed, and he shouldn't be afraid of slowly developing a work. A grand opera score is a terrible job, above all if one wants to respond to all the requirements that too often today one must suffer at general rehearsals. Here one asks for a cut, there an addition; there aren't enough dance tunes, the director wants a jingle to have the time for his groups to enter, another for them to exit, etc., etc. The unhappy composer, who sees his score ravaged like a field by a herd of buffaloes, loses his head, if he hasn't prepared for this battle, cuts, lengthens, improvises all he is asked for with a feverish anxiety, and God knows the disastrous results these conflicts and improvisations usually lead to.'

There are two commercial CD recordings; both are inadequate. The sound quality of Plasson's recording is poor, while neither of the two leads in the Martina Franca production can pronounce French. It mars the 'Fonte de la mer d'airain' scene when the chorus sing 'O vous, dont la grande a-MEE' rather than 'âme'; 'feu' comes out smeared; and Balkis begins her aria 'Me voilà seu-LEE enfin' and 'Je VUE console'. A pirate DVD of the Saint-Etienne production features the same tenor, Jeon-Won Lee, but gives a better idea of the work.

### *Recordings*

Suzanne Sarroca (Balkis), Gérard Serkoyan (Solimans), Gilbert Py (Adoniram), Yvonne Dalou (Bénoni), Jean-Paul Caffi (Amrou), Henri Amiel (Phanor), Jean Tezanas (Méthousael), Gérard Blatt (Sadoi) & Claudia Noves (Sarahil), with the Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse conducted by Michel Plasson, recorded Toulouse 1969. Gala GL 100.734.

Francesca Scaini (Balkis), Luca Grassi (Solimans), Jeon-Won Lee (Adoniram), Anna Lucia Alessio (Bénoni), Salvatore Cordella (Amrou), Jean Vendassi (Phanor), Piero Naviglio (Méthousael), Volodymyr Deyneka (Sadoi) & Annalisa Carbonara (Sarahil), with the Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia conducted by Manlio Benzi, recorded Martina Franca, 2001. Dynamic CDS 387/1-2.

Jia Lin Zhang (Balkis), Marcel Vanaud (Solimans), Jeon-Won Lee (Adoniram), Therry Cantero (Amrou), Jean Vendassi (Phanor), Jean-Pascal Introvigne (Méthousael), with the Nouvel Orchestre de Saint-Etienne conducted by Laurent Campellone, recorded Saint-Etienne, 2003. House of Opera CD 2463. DVD: Encore DVD 2203.

### *Mireille*

Opéra-comique in 5 acts and 7 tableaux. Libretto: Michel Carré, after Frédéric Mistral's *Mirèio*. First performance: Théâtre-Lyrique (place du Châtelet), 19 March 1864 (5 act version). Performed in 3 acts: Théâtre-Lyrique, 16 December 1864. First performance at the Opéra-Comique (salle Favart): 10 November 1874, in a 3 act version, with a tragic ending. Performed in 5 acts, with a happy ending: Opéra-Comique, 29 November 1889. 5 acts with a tragic ending: Opéra-Comique, 13 March 1901. Original score, edited by Reynaldo Hahn and Henri Büsser: Opéra-Comique, 6 June 1939.

This simple tale of a Provençal peasant girl's love for a basket-weaver may be Gounod's freshest and most charming opera, full of warmth and sunlight, and brimming with good tunes. The story – an adaptation of Mistral's Provençal poem – is picturesque. Girls collect mulberry leaves to feed silkworms; the country people sing as they gather in the harvest and dance the farandole; bull-tenders strut through the square of Arles; the ghosts of the drowned rise out of the Rhône; and the heroine journeys across the Desert of Crau, to meet her death in the chapel of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

*Act II Scene X – The arenas of Arles*



Mistral invited Gounod to come to Provence, where, under the alias of M. Charles, he stayed from March to May 1863, in Maillane and the village of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence. Despite Gounod's commitment to local colour, the opera that reached the Paris stage was, however, not what Gounod intended. The impresario Léon Carvalho demanded that he re-work the score to suit Mme Miolan-Carvalho's voice, eliminate one aria, add another, and replace the original tragic ending with a happy one. Saint-Saëns felt the result was a travesty, and he was never able to attend the opera without thinking sadly of Gounod's original conception.



The reception was mixed. Henri Blaze de Bury thought it an unfortunate attempt to combine the musical styles of Mozart and Wagner. Félix Clément, on the other hand, believed it was Gounod's most remarkable and inspired work for the theatre, although the descriptive side better treated than the drama.

