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Musical Interpretations of Medea's Myth in the 21st Century

by *Andriana Soulele*

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Musical Interpretations of Medea's Myth in the 21st Century

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Abstract: During the first decade of the 2000s, Medea's myth was revived numerous times on the operatic stage. Among several scenic works, we chose to refer to three French operas which, despite their differences, share some common features: *Médée de Thessalonique* by Christophe Looten (2001), *Médée* by Michèle Reverdy (2003) and *Medea* by Pascal Dusapin (2007), a choreographed version of the composer's opera *Medeamaterial* (originally written in 1992) by Sasha Waltz. These operas display a contemporary musical expression and they also reveal very different and modern versions of Medea's myth, associated to actual events, political or not. Each composer's point of view, their goals and choices concerning the myth's adaptation, vocal treatment, instrumentation and musical language show not only how intriguing is to represent Medea's character for an artist, but also how an ancient female archetype can offer countless possibilities for ingenious and powerful operas. As a free and strong immigrant woman, Medea is reflected in a way in the face of modern women, who still fight to find their place in patriarchal societies. As a result, Medea's myth is present in musical creation of our days and largely contributes to the fact that ancient Greek drama remains an indelible source of inspiration for the French contemporary opera.

Key words: French opera, ancient Greek tragedy, Medea, myth, 21st century, modality

Introduction

As a source of uncountable musical interpretations since the beginning of the 20th century, the ancient Greek tragedy continues to intrigue, seduce and inspire numerous French composers who essentially create stage works. Besides incidental

music,¹ opera has become an ideal form of research, creation, reinterpretation and innovation of myths. Being revived several times through centuries, Medea's myth has provoked great fascination on French opera stage since the 1980s² and even more since the beginning of the century. Offering a fecund field for original artistic interpretations which dare to question the foundations of our humanity, Medea seems to be the myth that, according to the stage director André Wilms, comes along with the occidental society's actual state and evolution.³

Apart from numerous performances of Marc Antoine Charpentier's and Louigi Cherubini's homonym operas, staged by Pierre Audi (2012), Marshall Pynkoski (Opéra Royal du Château des Versailles in 2017) and Krzysztof Warlikowski (2012) among others, new productions present remarkable adaptations or revisions of the myth. Examples of this can be seen in Pascal Dusapin's *Medea*, choreographed by Sasha Waltz (2007), Christophe Looten's chamber opera *Médée de Thessalonique* (2001) and Michèle Reverdy's *Médée* (2003).⁴ Why is Medea so important? How was Medea's myth represented in these three operas at the beginning of the 21st century? What were each composer's concepts, goals and choices in matters of musical language, orchestration and vocal writing? Were any elements of ancient Greek music (modes) and ancient Greek drama representations (chorus, episodes, stasima, etc.) considered?

Medea of Pascal Dusapin

Pascal Dusapin's opera *Medea* in Sasha Waltz's choreography was performed in Luxembourg's Grand Theatre in May 2007.⁵ It was originally created in 1992⁶ in

¹ See for this matter the author's PhD dissertation: Andriana Soulele, "La musique de scène des représentations de tragédies grecques en France et en Grèce de 1945 à 1975" (PhD diss., Sorbonne University, 2009).

² For instance, Alain Fourchette's *Médée* (opéra de chambre), performed at the M.A.N.C.A Festival (1983, Nice) ; Gavin Bryars's *Medea* in Richard Bernas's staging (1984, Opéra de Lyon) ; Robert Wilson's staging for Mac-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée* in 1985 at the Opéra de Lyon ; Pascal Dusapin's *Medeamaterial* in 1992 or Jean-Marie Villégier's staging of Charpentier's *Médée* in 1993 (Théâtre de Caen, Opéra National du Rhin).

³ According to the stage director's interview for the TV show « Médée à Nanterre » of France 2, June 23, 2003. A film by Michel Follin. *Archives of Inathèque de France*, BnF.

⁴ We can also refer to Mauro Lanza's choreographed opera *Le Songe de Médée* by Angelin Preljocaj (2004), Fratelli Mancuso's *Verso Medea* in Emma Dante's staging direction (2012) or even Mikael Buch's *Médée*, film around Cherubini's opera representation and the conflict relations between a mother and her son (2017).

⁵Staging concept / video – Sasha Waltz, musical direction – Marcus Creed. <http://www.sashawaltz.de/en/productions/> [Accessed in May 25, 2019].

Brussels, at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie as *Medeamaterial* and reproduced numerous times since then in France and other countries by different stage directors.⁷ This opera presents Heiner Müller's second part of *Despoiled Shore Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts*, written during the years 1982-1983.⁸ The libretto is Müller's original text in German. His adaptation, different from Euripides's tragedy, proposes a modern rewriting of Medea's myth clearly influenced by the political situation between East and West Germany. It reflects not only world violence, suffering and despair, but also the writer's life, his internal exile⁹ in East Germany and his opposition to power.¹⁰

Müller's Medea is a betrayed and abandoned woman who lost meaning in her existence. Confronted by the irreversibility of her actions (her brother's, Absyrtus, assassination) and devastated by her passion and jealousy, she murders Creon's daughter. At the end, murdering her children is the deliberate action that erases everything which reminds her of Jason. It is a violent action that allows her to forget him ("Do you know this man?") and finally to be free, even though she doesn't find her place; she's reborn in a nihilist context where she remains divided between two worlds; she's "no woman, no man".¹¹ Müller's text combines love, hate and rage and, in this context, Medea becomes a metaphoric figure for Pascal Dusapin, multifaceted and perfectly drawn to the world's reality.¹² For this opera, the composer wanted to

⁶ Musical direction – Philippe Herreweghe, staging direction – Jacques Delcuvellerie. Collegium Vocale Gen and Orchestre de la Chapelle Royale de Paris. The premier was held on Mars 13, 1992.

