

The Pescadero Opera Society presents

# Faust

Music by  
Charles-François Gounod

Libretto by  
Jules Barbier and Michel Carré

Based on Carré's *Faust et Marguerite*  
and Goethe's *Faust, Part I*

French translation  
by Gerard de Nerval

Opéra in Five Acts

Setting: Germany  
Time: 16th century



## Characters

Le docteur Faust, a philosopher (tenor) ..... Roberto Alagna  
Méphistophélè (bass) ..... Bryn Terfel  
Marguerite (soprano) ..... Angela Gheorghiu  
Valentin, a soldier, Marguerite's brother (baritone) ..... Simon Keenlyside  
Siébel, student of Faust (soprano) ..... Sophie Koch  
Marthe, Marguerite's neighbor (mezzo-soprano) ..... Della Jones  
Young girls, laborers, students, soldiers, burghers, matrons, invisible demons, church choir,  
witches, queens and courtesans of antiquity, celestial voices

Conducted by Antonio Pappano  
with the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden  
and the Royal Opera House Chorus and Ballet

Première performance at the Théâtre Lyrique, Paris on March 19, 1859

# Synopsis

## Act I

### Faust's Study, the hour before dawn



Alone in his study Faust is reflecting gloomily on the barren results of a lifetime spent in the pursuit of wisdom. His lamp is nearly burned out and dawn is glimmering on the horizon. At the prospect of another day he finds himself longing for death. He mixes a poisonous draught and prepares a drink, bidding a farewell to earth. He raises the goblet to his lips, but falters when the distant voices of peasant girls greeting the dawn and the song of reapers setting out for the fields re-awaken the unfulfilled passions and desires of his youth. He curses the God in whom they believe and calls instead upon the powers of Hell.

At once Méphistophélès appears before him dressed as a gallant of the day. He offers his services to Faust who tells him of his longing for youth and pleasure. Méphistophélès replies that these desires can all be realized, but on one condition — that he forfeit his soul. As long as he remains on earth Faust will be the master, Méphistophélès the servant; but, once in the world below, their roles will be reversed. He produces a contract for Faust to sign. Seeing him hesitate, Méphistophélès conjures up a vision of the young village girl, Marguerite. Enraptured, Faust signs his name to the contract. Méphistophélès hands him a goblet containing the elixir of youth. Faust drinks it and is immediately transformed into a handsome young man, ready to set forth in pursuit of adventure with Méphistophélès as his guide.

## Act II

### A tavern at the gates of a city during the Easter Fair (Kermesse)

The curtain opens to a festive chorus of students, soldiers, and townspeople gather for Kermesse. Groups of students, soldiers and townsfolk meet and make merry. The soldier, Valentin, enters, holding a small medallion, a parting gift of his sister Marguerite. About to set out for war, he can only think with sorrow about leaving his sister alone and unprotected. He instructs his friends, including Wagner and Siébel, to look after her in his absence.

Valentin pours out his feelings in the celebrated Cavatina. Students and soldiers call for more wine and a song. Wagner obliges with a ditty about a rat, but, before he gets very far with it, he is interrupted by Méphistophélès, who begs to be allowed to join the company, offering in his turn to regale them with a song far better than Wagner's. His offer is accepted. Méphistophélès leads them in the song of the calf of gold, that magnificent idol to whom kings and even gods do homage.

The company thanks him for his song. Méphistophélès then proceeds to tell their fortunes. He predicts that Wagner will be killed in a duel, and that Siébel will cause every flower that he touches to wither — “no more nosegays for Marguerite!” Valentin reacts angrily at the mention of his sister's name, whereupon Méphistophélès warns him that he knows the man by whose hand Valentin is destined to die.

Méphistophélès protests at the quality of the wine, and produces by magic a rare vintage from the barrel beneath the inn sign and bids them all drink their fill. He himself proposes a toast to the fair Marguerite. Furious, Valentin makes to attack him; but his blade shatters in mid-air. All are now

convinced that they have to do with the powers of Hell. The soldiers hold up the hilts of their words in the form of a cross and slowly retreat.

Faust enters and begs Méphistophélès to lead him to Marguerite. His guide replies that she will pass that very spot. At that moment the stage begins to fill with dancing couples. Siébel arrives; some of the girls invite him to dance, but he is waiting for a sight of Marguerite. When she enters, Méphistophélès takes good care to keep them apart. Faust offers Marguerite his arm. She demurely rejects his advance and quickly departs. As the dance resumes Méphistophélès promises to aid him in his seduction.

