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Symbolism in the Allegory:  
A Look at Apollo's Lyre

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### Symbolism in the Allegory: A Look at Apollo's Lyre

The opera *L'Orfeo* is seen as the first true opera and furthermore the root of all opera. Claudio Monteverdi's mastery is expressed in the music, drama, and symbolism of this opera. The libretto was written by Alessandro Striggio to deliver the story with lessons to be learned. Written in the late Renaissance, the opera incorporates the idea of "rebirth," through both the literal rebirth of Eurydice and Orpheus' journey as he reunites with his father. *L'Orfeo* is rich with symbolic Christian ideals that reflect the plot of the opera. Symbols and instrumentation aid in the execution of the themes present in the opera: love, trust, power, and death. The symbols used throughout the opera include a snake, river, lyre, representations of light and dark, along with the allegorical references to Christianity. Monteverdi takes a well-known myth and explores these emotions through his specific usage of instrumentation, themes, and symbolism of *L'Orfeo*.

In music and in theatre, instruments often aid in representing power through presentation and instrumentation. The presence of the lyre in *L'Orfeo* is often carried by the character Orpheus for the entirety of the opera; he is never seen without it. The lyre he carries is Apollo's lyre, which holds the power to charm objects and living beings with a strum of the strings. Apollo is the god of music, poetry, and light, and is one of twelve gods who lives in Olympus.<sup>1</sup> His lyre carries power and certain images with it, whether it is present on stage or the sound of a lyre is heard in the orchestration. When interpreting how the lyre is presented in the opera, it is important to consider the symbol the lyre serves for gods and Greek figures like Apollo, Hermes, the Muses, Castor and Pollux, Paris or youths who were pursued by Eos. The lyre represents the peace of Elysium, the paradise where heroes were sent after they were appointed immortality by the gods. As for Orpheus, he acquired the lyre from his father, Apollo, who taught Orpheus how to play it. Passing down this musical skill was crucial, because in Greek society the lyre held a powerful musical reputation that was well-respected among people. Learning how to play the lyre was also a part of education in Athens, so all citizens could contribute to the music community.<sup>2</sup> Athenian education was of the higher class, and therefore the lyre was seen as a high class instrument.

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Howes. "Notes on Monteverde's 'Orfeo'." *The Musical Times*, vol. 65, no. 976, 1924, pp. 509–511. JSTOR

<sup>2</sup>Thomas J. Matthiessen, *Apollo's Lyre: Greek Music and Music Theory in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 270

The lyre was truly a powerful tool that tied together all of Greek musical culture in a way that no other instrument did.<sup>3</sup>

The orchestration mimics the emotions expressed through instrumentation, and the lyre is associated with the hierarchy of social class. For example, the balletti and choruses in the first act are accompanied with strings, harpsichords, sopranino recorder, and harp. These are all higher instruments that hold a lighter, cheerful tone. The scene in the Underworld is accompanied with the regal, trombones, and bass gamba that hold a more raspy and darker tone.<sup>4</sup> These changes, which are notated in the score with certain instructions, help distinguish the scenes: where they're taking place, mood shifts, what characters are present, etc. This clear organization also illustrates the differences between class by using high, middle, or low styles in the music. For example, the low style is represented in the beginning of Act II through the simple strophic models with little text interpretation, harmonic expression or ornamentation. Whereas scenes and music with Orpheus and Apollo and characters who hold higher power are associated with the music of the higher style. Techniques of the high style consist of ornamentations, textual and melodic expression, which is a much more elaborate than the lower style.<sup>5</sup> These levels of styles correlate with the class levels in Greek society, specifically with Orpheus and his lyre. The power this lyre held is prominent not only in this story, but throughout Greek mythology.

The powers that Orpheus had through his music have been compared to other god-like figures, specifically, Jesus Christ. According to Wayne Daynes article "Polymorphous Orpheus", this belief in Orpheus' powers have evolved into a new religion known as Orphism. In other words, the parallels between the life of Jesus Christ and Orpheus are so similar that citizens during the time had developed the mystic religion Orphism. As Christianity became prominent, there was an increased interest in Orpheus resembling a Christ-like figure.<sup>6</sup> Kirsty Cochrane writes her article "Orpheus Applied: Some Instances of His Importance in the Humanist View of Language" that the powers Orpheus conceived were

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Matthiessen, *Apollo's Lyre: Greek Music and Music Theory in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (University of Nebraska Press, 1999), p. 248

<sup>4</sup> John Whenham and Richard Wistreich, *The Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 125. Date of access 28 Oct.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 133-136

