

MATTHEW AUCOIN /
LIBRETTO BY SARAH RUHL

Eurydice

A Guide for Educators



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Eurydice

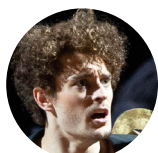
Is love strong enough to overcome death? Is music? The ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice—about a musician’s quest to save his wife from the Underworld—is at once a paean to the power of music and a cautionary tale about hubris and attempts to override the natural order. Still, we often forget that in this narrative, the Underworld is not merely an end point or a dark antithesis to life. Rather, it is a place where lively memories reside, personal discovery is possible, and the people we believed lost may once again be found.

Matthew Aucoin and Sarah Ruhl’s new opera *Eurydice*, which premiered at LA Opera in 2020 and opens at the Met this fall, turns the classic myth on its head. In their version, Eurydice is not merely Orpheus’s wife, a nymph whose untimely death pushes her husband to perform his most famous musical feat. Instead, this Eurydice is a vibrant individual with hopes, dreams, and curiosities all her own. Torn between the love of a father and the love of a husband, Eurydice embarks on a strange journey, one that offers a quiet meditation on choice, memory, and how those we love may forever affect who we are. Aucoin and Ruhl worked together to adapt Ruhl’s renowned play into an opera libretto, reshaping the text to enhance the beauty of Ruhl’s poetic language. Aucoin’s hypnotic sound-world creates an atmosphere of intense emotional expression through expansive orchestration. And director Mary Zimmerman’s breathtaking production invites audiences into a realm that melds the familiar with the mysterious, enabling us to reflect on the things and people we would want to save if we, too, could visit the Underworld.

This guide approaches *Eurydice* through the twin themes of myth and memoir. What do myths tell us about the human condition? What do they tell us about ourselves? And how can we use art to explore our lived experience? The materials on the following pages include an introduction to the ancient Greek myth and its many appearances in opera, an interview with playwright and librettist Sarah Ruhl, and classroom activities that will bring the opera’s music and story to life. By delving into *Eurydice*’s music, drama, and design, this guide will forge interdisciplinary classroom connections, inspire critical thinking, and help students discover both the mythic and human dimensions of this exquisite work.



MORLEY



ORLIŃSKI



BANKS



HOPKINS



BERG

THE WORK

An opera in **three acts, sung in English**

Music by **Matthew Aucoin**

Libretto by **Sarah Ruhl**, based on her play *Eurydice*

First performed **February 1, 2020** at **LA Opera**

PRODUCTION

Mary Zimmerman
Production

Daniel Ostling
Set Designer

Ana Kuzmanic
Costume Designer

T.J. Gerckens
Lighting Designer

S. Katy Tucker
Projection Designer

Denis Jones
Choreographer

Paul Cremo
Dramaturg

PERFORMANCE

The Met: Live in HD
December 4, 2021

Erin Morley
Eurydice

Jakub Józef Orliński
Orpheus’s Double

Barry Banks
Hades

Joshua Hopkins
Orpheus

Nathan Berg
Father

Yannick Nézet-Séguin
Conductor

A co-production of the Metropolitan Opera and LA Opera
Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera and LA Opera. Originally commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera/Lincoln Center Theater New Works Program.
Production a gift of Robert L. Turner

HD Live in Schools is supported through a partnership with the New York City Department of Education.

Opera in the Classroom

The Metropolitan Opera Educator Guides offer a creative, interdisciplinary introduction to opera. Designed to complement existing classroom curricula in music, the humanities, STEM fields, and the arts, these guides will help students confidently engage with opera whether or not they have prior experience with the art form.

On the following pages, you'll find an array of materials designed to encourage critical thinking, deepen background knowledge, and empower students to engage with *Eurydice*. These materials can be used in classrooms and/or via remote-learning platforms, and they can be mixed and matched to suit your students' individual academic needs.

Above all, this guide is intended to help students explore *Eurydice* through their own experiences and ideas. The diverse perspectives that your students bring to opera make the art form infinitely richer, and we hope that your students will experience opera as a space where their confidence can grow and their curiosity can flourish.

WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE:

Philosophical Chairs: A series of questions that introduce the opera's main themes while sparking creativity and encouraging debate

Who's Who in *Eurydice*: An introduction to the opera's main characters

Synopsis: The opera's plot

The Source: Information about the literary source(s) and/or historical event(s) that inspired the opera

Timelines: Timelines connecting the opera to events in world history

Deep Dives: Interdisciplinary essays offering additional information and context

Active Exploration: Classroom-ready activities connecting the opera to topics in music, the humanities, STEM, and the arts

THROUGHOUT THE GUIDE, YOU'LL ALSO FIND:

Critical Inquiries: Questions and thought experiments designed to foster careful thinking

Fun Facts: Entertaining tidbits about *Eurydice*

CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

This guide invites students to explore the opera through:

Ancient Cultures
Classics
Mythology
World History
Music History
Literature
Creative Writing
Gender and Family Studies
Psychology
Critical Thinking
Social and Emotional Learning

COMMON CORE STRANDS

This guide directly supports the following ELA-Literacy Common Core Strands:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.6-8.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.7.5a

Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. Interpret figures of speech (e.g., literary, biblical, and mythological allusions) in context.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.8.9

Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.

Philosophical Chairs

Philosophical Chairs is an activity designed to foster critical thinking, active inquiry, and respectful dialogue among students. To play, participants agree or disagree with a series of statements, but the game doesn't end there. The most crucial element is what happens next: Participants discuss their points of view and can switch sides if their opinions change during the discussion. (For more tips on using Philosophical Chairs in a classroom or via a remote-learning platform, see the activity description in your Google Classroom.)

Each topic statement is deliberately open-ended yet ties into a number of the themes present in *Eurydice*—including the possible overlap of joy and grief, the ways we remember those we have lost, and the power (and limits) of love. Set the stage for this conversation mindfully. Offer students a brief overview of the opera's plot, setting, and context, and remind them how to build a safe space for productive conversation. Some of the topics might be confusing or hard—that's okay! As you and your students explore and learn about *Eurydice*, you can return to these statements: What do they have to do with the opera's story? How might these questions help us explore the opera's story, history, and themes?

Keep in mind that the process of this activity is just as important as the statements themselves. Philosophical Chairs is designed to nurture civil dialogue, and students should be encouraged to listen actively, honor one another's contributions, and show respect for a diversity of opinions and ideas.

- Love is a powerful motivator.
- All love is the same.
- You can never love someone too much.
- Pain is inevitable.
- Loss is unavoidable.
- Death is inescapable.
- The dead will never be forgotten.
- Every day should be cherished.
- I hide my feelings of grief.
- I fear being alone.
- Silence is awkward.
- Music can be a healing balm in times of distress.
- Myths hold profound truths.
- We learn about life by telling and listening to stories.

Who's Who in *Eurydice*

CHARACTER	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
Eurydice Pronunciation: <i>yuh-RIH-dih-see</i> An independent young woman	soprano	Thoughtful and intelligent, Eurydice is drawn away from her beloved Orpheus by mysterious forces that remind her of her late father.
Orpheus Pronunciation: <i>OR-fee-us</i> A musician, engaged to Eurydice	baritone	A sensitive young man, Orpheus is obsessed with music and believes it has the power to heal everything, including his relationship.
Father Eurydice's late father	baritone	Eurydice's father continues to exist in the Underworld even though he died many years ago. He possesses human abilities to remember language and his past, whereas other citizens of the Underworld do not.
An Interesting Man / Hades Pronunciation: <i>HAY-deez</i> The god of the Underworld	tenor	A mysterious figure who appears to Eurydice on her wedding day, the Interesting Man is actually the god of the underworld, Hades, in disguise.
Orpheus's Double A representation of Orpheus's musical soul	countertenor	Orpheus's Double is a figure that can only be seen and heard by Orpheus. It represents the unearthly power of his music, as well as his dual identity as half-mortal, half-god.
Stones The administrators of the Underworld	soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor	Intended to both explain the arcane rules of the Underworld and provide comic relief, the stones were inspired by the myth that Orpheus's music was so beautiful it caused even stones to weep.



EURYDICE



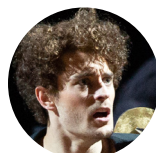
ORPHEUS



FATHER



HADES



ORPHEUS'S
DOUBLE



STONES

Synopsis

ACT I Orpheus and Eurydice, young and in love, are on a beach. Eurydice is frustrated that Orpheus's mind always seems to be elsewhere. But Orpheus surprises her; he playfully ties a string around her finger to remind her of their love, and she realizes (a little late) that he's tied it around her ring finger, and that it's a proposal. She says yes.

