Ruth Padel, Output from *Criticism Now* ROH Project

Agreed Output:

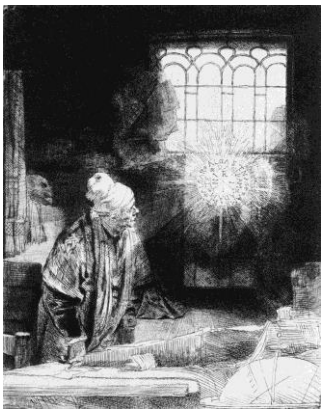
Blogs and Programme Notes, sent to Mark Turner, Andrew O'Hagan and Katherine Bond throughout residency
Press Articles, if arranged by ROH office (they were not)
S*eminar* for the KCL students I also accompanied to dress rehearsals

Contents

Linbury Programme: THROUGH HIS TEETH and THE CRACKLE

Ever since the sixteenth century, artists, poets, dramatists and composers have interpreted Faust through the lens of their own era. The story has endless everyday echoes. You do something you know you should not do but fail to realize you will pay for it all your life. You sign a deal without reading the small print. That credit card seems to offer all you want but makes you lose all you care about. You let someone get a hold over you, someone who at first seems easy to control. "How pliant is this Mephistopheles," says Faust at the beginning of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus.* "Full of obedience and humility." But this helpful person has his own agenda and is out to destroy you.

The landscape of Faust's temptation is the mundane and the familiar: your own frustration with the limits of your life. In 1650 Rembrandt showed Faust sitting at his desk in the safety of his own home, dissatisfied with his life. Mephistopheles enters in a burst of apparent illumination and the magical changes he offers lead to Faust's damnation.



In Matthew Herbert's opera *The Crackle*, Faust is George, a music teacher in his late 30s who runs a late-night phone-in radio show. He wins an award for a music text book but his work is not attracting sponsors and Susanna, mother of one of his pupils, tells him she has discovered he is due for redundancy.

Waiting for callers on his show, George admits that in this funding-obsessed society he now despairs of the arts, and even of what he most loves, music. This is Mephistopheles' cue. As in Rembrandt's etching, the devil comes in from outside.

But not through a Gothic window. In *The Crackle*, everything is sound. You never see Mephistopheles, you only hear his footsteps, the swish of his coat and his voice. He phones George on his show and says he is a developer. With cutting-edge hardware and software he can make George's work huge. He can plug him in, hook him up. Get an app called Chirp, he says, on your phone.

When George downloads Chirp, Susanna calls in too. She's been listening. In some versions of Faust, like Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c.1590) Faust is a

lone figure. In others, such as Goethe's tragedy (1806-1829) and Gounod's opera (1859), Mephistopheles helps him seduce an innocent girl called Gretchen or Marguerite. Her life is destroyed; but she might possibly, in the end, redeem Faust by her prayers.

Susanna in *The Crackle* is a bit of a Gretchen. She admires George and wants to help him. Chirp turns pictures into sounds, and music into pictures (Chirp is for real**:** you can get it on your phone) and Susanna says Chirp is exactly what George needs to save his job and get recognition.

Electronic sound is the medium of this opera but is also the way in which (along with our own dissatisfaction and frustration) the devil ensnares us. The all too credible temptation offered by Mephistopheles is electronic technology. We are so used to the maddening mysteries of IT. Few of us ask questions about how it really operates, we just want it to work for us. Would we know if it was the devil's magic?

In exchange for the codes that access Chirp, Mephistopheles asks George to raise money for charity on his radio show by staging a music event with his pupils. Susanna, a lawyer, begins to think there is something fishy about this charity but George's students (played by the Royal Opera House's *Youth Opera Company*) are enraptured by devil's IT playthings. First by Chirp, then by a machine which appears magically in their classroom. They perform for the radio show, money starts pouring in for the charity and George realizes too late what Mephistopheles was really after.

Through His Teeth by Luke Bedford has no supernatural element. The evil, the lies that come so smoothly between initially smiling teeth, are all too human. The focus is on how one human being can get other people in his power: conman who bewitches many different women simultaneously. None knows about the others. Each woman believes he works for MI5, is in danger of his life, and only she can help him. Each gives him huge sums of money, borrows from her family, breaks off contact with everyone close to her, loses her home and her hold on reality.

This charismatic fraudster, a persuasively human Mephistopheles, is a sexy psychopath called Robert. Eventually Robert is caught, tried and sentenced and the opera opens with a TV interviewer asking one of his victims for her story.

So Faust here is a woman, Robert's victim. Though there is a touch of Gretchen about her too: all along she has been trying to, as she thought, help a man she did not realize was through and through corrupt.

She agrees to do the TV interview, hoping to get free of the experience by describing what Robert did. The interview introduces a series of flashbacks beginning with her meeting Robert in a car salesroom. She did not want a car but did consciously or unconsciously want a new relationship.

Again, the window through which the devil enters is dissatisfaction with ordinary life. Making Faust a woman emphasizes the seductiveness of Mephistopheles and she loves sex with Robert. ("Eleven out of ten.") But more

widely, what Mephistopheles peddles as a car salesman is new dreams, vehicles for escaping from your old life and taking you to a new one fast, which may cost more than you can afford, run you over, pollute the world.

As her memories unfold, scene morphs into scene, revealing Robert's Iago-like enmeshment of her soul. Perforated screens glide across the stage. They ripple against each other, their light and dark suggesting her easy slide into Robert's power and the slipperiness of his persona. Now you see it, now you don't. Now he's tender, now he's terrifying.

In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Faust asks how Mephistopheles managed to get out of hell to visit him. "Why, this is hell," Mephistopheles replies, "nor am I out of it." Hell is wherever you meet and open up to Mephistopheles. In *Through His Teeth*, hell is believing Robert's paranoia-inducing lies.

In some versions, Faust's soul is saved by Gretchen's prayers for him. The victim whose story we follow is saved – just - by realizing Robert is a liar. "Guilty, guilty, guilty." When she meets another of his victims, she gets a glimpse of what *could* have happened. If she had gone on believing in Robert she would never have left hell.

Faust's story began in sixteenth-century Germany and also in Christian theology. Five hundred years later we are more ambivalent about religion and the supernatural. On the one hand we are increasingly secularized: churches in the UK are closing at the rate of two a week. On the other, we are increasingly fundamentalized. As we face unprecedentedly powerful new technologies with incalculable moral consequences, faith schools are on the rise while astrology and the Tarot are ever more popular.

Anyone basing an opera nowadays on a story rooted in Christian salvation and damnation has to make a big decision. Do you go for the secular and eliminate the devil, or dress him in contemporary garb? Each of these operas taken a different, and frighteningly convincing, option. Faust's story may be ancient but it speaks to every age.

Main House Programme

MAKING SPACE SING: Watching Rehearsals of Gounod's *Faust*

Watching this revival of David McVicar's *Faust* take shape as Covent Garden's first Writer in Residence has made me think about ways in which the theatre space and music of opera reflect each other.

Opera and its fore-runner Greek tragedy let us see and hear the inward, the unseen: what people feel at turning-points of their lives. Plots may seem over the top - surreal, extravagant or absurd, as visual effects often suggest. But the heart of opera is intimate: the intense musical expression of the most powerful feelings - love, terror, abandonment - we all experience.

The word we get *scenery* from is *skene*, the wall which hid actors from audience in the Athenian Theatre of Dionysus. It was invented around 460 BC and had a central door but seems soon also to have been painted with receding, fore-shortened pillars to represent tragedy's archetypal house or family. This illusion of depth (which led to the development of architectural perspective in Western art) gestured inward through a real door to hidden space where violent acts took place. It was also a visual metaphor for that other imagined inwardness full of violence, the hero's psyche. The door opened to expose the house as words and music exposed feeling in the hero.

Another key development in opera's spatial syntax came with Wagner, who wanted to make music drama to "express our innermost being." *Tristan's* first performance was 1865 (midway between Gounod's two versions of *Faust*) and Adolphe Appia's later work on it realized Wagner's dream visually by revolutionizing stage lighting. "Light that matters on the stage," said Appia, "is light that casts a shadow". As in sculpture the black areas, light's absence, direct th audience's feelings about the actors. No more gaslights for the whole auditorium. We sit in darkness now, out emotional attention directed by spotlights moving with the singers.

But spotlighting can only bring out the symbolism which the music creates.

"I love this production," the conductor Maurizio Benini says, gazing through the cathedral-like space of Rehearsal Room One where the 2004 *Faust* is set up. "The best I've ever seen. So many *Fausts* are traditional and nothing else. This is *intelligent*."

This set expresses the battle of good and evil in the language of nineteenth-century French painting. The devil's box of temptations sits on the left, opposite the church cloister, beside a gilt loggia. "Faust is Gounod," the revival director Bruno Ravello says. "He was a man of the church, torn between art and God."

It is a privilege to watch both conductor and director at work and realize the complex dove-tailing of their different arts crafting every movement, gesture and glance into every bar of music. The director's score has music on one side and a

diagram of the stage on the other. Stage managers, responsible for the journey of every inanimate object on stage and off, stick Post It notes into their scores keeping track of every prop and garment.

I am watching creation as well as recreation. Bryn Terfel and Simon Keenlyside sang in the 2004 production but have done so much since, how can they remember the moves? And anyway Faust, and both Marguerites, are new.

For the death of Marguerite's brother Valentin, Bruno moves his music stand centre stage to talk Sonya Yoncheva through Marguerite's reaction. "You're in your house, Valentin's on the floor, you look out of the window then come down quickly."

Sonya goes into the *skene*, appears at the open window, disappears, then comes rushing down the steps. It looks natural but she can't hear the music there. It has to be minutely timed with a stage manager giving her cues behind the *skene*.

"Ca y'est!" calls Bruno. Sonya is Bulgarian. She, Bruno and Benini work in a mix of Italian, French and English they don't seem to notice which. "Now run to your brother."

Valentin pushes her away. "O Dieu!" sings Sonya and the conductor comes forward.

Everything gives way to the music. They spend ten minutes on *O Dieu*, getting colour and tone, a sudden gasp not a lingering cry. Every sound Sonya makes is beautiful. It is a privilege to hear these thrilling voices when they sing out. But in rehearsal they often don't. The beauty is taken for granted. What matters is giving it the perfect context. Benini and Yoncheva polish the musical interpretation while the director waits, attentive but silent.

Then Valentin sings one of the most painful lines in the opera. Dying, he repulses the sister whose image he used to keep round his throat. "Even if God pardons you, be cursed here below." *Si dieu te pardonne, ssois moudite d'ici bas*. As the beautiful voice and terrible words ring out from the floor - *sois maudite… sois maudite* - I realize again what opera does: focus universal conflict down to the intimate, to a particular relationship. This heart-breaking voice is singing pain which relationships can make us all feel.

"It's horrible," says Sonya, out of character. The gorgeous voice and dreadful words have touched us all.

"You could collapse here," says Bruno to her, moving on.

BLOG www.ruthpadel.com, Feb-April 2014

#1 What is Opera Anyway?

If you look into the window of Masala Zone in Floral Street Covent Garden you see large Indian puppets suspended from the ceiling. Stirred by the air conditioning, all kohl eyelashes and curly moustaches, they swing gently in metallic robes, gold, glitter-green and blue: dancers and kings, demons and goddesses, and camel-puppets whose gaze is fixed on the other side of the desert.

This sunny March morning, I'm at the back boundary of the Royal Opera House. The Italian restaurant at the corner is titled, in faded flowery letters, *La Ballerina*. Floral Street is the borderland of the exotic, the luxurious and faraway, skilled in suspending everything from ritzy costumes to disbelief.

But next to Masala Zone is the door to the Royal Ballet School, gateway to one of the most demanding and disciplined arts in the world. And opposite is the Artists' Entrance to the Opera House itself. These glass doors are less flamboyant. Opera is "works" in Latin. It's a plural word and as I enter, I think it perhaps evokes the many demanding skills, from electricians to conductors, that go into making a performance on an opera house stage.

I'm here to pick up something wonderful: a pass to wherever, backstage.

I'm going to be Writer in Residence to the Royal Opera for two months, , attached to a new project, two years in the planning.

The Opera House has two performing spaces, the big traditional Main House which seats 2,256 people and the Linbury Studio Theatre, opened in 1999, which seats fewer than 400 and is dedicated to more intimate, contemporary work. This spring, the Opera House is rehearsing three operas at the same time on the theme of Faust. The Main House will rehearse Gounod's *Faust*, an opera I have never seen: but I do know it is grand opera in the grandest style. Just what Floral Street ordered: lots of glitter, luxury, exotic demons and a good gazes at the faraway. It will open April 4th but meanwhile the Opera House has also commissioned two new small operas for the Linbury Theatre, written by two very different contemporary composers, Luke Bedford and Matthew Herbert whose operas open April 5th and 8th .

Commissioned to write operas on the theme of Faust, Luke and Matthew have have come up with two utterly different, original and exciting contemporary takes on the ancient legend and I will be going in to these rehearsals first.

