

CD REVIEW

Charles Gounod, *Cantates et musique sacrée*

Flemish Radio Choir and the Brussels Philharmonic, Hervé Niquet *cond*
Includes book of essays in French and English edited by Alexandre Dratwicki
Collection Prix de Rome, vol. 6
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It's been 14 years since I was last asked to review a CD, for this journal no less (an Opera Rara recording of Meyerbeer's early Italian operas). If, like me, your new laptop no longer comprises a CD/DVD drive and the good-quality CD player and amplifier you bought yourself 25 years ago have finally given up the ghost, a CD review becomes a new and interesting challenge. Complicating this somewhat anachronistic task, the CDs under review here come tucked inside a book: it is the sixth volume of the Palazzetto Bru Zane 'Prix de Rome' series, which features French composers who won the prestigious Prix de Rome and presents recordings of either the competition piece itself or those 'envois' demanded by the Institute whilst the winning composers sojourned at the Villa Medici in Rome – proof of time well spent. Thus, at first I thought I was dealing with a book with accompanying CDs, before realizing that, in fact, I was reviewing a recording with a weighty 'booklet' – even more so as all the French articles are accompanied, as in a traditional CD presentation, by elegant English translations. As a retro-styled hardback, worthy of gracing any private library shelf, not only does this title scream 'thinking musician's CD', but it screams 'ageing thinking musician's CD', if this phrase is not a tautology in and of itself!

The two CDs are dedicated to different repertoires: the first, to the 'cantates' written as competition entries by Gounod for his three attempts to win the 'premier grand prix' between 1837 and 1839, and the second, to sacred repertoire written during his stays in Rome, where he heard Palestrinian polyphony at the Sistine chapel, and in Vienna (on his way back to France in 1843), where he composed his final 'envoi', the *Hymne sacrée*. The music is performed by a collection of nine solo singers, the Flemish Radio Choir and the Brussels Philharmonic, under the baton of renowned Baroque conductor Hervé Niquet. While the book provides the *dramatis personae* of the choir and orchestra, the solo singers and conductor are represented only by photographs, with no biographical information. Also presented are the full text and translations of the cantatas, as well as the French text (and translation) of the *Hymne sacrée*; all Latin texts are omitted.

The book's articles are elegantly collected and edited by Alexandre Dratwicki, and provide a brief but excellent overview and description of the cantatas (by Dratwicki) and of the religious choral works (by Gérard Condé). The first of three contextual articles (by Pierre Sérié) recounts the relationship between Gounod and the director of the Villa Medici between 1835 and 1841: the painter Ingres, whose taste for the 'virtuous' musics of Beethoven, Gluck and especially Mozart (or to

quote Ingres, 'Raphaël en musique') made Gounod a close ally and protégé from the start of his tenure in Rome. The second article, by Dominique Hausfater, re-evaluates the relationship between Gounod and his mother Victoire through the lens of the 102 letters she sent to Gounod during a period of 18 months while he was in Rome (from December 1839 to May 1842). This full correspondence should soon be available on the Palazzetto Bru Zane's online Mediabase of digital resources. Hausfater's sensitive article carefully distinguishes between Victoire the mother and Victoire the friend and confidante, always ready to offer advice on all aspects of her son's life – professional and private – but willing also to receive it, especially when submitting her own compositions to her son for evaluation. The third article reproduces extracts from Gounod's *Mémoires d'un artiste* that refer to his time in Italy; the text was posthumously published by his nephew in 1896 but drew from various sources including the two versions of Gounod's memoirs published during his lifetime (1876/77 and 1884). These make for poignant reading, especially as they reveal Gounod's opinions and emotions upon his first encounters with Palestrinian polyphony at the Sistine chapel, which would draw him back time and time again.

The technical stipulations for the writing of the 'cantate', designed to test composers' aptitudes for writing operatic music, developed greatly during the years Gounod attempted the Prix de Rome, with the format having evolved on his final attempt from a 'cantate' for two voices and orchestra into a much longer 'scène lyrique' for three voices, comprising a cantabile and an orchestral prelude in two distinct movements. The text was always imposed by the competition authorities, and Gounod's three successive cantatas attest to the diversity of subject material provided: the historical tableau *Marie Stuart et Rizzio* in 1837, the realist Corsican family drama of *La vendetta* in 1838, and, in 1839, the epic and exotic *Fernand*, set in late fifteenth-century Grenada. Dratwicki's chronological presentation of the cantatas, allied to Gounod's increasing level of erudition within the competition, implies some sort of progression in the composition of these works, although on hearing them, it was *Marie Stuart* that made the greatest impression on me. The music of the Italian Meyerbeer is not far away, yet the pastoral tone as each protagonist bids farewell to their homeland (France and Italy, respectively) sets this section apart from its musical surroundings and foreshadows Gounod's operatic writing of the 1860s and 1870s. Moreover, the lyrical declamatory style evokes his opera *Roméo et Juliette*, and as Rizzio separates from Marie saying 'Cette pâle lueur, est-ce le jour déjà?', I almost expected to hear the orchestral bird calls of the lark from the scene in which Shakespeare's young lovers awoken from their marriage bed.