The opera brims with melodies: the chanson de Magali; Taven's chanson 'Voici la saison, mignonne'; Ourrias's rousing couplets 'Si les filles d'Arles'; Mireille's cantilène 'Heureux petit berger'; and Vincent's cavatine 'Mon cœur est plein d'un noir souci'. There is a touch of the eerie in the third act, set in the Val d'Enfer, where horns whoop like Weber's Wolfsschlucht. The opera ends with a chorus of angels, which a modern audience might find overblown.

The work appeared in several revisions – in 3 acts, in 5 acts, with a happy ending, with a sad ending – but it was not until 1939 that Reynaldo Hahn and Henri Büsser presented a version close to Gounod's original intentions.

The recommended recording is the 1962 performance starring Renée Doria, Michel Sénéchal and Robert Massard.

#### *Recordings*

Géori Boué (Mireille), Jean Guilhem (Vincent) & Marguerite Pifteau (Taven), with the Orchestre National de France conducted by Reynaldo Hahn, recorded Paris, 1941. Malibran Music CDRG 137.

Martha Angelici (Mireille), Charles Richard (Vincent), Suzanne Darbans (Taven), Michel Dens (Ourrias), Lili Danière (Vincenette), Lucien Lovano (Maître Ramon), André Vessières (Ambroise), Andrée Cuvelier (Clémence) & Michel Hamel (Andreloùn), with the Orchestre Radio-Lyrique conducted by Jules Gressier, recorded Paris 1948. Audio Encyclopedia AE 202 - Opera in Paris (A Mike Richter CD-ROM); Malibran Music 522.

Janette Vivalda (Mireille), Nicolai Gedda (Vincent), Christine Gayraud (Taven), Michel Dens (Ourrias), Madeleine Ignal (Vincenette), André Vessières (Maître Ramon), Marcello Cortis (Ambroise), Christiane Jacquin (Clémence) & Robert Tropin (Le passeur), with L'Orchestre de la Société des Concerts du Conservatoire de Paris conducted by André Cluytens, recorded Paris 1954. EMI CMS 7 64382 2.

Andrée Esposito (Mireille), Alain Vanzo (Vincent), Suzanne Darbans (Taven), Gabriel Bacquier (Ourrias), Christine Harbell (Vincenette), Julien Giovannetti (Maître Ramon), Lucien Lovano (Ambroise), with the Orchestre de Radio France conducted by Jules Gressier, recorded Paris 1959. Le Chant du Monde 278 921; Gala GL 100.722.

Renée Doria (Mireille), Michel Sénéchal (Vincent), Solange Michel (Taven), Robert Massard (Ourrias), Christine Stutzmann (Vincenette), Adrien Legros (Maître Ramon), Julien Thirache (Ambroise), Agnès Noël (Clémence ; Une voix en haut), Claude Genty (Le passeur), Aimé Doniat (Le berger), with the

Orchestre de Paris conducted by Jésus Etcheverry, recorded Paris 1962. Accord 149527; Accord 472 145-2.

Mirella Freni (Mireille), Alain Vanzo (Vincent), Jane Rhodes (Taven), José van Dam (Ourrias), Christine Barbaux (Vincenette), Gabriel Bacquier (Maître Ramon) & Marc Vento (Ambroise), with the Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse conducted by Michel Plasson, recorded Toulouse 1979. EMI CDS 7 49653 2. [http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2008/June08/Freni\\_2062532.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2008/June08/Freni_2062532.htm)

Valerie Masterson (Mireille), Luis Lima (Vincent), Jane Berbié (Taven), Jean-Philippe Lafont (Ourrias), Diane Loeb (Vincenette), Jules Bastin (Maître Ramon), Pierre-Yves Le Magiat (Ambroise) & Colette Alliot-Lugaz (Le berger), with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande conducted by Sylvain Cambreling, recorded Geneva 1981. Mitridate “Ponto” PO 1019.

Danièle Borst (Mireille), Christian Papis (Vincent), Bernadette Antoine (Taven), Marcel Vanaud (Ourrias), Hiroko Kawamichi (Vincenette), Jean-Philippe Courtis (Maître Ramon) & Chris de Moor, with the Orchestre des Rencontres Musicales Lausanne conducted by Cyril Diederich, recorded Lausanne 1993. Cascavelle 062 014; Cascavelle/Helikon VEL 1048; Cascavelle VEL 3098.

