

Why I Consider "FAUST" the Greatest Opera of All

By LUCIEN CESARONI

Signor Lucien Cesaroni and his Grand Opera Company will produce, from 2YA, on Monday, December 14, several well-known scenes from "Faust" and three excerpts from other operas. In this article Cesaroni tells readers, not the story of the opera—that is common knowledge—but why he likes "Faust" and, in particular, the part of Mephistopheles. He, too, vividly describes some of the scenes to be presented.

"FAUST" is the most popular of all operas. The theme is better known than any other and, I think, few operas have been performed so many times. The reason for its popularity is not hard to find. It lies in the natural supernaturalness embodied in the theme—if you will permit my paradox. We have Mephistopheles, perhaps the best-known character in all opera. He is the incarnation of the devil, he performs miracles on the stage—not the ones that need a very liberal imagination to follow but simple tricks such as bringing up the vision of Marguerita, the rejuvenation of Faust, the changing of the wine, and the impersonation in the church scene. These feats the most conservative imaginations will concede as possible to one such as Mephistopheles who, by the way, is the principal character, and not Faust, whose name the opera carries.

Yet Mephistopheles is a human being having the emotions, certainly devilishly conceived, of a normal person who seeks to accomplish his own ends at any cost. Witness the garden scene in Act III, where the wily tongue of Mephistopheles, in the guise of the red cavalier succeeds in attracting the attention of the foolish Martha while Faust courts Marguerita, and succeeds in making the arrangements which culminate in the tragic developments.

Mephistopheles is by no means an easy role to play. The part cannot be modelled on anyone. One must interpret the character as one thinks best and infuse one's own individuality into the interpretation. The character calls for height, depth, contempt, deception, elation, cynicism and to a certain extent sarcasm. It is, I think, these conflicting emotions which make Mephistopheles the character he is. I hope I may be able to interpret a few of them in my presentation of the master spirit.

Of the scenes we are doing the church scene is probably the most famous—it is in fact one of the greatest of all opera. It cannot adequately be portrayed unless the grandest scenery be employed. Even then it calls for the highest intellectual qualities if it is to be appreciated to its fullest. But with the aid of the imagination and radio the scene can be visualised even more ade-

quately than it can be portrayed on the stage. Visualise one of those majestic Old World churches that breathe reverence and inspire awe. Its interior as silent as the grave. Tall Gothic pillars tower upward to support the gigantic arches on which rests the roof; the lines are long drawn out and pointed. Before the magnificently-carved altar is a statue, tall, noble and erect, looking down on the rows and rows of seats that go backward into the dim cloisters. Only a little light can penetrate through the enormous windows, for they are heavily stained and their patterns contain a wealth of detail.

BEFORE the statue of Mary kneels a solitary figure, deserted by her friends, and weeps as she prays for consolation. Another figure enters the church. It is that of a crouching old woman, and she shuffles up to the pew directly behind the praying girl. Drawing herself up on the seat, she too kneels, and in this position is almost right above the girl. There is something uncanny about the old woman, and as the girl kneels she feels some strange power, drawing, drawing, drawing and seeming to say, "Thou art damned—damned—damned." Fearful to look up, she can find no hope.

The choir in the distance chants, and the rolling chords of the cathedral organ are heard, as terrible to the girl's tortured consciousness as the sound of thunder to a timorous, ignorant soul. Far from bringing hope to seal her repentance, the sounds that assail her are menacing, gloomy, sad, forboding, as though Heaven itself added to the Tempter's mockery, the condemnation of a judgment above all human measure of good or evil, eager only to punish and not to forgive.

Gradually the organ and the voices grow quieter, the incarcerations of the evil spirit grow less and all becomes quiet. The girl has fainted (Concluded on page 10)



Over 400 times Cesaroni has played this part—Mephistopheles in "Faust."
—S. P. Andrew photo.

