



LONGBOROUGH

FESTIVAL OPERA

*aller Tage Abend*  
*aller Abende Tag*

WAGNER DONIZETTI MONTEVERDI PURCELL

2023



Jean Marais as Orphée  
in the Cocteau film of the  
same name (1950)

# LOVE, LOSS AND LOOKING BACK

Henrietta Bredin

Cherubini Ferrari to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga, August 1607: 'Monteverdi has shown me the words and let me hear the music of the play which Your Highness had performed, and certainly both poet and musician have depicted the inclinations of the heart so skilfully that it could not have been done better. The poetry is lovely in conception, lovelier still in form and loveliest of all in diction; and indeed no less was to be expected of a man as richly talented as Signor Striggio. The music, moreover, observing due propriety, serves the poetry so well that nothing more beautiful is to be heard anywhere.'

What can it have been like to hear *L'Orfeo* for the first time at the Ducal Palace in Mantua in February of 1607? Certainly it was an intimate occasion, with a select number of people - men and women - gathered, not apparently in the Palace's theatre, but in a smaller chamber. Monteverdi and the librettist Alessandro Striggio were both part of the Mantuan court, paid members of staff with duties to perform - the former as court choirmaster with overall responsibility

for secular music, the latter as a secretary and clerk. Music-making was highly prized at the ducal court and skilled instrumentalists were available: players of string, wind and brass instruments, lutenists and keyboard players. In addition there were court engineers who could construct staging and sets, artists to paint scenery, people to sew costumes and a dancing master to devise choreography.

Monteverdi was able to draw on all these resources and, above all, on a group of highly trained singers who performed songs and madrigals and participated in theatrical entertainments. He rehearsed and worked with these singers, cultivating a highly expressive, histrionic manner of performance, in tandem with the developments he was making with his own compositions. A contemporary commentator, Vincenzo Giustiniani, described the Mantuan singers: 'They moderated or increased their voices, loud or soft, heavy or light, according to the demands of the piece they were singing; now slow, breaking off sometimes with a gentle sigh, now

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singing long passages legato or detached ... They accompanied the music and the sentiment with appropriate facial expressions, glances and gestures, with no awkward movements of the mouth or hands or body which might not express the feeling of the song.'

This meant that when Monteverdi came to create an opera, his first venture in this form, described at the time as a *favola in musica* or story in music, he had a team of astonishingly sensitive and skilled artists at his disposal, used to performing as an ensemble and ready to discover and interpret a new form. He chose, as so many before and since, to tell the story of

Orpheus, and the opera opens with Music herself setting the scene:

Music am I, who with sweet accents  
Can charm and comfort the most  
despairing spirit;  
Now with noble anger's fire, and now  
with rage of desire  
The coldest heart inflaming.

The audience would have been familiar with the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice but they would not have been familiar with the concept of a drama that was sung throughout. Given the intimacy of the performance space it must have



Jean Marais as Orphée  
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been a startling, almost overwhelming experience. Orpheus has since become an ever-more potent symbol of the power of music, inspiring numerous further operas, along with poetry, paintings, sculptures, novels, musicals, ballets, plays and films.

It is intriguing that two previous Orpheus operas, by Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini, were entitled *Euridice*. With a couple of exceptions that would not happen again until 2020, when Matthew Aucoin's opera of that name was first performed in Los Angeles. In between we have had *Orpheus* alone, *Orpheus and Euridice*, *Orpheus in the Underworld*, *Orpheus in Elysium*, *The Laments of Orpheus*, *The Birth of Orpheus*, *The Death of Orpheus* and *The Mask of Orpheus*. We have had Orpheuses in English, French, Italian, German, Russian, Greek and Bulgarian.

Euridice is somehow always elusive, her early appearance as she dances joyfully on her wedding day is heartbreakingly brief - it seems only a moment before the news arrives of her death. When we next see her she is already a shadow, her spirit diminished and dimmed in the underworld kingdom of Hades. She never becomes a fully realised character but only a dream of love, a lost promise. We never witness the effect of Orpheus's music on Euridice; only on Charon, the boatman who ferries the dead across the river Styx, his vicious three-headed dog Cerberus, and on the grim lord of the underworld himself. It is related that, in the land of the living, his music is so potent that, not only does it entrance humans and calm wild beasts but it causes inanimate and rooted objects to move - rocks and stones and trees. Is Euridice in fact, not so much a person as Orpheus's inner self, his soul?

Why then, in his soul searching, his triumph over the forces of death, does he turn to look at Euridice as she follows him back to life? It is the one condition made by Hades and Orpheus fails to fulfil it. What compels him to turn around? Perhaps it is quite simply love. Euridice has been torn away from him and he is so besotted, so overjoyed to find her again that he cannot bear not to have her in his gaze. Is it fear? He cannot see behind him and at the last minute his courage falters. He is afraid that she is not there after all,



Orpheus and Eurydice, Auguste Rodin, modeled c.1887, carved 1893

and he is unable to resist looking back to make sure. Or is it anger? Suspicion? The gods are known to be slippery, to go back on their word. Orpheus did a deal with Hades but what if Hades has tricked him? What if he never intended to relinquish Euridice?

