



## CHAPTER 1

.....

## SELECTED SETTINGS FROM “AUERBACHS KELLER”

.....

ALBERTO RIZZUTI

GOETHE’S “Auerbachs Keller in Leipzig” (“Auerbach’s Wine-Cellar in Leipzig”) is an amusing scene near the beginning of Faust’s adventure in Mephistopheles’s company.<sup>1</sup> The set is a tavern where Goethe used to spend time during his student years in Leipzig, hence the vividness of the imagery, the liveliness of the characters, and the skillful evocation of the atmosphere. One could not think of a better choice for an episode aimed at stimulating a man oppressed by his erudition: a tavern crowded by students drinking, shouting, and singing represents everyday life, in stark opposition to the atemporal stillness of an alchemist’s studio.

The noise of Auerbach’s Cellar gives way to sustained song on two occasions, when two of its customers—first the student Brander, then Mephistopheles—perform a song. Not surprisingly, the two songs, both dealing metaphorically with animals, a rat and a flea, have attracted the attention of a number of composers since the publication of *Faust* in 1808. Starting with Beethoven, the chain of artists who devoted their craftsmanship to the stanzas resounding under Auerbach’s vaults extends well into the twentieth century. The focus of this chapter is on the first century of the musical fortunes of Goethe’s rat and flea. The time span is marked by a centennial occasion: Stravinsky’s 1909 orchestration of Beethoven’s 1809 voice-and-piano setting of “Es war einmal ein König” (“Song of the Flea”). Between these endpoints, Berlioz, Wagner, Liszt, Mussorgsky, and some lesser-known composers also engage with the theme. A synoptic reading of the two series of settings produced by these artists, sometimes at the outset of their careers, will help shed light on their individual achievements, among which Mussorgsky’s attains unparalleled heights.

### GOETHE’S TEXT

.....

The protagonists of the songs do not pop up unexpectedly under Auerbach’s vaults in Goethe’s *Faust*. In fact, rats and fleas are “announced” some five hundred lines earlier,



toward the end of “Studierzimmer [I]” (“Faust’s Study II”), in which Faust first encounters Mephistopheles in human form. After the chorus “Schwindet, ihr dunkeln / Wölbungen droben!” (“Vanish, dark arches / high but confining!”) (F 1447–505), with which Faust is lulled to sleep by the spirits, Mephistopheles explains that in order to leave the alchemist’s room, he needs a rat’s tooth to erase part of a cabbalistic symbol—the pentagram—drawn on the threshold. By summoning one, Mephistopheles defines himself as “Der Herr der Ratten und der Mäuse, / Der Fliegen, Frösche, Wanzen, Läuse” (“The Lord of Rats and Lord of Mice, / Lord of the Flies, Frogs, Bugs, and Lice”) (F 1516–17). Popular culture attributed to the devil a sort of patronage of repugnant animals and troublesome insects.<sup>2</sup> In Mephistopheles’s self-presentation, Goethe includes several references to the subject of Brander’s rat song in “Auerbachs Keller,” thus bridging the world of the alchemist’s study and that of the tavern over which Mephistopheles asserts his dominance.

Faust and Mephistopheles enter the tavern when Brander has already sung his strophes (F 2126–49), assisted by his friends in the performance of the refrain. Goethe suggests that the strangers might have heard the shouts of the chorus when they were still outside. It is possible that the shouts from the tavern as perceived by Faust and Mephistopheles did not correspond to the performance of the refrain; conceivably, they could derive from the bystanders’ violent reaction to Frosch’s attempt to sing first a political song (F 2090–91), then a love song (F 2101–2). In fact, Brander and another of the students, Siebel, brutally silence their friend as soon as he dares to perform a couple of lines. Marked by emphatic pounding on the table, Brander’s decision to sing instead three satiric strophes telling the story of a miserable rat derives from his ironic attitude toward love.

The choice of a certain topic involves the adoption of a specific meter for each song performed in the tavern, even if they are incomplete, as in the case of the two begun by Frosch. In “Es war eine Ratt” (“Song of the Rat”), Goethe’s choice of meter deserves special attention, since the metrical structure reveals the satiric attitude of his strophes (F 2126–49). An overtly anticlerical tirade starting with an irreverent reference to Luther, “Es war eine Ratt” adapts the so-called *Lutherstrophe*, the seven-line stanza alternating, on the base of a pattern of four four- and three three-foot iambs (4/3/4/3/4/4/3), with masculine and feminine ending, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Consistently used by Luther in his *Kirchenlieder* (church songs), this kind of stanza recurs in folksong collections and in late eighteenth-century art ballads: hence the irreverence of Goethe’s decision to allude to the response uttered at the end of each stanza by a church congregation repeating the last line sung by the soloist.

The metrical organization of “Es war einmal ein König” discloses an analogous satirical intent through the choice of the so-called *Hildebrandstrophe*,<sup>4</sup> involving that of a genre—the ballad—whose opening evokes a legendary time, ridiculed by the story of the unlikely rise of a flea (F 2211–40). In this case the chorus enters only at the end of the last stanza, a repetition of the two final lines, written in the first person plural. If in rhetorical and semantic terms the choral intervention is largely predictable, Brander’s statement after the first stanza is not. The four lines (F 2219–22) uttered by this student,

who just performed “Es war eine Ratt,” are a consequence of Mephistopheles’s position in the tavern, and of the placement of his song at the heart of a theatrical unit. In contrast to Faust, who silently observes the noisy scene taking place, Mephistopheles decides to get personally involved in the chaos of Auerbach’s Cellar. Although he is perceived as a stranger, his song is rather like an interjection, as if it were performed by another student; although it is not subject to brutal interference, unlike Frosch’s attempts, it becomes the object of a gloss uttered by Brander at the end of the first stanza (F 2219–22). Putting himself simultaneously in Hans Sachs’s place as a poetic advisor, and in the flea’s place as a *dramatis persona*, Brander encourages Mephistopheles to go on. In fact, the second stanza proves that the skyrocketing fortune of the flea has its roots in the perfect job carried out by the tailor, whose silk-and-velvet clothes fit him perfectly.

