



Mephistopheles (Branch Fields) appears to the old scholar (Alexander Boyer as Faust) in Opera San José's production of Gounod's *Faust*.
Photo by P. Kirk.

Great Singing Lifts *Faust* at Opera San Jose

Monday, April 23, 2012

It is a well-known story. Faust, an aging scholar, frustrated by his waning powers, his failure to unlock the secrets of the universe and his impossible yearning for youth and love fixes on suicide. Satan's minion Méphistophélès tempts him to trade an eternity in hell for an unspecified time of youthful beauty and pleasure. With the demon's help Faust seduces the lovely Marguerite whom he abandons pregnant and forlorn only to return to her just before she is to hang for infanticide. She dies and is escorted to

heaven by angels and he either repents and joins her or burns in eternal damnation, depending on which of the myriad versions is before one.

At the end of Opera San Jose's at times confusing production of Charles Gounod's "Faust," Méphistophélès and his minions throttle the lovers who then rise and ascend toward heaven led by the extra-textual spirit of Marguerite's dead sister (played by the lovely preteen supernumerary **Jessiga Sigurdardottir**) as the demon gnashes his teeth. In the translation of the libretto by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré that I consulted, Faust gets dragged down hell.

The libretto as written is frankly confusing and some of this production's directorial flourishes add to the fog. For example, the first act starts out well, but sows the seeds of puzzlement when Méphistophélès tempts Faust with a vision of the beautiful Marguerite walking in a funeral procession ahead of a small coffin. A little later we learn from Marguerite's brother that their mother has died. But the coffin was child sized. So who was in that coffin? In the second act Marguerite reveals to the enamored Faust that in addition to her mother's death her young sister has also died. "An even greater sorrow," she tells Faust. Aha! Now we know who that ghostly waif was that started the second act in front of the curtain.





Alexander Boyer as Faust and Jasmina Halimic as Marguerite in Opera San José's production of Gounod's Faust.
Photo by P. Kirk.

Great singing by a fine cast (Cast One at the matinee I attended) and a striking physical production save the show. Tenor **Alexander Boyer** as Faust sings better than I have ever heard him, hooking the high Cs with thrilling confidence and purity. **Jasmina Halimic's** marvelous power and control bring an aching poignancy to her Marguerite. With a rich, lush basso voice, **Branch Fields'** Méphistophélès is superb. With his movie star charisma and commanding presence, he brings a delicious, lively humor to the role. As Marguerite's brother Valentin, splendid baritone **Krassen Karagiozov** adds another sterling role to his OSJ resumé. The opera chorus's wonderful blend of voices gets a good workout in "Faust" singing the score with aplomb.

In costumes designed by **Earl Staley** and **Toni Businger**, the characters looked as if they had stepped out of the Breugel-esque painted drops of the marvelous minimalist set designed by **Steven C. Kemp**, which was transparently lit by **David Lee Cuthbert**, except for moments of demonic high style. The production nicely complemented the self-conscious theatricality of **Brad Dalton's** direction, which to his credit nicely blew some of the dust from the creaky libretto.

As always, the opera orchestra under the baton of **David Rohrbaugh** played the lush score flawlessly.

"Faust" runs through May 6 at The California Theatre on First Street in Downtown San Jose.