PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Hector Berlioz
Born December 11, 1803, Côte-Saint-André, France.
Died March 8, 1869, Paris, France.

The Damnation of Faust, Dramatic Legend in Four Parts, Op. 24

Berlioz composed Huit Scènes de Faust in 1828-29, which he expanded as La Damnation de Faust, completing the new score in October 1846. The composer conducted the first performance on December 6 of that year at the Opéra-Comique in Paris. Theodore Thomas led the U.S. premiere in Boston on January 28, 1880, eleven years before he founded the Chicago Symphony. The score calls for four soloists, mixed chorus, children’s chorus, and an orchestra consisting of three flutes and three piccolos, two oboes and two English horns, two clarinets and bass clarinet, four bassoons, four horns, two trumpets and two cornets, three trombones and two tubas, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, tenor drum, snare drum, bells, tam-tam, triangle, two harps, and strings. Performance times are approximately fifty-six minutes for parts 1 and 2, and sixty-eight minutes for parts 3 and 4.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra first performed music from Berlioz’s The Damnation of Faust (Invocation—Minuet of the Will-o’-the-Wisps, Dance of the Sylphs, and the Rákóczy March) on subscription concerts at the Auditorium Theatre on March 18 and 19, 1892, with Theodore Thomas conducting.

On his deathbed, Beethoven admitted his regret at never having set Faust to music. And with that simple remark, as with so many things, Beethoven set in motion one of the central concerns of nineteenth-century music. The year after Beethoven died, Berlioz was to discover Goethe’s Faust and Beethoven’s music firsthand. Both were a revelation. When he heard the Eroica and Fifth symphonies for the first time, in March 1828, he was bowled over by their genius: “Beethoven opened before me a new world of music, as Shakespeare had revealed a new universe of poetry.” That same year, he read Goethe’s Faust in a new translation by Gérard de Nerval. “I could not put it down,” Berlioz recalled. “I read it incessantly, at meals, at the theater, in the street, everywhere.”

A profound interest in Goethe’s Faust was to occupy many of the greatest composers of the nineteenth century, and they passed their enthusiasm from one to another like a talisman. In fact, it was Berlioz who introduced Faust to Liszt as early as 1830; the two great composers later dedicated to each other their own, highly individual versions of the tale: Berlioz’s The Damnation of Faust, completed in 1846, and Liszt’s A Faust Symphony; not finalized until 1880.

Few composers, it seemed, were immune. Even during Goethe’s lifetime, neither his formidable stature nor his strong antagonism to new music (he found Schubert’s songs of no particular merit and later listened in total incomprehension to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony), and not even his complaint that Mozart was the only composer who should have composed Faust could keep composers from trying. Beethoven considered the subject twice—first in 1812, after meeting Goethe, who found the composer “an utterly untamed personality,” and again in 1822, but on both occasions he stopped short of putting music on paper. Schubert, with the daring characteristic of youth, wrote his first masterpiece at seventeen, setting those verses from Faust now known by music-lovers everywhere as “Gretchen am Spinnrade” (Gretchen at the spinning wheel). (The song failed to win Goethe’s endorsement.) Mendelssohn, whose unusual, close friendship with Goethe may well have dissuaded him from tackling Faust himself, admitted that the scherzo of his great String Octet was inspired by the final lines of the Walpurgisnacht from Faust. Even Wagner, who preferred setting his own words to those by Goethe, toyed with a Faust Symphony while still in his twenties (only the overture remains and it was the first piece the Chicago Symphony ever played) and later found, to his dismay, that the biggest crisis of his first marriage was precipitated by an argument over Goethe’s Faust.
Hector Berlioz began to hear music as soon as he started reading *Faust*. At first he thought of a symphony or a ballet. While riding in a carriage in September 1828, he jotted down an oddly captivating little tune for Marguerite’s simple ballad, “The King of Thule,” later writing it out for voice and piano. Turning again to Goethe, he found seven more pieces which Nerval had translated in verse rather than prose, and he immediately fit them to music for various voices, chorus, and orchestra. These Eight Scenes from *Faust* were published at once—as impressive and promising as any opus 1 in history. On April 10, 1829, Berlioz sent the score off to Goethe, surely with some apprehension. Although the old poet was touched by Berlioz’s letter cover, he paid the music no mind, having been assured by his dear friend Carl Friedrich Zelter, a composer of a certain homespun charm, that it was madness. Soon Berlioz himself turned against the Eight Scenes, calling the music “crude and badly written,” and set out to recover as many copies as he could and destroy them. Then, as if to erase all evidence, he issued his *Waverly* Overture as his op. 1.

