



## Research Article

# When Orpheus looks back from the opera stage<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

While mythology provides profound insights into the human condition and the universe, opera has drawn much of its thematic material from mythology, with a particular emphasis on the Orpheus myth. The main question of this research centers on the significance of the Orpheus myth within the realm of opera and the enduring reasons behind its selection as a recurring subject matter for centuries. To comprehend the import of Orpheus in opera, it becomes imperative to conduct an examination of the sources that piqued the interest of early opera composers and librettists. Furthermore, delving into the identity of Orpheus and its multifaceted connotations is essential for a comprehensive understanding. Opera, emerging during the Renaissance period, finds its roots in the cultural revival that sought inspiration from Ancient Greece. Hence, the foundational sources for opera lie in the musical heritage of Ancient Greece and the profound significance of Ancient Greek tragedy as an art form within Greek society. The Orpheus myth, distinguished as the paramount mythological narrative, became a pivotal source of inspiration for opera creators who sought to craft a novel and potent form of vocal expression reminiscent of the emotive potency witnessed in Ancient Greece. The portrayal of Orpheus as a heroic figure symbolizing the transcendent power of music, along with the dramatic intensity inherent in the myth, rendered it an alluring choice for opera. Consequently, this myth significantly influenced opera composers and librettists who, too, aspired to harness the captivating power of music. This resonance has led to the creation of numerous Orpheus-themed operas since the inception of opera itself. This research, undertaken from a historical perspective, employs qualitative research methodologies, encompassing historical and descriptive analysis methods. The corpus of analyzed documents comprises primary sources narrating the Orpheus story, as well as foundational, reliable, and current scholarly articles, theses, and books elucidating the interplay between mythology and opera. The journey of Orpheus within the realm of opera is observed to have commenced from the very inception of opera and appears to persist to the present day. Consequently, this research underscores the enduring relationship between opera and the Orpheus myth, spanning centuries, warranting recognition as an interdisciplinary field of study under the nomenclature 'Orpheus Opera.' Considering the limited scholarly attention devoted to the intersection of Orpheus and opera within our national context, this study aspires to serve as an inaugural foray into this domain.

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### Introduction

Orpheus, as the subject of mythology and a religion, has been one of the most important themes of an opera since its inception, given the profound impact of his inherent musical power and its symbolic expression.

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This article aims to investigate why the Orpheus myth has been a recurring theme in opera for centuries, tracing its origins from the Renaissance era when the first operas drew inspiration from Ancient Greece and continuing through the Baroque, Classical, Romantic, and Contemporary eras. 31 Orpheus operas between 1600 – 1700, 51 between 1700 – 1800, 10 between 1800 – 1900, 32 from 1900 to the present, a total of 124 different Orpheus operas by different composers and librettists form the basis of this inquiry (Davidson Ride, 1993; Saide, 1992; Kapp, 1998; Loewenberg, 1978).

The reasons behind Orpheus' enduring appeal and selection across such a vast historical spectrum lie in how he resonates with each era's individuals and provides answers to evolving questions of humanity. Opera, as a genre with a rich and deep history spanning approximately 450 years, has strong social, psychological, artistic, linguistic, and dramatic connections with Orpheus.

Opera did not emerge spontaneously; its inception during the Renaissance was a deliberate effort of a group of musicians, composers, poets, philosophers, critics and academics gathering to find an expressive medium as influential as Ancient Greek tragedy grounded in Ancient Greek music thought. While influenced by preceding musical forms, vocal music and stage works opera's emergence was the product of human thought and creativity.

With a history of approximately 450 years, opera has had a profound and lasting impact, yet there is a lack of Turkish sources addressing its connection to mythology, especially the Orpheus myth. At least, there are no sources available to the author of this article.

Therefore, this research offers opportunities for opera enthusiasts, both amateur and professional listeners, creative practitioners such as singers, composers, librettists, directors who engage with opera, as well as scholars studying opera academically and, of course, students receiving opera education.

Furthermore, this study is open to interdisciplinary readings in fields such as mythology, philosophy, psychology, and more. The symbols and meanings contained within the Orpheus myth will form the foundation for such interdisciplinary examinations.

### **Purpose and Problem of the Research**

The purpose of this research is to explore the connection between the Orpheus myth and opera. This connection is established by examining how opera, from its inception to the present day, has approached the Orpheus myth from various angles. The central question of this research pertains to the relationship between mythology and opera, delving into what the Orpheus myth signifies for opera and why this connection has persisted for centuries.

### **Method**

This research adopts a historical perspective and employs qualitative research methods, including the examination of written documents and conceptual comparison, to conduct historical and descriptive analyses. Data for this research were collected through literature review techniques, and the sources obtained were analyzed and evaluated to reach conclusions.

