

## OPERAS FOR MAY 2021

5 May	Monteverdi	Orfeo
12	E. Korngold	Das wunder der Heliane
19	Rossini	Matilde de Shabran
26	Thomas	Mignon

### **ORFEO**                      **Monteverdi**

L'Orfeo (SV 318) (Italian pronunciation: [lor'fɛ:o]), sometimes called *La favola d'Orfeo* [la 'fa:vola dor'fɛ:o], is a late Renaissance/early Baroque *favola in musica*, or opera, by Claudio Monteverdi, with a libretto by Alessandro Striggio. It is based on the Greek legend of Orpheus, and tells the story of his descent to Hades and his fruitless attempt to bring his dead bride Eurydice back to the living world. It was written in 1607 for a court performance during the annual Carnival at Mantua. While Jacopo Peri's *Dafne* is generally recognised as the first work in the opera genre, and the earliest surviving opera is Peri's *Euridice*, L'Orfeo is the earliest that is still regularly performed.

There is much detail to be found here <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Orfeo>

### **Synopsis**

The action takes place in two contrasting locations: the fields of Thrace (acts 1, 2 and 5) and the Underworld (acts 3 and 4). An instrumental *toccata* (English: "tucket", meaning a flourish on trumpets)[35] precedes the entrance of *La musica*, representing the "spirit of music", who sings a prologue of five stanzas of verse. After a gracious welcome to the audience she announces that she can, through sweet sounds, "calm every troubled heart". She sings a further paean to the power of music, before introducing the drama's main protagonist, Orfeo, who "held the wild beasts spellbound with his song".

#### **Act 1**

After *La musica*'s final request for silence, the curtain rises on act 1 to reveal a pastoral scene. Orfeo and Euridice enter together with a chorus of nymphs and shepherds, who act in the manner of a Greek chorus, commenting on the action both as a group and as individuals. A shepherd announces that this is the couple's wedding day; the chorus responds, first in a stately invocation ("Come, Hymen, O come") and then in a joyful dance ("Leave the mountains, leave the fountains"). Orfeo and Euridice sing of their love for each other before leaving with most of the group for the wedding ceremony in the temple. Those left on stage sing a brief chorus, commenting on how Orfeo used to be one "for whom sighs were food and weeping was drink" before love brought him to a state of sublime happiness.

#### **Act 2**

Orfeo returns with the main chorus, and sings with them of the beauties of nature. Orfeo then muses on his former unhappiness, but proclaims: "After grief one is more content, after pain one is happier". The mood of contentment is abruptly ended when *La messaggera* enters, bringing the news that, while gathering flowers, Euridice has received a fatal snakebite. The chorus expresses its anguish: "Ah, bitter happening, ah, impious and cruel fate!", while the *Messaggera* castigates herself as the bearing of bad tidings ("For ever I will flee, and in a lonely cavern lead a life in keeping with my sorrow"). Orfeo, after venting his grief and incredulity ("Thou art dead, my life, and I am breathing?"), declares his intention to descend

into the Underworld and persuade its ruler to allow Euridice to return to life. Otherwise, he says, "I shall remain with thee in the company of death". He departs, and the chorus resumes its lament.

### **Act 3**

Orfeo is guided by Speranza to the gates of Hades. Having pointed out the words inscribed on the gate ("Abandon hope, all ye who enter here"), Speranza leaves. Orfeo is now confronted with the ferryman Caronte, who addresses Orfeo harshly and refuses to take him across the river Styx. Orfeo attempts to persuade Caronte by singing a flattering song to him ("Mighty spirit and powerful divinity"), but the ferryman is unmoved. However, when Orfeo takes up his lyre and plays, Caronte is soothed into sleep. Seizing his chance, Orfeo steals the ferryman's boat and crosses the river, entering the Underworld while a chorus of spirits reflects that nature cannot defend herself against man: "He has tamed the sea with fragile wood, and disdained the rage of the winds."

