

**Professor Andrew Earle Simpson is a composer and pianist based at the Benjamin T. Rome School of Music of The Catholic University of Washington, DC. His most ambitious classically inspired project to date is his operatic reception of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, created in collaboration with his wife, the classicist Sarah Ferrario, who wrote all three libretti. The first part of the trilogy, the *Agamemnon*, was written between 1999 and 2001, and was followed by *Libation Bearers* (2001-4) and *The Furies* (2005). He has composed two pieces inspired by the material culture of ancient Rome: *Tesserae: Six Mosaics of Ancient Rome* (2003-4) and *Four Views of Pompeii* (2004) and a musical-theatrical piece, *Orpheus and the Secret Road* (2012). He has also written and performed music for silent films that portray classical antiquity. Interview by Anastasia Bakogianni. All images, audio and video material copyright of the artist.**

**An illustrated version of this interview, with links to audio extracts from the works discussed, is available on the *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* website: <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2014/simpson>**

**AB.** Andrew, several of your musical compositions engage closely with Greco-Roman antiquity. What originally drew you to ancient Greece and Rome and their cultural output?

**AS.** It's hard to pin down exactly when or how my interest in Greco-Roman antiquity began. Frankly, there has never been a time when I haven't found it fascinating, strange, and absorbing. Admittedly, I have always felt that the Romans were more familiar, but Greek culture was by contrast the more beautiful, strange, remote, and mysterious. The Greek concept of *arete* ('excellence'), introduced to me in some class at some point in my early teen years, resonated powerfully.

**AB.** More particularly, what drew you to Aeschylus' famous trilogy, the *Oresteia*?

**AS.** I didn't read the *Oresteia* until I was in my thirties and already an assistant professor. My prior experience with Greek drama had been the so-called 'big hits' – *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Medea*, *Lysistrata*. I don't believe that I had ever read Aeschylus until I read the *Oresteia*. The backstory for my opera trilogy is that, in 1999, I had developed an interest in opera and felt ready to compose one, so I began looking for a subject. Meanwhile, my wife Sarah Ferrario, a classicist, urged me to read the *Oresteia*.

I've worked a good deal in theatre since my teen years, as orchestral pit musician, music director, chorister, composer, and once, in my undergraduate years, an actor. All of that time spent in the pit and on the stage – not to mention in the audience – has given me a good deal of varied experience and has helped me to develop a sense of theatricality. I take time to say this because I believe that opera is, above all, a *theatrical* genre. Operas and musicals are alike in that they are theatrical pieces assisted and encompassed by music, dance, and spectacle.

It's not coincidental, then, I think, that my introduction to the *Oresteia* came by way of a performing translation – indeed, a translation intended for television. This was *The Serpent Son*, the vital setting by Frederic Raphael and Kenneth McLeish, published by Cambridge University

Press, but previously commissioned by the BBC for television broadcast in 1979. The effect on reading it was like a thunderbolt to me: the power, strangeness, and beauty of the other Greek plays I knew was tripled, quadrupled, easily surpassed by this work. Raphael and McLeish's setting is highly theatrical, and my own instincts responded to the clarity and directness of their language. In fact, had I read another translation first, I am not sure that I would have chosen the *Oresteia*.

But more specifically, as a composer seeking to set a play as an opera, what attracted me so strongly to the *Oresteia* trilogy was its inherent musicality. The dramatic situations cry out for a musical setting: the moment at which Clytemnestra is revealed standing over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, for example, invites the most chaotic, super-charged musical setting, and I knew I had my opera subject from the time I read the *ekkyklema* of *Agamemnon*.

So began the idea to set the *Oresteia* or, at least, *Agamemnon*, as a one-act opera. My initial idea was to use Raphael and McLeish's translation as the basis for my libretto which I would compile myself, and I received permission from Cambridge to do so. However, once work began on the project, I quickly realised that it would be extremely cumbersome to contact Cambridge every time I wanted to make a small change to a line, add or remove a word, and such. I'd completed the first scene, setting the Cambridge text; this became Scene 1 of *Agamemnon*. (Later, Sarah grafted her own text onto my pre-existing music, once I'd abandoned the Raphael-McLeish translation – the only case in the trilogy in which this happened). Having come to this impasse, then, I wondered aloud what to do next. It was at this point that Sarah volunteered to make a new singing translation of the *Agamemnon*, effectively becoming the librettist. This is how our collaboration on what came to be known as the *Oresteia Project* began. I should add that Sarah is a trained musician with much experience in theatre as well.

First and foremost, I chose the *Oresteia* plays because I felt that they would translate remarkably well to the operatic stage, and would make engaging operas which allowed music to play that role of enhancing and amplifying drama which is dramatic music's special role. It's quite surprising to me, given the innate musicality of his plays, that so few opera composers have set Aeschylus; Euripides and Sophocles have been much more popular. Regardless of which author was set, however, our principal goal was to make operas which had musical and theatrical value: the *Oresteia Project* was and is, first and foremost, an *artistic project*.

**AB.** Why did you feel it was important to remain as faithful as you could to the dramatic pacing of the three plays? Where did you introduce changes to the ancient text and why?

