

Max Wickert

ORPHEUS DISMEMBERED:  
OPERATIC MYTH GOES UNDERGROUND



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“Librettos and Academies: Some Speculations and an Example” (VII:4 , 1974), pp. 6-16;

“Bellini’s Orpheus” (IX:4, 1976), pp. 11-18; and

“*Che Farò Senza Euridyce*: Myth and Meaning in Early Opera” (XI:1, 1978), pp. 18-35.

## ORPHEUS DISMEMBERED: OPERATIC MYTH GOES UNDERGROUND

BY MAX WICKERT

I do not believe that opera is a "culinary" pseudo-form which modifies the established morphologies of music and drama by coyness of juxtaposition or eccentricity of stance. It is, rather, a true genre like tragedy or the novel, and like them it responds to the pressure of historical circumstance on collective need by elaborating a unique constellation of images, gestures, and plots so as to create a repository of hope — in short, a myth. The metonymic name of the operatic myth is Orpheus. "All opera is Orpheus,"<sup>1</sup> I writes T. W. Adorno and sees no contradiction between the paradoxical fancifulness of this aphorism and the rigorous method he calls for in drafting a "sociology of music." Joseph Kerman, whose ambitions are perhaps more modest, concurs. He claims that in the myth of Orpheus "one is drawn inevitably to see . . . mirrored with a kind of proleptic vision, the peculiar problems of the opera composer." That problem, Kerman thinks, has something to do with "emotion and its control, the summoning of feeling to an intensity and communicability and form which the action of life heeds and death provisionally respects."<sup>2</sup> It is a cliché of operatic historians that the originators of the form would have agreed with Kerman. The direct settings of the Orpheus story by composers of the 17th and 18th centuries, from Peri and Monteverdi, through Landi, Rossi, Keiser, and Graun, to Gluck and Haydn, would all by themselves make a sizeable and a representative repertory for the period.

Much can be learned from a study of these works. Some peculiar features persist and intensify; others display an interesting tendency toward piquant metamorphoses. How to account, for instance, for the proclivity of operatic Orpheuses to narcissistic grief, the way they have of listening at great length to the echoes of their own laments, of praising their lyres or the power of song when they should be praising their Eurydices, of getting

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<sup>1</sup> T. W. Adorno, "Bürgerliche Oper," *Klangfiguren* (Berlin, 1959), p. 26 [my translation].

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York, 1956), pp. 27-28.

stuck in the contemplation of their "affects"? Why their uncertain wavering between the ideal of a Eurydice regained and that of a Eurydice renounced and apotheosized, a wavering so rarely resolved in one direction or another that *dei ex machinis* are likely to be needed in either case, just to bring the work to an end? Why, finally, the tendency to shift more and more of the weight of culpability from the shoulders of the hero onto that of his bride? Monteverdi's Eurydice follows Orpheus silently and passively until he himself decides to turn and defy the infernal imperative. Gluck's heroine, in the next century, importunes and ultimately overwhelms the fortitude of her husband. At last, the post-Enlightenment Eurydice of Haydn's *L'Anima del Filosofo* simply tricks an unsuspecting Orpheus by unveiling herself before he has a chance to look away. Is this drift merely another manifestation of growing western anti-feminism or (more likely) is a process both subtler and more complicated at work?

These are fascinating questions; they merit the attention of essays other than this one. But even more fascinating is the fate of the Orpheus myth in opera when its overt components disappear altogether and are replaced by covert or even "unconscious" allusions or analogues. For the disappearance of the character Orpheus himself from the operatic stage, together with his attendant divinities (*ex machina* or otherwise), is by the end of the 18th century a fact. We may encounter him in the guise of a Tannhäuser or a Blondel or a *trovatore* here and there in the 19th century, but on the whole we find that he is, as it were, both sent underground and dismembered. As in Matthew Arnold's "Scholar Gipsy," the fate *of* the myth begins to recapitulate the fate *in* the myth.

The way this happens is perhaps an aspect of the romantic shift from tenor to vehicle in the use of metaphor. For an 18th century operagoer the orphic underworld may evoke various "deadly" aspects of his reality — imprisonment and political repression, the ineluctable Social Contract, bourgeois money, *mésalliance*, scientific ignorance, or even just plain disease and death. He would feel these possibilities of signification vibrating "behind" the manifest stage action. His 19th century counterpart would want it the other way round. An "actual" dungeon, a plausible domestic or political tyrant, a tangible pile of ill-gotten gold, a really beclouded fanatic, or a common case of consumption appear on the stage and furnish him with a pretext for oscillating to the

larger "Idea" of the myth. In either case, the myth is felt to "redeem" the concrete exemplifications. But the operatic myth is itself a myth of "redemption." It is somehow corroded by the unleashing of the concrete upon the operatic stage, its applicability more and more ambivalent, displaced, fragmented, and subvertible, until the characteristic Orphic hero himself is a spokesman no longer of passionate affirmation, but of despairing metaphysical interrogation, like Wagner's Hans Sachs with his "*Wahn, Wahn, überall Wahn!*" or the Rodolfo of Verdi's *Luisa Miller* with his "*Tutto e menzogna, tradimento, inganno!*" or finally Stravinsky/Auden's Rakewell with his "In foolish dream, in a gloomy labyrinth I hunted shadows." All that is ultimately left of the Orphic affirmation is the minimal orphic idea —music itself, or more precisely the audience affect at the recognition of a returning melody. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to trace some aspects of the beginnings of this process by examining at length two pivotal and interrelated works, Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Beethoven's *Fidelio*.

