

A painting of a landscape with tall, dark cypress trees in the foreground and middle ground. The sky is a mix of purple, pink, and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. In the lower left, a small boat with two figures is on a body of water. The overall style is impressionistic and atmospheric.

GLUCK

*Orphée et
Eurydice*

Lyric

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From Orfeo to Orphée: Evolution of a Masterpiece

By Roger Pines



UPPER BELVEDERE, VIENNA



ROBERT KUSEL

Classic and modern visions of Orpheus and Eurydice: in painting (Anselm Feuerbach, 1869) and onstage (David Daniels and Isabel Bayrakdarian at Lyric, 2005/06).

What do composer Christoph Willibald Gluck, painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, filmmaker Jean Cocteau, and playwright Tennessee Williams have in common? An attraction to the myth of Orpheus.

One can hardly blame those incomparable creators and countless others in a multitude of media, for that name belongs to one of the most touching figures in the history of Western civilization. Orpheus is a hero who has endured and, even today, retains his power to move us to tears, just as he did the Furies of the Underworld. He is, of course, a symbol of the glory of music itself, but he also embodies devoted love and – in Gluck’s opera, especially – the capability of that love to change the course of a life.

In opera, it’s Gluck’s depiction of Orpheus that we know best. The German composer’s achievement is stupendous by any standards, but doubly so when we consider that *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera* lists close to 60 other “Orpheus operas.” Stylistically they encompass the early Baroque (many works, most prominently Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*), the rivetingly contemporary (Darius Milhaud’s *Les malheurs d’Orphée*, Harrison Birtwistle’s *The Mask of Orpheus*), and everything in between. Gluck, however, stands alone for both the mesmerizing loveliness and the heartrending eloquence that he brought to this

immortal tale.

For those of us who explored Greek myths in our youth (courtesy of such storytellers as Robert Graves and Edith Hamilton in their fabulous myth anthologies), surely no character made a more profound impression than Orpheus. We were deeply touched by his plight and devastated by its sad end. Unlike Gluck’s opera, in mythology Eros/Cupid/Love didn’t restore Eurydice to life. Instead, poor Orpheus returned from Hades to lament her death, wandering in utter misery. The Maenads – wild women who followed Dionysus – resented that Orpheus paid no attention to them. They caught him without his all-soothing lyre and tore him limb from limb. He was given a proper burial by the nine Muses, goddesses of literature, science, and the arts. Orpheus’s soul was transported to Elysium, where he was united with his beloved Eurydice.

On those occasions when Orpheus did have his lyre in hand, he gave the world music of a sort that had never been experienced before. His voice and his songs penetrated to any listener’s heart, and their beauty provided unique joy to all ears. Of course, it wasn’t only human beings who were entranced by him: Orpheus’s music was even able to tame Cerberus, the fearsome, multi-headed dog who guarded the gates of Hades, as well as the Furies.



In 1950 the legendary writer/director Jean Cocteau filmed one of the great works of postwar French cinema, *Orphée*, a contemporary version of the Orpheus myth that starred Jean Marais in the title role. Pictured here with Marais is Maria Casarès, who portrayed Death, embodied onscreen by a mysterious princess.

From the very earliest years of opera's development as an art form, it was inevitable that Orpheus would attract composers. In the work that scholars consider the first surviving opera, Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* (1600), the title character may be Orpheus's wife, but he remains the protagonist. By 1607, when an aristocratic audience heard the first truly great opera, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, the hero's name rightly took its place in the title. In Peri's version Orpheus and Eurydice return together to earth and live happily ever after. In Monteverdi's, Orfeo accepts the god Apollo's invitation to dwell in heaven, where he'll be able to behold Eurydice among the stars.

Do elements of the Orpheus/Eurydice story exist in other mythologies? Prof. Wendy Doniger of The University of Chicago, whose work has significantly enhanced international understanding of mythology, points to Lot's wife in the Book of Genesis, who looks back at the doomed city of Sodom and is turned into a pillar of salt. Doniger mentions, too, that "there is also the story of bringing Persephone, daughter of the goddess Demeter, up from the dead. She's brought back for six months of every year. There are other successful fetchings of people from the Underworld – Savitri in Hindu mythology, who retrieves her husband from death, for example. By the power of their virtue, their heroism, people in mythology bring

their spouses from death."

