

Oedipus at Colonus in Nine Fragmentary Tableaux

The music from which these selections were drawn was commissioned for the Handcart Ensemble's winter 2008 production of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. Seeking to evoke a mythological, ancient world, I selected the harp and oboe for being (very distantly) related to the Kithara and Aulos, two primary instruments of the Ancient Greeks. I chose the trombone for its common historical, theatrical association with gods, the supernatural and the other-worldly, as well as for that instrument's own relatively direct connection to ancient brass instruments. A fortuitous intersection with a gathering of Novus Trombone Quartet in Carlisle before the opening of the play that winter made possible a scoring for trombone quartet. Thus, half of the music was scored for the harp/oboe combination, and the other for trombone quartet. The music is mostly harmonically simple and static, suitable for underscoring the dense, weighty scenes of the play. Nevertheless, the harmonic palette and tonal shape for the piece as a whole is derived from a conflict between the common-practice interval of strength and stability, the perfect fifth, and the interval embodying the golden ratio in music (and therefore, by Ancient Greek standards, musical perfection), the major sixth. The triumph of the divine, transcendent forces (the oracular and godly calls for Oedipus's self-sacrifice and the inevitability of death) over the earthly, temporal forces (the ambitions of Creon and Polyneices, the persistent ramifications of Oedipus's past moral transgressions) is mirrored by the gradual emergence of the major sixth as the dominant and terminal interval.

Adaptation of the incidental music to a suite for trombone quartet entailed the considerable challenge of recasting oboe-harp music as four-trombone music, but it was also necessary to give the musical passages more specific shape. Nevertheless, most of the movements remain aphoristic and fragmentary in nature. Imagine these as scenes on fragments of a rediscovered Greek vase. We have been fortunate in recovering the majority of this vase, for our tableaux include many of the play's principal scenes and all of its characters. (The musicians also have the option of choosing a subset of the nine total tableaux and may therefore opt to display fewer pieces of the artifact.)

I. "Sanctuary of the Euminides" – Oedipus, a blind outcast from his home city of Thebes, wanders nomadically, led by his devoted daughter Antigone. As the action begins, they arrive at an especially beautiful and inviting resting place.

II. "Eumenides' Wrath," described by the citizens, manifests itself in the persistence of Oedipus's pathetic state as the result of his moral transgressions in the play's prequel (*Oedipus tyrannus*), in Creon's threats, Polyneices' insults, and, ultimately, in the requirement of Oedipus's death as atonement for those transgressions.

III. "Citizens of Colonus" - The citizens of Colonus (chorus) come to notify the wandering pair that the space is sacred to the Euminides, the much-feared trio of goddesses who perpetually hound transgressors. Oedipus is advised as to how to propitiate the wrath-inclined goddesses.

IV. "Theseus" - The legendary ruler of Athens acts as a restorer of order and bringer of justice throughout the play. Coming to discover the identity of the violator of the Eumenides sanctuary, Theseus recognizes the infamous victim of fate, Oedipus, and takes pity on him. Theseus castigates Creon for stealing Ismene and subsequently restores her to her father and sister; he vainly intercedes with Oedipus on Polyneices' behalf; and finally, he follows Oedipus to a secret site where he is the only witness to Oedipus's transcendence.

V. "The Oracle" - Ismene reports the bad news that Creon and Polyneices are vying for succession to the Theban throne vacated by Oedipus. Both have heard of an oracle which foretells that the possessor of Oedipus's person will have godly protection and victory.

VI. "Creon" - arrives with an army to take Oedipus away. Because Oedipus will not be moved, Creon has Ismene apprehended and taken away.

VII. "Antigone and Ismene" - Ismene, Oedipus's other daughter arrives with news of his successor on the throne of Thebes, Creon, and his son Polyneices. The music of this movement accompanied Ismene's entrance, the sisters' reunification and Oedipus's tender, poignant greeting.

VIII. "Oedipus Curses Polyneices" - Polyneices, seeking his father's blessing and allegiance in taking Thebes, is instead rebuked and cursed by Oedipus for being more concerned with his own ambition than with his blind and homeless father's well being.

IX. "Transcendence" - In fulfillment of the oracle and the will of the gods, Oedipus leads Theseus to a secret place within the sanctuary and, there, submits to a mysterious transcendence, a sacrifice by which he brings protection and blessings to Colonus.