**AS.** At some point in this process – I think that it really began with my own observations and instincts – we decided to make the opera track the action of the original tragedy as closely as possible. As far as I was concerned, at any rate, the dramatic situations of Aeschylus' dramas readily suggested strong and stageable musical counterparts, and I think that this gave rise to the idea of using the structure of the ancient play as the foundation for the opera. As a first-time opera composer, I also felt (and still do feel) how useful it can be to start with an already-established drama. Many technical problems have already been solved by the playwright: characters enter and exit correctly, plot and characterisation have been established; the theatrical validity of the piece is proven. This pre-set dramatic framework can be extremely useful to a

composer. To my mind, an opera-friendly play must be the sort to which music would add something crucial, or allow music to amplify and carry its impact still further - further than words and action alone would do. Not all plays have this quality. The *Oresteia* plays, at least as far as I was concerned, have it in depth.

Also, in part because of my own interest in antiquity and Sarah's status as a classicist, we proposed that the opera project would also conduct an intellectual and artistic experiment. In addition to creating three new operas, we were also asking a fundamental question – could one create viable contemporary operas based directly on the structure, proportions, and actual texts of ancient Greek tragedies?

Our guiding hypothesis was that the extant texts of the tragedies could serve as excellent blueprints for libretti, and that *adaptation*, in the sense of adjusting or altering the content and shape of an original work, should be kept to a minimum. Every line in the operas' libretti can be traced to a line of the ancient text: we did not add a single non-Aeschylean line. Naturally, this comes with the acknowledgement that our work is necessarily an adaptation. We realised that we were profoundly altering fundamental aspects of Aeschylus' work simply by translating it into English, let alone converting his text into an operatic libretto and setting it to contemporary classical music. I wanted to use music as a vehicle to convey the ancient drama as directly as possible to modern audiences. But I also wanted to see, by laying that music on the substructure of its ancient counterpart, if Aeschylus' text would transfer successfully to the operatic stage.

Cuts were the main means by which we adjusted the ancient text. Operatic libretti tend to be spare, economical documents, favoring direct, vivid language. Aeschylus' texts are particularly florid, and share that common ancient trait of varied repetition (for example, 'He was not silent, nor did his tongue stick in his mouth...'), and so we needed to shorten each of the three plays by at least one-third. A general rule which I find helpful is that it takes about three times longer to sing a line of text than to speak it, and Aeschylus' rich text is overly wordy for economical musical setting.

However, as we've written about before,<sup>1</sup> even though cuts were unavoidable, we strove to preserve the relative proportional relationship among the lines that did remain. This was something of a compromise in remaining true to the ancient structure while performing reductions for practicality. Our cut-down libretto did preserve each character, scene, and speech. The only exception I can think of is the Herald's speech in *Agamemnon* which describes Menelaus' return journey from Troy. Not only was this passage quite discursive, we felt that it distracted from the main thread of the plot, Clytemnestra's murder of her husband Agamemnon.

There were also places in which we suppressed specific place-names, as we felt that this would alienate audiences and provide no dramatic benefit. A prime example is Clytemnestra's so-called 'beacon speech' in *Agamemnon*. She describes the system of watch-fires which she arranged to carry a message swiftly from Troy to Argos: she names every mountain between the two cities, an impressive catalogue of names in a spoken context, but not particularly useful for musical

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<sup>1</sup> 'Aeschylean Structure and Text in New Opera: The *Oresteia* Project', *Didaskalia* 6.3 (2006).  
[http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol6no3/simpson\\_ferrario.html](http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol6no3/simpson_ferrario.html)

setting. Our solution, then, was to have the fact of the beacon announced by Clytemnestra in a brief recitative, followed by a showpiece aria. Since one of the main purposes of the beacon speech is to showcase Clytemnestra's intelligence and power, I gave her an aria which is fast-moving and virtuosic, vocal prowess is equated with personal power throughout the trilogy. In the aria, 'Troy is Fallen', the Queen of Argos imagines the scenes of Troy's destruction with fascination and perhaps even some measure of delight. This serves to reveal a bloodthirsty side of her character. And, indeed, arias are traditionally used as character development in opera, allowing the expression of emotions and/or inner thoughts.

**AB.** For your operatic reception of the three ancient plays you chose a mixed chorus of both male and female voices. Why did you feel that would work better in modern performance?

**AS.** First of all, there were musical and practical issues involved in my decision. I wanted the broader range and power which women's voices would add to the texture. The SATB [soprano, alto, tenor, bass] mixed chorus is certainly standard in contemporary opera, when a chorus is used. Another practical reason is that it is always difficult to find male-only choruses; and, at the university level, even more difficult simply to find enough men to staff a chorus.

I have been approached by at least one scholar who felt that the mixed chorus in *Agamemnon* removes an important dynamic of Clytemnestra's struggle against the male hierarchy. True, perhaps, but I also feel that she is quite strong on her own, and so the idea that she would be in a vulnerable position, as Queen, is not particularly convincing to me. Besides, she is after all fighting the old men of the Chorus, not the younger men in power. She is the dominant power in that world. Further, Clytemnestra's separation from the community is made stronger, I feel, and not weaker, if that community contains members of both genders: and so, from a dramatic and staging standpoint, I think that the SATB approach is valid.

