

*Virginia
Opera*

GOUDON'S
FAUST

STUDY GUIDE

2004-2005 SEASON

FAUST

Table of Contents

Premiere	2
Cast of Characters	2
Brief Summary	2
Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights	3
Historical Background	7
Discussion Questions	9
A Short History of Opera	10
The Operatic Voice	12
Opera Production	14

Premiere

First performance on March 19, 1859, at the Theatre Lyrique in Paris, France.

Cast of Characters

Dr. Faust , a philosopher	Tenor
Mephistopheles , incarnation of Satan	Bass-Baritone
Marguerite , a chaste young woman	Soprano
Valentin , a soldier, Marguerite's brother	Baritone
Marthe , a neighbor of Marguerite	Mezzo-Soprano
Siebel , a very young man, friend of Valentin	Soprano or Mezzo-Soprano
Wagner , a student, friend of Valentin	Baritone

Brief Summary

Setting: Germany in the 16th Century

Aging Dr. Faust sits at his desk brooding about his life, feeling it was worthless. Preparing to drink poison, he calls on Satan. Mephistopheles obligingly appears and offers Faust whatever he wants in exchange for his soul. Faust wants youth and its joys. Mephistopheles shows him a vision of a beautiful young woman named Marguerite. Faust seals the bargain with Satan. He is transformed into a handsome young man.

Mephistopheles and Faust travel to Marguerite's home. Marguerite's brother is leaving for war and is worried about leaving his sister alone. Once he leaves, Mephistopheles produces a chest full of jewels to help Faust entice Marguerite. She finds the jewels and is dazzled and excited. Faust and Marguerite walk in the garden and Mephistopheles calls on the powers of nature to cast a spell over them. Marguerite eventually succumbs to Faust's advances while Satan laughs.

Marguerite, alone and pregnant, has been abandoned by Faust. She is mocked by the townspeople and fearful of her future. Her brother Valentin returns from war and is full of anger over Marguerite's condition. Faust appears with Mephistopheles and Valentin is goaded into a duel. Faust mortally wounds Valentin, who denounces and curses his sister as he dies.

Marguerite loses her senses. In her madness she kills her newborn child and is in prison, awaiting execution. Faust and Mephistopheles appear in her cell. She recognizes Faust and is overjoyed, but when she sees Mephistopheles she recoils, instinctively sensing his evil. She asks for salvation and falls dead. Satan tries to claim her, but angels appear and bear her soul to Heaven. Faust falls to his knees and Mephistopheles turns away.

Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

Act I

An instrumental prelude opens the opera, setting the tone for the complex but depressed state of Faust's mind. He is an aged philosopher, cynical and unsatisfied by a lifetime of study which has brought him no sense of fulfillment. The music is both contrapuntal and chromatic, suggesting the complexity of Faust's mind. In contrast, there are passages of pastoral simplicity which reinforces the conflicted feelings Faust has about the meaning of his life. The second half of the prelude focuses on thematic material sung by Valentin, Marguerite's brother, in the first act.

As dawn approaches, Faust sits in his study brooding over his life and decides to end it all by drinking poison. As he prepares to drink from the goblet a chorus of girls is heard singing an early morning song. He hesitates, denouncing their happiness, and prepares again to drink the brew. Once again, the sound of a group of peasants heading to the fields and singing praises to God interrupts him. He mocks them and curses everything good and desirable. He finishes with an invocation to the devil and calls on Satan to appear. With a great crescendo and a crashing chord from the orchestra, Mephistopheles materializes.

Mephistopheles is dressed as a rich nobleman with a plumed cap and a mocking manner. In the ensuing duet he offers Faust gold, glory, power - anything he desires. In a rousing cabalette, "À moi les plaisirs," (I want pleasure) Faust spells out what he wants - youth, and the vitality to enjoy himself with the ladies. Mephistopheles replies easily that this request will be no problem and cost Faust very little. He will be Faust's servant here on earth but eventually "below" their positions will be reversed. The euphemism "below," representing hell, is accompanied by solemn brass instruments, a musical device frequently used in connection with the supernatural. When Faust hesitates, Mephistopheles causes an apparition to appear showing the lovely Marguerite sitting at her spinning wheel. The musical accompaniment foreshadows the love duet to come. Faust signs away his soul as the vision of Marguerite fades. Mephistopheles gives him a potion to drink and in moments Faust is transformed into a handsome young man. They sing a reprise of the cabaletta, "À moi les plaisirs," a half-tone higher than heard earlier. The two leave seeking pleasure and the company of the lovely Marguerite.

