

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

16 Nov | 18 Nov

Arrigo Boito (1842-1918)

"Mefistofele" Opera with Prologue, 4 Acts, and Epilogue
(Concert-Style Opera with Japanese supertitles)

Perhaps most well-known for his adept work as librettist for Verdi's final two operas, "Otello" and "Falstaff", Arrigo Boito was lesser known as a composer in his own right. He began his studies at the Milan Conservatory in 1853, and had already begun work on his first operatic composition (based on the Faust legend) when he first was introduced to Verdi in 1862. It was then their collegial relationship began with Boito writing the text for Verdi's "Hymn of the Nations" which had been commissioned for the world fair in London.

Apparently when Boito discovered that other more established composers were exploring the Faust legend, he set his own initial work to the side. Gounod was one of those composers whose premiere at *La Scala* with his version of "Faust" was a great success. In the meantime, Boito had begun openly criticizing what he viewed as a provincial approach in the Italian artistic circles, which caused a falling out with Verdi that would last for over a decade and a half. It wasn't until Verdi began working on "Otello" that the two would begin their collaborative work once again.

Still, Boito was nurturing ideas for his version of a "Faust" opera. Initially the composer had intended to divide the saga into two separate productions, based on the two main sections of Goethe's "Faust" in its literary form. However, in 1866 when he started actively pursuing the project again, a decision was made to meld them into one larger production called "Mefistofele", which was based on the demon figure, the drama unfolding from 'its' perspective instead

of Faust's. The first score of this version of the opera was completed in 1867 and premiered at *La Scala*, which also ended up being the premiere of any work there that had both the musical composition and the libretto by the same composer. Boito even decided to make the text of the libretto available ahead of the performance, which also had not been done before.

For the premiere in March of 1868, Alberto Mazzucato (Boito's former teacher at Milan Conservatory and now principal conductor at *La Scala*) was scheduled to conduct. However, when Mazzucato attempted to suggest cuts to the rather lengthy work, Boito resisted, so the conductor refused to lead the orchestra in the premiere. This set yet another precedent, with the composer/librettist also stepping in as the conductor. With a prologue, four acts, and an epilogue, the production went on past midnight. Apparently only the opening Prologue was deemed a success. A second staging took place, this time performed across two separate nights, with the successful Prologue presented both times, and with a ballet added at the end to close the work.

Boito would ultimately set the entire opera aside for several years while continuing his other work which included working for two publishing houses (Lucca and Riccordi), as well as translation work, and authoring articles on opera. At one point the composer even attempted to start work on a separate opera ("Nerone") which he eventually set aside as well, before determining to return to "Mefistofele" to revise the work extensively. This updated version of the opera was premiered in Bologna at the *Teatro Comunale* in October of 1875 where it was received warmly. Additional successful performances in Venice and around the world ensued.

The "Prologue in Heaven" opens the work with the text for the title (and much of the libretti) coming directly from Goethe's writings. It is considered by many scholars to be one of the best operatic scenes composed, to the point that it is often programmed separately and for special occasions. For example, Arturo Toscanini programmed the Prologue as the closing work for the concert that re-opened *La Scala* in May of 1946 following World War II.

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The Prologue is in itself presented in four sections, with the opening scene complete with trumpet calls and a chorus of angels singing their praises to God. This majestic theme is extended and repeated throughout the opening, acting as the central force uniting the remaining pieces presented. In the second section, Mefistofele makes his first entrance to a kind of scherzo dance theme, suggesting (to God) that he would like to wager that he can win the soul of Faust. God responds via a ‘mystical chorus’ accepting the challenge, and as Mefistofele exits, the cherubim chorus sings of their heavenly delights. Closing the Prologue, multiple choruses join together, including penitent women along with the cherubim and heavenly hosts, to reach a scintillating climax singing their song of praise to the high heavens.

In **Act I**, the first scene is set on Easter Sunday with the elderly Faust and his student (Wagner) observing the Easter celebrations in the main town square. During that time Faust gets a feeling that they are being followed by a mysterious ‘friar’ who appears to have evil intentions, but these are dismissed by his student. In the second scene, Faust is back in his study deep in thought, when Mefistofele appears, and whom Faust now recognizes as this mysterious friar from before. They enter into a pact whereby Faust agrees to give his soul to the devil when he dies in exchange for a life of bliss.

