



Rembrandt van Rijn, "Faust in His Study Watching a Magic Disc", 246 × 186 mm, etching.
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Gounod's Faust: Giving the Devil His Due

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Charles François Gounod was one of the most influential French composers of the 19th Century. Bizet, Faure, Massenet, Thomas and Tchaikovsky all acknowledged their debt to him. He is credited with having been the major force in ending the domination of French opera by huge overblown spectacles, e.g., Meyerbeer. He became rich and famous. Yet, today he is rarely performed. Asked to identify any of his many choral, orchestral, or *mélodie* works, the average music lover draws a blank. Only his opera *Faust* remains in the standard repertory and it continues to be one of the world's most popular operas. In it Gounod combined a great legend, his superb compositional gifts, and a dramatization of the personal issues that dominated his life. The result was a masterpiece and it was Gounod's only one.

The opera is based on Part I of Goethe's version of the Faust legend. Written at the turn of the century it is considered by many to be the single greatest piece of German literature. In it Faust struggles to move from selfishness to altruism, to reconcile the shame of passivity and the guilt of action, to integrate the chaos of life with the harmony of nature. Goethe's position is pantheistic and classical. In the opera's opening scene, Faust, the aged philosopher, is in despair. His first word is "rien," "nothing." Goethe's words were: "Alas, I have studied philosophy, medicine, law and unfortunately, also theology, thoroughly and with great pains. And here I stand, poor fool, and am no wiser than before." In Gounod's hands Faust's recognition that the power of knowledge is illusory became a statement that faith, not knowledge, is the answer.

Widely different interpretations of the Faust story have always characterized this particular legend, which is based on the life of a real man, Georg Faust. Born in Germany in 1480, he became an itinerant palmist, astrologer, doctor, alchemist, and magician. He was, apparently, both rather learned for his time and a somewhat seedy character who was frequently kicked out of town. He quickly became a legendary figure and has remained so for 500 years, and each era has focused on those aspects of the tale suitable to its time.

Shortly after his death, these tales emphasized his punishment for hedonistic godlessness. By the end of the 16th

Century the focus had shifted to punishment for his intellectual curiosity. The most famous of these versions is Christopher Marlowe's 1592 drama. In the first half of the 17th Century the focus became the magical elements, while in the second half of that century it was on the struggle between good and evil. The major shift in the 18th Century, the "Sturm und Drang" period, is that Faust becomes a subjective figure, often one who challenges the prevailing optimism of that century. The most significant modern version of the legend is Thomas Mann's. His Faust is a composer who can convert his dry, serene, intellectual musical genius into great compositions only by a bargain with the devil, who gives him passion and intensity.

Goethe's version of the legend is the most complex. He paraphrased the biblical "In the beginning was the word" into his "In the beginning was the deed." For Goethe, the Faustian conflict between thinking and acting was unresolvable. For Gounod, action came from the devil and its antithesis was not thought, but faith. (On the opposite side of the issue was Adolph Hitler, for whom "In the beginning was the deed" was Goethe's only worthwhile concept!)

Since Gounod's *Faust* is a thoroughly Victorian Christian morality tale, it is not surprising that the devil, representing sexuality and aggression, is feared. But the energy of the id is not to be denied and the devil is the agent of action in Gounod's version. The association of the devil with sexuality was elucidated by Saint Augustine. For him the assertion of sexuality is an attempt to usurp the throne of the Almighty. Hence, the devil exemplifies oedipal triumph. Hence also the devil's attractiveness. In Gounod as well as in Goethe and Milton, the devil is the most interesting character.

The devil is a fairly recent concept in mankind's history. In most early religions the godhead was the source of both good and evil, e.g., Brahma, Quetzalcoatl, and the early Yahweh, as in Isaiah 45:7, "I create the light; I create the darkness." Not until the religion of Yahweh came under the influence of Zoroastrian dualism, about 500 B.C., did the Old Testament God have a demonic counterpart separate from himself. However, throughout the pre-Christian era, the devil, although powerful, remained ultimately under God's control, as in the Book of Job. With the advent of Christianity the devil became increasingly more autonomous, more omnipresent, and more powerful. By the end of the 15th Century, the Pope was describing a worldwide conspiracy of witches.

