

The Transformations

of Faust

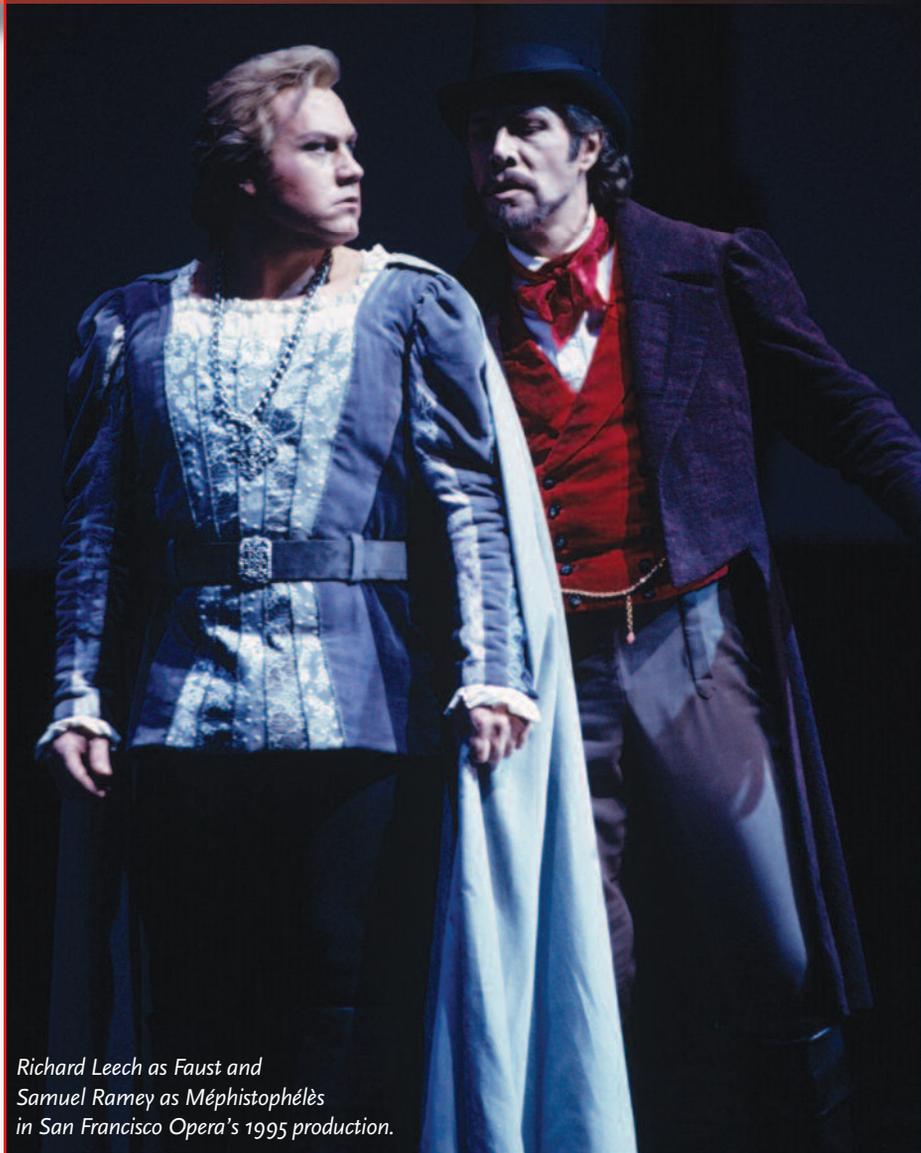
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Creating a new opera is fraught with extraordinary difficulties. Conceiving a libretto, composing the music, and staging and rehearsing a production to its premiere are nerve-wracking and exhausting processes. Frequently, a composer's finished score is far too long for performance, and deep cuts must be made for creative and practical reasons. Charles Gounod's *Faust* was no exception. The opera received its premiere at the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris on March 19, 1859 and went on to a *succès d'estime*, but the artistic results never satisfied everyone, especially Gounod. Over the next ten years, the score underwent further alterations before it achieved its "final" form. On March 3, 1869 it received a rousing triumph at the premier opera house in Paris, the Académie Impériale de la Musique, known simply as the Opéra.

Despite the popular success of *Faust*, no definitive version of the opera exists. Questions surrounding the changes and deletions in the content and ordering of the scenes still linger today. Several French operas have legendary status with their different published versions, and *Faust* can be considered among those that have long and difficult histories: *Les Troyens* (Berlioz, 1864), *Don Carlos* (Verdi, 1867), *Carmen* (Bizet, 1875), and *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (Offenbach, 1883). Many operas, including *Faust*, languish today without a "definitive" performance edition, and such uncertainty can affect the musical and dramatic presentation.

