

BOITO'S MEFISTOFELE

Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele* with a massive chord, played fortissimo (1 minute 25 seconds in – see QR code below); horns blare in a heroic salute to the Creator, followed by a feathering of strings, harp, and flute, and finally, a crashing orchestral body-slam signals a titanic, celestial struggle. “The great rolling crashes and echoes of brazen sound in the prelude,” George Bernard Shaw wrote, “transport us into illimitable space at once...” Listening to these colossal pillars of sound reminds me of the cold, expansive brass from Act 2 Scene 1 of Verdi's five-act *Don Carlos*, which premiered just a year earlier (and, perhaps, provided the young Boito with some inspiration). The prologue is so unique, so evocative, that I'd love to see it played more in local concert halls (BSO, I'm looking at you!).

At 10:37 emerges a plucking of strings, suggesting twitchy minions hopping, sparkle, around every corner (a la the obsequious servants to Hades in Disney's *Hercules*, Pain and Panic). Mefistofele climbs a ladder, alone, to the stage, and belts out a mocking salute to the lord – AVE SIGNORI // HAIL MY LORD. There's a lot of Iago in Mefisto's rhetoric here, much like Milton's Satan (whom, ironically for the librettist of *Otello*, we see echoed in Shakespeare's *Othello*). **Boito gives the orchestra a dark, beautiful, irreverent waltz at 12:41**, rocking along with Mefistofele's tirade. **An earth-shaking chorale concludes the prologue at 24:40**, which frankly sucked the air right out of my lungs. The gleaming white, gold, and red set, draped with gauzy linens, goes suddenly out, save for tiny candles held by vaguely ominous cherubim. One is left with the impression of smallness before something impossibly large.

Let's talk about Sam Ramey, the great bass who plays Mefistofele in this production. Ramey was the greatest singing actor of his time to play any Mefisto role in recorded history (predecessors include Fyodor Chaliapin and Norman Treigle; one recent successor is Christian Van Horn, who graces the cover of this zine). Ramey has a lithe, dancer's body, which must have been a dream for the director. He moves with such grace, even when rolling around on the stage in the spectacular finale. This is to say nothing of his voice, in excellent form here, syrupy at times, biting and metallic at others, and always inflected with the best musicianship, bending and breaking and interpolating notes with aplomb. The planets aligned in this production, including a set for the prologue and epilogue that is nothing short of breathtaking (the costume design, too, is impeccable; in Act 2, Ramey wears a pink and red seersucker suit with matching top hat)

Mefisto's seduction begins with his iconic aria, “**Son lo spirito che nega**” // “**I am the spirit who negates and destroys**,” at 46:45; accompanied by a storm of strings and woodwinds. Boito wanted to write a through-written opera but couldn't help himself, all the while poking fun at his own expense (whistles being the traditional sign of audience displeasure). **At 56:30 – amidst another volley of horns, Faust is hoisted away by a giant golden tassel**, to the spontaneous applause from the audience. **At 1:19:30 comes the showstopper**, “**ecco il mondo**” (SEE PAGE 5 FOR A DEEP DIVE).

Carson's production does a good job of carrying some of Boito's dramaturgical dead weight. For example, in Act 1, Scene 2 (at 41:38 in the recording), **the camera, in maximum cheesy '80s fashion, fades from a wide shot of the whole, darkened stage**, to a square of ultramarine sky, pin-pricked with stars, where our eye descends in a slow pan the length of a hilariously gargantuan telescope – perhaps a commentary on the occasional pompousness of science. Carson amplifies the impact of the chorus – by now shrieking and waving hysterically – by placing **Mefistofele as its demonic conductor, tailcoat and all (1:26:06)**. The shadows created by the footlights give the impression of inferno.

Act 4 – 1:54:42. THE ENDING!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I won't even bother trying to explain or analyze or froth with enthusiasm over the last four minutes of this opera. Please, watch for yourself!