Having earned a focal position with the performance of his song, Mephistopheles concludes his appearance in the tavern by giving a troubling proof of his extraordinary nature. When wine is requested and various opinions about its quality resound, Mephistopheles practices magic; as soon as a drop spills on the floor, a fire flares up (“ein Brand,” another “announced” event—in this case, through the use of Brander’s name) and causes terror among the students.

Summing up these preliminary remarks, it is evident that the songs have offered various suggestions to composers eager to set Goethe’s lines. The basic question of this chapter concerns the way in which the songs have been approached, that is, whether composers intended to set them as independent pieces or as parts of larger units, be it the scene in Auerbach’s Cellar or *Faust I* as a whole. As we shall see, each setting displays its individuality, showing strengths and weaknesses. In order to give as broad a picture as possible, compositions will be analyzed by pointing out their mutual relationships, not necessarily in the order in which they were composed or published.

## THE SETTINGS

In the beginning was Beethoven. By 1808, Mozart, the one composer who in Goethe’s opinion would have been able to set *Faust* to music, was long dead;<sup>5</sup> Haydn, an artist whose muse was all but Faustian, was aging and enfeebled, and died in May 1809; therefore, the task could be carried out by no one but Beethoven, an artist who, having received the spirit of Mozart from Haydn’s hands, at that point had established his fame firmly.<sup>6</sup>

A survey of Beethoven’s relationship with Goethe and his works far exceeds the scope of this chapter; suffice it to recall the composer’s extreme caution in selecting texts for setting. Having endowed a much less problematic drama as *Egmont* with no more than an overture and a few numbers of incidental music, Beethoven did not envision setting *Faust* as a whole, either in its original or in any refashioned form. Therefore, in the same year in which the commission for *Egmont* reached him (late 1809), Beethoven pulled from his drawer a sketch dating back to the years in which



Mozart's spirit was still in Mozart's body or had been just transferred to Haydn's hands. In fact, the sketch is an attempt to set "Es war einmal ein König" shortly after its appearance, in the *Fragment* published by Goethe in 1790.<sup>7</sup> Probably completed in late 1809, the song, "Aus Göthe's Faust" ("Flohlied," "Song of the Flea"), appeared in October 1810 as part of op. 75.<sup>8</sup>

Although a comparison between the two versions of "Aus Göthe's Faust" discloses a harmonic refinement in the opening measures, it is evident that the structure and the physiognomy of the song remained that of the sketch.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Beethoven chooses the late eighteenth-century model of the *Klavierlied*, in which the vocal line is essentially matched by the top part of the piano accompaniment. In theory, the strophic pattern of the ballad would allow a composer to place only the lines of the first stanza under the vocal part; nonetheless, Beethoven assigns one staff to each stanza, in order to transcribe Goethe's text fully and to add small variants to the vocal line where metrical differences occur.<sup>10</sup>

Beethoven's deference to Goethe's text involves a kind of setting tailored to the poet's preference for light, strophic songs. In fact, the Lied does not show deviations from the norm of syllabic setting, clear articulation of phrasing, and placing of instrumental sections at the beginning and the end of each stanza. The choice of a minor key is not surprising for a text whose satiric mood finds one of its musical correlates in the sudden change of mode: the most striking of all occurs at the end of each stanza, where a sudden G major chord occurs in *sforzando* under the last syllable, and is immediately contrasted by the reverse switch to G minor, marked in the accompaniment by a new *sforzando*, reinforced by an octave upward leap (see Musical Example 1.1). Hovering above the entire composition, Beethoven aims at conveying the witty nature of the flea, whose springs and quick moves are portrayed in the ample leaps and changes of register in the piano part. Conversely, the vocal line moves by small steps in the most ordinary range of a ninth. Harmonically, the only relevant spot corresponds to the setting of the second distich, the lines recalling the bizarre love of the king for the flea: in fact, the words "den liebt er gar nicht wenig" ("and loved him no less dearly")

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1.1 Ludwig van Beethoven, *Sechs Gesaenge*, op. 75, no. 3, "Aus Göthe's Faust," mm. 19–21.

19

Klei - der, und miss ihm Ho - sen an!



(F 2213) are set on a modulation to F major (mm. 9–11) that continues to C minor on “als wie seinen eignen Sohn” (“than if a son were he”) (F 2214) (mm. 11–13). Just after that, however, the piano reintroduces its sparkling opening figure; in so doing, its lower neighboring note lets sound B $\flat$ , thus suggesting a new, malicious change of mode (C minor to C major). Then, the second half of the stanza explores the relative major of the key (B $\flat$ ) and concludes with the joke on the two subsequent sforzandos.

Beethoven exploits intensively the potential of the change of mode in the final part of the song (mm. 69–81), where he sets the two lines assigned to the choir. By repeating them, he emphasizes the accented syllables of “ersticken” (“crush”) and “sticht” (“twitch”) (F 2239–40), making the voices swing between B $\flat$  and B $\natural$  and eventually resolving in favor of the latter, hence in the major mode. The satiric mood of the song is exemplified once more in the last measures of the postlude, where the right hand—and implicitly the left—is assigned a strange fingering—1–1—mimicking the act of smashing a flea by means of thumb pressure.<sup>11</sup>

Goethe’s opinion of Beethoven’s “Aus Göthe’s Faust” is unknown, yet his suspicious attitude toward the younger artist is disclosed in a letter written to Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758–1832) a couple of months after his meeting with Beethoven at Teplice, in the summer of 1812. After a bit of generic praise for the composer’s talent, Goethe adds “er ist leider eine ganz ungebändigte Persönlichkeit” (unfortunately, he is a totally untamed person), a judgment that seems to express a substantial distancing from the composer of the music for *Egmont*.<sup>12</sup>