### **Act 4**

In the Underworld, Proserpina, Queen of Hades, who has been deeply affected by Orfeo's singing, petitions King Plutone, her husband, for Euridice's release. Moved by her pleas, Plutone agrees on the condition that, as he leads Euridice towards the world, Orfeo must not look back. If he does, "a single glance will condemn him to eternal loss". Orfeo enters, leading Euridice and singing confidently that on that day he will rest on his wife's white bosom. But as he sings a note of doubt creeps in: "Who will assure me that she is following?". Perhaps, he thinks, Plutone, driven by envy, has imposed the condition through spite? Suddenly distracted by an off-stage commotion, Orfeo looks round; immediately, the image of Euridice begins to fade. She sings, despairingly: "Losest thou me through too much love?" and disappears. Orfeo attempts to follow her but is drawn away by an unseen force. The chorus of spirits sings that Orfeo, having overcome Hades, was in turn overcome by his passions.

### **Act 5**

Back in the fields of Thrace, Orfeo has a long soliloquy in which he laments his loss, praises Euridice's beauty and resolves that his heart will never again be pierced by Cupid's arrow. An off-stage echo repeats his final phrases. Suddenly, in a cloud, Apollo descends from the heavens and chastises him: "Why dost thou give thyself up as prey to rage and grief?" He invites Orfeo to leave the world and join him in the heavens, where he will recognise Euridice's likeness in the stars. Orfeo replies that it would be unworthy not to follow the counsel of such a wise father, and together they ascend. A shepherds' chorus concludes that "he who sows in suffering shall reap the fruit of every grace", before the opera ends with a vigorous moresca.

**Das Wunder der Heliane** (German for The Miracle of Heliane), Op. 20 is an opera in three acts by Erich Wolfgang Korngold with a libretto by Hans Müller-Einigen, after Hans Kaltneker [de]. It was first performed at the Hamburg State Opera on 7 October 1927. A suite for violin and piano based on the music from the aria "Ich ging zu ihm" is in print at Schott publishing.

After many successful premieres across Germany, Korngold composed this new opera beginning in 1924. Before its premiere in 1927 Korngold claimed that this would be his masterwork.

At the world premiere in Hamburg the audiences and critics were unimpressed, feeling that Korngold's music held no new surprises and it was not modern. Critics were united in their lack of esteem for the work, many simply dismissing it as kitsch.

The opera is generally considered to have been a flop for Korngold, following as it did the critical and public success of *Die tote Stadt* and several other operas by the composer. Within the artistic community however there is evidence that there was admiration for the work, soprano Lotte Lehman even stating that the title role was her favourite.

It was presented at the Berlin Städtische Oper under Bruno Walter in 1928, but Heliane was forgotten for some time. However, it was revived in the 21st century with high-profile performances in London and a recording and performance at the BBC's *The Proms* of the opera's the most famous musical sequence, "Ich ging zu ihm" sung by soprano Renée Fleming plus the release of the aria on the singer's studio album

## Roles

Role

Heliane soprano

The ruler, her husband baritone

The stranger tenor

The messenger alto

The doorman bass

The blind judge tenor

The young man tenor

The six judges

The seraphic voices

The people Chorus

## Synopsis

Place: An unnamed totalitarian state Time: In an unknown era.

### Act 1

The cruel Ruler exercises his power over the land. The Ruler suffers because he is unable to win the love of his wife Heliane. Since he is unhappy, he will not tolerate his subjects living in happiness. A young Stranger had recently arrived in the land and was bringing the people joy; as a result, he was arrested and sentenced to death. He will be executed at sunrise. The Ruler visits him in order to learn the reason for his actions. The Stranger pleads for mercy but the Ruler is firm on his death. However, he agrees to allow the Stranger to remain unchained this last night of his life. When her husband has left, Heliane comes to the cell to comfort the Stranger. As she speaks to the Stranger and realizes his goodness, her feelings of pity and sadness turn to love. The Stranger tells Heliane how beautiful she is and she reveals to him her long golden hair. She then exposes her bare feet and then, finally, stands completely naked before him. The Stranger asks Heliane to give herself to him on his last night of life, but she refuses and goes to the chapel to pray for the Stranger. The Ruler returns to the cell, proposing that if the Stranger can teach Heliane to love the Ruler then he will spare his life

and concede Heliane to him. Heliane returns, still naked. She is shocked to meet her husband in the cell. In anger, he orders the Stranger's death and Heliane's trial.

