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An overdoctored 'Faust' at SF Opera

Stephanie von Buchau - CONTRIBUTOR

THEY'RE baaaaack! Directors-dramaturges-deconstructors Sergio Morabito and Jossi Wieler have returned to San Francisco Opera, scene of their 2002 assassination of Handel's "Alcina," to do an operatic hit that Tony Soprano might envy.

Ferruccio Busoni's "Doktor Faust" -- never seen at SFO, but performed a few years ago in concert version by Kent Nagano and Berkeley Symphony -- received its company premiere Tuesday night at the War Memorial Opera House in a Morabito-Wieler "deconstruction" that left many, including this observer, bewildered, bored or annoyed.

To be fair, "Faust" is a difficult work. Left unfinished by the composer's death in 1924, the opera was premiered the following year in a completion by Philip Jarnach. SFO, in another of its continuing dubious musicological choices, played only the music Busoni had completed.

Unfortunately, this makes the already-confusing, nonlinear narrative come to an abrupt, undramatic close. If you read Morabito's program notes, a lot is explained, but who reads program notes until after the performance? And shouldn't the staging make things clear?

Busoni wasn't just writing an opera. Italian by birth but German by education and inclination, he was attempting nothing less than a revision of standard operatic purpose, based not on Goethe, Gounod or Boito (whose "Mefistofele" is a far more thrilling work), but on the Faustian puppet plays of the Middle Ages.

Busoni's Faust is irresolute, philosophical and apparently randy, but he only beds and betrays women offstage. Morabito and Wieler, who sexed up "Alcina" to a nearly pornographic degree, manage to leave sex out of their "Faust" altogether.

Not a great idea, as much of the music tends toward dry polyphony and can use all the humanizing it can get. Still, the performance of Donald Runnicles and his SFO orchestra is the main reason to hear this work. You can always "do a Balanchine." Close your eyes and listen to the music.

The other reason to hear the piece is Chris Merritt's Mephistopheles. The devil isn't often sung by a tenor, never mind one this potent, shuffling onstage with a "Shopping is fun again" bag full of tricks, bad facial hair and a stentorian voice that's the only thing that can be heard when Runnicles and Busoni are in full cry.

Merritt is so compelling to watch that he takes interest away from more important characters in many scenes. Rodney Gilfry, usually one of the most charismatic baritones in opera, is underused as a drunken, sleep-deprived, rude "artist" who moons the chorus and cuts up the evening gown of his latest conquest.

Gilfry's main prop is a plaid "security blanket," part of designer Anna Viebrock's cluttered warehouse set. He is unshaven, slovenly and not always audible. His primary lust object, the Duchess of Parma, is given a sassy, pop-star performance by a young New Jersey soprano, Hope Briggs.

As usual, Ian Robertson's chorus steals the vocal show. The battle between the Protestant and Catholic students in a Wittenberg pub is my favorite musical moment in the score. They sing it ferociously -- the one really thrilling event in the entire evening.

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