With the exception of *Don Carlos*, the Paris music publisher Choudens issued vocal scores that, unfortunately, are unreliable. Each opera endured difficult rehearsals. Much music was deleted, orders of scenes were rearranged, and stage dialogues were replaced with recitatives. Debates still occur over choices of a

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Richard Leech as Faust and Samuel Ramey as Méphistophélès in San Francisco Opera's 1995 production.

definitive version for *Carmen* and *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. Verdi revised *Don Carlos* seven times, but never found an ideal version in either French or Italian. Bizet and Offenbach died before they could complete their work. Before the first publication of the complete full score in 1969, Berlioz's *Les Troyens* existed only in flawed editions. The primary source of *Faust*—Gounod's autograph score—remained long out of public purview and surfaced only in 1977, when the French government preempted a public auction and acquired the manuscript for the Bibliothèque Nationale. Dur-



Two of San Francisco Opera's devils: Giorgio Tozzi (1977) and Ezio Pinza, who portrayed Méphistophélès with the Company seven times, beginning in 1928.

ing the first rehearsals, *Faust* suffered the same vicissitudes at the hands of Léon Carvalho, the enthusiastic and colorful director of the Théâtre Lyrique.

Born on the African isle of Mauritius, Carvalho (1825–1897) was a former baritone at the Opéra-Comique who, in 1856, became the director of the fourth Parisian opera house, the Théâtre Lyrique. He also was married to Marie Miolan, the talented soprano and star of many of his productions. Carvalho became known for staging important and new operas, including the Parisian revivals of Gluck's *Orphée et Euridice* (directed by Hector Berlioz, 1856), Mozart's *Les Noces de Figaro* (1858), and the first performance of Verdi's revised *Macbeth* (1865). In addition to the premieres of Gounod's *Le Médecin Malgré Lui* (1858) and *Faust* (1859), Berlioz's monumental *Les Troyens* (1864) also received its first performances—albeit in a severely truncated version—at the Théâtre Lyrique. Carvalho assumed leadership of the Opéra-Comique in 1876 and presented the first performances of Offenbach's posthumous *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (1883). Later that year Carvalho revived *Carmen*, but in a drastically expurgated version that outraged many musicians and devotees of Bizet. Eventually pressure forced him to stage the opera in its original edition with Celestine Galli-Marie, the first *Carmen*. This production provided the wildly successful breakthrough that cemented *Carmen* in the permanent repertory.

Not only did Carvalho manage theaters and direct productions, he drove composers and librettists mad with his incessant demands for changes in new operas. He reordered scenes, insisted on deep

cuts in the music, and interfered with the staging rehearsals. Carvalho did not meddle with the operatic creations solely out of artistic ambition; he also carried the entire financial risk of the theater and received almost no subsidy from the government. Every new opera was an investment that needed quick financial returns to recoup costs and to earn profits. Despite Carvalho's enthusiasm and professed good will, Berlioz dryly noted to a friend that the impresario was “full of good intentions... and his hell shall be paved with them,” a sentiment shared by many of his fellow composers. Although Carvalho proclaimed his highest regard for the composer's score, he often made erratic artistic decisions. He also occasionally displayed shrewd theatrical instincts that improved many productions. Although some of the changes were dubious, his goals always remained consistent—to produce operas with the greatest theatrical effect and subsequently fill the theater with a paying public.

Gounod, already well versed with Gérard de Nerval's translation of Goethe's masterwork *Faust* since his youth, first met his librettists Jules Barbier and Michel Carré in 1856. Carré had already written *Faust et Marguerite*, a stage play that premiered in 1850 at the Théâtre du Gymnase-Dramatique. Barbier actually wrote most of the libretto for *Faust* but incorporated parts of the Carré play. Carré himself contributed the verses for Méphistophélès's famous song of the Golden Calf—“le Veau d'or.” Gounod offered *Faust* to the Opéra, but it was rejected for reason of “not enough opportunities for spectacle.” Shortly thereafter, Carvalho enthusiastically commissioned Gounod to com-



Left to right: Nancy Shade as Marguerite in the 1977 production; Alfredo Kraus (*Faust*) and Arlene Saunders (*Marguerite*) in the 1967 production

pose *Faust*. The entire score was completed in the summer of 1858 and the premiere announced for late November. Rehearsals commenced in September, and Carvalho immediately began instigating his feared changes.