### **Findings**

In order to understand Orpheus's relationship with opera, it is essential to scan the sources that initially intrigued early opera composers and librettists and investigate who Orpheus is and the meanings of this identity. If the Renaissance era represents a rebirth seeking its sources in Ancient Greece, then the source for opera lies in the conception of music in Ancient Greece and its manifestation within the artistic form of Greek tragedy within Greek society.

During the Renaissance era, in pursuit of recreating the influence of Ancient Greece, opera creators naturally gravitated towards mythological narratives, with the myth of Orpheus prominently standing out. The allure, charm, and potency exhibited by Orpheus as a musician determine the affinity of opera, which seeks to evoke a similar impact, to this myth. These findings will form the core of the research and will elucidate why Orpheus holds such profound significance within the realm of opera.

### The Myth of Orpheus

Orpheus's mother is Kalliope, one of the nine Muses, while his father is either the Thracian river god Oeagros or, according to some sources, Apollo. Apollo gave Orpheus his lyre and taught him music (Uraz, n.d., p. 120). With his singing and mastery of the lyre, Orpheus could move even the most cruel individuals, calm wild animals, gather trees around him, move rocks, and alter the course of rivers (Estin, Laporte, 2002, p. 183). Unlike other Greek heroes known for their strength and valor, Orpheus stands out as a sensitive and refined poet, a hero who captivated hearts with the melodies of his lyre, accomplishing what brutal strength could not (Can, 1994, p. 225).



**Picture 1.** Animals listening to Orpheus. Ancient Roman floor mosaic. Palermo Arch. Museum. Photo. Giovanni Dall'Orto (Web 1)

Indeed, in his quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece, Orpheus did not actively engage in combat alongside the Argonauts; instead, he assumed a quasi-priestly role, pacifying both the warriors and the sirens with his music (D'Aoust, 2013, p. 2). Unlike other heroes, Orpheus lacked physical strength and power, rendering him unable to partake in rowing tasks; however, he took on the role of a "coxswain," maintaining the rowers' rhythm (Grimal, 1907, p. 582).

The story of Orpheus, as it is known today, is indebted to the works of two Roman poets: Ovidius in "Metamorphoses" and Vergilius in "Georgics" (Moss, 1995, p. 21).

### The Story of Orpheus

Ovid's narrative of Orpheus forms the basis for the well-known Orpheus story. Orpheus and Eurydice, both deeply in love and married, encounter a tragic incident when Eurydice is fatally bitten by a serpent while wandering in the fields. Overwhelmed by grief, Orpheus takes his lyre and embarks on a journey to the underworld to retrieve his beloved wife. His goal is to bring Eurydice back to the world above. With his song, he enchants Cerberus, who guards the gates of Hades, and persuades Charon to ferry him across the river Styx. Pluto, the god of the underworld, is initially angered by the presence of a mortal, but Orpheus's music soothes him, and he relents (Ovidius, 1994).

Orpheus pleads with Pluto and Proserpina, explaining his love for Eurydice and his profound sorrow at her premature death. He implores the gods to return his love to life. The gods, moved by his music agree to his request on one condition: Orpheus must lead Eurydice back to the surface without looking back at her until they reach the world above. As they ascend, Orpheus, overwhelmed by doubt, cannot resist the urge to glance back at Eurydice before they reach the surface, causing her to vanish once more into the realm of the dead (Graves, 2010, p. 138).



**Picture 2.** Orpheus looks back at Eurydice” , Stub, CG Kratzenstein (Web 2)

Having lost his wife again, Orpheus returns to Thrace in despair. He mourns Eurydice for months swearing off the company of other women. This indifference to the women in the region attracts the attention of a group of Maenads who become jealous of him. The jealous Maenads incite the women of Thrace to attack Orpheus, leading to his brutal death. Their cries drown out even the sound of Orpheus's voice, which had the power to move not only humans but also the natural world. The enraged women tear Orpheus apart, and his head, along with his lyre, is thrown into the river Hebros. Orpheus's head and lyre eventually wash ashore on Lesbos Island, where a temple and shrine are erected in his honor. Lesbos Island is considered the center of lyric poetry (Graves, 2010, p. 138).

