

*Virginia  
Opera*

Presents

# *Orphée*

*By: Philip Glass*

Libretto by Jean Cocteau



Study Guide  
2011-2012 Season

# 2010-2011 SEASON

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## Preface

### Purpose

This study guide is intended to aid you, the teacher, in increasing your students' understanding and appreciation of ORPHÉE. This will not only add to knowledge about opera, but should develop awareness of other related subjects, making the performance they attend much more enjoyable.

### Most Important

If you only have a limited amount of time, concentrate on the cast of characters, the plot and some of the musical and dramatic highlights of the opera. Recognition produces familiarity, which in turn produces a positive experience.

### The Language

ORPHÉE was written in French. The Virginia Opera will perform ORPHÉE in the original language, French, but an English translation will be projected on a screen above the stage. With these **Supertitles**, audiences can experience the beauty of opera in the original language, yet still easily understand all that is being sung.

## Objectives

1. To understand how opera, as an art form, reflects and comments on society and the world in which we live.
2. To develop an awareness of how the study of certain art forms such as opera can communicate ideas of the past and present.
3. To develop a basic understanding of what opera is. Students should be able to identify the many elements (musical, visual, and dramatic) of an opera and understand how they work together to produce a unified, exciting, and emotional work.
4. To understand the process of adapting a story for the stage; what changes need to be made and why. Incorporated in this objective is a basic understanding of what makes a good opera.
5. To know the basic plot/story line of ORPHÉE.
6. To understand how music serves as a mode of communication in opera and the effect music has on characteristics and mood.
7. To develop some sense of appreciation for opera as a timeless art form that brings real characters, emotions, and situations to life.
8. To understand the working relationship between words and music in an opera. Students should understand how a composer and librettist work together to create significant, dramatic, and unified meaning.

## What is Opera?

**Opera** is a unique type of entertainment—a play that is sung throughout. Because it combines music and theater, opera can be the most moving of all the arts, and can tell a story in a way quite unlike any other. It does so by means of words, actions, and music.

The words of an opera are called a **libretto** (the Italian word for “little book”), much like the words of a play are called a **script**. There are important differences between a libretto and a script, however. For one thing, a libretto usually contains far fewer words than a script. The reason for this is the music. It can take more time to sing a line of text than to say it; also, words are often repeated in operatic music for reasons of musical form. Therefore, there are fewer words in an opera than in a play of the same length.

While the spoken word can clearly show what people are thinking, singing is much better at showing emotions. For this reason, the plot of an opera is likely to be filled with dramatic situations in which highly emotional characters perform bold actions.

The way **librettists** (the people who write the words) use words is also different. Opera librettos are commonly made up of poetry, while this is not often true of the scripts for plays. Many of the musical passages can be considered a type of sung poetry, complete with meter, accents, and rhyme. If you were to say the words that the characters sing, this would become very clear.

A librettist can also do something that a playwright cannot—he or she can write an **ensemble**. An ensemble is a passage in the libretto in which more than one person sings; often, several characters sing different vocal lines simultaneously. In a play, if all the actors spoke at once, the audience could not understand the words. In an opera, the music helps the audience to sort out the thoughts and feelings of each singer. Frequently, each individual character has a distinct musical or vocal style which distinguishes him/her from the other characters.

If the libretto of an opera is a special language, the score (or musical portion of an opera) is a special use of music. It is music that is meant to be sung, of course, but it has characteristics that many songs do not. **Operatic music is dramatic music, written for the theater.** For this reason, it must also be capable of describing strong feelings that invite the audience’s involvement with the story and their identification with people on stage. In addition, a good operatic composer can use music as a tool to define character and personality traits of his characters.

One way in which a **composer** (the person who writes the music) can use music is through the voices of the singers themselves. A human voice, especially when singing, can express all sorts of feelings. Composers know this and use this knowledge to the fullest. First, they consider the personality of a character and then choose a voice type (either high or low) that best suits this type of person. For

example, younger characters are often sung by the higher voice types. There are five different voice categories (perhaps some students are familiar with these from singing in a choir):

**SOPRANO:** the highest female voice

**MEZZO-SOPRANO:** (also called ALTO) the lower female voice

**TENOR:** the highest male voice (like Pavarotti or Caruso)

**BARITONE:** the middle male voice

**BASS:** the lowest male voice

Each of these voice categories can be subdivided into more specialized types, such as “dramatic soprano”, “lyric soprano”, “coloratura soprano”, “basso-buffo”, depending on the specific type of music being sung. These distinctions are known as **vocal fachs**, from a German word meaning “mode”.