In the Underworld, Eurydice's father writes her a letter, offering fatherly advice for her wedding day. He laments that he doesn't know how to get his letters to her.

At their wedding, Orpheus and Eurydice dance. Eurydice says she's feeling warm, and steps outside to find a drink of water.

When she is alone outside, Eurydice realizes how much she misses her deceased father and says that she'd always thought there would be "more interesting people" at her wedding. At that moment, a mysterious, "interesting" man appears. He claims to have a penthouse apartment.



At his apartment, the Interesting Man gives Eurydice Champagne and puts on terrible mood music. He does not give her the letter. Eurydice realizes the situation she's in and turns to leave. The Interesting Man reveals the letter. Eurydice tries to grab it and run away, but she trips. She falls down hundreds of stairs, into the Underworld, to her death.



Eurydice arrives in the Underworld.

ACT II In the Underworld, three Stones—Little Stone, Big Stone, and Loud Stone—the obnoxious bureaucratic guardians of the land of the dead, explain that Eurydice has died, and that, as a dead person, she will lose her memory and all power of language.

Eurydice arrives in the Underworld in an elevator. Inside the elevator, it rains on Eurydice. She loses her memory.

When she steps out of the elevator, her father greets her. Eurydice has no idea who he is. Her father tries to explain what has happened to her.

In the world above, Orpheus mourns Eurydice's death. He writes her a letter but does not know how to get it to her.

In the Underworld, the father builds a room out of string for Eurydice. A letter falls from the sky. The father reads it and tells Eurydice it's from Orpheus. The name "Orpheus" triggers something in Eurydice, and she begins to remember who she is. She finally recognizes her father.

Orpheus slowly lowers the collected works of Shakespeare into the Underworld on a string. The father reads to Eurydice from *King Lear*. Eurydice begins to learn language again, word by word.

Orpheus resolves to find a way to get to the Underworld and bring Eurydice back.

In the Underworld, the Stones hear Orpheus singing wordlessly as he approaches the gates. His singing begins to rouse the spirits of the dead. Distressed, the Stones call their boss, Hades, who was also the Interesting Man.

A BRIEF GUIDE TO OPERATIC VOICE TYPES:

SOPRANO the highest-pitched voice, normally used for female characters; some children can also sing in the soprano range

MEZZO-SOPRANO the voice lying between the soprano and the contralto (from the Italian word "mezzo," meaning "middle")

CONTRALTO the lowest voice range associated with female characters (also called alto)

COUNTERTENOR a voice type associated with male characters but with a range equivalent to that of a contralto, mezzo-soprano, or (less frequently) soprano; achieved through the use of falsetto

TENOR the highest common voice type for male characters

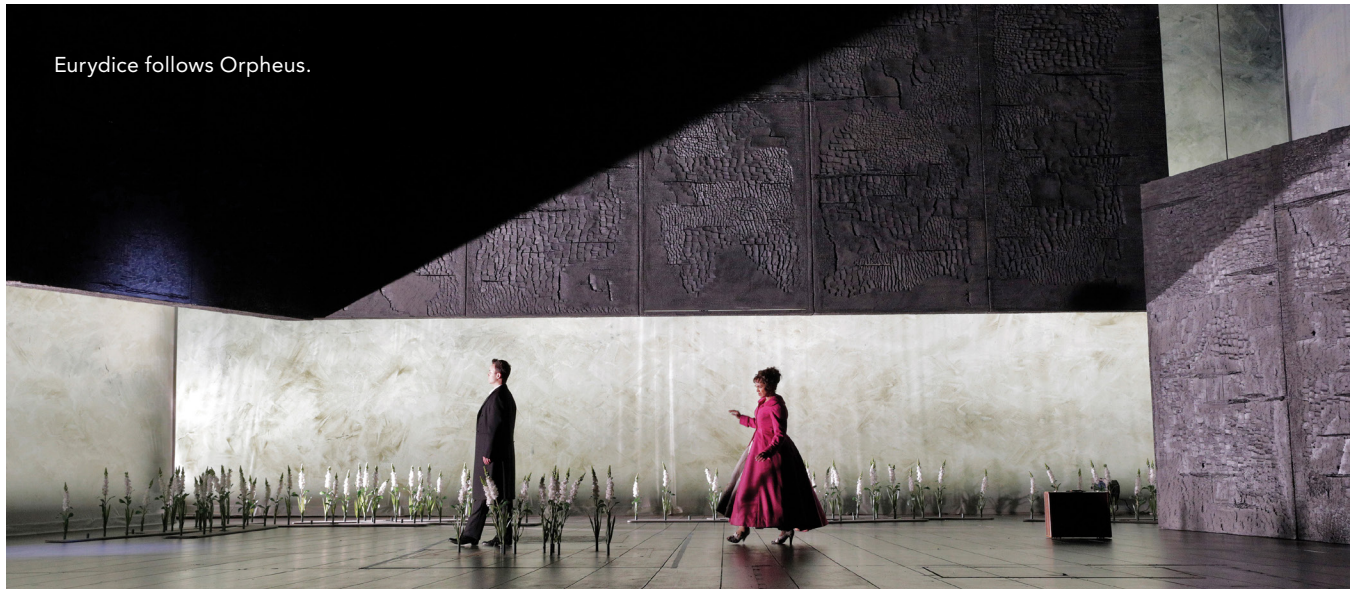
BARITONE the voice below the tenor and above the bass