⁷ Raffino François created a choreography named *Adieu* in 1994 (Festival d'Avignon), based in Pascal Dusapin's music for *Medeamaterial*. This opera was also reproduced in 1999 under Paul Esterhazy's stage direction in Bonn, in 2000 and 2003 at the Théâtre de la Nanterre under André Wilms' stage direction and in 2001 by Stephan Grögler in Lausanne. New productions of *Medeamaterial* with a new shortened title, *Medea*, were represented in 2006 at the Carré Saint Vincent in Orleans, as well as 2008 at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers, both under Antoine Gindt's stage direction. *Medea* in Sasha Waltz's choreography was performed at the Théâtre de Genevilliers in 2008, at the Grand Théâtre de Luxembourg in 2009 and at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in 2012.

⁸ *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten* is the German title.

⁹ Yixu Lü, "Exiled in the Homeland: Heiner Müller's Medea" in *Exile Clutures, Misplaced Identities, Critical Studies*, ed. Paul Alloison and Jo MC Comack, vol. 30 (New York : Brill/Rodopi, 2008), 173-192.

¹⁰ Claudine Purnelle, "La Médée de Heiner Müller, de Pascal Dusapin et de Sasha Waltz", March 2010, accessed May 25, 2019. http://culture.ulg.ac.be/jcms/prod_196150/fr/medea-la-femme-qui-pleure-de-pascal-dusapin.

¹¹ Irène Langlet, "Violence du récit, violence du théâtre: La Médée de Heiner Müller", *Protée*, vol. 31, no 1 (Spring 2003): 97. <http://www.classictoulouse.com/a-opera-capitole-2010-2011-medea-aire-du-dire1.html>.

¹² Pascal Dusapin, *Une musique en train de se faire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2009), 145-146.

reveal music's expressive dimension which is only conditioned by a desire to resonate with the world.¹³ He wrote about this matter:

“Transposing Medea’s tragedy in opera is not only *an opera idea, an idea of putting a text to music*. It is also a way to show *the theatre of what we want to say to the world*. Writing *Medea*, it was at first questioning about the collective or single dimension which this score could signify for each one of us”.¹⁴

Dusapin worked on Müller’s text during the beginning of the Croatian War in the early 1990s and his opera was also a way to express his political anxiety. According to him, Medea’s story interpreted by Müller could call attention to the Sarajevo drama at the time¹⁵. He explained:

“*Medea* is a metaphor for this world; it’s a modern text of our time. A woman who murders her children in order to revenge their father’s abandon, a man who deals with conflicts related to political territories...You can transpose this situation into a political context and then you can think of countries which murder their own people for other profits”¹⁶...That’s exactly what happens just one hour by plane from here”.¹⁷

The composer analyzed Müller’s text in order to deduct its musical dramaturgy, the form of the literal meaning, the prosody and the construction phrases. As he stated, the text had to be shown in a complete bareness if any ambiguity between the words and the sounds had to be avoided.¹⁸ For the original production in 1992, *Medeamaterial* was supposed to be performed just before the baroque opera *Dido and Aeneas*. Thus, for practical reasons and despite numerous inconveniences (lower diapason in 415 Hz, limited ambitus, sharps sounding lower than flats and less fast strings bow), the composer chose to use a baroque orchestra¹⁹ (the same for the opera

¹³ Márta Grabócz, “La notion de réécriture dans l’œuvre *Medeamaterial* de Heiner Müller et de Pascal Dusapin”, in *Littérature et musique dans la France contemporaine*, dir. by Jean-Louis Backès, Claude Coste and Danièle Pistone, Conference Proceedings March 20-22 1999 in Sorbonne, (Strasbourg : Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2001), 294.

¹⁴ Dusapin, *Une musique*, 149.

¹⁵ Danielle Cohen-Levinas, “Entretien avec Pascal Dusapin”, in *Causeries sur la musique : entretien avec des compositeurs* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 1999), 217.

¹⁶ From Pascal Dusapin’s interview for the France Culture show « Le Rendezvous’ » in November 27, 2009. *Archives of Inatèque de France*, BnF.

¹⁷ Kamila Stępień-Kutera, “Entretien avec Pascal Dusapin”, *Medea*, program notes for the opera’s representation at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, November 9, 2012, 48.

¹⁸ Dusapin, *Une musique*, 147.

¹⁹ The baroque orchestra included 6 first violins, 5 second violins, 4 violas, 4 violoncellos, 2 contrabasses, organ and harpsichord.

performance that followed), in order to benefit from an extraordinary sonority and from a specific articulation mode.²⁰ Within this constraint and a pitch in 415 Htz (sounds a ½ ton lower), Dusapin used modal scales for this score. According to him, he had to build a coherent harmonic project regarding the temperament, without destabilizing the melodic relations.²¹ Thus, he used a “compromised” tuning between the meantone temperament²² and the theoretician’s (organist) Andreas Werckmeister third tuning (III) divided up through 1/4 comma,²³ because all scales of the score were conceived by distinguishing the sharps from the flats.²⁴ In this “baroque tuning” with a 415 Htz diapason (sounds a ½ ton lower), sharps sound lower than flats. According to Danielle Cohen-Levinas, by differentiating scales between sharps or flat modes the composer was also concentrated on the great harmonic richness.²⁵

Therefore, Dusapin chose a modal musical language where micro intervals ($\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{3}{4}$ of ton) are also present, yet only in Medea’s vocal part and sparsely.²⁶ According to Márta Grabócz, Dusapin used different ancient modes which he revisited, completed and linked to an archetypal expression.²⁷ For instance, Medea enters on stage with a *lamento* song accompanied by the organ’s pedal (F) that has a pivotal role; the chords

²⁰ Tarquin Billiet, “Une interview de Pascal Dusapin”, *De Munt / La Monnaie*, no. 2, (March/ April 1992), 8. However, Medea was often performed with a modern orchestra for practical reasons, but the musicians accepted to play in a baroque way. Dusapin, *Une musique*, 148.

²¹ Danielle Cohen-Levinas, “Medeamaterial”, presentation text for the CD’s booklet, *Medeamaterial*, Orchestre de la Chapelle royale, dir. Philippe Herreweghe (Harmonia Mundi : 1998), 3-4.

