

New Voices for Ancient Songs

A Survey of Ancient Greek Motifs in Today's Opera and Music

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Prelude

Music often happens to have a privileged connection with classicists and it is not surprising that melodrama and opera frequently play a foreground role in our hearts. Whatever our background might be, as classicists we are definitely charmed by stories, storytelling, and storytellers. A millennium after Homer and Greek drama and several centuries before movies and tv series, opera gave voice to tragic heroes and comic characters. Opera displays timeless stories of burning passion, frantic lust for power, hellish revenge, blinding jealousy, and desperate love. Opera is fire and blood. Opera mirrors the full range of human emotions with its astonishing music, and some dense libretti remind some magisterial passages of the Greek tragedy. Yet opera goes far beyond words. It is a finely embroidered canvas, in which words and music, albeit intimately interwoven, sometimes seem to follow divergent paths. It is this superb dialectic tension what gifts us with a front-row seat to the real core focus of the events, makes our and the characters' hearts beat in unison, and, ultimately, gives us a glimpse into the composers' genius. Opera usually begins with a prelude, an instrumental part presenting the main characters and the salient points of the play, which is about to start.

In this brief survey, we will dive into some of the greatest operatic masterpieces to see that traditional boundaries, like time and space, lose much of their borders when we deal with what really defines us: our emotions and our choices. We will go through some examples of music from different chronological periods. In addition, we will see how deep the connection between today's music and the Greek world is, and has always been since the earliest stages of the Greek civilization.

Act One: Prologue and Prequel

Opera has an internal partition, i.e. is divided into acts, likewise Greek poems and drama. After the prelude, opera begins either *in medias res* or with a prologue recapping prequels. Verdi's *La Traviata* and the *Iliad* begin *in medias res*, a literary device that throws us in the midst of the action, without introductory details on the characters and the plot. In *La Traviata* the first information we gather is about Violetta, the protagonist: her life-style, her illness, her new feelings for Alfredo. In the *Iliad*, the reader is immediately aware of Achilles' fury and the war opposing Trojans and Greeks. Verdi's *Il Trovatore* and Euripides' *Medea* begin with a prologue, which – as it is often the case – is told by an elder character who knows first-hand protagonists by means of their (frequently painful and mysterious) past.

How the matter begins: the lyre player in Mycenaean times

The earliest direct evidence for music in the Greek civilization traces back to Mycenaeans, the first population to speak the Greek language. Their civilization thrived during the Bronze Age (ca. 1450-1200 BCE) in the Aegean area, in particular on Crete and the Greek mainland.

Evidence from the Mycenaean world is what illuminates our knowledge of the earliest steps of music in Greece: in addition to the debated iconography of the Ayia Triadha sarcophagus,¹ we can rely on a fresco from Pylos and an occupational noun from Thebes.

In Mycenaean times, Pylos was a prominent site and the main city of the Western Messenia. This kingdom had its administrative and economic center in the so-called Palace of Nestor, named after the legendary king of Pylos described in the *Odyssey*. The heart of Nestor's palace was the megaron, i.e. the great hall where the throne room of the Mycenaean ruler was located and sacrificial processions and court meetings took place. The main subject of the

¹ The complex iconography of the sarcophagus includes a lyre with seven strings. On the Ayia Triadha sarcophagus see Long 1974.

pictorial program of the room was the feast, and one of the frescoes resembling a celebratory context depicts a lyre player. He is an exceptionally tall man holding a swan-necked lyre and sitting on a rocky peak. A bird rising on the upper left side and two pairs of seated men drinking on the lower left side complete the fragment. The stature of the lyre player, along with his hieratic posture, his elaborated attire, his location, and the bird nearby suggests that he was a special participant to the feast, and possibly a musician god or a demigod.²

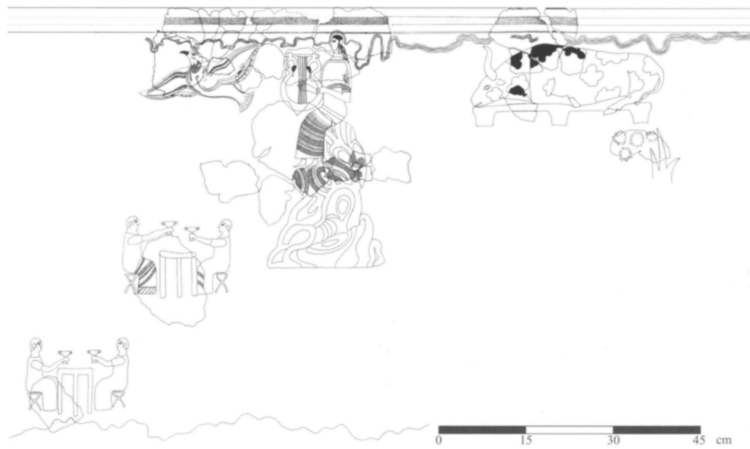


Fig. 1: Reconstruction of the fresco from the megaron of the Palace of Nestor (Room 6), with the lyre player on upper edge. From Wright 2004, 163.



