Stravinsky, Britten and the Lure of the Classical Past

Transcript

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"... these are no longer the myths of the Greeks. By now, they are ours, and we have made them into the myths we need, the stories through which we seek to understand ourselves ... And though they lead only to an acknowledgement of the bitterness of the human predicament, rather than to any kind of solution, that in itself offers some kind of dignity in the face of doom”.

"... every age must re-examine myths because of our desperate need to understand”.

Two quotations from two contemporary practitioners and commentators who have dealt, on a regular basis, with the legacy of ancient Mediterranean civilisation: Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, and Sir Peter Hall, theatre director among whose greatest achievements at the National Theatre stands his legendary production of Aeschylus’ Oresteia trilogy in the early 1980s.

I should say at the outset that I am not a classicist! I am a musicologist. In recent years I have become fascinated by the way in which the twentieth century has received the stories of the Greeks and Romans. What have modern minds found there? Why do they retain a significance and a relevance? Why do we still seem to need them? These questions have fascinated me, and the observations of MacGregor and Hall give a hint as to why – perhaps even more so in the twentieth century, the most violent century known to man – we return to the tales and characters of the Greeks and turn them into something that we can own in order to try to understand the horrors of our own times, and even the terrors that lurk deep within us. It is not without relevance that the century’s most influential psychologists, Freud and Jung, turned to myth in order to help us understand ourselves. Though their ideas may have subsequently been discredited, in part of whole, it is telling that Jung’s understanding of archetypal figures and events that we still discuss were derived from ancient myth, while Freud’s concept of the Oedipus Complex is part of everyday parlance.

There is one ancient personality with whom I have been rather preoccupied in recent years: Orpheus. Orpheus the first musician, the musician’s musician, poet and singer, composer and lyre-player. Orpheus, whose songs of lament have echoed down the centuries. Orpheus, whose lamenting moved all those who heard him to tears. Orpheus, whose head, though severed from his body, continued to sing. It should hardly surprise us, then, that Orpheus has long held a fascination for musicians. Since the birth of opera in the late sixteenth century, Orpheus’s song has continually been adapted and reinterpreted on the musical stage, from Claudio Monteverdi’s pleading ‘Possente spirito’ in the first great opera Orfeo of 1607 through to Harrison Birtwistle’s The Corridor, a retelling of the myth from Eurydice’s perspective premiered at Aldeburgh just a few years ago.

We can use Orpheus as an exemplar of what has happened to the tales of the ancient Greeks, of the ways in which such stories have been reclaimed by each age, how – to recall MacGregor – they are no longer the myths of the Greeks, but ours. Orpheus dates back at least 3000 years, making his first appearance in the sixth century BC, but by then he was already a celebrity - famous Orpheus, as the poet Ibycus describes him. Yet his origins remain obscure. Was there a real Orpheus, an historical figure, or was he merely the product of ancient Greek imagination? These are unanswerable questions. Does it really matter if Orpheus ever existed? Listen to the words of the Classical scholar W.K.C. Guthrie: ‘As we try to trace Orpheus back through the ages he becomes more shadowy, more elusive, more Protean in his aptitude for slipping away from anyone who tries to lay actual hands on him and make him tell just what he is and what he stands for.’ Who Orpheus is and what he stands for have been different for every generation. Each age has reclaimed Orpheus for itself; each age has remade Orpheus in its own image. For early Christians Orpheus was a Christ-like figure; the middle ages saw Orpheus and Eurydice as courtly lovers; and the twentieth century found in the untimely deaths of these beautiful youths an allegory for the slaughter of the battlefields of the Somme, or the siege of Leningrad, or the devastation of Hiroshima – as explored by Rilke, Kokoshka, Cocteau, and many others. The myth of Orpheus is really no longer a Greek myth because it is become a vehicle through which we all strive to find a deeper understanding of ourselves. And the same could be said for those other figures who have dominated twentieth century thought, including Oedipus (as rethought by Freud) or Ulysses (as rethought by Joyce) or Antigone (as rethought by Cocteau or Anouilh) or Apollo (as rethought by the NASA space project in the 1960s) or countless other examples.

Orpheus can be found in many ancient literary sources, as well as on vase painting, sculptures and coins (more often than not as a lyre player). But there were two narratives that had the greatest impact on later interpretations of the Orpheus myth, both Latin, written at much the same time: the fourth book of Virgil’s Georgics from 29 BC, and Ovid’s Metamorphoses from between one and eight AD. Ovid’s subject is, quite simply, change, transformation, metamorphosis.
Of bodies changed to other forms I tell; You Gods, who have yourselves wrought every change, Inspire my enterprise and lead my lay in one continuous song from nature's first Remote beginnings to our modern times.

