

On this week's edition of the WCPE Opera House, I'm presenting Arrigo Boito's exciting version of the Faust legend, *Mefistofele*. Recently revived at the Metropolitan Opera, it's based on episodes in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's epic 18<sup>th</sup>-century story of an elderly philosopher who sells his soul to the Devil in return for a love affair with a beautiful young woman. *Mefistofele* was premiered at Milan's La Scala Opera on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1868.

Prologue: The angels rejoice in Heaven. Mefistofele (bass **Nicolai Ghiaurov**) mocks Man's pitiful state and wagers the mystical choir that he can tempt the elderly philosopher Faust. A group of penitents prays for forgiveness.

Act I: On Easter Sunday in Frankfurt, while going for a walk, Faust (tenor **Luciano Pavarotti**) and Wagner (tenor **Piero de Palma**) observe a suspicious gray friar who follows them out. Faust returns to his study to contemplate but is interrupted by the scream of the gray friar, who reveals himself as Mefistofele, the spirit of chaos and death, who offers to serve Faust in this world if the philosopher will serve him in the next. Faust agrees.

Act II: Faust walks in the garden with Margherita (soprano **Mirella Freni**), speaking of love, while Mefistofele does the same with Marta (contralto **Nucci Condò**). Faust calls himself "Enrico". He gives Margherita a supposedly harmless sleep potion and persuades her to use it on her mother so that they may spend the night together. Mefistofele takes Faust to the witches' sabbath, where the witches bow down to their master. They offer Mefistofele a glass globe in representation of the world, and he sings of the world he would enslave before smashing it. Faust sees Margherita in fetters and is overcome with sadness.

Act III: Margherita is in prison for having killed her mother and drowned her child. Faust tries to help her escape, but she is raving. In spite of her love for Faust, Margherita realizes who Mefistofele is and renounces both of them. A heavenly chorus announces Margherita's salvation.

Act IV: Mefistofele has transported Faust to Greece in the time of Helen of Troy. A chorus of choretids dances and sings, and Helen (soprano **Montserrat Caballé**) remembers the destruction of Ilium. She is approached by Faust and they sing of their love.

Epilogue: Faust is dying and Mefistofele grants him one last wish: that he may see the angels in Heaven. Clutching a Holy Bible, Faust expires, having at last found what he was seeking. The angels announce Faust's forgiveness.

**Oliviero de Fabritiis** conducts the National Philharmonia Orchestra, the London Opera Chorus, and the Trinity Boys' Choir in this 1984 recording.

From Act I, **Nicolai Ghiaurov** sings Mefistofele's Whistle Aria, "Son lo spirito che nega": <https://youtu.be/-OCOc4nZCjk>

As a bonus, bass **Samuel Ramey** sings devilish arias from Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust* and Gounod's *Faust*.

This Saturday afternoon, March 30<sup>th</sup>, starting at 12:00 p.m. (EST), listen to the Metropolitan Opera's production of Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre*. Soprano **Christine Goerke** plays Brünnhilde, Wotan's willful warrior daughter, who loses her immortality in opera's most famous act of filial defiance. Tenor **Stuart Skelton** and soprano **Eva-Maria Westbroek** play the incestuous twins Siegmund and Sieglinde. **Greer Grimsley** sings Wotan. **Philippe Jordan** conducts.

Next Thursday evening, April 4<sup>th</sup>, please join me at 7:00 p.m. for Antonín Dvořák's *Rusalka*, starring **Renée Fleming** as the water sprite who wants to take on human form after falling in love with a mortal prince. Other principals include **Ben Heppner** (Prince), **Franz Hawlata** (Vodnik), **Eva Urbanová** (Foreign Princess), and **Dolora Zajick** (Jezibaba). **Sir Charles Mackerras** conducts this 1998 Decca recording.

The WCPE Opera House is heard every Thursday evening at 7 o'clock in the Eastern time zone on 89.7 FM in central North Carolina. We're streamed online world-wide at <http://www.theclassicalstation.org>, or you can listen on WCPE's Android or iPhone apps.

*Bob Chapman*

**W. Robert Chapman, Host of the Opera House**