Psychology Research, Sep.-Oct. 2026, Vol. 16, No. 5, 263-270
doi:10.17265/2159-5542/2026.05.004

Myth and Music: Myth-Ritual Practices in the Operatic Arts of the First Half of the 20th Century With Examples From Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*, and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex Operas*

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In 20th century culture, myth continues to represent an important form of philosophy and has acquired special significance. Cultural phenomena characteristics of mythology as a way of understanding the world, are present in the forms of social life and consciousness. Mythological plots and images remain a universal model for understanding modernity. The modern era is marked by close interaction and mutual influence of mythology and culture. The connection between opera and myth has been unusually close from the very beginning of the existence of this genre. Myth has become a source of creative inspiration for many composers ranging from Peri to Milhaud. At the same time, in the first half of the 20th century, the interpretation of mythological plots in opera had fundamental differences from their interpretation in previous times. In many ways this was predetermined by the cultural content of the era of modernism. The uniqueness of the interpretation of the myth is determined by the approach of the nation and its sociocultural values, which are subjectively reflected in the philosophy of the composers and librettist. The main goal of this paper is to study the semantics of mythological plots in Western European opera in the first half of the 20th century, in the cultural context of this time. By studying the example operas of Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*, and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, I aim to show that mythological operas of this period address global aesthetic and philosophical problems, and at the same time they themselves form new myths.

Keywords: myth, consciousness, opera, mythology

Introduction

Myth in the 20th century is characterized by the disintegration of the previous era's value orientations and the lack of establishment of new ones. Even during the Age of Enlightenment, a clear distinction between the sensory and the supersensible emerged, and myth was thus relegated to the unconscious. The aesthetics of the Modern Age are linked to sensory cognition. Myth, as a manifestation of archaic or traditional consciousness, is being pushed out of culture, and modern consciousness is defined exclusively as logical, conceptual, and scientific. Following Jürgen Habermas (1987), Modern Age culture relies on reason and science. However, every era experiences its own periods of rise and decline. Changes and attempts to rehabilitate myth were already taking place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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The process of re-mythologization that began in world culture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries led to the reactivation of the fundamental properties of mythological consciousness and the formation of stable mythological structures embedded in all spheres of social life. Opera was no exception, having been conceived from its earliest days as a revival of ancient drama. Nevertheless, the mythological component of opera is not a simple restoration of ancient (classical) mythology. This process was largely due to the loss of a reference point for moral values during this period. It was this factor that largely initiated modern consciousness's turn toward an archaic past that had not come into contact with the vices of a developing civilization.

The beginning of the 20th century introduced widespread eschatological sentiments, a premonition of a crisis due to the unstable political situation, rapid scientific and industrial development and the destruction of old values and traditions. This being so, composers are concerned with understanding the problem of man's place in the new world, and the ancient perception of human life as subject to fate, the decision of the gods, making it possible to understand one's destiny and purpose in a new way.

Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*

It is well known that one of the major concerns in mythological narratives ignores the fundamental aspects of human existence: mysteries, life, and death. In situations where religion takes a place in culture, it occupies functional explanations and facilitates death. For example, in Ancient Egypt, where life was perceived as preparation for death, after which, with the development of the necessary rituals, a person expected a happy afterlife. (Vongdip & Agai, 2025). If a religion fails to support this function, the culture will face the need for an outlet and other forms associated with death. One such form is myth.

Greek religion offered no answer to one of the fundamental questions—the fate of man after death. While myth for the ancient Greeks represented an attempt to understand the darkness of the unconscious (an attempt to conquer the darkness of the unconscious through myth), during the Renaissance, Europeans were drawn to the rich material of ancient Greek myths. They viewed this as instructive allegories that explained, in figurative and sensory form, the principles of morality, the laws of nature, and the characteristics of various aspects of socio-political relations. For example, Bacon viewed the myth of Dionysus as a symbolic account of unlawful desire or affection:

> Under the history of Bacchus is drawn the nature of unlawful desire or affection, and disorder; for the appetite and thirst of apparent good is the mother of all unlawful desire, though ever so destructive, and all unlawful desires are conceived in unlawful wishes or requests, rashly indulged or granted before they are well understood or considered, and when the affection begins to grow warm, the mother of it (the nature of good) is destroyed and burnt up by the heat. (Bacon, 1609)

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a rise in biblical criticism. Colonization led to an introduction to the religions of other continents. The consideration of alternative forms of experiencing death became relevant, since it increased the number of possible ways to control it and accept it as a natural continuation of life. During this period, myth received a new interpretation, acquired a sacred function, and became a crucial artistic tool for understanding the soul and the mysteries of existence.

