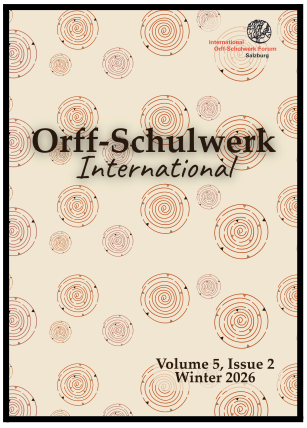
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Wagner – Strauss – Orff: Transformations of Greek Tragedy in Music Theatre through Two World Wars

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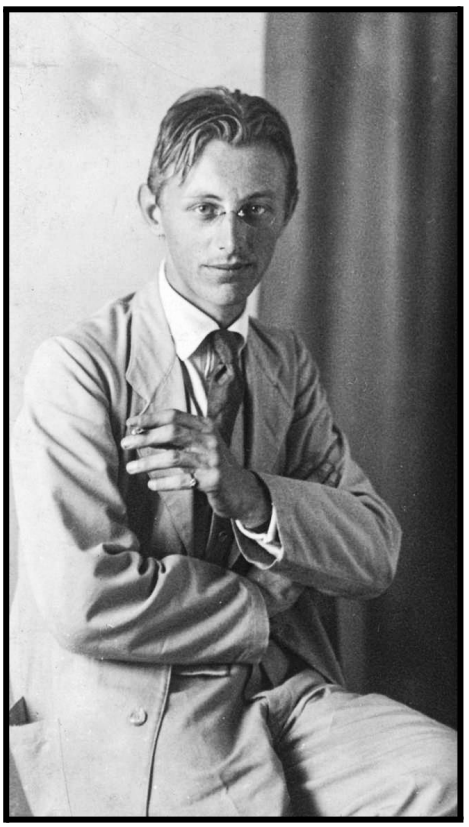
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Wagner – Strauss – Orff: Transformations of Greek Tragedy in Music Theatre through Two World Wars

Thomas Rösch

On 4 June 1914, Carl Orff, then just under 19 years old, attended a performance of Richard Strauss's 'Elektra' at the Munich National Theatre, conducted by the composer himself. The occasion was Strauss's 50th birthday; he was then at the height of his career. Orff reacted with a sense of being "moved, captivated and enthralled",[7] yet at the same time he felt irritated, agitated and deeply unsettled. However, the young composer had been familiar with the work for some time – so why did this particular performance trigger such profound unease?



Carl Orff, around 1914
(Carl-Orff-Stiftung/Archiv: Orff-Zentrum München)

In June 1914, Carl Orff was on the verge of completing his composition studies at the Academy of Music in Munich. From the very beginning, he had been dissatisfied: 'The whole academy was conservative and old-fashioned.'[8] Working independently and without guidance from his teachers, Orff immersed himself in the works of Debussy, Schoenberg and the sound experiments of the 'Futuristi'. As early as 1913, however, Orff's first stage work, based on a piece from Japanese Kabuki theatre, met with a lack of understanding from his

[7] Orff, C. (1981) *Carl Orff and his work. Documentation. Vol. VII: Western Music Theatre.* Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 9.
[8] Orff, C. (1975) *Carl Orff and his Work. Documentation. Vol. I: Early Years.* Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 44.

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conservative professors. Then, in June 1914, exactly one day after the performance of 'Elektra', Orff's first orchestral work was deliberately and in an extremely humiliating manner brought to a halt by the Academy professor Eberhard Schwickerath during a public rehearsal. The demonstrative rejection of his own works – conceived in a deliberately avant-garde music language – on the one hand, and the overwhelming experience of the impressive musical power of the established Richard Strauss on the other, thus inevitably plunged the young Carl Orff into a deep artistic crisis.

Carl Orff himself describes in detail his immediate reaction to the experience of 'Elektra', by far the most progressive opera of its time: 'For me, this magnificent work represented the pinnacle of all music dramas, a peak that could never be surpassed. […] One thing I knew for certain: everything I had written and created up to that point was nothing but outdated attempts, wrong turns and dead ends. There is no further progression beyond 'Elektra', no way forward. I had to start afresh, find new ground […]. A whole edifice of my plans and hopes – in many cases far too youthful – came crashing down."[9] In the following month of July, Orff completed his studies in composition – shortly afterwards, the First World War broke out. For the young graduate of the Academy of Music, this meant that performances of his works could hardly be expected for the duration of the war. Orff's personal situation was exacerbated by the uncertainty as to whether and when he would be called up for military service. His creative work eventually came to a complete standstill.

In early August 1917, after several deferments, Orff was finally called up for military service. Following a short period of training, he was sent to the Eastern Front. According to his own account, he was buried in a shelter during heavy artillery fire – virtually buried alive – and was only rescued, unconscious, at the very last moment. This was followed by a long period of convalescence in a military hospital. No longer 'fit for military service', he was sent to the National Theatre in Mannheim as a conductor, and immediately afterwards to the Court Theatre in Darmstadt. From the summer of 1919 onwards, Orff lived in Munich as a freelance composer. The crisis that began in June 1914 was only further deepened by his wartime experiences. Triggered by his first-hand experience of the 'primordial catastrophe of the 20th century' – the onset of which also marked the collapse of both the political and cultural structures of the old Europe – he sensed, as a composer, that the development of Western music had reached a dead end.

