

At San Francisco Opera, Updated Setting Obscures Busoni's *Doktor Faust*

By Richard Scheinin; 18 June 2004

Busoni: *Doktor Faust*

Gilfry, Merritt, H. Briggs, J. H. Morris *et al.*

San Francisco Opera Orchestra and Chorus

Runnicles, Wieler/Morabito

15 June 2004 - War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco

One of the joys of attending the San Francisco Opera is the exposure to difficult or rarely performed works.

One of the frustrations is when the directors insist on smudging our window to those works with their interpretive fingerprints.

Such was the case Tuesday night in the company premiere of *Doktor Faust*, a heavy work by Ferruccio Busoni that took 79 years to get to the War Memorial stage. It was probably worth the wait, judging by the mysterious, sometimes captivating music. But the staging made the first-time audience work even harder at a challenging opera.

For what purpose?



It's one matter to set *La Bohème* in the 21st century or interpret *The Flying Dutchman* as one big dream. Sometimes standard works gain from fresh presentations.

But how many people Tuesday night had ever seen the real *Doktor Faust*, which would allow them to appreciate a major departure in scene and setting from Busoni's vision?

Busoni wanted Faust to be a cleric at a university in the Middle Ages. We got a painter in 2004, complete with laptop and cell phone. Busoni called for scenes in a tavern, a chapel, a snow-covered street. We got one set: Faust's harshly lighted, slovenly apartment.

Fortunately, the performances were uniformly good. Rodney Gilfry was suitably tormented as Faust, and his baritone just did survive a long, trying vocal night. Chris Merritt was a sly Mephistopheles and soprano Hope Briggs, who grew up in the Bay Area, earned a loud ovation as the Duchess of Parma.

The orchestra, under Donald Runnicles, made the strange music affecting — which is unusual for a first listen.

Now that it has broken through on both U.S. coasts, it will be interesting to see where *Doktor Faust* fits into the repertory long-term. It's too bad the Bay Area will be left wondering what kind of opera Busoni wanted them to see.

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