

THE LIBRETTO OF SPOHR'S 'FAUST'

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WHEN mention is made of the sources on which Spohr drew for his opera, *Faust*, these are usually said to be *The History of Doctor Johann Faust*, the sixteenth-century German chapbook on a translation of which Christopher Marlowe based his play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*. It is then also claimed that, except for the Blocksberg scene, Spohr's opera owes nothing to Goethe's *Faust*, (i.e. *Faust Part I: Part II* was not published until 1832, and therefore could not have been a model for the opera, which was composed in 1813).

Superficially all this is of course true. The matter requires closer scrutiny, however. A more detailed comparison of the opera with its various precursors reveals that the above statement is at the very least open to question. More importantly, such a comparison also shows that the differences between the opera and its precursors mentioned above are precisely what reveal the merciless disillusionment that underlies its dramatic conception. That this is also apparent in Spohr's music, and in what ways, will be demonstrated in what follows. But first it is essential to consider the extent to which the composer was himself involved in shaping the libretto.

Spohr reached Vienna to take up his appointment as musical director of the Theater an der Wien at the beginning of 1813, and began straight away to look for a subject for a new opera. In his Autobiography he writes that he had originally intended to persuade the young poet Theodor Körner (1791-1813) to write him a text based on the Rübezahl legend. Körner agreed to do so, but shortly afterwards he joined the Lützow Volunteer Corps – because, according to Spohr, he had been unlucky in love – only to be mortally wounded in a skirmish at Gadebusch in North Germany on 26 August 1813. "It was thus opportune," Spohr writes, "that Herr Bernard offered me his adaptation of 'Faust' to set to music." However, in a letter Theodor Körner wrote to his parents on 10 February 1813, he mentions Spohr's compositional plans and tells them "he has Faust in mind". This statement contradicts Spohr's claim that Bernard [see note] offered him an already completed libretto.

As, however, Spohr did not write his memoirs until several decades later, and Körner's letter is an immediate response to events, it seems likely that Spohr was already toying with the idea of a Faust setting. What is quite certain is that he personally influenced the libretto. Indeed he actually writes that he expressed the wish for 'a number of alterations'. We may therefore assume that by and large the text was designed to suit him. But first of all, let us outline the plot of Spohr's version, identify the provenance of its various components and draw attention to a number of striking elements.

In the Spohr/Bernard version the signing of Faust's pact with the devil is not in fact the subject of the opera: this actually takes place before the action commences. As the curtain rises, Faust and Mephisto are seen standing outside a house from which the sound of a (stage) band can be

heard. A party is evidently in progress. Faust now tells Mephisto that he is tired of self-indulgence and from now on intends to devote the powers hell has given him to doing good. Mocking him, Mephisto draws his attention to Kunigunde, who is in need of help.

In scene 2, Faust's friends sing a drinking-song and tell us of his deeds. This in itself rather suggests that his resolution to do good is not exactly working. We are told, for instance, that the population of the town now consists almost entirely of beggars because Faust has set about making beggars rich, and many people seem to have decided to become beggars for this reason. However, Faust now intends to break his alliance with the devil and spend his life with Röschen, an honest, affectionate girl of humble background. But this plan goes awry, too, because Franz, a goldsmith, is also in love with Röschen, and now approaches with a band of armed men intent on arresting Faust and charging him with sorcery. In order to save himself and above all Röschen's honour, Faust has to revive his pact with Mephisto.

In Act I, scene 7, we meet Kunigunde, who is being held against her will by the sinister Gulf in his castle. Gulf tries every means he can think of to win her, but meanwhile Kunigunde's lover, Count Hugo, is drawing nearer with his friends in the hope of rescuing her by force. On their approach they meet Mephisto and Faust, who forces his help on him rather than just offering it. Instead of their original plan, which was to take the castle under cover of darkness, Faust decides to confront Gulf at once and demand the handover of Kunigunde. When, with a scornful laugh, Gulf refuses, Faust asks Mephisto to help him; the latter promptly sets fire to the castle and in a terrifying scene hands Gulf over to hell. Horrified, those around him think they are witnessing divine retribution.