BASS the lowest voice type

ACT III Orpheus sings gorgeously at the gates of the Underworld. Hades appears and dismissively informs him of the rules for bringing Eurydice back to the world above. She can follow him, but he must not look back to make sure she is there.

Eurydice is torn between following Orpheus and staying with her father. Her father insists that she go after Orpheus and live a full life.

When she sees Orpheus up ahead, Eurydice is afraid. She is convinced that it's not really him. She follows but eventually rushes toward him and calls



his name. Orpheus turns around, startled. The lovers are slowly, helplessly pulled apart.

The father is desolate now that Eurydice is gone. In despair, he decides to dip himself in the river of forgetfulness and obliterate his memory. He quietly speaks the directions to his childhood home and lowers himself into the water.

Eurydice returns to the Underworld and finds, to her horror, that her father has dipped himself in the river of forgetfulness and obliterated his memory. Hades reappears to claim Eurydice as his bride. She coyly asks for a moment to prepare herself.

She finds a pen in her father's coat pocket and writes a letter to Orpheus, which contains instructions for his future wife on how to take care of him. She dips herself in the river of forgetfulness.

The elevator descends once again. In it is Orpheus. He sees Eurydice lying on the ground. He recognizes her and is happy. But the elevator rains on Orpheus, obliterating his memory. He steps out of the elevator. He finds the letter Eurydice wrote to him. He does not know how to read it.

Synopsis by Matthew Aucoin; reprinted courtesy of LA Opera

The Source

THE ANCIENT GREEK MYTH OF ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

The ancient Greek myth of the demigod Orpheus and his wife, Eurydice, is more than 2,500 years old, but today we know it mostly through the Roman poets Virgil and Ovid. As is often the case with myths and other orally disseminated stories, the tale of Orpheus varies considerably between sources, yet the cornerstones of the myth are the following. Orpheus's father was Apollo, the god of music, and his mother was a muse. From his parents, Orpheus inherited phenomenal musical gifts. He was a particularly great virtuoso on the lyre, a small U-shaped harp, and it is said that his music was so beautiful that it caused even stones to weep.

The love of Orpheus's life was the nymph Eurydice. But on their wedding day, shortly after taking their vows, Eurydice was bitten by a snake and died. Refusing to accept his beloved as lost, Orpheus braved descent into the Underworld, the land of the dead. There he sang his pleas as he played the lyre, charming many of the spirits with his song. Even Hades, the king of the Underworld, and his wife, Persephone, were moved, and they agreed to allow Eurydice to return with Orpheus to the world above. There was only one condition: He must not turn back to look at his beloved until he had left the land of the dead. Yet as they walked in silence out of the Underworld, Orpheus grew desperate to confirm that Eurydice was, indeed, following him. They had almost reached the Underworld's gates when Orpheus turned around ... and *poof!* Eurydice disappeared, now lost to him forever.

CRITICAL INQUIRY

Compare this version of the story to the synopsis for *Eurydice*. What is the same? What is different? Which version do you like more, and why?



Orpheus and Eurydice by Peter Paul Rubens

MUSEO NACIONAL DEL PRADO, MADRID.

Timeline

THE CREATION OF *EURYDICE*

1974

Sarah Ruhl is born on January 24 in Illinois. Thanks to her parents' interest in theater, literature, and music, she finds her passion for language at an early age. As a child, she is involved in a local drama group, Piven Theatre Workshop, and spends much of her time reading.

