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L.A. Opera: *Roméo et Juliette*

USC LIBRARIES RESOURCE GUIDE

William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* has inspired a great many pieces of music. Berlioz composed a symphonic cantata to the story. There have been many operas dealing with this love story. Besides the Gounod, there is Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and a host of others that are no longer performed. Gounod composed a number of great operas, including *Faust* (based on Goethe's epic) and *Mireille* (based on the supernatural poem of Federic Mistral).

The Los Angeles Opera has performed Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* before. Tenor sensation Vittorio Grigolo makes his Company debut as Roméo, with the enchanting Nino Machaidze returning as Juliette. Plácido Domingo conducts one of L.A. Opera's landmark productions, *Roméo et Juliette*, directed by Ian Judge.

ROSS SCIMECA of the USC Libraries has selected the following resources to help you learn more about Charles Gounod and French opera.

Synopsis

The Metropolitan Opera gives the following synopsis:

PROLOGUE

A chorus introduces the story of the endless feud between the Montague and Capulet families, and of the love between their children, Roméo and Juliette.

ACT I

Verona, 14th century. At a masked ball at the Capulet palace, Tybalt waits for his cousin Juliette and assures her suitor, Count Paris, that her beauty will overwhelm him. Capulet presents his daughter to the guests and invites them to dance. The crowd disperses and Roméo, a Montague, enters with his friends Mercutio and Benvolio. He tells them about a strange dream he has had, but Mercutio dismisses it as the work of the fairy Queen Mab ("Mab, reine des mensonges"). Roméo watches Juliette dance and is instantly entranced with her. Juliette tells her nurse that she is not interested in marriage ("Je veux vivre"), but when Roméo approaches her, both feel that they are meant for each other. Just as they discover each other's identity, Tybalt returns. Roméo masks himself and rushes off. Tybalt identifies the intruder as Montague's son, but Capulet restrains him, ordering the party to continue.

ACT II

Later that night, Roméo enters the Capulets' garden, looking for Juliette ("Ah! lève-toi, soleil!"). When she steps out onto her balcony, he comes forward and declares his love. Servants briefly interrupt their encounter. Alone again, they vow to marry.

ACT III

Roméo comes to Friar Laurence's cell at daybreak, followed by Juliette and her nurse, Gertrude. Convinced of the strength of their love, the priest agrees to marry them, hoping that the union will end the fighting between their families.

Outside Capulet's house, Roméo's page, Stéphano, sings a mocking song. This provokes a fight with several of the Capulets. Mercutio protects Stéphano and is challenged by Tybalt. Roméo appears and tries to make peace, asking Tybalt to forget about the hatred between their families, but after Tybalt kills Mercutio, Roméo stabs him. The Duke of Verona arrives, and both factions cry for justice. Roméo is banished from the city.

ACT IV

Roméo and Juliette awake after their secret wedding night. She forgives him for killing her cousin, and after they have assured each other of their love, Roméo reluctantly leaves for exile (Duet: "Nuit d'hyménée"). Capulet enters and tells his daughter that she must marry Paris that same day. She is left alone, desperate, with Friar Laurence, who gives her a sleeping potion that will make her appear dead. He promises that she will wake with Roméo beside her. Juliette drinks the potion ("Amour, ranime mon courage"). When Capulet and the guests arrive to lead her to the chapel, she collapses.

ACT V

Roméo arrives at the Capulets' crypt and discovers Juliette. 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 Roméo grows weaker, Juliette takes out a dagger that she has hidden in her clothes and stabs herself. The lovers die praying for God's forgiveness.

Bibliography

French Grand Opera and the Historical Imagination

By Sarah Hibberd

Music Library: ML1727.4.H53 2009

The Operas of Charles Gounod

By Steven Huebner

Music Library: ML410.G7H3 1990

French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style

By Steven Huebner

Music Library: ML1727.4.H84 1999

Discography

There are three outstanding recordings of Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*. The latest recording is on EMI from 1998 with Alagna and Gheorghiu and conducted by Plasson [Music Library: 9086mus]. In 1996, RCA recorded Plácido Domingo and Ruth Ann Swenson in the title roles, conducted by Leonard Slatkin [Music Library: 1079mus]. Not available from the Music Library, but well worth looking for in used record stores, is the EMI recording from 1968 with Franco Corelli and Mirella Freni in the title roles with the Paris Opera Orchestra and Chorus conducted by Alain Lombard.