

Goethe's *Faust* in Romantic music

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In 1587, Johann Spies printed the anonymous *Historia von D. Johann Fausten*, the first literary work devoted to a certain Dr Faust, who died around 1540. Although the personage was also to inspire Marlowe, Klinger, Chamisso, Lenau and Heine, it was Goethe alone who raised him to legendary status. In the mid-1770s, he began to work on the subject that would obsess him all his life. In 1808, he published his tragedy *Faust* (Part One). In 1832, shortly before his death, he completed Part Two of *Faust*, published posthumously.

The play immediately fascinated composers for its concentration of Romantic themes (the quest for an inaccessible ideal, the figure of the 'eternal feminine', madness, the folk tone, supernatural scenes) and its non-linear dramaturgy, but also for the importance of music in it: almost a fifth of *Faust I* and more than a quarter of *Faust II* consist of songs and choruses. But what was one to do with this drama, the two parts of which comprise 4,614 and 12,111 verses respectively? With this discontinuous plot that intertwines humorous episodes, mythological references and metaphysical reflection? By advocating total art, Goethe in fact induced a fragmentation of his work and musical settings of isolated passages from it. But in treating his text in this way, composers blazed new trails.



FAUSTIAN MINIATURES

In 1774 Goethe wrote *Es war ein König in Thule* (There once was a king in Thule), a poem published in 1782 and then inserted in *Faust I*, which – as was only appropriate – inspired around one hundred isolated lieder (including versions by Reichardt, Zelter, Schubert and Liszt). Other ‘songs’ from the work also stimulated composers, to a somewhat lesser degree: a little more than fifty settings of Gretchen’s monologue at her spinning wheel, and around thirty ‘Songs of the Rat’ and twenty ‘Songs of the Flea’. With *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (Gretchen at the spinning-wheel, 1814), Schubert tackled Goethe for the first time and crystallised the founding principles of the Romantic lied: expressive gradations within a homogeneous style, unity derived from short motifs, a vocal line inseparable from its instrumental environment.

Set in isolation, a poem may suggest a dramatic situation and psychological state different from those of the play. Schubert’s *Gretchen am Spinnrade* implies that the eponymous heroine has been abandoned, whereas in Goethe she sings this complaint before becoming Faust’s mistress. His setting of *Der König in Thule* merges the chorale, the medieval ballade (three strophes in AAB form) and the funeral march. Liszt, in his setting, illustrates step by step the different episodes of the legend with rhetorical devices that one cannot imagine on Gretchen’s lips (the knights are associated with a heroic tone, while the music tumbles spectacularly into the bottom register when the goblet sinks into the waves).

The boundary between lied and stage music was sometimes tenuous, as is shown, for example, by Konradin Kreutzer’s twenty-two *Gesänge* (for solo voice or chorus with piano accompaniment, completed in 1834). Although the young Wagner intended his *Sieben Kompositionen zu Goethes ‘Faust’* (Seven compositions on Goethe’s *Faust*, 1831) for theatrical performance, the project never came to fruition. Several of these pieces are still known today because they appear in lieder recitals.



FAUST ON STAGE

Some musical compositions actually did accompany theatrical performances. In 1819, *Faust I* received a partial premiere in Berlin with music by Prince Antoni Henryk Radziwiłł. In 1829, on the occasion of Goethe's eightieth birthday, it was performed in several German cities with incidental music by Carl Eberwein. Throughout the nineteenth century, many other composers collaborated with the world of theatre. But to dare to convert the plot into an opera libretto... Were the Germans afraid of desecrating Goethe? Spohr's *Faust* of 1813, the first major opera on the subject, draws most of its material from the works of Friedrich Maximilian Klinger.

Hence Faust operas based on Goethe first emerged outside Germany. Though it was introduced to the stage of the Théâtre-Italien with Louise Bertin's *Fausto* (1831), the play did not inspire a significant French work until 1859. Forced to prune the sprawling original play, Gounod neglected the metaphysical questionings and the supernatural in favour of a love story centred on the character of Gretchen (Marguerite). He also privileged a tone at once tender and passionate, and gave a significant place to the religious dimension. Among the parodies spawned by the opera was Hervé's *opéra-bouffe Le Petit Faust* (1869), whose music Banville deemed 'lively, elegant, original, inspired from beginning to end'.

In Italy, Luigi Gordigiani composed a *Fausto* performed in Florence in 1837. In 1868, La Scala in Milan staged the *Mefistofele* of Arrigo Boito, who also wrote the libretto. A humiliating failure, explicable by the five-hour duration of the performance and the way in which the opera tramples the Italian tradition underfoot: little action, many ellipses, vast tableaux inherited from French *grand opéra*, and a love plot reduced to the bare bones. Despite its composer's numerous revisions, audiences remained unmoved by the only nineteenth-century opera that borrows material from *Faust II*.