In the crowd of composers who sent Goethe their settings, few are famous, and many obscure. The name of Johann Christoph Kienlen (1783–1829) is crucial because of his setting of “Es war eine Ratt,” “Lied der lustigen Gesellen” (Song of the merry companions), which appeared in a collection published ca. 1817.<sup>13</sup> The work of the music director of Bratislava’s court theater is accompanied by other songs found in *Faust I*, but is not paired by a setting of “Es war einmal ein König.” Kienlen’s work emphasizes the reference to Luther by means of a sudden harmonic jump that moves to the sharp side of the chromatic universe from a musical discourse rooted in the flat one (see Musical Example 1.2). In fact, once the satiric reference to Luther’s paunch is

**MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1.2** Johann Christoph Kienlen, *Lieder aus Göthe’s Faust*, no. 5, “Lied der lustigen Gesellen,” mm. 7–9.

7

mäst't, als wie der Doc-tor Lu-ther. Die

over, the composer drives his piece back to the flat side, starting an effective crescendo in a progression whose chasing triplets lead to a fortissimo setting of the refrain.

A composer who in Goethe's opinion could carry out a worthy setting of the lyric sections of *Faust I* was Anton Heinrich von Radziwill (1775–1833), “the first real Troubadour” whom the poet had the chance to meet. A nobleman of Polish origins, this man—an accomplished cellist, singer, and composer—made a favorable impression on Goethe on the occasion of his visit to Weimar in 1814, yet Goethe's enthusiasm for his talent was subsequently withdrawn when rumors of a full setting and performance of the tragedy with Radziwill's music began to circulate.<sup>14</sup>

The problem, however, was not Radziwill's talent, but Goethe's work. In the author's words, *Faust* is a “seltsames Stück” (strange piece), a piece whose strangeness makes it unsuitable for the stage. Nonetheless, performances took place, with Radziwill's music, in 1816 and 1820. A short description of the latter event is found in the preface to a piano-vocal reduction of the music, published in 1835 by the members of Berlin's Singakademie.<sup>15</sup> Working on *Faust I* throughout his life, Radziwill set selections from much of the tragedy, which he prefaced by means of an orchestral transcription of Mozart's Adagio and Fugue in C minor (K546), entrusted with the task of outlining the mood of the work.

The scene in Auerbach's Cellar is placed at the outset of part 2. After a prelude pivoting around an orchestral rendering of the goliardic hymn “Gaudeamus igitur,” Radziwill writes a scene in the style of a Singspiel, alternating spoken recitation with singing. Brander's violent dismissal of Frosch's attempt to start a political song is left to speech, as is Siebel's opposition to Frosch's second try. In this case, however, Frosch switches to speech in his turn; then he resumes singing on “Riegel auf! in stiller Nacht” (“Draw the bolt, the night is clear”) (F 2105). Siebel's ensuing intervention is unset, like Brander's announcement of a “Lied vom neusten Schnitt” (“The song's brand-new”) (F 2124).

If Brander's song is brand new, Radziwill's setting, “Lied des Brander” (Brander's song), is not. His choice of a slightly varied strophic form is opportune, given the structure of the text, but the satiric mood is hardly traceable among the staves of his composition. Having honored Mozart with a transcription of an important work, here Radziwill makes a reference to Beethoven by means of an almost literal citation of the opening of his “Aus Göthe's Faust” (syllabic setting, initial upward-fourth leap, and iteration of tonic are common to the two tunes), but the real surprise is the similarity between the bass lines, both descending by leap on quarter-note values. Apart from this, Radziwill's setting shows an effective chromatic turn where the text makes reference to Luther, a vivid depiction of the words “zernagt, zerkratzt' das ganze Haus” (“he gnawed and scratched, tore up the house”) (F 2136), and an equally expressive setting of the lines “fiel an den Herd und zuckt' und lag, und thät erbärmlich schnaufen” (“flopped on the hearth and, sad to say, / lay gasping, moaning,

twitching”) (F 2144–45), entrusted to a descending chromatic scale sung with the support of a lonely bassoon (see Musical Example 1.3).

**MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1.3** Anton Heinrich von Radziwill, *Compositionen zu Göthe's Faust*, no. 13, “Lied des Brander,” mm. 35–44.

35 Solo  
-be Sie kam vor Angst am hel - len Tag der

38  
Kü - che zu - ge - lau - fen, fiel an den Herd und

41 rit.  
zuckt' und lag, und thät er - bärm - lich schnau - fen. Da

The “Lied des Mephistopheles” (Song of Mephistopheles) follows, and is structured as a scene, with the setting of the opening stanza preceded by Mephistopheles’s first attempt to sing and by Frosch’s spoken interjection, and with Brander’s spoken comment before

the setting of the other two stanzas. For his second song, Radziwill chooses a strictly strophic form, with each stanza followed by an extensive postlude based on a lively figuration in sixteenth notes. The jumps of the flea are to be regularly perceived under the setting of lines 5–6, but the effect aimed at conveying the satiric mood of the text is a three-note motif played by the oboe just after the emphatic setting of the first distich. Acting as an unwritten question mark (How can a king love a flea like his son?), this subdued chirruping is the only minor inflection of a song that owes its musical originality to this little, descending semitone.