But let us return once more to the performance of 'Elektra' in June 1914 that triggered the crisis: in his 'Memoirs', Orff describes in great detail what had so deeply irritated him at the time: 'The highly Romantic 'Elektra' orchestra with its polyphonic richness of sound and expressive power, ran the risk of drowning out the singing voices and thus compromising the intelligibility of the text. It was clear to me that a new orchestral ensemble had to be found which would restore the word to its central importance on stage.'[10] And in the unpublished drafts on this subject, he elaborates further: "I believed that only the spoken word on stage would be decisive [,] not the music, [which] would drown out the word through the

[9] Orff, C.: Handwritten drafts for *'Carl Orff and his work '. Documentation. Vol. VII*, Carl Orff Estate, Carl Orff Foundation/Archive: Orff Centre, Munich.
[10] Orff, C. (1981) *Carl Orff and his work. Documentation. Vol. VII: Western Music Theatre.* Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 9.

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ever-expanding orchestra. I wanted the word, not the composed one […] but the one illuminated by music."[11]

The oversized late-Romantic orchestra, which threatened the intelligibility of the text: was, or is, this criticism of Elektra' at all justified?



Richard Strauss, 1914
Photo: Rudolf Dührkoop

'Elektra' is Strauss's fourth opera. In his own view, it stands 'alone' within his life's work: in it, he had 'pushed the boundaries of harmony, psychological polyphony […] and the receptiveness of modern ears to their very limits.'[12] Indeed, the composer employs a massive orchestra. The ensemble comprises over 100 musicians and enables the composer to carry out numerous experiments with timbre, as well as to achieve a truly radical expressiveness in the orchestral language.

Throughout the entire work, the music follows a symphonic style, with the singing voices embedded in the symphonic flow without participating in the polyphonic texture. Thus, it does indeed seem almost inevitable that the singers are occasionally drowned out by the

[11] Orff, C.: Handwritten drafts relating to *Carl Orff and his work. Documentation. Vol. VII*, Carl Orff Estate, Carl Orff Foundation/Archive: Orff Centre, Munich.
[12] Strauss, R. (1942) Memories of the First Performances of My Operas, IN: Schuh, W. (ed.) (2014) *Richard Strauss. Reflections and Memories.* Mainz: Schott Music, 219–246, here 230.

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orchestra, and no one was more aware of this than Richard Strauss himself. Looking back, he wrote about 'Elektra : 'My vocal style […] often comes into conflict with the figuration and polyphony of the orchestra, and only outstanding conductors who themselves understand something of singing can achieve the dynamic and rhythmic balance between the actors and the baton. The struggle between word and sound has been the problem of my life from the very beginning, and ends with 'Capriccio' as a question mark!'[13]

Despite Richard Strauss's awareness of this problem, however, there is no sign of a fundamental departure from the large orchestra in his work. The actual reasons for this are manifold. Strauss's preference for what he termed 'poetic counterpoint' plays an important role. Prompted by a remark from Johannes Brahms, he realised that counterpoint was only justified 'when a poetic necessity compels two or more themes – contrasting not only rhythmically but, above all, harmonically in the strongest possible way – into a temporary union'[14], as Strauss put it. Not least for this reason, his orchestral sound appears so dense and tightly woven, yet also 'so brilliant and evocative, because the […] motifs and melodies insist on their own distinct character and intertwine and interconnect with other motifs in a "ruthless" manner, employing dissonance and polyrhythm.'[15]

Closely linked to this is Strauss's view that there are, and must be, passages in his works where moderating dynamic markings in the score "may be overwhelmed by the orchestra, which builds to its utmost intensity, in favour of a necessary great crescendo by the singers."[16] A subject matter such as that of 'Elektra' does indeed occasionally require more intense clusters of sound or surging crescendos in which individual words may be lost without immediately jeopardising the understanding of the action on stage. One such passage can be found, for example, in the final duet between Elektra and her sister Chrysothemis. The tension that has built up throughout the entire work is released in an increasingly intense passage.

In the following example, Inge Borkh and Marianne Schech are singing. Despite precise pronunciation and the use of microphones during the recording, the words are nevertheless almost impossible to understand. The Staatskapelle Dresden is conducted by Karl Böhm, who had the privilege of witnessing Richard Strauss's own rehearsals of 'Elektra' on several occasions.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksByBZTbadA (as from 1:34:22)

[13] Ibid., 232.
[14] Strauss, R. (1909) 'Memories of Hans von Bülow', in: Schuh, W. (ed.) (2014) *Richard Strauss. Reflections and Memories.* Mainz: Schott Music, 183–193, here 190.
[15] Edelmann, B. (2012) Strauss and Wagner, in: Lütteken, L. (ed.) (2012) *The Richard Wagner Handbook.* Stuttgart: Metzler, 66–83, here 69.
[16] Strauss, R. (1924) Preface to 'Intermezzo', in: Schuh, W. (ed.) (2014) *Richard Strauss. Reflections and Memories.* Mainz: Schott Music, 140–149, here 143.

