CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

The Design and Technical Direction

of

FAUST

An abstract submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Drama

by

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ABSTRACT

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Faust, an opera in five acts (more commonly produced in four), was performed at California State University, Northridge, under the direction of David Scott, in June of 1973. The libretto for this opera was written by Jules Barbier and Michael Carre with the English translation by George Mead. The opera was based on the play by Goethe.

The purpose of this thesis project was to execute the scenic design for Faust and function as Technical Director for the production.

In preparing the scenic design, a great deal of research was undertaken in the following areas: the nature of grand opera, the relationship between opera and drama, various styles of architecture, the Faustian
legend, the history of Gounod's Faust, and the various styles and techniques employed in designing. Aside from the responsibilities as designer, the challenge of functioning as Technical Director required constant communication with the entire production staff and crews, the development of innovative techniques to facilitate the technical aspects of the production, and the responsibility of establishing a professional attitude that was eventually reflected in the success of the total production.

The most challenging aspect of designing an opera lies in the fact that the designer must approach a unified design concept from two directions. He must not only ascertain the underlying theme or themes of the story, but his design must also represent an interpretation of the music.

The basic theme of the Faust legend may be interpreted metaphysically as a conflict between Good and Evil. In Gounod's Faust, Good is represented by Marguerite, the epitomy of innocence, simplicity and noble purity, endowed with an unswerving faith in God. Though she falls prey to the moral decadence of Faust and the cunning of Mephistopheles, in the end her faith in God proves to be her salvation. Faust symbolizes the fallen man; denying his faith for the temporal pleasures of the world, he is condemned to eternal punishment. Mephistopheles is the
ultimate symbol of Evil. His presence in each scene evokes a sense of mysticism and foreboding that envelops the entire production.

The interpretation of the music for this opera presents a peculiar dichotomy for the designer. Gounod's Faust belongs to that very special genre known as the French Grand Opera. The operas of this period were characterized by their leadership in the Romantic Movement. Though one would expect the music to be quite sombre, as indicated by the tone of the story, it has a rather light and romantic quality. In view of the preceding factors, the design concept was based on the following premises: the prevailing sense of mysticism and doom, decadence, conflict, and the interpretation of the music.

The architectural style chosen to establish the mood and reinforce the themes was, in essence, Gothic. The design consisted of abstracted elements of the Gothic style. This period of architecture is best described as having developed as an expression of abstract intellectual ideas contrasted by intensive, impulsive emotionalism, and religious mysticism. To complete the stage picture, black velour draperies surrounded the set, seemingly suspending it in space. To serve as a symbolic representation and visual counterpoint to the contagious effect of Faust's moral decay, the scenery in the three scenes of
the final act was reduced to a minimal amount. Particular care was taken in choosing the line, mass, and color of each scenic element in order to capture the quality of the heavy Gothic style without being too heavy for the music. From a more practical point of view, the suggestive style of scenery, while maintaining the qualities of spectacle inherent in the true meaning of grand opera, was financially feasible as a university production.
Project Bibliography


Act 1, Scene 2: The Kermess
Act II: Marguerite's Garden
Act III, Scene 1: In the Church
Act III, Scene 2: A Public Square
APPENDIX