I should add that *The Libation Bearers* actually does have only a women's chorus (SSAA). In that case, however, I feel that the characters really *do* need to be the female slaves of the household, and there is more cause for specificity than there was in *Agamemnon*. The chorus needs to be vulnerable and powerless in *Libation Bearers*, and they perform the offices of women, bringing libations to the grave of Agamemnon, for example.

In *The Furies* (our title for *The Eumenides*), the chorus is also SATB: the entire city of Athens celebrates the resolution of the tragedy.

**AB.** The main protagonist of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is Clytemnestra, one of Greek tragedy's most transgressive and terrifying female characters. Did you adapt her character to make her more sympathetic for a modern audience?

**AS.** No, if anything, we made her more vivid and powerful. Her character is single-minded and relentless, crafty and brilliant. Musical means enhanced this aspect: her vocal role, mezzo-soprano, is a voice type which has a very wide range, can be strong in the low register but also go quite high. Her music is virtuosic, strong, highly ornamented— this is a musical metaphor for her powerful character. There is some opportunity in the myth to emphasise her grief and fury at Iphigenia's murder, but the tragedy does not really bring this out, to my mind. My own feeling is

that Aeschylus wanted Clytemnestra to be uniformly unsympathetic, *terrible* in the truest sense – and this is something which is not typical of modern theatrical practice. We tend to value characterisations which show conflicting types, give a nuanced, light-and-shade picture of a character. I think that Aeschylus actually wants Clytemnestra's unyielding nature to *be* the point – that she is so terrifying because she *is* determined, implacable, ruthless – and, after all, occupying the high moral ground (at least at first). If this were a free adaptation, I would certainly be intrigued by making her more sympathetic; but, we were setting Aeschylus' play, and I think that we need to adopt this position, as well. It might seem to make her one-sided – endlessly, unremittingly evil – but giving her a sympathetic side is, to my mind, projecting modern sensibilities and preferences onto a text which really doesn't want it. Aeschylus points out that Clytemnestra has good reason to act as she does, but the point of the play is her systematic and unyielding drive to revenge. The play then really becomes a lesson about not violating the most sacred obligations of family: Aeschylus, to me, seems to be saying: 'Look and see what can happen if you break those obligations... you could be *this* unlucky'.

**AB.** What about the audience response to Clytemnestra?

**AS.** An actor can bring layers and nuance to a role through extra-textual elements such as facial expressions, gestures which go beyond the intent of the text. The music can do many things to influence the characterisation: it can support, undermine, mock, praise, through quotation, choice of instruments, or other devices. An audience member can and should engage with these layers and think about things from Clytemnestra's position – indeed, we really do get the story from her point of view. But, Clytemnestra seems to seal her own dramatic doom as villain in a sense by her out-of-control, shocking behavior after the death of Agamemnon and Cassandra. Compare her reaction with Orestes' behaviour after he has killed his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus in *The Libation Bearers*... before the Furies show up. Orestes does not crow, he does not rejoice; rather, he grieves that he has been forced by Apollo to avenge his father's murder by this terrible deed. The *ekkyklema* in *Agamemnon* would have been an opportunity for Clytemnestra to show a good face, or at least for her to drop her grudge against Agamemnon, now having avenged their daughter. But she goes even further in the *opposite* direction, antagonising the shocked onlookers still further, then retreating into the safety of the palace with Aegisthus. So, an audience member might see something sympathetic in Clytemnestra, but Aeschylus and, I think, we don't give them much opportunity to do so.

**AB.** Returning to Orestes' decision to commit matricide, do you think it is justified? He does hesitate, after all, and it is his companion Pylades who reminds him that Apollo decreed it.

**AS.** Yes, as I mentioned before, this is a crucial point of comparison – Orestes is almost a negative-image copy of Clytemnestra, in that he performs the same action (a double murder), yet his motivations are involuntary and his rewards delayed. Indeed, Clytemnestra now has the protection of the Furies, ironically, who pursue Orestes for matricide. This sets up the trial in *The Furies*, in which Orestes' 'patron' Apollo spars with the goddesses, and Athena, as judge, decides in her brother's favour.

Orestes is caught on the horns of a dilemma not of his own making. Apollo will punish him if he disobeys the order to kill his own mother; yet by obeying Apollo he is breaking one of the

fundamental laws of the universe, and so must suffer punishment by the Furies. He is a tragic figure; and even though he is eventually vindicated, acquitted, and made King of Argos, a position he had to win by regicide, one has the impression that he is a ruined man. The heady sense of triumph is not his, as it was, if only in a defensive way, by Clytemnestra: he doesn't apparently have the same ready capacity for bloodshed that she does. One might interpret this difference in many ways, but the way in which we found this most useful was to use Orestes' character to illuminate Clytemnestra's. She is the protagonist – the only character to appear in each of the three plays - and she dominates the action of *Agamemnon* and half of *The Libation Bearers*. As you note, so strong is Clytemnestra that she almost escapes even at the moment of her death... it is only Pylades, who speaks but two lines, but which nonetheless perhaps serve the most important function of the trilogy by giving Orestes the final push as he hesitates. But even in this moment, when Clytemnestra could be seen as vulnerable, terrified, and human... she still somehow comes across in Aeschylus as simply conniving. She tries every trick – appealing to Orestes' sympathy, reminding him of his status as baby son and her as mother, then turning to anger and threats: nothing works.

