

INSPIRATION

as described by the Muses themselves

An interview transcribed for the 1998 Aspen Music Festival, inspired by "The Music of the French Revolution," an essay/interview for the 1989 Aspen Music Festival written by my mentor and friend Kurt Oppens

by Jane Vial Jaffe

Not being on the point of creating a work of art, and therefore unlikely to receive a house call, I made my way to the Helicon hoping to find some first-hand information. Perhaps the Muses themselves would divulge how they had inspired various artists in the course of history. Fortunately, all nine happened to be gathered around the Castalian spring and were in a talkative mood. They began by trying to untangle their origins for me. When Calliope first spoke I glanced backward involuntarily, for she seemed to be addressing a grand audience rather than my solitary and humble presence.

Calliope: When mortals first became aware of our existence, they thought there were only three of us, whom they named Melete (Meditation, Attention, or Practice), Mneme (Memory), and Aoede (Song). Pausanias wrote about how two boy giants, Otus and Ephialtes, discovered these three Muses on Mount Helicon.

Clio (*gently emending her sister's remarks, obviously not for the first time*): You may be the chief Muse, but history is *my* domain. You should have told how important memory was before writing developed and that our original mission was to help poets preserve their work through memory. *Then* you could tell her about Pausanias's account.

But Pausanias was not writing until the second century AD. Weren't there earlier stories about you?

Clio: Yes, but the events of those stories occurred later than the origin that Pausanias described.

All right then, after "three" Muses were discovered, but before Pausanias actually wrote about it, what were some of the stories circulating about you?

Clio (*recalling vividly*): One of the earliest stories revolves around one of our most celebrated talents—singing. When the bard Thamyris foolishly boasted of his own prowess, he lost to us in a contest at Dorium in Messenia. We had to punish him by blinding him and taking away his memory.

You're rather known for blinding people, aren't you?

Clio: Ah yes, it got around that we also blinded the Phaeacian poet Demodocus, but we did give him the art of minstrelsy in compensation. There were other singing contests, too...

Calliope (*interrupting imperiously*): I should tell this story because I, as the chief Muse, was the one who did the singing. (*She turns to me with a smile.*) It is sometimes said that we are the daughters of Pierus, son of Magnes—a Macedonian—and Euipe, a Paeonian. The Pierides people challenged us to a song contest. Naturally I won and I'm afraid my sisters and I transformed the Pierides into chattering magpies.

Didn't the Sirens also challenge you?

Clio (*sadly*): Yes, but it was really Hera's fault. Nevertheless, we had to punish the Sirens by stripping them of their feathers, which we made into crowns.

Who wrote some of these early stories about you?

Calliope: The Homeric poets, inspired by me, of course.

There are some who question the actual existence of Homer or his authorship of the epic poems. Could you set us straight?

Clio: Well, I really wouldn't want to deprive your historians of their livelihood. We *were* written about in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which are attributed to Homer. Some mortals have argued that he was more of a compiler and editor, but your scholars *have* shown that one author could indeed have composed and memorized such long poems if that individual came from a tradition of repeated storytelling.

When would the Iliad and the Odyssey have been written?

Clio: I've been steering your historians to suspect that it was around the mid-ninth century, BC. But you know, don't you, that it was Hesiod's account of us that most writers of antiquity followed. He described us—probably in the eighth century BC—in his *Theogony*, which is generally considered the earliest Greek religious poem.

Polyhymnia (*quoting Hesiod rapturously*): "From the Heliconian Muses let us begin to sing, who hold the great and holy mount of Helicon, and dance on soft feet about the deep-blue spring and the altar of the almighty son of Cronos, and, when they have washed their tender bodies in Permessus or in the Horse's Spring or Olmeius, make their fair lovely dances upon the highest Helicon and move with vigorous feet. Thence they arise and go abroad by night, veiled in thick mist, and utter their song with lovely voice, praising Zeus the aegis-[shield-]holder and queenly Hera of Argos who walks on golden sandals and the daughter of Zeus the aegis-holder—bright Athene—and Phoebus Apollo....and the holy race of all the other deathless ones that are forever. And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song while he was shepherding his lambs under holy Helicon, and this word first the goddesses said to me—the Muses of Olympus, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis:

'Shepherds of the wilderness, wretched things of shame, mere bellies, we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things.'

