

FAUST

Charles Gounod

Act I: Alone in his study, the aged Dr. Faust despairs that his lifelong search for a solution to the riddle of life has been in vain. Twice he raises a goblet of poison to his lips but falters when the songs of young men and women outside his window re-awaken the unfulfilled passions and desires of his youth. Cursing life and human passion, the envious philosopher calls on Satan for help. The Devil appears, and Faust tells him of his longing for youth and pleasure; Méphistophélès replies that these desires can be realized if he will forfeit his soul. Faust hesitates until the Devil conjures up a vision of a lovely maiden, Marguerite. A magic potion transforms Faust into a handsome youth, and he leaves with Méphistophélès in search of Marguerite (Duet: "A moi les plaisirs").

Soldiers and townspeople gather for a fair. A young officer, Valentin, holding a medallion from his sister Marguerite, asks his friend, the young boy Siébel, to protect the girl in his absence and then bids a touching farewell ("Avant de quitter ces lieux"). Wagner, a student, starts the revels with a lively song but is interrupted by Méphistophélès, who delivers an impudent hymn in praise of greed and gold ("Le veau d'or"). The Devil refuses a drink from Wagner and amazes the crowd by causing new wine to flow from an old keg. When he makes a brazen toast to Marguerite, Valentin draws his sword, but it shatters; the other soldiers, recognizing Satan, hold their swords like crosses before Méphistophélès (Chorus: "De l'enfer"), who cowers before them. As the crowd begins a waltz, Faust speaks to Marguerite. She demurely refuses to let him escort her home; Méphistophélès returns to lead the merrymakers in their dance.

Act II: Siébel briefly visits Marguerite's garden to leave her a bouquet of flowers ("Faites-lui mes aveux"). The romantic youth is followed by Faust and Méphistophélès, who goes in search of a gift to outshine Siébel's; left alone, Faust hails Marguerite's simple home ("Salut! demeure"). The Devil returns with a box of jewels, which he places near Siébel's flowers. When Marguerite arrives, she sits by her spinning wheel to sing a ballad about the King of Thule ("Il était un roi de Thulé"), distractedly interrupting the verses with reflections on the stranger she has met. Discovering the flowers and box, the girl exclaims in delight as she adorns herself with jewels. ("Ah! je ris"). Méphistophélès detours a nosy middle-aged neighbor, Marthe, by flirting with her, so that Faust may complete his seduction. As Méphistophélès invokes a night full of stars, Marguerite confesses her love (Duet: "Il se fait tard!"), but nevertheless begs Faust to leave. The Devil mocks Faust's failure, and points to Marguerite, who has reappeared at her window. As she ecstatically expresses her love for Faust, they meet and embrace. She yields to his embraces, as Méphistophélès' taunting laughter is heard in the garden.

Act III: Marguerite seeks refuge in church, only to be pursued by Méphistophélès, who curses her and torments her with threats of damnation. She collapses.

In the town square, Valentin and his comrades return from war, singing the glory of those slain in battle (Soldier's Chorus: "Gloire immortelle"). The soldier questions Siébel about Marguerite but receives only evasive replies; puzzled, he enters his house. Faust, remorseful at having abandoned Marguerite, arrives with Méphistophélès, who serenades the girl with a lewd ballad ("Vous qui faites l'endormie"). Valentin, stepping forth to defend his sister's honor, fights a duel with Faust. At a crucial moment, Méphistophélès interferes and Faust inadvertently kills Valentin. As the Devil drags Faust away, Marguerite kneels by her fatally wounded brother, who curses her with his last breath. She rises slowly and giggling madly to herself, moves through the crowd of villagers.

In the prison Marguerite lies asleep, condemned to death for the murder of her illegitimate child. Faust and Méphistophélès enter, bent on spirited her away. As the Devil keeps watch, Faust wakens Marguerite; at first the distracted girl is overjoyed to see her lover, but instead of fleeing with him she tarries to recall their first days of happiness. When Méphistophélès emerges from the shadows urging haste, Marguerite calls on the angels to save her (Trio: "AnGES purs, anges radieux"), and she walks to the gallows. Méphistophélès pronounces her condemned, but as she approaches the hangman, a choir of angels proclaims her salvation.