

## Mythology and Music

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### Abstract

Mythology played a vital role in the development of music in the Late Romantic and Impression-istic eras. Jean-Baptiste Camille-Corot's *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld* is an excellent example of how mythological themes were used in the art of early Impressionism. Four composers notably espouse the convergence of myth and music: Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, Claude Debussy, and Maurice Ravel. Each of these composers viewed mythology differently and made unique contributions to the world of music, often in a form closely tied to mythology. Mythology inspired many of the great composers of the Late Romantic and Impressionist eras and provided the creative material for some of music's greatest masterpieces.

**Keywords:** mythology, music, Romanticism, Impressionism, Corot

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Since antiquity, mythology has played a vital role in the creative lives of artists. Painters have long incorporated themes of Greek and Roman mythology into their masterworks; sculptors have molded the elements into the shape of gods and goddesses; and composers have portrayed the colorful stories of ancient myth through their operas, ballets, and orchestral works. The artists of the Late-Romantic and Impressionist eras fully embraced mythology, as many of the great masterpieces from this time evince. Artists such as J.M.W. Turner, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Édouard Manet frequently incorporated characters from ancient mythology into their paintings. Similarly, composers such as Franz Liszt, Richard Wagner, Claude Debussy, and Maurice Ravel borrowed from the mythologies of antiquity and the more contemporary myths of Germany, Scandinavia,

and France. Jean-Baptiste Camille-Corot, a predecessor of the Impressionist movement, provides an excellent example of mythology's impact on art in his painting, *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld*. Housed in Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, this painting portrays the famous Grecian story of Orpheus, the most celebrated musician of his time, at the moment immediately before his beloved, Eurydice, disappears forever into Hades. Mythology heavily influenced the cultural and artistic changes of the Late Romantic and Impressionist eras and provided a creative foundation for some of the most vibrant and impactful artworks of the time.

Many of the nineteenth century's most prolific and skilled artists were heavily influenced by mythology and used it as a source of inspiration and creative material. In a famous example, J.M.W. Turner's *Ulysses Deriding*

*Polyphemus* portrays the Homeric story of Ulysses as he sails away from captivity at the hands of Polyphemus, the cyclopean son of Neptune. Turner, a prominent landscape artist of the mid-nineteenth century, was primarily focused on the combination of light and color, and for him “the literary sources, allegorical references and rhetoric of his subjects [were] like footnotes to the central fact of paint” (Vaughan 158). The supremacy of art was a common Romantic mindset: artists and composers were focused primarily on the art itself while the subject matter was of secondary importance. Turner frequently painted turbulent ocean scenes, believing they were excellent representations of the stormy Romantic spirit; consequentially, the Grecian story of Ulysses and Polyphemus provides a framework which Turner exploits for its emotionally potent content (Vaughan 163). This attitude is reflected clearly in the art of the Impressionist era which sought to portray the essence of its subject without any strict adherence to detail. Gustave Moreau, who played an influential role in the development of the Symbolist and Impressionist styles, valued mythology for its vibrant characters. In his *Narcissus*, Moreau portrays the hunter from Ovid’s story of Echo and Narcissus. With vague and broad brushstrokes, Moreau developed his own style that anticipated the Impressionist’s use of subtlety and light – using Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as his inspiration (Abbate, 22). Other paintings, such as Jean-Auguste Renoir’s *The Judgement of Paris* and *Venus and Love (Allegory)*, and Édouard Manet’s *Jupiter and Antiope* draw from Greek mythology for their subject matter while using a strictly Impressionistic style. Although these impressionist artists typically concentrated their efforts on scenes of domesticity and French culture, both perceived the value of mythology in artistic rendering. Not only did it allow them to participate in the great stream of artistic tradition, but both artists found themes of significance and relevance in the ancient stories of mythology.

