

[On Busoni's *Doktor Faust*]

“Meeting Misfortune”

Ferruccio Busoni: *Doktor Faust*

The Metropolitan Opera, Jan.8 to 29

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By Joseph Horowitz

Few operas are as tantalizing as *Doktor Faust*. A work of strange beauty, of curious musical fragrances, it was left unfinished when Ferruccio Busoni, who wrote both words and music, died in 1924. It summarizes a creative life itself incomplete, riddled with paradox and lacunae yet crowned with an elegiac serenity. Its Mephistopheles mirrors Busoni's intellectual fatalism, its Faust his unquenchable idealism. Its combination of earnest existential quest with a Fellini-like addiction to the fantastic and grotesque is, again, a signature duality.

Keying more on the old Faust puppet play than on Goethe's verse drama, avoiding the Faust-Gretchen romance narrated by Goethe, Berlioz, Gounod, and Boito, Busoni moves swiftly through space and time from Faust's study and the summoning of Mephistopheles (a Prelude) to a series of disjunct tableaux. An Intermezzo depicts the slaying of a Soldier by Mephistopheles at Faust's bidding; Faust, we learn, had murdered the Soldier's sister. The first scene of the “Main Play” is set in the ducal court of Parma: Faust, now a famous magician, brazenly seduces the Dutchess by conjuring visions of Solomon and Sheba, Samson and Delilah, and John the Baptist and Salome. In scene two, a raucous Wittenberg tavern, Mephistopheles reports the Duchess' death – and presents the corpse of her child, fathered by Faust. In the last scene, Faust, in a final repentant sorcery, relinquishes his spirit to the dead child. Mephistopheles, entering as a Night Watchman, examines Faust's remains and remarks: “This man, it seems, has met with some misfortune.”

*Doktor Faust* has found a marginal niche in England and Western Europe – but not in the United States. Its current run at the Metropolitan Opera is only its second New York staging; the previous one, by Frank Corsaro at the New York City Opera in 1992, misfired. The Met production, by Peter Mussbach, originated at the Salzburg Festival last summer, but with a different conductor.

Musically, the Met's *Doktor Faust* is strong. Thomas Hampson, as Faust, and Katarina Dalayman, as the Duchess, are potent singing actors. Busoni's Mephistopheles calls for a character tenor with heft – a tall order. Robert Brubaker, at the Met, has a slighter voice than the other principals, but mainly holds his own. The conductor,

replacing James Levine (sidelined with sciatica), is Philippe Auguin, who as music director in Nuremberg led *Doktor Faust* last season. Compared to Kent Nagano, Salzburg's conductor and the conductor of a disappointing recent *Doktor Faust* recording on Erato, Auguin shapes the score more expansively and suggestively – as when the orchestral Sarabande, the opera's indelible centerpiece, snakes upward toward patches of luminescence. Orchestra and chorus are well prepared.

A performance this assured (on Jan. 16; I am told the premiere was shakier) confirms both the magic of *Doktor Faust* and its disappointments. The Parma and Wittenberg scenes are at once bracingly theatrical and wondrously spectral. But the overall trajectory seems not merely episodic (this is conscious), but unsure. And there is the problem of the unfinished ending. Auguin uses the standard completion by Busoni's pupil Philipp Jarnach, which simplifies both Busoni's modal excursions (which resist resolution) and his musical dramaturgy (which resists catharsis). (A more recent completion, by Antony Beaumont, also problematic, may be heard on the Nagano recording.)

Mussbach moves the action well and sharply characterizes the roles. The production has a concept: Busoni's Faust is an actor playing the role of Faust, embarked on a "virtual journey taking place solely inside Faust's head, and not in the outside world." Faust and Mephistopheles, identically attired, are portrayed as two sides of the same complex personality – which is plausible (they show two sides of Busoni). The production's premise underlines the strangeness and unreality of the people, events, and locales (the Wittenberg students are harlequins in whiteface) – which is distracting and superfluous. Anyone with ears can hear this opera's strangeness and unreality.

I hope (but doubt) that the next production of *Doktor Faust* will trust the precise evidence of Busoni's music and musical aesthetics -- of his compositions, his writings, and his recordings. Busoni the pianist (who left 25 minutes of disk-recordings of music by Bach, Chopin, Liszt, Bach-Busoni, and Beethoven-Busoni in 1922) conjures iridescent sonorities yet maintains an incisive clarity of design. He is playful but never frivolous. His dialectical panache invigorates the mind. Mussbach's surreal, subterranean stage pictures (sets by Erich Wonder, costume design by Andrea Schmidt-Futterer, lighting by Konrad Lindenberg) are too heavy, dense, and murky for this composer. Mussbach's grubby Faust, with his trenchcoat and hat, is too weird ("his appearance," Busoni instructs, "should be very startling, but not that of a charlatan"). The production lacks nobility.

I wish the Met had furnished more penetrating essays for its skimpy program book, and that the Met audience were quieter during the Sarabande. Still, one can only be grateful for this overdue Metropolitan Opera debut of an amazing twentieth-century opera, in a performance that makes good on many of Busoni's elusive promises.