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Richard Wagner, around 1877
Historical portrait photography, presumably from the studio Elliott & Fry, London.

Richard Strauss's compositional style is based to a large extent on the musical achievements of Richard Wagner. Strauss, in particular, had boundless and unreserved admiration for Wagner's orchestration. In the summer of 1945, he even wrote: '[…] following the magnificent palaces of Beethoven's symphonies, the dramatic poet and musical philosopher Richard Wagner has finally, in the language of the modern orchestra, […] brought three thousand years of cultural development to a close.'[17] This reference to Richard Wagner even serves to justify the occasional, seemingly inevitable drowning out of the text by the orchestra: "Even our greatest dramatic master succeeded in creating 'ideal recitatives' […] only in 'Lohengrin' and 'Rheingold', whilst , without any dampening of the orchestra in the great polyphonic symphonies of the second 'Tristan' act and the third 'Siegfried' act, he cannot convey to the listener the pleasure of the poet's words."[18]

Of the utmost importance to Strauss, however, was the concept developed by Wagner of an entire opera act as a 'symphonic unity'. In Richard Wagner's essay 'On the Application of Music to Drama', he writes: 'Nevertheless, in order to constitute a work of art as music, the new form of dramatic music must exhibit the unity of the symphonic movement […].'[19] Richard Strauss held fast to this idea throughout his life.

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[17] Strauss, R. (1945) Letter on the humanist grammar school, in: Schuh, W. (ed.) (2014) *Richard Strauss. Reflections and Memories.* Mainz: Schott Music, 128–133, here 130.
[18] Strauss, R. (1924) Preface to 'Intermezzo', in: Schuh, W. (ed.) (2014) *Richard Strauss. Reflections and Memoirs.* Mainz: Schott Music, 140–149, here 142 ff.
[19] Wagner, R. (1879) 'On the Application of Music to Drama', in: Wagner, R. (1907) *Collected Writings and Poems. Fourth edition, Vol. X.* Leipzig: Siegels Musikalienhandlung, 176–193, here 185.

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Strauss's relationship with Wagner, however, proved more complicated than is generally assumed. In compositional terms, the 'song-poem' 'Feuersnot', composed between 1896 and 1901, marked Strauss's definitive departure from Wagnerian music drama and his breakthrough to his own style of musical theatre. Nevertheless, he continued to show his unreserved respect for the role model he had ultimately outgrown right up to the end. Strauss unreservedly admired the convergence of musician, poet and theorist in Wagner's genius. And so, throughout his life, he studied not only the scores of the Bayreuth master, but also, time and again, his writings. Strauss held 'Oper und Drama', Wagner's principal theoretical work, in particularly high regard. Around 1940, he wrote: "In any case, 'Opera and Drama' is perhaps the most significant scholarly book in world history."[20]

In 'Oper und Drama', Strauss read how Richard Wagner explained the function of the modern orchestra in music drama. Wagner derived the orchestra from the chorus of ancient Greek tragedy; he wrote: 'The chorus of Greek tragedy has left behind, in the modern orchestra alone, its emotionally essential significance for drama […].'[21] The prerequisite for this decisive 'transfer of function' is the concept of the so-called leitmotifs, which can be associated primarily with specific words, but also with objects, images or other associations. When repeated as an 'orchestral melody', this semantically charged musical motif can complement the respective new dramatic situation, comment on it, or even cast it in a different light through the meaning it conveys.

But how, according to Wagner, could the chorus of Greek tragedy be transformed into the modern orchestra? And what consequences did this transformation have for the choir on the opera stage? Wagner observed a 'decline of Greek tragedy'[22] from Aeschylus through Sophocles to Euripides, holding the latter responsible for the expulsion of music from tragedy. The resulting demise of the choir was, of course, a necessary historical development. In Wagner's view, the choir dissolved as a real dramatic collective, on the one hand visibly into the individuals acting as supporting characters, and on the other, as a musical body, into the modern orchestra. If, nevertheless, a choir appears on the opera stage, this, according to Wagner, should be understood as a misguided analogy to Greek tragedy and rejected. He states succinctly: 'Even the choir hitherto used in opera will, according to the significance attributed to it there in the most favourable cases, have to disappear from our drama […].'[23] A look at his late music dramas, particularly 'Die Meistersinger' and 'Parsifal', shows, however, that Wagner does not categorically rule out the use of the choir despite his sharp theoretical verdict. It appears as an active mass wherever the dramatic situation warrants it.