### **Act 2**

The Ruler and his messenger (also his former lover whom he has rejected) await the coming of the executioner and the members of the high court. Heliane will be tried when the six judges and the blind Chief Justice arrive. The Ruler accuses her of adultery with the Stranger. Heliane cannot deny that she stood naked before the Stranger, but she insists that she gave herself to him in thought only. The Ruler presses his dagger into her breast telling her she should kill herself. The Stranger is brought in to testify but he will not speak, wanting to be left alone for a few moments with Heliane. He kisses her and then takes the dagger and kills himself, making it impossible for the Ruler to prove that Heliane is lying. The Ruler dismisses the court and tells Heliane that she will be on trial before God: if she is innocent, as she claims, she must bring the Stranger back to life. Shocked, she agrees to undergo the trial.

### **Act 3**

A crowd has assembled outside of the Ruler's palace. The Judges, together with the Chief Justice arrive to witness Heliane's attempt to bring the Stranger back to life. The messenger stirs up the crowd against Heliane as the test begins. She cries, she will not lie, admitting that she did love the young Stranger. When the Ruler sees her cry he wants to save her, but only on the condition that she will be his. Heliane resents her husband more than ever and she refuses this last offer for life. The crowd drags her away to the stake where she will die. Suddenly all are shocked as a thunder crashes. Just as suddenly, stars begin to appear in the sky and everyone is amazed to see the young Stranger's corpse rise, transfigured from the funeral bier. By some miracle he is alive. Heliane breaks away from the shocked crowd and runs into the arms of this Stranger whom she loves. In a fit of rage the Ruler plunges his sword into her breast. The Stranger offers a blessing to the people and banishes the ruler whose power is broken. The Stranger takes Heliane in his arms. United in their love they rise to heaven.

## **Matilde de Shabran**

First performance on 24 February 1821 (Conductor: Niccolò Paganini )

Synopsis

Place: In and around Corradino's gothic castle in Spain

Time: The Middle Ages

### **Act 1**

#### **Scene 1: Outside the castle gatehouse**

Egildo and some peasants arrive with some of their produce, which they hope Corradino will accept (Zitti; nessun qui v'e - "Quiet, no-one is here"). Aliprando draws their attention to two inscriptions on the castle gates (Chi vi guida a questa mura? - "Who brings you to these walls?"), but since the peasants have not been taught to read, he is obliged to read them out: "Anyone entering without permission will have their heads split in two" and "Anyone who disturbs the peace will be starved to death". He and Ginardo confirm that the ferocious Corradino will have no hesitation in carrying out these threats, and furthermore he has a particular hatred of women (Se viene il Cerbero fioccano i guai - "When Cerberus comes, woes rain down"). The alarmed peasants disperse rapidly. Ginardo asks Udolfo to check that

Corradino's prisoners are not being ill-treated, except that he himself will visit the most recent arrival, Edoardo, the son of Corradino's enemy Raimondo Lopez.

The wandering poet Isidoro arrives with his guitar at the castle, tired, hungry and thirsty, having travelled all the way from Naples. Seeing the castle, he hopes that his luck will change (Cavatina: Intanto Armenia 'nfra l'ombrese piante - "Meanwhile, Armenia, through the shady trees"), but, when he sees the inscriptions, his instinct is to flee. But he accidentally runs into Ginardo, who tells him that it is too late. Corradino, armed and surrounded by guards, makes his appearance and demands to know who Isidoro is and why he is there (Quartet: Alma rea! Perché t'involi? - "Wicked man! Why are you running away?"). Isidoro tries to curry favour with Corradino by offering to serenade his ladies, but this enrages the tyrant further. He is about to kill the poet when Aliprando intervenes. Corradino relents, but Isidoro is marched off to the dungeons by Ginardo.