And, Clytemnestra has learned nothing in *The Furies*... her sole appearance is to chide the Furies for their slowness: why do they not pursue Orestes – her son, remember – with more vigour? This is a cold-blooded character from start to finish, and the other characters serve largely to provide relief to this terrifying portrait. Musically speaking, Clytemnestra has the most extensive and virtuosic and demanding role in the trilogy. Only Athena can be compared with her, but she appears in only one half of the third opera.

**AB.** As you know one of my main research interests is the tragic heroine Electra, so I cannot resist asking you how she is portrayed in your modern operatic adaptation of *The Libation Bearers*.

**AS.** Electra is entirely sympathetic, a true heroine, in our opera, and for good reason. She is a daughter who has lost *both* her parents, in a sense, since she continues to mourn her murdered father and has been relegated to the status of a slave by her mother. She rightly grieves for Agamemnon, and is well aware of her precarious situation and powerlessness. She wishes for the return of Orestes and that Clytemnestra be repaid with murder. And, she knows what she is about, and is rightly cautious at Orestes' appearance. Still, there is a balance and clarity in her character which is appealing. To me, Aeschylus' Electra presents as less thorny and extreme than in Sophocles or Euripides. Moreover, the direct emotions of her speeches suggest ready musical analogues.

I also have sympathy for Electra because she is very much alone: even the joyful recognition duet with her brother is more or less one-sidedly joyous: Orestes does not seem nearly as happy as his sister to be reunited. Perhaps this is because he is focused on his mission above all else; but whatever the reason, it makes this 'love duet' somewhat unusual. Musically, I have set both lines lyrically, but the differing emotions show in the slightly different vocal lines. Displaying different emotions simultaneously is something which opera does very well.

Electra is a lyric soprano in the opera, a traditional heroine's voice type. Her role is comparatively small, but active: she has one aria, a duet with her brother Orestes, one of the most

lyrical moments in the trilogy, and joins the chorus and Orestes in the extended *kommos*, in which the siblings try to raise the spirit of their dead father Agamemnon to gain his blessing for their plan to murder Clytemnestra. I have made her role highly melodic and lyrical as a metaphor for her sympathetic nature.

**AB.** Many modern theatrical directors tend to reduce the length of the *kommos*. The reason they offer for the at times quite radical cuts is their view that modern audiences, unfamiliar with the theatrical conventions of ancient Greek theatre, find it hard to understand its dramatic function. How did you deal with this in your opera?

**AS.** Electra's role in Aeschylus is far smaller than in Sophocles' or Euripides' *Electra*, and so it is a challenge to give her Aeschylean role appropriate weight. Indeed, she appears only in the first half of the play, and disappears after the *kommos*, about midway through. This means that her character must be established very rapidly, within about 30 minutes of stage time. Her aria expressing grief for her father's death, her awareness of own outcast status, her prayers for her brother's return, show her as a person who genuinely loves her father and brother. She also expresses the harshness of her current fate without bitterness, another important component in gaining audience sympathy.

We did make cuts in the *kommos*, as we did with the rest of the plays. Coming as it does near the centre of the play, with a large number of characters onstage, the *kommos* is positioned to carry great dramatic and musical weight: it is the 'production number' of the opera – the trilogy, really. It plays something like an ancient version of a *séance*, an attempt to contact the dead. Musically, it builds in intensity, tempo, and dynamics over several minutes. Seen in this light, the *kommos* certainly should have resonance for contemporary audiences. Orestes and Electra, by joining together to summon their father's spirit, in the sight of the chorus, publicly declare their unity and determination to avenge their father. The *kommos* is ultimately unsuccessful, of course: Agamemnon's spirit does not appear. We interpreted this to mean that Agamemnon cannot give his blessing to his children's plan. The fact that Orestes pursues the plan in spite of this shows that he has strength of purpose (Apollo's threats, of course, help). We may assume that Electra also remains faithful to their plan, although her absence from the stage after the *kommos* means that this must be surmised.

**AB.** Why did you choose *The Furies* as the title of your third opera, over the more traditional *Eumenides*?

**AS.** Simply because I find *Furies* to be a more familiar and appealing title for audiences. Many more audience members, I expect, know what a 'fury' is than a *eumenide*! Our title also makes a direct link with the end of *The Libation Bearers*, as Orestes sees the Furies coming to pursue him.

**AB.** How did you deal with the scene where Orestes is attacked by the Furies? Did they appear on stage and pursue the matricide?

**AS.** No. Their power and terror comes from being unseen: only Orestes sees them. Imagining a terrible thing is much more powerful than actually seeing it, which brings an inevitable

disappointment. And it is this disappointment, I believe, which is the point of Aeschylus portraying them on stage in *Eumenides*.