Inva Mula (Mireille), Charles Castronovo (Vincent), Sylvie Brunet (Taven), Franck Ferrari (Ourrias), Anne-Catherine Gillet (Vincenette) and Sébastien Droy (Andreloun), with the Orchestra and Chorus of the Opéra national de Paris conducted by Marc Minkowski, recorded Paris 2009. DVD: FRA Musica 502.

### ***Roméo et Juliette***

Opéra in 5 acts & 8 tableaux. Libretto: Jules Barbier & Michel Carré, after William Shakespeare's tragedy. First performance: Théâtre-Lyrique (place du Châtelet), 27 April 1867 (102 performances). Revised version: Théâtre de l'Opéra (Palais Garnier), 28 November 1888.

Of all the attempts to capture Shakespeare's masterpiece in opera – Vaccai's *Giulietta e Romeo* (1825), Bellini's *Capuleti e i Montecchi* (1830) and Zandonai's *Giulietta e Romeo* (1922) – Gounod's is the most enduring. It is his most popular work after *Faust* – but, unlike *Faust*, it was a success from the start.

For once Gounod has an opera with a strong plot, and one familiar to every theatregoer, so that his lyrical score is not wasted on dross.

‘The First Act,’ he wrote, ‘ends *brillant* (brilliantly); the Second *tendre et rêveur* (tenderly and dream-like); the Third *animé et large* (lively and expansive) with the duets and Romeo sentenced to exile; the Fourth *dramatique* (dramatically) and the Fifth *tragique* (tragically). That's a beautiful progression.’



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Shakespeare's story inspired Gounod to some of his finest music. The opera is built around four love duets – the lovers' meeting at old Capulet's party (Act I), the Balcony Scene (Act II), the morning of



Romeo's banishment (Act IV) and their parting in the tomb (Act IV). Juliette's ariette "Ah! – Je veux vivre dans le rêve" and Roméo's cavatine "Ah! lève-toi, soleil!" are famous.



### *Act III Scene 2 finale*

However, the opera does not capture all the colour of Shakespeare's opera; the bawdy wit of Mercutio and earthiness of Juliet's Nurse are alien to Gounod, while the Act III finale is closely modelled on that of Meyerbeer's *Huguenots*.

### *Selected recordings*

Augustarello Affre (Roméo), Yvonne Gall (Juliette), Jeanne Goulancourt (Gertrude), Marcel Journet (Frère Laurence), Henri Albers (Capulet), Edmond Tirmont (Tybalt), Valeramont (Le Prince), Hippolyte Belhomme (Gregorio), Alexis Boyer (Mercutio) & Mme. Champell (Stéphano), with L'Opéra-Comique de Paris orchestra conducted by François Ruhlmann, recorded Paris 1912. VAI Audio VAIA 1064-3; Malibran Music CDRG 108.

Charles Hackett (Roméo), Eide Norena (Juliette), Henriette Wakefield (Gertrude), Léon Rother (Frère Laurence), Louis D'Angelo (Capulet), Angelo Bada (Tybalt), Arthur Anderson (Le Prince), Paolo Ananian (Gregorio), Giuseppe De Luca (Mercutio) & Gladys Swarthout (Stéphano), with the Metropolitan Opera orchestra conducted by Louis Hasselmans, recorded New York 1935. Encore Grand Tier ENGT 4/93; Naxos "Historical" 8.110140-41; Bensusan OL 12635 (BRO 125833).

Georges Noré (Roméo), Lucienne Jourfier (Juliette), Lucien Lovano (Capulet), Louis Rialland (Tybalt), Willy Clément (Mercutio), Jean Planel (Stéphano), with the Orchestre Lyrique de Radio France conducted by Jules Gressier, recorded Paris 1951. Malibran Music MR 513.

Raoul Jobin (Roméo), Janine Micheau (Juliette), Odette Ricquier (Gertrude), Heinz Rehfuss (Frère Laurence), Charles Cambon (Capulet), Louis Rialland (Tybalt), André Philippe (Le Prince; Gregorio),

Pierre Mollet (Mercutio), Claudine Collart (Stéphano), with the Théâtre Nationale de l'Opéra Paris orchestra conducted by Alberto Erede, recorded Paris 1953. Decca(London) 443 539-2; Decca "Rouge Opéra" 455 844-2 (France); Preiser Records PR 20041; Cantus Classics 500664.