There are serious flaws in *Mefistofele*. The writing for Faust and Margherita is mostly inert, and the drama drags at various points. It does make one wonder whether Boito's critics were right after all – that he was a second-rate composer, a cheap imitation of Wagner (although many, at the time, had never heard a note of his music), and that he should stick to literary matters (he did, to all of our benefit, penning immortal libretti for Verdi's *Otello* and *Falstaff*). Compare, for example, Verdi's mastery of baller-chorus in the “*Fuoco di gioia*” from *Otello*, with **whatever is happening 34 minutes in** (OK, maybe that's punching down). Verdi, perhaps chafing at the “new school” of Italian musicians rebelling against bel canto tradition, said of the creator of *Mefistofele* that “he aspires to originality but succeeds only at being strange.” (Later, Verdi would come to love and respect Boito as a friend, artist, and collaborator.)

Certainly Boito had talent as a composer (his genius as a literary man and librettist is beyond question). The term “signature significance” comes to mind, coined by baseball genius Bill James to describe an outlier performance that predicts future excellence despite a small sample (i.e., “if he did it once, he could do it again!”). While *Mefistofele* was panned when it premiered in 1868, Boito wound up revising and re-staging it in 1875 to great success, and the piece remains a showcase for great basses – my favorite in the operatic Faust canon.



Boito's *Mefistofele*,
San Francisco Opera, 1989



Mefistofele libretto
(English-Italian)

GOUNOD'S FAUST



Gounod's *Faust*
Opera de Lille, 2025

Someone help me love Gounod's *Faust*. It is littered with fine moments. There is plenty to love in this production, staged last year at Opera Lille, the tenor playing Faust (Julien Dran) has a shimmering golden voice, light and Mozartean. A perfect vibrato to my ear. The makeup on Faust in the beginning is so good. Gnarly. Convincingly decrepit. The star of this show, however, is Jerome Bouillier, the bass-baritone playing Méphistophélès. From the first blazing high notes, one is hooked. A sleazy Satan! A clever subversion of our expectation of a dashing, debonair devil. As one YouTube put it, the director (Denis Podalydès) extends the devil's power by surrounding him with ghastly-looking silent minions. At **2 hours 36 min, Boutillier's velvet bass-baritone shines darkly through, accompanied by organ, in a chilling, mocking hymn.** Throughout, a spinning dancefloor mimics the whirling quality of a waltz. At 56:32, for example, the dancing, combined with some exquisitely confectionery conducting, feels as though I'm strutting in some 19th century ballroom. At the end, the dancers literally dance themselves to death – a nice morbid glaze to an otherwise saccharine moment. Back to my griping. **The melody at 1:07:15 sounds like flattened bel canto.** By the end, I realized that this rotating wheel suggests our helplessness against the inexorability of time: A wonderful set, inspired singing, and overall great production that had me rethink this staple in the repertoire.

BERLIOZ'S LA DAMNATION DE FAUST

If there's one moment you should check out in Hector Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust*, it's the **Hungarian March (11:15)**. Shaw wrote that George Bernard Shaw wrote that he would "charge out and capture Trafalgar Square single-handed" if it lasted one minute more. With Berlioz, to an even greater extent than Verdi, it seems, the orchestra is the main character. In the Met's 2008 production (sadly not available on YouTube), the frenetic leaps and bounds around 19 minutes in sounds hysterical and unhinged. The gridded set, wonderfully populated by soldiers marching

→ + 1:11:06: SUSAN
11 GRIFFITHS STUFF A WONDERFUL

"THE DEVIL YOU KNOW..."

Introduction

The following is a rundown of three productions of the Faust tale. This is a triumph of the BAD – a reminder that, sometimes, the best things in life are the most deliciously evil. We will follow Boito's *Mefistofele*, primarily, but I'll also touch on Gounod's *Faust* – the lesser opera of the three, in my opinion – and Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust*, a wonderful spectacle for orchestra.

My intention is to walk you through musical manifestations of hell, evil, mischief, power, and fate. Look for **bolded sections** which lead you to QR codes to the various performances. Each link will take you to a free, full performance on YouTube, but don't feel the need to watch the whole thing to get the gist.

(Note: unfortunately, English subtitles are not available for the Boito or Berlioz; however, I've included QR codes to the English-Italian libretti if you'd like to follow along.)