<sup>6</sup> Wayne Dynes, "Polymorphous Orpheus," *Art Journal* 39, no. 4 (1980): 252-53. doi:10.2307/776293

compared to the same powers Christ had. This power or importance of Orpheus in Ancient Christianity were represented visually through paintings as well. Cochrane states, "Ancient Christians had represented Christ as an Orpheus, with a lamb over his shoulders, and holding a pastoral flute". This imagery shows the abundance of power and respect people had for Orpheus, because they framed him as being the Lamb of God or the Good Shepherd. The common factor between Orpheus and Christ is the power of persuasion through speech, whether it be the word of God or the harmony of music. If the myth of Orpheus is taken literally, it can be described as the persuasion of men or gods through his music of the lyre.<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Irwin interpretes the work of Clement of Alexandria, a Christian Apologist and a student of Greek philosophy in "Orpheus: The Metamorphoses of a Myth." Clement believed that perfectly tuned instruments and perfect harmonies symbolized the perfect harmony of God's creation along with Christ creating the balance of harmony among his people. Clement states "[the] Singer appears in Christian art or writing, symbolizing the harmony of God which is at work now through the activity of Christ the Word." In other words, the Gospel or Word of God was seen as harmony. Orpheus resembled a Christ-like figure through the usage of his lyre as well. Orpheus had the ability to control people with the music he produced. This capability to manipulate certain actions or emotions in the people around Orpheus resembles the powers of Christ or at least gives a better understanding of the powerful abilities Christ had. Christ is said to have tamed wild animals, and he is also known as the Good Shepherd. Orpheus tamed not animals, but humans who resembles these beasts, according to Clement.<sup>8</sup> This symbolism of persuasion is displayed through the composer's choice of harmonies and rhythmic devices.

John Whenham writes in his book *Claudio Monteverdi: Orfeo* that Monteverdi was able to produce these symbolic traits of persuasion through music by including certain music devices. These include rising lines and quickening rhythms to suggest agitation show how quickly music mimics actors emotions or actions on stage. Dissonances suggest anguish. Sudden changes in harmonic direction

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<sup>7</sup> Kirsty Cochrane, "Orpheus Applied: Some Instances of His Importance in the Humanist View of Language," *The Review of English Studies* 19, no. 73 (1968): 1-13, Date of access 28 Oct.

<sup>8</sup> John Warden, *Orpheus: the Metamorphoses of a Myth*, University of Toronto Press, 1985

signals a change in discourse. L'Orfeo is powerful in musical terms, and this creates some very effective theater.<sup>9</sup>

Ultimately, music serves two major functions in this myth. First, it allows Orpheus to express himself, and second, it alters people's moods, actions, and ideas. Orpheus is constantly strumming his lyre. He plays happy music when he is in love and somber music when Eurydice dies. He uses music to charm the beasts and spirits of the Underworld. In fact, just by listening to his music, Orpheus is able to tame the beasts in the Underworld: Cerberus, the three-headed dog quits barking, Charon grants Orpheus passage. Orpheus's playing is so moving that he's able to enter the Underworld unscathed and that is a powerful example of what his music can do.<sup>10</sup>

Snakes and serpents are associated with sneakiness, corruption of innocence, and quick deaths throughout literature. All three of these ideas play into Eurydice's unexpected demise. As a hidden snake sneakily bites her without warning, instantly robbing her of life and resulting in a quick death. The snake bites Eurydice on her ankle. Throughout Greek mythology, ankles and heels appear as a symbol of vulnerability. For example, Achilles' only weak spot was his heel (Achilles' Heel). So the fact that the snake bit Eurydice on the ankle might mean that, symbolically, it went for her most vulnerable, exposed body part. Or it might just be that since this was a snake on the ground, Eurydice's ankle was the easiest part to reach.<sup>11</sup>

Love is a powerful motivator in the plot of *Orfeo*. In the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, there are instances of Orpheus making extreme and irrational decisions simply because he was powered by love. Orpheus is so heartbroken when he loses Eurydice that he travels to the Underworld for her, which is an action that no mortal man has been able to successfully achieve. As they make their way to the upper world, Orpheus turns around to look at Eurydice. This unexpected action was irrational and caused torment, since he knew that looking back at his wife would send her plummeting back to the Underworld.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> John Whenham, *Claudio Monteverdi: Orfeo*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1986

<sup>10</sup> Ann Wroe. "Ann Wroe's 'Orpheus': Why the Mythological Muse Haunts Us." *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast Company, May 31, 2012. Date of access 28 Oct.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Burgess. "Achilles' Heel: The Death of Achilles in Ancient Myth." *Classical Antiquity*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1995, pp. 217–244. JSTOR,

<sup>12</sup> "Orpheus and Eurydice." *Greek Mythology*. Accessed December 11, 2019. Date of access 28 Oct.