The *Magic Flute*, written in the same year (1791) as Haydn's *L'Anima del Filosofo*, has a very Orphic iconography indeed. It contains one or two clearly conscious allusions to the Orpheus story — among them the stage direction which calls for the animals of the wilderness to assemble, enraptured, at the sound of the hero Tamino's music. There is a descent into an underworld, a winning of the lost bride from the powers that govern it. The prohibition against speaking to Pamina is analogous to the prohibition against looking back at Eurydice. Pamina's response to her bridegroom's obedience to the prohibition is not only psychologically and dramaturgically, but also musically reminiscent of Eurydice's in Gluck. There is, of course, a great deal of resemblance between Tamino's relation to the solar Sarastro and Orpheus's to Apollo. (The bridge between Monteverdi's Apollo and Mozart's Philosopher Priest is probably the Zoroastro of Handel's *Orlando*, an opera which, as Winton Dean has pointed out,<sup>3</sup> has a great deal in common with Mozart's.) One notes with some interest, too, that, once in his underworld, Mozart's Tamino, like Monteverdi's Orfeo, spends a pivotal five minutes singing in admiration of his instrument and its powers. Finally, when Tamino finds the temple gates of Nature and Reason equally barred against him and has to choose the

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<sup>3</sup> Notes to the recording, RCA LSC-6197.

only other alternative, a portal labeled "Wisdom," that curious scene suggests what may be termed the epistemological void of operatic tradition, the necessity of affirming an orphic way of knowing unsupported by those two cornerstones of Enlightenment metaphysics — common sense (Nature) and the laws of evidence (Reason).

Yet the more obvious Tamino's apparent *connection* with the operatic Orpheuses seems, the less evident is his real *affinity* to them. In essential ways he seems the less Orphic, the more superficial evidence of his orphic nature one contemplates. In its putative hero, the opera gives us all the Orphic trimmings, only obscurely to disappoint us when it comes to the crux. Kierkegaard was the first to perceive this, and though his way of putting it is extreme and more than a little ironical, it is worth quoting:

Tamino's flute, from which the opera takes its name, fails altogether of its effect. And why? Because Tamino is simply not a musical figure. This is due to the mistaken plan of the opera as a whole. Tamino becomes exceedingly tiresome and sentimental on his flute ... and ... as a dramatic figure is entirely outside of the musical, just as the intellectual development the play would realize is, on the whole, a totally unmusical idea. Tamino has really come so far that the musical ceases; therefore his flute-playing is only a time-killer, brought in to drive away thought ... The fault in *The Magic Flute* is, however, that the whole opera tends toward consciousness, and consequently its whole trend is to do away with music, while still remaining an opera.<sup>4</sup>

Kierkegaard (or his "aesthetic" persona in *Either/ Or*) is unfair only inasmuch as he assumes that, given the conception of Tamino as essentially unmusical, it necessarily follows that the "plan of the opera as a whole" is "mistaken." In every other respect, the Danish philosopher's insight is profoundly suggestive, for what he is above all alert to is the absence of crisis, of failure in Tamino's behavior as a musical figure. We miss, once we consider Tamino as an Orphic type, at least one essential feature of the Orpheus archetype: the infraction of the infernal taboo and its consequences. This quasi-Orpheus, like the real

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<sup>4</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, translated by D. & L. Swenson (New York, 1959), volume 1, pp. 81-82.

one, is given a prohibition, but he has disturbingly little trouble in abiding by it. He passes his test with flying colors. In this respect, he may be edifying, in the manner of, say, Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, with whom he has much in common, but he is certainly not only undramatic, but unoperatic. Were the *Magic Flute* entirely a matter of his personality and actions, it would be no more operatic than a kind of *Ascanio in Alba* on a Masonic theme. But of course there is more to this work than its hero; in fact, there is more to it than the magic instrument of its title.

There is, for one thing, Papageno. Mozart's work is no more conceivable without that comical, childish, grotesque side-kick of Tamino's than *Don Quixote* without Sancho Panza. To return to the Kierkegaard passage, we find that its author is far from unaware of this, though he is or pretends to be at a loss about what to do with it. "The significance of Papageno's relation to Tamino," he writes, "looks so profound and thoughtful that it almost becomes unthinkable for sheer thoughtfulness."<sup>5</sup> This is Kierkegaard's way of accusing an opera of epistemological hucksterism, and since he is intent on other purposes he leaves the matter of Papageno's relation to Tamino unexplored. Or almost unexplored. He does drop, in passing, one fascinating hint: "It is so very profoundly arranged in the opera, that the flutes of Tamino and Papageno harmonize with one another."<sup>6</sup> He might have gone on to say that in the progress of performance, Papageno's flute is heard first, in the opening aria of the work, so that, for all the opening-night audience knows, *it* could be the magic flute announced in the title. It even *is* magical inasmuch as it attracts animals, much as Orpheus's or Tamino's more dignified instruments do, though Papageno makes use of this virtue to catch the animals and sell them. Later on in the opera, Papageno's piping is as needful for orientation in Sarastro's underworld as Tamino's; the two, in fact, work in tandem. Finally, Papageno's first song clearly associates his pipe with the means for attracting (and catching) a true-love.