After a composer has chosen the characters’ voice types, he then tries to interpret the libretto in musical terms. A character may sing very high notes when agitated or excited, or low notes when depressed or calm. He or she may sing many rapid notes or a few long held notes, depending upon the mood at the time.

In an opera production, the ideas of the composer and librettist are expressed by the singers as directed by a **conductor** and **stage director**. The conductor is responsible for the musical aspects of the performance, leading the orchestra and the singers and determining the musical pace. The stage director is responsible for the dramatic movement and characterizations of the singers. He works with a **design team**—a set designer, costume designer, and a lighting designer – to determine the visual interpretation of the work. Just as the composer and librettist must work in close communion in the writing of an opera, the conductor and stage director must have a close collaboration to produce a unified interpretation of an opera. Both must collaborate with the singers and the design team (and sometimes a **choreographer**, if dancing is involved). For this reason opera is perhaps the form demanding the greatest degree of collaboration.

An opera then, is a partnership of words and music with the purpose of telling a dramatic story. While the story itself may be about everyday situations or historical figures, it usually has a moral or idea that the entire audience understands. This is one of the great features of opera—it unites a variety of people with different backgrounds by giving them a common experience to relate to.

## The Operatic Voice

To present a true (and brief) definition of the “operatic” voice is a difficult proposition. Many believe the voice is “born,” while just as many hold to the belief that the voice is “trained.” The truth lies somewhere between the two. Voices that can sustain the demands required by the operatic repertoire do have many things in common. First and foremost is a strong physical technique that allows the singer to sustain long phrases through the control of both the inhalation and exhalation of breath. Secondly, the voice (regardless of its size) must maintain a resonance in both the head (mouth, sinuses) and chest cavities. The Italian word “*squillo*” (squeal) is used to describe the brilliant tone required to penetrate the full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singers. Finally, all voices are defined by both the actual voice “type” and the selection of repertoire for which the voice is ideally suited.

Within the five major voice types (*Soprano, Mezzo-Soprano, Tenor, Baritone, Bass*) there is a further delineation into categories (*Coloratura, Lyric, Spinto, and Dramatic*) which help to define each particular instrument. The *Coloratura* is the highest within each voice type whose extended upper range is complimented by extreme flexibility. The *Lyric* is the most common of the “types.” This instrument is recognized more for the exceptional beauty of its tone rather than its power or range. The *Spinto* is a voice which combines the beauty of a lyric with the weight and power of a *Dramatic*, which is the most “powerful” of the voices. The *Dramatic* instrument is characterized by the combination of both incredible volume and “steely” intensity.

While the definition presented in the preceding paragraph may seem clearly outlined, many voices combine qualities from each category, thus carving a unique niche in operatic history. Just as each person is different from the next, so is each voice. Throughout her career Maria Callas defied categorization as she performed and recorded roles associated with each category in the soprano voice type. Joan Sutherland as well can be heard in recordings of soprano roles as diverse as the coloratura Gilda in *Rigoletto* to the dramatic Turandot in *Turandot*. Below is a very brief outline of voice types and categories with roles usually associated with the individual voice type.

	<i>Coloratura</i>	<i>Lyric</i>	<i>Spinto</i>	<i>Dramatic</i>
<b><i>Soprano</i></b>	Norina (Don Pasquale) Gilda (Rigoletto) Lucia (Lucia di Lammermoor)	Liu (Turandot) Mimi (La Bohème) Pamina (Magic Flute)	Tosca (Tosca) Amelia (A Masked Ball) Leonora (Il Trovatore)	Turandot (Turandot) Norma (Norma) Elektra (Elektra)
<b><i>Mezzo-Soprano</i></b>	Rosina (Barber of Seville) Angelina (La Cenerentola) Dorabella (Così fan tutte)	Carmen (Carmen) Charlotte (Werther) Giulietta (Hoffmann)	Santuzza (Cavalleria) Adalgisa (Norma) The Composer (Ariadne auf Naxos)	Azucena (Il Trovatore) Ulrica (A Masked Ball) Herodias (Salome)
<b><i>Tenor</i></b>	Count Almaviva (Barber of Seville) Don Ottavio (Don Giovanni) Ferrando (Così fan tutte)	Alfredo (La Traviata) Rodolfo (La Bohème) Tamino (Magic Flute)	Calaf (Turandot) Pollione (Norma) Cavaradossi (Tosca)	Dick Johnson (Fanciulla) Don Jose (Carmen) Otello (Otello)
<b><i>Baritone</i></b>	Figaro (Barber of Seville) Count Almavira (Marriage of Figaro) Dr. Malatesta (Don Pasquale)	Marcello (La Bohème) Don Giovanni (Don Giovanni) Sharpless (Madama Butterfly)	<b><i>Verdi Baritone</i></b> Germont (La Traviata) Di Luna (Il Trovatore) Rigoletto (Rigoletto)	Scarpia (Tosca) Jochanaan (Salome) Jack Rance (Fanciulla)
<b><i>Bass</i></b>	Bartolo (Barber of Seville) Don Magnifico (Cenerentola) Dr. Dulcamara (Elixir of Love)	Leporello (Don Giovanni) Colline (La Bohème) Figaro (Marriage of Figaro)	<b><i>Buffo Bass</i></b> Don Pasquale (Don Pasquale) Don Alfonso (Così fan tutte)	<b><i>Basso Cantate</i></b> Oroveso (Norma) Timur (Turandot) Sarastro (Magic Flute)