Act II

Mephistopheles and Faust arrive in Leipzig during the town fair. The townspeople are lighthearted and happy and an extended choral number ensues with various groups voicing their attitudes toward life. The music is contrapuntal and exacting, punctuated by a drinking song being offered by a group of students. Into the crowd walks Valentin, Marguerite's brother, who is a soldier preparing to go off to war. He is worried about his sister because she will be left alone. He sings an aria, "Avant de quitter ces lieux," (Even bravest heart may swell), a prayer that God will protect her in his absence. His friend, Siebel, promises to look after Marguerite. Siebel is very young man. This is represented musically by a woman singing the part while dressing and acting as a man.

Valentin joins his friends at the tavern for a final drink when Mephistopheles arrives and joins the festivities. He sings the strophic song, "Le veau d'or" (The Calf of Gold) and leads everyone around the tavern using irreverent humor. Valentin is suspicious of Mephistopheles who is reading palms and making predictions. When Mephistopheles proposes a toast to Marguerite, Valentin challenges him with his sword. Mephistopheles' dark power causes Valentin's sword to break in mid-air. Everyone realizes that they are dealing with something supernatural. In response Valentin and his friends sing, "De l'enfer qui vient émousser," (Chorale of the Swords). The men reverse their swords, showing the sign of the cross with the handles. The music is impressive as the men slowly back away off-stage, leaving Mephistopheles cowering, alone on the stage. He is soon joined by Faust, who wishes to meet Marguerite, and a crowd of villagers who dance and sing the waltz and chorus, "Ansi que la brise légère." Marguerite appears among the dancing villagers and Faust tries to introduce himself. She gently but firmly rebuffs him. Mephistopheles promises assistance in the conquest of Marguerite as the villagers continue their merriment.

Act III

Outside Marguerite's home, Siebel has arrived to bring flowers to Marguerite. When he touches the flowers they wither due to Mephistopheles' influence. Dipping his hand in holy water breaks the spell. Siebel sings of his love for Marguerite and his gift of flowers in the song, "Faites-lui mes aveux," (The Flower Song). After placing the flowers on Marguerite's doorstep he leaves. Faust and Mephistopheles observe his actions and Mephistopheles comments that he will provide a far more tantalizing gift. Faust remains alone in front of the house and sings an aria, "Salut! demeure chaste et pure," (Fair home of heaven's fairest angel). Mephistopheles returns with a casket of jewels and a mirror, placing them on the doorstep. The two men hide themselves.

Marguerite brings her loom out of the house and in a recitative speculates to herself about the man who tried to speak with her at the fair. She proceeds to sing a three part air the first section of which is a ballade about the King of Thule, "Il était un roi de Thulé." She sees the gifts left on her doorstep and exclaims over the jewels which she picks up and tries on, observing herself in the mirror. The final part of her air is the *cabelette*, "Ah! je ris de me voir," (The Jewel Song) where Marguerite excitedly exclaims over the jewels and her appearance. The music reflects her pleasure and exhilaration through the use of trills, runs and roulades, conferring a breathless quality to her reaction to the jewels.

Marguerite's neighbor, Marthe stops by and comments on the jewels, saying they must be from a rich admirer and adding that her own husband has never been so generous. Faust and Mephistopheles arrive and the four engage in a quartet in which Mephistopheles flirts with Marthe in an effort to give Faust time with Marguerite. Faust and Marguerite stroll outside into the garden where Mephistopheles uses his powers to cast a spell over them. The love duet begins with Faust's words, "Laisse-moi, laisse-moi," (Stay my dear) and proceeds to the central section of the duet, "O nuit d'amour," (Oh night of love) where Marguerite declares her love for him. Their exchanges become more passionate until Marguerite breaks away, overcome by her emotions. She begs him to leave and Faust complies after a promise that they will meet again in the morning.

Marguerite goes inside while Mephistopheles blocks Faust from leaving, telling him he's foolish to leave and to listen to her words. Marguerite opens the window to the night sky and pours out her heart, declaring her love and her desire for Faust's return. When Faust hears her words he rushes from the shadows and takes her in his arms. As they passionately embrace Mephistopheles laughs in a mocking manner, believing he has an additional soul in his grasp.

Act IV

As a result of her liaison with Faust, Marguerite expects a child and is scorned by the people of the town. Faust has seemingly abandoned her. She sits down at her spinning wheel and sings a Spinning Song, "Il ne revient pas," (He is not returning) which expresses her desolation. Siebel visits and tries to lift her spirits with the aria, "Si le bonheur," (When all was young). (This scene is frequently omitted).