So said the ready-voiced daughters of great Zeus, and they plucked and gave me a rod, a shoot of sturdy laurel, a marvelous thing, and breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things there were aforetime; and they bade me sing of the race of the blessed gods that are eternally, but ever to sing of themselves both first and last."

Hesiod used your gift well. Did he recount how there came to be nine Muses?

Erato (*entering the conversation in a sultry voice*): He did. It would especially please me to tell of our begetting in his words: "Then in Pieria did Mnemosyne, who reigns over the hills of Eleuther, bear of union with the father, the son of Cronos, a forgetting of ills and a rest from sorrow. For nine nights did wise Zeus lie with her, entering her holy bed remote from the immortals." Our mother was the personification of memory, in case you'd forgotten, and Hesiod was the first to name her. The poet's account goes on: "And when a year was passed and the seasons came round as the months waned, and many days were accomplished, she bore nine daughters, all of one mind, whose hearts are set upon song and their spirit free from care, a little away from the topmost peak of snowy Olympus." Hesiod was also the first to call us by the names that have become familiar to you.

Calliope: Do not forget that other Greek poets including Pindar and Aristophanes invoked us as well. Nor were our visits limited to the Greeks. Among the Roman poets, Virgil asked for our assistance in the *Aeneid*, and the story I told about our singing contest with the Pierides was described in 8 AD by the great Ovid in his epic *Metamorphoses*, Book V.

It seems that everything I read assigns different functions to each of you.

Clio: 'Tis true. Each Classical writer made different assignments; these only became somewhat fixed in the later Roman Empire. Take your pick, but quite often Calliope is connected with epic poetry, I with history, Euterpe with flutes (the double aulos, to be exact) and music (sometimes with Dionysiac music; but also with lyric poetry, joy, and pleasure), Thalia with comedy and pastoral poetry, Melpomene with tragedy, Terpsichore with dance and dramatic chorus, Erato with love poetry, Polyhymnia with sacred poetry and religious dance or mime (and sometimes lyric poetry), and Urania with astronomy. Many of us were also assigned specific instruments—I mentioned Euterpe's flutes, and you often see me depicted in art plucking the kithara. Terpsichore often holds a lyre, Polyhymnia a large lyre called a barbiton, and Calliope various stringed instruments. It's extremely confusing, but we are bound together by our heavenly singing. We are often called upon to sing at important occasions for gods or mortals.

My readers in Aspen would love to know about some of the composers who have benefited from your inspirations. We'd particularly like to know how you helped Mahler, since we're performing both his First and Sixth symphonies this summer.

(All nine Muses clamor to speak. Naturally the most commanding Muse wins, but other heretofore silent sisters enter the discussion.)

Calliope: The First is an epic work, don't you think? You can sense my overall plan in Mahler's conception of the "hero" of the work, Nietzsche's superman.

Thalia *(with sparkling eyes and high color in her cheeks)*: But what about all the pastoral sections? And Mahler's awakening of spring—how do you like my cuckoos? They call in fourths instead of thirds. And it was my idea to use the *Wayfarer* songs that Mahler had composed with my help several years before. How pastoral can you get? *(She cheerfully begins a wordless rendition of "Ging heut' morgens übers Feld" as it appears in the first movement.)*

Terpsichore *(pausing in the middle of a pirouette)*: I wanted an Austrian folk dance for the second movement. Don't you think Mahler achieved that character in the Scherzo? He even made the Trio a kind of Ländler. *(She waltzes off.)*

Melpomene *(in dark, mellifluous tones)*: There is a funeral march for the third movement...

Thalia: Oh please, it's a mock funeral. And don't forget that he originally called the second half of the work (beginning with this movement) "*Commedia umana*."

Melpomene: Yes, but the finale contains such despair and longing before its resolution.

