

# ‘Mighty Palestrina, old master, ancient genius’

Gérard Condé

Faith, Palestrina, Italy: those were the three revelations received by Charles Gounod – a true Parisian who swore only by Beethoven, Rossini and Weber, and a Catholic by baptism rather than conviction – during his stay at the Villa Medici. His academic stay in Rome (1840-1842), then Vienna (1842-1843), was marked by the composition of his first important art songs, ‘Le Soir’, ‘Le Vallon’ and ‘Lamento’, and by a blossoming of works of religious inspiration: a neo-Palestrinian *Te Deum* for two choirs (apparently lost), a *Symphonie dramatique* on the life of Jesus Christ (unfinished), and above all a *Messe à grand orchestre*, the motet *Christus factus est*, an unaccompanied *Vokalmesse* and the *Hymne sacrée*, all of which are presented on this première recording. Finally, his vast and powerfully minimalist Requiem still awaits performance.



## MESSE DE SAINT-LOUIS-DES-FRANÇAIS

The feast day on 1 May of the French king, Louis-Philippe, provided the musicians of the Villa Medici with an opportunity to compose a high mass, to be celebrated at the church of the French community in Rome, Saint-Louis-des-Français. On the year of Gounod’s arrival the mass had been

provided by Georges Bousquet; in 1841 it was Gounod's turn. The opportunity to hear his work and improve his technique was a godsend for Gounod. He had already written a solemn mass in memory of his teacher Lesueur, performed at Saint-Eustache before his departure for Rome, and now, with greater faith and awareness of the meaning of the liturgical text, he had a chance to set it again. The work is scored for mezzo-soprano, tenor and male-voice choir.

At the end of September 1840 he had his first ideas for the Sanctus. His description appears to have worried his mother, for she wrote in reply:

Is it out of a feeling of deep respect that you have decided to have the whole piece sung in an extreme *pianissimo*? Will the Hosanna also be sung very softly? Aren't you afraid that it might become monotonous? When you say 'the officiant will begin, singing the first sentence alone, very clearly, in a low voice', you don't mean the priest, I imagine, but a singer standing in for him: no priest has a voice good enough or sure enough to be able to give a good rendering of such an important piece in a solemn mass.

Gounod did not actually embark on the composition of the mass until the beginning of 1841, but once he had started the work progressed quickly: 'I have almost finished my mass,' he wrote on 1 April to his friend, the architect Hector Lefuel. 'I am writing the Credo, which I had saved until last in the hope that each day would bring me the strength I need to express such a subject.'

Gounod conducted the work himself, and such was its success that he was appointed honorary *maître de chapelle* for life of the church of Saint-Louis-des-Français. After a disastrous rehearsal, he had decided to direct the work 'with a rod of iron', as he told Georges Bousquet in a letter of 20 May. 'Whenever the pianissimos and fortissimos are not perfectly observed, we'll begin the piece all over again. I am decided on the matter, even if it means remaining until the Hail Marys (i.e. until evening). ... They were a dozy lot, but they woke up, their attention improved, and things began to work in such a way as to ensure a really satisfactory performance.'

The evolutive tonal structure of the work is as follows: Kyrie in A minor/major; Gloria in C major; Credo, in C minor/major; Offertory in F minor/major; Sanctus in B flat major; Agnus Dei in E flat major. The work thus progresses from darkness to light, from minor to major, then from fourth to fourth.

After the initial melody (the only allusion to plainchant), played by all the instruments *fortissimo*, the vocal style is characterised by the firmness of its rhythmic and melodic contour. The choral writing is often homorhythmic; polyphony appears essentially as a means of increasing tension and underlining certain elements of the text, such as ‘Deus Pater omnipotens’ in the Gloria. A little further on, a fugato on ‘Qui tollis peccata mundi’ evokes the accumulation of the world’s sins. The expressive role of the instrumental timbres and the orchestral interventions shows that Gounod was not yet sufficiently familiar with the liturgical texts to be content with simply setting them to music: he seems rather to have had his mind set on using the music to bring out the meaning of the words.

