



**Jesus and Satan in Moscow**  
Three Late-20th-century Operas on Bulgakov's Novel  
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## The Creation of Meaning in Opera: A Contest

One of the ongoing power struggles in the field of art is that between the competing claims of musical and discursive languages in all genres of vocal music for a greater share in the creation of "meaning." Nowhere is this struggle more evident than in opera. The history of the kind of music-dramatic performances of which today's operas are the heirs begins, as I have argued elsewhere (**Bruhn 2003**, pp. 7-8), with Hildegard of Bingen's 1151 *Ordo virtutum*. This drama, whose Latin words were sung to some instrumental accompaniment and with some degree of staging and acting, was performed by the nuns of the Benedictine abbess's convent, most likely before a mixed audience of clergy and lay visitors. Hildegard set her own mystically inspired text to sometimes syllabically simple, more often melismatically ornate melodies. At the time when *Ordo virtutum* was conceived, the use of music to transport the message of a self-contained drama was still uncommon. All the more astounding is the fact that this early composer uses what one of her researchers, Audrey Ekdahl Davidson (**1985**, p. i), has called "Hildegard's thumbprint" — a particular interval (the rising fifth) employed for the purpose of musical signification.<sup>[1]</sup> In addition to this fascinating play with an early precursor of a melodic signifier, Hildegard makes use of a timbral means to convey another message. In contrast to the old proverb, according to which "the Devil has all the good tunes," Hildegard's Devil is unable to express himself with consonances and beautiful cadences. His purposefully harsh speaking-voice (the performance edition suggests that his speeches be "broken or shouted" and "accompanied by a rattle"), cuts into the mellifluous beauty of the female unison chant and serves as an effective means of character portrayal.

The question as to which nuances of signification music adds to a text depends largely on whether or not this text is known in advance or at least distinctly understood during performance. The former alternative entered the operatic genre only with the advent of the so-called *Literaturoper*; the latter alternative was a vexing point of dispute until the (very recent) introduction of supertitles. Musical theater actually known as "opera" began in Italy around the year 1600 under the watchful eyes of the members of the Florentine Camerata, and was determined by the new ideal described as *recitar cantando*. The composers and music critics around Giovanni de' Bardi demanded a style of presenting texts that was to be both truthful and convincing, a sort of singing not burdened by endless and rhythmically distorting ornaments, but in a manner reminiscent of speech. The basic claim of this approach seems to have come full circle in the first half of the 20th century with the development of techniques summarized under the term *Sprechgesang*. At the other end of the spectrum we have not only vocal virtuosity such as coloraturas, in which the underlying text, whatever there still is of it, is entirely secondary to the display of vocal technique (and perhaps, through it, of the super- or inhuman nature of the character), but also some more recent phenomena which Michel Poizat (**1993**, p. 161) has described as "pure vocal emission, the isolated phoneme, all modalities of expression of breath, and literally unheard-of vocalic inflections." This has resulted, in Poizat's view in "the exclusion of all reference not only to meaning but to the word itself."

A different aspect in the contest, which transcends vocal presentation and encompasses other musical modes of meaning formation in the operatic genre, regards the question as to what kind of text is best suited to a setting involving both singing voices and non-vocal commentary intended to enrich the conveyed signification. An early view which maintained that the simpler the verbal source, the more successful its musicalization, has long been abandoned. In her 1994 book *The Powers of Music: Aesthetic Theory and the Invention of Opera*, Ruth Katz argues that "the 'denser' the discursive language the more it is able to benefit from an association with music for the purpose of elucidation. Conversely, the less ambiguous the utterance is, the more the recourse to music may prove inefficacious or even alienating. If mood, disposition and the like are thought to be

best expressed by music, it is because music is capable of pinning down, incontestably, so to speak, that which is most ambiguous in discursive language (**Katz, 1986**, pp. 33-42).

Based on Sandra Corse's assertion (**1987**, p. 14) that "a composer reinvents, in a different medium, the ambiguity and multiple relationships of literary texts," Michael Halliwell (**2005**, p. 11) in his recent book, *Opera and the Novel: The Case of Henry James*, investigates "the 'translation' or transposition of a particular artistic work from one genre to another," a process he terms *metaphrasis*. Addressing a particular case of *metaphrasis*, the transposition of a work of prose fiction into sung drama, **Halliwell** (p. 1) reflects on what he refers to as "music's often turbulent relationship with that most wordy and anarchic of literary forms, the novel," arguing (p. 12) that "opera exhibits the features of a special narrative mode which distinguishes it from purely performative modes such as spoken drama."

Operatic adaptations of novels began with an outburst triggered by the novels of Sir Walter Scott; Jerome Mitchell, in two studies devoted to this subject (**1977, 1996**), lists some eighty-five operas that use Scott's prose narratives as their source, cautioning that his list is by no means complete. One of these operas, Gaetano Donizetti's 1835 *Lucia di Lammermoor*, is a staple of world-wide repertory; other well-known novel-based operas include Giuseppe Verdi's 1852 *La Traviata* (after Alexandre Dumas), Georges Bizet's 1875 *Carmen* (after Prosper Mérimée), and Giacomo Puccini's 1896 *La Bohème* (after Henry Murger). In the 20th century, the trend gained more and more momentum; **Halliwell** (pp. 33-34), who covering only literature in English, lists thirty-two prose works that have served as sources for operatic adaptations during the years 1951-2003.**[2]**

The following chapters examine three music-dramatic adaptations of a famous Russian novel. Beyond the question which segments — or strands — of the literary plot have been selected (or omitted) in libretto setting, the focus is on the way in which the musical language contributes its own interpretive nuances and how these influence the overall message of the novel-become-opera.

### **A Plot Braided from Three Threads**

One hot spring evening in the 1930s, the Russian incarnation of Goethe's Mephisto stepped into the lives of Moscow's writers. At this time, "the Master" was already in a psychiatric ward as a result of his novel on Pontius Pilate. Learning that the manuscript put him at risk in a country that prided itself to be the center of world atheism, he had attempted to burn it in the stove of his little apartment. But manuscripts don't burn. That's at least how Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) tells it in *The Master and Margarita*, a novel that was suppressed for a quarter century after its author's death in 1940 but has now been translated into more than twenty languages and is considered a masterpiece of 20th-century Russian literature. With differing accents, the story is musically retold in the operas of Bulgakov's compatriot Sergey Slonimsky and the German composers Rainer Kunad and York Höller.

Like many great works of Russian literature, the novel has a complex plot, woven from three strands that unfold in different dimensions. Each of these strands has its own plotline, with a very active person from whose point of view the events are told and a seemingly more passive one who is the true spiritual protagonist. The strands interweave, both in terms of their emergence in the novel and in that aspects of one dimension influence events in another.

At first glance, the satirical strand is the most captivating one. Playing in Moscow during three consecutive May days — Wednesday evening through Saturday night —

presumably in the 1930s, it debunks in myriad hilarious ways the stupidity and greed of that great city's population. The active person whom the reader follows primarily is the poet Ivan Bezdomny; he is surrounded by other representatives of the Moscow literary and theater scene along with their neighbors, relatives, and audiences. The actual protagonist of this strand is Woland, a man who introduces himself as a foreign professor, a specialist in black magic, and who is none other than the devil in person. Like Ivan he is part of a group: he is accompanied by several inferior devils, above all the ridiculously tall and absurdly dressed Korovyov, the giant cat Behemoth, who speaks and acts like a human, and the cynical Azazello.

The second strand is the fantastic one. Ostensibly linked in terms of both time and place with Moscow and with one of the nights within the three-day period, it actually plays out in the atemporal expanse of a hauntingly protracted midnight beat and in the distended space of a "fifth dimension." This story is told from the perspective of Margarita, a wise and courageous woman ready to trust her instincts, who was the lover and muse of the disappeared "Master" and is prepared to risk everything — even the entry into a completely unreal dimension — in order to save him. The real protagonist in the background of this strand is thus the Master. He is a historian who has written a novel about Pontius Pilate, which infuriates his literary colleagues in their state-decreed atheism because of its presupposition of an historical, human Jesus. Consequently, publication is thwarted, the author is harassed and slandered by critics on the basis of the subject matter, and then is finally "removed."

Finally there is the religious strand. Its plotline is situated in Yershalaim (old Hebrew for Jerusalem), on the Friday preceding the Passover feast some 1900 years prior to the Moscow story. The person who gives this strand its title and is apparently its central figure is Pontius Pilate, the procurator of Judea. The actual protagonist of course, without whom no later generation would have any reason to remember the Roman politician, is a poor itinerant preacher from Galilee, Yeshua Ha-Notsri, who has been arrested on charges of instigating to overthrow the established order, whom Pilate will question and condemn to be crucified, and whose death will forever deprive the man responsible for the verdict of any peace.

Bulgakov's novel braids these threads in multiple ways. The satirical strand runs through the whole work, with particular prominence in the first of the two books; the fantastic strand proper begins only with the appearance of Margarita in book II, and the religious strand is inserted into both books in a roughly equal distribution. In the satire we initially follow the poet Ivan: how he is reproached by Berlioz, chief editor of a literary journal and chairman of the Moscow literary association, for having represented Jesus in a recent poem as though he were a historical person; how he listens in awe to a mysterious foreigner who claims to have been present on Pilate's balcony during the questioning of Jesus; how he watches the fatal accident predicted by the foreigner in which a streetcar severs Berlioz's head; how he chases the foreigner through major portions of the city and in the process becomes increasingly confused and disturbed; how he tells the literati assembled for their meeting of their chairman's death, demands the immediate arrest of the stranger, and finally becomes so bewildered and aggressive that he is committed to a psychiatric ward; and how once there he meets a co-inmate who introduces himself as "the Master" and tells him his story. We are also shown the havoc the mysterious professor Woland and his retinue wreak after the internment of Ivan, how they make a large number of persons disappear, frighten others, denounce virtually all who cross their way in some all-too-human weakness, set fire to various buildings when the military police attempts to end their antics, and then finally vanish into thin air.

In the fantastic strand we witness how Margarita is presented with a mysterious invitation issued by Woland, which she accepts after brief hesitation. With the help of a cream provided by Azazello she transmutes into a beautiful witch, flies on a broom — interrupted by myriad adventures — to Woland's Moscow headquarters, an apartment

that is magically expanded to encompass a gigantic palace, and learns about her task: to preside over Satan's magnificent annual spring ball. As queen of the ball she receives the guests: corrupt statesmen, poison mongers, fraudulent gamblers, suicides, executioners, traitors, spies and sexual offenders, all of whom are resuscitated for the duration of the feast in their various states of decomposition. As a compensation for her ordeal, Margarita is reunited with the Master, whom Woland magically kidnaps from the ward and brings into his room. Upon her wish the two are allowed to return to the Master's former apartment. Once there however, they face the question of how and on what to live, since the Moscow writers' hatred toward the author of the novel on Pontius Pilate has not diminished. This problem too is miraculously solved: within hours they are visited again by Azazello who gives them blood-red wine to drink. The first dose causes their immediate death, the second leads to their resurrection into another life.

### **Jesus, Satan, Faust and Gretchen**

The religious strand is conveyed in mediated form. A first chapter is told by Woland, who claims to have been an eye witness on Pilate's balcony; a second chapter forms the content of a dream dreamed in the psychiatric ward by the poet Ivan, who ever since he heard the story told by the mysterious foreigner has been asking himself what may have really happened to the condemned Yeshua. The reader soon realizes that both scenes form part of the novel about Pilate that has cost the Master his happiness and freedom. The following chapters are believed to be lost: Margarita reads a few lines from a scrap of singed paper that she has been able to rescue from the Master's oven. When Azazello later quotes these lines verbatim, he proves that Woland and his retinue are familiar with the destroyed novel and could reconstruct it any time. From this reconstructed version, Margarita eventually reads the last two chapters, so that we get to know the story of the innocent Yeshua's crucifixion in a most indirect way: from Woland, Ivan, and Margarita, reflected through Pontius Pilate's pangs of conscience as the Master has tried to capture them in his novel.

