

A silhouette of Romeo and Juliet from Charles Gounod's opera. Romeo is on the left, holding a sword, and Juliet is on the right, looking towards him. The background is a soft, warm gradient.

CHARLES GOUNOD'S
ROMEO & JULIET

A TIMELESS TALE OF
FAMILY, BETRAYAL & SELFLESS LOVE

FEBRUARY 16 & 18, 2024

Audience Preview Guide

Wednesday, February 14, 2024 -

Student Night at the Opera

Friday, February 16 , 2024

Sunday, February 18, 2024

Valentine Theatre

Toledo Opera

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The Setting

Setting: Verona, Italy
Time: 18th century

Characters

Romeo and Juliet

By Charles Gounod

Libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré

Romeo, son and heir of Montague and Lasy Montague

Juliet, daughter of Capulet and Lady Capulet

Mercutio, Romeo's close friend

Friar Laurente, A Franciscan friar and friend to Romeo and Juliet

Capulet, patriarch of the Capulet family and Juliet's father

Tybalt, Juliet's cousin and aggressive towards the Montagues

Duke of Verona, a kinsman of Mercutio and Romeo, concerned with keeping the peace.

Stephano, Romeo's page

Gertrude, Juliet's nurse and faithful confidante

Gregorio, servant in the Capulet house

Count Paris, kinsman of the Duke and suitor of Juliet

Benvoglio, Romeo's cousin and thoughtful friend

Relatives of the Capulets and Montagues



Synopsis

Time: 18th century Verona, Italy

PART I

A chorus tells of the endless feud between the Montague and Capulet families, and of the love of their children, Romeo and Juliet.

At a masked ball in the courtyard of the Capulet palace, Juliet's cousin Tybalt assures Count Paris that Juliet, who has been promised to him, will enchant him. Capulet presents his daughter to the guests and invites them to dance. Mercutio and Romeo, a Montague, have donned masks to sneak into the ball, together with other friends. Romeo tells them about a strange dream he has had, but Mercutio dismisses it as the work of the fairy Queen Mab. Romeo watches Juliet dance and instantly falls in love with her. Juliet explains to her nurse, Gertrude, that she has no interest in marriage, but when Romeo approaches her in a quiet moment, both feel that they are meant for each other. Just as they discover each other's identities, Tybalt happens upon them and recognizes Romeo. Capulet prevents him from attacking Romeo, who, with his friends, beats a hasty retreat.

Later that night, Romeo enters the Capulets' garden, looking for Juliet. When she steps out onto her balcony, he declares his love. Servants briefly interrupt their encounter. When they are alone once again, Juliet assures Romeo that she will be his forever.

Romeo visits Friar Laurent in his cell and confesses his love for Juliet. Shortly thereafter, she also appears with Gertrude. Hoping that their love might reconcile their families, Friar Laurent marries them.

INTERMISSION

PART II

Outside the Capulet palace, Romeo's page, Stephano, sings a song about a turtledove imprisoned in a nest of vultures. This angers several of the Capulets. Mercutio comes to Stephano's aid, but soon Tybalt challenges him to fight. Romeo steps between them and asks Tybalt to forget about the hatred between their families. Tybalt has nothing but scorn for him, and when he kills Mercutio in their duel, Romeo stabs Tybalt to death. The Duke of Verona appears and, after partisans of both families demand justice, exiles Romeo.

Romeo and Juliet have spent their secret wedding night in her room. She forgives him for killing Tybalt. The newlyweds passionately declare their love as day is dawning. They can hardly bring themselves to say goodbye. After Romeo has left, Capulet appears, together with Friar Laurente, and announces to his daughter that she is to marry Paris that same day. Desperate, Juliet turns to Friar Laurent, who gives her a potion that will make her appear to be dead. He promises that she will awaken with Romeo beside her. Love lends Juliet courage: she overcomes her fear and drinks the poison. On the way to the chapel where her wedding to Paris is to take place, Juliet collapses. To the guests' horror, Capulet announces that she is dead.

Romeo arrives at the Capulets' crypt. Discovering Juliet's body, he believes her to be dead and drinks poison. At that moment, she awakens, and the lovers share a final dream of a future together. As Romeo grows weaker, Juliet takes a dagger from his belt and stabs herself. The lovers die praying for God's forgiveness.

Charles Gounod 1818-1893

Charles-françois Gounod was a French composer noted particularly for his operas, of which the most famous is *Faust*. He was born June 17, 1818 in Paris, France.