That the forces for good and evil were perceived by pre-Enlightenment man as existing outside himself needs to be understood as both defense via projection and as good reality testing. For, indeed, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse

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were likely, in those eras, to visit one at any time. Only with the development of Western science and industrialized society was man able to gain some control over the ravages of natural disasters, disease, and starvation. But with the onset of the Enlightenment, the devil's power gradually abated, although, to this day, we retain some customs from the heyday of the devil. For example, today's "bless you" (when someone sneezes) was, at that time, required because, at the moment of the sneeze, the person was out of control and thus demons could enter.

The Enlightenment brought a sense that man had power over the forces of nature and over his own destiny, and from the 17th to the 20th Century, not only the devil, but also God, came to have less power over man's daily life. Beginning with the 20th Century, however, confidence in man's rationality began to fade as forces beyond man's conscious control reemerged, this time in the unconscious. And the re-emergence was in the pre-Zoroastrian combined form of Eros and Thanatos, both components of the id. But, no sooner had Freud thus internalized the devil (as well as the deity), than reality changed. In the 20th Century, the devil has been re-externalized. The forces of destruction—the Holocaust, the atom bomb, and pollution—are man made. But they are also external reality. This ambiguity in the current view of the locus of the devil is reflected in modern psychiatry. Is the origin of neurotic conflict to be found in internal conflict, à la Freud, or in conflict with the environment, à la Kohut?

Gounod's *Faust*, although derived from Goethe's and although similar to 17th Century morality tale versions, is uniquely Gounod. It is a tale of the sinfulness of sexuality and this is apparent from the moment of Mephistopheles' appearance. He first offers Faust gold, then glory, then power. Faust is not tempted. But when Mephistopheles conjures up the vision of Marguerite and promises her to him, Faust succumbs. His fantasy is that he will be young again, like Marguerite. He will be given a second chance at loving, something he failed at the first time. But, as the story shows, since his unconscious hasn't changed, he is no more able to love the second time than he was the first. The devil may be able to alter conscious time, but he cannot touch the timeless unconscious.

Faust and Mephistopheles are thus introduced in Act I, but our heroine, Marguerite, does not appear until Act II. Her first word in the opera is "No" paralleling Faust's opening word in Act I, "Nothing." By contrast, Mephistopheles' first words (also in Act I) are "Here I am." The Prince of Death is clearly the most life-loving of the three. Act II does not particularly further the dramatic action. Rather it is a set of musical tableaux. And here Gounod excels; he is one of the world's great painters of musical pictures. This talent underlies both his greatest artistic achievements and his artistic downfall.

The "squareness" of Valentin's second act aria precisely describes his bourgeois personality. Mephistopheles' cynical Golden Calf aria limns his character. In the third act the solid, folk-ballad quality of Marguerite's King of Thule aria contrasts with the tinkling superficiality of the Jewel Song. Gounod hereby musically depicts the comparison Goethe made between the King's goblet (as a symbol of hospitality and friendship, to be proudly displayed as a lover's present), and Mephistopheles' jewels (as symbols of show, to be en-

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joyed only furtively, a devil's snare). Such musical pictures occur throughout the opera. They constitute the entire Walpurgisnacht scene.

The painting of such musical pictures has a long and honorable history in music. It is called "program music," in distinction to "absolute music," which has no visual or living sound referents, e.g., a Bach fugue. At the same time, program music is vulnerable to degeneration into banality, just as absolute music can degenerate into sterile intellectuality. Gounod's *Faust* constantly skirts the edge of banality, but it is saved both by Gounod's lyrical gifts and his great technical compositional skills, e.g., the use of seven choruses simultaneously at the start of Act II. Similarly, the essentially banal plot is saved by Gounod's heartfelt concern with the issues raised by the story.