Woland's chronicle concentrates on the questioning of the accused. Pilate forms the impression that Yeshua is not only innocent, but a very unusual person. He decides not to ratify the proposed death sentence, but the high priest Kaipha is prepared. Through a go-between named Judas, who insinuates himself into the company of Yeshua as a potential student, he has trapped the unwelcome preacher into a comment on the transience of all earthly empires. In response to this alleged *lèse majesté*, Pilate has no choice but to condemn the unusual man if he does not want to risk losing his own favor with the Roman emperor. Ivan's dream focuses on a period several hours later, shocking readers with a detailed, hyper-realistic description of the torture to which the dying men at Golgotha are subjected. Yeshua's sole disciple, the former tax collector Levi Matvei, had planned to spare his master the terrible pains of the crucifixion by surreptitiously stabbing him to death on the way up the hill. By the time he has run back to town to steal a knife and rejoined the procession, however, the condemned have reached their goal and no opportunity presents itself for the commiserative murder. Only minimally distracted by the notes he is making for future generations, he witnesses Yeshua's painfully slow dying process, which the soldiers finally cut short with a stab of their lance only because a momentous thunderstorm is approaching. As we learn much later, through Margarita's reading in the Master's manuscript, Pilate had sent the chief of his secret police to watch the crucifixion and describe it to him. Having listened to the account during the terrible thunderstorm, he instructs his agent in veiled language to have Judas killed this very night. When the agent returns at midnight to report the successful completion of this order, he startles Pilate from a blissful dream in which he saw himself immersed in a fascinating dispute with the itinerant philosopher Yeshua — whom, of course, he had never sentenced to death. Their conversation revolves around cowardice as the most devastating of all sins; Pilate assures Yeshua that he would rather endanger his career than condemn an innocent. Yet the dream ends. Yeshua is in fact

dead and already buried, and Judas, Pilate suggests forcefully, had best be remembered as a suicide; that will forestall unnecessary speculations.

The above-mentioned thunderstorm, by the way, described in near identical wording, also rages over Moscow at the moment when the Master and Margarita die and are revived with the help of Azazello's red wine. And as the agent entrusted with their transformation informs them, the particular wine is the label Pilate drank. This is by no means the only way in which the three strands become enmeshed. Under the influence of Woland's retinue, the satire's victims experience all manner of hair-raisingly fantastic contortions of reality. Conversely, Margarita is drawn into a conversation with Azazello when he explains that the passing funeral procession is that of the chairman of the literary association, Berlioz, whose head has unfortunately been stolen from within the coffin. Yeshua and Pilate assume a vividness for Ivan that soon supercedes the reality of his Moscow acquaintances and even that of the mysterious foreigner, whom he announces to his literary colleagues with the words in which the first epistle of John speaks of the arrival of Jesus: "He has appeared." The Yershalaim action also plays into the satiric strand when a knife in a Moscow shop is described as resembling the one Levi Matvei stole in the hope to relieve Yeshua. When Yeshua's disciple approaches Woland and delivers the request that Woland "redeem" the Master and Margarita, all strands seem to merge for a moment. Woland takes the lovers to Pilate, who for nearly 2000 years has been suffering from self-accusations for his cowardly condemnation, against his own inner judgment. He is found sitting in a rocky terrain, trying to dream once again the dream in which the execution never took place and he is allowed to continue his conversation with Yeshua. He cries out that he hates his immortality and above all his incomparable notoriety. Margarita, deeply moved, pleads with the devil to release the long-tormented opportunist. Woland replies that Yeshua has just arranged this, and the Master completes his unfinished novel by adding the sentences: "You are free! He is waiting for you!"

In all its threads, the story is diabolical — and Faustian. The mutual influence of the strands is manifested not least in the choice of names. When the four devils are last seen riding on black horses across Moscow's sky and in the course of their ride return to their original shapes as black angels, they recall the four riders of the Apocalypse. Two of them even have biblical names: Behemoth, here a giant cat, is featured in the books of Job and Enoch as an animal-shaped demon of lust and gluttony, and Azazello haunts the books of Leviticus, Isaiah and Enoch as a devil who, among other things, teaches women cosmetic tricks; hence his potent cream for Margarita. Woland (spelled with an initial "w" in both the Russian and the English texts to identify him as a German, although the German version itself uses a "v") is Satan's name in middle-high German poetry of the 12th and 13th centuries, best known from Goethe's *Faust*, where Mephisto's appearance at the witches' Sabbath is announced with the words, "Give ground! Squire Woland comes!" (**Goethe 1909**, line 3817) Many of his attributes — the handle of his cane, the amulet his assistants hang around Margarita's neck for the night of the ball, and the embroidery on the foot pillow in his palace — show the poodle motif that is also a hallmark of Goethe's Mephisto. The nameless and despondent "Master" is reminiscent of him who said of himself: "And here I stand with all my lore, poor fool, no wiser than before. Magister, doctor styled indeed ..." (**Goethe 1909**, line 5) It is not him though but his lover who makes a bargain with the devil — and one, significantly, in which she delivers first. Even Woland grants her a wish to reward her services during the ball; she pleads for others first. In acknowledgment of her dignified behavior she is called by her full name; a diminutive like Goethe's "Gretchen" would not be appropriate for this woman. Rimsky, the financial director of the variety theater who bears the full brunt of the antics initiated by the professor of black magic, is connected to Pilate insofar as his name is Russian for "the Roman." Moreover, this name points to Rimsky-Korsakov, whose fame owes much to his completion of Musorgsky's *Night on the Bare Mountain* — a witches' Sabbath similar to the one Bulgakov describes. The leading physician in the psychiatric ward is called Stravinsky, like the composer whose orgiastic *Rite of Spring*

recasts the diabolic Easter Rite in Goethe's *Faust* and thus also links the novel's three strands. Finally, the chairman of the literary association, beheaded as predicted by Woland, shares his name with the French composer whose *Damnation of Faust* climaxes with Mephisto's plunge into the abyss by means of which Bulgakov gets rid of Woland and his crew.

The inversion of known characteristics is not restricted to the Faustian source, but can also be observed in the biblical material. "Miracles" are worked here exclusively by the devils. Yeshua's superhuman faculties manifest themselves only once, when he diagnoses and temporarily relieves Pilate's migraine headache — possibly, but not necessarily, through hypnosis. That is nothing compared to the supernatural shenanigans performed by the diabolic band. Unlike his biblical model, Yeshua is also reluctant to admonish and moralize; he does not preach, he philosophizes. Much as he declares and lives his conviction that all humans are basically good, he does this without any expectation that others emulate him. Nor does this Jesus know of being specifically chosen. Apart from his simple answer to Pilate's question — that he does believe in the one God — we do not hear any statements about a heavenly father or the celestial realm. Finally, death overcome and life eternal assume an unexpected signification in Bulgakov's novel. Seeing that Levi Matvei is sent to Woland requesting that he abduct the Master and his lover from their reunited but mundanely hopeless life to a realm of netherworldly peace, both Yeshua and his disciple must be in contact with life during the time of the eponymous heroes, i.e., in the early 20th century. Yet the same holds true for Pilate — and for his dog! "Resurrection" is granted only to the Master and Margarita, but no reader will assume that theirs is identical with what Christians hope for after the Last Judgment.

### **Vital Symmetries and Awesome Analogies**

Such observations bring up a question that has also intrigued the composers of the three music-dramatic interpretations of the novel: what kinds of analogies exist between the three strands? Immediately striking is the correspondence between the satirical and the fantastic threads; it concerns the layout and the apparent protagonists, i.e., the material level. As chapters 1 and 3-6 present the story of and events around Ivan, so chapters 19-23 depict those around Margarita. In the first exposition, Berlioz acts as a foil for a conversation that tells us about Ivan's poem about Jesus; in the second exposition, a dialogue with a maid fulfils the same role by telling us about Margarita's thoughts prior to the moment when we meet her. While Ivan is sitting on a park bench, a mysterious man addresses him, reads his thoughts, and predicts Berlioz's death; Ivan's mind snaps and he embarks upon a chase through Moscow that is interspersed with myriad irrational adventures. Margarita too is sitting on a park bench when a mysterious man addresses her, reads her thoughts, and shows improbable knowledge; her body changes and she flies over Moscow as a witch, her wild trajectory interrupted by all kinds of irrational adventures. The satiric description of the writers' building and Ivan's exchange with the literati corresponds with the fantastic description of the satanic society and Margarita's exchange with Woland's coterie. In the psychiatric ward, Ivan finds himself surrounded by people who appear innocent but persecuted and who live here with their dignity destroyed; conversely, Margarita as the queen of Woland's grand ball presides over a gathering of people who have committed heinous crimes, but are here ironically honored for one night.

A more intriguing correspondence, that between Yeshua and the Master, suggests itself to lovers of Russian literature through Max Brod's novel about the life of Jesus which is entitled "The Master" and whose protagonist is called Yeshua Ha-Notsri. In Bulgakov, these two men are the ones on whom all actions hinges in spite of the deceptively small roles they play on the surface of the novel. Both are denounced and arrested when the powers that be see cause for worry, fearing respectively the impact of Jesus' teachings and the Master's narration of Christianity's founding story. Most threatened are the representatives of the reigning religions — Judaism as regulated by the high priests in

the first century and atheism as decreed by the Soviets in the 20th century. Kaipha as a high priest of the Jewish religion corresponds to the Moscow literary critics as priests and defenders of Soviet "faith," Pilate as the responsible representative of the Roman power parallels the literary association as a representative of Stalin's cultural bureaucracy. Bulgakov's depiction shows both Yeshua and the Master exclusively in the ultimate stage of their respective passions, after denunciation and arrest; of the history that led up to this state, we learn little. Both men die, but their words live on. Levi Matvei's clandestine removal of Yeshua's corpse is mirrored in the Master's surreptitious removal from the psychiatric ward in response to Margarita's wish. Each man finds one disciple; in the Russian original Bulgakov even uses the same word to describe Ivan, whom the Master asks to complete the novel, and Levi Matvei, who chronicles his master's words.

Finally, there is the symmetry of Yeshua and Woland. It begins with the fact that the two, ostensible incarnations of Good and Evil, collaborate; they also share in representing the novel's spiritual element. Both read thoughts and predict the future. Both are wanderers without a permanent home and both involve anyone they meet in conversations of a philosophical or even theological nature, while pointing to the essential powerlessness of human beings. Both are suspected by their surroundings of planning political revolution. Yeshua is convinced that humans are basically good, yet reality seems to contradict his belief, making him the victim of self-interested men. Woland is determined to expose the weaknesses and faults of human beings, with the ultimate aim of provoking their self-responsibility, a hope for which only Margarita is a dignified object. The vehement rejection caused by both Ivan's polemical poem about Jesus and the Master's historical novel about Pilate shows Moscow's society gripped by a fear that Jesus might have lived that is hardly less than their dread of the devil. It is Woland who defends the historical existence of Jesus and attempts to prove that the counter-arguments against God's existence are faulty. Conversely, Ivan uses biblical wording firmly linked to Jesus to announce Woland's arrival in Moscow to his writer colleagues. (As the recently published sketch books show (**Weeks 1996**, p. 14), Bulgakov even planned for a while to use the expression "He has appeared" — which is more idiosyncratic in Russian than in English — as a title for his novel.) Both Woland and Yeshua read the Master's novel and are persuaded by its presentation to concern themselves for him. When Yeshua decides that the broken man and his brave lover should be shielded from further attacks by their contemporaries, he turns with his plea to Woland of all beings. Both seem to pursue the same goal, albeit in very different ways: to foster belief in the goodness within humans. For the devil too is, as proven in the quote from Goethe that Bulgakov chose as epigraph for his novel, "part of that power which still produceth good, whilst ever scheming ill" (**Goethe 1909**, lines 1005-1006).