If we discount Papageno's clownishness, his evidently low-mimetic stature in the hierarchy of the *dramatis personae*, and examine him with coldly classificatory logic, we find he

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<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Kierkegaard, p. 81.

is as "orphyic" as his master, and in some ways more so. Orpheus, in the first place, classically does not have a flute, but a lyre or lute or harp. Papageno's flute, we quickly learn in the opera, is not magic at all and he retains it only, as it were, in his Tamino-aspect. What he does receive in the course of the action is not, to be sure, a magic lyre, but a magic glockenspiel, which is close enough. As any classicist knows, there are ancient, profound overtones to the flute-lyre opposition. The two instruments are repeatedly pitted against each other in musical contests of Greek myth, paradigmatically in the one between Marsyas and Apollo. The lyre-playing Apollo defeats his opponent because his lyre allows him to sing *while* playing. And Orpheus is above all a singer and to that extent Apollonian. Needless to say, in *The Magic Flute*, Papageno is the one who can sing and play simultaneously; he does so, very charmingly, on two occasions, and is both times rewarded with the arrival of his "Eurydice". (It is a little droll to contemplate the fact that when Tamino plays his flute, the person who arrives is, at least on one occasion, Papageno!). But the most significant Orphyic feature in Papageno is precisely the one missing in Tamino: he breaks the prohibition, loses his bride, is ready (like Gluck's or Haydn's Orfeo) to kill himself, and is made finally happy by *ex machina* intervention.

So much for cold classificatory logic. We do not, of course, for a moment take Papageno seriously as an Orphyic figure. One reason is that, unlike his master, he lacks a capacity for metaphysical suffering. His conception of anguish is circumscribed by hunger, thirst, sexual need, and what the transactional analysts call insufficient stroking. The ethos of the opera clearly forbids the conception of Orpheus as an *homme moyen sensuel*; yet, paradoxically, it presents such a figure and even endears him to us rather as though Shakespeare were to roll drunken Trinculo, birdlike Ariel, and monstrous Caliban into one. What is more, Papageno has the last word, for he gets his Papagena after Tamino has already been united with his Pamina, thus necessitating two finales, and occasioning much talk of anticlimax among the work's more hide-bound critics (among them the film-maker Ingmar Bergman, who thought he knew better than Mozart and reshuffled the scenes).

One thing is clear: in the context of *The Magic Flute*, the figure of Papageno is literally irrepressible. Perhaps we should see the figure of Tamino as an embodiment of the



forces that, unsuccessfully, attempt to repress him. Mozart (is this what Kierkegaard obscurely senses?) desperately wants to make Tamino a repository of ultimate meaning, and he works within a tradition which associates such ultimate meaning (initiation) with the figure of Orpheus. But he can accommodate him only in the context of Papageno's equal assertiveness, which seems rather like the assertiveness of a wish that the "ultimate" be deprived of its special, its aristocratic status. Edward Dent points out that there is something of a mystery about Mozart taking on this particular project: "It is difficult to imagine what thought led him to do so. It was hardly dignified for a musician who had been constantly associated with court life at Vienna ... to undertake to collaborate in a fairy play to be acted in what was little more than a wooden barn, to an audience that cared only for the trivial and vulgar"<sup>7</sup>—an audience, in other words, responsive mainly to Papageno. We should perhaps see the magic of *The Magic Flute* as the result of an uneasy compromise between the composer and that audience. The deeper needs of that audience are satisfied by the attribution of the Orphic myth's chief structural features to Papageno, while on the surface that myth's characteristic affect is displaced onto the story of Tamino. There is even a disquieting fantasy undercurrent in the work which makes Papageno the "real" rescuer of Pamina. It is he who sees her first, who removes her from the clutches of the vile Monostatos, who leads her back to Tamino on at least one occasion, whose suicide attempt is carefully paralleled to hers, and who, for that matter, spends more time in her company than her ultimate bridegroom. The duet "*Bei Männern welche Liebe fühlen*," easily imaginable as a hero-heroine *vaudeville* at the end of an *Abduction from the Seraglio* or a *Finta Giardiniera*, is in this opera sung by the heroine and Papageno. At any rate, there is something touching in the story that Mozart on his death bed, unable to attend any more performances of the work, had a friend sing to him, several times, not Tamino's "*Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön*" or "*Wie schön ist doch dein Zauberton*," not Sarastro's "*In diesen teuren Hallen*," not even the sublime flute and timpani march by which Tamino and Pamina pass through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, but Papageno's opening song. Mozart's loftiest ideals went into Tamino, but he identified with Papageno.

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<sup>7</sup> Edward J. Dent, *Mozart's Operas* (London, 1913), p. 211.

Papageno is at his least Orphic when he talks; and he is loquacious to the point of silliness. It is talking to, rather than looking at, Eurydice which the underworld of his opera forbids. The wedge driven between word and melody mirrored in the theory of Rousseau is in the practice of this opera near-absolute. Is Papageno perhaps an embodiment of Rousseau's sense that once music and language coexist, as they must both in opera and in a lyre-playing Orpheus, there is an ineluctable false note, a "flaw" that "cannot be removed"?<sup>8</sup> It certainly seems so; and we may conclude our discussion of Mozart's work with a meditation upon Papageno as a representation of a pervasive fear of language.

We find the first hint in Papageno's very name. Dent notes that this name, with its Italianate ending, should "be pronounced as in Italian ... with a soft *g*, although the current practice in Germany is to pronounce the *g* hard."<sup>9</sup> The great scholar is here misled by philology, or rather not led far enough. As any German could have told him, the name is an obvious cognate of the most common German name for 'parrot' (*Papagei*), etymologically related to the English 'popinjay'. "Nyghtengales syngand, and papeiayes spekind," the *OED* quotes Mandeville, and there we have one of Mozart's primary intentions in a nutshell.<sup>10</sup> We remember the almost Protestant suggestion in Rousseau that music, referring itself for verification only to the inner light of the listener's subjective feelings, cannot deceive. The corollary of that position is that language, with its capacity of referring to things the subject has never experienced, not only can, but inevitably does deceive - and that its plausibility, its association with "truth" derives only from conventional repetition, in other words from "parroting". Language, from an Orphic perspective, is infantile echolalia — and in *The Magic Flute* this position is not only illustrated, but compounded with the opera's strong streak of anti-feminism, at

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionary of Music*, translated by Ulrich Weisstein, in: Ulrich Weisstein, *The Essence of Opera* (New York, 1964), pp. 82-90 *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> Dent, p. 220 n.

