# Sudden Death in Opera

The co-authors of this book draw on a wealth of experience, knowledge, understanding and, not least, love of opera, aptly defining this our most plural and complete form of artistic creation and expression, to explain the romantic themes of love and death, recurring throughout the operatic canon, and to provide brilliant insights and fascinating forays into the overlapping fields of culture, neuroscience, medicine, philosophy, history and religion. The authors' multidisciplinary research and scholarship have resulted in a work which is both accessible and enlightening for any opera lover, and a particularly valuable source of background information and interpretative inspiration for those making opera, be they working on the stage, in the pit or behind the scenes.

—Ian Ritchie (Artistic Director, The Musical Brain, and freelance curator)

# Sudden Death in Opera:

## *Love, Mortality and Transcendence on the Lyric Stage*

By

Michael Trimble,
Robert Ignatius Letellier
and Dale Hesdorffer

**Cambridge Scholars** Publishing

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DUCA
*Ma dee luminoso*
*in corte tal astro qual sole brillare.*
*Per voi qui ciascuno dovrà palpitare.*
*Per voi già possente la fiamma d'amore*
*inebria, conquide, distrugge il mio core.*

DUKE
So bright a star
should be shedding its brilliance on my court.
You would make every heart beat faster here.
The fires of passion already flare
headily, conquering, consuming my heart.

(Francesco Maria Piave, *Rigoletto*, Act 1)

STIMMEN
*Selig sind die Liebenden*
*Die der Liebe sind nicht des Todes,*
*Und auferstehn werden,*
*Die dahingesunkenen sind*
*um Liebe, um Liebe, um Liebe,*

VOICES
Blessed are they that love.
Those who have loved shall not die.
And those who have died for love
shall rise again.

(Erich Korngold, *Das Wunder der Heliane*, Act 3)

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# PROLEGOMENON

## NIGEL OSBORN

The colloquialism “It ain’t over till the fat lady sings” sums up a popular view of opera: that operas are full of buxom singers and extreme emotions, and tend to end when women die. In fact, the saying has been attributed historically to baseball games, church services as well as to the final Acts of Wagner’s operas *Götterdämmerung* and *Tristan and Isolde*.

As it happens, the nature of and reasons for Isolde’s collapse and subsequent demise at the end of *Tristan* go to the heart of this extraordinary book on love and unexplained death in opera, elegantly penned by musician and cultural historian, Robert Letellier, epidemiologist Dale Hesdorffer and distinguished neurologist Michael Trimble. It is a wonderful journey through the emotional landscapes of our cultural history, as expressed in the most empathetically communicative of our art forms - opera. The authors trace the operatic and medical history of *Liebestod* (love-death) from Fouqué’s novella *Undine*, much influenced by Paracelsus in a combination of the new scientific medical spirit and Neo-Platonism, through E.T.A. Hoffmann’s opera/melodrama, to Lortzing’s *Undine* and Wagner’s own *Tannhäuser*. Both Tristan and Isolde die of a “love potion” But whereas Tristan kills himself by ecstatically removing the dressings from his wounds, Isolde collapses in a way reminiscent of disorders of the autonomic nervous system. In fact, as Michael Trimble has pointed out in his excellent writings on music, the experience of music is in itself closely related to autonomic activity.

The authors also explore the philosophical and literary highways and byways of this colourful journey. The theme of love and unexplained death is traced from the Bible, through the stories of Ananias and Sapphira, Enoch and Moses to *Pyramus and Thisbe, Romeo and Juliet*, Goethe, Scottish ballads, Emily Brontë and Tennyson. As the authors point out, Wagner’s own death was intimately intertwined with the loves of his life and his planned article “The Eternal in the Feminine” - the diagnosis of heart disease was kept from him. And as they conclude:

“Humans are distinguished from other animals by several fundamental behaviours, especially the six L’s of life: Language, Lying, Laughter, Lacrymation, Lyric and Love. For Wagner, and the rest of us, death is always the present-future—without death, there is no life; without life there is no love; without love there is no art; without art there is no music, and a world without music would be inhuman”.

# PROLOGUE

> Opera is a song of love and death, of conditions which bypass rational understanding. This linked it to those ancient mysteries which the Renaissance revived; its practitioners remain devotees of the mysterious transformations probed by religion.[1]

The association of love with death is a universal phenomenon in art and in the world's religions. And since art has emerged as a way of seeking to articulate or express the universal truths enshrined in faith and mythology, it is hardly surprising that it is central to that most complex fusion of drama and song, the lyric genre of opera. Peter Conrad's book *A Song of Love and Death: A Meaning of Opera* is one of the only comprehensive texts to explore the unbelievably believable world of one of the greatest art forms of human creation. This seems somewhat surprising, in the sense that so many famous operas involve death at some point, even in apparently comic circumstances. In this book, we have attempted to closely examine what we have termed *Unexpected Death,* those that seem to occur without perhaps an obvious cause, so-called *Unexplained* Death.