It was fifteen years before Berlioz would return to *Faust*. In the meantime, the *Symphonie fantastique*, *Harold in Italy*, and *Romeo and Juliet* had proven that his madness was in fact genius and made him famous. Fifteen months in Italy had enlarged his vision and intensified his response to life. The overwhelming, idealized love for Harriet Smithson—the subject of the *Symphonie fantastique*—had crumbled under the commonplaces of marital discord. He had known artistic disasters and triumphs as great as any in his time. By 1842, he had begun an ambitious series of tours, partly to cover up the fact that he was no longer able to write music. Perhaps now, with a new understanding of the depths of experience and the limits of human knowledge, he felt ready to tackle Goethe’s *Faust*.

Some time before Berlioz set off on another concert tour in October 1845, he contacted Almire Gandonniere, asking for a libretto for a “concert opera” based on *Faust*, with the intention of incorporating the Eight Scenes into a major new work. What Gandonniere could not complete before Berlioz’s departure, Berlioz wrote himself, realizing that he had no need to call on any other writer in the future. Music came to Berlioz in fits and starts throughout his travels in central Europe, with lightning flashes of inspiration striking indiscriminately, often without warning:

I composed the score with an ease such as I have rarely experienced with any of my other works. I wrote it when and where I could: in coaches, in trains, on steamboats, even in the towns that I visited…

In Vienna, in the course of one night, he arranged his rousing *Rákóczy* March—an enormous success in Budapest earlier in the trip—now calling it the Hungarian March and creating a place for it in his new *Faust* by moving the opening scene to the plains of Hungary. In Prague, he got up in the middle of the night to write down the music for Marguerite’s apotheosis, afraid that he would forget it by morning. The dazzling ending of part 2, with its mixture of student and soldiers’ choruses, was begun in Breslau and finished weeks later in Paris, where he was struck with the idea of pitting those two songs against each other when he saw friars and soldiers marching down the boulevard at the same time. By the time Berlioz had returned home in May 1846, the work was very nearly complete; Berlioz filled in the missing pieces by the end of that summer.

Then came one of the toughest setbacks of his career. The first performance, on December 6, 1846, at the Opéra-Comique, was an artistic failure and a financial disaster: *Faust* was given twice before a half-empty house. “The fashionable Paris audience, the audience which goes to concerts and is supposed to take an interest in music,” he wrote, “stayed comfortably at home, as little concerned with my new work as if I had been the obscurest Conservatoire student…Nothing in my career as an artist wounded me more deeply than this unexpected indifference.”

Berlioz would eventually learn to expect nothing of Parisian audiences and to take comfort in the fact that his most daring efforts did not go unappreciated elsewhere. And in time, *The Damnation of Faust* would be recognized as a work of greatness, often penetrating to the heart of Goethe’s poem and touched throughout by the most brilliant inspiration.
Even Berlioz, who had long ago ceased caring about the traditional boundaries of opera, symphony, oratorio, cantata, and song, had trouble classifying the piece. At first, he called it a “concert opera,” but it was published as a “dramatic legend.” In 1847, when someone proposed turning it into an opera, Berlioz realized just how far from the conventions of the theater his imagination had carried him. Like Goethe’s own Faust, which was conceived more as a dramatic poem than a stage play, The Damnation of Faust is a work of drama, not of the theater. Its many vivid stage directions are meant for no stage except that of our minds. The way Berlioz travels through Goethe’s tale, telescoping scenes at will and changing moods and settings in a flash, would pose no problems to today’s film directors, but in Berlioz’s time, the imagination was the only place such things might happen.

