

Setting The Orpheus Story To Music

THE story of Orpheus has long been a favorite with composers, from Monteverdi down to the present day.

At the beginning of the 17th century Monteverdi wrote what passed for an opera in those times on the subject. His title, "La Favola d' Orfeo," was used again by the 20th century composer, Alfred Casella, for an opera on the same theme in 1932.

Between these dates numerous other operas, or prototypes of opera, have appeared based on the well-known fable.

The most famous is Gluck's "Orfeo ed Euridice," which was produced in Vienna in 1762; but there are many other versions by lesser-known German and Italian composers.

What caught the fancy of these operatic composers was the drama of Orpheus's braving the fires of Hell to bring back his wife from death.

That Orpheus himself was a character associated with music also enriched the musical possibilities of the subject, since no expedient was necessary to provide an opportunity for Orpheus to sing (or to play), since he was expected to make music anyway.

Possibly it was the dramatic aspect of the story which also attracted Liszt in the first place to compose his symphonic poem, "Orpheus," which is to be given an airing by the Burnside Symphony Orchestra under Dr. John Black this month.

This brief, rarely heard work is considered to be a little masterpiece; and even those who are antipathetic to Liszt acknowledge its beauty.

Actually, according to his own account, Liszt was less interested in the details and drama of

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Orpheus's story than in the poetic idea behind it.

He preferred his subjects vague, since they could then be metamorphosed more easily into music — quite contrary to the practice of his modern successor, the realist, Richard Strauss.

So, in his setting of "Orpheus," Liszt works out a symbolical conception of the story, seeking to portray Music itself as a civilising or humanising force in a world of cruel and shattering violence.