

Symphony in C
– Georges Bizet

Born October 25, 1838 in Paris, France

Died June 3, 1875 in Bougival, France

The work was first performed on February 26, 1935, in Basel, under conductor Felix Weingartner.

Occasionally, a gifted composer emerges but, despite numerous promising works, does not capture the attention of audiences. This was the case with Georges Bizet. He entered the Paris Conservatoire at age nine. Being immersed in such a musical atmosphere led the boy to a few early experiments in composition, but his first formal training did not occur until he was fourteen and was already an established pianist. His composition teacher was in ill health and unable to hold regular lessons; so, as a substitute, the Conservatoire brought in the revered, but retired, Charles Gounod. Under Gounod's tutelage, Bizet went on to win the coveted Prix de Rome in 1857, at the age of nineteen.

The 1855 Symphony in C is clearly modeled after Gounod's Symphony No.1. According to annotator Howard Shanet, as quoted by Richard Freed:

“The first glance at the score of Gounod's Symphony No.1 in D major makes it clear that the young Bizet copied all its most conspicuous features . . . This is not to accuse Bizet of plagiarism. Although there are some minor thematic borrowings, most of Bizet's imitation is confined to the structural plan of his teacher's work – the way in which the piece is put together . . . In Bizet's first movement, for example, it is startling to find at least two passages that are almost identical, note for note, with passages in Gounod's first movement – rhythmically, melodically, and harmonically – although both composers developed them from different themes. Also, Gounod ends his movement abruptly with the same brisk announcement with which he began it, framing the movement between two epigrams, as it were; Bizet adapts the idea to his own first movement. In Gounod's second movement, the section which seemed most striking to the Paris public of 1855 was the “development” . . . in the shape of a little fugue based on the opening theme of the movement . . . Now, Bizet not only wrote a fugue for the development section of his second movement; he even had the instruments enter in the same order. There are actual thematic resemblances in the fugue, too . . .”

The scherzo is a boisterous diversion with its asymmetrical phrases and heavy orchestration. The central trio delightfully imitates the drones and peculiar melodic patterns of a peasant bagpiper – complete with ‘wrong’ notes. The finale begins with a virtuosic theme in the violins and evolves into an energetic movement very much in the familiar French style. Comparison to moments in Bizet's *Carmen* is not uncommon.

Bizet died in 1875, just a few months after *Carmen* premiered to lukewarm reviews. It was not until a few months after his death that the opera began its steady climb into the pantheon of musical masterpieces. Even then, the symphony had never been performed. In fact, it had been passed from Bizet's widow to composer Reynaldo Hahn, who donated it to the Paris

Conservatoire library. In 1933 – 58 years after the composer’s death – French musicologist Jean Chantavoine rediscovered the work and passed it along to Bizet’s biographer, D.C. Parker. Through Parker, the unknown work emerged from its convoluted provenance when he gave the score to conductor Felix Weingartner. The premiere took place in 1935, almost sixty years after Bizet’s death. It is regularly performed today – much more often than Gounod’s Symphony.

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