Monet famously said in 1897 “There is only one master here: Corot. We are nothing compared to him, nothing” (Tinterow xiv). Jean-Baptiste Camille-Corot was born July 16, 1796 in Paris. His father, a cloth merchant, decided that his son should be apprenticed to a draper when he came of age, but Corot’s affinity for art persuaded his father to pay for drawing classes after work. Thankfully, Corot was a part-time artist for only a brief period; in 1822 his parents gave him permission to devote himself to painting and provided him with a

yearly allowance of 1500 *livres* a year (Leymarie 6). The young artist soon began studying the Neoclassical style with Achille Etna Michallon, a student of Jacques-Louis David’s. The impact of his time studying with Michallon was profound; even when Corot began to depart from the Neoclassical tradition and the suggestion of Impressionism began to form in his work, Corot maintained many of the Neoclassical style traits. Among these characteristics which he employed for the remainder of his career were the mythological and Biblical motifs that pervade Neoclassicism. An emancipation of landscape painting from Neoclassicism occurred in Paris in the middle of the nineteenth century, and while many painters began to dismiss the tradition, Corot maintained the stylistic heritage of Ingres and David (Leymarie 39). Consequently, Corot’s mature style was an amalgamation of his Classical heritage and the impending plein air Impressionist style. *L’Artiste*, an art review publication of Corot’s day, said of his style: “Monsieur Corot belongs neither to the classical nor to the Anglo-French school of landscape...He seems to have his own ideas on the subject of landscape painting and, originality being so rare, we would not wish him to abandon them” (Leymarie 62). Works that exemplify this style most clearly are *Homer and the Shepherds*, *The Dance of the Nymphs*, *Orpheus Greeting the Light of Day*, and *The Sleep of Diana*. Clearly, mythological themes were a vital part of Corot’s artistic style and a great source of inspiration for this monumental artist. Corot’s innovations in form, color, and the capture of light directly influenced the Impressionist school, and his innovations can be clearly seen in the art of Monet, Renoir, and other leading Impressionists.

*Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld* is a particularly fascinating painting as it not only focuses on Greek mythology, but also on a myth in which music plays a vital role. According to Greek mythology, Orpheus was the most skillful musician of his time. As the child of Apollo and Calliope, the god of music and the muse of epic poetry, respectively, Orpheus was born to be a great musician. The story depicted in Corot’s painting is drawn from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book X, which recounts Orpheus’ journey to the underworld to retrieve his wife. According to Ovid, shortly after marrying Orpheus, Eurydice was walking in a meadow and was bitten by a snake whose venom quickly killed her. Orpheus, in despair, traveled to the underworld to gain conference with Persephone and Hades. Through

his beautiful song, accompanied by the lyre, Orpheus persuaded the gods to let him bring Eurydice back from the underworld on the single condition that he not look back at her until they returned completely to the surface of the earth. However, as they were nearing the surface Orpheus turned to Eurydice, “anxious in case his wife’s strength be failing and eager to see her,” and she vanished forever from him (Ovid 226). Corot depicts this tragic climax with muted hues and shadowy figures that convey the “dim haunts of Tartarus,” and forebode the story’s grievous ending (Ovid 250). Interestingly, the MFAH’s description of the painting uses explicitly musical terms; it speaks of “melancholy lyricism,” “a wistfully sweet tonal chord,” and describes it as “carefully modulating a narrow range of grays, greens, and blues” (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston). Clearly suggestive of the Impressionist style that would be popularized within two decades, *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld* is dense with technical innovation and themes of mythology and music.

Music has played a significant role in the mythology of numerous cultures over the last two millennia. Orpheus’ prestige as a skilled musician is only one instance in which music is featured as a primary motif in mythology. Only one book later in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is the story of Midas judging between the music of Pan and Apollo. After hearing Pan play the flute and Apollo play the lyre, the unlucky King Midas’ ears were transformed into those of an ass after he deemed Pan’s music the greater (Ovid, 250). In Irish mythology, the god Aengus is often believed to have singing birds circling around his head, for he controls the realms of music and poetry. William Butler Yeats, a prominent Irish poet during the Impressionist era, wrote a poem about this Irish god entitled *The Song of Wandering Aengus*. Nearly every major system of mythology has a god of music who was inevitably revered as possessing mystical powers. Some cultures, such as that of the Native Americans, believed music was so powerful that it was through the song of a great deity that the world was created. The existence of music has fascinated every primitive culture, and mythological characters have frequently been evoked in an effort to explain its origins.