Calliope: Which brings us back to my contribution. It really is a monumental work. How do you like my idea of redemption at the end?

Clearly many forces are at work. I'm a little afraid to ask about Mahler's Sixth.

Calliope: Oh, we all agree that Melpomene ought to speak about the Sixth even though it entwines epic, idyllic, dancelike, parodistic, and passionate elements with the tragedy.

Melpomene *(intoning the facts, as if they were inevitable, without any display of sympathy)*: I came to Mahler several times, mostly on summer visits because he was so busy with his conducting duties during the rest of the year. Though his life was relatively happy in the years 1903 and 1904, his obsession with death seemed always present. In the Sixth Symphony it was as if he was prophesying his own doom. I'm afraid I encouraged him—he was a master at reaching the depths of despair in his music. The tragedy is somehow overcome in his other symphonies—they end with triumph, resurrection, quiet bliss, or at least acceptance. But there is something so bleak and hopeless about the ending of the Sixth....Mahler said that in the Finale his "hero" is dealt "three hammer-blows of fate, the last of which fells him as a tree is felled." I must tell you that Mahler himself was sobbing and

wringing his hands after the dress rehearsal for the first performance.

(We are all silent for a time, staring into the spring, whose bubbling seems suddenly quite loud. Even Terpsichore has come to rest on a nearby rock.)

Erato (*quietly*): Through it all I hear Mahler's love for his wife Alma and his love of life in general....How else could there be such tragedy?

Thalia: Come, come...there must be something lighthearted we can discuss.

(I pull my thoughts back to the present with some difficulty.) ***We're most fortunate to be able to hear Verdi's Falstaff this summer.***

Thalia: Just the thing! Did it surprise you that Verdi could produce such a comedic masterpiece in his old age and after so many celebrated tragedies? I got Boito to send him a sketch of a Falstaff libretto, knowing that Verdi could never resist Shakespeare. Was I right? Verdi couldn't help himself, but he insisted that no one must know he was working on it. He especially admired the way Boito had cleverly combined elements from both *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV*.

Erato (*bursting out in song*): "*Bocca baciata non perde ventura. Anzi rinova come fa la luna*" (Lips that are kissed lose none of their allure. Indeed, they renew it, like the moon). Do you recognize the melting close of Fenton and Nannetta's love duet? I was particularly proud of that phrase.

(Altogether, as if a telepathic downbeat passed among them, the Muses launch into the notoriously complicated ensemble at the end of Act I.)

It's abundantly clear how you won all those singing contests!

Euterpe: Or how about Verdi's exquisite "Sul fil d'un soffio etesio" (On the thread of a summer breeze) in Act III, sung by Nannetta (disguised as Queen of the Fairies) and chorus?

Thalia: Or Falstaff and company launching into a final fugue? What a surprise from Verdi, the non-academician!

Verdi truly outdid himself in Falstaff. What can you tell me about Carlisle Floyd's Susannah?

Polyhymnia: I suggested to him the Apocryphal biblical story of Susannah and the Elders associated with the prophet Daniel. I also wanted him to focus on the fervor of religious revivalism, set in the rural South, of your United States.

Melpomene: And I wanted him to deal with the tragic aspects of that fervor taken to extremes. You'll be fascinated to know that we suggested he bring his newly completed score with him when he came to your fair Aspen as a piano student. You may be aware that Phyllis Curtin sang in the premiere at Florida State University in 1955, but did you know that it was in Aspen that Floyd had gotten her interested in the role? She then got Mack Harrell interested.

Terpsichore (*doing a do-si-do around Melpomene*): We have enough here to do the opera's opening square dance!

Melpomene (*steadfastly ignoring her sister*): But Floyd's dance scene just sets up the fateful events that follow, because the Elders have already made up their minds that Susannah is a sinner. They begin their campaign against her after accidentally spying her bathing in the creek. Susannah, the preacher, and Sam (Susannah's poet brother) are all brought down by forces they are powerless to control. The tragic ending is tremendously effective, and critics applauded the opera's realism. It won the New York Music Critics' Circle award following the first New York performance in 1956. *Susannah* launched Floyd's career.