Acts I and II, having set the stage, Acts III and IV contain the dramatic action and Act V the resolution. Actually, the action starts in the intermission between Acts II and III for, in good Victorian fashion, although sexuality is the driving force throughout the opera, it is never openly depicted. Act II ends with Faust rushing into Marguerite's house and Act III begins with her as a fallen woman, but the actual sexual relationship is only hinted at. Contrast this taboo on openness about sexuality with the opera's attitude toward violence—Faust's murder of Valentin occurs on stage.

Acts III and IV are studies of the battle of the sexes. For Gounod, relations between men and women are not only always conflict-ridden but also always end badly. There are three kinds of male/female relationships in Act III: Mephistopheles' relationship with Marthe is a purely manipulative one—she wants to trick him into marriage, he wants to keep her from coming between Faust and Marguerite; Faust's relationship with Marguerite is one of passionate, sexual involvement; Seibel's with Marguerite is one of hopeless, idealized, romantic love (the only one Gounod approved of). Equally doomed are the relationships in Act IV. Valentin's idealization of his sister as virginal leads to his death, while Mephistopheles' unremitting sadism toward Marguerite leads to her insanity.

The cause of all these disasters is the illicit sexual relationship between Faust and Marguerite. Just in case the audience failed to get this message from the plot, Gounod added two set pieces on the subject: Marguerite's Act III King of Thule aria extolling marital fidelity; and Mephistopheles' Act IV aria warning girls not to give in without a wedding ring. This "overkill" suggests that Gounod was preoccupied with the issue and, indeed, as we shall discuss, there is a good deal of evidence suggesting that this was the case. In the final scene Marguerite suffers the ultimate punishment for her illicit sexuality—insanity and death. Gounod makes it clear that once having given in to illicit sexual impulses, all conscience goes. Marguerite murders her child.

Marguerite's fate reflects the opposite side of the 19th Century view of the woman as noble and self-sacrificing. Woman is also lacking in moral strength (a view Freud shared) and unable to control her impulses. Faust actively chose to sell his soul. Marguerite simply lacked the strength to resist temptation. But this same "weakness" also leads to her insanity, whereby she is absolved of her guilt. Gounod knew well whereof he wrote, for this was an absolution he seems to have intensely yearned for himself, and the music he wrote for this scene is indeed sublime. But this absolution is not available to men. Man can only repress his guilt by satiating his appetites, as in the first scene of Act V, where Mephistopheles offers Faust "a place at a feast of queens and courtesans 'to stifle' the remorse in his enchanted heart."

Speculating in this way about the relationship between a single piece of work and an artist's personal life is indeed risky, for too often one can find another work that would lead one to different conclusions. But Gounod's *Faust* is unique in his oeuvre. He, himself, said about it—"None of my works written before *Faust* gave any reason to expect a score of this kind; nothing had prepared the public for it." Adding to its popular appeal is the fact that, in addition to his musical creativity, Gounod also skirts the edge of musical banality. For example, the great trio in the opera's final scene is repeated the second time a half-tone higher than the first. This device is common in pop music but rare in classical music. Here, Gounod uses it to great effect. *Faust* stands in contrast to Gounod's eleven other operas, mostly failures already in their own time. The only other one ever performed today is his *Romeo and Juliet* and that deals with a closely related theme. Additionally, he wrote much other music: symphonies, choral works, religious works, songs, etc., but with the exception of his *Ave Maria*, practically none of it is ever performed. The uniqueness of his *Faust* thus suggests that it had special meaning to Gounod. It was also the highest water mark in Gounod's creative life.