**AB.** What about their transformation into the ‘Kindly Ones’ at the end of the play?

**AS.** Aeschylus, I think, understood that the longer you look at something, the more familiar it becomes. So, the Furies might be dreadful at their first appearance... but as more and more time passes and they are still on stage, you get used to them. Finally, once familiar with them, you are no longer so afraid of them; this gradual familiarisation accustoms the audience to accept that these goddesses can agree to take part in a trial and to lose their case. Also, familiarity with the Furies on stage allows the audience member to imagine that the characters have some vulnerability, and even have latent goodness. Athena appeals to this innate goodness, as well as to their equally innate pride, as part of calming their anger after losing Orestes’ trial.

That having been said, the status of the Furies/Eumenides is not lessened: these are still mighty gods. They have power to bless as well as to curse, and it is the former capacity which Athena particularly encourages. The Athenian citizens in the play will acknowledge and honor the Furies, and be wary of their power if they offend them. So, I think that Aeschylus was very aware of the theatrical problem of having these awful creatures on stage for the whole play, and his solution of gradual acclimatisation makes his work even more awe-inspiring to me.

The music of *The Furies* tracks the transformation of the chorus: the opening is angular, intense, dissonant; gradually, the music brightens, so that by the conclusion, it is fully lyrical and tonal. The chorus of Furies consists of 12 women who dance as well as sing; the jurors and citizens of Athens are SATB. Thus, the only opera of the three which has an all-female chorus is *The Libation Bearers*.

**AB.** You chose a happy ending for the finale of your third and final play. Some scholars have raised doubts about the nature of Aeschylus’ ending. What do you think?

**AS.** It is possible to interpret the ending of *Eumenides* in such a way as to say that all seems well on the surface, but underneath there is still trouble. This is a popular contemporary take with many directors, I know. For me, the ending reads somewhat differently: Aeschylus points up the *dual* capacities of the Furies to bless and to curse. The solution establishes an understanding, a settlement, between the people of Athens and the powers which control part of their universe: any underlying trouble would be caused by human action.

I feel that we really *do* need to have Orestes’ problems resolved, and for the Furies to *truly* be placated, in order for the play’s celebration to have any meaning, for the new order to have at least moral authority at its institution. Otherwise, it seems that the tension built up through the whole trilogy is not truly released, and the ending is thereby diluted. Why, after all, should we bother to celebrate if these problems have not been solved?

It strikes me also that an ambivalent ending could second-guess the self-knowledge of the characters onstage as well as Aeschylus. This type of directorial interjection between play and audience seems to say: ‘You see that these characters seem happy, but I am showing you that I



do not buy it... I see through it'. Although such an ambivalent ending might seem to give the play more depth, to me it paradoxically undercuts the power and efficacy of Athena's gesture – and, by extension, Aeschylus' play. It is in effect saying that the gods are not gods: if Athena does not truly have the power to ordain matters at the end, then why are those events presented on stage? Orestes has been restored to his throne and acquitted of matricide, and the gods pursuing him have ceased to do so. Two Olympian gods have intervened on his behalf, and the city of Athens gains powerful new patrons and protectors – so long as they are honored and respected. What in this does not seem to constitute a happy ending – the traditional operatic *lieto fine*?

**AB.** Many of the questions I have asked you so far about your version of the famous ancient trilogy touch upon different aspects of ancient Greek religion. These ancient Greek plays were first performed in the context of the civic festival of The Great Dionysia in which religion played a key role. The dramatic contest was dedicated to the god Dionysius whose statue presided over the competition. How did you deal with the issue of ancient Greek religion in your modern version of the *Oresteia*?

**AS.** We did not explicitly think of the operas in a religious context, ancient or modern: our primary concern for these texts was their effectiveness as works of contemporary secular theatre. All the same, the plays do reflect ancient religious views, and as such we sought to draw upon their strengths to lend depth to our setting.

Piety – reverence for the gods – is a central theme of the trilogy, although it is presented as much in the breach as in the observance. Reverence for the most sacred of obligations – to one's family – falls within the sphere of ancient religion; and the universal nature of the drama, involving Olympian gods and older gods, has by its essence a philosophical and religious significance. This, bound up with the nature of the tragic festival as a civic occasion, means that religion was likely not far from the mind of Aeschylus: religion as it informs acceptable and right behaviour, which includes respecting the rights and claims of parents, children, fellow-citizens, one's *polis*, and of course the gods.

**AB.** This brings me to the question of what it was like to work on and perform your three operas over the course of a number of years. Unlike Aeschylus you did not have the opportunity to create a trilogy for one particular theatrical occasion. Did you always hope to create a modern trilogy modelled on Aeschylus' dramas or did working on the *Agamemnon* inspire you to tackle the other two plays?

