Pestis Atreus:
A Short Oratorio

By

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ABSTRACT

Probably most known today from Aeschylus' trilogy The Oresteia, the curse on the house of Atreus was a popular myth for artistic works in ancient Greece and Rome. This fabled curse begins with Tantalus, who killed his own son (Pelops) and fed him to the gods in order to test their omniscience. Horrified, the gods cursed Tantalus and his lineage, thus dooming his descendants for several generations until the curse was finally lifted by Orestes' humble plea to the goddess Athena. The curse runs its course through the well-known tale of Helen and Menelaos and the sacrifice of the unsuspecting Iphigenia by her father Agamemnon. Aeschylus' The Oresteia picks up with the subsequent murder of Agamemnon by his wife Clytemnestra, the resulting matricide by Orestes, his bout with the Furies, and his eventual redemption.

Family Tree (Simplified)

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Atreus

Menelaos (Helen)                                      Agamemnon (Clytemnestra)

Iphigenia                                     Electra                                     Orestes
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Pestis Atreus (The Atreus Curse), for chorus and orchestra, depicts manifestations of this cursed lineage into five movements.

Menelaos – The chorus reflects on the curse of Atreus' lineage and ominously reveals that Menelaos is brooding over the loss of Helen.

Helen's Flight – Portrays Helen's tantalizing journey to Troy with her lover, Paris.

Agamemnon and Iphigenia – Expresses Agamemnon's sorrow at fulfilling his duty: sacrificing his innocent daughter in order to ensure favorable winds for the Greek fleets' journey to Troy in pursuit of Helen.

Clytemnestra's Vengeance – Encapsulates Clytemnestra's rage at Agamemnon for murdering their daughter, spending ten years fighting at Troy, and then returning with the prophetess Cassandra as a lover. In a fury, she murders Agamemnon and Cassandra, and would have killed the young Orestes as well if Electra had not rescued him.

The Torment of Orestes – Orestes has avenged his father's death by killing his mother. He wanders the land, tormented by guilt while the Furies pursue him for matricide, the most heinous of crimes.
INSTRUMENTATION

Piccolo
Flute I, II
Oboe I, II
English Horn
Clarinet I, II
Bass Clarinet
Bassoon I, II
Horn in F I, II, III, IV
Trumpet in C I, II, III
Trombone I, II
Bass Trombone
Tuba
Timpani
Percussion I, II

Harp

Baritone Solo (Agamemnon)
Soprano Solo (Clytemnestra)
Tenor Solo (Orestes)
SATB Choir

Violin I
Violin II
Viola
Cello
Contrabass

Thank you to Dr. Dennis Christilles for creating the libretto for PESTIS ATREUS. Also, many thanks to my wife Katrina for her endless support and patience.
Libretto

I – MENELAOS

In that dark dawn of days before,
Lace of dust,
Yet whispered still beneath the earth.
Disfigured breath recalled from rust,
Shaded blood of Atreus.

The primal curse well known to all,
Dressed with time’s philosophy.
More real than blood, more blood than real,
And more, and more, but see,
Reliving brings some end for us.

A brother robbed of all he
Could never have or hold.
Treasure robbed of Menelaos.

II – HELEN'S FLIGHT

Fading line of Argos, gone
Forgotten land of grief!
Paris to his Helen smiles,
Caressing, thief to thief.

Sleepy stars replace the skies,
Two care-free children off to bed.
Roll and coil beneath the sheets,
Dark water turning red.

Fading line of Argos,
New life begun today.
Helen to her Paris smiles,
Her cares all blown away.

III – AGAMEMNON AND IPHIGENIA

AGAMEMNON:
Why a god should wish a life away?
Who cares now if we go or stay?
Why a god should wish a young life away?

CHORUS:
Seems like a game too cruel to play.
And so we ask, why a god?

AGAMEMNON:
Such a demon could create a curse
To split a soul. Conceive perverse
Ideas. And, yet still, what's worse
To make me ask this,
why a god should wish her life away?

My little girl, so fair and mild,
With trusting face, with eyes that smiled!

CHORUS:
Take this sword from his hand.
Take these thoughts from his head.
Let him bleed in the sand.
Let him die here instead!
AGAMEMNON:
It is done.
Now gone the life I used to know.
I stood and stared, her blood did flow.
A haunting tune, cold wind did blow.
Turn off my mind, now I must go.

IV – CLYTEMNESTRA'S VENGEANCE

CHORUS:
Grief and anger fill my soul.
Fear and anguish ply the spur.

CLYTEMNESTRA:
So many years have come and gone.
You might guess where my heart has been.
I’ve nursed my hate, true child of mine,
And now this fool pays for his sin!

CHORUS:
Sweet daughter summoned by his lies,
Sacrificed on drunken sands.
Cut and carved, deceived and dead,
Her blood dried black upon his hands.

CLYTEMNESTRA:
His lover bathes now in his blood.
I’ve cut them both; I’ve killed them all!
I’ve put it right – yet now I hear
Dry voices murmur in the hall.

I hear them whisper through the mist.
I’ll live with it, small price to pay.
On with my life, I’ve put it right!
Yet did you hear? What’s that they say?

V – THE TORMENT OF ORESTES

ORESTES:
I awoke in madness, stained, a
Criminal without warning!
Haunted darkness, hunted holy
Light unseen until this morning.

I awake or am I dreaming?
Left undead, un-mourned, forsaken.
Torn and tortured, yes, I killed them!
Seemed so sure – was I mistaken?

CHORUS OF FURIES:
Ah! Guided well, from here to hell!

Hear him cry and wonder why.
Hear his sighs, was he unwise
to murder and destroy?

Now cast out, full of doubt.
Left alone, this blood and bone
to suffer as he stands!
I. MENELAOS
"In that dark dawn of days before..."

Brian Bondari (ASCAP)

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II. HELEN'S FLIGHT

"Fading line of Argos...."
III. AGAMEMNON AND IPHIGENIA

"Why a god should wish a life away?"
Faster, with urgency (  \( \dot{\sigma} = 88 \cdot 92 \) )
Adagio dolente (q = 68 - 72)
I stood and stared, her blood did flow!

An haunting sound...
IV. CLYTEMNESTRA'S VENGEANCE

"So many years have come and gone...."
His love so bitter now, his blood! For cut them both, for shield their sons.

All my soul, have and as god! ply the way. Glad and as go! all my soul.

All my soul, have and as god! ply the way. Glad and as go! all my soul.

His love so bitter now, his blood! For cut them both, for shield their sons.

All my soul, have and as god! ply the way. Glad and as go! all my soul.

His love so bitter now, his blood! For cut them both, for shield their sons.

All my soul, have and as god! ply the way. Glad and as go! all my soul.

His love so bitter now, his blood! For cut them both, for shield their sons.

All my soul, have and as god! ply the way. Glad and as go! all my soul.

His love so bitter now, his blood! For cut them both, for shield their sons.

All my soul, have and as god! ply the way. Glad and as go! all my soul.
V. THE TORMENT OF ORESTES

"I awoke in madness...."
Maestoso (\( \text{\textit{a = 58 - 64}} \))