

Gounod: Sympathy for the devil

Gounod's life paralleled that of his own Faust. As the Royal Opera stages a starry revival, Jessica Duchon discovers a man who sold out for fame and money

Published: 11 September 2006

Near Paris's Opéra Garnier stands a patisserie that offers the culinary equivalent of Charles Gounod's Faust. In a religieuse aux roses, a choux pastry cathedral dome topped with pink icing masks decadent fresh raspberries suggestively embedded in rose-scented crème Chantilly.

Faust, now being revived in David McVicar's spectacular production at the Royal Opera House with the superstar soprano Angela Gheorghiu as Marguerite and the exciting young Polish tenor Piotr Beczala as Faust, sprang from the climate of 19th-century France that likewise veiled a seething sexual undercurrent with a pudeur bordering on hypocrisy.

Premiered in 1859, Faust became the most popular opera of its day. It provides its singers with meaty roles and its audience with ripping good tunes; and its finest moments ooze lascivious sensuality, proving the shallowness of any supposedly moral overlay.

Yet, after its runaway success, Faust virtually vanished for nearly a century. "Melody, always melody, my dear child, that is the sole, the unique secret of our art," Gounod once advised a student, but when the composer died in 1893, music had already changed direction under the impact of Wagner's heady, through-composed soundworld; Debussy and Schoenberg were experimenting with techniques that would determine the predominance of atonality through the 20th century; and after the First World War, with societies torn apart and the arts struggling to match the pace of change, Gounod's whole ethos - and Faust with it - was hopelessly outdated.

The opera's travesty of a literary classic added insult to injury, especially as other composers, including Schumann, Liszt and Berlioz, had tackled the same topic with high seriousness. Gounod's grand-scale take on Goethe's masterpiece, in which Faust sells his soul to the devil Mephistopheles in return for renewed youth, has so little to do with the original that in Germany it was tactfully retitled Margarethe.

Today, though, in a freer musical climate, Faust is making a comeback, and with good reason. "It's genius," insists Beczala. "The role has everything: beautiful phrases, high notes, dramatic moments and tremendous lyricism. It's one of my favourite operas." Gheorghiu adds: "This production is very refined

and intelligent - something you do not see often on an operatic stage nowadays."

When it was premiered two years ago, even the ballet raised the rafters, transformed into a vicious parody of Giselle; other immortal moments included the devil in dramatic drag and a point at which, according to Gheorghiu, Faust turned "a cartwheel like Nadia Comaneci".

Perhaps the strangest thing about Faust, though, is the degree to which its composer's history mirrors its story. McVicar's Faust is the ageing Gounod, claspng his manuscripts and gazing towards the organ loft to which his failing legs cannot carry him. "He can no longer make music, which was his whole life," Beczala comments. "You can understand why he longs for youth. But during the opera, he descends to the depths of human experience."

Gounod sold the French and Belgian rights to the opera to the publisher Choudens for 6,666 francs and 66 centimes (the sinister figure is explained by the division of the fee of 10,000 francs with his librettists). But did he sell his soul? "Yes," David McVicar declares. "He sold out to his own status."

Born in 1818, the gifted young Gounod first cast his compositional eye on the church. After winning the Paris Conservatoire's Prix de Rome, he spent an obligatory year in the Holy City where he was transfixed by the 16th-century music of Palestrina in the Sistine Chapel. He dreamed of bringing such purity into music in France and even considered taking holy orders. The enchantment of Rome never quite left him.

Worldly lures soon proved stronger, though. Gounod's breakthrough arrived when he met Paris's most influential opera singer: the Spanish-born mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot, uniquely placed to help establish him in the opera world, the only place a French composer could then find fame and fortune.

Viardot was married to a theatre director 20 years her senior and was already trailed by the infatuated Russian novelist Ivan Turgenev, who had virtually taken up residence at their country estate, Courtavenel. Gounod was adept at worming his way into female affections. He went to stay at Courtavenel, where he and Viardot made music together ceaselessly. Such was his impact on the bedazzled singer that poor Turgenev retreated to Russia (his play *A Month in the Country* was the direct result of this episode).

Gounod wrote Viardot an opera entitled *Sapho*; premiered in 1851, it brought him the hoped-for foothold, with the necessary star endorsement. *Sapho* is forgotten today, but without it Faust might never have existed.

Soon afterwards, Gounod accidentally became engaged to a wealthy young woman named Anna Zimmerman. He had been visiting the family socially, with no particular intentions, until Madame Zimmerman instructed him that he should either propose or cease compromising her daughter. Gounod went round to deliver an explanatory break-off letter, only to find Madame embracing him as her son-in-law before he could utter a word. Rather than putting her straight, he married Anna, whose fortune would undeniably come in useful.

The ructions with Viardot proved immense. She sent the bride a gift of a bracelet. Anna's family promptly returned it, having heard malicious gossip about the composer and singer's relationship. Gounod could have taken a stand - the gossip was almost certainly unfounded - but instead provided the lame excuse that he had given Anna a bracelet and she didn't need another. "The heart which Gounod talked about so much proved nothing but a bag of selfishness, vanity and calculation," wrote the enraged Viardot.

Real celebrity reached Gounod as unexpectedly as marriage. In 1853, a visitor overheard him improvising a tune over Bach's Prelude in C major and remarked that he should write it down. The resulting "Ave Maria" became a smash hit and made its startled composer a household name; he had the grace to be slightly embarrassed about it. Years later, though, he found it expedient to write a second "Ave Maria".

Greater indignity lay ahead. Fleeing the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Gounod went to London, which welcomed him with open arms. "The Victorians adored Gounod," says McVicar. "His music is like a Victorian parlour crammed with family photos, palm trees and skirts round the table legs in case they aroused people!"

Particularly welcoming were the arms of Mrs Georgina Weldon, with whom Gounod embarked on a peculiar and disastrous love affair. His health was delicate and she enjoyed taking care of him - although he loathed her beloved dogs. But the acrimony of the relationship's breakdown in 1874 was such that the vexatiously litigious Mrs Weldon presented him with a bill for £9,787 5s 9d and refused to return the manuscript of his latest opera, *Polyeucte* (Gounod had to reconstruct it painfully from memory).

Meanwhile, when the war had threatened his country property in France, this leading light of French culture had written a grovelling letter to the Crown Prince of Prussia begging him to save his house, declaring that his art stemmed from Germany and the German spirit.

Treacherous, cowardly, hypocritical, calculating and two-faced he may have been, but Gounod's musical output was prodigious and often exquisitely formed. By the end of his life, he had garnered every status symbol that France could provide, and was revered as the grandest composer in the land.

He's still not everybody's tasse de thé and McVicar says that his task has been "to make Gounod palatable to modern audiences. This production takes a slightly cynical view, exposing the mawkishness of the drama, but without betraying the work."

The final image of God, clad in top hat and black wings, perhaps sums it up. "Gounod wasn't interested in religion, but religiosity," says McVicar. "He liked its theatrical element. And I think it helped him to lead his dual life. He knew he'd be saved in the end."

'Faust', Royal Opera House, London WC1 (020-7304 4000), in rep 15 to 29 September