Luke's opera *Through His Teeth* begins with a television interview after a high-profile fraud trial. Matthew's opera *The Crackle* begins in a school classroom and features Chirp: an iPhone/Android app which turns pictures on your mobile phone into sounds. IN an initial interview, a production assistant has already taken a photo of me on her phone and turned it into something that sounds like a sparrow on Speed.

I'm going to watch their rehearsals and talk to singers, conductors, composers, directors, designers. I'll be tweeting from rehearsals, and here I'll describe watching the work develop. I want to find out about the many activities of the Royal Opera House and interview as many people involved in creating opera as I can: designers, directors, conductors, composers, singers, lighting engineers, stage managers and stage hands whose hard work goes into making opera. I want to ask what opera is, why we need it in the twenty-first century and how we, the public, can respond to it. We all share our opinions, criticism and enjoyment of new films and TV programmes: why not about opera, too?

#2 “I want to see that Energy”: Children Rehearsing The Crackle

“Breathe with your whole body – I want to see that energy! Don’t make it a frozen moment of stillness – I want active wonder, five bars of wonder OK? After that, the only people who have any movement are the soloists.” I‘m in the Clore Studio Upstairs at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, watching a rehearsal of Matthew Herbert’s new opera The Crackle with forty-seven schoolchildren from the Youth Opera Company team and their director Karen Gillingham.

Faust in The Crackle is George: a well-meaning schoolteacher regarded by the school governors and his younger contemporaries as a jolly good sort but a bit passé. Mephistopheles seduces him with electronic technology. In this scene George’s pupils become entranced by what the devil’s brought.

Karen Gillingham is directing them.

“You come in and find this wonderful machine in your classroom! Imagine it in your head. Close your eyes.”

The children are learning the magic of stage language, how to build group reaction by movement as well as song. They know the score. This machine – represented at the moment by a few chairs – is evil but they have to think it’s terrific. The sunlit studio is filled with silent intense imagining. Karen divides them in three groups.

“You come in breathing wonder, can’t take your eyes off it, If you do, it might do something to you!”

“One lot sees it and stand back, another lot – you, on the right- go right up and start measuring. You can’t take your eyes off it. If you do, it might do something to you! Go!”

Tumbling, excited, they rush in from three directions, acting amazement. But they forget about the tape on the studio floor which marks the walls of the stage wings and the entrances.

“You’ve just gone through a wall!” says Karen. “You have to go round the tape on the floor.”

They laugh and mill and start chattering. It’s like taking the cork out of a fizzy bottle and you realize the immense child energy Karen is channelling and Tim is conducting.

“Hip!” calls Karen and they snap to attention. “Hop!” they immediately answer from all over the taped stage and become again an obedient chorus, drilled and responsive.
“Now, off you go!”

Tim Murray the conductor lifts his hand, they watch the tip of his red pencil and start singing, “Have you seen this thing?” turning to each other, acting a brilliantly convincing fearful wonder, just right for something magicked into their classroom by an invisible Mephistopheles.

| Tagged Covent Garden. Crackle, Crackle, Faust, Opera

#3 How to Get Opera into The Archers: Crackle Rehearsals for Faust at Covent Garden

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Ruth's Opera Blog for The Faustian Pack of three operas at Royal Opera House, Covent Garden

The Clore Studio Upstairs in Covent Garden, where the Youth Opera children are rehearsing The Crackle at half-term and on Saturdays, is a rehearsal studio-cum-third-performance-space for audiences of up to 200. A lovely, intimate laboratory space, lit by a roof-light. I think it feels, full of children's alert and excited faces, like an open air courtyard.

This was built to supplement the bigger spaces at the Royal Opera House. So much about opera is contrast between the glittery front and the gritty hard work that goes into the illusion. But from the 1990's on, Covent Garden has worked hard to create the best conditions in which all the hard work gets done and this little jewel is the result.

I'm sitting on a bench in it with a coffee, watching the Youth Opera musician-actors react to Faust's evil machine.

Poor old Faust. This one is called George. Marlowe's Faust is ambitious - he throws away all his knowledge because learning hasn't won him the recognition he desires. But he was a good man once. "Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight," say the chorus when the devil whisks Faust away to hell. "And burned is Apollo's laurel bough,/That sometime grew within this learned man."

Matthew Herbert's Faust is a good man too. George is a passionate educator. He wants to inspire students as well as impress his line managers: that's how Mephistopheles traps him.

I'm sitting beside Opera Learning Manager Fiona Lambert and she too is a passionate educator. She directs programmes of opera projects for everyone, kids to adults. Her brief, from The Royal Opera House, is opening opera up to new people in new ways.

There, I suddenly think, is a beautiful possibility for opera in The Archers. Because I keep coming back to the question a musician friend asked me the other day: why does no one in The Archers listen to classical music? Why don't they ever mention opera – which is not the elitist bandwagon it once was? Opera today is a fun, passionately involving, often political mix of drama and music. And ever since Benjamin Britten began recreating English opera, children have loved performing in it.

Beside Fiona sits Rosina, Deputy Stage Manager for The Crackle, tearing the cellophane off 47 new plastic set squares and tape measures. Props for opera these days are a far cry from tiaras and scimitars.

"Where do you find the children?" I ask.
They look a lovely disparate lot: casual, alert and into everything.

"All over," Fiona says. "Rather than tapping into a single well-behaved class like a choral school, a choir already singing beautifully, we look for talent in places where there's no obvious recruitment path. They do three workshops – and then join the company. They rehearse on Saturdays."

Lucky children, I think, watching them measure the devil's machine, learning the real magic – of angels not devils – of rehearsal, stage discipline, the melding together of speech, drama and song.

Couldn't just one Archers' grandchild have the fun of performing in a community opera – say, in the Corn Exchange Borchester or – if the getting kids to rehearsals logistics are too difficult - how about Ambridge Village Hall? Or a barn on somebody's farm?

#4 “Faust – Fragile”: and Mephistopheles as Car Salesman

Ruth’s Opera Blog for A Faustian Pack of three operas at Royal Opera House, Covent Garden is part of Criticism Now, a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London

The two new Faustian operas are being put together a long way from the Grand Guignol of Covent Garden.

Rehearsals are in the Jerwood Studios, Union Street, Southwark. I make my way there from the tube. Wire netting in an empty lot where I’m sure an architectural salvage yard once stood - it must have been knocked down - rusts around random cars: some are shiny and finny, others have the bloom of paint on metal that will never be renewed. Life is coming in, life is going out: this neighbourhood is changing fast.

Outside the Studios are bikes and a lorry unloading. Inside, there’s a café, a conservatory, a stone fountain and rehearsal rooms. Bright and clear, with beautiful floors. Silvery sunlight throws window-shadows on a white wall.

Today is the first moment of coming together: the singers meet composers, directors, lighting director, stage manager and deputies, conductors, producers the lot. I marvel at the diverse talent around me in the room and greet Claire Shovelton, Manager of the Chroma Orchestra which will play for *Through His Teeth*. I’ve met her before, at a friend’s launch.

I meet the two repetiteurs: the pianists cum assistant conductors. The designer, Becs Andrews, a young prize-winning designer, has somehow designed a set which will work for both utterly different operas, and is going to show everyone the model.

A large cardboard box has just arrived marked FAUST. FRAGILE. I gaze at Becs with awe. When I was eight I had one of those toy Pollocks Theatres. I adored it, but it was fiddly, the stage sets fell about, I was clumsy and impatient and never got it going properly. But I've always loved the magic box of a little theatre. An altar, a vanishing point where what happens between people is always important. The shaped empty space where miracles happen.

I was once interviewed for a column called My Other Life, in which writers say what they would have loved to do if they hadn't gone in for this strange addictive thing called writing.

What I've always wanted to be is a theatre – and ideally an opera – director. I'm fascinated by how the direction works with the design. How do they get just that colour to work with just that gesture at that key moment of interchange between two people: to bring out some peak or pivot of relationship – and, in opera, of music? Here's my chance to find out.

Becs, I imagine, couldn't be clumsy or impatient if she tried. She worked, she tells me, over Christmas and New Year without a break and has produced a set which can be used, with a few changes, for these two very different pieces which she must have thought about for months.

This morning she is taking us through Luke Bedford's exploration of Faust in his opera *Through His Teeth* with libretto by David Harrower.

Here, Mephistopheles is a conman who bewitches many different women – none of them knows about the others – into believing he works for MI5, is in danger of his life, and only they can help him – by giving him incredible amounts of money. They borrow from their families, lose contact with everyone close to them, their lives are destroyed – and eventually the guy is caught and charged and they realize it was all lies.

Luke's opera begins after the court case, with a TV interviewer asking one of the victims for her story.

There is no supernatural element here: Luke and David are focussing on the Faustian power one human being can wield over another. Robert, the philandering defrauding psychopathic lover, may be evil but he's human. That makes A, his victim, Faust.

Becs takes us through the scenes. She has designed brilliant perforated black sliding screens which shift the scenes quickly from one to the other. An image of A's sliding consciousness, perhaps, or the slipperiness of Robert's lies. With precise fingers, never a wobble in sight, Becs shows how the set changes. The interview set-up slides away and the set morphs into the woman's memory: and a car sale-room where she first met this man.

Mephistopheles, a car salesman?

Of course, I think. That's what the devil offers: shiny new dreams. World-polluting vehicles for getting away getting to a new place fast.

#5 The Foley Artist and Diabolical I.T.

My *Faust Opera* blog is for A Faustian Pack - three operas I am watching rehearse as part of a *Criticism Now* project of the Cultural Institute at Kings College London.

These operas will be put on simultaneously at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden in April. Gounod's *Faust,* a 19th-century French opera in the grandest style, will play in the Main House while two newly commissioned operas on Faustian themes in contemporary settings will play in the Linbury Theatre: *The Crackle* by Matthew Herbert and *Through His Teeth* by Luke Bedford with libretto by David Harrower.

The Crackle is going to be an extraordinary bit of theatre and sound. Its composer, appropriately for a Faust piece, is a sonic wizard: the sound artist Matthew Herbert .

I remember when studying philosophy in college (not well and pretty reluctantly) reading a chapter in a book by Peter Strawson called *Individuals* which imagined creatures for whom sound was the only medium of their bodies and lives. What sort of beings would they be and how would they describe things?

That's the kind of world and kind of being which Matthew Herbert would relate to. He once composed a piece called *One Pig* for which he patterned the recordings he made of the entire life of a pig – from the squeals and grunts at its birth through to its slaughter, and then the sizzle on the plate, the munch of it as crispy bacon.

He reminds me of Jimi Hendrix, another sonic wizard, always experimenting with sound. In the army, at 18, he was jumping from parachutes as a 'Screaming Eagle' (such a clairvoyant title) and off duty he imitated on his guitar the squeal and rasp of the plane door opening before he jumped.

Peter Strawson was asking us to think about, and notice, how we relate to things – how we describe. This is what a good poem does too: ask you to see the world freshly. In Seamus Heaney's poem 'Making Strange', an alien perspective on what you are used to, or how you are used to describing things, "goes beyond what's reliable". It lets the reader see the world new. As Robert Frost said, poetry is 'a fresh look, and a fresh listen'.

Matthew Herbert uses sound to ask us to think about and listen freshly to sounds we know, like sizzling bacon. His opera *The Crackle is* nothing to do with bacon: in it, the temptation Mephistopheles offers is the bewitching and potentially diabolical technology of electronic sound.

Matthew's Faust is a music teacher called George. Part of George's weakness is his belief that art matters more than the world, that "the show" is more important than what's happening in Syria. This is Mephistopheles' way in. The medium of the opera, electronic sound, is also the way the devil ensnares us.

Matthew is using an app called Chirp designed by a British company led by Patrick Bergel - which turns pictures on your mobile into sounds. He has also devised an extraordinary whirling dervish sound machine which appears in the children's classroom, bewitches them and in the end, of course, turns out to be their doom.

Mephistopheles in Gounod's *Faust*, on the Main Stage, will be sung by Bryn Terfel and is the centre of the opera. But in *The Crackle,* Mephistopheles never appears. You only hear him. The Opera House has engaged a foley artist. I've never heard of foley artists. That, The Crackle's conductor Tim Murray tells me, is partly their point. You hear the sounds they make but you are never aware of them. In films, they create the clopping hoof-taps, gurgling taps, squeak of a door.

Opera, like Orpheus, draws all other art forms to itself. The foley artist Barnaby Smyth has worked on films like *Resident Evil* and *We Need to Talk About Kevin*. Now he's going to drop the devil's hollow footsteps and swish of his long black coat into *The Crackle*.

But Becs Andrews the designer has to sign off every visual thing on stage.
"Sorry to ask a boring make-up question," she says. "The fancy dress the kids get to wear: do they come off before the blood gushes out? It affects what we make them out of. If blood is still dripping everywhere…"
"Will they be carrying the capsules in their mouths?" says someone.
"Then how can they sing?"
"What about their noses, their ears?"
"I'm not imagining loads of blood," says Matthew. "Just enough to know they've died."

