Lustmord or Liebestod? Death in Ernst Krenek and Oskar Kokoschka's *Orpheus und Eurydike*

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Abstract

In 1923, Ernst Krenek composed an operatic setting of *Orpheus und Eurydike*, a drama by painter and occasional playwright Oskar Kokoschka. Because musicologists and opera houses alike have overlooked this work, credit afforded to Krenek for his role in Weimar modernity is often confined to the *Zeitoper* vein of 1920s European culture: the cosmopolitan, jazz-inspired, contemporary aesthetic of Krenek's 1927 *Jonny Spielt Auf*. This article, the first English-language study devoted to *Orpheus und Eurydike*, explores Krenek's contribution to another crucial facet of Weimar culture: the Austro-German identity crisis provoked by defeat in World War I and social upheaval.

After tracing the opera's rich genealogy and situating it in the lives of its creators (Alma and Gustav Mahler, among others, influenced Kokoschka's original play), this paper focuses on the drama's multiple death scenes. Drawing on scholar Maria Tatar's study of the Weimar obsession with sexually-tinged female death, I argue through score and libretto analysis that Krenek and Kokoschka synthesize aspects of the contemporary *Lustmord* (sexual murder) trope with elements of the Wagnerian *Liebestod* (love death) archetype. Rather than reconcile them with their artistic predecessors, however, this synthesis fleshes out the *Lustmord* latent in any *Liebestod*. With its first performance in 1926, this opera joined the ranks of "progressive" works by male artists who used aesthetic violence against women to navigate the Weimar identity crisis—in many ways, a crisis of masculinity. Paying *Orpheus und Eurydike* the attention it deserves underscores Krenek's seminal but underappreciated role in both the glittering and dark sides of Weimar culture, and reveals just how interrelated those two sides are. Though it retells a well-worn classical myth, this *Orpheus* is as much an "opera of its time" as *Jonny*.

Keywords

Krenak, Kokoschka, Orpheus, Lustmord, Weimar

Lustmord or Liebestod?
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Nicht sind die Leiden erkannt,
nicht ist die Liebe gelernt,
und was im Tod uns entfernt,

ist nicht entschleiert.
Einzig das Lied überm Land
Heiligt und feiert.

Pain has not been understood,
love has not been learned,
and what in death removes us

remains undisclosed.
Alone over the land
Song hallows and heals.

—Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, 1923¹

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1. Rainer Maria Rilke, “19,” in *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. Edward Snow (New York: North Point Press, 2005), 42–3.

Imagining opera without Eurydice and Orpheus is difficult. Settings of the classical myth by Jacopo Peri (1600), Giulio Caccini (1600), and Claudio Monteverdi (1607) begin most timelines of operatic history; in the four centuries since, dozens of reinterpretations have played central roles in the art form's development.² The dramatic riches of the myth stake out the territory within which opera largely operates: love, the power of music, and—along with attempts to thwart it—the inevitability of death.³ Making meaning out of death is so central to the operatic stage that dramatic archetypes for death scenes have taken shape over the course of opera's development. The predominant scenario to emerge in the nineteenth century, during which opera reached maturity, was the *Liebestod* (love death). Epitomized in the final aria of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, the *Liebestod* spiritualizes desire by depicting female love strong enough to annihilate the self: over Tristan's dying body, Isolde sings of love and heavenly visions before perishing. In consonance with nineteenth-century European society's gradual estrangement

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2. For an introduction to Orpheus and music, and an overview of operatic treatments of the Orpheus myth over the last four centuries, see Warren Anderson, et al., "Orpheus (i)," in *Grove Music Online* (Oxford University Press). <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/51461>.