**AS.** It is hard to remember exactly what I envisioned at the start: I think that I did begin with the idea of composing *Agamemnon* alone. However, the much more ambitious idea of making a trilogy came along fairly early in the process, and so the idea of the trilogy – of telling the complete story – was part of the goal from an early stage. I did feel, also, that the operas would be separate one-acts, which could be performed separately (indeed, they have only been performed separately to date). The complete trilogy, performed on a single date, would run to about 240 minutes of music. With intermissions, that's almost a 5-hour experience; this is not unprecedented in opera, by any means, but certainly runs to the long side.

**AB.** What was it like working within a university setting? Did that affect your design and plans

for the operas? What was it like working with the singers who took on the roles of the Greek tragic personae and the chorus?

AS. The university brings with it certain freedoms and limitations: the freedoms outweigh the latter, certainly at my institution. Dr. Elaine Walter, then Dean of the Benjamin T. Rome School of Music, cast an enormous vote of confidence in *Agamemnon* by supporting it as the School's official operatic production for the spring semester of 2003. What this meant is that all the resources of the opera division - orchestra, singers and chorus, vocal coaching and rehearsal pianists, sets, costumes, lighting, props, publicity – were given to us under the *aegis* of the School of Music. This was a tremendously generous and significant gesture on the part of Dean Walter, and I remain immensely grateful to her for placing such confidence in the first opera of a then-junior faculty member. In addition to the School of Music's production budget, the university assisted us in raising additional monies through our Development office; much support came through this, as well. And, I was able to secure internal and external grant funding, all of which helped to bolster the budget. The university's tech office even created a new supertitle program, which runs more smoothly than PowerPoint, in my experience, so *Agamemnon* engendered a technical invention, as well.

*The Libation Bearers* was given a staged reading, off-book and with blocking, lights, and instrumental ensemble, in Ward Recital Hall, a 120-seat space, in March 2004. The SSAA chorus for the opera was Sibylla, a DC-based chamber chorus. One distinctive aspect of the production was the screening of several black-and-white silent films, shot specifically for *LB* by Nicholas Ferrario, Sarah's brother, a Chicago-based film-maker. The short films were cued to play at specific spots in the score; so, since the music was written first, the films synchronised with the music, the opposite of the usual approach.

*The Furies* received a full staging with an instrumental chamber ensemble in February 2006, also in Ward. We were very fortunate for *The Furies* to have Michael Scarola, who is on the directing staff of New York City Opera, as stage director.

Learning through performing and doing is the most valuable part of students' training, and the experience of premiering a new opera is something which few are able to do as students. All the same, there are always additional wrinkles which derive from inexperience. The most vivid example of this came on opening night of *Agamemnon*'s 2003 full-stage production. Scene 5 is the triumphant entrance of *Agamemnon*, returning from Troy. He arrived in his chariot, stepped off to sing his boastful aria 'Smoke Marks out the Conquered City'

then stepped onto the back of the chariot in which Cassandra had been riding. He placed his foot on a spot which had not been properly reinforced by the crew which built it, and the entire chariot flipped over backward, tossing *Agamemnon* and Cassandra onto the stage, Cassandra actually into the wings offstage right! Fortunately, our *Agamemnon* recovered like a pro; he remounted the righted chariot, gave a small shrug to the stunned audience, eliciting a general chuckle, and the show went on as before. This 'chariot accident', I am told, was shown on loop on many a student computer in their dorm rooms the next few days! We recorded and webcast each performance: *Agamemnon*: <http://composition.cua.edu/faculty/OresteiaProject.cfm>, *The*

*Libation Bearers*: <http://composition.cua.edu/faculty/LibationBearers.cfm>, *The Furies*: <http://composition.cua.edu/faculty/Furies.cfm>.

Although *Agamemnon* is by no means atonal, it does have challenging moments, harmonically and rhythmically. At first, the music was quite difficult for the student performers; but to their great credit – and this is the happy ending - they learned it. Not only did they learn it, they memorised an extraordinarily large choral part while blocking and singing in half-masks, a difficult thing to do for any singer. Their achievement is all the more remarkable now that I look back on it: I think that I would not ask so much of a chorus in an opera which I started today!

*The Libation Bearers* is the nocturne, the middle-piece of the set, and its style is more muted: that having been said, the chorus has some rhythmic and violent music, and the *kommos* is intense and driving. I drew on a Greek folk song for the opening dirge, and there are modal inflections throughout this score which soften its edges: the style of *LB* is less monumental than *Agamemnon*, because so too is the play.

*The Furies* ends with the most accessible music of the trilogy, reflecting the solution of the earlier difficulties and a joyous release of tension and a new establishment of order. The chorus of *Furies*, SSAA, has a highly polyphonic and rhythmically diverse role: many of the singers were graduate students or advanced undergraduates. Because there were 12 of them, they were a small enough group to gain real cohesion, and they worked together in choreography as well as singing. In all three operas, the chorus has an extensive role; in all three, they rose to the occasion beautifully.

**AB.** Turning now to your pieces inspired by Roman material culture: *Tesserae: Six Mosaics of Ancient Rome* (2003-4) and *Four Views of Pompeii* (2004). They were created following a trip to Italy. Did physical proximity to the ruins of Rome and Pompeii prove a catalyst for these pieces?