No Faust opera ends well.

| Tagged electronics, Faust, foley artist, Hendrix, IT, Jii Hendrix, Opera, philosophy, Screaming Eagle parachutes, Seamus Heaney.makign strange, sound, sound artist, stage, Strawson

#6 Calling for Faust

My *Opera Blog* is part of a *Criticism Now* project from the Cultural Institute of Kings College London. I'm watching three different Faust operas rehearse at Covent Garden in a new enterprise at the Royal Opera House: A Faustian Pack. The operas will be put on simultaneously at the Royal Opera House in April. Gounod's *Faust,* a 19th-century French opera in the grandest style, will play in the Main House while two newly commissioned operas on Faustian themes in contemporary British settings will play in the Linbury Theatre: *The Crackle* by Matthew Herbert and *Through His Teeth* by Luke Bedford with libretto by David Harrower.

"Calling for *Faust*," says the tannoy at the stage door. I'm still amazed to be sitting on the artists' side of the Artists' Entrance at Covent Garden. There are people sitting, standing, chatting and checking their mobiles around the water machine. "Rehearsal Room 1. You have 15 minutes."

Several people rise and leave. Rehearsals are beginning for the revival of Gounod's *Faust* with a furiously high-profile international cast. Among these people must be Joseph Calleja, the tenor who will sing Faust, Sonya Yoncheva his innocent Marguerite, Simon Keenlyside singing Marguerite's brother Valentin, and the great Welsh baritone Bryn Terfel: Méphistophélès.

"Calling for *Die Frau Ohne Schatten!*"

Another lot rise. So much is going on in the Royal Opera House all the time. It's like a city. Opera is all about collaboration and Covent Garden gets the best.

The best of goodwill, too. Sian Edwards, conductor of Luke Bedford's Faust piece *Through His* Teeth, told me that one of the wonderful things about working here is that everyone, electricians, singers, technicians, conductors, stage hands and international stars, respects everyone else's expertise.

Rehearsal Room 1 looks more like a cathedral, or a techni-colour 3D Piranesi, than a room. It's wide as a tennis court and tall enough to accommodate high scenery which will carry on the illusion and soar upwards even seen from the front row of the stalls.

On one side is an enormous slice of opera box: a gilt and silver loggia with bare-breasted caryatid and red velvet elbow-rest. On the other is a colonnade of black marble church, with steps up to an organ loft. A crucifix with life-size Christ is off to the side and behind is a run-down apartment front painted the nothing grey of a 19th century Parisian apartment bloc with a black down drainpipe.

All lit by three beautiful tall arched windows and a series of high strip lights. The black floor is painted to look like tiles.

Simon the stage manager greets me and I dump my coat at the foot of a large plaster tomb topped with an angel. Maybe for Marguerite's soul right at the end.

As with the chamber operas rehearsing in Southwark, there are tables facing the stage, desks for conductor, director, and stage managers. Only there are more of them and the repetiteur has a grand piano not an upright.

A stage hand is tearing off a square of carpet on the stage front.
"This opera is a revival, you see. In 2011, when we used this set before, there was a vent above it which dripped, so they tacked this extra carpet down. It's been sitting in Wales for three years, where we store the scenery. And now we don't need it." He starts prising up tacks.

Bruno Ravella, director of this revival, is talking to Bryn Terfel who is wearing a grand caped greatcoat (to get used to it, I guess) and with it a Bob Marley T-shirt and white-flashed trainers with luminous laces.

Bruno stands close to him, murmuring him through a series of moves as the piano plays. Bryn Terfel is sitting on a large chest by the opera loggia. He stands up, shadowed by Bruno in a plaid shirt and walks across to the other side of the stage, the church side. Now he is climbing the steps to the organ loft, looking upwards – and also looking increasingly hesitant. .
"How far do I dare go?" he asks and stops halfway. He comes down and raises his arms. A group of actors dressed in black creep towards him, holding up black wings, run to him, accompany him to the back of the stage.

Is he Faust raising Mephistopheles? I don't get this. Dramatizations of Faust usually start off with him alone in his study. I don't know the opera but this music sounds like an overture and Bryn Terfel is a bass baritone, one of the greatest in the world. He can't be Faust: Faust is a tenor.

Later, Bruno explains they have set the opera in 1870s Paris with all its bourgeois fascination with guilt, innocence, decadence and corruption. "Usually they raise the curtain after the overture, look." He shows me where it says CURTAIN UP in the score.

His score is fascinating. Instead of music spread over two pages, the music is only on the left and on the right, each page, is a scrupulous drawing of the stage, the angles and diagonals, props – and singers. Every page plotted simultaneous with its music. He can see at a glance. Of course he has to have that, I've just never seen or thought of it before.

"We're doing it differently. We're raising the curtain right at the beginning. The overture plays while we see Mephistophe in Faust's study planning his campaign."

Something else I've never thought of before. Mephistophe *is* Faust – his shadow ego, his dark self, like the good and bad swan, white and black, in *Swan Lake*.

"Faust is Gounod, really," says Bruno. "He was a man of the church for a while. He was torn between the church and the gorgeous temptations of music and art. That's why we have the church on one side and an opera box on the other. And why Mephistophe doesn't dare go all the way up. He's taking on God.

"The opera *is* Mephistophe. At the end he is battling God not for Faust's soul, he's a pushover, but for the innocent soul, the greatest prize of all – Marguerite."

| Tagged Bryn Terfel, church, Covent Garden, devil, Faust, God, Gounod, innocent, music, Opera

#7 The Devil's Way In: Luke Bedford's Through His Teeth

My *Opera Blog* is part of a *Criticism Now* project from the Cultural Institute of Kings College London. I'm watching three different Faust operas rehearse at Covent Garden in a new enterprise at the Royal Opera House: A Faustian Pack. The operas will be put on simultaneously at the Royal Opera House in April. Gounod's *Faust*, a 19th-century French opera in the grandest style, will play in the Main House while two newly commissioned operas on Faustian themes in contemporary British settings will play in the Linbury Theatre: *The Crackle* by Matthew Herbert and *Through His Teeth* by Luke Bedford with libretto by David Harrower.

How do you get to know a brand new opera? With a classic like Gounod's *Faust*, the singers, conductor and director know the music already. For a new production, they have to learn and work on interpretation: the moves, the inter-actings. Here in the Jerwood Studios, the singers, conductor and accompanists are making and hearing the music of *Through His Teeth* for the first time.

This is Faust with a human devil, no supernatural about it, and I am at the first read-through. Luke Bedford is a young award-winning composer: this is only his second opera and he too is very keen to hear it.

Once you've finished a poem, you can read it aloud yourself, hear its presence and weight. A composer has to wait for singers, orchestras and other people. If I were Luke, I'd be thrilled – and nervous, too.

The score for a new opera is often late, later than the singers were promised or hoped. I sympathize, I always write right up to a deadline. If I were a composer I'd be finishing things off at the last minute; and then firing off second thoughts. But singers have to learn the music as it comes off the press and new music is often innovative, and difficult.

The conductor Sian Edwards perches on a stool behind her white formica table like an interviewer who wants to put candidates at their ease. She picks up a pencil and looks with a gentle alert smile at the two singers, soprano and mezzo soprano who are sitting on black plastic chairs in front of her.

A woman conductor is still a rare being.

"It's a question of how you find your voice," Sian told me. "How you make your own position in a traditional man's role: a situation so clearly created over the centuries by men, for men." She teaches at the Academy and does now have

several coming women students. “It’s tremendously challenging for a woman in any leadership role.”
Traditionally, opera expresses men’s ideas of what happens to women- and what women feel about it. And the stories often turn on the destruction of women. I remember a pioneering French book on opera called *Comment Tuer une Femme*; in English, *The Undoing of Women*.

In Luke’s opera the female protagonist, A, is strong. “I survived,” she says dryly to one of those who did not. But at the end, it is an open question whether she will go on resisting the temptation that nearly destroyed her. It is a harrowing story and Sian has to help steer the singers through it.

All the two singers have are their scores, their bottles of water (no singer is ever without that), handbags under their chairs – and inside them their wonderful trained voices.

They could be feeling as vulnerable as interviewees. But this is partnership, the best there is: working on something together. All these people, the conductor, Peter the *repetiteur* on the piano who will conduct when Sian isn’t here, director and stage managers and above al the singers, are beginning a journey into as yet unheard music and drama. They have learned their parts. Now they have to understand their characters in context: to act, feel and sing their way into these new psyches.

Beside Sian, sitting at another formica table, is director Bijan Seibani. Last night I saw his *A Taste of Honey* at the National. Since directing that, he’s immersed himself in this. With opera, the crucial extra dimension is the music.

The director has to work with the conductor, listen to the flow of emotion the composer has written as well as to the space, the gaze and gestures of the actors.
‘Directing’s like playing music, he’s said. “You must get the rhythm.’
“Sian will conduct the silences,” he says now. “I want to get used to what happens in the gaps.”

The opening is a very delicate interview and they need to find, or to work out, the flavour and dynamics. It’s like seeing morning grow clear, from black to grey half-light into day.

The dynamic Irish soprano Anna Devin is A, whose story it is: a woman fooled out of her money, her life, and for a while nearly out of her mind.

This is Faust without the supernatural. The evil is all human. But there’s lots of it: demonic sex, demonic fraud, demonic psychological abuse. Robert, whose

singer isn't here this morning, is a diabolically brilliant liar, professional charmer and psychopath.
The mezzo, Victoria Simmonds, with a lovely warm rich voice, sings several parts in relation to A, including A's sister. She starts off here as a TV interviewer trying to get A's story.

Sian lifts her baton, Peter the *repetiteur* plays, and the singers begin.

It's hard to act when you are getting used to the notes. But everyone's first question is this: is the interviewer just using A, to get a colourful story for TV, or is she invested in her emotionally, concerned and caring?

After a few read-throughs they get up, move away from the music stands and start to act.

The big Faust question – what is free will? – is set up right at the beginning. A. has agreed to the interview but many of "the others" – Robert's other victims, some of whom he treated much worse – didn't even answer the phone calls from the TV company. This means A. is a strong woman, she has chosen to do the interview. She also says that Robert "always gave her the choice", whether to stay with him or not.

But she isn't prepared for questions about sex.
"That's private," she says, at first.
The TV interviewer presses her. She isn't quite Paxman but she's not going to let her get away with that.
"You said you wanted to tell the truth," she reminds A.

"Every time you do the opera," Bijan says to Anna, "you've got to think, what was it about him that drew you? Yes there was fantastic sex – but what else?" Cue discussion of relationships everyone here has had, in which some mysterious element kept them in it against their better judgement.

This is not just gossip. This moment is building the trust and partnership from which the singing and acting will come, and will help Anna towards the "burrow deep inside myself moment." She will have to use her own experience to sing and play A with conviction to make this character her own.

Gone are the days when opera singers just (just!) sang perfectly. "It used to be called 'park and bark'," Bijan told me.

Today, an opera singer's long professional training includes acting. It has to. Their extraordinary voices express the while gamut of human experience: that's

what the art-form is for. But these days, for audiences used to close up sophisticated acting everywhere on theatre and screen, their bodies and faces have to match. So, as if singing perfectly weren't hard enough, the interpretation of the music goes hand in hand with the acting. Every particle of sensibility and self must be at the service of both.

Yesterday, in a rehearsal for the Gounod *Faust*, I looked at the score of one of the assistant stage managers. The blizzard of yellow Post It notes all over bars of the music, said things like "Actors enter left". The singers, as far as the stage managers are concerned, are actors.

They go on. A. does try to get to a truth and explain why she got and stayed hooked on Robert. She explore images of him, and the good memories at first. "I've certainly never had a relationship like it," she admits. "I felt as if I'd been waiting for him all my life."

That's the devil's way in – that chink of vulnerability, which Tatiana has in *Eugene Onegin*. Maybe predators like Robert play on a mysterious and fatal predisposition to recognize an illusory familiarity. Maybe that's what the devil is. The unspoken whisper. Y*ou've been waiting for me, haven't you*?

| Tagged Bijan Seibani, Covent Garden, devil, dirctor, Faust, Opera, psychological abuse, psychopath, sexual predator, soprano, woman conductor

, singer, soul, stage door

8 The Attraction of Innocence Under Threat

As part of *Criticism Now* at the Cultural Institute of Kings College London I'm watching rehearsals for the three operas in the Royal Opera House's Faustian Pack: Gounod's *Faust* and two newly-commissioned operas on Faustian themes in contemporary settings - *The Crackle* by Matthew Herbert and *Through His Teeth* by Luke Bedford.

I'm sitting in the Opera House staff canteen. It is full of musicians in evening dress: a matinee is about to start. I have in front of me the score of Gounod's *Faust* and a drink I've never tasted before. Vitamin Water with Artichoke and Dandelion: Elderflower and Pear Flavour. I'm sure very healthy, because the dancers who come here will only eat healthily. There is a gym for them somewhere, on an upper floor.