Georges Noré (Roméo), Janine Micheau (Juliette), Fréda Betti (Gertrude), Pierre Froumenty (Frère Laurence), Charles Cambon (Capulet), Louis Rialland (Tybalt), André Philippe (Le Prince), André Vessières (Gregorio), Pierre Mollet (Mercutio), Nadine Sautereau (Stéphano) & Julien Thirache (Pâris), with the Orchestre Lyrique de Radio France orchestra conducted by Jules Gressier, recorded Paris 1954. Malibran Music MR 613.

Nicolai Gedda (Roméo), Rosanna Carteri (Juliette), Christine Gayraud (Gertrude), Joseph Rouleau (Frère Laurence) & Michel Dens (Mercutio), with L'Opéra de Paris orchestra conducted by Alain Lombard, recorded Paris 1964. EMI 5 73089-2 (collection).

Franco Corelli (Roméo), Mirella Freni (Juliette), Michèle Vilma (Gertrude), Xavier Depraz (Frère Laurence), Claude Calès (Capulet), Robert Cardona (Tybalt), Pierre Thau (Le Prince), Christos Grigoriou (Gregorio), Henri Gui (Mercutio), Eliane Lublin (Stéphano), Yves Bisson (Pâris) & Maurice Anzeville (Benvolio), with L'Opéra de Paris orchestra conducted by Alain Lombard, recorded Paris 1968. EMI CMS 5 65290-2.

Alfredo Kraus (Roméo), Catherine Malfitano (Juliette), Jocelyne Taillon (Gertrude), José van Dam (Frère Laurence), Gabriel Bacquier (Capulet), Charles Burles (Tybalt), Jean-Jacques Doumène (Le Prince), Jean-Marie Frémeau (Gregorio), Gino Quillico (Mercutio), Ann Murray (Stéphano), Kurt Ollmann (Pâris) & Roger Trentin (Benvolio), with the Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse conducted by Michel Plasson, recorded Toulouse 1983. EMI CDS 7-47365-8; Angel CDCC-47365-8.

Roberto Alagna (Roméo), Leontina Vaduva (Juliette), Sarah Walker (Gertrude), Robert Lloyd (Frère Laurence), Peter Sidhom (Capulet), Paul Charles Clarke (Tybalt), David Wilson-Johnson (Le Prince), Jeremy White (Gregorio), François Le Roux (Mercutio), Anne Maria Panzarella (Stéphano) & Richard Halton (Pâris), with the Covent Garden orchestra conducted by Charles Mackerras, recorded London 1994. DVD: Covent Garden Pioneer 8 42573 60892 59; Opus Arte "Royal Opera House Collection" OAP 3106 D.