²² A mean-tone temperament is a system of tuning keyboard instruments, used from c.1570 into the 19th century and revived in the 20th, in which each whole tone is half the size (the ‘mean’) of a pure third. Jeremy Montagu, “Mean-tone temperament”, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, (Oxford University Press: 2011). <https://www-oxfordreference-com-s.rprenet.bnf.fr/view/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037-e-4312>.

²³ From the 17th century, ‘irregular temperaments’ such as those devised by Andreas Werckmeister and others were used instead of either equal temperament or mean-tone. Jeremy Montagu, “Temperament”, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, (Oxford University Press: 2011), <https://www-oxfordreference-com-s.rprenet.bnf.fr/view/10.1093/acref/9780199579037.001.0001/acref-9780199579037-e-6695>.

²⁴ According to the composer’s notes for the published score. Pascal Dusapin, *Medeamaterial* (Paris: Salabert, 2010), I.

²⁵ Cohen-Levinas, “Medeamaterial”, 3-4.

²⁶ According to the composer’s notes for the published score. Pascal Dusapin, *Medeamaterial* (Paris: Salabert, 2010), II.

²⁷ Márta Grabócz, “La notion de réécriture dans l’œuvre *Medeamaterial* de Heiner Müller et de Pascal Dusapin”, in *Littérature et musique dans la France contemporaine*, dir. by Jean-Louis Backès, Claude Coste and Danièle Pistone, Conference Proceedings March 20-22 1999 in Sorbonne, (Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg : 2001), 306.

and the modes are organized around the pedals.²⁸ The song is developed in a D mode of a diminished fifth (C #, D, E flat, E, F, G flat; notes pivot D and F)²⁹ which is soon ornamented (B flat, A, G flat, F) in order to incur a moving harmonic and expressive color (see example 1).³⁰

Example 1

According to Pascal Dusapin's edited score. Pascal Dusapin, *Medeamaterial* (Paris: Salabert, 2010), 1 (m. 1-8). ©With the kind permission of the Editions Salabert.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a vocal piece. Each system consists of two staves: the top staff is for 'Médéc' and the bottom staff is for 'Positif'. The first system (measures 1-4) has lyrics: 'Ja - son Mein Ers - tes und mei - n Letz - tes Am - me'. The second system (measures 5-8) has lyrics: 'wo ist mein Mann wo ist wo ist Mein Mann Mein Mann Wo'. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'p' and 's' colla parte.

This part expresses sadness, melancholia and recalls oriental modes. The composer himself admitted his fascination with Egyptian music and explained the presence of *orientalized* passages to the score (micro-interval glissandi).

“I like the Arabic music very much, especially the Egyptian music and I learned a lot by listening to it. (...) In the oriental music, there are glissandi of micro-interval notes, *melodic slopes*. (...) I kept a proximity with the Arabic music, and I like the fact that someone can perceive it, localize it”.

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Besides the composer's preference for the Arabic music, the fact that Medea comes from Colchis (Asia Minor) could justify the use of an *orientalized* mode.³² Medea's

²⁸ According to Cohen-Levinas, the organ's pedals have a pivot role because the modes and the chords are organized around them. Cohen-Levinas, “*Medeamaterial*”, 5.

²⁹ According to the composer's interview for the France 2's TV show, “*Musiques au cœur de la danse*”, January 29, 1995. *Archives of Inathèque de France*, BnF.

³⁰ Grabócz, “*La notion de réécriture dans l'œuvre Medeamaterial*”, 306.

³¹ Billiet, “*Une interview*”, 8.

³² The ancient greek modes lydian, phrygian, were named by certain neighboring non Greek people from Asia Minor (Lydia, Phrygia). We assume that there were used in a way to represent them

part is indeed characterized by long melismatic phrases with a modal color (see example 2) which, compares to Jason's more agitated or static (ostinato) musical representation (for instance Jason's entrance; see example 3), could suggest the distance between the two characters.³³

Example 2

According to Pascal Dusapin's edited score. Pascal Dusapin, *Medeamaterial* (Paris: Salabert, 2010), 15 (m. 142-144). ©With the kind permission of the Editions Salabert.

m.142
p.15 ♩ = 50

Médée

Ich bin nicht er - wünscht hier Daß ein Tod mich

Example 3

According to Pascal Dusapin's edited score. Pascal Dusapin, *Medeamaterial* (Paris: Salabert, 2010), 13 (m. 124-127). ©With the kind permission of the Editions Salabert.

Clavecin

The vocal treatment for Medea's musical monologue is very arduous, but ingenious because it plays a significant role to the opera's dramaturgy. It evolves from the extreme low register to the extreme high (a real dramatic coloratura register), while the orchestra's part does not exceed a medium ambitus. As a result, Medea seems completely detached, even though the orchestra goes along with her as into her extreme distress.³⁴ The song, according to the composer, is almost abandoned

musically too. Even though Dusapin doesn't mention it, we can assume that among the ancient Greek modes, the mixolydian could be chosen for the representation of foreigners, barbarians, as Medea.

³³ Márta Grabócz, "Archetypes of Initiation and Static Temporality in Contemporary Opera: Works of François-Bernard Mâche, Pascal Dusapin, and Gualtiero Dazzi", in *Music and Narrative since 1900*, ed. Michael L. Klein and Nicholas Reyland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 111-119.

³⁴ Pascal Dusapin, "La femme qui pleure", *Medea*, program notes for the opera's representation at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, November 9, 2012, 18.

progressively because the isolation of this voice is the foundation of her terror. But it was not enough for Dusapin to express with these tools Medea's loneliness. Therefore, he made a dramaturgic choice. In order to emphasize the irrepressible solitude that trapped her in a schizophrenic and melancholic process (what Dusapin calls "arachnéisation schizophrénique et mélancolique"), he fragmented Medea's character in five voices, one solo and a vocal quartet (see example 4).