All who write about the history of opera start with the Orpheus myth. One of the very first operas, Claudio Monteverdi's (1567-1643) *Orfeo* (1607), tells of the origins and mysteries of music and the importance of Apollo (the father of Orfeo), bringer of light and order. The story is well-known. Orfeo is to marry Euridice, and when she dies from a snake bite, he resolves to rescue her from Hades. Pluto hears Orfeo's beautiful music and grants him permission to take Euridice back to the world on the condition that he does not look at her as they ascend. He looks, she disappears, Apollo appears, and Orfeo ascends with him to heaven, where he will see Euridice in the stars.

As we follow opera's development, Orphic laments are renewed on the stage until today, yet from early times the energies of Dionysus, with the charge of Eros, complemented by Thanatos, galvanized and emboldened the myths and music. For about the last 250 years a relatively stable 'canon' of 'classical' music which 'harnesses' human nature has developed, notably in the Western world: a tradition, upheld by our responses to music, so often intense and emotional.[2] Opera charts the latter. The 19th century saw a rise in the number of deaths with transcendental dimensions

and themes of redemption. It is widely accepted that such developments characterised the operas of Richard Wagner (1813-1883), who wanted to 'redeem' not only his protagonists but opera itself. Music needed drama and vice-versa, delivered with mighty sounds and glorious visions exulting final moments of epiphany.[3]

There are many well-explained causes of death in opera (for example, by murder, poison, illness etc., but it is the *Unexpected Deaths* which intrigued the authors. It seemed to be one of the *topoi* linked with the rise of Romanticism, and we wanted to explore how they may intertwine with such concepts as Redemption, transcendentalism, states of consciousness and religion. We set about this task by reading many librettos, examining the associated musical styles, and looking at the socio-historico-cultural circumstances of the plots. Between us we have seen and written about many operas, explored such themes in discussions with friends and colleagues, and asked ourselves, as others we later note have implied, are those *Unexpected Deaths* unexplained*?* Indeed, sudden death is a commonly reported experience, but even today, with our advanced medical knowledge, sometimes causes cannot be found. Watching characters suddenly expiring on stage, so often females and at the end of the drama, asked for a resolution.

In this book, to we have tried to examine that challenge by combining our understanding and intimate knowledge of music (Robert Letellier) with our studies of medicine (Michael Trimble), and epidemiological expertise on causes of death in various circumstances (Dale Hesdorffer). To complement our disquisition, we explore some philosophical perspectives of those who have ventured to step into the murky waters of music, look at the meanings of transcendentalism, tried to navigate from the erotic mysteries of *Tristan und Isolde* to the spiritual transcendence of *Parsifal*, and constructively deconstruct the metaphysical dialectic between love and death. The latter brings us to the famous *Liebestod* (Love-Death), the long history of which we uncover: it was not simply a Liszt-Wagner neologism. We consider in some detail the compositions and writings of Wagner. The *raison d'être* of our work should not be perceived as yet another study of Wagner, but he is germane to many of our ideas, and the principal articulator of the issues involved. His ideas were kindled early. At the age of 19 he sketched out the libretto of his first opera, *Die Hochzeit* (*The Wedding*), inspired by an E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) tale. A bride (Ada) is attracted to a stranger (a magnetism referred to by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, 1749–1832, as elective affinities) whom she sees at her wedding procession. She shudders at his sight. Later, he

climbs to her bedroom, where she awaits her bridegroom (Arindal). She fights with him and hurls him into the courtyard below, where he dies. The bride's father wants the murdered man to be buried in front of the whole clan because a divine sign will reveal who is guilty of the murder. The bride shows signs of madness, locks herself in her room, but appears at the funeral and, as the body is carried past, sinks lifeless, falling onto his dead body.

Even before *Die Hochzeit*, as a teenager Wagner had written sketches for stories with gruesome endings; such metaphysical paradigms that came to dominate his later works clearly had early beginnings.[4]

The opera was never performed in Wagner's lifetime, and he immediately went on to compose *Die Feen* (1833).[5] Unlike *Die Hochhzeit*, the latter (which we discuss in Chapter 19), has many of the themes and tropes that can be found in one form or another in all Wagner's later operas, especially the idea that the power of love can overcome death. *Die Feen* moreover has an Orpheus and Euridice-inspired ending in which unreconcilable worlds are reconciled with redemptive poignancy. In later chapters, we discuss Wagner's obsession with death, and his views on the feminine—*Die Ewig-Weibliche*, the eternal feminine.

The first Part of this book deals with the origins of opera and the emergence of Romantic ideology (Chapters 1 and 2), transcendentalism and phenomenology (Chapters 3 and 4), and out-of-body experiences (Chapter 5). We open several lines of enquiry which lay out the foundations of our journey to explore the *Unexpected*, introducing some philosophical ideas that are emergent and necessary to penetrate into cultural and musical developments of the 19th century. It is difficult to explore themes of death in opera from the specific perspective we have chosen without noting well-reported experiences in contemporary literature and medical circles of alteration of mind and body, such as twilight states, trances, dreams and bodily transmigrations. At the same time we need to emphasise matters of the heart, metaphorical and literal which are embedded in literature from very early days.