Another interpretation of Orpheus's demise attributes it to Dionysus's anger over Orpheus's devotion to Apollo. When Dionysus conquered Thrace, Orpheus failed to honor the god and, instead, taught the Thracians, who held him in high regard, the sacred mysteries and urged them to abstain from wrongdoing. Orpheus also offended Dionysus by praising Helios, whom he called the greatest of the gods, Apollo, during his daily ritual on Mount Pangaeus. In retaliation, Dionysus sent the Maenads to attack Orpheus, accusing him of turning women away from men and promoting homosexual relationships. As a result, the Maenads, driven by jealousy and rage, attacked Orpheus and killed him, dismembering his body and casting his severed head into the Hebros River. Orpheus's severed head drifted along the river, its beautiful songs freezing the blood of all who heard it, until it reached the shores of Lesbos Island (Graves, 2010, p. 138).

In Vergil's account, Orpheus is not at the center of the story but is a key figure within another myth. Aristaeus, a shepherd who has lost his bee colony, seeks out Proteus who guards Neptune's herds, for answers. Proteus blames Aristaeus for the death of Eurydice, asserting that Aristaeus pursued her, causing her to be bitten by a serpent and die. Aristaeus decides to make amends with the gods by offering a great sacrifice on Orpheus's altar. When he does so, bees miraculously emerge from the carcasses of the sacrificed animals (Vergil, n.d., p. 105-110).

Unlike Ovid's narrative, Vergil's account does not feature the reunion of Orpheus and Eurydice in the afterlife. However, it does touch upon the tragic depictions of ordinary souls in Hades and how the magic of Orpheus's music temporarily alleviates the suffering of those enduring torment in the underworld (Graves, 2010, p. 137).

According to Roman poets, Orpheus is a hero not a god. He possesses superhuman abilities and is close to the realm of the gods, yet he remains a mortal. He is esteemed as a prophet and holds a high rank in the religious hierarchy.

### **Orphism**

Orphism as a recognized religion has had a significant influence on prominent philosophers and literary figures of the Greek world, such as Plato and Pythagoras. The presence of several features of Orphism in Christianity, which underwent a transformation through the teachings of Saint Paul, has been a subject of debate. The doctrine that determines one's position in the afterlife based on their conduct in this world, as observed in monotheistic religions, also finds expression in this mystical belief system (Berk, 2010, p. 116). According to Orphism, the divine soul within humans is imprisoned in the body (soma) like in a grave (sema) and strives to reach the afterlife. To achieve this, the soul must undergo multiple lifetimes in an effort to cleanse itself of sin. The process of purification and the attainment of an

honest way of life will be achieved through the abstention from substances derived from living organisms, such as meat and eggs. The virtuous can look forward to a happy afterlife, while the wicked will face judgment before the lord of the dead and be led to the Tartarus swamp (Erhat, 1996, p. 255).

Orphism stands out as a pagan religion due to its dualistic structure, belief in the afterlife, and the incorporation of pantheistic ideas (Berk, 2010, p. 116). Orphic priests distinguished Dionysos as the "god of emotions" from Apollon, the "god of wisdom." This distinction explains why the severed head of Orpheus was placed in the temple of Dionysos and his lyre in the temple of Apollon (Graves, 2010, p. 140).

### **Sources of Orpheus in the Renaissance Opera**

References to Orpheus appear in literature in the 5th century BC, in a poem by a poet named Ibycus and in a play by Aeschylus, although these two sources are currently lost. Subsequent quotations from these mentioned sources have allowed the traces of Orpheus to be followed.

In the 5th century BC, Aristias had a play titled "Orpheus," and in the 4th century BC, Antiphanes had another play with the same title (Moss, 1995, p. 14). Later, Euripides mentioned Orpheus's journey to Hades in his play *Alceste*. Plato also wrote about Orpheus and Orphism, implying that Orpheus was a real person, although this view did not gain widespread acceptance (Moss, 1995, p. 17). Neither Euripides nor Plato mentioned the name of Orpheus's wife. The poet Hermesianax used the name Agriope, which suggests that Eurydice may have been a nymph or a dryad (Moss, 1995, p. 18).

Throughout history, references to Orpheus continued into the Renaissance and Baroque periods. However, during this time, most inspirations from Orpheus were based on the narratives, translations, and interpretations of Ovid, Virgil, and Boethius. Boethius's book "The Consolation of Philosophy," which tells the story of Orpheus, was translated in 1380 by Chaucer, in 1556 by G. Colville, in 1561 by T. Chaloner, and even in the 16th century by Queen Elizabeth (Moss, 1995, p. 30).

Additionally, in the 16th century, many music theorists were influenced by Boethius's book "De Musica." It is highly likely that the Camerata group, who were pioneers of opera, was aware of the story of Orpheus in "The Consolation of Philosophy." This group later commissioned the first opera about Orpheus, "L'Euridice," to be composed by Jacopo Peri and librettist Ottavio Rinuccini in Florence at the request of the Medici family in the late 16th century. Ludovico Domenichi also translated the same work in 1550 (Moss, 1995, p. 31).

