



AN UNKNOWN CHORAL GEM: CHARLES GOUNOD'S *SEVEN LAST WORDS OF CHRIST*

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The Seven Last Words of Christ—those sayings uttered by Jesus between his crucifixion and death as recorded in the Gospels—have long been of interest to both liturgists and composers. Charles Gounod's (1818–1893) *Les Sept Paroles de Notre Seigneur Jesus-Christ sur la Croix*, written in 1855, was one of the first settings of this text by a French composer,¹ commencing a tradition that would later be continued by César Franck and, perhaps most famously, Théodore Dubois.² The fifteen-minute work is extremely accessible for high school and amateur choirs; yet despite its brevity and simplicity, the work seems to be largely unknown. While a smattering of recordings exist (approximately half a dozen), this particular work seems to only have merited passing reference in encyclopedia articles and biographies and has never been the subject of an article. To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first in-depth analysis of this setting ever published.

After a brief introduction placing this work into the context of Gounod's compositional *oeuvre* as a whole, this article will highlight its salient points to make Gounod's composition more familiar to readers. *Les Sept Paroles* includes some of the most glorious music Gounod ever composed, yet here he is also writing in an idiom that is completely distinct from most other compositions of the era. For both of these reasons, one might hope that this composition could be both more frequently programmed and performed. The entire score is available on the Choral Public Domain Library.³

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Textual Background

The seven last words of Christ are found in the first four books of the New Testament known as the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each author recounts the life and death of Christ with a distinct audience in mind. Jesus’s seven last words are not found in any single Gospel but are rather a combination of everything that Christ said from the cross as related in all four Gospels. “Sayings” or “utterances” might be better descriptive terms, since all are complete sentences. The term “word” is used in the broad historical sense, in the way that someone who asks to “have a word” with you generally wants to say more than one.

As Table 1 makes clear, if you read only one Gospel, you will encounter only one of the Seven Last Words of Christ in Matthew and Mark (with allusions to two more), or three in Luke and John. The two Gospels (Luke and John) that each supply three do not overlap at all. The construction of a single “Seven Last Words” narrative is, therefore, an attempt to harmonize the Gospels. One might logically expect musical settings of the Seven Last Words to have seven movements, but in fact

many have eight (or more—Haydn’s 1795 oratorio has ten movements, and this was an adaptation of his strictly orchestral version of 1786, which has nine). Like Haydn, Gounod added an introductory movement to the Seven Last Words, but unlike Haydn’s, Gounod’s Prologue has text. This textual latitude perhaps stems from the fact that composers and librettists were not—by definition, *could* not be—restricted to a given Evangelist’s version of events. This allowed for Seven Last Word settings to be more textually expressive than Passions, for example, and could be more representative of what a composer/librettist *wanted* to include, not what they *had* to include.

Gounod’s Seven Last Words in Biographical Context

A native Parisian, Charles Gounod came by his artistic instincts naturally. His father was a painter; his mother, a piano teacher. His studies at the Paris Conservatoire led to early successes: he won second prize in the Prix de Rome in 1837 and first prize in 1839. Gounod’s studies in Rome circa the late 1830s familiarized him with the most

Table 1: Jesus’s Seven Last Words in the Gospels

Saying	English Translation (NKJV)	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
First Word	“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”			Luke 23:34	
Second Word	“Surely I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”			Luke 23:43	
Third Word	“Woman, behold your son!” “Behold your mother”				John 19:26
Fourth Word	“Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?” (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”)	Matthew 27:46	Mark 15:34		
Fifth Word	“I thirst.”				John 19:28
Sixth Word	“It is finished.”				John 19:30
Seventh Word	“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”			Luke 23:46	

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prominent opera composers of the day (e.g., Donizetti, Bellini, and Mercadante⁴) and the music of Palestrina (1525–1594), whose style was particularly influential on this composition. As Steven Huebner, author of the *New Grove* article on Gounod, points out:

[Gounod's] Roman experience laid the foundation for the stark comparison he drew in his aesthetics between, on the one hand, a universally appealing combination of beauty, truth and Christianity and, on the other, egoism, artifice and insularity. He described *stile antico* counterpoint as a selfless analogue to Michelangelo's frescoes issuing from pure Faith.⁵

Gounod's *Seven Last Words* is his composition that most closely resembles *stile antico* and can thus be argued to be inspired directly from his Roman studies. Its complete lack of artifice (and ego?) can be interpreted as a testament to the sincerity of Gounod's faith.

Over the course of his life, Gounod composed nineteen Masses, two Requiems, over fifty Latin motets, three oratorios, several other cantatas and "biblical scenes," and thirty-seven solo sacred songs accompanied by keyboard (either piano or organ). This latter category would include his *Ave Maria*, surely Gounod's most famous work—a superimposition of a new melody above Bach's first prelude from *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* (1722). *Les Sept Paroles de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ sur la croix* was written for unaccompanied SATB choir in 1855 and revised in 1866. The genre of this work is ambiguous: due to its multimovement form and obviously sacred subject, one might be tempted to consider it an oratorio, but its brevity and unaccompanied scoring prevent it from being considered as such. The *New Grove* lists it generally amongst Gounod's "sacred or pious part-music in French or English," where it has much competition for attention among Gounod's sacred works.

