

- The Company
- Mission Statement
- Ballet Master in Chief
- Dancers
- Orchestra
- Personnel
- Volunteers
- NYCB Alumni
- Repertory Index
- The Viewing Room
- Brief History
- NYCB Lyre
- Annual Reports
- Job Postings

Home > The Company > Repertory Index
Gounod Symphony



Photo © Fred Fehl

Music Symphony No. 1 in D major (1855) by Charles Gounod

Choreography George Balanchine © The George Balanchine Trust

Premiere January 8, 1958, New York City Ballet, City Center of Music and Drama

Original Cast Maria Tallchief, Jacques d'Amboise

Gounod Symphony is often seen as a companion piece to Balanchine's Symphony in C, his 1947 work set to the music of Georges Bizet. This comparison is partly due to the similar full-stage, patterned use of the corps, and partly due to the music: one of Gounod's pupils was the 17-year-old Bizet, who, after transcribing his master's work, began composing his own symphony. The focus of the ballet lies with its corps of 10 men and 20 women, which constantly shifts into a variety of geometric patterns and spirals. Violette Verdy, one of the definitive interpreters of the female principal role, compares Gounod Symphony to the gardens of Versailles. She writes: "It has everything we admire there - regularity, invention, diversity, perspectives." The original production was, in fact, set in a garden. For the 1985 revival, Robin Wagner created a new solarium decor, transforming the garden into a crystal greenhouse. The new production also featured a new pas de deux for the third movement by Peter Martins, replacing choreography from the original production that has been lost. Charles François Gounod (1818-1893) was a central figure in French music during the third quarter of the nineteenth century; his style influenced the next generation of French composers including Bizet, Fauré, and Massenet. Faust, produced in 1859 (the ballet music was added in 1869) made Gounod's reputation. Faust was drastically different from French opera of the previous thirty years because of its lighter style and sentiment, which relied less on the spectacular and more on the delineation of character through the music. Gounod wrote other operas, none as successful as Faust, and other forms of music, including songs and the Symphony No. 1 in D Major (1855).

"A BALLERINA IS A PERSONALITY AND A PERSONALITY MEANS IMPROVISATION."

— George Balanchine

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