In 1820, Conradin Kreutzer (1780–1849), Kapellmeister to Prince Carl Egon of Fürstenberg, composed a set of Faust compositions that were published in 1836, soon after Radziwill's *Compositionen zu Göthe's Faust*.<sup>16</sup> Kreutzer's score comprises no fewer than twenty-two pieces, starting with the choir of angels "Christ ist erstanden!" ("Christ is arisen!") (F 737) and finishing with the choir of spirits addressing Gretchen in the cathedral scene. The songs performed in "Auerbachs Keller" are numbers eight and nine in the collection. They are both set as operatic scenes, with extensive recitatives and massive participation of the choir. Although Brander's song, "Zeche lustiger Gesellen" (Bill of the merry companions), does not display great originality, Mephistopheles's song shows a stylistic feature not found in other settings, despite a suggestion derived directly from Goethe's text. Introducing himself and Faust to the noisy tableful, Mephistopheles says, "Wir kommen erst aus Spanien zurück, / Dem schönen Land des Weins und der Gesänge" ("We've only just come back from Spain, / that lovely land of wine and song") (F 2205–6). Playing on this reference, Kreutzer sets Mephistopheles's stanzas to the driving rhythm of a bolero (see Musical Example 1.4). The choice gives the song a spicy flavor, and shows the assimilation of a theatrical device that had become famous with the act 1 finale of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, where a minuet starts in the middle of a phrase, giving the impression of the unexpected opening of a ballroom door. Kreutzer offers a passage resembling Mozart's at the beginning of the second strophe, where the bolero rhythm in the piano accompaniment takes over the section in recitative, starting on a degree other than the tonic.

Radziwill's choice of the bassoon as an instrumental support to the setting of the line that depicts the wretched fate of the poor rat finds an amplification in Berlioz's first setting of Brander's Lied, "Écot de joyeux compagnons–histoire d'un rat" ("Song of the Rat"), the fourth of his *Huit scènes de Faust (Eight Scenes from Faust)* (see Chapter 4) composed in 1828–29 to a translation by Gérard de Nerval. In fact, a quartet of bassoons represents the only group of non-stringed instruments in this setting. Preceded by Brander's call for attention, the song is further framed by a quotation from *Hamlet* ("How now! a rat? dead, for a ducat, dead."). After a four-measure motto, performed fortissimo by four bassoons and strings, Brander starts singing his first stanza excitedly ("ivre") in an atmosphere of "joie grossière et désordonnée" (coarse and unruly joy). Not surprisingly, Berlioz spares his most daring harmonic move for the passage where



## SELECTED SETTINGS FROM “AUERBACHS KELLER” 27

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1.4 Conradin Kreutzer, *Gesänge aus Goethe's Faust*, no. 9, “Recitativo [‘Es war einmal ein König’]” mm. 1–9.

Tempo di Boleros.  
Moderato

Cantabile

Es war ein -

mal ein Kö - nig, der

hatt' ei-nen gros - sen Floh.

Nerval's translation introduces the word “diable” (devil). After the reference to Luther, the satiric intent of which made a negligible impact on Berlioz's imagination, Nerval recasts Goethe's three subsequent lines (“Die Köchin hatt ihr Gift gestellt; / Da ward's so eng' ihr in der Welt, / Als hätte sie Lieb' im Leibe” [“The cook, she set some poison out; / and then he felt as helpless as if— / as if he'd fallen in love”]) (F 2130–32) to four

lines, making the *Lutherstrophe* lose its seven-line, asymmetric structure; nonetheless, after five measures of bassoon-grumbling on “Mais un beau jour, le pauvre dia-” (But one lovely day, the poor dev-), in the middle of the word “diable” the translation gives Berlioz a chance to make his orchestra blast fortissimo with an unexpected A minor chord (see Musical Example 1.5). Something similar happens on “[sau]-ta” ([jump]-ed), yet the harmony differs; then a chromatic descending scale underlines the setting of the word “triste” (sad), on the longest-held note of the song; finally, a Phrygian cadence does the same with the word “misérable.” In sum, Berlioz concentrates his most effective gestures in the second part of the stanza, heating the atmosphere for the intervention of the choir.

**MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1.5** Hector Berlioz, *Huit scènes de Faust*, no. 4, “Écot de joyeux compagnons–histoire d’un rat,” mm. 31–50.

31

I, II  
Bassoon

III, IV  
Bassoon

Brander

Mais un beau jour, le pau-vre dia - ble, Em -

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Contrabass

*ff*

*ff*

*ff*

*ff*

*ff*

*ff*



The next piece in the collection is “Chanson de Méphistophélès–histoire d’une puce” (“Song of the Flea”), framed by another line borrowed from *Hamlet* (“Miching mallecho; it means mischief”). Here Berlioz employs a wider palette of colors, but exploits it essentially in the setting of the last stanza (F 2231–38), where the clarinets rise to the rank of leaders. Berlioz’s decision to take advantage of their humoristic timbre was fueled, again, by Nerval’s all but literal translation, which enhances the satiric mood of the stanza at the outset. In the context of a genre—the *chanson à boire*—that was highly congenial to Berlioz, adjustments of this sort were like pouring fuel on fire; and in fact, the strophes find their explosive conclusion in the choral interventions.

When the *Huit scènes* became a *légende dramatique* (dramatic legend) to be performed on stage, *La damnation de Faust* (*The Damnation of Faust*), the songs were included in part 2. In the case of “Histoire d’un rat,” the revision involved the addition of flutes and oboes and the exclusion of the sudden chords under “diable” and “sauta”; only the chromatic descent remained, in the upper strings reinforced by the flutes. The individuality of the original scoring had faded, but the song was better incorporated into what had become a theatrical scene. “Chanson de Méphistophélès” underwent a similar treatment, yet the additions to the orchestra did not prevent the clarinets from leading the musical discourse in the final strophe, thus preserving the satiric mood of the setting.

The really new aspects, in the reworking carried out by Berlioz in the mid-1840s, are those elements that connect one song to the other: the extraordinary fugue on Brander’s theme, an impressive setting of the word “Amen” pronounced by the choir in mourning the rat (“Requiescat in pace. Amen”), and Méphistophélès’s response to it.

