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## Same Old Song: An Analysis of Adaptation and the Orpheus Myth in Musical Theatre

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## Same Old Song: An Analysis of Adaptation and the Orpheus Myth in Musical Theatre

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## Same Old Song: An Analysis of Adaptation and the Orpheus Myth in Musical Theatre

### Abstract

This essay is a brief examination of various adaptations of the myth of Orpheus and Euridice throughout the history of musical theatre and opera, specifically through comparative textual analysis of the scripts and libretti. In this examination, additions to or retractions from the original story, whether common to several adaptations or unique to a single source, will be analyzed. From these findings it will be possible to speculate on historical and contextual reasons for the unique shape taken by each adaptation, and to add to the conversation about the nature and purpose of adaptation in general as well as the general cultural prevalence of the Orpheus myth itself.

### Annotated Bibliography

1. Carter, Tim. "Orfeo." *The Viking Guide to Opera*, edited by Amanda Holden, Nicholas Kenyon and Stephen Walsh, 676-9. London: Viking, 1993.

Viking Publishing, a subsidiary of Penguin Books, is a well-regarded publishing house though not necessarily known for its contributions to academic literature; chief editor Amanda Holden, however, is a well-regarded British librettist and opera expert with dozens of translated and original libretti to her name, and is therefore a highly authoritative figure to head such an ambitious opera encyclopedia as *The Viking Guide to Opera*, an exhaustive collection of biographies and description of the works of some 800 composers of musical drama. Of course, such a monumental work and the overviews it provides to thousands of operas are invaluable for any comparative discussion of the medium, making this opera guide a tremendously useful starting place for the present evaluation of Orpheus adaptations. The biographical and work-specific essays on Monteverdi and Jacopo Peri are both supplied by Tim Carter, a Reader in Music at the University of London and a scholar on 1600s opera who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Peri. This essay on Monteverdi's 1608 opera *L'Orfeo* makes interesting acknowledgement of an alternate libretto ending which was published concurrently to the opera's first performances – this ending hews closer to the original myth and features a despondent Orpheus being swarmed (but not killed) by a crowd of Bacchantes women who berate his decision to renounce women forever. The "standard" ending in the score instead features the appearance of Apollo, who whisks Orpheus away to heaven (and his implied death?) to be reunited with Euridice. Carter makes special note of an important *ritornello* at the beginning which "returns at key points in the opera where music and its power come into play," and though musical analysis is beyond the scope of this current research, it is worth noting that a motif for Orpheus' musical power is a common recurring feature in these adaptations, making a series of particularly noteworthy and poignant appearances in *Hadestown*. Other adaptive commonalities can be seen with the Monteverdi opera: here we find a more active role for Persephone than in any of the other operas as she pleads with Hades to release Euridice (a character beat adopted and made even more pivotal in *Hadestown*); there is also the common trope of introducing a friend (this one named Sylvia) to relay Euridice's offstage death, as happens similarly in Peri;

finally we see the introduction of multiple gods as supporting characters, including Apollo as mentioned above, the boatman of the river Styx Charon who provides Orpheus an obstacle to overcome in what Carter describes as “the opera’s climax,” and the common trope of a godly guide to lead Orpheus into the underworld, this one named Hope.

2. Coronis, Athena. “Sarah Ruhl’s ‘Eurydice’: A Dramatic Study of the Orpheus Myth in Reverse.” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement*, no. 126 (2013): 299–315. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44215423>.

Dr. Coronis is a professor and scholar of classical studies, and her credentials along with those of the journal in which she is published here offer authority which perhaps the quality of her writing itself does not bear out. The article presented here is essentially an in-depth play-by-play review of the Sarah Ruhl script to *Eurydice* in which Coronis comments on various allusions, perspectives, and frameworks for understanding Ruhl’s adaptation of the Orpheus story without going into much depth of analysis on any. This article does highlight adaptive differences between the original myth and Ruhl’s play (for example, Coronis speculates on the choice to use Euridice as the point-of-view role, her relationship with the added character of her father, and the strange characterization choices used for Hades in relation to feminist theory and a handful of other analytical frameworks), so it is a relevant piece of discourse in discussing adaptation if only as a fly-over view of these differences rather than an analytical deep-dive. The scope of the paper means that Coronis is only directly referencing the Ruhl play and the original myth (she does not cite a specific “original” version other than a brief allusion to Ovid), so it does not relate to any of the musical drama versions in the remainder of this bibliography. However future researchers may still find it useful as a jumping in point to their own analysis and questions of how and why Ruhl’s work deviates from others in the canon.

