

AESCHYLUS', EURIPIDES', CACOYANNIS'S—AND SHORTER-SPALDING'S IPHIGENIAS

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Like Euripides' play, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the Shorter-spalding opera is open-ended and unresolved—partly because, again like the Euripidean version, it is multi-authored and somewhat incomplete. Euripides' play, in the form(s) in which we possess it, presents at least three different endings, none of which is likely to come from Euripides' own pen; other authors certainly contributed to various sections of the final scene. Euripides himself also had a musical collaborator, Cephisophon, who presumably continued to work on finishing and rehearsing the play after Euripides himself died, up to its first production. The Shorter-spalding opera, ...(*Iphigenia*), likewise is the result of collaboration—often at a distance, and over several years—between musicians, writers, and designers (as Morales describes in her Introduction to this issue). At least six different authors altogether are identified in the program notes as contributing to the libretto, including the three poets whose lyrics were sung in Act II: Ganavya Doraiswamy, Joy Harjo, and Safiya Sinclair, respectively South Asian, Native American, and Jamaican. As for the opera's ending—the most notoriously uncertain aspect of this myth ever since archaic Greek times—esperanza spalding states in her notes on the opera that the process of creating an ending has been one of constant adjustment, wholesale rewriting, and improvisation, and that even through the rehearsals the singers themselves onstage, as well as the instrumental jazz trio, were still trying out new things, right up to and including perhaps the performance that we saw. (I attended the Berkeley performance on February 12, 2022.) The opera is, we may say, unfinished.

So this opera's 'lateness' too is authentically 'Euripidean', coming as it does at the end of Shorter's long and distinguished career, and composed in self-conscious awareness that the story has been told so many times before, with variations that are by now familiar to almost everyone. (The Usher character even checked in to make sure of this with members of the audience before the performance began.) Not only is this new ...(*Iphigenia*) another remix of key elements of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the classic theatrical work that is regarded as one of the founding documents of Western drama (and of opera, in the opinion of Wagner and Nietzsche), but its themes of doubleness (human or animal sacrifice? Iphigenia as girl or goddess? a heroine's victimization or salvation and transformation?—even Helen's abduction to Troy: is it herself, or a fake replica?) are intrinsic to the story, and inescapable. Euripides' play (at least in its surviving state) leaves all of these questions open, even as it alludes constantly to particular lines and episodes from the *Oresteia* and from other well-known texts in the Greek mythological tradition; and the processes of continual remixing and

further adapting of the story persisted throughout antiquity (e.g., the well-known wall-painting based on a fourth-century BC Greek original by Timanthes that is preserved from the House of the Tragedian in Roman Pompeii).¹

One particularly striking and effective element of allusion that the new opera deploys is the recurrent motif of a gag placed over the mouth of several of the individual Iphigenias before they are sacrificed in Act I, together with the recurring phrase ‘the wind blows’. This motif was introduced by Aeschylus into the story in the unforgettable description sung by the Chorus of his *Agamemnon* (the first play of the *Oresteia* trilogy):

Her supplications and her cries of ‘father’
 were nothing, nor the child’s lamentation
 to kings passionate for battle.
 The father prayed, called to the men to lift her
 with strength of hand swept in her robes aloft
 and prone above the altar, as you might lift
 a goat for sacrifice—with a gag
 against the lips’ sweet edge, to check
 any curse cried on the house of Atreus
 by force and a bit’s speechless power.
 Pouring then to the ground her saffron mantle
 she struck the sacrificers with
 the eyes’ arrows of pity,
 lovely as in a painted scene, and striving
 to speak—as many times
 at the kind festive table of her father
 she had sung, and in the clear voice of a stainless maiden
 with love had graced the song
 of worship when the third cup was poured.

(Aesch. *Ag.* 228–47; tr. R. Lattimore)

At several points the Shorter-spalding opera recalls this scene, and the dominant theme of their drama is indeed the giving of a voice (multiple voices) to Iphigenia—and ultimately, with Artemis’s aid and guidance, agency—in controversion of Aeschylus’ silencing of her and the myth’s ‘original’ subjection of her to the Greek war machine. In the *Oresteia*, others do speak for, and about, Iphigenia—especially her mother, as she reminds the Chorus of what Iphigenia’s father did to their daughter and why she herself is taking revenge on her daughter’s behalf. Other treatments of the story by Sophocles and Euripides had implicitly replicated Aeschylus’ description by having Agamemnon and Menelaus,

1. Pompeii VI, 8, 5, peristylum (10); Naples, Museo Archeologico Nazionale inventory no. 9112. (Available on Wiki Commons.)