Gounod came by his talents from his parents. His father was a very gifted but not very successful painter; his mother was an accomplished musician. In his autobiography he describes his father as painting fine portraits, but leaving the background unfinished so that, in order for them to be salable, Gounod's mother had to do the tedious work of completing them. In contrast to this ambivalence about his father is Gounod's idealization of his mother, to whom he dedicates his autobiography:

"This account of my life is a testimony of veneration and affection for the being who has given me the greatest love in the world—mother love. The mother is, here below, the most perfect image, the purest and warmest ray of providence; her never-failing care and watchfulness are the direct emanation of the eternal care and watchfulness of God."

Chapter I of Gounod's autobiography starts off with the words, "My mother" and, as indicated in his dedication, his idealization of her continues throughout. By contrast, there are only a few sentences regarding his wife. The passages about his father are revealing, albeit brief, since he was but five when his father died. That this loss left him incompletely identified with his father and over-involved with his mother is clear from this passage:

While my father was thus absorbed in reading, I used to lie flat on my stomach on the floor in the middle of the

room, drawing with a white crayon on a varnished black-board, eyes, noses and mouths, for which he had already traced the copy on the aforesaid board. I see this now as if I were still there, and I was then but four or four and a half years old at the most. This occupation had for me, I remember, so great a charm that I have no doubt if my father had lived I should have been a painter instead of a musician, but my mother's profession and the education received from her during the years of childhood determined the balance in favor of music.

Gounod describes the origins of his interest in music as follows:

"My mother, in nursing me, had certainly made me imbibe as much music as milk. She never performed that function without singing, and I can say that I took my first lessons without knowing it and without having to give them the attention so painful to tender years."

Despite his father's death, his interest in painting remained strong and he was talented. While he was studying in Rome, having won the Grand Prix de Rome in music, it was suggested to him by the painter Ingres that, if he dropped music for painting, he could get a second Grand Prix in painting. Although Gounod decided against that course, the continuing importance for him of visual thinking is evident in his music.

During the composer's years in Rome, Ingres became a father figure for Gounod. As Gounod recognized, few young men would have chosen Ingres for this role:

It has been said, and often mechanically repeated, that Mr. Ingres was despotic, intolerant, exclusive; but he was nothing of all that. If he asserted himself strongly, it was because he had strong belief, and nothing in the world gives more authority than that. I have never seen anyone admire more things than he, simply because he could discern better than anyone else in what respect and why a thing was admirable. But he was prudent; he knew to what extent the impulses of the young lead them, without discernment and without method, to be enamored of, and infatuated with, certain personal traits of such or such a master.

For Gounod, Ingres was a perfect choice. Like the composer's father, Ingres was not only a painter but also one who felt his talent was unappreciated. Furthermore, Ingres was a prototypical Victorian. Publicly, his fame rested on his idealized studies of female nudes, and he adamantly proclaimed that there was nothing prurient in these pictures; they represented the ultimate in beauty and it was the role of art to depict beauty. Privately, Ingres drew pornographic sketches. Publicly, Ingres denounced the "ugliness" of Delacroix's paintings. Privately, he hated him as a competitor and was paranoid about the art world in general, even long after it had showered him with honors. This outwardly prudish, inwardly prurient man struck a responsive chord in Gounod.

As with numerous other creative geniuses, Gounod was clearly his mother's favorite. With the death of his father, Gounod's attachment to his mother became intense and remained so throughout his life. He idolized her as noble, self-sacrificing and long-suffering. Such a view of women was a common cultural stereotype in the 19th Century, and appeared frequently in opera. This "mater dolorosa" image serves to desexualize the mother-figure and protect against

incestuous impulses. For someone like Gounod who, with father dead and brother away, had his mother all to himself, it probably played a very powerful role. Furthermore, he was a devout Catholic and the dominant role of the Virgin Mary in 19th Century Catholicism undoubtedly reinforced this image.

Gounod's only brother was ten years older and had been away at school during much of Gounod's childhood. That Gounod had ambivalent feelings about him and that these influenced his artistic work is evident from this passage about the time immediately after his brother's death:

Strange fact! It seems as if sad and pathetic accents should have been the first to thrill the fibers of my being, so recently shaken by the most painful emotions! But it was to the contrary; the brighter scenes were those that first seized and took possession of me, as if my nature, bent under the weight of sorrow and mourning, felt the need of reaction and of free respiration after those hours of agony and days of tears and sighs.