<sup>10</sup> This does not rule out a possibly half-conscious Latinate pseudo-etymology: **Papa-geno**, 'father-begotten'. This is, however, ironical, since Papageno is patently a mamma's boy; at one point he even wishes he were a girl.

the point where Tamino admonishes Papageno that what the latter believes is "*Geschwätz von Weibern nachgesagt*" ("tittle-tattle parroted by women"). In the very next line, Tamino uses a form of the German language's strongest word for deception (*heucheln*), a word so strong in sinister epistemological overtones that he had used it once before (the only time it occurs in the opera) to cry out at the total collapse of all his values as he enters the underworld of the Temple of Wisdom: "*So ist denn alles Heuchelei!*"

Papageno then embodies a naive faith in the adequacy of language—an infantile belief that the syllables stammered at the breast, the "mother tongue", can be escalated into a true language of feeling. The concept of feeling is the crucial differential here. Dent, to quote him once more, contemplates with some surprise that in this remarkable work "hero and heroine have no more than one solo aria apiece!"<sup>11</sup> It is one of the virtues of the opera's unjustly maligned libretto that the texts of these two arias, separated by the bulk of the work, are in beautiful and certainly conscious balance. And the obvious keynote in both is the word *fühlen* (to feel).

Tamino: . . .

*Ich fühl es, ich fühl es,  
Wie dies Götterbild  
mein Herz mit neuer Regung füllt.* (Act I, no. 3)

Pamina:

*Ach, ich fühl's, es ist verschwunden,  
ewig bin der Liebe Glück!  
Nimmer kommt ihr, Wonnestunden  
meinem Herzen mehr zurück.*

(Act II, no. 17)

(The symmetry of the two arias is accented by other key-words in both *Herz*, *Liebe*, *allein*, *ewig*). Tamino's aria specifically associates feeling" with the linguistically inexpressible ("*Dies etwas kann ich zwar nicht nennen*"), and Pamina's outburst is occasioned by the refusal of Tamino to speak. She takes that refusal as evidence of the cessation of his

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<sup>11</sup> Dent, p. 219.

"feeling" for her (*"fühlst du nicht der Liebe Sehnen"*), while he has learned that, on the contrary, it is speaking that would invalidate his desire. In the background of both scenes is Papageno, silenced against his will in the first, and merrily prattling away in the second. For his part, Papageno never uses the word *fühlen* at all in the opera except once, when it is fed to him by Pamina (*"Bei Männern welche Liebe fühlen"*).

We are thus dealing with a distrust not so much of the capacity of language in general, as of its adequacy to the world of desire. But Papageno is given desire, and what is more, he attains its object. The moment of that attainment has other features of interest besides its obvious structural similarity to Pamina's. Like Pamina, Papageno is desolate and ready to do away with himself. As with Pamina, the three fairy genii appear to dissuade him (shadows of the old Orphic *deus ex machina*). At their urging Papageno remembers his magic bells, and when he plays them his Papagena finally appears. The ensuing duet, charming to the point of fatuity, has the two bird-humans literally parroting each other for five minutes. They stammer the syllable *Pa-* at least sixty times, and then launch into a *stretto* over half of which consists of iterations of each other's names. Papagena, of course, as the priest of Isis had promised earlier, reproduces her husband's appearance in every detail except sex (and vocal timbre), and they sing of reproducing each other in the form of legitimately conceived offspring — a large Catholic family, one can be sure, is being launched here. Kierkegaard dismissed the scene with amused contempt: "The fate of the actual Papageno need not concern us. We wish him happiness with his little Papagena, and we willingly permit him to seek his happiness in populating a primitive forest or an entire continent with nothing but Papagenos."<sup>12</sup> The scene is an epitome of the ethos of reproduction — infantile in both the linguistic and the sociological sense — and the shower of babies it envisions is an ambiguous blessing. Still, Mozart forces us, or was forced by what he shared with the popular audience of Schikaneder's theater, to accept it uncritically and even with delight. His opera needs to accommodate an anti-Orpheus whose desire is as organic and as commonplace as the warbling of birds and the copulation of the masses.

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<sup>12</sup> Kierkegaard, p. 82.

But the opera more than hints that this accommodation is the sign also of a secret fear, the fear that desire *in all its aspects* is featureless and undifferentiated. The classic Orpheus cannot endure even the possibility of such a state of affairs. "*Ché farò senz' Eurydice?*" he sings: life without the particular and unique form of desire he imagines is unbearable. His music is the do-or-die means for keeping that vision alive. And yet the classic Orpheus is a narcissist, too — at least his proclivity for confounding his gift with his need, his lyre with his bride, his lament with his loss. The very intensity with which he wants to give his desire for a special woman a privileged status has a tendency to make him enamored, not so much of that woman, but of his song. Counterbalancing this classical Orpheus *in The Magic Flute* is that parody Orpheus, Papageno, de-individuated as far as his humanity will permit, announcing from the outset that his desire is undifferentiated, that one good-looking woman will do as well as another. He needs no image, no *bezaubernd schönes Bildnis*, to convince him of his yearning. And he accepts with the naive delight of a child getting a birthday surprise the fact that, when his yearning is given an object, that object is a narcissistic reproduction of himself, feathers and all. It is perfectly fitting, too, that she should first appear to him in a shape quite unlike his own, that of the archetypal carlene crone, and that he should both accept and reject her in the guise (he says yes, but crosses his fingers behind his back). One of the sublimely trivial quibbles in the libretto of the work (so trivial that Mozart did not bother to set it to music) occurs when Papageno is first promised his bride:

