

NAXOS

ROMANTIC
PIANO

CHARLES
GOUNOD

Piano Works

Méditation sur le premier Prélude de J.S. Bach

Marche funèbre d'une marionnette

Six Romances sans paroles

Warren Lee



Charles
GOUNOD
 (1818–1893)

Piano Works

1	Méditation sur le premier Prélude de piano de J.S. Bach (1853) (version for piano)	4:57	Préludes et fugues pour l'étude préparatoire au <i>Clavecin bien tempéré</i> de J.S. Bach (c. 1890)	23:57
	Six Romances sans paroles (1849–71)	18:20	No. 1 in G major	
2	No. 1. La Pervenche (1849)	2:53	14 Prélude	1:17
3	No. 2. Le Ruisseau (1849)	3:17	15 Fugue	2:16
4	No. 3. Le Soir (c. 1840–42) (version for piano, arr. 1861)	2:51	No. 2 in E minor	
5	No. 4. Le Calme (1854) (version for piano of <i>La Nonne sanglante</i> – Act III: Cavatina: Un jour plus pur, arr. 1865)	3:28	16 Choral	0:52
6	No. 5. Chanson de printemps (1849) (version for piano, arr. 1866)	2:03	17 Fugue	2:35
7	No. 6. Le Lierre (1871) (version for piano)	3:48	No. 3 in C major	
8	Prélude in C minor (pub. 1877)	2:21	18 Prélude	1:46
9	La Veneziana, Barcarolle (1873–74)	3:30	19 Fugue	2:59
10	Impromptu in G major (1888)	2:29	20 Prélude	1:39
11	Souvenance, Nocturne (c. 1865)	4:09	21 Fugue	2:26
12	Messe solennelle de Sainte Cécile: Offertoire 'Invocation' (1855) (version for piano, arr. c. 1875)	3:06	No. 5 in F major	
13	Grande valse brillante in D major 'Georgina' (1838–42?)	6:48	22 Choral	1:07
			23 Fugue	3:03
			No. 6 in A minor	
			24 Choral	1:07
			25 Fugue	2:50
			26 Gavotte in A minor (1887–93?)	3:36
			27 Marche funèbre d'une marionnette (1871–72)	3:25

Romantic Piano • 3

Charles Gounod (1818–1893)

Early years

Charles-François Gounod was born in Paris on 17 June 1818, and died in Saint-Cloud on 18 October 1893. His father was official artist to the Duc de Berry, a member of the royal family, and the Gounods' home in his early years was at the Palace of Versailles, where they occupied an apartment until his father's death in 1823. Gounod's mother was an accomplished pianist, appreciated the fine arts and encouraged Charles, the younger of two sons, in his piano studies with Anton Reicha, an acquaintance of Beethoven. At the time he was much taken with the operas of Mozart and Rossini.

Despite his mother's wish for him to choose a career in Law, Gounod's talents lay clearly in music and he entered the Paris Conservatoire to study composition and piano. Gounod's preference was for composition, although unfortunately a succession of venerable composition teachers, Henri-Montan Berton, Jean-François Le Sueur and Ferdinando Paër all died during his studentship and failed to make a strong impression. However, meeting Hector Berlioz, one of France's leading composers, who in turn admired some of his early compositions, proved immensely influential.

In 1839 at his second attempt Gounod won the Prix de Rome, a clear acknowledgement of his compositional gifts. Gounod had so far been living in post Napoleonic France, firstly under the restored Bourbon monarchy of Charles X and after the 1830 July Revolution under Louis Phillipe, the Citizen King. Undoubtedly the golden opportunity provided by the Prize for three years in Rome plus additional travel afforded this sensitive and highly intelligent young musician breadth and depth in discovering how his music could be further developed.

In Rome Gounod was especially drawn to the music of Palestrina with its unadorned simplicity and religious inspiration, further embedding a strong religiosity already present in Gounod's character. Michelangelo was also an especially strong influence concerning proportion and beauty. In fulfilling required commissions at this time Gounod completed various compositions including a *Messe à grand orchestre*. Fanny Mendelssohn, who he met in Rome, depicted Gounod's character as beset by rapid mood changes ranging from excitable, effusive and eminently charming to contemplative, aloof and mystical. Broad reading included Goethe's *Faust* which ignited a desire to set it to music at some point. Thus, Gounod's willingness to mesh abstract objective philosophical elements with life's raw realities was emerging even at this early stage.