### **The Relationship Between Myth and Music**

Why has opera, over the centuries, particularly focused on the myth of Orpheus and mythology in general? This question can be answered from various perspectives.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his comparison of myth and music, suggests that both are fundamentally structural and thus untranslatable but endlessly transformable. Myth, like music, cannot be translated into any other form of communication; similarly, both myth and music are "infinitely transformable" in terms of their form (Lévi-Strauss, 1971, p. 647). The potential for this infinite transformability in both forms opens the doors to creativity for humans, who possess the ability and imagination to engage with them.

While all of mythology awaits the opening of these doors, the door to Orpheus seems to be already ajar. Adorno's assertion that Orpheus is "the" opera may indeed be true. The story of Orpheus is exceptionally captivating, and can be endlessly transformed especially in the hands of opera creators.

Lévi-Strauss remarks on myth: "When a myth is narrated, listeners receive a message that seems to come from nowhere; this is why it is attributed to a supernatural origin" (cited in Floros, 2012, p. 25). In this sense, myth and magic function in part as a hidden narrative and a semi-hidden activity that addresses the mysterious; in contrast, philosophy and art function as public discourse and public activity when they reject mystery. These dualities will help to identify the moments when the Orpheus myth transitioned from one cultural form to another, altering its mythical nature. However, it is essential to recognize that these dualities are analytical tools of understanding of intertwined elements within culture and history (Marchenkov, 1998, p. 29).

## Orpheus and the Opera

One of the most significant reasons opera creators have turned to the myth of Orpheus is its portrayal of a tragic, profoundly human love story with a poignant ending. The myth of Orpheus holds direct dramatic appeal. The hero overcomes various obstacles in his quest to regain his lost love but ultimately succumbs to his own humanity. The tragedy of Orpheus lies within the depths of his own humanity. He is a tragic hero defeated by his flaws (Dycus, 2016, p. 5).

Moreover, the traditional form of the Orpheus legend includes a wedding, a tragic death, a journey to the underworld, a second parting of two lovers, and numerous other episodes with great potential for the stage adds to the dramatic intensity (Buller, 1995, p. 57).

Another reason that makes the Orpheus myth unique is its ability to be continuously transformed in the hands of creators, especially those in the world of opera (Floros, 2012, p. 20). In this sense, the Orpheus myth, by its very nature as a narrative, allows creators to identify with the hero. It becomes intimately related to the artist and enables the artist's immediacy. Thus, the Orpheus myth can be considered a self-reflective myth (Dycus, 2016, p. 5).

The fascination with the dramatic intensity of Orpheus's story also finds resonance in social and cultural contexts. The invention of opera, as an expected outcome in the development of music history, is not coincidental because it encapsulated what a group of intellectuals in the Renaissance period believed in the immense power and influence of ancient Greek Tragedy. In the Renaissance, a group of intellectuals, contemplating the potential contained within ancient Greek Tragedy, found their answer to how to transform these powers and influences with the demands of their era: opera. In this light, it is essential to examine what ancient Greek music and Tragedy were about. While Europe has its "rebirth", how did they influence "intellectuals" who sought to express themselves, centuries later.

## The Notion of Music in Ancient Greece

Comprehending the concept of music and what tragedy conveys in ancient Greece can be challenging for today's person in a life-cycle in which the perception of time is fundamentally different. As the music is transformed into a consumable "tool for sparing time" lost its primordial simplicity and directness. This is because the musical thought of ancient Greece was vital, posed a moral quandary, and concerned the governance of the State. What may astonish contemporary individuals holds significance for the people of that era.

Bringing the idea of music so close to humans is parallel to the idea of humanism in Ancient Greek thought. The most important thinker who addressed and theorized the problem of the power of music is Plato. Plato, who lived in the 4th century BC, regarded music as the most crucial element of education. This belief stemmed from his conviction that music permeates the depths of the human soul, exerts a profound influence on individuals, and consequently, transforms them. In fact, Plato even considered music as a kind of guardian for the State. He indicated a noteworthy harmony between the institutions of the state and music and cautioned against innovations in music for the preservation of the state and the sustainability of its governance (Plato, 2012, p. 127).

In order to understand the perspective of the Greeks on music and what tragedy meant to them, it is necessary to delve into the concept of ethos. Ethos generally means comprehensive ethics. However, when applied to music, it has a more specific meaning that cannot be easily translated into other languages. According to the Ethos doctrine, music affects the listener's voluntary faculties in three ways: It affects "positively", "semi-paralyzing" and "temporarily suspending" (as seen in the ecstasy of the Dionysian cult).