Buckle up, and enjoy the ride...if you dare 🍷

(Illustration: Detail from *The Last Judgement*, Fra Angelico, c. 1425)

CRITIC'S

CORNER

in reverse and, ultimately, men sitting at desks, reminded me of humdrum life in a modern office, and had me wondering about a FAUST opera set amidst cubicles. At 1:45:00 the tempo accelerates in a rhythmic, coital pumping – “for him my bosom doth forever cry out...oh if I might clasp him, and keep him ever mine” – finally expanding and dissolving. Check out a young, very young, Jonas Kauffman at 1:52:00, dark and ringing, who transfigures himself into an image of the cross after his mournful aria. At 1:56:00 Berlioz sends us with his galloping strings straight to hell. Thrilling stuff. As they descend into hell, Satan whipping on his frothing steeds, Faust is “transfixed with terror...”; the chorus of the damned, explosive, trilling, is in total thrall to the unending night. In the blaring horns and crashing gymbals, one sees a shaking, wrathful, undeniably sensual affinity between composer and subject – like the poet Milton before him, in sympathy, if not league, with the devil.



Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust*
English-French Libretto



La Berlioz's *La damnation de Faust*
La Monnaie, Brussels, 2002

STRAVINSKY'S
THE RAKE'S PROGRESS

A final note: if you can, check out *The Rake's Progress*, by Igor Stravinsky, with a libretto by WH Auden. I don't have the space to discuss this piece here, but a masterpiece that deserves close attention in the canon of Faust interpretations.



Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*
Aix-en-Provence, 1992



OPERA GLOSSARY

(COURTESY
OF OPERA
VISION)

Aria (air): vocal or instrumental melody, sung with or without accompaniment, it represents the moment when the action stops and allows the character to

Bel canto: literally the Italian for 'beautiful singing', *bel canto* is a richly decorated style, which demands great vocal virtuosity and flawless technique from its interpreters. Appearing towards the end of the 17th century, it remained popular till late in the 19th century. Famous *bel canto* composers are Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti.

Coloratura: much elaborated melody, characteristic of the Italian *bel canto* or of the Queen of the Night's arias in *The Magic Flute* (Mozart, 1791). By extension,

Leitmotiv: musical theme (melody, chord, rhythm) associated with a character, an idea, a state of mind or a place. The German Romantic composer Richard Wagner used them in all his great music dramas, not only to recall a theme but also to show how it was modified during the course of the plot.

Libretto (book): text of an opera, literally 'little book' in Italian. It is most often written by an author or poet (called the *librettist*), sometimes by the composer himself.

Recitative: phrases sung freely, in a tone closer to declamation than to song. In opera, the recitative often serves to recount events and to advance the plot, whereas the aria puts the accent on the emotions.

Vérisme: This term indicates a style of Italian opera dealing with 'real life' and social problems. *Cavalleria rusticana* (Mascagni) and *Pagliacci* (Leoncavallo) are perfect examples. Others composers writing in the style include: Giordano and Puccini.



ECCO

IL

MONDO

Ecco il mondo,
Vuoto e tondo,
S'alza, scende,
Balza e splende.
Fa carole
intorno al sole,
Trema, rugge,
dà e distrugge,
Ora sterile or fecondo.
Ecco il mondo.
Sul suo grosso
Antico dosso
V'è una schiatta
E sozza e matta,

Fiera, vile, ria, sottile,
Che ad ogn'ora si divora
Dalla cima sino al fondo
Del reo mondo.
Fola vana è a lei Satana,
Riso e scherno
E' a lei l'inferno,
Scherno e riso il Paradiso.
Oh per Dio!
Che or rido anch'io,
Oh per Dio! ecc.
Nel pensare ciò
Che le ascondo.
Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!
Ecco il mondo!

Here is the world,
Empty and round.
It rises, falls,
Dances, glitters,
Whirls about
Under the sun,
Trembles, roars,
Creates, destroys,
Now barren, now fecund-
Such is the world.
Upon its huge
And rounded back
Dwells an unclean
And mad race,
Wicked, subtle,
Proud, vile,
Which forever
Devours itself,
From the depths
to the heights
Of the guilty world.
This proud
And foolish race,
Amid vanities
And orgies,
Laughs, exults,
Merrily, heedlessly,
Wealthy, proud,
And swells up
On the foul globe!
Here is the world!!!