**AS.** I am fascinated above all by exploring how music touches the world around it, and using those points of contact to animate my pieces. Greco-Roman antiquity is a particularly fertile point of contact for me, but all of my creative work is a subset of this large exploratory voyage. I think a good deal about music in its social and historical context, and what role music plays in the world, a role which changes in each time and place. *Tesserae* and *Four Views of Pompeii* are ideal examples of this exploration, in that Roman art, history, and culture drives these self-contained concert works in a fundamentally organic way. Both pieces were commissioned by the Cedar Rapids (Iowa) Museum of Art (CRMA), in connection with its exhibition *Art in Roman Life: Villa to Grave* (2003-05). CRMA built an exhibition around its Riley Collection, an interesting group of sculpture from Republican and Imperial Rome. I was chosen to be Composer-in-Residence for the exhibition through a program called *Museums, Composers, and Communities* sponsored by the American Composers Forum. The program puts composers in contact with the materials of a given art exhibition, and to have that composer create a new work or works inspired by that exhibition to be premiered during the exhibition's course.

Briefly, *Tesserae: Six Mosaics of Ancient Rome*, for flute, viola, and guitar, uses three sculptural works from the Riley Collection as the basis of a narrative based on historical accounts. The first two movements depict Caracalla and his brother Geta. There are busts of each in the exhibition:

Geta is listed as ‘probably’ Geta. For a creative artist, this ‘probably’ is enough to start a creative thread: definitive proof of the bust’s identity is not needed. Knowing that Caracalla had his brother killed, this conflict is presented musically. The central movement, ‘The Syrian Woman’, is a dirge – a lament for Geta – inspired by a Syrian tomb relief. The final three movements draw on Roman culture: ‘Banqueting Music’ draws on the iconic image of Roman feasting, basing the music on an Anacreontic rhythm. ‘Funeral March and Oration’ derives from the fascination of the ancient Roman funeral processions featuring the death-masks of one’s ancestors; the oration is a pompous eulogy. ‘Coda: Apotheosis’ predicts a hopeful after-life for Geta, inspired by the common Roman image of banqueting in the afterlife, carved on so many sarcophagi, including in the exhibition.

*Four Views of Pompeii* was written before I visited the famous site. However, I knew about the four styles of wall painting, and I created four movements which musically evoked the distinctive visual aspects of each style. The first movement, ‘Vast Airy Mansions’ (second style), features numerous *trompe l’oreille* effects as a metaphor for the style’s visual illusions. ‘A Curious Story’ (third style) creates soft, rapid figurations as the inset pictures within a larger plain field. The third movement, ‘Polychrome Elegy’ (first style), layers chords in offset patterns to evoke the *faux* stonework of that style, and a lyrical melody is placed over it to hold musical attention and interest. The final movement, ‘Nero and the Golden House’ (fourth style), borrows the outlandish and dramatic aspects of that latest painting style to depict Nero as the lead guitarist of a travelling rock band, again, drawn from historical accounts of Nero’s imperial travels as a singer. Naturally, the first violin is the *prima donna*, or more aptly, *primo uomo* soloist/lead guitarist/Nero.

I have travelled to Rome many times, and lived there in Fall 2012, but must confess that proximity to its ruins did not have a particular musical effect on me for this piece. Speaking for myself, I carry music around with me everywhere, and so while certain places, situations, and images do suggest musical ideas, those moments of inspiration are unpredictable, and can happen anywhere, at any time. Other creative artists may feel the same way with respect to the continual presence of their work. That having been said, visual contact with specific pieces in the CRMA exhibition *did* spark the musical content.

**AB.** Do what degree do you engage with ancient musical practices? Do you feel that it is important to do so?

**AS.** Since I am a contemporary American composer, my life experience and musical influences reflect those of my time and place. This is to say that, while I respect ancient musical practices, I feel no obligation to draw on them, nor do I have an interest in using them for their own sakes. One reason for this is that we after all can’t be entirely sure of what those practices are: many treatises remain, and many important scholars have articulated those practices. But we have never actually *heard* an ancient piece of music performed by a performer in its original context. So, even our most thorough work is speculation. Having said that, I do sometimes dip into the well of ancient materials as might I find them useful for a piece. This is what artists do: if we find something useful to our work, we incorporate it. If it is not, we discard it. So, for example, I used an ancient Greek rhythm, an Anacreontic, in ‘Banqueting Music’, the fourth movement of *Tesserae*. I used it because I happened to like the rhythm and found it useful for the frenetic and

ecstatic context and texture of that piece. The guitar plays the rhythm repeatedly, which interacts and cuts across the other rhythmic lines of the flute and viola in ever-shifting ways.

The fact that it was an ancient rhythm was really coincidental, although the ancient Greek connotations were suitable. An added enhancement was that Anacreon is associated with wine, giving an extra referential layer to a banqueting piece. This kind of intellectual layering is something that I delight in doing, but don't expect that listeners will catch it. For me, using ancient materials for their own sakes is not important. But, ancient materials can provide fertile ground for original usage, as with *Tesserae*.