## Act III

### Marguerite's garden

Siébel, who is in love with Marguerite, arrives leaves a bouquet of flowers for Marguerite. He is concerned that Méphistophélès' prediction is coming true — each time he plucks a flower it withers away. He dips his hand in the holy water that stands in front of the door, and the spell is broken.

Faust and Méphistophélès arrive just in time to hear Siébel resolve to warn Marguerite against the stranger who accosted her. Siébel leaves. Méphistophélès then tells Faust to wait there while he searches for a gift to outshine Siébel's bouquet of flowers. Alone, Faust bursts into rapturous praise of the pure and holy dwelling of his beloved. His one thought is now to leave her innocence untouched. But Méphistophélès has meantime fetched a jewel box, which he places near Siébel's flowers. He and Faust hide as Marguerite enters in pensive mood.

Marguerite sits by her spinning wheel and sings a ballad about the King of Thule, distractedly interrupting the verses with reflections on the stranger she has just met. She notices Siébel's bouquet and, with incredulous surprise, the box of jewels. Eagerly she begins to adorn herself with the jewels, admiring herself in the mirror included in the box. Marguerite's middle-aged neighbor, Martha Schwerlein, tells her that the jewels must be a gift from an admirer. Her own husband, who has left for war, was never so generous to her.



*Faust and Marguerite*

Faust and Méphistophélès now enter. Méphistophélès detours Martha, by flirting with her, so that Faust may succeed in his seduction. He gives her a message from her husband, who was mortally wounded in battle. Her husband has sent her his blessing — but nothing else. Méphistophélès advises her to remarry as soon as possible by way of revenge. Martha tells Méphistophélès pointedly that at his time of life he ought to think of settling down.

Meantime, Faust again offers his arm to Marguerite. She weakly protests, but accepts it. The couples now separate and stroll about the garden. It begins to grow dark. Méphistophélès, having finally gotten rid of Martha, calls upon the forces of the night to aid him in breaking down Marguerite's defenses. Then he retires.

Marguerite and Faust return. Faust woos her directly, and Marguerite coyly responds by plucking petals of a daisy in the game of "He loves me, he loves me not." She suddenly breaks away from Faust's embrace and, in an agitated state, begs him to leave. Reluctantly he obeys, but insists on returning the next day. Marguerite hurries into the house.

Faust is about to leave, but is suddenly detained by Méphistophélès, who points out that Marguerite has opened her window and is ecstatically expressing her love for Faust. She yearns for Faust's quick return. Faust emerges from the shadows and takes her into his arms. Marguerite yields to his embraces. Méphistophélès' mocking laughter is heard in the garden.

## Act IV

### Inside the church

Marguerite seeks refuge in church, only to be pursued by Méphistophélès, who curses her and torments her with threats of damnation. She collapses.

In the town square, Valentin and his comrades return from war, singing the glory of those slain in battle. The soldier questions Siébel about Marguerite but receives only evasive replies; puzzled, he enters his house. Faust, remorseful at having abandoned Marguerite, arrives with Méphistophélès, who serenades the girl with a lewd ballad. Valentin, stepping forth to defend his sister's honor, fights a duel with Faust. At a crucial moment, Méphistophélès interferes and Faust inadvertently kills Valentin. As the Devil drags Faust away, Marguerite kneels by her fatally wounded brother, who curses her with his last breath. She rises slowly and giggling madly to herself, moves through the crowd of villagers.

Marguerite has given birth to Faust's child and has gone to church to pray for forgiveness. But the voice of Méphistophélès cuts across her prayers, telling her that her soul is doomed to everlasting perdition. A chorus of priests and boys chant the *Dies Irae*. Marguerite implores God's grace, then faints away.

Meanwhile, a platoon of soldiers marches into the square near Marguerite's house, having returned victorious from the wars. Among them is Valentin. On seeing Siébel he inquires eagerly after his sister. Siébel replies, with some embarrassment, that she has gone to church. Valentin, reassured, concludes that she is praying for her brother's safe return. His comrades then sing the famous Soldier's Chorus to the glory of their ancestors; they depart.

Valentin now wishes to enter the house. Siébel tries vainly to prevent him from entering the house. Sadly, Siébel makes his way towards the church.