But such intense feelings of specialness as accompany being mother's favorite, having father die, and then brother being away, (thereby becoming the only remaining male in the house) are not retained without much accompanying guilt. When Ingres told Gounod that he could win a second grand prix in painting, he provided the support of a father-figure for Gounod's sense of omnipotence, now in the form of a faustian omnimath. But then the oedipal triumph became too much to tolerate. Gounod sought to allay his guilt by studying for the priesthood. However, this attempt to deny his grandiosity meant abandoning both his artistic creativity and his sexuality. It lasted less than two years (1846-48).

Four years later he married. His autobiography says little about his wife, but he comments about his father-in-law (a music teacher) and the connections to the world of art and music that his in-laws provided.

That that marriage was likely to fail was indicated from the one passage in his autobiography where Gounod discussed his wife:

It was during the time of one of the grand annual meetings of the *Orpheon*, June 8, 1856, that my wife presented me with a son. (Three years before, on the 13th of the same month, we had the sorrow of losing at birth our firstborn, a girl.) On the morning of the day when my son was born, my brave wife, although feeling the first pains of motherhood just as I was starting out for the meeting of the *Orpheon*, had the force to conceal from me her sufferings, and when in the afternoon I returned to the house my son was already in the world.

The "mater dolorosa" image was too powerful. It became his view of his wife as well as of his mother.

Gounod started working on *Faust* in 1856, and the opera's first production took place in 1859. After a slow start, it soon became a great success. And here Gounod's autobiography ends. He continued to keep the private diary on which his autobiography is based, but destroyed everything after 1859. Although his public life became increasingly successful after *Faust* and he continued to write much music, commanded large fees, and got much recognition, his artistic creativity and his personal life began a downhill course.

As he ground out one religious piece after another, his work became increasingly banal. Although he was only 40 when he wrote *Faust* and lived to be 75, nothing even approaching the quality of *Faust* ever again flowed from his pen. Simultaneously, his personal life deteriorated. With the success of *Faust*, Gounod's childhood sense of specialness was again reinforced. Only this time he dealt with it in a different way. It became ego-syntonic and the former novice priest became the profligate. During his stay in England (1870-75) he not only had a series of mistresses but was a flamboyant patroness of the arts who eventually landed in jail. She has the distinction of being the only person ever known to have attempted to blackmail Queen Victoria. An ironic twist, since *Faust* was Victoria's favorite opera.

But Gounod was a man with a powerful superego and a strong sense of conscience and denying his moral standards came at a high price. Like his mistresses, his compositions became interchangeable; he abandoned the creative struggle and became merely a producer of technically competent but aesthetically increasingly mediocre pieces.

The banal quality that pervades these later works is already evident in *Faust*. But an element of banality is almost built into romantic opera: the limitation on the number of words that can be sung (and understood) leads to inevitable oversimplification; the passionate intensity that opera is uniquely able to convey leads to overly dramatic plots. Gounod's character structure made him vulnerable to the appeal of banality and, indeed, *Faust* is probably the most banal of the great operas in the standard repertory. But Gounod's musical genius found its greatest expression in *Faust*. And to most, if not all, opera-goers, the greatness vastly outweighs the banality.

Gounod wrote nothing of a quality comparable to *Faust*. Despite all its flaws, it remains one of the world's operatic masterpieces. It is as though, understanding his subject matter so well and feeling it so deeply, he was able to give it such exquisite expression that, despite its sentimentality and narrowness of scope, it touches us profoundly. Perhaps it is not an artist's scope that matters so much as his ability to allow us to see deeply into himself. Though he was a composer with many limitations, Gounod poured all of himself into *Faust* and it is we who are forever the richer for it.