

Creating or recreating the ‘first’ *Faust*

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We are nowadays well informed about the history of the composition of the ‘first’ *Faust*, thanks to the work of Gérard Condé and – on the genesis of the work in particular – Paul Prévost. For a long time, however, the dispersion of the numerous musical and literary sources made it impossible to recreate the original version of one of the French operas most frequently performed in the world, alongside *Carmen* and *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*. And, while efforts have been made to programme all the possible variants – often not very different – of the versions with dialogue or recitatives of *Lakmé*, *Mignon* and *Carmen*, during all this time *Faust* has never known anything but ‘traditional’ dramaturgies, whose standard cuts (Siebel’s second air, the spinning-wheel air, and so on) hardly change the profile of the score. The bicentenary of Gounod’s birth in 2018 made it imperative that this mysterious ‘first’ *Faust* should finally be revealed. Or almost revealed...

The major difference from the generally known version (that of 1869, reformatted for its entry into the repertory of the Paris Opéra following the bankruptcy of the Théâtre-Lyrique) lies in the numerous passages of spoken dialogue which bring (back) to life roles subsequently sacrificed. Today there is almost nothing left of the young Wagner or the not so young Dame Marthe, who, though she still amuses us in the garden quartet, also astonishes us with her comic banter in what otherwise seems an eminently poetic and serious work. Wagner and Marthe initially had a great deal to do in the spoken text, punctuating the dialogue with piquant repartee

that gave the first *Faust* a profile more in accordance with the *opéra-comique de demi-caractère*, after the manner of the works of Adam or Auber. How can one not suggest a parallel with Hérold's *Zampa* (1831), in which the demonic title role and the tender character of Camille are counterbalanced in their gravity by the comic verve of Rita, Daniel and especially Dandolo? In this context of the artistic 'middle ground', which was a typically French yardstick for judging the quality of a work by its variety (and which is also to be found in the theatre and painting of the period), the comic aspect of the first *Faust* is further emphasised by the spoken dialogue for Méphistophélès, addressed either to his rejuvenated companion or to the audience, in asides intended to make the latter complicit in his manipulations. This devil is more ironic and mocking than evil, and operates less with the aid of genuine sorcery than with very concrete, pragmatic subterfuges when he has to produce jewel caskets or parry sword-strokes in a dangerous duel.

The spoken dialogue of the first *Faust* makes use – more than is customary in the genre of French Romantic opera – of melodrama (that is, text spoken over a discreet musical background). Every kind of orchestral device is deployed to dramatise the dialogue: ample chords punctuating a declamatory phrase, sustained harmonies to colour a psychological state, genuinely thematic motifs, or even extended orchestral inserts (the most inventive being the depiction of poisonous flowers blooming in Marguerite's garden, which in 1869 became a brief arioso for Méphistophélès, when, quite legitimately, Gounod could not bring himself to delete his fine nocturnal inspiration).



The other great difference between the two *Fausts* lies in the musical numbers absent from the many recordings issued in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. First there are those that have disappeared without the corresponding dramatic situation being conserved: the initial trio for Faust, Wagner and Siebel, and the farewell duet for Valentin and Marguerite,

for example. Then there are those that were replaced by a different musical idea: Méphisto's first air (with 'Le veau d'or' consigning to oblivion the rather similar strains of the earlier 'Chanson de Maître Scarabée'), Siebel's second ('Si le bonheur à sourire t'invite' replacing at a much later stage the *romance* 'Versez vos chagrins dans mon âme', which had been cut before the premiere), Valentin's air with interjections from the soldiers (replaced by the Soldiers' Chorus so famous today). Finally, there are a multitude of slight modifications that will have the merit of surprising the ear of the informed music lover. Everywhere details were retouched in the 1869 version, but not necessarily to more judicious effect: one might mention in this respect the interventions of the chorus of demons and the final bars of the church scene, for example, or the end of the prison trio and the pealing bells now absent from the concluding apotheosis. Incidentally, it is worth noting that the fair scene of Act One, unchanged in its form, features the intervention of a beggar whose solos relegate a few choral phrases to the background as the man requests alms, moving from one group to another. As for the indispensable 'Jewel Song', it is heard here in its initial version, that is, with a complete reprise of the 'Ah! je ris de me voir si belle' section before the coda.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that a perfectly delimited 'first *Faust*' preceded a 'second *Faust*' that has been revived in immutable form ever since 1869. For some passages were cut or modified even before the 1859 premiere. These are therefore completely new and previously unpublished, while others were replaced or rewritten in the course of the work's transfer from the Théâtre-Lyrique to the Opéra. And, finally, several numbers were later additions, the most famous being Valentin's air 'Avant de quitter ces lieux' (premiered in English at Covent Garden before its incorporation in the French *Faust* via an ad hoc translation). This is why the *Faust* presented by the Palazzetto Bru Zane, based on the new critical edition prepared by Paul Prévost and published by Bärenreiter, is nothing more nor less than a 'different' *Faust*, rather than a 'first' *Faust*, deliberately accumulating the maximum number of unpublished numbers. Some of these have never been performed on an operatic stage anywhere

in the world, and several are presented here for the first time, since even Gounod probably never heard them, at least not with orchestra.