3. Ellis, Lindsay, writer/director. “The Case for Disney’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*,” October 31, 2017, video essay, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIWY3TZ1eI>.

Admittedly, Lindsey Ellis is not an academic in the traditional sense, and the present video essay does not address the Orpheus myth at all. Nevertheless, I find Ellis’ evaluation of the nature of and motivation for adaptations of stories across history to be extremely insightful and inspiring, and so I feel it important to include them here as they were instrumental in piquing my own interest in the present analysis. Ellis is certainly more than a common entertainer on YouTube, and she is no stranger to research and writing; she holds an MFA in Film Studies from NYU, is a frequent contributor to the PBS program *It’s Lit!*, and has made her brand out of highly researched and well-cited analytical video essays, a large number of them specifically dedicated to parsing different adaptations of a given character throughout history and various media, including a sizeable body of work on musical theatre canon. The present video does not even mention Orpheus (and thus can hardly be said to be in conversation with my other sources) but does heavily exposit on the “why?” of adaptational changes, specifically those made to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* from Victor Hugo to Disney. Ellis’ thesis here is that the purpose and focus of a story must change with each retelling as the problems and priorities of its audience change, meaning her thoughts are an excellent springboard into examining the “why” of the many adaptive changes to Orpheus’ story across the centuries. It is worth noting that she has other video essays which do touch upon Orpheus specifically, including one that examines

*Hadestown* briefly in the context of musical theatre as a medium, though these sources are not as relevant to my discussion as her thoughts in this video.

4. Gordon, Ricky Ian, composer/librettist. *Orpheus and Euridice: A Song Cycle in Two Acts for Soprano, Clarinet in B-flat and Piano*. New York: Carl Fisher, 2006.

This score contains the program notes, libretto, and music to Rick Ian Gordon's song cycle adaptation of the Orphean myth. Events in Gordon's life at the time of the project's inception manifested in the peculiar details unique to his version, most notably the substitution of Orpheus' lyre for a clarinet (the work was a commission by clarinetist Todd Palmer) and the strong allusions to the epidemic of AIDS with which Gordon's partner Jeffery Grossi was to lose his battle shortly after the cycle's completion. As such, this score and song cycle present an extremely relevant adaptation to discuss for its contributions from the LGBTQ perspective and the historical context of the late 80s and early 90s. Though the framework of the myth otherwise largely remains intact, it is notable that Gordon takes the opposite tact of the opera and Broadway librettists by reducing the cast rather than adding characters; only Orpheus and Euridice are named in his cycle, and there is not even a character of Hades or Death but only a nameless committee of "the powers that be." Naturally only the soprano has any lines of dialogue; she explicitly is to depict Euridice in the story of the song cycle, but about half of her "dialogue" is speaking for Orpheus instead. Proportional differences from the original and adapted myths are noteworthy in Gordon's setting – of the thirteen parts and two acts in the cycle, six parts and the whole first act are dedicated to the love story before Euridice even grows ill (a backstory afforded no elaboration in either Virgil or Ovid and only deigned half a paragraph in Hamilton's retelling!), though this is in common with the operas of Monteverdi and Peri especially, each of which spends many minutes and much dialogue establishing the happiness of our doomed couple at the story's beginning. This edition is of course the authoritative score of Gordon's work, published with his oversight, and everything contained therein was written by him, so there is no more definitive source for this adaptation to be found.

5. Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology*. Illustrated by Savage Steele. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1942.

