

The Damnation of Faust, English National Opera,

(Rated 4/ 5)

By Jessica Duchon

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Poor old Berlioz. The moment Terry Gilliam was announced as director of this new ENO staging, it was obvious that the composer would scarcely get a look in, at least in advance.

It's the first venture into opera (in a co-production with De Vlaamse Opera, Antwerp) for the former Monty Python animator and director of such legendary movies as *Brazil*, *Twelve Monkeys* and *The Fisher King*. The question, of course, was: could this operatic novice deliver in a field where so many other film supremos have fallen flat on their faces?

Well, in certain ways Berlioz doesn't get a look in in the finished version either, since Gilliam has elected to take us through a journey through German history, all the way from Romanticism – the red-haired Faust himself is straight out of that famed Caspar David Friedrich painting – to?you guessed it, Marguerite rises to heaven from Auschwitz.

It's not so much Monty Python as *The Producers*, so full is the show of camp, dancing, exercising Nazis. Springtime for Terry and Berlioz, anyone? But Python fans will be glad to know that close to the start we do get a glimpse of something much resembling the Knights that say Ni.

Berlioz's *Faust* is a challenge at the best of times – it's not even opera, strictly speaking, but in the composer's terminology a 'légende dramatique', part cantata, part opera and possibly as ill-suited to the stage as Goethe's 'closet drama' (a deliberately unstageable play) that inspired it. But Berlioz, Gilliam and the character of Mephistopheles, the devil, have two great things in common: a vast imagination and a sense of unbounded mischief that means breaking all the rules, including 'avoid cliché'; Gilliam seems to have elected to do the latter so spectacularly that it floors everyone anyway. At least sometimes.

When it doesn't work, it really doesn't work. After all, the Nazis had nothing whatsoever to do with Berlioz, who wrote this magnificent work back in 1846, let alone Goethe. Yet the best moments are stunning. Having spent most of the first half thinking "When are we ever going to grow up and get past putting the Nazis into opera?" by the end of the evening this critic was shaken and profoundly moved.

All credit to ENO for pulling it off. It's a phenomenally slick, complex show of many components and brilliant theatrical effects: Faust and Mephisto's motorbike ride to the gates of hell, dodging "birds" that are aircraft dropping bombs, Faust's entry to – and exit from – hell itself, and the chilling transformation in Act I of the songs of the Rat and the Flea into anti-Semitic cabaret horrors. And there's a brilliant moment at which Gilliam literally turns back time: the precision of its execution alone would have been astounding even if it hadn't happened to work conceptually.

Gilliam's not-so-secret weapons are his Mephistopheles, Christopher Purves at his most charismatic, infallible and infinitely nuanced; and, as Marguerite Oppenheim (yes, really), the glorious Christine Rice, whose rich yet pure mezzo - and aching calls of 'Alas' as she is herded into the cattle truck - suits this music to perfection. Peter Hoare as Faust performed strongly in the first act, though the start of Act II found him suffering in the high notes and somewhat losing his stride for a short while thereafter. The orchestra and chorus were on fabulous form under Ed Gardner's baton.