

Synchronized Chaos

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Performance Review: Opera San José's Production of "Faust"

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[Reviewed by Kelly Munoz]

On South First Street in San Jose, California, there is a building that looks like most others. It has a large sign that says, "California Theatre." However, as you walk into this unassuming building, you feel as if you are transported to another era. Lush beautiful carpeting through the entire lobby, with large ornate light fixtures; red and gold surround you. Slowly you walk toward the theatre itself and notice a beautiful melody encompassing the front lobby. A wonderful musician plays for your pleasure. While you wander along the passage and down the stairs you can feel a reverence from the theatre itself; you cannot help but expect a wonderful experience. As you head into the seating area you are assisted by staff with warm smiles and once you find your seat, you meet your welcoming fellow patrons. Suddenly, you feel as if you are a part of the theatre.

Looking up you see more beautiful light fixtures, a beautiful balcony, and just a breathtaking feeling of being back in time. The lights dim and the conductor immediately takes control of the orchestra. Slowly, the music begins to carry you away further, the curtains rise, and there is Faust. As the first few words are spoken, you see a screen above the stage; and there you see the English translation, clean, clear, and right on cue with the actors. The next thing you notice you are swept away by this well-crafted, well-organized, and extremely well presented story.

Faust is the story of a scholar who has spent his life searching for an elixir to give him eternal youth; but, to no avail. Faust summons Mephistopheles, also known as the devil, and in a fit of frustration and anger makes Mephistopheles a cursed deal. Faust will receive eternal youth while on earth, with the devil as his servant, in return Faust agrees to give up his soul to Mephistopheles and promises to be his servant in the afterlife. Once youthful again, Faust finds himself in love with a chaste and righteous young woman, Marguerite. Marguerite tries to refuse Faust, but finds herself succumbing to his advances. Some months later, we rejoin our characters and Marguerite is with child, Faust's child, but he is gone, unaware that Marguerite carries his child. When Faust returns to win back Marguerite he is forced to duel her brother, Valentin, and, with the help of Mephistopheles, kills him. Marguerite, now unsure of what to do and having lost her sanity, kills their child and is sentenced to death. Faust requires Mephistopheles to assist him in freeing Marguerite, but as they flee she refuses to leave the city. Just as Mephistopheles is condemning their souls to himself eternally, a heavenly host appears and takes them under their protection, banishing Mephistopheles.

[Opera San Jose](#) does an amazing job of making each performance feel like a special experience that is apart from every day life, but still available to everyone. This performance was one of the most beautiful I have had the pleasure of seeing. David Rohrbaugh, conductor and Opera San Jose's founding music director, had his orchestra completely tuned in to him. While the score is beautiful itself; the flawlessness with which it was carried out made it even more enveloping. The performance itself, the actors, the props, the sets, the lighting, the technical work, were all absolutely beautiful. All of these pieces were orchestrated by stage director Brad Dalton. He arranged such a beautiful use of minimalism. All of the backgrounds were used as actual set pieces or props in one way or another, and the combination of lighting with these backgrounds was intriguing. Each set piece or prop had a purpose, but there were so few it was almost surprising. The benefit to this was your attention was directed to exactly where it needed to be at the time. You almost didn't notice set changes, and the lighting cues were so drastic and yet so seamless. It was a beautiful example of using everything at your fingertips to tell the story.

The cast was phenomenal. It was apparent that each of them were fully part of their characters. Ranging from Branch Fields' mischievous and sneaky portrayal of Mephistopheles, to the full and flowing singing of Alexander Boyer as Faust and Krassen Karagiozov as Valentin. However, the ladies were not to be outdone, Jasmina Halimic's flawless and inspiring portrayal of Marguerite, and the fun and smooth work of Tori Grayum as Marthe, Marguerite's friend, were wonderful. The entire cast was very strong and fit together very well.

If you have been worrying that you cannot see an opera because you do not know other languages, worry no more. Opera San Jose has found a way around this dilemma. They have a screen above the stage that runs an English translation through the whole performance. It even notes that different people are speaking at the same time. It seems like Opera San Jose has a great way to open up the opera to everyone. If you get a chance to see this, or another opera, by Opera San Jose, who are in their 28th season now, I recommend it. This performance of Faust will ensure my return to [Opera San Jose](#).

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