3. For one foundational version of the myth, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.S. Kline, Book X and XI (Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library). <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph10.htm>.

from physical death, the *Liebestod* trope reduces dying to a blissful abstraction.⁴

By the end of World War I, death ceased to be an abstraction. The war not only harshly reacquainted European society with mass undignified deaths, but also violently accelerated decay in Old Europe's social order, creating a cultural wound to which artists responded. Out of the many fragmented strains of Weimar modernity, one such response involved violent depictions of sexually-tinged female death, termed *Lustmord* by Maria Tatar.⁵ These murderous representations, exemplified in paintings by George Grosz and Otto Dix; novels like Alfred Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*; operas such as *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* by Alban Berg; and, many other cultural artifacts, channel male rage onto the female body and offer disturbingly sensationalized scenes of death but little in the way of the *Liebestod*'s spiritual consolation.

In this paper, I examine one such work from these post-war years that has been overlooked in performance and English-language scholarship: Oskar Kokoschka and Ernst

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4. For a summary of the modern Western history of death and its musical implications for German culture in the 1920s (specifically, applied to Alban Berg's seminal 1922 opera *Wozzeck*, completed one year before Krenek's *Orpheus*), see Meaghan Parker, "'Wir Arme Leut': Undignified Death and Madness in Berg's *Wozzeck*," *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology* 6 (2013):89–118.

5. Tatar uses the term *Lustmord* interchangeably with the English "sexual murder," but notes that "the German term *Lust*—which implies desire and pleasure along with sexual gain—captures more precisely the multiple dimensions of the motives driving this type of killing." Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 7–8.

Krenek's 1923 opera *Orpheus und Eurydike*. Krenek and Kokoschka grapple with the past and respond to their present by recasting the classical myth, staking a claim in the history of Orpheus retellings. I begin my investigation historically, tracing the unusually rich genealogy of the work and situating it both in the artistic lives of its creators and in their social context. Then, I analyze the opera's death scenes, focusing on the violent murder that Krenek and Kokoschka add to a narrative already haunted by death. I posit that they combine the influence of the *Liebestod* archetype with radical and unsettling elements of *Lustmord* in an attempt to reconcile the legacies of their artistic predecessors with the chaotic instability of post-war Europe. Impossible as that reconciliation may be, their work exposes the close link between these two archetypes, fleshing out the *Lustmord* latent in any *Liebestod*. My study of this neglected *Orpheus* illuminates threads of influence between generations and art forms; introduces the theory of *Lustmord* to a musical context and examines how Krenek approaches scoring death; considers the drama as a model and modeler of gender; and, aims to broaden understanding of how Austro-Germanic society used aesthetic violence against women to navigate its post-war identity crisis.

The libretto of *Orpheus und Eurydike* originated in Oskar Kokoschka's drama of the same title. Because his personal circumstances strongly influenced the play's conception, any account of his work merits substantial biographical context.⁶ Kokoschka, primarily a visual artist,

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6. According to Henry Schvey, the play is Kokoschka's "most strongly autobiographical work." *Oskar Kokoschka, the Painter as Playwright* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982), 89.

first envisioned the theater piece in a field hospital during recovery from a severe head wound incurred on the Eastern front in 1915:

I had to wait many weeks for transport home, always in danger that the Front would be rolled back. I had lost all sense of time, and for some reason I felt spatially isolated as well, as if in a cell. There were flies everywhere. Sometimes I was overcome with memories of the past: I saw the woman from whom I had so painfully parted standing there before me. I felt myself succumbing to her power of attraction, as if I could never part from her. The head wound had impaired my power of locomotion and my vision, but the words of my imaginary conversations with her phantom impressed themselves so vividly on my mind that without having to write anything down I could progressively expand them in my imagination to create whole scenes. My play *Orpheus und Eurydike* grew out of the repeated hallucinations I experienced in the camp at Wladimir-Wolhynsk. I wrote it down from memory afterwards.⁷

Without a doubt, Kokoschka's war experience and personal suffering on the front strongly influenced the drama's conception. However, another trauma clearly haunted him—

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7. Oskar Kokoschka, *My Life* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 96.

“the woman from whom [he] had so painfully parted”—his own Eurydice.

