

# Mefistofele

by Arrigo Boito

Libretto by the composer after Goethe's *Faust*

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These study materials are produced for use with the Bob Jones University Opera Association production.

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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.

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.

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



**Arrigo Boito (1842-1918)**  
Poet, Composer, Music Theorist

Arrigo Boito, a man of varied artistic accomplishments, was born in Padua, the son of a painter of miniatures and an impoverished Polish aristocrat. He enrolled at the Milan Conservatory in 1853 to study composition and aesthetics. He eventually became part of a circle of progressive musicians who sought to bring German and French influence into Italian music. Boito was a poet steeped in European literature as well as a composer. He created libretti for Verdi's cantata *Hymn of Nations* in 1862 and Franco Faccio's *Hamlet* in 1865.



Bob Jones University Opera Association 1989 production

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. His play is a work of spiritual sincerity and intensity that dramatizes Protestant theology and the universal struggle between good and evil.

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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By this time Boito had already begun work on the libretto and score of his own opera based on Goethe's *Faust*. His unique gifts allowed him to be one of those rare composers who write their own libretti. From the legendary German work Boito derived a number of antithetical themes that are inherent in the world's greatest literature: the irreconcilable conflict between God and Satan, youth and age, love and betrayal, life and death.

Boito's *Mefistofele* premiered on March 8, 1868, at Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Italy's leading theater, with Boito himself conducting. The audience response was so vociferous and so mixed that Boito lost his confidence as a composer and pursued instead his literary interests by writing music criticism and translating foreign libretti for publication in Italy.

After undergoing extensive cutting and revision, *Mefistofele* returned to the

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## The Plot

### Prologue in the heavens

In the courts of heaven the celestial hosts praise “the Lord God of angels and of saints.” Mefistofele, a mocking agent of Satan, appears and presumptuously complains to God that man is nothing but “conceited dust.” The Mystic Choir replies, “Do you know of Faust?” Mefistofele concurs that Faust is a devout old man who serves God earnestly, but he wagers that he can capture Faust’s soul. Mefistofele boasts, “I shall triumph over the King of Heaven!” Playful cherubim taunt him, and he vanishes. Then the children’s choir joins angels and penitents on earth in singing a great hymn of praise to God.



### Act I, Scene I in the Town Square on Easter Sunday

The aged scholar Faust with his student Wagner strolls through the town’s lively Easter festivities and contemplates the pleasures of spring. As the two begin to make their way home at dusk, a mysterious friar who has passed among the townspeople that day follows them. Faust tells Wagner that he suspects that the friar is actually the devil, who appears to be spinning a web around them.

### Act I, Scene II in Faust’s study, later that evening

The friar follows Faust into his study and lurks there while the old man muses on eternal peace. Faust then opens a Bible, preparing to meditate on the Gospel. At that moment the friar howls and emerges from an alcove, throwing off his cloak to reveal the appearance of a gentleman. Faust recognizes him as a supernatural apparition and fends him off with a symbol of God’s name. But Mefistofele eventually persuades the scholar to sign a pact by which he will serve Faust absolutely on earth if Faust agrees to reverse roles with him in the afterlife. Faust becomes exhilarated at the prospect of capturing ideal beauty. Thus the eternal pact is sealed, and the two fly away together on Mefistofele’s coat.



### Epilogue in Faust’s study and the heavens

Faust, again an old man, is dejected by the emptiness of his life. Yet momentarily he imagines that he can make the world a better place by giving of himself for the good of others. Mefistofele, who realizes the nature of Faust’s contemplation, becomes desperate to claim the old man’s soul, especially when the celestial choir once again begins to sing. Clutching a Bible and resisting Mefistofele’s invitation to join him for new adventures, Faust at last prays for protection and salvation. At Faust’s death the heavenly hosts welcome his triumphant soul into heaven while the defiant Mefistofele sinks in defeat.



### Act III in a prison cell

Convicted of poisoning her mother with a sleeping potion and drowning the illegitimate baby she has borne by Faust, Margherita in a state of madness awaits execution. Faust is brought into the cell by Mefistofele, who withdraws. Faust pleads with the woman he has seduced and then abandoned to escape with him to happiness and freedom. As the time of Margherita’s execution draws near, Mefistofele returns. After Margherita recognizes him as an agent of Satan, she calls upon heavenly powers for forgiveness and protection. In her dying moments she rejects Faust. As she sinks in death, the heavenly hosts joyfully proclaim her salvation.