## Opera Production

Opera is created by the combination of a myriad of art forms. First and foremost are the actors who portray characters by revealing their thoughts and emotions through the singing voice. The next very important component is a full symphony orchestra that accompanies the singing actors and actresses, helping them to portray the full range of emotions possible in the operatic format. The orchestra performs in an area in front of the singers called the orchestra pit while the singers perform on the open area called the stage. Wigs, costumes, sets and specialized lighting further enhance these performances, all of which are designed, created, and executed by a team of highly trained artisans.

The creation of an opera begins with a dramatic scenario crafted by a playwright or dramaturg who alone or with a librettist fashions the script or libretto that contains the words the artists will sing. Working in tandem, the composer and librettist team up to create a cohesive musical drama in which the music and words work together to express the emotions revealed in the story. Following the completion of their work, the composer and librettist entrust their new work to a conductor who with a team of assistants (repetiteurs) assumes responsibility for the musical preparation of the work. The conductor collaborates with a stage director (responsible for the visual component) in order to bring a performance of the new piece to life on the stage. The stage director and conductor form the creative spearhead for the new composition while assembling a design team which will take charge of the actual physical production.

Set designers, lighting designers, costume designers, wig and makeup designers and even choreographers must all be brought “on board” to participate in the creation of the new production. The set designer combines the skills of both an artist and an architect using “blueprint” plans to design the actual physical set which will reside on the stage, recreating the physical setting required by the storyline. These blueprints are turned over to a team of carpenters who are specially trained in the art of stage carpentry. Following the actual building of the set, painters following instructions from the set designers’ original plans paint the set. As the set is assembled on the stage, the lighting designer works with a team of electricians to throw light onto both the stage and the set in an atmospheric as well as practical way. Using specialized lighting instruments, colored gels and a state of the art computer, the designer along with the stage director create a “lighting plot” by writing “lighting cues” which are stored in the computer and used during the actual performance of the opera.

During this production period, the costume designer in consultation with the stage director has designed appropriate clothing for the singing actors and actresses to wear. These designs are fashioned into patterns and crafted by a team of highly skilled artisans called cutters, stitchers, and sewers. Each costume is specially made for each singer using his/her individual measurements. The wig and makeup designer, working with the costume designer, designs and creates wigs which will complement both the costume and the singer as well as represent historically accurate “period” fashions.

As the actual performance date approaches, rehearsals are held on the newly crafted set, combined with costumes, lights, and orchestra in order to ensure a cohesive performance that will be both dramatically and musically satisfying to the assembled audience.



# ORPHÉE

## Premiere

First performance at the American Repertory Theater  
in Cambridge, Massachusetts on May 14, 1993.

## Cast of Characters

Orphée.....	Baritone
Eurydice.....	Soprano
La Princesse.....	Soprano
Heurtebise.....	Tenor
Cégeste.....	Tenor
Judge.....	Bass
Poet.....	Bass
Aglaonice.....	Mezzo-Soprano
Le Commissaire.....	Bass
Reporter.....	Tenor
Glazier.....	Tenor
Policeman.....	Baritone

## Brief Summary

The great poet Orphée has become disillusioned with his art and his place in the arts world. He's been attacked by his peers who are jealous of his success. The derision of other poets results in Orphée's self-imposed isolation. When a rival poet is killed, Orphée observes a mysterious woman called The Princesse convey him through a mirror into the underworld. When Orphée's wife Eurydice is also killed, Orphée passes through the mirror, following her into the bizarre and unfathomable region between life and death.

