

Gounod, Charles : Mémoires d'un artiste (1896)

Unlike Berlioz—whose [Mémoires](#) portray his struggles, victories, failures, loves, tempers, and passions—Gounod was motivated by two concerns: warning the reader away from his own mistakes and showing his gratitude to those who shaped him: his parents, his teachers, and the great musicians, painters, and sculptors he knew only through their works of genius. One has to read between the lines to get past the edifying tone and sense the tormented temperament of the “hyperromantic”, described by Fanny Hensel, he who was fundamentally independent, a rebel against hierarchies who refused the idea that any man might exercise power over another, except for the pope (because he received his legitimacy from God). Gounod’s Catholicism was founded on an ideal of universal brotherhood much more than it was on profound piety. His faith served as a refuge, a relief from the depression that marked certain periods of creative overwork. (The Doctor Blanche treated him several times.)

The *Mémoires*, likely written in reaction to the English publication of the so-called [Autobiographie](#) and many letters, must have also been an occasion for taking stock. However, it is not known when or why Gounod began work. An allusion to the ordination (in May 1845) of Charles Gay, “a priest for the last thirty years”, and the age, “43 years” of Gaston de Beaucourt (born on 7 June 1833), makes the summer of 1876 a probable starting date, were it not for a later reference to the age of his son Jean (born 8 June 1856), “and who has now attained the age of 21”, suggesting the summer of 1877... Whatever the case, Gounod’s work was interrupted until the July 1884 publication of an article by Arthur Pougin, “Les Ascendants de M. Charles Gounod” (“The Ancestors of Mr. Charles Gounod”). Pleased to rediscover details once related to him by his mother, Gounod returned to his manuscript with a new perspective: “My work on my dear mother interests me a great deal,” he confided to his wife, “in the sense that, for my heart, it is the tenderest means by which I might remake what I had initially destined *Mémoires* to become; she will occupy a more important role.” But the narrative stopped short in December 1842. Upon his death, Gounod had not completed his work.

The plans of his widow, Anna, and their son Jean to write “a *Mémorial*, a veritable *Autobiographie*” based on the letters from Gounod to an [unnamed] writer (Camille Bellaigue?) seems to indicate that they did not have in mind these earlier sketches (*Mémoires d'un artiste*, 1876; *À ma Mère*, 1884), perhaps because the composer had left them in Morainville with his friends the Beaucourts, where he had written them. This new project, announced in *Le Ménestrel* of 22 July 1894, was never completed and the following summer *La Revue de Paris* offered its readers the *Mémoires d'un artiste* in the form that Calmann Lévy later published them in 1896.

The veil was lifted regarding the origins of this text when, on 5 July 1895, *Le Figaro* announced that Gounod's nephew, "M. Guillaume Dubufe is preparing to compile the master's memoirs, or rather his autobiography."

These four chapters draw from three sources: the autograph manuscripts of *Mémoires d'un artiste* (1876) and *À ma Mère* (1884), and a manuscript in another hand titled *Mes souvenirs de pensionnaire de l'Académie de France à Rome* (which served as the basis for [a partial English translation published in the 3 January 1892 issue of *The Century*](#)). The text appears to be a redrafting of the chapters relating to Italy and Germany from the *Mémoires* and *À ma Mère*. Guillaume, a painter, knew his uncle well enough to remain faithful to the sense of his words. The new structure that he created with a view to respecting or re-establishing the sequence of events and eliminating a few intimate details is very skillful and coherent. He rounded out the volume with a few important letters and articles (« [De l'artiste dans la société moderne](#) », « [L'Académie de France à Rome](#) », « [La nature et l'art](#) », « Préface à la correspondance d'Hector Berlioz », « [M. Camille Saint-Saëns, Henry VIII](#) »).

Only in the first chapter ("L'Enfance"), devoted to his apprenticeship, does Gounod talk largely about himself. In the second chapter, ("L'Italie"), he speaks more about painting and architecture—Michelangelo, the Sistine Chapel, the friendship of Ingres and his related memories—than about music (Palestrina, Fanny Hensel, Pauline Viardot), saying nothing about his return to the faith under the double influence of Charles Gay and the sermons of Lacordaire. In the third chapter, ("L'Allemagne") his time in Vienna—where he wrote his *Requiem* and his *Messe vocale*—, in Berlin—where he saw Fanny again—, and in Leipzig—where Mendelssohn gave him a cordial reception—are preceded by a particularly striking evocation of Venice. Chapter IV, ("Le Retour"), solemnly retraces the steps that led from the modest position of Kapellmeister at the Église des Missions étrangères to the mixed reviews of *Faust's* first performance.

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