In only one case do we see him attempt to reproduce the forms of polyphony *a la* Palestrina: this is in the *Sept Paroles du Christ*, a work written in strict *a cappella* style and dating from the commencement of his mature period (1855), but which we suspect of having been conceived some time before—a

composition deserving to be better known today.⁶

Thus the austerity of Gounod's *Les Sept Paroles* is out of character with much of the rest of Gounod's *oeuvre* but not with his thoughts on sacred music. While in Rome, he once declared, "It is possible to write beautiful sacred music in a strict style, and, side by side with it, to paint from another palette the uncontrolled tempest of human passion."⁷ Later in life he would continue to exemplify the same concern with the quality of sacred composition; as he wrote to Charles Bordes in 1883:

It is time indeed that the flag of true liturgical art should be raised in our churches in place of any profane standard and that musical fresco-work should banish the drawing-room ballad and the saccharine poisties with which our digestions have been spoiled for so long. Palestrina and Bach made the art of music and remain for us the Fathers of the Church. Our concern is to remain their sons, and I can only thank you for helping us.⁸

Palestrina, then, was for Gounod a model to be emulated. In writing sacred music, Gounod felt that one should avoid superficial musical effects but strive to keep the message of faith in the forefront of the listener's attention. Of all of Gounod's sacred works, none illustrates Gounod's reverence for and reference to the austere and restrained style of Palestrina more than *Les Sept Paroles*. The work is published by Carus only in a photomechanical reprint of the first edition published by Novello in London, and no date can be ascertained for that first printing.

Musical Analysis

Table 2 provides an analysis of each movement of Gounod's work. In the texture column, the first letter (either "H" for homophonic or "P" for polyphonic) is often supplemented by lowercase letters denoting the microform, which provides the amount of textual repetition. A "D" indicates that the text is set declamatorily, with no textual repetition. An "A" represents antiphonal, indicating responsorial repetition of musical material between

Table 2: An Analysis of the Movements of Gounod's *Seven Last Words of Christ*

Movement	Latin Text	Measures	Texture (micro-form)	Scoring	Macro-Form	English Translation	Source of Text
Prologue	<i>Filiae Jerusalem,</i>	1–13	H (aaa)	SATB Choir	A	Daughters of Jerusalem,	Luke 23:28
	<i>nolite super me,</i>	14–21	H (bb)			weep not for me,	
	<i>sed super vos ipsas flete, et super filios vestros.</i>	22–39	H (ccd ccd)			but weep for yourselves, and for your children.	
	<i>Et venerunt in eum dicitur, Calvariae locum</i>	40–61	P		B	And when they came to the place which is called Calvary,	Luke 23:33
	<i>Ibi crucifixerunt Jesum.</i>	62–76	H (eef)		C	there they crucified Jesus.	
First Word	<i>Praeter euntes autem blasphemabant eum,</i>	1–6	H (D)	SATB Choir	A	And those who passed by reviled him,	Mark 27:29
	<i>moventes capita sua.</i>	6–15	A			wagging their heads.	
	<i>Jesus autem dicebat:</i>	16–19	H (D)		B	Then Jesus said,	Luke 23:34
	<i>Pater, dimite illis,</i>	20–27	H (aa)			“Father, forgive them;	
	<i>non enim sciunt quid faciunt.</i>	28–39	H (bbccbc)			for they know not what they do”	
Second Word	<i>Unus autem de his qui pendebant latronibus dicebat ad Jesum.</i>	1–13	P	SATB Choir	A	One of the malefactors which were hanged said to Jesus,	Luke 23:39a
	<i>Domine, memento mei cum veneris in regnum tuum!</i>	14–25	H (aaabc)	SATB quartet	B	“Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”	Luke 23:42
	<i>et dixit illi Jesus:</i>	26–28	H (D)	SATB Choir	C	And Jesus said to him,	Luke 23:43
	<i>Amen dico tibi;</i>	29–33	P			“Truly I say to you,	
	<i>Hodie mecum eris in Paradiso</i>	34–44	H (aabc)			Today you will be with me in paradise”	
Third Word	<i>Cum vidisset ergo Jesus matrem,</i>	1–6	H (D)	SATB Choir	A	When Jesus therefore saw his mother,	John 19:26
	<i>et discipulum stantem quem diligebat</i>	7–12				and the disciple standing by whom he loved,	
	<i>dicit matri suae:</i>	13–16				he said to his mother,	
	<i>Mulier, Ecce filius tuus.</i>	17–26	P (aab)	Quartet	B	“Woman, behold thy son!”	John 19:27
	<i>Deinde dicit discipulo</i>	27–30	H (D)	SATB Choir		Then he said to the disciple,	
	<i>Ecce Mater tua</i>	31–39	H (aa)			“Behold thy mother!”	