Papageno:

*Und wozu bestehen diese Prüfungen?*

2nd Priest:

*Dich allen unseren Gesetzen zu unterwerfen, selbst den Tod nicht zu scheuen.*

Papageno:

*Ich bleibe ledig!*

2nd Priest:

*Aber wenn du dir ein tugendhaftes, schönes Mädchen erringen könntest, das an Farbe und Kleidung dir ganz gleich wäre?*

Papageno:

*Mir ganz gleich . . . Mir ganz gleich!?*

(Act II, scene 1)

The passage does not translate well, for the German word "*gleich*" means both "similar to" and "a matter of indifference to". But then in English, too, "sameness" is, at least by a trick of etymology, "indifference." Papageno needs only to be paid the indirect compliment of hearing, in the next sentence, that his promised simulacrum is both young and beautiful, and he thinks that life is worth risking for her, for it, for himself.

So the pseudo-Orphic Papageno is prepared to undergo the descent with his master, the quasi-Orphic Tamino. And what, one might well ask, do they both descend into? A peculiar underworld, to be sure; an underworld only in the theatrical sense, but an overworld in the ethical. That the ascent into enlightenment must look like a descent into darkness is perhaps a commonplace of religion and fiction; still, since Tamino and Papageno work at such meta-physical cross-purposes and yet are both repositories of Orphic motifs, one is tempted to see a more unique paradox in the fact that this dual Orpheus descends not from the pastoral civilization of Thrace into the barbaric demonism of Hades, but from the emotional violence of the Queen of the Night's territory into the realm of the philosopher-king Sarastro. The chorus of furies is on the wrong side of the gate. Tamino / Papageno's descent is a descent into *culture*. We must leave to one side a consideration of the question whether, when Tamino exclaims at the gate of that underworld, "*So ist denn alles Heuchelei!*" his might not be the dawning voice of what a later age was to call the Social Lie. At any rate, the stage is set for a dramatic connection between the darkness into which Orpheus descends and the forces of social and political repression, a connection which powerfully emerges in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, however far the Orpheus myth in that work retreats into a latent rather than manifest layer of signification.

Early in his career Beethoven (though the fact is little known) seems to have given the Orpheus myth a more or less direct treatment. The occasion was a commission from the Italian dancer Salvatore Vigano for music to a ballet entitled *The*

*Creatures of Prometheus*.<sup>13</sup> Though the complete scenario of that ballet has been lost, we know enough about it from the program outline that survives to dispose of the assumption that its plot had any Aeschylean overtones. No mention seems to have been made of Prometheus's torment—and at any rate any romantic associations of Beethoven's "titanism" with the presumed content of the work are immediately dispelled by listening to its music. On the contrary, Prometheus appears in it as a serenely tutelary figure rather like, one would imagine, Mozart's Sarastro.<sup>14</sup> The main agents are a pair of statues-come-to-life, presumably a man and a woman, whom Prometheus initiates into the mysteries of Apollo. The most revealing sentence of the outline declares that these two figures "through the power of harmony are made sensitive to the passions of human existence."<sup>15</sup> A key role in that education is taken by Orpheus who appears not only in his own form but in those of his analogues, Amphion and Arion. It is clear from this that Beethoven at the beginning of his creative life was no stranger to the allegorical habits of thought the Orphic legend tended to nurture, and which tended to give it a twist in the direction of what we have already observed in *The Magic Flute*.

But Beethoven's aristocratic entertainment of 1801 is a far cry from the almost Jacobin opera he began four years later, the most striking feature of which is its almost totally unallegorical topicality. Whatever myths operate in *Fidelio* have been pushed below a surface that is as resolutely contemporary as the Viennese censorship of the time would allow. Given this, it is rather baffling to contemplate *Fidelio*'s profound emotional kinship to, precisely, *The Magic Flute*. The similarity of evocation

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<sup>13</sup> Vigano worked under the famous ballet master Gasparo Angiolini who, through his connections with Gluck and "Reform Opera," illustrates the inextricable interweaving of operatic and balletic traditions, leading all the way back through Lully to the simultaneous origin of both genres in the sixteenth century.

<sup>14</sup> Dent (p. 258) ventures a direct connection: "The final chorus [of *The Magic Flute*] may well have suggested the theme in *Prometheus* which afterwards became famous through its employment for a great set of pianoforte variations and for the last movement of the *Eroica* Symphony.

<sup>15</sup> Cited by Philip Ramey, liner notes to the recording, Columbia M30082.

between those two totally different works has, of course, been much noted, though the reasons given for it have not often supported close examination. The musicological formalists have sought it in some label like *Singspiel* or "Viennese classical style". But Weber's *Oberon*, derived from the same source as, and very similar in plot to, *The Magic Flute*, a work whose form is certainly that of the *Singspiel*, has virtually no resemblance to Mozart's opera beyond the obvious. Mozart's own Viennese classicism produced other operas, and yet one of the greatest Mozart critics has stated flatly that "*Die Zauberflöte* stands much closer to *Fidelio* than it does to *Don Giovanni* or *Così fan Tutte*."<sup>16</sup> <sup>16</sup> The fact is that formalist considerations cannot quite define and certainly do not invariably determine affinities. In this case the relationship between the two works is both more direct and more profound.