1990

Matthew Aucoin is born on April 4 in Massachusetts. His early musical endeavors include playing keyboard in an indie rock band called Elephantom.

1995

Ruhl writes her first play, *The Dog Play*, as an assignment for one of her undergraduate classes at Brown University, where she is studying literature. Although Ruhl plans to become a poet, she is deeply influenced by her teacher, the playwright Paula Vogel, who encourages her to consider writing plays.

2001

Ruhl graduates from Brown University. Over the next few years, she will receive play commissions from Piven Theatre Workshop and Arena Stage in Washington, DC.

2003

Ruhl's play *Eurydice* premieres at Madison Repertory Theatre in Madison, Wisconsin. It is an instant success, thanks to its thoughtful retelling of the Orpheus myth, and in the coming years the play will be produced by regional theatres across the US, on Broadway, and in London. It is also frequently performed by university and high-school dramatic groups. Over the next 15 years, Ruhl



Sarah Ruhl, Matthew Aucoin, and Mary Zimmerman at a workshop of *Eurydice* in 2019
RICHARD TERMINE / MET OPERA

writes prolifically, producing plays, poems, essays, and novels. She receives numerous awards.

2010

While studying poetry at Harvard, Aucoin begins conducting operas. He writes the music and libretto for his first opera, *From Sandover*, an adaptation of James Merrill's supernatural epic *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1976–1980). *From Sandover* and Aucoin's second opera, *Hart Crane* (2012), are performed by undergraduates at Harvard; both works chronicle the lives and loves of American poets.

2012

After graduating from Harvard, Aucoin goes on to study composition at Juilliard under the guidance of composer Robert Beaser. He also begins working as an assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera.

2015

Aucoin's first professional opera commission, *Crossing*, premieres at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This piece is based on the poet Walt Whitman's

experiences working as a nurse during the Civil War.

This same year, Sarah Ruhl joins the faculty at Yale School of Drama.

2016

Aucoin begins a three-year appointment as artist in residence at LA Opera. The artistic director of Lincoln Center Theater, André Bishop, recommends Sarah Ruhl's play as a potential libretto source, and Aucoin begins working with Ruhl to adapt her text into an opera.

2018

Director Mary Zimmerman joins the *Eurydice* project, now a fully fledged co-production commissioned by LA Opera and the Met.

2020

Eurydice receives its world premiere at LA Opera on February 1, starring soprano Danielle de Niese and baritones Joshua Hopkins and Rod Gilfry.

2021

Eurydice premieres at the Met on November 23.

Deep Dive

OBSESSIONS WITH ORPHEUS

The Orpheus myth has inspired countless adaptations in many different art forms over the millennia, but the mythical musician—and his doomed beloved—have a special place in the history of opera. In 1600, the composers Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini were hired to write a musical entertainment for the wedding of Maria de' Medici and King Henry IV of France, which took place in the bride's hometown of Florence, Italy. At the time, Florentine musicians and thinkers believed (falsely) that ancient Greek theater had been sung throughout using a “heightened” form of speech. Hoping to recreate this ancient theatrical style, Peri and Caccini decided to compose an entire theatrical work for the wedding festivities using this style of speech-song, and they settled on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice—the ultimate story about the power of music—for their subject. The result, *Euridice*, which was performed with Peri himself singing the role of Orpheus, is the earliest surviving complete opera.

Throughout the Renaissance, composers from across Europe crafted musical settings of the Orpheus myth. These included works by Heinrich Schütz (German, 1585–1672), Matthew Locke (English, 1621/3–77), Marc-Antoine Charpentier (French, 1643–1704), and Claudio Monteverdi (Italian, 1567–1643), whose opera *Orfeo* (1607) is still performed regularly today. Many 18th- and 19th-century composers were also inspired by the myth; one of the most famous operas of this period is Christoph Willi-