### **The Russian Take: A Parable of Selfless Love**

Bulgakov's widow never relented in her struggle to make her late husband's masterwork known. Twenty-six years after his death *Мастер и Маргарита* (hereafter *Master i Margarita*) was finally published, albeit in a heavily censored version: in the winter of 1966/67 it appeared in two consecutive issues of the literary magazine *Moskvá*. The audience response was overwhelming and immediately alerted foreign presses. The excised portions were separately published abroad in the Russian original, and translations into other languages began within months.

In Russia itself, the seeming relaxation of censorship turned out to have been deceptive. Nothing proves this better than the fate of the opera that the Leningrad-born composer Sergey Slonimsky (1932- ) conceived shortly after the release of Bulgakov's novel and, based on a libretto by Jury Dimitrin and Vitali Fialkovsky, completed in 1972. At the time of composing, Slonimsky had stature as a renowned composer with many awards and prizes to his name. This may sound astonishing since his Western colleagues attest that his music stretched the limits of what was allowed in the Soviet Union. He had been one of the first composers in his country to experiment with twelve-tone technique, a device



vilified as a prime signal of Western decadence. He also explored aleatoricism, modal and microtonal modulations, asymmetric rhythms, graphic notation, the juxtaposition or fusion of live music with taped sounds, and the combination of popular and serious music. [3] His first opera, *Virineja*, which depicts the contradictory passions in post-revolutionary Russia, had been well received. He seemed superbly placed to set to music a source text that had once been considered inimical to the beliefs and aesthetics in his state. Nonetheless, his second opera, *Master i Margarita*, became a victim of Soviet cultural despotism just like Bulgakov's novel before it. The functionaries in Leningrad felt that the work was ideologically anachronistic and repressed it for seventeen years. It received its first concert performance in 1989. The fully dramatic premiere followed 1991 in the Mossowjet-Theater under the baton of Mikhail Jurowsky, who also conducted the first performance in a Western country, which took place to unanimous critical acclaim on 9 July 2000 in the context of the World Exposition in Hannover, Germany, sung in German by the ensemble of the Volkstheater Rostock. Subsequent performances in the Baltic harbor town of Rostock in October of the same year met with equally great appreciation by audiences and reviewers.

Slonimsky's is the earliest of the three music-dramatic interpretations, and it is in many respects the most intriguing. In spite of the drastic cuts needed to convert a long novel into the libretto for an opera of barely two hours' duration, the librettists managed to match Bulgakov's surrealist representation. The composer's decision to realize the satirical strand primarily through mime and choreography goes a long way to achieve the desired consolidation, and his musical interpretation complements and further deepens this interpretation. Slonimsky sets Bulgakov's complex subject matter as a chamber opera for vocal soloists, choir and fifteen instrumental soloists, two of which participate on stage as non-vocal, but fully costumed actors: the bassoonist as the devil Korovyov, who in his role as a variety theater artist adopts the German name of this instrument (*Fagott*), and the piccolo-playing flutist as the diabolical cat Behemoth. The other instruments are matched to specific *dramatis personae* or human qualities. In many passages of the score, the individual singer is accompanied by nothing but his or her character instrument; on many occasions, the instrument even substitutes for the human it signifies. This purely musical realization of certain episodes, which adds a third dimension to the vocalized-and-dramatized on the one hand and the mimed-and-choreographed on the other, is always convincing and often simply ingenious.

The opera opens and closes with the verbal evocation of blissful silence, eternal light, and eternal sleep. The chorus, whom the audience may at first take for the collective voice of attic tragedy, reveals itself as a rather superhuman voice in the world beyond death where it greets Margarita at the end. But when the curtain first rises and a lonesome flute cantilena leads into the action, all associations are still available. The opening words, an incomplete section of a question that Pilate asks of an invisible dialogue partner — "... live? You live? So there was no execution? was no ..." [4] — provides an entry that is exemplary in its succinctness and dramatic power. The urgency with which the questioner requests a reply finally wakes him from a dream. Hardly has he admitted to himself that his wishful thinking cannot correspond to reality, than Levi Matvei appears and describes Yeshua's never-ending pains on the pole. The narration changes to direct enactment when we hear the executioner as well as the croaking voices of the crucified men, interspersed with the repeated assertions, "Death does not come," with which Levi Matvei and the chorus convey the oppressiveness of the torture. When Pilate attempts to distance himself from this image of the Crucifixion by calling it "vulgar," but immediately recounts how he does not find any peace, spectators feel as if suspended in the transitional space between Golgotha and the place where he who was responsible for the verdict suffers eternal remorse.

Immediately following Pilate's confrontation with his past, we witness a scene in the pit: Berlioz reproaches the poet Ivan that his poem about Jesus gives the false impression of referring to a historical person. The brief sequence unleashes a kaleidoscope of

seemingly unrelated, mutually interlacing vignettes. In a first insert we listen in on a dual outcry of the separated lovers, who worry about and pine for one another. In vignettes embedded into this indirect dialogue, we see the literary functionary scorn the Master's novel as well as moments from the lovers' first happy time together, including Margarita's encouragement for the Master and his novel. She reads a few sentences aloud, which subsequently turn into another enactment of the Pilate strand. Much room is given to Judas's slandering and boastful self-justification. Only thereafter do we hear Berlioz complete Ivan's edification regarding the merely mythological existence of Jesus. This assertion in turn brings Woland onto the stage, highly amused about the declared atheism reigning in Moscow. On another, quasi-simultaneous layer, Margarita utters her determination that she would sell her soul to the devil if doing so could reunite her with the Master — here she at once contradicts Berlioz by confessing belief in superhuman beings and suggests to the audience that the mysterious stranger could be the devil. Thereafter, Berlioz's fate runs its course: Woland prophesies Berlioz's death by beheading, Berlioz decides to alert the police about the suspect foreigner, slips on the oil spilt on the tracks he must cross to reach the next telephone booth, and is run over by the approaching streetcar. Ivan recognizes with horror that the foreigner Woland has prophetic powers and begins to lose his mind. When he addresses the assembled members of the literary association with an incoherent tale of the events, they take him for drunk or mad and have him committed to a psychiatric ward.

While we follow Ivan on his way into captivity, our eyes are led back to Margarita who is still reading in the Master's manuscript. Once again the words she reads turn into direct enactment, and we witness the conversation between Pilate and Yeshua, which complements the fragments of dialogue exchanged earlier between Pilate and Kaipha and Judas's testimony. This conversation is extensive; it encompasses Yeshua's views about humankind, the corruptive nature of earthly power, and the temple of faith as well as his healing of Pilate's migraine. A brief interjection by Woland cunningly alerts us to the devil's presence.

The surreal sequence of scenes in act I is held together by dramatic and thematic threads. The central issue is a question about the truth of earthly life and suffering. It concerns above all the historical Jesus: Pilate wishes that the verdict he signed had never been acted upon and that the innocently condemned man were still alive; Berlioz informs Ivan that Jesus has never existed in the first place; and the literary functionary explains to the Master that a novel attempting to shed light on the historic relationship between Pilate and Christ is "dated." In a wider sense, Yeshua's protracted suffering on the Cross is mirrored in the Master's suffering, who feels suffocated by the octopus of fear although he believes his innermost self long dead.

The vignettes of the second act are framed by three large brackets, prefaced by an ostensibly unrelated human statement and interrupted by an inhuman cataclysm. The three brackets all concern the strand unfolding in Yershalaim. In the first we have the continuing torture of the three crucified men at Golgotha (hauntingly conveyed in the combination of Levi Matvei's horrified commentaries), the deranged folk song intoned by the murderer Gestas, and the wild tongue flicking with which the chorus pretends to fight off the pestilential flies. These events all surround a sequence of scenes in which Moscow critics warn the public against the novelist and his "Pilatism". From the various expressions of hatred that the critics dictate for publication in the media, our attention is directed to the Master who is reading these devastating verdicts, then to Margarita who pledges revenge, until the scene transforms itself into the one in which the Master tells Ivan, his neighbor in the psychiatric ward, about the reviewers' outbursts of scorn. Evoked by the Master's memories, shouts of "Pilatism" reverberate once more and transport us back to Golgotha, where the three crucified men continue to suffer cruelly and Levi Matvei curses the inactive God.

The second bracket brings relief to the tortured men in the form of a spongeful of vinegar and a stab of the lance, ending their waning lives. This merciful abbreviation of the death throes is first granted to the two criminals, accompanied by the chorus's explanation that the threat of an unusually ferocious thunderstorm makes the executioners want to go home. An inserted scene shows the Master's internal death throes as he, threatened by the octopus of fear, offers his manuscript to the flames. Only when the document intended to intuit the true events in Yershalaim is destroyed does Yeshua too receive the executioner's releasing lance wound. The cataclysmic thunderstorm that immediately breaks out, while predicted by the chorus and thus rationalized as an event of changing weather, doubles as a symbol of the universe's response to this multiply echoing murder: the crucifixion of the innocent preacher from Galilee, the burning of the manuscript reflecting on the events, and the psychological execution of the manuscript's author.

The third bracket, following the storm in Slonimsky's opera, is dedicated to the requirement that Judas, the bought traitor who forced Pilate's verdict, be clandestinely killed. The string of actions that brings about his death frames scenes in which Ivan asks the Master how things developed further, Woland invites Margarita to his palace and in the process enables her to take revenge on the Moscow writers' meeting house, and Pilate seeks Levi Matvei's friendship. The murder of Judas that closes the bracket is presented in much detail. Insofar as it represents an act of retaliation committed against a paid slanderer, it provides a parallel to Margarita's revenge; insofar as Pilate uses the chief of his secret police and he in turn a seductive woman working as a double agent, it reflects Moscow's intermeshing of power and money, its disrespect for individual life.

Prior to the three brackets just described, Margarita steps in front of the closed curtain to address the audience, assuring them that true, eternal love does in fact exist.

**EXAMPLE 1:** Serge Slonimsky, *Der Meister und Margarita*, "True Love"

(Who told you that true, eternal love did not exist?)

As a preface to the part of the plot whose red thread links several executions, this assertion may strike one as odd. A close reading reveals that her affirmation is a response to the overarching theme of the first act: the question whether Jesus — the incarnation of true, eternal love — has ever lived. An audience will initially interpret Margarita's lines as a personal statement concerning herself and the Master. In teasingly evoking this reaction and correcting it only in hindsight, Slonimsky draws attention to one of the central messages in Bulgakov's complex novel: the parallel between an ideal earthly love whose selfless courage shuns no risks, and the qualities that characterized the man Jesus of Nazareth. I will return to this later.

