

Classroom guide to Charles Gounod's melodrama of good and evil

FAUST

Presented by Michigan Opera Theatre at the Detroit Opera House

Performances May 9, 13, 16 at 7:30 PM, May 17 at 2:30 PM, 2015

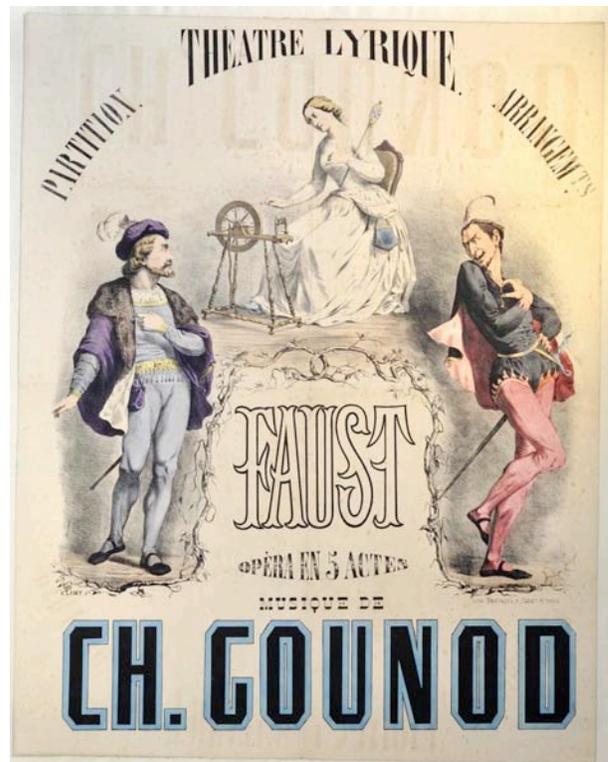
Student and Senior Dress Rehearsal May 8 at 11 AM

THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

- Grand opera in five acts, based on the 1850 play *Faust et Marguerite* [Faust and Marguerite] by French author Michel Carré (1821-1872, born in Besançon, the capital of the eastern French province of Franche-Comté), which was itself based on an episode from the 1808 play *Faust. Der Tragödie erster Teil* [Faust: The first part of the tragedy] by German author Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832, born in Frankfurt-am-Main, then part of the Holy Roman Empire, now the largest city in the German state of Hesse), which was itself based on the medieval German legend of Dr. Faust
- Set in 16th-century Germany, in a range of Romantic spots (the genre called “grand opera,” popular in France, is notable for its number and variety of diverse scenic locations within one opera): Faust’s study, a fair outside of a tavern, Marguerite’s garden and bedroom, the town square beside her house, a church, the Harz mountains in northern Germany, a prison
- Premiered in March 1859 at the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris, France
- Libretto by Jules Barbier (1825-1901, born in Paris, France) and Carré—their 2nd joint libretto for the composer
- Music by Charles Gounod (1818-1893, born in Paris, France)—his 4th opera and 1st successful one
- Sung in the original French, with projected English supertitles
- Running time about 3.5 hours

MEN IN TIGHTS:

A cover for sheet music from Faust, bearing the name of the Parisian theatre where the opera debuted.



A WICKED LITTLE STORY

(Adapted from Naxos Records. Note that in different versions of the opera, some of these scenes may be performed in a different order or omitted entirely.)

The old philosopher Faust, in his study, is tired of life, but hearing cheerful sounds from outside, calls on the Devil to help him rejoin the world. Méphistophélès (a Satanic figure of German legend) appears and grants him youth in return for his soul and eventual damnation. The aged scholar is transformed to a handsome young nobleman.

At a fairground outside a tavern, there is a lively crowd of people. Méphistophélès enters and sings a toast to the young woman Marguerite, whom Faust loves. Valentin, her brother, draws his sword, which is broken through the magic of Méphistophélès. Faust appears and escorts Marguerite as she leaves the church, while her former suitor Siébel is kept at bay by Méphistophélès.

Some time later, Faust approaches Marguerite's house and lays a casket of jewels on the step, to replace the bouquet Siébel has placed there. Marguerite sees and hesitatingly opens the casket, donning the jewels, which delight her. Her neighbor Marthe encourages her, and when Faust and Méphistophélès appear, Marthe exits with the latter, leaving Faust and Marguerite alone. After she parts from him, Faust hears her confession of love and rushes back to her as night descends.

Eventually, Marguerite, impregnated by Faust, has been deserted by him, and she is left with a terrible sense of shame. In front of her house, Méphistophélès provokes Valentin, who has returned from war, with a serenade mocking Marguerite. Valentin emerges, duels with Faust, and is killed by him, with the Devil's assistance. Valentin dies cursing his sister for her sins. She goes to the church and attempts to pray, but is prevented from doing so by the interruptions of Méphistophélès and his gang of demons.