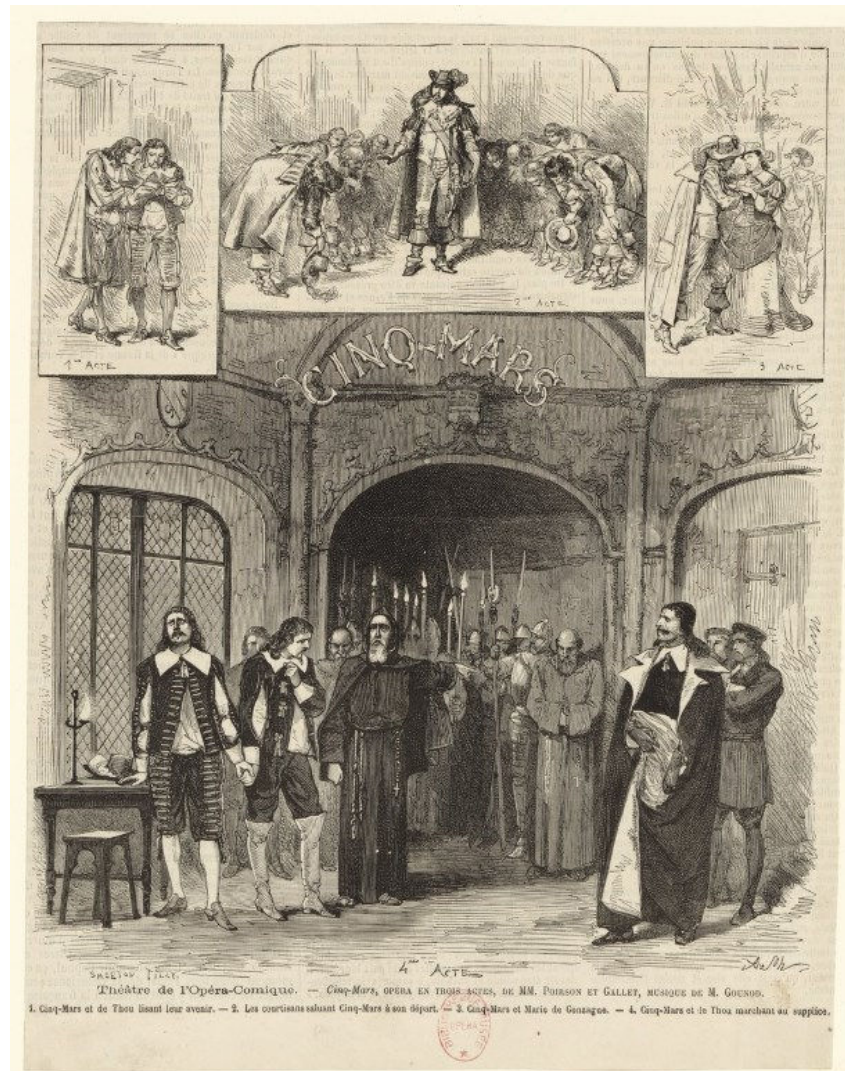
Roberto Alagna (Roméo), Angela Gheorghiu (Juliette), Claire Larcher (Gertrude), José van Dam (Frère Laurence), Alain Fondary (Capulet), Daniel Galvez-Vallejo (Tybalt), Alain Vernhes (Le Prince), Till Fechner (Gregorio), Simon Keenlyside (Mercutio), Marie-Ange Todorovitch, (Stéphano) Didier Henry (Pâris) & Guy Flechter (Benvolio), with the Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse conducted by Michel Plasson, recorded Toulouse 1995. EMI CDS 5 56123-2; EMI 358624-2.

Plácido Domingo (Roméo), Ruth Ann Swenson (Juliette), Sarah Walker (Gertrude), Alastair Miles (Frère Laurence), Alain Vernhes (Capulet), Paul Charles Clarke (Tybalt), David Pittman-Jennings (Le Prince), Erik Freulon (Gregorio), Kurt Ollmann (Mercutio), Susan Graham (Stéphano), Christopher Maltman (Pâris) & Tony Spence (Benvolio), with the Münchner Rundfunkorchester conducted by Leonard Slatkin, recorded Munich 1995. RCA Victor "Red Seal" 09026 68440-2; RCA BVCC 1933-4.

Rolando Villazón (Roméo), Nino Machaidze (Juliette), Susanne Resmark (Gertrude), Mikhail Petrenko (Frère Laurence), Falk Struckmann (Capulet), Juan Francisco Gatell (Abre) (Tybalt), Christian van Horn (Le Prince), Jean-Luc Ballestra (Gregorio), Russell Braun (Mercutio), & Cora Burggraaf (Stéphano), with the Mozartium Orchester conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin, recorded Salzburg 2008. DVD: Premiere Opera Ltd. DVD 6536; DG 073 4518. Blu-ray: DG 073 4521.

## *Cinq-Mars*

Opéra in 4 acts & 5 tableaux. Libretto: Paul Poirson, revised & versified by Louis Gallet, after Alfred de Vigny's novel. First performance: Opéra-Comique (2e salle Favart), 5 April 1877. Re-mounted in November 1877 in a new version of 5 acts.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

People flocked to hear Gounod's first opera in a decade. Ten thousand demanded seats for the first performance; there were 60 performances up to 1878; and the opera was performed in the provinces and abroad. And then the public lost interest.

As often, Gounod's music is better than the opera, which is archaic. In the same year as Massenet's *Roi de Lahore* and Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*, two years after *Carmen* and the first complete Ring Cycle, seven years after Verdi had apparently retired with *Aida*, and a decade after *Don Carlos*, Gounod offered his public a throwback to Halévy and Meyerbeer's grand opéras of the 1830s.

The libretto is undramatic, though based on a historical event which cries out for operatic adaptation. The young and handsome Cinq-Mars began as a protégé of Cardinal Richelieu, became the favourite (read: lover) of Louis XIII, plotted with Louis' queen and brother to overthrow the Cardinal, and ended up on the scaffold.