In 'The Ring of the Nibelung', which in many respects comes closest to Greek tragedy, Wagner does indeed dispense with the choir almost entirely. Only in 'Götterdämmerung' does it make a significant appearance as Hagen's 'men'. Interestingly, Wagner even felt obliged to offer an explanation to his wife Cosima on this matter; her diary entry for 28

[20] Strauss, R. (c. 1940) 'Remarks on Wagner's "Opera and Drama"', in: Schuh, W. (ed.) (2014) *Richard Strauss. Reflections and Memoirs.* Mainz: Schott Music, 94–97, here 95.
[21] Wagner, R. (1851) 'Opera and Drama', in: Wagner, R. (1907) *Collected Writings and Poems. Fourth edition, Vol. IV.* Leipzig: Siegels Musikalienhandlung, 190 ff.
[22] Ibid., 145.
[23] Ibid., 162.

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August 1871 reads: 'R.[ichard] is composing, whilst telling me that he will by no means assemble a large choir for Hagen's call, but rather individual men who appear as if from the nearby farmsteads.'[24] The choir is thus divided into individual figures, or more accurately: into small groups of two or more voices. At the beginning of the third scene of the second act, Hagen, feigning an enemy raid, alarms the men and summons them to him, armed. Only when everyone has gathered in a state of great agitation does Hagen reveal the purpose of the gathering: a feast is to be prepared in anticipation of the arrival of Gunther and his newly wedded wife Brünnhilde. The tension gives way to merriment and laughter.

The following music example features Gottlob Frick as Hagen, the Vienna State Opera Choir and the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Georg Solti.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38t78fj9Iek

Whilst this choral passage can, at best, be explained as a compromise between the theoretical ideal and the demands of the dramatic plot, the third act of the same work does ultimately present the purest form of Wagner's idea of the orchestra as the successor to the ancient chorus. This is the widely known 'Funeral March', which follows immediately on from Siegfried's death. In Cosima's diary, under 29 September 1871, it reads: "'I have composed a Greek chorus,' R. calls out to me in the morning, 'but a chorus that is, as it were, sung by the orchestra; after Siegfried's death, during the change of scene, the Siegmund theme will sound, as if the chorus were saying he was his father; then the sword motif; finally his own theme, at which point the curtain rises, Gutrune enters, believing she has heard his horn; how could words ever make the impression that these solemn themes, newly formed, will evoke, whilst the music constantly expresses the immediate present.'"[25] A purely orchestral piece, then, as a counterpart to the stasimon of Attic tragedy – and by virtue of the leitmotifs previously imbued with meaning, this music 'speaks'; indeed, it tells a coherent story, the story of Siegfried's development, life and death. The rhythmically defined 'death motif' serves to structure the work and thus creates formal coherence. In the following musical example, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra can once again be heard under the baton of Georg Solti.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kKbZyfJki8E

Richard Strauss drew his own conclusions from all this. He was familiar with the idea that the modern orchestra was derived from the chorus of Greek tragedy, but felt that this description of the transfer of function was by no means sufficient. Strauss writes: '[Wagner's] fine idea that the chorus of ancient drama, which accompanied the action as a critic, 'explainer' and interpreter, has been replaced by the orchestra created by our classical symphonists, is […] only partly correct. There is no need for further proof that the expressive possibilities of the modern orchestra […] are entirely different from those of the descriptive, explanatory chorus of the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The modern

[24] Wagner, C. (1871) Diary entry of 28 August 1871, in: Gregor-Dellin, M. & Mack, D. (Eds.) (1976) *Cosima Wagner. The Diaries. Vol. I,* Munich/Zurich: Piper, 431.
[25] Wagner, C. (1871) Diary entry dated 29 September 1871, in: Gregor-Dellin, M. & Mack, D. (Eds.) (1976) *Cosima Wagner. The Diaries. Vol. I,* Munich/Zurich: Piper, 444.

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orchestra does not merely provide a backdrop, does not merely explain, does not merely remind – it conveys the content itself, reveals the archetype, and conveys the innermost truth."[26]

Whether Strauss truly understood Wagner correctly in this respect is a matter for debate. This quotation is important above all because it once again impressively underlines what had already been hinted at: throughout his life, Strauss was fascinated by the almost limitless possibilities of the modern orchestra. For him, the orchestra always took absolute priority. To put it somewhat bluntly: First and foremost, Strauss wanted to make 'only' music; drama was for him merely a means to an end, namely the unfolding of his brilliantly orchestrated 'poetic counterpoint'.

But let us return to the relationship between the choir and the orchestra. No other work by Richard Strauss comes as close to Greek tragedy as 'Elektra'. How, in this particular work, does the composer shape the relationship between the two ensembles?

In a marked departure from Sophocles, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, in his adaptation on which the opera is based, dispenses almost entirely with the chorus, which plays a central role in the original. Hofmannsthal, and with him Richard Strauss, reduce the chorus to the maids' scene right at the beginning and the appearance at the very end, which serves merely to increase the volume. The extent of this intervention becomes particularly apparent when one compares the opening maids' scene with the original Parodos, the chorus's entrance song. In Sophocles, the Parodos consists of a dialogue between Electra and the women of Mycenae, spanning 130 verses; in Hofmannsthal/Strauss, the maids do not speak with Electra but about her, and the chorus is broken down into a total of six individual characters. Strauss thus realises here the form of the chorus on the opera stage that Richard Wagner had only just tolerated, namely its individualisation.