Considering that Wagner was all but an *enfant-prodige*, his settings of *Faust I* songs appear as true juvenilia. No hints of the future *Tondichter* are found in these pieces, composed in 1830–31, unless one wants to hear an anticipation of *Parsifal* in the opening measures of “Branders Lied” (“Brander’s Song”). Obviously, the resemblance to a prelude written half a century later is a mere curiosity: the song is a simple strophic setting in the style of a music student of his time. Nonetheless, the dramatic talent of the young author of the *Sieben Kompositionen zu Goethes Faust* (*Seven Compositions on Goethe’s Faust*) (see Chapter 6) emerges in what follows the reference to Luther, a passage marked by a modulation to the dominant and by a sudden abandonment of the chordal accompaniment in favor of octave-doubling in the vocal line, rising up to a cadence (see Musical Example 1.6). After that, the piano resumes its chordal accompaniment marking the downbeat of the next four measures; starting on the minor tonic, the sequence descends chromatically, building increasingly unstable chords. The progressive narrowing of the harmonic space is the best way to convey the meaning of a line such as “da ward’s so engih in der Welt,” that is, to give a sense of the doom impending over the miserable rat. The setting of the “Lied des Mephistopheles” (“Song of Mephistopheles”) is more

## SELECTED SETTINGS FROM “AUERBACHS KELLER” 31

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1.6 Richard Wagner, *Sieben Kompositionen zu Goethes Faust*, no. 3, “Branders Lied,” mm. 10–16.

10

Lu - ther Die Kö - chin hatt' ihr Gift ge - stellt; da

13

ward's so eng ihr in der Welt, als\_ hät - te sie Lieb' im Lei - be. Als

CHOR

conventional: jumps and sliding figures pop up overall, both in the voice and in the piano; the evocation of the fabulous time of the (unlikely) events is entrusted to frequent “Amen” cadences.

Discussed in detail in Chapter 7 of this book, Liszt’s compositions based on Goethe texts are overviewed in the prefatory pages of a facsimile edition of his “Es war einmal ein König,” a setting that remained unknown to scholars until a quarter-century ago.<sup>17</sup> Before taking a look at this piece, composed for baritone/bass, male chorus, and piano in 1844/45, it is advisable to look at Liszt’s setting of “Es war eine Ratt,” composed for four-voice male-chorus, published in 1843 as “Studentenlied, aus Göthes Faust” (“Students’ Song from Goethe’s Faust”).

The scoring for a cappella choir is a consequence of the circumstances in which the composition and performance took place. The founder of Frankfurt’s Mozart Stiftung, Liszt’s friend Wilhelm Speyer also ran a series of Liederkranz evenings. Most likely, Liszt composed some of his pieces for one of these events in which the group directed by Speyer was engaged. Liszt composed the “Studentenlied” in the first of three consecutive summers spent at Nonnenwerth, an island in the Rhine not far from Loreley’s cliff. On September 25 and November 15, 1841, he gave two

piano recitals for the benefit of Frankfurt's Mozart Stiftung; two weeks later, his "Studentenlied" was first performed at Jena, a university city representing an ideal venue for such an event.

The choir is instructed to perform with humor, like drunken students singing in Auerbach's Cellar. As usual in strophic songs, the music is aimed at setting off the content of the first stanza; therefore, Liszt also takes advantage of the reference to Luther. Like Wagner, he works on the harmony to suggest the fate of the poisoned rat. Writing for a choir, Liszt enhances the sense of sorrow, making one of the two groups of basses repeat a capriccio the words "da wards zu eng ihr in die Welt" [*sic*] on two arpeggios, highlighting a sudden, most eloquent silence (see Musical Example 1.7).<sup>18</sup>

**MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1.7** Franz Liszt, *Vierstimmige Männergesänge*, no. 2, "Studentenlied, aus Göthes Faust," mm. 11–15.

Gift ge-stellt da wards zu eng ihr

11

- stellt da wards zu eng ihr in die

- stellt da wards zu eng ihr in die

- stellt da wards zu eng, zu eng ihr in die

in die Welt.

13

Welt.

Welt. rit. - - - a - - - capriccio - - -

Welt, da wards zu eng ihr in die Welt.

The setting of "Es war einmal ein König" was preceded by the piano transcription of Beethoven's song, along with that of five more songs by Goethe.<sup>19</sup> In this new setting, the male choir interacts with a soloist; probably inserted for temporary use, a chordal piano accompaniment is still part of the manuscript. Once more, the song is strophic; its opening measures present all the materials of a composition whose most ingenious

harmonic turn intervenes to separate the narrative of the first six lines of the stanza from the quotation that occupies the final distich. The possibility of a break at this point had not been exploited before: as in the case of Kreutzer’s choice of a “Spanish” rhythm for his setting, the premise for the choice was again in Goethe’s text. Coming some forty years after the publication of *Faust I*, the harmonic language of mid-century settings must be considered against the background of the development of Romantic harmony; nonetheless, the juxtaposition of  $A^b$ —the relative major of F minor, the main key of the piece—and  $G^b$  remains striking, and sheds a skewed light on the strange order given by Mephistopheles’s king.

## MUSSORGSKY’S MASTERWORK

Two years before succumbing to his fascination for wine-and-spirit cellars, in 1879 Mussorgsky left for a concert tour with the famous contralto Darya Mikhailovna Leonova. For this artist, an opera singer gifted with a powerful and wide-ranging voice, Mussorgsky composed a concert number that represents one of his most fortunate achievements. His setting of a Russian translation of “Es war einmal ein König,” *Песня Мефистофеля в погребке Ауэрбаха (Песня о блохе)* (“*Pesnia Mefistofelia v pogrebke Auerbakha [Pesnia o blokhe]*” [Song of Mephistopheles in Auerbach’s Cellar (“Song of the Flea”)]), was first heard on April 8, 1880, and was very well received. The composition rests on Mussorgsky’s acquaintance with Goethe’s oeuvre and the German language, which he had learned in his youth at Saint Petersburg’s Peterschule, and on the knowledge of Méphistophélès’s serenade in Gounod’s *Faust* (see Chapter 13), an opera that circulated widely in Russia, along with Berlioz’s *Damnation*.<sup>20</sup>

Compared to the handful of settings discussed thus far, Mussorgsky’s piece is exceptional in overcoming the rigidity of the strophic structure of the text. This was made possible by the fact that Mussorgsky was composing not a mere song, but a concert piece for an operatic singer.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Mussorgsky sets Goethe’s (translated) stanzas with a variety of music materials, never recurring literally but well interwoven. The risk of fragmentation is avoided, in melodic terms, by the fact that all motifs pivot around the pitch  $F\sharp$ . Mussorgsky distributes his materials along the sections of a varied ternary form: marked by an arpeggio accompaniment, the music of the first half of the middle stanza returns in the second half of the third, thus superimposing the linear structure of the musical flow to the recursive structure of the tripartite Lied form.