Grand-scale opera is not my natural territory. I feel at home with Mozart and Verdi. Faced with Gounod I feel slightly as I feel about this drink: why add flavours of elderflower and pear if you already have artichoke and dandelion?

The Faust I know from school is Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* of the 1590s, in which the drama turns on what happens to Faust's soul. In Gounod, Méphistophe's real target is the pure soul of Marguerite. That's the ground of his battle with God: her innocence.

Gounod was following Goethe when he wrote his first version of *Faust* in 1859 and his second in 1869, and he polished into operatic glitter the motif of the innocent girl whose life Mephistopheles gets Faust to destroy.

Marguerite's Jewel Song in Gounod is the trademark aria of that annoying opera singer Bianca Castafiore in *Tintin.* "O, these jewels past compare" she keeps singing at full blast, wherever she turns up.

I never used to know what she was going on about. I do now. These jewels are what the devil provides for Faust to seduce Marguerite. Above is Angela Gheorghiu in the last production entranced by them.

What is it with innocence? Gounod's *Faust* was so popular in 19th- century America that the New York opera season always began with it - as in a wonderful scene in Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence*.

Perhaps the whole point of innocence - in a novel or drama anyway – is to *be* under threat? And jewels, or seeing yourself in the mirror wearing them as Marguerite does – Gheorghiu is smiling because she is singing, exactly as La Biancafiore in *Tintin, Ah! je ris de me voir si belle en ce miroir* - provide the high road to its corruption.

"We are going to model Marguerite on Manet's barmaid, in his *Bar at the Folies Bergères*," Bruno the director told me, showing me the picture. "She's going to look just like this."

This painting lives just down the road from here at the Courtauld Gallery. A few years ago I curated a series of Writers' Talks there and invited Philip Pullman to open them. This was the painting he chose – and did a wonderful talk about its ambiguities: the innocence of the girl's face, the mirror behind her which does not quite fit.

Her face, her positioning in front of the observer's gaze, make her the perfect image for Marguerite. The devil's true target. Innocence under threat.

"Engineer to the stage immediately please!"

Urgency in the voice.

"Engineer to the stage immediately! Thank you."

On the backstage tour I took at the beginning of all this, I think I heard that the stage floors (there are several of them) were built by Rolls Royce and two Rolls Royce engineers are standing ready at all times. Can this be true?

"Ladies and gentlemen of the orchestra, please take your places in the pit. Five minutes please. Thank you."

I set off too, for Rehearsal Room One, and take my breath again as I come in to this place of waiting sets, waiting drama, waiting music. I don't want ever to leave it.

The actors are waiting to rehearse Walpurgis Night with the singers, to rehearse the death of Valentin, Marguerite's brother, with Sonya before she disappears - temporarily - for a commitment somewhere else. Marguerite will look like Manet's barmaid in every performance but she is going to be sung by two different sopranos, on different nights, Sonya Yoncheva and Alexia Voulgaridou.

They are both wonderful. Sonya has a watchful held-in energy while sitting watching, or chatting to you, which translates, when she's working, into a kind of responsive fluid sparkle. But the director has to rehearse the moves with both. Alexia – she is Greek, I'm really looking forward to seeing her work too – is coming in next week.

It must be a nightmare of complexity, planning all this. Bruno looks calm. But it must be the coiled calm of highly wound steel. In the lunch break, I come in to the Rehearsal Room and find him auditioning singers for a quite different production, Strauss's *Intermezzo*.

Does an opera director ever rest?

| Tagged Courtauld, devil, director, Edith Wharton, Faust, Folies bergeres, Gounod, innocence, jewel song, jewels, Manet, Opera, painting, Tintin

9 Crackling Demonic Energy

My *Faust in Opera* blog is for A Faustian Pack of three operas at Royal Opera House Covent Garden, part of Criticism Now, a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London

A few weeks ago I watched forty-eight children rehearsing *The Crackle. S*ince then I've been watching adult rehearsals. Now it's riveting to see, for the first time, the two put together.
The people who coach these kids are quite extraordinary. Suzi Zumpe, joint artistic director of the Royal Opera House's Youth Opera Company, and Karen Gillingham share the action, drama and music.

The children know the musical score as well as any professional now. They say hello to the baritone Andrew Dickinson who will sing George - their nerdish schoolteacher who lets the devil loose on them through electronic music - and to soprano Stephanie Marshall the parent who at first tries to help George and then, too late, to stop him.

Andrew and Stephanie jump about with the kids in the warm-up. Suzi gets them all singing, *What shall we do with the drunken sailor*? in lots of different tones. "Quick, the captain's coming, and this is your mate: you don't want the captain to see. *Put him in the long boat till he's sober!* Ssh – urgent - you're conspirators! Now you're angry with him. *Put him in the scuppers with the hosepipe on him* – and you're giggling!"
They are getting singing technique - all those quick consonants – and stage sense together.

Karen divides all 48 children plus the two adult singers into five groups. Each group has three and a half minutes to tell the story of one of the opera's acts. It takes my breath away to see ten year olds working out a little script and getting over the dramatic essentials of a complex scene so quickly.

"They're used to doing that," said Karen. "Three and a half minutes is a luxury. They usually have only two."

The children are wonderful, all shapes and sizes, all enthusiastic, all different, all alive. One thing this opera is going to do is crackle with their energy.
"*Fantastic* training," I say to Suzi. "What happens when they reach the age

limit?"
"Well they have to look like children on stage. They start and 9 and stop at13."

(Afterwards, I'm really glad to hear many kids I talk to say they are going on to other part time training courses. How could they not be in love with drama and music, after all this?)

Now the opera itself. Their energy zips through the studio. Karen and Suzi, with Tim Murray the conductor contain it, channel it and let it rip. They are like a ginger ale fizzing out of the bottle all over the stage.
"Are you excited to watch it all come together?" I ask Matthew Herbert the composer –director and sound artist *extraordinair*e.

"Fantastic," he said. "I wanted the piece to start quietly: with the audience not having any sense that this demonic energy of the children is going to come bursting in."

At one point the children suddenly hush: they hear Mephistopheles stalking the classroom. Sound is everything in *The Crackle*. George has a brilliant mind and a pathetic tunnel-vision personality.Andrew Dickinson is playing him very convincingly. George has heard Mephistopheles already. He is the one who let him in. The devil's voice will be sung by Bryn Terfel, as in Gounod's *Faust*.

Mephistopheles never appears: his sounds are made by foley artist Barnaby. who will sit in the orchestra pit, part of the orchestra. Matthew wants him to be visible so the audience sees him as a player – they will know the devil's sounds are being made live.

"What will you wear?" I ask Barnaby . "A scarlet and black bow tie?"
"Devil's horns, perhaps." He is still working out exactly what props he needs to get the right sounds. "I want a Gestapo-ish vibe," he says.

Now Barnaby is on the mike, clopping his hard shoes on a hollow platform and at the moment what he is holding in his arms is: a white patent leather shoe, a pair large leather gloves and a leather jacket.

He rubs them together in front of the all-important mike. They make a beautifully sinister shushing sound and the kids freeze.
"You're terrified and fascinated," says Karen, "Now what? "

The children brandish little tubes of paper in th3 air and start unrolling them. The devil has suddenly given them the code for the new app. The devil has, as it were, got into them.

The crackling of paper spreads through the studio. It will be amplified by mikes and will trigger an explosion of coloured lights. Everything in this opera is sound, from the devil to the apps that so excite the once-bored kids.
“Wonderful!”

I catch Matthew’s eye and he grins. After years of work, his opera – with its cutting-edge far-out technology, the gorgeous voices and urgent acting of Andrew and Stephanie, and the bubbling disciplined energy of the kids, is coming fantastically alive.

It is going to be a most extraordinary experience, all round.

#10 Kiss – and the Devil in our Relationships

Bryn Terfel, Devil © Catherine Ashmore

My *Opera* blog is for A Faustian Pack of three operas at Royal Opera House Covent Garden, part of Criticism Now, a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London

I've never seen a sword-fight rehearsed before. Now here are three international opera stars lunging around in one on the rehearsal room stage.

They are rehearsing the Duel scene. In the score it's marked "Trio", because Mephistopheles is singing in it too.

Gounod, man of the church, makes it quite clear that the devil makes a third in every vulnerable duo.

Simon Keenleyside is Valentin, Marguerite's soldier-brother. Joseph Calleja is her lover, the rejuvenated Faust, and Bryn Terfel is Mephistopheles – who, with his evil crimson staff, is tipping the balance for Faust.

This is a totally male stage. A slight touch of the playground despite the international stature of the actors and the cosmic stature of the struggle. Three large men moving round fast, swords clash to the music, and three incomparable male voices ring out to the rafters of Rehearsal Room One.

They are all suddenly singing out. Which many stars don't do, I have learned, in rehearsal. Like wild animals, they conserve their energy – their valuable voice energy – for when it's really needed.

The texture, the resonance, is extraordinary.Joseph Calleja the tenor rings highest and most curvily questioning. He is agonized. Faust has a conscience

even though he's weak and signed the devil's contract. Valentin has right on his side: Faust has seduced Valentin's sister. So does he have to kill him now, too?

Foolishly, Valentin throws away his medallion, the image of his sister which once preserved him in battle. He has stopped believing in her. And when you do that, stop trusting a person you love, that's where the devil steps in. Bryn Terfel stoops and snatches up the medallion.

In time with little runs in the music, Mephistopheles is orchestrating all the moves. Valentin is a professional soldier so he's winning at first, but the hovering Mephistopheles freezes him so Faust can thrust and wound him, fatally.

In fact it's a slice across Simon Keenleyside's belt. He falls gracefully to his knees and the devil pulls Faust speedily away.

Then they do it again. And again.

"Chances of getting to the death of Valentin before lunch are zero," says the assistant director gloomily to the stage manager.

Back they go, and back over it again. Every move and step, lunge and glance are crafted into every bar of music. They try it in different parts of the stage. They get clear exactly where they have to end up.

When Valentin came in at first he was tossing his sword from hand to hand. After the Trio, Mephistopheles kicks that sword away.

"When you fall," Bruno the director tells Simon Keenleyside, "you must crawl to the centre because there'll be six chorus members there. You need to be centre stage so they can go round you."

The chorus is in rehearsal separately, the parts will be put together next week. I think again what an extraordinary art form this is. The heart of it is the singing but everything else must be got exactly right. The work is intense and a lot goes on at once, in each moment of rehearsal: music notes, director's notes, stopping to discuss – and the stage managers' three note-books keep track of every prop and garment.

At the beginning of the lunch break I watch Simon and Joseph compare notes on holding the sword hilt so their fingers don't jar as they clash.

Bruno spends lunchtime looking over his notes. Opera directors seem to live on air and adrenalin.

“I came to directing late,” he says. “’I was in charge of communication for Ford, for the whole of Europe - TV advertising, print, internet, everything. But I thought, *I must get out*! Directing opera is what I want to do and we only get one crack at life so I made the jump.”

Was that hard?

“Well - advertising taught me to be in touch with my thoughts and emotions in the moment, just as they happen, first time you see a 30 second edit of an ad. Second time round it’s too late, you know what’s coming. It’s the same thing when you see a scene here.” He waves at the empty set. “What does every gesture or turn of the head make you feel? What does it communicate about the situation, the character?”

This is exactly what I’ve been watching him do all morning. He knows the musical score as well as the singers or conductor, but he is using it to see everything newly, spot the fresh interpretative potential in every turn, glance and tableau.

After lunch, for instance, he makes the devil an even clearer presence in a quite different relationship.

In Act III, Faust and Marguerite sing their falling-in-love Duet. At one point, Bruno calls “Kiss!” Tenor and soprano obediently clinch and Bruno then turns to Bryn Terfel. “Let’s try it with you visible. Every time they kiss, you’re there.”

As it happens, Bryn Terfel today is wearing – along with his devil’s top hat and tall devil boots (opera singers, it seems, have to wear a lot of incongruous garments in rehearsal) - a faded grey T–shirt with the name of a rock band on his chest.

KISS.

And on the back: DETROIT ROCK.

DESTROYER.

KING OF THE NIGHT.

I wonder whether he's wearing it on purpose. More importantly, Bruno is suggesting through the grammar of the stage that the devil is present in every contact between one person and another.

Bryn Terfel, in Parisian top hat and KISS T-shirt - the Destroyer, King of the Night - is huge. But he moves round the stage very lightly, quietly responsive to Bruno's suggestions.

We see Mephistopheles everywhere, watching and manipulating the hapless humans. Now in the lime-light, up the iron stairs, now poking his head round the house wall in the shadows. Grinning, pointing, darting in and out.