The French royals and Richelieu do not appear; the king appears silently in Act II, crossing the gallery, while Richelieu's place is taken by Père Joseph – who died four years before *Cinq-Mars* was executed. *Cinq-Mars*, Marie Gonzague and Marion Delorme are only shadows of their historical selves. Marie Gonzague, an ambitious woman who encouraged Cinq-Mars to oppose the Cardinal and ended as a



powerful Polish politician, becomes a copy of Elisabeth de Valois in Verdi's *Don Carlos*: married off for political reasons, to the tenor's horror. Marion Delorme (whom some may know as the heroine of a Hugo play) is relegated to a divertissement.

The libretto doesn't ring true, because the events are not grounded in history. True, many of Scribe's libretti were more inspired by history than strictly accurate, but he knew the value of a well-made play and a strong storyline (*La Nonne* excepted). This opera lacks both. The historical events could have led to an interesting opera about a homosexual love triangle between the king, Cinq-Mars and De Thou (although the historical Cinq-Mars seems to have been a narcissist who loved himself with a passion tenderer still), the favourite rebelling against Richelieu and the king's indifference to his death – a counterpart to Donizetti's *Favorite* or *Roberto Devereux* – and the love affair between Cinq-Mars and de Thou. (Sub rosa homosexuality is present in Victor Hugo's *Lucrece Borgia* and Donizetti's operatic adaptation, while Wagner was friends with openly gay couples in Paris.)



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

### Act III Tableau 4

Like most of Gounod's operas, the work exists in several versions, as the composer turned a historical *opéra comique historique*, with spoken dialogue, into a full-scale *grand opéra* "à la manière sérieux de Meyerbeer", with sung recitatives and expanded numbers. In all versions, the format is old-fashioned and curiously undramatic. There are two sopranos: a dramatic soprano and a coloratura soprano who sings a divertissement, like Isabelle de Bavière in Halévy's *Charles VI* or Marguerite de Valois in Meyerbeer's *Huguenots*. Much of the second act is taken up by an interminable ballet and divertissement, an archly sentimental Baroque dance based on Mlle de Scudéry's novel *Clélie*. The act ends with an electrifying, thundering Conjunction, in the line of Meyerbeer's Blessing of the Swords or Prêche anabaptiste, or the Gathering of the Cantons in Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*. This is one of Gounod's most magnificent



inspirations – but the events leading up to the Conjunction or Cinq-Mars’s position in court aren’t shown. Later, the opera moves from Marie agreeing to marry the King of Poland (which will save Cinq-Mars’s life) to Cinq-Mars in prison awaiting execution.

As always with Gounod, much of the music is attractive and elegant, but rarely catches fire. It contains, among other good things, “Nuit resplendissante”, considered his most beautiful cantabile; a melancholy duo in Act I; “On ne verra plus dans Paris”, a witty character song in the line of Halévy’s opéras-comiques; the cavatina and trio in Act II; De Thou’s “Cœur vaillant”; the lovely trio in Act III; and the duos in Act IV.

Parts of this article were published by *Limelight Magazine*.

<http://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/content/gounod-cinq-mars>

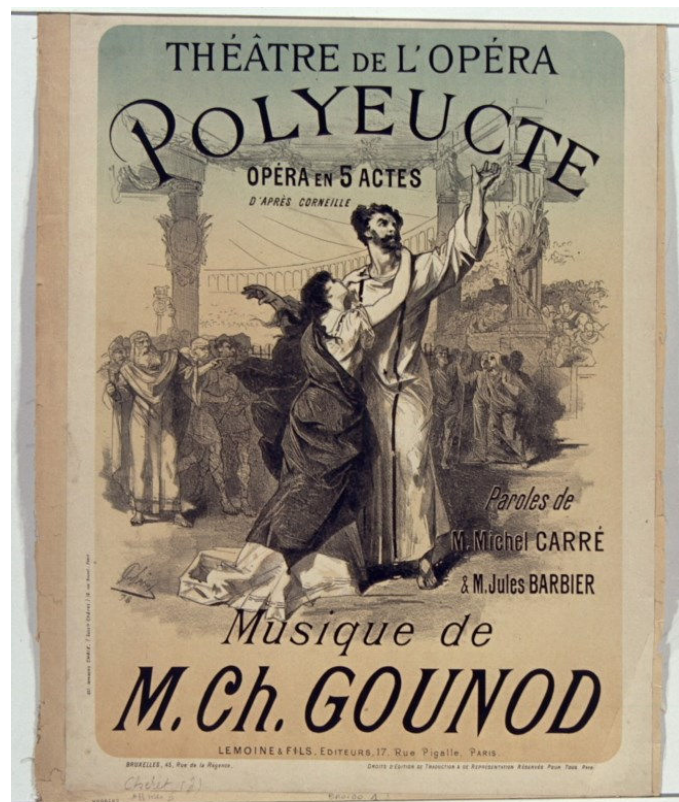
#### *Recording*

Matthias Vidal (Cinq-Mars), Véronique Gens (Marie de Gonzague), Tassis Christoyannis (De Thou), Andrew Foster-Williams (Le Père Joseph), with the Münchner Rundfunkorchester conducted by Ulf Schirmer, recorded Munich 2015. Palazzetto Bru Zane Ediciones Singulares 1024.

