

Minnesota Opera's 'Faust' a devilish dyad of arts

By Rob Hubbard

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Opera has been described as the ultimate art form, combining magnificent music with gripping theater.

But the Minnesota Opera's new production of Charles Gounod's "Faust" takes those two artistic disciplines and doubles them. Thanks to director and choreographer Doug Varone, it's a production that moves like a modern dance performance. And the magnificent sets of Andromache Chalfant hold their own as large-scale visual art installations. Put them all together and you have a deeply involving evening at St. Paul's Ordway Center — and, arguably, the best production the Minnesota Opera has created since the world premiere of Ricky Ian Gordon's "The Grapes of Wrath" two years ago.

From the rise of the opening curtain, this production never takes its foot off the accelerator. The classic tale of the doctor who makes a deal with the devil always offers audiences something visually imaginative and sweet to the ears.

As the conflicted Faust, tenor Paul Groves transforms himself from a bitter old man on the edge of suicide to a love-smitten 20-something experiencing life's pleasures anew.

But the designated scene-stealer is Mephistopheles, and bass-baritone Kyle Ketelson is a graceful ringleader for the well-paced festivities, one with a powerful voice and the kind of smoothness, charisma and spookiness that inspires simultaneous attraction and aversion. More than anyone else on stage, he must engage the audience in the concept of opera as dance, and he does so while diabolically directing eight members of Varone's New York-based troupe.

Judith Howarth stands out as the principal with the deepest understanding of the ebbs and flows of Gounod's music. As the object of Faust's longing, Marguerite, the Scottish soprano evolves from an angelic theology student to a murderous outcast, making each aria a little tour de force, her part in each duet or quartet a showcase for her pure, resonant voice.

Gounod also gives some lovely solos to supporting characters, and Lucas Meachem and Nicole Percifield sing them beautifully. But this production will remain most memorable for its ambition and imagination. Its reach is admirable, its grasp secure. It's as epic as you could ask a work about the battle of good and evil to be. But it's also compellingly human for a metaphysical fable, thanks to a cast clearly confident in Varone's vision.

Rob Hubbard is an associate producer for American Public Media's "Performance Today."

What: the Minnesota Opera's production of Charles Gounod's "Faust"

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Ordway Center for the Performing Arts, 345 Washington St., St. Paul

Tickets: \$150-\$20, available at 612-333-6669 or mnopera.org

Capsule: A devilishly clever staging is driven by dance.