That is the case in the Kyrie, two-thirds of which are devoted to a dramatic rendering of ‘Christe’, without a return to the initial ‘Kyrie’. The form pertains to an evolutive logic: the gradual introduction by *tuilage* (voices alternating and slightly overlapping) of the word ‘Christe’ in the modulating transition, in which the ‘eleison’ of ‘Kyrie eleison’ is drawn out, abolishes the caesura between ‘Kyrie eleison’ and ‘Christe eleison’, thus imposing the idea of Christ as Redeemer that seems to dominate this mass.

The Gloria follows a symphonic plan. The gentle melismatic melody for the solo tenor on ‘Gloria’, in C major, supported by murmuring strings (divided into ten parts) and distant rolls on the timpani, takes the place of an introductory adagio. Gounod was to take this up again in his *Messe en l’honneur de Sainte Cécile*. The first section, an unaccompanied choral *Allegro* in 2/4 on ‘Laudamus te’, well scanned, *forte*, becomes animated and culminates on ‘Deus Pater omnipotens’, before evoking ‘Jesu Christe’ in a mysterious calm. A tormented fugato in C minor on ‘Qui tollis’ forms the middle section, with chromaticism on ‘miserere’. The

third section, 'Quoniam tu solus', returns to the brisk style of 'Laudamus te' and leads to strange harmonic progressions under 'Sancto Spiritu in gloria Dei', the climax before the final 'Amen', *Adagio*.

For the Credo, Gounod was guided more by the dramatic elements contained in the text. Thus we notice, after the seriousness of the statement of belief, 'Credo in unum Deum', from the choir in unison over a ground bass, the contrast of the arpeggios from a solo violin in counterpoint to the tenor's 'et in unum Dominum'; then the long, mysterious A-flat pedal point on 'Et incarnatus est', which, after 'sepultus est', turns into a G-major pedal point for the timpani, with a rhythm recalling a distant trumpet call leading to the 'resurrexit'; finally, in an unexpected *pianississimo*, the evocation of the Last Judgment ('iudicare'), leads to a repeat, *fortississimo*, of the melody of 'et resurrexit', bestowed after a fashion on 'Et unam', thus providing a majestic ending.

Written for five solo voices, the setting of *Exaudiat te Dominus* (May the Lord hear thee in the day of trouble, Psalm 20) has all the soberness that befits such a humble, fervent prayer. The wind instruments, with trombones and timpani, echo the singers (as in the 'Prayer' from Act II of Méhul's opera *Joseph*), before enveloping them in the less homorhythmic second part (in F major). This piece is performed here by a full choir, without sopranos.

Supported from beginning to end by the low *pianissimo* tremolo of the violins and violas, punctuated from time to time by pizzicatos from the bass strings, the Sanctus presents the solo tenor in dialogue with the choir. The impression of floating unreality stems from the irregularity of the bar structures and from rhythmic values that stretch, contract, then lengthen the melody, which is freed from the constraints of a regular pulse. For the second episode ('Pleni sunt coeli') a borrowing from G flat major adds to the mystery. The choir echoes this, but in very short note values, like a murmured psalmody. 'Gloria tua' plays the same game. Then the tenor, taking up the Latin sentence in its entirety, launches into a warm effusion of lyricism, supported by the oboe, which pushes the voice up to high B flat, still in an ethereal dynamic. For the repeat of the beginning,

the choir now sings ‘Sanctus’, illuminated by a flute two octaves higher; the tenor responds by intoning, *recto tono*, ‘Pleni sunt coeli...’ The effect of the final ‘Hosanna’ in *crescendo/diminuendo* is strengthened by a fresh borrowing from G flat major, leading to high B flat, this time *forte*, from the soloist.

In the Agnus Dei, as in the Sanctus, the solo tenor converses with the choir; but the atmosphere is very different: everything converges towards ‘miserere nobis’ in the middle, the culmination of the crescendo. From the start, the *malaise* associated with the sins of the world is expressed by the syncopations of the violins and violas, then by the large descending intervals of a vocal line that is presented dramatically. The hope for redemption comes from the orchestral response, which creates a moment of inaction before the choir takes up the soberly harmonised ‘Agnus Dei’ melody again, this time with sweeping arpeggios instead of syncopations from the violins. Introduced by the tenor, the middle episode on ‘miserere’ moves swiftly towards a climax, *forte*. As if freed from all guilt, the tenor sings a new ‘Agnus Dei’, culminating in a long high B flat. The choir takes up the original ‘Agnus Dei’ as a refrain over arpeggios from the violins, preparing for the changing colours of ‘Dona nobis pacem’, whose melodic curves, with their gently repetitive rocking motion, expand until the orchestral coda, on a pedal point, typical of Gounod, sounding like a long farewell.



