



ORPHÉE

There is very possibly no subject that has inspired more operas than the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. These range from one of the very first operas, *Orfeo* by Monteverdi (1607) to Offenbach's racy satire, *Orpheus in the Underworld*. The most famous setting is Gluck's *Orfeo Ed Eurydice*.

It is little wonder, since Orpheus is a legendary artist, whose ravishing music persuades even the Gods of the Underworld to allow his beloved wife Eurydice to return from the dead. This is only under the condition that he not turns and looks at her as he leads her back to the world of the living.

Phillip Glass, one of today's most popular and influential composers wrote his operatic setting of the myth, *Orphée* in 1993, following the sudden death of his own wife, the artist Candy Jennings. Glass adapted his own libretto, based very closely on the screenplay of the 1949 film ORPHEUS, written and directed by the great French film maker, Jean Cocteau. *Orphée* was the first of Glass' "Cocteau trilogy"; the other two operas based on the films *La Belle et la Bête* and *Les Enfants Terribles*.

Orphée is set in contemporary Paris and the title character is a successful but misunderstood poet, despised by the avant-garde for his popularity. Glass studied composition in Paris, under the famous teacher, Nadia Boulanger. While he has said his main influences were Bach and Mozart, he soon developed his own style. While often called "minimalist", Glass describes his compositions as "music with repetitive structures".

Orphée is a chamber work, an intimate piece written soon after Glass' large-scaled piece "*The Voyage*" (1992), commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera. *Orphée* was a joint commission by the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, where it had its premiere in 1993.

Written in eighteen brief scenes, the opera is filled with Glass' insistent rhythms, yet also manages to convey a truly French flavor, with its evocation of such composers as Ravel, Milhaud and Poulenc. With his transparent textures and subtle colorings, Glass also sets the text with a great feeling for the language. The entire work is unmistakably French.

Cocteau gave the Orpheus tale a unique, symbolic interpretation. The character of the Princess is the Angel of Death, the underworld is reached through mirrors, etc. and yet, this version of the story manages to have a happy ending. Orpheus and his wife are reunited, expecting their first child, the ultimate sign of life after death.

Phillip Glass is an extremely prolific composer, having written musical theater, symphonies, concertos, solo works, chamber music, sonatas and film scores, three of which have been nominated for Academy Awards!

And in *Orphée* he has composed a unique, immediately accessible work, which, in its increasing popularity, is taking its firm place among the long list of operatic settings of the Orpheus myth.

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