

## Notes on the Oedipus Works

**Matthew Aucoin *The Orphic Moment*  
a dramatic cantata for high voice (countertenor or mezzo-soprano),  
solo violin, and chamber ensemble (15 players)**

The story of Orpheus is music's founding myth, its primal self-justification and self-glorification. On Orpheus's wedding day, his wife, Eurydice, is fatally bitten by a poisonous snake. Orpheus audaciously storms the gates of Hell to plead his case, in song, to Hades and his infernal gang. The guardians of death melt at his music's touch. They grant Eurydice a second chance at life: she may follow Orpheus back to Earth, on the one condition that he not turn to look at her until they're above ground. Orpheus can't resist his urge to glance back; he turns, and Eurydice vanishes.

The Orpheus myth is typically understood as a tragedy of human impatience: even when a loved one's life is at stake, the best, most heroic intentions are helpless to resist a sudden instinctive impulse. But that's not my understanding of the story. Orpheus, after all, is the ultimate aesthete: he's the world's greatest singer, and he knows that heartbreak and loss are music's favorite subjects. In most operas based on the Orpheus story – and there are many – the action typically runs as follows: Orpheus loses Eurydice; he laments her loss gorgeously and extravagantly; he descends to the underworld; he gorgeously and extravagantly begs to get Eurydice back; he is granted her again and promptly loses her again; he laments even more gorgeously and extravagantly than before.

So might this backwards glance be a conscious gesture? Might Eurydice's second death be not an accident but a kind of murder? Or, if Orpheus does look back out of a sudden impulse, might that impulse be the aesthetic one, the seductive and amoral tendency to value art above one's fellow human beings? I take this interpretation to an extreme in *The Orphic Moment*, a "dramatic cantata" that shines a magnifying glass on the final moments before Orpheus turns around. Up to the moment when the piece begins, Orpheus's conscious intentions have been noble: he has risked his life to rescue Eurydice, he's succeeded, and they are walking toward the light. But as the piece begins, he has a second thought: "It has been life to lose you," he says. "It has been life to go without..." He muses on what would happen if he lost Eurydice again. A second death...the loss of Eurydice at the very moment when she was about to be granted life...nothing could be more tragic than that. It's bound to inspire the greatest music ever.

The solo violin is Eurydice, wordlessly calling to Orpheus, growing more and more unsettled as she senses his emotional withdrawal. In the second half of the piece, Orpheus calculates the perfect moment to aim his gaze backwards at Eurydice. Patiently, coldly, he waits until light

from the world above begins to filter down through the soil. He slowly turns his head. The scene goes dark.

-- Matthew Aucoin

### **John Harbison Symphony No. 5**

John Harbison was born in Orange, New Jersey, on December 20, 1938; he lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Token Creek, Wisconsin. He wrote his Symphony No. 5 on commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra, James Levine, music director, through the generous support of Catherine and Paul Bittenwieser. Harbison began work in earnest in December 2006 (among other projects) and completed the full score early in 2008.

The score of Harbison's Symphony No. 5 calls for baritone and mezzo-soprano soloists, three flutes (third doubling piccolo), three oboes (third doubling English horn), three clarinets (second doubling E-flat clarinet, third doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, percussion (three players—I: glockenspiel, vibraphone, cymbals, metal blocks, guiro, slapstick; II: concert marimba, high bell, triangle, tenor drum, maracas, high and highest claves, sandpaper blocks; III: large bell [E], tuned gongs [E, G], cowbells, snare drum, bass drum, sandpaper blocks), timpani, piano, harp, electric guitar, and strings. The piece is about thirty-five minutes long.

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is the most musical of classical myths: Orpheus's songs with his lyre could charm the very stones and trees, although it wasn't enough to keep the nymph Eurydice from a deadly serpent's bite on their wedding day. Nor was it enough, in the end, to keep the singer himself from being torn limb from limb by frenzied Bacchantes. But what concerns us, mostly, is what happens in between: Orpheus's descent into the underworld, heartbroken, to try to reclaim his lover, his song charming his way past Cerberus and Charon and convincing Hades and Persephone to allow Eurydice to return to the world of the living. The conditions were that Orpheus make no attempt to speak to Eurydice on their way out of the underworld, nor to glance behind him to make sure she was still there. Impatience, or distrust, turned Orpheus's head just as the sunlight of the surface world became visible again, and he lost Eurydice for good.