These are Ovid's opening words, and they continue to ring true for more recent modern times. The world is in a continual state of flux. Ovid weaves together over 250 mythological stories interpreted as tales of transformation of people and objects from one state to another – Bacchus, for example, avenges the murder of Orpheus by turning the Thracian women into oak trees. But, in a larger sense, Ovid sanctions the continual reinterpretation and metamorphoses of these stories. As E. J. Kenney writes, 'Ovid rings the changes on the theme of change itself'. And while composers have only fitfully turned to Ovid, when they have – as we shall see in the case of Benjamin Britten shortly – one can understand, to put it at its crudest, why Ovid's message is one to which musicians would readily respond, most especially in music since about 1800 in which change, transformation, development (to use a more music-specific term) has been given a primacy. At the most basic level, the art of composition is the art of metamorphosis: take an idea, and transform it into something else. To give a very obvious example, just think of one of the most famous musical ideas of all: the bold, four-note rhythmic motive that opens Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, and then think of the metamorphosis it undergoes across the course of the first movement, and across the four movements of the symphony as a whole; think how just one idea is transformed into a completely different idea, yet retains its essence, and how dark despair at the start (C minor) is transformed into triumphant light at the end (C major). Beethoven gives his idea mythopoetic status. It is also been suggested, incidentally – first by A. B. Marx in the 1850s – that Beethoven's contemporaneous Fourth Piano Concerto (1803-6) was based on the Orpheus myth as told by Virgil and Ovid. There was certainly a particular interest in Orpheus in Vienna at this time.

However, my subject is not Beethoven. I have chosen to talk about Britten and Stravinsky as two composers who are prominently represented in this year's City of London Festival and for whom important anniversaries fall this year. 1913 was the year of Britten's birth (on 22 November, in fact, St Cecelia's day, the patron saint of music), and 29 May 1913 saw the notorious premiere in Paris of a ballet with music by Stravinsky that remains perhaps his best-known work, and which – for better or worse – came to define musical modernism, The Rite of Spring.

Before I look at the significance of the classical past for them individually – and their responses were distinctly different – I should say that there was a degree of common ground between the two. They shared the same publisher for a period in Boosey & Hawkes, who would regularly supply Stravinsky on request with copies of Britten's scores. Topical for our purposes here with the current production at Covent Garden in our minds and ears, having asked for a score of Gloriana, Stravinsky wrote to Leslie Boosey in September 1953, 'Many thanks ... for the beautiful edition of Gloriana which arrive safely. Now, I wish to have a chance to hear it because I find the music very interesting.' I'm intrigued to know what Stravinsky saw in the score in the early 1950s that resonated with him. (This, it should be remembered, was a time of crisis for Stravinsky, having completed his opera The Rake's Progress in 1951, and was now starting to take his music in a very different direction, engaging for the first time with the serial method as first expounded by Schoenberg in the 1920s.) It is clear that Stravinsky followed Britten's progress with interest. It's also clear that Britten had an impact on Stravinsky, even though the senior composer would never have acknowledged it. In 1952 Britten wrote his second Canticle Abraham & Isaac; in 1962/3 Stravinsky produced his own Abraham & Isaac. Coincidence? In Stravinsky's late TV opera The Flood of 1961/2, the text is derived in part from the Chester mystery play Noah's Flood, the same source Britten used in 1957 for his telling of the same tale. The voice of God is cast by Stravinsky for two basses, who sing separate lines but in rhythmic unison. Where did he get this idea? The voice of God in Britten’s Abraham & Isaac is represented in just the same way, using alto and tenor. I leave you to draw your own conclusions – Stravinsky had always been a musical magpie! It was only natural that he should try to put people of the scent, and was often quite mean about Britten in private. Take this, from a letter from Stravinsky to his friend Nicolas Nabokov in 1949, written from Los Angeles on the only occasion, as far as I am aware, that the two composers met:

All week here I've listened to Aunt Britten and Uncle Pears. Britten himself makes quite a favourable impression, and he is very popular with the public. He undoubtedly has talent as a performer, especially at the piano.

When in 1965 Stravinsky and Britten were jointly awarded the Erasmus Prize, Stravinsky declined it: 'How tactless these Dutch', he wrote.

