

Gounod, Charles, Autobiographie de Charles Gounod and Articles “Sur la routine en matière d’art” (1875)

Published in London (in French) in August 1875 by Georgina Weldon, who had hosted Gounod there between 1871 and 1874, this misleadingly-titled compilation brings together essays destined for a Brussels periodical, *L’Art universel*, which had published the first four in the spring of 1873. *The Cosmopolitan* reproduced them alternately in French and English from 28 August 1873 to 23 April 1874. The subsequent texts, unfinished, were added by Georgina Weldon to complete the collection. The claim that Gounod wrote them according to her ideas can only be partially credited. Weldon knew French well but the awkwardness of certain turns of phrase gives her away.

De la routine en matière d’art: “*Routine* is a chronic illness whose acute state is *prejudice* . . . If a being is to live, it must assimilate elements outside of it; it must *decompose, absorb, eliminate* . . . Reflection is the stomach of the intelligence.”

Le Public, that gathering of jaded idlers, is less sensitive to masterpieces than “the people”, when the latter is made to discover them. Nevertheless, the Public is impersonal, and it is by virtue of this fact that, for all its blunders, it escapes the petrification that is Routine.

Critics, short-sighted, have no idea that it is not the absence of faults that makes a great master, but the presence of qualities; they let themselves be cowed by the diversity of sensation and expression proper to true artists.

La Propriété artistique: Gounod retraces his career as a dramatic composer from *Sapho* to *Roméo*, which alone justifies the general title of *Autobiographie*, and retraces the history of the loss of his rights to *Faust* in England for having failed to file for them in time. He then explains the principle of the royalties system, unknown on the continent at the time, which involves paying the author a percentage of the sales of copies of his scores.

Urgence d’un congrès international: Gounod would also like to do away with the notion of public domain, which enables publishers to enrich themselves on editions of Bach or Handel that cost nothing. These works should become the National Property of National Libraries which would print them and, with the proceeds of the sales, buy fine modern works and offer them at the lowest possible prices.

Les Auteurs are mistaken. Genius brings humility: “The loftier the inspiration, the more clearly one feels that one is neither its principle nor its source, but only its instrument.” The influence of the age on the degree of artistic authenticity was the

cause of the contrapuntal games that encumber the masses based on popular songs of the late Middle Ages, which “echo the pretentious style of the Flamboyant Gothic.”

Gounod, who had undertaken to set to music Molière’s prose text, wanted to justify himself in a **Preface to George Dandin**: “verse, in virtue of its symmetry, offers the musician a much easier canvas, indeed often dangerously easy”; beautiful prose is worth more than mediocre verse, for in prose “each syllable can have its quantity, its exact and rigorous weight in the truth of the expression and the fitness of the language.”

Les Interprètes, “instead of getting into the skin of the role, [most often] put all their roles into the same skin”, and, to produce an *effect*, cultivate *virtuosity*.

Les Compositeurs-Chefs d’orchestre: In addition to this series, Gounod wrote (11 March 1873) an article for the Paris magazine [*Le Ménestrel*](#) in which he argued for composers’ right to conduct their own works, which the theatres and orchestras of Paris opposed. This right was recognised in Italy and Germany. “Is there a single conductor, even the best, who can claim to have in his mind a synthesis and analysis of any work as exact as that of the composer?” Finally, Gounod praises the superiority of certain very rare conductors who are true translators: “The whole business, fundamentally, is to save the work of art from slavery to *the letter which killeth*.”

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