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Music History II

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Three Character Pictures of “A Faust Symphony”

One of the key characteristics of music in the Romantic era is the tremendous impact that literature had on compositions during this period. Great works of literature were quite often a source of inspiration for composers. Not only did these works help to fuel creative energy, but frequently served as the actual model for the composition itself. These pieces, called *program music*, were written to convey a particular idea, theme, or story and were descriptive in nature. The motivation behind the music was not purely aesthetic, but was intended to develop the experience of a non-musical subject.

An excellent example of such a work is “*A Faust Symphony*” by Franz Liszt, based on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s drama “*Faust, eine Tragödie*” (Faust, a Tragedy). The symphony attempts to describe the three main characters from the story through music instead of text. The composition is divided into three movements, each representative of an essential character in the *Faust* story.

To even begin to understand the symphony, we must develop an understanding of the original literary work. The poem begins with the Prologue in Heaven, where several archangels are discussing the order and complementary disorder of the universe. It is during this scene that Mephistopheles, a subordinate of the Devil, first appears and proceeds to criticize mankind. The Lord agrees that humans are not perfect, but offers Faust as an example of a model subject. In a manner reminiscent of the biblical story of Job, Goethe’s Mephistopheles sees an opportunity and proposes a bet. He is allowed to tempt Faust with worldly desires in an ongoing test of his character, with the prize being Faust’s soul. Being confident in Faust, and mankind in general, God agrees to this challenge and the story unfolds.

Meanwhile, Faust is in his study complaining of his life's work. He has spent years studying all disciplines, and it has not brought him any great understanding of his place in the universe or any relative satisfaction with life in general. In fact, Faust is so discontent with his situation that he is just about to drink a phial of poison, in hopes of gaining ultimate knowledge in the afterlife, when he is interrupted by the sounds of Easter bells and the singing of angels. These sounds give Faust a sense of renewed hope, and he suddenly rejects the option of suicide.



In the next scene, Faust is in the countryside enjoying a beautiful Easter day, and a stray dog follows him back to his study. Faust realizes that this is not an ordinary dog, partly because he "...lays welts...Of fire behind him in his wake" (ll. 1154-1155), and conjures the spirit that dwells within the canine. Of course it turns out to be none other than Mephistopheles.



After some conversation he admits, "...I have come here to dispel...Your moods..." (ll. 1534-1535) referring to Faust's recent state of despondency. Mephistopheles further seduces Faust by saying "If it suits you, to the grave,...I am your servant and your slave." (ll. 1647-1648) Faust, being far from a fool, replies by asking what is expected in return, to which

Mephistopheles answers:

I'll bind myself to be your servant *here*
And at your beck and call wait tirelessly,
If when there in the *yonder* we appear
You will perform the same for me. (ll. 1656-1659)

Faust expresses some brief skepticism of Mephistopheles' abilities, but then agrees:

If ever I lie down upon a bed of ease,
Then let that be my final end!
If you can cozen me with lies
Into a self-complacency,
Or can beguile with pleasures you devise,
Let that day be the last for me!
This bet I offer! (Faust lines 1692-1697)

So concludes the conception of their agreement, and they then begin their journey together.

Mephistopheles first takes Faust to Auerbach's Tavern, attempting to end his period of servitude quickly by simply getting Faust drunk with the locals. To Mephistopheles' dismay, this does not happen. Faust is much too refined to be appeased by an open bar and a gang of merry men. Mephistopheles' next attempt is to grant Faust the company of a young woman. In an effort to facilitate this, they first visit a witch and employ her services to change Faust back into a young man again. While they are at the witch's house, Faust peers into a mirror and sees the image of a beautiful woman and becomes infatuated with the figure.

In the next scene, they are walking down the street when the feelings Faust experienced for the image in the mirror are manifest as they pass by Margaret (Gretchen). Faust immediately takes notice of her and offers to escort her. When she promptly denies him and continues about her business, he turns to Mephistopheles and demands that he help Faust in his pursuit of her. Mephistopheles arranges a series of meetings, which allows Faust to successfully court and seduce Gretchen. This comes at a price, however. During the course of their involvement together, Gretchen's mother, brother, and child (by Faust) are all killed.

