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## 'Doktor' is devilishly delightful

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Pity poor "Doktor Faust." No matter how many trials the title character of Ferruccio Busoni's 1925 opera endures — and they are many — it's Mephistopheles who always ends up stealing the show.

The new San Francisco Opera production that opened Tuesday night at the War Memorial Opera House is no exception. Receiving its first staging by the company, Busoni's dark, seldom-performed fantasy work made the greatest impact in its depiction of the wily old devil who strikes the bargain for Faust's soul.

Of course, Mephistopheles is an inherently fascinating component in any adaptation of the Faust legend. But Busoni made him particularly three-dimensional. And, as sung by tenor Chris Merritt, the character acquires a vertiginous power over the course of the three-hour, five-minute production (presented with one intermission).

Shuffling onstage in a shapeless coat in his first scene, Merritt's Mephistopheles looks ineffectual, possibly homeless. He carries all his belongings in a large plastic shopping bag. He squints behind thick glasses.

Once he offers his services to Faust, however, Merritt's performance comes frighteningly into focus. Singing with unflagging energy and projecting a keen sense of the malevolence under the veneer, Merritt creates an unforgettable portrait of evil.

There's much to admire throughout this "Doktor Faust," which is a co-production with the Staatsoper Stuttgart. Co-directed by Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito, and conducted by San Francisco Opera music director Donald Runnicles, it's both arrestingly modern and oddly timeless.

It also boasts a superb performance by baritone Rodney Gilfry in the title role. In Busoni's version, Faust is less romantic, and infinitely more complex, than his counterparts in operas such as Gounod's "Faust." He exists to express Busoni's views of life and art; and Gilfry, an outstanding singing actor, makes him as elegant, articulate and tormented as Busoni undoubtedly intended.

The production takes place in an abandoned warehouse. Anna Viebrock's set, evocatively lit by David Finn, is aptly industrial, with rows of square windows and fluorescent lights overhead and dull gray paint peeling from the walls below.

This is Faust's studio in Wittenberg, the place where he lives, works and sleeps. We first see Gilfry sacked out in a cot in the middle of the room, while his assistant, Wagner (the clear-voiced bass Friedemann Rohlig), works through the night on a laptop.

It is here that Faust is visited by Three Students from Krakow (Dennis Petersen, Joshua Bloom and Ricardo Herrera), by a parade of demonic servants (Gregory Stapp, William Pickersgill, Jere Torkelsen, Daniel Harper and Richard Walker, all dressed by Viebrock as various runners, couriers and pizza deliverymen) and by Mephistopheles. Even the subsequent Parma scenes take place in Faust's studio (or in his mind?), as does the searingly brutal tavern scene that marks the beginning of the end.

Throughout, Gilfry sings handsomely and gives the character a magnetic presence. His Faust is no love-struck poet, nor is he particularly heroic. His tragic flaw is his quest for genius.

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Chris Merritt, left, as Mephistopheles makes a deal for the soul of Rodney Gilfry as Faust in San Francisco Opera's "Doctor Faust."

(Gregory Urquiaga/Contra Costa Times)

Still, he's no match for this Mephistopheles. In Merritt, the company has a devil for the ages. The singer, who made his San Francisco Opera debut in 1988 in "Maometto II," has made several return appearances since then (most recently, as the memorable Leper in "Saint Francois d'Assise"). This is his most commanding role to date.

The opera is well-cast throughout, with standouts including soprano Hope Briggs as the Duchess of Parma; tenor Todd Geer as the Lieutenant; and Dvora Djoraev, Virginia Pluth and Sally Mouzon as the Three Voices. Baritone Johannes Martin Kranzle (Gretchen's Brother), Oren Gradus (Master of Ceremonies) and Jay Hunter Morris (Duke of Parma) also made fine contributions.

Busoni, whose compositional gifts were overshadowed by his reputation as a virtuoso pianist during his lifetime, worked on "Doktor Faust" for more than a decade until his death. He never finished it. Instead of the standard ending supplied by his student, Phillip Jarnach, the San Francisco Opera is performing only the music left by the composer. It is enough.

There are long static episodes in the staging — and in the opera itself — yet "Doktor Faust" remains a unique masterwork of the 20th century. Pieced together from numerous musical studies ranging from fragments (lieder and piano pieces) to larger published works, the score's orchestral colors and textures are astonishing, and Runnicles led a magnificent performance in the pit. The devil may have had his way, but it was the conductor who triumphed in the end.