Electra and Orestes, all speak or argue about this sacrifice. But Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* is the first extant drama in which the young Iphigenia is allowed to speak for herself before the sacrifice—and that is what Shorter and Spalding take as their own point of departure. Not only is Iphigenia of the Open Tense (the role performed by Spalding, in fully jazz-inflected voice) not gagged: she is joined by five other singing Iphigenias, each of whom, vocalizing in more 'classical' operatic style, gains a new, liberated expressiveness as Act II proceeds and as each begins to escape from the politicians' and soldiers' attempts at silencing and victimization in Act I, and to voice their own individual aspirations 'like a dandelion growing through the cracks in the concrete'.

Why, we may wonder, did Wayne Shorter choose this story (myth) for his opera—a work that apparently he had contemplated for several decades? Among the factors that may have contributed to this choice, apart from the myth's sheer centrality in the West's theatrical, and specifically operatic, tradition, we might note the award-winning and finely acted 1977 movie, *Iphigenia*, directed by Michael Cacoyannis and with music by the great Mikis Theodorakis (Shorter was a life-long film-goer), a rare example of a Greek tragedy successfully adapted for the screen; also Shorter's dedication of at least two of his musical compositions back in the late 1960s to his young daughter, Miyako, whose mother, Teruko Nakagami, had been raised as a child in a Californian internment camp during World War II, an intimate reminder of the collateral costs and sufferings for innocent non-combatants resulting from machismo-fueled and racist East–West wars for world domination. 'Miyako Music' was the name that Shorter gave to the copy-right-holding company that published several of his compositions.

Shorter's own performing 'voice' was not heard directly in the opera. Perhaps it would have been, had he completed it several years earlier. Over the last months of his life, late in his eighties, he no longer played saxophone; but from the 1970s on, he had been the most widely recognized jazz soprano sax player—the 'Euripides', we might say, to Bechet's Aeschylus and Coltrane's Sophocles. The other three members of Shorter's long-time quartet were (are?) crucial to the opera's musical success: John Patitucci's warm, sonorous bass and Danilo Pérez's exploratory, lyrical piano provided many of the most exciting musical moments, even while one yearned at times for the sound of Shorter's own warm, plaintive, chirpy, piercing soprano sax. The orchestra that provided the main accompaniment for Act I and parts of Act III contained clarinet, oboe, and cor anglais, as well as strings and brass—but no saxophone. Euripides' play, of course, contains lengthy sung passages for Iphigenia, which would have been accompanied in the Theater of Dionysus by the saxophone-like reed-pipes (*auloi*); and—by extraordinarily rare luck and coincidence—we even possess a few phrases of a musical notation for parts of her songs in a Leiden papyrus!² The six female singers who in

2. Papyrus Leiden inv. P. 510 (Eur. *IA* 784–94, 1500–9). See West (1992), 278, 286f. (Catalogue # 4, 5); Pöhlmann and West (2001) (#4), 18–21 (and Frontispiece). There is uncertainty as to whether this papyrus' musical notation dates back to Euripides himself, or, more likely, reflects Hellenistic

Shorter-spalding's version perform the roles of several (potential) Iphigenias thus seem to provide stand-ins for Wayne's own sax voice. Five of them are sopranos, the sixth a warm, thicker-textured contralto (perhaps reminding us of Shorter's own distinctly-timbred tenor sax playing); and of these voices it is esperanza spalding's voice that emerges and soars as the most adventurous and creative of them all, the one most open to new and transformative possibilities ('the open tense').

