

*Virginia
Opera*

Gounod's
Romeo 
&
Juliet 

STUDY GUIDE

2005-2006 SEASON

ROMEO & JULIET

by
Charles-Francois Gounod

Libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carre
after the play by William Shakespeare

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Premiere

First performance on April 27, 1886, at the Theatre Lyrique in Paris, France.

Cast of Characters

THE CAPULETS:

Count Capulet	Bass
Juliet , his daughter	Soprano
Tybalt , her cousin.....	Tenor
Gregorio , retainer.....	Baritone
Gertrude , Juliet's nurse	Mezzo-Soprano

THE MONTAGUES:

Romeo	Tenor
Stephano , his page	Soprano
Benvolio , his friend	Tenor
Mercutio , his friend.....	Baritone
Friar Lawrence	Bass

Count Paris, Juliet's suitor

Baritone

The Duke of Verona..... Bass

Relatives, retainers and guests of the Capulets and Montagues..... Chorus

Brief Summary

Setting: Verona, Italy, during the Thirteenth Century

Juliet is introduced to Veronese society at a masked ball at her family home. At the ball she meets Romeo, a member of a rival family who is attending the ball in secrecy. They fall in love but are separated by the long-standing feud between their families. After the ball Romeo returns to the garden beneath her balcony window. They profess their love and agree to marry the next day.

Romeo and Juliet visit Friar Lawrence who marries them in secret. Later, a fight breaks out between the two families. Juliet's cousin kills a close friend of Romeo and he, in turn, kills Juliet's cousin. For this deed he is banished from Verona. Romeo slips into Juliet's room to bid her a tender farewell. After he leaves, Juliet's father informs her that she will be marrying the young friend of her slain cousin.

Juliet turns to Friar Lawrence for help. He gives her a special potion to drink that will make her appear dead. He tells her that eventually she will awaken and be free to join Romeo. She drinks the potion. Juliet's sorrowing family believes her to be dead and places her in the family tomb. Romeo hears only of her death and comes to the tomb see her one last time. He embraces her and takes poison. Juliet awakens joyously but becomes horrified to see Romeo dying. She stabs herself with his dagger and the two lovers die in each other's arms.

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Overture-Prologue

Gounod begins with an ominous downward theme in the brass section. There is a sense of aristocratic grandeur as well as impending doom. A fugue, a musical device in which conflicting melodies are woven together, quickly ensues, depicting the struggle between the rival families of Capulet and Montague.

An unaccompanied chorus relates the tragic tale of the “star-crossed lovers” from the two feuding families. The colorful harmonic language of the choral section is punctuated by interjections from the harp, a favorite instrument of French composers. The foreboding atmosphere of the prologue music is supplanted by the joyous sounds of the Capulet’s ball as the curtain rises.

Act I

Count Capulet, a Veronese nobleman, is giving a masked ball for his daughter, Juliet, in honor of her entrance into society. The music begins with a multi-sectional ensemble for soloists and chorus that reflects the festive nature of the opening scene. Secretly attending the ball is a group of young men from the noble house of Montague, bitter rivals of the Capulet family. The leader of the group, Romeo, and his friends treat this escapade as a lark although Romeo has recently had a disturbing dream about the adventure. The first important aria, “Mab, reine des mensonges,” (“Mab, queen of illusions”) is sung by Romeo’s friend, Mercutio, who reassures his friend that his dream is only the work of a fairy called Queen Mab. The aria is in the form of a three section ballade and contains colorful nuances in the orchestra. Of particular note is the use of the violin and the flute which produces a fairy-like, ethereal effect. Romeo’s forebodings are laughed off by his friends.

