

Anna-Maria Rentzeperi-Tsonou

Ancient Greece and Opera – The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice

Associate Professor, Department of Music Science and Art, University of Macedonia, Greece

arentzep@uom.edu.gr

Address: Meg. Alexandrou 13

54640 Thessaloniki

Greece

Tel. 00302310832840, mob. Phone. 00306944839637

## ABSTRACT

Orpheus is one of the most significant poets and musicians of Ancient Greek Mythology. His lyre playing had supernatural forces. The myth of Orpheus and nymph Eurydice is probably a late addition to the Orphic myths and is presented in several versions by various ancient philosophers and authors as Plato, Virgil and Ovid. The theme of the myth inspired many composers of the European Opera from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this study is examined the arrangement of the libretti in three operas and one operetta: Claudio Monteverdi's *La favola d' Orfeo* (1607), Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Italian version 1762, French version 1774), Joseph Haydn's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1791) and Jacques Offenbach's, *Orphée aux enfers* (operetta, 1858). Similarities and differences among their libretti are pointed out and several versions of the myth, which are their basis, are presented. According to this study the following differentiations of the libretti were found out and analyzed: the beginning of the operas in comparison with the myth, Eurydice's ancestry, the place and the time that the snake bit her and the ending of the operas. The libretto of Offenbach's operetta is of course strongly differentiated from the operas' libretti as it is a parody of the myth.

**Keywords:** Orpheus' Ancient myth, Operas based on Orpheus' myth, Claudio Monteverdi, Christoph Willibald Gluck, Joseph Haydn, Jacques Offenbach

### **Introduction**

Orpheus is considered to be one of the most significant poets and musicians of Ancient Greek Mythology. Regarding to the most well-known tradition Orpheus was the son of Oeagrus, king of Thrace, and of Calliope, Muse of epic poetry, and was born most probably on mountain Elikon in Pimpleia. According other traditions his father was god Apollo who taught Orpheus music and

gave him a lyre as a gift. His lyre playing had supernatural forces. He had the ability to charm with it wild animals and even stones and trees.

The myth of Orpheus and nymph Eurydice is probably a late addition to the Orphic myths and is presented in several versions by various ancient authors, as Plato, Virgil and Ovid. Eurydice, Orpheus wife, died according to the tradition the day of their marriage. Orpheus overwhelmed with grief by her death sang and played the lyre with such a lament that the nymphs advised him to go to the Underworld and try to retrieve his wife. So Orpheus went to the underworld and moved with his music Pluto and his wife Persephone. Pluto allowed him to take Eurydice with him under the condition that he would not turn around and look at her. Orpheus broke his promise and lost Eurydice forever. Orpheus had a tragic end. According to the most basic version he was killed by the Maenads. The Maenads were furious with him, because whenever he saw them in the woods he ignored and despise them. One day that they met Orpheus in the woods they were in a frenzied mood and they attacked him and tore him apart. There are two basic versions of the death of Eurydice. She died by a snake's bite either trying to escape from Aristaeus (Virgil's version) or while dancing with the Naiads celebrating her wedding day (Ovid's version in his *Metamorphoses*, X, verses 1-11).

### **Catalogue of operas and operettas based on Orpheus myth**

The theme of Orpheus' myth inspired many composers of the European Opera from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the following catalogue are mentioned several operas from the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Kapp, 2016).

*17<sup>os</sup> century*

1600, Jacopo Peri, *Euridice*  
1602, Giulio Caccini, *Euridice*  
1607, Claudio Monteverdi, *L' Orfeo (Favola in musica)*  
1619, Stefano Landi, *La morte d' Orfeo*  
1638, Heinrich Schütz, *Orpheus und Euridice*  
1654, Carlo d'Aquino, *Orfeo*  
1659, Johann Jacob Löwe, *Orpheus aus Thracien*  
1672, Antonio Sartorio, *Orfeo*  
1677, Francesco della Torre, *Orfeo*  
1683, Johann Philipp Krieger, *Orpheus and Eurydice*  
1685, Marc Antoine Charpentier, *La descente d' Orphée aux enfers*  
1690, Louis Lully, *Orphée*  
1698, Reinhard Keiser, *Die sterbende Eurydice oder Orpheus*  
1699, André Campra, *Orfeo nell' inferni*

