

September 9, 2021 – Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*

Join me on this week's Thursday Night Opera House for Arrigo Boito's highly dramatic *Mefistofele*, a retelling of the Faust legend. The only completed opera by the Italian composer-librettist, the opera had its premiere on March 5, 1868 at La Scala, Milan,

In the Prologue, a heavenly chorus of angels praises God the Creator. Mefistofele (bass **Samuel Ramey**) scornfully declares that he can win the soul of Faust. His challenge is accepted by the Forces of Good.

On Easter Sunday, the elderly scholar Dr. Faust (tenor **Plácido Domingo**) and his pupil Wagner (tenor **Sergio Tedesco**) are watching the Easter celebrations in the main square in Frankfurt. Faust senses that they are being followed by a mysterious friar, about whom he senses something evil. Wagner dismisses his master's feelings of unease. Later, Faust is in his study, deep in contemplation. His thoughts are disturbed in dramatic fashion by the sudden appearance of the sinister friar, whom he now recognizes as a manifestation of the Devil. Far from being terrified, Faust is intrigued and enters into a discussion with Mefistofele culminating in an agreement by which he agrees to give his soul to the devil when he dies in return for worldly bliss for the remainder of his life.

Restored to his youth, Faust has infatuated Margherita (soprano **Eva Marton**), an unsophisticated village girl. She is unable to resist his seductive charms and agrees to drug her mother with a sleeping drug and meet him for a night of passion. Meanwhile, Mefistofele amuses himself with Margherita's neighbor Martha (contralto **Tamara Takács**). Later, Mefistofele has spirited Faust away to witness a Witches' Sabbath on the Brocken mountain. Declaring himself king, Mefistofele calls to them to bow down before him. The devil mounts his throne and proclaims his contempt for the World and all its worthless inhabitants. As the orgy reaches its climax, Faust sees a vision of Margherita, in chains and with her throat cut. Mefistofele reassures him that the vision was false.

But Faust's vision had been true. Margherita lies in a dismal cell, her mind in a state of confusion and despair. She has been imprisoned and condemned to death for poisoning her mother with the sleeping drug supplied by Faust and for drowning the baby she had borne him. Faust begs Mefistofele to help them escape together. When they enter the cell, Margherita does not initially recognize her rescuers. Her joy at being reunited with Faust turns to horror when she sees Mefistofele and recognizes that he is the Devil. Refusing to succumb to further evil, she begs for divine forgiveness, then collapses to the cell floor as the Celestial choir proclaims her redemption.

Mefistofele has now transported Faust back in time to Ancient Greece. Elena (Helen of Troy) (**Marton**) and her followers are enjoying the luxurious and exotic surroundings on the banks of a magnificent river. Faust, attired more splendidly than ever, is easily able

to win the heart of the beautiful princess. In a passionate outpouring, they declare their undying love and devotion to each other.

In the Epilogue, Faust is back in his study. Once more an old man, he reflects that neither in the world of reality nor of illusion was he able to find the perfect experience he craved. He feels that the end of his life is close, but desperate for his final victory, Mefistofele urges him to embark on more exotic adventures. For a moment, Faust hesitates but, suddenly seizing his Bible, he cries out for God's forgiveness. Mefistofele has been thwarted; he disappears into the background as Faust dies and the Celestial choir once more sings of ultimate redemption.

Giuseppe Patané conducts the Hungarian State Orchestra and the Hungaroton Opera Chorus in this 1991 Sony Classical recording.

From Act 2, **Samuel Ramey** sings "Ecco il mondo": <https://youtu.be/WSyV3cjWLWY>

As a bonus, Samuel Ramey sings additional music of Mefistofeles by Hector Berlioz and Charles Gounod. It's from his *A Date with the Devil CD*.