

Gounod, Charles (1818-1893): Overview of his Writings

On 24 June 1864, then absorbed in reading Victor Hugo's *Shakespeare*, Gounod confided to his wife, "What a beautiful thing a book is! It is the most complete expression of human thought: a painting cannot do everything, nor can a poem or a musical composition. Eloquence itself must come to an ending, but the book! The book is a sphere, an argus, it has eyes everywhere."

Book projects would appear with increasing frequency in Gounod's correspondence. On 14 November 1868, in the midst of orchestrating the *Ballet* for *Faust*, he expressed his impatience to finish so that he could devote himself to his book on *Les Lois de l'Art* (the laws of art) which interested him much more. In July 1872, Gounod announced to his wife that he had sketched a book on art which transformed in February 1873 to an agreement to write a series of letters, [*De la Routine en matière d'art*](#), for a new review published in Brussels, *L'Art universel*. "I will discuss the Routine of the Public, of Authors, of Singers, of Critics, of Editors, and of Professors; the series can later form a volume," Gounod would write. Only the first four installments were published and were later republished in *The Cosmopolitan*, alternating between French and English. The remaining articles, which Gounod had outlined, were published (and perhaps completed) by Georgina Weldon in her [*Autobiographie*](#).

On 8 May 1874, Gounod confided to his son that he was writing the introduction to his book *La Grâce*, which he had come to him in a revelation, "It is a set of ideas and views on human life in relation to the natural and supernatural orders." In 1876, in response to publication of Weldon's unauthorized [*Autobiographie*](#) in London, he began work on [*Mémoires d'un artiste*](#) which he left off after describing the success of *Faust*.

On 5 August 1881, he confided to Édith de Beaufort his intention to work on a book, *De l'Identité Substantielle de la Foi Catholique et de la Raison*, which remained unfinished like his previous projects. This work would later take a turn, "This book that I began to write in prose," he explained to his wife, "turns into poetry: my thought writes itself, and invincibly so, in verse. The result of substituting a lyric form for ordinary language allows me to speak with emotion as much as with reason, to create art and philosophy at the same time. A book of this sort is something completely new and unique, I know of none other like it. My work as a whole is called *Poèmes philosophiques*: it includes several poems, linked to one another through 'the universal law of life'; Politics, Science, Art, Reason, Revelation, Philosophy, etc." This book was intended to be dedicated to the memory of the metaphysical mathematician Józef Maria Wrónski.

In 1884, Gounod returned to his *Mémoires*, writing them from the perspective of an homage to his mother, but he did not manage to get beyond 1842... In 1890, he announced a work that would keep him busy: a commentary on a piece of Scripture. He also worked for a long period, between 1889 and 1891, on the translation of the sermons of Saint Leo on the Nativity which he hoped, in vain, to publish with his own introduction.

The list of Gounod's known writings, of varying importance and often unfinished, show the sheer variety of subjects he took on, for Gounod did not limit his field of investigation to music. Beyond intersecting reflections on religion, morals, and politics, one also finds fables (*La Fourmi*, *La Taupe et les Renards*) a *Proverbe* in one act written in verse (*La Paix dans le ménage*), and a moral tale (*Le Vase et le Parfum*). Apart from the *Méthode de cor à pistons* (1839 ?) which he wrote for M. Rioux, and the *Choix de chorals de J. S. Bach annotés* (1869), Gounod only published one book, *Le Don Juan de Mozart* (1890), along with reviews of *Henri VIII*, *Proserpine*, and *Ascanio* by Saint-Saëns; a few prefaces for friends (*Les Vivantes*; *Une idée fantastique*; *Maman Jean*); and a dozen articles, the most developed of which are *Les Compositeurs chefs d'orchestre* (1873), *Préface aux lettres inédites de Berlioz* (1880), *La Recherche de l'effet et l'Esprit de système* (1884), *Considérations sur le théâtre contemporain* (1886), and *Mes souvenirs de pensionnaire à l'Académie de France à Rome* which was published in English (1892).

Gounod complained of being overwhelmed by letters to answer, but he obviously liked to write and took care with his correspondence knowing that, at the time, letters were read not only by their addressee but made the rounds of relatives (the library of the Conservatoire de Paris holds photocopies of several thousand letters). Gounod himself liked to read his letters before sending them. He did not, however, (or only rarely), make his letters pieces of literature. There are many rhetorical gems, edifying sermons, typical turns of phrase according to the expectations of his correspondents, but even during a time when he might have suspected that his letters would one day be published, he does not seem concerned with posing as a great man. In the great French tradition, he had a way with words, "What a horror, that appalling catastrophe in Batavia, 100,000 victims!!!! Volcanoes are doing well!" (05/09/1883 to his daughter Jeanne), "The Princess has a pretty voice, but she needs somebody to put some wood in her stove, if she has a stove!" (from Milan, 08/01/1878 to his wife); a taste for postscripts, "I have nails in my rear, and my muse, in knots, / Refuses to plumb the depths of my thoughts! / You will excuse me then, if I say, after all, / When the ass is in pain, one's mind hits a wall." (mid-May 1886 to Jules-Émile Alaux); the need to share "There is something painful about the impressions that we do not communicate, like food which cannot be swallowed; they weigh upon the heart and miss their meeting with another person" (28/03/1863 to his mother-in-law Hortense Zimmermann); and the art of evocation, "...the incomparable young figure of the Hemaphrodite [of the Villa Borghese], nothing surpasses its voluptuous elegance and supple abandon. The foot! The lifted foot of the upper leg! What grace! It is immortally beautiful. The entire figure is the ideal of charm and seduction" (Diary of Travels in Italy, 19/04/1862).

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