



Faust's myth in the interpretations of Hugo de Ana

by Giulia Covelli

Therefore, Goethe is the basis for the Maestro's direction and the presentation of the "Prologue on Theatre" at the beginning of *Faust* confirms this.

"Starting from Goethe is fundamental for me. The presentation of "The Prologue" is one method of justifying the concept of my performances while demonstrating to the public the wonder of the prologue itself. It is the essence of Faust. Goethe's theatrical philosophy produced a work to be read rather than to be performed. The Prologue emphasizes that the spatiality of the universe is reflected in that of the theatre: the geometry of the theatre reflects that of the heavens. "

The Maestro's powerful sensitivity, deeply affected by the Faustian Myth and strongly attached to Goethe's poem, brings to light profound meanings often neglected by the three composers who felt constrained to select one of the several possible themes presented in the poem. Hugo de Hana's direction can be considered "baroque" due to the excessive visual elements, "symbolical" for the constant reference to symbolic elements, "visionary" where fantastic representations prevail. In any case and in every case it is always precise, never vague or sketchy; indeed it is in these very qualities, in its profound harmony with the "immeasurable" poem, that lie its expressive richness and its extraordinary capacity to capture the collective imagination.

The choice of these three works dedicated to the Faustian myth travels a specific musical course – from the structure of the traditional opera (Gounod's *Faust*) to the symphonic concert music (Berlioz's *Damnation de Faust*) to the oratorical music Schumann's *Szenen aus Goethes.*) The thematic path begins with the affairs of the heart, Faust's first impetus toward life; it progresses through the fantastic journey that comprehends part of the successive stages of apprehension, to

arrive at last at the transfiguration of Faust's body in the afterworld: from stasis to dynamism, from flesh to spirit, from the finite to the infinite, from the human to the divine, from the concrete to the abstract.

The first work, Gounod's *Faust*, focuses the attention on the love affair between Faust und Margaret and it appears to be a classical lyrical work. The love story is extrapolated from the first part of Goethe's poem and follows the predetermined stages of love tragedies: the meeting, the falling in love, the passionate consummation, the subsequent complications, the lovers' separation and the death of one or both lovers.

The set is designed to present the entire event inside an immense glass cube which imprisons the two lovers within its finite confines, and which opens magically only upon the death of Margaret, precisely because she, in that moment, transcends human limits. Of the salvation of Faust himself there is no indication, except, visible in the background, of the transformation of Mephistopheles into a Jesus Christ granting a blessing.

Berlioz's *Damnation de Faust* shifts the attention from Faust's love for the young woman, the first stage of his journey with Mephistopheles, to the theme of the fantastic journey, that justly is no longer expressed through the musical schemes typical of the sentimental lyric opera, but through the elusive and mobile schemes of the profane oratorio, or according to the author's definition, of the "dramatic legend".

The theme of the fantastic journey offers unlimited expressive possibilities to the director, who uses video-projections as an expressive means, both to visualize a series of symbolic and hidden plots to which the work implicitly refers, and to motivate the place of the action realistically: *"The use of video-projections in the theatre space is designed to give the impression of a "total theatre", the impression of a multiple space not confined within its corporal/physical limits. Video-projections are used not only to indicate the site of action, but also to symbolically emphasize the character's journey. In the Damnation for example, in Faust's journey and fall they are absolutely not used in a descriptive sense: the horses race around a man dismembering a lamb and the names of the four elements, which are the link with another world"*.

Faust's journey through the earthly pleasures up to the race for the abyss and pandemonium is taken yet again from the first part of Goethe's poem, from which it differs, however, in its tragic finale. Szenen aus Goethes Faust shift the thematic focus onto Faust's transfiguration, the last stage of his journey in search of knowledge. Schumann's work dedicates two thirds of the scenes to the second part of Goethe's poem and concentrates particularly on the psycho-physical passing of the protagonist into the afterworld.

"Schumann has created a work that closely follows Goethe's original verses. The peculiarity of his work is in the dramaturgy, which is not that of a typical melodrama, but rather uses Goethe's own. These chaotic parcels of dramatic action are modern; it is philosophy set to music. The poem itself had been conceived as a series of pieces set to music to be sung and danced; Goethe's idea was of total theatre. One could debate whether the composer actually intended to write an opera: in my opinion, Schumann was simply applying his own personal reflections to portions of Goethe's work. Indeed, he has created scenes which can appear "more simple" because, aside from the first scene in the Garden, they are not built with a dramatic structure that can scenographically represent that of absolute reflection on the existential dilemma. Clearly, to the critic of two centuries ago, this could seem ordinary. In this day and age, however, it is exactly the contrary, and this difference defines the modernity of the opera; to us Gounod's libretto (and everyone else's) on the myth of Faust seems banal. Back then, there was a need for melodramatic development which is much less necessary today, when knowledge of the plot line is a given, even despite the risk that the audience not grasp the sense of the action."