The first half of the third act is a ballet suite. It weaves the climactic moments of the satirical strand, which had surfaced only sporadically so far, into the fantastic strand. As with the preceding two acts, scenes are mirrored in each another, but the process is

simpler here than before. After Margarita's flight to Woland's palace and her nomination as queen of his ball, Fagott and Cat show her the pranks played in the variety theater. Thereafter she presides over the receiving line of guests at Woland's grand ball, during which various murderers distinguish themselves by compulsively repeating their criminal deeds of which other ball guests were victims, and where perpetrators and victims alike are in advanced stages of decay. The tragic story of Frieda who, unable to feed her baby, murdered it, is reenacted by the desperate young mother herself, and Margarita's overwhelming empathy, which will enable Frieda's liberation, follows on the spot. Similarly, the notorious traitor and spy Baron Maigel is shown in action and immediately shot dead. The ball ends with what the composer calls a "monkey jazz," which crowns the absurd scene but is cut short by the twelve-tonal chiming of the midnight bell.

The second half of the final act follows the various threads to their conclusion. Woland reasons with Berlioz's severed head about the danger of not believing in superhuman powers but then turns to Margarita, whom he invites to utter a wish. Her desired reunion with the Master manifests in a flash, but the anxiety-ridden author, who sounds much more self-pitying than in Bulgakov, appears as a badly matched partner for this heroic woman. Just as the spectator has managed to form the thought that she should also have asked for his psychological healing, she pronounces this additional wish. The devil obliges her: the novel, believed to have been destroyed, is ready to be handed back to its author since, as Woland assures the lovers with Bulgakov's by now famous lines, "manuscripts don't burn!"<sup>[5]</sup> When Levi Matvei arrives a little later, sent by Yeshua to ask Woland to give the Master and Margarita peace, this gesture too, although explained as a tribute to the novel's value, strikes an audience as a response to Margarita's plea. The eponymous heroes then take their leave from the Master's "disciple" in Dr. Stravinsky's ward, who promises that he will never again write poetry to please the bureaucracy, but will change his life and turn to serious research.

The operatic epilogue takes us back to the world of the guilt-ridden Pilate. Accompanied by the flute, the chorus creates an atmosphere similar to that which reigned at the beginning. A few words spoken by Woland suffice to remind us of Pilate's wishful dream that the Crucifixion had never been carried out. Margarita, choked by commiseration for the long-suffering politician, pleads for his release. Woland grumbles a little about the dangerous mercy that seems to seep in through every crack in the walls of his world, but then admits that Yeshua has already forgiven Pilate. The Master phrases the final sentence of his novel, and Pilate receives the much-craved assurance that all was merely a bad dream.

Significantly, the Master's "farewell" and "entry into a new life" is not preceded in Slonimsky's work by a death by poisoning and subsequent resurrection at the devils' hands. The lovers' encounter with the procurator of long ago appears as just another feat of diabolic magic, and Pilate's absolution is followed by a choral mediation that hails redemptive, restful death. When Margarita, whom Woland sends together with the Master on her way to their "eternal home," intones a song of praise for the longed-for silence and stillness, one perceives the opera's ending not so much as the entry into Arcadia that Bulgakov suggested, but as a liberation from life itself.

In spite of the fact that the opera's three acts consist of kaleidoscopically flickering images, close inspection reveals that they are each devoted to one theme: the first, to human life and suffering; the second, to multiples forms of execution; and the third, to several dimensions of liberation. This corresponds with the sequence "suffering – death – redemption," which thus shines through the busy surface as the work's hidden secret skeleton.

Above this three-step sequence of Christianity's founding events hovers another, all-embracing theme, which permeates the opera but is only rarely — as at the beginning of

act II — emphasized by structural means: that of selfless, redemptive love. Yeshua and Margarita are devoted entirely to it: the itinerant philosopher who believes unerringly in the basic goodness in every human and gives his life for this belief, and the great merciful one who pleads for the redemption of not only her beloved Master, but also of the infanticidal Frieda and the opportunistically condemning Pilate. More indirectly, even Woland, the grumbling but reliable secret agent of the good, contributes to this love. And the story's two "disciples" undergo a maturation that is essentially characterized by the progressive achievement of an understanding of selfless love.

### **Sergey Slonimsky: Timbral Characterization and Substitution**

Slonimsky's music conveys this hidden program in a most fascinating way, without thereby neglecting the dramatic development. The way he plumbs his characters' psychology is quite unique, conveyed to listeners above all by means of precisely matched instrumental timbres. The choice of instruments reflects culturally given notions — such as the association of "high" with "exalted" — as well as exploiting subconscious associations and supplementing them with newly invented, immediately convincing links. The plot's evil powers are matched to the low timbres. The high priest Kaipha is portrayed with a pizzicato-playing double bass; repeated indications in the score, which remind the player that the strings are to be plucked in such a way as to snap brutally against the finger board, characterize the motives behind his cunning eloquence. The boastful traitor Judas is coupled with the lowest brass instrument, the tuba, and Pilate at the moments when he opportunistically ignores the voice of his conscience and signs the death sentence, with the lowest woodwind instrument, the bass clarinet. These three are juxtaposed with the highest-sounding instruments as timbral correlates of humans seeking liberation or salvation: Margarita's violin, the helping and healing Yeshua's oboe, and the eternal penitent Pilate's flute. A middle register combines all those who waver between human good intentions and a weak will: the two "disciples," Levi Matvei and Ivan Bezdomny, are accompanied by the viola; when Pilate hears the voice of his conscience during his conversation with Yeshua, he is supported by the clarinet; and the chorus's empathetic comments about the execution at Golgotha sound with the muted French horn.

Cutting through this division into three registers runs a division into timbral groups. The world of corruption sounds pervasively in brass: Berlioz as well as the Jerusalem executioner are bolstered by trumpet, trombone, and tuba; the critics of the novel on Pilate by trumpet, French horn, and trombone; Judas the traitor by the tuba alone and Pilate caving in to political opportunism first by the trumpet, then by the trombone. The corrupt are juxtaposed with those who honestly feel, where the latter are represented by strings: beside Margarita's violin and Levi Matvei's as well as Ivan Bezdomny's viola there is the violoncello that accompanies the Master but that also characterizes Yeshua whenever he appears as the accused and defends himself within the world of human laws. Woodwind and percussion share in the representation of good and evil. The devil is accompanied by the two woodwind timbres that are most capable of mockery: the piccolo played by the cat Behemoth and the bassoon corresponding to the second supportive devil. The literary bureaucrat who rejects the Master's novel as well as the chief of Pilate's secret police are characterized by saxophones, the two criminals crucified beside Yeshua, by the English horn. These negatively associated woodwinds are countered by the loving Yeshua's oboe and three of the instruments tracing Pilate's inner conflict: the clarinet tied to his typically human wavering between conscience and political expediency, the bass clarinet representing his capitulation to opportunism, and the flute embodying his eternal self-accusation.

While the untuned percussion is employed for typical dramatic effects, the instruments of the fifth group invite classification along psychological lines. Prominent among them are the harps, who contribute the sounds of love. Paired harps characterize Yeshua whenever he expresses convictions born out of his love for all of humankind. A single harp

accompanies the words of love and longing uttered by the two lovers. Significantly though, the harp invariably abandons the Master as soon as he turns from expressions of affection to self-pity. Whenever love appears as nostalgia for an allegedly idyllic past, as happens in the Master's reminiscences, the harp gives way to a combination of vibraphone and celesta. Conversely, when lust or glee drown all sympathy for fellow humans, as happens with the spectators of the Yershalaim executions and in Judas's fatal appointment with the beautiful seductress, we hear the piano. The seductress herself is represented by a guitar, and the Moscow woman who describes with glee how Berlioz was beheaded by a streetcar, by an accordion. An organ provides the backdrop behind Levi Matvei as he grows into his role as heir to the thoughts Yeshua preached and begins to live for his mission.

Finally there are three timbres that unite humans and nature. They span the entire spectrum from delight to panic and revulsion. The chorus's wild tongue flicking expresses disgust for the flies and their parasitic attack of the crucified men. The instrumental representation of the cataclysm that takes up roughly ten percent of the composition in the middle of act II is intensified at its climax with the taped explosions of a momentous thunderstorm. And the persistent song of a nightingale, accompanying the closing events of acts II and III, draws an eerie parallel between the treacherous serenity of the Garden of Gethsemane where Judas is murdered and the place of eternal calm that the Master and Margarita are finally entering.

One of the many things that make this timbral characterization so convincing is that it communicates itself to almost all listeners in a direct, sensual manner and thus presents a genuine supplement to leitmotifs of the Wagnerian kind, which strive for the same effect by means of memorable contours and rhythms. Furthermore, Slonimsky employs this intuitive guidance of listeners' understanding to transfer numerous aspects of the plot to the music-dramatic scene with an economy of means that is particularly welcome with so complex a source text. This applies particularly to all the cases of instrumental substitution. Instead of giving us the endearments exchanged between the Master and Margarita in new variants of the words that after four hundred years of operatic history may sound somewhat worn, Slonimsky transmutes the lovers' duet after only a few initial utterances to a duet of their instruments, violin and violoncello. This sounds no less sweet or sorrowful but never sentimental, and it conveys in an admirably brief time a wealth of nuances. Similarly, the condescension that the vitriolic critics shower upon the dejected Master in act II continues on the instrumental level, where we hear the hopeless attempts of the violoncello to hold its own against the deafening sounds of the brass instruments. Part of the conversation between the Master and the poet are substituted by a duet of violoncello and viola, and in the instrumental continuation of the dialogue between Pilate and Levi Matvei, the power of the bass clarinet and the very human singing of the viola persuasively convey the nature of their meeting — in a concentration seldom available to verbal utterances. When the chief of the secret police informs the seductive agent of the plan that is to enable the murder of Judas far from watching eyes, Slonimsky can do without any words: since Judas's beautiful acquaintance has introduced herself with the guitar, the mime of a whispered conversation combined with a meeting of her instrument with Pilate's bass clarinet suffice to explain what is happening. Scattered insertions of the alto saxophone remind us of the man who delivered the message only after his character has retreated on stage. Pilate in turn reads the words expressing Yeshua's faith as chronicled by Levi Matvei to the sound of the two harps characterizing the preacher of courageous and forgiving love, accompanied by the disciple's viola.

Frequently, the instruments substitute for *dramatis personae* or their attitudes without a vocal introduction. After we have learned about Berlioz's fatal accident through the screeching sounds of the streetcar, manifold grueling percussive noises and finally the report of the accordion-accompanied eye witness, Ivan Bezdomny's cry that the suspect foreigner be arrested sounds against mocking motifs played by piccolo and bassoon.

Then the stage turns dark and the lonely viola plays a grisly cadenza on strings gone seriously out of tune. Could there be a more riveting and more succinct image showing how the poet loses his mind in the wake of the shocking accident? In the course of its solitary cadenza, the out-of-tune viola eventually gets hooked on a single rhythm. This "fixed idea" then underlies Ivan's unfortunate speech at the writers' meeting house and his subsequent arrest. The fixed idea, now welded to a repeated pitch pattern, is then handed over to the tom-toms (another instrument sound "out of tune") to document Ivan's admission into the psychiatric ward. The traitor Judas, later himself betrayed, is accompanied by his tuba only as long as his opportunism seems to carry fruit. As soon as he is debunked as an agent of Kaipha motivated by nothing but greed, his backdrop is painted by the high priest's brutally plucked double-bass pizzicati and the piano, previously associated with lust and glee.