Fig. 2: Particular of the lyre player.

² For a recent and detailed analysis of the lyre player in ancient Greece see Ercoles (in press).

The earliest written evidence for the word ‘lyre player’ in the Greek language comes from Bronze Age Thebes. The Mycenaean administration kept record of palatial activities on clay tablets. These documents were written in Linear B, a syllabic writing system, deciphered by Michael Ventris in 1952, which records the earliest form of Greek language known to us (Mycenaean). Thebes tablets attest the word *ru-ra-ta-e*, */lurātāhe/* (see 1st millennium BCE Greek *luristēs*), ‘lyre player’ on the document TH Av 106. Although it is debated whether this figure had ritual or secular duties, the attestation of *ru-ra-ta-e* provides further evidence for the major role of music in ancient Greek civilization since its earliest phases.

What we see *in nuce* in the fresco from Pylos and on the tablet from Thebes was bound to be fully developed in later times and create immortal figures and pieces, such as the bard, the Homeric poems, the Greek drama.

Wheels, rafts, and music: the multiple roads of ‘harmony’

In addition to constituting a core part of the music theory, ‘harmony’ refers to a wide range of contexts, such as the pleasant effect we experience by being in agreement or, precisely, listening to our favorite music. ‘Harmony’ stems from ancient Greek, where its root appears in various words, including Mycenaean nouns. In Linear B, *a-mo* means ‘wheel’, whereas ‘chariot’ is the meaning of its 1st millennium BCE Greek correspondent *harma*. Moreover, a context like book 5 of the *Odyssey* shows a number of words etymologically related to *harma*, yet with a different meaning. After seven years in Ogygia with the nymph Calypso, in this chapter Odysseus leaves the island by sailing on a raft of his own making. Terms related to *harma* are frequently used in the description of Odysseus making a raft from scratch, which begins with Calypso giving him some advices on the building process. According to the nymph’s instructions, the first step consists in cutting down some big logs and the second is *harmozein* (5,162) these logs as a large raft. The action the verb *harmozein* refers to is often translated as

‘connect’. This apparently striking difference in meanings is actually the result of linguistic (and technological) evolution. A wheel (*a-mo*), a chariot (*harma*), and a raft-in-the-making do share a core concept: they are connected, assembled, held together, joined together (*harmozein*). Mycenaean *a-mo* ends up meaning ‘wheel’ because a wheel is an item made up of single parts *held together*, just as ‘chariots’, ‘rafts’, ‘agreement’, and ‘music’ are. All these objects and concepts are made up of different components, each and every mutually connected to pursue the same goal. *Harmony* is a consonant combination of heterogenous elements that, put together, create something bigger.

Act Two

The second act is the place in which new elements surface and the action develops. Novelties include revelations of facts or feelings, difficult decisions, background elements suddenly propelled to the foreground, discoveries.

***Usus scribendi* and *lectio difficilior*: Verdi's *Aida* Act II Finale**

In examining the use of internal criteria for the selection of variants in the *constitutio textus* (the construction of the text, i.e. an attempt to reconstruct an author's original text on the basis of variant copies of manuscripts), Timpanaro (2003, 57-58) draws attention to the criteria of *usus scribendi* (habits in writing) and *lectio difficilior* (the more difficult reading), as well as to the subtle contradiction within these two concepts. The former refers to the habits, to what is well known, to what in modern terms would be defined as a ‘comfort zone’. By contrast, the latter refers to what is unusual, unexpected, new, ‘out of the box’, to use a contemporary expression. When confronting with an unusual element, should a philologist consider it as an error or not? Similar considerations are daily fare for anyone dealing with texts by external authorship. Musicians make no exception. Significantly, external circumstances, such as the

cultural background of a particular geographical and chronological area, have often played a role in decisional processes. An example: until quite recent times, singers were allowed to make variations from the score in operatic performances. Today, with few exceptions, this practice is very much off the table. In some records of Verdi's *Aida* from the earliest 1950s, in the Act II finale we happen to hear a high E-flat (in the score, the E-flat is written an octave below). In the performance of *Aida* that took place in Mexico City in 1951, Maria Callas, who was playing the title role, closed the Act II finale with a stunning high E-flat, driving the audience crazy (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTjUi_tSzik). However, it seems that the great soprano was reluctant, at least initially, to agree on singing the high note, precisely because it was not written on the score.

