

# GOUNOD'S "REDEMPTION."

THE NEW ORATORIO WHICH IS TO BE PERFORMED NEXT MONTH.

*From the London Times.*

The new oratorio by Gounod, which will be the most important feature of the Birmingham Festival next month, has for some time excited the curiosity of musical amateurs, and our readers will be glad to have some preliminary account of its scope and general character. That account cannot, as a matter of course, take the form of a detailed analysis or criticism. Musical works of this class to be judged must be heard, and even the most experienced reader of a full score can derive but an imperfect idea of the beauties of harmonic and orchestral combination which lie hidden in its signs and symbols. Even more difficult would it be to convey the faint impression thus received to others. The importance which the composer himself has placed on this work is sufficiently proved by the words "Opus vitam meam," inscribed by his own hand on the score. These words bear reference, no doubt, to the sacred import of the subject no less than to its artistic execution. Gounod's has always been a deeply religious mind. More than once he is said to have been on the point of entering the Church, and nothing is more natural than that he should have devoted the "work of his life" to the sacred tragedy which has been here selected by him and which is known to have engaged him for a number of years. In the book of words compiled by himself, Gounod has wisely adhered to the matter, and in most cases to the diction, of Scripture, the lyrical portions and the chorales only being written in verso. In accordance with the accepted form of the oratorio, the events are related by a *réchant*, or, more correctly speaking, by two *réchant*s or narrators (a tenor and a bass,) to whom some of the most effective portions of the vocal music are assigned and who continue the tale alternately, and, on one occasion, in conjunction. In addition to this, the leading actors of the sacred drama—Christ, the Virgin, the Apostles, the Two Thieves, and others—are introduced, and the chorus takes, of course, a prominent part, representing at various times and in various combinations a "*chœur mystique*," a "*chœur céleste*," the soldiers of the watch, and the Christian Church.

The oratorio is divided into three parts—the Passion, the Resurrection and Ascension, and the Pentecost; a short prologue briefly refers to the Creation, the Fall, and the Promise of Redemption. The music, in a general way, may be described as thoroughly representative of Gounod's style—in most respects of his best style. The sacredness of his subject has not prevented the composer from looking at it in the spirit most congenial to him—the dramatic spirit. There are some portions of the oratorio which might be transferred to the stage without any change as far as the music is concerned; and Gounod, moreover, has now and then attempted effects of realism which are, perhaps, unprecedented in sacred music. Thus, a long-drawn phrase of the violins in the scene of the Crucifixion is superscribed in the original score "*Jésus est étendu sur la croix*," and the meaning of another characteristic passage is indicated by the legend "*On enfonce les clous dans les pieds et dans les mains de Jésus*." The earthquake, successfully represented by the rapid chromatic scales of the cellos and violins in unison, while the brass sustains the harmony and *grosse caisse* and tam-tam enforce the rhythm, may be mentioned in this connection. In the characterization of individuals Gounod also has employed essentially dramatic means, and the person of the Saviour or rather His mission of forgiveness and redemption, is indicated by a "leit-motive" of great beauty, which occurs again and again in the course of the action. The choral treatment throughout partakes of the spirit of the French opera rather than of that of the oratorio as developed by Bach and Handel. With the exception of a short *fugato* extending over 24 bars in the last chorus, there is no attempt at counterpoint or part-writing proper, the voices moving throughout in homophonous progressions. In speaking of a work of Gounod, it is scarcely necessary to add that there is abundance of beautiful melody; that the orchestra is treated in a masterly manner, and that the harmonic effects are often new and striking, the accompaniment of one recitative showing, for example, an all but unbroken sequence of augmented fifths. Altogether, there is every reason to think that Gounod's new work will be among his most successful efforts. It contains all the elements of popularity, and not a few of the higher artistic qualities which appeal to the cultured musician rather than to the masses.

It remains to point to a few detached features of the score which immediately attract the attention of the reader, and are likely to be among the chief successes of the performance. One of these in the first part is the "March to Calvary," an elaborate scene conceived in a thoroughly dramatic spirit and admirably constructed from that point of view. It commences with a march tune, brilliant rather than solemn, and too modern in character to be poetically significant, the rhythm of which, sustained almost throughout the entire scene, gives unity to it. It is interrupted by a chorale, sung by the soprano, which might be technically described as the trio of the march, which is resumed after its conclusion. A second *intermezzo* is formed by a short narrative for the *réchant* (bass) and a beautiful *arioso* for baritone, "Ye daughters of Jerusalem, weep ye not for Me," after which the march is once more briefly resumed, the chorale already referred to, being this time by the entire chorus, bringing the piece to an effective close. The "Improperia," sung by solo, quartet, and chorus, a kind of paraphrase of the "Stabat Mater," divided among contralto, solo, quartet, and chorus, and the dialogue between the two thieves, one of the most impressive numbers of the score, also belong to this part of the sacred tragedy. The second part contains a very effective orchestral interlude describing the Holy Women on their way to the Sepulchre, and, following upon it, the appearance to them of Christ, the representative theme already referred to being turned to excellent account. The same "leit-motive" plays an important part in the finale of this act, which may be called, without hesitation, the most effective number of the whole score. The composer here has called all the resources of modern music to his aid, and the sonorous effect of the piece will, no doubt, be greatly enhanced by the additional four harps and four trumpets which accompany the celestial choir of soprano. At the beginning of the third part Gounod pays a no doubt conscious tribute to the memory of Mendelssohn by quoting the lovely air, "Be thou faithful unto death," in a kind of *ritornel*, which precedes the first chorus. The finale of this part, comprising the short fugue already mentioned, is again designed on a grand scale and serves as an effective climax to the oratorio.

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