

Berkshire Opera Festival, Great Barrington, MA

**Faust**, Libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré based on Goethe's Faust, Part I.

Music by Charles Gounod

Directed by Jonathan Loy. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

“Anges purs, anges radieux”

Gounod wrote his masterpiece, “Faust,” in 1859, ultimately replacing the spoken dialogue with sung recitative, the form we know it in now. As with so many French operas it is a string of hit tunes held together loosely by an inviting story line that was already familiar to many opera-goers. It is a great work, easily understood, that is very enjoyable. Roughly, elderly Faust desires young Marguerite and makes a deal with the devil for youth so he can pursue her. When she capitulates it is her undoing and she dies in prison while he mourns the loss of his love and his soul. Berkshire Opera Festival is presenting this work with a fine cast of singers, an excellent orchestra, conducted by by co-founder Brian Garman with a simple but effective production. Sung in French the company employs sur-titles in English.



The chorus with Justin Hopkins as Méphistophélès; Photo: Ken Howard

Written in five acts the company uses a single intermission after Act Three which ends with the famous “Jewel Song” in which Marguerite celebrates the mysterious gift of a chest full of fabulous gems. Raquel Gonzalez, on opening night, sang Marguerite’s song with gusto, clarity and great beauty. It was joyful to watch her and listen to this beautiful young woman sing the triumphant song that celebrates the physical strengths of love combined with wealth. Her lyrical tone was matched by her sensitive interpretation of her role.



Duke Kim as old Faust; Photo: Ken Howard



Duke Kim, Raquel Gonzalez as Marguerite;  
Photo: Ken Howard

As her paramour, Faust, Duke Kim brought a sensitive interpretation of the role matched by a sensitive tenor voice that sometimes seemed to disappear into the orchestration. His performance of the role was excellent and if his voice didn't have the strength one expects in a Faust it may be the result of the director's concept of the opera, for other singers in the company occasionally slipped into vocal obscurity at odd moments in the performance. Most specifically, the Méphistophélès of Justin Hopkins, an extremely authoritative role sung by a man with a beautiful bass voice that clearly had intense strength, now and then slipped into a sotto voce style that obscured his character's malevolence and evil intent.

High up in the secondary roles was Chinese-American mezzo-soprano Sun-Ly Pierce who sang the pants role of Siébel, a village boy in love with Marguerite. Her arias and ensembles were definitive audience pleasers as well they should have been, for they were gloriously sung with volume, agility and meaning. Also quite wonderful was baritone Jarrett Porter as Marguerite's brother, the soldier Valentín. Abbeagel Greene had a good time as Marthe, a neighbor who gets temporarily romantically involved with the Devil.

The chorus, guided by chorus master Geoffrey Larson, sang well, moved well and kept the show on track throughout the performance. As with the soloists, they sang their hit tunes to absolute perfection.

The 36 member orchestra played everything perfectly giving Gounod his due under the baton of Brian Garman. If occasionally the tempo felt languid and too similar to what had preceded it, this was clearly an interpretive choice and didn't truly diminish either the composer's intent or the dramatic need of the work.

Any diminishment in the production lay in the work of the director and designers. Faust's lament about age and inability was played in front of the house curtain under minimal lighting which made the scene and the character's emotional distress a bit hard to grasp and very difficult to take in. In fact the lighting throughout the opera was minimal and sometimes disturbing. I do not know if Alex Jainchill's lighting design was well executed or not, but it did threaten to execute the production itself. Stephen Dobay's minimalist set design worked surprisingly well, however. Brooke Stanton's costumes were also very much in keeping with the opera's setting.

Faust is, as always, a singer's holiday and a hit. No one wrote a better musical setting of a great poem than Gounod. BOF's production is a special three hour event that should be on everyone's list, even if you don't like opera. It is the mid-19th century's "Carmen," another great French opera people love.



Justin Hopkins; Photo: Ken Howard



The chorus, Justin Hopkins, Raquel González; Photo: Ken Howard

The show has two more performances: Tuesday August 27 and Friday, August 30. I suggest you wrangle a ticket and see what was popular when your grandparents were children. This is the music they sang at home.

+ 08/24/2024 +

**Faust** plays at G.B.s Mahaiwe Theatre through August 30. Call the box office for tickets.