This is the part of the story that we know best, and naturally many composers have taken on the myth, most notably Monteverdi, Gluck, and Stravinsky, and more recently Birtwistle and Philip Glass. It's this story that is the narrative spine of Czesław Miłosz's "Orpheus and Eurydice," the poem that John Harbison sets for baritone and orchestra as the first two movements of his Symphony No. 5. Miłosz wrote the poem, in Polish, in 2003 in reaction to the death of his wife; Harbison employs its English translation, which is by Miłosz and Robert Haas. Eurydice's voice, one rarely heard in literature, is present in Louise Glück's "Relic," set for mezzo-soprano in the

third movement. Baritone and mezzo-soprano come together for the fourth movement, a setting of one of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, in English translation by Stephen Mitchell.

Although these poems are the textual medium of Harbison's piece, his symphony lacks any but anecdotal connection to the Orpheuses of music history. It began as a purely orchestral symphony, like his previous four in the genre. His Symphony No. 1 was a BSO centennial commission; this was premiered by Seiji Ozawa and the orchestra in March 1984 and led to the composer's first opportunity to conduct the BSO that summer at Tanglewood, when Edo de Waart cancelled a scheduled appearance. He wrote his Symphony No. 2 (1987) for the San Francisco Symphony, his No. 3 (1991) for the Baltimore Symphony, and his No. 4 (2004) for the Seattle Symphony. He has had the Boston Symphony sound in his ear since first attending concerts during Charles Munch's era, when he was a student at Harvard; and in 1977 it was the BSO that performed his first big orchestral work, *Diōtima* (a Koussevitzky Foundation commission). In addition to the Symphony No. 1, the BSO has commissioned or co-commissioned several of the composer's major pieces. His Cello Concerto, written for Yo-Yo Ma and co-commissioned with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, was premiered by Ma and the BSO under Seiji Ozawa in April 1994. Bernard Haitink conducted the premiere of his BSO-commissioned Requiem for soloists, chorus, and orchestra in 2003. His *Darkbloom: Overture for an imagined opera* was commissioned for James Levine's first season as music director; Levine led the premiere in March 2005. In July 2007 at Tanglewood, with BSO principal bass Edwin Barker as soloist, Levine conducted the BSO's first performance of the composer's Bass Viol Concerto, a BSO 125th Anniversary Commission and a co-commission with several other orchestras. The orchestra also commissioned his Symphony No. 6, premiered by the BSO in January 2012 as the culmination of a two-season survey of all of Harbison's symphonies. For the 75th anniversary of Tanglewood in 2012, the BSO commissioned his chorus-and-orchestra scherzo *Koussevitzky Said:* and premiered it on a concert with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony that summer.

Harbison and James Levine began discussing the possibility of a new symphony in 2005. . It was only after the composer had conceived and made sketches for orchestral material that Levine suggested that voice might be added. At the time, Levine was rehearsing the chamber-orchestra version of Harbison's big song cycle *Mottetti di Montale* with the Met Chamber Ensemble. He had previously led the premiere of the composer's opera *The Great Gatsby* at the Metropolitan Opera and clearly felt particular sympathy with Harbison's writing for voice; the MET Orchestra also commissioned his *Closer to My Own Life*, for mezzo-soprano and orchestra. Harbison warmed to the conductor's suggestion, and, having already established the work's central idea, cast around for a poem that would help embody its theme of loss and the aftermath of loss—a subject that has accompanied Harbison through the composition of many of his recent works.