Her mother passes away in her sleep because she has been dosed with a "sleeping" potion, given by Faust (l. 3511) to Gretchen, to ensure that she sleeps much deeper than normal so that Gretchen and Faust may enjoy each other's 'company' without waking her mother. This potion proves to be too strong, and Gretchen's mother dies. Gretchen's brother, Valentine, is a soldier that has returned home only to hear dirty rumors of his sister. He seeks out her seducer, finding Faust and Mephistopheles.

Valentine is ready to attack his sister's lover, when Mephistopheles causes Valentine's hand to go limp, allowing Faust to deliver the fatal thrust with his "feather duster". Gretchen, abandoned by Faust, tormented with guilt about the deaths of her mother and brother, and driven by the fear of public shame and humiliation, is overwhelmed by grief inspired madness. In desperation, she drowns her own infant, and consequently is imprisoned and sentenced to death by decapitation for her actions.

Faust, not knowing of Gretchen's pregnancy or subsequent plight, has fled the scene to avoid the repercussions of Valentine's death. He and Mephistopheles have escaped to Blocksberg, the highest



peak of the Harz Mountains, to enjoy the celebrations of Walpurgis-Night (May Eve) when it is said that witches and evil spirits gather to praise the Devil. They partake in flirtatious dancing with witches and Faust sees an image of Gretchen in the distance with a thin line of blood about her neck, reminding him of his guilt and longing for her at the same time.

In the final scene, Faust goes to the dungeon in an attempt to save Gretchen from her imminent death only to find her reaching the state of insanity. She is quite unresponsive to Faust's pleas for her to leave with him immediately. Mephisto's intrusion near the conclusion puts an end to Faust's hope, even though Gretchen has already refused his offer of freedom. She recognizes the need to repent for her sins, and she prays to God for justice and mercy. For these reasons, and because she knows the evil nature of Faust's companion, she stays to be executed. In making this choice, she saves herself – we hear the voice of redemption. As Mephistopheles says, "She is condemned," a voice from above calls

out “Is saved!” (ll. 4611-12) Mephisto calls for Faust to leave, and the final words of Part I are from Gretchen as she calls out “Henry! Henry” (l. 4614).

Hector Berlioz initially introduced Goethe’s *Faust* to Liszt on the night before the opening of Berlioz’s famous “*Symphonie fantastique*” on December 5, 1830 in Paris (Watson, 27). Although Liszt was already quite eager to compose a work based on *Faust*, Berlioz provided further encouragement by sharing thoughts on his own composition, *Damnation de Faust*, which he was in the midst of composing in the mid-1840’s (Taylor, 142). (This piece focuses on Faust’s descent into hell, which comes from the original *Faust* legend. It differs from Goethe’s version in that, Goethe allows Faust to win his bet with Mephistopheles and avoid Hell.) Liszt dedicated the work to Berlioz for his continued support as a close friend and fellow composer (Taylor, 143).

Due to Liszt’s demanding concert career, he was unable to fully dedicate himself to this composition for several decades, but in August of 1854 he managed to complete the entire score in only two months. Three years later, Liszt added the final Coda, a choral presentation of the Chorus Mysticus, the closing text of Part II of *Faust*. It wasn’t until then that he conducted the first public performance. This took place in September of 1857 at the Weimar Hoftheater to welcome the installments of the statue of Wieland, the foundation stone to a memorial to Grand Duke Karl August, as well as the memorial to Goethe and Schiller (Taylor, 142-3).



The first movement, representing Faust, is one of varied emotions to reflect Faust’s inner turmoils: his discontent with his lifelong pursuit of knowledge, his spiritual conflicts, and his simultaneous longing for Gretchen and guilt for the pain and suffering he causes her. In the scene entitled OUTSIDE THE CITY GATE, the spiritual conflict residing within Faust is addressed. Faust confides in his assistant, Wagner, his feelings of the duality of his spirit:

Two souls abide, alas, within my breast,
And each one seeks for riddance from the other.