Example 4

According to Pascal Dusapin's edited score. Pascal Dusapin, *Medeamaterial* (Paris: Salabert, 2010), 45 (m. 398-399). ©With the kind permission of the Editions Salabert

The vocal quartet imitates some specific elements of Medea's solo part in a more subdued, fragile, even "wrecked" way.³⁵ The mixed chorus³⁶ (under the stage, next to the orchestra), repeats, comments and anticipates everything the protagonist says, just as like in a Greek tragedy, pointing out Medea's fatality.³⁷ The secondary characters, Nurse and Jason, are limited to a voice of prerecorded phrases in order to reinforce the multiplication effect. According to the composer, Medea seems to be all alone in Müller's text (which is a monologue), and thus, she doesn't really need any interlocutors for the opera performance.

³⁵ Billiet, "Une interview", 8. According to the composer's interview for the France 2's TV show, "Musiques au cœur de la danse", January 29, 1995. *Archives of Inathèque de France*, BrF.

³⁶ According to the score, it's a mixed chorus consisted of 7 sopranos, 6 contraltos, 6 tenors, 7 basses. Pascal Dusapin, *Medeamaterial* (Paris: Salabert, 2010), I-II.

³⁷ Billiet, "Une interview", 8.

Sasha Waltz's production of *Medea* respected Dusapin's music and choices. She underlined Medea's fragmentation by the presence of an actress who takes in charge the theatrical aspect. In addition, she declaims Medea's spoken parts, surrounded by numerous dancers (solos, duos and groups). Inspired not only by Müller's adaptation but also by Christa Wolf's novel "Medea: Voices" as well, Waltz highlighted the feminine power of the myth and shaped the tension between the creative and destructive powers of the character; mother, healer, as well as ruthless killer. Willing to stage her own interpretation of the myth, Waltz chose to perceive Medea essentially as a healer, a magician. As the choreographer stated:

"Her powers are benefic, even though she uses them to destroy. It is another version in order to point out the body...and even many different bodies".

"Her expressive language makes the bodies talk and enlightens the ancient world with an astonishing modernity".³⁸

Waltz's choreography lengthened Dusapin's original opera, especially with silent dance parts in crucial moments; the dancers' entrance on stage for instance. It also reveals an economy of the spectacular form and many contrasts, as can be perceived by the empty set besides corpses and huge ventilators, the cohabitation of music, silence and ventilation noise, and the contrast of black and white colors with red.³⁹ No other decors or sophisticated costumes were used as the dancers' gestures were already reflecting Medea's personality along with her actions. They contributed to understanding the opera's dramaturgy. Between the silent dancing chorus and the solitaire figure of Medea, the choreography associates Waltz's personal style with the ancient Greek tragedy evoked by Müller and Dusapin.⁴⁰ It also weaves contradictory bonds of attraction and repulsion. The dancers try to explain Medea's action, just like the chorus, and they are the echo of her troubles.⁴¹ Waltz make their bodies talk and stages them with a pure and warm modernity.⁴² For instance, the dancers take part in Glauce's poisoning and try to avoid Medea's children's assassination; their actions are set on stage in a remarkable and ingenious way. Waltz's production is attached to

³⁸ Sasha Waltz, "Point de vue sur Medea", *Medea*, program notes for the opera's representation at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, November 9, 2012, 43.

³⁹ Tiphaine Karsenti, "Quels tragiques pour Médée", *Skénégraphie*, vol. 4 (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de France-Compté, 2016), 40.

⁴⁰ Michel Grialou, "MEDEA, porte-drapeau antique de la monogamie", *Culture 31*, January 17, 2011, <https://blog.culture31.com/2011/01/17/medea-porte-drapeau-antique-de-la-monogamie/>.

⁴¹ Karsenti, "Quels tragiques pour Médée", 40.

⁴² Brigitte Cormier, "70 minutes implacables. Medea-Paris (TCH)", *Forum Opera*, November 10, 2012, <https://www.forumopera.com/spectacle/70-minutes-implacables>.

the original source but offers another interpretation of the myth via the choreographer's vision. As stated by the composer, it is more of an actual staging of his original opera than a simple choreography; it goes beyond that in favor of a unique creation, it is a real object of art.⁴³

***Médée* of Michèle Reverdy**

On the antipodes of Dusapin's *Medea*, Michèle Reverdy composed *Médée*⁴⁴ in 2003; an opera which incarnates her love for literature and theatre, as well as her passion for music.⁴⁵ It was performed at the Opera de Lyon under Raoul Ruiz's staging direction and Pascal Rophé's musical direction.⁴⁶ The opera's libretto was directly inspired by another successful novel, "*Medea. Voices*", published in 1996 by a German writer, Christa Wolf. The adaptation and French translation were made by Kai Stefan Fritsch and Bernard Banoun. The text was a revelation for Reverdy who was completely seduced by it

Wolf took into consideration Hesiod's *Theogony* and other texts written before Euripides's tragedy, which disclose a different version of Medea's story; her children were murdered by the royal family or by the Corinthians and, inside this obscure political context, Medea is the victim.⁴⁷ Wolf, through the interior monologues of six characters, draws a less sanguinary and more positive image of her as a free, confident, generous woman, a magician and a healer whose status (an arrogant immigrant who came from East) and actions (being a free woman), however, are not really appreciated by the people of Corinth.⁴⁸ Medea heals Creon's daughter from her anxiety by revealing Iphinoe's murder (her oldest sister) by her own father,

⁴³ According to France Culture's show "Le rendez-vous", November 27, 2009. *Archives of Inathèque de France*, BrF.

⁴⁴ The score was written for a male chorus (four tenors, four baritones and four basses), 3 flutes, 2 oboes, 1 English horn, 1 small clarinet in E flat, 2 clarinets in B flat, 1 clarinet bass, 2 bassoons, 1 contrabassoon, 3 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones tenor-bass, 1 tuba, 1 harp, 1 harpsichord, violins, violas, cellos, contrabasses, 3 percussions, timpani, harpsichord and strings quintet.

⁴⁵ Cécile Auzolle, "L'opéra comme lieu de recherche et de création: *Médée* (2003) de Michèle Reverdy", *Les Cahiers de la Société québécoise de recherche en musique*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Octobre 2009): 50. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1054091ar>.