Aliprando tells Corradino that Matilde, whose father, Shabran, has been killed in battle, is approaching the castle. With his dying breath, Shabran commended her to Corradino's care. Corradino, who respected Shabran, agrees to accommodate Matilde in fine apartments, but wishes her to be kept out of his sight unless he summons her. Aliprando goes to meet her.

Ginardo returns, telling Corradino that Edoardo is weeping and may be repentant. But when he brings the chained prisoner to Corradino, it is clear that Edoardo remains defiant. Corradino demands that he acknowledge him as the victor over his father. Edoardo refuses (Cavatina: Piange il mio ciglio, è vero - "It's true that tears fall from my eyes"), but Corradino has his chains removed and will give him the run of the castle if he promises not to escape. Edoardo agrees and goes in. Ginardo reports that Aliprando and Matilde are approaching the castle. Corradino vows to find Matilde a husband and supply her with a dowry, but will see her as little as possible. Ginardo, alone, muses that a heart of iron ("cuor di ferro") may not be enough to save his master from Cupid's darts.

### **Scene 2: A magnificent gallery in the castle**

Matilde tells Aliprando that Corradino will yield to her (Duet: Di capricci, di smorfiette - "I've caprices, little glances"). The physician is not so sure, but he admires her spirit and tells her that Corradino, despite his warlike demeanour, runs to him whenever he has a headache or a cold. Maybe his dislike of women can be overcome.

Ginardo announces the arrival of the Contessa d'Arco, who, as a result of a peace treaty, was promised in marriage to Corradino. He had immediately repudiated her, but was obliged to agree that he would not marry anyone else. The Countess has heard that Matilde is to be accommodated in the castle and intends to have her evicted. The women insult each other, and the resulting noise brings Corradino and his guards to the gallery (Quintet: Questa è la Dea? Che aria! - "This is the goddess? What a picture!"). Matilde stands firm, Ginardo and Aliprando are amazed that Corradino makes no attempt to kill her for her impertinence, and the Countess is further enraged. Corradino is confused - his head is spinning and his blood is burning. He asks Ginardo to look after Matilde, and departs with Aliprando. The Countess storms off, pursued by Matilde.

Corradino asks Aliprando what is wrong with him, and is told that he is lovesick, which is a disease with no cure. Aliprando leaves, and Corradino summons Isidoro, whom he suspects of bewitching him, from his prison. Isidoro, in fear of his life, has no idea what he is talking about, but, just when Corradino is about to have him torn into pieces, a contrite Matilde appears. Ginardo is to take Isidoro back to the dungeon, but the two of them hide in order to

watch developments. The bemused Corradino succumbs to Matilde's wiles (Finale: Ah! Capisco; non parlate - "Ah! I understand, do not speak"), and falls at her feet just as Aliprando arrives to announce that Raimondo and his troops are on their way to rescue Edoardo. Corradino leaves to give orders to the guards, taking Matilde with him, as the others comment on his surrender to her.

### **Scene 3: Outside the castle gatehouse**

Edoardo, Rodrigo and the guards await the enemy. Corradino, Matilde, Aliprando and Ginardo come through the gate, together with Isidoro and his guitar (he has appointed himself court poet). The Countess follows them. When Corradino tells Edoardo that his father will be defeated, Edoardo is overcome, but when Matilde comforts the boy, Corradino succumbs to jealousy. An ensemble (Oh come mai quest'anima svavilla in un momento! - "Oh, how my soul flares up in a minute!") develops, Isidoro urges the guards onwards, and the curtain falls.

## **Act 2**

### **Scene 1: The countryside near the castle**

Isidoro, sitting in a tree, is writing about his exploits. The peasants and Corradino's troops arrive (Di Corradino il nome per ogni suol rimbomba - "May the name of Corradino resound in every country"), and, although they know that most of what Isidoro has written is made up, he persuades them that that's what poets do (Le penne de i poeti so spade assai diverse - "Poets' pens are quite different weapons"), and they nevertheless salute him and take him with them.

