Euripides and Opera from the Baroque Period to the Twentieth Century

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This essay aims to report on any connections between Eurpides' tragedies and opera over its 500 year history. I will begin by laying out the thematic concerns that are central to Euripides' writing as the summaries his tragedies that have most often been adapted to opera, which are including but not limited to *Medea*, *Alcestis*, and the *Bacchae*. This argument will focus on key operas that connect the art form to Euripides, mostly by being direct adaptations of one or more plays, such as Lully's *Alceste*, Cherubini's *Medea*, and Wellesz's *Alkestis*. Any diversions from the source material, whether thematic or narrative, will then be assessed and accounted for within the wider musical and historical context. This will determine that, as I hypothesise, the extent to which the plays of Euripides had a place in shaping the development of Western opera was significant.

Introduction

In his Short History of Opera, Grout draws a conclusive picture of the relationship between Western opera and the dramatic music of the Ancient Greeks, stating that 'the history, literature, and mythology of the Ancient World' are 'indispensable' areas of knowledge for those studying the history of the artform.[39] His hypothesis is widely accepted by scholars of Music History and Classical Reception; Classical mythology has produced seminal works by its inspiration and the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, most prolific of extant theatre, are no exception to this. Euripides is the tragedian to whom the majority of surviving Greek tragedy is attributed, with nineteen extant plays, compared to the seven each of his contemporaries Aeschylus and Sophocles. Therefore, if Greek theatre is such an important component of opera, to what extent can this influence be traced regarding the work of Euripides? Since its conception, Opera has been inextricably linked with the Classical canon; in fact, the earliest surviving opera draws on

[39] Grout, 1947 p.9

the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in Peri's Eurydice (1600), shortly followed by the more often performed L'Orfeo (1607) by Monteverdi. On this subject, most often taken for Ovid's Metamorphoses, over thirty operas have been written, yet even more still are drawn from stories immortalised by Euripides.[2] For this reason, this essay will explore Euripides' influence on opera, focusing largely on the stories of Alcestis, Medea, Orestes, and the Bacchae, and tracing thematic and narrative concerns of human flaw and vulnerability in classical mythology from the conception of opera in the Baroque period of the seventeenth century to the post-war period of the twentieth century.

While it would be interesting to discuss the music and staging of Euripides' plays in comparison with that of opera today, most of these specific details have been lost to time. While all drama, like lyric and epic poetry, would have been set to music and sung, there are very few surviving artefacts that offer much tangible insight into this aspect of performance. Feaver describes aptly how regrettable it is that these crucial elements are lost to us, arguing "the music was an integral part of the artistic whole; without it (and without the dance and the spectacle, something of value has been lost".[3] Feaver's analysis of the Orestes Papyrus which preserves the musical "score" so to speak from the play's first stasimon, as well as D'Angour's more recent reproduction of the music for performance by a choir, are among an ever-growing field of Classical research seeking to understand this elusive aspect of Greek theatrical performance, however much of this work is speculative.[4] Ancient Greek musical theory is an extremely complex and often contradictory area of study, thus this article will instead compare in the largest part the thematic and narrative concerns of Euripides' plays against those of the operatic works that are inspired by them, as well as wider musical trends during their time.

Eurpides' tragedies explore themes of human flaw and vulnerability, often painting a bleak, pessimistic image of Athenian society and their attitudes toward war and authority. Euripides died four years before the end of the Peloponnesian war and the collapse of the Athenian Empire, so it is necessary to view his drama through a cynical lens; he drew

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Feaver, 1960 p.170

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hOK7bU0S1Y

inspiration for his plays from mythological tradition, using the catastrophic tales of gods and heroes to communicate questions of suffering and the nature of man, alone out of his contemporaries choosing to "juxtapose myth... with the truth or world of his present".[5] He often used human, down-to-earth protagonists whose very realistic flaws and vulnerabilities lead to their own tragic fates. Their struggles are often met with indifference by the gods, towards whom he is sceptical, rejecting earlier literary conventions of religion demonstrated in the works of his fellow poets Aeschylus and Sophocles, for example.