The Princesse helps Orphée and Eurydice return to the land of the living. In the process Orphée has gained perspective on his own mortality and regains his emotional vitality. Love triumphs and he is able to resume his life as a poet, unconcerned with the vagaries of daily life. Orphée and Eurydice have no memory of their experience and continue with their married life together. The Princesse is banished to oblivion for interfering with the rules of the underworld.

# ORPHÉE

## Full Plot Synopsis and Musical Highlights

### Act I

The famous poet Orphée is visiting with old friends at a local bar, The Café of the Poets. The music is reminiscent of “ragtime,” with a decidedly jazzy, honky-tonk sound. The rhythmical, musical motif is established and repeated, underscoring the recitative. As he chats, he is watching a group of young people gathered around the young poet, Cégeste, who is attracting much excitement and recognition. Orphée feels envious of the attention the younger man is receiving. Orphée also is quite taken by Cégeste’s patron, a woman called The Princesse. Cégeste becomes drunk and starts to brawl. Throughout, the rhythmical motif which underlies the dialogue is sustained by the orchestra. The police are called and the party ends. Cégeste eludes the police by running outside. The music halts abruptly and the overpowering sound of motorcycles dominates. Cégeste has been struck down by two motorcyclists. The crowd is shocked as the motorcyclists carry his body into the café. The “honky-tonk” music is gone, replaced by a tragic sweep of sound in the orchestra. The solemn tone is reflected in the voice of The Princesse as she takes charge of the scene. She and her chauffeur, Heurtebise, prevent the police from removing Cégeste’s body. The Princesse directs Orphée to accompany her as she deals with the corpse. Orphée is shaken but agrees to help. Repeated rhythmical patterns abound in the orchestra as the corpse of Cégeste is carried by Orphée and Heurtebise. The Princesse rebuffs Orphée’s questions as he tries to understand what is happening. Eventually the two motorcyclists arrive and take the body, leading the procession to The Princesse’s chalet. There, they dump the body and leave. The chalet contains a very large mirror and a radio next to a bed. Orphée is very confused and demands an explanation. Still ignoring Orphée’s questions, The Princesse turns on a radio which broadcasts brief, odd messages. The repeated orchestral motifs suggest watchful waiting. Suddenly the mirror breaks and the radio goes silent. The Princesse bides her time, telling Orphée to make himself comfortable.

The two motorcyclists return and stand by the mirror. They nod when The Princesse asks if all is ready. She commands Cégeste to get up, which he does immediately. She asks him if he knows who she is. He replies that she is his Death. She further states that he will serve her and follow all her orders. Then she tells him to take hold of her dress. They walk through the mirror followed by the two motorcyclists. Orphée tries to follow but can’t, becoming dizzy and fainting. When he awakens he is alone and is no longer in the chalet. Heurtebise appears, holding the radio. He will not answer Orphée’s questions. He leads Orphée home.

The orchestral motifs become more active and assertive as the scene changes to the home of Orphée and Eurydice. Eurydice, her friend Aglaonice, and the police commissioner are having a heated discussion about the disappearance of Orphée and the circumstances of the night before. The musical motif recedes somewhat as a reporter knocks on the door to ask Orphée about Cégeste’s whereabouts. They say Orphée is

sleeping and the commissioner satisfies the reporter saying he'll stop by the newspaper office. The intensity of the motif returns as Orphée bursts through the door. He is unhappy to see Aglaonice and the police commissioner. He wants them to leave and they do. Eurydice is happy to see him but is confused by his behavior. He will not explain why he was out all night or what he was doing. He is very short-tempered. She wants to tell him of her pregnancy but he rushes out before she can say anything. The musical motif begins to calm and becomes markedly sweet and lyrical. Eurydice notices the figure of Heurtebise standing by the door. She asks who he is. He replies that he was the one who brought her husband home. He is the chauffeur of the lady whose car her husband got into while helping a man who was hurt. His mistress, who didn't want any interference, took off with the injured man and left them in the car on the road. They spent the night there. During their conversation the musical motifs are supplemented with solo flute. He tells her his name is Heurtebise and he is a penniless student who has been working as a chauffeur for two weeks. Eurydice replies that even though her husband worships her, they have had an argument and he's been drinking. As she explains, the beautiful lyricism of the motifs intensifies. She drops her knitting and Heurtebise retrieves it, noticing the baby clothes. The melodic motif becomes more emotional and piercing as she comments on how she wanted to tell Orphée her news but he ignored her. Heurtebise continues to converse easily, calming her. She offers coffee and worries about the gas flame. He mentions that he dislikes the smell of gas since he gassed himself and died. She reacts to his words and he replies it was an attempted suicide. They formally introduce themselves once again as they gain comfort from each other. The music slows and trails off.