Mephisto's plan is working out well. Faust is not captivated by Kunigunde, and at the start of Act II Mephisto is able to lead him to the Blocksberg where he can obtain a love-potion from a sorceress called Sycorax which will make him irresistible. Yet again, however, Faust is deceived by Mephisto. The potion not only has the intended power to make all women who set eyes on him fall irresistibly in love with him – including the witches – it also has the power to rouse desire for Kunigunde in Faust himself: 'The longing of wild lust stirs deep within me, my blood is all aflame' (Act II, scene 3). Gone is the restraint he had sworn he would maintain in Act I, scene 14, when he realized that Hugo was worthy of her. The result is inevitable. Faust seduces Kunigunde while she is still celebrating her wedding in Aachen, and just after he has turned a cold shoulder to Röschen, whom Mephisto has brought there along with Franz, he goes on to kill his jealous rival, Hugo, in a duel.

The Finale brings the work to its inevitable and harsh conclusion: Faust is condemned to hell. All the characters who are still alive gather in his apartment. Kunigunde, now well aware of her mistakes (the potion's effect seems to have been short-lived), now decides to take revenge on Faust, and, when she hears about Hugo's death, she attempts to kill him.

Röschen, in contrast, still hopes to find her beloved Faust again. When, however, she discovers that he has deceived her, she kills herself. The news of her death prompts Faust to make one last attempt to escape from his alliance with hell. But it is too late. Deserted by all his friends, who curse him, calling him 'hell's rejected servant', he is forced to follow the chorus of spirits down to hell.

Bernard's libretto contains little in common with the *Faust Chapbook* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* apart from the broad outlines and some isolated similarities which, however, occur in different contexts.

These obviously include the Faust-Mephisto duo, the presence of Faust's friends (only Wagner is still present in Goethe's *Faust Part I*) and the role they play – which remains to be considered – the pact with the devil, which, in the case of Spohr/Bernard, has taken place before the action

commences, and Faust's descent into hell, which here, as in the earlier versions, takes place in Faust's apartment.

Even in the *Faust Book* (Chapter 50, p. 98ff) there is a hint that now and again Faust actually puts his abilities to good use. In contrast to Spohr's version, however, the outcome there is successful: he manages to cure a peasant of his dishonesty and unhelpful attitude by making the four wheels of his cart fly off through the town's four gateways, which gives the peasant such a fright that he learns his lesson. The outcome of Faust's attempts to perform good deeds in the Spohr/Bernard version is foretold by Mephisto as early as the first scene of Act I:

If you try to perform good deeds
When you are subservient to evil,
Your very best will go awry
And have wicked intentions;
Your delusion is your own self-punishment.

This is in a way reminiscent of Goethe, though there Mephisto is talking about himself and the premonitions are as it were inverted when, in answer to Faust's question "So tell me who you are?", he replies "part of that power which always wills the bad, and always works for good." A parallel may also be seen here with *Faust's Life, Deeds and Descent into Hell*, a novel published in 1791 by Goethe's contemporary and friend, Friedrich Maximilian Klinger. As Meier puts it, 'His intention to do a good and just deed can be observed in various episodes in Klinger's novel, in which the devil opens Faust's eyes to the consequences of his well-intentioned good deeds.' (Meier 1990, p.182).

In both Marlowe's drama and the *Faust Book* Mephisto is opposed to monogamy and the marriage sacrament, and favours promiscuity, an attitude which is developed further by Bernard. Here the corresponding female partners are no longer mere apparitions but real people who get drawn into situations created by the devil. The 'burning castle' motif is also present in these earlier versions. But it is no more than a mirage conjured up by Faust to entertain the prince of Anhalt, and its flames harm no-one. Similarly the enraged mob which tries to seize Faust is also present in both the *Faust Book* and Marlowe's drama. But on this occasion Faust finds a clever way of getting out of the situation – albeit with the aid of magic – and there is therefore no reason to renew the contract.

To sum up, it may be said that what is taken from the earlier sources is the overall pattern and a few isolated motifs which are usually given different functions.