It is Dent, exquisitely sensitive to the scores of the two works, who comes closest to accounting for it, though, intent only on Mozart, he leaves the question hanging. He notes that there are motivic reminiscences of the earlier opera in the later which seem to establish relationships not so much between their atmospheres as between their characters. "Pizarro as a singing character, " says Dent, "might be the son of the Queen of the Night by Monostatos. In the duet between Pizarro and Rocco we are often reminded of Monostatos and Papageno; the most curious reminiscence is the resemblance between the duet for Florestan and Leonora (after she has rescued him) and that for Papageno and Papagena."<sup>17</sup> Dent might have added that the tones of Don Fernando are clearly those of Sarastro, that Pizarro is dispatched in a swift musical figure not unlike those that accompany the final disappearance of the Queen of the Night, and that *Fidelio* and Rocco's duet near the conclusion of Act One more than once conjures up the initial meeting of Pamina and Papageno. Dent quite appropriately finds these reminiscences "curious"; his use of the word indicates precisely how much and how little this kind of motif-hunting can accomplish. It can show that in the *Magic Flute* echoes are pervasive enough to form textures that, though scarcely conscious, cannot be matters of mere accidental reminiscence. And yet it

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<sup>16</sup> Dent, p. 259.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



cannot account for their meaning because, instance by instance, the parallels have a dreamlike, displaced oddity which disappears once either work is viewed as a whole. The snivelling and lecherous underling, Monostatos, somehow becomes the sinister and inquisitorial Pizarro; the coloratura Queen of the Night is transmogrified into a dramatic bass and also assimilated in Pizarro; the silly monogamous twittering of the Papagenes turns into the ecstatically sublime spousal hymn of the Florestans; the agile harlequinade of Papageno himself reappears as the clumsy good-heartedness of the jailer Rocco. Cumulatively the effect is the distortion and reintegration of an entire associative context—in short the transformation of a myth.

If we take, for a minute, a more abstract approach we might remind ourselves of the more obvious structural similarities of the two works. We might take as a hallmark of that similarity the almost identical way in which the two central pairs of lovers greet their ultimate delivery. Tamino and Pamina sing:

*Ihr Götter, welch ein Augenblick!*

*Bewahret ist uns Isis Glück!*

and the words of Leonora and Florestan at the analogous moment in *Fidelio* are almost certainly a conscious echo:

*O Gott, welch ein Augenblick!*

*O unaussprechlich süßes Glück!*

Working backward from these culminating moments, we see that they are brought about by similar patterns, differentiated in only one important way: in *The Magic Flute* the man descends to redeem the woman, while in *Fidelio* it is the other way around. The former has affinities with the myth of Orpheus, the latter with that of Alcestis. It should not surprise us that the two themes have displayed a conscious reciprocity since the beginning of opera. The connection has the sanction of antiquity: both Orpheus and Admetus are well-known protégés of the Paean Apollo and there are several references to Orpheus in Euripides's *Alcestis*. There are almost as many operatic *Alcestes* as there are *Orfeos*. By the time we reach the work of

Gluck, the setting of the one seems almost to necessitate the setting of the other. Interestingly enough, the Italian tradition seems to put Orpheus in the foreground and Alceste in the background, while the French tends toward the reverse. Genetically, Beethoven's *Fidelio* is of course best understood as an offspring of the French line which reaches back through Cherubini's *Les Deux Journées* to Gluck's and ultimately to Lully's *Alceste*. Especially after the French Revolution, the fashion for what has come to be called "rescue opera" tends to gravitate toward the theme of heroic, self-sacrificing wifeliness. Bouilly's *Lenore, ou L'Amour Conjugal*, the paradigm of the genre, was set by at least three composers before Beethoven and his collaborators turned it into *Fidelio*. This much is an obvious and much repeated fact of operatic history. What is less obvious is that in examples of rescue opera where the final redemption is accomplished by a man rather than a woman, feminine agency seems to be replaced by musical agency. Grétry's extraordinarily influential *Richard Coeur-de-Léon* culminates in a scene during which the imprisoned hero is liberated by recognizing the melody his minstrel Blondel plays outside his dungeon. Blondel is thus more than faintly Orphic and only the love-interest is missing to make him completely so. Grétry's opera, at any rate, is a representative instance of a popular genre in which the moment of deliverance is signaled by some kind of on-stage music, where anagnorisis hinges on the recognition not of a person but of a melody. The allegorical Orpheus, totally identified with the power of music, appears disguised as a human serenader with a signature tune. His appearance in serious musical drama has indeed been prepared for by centuries of comic operas in which the romantic serenader (e.g. Paisiello's Almaziva or the Belmonte of Mozart's *Entführung aus dem Serail*) "rescues" his bride from the "underworld" of bourgeois money or oriental tyranny.

The two strands of rescue opera—Orphic and Alcestian—are both present in *Fidelio*: on one hand the heroic wife who braves death for the sake of a husband, on the other the signaling of the moment of release by a piece of on-stage (or back-stage) music, in this case a trumpet fanfare, which the opera has trained both its audience and its *dramatis personae* to "recognize". The full power of that trumpet call in *Fidelio*, its obscurely urgent suggestion that *here* is the work's center of meaning, has been felt by

all who have heard it in performance. That Beethoven himself intended that centrality is shown by the fact that three of the four gigantic overtures he wrote for the opera use that theme for a structural pivot. Yet the fanfare, Orphic in derivation, has curiously no direct connection with either the hero or the heroine of the plot—in fact, it is one of *Fidelio's* most satisfying ironies that it is arranged for by the villain of the piece, who then finds his evil designs foiled by it. The importance of that emancipation of music as a dramatic agent from the human cast of characters seems to me far-reaching indeed. Wagner's capacity to give certain *Leitmotives* something approaching an independent theatrical personality is inconceivable without it.