Table 2 continued: An Analysis of the Movements of Gounod's *Seven Last Words of Christ*

Move- ment	Latin Text	Mea- sures	Texture (micro- form)	Scor- ing	Mac- ro- Form	English Translation	Source of Text
Fourth Word	<i>Tenebrae factae sunt super universam terram</i>	1–16	H (aab aab)	SATB Choir	A	There was darkness over all the land.	Matthew 27:45
	<i>Et circa horam nonam clamavit Jesus voce magna dicens:</i>	17–27	H (D)			And about the ninth hour Jesus called with a loud voice, saying,	Matthew 27:46
	<i>Eloi,</i>	28–31	H (cc)	SATB Quartet	B	“Eli,	
	<i>lamma Sabacthani?</i>	32–37	P (ddd)				
		38–43		Semi-chorus			
		44–48		SATB Choir			
	<i>quod est interpretatum:</i>	49–52	H (D)	C	that is to say,		
	<i>Deus meus,</i>	53–56	H (ee)		“My God,		
	<i>ut quid dereliquisti me?</i>	57–64	H (ff)		why have you forsaken me?”		
Fifth Word	<i>Postea sciens Jesus quia omnia consummata sunt ut consummaretur scriptura, dixit:</i>	1–13	H (D)	SATB Choir	A	After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished [and] that the scripture might be fulfilled, said:	John 19:28
	<i>“Sitio.”</i>	14–21	P	Quartet	B	“I thirst.”	
Sixth Word	<i>Vas ergo erat positum aceto plenum;</i>	1–7	H (D)	SATB Choir	A	Now there was set a vessel full of vinegar,	John 19:29
	<i>Illi autem spongiam plenam aceto hysopo</i>	8–14				and they filled a sponge with vinegar, and put it upon hyssop,	
	<i>circumponentes</i>	14–17	H (aa)			[put it upon]	
	<i>obtulerunt ori ejus,</i>	18–24	H (bb)			and put it to his mouth.	
	<i>cum ergo accepisset Jesus acetum dixit</i>	25–32	H (D)	Quartet	B	When Jesus had therefore received the vinegar, he said,	John 19:30a
	<i>Consummatum est.</i>	33–37	A (ccc)		C	“It is finished.”	
		37–42					
		41–47		Choir			
Seventh Word	<i>Pater, in manus tuas</i>	1–7	H (aa)	SATB Choir + SATB Choir	A	“Father, into thy hands	Luke 23:46
	<i>commendo spiritum meum.</i>	6–11	H (bbc)			I commend my spirit.”	
	<i>Pater, in manus tuas</i>	11–18	H (aa)	A'	“Father, into thy hands		
	<i>commendo spiritum meum.</i>	18–23	H (bbc)		I commend my spirit.”		

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sections. “P” or “A” indications may be combined with smaller letters (as in the Third, Fourth, and Sixth Words) where Gounod repeats polyphonic or antiphonal musical material, respectively. The macro-form column (with uppercase letters) analyses each movement as a whole. One can quickly see that Gounod structured his movements very closely around the Latin text, dividing his movements

into two or three sections depending on the number of Latin sentences in each.

Prologue

From the first few measures of the composition, the austerity of Gounod’s setting is obvious. The SATB choir



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begins with a simple F major chord, *pianissimo* and unaccompanied, and each voice only changes its note once in the entire first four-measure phrase (Figure 1, mm. 1-4). In addition to minimizing the frequency of pitch changes, the distance is also minimized, as the three upper voices only move a semitone when they do. Not all phrases are this simple, nor is the entire piece homorhythmic. In the third phrase, the altos are given a 4-3 suspension (Figure 2, mm. 12-13), similar to what Palestrina might have done; and in the fourth phrase (Figure 2, mm. 14-17), the tenors join them.

Gounod obviously has no problem with the repetition of text; most phrases in the work are repeated either two or three times. While the words “Filiae Jerusalem” (Daughters of Jerusalem) are the words of Christ, they are not the first word; those commence only after the crucifixion. Christ uttered these words on the road to Golgotha, or the *Via Dolorosa*. This prologue sets the tone, textually and texturally, for the entire work that follows.

A faster middle section (mm. 40-61) are marked *moderato* comes in imitative polyphony, likely another homage to Palestrina, and becomes as complex as Gounod’s setting

Figure 1. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Prolog,” mm. 1–8.
Semitone motion (indicated by arrows)

Figure 2. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Prolog,” mm. 9–17.
Suspensions

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gets. In addition to the built-in *crescendo* that counterpoint automatically supplies with the gradual addition of voices, Gounod marks one in as the dynamics increase from *piano* to *forte* over several measures (Figure 3). Gounod's change in texture here, from homophony to polyphony, for the Latin phrase "*et venerunt in eum dicitur, Calvariae locum*" (and

Figure 3 shows the vocal entries for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B) in measures 40-53. The score is in G major, 4/4 time. It features a *crescendo* marked *poco a poco* and an *extended "crescendo"* box. The lyrics are: "Et ve - ne - runt in e - um qui di - ci - tur, Cal - va - ri - ae lo - cum,".

Figure 3. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "Prolog," mm. 40–53.
Fugal entries, A–T–S–B

Figure 4 shows the vocal entries for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B) in measures 62-76. The score is in G major, 4/4 time. It features a *Slow, third and final repetition of text* box. The lyrics are: "I - bi - cru - ci - fix - e - runt Je - sum, i - bi - cru - ci - fix - e - runt Je - sum, cru - ci - fix - e - runt Je - sum.".

Figure 4. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "Prolog," mm. 62–76.

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when they came to the place which is called Calvary) adds musical weight to the sobriety of the text.

The first movement concludes with its third section (Figure 4), set in strikingly accented homophonic chords, word-painting the hammering of the nails through Christ's flesh (mm. 62-65). This verbal phrase mentioning the crucifixion, "*Ibi crucifixerunt Jesum*" (there they crucified Jesus), commences on an A major chord (m. 62), which was also Bach's key for the crucifixion in his *St. Matthew Passion* with its three sharps representing three crosses (*drei kreuze* in German).