An examination of the differences may well be more telling. They can be traced as early as the contract, which in both Marlowe and the *Faust Book* is clearly drawn up to last 24 years. This means that Faust always knows exactly when his end will come, and can even make his own will. Spohr's Faust, however, never really seems to realize that his is a no-go situation. In fact the conditions his 'precursors' are offered are a good deal fairer. For instance a good angel warns them three times before they sign the contract, and when they draw blood from their own veins to do so, they are warned 'homo fuge'. In Marlowe's drama, Faust doubts the existence of hell, but Mephisto actually points out to him that he, Mephisto, is proof of it:

But, Faustus, I am an instance to prove the contrary,
For I am damn'd, and am now in hell.

Even when the contract has been signed, it is not too late either for the chap-book Faust or for

the Faust of Marlowe's drama. As Mephisto points out to him, he is still in a position to withdraw from it if he really has any regrets. When, in the chap-book, Faust asks him what he would do if he were a human being in his position, Mephisto with a sigh replies: "There would not be much to argue about, for even if indeed I had sinned against God, I would wish to restore myself to His grace. Faust answered him thus: "So for me too there would still be time for me to improve myself. Yes, the spirit replied" (*Faust Book*, p.43) In his monologue in Act II, Scene 7, Spohr's Mephisto also alludes to the fact that Faust was given three chances to tear up the pact; Faust, however, seems unaware of this or assumes that he would be compelled to renew it when caught in hopeless situations, from which there was no other way out.

In the earlier version an old man attempts to save Faust. He doesn't succeed in doing so, but at least he shows himself to be Mephisto's equal when it comes to the salvation of his own soul. In Bernard's libretto, however, no character is endowed with such strength. Mephisto himself deplores this, saying "There is never any struggle, never any opposition, and no stomach for it." His precursors have a further advantage in that they benefit from hell's contractual services.

In Marlowe's drama Faustus is quick to quiz Mephistophilis on the subject of heaven and hell: there is an intellectual element in the bargain. In both the chapbook version and the Marlowe play Faustus is given a book in which he can find out everything he wants to know about the world and magic. This Faust is at one and the same time an alchemist, a scientist and a charlatan. He draws up astronomical charts, conducts long discussions with Mephisto, explores the world, heaven and hell (whole sections of the *Faust Book* are devoted to accounts of his travels) and takes a boyish delight in using his abilities to fool other people.

Spohr's Faust, by contrast, is a mere puppet in Mephisto's hands. One dramatic difference seems to be that in both Marlowe and the chapbook version, evil and hell come into life from outside: it is first conjured up to do so. Both works are thus meant as warnings against such foolishness. Indeed in the chapbook version the Bible is time and again presented as an effective weapon against it. In Bernard's version, on the contrary, Mephisto and thus evil are present from the start and dominate the action.

Alongside these earlier versions, Spohr's *Faust* has another influential source: the Don Juan story, as Bruckner and Hadamovsky have shown. In this case the chief influence is most likely to have been Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, the major prototype of Romantic opera. The very opening of Spohr's opera is reminiscent of *Don Giovanni*. The first music we hear after the overture is that of a stage band: a party is taking place. If a parallel is to be drawn between this and the party and stage bands in the Act I finale of *Don Giovanni*, what is striking is that the scene in which its world gets out of hand is now located at the very start of the opera.

The party taking place may not be a full-scale musical depiction of chaos, but there is certainly something very odd about it: the guests only appear in a brief stage direction! Faust and Mephisto are found standing alone outside the house, which could be taken to mean that they are excluded from society right from the start. This may seem rather far-fetched, yet it does seem to foreshadow the situation that is fully developed in the finale to Act II. To this we shall return, this time extending the musical parallels to *Don Giovanni*.

Before concentrating on the definite parallels, another detail is worth mentioning. At the start of *Don Giovanni*, Leporello outlines his programme for the opera with the words "voglio far il gentiluomo, e non voglio più servir", but fails to accomplish his intention: a servant he remains and come the end of the opera he finds himself looking for a new master. In Spohr's opera it is Faust who outlines his programme at the beginning: "Mankind, rest assured, I shall avenge you at Hell's expense," he sings. Similarly he, too, fails to live up to his word.

At this point we should also take a quick look at the pairings of Don Giovanni and Leporello,

and Mephisto and Faust. Superficially both are master-servant relationships (Don Giovanni and Faust being the masters, Leporello and Mephisto their servants). But in Spohr's case the relationship is in fact the reverse. The most obvious similarity between the title characters of both operas is that they are both dragged down to hell, though Faust's resistance to this is pitiful by comparison to Don Giovanni's.