That emancipation facilitates one other transformation. It removes, at least temporarily, the shadow of narcissism from the mechanics of the Orphic plot. An Orphic hero completely dissociated from the Orphic song is in no danger of confounding the song with the bride. He will not at any rate sing long monologues in praise of his lyre or demand from echo a reproduction of his own laments. The bride herself can thus cease to be an image and become a real agent. Here again one is reminded of the dynamics of *The Magic Flute* in which Tamino is catapulted into action by an image (a portrait, in fact) but can complete his rescue only when Pamina, whom he wants to lead out of the underworld, turns around at the crucial moment to lead *him*. "*Ich selber führe dich,*" Pamina says during the final crisis of Mozart's opera—and Tamino, playing his magic flute, brings up the rear. Beethoven merely goes a step further, taking the magic flute out of both of their hands and extending female initiative to the beginnings of the story. Eurydice/ Admetus becomes Orpheus/ Alcestis, and the affective overtones of all the other characters rescrumble themselves. It is a perfect, if revolutionary answer to the suspicion of feminine agency which can be seen developing from Gluck's *Orfeo ed Eurydice* to Haydn's *Anima del Filosofo*. Beethoven in fact, at the peak of his Act II prison duet, quotes a well-known musical phrase from Gluck's opera:

*Orfeo ed Eurydice:*



*Eu—r---di-----ce! Eu—ry—di-----ce! Eu—ry---di-- ce! Eu--- ry----di--ce!*

*Fidelio:*



*Le—on—no--re! Flo—re---stan! O Le—o---no----re! Flo-----re----stan!*

The citation has the force of rebuttal. Orfeo's self-absorbed iteration of the name "Eurydice" splits back into a partnership of mutual passionate address, an exchange of names.

In *Fidelio*, then, we encounter a fragmentation and displacement of the Orpheus myth consistent with, but more radical than, the one in *The Magic Flute*. All the features are present. There is an interrupted marriage--but rather than the rape of the bride by an underworld principle, benign or malign, it involves the spiring away of the groom. There is an underworld, but not a supernatural one. (Scholars tell us that the dungeon scenes of French rescue opera developed directly "from the *enfer* scenes... which ran through French opera from its beginnings."<sup>18</sup>) There is an Orphic savior, but he has changed sex—a mutation which the ambiguous transvestitism of two centuries of operatic castrati and of sopranos in breeches has prepared for. There is an infernal prohibition, though it is no longer "Do not look back!" or even "Do not speak!" but "Do not reveal yourself!" Finally there is deliverance through music, even though it appears as severed from the real body of Orpheus as the head which floated to Lesbos. Changing the sex of the Orphic deliverer is almost Euripidean in implication--and as so often in Euripides, the myth is revitalized in the act of its ironic or humanistic dismemberment. One effect of that revitalization is the possibility of a convincing happy ending. This is surely related to what I have called the suppression of Orphic narcissism. It is as if Beethoven had converted the latent hopelessness of the myth into hope by flying in the

<sup>18</sup> Patrick J. Smith, *The Tenth Muse* (New York, 1970), p. 182.

teeth of it—an act perfectly illustrative of the ethical meliorism of the composer's post-Revolutionary generation.

Yet it would be precipitous to conclude that the essential irrationalism of opera has here been for a moment suspended—that no sense of epistemological crisis lurks behind the rational morality of this drama. On the contrary, bursting the shackles of a self-contained symbolism only *seems* to open the way to a more direct reflection of "reality." By severing the figure of Orpheus from the liberating music, Beethoven opens the door to a profounder absurdity. The trumpet call that sets Florestan free is a function of capricious and arbitrary theatrical timing. Had Don Fernando arrived a minute later, both the Florestans would probably have perished, however heroically. The fanfare is no more and no less opportune than the cavalry charges in American Westerns—and yet the symbolic weight it is given deflects all attention from its fortuitous character. The culmination is, once more, *ex machina*; we are swept along into accepting it by a very spurious act of assent. For this reason the libretto's piously repetitive affirmation of "Providence" makes some of us uncomfortable. We cannot ultimately tell the difference between providence and coincidence. *Fidelio* opens the way to the many nineteenth century operas that seem particularly prone to confuse destiny with adventitiousness: Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*, which might just as well be entitled *La Forza della Coincidenza*, is a representative example of the type. The faith in the transcendence of a world of tyrannical caprice on the human plane is purchased in *Fidelio* by a hidden acquiescence in its immanence on the ontological plane.

Not unrelated to this, and in some ways even more problematical, is another implication of alienating the Orphic hero entirely from the Orphic means of release, an implication we catch best by contemplating the relation of the opera's subject to its composer. That relation seems to me pretty thoroughly compensatory. Beethoven, the author of the *Heiligenstadt Testament*, the self-created tragic bachelor, fixes, in composing his only opera, on the subject of connubial bliss. One day, some years after its completion, Beethoven had a female visitor. It was Countess Giulia Gallenberg, the object of Beethoven's passionate wooing years earlier, identified by some biographers with the mysterious *Unsterbliche Geliebte*. She had either jilted him or had failed in the strength of

