

# Gounod's *Faust* March 2011

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## Five Hundred Years of the Faust Story

The story of a man who sold his soul to the devil has fascinated poets and musicians for centuries. No subject has inspired more works of music than Faust, a German sorcerer who yearned for knowledge and power.

Even today new operas, tone poems and cantatas based on Faust continue to appear. Contemporary composers who have been attracted to the story include Alfred Schnittke, Henri Pousseur and Wolfgang Rihm.

The historical Faust was a well-known traveling sorcerer who lived in Germany from 1488 to 1541. He was a philosopher who also dabbled in alchemy, a medieval pseudo-science that aimed to convert baser metals into gold and to develop an elixir that would extend the human lifespan.

Johannes Faust had a reputation for being an evil man who claimed the devil as his crony. Whereas Martin Luther and other German theologians who were Faust's contemporaries refer to Faust as having diabolical powers, some writers suggest that he was merely a petty, fraudulent charlatan.

The early Lutherans believed that Faust turned to black magic to satisfy an insatiable craving for knowledge and its attendant power, which they viewed negatively. Eighteenth- and 19th-century writers, on the other hand, looked upon Faust's desire for knowledge as noble.

After the historical Faust's death, said to be a very tortured one, a tangled web of legends circulated about his soothsaying and feats of black magic.

During the 16th century, Faust became the subject of broadsides and puppet shows. Such versions of the story remained popular for over 200 years.

In 1587 the first "biography" of Faust, *Faustbuch*, appeared. This collection of tales included graphic descriptions of hell and emphasized the fearful state of Faust's soul as he carried



BJU Opera Association's 1984 production of Gounod's Faust

out his merciless deeds. The anonymous author also created the ruthless fiend Mephistopheles.

In 1593 Christopher Marlowe, influenced by an English prose translation of the *Faustbuch*, created a powerful drama called *Doctor Faustus* that took the London stage by storm. Marlowe expanded the traditional story, taking Faust all the way to Rome to meet the Pope and bringing Helen of Troy from Hades to seal his damnation.

Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a work of spiritual sincerity and intensity that dramatizes Protestant theology and the universal struggle between good and evil. Faustus is a man of great stature and ambition who barter his soul to gain earthly power. As the play progresses, Faustus degenerates into a spiteful buffoon who hardens his heart against God's offers of grace through the Holy Spirit. Although he has opportunities to repent and renounce the infernal pact, his persistence in sin finally leads to damnation.

All these versions of the story end with Faust's suffering the consequences of his bargain. In an unfinished play of 1780, however, German writer Gotthold Lessing depicted Faust as a noble man who turned to magic to satisfy his longing for knowledge. Ultimately this Faust is reconciled with God and attains salvation.

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# Gounod's *Faust*: Plot Summary

## *Act I, Scene 1—Faust's Study*

Faust, renowned doctor of philosophy, laments the vanity of human learning, which has brought him nothing but despair. Tempted to end his misery with poison as morning dawns, he is distracted by sounds of maidenly laughter and hymns to God. In a rage he curses human science, prayer and faith, shouting, "Appear, O Satan!" To his surprise, his invocation produces Mephistopheles, an emissary of Satan dressed as a nobleman.



Mephistopheles offers Faust all earth's wealth, power and glory in exchange for his soul. The doctor is finally persuaded by his desire for youth and a vision of a beautiful maiden, Marguerite, whom Mephistopheles promises him. Thus Faust agrees to a compact. According to the terms of the bargain, Mephistopheles will serve Faust on earth, restoring his lost youth and granting his every desire. But in death Faust's soul will be delivered to hell, where he will serve Mephistopheles.

The two drink to life and rapture, and as Faust drains the goblet, he is transformed into a young man who leaves in the company of Mephistopheles in search of Marguerite.

## *Act I, Scene 2—The Town Square*

Soldiers and townspeople celebrate at a gala town fair. Valentine, a young officer about to leave for war, prays for his sister Marguerite, committing her to the care of his friend Siebel, who loves her. Wagner, a student, begins the rousing "Song of the Rat," which is interrupted by the appearance of Mephistopheles, who sings his own "Song of the Golden Calf," leading the men in its chorus.



Mephistopheles then displays his sinister power to the amazement of the onlookers. When he makes a brazen toast to the health of Marguerite, Valentine angrily draws his sword, which is immediately shattered by the magic circle Satan's servant has inscribed around himself. Thus recognizing the power of Satan, the soldiers leave, their sword hilts raised for protection.

As the merriment resumes, Marguerite passes by on her way home from church. She declines Faust's offer to escort her, leaving him even more infatuated with her beauty.

## *Act II—Marguerite's Garden*

Siebel watches in dismay when the bouquet he plans to leave on Marguerite's doorstep withers as if touched by some sorcerer's spell. The spell is broken, however, when he dips his fingers in holy water. As he departs, Faust and Mephistopheles arrive to place a casket of glittering jewels on the threshold and then conceal themselves in the garden.



Marguerite enters and seats herself at a spinning wheel, where she sings an old ballad and then muses on the handsome stranger whom she saw at the fair. Finding the jewels, she excitedly adorns herself with them, expressing her delight until she is interrupted by Martha, the neighborhood gossip. Faust appears with Mephistopheles, who draws Martha aside while Faust ardently pursues Marguerite.

After they part because the hour is late, Marguerite muses at the window on her newfound love. Faust overhears and rushes to her while the onlooking Mephistopheles breaks into wild, triumphant laughter.



