

Senior Citizens Music Appreciation Program

Date: Oct. 20, 2025

Time: 10:30-noon

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Operas Inspired by Ancient Greece

I. Announcements

- A. Blawenburg Band Holiday Concert: Dec. 7, 2025 3 pm, College of New Jersey
<https://blawenburgband.org/performance-schedule>
- B. NJ Symphony Concert: Recommend concert of March 15, 2026 at State Theatre, New Brunswick (Bartok and Chopin)

II. Ancient Greece and The Birth of Opera

- A. The development of “opera” occurred in Italy during the late 16th century, with various forms of drama and music being presented in courts and other settings (pastoral dramas with music presented as interludes, Medieval religious plays and others)
- B. By the late 16th century, we find composers such as Jacopo Peri using ancient Greek myths, in this case Orfeo and Euridice, as the subject for his opera, which introduced the concept of recitative—setting the libretto to the accents of poetry, so singers would converse in music, rather than apart from it.
- C. The most important early opera, one that still holds the stage today, is Claudio Monteverdi’s Orfeo, produced in 1607, published in 1609, but then effectively forgotten for 300 years. Note that Monteverdi also chose an ancient Greek story as the content for his libretto.
- D. Why the Ancient Greeks?
 - 1. According to Abbate and Parker, the influential academicians of Florence drew on Aristotle’s Poetics, where the philosopher stresses “the emotions evoked by tragedy.” According to Aristotle, spectators (audience) feel for the characters and experience “what he termed a “catharsis”, or purification (intense emotion) brought on by understanding what the characters undergo.” (Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, A History of Opera, Norton: 2012, p. 43)
 - 2. This was part of a great renewal of interest in ancient scholarship and knowledge, much of it preserved by Christian monks and Arab scholars after the fall of the Roman Empire. The significance of ancient Greek ideas was pervasive in architecture, painting, poetry, music and drama, notably in Italy.

E. Gluck and “Reform” Opera

1. Christoph Willibald Gluck’s opera *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) represented a repudiation of the idea of opera as a spectacle and platform for uninhibited displays of virtuosic singing, which often diminished the significance of the opera’s plot and storyline. Gluck wrote a series of operas on ancient Greek stories, including *Alceste*, *Iphigenia en Aulide* and *Iphigenia en Tauride*. Each of these operas focused on Greek drama as powerful conveyors of tragedy and/or triumph, but with the story paramount and the singing in service to the story.

C. French Lyric Tragedy and Comedy

1. Jean Philippe Rameau: *Platee* (comedy) (1745), called a “ballet buffoon”, it presents a comic alternative to Greek tragedy but still draws upon an ancient Greek tale by Pausanias. The opera was prepared and presented as part of the wedding festivities for the marriage of Louis, the son of Louis XV to the infanta Maria Theresa Rafaela of Spain.

D. Late 18th and 19th Century Operas

1. Luigi Cherubini’s *Medee*: Premiered in 1797, it was based on Euripides tragedy of the same name and a French version by Pierre Corneille. The original libretto was in French.
2. The opera was also performed in German and Italian versions and has become a noted vehicle for dramatic sopranos.
3. Comic Operas by Jacques Offenbach
 - a. Orpheus in the Underworld: Offenbach’s first full-length opera, premiered in 1858 and extensively revised in 1874. The plot is a comic satire on the original Orpheus legend:

“In this version Orpheus is not the son of Apollo but a rustic violin teacher. He is glad to be rid of his wife, Eurydice, when she is abducted by the god of the underworld, Pluto. Orpheus has to be bullied by Public Opinion into trying to rescue Eurydice. The reprehensible conduct of the gods of Olympus in the opera was widely seen as a veiled satire of the court and government of Napoleon III, Emperor of the French. Some critics expressed outrage at the librettists’ disrespect for classic mythology and the composer’s parody of Gluck’s opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*; others praised the piece highly.”

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orpheus_in_the_Underworld

- b. La Belle Helene: Premiered in 1864, the story is a parody of the story of Helen of Troy.

III. Today's Recordings

- A. Monteverdi, L'Orfeo: Archiv 419 250-2
- B. Gluck: Orfeo ed Euridice EMI Classics 7243 5 861294 2 3
- C. Gluck: Iphigenie en Aulide Erato 0630 15732-9
- D. Rameau: Platee Warner 2664 68020-9
- E. Cherubini: Medea EMI 7 63625 2
- F. Offenbach: Orphee Aux Enfers EMI Classics 7243 56725 2 0
- G. Offenbach: La Belle Helene Virgin Classics 7243 5 45477 2 0

IV. YouTube Films

- A. Monteverdi: Orfeo <https://youtu.be/xatmIJHD4z8>
- B. Rameau: Platee <https://youtu.be/2Ujilt3YNNc>
- C. Cherubini: Medee <https://youtu.be/xatmIJHD4z8>
- D. Offenbach: Orpheus in the Underworld <https://youtu.be/0lD8Fwtcv6Y>
- E. Offenbach: La Belle Helene <https://youtu.be/nqmXwDK27Sc>

V. Internet Sources

- A. Monteverdi: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27Orfeo>
- B. Rameau and Plate: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Platée>.
- C. Cherubini and Medee: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Médée_\(Cherubini\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Médée_(Cherubini))
- D. Offenbach and Orpheus in the Underworld:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orpheus_in_the_Underworld
- E. Offenbach and La Belle Helene: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_belle_Hélène

VI. Next Session: November 17, 2025: "Music of the American Revolution--A Global Perspective"