Inspired perhaps by Doctor Marianus's expression "as a foot slides down a smooth slope"(III,7), the director has placed the scene on an inclined stage, symbolic of the descent toward damnation and the ascent toward salvation, the two perspectives of the same road. Coherent to Goethe's poem finale, the work ends with Faust's salvation and his ascension to heaven through the intercession of Margaret's soul.

In a manner more minimalist and concise than the previous, this director also employs the technique of video-projections, and even used the laser to emphasize certain symbolisms, such as the enormous symbol of the macrocosm that appears when Margaret dies (I, 3) or to render the action more realistic, as in the reflection of the water circles during Faust's crossing of the Acheron. (III, 7/3): "*In the Szenen, along with the video-projections, I also use the laser technique as a light that draws in space geometric figures that move until they take on a concrete form in the scenic element*". *The light, together with other elements, refers to the divine, which Faust always feels as a weight on his shoulders, as seen in his declaration "the sun is heavy for me and I carry it on my back. The sun represents the light, the creation, God."*

The organization of these three musical works has allowed the audience to appreciate the Faustian myth, first through the classical schemes of the operatic genre of Gounod's work, then flying with the imagination through the mobility and symphonic variety of Berlioz's work, and landing at last in a territory never before explored like the production of Schumann's profane oratory. The audience has thus been gradually introduced to the voice and vision of the last work, undoubtedly the most difficult to understand and to appreciate because the least traditional of all. The repertory of musical works dedicated to Faust's myth is immense and varied but the choice of this trilogy proves to be extremely coherent and meaningful. After two French works it was impossible not to see a German work appearing from the native land of the myth. Paradoxically the first two works, which narrate the development of events using a heavier hand and not taking the storyline for granted, express the meaning of the myth in a less effective way than the third, which, strongly anchored to Goethe's verses and setting the story aside, focuses on those spiritual and symbolic aspects on which the myth itself is based.

Hugo de Ana's direction responds perfectly to the production needs of the three works. Since *Faust* is static and melancholy in the arias but lively in the combined choirs, the scenery, completely in synchrony, is static in the former (consider the Scene of the Garden III) and it is mobile and colourful for the latter (Kermesse II, 3). To the *Damnation's* variegated musical crescendo (particularly in the Race to the Abyss IV, 19), corresponds the wild, unrestrained intersection of the video-projected images. The *Szenen's* compositional rhythms, now varied and passionate (Cathedral's scene I, 3), and later repetitive and alienating (Faust's Transfiguration III, 7), are supported by scenery either bursting with references or minimalist in the extreme. It is interesting to note the many scenic and symbolic elements recurring in all of the performances. Though the significance is usually the same, it occasionally differs. An example of this is the crucifix inscribed in the circle seen both in the *Damnation*, in the scene where Faust ponders suicide but is stopped by the hymn to Easter Holiday (II, 4), and in the *Szenen*, in the scene of the fainting-death of Margaret in the cathedral (I, 3). In both cases it unequivocally refers to death.

Memorable also is the video-projection of the horses' race to the abyss in the *Damnation* (IV, 19) which is reiterated in *Szenen's* Overture as if the director meant to change the result of the pact with the devil. In the *Damnation* in fact Faust is brought to damnation while in the *Szenen* Faust is led to salvation.

In *Szenen* once again we see the cubic crystal structure, characteristic of this whole production of Faust, but it is in reduced proportions and lowered from the top. While in the first work it represents, in its monumentality, the concrete limits of man, in the latter the presence of Baby Jesus is the expression of the presence of the divine in the human existence. The cube, in fact, is hovering over Margaret's head while she is reciting the Mater Dolorosa (I, 2) and over Faust's head in the scene of the transfiguration. (III, 7.)

In all these three performances the symbolism is a recurring element that often concludes with the fusion of the sacred and the profane; examples of this are the continuing osmosis between the figure of Christ and the figure of Mephistopheles in *Faust* (I,2; V,19), and the presence of the wounded Saints Sebastian in the *Damnation* (II, 5): “*All these references should be interpreted from a spiritual and not from a provocative point of view. When man is in search of knowledge, he is on two parallel platforms, one of which will lead him to the sacred, and the other to the secular, both of which belong to the same path, which is the life of man. Along the way, some elements are encountered which go beyond science while others are instead more material. I use concrete and religious iconography because it is the easiest type for man to understand nowadays. I used the image of Saint Sebastian as it is very clear in the mind of the audience. His self-destruction lies in the arrows of his martyrdom, which he could have avoided, thus saving himself. To this end, still with regards to Damnation, I associated the formula of relativity referring to the atomic bomb, to the signature of Faust: when man achieves maximum wisdom he faces self-destruction. There is a key point in all my performances: to make the audience understand what is behind the music and the words of Goethe, which is often much more than they are able to conceive. In Damnation, many images regarded not only a concrete action, but they also alluded to what was happening within the character: maybe the audience experienced this visual exuberance as an excessive bombardment of images but my intent was to explain in more depth, through the latter, what was happening.*”.