These themes are treated with varying degrees of interest on the operatic stage. For pre-20th Century work in particular, artists are interested more in the Classical canon as a basis for ideal beauty and a vessel through which contemporary ideology and philosophy may be explored, as will be discussed in due course. This treatment views antiquity through a filtered lens; until the 19th and 20th centuries, much of what was known about Ancient Greece and Rome had yet to be discovered, and what people, largely educated men, did have access to was whatever the Church deemed worthy of study and thus preservation over the course of many centuries. Though not based in conscious bias, this treatment is problematic as it neglects the historical and cultural contexts which influenced the intention of the playwright. Despite this, these works offer valuable insight into the preoccupations and concerns of composers and artists over time.

Emergence of secular opera in the Baroque period (1600-1750)

Opera began to flourish in the Baroque period, beginning during the Late Renaissance in Italy. The genre was distinct from more established forms of religious music, such as the cantata, oratorio, and the Passion, in its use of stage action, narrative, and costume.[6] During the development of opera in the seventeenth century, Greek myth made up the subject matter for at least sixty-nine operas, representative of a little over half of all operas written between 1600 and 1700.[7] In Grout's *A Short History of Opera*, he argues the overuse of accidenti verissimi, or 'incidents invented and added by the poets', to the outlines of history or

[5] Eisner, 1979 p.170
[6] Grout, 1947 p.83
[7] Grove, 1954

legend 'to the point of being no longer recognisable'.[6] Two works which exemplify this idea are Lully's *Alceste* (1674) and Handel's *Oreste* (1734), which both embellish their source material to a great extent. In light of this view, it may be observed that, despite their popularity, mythological figures in these plays are often personifications of the political or moral interests of the composer, or their patron, as a result of their reception through time, rather than being adherences to the source material.

Among the earliest surviving operas based on a Euripidean play is Jean-Baptiste Lully's Alceste, which draws from the tragedy Alcestis. Euripides' play, first performed in 438BCE, is taken the myth of Alcestis and Admetus, in which King Admetus is granted safety from Death when his loving wife Alcestis sacrifices herself in his place, before being retrieved by Heracles at the end of the play. Alcestis portrays the overcoming of death, offering hope in the face of the inevitable. Mitsis argues that "by violating the divide between mortality and immortality... Euripides upends political values of democratic Athens" some years before the delivery of Pericles' funeral oration in 431BCE, after the first year of the Peloponnesian war.[7] When considering Alcestis against the political climate of Athens ahead of the breakdown of peace between the Peloponnesian and Delian Leagues, Euripides poses a salient question: is death something to be feared or something which can be overcome? From this perspective, it may be argued that, as the source material for an adaptation, Alcestis offers the piety and moral concerns transferrable to the predominantly Christian philosophy of Baroque and Classical operas, such as Lully's adaptation

Grout describes Lully's style of writing as more often than not 'stately, formal, and detached from ordinary life', in a stark departure from the tradition of Euripides. [8] *Alceste* is concerned with the unfolding mythology antecedent of Euripides' *Alcestis*, with the events of the play at the forefront of the action in Act III. Interestingly, the role of Heracles is substituted by Lully with Alcide, a gallant hero who loves Alcestis. Here, Alcide is only able to retrieve Alceste on the condition that she will return his love with marriage. Upon her return to Admete, the couple say moving farewells, bound by duty which is stronger than love. When

[6] Grout, 1947 p.83

[7] Mitsis, 2023 p.166

[8] Grout, 1947 p.135

Alceste offers her hand to Alcide, however, he refuses, moved by the depth of their love. Lully celebrates Alcide's gallantry, perhaps as a reflection of the prologue he included in this opera, in which the Nymph of the Seine tells of the glory that will return to France with King Louis XIV when he returned from battle, as Alceste was presented in celebration of his victory against the Franche-Compte. This is not far from Euripides' possible intentions with Alcestis, though Lully's style of storytelling downplays the irony of the original tragedy. The vivid emotion and internal struggle of Euripides' characters are likewise softened in favour of refined gallantry as would suit the seventeenth-century French court. In light of these points, it is likely that Lully was simply inspired by the story of Alcestis rather than interested in Euripides himself as a playwright.