According to the philosopher and playwright Maeterlinck, the period of the late 19th and early 20th centuries is considered a transitional period in which the power of the soul increases.

In his 1911 treatise *Death*, he writes that he is interested not in the struggle leading to death, but in death itself "let us accustom ourselves to regard death as a form of life which we do not yet understand; let us learn to

look upon it with the same eye that looks upon birth; and soon our mind will be accompanied to the steps of the tomb with the same glad expectation that greets a birth" (Maeterlinck, 1912, p. 87). The motif of death plays an important, if not central, role in such plays by Maeterlinck such as *The Blind* (1890), *The Uninvited* (1891), *There, Within* (1894), and *Ariane and Bluebeard, or the Futile Deliverance* (1896).

His works reveal a symbolist picture of a dual world, different from the dual world of the romantic: People and nature enter into this world, and the soul, which is often identified with God and to which the souls of individual people, also belonging to the other world, are subordinate (Maeterlinck, 1912). According to Maeterlinck,

> What we know is not interesting; the really interesting things are those which we can only divine the veiled life of the soul, the crepuscular region of subconsciousness, our borderland feelings, all that lies in the strange neutral zone between the frontiers of consciousness and unconsciousness. (Maeterlinck, 1897, p. xii)

The play *Ariana and Bluebeard, or the Futile Deliverance* most clearly develops the idea of the symbolist duality of self-knowledge and self-soul.

If we consider the story of Ariana and Bluebeard itself, as told by Maeterlinck, we can trace an analogy with ancient Greek mythology. Their story is reminiscent of the myth of Hades and Persephone: Bluebeard loved Ariana more than anyone else, willing to forgive her disobedience. She, unlike the peasants and other wives, is not afraid of him, enters the forbidden room without trepidation or fear, and tells Bluebeard's former wives that spring has already arrived.

It is in the spring that Persephone emerges from the underworld and everything begins to bear fruit. Thus, by placing Ariana among Bluebeard's unfortunate five recluses in the springtime, Maeterlinck seems to delegate to her the functions of the ancient Greek goddess. She must bring them out of the shadows and revive them so that they can blossom again. The lines spoken by the play's characters also suggest the myth of Hades and Persephone; for example, the crowd shouts after the carriage.

> "Don't enter the castle! Don't enter—there's death!" (Maeterlinck, 1901)
> "People were crying in the streets." (Maeterlinck, 1901)
> "Following the diamonds, flames will burst forth, or even death itself..." (Maeterlinck, 1901)
> The theme of death also resonates in the song of the five recluses:
> "The five daughters of Orlamonde
> (the dead sorceress of darkness)
> <...> Peer through the cracks at the sea,
> They are all afraid to die.
> They knock on the deaf doors,
> But they don't want to open them…" (Maeterlinck, 1901)

The Hungarian poet Balázs, using Maeterlinck's play as a basis, initially wrote the libretto for Kodály. However, at the request of Bartók, who had attended the play's reading and was delighted by it, handed it over to him.

Both Maurice Maeterlinck and Béla Balázs develop the theme of the afterlife. There is also a noticeable reference to the myth of Hades and Persephone. At the very beginning of the libretto, Bluebeard tells Judith that her mother is dressed in mourning, creating an allusion to the myth of Aide and Persephone: When Hades abducts Persephone, her mother, Demeter, dresses in mourning.