This text, too, is repeated (mm. 66-69), just as loudly but less forcibly than it was first presented. The final repetition is at half speed, almost mournfully, as the long wait for death begins (Figure 4, mm. 70-76).

The First Word

Gounod's *First Word* begins in D minor, a reversion to the enharmonic minor after the Picardy third that ends the prologue (Figure 4, mm. 76). Gounod's harmonic rhythm is much increased in this opening passage from the previous movement, possibly harmonically illustrating the passers-by mentioned in the text.

Gounod musically highlights the text “*moventes capita*” (wagging of their heads) with word-painting: accented descending imitative passages on the word set in a two-part canon between SA & TB (Figure 5, mm. 6-8). The effect of this canon sounds antiphonal to begin with, as if others are “nodding their heads in agreement”—and the descending scalar passages reinforce that musical symbolism (Figure 5, mm. 8-13).

While the first phrase of Christ's First Word is sung at

The musical score continues from measure 6. It features four staves for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The lyrics are Latin liturgical text. Measures 6-8 show the choir singing "e - um mo - ven - tes," with various vocal parts having melisma lines above them. Measures 9-11 continue the phrase "mo - ven - tes ca - pi - ta su - a, mo -". The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of one flat, and a common time signature. Dynamics like *f* and *p* are indicated.

Measures 6-8:

- Soprano: ant e - um mo - ven - tes mo - ven - tes, mo - ven - tes ca - pi - ta su - a, mo -
- Alto: e - um mo - ven - tes, mo - ven - tes, mo - ven - tes ca - pi - ta su - a, mo -
- Tenor: e - um mo - ven - tes, mo - ven - tes, mo - ven - tes ca - pi - ta
- Bass: e - um mo - ven - tes, mo - ven - tes, mo - ven - tes ca - pi - ta

Measures 9-11:

- Soprano: ven - tes ca - pi - ta, ca - pi - ta su - a,
- Alto: ven - tes ca - pi - ta, ca - pi - ta su - a.
- Tenor: su - a, mo - ven - tes ca - pi - ta su - a.
- Bass: su - a, mo - ven - tes ca - pi - ta su - a.

Figure 5. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “First Word,” mm. 6–15.
Antiphonal effect coupled with descending passages

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a higher pitch level when it is repeated (Figure 6), this is not the general direction of this line. On the contrary, as each voice sings the text “*Pater, dimitte illis*” (Father, forgive them), they all conclude their four-measure phrase on a lower pitch than where they began. The musical effect is of a speaker rising up and falling lower, attempting again and falling again, which is how one breathes while hanging suspended from a cross: this may be a musical portrayal of the crucified Christ.

When Gounod sets the completion of the Latin phrase “*non enim sciunt quid faciunt*” (for they know not what they do), the pitch descends with each successive repetition of text (Figure 7). This symbolically suggests a Christ who is both physically losing strength and mentally resigning

himself to his fate. Even the change in meter (Figure 7, m. 32) can be interpreted as a shortening of breath. The repetition of musical material at a lower pitch continues after measure 32.

The plagal cadence that ends this movement (Figure 8) is appropriate for its association with sacred music in general and the “amen” that concludes many hymns specifically. By using this cadence, Gounod may be musically concluding Christ’s prayer for his persecutor’s forgiveness. There are two facets of this amen, which means “yes, it shall be so”: first, God’s forgiveness of these people who crucified and mocked Christ out of ignorance as requested by Christ; second, Christ’s confidence in making this request, as He Himself is God. This simple cadence

Figure 6 shows a musical score for four voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) in G major, 4/4 time. The lyrics are "Pa - ter, di - mi - te il - lis,". The score includes dynamic markings (p, pp) and arrows indicating the general contour of the line, showing a descending pitch pattern.

Figure 6. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “First Word,” mm. 20–27.
(Arrows indicate general contour of line)

Figure 7 shows a musical score for two voices (Soprano, Bass) in G major, 4/4 time. The lyrics are "non e - nim sci - unt" and "quid fa - ci - unt,". The score includes dynamic markings (p, pp) and arrows indicating the general contour of the line, showing a descending pitch pattern.

Figure 7. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “First Word,” mm. 28–35.
Same musical material repeated one step lower

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evokes this French composer and one-time seminarian's deeply held Catholic faith.

The Second Word

The Second Word begins with imitative entries: just as Gounod had done in the Prologue, a fugue is used to set the narrative text (not dialogue), and the order of the entry of voices is also the same: alto, tenor, soprano, bass. While it is hardly atypical that fugues would use consistent intervals of a fifth between entries, it is noteworthy that the soprano and basses enter on the same pitches as they did in the Prologue (compare mm. 47-48 of Figure 3 to mm. 5-6 in Figure 9).