Gounod visited Vienna during his final year of the Prize and amongst other things wrote *Messe vocale pour la fête de l'Annonciation* adhering to his by now innate desire for simple directness and a balance of sonic beauty and proportion. He had also shown adept technique writing *Mélodies* for voice and piano such as *Où voulez-vous aller?* (1839), *Le Soir* (1840) and *Venise* (1842). An introduction to Felix Mendelssohn from Fanny Mendelssohn led to meetings in Leipzig where he heard Mendelssohn rehearsing the famous Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and also playing Bach on the Thomaskirche organ. Gounod's musical and artistic outlook was now taking shape with Palestrina and Bach as its undoubted bedrock.

The 25-year-old Gounod returned to Paris in 1843 to take up a position that his mother had negotiated on his behalf as *maître de chapelle* at the Séminaire des Missions étrangères. This held positives and negatives. He was free to write and direct church music as he saw fit, such as the *Messes brèves* he composed during 1844–45 and he had hopes for an exemplary church music there that would stimulate a revival in standards throughout France. But the organ was poor and the choir maintained only a very modest standard to start with although he effected improvements. By 1847, and in all seriousness, Gounod began studies at St Sulpice Seminary in preparation for ordination as a priest. But a major change was to take place shortly. The 1848 Revolution had just broken out when he resigned from the Séminaire des Missions étrangères and as far as a future in church circles was concerned he indicated he was without prospects. He now felt there was only one place where a composer could make a name and that was the theatre.

The operas

Gounod's pivot towards the theatre and opera has been interpreted many ways, but it is clear he himself saw no conflict between the secular and the sacred in so far as his own music was concerned. He harboured ambitions to write a Faust opera during his Prix de Rome years when his religious musical aspirations were at their peak and continued to write religious music in later years when his operas were being created at regular intervals. Nevertheless, some writers have challenged his religious sincerity because of this apparent dichotomy.

The place of opera as a medium at the forefront of musical development was rising during the 1840s and 1850s with composers such as Wagner in neighbouring Germany and Verdi in Italy producing forward looking works. Following the establishment of the French Second Republic under Louis Napoleon after the February revolution of 1848 and his elevation to Emperor as Napoleon III in 1852, opportunities within his expanding Second Empire were growing. Paris, under Baron Haussmann's influence was being rebuilt in the grandiose Second Empire Style culminating in Garnier's superb opera theatre (1862–75). Berlioz's desire to return French opera to its previous heyday in Gluck's time hadn't gained traction with *Bevenuto Cellini* (1838) and his *Les Troyens* and *Béatrice et Bénédict* lay in the future. Opportunities beckoned for a young composer such as Gounod to lift French opera to a similar level as neighbouring countries.

Gounod had made the acquaintance of singer Pauline Viardot during his stay in Rome and it was greatly to his advantage that this friendship was rekindled in 1849. Her husband Louis Viardot was a critic and impresario, the two forming a power couple on the French musical scene. Her taste for Gluck's operatic style resulted in a commission for Gounod to use Émile Augier's libretto on the classical subject *Sapho*, which would feature her in the leading role at the Paris Opéra in 1851. But Gounod's wish for classical simplicity coupled with delicately lyrical qualities failed to engage his audiences and the work didn't succeed.

His next opera, *La Nonne sanglante* in 1854 was also unsuccessful, and had been written without the help of the Viardots who had become estranged following Gounod's marriage to Anna Zimmermann. But her father Pierre-Joseph Zimmermann was a piano professor, retired from the Paris Conservatoire but well connected and very supportive of Gounod's works. Indeed, it was Pierre-Joseph Zimmerman who in 1853 apparently heard Gounod improvising a descant to Bach's *First Prelude* from the *48 Preludes and Fugues* and encouraged him to notate it, leading to its astonishing popularity as *Ave Maria*.

The gothic novel atmosphere of *La Nonne sanglante* was a far cry from *Sapho* and is indicative of Gounod's multifaceted career moves at this time. His *Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2* were written in 1855 as was his *Messe solennelle de Saint Cécile* and six of his *Mélodies* for voice and piano were published. For some, Gounod's style was maturing at this time, becoming rather less direct and simple, whether in the sacred or secular works. His reputation was spreading, and he had been directing vocal teaching in Paris schools as well The Orphéon, a collection of Paris choral societies.