Edith Hamilton's book is widely considered the definitive compilation of Greek/Roman and Norse mythology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – it is easily the most widely read, and a favorite of high school and college literature choices. Hence it is extremely useful and relevant to the discussion of any myth as a solid starting point for determining the "original" myth or beginning to trace it back to its earliest sources. Hamilton is an (admittedly dated) source of good authority, not the least because her mythology retellings have shaped generations of English speakers' knowledge of the old stories, and therefore the adaptations they would go on to create; Hamilton is well-read and studied in the classical poets and playwrights, and her multiple books on the subject cite each myth's sources in antiquity and discusses the ancient writers' strengths and weaknesses as a preface to her retellings of the myths. Obviously, her retelling of Orpheus' story is of central importance to this paper, but I found her preface on the nature of Classical mythology equally useful as a means to contextualize the history and culture in which the original myth was told, which is just as important as the contexts in which it was retold in other versions. Key points of deviation between her "original" version of the myth and some of those

that follow include: Euridice's lack of agency in the story (she is largely an inactive character, but much more fleshed out in most modern retellings including those by Offenbach, Ruhl, and Mitchell), Orpheus' death at the hands of the Maenads (this ending is almost always omitted in retellings, Stravinsky's a notable exception), and the inclusion of Persephone (of limited importance, but made much more significant in *L'Orfeo*, *Hadestown*, and the *Percy Jackson* novels).

6. Mitchell, Anaïs, composer/librettist. *Hadestown: Original Broadway Cast Recording*. Developed with and directed by Rachel Chavkin. New York: Sing It Again Records, cat. 644216939497, 2019. 2 CDs.

This album contains the most recent and complete recorded form of *Hadestown*, Anaïs Mitchell's hit Broadway musical adaptation of the Orpheus myth, along with jacket notes by the composer and the complete libretto. Mitchell herself acknowledges this as the authoritative recording in her forward to the program, and since she and co-creator Rachel Chavkin oversaw the entire project from its onset this is hard to contest. Mitchell's adaptation is perhaps the most self-aware, using as a framing device the character of Hermes referencing the many retellings with his refrain "It's an old song, And we're going to sing it again... Maybe it will turn out this time." *Hadestown* is far and away the most popular American version of this myth for the Broadway stage, and likewise notable for its use of very American idioms like jazz and blues in its scoring, and thus is highly relevant to explore as a definitively American adaptation of the myth. Many features of the story set it apart from the others; in common with only Monteverdi and Hamilton's original it includes Persephone and references her influence on Hades' decision to release Euridice (Persephone's and Hades' roles are greatly expanded in length and thematic import in *Hadestown*) as well as including other gods in supporting roles (in common with, though executed much differently in Offenbach). The tragic ending is retained in contrast with most pre-1900 versions, though with the curious addition of Orpheus not being killed but being silent in the score from the moment he turns around and beholds Euridice. This version is notably the most developed and complex for the character of Euridice (originated by Mitchell herself in workshops) and arguably for all of the characters, who are uniquely flawed and expressive here.

7. Peri, Jacopo, composer. *Euridice: An Opera in One Act, Five Scenes*. Libretto by Ottavio Rinuccini. Edited by Howard Mayer Brown. *Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era*, edited by Robert L. Marshall, vol. 36-7. Madison: A-R Editions, 1981.

This edition of Peri's *Euridice*, the earliest known complete opera, is a particularly scholarly Urtext score from A-R Editions and thus as authoritative a text as one is likely to find. The libretto and translation (created with assistance by native Italian, Prof. Nino Pirrotta) are included and likewise extremely thorough, containing helpful editorial notes. Since Peri's rendition of the Orpheus myth is the first complete opera discovered, it is naturally extremely relevant and interesting subject on the topic of musical Orphean adaptations, of which it is also naturally the earliest. The bones of the story are almost identical to those used by Gluck some 160 years later, including major beats like Venus guiding Orpheus to the underworld and facilitating his reunion with Euridice on earth, though this time without the maiden's second death (an unusual omission that is not mirrored in any other version). Where Peri deviates seems

mainly to be in additional “filler” characters, perhaps created to feature a larger ensemble of more singers and to give the principal characters someone to talk to. These include a prologue named Tragedy, a chorus of Shepherds and Nymphs, and a slew of friends to Orpheus and Euridice (Arcetro, Tirsi, Daphne, Aminta, solo nymphs, and more) who have excessive amounts of expository singing via recitative. This device would become common in operatic expansions – Stravinsky’s ballet uses similar means to expand the ensemble, and *Hadestown* makes quite literal use of a similar “Greek chorus” idea with its chorus, the three Fates as featured ensemble, and by employing Hermes as a similar prologue/narrator character throughout. Peri’s opera is very long and bloated, considering the simplicity of the fundamental story it tells, but is nevertheless an important reflection on the priorities of musical dramatists of its day.