### Act II, Scene II on a desolate mountaintop, months later

Faust and Mefistofele ascend a mountain, led by mysterious, malevolent lights, known as will-o’-wisps, that lure travelers from well-worn paths to treacherous ground. At the top of a mountain the two join a group of witches and warlocks who are celebrating their black rituals. The evil spirits hail Mefistofele as the King of Darkness and give him a crystal globe that symbolizes the world he despises. With derisive laughter, he throws it down and shatters it. While the spirits dance themselves into an infernal frenzy, Faust has a disturbing vision of Margherita with an eerie red line around her neck. The evil creatures continue their revelry.



### Act II, Scene I in Marta’s garden

Now youthful in his appearance, Faust glories in the rejuvenation and change of scene Mefistofele has afforded him. While the devil flirts with Marta, Faust woos her beautiful young charge, Margherita. He at last persuades the village maiden to give her mother a sleeping potion he will provide so the couple can be alone together for the night.



# Five Hundred Years

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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.

Gounod's *Faust* (1859), one of the most popular of all French operas, 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.

Boito's *Mefistofele*, which appeared less than a decade after Gounod's *Faust*, centers around the struggle between Mefistofele and Faust for Faust's soul. Boito's Faust does not conjure to instigate the demon's appearance as in other versions of the legendary plot. Instead, Mefistofele, dressed as a friar, stalks Faust.

Boito's revised opera embodies the powerful prologue from Goethe—a wager between God and the devil that foreshadows a wager between Faust and Mefistofele. The piece was originally intended to play in two parts, like Goethe's work, on two nights. Unlike Gounod's Marguerite, Boito's village maiden is not in the limelight for long, nor does she, as in Goethe's Romantic work, bring about the salvation of Faust.

The list of poets and musicians who have been intrigued by the power and rich ambiguity of the Faust legend continues to grow longer. Contemporary composers who have been attracted to the story include Alfred Schnittke, Henri Pousseur, and Wolfgang Rihm. Most recently Faust has been portrayed as the architect of weapons of mass destruction.

*"Mefistofele is the work of an extraordinary man whose place as a poet, revolutionary, composer and—perhaps above all—librettist to Verdi, is secure in both Italian and operatic history."*

—Tom Rosenthal

## Samuel Ramey,

the most recorded bass in history, is well known in opera houses and concert halls around the world for his portrayal of the title character in Boito's *Mefistofele*. Ramey, who has sung the role in over 100 performances, sang it first at Bob Jones University in 1976.



## Arrigo Boito (1842-1918) Poet, Composer, Music Theorist

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stage on October 4, 1875, in Bologna. Boito made further modifications before its next performance in Venice on May 13, 1876. By 1881 Boito was fully vindicated when the shorter, more accessible *Mefistofele* made a triumphant return to La Scala, this time with the librettist/composer serving as stage director. The opera, now regarded as Boito's finest achievement, soon won a secure place in the international repertoire. In the same year Boito resumed his work as a librettist, creating the text for Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*.

Boito's finest achievements as a librettist, however, came in his work with the great composer Giuseppe Verdi to create two highly successful operas based on Shakespeare plays: *Otello* (1887) and *Falstaff* (1893). Boito also began a *King Lear* libretto, but the aging Verdi was unable to take up the project.

After Verdi's death in Milan in 1901, Boito returned to intermittent work on a second opera of his own composition he had begun decades earlier. But *Nerone*, the story of the emperor Nero, remained unfinished at Boito's death in 1918. In the next few years the famed conductor Toscanini and others completed the opera, which premiered in 1924, some 62 years after Boito conceived it. Like *Mefistofele*, *Nerone* presents the struggle between paganism and Christianity, destruction and redemption. According to some critics, the *Nerone* libretto is Boito's greatest achievement.

In the words of William Ashbrook, "The mark [Boito] left on Italian opera is greater than the sum of his own accomplishments."



**Jerome Hines** (1921–2003), bass, was one of the twentieth-century's most celebrated singers. He appeared in more than 850 performances at New York's Metropolitan Opera.

The obituary for Mr. Hines published by *The New York Times* on February 5, 2003, included the following details: "In the mid-1950's Mr. Hines became a born-again Christian, and made his faith the center of his life and work, noting in interviews at the Met in those years, he was 'like a square peg in a round hole because of [his] beliefs.' . . . Mr. Hines composed an opera of his own, 'I Am

the Way,' about the life of Jesus, in which he sang the title role. The work was performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1968, and Mr. Hines sang it 93 times around the world, including a performance at the Bolshoi in Moscow."

Jerome Hines appeared twice at Bob Jones University: in 1989 as the title character in Boito's *Mefistofele* with the University Opera Association and in 1990 as the title character in Moussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, performed in a semi-staged production in Founder's Memorial Amphitheater.