These effects manifest themselves in three dimensions: expanding (dyastaltic), contracting (systaltic) and calming (hesychastic) (Floros, 2012 p. 23). According to Cleonides, the diastaltic ethos could direct the will towards nobility, masculine courage, and heroic actions which had a definite place in tragedy. The systaltic ethos, on the contrary, led the will into non-masculine moods, erotic passions, laments, supplications, and similar emotions. Hesychastic ethos produced inner balance and peace (cited in Floros, 2012, p.23).

Plato's teachings on music have consistently served as a primary source for the entirety of the historical development of music thought in Europe. Consequently, during the Renaissance period, which is regarded as a pivotal juncture in European musical culture, Plato's influence persisted. Marsilio Ficino, a philosopher, translator, and interpreter of ancient philosophy, wielded significant influence during this epoch. The myth of Orpheus, as it did for numerous

Renaissance thinkers, occupied a central position in Ficino's philosophy of music, exemplifying the role of this myth in the contemporary musical thought of the era (Marchenkov, 1998, p. 2).

In his eighth book of madrigals, Monteverdi explicitly references Plato while articulating his own thoughts. Drawing from ancient Greek philosophy, he posits that passions and emotions can be categorized into three types: anger (*ira*), temperance (*temperanza*), and humility (*humilitá*), and that music can thus be organized under three concepts as "excited" (*concitato*), "soft" (*molle*), and "temperate" (*temperato*) (as cited in Floros, 2012, p. 23).

During the Renaissance era, the Orpheus myth, from Ficino to Monteverdi, underwent secularization, and the mystical powers it symbolized for the philosopher evolved into entirely aesthetic aspects for the composer (Marchenkov, 1998, p. 205).

### **Ancient Greek Tragedy and the Opera**

Another phenomenon that inspired the invention of opera is the ancient Greek consciousness, looking at religion, the state and civilization in general through music and assigning it a unique role.

In his 1879 analysis titled "The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music," Friedrich Nietzsche interprets Greek culture and the origins of Ancient tragedy. Within this work, Nietzsche develops the renowned concepts of the Apollonian and Dionysian, elucidating the "tremendous contrast" between the two Greek "art deities," Apollo and Dionysus. Nietzsche regards the sun god Apollo as the representative of "visual art," while Dionysus stands as the progenitor of "non-visual music art."

According to Nietzsche, the convergence of these opposing principles gives rise to Ancient tragedy. The key to Nietzsche's music-philosophical understanding is encapsulated in the following statement: "The Dionysian, in its primal delight, even in suffering, is perceived as pleasure, and it is the common source of both music and the myth of tragedy" (Nietzsche, 1999, pp. 111-112).

Tragedy, the rules and outlines of which are established through Aristotle's *Poetics*, held a unique power just like music within itself: the magic of the performance, the magnificence presented on the stage, the representation of the intervention of extraordinary powers such as "deus ex machina" in tragedy, and the catharsis that the audience experienced which was very likely to be manipulated.

In 1586, Lorenzo Giacomini described the pleasure derived from tragedy. According to Giacomini, this pleasure can be categorized into four forms: The audience enjoys learning about the events depicted in the tragedy and is astonished by the realization of incredible things. They appreciate the play as an "imitation" with its beautiful language, sweet music, festive dance, staging with grand machinery, magnificent costumes, and masterfully crafted plot that involves the twists and turns of fate. They develop affection for the characters on stage and find joy in reflecting their own freedom through the characters' 'fearful adventures'. In this way, they personally experience the 'pleasures that accompany the cathartic process' (as cited in Hoxby, 2005, p.264).

Classical authors have narrated numerous stories about the extraordinary emotional power of ancient tragedy and music, but perhaps no tragedian has been as influential as Euripides. Plutarch records that a citizen of Athens used Euripides' *Electra* to move a conquering army to pity and thus prevent the destruction of Athens. Lucian mentions that during the reign of Lysimachus, the successor of Alexander the Great, Euripides' representation of *Andromeda* set the entire city of Abdera on a tragic fire, with people reciting the roles of Perseus and *Andromeda* in the streets and enthusiastically imagining Perseus holding the head of Medusa (as cited in Hoxby, 2005, p. 257).

These accounts serve as evidence of the profound impact of tragedy on Ancient Greek society. Naturally, the creators of opera, who sought to evoke the same powerful effect, turned their attention to the essence of music and tragedy in Ancient Greece while exploring their roots in the hope of a rebirth.

