

# Petite symphonie for Wind Nonet

## Charles Gounod

Charles Gounod's father was a painter and engraver, and his mother was an accomplished pianist who supported the family by giving music lessons after her husband's death, when Charles was only five. Gounod inherited both of his parents' talents, and it seemed a toss-up whether he would pursue a career in the visual or the musical arts. Fortunately, he received a firm musical education that included private lessons in harmony and counterpoint from Anton Reicha followed by a rigorous course of study at the Paris Conservatoire. The seal of approval for any aspiring composition student at the Conservatoire was winning the Prix de Rome in music, which Gounod did in 1839. The artist Dominique Ingres observed that Gounod might just as easily have won a Prix de Rome in fine arts, so adept had he grown in that area.

Gounod was bored by the musical culture he encountered during his residency in Rome. The visual art, the general milieu, and the religious fervor of the city affected him more deeply, and for a while he contemplated entering the priesthood. In the end he decided against a religious vocation, but he maintained a deep sense of faith and a somewhat mystical outlook throughout his life and produced a small ocean of sacred compositions, including three oratorios and 21 masses.

He might have remained principally committed to sacred music had he not fallen in with the mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot, who was well-connected in Parisian musical life. Impressed by Gounod's talent, she secured a commission for him from the Paris Opéra for his first stage work, *Sapho*, in which she sang the title role. That served as a stepping stone to further theatrical projects and, ultimately, the great operas for which

he is principally remembered today: *Faust* (1859) and *Roméo et Juliette* (1867). Gounod is hardly known as a symphonic composer, but he did write two symphonies. His First, from 1855 (drawing on material dating back to 1843) is almost Haydnesque; his Second (1855 or 1856) is more in the Beethoven / Mendelssohn line. They are almost never programmed today, and it is a pity; the First would be especially sure to delight, being in the spirit of the ever-popular Symphony in C of Georges Bizet.

Gounod's *Petite symphonie* for Wind Nonet is also a symphony of sorts, straddling the boundary of large-ensemble chamber music and wind symphony. He wrote it at the instigation of his friend Paul Taffanel, who is widely viewed as the founder of the modern French school of flute playing. For 30 years Taffanel was his nation's leading flutist, playing in the orchestras of the Concerts du Conservatoire and the Paris Opéra. In 1892 he veered onto the path of conducting, where he also achieved great

---

## IN SHORT

**Born:** June 18, 1818, in Paris, France

**Died:** October 18, 1893, in St. Cloud, just outside Paris

**Work composed:** 1885, dedicated to the Society of Chamber Music for Wind Instruments

**World premiere:** April 30, 1885, at the Salle Pleyel in Paris, played by flutist Paul Taffanel, oboists Georges Gillet and Alfred Boullard, clarinetists Charles Turban and Prosper Mimart, hornists Jean Garigue and François Brémond, and bassoonists Jean Espaignet and Adolphe Bourdeau

**Estimated duration:** ca. 18 minutes

distinction, even leading the first French productions of several operas by Verdi and Wagner. In 1879 he founded the Société de Musique de Chambre pour Instruments à Vent (Society of Chamber Music for Wind Instruments), intended to elevate the status of wind-players in the musical scene and, through its commissions, to expand the worthwhile repertoire available to them.

The group presented a concert series every year from 1879 through 1893, mixing classic wind-centered works by Mozart, Beethoven, and others with recent works by international composers of note (Anton Rubinstein and Joachim Raff, for example) and pieces Taffanel commissioned. Most of the latter

failed to make an imprint in posterity, the exception being Gounod's *Petite symphonie*, the *pièce de résistance* of the 1885 season. The group brought it back in five ensuing years.

Here, Gounod returns to the sparkling style of his early orchestral symphonies. He follows the plan of a Haydn-style Classical symphony, with a resolute prologue introducing a vibrant opening *Allegretto*; a spacious *Andante cantabile* — or *Andante (quasi Adagio)*, as the composer adds in the score — effectively an opera aria for flute (to spotlight Taffanel); a bustling *Scherzo* (shades of Mendelssohn) with a lilting, folk-like trio section in the middle; and a punchy *Finale*.

---

## Angels and Muses

Paul Taffanel gave audiences their money's worth when they attended concerts of the Société de Musique de Chambre pour Instruments à Vent, which he had founded. When Gounod's *Petite symphonie* was premiered, it was the last of eight pieces on the program, preceded by Mozart's Quintet for Piano and Winds; Weber's Grand Duo for Clarinet and Piano; Franz Lachner's Octet for Winds; Saint-Saëns's Romance for Flute and Piano, Georges Pfeiffer's *Musette* for Oboe, Clarinet, and Bassoon; and Louis Diémer's *Grande Valse* and Handel's "Air varié", both for solo piano — to provide sonic variety, and played by Diémer.

Although Diémer was the star pianist in the French musical firmament, it was he alone who earned less than favorable comment in the reviews of the concert. Critics complained that his tone proved loud and harsh, particularly when compared to "such soft, such mellow and melting sounds" from the wind complement, as one account put it. Readers of *La Tribune de Genève* were informed by its correspondent:

If I say that Taffanel's legendary flute is at the head of this wonderful band, you can well believe me when I claim that they are outstanding artists .... How rarely we hear such a perfect performance, one with such polish in every detail, such precision of attack, such delivery of sounds and color.



Influential flutist Paul Taffanel