### **Act III, Scene 1—A Cathedral**

Marguerite prays for forgiveness of the sin she has committed with Faust, who subsequently deserted her. But Mephistopheles taunts her even as she repents, producing demon voices to accuse her amid the chant of a choir. When he finally reveals himself as Satan, Marguerite swoons.

### **Act III, Scene 2—The Street outside Marguerite's House**

Victorious soldiers return from the war. Valentine learns from the reluctant Siebel that his sister is in disgrace because Faust has seduced her. Defending Marguerite's

honor, Valentine confronts Faust and Mephistopheles outside her house, where Mephistopheles sings a ribald serenade.



The men fight, and through the interference of Mephistopheles, Valentine is dealt a mortal wound by Faust. The dying Valentine curses his sister for the shame she has brought upon him and blames her for his death.

### **Act IV—A Prison Cell**

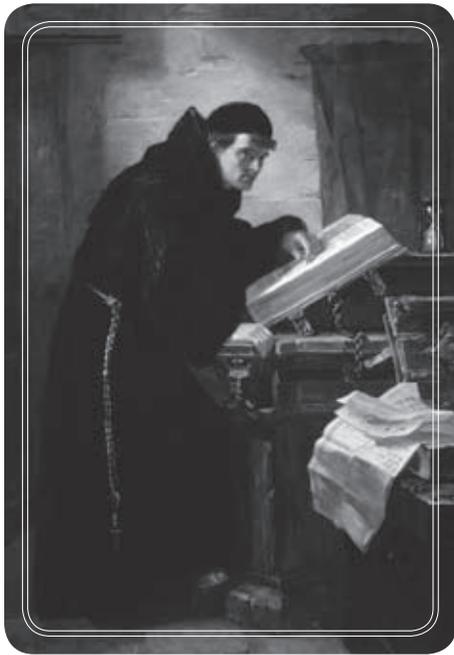
In prison Marguerite awaits death for having slain her illegitimate infant in a fit of insanity. Faust enters to urge her to escape with him, but in her distraction she cannot understand his pleas, her befuddled mind reverting to their meeting and illicit love.

Mephistopheles appears, and Marguerite shrinks away from Faust in horror. She falls upon her knees, imploring heaven for mercy before sinking upon the floor in death.

Mephistopheles thunders her eternal damnation, but heavenly voices resound her deliverance. Chanting an Easter hymn of resurrection, angels bear Marguerite heavenward as Mephistopheles drags Faust into hell.



Photos taken from the Bob Jones University Opera Association's 1984 and 1996 productions of *Faust*.



# SMART Enrichment Activity: Martin Luther and the Faust Story

Martin Luther (1483-1546), a German monk who led the Protestant Reformation, refers to his contemporary and compatriot Johannes Faust in *Table Talk* as “one lost beyond all hope.”

Luther’s friend and fellow reformer Philipp Melanchthon knew Faust personally. Melanchthon writes, “This sorcerer Faust, an abominable beast, a common servant of many devils, boasted that he, by his magic arts, had enabled the imperial armies to win their victories in Italy.”

*Martin Luther Discovering Justification by Faith*, a large oil-on-canvas painting by Englishman Edward Matthew Ward (1816-1879), is on display at Bob Jones University’s Museum & Gallery. The piece is dated 1868.

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## Five Hundred Years of the Faust Story (*continued*)

After Lessing, all versions of the Faust story fall into one of two categories with regard to Faust’s end: traditionalist or salvationist.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe promises Faust’s ultimate salvation from the very beginning—the prologue—of his two-part drama, which appeared in 1808 and 1832. Goethe’s protagonist is an idealist and philanthropist who strives, seeks, errs and is finally redeemed by his love of knowledge and truth.

It is Goethe’s masterpiece that has become a favorite source for composers, who employ details of character and plot selectively. Among the Romantic era composers who drew from it were Gounod, Liszt, Schumann, Berlioz and Boito.

Charles Gounod’s *Faust* (1859), one of the most popular of all French operas, premiered in Paris on March 19, 1859. It is the love story of Marguerite and Faust in which the fiend Mephistopheles serves as the agent who brings both to ruin.

Neither Gounod nor his librettists, Jules Barbier and Michel Carre, were interested in Goethe’s philosophy, but they did employ the colorful plot of Part I of his drama. Gounod, in fact, read Goethe dozens of times over a period of more than twenty years. The libretto that resulted is both a simple tale of innocence corrupted by evil and the enactment of a cosmic conflict between forces of heaven and hell.

It concentrates on a lesser character from Goethe’s poem, the maiden Gretchen, who is named

Marguerite in *Faust*. Through the lens of Goethe’s Romanticism, it is she who ultimately brings about the salvation of Faust’s soul. But in German-speaking countries Gounod’s opera is referred to as *Margarethe* in a pejorative sense because it cannot be recognized as a serious setting of Goethe.

Gounod had a gift for lyrical composition that is especially apparent in the love music of *Faust*. He was also very skilled at delineating character through music, not only by each singer’s melodic lines but also through coloring in the orchestral accompaniment.

The enthusiasm with which Paris audiences received Gounod’s *Faust* gave the composer opportunity to score other successes in the opera house.

The list of poets and musicians who have been intrigued by the power and rich ambiguity of the Faust legend continues to grow longer. Most recently Faust has been portrayed as the architect of weapons of mass destruction. The man who bartered his soul to the Devil for power and knowledge makes his way into the arts of every generation.

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