Bruno is crafting, and Bryn Terfel is acting, exactly what Gounod's music suggests: that whether you're in a sword-fight, a conversation or a kiss, the devil is the potential for damage for all of us, in every relationship.

| Tagged devil relationship Faust opera soowrd fight, kiss, opera director, sword

#11 The Get-In

Connections and screws for the set of The Crackle & Through is Teeth

My *Opera* blog is for A Faustian Pack of three operas at Royal Opera House Covent Garden, part of Criticism Now, a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London

The back acres of the Royal Opera House are labyrinthine. I find myself dreaming about them now at night. Like Hansel and Gretel following their breadcrumb trail, I trot along beside green tape stuck to the floor, which takes me from Stage Door to Reception.

I pass a stage manager carrying a bright gilt and scarlet dagger, maybe the one Mephistopheles draws Faust's blood with to seal the contract – but then, so many operas have daggers in them – and find a lift.

"I'm looking for the Clore Studio," I tell the girl getting in with me. I think the two new Faustian operas have switched from rehearsals at Southwark to rehearsing here in the Opera House. "I'm a bit lost."

"I get lost too, back of house," she says. ""I'm an usher, I've been here 18 months, I know my way all round front of house. But the back…"

"It's like a website."

"Exactly. Much more complicated than it looks from the front."

As I press the button there's a call on the tannoy.

"Aurora's friends to the Clore Studio, please. Rehearsal for Aurora's friends."

I love these announcements. You hear them wherever you are, even in the Ladies. Now I do a quick flashback to watching Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* with my daughter when she was five: the three good witches, Mistress Flora, Fauna and her favourite, Mistress Merryweather, Aurora's friend who saves the day.

But if Aurora's friends are rehearsing ballet in the Clore Studio, the singers for *Through His Teeth* and *The Crackle* haven't arrived here yet so instead of going up to Floor Stage +1, I go down to Floor Stage -3 and the Linbury Theatre stage.

I was wrong about the rehearsal, but I know today is the big Get-In, when they start putting up the set for *The Crackle* and *Through His Teeth*.

The innovative young designer Becs Andrews has dreamed up a brilliant set which will house both operas even though they are so different. At the beginning of rehearsals, I saw the model she made. I have watched Bijan Sheibani, director of *Through His Teeth*, moving tiny chairs around in it like arranging furniture in a dolls' house, to get clear where he wants his singers on the real stage.

Last week Becs invited me to go along to a yard to watch the pieces being cut out. I'd have loved to go, see the whole process, but didn't have time.

Everything comes down to budget. Rehearsal time, fabric, expertise. Opera costs. "Always on the verge of bankruptcy," was how Sian Edwards, conductor of *Through His Teeth*, put it. She didn't perhaps mean this opera house, but internationally, from top to bottom, everywhere from community opera in a village barn to the glitter-some opera houses of Rome and Milan, there are innumerable expensive crucial pieces to put in place.

Co-production means the cost is shared, so it's easier to put on. But it also means that Becs's beautiful set has to fit a German stage as well as the Linbury. And all this jetting about has taken time. But they're on schedule and today's the day it starts to go up.

Floor -3 is the deepest layer of the labyrinth, an empty corridor with doors. (This is the bit I dream about most.) There are doors saying "Danger" with a jagged lightning electricity sign. That kind of feeling.

At the corner are three men in a control room, contemplating black banks of electronics.

“That stage’s not a safe place at the moment,” one says.

“If I stay in the auditorium, is that OK?”

“Could be. Should be.”

I slip in. The stage looks like the inside of a car engine. Black metal joists and vices, poles, jacks and bolts, rivets and trivets, locknuts, scaffolding and anchor ties. God knows the names for all the technicalities. Poles and cables lie across the floor. .

I take a photo of the beautiful ferocious brass-tipped connecting joints which stud the scaffolding. Someone has had to tighten every single one of these million screws.

This is where everything comes together. Connection is everything, in opera.

“You’re welcome to stay if you don’t mind the swearing,” calls one of the people clambering over prone scaffolding.

I sit in the stalls beside a diagram that looks like the worst sort of IKEA instruction. At the back of the stage I recognize the black perforated screens that will slide from scene to scene in *Through His Teeth*. Overhead I see some of the wooden slats, already hanging from the ceiling.

I remember Andrew Dickinson, baritone in *The Crackle*, asking Becs what those slats were made of when he first saw the model.

“Wood,” Becs said, and Andrew looked happy.

“Why’s that important?” I asked him.

“Because wood’s a good resonator. It’s easier to sing with wood than, say, plastic.”
Now here’s the wood, and Paul, the lighting guy, is looking up at bits of it overhead.

“What are you looking for?” I ask. “Worrying if it’s safe?”

“Thinking where the overhead lights will go. You have to put the lights in first, so you know what pattern they are going to make on stage.”

So much to think about. So many connections to make.

| Tagged stage opera Covent Garden

#12 Seduction vs the Pure Soul Within

I'm writing my o*pera* blog for A Faustian Pack at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden. As part of *Criticism Now,* a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London, I'm watching rehearsals of Gounod's *Faust* and two modern operas on Faustian themes, Luke Bedford's *Through His Teeth* and Matthew Herbert's *The Crackle*.

Seducteur, says Mephistopheles mockingly, as he and Faust watch Marguerite's hopeless admirer, little lame Siébel, leave a bunch of flowers by Marguerite's door.

They eavesdrop on Siébel as he sings, tremulously asking the flowers to reveal the flame of his love to Marguerite's soul. *Revelez a son âme, Le secret de ma flamme*. (It's pretty simple pop stuff, this libretto.) And he imagines accompanying this revelation, and the flowers, with one chaste kiss.*Un baiser, un doux baiser.*

Poor Siébel is the opposite of a seducer. Like Cherubino in *The Marriage of Figaro,* he is a trouser role, a boy sung by a woman. But Cherubino is joyously hormonal, turned on by any and every girl, whereas Siébel is unwaveringly loyal and has sworn to watch over and protect Marguerite in her brother's absence.

He can't, of course. He's not fit enough to go and be a soldier like her brother, he can't take on Faust and the devil, and is the sort of guy a girl takes for granted but never, unfortunately for her, falls in love with. *Pauvre garcon*, she will say when she sees his bouquet.

She's anyway halfway to falling for Faust. In the last scene she modestly declined his arm; now she's wondering who he is.

When Siébel disappears, Faust and Mephistopheles come out of hiding. Faust explores the poor, rundown building where she lives while Mephistopheles goes off to get some tempting jewels, to rival Siébel's little offering.

Bryn Terfel and Jospeh Calleja rehearse the moves again and again. Bruno the director gets Bryn Terfel to take up the flowers contemptuously, crumble them between his fingers and blow the petal-dust away. Meanwhile Joseph Calleja,

the legendary Maltese tenor, is a large man and has to climb the railings. There are cunning toe-holds in the scenery but it's not easy in top-boots, while singing passionately about the pure soul of a girl you want to seduce. A soul that lies hidden, like treasure, in this shabby Parisian apartment block.

I am more and more interested in what this notion of soul, or inwardness, is doing in the opera. This house Faust is trying to enter – Bruno has Calleja climbing the steps that lead to Marguerite's bedroom now, but at the end of this Act he will enter that bedroom via the balcony and window - and the girl he wants to enter…. All that is dressed up in the language of a pure *soul:* the thing, the prize, inside whatever has got to be entered.

What Faust *says* he is thinking about – a fantasy sung ravishingly in Calleja's golden voice - is *la presence d'une âme innocente et divine.* But what he's actually going to *do* is make her pregnant and abandon her.

The casket of jewels Mephistopheles brings, for Faust to tempt her with, sums up the symbolism. "If these don't beat Siébel's flowers," Mephistopheles says in one of his snarky devil's asides that Terfel does so well, "I'll retire".

By helping Faust unlock the key to Marguerite's body, Mephistopheles plans to win her soul. That's what his whole campaign is about – but in the opera's very last bars he's going to fail. "Judged," he'll snarl as she dies, trying to haul her soul to hell "Saved," angelic voices will reply, as she ascends to heaven.

The soprano in rehearsal today, representing all this pure inwardness, is Alexia Voulgaridou. She was born in north Greece, she told me this morning, and has sung the role several times before. Wearing blue jeans under the long white rehearsal skirt, which gets her used to the fulsome 1870s clothes she'll wear on stage, she has a lovely quicksilver grace.

When she finally appears, she sings a folkish song about the king of Thule, constantly interrupting herself to wonder about the debonair stranger who offered her his arm.

Gounod's librettists, Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, were working with Carré's play *Faust et Marguerite*, which was loosely based on Part 1 of Goethe's *Faust*. They took this King of Thule song from Goethe, who wrote it in archaic language to make it feel like a folk ballad. But in translating it, they engineered it to end (unlike Goethe's poem) with that word which is becoming increasingly important to the opera - *âme*.

With his last breath, sings Marguerite, the king who kept a gold goblet to remind him of his lost love drank from it and gently *rendit l'âme*, gave up his soul.

Then she sees the casket, finds the key and thinks "it can't be wrong" to open it. She is giving up *her* soul at this point - or rather, poor girl, making the first move that risks it. Her opening of the casket enacts, in bone-simple symbolism, the way she will open her being to Faust and provide Satan with a way in to her soul – because the next casket we'll see her opening will be her baby's coffin. Abandoned by her lover, cursed by her brother, she murders her baby:

But, like the image conjured up by Thomas Hardy's sub-title for *Tess of the d'Urbevilles*, 'A Pure Woman', she is a spotless soul really: and dead centre of the 19th century's obsession with women whose minds are made mad by what the male world does to their inner being.

Is that what a woman (also) is, in opera: a casket of human inwardness?

I came upon this baby's coffin yesterday unexpectedly, entering Rehearsal Room One alone. The room was empty except for a black casket on the director's table, lid half off and a staring, very dead-looking doll face inside.

"Terrible," the other soprano, Sonya Yoncheva, said to me after rehearsing the dead baby scene last week.

This is the first time Sonya has sung Marguerite. She is from Bulgaria, just over the border from North Greece. Nice that the two Marguerites come from the same part of the world. I've been getting to know the opera from scratch so it's been exciting to watch her, too, rehearse it for the first time. She'll do it again in May with the Vienna State Opera and will be singing it on the first night in Covent Garden.

"It is so realistic," she said. "So – limp!"

All this collateral damage – Siébel's broken heart, Valentin dying with a curse on his lips, and a murdered baby – just for the devil to capture the inner-most alleys of one soul. What does Gounod want us to think this pure soul is?

| Tagged chaste, Faust, flowers, innocent, jewels, mephistopheles, Opera, seducer, soul

#13 The Art that Absorbs New Arts into Itself

A corner of a "wagon": which slides the whole set on stage and off.

I'm writing my o*pera* blog for A Faustian Pack at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden. As part of *Criticism Now,* a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London, I'm watching rehearsals of Gounod's *Faust* and two modern operas on Faustian themes, Luke Bedford's *Through His Teeth* and Matthew Herbert's *The Crackle*.

Everything is hotting up in the Opera House. Rehearsal Room One is a tall bare emptiness, bright-lit by huge windows. The *Faust* set, home for everyone for two weeks, has disappeared.

I look around the tall echoey room and think again about the mantra I learned from a paperback I carried with me for the twenty years while writing my thesis – and then the books – on Greek tragedy: Peter Brooke's *The Empty Space*.

A stage is "just a space with some doors".
A place which is always – and so quickly – some other place.

I adventure back stage, get lost again and am rescued by a large technician. His father was a technician here before him.
"I'll find *Faust* for you," he says, he says, and brings me through the back where I recognize parts of the set, and the black-tile-painted floor

The whole thing moves together.
"How on earth do you shift it all – the whole lot, floor and all?"
"It's on what we call a wagon. We do it slowly, manually, but controlled by a computer – there are 44 positions this wagon can be at in its journey to the stage. The grey floor sinks – here – and the wagon moves onto the stage from behind."

I get lost through a few wings and come out on the stage, the vast red velvet auditorium with its gold-leaf caryatids and empty seats before me, and a few million furiously busy stage hands moving loggias, churches and prison bars around me.

Nowhere is safe,.beside me or above. A theatre is a dangerous place, No wonder Ngaio Marsh set a lot of her murders in theatres. .

I perch upstage on the left for a while but someone need to put a bicycle there and I escape through the auditorium and down lifts to the Linbury in the basement.

Things are hotting up here too: the director and singers of *Through His Teeth* are now working on the stage.

The set, which looked like black spaghetti only a few days ago, is now in place, and in the orchestra pit, Sian Edwards is conducting an accordion, harp, violin, cello and bass, a clarinet, trumpet, and various whiskery-sounding percussion instruments.

They are players from the chamber ensemble Chroma and specialize in contemporary music.. The rhythms, as well as the quartertones, need a lot of concentration. Till now, the singers have rehearsed with piano. With the orchestra, Luke Bedford's real textures come out: light, intense, shimmery, sometimes creepy.
Luke has written quartertones for the instruments, but not the singers. So the sound – it reminds me a of Bartok's 6th Quartet but lighter, thinner, more shot slik – is sliding around the characters, just as the black perforated screens slide across from one scene to the next.