[http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2016/Oct/Gounod\\_Cinq-Mars\\_ES1024.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2016/Oct/Gounod_Cinq-Mars_ES1024.htm)

#### *Polyeucte*

Opéra in 5 acts. Libretto: Jules Barbier & Michel Carré, after Corneille’s tragedy (1642). First performance: Théâtre de l’Opéra (Palais Garnier), 7 October 1878.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Gounod wanted to make *Polyeucte* his masterpiece – but, as Saint-Saëns wrote, it only caused him disappointment. First, he was forced to leave the manuscript score with Georgina Weldon in England; when she refused to return it, he had to reconstruct the score from memory. Eventually she did return it, with her name scrawled over every page. Second, he never found a Polyeucte who satisfied him. Third, although it is his most personal work for the stage and he spent a decade on the opera, it met with a cool reception from critics and public alike and closed after 29 performances.

Donizetti had already adapted Corneille's play about a Roman provincial who becomes a Christian martyr; his *Poliuto* (in Italian) or *Les Martyrs* (in French) is a better opera, but less religious, which the subject demands. Gounod's treatment is more "churchy". Polyeucte converts Pauline to Christianity by reading a Bible passage, while the centre of the opera is a beautiful and impressive religious choral scene in Act II, followed by a baptism scene that raised a few eyebrows. Other highlights include Pauline's récit and invocation to Vesta in the noble style of Gluck, her duet with Sévère, and the lovely barcarolle at the start of Act II, tableau 2.

The opera would make more effect with a better recording. Gounod's opera demands a first-rate Francophone cast, but the only available commercial recording has Italian singers who often sound strained. (The opera was also produced in Saint-Etienne, with Laurent Campellone conducting, but no recording exists.) As a result, many fine passages fail to make their effect, particularly Sévère's cavatine "Ah! quittons le festin" and Polyeucte's famous stances "Source délicieuse en misère féconde". The duet between Polyeucte and Néarque "Où pensez-vous aller" is heavily cut, and the recording does not pick up some of the choruses in the Act III finale.

More *Polyeucte* images at the end of the article.

### *Recording*

Giorgio Casciari (Polyeucte), Luca Grassi (Sévère), Pietro Navaglio (Félix), Vincenzo Taormina (Néarque), Fernando Blanco (Albin), Emil Zhelev (Siméon), Nicola Amodio (Sextus), Nadia Vezzù (Pauline) and Tiziana Portoghese (Stratonice), with the Orchestra Internazionale d'Italia conducted by Manlio Benzi, recorded Martina Franca, 2004. DYNAMIC CDS 474/1-2.

### *Le tribut de Zamora*

Opéra in 4 acts. Libretto: Adolphe d'Ennery & Jules Brésil. First performance: Théâtre de l'Opéra (Palais Garnier), 1 April 1881. Re-mounted at the Opéra: 13 March 1885 (48<sup>th</sup> performance) – 50<sup>th</sup> & final performance 25 March 1885.

Gounod's last opera is set in Moorish Spain, and was originally intended for Verdi, who may have been better inspired by its conflict between Christians and Muslims, tributes of a hundred virgins, slave auctions, murders, battles, and a madwoman reunited with her long-lost daughter.



Although the opera was favourably received on its premiere, and remounted for three performances in 1885, it soon vanished from the stage and has never been produced or recorded in modern times. Félix Clément wrote:

"Mediocre and banal, without interest, without novelty, without passion, without poetry, the libretto of this unwelcome work has little to inspire a musician. It is astonishing that M. d'Ennery, so skilful in his trade and so experienced, could have been so mistaken as to think that such a subject, treated in this fashion, could capture an audience's attention for a single instant. And it is even more surprising that an artist of Gounod's rank could get on with the thankless task of setting to music a vulgar melodrama. It was his last dramatic work, and I regret to say that it was unworthy of his great name and his noble genius. *Le Tribut de Zamora* owed its semblance of existence only to the marvellous performance of Mme Gabrielle Krauss, that admirable lyric actress."