Euterpe: Couldn't we get back to some of the instrumental works you'll be hearing in Aspen this summer?

Yes, how about Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony?

Calliope: A very different kind of epic than Mahler's Sixth! It is such a triumphant, victorious work. Prokofiev wrote about it, "My Fifth Symphony was intended as a hymn to free and happy Man, to his mighty powers, his pure and noble spirit. I cannot say that I deliberately chose this theme. It was born within me and clamored for expression." He also stated that the work was "very important to me, for after a long interruption I have returned to a symphonic form of composition. It was the culminating point of my creative life." You can see what an effect my visit had on him in 1944! He hadn't written a symphonic work since 1930.

Euterpe: Many of Prokofiev's works are characterized by driving energy, percussive sounds, and angular themes, and you'll find all of that in this Symphony. But, despite what some early critics thought, Prokofiev possessed a strong lyrical streak, thanks to my efforts. You'll notice it particularly in the slow movement.

Thalia: What about something a bit more pastoral?

Euterpe: Yes, and if at all possible, something a bit orgiastic and with plenty of flutes.

It just so happens that Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony and Debussy's Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune are being performed. You wouldn't by any chance be interested?

(Thalia and Euterpe smile broadly.)

Thalia: How did you know? I accompanied Beethoven on many of his walks in the countryside.

Euterpe: The storm was really his idea (*Melpomene raises a questioning eyebrow, but remains silent*), isn't it marvelous? But I whispered in his ear, "You really need a great celebration afterwards." Do you notice how the flute leads into the celebration? And speaking of the flute...I can hardly contain myself when the solo comes at the beginning of the Debussy....He was quite partial to the flute.

Thalia: It really does set the scene perfectly for the pastoral, dreamy piece.

Euterpe: And I hardly need mention the lush, sensual aspects of Debussy's score—really quite exotic and harmonically advanced for 1894.

Terpsichore: Of course it was a masterpiece—it *was* a ballet, after all! Debussy thought Nijinsky's choreography was altogether too explicit, but the work as a whole was an instant success.

Your dancing soul will be thrilled by Copland's Rodeo, Weber's Invitation to the Dance in Weingartner's orchestration, Piazzolla's Tango Ballet, and quite possibly by Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, which Wagner called "the Apotheosis of the Dance"...

But no one pays attention to my last remark. All heads turn swiftly at the sudden rustling nearby and nine pairs of eyes begin to glow as they light upon their gorgeous leader, Apollo. I am awed, but outwardly try to maintain my journalistic composure.

Your timing is impeccable. I was just about to ask about another ballet, Stravinsky's Apollo, originally called Apollon musagète (Apollo, Leader of the Muses).

Terpsichore (*smiling up at Apollo from an arabesque*): It was a wonderful idea to center the ballet around our dear Apollo.

Clio (*pouting*): Yes, but how unfair to reduce the nine muses to three. Only you, Calliope, and Polyhymnia got parts.

Apollo: There, there...(*He gently brushes his fingertips over her furrowed brow.*) Stravinsky did incorporate the wonderful qualities of all of you. And what is truly remarkable—he blended the elements to minimize contrasts...almost as if the entire spectrum of colors had been focused into white, as is the case with light itself. When Balanchine choreographed the ballet, he described Stravinsky's music as "white on white." He later said that Stravinsky's score was a revelation: "It seemed to tell me that I could dare not to use everything, that I too could eliminate." I, myself like the idea of the color white. It fits in so beautifully with the opening scene when my mother Leta gives birth. (*He gives part of the legend as quoted by Stravinsky in his Autobiography*): "And the earth smiled beneath her and the child sprang forth to the light....Goddesses washed him with limpid water, gave him for swaddling clothes a white veil of fine tissue, and bound it with a golden girdle." You see that I've retained the color scheme of the garments in which I was first clothed.