During a musical interlude which prominently features a solo flute, The Princesse enters Orphée's bedroom and watches Orphée and Eurydice sleeping side by side. Orphée stirs and looks around but sees nothing. He returns to sleep. The Princesse observes him until the scene ends.

Orphée is in his studio listening to the radio, taking notes. The radio is transmitting Morse Code. He believes the messages to be poetic in nature and thinks he will be inspired. Eurydice is knitting and is comforted by Heurtebise's presence. Eurydice complains about the radio but feels she must put up with it. Orphée feels he must follow every detail because the messages contain something better than anything he has ever written. He blurts out that the best part of his life is over. Heurtebise tries to have a calming effect on them both. Eurydice is very irritated but follows Heurtebise's advice and lies down. Heurtebise notices the sound of motorcycles driving by as the phone rings. The police commissioner is on the phone and asks for Orphée to come to his office. Heurtebise gives him the message and Orphée turns off the radio. He suggests Orphée see Eurydice before he leaves. He does so, speaking more gently and lovingly to her for the moment.

The repeated musical motifs change character dramatically as the scene changes to the police commissioner's office. The effect is busy and intense. The commissioner reads an article in the newspaper and is vexed. A group of poets enters the office accompanied by Aglaonice. They are incensed that Orphée has sent out some texts that they believe were actually written by Cégeste before the accident. They accuse Orphée of plagiarism and demand that the commissioner deal with it. He refuses without better evidence,

commenting that Orphée's stature is unassailable. The accusers swear they will seek justice elsewhere and will even take matters into their own hands.

The next scene is primarily a musical interlude describing a "chase" scene. The musical motifs are bold, assertive and pulsating. Brass instruments heighten the effect. Orphée is walking to the police commissioner's office and sees The Princesse. He tries to follow her but she seems to appear and disappear in multiple places. Orphée tries to follow her until a group of autograph seekers begin to pursue him and he runs away from them.

Orphée returns home to seek refuge from his fans without stopping at the police commissioner's. Eurydice is still sleeping. Heurtebise tells Orphée that his employer had stopped by to say that he should stay where he was and await orders. Orphée is upset that he missed seeing The Princesse. He goes into his study and begins listening to the Morse Code on the radio and taking notes. Eurydice awakens and is very upset as she speaks to Heurtebise. She tells him that she must go to see Aglaonice for some advice. She will go mad if she doesn't leave the house. Heurtebise is unable to prevent her from leaving and Eurydice dashes out the door. The sound of approaching motorcycles is heard followed by screeching wheels and a thud. Heurtebise runs out and reenters the house carrying Eurydice. He puts her on the bed. A moment later The Princesse enters the bedroom through the mirror. The orchestral motifs sound plaintive and become more subdued. She speaks to Cégeste who has followed her through the mirror. He is carrying a metal case. She chides him for his slowness. He is affected by The Princesse's appearance, knowing she is Death. She directs him to get busy with his task, which is to open the metal case and begin transmitting messages. Orphée, listening to the radio, takes notes. The Princesse and Heurtebise exchange testy comments. Heurtebise is in a rebellious mood. He admits to loving Eurydice and forces The Princesse to admit she loves Orphée. Heurtebise attempts to jar Orphée with news of his wife's impending death. Orphée puts him off, absorbed in copying the messages from the radio.

The Princesse speaks to Eurydice, commanding her to arise. She asks if Eurydice knows her identity. Eurydice replies that she knows The Princesse is her Death. The Princesse states that Eurydice now belongs to the other world and she will obey her orders. Eurydice complies, robot-like. The Princesse, ready to leave with Eurydice, reminds Cégeste to pack the apparatus and commands him not to look back. The Princesse, Cégeste and Eurydice leave through the mirror. Orphée has stopped writing since the radio transmissions have stopped. He finally speaks to Heurtebise who tells him his wife is dead. Orphée does not believe him at first, but then cries out for his Eurydice. Heurtebise tells him there is only one chance of retrieving her and that is through The Princesse. Understanding comes over Orphée and he moves toward the mirror. Heurtebise tells him that mirrors are the doors through which Death comes and goes. If he wants to rejoin his wife he must believe his words. Orphée is conflicted and Heurtebise, understanding his attraction to The Princesse, asks him who he wants – Eurydice or Death. Orphée replies, "Both." Heurtebise instructs him on successfully passing through the mirror. The clock strikes 6:00. As the scene moves toward its climax the musical motifs have increased in density, volume and speed. The dense fabric of the music becomes all-consuming before breaking off suddenly as the act ends.