Eros and Thanatos: *La Traviata* by Verdi

Eros, the Greek god of love, and Thanatos, the personification of death in the Greek mythology, are closely related in a number of Greek myths. Verdi initially titled *Amore e morte* (Love and death) his masterpiece *La Traviata*. This choice sheds substantial light on the whole opera and illuminates key details throughout the plot. Whereas the libretto does not linger on these elements, music mightily dwell on them.

At the beginning of the opera, Violetta, a famed courtesan, celebrates her recovery from an illness (which is far from being full, as she soon realizes) by hosting a lavish party. Alfredo, a young guy who has long been in love with Violetta, rises the occasion to give a toast and sings the most famous brindisi, i.e. a drinking song, of all times, *Libiamo ne' lieti calici* (Let's drink with joyous abandon, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTHHyUDGcUE>). Left briefly alone, Alfredo declares his love for Violetta through the aria *Un dì, felice, eterea* (One heavenly day, I saw you, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXZNX32E3ew>). Despite her initial rejection, Violetta begins to feel something for this guy (*Ah quell'amor ch'è palpito*, Love is the very

heartbeat, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uzkxQMh05I). Yet, she keeps verbally denying her feelings (*Follie! Follie!*, It's madness, sheer madness!, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sh5mbkyGPQg&list=RDzhu_6dHrkDw&index=9). By looking just at the libretto, Act I puts on the plate the themes of love and death. The latter is, for now, alluded by means of Violetta's physical illness, which happens to be tuberculosis and will cause her death at the end of the opera.

On a musical level, different devices express the themes of love and death. Very simply put, positivity and joy, e.g. love, are usually expressed by means of major modes (+), whereas negativity and sadness, e.g. death, by means of minor modes (-). Within the music context, the adjectives major and minor may apply to a number of issues, including keys. The key, in turn, is what forms the basis of a music composition since it gives information on its tonality. We can see the key signature of a given piece by looking at its score, in particular the set of sharps or flats (or the lacking thereof) at the beginning of the pentagram, immediately after the clef. However, we have to go through the score and focus on the relevant notes to understand whether it is a major or minor key (relevant notes and internal relationship between tones and semitones differentiate major keys from minor keys, even though they happen to share the key signature.) Some examples: a key signature without added signs may be either C+ or A-; a key signature with one flat, i.e. B-flat, may be either F+ or D-; etc. In the F+ key signature, the relevant notes are A and, especially, C. Accordingly, should I give the value 'day' to F+, I will express its opposite 'night' by means of C- (see Fig. 3).



Fig. 5: Score of *Ah quell'amor ch'è palpito*.

Accordingly, Act II opens with Alfredo and Violetta mutually in love and living in Violetta's country house (Violetta has completely abandoned her former life as a courtesan and no mention of her health's condition is made). This idyllic scenario is unlikely to last and the plot twist is just around the corner. Act II marks a turning point in the plot. Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont, demands Violetta to break off her relationship with his son, since her reputation has threatened his daughter's engagement. The pair engages in a heartbreaking confrontation, of which Maestro Antonio Pappano has recently given a superlative reading (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=165690291225501>). By singing *Dite alla giovine, sì bella e pura* (Go to your daughter, so lovely, so pure, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWlVzrSh-h8>), Violetta, with a heavy heart, eventually makes the grievous decision to leave Alfredo. Significantly, this aria, the aria of the death of love, is in C- (Fig. 6).

(a G. cantabile) *p cantabile*
 Ah! Di - te al - la gio - vine sì bel - lae pu - - ra,
 Ob. I. Solo *p*
 v. c'av - viu - na vit - ti - ma del - la sven - tu - ra, cui re - sta un u - ni - co, un

Fig. 6: Score of *Dite alla giovine*.

Prior to leaving him, Violetta declares her love to Alfredo (more accurately, screams desperately) one last time, *with passion and force* as the remarks on the score recommend to sing *Amami, Alfredo* (Love me, Alfredo, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2G3bLB5LVIY>), in F+ (Fig. 7).

(With passion and force)
 A - - ma - mi, Al - fre - do, a - ma - mi quan - t'io
 Al - fred, oh love me, love me as I do
 Wied. molto. *p*
 i'a - mo, a - ma - mi, Al - fre - do, quan - t'io
 love there, Al - fred, oh love me, love me

Fig. 7: Score of *Amami, Alfredo*.

