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## **Gounod's *Faust*:**

### **A Review Essay on Recent CD Releases**

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César Vezzani (*Faust*), Marcel Journet (*Méphistophélès*), Louis Musy (*Valentin*), Mireille Berthon (*Marguerite*), Marthe Coiffier (*Siebel*), Jeanne Montfort (*Marthe*), M. Cozette (*Wagner*), with choruses and orchestra of the Théâtre national de l'Opéra de Paris conducted by Henri Busser. Music Memoria 30186-30187 (2 CDs).

Nicolai Gedda (*Faust*), Boris Christoff (*Méphistophélès*), Ernest Blanc (*Valentin*), Victoria de los Angeles (*Marguerite*), Liliane Berton (*Siebel*), Rita Gorr (*Marthe*), Victor Autran (*Wagner*), with choruses (René Duclos, chorus master) and orchestra of the Théâtre national de l'Opéra de Paris conducted by André Cluytens. EMI Records 7.69984.2-7.69986.2 (U.S.: CDMC-69983) (3 CDs).

Gianni Raimondi (*Faust*), Nicolai Ghiaurov (*Méphistophélès*), Robert Massard (*Valentin*), Mirella Freni (*Marguerite*), Luigi Alva (*Siebel*), Anna di Stasio (*Marthe*), Alfredo Giacomotti (*Wagner*), with chorus (Roberto Benaglia, chorus master) and orchestra of the Teatro alla Scala, Milan conducted by Georges Prêtre. Melodram MEL 37005 (3 CDs).

Plácido Domingo (*Faust*), Nicolai Ghiaurov (*Méphistophélès*), Thomas Allen (*Valentin*), Mirella Freni (*Marguerite*), Michèle Command (*Siebel*), Jocelyne Taillon (*Marthe*), Marc Vento (*Wagner*), with choruses (Jean Laforge, chorus master) and orchestra of the Théâtre national de l'Opéra de Paris conducted by Georges Prêtre. EMI Records 7.47493.2-7.47495.2 (U.S.: CDCC-47493) (3 CDs).

Francisco Araiza (*Faust*), Evgeny Nesterenko (*Méphistophélès*), Andreas Schmidt (*Valentin*), Dame Kiri Te Kanawa (*Marguerite*), Pamela Coburn (*Siebel*), Marjana Lipovsek (*Marthe*), Gilles Cachemaille (*Wagner*), with chorus (Hans-Peter Rauscher, chorus master) and Symphony Orchestra of the Bayerischer Rundfunk conducted by Sir Colin Davis. Philips 420.165.2-420.167.2 (3 CDs).

The recordings of Charles Gounod's *Faust* on CDs, listed here more by recording than release date, are the focus of this essay. Recordings that are unavailable also will be mentioned. In print recordings uniformly present the opera as it appeared in productions mounted in Strasbourg, London, and Paris during Gounod's lifetime. These performances, which present the opera in five acts rather than in an almost equally well

known four act guise, include recitatives in place of the original opéra-comique spoken dialogue, along with Valentin's aria "Avant de quitter ces lieux." The major differences among performances occur within Acts 4 and 5. Traditional practice omitted Act 4's lovely Marguerite-Siebel scene (to which Gounod added Siebel's "Si le bonheur" at the same time he wrote "Avant de quitter ces lieux" for Valentin) until recent recordings, reflecting customary stage practice. The performances under review, conducted by Busser and Cluytens, begin Act 4 with the Church Scene that, in the order of scenes that has become commonly adhered to, follows that frequently omitted scene in the score. Prêtre includes the full Marguerite-Siebel scene in his studio recording (EMI) and a truncation of the same scene (omitting "Si le bonheur") in the live recording (Melodram). Davis includes the scene *in toto*. As for the Walpurgisnacht, the most important difference is the inclusion and placement of the famous ballet music. Of the recordings listed above, Prêtre (his Melodram performance) and Cluytens include the delectably piquant and tuneful dances of the ballet sequence *in situ*. Prêtre's EMI and Davis' recordings relegate the dances to an appendix position at the end of the opera. Busser omits the ballet entirely. The action of the Walpurgisnacht moves along more tautly and dramatically if the dances are not interpolated, but they make a nice effect within the scene as well. Preference for these options is a matter of taste.

Two LP recordings, both presently unavailable but too important to remain unissued on CD, strive for different kinds of authenticity. Richard Bonyngne conducts the most nearly complete *Faust* (1966, London OSA-1433), restoring most cuts and reverting to Gounod's original sequence of Act 4 scenes with a cast, except for Robert Massard's Valentin, more notable for vocal opulence than for French enunciation or style. Franco Corelli is given the title role, with Joan Sutherland's Marguerite, and Nicolai Ghiaurov, in fresher voice than for Prêtre, as Méphistophélès. The Sir Thomas Beecham recording (R.C.A. Victor LCT-6100, reissued from 78 rpm discs of 1945 vintage) omits certain numbers added after the work's 1859 premier, in an attempt to conform more closely to *Faust* as Gounod first penned it. Beecham's cast had a classic balance of vocal allure and genuine French style, although few readers today would recognize the singers.