This Faustian ‘object’, though designed to offer maximum satisfaction to the curiosity of music lovers, has also been conceived as a coherent dramatic work that would be wholly viable on stage. Its interest is increased still further by the fact that it is performed on period instruments, with the aim of mirroring the original orchestral colours, which nowadays are smoothed over by the timbres of modern instruments playing without asperities. This is not the least quality of the present performance. Right from the overture – even though in this case there is no difference between the 1859 and 1869 versions – the listener will rediscover the sombre, disturbing fugato with which Gounod plunges the audience into his hero’s Romantic torments. The fair, the garden, the church, the prison also take on a quite different relief in the hands of Christophe Rousset, a relief that will not fail to disconcert tradition-loving purists, so radically does it renew the ‘usual’ sonorities of a *Faust* we all thought we knew right down to the smallest detail.



Finally, a word about the vocal casting, also unexpected to some extent. The presence of Véronique Gens as Marguerite reminds us that, when the work was performed in the provinces, Gounod wanted managements to engage a powerful operatic voice (a ‘forte chanteuse de grand opéra’) in the role and not the company’s leading *opéra-comique* soprano. It was precisely for the same reason that he wrote recitatives as early as 1862, so that the work would correspond to the canons of ‘lyric’ rather than ‘light’ opera. It should be noted in this regard that the creator of the role – Madame Miolan-Carvalho – had almost all the works that Gounod wrote for her mutilated on the pretext that the writing was too dramatic for her: the ‘potion’ scene in *Roméo et Juliette* (initially shortened and then deleted before the premiere), the ‘Crau’ scene in *Mireille* and Marguerite’s mad song in the prison in *Faust* (which was apparently never finished) among

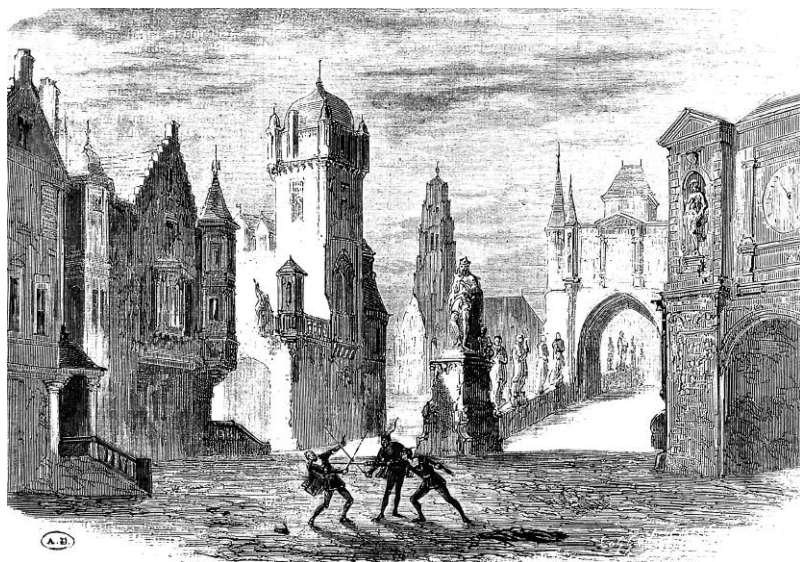
others. Indeed, as the 1859 premiere approached, several journalists wondered whether Madame Carvalho had the capacity to handle the 'ample vocal line' to which Gounod was known to be partial. These remarks justify not only the presence in this recording of a darker voice with a more central tessitura, but also the return to lower-pitched 'ossias' in the score. The high B of the 'spinning-wheel' air is here replaced by the F sharp that the score also suggests, not as a note in smaller type for the singer's convenience, but as a genuine artistic alternative (doubtless more in keeping with the poetry of the air), just as the final cadenza of the church scene reverts, in this 1859 version, to its initial configuration, rising only to high G (and not to B flat) and visiting the lower register at greater length. In the latter case, no alternative is proposed in the first edition, and it is to the lighter Marguerites of the late nineteenth century that we owe the now traditional addition of as many high notes as possible. Other modifications will also be noticed here and there (in particular the final cry of the 'window' air, replaced here by the optional G instead of the traditional top C). Listeners will appreciate the artistic probity of Véronique Gens, who allows us to hear all these variants.

Benjamin Bernheim, for his part, brings to Faust a more youthful timbre than usual, true to the genuine tradition of the early exponents of the role, making use of head voice and *voix mixte* in the manner of the French *ténor de demi-caractère*. The role of Méphisto is here assigned to Andrew Foster-Williams, thus restoring the theatrical specificity of the *baryton-basse de caractère* voice that was the glory of the Opéra-Comique and the Théâtre-Lyrique in the 1860s. Far removed from the large-voiced *basses profondes* of Meyerbeer, these roles placed equal emphasis on vocal qualities and acting. And one need only read the lines allotted to the devil in the libretto to be persuaded that the original Méphisto was doubtless not conceived for the kind of monolithic stentorian voices that are often to be heard in the role today. Were it not for two or three low notes, one would even be convinced that a baritone with a central tessitura would be wholly legitimate in the part, which constantly calls for flexibility, speed, finesse and verbal dexterity. As for Dame Marthe, she was indeed a

soprano in the first casts, before moving into the contralto register that we hear today.



The creation of this new *Faust* is a reminder of the major revisions that French operatic works were destined to undergo during their composers' own lifetimes. There is almost never a single and indisputable version of an opera, but a constellation of subtly different scores. And from now on there will be another *Faust*, which illustrates the successive stages in the creative processes of one of the greatest geniuses of French Romantic art.



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