As with many 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century operas, the Muslims are treated with respect. The benevolent Hadjar quotes verses from the Qur'an ("Consider as saints the madmen, otherwise be cursed"), twice sparing the lives of the madwoman and her party.

The entire work has never been recorded. Timothy Flynn, however, believes the opera contains 'some very fine music', a view borne out by the extracts of the Greek dance and soprano arias performed by Zélie de Lussan and Joan Sutherland.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqPludGA5hw>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ei6lWUKGpYg>

More *Le Tribut de Zamora* images at the end of the article.

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## ***Polyeucte***



OPÉRA. — POLYEUCTE, musique de M. Charles Gounod, livret de MM. Barbier et Carré. — Représentation à l'Opéra, samedi 11 février, second tableau du premier acte. — Décor de M. Duret, Costumes de M. Lacoste (dessin de M. Steeg).

Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

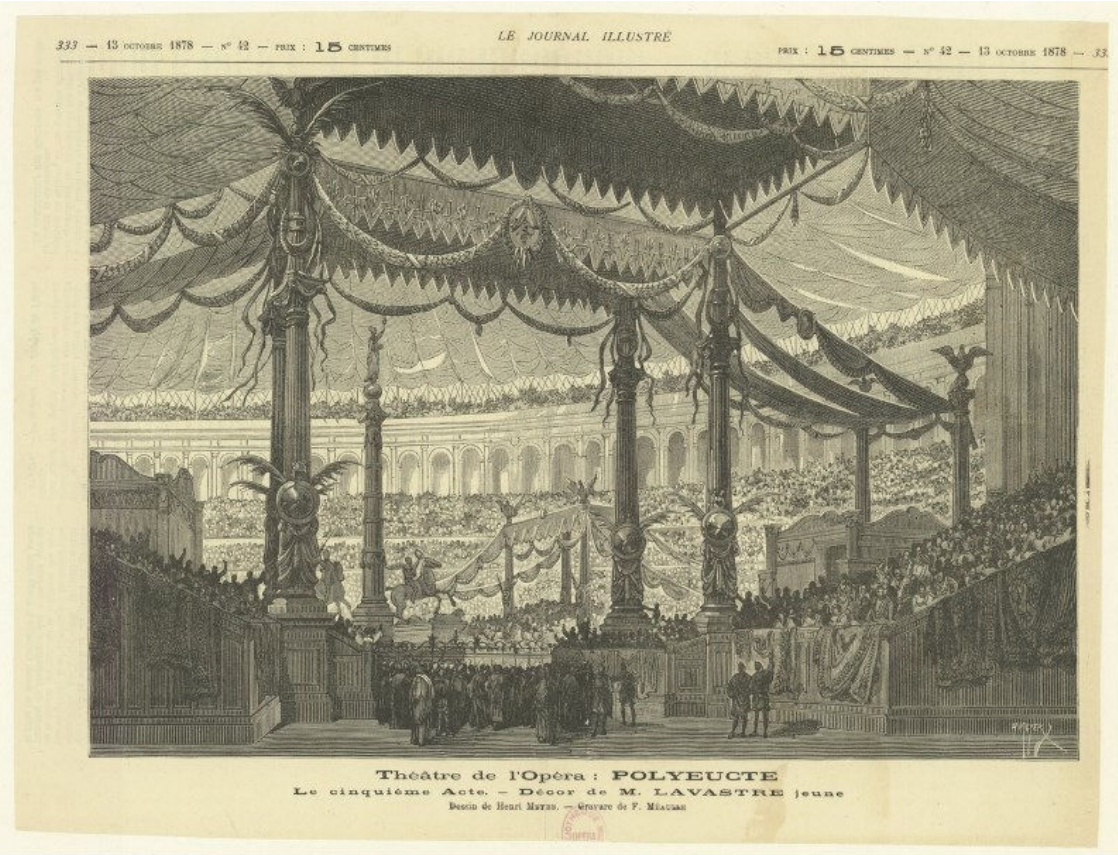
*Act 1 tableau 2*





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Act 1 tableau 2



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Act 5





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*The Credo scene*

*Le tribut de Zamora*



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*Act 2 – the shores of the Oued-al-Kebir*





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Press illustration



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The slave market at the gates of Cordoba