Composers have long valued the rich and colorful stories of mythology. Opera provided a particularly fertile environment for the use of mythological themes, and from its creation in the Baroque era, composers have utilized its vast repertoire. *Opera seria*, a genre that de-

veloped in Italy but quickly spread throughout Europe, implemented mythological stories for their allegorical purposes. Because monarchical patronage restricted their artistic expression, composers frequently turned to historical and mythological narratives for their librettos, altering the stories to serve as metaphors for the current rulers. Despite their thinly veiled critique of the ruling class, these operas were met with great success. Christoph Gluck, a major late-Baroque composer and proponent of operatic reform, used the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in his revolutionary opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*. However, as opera composers transitioned from the Classical style into the Romantic, many of the conventions of opera were discarded, including the use of mythological and chivalric themes. In the early nineteenth century composers frequently preferred more common plots, as they appealed to a wider audience. However, with the conception of the symphonic poem by Franz Liszt and the monumental operas by Liszt’s close friend, Richard Wagner, mythological themes were revived after their brief hiatus. Greek and Roman mythology was not the only source of inspiration during this time, for with the rise of nationalism, composers began to look at the mythologies of their native countries. Liszt and the French composer Berlioz, who found much acceptance in Germany, drew from Goethe’s story of Faust; Sibelius used Scandinavian myths for his *Swan of Tuonela*; Smetana and Dvorák found inspiration in Czech mythology; and Debussy referenced French mythology in his prelude, *La cathédrale engloutie*. As the musical climate changed during the Late Romantic period, the symphonic poem and opera genres functioned as conduits for some of the most stunning retellings of mythological narratives.

Four composers made significant innovations in the world of music and displayed a particular fondness for mythology: Franz Liszt (1811-1886), Richard Wagner (1813-1883), Claude Debussy (1862-1918), and Maurice Ravel (1875-1937). One of Liszt’s contributions to the world of music was his creation of the symphonic poem, a genre which carries a programmatic narrative with the orchestra (Hamilton 206). From its conception in 1854, the symphonic poem proved a favorite for telling mythological stories because of the innumerable colors of the orchestra that allow for vast narrative expression and evocative motifs (Sitwell 155). Liszt wrote symphonic poems recounting both the Grecian story of Prometheus, the Titan who gave fire to man, and Or-

pheus. In his *Orpheus* symphonic poem, Liszt included parts for two harps, which are evocative of Orpheus' lyre and play a vital role in the extended crescendo of the orchestra. After a climax, the piece returns to the subdued mood that it started in, suggestive of the slow ascent of Orpheus into the clouds at the end of his life (Searlem 72). Liszt merely began the culture's revitalization of mythology in music, however, for Wagner would soon produce a work of such magnitude that it would shake the political and cultural foundations of the day.

Wilhelm Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig in 1813 to working-class parents and had no clear direction toward music. Despite his poor piano skills and disappointing early compositions, he greatly admired the composers of his day and relentlessly strove to write his own music (Wagner 241). As a young man, Wagner's principal studies were Greek, Latin, mythology, and ancient history, and he spent his leisure time writing a tragedy heavily influenced by Shakespeare (Wagner 240). This education greatly influenced his later works, and it was his desire to write program music for his tragedy, in the style of Beethoven's *Egmont*, that first sparked his desire to become a musician. Wagner's passion for literature – he learned English to more accurately understand Shakespeare and translated the first twelve books of Homer's *Odyssey* into German by the time he was fourteen – directly impacted his development as a musician. One of Wagner's most important contributions was his creation of the music drama, a genre that placed equal importance on both text and music. (Bernstein 91). Wagner's various innovations within this form, such as the leitmotif and continuous melody, allowed him to share lengthy narratives while maintaining musical continuity and textual integrity. Although his ego and tenuous morals would keep his relationships, finances, and personal life in turmoil for most of his life, Wagner is undoubtedly one of the most influential composers of all time.