The sounds emanating from the castle resemble mournful groans. The libretto states that even the wind weeps in the long, dark galleries, further drawing parallels with the afterlife. It is interesting to note that for the ancient Greeks, life after death was equally hopeless and terrifying for everyone. This is demonstrated in Homer's *Odyssey* when Odysseus encounters Achilles in the realm of shadows. Odysseus tries to console him with his past achievements and the honors Achilles received in life, but the hero gives him a dismal response:

> Glorious Odysseus: don't try to reconcile me to my dying.
> I'd rather serve as another man's labourer,
> as a poor peasant without land, and be alive on Earth,
> than be lord of all the lifeless dead... (Homer, 2004, Bk XI: 465-540)

Therefore, mysteries naturally arose during this period together with different sacraments through which newcomers could secure a different status in the afterlife.

B. Bartok's *Bluebeard Castle* (libretto of Bela Balázs) was written in September 1911, but it was not performed until May 1918.

Bartók and Balázs also call their opera *Bluebeard Castle,* a mystery play alluding to ancient Greek mysteries. However, while participation in ancient Greek mysteries gave participants hope for a special place in the afterlife, Bartók and Balázs's approach is an attempt to show that although death is inevitable, it is not frightening and represents merely a transition to a different state.

> It's not the body that's mortal and the soul that's immortal, but the other way around. The soul is transitory and the body (that is, matter) is everlasting! … The body, as matter, is "immortal" indeed, for matter in this world is never lost; it only changes its form. (Bartok, 1971, p. 81)

Matter does not die; it simply passes from one state to another. Human beings are also material and natural, and therefore, to attain a true place in the hierarchy of existence, it is necessary to overcome the threshold of human essence, which is accomplished through the rite of passage. The image of Persephone descending into the underworld, dying and being reborn, is again evident in the figure of Judith. We see here the traditional unification of wedding and funeral rituals within the system of the calendar myth, the narrative of the dying and resurrecting god, the demonstration of the cyclicality of myth.

Nature is also the highest criterion, the Cosmos, self-sufficient and alienated from human existence, in which the unchanging order of being, its manifestation, is revealed.

The opera's ending is noteworthy, with the appearance of the Duke's three wives, each personified by a specific time of day—"I met her in the morning". Judith is destined for the role of night, closing the circle of day, fading into darkness, and becoming night herself.

The idea of nature as a creative principle, the organizing force of the universe, remained the most intimate foundation of Bartók's work until the end of his life. "In the name of Nature, Art, and Science!" he exclaimed in a letter to S. Geyer (Liz, 2010).

In *Bluebeard's Castle*, Bartók thinks of nature in terms of its dissonance, otherness, and incongruity with human modes of being. Bartók rethinks traditional definitions of nature, in which nature is conceptualized as the opposite of culture and identified with the qualities of harmony, unity, and a stable self-identity unmediated by human thought and human being.

In Bartók, folklore, as a hypostasis of nature's creative power, acquires not only the meaning of art but also the features of a mythologized symbol of life, truth, and new harmony. Like the ancient Greeks, Balázs and

Bartók use mystery plays to attempt to establish a connection between two worlds, compelling the listener to view the legend of Bluebeard, transformed into a tale by Charles Péraud, from a different perspective, where Bluebeard is not a fearsome murderer, but the Lord of the Underworld, Hades.

Igor Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*

The most striking ancient Greek myth about the role of fate in human life is the story of King Oedipus, who failed to escape the curse that haunted him. This story has been interpreted by authors throughout the ages.

Stravinsky's opera *Oedipus Rex* was presented in 1927, the anniversary of Diaghilev's Russian Seasons, the 12th anniversary of Diaghilev's enterprise, which began in 1907. The opera-oratorio was conceived as a kind of offering, a gift to Diaghilev.

Stravinsky, turning to one of the most famous Greek myths—the myth of King Oedipus—offers his own interpretation: the idea of the hero's recognition of guilt and his willingness to accept responsibility for it.

However, if we turn to the earliest Greek explanations of the myth, we can see that in the pre-Sophoclean tradition, the image of King Oedipus was not perceived as key, structural, or meaningful.

