

Program notes

Orphée Suite for Piano

The impetus for my transcriptions from Philip Glass's *Orphée* came when Mr. Glass visited Lincoln back in 1999. After spending an exhilarating hour in my studio going over potential opera scores, we both decided that *Orphée* would work especially well transcribed for piano. A UNL Research Council grant enabled me to both transcribe and record the newly created *Orphée Suite for Piano*, during the summer of 2000. I have always been inspired as a musician by the mystical interplay between the spiritual and the physical worlds. And this fascinating intercourse is the basis for Jean Cocteau's remarkable 1950 film version of *Orphée* on which Glass based his 1991 opera. The disarming simplicity of Glass's musical idiom is especially capable in communicating in an emotionally powerful way the tensions that exist between these two worlds.

I have tried in my selection of transcriptions, to communicate the most poignant aspects of the emotional world so brilliantly crafted by Glass in his score. The opening movement, *The Cafe*, takes place in the 1950's in a trendy, poet's cafe in Paris. At a time when poetry constituted the cultural life blood of society, poets young and old gather in this stimulating and emotionally charged environment to discuss the latest and most controversial trends. Orphée (play by Jean Marais in Cocteau's film) is in the cafe and comments to the owner "Your cafe is a winner. I think it is the center of the world!" Glass uses a neo-ragtime style that increases in complexity as the scene erupts into a brawl of emotionally fired artists and poets.

The second movement is a touching piece accompanying the scene where the mysterious Princess, Orphée's "Death" (played by the stunning Maria Casares), seriously violates a precept of underworld justice: she tarries in the human world for personal reasons. Here she simply watches Orphée as he sleeps with Euridice, crossing that forbidden chasm of emotional connection to the human world. Glass's music is particularly effective in portraying the timeless contemplation of love in this scene totally without action.

The *Journey to the Underworld* is the mysterious journey of Orphée with the Princess's faithful chauffeur Heurtebise to find Euridice who has been prematurely taken to the Underworld by the Princess. The journey begins with Heurtebise revealing the mysterious nature of mirrors. "Mirrors are the doors through which death comes and goes..." And right before the journey begins, Heurtebise gives Orphée the most important truth for those seeking the mystical journey: "You don't have to understand. It is only necessary to believe." Again, because time stands still in the Underworld, Glass's musical idiom is quite appropriate. Heurtebise exclaims, "Life takes a long time to die." And the harmonic and rhythmic stasis of Glass's music communicates this spiritual limbo most effectively.

The fourth movement introduces an important chord progression symbolizing the love of the Princess for Orphée. It's simplicity and emotional directness disarms the critic as the music simply melts into the unadulterated beauty of triadic bliss. Yet the F Major-a minor, B-flat Major-D-flat Major love theme never occurs without an excursion to e-minor, a musical darkness that reveals the complicated nature of this cross-temporal love. The Princess remarks "In our world, no one loves, we only move from judgement to judgement." A brief musical interlude accompanies Orphée, Euridice, and Heurtebise as they return from the Underworld to the world above.

In a brawl, Orphée is shot and returns for a second time to the Underworld where he encounters the Princess. Orphée exclaims: "I found a way to rejoin you!" This impressive scene consists of the love progression varied and brought to an almost frenzied climax as the Princess reveals her plan to sacrifice herself in order to send Orphée back to the land of the living. The melody accompanying the love progression is chromatically contorted reflecting the incredible pain amidst this difficult love. She exclaims to Heurtebise "A poet's Death must sacrifice herself to make him immortal." She then tragically tells Orphée: "Don't try to understand what I am about to do- for it isn't understandable in any world." And as the love theme builds to an impassioned climax, Heurtebise begins the difficult task of leading Orphée out of the Underworld, unauthorized- a sacrificial act that will doom the Princess for eternity. The clock strikes six, the same time when Orphée entered the Underworld revealing that time does not exist in the Underworld.

The final scene return's to Orphée's bedroom ironically as Orphée watches Euridice sleeping. In the style of a baroque lament, the music is at once tender and melancholy. The contemplative mood of the first Bedroom piece is maintained yet then moves to the ominous key of e-minor where the fate of the princess is being carried out amidst the bliss of the reunited Orphée and Euridice. The love progression returns for a final time, as the princess' faithful aides have now been transformed into her escorts to her final judgment.