As for Britten, Stravinsky was an ever-present part of his composing life. He studied Stravinsky's scores and they left their mark (as, it should be said, did Mahler and Berg amongst the early twentieth-century European modernists), most particularly the neo-classical works on his formal and harmonic thinking. As Peter Pears once pointed out, Stravinsky's Apollo of 1928 was a key influence on Britten's emerging voice in the 1930s.

I will return to Apollo shortly, who periodically punctuates Britten's output. But I would like to take you first to the Six Metamorphoses after Ovid for solo oboe, composed in 1951. Each movement is a musical portrait of a different figure from the Metamorphoses: Pan, Phaeton, Niobe, Bacchus, Narcissus and Arethusa. Most of these have watery associations, in keeping with the commission – the piece was to be played on the water at Thorpeness. The solo oboe is clearly the reed pipe or aulos from antiquity, as played by the satyr Pan, which is where we begin. The reed pipe is in fact his beloved Syrinx, a water nymph, who has been changed into reeds. ‘You and I shall stay in unison!’ says Pan. ‘And waxed together reeds of different lengths / And made the pipes that keep his darling's name.'
Stravinsky would eventually follow their example when, towards the end of the 1920s, he worked with Jean
of the First World War and after: Apollinaire, Debussy, Cocteau, Gide, Milhaud, Picasso, Satie, to name but a few.

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Spring, Balanchine in the early 1920s with work inspired by the experimental choreography of Kasyan
George Balanchine. The agreement of Stravinsky and Balanchine on such aesthetic matters as ‘classical order’,
gamelan, as so often in Britten suggesting the seductive, the exotic, the allure of the forbidden.

This was the continual dilemma of Britten’s own life – primal instinct versus ordered behaviour. We hear and see
the dance of the followers of Dionysus, with at its climax, the musical sounds of the Oriental other, the Balinese
unchanging A major, this youthful beauty never fades, it never grows up.

More than thirty years later in Death in Venice, currently running at ENO, Britten returns to Apollo. Now an ill
man, contemplating his own death, which came just three years after he completed the opera in 1973, he
invests himself into the elderly novelist, Gustav von Aschenbach. Aschenbach contemplates from afar, is caught
by the allure of, a beautiful youth called Tadzio. It is another Wolff Scherchen, or one of the many other boys on
the threshold of adolescence with which Britten had been infatuated during his life. As Bridcut writes, ‘The opera
laid bare the turbulence in Britten’s own mind which for most of his career had so enriched his music.’ Here this
is cast as the contest between once again Apollo, god of beauty and order, and Dionysus, the god of instinct,
passion, untrammelled libido. Towards the end of the opera, in a dream, the two sides of Aschenbach –
represented by the voices of Dionysus and Apollo – pull in different directions.

DIONYSUS: Do not refuse the mysteries

APOLLO: No. Love, reason, beauty, form.

DIONYSUS: He who denies the god, denies his nature.

APOLLO: No. Be ruled by me and by my laws.

That is the opening third of the movement. You can already hear how the first falling idea is being worked,
transformed. ‘Narcissus’, the fifth movement, presents even more opportunities for the kinds of games
composers love to play. The youth Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a silvery pool and was
transformed into a flower. The music has three statements, that is, a short set of variations or transformations
of the openingidea, rippling across the water in demi-semiquaver figures. And it is full of reflections: rising ideas
are immediately echoed as falling ones, and vice versa.

Now let us go back almost a decade and a half to 1939. Britten’s in the USA, where he has gone for a complex
of reasons, but in part as a kind of sabbatical to escape the stifling atmosphere he found in England. On the
outbreak of war, as a pacifist, he decided to remain in America. The difficult atmosphere at home was not just
one created by his phenomenal success at a young age, but also by various complex relationships. In the
summer of 1938 Britten aged 24 had met a German youth, seven years his junior, called Wolff Scherchen, son
of conductor Hermann Scherchen. As John Bridcut writes, ‘In 1938–39 [Wolff] Scherchen was the most
important person in Britten’s life, and he was still at school. He, more than any other, was the figure who
embodied Aschenbach’s (and Britten’s) own dilemma in Death in Venice [the novella of Thomas Mann, and
source of Britten’s late opera]: the enchantment he found in the beauty of boys.’ Over the Atlantic, and away
from Scherchen, Britten was commissioned to write a curtain-raiser for piano and strings. He called it Young
Apollo, headed with a quotation from Keats’s Hyperion that speaks of the god of beauty’s ‘limbs celestial’ and
‘golden tresses’. Britten wrote about it to Wolff Scherchen, and there was no doubt who he had in mind in
making this portrait of Apollo.