FROM "MEFISTOFELE"
BY ARRIGO BOITO

Christmas lights festoon a demonic set bathed in red light as party-hatted minions dance and gather in rapture, freezing upon the stentorian tones of their lord: "Room, make room, for Mefistofele, bow to your king." What I love most about "Ecco il Mondo" is that the duality of the devil is wonderfully and memorably illustrated in the music: the rhythmic yet expansive phrasing; flute floating in rapt wonder; the devil, despising the earth and its populace, all the while proud of his domain. It begins with a cavernous "ha-ha-ha...ha-ha-ha" (interpolated, I think, by Ramey) and the devil, in delicious self-gratification, proceeds to delight in enumerating the evils of the world: "Upon its huge and rounded back/dwells an unclean/and mad race/wicked, subtle/proud, vile..." — interspersed with trumpets, suggesting the ultimate rightness and nobility of Mefistofele's litany. As the passage comes to a close, Mefstro is overcome with unhinged triumph — HA HA HA HA HA, HA!!!!!!!!!!!!!! THIS IS THE WORLD. Yes yes yes!!!!!!!!!!!! —

POPI!

LISTEN

To

THIS



LISTEN WITH ME!
SAMUEL RAMEY,
"ECCO IL MONDO"

San Francisco Opera

FIRE CHIEF

SAYS:

GOOD LUCK!

THERE'S

NO WAY

OUT!!

MAP OF HELL



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RANDOM, BUT

INTERESTING...

Seven members of Clinton's Planning & Zoning Commission (PZC) held a prohibited, private meeting in December 2016 to discuss a change in leadership and at which pending applications, including the proposed CVS, may have been discussed.

"I went to these people and all I was asking for is transparency," [Then-PZC Chair] Bousquet said in reference to the seven commission members at the illegal meeting. "As elected officials, it is our duty to know the laws."

Bousquet [added that] he knows "for a fact that the CVS was at least mentioned," noting, "It could have been someone just saying 'hey don't talk about CVS.'"

The controversial proposal for a CVS at the corner of Hull and Main Streets was denied by the PZC on Feb. 13. Should the developer contest the decision in court, the commission's unnoticed, unrecorded meeting in advance of the decision is likely to be discussed.

[Current PZC Chair Michael] Knudsen did not respond to emails seeking comment at press time.

- Eric O'Connell, from "PZC Off-Book Meeting Causes Concern in Clinton," The Harbor News, 4/4/2017

"IS THIS THE REGION, THIS THE SOIL, THE CLIME," SAID THEN THE LOST ARCHANGEL, "THIS THE SEAT THAT WE MUST CHANGE FOR HEAVEN, THIS MOVING FROM GOOD FOR THAT CELESTIAL LIGHT? BE IT SO, SINCE HE WHO NOW IS SOVEREIGN CAN DISPOSE AND BID WHAT SHALL BE RIGHT: FARTHEST FROM HIM IS BEST WHAM REASON HATH EQUALLED, FORCE HATH MADE STURGE ABOVE HIS EQUALS. FAREWELL, HAPPY FIELDS, WHERE JOY FOR EVER DWELLS. 'HAIL, HORRORS, 'HAIL, INFERNAL WORLD. 'AND THOU, PROFOUNDEST WELL, RECEIVE THY NEW POSSESSOR - ONE WHO BRINGS A MIND NOT TO BE CHANGED BY PLACE OR TIME. THE MIND IS ITS OWN PLACE, AND IN ITSELF CAN MAKE A HEAVEN OF HELL, A HELL OF HEAVEN. WHAT MATTER WHERE, IF I BE STILL THE SAME, AND WHAT I SHOULD BE, ALL BUT LESS THAN HE WHOM THUNDER HATH MADE GREATER? HEAR AT LEAST WE SHALL BE FREE; TH' ALMIGHTY HATH NOT BUILT HERE FOR HIS ENVY, WILL NOT DRIVE US HENCE; HERE WE MAY REIGN SECURE; AND, IN MY CHOICE, TO REIGN IS WORTH AMBITION, THOUGH IN HELL; BETTER TO REIGN IN HELL THAN SERVE IN HEAVEN."