## Act II

The music of the first scene of Act II describes the journey of Orphée and Heurtebise to the underworld. The orchestral sound is full of tension and purpose of movement. The sung dialogue is interspersed throughout the scene. The two men appear to be walking against a strong headwind. They pass some people who they will see in reverse order on the way back. Orphée keeps asking questions for which Heurtebise has no answer. Finally with some exasperation, Heurtebise takes Orphée's hand and pulls him along from behind.

The next scene returns to the rooms of The Princesse's chalet. The living room appears as it did before with the addition of three judges dressed in dark business suits. The two motorcyclists guard the door. The Princesse is on trial in the underworld for taking Eurydice's life without permission. All is calm and business-like, with no emotion. This is reflected in the musical motifs. The judges begin by asking questions of Cégeste and then proceed to The Princesse. She admits that she may have overstepped her authority. The judges then speak to Orphée and Heurtebise who have just arrived in the underworld. The Princesse admits that she loves Orphée. The judges tell the two motorcyclists to escort them out. Then the judges interview Eurydice in the presence of Heurtebise. He admits he loves Eurydice. The interrogation is over and the scene shifts to Orphée and The Princess who are left by themselves in the bedroom. They express their feelings for each other in a passionate love duet. The music features a solo flute and is full of warmth, lyricism and emotion. Orphée declares his love for The Princess and wants to be with her forever. She responds to his entreaty and says she will find a way for them to be together. Escorted by a motorcyclist, they leave the bedroom. The judges have returned to decree that The Princesse is allowed her freedom for the time being and Eurydice may return to her life with Orphée as long as he remains silent about what he has seen and does not look at Eurydice. Heurtebise is allowed to accompany them out of the underworld.

A musical interlude accompanies Heurtebise, Eurydice and Orphée on their return trip out of the underworld. They arrive at home through the mirror. The clock strikes 6:00. A letter arrives and Orphée takes it into his study to avoid looking at his wife. Heurtebise works constantly to prevent the pair from seeing one another. The letter Orphée receives is written backwards and must be held up to the mirror to read it. It charges him with being a thief and a murderer. With Heurtebise's help they try to prevent Orphée from looking at Eurydice. Their efforts become almost comical. The musical motifs are fast-paced and reflect the tension that is engendered by their inability to cope. Orphée is so annoyed by the process that he seeks refuge in his study. Eurydice is upset by his attitude and becomes resentful. She does not believe he came for her in the underworld, but for The Princesse. Eventually, Orphée does the unthinkable while in his study. Eurydice comes in for a moment and sits behind him. She reaches over his shoulder to touch his cheek and, as the musical motifs rise to a crescendo, he turns and looks at her. All goes black. The moment is underscored by percussion instruments. When the lights come back up, Eurydice is gone. Orphée defends his actions to Heurtebise, saying he could not bear half measures and the situation had to be seen through to the end.

A crowd is heard outside shouting and making noise. The musical motifs become bright and agitated. A pounding is heard on the front door and voices are heard calling the name Cégeste. Heurtebise wants to reason with the crowd but Orphée insists he must live his own life. Heurtebise hands him a small gun with which to defend himself. The door bursts open and the crowd pours into the room demanding to see Cégeste. A struggle breaks out and someone tries to grab the gun from Orphée. The musical motifs swell into a forté. The gun goes off and Orphée falls. A moment of silence is followed by police sirens. The crowd runs and the police arrive. Accompanied by solemnity in the orchestra, Heurtebise picks up the gun and the motorcyclists arrive. Heurtebise greets them and says, "It's done." The police try to intervene but seem unable to act and back out the door. The motorcyclists pick up Orphée and follow Heurtebise through the mirror.

