JONATHAN GAISMAN

# A glimpse of heaven

One's favourite piece of music isn't always the greatest ever written: it can just be what affects you most

Not everybody has a favourite piece of music; but some of us do. Our choice may not necessarily favour the work we think the greatest ever written; it is just the one that affects us the most. In the game of virtual *Desert Island Discs* which I have been playing with myself, in the absence of an invitation, for the last 45 years, only one composition has remained consistently among my eight permitted records. It is a lengthy work for substantial forces that is hardly ever performed in concert, and so it languishes in unmerited obscurity. In addition, it is a setting of extracts from a play (if it can be described as a play) which intimidates even those who speak as natives the language in which it was written. The piece is to be given a rare outing in the Concertgebouw, where Sir John Eliot Gardiner conducts it on December 6 with the German baritone, Christian Gerhaher, in the principal role.

Schumann's *Scenes from Goethe's Faust* has rightly been said by Dominic Lowe to be "one of the most astonishing works of the 19th century. Ostensibly an oratorio, it combines the choral weight of that genre with the dramatic power and grandeur of opera and the intimacy of *Lieder*." Rupert Christensen by contrast, from the partial perspective of an opera critic, finds it "a frustrating experience for the listener", although he concedes that "there is so much beautiful music here". It is true that the piece is in some senses fragmentary and provides only glimpses (long though they are) of transcendence. As Gerhaher has written, it is more carefully planned and constructed than is sometimes realised (he calls it an "abstract opera"), but it is not a work of formal perfection. No more is *Faust* itself.

Goethe referred to the 12,111-line drama that occupied him for 60 years of his long life as "incommensurable", adding that all attempts to bring it within human understanding were in vain. Another reason for the limited exposure of Schumann's work on these shores is that it is best approached through an acquaintance with Goethe's text. German as a school subject is in steep decline, and only a few thousand candidates a year take it at A-level (and even then with limited focus on literature); so the British generally do not know *Faust*, and even educated Germans know little of the two-thirds of the poem which make up its second part.

*Faust Part One* contains a reasonably accessible (and even stage-able) drama. It begins with a conversation between the Almighty and the devil in the so-called Prologue in Heaven. Echoing the Book of Job, Goethe imagines God allowing the arch-cynic Mephistopheles to attempt to corrupt and win his "servant" Faust. God's confidence in Faust derives not from the fact that he is devout (he is not), but from the knowledge that whilst this most learned of men is mired in error, he yet strives. When we meet Faust, we see that this striving is the converse of his bottomless dissatisfaction with all that the world has to offer. Mephisto, the spirit of eternal denial, enters his service, and the two bargain that he will gain Faust's soul if he can ever put before him a pleasure so intense that it induces Faust to address the passing moment with the words "Tarry awhile, thou art so fair". Their relationship and the compelling struggle for mastery between them occupy *Part One*, which mainly takes the form of an established 18th-century genre, the *bürgerliches Trauerspiel* (bourgeois tragedy). For the most poignant episode in the career of unrelieved selfishness which Faust leads across the entire drama is his seduction, with diabolical aids, of the innocent and ignorant Gretchen. In due course, she falls pregnant by him and kills her own child and (inadvertently) her mother, but despite the simple strength of her love for him, she finally rejects his offer of escape from the condemned cell, and is saved by her choice.

*Part Two*, which unlike the episodic *Part One* is in the form of a five-act classical tragedy, spreads over a far wider canvas, through imperial court politics, the evils of paper money, alchemy, the contrast between Northern and Greek civilisations, Faust's union with Helen of Troy and the short life of their son Euphorion, a land reclamation scheme, blindness in old age, and the hero's death. It is verbose, wildly complex and allusive, and (as Goethe predicted) fully understood by almost no one.

What holds all these elements together is Goethe's (somewhat self-serving) theology, not only enunciated by God at the outset but intoned by the angels at the very end of *Part Two*, that it is not good works but rather struggling and striving which create the possibility of salvation. Accordingly, despite the chaos and destruction which he has left in his wake, Goethe does not consign his Faust to hell, as Marlowe and Berlioz supposed to be the wages of the character's sin. Another destination awaits, and it was one of great interest to Schumann.

*'Scenes from Goethe's Faust* contains the most elevated music Schumann ever wrote'

Towards the end of *Part Two*, the story regains simplicity and accessibility. The dying Faust, perhaps tired at last of self-gratification, has an inner vision (for by now he is sightless) of a future world in which others will prosper, on land won back from the sea thanks to a system of dams and ditches which he has built. He foresees that he might then address the passing moment: "Tarry awhile, thou art so fair". Still striving, he does not quite repeat the original words of the wager, for he uses the conditional tense about something that has not yet happened. It is a nice point for the lawyers whether the devil, as he thinks, has won. Nihilistically triumphant, Mephisto claims his prize at the moment of Faust's death, but angels intervene to pelt burning roses at the demons who are carrying him away, and his soul is borne heavenwards, on a journey which the poem tells us that Gretchen has taken long before.