Gounod's next opera, *Le Médecin malgré lui* at the Théâtre Lyrique in 1858 was more successful, in terms of performances and ticket sales. Princess Mathilde, Napoleon I's niece, was partially responsible for persuading the Comédie-Française to withdraw its claims on the libretto and it is clear Gounod's reputation was becoming much more firmly established.

Once again at the Théâtre Lyrique and in collaboration with its director Léon Carvalho, Gounod's next opera, *Faust*, had been an ever-present idea since his days in Rome. This time, in 1859, Gounod was able to achieve a desirable balance between simplicity and directness and highly sensitive word-setting, in Goethe's portrayal of lofty idealism, worldly greed and religious piety. Although not without many initial changes and a mixed reaction in Paris, *Faust* was well received in Germany and beyond, thereafter becoming a popular drawcard in Paris itself. Between 1860 and 1862 *Philémon et Baucis*, *La Colombe* and *La Reine de Saba* followed, but all met with a mixed reaction.

Gounod had to re-group after these comparative failures and it was 1864 before *Mireille* appeared, planned with care and an eye for French provincial atmosphere and colouration. Perhaps inevitably it achieved greater popularity in France than elsewhere but as always Gounod's stylistic elegance and charm sometimes failed to adequately represent the harsher realities of life. Appearing in 1867, *Roméo et Juliette's* subject matter proved more generally suitable for Gounod's musical approach and achieved immediate success. In fact, these years up to 1870 reaped the benefit of Gounod's assiduous attention over time not just to opera but many other genres such as drawing-room *Mélodies* and religious works. Since Berlioz's death in 1869 Gounod had been France's acknowledged leading composer.

Success with religious music

A third major outbreak of conflict in France during Gounod's lifetime, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, had the greatest personal effect on him. The height of his success had occurred during Napoleon III's brilliant but assertive Second Empire which collapsed and morphed into the Third Republic as a result of the German victory. Gounod was forced to seek refuge in London with his wife and two children, leaving his late father-in-law's house in Saint-Cloud which was later destroyed by advancing Prussian troops.

Gounod was to spend nearly four years in Britain, although his wife and children returned to France in 1871, reportedly following disagreements over Gounod's personal affairs. These included his wish to remain in London as a guest of Mrs Georgina Weldon who had become a protagonist for Gounod's music and who provided much appreciated financial advice. Furthermore, in his mind Gounod had cast the Franco-Prussian war in terms of the superficial triumph of technology over Christian precepts, reinforcing his religious leanings. He found in Britain a great demand for religious music and drawing room ballads, two areas he could service with complete confidence in order to maintain a living. Songs such as *Oh Happy Home!* and *The Worker* (lyrics by Fred Weatherly and with orchestral accompaniment), the Latin motet *Gallia* (performed at the opening of the London International Exposition in 1871), *The Annunciation* first of the *Fifteen Mysteries after the Holy Bible* (1873–74) and other works occupied him as well as numerous conducting engagements and appearances before enthusiastic audiences.

Exhausted, he finally returned to France in 1874 but the musical scene had moved on during his absence and although greatly honoured he was no longer at the forefront. More vibrant chromaticism and tonal flexibility were present in the music of Fauré and more colour in Bizet's *Carmen* (1875). His operas *Cinq-Mars* (1877) *Polyeucte* (1878) and *Le Tribut de Zamora* (1881) were staged but failed to achieve lasting success. Nevertheless, Gounod's religious music continued to find favour, with his oratorios *La Rédemption* (1882) and *Mors et Vita* (1885), premiered in Britain and personally approved by Queen Victoria, securing numerous performances. To many Britons accustomed to adopting the primacy of foreign composers, Gounod followed on naturally from Handel and Mendelssohn.

Instrumental music also occupied Gounod's final years with his *Petite Symphonie* (1885), and four string quartets continuing to show those qualities of refinement and sensitivity that permeate so many of his works and find a lasting legacy in Fauré, Debussy and succeeding French composers.

The piano music

The *Romances sans paroles* ('Romances without Words'), with their simple, vocally inspired strophic form and intimate characterisation are very close to Gounod's numerous *Mélodies* for voice and piano and unlike the bigger-scale Mendelssohn *Lieder ohne Worte* ('Songs without Words'). Even though they are comparative miniatures, Gounod demonstrates time and again his talent for characterisation and mood painting together with beautifully crafted melodic writing. The structures are simple and direct with a conservative approach to keys and tonalities. The overall effect is undeniably French and a polar opposite to German Romanticism as advanced by Richard Wagner.