When Margarita assures the Master, who has been abducted from the psychiatric ward through diabolic magic, that everything will now turn toward the better, the instrumental continuation of her assertion combines her violin, the Master's violoncello and the harp of their love but is joined by viola and oboe — thus announcing the imminent arrival of Levi Matvei whom Yeshua sent to assist them. The disciple begins delivering his message to the soft accompaniment of the viola, but as soon as he finds himself countered by Woland's mocking bassoon and scornful words, his mission is supported by drawn-out organ chords. When Ivan, encouraged by the mission with which the Master has entrusted him, asks after Margarita, she appears not only as the great lover by repeating verbatim the words about true, eternal love so prominently sung at the opening of act II, but also as a human redemptress. The composer conveys this by supplementing her violin and harp with Yeshua's oboe, presumably suggesting his spiritual presence.

As the enumeration of instruments involved at any moment shows, the accompaniment is always extremely transparent: in many instances, a voice is backed by a single instrument only, occasionally there are two, rarely three or more. The chamber ensemble is heard as a *tutti* of at least twelve parts only three times altogether: at the climax of the cosmic thunderstorm, at the apex of Satan's grand ball, and for the final three measures of the "Misterioso" that concludes the opera.

### **Motifs and Metaphors, Tones and Times**

Slonimsky's musical language in this work is fully chromatic without ever following the strict rules of dodecaphonic music. Quartertones are inserted between semitones as "colors" rather than with any serialist aim. Individual passages are often dominated by tonal centers, yet this dominance is invariably transitory. Thus the flute cantilena that opens act I closes on B, the subsequent choral lines begin and end on B, and Pilate too launches his first three exclamations from B. But no triad or other vertical support ever affirms B as a prominent pitch, and its preeminence wanes soon thereafter. The instrumental backdrop of vocal lines generally does not provide harmonic backing but either a heterophonic parallel, whereby selected notes are doubled, or occasionally an independent counterpoint. Consonant octave and fifth parallels are heard only in Yeshua's harps whenever he appears as a healer of ailments in body or soul, and in the organ chords that accompany the missionary attitude of the matured Levi Matvei. Their counterpart is the dissonant major seventh, which in three instances settles in the depths of trombone and tuba: in act I, when Berlioz denies the historic existence of Jesus, in act II as an accompaniment to the words and deeds of the executioner at Golgotha; and in act III, when Pilate tortures himself once more with thoughts of the "vulgar crucifixion."

Of the fifteen or so recurring motifs, three play a role throughout the opera. The first is Margarita's love motif. It ascends through perfect fourths separated by note repetition and descends after a quartertonal ornament by a third, its contour — more than that of any other motif in this opera — indebted to folk tradition. This allusion is underscored by

a harp accompaniment featuring stacked fourths in the bass under melodic parallel thirds. Whenever the heroine expresses herself in this musical emblem, she is above all the loving, self-sacrificing woman.

**EXAMPLE 2: Slonimsky, Margarita's motif – the harp of human love**

Margarita

Meis - ter, lebst du? Sa - - ge mir!

harp

(Master, are you alive? Tell me!)

$\flat =$  a quartertone flat

The second motif also acts as a personal signature; it is ascribed to the Master. It uses almost all semitones, whereby the contour zig-zags as if in pained contortions. Expressed in the number of semitones above the initial pitch, it reads: 0 – 3 – 11 – 6 – 5 – 12 – 9 – 1 – 4 – 2 – 10 – 7 – 11.

The text associated with this figure explains its semantic background: "I am afraid of men and of myself," the martyred novelist sings when he first intones the motif only minutes after the opera's beginning, and "When the moon shines at night I find no peace; why am I being disturbed again," he complains even after his magic abduction from the psychiatric ward in act III. The jaggedness of the lines gives a metaphoric depiction of an internally torn man.

**EXAMPLE 3: Slonimsky, the internally torn master**

Master

Ich fürch - te - te mich vor den Men - schen und vor mir selbst...

(I was frightened of people as well as of myself)

When Margarita expresses her angst about her beloved's fate during her first appearance, she matches this quality by couching the scream that brings the Master's ghost onto the stage in a two-octave dive. It is hardly a coincidence that Slonimsky chose precisely the plunge from the B of a high soprano to the B in the alto register with which Marie in Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, her lover's knife already in her throat, exclaims her final "Help!!!"

**EXAMPLE 4: Slonimsky, Margarita's scream of fear**

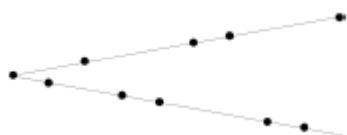
Mel - - - - de dich! Meis - - - - ster!

(Send word, Master!)



The diametric contrast to these momentous leaps is found in the density of adjacent semitones. For good reasons, composers often use chromaticism to represent a protagonist's actual or perceived narrowness. Slonimsky modifies this impression by rearranging the semitones, thereby creating a semantic gesture with a significance of its own. It is manifested most impressively in the opera's principal motif, which pervades all three acts and is taken up by many characters and instruments. Margarita employs it to express her worries about the Master as well as her retaliation against the critics who destroyed him; Judas employs the gesture to sound grandiloquent, and Jesus does so to be meek and forgiving. The chorus intones it both during its dismayed observations of the torture at Golgotha and in various musings about the errors of human life. Additionally, the motif is heard in three very different ballet numbers: in the *Allegro furioso* of Margarita's wild flight to the witches' Sabbath, in the lyrical *Lento* with which the violin accompanies the pantomime of her coronation as queen of Woland's ball, and in the poison monger's appearance that forms part of the *Grave lugubre* portraying Satan's guests. The motif constitutes the leading thematic material of the orchestral thunderstorm and underlies, extended to a twelve-tone sequence, the renewed chiming of the midnight bells that end the ball.

These situations are so diverse as to make one assume at first that Slonimsky may not have connected any signification at all with this figure. But its contour itself invites reflection. Mostly in fairly equal note values, it describes a "chromatic expansion" whose basic shape looks like this:



This expansion or growth seems to contain a message that does not concern any aspects of the individual dramatic scene unfolding at the moment when the motif is heard, but rather the work as a whole. One might read the figure as liberation from narrowness, a widening of the inner view, perhaps even as a continuous growth of understanding. The motif's signification thus resembles the quality that Slonimsky and his librettists seem to have in mind in their emphasis on the "true and eternal love" toward which so many of the central characters develop. The fact that Slonimsky never once uses the principal motif in the satirical scenes supports this interpretation. Just as the libretto unfolds above a subcutaneous web of messages that conquer the pervasive fear-driven self-absorption with a faith in selfless love, so also does the motif of inner growth thread through the entire work. Shortly before the close, it culminates in the Master's final line, which confirms Pilate's release from self-accusation, and in Margarita's blissful entry into "silence, stillness, rest."

My final comment on this opera regards rhythm and meter, which are employed in intriguing ways to further interpret the subject matter. Only about 15 percent of the score is taken up by metric passages — sections with time signatures that determine the order of pulses for at least a while. These passages build a single block at the beginning of act III: they correspond to the magic events surrounding Satan's ball, the genre suite in dance and mime from Margarita's witches flight to the final jazzy "monkeys' gallop." The rhythm within these passages is simple, and even quasi-harmonic skeletons are found more often here than elsewhere in the opera. The other end of the spectrum of metric treatment is realized in the musical depiction of the cosmic thunderstorm: note groups of varying length are here assigned to the individual instruments for aleatoric play and combination until the next vertical meeting point. Of the remaining ca. 80 percent of the opera, about one third consists of rhythmically notated passages in measures of continuously changing count. The other two thirds, i.e., more than half of the composition, are marked with the help of specific notation (white and black note heads

without stems for the slower notes and normal heads with wavy stems or beams for the faster notes) as "rhythmic improvisation." While notes are thus of very different duration, they do not observe mathematical proportion but follow one another without an underlying count, submitting only to an occasional coordination with the one or two simultaneously unfolding lines. Kaipha's and Judas's attacks on Jesus are invariably squeezed into tight rhythmic corsets, as is Pilate when he yields under their threats; Yeshua, by contrast, remains free and flexible. As long as the poet Ivan is naive and Margarita is caught in her reminiscences of an allegedly idyllic past, their pulses repeatedly fall back into regularity. As their understanding and their ability to love selflessly become ever more encompassing, they sing with increasing rhythmic freedom.

The ordering of musical time thus equally addresses the questions of liberation and redemption. The chaos of the momentous thunderstorm mocks human volition; the conventionally square forms of the witches' Sabbath depict a world in which the laws of gravity and mortality may be abolished owing to diabolic power, yet the characters dance like puppets on Satan's invisible strings. Humans move in the intermediate realm, and the way Slonimsky conceived this dimension of the composition reveals how the composer sees them: momentarily trapped between grids of their own making, but born for inner freedom.

### **The East-German Take: A Diplomatic Tight-rope Act**

Soon after Bulgakov's novel became available to Russian and international readers in its unabridged form in the early 1970s, the dramatist Jury Lyubimov, who then still lived in Russia but was later stripped of his citizenship and now resides in Germany, arranged the story for the stage of Moscow's Taganka Theater. About ten years later in his new homeland, he directed the production of a "romantic opera" based on the novel, thus closing another circle. The composer was Rainer Kunad, who had recently defected from the German Democratic Republic.

Kunad, born in the East German town of Chemnitz in 1936, had worked in highly respected positions prior to his relocation to West Germany in 1984. He had been a professor of composition at Dresden's illustrious music academy and the director of incidental music at the city's State Theater. *Der Meister und Margarita*, his sixth opera, was completed in 1983, while he was still a citizen of the communist state. As a result of his emigration to the Federal Republic, he was not only expelled from the East German Academy of the Arts, of which he had been a member since he was 38, but all his works were now taboo in his land of origin. The punishment of the traitor went to considerable lengths: the Weimar National Theater, on whose commission Kunad had composed *Der Meister und Margarita*, refused to schedule it, without however releasing the rights to the world premiere. When the Karlsruhe State Theater finally decided to schedule the work anyway and performed it March 1986, it was forced to announce the event merely as "the German premiere."**[6]** This detail highlights a sad repetition on German soil of the oppressive atmosphere reigning in Moscow's cultural life half a century earlier. It also brings another aspect full circle, in that a work whose source text had long been suppressed in the Soviet Union owing to its critique of the perverted thinking in totalitarian regimes now became the victim of another state's defensive attitude.

It is hard to say whether the repressive atmosphere in the Soviet satellite state was alone responsible for the fact that both the libretto and the music of this opera seem intent on attenuating the political aspects of Bulgakov's message. Both are constructed with the highest competence and skill; and yet it seems that Kunad and his collaborator took pains to avoid suggesting to the Weimar audience that the depicted story might mirror their own reality.

On a first level, the librettist, Heinz Czechowski, simplified the novel's complex plot in a way for which a theater audience is likely to be grateful. This begins with the proper names: Yeshua is simply Jesus, Yershalaim is Jerusalem, and unfamiliar names of places, objects, and other accessories are avoided entirely. Within the diabolic quartet, Korovyov is combined with Azazello to form a character by the name of "Fagott" after the artist's name Korovyov uses also in Bulgakov. German for bassoon, the name would easily stick with the audience. Another reduction of the cast of characters makes Berlioz both the journal editor and literary association chairman who criticizes Ivan Bezdomny's poem about Jesus and the publisher who rejects the Master's novel about Pilate. The quotation from the Pilate strand by means of which members of the Woland quartet prove their knowledge of the Master's work and circumstances does not consist here, as it did in Bulgakov, of two long, poetically demanding sentences. Instead, the purpose is fulfilled by a brief exclamation originally made by Pilate: "O gods, gods." This wording, which Bulgakov employs in a more general leitmotivic way, is easily memorable — many readers will recognize it from Verdi's *Aida* — but also rather unspecific. A similar simplification applies to the biblical quotation by means of which the frenzied Ivan links Woland's appearance in Moscow to the emergence of Jesus. The poet does not exclaim, as he did in Bulgakov, "He has appeared", but simply "Alleluia." To German audiences, this expression for "praise to the Lord" may indeed be heard as referring to Jesus; Bulgakov, however, uses the word elsewhere in his novel with quite a different connotation. [7] With regard to the principal devil's name, the text setting shows that Czechowski and Kunad have agreed on a pronunciation in the French fashion with a stress on the ultimate syllable. This turns "Monsieur Voland" into someone who is as much a foreigner for the citizens of the German Democratic Republic as the alleged German Woland was for the Muscovites: a being whose name alludes to flying, and no longer a relative of that great challenger of God's power who roamed Weimar stages almost two centuries earlier.