⁴⁶ The opera was performed several times between January and February 2003. The film was also realized by Raoul Ruizl and the costumes by Carolie de Vivaise.

⁴⁷ Jacqueline Rousseau-Dujardin, "Du roman de Christa Wolf au livret d'opéra", *Médée*, program notes for the opera's representation at the Opéra de Lyon, 2003, 12.

⁴⁸ Raphaëlle Legrand, "Michèle Reverdy, composer à tout prix", *Travail, genre et sociétés*, no. 34, vol. 2 (2015) : 5-30. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-travail-genre-et-societes-2015-2-page-5.htm>.

greedy for power. Thus, being dangerous for knowing Creon's secret and realizing that his power partly derives from a crime, she, the immigrant and barbarian woman, seems to be the perfect scapegoat in order to calm down people's violence and pay for the city's problems. Condemned, she is exiled and separated from her children. Years later, isolated, she discovers that her children were murdered from the Corinthians just after her departure and that she is being accused of their assassination.

The complexity of Wolf's novel is developed by many voices (11 monologues)⁴⁹ who reveal its autobiographic character. The Nazi period, the Berlin Wall, the communist party in East Germany, the false accusation of having collaborated with the Stasi, are facts linked with Wolf's past and Medea's story in a way that allowed her to go deeper with her own political reflection.⁵⁰ Medea's myth through Wolf talks about people's memory and people's history written through violence (especially about the history of German people).⁵¹ Her novel points out a crucial question; "How can we conciliate personal integrity, elementary freedom and political engagement – being concerned for the common good, especially when we are women?"⁵² These aspects of the novel, freedom, independence, injustice, solitude, as well as its political and ideological dimension fascinated Reverdy. Being remarkably close to the novel, the opera's libretto highlights its political and feminist features by revealing the power based on crime and corruption, Medea's place in the xenophobic Corinthian society and all the violence resulting from it, as well as her sacrifice by the Corinthians who dislike her status as a free woman.

With the composer's implication, the librettists Banoun and Fritsch opted for a linear dramaturgy⁵³ in eleven scenes (the text's architecture was related directly to the novel's architecture, the eleven monologues), with the physical presence of five out of the six characters, and the male chorus.⁵⁴ Leukos was replaced by the chorus, who had multiple roles (Leukos voice, Merope's voice, the Corinthians). Considering the dramaturgy's progression (that points out two different faces of Medea) from Medea's joy, her Colchis' memories up to the discovery of crimes (which created a serial of hate, lies, pain, Merope's silence and Glauce's sickness) and her void point at the end, the sixth scene with Glauce has a central and important role. It represents

⁴⁹ Merope, Akamas, Glauce, Medea, Creon, Jason and Leukos are the novel's characters.

⁵⁰ Rousseau-Dujardin, "Du roman de Christa Wolf", 12.

⁵¹ Philippe Gut, "Médée, le mythe revisité", *L'humanité*, Janvier 24, 2003.

⁵² Rousseau-Dujardin, "Du roman de Christa Wolf", 12-13.

⁵³ Michel Pazdro, "Entretien avec les librettistes. Six questions à Kai stefan Fritsch et Bernard Banoun", *Médée*, program notes for the opera's representation at the Opéra de Lyon, 2003, 21.

⁵⁴ Minimum twelve singers. According to the composer's notes for this work at her personal website. Michèle Reverdy, "Médée. Notice", accessed May 25, 2019. http://www.michelereverdy.com/oeuvres_detail.php?id=55

the opera's climax.⁵⁵ Thus, numbers 6 (six characters) and 11 (eleven scenes) became symbolic for Reverdy's opera, its musical construction, and form. In fact, before even beginning to work on the opera, the composer expressed her wish to find a symbolic number. She wrote:

"I've dreamt the beginning of the opera: a drums' theme, at first distant but getting closer until it is unbearable – Christa Wolf talks about the Colchis drums. I would like to find a symbolic number to build the rhythm of this percussive theme".⁵⁶

By using these symbolic numbers, Reverdy's harmonic conception resulted from a "harmonic reservoir" of eleven chords, transposed six times (see example 5).⁵⁷

Example 5

According to Michèle Reverdy's edited score. Michèle Reverdy, *Médée*, (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, coll. Notissimo, 2006). With the kind permission of the composer.

The image shows a musical score for eleven chords, labeled A through K. The chords are arranged in two staves, treble and bass clef. Each chord is represented by a cluster of notes on a staff. The chords are: A (C4, E4, G4, B4), B (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5), C (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5), D (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5, A5), E (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5, A5, C6), F (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5, A5, C6, E6), G (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5, A5, C6, E6, G6), H (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5, A5, C6, E6, G6, B6), I (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5, A5, C6, E6, G6, B6, D7), J (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5, A5, C6, E6, G6, B6, D7, F7), K (C4, E4, G4, B4, D5, F5, A5, C6, E6, G6, B6, D7, F7, A7).

According to Pierre Michel and on the contrary to dodecaphonic music or post-serialism, this method assured a harmonic unity and allowed Reverdy to favor or separate specific notes; like E flat, symbol of Akamas's power.⁵⁸ Even though there is no presence of any kind of modes and Reverdy's music is composed in a free atonal language, the use of these chords is not aleatory; it depends on the scene, the action, and even on each character's nature. Concerning this subject, the composer said the following of France's Culture show "Le bel aujourd'hui" in 2003:

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Pierre Michel, "Médée, opéra en onze scènes. Analyse de la partition", program notes for the opera's representation at the Opéra de Lyon, 2003, 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

“I work a lot on the color and the matter. There are always in my works oppositions of the sound climates and, in opera, they are defining a precise psychological state”.⁵⁹

In consequence, a precise number of chords and their transpositions correspond to different themes – *topoi* (common place) of the recite, like crime (A, D, E, F, J) or secret (EI, F1)⁶⁰. For instance, Medea’s love passion is expressed by a combination of the I, F, G, J, K chords (in first transposition) played by the strings (see example 6).⁶¹

Example 6

According to Michèle Reverdy’s edited score. Michèle Reverdy, *Médée*, (Paris: Alphonse Leduc, coll. Notissimo, 2006), 14 (m. 136-137). With the kind permission of the composer.

m.136
p.14 **Passion amoureuse**

The image shows a musical score for six string instruments: Violon I, Violon II, Alto, Vcl Solo, Vcl, and Contrebasse. The score is for measures 136 and 137 of the piece 'Passion amoureuse' from the opera 'Médée'. The music is written in 4/4 time and features a complex harmonic structure with many accidentals and ties. The score is for measures 136 and 137 of the piece 'Passion amoureuse' from the opera 'Médée'. The music is written in 4/4 time and features a complex harmonic structure with many accidentals and ties.