Although imbued with great melodic charm the miscellaneous piano solos heard here tend to show a more pianistic and instrumental focus than the *Romances*. Their musical form often goes beyond strophic construction, using Binary or Ternary form across the work concerned.

The *Préludes et fugues pour l'étude préparatoire au Clavecin bien tempéré de Jean-Sébastien Bach* were collected together, edited and published posthumously by Gounod's one-time student Henri Büsser in 1895. A Bach aficionado, Gounod wrote them to encourage the performance and study of Bach's famous *48 Preludes and Fugues* and Gounod probably completed them individually over many years. Most are dedicated to friends and acquaintances, now little known, but Camille Saint-Saëns is the dedicatee of the *Prelude and Fugue in D*.

1 Méditation sur le premier Prélude de piano de J.S. Bach (1853)

Lauded or deplored, Gounod's addition of a melody to Bach's *First Prelude* remains his most famous work, generally known as *Ave Maria*. Allocated to the accompaniment, Bach's original notes remain mostly unaltered, but the first four bars are repeated for an introduction and bar one is again repeated later to allow the entire *Prelude* to be played a second time. The piano solo version, heard here, redistributes Bach's notes between the hands to facilitate the addition of Gounod's increasingly elaborate melody, with further notes occasionally added to the accompaniment.

Six Romances sans paroles

2 No. 1. Le Pervenche (1849)

This gentle unassuming piece is dedicated to composer Antoine François Marmontel.

3 No. 2. Le Ruisseau (1849)

The work's flowing, limpid character is clearly expressed, and the dedicatee is composer Félix Le Couppey.

4 No. 3. Le Soir (c. 1840–42)

This contemplative thoughtful work, like the previous two, features theme and accompaniment integrated into a seamless whole.

5 No. 4. Le Calme (1854, arr. 1865)

The dedicatee of this work is composer Georges Bizet who was once a pupil of Gounod. Its accompaniment, and that of *Nos. 5* and *6*, is more independent from the theme than in *Nos. 1–3*. It also features tremolandos, pianistic devices frequently used in Romantic music to give expression to a chord or harmony.

6 No. 5. Chanson de printemps (1849, arr. 1866)

This piece is dedicated to composer Camille Saint-Saëns, one of France's best-known musicians. The theme is differentiated from the accompaniment in the score through the use of larger printed notes.

7 No. 6. Le Lierre (1871)

Published while Gounod was in Britain due to the Franco-Prussian War, this work is dedicated to Arabella Goddard, one of the foremost British pianists of her time. Appropriately it is rather more instrumental than vocal in texture.

8 Prélude in C minor (pub. 1877)

This rather austere miniature recalls Bach and Beethoven, two of Gounod's musical idols.

9 La Veneziana, Barcarolle (1873–74)

A pensive Barcarolle, this is written in the pianistic manner of Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*.

10 Impromptu in G major (1888)

Dedicatee Jules Simon was a prominent French politician, writer and philosopher of the time. This is another work that demonstrates pianistic rather than vocal inspiration.

11 Souvenance, Nocturne (c. 1865)

This charming Nocturne moves with balletic grace through ABA musical form with delicate figuration in 6/8 time.

12 Messe solennelle de Sainte Cécile: Offertoire 'Invocation' (1855, arr. c. 1875)

Invocation is a movement from Gounod's *Messe solennelle de Sainte Cécile* written in 1855. Here it is arranged for piano in A flat major, a richer key for that instrument than the original G major orchestral score.

13 Grande valse brillante in D major 'Georgina' (1838–42?)

This is a fine example of the Waltz genre popular during the era. Plentiful repeats render it flexible enough for both drawing-room performance and ballrooms of the day.

Préludes et fugues pour l'étude préparatoire au *Clavecin bien tempéré* de Jean-Sébastien Bach

(c. 1890)

14 15 No. 1. Prelude and Fugue in G major

The *Prelude's* spirited mood is portrayed in a quite Romantically styled manner. By contrast the *Fugue* comprises strictly German Baroque styled counterpoint in two parts.

16 17 No. 2. Choral and Fugue in E minor

The opening *Choral* is very Bachian in every respect. The two-part *Fugue* introduces gently chromatic material and blossoms into multiple parts in its final bars.