#### CHRISTUS FACTUS EST

Gounod left Rome towards the end of May 1842, and by the beginning of July he was in Vienna, where he made the acquaintance of Count Stockhammer, president of the recently founded Philharmonic Society, who invited him to compose an unaccompanied vocal mass to be performed at the Karlskirche on 14 September 1842 for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. The text, celebrating Christ’s willing sacrifice on the cross

is taken from Philippians 2: 8-9. Gounod chose it to replace the Offertory for the feast day of the French king. Since the autograph material (for tenor and nine instruments) now in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna is incomplete, we have followed the manuscript (for soprano or tenor with orchestral accompaniment) belonging to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, which according to the signature dates from the late 1840s.

The style of this motet in A major is rather mixed: the introduction, whose melody is not concluded before the entrance of the voices, is almost operatic (despite its somewhat archaic suspensions); subsequently, as in an aria, the text becomes almost a support for the vocal line. The first sentence, from verse 8 ('Christ humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross'), is in a flexible 9/8 expressing Christ's docility: everything revolves around the mediant, as is often the case in the operas of Bellini. On the other hand, the second sentence, verse 9 ('Wherefore God hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name'), on a ground bass, seems to be striving to rise up to the authority of God the Father or of J. S. Bach. The line fills out until regular batteries of chords lend all their force to the harmonic progressions supporting 'super omne nomen', before affirming the dominant key. The 'Alleluia' is thus the climax of the motet. There follows a long F-major pedal point representing Christ's willingness to die in order to save mankind; and the motet ends as it began, enriched by a borrowing from D minor (representing the death of Christ) by way of a plagal cadence.



#### VOKALMESSE POUR LA FÊTE DE L'ANNONCIATION

So pleased was Gounod with the performance of his *Messe à grand orchestre* that he decided to stay on in Vienna in order to present his Requiem. And soon after its performance, on All Souls Day, 2 November 1842, he received another commission, this time for an unaccompanied

vocal mass, to be performed at the Karlskirche on 25 March 1843, the Feast of the Annunciation.

Gounod's *Vokalmesse* is a highly original work: each of the prayers except the Sanctus is introduced by a brief chorale ('coral'), the text of which is a versicle or responsory associated with the Virgin Mary. After appearing first in its harmonised version, the melody is subsequently heard several times in the course of the prayer as a *cantus firmus* relating to certain words. Since, in order to recognise the presence of a quotation, a congregation needed to be familiar with the melody, we hesitate to attribute the paternity of these chorales to Gounod, especially since the stress on the syllables of the Latin text is not always ideally placed.

Kyrie. The opening chorale, '*Dei genitrix intercede pro nobis*' (Mother of God intercede for us), returns here in the second part of each of the three 'Kyrie', which is treated as a tonal fugal exposition, an archaism for Gounod. The chorale is barely heard at first, taken by sopranos 2 in G minor, before being presented more clearly in C major by sopranos 1, then vigorously by the bass voices in F major. All this forms a progression that culminates *fortissimo* on 'eleison'. The first 'Christe', on the other hand, presents a steady polyphony, more harmonic in conception, in which the voices almost recite the text, *recto tono*. The second 'Christe' is livelier, and the third one, with its modulations before the repeat of the 'Kyrie' in C minor, gives a Romantic slant to the Palestrinian model.