Handel's *Oreste* was adapted from Euripides' interpretation of the story of Orestes and Iphigeneia and is the only pre-Romantic telling of the story in opera. *Orestes*, Euripides' final play, was written in 408 BCE, two years before the death of its writer, and four years before the fall of Athens in the Peloponnesian war. On *Orestes*, William Arrowsmith wrote, "I am tempted to see in the play Euripides' prophetic image of the final destruction of Athens and Hellas, or that Hellas to which a civilized man could still give his full commitment."[11] If we are to view the play in this light, it could be interpreted as a cynical and poignant response to Athens' ongoing conflict with Sparta. The play follows the torment of Orestes after having murdered his mother, Clytemnestra, and grapples with the distinctly Euripidean concern of divine justice, and the rule of law against the will of the gods. Orestes is torn by grief, pursued by the furies, and only finds repose on Apollo's arrival onto the stage at the end of the play, following Orestes' trial. Unlike Lully's Alceste, Oreste was not so concerned with courtly bravery and morality, with the play demonstrating a distinct preoccupation with human sacrifice and desire. Handel takes liberties with the plot, in the sort of *accidenti verissimi* that will soon fall out of fashion with Gluck, as will be discussed in due course. He gives Hermione a more prominent role, and creates the character Filotete to be in love with Iphigeneia and to add another layer of intrigue to the story. This opera ends with Orestes' overcoming of his emotional torment and the imperative reunion of family and liberation of the oppressed in a way that is not so reminiscent of Euripides.

[11] Arrowmith, 1958 p.4

Euripidean tragedy in Classical opera (1750-1820)

By the 18th century, opera became a very heightened form of art. The works of composers such as Handel, Mozart, and Scarlatti often centred around the virtuoso, with secco recitative passages and long de capo arias. Typically, this style facilitates complex vocal lines with disjunct movement, varied rhythms, and long melismatic passages. This style is referred to as *Opera Seria*, or "serious" opera. Gluck pioneered the return of *Opera Seria* to its more basic form in 1767 with his *Alceste*, which premiered in Vienna. His librettist, Ranieri De' Calzabigi, wrote a preface to the opera, outlining the reforms. This was including, but not limited to, no de capo arias, no vocal improvisation, no long melismas and an overture that is linked by theme or mood to the ensuing action. Gluck's Alceste demonstrates the extent of these revisions, especially in regard to the resolve of the action at the end of the opera. It premiered first in 1767 in Vienna but was revised for presentation in Paris in 1777. In the original version, Gluck veers away from the stories of both Lully and Euripides, having Alceste be brought back to Admete by Apollo, whereas in the Paris revision, Gluck remains true to his source material by replacing Apollo with Heracles. While Euripides, however, is concerned in part with Xenia, guest friendship, presenting through Heracles its importance in Athenian culture, Gluck centres his narrative more prominently around Alceste, moving away from not only Opera Seria but also the *accidenti verissimi*, so often practiced by his predecessors as well as the influence of Euripides' works themselves.[12]

While the story of *Alcestis* was popular in early opera, perhaps for its relatively sanitised themes of morality, duty, and sacrifice, the story of *Medea* remained largely off the operatic stage until Cherubini wrote his notable work *Medee* in 1797. First performed in 431 BCE, Euripides' *Medea* explores feelings of love, passion, and vengeance. Classicist Suzanne Said argues that its protagonist is isolated from Greek values and sympathies by her 'barbarian' identity, which would preserve the emphasis on piety and duty in Athenian thought and assert superiority over foreign forces at the start of the Peloponnesian war.[13] The war began in the same year as the play's first performance, 'antagonising' a fifth-century BCE Greek audience.[14] In the play, Medea is distraught over

[12] Grout, 1947 p.261
[13] Said, 2002 p.62
[14] *Ibid.*

her abandonment by Jason for the daughter of King Creon of Corinth. On the brink of exile, she plots her revenge, killing both Creon and his daughter. In the climax of the play, she murders the sons that she had had with Jason, bringing her former husband to anguish. *Medea* concludes with its anti-heroine flying into the sky on her golden chariot, her sons' bodies hanging behind her, a scene now iconic in the Western mind. While Medea's filicide seems to be the invention of Euripides, it has gone on to set the standard for the myth, as described by Roman writers such as Seneca, Ovid, and Hyginus, for example. *Medea* has been adapted for the stage and screen more times than this paper offers time to examine, but arguably, its most famous operatic adaptation was Cherubini's *Medee*.