will needed to resist her father's choice of a more suitable match. Now she regretted it. "After her arrival in Vienna," the composer confided to his friend Schindler, "she sought me out, dissolved in tears. But I spurned her." Schindler, apparently puzzled by the harshness of Beethoven's attitude, probed further, hinting that the composer had the opportunities of a Hercules at the crossroads. Beethoven's reply was severe: "Had I thus surrendered the force of my life to living, what would have been left for the noble better part of me?"<sup>19</sup> The "noble better part" is clearly art, and the statement implies, it seems, not so much a judgment specifically against the unfortunate Giulia, but an axiomatic dismissal of the compatibility of an artistic vocation with the ordinary happiness represented by marriage. The transformation of reality through music to which Beethoven dedicated himself implied a radical *askesis* — and yet Beethoven writes an opera in which, on the surface, reality is transformed specifically by the opposite of *askesis*, that is, by "*eheliche Liebe*" — passionate conjugality. It is that crucial, arbitrary trumpet call only that remains Beethoven's own property, his way of having his cake and eating it too. It must be left an open question whether we have here the tragic arrogance of the bourgeois artist, determined to monopolize transcendence by taking the harp or trump of Orpheus the musician out of the hands of Orpheus the husbandman, or whether with a profound unconscious humility Beethoven restores to ordinary human fidelity the honor usually accorded to "genius" by making sure that no musical instrument is found on the premises when the shadow of tyranny is dispelled.

There is more than a hint of pessimism in all this — and indeed, moving as the conclusion of *Fidelio* is, it is not to most listeners of the work the moment they remember best. What sticks in the memory is the scene that greets us at the opening of Act II: the unrelieved, unrelievable gloom of an imprisoning lower depths out of which issues, like a hopeless scream, Florestan's "*Gott! welch Dunkel hier!*" Verdi, at any rate, seems to have heard *Fidelio* in this way, for when, a generation after it, he wrote *I Due Foscari*, in many ways his darkest opera, he included a prison scene quite clearly modeled on Beethoven's. There too the faithful wife descends into her husband's dungeon. But this epigone of Leonora has not a chance of success, and he knew it. "At one moment," to quote the

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Nettle, *Beethoven und seine Zeit* (Frankfurt, 1958), p. 107 [my translation].

summary of a recent Verdi critic, "the lighthearted song of the gondoliers is heard in the distance, and for a few bars Lucrezia sings in unison with them, ironically remembering the world of happiness and freedom."<sup>20</sup> In the song of the gondoliers we have a Verdian version of Orpheus as back-stage music. The setting now is Venice, both the birthplace of opera and the "*tote Stadt*" of future symbolists. Verdi has sent Orpheus and Eurydice back to their beginnings to brood on the impotence of their myth.

For the opera composer of the 19th century, that impotence comes to have something to do with an essential split in Orpheus's nature. Orpheus is both regal and musical. If his musicality makes him lord of all things in the world of day, it renders him a suppliant in the underworld. The more his musical aspect is humanized, the less aristocratic he becomes; the more his aristocratic aspect is humanized, the less musical. But at the core of the myth is the single, the irreplaceable object of desire, Eurydice — and only privilege has the power to insist on a privileged object of desire. Mozart confronted this contradiction by splitting his Orpheus in two, letting a "proletarian" pseudo-Orpheus supply the element of common humanity missing in his aristocratic quasi-Orpheus. He gives — one is tempted to say, for the last time — a positive articulation to the myth by letting them walk together as a double image. After him, attempts to re-unify the image founder on the opposition between music and power, producing at best an anti-Orpheus, more often than not malign. The Duke of Mantua in Verdi's *Rigoletto* is such a figure, as is Barnaba, the *cantastorie* of Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*. Arrigo Boitò, the librettist of the latter, seems to have felt this problem acutely; in his work, music and tyranny coalesce in a problematical thematic fusion. Both Iago and Mefistofele, as he conceives them, are crypto-Orphic, and in his most ambitious work, *Nerone*, he consciously combines the features of Orpheus with those of the Roman arch-despot.

The alternative is Beethoven's way in *Fidelio*: divorcing musical agency from human power altogether through the device of the signature theme, the fanfare of release — a disembodied Orpheus signaling redemption. This too is, as we have

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Verdi* (New York, 1970), p. 103.

seen, not without its problems. For it is impossible to disembody Orpheus altogether. Lacking an epiphany among the cast of characters, the audience seeks him out in the power that moves the work, that is, the composer. Richard Wagner was to shoulder the burden of this election squarely by making the signature theme into a programmatic element of both his dramatic and his compositional style. But in him the dialectic between the fantasies of power and of musicality reaches a crisis-point. He can no longer be the redeeming Orpheus of Monteverdi who leads the Eurydice of popular fantasy into a bright Platonic day. Nor can he be the romantic anti-Orpheus, the demonic pied piper followed by the vulgar. ("A people frantic for a fiddler!"<sup>21</sup> was Byron's aristocratically scornful assessment of Rossini's success.) He is forced to become the coercive leitmotivist, the trumpeter of a musical *Führerprinzip*, compensating for the dearth of personalities in his work by the insistent, predictable thumping of recurrent melodic shreds. Power, yes; and musicality, yes but dehumanized. It is a tragic irony of Wagner's career that his cultivation of Orpheus's ghost — the audience's shock of recognition at the reappearance of musical material — leads him into a complexity of musical articulation so thoroughgoing that the logical next step is Schoenbergian dodecaphony, a system in which the return of musical material is so total as to make the shock of recognition ubiquitous, which is to say, impossible. The modernist extension of the Orpheus myth in opera is for it to become a repository not so much of "hope" but (as in Dallapiccola's twelve-tone opera, *Il Prigioniero*) of "torture through hope."

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<sup>21</sup> Letter to J.C. Hobhouse, 17 May 1819.