It is now dark. Faust with Méphistophélès enter. Méphistophélès carries a guitar and proposes to entice Marguerite from her house with a serenade — a satirical warning to young girls not to be too compliant before the ring is safely on their fingers.

The door opens, but it is Valentin, not Marguerite. He breaks the guitar and demands satisfaction from either Faust or Méphistophélès as his sister's seducer. Valentin tears Marguerite's medallion from his neck. Faust and Faust prepare to fight a duel. Almost at once, Méphistophélès thrusts aside Valentin's sword and Faust fatally wounds him. Méphistophélès drags Faust away. Martha, Marguerite, Siébel and some townspeople run in, carrying torches. Valentin curses his sister with his dying breath, damning her for eternity.

### *Walpurgis Night — The Harz Mountains*



feast to degenerate into unrestrained orgy.

The scene is now the Hartz mountains on Walpurgis Night. The souls of the dead gather in the form of will-o'-the-wisps. At Méphistophélès' call evil spirits, witches and goblins present themselves. The scene becomes a splendid feast at which Faust and Méphistophélès are entertained by a ballet of celebrated beauties of the ancient world: a dance by Nubian slave girls; an Adagio for the prima ballerina and her partner; a Danse antique for Helen of Troy and others; a Variation for Cleopatra as she sips from a golden goblet in which she has dissolved the most precious of her pearls; a dance for the Trojan women; Mirror Variation for Astarte at her toilet. Their rival attempts at seduction are interrupted by the veiled Phyrne who joins the resumed dance and gradually sheds her veil, arousing the jealous anger of the others and causing the



Suddenly a vision appears of Marguerite in her prison cell. She is pale and silent, a scarlet ribbon around her neck like a wound. Méphistophélès addresses the vision and, when Faust also suddenly sees it, he insists on being taken to Marguerite at once. As Méphistophélès and Faust depart, the mountain closes and the witches return.

## Act V

### Marguerite's prison cell

Marguerite lies asleep in a prison cell, condemned to death for the murder of her child. Faust and Méphistophélès enter to help her escape. As Méphistophélès keeps watch, Faust wakens Marguerite. At first the distracted girl is overjoyed to see him but, instead of fleeing with him, she instead begins to recall the first days of their love. Méphistophélès emerges from the shadows to hasten their escape but, at the sound of his voice, Marguerite shrinks back in fear. In vain, he and Faust again urge her to come with them. Marguerite calls on the angels to save her. She falls to the ground, dead. Méphistophélès pronounces her condemned. A chorus of angels proclaims her salvation. Faust falls to his knees in prayer. Marguerite envisions her child, her soul rises to Heaven.



*Faust and Marguerite*

# Charles-François Gounod

**Born: Paris, France, June 17, 1818; Died: Saint-Cloud, France, October 18, 1893**



Charles Gounod was one of the country's best composers of the late nineteenth century and had a strong influence on French composers of that time.

Gounod was born in Paris, the son of a pianist mother and an artist father. His mother was his first piano teacher. Under her tutelage, Gounod first showed his musical talents. He entered the Paris Conservatoire where he studied under Fromental Halévy and Pierre Zimmermann (he later married Zimmermann's daughter). In 1839, he won the Prix de Rome for his cantata, "Fernand." In this, he was following in the footsteps of his father, François-Louis Gounod, who had won the second Prix de Rome in painting in 1783.

Gounod subsequently went to Italy where he studied the music of Palestrina and other sacred works of the sixteenth century. Around 1846-47 he began studying for the priesthood, but he changed his mind and went back to composition.

In 1848, Gounod started writing a "Messe Solennelle," also known as the "Saint Cecilia Mass." This work, which is still often played in concerts and on CD, was first performed in London during 1851 and, from its premiere, dates Gounod's fame as a noteworthy composer.

During 1855 Gounod wrote two symphonies. His Symphony No. 1 in D major was the inspiration for the Symphony in C, composed later that same year by Georges Bizet, who was then Gounod's 17-year-old student. Despite their charm and brilliance, Gounod's symphonies are largely neglected today; however, there are a few recordings of them on CD.