The soldiers return from war to the sounds of a military band. The lively Soldier's Chorus, "Gloire immortelle de nos aïeux," (Glory to those who have gone before), rouses the townspeople to an excited pitch. Siebel informs Valentin of Marguerite's troubles and Valentin rushes into the house in great anger. Faust returns with Mephistopheles who sings a derisive serenade before Marguerite's door, "Vous qui faites l'endormie," (Don't pretend that you are sleeping). The serenade is in strophic form and an insulting parody of Faust's serenade in the previous act. Valentin emerges, demanding to know who is responsible for what has befallen Marguerite. He and Mephistopheles spar threateningly as Faust draws his sword in the trio, "Que voulez-vous, Messieurs?" (What do you wish). The orchestra increases the tension with dotted rhythms as Valentin and Faust begin to duel. Faust is protected by Mephistopheles and Valentin is mortally wounded. As Faust and Mephistopheles run from the scene, Valentin curses his sister and damns her. The shocked crowd urges him to have Christian compassion as Valentin dies. (This scene and the next are sometimes reversed in order).

Marguerite goes to church and tries to pray. She is afraid for her immortal soul and her prayers are continually interrupted by the voice of Mephistopheles undermining her confidence. Choral music being sung in the church, set to the Dies Irae (Day of Judgment) of the Latin Mass, greatly magnify her fears. With great effort, Marguerite completes her prayer, "Seigneur, accueillez ma prière," (Father, hear my prayer), but collapses when Mephistopheles announces her damnation. (This scene occasionally comes before the previous one).

Act V

Mephistopheles takes Faust to the Hartz Mountains to celebrate Walpurgis Night, The Witch's Sabbath. Faust meets some of history's most beautiful women. There is an extended ballet. Faust sees a vision of Marguerite with a red line around her neck. He is upset by the vision and wishes to return to her. Mephistopheles complies. (This scene is usually omitted except at the Paris Opera where it is performed in its entirety).

Marguerite, whose life has been shattered, has lost her senses. She has been imprisoned for the murder of her baby and awaits execution. Mephistopheles helps Faust

gain entry into the prison. The sound of Faust's voice awakens Marguerite who is overjoyed at his return. They sing a duet, "Oui c'est toi je t'aime," (Yes, 'tis thou, I love thee), and recall their past meetings and happiness. Faust begs her to escape with him. It becomes clear that Marguerite's mind is wandering. She does not respond to Faust's entreaties. Mephistopheles enters the cell to tell them to hurry. Marguerite recoils and tries to get away from him. She gets down on her knees and begs for the protection of Heaven. In the trio, "Ange pur, ange radieux," (Angel host shining in the sky), she prays for deliverance, joined by Faust and Mephistopheles, urging her to escape with them. In a stepwise sequence that raises the key several times, the melody soars heroically to a full conclusion. Marguerite then renounces Faust and dies. Mephistopheles tries to claim her soul but a heavenly choir intercedes, proclaiming she is saved. As her soul is borne to heaven, Faust falls to his knees in prayer and Mephistopheles turns away.

Historical Background

Music critics like to poke holes in Gounod's *Faust*. Harold Schonberg, the great music critic of the New York Times once wrote, "*Faust* was a triumph of bourgeois music applied to bourgeois taste." Paradoxically, Gounod's *Faust* was, in fact, an opera that conquered Europe and the United States in a craze of popularity that lasted decades. The public could not get enough of it. As Schonberg writes in his book, *The Lives of the Great Composers*, a British critic once complained (in 1863), '*Faust, Faust, Faust*, nothing but *Faust*. *Faust* on Saturday, Wednesday and Thursday; to be repeated tonight, on Tuesday, and every night until further notice.'

Critics aside, *Faust* was embraced by audiences everywhere it was performed and made Gounod the most famous composer in France. The triumph of *Faust* can be measured in its performance numbers: by 1894 it had been performed 1000 times in Paris alone. This work, based on Goethe's masterpiece of a man who sells his soul to the devil, was translated into more than twenty-five languages. Praised for its elegance and lyrical qualities, *Faust* is still considered Gounod's greatest masterpiece and one of the most successful French operas of the nineteenth century.

The Faust legend has been a commonly used vehicle of artistic expression for centuries. As early as 1588, Christopher Marlowe's play, *Dr. Faustus*, resonated with audiences. Since that time dozens of plays, operas and ballets have entertained and excited scores of theater-goers. (A comprehensive list of the Faust legend in music can be found at www.carolinaclassical.com/faust/index.html). The expression, "making a pact with the devil," has entered the mainstream of commonly-used phrases, and the underlying significance of Faust's bargain has many present-day applications. Of all the iterations of the Faust legend, one of the greatest was the play by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, one of the giants of world literature. Goethe's *Faust* is a profound work of philosophy, theology, science, music and literature and was written in two parts which spanned sixty years of Goethe's life. Part I was completed in 1808 and Part II shortly before his death in 1832. Gounod based his opera on Part I of Goethe's masterpiece.