Harbison has spoken of this symphony as having an identity that precedes the text: text, in the work of any composer, is a medium that allows the composition of music they had in mind to begin with. The Orpheus connection here was serendipitous. The text might well not have been about Orpheus at all, but when Harbison came across Czesław Miłosz's poem in a magazine, it read as a clear complement to his symphonic ideas. Miłosz, a Nobel Prize-winning poet and statesman, already figured large in Harbison's artistic world. His poem "A Task" acted as an unheard "theme song" of Harbison's Symphony No. 2 (1987), and the composer's *Miłosz Songs*, a large-scale orchestral song cycle, was premiered by Dawn Upshaw and the New York Philharmonic in February 2006.

Miłosz's "Orpheus and Eurydice," the text of the first two movements, is the main part of the piece, big enough to stand alone, but it was only during his work on that setting that Harbison began to feel it fell short of what was necessary for his symphony. His choice of Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet Louise Glück's "Relic," from a larger Orpheus cycle called *Vita Nova*, for the third movement offered a counter to Miłosz's poem, but also required a different physical voice, a mezzo-soprano. To reconcile the Miłosz and Glück perspectives both musically and thematically, he added a fourth movement, a setting for both voices of an English translation of Rainer Maria Rilke's "Sonnet to Orpheus" II–13. The third and fourth movements feel like realigning epilogues, simultaneously clarifying and broadening the matter of the first two movements.

In this symphony with voices, Harbison takes a somewhat different tack from other song-symphonists. The approach is in part necessitated by the requirements of Miłosz's poetic stance—neither ballade nor lyric, its surreal imagery unequivocally concrete, the voice of the poet (who is, and isn't, Orpheus) emotionally affected but consistently controlled to the point of being almost sardonic. Following an orchestral introduction (material remaining from the symphony's pre-vocal stages), Harbison's two-movement through-composed setting follows the contour of the Miłosz poem's narrative and descriptive episodes, with frequently changing local moods—pitch, texture, tempo, meter, orchestration. These correspond to sections indicated in the score. In the first movement the sections are "The death of Orpheus"; "At the entrance to Hades"; "He remembered her words"; "In a labyrinth." In the second: "He sang the brightness..."; "But there were conditions"; "It happened as he expected."

The prosody of the vocal line is almost conversational, with stylizations such as the baritone's glissandos expanding the drama of the setting, along with "environmental" indicators in the orchestra such as the orchestral flurries at the line "... hunched in a gust of wind/That tore his coat." These touches mirror some of the radically off-kilter details of the poem, for example "Electronic dogs passed noiselessly" and Hades' "glass-paneled door," along with the suggestion of the underworld as the many sub-basements of an enormous office building. The poem begins

incongruously commercially in this way, but at the end reverts to the pastoral “Sun. And sky. And in the sky white clouds” that we expect of the myth.

The movement break is within the flow of the music but corresponds to a sudden change in sound. Near the end of the first movement, when Orpheus encounters Persephone, Hades’ queen, a new sonority arrives to enchant the listener. Electric guitar is Orpheus’s “nine-stringed lyre,” chosen by Harbison to match Miłosz’s strange little modern details. The poem’s description of Orpheus’s song, “He sang the brightness,” is accompanied by a sheen of overlapping triadic arpeggios in guitar, harp, piano, and mallet percussion. Other details include the ethereal music that accompanies Persephone’s response to Orpheus’s pleas, and the dry percussion that echoes his footsteps as he strains to hear Eurydice behind him as he leaves the underworld.

In the third movement, “Where would I be without my sorrow,” we hear a new voice, that of the mezzo-soprano/Eurydice in the words of Louise Glück’s “Relic.” In contrast to the Miłosz setting, this suggested a much more autonomous approach, and a character that remains mostly consistent throughout. The electric guitar returns here as Eurydice sings of hearing Orpheus, singing as she descended in death. Her immediate reaction to the moment of her death, in the penultimate line of the poem, is reinforced in an orchestral moment that echoes from the start of the piece.

The finale, “Be ahead of all parting,” is similarly a self-contained song, but now a duet, intertwining the voices as Orpheus and Eurydice are inextricable in our consciousness. The voice is neither his nor hers, but Rilke’s, one of his sonnets of ecstatic meditation on the myth, insisting upon an embrace of life that reconciles it with the necessity of death. The voices are in close canon at the octave or unison throughout, finally coming together rhythmically for the final three lines. In its ebb and surge and changing colors, the accompaniment is almost processional and ritualistic. It continues in a new direction long after the voices stop.