It is interesting to notice that certain chords are present in various *topoi* and they derive from Medea’s harmonic reservoir which is constituted by all the chords in first transposition. For dramaturgic reasons, the chord B4 is only used at the last scene in order to create a feeling of strangeness. According to Reverdy, each scene has a special orchestra color, and each thematic group a specific way of writing. For example, strings symbolize power, the harp and the cello express Medea’s tenderness (see example 7), the city’s appearance is represented by a fugue which becomes diabolic at the end of the opera with the assassination of Medea’s children, while a

⁵⁹ According to Michèle Reverdy’s interview for the France Culture’s show, “Le bel aujourd’hui”, February 23, 2005. *Archives of Inathèque de France*, BnF.

⁶⁰ Dörte Schmidt, “ A qui poser la question sur Médée de Michèle Reverdy”, *Musique, art et littérature dans l’œuvre de Michèle Reverdy*, (Paris : l’Harmattan, 2005), 168.

⁶¹ According to the composer’s notes for this work at her personal website. Michèle Reverdy, “Médée. Notice”, accessed May 25, 2019. http://www.michelereverdy.com/oeuvres_detail.php?id=55. The following analysis is based on the same source.

very somber instrumental and vocal color characterizes Medea's lament for her brother's death. Consequently, this opera is thematic, almost in a Wagnerian kind of way, as the composer herself admits.⁶²

Example 7

According to Michèle Reverdy's edited score. Michèle Reverdy, *Médée*, (Paris: Alphonce Leduc, coll. Notissimo, 2006), 13 (m. 119-123). With the kind permission of the composer.

m.119
p.13 **Tendresse de Médée**

Conceiving her music like a homogenous sound material (not like an accompanied melody), the orchestral part has a substantial role; it evolves as an interlocutor who recites and intervenes with the dramatic action. For example, for Medea's happy memories and intimate moments' illustration, Reverdy used an *unconventional* baroque continuo at the core of the orchestra, composed of a cembalo, harp, harpsicord, steel drums, vibraphone and chords (in pizzicato).⁶³ Moreover, at the highest point of the opera, when Medea finds out about her children's stoning, the orchestra and even the chorus, amplifies the moment with stones banging together. Indeed, only the harp and some percussion resonate⁶⁴. The orchestra's musical tissue is so imposing that the vocal parts don't appear independently of it and are basically extracted by it.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Reverdy composes expressive melodic lines, adopts a syllabic writing and changes the French prosody in order to make the text more intelligible.

The narrative qualities of Reverdy's opera are enhanced with Raoul Ruiz's cinematographic staging.⁶⁶ The shootings respected the timing of every musical

⁶² According to Michèle Reverdy's interview for the France Culture's show, "Tout arrive", January 23, 2003. *Archives of Inathèque de France*, BnF.

⁶³ According to Michèle Reverdy's interview for the France Culture's show, "La musique dans tous ses éclats", January 23, 2003. *Archives of Inathèque de France*, BnF.

⁶⁴ Schmidt, "A qui poser la question", 175-176.

⁶⁵ According to the composer's notes for this work at her personal website. Michèle Reverdy, "Médée. Notice", accessed May 25, 2019. http://www.michelereverdy.com/oeuvres_detail.php?id=55.

⁶⁶ For more information regarding the stage direction of Raoul Ruiz, see the documentary film "Chronique d'une mise en scène", September 16, 2009. *Archives of Inathèque de France*, BnF.

passage according to the composer's instructions.⁶⁷ The projection of images and short films, taken mostly in Sicily (temples, sea, cars...), in three vertical screens offers a natural, bare décor. It not only combines the past with the present, but also evokes a Mediterranean and oriental space,⁶⁸ reinforced by the costumes of vivid colours, (created by Caroline de Vivaise), imagined, and inspired by the Orient, too. As a literature opera, Reverdy's *Médée* offers a strong political, feminist, and alternative version of Medea's myth as known by Euripides's tragedy, that make us wonder how anyone can survive in a world hostile to any form of difference, in a world of violence and corruption.

***Médée de Thessalonique* of Christophe Looten**

Completely different from the operas of Dusapin and Reverdy, Christophe Looten's chamber opera, *Médée de Thessalonique*, was created at the Théâtre d'Arras in 2001 under the stage direction of Vincent Gothals and the music direction of Philippe Nahon (ensemble Ars Nova).⁶⁹ It does not exactly treat Medea's story, but it is focused on the myth's sensible matter; the murder of an innocent child. Frédéric Lenormand's libretto digresses essentially from the myth as we know it and was inspired by a true story that took place in Thessalonica, Greece. For the libretto's choice, Looten claimed:

"I'm convinced that an opera is a history of love and death. Thus, we need these two elements to make an opera. When he [Lenormand] told me about this story in Thessalonica, I found that it was interesting not only for recalling the myth – cause I think an opera is better when it goes deep into the roots of a myth, but also because the story pointed out very interesting matters to treat in an opera, innocence and injustice".⁷⁰

In the 1990's, Greek journals disclosed a tragic story of murder and referred to the offender as *Eleni "Medea of Thessalonica"*.⁷¹ With some allusions to Seneca's *Medea*,

⁶⁷ Auzolle, "L'opéra", 53.