### **Return to the Roots and the Discovery of Opera**

The pioneers of opera or 'dramma per musica' may not have directly studied the music of Euripides, but they were able to learn a lot from the texts of his tragedies. One of the main goals of these creators was to find a musical style that could speak the language of passions by synthesizing textual, musical, and expressive content. In this sense, perhaps no musical-poetic form has had a formative impact as the lament (which held a separate value in Euripides' tragedies) on the early

development of opera. The pioneers of opera, considering monodic (based on a single voice) singing as one of their tools, transformed the lament into a song while also aiming to preserve the cathartic function of tragedy. In this regard, while the formal example of Euripides' laments may be important, the high and special meanings attributed to the singing voice may have created a much more important dramatic legacy (as cited in Hoxby, 2005, pp. 258-259). As there is no laughter in Orpheus's story, no lighthearted music, never a cheerful affair; his music, it seems, was to be transmitted from antiquity as a somber out pouring, a response to fear, violence, loss, and grief. (Agnew, 2008, p. 136).

The persuasive power contained within ancient Greek tragedies lies in their being "sung" from beginning to end, the Greeks' reliance on simple but impactful melodies, and their use of modes that evoke strong emotions in the souls of listeners through pitch and rhythm. It is undeniable that those who articulate the idea of opera or 'dramma per musica' were influenced by this content. The use of monodic singing as a powerful tool and the initial foundations of recitative, known as *stile rappresentativo*, emerged as a result of this quest.

However, there are also critics who reject any meaningful connection between tragedy and *stile rappresentativo*, claiming that this new form of expression finds its origins in the musical practice of the fifteenth century and developed in dialogue with contemporary madrigals, solo songs, and theater music (Hoxby, 2005, p. 254).

Taking into account the ancient Greek tragedy, two influential historians of early opera, Claude Palisca and Nino Pirrotta, emphasize the contribution of contemporary theatrical forms such as masques, pastorals, and comedies to the form of "dramma per musica." According to Palisca, what contemporary tastes demand is not a "true tragedy" but a mixed genre (cited in Hoxby, 2005, p. 254). However, when scholars reject the claim that early opera or "tragédie en musique" is a "true tragedy," they conceal both the open and debatable boundaries of tragedy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the enthusiastic nourishment of Baroque opera from a specific tragic dramaturgical style. Baroque opera encompasses a powerful and consistent interpretation of a series of Euripides tragedies, highly valued in Hellenistic Greece, by incorporating the musical representation of passions, episodic plot structure, choral interludes, happy catastrophes, and the sources of tragic pleasure and catharsis (Hoxby, 2005, p. 269).

### **The Camerata Group**

Who are these wise individuals mentioned in the text, who came together as the Camerata group, discussing topics such as the influential tragedies of Euripides, Aristotle's Poetics, appropriate poetic forms for tragedy, how rhetoric and the passions of poetry are activated, and the meaning of tragic catharsis, in order to conduct their own research for their expressions as pioneers of opera?

Indeed, "coming together" is the initial action of this group of humanist scholars, as they adopt the name 'Camerata' (Chamber Group), which could mean gathering in a "room." The Camerata group, one of the many academic or semi-academic intellectual groups that gathered in Florence during that period, conducted their intellectual activities under the patronage of Giovanni Bardi from approximately 1573 to 1587. The term 'Camerata' is also associated with another group who gathered around Jacopo Corsi in the 1590s. Among these intellectuals gathered around Bardi and Corsi were musicians Giulio Caccini, Pietro Strozzi, Jacopo Peri, Emilio de' Cavalieri, Cristoforo Malvezzi, Alessandro Striggio, theorist Vincenzo Galilei (father of astronomer Galileo Galilei), Girolamo Mei, and the first opera librettist, Ottavio Rinuccini (Sadie, 1992, vol. 1, p. 701).

The musicians, poets, and scholars of the Camerata group agree that, although their knowledge may not be based on the true remainings of Greek music, something beautiful can be constructed based on its ideals. They establish their principles based on what they know about the musical arrangements of Greek tragedies - dialogues and choruses sung in a simple, monophonic style with equally simple instrumental accompaniment. Composer Jacopo Peri is convinced to dramatize a Greek myth (assisted by Corsi), and poet Ottavio Rinuccini takes on the task of writing the text. The group's first production is *Daphne*, adapted from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, skipping the well-known and beloved classical author Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in Europe. Although not as ambitious as *Agamemnon*, *Oedipus*, or *Medea* when performed, *Daphne* is well-received by the audience as an authentic reconstruction of Greek tragedy, and it is reported that the work is repeated several times. However, this "first opera" does not serve as a complete source today, as most of its music, except for a few fragments, has been lost (Lee, 2000, p. 6).



