

Orpheus, Eurydice

for BBC, May 1972

It must have been early in 1923 that I was approached by Professor Leo Kestenberg who at that time was head of the music education system of the State of Prussia with the question whether I would be interested in using the drama Orpheus and Eurydice by Oskar Kokoschka as ~~a~~ ^{libretto} for an opera. Professor Kestenberg, ^{himself} an excellent musician ~~and~~ who had studied piano with Ferruccio Busoni had formerly been connected with the Berlin art dealer Cassirer and in that capacity concerned with the promotion of the paintings of Kokoschka who ~~was~~ in the last years before World War I had acquired some fame and perhaps even more notoriously as one of the first wild men of Central European expressionism, and I was known to Kestenberg as one of the pupils of Franz Schreker whom I had followed from my native Vienna when he was called to Berlin by Kestenberg in 1919 to become director of the State Academy of Music.

Because Schreker did not much approve of the more progressive ways of composition upon which I had embarked in Berlin under the influence of such personalities as Busoni, Arthur Schnabel, Eduard Erdmann

and Hermann Scherchen, my studies at the Academy had come to a somewhat informal end, and at the time of Kestenberg's inquiry I was entirely on my own.

~~In spite of~~ Working at a pace that today appears to me utterly miraculous, I had at that time already completed two stage works, a one-act play entitled Zwingburg (the Tyrant's Castle) and described as scenic cantata, and a comic opera for which I had contrived my ^{full-length} own libretto, called Der Sprung über den Schatten, (The leap over the shadow). Although I had not yet gathered any practical ^{operatic} ~~stage~~ experience through witnessing a performance of ~~any~~ either of these works, I was quite eager to continue in this direction. Thus I responded enthusiastically to Mr. Kestenberg's inquiry especially since I had heard that Paul Hindemith had composed another of Kokoschka's plays, and I found it very exciting to be associated with so famous an artist ^{as this painter of} of ultra-modern reputation.

The first reading of the drama was somewhat alarming. Not only was it much too long for an operatic libretto, ^{which was normal after all,} but also even more obscure and irrational than one might expect of literature destined to be immersed in musical sound. Kokoschka had written ^{the Orestes} ~~this~~ drama under severe ^{trauma} ~~when~~ when he was recovering from a ~~severe~~ dangerous wound as a prisoner of war

in Russia, and this difficult condition ^{may} ~~be~~ (3) have left traces on the concept and the style of his work. Kokoschka's language is typical of ~~the~~ ^{some} mannerisms of early expressionism in its propensity for involution or fragmentary syntax and neologistic additions to the traditional vocabulary; at the same time it is highly personal in its unmediated juxtaposition of almost colloquial conversation and very precious *recherche* ^{passages} ~~turns~~ some of which ~~would~~ elude most diligent and sympathetic analysis. The general impression was fascinating because of the aura of demonic power of ~~emotion~~ and emotional mystery. These elements made me overcome my initial hesitation, for ~~the~~ I hoped that preoccupation with this orphic poetry would propel my own musical imagination in a direction that at that time seemed to me highly desirable.

When I had ~~regulated~~ ~~the~~ condensed the drama to manageable operative size I felt I ought to visit the author, ~~ask~~ ask for his approval and perhaps ~~gain~~ benefit from his ideas on the work and some suggestions he might offer. He was after all, ^{by} ^{my senior} fourteen years older than I, ^{a fact} ~~which placed~~ ~~me in a normally respectful attitude~~ ~~a condition~~ which at that time still engendered a feeling of respect in the ^{junior} ~~younger~~ man. I traveled to Dresden, where Kokoschka was professor at the Academy of Art, and he received ^{me} ~~me~~ most cordially, and with his irresistible, somewhat roguish charm.

While I gladly succumbed to the latter, I was (4)
frustrated in the chief ~~pur~~pose of my errand.
The great man did not even look at what I had
done to his work, saying ~~that~~ he trusted that
everything was just fine. At a second session
~~he had~~ he was so absorbed in putting together
a Chinese puzzle that no real discussion ~~emerged~~
~~emerged~~. In spite of my ~~frustrated~~ disappointment
I developed ^{unchanging} feelings of warm sympathy for
Rokoschka, but I have ^{to my regret} not succeeded in
getting closer to him as a friend, probably
because the component of ^{roving} ~~vagrant~~ irration-
ality has in his mental make-up so much
more weight than in my own.