After this introductory fugato, the words of the thief on the cross, "*Domine, memento mei cum veneris in regnum tuum.*"

(Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom) are set for solo voices. This is the first attempt to concertize this music in the work and is perhaps another musicological reference to *stile antico*. Musical contrast is, therefore, provided in two ways, with the reduction of forces and dynamic changes implied. It also adds drama to the story, as the narrative words are sung by the entire chorus (mm. 1-13), but the dialogue is sung by a solo quartet (Figure 10). The word "*Domine*" (Lord) is set three times, but the rest of his phrase receives no textual repetition. Instead, Gounod grants a small melisma in three voices to the word "*mei*" (me) in measures 20-21 (Figure 10). While a melisma lasting a few notes and only one measure is certainly not by itself impressive, it nonetheless stands out from the rest of Gounod's noticeably austere and syllabic setting. It seems likely that Gounod intentionally highlighted this

word for a reason: this subtle setting of the word is perhaps intended to make the thief sound as if he is begging or in pain. The added accidentals place this phrase in the minor mode and assist in portraying the desperation of his supplication.

Gounod again sets off Jesus's words from the preceding section with a change in texture (Figure 11, m. 29): the entrances on the word "*amen*" (which here commences instead of concludes the phrase) are imitative.

These fugal entries cadence quickly and proceed homophonically to the end. But the effect of beginning with the fugal entrances on *forte*

Figure 8. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "First Word," mm. 36-39. Plagal cadence

Figure 9. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "Second Word," mm. 1-7. Fugal entries, A-T-S-B

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"Domine" (Lord)
[sung three times]

minor mode

14 *f* *p* *f* *p* *f*

Sop. Solo
Do - mi - ne, Do - mi - ne, Do - mi - ne, me - men - to

Alto Solo
Do - mi - ne, Do - mi - ne, Do - mi - ne, me - men - to

Tenor Solo
Do - mi - ne, Do - mi - ne, Do - mi - ne, me - men - to

Bass Solo
Do - mi - ne, Do - mi - ne, Do - mi - ne, me - men - to

20 *p* *cresc.* *p* *cresc.* *p* *cresc.* *p* *cresc.* *p*

Sop. Solo
me - - - i, cum ve - ne - ris in re - gnum tu - - - um!

Alto Solo
me - - - i, cum ve - ne - ris in re - gnum tu - - - um!

Tenor Solo
me - - - i, cum ve - ne - ris in re - gnum tu - - - um!

Bass Solo
me - - - i, cum ve - ne - ris in re - gnum tu - - - um!

Melisma on "mei" (me)

Figure 10. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "Second Word," mm. 14–25.

26 *pp* *p* *f*

S
Et dix it il - li Je - sus: A - - - men di - co - ti - bi;

A
Et dix it il - li Je - sus: A - - - men di - co - ti - bi;

T
Et dix it il - li Je - sus: A - - - men di - co - ti - bi;

B
Et dix it il - li Je - sus: A - - - men di - co - ti - bi;

Figure 11. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "Second Word," mm. 26–33.
(Imitative entrances, T–B–S–A)

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and then proceeding to *pianissimo* for the remainder of the phrase (Figure 12) suggests a Christ who speaks with vigour from the cross for “*Amen dico tibi*” (Verily I say to you) and then quiet assurance (or faltering strength) for “*Hodie mecum eris in Paradiso*” (Today you shall be with me in Paradise). One also notes that whereas the thief made his supplication in the minor mode (Figure 10),

Jesus responds in the major mode (Figure 12), which musically conveys a more hopeful outlook. This also happens in the enharmonic major, underscoring the fact that Jesus is speaking the same language as the thief. The four measures that Gounod devotes to the beautiful cadence (again replete with Palestrinian suspensions) on the word “*Paradiso*” (Figure 12) is as much

Major mode

34 *pp* *cresc.*

S
A
T
B

Ho - di - e, Ho - di - e, me - cum e - ris

Ho - di - e, Ho - di - e, me - cum e - ris

40 *Four bars devoted to one word* *pp*

S
A
T
B

in Pa - ra - di - so.

in Pa - ra - di - so.

in Pa - ra - di - so.

Figure 12. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Second Word,” mm. 34–44.



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AN UNKNOWN CHORAL GEM: CHARLES

time as he devotes to a single word in the entire work. This may be Gounod's way of emphasizing the eternal duration of heaven, such as he can do in a short liturgical work.

The Third Word

Similarly, when Jesus speaks in the Third Word, his words are given to the solo quartet, as if to help aurally isolate the words of Christ that are said to only one person (Figure 13). Christ's statement opens with a polyphonic texture, just as in the Second Word (Figure 11).

The words "*Ecce Mater tua*" (Behold thy mother) are set quasi-canonically, with a delayed entrance in the alto voice that mimics the soprano line (Figure 14). The descending scale in the bass line illustrates how this music can be sight-read easily by well-trained ensembles.

The Fourth Word

For his fifth movement, Gounod sets the phrase "*Tenebrae factae sunt super universam terram*" (There was darkness over all the land) to a chromatic melodic line that rises incrementally by half-steps (Figure 15). Just as he did in the Prologue (Figure 1), Gounod uses ascending half-steps. Yet the picture of darkness falling is still painted by the immediate repetition of measures 1-8 a full step lower in measures 9-15. The *pianissimo* dynamic and the minor mode are two other musical elements that assist in illustrating the sombre affect.

The text "*et circa horam nonam clamavit Jesus voce magna*" (and about the ninth hour Jesus called out with a loud voice) is set suitably *fortissimo* (Figure 16), but an immediate contrast follows with "*dicens*" (saying) being sung *pianissimo*. The juxtaposition is both dramatic and startling and gives the listener the impression of a forlorn voice crying out in

17

Sop. Solo

Alto Solo

Tenor Solo

Bass Solo

Mu - li - er, mu -

22

Sop. Solo

Alto Solo

Tenor Solo

Bass Solo

li - er, Ec - ce fi - li - us tu - us.