*18<sup>th</sup> century*

1715, Johann Fux, *Orfeo ed Euridice*  
1722, Georg Caspar Schürmann, *Orpheus*  
1726, Georg Philipp Telemann, *Orpheus*  
1740, John Frederick Lampe, *Orpheus and Eurydice*  
1749, Giovanni Alberto Ristori, *I lamenti d' Orfeo*  
1750, Georg Christoph Wagenseil, *Euridice*  
1762, Christoph Willibald Gluck, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (version in Italian) - 1774,

*Orphée et Euridice* (version in French)

1767, Francois-Hippolyte Barthélémon, *The Burletta of Orpheus*

1781, Luigi Torelli, *Orfeo*

1785, Friedrich Benda, *Orpheus*

1786, Johann Gottlieb Naumann, *Orpheus og Eurydice*

1788, Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf, *Orpheus der Zweite*

1789, Vittorio Trento, *Orfeo negli Elisi*

1791, Joseph Haydn, *L' anima del filosofo, ossia Orfeo ed Euridice*

1793, Prosper-Didier Deshayes, *Le petit Orphée* (parody)

1798, Gottlob Bachmann, *Der Tod des Orpheus/Orpheus und Euridice*

*19<sup>th</sup> century*

1802, Karl Konrad Cannabich, *Orpheus*

1813, Ferdinand Kauer, *Orpheus und Euridice, oder So geht es im Olympus zu*

1858, Jacques Offenbach, *Orphée aux enfers*

1860, Gustav Michaelis, *Orpheus auf der Oberwelt*

1867, Karl Ferdinand Konradin, *Orpheus im Dorfe*

Further on in this study will be examined the adaptation of the myth in the libretti of three operas (one written in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the other two in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) and of an operetta (written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century). More specifically, will be examined the operas *L' Orfeo* (Favola in musica 1607) by Claudio Monteverdi, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762, version in Italian) - *Orphée et Euridice* (1774, version in French) by Christoph Willibald Gluck, *L' anima del filosofo, ossia Orfeo ed Euridice*

(1791) by Joseph Haydn, and *Orphée aux enfers* (operetta - parody of the myth 1858) by Jacques Offenbach, which are considered to be of the most significant.

**Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), *L' Orfeo* (Favola in musica, 1607)**

Claudio Monteverdi's opera *L' Orfeo* is characterized as favola in musica and is the third opera ever written on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. It is considered to be the first significant opera that played a very important role to the evolution of the genre and overshadowed the two previous operas on the same myth by Peri and Caccini. It is written in a prologue and five acts on text by Alessandro Striggio. It's first private performance took place in February 1607 at Conzaga's Palazzo Ducale in Mantua and then on 24 February 1607 at the Court Theater, Mantua (Kobbé, 1997: 484-485; Batta, 2006: 324; Steinheuer, 2007: 119-122).

The roles of the opera are the following:

La Musica (Prologue)	Soprano
Orfeo (Orpheus), a poet	Tenor
Euridice (Eurydice), his wife	Soprano
A Nymph	Soprano
Four Shepherds	Three Tenors, Bass
Messenger	Soprano
Speranza (Hope)	Soprano
Charonte (Charon)	Bass
Proserpina, Queen of the Underworld	Soprano

Plutone (Pluto), King of the Underworld	Bass
Echo	Tenor
Three spirits	two Tenors, Bass
Apollo	Tenor or Baritone

Choir of Nymphs, Shepherds, Spirits of the Underworld

## SYNOPSIS

In the prologue La musica talks about her powers with which she can calm even the forces of the Underworld. Besides she asks from the audience to be quiet in order to listen to it.

In the **first act** the plot starts in a pastoral landscape of Thrace where Shepherds and Nymphs rejoice together with Orpheus and Eurydice over their wedding.