I see now – we get both a sonic and a visual image for the paranoia which the villain, Robert, a human psychopathic Mephistopheles, creates in his victim's mind.
He tells her he's working for MI5, she and he are in danger, she must go here and do that without question, stay out on a park bench, stay in the flat ten days without him and without food, get him thousands of pounds, break with her family.

It is all about power, about changing the way his victim perceives reality; getting her into a world of quartertones, sliding scales, sliding screens and

surveillance. You can see through these screens yet they are very black. They imprison, they cut people off.

Meanwhile a screen at the back of the stage is taking these themes of slippery fluidity and rigid surveillance to a new level with live camera collage.

These live film projections are the dream-child of video artist Sam Meech. Sam does videography, live projection, interactive design. I met first him at an early *Through His Teeth* rehearsal and then again at the get-in when he was setting up video and stage cameras on a complicated electronic workbench for *The Crackle*.

He works with video software called Isadora, a real-time interactive media system designed by Mark Coniglio for Troika Ranch which gets dancers moving across the stage to trigger media events like sounds and video.

I watch the singers move around the set and the film behind magnify their faces as they sing. Extraordinary what contemporary opera has morphed into – what opera can take on board. It is not a heritage art, a museum thing: opera has always been in the vanguard, trying to represent human experience always fully, and more fully, by blending cutting-edge technology with the traditional skills of character and music.

The Greek word *techne* meant ‘art’ as well as ‘skill’, and the original Greek tragic stage-front, the *skene,* was the site of the first experiments in painting perspective. When opera was invented, in Renaissance Florence, it was imagined as a re-creation of tragedy, and its stage-fronts then were complex structures of painterly perspective and illusion.

Then there’s the whole history of stage lighting led by Wagner and his lighting genius, my hero Adolphe Appia. who wrote a sentence which has reverberated round my head for 20 years, “The light that matters n the stage is light that casts a shadow.”.

Next day, on the same Linbury set but without the sliding screens, I sit watching a rehearsal for *The Crackle* and hear Bryn Terfel’s recorded voice singing Matthew Herbert’s invisible – totally electronic-sonic – version of Mephistopheles.

It feels creepy because I know Bryn is also singing another devil in the flesh right now: there is a rehearsal for Gounod going on, now that set has settled in on the main stage .

Opera, I think – watching Matthew Herbert in the dark and the extraordinary electronic magic of his production – goes on absorbing and using multiplicities and technologies as they evolve.

Yet at the centre opera preserves the essence of what it has always been: human voices in their most perfect form, expressing the most inward of experiences: feelings, relationships, soul and spirit. Eaxactly what Mephistopheles, in all his shapes, sizes and avatars, tries to destroy.

#14 Wigs, Orchestra and Costume

I'm writing my o*pera* blog for A Faustian Pack at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, as part of *Criticism Now*, a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London. I'm watching rehearsals of Gounod's *Faust* and two modern operas on Faustian themes: Luke Bedford's *Through His Teeth* and Matthew Herbert's *The Crackle*. This is the week of highest adrenalin levels, dress rehearsals and intense pressure on everybody, upstairs and downstairs, back-stage and front.

At the General Rehearsal for *Faust*, the first with chorus and orchestra, I am right by the orchestra. Forty strings at least, more than twelve woodwind, plus brass percussion and two harps, who are positioned right underneath the stage.

It's like a cave. For Joseph Calleja to hear them while singing Faust's tender love-duet with Marguerite, there have to be speakers back-stage for him to hear the orchestra, especially those beguiling symbolic harps.

An orchestra pit, I realize, is yet another hieroglyph of opera technology, full of black-wrapped electricity: snaky cables, mikes and adaptors.

There is now a 60- strong chorus, as well as the dancers and actors, as a physical setting for the central drama. The whole idea of the complete work of art, the publicness of opera, is coming together on a huge scale.

And I'm seeing scenes I haven't seen rehearsed before.
While Valentin, Marguerite's brother, is in her house discovering to his horror that the pure sister he left behind is is a fallen woman, pregnant, abandoned by her lover, Bryn Terfel as Satan is teasingly waving the tackle for a heroin fix above Faust's head.

Joseph Calleja flops around gasping for it on the raised plinth which held the jewels they tempted Marguerite with, and which will hold the coffin of the dead baby later.
Finally, trembling and jerking brilliantly, Calleja injects himself and lies back like Aslan on his sacrificial stone while Bryn Terfel sings a mocking love serenade – to him, banging his finger into Calleja's chest to mark the chords.

Satan is gaining a horrible ascendancy. David McVicar's production really hammers home the cruelty under the skin of 1870s society, its elegant top hats, flounces and bustles.

The ballet, which Satan reveals to Faust on Walpurgis Night, is a travesty of innocence corrupted. The dancers, all white net and twinkling shoes like any conventional *Les Sylphides. B*ut when they come to front of stage you see their green frosted demon-lipstick, as they begin to turn ballet's language of grace inside out, into the language of lascivious nightclub sexuality – that looks all wrong in the virginal swan lakey outfits.

The solo ballerina is pregnant, humiliated, gasping, and in pain. The devil is turning the screws on Faust.

Terfel is now in a flowing chestnut wig. The Opera House's wig-making department is vital. "He's an opera singer, he must be used to wigs," I heard someone say backstage last night during a discussion about whether the villain in *Through His Teeth* should wear one or not.

Something about opera: all that falseness – and underneath, an emotional truth.

For Walpurgis Night, Bryn Terfel is also wearing a black jet-and-sequin *dress*, plus black fan, long black gloves and an appalling décolletage. He is enormous and grotesque. With goatee and cane he sits fixing his devil eyes on Faust as his dance parody of innocence and corruption goes frighteningly on.

The pangs of the pregnant ballerina, pathetically clinging to the language of classical ballet, to that tulle vision of innocence she cannot sustain, stand in for the real birth pangs of Marguerite, whom we see clutching her baby at the end of the scene

For this rehearsal the soloists are costumed to their eyeballs but the chorus still in mufti; mostly jeans. I rather like the mix, but Bruno Ravello the director afterwards says, No no, wrong colours. Visually, it's all got to cohere.

The director is the conduit – and the juggler, perhaps – for the mixing and balance of different elements, the music, the concept, the visuals.

I find him afterwards, going through his "Notes" with Alexia the Greek soprano.

He wrote them during the run-through, his assistant Directors typed them up in the lunch-break, and as I watch they get emailed to him on his white cell phone,

“Notes” are everything in opera rehearsals. Like shards for archaeologists, they are the currency with which some big picture gets constructed.

The Youth Opera children in *The Crackle* clearly know them well: Music Notes, Blocking Notes, Prop Notes.

Opera in the round means so much for the singers to concentrate on and remember at every second. And it’s got to look natural. The music comes first, but then it’s the acting.

Alexia is Greek but most of their discussion is in Italian with bits of French thrown in. I sit beside the assistant director and look at his score, the post it notes and highlighting, the pencilled sketches blocking in every turn and twirl of every character.

“Opera directors need six languages,” he says, “to talk to the singers. Italian obviously, French and Spanish. German and Russian are useful too.”
He’s been at the job five years himself.
“I’m OK with Italian. Need to work at the French. Bruno is great.”

It is very intense, this work. All the public trappings are stripped away, Alexia is slim and vivid, dark blue jeans and jumper, no more white long dress, no props, not even a dead baby – and no singing. This is all about the elemnts around the score, the face, her hands, her being – and her feeling.

In this bare, tall, backstage rehearsal room,they go through Bruno’s emailed Notes. Something that is huge, utterly public and very complicated, I realize, all comes down to this in the end: how to represent – and recreate – a single woman’s agony in an empty space.

#15 The Lies that Tell a Truth

Sam Meech, video artist for The Crackle and Through His Teeth

I'm writing this o*pera* blog for A Faustian Pack at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, as part of *Criticism Now*, a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London, I'm watching rehearsals of Gounod's *Faust* and two modern operas on Faustian themes: Luke Bedford's *Through His Teeth* and Matthew Herbert's *The Crackle*. This is the week of highest adrenalin, dress rehearsals, tech rehearsals, intense pressure on everybody, upstairs and downstairs –

- including Sam Meech the video artist. In one of his latest Tweets, Sam reported hearing the composer of *The Crackle*, Matthew Herbert, asking for a can of worms.

Sam has a head that can cope with the can-of-worms brand of techological complexity which *The Crackle* is luxuriantly pioneering. He has worked with dance and music, all kinds of things, but never before with opera.
"I'd never even seen an opera," he says. "Now I'm working on two at once, *The Crackle* and Through His Teeth."
"And – do you like it?"
"I see that though in one sense opera's very stylized, on the other it's about completely natural emotions. It's a stylized way at getting at authentic feeling."
"That's a brilliant way of putting it."

In another part of the building, I've just been watching Bruno Ravella, director of Gounod's Faust – which on one level you (or someone) might call a lumbering sentimentalizing tip-up truck of a piece and on another, one of the most popular operas ever written – working for hours with one singer to hone the right gesture, sigh and gaze for one piece of stage business, one bar of music.

“It’s got to be true,” Bruno said – and I immediately thought of Seamus Heaney, dearly loved missed poetry chieftain, talking about writing “truth”.

In a poem, it doesn’t matter if what you are saying is not historically true.

Any sort of art can be a way of lying to tell the truth. What you have to be true *to*, Heaney insisted, is yourself: and your imagination. If you fake it, it won’t work.

And in an opera, even if the plot is completely over the top, if it’s good there’ll be an honesty there, a hard emotional truth, and you have got to find it.

Sam is following his own associations, on what his new extraordinary video and sonic software, his own art and imagination can do for opera today.

“My job is to do something that helps the story in an interesting way. Putting a screen on an opera stage is a big responsibility. The film I make has often got be background texture, there but ignored. If it stands out all the time, it’s too much.”
He pulls out one or two wires on his black work-bench.
“Opera’s about singing. You don’t want the wallpaper to shout at you.”

“Will the cameras in *Through His Teeth* be on the singers, projecting their faces onto the back, the whole time?”

I think of the extra strain on these wonderful singers. What else they have to think of, while acting, doing the agreed moves, and singing this difficult music.

“Yes and no. We have park scenes, outside scenes, street scenes and bomb footage too.”

I think back to the first rehearsal of *Through HisTeeth*. Just two singers sitting on plastic chairs with the score.

“When you use cameras in theatre,” whispers Sam, “you’re not making it into cinema.”

We’re whispering because the Irish baritone Owen Gilhooly – who is singing Robert the villain horribly convincingly,I’ll never be able to look at him without seeing him as the machiavellian Robert – is ordering the soprano to get a mass of money out of her sister.

“You’re using film to amplify gestures and events,” murmurs Sam. “If I have a camera on an actor’s face and make it a hundred times bigger, it highlights moments. Not all the time: then it would really be like cinema. What you do, is change the scale of what the audience is seeing.”

On his smartphone, Sam shows me the Wikipedia entry on *Gesamtkunstwerk;* meaning “total artwork” or “all-embracing art”.

I peer at the lit screen in the dark. The German philosopher Karl Trahndorff coined this word in 1827 but composer Carl Maria von Weber first dreamed of something like it in 1814, when he praised an opera called Undine, with music by E.T.A Hoffman.

Undine, von Weber said, was an “artwork complete in itself, in which partial contributions of collaborating arts blend together and disappear: “and, in disappearing, somehow form a new world.”

I love that “new world” idea.

So did Wagner, writing about it in his essays – and putting it into practice in his operas. He wanted to blend poetry and music to make drama “that would express our innermost being.”

Rather like what Sam said in another way: a highly stylized way at getting at authentic feeling.
Like the opera voice itself, which is the heart, the point of the whole thing,the vehicle for the opera’s emotion and truth.

Each of these singers I have been getting to know a little through rehearsals- they may look like ordinary human beings but they carry within them this dangerous and marvelous thing, something they have to protect, feed, nurture, exercise, train, and think about all the time.

They protect their voice in rehearsals. “It’s a question of how much to give to them, each time.” one told me. Each note must be perfected – and an image for the specialness each person has inside themselves.

It must be like owning a leopard or a racehorse: something terribly valuable, acquired a great expense, terribly beautiful and vulnerable – and incredibly powerful.

#16 The Hundreds of People Invisible All Round the Singers

After two months, there are suddenly (or it seems sudden) three Faust Dress Rehearsals within 36 hours. Before I go into the first, I try to reckon up the numbers of people involved.
They make my head spin.