Gounod's father was a painter, and his mother was a capable pianist who gave Gounod his early training in music. He was educated at the Lycée Saint-Louis, where he remained until 1835. After taking his degree in philosophy, he began to study music with the Bohemian composer Anton Reicha. Upon



Charles Gounod
1818 - 1893

Reicha's death, Gounod entered the Paris Conservatoire, where he studied under Fromental Halévy and Jean-François Lesueur. Three years later his cantata *Fernand* won him the Prix de Rome for music, an award that entailed a three-year stay in Rome at the Villa Medici.

In Italy, Gounod devoted a considerable amount of his attention to the works of Giovanni da Palestrina, an Italian Renaissance composer. From Rome, he proceeded to Vienna, where a mass and requiem, composed in Italy, were performed in 1842 and 1843. Returning to Paris, he passed through Prague, Dresden, and Berlin and met Felix Mendelssohn in Leipzig.

In Paris, Gounod became organist and choirmaster at the Church of the Missions Étrangères, and for two years he mainly studied theology. In 1846, he entered the seminary of Saint-Sulpice but in 1847 decided against taking holy orders. A requiem and a Te Deum that he had started writing the previous year remained unfinished, and he turned to composing for the operatic stage.

The reception of his earliest operas, *Sapho*

(1851) and *La Nonne sanglante* (1854), was not very enthusiastic, despite favourable reviews by the composer Hector Berlioz. In his *Messe de Sainte-Cécile* (1855) he attempted to blend the sacred with a more secular style of composition. An excursion into comic opera followed with *Le Médecin Malgré Lui* (1858), based on Molière's comedy. From 1852, Gounod worked on *Faust*, using a libretto by Michel Carré and Jules Barbier based on J.W. von Goethe's tragedy. The production of *Faust* on March 19, 1859, marked a new phase in the development of French opera. This work has continued to overshadow all of Gounod's subsequent stage works, including *Philémon et Baucis* (1860), *La Colombe* (1860), the fairly successful *Mireille* (1864), based on a Provençal poem by Frédéric Mistral, and *Roméo et Juliette* (1867).

In 1852, Gounod had become conductor of the Orphéon Choral Society in Paris, for which he wrote a number of choral works, including two masses. From 1870, he spent five years in London, formed a choir to which he gave his name (and which later became the Royal Choral Society), and devoted himself almost entirely to the writing of oratorios. *Gallia*, a lamentation for solo soprano, chorus, and orchestra, inspired by the French military defeat of 1870, was first performed in 1871 and was followed by the oratorios *La Rédemption* and *Mors et Vita* in 1882 and 1885. He was made a grand officer of the Legion of Honour in 1888.

Gounod's melodic vein is unmistakably original, though often oversentimental. He knew how to write for the voice and was also a skillful orchestrator; but in his operas his sense of musical characterization, though rarely devoid of charm, is often excessively facile, and the religiosity displayed in his sacred music is too often superficial. His *Ave Maria* superimposed on Johann Sebastian Bach's *Prelude in C Major* (from *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I*) illustrates both his inventiveness and ease as a melodist and his naïveté in matters of style. The operas *Faust*, *Mireille*, and *Le Médecin Malgré Lui* show his melodic talents at their best. Gounod died Oct. 18, 1893 in Saint-Cloud, near Paris.

What to Listen For

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is filled with some of the best-known images in literature: a girl on a balcony and a boy below, bathed in moonlight as they express their newfound passion; a secret wedding of young lovers from rival families; a desperate plan to be together in spite of violence and exile; and a reunion in a dark tomb, where the dying hero and heroine prove that love is stronger than death. To these unforgettably romantic scenes, Charles Gounod's operatic adaptation *Roméo et Juliette* adds music that is a thrilling, rapturous, and heartbreaking counterpart to the transcendent poetry of Shakespeare. Take a listen to these selections from *Romeo and Juliet*.

Mab, la reine des mensonges

Mercutio sings an aria, a ballad to Queen Mab, a mysterious fairy creature that gets into one's dreams; it's a breathless bit of excitement that sets up Mercutio as Roméo's outgoing, affable friend, so when he meets his end later in the opera, the loss sinks in deeply. Sung by baritone Andrew Ashwin.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXkXq7TbV94>

Ah! lève-toi, soleil!