**AB.** You also compose and perform music for silent films, a number of which are among the first cinematic adaptations of the history, myths and literature of ancient Greece and Rome. Can you tell us more about this aspect of your engagement with classical antiquity?

**AS.** I feel very fortunate that two important sub-threads of my larger exploratory journey meet here. Since 2005, I have been increasingly active as a composer, pianist, organist, and conductor of new silent film scores. The ways in which music supports and partners with on-screen images works in the same way, to me, as does music for opera and ballet: in all these genres, music helps the story to be told. It reinforces, enhances, amplifies, and pushes the story along while being as imperceptible as possible. This is extremely difficult to do, and I have found working in silent film to be one of the most rewarding aspects of my professional life.

As with all aspects of reception, the films tell us more about the receiving culture than about ancient Greece or Rome. Classical subjects were particular favourites in the first two decades or so of cinema (ca. 1895-1915), perhaps because the new genre was working very hard to appear to be 'respectable', and Greek and Roman topics come with a pre-loaded burden of respectability. A challenge of these early films is to make the scores support the story as well as possible; in those early decades, the actors came mostly from the theatre, and they used the same exaggerated facial expressions and gestures which they would have used onstage. This works well on stage, but can look absurd or hilarious to modern audiences. The music, by focusing on the story and treating the film as a serious dramatic offering, helps the audience to overcome that visual distraction. Some of the films are particularly beautiful, as well: Giovanni Pastrone's *La Caduta di Troia*, from 1911, features some stunning imagery and a very convincing sack of Troy. His *Cabiria* of 1914, a story of ancient Rome, would prove to be one of the most important early silent films. Focusing on Greco-Roman silent films frequently means engaging with the early decades of cinema, in itself an interesting historical journey.

**AB.** Do your academic interests inform your compositions, and if so to what degree? Do the two aspects of your working life feed of and reinforce each other? In terms of pedagogy do you feel that your interest in classical antiquity has informed your teaching?

**AS.** These different aspects of my professional life blend together in such a way that it is difficult to separate academic interests from composition: they are all of a piece, aspects of this exploration I've been discussing. However, one way in which this overlap has impacted my teaching is that Sarah and I have created and team-taught two courses at Catholic University, *Greek Tragedy and Opera* and *Roman History and Opera*, undergraduate seminars open to

students of all majors (music reading is not required), which consider specific works of ancient literature and the operas that use them as sources. So, yes, these different interests do inform and support one another.

**AB.** More generally why do you believe that it is important to continue this dialogue with Greco-Roman culture? Do you feel that the classical past is still relevant today?

**AS.** First, I engage with Greco-Roman culture because I find it fascinating, rewarding, and fulfilling. I do it because it satisfies me. That's the first and most important reason an artist should give for any interest. With regard to a larger sense of responsibility for keeping the flame of Greco-Roman antiquity alive, this is something which I may not be bound to do, but I do hope that the music does in some way keep knowledge or awareness of the ancient tradition alive for performers and audiences.

My short answer to your second question is 'absolutely'. And I would answer the same for every period of history. We need to benefit from all history, ancient and modern. As an American, I particularly feel this: my compatriots like to compare themselves with ancient Rome. Our buildings in Washington are Roman temples; we have a Senate; we value military prowess and personal moral purity. But I'm not sure that we really fully understand what it is we think we're identifying with. The Romans were a very different culture, as tolerant in some ways as they were brutal in others. We have adopted much of their brutality and aggressiveness while missing some of their toleration. The classical past is as relevant as any period in history, but particularly so for those of us from cultures founded as European offshoots. Pagan Roman and Judeo-Christian philosophies are deeply ingrained, and it is useful to explore how these Greeks and Romans are like us and not like us.

**AB.** What has your audiences' response been to your engagement with ancient Greece and Rome? Do you believe that audience members who are more familiar with classical antiquity respond differently to your compositions that evoke and/or are modelled on antiquity?

**AS.** Undoubtedly this must be true. I have to say that I don't recall audience members making this point to me, but it may be something that one doesn't think to say. Certainly, I don't intend for pre-knowledge of antiquity to be a precursor.

However, this question did come up recently with *Orpheus and the Secret Road*, my new musical-theatrical piece which was just premiered (February 2013). The two musicians, who enacted the piece, Orpheus (harp) and 'Yuri' (soprano saxophone) – the genders of the musicians reverse those of the myth – wondered if the audience would be able to follow the story. Much of our time in shaping the piece was spent creating clues for the audience to follow the events of the tale. For myself, I had assumed that almost any audience member knew the basic facts of the Orpheus myth: his lover dies suddenly, he goes and retrieves her from Hades, he's not supposed to look back and does anyway, he loses her a second time. And, even if audiences are foggy on the details, it seemed that the story was told in a clear enough way. So, this is still something we're debating as I revise the piece based on the first performance: how clear the story is to non-initiates. And so, it's a very present and ongoing concern.

**AB.** Thank you very much Andrew for taking the time to discuss the impact of Graeco-Roman culture in your work as a musician, composer and performer. The reception of the classical past in contemporary music is another field of artistic endeavour that brings us into dialogue with the literature, arts and culture of ancient Greece and Rome.