*

For Faust on the Main Stage, I think I heard it was fifty stage hands and fifty electricians.
There are people storing things backstage, checking the speakers are working, giving cues for whoever is on stage. People checking that Mephistopheles' dagger is sewn/ velcro'd safe inside the lining of his coat (and won't fall out) until needed; that the wheels run smoothly on the ladder he puts in place to get Faust into Marguerite's bedroom. That the pistol is loaded with blanks and the sword hilts won't fall off.
Plus costumiers, boot-makers,jewel-makers, wig-fitters, prop managers. Each side of the stage has a sub stage manager, if that's the right term. Production managers, props managers, sword-fight trainers, make-up team. And the whole complex lighting team,
That's before you start on the performers. The way the dancers take over that space is astonishing. The actors (including Mephistopheles' pet demons) and professional acrobats I met right at the start, being blocked in with the singers.

Musicians: sixty in the chorus and below them sixty more in the orchestra with sound technicians.

All these people surround those I have been following for two months: stage managers, producers, director and assistant director; conductor and his assistants – the people keeping track of Music Notes and playing accompaniment. And 6 soloists. The ones whose feelings and voices speak for us.

The ones who sometimes seem so lonely on the stage.

*

Down on the Linbury Stage, *Through His Teeth* has only three soloists, though the wonderfully rich-voiced Victoria Simmonds the mezzo, plays several

characters: the interviewer, the sister, and a further, far-gone, undiscovered victim of Robert, still in her deluded state.

In the dressing room is a colour-coded rack of clothes which they all, especially Vicky, have to do quick changes into, between scenes. So there must be people keeping track of the clothes, holding the right jacket and wig ready. And the hairdresser, wig and make-up team.

And here is Becs Andrews the designer, responsible for every single seen thing on stage (except the electronics) and director Bijan Sheibani, All of them have been working since Christmas to a fantastic pitch of rising intensity.

For the stage, there is the lighting guy Paul Knott whom I wish I'd talked to more. The stage hands are especially crucial for wheeling on and off at scene change the black sliding screens.
Perforated screens. P for the Paranoia which Robert induces.
Too many people to get to know over only two months. Ian the brilliant stage manager, and the production team. People I know by sight now but haven't talked to properly. All of them vital.

In the orchestra pit, musicians from the Chroma ensemble, Sian Edwards the conductor and her assistants ,who have stood in for her when she was conducting somewhere else, and played piano in rehearsal for the singers.

And, usually, the composer, Luke Bedford: he has just yesterday – hurray, congratulations – had a baby – called Rudy.

I have never met the librettist, playwright David Harrower who lives in Edinburgh. I wish I had because the script is brilliant.

Plus there's all the new technology, the video and live stage cameras master-minded by Sam.

That's maybe a hundred people who have worked to get soprano Anna Devin on stage in a white blouse and neat pencil skirt sliding deeper (and so convincingly) over the edge and out of touch with her own instincts, because of a ruthlessly controlling man. I wish *Cosmopolitan*, and all magazines who give love advice to women, would come and review it

*

For *The Crackle,* in the same set, same production crew, same stage manager and technical crew, same designer responsible for every physical thing on stage, but different musicians and a whole rainbow of sound specialists, from Sam Meech to Matthew Herbert himself, composer, librettist and director; Barnaby the foley artist, guys in charge of playing the recording: Bryn Terfel's voice for the devil and a wonderland of crackly strange sounds.
The two soloists: tenor Andrew Dickinson has perfected the demo-autistic music teacher George. Stephanie Marshall is a wonderful warm-voiced presence, centre of the piece's warmth and lyricism. After one rehearsal, she talked to me about telling her own kids about the piece.
Are they going to come and see it?
"Well, the children all die. They're a bit young for that."
There is the Youth Opera: 48 high maintenance kids, plus their week-in week-out directors, both musical and acting, their infrastructure and minders.
And finally, the conductor, Tim Murray. Tim's been working double time, for months all day Saturdays with the children as well as week in, week out, with the singers; plus with the foley artist; the electronics and video guys.
Part of the point of *The Crackle* is that sound triggers visuals. But conducting with a running tape must be fantastically hard.

And in the end, it is all going to come down to the tip of Tim's baton. One small visual cue gives the signal for the overriding thing – live sound.

This is pulling-everything-together week – all the many different pieces and people. So that finally, the conductor, Maurizio Benini, Sian Edwards and Tim, can raise a baton and give a beat.

#17 Dizzying Publicity versus Alone with Your Voice

I'm writing this opera blog for A Faustian Pack at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden as part of *Criticism Now*, a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London. I've been watching rehearsals of Gounod's *Faust* plus two modern operas on Faustian themes Luke Bedford's *Through His Teeth* and Matthew Herbert's *The Crackle*. The operas are all opening this weekend: one First Night tonight, another Friday, the third on Saturday. I am watching everything coming together in a week of adrenalin over-kill for all staff, technical, production, stage hands, directors, conductors, musicians, singers. Best of luck to them all….

Trying to reckon up the vast numbers of people behind the three Faust operas this spring – opera house administration, directors, web people, publicity, booking, usher as well as everyone in and around the stages – I keep thinking of opera's ancestor, Greek tragedy in ancient Athens.

How the city stopped for the nine days of the Festival of Dionysus, where these great costumed music dramas played.

How, it is said, people who couldn't afford the entrance fee got subsidized.

(Would our current government… oh, never mind.)

So many people are involved in putting each one on: you multiply in the thousands to whom coming to watch these tragedies, these operas, will really matter.

"The Athenians are a strange people". Herodotus reported the Persians saying. "They get together in the middle of their city and tell each other lies."
But too bad for the Persians: opera, like Athenian tragedy, is a public voicing, and sometimes a fiction (a make-up, fantastical, yes maybe a lying) which tells a truth profoundly important for its community.

As I race not to be late for Gounod's *Faust* Dress Rehearsal, I think of the singers at this moment.
They are getting dressed, getting be-wigged and made up, swords put in place, cloaks and daggers settled, noses powdered, all by experts.

But above all they are practising and warming up the flexibility and resonance of the instrument on which their own expertise depends, the all-important larynx.

And the vocal chords. Up the scale and down, in different vowel positions so all of them are exercised. This is the narrowest part of the human anatomy, and has to be sustained by life, by the breath.

The huge publicness and publicity of opera is counterweighted by the slender vase of what lies inside an individual throat – and beyond that, each sensibility.

Every perfected note is a kind of vocal image for the specialness of feeling which everyone has inside them. That's why we relate to them emotionally. The voice that comes out of that larynx stands for us.

So much complexity. So much false hair – and make-up, with all that implies – and so many framed, stylized, bejewelling conventions and technologies.

But all three Faustian composers are (were, in Gounod's case) trying to get across a truth - about evil now: and its ways in to human beings.

How we let the devil in. How we let evil destroy us but sometimes (after all, it was Greek tragedy which crafted the Western concept of a hero that opera took over) we stand up to it, and survive.

#18 Dress Rehearsal: Gounod's Faust

The auditorium feels quite different full. The public can come to dress rehearsals. Wonderful for them – and essential for the singers to have the buzz, feedback, the echo chamber in front.

The dark quiet now is the rustling stillness of a forest when the tiger wakes.

This is what all the months of hard work have been for. The dative – the giving - of doing anything on stage but especially singing, is immense. Ex-pressing comes from *ex-primere*, "to press out", as in wine from grapes. You are bringing something out something deep in yourself and offering it to somebody else.

In these two months of rehearsals, I've seen singers working on the moves and the interactions deciding, as one put it to me, "how much to give them." They all have the Voice inside, but the resonance has to be perfect, supported, held. And when you are working out where to run, how to exit without bumping into a pillar, you don't want to waste it.
Sometimes I've joined in the small clapping at a rehearsal after a wonderful aria: where the public will clap – so the conductor has to wait.
"And if there's no applause?" one person waspishly said after one particularly poignant aria.

Everyone laughed. Because, of course, there will be.

The beauty of all that voice and song has been taken for granted, these last months. Now, at last in the Dress Rehearsal, here are the people whom it is for.

I find a seat in front of banks of – cameras! Some set up on tripods.
It is like a firing squad. The Press have arrived. Reviewers will come on the First Night but this phalanx of photographers are the advance guard. They represent publicity, the world – and they are ruthless.

The firing squad line right above me are clicking noisily away all through. Valentine dies – I know how hard it is for him to watch the conductor from floor level – and click click click go the lenses above me In front of me there are a lot of quieter photographers, checking through on their digitals to see if they have the right pic before moving on.

Now, on stage, the whole chorus, unaccompanied, are asking God to pardon Valentin's sins as he breathes his last and his sister goes mad.

CLICK CLICK CLICK

Maurizio the conductor throws a word over his shoulder, trying to shut them up while holding the tension of 60 voices singing a capella as soft as they can.

It is a magical sound but the photographers go on with their irregular loud clicks to the end of the Act. It is as if they cannot actually hear what they are doing, they are so intent on the visual.

When the curtain is briefly down and house lights go up a moment the photographer in front of me, the quiet one, looks up at them and wags his finger.

"Who are they?" I ask. "It's outrageous."
He ticks them off on his fingers.
One's from a Welsh paper. "He's here for Bryn."
They should know better, he says.
"I have a quiet camera. They are totally insensitive."
"Where are you from?"
"The Times."
Always discreet.

I'd never thought before of how this works. Yet another new world revealed to me through opera: of press photographers at a million Dress Rehearsals.

The curtain goes up on a backdrop showing an opera house, red and gold: the place of art, of transformations.

We could be looking into a mirror, with Faust and Satan in front of us.
This is the realm of the devil which opposes the dark serenity of a Romanesque church.

"Where are we?" asks Faust.
"Dans mon empire," sings Mephistopheles. And in a twinkling, he transforms it to a remote heath peopled by demons and witches. Up from below come the beautiful actresses painted and statued up, playing the courtesans of antiquity.

I remember sitting in Rehearsal Room one with the actresses saying they would be costumed as queens of legend. They shimmer and glitter voluptuously. Faust

is entranced. He has forgotten Marguerite,The devil's empire, apparently, is not a galaxy of press photographers but the place where you make a choice – to prefer the legendary, the illusory, the courtesans of antiquity to the suffering , the real.

When we do finally see the real – Marguerite - she seems like a vision. She had her baby while the grotesque cruel ballet of corruption was playing. Now she is going to kill it.

Three or four demon-ballerinas race over to her, all jagged legs and arms, and stuff it into its tiny coffin. I remember coming on that small black casket with a doll in it, backstage. All the elements: props, light, costumes, orchestra, dancers, the movements Bruno has written endless Notes on: Everything is coming together.

#19 First Night: Luke Bedford's Through His Teeth

This performing life is so different from a writer's life, alone with words, coffee and your own thoughts.

Poets work in private. Doing public readings is fun, you give what you have worked on to other people in new ways and get to know the poems better each time, see new colours in them – but you are doing it on your own.

While I can see how everyone working on *Through His* Teeth, stage manager, conductor, musicians, director, production team as well as the singers, has been on a journey *together* into the piece, into their experience and understanding of it. They are all experts in their particular job, but they are putting their separate skills together, creating something all as one.

Through His Teeth has been a particularly unnerving journey. Partly because it is based on a true story, though its scenes, events and dialogue are all imaginary.

The more I see of it, the more I admire the imaginative mill of David Harrower and Luke Bedford and what they did with the real life story.Newspaper cuttings from it were up on the rehearsal room walls, but each of the three singers, with the director, were gradually creating a character from within the opera itself, independent of the real life basis.

David Harrower's language is bare and the events, the little quick scenes, perfectly crafted. They leave exactly the right amount of space for Luke's musical textures, from a heart-rending cello solo to whispery whiskery percussion, a drum beat throb building to the arrest of Robert, and harsh intense brass, to explore the emotional tension.

I bring a friend to the first night. Front of house now, not the bowels of the opera house. It is full: this space that looked to me like a complicated car wreck a week ago looks beautiful, alert, excited, packed.

Clapping for Sian Edwards the conductor. She picks up her baton. Sam Meech is ready at his desk of electronics.

Please God let it go well, let the sliding screens slide properly.

And yes, the quick-sliding flow of one scene into the next, both musically and visually, works brilliantly, getting exactly the progressive way the sinister Robert, the human Mephistopheles, gains ascendancy over his victim, so brilliantly sung by Anna Devin.

I remember sitting by Anna at the first lunch break of rehearsals. She had learned her part over Christmas but I now see that for an opera singer, learning the part, by yourself (the kind of work a writer can relate to, the private hard work no one else sees) is just the beginning of the journey.

What I have watched, these last two months, is how that private work is built on, to create the acting, the performance, the character.

I am delighted to watch its effect on my friend, and others afterwards, seeing it for the first time.

At first Anna is sane – sad, with something missing in her life, but sane. But progressively she buys sexual-emotional bliss with the demonic Robert, the bliss of total attachment, at the cost of her sanity: which you could also put in nineteenth-century terms, and say it is at the cost of her soul.

We see this most, when he brings her flowers he has picked up from the road: laid where a child was knocked down and killed.

She stares, then gives a little laugh, says lightly, “You’re sick,” and accepts his proposal of marriage..