One in print recording that is superior, in terms of style, singing and musicality to all others in or out of print, must be singled out. Not having heard Busser's 1930 recording for many years, it was an awesome experience to return to it on CD. The cast, which is as impeccable for French style and taste as it is for virtuosity, musicianship, and the splendor of vocalism, has never been equalled. Cèsar Vezzani sings the title role as brilliantly as the best of later tenors (Gedda and Bjoerling). In his possession are a range of coloration along with the means and control to vary his singing from sweetly lyrical to heroically assertive, as the music requires from phrase to phrase and note to note, all with dramatic conviction and seeming naturalness of delivery. Much the same can be said of Louis Musy's Valentin, whose smooth, elegant vocalism and dignified style are as close to ideal as life in the real world can come. The ladies sing with equal artistry. Marthe Coiffier's Siebel (a trouser role) appeals particularly for her light voice's rapid, sweetly penetrating vibrato. Mireille Berthon might be a bit cool of tone and too restrained for modern taste, but she is supremely in command of the part's requirements as Marguerite.

As for Marcel Journet, his Méphistophélès is beyond comparison, the voice more solid and sleekly elegant than even imaginable in comparison to the basses on the recordings listed above. Journet sings the lowest notes with comfort, as richly resonant as in the voice's middle and upper registers, and he is the only Méphisto of those discussed

who is willing and capable of singing trills. Of later basses taking the devil's part, only Ezio Pinza and Cesare Siepi approach Journet's ease and artistry in coping with the demands of the part. Unfortunately, all of the recordings with Pinza (and they even include one, at least in excerpts, under Beecham's direction) or Siepi in the title role are unavailable. The 1950 Columbia studio recording with Siepi (on LP also issued as Philips L3L-1.020 and, later, Odyssey Y3.32103) would seem the most likely to be reissued on CD. One studio recording prone to make the transition, this one with Paul Plishka's bland Méphisto, is the Erato recording (STU-7103), which Alain Lombard leads featuring the fine Faust and Marguerite of Montserrat Caballé and Giacomo Aragall, respectively.

It is perhaps ironic to devote the greatest space to a recording that would be a second choice for most, due to the quality of the sound, which is good for 1930 but now very dated. Busser obtained playing and singing of higher calibre from his Parisian forces than the same opera house could provide for Cluytens and Prêtre years later. The chorus of the 1930 Opéra, especially the men, sing securely with a collective personality and character that are uncanny. But, the sound, while not unpleasant, is simply inadequate for such large-scale episodes as the Walpurgisnacht and church scenes. The most satisfactory modern recordings from this standpoint are those of Georges Prêtre (for EMI) and Sir Colin Davis. Prêtre's EMI *Faust* is the stereo recording to own among studio recordings. Prêtre draws playing and singing of considerable vigour and warmth from his forces. The vocal and instrumental execution is grand indeed. The musical gestures and flow of the performance subordinate detail to a symphonic conception of the score, but to powerful effect, without the crudity or even vulgarity (such as the aggressive tuba rampaging like a rogue soloist through the Soldiers' Chorus) of the La Scala live performance. Davis' rendition is more intimate, with much of the Gallic charm and delicacy of Busser and Beecham. The dances have a spiciness and rhythmic bounce that are endearing, although the heartiness and healthy glow infused by Prêtre also is appealing. Unfortunately, in striving for such intimacy and Gounod's now elusive style, Davis frequently lapses into mere fussiness. Davis' obsession with detail and nuance often causes the music to sag, especially in the Garden Scene which is the very heart of the score. Acts 4 and 5, however, benefit from a change of gear into a more straightforward approach as Davis supplies momentum required in the music. André Cluytens conducts capably, without Prêtre's sweep, Davis' probing freshness, or the stylishness of Busser or Beecham. While acceptable, the Opéra's orchestra and chorus were at a lower ebb in 1958 (not Cluytens' fault) than in 1930 (Busser) or 1979 (Prêtre). Cluytens had led the same forces with most of the same soloists in a 1954 mono studio recording (RCA Victor LM-6400), upon which the Angel-EMI remake improved somewhat.

Despite the transcendent quality of Busser's 1930 cast, none of the other recordings of *Faust* discussed here could be considered less than satisfying. *Faust* is a rugged score, its effectiveness difficult to abort even when exposed to the onslaught of a substandard cast. In the title role, Nicolai Gedda rivals Vezzani for sheer brilliance of tone, taste, diction, style, and the intelligence of his interpretation. Gedda simply lacks the range of color and the ability to lunge into the music's heavier passages with the heft that Vezzani can summon. Plácido Domingo is the better of Prêtre's two Fausts, singing that title role with superior enunciation and more idiomatically than Gianni Raimondi, who is more than adequate in a role well suited for him. Domingo also commands more power in the part's heavier writing than does Raimondi. Francisco Araiza sings just as artistically as Domingo; both have the Mediterranean warmth of tone many listeners appreciate above all else in a tenor, but Domingo's voice is more freely produced with

additional focus and “ring” to fill the music’s phrases.