TOWARDS AN ABSTRACT DRAMATURGY

Loaded down with philosophy, *Mefistofele* tends towards abstraction. Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* (1846), designed for concert performance and based on the material of his earlier *Huit Scènes de Faust* (1828-29), also distances itself from dramatic verisimilitude. The composer considerably modifies Goethe's play (the tragic denouement being the most obvious change) in order to produce a succession of discontinuous episodes, rich in ellipses. It combines meditation and action, relying on orchestral episodes to 'show' what the absence of staging conceals. His 'Dramatic Legend in Four Parts' nevertheless remains understandable to audiences unfamiliar with Goethe. By contrast, other non-theatrical works eliminate narration and affirm even more strongly their desire for abstraction. By composing an oratorio, Schumann was able to preserve the play's fragmented construction and the original verse. His *Szenen aus Goethes 'Faust'* (Scenes from Goethe's *Faust*, 1844-53) deletes the pact with Mephistopheles and the scholar's suicidal urge. Schumann also removes the folk character and the humorous aspects and opts instead for a spiritual meditation on *Faust II*. Only the first of the three parts (about a quarter of an hour of music), centred on the character of Gretchen, makes use of *Faust I*. Unlike other composers who dwell chiefly on the love story between Gretchen and Faust, Schumann is more concerned with the issue of duality and redemption. He assimilates the trajectory of Faust with a Christlike Passion, in which the character's love for Gretchen represents the profane side. At the end of the *Szenen*, the abandoned mistress reappears in the *Chorus mysticus* (the conclusion of *Faust II*) as a Penitent Woman, the double of the Mater Gloriosa and incarnation of the Eternal Feminine (*das Ewig-Weibliche*) that 'draws us ever higher'.

Mahler too set the *Chorus mysticus* to music, in the second part of his Eighth Symphony (1910), whose premiere stoked the last fires of Romanticism. For the Austrian composer, only this text could form a counterpart to the *Veni creator spiritus* sung in the first part. If his score does not encapsulate every aspect of Goethe's drama, it takes on the play's

totalising ambitions in the juxtaposition of two languages (Latin and German), the fusion of the sacred and the profane, and the hybridisation of the genres of symphony, oratorio and opera.



FAUST WITHOUT WORDS

The operatic works of Berlioz, Gounod and Boito exploit the potential of the orchestra in masterly fashion. Although the 'symphonisation' of opera is a general trend of the nineteenth century, Goethe's play was intimately bound up with this evolution and, more generally, with the poetisation of instrumental music. Let us recall Berlioz's letter to Humbert Ferrand in 1829: 'I have long had in mind a descriptive symphony on *Faust* that is in the process of fermentation; when I give it its freedom, I want it to terrify the musical world.' Once the idea was abandoned, he nevertheless preserved traces of the scene on the Brocken Mountain (*Faust I*) in the finale of the *Symphonie fantastique*.

In 1839-40, Wagner composed *Eine Faust-Ouvertüre*, planned as the first part of a *Faust-Symphonie* that he never completed. At the same time, Liszt wrote to Marie d'Agoult: 'If I feel the necessary life and strength within me, I will undertake a symphonic work based on Dante and then another on *Faust*.' It was only in 1854, in Weimar (the city of Goethe), that he composed *Eine Faust-Symphonie in drei Charakterbildern* (*A Faust Symphony in three character portraits*). The three movements, successively devoted to Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles, isolate the characters and question the spiritual condition of man. By adding the *Chorus mysticus* (sung by male chorus and solo tenor) as the work's apotheosis in 1861, Liszt shifted it in the direction of sacred oratorio, especially as the orchestra includes an organ.

While Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor is sometimes regarded as a 'Faust Sonata', there is no evidence to support this interpretation. On the other hand, Charles-Valentin Alkan alluded to Goethe in his *Grande*

Sonate 'Les Quatre Âges' (Grand Sonata 'The Four Ages [of Man]') op. 33 (1847-48), the second movement of which he entitled '30 Ans - Quasi Faust' (Thirty years old - quasi-Faust). This movement of transcendental virtuosity, which ends with a monumental eight-part fugue on the hymn *Verbum supernum*, glorifies self-expression. Ultimately, Goethe's drama fertilised Romantic music because it exhorted creators to surpass themselves, to invent new forms and sounds – as if the poet were urging them to make these lines from *Faust I* a profession of faith:

*Ins hohe Meer werd' ich hinausgewiesen,
Die Spiegelflut erglänzt zu meinen Füßen,
Zu neuen Ufern lockt ein neuer Tag.
(I am summoned forth towards the broad ocean,
The mirror of the waves gleams at my feet,
A new day draws me to new shores.)*



Faust's study, stage design of 1869.
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.

Le cabinet de Faust, décor de 1869.
Bibliothèque nationale de France.