Raimondo appears, laments the loss of his son, and departs. Edoardo, dispirited, longs for death (Cavatina: Ah! perché, perché la morte non ascolta i pianti miei - "Ah, why, why does death ignore my tears") but then he hears Raimondo calling his name. Corradino and Raimondo arrive simultaneously, but, before they can fight, Edoardo takes Raimondo's place. As he fights Corradino, he tells him that it was Matilde who set him free. Corradino rushes off in a rage, and father and son leave together.

### **Scene 2: The gallery in the castle**

The Countess reveals that Edoardo had bribed the guards and escaped. She is sure that Corradino will blame Matilde, who now arrives, followed by Isidoro. He tells the ladies how he saved the day by taking command of the army. Ginardo and Aliprando confirm that the enemy has been routed, but add that Corradino ran off to find Raimondo and challenge him to a duel. Corradino returns, demanding to see Edoardo, but Ginardo discovers that he has escaped. Corradino starts to question Matilde, but Rodrigo enters with a letter for her. It is from Edoardo, who swears undying love for her and thanks her for allowing him to escape. Corradino condemns her to death, to the delight of the Countess (Sextet: E palese il tradimento - "Her treachery is obvious"). Isidoro and the guards are to take Matilde to a deep chasm and throw her in. Corradino, alone, meditates on his revenge. He is joined by some peasant women, but their pleas that Matilde be saved (Mandare a morte quella meschina? - "Are you really sending that poor girl to her death?") fall on deaf ears. As they leave, Isidoro, Ginardo, Aliprando and the Countess return. Isidoro describes how he kicked Matilde into the gorge, amid conflicting emotions from the others.

Suddenly, Edoardo appears and describes how the Countess bribed Udolfo to release him, with the intention of throwing the blame on Matilde. The Countess flees Corradino's wrath, and he and Edoardo lament Matilde's death (Duet: Da cento smanie, e cento sento straziarmi il cor - "A hundred agonies, and then a hundred more, pierce my heart").

### **Scene 3: Outside Raimondo's castle: a steep mountain with a raging torrent plunging into a gorge**

Isidoro is at the foot of the mountain and Corradino is above, planning to throw himself off in order to atone for Matilde's death. But before he can do so, a bell rings and Raimondo emerges from the castle. Aliprando and Ginardo try to restrain Corradino as Edoardo rushes into the castle, immediately returning with Matilde. Isidoro admits that he made up the story of Matilde's death, Matilde thanks Edoardo, instructs Corradino to make peace with Raimondo and regrets that the Countess is not there to see her triumph. She and Corradino are reunited, and, to general rejoicing, she sings in praise of love (*Ami alfine? E chi non ama?* - "Are you at last in love? Who does not love?") as the peasants comment: "Women are born to conquer and rule".

**Mignon** is an *opéra comique* (or opera in its second version) in three acts by Ambroise Thomas. The original French libretto was by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, based on Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* [*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*]. The Italian version was translated by Giuseppe Zaffira.

The first performance was at the Opéra-Comique in Paris on 17 November 1866. The piece proved popular: more than 100 performances took place by the following July, the 1,000th was given there on 13 May 1894, and the 1,500th on 25 May 1919.

The opera was also adapted and translated into German for performance in Berlin with Madame Lucca as Mignon. Lucca was well received, but the German critics were unhappy with the opera's alterations to the Goethe original, so Thomas composed a shorter finale with a tragic ending, in which Mignon falls dead in the arms of Wilhelm. This ending was an attempt to make the story of the opera somewhat more similar in tone to the tragic outcome of Goethe's. (The original version of *Mignon* for the Opéra-Comique had to have a happy ending, since at that time in Paris tragic operas in French were exclusively reserved for the Opéra.) Unsurprisingly, this "Version allemande" still failed to satisfy the German critics and proved to be a futile endeavour

#### **Setting of Mignon:**

Thomas' *Mignon* takes place in Germany and Italy in the late 18th century.