Kokoschka met Alma Mahler in 1911, shortly after the death of her first husband, the legendary composer Gustav Mahler. In Vienna, her reputation as a beautiful socialite had rivaled her husband’s as a musician. Though Viennese high society defined her almost exclusively by her relationships with celebrated men, she was also a skilled musician with excellent training.⁸ In an eerily prophetic act (considering Kokoschka’s later work, including *Orpheus*, and the character of their future partnership), she played Isolde’s *Liebestod* aria for him at the piano when they first met.⁹ The pair soon became lovers, beginning what Kokoschka described as “an exceedingly passionate relationship.”¹⁰ This passion consumed Kokoschka, unleashing a storm of artistic inspiration but also overwhelming him with jealous anxiety at any threat to her love—even from the absent figure of her former husband.¹¹ During the next decade, his creative output reflected his tumultuous emotional life in such paintings as the *Double portrait of Oskar Kokoschka and Alma Mahler* (1912); the

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8. Alma Mahler studied music with Josef Labor and took composition lessons with Alexander Zemlinsky. During her marriage to Gustav Mahler, he initially dismissed her compositional aspirations, recanting only during their last several years together. Her only known surviving works are 14 *Lieder* for voice and piano. See Peter Franklin, “Mahler, Alma Maria,” in *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online* (Oxford University Press). <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/43383>.

9. Kokoschka, *My Life*, 72.

10. *Ibid.*, 73.

11. Kokoschka insisted that “nothing of the dead Gustav Mahler... should be brought into our house.” *Ibid.*, 77

famous *Die Windsbraut/The Tempest* (1912–13); the disturbing sketch *Alma spins using Kokoschka's intestines* (1913); and, the unsettling *Self-Portrait with Doll* (1920–21), among many others.¹²

This final painting exemplifies a crucial element of Kokoschka's artistic persona: the performance of his personal life in the public sphere through artwork. In many cases, heavily biographical artistic interpretations risk venturing into murky psychoanalytic waters. Kokoschka, however, conspicuously encouraged this interpretive process, curating the manic public image that he wanted people to project onto his artistic creations. In 1918, he ordered a life-sized doll of Alma Mahler, provoking scandal by hiring a maid for it and bringing it with him to the opera. Even his description of the doll's delivery in his 1971 autobiography is theatrical: "The packing-case was brought into the house by two men. In a state of feverish anticipation, *like Orpheus calling Eurydice back from the Underworld*, I freed the effigy of Alma Mahler from its packing."¹³ The Alma doll arrived around the same time that Kokoschka published the completed *Orpheus und Eurydike* play in 1921.

After the drama's premiere in Frankfurt in February 1921, Kokoschka harboured grand aspirations for an operatic

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12. For one collection of these and other relevant works by Kokoschka, see Richard S. Field, *Oskar Kokoschka: Literary and graphic works, 1906-1923* (Storrs, Connecticut: William Benton Museum of Art, 1977). Though copyright restrictions prohibit reproducing any of them here, many of Kokoschka's works can also be found online or accessed via Artstor. <http://library.artstor.org/library/welcome.html>.

13. Kokoschka, *My Life*, 117. My emphasis.

setting of his text. In a letter to Alma Mahler-Gropius dated 9 October 1922, he imagines a musical triumph: “I foresee *Orpheus*, by a man like Scriabin or some such maestro in New York, and that masterpiece I shall present at the Metropolitan Opera will make you rejoice in me again.”¹⁴ Directly or indirectly, the then 22-year old composer Ernst Krenek had the good fortune to hear about Kokoschka’s wishes. He had met Anna Mahler, the second eldest daughter of Gustav and Alma Mahler, in February of the same year. Soon in love, he dedicated his second symphony to her upon its completion in May 1922.¹⁵ Krenek’s developing relationship with Anna Mahler and his musical talent proved sufficient grounds for her mother to accept him into the Mahler circle. Alma Mahler even asked Krenek to complete Gustav Mahler’s unfinished Tenth Symphony. He worked for a time on several movements of the work, but, likely overwhelmed by the implications of the endeavor and the level of incompleteness in the original, abandoned the project before long. More importantly, Krenek’s engagement to Anna Mahler during the compositional period for *Orpheus* further complicates the already dense web of connections that the opera bears: his soon-to-be mother-in-law

