

## **Osher Institute class, Opera in Williamsburg's Orfeo ed Euridice**

### **Orfeo ed Euridice by C. W. Gluck, Vienna, 1762 – an original video production by Opera in Williamsburg, Fall 2020 (now available in a preview version).**

When it became clear that Opera in Williamsburg would not be able to perform at the Kimball Theatre in 2020 – or on any stage in Williamsburg for that matter – the company decided to create instead a video production of an opera, recorded safely, and make it available to our audience in Williamsburg and elsewhere. The series of talks you have joined is about this opera and the challenges of creating this production.

The February 3 meeting will explore the myth and several of its opera versions, with examples from various productions. The meeting on February 10 will cover the music in our production, with Maestro Jorge Parodi. The meeting on February 17 will cover elements other than music (staging, costume, video-recording technology and video editing, etc).

### **Orpheus in Greek mythology**

Orpheus (Orfeo in Italian), the superb singer and musician, is one of the most significant figures from classical mythology in later Western culture. The story that appears most often is his descent to the underworld to bring his wife back to the world of the living. Orpheus' music softens the hearts of [Hades](#) and [Persephone](#), the rulers of the underworld, who agreed to allow Eurydice to return with him to earth on one condition: he should walk in front of her and not look back until they both had reached the upper world. Orpheus sets off with Eurydice following; however, as soon as he has reached the upper world, he immediately turns to look at her, forgetting in his eagerness that both of them need to be in the upper world for the condition to be met. As Eurydice has not yet crossed into the upper world, she vanishes for the second time, this time forever.

The story in this form appears in Virgil and in Ovid in the first Century CE. It has permeated Western culture and has been used as a theme in all art forms. The list of operas based on it in Wikipedia includes 68 examples, mostly from the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. The story also appears frequently in works of literature, in paintings and sculptures, in ballets and in films. Among the latest in a long list, [Anaïs Mitchell](#)'s 2010 folk opera musical [Hadestown](#) retells the tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice with a soundtrack inspired by American blues and jazz, portraying [Hades](#) as the brutal work-boss of an underground mining city. Mitchell, together with director [Rachel Chavkin](#), later adapted her album into a multiple Tony award winning [musical](#) which opened on Broadway in 2019.

### **Opera synopsis – Gluck's Orfeo ed Euridice, Vienna 1762 version.**

#### **Act 1**

A chorus of [nymphs](#) and shepherds join Orfeo at the tomb of his wife Euridice in a solemn chorus of mourning; Orfeo is only able to utter Euridice's name. Orfeo sends the others away and sings of his grief. Amore appears, telling Orfeo that he may go to the Underworld and return

with his wife on the condition that he not look at her until they are back on earth, and not tell her why. As encouragement, Amore informs Orfeo that his present suffering shall be short-lived. Orfeo resolves to take on the quest.

## **Act 2**

In a rocky landscape, the Furies refuse to admit Orfeo to the Underworld, and the barks of Cerberos are heard. When Orfeo, accompanied by his lyre, begs for pity, he is at first interrupted by cries of "No!" from the Furies, but they are eventually softened by the sweetness of his singing, and let him in.

The second scene opens in Elysium. After a brief ballet "Dance of the Blessed Spirits." Orfeo arrives and marvels at the purity of the air and the beauty and calm of the place. But he can find no solace without Euridice. He implores the spirits to bring them together, which they do.

## **Act 3**

On the way out of the Underworld, Orfeo refuses to look at Euridice, and does not explain to her why. She does not understand his actions and reproaches him, but he must suffer in silence. Euridice takes this to mean that he no longer loves her, and refuses to continue -- death would be preferable. Unable to take any more, Orfeo turns and looks at Euridice; again, she dies. Orfeo sings of his grief in the famous aria "Che farò senza Euridice?" ("What shall I do without Euridice?") He decides to kill himself to join Euridice in the Underworld, but Amore returns to stop him. In reward for Orfeo's continued obedience to love, Amore returns Euridice to life, and she and Orfeo are reunited. All sing in praise of Amore.

## **Viewing Opera in Williamsburg's Orfeo ed Euridice (currently in preview)**

If you wish to view Opera in Williamsburg's opera video, you can reach it through a link at Opera in Williamsburg's website, <https://www.operainwilliamsburg.org>. Tickets are pay-what-you-wish (or pay-what-you-can, PWYC) and provide you with a link to the opera on YouTube (the opera is not visible to search on YouTube at this time).

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