

## MEFISTOFELE

Arrigo Boito

**Prologue.** In the heavens, angels and cherubim sing the praises of God. The fallen angel Mefistofele politely but sardonically greets the Almighty from a distance, remarking that human beings, the lords of the earth, seem to him so feeble that he scarcely has the heart to tempt them. The mystic choir asks, "Do you know Faust?" Mefistofele replies that he does indeed know that strange madman, whose thirst for knowledge leads him past man's usual capacities. The mystic choir accepts his wager that he can lead Faust to damnation. Mefistofele remarks that he likes to visit with God, the "Old Man," occasionally and have Him speak so humanly with the devil. The cherubim, who remind Mefistofele of a swarm of bees, start singing more songs of praise, and he retires. The chorus, augmented by the voices of earthly penitents and celestial phalanxes, swells in glorifying the Eternal One.

**Act I.** On Easter Sunday in Frankfurt, during the sixteenth century, groups of citizens gather in a festive mood. The old scholar Dr. Faust remarks to his pupil Wagner that spring has brought hope and beauty to the earth again, but Wagner tolerates the vulgar throng only for the sake of his master. Further celebration and wild dancing are stilled by the onset of darkness. Though apprehensive about spirits, Wagner thinks little of a gray friar who has been moving about them, but Faust notices that his steps leave traces of fire and that he seems to be forming a circle or drawing a net around them. When they leave, the friar follows them.

At night in Faust's study, the friar enters unnoticed and conceals himself as Faust muses on the sleeping world and on what means most to him — the search for knowledge and good. As he starts to read the Scriptures, the friar lets out a cry and shows himself to be Mefistofele, dressed like a gentleman of the world. Questioned as to his identity, he says he is the spirit that denies everything and answers the universe with a whistle of defiance. He offers his services on earth in exchange for those of Faust in hell. Faust is less concerned about an afterlife than about achieving one perfect moment of contentment, a moment so beautiful that he would ask time to stop for it. Agreeing on this, the two make a contract.

**Act II.** In the garden near Margherita's house, Faust walks with the girl while Mefistofele entertains and distracts her widowed neighbor, Marta. When Margherita asks Faust whether he believes in religion, he says he can neither affirm nor deny that he believes, having faith in nature, love, mystery and life. She tries to leave, but he inquires whether they can ever be alone together, to which she replies that her mother shares her bed and is a very light sleeper. Faust gives her some sleeping potion to make sure the old lady does not wake up, then woos Margherita ardently. Their declarations are interrupted by Marta and Mefistofele, returning from a stroll.

In the valley of Schirk, bounded by the heights of Brocken, the witches' sabbath is about to take place. Mefistofele leads Faust toward the place, and they are greeted by will-o'-the-wisps, witches and sorcerers, who hail Mefistofele as their ruler. They present him with a glass globe, which he proclaims is the world, capable of reflecting and continuing everything. With scornful laughter he hurls the globe down and smashes it. Faust sees a vision of Margherita in chains, the mark of an executioner's ax on her neck. Mefistofele tries to disabuse him of the notion as the infernal orgy reaches its height.

**Act III.** The delirious Margherita is in prison, imagining that her tormentors have made up stories, saying she drowned her baby and poisoned her mother, in order to drive her mad. Mefistofele

helps Faust gain entrance to the cell to rescue her. Margherita greets Faust but sorrowfully notices that his love for her seems to have died. She says she cannot leave the prison, because of her crimes and her fear of the outside world, but he tries to calm her with visions of escape to a faraway island. Mefistofele urges haste, because daybreak is at hand; seeing him, Margherita breaks into fearful fantasies about her approaching execution, then mourns the fact that today was to have been her wedding day. Dying, she renounces Faust and prays for heavenly pardon. Mefistofele pronounces her damned, but heavenly voices declare her saved. As the two men make their escape, guards and the waiting headsman are seen, cheated of their victim.

**Act IV.** In a valley of ancient Greece, the classical Sabbath is under way. Elena (Helen of Troy) summons sirens and nymphs to serenade her. In the distance, the voice of Faust is heard calling Elena as he dreams of her; he has asked Mefistofele to lead him to this legendary land, where the devil feels much less at ease than among his subjects of hell. Elena, carried away by a vision of the sack of Troy, cries out and describes the horrible night of the vanquished. Faust enters and hails Elena as the ideal of classical beauty. Her courtiers retire, leaving the pair to join in a hymn to the mysterious power of love.

**Epilogue.** Faust, again an old man, is back in his study. Mefistofele stands behind him and reminds him death is near. Faust reflects on happy experiences but regrets that none of them ever struck him as so beautiful that he wanted to make time stand still. Though he has experienced everything — the love of a mortal maiden, the love of a goddess — reality has been grief, the ideal just a dream. Now at last he conceives of a higher dream, seeing himself as ruler of a peaceful realm, secure in wisdom and justice. Such a realm could create heaven on earth, and Mefistofele is shaken by it, fearing he may yet lose the wager for Faust's soul. As voices of heavenly cohorts are heard praising the Lord, Mefistofele tries desperate means to lure Faust away from his vision, conjuring up sirens to tempt him. But Faust kneels, grasping the Bible, aware that his vision is one of paradise and eternity. Recognizing it as the one fleeting vision he would wish to stay, he falls dead. Cherubim appear, showering roses on Faust — and on Mefistofele, who retreats in torment from them and from the dawning light. Whistling his last defiance, he returns to his own domain as heavenly forces claim the soul of the redeemed Faust.