Count Capulet introduces his daughter to the glittering assembly. Juliet makes her appearance with a dazzling entrance aria, “Je veux vivre,” (Let me live in my dream) in which her youthful charm and exuberance are clearly demonstrated by the waltz-like tempo and the coloratura passages and grace notes. When the guests have gone into the banquet hall Juliet lingers behind and gives expression to her girlish joy in life. Romeo steps out from concealment and looks directly into Juliet’s eyes. The two are instantly aware of a mutual feeling and attachment that seems to exist between them. This encounter is the occasion of the first of four love duets. Gounod titles the short duet a “madrigal,” not a traditional operatic musical form, but one that reflects the structure of the text and the backdrop of the Renaissance period. The arpeggio-like accompaniment in the upper strings seems to characterize the adoration bubbling up in both Romeo and Juliet.

The sudden appearance of Juliet’s cousin, Tybalt, cuts short their reverie. He recognizes Romeo and denounces him. A fight is averted by the timely arrival of Count Capulet who does not wish to have the festivities spoiled by violence. He restrains

Tybalt and allows Romeo and his friends to depart in peace. The same joyous waltz music that began the scene returns the revelers to their celebrating.

Romeo has again braved the wrath of the enemy for another chance to see Juliet. Gazing up at her balcony he compares her to the morning sun. Juliet appears on the balcony. Romeo reveals himself and declares his love. Gounod clearly demonstrates his gift for lyricism. Accompanied by the harp the beautiful, long melodic line communicates a sense of purity and peace. Gounod closely follows the original Shakespeare in Romeo's aria, "Ah! Leve-toi soleil!" (Ah, Rise fair sun!). A lovely orchestral feature is Gounod's use of harmonies which descend chromatically to represent the waning stars. A lovely orchestral feature is Gounod's use of harmonies which descend chromatically. Juliet's nurse, Gertrude, calls for her and she reenters her apartments. After a few moments she returns to bid Romeo good night. The tender scene is resumed as Romeo pleads with Juliet to linger awhile longer. Juliet cautions Romeo that someone may see them together, but she lingers nonetheless. The two pledge their love in the second love duet, "O nuit divine," (O blessed night) which culminates with the lovers singing in sixths, a technique in duet writing used to convey oneness of spirit. Gounod used musical holds (fermatas) and directions to hold back (*molto ritenuto*) to heighten the sense of passion. The scene ends with the lovers committed themselves to marriage the next day.

Act II

Romeo comes to Friar Lawrence to tell him of his love for Juliet. Juliet arrives shortly thereafter with Gertrude and asks the friar to marry them. Friar Lawrence believes in the strength of their love and performs the ceremony, hoping their union will help end the hatred between the two families. The marriage of Romeo and Juliet is expressed in a trio, "Dieu qui fis l'homme à ton image," (Oh God who made man in thine image). Each verse of Friar Lawrence's prayer alternates with Romeo and Juliet intoning a unison response. The trio becomes a quartet when Gertrude joins them in a joyful praising of God for their happiness.

Romeo's page, Stephano, is looking for his master and stops in front of the Capulet house where he sings a taunting song, "Que fais-tu, blanche tourterelle," (What are you doing, white turtle-dove?). (Stephano is played by a woman in order to achieve the youthful timbre of a young boy's voice). Gregorio and other Capulet servants hear him and come out of the house to attack him. A group of Montagues and other Capulets join the fight and soon the brawl escalates out of control. For the fight music Gounod writes a jagged, rhythmic figure in the violins, accompanied by tremolos in the lower strings. Romeo arrives and tries to stop the fight between his friend, Mercutio, and Tybalt, Juliet's cousin. Tybalt challenges Romeo who refuses to fight. Mercutio defends Romeo's honor but is slain by Tybalt. Romeo cannot restrain himself and he, in turn, slays Tybalt. A heart-wrenching and moving solo for Romeo and chorus, "O jour de deuil," (O day of mourning) continues with the arrival of the Duke of Verona. After hearing an accounting of events, the Duke banishes Romeo from Verona.