Wagner was fascinated by literature and mythology from a very early age, and he frequently drew from the rich repository of Norse, Greek, and Christian mythology for his programmatic and operatic works. Although these themes pervade his entire oeuvre, Wagner's last three music dramas most clearly show the importance of mythology to the composer. *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Parsifal* each draw from different cultures' mythologies, and present their narratives in innovative ways. Perhaps the most monumental work

to come from the Romantic era is Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, which draws from Norse mythology and tells of the epic struggle of the gods over a ring that grants immense power to its bearer. Wagner worked on this masterpiece for over 25 years, even designing a special opera house for its performance. The immense scope of the *Ring* is due not only to Wagner's dramatic innovations, but also his desire to provide commentary on a vast array of political and historical topics. The Norse sagas and *Nibelungenlied*, which Wagner used as his thematic material, were chosen for their ability to be molded into the dense social commentary of Wagner's libretto. One analyst of Wagner's *Ring* claims it “contains layers of myth, a self-consciousness of its own dual mythical nature, and a conglomeration of history and myth...as a nineteenth-century metaphorical explanation of history” (Cicora 76). The “dual mythical nature” to which the author refers is the interpretation of Wagner's narrative as either psychological or political in nature. Because of the density and obviously allegorical nature of the *Ring*, many renowned critics have interpreted the work differently. *The Perfect Wagnerite*, George Bernard Shaw's commentary on the work, claims that the *Ring* is of an entirely political nature, with strong Socialist tendencies. On the opposite extreme, Robert Donington claims in *Wagner's Rings and Its Symbols: the Music and the Myth* that the work is entirely psychological, with each character embodying a different part of a single psyche (Cicora 77). The disparity between these two viable interpretations is evidence of both Wagner's genius as a librettist and composer as well as of the rich narrative possibilities of mythology.

Wagner's last two musical dramas, *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, are also excellent examples of mythological narratives from the Late Romantic era, though they are smaller in scope than the *Ring*. *Tristan und Isolde* was inspired by Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan*, a 12th century Germanic poem based on an ancient Celtic legend. Wagner turned its narrative of lost and forbidden love into a powerful German nationalistic masterwork. Although he used a different country's mythology as the source for this opera, Wagner believed *Tristan und Isolde* and the *Ring* to be closely related. In an essay on the two operas, Wagner said that “with the sketch of *Tristan und Isolde* I felt that I was really not quitting the mythic circle opened out to me by my Nibelungen labors... two seemingly unlike relations had sprung from the one original mythic factor” (Wagner 280). *Parsifal* uses yet

another mythological source: Arthurian Grail mythology. Much like *Tristan und Isolde*, *Parsifal* is based on a 13th century Germanic poem, *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach. In this, his last opera, Wagner explores themes of religion and redemption through the young knight and Christ-figure, Parsifal (Skelton 196). Wagner found immense inspiration and creative freedom in the mythologies he studied as a youth and exploited their rich psychological, political, religious, and narrative possibilities for his operas.

The Late Romantic era witnessed a flowering of mythological themes in the world of music, and this trend carried steadily through into the Impressionist era. Claude Debussy, the most renowned Impressionist composer, frequently turned to mythology for inspiration. Because of his close ties to the Symbolist literary movement, which attempted to evoke a subject without actually describing it, Debussy's programmatic titles are often vague (Pasler 197). However, many works of this great composer allude to mythological themes. One of his most famous works, *Prélude à l'après midi d'un faun*, translates Paul Valéry's influential Symbolist poem into music. Although it does not describe a particular Greek myth, the faun, nymphs, and naiads of the poem are directly extracted from Greek mythology. Pan, the Greek god of wilderness and rustic music, is often depicted in the company of nymphs with a reed pipe, so a correlation to the faun of Valéry's poem and Debussy's *Prélude* is likely what these artists tried to evoke. Debussy's *Syrinx*, the first significant work for solo flute since C.P.E. Bach, is also about Pan's flute. The title refers to a particular nymph of Greek mythology who, while being chased by Pan, escaped from the god by turning into river reeds. Debussy also turned to the mythology of France for inspiration, as in the famous piano prelude, *La cathédrale engloutie*. A popular legend among the people of Brittany, a region in North-western France, claims that an ancient and beautiful city named Ys is sunken near the coast, but emerges from the water on still mornings. Debussy evokes the image of a rising cathedral in his prelude through ascending lines, modal harmonies, and strategic key changes. Debussy did not use mythological stories as the foundation for his music – working from their narrative foundation and combining both the music and myth into a single artistic statement, like Wagner's operas – but instead worked toward them, manipulating his music to clearly portray the myth without explicitly stating it. This approach is

not unique to Debussy, however, for Ravel would soon follow in his footsteps as the leading Impressionist composer.