Figure 13. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "Third Word," mm. 17–26.
Imitative entries, B–T–A–S

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the wilderness. Note that the rhythm used to set the word “*Eloi*” (My God) is the same as for “*Domine*” (Lord) in the Second Word (Figure 10, mm. 14-15). The text continues with “*lama Sabachthani?*” (why have you forsaken me?). This is set with *fortissimo* canonic entries: all voices enter on G and sing a descending c minor scale to cadence in G major, the dominant (Figure 17). This phrase is repeated twice, first by the semi-chorus then the *tutti* chorus. All entries are similarly marked *fortissimo*, but a crescendo

between entries will be observed above that on the macro level due to the doubling of forces with each repetition. The translation of this text that follows from Aramaic into Latin is homorhythmic (mm. 49-64): “*quod est interpretatum: Deus meus, ut quid dereliquisti me?*” (which means, My God, why have you forsaken me?). The rhythm Gounod uses to set the words “*Deus meus*” (My God) is the same as we saw for “*Pater*” (Father) in the First Word (compare mm. 53-54 of Figure 18 to mm. 20-21 of Figure 6).

Figure 14. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Third Word,” mm. 31–34.
Delayed Alto entrance

Figure 15. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Fourth Word,” mm. 1–8.
Brackets indicate semitone motion

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19 *Tutti ff* *pp*
S nam cla - ma - vit Je - sus, cla - ma - vit Je - sus vo - ce
A *Tutti ff* *pp*
Et cir - ca ho - ram no - nam cla - ma - vit Je - sus vo - ce
T *Tutti ff* *pp*
Et cir - ca ho - ram no - nam cla - ma - vit Je - sus vo - ce
B *Tutti ff* *pp*
Et cir - ca ho - ram no - nam cla - ma - vit Je - sus vo - ce

25 *pp* *Solo sfz* *p*
S ma - gna di - cens: E - lo - i,
A *pp* *Solo sfz* *p*
ma - gna di - cens: E - lo - i,
T *pp* *Solo sfz* *p*
ma - gna di - cens: E - lo - i,
B *pp* *Solo sfz* *p*
ma - gna di - cens: E - lo - i,

Figure 16. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Fourth Word,” mm. 19–29.

32 *ff*
S lam - - - ma Sa - bac - tha - ni?
A *ff*
lam - - - ma Sa - bac - tha - ni?
T *ff*
lam - - - ma Sa - bac - tha - ni?
B *ff*
lam - - - ma Sa - bac - tha - ni?

Figure 17. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Fourth Word,” mm. 32–37.
Canonic entries, T–S–B–A

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Figure 18. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Fourth Word,” mm. 53–56.

The Fifth Word

This is the shortest movement of the entire work, taking less than sixty seconds to perform. It is divided into two sections: a homophonic opening with minimal harmonic

motion to set the narrative text “*postea sciens Jesus quia omnia consummata sunt ut consummaretur scriptura, dixit*” (After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished that the scripture might be fulfilled, said); and the polyphonic

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conclusion, a descending chromatic line for “*Sitio*” (I thirst). Despite the greater length of the first phrase, it is set declamatorily, in thirteen measures, while the one remaining word is set imitatively and using repetition over eight measures. Notwithstanding the polyphonic texture, this is some of the most distinctive and dramatic writing of the entire work. The descending half-step has for centuries been associated with death, and Gounod is likely using this awkward chromaticism similarly to illustrate Christ’s diminishing strength and pain, as he uses solists to set the first-person text, “I thirst” (Figure 19, mm. 14-21).

The Sixth Word

Gounod again chooses a homophonic texture to present the narrative part of the text. One cannot help but notice the rhythm here (Figure 20). His increased use of syncopation illustrates the care with which he set this text: he cleverly avoids the barbarisms that would be found if weaker syllables of words were found on strong beats in the measure. The resulting lilting meter is almost identical to his fellow countryman Claude Le Jeune’s (c. 1528–1600) “*Revey venir du Printans*” (Figure 21). With the exception of the bass line, Gounod has succeeded in compiling a vertically oriented section (mm. 1-12) with nonetheless conjunct lines. The motion involved here is

8

S ut con-sum-ma-re-tur scrip-tu-ra, dix-it:

A ut con-sum-ma-re-tur scrip-tu-ra, dix-it:

T ut con-sum-ma-re-tur scrip-tu-ra, dix-it: Si-ti-

B ut con-sum-ma-re-tur scrip-tu-ra, dix-it:

15 Solo *f* *p* *f* *p* *cresc. molto* *p*

S Si-ti-o, si-ti-o, si-ti-o, si-ti-o.

A Solo *f* *p* *f* *p* *cresc. molto* *p*

A Si-ti-o, si-ti-o, si-ti-o, si-ti-o.

T *p* *f* *p* *cresc. molto* *p*

T o, si-ti-o, si-ti-o, si-ti-o.

B Solo *f* *p* *f* *p* *cresc. molto* *p*

B Si-ti-o, si-ti-o, si-ti-o, si-ti-o.