Polyhymnia (*sighing delicately*): Such serenity!...The solemnity and grace of those Baroque-inspired dances...The first audiences were somewhat puzzled by what is now celebrated as the great calm of Stravinsky's score.

Apollo: I really must take my leave. My dear Muses...until we meet tonight to entertain the gods on Olympus...

(*He strides off, but a bright glow still illuminates our circle. I thought with regret that I would like to have asked him about Britten's Young Apollo, for piano and strings. Nevertheless, I press on.*)

One of our greatest events this summer in Aspen will be a performance of Stravinsky's opera-oratorio Oedipus Rex.

Melpomene: It was I who visited Stravinsky in 1925 to plant ideas for his Greek tragedy. Much earlier—in the fifth century BC—I had persuaded Sophocles to take up the same tragic story. By the time Stravinsky thought about Oedipus, he had already become fixed upon the idea of Latin as the language for his work—he said Latin would lend a monumental flavor. The Latin also imparts a certain ecclesiastical flavor, don't you think? (*Polyhymnia nods gently.*) In any case, I prodded Stravinsky to approach his friend Jean Cocteau about writing an Oedipus libretto. The composer didn't like Cocteau's first draft, but the poet's time was not wasted. From this libretto he drew his play *Oedipe-Roi* in 1928 and another Oedipus play *La machine infernale* in 1934. After Cocteau revised the libretto several times and Abbé Jean Daniélou had made the Latin translation, Stravinsky was finally satisfied.

Terpsichore: I suggested to Stravinsky that he could use the chorus to enhance the ancient scenario of the work, which he did, employing only tenors and basses. I especially love the splendid chorus hailing Queen Jocasta at the exact center of the work. It's heard at the end of Act I and repeated at the beginning of Act II! The role of the chorus is especially crucial at the end when Oedipus is too overcome to speak.

Calliope: Although Stravinsky was later so thoughtless as to express dislike for my stroke of brilliance, I urged Cocteau to create the Speaker, who would preview each scene in the language of the particular audience. The audience could then concentrate on the effect of the Latin, rather than on trying to understand the actual words. Cocteau envisioned himself in the role and later performed it, though he was denied that honor at the premiere. Stravinsky truly achieved the epic quality he sought in this work, but his opera-oratorio gained its proper recognition by you mortals only after a long struggle.

Melpomene: I have managed to interest a good many writers and composers in the Oedipus story—one of the most recent artists was Mark-Anthony Turnage. I visited him when he was only twenty-five years old and yet to undertake anything as daunting as an opera. He had been asked by

Hans Werner Henze to write an opera for the Munich Biennale. I urged Turnage to ask Steve Berkoff which of his plays would make a good opera. Berkoff immediately suggested *Greek*, his Oedipus drama. When I had gotten Berkoff interested in the Oedipus story in 1980, I had hinted that it needed updating, and he took off with the idea of setting it in modern-day London's East End. The contemporary setting kept our composer from being too intimidated by the famous subject.

Thalia: You weren't the only one involved. *I* convinced Berkoff to alter the tragic ending and have a mock funeral.

Erato: No, it was really I, you know, who convinced him that love was all that mattered.

Urania (*in a dreamy voice as if from afar*): May I?

By all means.

Urania (*modestly*): Perhaps I am noticed least among my sisters, but I am somehow able to sense that this summer you'll be hearing Ives's *The Unanswered Question*, a piece that I like to think I helped inspire.

Please go on.

Urania: Ives does, I think, transport one beyond the earth's atmosphere. He created a fabric of quiet, slowly moving harmonies—almost stasis—as a backdrop for what he called "The Perennial Question of Existence" and the agitated search for the "Invisible Answer." The literal and abstract elements of time and space in his haunting "Cosmic Landscape" were remarkable for 1906 when it was written.

With that glimpse of the "Beyond," I'm afraid I must be going. I'll be forever grateful for all the time you've given me.

Urania: Time? We always have time and always will.

Would any of you like to say anything in conclusion?

(With a smile they burst into ravishingly beautiful song. I feel privileged to hear a bit of what they will no doubt perform for the gods that evening.)