The Music of Fausto
— Kris Stroobants

Fausto is about how the very powerful new information technologies being developed today are beginning to impact our beliefs, desires, and behaviors, including in such esoteric domains as immortality, mystic experiences, incarnation, or access to universal knowledge. Given this orientation to present-day technology, one might expect that the music of Fausto follows contemporary trends in electronic and computer music, stretches experimentally the limits of instruments and voices, or uses formalistic approaches to composition as pioneered in serial music and characteristic of the 'new music' of today's composers. However, this is not the case.

Composer Luc Steels goes back to the roots of the European opera tradition which was born at the end of the 16th century through the work of Italian composers such as Emilio de' Cavalieri, Giulio Caccini and Claudio Monteverdi. He puts the text and its meaning at the core of his work and employs the traditional means of melody, rhythm, harmony and expressiveness entirely in the service of the story and its main characters. Steels has a knack for coming up with catching melodies and harmonisations that many listeners spontaneously call beautiful.

The orchestra is kept small with basic strings and classical woodwind instruments (flute, oboe, english horn, clarinet and bassoon), and and one brass instrument (horn). The main characters sing as tenor (Fausto), baritone (Mephisto) and soprano (Margherita). Similar to baroque oratoria, the choir plays different roles, sometimes commenting on the action, sometimes echoing and enhancing what solists are singing, sometimes evoking additional characters. There is no percussion section nor keyboards. Everything is without amplification. This way the opera strives for intimacy and helps to focus the audience entirely on the dramatic content.

The basic structure of Fausto follows that of baroque operas with a succession of arias, recitativo's, duets, choral interventions, and short instrumental pieces. Each one of these is designed to support the dramatic action that unfolds on stage and the psychological development of the characters. This return to the basic materials of our powerful Western musical tradition does not imply that the music of Fausto follows rigidly the compositional techniques of the baroque or classical period. True, there are some arias that are reminiscent of Haendel or Vivaldi, but quite often the classical harmonic framework is transcended with atonal fragments, sharp dissonants, and uncertain harmonies, even though these transgressions always remain functional, designed to symbolize meaning. They are never used as purely formal structuralist devices, employed for their own sake.

Although it is not easy to give a simple characterization of the many stylistic compositional techniques that Steels is using, there are two compositional mechanisms that are prominent in Fausto: allusion and montage. Montage is a stylistic principle pioneered in cinema, particularly by

Eisenstein and his contemporary. It tries to convey symbolic meaning by stringing together and juxtaposing different images which resonate individually but also create new emergent meaning as a whole. In the case of opera, the images are of course musical, not in the sense of naturalistic imitations of environmental sounds but in the form of allusions or echoes to musical masterpieces and styles that belong to the common Western musical heritage. They thus invoke the emotions and meanings that those pieces tend to invoke.

An allusion is different from a direct plain quotation. Rhythmic, melodic or harmonic elements from existing works are integrated, remixed, and often only briefly mentioned. Listeners are vaguely aware that they heard something similar. The re-use and remix triggers unconsciously traces in the musical memories of the audience that then merges with the newly created melodies or harmonies.

Sometimes the allusion is only a single word, like "Libiamo" (let's toast), which begins the taverna scene (III.1), alluding to Verdi's 'La Traviata' where the first party scene starts with the same word. The rest of this aria uses however an entirely different melody and rhythm. Sometimes the allusion is made by adopting a similar harmonic/rhythmic structure but using novel melodic and accompanying details, as in Margherita's suicide scene (I.5. Fausto addio), which unconsciously evokes Haendel's 'Lascia ch'io pianga' (leave me to weep). Haendel and other baroque composers constantly used a similar technique: reintegrating and adapting fragments of their own musical materials or that of oth-

er composers for new musical contexts. In earlier time periods, music could only be heard once and composers therefore had to make use of existing materials in order to pull their audience quickly into familiar terrain from which new musical creativity could thrive.

The choice of musical sources in Fausto is far from accidental. For example, in scene IV.4 the choir takes the role of a group of digital replicants that have already been uploaded and live in the Cloud. Fausto is at the tipping point of resolving his primary dilemma: staying alive but away from Margherita or uploading himself to the Cloud thus reaching wisdom (gnosis), immortality and reunion with his true love. It is almost self-evident that the music here should allude to Gluck's incredibly dramatic and sorrowful opera Orfeo. Like Eurydice, Margherita is already in the other world and Fausto is on a quest to get her back. Like Orfeo, Fausto has been given a strong constraint: He should not touch Margherita otherwise all is lost. Steels has reappropriated the harmonic and rhythmic structure from Gluck's original composition in this scene, throwing the listener irrevocably into the mood of absolute sadness and eminent danger as well as expressing the dilemma in which Fausto finds himself.

Another example is in the final scene (IV.5 Hai fatto la scelta giusta) which makes allusions to Erik Satie's master piece 'Socrate': the rhythmic/melodic structure in the beginning and a series of chord progressions towards the end. Socrate is based on Plato's dialog Phaedo and describes the passing away of Socrates by drinking poison. Platonism has had very strong ties and

influences on gnostic thought, through its insistence on innate ideas, perfect knowledge, immortality, and reincarnation. Socrates or Plato themselves do not appear in Fausto but through these musical allusions they are indirectly present.

Such musical reference to gnostic tradition happens also in the Coda for which the music is closely based on a fragment of Emilio de' Cavalieri's oratorio 'Rappresentazione di anima e di corpo' (the representation of the soul and the body) but using the ending phrases of Goethe's Faust II, the famous 'Das ewig weibliche zieht uns hinan' (The Eternal-Feminine draws us upwards), which is itself an allusion to Dante's "Elle in suso, ed io in lei guardava" (from the Divina Comedia 11,22). De Cavalieri's oratorio, written in 1600, the time when the original dr. Faust was roaming around in Germany and Holland, treats the same topics as Fausto: immortality, the relation between soul and body, re-incarnation.

These various allusions are sprinkled throughout the score and complement the original fragments written by Luc Steels. Overall, we get a coherent fascinating musical tapestry that rolls from one emotion to another, with beautiful passages and expressive moments of anger, hubris, fear, or disappointment. Some people have declared opera to be dead or dying. But here we see that the traditional musical language of opera with its incredibly rich history can still give rise to novel musical experiences and can not only touch contemporary audiences but also be enjoyed greatly by the musicians who bring this music to life.