La vendetta, by comparison, is much less subtle and far more emphatic, with some awkward prosody and (despite Dratwicki's affirmation to the contrary) many odd text repetitions. The final ensemble comprises a fine dramatic revelation of the death of Lucien's father (he who must be avenged), but this was followed in quick succession by a major-key, upbeat cabaletta and stretta section that, while technically accomplished, rather destroyed the preceding well-rendered dramatic effect. *Fernand*, Gounod's 1839 winning 'scène lyrique' is a work on a different scale than his other two 'cantates', and is divided into scenes and many more distinct numbers, labelled 'duo', 'ensemble', 'Marche', 'trio', etc. Here Gounod inhabits the theatrical space, incorporating the 'off-stage' *banda* to represent the external threat to the protagonists' intimate discussion. Unfortunately, without the 'rest of the opera' to go with this scene, the character motivations, and particularly Fernand's quick decision to sacrifice himself for the sake of

the Muslim lovers Zelmire and Alamir – just minutes after he had expressed his emotions for Zelmire and imagined their future life together – leaves the listener rather cold. For me, *Marie Stuart* remains the most successful of the three works and clearly demonstrates Gounod's penchant and skill in composing the dramatic yet sentimental love duets that pervade his mature operatic output. The soloists for the three cantatas – sopranos Gabrielle Philiponet, Judith Van Wanroij and Chantal Santon-Jeffrey; tenors Sébastien Droy and Yu Shao; and bass Nicolas Courjal – all acquit themselves wonderfully, although Courjal represents all I dislike about a certain type of French bass voice – a lack of resonance 'dans le masque' which exacerbates the vibrato. The orchestra, under the direction of Niquet, is accomplished. I thoroughly enjoyed listening to this CD and will go back to it many times, I have no doubt.

The listening experience is slightly different for the second CD. Once again, I listened to the works in chronological order (as presented in the book), rather than in the order presented on the CD, and this was probably a mistake. While the Flemish Radio Chorus's small ensemble and performance style were well suited to the Palestrinian, mixed-voice *Messe vocale* (commissioned and first performed in Vienna for the Feast of the Annunciation on 25 March 1843), its male voices were much less satisfactory in the *Messe de Saint-Louis-des-Français* (written by Gounod while in Rome in 1841), for which a more rounded vocal colour is needed and a larger number of choristers are required to blend the sound of the more strident tenors. In addition, I disliked their Latin pronunciation according to trends in French Baroque performance, the school of which Niquet is a product: all 'u' vowels – in Sanctus, Dominus, Laudamus, Benedictus, Jesu, Spiritu, Deus, sepulchus est, etc. – are pronounced as closed French 'u', the /y/ of the International Phonetic Alphabet.

The *Messe vocale* is interesting in its use of introductory 'corals' to each movement (except the /saŋk.tys/), which are drawn from versicles or reponories dedicated to the Virgin; the melody returns, weaved into the fabric of each movement. Unfortunately, the recording missed the opportunity to bring out these 'coral' motifs when and where they return in the vocal polyphony. Condé describes passages of the 'Christe eleison' as almost *recto tono*, which seems a bit of an exaggeration despite his qualifying adjective, because the mass remains firmly polyphonic, with even a hint of characterization in the Credo, where the bass voices are linked to an evocation of God the Father. For those who know well Gounod's later *Messe solennelle de sainte Cécile* (1855), the opening tenor solo of the 'Gloria' will seem extremely familiar: transposed and given to the solo soprano voice, this music nevertheless originated in this earlier mass.

Although probably never performed, the *Hymne sacrée* was well received at the Institute. It presents a range of styles, including a pleasing opening, largely inspired by Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy', a rendition of which had made a deep impression on Gounod in Vienna in March 1843. But in the end, this work feels a bit 'pompier', academic and emphatic in comparison to the *Messe vocale*, or even the less austere *Messe de Saint-Louis-des-Français*, yet possibly more suitable for the 'envoi' that it was. Occasionally the performers make puzzling decisions: why is the 'Exaudite te Dominus' (Psalm 20) of the *Messe de Saint-Louis-des-Français*, originally written for 5 solo voices, sung here by the full choir, minus the sopranos? The musical direction of both chorus and orchestra (where used) is again accomplished, but the colour and size of the vocal ensemble sometimes inhibits the pleasure which could be gained from this repertoire. As I said at the beginning of

this review, this is a CD-book-CD for the thinking musician – not one interested in the beauty of choral sound!

So, does the CD have a future? This new book form seems to be a novel attempt to forge one – and they might be successful, were it not for our malfunctioning or non-existent CD players. In the long term, I would urge the editors at Bru Zane to think about alternative or complementary solutions: as Bru Zane has its own radio station, could they not also provide an individual login (for indeed, each copy of this limited-edition CD-book-CD is individually numbered) to access the recording via an online playlist? I really am one of the last dinosaurs, so for me to be suggesting something along these lines is somewhat surprising. Long may Bru Zane continue in its endeavours to promote little-known French Romantic music, both in live performance and in various electronic formats.

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