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14. Kokoschka, letter to Alma Mahler-Gropius (Kokoschka included the surname of Bauhaus school founder Walter Gropius, even though Gropius and Alma had divorced in 1920), 22 October 1922, in Olda Kokoschka and Heinz Spielmann, eds., *Oskar Kokoschka: Letters 1905–1976* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 85–7.

15. John L. Stewart, *Ernst Krenek: The Man and His Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 47.

functioned as in indisputable inspiration to Kokoschka for the troubled character of Eurydike, and for the drama as a whole.¹⁶

Krenek contacted Kokoschka in November 1922 and they met in December at Kokoschka's home. Without finalizing any details, the composer and painter-playwright agreed that Krenek should compose an opera, not merely incidental music to the play. The difficult expressionistic drama, with its vehement language and deep personal connections, initially bewildered Krenek as much as its first public audiences.¹⁷ He met with Kokoschka less than two months later to discuss the possibility of revision. Kokoschka's interest in the project had waned, so he granted Krenek free reign to edit as he pleased.¹⁸ Though Krenek went over the play line-by-line and reduced the length by a third, he did not cut any scenes or substantially alter the plot. By July 1923, Krenek had finished the entire opera.¹⁹

In the tradition of Orpheus operas, Krenek and Kokoschka shape particularities of the myth to suit their artistic vision—for them, one of intense violence, jealousy, and despair.²⁰ While the first act of the opera more or less follows

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16. Though Krenek married Anna Mahler in 1924, the couple divorced within a year.

17. Stewart, *Ernst Krenek*, 75.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 76.

20. Two prominent examples that demonstrate the versatility of the Orpheus template are Christoph Willibald Gluck's attempted reform of *opera seria* with the noble simplicity and happy ending in his *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) and Offenbach's irreverent and satirical *Orphée aux enfers* (1858), famous for the final scene's "Galop Infernal" (widely known as the "can-can" music).

Ovid's account, several significant changes distinguish Krenek's final version from the classic Orpheus legend. To begin with, hints of jealousy and doubt taint the happiness of the newly married couple in the opera's first scene. The first words they utter sound less like adoration than interrogation: "*Du bist zurück? So bald? / Und du? Wie nicht allein?*" (You're back? So soon? / And you? As if not alone?).²¹ The three Furies soon appear with a command from Hades: Eurydike will die and spend seven years in the underworld. Their sentence delivered, Orpheus and Eurydike spend one last melancholy dinner together before a serpent delivers the fatal bite. The dramatic circumstances and musical setting of her death are remarkably mild, especially when contrasted with the extreme violence to come in the opera. The lone *fortissimo* measure surrounded by *piano* woodwind and string murmurs that represent Eurydike's snake bite and death pales in comparison to the shock value of the blaring, *triple-forte marcatissimo* brass that closes act 1 (evoking the underworld brass from Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*). Krenek's musical setting suggests not so much a death, as a transition to the underworld, hinting that the worst still lies ahead.

While their first act remains relatively faithful to the traditional legend, Krenek and Kokoschka destroy the conventional narrative by the end of the second. Seven years have elapsed at the start of the act 2, and Orpheus embarks on a quest to save Eurydike from the underworld. With the help of Psyche, he rescues Eurydike and restores her to life. Here,

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21. Ernst Krenek, *Orpheus und Eurydike*, libretto by Oskar Kokoschka (Vienna: Universal Edition A.G., 1925), 6. My libretto translations, unless otherwise noted.