Orphée returns to the underworld and The Princesse. They greet one another with joy and passion. The musical motifs are fully emotional and flowing, becoming transcendental as she decides she must sacrifice herself to make Orphée immortal. After gaining Orphée's promise to obey her, The Princess commands that Heurtebise restore Orphée to his former life and take him back in time so that he has no memory of what has transpired. It requires monumental effort but Heurtebise carries out The Princesse's commands. Orphée and Heurtebise make the return journey, passing in reverse order all that they passed on their first journey. They enter the bedroom through the mirror to find Eurydice sleeping. The clock strikes 6:00. Eurydice awakens and asks if he was watching her sleep. They hold hands and laugh together. They discuss their coming child. The musical motifs reflect contentment and serenity. Orphée and Eurydice express their love for one another, oblivious to what has transpired. Heurtebise observes their happiness and then passes back through the mirror to The Princesse and Cégeste. They know they will pay a fearsome price for their actions. The two motorcyclists appear and walk toward them. The Princesse and Heurtebise calmly accept their fate with the certainty that their sacrifice was needed and right. The orchestral ending is spare with a sense of calm finality.



# ORPHÉE

## Historical Background

The figure of Orpheus is one of the great legendary heroes introduced to Western Civilization by the ancient Greeks. According to Greek mythology he was a poet, musician and prophet whose divine music could charm all living things, influence the course of rivers and move inanimate objects such as sticks and stones. His mother was Calliope, one of the nine Muses, and his father was the god Apollo, according to many mythological traditions. Apollo gave him a golden lyre and taught him to play it. Calliope taught him to write verses to sing. He was an Argonaut who sailed with Jason on the Argo, saving the ship's crew with his music during their encounter with the Sirens. He fell in love with Eurydice and when she was killed on their wedding day he followed her to the Underworld to have her restored to life. Over the centuries Orpheus has been the subject of countless works of art – poetry, opera and paintings, as well as books and treatises. Since the beginning of the operatic art form in 1600, the character of Orpheus has been the subject of at least seventy operas.

As a mythological figure Orpheus characterizes many timeless truths about humanity. He is a metaphor for the power of music and its ability to move us emotionally and to express deep innermost feelings. He is a metaphor for the power of words and music together to defeat death except for the incidence of human frailty. His story shows that man has free will, a choice of actions, and can find courage to act in the most bleak of circumstances. The story of Orpheus also shows the imperfections of humanity whether it is poor judgment, lack of faith, or poor discipline. And, his story shows the importance of looking to the future, of not looking back when doing so becomes fatal to your cause. The Orpheus myth is full of deeper meanings concerning mortality and immortality that transports the human experience to the archetype level. Its universal aspects explain why the Orpheus myth has been found in various forms in many other cultural traditions, including Sumerian, Mayan, Japanese and Native American.

One twentieth century artist who strongly identified with the Orpheus myth was the Frenchman Jean Cocteau who wrote a one-act play entitled *Orphée* in 1926. He turned his play into an award-winning movie in 1949. The film has a contemporary setting in post-war France and is



Cocteau's story of a poet modeled after his own experience. He is the modern-day Orpheus, a successful poet who is considered somewhat dated and outmoded by the younger, trendier crop of poets and intellectuals who inhabit the Parisian arts scene. Cocteau stated, "Two major themes emerge from the film: the poet must undergo many types of 'death' in order to achieve immortality through his art and he must listen to his own voice which comes from his 'nocturnal factory'." The film *Orphée* won top prizes at the Venice Film Festival in 1950 and the Cannes Film Festival in 1951.

It is Cocteau's film *Orphée* that became the basis for the Philip Glass opera. The libretto of the opera follows the script of the movie closely, with changes made only for the purposes of concision. The milieu of the Cocteau film is successfully maintained without sacrificing Glass' unique operatic adaptation. It is a highly personal work, drawing on an avant-garde film and a mid-century Parisian setting, both of which were instrumental in the development of Glass as a composer. Additionally, Glass composed the opera in 1991 while mourning the sudden death of his wife. The opera ORPHÉE premiered at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1993.

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## A Short Biography of Philip Glass



photo by Robert Mapplethorpe

Philip Glass has enjoyed a wide-ranging and successful career writing music for opera, dance, film, theater, chamber ensemble and orchestra since the latter half of the twentieth century. He is considered one of America's most important composers. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, on January 31, 1937, he began the violin at the age of six; two years later studied the flute at the Peabody Conservatory of Music. He was admitted to the University of Chicago at fifteen and graduated at nineteen. He then attended the Julliard School of Music with a focus on composition and the keyboard. Subsequently, he won a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger, an episode that greatly influenced his further development as a composer. At this juncture he also spent time transcribing the Indian music of Ravi Shankar into Western notation. This experience provided an insight into Eastern music that he eventually incorporated into his own musical style. While in Paris he also became attracted to experimental theater and film. After leaving Paris he traveled extensively through India, Northern Africa and the Himalayas, researching the local musical techniques.