On Walpurgis Night, a German holiday said to be a time when witches hold a "Sabbath" in the Harz Mountains, Méphistophélès conjures up beautiful women of history to bring pleasure to Faust, but instead the philosopher sees a vision of Marguerite with a red mark on her neck like the cut of an axe. Brought to her in prison, where she has been condemned to death for killing her child, Faust begs her to escape with him, but she turns instead to God, aware of the evil in Méphistophélès. A band of angels carries her up to heaven as Faust kneels in prayer. The wicked plotting of Méphistophélès has apparently come to nothing.



HOT DATE :
Marguerite plays with fire by indulging in a romance with Faust, in an 1861 painting by French artist James Tissot, Faust and Marguerite in the Garden.

THE NAUGHTY NO-GOODNIKS OF *FAUST* (AND THE PEOPLE PLAYING THEM)

Le docteur Faust [Doctor Faust], a philosopher

- American tenor Russell Thomas (performing May 9, 13, 16)
- American tenor David Miller (May 17)

Méphistophélès, the Devil

- American bass Matt Boehler (May 9, 13, 16)
- American bass Jamie Offenbach (May 17)

Marguerite, a young woman

- American soprano Caitlin Lynch (originally from Birmingham, MI!) (May 9, 13, 16)
- American soprano Sarah Joy Miller (in real life, married to her onstage love interest David Miller) (May 17)

Valentin, her brother, a soldier

- American baritone John Viscardi

Wagner, his friend

- American baritone Zachary Coates

Siébel, a student, in love with Marguerite (a “pants role,” meaning it is male character played by a female singer)

- American mezzo soprano Kimberly Sogioka

Marthe Schwerlein, Marguerite's neighbor

- American mezzo soprano Susan Nicely

The chorus, dancers, and supernumeraries (non-singing actors) play a number of roles, including laborers, students, maidens, soldiers, wealthy citizens, matrons, fiddlers, demonic spirits, church choristers, witches, the souls of the dead, famous women of ancient times, and heavenly voices.



American conductor Steven Mercurio (leading the Michigan Opera Theatre Orchestra and Chorus) and French stage director Bernard Uzan, both of whom have directed myriad productions for MOT, head up the artistic staff.

CLOAKED IN LOVELINESS:

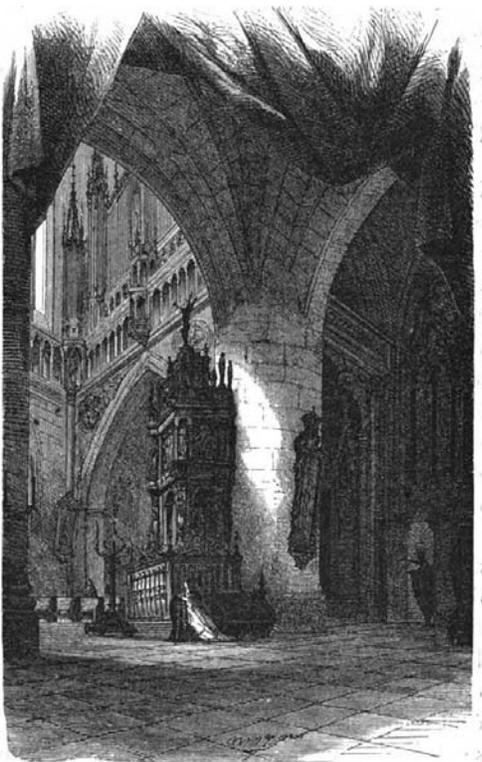
Michigan native Caitlyn Lynch (seen here as Micaëla in a performance of another famous French opera, Georges Bizet's Carmen, at Seattle Opera) sings the role of Marguerite for the first time with Michigan Opera Theatre in the coming production of Faust.

AIN'T OPERA GRAND?

Opera is an art form. It is a kind of theatre in which a story is told through text, sung with classical technique and given rich and complex musical accompaniment, often by an orchestra. Another sort of art form is a movie or a novel, a video game or a painting. Each has its own specific medium—a stage, a reel of film, a canvas and pigment—but not necessarily one set of rules, or one way of expressing through that medium. Within the art form of film, there are multiple categories: romantic comedy, action-adventure, science fiction, biopic. So, too, in opera, there are a number of different genres.