Gounod wrote his first opera, *Sapho*, in 1851, but had no great theatrical success until *Faust* (1859), based on the play by Goethe. This remains his best-known work and, although it took a while to achieve great recognition, it eventually became one of the most frequently staged operas of all time. The romantic and highly melodious *Roméo et Juliette*, based on the Shakespeare play, which premiered in 1867, and is also performed and recorded now and then, although it has never come close to matching *Faust's* popularity. *Mireille* (1864) is a charming and graceful composition that has been admired by music connoisseurs rather than by the general public.

From 1870-1874 Gounod lived in England, becoming the first conductor of what is now the Royal Choral Society. Much of Gounod's music from this time is vocal in nature. He became entangled with the amateur English singer, Georgina Weldon, a relationship (platonic, it seems) which ended in great acrimony.

Gounod came to revere the keyboard music of J. S. Bach. For him, *The Well-Tempered Clavier* was "the law to pianoforte study, the unquestioned textbook of musical composition." Later in his life, Gounod returned to his early religious impulses, writing much religious music. His earlier work included an improvisation of a melody over the C major Prelude (BWV 846) from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, to which Gounod set the words of Ave Maria (1859), resulting in his composition, "Ave Maria," a setting that has become world-famous. He also wrote a Pontifical Anthem, which is now the official national anthem of the Vatican City. Gounod also wanted to compose his "Messe à la mémoire de Jeanne d'Arc" while kneeling on the stone on which Joan of Arc knelt at the coronation of Charles VII of France. One of Gounod's short pieces, *Funeral March of a Marionette*, became well known as the theme to Alfred Hitchcock Presents. A devout Catholic, Gounod had carved on his piano a music-rack an image of the face of Jesus.

Gounod was made a Grand Officer of the Légion d'honneur in July 1888. In 1893, shortly after he had put the finishing touches to a requiem written for his grandson, he died in Saint-Cloud, France.

## Goethe's tragic play, *Faust*

Goethe based his work in part on the life of Johann Georg Faust (1480-1540), a magician, astrologer, and fortune-teller. *Faust, Part One* begins with a Prologue in Heaven in which Méphistophélès is given permission to attempt to capture Faust's soul, the Lord being confident that he will fail (this episode forms the Prologue of Boito's *Mefistofele*). Disillusioned and world-weary Faust comes to terms with the Devil. If he should experience some moment of delight and utter the words, "Stay! Thou art so fair!" he agrees to become the servant of Méphistophélès. Then follows the attempt to satisfy Faust. Lured on by the Devil, Faust seduces Gretchen (Marguerite) and eventually brings about her death.

Part Two is in two main sections. The first, the Helen scene, was originally a separate poem. Helen, symbolizing ideal beauty as perfected by Greek art, is ardently wooed by Faust, but she is finally taken away from him. Euphorion, their son, representing poetry and the union of the classical and romantic, disappears in flames. In the second section Faust seeks to serve mankind and, with the help of Méphistophélès, reclaims some land from the sea. Then, satisfied with his good works, he cries out to the fleeting moment, "Stay! Thou are so fair!" and instantly dies. The Devil tries to seize his soul, but it is carried away by the angels.

## Gounod's opera, *Faust*

During his tenure of the Prix de Rome, 1839-42, Gounod's interest in *Faust, Part One* as an operatic subject was aroused by Nerval's French translation of Goethe's play. He attempted a setting of the church scene as early as 1849, but plans for an opera did not materialize until he met the libretto-writing team of Barbier and Carré in 1855. Asking the librettists to collaborate with him on a new opera, parts of Goethe's play, *Faust* were suggested. Carré, having already written *Faust et Marguerite*, a three-act play loosely fashioned after Goethe, provided the basic scaffolding for Gounod's work, including the idea of enlarged roles for Valentin and Siébel (minor players in Goethe's Auerbachs Keller episode).

Because the librettists used only certain episodes of Goethe's great poem in compiling the text of the opera, *Faust* has at various times incurred the wrath of serious-minded people, who denounced it as a travesty of the original.

The public's reception of *Faust* was favorable. Gounod, writing in his memoirs many years later on the triumphant career of his opera, modestly attributed its success to "the conjunction of favorable elements and circumstances rather than to the intrinsic elements of the work itself."

*Faust* was a considerable success during its first run at the Théâtre Lyrique in 1859. It was published in June of that year by Antoine Choudens, who helped arrange productions of the work in Strasbourg, Rouen and Bordeaux in 1860. Gounod supplied recitatives to replace the original spoken dialogue for these performances. Productions on many major German stages followed in the next two years. At the Dresden première in August 1861 the work was called *Margarete* for the first time, a symbolic distancing from Goethe's play that has endured on German stages.