#### **ACT 1**

Lothario, a minstrel, has wandered into a small German tavern. As he sings, Gypsies dance and townsfolk patronizing the tavern drink and watch.

Jarno, a gypsy, orders Mignon to dance. When she refuses, he threatens to beat her with a stick. Thankfully, Lothario and Wilhelm Meister step in and help her. Mignon offers the two men a bouquet of flowers as a sign of gratitude. Wilhelm shares a round a of drinks with actor, Laerte, before Laerte leaves with fellow actress, Philine. As they are leaving, Wilhelm gives his small bouquet of flowers to Philine. Mignon comes back to visit with Wilhelm. During their conversation, she tells him that she was captured by Gypsies when she was a little girl. Wilhelm is moved by her story and offers to purchase her freedom. Lothario invites her to travel with him, and though the idea sounds promising, she chooses to remain with Wilhelm. Frederick, who is madly in love with Philine, follows her back into the tavern. Little does he know that she has a crush on Wilhelm. Philine's acting troupe is about to depart to perform at the Baron's nearby castle. When Philine exits the tavern again, Mignon notices that she is carrying the bouquet that Mignon gave to Wilhelm.

Mignon becomes upset because she has fallen in love with Wilhelm.

## **ACT 2**

While in the Baron's castle, Philine flirts with the Baron and enjoys all the luxuries his wealth and title has earned him. Outside, Laerte expresses great praise for Philine as Wilhelm and Mignon enter the castle. Philine greets Wilhelm, and as they converse Mignon pretends to be asleep. Philine and Wilhelm leave so as not to disturb the sleeping Mignon. Once alone, Mignon shuffles through Philine's make-up and costumes, even trying a few on for size. Clearly Mignon is jealous and after becoming upset again, she leaves. Frederic enters the room shortly thereafter, and when Wilhelm returns to fetch Mignon, Frederic confronts him about Philine. Mignon happens to enter the room just before a brawl breaks out between the two men and she is able to stop them. Wilhelm makes up his mind and tells Mignon that he doesn't want to be with her. Instead, he chooses to be with Philine. They exit the room with their arms interlocked.

After the performance starts, Mignon jealously paces about in the castle's courtyard. She hears Lothario playing the harp nearby and speaks with him. As he comforts her, applause is heard emanating from the castle's conservatory. The audience is thrilled with Philine's performance as Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Mignon becomes furious and shouts that she wishes that the castle would catch fire. In a jealous rage she storms out of the courtyard. Lothario proceeds to the conservatory. Wilhelm and Philine have walked into the courtyard, and when Mignon reappears, Wilhelm is very pleasant towards her. Philine becomes jealous and orders Mignon to fetch flowers from the conservatory. Mignon angrily complies. Moments later, a fire set by by Lothario is seen billowing from the conservatory. Wilhelm rushes there to save Mignon, but he finds her unconscious, still clutching a bouquet of scorched flowers.

## **ACT 3**

To take care of Mignon, who is still unconscious, Wilhelm brings her and Lothario to a castle in Italy that he is deciding whether or not to buy. Wilhelm leaves Mignon under the care of an old man who promises to pray over her everyday. Wilhelm meets with the castle servant, Antonio to question him about the castle. Antonio tells him that the previous owner was driven mad by the death of his wife, who died from grief after they lost their child. After Wilhelm discovers that the castle has sped Mignon's recovery, he immediately offers to buy it for her. Mignon awakens to this strangely familiar place and tells Wilhelm that she loves it. Wilhelm has a change of heart and declares his love for her. His love is tested when Philine arrives seeking to be with him again. This time, however, Wilhelm rejects her and tells her he is in love with Mignon. Lothario returns to the room where Wilhelm and Mignon are and tells them happily that being in the castle has cleared his mind. Mignon looks around the castle and picks up a book to read. As she reads it, she finds a prayer written within its pages. She suddenly remembers that her real name is Sperata and that Lothario is her father. This was the castle she was born in before she was taken by Gypsies. Lothario is overcome with joy and the three hug each other tightly