

BUSONI'S FLASHY 'FAUST'- [Joshua Kosman](#)

Sunday, May 30, 2004



The legend of Faust is an evergreen subject, but I suspect it may be even more compelling to creative artists than to the rest of us. Who else, after all, has such intimate experience with the fatal bargain by which something precious is traded away in the search for knowledge and experience?

OK, scientists maybe -- hence composer John Adams' forthcoming opera "Doctor Atomic" about J. Robert Oppenheimer -- but they don't generally put their ideas down on paper or canvas.

But for poets, playwrights, composers and the like, the figure of Faust is a touchstone, conjuring up all the moral implications of everything they do. As a result, they tend to recast him from generation to generation in their own image.

"Every serious reworking of 'Faust' is to some extent autobiographical," wrote music critic Andrew Porter, and nowhere is that truth more apparent than in Ferruccio Busoni's "Doktor Faust," which gets its first San Francisco Opera production this month at the War Memorial Opera House.

The summer installment of the company's 2003-04 season gets under way Saturday with Puccini's unquenchable "La Bohème," followed on June 11 by the company premiere of Janáček's enchanting forest fable "The Cunning Little Vixen."

But the main focus of interest will be Busoni's unfinished magnum opus, which he worked on with increasing intensity from 1916 until his death in 1924.

Faust is not a subject for the faint of heart, and no one could ever accuse Busoni of lacking ambition. The opera he wrote to his own libretto is a grand, capacious grab bag of diverse scenes and theatrical strategies, all channeled through the restless exploratory fervor of the composer's imagination.

The sheer variety of the thing -- in form, genre and dramatic effect --

is what strikes a listener first. The opera opens with a veritable deluge of introductory sections: an orchestral symphonia, a spoken prologue by the poet outlining the premise of the work, two preludes and an intermezzo.

Only then does the opera proper begin, and the flurry of different approaches continues unabated. Busoni was largely inspired by puppet theater, and that forms a central strain in "Doktor Faust."

But there is also room for a dream sequence, military marches, extended choral episodes in both a liturgical and bibulous vein and a lavish, extended ballet, as well as more traditional operatic writing.

The diversity extends right into the final scene, whose libretto survives but which Busoni did not live to compose music for.

His student Philipp Jarnach completed the score in time for the posthumous Dresden premiere in 1925, and in 1985 musicologist Antony Beaumont unveiled a new version based on recently discovered sketches. The San Francisco production will use neither completion, opting instead to simply speak the lines Busoni never set to music.

In any event, Busoni's grab-bag aesthetic is mirrored in the sources he drew on in composing "Doktor Faust." Piano music, orchestra works, songs and choral writings -- all of these and more were adapted and recycled into the pages of the opera. Many of these pieces were written expressly as preliminary sketches, but others began life as free-standing compositions.

Unity, in short, is hardly the guiding principle here, even if Busoni maintained that the opera's harmonic and textural language imparted a sense of cohesiveness to the piece.

But that is only to be expected from this intellectually far-flung and elusive character. Everything about Busoni's life and work is informed by a similar blend of diverse, sometimes disparate elements.

Even his nationality was a hybrid. Born to Italian parents (both of them professional musicians), Busoni spent most of his career in Germany and Austria, and considered himself an heir to the tradition of Bach, Beethoven, Wagner and Liszt. To complete his cosmopolitan resume, he also spent extended periods in Moscow (where he met and married his Swedish wife), New York and Zurich.

For much of his career he was best known as a piano virtuoso of astounding facility and power, with a huge repertoire whose twin centerpieces were the music of Bach and Liszt. Busoni's many piano transcriptions of Bach's organ music remain his most frequently encountered creations.

But he was also a composer of remarkable scope, a quality that shows up most clearly in his mammoth, sprawling Piano Concerto. Nearly an hour long, it calls for an almost superhuman level of virtuosity from the piano soloist (Busoni, naturally, played that role at the 1904 premiere), and it concludes with a choral finale expressly modeled on that of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

For many listeners it is not a piece that is particularly easy to love (not that we have many opportunities to encounter it in the concert hall). But its sweep and ambition are undeniable.

On top of his musical accomplishments, Busoni was also a formidable theorist, writer and all-around intellectual, tracing his ideas about tonality and musical form in a series of influential pamphlets and essays.

In other words, the catchall quality of "Doktor Faust" -- its willingness to pursue any formal and musical means necessary to get to the heart of its subject -- is essentially a reflection of its creator's own outlook.

In that respect, it is in keeping with other treatments of the Faust legend through the centuries, from Berlioz's brilliant, seductive "Damnation of Faust" to Gounod's cheesily bourgeois entertainment to Boito's "Mefistofele," with its blend of high-minded philosophy and Italianate lyricism. Most recently, playwright David Mamet, in his "Dr. Faustus" at the Magic Theatre, grafted his interests in magic, showmanship and Jewish mysticism onto the ancient source material.

Busoni's "Doktor Faust" is no exception. In every scene we see the picture of the composer himself.

E-mail Chronicle Music Critic Joshua Kosman at jkosman@schronicle.com.

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BUSONI'S FLASHY 'FAUST'

Ferruccio Busoni: San Francisco Opera performs the composer's "Doktor Faust" June 15. The summer season opens Saturday with Puccini's "La Bohème," followed June 11 by Janáček's "The Cunning Little Vixen" at the War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. Tickets: \$25-\$195. Call (415) 864-3330 or go to www.sfopera.com.