- SATAN, FROM
"PARADISE LOST,"
JOHN MILTON



"MERPHISTOPHELES FLYING,"
EUGÈNE DELACROIX, 1828



ARTIST: MARK FREDRICKSON

UPCOMING SHOWS

Washington National Opera
American Opera Initiative
(Debut of three one-act operas)
January 24th, 2026

Metropolitan Opera
I Puritani, Bellini
Met Live in HD (The Charles)
January 10th, 2026, 1pm

*The Amazing Adventures of
Kavalier & Clay*, Bates
Met Live in HD
January 24th, 2026, 1pm (Cinemark Towson)
January 28th, 1pm, 630pm (Cinemark Towson)

Opera Delaware
Studio Series: *Service Provider/Pagliacci*
January 23rd & 25th, 2026

"REMOVED THE SEWERS"
FOLLOWED RAPS, 1878

As I write this, Washington National Opera revealed that it's leaving the Kennedy Center. Per the *New York Times*: "Opera leaders said the decision to leave was in response to a drop in attendance and a decline in donor contributions during the president's second term, as well as an escalating number of artists who

~~FIRE~~

have refused to appear at the Kennedy Center since Mr. Trump's name was added to the building last month." Good for them. To paraphrase my wife, Sophie, organized protests of this kind actually serve the cause, as opposed to individual boycotting, which protects little more than feelings of virtue. It's the kind of statement people will pay *more* to support, rather than pay *less* to avoid. Sometimes, the Devil loses, after all.

In this issue, you'll find a lithograph by Eugene Delacroix (pg. 3), an excerpt from Milton's *Paradise Lost* (pg. 4), a spotlight on my favorite satanic music (pgs. 5-6), a review of three of the best operatic Faust interpretations (pgs. 7-13), an Opera Glossary (pg. 13), a message from your friendly Fire Chief, with artistic support from Sophie Ziner (pg. 14), a too-real "Random, but Interesting" from our in-house reporter, Eric O'Connell (pg. 15-16), Upcoming Shows (pg. 17), "Principles of an Anti-Elite Opera" from Yuval Sharon (pg. 18), and an eerie back cover by photographer Dylan Stratton.

Sit back, relax, and enjoy the (very hot) ride!