The great message of Gluck's opera is that true love triumphs over death: if you love someone enough, you get them back and live happily ever after! But ultimately this piece, in whatever incarnation, is about the power of music, not only the power of love. "This is hardly your average lovesick guy," notes Doniger. "Orpheus is the son of Calliope, the Muse of Music. If you can charm nature, then you can charm death."

Orphée et Eurydice began life in 1762 in Vienna, in Italian, as *Orfeo ed Euridice*. The work embodied what came to be known as the "Gluckian reforms." *Orfeo* was the first of three "reform operas" (next came *Alceste*, the story of a woman who literally goes through hell, Orpheus-like, to save her husband, followed by *Paride ed Elena*, the story of Paris and Helen of Troy). The reforms were represented by a basic idea that Gluck termed "beautiful simplicity." He called for a new naturalness in the way a text was delivered, a no-frills attitude devoid of emoting purely for effect. In contrast to serious Italian opera of the previous generation, Gluck wanted plots that flowed in a direct way – no convolutions of any kind. He aimed to have the music "serve poetry by means of expression and by following the situations of the story, without interrupting the action or stifling it with a useless superfluity of ornaments." All of that came into play in *Orfeo*, which offered an

austerely lovely style. The work consistently focused on the protagonist; Orfeo expressed his agony and ecstasy through exquisitely sculpted arias, as well as through recitatives that projected all the directness of natural speech. No Gluck interpreter can excel without a total commitment to eloquent delivery of the text.

Gluck fashioned the role of Orfeo for one of the greatest singers of the 18th century, the castrato Gaetano Guadagni. He had what we would consider today to be a countertenor's range, and by all accounts he was matchlessly expressive (years before *Orfeo*, he earned the admiration of Handel, who revised three *Messiah* arias especially for him). Although Guadagni was capable of stupendous flights of vocal display, Gluck had no need to call upon the showier aspect of the singer's artistry in *Orphée et Eurydice*.

The virtuosic element missing from the original version of *Orfeo* was brought into play when the work was substantially revised for the Paris premiere. This was thanks to the brilliance of Joseph Legros, exemplar of a vocal category highly favored in French opera at the time: the *haute-contre*, a lyric tenor whose voice "sits" exceptionally high. Very particular then, as now, regarding their likes and dislikes where singers were concerned, Parisian audiences frowned on castrati, who never made any headway at all in Paris, even in their heyday. Onstage tenors were the heroes, and Orphée would have been no exception. Keys were adjusted to allow for Legros to negotiate a vocal line conceived for Guadagni, and there were some marvelously effective alterations, such as the end of the great lament "J'ai perdu mon Eurydice" ("I've lost my Eurydice"): the stabbing beauty of the repeated high B-flats – on the word "douleur" ("pain") – makes for a much more dramatic climax than in the aria's original version.

At the time that Gluck was invited to write for the Académie Royale de Musique (i.e. the Opéra) in Paris, Legros had long since established himself there as one of the company's most eminent stars. Initially Gluck was reportedly not at all pleased with his dramatic presence and vocalism, and gave Legros a good deal of grief, accusing him of screaming rather than singing. His advice: "Scream with just as much anguish as if someone were sawing through your bone. And, if you can, realize this pain inwardly, spiritually, and as if it came from the heart." Gluck's admonitions apparently worked – Legros triumphed as Orphée, with his achievement in the role hailed as something of a miracle.

**Modern Match –
Orphée et Eurydice**

In literature, damsels in distress have been in need of saving for years. The stories often depict a brave young man battling anything from dragons to evil witches to powerful enemies in order to save his true love. *Orphée et Eurydice* is no exception, with Orphée embarking on a treacherous journey to the Underworld to save his beloved wife, Eurydice. The idea of heroism certainly lives on, but now *women* can do the saving! Witness the Chinese heroine of Disney's *Mulan*, who may have more in common with Orphée than it might seem.

