

Charles Gounod's *Ave Maria*: textual versus performance analyses

Eva Mantzourani

Canterbury Christ Church University, UK

Tim Crawford

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Stephen Cottrell

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

BACKGROUND IN MUSIC HISTORY AND THEORY/ANALYSIS

Gounod's *Ave Maria* is a complex and often misunderstood work. It is not a single arrangement of Bach's C major prelude, BWV 846, from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, but one in a series of arrangements, some of which themselves have different versions. This presentation includes a brief outline of the compositional roots of the piece, together with an examination of its musical form and structure, and its relationship to and deviations from the prototype. The structural analysis, using voice-leading (Schenker 1979), motivic, harmonic and formal analysis (Schoenberg 1990) demonstrates a particular interpretation of the piece, one grounded in textual analysis.

BACKGROUND IN COMPUTATIONAL MUSICOLOGY

The growth of performance analysis (Rink 1998) has been recently underpinned by developments in computational musicology (Cook 1987, 2005; Crawford & Gibson 2007). Computer software such as *Sonic Visualiser*, *Humdrum* and multidisciplinary projects such as CHARM and OMRAS 2 have brought a new level of detail to the study of musical performance, allowing empirically-grounded assertions similar to those found previously in textual analysis.

AIMS

The paper aims to relate these two different approaches to musical structure – textual and performance analysis – to explore how performance structures change according to the contexts of performance, and what this might reveal to us of the performance aesthetics prevailing in such contexts.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

In his *Ave Maria* Gounod does not neutralise Bach's prelude by undermining its tonal harmonic movement or voice leading. In his 'recomposition' of Bach's piece he uses the source unchanged, adapting the new melody to emphasise the structure of the original. Contrary to the view that 'Gounod's "Ave Maria" imposes a redundant melody on [the prelude's] delicate structure, thereby submerg[ing] it' (Scruton 1997), textual analysis shows that the notes of Gounod's melody not only directly derive from the harmonic accompaniment but also highlight certain intervallic relationships in the voice leading. At important structural points the melody emphasises through its motivic and rhythmic structure the changes in the harmonic progressions of the piano accompaniment (i.e. the prelude), and it could be considered an implied voice which Gounod brought out to 'analyse' the prelude and clarify its logic. Analysis not only illuminates Gounod's compositional process but also his attitude towards Bach's prelude. It does not, however, necessarily coincide with performances of the piece, since musical structure in performance can be very different from that inferred from a text (Bowen, 1999). Computational analyses of various performances, concentrating predominantly on tempo variation, both contextualise and illuminate differently the textual analysis.

IMPLICATIONS

From its first appearance Gounod's 'reworking' of Bach's prelude proved very popular (the National Sound Archive of the British Library holds some 626 recordings). The *Ave Maria* has been performed in a wide variety of contexts, some of which may be described as 'art', 'light classical', or 'popular', often in arrangements increasingly distinct from Gounod's original (Crawford 2003). Examination of these different performance traditions shows changing approaches to the piece's musical structure, not only in tempo variation, but also changing

relationships between melody and accompaniment. While the harmonic outline of the piece, and Gounod's melody, remain more or less constant, Bach's prelude features less and less in terms of note detail.

Comparing the different performance structures with textual analyses demonstrates new insights into the underlying cultural precepts which gave rise to those performances. These in turn contribute to a broader understanding of the changing perceptions of both Bach's prelude and Gounod's *Ave Maria* over the past 150 years. This interdisciplinary approach allows deeper understandings of the various social-musical values prevailing at a given time.

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Eva Mantzourani

Current position Senior Lecturer in Music, Canterbury Christ Church University
 Main field of research Theory and analysis; Music history
 Main research areas Skalkottas; music and social history; Gounod
 Relevant qualifications Two MMus from Goldsmiths, University of London (i) Theory and Analysis (1991); ii) Historical Musicology (2000). PhD from Kings College, London (1999)
 Publications (selection) 'In the greater scheme of things: Musical form in the twelve-note works of Nikos Skalkottas', in Wanek N.M. (ed.), *Nikos Skalkottas (1904-1949) Zum 100. Geburtstag* (Vienna: Der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006), 71-101.
 Editorial work International advisory board: *ex-tempore*
 Contact eva.mantzourani@canterbury.ac.uk

Tim Crawford

Current position Senior Lecturer in Computational Musicology, Goldsmiths, University of London.
 Main field of research Music information retrieval (MIR); computational musicology
 Main research areas OMRAS (*Online Music Recognition And Searching*; Goldsmiths PI); applications of music informatics to musicology; editions of lute music.
 Publications (selection) a) Casey, M. & Crawford, T., 'Automatic Location And Measurement Of Ornaments In Audio Recordings', ISMIR conference, Paris, September 2004 <http://ismir2004.ismir.net/proceedings/p057-page-311-paper252.pdf>
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 Editorial work General editor of *Silvius Leopold Weiss Sämtliche Werke für Laute (Das Erbe deutscher Musik)*; Cassel: Bärenreiter)
 Contact t.crawford@gold.ac.uk

Stephen Cottrell

Current position Senior Lecturer in Music, Goldsmiths, University of London
 Main field of research Ethnomusicology, Performance Practice, Organology
 Main research areas Urban music-making, recordings, the saxophone
 Relevant qualifications MMus from Goldsmiths, University of London (1994). PhD from Goldsmiths, University of London (1999)
 Publications (selection) *Professional Music-Making in London* (London, Ashgate, 2004)
 Editorial work Associate Editor, *Twentieth-Century Music*
 Contact s.cottrell@gold.ac.uk