During the decade of the Seventies, Glass composed music that encompassed the musical studies and experiences of earlier years. His compositions were performed by his own concert group, the Philip Glass Ensemble, and the Mabou Mines Theater Company, an organization he co-founded. He also supported himself by driving a taxi and working as a plumber. Notable works during this period were *Music in Twelve Parts* (1974) and the opera *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), the first opera of his Portrait Trilogy.



photo by Annie Leibowitz

Early in his career Glass' compositions were considered "minimalist." This method of composition is characterized by short repetitive phrases repeated multiple times, and slowly altered to introduce a new phrase or musical idea that builds on the previous one. It is music that contains a plethora of musical ideas using a minimum of means. Minimalist style music had its beginnings in the United States in the 1960s and was greatly influenced by classical Indian music, the gamelan music of Bali and West African drumming. Glass applies the minimalist description of his work only to the earliest part of his compositional career. He regards his musical style to be "music with repetitive structures." He currently considers himself a Classicist.

During the next three decades his creative output became even more prolific, producing numerous works for film and theatrical productions, such as opera, and



photo by Chuck Close

symphonies. He completed his Portrait Trilogy with the operas *Satyagraha* (1980) and *Akhnaten*, (1984), wrote operas about the explorers Christopher Columbus (*The Voyage*, 1990) and Vasco da Gama (*White Raven*, 1991), and composed the Cocteau Trilogy (*Orphée*, 1993; *La Belle et la Bête*, 1994; and *Les Enfants Terribles*, 1996). He has written the soundtracks for more than fifty movies and three of his film scores have been nominated for an Academy Award. Over the course of his career Philip Glass has composed more than twenty operas, eight symphonies, multiple orchestral pieces, and soundtracks for a multitude of films. His musical style, both postmodern and avant-garde, has proven to be very popular and accessible to a wide range of the music-loving public.

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## Discussion Questions

1. The story of Orpheus comes to us from Greek mythology. How are the characters different from the original myth?
2. The character of Orpheus is a metaphor. What is he a metaphor for?  
(The power of music/the power of words and music)
3. What is compelling about the use of the Orpheus myth in opera?  
(Orpheus is metaphor for the power of words and music)  
(Opera is the synthesis of words and music)
4. Orpheus and Eurydice are considered archetype characters. What are archetypes and how does it apply to these two characters?
5. In the original myth Eurydice is considered to be “lost twice”. How would this be the case and how is this character treated differently in the Glass opera?
6. Jean Cocteau, whose movie *Orphée* formed the basis for the opera, stated that an important point of his film was to pay attention to one’s “nocturnal factory” – meaning one’s dreams. List some of the dream-like occurrences in the opera. Is the story of the opera structured like a dream?
7. Who is a more important character – The Princesse or Eurydice?
8. Who is Orphée in love with – Eurydice or The Princesse?
9. What is The Princesse a metaphor for?  
(Death)
10. What does the mirror represent?
11. Is the Cocteau/Glass Orphée on a quest for immortality? How would this character define immortality?
12. How does this story show human frailty?
13. The original myth ends in tragedy. The opera does not. Does this affect your view of the significance of the story? Do stories have to end in tragedy in order to have significance?
14. The most recent opera using the Orpheus myth is *Hadestown* (2010) by Anais Mitchell. Why does the ancient story of Orpheus always have relevance?

15. The Orpheus myth contains timeless truths about humanity. Why, then, do we currently think of a myth as – a lie?
16. Cocteau said his film was about the life of a poet. Do you agree? Must an artist suffer in order to create? Must an artist/poet sacrifice in order to be successful?
17. Philip Glass' music is sometimes described as "minimalist." How would you describe his music? Another word used to describe his music is "repetitive." Do you find it so? Would you describe it differently?
18. At the end of Act I The Princesse commands Cégeste to not look back – that someone was once turned into a pillar of salt for doing so. What does this statement refer to? (From the Bible – Lot and his wife leaving the city of Sodom) Why should Cégeste not look back? Is there a larger point being made?
19. Why does The Princesse sacrifice herself by defying the judges of the underworld and restoring Orphée to life and to Eurydice?
20. As the story unfolds, each time the clock strikes an hour it is always 6:00. What is the significance of this? Has time stood still?
21. Jean Cocteau stated that an important theme of his film was that the poet must undergo many types of 'death' in order to achieve immortality through his art. Do you think Cocteau's theme is borne out in the opera?