

Orpheus & Eurydice

Music by Christoph Willibald Gluck,
with instrumentation by Hector Berlioz
Libretto by Pierre-Louis Moline

Study Guide to the Opera

Juan Diego Flórez as Orphée and Lucy Crowe as
Eurydice in the Royal Opera House production of
Orphée et Eurydice by Christoph Willibald Gluck, 2015



Gluck's operas make words and music equally important

Christoph Willibald Gluck was a composer of Italian and French opera in the early Classical period. He was raised in Bohemia by a family whose name has been spelled Gluckh, Gluck, Klugh, and Kluch (likely from the Czech word for boy—*kluk*). Though Gluck's father was a forest master and planned for his son to succeed him, Gluck excelled so much in the music practiced in the village that he dreamed only of singing and playing violin, cello, and organ. He studied in Prague, and then worked as a musician, teacher, and composer in Vienna, Italy, London, and Paris.

Gluck's native language was Czech but he was able to communicate in English and German (with George Frideric Handel in London), in Italian (with Antonio Salieri), and in French (with Marie Antoinette). Under her patronage, Gluck composed *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774), an opera that demonstrated the composer's intent to return opera to its origins, focusing on human drama and making words and music equally important. He began to craft a Neo-Classical style with *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762)—the first of Gluck's "reform" operas—by eliminating dry recitative that broke up the action. *Orfeo ed Euridice* belongs to the opera genre *azione teatrale*—based on a mythological subject with choruses and dancing. With *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779), Gluck took his operatic reform to its logical conclusion, with simple and direct music, and with fluid and continuous drama.

Although only half of his work survived after an 1809 fire, Gluck's musical legacy includes approximately 35 complete full-length operas, as well as shorter operas, numerous ballets, and instrumental works. Martin Pearlman, music director of Boston Baroque, wrote, "Gluck, a composer esteemed by Berlioz and admired by Wagner, is sadly neglected today. Histories of music grant Gluck a prominent place as an important mid-eighteenth-century revolutionary, who gave opera a new breath of life, broke down formal conventions to make opera dynamic and truly dramatic, and influenced the course of opera into the nineteenth century."

Operatic Reforms

Gluck wanted to return opera to its origins, focusing on human drama and passions and making words and music of equal importance.

Today, he would be called a changemaker.

Orpheus & Eurydice Synopsis

Orpheus & Eurydice (ancient Greek myth)

1762 *Orfeo ed Euridice* (3-act Italian version by Gluck. Orfeo sung by an alto castrato)

1774 *Orphée et Eurydice* (French version by Gluck. Orphée sung by a tenor)

1859 (French 4-act version by Berlioz. Orphée sung by a mezzo-soprano)

(BOLD = Memorable musical moments)

Act I

Nymphs and shepherds lament the death of Euridice, who was bitten by a snake. Left alone, Orfeo, Euridice's husband, adds his voice to the rites. Only Echo replies. Orfeo vows to rescue Euridice from the underworld.

Amore, god of love, appears with word that Jove, pitying Orfeo, will allow him to descend into the land of the dead to retrieve Euridice. To make this trial more difficult, Orfeo must neither look at Euridice, nor explain why looking is forbidden. Otherwise he will lose her forever. Orfeo agrees and begins his voyage.

Orpheus's lament at Eurydice's tomb:
Objet de mon amour

Act II

Furies and ghosts try to deny Orfeo's passage to the underworld. His lament softens and placates them. He is eventually allowed to pass through to the Elysian Fields.

Orfeo is moved by the beauty of the landscape. Heroes and heroines bring Euridice to him. Without looking at her, he takes her away.

Dramatic instrumental piece as Orpheus approaches
Hades: **Dance of the Furies**

Orpheus's aria of wonder: **Quel nouveau ciel**

Serene instrumental piece depicting peaceful rest:
Dance of the Blessed Spirits

Act III

Orfeo leads Euridice toward the upper world, forbidden to look at her. Orfeo can't explain. Euridice panics at the thought of a life without the love of Orfeo, and, in desperation, he turns to her. She dies, again. Grief-stricken, Orfeo wonders how he can live without her. He decides to kill himself.

Amore appears and stays Orfeo's hand. In response to Orfeo's deep love and devotion, Amore revives Euridice for the second time. The three return to Earth.

Orfeo, Euridice, Amore, the nymphs, and the shepherds all celebrate the power of love.

Duet when Eurydice confronts Orpheus about not
looking at her: **Viens, suis un époux**

Eurydice's aria expressing despair about

Orpheus's cold behavior: **Fortune ennemie**

Orpheus's sorrowful lament about Eurydice's death:
J'ai perdu mon Eurydice

— synopsis courtesy of the Metropolitan Opera



Orpheus and Eurydice,
painting by Edward Poynter (1836–1919)

Characters

Pronunciations in French, Italian, English

Orphée (Orfeo, Orpheus) *contralto*
[or-FAY] [or-FEH-oh] [OR-fee-us]
A musician who plays the lyre and is married to Euridice. He grieves his wife when she is bitten by a snake, dies, and goes to Hades.

Euridice (Eurydice) *soprano*
[uh-ree-DEES-suh] [yoo-RID-ih-see]
The beautiful daughter of Apollo who is married to Orphée.

L'Amour (Amore, Cupid) *soprano*
[la-MOOR] [ah-MOH-reh]
The God of love tells Orpheus that to reunite with his wife, he must travel to the Underworld and return with her on the condition that he may not look at her until they are back on earth.