The next musical example features the beginning of the maids' scene. It is performed by the *Staatskapelle Dresden* under the baton of Karl Böhm.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksByBZTbadA (Beginning)

So what does all this have to do with Carl Orff? Let us recall: following his traumatic wartime experiences, Orff retired to Munich in 1919. What he had initially only sensed in 1914, triggered by his experience of 'Elektra', became a certainty to him in the early 1920s: The development of European art music had reached an impasse; to him, 'carrying on as before' in the same direction seemed neither possible nor desirable. He wanted to move away from this protracted 19th century, whose traditions and conventions were still palpable everywhere and paralysed everything new; he wanted to move away from the 'Wagnerian musical armour', away from Strauss's polyphonically overloaded 'poetic counterpoint', away from the hypertrophic expressive aesthetics of late Romanticism, which he found deeply decadent. Orff decided on a complete fresh start. Inspired by Curt Sachs, from 1921 onwards the composer studied early European music from the Middle Ages to the 18th century, in

[26] Strauss, R. (c. 1940) Remarks on Richard Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk and the Bayreuth Festival Theatre, in: Schuh, W. (ed.) (2014) *Richard Strauss. Reflections and Memories.* Mainz: Schott Music, 91–93, here 91.

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particular the works of Claudio Monteverdi, as well as non-European music, especially from Africa, Asia and Indonesia. He also studied early European (percussion) instruments in depth, but even more so their non-European counterparts.

Orff's aim as a composer was the 'regeneration of music through movement, through dance',[27] as he put it himself. He turned away from the highly differentiated polyphony of the late Romantics and developed a linear musical style; he abandoned absolute instrumental music and placed human speech at the centre of his artistic work; he ultimately drew on a rhythmic structure derived from dance and language, which, when translated into gestures and movements, was intended to lead directly to a staged performance. The human being – the singing, speaking, dancing performer – was to be at the centre of his stage works. All other artistic means were to be subordinated to this. The decisive first phase of this long-standing process of stylistic development was completed around 1930 and led, with the premiere of 'Carmina Burana' in 1937, to the composer's widely acclaimed breakthrough; with 'Antigone' in 1949, Orff finally arrived at his characteristic late style.

Orff had come across Sophocles' 'Antigone' in 1917 of all years – a year that proved so ill-fated for him – immediately after his service on the Eastern Front. In a notebook, he recorded all the books he had read during his long convalescence in the military hospital; there is an entry there that reads: 'Sophocles – Antigone – magnificent!'[28] Having been buried alive, he must have been immediately gripped by the punishment imposed on Antigone: to be walled in alive. Yet he was moved at least as deeply by the play's humanitarian message. Just one year later, in 1918, he happened to come across Hölderlin's 1804 translation of 'Antigonae'. Looking back, Orff writes: "That very evening, the book was already in my hands. I threw myself into it. Sleep was out of the question. I read all night. Never before had I encountered a poem of such linguistic power. […] Even on my first reading, it had become clear to me that my task would consist, above all, of taking as my starting point the music already contained within Hölderlin's language."[29] The work premiered in 1949 as part of the Salzburg Festival.

In the meantime, the Second World War had broken out and, after immeasurable suffering, had come to an end within six years. This second, even more catastrophic and bloodier catastrophe of the 20th century led Orff to further radicalise his musical language. At the same time, however, it also sharpened his insight into the content of this very tragedy, which was, on the one hand, timeless and, on the other, had once again become a burning issue of the day. More than ever before, 'Antigonae' appeared to embody Western humanity, devoted love for one's family, and, ultimately, courageous, selfless resistance to state authority. Her antagonist, Creon, on the other hand, embodied more than ever the unyielding representative of state power, the inhuman tyrant, the deluded egoist.

The fundamental humanistic ethos of the 'Antigonae' drama is perhaps most clearly manifested in a particular passage, which at the same time marks the decisive difference

[27] Orff, C. (1978) *Carl Orff and his work. Documentation. Vol. III: The Schulwerk (M.Murray, Trans.),* New York: Schott, 17.
[28] Orff, C. (1917/18) Notebook 1917/18. Carl Orff Estate, Carl Orff Foundation/Archive: Orff Centre, Munich.
[29] Orff, C. (1981) *Carl Orff and his work. Documentation. Vol. VII: Western Music Theatre.* Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 12.