*Faust* had its Italian première at La Scala in November 1862 and was first produced in England (in Italian) at Her Majesty's Theatre in June 1863. At the first English-language production in January 1864 (also at Her Majesty's) Gounod arranged music from the opera's prelude to create a new solo number for Valentin in Act II, "Even the bravest heart may swell," to a text by his friend, Henry Chorley (the poet Onésime Pradère later supplied the French verse). The composer made this famous addition reluctantly, however, and the number never appeared in a French vocal score during his lifetime.

Following the bankruptcy of the Théâtre Lyrique, *Faust* had a lavish production at the Opéra in March 1869 with a ballet and a new set of couplets for Méphistophélès supplied by the composer. It became the most frequently performed opera at that house, and one of the staples of the international repertory, though its popularity has waned somewhat after World War II.



By the end of the century *Faust* had become the most performed opera in the world, and particularly important to the French musical establishment previously dominated by Meyerbeer. After several initial comparisons as “Wagnerian,” *Faust* became important in the defining “French” musical aesthetics.

In the late nineteenth century, *Faust* became so popular in the United States that the Metropolitan Opera opened its season with a performance of it every year for several decades. It was played so often that the old Met that was given the nickname of the “Faustspielhaus” (after Wagner’s Festspielhaus in Bayreuth, Germany). *Faust* is listed as #18 in Opera America’s 20 most performed operas in North America.

Parts of *Faust* have seeped into popular culture in Europe and the United States for more than a century:

- A performance of *Faust* is part of the back story of *The Phantom of the Opera* by Gaston Leroux, and appears in some of the film adaptations of that novel, such as *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925). Jeanette MacDonald performed several scenes from the opera in the 1936 film, *San Francisco*, complete with costumes, sets and orchestra.
- The biggest impression has perhaps been left by the famous aria, “The Jewel Song,” sung by Marguerite. Children all over the world have been reading very short extracts from it in several stories in *The Adventures of Tintin*. In this series of graphic novels or comic strips our hero Tintin and his sidekick, Captain Haddock, often encounter a bombastic opera singer called Bianca Castafiore. Her trademark is the “Jewel song,” which she always sings at high volume, never saying more than “Ah! je ris de me voir si belle en ce miroir,” or a few words more from other lines.
- The waltz from Gounod’s *Faust* was used on British television in the third series of Monty Python comedy programmes, first shown in 1972. The music was used in the soundtrack of the 34th episode, entitled “The Cycling Tour.”
- The ballet sequence of Walpurgis Night, added in 1869, ten years after its first production, is often omitted from staged opera performances. However, it is frequently performed separately as part of a ballet program.

Of the thirty or more musical settings of this drama only Gounod’s *Faust*, Boito’s *Mefistofele* and Berlioz’s *La Damnation de Faust* are still regularly performed. Boito’s opera is closer to the original drama and incorporates a Prologue in Heaven and a Classical Act. The Devil is not a very terrifying figure in any of these works (Gounod described Balanqué as “an intelligent comedian”). Carlisle said of Goethe’s devil “[he] is a cultivated personage and acquainted with the modern sciences; sneers at witchcraft and the black arts even while employing them, and doubts most things, nay, half disbelieves his own existence.”

### ***Faust: The Video (2004)***

**Starring Angela Gheorghiu, Roberto Alagna and Bryn Terfel**



This production of *Faust* from the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden is phenomenal. The staging is incredible and even includes the ballet of Walpurgis Night, which adds an interesting ambience to the opera and helps define the depraved nature of Méphistophélès. As for the cast, Robert Alagna, whose French is native, makes an incredible Faust, bringing down the house with his first aria. Alagna’s beautiful wife at the time, Angela Gheorghiu, is the delicate Marguerite, beautifully sung and acted. While Bryn Terfel doesn’t exactly have the deep, dark, rich-sounding bass voice that is generally preferred for the role of Méphistophélès, he still has all the notes (his low G is loud, clear, and quite impressive most of the time), and his villainous disposition makes him a spectacular devil. This is truly an opera in the grand tradition, and Covent Garden should be extremely proud of it. Easily the best production of *Faust* recorded.