Written in the later part of the Classical period, Cherubini is aesthetically interested in the amoral and vengeful tone of Euripides' play, and he represents this in his orchestration. For example: at the beginning of Act 3, after the deaths of King Creon and his daughter, the strings sound a slow, lamenting melody played in imitation with the bass instruments in the orchestra, and later, after the murder of Medea and Jason's children when Medea stands triumphant in her golden chariot, the chorus sings a fast-paced finale in parallel with the horror of the scene. The use of the chorus in this way echoes Greek tragedy in that it helps to set the tone of the scene and guide the audience through the action. This differs to Euripides' use of the chorus as the women of Corinth are rather sympathetic with Medea up until her filicide. The plot of Cherubini's *Medee* remains true to its source material. Cherubini was known for his original and bold style of composition, and it has been argued that this treatment of literature in his operas kept intact the 'ethical rigour' of Classical Greek tragedy in a new form.[15] This daring attitude allowed Cherubini to explore the themes established in Euripides' play to a greater extent than had been done in the Baroque period, demonstrating the rise of Euripidean plays as source material for Classical opera in comparison to preceding eras, before its inevitable decline with the turn of the nineteenth century, along with the influence of all things Hellenic.

[15] Russo, 1994 p.124

Decline of Classical influence in the Romantic period (1820-1900)

After the Classical period, there was a decline in interest in the Hellenic and Nationalism became a key area of interest for Western composers. Grout argues that 'national subjects' and 'patriotic motives' stimulated composers to seek 'national expression' in their music.[16] Opera was placed at the forefront of this movement. Defining Romantic music as Western Classical music written between 1825 and 1900, it may be observed that over the course of the Romantic period, the prominence of Euripides' tragedies in opera declines sharply. Of some 100 operas listed as being prominent between 1833 and 1900 in the Viking Opera Guide, none are based on Euripidean tragedy[17]. In fact, very few draw inspiration from Classical tradition at all. Of these few, two come from Greek mythology: Offenbach's *La Belle Helene* and *Orfee aux Enfers*, both satirical and cynical in nature, and one from Roman tradition: Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, based on Virgil's Aeneid.

Unlike the Greek Tragedian, the Romantic composer was not under the confines of a strict mythological cycle, so during this period they often drew inspiration from other sources, such as folk traditions, poetry, and contemporary life itself. [18] This led to the production of several key operas in music history, such as Wagner's *Die Walkure*, Puccini's *La Boheme*, and Verdi's *La Traviata*. Moreover, as is often the case in Euripides' tragedy, Verdi and Puccini in particular are preoccupied with human nature, and are less interested in idealistic, moral representations of life. Like how Euripides often writes mortal, flawed protagonists, so too do the writers of Romantic opera. In perhaps the most often performed today of these three examples, *La Traviata*, the courtesan Violetta sacrifices her hedonistic lifestyle for love of Alfredo, a young man of means from the country. When they are separated by Alfredo's father, who disapproves of Violetta's past, Alfredo reckons with his morals, cultural custom, and his emotions. The opera ends with the death of Violetta in the arms of Alfredo after three acts of drama permeated by intriguingly Euripidean themes of grief, sacrifice, and human vulnerability. This suggests that even though the operatic output of the Romantic period was not explicitly based on Classical tragedy,

[16] Grout, 1947 p.507

[17] Holden, Kenyon, Walsh *et al.* 1993

[18] Schultz-Gerhard, 1924 p.480

they are still often implicitly linked with the works of Euripides in their thematic concern.

Classical reception and the 'Renaissance' of Euripidean tragedy in 20th Century opera

Romantic aestheticism and Germanism began to be rejected at the beginning of the twentieth century and, in rapidly developing technological terrain, artists began to experiment with the form of their music in its tonality, harmony, timbre, as well as instrumentation, sound production, and staging, thus shifting the musical landscape into a sprawling mass of the impressionistic, the neo-classical, and avant-garde. European Nationalism also largely declined in popularity in music after the end of the Second World War, though folk tunes often influenced the work of composers during this time, notably that of Vaughan-Williams and Stravinsky, for example, using respectively English and Russian folk music extensively in their writing. Operatic composers were influenced by the globalisation of art and fascination with the East and often portrayed different cultures and time periods on the stage, albeit to varying degrees of success, as can be seen in Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and *Turandot* (1926). This interest in different cultures and experimentation music was not limited to Eastern subjects, but also gave way to developments in the realm of Classical reception.