The musical substance is displayed *in nuce* in the instrumental prelude, acting as a sort of refrain throughout the song (see Musical Example 1.8). In measures 1–7 Mussorgsky presents (1) a series of chords aimed at outlining the harmonic space of the song, that is, the key of B (major / minor); (2) a quick, rhythmically effective cell aimed at conveying the liveliness of the flea; and (3) a dotted, harmonically unstable phrase aimed at portraying the devilish character of Mephistopheles, in the wake of Gounod’s serenade.



MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1.8 Modest Mussorgsky, Песня Мефистофеля в погребке Ауэрбаха (Песня о блохе), mm. 1–7.

**Moderato giusto**

With the addition of a sardonic laugh, the instrumental refrain intervenes irregularly among the lines. Its final element splits the first stanza into two halves (ll. 1–4 and 5–8), and splits again the lines of the first half into two pairs (ll. 1–2 and 3–4); the choice is functional to the intention of pointing out the strangeness of the king, a man who loves—the (opera-) singer repeats with changing inflections—“блоха!” (“blokha!” [a flea! . . . , a flea! . . . , a flea!]). If the function of an instrumental refrain is that of separating strophes, Mussorgsky’s employment of it is quite atypical. After having turned up unexpectedly within the first half of the first strophe, his refrain barely returns between the second and third strophe, being reduced to two notes, an upward leap on which the voice repeats “Ха, ха!” (Ha, ha!): this choice enhances the goal-directed motion of a musical discourse meant to overcome the rigid structure of the text; similarly, the first half of the last stanza concludes with the sole interjection of another laugh, “Ха, ха!” sounding on a smaller upward leap.<sup>22</sup>

If the setting of the first stanza is entirely based on materials from the refrain, that of the second is not. Its vocal line is bathed in the arcane light of a series of arpeggios on odd beats. A switch to major mode—B in the first half, D in the second—contributes to the establishment of a musical universe sounding completely new. The varied return of the music of the first strophe marks the beginning of the third, separated from the second by the utterance of a single “Ха, ха!” Quite unexpectedly, the arpeggios of the middle strophe resound again in the second half of the last; the re-establishment of arcane sonorities is functional, then, to the coup de théâtre on “душить!” (“dushit!” [crush!]), the last word of the song sung fortissimo on two neighboring notes (F#–G<sup>♯</sup>), a combination never heard before. The sudden transcendence of the bottom edge of the range—D<sup>♯</sup>, acting as a reciting tone for the sections in B major—is marked by a ninth chord on A<sup>♯</sup>: nothing particularly reckless, but something fairly striking in the context of a piece rooted in B. The





breaking effect of this harmonic move is enhanced by a long, unaccompanied laughter: a gesture that concludes the piece in a most theatrical manner.

As was much of his output, Mussorgsky's *Песня Мефистофеля в погребке Ауэрбаха* was published posthumously, thanks to the editorial work of Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. This was some thirty years after its composition, yet the piece was endowed with orchestral color. The occasion was a “Goethean” concert organized at Saint Petersburg on November 28 (December 10), 1909, on the 160th anniversary of Goethe's birth, with Fyodor Chaliapin in the main role. The composer entrusted with the transcription was a most promising pupil of the late Rimsky-Korsakov: in fact, Aleksandr Ziloti, the organizer of the event, had singled out the young Igor Stravinsky for the task of transcribing Mussorgsky's and Beethoven's “Aus Göthe's Faust” for the benefit of Chaliapin. The circumstances in which the transcriptions were completed, and the individual features of the two, are narrated and described with a lavish amount of detail in a recent, monumental monograph.<sup>23</sup> Suffice it here to point out Stravinsky's different attitude toward the works of his late colleagues: a distancing from Beethoven, and a proximity to Mussorgsky, the originator of a tradition of which he felt a part.

Orchestrating Beethoven's song, Stravinsky supposed that Beethoven thought of turning it into an orchestral piece, perhaps in the frame of a larger *Faust* project. Therefore, Stravinsky chose a typical early nineteenth-century orchestra, and treated it accordingly. Obviously, he was aware of the time—exactly one century—that had elapsed; therefore, he infused some pigments of his taste in it, making the woodwinds stand out in the strophes, and the tutti only in the refrain.

The reading of Mussorgsky's song shows, on the contrary, a tendency toward chamber-like treatment of an orchestra, the only tutti of which is heard on the first chord.<sup>24</sup> In the next eighty measures, Stravinsky's *Песня о блохе* (“*Pesnia o blokhe*” [“Song of the Flea”]) sheds the light of individual timbres on the different passages of the setting; again, the woodwinds are given a prominent role, but Mussorgsky's evocation of the harps in the arpeggio sections offers the young orchestrator an opportunity for combining the sound of his beloved woodwinds with the potentiality of the plucked instruments. The renunciation of the sonority of a full orchestra appears all the more remarkable when considering that Stravinsky could rely on the voice of Chaliapin; coping with the need to transfer Mussorgsky's vocal line one octave lower, from Leonova's contralto to Chaliapin's bass range, Stravinsky could have favored a heavier orchestral sound. The fact that with his light, at times heterophonic, orchestration the young pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov looked in a new direction is eloquent proof of his desire to continue, not to restore, a tradition: a great tradition of which he strongly considered himself an heir.

