

The other *Faust*

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The undisputed masterpiece of Charles Gounod, *Faust* has acquired an international reputation in its wholly sung version. But this is to forget that the work, the subject of which had not interested the director of the Paris Opéra, had initially been composed with spoken dialogue for the Théâtre-Lyrique, the third-ranking Parisian opera house after the Académie Impériale de Musique (Opéra) and the Opéra-Comique. The mixed form that was chosen for the occasion, which differs from both *grand opéra* and *opéra-comique*, itself went through two principal versions which include unpublished numbers and melodramas.

Although he discovered Goethe's *Faust* as early as 1838, Gounod did not take a genuine interest in the subject until 1850, when Michel Carré had a *drame fantastique*, *Faust et Marguerite*, performed at the Théâtre du Gymnase-Dramatique. This play served as Jules Barbier's model for the libretto of the future opera, which the composer set to music with total fidelity. This was to be the first version of the work. Its libretto, overlong but skilfully designed to ensure success in performance, is founded on three equally important elements, which ensure a balance that is unfortunately disturbed by the successive modifications of the original work. The first of these elements is of course the love affair between Faust and Marguerite. The pious, naïve girl succumbs to the charm of an ambiguous Faust, at first an unscrupulous sensualist who ends up doubting his diabolical companion in debauchery. The impossible love of classical drama has given way to an unhealthy relationship that leads to the murder of a child born out of wedlock. The second thematic element is of a

religious nature. The librettist presents a catechesis of sin: having yielded to a lover who desires her without truly loving her, the pure Marguerite has given birth to a child whom she kills to conceal her sin. Her sincere contrition enables her to unmask the demon and triumph over him. Like a new Eve, she achieves deserved salvation in an apotheosis that evokes the Assumption of the Virgin. In dealing with such a delicate subject, the authors feared the reaction of the censor's office, but it only made very superficial remarks on the libretto. The final dramatic mainspring of the work is the supernatural. This provides scope for specifically theatrical stage effects, from Faust's rejuvenation and Marguerite's idealised apparition at the back of the scholar Faust's study to Walpurgis Night, where demons and witches indulge in a Black Sabbath that one might perhaps have wished more frenzied.

Although several numbers differ from the well-known pieces only in details of orchestration (the duet for Faust and Méphistophélès 'Me voici!'; the duel trio, 'Que voulez-vous messieurs?'; the death of Valentin, 'Par ici, mes amis!'), others transform the informed music lover's customary perception of Gounod's *Faust*. Among these are the trio for Faust, Wagner and Siebel, 'À l'étude, ô mon maître'; the Valentin-Marguerite duet 'Adieu, mon bon frère!'; Méphistophélès's air 'Maître Scarabée'; Siebel's *romance* 'Versez vos chagrins dans mon âme!'; Valentin's air with chorus 'Chaque jour, nouvelle affaire'; and the chorus of witches 'Un, deux et trois'. To this we can add seven melodramas whose missing or incomplete orchestration has been written for the present reconstruction.

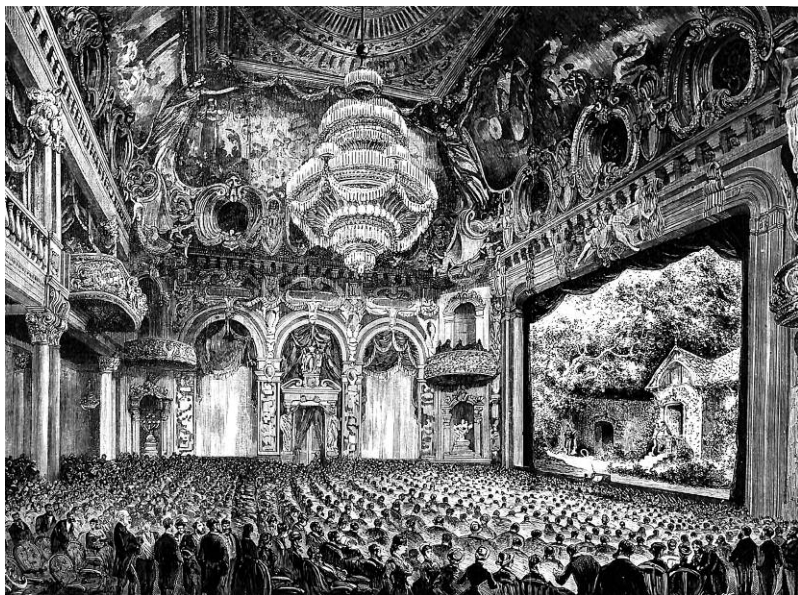
Unfortunately, it proved impossible to locate several other numbers from this first version, especially in the last act, which was very heavily revised. In addition, some numbers were severely abridged, but we have been unable to restore them to their original state. Only the first section of Faust's original *cavatine* 'Salut! demeure chaste et pure' has survived. Similarly, the quartet 'Prenez mon bras un moment!' was truncated by more than 100 bars.

Having been accepted by Léon Carvalho, the director of the Théâtre-Lyrique at the time, the work went into rehearsal in 1858. Carvalho, who

also directed the staging, had a very strong personality and constantly forced Gounod to make modifications. This was only the beginning of an uninterrupted succession of transformations, since the work was given each season. The premiere on 19 March 1859 already presented a very different state from what Barbier and Gounod had initially imagined. The trio and duet mentioned above were cut altogether. The 'Ronde du veau d'or' replaced the original 'Couplets du Scarabée' after Carvalho had rejected four different attempts at an air for Méphistophélès. The Soldiers' Chorus replaced Valentin's air. The dialogue was reduced and two melodramas disappeared. But the Walpurgis Night remained, though widely criticised by the press, which did not appreciate witches riding broomsticks or fanning the flames of a boiler with iron spoons. As early as the revival of autumn 1859, the Walpurgis Night was, according to the press, 'purged of many horrors'. Thus the last act was considerably shortened and the work lost most of its supernatural dimension. It is probable that Gounod, very comfortable with languorous love duets, was unable to give the Witches' Sabbath the brilliance it called for. There cannot be much doubt that he was scarcely helped by the evidently botched staging of this scene. By contrast, the audience was enraptured by the church scene, which originally preceded the return of the soldiers. Marguerite did not spin at the wheel in her room but in front of her house, in the public square; the nearby church opened out in full view of the spectators until it absorbed the entire stage area, which was then inside the building. This effect disappeared in 1862 when the Théâtre-Lyrique moved to the Place du Châtelet, where the smaller stage did not offer the same scenic possibilities; the church scene was then relegated to the end of the act. The spoken dialogue disappeared in 1866, but all the surviving evidence suggests that several melodramas remained until the work was transferred to the Paris Opéra in 1869.

The gradual and continuous nature of *Faust's* transformations at the Théâtre-Lyrique (let us not even go into what happened in provincial opera houses!) makes it impossible to define a second version. However, the first vocal score, published in June 1859, may be considered as a second

stabilised version. It was accompanied by a second edition of the libretto. Although this score is not exactly congruent with contemporary Parisian performances, it was mostly inspired by them. Complete except for the five melodramas that needed to be orchestrated for publication by Bärenreiter, this second version obviously arouses less curiosity because it is closer to the work that tradition has handed down to us, despite the persistence of spoken dialogue. The psychology of the characters is simplified and the supernatural dimension is considerably lessened. It was for this reason that Gounod composed a new bacchanal for the last act, which was rehearsed in Paris in October 1859 but finally never performed there.



Faust at the Palais Garnier in 1880.
Leduc Archives.

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