Kokoschka adds an intensely personal corollary to the standard condition that Orpheus simply must not look back. Psyche orders Orpheus never to mention Eurydike's time spent with Hades, mirroring Kokoschka's obsessive jealousy and resentment for Gustav Mahler. Although reading Hades (who never actually appears onstage) as a direct representation of Gustav Mahler would oversimplify, their similarities seem more than coincidental given Kokoschka's history of autobiographical inspiration. As Henry Schvey points out in his discussion of Kokoschka's original drama, "Both Hades and Mahler loom as unseen powers which either exert a powerful attraction or pose a threat to the lovers even after death."²² Taking Krenek's contributions as composer into account complicates matters further. Not only must Krenek score the triangle of love and death, but his portrayal must respond stylistically to Mahler's artistic legacy. In a reflective essay written in 1974, Krenek describes the weight of Mahler's influence during the early 1920s: "I remember distinctly . . . that I had decided to try to become the successor of Mahler in the field of the symphony. First I wrote no less than three symphonies at the age of twenty three."²³ These symphonies

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22. Schvey, *Oskar Kokoschka*, 93.

23. Ernst Krenek, *Horizons Circled: Reflections on My Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1974), 21–2.

24. The shocking elements in Krenek's musical language were not reserved exclusively for violent programmatic music. As Adorno testifies in his brief sketch of Krenek, they also characterized his early symphonies: "The world premiere of the Second Symphony under Laugs, which took place in Kassel in 1923, was probably no less potent in its effect than the legendary premieres before the first World War, such as Berg's *Altenberg-Lieder* or *Le*

flanked the compositional period of *Orpheus*; like many of Mahler's, they shocked audiences in premieres.²⁴ While the symphonies respond to Mahler more directly, the opera also reflects Mahler's stylistic influence. Even if Krenek's third- and fourth-based atonality explores a radically different harmonic palette, his eclectic orchestration and juxtaposition of tender intimacies with pointed outbursts and huge soundscapes have a distinctly Mahlerian imprint.

With the caveat never to mention Hades lurking ominously, the pair set sail from the Underworld towards their homeland. One of their ship's nets catches a skull with a ring Orpheus had given Eurydike years earlier clenched in its teeth. The ring's inscription reads *Alos makhar*, Greek for "happiness is otherwise" and a play on the names Oskar and Alma. Kokoschka also used the phrase as the title of a poem written in 1913, at the height of their relationship. The ring, an artifact within the drama with a painful anchor to Kokoschka's romantic past, functions similarly for Orpheus. His jealousy eclipses his restraint, spurring him to break his vow and question Eurydike about her time in the underworld. She confesses that after seven years she yielded to Hades's seduction. Blind with rage, Orpheus murders her.

Sacre du Printemps. The final movement, an Adagio, ended in that performance with a fortissimo that went beyond all accepted standards, a dissonant chord progression in the brass analogous to a gaping black abyss threatening to swallow the earth from the outside. Such panic has surely not been caused by any music since." Theodor W. Adorno, "Physiognomy of Krenek," in *Night Music: Essays on Music 1928–1962*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Wieland Hoban (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 180.

Why the radically violent departure from the standard script? There is no question that Orpheus's reaction to Eurydike's confessed infidelity is a sexually tinged murder. I propose that Kokoschka's intense violence stems not only from his stormy emotional life but from a larger phenomenon: the crisis of masculinity in post-World War I Europe, particularly in the defeated German and Austrian states. Maria Tatar points out several factors that contribute to this crisis and result in aesthetic depictions of violence. For one, the war had asymmetrical effects on male and female bodies: "amputees everywhere testified to the brutalization of men's bodies in the theaters of war. Women, who had. . . survived the war intact, could easily slide into the role of a covert enemy."²⁵ Tatar recognizes an important point: representations of *Lustmord* originate at least partly in a strange effort to "balance the gender scales of carnal violence."²⁶ Another crucial element is the role of female sexuality in male motivation for murder. In the paintings and photographs by George Grosz and Otto Dix that Tatar examines, the most characteristic and disturbing *Lustmord* images depict the victims as prostitutes, framing murder as a response to uninhibited female sexuality.²⁷

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25. Tatar, *Lustmord*, 12.