Figure 19. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Fifth Word,” mm. 8–21.
Descending chromaticism

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stepwise and often chromatic, or outside of the original key. For example, Figure 20 ends on an E major chord, which is harmonically far removed from F major. This is immediately followed by a dramatic shift in mood. The choir has been singing from the perspective of the mocking crowd (mm. 1-24). Now, however, the point of view changes to that of Christ's. Marked *pianississimo* and *piu adagio* in the score, the following section is instantly more

reflective. The *piu adagio* marking (Figure 22) signals both a change in perspective (from the crowd's point of view to Christ's) and mood (from mocking to acceptance). One cannot help but notice the chant-like motion of the melodic lines. The acceptance of the vinegar physically represents Christ's acceptance of his fate, and the words that follow are the sixth word proper: "*Consummatus est*" (It is finished). Just as he did in the Fourth Word (Figure

Figure 20. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "Sixth Word," mm. 18–24.

Figure 21. Claude Le Jeune, *Reveyr venir du Printans*, mm. 1–2.

Figure 22. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "Sixth Word," mm. 25–32.
Chant-like melodic lines

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16, mm. 28-29), Gounod follows his pattern of building in crescendos with the graduated use of soloists, semi-chorus, and *tutti* chorus (Figure 23). The movement ends with Christ's words being sung antiphonally, led by an alto cantor, which adds to the liturgical feel of the music. The longer note values that conclude this movement provide an added sense of arrival at the conclusion. Another plagal cadence, just as Gounod did at the end of the First Word, reinforces the liturgical connection.

The Seventh Word

It is only Gounod's setting of the Seventh Word that approaches the musical language of the nineteenth cen-

tury. For the final movement, Gounod sets the entire text antiphonally, with two distinct SATB choirs—a division appearing nowhere else in the work. This new texture allows a much greater harmonic density, one that is more characteristic of Gounod's time. His harmonic language is still similar (see the pedalpoint in the bass parts in Figure 24), but the effect of doubling up on the number of parts adds a stereo quality to the sound in performance that makes for a very satisfying conclusion to the work. This movement is also excerptable but due to its very different voicing does not well represent the work as a whole.

The stately quarternote motif is traded antiphonally between the choirs and could indicate Christ's resignation to his fate; this is Gounod's musical depiction of the inevi-

The musical score for Charles Gounod's "Sixth Word" (mm. 33-47) is presented in SATB format. It features three distinct textures:

- Texture 1 (mm. 33-37):** Solo *f*. The lyrics are "Con - sum - ma - tum est." The music is characterized by long note values and a stately quarternote motif.
- Texture 2 (mm. 38-40):** Semi-chorus *f*. The lyrics are "Con - sum - ma - tum est." The music continues with the same stately quarternote motif.
- Texture 3 (mm. 41-47):** Tutti *ff*. The lyrics are "ma - tum est." The music concludes with a plagal cadence: IV - I.

Figure 23. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, "Sixth Word," mm. 33–47.
Three responses to an Alto Cantor

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table approach of death (Figure 24). The opening rhythm in each choir is the same that was used to introduce the words of Christ in the First Word (compare the rhythm of mm. 20-21, Figure 6, to mm. 1-2, Figure 24). Both of these Words of Christ commence with the same word, “*Pater*” (Father), but Gounod’s utilization of the same rhythmic motive for this word in the First and Seventh Words and “*Deus*” (My God) in the Fourth Word (Figure 18, mm. 53-54) helps provide the work with a greater sense of unity. There is one other major difference in this movement in addition to the double choir setting: this movement is the only one that does not have a narrative “preface” to the words of Christ, leaving Gounod free to avoid the sectionalisation present in the previous movements. Consequently, this is the most musically unified movement in the entire work.

Examining the Work as a Whole: Lengths and Tonal Centers of Movements

A quick comparison of the length of each movement in Gounod’s setting in Table 3 reveals a number of surprises. For example, Gounod’s prelude to the Seven Last Words of Christ—a textual trope to the set and narrative set-up—is longer than any of the movements that follow it, which may appear as if the introduction to the Seven Last Words were more important to the composer than any of the Seven Last Words themselves. However, this lends support to the argument that Gounod conceived of his Seven Last Words as a coherent set and intended them to be performed together.

The Fifth Word, Gounod’s shortest movement, is also the shortest word (“I thirst,” which is one word in Latin: “*sitio*”). Interestingly, this movement is also a perfect Fi-

Figure 24. Charles Gounod, *Les Sept Paroles*, “Seventh Word,” mm. 1–5.
Quarter note motif

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bonacci number, that series of numbers wherein each is the sum of the previous two (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, etc). The higher one goes in the sequence, the more accurately any two consecutive numbers provide a ratio closer to the golden mean—the proportion found everywhere in nature from the rate of increase in consecutive seashell sections to the arrangement of florets on a sunflower to leaflets on a pinecone.

The golden mean, or *phi* of Gounod's Fifth movement, occurs right at the double bar line split between the A and B sections of the movement (see Table 2, page 14)—at measure 13, where we hear the Fifth Word of Christ itself, where there are eight remaining measures in the movement (all Fibonacci numbers). This location is supplied in Figure 19. The architecture of Gounod's Fifth Word correlates precisely to the golden mean. This author could not locate any indication of whether the composer was consciously aware of this ratio or tried to use it intentionally in composing. To call its use merely coincidental, however, seems unlikely, as the golden mean appears so often in art and music. To explore the appearance of this sequence in Gounod's work further would move beyond the scope of this article; but intentional or not, this author

contends that this is surely one of the finest examples of the Fibonacci sequence in music anywhere.