Berlioz’s music is dazzling in its orchestral brilliance, the aptness of melody, the ever-amazing freshness of the harmonies, the unerring dramatic pacing. Berlioz plants us at once in each scene: the vast, echoing spaces of the Hungarian countryside, the stillness of Faust’s study, the smoky din of Auerbach’s cellar, the stuffy emptiness of Marguerite’s room, where her despairing song seems to use up what little air there is.

On page after page, Berlioz creates unforgettable sounds: the brazen swagger of the Hungarian March; the flash that brings Mephistopheles and blinds Faust to all reason; the drunken “Amen” fugue sung over the demise of a rat; the remarkably sensuous, yet icy tone of Mephistopheles’s lullaby, uncannily accompanied by cornet, trombones, and bassoons; the brilliant clash of two simultaneous choruses—the soldiers singing in B-flat major and in French, the students in D minor in Latin. Or the stirring heartbeats in Marguerite’s music; the plaintive voice of the solo viola in her “The King of Thule” or the heartbreaking English horn solo of her Romance; Mephistopheles’s Serenade, with its grand guitar strumming; Faust’s noble, impassioned Invocation to Nature; the lone, ominous call of hunting horns that precedes Faust’s downfall; the wild, reckless, galloping Ride to the Abyss; the final horrible babbling of the damned.

After Berlioz, few composers would find success with Goethe’s great work. Only Gounod’s picture-postcard opera has achieved wide popularity, although Schumann’s Scenes from Faust, Liszt’s bold Faust Symphony, and Boito’s Mefistofele are still performed occasionally. (Mahler’s Eighth Symphony sets verses from Faust, part 2 instead, and Busoni’s rarely encountered Doktor Faustus is based not on Goethe, but on the old puppet-play legend, which is how Goethe first learned the tale.) Dozens of others failed miserably, often simply undone by their subject—although as Berlioz pointed out, if composers were forbidden from setting famous poems, we would be deprived of Mozart’s Don Giovanni and The Marriage of Figaro, and Rossini’s Barber of Seville, for starters.

A large measure of Berlioz’s success came from his sympathetic reading of Goethe; he called Shakespeare and Goethe “the silent confidants of my suffering; they hold the key to my life.” Perhaps he knew something of both Faust and Mephistopheles; clearly he had loved unreasonably and lost. He brought to Goethe what few others could provide: sheer, abundant genius and an imagination unmatched before his time and seldom since. And he had created a highly personal, richly expressive language that might have been designed to convey all that is essential in Faust—wit, pathos, wisdom, farce, mystery, reverence, doubt, magic, and irony, to name only those qualities suggested by an important Goethe scholar—even though Berlioz knew all along what his century failed to see: that he simply “took up music where Beethoven left it.”

For the record

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra recorded Berlioz’s Damnation of Faust under Sir Georg Solti, with Frederica von Stade, Kenneth Riegel, José van Dam, and Malcolm King; the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director); and the Glen Ellyn Children’s Chorus (Doreen Rao, director) in 1981 for London Records. A 1989 performance led by Solti (at Royal Albert Hall in London) with Anne Sofie von Otter, Keith Lewis, José van Dam, and Peter Rose; the Chicago Symphony Chorus (Margaret Hillis, director); and the Choristers of Westminster Cathedral (Rodney Greenberg, director) was released on video by London Records. A 1990 performance of the Rákóczi March led by Solti (at Suntory Hall in Tokyo) was released on laser disc by CBS.
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