It is both restrained, never leaving A major, and yet full of youthful exuberance, in a piano part written for Britten
himself to play. Youth and beauty. Innocent – naïve almost – yet knowing too. Through the Greek god of beauty
and order, Britten finds the means of expressing – directly yet covertly – his idealised vision of youth. Just like the
unchanging A major, this youthful beauty never fades, it never grows up.

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Tadzio is played in the opera by a mute dancer. It was principally through the ballet that Igor Stravinsky explored
the lures of Apollo and other figures from the classical past, most notably with the dancer and choreographer
George Balanchine. The agreement of Stravinsky and Balanchine on such aesthetic matters as ‘classical order’,
and on the temporal dimension of music and dance resulted in an extraordinary unity of creative vision. Their
three great classical ballets – Apollo, Orpheus and Agon – stand as witness. ‘If I could write music’, Balanchine
once wrote, ‘it seems to me this is how I would want it to sound.’ For his part, Stravinsky trusted Balanchine
deply: ‘I do not see how one can be a choreographer unless, like Balanchine, one is a musician first.’ Stravinsky
would listen to Balanchine; they planned projects in detail together; he had even changed his music at
Balanchine’s suggestion, something this all-controlling composer would do for no-one else. Many of Stravinsky’s
most celebrated scores were initiated and guided by this man 22 years his junior.

Both artists had begun as progressive modernists, Stravinsky before the war pre-eminently with The Rite of
Spring, Balanchine in the early 1920s with work inspired by the experimental choreography of Kasyan
Goleizovsky, whose near-nude dancers were placed in abstract formations amidst constructivist décor. For both
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Many of the artists in Paris in whose circle Stravinsky moved were turning to classical subject-matter in the years
of the First World War and after: Apollinaire, Debussy, Cocteau, Gide, Milhaud, Picasso, Satie, to name but a few.
Stravinsky would eventually follow their example when, towards the end of the 1920s, he worked with Jean
Cocteau on the opera-oratorio Oedipus Rex after Sophocles. But this was by no means Stravinsky’s first encounter with classical art. He had for more than a decade been working in the midst of an emerging Parisian Art Deco culture that referenced and reinterpreted antiquity. Indeed, the importance of classical models as the basis for a new art, for modernism, had been at the heart of the early productions of the Ballets Russes, most notably in Tcherepnin’s Narcisse (1911) and Ravel’s Daphnis et Chloé (1912). Their designer had been Léon Bakst, one of the architects of Mir iskusstva (World of Art, founded by DIAGhilev), and who in 1909 had published in the journal Apollon an essay entitled ‘The paths of classicism in art’. Here he gives a prescient vision of the post-war Parisian synthesis of high art and haute couture: ‘Fashion is everywhere that art is to be found’. He had been deeply impressed by the American Isadora Duncan dancing barefoot, ‘in a revealing Greek tunic’, in St Petersburg as early as December 1904. ‘Duncanism’ took a strong hold on the Ballets Russes. Bakst saw the art of the future as being ‘deliberately uncomplicated’, moving towards ‘a new and very simple form’. Artists will ‘return, like the Greeks of Periclean Athens, to proclamations of the beauty of nature’. Bakst, then heralds the birth of ‘a new classical art’.

Stravinsky’s overt turn towards the classical after the First World War and his apparent moving away from progressive modernism perplexed many. Leonid Sabaneyev, for example, writing of Apollo a year after its premiere in the Musical Times, was scathing of Stravinsky’s vault-face: ‘the Bolshevik, the Lenin and Trotsky of music has become a peaceful rentier spending the rest of his days in a suburban villa.’ But does Apollo signal the disappearance of the revolutionary Stravinsky? Like Art Deco more generally, Stravinsky and Balanchine embraced the classical past, not to repeat it, but to reinvent it, turning it to their own modern purposes. Their reconfiguration of the classical was part of a process of objectivizing, of formalizing, but also of distancing from the past, from direct emotion and expression. Behind the masks of their three great classical ballets lies also a late-modern uncertainty, a questioning, a sense of loss after the First World War and the Russian Revolutions. Stravinsky, in exile in Switzerland during the War, lost old loves and homeland. He would not return to Russia until 1962. The classical art of antiquity as well as the classical music of Western Europe became Stravinsky’s new home.

