Ballet Music

GOUNOD Faust

VERDI Aïda

Verdi Overtures:
LA FORZA DEL DESTINO
LA TRAVIATA (Preludes to Acts I and III)
I VESPRI SICILIANI
AÏDA

Fausto Cleva conducting the ORCHESTRA OF
THE METROPOLITAN OPERA ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK
Fausto Cleva conducting the Orchestra of the Metropolitan Opera Association of New York

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Charles Gounod, perhaps the most important French dramatic composer during the middle of the nineteenth century, produced one work that has been monumentally successful out of all proportion to the rest of his output. That was his Faust. Inevitably, it seems, the work was all but completely repudiated when it first came out, critics charging that it was Wagnerian, too experimental, and full of obscurity traceable to the composer's fondness for the late quartets of Beethoven, "that muddy spring whence have issued all the bad musicians of modern Germany," one critic opined.

After the Germanic criticism had died out and the excellence of the work was largely admitted came the charge that Gounod must have written it at all, or have had something from a young genius he had stolen the score from a young genius who had known Gounod circulated the story that he had stolen the score from a young genius — "Verdi himself, in fact, who best maintained the charm of the work at the Theatre Lyrique. The scene is placed at the beginning of the final act, immediately preceding the dungeon scene.

The setting of this scene in which the ballet music occurs is Walpurgis Night on the Brocken in the Harz Mountains. Mephistopheles has conducted Faust here so that the philosopher may gaze upon the unholy revelry of the Witches' Sabbath.

It is the night on which the souls of the dead have been liberated to roam at will in this fearful spot. Mephistopheles conjures up the shades of celebrated beauties of history; and, at his command, Helen of Troy, Cleopatra, the Trojan Woman and Phrynie emerge from the mists in a voluputious dance.

Giuseppe Verdi dominated the history of Italian opera for the last half of the nineteenth century. Again, the charge of Wagnerianism was levelled at the head of this most Italian of composers, and it has been at Gounod, and accounted for considerable bitterness on Verdi's part and the conclusion, not altogether illogical, that he was not understood. Verdi was, in fact, bluntly told that he was a disciple of Wagner and owed much of his success to the German's spiritual guidance. This, in the spirit of an age that was strongly motivated by nationalism, could alone have been enough to make him doubt himself, for the struggle between Latin and German in opera, North and South, the singer versus the orchestra, simplicity against complexity, was never more completely expressed than in the antipathetic poles of Wagner and Verdi.

La Forza del Destino was written on commission for St. Petersburg and produced there in 1862, in the Imperial Italian Theatre, Italian opera being the rage in Russia at that time to the comparative exclusion of native works. In the rising nationalism, then, it is easy to understand the hostility felt toward this production and the open opposition of the Russian Nationalist party who held at least one demonstration against the work. The principal difficulty seems to have been that Verdi was given 22,000 rubles instead of the 600 usually given to a Russian operatic composer.

La Traviata, produced in Venice in 1853, nine years before, had been much more an initial failure. The second performance was no better than the first, and Verdi wrote in a typically ironic letter: "La Traviata! last night a failure. Is the fault mine or the singers? Time will show." It certainly must have with the singers; today the work is considered one of our deathless operatic literature. It was later revived, successfully, and in fact aroused attention of a scandalous nature because of the daring plot, an adaptation of the Dumas fils "La Dame aux Camelias." Using the undisguised character of a Parisian courtesan for a central figure was felt to be a direct attack on the institution of marriage and a symbol of revolt against sexual conventions, although his biographers feel it extremely unlikely that Verdi himself could have been attracted by this element.

I Vespri Siciliani achieved a success for the composer two years later in Paris, with a run of fifty consecutive performances and good press notices. However, in this case a good start led to eventual obscurity, perhaps partly due to the faulty libretto by Scribe.

Aida, the plot of which is set in ancient Egypt, was composed in response to the invitation of the Khedive of Egypt to write an opera for the opening of the Italian Opera House in Cairo in 1869 as part of the celebration of the Suez Canal. Verdi was not in for the composer, however, of his opera. Nevertheless, it was given its first performance in Cairo on Christmas Eve, 1871.

The principals of the opera are Aida, the Ethiopian princess held as a slave of Amneris, who is the King of Egypt's daughter, and Radames, the heroic Egyptian soldier. The drama grows out of the fact that both Aida and Amneris love Radames, while the warrior is enamored of Aida alone.

The Dance of the Priestess occurs in the second scene of the first act. Radames has been chosen to lead the forces of the Egyptians against the Ethiopians. He is summoned to the Temple of Vulcan to be vested with sacred armor. First the Priestesses chant their hymn to the god Pthah, and then they perform their solemn ceremonial dance while incense rises from the golden tripods on the steps of the temple.

FACTS ABOUT THIS RECORD
Charles Francois Gounod born in Paris, June 17, 1818; died at Saint-Cloud, October 18, 1893.

Giuseppe Verdi born at Le Roncole, Italy, October 19, 1813; died in Milan, January 27, 1901.
Aida first produced in Cairo, December 24, 1871. The date of production of La Forza del Destino was November 10, 1862, in St. Petersburg; La Traviata, March 6, 1853, in Venice; I Vespri Siciliani, June 15, 1855, in Paris.

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GOUNOD: FAUST — BALLET MUSIC
Band 1: Dance of the Nubian Slaves
Band 2: Dance Ariodante
Band 3: Dance of the Trojan Maidens
Band 4: Slave Dance
Band 5: Dance of Piryne

VERDI: ATRA — BALLET MUSIC
Band 6: Dance of the Priests
Band 7: Dance of the Little Wounded Slave
Band 8: Triumphal March and Grand Ballet

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