The musical score of Camerata's second attempt has been preserved in its entirety to the present day. Jacopo Peri, perhaps inspired by Politian's century-old Orpheus<sup>3</sup>, based his new endeavor on the myth of Orpheus and named it Eurydice. The libretto, also authored by Rinuccini, does not include Orpheus looking back; instead, the hero successfully brings Eurydice back from the underworld. Peri adapts the text to a simple yet flexible monodic music style, similar to what he used in *Daphne*. The work was first performed in 1600 at the Pitti Palace to celebrate the marriage of King Henri IV of France and Maria de' Medici, with Peri himself singing the role of Orpheus. The staging was modest, and the orchestra was small. Corsi accompanied the songs on the harpsichord (Lee, 2000, p. 6).

Thus, a group of humanists, using the Orpheus myth, reintroduced monodic music to the theater, which was necessary for the creation of opera. In the preface of *Eurydice*, Peri claims to have found the only style capable of effectively adapting Greek myths to the stage by setting aside all other methods of singing heard until then, referring to Emilio de' Cavalieri, who incorporated the monodic vocal style into the richer sacred drama music traditions of that time (Lee, 2000, p. 7). Camerata's *Eurydice* is undoubtedly neither a true Greek tragedy nor a true opera. They are, rightfully so, experimental attempts in Greek drama that brought monodic music back to the stage for opera. At this point, Claudio Monteverdi's response to these endeavors is composing *Orpheus*, which is considered the "first true opera" in opera history. Monteverdi delineates the boundaries of opera as a new genre and presents the first example of a culture that would continue for centuries after him.

Monteverdi is aware that if Orpheus's story is to be dramatized, it can only be achieved through monodic solos. However, Monteverdi's proposed monody does not rely on the historical fact that Greek tragedy was performed monodically; it arises from the dramatic necessity for Orpheus to express his individual grief. If Orpheus is a singer capable of moving heaven and hell and a lover burdened with profound sorrow in the face of death, he must express himself with more challenging tones.

Despite being a madrigalist capable of complexity in polyphony, Monteverdi creates an extraordinary vocal writing for this new genre, which approaches human speech but goes beyond it, with daring chromaticism and musical intensity. When Orpheus pleads with Charon to ferry him across the Styx, declamation becomes an opera aria for the first time. Monteverdi, considering the experiences of the Camerata, expands these endeavors by defining a new genre.

Monteverdi utilizes all the tools at his disposal to tell the story of Orpheus. He blends the styles of Renaissance music, allowing the music to accompany the dramatic flow as required by the situation. The developed recitative, the "pastoral" music and songs (which also are considered predecessors of the genre) that define the love of Orpheus and Eurydice, the serious and religious music (which is specific to the "sacred dramas") accompanying his journey to the underworld, the choral music accompanying his sorrow and joy, dance, instrumental toccatas (which can be defined as overtures or opening music), and the "ritornello" where the orchestra provides unity upon its return—all these elements come together in Monteverdi's opera concept. In this opera, where music is exalted, librettist Alessandro Striggio brings *Musica* onto the stage at critical moments of action, allowing her to express her influential presence by constantly repeating her "ritornello."

Monteverdi's *Orpheus* looks back at a century of Renaissance music history and the entire history of opera, as it still embodies all the main traditions in an embryonic form that continue to govern opera composition, such as recitative, aria, duet, chorus and dance interludes, musical characterization, and leitmotif (Lee, 2000, p. 8). After Monteverdi's *Orpheus*, which can be considered the first "true" opera, the myth of Orpheus continues to be the source that this genre has most frequently turned to throughout its own journey. Librettists and composers, in various periods and forms including comedy, grand opera, and singspiel, have continued to use this myth, sometimes altering the ending of the story and sometimes remaining faithful to its sources. The centuries-long journey of opera has, in a sense, been the

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<sup>3</sup> In the celebrations held for the return of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga to Mantua, the task of preparing a performance that had to be ready within two days fell upon Angelo Ambrogini di Montepulciano, also known as Angiolo Poliziano or Politian. In 1472, the young Politian chose the myth of Orpheus, which he believed to be suitable for the new secular spirit of the Renaissance, beyond the liturgical dramas of his time. The name of his performance was *La Favola d'Orfeo*. While Politian had his protagonist recite Latin verses from Ovid, he wrote most of the play in Italian rather than Latin, making it the known first secular drama performed in a modern language in Europe (Lee, 2000, p. 11).

journey of Orpheus as well with opera looking back at Orpheus as he looks back at opera. As opera endures as a resilient art form over time, it appears that Orpheus, too, shall persist in an eternal cycle alongside it.