Before rehearsals began, Carvalho informed Gounod, Barbier, and Carré that the music—weighing in at more than 1,250 manuscript pages—was far too long. Uncut, the performance without intermissions would last over five hours. Pressured by Carvalho during the rehearsals, the reluctant Gounod progressively tore out what ultimately would be more than a third of the score.

To list the changes in the score in detail goes beyond the limitations of space, and only several of the significant changes can be highlighted. At first, *Faust* followed the nineteenth-century convention of French opéra-comique that replaced recitatives with dialogue—a dramatic device also used in the first versions of *Carmen* and *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. This use of spoken dialogue (*parlé*) did not last long. After thirty-six performances, recitatives replaced the text for the revival of *Faust* in September, 1859, and the original text appears only in the very rare first edition of the libretto from the premiere, but not in the equally rare first edition of the vocal score.

Some of the cuts are regrettable—weakening several of the characters, particularly Valentin—whereas other changes served to strengthen the dramatic tension throughout the opera. One of the changes involved Méphistophélès's aria during the Kermesse waltz in Act II, when he interrupts Wagner's song about a flea.

MÉPHISTOPHÉLÈS

Master beetle having made his fortune
by plundering, biting, stealing, and duping,
made himself honored, as is common,
not for his virtue, but for his money.

Even if it is filthy,
in all the world
there is only one treasure,
and it is gold!

Instead of a humorous song about a beetle, the aria was changed to one of a blasphemous nature, “Le veau d’or est toujours debout!” (“The golden calf still stands as always!”). The text (of which Carré and Gounod supposedly experimented with fourteen different versions) greatly improved the dramatic transition to the subsequent scene of Valentin and his companions holding aloft their crossed swords before Méphistophélès.

Originally, Gounod composed a duet in Act II for Valentin and his sister Marguerite, each bidding farewell at his departure for the battlefield. Carvalho probably insisted on deleting the duet, arguing in favor of highlighting the theatrical effect of Marguerite’s first encounter with Faust, “Non, monsieur, je ne suis demoiselle, ni belle” (“No monsieur, I am neither a lady nor am I pretty”).

Additionally, in Act IV Valentin was given a couplet with the



Rod Gilfry as Valentin in the 1995 production.

chorus celebrating his return from battle, “Chaque jour, nouvelle affaire!” (“Each day, something new!”):

Each day, something new!
Bugles, with their clear voices
are calling us to the assault!
To the noise of this fanfare,
one is preparing for death!...

This too was cut. In its place came the magnificent chorus of soldiers returning from the battlefield, “Gloire immortelles de nos aïeux” (“Immortal glory of our forefathers”). In the end, both the duet and couplets were deleted, thus rendering Valentin’s role almost superfluous. At the March 1859 premiere, Valentin did not sing one of the most recognizable arias of the baritone repertory, “Avant de quitter ce lieux” (“Before I leave this place”) in Act II. After the September 1859 revival with the introduction of recitatives, Valentin received a short, lyrical recitative, “O sainte médaille” (“Oh, sacred medallion”). At the request of Charles Santley, Gounod composed “Avant de quitter” to follow “O sainte médaille” for the 1864 performances of *Faust* at Her Majesty’s Theatre in London. The aria, however, was not used in the 1869 revival at the Paris Opéra, nor was it published until after 1871.

Among the magical moments of the opera is Act III, with its Garden scene that ultimately leads to the magnificent love scene of Faust and Marguerite. At his first entrance, Faust is enchanted at the sight of Marguerite’s house, and reveals his feelings in the couplet “Salut, demeure chaste et pure” (“Greeting, pure and chaste abode”). Yet the original intention of Gounod and his librettists was to show a remorseful side to Faust, fully aware of possible consequences:

FAUST

And you, unhappy Faust, what senseless passion
leads your steps here?
Do you dare read your thought?
Ah!... do you not tremble?

It is hell that sends you,
burning with a dark love,
poisoning the joy of this calm place!

Swift and furious
the impetuous torrent
mingles with the limpid stream
which flows as a murmur!
She has enclosed her life
in this little garden,
without desire, without longing,
without regret! And suddenly
you appear, you will entice her
into your successful trap!
Oh monster, you will break
the strings of her heart!

Unfortunately this portion of the score was cut, not only to reduce the running time of the entire opera, but also to lessen the strenuous demands placed on the tenor originally engaged to sing the role. Indeed, during the final rehearsals the tenor Guardi (his true name was Hector Gruyer, but changed to avoid confusion with the French cheese) was forced to withdraw due to

hoarseness and replaced by Joseph Barbot.