As underlined by the Master, the production used Christian iconography, above all in *Faust* and in *Damnation*, in order to stage the main metaphysical themes and reflections but in *Szenen* cross-references to oriental philosophies also appear: the mannequin that represents the Mater Dolorosa (I,2), with the tiara on her head and the thousands of hands that move it using wires, calls to mind the Goddess Kalī; as the Master explains, the presence of a giant rosary would confirm this hypothesis: “*In Szenen I dedicated an entire scene to the symbology of the rose, a Marian attribute of excellence: in fact, a large rosary appears, descending from above, which expresses the meaning of the phrase “those roses, from hands of penitents, saints of love, helped us win and accomplish great things”. The rose should not be seen to represent a flower but a rosary, an element of communication between man and God, not only in the Christian religion but strangely enough, also by the Muslims and Buddhists.*”.

By integrating elements from various cultures, the production probably intended to underline the universality of the expressed concepts.

In the three performances, the direction used conspicuous geometric shapes which, apart from being scenographic elements, have a symbolic value. In *Faust* the cube is used, a symbol of the limits of human intellect, in *Damnation* the circle prevails, symbol of the eternal journey, in *Szenen* the triangle is added to these shapes, in the form of a set square and compass, instruments from God for the creation of heaven and earth and for measuring the rectitude of Man. According to the interpretation of the Director, Faust is not searching for God but he wants to be like God: his sin lies here-in, disclosed, in *Faust* on the set of the first act in a laboratory where he, now an old man, works on the correct combination of human “pieces” to create an artificial man (I,1), in *Damnation* with the famous temptation of the apple (I,I), in *Szenen* with the appropriation of the divine instruments of measurement (II,4/2).

During the course of the three sets, the figure of Mefistofele and the corresponding issues connected to evil become altered: in *Faust* it is, as for Goethe, “part of that strength which, in doing bad, does good”, and is demonstrated by the continuous “osmosis” between the figure of Mefistofele and that of Christ, almost underlining an attraction between the two, as shown by the “Prologue in Heaven”; in *Damnation* he is similar to an evil elf who makes Faust fall asleep in order to transport him to a world of magic and of dreams in which he is the owner of space and time; in *Szenen*, Mefistofele assumes, also physically with a hunched back, the characteristics of the pilgrim that carries the luggage from his long journey on his back: “*In Szene, Mefistofele has a hunchback because he must be deformed, but not in the sense of the Rigoletto. At the end of Faust, he becomes handsome,*

calling to mind the image of Christ, in Szenen however, he undergoes an inverse transformation towards a human being: the hunchback is fake, it is not a physical deformity but it signifies the weight that the pilgrim carries after a very long journey. Visually it appears to be a hunchback while in reality it is the baggage which one carries throughout life.”.

The figure of the woman also changes in this trilogy: in *Faust* the character of Margherita is essential for the love story. She wears a red dress, the color of a passion which sweeps away the two main characters; in *Damnation*, Margherita, who still wears a red dress, plays a marginal but more significant role in the journey of Faust. She wears a wreath of red roses on her head in which a deep symbology is hidden, which shows the rose as a flower suggestive of salvation and an element of opposition between Margherita and the world of Mefistofele; in *Szenen* only a third of the scenes of the play are dedicated to her: only the love of the two youths, the forgiveness asked for before the image of the Mater Dolorosa (I,2), her fainting-death in the Cathedral caused by the voice of the Evil Spirit is mentioned (I,3); in the work of Schumann, she wears a pale blue dress, which brings her symbolically closer to a spiritual love rather than a sensual one. *Szenen* is the only play in which the Eternal feminine is expressed, in which Margherita, in the white clothing of a penitent, guides Fausts’ soul in its ascent (III,7/4): “*If Damnation represents the triumph of the demon, then Szenen is a so-called, “feminist” work, as it seems to indicate that salvation of man can occur only via the eternal feminine. In a much deeper sense, woman represents mother earth, everything, the beginning and the end. One is born from the earth and returns to the earth. In all nations, the woman has always meant birth and rebirth.*”

The production staged the myth of Faust in a crescendo of abstraction found both in the changing of the focus of the theme – from the love story, to the fantastic trip, to the transfiguration of Faust – and in the type of performance – from the work to the legend to the oratory – and in the expressive techniques adopted – from the traditional set to the use of projections (that synthesize the meaning into images) and by the laser technique (that conveys the concept of light) – It seems that the director Hugo de Ana relied on the conciseness of symbols to stage a myth born from a poem defined by the author himself as “immeasurable” because it encloses the sense of the absolute and of the metaphysical, conveyable through a path that can only flow into abstraction.

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