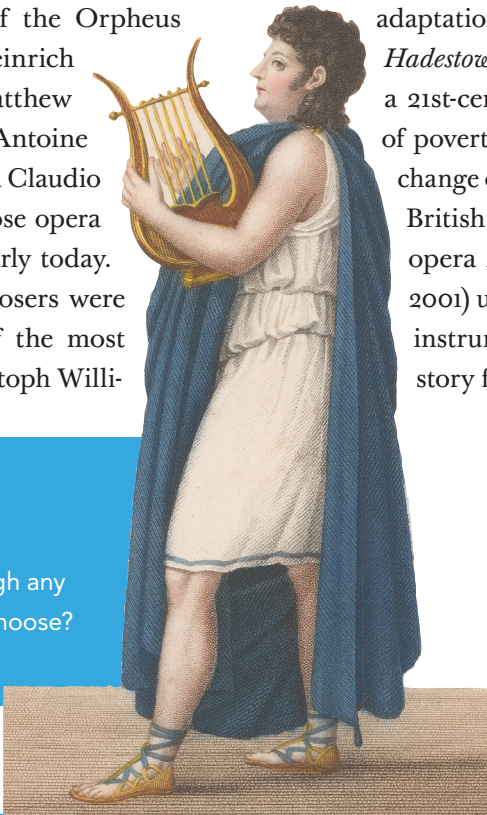
bald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762). More recent adaptations include two chamber operas by American and British composers: Philip Glass's *Orphée* (1993) and Harrison Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus* (2010).

Just like Aucoin and Ruhl did in *Eurydice*, many artists have altered the myth to offer their own take on Orpheus's adventures. Offenbach's *Orphée aux Enfers* (*Orpheus in the Underworld*, 1858/1874) satirizes the lavish world of the Parisian bourgeoisie under Napoleon III's reign, portraying Orpheus and Eurydice as a mismatched couple who are quite happy to be separated by death. This operetta features the famous “can-can” or “galop infernal” (“infernally gallop”), which celebrates the never-ending party in the Underworld. Another adaptation, the Tony Award-winning musical *Hadestown* (2006), reinterprets the story in a 21st-century context, dealing with themes of poverty and worker exploitation. And in a change of perspective that echoes Ruhl's play, British composer Jonathan Dove's one-act opera *L'Altra Euridice* (*The Other Eurydice*, 2001) uses a mixture of Baroque and modern instruments and a solo baritone to retell the story from Hades's point of view.



CRITICAL INQUIRY

If you were to tell the Orpheus story through any medium of your choice, which would you choose?



Above: Sheet music for the “galop,” or can-can, from Offenbach's operetta

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

Left: Tenor Adolphe Nourrit as Orpheus in an 1824 Paris revival of Gluck's opera

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON

Active Exploration

The following activities will help familiarize your students with the plot of *Eurydice*, forge connections between a variety of classroom subjects, and encourage creative responses to the opera. They are designed to be accessible to a wide array of ages and experience levels.

WHAT IS LOVE? (BABY DON'T HURT ME!)

Invite students to write their own definitions of love, and then discuss the language we use to describe love. While discussing the love-based idioms we use, you and your students may enjoy watching Mandy Len Catron's TED talk, "A Better Way to Talk about Love." Finally, have your students ask and answer the "36 Questions that Make Strangers Fall in Love" by Arthur Aron et al. (popularized in Catron's *New York Times* essay "To Fall in Love With Anyone, Do This") from the perspective of a character from the myth or the opera.

MEMORY AND LANGUAGE: AN ELEGY

Study the elegy form with your students, and then invite them to write two elegies—one from the perspective of a character in *Eurydice* and one from their own perspective.

MY DEAREST LOVE: AN EPISTOLARY REMEMBRANCE

Think about how letters are used in *Eurydice* to enable communication between different characters and even different realms. Have students read some famous letters from history, and then invite them to write two letters—one from the perspective of a character in *Eurydice* and one from their own perspective.

A ROOM MADE OUT OF STRING

In *Eurydice*, Sarah Ruhl uses string to represent the many ways we can take care of each other using objects that are small, inexpensive, and fragile, like string. Invite students to think of a few objects that make them feel safe or comforted, and then ask them to imagine how they might use these objects to care for other people in their lives. Finally, have students make a collage or a diorama using some of these items, or ask them to collect these items in a box to draw on when they feel sad or overwhelmed.

FUN FACT

When Sarah Ruhl was a child, one of her favorite myths was the story of Demeter and Persephone. In this story, Hades kidnaps Persephone, daughter of the harvest goddess Demeter, to be his wife. Demeter is so distraught by the loss of her daughter that she refuses to produce any crops. When the gods become desperate, Zeus summons Demeter to Olympus so they might plead with her, but none of them can lessen her grief or break her resolve. So Hermes travels to the Underworld to beg Hades to return Persephone to her mother. The god of the Underworld agrees—but at her departure, he secretly gives Persephone some pomegranate seeds to eat. After Persephone is reunited with her mother, it is revealed that, because she had eaten the seeds, she must spend part of every year with Hades in the Underworld. To this day, we can tell when Persephone is with Hades, since the earth becomes barren, and no crops grow.