The ten tableaux into which the story is cast rearrange the episodes related by Bulgakov in a way as to make the plot seem imminently plausible. As a result, the surreal aspect is lost, though not the religious dimension. And it may well be that this dimension of Bulgakov's story interested Kunad much more than did its criticism of political circumstances. During the eleven years until his premature death in 1995, which he spent as a freelance composer in the West German town of Tübingen, Kunad created symphonies, music-dramatic works and oratorios exploring one theme alone: the apocalyptic prophecy. I wish to argue that from the start he took *Der Meister und Margarita* as subject matter that would allow him to create a subtext of religious messages that would not easily be ascertained by cultural bureaucrats. These messages are not identical with Bulgakov's inserted Pilate strand, but result from subtle emphases in the treatment of the whole text.

The first two tableaux serve as exposition. Tableau 1 opens with the male protagonist. The Master's first sentence, in which he deplores that he has still not found the final words for his novel about Pontius Pilate, introduces the religious strand; his subsequent lonesome dialogue with the photo on his desk informs the audience about his beloved, Margarita. His conversation with the editor Berlioz, who calls the subject matter of his novel impossible and suggests jovially that the Master may want to try his hand at a different topic, dismays him so much that he decides to burn the manuscript. When Margarita arrives, she can save only a few singed pages, but attempts to soothe the Master with loving reassurances of his worthiness as a person and as a writer. Hardly has she left than the Master steps out of his house and is swallowed by a wintry night. After a lapse of time of unknown duration, the audience hears the sounds of an approaching van and then sees him being admitted to a mental hospital. The van driver who found and decided to help the disoriented man is a neutral person, his motivation is concern; there is no indication of politically motivated abduction.

Tableau 2 completes the exposition by belatedly providing Bulgakov's opening chapter with the first appearance of the Woland quartet, which interrupts the conversation between Berlioz and the poet Ivan about the latter's Jesus poem. The repetition of the arguments against literary works featuring Jesus links this conversation to that in tableau 1. Moreover, since the functionary in both instances is the same Berlioz, he is able — as was not the case in Bulgakov — to recognize Woland's tale of the questioning in Jerusalem as a chapter from the Master's novel and thus clarify these connections for the audience already at this early point. The Jerusalem episode is fairly complete; it includes Jesus' words about the temple of faith and the corruption inherent in all worldly powers as well as his belief in the essential goodness of all humans, Pilate's migraine headache, Judas's role in the arrest and the castigation of cowardice as the greatest vice. As in Bulgakov the tale is framed by Woland's prophecy of Berlioz's accident and its corresponding occurrence. The poet Ivan is disturbed by the foreigner's accurate prediction, but when Woland dissolves into thin air, he identifies him without hesitation as the devil, thus once again clarifying things for the audience. This concludes the exposition, which thus sketches the misery of unsuccessful artists and other naive believers. In none of the cases does the rejection of cherished convictions seem to go beyond what is also customary in less totalitarian regimes. The Master's reactions thus appear as abnormal, his deliverance to Dr. Stravinsky's ward as an act of caring.

Tableaux 3-5 provide the development, in that they further explore the themes of physical and psychological vulnerability and of human greed and stupidity. In tableau 3, Fagott uses the funeral procession in Berlioz's honor that passes by Margarita's home to address her, identify himself as someone familiar with the Master's work and current whereabouts, pronounce his mysterious invitation and hand her the jar with the potent transformative cream. Tableau 4 combines the various satiric strands: the antics of the Woland quartet in the variety theater, Ivan's confused speech at the writers' meeting in which he comments the foreigner's appearance with "Alleluia" while simultaneously demanding his arrest, and the involuntary singing of a group of women, equally caused by the diabolic gang (i.e., Bulgakov's chapters 12, 5 and 17). Tableau 5 joins all strands of mental confusion: the hysterically singing women are being committed to the psychiatric ward, where they "infect" all who come into contact with them with the compulsion to sing along; Ivan Bezdomny arrives soon afterwards, and the Master is already a patient, as we soon discover when we see him enter the poet's room through a window.

The first conversation between the two authors reveals that both believe to be detained and considered insane "because of Pilate." Audiences — at least those who see this opera without prior familiarity with Bulgakov's novel — may think they know better, having been witness to nervous breakdowns in the preceding scenes. The Master's tale about his terrible sufferings at the hands of Moscow's cultural priests triggers in the poet a dream about the Jerusalem execution. Its representation, however, is limited to Levi Matvei's statement that he had wanted to spare Jesus the pains of crucifixion and to his futile appeal to and desperate curse of a God who seems deaf.

The last tableau before the intermission brings the crisis: Margarita apprises her husband by telephone of the end of their marriage, transforms herself into a witch with the help of the devils' powerful cream, and flies on a boar to Woland's Moscow quarters. The first part of the opera thus releases its audience at the very moment when, voluntarily or involuntarily, all human characters have left the world of rationality.

Part II seems to have two simultaneous purposes. On the surface, it further develops the strands laid out in part I; in a subtext, it traces an independent, religiously determined sequence of scenes. Tableau 7, which centers on Satan's grand ball and gives much room to all its hilarious monstrosities is framed by encounters between Margarita and Woland. Margarita distinguishes herself through her readiness to serve him (as a masseuse for his leg, which he says has been aching since St. Bartholomew's Eve, the Huguenot massacre

in 1572, and as queen of his traditional spring ball) as well as through her wise and modest behavior. When asked to utter a wish, she only pleads for others: first for the infanticidal Frieda, then — after the devil has declared that acts of mercy are not his business but has permitted her to redeem the long-tortured woman herself — for the Master. Tableau 8 shows the lovers reunited in their little basement apartment, where it becomes clear that the Master is a broken man and Margarita, as she announces triumphantly, now “believes in Woland.” Fagott brings them wine and with it, death, but Woland calls them to another life. In an insertion, he shows the Master an enactment of the next events in his novel, after the Crucifixion of Jesus. Pride of place is given to the procurator’s devastating self-accusations as he calls cowardice not only a vice, as Jesus had done, but the gravest sin of all. When Pilate asks Jesus’ disciple, through whom he hopes to maintain a contact of sorts with the executed philosopher, to be allowed a glance into his notes, his eyes fall precisely on Jesus’ words about cowardice.

The conversation between the two men in Jerusalem ends with Pilate’s oath that he will have Judas killed, the conversation of the Woland gang with the Master and Margarita with the arrival of the Moscow militia who intend to arrest the devil but flee from the blaze with which the cat Behemoth destroys the earthly home of the no longer earthly Master. Tableau 9 brings the various strands to their respective resolution. The Woland quartet together with the two lovers rides on black horses across the Moscow sky. The Master pays a farewell visit to his “pupil” Ivan and the devils transform themselves back into their original shapes as black angels. Seeing Pilate tortured by self-reproach, Margarita pleads for his absolution and the Master decides to complete his novel with a corresponding sentence. Jesus confirms the redemption by assuring Pilate that the execution never took place. The Master and Margarita walk to the house of their final rest, while the Woland quartet plunges itself into the abyss. The tenth and final tableau shows the eponymous heroes’ last abode both from the inside, seen by Margarita who promises the Master that he will find peace, and from the outside: the poet Ivan, released from the asylum and strolling past, ponders the question discussed in the Bible between Pilate and Jesus: “What is truth?” He concludes that it must consist in discerning one’s own path and following it.

Several details in this libretto are abbreviated to such a degree that they risk causing misunderstandings. This applies above all when Levi Matvei gives the impression that he has power over Jesus’ execution but fails to mention his plan for a preemptive murder, or when Margarita more or less “resigns” from her marriage with an all-too-modern and distanced announcement of “our marriage no longer works” and thus loses credibility as a great lover. These lapses are compensated for by the intriguing subcutaneous development enabled through the drastic rearrangement of Bulgakov’s episodes. The sequence of the four scenes after the intermission, i.e., when all human characters have left the realm of rationality, can be read as “Last Supper – death – descent to hell/ascent to heaven with Judgment – eternal life.” The witches’ Sabbath is often called a black mass or a perverted celebration of the Eucharist. The specific symbolism of the scene in Kunad’s opera underscores this relationship: Margarita is “consecrated as a priestess” with a mantle of blood and has to drink blood (which is not, as in Bulgakov, transmuted to wine). When at the end of the ball both the editor Berlioz and the literary critic Latunsky appear as recently killed men and Woland drinks the one’s blood as wine from the other’s skull-turned-chalice — only hours before his aide will kill the Master with red wine — these symbols stress more than in Bulgakov the parallel to Golgotha, where two men destined to be crucified will be joined by a third, innocent one. The Master’s death in tableau 8 is not, as in Bulgakov, followed by an imminent resurrection with the help of another sip of the same wine. Instead the revival is caused by a word from Woland, the lord of the netherworld, leaving it open whether the lovers are on their way to heaven or hell. The cavalcade across the night sky and the meeting with Pilate can be read as a Last Judgment in kind (the apocalyptic horsemen add much to this image), and the final entry into the promised house of peace as a metaphor for an admission into eternal life.

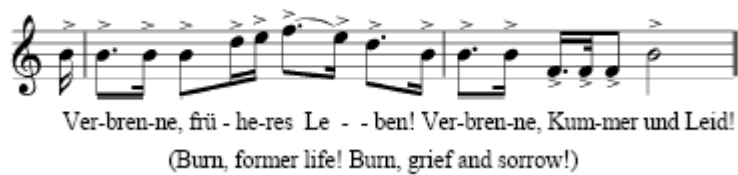
## Rainer Kunad: Convention and Defamiliarization

Not unlike the libretto, the music also allows us distinguish a mixture of ingredients that render the message at times more harmless, at times more profound. Kunad has composed his opera for large symphony orchestra. Although he colors individual passages by thinning the instrumental backdrop or highlighting specific timbres, the overall tapestry is unified enough to provide a stark contrast to the Jerusalem insertions, which are supported exclusively by the sustained chords of an electric piano. The latter passages are harmonically simple and conventional; the vocal parts are metrically free, their contours frequently reminiscent of early medieval music. By contrast, the metric organization in which the Moscow action is clad appears utterly regular, and even in the passages pertaining to the fantastic strand, where constantly changing time signatures prevail, there is a strong emphasis on pulse. Harmony is treated correspondingly: while it does not sound atonal in the Moscow action either, it is couched in the expanded tonal idiom of late-romantic music, with frequent tritones disturbing otherwise complacent melodic gestures. Wholly chromatic chords are an exception; the twelve-tone cluster trill that, grumbling in a barely audible *ppp*, opens the first tableau is cut off by a wholly conventional brass fanfare in *fff* complemented by wild runs in the strings. These two contrasting components surface again and again in the course of the two tableaux devoted to the exposition. They convey the atmosphere of oppression punctuated by forceful actions of self-assured functionaries, a situation that characterized Jerusalem in the epoch of Herod as much as Moscow under Stalin (and the GDR under Honnecker).