Rivers are a place of symbolic transition, because they have constantly flowing, ever-changing waters. In fact, rivers usually represent the biggest transition of all: the change from life to death. The change is exhibited in the Underworld scene of *L'Orfeo* with the River Styx, the river that mortals must cross before entering the deathly Underworld. The river appears in the Orpheus and Eurydice myth since Orpheus is perpetually traveling to and from the Underworld in this story. When Orpheus goes to find her, he must cross the River Styx. The Ferryman denies him access, blocking him from transitioning to the afterlife. Through Orpheus's skillful lyre playing, he is able to convince the ferryman to let him pass.<sup>13</sup>

The division between light and dark is saturated with ideas about life, death, happiness, and sadness. When Orpheus enters the Underworld he believes his depressing and gloomy days were over, but his outlook turns dark as he comes across so many barriers. It is hard for him to make sense of what he is doing when he approaches so many hurdles standing in the way of his true happiness. Since Orpheus's father is Apollo the God of Light, Orpheus would be seen as too feeble to overcome the challenges of the Underworld, because of the absence of light. If light were available, Orpheus's lyre might have a more powerful affect. This absence of light is also seen creating feelings of being lost and misdirected as Orpheus leaves the Underworld filled with apprehension and fear. Thus, the absence of light foreshadowed his feelings of doubt and anxiety which corresponds to the intense sadness.<sup>14</sup>

Then, as Orpheus and Eurydice approach the upper world, Orpheus sees the light of day. Literally and figuratively, this is the light at the end of the tunnel offering hope and optimism to his reunion to his wife. When Orpheus turns around to look fondly on his love, Eurydice must return to the darkness and all of the misery it symbolizes. The fact that this separation occurs at the threshold of light and dark gives climatic tension to the story. If Orpheus had turned around at the beginning of their journey, it would not have been nearly as gut-wrenching.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ann Wroe. "Ann Wroe's 'Orpheus': Why the Mythological Muse Haunts Us." *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast Company, May 31, 2012. Date of access 28 Oct.

<sup>14</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. "Orpheus." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., April 5, 2019. Date of access 28 Oct.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey L. Buller. "Looking Backwards: Baroque Opera and the Ending of the Orpheus Myth." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol. 1, no. 3, Winter 1995, pp. 62–65.

Another example of the symbolism used in this powerful moment is shown through the use of trust, and this has to do with trusting the word of the gods. Orpheus is told that he would be followed by his wife as he left the underworld, but he's never quite sure that she's there. Showing his distrust to the ruler of the underworld.<sup>16</sup> Had he been able to have faith in those around him and simply trust that Eurydice was behind him, they might have made it back to Earth and lived happily ever after. Twice in this myth, incredible happiness slips away from Orpheus and Eurydice. First, it disappears after Eurydice dies upon their wedding. Then, the joy that comes from Eurydice's release from the underworld is destroyed when Orpheus looks back during their ascent to the upper world. Each time, the couple's extreme happiness is only temporary. In highlighting how quickly Orpheus and Eurydice lose their joy, the myth reminds us of the fleeting nature of happiness.<sup>17</sup>

Death haunts this myth. The story begins with Eurydice's fatal snake bite, continues with Orpheus' journey into the Underworld, and ends with Orpheus' death as he leaves Earth. As a myth about escaping death, death seems to be inescapable as Orpheus stands at the edge of the river that separates the mortal world and the Underworld. At this moment, Orpheus uses bargaining to seize his love, Eurydice. When Orpheus is in the Underworld, he convinces them to let go of Eurydice by using his superior musical abilities. Despite his successfully bargaining for Eurydice's release, Orpheus ends up losing his wife to death a second time. The lesson here might be that although love is powerful, it's ultimately not as powerful as death. In an age where music was seen as mysterious, composers saw this opera as a symbol and belief that accompaniment of the harp or lyre could produce miraculous continuity, but in reality it is the spirit of the music itself which conquers time and death. The power of song to command life, the love to overcome dying, and death as he returns to the heavens are combined into one theme.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Adam Phillips. "Abandoning Hope: Monteverdi's Orfeo." *The Threepenny Review*, no. 120 (2010): pp. 21-23.

<sup>17</sup> Ann Wroe. "Ann Wroe's 'Orpheus': Why the Mythological Muse Haunts Us." *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast Company, May 31, 2012. Date of access 28 Oct.

<sup>18</sup> F.W. Sternfeld. "Orpheus (ii)." [Grove Music Online](#). 2002. Oxford University Press. Date of access 28 Oct.



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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the symbolic meaning within Monteverdi's operatic version of the fable of Orpheus, a demigod who has a talent for music. When Orpheus' bride Eurydice dies suddenly from a snake bite, he decides to seek her soul in the Underworld and bring her back to the land of the living. This task does not prove to be as easy for Orpheus as he initially thinks, when he finds himself losing her twice during the course of the five acts. To show how his journey unfolds, and the meaning behind each step, we will develop the symbolic meaning in each of the major incidents and show the devices used within this opera. Our research shows that through the power of the famed lyre of Apollo, Orpheus is able to accomplish most of all that he sets out to do through the power of music. This power as well as other themes of love, trust, hope, and rebirth are represented in the many symbols present in this opera such as the lyre, the river, snakes, representations of light and dark and symbols associated with Christianity. This style of *favola in musica* revolutionized the music world because it showed that words and the emotions carry the music more than the melody. Toward the end of Act 4, Orpheus is seen losing his true love forever proving that there is one condition that even he cannot escape, and that is death.