~Robert Kirzinger

### **John Harbison about his Symphony No. 5.**

As an audience member I’ve noticed that listeners for a piece with words fall into three groups: 1) those who follow the text as the music is being performed, 2) those who read the text over, before or after the performance, with varying degrees of attention, and 3) those who pay no close attention to the text at any point, but listen only “symphonically,” that is, to the pattern of sound.

Those in the last group, though the ones for whom I have the least understanding, are probably the ones best qualified to decide whether this piece is, indeed, a Symphony. Every piece with singers and instruments should be coherent as a lucid sequence of sounds. These sounds, without reference to their verbal origins, aspired to a significant musical shape, something *symphonic*.

This piece existed, in imagination, as an orchestral meditation on loss, before the welcome suggestion from James Levine that it might contain music for voice. Three poems make more explicit the musical “theme.”

Tellers of mythic stories are especially free to tell, on the frame of a known “plot,” their own stories. What I loved about Miłosz’s narrative was how truly *Miłosz* it is—the habitual glosses and asides, his tough sensuous survival instinct, his sudden bolts of lyricism.

Miłosz’s ending winningly evades the sober consequences suggested in my orchestral introduction. I felt his ending required an answer, a strong rejoinder. Louise Glück’s “Relic” is the counterforce. Song.

Then perhaps a Summation is possible. Rilke’s poem can be read and translated many ways. That quality allows the composer to set the tone. Stephen Mitchell’s graceful rendering gives the singers clear phrases to sing. On certain days I “thought” the poem this way:

Be in front of every Farewell as if  
it was already past, like the winter just passing now.  
Because among winters comes one so finally Winter  
that only by out-wintering it can your heart endure.  
Be forever dead in Euridice—rise singing,  
praising, rise back into your pure enterprise.  
Here amid that which disappears, be, in the realm of negation,  
be a sounding glass that shattered as it sounded.

Be—and still know at the same time the source of non-being—  
the endless basis of your inner “swing”  
so that this one time you can completely seize it.

To all that is worn out, to the mute and muted  
creatures of nature’s totality, the unexpressible sum,  
add yourself, rejoicing, and call it complete.

—John Harbison  
(Rilke translation by John Harbison)

**Igor Stravinsky *Oedipus Rex***  
Composed: 1926-1927; rev. 1948

The Oedipus story has been traced to cultures all over the world, and it has inspired musical treatments through the centuries—from Andrea Gabrieli in 1585 to Purcell and Mendelssohn. Igor Stravinsky came to the subject at a crossroads in his life and career, when he was learning how it felt to be an expatriate, rediscovering religion, and assessing his own relationship to the musical past. At that moment, Stravinsky's longtime desire to compose a large-scale dramatic work found its voice—not in the Russian of his childhood or the French, German, and Italian he now more regularly spoke, but in ancient Latin. "The choice," he later realized, "had the great advantage of giving me a medium not dead but turned to stone and so monumentalized as to have become immune from all risk of vulgarization."

Stravinsky turned to his friend, the writer Jean Cocteau, who had known the composer since the days of the riotous premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913. Stravinsky had been highly impressed with Cocteau's recent adaptation of *Antigone* and with "the manner in which he had handled the ancient myth and presented it in modern guise." Stravinsky wrote to Cocteau: "For some time now, I have been pursued by the idea of composing an opera in Latin on the subject of a tragedy of the ancient world, with which everyone would be familiar." Stravinsky was already set on taking Oedipus the King as his subject, remembering how great an impression the story had made on him as a teenager, when he read Sophocles in Russian translation. "I wished to leave the play, as play, behind," he now said. "I thought to distill the dramatic essence by this, and to free myself for a greater degree of focus on a purely musical dramatization."