Act III

Romeo has found his way into Juliet's room. It is their wedding night. An instrumental prelude, scored for four cellos, creates a rich musical texture expressing the tenderness and intimacy of young love. Dawn has broken and Romeo knows he must leave even though Juliet begs him to remain a little longer. They begin the third love duet of the opera. In the first section Juliet forgives Romeo for having killed her cousin, "Va, je t'ai pardonne," (Go, I forgive you). In the low section of the duet the music evolves into a passionate melody with Romeo and Juliet singing in thirds, accompanied by a pulsating figure in the strings, perhaps reflecting the intense beating of their hearts, "Nuit d'hymenee," (O wedding night). They bid each other farewell in a cabaletta, "Il faut partir," (You must go, alas).

After Romeo's departure Friar Lawrence, Capulet and Gertrude arrive to tell Juliet that it was Tybalt's dying wish that she marry Count Paris. Arrangements are being made for an immediate wedding. Capulet and Gertrude leave Juliet alone with Friar Lawrence. She begs for his help and advice. He tells her not to despair and gives her a potion to drink which will induce a death-like sleep. When her family believes her to be dead and places her in the family tomb she will awaken and be able to flee Verona with Romeo. Friar Lawrence promises to be there with Romeo when she awakens from her trance. Juliet agrees and drinks the contents of the flask. Capulet arrives with Paris and Gertrude to escort Juliet to the wedding. The potion takes effect and Juliet falls, seemingly lifeless. The assembled company cries out in horror and grief.

Juliet lies in the Capulet burial vault. A delicate instrumental passage reflects her motionless state. Romeo believes that Juliet is dead and enters the vault to see her one last time. He sings, "Salut, tombeau! Sombre et silencieux," (Hail, tomb! Somber and silent) and gives her a farewell embrace before drinking a deadly poison. Juliet begins to stir and show signs of life. They greet each other with ecstasy, "Viens! Fuyons au bout du monde!" (Come let us flee to the end of the earth!) and begin the last of their four love duets, using thematic material from earlier in the opera. The poison Romeo has taken begins to take effect. Juliet, reacting with despair, reaches for Romeo's dagger and stabs herself. Romeo and Juliet, begging God's forgiveness, die in each other's arms.

Historical and Literary Background

William Shakespeare's masterpiece, *Romeo and Juliet*, is a classic story that has resonated throughout the centuries, engendering many distinctive artistic adaptations. In addition to the opera by Charles Gounod, there are operas by Zingarelli, Meyer, Bellini, and Zandonai, a ballet by Prokofiev, orchestral works by Tchaikovsky and Berlioz, a Broadway musical by Bernstein, and several films. Of the operas, Gounod's work has achieved the greatest popularity and is a mainstay of the operatic repertory.

Shakespeare is generally considered the greatest dramatist and the most popular author the world has ever known. No other writer's works have been produced, or read, so widely around the world. Many reasons can be given for his broad appeal, but a key element would certainly be his understanding of human nature, and his insights into the wide range and depth of human emotions. He was able to create characters and dramatic situations that were timeless in their impact. His works continue to resonate today, relating to real human beings as they struggle with life's challenges. He is also among the few playwrights who excelled in both tragedy and comedy.

Romeo and Juliet was the first tragedy that Shakespeare wrote, completing it at an early stage in his career, probably in 1594 or 1595. It represented a departure from many playwriting conventions of the time. *Romeo and Juliet* was first printed in 1597 from a collection of notes, recollections, and copies of portions of the original story. There were three revised editions, some showing evidence of a maturing style in the careful revisions. It is believed that Shakespeare conceived this play as an adaptation of a long narrative poem by Arthur Brooke. The story had long been popular in France and Italy, and there was a play about the warring families by Luigi Da Porta, widely believed to be based on the historical struggle between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. Shakespeare's interest in the story seemed to stem from the external conflict confronting the lovers. A problem of love versus hate, rather than an internal struggle affecting the soul, is the engine that drives the tragedy. The war between the two families is not of the lover's making, but it is a cruel fact they cannot escape. In addition, Shakespeare introduces another element that helps precipitate the tragedy, that of fate. There is prominent inclusion of dreams and omens and forebodings. Hence, the definition of *Romeo and Juliet* as "star-crossed lovers" is an additional reason for the tragic outcome.