Much of Acts I and III involves parodies of masculinity and frat-boy behaviors, as well as pointed anti-war critique and satire of jingoistic patriotism: I was reminded intermittently of Kurt Weill (and the male chorus of soldiers may remind us also of Cacoyannis's movie, which dispenses completely with Euripides' female chorus but includes several crowd scenes of Greek soldiers complaining, arguing, and clamoring for war). Other parts are more straightforwardly emotional, angry, and pain-filled: brothers in conflict; adolescents facing imminent death; ambivalence about the Trojan War. Overall, Acts I and III and their aggressively male singing contrast strikingly with Act II, where the young women's individual introspections and sharing of options and dreams, their confrontations with the possibilities of being 'there', becoming yourself, animating each of their unique potentialities amidst the life processes of constant change, growth, birth, disintegration, death, regeneration, find distinctively lyrical and exhilarating expression, enriched by Danilo Pérez's ever-mood-altering piano and by Caroline Shaw's remarkable a cappella harmonies. Each of the young women has her own voice and her own (musical) identity—the contralto voice of Sharmay Musacchio (Iphigenia the Elder) was especially impactful, and spalding's own vocalizing is spectacular, coming almost out of another world.

Conspicuously absent from the whole opera is Clytemnestra, Iphigenia's mother and eventual avenger (unforgettably played in the 1977 movie by Irene Papas). Her voice and presence dominate the first two plays of *The Oresteia*, and the myth is usually told so as to present the killing of Iphigenia as the chief motivation for Clytemnestra's killing of Agamemnon when he returns home from Troy. In Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, tender scenes between mother and daughter are among the play's most moving moments, as are the scenes of angry confrontation and pathetic entreaty directed by each of them at Agamemnon. Shorter and spalding are not promoting ideas of vengeance, nor primarily of family conflict and resolution: their focus is more on personal and political liberation and recuperation. The new opera replaces the close, supportive Iphigenia–Clytemnestra relationship with the multiple-Iphigenia bonding, and also with the unexpected new figure of Artemis/The Usher as Iphigenia's guide and escort. This figure perhaps offers some maternal qualities; but she is distinctly more detached, less angry, and queerer than any of the Greek

reperformances; for a thorough discussion, in favor of the latter position, see esp. Prauscello (2006), 160–82.

tragedians' portrayals of Clytemnestra. (Her deer, lying dead onstage throughout, has antlers—a detail taken authentically from Euripides' version, which gave rise to extensive ancient discussions about does, bucks, horns, and gender:³ and in her first appearance onstage spalding is wearing antlers too...) In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* Artemis is said to be 'angry at her father Zeus' winged dogs' (i.e. at his ominous eagles that symbolize the destruction of innocent lives at Troy, 134f.)—so she defends the babies and women and penalizes the Greek warriors and their king. Euripides and Shorter/spalding do not seem to give Artemis such sentiments. We may find ourselves wondering, though: what does this Artemis want? Who is Artemis (The Usher, aka Diana)? How does she want this 'Iphigenia' to end?

Overall, the music and the dramatic development of Acts I and II work effectively to build towards a growing sense of expectation and the potential of individual and perhaps collective fulfilment—Act I composed largely in a kind of 'Third Stream' style (Gunther Schuller's term for something not quite jazz, but not really 'classical' either—one critic, Vanessa Stovall, remarks that it reminds her of Gustav Holst at times);⁴ Act II is ravishingly lush and exploratory in more fully jazz idioms. But the musical resolution that we might be expecting in Act III, like the dramatic denouement, is less definitively and less reassuringly articulated. The mood, or ethos, of probing introspection and aspiration that came to the fore in Act II seems almost to peter out and be swallowed up (again) in the stridency of the disputing men and their war. (Textual elements borrowed from Charles Elgutter's 1904 adaptation of the story add to the sense of rigidity and impasse.) Are the men neutralized? Converted? The audience might be wanting and expecting this—but the final scenes remain enigmatic. Does the expedition against Troy proceed? Or not? Is Iphigenia reconciled with her father? Or not? The opera is 'unfinished' and the collaborations on it will doubtless continue. Theater—especially opera—is like that, and so is (this) myth.

3. Eur. *IA* 1592–5 *elaphos*, and fr. i in Collard and Morwood (2017) (*Aelian Nature of Animals* 7.39 = Nauck Eur. fr. 857; not in Kannicht [2004] (*TrGF* V)). On the ancient debate whether female deer might sometimes have antlers, see Arist. *Poet.* 25.1462b32–5 with D.W. Lucas's note (1968), and further Haselswerdt, this issue. The deer pictured in the Pompeian wall-painting (above n.1) has antlers; cf. also the mythical Ceryneian Hind, sacred to Artemis.

4. Stovall (2021) and (2022).