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from the 'Elektra' tragedy: Whilst Strauss's and Hofmannsthal's Elektra think only of bloody revenge and lives solely for that purpose, Antigonae, in her decisive confrontation with Creon, responds to his verdict – 'The enemy, even when dead, is never a friend' – with the indignant exclamation: 'But certainly. I am not for hatred, but for love.'[30]

Following the formative experience – 'up close and personal' in the very best sense of the term – of no less than two devastating world wars, Carl Orff thus draws directly on the original Greek tragedy, and not by chance on the 'Antigonae'. Richard Wagner had categorically ruled out such a recourse. Referring to Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's incidental music for Sophocles' 'Antigone', he wrote that Attic tragedy, taken as a whole, was "such a distinctively original product of the Hellenic spirit, its religion, indeed its state […], that the assumption that it could be imitated was bound to lead to the greatest aberrations."[31] Nevertheless, ancient Greece plays a prominent role throughout his entire oeuvre. Wagner himself clearly stated in his 'Letter to My Friends' that, for instance, the 'Dutchman', 'Tannhäuser' and 'Lohengrin' are, in their 'basic outline', founded on Greek myths.[32] In the early 1960s, the classical philologist Wolfgang Schadewaldt demonstrated the extent to which Wagner's other works, in particular 'The Ring of the Nibelung', were also influenced by ancient myths and, in particular, by certain Greek tragedies.[33]

Interestingly, Wagner himself refers quite explicitly to 'Antigone' in 'Opera and Drama'. Antigone's act brought about the collapse of the state, embodied in Creon. From Wagner's perspective, the conclusion of the 'Antigone' tragedy is the mythical anticipation of the goal of history, and this goal is the 'downfall of the state'.[34] 'Götterdämmerung', and perhaps even the entire 'Ring', is thus, in a sense, Wagner's 'Antigone'.[35] Wagner therefore did not regard Greek tragedy as a model to be imitated directly, but as a call to create 'something new', whilst remaining fully aware of the historical distance.

Richard Strauss, who held Greek antiquity in the highest regard throughout his life, once described himself as a 'Greek German'. He approached Greek tragedy on only one occasion – namely 'Elektra' – but did so in an explicitly modern adaptation by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. In a series of other operas, ancient Greek myths at least provide the backdrop for questions concerning modern society.

It was not until 1949 that Carl Orff took the decisive step towards the original tragedy. Naturally, he was not concerned with the 'imitation' criticised by Wagner; naturally, he did

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[30] Orff, C. (1959) *'Antigonae'. A Tragedy by Sophocles, adapted by Friedrich Hölderlin,* study score. Mainz: Schott, 117.
[31] Wagner, R. (1871) 'On the Purpose of Opera', in: Wagner, R. (1907) *Collected Writings and Poems. Fourth edition, Vol. IX.* Leipzig: Siegels Musikalienhandlung, 127–156, here 151.

[32] Wagner, R. (1851) A Letter to My Friends, in: Wagner, R. (1907) *Collected Writings and Poems. Fourth edition, Vol. IV.* Leipzig: Siegels Musikalienhandlung, 230–344.
[33] Schadewaldt, W. (1962) 'Richard Wagner and the Greeks', in: Thurow, R. & Zinn, E. (eds.) (1970) *Schadewaldt, W.: Hellas and Hesperia. Collected Writings on Antiquity and Modern Literature, Vol. II,* Zurich/Stuttgart: Artemis, 341–405.
[34] Wagner, R. (1851) Opera and Drama, in: Wagner, R. (1907) *Collected Writings and Poems. Fourth edition, Vol. IV.* Leipzig: Siegels Musikalienhandlung, 72.
[35] See Borchmeyer, D. (1982) *Richard Wagner's Theatre. Idea, Poetry, Impact.* Stuttgart: Reclam, 237.

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not attempt, with naive intent, to reconstruct Attic tragedy. Fully aware of the unbridgeable historical distance, he instead undertook an attempt at a 'contemporary interpretation' of Greek tragedy 'using […] appropriate musical means'.[36]

He found the main point of departure for this in the choir. As a composer, he was drawn to the musical potential of the extended choral pieces; he therefore decided to set the text to music without any abridgements. In doing so, he preserved the original proportions and restored the choruses to their role as the supporting pillars of the entire structure.

How, then, does Carl Orff shape the relationship between choir and orchestra, which is so central to the entire conception? To put it bluntly: by, contrary to Wagner's theory, restoring the Greek chorus – as a mass physically present and active on stage – to its rightful dramaturgical and musical status, whilst assigning a completely newly constituted orchestra merely an accompanying role. This daring approach seemed possible solely through direct recourse to the original, unadapted Greek tragedy. Orff's 'Antigone' thus indeed represents a completely new beginning, rising from the ruins of a Europe devastated by two world wars. Hölderlin's adaptation served as the starting point for Orff's musical setting; it alone was to take centre stage in the work. In order to achieve the clarity of text he had sought since his experience with 'Elektra', the composer developed a recitative style that often remains anchored to a structurally significant central note; interval deviations particularly emphasise weighty words and trace the emotional arcs of the characters. Every note sounded is structurally related to the overall framework, both in the horizontal melodic line and in the vertical harmony.[37] Orff thus created a musical equivalent to Hölderlin's use of language, which allows for the most precise immersion in the respective dramatic situation without overwhelming the language with too much music.

