

Messe solennelle de Sainte Cécile (1855)

Charles-François Gounod

- Kyrie
- Gloria
- Credo
- Offertory
- Sanctus
- Benedictus
- Agnus Dei

Hundreds of masses have been written before and since Gounod composed his *Solemn Mass for St. Cecilia* in 1855. Yet in terms of lyrical beauty, St. Cecilia should rank as one of the great accomplishments in Western music. It seems nearly flawless in its sincerity and in its joyful awe for divine mysteries and promises.

During his lifetime, Gounod was one of the leading French composers, though known mainly for his operas. He was so renowned that the Khedive (King) of Egypt considered Gounod along with Wagner and Verdi for an invitation to compose *Aïda*, to inaugurate the Cairo Grand Opera House. Nevertheless, it was the St. Cecilia Mass that solidified Gounod's reputation. In truth, his operatic expertise lent the Mass some of its dramatic effects.

Gounod's devotion to Catholicism began around 1840, when he had won the coveted Prix de Rome for composition. Living in Rome, he found inspiration in the extraordinary religious paintings of Michelangelo and in the music of Palestrina and other 16th Century church composers. When Gounod returned to Paris, his deepening faith led him to seminary studies at Saint-Sulpice. He considered becoming a priest and, for a time, even referred to himself as Abbé Gounod. Gounod was also deeply moved by the Romantic authors like Goethe (especially his *Faust*), and by the sumptuous French poetry of Lamartine. These two muses, faith and romanticism, bring an enchanting juxtaposition to much of Gounod's music. The Mass exemplifies the sensuous beauty of his works, and their simple, forthright expression.

The hagiography behind this Mass is an even grimmer tale than most saints': Around the year 177, the Romans persecuted Cecilia for her Christianity, tried to boil her alive, and then tried to cut her head off. Miraculously, she survived for three days. Cecilia became the patron saint of music somewhat by mistake, when a Latin inscription of "organis"

under a portrait of her was misinterpreted to mean that Cecilia herself played the organ. Thus, when the Academy of Music opened in Rome in 1584, Cecilia was made its patron saint, with a painting of her playing the organ. She has been associated with music ever since.

Although Gounod intended his Mass for St. Cecilia for both church and stage, his pious expression was no mere posturing. In fact, he wrote his own prayers to be spoken at the appropriate moments during the Mass Proper.

1. As befits Cecilia's somber martyrdom, he begins the **Kyrie** with a plaintive seven-note motif that grows out of the silence, gradually adding more instruments and a counter-line, and, finally, the choir. This reflective reverence soon transforms into a sweetly tender plea to Heaven, with a wafting arpeggiated accompaniment. The musical tension builds for a time over a sustained pedal note and then releases in a colossal, liberating cadence – one of Gounod's dramatic signatures.
2. The next two movements, the Gloria and Credo, are the cornerstones of the Mass and among the most stunning pieces of religious music ever written. An expression of ebullient adoration, the **Gloria** draws upon Gounod's predecessors Bach and Handel. The musical variety is wonderful, especially in the lyric middle section's rich solos for tenor, bass, and soprano. With a return to the first section, the Gloria ends with voices blazing.
3. In the incomparable **Credo**, Gounod joyfully proclaims his faith. The motor-like accompaniment sounds like a child skipping in pure glee. In the middle section (*Et incarnatus* and *Et resurrexit*), the chorus parts are splintered into extra layers, with passages suggesting fantastical and mysterious wonderment.
4. The **Offertory** is a lush orchestral interlude, a gentle contrast to all that precedes and follows it.
5. In the poetic **Sanctus**, Gounod gives the solo tenor a sublime two-phrase melody followed by a half-bar of instrumental stillness. Gounod's ability to adorn such a sensuous song so humbly brings a sense of deep contentment.
6. The **Benedictus** is a simple hymn.
7. The **Agnus Dei** finishes the Mass with a feathery lightness and a smiling lyricism.

Camille Saint-Saëns attended the premiere and aptly exclaimed, "The appearance of the *Messe Saint-Cécile* caused a kind of shock. This simplicity, this grandeur, this

serene light which rose before the musical world like a
breaking dawn, troubled people enormously... at first one
was dazzled, then charmed, then conquered.”

—Max Derrickson