Kunad has composed three arias for this opera. All are designed in traditional *da capo* format, albeit of very different lengths and complexity, and all express sentiments of loving concern. The first encompasses the Master's lonely conversation with the photo of his beloved in tableau 1, in which he reminds himself of her selfless affection and her faith in him, the hopeless man. This aria is paralleled by a shorter arioso in tableau 8 in which Margarita implores her despondent lover not to give himself up since it was only for him that she became a witch and participated in the witches' Sabbath. Finally, the whole of tableau 3, which also addresses Margarita's attempts to save the Master, is laid out as a large-scale lyrical aria. In the first segment, Margarita addresses a monologue to the disappeared Master; in the reprise, she affirms her decision to risk everything for her lover's release and in the two contrasting sections, she enters into commerce with Fagott.

The thematic and metric organization in these three very different arias is paradigmatic for much of the opera. The contrasting sections of the two longer arias as well as countless smaller and larger segments all through the opera are composed as genre pieces. There are many waltzes, several tangos, foxtrots and military marches, all contributing to the characterization of the human and diabolic figures. Specific situations are captured in the form of a polonaise, a funeral march, a pastoral etc. There are quotations of well-known tunes, imported from folk material without any change, such as the Baikal Song involuntarily sung by the hypnotized women (well-known throughout the Western world since every touring Russian choir seems to have it in its repertoire). Conversely, a tonally distorted quotation expresses doubt about the appropriateness of a wish. Bulgakov's Woland sends the Master to Arcadia with the words: "O Master, thrice a romantic, wouldn't you like to stroll with your beloved under the blossoming cherry trees by day and then listen to Schubert by night?" Kunad has the eponymous heroes, who see their former home go up in flames, greet this "incineration of sorrow and pain" with a duet that sounds like a skewed quotation of a Schubert lied — all its perfect fourths and fifths are replaced by tritones — and thereby seems to convey how unlikely it is that citizens of Soviet-ruled Moscow should ever feel as cozy as their Viennese counterparts of a hundred years earlier.

**Example 5: Rainer Kunad, *Der Meister und Margarita*, defamiliarized Romanticism**



On the melodic level, the first aria introduces the two motifs that then pervade the entire opera. The four-bar-long instrumental prelude that precedes the Master's disheartened meditation consists of nothing but the principal motif, an ascending minor-mode triad with added minor sixth: Bb-Db-F-Gb. The *stretto* entries in which the instruments present the motif and its variants will remain characteristic for this figure. The aria's second contrasting section presents the secondary motif, a contour that turns diatonically around a center and also recurs frequently throughout the composition. This latter motif is easily associated with the topic of love. More interesting is the multiple significance of the principal motif. Its original pitch content is later complemented by two transpositions that are equidistant to their source and to one another, thus forming a circle that leads via F#-A-C#-D and D-F-A-Bb back to Bb-Db-F-Gb. This Trinitarian way of covering tonal space will hardly be coincidence or mere play, especially since it is matched by the semantic associations the motif acquires in the various situations it helps to shape. Three ostensibly very different topics are highlighted by the motif: (1) the questions concerning the historicity of Jesus and the existence of the devil, (2) the Master's bitterness, and (3) the declaration that cowardice is the gravest sin. These topics in fact unite all the main characters. The problem of cowardice is addressed explicitly by the three men of the religious strand, but also implicates the citizens of Moscow who, living in fear of the brutal powers that govern their lives, continually find themselves betraying their consciences. The question whether incarnations of good and evil have any reality is the work's implicit and the Master's bitterness, its explicit theme.

Kunad's very professional treatment of the operatic orchestra and vocal forces grants a result that is exciting and easily accessible to the public. Yet the two above-mentioned traits — the prevalence of explicit dance forms cast into fairly simple harmonic molds and the complex semantic task entrusted to the two motifs — strike me as disturbing metaphors for the composer's precarious tight-rope walk between corruptive power and a plunge into the abyss of cultural oppression. The almost all-too-pleasant musical language, presumably intended to shield its creator (who at the time of composition still hoped for performance and acceptance in the GDR) from the attacks of a bureaucracy modeled on Moscow, may strike a Western audience as somewhat glib. Yet beneath it Kunad manages to create a subtext that is certainly inaccessible to bureaucrats suspiciously searching for signs of revolt. In the threefold semantic definition of the principal motif he links the topic of superhuman agents and their aims with, on the one hand, the desperation felt in a life severely limited by oppressive forces, and on the other hand, the omnivalid precept of individual courage. At the same time, the opera's two halves juxtapose despair and religious hope. By reshuffling the novel's episodes, librettist and composer draw attention in the first part of the composition to the fact that one human character after the other is cut off from self-determined life, while presenting in the second half a semi-allegorical four-part sequence leading from sacrifice to redemption. Through the combination of the thematic and structural devices, Kunad highlights by musical means a message that is otherwise easily lost in the fantastic bedlam of Bulgakov's diaboliad.

**The West-German Take: York Höller's Projecting Master**

Slonimsky worked with a text that transformed Bulgakov's surrealist narrative into a no less surreal drama. His decision to represent one strand of the action primarily with

choreographic means and to consolidate many developments within the other strands by way of instrumental substitution allowed him a condensation of the verbal component along with a highly satisfactory musical language that communicates directly even to unprepared listeners. Kunad's libretto achieves consolidation through an "ordering" of events along the lines of classical drama theories, and listeners' access through conventional musical forms. Both works originally fell victim to the censorship in the totalitarian nations into which their creators had been born.

York Höller was born 1944 in Leverkusen near Cologne, studied with Bernd A. Zimmermann and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and is today a professor of composition at Cologne's Musikhochschule. When he wrote his opera in 1984-88, his situation was different from that of his two Eastern colleagues above all in that he did not have to fear political objections. Neither after the work's premiere at the Paris Opéra on 20 May 1989 and the first German performance in Cologne in November 1991 nor in any of the many reviews of the CD recording published on the *col legno* label did anyone discuss or question the composer's ideology. Yet this anxiety-free approach to a text whose criticism of totalitarianism of the Communist persuasion is welcome rather than suspicious in the West will hardly have been the only reason why Höller chose entirely different paths to present the material. To begin with, he prepared his own libretto by excerpting Bulgakov's wording verbatim. His depiction begins with the Master who is not, as in Kunad, struggling with the last words of his novel and thus pointing the audience to the *mise-en-abîme* as the reason behind the story. Instead, the eponymous hero tells his and Margarita's story in words from Bulgakov's chapter 13, thereby introducing the two lovers, the work's central characters, as they were long before the events involving Berlioz' critique of Ivan's Jesus poem and Woland's reminiscence of the conversation between Pontius Pilate and Yeshua took place. Apart from this prologue, however, Höller's excerpts follow the sequence of events given in the novel practically without exception. Needless to say that many marginal episodes are omitted and even scenes that are included appear drastically abridged, since Höller adopts primarily the passages in direct speech. But every sentence in Höller's libretto can be found identically or very similarly in Thomas Reschke's German translation of Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita*; even the stage directions are generally verbatim quotations from the book. (The only self-assertion Höller the librettist permits himself after the prologue consists in a poem by Mayakovsky, which Margarita recites toward the beginning of act II as she worries about the Master's fate.) The result of this kind of textual preparation is a very voluminous libretto. And even though Höller composes his vocal parts throughout in syllabic fashion, forgoing any meditative lingering of the kind provided by arias in traditional operas, or by Slonimsky in occasional vocal melismas and above all his instrumental continuations of atmospheric moments, this work is roughly one-and-a-half times as long as its sister compositions, without really conveying more content.

Regarding the musical apparatus, Höller makes full use of the options provided in the late 1980s. The orchestra is of late-romantic dimensions, requiring 87 players and including a 35-part percussion as well as a synthesizer next to harp, celesta, piano, and guitar. Moreover, the symphonic body is supplemented by two stage ensembles: a jazz combo led by saxophone and jazz trumpet and a rock band with electronically amplified violin. Finally, Höller mixes the live sounds of instruments and voices with ones that are electronically manipulated and played from a prerecorded four-channel tape. This expansion of the timbral spectrum is often fascinating, since Höller is very experienced in the medium (he regularly works at IRCAM in Paris) and has much imagination. Thus Margarita's flight and Satan's grand ball are thrilling and exceedingly convincing. He also places the Master's reminiscences, which the audience witnesses as a bracket around the first portion of the satirical action — the prologue is complemented on occasion of the Master's visit to Ivan Bezdomny in the psychiatric ward — in a kind of "modified space" by using taped modifications of the protagonist's voice and various accompanying instruments and sounds. This is very persuasive: it highlights the semi-real nature of memories and allows the composer to convey his hero's mental states as somehow



“altered.” Höller is also the only one among the three composers who exploits the parallels with the Faust story when, during Satan’s grand ball, he quotes passages from Federico Busoni’s *Doktor Faust* and Hector Berlioz’s *Damnation of Faust*. (By contrast, a citation from Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* during the funeral march for the beheaded Moscow editor plays more with the namesake and the fantastic circumstances of this death.)

To shape the musical language in his score, Höller has designed what he calls a “Klanggestalt,”<sup>[8]</sup> a tone row that, in conception and application, occupies a position half-way between the serially predetermined and the emotionally variable. Höller’s *Klanggestalt* consists of thirty-one pitches, which can be read as a twelve-tone row with irregular repetition of previously introduced pitches and fixed octave allocation — hence a fixed interval sequence. This basic tone row holds the entire work together. In the words of Jürg Stenzl (1991, p. 12),

This macroseries is used as a ‘formula’ or a base structure which generates all the work’s parameters: its form, its division into sections and sub-sections, the duration of the formal units, its metric, and above all, its harmonic organization (creation of harmonic centres, of pivot notes or chords which organize the space). The ‘formula’ is predominant right up to the electro-acoustic transformation of sounds and the programming of equipment.

Besides determining overarching as well as local aspects of the composition, the *Klanggestalt* generates quasi-melodic offspring. Of particular interest for Höller’s musical interpretation of Bulgakov’s tale is the fact that these derivative entities define the various persons and situations as projections emanating from the Master. His own tone row is identical with the original form of the *Klanggestalt*; Margarita’s is an augmentation of all intervals to roughly twice their size (where the “roughly” guarantees that the augmentation results in what is once again a derivation of a complete twelve-tone row); the satirical debunking of Moscow society in the variety theater draws on the enlargement of the formula to about triple depth, and Woland is depicted in shapes that blow up the basic row to grotesquely leaping intervals approximately six times the size of those characterizing the Master. (Example 6 shows the opera’s *Klanggestalt* next to the dodecaphonic row from which it is derived; example 7 juxtaposes the Master’s, Margarita’s, the Muscovites’, and Woland’s lines, each consolidated for easier comparison to the twelve-tone source on which they draw.)

EXAMPLE 6: York Höller, *Der Meister und Margarita*, “Klanggestalt” and underlying row



EXAMPLE 7: Höller's 12-tone rows for the Master and his projections

the Master	
Margarita	
the Muscovites	
Woland	

For his work with these 12-tone derivations, Höller has not given himself any laws of the kind Schoenberg devised for the Second Viennese School believing that only the challenge of voluntarily adopted rules will unleash the full force of creativity. Höller's *Klanggestalt* strikes one much rather as something vegetal, organic: it can be likened to a tree that sprouts branches, twigs, distinctively fashioned leaves, blossoms, and finally, unique fruit. While beholders understand each manifestation as an aspect of the original concept, horizontal comparison is not straightforward.