In the **second act** again in the same landscape in Thrace Orpheus plays his lyre happily when a Messenger comes and announces to him the terrible news that Eurydice is dead. While she was rejoicing with the Nymphs and was picking up flowers to make a garland a snake bit her. Orpheus transfixed by grief mourns and decides to go down to the Underworld to find Eurydice.

In the **third act** Speranza (Hope) guides Orpheus to the Gates of the Underworld where she leaves him alone. He tries with his song to persuade Charon to take him with his boat to the other side of Lake Stigos, so as to go in the world of the dead but he is adamant. In the end Orpheus succeeds

with his music to send him to sleep. He then takes his boat and passes alone to the Underworld. The Spirits praise his courage.

In the **fourth act** Proserpina, wife of Pluto, is moved by Orpheus' lament and asks from her husband to allow Orpheus to take Eurydice with him to the Upper World. Pluto agrees but under one condition: Orpheus is not allowed to turn and look at her till they come up to earth. Orpheus finds his wife in the Underworld and takes her with him but on their way back he starts doubting whether she is following him and he turns to look at her. At that moment he loses her forever.

In the **fifth act** Orpheus is devastated wanders on the plains of Thrace. Only Echo responds to his grief. Apollo, father of Orpheus, descends from the sky on a cloud to console his son and offers him immortality. From Heaven, dwelling with the Gods, he will be able to look at the wraith of Eurydice. Father and son ascend to Heaven. Nymphs and Shepherds express their joy for the immortality given to Orpheus.

In Monteverdi's opera the plot starts with the happy atmosphere of the wedding celebration of Orpheus and Eurydice. Regarding Eurydice's death Ovid's version is followed as she dies while celebrating with the other Nymphs (Ovid (trans. Giannatou), 1966: 151). The opera is completed with the final loss of Eurydice and the offer of immortality to Orpheus by his father Apollo, so as to be able to look at the wraith of Eurydice (see also Grout, 1988: 57-58). Striggio in his initial libretto followed the ending of the ancient myth regarding Orpheus' death. Thus, one day that Orpheus met the Maenads in the woods they were in a frenzied mood and they tore him to pieces. Monteverdi for dramaturgical reasons changes the tragic ending.

**Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787), *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762, Italian version) - *Orphée et Euridice* (1774, French version)**

Christoph Willibald Gluck wrote the opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* initially in Vienna (1762) on Ranieri da Calzabigi's libretto in Italian (Italian version). The duration of this version is short (90 minutes). The opera is considered to be an azione teatrale and it has a lot of choruses and dances. *Orfeo ed Euridice* is the first opera that Gluck composed according to the movement for the reformation of the opera. The choice of the opera's theme was probably made because three of the first operas composed in the beginning of the opera as a genre (Peri's *Euridice* 1600, Caccini's *Euridice* 1602 and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* 1607) were also based on Orpheus' myth. The movement encouraged count Giacomo Durazzo whereas Calzabigi's libretti play a very important role. Gluck's manifesto was written in the preface to the published edition of his next opera *Alceste* (1769). The première of the opera (Italian version) took place in October 1762 in the Imperial Theatre of the Court in Vienna. After his settlement in Paris Gluck revised the opera together with the librettist Pierre Louis Molin based on Calzabigi's libretto (French version). The plot remains the same but he added a lot of new material and adjusted the old material to French language. The première of the opera in the French version took place in 2 August 1774 in the Royal Academy of Paris. Hector Berlioz revised the opera with the help of Saint-Saëns in 1859 trying to reach a compromise between the two versions. In this form the opera was produced for the first time in 1859 in Paris. The opera is written in three acts. Gluck wrote both his versions for a male hero: in Vienna for the contralto castrato Guadagni and in Paris for the tenor Legros. In Berlioz's version the tenor role of



rest. There Orpheus searches for Eurydice and when he finds her they start returning to the Upper World.