Gounod's first interest in Faust as an operatic subject occurred in 1839 when he read a translation of Goethe's play during time he spent in Italy as a recipient of the Grand Prix de Rome. The time he spent in Rome was instrumental in its effect on his life and music. He was greatly influenced by early Italian music, especially that of Palestrina (1524-1594). His strong religious beliefs sparked an abiding interest in theology which he continued to pursue upon his return to Paris in 1844. From 1845 until 1850 Gounod was so preoccupied with matters of religion that he produced few musical works. This period in Gounod's life is known as "the silent years." In 1847 he actually enrolled in a seminary but ultimately decided against becoming a priest. Gounod's deeply-held spirituality and religious training remained an important factor in his musical composition and is clearly evident in the operas that became his main focus as a composer.

Gounod's full attention turned to opera in 1850. Over the next few years he wrote several operas which received little notice. During this period he was employed by the Orphéon Choral Society as conductor with the impressive title of Superintendent of Instruction in Singing to the Communal Schools of the City of Paris. This post added greatly to his experience in working with the human voice in solo and in concert. Throughout, he continued to persevere in his opera composition, declaring, "...the composer who would achieve a successful career must create it through writing operas."

In 1855 Gounod met the libretto-writing team of Jules Barbier and Michel Carré. Carré had written a play on the Faust subject, entitled *Faust et Marguerite*, which was loosely based on Goethe's play. Carré's play provided a basic framework for the proposed opera, while the majority of the opera's text was written by Barbier. Since Carré used Goethe as the basis for his play, the character of Marguerite is central to the story. Her character does not appear in Marlowe or earlier iterations of the Faust legend. She is a character created by Goethe (called Gretchen in his play), a simple, direct and trusting girl who falls victim to the machinations of the devil. She is a sympathetic figure, more so in Gounod's work than Goethe's. The characters of Faust and Mephistopheles lose a little of their depth in the opera, largely because Barbier removed the deeply philosophical nature of their dialogue, favoring action, not discourse in his libretto. Faust eventually achieves a kind of moral stature, and is ultimately redeemed, but this does not occur until Part II of Goethe's work. In Germany a clear distinction is drawn between Goethe's *Faust* and Gounod's *Faust*. The opera's name is advertised as *Margarethe*. Goethe's masterpiece is an important part of German literature and national pride dictates this separation between the two.

Barbier and Gounod worked closely with the director of the Théâtre-Lyrique, a venue where new French composers were made welcome. The venerable Paris Opéra was wary of presenting new works. *Faust* made its debut at the Théâtre-Lyrique on March 19, 1859, not as we hear it today, but as an *opéra comique*. This term identifies a genre of musical stage works in France with spoken dialogue, not necessarily comic in nature. (*Carmen* is another example of an opera that debuted as an *opéra comique*). Musical recitatives and ballet music were eventually added by 1869, making *Faust* the French grand opera we see today. In Paris it is still produced in its full five-act form. In other venues a variety of scenes are omitted to streamline the action and reduce the production time.

Gounod's success with *Faust* became an important milestone for the French musical establishment and for French operatic culture on the international stage. The transparent textures of Gounod's orchestrations served as a model for other French composers such as Bizet and Massenet, and helped to establish a distinctly "French" orchestral sound. *Faust* established itself as a grand opera with modern style, sweetly melodic phrasing, and a refined, delicate tone that was unreservedly popular with the public. In French national terms, it is a national asset.

Discussion Questions

1. The phrase, “making a pact with the devil” does not have to be related to religion . How can it apply in today’s world in a non-religious sense?
- 2.. For what things can the character of Mephistopheles be a metaphor?
3. Is there a difference between Faust’s desire for youth and the extreme emphasis on a youthful appearance in present day society?
4. The character of Mephistopheles is witty and urbane. Can anyone see his true nature?
5. Does Mephistopheles do anything truly evil, or does he merely take away a person’s inhibitions and see what happens?
6. Which character does the story revolve around?
7. Is there a purpose in the character of Valentin?
8. If Valentin had been more understanding would his sister have suffered the same fate?
9. How many times was Marguerite abandoned?
10. Did Faust truly care for Marguerite?

of the country's folk music and legends. Composers such as Aaron Copland, Douglas Moore, Carlisle Floyd, Howard Hanson, and Robert Ward have all crafted operas that have been presented throughout the world to great success. Today, composers John Adams, Philip Glass, and John Corigliano enjoy success both at home and abroad and are credited with the infusion of new life into an art form which continues to evolve even as it approaches its fifth century.



The Operatic Voice

A true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving an unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<i>Soprano</i>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<i>Mezzo-Soprano</i>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<i>Tenor</i>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<i>Baritone</i>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Le nozze di Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	Verdi Baritone Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<i>Bass</i>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	Buffo Bass Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	Basso Cantate Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of myriad art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.