⁶⁸Philippe Gut, "Médée, le mythe revisité", *L'humanité*, Janvier 24, 2003, <https://www.humanite.fr/node/278589>

⁶⁹ Chamber opera in three acts and six scenes, for four singers and 15 instruments: flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, 2 horns, trumpet, trombone, harp, percussions, 2 violins, viola, cello, contrabass. Costume design – Catherine Lefebvre, set design – Jean Haas. Christophe Looten, *Médée de Thessalonique*, facsimile reproduction of the manuscrit, 2001.

⁷⁰ Christophe Looten, personal interview to author in Paris, August 19, 2017.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

Lenormand adapted freely this “modern Greek drama”. It talks about Eleni, a single mother, who loses her daughter Eva to an overdose. Convinced that her daughter was murdered and unable to count on the police’s help, she leads her own investigation. She finds out from her daughter’s friend, Litsa, that she was a prostitute. Consequently, she decides to prostitute herself in order to find out what really happened and, hopefully, even expose the murderer. One night, she is highly attracted to a mysterious client, Gatissios, who confesses he murdered a young girl. He eventually divulges the name of her daughter, Eva. Following this revelation, Eleni takes a knife, kills him and so takes revenge for Eva’s untimely death.⁷²

Looten was intrigued by this incident which recalled Medea’s myth in a reversed way: Medea is not the murderer in this opera; she is a woman hurt and isolated who revenges the murder of her only daughter. It could be titled “Anti Medea” according to the composer⁷³. Even though it could seem a melodramatic subject, this story gave Looten the opportunity to raise significant aspects of Medea’s myth, such as innocence, love and injustice. As he stated, the libretto allowed him to deal with these matters in depth and in the sense of the ancient Greek tragedy. Furthermore, Looten worked on the opera’s characters in order to give them profound and universal resonances, not only in a psychological way, but also in a symbolic one. “How can we live after the death of an innocent child?” is an essential interrogation which led him to attribute specific symbols to the characters. As far as Eleni’s character is concerned, Looten explained:

“I wanted to transform this character to a symbol. If I tell a story about a mother whose innocent child was murdered, many people will think about Virgin Mary. And that is what interests me the most; I thought that Eleni had a side that recalled her”.⁷⁴

As paradoxical as it might sound this point of view, for Looten composing an opera supposes also to work on the plot and try to give it profound and universal resonances. In particular, Eleni’s actions and character are shaped through choral and plainchant citations which connect her, in a musical way, to the Christian religion. During the second scene, where Eleni buries her daughter, Looten wrote a choral which was interpreted by the other characters, present on stage, but hidden by black umbrellas. As Looten claimed, they supported action just like an ancient Greek tragedy’s chorus. Thus, we can assume that the composer associates, without any hesitation, Christian symbols, sacred musical genres and theatrical practices that recall the ancient Greek tragedy.

⁷² According to the libretto. Christophe Looten, *Médée de Thessalonique*. Opéra en trois actes sur un livret de Frédéric Lenormand, (Great Britten : Editions Musica Nova, 2001).

⁷³ Christophe Looten, personal interview to author in Paris, August 19, 2017.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

Looten's attachment to symbolism can also be found in other musical parameters which prove a way of thinking. For instance, he attributed rhythmic motifs to the characters' names by using the Morse signals, as well as concrete intervals to each character.

"I am a musician who like symbols. I think music should be a symbolic language. So, I thought for this opera to distinguish a musical interval for each character; a major second for Eva and a diminished fourth for the police officer, Stratos"⁷⁵ (see examples 8 and 9).

Moreover, he conceived the music as a kind of race to the bottom in matters of tempo: there is indeed a progressive acceleration of the music which arrives to the opera's climax/*katharsis* at the last scene's revelation and murder.

Example 8

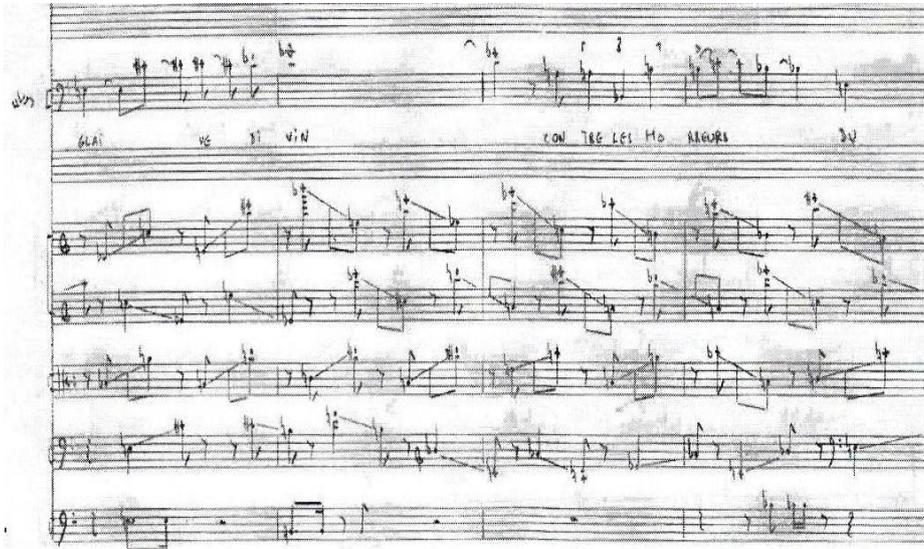
Eleni's part. Christophe Looten, *Médée de Thessalonique*, facsimile reproduction of the manuscript score, 2001, 126.
With the kind permission of the composer.

The image shows a page of a handwritten musical score. At the top left, the name 'Eleni' is written. The first staff is a vocal line with the lyrics 'QUE SE COM DE SE LOUY AU TANT DE DE' written below it. The rest of the page consists of several staves of piano accompaniment, featuring various musical notations including notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Example 9

Stratos's part. Christophe Looten, *Médée de Thessalonique*, facsimile reproduction of the manuscript score, 2001, 126. With the kind permission of the composer.



