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Classical Music: Designer sets the stage for Festival's 'Faust' with video projections

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FEW TALES ARE as beguiling and fascinating as Johann von Goethe's "Faust." Part I of this monumental saga was published in 1808, and the great German polymath labored over Part II until 1832, the year of his death.

At least 16 operas have been written on the "Faust" theme, the most famous of which are Charles Gounod's 1859 "Faust" and Arrigo Boito's 1868 "Mefistofele." In addition, Goethe's chilling theme of a man selling his eternal soul to the devil in exchange for something earthly and transitory has inspired countless more literary, artistic and cinematic works.

Festival Opera of Walnut Creek is launching an excursion into the world of "Faust" with its production of the Gounod version. Michael Morgan, who is both directing and conducting, says he is working with a dream cast and some innovative staging.

In the title role is tenor Brian Thorsett, first prize winner in the 30th annual Carmel Music Society Competition and a graduate of both San Francisco Opera's Merola Program and England's Glimmerglass Young American Artist Program. Former Adler Fellow

Kristen Clayton will sing the soprano role of innocently trusting Marguerite; bass Kirk Eichelberger, wily, ruthless Mephistopheles; baritone Eugene Brancoveanu, Marguerite's brother Valentin; Erin Neff, Siebel; Patrice Houston, Marthe; and Zachary Gordin, Wagner.

During a telephone chat, Morgan had high praise for all his collaborators. "The cast is outstanding, right down to the smallest part — and the chorus, simply amazing," he said. "With the help of choreographer Mark Foehringer and chorus director Jim Toland, they not only sing well, they also move about the stage and act with exceptional skill."

Because the Faust story is so timeless, Morgan has chosen modern dress for the production. He also acknowledged that the current economy has necessitated a bit of frugality, but it also has encouraged some remarkable creativity — particularly in using visual artist Matthew Antaky's evocative designs as giant backdrops in the production.

Antaky was born to American parents while they were traveling in France. The family settled in Southern California when he was 5. He moved to the Bay Area to study visual and theatrical design at San Francisco State University in 1983. Since then, he has created and collaborated on both scenic and lighting designs for a wide range of performing arts, including dance, opera, theater and music in the United States and throughout the world.

His dance company clients have included the Liss Fain Dance Company, which he accompanied on its recent tour of Belarus, Poland and Russia; the Smuin Ballet; the National Ballet of Peru; the Mark Foehringer Dance Project and many others. He is a six-time nominee and a three-time recipient of the Isadora Duncan Award for outstanding visual design. Among his commissions for opera designs

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have been productions of "La Boheme," "The Barber of Seville," "The Crucible," "Cosi fan tutte," "La Cenerentola," the world premiere of Lou Harrison's "Young Caesar" and Festival Opera's West Coast premiere of the Thornton Wilder/Ned Rorem "Our Town." His designs for symphonic presentations have included Bernstein's "Mass," the Dallas Symphony Orchestra's concert commemorating the 40th anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, the San Francisco World Music Festival and Carnegie Hall concerts.

He explained during a telephone interview that he had created 30 images to be projected onto screens set up onstage as backdrops for Festival Opera's upcoming "Faust." "The designs will change almost imperceptibly, as the action evolves," he said. "For instance, the most colorful of the projections will be during Marguerite's joyful garden scene, which I consider the apex of the story. But the colors will fade out to almost black and white when the Devil comes on stage."

Elaborating further, Antaky said that the projections have allowed the stage props to be very simple, mostly black and white and fairly sparse. A series of platforms and projection screens will be set up on the stage, with a sort of crown molding suspended above. Most of the color in the show will be from the costumes and the projections.

"It's a whole other level of production," he said. "What we are doing is manipulating three-dimensional space to create an environment and set a mood."

Reach Cheryl North at cherylnorth@hotmail.com.

opera Preview WHAT: Festival Opera production of Gounod's "Faust" WHEN: 8 p.m. Aug. 8 and 11; 2 p.m. Aug. 16 WHERE:

Hofmann Theatre, Leshar Center for the Arts, Civic and Locust, Walnut Creek HOW MUCH: \$39-\$100 CONTACT: 925-943-7469 or www.lesherartscenter.org

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