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Reclaiming the Orphic myth for opera:

When the Flame Dies (2012)

Jean Marais in Orphée (1950)

2. Circumstances of public presentation (i)

- First publication of score 1 June 2012 – University of York Music Press
- First public performance 17 October 2012 – Canterbury Festival
- First release on CD/DVD 1 November 2013 - Metier

When the Flame Dies is a one hour opera which uses modern musical resources, including five singers, ensemble and electronics, to reference the film 'Orphée' (1950) by Jean Cocteau, and reclaim the Orphic myth from film for opera.

2. Circumstances of public presentation (ii)

An important element was the use of video as a dynamic link between symbolic visuals, which ritually invoke Cocteau's work, and the opera's electronic sounds. The video is by Will Reynolds. The libretto is by Roger Morris. The score and all electronic elements are by Ed Hughes.

The visuals and electronics in combination allow the opera to access and reference Cocteau's filmic conception of the underworld through the medium of opera. The visuals and electronics rupture and fragment the narrative and unfolding of time. The ensemble writing has a more normative quality and has the effect of restoring narrative flow. There is a productive tension between these elements.

3. Research Question

Although there are notable examples in recent opera of the use of the Orpheus myth (e.g. Birtwistle's Mask of Orpheus, 1986) wider cultural awareness, beyond opera, of this musical myth is arguably through its translations into film. E.g. *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), *Black Orpheus* (1959), *Orpheus & Eurydice* (2000). Therefore this project engaged with film and film music theory in order to ask **can contemporary opera reclaim the Orphic myth from film by adopting and absorbing film's own methods and inscribing them in musical terms into new opera**?

4. Context (i)

The research was informed by and drew on the following scholars' works:

- Carolyn Abbate, Unsung Voices (Princeton University Press 1991), for the idea that 'the mingling of two musics' might be a 'transfiguring moment at which the mundane and transcendental cross' (p.120)

- Michal Grover Friedlander, Vocal Apparitions (Princeton University Press 2005), for the idea that films have invoked 'the operatic founding myth of Orpheus through a visual representation of the power of the operatic voice' (p. 30)

- James S Williams, Jean Cocteau (Reaktion Books 2008), for the idea of Cocteau's filmic language as 'a porous world of flux, reversals and metamorphosis unfolding like a series of tableaux' (p. 187)

4. Context (ii)

The following composers' works informed the research:

- Jonathan Harvey, *Wagner Dream*, opera (2005) for the idea of staging spatially (sonically and physically) simultaneous and interlocking scenarios

- Michal van der Aa, *Sunken Garden*, opera (2012) for the idea of screened visual motifs spilling beyond the frame of the screen into the physical space of the stage, and then into the musical material.

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Intercutting acoustic ensemble with electronic music, modelling the operatic concept of a 'transfiguring moment' and the filmic technique of the crossfade.

This can be seen in the following example, in which the live voice and ensemble sounds are captured and mixed in real time with electronic treatments to create a very long transitional crossfade between the 'mundane' world of the Poet's apartment, and the 'transcendental' world of the zone/underworld.

Methods example (i).

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<u>Musical figurings/representations of visual constructs from the world of Cocteau's Orphee.</u>

This can be seen in this example, in which the live electronic treatment of the voice directly evokes (in purely operatic terms) the lingering of the main female lead (Cocteau's PRINCESS) in the liminal space between the living world and her shadow in the underworld (Cocteau's ZONE). The mezzo-soprano's live voice is projected electronically in simultaneous counterpoint as her own voice's shadow, pitch-shifted down a perfect fourth.

Methods example (ii).

Creating through musical composition and orchestration for ensemble and live electronics a musical metaphor for a 'porous world of flux'.
This can be seen in this example, in which multiple delay lines are applied to both the ensemble's piano and the live singing voice of the soprano, and combined with a sudden change to a very slow rate of harmonic change, to produce a musically 'porous world' as an analogue to Cocteau's film language.

Methods example (iii).

6. The work

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- Video of the first performance of 'When the Flame Dies' at the Canterbury Festival on 17 October 2012
- Score provided as pdf and in print form

7. New insights...

<u>When the Flame Dies (2012):</u>

• critically and creatively appropriated filmic strategies and devices through musical figuring of some of Cocteau's symbolic, visual and dramatic qualities, and

• translated the concept of the power of the operatic voice from theory of nineteenth and twentieth century opera and film into the practice of contemporary opera, and harnessed contemporary music techniques (including music technologies) to achieve this

Thereby the research

• built a bridge between this new opera and Cocteau's *Orphée*, in order to 'reclaim the Orphic myth for opera' (Michal Grover-Friedlander in notes for the forthcoming CD and DVD release of When the Flame Dies on Metier msv 77203).