The same principle, using the very same *Klanggestalt*, determines two compositions immediately preceding *Der Meister und Margarita* in Höller's output: *Schwarze Halbinseln* (Black peninsulas) of 1982 and *Traumspiel* (Dream play) of 1983. As Stenzl reports, the composer regards the three works as the component parts of a triptych with a metaphysical message. *Schwarze Halbinseln*, the setting of an expressionist poem by Georg Heym for solo voice, orchestra and taped chorus, presents an "apocalypse"; *Traumspiel*, a composition for soprano, orchestra, and tape based on a Strindberg text, expresses "resignation"; and the Bulgakov opera completes the sequence with a musical interpretation of "hope."

There is danger in embedding a lengthy and complex work within a larger whole: its task within the overarching entity may narrow its message to little more than a single aspect. In view of the opera's function as an allegory of "hope," it is therefore all the more surprising that Höller gives so much room to Bulgakov's satirical and fantastic strands, clearly enjoying exploring their potential for representation with modern stage craft, but prunes the religious strand so drastically that it is all but unrecognizable. Once Woland has given a taste of the Jerusalem questioning in the first scene, Yeshua reappears only indirectly: in scene 5 we see his miming double mutely carrying a cross while his disciple curses God, and the immediately following dialogue between Levi Matvei and Pilate reduces the latter's remorse to a single hint, thus barely preparing a ground upon which the audience might infer what bothers the silent man in the seventh scene of act II.

Furthermore, Höller bases his casting on an idea that has far-reaching interpretative consequences: he has the Master and Yeshua sung by the same singer, a heroic baritone. At first glance this sounds promising: it might have allowed him to relate the suffering and spiritual execution in Moscow in manifold ways to the passion and crucifixion in Jerusalem. Yet one soon discovers that Höller aims at a very different angle of the projected identity. In scene 5, the Master's reminiscences of the slandering he had to suffer on behalf of his novel about Pilate lead him to relive the terrible anxiety then

experienced. In the course of the regression, he has a hallucination: he sees (and we see with him) Yeshua carrying his cross and Levi Matvei exclaiming words of commiseration. Apparently responding to this empathy, the Master replies with words addressed to Margarita and thus suggests that he regards not only Yeshua as a projection of his suffering self, but also the disciple as a double of his compassionate lover. Similar observations can be made in the liberation scene at the end of the opera: through subtle play with excerpt and omission, we are given the impression that Pilate is absolved from his self-accusations by the Yeshua who is a product of the Master's imagination — an thus actually by the Master. In thus limiting Yeshua to an autobiographically determined fictional character (rather than a fictionally explored one believed to have historic reality), Höller impoverishes Bulgakov, who allows the various layers of history, myth, contemporary and assumed fiction forever to flicker in an indeterminate play of mystery.

In short, it is the Master alone who interests the composer. Margarita, the Muscovites, and Woland are "projections" of this hero — musically in their derivation from the work's *Klanggestalt*, but presumably even beyond that — and Yeshua is nothing but a foil. The "hope" within Höller's triptych seems to consist in the Master's self-liberation by way of his novelistic exploration of the subject matter and his identification with the Yeshua whom he has fashioned. But even this thread is so thin within the dramatic and musical textures that it risks to go unnoticed among the boisterousness of the satirical and fantastic shenanigans.

### **Human Qualities in the Three Operas after Bulgakov's Novel**

When Bulgakov conceived the religious strand within his novel, he changed the story told in the Gospels on three levels. To begin with, unlike the evangelists, he emphasizes historical and geographic specificity. By using the Aramaic or ancient Hebrew forms of proper and place names, referring to the colonialists and their troops as well as the blood money received by Judas in the precise terms associated with them in the first century, and describing the geography and architecture of ancient Jerusalem in loving detail, he deepens the readers' sense of authenticity. At the same time he defamiliarizes some of the best-known details: Yeshua is 27 and not 33 years old, an orphan from Gamala rather than the (real or adopted) son of the carpenter Joseph from Nazareth and of Mary; he is followed by only a single disciple, etc. Finally, Bulgakov endows the scene of the Crucifixion with such a wealth of gory details that readers feel sickened: the parasitic flies that seem to expose the bodies of the crucified men as helpless animal carcasses and the broken voice of the criminal Gestas who, having lost his mind as a result of the continued torture, now croaks children's songs, make it difficult ever again to see the crucifixes of Catholic churches as decorative symbols of consolation. Bulgakov's depiction divests Yeshua of all the attributes pertaining to a Messiah: there is no hosanna, no miracle, no coat to be gambled for, no crown of thorns, no mission to redeem humankind if it believes in him, and no resurrection. In having his Yeshua complain to Pilate that his only disciple Levi Matvei is forever trying to record his words but seems to be getting almost everything wrong, Bulgakov calls the canonical gospels and with them, the history of Christendom, into question.

Even more important in his revision of Judeo-Christian concepts is a deliberation that Woland, the alleged representative of dark realm, puts forth in conversation with Yeshua's emissary, Levi Matvei, regarding the coexistence of good and evil. As Bulgakov phrases it (1995, p. 305): "Would you kindly ponder this question: What would your good do if evil didn't exist, and what would the earth look like if all the shadows disappeared? After all, shadows are cast by things and people. [...] Do you want to strip the earth of all trees and living things just because of your fantasy of enjoying naked light?" By proposing that it is required that Woland explain to Yeshua's disciple the need of a balance of forces, Bulgakov seems to offer an alternative to central tenets of Christian theology. When all is said and done, this satan is not Yeshua's enemy but his associate; he accepts his commissions and carries them out, willingly and knowingly, and

thus has a non-Manichean role to play within the heavenly hierarchy. Yeshua works through light and love; Woland, through force and darkness. Their goal is the same insofar as both aim at breaking through the world's fatal *status quo* and awakening an understanding of true life and genuine freedom. Woland and his cohort act concretely when they set fire to various Moscow buildings that they consider representative of corruption and opportunism; Yeshua speaks metaphorically when he predicts the need to destroy the temple of misunderstood truths and points to the transience of worldly powers.

A fascinating characteristic of Bulgakov's novel is the observation that renewed reading results in a noticeable shift of emphasis: with each exposure, the Moscow satire and the magical fairy tale move further into the background in favor of the Jerusalem strand, in which readers discover ever new nuances and whose echoes they hear resonating ever more densely through the other two strands. This should perhaps not surprise anyone, since Bulgakov's novel, as all scholars of this work keep reminding us, sprang from a fascination with the Passion story, which he first planned to tell "from the devil's point of view." One feels reminded of Dostoevsky's legend of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which literally takes up only a minute portion of the extensive novel but seems to expand with each additional reading.

As close scrutiny of the three operas reveals, Slonimsky gives about as much explicit room to the religious strand as Bulgakov's novel accords it implicitly. It is perhaps before the backdrop of his own religion that he expands his interpretation of the eponymous lovers in a way that suggests the Russian Orthodox view.<sup>[9]</sup> In its light, Bulgakov's Margarita stands for Mary, whom the Eastern Church sees above all as the Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, and Bearer of Sorrows (rather than as the immaculate virgin of the Western Church). Bulgakov's portrayal stresses this relationship on many levels. Interestingly, he dates the female protagonist's transformation from her mundane to her mythical role to the beginning of her relationship with Woland. Hardly has Margarita become a "witch" than she acts as a harbinger of mercy who overcomes the limitation to individual human interests. In a brief episode that has not found its way into any of the operas, she interrupts her flight over Moscow's rooftops to comfort an anxious child. Later she pleads for the redemption of the eternally tortured infant murderer Frieda before making any wish for herself or the Master. She — not the Master — feels overwhelming compassion for Pontius Pilate. In addition to these direct Marian qualities, her nocturnal odyssey comprises many symbols pertaining to the Orthodox rite: the transforming cream is reminiscent of the ointment used for "christmation" with which the newly baptized receive the Holy Spirit; her immersion into the river during her flight to Satan's grand ball corresponds with the actual baptism; and the blood turned wine she is given to drink during the ball, with the Eucharist. Just as Christians in the Eastern Church are "washed in the blood of the Lamb," so Margarita, exhausted from the strain of the strange Sabbath, is revived in a bath of blood. The heavy necklace with the poodle amulet she has to wear is reminiscent of the giant crucifix worn by Orthodox priests. Even her involvement in Satan's ball can be read as an allegory on the apocryphal story of the Orthodox tradition whereby Mary, accompanied by the archangel Michael, descends into hell on Good Friday to beg for temporary relief of its inmates.

While all three operas include the scenes with Margarita's pleas for the redemption of Frieda and Pilate, only Kunad's integrates some of the symbols described above as evocations of the Orthodox rite, thus suggesting to his audience an interpretation of the witches' Sabbath as a perverted celebration of the Eucharist. Yet his music seems intent on leveling this interesting symbolism, and he does not cast Margarita in musical emblems that would support this reading. Only Slonimsky, as shown above, highlights her religious importance, employing above all a wealth of purely musical means.

Slonimsky's, Kunad's, and Höller's operas also differ considerably in another central respect. The theme that in Bulgakov permeates all three strands is cowardice,

acknowledged by Pilate as the greatest sin, responsible for the worst occurrences in the Moscow satire, and in the fantastic strand juxtaposing the courageous, self-sacrificing Margarita with the anxiety-ridden, self-absorbed Master. In Höller's portrayal, this topic is not only drowned in the multi-colored variety of events, but significantly veiled even where mentioned owing to the pared-down role of Yeshua. The wandering philosopher from Gamala remains too pale ever to win the audience's heart; his death is so completely elided that thoughts about the guilt experienced by the man who condemned him lack urgency and their absence from Höller's depiction seems only consistent. This work focuses on the suffering of the Master who, elevated through his identification with the persona of his fictional Yeshua, pities himself. His redemption at the end of the story owing to the impact of all his "projections" is liberation from anxiety, not maturation from that cowardice which in Bulgakov unites so many people. Slonimsky portrays the recognition of cowardice as part of remorse, but does not seem to believe in attempts at overcoming it. His composition emphasizes redemption, not a process of maturation by way of self-mastery; individuals may be absolved from the consequences of cowardly actions but will not be freed from cowardice itself. By closing with Pilate redeemed through Yeshua's assurance that his execution has never taken place and the Master, lulled by Margarita's comforting words, walking toward his eternal resting place, Slonimsky captures the underlying message of Bulgakov's epilogue: nothing has changed in Moscow in the aftermath of the dramatic events. Cowardice remains.

By contrast, Kunad's interpretation highlights the overcoming of human cowardice by means of a combination of dramatic and musical means. Soon after the two lovers have been poisoned, the topic is emphasized in a threefold way: Woland confronts the Master with an enactment of that passage from his novel in which Pilate declares cowardice to be the greatest sin of all; immediately thereafter — the episodes are separated in Bulgakov — follows the scene in which Pilate asks to see the disciple's notes and reads Yeshua's words about cowardice; and finally, the Master understands with dismay that his own comportment — the burning of his manuscript, his retreat into psychic illness, his self-pity — is characterized by cowardice. Since these insights fall into a time after his "first death," he is able to address the topic of personal courage in a mature way. His ability to admit his weaknesses in turn determines Kunad's subtle play with his principal motif.

The three operas composed on the basis of Bulgakov's novel within the span of seventeen years invite their combined audience to ponder essential questions of self-definition: do we want to join Slonimsky in accepting human cowardice as inevitable and relying entirely on divine redemption, to side with Kunad in hoping for human maturation, or to identify with Höller's hero in perceiving the whole world as a projection of the inner self, which can be manipulated to reflect back on and liberate the self?