Apollon musagète (or more simply Apollo, as Diaghilev renamed it) was Stravinsky’s first collaboration proper with Balanchine. It was written mainly in Nice during the latter part of 1927 and completed in January 1928. Stravinsky later generously acknowledged that the early success of the ballet was attributable to the beautiful choreography of Balanchine. For Balanchine, Apollo marked a creative epiphany that enabled him to pare down his modernist choreographic style. Apollon I look back on as the turning point of my life. In its discipline and restraint, in its sustained oneness of tone and feeling the score was a revelation. It seemed to tell me that I could dare not to use everything, that I, too, could eliminate.

Stravinsky had decided ‘to compose a ballet founded on moments or episodes in Greek mythology plastically interpreted by dancing of the so-called classical school’. Following the ‘Prologue’ depicting the Birth of Apollo, the three Muses Calliopée, Polyhymnia and Terpsichore are introduced, before the work proceeds through a series of conventional variations entirely in keeping with the traditions of the classical ballet. A ‘Coda’ is reached for all four dancers before the final ‘Apoteosis’ in which, simply, Apollo leads the three muses towards Parnassus. There is thus a stripping away of any meaningful narrative. What is left is an abstract meditation on classical themes, figures and dances. (One might almost be tempted to rename it ‘Apollon et sa meditation’, recalling Bourdelle’s bas-relief at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées). Such a description is equally appropriate to Balanchine’s restrained, sculptural choreography, where music and dance are unified in the expression of pure, classical beauty. Stravinsky himself designated Apollo a ‘ballet blanc’, in that the music also eschews contrast, pares down the scoring to just strings, and employs principally diatonic (‘white-note’) harmony. Here is the start, the ‘Birth of Apollo’:

[Audio Ex. 5: Stravinsky, Apollo, ‘The Birth of Apollo’, 0’00–1’25’]

How did Stravinsky achieve this sense of order as symbolised by the Greek god Apollo? By making it his most thoroughly French work to date. He explicitly turned his back on his own earlier music by trying, as he later said, ‘to discover a melodism free of folk-lore’. One means of achieving this was to look to French poetry: the ‘real subject’ of Apollo, he claimed, is ‘versification’. Each dance explores a basic iambic (short–long) pattern; the ‘Variation of Calliopée’ is headed by two lines from Nicolas Boileau, poet at the court of Louis XIV, and takes the twelve-syllable lines of the alexandrine as its rhythmic model. It also references French Baroque dances, such as the ouverture style of the opening ‘Birth of Apollo’ or the pavane-like second ‘Variation of Apollo’. But ultimately this speaks of the present, not of the past. This white-note Hellenism points more to Satie than Lully: as Paul Griffiths quips, the ‘Gallic spirit of Apollo is a complex superimposition of Lully and Delibes, Daphnis and the Ritz’. Stravinsky and Balanchine have turned a Greek god into French chic.

[Audio Ex. 6: Stravinsky, Apollo, ‘Calliope’]

In 1946, following another terrible war, Stravinsky and Balanchine now turned to Apollo’s son, Orpheus. It is the lamenting Orpheus who is encountered at the start of the ballet. ‘Orpheus weeps for Eurydice. He stands motionless, with his back to the audience.’ We hear his lyre, represented by the sounds of the harp, playing repeated falling lines in a conventional sign of lament. It echoes outward into the strings, who linger over the notes of the harp.

[Audio Ex. 7: Stravinsky, Orpheus, opening, 0’00–1’06’]

As I said at the start, the premature deaths of the youthful Orpheus and Eurydice took on particular resonance in the violent twentieth century. Artists turned, as so often before, to myth as a way of coming to terms with events that were, literally, unspeakable. It is telling that Stravinsky began work on Orpheus within a year of the end of the war. Though the idea for the subject came from Balanchine, it struck a chord with Stravinsky at that
particular moment. Never one to reveal his true feelings, it was behind the mask of Orpheus that he was best able to come to terms with both a series of tragic personal losses and his anxieties for the world situation during the war years. He would still surely have felt the tragedy of the late 1930s when in rapid succession his first daughter, first wife and mother had all died. Once more an émigré, now in the USA, Stravinsky experienced the horrors and privations of war only at a distance. Separated from his family in Europe, both his sons now signed up to the French army, he followed from afar the terrifying and destructive siege of his native city of Leningrad. And it is a sense of distance, too, that in general characterizes the apparently timeless Orpheus. Yet, beneath this universalized ritual, the work seems to speak more personally and of its time. It is striking that Orpheus is Stravinsky’s only score after Firebird in which the term expressivo occurs frequently.