8. Rowell, Lewis. “The Orpheus Principle: Myth and Musical Identity.” *The American Music Teacher* 23, no. 4 (February/March 1974): 31-3, <https://du.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/orpheus-principle-myth-musical-identity/docview/1294861857/se-2?accountid=14608>.

Like Ellis’ video essay, Rowell’s piece is not directly applicable to any of the individual Orpheus adaptations investigated here, although an examination of the Orphean myth is central to his larger discussion about the use of mythological archetypes in a person’s creation of self-image. Specifically, he is interested in how the self-perception of musicians and music educators is shaped by the artist-hero archetypes of mythology like Orpheus, and how these archetypes are made manifest in more modern artist-hero stories. While not directly correlated to any specific Orphean adaptation (though Rowell does include a general Orpheus overview which closely hews to Hamilton’s account), this essay is (like Ellis’) relevant to the larger conversation of why and how stories are retold and recontextualized for different audiences and eras. Both Rowell and the publishing journal are well reputed scholarly sources in the world of music education, though his writing style and views are admittedly dated.

9. Ruhl, Sarah. *Eurydice*. London: Methuen Drama, 2010

Though Sarah Ruhl’s *Eurydice* is a straight play, it has gained new life as a brand new opera by Matthew Aucoin (libretto also by Ruhl), allowing her retelling of the myth from Eurydice’s perspective to find new life and relevance in this discussion of musical adaptations. Ruhl’s play borrows both from post-modernist drama and the theatre of antiquity, particularly with her unique introduction of a “Greek chorus” of three stones as characters to comment upon and react to the action, quite similarly to how the traditional opera choruses of Peri and Gluck would. Ruhl’s most unique contribution to the mythos is the introduction of Eurydice’s father as her guide in the underworld, building a complex narrative of conflicted emotional attachments for our usually passive and simple heroine. Eurydice does not take active agency in her death (this choice conversely makes for an important character beat in *Hadestown*), but unique to this version, she is the cause of her ultimate return to the underworld. Ruhl’s text reacts to tenets of third-wave feminism, shown through Eurydice’s ambivalence towards Orpheus and fear of being tied down to him in marriage (a more somber callback to the comic anti-lovers of Offenbach’s operetta), emotions which a rapist-like Hades analog exploits. This version rarely mirrors the original tale, least of all in its point-of-view character being Eurydice, but it is noteworthy for having an ambiguous and somber ending featuring Orpheus dying and returning to the

underworld to lose his memories of Eurydice as she has of him. Although the opera version's libretto is not published yet, Aucoin and Ruhl both speak often of the faithfulness of his adaptation, and in either case this is once again a primary source published by a living author and therefore an authoritative and useful case study in adaptation from Ruhl's feminist and psycho-sociological perspective.

10. Rushton, Julian. "Orfeo ed Euridice/Orphée et Euridice." *The Viking Guide to Opera*, edited by Amanda Holden, Nicholas Kenyon and Stephen Walsh, 370-1, 375-7. London: Viking, 1993.

See entry no. 1 for a discussion of the authority and relevance of *The Viking Guide to Opera* and its chief editor Amanda Holden. Article author Julian Rushton is himself another esteemed academic in the study of musical drama, for he holds a PhD from Oxford and has a career of several decades as professor and author on musicology at Cambridge, East Anglia, and Leeds. This essay on Gluck and his masterpiece *Orfeo ed Euridice* helpfully includes both 1762 and 1774 versions of the opera (the latter a revision by Gluck) and discusses the differences between them. Examining adaptations of a work by its original creator is itself a worthwhile and interesting topic to explore (Ellis also expounds upon this with the works of Victor Hugo) and is of course a highly relevant question to raise in our discussion of adaptive changes; that said, the changes made by Gluck are minor and mostly involve expansion of the dance portions of his first edition. The summary of Gluck's opera(s) highlights a few elements which are noteworthy in contrast to the other Orpheus libretti: Euridice starts Gluck's opera already dead (this in common with only the Stravinsky ballet); Gluck introduces the character of Love, an intervening god (generally agreed upon to be Venus or Aphrodite) who both encourages and guides Orpheus into the underworld then returns to prevent Orpheus' suicide and restore Euridice to life. This has parallels to the unique Angel of Death character in Stravinsky, though Love or Venus makes appearances in a number of versions in sometimes similar roles. Of course the highlight of Gluck's work is the famous chorus and ballet sequence "Dance of the Furies," an iconic addition that is mirrored in Stravinsky and parodied in Offenbach.