Act II is set in a garden where Faust has been returned to more youthful times. Here he is attempting to seduce Margherita and convinces her to give her mother a sleeping potion so they can have a tryst without her awakening. In the second scene, Mefistofele leads Faust to the Witches’ Sabbath where he sees a vision of Margherita in chains about to be executed. Mefistofele attempts to convince Faust that it was just an illusion as the festivities reach their climax.

Act III opens with Margherita in prison for supposedly poisoning her mother and drowning her baby (in an attempt to drive her mad). Faust attempts to intervene to rescue her, but when she sees Mefistofele and recognizes him as the epitome of evil, she renounces any connection to Faust and prays for

forgiveness from the heavens in her aria “*L'altra note in fondo al mare*” (The other night into the depths of the sea). Mefistofele declares that she is damned, but the heavenly voices sing that she is indeed saved.

Act IV is set in Ancient Greece, where Mefistofele has now taken Faust, back to an earlier time. A more classical Sabbath is taking place with Elena (Helen of Troy) calling upon sirens and nymphs to serenade her along the banks of the river. Faust enters the scene claiming that Elena represents the ideal of all that is classically beautiful. The two then join together to sing a hymn to the mysteries of the power and devotion of love.

The **Epilogue** finds Faust back in his study once again as an old man, reflecting on his past experiences. And although he feels he has had the chance to experience all that he could ever want, including the love of a beautiful (albeit mortal) maiden, as well as the love of an immortal goddess, the ideals appear to be mere dreams. Mefistofele attempts to convince him to explore even more temptations and adventures, but Faust resists grabbing his Bible and praying for his own redemption. The Cherubim appear singing celestial songs as Mefistofele retreats to his own evil domain, having lost the wager for Faust’s soul.

Some scholars compare Boito’s version of “Mefistofele” to those of Gounod and Berlioz, among others. Berlioz’s “The Damnation of Faust” (1846) focused primarily on Part 1 of Goethe’s work, and is said to be more freely adapted. Robert Schumann’s oratorio “Scenes from Goethe’s Faust” (1853) highlighted select scenes, while Franz Liszt’s “Faust Symphony” (1857) presented individual portrayals of Faust, Mefistofele and others, and included only the final lines from Part 2 to close the work with a choral setting. Gounod’s version (1859) is said to be one of the most popular, but it also only focused on Part 1. In contrast to these, it appears that Boito’s version seems to be more ‘complete’ in its coverage of the full breadth of Goethe’s dramatic poem. In addition, there is a sense that Boito’s version emphasizes the more philosophical notions of the conflict between the forces of good and evil,

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instead of just focusing on the various events in the life of Faust.

Ultimately, Boito's opera presented a work that was not like any preceding in the genre of Italian opera of the time. The unusual harmonies were so unconventional to the times, that Verdi himself was critical of them, especially as they are heard in the Prologue in such a strong sequence, with dissonances unresolved from one to the next over long sections. Verdi commented: "I had always read and understood that the Prologue in Heaven was a thing of spontaneity, of genius... yet hearing how the harmonies of that piece are almost all based on dissonances, I seemed to be – *not* in Heaven certainly."

However other scholars have countered this notion and have instead highlighted that Boito's innovative approach to Italian operatic tradition is what transforms it into "one of the truly magnificent scenes in opera, and it is all the more powerful for its dazzling unconventionality." (Huscher) This is especially apparent in the "*Ave signo*" which closes both the Prologue and the Epilogue (and consequently the entire opera) with "one of the most thrilling choral passages in all opera, beginning quietly and sweetly but fervently, and building overwhelmingly toward a glorious climax." (Milicia)

Original work: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe "Faust"

Libretto: Arrigo Boito **Work composed:** 1867 **World premiere:** 1st version : 5th March, 1868, at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan conducted by the composer / Revised version: 4th October, 1875, at the Teatro comunale di Bologna

Instrumentation: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, triangle, tam-tam, glockenspiel, tubular bells), 2 harps, organ, strings / **banda:** 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, percussion (thunder-machine)

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