### **Conclusion**

In the mythological narrative of Orpheus, his fateful backward glance delineates the profound boundary between life and death. Even within this concise statement, the singular layer of meaning it carries unveils the inherent dramatic potency in both the narrative and its central character.

Who is Orpheus? Orpheus, foremost, is a musician who skillfully wields the lyre, an accomplished singer who eloquently narrates his tale through song – thus, he embodies the essence of a storyteller. Additionally, he is a wanderer in the natural landscapes just as he engages in warfare alongside the Argonauts, providing assistance not through brute force but rather through the potency of his music. Moreover, this same wandering spirit propels him into the depths of Hades, the domain of the deceased, driven by his unwavering love. Consequently, he becomes a dissenter against the very fabric of existence, a rebellious figure against life's design. His insurrection, conveyed through the power of his music and song, resonates so profoundly that it compels the gods to grant him passage into the afterlife – a testament to his audacity and courage.

Orpheus's loyalty and devotion to his wife, Eurydice, is to an extent that, after losing her twice, he forsakes interest in women and turns his affections toward men. This shift in orientation inadvertently catalyzes the fatal consequences leading to his murder by Dionysus's female followers. This emblematic transformation underscores Orpheus's gender-transcending nature. He embarks on a relentless quest to test the boundaries between life and death through the conduit of love. His music and song exert a mesmerizing influence, not only on the living but also on the inanimate, such as rocks and stones. Incorporating these multifaceted attributes, Orpheus simultaneously embodies the roles of a prophet, missionary, and philosopher.

How can such a wealth of attributes coalesce within a single narrative and character? One of the insights gleaned from this research is that comprehending Orpheus necessitates a multidisciplinary exploration. His story, touching upon themes of religion, philosophy, psychology, sociology, linguistics, gender studies, art, and more, beckons scholars from diverse fields to delve into his profound significance. Thus, the meaning of myths, their significance, and their broader implications stand open to interpretation, naturally becoming the subject matter of literature, music, and visual arts.

Reducing a myth to a singular interpretation would confine Orpheus to a one-dimensional portrayal, as it is hard to think of a man changing the nature with his music. The meanings, symbols, and allegories inherent in his tale serve as elements that engage the imagination and creativity of those who study or adopt this myth as their subject. Consequently, Orpheus transcends his initial dimensions to emerge as a character endowed with profound psychological depth. The underlying meanings of his narrative become open to interpretation, and the interplay and ramifications of these meanings invite contemplation.

This research underscores the historical continuity of Orpheus's presence, tracing how his story has resonated through the ages, particularly within the domain of opera. The dramatic structure embedded within the Orpheus myth serves as a pivotal subject of tragedy. The theatricality it encapsulates is what opera sought for profound expression and emotional impact.

Another noteworthy revelation of this research pertains to the unique power ascribed to Orpheus as a musician within his narrative. His ability to stir and influence all living creatures, nature itself, and even inanimate objects has profoundly influenced opera composers and librettists. The hero they adopt within their compositions not only shapes his immediate narrative realm within the temporal confines of the stage but also symbolizes their quest for influence and transformation beyond the confines of the operatic domain.

Within this research, the significance of music in ancient Greek thought, both in social and psychological contexts, is unveiled. It is evident that opera creators have endeavored to tap into the essence of this power, drawing inspiration from these ancient ideals. Vocal music forms that incorporate the human voice into the evolution of polyphony and stage dramas are evaluated, providing insight into how opera has been approached and developed. It becomes evident

that opera composers favored the power of monophonic singing for the sake of clarity and comprehensibility of expression. This choice led to the emergence of the 'stile rappresentativo,' which forms the foundation of recitative. In its essence, recitative involves the act of singing as if speaking or speaking as if singing, all the while accompanied by music. Opera creators were drawn to this form of expression primarily because they found the desired impact in its simplicity. Orpheus, in this sense, transcends traditional artistic boundaries; he laments, sings, speaks through the language of music, acts, and addresses his audience with eloquence.

The Orpheus myth continues to thrive as a perennial subject within the realm of opera. Orpheus's operatic journey commenced the moment opera itself came into existence. In this context, this research proffers the concept of establishing a dedicated field of study termed 'Orpheus Opera.' This scholarly domain would encompass the multifaceted evolutions and transformations of the Orpheus myth, including contributions from composers, librettists, directors, and the engaged audience.

Arguably, no other myth or subject has witnessed such diversity in its treatment by composers and librettists throughout the annals of opera history. This research asserts that Orpheus's myth still resonates with contemporary audiences and will, in the context of its enduring historical significance, continue to resound with its inherent meanings in the future.

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