26. Ibid.

27. See Tatar's monograph for many examples of characteristic *Lustmord* images by artists George Grosz (including *John the Sex Murderer* and *Self-Portrait as Jack the Ripper, with Eva Peters*, 1918) and Otto Dix (including *Sex Murderer: Self-Portrait*, 1921). For a more detailed account of how turn-of-the-century sexism affected Kokoschka's work, see Claude Cernuschi, "Pseudoscience and Mythic Misogyny: *Murder, Hope of Women* and Antifeminism in Vienna 1900," 73–100 in *Re/Casting Kokoschka: Ethics and*

Similarly, Orpheus's murder comes only after Eurydike's admission of sexual infidelity. Orpheus's jealousy may come from Kokoschka's personal life, but the expression of twisted justice through murder connects to broader cultural trends. For all of his avant-garde technique and provocative public displays, much of Kokoschka's output expresses the regressive impulse to control and destroy women who threaten traditional hierarchies, or like Alma, deny him control.

In stark contrast to his relatively restrained musical setting of Eurydike's snakebite death, Krenek unleashes the full fury of the orchestra to accompany her murder at the hands of Orpheus. After Eurydike's final words, ending with four unaccompanied measures and a *ritardando*, Krenek dispenses a jarring sonic blow: the ensemble explodes in an accented *tutti* eighth-note marked *sfffz*, with 10 of the 12 chromatic pitches present over a span of more than five octaves. A fierce storm suddenly appears and an all-male chorus of sailors, marked *fff* and *schrill*, erupts in frenzied exclamation, more shout than song. Piercing chromatic oscillations by the glockenspiel and accented octaves in the low brass punctuate their cries as lightning flashes overhead. Only when Orpheus rushes out of the cabin, bloody knife swinging, do they abate. The orchestra quickly drops out, and he screams "*Wehe! Wehe! Unglück! Unglück!*" (Woe! Calamity!). In the score, Krenek calls for a cloud of smoke and the orchestra rises yet again to its highest dynamic level of the piece—*ffff*—with seven accented quarter notes of the ten-tone chord, likely one for each of Eurydike's

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Aesthetics, Epistemology and Politics in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna (Madison, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002).

years in the underworld (see Ex. 1). Krenek's maximalist setting of the murder scene goes to every conceivable orchestral length to heighten the violent action. The sheer acoustic volume assaults the listener, and the shrill panic of the all-male chorus heightens the sense of the murder as a reaction to a perceived irresolvable gender crisis—as *Lustmord*.

EXAMPLE 1. *Lustmord* setting with 10-note chord. Krenek and Kokoschka, *Orpheus and Eurydike*, act 2, scene 4, mm. 809–16.

Orpheus. (das Messer schwingend, stürzt verwirrt aus der verhängten Kabine) (Rauchwolke.) **Vorhang!**
Frei. a tempo (Vivace)
We - he! We - he! Un - glück! Un - glück!
Gr.Tr. pp V. o. mtr
8 Ende des zweiten Aktes.

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www.universaledition.com. © 1925 Universal Edition.

Radical as Eurydike's second death may be, it is not the last violent addition that Kokoschka contributes to his narrative. Act 3 opens two years later with the still-deranged Orpheus digging his own grave in the ruins of the house from act 1. He discovers his broken lyre and begins a cacophonous lament that draws an insulting and motley crowd. The situation breaks into a wild frenzy, culminating with the crazed mob