Chorus and dancers:
shepherds, shepherdesses,
nymphs, demons, Furies, happy
spirits, heroes, and heroines

Orchestration

2 flutes
2 oboes
2 clarinets
2 bassoons
2 French horns
2 trumpets
3 trombones
Violins
Violas
Celli
Double Bass
Harp (to represent the lyre)
Timpani



Meet the Composer

Christoph Willibald Gluck gained prominence as a composer at the Habsburg court at Vienna, where he brought about the practical reform of opera's dramaturgical practices. With a series of radical new works in the 1760s, he changed the *opera seria* style that Pietro Metastasia had used for much of the 18th century. Gluck introduced more drama by using **orchestral recitative** and **cutting the usually long *da capo* aria**, resulting in operas that were half the length of a typical Baroque opera.

Gluck's **operatic reforms** included:

- no opportunity for vocal improvisation or virtuosic displays
- no long melismas
- a more predominantly syllabic setting of the text to make the words intelligible
- far less repetition of text within an aria
- a blurring of the distinction between recitative and aria, declamatory and lyrical passages
- simpler, more flowing melodic lines
- an overture that is linked by theme or mood to the ensuing action

Future composers Mozart, Schubert, Berlioz, and Wagner revered Gluck. In 1773, Gluck moved to Paris, where he fused the traditions of Italian and French opera (with its rich chorus) into his own unique synthesis. Gluck wrote eight operas for the Parisian stage, including *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774), *Orphée et Eurydice* (1774), and *Alceste* (1776). His *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) was a great success and is often considered to be his finest work. Though he was extremely popular and widely credited with bringing about a revolution in French opera, Gluck's mastery of the Parisian operatic scene was never absolute, and after the poor reception of his *Echo et Narcisse* (1779), he left Paris in disgust and returned to Vienna to live out the remainder of his life.



Christoph Willibald (Ritter von) Gluck (1714–1787)
Portrait of Gluck playing his clavichord
by Joseph Duplessis (1775)



Pierre-Louis Moline (1739–1820)



Louis-Hector Berlioz (1803–1869)
Portrait of Berlioz
by Émile Signol (1832)

Meet the Librettist

Pierre-Louis Moline was a prolific French dramatist, poet and librettist. His play *La Réunion du six août* (1794) was one of the longest-running patriotic pieces during the time of the French Revolution. He is best remembered today for having adapted Calzabigi's Italian libretto for *Orfeo ed Euridice* into Gluck's French version: *Orphée et Euridice*.

Meet the Composer who adapted *Orphée*

Louis-Hector Berlioz was a French composer, critic, and conductor. He is most known for his *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), the choral symphony *Roméo et Juliette* (1839), and the dramatic work *La Damnation de Faust* (1846). His operas (*Benvenuto Cellini*, *Les Troyens*, and *Béatrice et Bénédict*) are rarely performed today. Having limited success as a composer, Berlioz turned increasingly to conducting; he gained an international reputation. To supplement his income, he wrote music journalism. His 1844 *Treatise on Instrumentation* was influential and is still widely available today. A great admirer of Gluck, Berlioz reorchestrated *Orphée et Eurydice* (1859) and rewrote the title role for a mezzo-soprano. There are many recordings of the opera, with female and male singers in the role of *Orfeo* (*Orphée*).



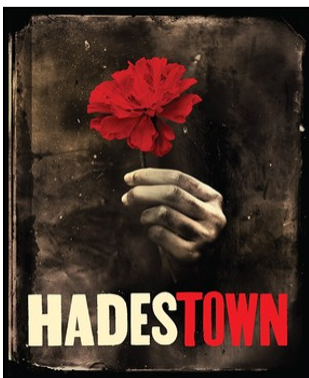
*Orpheus Mourning
the Death of Eurydice,
1814 painting Ary Scheffer*



*Orpheus glances
back at Eurydice,
1806 painting by Christian
Gottlieb Kratzenstein Stub*



*Orpheus and Eurydice
in Palais Garnier, Paris.*



*Hadestown, 2019 Broadway
musical by Anaïs Mitchell*

A story retold many ways

One of the most frequently told Greek myths is the tragic legend of *Orpheus and Eurydice*:

Orpheus fell in love with Eurydice, who was bitten by a snake and died. Orpheus sang about his grief with his lyre and descended to Hades to see his wife. Hades, the god of the underworld, told Orpheus that he could take Eurydice back with him if he did not turn to look at her. Unable to hear her steps, Orpheus feared that the gods had fooled him. A few feet from the exit, Orpheus lost his faith and turned to see Eurydice behind him, sending her back to be trapped in Hades forever.

Opera note: The ending of *Orfeo ed Euridice*, in which Amore restores Euridice back to life to be reunited with Orfeo, is a significant departure from the normally tragic ending of the Orpheus myth.

Versions of the myth

In Virgil's classic version, the tragic conclusion was introduced. In Ovid's version, Eurydice's death was caused by dancing with nymphs on her wedding day.

For two millennia, the myth's central moment—the backward glance—has left a permanent, unsolved riddle about human nature, love, and doubt. Some famous retellings include literary works, film/television/stage works, operas, music pieces, ballets, visual art works, and video games:

- 1950 Jean Cocteau's film
- 1991 Philip Glass's opera
- 2005 Ricky Ian Gordon's songs
- 2019 Anaïs Mitchell's Broadway musical *Hadestown*

Whatever version you experience, notice how the work portrays the emotional core of the myth—sorrow, trust, and the tension between nature and death.

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