As Table 4 illustrates, Gounod's setting can be interpreted entirely in the key of F: it both starts and ends in that key and returns to it more frequently than any other. The entire work uses one flat as its key signature, which requires the naturalization of B and the appearance of accidentals to identify any other tonal centers. The work commences in F major, and the ending of the prologue in the relative minor relates by Picardy third to the opening of the next movement, which allows interpretation of the Prologue and First Word together as one extended tonal journey that begins and ends in the key of F. The next two movements follow the same tonal pattern established by Gounod's First Word, commencing in other keys but always concluding in F major. The tonal journey in the Fourth Word is an extended variation of the same journey just taken in the Third, with a relative and enharmonic

Table 3: The Number of Measures in each movement	
Movement	Gounod's Setting
Prolog	76
First Word	39
Second Word	44
Third Word	39
Fourth Word	64
Fifth Word	21
Sixth Word	47
Seventh Word	23
Total	353

Table 4: Tonal Centers Utilized in Each Movement	
Movement	Gounod's Setting
Prolog	F, g, D
First Word "Father, forgive them..."	d, a, C, F
Second Word "Today you will..."	c, Bb, F
Third Word "Woman, behold your Son!"	a, D, Bb, C, F
Fourth Word "Why have you forsaken me?"	a, D, g, c, C, a, F, A
Fifth Word "I thirst"	F, A
Sixth Word "It is finished"	d, a, E, A, d, g, C, F
Seventh Word "Father into your hands..."	F, C, F

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minor included in addition. It also ends in A major, which is also the key in which the next movement ends. The final two movements, however, return to Gounod's system of concluding movements in F major, which helps to firmly reinforce that key as the primary tonal center of the entire work and assist in viewing *Les Sept Paroles* as a unified whole.

A Grand Finale

Charles Gounod's *Seven Last Words*, simple in both concept and construction, does not have length or complexity. The accompaniment forces are minimal, possibly even non-existent, as the keyboard part is marked *ad libitum*. His use of soloists is hardly virtuosic—it is not even soloistic, as the soloists never appear individually but function only as a quartet. As such, this composition resembles a vocal *concerto grosso*, only contrasting small and large groups—another connection to its Palestrinian aspirations and Italian influences.

Gounod's completely unaccompanied setting provides a variety of ensemble sizes to achieve contrast. Only the first two movements are for SATB choir alone; soloists appear in every word subsequent to the first. In addition, Gounod twice uses a semi-chorus as a transitional element between the soloists and the large group in his Fourth and Sixth Words. Novel in its simplicity and austerity, this work is very approachable, performable by even small church choirs. Its total length is only 353 measures and takes approximately fifteen minutes to perform. Furthermore, use of the *stile antico* renders the work very accessible to performers and audiences. Both its brevity and use of Latin suggest that it was surely intended for liturgical use. Gounod has supplied us with a nineteenth-century homage to Palestrina that is consistent with his views on austerity and avoiding Romantic excess in the liturgy: the composer seems to be trying not only to emulate Palestrina but to recreate his idiom. The distinctiveness of this piece seems to have gone hitherto unnoticed by commentators, as this author is unaware of any other multimovement unaccompanied sacred works composed in an intentionally Renaissance style that date from the entire nineteenth century.⁹

Overall, the simplicity of the first seven movements is balanced by the antiphonal “grand” finale, which provides

a conclusion in a more Romantic vein—a suitable finale to a grand multimovement work and some of the most moving music Gounod ever composed. On a personal note, one pastor who attended the work's performance on Good Friday commented that it was “the most worshipful experience she had ever had in her own sanctuary.” This author hopes that this article might inspire further performances of this accessible yet emotionally arresting work. 

NOTES

- ¹ Eugene Gautier (1822–1878) also wrote a work titled *Les Sept Paroles de Christ* in approximately the same year, but a precise date for this composition is unknown (Lesley A. Wright “article url: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/music/1075Gautier> [Jean-François-] Eugène” *Grove Music Online* [accessed February 27, 2011]). Therefore, whether Gautier's or Gounod's work was the first work of this title by a French composer is difficult to ascertain.
- ² Later French composers who would further contribute to this genre include Adolphe Deslandres (1840–1911) and Tristan Murail (b. 1947). Charles Tournemire's (1870–1939) fascinating textless setting for organ also deserves mention.
- ³ See <http://www1.cpdl.org/wiki/index.php/Gounod> (last accessed June 9, 2014).
- ⁴ Saverio Mercadante's *Le sette ultime parole di Nostro Signore*, which dates from 1838, is the most recent setting of this text that this author was able to identify (i.e., immediately prior to Gounod's 1855 setting).
- ⁵ Steven Huebner, “Gounod, Charles-François” in *Grove Music Online*. (<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/4069>, accessed February 27, 2011).
- ⁶ Julien Tiersot, “Charles Gounod: A Centennial Tribute,” *Musical Quarterly* IV (1918): 424–25.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 426.
- ⁸ Martin Cooper, *French Music: from the Death of Berlioz to the Death of Fauré* (London, Fletcher and Son, Ltd., 1969), 60.
- ⁹ Bruckner's and Brahms's motets might be the most similar, but these are single, stand-alone pieces that make much greater use of nineteenth-century chromatic harmony.