Nicolai Ghiaurov, rather surprisingly, sings Méphistophélès (on EMI) more interestingly and smoothly than either Boris Christoff or Evgeny Nesterenko. In the Garden Scene, Ghiaurov, like Journet and Siepi before him though less fully, conveys the humor of Méphisto’s dalliance with old Marthe. Christoff has a voice of sheer blackness of timbre and more exciting resonance than either Ghiaurov or Nesterenko, but sings jaggedly in music that requires a mastery of legato phrasing. Yet the very magnitude of Christoff’s tone generates visceral excitement. Surprisingly, Ghiaurov sings with more assurance in his 1979 studio recording than he did for the same conductor in the live performance of 1967 (perpetuated on Melodram) when his voice was in its prime. As noted, Ghiaurov sang the role superbly in Bonyngé’s 1966 Decca-London recording, and rather well in a 1973 very fine live performance of *Faust* under Paul Ethuin’s direction. Once available on LP on the Historical Recording Enterprises label (HRE-345), this recording is worth seeking out for the even more extraordinary contributions of Renata Scottò, in vintage vocal state, as Marguerite, and Alfredo Kraus, at least Gedda’s equal in the title part. As with Prêtre’s 1967 outing, the performing edition used in Tokyo presents much more of Gounod’s music than is usually attempted on stage. Nesterenko resembles Ghiaurov more than he does Christoff, but sings without the power of either or the greater control and finesse of Ghiaurov. All three seem heavy-handed yet lacking in solidity in the lower reaches of the bass range when compared to Journet.

When their roles are performed uncut, the parts of Valentin, especially, and Siebel are more than mere supporting roles. Ernest Blanc (under Cluytens) sings Valentin’s music even more imposingly than Thomas Allen does for Prêtre, although the latter baritone is the suavest Valentin since Musy. Both convey the tragic dimension of the soldier’s character and plight. Andreas Schmidt’s tasteful singing would rank better in these comparisons if his higher range matched the warm loveliness and control that he displays in mid-range. Robert Massard, also the only Frenchman in Bonyngé’s recording, sings more gruffly than with vocal elegance. As for Siebel, Pamela Coburn is the most believable as this lad, singing sweetly and with boyish innocence eager enough to suggest the character’s youth. In 1967, Prêtre opted for a tenor Siebel; Luigi Alva sings the music with enough delicacy and skill for such a decision to work. Neither he nor Liliane Berton, the most charming though inappropriately girlish of Siebels after Marthe Coiffier, has a chance to sing “Si le bonheur” which was cut from the performances in which they (and Coiffier) participate. Michèle Command sings the entire role uncut, but sounds too mature as well as a bit sour of tone and inexact in pitch to be convincing.

Marguerite’s role is arguably the axis around which the opera turns, unlike Goethe’s play upon which the libretto is based. The fact has been overstated, the Germans having gone to the extreme of substituting her name for Faust’s in retitling the opera *Margarethe!* All of the sopranos on these recordings do themselves and Gounod honor. Mirella Freni’s once horrible Italian accent, on display in the Melodram set, mostly disappeared when she repeated the role in the studio for Prêtre on their 1979 recording. She sang the part with even greater freshness and delicacy in 1979 than in 1967. Although Freni is decidedly more the “Latin lover” (but in depicting a Teutonic lass, not necessarily entirely in character) than her chaster rivals, it is Victoria de los Angeles who sings Marguerite most enchantingly, indescribably feminine and alluring. Only Eleanor Steber exceeds her achievement. In addition to the mastery of her vocalism and sensitive portrayal, the individuality and highly personal quality of her voice’s silvery hue adds the decisive element accounting for de los Angeles’ supremacy among the four sopranos heard on these five CD recordings. Dame Kiri Te Kanawa also sings beautifully, but her tone is too soft-

grained to compete with the best Marguerites. She was in better form and singing more consistently on a deleted LP disc of scenes from *Faust*, under Sir Charles Mackerras' enlivening direction, issued in "Kiri Te Kanawa: Portrait of the Artist" (Historical Recording Enterprises HRE-371, 2 discs).

Sound quality is excellent on the stereo releases. EMI's Prêtre set is particularly satisfying. Melodram's mono sound is clear for a live recording, with stage and audience noise at a reasonable level that does not distract unduly. When listening on one CD player, a tracking problem occurred in number 3 of disc 2 of this Melodram set. On the MM-Musica Memoria set, cueing difficulties arose when playing disc 2. In both cases the problems vanished when setting the discs in another player, but let the reader be cautioned. All sets, except the one on the MM-Musica Memoria label, come with libretti. The booklets in the Philips and Prêtre EMI sets include substantial essays in various languages, which justify the effort to read them. 