Yours Truly,

~~EDITORS~~

HELL

LISTA OPERA ARTISTS

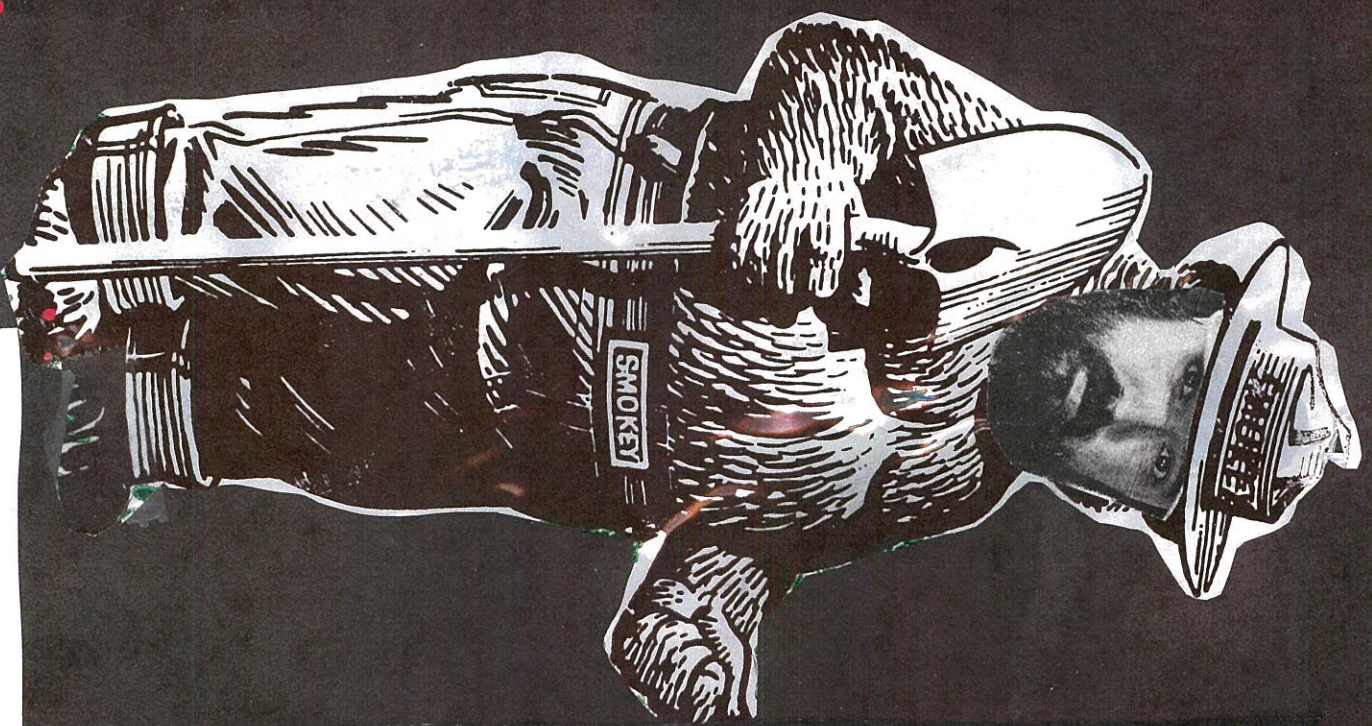
Fire Chief
2



17

LETTER

FROM



CONTACT: OPERANOISES@GMAIL.COM

Dear Reader,

You've been doomscrolling for an hour but you just can't stop. Dishes piled up in the sink, and you just can't clean them (what's another episode of *The Wire* in the grand scheme of things?). Taxes unfilled. Laundry unfolded. Freezer pizza – definitely opened. Hell can be a lot of things. Most of us in the West are privileged to observe, at a safe remove, conflict rolling other parts of the world. Yet, like trauma, Hell can take a lot of forms. Succumbing to temptation, for example – continuing to behave in ways that feel good now and hurt later, “Robbing Peter to pay Paul.” In this issue of *Opera Noises*, we call this a “Faustian Bargain.”

The Faust Tale is an old one, and, in the interest of time and space and best serving the music, I won't talk about plot points much in these pages. Here's the gist, from the Royal Ballet and Opera Website: “At its heart, the story is about a man, Faust, who makes a pact with the devil in exchange for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures – only to find himself trapped by his desires and eventually damned.” We can think of a million examples of this, from the famous – I mean, what was Tom Brady really up to all those years? – to the mundane – do you really know what you're doing when you “accept cookies”?

PRINCIPLES OF ANTI-ELITE OPERA

- *Exclusivity* is not a virtue; *inclusivity* is.
- Acknowledging that conventional spectatorship breeds acceptance of the status quo, newer works must challenge and avoid well-known musical and dramatic conventions in favor of new directions, new sounds, and new voices.
- “Dumbing down” insults the audience. The opera's creators and producers don't rely on any assumed knowledge of the spectator.
- In classic works, historical indecencies are not relativized or apologized for but actively called out and revised.
- In newer works, the opera's subject matter originates from “the ground up.” No celebration of privilege or power.
- Translation and engagement are encouraged; condescension and arrogance—toward the artists and members of the audience—are shamed.
- Rather than schooling the audience on correct and incorrect modes of spectatorship, the opera house is hospitable and inviting, encouraging the spectator to make the experience their own.
- In the lobbies and on the stage, opera is actively decoupled from fantasies of economic advancement. Instead, the possibility of social and spiritual advancement—accessible to everyone—can once again become opera's true aspirational character.
- A mindfulness around the use of natural resources must inform every choice, from the audience experience to the rehearsal conditions to the material creation of a production. Where can our taking be offset by giving?
- Perform opera outside the opera house. In parking garages, in escalator corridors, in park grounds, and in automobiles. Opera can happen anywhere.