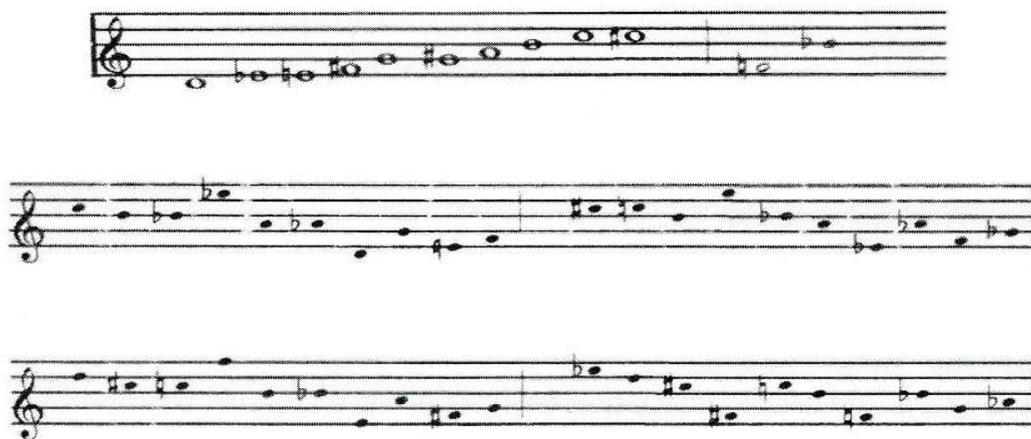
Regarding the musical language, the composer employed a mode of ten notes of his invention, the bi-pentaphonique mode; a result of a methodic research and creation (see example 10). This mode is transposable in order to reintroduce the two notes excluded from the chromatic scale (12 notes) and change the harmonic color into a tonal environment (see example 11). The bi-pentaphonique mode, along with its transpositions,⁷⁶ constitutes a *modal serial tank* from which Looten develops the whole opera's material and helps him to attribute a sound diversity to each scene.

⁷⁶ Christophe Looten, "Organiser le chaos... Pour l'élaboration d'un système de composition musicale", *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, vol. 25, (1989) : 527-543. <https://doi.org/10.3406/casa.1989.2555>

Example 10

Bi-pentaphonic mode. Christophe Looten, "Organiser le chaos... Pour l'élaboration d'un système de composition musicale", *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez*, vol. 25, (1989): 532.

<https://doi.org/10.3406/casa.1989.2555>



assume that there is a common point here between Looten and Reverdy who used the B4 chord only once and at the last scene of her opera in order to create a mysterious feeling.

Staged in a sober decor with the musicians on the set, Looten's opera combines the myth's important eternal questions with life in modern Greece. Furthermore, it offers another perspective by having a Christian point of view which is reflected using sacred music genres, such as choral and plainchant.

Reverdy, Dusapin and Looten created three dissimilar images and original musical interpretations of Medea's myth via German and French adaptations. They actually reveal ancient Greek drama's complexity, incredible richness and ability to readapt its content and form through art. Faithful to some principles of ancient Greek tragedy form and music that have been revisited, as the chorus, the modes and the importance of the voice, inventive in matters of orchestration and vocal treatment, resourceful in ways of musical expression and language that goes from modality to free atonality, these operas show how Greek mythology remains a limitless font of inspiration and creation. Dusapin and Reverdy preferred to put in music German adaptations of the myth with strong political and feminist features (exile, corruption, violence, power), whereas Looten outlined his *Anti-Medea* in a modern Greek environment characterized by innocence, injustice and revenge. Even if Looten and Dusapin do not seem to have any attachments to ancient Greek music, they chose to use a modal musical vocabulary. Even though the musical context of these three operas was completely dissimilar, baroque elements were also used by Dusapin (baroque orchestra), Reverdy (baroque continuo) and Looten (choral). Additionally, symbolism was a choice shared by Reverdy and Looten, even though it was expressed in quite different ways in their music.

According to the press, Dusapin's *Medea*, introspective,⁷⁸ powerful⁷⁹ and cruelly expressive⁸⁰ as well as Reverdy's *Médée*, profound, poetic⁸¹ and attractive because of her dramatic and lyric vision, were a great success. The three operas captivated the French public at the time and created a bond between the present and the ancient past through a dominant feminine figure. So, Medea seems to speak to us directly, but why now in particular? Specific moments of historical crisis were defined in art by female archetypes: Salome or Cleopatra during the WWI or Antigone and Jeanne d'Arc during the WWII.⁸² Since the 1980s, Medea's archetype finds echoes to

⁷⁸ Jérémie Szpirglas, "Médée mise à nue", *Le monde de la musique*, no. 318, (March 2007), 27.

⁷⁹ Laurent Vilarem, "Médée [II]: le mythe de Dusapin", *Cadences*, no. 258, (Novembre 2012), 12-13.

⁸⁰ Anne Rey, "Médée, soleil noir", *Le Monde*, March 21, 1992.

⁸¹ Renaud Machart, "La 'Médée' poétique et singulière de Michèle Reverdy", *Le Monde*, January 28, 2003.

⁸² Jane de Gay, "Seizing Speech and Playing with Fire: Greek Mythological Heroines and International Women's Performance", in *Languages of Theatre Shaped by Women*, (Bristol: Intellect, 2001), 12-13.

women's position in patriarchal societies; she is a stranger, free and strong woman, but also a victim and pays the price for all men's crimes (manipulation, infidelity, betrayal).⁸³ Even though it is partially believed that classical mythology celebrates the submission of matriarchal power to patriarchal,⁸⁴ Medea pushes women to reconsider their place into the world, their attitude towards men, to think over their role as mothers and to fight for their rights and beliefs. As far as the evolution of the occidental society is concerned, Medea, as a furious, passionate, schizophrenic and sanguinary murderer, radiant, confident and generous magician, mother, healer, victim and offender, will always point out our questionable actions and force us to look in the mirror and face our humanity.

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⁸³ Vincent Borel, "Le syndrome de Médée", *Medea*, program notes for the opera's representation at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées, November 9, 2012, 15.

⁸⁴ Gay de, "Seizing Speech", 12.

- Follin, Michel. "Médée à Nanterre." Film projected by France 2, June 23, 2003. *Archives of Inathèque de France, BnF.*
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