Rokoschka's ^{treatment} ~~interpretation~~ of the ancient Greek
legend reflects his famous ~~and~~ stormy love
affair with Alma Mahler, ^{the widow of Gustav Mahler,} an experience that has
also inspired several of his most significant
paintings. The reference is made quite obvious.
At the ~~beginning~~ opening of the play Eurydice is con-
~~templating~~ ^{the inscription in her wedding} A ring of which she says in one
of her first lines "This ring ~~is~~ welding together
Orpheus and Eurydice, thus forever ~~is~~ one's happiness
^{rests} on the other". ~~And~~ But when at the climax of the
tragedy after Eurydice's ^{release} ~~return~~ from Hades the
ring turns up and Orpheus asks what is left of
the inscription he reads the Greek words $\eta\delta\omega\varsigma$
 $\mu\alpha\kappa\alpha\rho$, which ~~with~~ - allowing for some variants of
spelling - may be ^{interpreted} to mean "Happiness
is different", or "The other one happy". The Greek
and he certainly did not ^{elucidate} ~~explain~~ any
of the ^{more} obscure spots of the play

words 'Aloz' ~~mean~~ however, are meant to be recog⁵
nized as a combination of the four syllables of the lovers
names: Alma and Oskar. The relationship of Orpheus
and Eurydice, as it unfolds in the play, is a very com-
plicated one, mixed of love ~~and hatred~~, passion, suspicion,
devotion, melancholy resignation, fierce vindictiveness
and destructive hatred. The ways in which some of the
ancient symbols are here interpreted ^{perhaps} may be traced
to ~~the~~ Freudian psychological concepts. While in the
well known legend ~~the~~ Orpheus is forbidden to turn his head
and to look at Eurydice when he leads her out of Hades,
the injunction in Kokoschka's version reads that he must
not ask her about what happened during those seven
years in the netherworld. And while the ancient Orpheus can
not restrain himself from looking back because of his
overwhelming desire to see her again, his modern counter-
part breaks the command because ~~he~~ he can not any
longer suppress his growing suspicion after he has dis-
covered the mutilated inscription on the ring.

For me it appears ^{as} ~~to be~~ ^{red} a stroke of genius how
Kokoschka ^{interprets} the tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice with
the ~~legend~~ ^{story} of Amor and Psyche as a counterpoint.
Psyche is here attached to Eurydice as a com-
panion and guardian angel. Her own love affair
with Amor is made difficult because she can
receive him only in the dark of ~~the~~ night, but
must never see him lest he will be blinded. ~~When~~
When the three furies, sinister emissaries of Hades,
appear to fetch Eurydice, Psyche ~~blows~~ ~~the~~ ~~en-~~
~~down~~ stops them at the gate until the cleverest
of the witches succeeds in making Psyche so

suspicious of the true nature of her mysterious lover that she allows a torch to be lit when he arrives, and in the ensuing confusion the furies gain access to the house and take Eurydice away. In ~~the~~ ^{such} ways a great deal of dramatic contrast and profound symmetry of symbolism is achieved within a very small group of characters. (6)

Strangely enough it so happened that when I courageously tackled even the more hermetic passages of the text they seemed ^{to become somehow translucent and to} reveal some sort of secret meaning when invested with musical shape, although I would not be able to pin it down in so many words. The character of ~~my music~~ ^{for this opera} may ~~be~~ ^{the musical idiom I utilized} be classified as,

Expanded tonality, or bordering on atonality, or some such thing. There are a few characteristic motivic configurations appearing from time to time. ^{They have} much the function of a psychological reference dictionary ^{like} the Wagnerian leitmotiv, ~~but~~ ^{their} purpose is rather to ~~create~~ ^{supply} structural continuity and relate corresponding dramatic situations to one another.

The opera which ~~was~~ ^{was} at the time of its creation considered excessively difficult was premiered in 1926 at the State Opera House in Kassel, Germany, where I functioned for two years as an assistant to the director, the former music critic Paul Bekker. ~~It~~ ^{Like most} of my earlier works it was totally obliterated ^{in the public eye} ~~by the~~ ^{and} ~~the~~ ^{through the} success of Jonny spielt auf, ~~and~~ ^{before} the present revival resuscitated only once by ~~at~~ ^{at} a Berlin ~~radio station~~ ^{radio station}, ~~directed by~~ ^{directed by} Hermann Scherchen, around 1930.