The very last scene of the drama depicts a rocky wilderness, said to have been suggested to the poet by the mountain of Montserrat near Barcelona. It is populated by holy anchorites, angels in different stages of perfection and the souls of blessed children; we are on the verge of Paradise, and the almost-redeemed Faust is being carried towards it. It is this scene which inspired the most elevated music that Schumann ever wrote.

Previous musical admirers (Spohr and Schubert, Berlioz and Liszt) concentrated on depicting aspects of the more conventional *Part One*. Schumann, however, felt immediately drawn to the mystical and unstageable closing of *Part Two*. This had never been set to music before. Having in 1843 completed his oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri* and fully aware of the ambitious and experimental nature of his undertaking, he set to the task in earnest. By the end of 1844, he had completed the realisation in music of Goethe's final scene. Broadly speaking, he thereafter worked on the text in reverse order, setting three earlier scenes from *Part Two* and later a further three from *Part One*. The opening overture was not composed until the final weeks of 1853. Two months later, he flung himself into the Rhine near Düsseldorf in a suicide attempt that led to his internment in an asylum and ended his creative life.

This ten-year gestation was unique in Schumann's career. While one can hear in the later music the influence of Wagnerian "endless melody", the scene which he composed first breathes the fresh spirit of his earlier through-composed oratorio style. There is a


AFFICHE. "GOETHE'S FAUST". N.V HET TOONEEL (AMSTERDAM). DIR. WILLEM ROYAARDS.

prevalent misconception that Schumann's later music represents a decline from the Clara-animated works of his earlier years. No one listening to the beautiful love-passages between Faust and Gretchen in the Garden Scene (composed 1849-1850) could possibly accept this. Nonetheless, of all the beauties in this neglected piece, none matches his setting to music of the culmination of Goethe's poem.

This tremendous achievement has the character of all the best religious music; it operates on the aesthetic and the spiritual planes alike, and offers both a devotional aid and an aural and quasi-visual experience of the beyond, which even the hardened agnostic cannot entirely resist. Fleshing out the taut allusiveness of Goethe's poetry, Schumann shows us how Heaven might be. Of course, as the poet says, "All that is transitory is but a parable"; we are in the realms of musical allegory. But we can measure Schumann's achievement by recalling how disappointing other attempts have been to capture the empyrean in music: the feeble *tremolandi* in Liszt's Dante Sonata, for example, or Fauré's saccharine *In Paradisum*. (Bach is obviously *hors de concours*.) The same Goethe text was set with larger forces, at greater length and volume, yet with a fraction of Schumann's penetration and beauty, by Mahler in the second movement of his eighth symphony. When the two works are compared, it is hard not to see Mahler as exhibiting many of the shortcomings which his detractors (sometimes unfairly) level against him—not least a tendency to what is in this context a painful vulgarity. (Mahler's first movement, a setting of the 9th-century *Veni Creator Spiritus*, is much more convincing.)

There are details in Schumann's setting of Goethe's vision which are particularly worth highlighting. A soul who appears in this final scene is described as "A Penitent Woman, formerly called Gretchen". The music which Mahler gives her is sweet but shallow; in his hands, the episode passes by as one more voice amid the gaudiness. It should not: for something more numinous is happening. In a poignant echo of her earthly guilt and shame, both Goethe and Schumann have her now repeat her prayer to the Virgin from *Part One*: then, she bids the Mother of God to look down on her sorrow, but now in Paradise on her happiness. And the reason for her joy is that "her early beloved, his mind no longer clouded, is returning" to her. Even more touchingly, and in a reversal of their terrestrial roles, she begs to be allowed to instruct Faust, "dazzled as he is by the new day". Her prayer is granted, and the chrysalis of his soul (or entelechy, as Goethe describes it, with needless obscurity) passes within. Schumann's description of Gretchen's humility is sublime.

All that then remains is for the Chorus Mysticus to sing of the Eternal Feminine which draws us ever onwards, in the famous couplet which ends Goethe's poem. However, before we hear it, the sympathetic listener will have been raised to a state of appropriate metaphysical receptivity by the intimate *arioso* sung just before Gretchen makes her entry. Dr Marianus is one of the hermits who people this imagined landscape; he occupies the highest, purest cell, and the object of his worship is indicated by his name. It is a large claim, but his hymn to the Virgin may be the most beautiful ever written.

Such music requires a singer to match. For many years, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau was definitive in this role (especially in a celebrated Britten recording of 1972), just as he earned by general consent the title of the finest *Lieder* baritone since the war. For a long time after his retirement, we scanned the horizon for a successor. Olaf Bär, Wolfgang Holzmair, Matthias Goerne—these have come and gone without challenging for the crown. Now it is time to declare Gerhaher the equal of his great teacher; and in the Marianus music he surpasses him. His rendition of "*Hier ist die Aussicht frei*" in the Harnoncourt recording is singing of matchless purity, sensibility and (to use the untranslatable word so applicable to Schumann) *Innigkeit*. This treasurable artist is a convinced enthusiast for the *Scenes from Faust*, and those who have the opportunity to do so should go to hear him demonstrate why, or at least conjure him up on Spotify or YouTube, and so immerse themselves in music that, for once, can properly be called heavenly. S