18 19 No. 3. Prelude and Fugue in C major

The *Prelude* commences in Bachian two-part Invention style but Gounod's Romantic thematic shaping bursts through towards the end, lightening the atmosphere. Again, the *Fugue* contains mild chromaticism in preparation for Bach's more astringent sonorities.

20 21 No. 4. Prelude and Fugue in D major

The theme in this poised *Prelude* in the style of a Mendelssohn *Song without Words* soars delicately. The light-hearted *Fugue* in Bachian manner is mostly in two parts.

22 23 No. 5. Choral and Fugue in F major

The opening *Choral* is a Bachian model and the lengthy *Fugue* with its chromatically tinged subject breaks into multiple parts in the final bars. Episodes within the *Fugue's* formal structure are often pianistically written.

24 25 No. 6. Choral and Fugue in A minor

The opening *Choral* produces a grand effect and is pianistically scored for maximum tonal impact. The sprightly *Fugue* with its Baroque dance-like quality ends with a coda using a persistent pedal note, one of Gounod calling-cards in this set of pieces.

26 Gavotte in A minor (1887–93?)

Gounod's admiration for Bach is celebrated in this pastiche of a Baroque Gavotte such as Bach wrote in his many keyboard suites.

27 Marche funèbre d'une marionnette (1871–72)

As the theme music for the television series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955–65) this music gained worldwide attention although many would not have known the music was Gounod's. Its slightly macabre humour includes score directions such as 'Here many of the principal personages stop for refreshments' at the major-key section!

Warren Lee

Photo: Cheung Ka Lung Moses



Warren Lee made his debut with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra at the age of six. A graduate of the Royal Academy of Music in London and the Yale School of Music, he was the First Prize winner of the Stravinsky Awards International Piano Competition and the Grand Prix Ivo Pogorelich in 1995. He has performed on four continents, often in collaboration with international artists and leading orchestras. His multiple recordings for Naxos have been streamed over 15 million times and have garnered favourable reviews worldwide. A Steinway Artist as well as an award-winning composer, Warren Lee received the Ten Outstanding Young Persons Award in Hong Kong in 2012 and was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music in 2015 for his contribution to the music profession. In 2017 he received the Ian Mininberg Distinguished Alumni Award from the Yale School of Music.

www.warren-lee.com

During his time in Italy and later in Leipzig, Charles Gounod was drawn by the balance of sonic beauty and proportion to be found in the music of Palestrina and J.S. Bach. He developed an innate desire for simple directness as can be heard in the excerpt from the *Messe solennelle de Sainte Cécile* and the *Méditation sur le premier Prélude de J.S. Bach*, now better known as *Ave Maria*. Gounod's talents for melody and mood painting are demonstrated in his *Romances sans paroles*, while his sense of wit can be heard in the famous *Marche funèbre d'une marionnette*.

Charles
GOUNOD
(1818–1893)

- | | | |
|--------------|--|--------------|
| 1 | Méditation sur le premier Prélude de piano de J.S. Bach (1853)
(version for piano) | 4:57 |
| 2–7 | Six Romances sans paroles (1849–71) | 18:20 |
| 8 | Prélude in C minor (pub. 1877) | 2:21 |
| 9 | La Veneziana, Barcarolle (1873–74) | 3:30 |
| 10 | Impromptu in G major (1888) | 2:29 |
| 11 | Souvenance, Nocturne (c. 1865) | 4:09 |
| 12 | Messe solennelle de Sainte Cécile: Offertoire 'Invocation' (1855)
(version for piano, arr. c. 1875) | 3:06 |
| 13 | Grande valse brillante in D major 'Georgina' (1838–42?) | 6:48 |
| 14–25 | Préludes et fugues pour l'étude préparatoire
au <i>Clavecin bien tempéré</i> de J.S. Bach (c. 1890) | 23:57 |
| 26 | Gavotte in A minor (1887–93?) | 3:36 |
| 27 | Marche funèbre d'une marionnette (1871–72) | 3:25 |

Warren Lee, Piano

A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet

Recorded: 9 **8**-**12** **14**-**26** and 10 **1**-**7** **13** **27** December 2022 at Wyastone Concert Hall, Monmouth, Wales, UK

Producer and editor: Andrew Walton (K&A Productions Ltd)

Engineer: Deborah Spanton (K&A Productions Ltd)

Booklet notes: Rodney Smith • Piano: Steinway, Model D • Cover photograph: www.pixabay.com

© & © 2025 Naxos Rights (Europe) Ltd • www.naxos.com