

SHAKESPEARE ON THE RIVIERA

BY MARY DIBBERN

In April of 1865, the French composer Charles Gounod (1818-1893) left Paris, seeking the calm beauty of the French Riviera. In the town of Saint-Raphaël, on a street that now bears his name, he began to compose *Roméo et Juliette*, an operatic adaptation of Shakespeare's play that would become the greatest critical success during his lifetime. Gounod quartered in the *Oustalet dou Capelan* ("House of the Pastor"), a small villa belonging to the retired army officer and bibliophile René Savigny de Moncorps (1837-1915). He had transformed the three-story dwelling into a residence for poets and artists and it was "a gorgeous villa with an enchanting view of the shoreline bathed in the blue waves of the Mediterranean."¹ Today we can still see a plaque on the outside wall reading "The illustrious master Gounod composed *Romeo et Juliette*, at Oustalet dou Capelan, in the spring of 1865."

The composer's correspondence with his wife Anna (née Zimmerman) portrays a composer who habitually fled urban distractions and idle "chitchat" in order to listen attentively to his inner muse. An added attraction of Saint-Rafaël was that his librettist, Jules Barbier, also lived in a nearby house. While their close proximity means we are deprived of the letters that would have given us insight into their daily creative process, we can imagine them sitting comfortably outside under the big umbrella pines, perhaps sharing a refreshing afternoon *pastis*. In this lovely setting, he reported to Anna, "I awoke at sunrise and sat twenty paces from the beach. I'm working on the introduction to act one, the first duet of the ball scene and Friar Lawrence's cantilena. Four days' work here is better than forty in Paris." A few weeks later he explained, "For me, the sea is a true collaborator. This morning, the sea and I have written a huge section of act three." In another letter, Gounod evoked his student days in Rome when he compared the Mediterranean to the Bay of Naples and wrote of the inspiration nearby archeological sites similar to his memories of the Roman Campagna. "I am working on the love duet from act four. It is 6:30 am, under the ruins of the Fréjus aqueduct." He worked at a feverish pace, as if taking dictation. "I heard it [the music] for several days as if it were behind a wall; then closer and closer as if behind a thin partition; finally it emerged from the ruins of the nearby town and everything was clear; I wrote in my notebook without stopping." Such intense concentration took its toll. A physician arrived from Paris to treat him for nervous exhaustion and he was obliged to stop for several weeks. Nevertheless, by July of 1865 he completed the opera and it received its premiere in Paris at the Théâtre-Lyrique on 27 April 1867.

Why Romeo and Juliet? In 1839, Gounod had attended rehearsals of Hector Berlioz's great dramatic symphony *Roméo et Juliette*, which perhaps inspired him to set a portion of an Italian text *Romeo e Giulietta* as one of his Prix de Rome obligatory *envoies*. While Berlioz's symphony with soloists and chorus emphasized the political situation leading to a need for reconciliation between warring factions, Gounod and his librettists Barbier and Michel Carré concentrated on the love story. One outstanding feature of this opera is the four great duets sung by the title characters. Only the final duet deviates significantly from Shakespeare's play. Juliette awakens before Romeo's death, allowing a final scene between the lovers; this love-death scene might be seen as a French response to the denouement of Wagner's 1865 setting of *Tristan und Isolde*.

With his three greatest operas—*Faust*, *Mireille*, and *Roméo et Juliette*—Gounod created a new operatic genre, intermediate between the grandiose "grand opera" and the more superficial, formulaic *opéra-comique*. His combination of dramatic realism combined with a characteristically light touch successfully eludes French comic opera's deliberate superficiality. In 1862, an anonymous Belgian critic had asked Gounod the rhetorical question, "When will you give us that *Roméo et Juliette* that seems made for you

and that only you can give to the French stage?"² The critical reception of *Roméo et Juliette* resoundingly confirmed that earlier statement. "I left the Théâtre-Lyrique touched and overjoyed," wrote Eugène Tarbé in *Le Figaro*. "Work without precedent over which hovers, sovereign and dominant, the great spirit of Shakespeare," exclaimed Monreno in *Le Ménestral*. "A work in which knowledge and inspiration are revealed to the same degree," penned composer Ernest Reyer in *La France musicale*. The work's success led to many performances in increasingly important French venues. At the Opéra-Comique, *Roméo et Juliette* became the first opera performed with sung recitatives. In 1888, it entered the repertoire of the Opéra with the addition of a ballet, and later was revived for the 1889 Universal Exposition. Gounod's eloquent melodies, lavish orchestration, and deep sensitivity to dramaturgy had a lasting impact upon successive generations of composers. Henri Duparc wrote in 1918, "[Gounod] was an innovator in the sense that his extremely personal music had an immense influence on the composers who came after him."³ *Roméo et Juliette*, performed worldwide for over a century, remains one of the jewels of the operatic repertoire.

1 GEORGES VICAIRE, *LE VICOMTE DE SAVIGNY DE MONCORPS DE LA SOCIÉTÉ DES BIBLIOPHILES FRANÇOIS ET DE LA SOCIÉTÉ DES AMIS DES LIVRES*. PARIS: LIBRAIRIE HENRI LECLERC, 1916, 15.

2 QUOTED IN STEVEN HUEBNER, *THE OPERAS OF CHARLES GOUNOD*. OXFORD: CLARENDON PRESS, 1990, 160.

3 QUOTED IN *LE COURRIER MUSICAL*.

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