In summary, it is evident that the “*Es war einmal ein König*” and “*Es war eine Ratt*” ignited the creativity of a handful of composers in a variety of ways. This proves the plurality of perspectives from which one can look at Goethe's lines and, in general, at the chaotic events in “*Auerbachs Keller*.” The most surprising aspect is, by far, the limited impact of some textual suggestions on the work of the various composers. Kreutzer alone exploited the “Spanish” hint offered by the lines that introduce “*Es war einmal ein König*”; similarly,



only Berlioz—possibly with the help of Nerval, who transformed the “odd” seven-line *Lutherstrophe* into a regular pair of quatrains—profited from the parodic attitude displayed by Goethe’s choices in terms of structure: musically, Luther’s paunch and its physiognomic implications remained virtually unexploited in the settings that appeared in the nineteenth century. If a process of decontextualization from the dramaturgy of *Faust* is not surprising in this series of settings, the exclusive focus of the music on specific lines or words shows a cultural blindness whose roots are not difficult to trace. No major composer, not even Berlioz or Schumann, dared to plan a complete setting of the tragedy; therefore, those who concentrated on Goethe’s songs treated their lines following the rules codified by the musical tradition in which they were born and educated. Fortunately, toward the end of this chain, an untamed genius such as the composer of Борис Годунов (*Boris Godunov*) decided to abandon the tradition of song and set Goethe’s text as an operatic scene, regardless of whether an opera was to be composed. Sometimes masterworks blossom unexpectedly on the threshold of genres, or at culturally crowded junctions: Mussorgsky’s setting of “Es war einmal ein König” is a remarkable example of this fascinating phenomenon.

## NOTES

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, ed. Albrecht Schöne, vol. 7.1, *Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 2073–336; Goethe, *Faust I & II*, ed. and trans. Stuart Atkins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 2073–336, henceforth F.
2. The name of Beelzebub derives from that of the Philistines’ Lord of Flies, Baal-Zebub (2 Kings, 1:2).
3. Horst Joachim Frank, *Handbuch der deutschen Strophenformen* (Tübingen: Francke, 1993), 543–48.
4. *Ibid.*, 573–80.
5. Johann Peter Eckermann, *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, ed. Christoph Michel with Hans Grütters, vol. 39, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1999), 305–6.
6. *Die Stammbücher Beethovens und der Babette Koch*, in *Faksimile mit Einleitung und Erläuterungen*, ed. Max Braubach (Bonn: Beethoven-Haus, 1995), 19.
7. *Ludwig van Beethoven: Thematisch-bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis*, ed. Kurt Dorfmueller, Norbert Gertsch, and Julia Ronge (Munich: G. Henle, 2014), 1:524–27. Also see Peter Höyng, “Mephistopheles’ Flohlied Meets Beethoven’s Devilish Sting,” *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 83.2 (2014): 77–88.
8. Ludwig van Beethoven, *Sechs Gesänge mit Begleitung des Pianoforte* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1810). The first half of the collection is entirely devoted to settings of texts by Goethe: Mignon’s “Kennst du das Land,” “Neue Liebe neues Leben,” and “Aus Göthe’s Faust.” Also see Ludwig van Beethoven, *Drei Lieder nach Gedichten von Goethe*, ed. Helga Lühning (Bonn: Beethoven-Haus, [1999]).
9. Helga Lühning, “Drei Goethe-Lieder von Beethoven,” in *Drei Lieder nach Gedichten von Goethe*, 35.
10. A similar accuracy is not found in the Reißig settings (op. 75, nos. 5–6), where the text of the ensuing strophes is entered by a different hand. Beethoven’s care in transcribing



- Goethe's text is documented by the appropriate placing of punctuation marks, corresponding to those of the 1808 edition of *Faust*.
11. The gesture is explicitly requested in the autograph. See Beethoven, [“Aus Göthe's Faust”], in Lühning, *Drei Lieder*, 12.
  12. Goethe to Carl Friedrich Zelter, Karlsbad, September 2, 1812, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Von 1812 bis zu Christianes Tod, Napoleonische Zeit. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche vom 10. Mai 1805 bis 6. Juni 1816*, ed. Rose Unterberger, vol. 34.2, *Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 100. Translations by the author, unless otherwise noted.
  13. Johann Christoph Kienlen, *Lieder aus Göthe's Faust* (Berlin: Schlesinger, [1817?]).
  14. Goethe's enthusiasm resounds in a letter to Karl Ludwig von Knebel, Weimar, April 2, 1814, in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Briefe*, vol. 24.4, *Werke* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987), 213.
  15. Derived from the full score published shortly before, the piano-vocal reduction appeared at the same time as the *Scenen aus Goethe's Faust in 8 litographirten Bildern*, to which the preface implicitly refers. Some of these leaves were originally only pictures (by Hensel, Zimmermann, and others) of Schinkel's decorations for the scenic performance of *Faust* in the royal castle Monbijou. Anton Radziwill, *Compositionen zu Göthe's Faust* (Berlin: Trautwein, [1835]), ii; Detlef Altenburg, “Fürst Radziwills *Compositionen zu Göthe's Faust*. Zur Geschichte der Schauspielmusik im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Festschrift Christoph-Hellmut Mahling zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Axel Beer, Kristina Pfarr, and Wolfgang Ruf (Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1997), 1:28–29.
  16. Conradin Kreutzer, *Gesänge aus Goethe's Faust* (Vienna: Trentsensky & Vieweg, [1836]). Thomas Seedorf, “Faust—hausmusikalisch: Conradin Kreutzers *Gesänge aus Goethe's Faust*,” in *Faust in Wandel: Faust-Vertonungen vom 19. bis 21. Jahrhundert*, eds. Panja Mücke and Christiane Wiesenfeldt (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2014), 42–43.
  17. Hans Rudolf Jung, ed., *Es war einmal ein König: Goethes Flohlied in der Vertonung von Franz Liszt* (Weimar: Nationale Forschungs- und Gedenkstätten der klassischen deutschen Literatur, 1986).
  18. Franz Liszt, “Studentenlied, aus Göthes Faust,” in *Vierstimmige Männergesänge* (Mainz: Schott, [1843]), 1.
  19. “Es war einmal ein König” is part of a collection of six transcriptions of Beethoven's Goethe songs published by Liszt for the centennial celebrations of 1849, *Beethoven's Lieder für das Pianoforte* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1849).
  20. The knowledge of Gounod's serenade is particularly evident in the shape of Mussorgsky's refrain. In light of his attention to phonic elements, though, his “analytic” setting of the words of the piece is distinctive.
  21. Needless to say, in doing this, Mussorgsky could play on his own experience: see Varlaam's song in the scene of Борис Годунов set in the inn on the Lithuanian border.
  22. Mussorgsky's use of the refrain in his setting is similar to that of the Promenade in his *Картинки с выставки*: after an initial statement, the appearances of the latter become gradually irregular, and are then overcome in the development of the work.
  23. Arkady Klimovitsky, ed., *Instrumentovki: “Pesn' o bloche” M. Musorgskogo. “Pesn' o bloche” L. Betchovena* (Saint Petersburg: Muzykal'naiia škola, 2003).
  24. This choice is indicative of Stravinsky's critical reading of Mussorgsky's work: in fact, the silence prescribed to all stringed instruments on the final scream on “душить!” an exclamation sustained by woodwinds and brass playing fortissimo, discloses Stravinsky's intention of creating a modern, acid sound, far removed from the boldness of a late nineteenth-century orchestra playing tutti.