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From "A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF OPERA" BY YUVAL SHARON

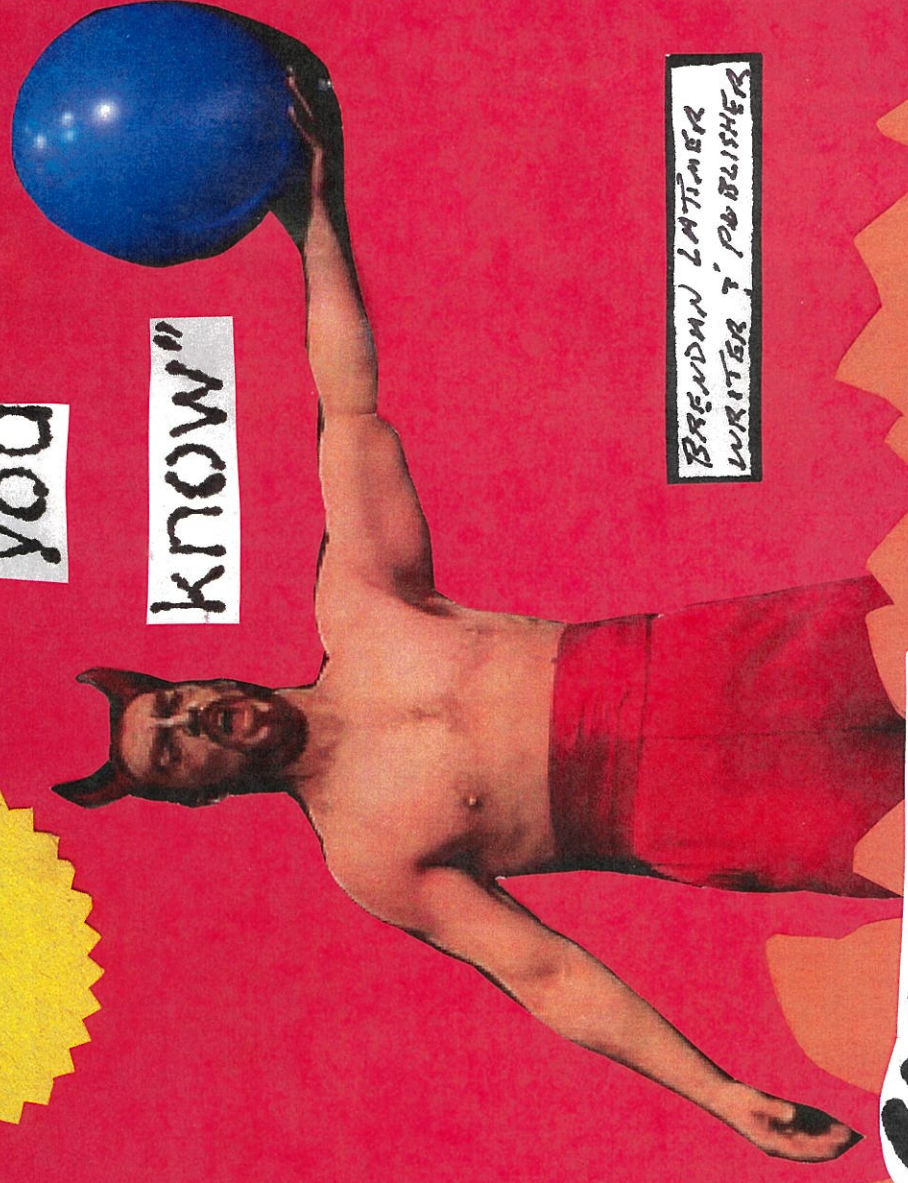
FREE

"the devil
you
know"

SPECIAL
EDITION

A POETRICS KITCHEN PUBLICATION

BRENDAN LATIMER
WRITER & PUBLISHER



Opera Noises

Noises

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"MY BABY HAND,"
DYLAN STRATT, 2025

DR. STRATT