hanging Orpheus; a drunkard character—*Ein Betrunkener*—completes this cruel parody of the Maenads, the followers of Bacchus-Dionysus who tear Orpheus apart in some versions of the traditional myth. Kreněk's gallows drumroll and, within the harmonic context of the opera, radically consonant E-flat major brass chords evoke a comparable scene from Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, further signifying a mad love that ends in death.²⁸ The awkwardly alternating major ninth intervals in the trumpet intensify the sense of madness and discomfort, which heightens as Orpheus hangs without dying. Finally, in the opera's last full scene, the spirit of Eurydike appears, seeking reconciliation. Her loving pleas for release from his passionate hatred evoke a variant on the Wagnerian *Liebestod*. In an inversion of the original archetype's gender roles, she has already died but still professes her love; Orpheus wants death and spits rancor but lives even as he hangs. He refuses to relent, bitterly exclaiming "*Hinter der Liebe bis in den Tod steckt Haß*" (To the death, hate sticks to love). Eurydike's spirit, trying to suffocate Orpheus's maniacal laughter, constricts his neck, killing him in what is ultimately an act of mercy. Finally freed of his hatred, she repeats the lament from the ring: happiness is otherwise.

In many ways, the end of act 3 fulfills the requirements for an archetypal *Liebestod*. Eurydike's spirit, guided by love, relieves both Orpheus and herself of mortal anguish through death. The hopeful major-key epilogue, in which Psyche and a

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28. For an account of Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* program, see Michael Steinberg, *The Symphony: A Listener's Guide* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 61–6.

chorus sing of renewal and love, reinforces the sense of relief by offering the tonal resolution withheld thus far by Krenek. Nevertheless, it falls short of atoning for the trauma wreaked upon the characters and Orphic convention. While the ending does temper the effect of the violent *Lustmord* that ended act 2, it also fundamentally contradicts many conventions of a typical love-death. Krenek's scoring of this anti-*Liebestod* features highly symbolic writing: exactly when Eurydike ends Orpheus's life, the orchestral setting resembles aspects of a famous motive from the *Liebestod* climax of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (see Ex. 2 and 3). While not rhythmically identical, each figure begins with a half note and progresses through a dotted-eighth and sixteenth in the second half of the first measure to a sweeping triplet in the second measure. However, Krenek inverts the melodic shape of Wagner's blueprint, symbolizing the narrative inversion of the *Liebestod* itself. Wagner's melody in the soprano descends from measure one to measure two as the bass line rises a fifth from the first to the second downbeat; Krenek's melody ascends as the bassline falls a fourth from the first to second downbeat. Most importantly, the two passages communicate almost opposite affects. Wagner's harmonies evoke overwhelming bliss, reaching inexorably towards the root-position tonic triad transcendence hinted at as early as the prelude but not quite achieved (that resolution is finally delivered just moments later, in final bars of the opera). Krenek's murky chords, on the other hand, feel just as dark, foreboding, and confusing as the opening bars of the opera. In fact, as Krenek notes in the score, they paraphrase the beginning almost literally (See Ex. 4),

suggesting cynically that the suffering in the drama is cyclical instead of progressive, as in *Tristan*.

EXAMPLE 2. Orchestral motive from finale Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, act 3, scene 3 (“*Libestod*”), mm. 1683–4.

Piano reduction by Richard Kleinmichel. Public Domain, New York: G. Schirmer, 1906, plate 18325.

[http://imslp.org/wiki/Tristan_und_Isolde,_WWV_90_\(Wagner,_Richard\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Tristan_und_Isolde,_WWV_90_(Wagner,_Richard)).

EXAMPLE 3. Inverted *Liebestod* setting in Krenek, *Orpheus and Eurydike*, act 3, scene 3, mm. 707–8. *Wie im Vorspiel* (“Like in the prelude”).

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EXAMPLE 4. Original motive, Krenek, *Orpheus and Eurydike*, prelude, mm. 1–2.

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Although the release from mortality originates from Eurydike's female love, Orpheus is no fallen hero. Insane and embittered, he cedes to Eurydike the role of principal actor. That she silences him in the final step empowers her, to a limited degree, after an existence devoid of any agency. Moreover, this final step functions, not as a gateway to a shared eternal life, but as a blunt farewell, the bleak antithesis of romance. Even death itself is stripped of some power over the course of the opera—each character's physical and spiritual resurrections undermine its permanence.

