

Charles Gounod, Mozart's Don Juan (1890)

Written in the spring of 1890, this analysis is the testimony of a composer still dazzled by a masterpiece discovered fifty years earlier. The circumstances of this discovery Gounod had recounted in a memorandum on the same subject, but entirely different, read on 25 October 1882 at the Institut (subsequently published in *Le Ménestrel*). This earlier text, less detailed, begins with an account of the performance at the Théâtre Italien and of Gounod's emotion, then goes on to become a kind of sermon. Certain striking expressions were omitted in 1890; thus: "The whole of drama is already contained in this prodigious overture composed in one night: a fecund night, of which it could be said, as with the inspired writer prophesying that of the birth of the Christ Child: *Nox sicut dies illuminabitur!* This night will be lit up like the day . . . How overpowering it is! How terrifying! This man of stone who advances with a step as monotonous and implacable as fate! He resembles the dull groan of a rising ocean that will submerge everything; this Man is a deluge unto himself!" Or, apropos of the first finale: "What light in this tempest! What brilliance in this riot! And all that without violence in the instrumentation, for sonority lies in strength and strength lies in the idea."

In 1890, Gounod intended to avail himself of *Don Giovanni* to demonstrate, score in hand, the superiority of the synthesis of the True and the Beautiful over the pretensions of a naturalism that would reduce the Beautiful to the True. Along the way, he also draws his examples from Michelangelo: "Like this head of Niobe which a faint contraction of the brow renders profoundly sorrowful, with Mozart the most poignant anguish never once troubles the serene tranquility of the form."

Aware of the futility of trying to reduce the masterwork to compositional formulae, Gounod introduces his analysis with the evocation: "Intuition, that spontaneous clairvoyance of Genius, is nothing other than unconscious philosophy: it is reason divined by sentiment, which in man is the first phase of creative potentiality. Hence the infallibility of the Genius; he *sees* where we *reason*. I shall endeavour to let the reader understand what Mozart saw."

"What made Mozart an absolutely unique genius was the constant and indissoluble union of *beauty of form* and *truth of expression*. In his *truth* he is *human*; through *beauty*, he touches us, he moves us; we recognise ourselves in him, not only in his divers passions, but also in the variety of form and character that they can take on. Through beauty he transfigures the real, even while leaving it entirely recognisable; he elevates and transports it, with the magic of a superior language, to that serene and luminous region that is Art, in which the Intelligence retells, with the tranquility of Vision, what the heart has felt in the throes of Passion. And the True in the beautiful is the whole of Art."

Here Gounod draws our attention to a discovery, there he takes hold of a particular feature to draw from it a general rule. Thus, on the trio that follows the duet with the Commander: "As ever, the situation is established from the first note. No fumbling about or vain preliminaries. The lugubrious gravity of the movement, the rhythmic uniformity of the triplets in the violins [...], everything contrives to convey, in this unforgettable scene, a stupor that the pen of Dante and the brush of Michelangelo never surpassed."

The aria "Batti, batti" suggests to Gounod this remark: "One is tempted to wonder whether Mozart ever had to *look for* the musical form of his characters. The forms fit them so well they they seem themselves to have been the authors of the music that expresses and represents them."

An appendix on the interpretation of the work reflects everything that Gounod himself had had to endure in his time. He treats in turn of "Tempo", which depends on the location and on the style of the performers; "Metre", which ensures musical equilibrium; "Nuances", equivalent to shading in painting; "Breathing", tied to the prosody; "Pronunciation", which reveals the idea by means of the word; "The Conductor", who must understand and make the others feel how much he can concede in terms of metre, without losing the *feeling* of metre.

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