Opera seria (Italian for “serious opera”) was popular in the 18th century and focused on telling stories from ancient myth or history (often Greek or Roman) with noble and courtly music. **Opera buffa** (“comic opera”) was its opposite and contemporary, and drew on Italian comedic theatre traditions to tell ridiculous and chuckle-worthy stories, usually set around the period of the operas’ composition, and not in the ancient past. **Verismo** (“realism”), popular in the latter half of the 19th century, also avoids myth and fantasy in its stories, but prefers more serious and violent plots to the sillier sort found in comic opera, and tries to stick close to conceivable situations that might occur in real life—or at least, a really sad and frightening life! **Operetta** (“little opera”) is funny like opera buffa, but, like verismo, emerged in the latter half of the 19th century. It has long stretches of dialogue intermixed with musical passages and dancing, so that it in some ways is the ancestor of the modern-day American musical comedy.

The genre of *Faust* is **grand opera**, a form favored in 19th-century France (but which has since lost popularity, partly owing to the great expense of staging such works). This genre typically tells intensely dramatic and sweeping stories (often from history or a distant legendary past), which are given plenty of time to unfold, usually in five acts, each one set in its own vastly different and picturesque location. Often there is a ballet



somewhere in the opera—a chance for the audience to take a break from the action and enjoy hearing some lovely lively music and viewing some beautifully wriggling dancers’ bodies. Gounod had to write a ballet for Act IV of *Faust* 10 years after it premièred so that it would be accepted by the Paris Opera for performance in 1869. The French grand opera-loving public considered a ballet showpiece to be essential, along with the other elements of the form that made it so irresistibly *grand*.

WORSHIPING AT THE SHRINE OF LAVISH STAGE EFFECTS:

The cathedral scene for Act IV of Faust, as designed by Charles-Antoine Cambon for the 1869 production at the Paris Opera. The richly detailed and epically scaled set is typical of French grand opera.

A LITTLE QUIZ

Based on the descriptions of the various operatic genres about which you have just read, and the descriptions of these opera stories, try to identify to which genres these operas are considered to belong. Each has a different answer. Your choices are: **opera seria**, **opera buffa**, **verismo**, **operetta**, and **grand opera**.

Cavalleria rusticana [Rustic chivalry] by Pietro Mascagni (1890) — In a 19th-century Sicilian village, a peasant girl is wooed and then abandoned by a fellow villager trying to make his former lover jealous. That former lover's new husband picks a fight with his rival and kills him. All are distraught.

Genre: _____

Die lustige Witwe [The merry widow] by Franz Lehár (1905) — After a discussion of their years-ago infatuation, and exchanging thoughts on why they cannot be together now, a wisecracking, wealthy woman and her former suitor spend the rest of a few evenings waltzing, wining, and, finally, admitting their lasting love to each other.

Genre: _____

Giulio Cesare [Julius Caesar] by George Frideric Handel (1724)— The loves and military exploits of the famous Roman emperor, accompanied by elegant plunking on the harpsichord.

Genre: _____

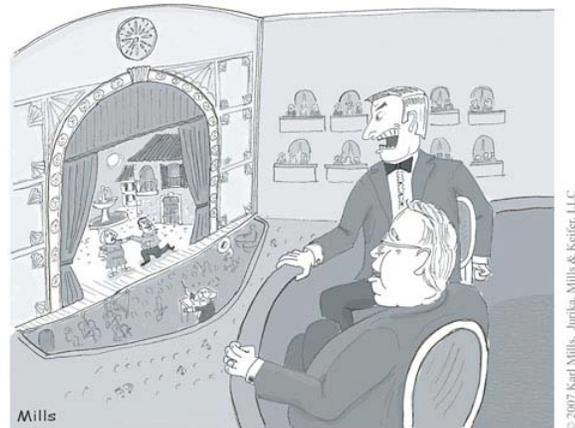
L'Africaine [The African woman] by Giacomo Meyerbeer (1865) — Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama gets himself into political and romantic entanglements in the royal court of Lisbon, on the high seas, and in a tropical island.

Genre: _____

Il barbiere di Siviglia [The barber of Seville] by Gioachino Rossini (1816) — A young nobleman, assisted by a meddling hair stylist, assumes a variety of ever-loonier disguises—namely, a student, a drunken soldier, and a music teacher—to work his way into the heart of the woman he loves, without being noticed by the young woman's guardian, a rambling old doctor.

Genre: _____

(Answers on the next page)



**THESE TWO WOULDN'T DO WELL ON
THIS GENRE QUIZ!**
A 2007 cartoon by Karl Mills.

CHARLES GOUNOD, A MOST SINGULAR BABY

Charles Gounod was born into an artistic household. His father was a painter and his mother a pianist. From her, he received his first training in music and love for it. Some of the works to which she exposed him early in his life would make a deep impact on him...and perhaps, many years later on, would even inspire his *Faust*. One such work was Austrian composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's 1787 opera *Don Giovanni*, which, like *Faust*, pits the sinning protagonist against a frightening demonic figure who threatens the hero with eventual condemnation to Hell. Gounod would later write of seeing *Don Giovanni* as a child, and how it impressed him with its musical evocation of pure horror (a trick which he would attempt with *Faust*):



**LOOK, MA,
BOTH
HANDS!**
*Young Gounod
at the piano.*

The first notes of the overture with the solemn, majestic chords out of the...final scene seemed to lift me into a new world. I was chilled by a sensation of actual terror, and when I heard the terrible thundering roll of ascending and descending scales, stern and implacable as a death warrant, I was seized with such shuddering fear that my head fell on my mother's shoulder, and trembling in the dual embrace of beauty and horror, I could only murmur, "Oh mother, what music! This is real music indeed!"