Joseph Maurice Ravel began studying music from an early age, taking piano and harmony lessons at the age of seven, and gained admission to the Paris Conservatoire by fourteen (Orenstein 476). However, the young student resented the confinement of conventional education and frequently struggled academically as a result. Generally regarded by his professors and fellow students as somewhat detached and avant-garde, Ravel's time at school was impactful mostly because of the artistic society it introduced. The young musician studied composition under Gabriel Fauré, frequently found companionship in the older Eric Satie and Emmanuel Chabrier, and discussed piano and harmony with a classmate, Ricardo Viñes, who would premier virtually all the piano works of Debussy and Ravel (Orenstein 21). Although his disdain for convention and generous experimentation with classical forms invited criticism from the musical elite in Paris and kept him from winning the Prix de Rome in all five attempts, Ravel soon established himself as the musical voice of his generation. Two of his compositions for the Prix de Rome, the cantatas *Myrrha* and *Alcyone*, are based on Greek mythology. The years between 1905, when he became too old to enter the Prix de Rome and severed all ties to tradition, and the start of World War I, in 1914, proved his most productive (Orenstein 46). During this time Ravel composed many of his most prolific works, including *Daphnis et Chloé*, a ballet rooted in Greek mythology. Although Ravel did not frequently use mythology as inspiration, *Daphnis et Chloé* remains one of the composer's most influential works. Ravel's initial failures in an academic setting were soon overcome by his immense success as a composer, and by the end of his life he had established himself as Debussy's predecessor as the voice of French classical music.

Ravel, like many of the Impressionist artists, had a deep love for the exotic and fantastic, making Diaghilev's commission for *Daphnis et Chloé* very attractive to the young composer (Mawer 49). Based on a second century work by the Greek novelist, Longus, *Daphnis et Chloé* is about two siblings who are separated at birth and raised by different families, but later fall in love and marry with the help of the gods. The risqué nature of this story, paired with the distant culture of Ancient Greece, fascinated the young, ribald composer. Ravel said his

aim “was to paint a ‘vast musical fresco, less concerned with archaism than with faithfulness to the Greece of my dreams, which is similar to that imagined and painted by French artists at the end of the eighteenth century’” (Mawer, 143). Ravel achieved this vision through the use of numerous exotic tonalities, such as the Lydian, Dorian, pentatonic, whole-tone, chromatic, and octatonic scales. Other clever motifs in the music, such as the use of ascending fourths and descending fifths in association with Daphnis and Chloe, subtly imply the essential likeness of the siblings. Much like Debussy, Ravel found creative freedom in Greek mythology and utilized it for its colorful, exotic elements rather than for its narrative possibilities.

Mythology has always inspired artists and composers, and many of the most important masterworks of the Late Romantic and Impressionist eras utilize the vibrant stories of mythology. Broadly, the discipline of art is concerned with conveying a subject or concept in a way that will evoke an emotional response from the perceiver. Mythology provides a narrative and message familiar to every man, creating a common foundation from which the artist can lead his audience. Artists of the Late Romantic and Impressionist eras used mythological stories in incredibly diverse ways, giving credit to the vast creative possibilities of mythology. Turner and Corot used Grecian myths to usher in a new style of art, while Renoir used the same set of mythology to prove himself a master of an established style. Composers like Wagner used the narrative foundation of Norse mythology to create an intricate operatic cosmos, whereas Ravel and Debussy crafted music into stunning portraits of Grecian myths. Corot’s painting, *Orpheus Leading Eurydice from the Underworld* is an excellent example of how mythology and art can be interwoven. Mythology has inspired many of history’s greatest artists, and it played a vital role in the artistic world of the Late Romantic and Impressionist eras.

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