Stravinsky told Cocteau he did not want an action piece, but rather a "still life," and it took the writer more than one attempt to achieve what the composer demanded. It was Cocteau's idea to use a speaker—a narrator who would give advance commentary on the action, scene by scene, in the language of the audience—a device that only heightened the sense of distance between the ancient tale and the modern world. Though in fact, Cocteau's text (translated into English by e.e. cummings) obscures nearly as much as it clarifies. Stravinsky came to loathe these speeches for their obscurity and implied snobbishness, but they are a crucial aspect of the work's dramatic effect. Some additional explanation may be helpful.

The Oracle warned King Laius of Thebes that he would be killed by his own son. When a son was born, Laius and his wife, Jocasta, left him exposed on a mountainside, piercing his feet with leather thongs. There he was found and brought up by Polybus, a shepherd of the Corinthian king. Polybus, being childless, adopted the boy and named him; later, Oedipus was taunted about his parentage, and, when he consulted the Oracle, was told that he would kill his father and marry his mother. To avoid these crimes, and naturally taking them to refer to Polybus and his wife, he left Corinth for Thebes, and on the way killed an old man he met at a crossroads, not recognizing him as King Laius. At Thebes he solved the riddle of the Sphinx, who was laying waste the city, winning thereby the throne and the hand of the now-widowed Queen Jocasta. It is crucial that,

even when he begins to suspect that he is the murderer of King Laius and thus the cause of the plague in Thebes, Oedipus still does not realize he is Laius's son. He simply believes his crime to be usurping the marital bed of a man he has killed. Finally, the listener needs to know that when, after the scene with Jocasta, 'the witness to the murder emerges from the shadow', this is not the Messenger but the Shepherd, who had been the one member of Laius's retinue to escape. On returning to Thebes and finding Oedipus installed as King, he had requested transfer to remote pastures, but has now returned at Oedipus' summons for the inquest into Laius's death.

From the start, Cocteau and Stravinsky intended to offer *Oedipus Rex* to Diaghilev as a birthday present to mark the twentieth season of the Ballets Russes in 1927. They kept their plan from Diaghilev for a while, but eventually had to let him in on the secret, since it was his company, after all, that was slated to give the premiere. Although Stravinsky and Cocteau conceived the work operatically, with precise staging directions written into the score, as time grew short and as the projected costs soared, it became clear that this idiosyncratic work, combining elements of both opera and oratorio, would be introduced as a concert piece. Early in 1927, Diaghilev announced: "I've thought of the way to do *Oedipus*. We'll simply give it a concert performance—no decor, and the cast in evening dress, sitting on the stage in front of black velvet curtains. Musically it will even gain." (Eventually Stravinsky simply labeled the work an opera-oratorio.)

The official premiere was given at the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt on May 30, 1927, with Stravinsky conducting. The response was cool. The critics, still coming to terms with the idea of neoclassicism, harped on Stravinsky's return to the musical sensibilities of the past. Ironically, in Stravinsky's organization of arias, duets, ensembles, and choruses they found echoes of Handel and other eighteenth-century music, but initially overlooked the greatest influence of all: the Italian operas by Giuseppe Verdi, with their vaulting vocal lines and repeated-chord accompaniments. Jocasta's big aria, with its concluding cabaletta, confirms that Stravinsky's enthusiasm for Verdi's opera throughout the 1920s was not only high, but deeply influential.

*Oedipus Rex* is a landmark of the twentieth century—the first large-scale masterwork of Stravinsky's neoclassical maturity—and a pivotal score in the output of one of the twentieth century's true modern masters. It crystallizes many of the ideas Stravinsky had been playing with since *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*, and it points the way forward to the solemn splendors of the *Symphony of Psalms* and the brilliant Hogarth romp, *The Rake's Progress*. But it is, above all, a composition that defies categorization and cannot be contained even by Stravinsky's proposed hyphenate: opera-oratorio. Like the great *Requiem Mass* by Verdi, which at first divided listeners because of its mixture of the operatic and the ecclesiastical, *Oedipus Rex* has come to be understood as a work that stands alone.

~Phillip Huscher/Chicago Symphony Orchestra