Like Lully and Gluck, Wellesz composed an opera based on *Alcestis* (1924). Unlike his predecessors however, Wellesz uses the tragedy as a vessel through which to explore themes of desperation and grief. The prologue to Act 1 is made up exclusively of the string section of the orchestra, built up slowly from the double bass to the first violin, creating a feeling of apprehension. This is amplified in the monotonous timbre by the use of dynamics, beginning piano and swelling to a fortissimo with the introduction of new instruments before falling back down to piano, as well as the use of bitonality, a very new technique, and the long, slow, rhythms, drawing out close dissonances often of no more than one whole tone. When the orchestra falls away and the curtain opens, Wellesz introduces the orchestra with only uneasy percussion, reminiscent of a funeral procession. In *Alkestis*, Wellesz strived to avoid subjectivism, perhaps in a similar way to Gluck, and wrote purely

illustrative music to the text he was setting in a way that contrasted starkly from the aesthetic operatic writing of Wagner or Puccini in the Romantic period. Five years later, Wellesz similarly approaches one of Euripides' tragedies which before the twentieth century had never been adapted into opera: the *Bacchae*. Posthumously winning the Athenian Dionysia in 405 BCE, the play is drawn from the myth of the Theban king Pentheus and his mother Agave in which Dionysus punished Thebes for slander against him by leading the city's women, led by Agave, in crazed Dionysian worship. This leads to the grisly death of Pentheus and the exile of the maenads. Philip Ward states that 'if the primary mood of Alkestis was an elegiac adagio, *Die Bakchantinnen* (1931) is all dance-like allegro and pulsating rhythm',[19] an idea very effectively portrayed in the ecstasy of the Maenads in the context of experimental use of bi and polytonal harmonies. In setting the text, Wellesz said that his aim was in 'Singstimme' (more speech than singing) rather than 'post-Wagnerian rhapsodic Sprechgesang' (closer to operatic recitative), illustrating again the experimental, expressionist aims of the work. While it is likely that Wellesz was significantly influenced by the artists around him steering their work away from German Romanticism, it was this influence that allowed him and others to explore Euripides in new ways.

Since Wellesz's adaptation, the play has been adapted several times, usually in more modern, experimental contexts, such as Buller's *Bakxai*, written for the English National Opera in 1992 entirely in ancient Greek and Partch's Revelation in the Courthouse Park. which premiered at the University of Illinois in 1961. In this work, another adaptation of *The Bacchae*, Partch alternates between ancient Thebes and small-town 1950s America in a critique of contemporary pop culture and religious fanaticism, an example of this being his interpretation of Dionysus, who in his American form becomes Dion, a rock-and-roll star who is greeted by a fervent female fanbase. Partch places equal emphasis on the character as a stand in for a figure like Elvis or the Beatles as he does a revivalist preacher, having drawn some inspiration for his musical composition from Christian evangelistic services, to however abstract a degree.[20] *Revelation* is orchestrated for a number of the composers own invented instruments, and experiments with tonality, timbre, and language, often using non-sensical vocals. The music is written to be

[19] Ward, 2002 p.27

[20] Sheppard, 1996 p.468

innovative, unsettling, and uncomfortable as the worshippers descend into religious frenzy. Professor in Music W. Antony Sheppard argues for *Revelation's* role as a didactic piece, written for performance by students and cautionary toward the "menace of mindless group behaviour"[20], a view which places upon the opera a cynicism toward popular and religious culture of mid-century America, in much the same way that Euripides urges a closer consideration of the Greek gods and conventions of religious fanaticism in his play. By contemporising The Bacchae in this way, Euripides' writing becomes a tool through which a composer may perform a complex examination of post-war American society at a time when the musical landscape of the Western Classical world was developing at an incredible rate.

Conclusion

The resurgence of Euripides in twentieth-century opera and the use of his tragedies by composers demonstrates a shift towards experimentation and exploration not just of Euripides' intentions and preoccupations but of wider cultural interests in a rapidly changing musical landscape. The stories passed down through his tragedies have pervaded opera from its conception to the modern day, either explicitly in the Baroque and Classical periods, which often took inspiration from these plays, or more implicitly in the thematic and emotional preoccupations of Romantic opera. In any case, Euripides has been, and remains, not only a popular source of inspiration for composers, but a key component in the development of opera.

[20] *Ibid.*

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hOK7bU0S1Y

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