It is clear that *Don Giovanni*—with its dark and powerful orchestration, its moody and frightening environment, its musings on a man's descent deeper and deeper into wrongdoing—made a lasting impression on Gounod. With his *Faust*, he would write perhaps the most powerful "horror opera" since *Don Giovanni* some 70 years before. Yes, just as there are horror movies, so are there horror operas! (*Faust's* Méphistophélès and his band of demons can get pretty scary, especially in the notorious church scene of the opera, which, with its blend of Christian religion and Satanic foreboding, almost got the première of the opera canceled in Paris.)

So the quotation from Gounod is an interesting comment on a person's early encounter with an art form that would grow to be his career and great passion. It is also a clear testimony to the wonders that opera can work in young minds. The Opera House is a place of great enjoyment for all ages, and let no one tell you otherwise!

Discussion questions:

What musical or theatrical memory from your earlier years is very special to you? A trip to the symphony, maybe a time you brought cookies to feed to the Cookie Monster at Sesame Street Live? Do you still think about that memory often, and in what ways might it have impacted you as you have grown up?

Have you ever created an artistic work that was somehow inspired by another artistic work that you saw or read? What elements did you borrow from the original work in creating your own, or what in the original work were you trying to reflect in yours?

MUSIC THAT SHINES BRIGHT LIKE A DIAMOND

One of the most famous pieces from *Faust* is an aria (operatic solo) called the “Jewel Song,” or in French, the “Air des bijoux.” Marguerite sings the song in the third act (set in the garden outside her home) after she finds a box of beautiful baubles that Méphistophélès has left on her doorstep to tempt her into leaving her modest past behind and entering a new life of romantic indulgence and pleasure with Faust. Trying on a glittering necklace and dazzling bracelet found in the box, she indeed begins to forget her old existence, wondering aloud, “Is it you, Marguerite, is it you I see in the mirror? No, no, it is not you...it is the daughter of a king!” The delusion, and the wild infatuation that follows, will lead her down a dangerous road ending with her imprisonment.

But before everything gets so remarkably dark for Marguerite, she has this scene of pure fun and brightness. We hear her giggling as she anxiously inspects the jewels, we hear her girlish excitement, her amusing self-admiration as she happily warbles her high notes. The attractiveness of the music and the stage-picture that accompanies it have long made the aria a popular showpiece for soprano singers (the highest female voice type).

Classroom activity:

Search Youtube for videos of different singers performing the Jewel Song (you will find some good ones from Australian soprano Dame Joan Sutherland, Romanian soprano Angela Gheorghiu, and American soprano Anna Moffo). Follow along with the lyrics and translation below (adapted from Lea Frey, aria-database.com). Engage in a class debate over which performers different students like best, and why. How does each singer communicate Marguerite’s situation? How do their dramatic styles differ—their gestures, facial expressions? A character can truly change depending on who is playing her—what sort of person does each of these singers make Marguerite?

Ah! je ris de me voir
si belle en ce miroir,
Est-ce toi, Marguerite, est-ce toi?
Réponds-moi, réponds-moi,
Réponds, réponds, réponds vite!
Non! Non! ce n'est plus toi!
Non...non, ce n'est plus ton visage,
C'est la fille d'un roi,
Ce n'est plus toi,
Qu'on salut au passage!
Ah s'il était ici!
S'il me voyait ainsi!
Comme une demoiselle
Il me trouverait belle!
Achevons la métamorphose,
Il me tarde encor d'essayer
Le bracelet et le collier!
Dieu! c'est comme une main,
Qui sur mon bras se pose!
Je ris de me voir si belle dans ce miroir!

Ah, I laugh to see myself
so beautiful in this mirror,
Is it you, Marguerite, is it you?
Answer me, answer me,
Respond, respond, respond quickly!
No, no! It is no longer you!
No...no, it is no longer your face,
It is the daughter of a king,
It is no longer you.
One must bow to her as she passes!
Ah, if only he were here!
If he should see me thus
Like a lady
He would find me so beautiful!
Let us complete the metamorphosis,
I am late yet in trying on
The bracelet and the necklace!
God! It is like a hand
Which is placed on my arm!
I laugh to see myself so beautiful in this
mirror!



♪ Michigan Opera Theatre Communications Department ♪

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