

OPERA REVIEW: Go for the melodies and fine voices but ignore plot of "Faust," Opera San Jose's season closer

by Mort Levine *The Milpitas Post*

Posted:

MercuryNews.com

Back in 1859 when Charles Gounod premiered his "Faust," based only on a sliver of the vastly more complex and philosophical work by Goethe, he was one of at least 20 composers who set the saga as an opera. But his was destined to be, by far, the most successful. It has had more than 3,000 performances worldwide and is still going strong.

The obvious reason is the succession of catchy tunes and gorgeous vocalizations in which every young singer can take great pleasure, as can the audience. As a unified and compelling dramatic narrative story, it comes up short.

Opera San Jose wraps up its 28th season with "Faust" with performances ending May 6 at the California Theatre. The opening weekend proved again the durability of this episodic morality tale in which an elderly scholar who contemplates suicide instead makes a pact with the devil's henchman Mephistopheles. In exchange for a youthful fling with a beautiful virgin, he agrees to give up his soul to Satan.

Usually Faust goes down to burn in hell in a big puff of smoke. But director Brad Dalton couldn't bring that kind of sad ending to San Jose. So instead the now youthful Faust strides off to heaven with the maiden, Marguerite, whom he has seduced and begotten with child. The lovely lady kills the child, goes to jail, loses her mind but Faust pays no price whatsoever for the accumulation of evil deeds.

Longtime opera buffs who were bothered by the implausibly happy ending could take solace in the excellent singing and lilting melodies.

The alternate cast which we heard brought together some of Opera San Jose's most experienced performers. The title role was sung capably by tenor Alexander Boyer. Bass baritone Branch Fields, a guest artist, is a suave and shrewd Mephistopheles. Marguerite was portrayed by Jasmina Halimic, the Bosnian soprano who made outstanding vocal flights throughout. The gallant Valentin was sung by Bulgarian baritone Krassen Karagiozov. The pants role of Siebel, friend to Marguerite and Valentin, was sung by Cathleen Candia, a guest artist.

There were several cuts that kept "Faust" from exceeding three hours. Given those chops, and the already creaky libretto, it is no wonder that the performers had difficulty capturing the inherent drama. There seemed to be few moments where any dramatic tension gripped the audience even though Gounod's music carried the storyline.

Conductor David Rohrbaugh and the Opera San Jose orchestra produced marvelous sounds especially in the long opening overture. His sensitivity to the singers was once again a key to the seamless flow of the opera.

Especially noteworthy in this production is the outstanding chorus work under the leadership of Andrew Whitfield.

Sets for this production were done by Stephen Kemp. They were on the minimalist side using painted flat panels to suggest each scene.

More than a dozen well-known arias and ensemble pieces are sprinkled throughout. They range from the lustrous "Jewel Song" by Marguerite to the rollicking "Soldier's chorus," which Gounod dropped in from his earlier little known opera about Ivan, the Terrible.

Performances continue with this cast April 29 and May 4. The other cast whose lead singers are Silas Elash (Mephistopheles), Michael Dailey (Faust) Jouvanca Jean-Baptiste (Marguerite) and Evan Brummel (Valentin) will run April 28, May 1 and May 6.

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Mort Levine is co-founder and publisher emeritus of Milpitas Post Newspapers.