In the **third act** Eurydice, who doesn't understand why Orpheus doesn't look at her and speak to her, is deeply wounded and doubts about his feelings. It would be better to stay by the dead people if he does not love her. Orpheus cannot resist any more to her begging him, he turns around and embraces her. She dies again in his arm. Orpheus is devastated and mourns for the loss of his beloved. Amor moved by his grief and his deep love for his wife gives him Eurydice back. All praise the force of love.

The plot in Gluck's opera has many differences from the ancient myth. It starts with Orpheus lamenting for his wife as Eurydice has died before the action begins. Amor informs him that Jupiter is moved by his grief and gives him his permission to visit the Underworld. There Orpheus makes great effort to tranquillize the Furies and the Demons so as to pass the gates of the Underworld. The opera has a happy ending (*lieto fine*) since Amor gives Eurydice back to Orpheus for a second time. So the ending of the plot is completely different from the one of the ancient myth. Besides the characters of the opera are only three.

**Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), *L' anima del filosofo, ossia Orfeo ed Euridice* (1791)**

Joseph Haydn's opera *L' anima del filosofo, ossia Orfeo ed Euridice* is characterized as drama per musica and is written in five acts – the fifth act is unfinished or according to others it is said to be

the last scene of the fourth act. The libretto is written by Carlo Francesco Badini. The première of the opera took place on 9 June 1951 in Teatro Pergola in Firenze.

The roles of the opera are the following:

Orpheus, singer from Thrace	tenor
Eurydice, daughter of Creonte – engaged with Aristaeus or Aridaeus	soprano
Creonte, King of Athens	bass
Spirit – guide of Sibyl	soprano
Hades (Pluto), King of the Underworld	bass
Four Creonte’s followers	four basses
A warrior of Aristaeus	bass
A Maenad	soprano

Cupids, virgins, men, unburied bodies, furies, maenads

## SYNOPSIS

Before the action of the opera begins Creonte has given his promise to Aristaeus that he will marry his daughter Eurydice, but she is in love with Orpheus.

In the **first act** Eurydice has run away from Aristaeus, because she doesn’t want to marry him. She is now in a deep forest threatened by savages who want to sacrifice her to their gods. Orpheus

saves her by playing his lyre – his music was vital in softening them up. Creonte was informed of the occurrence and gave his permission for the marriage of his daughter with Orpheus.

In the **second act** Orpheus and Eurydice celebrate their marriage. But Aristaeus, who is mad with Eurydice because she rejected him, sends his soldiers to the celebration and captures Eurydice. She manages to escape for a second time but as she struggled to go away a serpent bites her and she dies. Aristaeus declares war on Creonte, because he broke his promise, and Creonte swears to take revenge.

In the **third act** Orpheus, Creonte, men and virgins mourn for Eurydice on her tomb. Orpheus decides to go to the Underworld to find her. He asks from the wise Sibyl to help him and she sends a spirit to accompany Orpheus to the Underworld. The spirit also advises him to take comfort in philosophy.

In the **fourth act** in the Underworld they meet Unburied spirits. Orpheus moves Pluto with his lyre and he allows him to take Eurydice with him on the condition that he will not look at her until they reach the Upper World.

In the **fifth act or according to others the last scene of the fourth act** Orpheus violates the condition as he cannot control his urge to see Eurydice and he loses her forever. Devastated he wanders by the seaside. There a group of Maenads tries to seduce him but he rejects them. They then force him to drink the so called filter of love which is nothing more but a poison and Orpheus dies. (Kobbé, <sup>11</sup>1997: 335-336; Batta, 2006: 220; Caryl, 2005: 195-199).

In the libretto of Haydn's opera there is a confusion regarding Eurydice. In the Greek mythology there are several persons with the name Eurydice but Orpheus' wife is the nymph and not Creonte's daughter. Besides in the libretto is written another version of Eurydice's death: she dies during her struggle to escape from Aristaeus' soldiers. In the ending of the opera the death of Orpheus is also differentiated from the Ancient myth for dramaturgical reasons. Orpheus is being killed by the Maenads but instead of being torn by them to pieces, they give him a poison which is supposed to be the filter of love. With this change in the libretto the ending of the opera is ameliorated.