11. Stravinsky, Igor. *Orpheus: Ballet in Three Scenes*. London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1948.

Though a ballet can scarcely be said to have a libretto, the scores do frequently include titles, scenes, or other descriptive texts that inform what the composer's intended story for the ballet is and how it flows musically moment to moment. Stravinsky's score to *Orpheus* contains enough of these indications that his vision (or the original choreographer's – the score does not indicate whose) is clearly stated in broad strokes in the music, and likely on the program for any production of the ballet. I feel ballet is a relevant and very interesting addition to this conversation on musical theatre, in which all dance is all too often neglected as a valid medium. Of all the adaptations examined here, Stravinsky's adheres perhaps the closest to the original myth as spelled out by Hamilton (though this is perhaps a necessary result of the required simplicity needed for purely visual storytelling in ballet!). A few deviations occur: Stravinsky includes a dance where the furies try to scare away a newly arrived Orpheus as he reaches the underworld, clearly an homage to the famous parallel section in Gluck's opera; Orpheus' guide to the underworld is a unique character called the Angel of Death, reminiscent of the role filled by Love who is his helper in Gluck's version or Hope in Monteverdi's but made expectedly



darker for this post-WWII telling; Stravinsky also adds a chorus of friends who appear early on to console Orpheus with gifts, though this is presumably an addition made to accommodate a corps of dancers with little else to do in the first scene (we see this paralleled in Peri and Monteverdi). A noteworthy point where Stravinsky does not deviate is in Orpheus' violent death, one of the few versions to retain the bloody and brutal dismemberment of the original myth (though not the singing decapitated head!). Though Boosey & Hawkes are a reputable publisher of scores with a long relationship working with Stravinsky and other high-profile composers of his generation, the present copy of the score makes it difficult to ascertain how exactly critical and accurate it is to Stravinsky's intentions it is. That said, Stravinsky was famously exacting with his scores for publication, so we can be reasonably sure this one is representative of his wishes.

12. Traubner, Richard. "Orfée aux enfers (Orpheus in the Underworld)." *The Viking Guide to Opera*, edited by Amanda Holden, Nicholas Kenyon and Stephen Walsh, 734-6. London: Viking, 1993.

See entry no. 1 for a discussion of the authority and relevance of *The Viking Guide to Opera* and its chief editor Amanda Holden. Essay contributor Richard Traubner is a noted expert on the subject of operetta who frequently writes and lectures on the topic and includes among his credits four Offenbach translations, making him a natural choice to create the entries on the father of French operetta. The present essay and summary of *Orphée aux enfers* is brief, but sufficient to highlight the absurdity and farce with which Offenbach and his co-creators treat their (usually tragic) subject. Indeed, this operetta is probably the single furthest deviation from the original myth of all the present versions (and therefore the most relevant to a conversation on adaptive choices, since it makes so many dramatic changes), for every element has been inverted for the sake of comedy: Orpheus and Euridice are beleaguered lovers and fed up with each other, meaning Euridice is happy to enter into death both times to get away from Orpheus, now transformed into a dreadful amateur fiddle player; the gods (and primarily Jupiter) are introduced as active characters who deliberately make our young "lovers" miserable for their own amusement, such as by forcing an unenthusiastic Orpheus to go to Hades to save his wife; and the terrifying Furies of Gluck are replaced parodically with a raucous party in hell wherein the famous Can-Can is danced. Like most operettas, the goal here is satire (Traubner states the target to be the "posturing excesses" of 1800 *opera seria* and its elite patrons), and this is made nowhere clearer than by the addition of a stick-in-the-mud critic character named Public Opinion who pressures Orpheus to go unhappily on his quest and is consequently the only character to be dissatisfied by Euridice's second death at the end. Despite its dramatic departure in tone, *Orphée aux enfers* did pioneer elements seen in later more serious adaptations, most particularly in *Hadestown*, which borrows a certain amount of the bawdiness and humor of Offenbach for its depiction of Persephone; indeed, the weaving-in of other mythological figures and stories Offenbach employs here is central to the conceit and themes of *Hadestown*.