Digging up the past: *Médée* by Cherubini and *Idomeneo* by Mozart

The action of 'digging' is often related to archaeological excavations that bring to light remains of past civilizations, as it was the case of Arthur Evans unearthing the palace of

Knossos. The same principle applies to operatic works that for some reasons stopped being performed soon after their premiere. This has prevented them from being part of the standard operatic repertoire until a music genius or a joint effort rescued them from the oblivion and made them re-emerge from dust.

Cherubini's *Médée* is a French-language opera, lukewarmly received since its premiere (end of 18th century CE). The turning point was a representation in Florence in 1953, with Maria Callas in the title role. Callas' performance was so astonishing and the production so successful that the *Teatro alla Scala* staged *Medea* (until recent times this opera has been mainly performed in its Italian translation) during the opening week of the upcoming operatic season, starring Callas as Medea and Leonard Bernstein on the podium. (Act 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmfTMhQitTY&t=33s>; Acts 2 and 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTdCEZFvM3w>). Callas performed the role throughout the 1950s and early 1960s in major theatres of US and Europe. The production staged at the Dallas Opera in 1958 has made history, especially by virtue of Callas' wildly demonic outbursts while she summoned Erinyes to assist her in killing her own children (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwmC2Z1CYxU>). Since the 1953 revival, Cherubini's masterpiece is a regular presence in opera houses all over the world.

Since its earliest representations in the 1780s, mixed reactions have characterized the response to Mozart's *Idomeneo, Re di Creta* (Idomeneus, King of Crete). Despite its good reception at the premiere, *Idomeneo* was scarcely performed during Mozart's lifetime and this scenario slightly changed until 1980s, when major US and European productions brought this opera to the fore. Yet, this did not immediately reignite the wider audience's attention. *Idomeneo* is a milestone in Mozart's production and represents a transitional work. Its stylistic elements partly belong to the previous tradition and partly launch new features. Significantly,

Mozart himself always considered this opera his theatrical masterpiece and people who immediately fall in love with *Idomeneo* are often used to pave new ways, look at the potential of individuals and situations, and have a pioneering approach to work. Luckily, the story of the king of Crete has kept being represented nevertheless, on an increasingly regular basis since its rediscovery in the earliest 1980s. In the 2000s two productions in particular have significantly contributed to a wider circulation of *Idomeneo*, i.e. a representation in the opening night at *Teatro alla Scala* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ba9K_T5ivTQ&t=6495s) interpreting a new reading of the score, and a representation at the Opera San José (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYQKH0Xvqoo>) showing a meticulous archaeological work in reconstructing Aegean Bronze Age textiles, set, and decorations. Although some work has yet to be done to give *Idomeneo* the place it deserves, an exceptionally long and intelligent effort has finally unraveled this masterpiece.

Act Three

The third act often coincides with the epilogue, in which the previous action comes to a solution and an end. However, this paper will conclude with a *Ringkomposition*, i.e. a ring structure, while addressing the question “What’s next?”.

Whereas the earliest composition labelled as ‘opera’ is Peri’s *Dafne* (end of 16th century CE), which – remarkably – was an attempt to revive the Greek drama, it is more difficult to establish which piece can be considered the last opera. What is clear is that this music genre has enormously changed and the latest compositions show considerable differences, such as the use of smaller orchestras, now scored for less than 20 instrumentalists, and the choice of recent events (instead of a distant past) as topics. Alongside these tendencies, further developments have taken place. Some musicals show complex polyphonic ensembles and are regularly represented in opera houses, like *West Side Story*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi8thLTKvco>, music by Leonard Bernstein) and *Porgy and Bess* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NghjBMn6ZJM>, music by George Gershwin), which opened the last Met Opera season (2019/2020). Other types of recent works frequently performed include pieces such as *La voix humaine*, by Francis Poulenc (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpEPlRcIE2E>). This is a one-act opera for soprano (solo role) and orchestra, premiered in Paris in the late 1950s. It met immediate success and today is regularly revived. Finally, *Folk songs* by Berio paved the way for a further kind of music. It is a song cycle of folk music and other songs from various countries composed in the middle 1960s. Initially scored for voice (mezzo-soprano soloist) and a few instrumentalists, it has been subsequently arranged for a larger orchestra. Cathy Berberian was the first artist to perform *Folk songs*. After Berberian's death, Berio personally chose as a performer Alda Caiello, an outstanding singer who is the reference interpreter in this (and a far wider too) repertoire (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZYWFz3Zf3U>). Significantly, the definition of 'folk songs' might be well applied also to describe the earliest stage of composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Curtain Call

"With great music comes great responsibility". Outstanding performers take masterpieces a step further and bring them directly to the Olympus. Be prepared to be amazed!

References

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