

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Perséphone ("Persephone")

BORN: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia

DIED: April 6, 1971, in New York

WORK COMPOSED: 1933

WORLD PREMIERE: Paris Opéra, on April 30, 1934, conducted by the composer.

Perséphone offers a unique blend of drama, dance, opera and oratorio, one that nevertheless can function as a concert piece, as we hear it now. Stravinsky described it as a "melodrama," a term that denotes spoken text with musical accompaniment, but it is a more rich and varied work than this implies. Although the title part is spoken, the other main role, that of the narrator Eumolpus, is sung by a tenor. A chorus also sings its lines.

"The music of Stravinsky has played a large role in my work over several decades. Working with Seiji Ozawa and Julie Taymor, I created characters and illusions for *Oedipus Rex* at the Saito Kinen Festival Matsumoto. This innovative work won an Emmy for Outstanding Individual Achievement in Costume Design for a Variety or Music Program. I've worked with Robert Lepage on Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol* at the Canadian Opera Company developing an extensive cast of puppets and character designs.

"Through these experiences with Stravinsky, I've found his music to be incredibly visual. *Persephone* is no exception and provides a rich source of fantastic notions for my illusionistic styling. The themes of nature in Stravinsky's compositions have always appealed to my sensibilities and the myth of Persephone is a stunning metaphor for our coexistence alongside nature's whims. I always enjoy letting the music guide my direction and this particular work balances the textures and shapes that enter my ears and flow through my hand as I draw the impressions you will experience onstage."

– Michael Curry

The emergence of a pronounced neo-classical aesthetic was the most conspicuous development in Stravinsky's work after about 1920, and one of the most influential in music generally during the second quarter of the 20th century. This aspect of the composer's evolution is usually associated with his appropriation of 18th-century forms, textures and expressive ideals. But there was another way in which Stravinsky's neo-classical bent manifested itself, one more in keeping with the original sense of classicism. This was his use of Greek mythology as subject and inspiration for four major compositions written between 1927 and 1948: the ballets *Apollo* and *Orpheus*; *Oedipus Rex*, a hybrid opera-oratorio; and *Perséphone*, which combines elements of these different genres and others.

Stravinsky composed *Perséphone* in 1933 to a libretto by Andre Gide. The French poet's telling of the Persephone legend departs from that of his source, the Homeric hymn to Demeter, in several respects, chiefly that the goddess is not abducted to the underworld but, moved by pity for its denizens, goes there of her own free will. The three scenes of *Perséphone* relate the tale as follows:

I. *The Abduction of Persephone*: Eumolpus, priest of Demeter, goddess of fertility, tells how she has entrusted her beloved daughter Persephone to the care of the Nymphs. They, portrayed by the chorus, extol the beauties of springtime, and of flowers in particular, but warn Persephone of the narcissus, whose fragrance grants a glimpse of Hades, the underworld. Alas, she bends too close to that blossom and sees a vision of the unhappy Shades who languish there. Eumolpus tells her that those lost souls

await her coming, and that compassion for them will make her their queen and Pluto's bride. Filled with pity, Persephone departs the world of the living.

II. *Persephone in the Underworld*: Persephone is welcomed in Hades and offered gifts of gems. She refuses them, professing her preference for the humble fruits of the earth. At this, Mercury, who has come to restore in Persephone thoughts of her mother, gives her a pomegranate, whose sweetness arouses her longing for life. The narcissus blossom then offers Persephone a vision of earth overtaken by desolate winter since her absence, of her mother and Demophoon, a new child Demeter has taken into her care. Persephone realizes that he will become Triptolemus, god of agriculture and her earthly husband.

III. *Persephone Reborn*: At the temple of Demeter, Persephone reappears to greet her mother and pledge herself to Demophoon. Flowers spring up in her footsteps. But Persephone knows that she is pledged equally to Pluto and the suffering Shades. And so she will ever divide her time between earth and the underworld, springtime and autumn marking her coming and going in unending cycle.

Stravinsky's *Perséphone* music comprises a series of discreet yet connected numbers that take the forms of arias by Eumolpus, choruses, orchestral interludes, Persephone's melodramatic recitations and various combinations of these. Each employs a different instrumentation and has a distinct character. In the first scene, Eumolpus's invocation, which begins without prologue, is an austere incantation. The chorus for the Nymphs that follows is one of the very few movements in Stravinsky's output whose music might be described as "pretty." And the priest's announcement of her fate in Hades is appropriately grave.

The second scene is even more varied. Persephone's descent into the underworld is marked by an orchestral interlude, her awakening there by a beautiful choral lullaby, the arrival of Mercury by the most dramatic and energetic part of the composition. An extended movement combining aria, chorus and recitation closes the scene.

The third scene also opens with an orchestral passage, in this case a march indicating Persephone's return from Hades. Eumolpus's initial aria has an almost bardic quality, while his final one, which the chorus joins, recalls music from the opening moments of the work. The central part of the scene constitutes the emotional apex of the composition and is given over largely to choral singing, including a segment for children's voices. The work ends as abruptly as it had begun, on a radiant, widely spaced orchestral chord.

There is nothing natural about Stravinsky's setting of Gide's verses, yet his departure from the normal cadences of French speech perfectly suits the artificial air of the music as a whole. Stravinsky had no interest in either realism or openly emotive utterance. Rather, expressive restraint and formality were the principal attributes of his neo-classicism. Nowhere did these attain greater refinement than in *Persephone*.

Scored for solo tenor; speaker; children's chorus; mixed chorus; 3 flutes (the 3rd flute doubling piccolo); 3 oboes (the 3rd oboe doubling English horn); 3 clarinets (the 3rd clarinet doubling bass clarinet); 3 bassoons (the 3rd bassoon doubling contrabassoon); 4 horns; 3 trumpets; 3 trombones; tuba; timpani and percussion; 2 harps; piano; strings.

