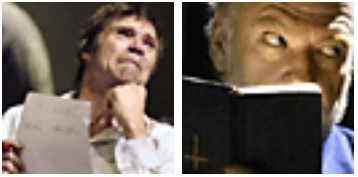

[Strong orchestra and cast, but only deal with devil could save Opera's 'Faust'](#)

- [Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic](#)

Thursday, June 17, 2004



Any operatic production with the musical expertise and theatrical imagination that have been lavished on the San Francisco Opera's company premiere of Ferruccio Busoni's "Doktor Faust" should by rights make for an evening of scintillating musical theater.

Heaven knows Busoni doesn't make it easy.

Tuesday's opening performance at the War Memorial Opera House found the Opera Orchestra playing in top form under music director Donald Runnicles. It boasted a strong cast, headed by baritone Rodney Gilfry in the title role and Chris Merritt as an especially forceful Mephistopheles.

And director-dramaturges Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito, the auteurs behind last season's meddlesome production of Handel's "Alcina," have staged the piece with fervor and wit.

But instead of a silk purse, all these virtues produced no more than a sow's ear nicely gussied up. Certainly the performance left listeners no closer to understanding why Busoni's final work, which he left unfinished at his death in 1924, should be considered a masterpiece by so many knowledgeable observers.

Busoni's take on the Faust legend is a dramaturgically diffuse grab-bag of familiar and unusual elements of the tale. Faust is already in dire straits when we meet him -- his creditors in hot pursuit, Gretchen already long since debauched and abandoned, and his scientific or artistic work at a standstill.

In a series of disconnected scenes, Faust seals a pact with Mephistopheles (with his enemies at the door, this seems to be an offer he can't refuse rather than a tragic exercise of will), seduces the Duchess of Parma on her wedding night, partakes in a barroom debate about metaphysics, and finally succumbs to guilt and despair.

The writing is dense and drab, a strange melange of neo-Bachian counterpoint at its most Teutonic together with abortive stabs at Italianate vocal lyricism. Busoni is most at home when crafting learned, intricately wrought textures; the few extended solo arias are shapeless to the point of embarrassment. Not even Runnicles' urgent, committed advocacy could help this turgid score.

Like all artists drawn to the Faust story, Busoni poured much of himself into the title character. But like many an autobiographer before him, he seems to have taken for granted the audience's fascination with his protagonist.

Yet there's nothing alluring or even particularly interesting about this threadbare figure. His intellectual vigor must be taken on faith, and his moral failings are as commonplace as they are appalling. Mostly he whines and tears his hair in remorse.

For better or worse, I suspect that Wieler and Morabito entertain some of the same doubts. That would explain why they have expended so much energy trying to rescue the opera from its own weaknesses.

By confining the action of "Doktor Faust" to a single location, a grimy contemporary industrial loft where Faust pursues his artistic career and reviews his sordid history in flashback, they impose a jury-rigged unity on the piece. Anna Viebrock's design, its patchy walls and barren spaces lit in garish fluorescence by David Finn, is a luridly ugly masterpiece.

The staging brings some much-needed theatrical flair to the work as well. The arrival of a series of infernal messengers in modern-day garb -- a U.P.S. guy, a security guard -- is a dexterous touch, as is Mephistopheles' sleight-of-hand transformation of Faust's loft into a church. Three students from Krakow who appear first as cuddly undergraduates and later as threatening authority figures are superbly theatrical.

But one often feels that a more faithful account might have let the opera stand or fall on its own merits. Faust's seduction of the Duchess, for instance, is supposed to be achieved through a dazzling display of historical holograms, not the Polaroids and splattery painting he uses here; surely some well-managed stage magic would have a more powerful impact.

Gilfry, who spent the entire evening on stage in a state of drunken dishabille, did his best to bring dramatic power to the part. His voice lacks power in the lower range, making some of his more subdued utterances almost inaudible, but he sang the more impassioned parts of his assignment with vital intensity.

For sheer glittery menace, though, Merritt -- who since his former days as a bel canto specialist has become a singing actor of unnerving dramatic virtuosity -- was the star of the evening. His voice remains problematic, a blend of sinewy strength and desperately strained high notes, but as a total performer he's unbeatable.

Other roles among the large cast were handled with almost uniform skill. Soprano Hope Briggs made an impressive company debut as the Duchess, singing with luscious tone in the opera's lyrical passages, and bass Friedemann Röhlig brought vocal majesty to the part of Faust's sidekick Wagner.

Baritone Johannes Martin Kränzle made a potent contribution as Gretchen's avenging brother, Oren Gradus was a sonorous Master of Ceremonies, and Dennis Petersen, Joshua Bloom and Ricardo Herrera made a splendid trio of students. The men of the Opera Chorus brought transparency and zest to the barroom scene.

San Francisco Opera: Busoni's "Doktor Faust" plays five more times through July 3 at the War Memorial Opera House. Tickets: \$25-\$195. Call (415) 864-3330 or go to www.sfopera.com.

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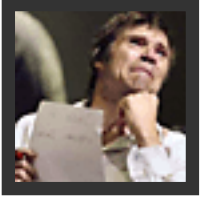
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Chris Merritt (background) plays Mephistopheles with glittery menace, while Rodney Gilfrey -- who sang the most passionate parts of the night with intensity -- laments just before signing a sinister pact.

Chronicle photo by Kim Komenich



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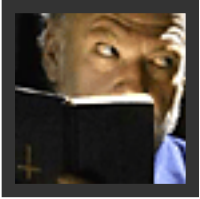
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Chris Merritt's Mephistopheles was the star of the evening during a performance of Busoni's "Doktor Faust." Chronicle photo by Kim Komenich



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