

## A Program Note: The Modern Orpheus

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The Orpheus legend began in ancient Greece around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Orpheus was the son of Apollo and the Muse Calliope and became the most talented musician alive. He rivaled the gods. He sang and played so well that the wild animals were tamed and rivers stopped to listen to him.

Orpheus fell in love and married the beautiful Eurydice. One day Eurydice was walking among tall grasses and was bitten by a poisonous snake. She died and immediately went to Hades. Orpheus was stunned, deeply depressed by the loss of his wife. He vowed to go find her in Hades and bring her back. He made the journey with great daring and against all odds that he would succeed. He hoped to release Eurydice by singing sweet songs and playing his lyre. He hoped to convince Hades, the god of the Underworld, and his consort Persephone to release her.

Hades was persuaded by his music and agreed to let her go under one condition: Eurydice was to walk out of Hades behind Orpheus. If he ever looked back at her -- she would vanish and return immediately to Hades.

As they were reaching the top, Orpheus became anxious to know if she were there and he looked back. By looking back, he lost her to Hades forever.

Variations on this narrative continued in later centuries. They appeared in the form of poems, operas, stage and finally, film. The story changed with the evolving structure of society, the arts, and relations between male and female.

Plato criticized the idea of Orpheus going to Hades, saying that he mocked the gods. If Orpheus were a true hero, he would have killed himself to follow his lover to the underworld to be with her. [\[1\]](#)

Virgil (70 BC-19 BC) tells the first story in which Eurydice appears as complete character. He writes of Orpheus's courtship and marriage to Eurydice, her tragic death, and his daring rescue attempt in Hades and finally Orpheus's own violent death at the hands of the Maenads, priestesses of Dionysus. The Maenads tore Orpheus to pieces and threw his body parts into rivers.

About 25 years later, Ovid writes about Orpheus' heroic journey into hell: "...striking the lyre-strings to accompany his words, [Orpheus] sang: 'O gods of this world, placed below the earth, to which all, who are created mortal, descend; if you allow me, and it is lawful, to set aside the fictions of idle tongues and speak the truth...My wife is the cause of my journey.'" (Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Bk.10)

The earliest recorded opera about Orpheus was by Jacopo Peri in 1600; the second was by Giulio Caccini in 1602; and the third by Claudio Monteverdi. Peri and Caccini were hoping to revive ancient ("dead") Greek music. Peri orchestrated his opera to the sound of plucked instruments like the lyre. In *Orfeo*, they changed the ending to a happy one in which the hero Orpheus saves Eurydice and they live happily ever after.

Monteverdi drew upon their work to compose his most famous opera in 1607. He orchestrated his *L'Orfeo* with many more instruments and he set the stage for more operas. Successively, there were at least 26 operas about Orpheus in the 1600s; and 29 in the 1700s, including classics by Telemann,

Gluck, Handel, and Hayden. The first operetta was *Orpheus in the Underworld* by Offenbach in 1858.<sup>[ii]</sup>

Certain ideas in the Orpheus story need explanation. The river Styx played a key role. Its name is drawn from the Greek word *stugein*, which means, “hate.” Styx, *the river of hate*, was so respected by the gods in Greek mythology that they would take life-binding oaths to not mention its name. The river ran around Hades nine times.

“Hades” referred to the god who ruled the dead but was also the place where the dead would go. Hades (the god) strictly forbade his subjects to leave his domain and became enraged if anyone tried to leave. Hades (the Underworld) was a place where everyone went before they might move on to other regions. The great pit of *Tartarus* was the home of damned souls, the embodiment of primordial darkness. But there were also the *Elysian Fields* where great heroes went to reside after death. Admission to Elysium was reserved for mortals related to gods and heroes. The idea expanded later to include those chosen by the gods, the righteous, and the heroic, where they would remain to live a blessed and happy life, a final resting place for the souls of virtuous men.

The Modern Orpheus (tonight) is my version composed for our time. The story opens with the mother and father of Orpheus (Apollo and Calliope) being worried about his condition. He remains at Eurydice’s gravestone longing for her.

Scenes of a modern Orpheus interrupt the narrative. Orpheus is in despair over the loss of his wife and goes to a therapist. Now the story changes into a new version. In the ancient story, Orpheus was the hero acting bravely to save his loved one from Hades, but in tonight’s performance, Eurydice is the hero. Eurydice, bitten by the snake of passion, goes to Hades. But when Orpheus goes to Hades, he finds her learning to go into a higher level called the Elysian Fields. She takes Orpheus on a tour and teaches him how to find her when he dies by living the good (nonviolent) life on earth.

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[i] Plato mentioned “Orpheus” in the dialogue *Symposium* written around 360 BCE. He had one of his characters criticize Orpheus. The gods showed him only her ghost, he says: *But Orpheus ...the gods sent empty away, and presented to him an apparition only of her whom he sought, but herself they would not give up, because he ... did not dare ... to die for love, but was contriving how he might enter Hades alive.* Plato does not name the woman involved in Orpheus’s descent to the underworld. In one of Euripides’ plays (*Alcestis*, 438 BCE) the reader can see the oldest surviving evidence concerning the outcome of Orpheus’s descent to the underworld. The play does not state that Orpheus successfully brought his wife back to life: it merely says that Orpheus’ singing charmed the gods of the underworld. Some legends describe Erebus as the Infernal Region below the earth. The stories of Erebus in some cases become synonymous with Hades. Other legends say that Hades was split into two regions. Erebus was the top region of Hades where the dead have to pass through shortly after they have died. Tartarus is the deepest region, which is where the Titans were imprisoned. For sources, see I. Cornford, F. M.,

"Mystery Religions and Pre-Socratic Philosophy," ch. XV in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. IV, 1960. 2. Darrow, F. S., "Studies in Orphism," a series of seven articles in *The Theosophical Path*, July 1933-April 1935. 3. Guthrie, W. K. C., *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, rev. ed., 1966. 4. Harrison, Jane, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, 1959. 5. Mead, G. R. S., *Orpheus*, John Watkins reprint, 1965. 6. Taylor, Thomas, *The Hymns of Orpheus*, Philosophical Research Society, 1981. 7. Athanassakis, Apostolos N., trans. [The Orphic Hymns](#). Missoula: The Scholars Press, 1977. 8. Macchioro, Vittorio D. [From Orpheus to Paul: A History of Orphism](#). New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1930.

[ii] The Gluck opera of Orpheus was one of the most important 18<sup>th</sup> century operas, moving from a Baroque to Classical style. It focused more on dramatic action than on virtuoso singing. The Offenbach opera (1858) was infused with satire and used dialogue with set pieces. Leaping ahead to the 1959 movie of the *Black Orpheus* we see race relations entering the narrative. The movie begins with images of white Greek statues that explode to reveal black men dancing samba to drums in a *favela* (shanty town.) Eurydice arrives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and takes a trolley driven by Orpheus (Orfeu). Orpheus and Eurydice fall in love, but are constantly on the run from *Death*. In the end they both die.