

Cleveland Orchestra — Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*: a preview and chat with Sir Willard White

by Daniel Hathaway



The legend of Dr. Faust — the world-weary scholar who makes a deal with the Devil to gain superhuman knowledge and powers — has fascinated writers since Christopher Marlowe made the story into a famous play in 1604. The tale became a rich source of inspiration to German composers as well, after Johann Wolfgang von Goethe published the first part of his own enormous play, *Faust*, in 1808. Those composers included Liszt and Mahler, who based symphonic movements on Goethe's final chorus, and Robert Schumann,

who created his full-length oratorio *Scenes from Goethe's 'Faust'* over a period of years.

This weekend, The Cleveland Orchestra will present three performances of Hector Berlioz's imaginative version of the tale in the form of the oratorio (or is it an opera?) *La Damnation de Faust*. The Orchestra and the Cleveland Orchestra Chorus, conducted by Charles Dutoit, will be joined by mezzo-soprano Ruxandra Dunose as Marguerite, tenor Paul Groves as Faust, bass Sir Willard White as Mephistopheles (the Devil) and baritone Christopher Feigum as Brander and other characters. Performances will take place in Severance Hall on Thursday, May 7 at 7:30 pm, Saturday, May 9 at 8:00 pm, and Sunday, May 10 at 3:00 pm.

"I think Mephistopheles resides in every one of us," Sir Willard said in a telephone conversation from his Cleveland hotel on Monday. "He presents the human question of whether we take responsibility for our actions or blame the other guy. It's fun to play the Devil," he said, chuckling, "or playing the guy who *pretends* he's not the Devil — or

realizes that he's not the Devil. We have the power to influence another person, but we can't force another person to do something. In the end — or at the beginning — we really do have a choice.”

White, who grew up in Jamaica and studied in New York before launching an international opera and concert career, eventually became a British subject and was knighted by the Queen in 2004. After his appearances in Cleveland, he'll travel to Chicago to sing Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Chicago Symphony, to the Bath Festival in England for highlights from *Porgy and Bess* with the Bath Philharmonia, to the Aix-en-Provence Festival for performances of Tchaikovsky's *Iolanta*, and onto Rome for Kurt Weill's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. That's an amazing buffet of music in only a few months, I said. “A richness that I'm privileged to still partake in,” White replied.

Sir Willard made his debut with The Cleveland Orchestra in 1975 in a landmark recording of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* under Lorin Maazel. He returned twenty-five years later, in January of 2000, to sing Mephistopheles in *La Damnation de Faust* under Christoph von Dohnányi in performances that featured tenor Paul Groves as Faust (Groves will reprise that role this weekend). More recently, he joined Groves in a staged production of *La Damnation de Faust* at the 1999 Salzburg Festival and appeared in a concert version of the piece with Dutoit and Donose at the Verbier Festival in 2014.

Berlioz, who first conceived of the work after reading Goethe in translation in 1828, couldn't decide himself whether or not *La Damnation de Faust* was an opera. Its scenic locations stretch from the fields of Hungary to the gates of Hell, making the piece a director's nightmare. After the composer saw it in a stage version, he finally subtitled it a “legend dramatique.”

La Damnation de Faust is most frequently encountered as a concert work, though a famous production by Robert Lepage was mounted at The Metropolitan Opera in 2009 with interactive computer technology that anticipated Lepage's controversial “Ring” Cycle.

Sir Willard has performed the work in both formats. “The journey is still the same,” he said. “No matter how you try to twist it, it's about who's calling the shots. It's fun to do it as opera and fun to do it in concert — which is really opera in recital. Without costume changes and the other physical aspects of a stage production, you have to use more of your imagination. But it's no less difficult to perform just because you have the score in front of you.”

In whatever format you encounter the Berlioz, and through whatever composer's music you encounter the tale of Faust, White believes the experience will be different.

“Berlioz’s story is different from the German or the Gounod character. If each one of us had the opportunity to write the story, our versions of Mephisto would all be different, but still aiming in the same direction: blaming the other guy for creating misery.”

A Brief Tour through Hector Berlioz’s *La Damnation de Faust*

Berlioz has created rich opportunities for the chorus in his Dramatic Legend. In the course of the piece, the singers portray peasants, soldiers, students, and souls in hell. And being Berlioz, the composer has let his imagination run wild in several places.

One instance is at the beginning of the first act. Berlioz opens his scenario in Hungary — for no better reason than to include a famous Hungarian military march that would win an enthusiastic response from the audience early on. The scene finds the aging Faust despondent over the happiness of peasants rejoicing in the arrival of spring, as well as over the enthusiasm of soldiers for the glory of battle.

[Hear](#) the chorus of peasants as sung by the Edinburgh Festival Chorus, conducted by John Eliot Gardiner with the Lyon Opera Orchestra.

Chorus

The shepherds leave their flocks;
They deck themselves out for the holiday;
Flowers of the fields and ribbons are their ornament;
Under the lime-trees, there they all are,
Dancing, leaping like madmen.
Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Landerida!
Follow then the dance.
Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Landerida!

Faust

What are these cries? What is this distant noise?

Chorus

Tra la la la la la! Ha ha!

Faust

These are villagers, at sunrise,
Who dance, singing, on the green grass.
Of their pleasures I am jealous in my misery.

