

EUGENE ART TALK

BY BOB KEEFER



BARITONE PHILIP CUTLIP

HEAVEN, HELL & CONTEXT

at Eugene Symphony's amazing multi-media performance of Faust

Did you catch Eugene Symphony's performance of *The Damnation of Faust* the other evening? It was, I can't resist saying, one Hell of a show, and if you weren't there you should have been.

First, the basics: The symphony teamed up with the University of Oregon's John Park and Harmonic Laboratory to put on the entire two-hour Hector Berlioz oratorio — that's like an opera with no sets, costumes or staging — with a full-on light show inside the Hult Center's Silva Concert Hall.

To make sure the elaborate video projections could be fully seen and enjoyed, the orchestra played under much-dimmed lighting, making the spacious 2,500-seat Silva feel wonderfully intimate.

The story is simple. Faust (tenor Matthew Plenk), a bored and aging scholar, is lured off by Mephistopheles

(baritone Philip Cutlip) to a tavern where he complains about his dull, arid life. Next thing he knows, he's falling in love with the lithe and willing Marguerite (mezzo Sasha Cooke).

To cut to the chase, she ends up in jail for killing her mother, and it's time for Faust to strike that deal with the Devil: In exchange for saving Marguerite, Faust offers his soul to Mephisto for all eternity.

Familiar story, beautifully performed. I was rapt for the entire two hours. In fact, I can easily say this was one of the best symphony concerts I've ever attended.

My favorite of the three soloists was Cutlip, the baritone Mephisto. Cutlip's a star in the opera world known for his charming bad-boy roles, from the double murderer Joseph De Rocher in Houston Grand Opera's *Dead Man Walking* to the trickster Papageno in Seattle Opera's *Magic Flute*

(where a *Seattle Times* critic called him "adorable" as an actor). He's been repeatedly featured on Barihunks, a blog about the sexiest baritones in opera.

As Mephisto, Cutlip was quick, engaging and theatrical, a perfect foil to Plenk's straight-man Faust.

Now here's where the opera thickens. Cutlip started fooling around on stage during the performance. He slouched in his seat. He took off his jacket and tie. He put on a cowboy hat. He dropped a water bottle that clattered noisily on the stage floor.

All the while, I'm thinking this is an unusual but interesting take on Mephisto. Is this what you get when you cast a bad boy as the devil? Meta-opera, perhaps?

Then, Sunday morning I picked up *The Register-Guard* and read Alison Kaufman's absolutely scathing review of Cutlip's performance.

"Hell was indeed present on stage in the form of baritone Philip Cutlip," she wrote. "Never has such an insulting mess of unprofessionalism been permitted to share this stage — at least not in my years attending Eugene performances."

Let me say here, *brava*, Alison! I have never before read in the *R-G* such a harsh review of anything the symphony has done. I mean, I've written the odd negative review now and again, but wow!

"How this 'singer' gets hired is beyond me, and hopefully Eugene will not be subjected to this clown again," she concluded.

Kaufman is a Ph.D. student in musicology at the UO School of Music and Dance, which supplies a lot of musicians to the symphony's orchestra and chorus. Obviously she knew something I didn't coming into the *Faust* performance. So I spent some time Sunday checking in with a few musicians around town.

The story I got is one of a backstage soap opera that afflicted last week's rehearsals, with clashes between conductor Danaïl Rachev and the chorus and between Rachev and Cutlip, who was suffering severe allergies and had pulled his voice back until the concert.

Kaufman and I had utterly different contexts for the evening: She was, no doubt, seeing the concert — and Cutlip's cowboy antics, whether entertaining or unprofessional — in terms of those rehearsal battles.

Me, I saw and heard an utterly enjoyable concert with, at the end, a couple strange twists from one of many performers on the Silva stage.

Context may be everything; will past be prelude? *Faust* was Rachev's next-to-last appearance conducting the orchestra as music director. Given all that happened last week, it will be interesting to hear him conduct Richard Strauss' *An Alpine Symphony* for his final Eugene gig May 11.

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