For starters, Orphée and Mulan both endure loss. Orphée's true love Eurydice dies, leaving him alone. Mulan's father, Fa Zhou, is required to go to war for the Chinese emperor because he's the only male of the family. Both Orphée's love for Eurydice and Mulan's love for her father give them the courage they need to begin their dangerous journeys.

Orphée is granted the chance to bring Eurydice back to life by guiding her out of the Underworld. To do so, he must get past the Furies. Playing his lyre, he convinces them to let him through. Once he retrieves Eurydice, he's not allowed to look at her as he leads her back to earth. This proves even more difficult than getting past the Furies, as Eurydice is distraught over whether Orphée still loves her or not.

Similarly, Mulan has a chance to save her father's life: she disguises herself as a man in order to take his place in the army. While she's able to pass as a man, that's only part of her journey. She now has to prove her worth by fighting against the Huns who are invading China. Her military skills prove to be initially poor, and Mulan is forced to work even harder to keep up with the men.

This brings up the next similarity: failure. Orphée succumbs to Eurydice's pleas and looks back at her, instantly killing her. After a fatal attack by the Huns, Mulan's gender is revealed, and she's released from the army. Luckily, both Orphée and Mulan have heavenly sidekicks pulling for them: Amour returns to Orphée and, moved by his love and strength, he restores Eurydice to life. Mushu, a dragon sent to protect Mulan, convinces her to not give up yet. Together, Mulan and Mushu work alone to defeat Shan Yu, leader of the Huns. In an effort to save her father, Mulan's bravery ends up saving China from the invading Huns!

Willing to go through hell to save their true loves, Orphée and Mulan prove that love can triumph over any obstacle, regardless of gender orientation.

— Margaret Rogers

The author, Lyric's dramaturgy intern earlier in the year, will enter her senior year at the University of Minnesota this fall.



"Orpheus in Hades," painted in 1897 by Pierre-Amédée Marcel-Beronneau.



Auguste Rodin's "Orpheus and Eurydice Emerging from the Gates of Hell" (c. 1893).

Gluck, who had composed 41 operas by the time he arrived in Paris, had begun there in April 1774 with the premiere of *Iphigénie en Aulide*. *Orphée*, an even greater success, followed four months later. The Paris audience wouldn't have considered the original version a full evening of opera (it contains about 100 minutes of music), therefore major additions were needed. Most important on the vocal side was a hair-raisingly florid new aria for Legros, "L'espoir renaît dans mon âme" ("Hope is reborn in my soul"), in which Orphée proclaims that he'll brave the terrors of Hades to find Eurydice. Gluck also gave Sophie Arnould, the prominent soprano who sang Eurydice, a ravishing entrance aria in Elysium, "Cet asile aimable et tranquille" ("This pleasant and tranquil haven"). Amour, too – created by a third major star, soprano Sophie Levasseur – was given a brief, deliciously buoyant aria sung to Orphée, "Si les doux accords de ta lyre" ("If the sweet sounds of your lyre"). In the last act Gluck also added an extended trio for the lovers and Amour.

While altering vocal lines, Gluck also created important dance episodes to please a public for whom dance in opera had always been essential. These included the thrillingly aggressive "Dance of the Furies," as well as the dulcet "Dance of the Blessed Spirits" (probably the most celebrated purely instrumental passage in Gluck's entire oeuvre) and three dance movements for

the final celebration, making a total of seven for that scene. Fittingly for Paris, *Orphée* ended not with a chorus, as in 1762, but with a danced Chaconne, confirming the vital role that dance now played in the work.

For decades this opera was known strictly as a vehicle for female contralto or mezzo-soprano, up to the 1980s, when countertenors began singing Orfeo. The tenor version, however, cropped up only very occasionally. Nowadays, however, we're fortunate to have an ever-increasing number of tenors – among them Dmitry Korchak at Lyric this season – who not only sing eloquently in French, but also possess the technical prowess to sustain the extraordinarily high lines Gluck gave Legros 243 years ago. At the same time, ballet companies in major cities are full of performers who can illuminate the opera's dance episodes. With artistry of this high level available, opera companies worldwide will surely follow Lyric's example by more frequently presenting Gluck's masterpiece onstage in its glorious French guise.

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