Closely linked to this is the entirely new set of instruments. Orff consistently eschews the traditional symphonic orchestra. Instead, he creates a new ensemble consisting predominantly of percussion instruments, in which the classical-romantic timbres are deliberately omitted. The 'Antigone' orchestra consists of 6 grand pianos, 4 harps, 9 double basses, 6 flutes, 6 oboes, 6 trumpets and 8 timpani; in addition, there is percussion for up to 15 players (including xylophones and drums of various sizes, cymbals, bells, hump gongs, triangles, tambourines and castanets, as well as a lithophone and a small anvil). The sound of this orchestra never drowns out the singing voices, as a polyphonic layering of different melodic lines in the spirit of Strauss's 'poetic counterpoint' is not intended here and would, in any case, be technically difficult to achieve.

Just how consciously Carl Orff implemented all these innovations, and how perceptively he responded to developments in music history – particularly to the orchestras of Wagner and Strauss – is evident from an interview the composer gave in 1965. When asked about the role of music in his musical theatre, Orff replied: 'For me, the human being in his or her most fundamental impulses is the central artistic problem. Thus, all the characters who act on my

[36] Seifert, W. (1970) '… it all comes down to the spirit'. Carl Orff on his 75th birthday. Commentary and interview, in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, Vol. 7/8,* Mainz: Schott, 370–377, here 377.
[37] Rösch, T. (2003) 'The Music in Carl Orff's Greek Tragedies', in: *Münchner Veröffentlichungen zur Musikgeschichte, Vol. 59,* Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 127 ff.

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stage rely on acting, singing and speech, and not on the orchestra. The instrumental part is assigned the task of creating a sound space appropriate to the meaning and nature of the piece, within which the experiences of the individual characters unfold. It is therefore a form of 'music' that deviates entirely from the trend of the 19th century and is of a completely different nature. In the 19th century, opera music had, after all, gradually shifted ever more towards the symphonic. In order to bring the person on stage back into the centre of attention, to make them comprehensible in a vivid form and with a fullness of life derived solely from their elementary sensations—and not from the interpretative sphere of instrumental accompaniment—there was simply no alternative but to sacrifice the symphonic orchestra."[38] The orchestra was thus intended, first and foremost, to fulfil an architectural function and to create a sound space into which the performers could sing, speak or move; what Orff thereby takes away from the music, he gives back to the theatre through the freedom it affords for intelligible speech, facial expressions, gestures and movement.

But let us now turn to the work and the music. A case in point is the Parodos of 'Antigone', the entrance song of the chorus of Theban elders. At the beginning, the choreutai – who, for the first time since a bloody war, are able to leave the city safely – jubilantly greet the rising sun. They describe the attacker Polynices, the fierce battles and, finally, the attacker's defeat. Finally, they recall the curse that led to the simultaneous death of the hostile brothers Eteocles and Polynices: they were the product of their father Oedipus's incest. The choral song concludes with a victory celebration and a dance in honour of the god Dionysus, described in Hölderlin's adaptation as the 'Bacchus Roundelay'. The choir, consisting solely of male voices, sings in unison throughout. Orff sets the verses to rhythm in characteristically swaying eighth-note triplets with occasional syncopated transitions. Particularly striking is the extended choral melisma on the word 'Blik (der Sonne)', i.e. 'ray of the sun'. Here, on the one hand, the Thebans' pent-up joy bursts forth; on the other, the composer lends the music a slightly 'Oriental'-sounding accent.

The orchestra comes to the fore only in the prelude, an interlude and the postlude; otherwise, during the choral singing, it confines itself strictly to providing a background accompaniment. Beginning in the high piano registers, suggesting the first rays of the sun at daybreak, the sound space expands ever further from high to low; powerful chords on the six grand pianos accompany the solemn entrance of the choreutai onto the stage. During Verse 1, the orchestra provides sporadic sharp accents that punctuate the depiction of the battle; then, in Antistrophe 1 and Verse 2, regular pulsations start with gradually intensifying instrumentation. Finally, the 'Bacchus Roundelay' is heard before, during and after antistrophe 2, which contains the jubilation of victory; here the choir dances, just as it did in ancient theatre, and instruments such as the tambourine, cymbals, and anvil signal the presence of the god Dionysus.

The architectural function of the orchestra is evident not only in the prelude, interlude and postlude; it is also manifested in the gradual descent, occurring twice in total, from the unison E/E via the second D/E and the third C/E to the fifth A/E – and this is independent of the central notes of the choir and the stanzaic structure of the text. In the following excerpt,

[38] Lohmüller, H. (1965) Carl Orff on Himself, in: *Melos, Vol. 32,* 194–195, here 195.

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members of the Bavarian Radio Choir and Symphony Orchestra can be heard; the musical direction is by Ferdinand Leitner.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI6PqV7JGFY (as from 9:54)

This, then, is how the Greek tragedy 'Antigone' sounds – Orff's alternative to Wagner's music dramas and Strauss's operas.