Chorus

They pass by like a flash of lightning,
And their dresses flew in the air;
But soon they are less agile;
A blush came to their cheeks;
And one after the other in the round,
Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Landerida!
All fell in turn.
Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Landerida!
Do not touch me so!
Peace! My wife is not here!
Let us seize the occasion!
He led her away suddenly,
And yet the dance went on.
Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Landerida!
The music and the dance.
Tra la la la la! Ha ha!

In Act II, Mephistopheles arrives just as Easter church bells and a hymn break out, reminding Faust of his youthful faith. Mephistopheles promises to whisk Faust away on a journey that will restore his youth and fulfill all his desires.

Watch a [video](#) of Sir Willard White as Mephistopheles and Paul Grove as Faust in the duet, *Ô pure émotion!* with Sylvain Cambreling conducting the Staatskapelle Berlin, in a staged production at the Salzburg Festival in 1999.

Mephistopheles

(appearing suddenly)

O pure emotion!
Child of the holy church!
I admire you, doctor!
The pious peals
Of these silver bells
Have charmed
Your troubled ears.

Faust

Who are you, whose burning look
Penetrates like the flash of a dagger,
And who, like flame,
Burns and devours the soul?

Mephistopheles

Truly for a doctor that is a frivolous question.
I am the Spirit of Life, and it is I that console.
I will give you everything, happiness, pleasure,
All that the most ardent desire can dream of.

Faust

Very well, pour demon, show me your wonders.

Mephistopheles

Indeed! I shall enchant your eyes and your ears.
Instead of shutting yourself away, sad as the worm
That gnaws your books,
Come, follow me to a new place.

Faust

I agree.

Mephistopheles

Let us go then to learn about life.
And leave the rubbish of philosophy.
(They go.)

The first stop is Auerbach's Tavern, where some boisterous student songs accompany the clinking of beer steins.

Hear Brander's [song](#) about a love-sick rat who ends up being poisoned and the sacrilegious requiem Mephistopheles proposes in the rodent's honor. The men of the Edinburgh Festival Chorus are conducted by John Eliot Gardiner with the Lyon Opera Orchestra.

Brander

A certain rat, in a kitchen
Living, like a true friar,
Did so well that his appearance
Would have made fat Luther envy him.
But one fine day the poor devil,
poisoned, jumped out
As sad, as wretched
As if it had been on heat.

Drinkers

As if it had been on heat.

Brander

It ran backwards and forwards;
It scratched, sniffed, bit,
Ran through the whole house;
Anger added to its troubles
Until at the sight of the frenzy
That drained all its efforts,
Evil jokers could have said:
This rat is really on heat.

Drinkers

This rat is really on heat.

Brander

In the stove the poor animal
Thought it could hide;
But it was wrong, and worse,
In the end it was roasted,
The servant, wicked girl,
Laughed then at its misfortune.
Ah!, she said, how it roasts!
It really is on heat.

Drinkers

It really is on heat.
May it rest in peace. Amen.

Brander

A fugue for the Amen. A fugue, a chorale!
Let us improvise a masterpiece!

Mephistopheles

(aside to Faust)

Listen to this! We shall see, doctor,
Brutality in its very essence.

Fugue on the Theme of Brander's Song

Brander and Drinkers

Amen, amen, amen...

Faust bristles at the vulgarity of the tavern, so Mephistopheles takes him to a meadow on the Elbe River to show him the vision of Marguerite in a dream. Faust falls in love and marches off with Mephistopheles (and a group of students and soldiers) to her house. In Act III, Mephistopheles puts Marguerite under a spell. She falls in love with Faust, but just before they can celebrate their mutual ardor, Marguerite's mother intervenes, warned by neighbors.

By the top of Act IV, Faust has managed to seduce and abandon Marguerite, who awaits his return in vain with the song *D'amour l'ardent flame*, sung in this [video](#) by Ruxandra Donose in a concert version under the baton of Charles Dutoit at the 2014 Verbier Festival.

Marguerite

Love's burning flame
Consumes my life.
Ah, my soul's peace
Has fled for ever.
His departure, his absence
Are death to me,
And far from his presence
All seems to me in mourning.
Now my poor head
Is soon in turmoil,
My feeble heart stops,
Then at once freezes over.
His gait that I admire,
His carriage so graceful,
His mouth sweetly smiling,
The charm of his eyes,
His enchanting voice
With which he knows how to set me afire,
The caress of his hand,
Alas! and his kiss,
The flame of love
Consume my life.
Ah, my soul's peace
Has fled for ever.
I am at my window
Or outside all day -
To see him appear,
Or hasten his return.
My heart beats and throbs faster

When it senses his coming,
O that through my tenderness
I might bring him back!
O burning caresses!
How I should wish one day
To see my soul sigh
In his loving kisses!

The plot thickens: Marguerite has killed her mother with an overdose of a sleeping potion and is due to be hanged at dawn. Mephistopheles proposes a deal that Faust accepts: Marguerite's life in exchange for Faust's soul. The two ride out on black horses, but their destination is not Marguerite's prison but Hell itself. All of Berlioz's vivid imagination is brought to bear on the [orchestral music](#) during the ride to hell:

Spoiler alert: unlike the final episode in Goethe's play when Faust is redeemed (the playwright saves his Easter bells for the last scene), in Berlioz's work the protagonist is doomed to the unspeakable horrors of the underworld, while Marguerite is saved.

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