Gloria. The chorale makes a request to the Virgin Mary to be allowed to praise her in a prayer addressed to her Son: '*Dignare me laudare te, Virgo sacrata*' (Allow me to praise thee, O sacred Virgin). Its melody is heard later beneath the exclamation 'Laudamus te', then under 'Filius Patris', as a reminder of the Mother's role, before finally triumphing at the end by crowning with its semibreves the evocation of the Holy Trinity – which may seem theologically bold, since Mary does not belong to the Holy Trinity. Like the Kyrie, the Gloria begins with a fugal exposition for two, then four voices, but here the subject flies heavenwards with an ascending leap of a fifth. Like the 'Christe' in the Kyrie, the 'gratias' offers the contrast of homophony: a moment of quiescence before the return of polyphony to

praise the King of the Heavens ('Domine Deus'), then his Son ('Filius Patris'), hailed by the forceful return of the original motif. But the Son of God is also the Lamb, who has accepted to bear the sins of the world; the accidentals, the suspensions, the pained intervals ('Qui tollis') introduce a darker climate. The Gloria culminates on a long pedal point on the dominant, with free counterpoint unfolding above it. The words, 'Qui sedes', correspond naturally to this harmonic throne. The repeat, with variations, of the original 'Gloria' is capped by the chorale (sopranos 1) as a means of praising the Virgin as well as the Trinity in 'Quoniam tu solus Sanctus'. Again, with a 'Renaissance' vocabulary (perfect chords, suspensions, weak degrees) Gounod uses modern syntax, without pastiche.

Credo. The text of the chorale, '*Da mihi virtutem contra hostes tuos*' (Against thy enemies give me strength), seems to be in opposition to the vigorous affirmation of faith of the Credo. The chorale reappears in counterpoint to 'propter nos homines': Christ the Redeemer may have come down from Heaven, but the Virgin's help is still a welcome benefit. It then returns for the evocation of the Last Judgment ('Et iterum venturus est cum gloria, iudicare vivos et mortuos'), for on that day only those who have been able to resist evil will be counted among the righteous. Further on, the remission of sins ('remissionem peccatorum') likewise calls upon the chorale. With its lively tempo and syllabic writing, the Credo contrasts with everything that went before. Gounod appears to have associated the bass voices with mentions of God the Father: they enter for 'Patrem omnipotentem', remain silent for the mention of Christ ('Et in unum Dominum, Iesum Christum') and return for 'et ex Patre natum'. They are not required in 'Lumen de Lumine ...' until the affirmation of consubstantiality with the Father. An effect evoking the descent from Heaven ('descendit de caelis') leads to the middle section: the mystery of the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ ('Et incarnatus ...'). This *Adagio* contains a wealth of dramatic touches. Return to *allegro* for 'Resurrexit', while the bass voices wait until Christ is seated with his Father ('sedet ad dexteram Patris') to make their return. The chorale joins in the announcement of the Last Judgment. We expect the beginning to



be repeated from 'Et in Spiritum Sanctum', but Gounod maintains his momentum and delays the (quasi-) repeat until 'Et unam, sanctam ...', *fortissimo*, in which the chorale is heard from the tenors.

An introductory chorale would have spoiled the essentially harmonic effect of the Sanctus. This prayer is very gentle and very rich in sound, and its slow pace increases the magic. This is heavenly music, especially the middle section for five soloists: the polyphony unfolds without tension amidst perfect chords. The Benedictus, also for five soloists, is a free fugato, its subject a sweet melisma coiled around its third. Without ever becoming ponderous, this progresses until the homorhythmic exclamation 'Hosanna in excelsis!' launches the full repeat of the Sanctus.

Agnus Dei. The chorale for the invocation of the Lamb of God is '*Post partum Virgo inviolata permansisti*' (After childbirth, O Virgin, thou didst remain inviolate). The Agnus Dei sees the return of fugal writing similar to that of the Kyrie, but looser and for five voices. There is more gentleness than gloom in this piece in C minor. Arriving on the cadenza, the chorale rises in the alto voice to G minor over free counterpoint. Then the fugato resumes, and the work ends with the chorale taken by the soprano, leading to a state of peace for 'Dona nobis pacem'.



#### HYMNE SACRÉE

Dated 1843 and scored for four soloists, mixed choir and orchestra, this *Hymne sacrée* was Gounod's third official despatch from Rome. It received a favourable report that was summed up as follows by the permanent secretary of the Institut de France, Raoul-Rochette:

This composition is original in its progression and form; the choice of ideas is in keeping with the mystical colouring of the words; the combination of the voices and their relationship with each other is good, and the orchestral part is well written and includes some fine effects.