In April 1946 Balanchine and Stravinsky worked side-by-side on the scenario and timings. Music and choreography emerged simultaneously. They developed a scenario that starts with Orpheus weeping at Eurydice’s funeral and ends with an apotheosis where Apollo appears, ‘wrests the lyre from Orpheus and raises his son heavenwards’. The music throughout is restrained, distanced. The sense of formality is reinforced by, for example, the hymn-like frame provided by prologue and epilogue, and the importance throughout of the craft of counterpoint. The designer eventually chosen for the premiere production was the Japanese-American Isamu Noguchi, a sculptor whose abstract geometric sets, costumes and masks perfectly matched the distilled, ritualistic purity of Stravinsky’s music and Balanchine’s dances.

The only really violent music in the work is the second ‘Pas d’action’, where the ‘Bacchantes attack Orpheus, seize him and tear him to pieces’. Even here the music is disciplined. Orpheus offers not the depiction of the violence of war, but rather reflections on war and death. The violent, mechanical repetitions, ostinatos, and rhythmic energy of The Rite of Spring are still to be heard, but now with a sense of detachment. This, above all else, is what the classical past gave to Stravinsky: not a turning back to ancient Greece, but a universal story retold for a new age. This myth in particular gave him the context in which he could sing his laments of loss. In the ‘Air de danse’ Orpheus sings for the loss of Eurydice. To the accompaniment of the lyre, a pair of obbligato oboes gives voice to a deeply melancholic lament, weaving lines round each other in grief, echoing a Bach Passion aria. Stravinsky glances back both to ancient Greece and to the 18th century, but in so doing he highlights the chasm between his own time and Bach’s, articulating uncertainty and alienation.

[Audio Ex. 8: Stravinsky, Orpheus, ‘Air de danse’, 0’00”–1’25”]

I return to the words of Neil MacGregor with which I began: ‘By now, these myths are ours, and we have made them into the myths we need, the stories through which we seek to understand ourselves … ‘ In the cases of both Britten and Stravinsky, I think it fair to say that this evaluation holds, more or less. At key moments in their creative lives they both turned to the classical past in order to try to understand the present. Greek antiquity had little to do with history; Apollo, or whoever, was an idea, a utopian ideal, that stood for an inaccessible past, and associated values of order, wholeness and unity, from which either the subject or more generally the modern age has become alienated. In Death in Venice the Voice of Apollo sings of the ideals of ‘Love, reason, beauty, form’, and yet in acknowledging this Aschenbach (and via him, Britten) also recognises the lure of its passionate opposite: ‘What is art itself, compared to the rewards of chaos?’, sings Aschenbach. But in playing out an argument that goes back at least as far as Socrates, both character and composer, at the ends of their lives, find some sort of solace if not resolution.

Stravinsky’s reinvention of Greek classicism carries a double bind. First, it recognises that that unified past has been lost for ever, even while expressing the desire, in the wake of war and revolution for the restoration of its values. It is a desire, however, that is destined to fail, as heard in the melancholic apotheoses at the end of both Apollo and Orpheus. But in ways that echo the Art Deco milieu in which he moved, it is the dialogue between past and present that is crucial - the fragile, even tragic confrontation of new and old values. This forms a highly pertinent expression both of modernist aesthetics and of the post-war world. Secondly, and more personally, as an émigré as much of his own making as victim of political circumstance, Stravinsky appropriated these exemplars of high Western European culture in order to distance himself from his own Russian ‘backwaters’; yet the myths he came to inhabit were not his own, and he remained distanced from those too. The classical past became a vehicle for articulating the losses and alienation of exile.

These are just two examples. You can find many counter-examples of the classical past being used as, say, a source for the comic or ironic or merely decorative, as well as the tragic – just think of Poulenc’s surreal Les mamelles de Tirésias, after the play by the appropriately self-named Apollinaire. But in all cases what is extraordinary is that the stories and figures of antiquity still have a lure, still demand to be retold and remade for our own times, ‘because of our desperate need to understand’, as Peter Hall put it. It would seem we have as much need of Apollo today as ever we did.