



**Anthology of
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CSM:39

**REGARDING FAUSTUS
HELEN GIFFORD**

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Regarding Faustus
Helen Gifford

Regarding Faustus is a music-theatre piece in one act (with prologue and two intermezzi). The libretto is by Helen Gifford and Harold Love, and is taken from *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, and various other sources. The sole performer is a tenor who must take the parts of Narrator (prologue), Faustus and Mephistophilis (pre-recorded). The chorus of spirits, who utter a variety of generally unvoiced sounds and choric effects, are pre-recorded. At different times these voices represent, variously, Faustus' mental state, his ambitions, his doubts, and so on, or else they may be sounds or wordless noises made by spirits — angels or devils, good or evil, encouraging or threatening Faustus.

The Faust Legend

The story of a man who sells his soul to the Devil first appeared around the sixth century. The first literary version of the story of Faust was the *Volksbuch*, published in Germany in 1587, and shortly afterwards translated into English

under the title *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*. This translation provided Christopher Marlowe with the dramatic outline of his story.

Marlowe's play was probably the first dramatisation of the Faust legend. The most direct inspiration for the play was the real-life Doctor Faustus, who was born in Kundlingen, Germany in 1480. Doctor Faustus, a notorious necromancer and astrologer, supposedly used a magic lantern to conjure up shadows of the dead. Having lived most of his life in Wittenburg (Hamlet's University town), Faustus eventually died in Freiburg in 1540, when an experiment he was conducting exploded.

Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* was completed in 1592, and immediately became a favourite with theatre-goers throughout Europe. The play, which was regularly performed in England until the closing of all theatres there in 1642, went on to become a staple of the Viennese theatre during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Goethe in fact considered translating Marlowe's text before embarking upon his own play about Faust.

Synopsis of *Regarding Faustus*
(with extracts from the libretto)

The learned scholar, Faustus, is trying to decide on a field of specialisation, but his pride leads him to reject all lawful forms of knowledge in favour of magic:

Had I as many souls as there be stars,
I'd give them all for Mephistophilis.
By him I'll be great Emperor of the world.

Emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man;
A sound magician is a mighty god!

Having made his choice to pursue the forbidden knowledge that can only be had through the black arts, Faustus goes at night to a grove, draws a magic circle and begins his incantations. He succeeds in raising Mephistophilis, Lucifer's agent. But when Mephistophilis' voice is heard it seems to be an altered form of Faustus' own voice.

At Mephistophilis' direction, Faustus draws up a deed of gift of his soul for 24 years — a year for every hour of the day. As he reads over the bond, spirit voices are heard repeating each clause after his three times backwards. Faustus stabs his arm and signs with his own blood, and at once experiences a fierce exhilaration of power as the spirits rush to serve him.

Time for Faustus now stands still, and he begins his promised 24 years of power. All his ambitions are now being realised. The spirits reveal to him the mysteries of astronomy, and bring to him a paramour more beautiful than any living woman, so as to take his mind off growing misgivings about the pact. To further distract Faustus, the spirits bring him a crown and rich apparel. Intoxicated by all this, Faustus reaches the summit of his arrogance with the words: 'A sound magician is a mighty god!' The First Intermezzo now marks the passing of some 20 years. When he re-appears, Faustus' mood has changed to one of agitation and remorse as he realises how little he has gained from his bargain, and how much he has lost. He tries to repent, but has grown too hardened to succeed:

I gave my soul for my cunning! God forbid!
God forbade it indeed: but Faustus hath done it: for vain pleasure of twenty-four years hath Faustus lost eternal joy and felicity. I writ a bill with mine own blood: the date is expired; the time will come, and he will fetch me.

Faustus tries to repent:

Have I not made blind Homer sing to me
Of Alexander's love and Oenon's death?
And hath not he built the walls of Thebes
With ravishing sound of his melodious harp,
Made music with my Mephistophilis?

Tell me where is this place that men call hell?
Come, I think hell's a fable. Think'st thou, Faustus,
That after this life, there is any pain?
Tush; these are trifles, and mere old wives tales.
What boots it then to think of God or heaven?
Away with such vain fancies, and despair.

Now go not backward: no, Faustus, be resolute:
Why waver'st thou? O, something soundeth in mine ears
'Abjure this magic, turn to God again!'
Ay, and Faustus will turn to God again.
To God? — He loves thee not —
The God thou serv'st is thine own appetite.
Why should I die then, or basely despair?
I am resolved: Faustus shall ne'er repent!

...
Damned art thou, Faustus, damned;
despair and die!
Hell calls for right, and with a roaring voice
Says 'Faustus! Come! Thine hour is come!'
And Faustus will come to do thee right.

The Second Intermezzo concludes with the clock striking eleven. Faustus' despair has now intensified:

Ah, Faustus,
Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,
And then thou must be damned perpetually!
Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,

That time may cease, and midnight
never come;
Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again and
make
Perpetual day; or let this hour be but
A year, a month, a week, a natural day,
That Faustus may repent and save his
soul!
O lente, lente, currite noctis equi!
The stars move still, time runs, the
clock will strike,
The devil will come, and Faustus must
be damned.

Faustus utters his final appeal for help:

O God!
If thou wilt not have mercy on my soul,
Yet for Christ's sake, whose blood hath
ransomed me,
Impose some end to my incessant
pain;
Let Faustus live in hell a thousand
years —
A hundred thousand, and — at last —
be saved!

The half-hour passes, and finally the
clock starts to strike twelve, when amid
thunder and lightning, devils appear to
claim Faustus for Lucifer and carry him
off to Hell:

O, it strikes, it strikes! Now, body, turn
to air,
Or Lucifer will bear thee quick to hell!
O soul, be changed into little water-
drops,
And fall into the ocean — ne'er be
found.
My God! My God! Look not so fierce
on me!
Adders and serpents, let me breathe
awhile!
Ugly hell, gape not! Come not, Lucifer!
I'll burn my books! Ah, Mephistophilis!
Ah —

Libretto and notes by Helen Gifford
and Harold Love

Musical Director: Robert Gavin

Tenor: Robert Gard

Flute/Piccolo: Sylvie Leprohon,
Michael Sargeant

Cor Anglais: Stephen Robinson,
Geoffrey Dodd

Bassoon: Amanda Earle

Horn: Eric Bramble

Trumpet: Philip Ryan

Violin: Stephen McTaggart

'Cello: Andrew Zreczycki, Andrew Weiss

Harp: Marshall McGuire

Mandolin: Joy Peterson

Percussion: Robert Clarke,
Christine Turpin, Barry Quinn, Ron Burns

Chorus: Shauna Beesley,
Connie Calwell, Marion Ewan,
Jane Hammond, Helen Hassell,
Yvonne Turner

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Studio 325 (Waverley Theatre), Melbourne

BIOGRAPHIES

Helen Gifford has composed over a
range of genres, including chamber,
orchestral, and music for theatre. In 1996
she was awarded a Doctorate of Letters
(*Honoris Causa*) by Monash University,
Australia. Most recently Helen has written
works for the Astra Choir, including
*Choral Scenes: The Western Front, World
War I* (1999), a 50-minute work for choir
and instruments that sets to music
English, French and German verse from
the period. This was followed in 2001 by
Catharsis, for unaccompanied choir.

Harold Love is a professor emeritus in the
School of Literary, Visual and Performance
Studies at Monash University. Professor
Love has written on the history of opera
performance in Australia.

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