Gounod's interest in the subject of the opera was mentioned in his correspondence in the later part of 1864 and his librettists, Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, completed a libretto in the early part of 1865. Gounod had known these men for ten years and they had been the librettists for his earlier operatic triumph, *Faust*. The libretto follows the Shakespearean play very closely, particularly in the dialogue, and they treated the original with great respect. As in Shakespeare's play, the opera was originally structured in five acts. Some characters from the play were eliminated and a new character, Stephano, Romeo's page, was added. *Romeo and Juliet* secretly marry in the opera. There is no marriage scene in the play. They eliminated the final scene where the feuding families are reconciled, and in the new final scene, Romeo takes poison, but does not die before Juliet awakens. This allows for a final duet. As this particular change

demonstrates, all changes were made for the sake of the music and the needs of a well-structured music drama.

After receiving the libretto Gounod began working on the score almost immediately and completed his initial work by July 1865. During this time a recurring nervous disorder began to interfere with the pace of his work but did not prevent him from dealing with the orchestration of the opera altogether. By September of 1866 Gounod had completed the orchestration and was making major revisions, adding an elaborate wedding scene to Act IV. Significant changes also occurred during the rehearsal period. Gounod had originally planned to use spoken dialogue between the musical numbers but during the early rehearsals decided that recitative would be preferable. Other changes that occurred during rehearsals were the additions of the Prologue and Juliet's waltz song, "Je veux vivre."

The premiere of *ROMEO & JULIET* was a sensation. It occurred during the Exposition Universelle in Paris on April 27, 1867. The city was full of people from outside the city visiting the exposition and the opera played to sold-out houses night after night. Many foreigner visitors also saw the production which contributed to its rapid acceptance at opera houses in other parts of the world. By the end of 1867, *ROMEO & JULIET* had been produced in England, Germany, Belgium and New York. The New York premiere occurred on November 15, 1867, at the Academy of Music and was sung by the celebrated American soprano, Minnie Hauk.

A distinguishing feature of the opera is that it contains four love duets for soprano and tenor, a number that was without precedent in its time. Each of these praiseworthy duets has a musical character and vitality all its own and their importance in the opera can be measured by the oft-quoted statement that the score of *ROMEO & JULIET* is a "love duet with occasional interruptions." In contrast to the love music is the sacred nature of the religious music associated with the character of Friar Lawrence. Gounod's deeply-held spirituality and religious training is clearly evident in this aspect of the opera. The success of *ROMEO & JULIET* can also be measured in the high level of drama Gounod was able to achieve in depicting the conflict between the rival families. Throughout the opera, beginning with the Prologue and carrying through to the great confrontation scene at the end of Act II, the music depicts the active strife which bears the ultimate responsibility for the tragedy.

Discussion Questions

1. This story has been used in many different mediums – plays, ballets, operas, orchestral works- usually to great success. Why?
2. Many of Shakespeare’s scenes were omitted from the opera for the sake of brevity. Can you explain why this is necessary when telling a story through a musical drama?
3. How effective is the composer, Charles Gounod, in portraying the concept of conflict musically? Can you give examples?
4. In the Overture-Prologue, one of Gounod’s musical devices is the use of a musical form called a fugue. A fugue introduces a musical theme, called a “subject”, and a secondary theme, called a “countersubject”, and weaves them together through instrumental or voice parts, called “voices.” How can this musical device be effective in the opera?
5. Is there a villain in this opera?
6. What role does fate, or chance, play in this story?
7. What is the significance of the character Stephano in the opera? He does not appear in the play. Why was he added?
8. The part of Stephano is sung by a soprano, dressed as a boy. Why would a woman play this part?
9. In Shakespeare’s play Romeo takes poison and dies before Juliet awakens from her drug-induced sleep. In the opera Juliet awakens before Romeo dies. How does this benefit the flow of events at the end of the opera?
10. One important change from the play to the opera was the omission of the final scene where the two families end their feud after the deaths of their children. This scene adds a moral dimension to the play. Why did Gounod and his librettists leave this scene out, and how does it affect the dramatic structure of the opera?

of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