The one clings with a dogged love and lust
With the clutching parts unto this present world,
The other surges fiercely from the dust
Unto sublime ancestral fields. (ll. 1112-17)

So throughout the story, Faust experiences a wide array of characteristics and emotions. To express this, Liszt includes five major themes within this first movement, each representing a critical aspect of his character (see attached) as explained in Liszt, by Derek Watson:

(F.a) is famous for embracing a 12-note row (formed by a descending sequence of four augmented triads): commentators have associated it with the mystical aspects of Faust's character, just as (F.b1) may be seen as Faust's emotions and longings, (F.b2) as Faust the lover, (F.c) his ceaseless striving and (F.e) his heroism and his words "Im Anfang war der Tat" (In the beginning was the deed). The yearning figure (F.d) plays an important part in the second movement." (Watson, 275)

In the second movement (Gretchen), each of these five themes return, except the 'mystical' (F.a) theme. Also within this movement, two new themes are introduced to represent Gretchen (Searle, 79). The main 'Gretchen' theme (G.a) is introduced in measure 15 with the oboe, and variation of this theme is repeated in the finale by the tenor soloist (Mode, 19). The second 'Gretchen' theme (G.b) is the only one to represent an actual event within the work. It symbolizes the scene where Gretchen is in the Garden with Faust as she plucks the petals from a flower while murmuring "He loves me – He loves me not" (l. 3182), eventually reaching the last petal – "He loves me!" This movement is in the usual ternary (ABA) form with the two 'Gretchen' themes dominating both A sections, and the middle B sections and coda built around the four mentioned Faust themes. This intermingling is most likely meant to represent the union of the two lovers (Searle, 79) and is perhaps why Liszt chose to leave out the (F.a) theme that represents the 'mystic seeker' within Faust.

The finale, Mephistopheles, theme is built almost entirely around variations of the previous Faust themes. Since Mephisto, being "the spirit of negation, can only destroy, not create" (Searle, 79), his movement must borrow and alter or 'destroy' the themes 'created' by Faust. This is consistent with

Goethe's telling of the legend in that throughout, Mephisto continues to work largely through the wants and actions of Faust, rarely acting as an independent character. There is one new theme introduced, "the 'pride' motive from the *Malediction* concerto" (Searle, 79) (see attached) and the 'Gretchen' (G.a) theme appears briefly and unchanged to symbolize Gretchen's rejection of Faust's sinister companion. In the scene entitled MARTH'S GARDEN, Gretchen makes her feelings of Mephisto clearly known with such profound statements like "The person whom you have with you, ...In my profoundest being I abhor" (ll.3472-3) and "His presence roils my blood, yet for my part,...People otherwise win my heart;" (ll. 3477-8).

The entire composition originally concluded with the disappearance of Mephistopheles, a brief return of the 'Gretchen' (G.a) theme and the 'heroic' (F.e) Faust theme, but as mentioned earlier, Liszt later added the choral presentation of the Chorus Mysticus, the final lines of Goethe's *Faust* (Searle, 80).

Bayard Quincy Morgan provides us with a concise translation:

1) All earthly happenings are but visible manifestations of divine ideas. 2) Human achievement, too fallible to justify a man's admittance to heaven on his merits, is nevertheless declared worthy by the grace of God. 3) The transition from earthly to heavenly existence, which cannot be described (i.e., visualized), is accomplished (made a fact) by the individual will. 4) It is divine love – symbolized by the ideal woman as embodied in the Virgin Mary – which forgives and redeems sinners and draws them up into Heaven. (qtd. in Mode, 21)

This few lines encompass the underlying theme of the whole story. Not just that of *Faust*, but to some extent, that of mankind as well. Faust initially attempts to reach spiritual illumination through his studies, but as this cannot be "described (i.e., visualized)", he eventually finds redemption through his "individual will". Although his actions have proved to be disastrous, his intentions have remained true, thus allowing him to avoid losing his bet with Mephisto.

The legend of *Faust* is one that has had a tremendous impact on spirituality and humanity as well as literature. It exists in many different variations, but the main ideas remain the same: man's quest for knowledge and understanding the fate of our souls. The characters in Goethe's *Faust* can be interpreted to represent certain archetypal ideas and figures in history that have always been under debate. That is

why conveying these sentiments through music is such a tremendous task. Fran Liszt not only manages to complete this challenge, but does so quite convincingly and with seeming ease. Throughout the story and composition, there is a recurring sense of conflict and duality apparent between the earthly and heavenly realms, man and his elements, and between man and himself. Ronald Taylor does a wonderful job of explaining Liszt's ability to express this through this composition:

Liszt immerses us in an intense and total experience of what his chosen subject means to him, an experience compounded of the sensuous and the intellectual, the situational and the visionary, the expressed and the implied, the real and the ideal. And although the form that he gives to his experience is a musical form, there lie behind the music, thoughts, emotions, even judgments, proper to the other areas of his reflective and creative personality, which cannot be dissociated either from the musical utterance itself or from our understanding of it. (Taylor, 53)

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