Does Orff, therefore, dispense with polyphony entirely? By no means, as the 3rd stasimon in 'Antigone' demonstrates. However, where polyphony does occur, it is found solely and exclusively in the vocal parts; consequently, the orchestra remains silent. The third choral song consists of just a single pair of stanzas. The choreutai surmise that Eros, the 'spirit of love', must have clouded Haemon's judgement, as he sought, in an increasingly heated argument, to dissuade his father Creon from having his betrothed, Antigone, executed for her violation of the burial ban. The Thebans, however, place their trust in the reconciling, peace-bringing power of love – entirely in keeping with Antigone's 'I am not for hatred, but for love'. Beginning in three parts, the a cappella movement expands to eight parts before concluding in six parts. The entire musical texture is based on two major and two minor triads. A cadence on the word 'beauty' concludes the stasimon. At the same time – for the first time in the entire work – a solo flute enters; it lends this pivotal choral piece a particularly delicate and hopeful aura. In the following excerpt, members of the choir and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Ferdinand Leitner, can be heard once again.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SI6PqV7JGFY (as from 1:26:37)

In January 1951, Wieland Wagner, the eminent director and grandson of Richard Wagner, attended a performance of Carl Orff's 'Antigone' in Munich. Enthusiastically, he wrote to the composer: 'For me, your work is a momentous event and the solution to everything that has been endlessly chattered about and debated. […] I am convinced that, with this work, you have succeeded in validly shaping our conception of the essence of both the "Greek" and the "tragic" – valid and therefore lasting.'[39] Five years later, Wieland Wagner staged 'Antigone' himself in Stuttgart. Just one year earlier, on the occasion of Carl Orff's 60th birthday, Wieland Wagner wrote in the 'Tannhäuser' programme for the Bayreuth Festival, addressing Orff directly: '… You have created something new – "new" in the sense of Richard Wagner, who wanted to have all those who "cling to the old" rescued "from the devil of unproductivity". […] With 'Antigone' […] you have achieved the […] miracle of creating, through a completely new soundscape of startling relentlessness, a new interpretation of the phenomenon of 'Greek tragedy' that is relevant to us today. As listeners, we owe you primal rhythmic experiences; as spectators, truly elemental theatrical impressions – but beyond that, the joy of realising that the creative individual, possessed by the idea of theatre, is capable – even in an age of cultural pessimism – of reducing all professional doomsayers to absurdity through the power of his intuition and his knowledge of primordial truths. Continue unwaveringly along your path, far removed from all dogmas,

[39] Letter from Wieland Wagner to Carl Orff dated 31 January 1951. Carl Orff estate, Carl Orff Foundation/Archive: Orff Centre, Munich.

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schools of thought and conventions: it is the right one, for its goal is the same as that which lay before the eyes of all the masters of the past, for whom theatre had not lost its original meaning: theatre as a magical place for the proclamation of spiritual realities […].“[40]

What a statement! Wieland Wagner died completely unexpectedly in the autumn of 1966. His far too early death prevented the world premiere of Orff's third tragic setting, 'Prometheus' based on Aeschylus, which he had already planned – specifically in (as he himself put it) 'his theatre'[41] – by which he could only have meant the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth. An extraordinary breach of taboo with almost incalculable consequences for everyone involved – even more so back then than today! It is a pity that this plan could not be realised.



Carl Orff on the Akropolis in Athens, 1967
Photo: Werner Schloske, Archiv der Akademie der Künste, Berlin
(Template: Carl-Orff-Stiftung/Archiv: Orff-Zentrum München)

What else is there for me to say in conclusion – here in Athens, where the magnificent works of the Greek tragedians were written and first performed two and a half millennia ago? In September 1967, the Stuttgart Opera was invited to Athens for the 13th International Festival. The company performed Carl Orff's 'Antigone' and 'Oedipus' at the Theatre of Herodes Atticus, dating from the 2nd century AD; not in Wieland Wagner's production, but using the costumes he had designed. Reliable eyewitnesses recount the following event: when Carl Orff stepped onto the upper rear gallery of the theatre shortly before the performance, the five thousand members of the audience spontaneously rose from their

[40] Wagner, W. (1955) 'Carl Orff on his 60th birthday', in: *Bayreuth Festival 1955, 'Tannhäuser' programme*, 31.
[41] Orff, C. (1981) *Carl Orff and his work. Documentation. Vol. VII: Western Music Theatre.* Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 192.

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seats to cheer him on. Walter Erich Schäfer, then artistic director of the Stuttgart Opera, writes: 'I do not know whether there can be a greater moment for an artist than that when he feels honoured by the people of a nation to which he has devoted a large part of his work and his love. Even today, it is still a profound joy for me to have witnessed that moment and the emotion it stirred in Carl Orff.'[42] I myself believe that this may well have been one of the greatest triumphs in the composer's life, but it was certainly his finest. We can only hope that, in our own time, discerning theatre professionals will recall this event and that they will be brave enough to stage Orff's Greek tragedies once again, particularly in Greece, in Athens.

An abridged version, edited by the author, of a lecture of the same title, which was first delivered on 29 November 2014 as part of the 'Giornate Wagneriane' organised by the *Associazione Richard Wagner di Venezia* in Venice.



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[42] Schäfer, W. E. (1981) Carl Orff and Stuttgart, in: Orff, C. (1981) *Carl Orff and his Work. Documentation. Vol. VII: Western Music Theatre.* Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 352–355, here 354 ff.

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