

The Legend of Orpheus

Orpheus the son of a Thracian king and the Muse Calliope, was the greatest of all poets and musicians. Apollo gave him his lyre and the Muses taught him to play it, which he did so sweetly that his music even tamed wild beasts. The beauty of his wife, Eurydice, inspired the passion of the rural deity Aristaeus, who presided over the making of honey and olive oil. One day he pursued her into a wood, and as she fled from his embraces she trod on a serpent and died of its bite.

Orpheus' grief was so great that he descended into Hades and begged the gods of the Underworld to let Eurydice return to life with him. Enchanted by his playing, they agreed on one condition: that Orpheus must not look behind him until they had both arrived on earth. But Orpheus turned to see if she was following, whereupon Eurydice was doomed to stay forever in the Underworld.

So ran the ancient myth; but Offenbach has rung his own light-hearted changes on it. Orpheus is portrayed as a not-too-successful violinist, while Aristaeus is merely the disguise for Pluto, King of the Underworld, whose pursuit of Eurydice incites the wrath of Calliope, mother of Orpheus. Pluto absconds with Eurydice to Hades, and the infuriated Calliope takes off to see King Jupiter in a singularly appropriate hot-air balloon.

On Mount Olympus, King Jupiter has his own troubles, but sends Mercury off to bring Pluto up to explain himself. Calliope and Orpheus also eventually arrive in search of justice, so Jupiter takes all the family off to Hades to search for the missing Eurydice who has found that Hell was not as heavenly; as she hoped. She more than welcomes the arrival of Pluto, who puts on a gigantic party, but the riotous dancing is interrupted when Orpheus and, mama arrive.

Yes, Orpheus can have his wife back on condition that he does not turn, and look at her as they depart from Hades. They turn to go and Orpheus and Eurydice are each destined to live happily ever after ... but with whom?