The final placement of the scene of Marguerite in the church in Act IV has never been settled. Should the scene appear after the death of Valentin as first performed at the Théâtre Lyrique? Or should it follow Marguerite's aria at the spinning wheel reflecting on her abandonment by Faust, "il ne revient pas" ("he has not returned") at the beginning of the act? The first published scores place the scene at the end of the act, whereas later editions set the church after Marguerite's aria. In current practice, the final placement depends upon which will provide the greatest dramatic and theatrical effect. (For the present staging, San Francisco Opera has chosen to follow the later practice.)

During the final rehearsals, the censors informed Carvalho of the diplomatic difficulties between the French government and the Vatican, thus raising the possibility of cutting the church scene. Carvalho admitted to being "perplexed," but the wily impresario enlisted Gounod's help to resolve the crisis:

Fortunately, Gounod was a fellow student of Monsignor de Ségur, who was at that time papal nuncio in Paris. Out of friendship for the composer, he came and attended nearly every rehearsal of *Faust*. By a stroke of luck, on the day that [the censor] Monsieur Plante arrived, Monsignor de Ségur was to be found in the little salon of my box. I immediately had the idea of informing Plante, 'We have next to us ..., the papal nuncio. Let us approach him and I will ask him for his opinion on the scene in question.' I was certainly inspired in asking him, for Monsignor de Ségur cried out, 'But Monsieur Carvalho, I wish that theatres were full of scenes like this one. Cutting the church scene! Whoever is asking that of you?' Our cause was won, and Plante never spoke to me of it ever again.

One of the most regrettable cuts, at Marguerite's expense, was her mad scene at the beginning of Act V. Marguerite is alone in her prison cell, condemned for her murder of her infant child.

MARGUERITE

My mother, the gypsy,
has killed me in the midst of this wood!...
My father, may hell keep him,
while laughing burned my fingers!
My sister took me on her back,
and then over yonder, far, far away,
hid my bones beneath an aged willow
in the corner....

Shh! Shh! I hear footsteps.
They are coming to fetch me!
What do you want, executioner?
It is not time yet!
Tomorrow at daybreak...
is it not soon enough?

Lower your naked axe,
take away that block!
See I am still young,
and when he knew me,
I was very pretty too! Very pretty!
However, he is gone!

Everyone weeps, when they look at me,
and I see you laughing,
and your arm threatens me!
I cradled my baby on my heart until daybreak,
They wanted to take it from me,
and I killed it! Mercy!

In the end, Marguerite's mad scene succumbed to Carvalho's scissors. Only the first five lines of the text survive fully orchestrated in Gounod's autograph score, the remaining pages of music torn out. Thus, only tantalizing clues remain to what might have been a highly effective scene of pathos and drama.

Gounod sold the French publication and performance rights to *Faust* for a paltry 10,000 francs to Antoine de Choudens, then an obscure music publisher. The composer later greatly regretted his decision, for as the success of the opera increased, the royalties flowed singularly to the pockets of the publisher. Choudens's inspired decision to tour the opera through Germany served to publicize the work and led to its growing success outside of France. After haggling between Choudens and the directors of the Paris Opéra, *Faust* received a lavish and triumphant production on March 3, 1869, ten years after the premiere, with 352 performances at the Théâtre Lyrique.

Charles Gounod's *Faust* became among the most staged operas of the entire repertory, receiving more than 2,500 performances in Paris alone in the next hundred years. The opera was also a hit in London, to the extent that the critic George Bernard Shaw grumped in the newspaper *The World*:

What must it be then to the professional critic, who has to spend about ten years out of every twelve of his life listening to *Faust*? If Gounod's music were less seraphically soothing, it would have long ago produced an inflammatory disease—*Faustitis*—in my profession. Even as it is, I am far from sure that my eyesight has not been damaged by protracted contemplation of the scarlet coat and red limelight of Mephistopheles (February 23, 1893).

In 1883, the Metropolitan Opera opened its doors with *Faust*—albeit sung in Italian. By the end of that company's 2009 season, the opera ranked as the eighth most-performed with 733 performances (Puccini's *La Bohème* tops the list with 1,208 performances). The potent elements of Faust and Marguerite's love story, the pathos of her abandonment, and the whiff of Méphistophéles' sulphur mixed with the charm of Gounod's music and the theatrical spectacle guarantees that the opera will long continue enchanting the public. 🌸