Turning to the female characters, these are by no means so prominent either in Marlowe or the *Faust Book*: in this case, *Don Giovanni* seems a much more likely model. The intended seduction of a woman on her wedding-day provides a further parallel. In Mozart's case we have Zerlina, in Spohr's, Kunigunde. And just as Giovanni kills the Commendatore, Faust, in a similar situation, kills Hugo.

Furthermore Röschen appears at Kunigunde's wedding disguised as a man, which is reminiscent of the appearance of the three disguised and masked figures in the finale to Act I of *Don Giovanni*. In Spohr's opera there is even a catalogue of sorts: in Act I, scene 2, Wohlhaldt and Moor, two friends of Faust, count up his previous conquests:

Wohlhaldt: [...] Come to think of it: there was Angelica, Elsbeth, and the two countesses in Innsbruck. –

Moor: And Susanna at Frankfort, Lucretia in Rome, and that pretty Gretchen...

It should be added that something similar is mentioned, albeit incidentally, in the *Faust Book*: “He then travelled to many kingdoms with his famulus so as to see all the women there. Seven of them he saw only too well: two Dutch ones, one Hungarian, one Englishwoman, two Swabians, and one woman from Franconia.”

Early nineteenth-century writers were quite ready to see an affinity between the stories of Faust and Don Juan. On 29 March 1829 a tragedy entitled *Don Juan and Faust* by Christian Dietrich Grabbe was premièred at the Detmold Court Theatre, and Lortzing made use of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Spohr's *Faust* when writing incidental music for it. If Spohr's Faust had to stand in for Mozart's Don Giovanni, that impressive character would be reduced to a pallid echo of himself. After all, Faust has to resort to supernatural assistance in the one and only seduction scene in Spohr's opera!

The figure of Kunigunde, a noblewoman bent on vengeance, seems to have been inspired by Mozart (though she is really no more than a pallid shadow of her predecessor). The other female figure we have not considered yet is Röschen. Contrary to the conventional opinion that the only borrowing from Goethe's *Faust* is the Blocksberg Scene, she seems clearly related to Goethe's Gretchen. In none of the other sources we have mentioned does Faust fall in love with a figure like her. Whereas in Mozart the only characters to survive unharmed and capable of genuine reconciliation, namely Zerlina and Masetto in “Vedrai carino”, are drawn from the lower classes. Spohr's Röschen is not granted such an outcome, alas. Like Goethe's Gretchen, she has to perish.

Last but not least, what about Faust's friends? In number they may be traced back to earlier versions, but whereas in the *Faust Book* and in Marlowe they are true friends and confidants, drinking companions and students, in Spohr's opera they are no more than extras. In Marlowe's play Faust's friends attempt to save him during his last night by lying in watch in a room next door. He is thus the beneficiary of a final reconciliation (as in the *Faust Book*):

First Scholar: Well, Gentlemen, though Faustus' end be such
As every Christian heart laments to think on,
Yet, for he was a scholar once admired

For wondrous knowledge in our German schools,
We'll give his mangled limbs due burial,
And all the students clothed in mourning black
Shall wait upon his heavy funeral. [Scene xix]

In the finale to Spohr's opera, Faust's 'friends' Wohlhaldt, Wagner and Kaylinger, having at last realised what they should have suspected long since, adopt a very different attitude as they sing:

Away from the cursèd
Leave the cursèd alone,
The servant of hell!
Let it have its horrible way!

Even Don Giovanni still had Leporello, who stood by him with excuses, weak though they were. Spohr's Faust, in contrast, is left all on his own during his last few minutes of life. One cannot help being struck by the fact that what Spohr's libretto mainly borrows from its precursors are their darkest, most hopeless elements. In his 1852 revision of the opera these elements are actually brought out even more strongly.

Bibliography

Meier, Andreas. *Faustlibretti: Geschichte des Fauststoff auf der Europäischen Musikbühne nebst einer lexikalischen Bibliographie der Faustvertonungen* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1990).

Note

The reference is to the Viennese publisher and journalist Joseph Carl Bernard (1780-1850).