A complete interpretation of death in this *Orpheus und Eurydike*, then, must not only take into account both the historical *Liebestod* and the contemporary *Lustmord*, but also emphasize their inseparability. Krenek and Kokoschka's synthesis of styles, philosophies, and eras illuminates this connection. As Lawrence Kramer attests, "the loved death is also

the unfulfillable wish par excellence; it can never be carried out into reality. Or rather, when it carries over, it miscarries in the form of jealous rage.”²⁹ Instead of reconciling the two, then, this opera lays bare the *Lustmord* as a historical consequence of the *Liebestod*. In each death archetype, characters on stage die so that the spectator might live. What life are they left with? The nineteenth-century *Liebestod* “absorbs, and turns to bliss, the guilt that the spectator feels for desiring what they do. The imaginary bodies of the actors are consumed by their bliss but leave their bliss behind, make it available to the spectator who is dying to have it and only now can have it without dying.”³⁰ The post-World War I *Liebestod*, in contrast, absorbs none of the spectator’s guilt, amplifying it instead with the blunt, traumatic staging of mortality.

Although this version of *Orpheus* has been largely neglected, giving the opera its due attention can transform our understanding of Krenek and of music’s role in Germanic society between the World Wars.³¹ Krenek himself, in an interview with his biographer John Stewart, placed *Orpheus*

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29. Lawrence Kramer, *After the Lovedeath: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 140.

30. *Ibid.*, 134–5.

31. A brief account of the reception history: though Krenek finished *Orpheus* in 1923, the work went unperformed for another three years. Only after Krenek achieved widespread recognition with the overwhelming success of his 1926 *Jonny spielt auf* was *Orpheus* performed for the first time in Kassel. After the 1926 opera premiere, the next full production of *Orpheus* did not come until 1973–74 in Graz. Krenek’s death in 1991 provoked a flurry of performances of his works, and *Orpheus* has been staged in Madrid and Berlin within the last five years, but no commercial recordings or English-language scholarship devoted to the opera exist of which I am aware.

und Eurydike among his most important works.³² Even so, most accounts of his life's work begin the narrative of his opera career with *Jonny spielt auf*. (Stewart even succumbs to this temptation in his excellent biography, choosing *Jonny* as the focal point for the book's opening pages.) While the black jazz violinist *Jonny* is unquestionably an icon of Weimar culture, overemphasis on the cosmopolitan milieu of jazz, satirical revues, and artistic experimentation in the 1920s can obscure the deep wound of Germany and Austria's war trauma that Weimar modernity also carried. Adorno argues that "the aggression radiated by the young Krenek's works" encapsulates this darker side of the 1920s, of "that modernity whose compelling and forceful nature lies in the fact that it takes where others give."³³ *Orpheus und Eurydike* denies the audience comfort or complacency, confronting them with a shocking reinterpretation of a well-travelled myth and revolting against transcendence. Collective willingness—even if passive—to let this *Orpheus* fade into oblivion betrays a reluctance to confront the many challenges it poses, such as connections between Germany's secret pathologies in the 1920s and the violent atrocities it enacted during the 1930s. Fully detailing that connection lies beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that the fearsome impulse to violently eradicate the Other (in this opera and in so many

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32. Stewart, *Ernst Krenek*, 80. *Jonny spielt auf* was not among the works Krenek named.

33. Though Adorno's intent in this characterization of modernity likely lies in more of a Marxist vein, his commentary on the shocking elements of Krenek's musical style is also apt for the broader discussion of aesthetic violence in the Weimar years. Adorno, "Physiognomy of Krenek," 178–9.

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other Weimar *Lustmord* works across the disciplines, to eradicate the Feminine) has roots in even some of the most radically “progressive” cultural products of the time. Expanding our view to consider *Orpheus* alongside *Jonny* deepens our historical understanding of the Weimar period and underscores Krenek’s seminal but underappreciated role in both the glittering and dark sides of its culture.

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