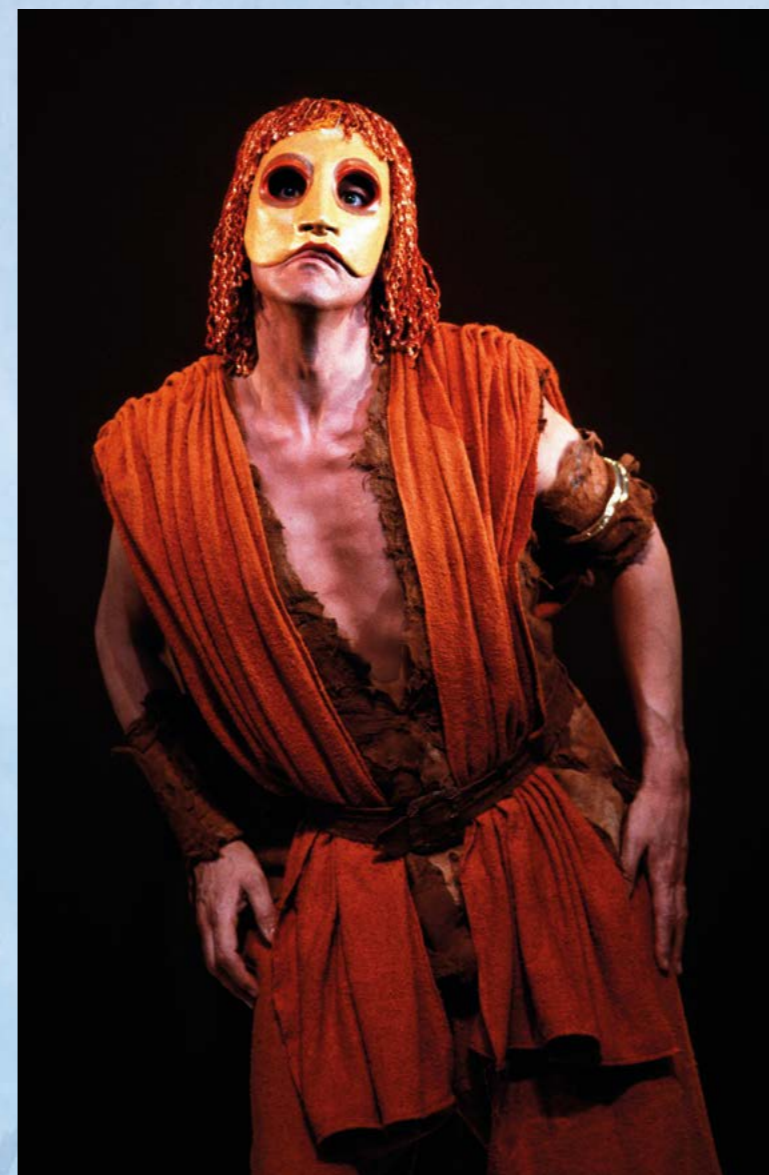
Or perhaps it is a sort of cowardice, a fatal flaw within his own thinking, feeling self. Until now Orpheus has led a charmed existence, his astonishing gift of musical potency making everything and everyone give way before him. Now, climbing his way out of the darkness, not knowing for certain whether his beloved is following him or not, he has only his own self to grapple with. His gift is powerless to help him. He is unable to charm, to soothe, to sustain himself. And so he falters, doubting and afraid.

Like all the best stories, that of Orpheus and Euridice can be told and understood, revealed and repeated over and over again

We never know how Euridice feels. She is not given a choice - first fatally bitten by a snake and transported to the land of the dead, then unexpectedly handed over to be taken back again, to the living world. Willingly or not? Margaret Atwood writes about her ambivalence with perceptive delicacy:

You walked in front of me,  
pulling me back out  
to the green light that had once  
grown fangs and killed me.  
I was obedient, but  
numb, like an arm  
gone to sleep; the return  
to time was not my choice.

Philip Langridge as Orpheus in *The Mask of Orpheus* at ENO, in the Birtwistle premiere



In numerous interpretations of this enduringly potent myth Orpheus is seen in many different guises. In Cocteau's 1950 film he is torn between life and death, falling in love with death and losing Euridice when he glimpses her reflection in a car mirror. Reflections are a recurring image - he sees himself in a pool of water, and in the eyes of death herself. In *The Mask of Orpheus*, the composer Harrison Birtwistle and librettist Peter Zinovieff make a ritual, ever-looping version of the story, with time flowing both backwards and forwards as Orpheus travels through a series of arches. The story is fragmented, repeated, sometimes taken out of order, sometimes with elements presented simultaneously. The main characters are each represented by three different performers. It is elaborate, complex and immensely powerful. In Offenbach's version, Euridice is so maddened by her husband's scraping away at his violin that she cannot wait to be carried off to the underworld. It is only when he is shamed into action by Public Opinion that Orpheus reluctantly goes to rescue her. Everyone ends up in hell when the gods revolt against their boring existence on Mount Olympus with their never-changing diet of nectar and ambrosia and follow Jupiter, disguised as a fly, in search of Euridice. It all culminates in a wild bacchanal and can-can.

Like all the best stories, that of Orpheus and Euridice can be told and understood, revealed and repeated over and over again. What Monteverdi and Striggio created was one version, exquisitely distilled, communicating through the eyes and ears directly to the heart and mind.

Music am I, who with sweet accents  
Can charm and comfort the most  
despairing spirit. ■

Henrietta Bredin writes widely on opera and other cultural topics and is Deputy Editor of *Opera* magazine. Her narrated song recitals - *My Dearest Hedgehog* and *Gounod and Georgina* - have been performed throughout the UK.