In the Theban cycle of myths, which recounts the fate of the local dynasty of the Cadmids and Labdacids, the theme of a family curse imposed by the god of war, Ares, for the slaying of King Cadmus's dragon comes to the fore. (Takho-Godi, 1989). The plot focuses on the tragic lives of all Cadmus' descendants, atoning for their ancestor's crime. Sophocles was the first ancient Greek playwright to shift attention from the fate of an entire family to the fate of an individual, who comes into conflict with some impersonal principle. As Maria Haley pointed out

> Sophocles' Theban tragedies: *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, were each staged decides apart. Therefore, whilst many scholars have conflated the plays into a continuous narrative, in performance they were presented as separate interpretations of various stages in the Theban myth. (Haley, 2015)

Moreover, in the classical interpretation of Sophocles, reflected in the tragedies *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the theme of fate hostile to man is not dominant: The word μοῖρα (fate) is applied to the description of Oedipus's life once, at the end of the play (Yarkho, 1978). The author perceives the story of the title character as the embodiment of the paradigm of universal human existence and understands it not so much in moral and religious terms as in philosophical ones.

The dramatic situation is not associated with the evasion of prophecies, but with the gradual revelation of the truth about Oedipus's true situation. Oedipus's role is not passive: He does not submit solely to the will of fate, but independently fights to restore justice. The heroism of the Theban King lies in his persistence in the investigation, despite the bitterness of the truth, and his steadfast acceptance of his fate. The main focus of *Oedipus Rex* is "the moral character of the protagonist, who directs his actions in accordance with his consciousness" (Haley, 2015).

In the opera, Oedipus is a victorious king, a proud man who seeks the truth himself and challenges oracles. From blind confidence, he comes to a terrible realization of his guilt. The clash of human will and fate occurs. Oedipus blinds himself only after he has gained spiritual insight. This is not a victim of blind chance, but a gesture of supreme tragic responsibility. In Stravinsky's opera-oratorio, the theme of Fate, first appearing in the opening chorus, changes throughout the opera and goes from "an ominous background to triumphant fanfares" (Yarkho, 1978), to conclude the entire work with its dull throb.

The definition of *Oedipus Rex* as a "death-haunted work" appears also in the article of Daniel Albright:

> Now this could be said about Sophocles's version, or anybody's version, but Stravinsky extends the idea of deathliness in all sorts of strange directions. Sophocles has Jocasta hang herself; but Stravinsky, a more flagrant sort of mass murderer, kills off the language, the music, even the concept of drama itself.
>
> Cocteau's narrator says that Oedipus contends with "those deities who watch us from beyond death." (Albright, 2007, p. 26)

This is the contradiction: Man opposes the will of the gods, but the unconscious honors their will.

In the 20th century, the theme of evil fate and man as a plaything of the gods became widespread. The musical language of 20th-century theater was transformed and subject to significant changes. It is interesting to note that for the ancients the motif of incest was also equated with the theme of usurpation of power, self-deification.

Nero and Caligula deified themselves, and the more they insist on their choosiness, on their lifetime divinity, the more they fall into megalomania with all the clinical signs of the disease. Incestuous whims are considered in this case an indicator of self-will.

But for Stravinsky, the theme of a generational curse or the usurpation of power is less relevant. Savenko points out that Stravinsky focuses on the depiction of extremely generalized, supra-individual feelings, on the geometry of tragedy (Savenko, 2000). A detachment or alienation from the image occurs. By alienating himself from the material, the composer gains the opportunity to touch upon his relationship to it. It is like a crow's eye on the natural course of events.

Opera is written in Latin. But why is Latin the language if Sophocles' work is written in Greek? In his *Chronicle of My Life* Stravinsky writes:

> I've always felt that conveying an elevated state of mind requires a special language, not the one we speak every day. That's why I began to consider the language most suitable for the work I had in mind, and ultimately settled on Latin. This choice also offered the advantage that the material I was working with wasn't dead, but petrified, acquired a certain monumentality, and thus protected myself from anything banal. (Stravinsky, 2005, p. 464)

Latin text is also effective on the semantic level (Albright, 2007). Therefore, at the beginning of the opera the chorus glorifies Oedipus:

"Reskiturus sum monstrum, monstrum reskiscam, Deo claro Oedipus natus est" (I am soon to discover a wonder; Oedipus is born of a god) (Stravinsky, 1949, p. 9) but after Oedipus's fall the chorus sings "Ekke! Regem Oedipoda: foedissimum monstrum monstrat" (Behold! King Oedipus; he shows the foulest monster) (Stravinsky, 1949, p. 9).

