**Operas on the Orpheus Myth: Old to New**

Operas based on Orphean myths can be traced back to the earliest examples of the art form in 1600 and are continuing to be written into the 21st Century. The following is a brief list of operas based on the myth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Century</th>
<th>Versions</th>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17th</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Jacopo Peri</td>
<td>Dafne (around 1597)</td>
<td>Italian composer Jacopo Peri is often called the inventor of opera. He wrote the first work to be called an opera today, Dafne (around 1597), and also the first opera to have survived to the present day, Euridice (1600).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18th</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Christoph Willibald Gluck</td>
<td>Orfeo ed Euridice</td>
<td>Gluck’s Orfeo ed Euridice was a popular work, and one of the most influential on subsequent German opera.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19th</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Jacques Offenbach</td>
<td>Orpheus in the Underworld</td>
<td>Offenbach’s opera culminates in the risqué Galop infernal that shocked some in the audience at the premiere, but has become famous as the music for the French &quot;can-can.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20th</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Philip Glass</td>
<td>Orphée</td>
<td>Philip Glass is a chamber opera with a libretto adapted by the composer from Jean Cocteau’s film.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21st</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ricky Ian Gordon</td>
<td>Orfeas</td>
<td>Ricky Ian Gordon composed an hour-long song cycle in two acts, Orfeas and Euridice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Orpheus myth reflects universal human themes—it has been found in various forms in many other cultural traditions, and has inspired poetry, paintings, books, and more. Orpheus has been the subject of at least seventy operas since the 1600s. The French playwright Jean Cocteau was deeply interested in the Orpheus myth and wrote a one-act play entitled Orphée in 1926. He transformed the play into a movie in 1949 using a contemporary setting in post-war France and a poet modeled after his own experience.

Composer Philip Glass used the Cocteau film as the basis for his chamber opera Orphée. The composer’s libretto closely follows the script of the movie. A highly personal work, Orphée was composed in 1991 while Glass was mourning the sudden death of his wife, the artist Candy Jernigan. The opera was advertised as a “folk opera,” set in Depression-era America.

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Music by Philip Glass, Libretto by Jean Cocteau, adapted by Philip Glass and edited by Robert Brustein

Orphée Score, published by ChesterNovello

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**Myths, Movies, and Music Legends**

The ancient Greeks introduced many legendary heroes through the great body of stories they brought to the world. According to Greek mythology, Orpheus was a poet, musician, and prophet whose songs could charm both gods and wild beasts and persuade the natural world—trees and rocks—to dance. According to many mythological traditions, Caliope (one of the nine Muses) was his mother, and the god Apollo was his father. With the powers passed to him from his parents, he was able to follow his dead wife Eurydice into the underworld to bring her back. Among deeper thoughts about mortality and immortality, and looking to the future and not the past, Orpheus can be viewed as a metaphor for the power of music to move us emotionally and to express our innermost feelings.

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Meet the Inspiration and Filmmaker

Jean Maurice Eugène Clément Cocteau (1889 – 1963) was a French poet, novelist, dramatist, designer, playwright, artist, and filmmaker. Cocteau is best known for his novel Les Enfants Terribles (1929), and the films Blood of a Poet (1930), Les Parents Terribles (1948), Beauty and the Beast (1946), and Orpheus (1949). His circle of associates, friends, and lovers included Pablo Picasso, actors Jean Marais, Yul Brynner, Marlene Dietrich, the designer Coco Chanel, composers Erik Satie and Igor Stravinsky, and singer Édith Piaf.

Cocteau always seemed to be working on projects, often simultaneously. A sample schedule: In May, the paperback compendium of his plays, Théâtre de poche, arrived in bookstores. During the summer, Cocteau adapted the Tennessee Williams play A Streetcar Named Desire and organized the Festival du Film Maudit in Biarritz. The filming of Orphée (Orpheus) lasted from August to November. Orphée won top prizes at the Venice Film Festival and the Cannes Film Festival. In 1951, the filmmaker was made a chevalier of the Légion d’honneur—the first official recognition of Cocteau and his works.

From 1950 onward, he was considered a true celebrity, often being asked to preside over events, to write prefaces, to illustrate programs, and to design posters. In 1957, at the age of 68, he learned to make pottery; he created a new collection of poems, and he attended a bullfight in Aries, France with Picasso. While visiting Venice in 1958, he decided to take a training course at a Murano glass factory, then returned to Paris for the opening of an exhibition of his pottery at the Galerie Lucie Weill. Though continuing his busy pace, in the early 1960s, his health started to fail and he began slowing down. On October 11,1963, one hour after learning of Édith Piaf’s death, Jean Cocteau passed away.

Meet the Composer and Librettist: Philip Glass

Philip Glass was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1937. A graduate of the University of Chicago and the Juilliard School, he also studied in France with the legendary pedagogue Nadia Boulanger and worked closely with the sitar virtuoso and composer Ravi Shankar. Through operas, symphonies, collaborations with leading rock, pop, and world music artists, Philip Glass has had an extraordinary and unprecedented impact upon the musical and intellectual life of modern times. His revolutionary musical style has been dubbed “minimalism,” though Glass himself has never liked the term and prefers to speak of himself as a composer of music with repetitive structures.

Glass has composed more than twenty operas, eight symphonies, two piano concertos, and concertos for violin, piano, timpani, and saxophone quartet and orchestra. His film soundtracks range from new scores for the stylized classics of Jean Cocteau to Errol Morris’s documentary about former defense secretary Robert McNamara, and include popular works such as The Hours, Kundun, Notes on a Scandal, The Thin Blue Line, and The Truman Show. Glass has written chamber music as well—string quartets and a growing body of work for solo piano and organ. He has collaborated with Paul Simon, Linda Ronstadt, Yo-Yo Ma, Doris Lessing, Woody Allen, Stephen Colbert, and Leonard Cohen. Dark Sisters composer, Nico Muhly, worked for Mr. Glass. A time. After leaving Juilliard in 1962, Glass moved to Pittsburgh and worked as a school-based composer-in-residence in the public school system, composing various choral, chamber, and orchestral music.