### **Jacques Offenbach, *Orphée aux enfers* (1858)**

Jacques Offenbach composed the operetta (opéra-bouffe) *Orphée aux enfers* (1858) as a parody both of the Ancient myth and of Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Besides Offenbach wanted to satirize the Second Empire and the social conditions of his time. The opéra-bouffe was initially written in two acts. In 1874 Offenbach revised it to four acts by adding ballet and transformation scenes. The premiere took place in October 21<sup>st</sup> 1858 at his own theatre Bouffes-Parisiens in Paris. The original operetta's libretto was written by Ludovic Halévy whereas the revision of the libretto was made by Hector Jonathan Crémieux (Grout, 1988: 394; Kobbe, <sup>11</sup>1997: 543).

The roles of the opera are the following:

Pluton (Pluto), king of the Underworld, transformed into the farmer Aristaeus	tenor
Jupin (Jupiter), king of Gods	baritone
Orphée (Orpheus), a violinist	tenor
John Styx	baritone or Tenor
Mercure (Mercury)	tenor
Mars	bass
Morphée (Morpheus)	Tenor
Eurydice, Orphée's wife	Soprano
Diane (Diana)	Soprano
Public Opinion	Mezzo-Soprano
Vénus (Venus)	Soprano
Cupidon (Cupid)	Soprano
Junon (Juno)	Mezzo-Soprano
Minerve (Minerva)	Soprano

## SYNOPSIS

In the **first act** Public Opinion introduces herself to the audience as the guard of morality and introduces the plot. Orpheus and Eurydice, although they are husband and wife, hate each other and have extramarital affairs. Eurydice is in love with Aristaeus, who lives next door (in fact he is Pluto transformed into a farmer) and Orpheus is in love with the shepherdess Chloe. When Orpheus mixes up Eurydice with Chloe, it appears that both he and Eurydice have other lovers. Eurydice

asks for divorce. But Orpheus is afraid of the Public Opinion and he forces Eurydice to keep the matter secret by playing music on his violin, which Eurydice hates.

Pluto plots with Orpheus to kill Eurydice, so as to take her with him to the Underworld. He tricks her by stepping first on a trap without to be hurt as Pluto is immortal, while Eurydice who followed him is fatally injured. She finds out though that death is not so bad when the King of the Underworld is in love with her. Before dying Eurydice leaves a message to her husband. Orpheus is very happy till the moment Public Opinion threatens him that if he does not descend to the Underworld to save Eurydice, she will destroy his carrier as a violinist. Orpheus is forced to agree and descends to Hades accompanied by the Public Opinion.

In the **second act** on Mount Olympus the gods are sleeping peacefully. Quietness is being interrupted by the returning of goddess Diana, who speaks to the gods about her new lover Actaeon. Jupiter however has already transformed him into a stag. All the gods started complaining about Jupiter's tyrannical behavior. Then comes Mercury who announces that Pluto keeps Eurydice in the Underworld and that he will soon visit Olympus. When he appears Jupiter accuses him for Eurydice's abduction and he defends himself. The rest of the gods join him soon and they all protest against Jupiter's intolerable domination, as well as for the boredom they feel in Olympus especially because they have to eat ambrosia and drink nectar all the time. Gods remind Jupiter of his transformation in order to seduce several women. Then Orpheus and Public Opinion are announced and Jupiter asks from the gods to behave themselves. As Pluto keeps denying that he hasn't taken Eurydice with him, Orpheus starts singing the famous aria from Gluck's opera that he has lost Eurydice. Gods interrupt him and start singing the aria themselves as they say that this

melody is well-known even on Olympus. Jupiter orders Pluto to return Eurydice to her husband and decides to descend himself to the Underworld to look for Eurydice.

In the **third act** Eurydice is under restraint by Pluto and her guard is John Styx, who was in earth king of Boeotia. Jupiter descends to Hades and looks for Eurydice. With Cupid's help Jupiter is transformed into a golden fly so as to be able to come in the place where Eurydice is kept by Pluto. Jupiter realizes that he is interested in Eurydice himself.