Deep Dive

WHAT'S IN A MYTH?

Today, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice is an iconic example of ancient Greek mythology. But what exactly is a myth, and why have myths played such a significant role in the history of opera?

In the broadest terms, a myth is a traditional story or folktale that has been handed down orally (through speech rather than through writing) for many generations. Additionally, myths are used to explain the world and people's experiences within it, often using symbolism and allusion to discuss life, death, relationships, and spirituality. Such stories were especially relevant for ancient civilizations attempting to make sense of geographical,

Fifteenth-century engraving of the mythical griffin, by Martin Schongauer
RIJKSMUSEUM, AMSTERDAM



atmospheric, or other natural events that challenged, belied, or could not be explained by the scientific knowledge of the day. Thus, myths often straddle the real and the fantastic: Many mythical creatures, for example, have their origins in poorly understood or misrepresented animals discovered during early world travels. The unicorn, which many ancient writers, including Julius Caesar, were convinced was a real creature, was likely inspired by sightings of rhinoceroses and narwhals. This animal also has a parallel in the mythological Chinese qilin, a horse/dragon hybrid with two horns.

With their forays into magic and their tendency to grapple with the big questions facing humanity, myths

are an ideal source for operatic subjects. Early opera performances were expected to boast lavish productions and breathtaking stagecraft, and mythological gods, monsters, and miracles lent themselves perfectly to spectacle-filled nights at the opera. What is more, the mythical heroes depicted in these stories were seen to symbolize the ruling monarch, with the operatic characters' nobility and strength flattering the supposed same qualities in the king. Sometimes, the king would even appear onstage in the opera's "deus ex machina" (literally "god from the machine") denouement, a final scene in which a god suddenly appears, often through a feat of dazzling stagecraft, to facilitate a happy ending. (In the finale of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, for instance, the god of love restores Eurydice to Orpheus even after his empty-handed return from the Underworld.) The political message of this moment was clear: Like a god, the all-powerful noble ruler could easily and efficiently solve society's seemingly intractable problems.

In general, 17th- and 18th-century operas drew primarily on Greek and Roman mythology for their source materials, but composers have since drawn on

CRITICAL INQUIRY

What are some other mythological stories that would make good material for an opera? How might you change these myths for the opera stage?

mythology from a range of cultures. In the late 19th century, for instance, composer Richard Wagner took inspiration from Norse mythology for his epic *Ring* cycle. In these operas, Wagner based his characters on traditional Norse gods and included the Norse imagining of the afterlife, the legendary Valhalla or "hall of slain warriors."

Deep Dive

A CONVERSATION WITH SARAH RUHL

With nearly 20 plays and a MacArthur “Genius” Grant to her name, Sarah Ruhl is one of the most important and decorated American playwrights working today. Shortly before she arrived at the Met to begin rehearsals for *Eurydice*—her first opera libretto—Ruhl sat down with Kamala Schelling, the Met’s Educational Content Manager, to discuss her play and the process of bringing it to the Met stage.

Do you remember how and when the Orpheus story first entered your life?

I remember I had a big book of Greek mythology, *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, so maybe that's where I first encountered it. But it's one of those myths that you feel like you're born knowing, or at least I feel like I was born knowing it.

A major topic for us this year is art as memoir. Is *Eurydice* in any way autobiographical?

Eurydice is one of the most personal plays I've ever written. I wrote it for my father, who was diagnosed with cancer when I was 18 and died two years later, and I think in many ways I wrote it to have more conversations with him.

So did you identify with *Eurydice* while you were writing this work?

Yes, absolutely. In some ways she's not me, she's an archetype. But there are also pieces of text that are like talismans from my life. For instance, the father's directions at the end of the play are directions to my grandparents' home in Iowa. So if you think of memoir as telling your life story, then I don't think this is a memoir in that traditional way. Instead, it's like taking significant fragments of your life and placing them within, or pushing them through, a giant myth that is much bigger than yourself.

Sarah Ruhl and composer Matthew Aucoin discuss the Met's production of *Eurydice* with opera house staff.