## REFERENCES

- Altenburg, Detlef. "Fürst Radziwills *Compositionen zu Göthe's Faust*. Zur Geschichte der Schauspielmusik im 19. Jahrhundert." In *Festschrift Christoph-Hellmut Mahling zum 65. Geburtstag*, vol. 1, edited by Axel Beer, Kristina Pfarr, and Wolfgang Ruf, 25–45. Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1997.
- Beethoven, Ludwig van. *Sechs Gesaenge mit Begleitung des Pianoforte* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1810).
- Beethoven, Ludwig van. *Drei Lieder nach Gedichten von Goethe*. Edited by Helga Lühning. Bonn: Beethoven-Haus, [1999].
- Berlioz, Hector. *Huit scènes de Faust*. Edited by Julian Rushton. Vol. 5, *New Edition of the Complete Works*. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1970.
- Eckermann, Johann Peter. *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*. Edited by Christoph Michel with Hans Grüters. Vol. 39, *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Sämtliche Werke*. Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1999.
- Frank, Horst Joachim. *Handbuch der deutschen Strophenformen*. Tübingen: Francke, 1993.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Briefe*. Vol. 24.4, *Werke*. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1987.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust*. Edited by Albrecht Schöne. Vol. 7.1, *Sämtliche Werke*. Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust I & II*. Edited and translated by Stuart Atkins. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Von 1812 bis zu Christianes Tod. Napoleonische Zeit. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche vom 10. Mai 1805 bis 6. Juni 1816*. Edited by Rose Unterberger. Vol. 34.2, *Sämtliche Werke*. Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994.
- Höyng, Peter. "Mephistopheles' Flohlied Meets Beethoven's Devilish Sting." *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 83.2 (2014): 77–88.
- Jung, Hans Rudolf, ed. *Es war einmal ein König: Goethes Flohlied in der Vertonung von Franz Liszt*. Weimar: Nationale Forschungs- und Gedenkstätten der klassischen deutschen Literatur, 1986.
- Kienlen, Johann Christoph. *Lieder aus Göthe's Faust* (Berlin: Schlesinger [1817?]).
- Klimovitsky, Arkady, ed. *Instrumentovki: "Pesn' o bloche" M. Musorgskogo. "Pesn' o bloche" L. Betchovena*. Saint Petersburg: Muzykal'naiia škola, 2003.
- Kreutzer, Conradin. *Gesänge aus Goethe's Faust*. Vienna: Trentsensky & Vieweg, [1836].
- Liszt, Franz. *Beethoven's Lieder für das Pianoforte*. Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1849.
- Liszt, Franz. *Vierstimmige Männergesänge*. Mainz: Schott, [1843].
- Ludwig van Beethoven: Thematisch-bibliographisches Werkverzeichnis*, vol. 1. Edited by Kurt Dorf Müller, Norbert Gertsch, and Julia Ronge. Munich: G. Henle, 2014.
- Lühning, Helga. "Drei Goethe-Lieder von Beethoven." In *Ludwig van Beethoven, Drei Lieder nach Gedichten von Goethe*, edited by Helga Lühning, 33–47. Bonn: Beethoven-Haus, [1999].
- Mussorgsky, Modest. *Песня Мефистофеля въ погребке Ауэрбаха*. *Sämtliche Lieder und Gesänge für eine Singstimme mit Pianoforte-Begleitung*, no. 19. Paris-Leipzig: W. Bessel, [1911].
- Radziwill, Anton. *Compositionen zu Göthe's Faust*. Berlin: Trautwein, [1835].
- Seedorf, Thomas. "Faust—hausmusikalisch: Conradin Kreutzers *Gesänge aus Goethe's Faust*." In *Faust in Wandel: Faust-Vertonungen vom 19. bis 21. Jahrhundert*, edited by Panja Mücke and Christiane Wiesenfeldt, 41–53 (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2014).
- Die Stammbücher Beethovens und der Babette Koch, in Faksimile mit Einleitung und Erläuterungen*. Edited by Max Braubach. Bonn: Beethoven-Haus, 1995.
- Wagner, Richard. *Klavierlieder*. Vol. 17, *Sämtliche Werke*. Edited by Egon Voss. Mainz: Schott, 1976.