The real Anna, the soprano, acts and sings it brilliantly. The character she has create is clearly so far gone, she can’t find in herself the right way to react to this appalling offering.

Another element that comes across is the infection of mental illness: how Robert’s pretence of working for MI5, of being targeted and under surveillance, generates or transmits itself to her as real deep-rooted paranoia.

Which leaves a permanent scar. We come to the final scene, the scene at which Bijan the director said at one rehearsal: “I can’t do this scene, it freaks me out.” And then, joking, “Let’s just leave it!”

Now the sliding screens roll right back, exposing the whole of the beautiful wood- slat stage, almost Chinese, which Becs Andrews has created. Now

completely bare except for Vicky Simmons as the interviewer in a blonde wig, and Anna.

The truth at last.

What would he say to you, if he saw you now?

He'd say he thought about me every moment of his sentence. That that kept him sane.

Would you believe him?

Anna hesitates.

Sam's cameras are on her face, and I can see what he meant about using film at moments, to amplify a dramatic ill second. We see every muscle tense – and her terrified thoughts moving behind them like fish in water.

I truly hope not.

What if I call a cab now, would you come and see me with him? Would you?

That's how it ends, with a terrifying question. Would you? would you give in to temptation, sign that contract with the devil *again*, now you know the cost?
A question and a bare bare stage.

Fantastic. Vicky Suimmonds's wonderful rich voice – the voice of moral questioning as interviewer, moral break up as Robert's unknown other victim, and moral sanity as the sister – is asking a question that goes unanswered.

And Anna Devin's face: unanswering, shamed, still addicted, still longing, still half-trying to do what her made her do: keep hiding.

It leaves us all feeling we have seen a really wonderful new opera being born.

#20 The Devil's Technology: Dress Rehearsal & First Night of The Crackle

For two months at the Royal Opera House Covent Garden I've been watching rehearsals of their Faust Pack: Gounod's Faust and two modern operas on Faustian themes: Luke Bedford's *Through His Teeth* and Matthew Herbert's *The Crackle*. Now it's all coming together and I've just found out, rather late in the day, that this Faust theme goes right back to the roots of the place.

The original Theatre Royal Covent Garden, where the Opera House stands, was built by John Rich in 1732 from money he first made from his hit pantomime Dr Faustus (1723). He added on money from The Beggar's Opera (1728) and five years later built the Theatre Royal. So the operas sung here more or less continually ever since owe their performance to, precisely, the Faust story.

I can't make the First Night of *The Crackle*, I'm booked for a poetry reading, but the Dress Rehearsal is crackling with several different kinds of energy.

The kids of the Youth Opera know the opera so well they seem unfazed by the complex technical aspects, now in full swing: dervish machine, film visuals, the works. But the children are filling the stage with their own natural energy, enough to compete with any amount of hi tech dazzle.

Maybe the Faust harlequin panto of 1723 was as hi tech then as this is now: at the end, Faust got eaten by a dragon. Tonight, instructions for downloading the app called Chirp which turns image into sound, are given out at the entrance.

The dress rehearsal audience bewilderedly download it, look round at each other, get out their phones when the kids start waving their mobiles and receiving the devil's app. Suddenly a glitter exchange explodes – a crackle, in fact, a ping pong of spark and sound - between audience and stage,

That's when I realize how potent Matthew Herbert's message is

The opening the devil finds in George is his vanity and life-disappointment. But the opening he finds into the kids is worse – it is exactly the chink he found in Adam and Eve. We are all of us vulnerable to evil through our curiosity, desire for knowledge, and hunger for the new invention.
And it's infectious – it can spread in an instant, and catch fire from stage to

audience. All those kids waving Chirp around – they, with their life-enhancing enthusiasm, are exactly what the devil is after.

As with Prometheus, human beings have always been drawn to new inventions, however diabolical. New technology will always be the biggest draw and will always – like fire – have its destructive as well as creative side.

That's what's so clever about the devil, and about Mathew Herbert's portrayal of him. He exploits what's good and creative about us.

*

Two days later: I'm about to go on stage to read in Cheltenham Poetry Festival and Sam Meech, video supremo, reports that *The Crackle's* Opening Night is being brilliantly received.

The atmosphere's very informal, everyone has their phones out, sending and receiving images and text via Chirp. The audience get on their mobiles the same text poor old George - brilliantly acted as well as sung by baritone Andrew Dickinson, I've marvelled at the way he has gradually crafted his doomed nerdish hopeless character through the weeks of rehearsal – and the audience like the kids are now opening themselves to the new Mephistophelean art.

They are creating their own narrative on top with random pics from their phones and comments on the show. Throughout the performance, this other spontaneous, free association level of dialogue and exchange is going on.

The parent of one of the children – sung meltingly by Stephanie Marshall, the lyrical heart of the piece – cottons on to how dangerous this is. She phones George desperately in the midst of his show – during which the fun new technology will kill the kids one by one.

But she hasn't a chance against the infectious addictive fun of pure newness.

Amazing performance. I don't know how Tim Murray the conductor holds it all, crackle technology, sound, light and children, together, but he does.

Long live Faust and the dragon.

Long live John Rich and his Faustian pack on which repose the Royal Opera House architecture and history, all this music, light, technology, adventure and sound.

#21 Glamour Moment: First Night of Gounod's Faust

Something about selling your soul for short-term pleasure must be a box-office draw. The Faust story goes back to the beginnings of opera in Covent Garden. The first Theatre Royal (1732) was built with money made from a pantomime *Dr Faustus* so opera here owes its origins to the Faust theme, and Gounod's Faust is one of the most popular operas in history.

For two months this spring, as part of the 'Criticism Now' project at the Cultural Institute project at Kings College London, I've been watching rehearsals at the Royal Opera House for their Faust Pack - Gounod's Faust plus two new chamber operas on Faustian themes. This is the first time they've integrated a main stage production with their lovely studio space which does smaller, new, post 1950 opera. The new operas found disturbing Faustian echoes in contemporary scenarios: cutting-edge electronics and a conman specializing in sexual magnetism.

It's been an extraordinary experience. I was made more and more aware of the opportunities for Mephistopheles everywhere in modern life, but I've also been fascinated by watching gifted directors, conductors and singers crafting together their own vision of an ancient story, clarifying the Faust in all of us.

First night of Gounod's *Faust,* A packed house, very different from the auditorium dark and empty, when I watched the set going up with a hundred technicians all over it.
To limit the coughing that bedevils every silence, programme sellers are handing out free throat pastilles to the smartly dressed audience finding their seats.

I'm behind two opera buffs comparing star sopranos like runners in the Grand National.
The soprano tonight, Sonya Yoncheva, is singing Marguerite for the first time, and first time on this stage.

I thought she was fantastic when I first met her two months ago backstage in Rehearsal Room One. I've learned that singers don't normally sing out in rehearsal. The work there is crafting the moves, perfecting the acting to fit each bar of music. So I've heard Sonya's full voice only intermittently but I know it's gorgeous. These guys are in for a surprise.

I didn't know this opera two months ago. As the curtain rises, we see Bryn Terfel in flowing wig and 19th century cape, rather than his faded T shirt saying Detroit Rock.

He walks slowly up the iron ladder towards the organ loft which on this set houses God who will eventually confound him.

I remember him at the first rehearsal on that ladder, asking the director, "How far up do I dare go?"

I realized then that all of them, singers and director, are working all the time while carrying the intimately-known *music* inside their heads, to uncover the heart and point of the *drama* more and more deeply.

The cheval glass, in which Mephistopheles shows Faust his rejuvenated self, is filthy. I remember mentioning this, hesitantly, to Greg Eldridge the assistant director after the first stage rehearsal - in a post-mortem rehearsal. (Called "Notes", I now know). I said it could do with a wash.

"It's *supposed* to be dirty," Greg said. "Faust is an old guy, a bachelor. Everything round him is smeared and gone to pot."

Now, the staging makes me think, does Faust's smeary sense of self reflect his compromised soul?

A contrast with Marguerite, when she is being tempted innocently by the devil's jewels.

"It can't be wrong to open the casket," she says.

All the "openings" she does, laying herself open to the devil - opening the casket, the window, opening herself to love - are inadvertent compared to those of Faust.

She too looks in a mirror but this one's as spring-sparkling as the Jewel Song itself – and Sonya sings it dazzlingly.

All that power, warmth and golden voice sat quiet within her in the canteen, or sitting around in rehearsal checking her mobile phone.

The men clapping in front of me look at each other.
“Good, isn’t she?” one says as if a horse he bet on is running strong.

Now for the Quartet, when the three main singers first engage with each other musically. The fourth time I’ve watched Faust, Mephistopheles, Marguerite and her nosy neighbor Marthe sing it.

Marthe comes out of her house with a saucepan, dabbles enviously in the jewels, then flirts with Mephistopheles. Bryn Terfel, in a captain’s uniform, just like the one we’ve seen on Marguerite’s brother Valentin, distracts Marthe so Faust can begin seducing Marguerite.

They go into Marthe’s house and the blind goes down. Terfel comes out buttoning his flies.

When I looked at Greg’s score for this scene I saw opposite the music the stage direction was ”buckling his belt”.

“It wasn’t that,” I said. “It was his flies.”

Greg smiled. “Some things you don’t put in the Notes.”

Mephistopheles and Marthe are written to be an ugly mirror, of Faust’s seduction of Marguerite which will also end in male abandoning female. The Quartet contains the whole story arc of Faust and Marguerite, *as the devil sees it*. At the first rehearsal there were problems about what to do with the saucepan and how Mephistopheles gets away from Marthe, afterwards.

Now the moves are clear, and bring out the mirroring (more mirror stuff) between each couple: which Gounod has written into the music, giving each voice a different emotional as well as musical agenda.

I realize what an extraordinary thing it is, to direct an opera with intelligent singers.
Scene after scene, details I’ve watched long hours spent on in Rehearsal Room One, follow each other, more and more clearly .They drive home to me one of opera’s great strengths: that it can vault over the connections of realism.

Yes, stage manager and directors have to think about how to get someone off stage and on, holding a a sword or string of pearls. But the music cuts effortlessly, as in cinema, from the fore-play of a love duet to Marguerite

pregnant and abandoned, and to her brother's death in his attempt to avenge the dishonour.

I've watched Bruno Ravello the director making tiny adjustments to gestures Bryn Terfel does. Now here are two more mirrorings. The devil has turned Faust into a shambling junkie: when he gives him his fix, he sings a mocking serenade above him, right in his face, stabbing his chest with his finder to mark the chords.

Tonight, ending this cruel serenade, Terfel swipes his staff over Faust's prone body. It is a new gesture. Since the Dress Rehearsal. Bruno and Bryn must have refined it: the devil is making a clear sweep of Faust, sealing his power.

And in the following scene in the church. he seals his power over the pregnant body of Marguerite, who enters in a pink shawl. He lifts the shawl off her and tosses it away, then presses down on her swollen belly, causing pain you can hear in agonized chords in the music.

Again, new gestures, different from the Dress Rehearsal.

It's much clearer now, how the devil is playing with his victims.

Afterwards, I go up to staff drinks celebrating the first night and pass the open door of Bryn's dressing room.

He's having his make-up taken off. No more flowing wig. Behind me, the corridor is full of Bulgarians arriving to congratulate Sonya.

"A new star is born," says Bryn, delighted. "They're all here, Deutsche Gramophon, opera houses – all queuing up for her."

"You've changed some stuff," I say. "It's different with Faust and Marguerite when you have them each on the floor."

He smiles. Of course, it's obvious: a show gets honed with each performance, it's not set in stone.

“I’m on the whole time,” he says as make-up is wiped from his right cheek. “People say it’s creepy when I’m in the dress on Walpurgis Night, but I think it’s creepiest when I’m in ordinary uniform, like Valentin. *That’s* creepy”.

I hadn’t thought of that. Maybe it’s the same point that the contemporary Faust operas in the Linbury are making: that the devil is at his worst not dressed up but when he’s in our own clothes, wearing the familiar face of everyday.

For Faust and all of us, that’s when Mephistopheles is most dangerous.

That’s the joy of opera – it makes you see and understand new things each time you see one.

#22 Like Killing Facebook

I've been writing this What is Opera? blog for A Faustian Pack at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. As part of Criticism Now, a Cultural Institute project at Kings College London, I've watched Gounod's *Faust* and two modern operas on Faustian themes – Luke Bedford's brilliant and unsettling *Through His Teeth*, Matthew Herbert's sonically weird and wonderful *The Crackle* - from first rehearsal to first night. I thought I'd finished but can't resist this last bit of audience reaction, which sums up the disorientating effect of Matthew Herbert's project: approaching the story of Mephistopheles in relation to Faust – and to all of us – through his unique style of sound electronics.

I: "There's a really strange noise coming from the downstage left speaker."

N: "Yeah – it's coming from the downstage right one too."

R: "I think that might be deliberate."

I: "It's deliberate?"

R: "Yeah, that's part of the sound."

I: "It sounds like someone is killing Facebook."