JONATHAN TICHLER/MET OPERA

That brings me to a question that a lot of our students have asked as we explore the art of memoir. Was it hard to share this story of your father? And if so, how did you find a way to bring these memories to the page?

I remember my first reading of the play in New York. It was beautifully read. But afterwards, I shut myself in the bathroom and sobbed, thinking, “Why did I let this story into the world? It's too raw. I feel too exposed.” I didn't want to talk to anyone, so I waited for the audience to clear out, and then I made my way

outside. But through repetition (and the word “rehearsal” really means repetition), I was able to share the play, and share the grief.

There's a wonderful intimacy that radiates outward in a collaborative process. With a play, you start alone. Then you add actors, which is a first layer of sharing (and shedding) vulnerability. And then you add the audience. In the case of an opera, the scale is much larger: First you have the safety of the rehearsal room, then you add an orchestra, and then you add the audience, which at the Met is enormous.

I also think that when you repeat grief enough times, it hopefully becomes less raw, less only-yours. I wrote *Eurydice* almost 20 years ago, so at this point I feel like the play really belongs to my collaborators—to Matt, to Mary, to the people acting and singing, and to the audience.



Can you briefly describe the process of turning this play into an opera?

Luckily, it was a pleasurable task, not an arduous one. Matt [Aucoin] would call me from some field in Vermont with the wind blowing, where he'd be composing, and he'd say, "Can we think about a cut here, or a little versification here?" And I'd say, "Sure!" Sometimes he'd ask me to change something and then decide the original was better. And I'd say, "Great!" (It's always music to a writer's ears to think that the original was better.) It helped that we already had an intact play to work with. The other lucky thing was that we're intuitive as collaborators, and I think Matt is intuitive about making dialogue sing.

The amazing Mary [Zimmerman] came on board after the opera was written. She is someone I've always looked up to in the American theater. I was deeply influenced by her *Metamorphoses*, so it felt like incredible synchronicity to have her direct this production, and she created a remarkable visual life for what Matt and I had built, which made the work even more complete.

Mary Zimmerman recently told us that the production of *Eurydice* at LA Opera was the last thing she directed before the world shut down for the pandemic, and now it's the first thing she's doing after the world has opened back up.

It's the same for me! We're like the Rip Van Winkle cast: It felt like such a long time until we'd be at the Met, and then suddenly we woke up, and here we are.

Does it feel like the opera has changed over the last 18 months?

I suspect that the opera will feel more raw than it did a year and a half ago, but I think we won't really know exactly how it's changed until we're in the room together rehearsing. So many people have lost loved ones, and this play is very much about grief. Oddly enough, the chorus in the afterlife wears death masks, so there was already an iconography of masking in the production. And the father and daughter are together in a kind of suspended time, like so many of us have been this past year.

One of my favorite things in your play is the trio of stones. Was this a reference to the chorus of ancient Greek theater?

Yes, definitely. I also remember being intrigued by the idea that Orpheus played such beautiful music that even the stones wept, and I was interested in using them both as a vehicle for laying out the rules of the Underworld and also as comic relief. Any time I felt like the play was getting too lachrymose, the stones enter and amuse us.

I'm fascinated by the use of string in the play, both the string that Orpheus ties around Eurydice's finger and the string

her father uses to make a room. What was, for you, the significance of this string?

I think when I wrote the play it was very intuitive, and it's only afterward that I might analyze the imagery. The string is the umbilical cord, and it's the string of an instrument. It's also the idea of improvised care for others: If Orpheus can't afford gold, what does he have? He has a string, a more fragile tool. The father can't create a home out of bricks or straw, but maybe he has a bit of string. How can we show love and care for people with these very thin, tender, improvised objects?

What would you like a young viewer to bring to this show?

I'd love for them to bring their own experiences of having lost someone they love, their own questions about what the afterlife could look like, or their own questions about the power of music or art to reach the dead. I think there's something about myth that allows you to understand it through your own individual experience—and I think that's true of opera in general. What's incredible about opera is that the scale is so large that you don't see a direct reflection of reality. You're seeing massive imagery—it's almost a dream logic. So I'd invite the students to dream their way into it.

FUN FACT

Eurydice is not Matthew Aucoin's first interpretation of the Orpheus myth. The year before he embarked on this operatic project with Sarah Ruhl, he composed *The Orphic Moment*, a "dramatic cantata" based on the "final few milliseconds before Orpheus's backward look."

Eurydice Educator Guide

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