Before each scene in the opera, the narrator narrates the scene's premise in the audience's native language. The audience does not guess. They know in advance what will happen, observing the mechanics of fate from above. Such alienation from the image is characteristic of performance theater, which, in its aesthetic essence, is closely linked to the principle of stylization.

Stravinsky's new stylization is a connection with the styles of the past—a connection that is a special form of continuation of tradition. Stravinsky understands artistic tradition "in a highly dialectical manner, clearly recognizing it not only as the sum of crystallized principles of musical thought but also as a processual category" (Pavlov, 2012, p. 120).

In his *Dialogues* he mentioned: "A real tradition is not the relic of a past that is irretrievably gone; it is a living force that animates and informs the present" (Stravinsky, 2026). For a composer, stylization is a method that alienates himself from the image and achieves the ability to express his relationship to it.

Anti-romanticism and dehumanization became dominant trends, and the neoclassicism approach emerged. One of its significant essential features was its appeal to the genres and forms of past eras, primarily baroque music, whose stylizations perfectly corresponded to the trends of the new era. Neoclassicism possessed a number of characteristic features inherent in its musical language, primarily its pitch organization. Neoclassical music is built on linear dependencies while rejecting the homophonic texture.

In Stravinsky's opera, the theme of fate, evil destiny, and the impossibility of preventing or changing destiny, is fundamental. The view from above, the distance from the material, and the monumentality were more suited to the composer's method of variations on style. The stylization of baroque forms, the musical fabric of the works built on polyphonic means of development, and its detachment, suit the composer's vision. However, the stylization is not pure stylization. Automatic imitation is not stylization, but, as Druskin notes, a "deformation of style" (Druskin, 2009).

Or, for example, in the first appearance of Oedipus "Liberi, vos liberabo" (Stravinsky, 1949)—(just as I saved you from the sphinx I will save you from the plague). In his *Dialogues* Stravinsky describes this as Oedipus's spreading "the tail feathers of his pride" (Stravinsky, 2026) and it is indeed preening, peacock music (Albright, 2007). For Oedipus's appearance Stravinsky used the technique of baroque opera, with forms rhythmically shaped and brilliant coloraturas.

The new stylization establishes a unique connection with the styles of the past—a connection that, in Stravinsky's view, is a special form of continuation of tradition. This new form of stylization does not, as before, presuppose the subordination of the entire system of expressive means to a chosen style; rather, the opposite phenomenon occurs here: the subordination of the model to contemporary artistic thinking, very skillfully executed.

Conclusion

Both myths—Oedipus and the abduction of Persephone by Hades—intersect in the themes of the inevitability of fate, fatal error, connection with the underworld, and personal transformation. Both plots emphasize that the intervention of higher powers or prophecies irreversibly changes the lives of the heroes, forcing them to undergo suffering (a descent into Hades, a movement toward oneself for the sake of a new understanding of the world and oneself). Transformation and a new reflection of ethical myths, a connection with the social, political, and cultural situation of society at that time.

For Béla Bartók and Igor Stravinsky, turning to mythology, archaism, and ritual, truly became a crucial tool for understanding the surrounding reality, hidden beneath the thin veneer of modern civilization. For both composers, myth was not an escape from reality—on the contrary, it helped them reveal the true, primordial nature of humanity and society during the transformative era of the early 20th century.

For both composers, turning to mythology is a return to their roots, to a period of archaic, magical thinking. For Bartók it is a return to his roots, interpreting folklore as primordial, magical thinking. He embraces fairy tales as living, pre-rational language, striving to restore materiality and expressiveness to art.

Stravinsky turns to pure myth, where constant meanings and not random emotions operate. Igor Stravinsky's reflection on myth is a conscious artistic reinterpretation of archaic, pagan, and ancient themes through the prism

of the cold intellectualism of the 20th century where rock is a cold, majestic, and inexorable ancient law, functioning like a clockwork mechanism, and the myth is the constructor of time, which explains this mechanism. The composer does not dissolve into the elemental force of primordial ritual, but rather de-familiarizes and models it with the help of strict geometry of form, rhythmic innovation, and neoclassical masks.

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