In the **fourth act** there is a joyful atmosphere in the Underworld. Jupiter has transformed Eurydice into a Bacchante and he dances with her a minuet. Then they all dance Can Can. Afterwards is heard Orpheus playing in his violin the melody of the well-known aria "J' ai perdu mon Eurydice". He has come together with Public Opinion to get Eurydice back to earth on the condition not to look back at her till they are on earth. But Jupiter who wants Eurydice for himself throws a thunderbolt on the back side of Orpheus, so he turns back to look what's happening and he inevitably looks at his wife and loses her forever. The operetta has a happy end and finally is heard again the Can Can melody.

Offenbach's operetta is a parody of the ancient myth regarding Orpheus' marital love and faithfulness and of the gods of Olympus. Especially in Jupiter's role is allegorically outlined emperor Napoleon III and is satirized the way he ruled. Besides are mocked the morals of the society. Through the well-known aria "J' ai perdu mon Eurydice" is spoofed Gluck's opera and generally is mocked the European operatic tradition.

## Conclusions

The several versions of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice inspired many composers from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this study the synopses and the roles of three operas (Claudio Monteverdi's *La favola d' Orfeo* (1607), Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Italian version 1762, French version 1774) and Joseph Haydn's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1791)) and of one operetta were presented and similarities and differences among them based on the different versions of the myth were pointed out. The following differentiations of the libretti were found out and analyzed: the beginning of the operas in comparison with the myth, Eurydice's ancestry, the place and the time that the snake bit her, the roles of the opera and their ending. The libretto of Offenbach's operetta is of course strongly differentiated from the operas' libretti as it is a parody of the myth.

More specifically regarding the beginning of the operas, Monteverdi's opera starts the day that Orpheus and Eurydice were going to marry. Gluck's opera starts just after Eurydice is dead with the lament of her husband Orpheus at her tomb. Both operas follow Ovid's version of the Ancient myth. Haydn's opera starts with Eurydice running away from Aristaeus following Virgil's version of the myth.

Regarding Eurydice's ancestry, in the Monteverdi's and Gluck's opera Eurydice is a nymph, while in Haydn's opera she is Creonte's daughter.

Regarding Eurydice's death, in Monteverdi's opera Eurydice dies bitten by a snake while picking up flowers for her wedding garland (Ovid's version). In Haydn's opera Eurydice dies again bitten by a snake while trying to escape from Aristaeus' soldiers (Virgil's version).

Regarding the roles of the operas, Monteverdi's opera has eighteen singers (La Musica, Orfeo, Euridice, a nymph, four Shepherds, a Messenger, Speranza, Charonte, Proserpina, Plutone, Echo, Three spirits and Apollo) and choirs of Nymphs, Shepherds and Spirits of the Underworld. Gluck's opera has only three singers (Orfeo, Euridice and Amor) and choirs of Shepherds and Shepherdesses, Furies and Demons, Heroes and Heroines in Hades. Haydn's opera has eleven singers (Orpheus, Eurydice, Creonte, Spirit, Hades, four Creonte's followers, a warrior of Aristaeus and a Maenad) and choirs of cupids, virgins, men, unburied bodies, furies and maenads.

Regarding the ending of the operas, in Monteverdi's and Haydn's opera the composers change to an extent Orpheus' end so as to be less tragic. In Monteverdi's opera Orpheus loses for a second time his wife and Apollo offers him immortality and gives him the chance to look from Olympus at the wraith of Eurydice. In Haydn's opera Orpheus again loses his wife for a second time and is being poisoned by the Maenads with a so called filter of love and not torn to pieces. In Gluck's opera the composer writes a lieto fine. Amor gives Eurydice back to Orpheus for a second time.

In Offenbach's operetta the composer changes the Ancient myth completely. The operetta is a parody of the Ancient myth and of the gods of Olympus. In certain points the operetta is a political satire since in Jupiter's role is allegorically outlined emperor Napoleon III. Also in the operetta are mocked the morals of the society and is spoofed European operatic tradition through Gluck's opera based on the same myth.

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