This work is broad in style, simple and striking, with Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' as its supreme model. Gounod had been deeply impressed by the latter when he heard it conducted by Otto Nicolai in Vienna in March 1843. The text is borrowed from two hymns by the contemporary poet Édouard Turquety: *Hymnes sacrées*, XIV, 'L'Ascension', first 4 lines of verses 10 and 11, then *Hymnes sacrées*, VIII, 'La Passion', excerpts from verses 18, 19 and 20. Apparently this hymn was not performed.

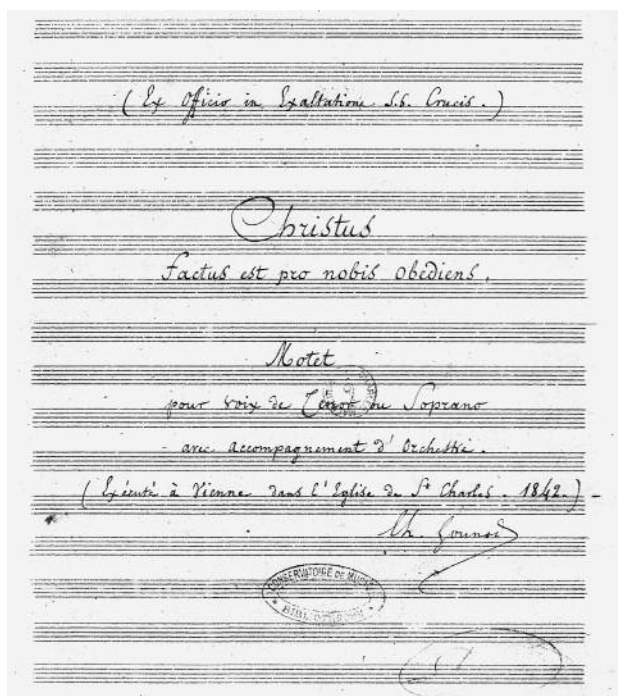
The introduction is pastoral in style. A melody rises and the tenor enters with the words 'Seigneur, tu vois notre âme'. The melody is in an easy, flowing style, with the sweetness and dramatic disposition that we associate with the tenor voice in the works of Bellini. The choir takes up the melody with fuller support from the orchestra. A transition, also in the pastoral style, leads to the first part of the middle section, the recitative for the baritone 'Frères, rallions-nous quand le monde s'écroule'. The light orchestration subtly adds a dramatic quality to the modulations. Supporting the baritone, the choir takes up the first line, *adagio*.

The baritone then intones the hymn proper, the heart of the piece, 'Prions pour que l'autel reste à jamais vainqueur', a broad cantilena, march-like, doubled by the cellos. The four soloists, doubled by the four principal woodwinds, take up the words and the polyphony becomes quite lively. The brass enter for the last lines.

'Frères, rallions-nous' is then taken up again and used for the subject of a choral fugue, resolute in character. Crowning the conclusion, the choir intones a chorale, doubled by the brass, taking up in reverse order the first two lines of the baritone's recitative, supported by batteries of triplets from the woodwinds, while the organ's *Voix céleste* creates a gentle tremolo effect.

The four soloists then sing 'Frères, marchons près de Jésus', to a melody with a pastoral colouring (gentle parallel tenths over a pedal point on the dominant) recalling that of the introduction, and a melodic pattern recalling that of the hymn, in accordance with Gounod's concern at that time to link motifs. The choir then takes this up, supported by an orchestra that is more animated, until a tutti, *fortissimo*, punctuated by the words 'Sans parler, sans pleurer. – Pas de voix, pas de larme'.

Alone, the baritone sings the hymn 'Prions pour que l'autel reste à jamais vainqueur', before it is taken up by the soloists, choir and full orchestra. The choir, without the soloists, then echoes the last words ('Père, nous sommes là ... Gloire à vous'), with tremolos, then held notes from the violins. The choir in turn falls silent while the soloists, starting lower, re-echo the words 'Gloire! Gloire à vous!'. The orchestra brings the work to a close with soft cadences beneath tremolos from the violins.



Autograph title page of the motet *Christus factus est*, written in Vienna.  
 Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

Page de titre autographe du *Christus factus est* de Vienne.  
 Bibliothèque nationale de France.