Romeo stands underneath Juliet's balcony waiting for the sun to rise and sings of his love for her. This clip is sung by Michael Spyres.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ea95I3Oqw14>

Hélas: moi, le haïr

In the famous balcony scene, the lovers comment on the situation that binds them but also keeps them apart. Roberto Alagna and Leontina Vaduva in this production from the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzYHpPNUcfs&t=12s>

The Poison Aria

Juliet contemplates the poison and whether it will work and her situation in life. Anna Sohn sings Juliet in this performance from the Korea National Opera (2014).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1RryB7AuaU>



In Gounod's Time

- 1818** Charles Gounod is born in Paris
- 1818** The first performance of Silent Night takes place in church of St. Nikolaus in Obendorf, Austria
- 1819** Queen Victoria of Britain is born
- 1821** The US takes possession of its newly bought territory Florida from Spain
- 1823** "A Visit From St. Nicholas," also known as "The Night Before Christmas," is published anonymously
- 1826** Thomas Jefferson and John Adams die on the 50th anniversary Declaration of Independence.
- 1828** Henrik Ibsen, Norwegian poet, playwright, and director is born
- 1830** *Mary Had A Little Lamb* by Sarah Josepha Hale is published
- 1831** Vincenzo Bellini's opera *Norma* premieres in Milan
- 1833** German composer and conductor Johannes Brahms is born in Hamburg, Germany
- 1835** Gaetano Donizetti's opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* premieres at the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples
- 1836** The Toledo War unofficially ends
- 1838** Coronation of Britain's Queen Victoria
- 1840** Donizetti's *La Fille du Regiment* premieres at the Salle de la Bourse in Paris
- 1842** Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Nabucco* premieres in Milan
- 1844** University of Notre Dame receives its charter from the state of Indiana
- 1845** Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* premieres in Dresden
- 1847** The American Medical Association is founded in Philadelphia
- 1848** Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels publish *The Communist Manifesto*
- 1849** Pianist Frédéric Chopin dies of tuberculosis at age 39
- 1851** *Sapho* premiers at the Paris Opera at the Salle Le Peletier
- 1853** Dutch Painter Vincent van Gogh is born in the Netherlands
- 1854** Composer and "March King" John Philip Sousa is born in Washington, DC
- 1856** Covent Garden House, London, destroyed in a fire
- 1859** British and French engineers break ground for the Suez Canal
- 1862** *Faust* premieres at La Scala in Milan, Italy
- 1863** Abraham Lincoln delivers the Gettysburg Address to dedicate the military cemetery at Gettysburg, PA
- 1865** Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* premieres in Munich, Germany
- 1867** *Roméo et Juliette* premieres at the Theatre Lyrique in Paris
- 1869** The Folies Bergère opens in Paris
- 1870** Richard Wagner's opera *Die Walküre* premieres in Munich, Germany
- 1872** The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City opens
- 1874** Gertrude Stein, American novelist, poet and art collector is born in Allegheny, PA
- 1876** Alexander Graham Bell is granted a patent for an invention he calls the telephone
- 1878** W.S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* premieres in London, their first international success
- 1881** Spelman College in Atlanta is founded
- 1883** New York's Metropolitan Opera House opens with a performance of *Faust*
- 1885** Jerome Kern is born in New York City
- 1888** The National Geographic Society is founded in Washington, DC
- 1890** Vincent Van Gogh shoots himself and dies two days later
- 1893** Gounod dies at the age of 75 after suffering a stroke

Pre-Opera Activities

1. Consider the roles of the many different people who prepare for and perform in an opera. Which role appeals to you as a possible career? Once you have seen *Romeo and Juliet*, you may reconsider your choice.

2. One of the best ways to describe the art form of opera is: a drama or a story combined with music. Since the 16th century, when the first opera was composed, stories or plots have come from a variety of sources including Greek and Roman dramas, myths, historical events, and novels or plays. Find some examples of contemporary or modern American operas composed in the 20th and 21st centuries. What are their stories or plots based on?

Post-Opera Activities

Personal Response

1. What surprised you the most about Gounod's opera, *Romeo and Juliet*?

2. What struck you as the most important theme in the opera?

Post-Opera Activities

Critical Response

Create Your Own Review of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Write a review of *Romeo and Juliet*. Use the following chart to organize your thoughts. You can be critical, describing what you liked and what you thought needed improvement. In your review mention the plot, the music, the singing and acting, and visual elements such as the scenery and costumes.

Notes for review of <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	
Music	
Plot	
Vocal Artists (quality of voice and acting)	
Scenery and Costumes	
Overall Rating from 1 (low) to 5 (high)	