After that lead-in, Part 2 reviews some Romantic *topoi.* We briefly meet Orpheus again, but then note the dramas of several operas with death as a prominent theme (Chapter 6). This is followed by biblical, poetic and dramatic accounts of sudden death, introducing Love-Death, the *Liebestod* itself (Chapter 7). These themes echo from ancient sources, but we follow their representation in opera as a prelude to various forms of Love-Death

(Chapter 8). In these, the apparent cause of death derives from the drama (such as by illness, poisoning or execution) and may be referred to as explained. The chapter ends with a comment on the following two chapters which expand on important concepts which reverberate in later sections of our book. These concern the Elemental Being (from early origins to her resurrection, especially with Hoffmann's Undine) and the transcendental symbolism of water and flames (Chapter 9). In chapter 10 we draw attention to a variant of love-death which is rarely discussed, the masculine *Liebestod*.

Before embarking on our analysis of the operas that we identify with *Unexpected Death,* we first return (in Part 3) to the development of music and opera from the late 18th to the late 19th century, picking up from our introduction in Chapter 2. We have split the dramatic progression of operatic exposition into two sections to better enable the co-occurrence of musical themes, especially following the French revolution(s), with singing (as the castrati lost favour), scenery and lighting (Chapter 11). Chapter 12 looks at the fate of the unbroken musical line, the development of the aria, the growing influence of the librettist and the rise of French Grand Opera.

In Part 4 we get to the heart of the matter, the kernel of our exposition to try to understand the so-called *Unexpected Deaths.* As an introduction to our methods we return to important medical themes which were progressing in the 19th century, and include a brief excursion into what is referred to as the *Autonomic Nervous System* (ANS). We introduce physiology, and aspects that we consider have been seriously neglected in discussions of these deaths, pivoting on the heart as the 'seat' of the emotions, and the widespread somatic effects of autonomic disturbance. We thought that these might play a role in explaining those *Unexpected Deaths,* and one way to find out was to read the relevant librettos. To identify the latter, we inductively used our knowledge of many operas, and singled out as many as we could find with such deaths and noted references to signs and symptoms of ANS dysfunction (Chapter 13).

There is a brief intermission, and the operas that are our primary database are shown in List 1. Part 5 is our summary of 50 operas, in which one or more of the protagonists suddenly die. We briefly describe the story, quote sections of the libretti which hint at autonomic instability, set the deaths in contexts of the social/political circumstances of composition, and review the music.

To help our venture, we have divided the libretti into six chapters. Chapters 14, 15 and 16 deal with females and males separately in whom the ANS could be implicated in the sudden death.

We singled out some operas for special consideration, analysed in Chapters 17, 18 and 19. They do not all reference to autonomic events, but we selected them because their special themes are relevant to ideas fostering Romantic opera (such as *La Muette di Portici*), because they adopt specific settings (such as the Undine and Faust operas, or *Pélleas et Mélisande*), or because they were composed by Wagner. The reason to look in detail at the latter is their special relevance to our concerns: List 1 revels that he was the composer whose operas most involved *Unexpected Death,* especially in females.

In Chapter 20 we analyse specific aspects of the operas from List 1, with a further brief medical interpolation before we document important themes and variations that infuse Romantic operas with meaning, so often elided in productions or discussions of the genre.

In Chapters 21, 22 and 23 we delve into associations intertwining transcendence, Redemption, Love and the *Liebestod*, and in Chapter 24 we offer reflections on our quest into the unexplained: we finish with a coda.

We cite the titles of all works, especially operas, in the original language with English translation. We use English-language versions of the libretti for immediacy of access for readers. Some terms are traditionally known in their original medium: *Liebestod*, *Ewig-Weibliche*, but are used interchangeably with their English translations: 'Love-Death', 'the Eternal Feminine'. *Liebestod* is often, but not always, associated with the musical form of this *topos* because of its occurrence in *Tristan und Isolde*. Our book is devoted to exploring the meaning of these terms.

A key understanding of the love-death, a recurrent *Liebestod* motif, is the death of a protagonist (usually female) through illness in a situation which highlights the fragility of the human condition and underscores the tragedy of a doomed love that can find fulfilment only in death.

In all these matters the questions of song (as Apollonian) and inebriation/ madness (as Dionysian) are operatic phenomena intimately associated with the core issues of transcendence, Redemption and their relation to the key concepts/metonym of *Unexpected Death*. In this respect the Mad Scene from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and Isolde's *Liebestod* in

*Tristan und Isolde* (1865) attain iconic status where music, love and transcendent death coalesce perfectly.

We have surveyed a small collection of operas from the vast corpus that has been composed over time, and it must be the case that we have missed many which may have ANS references in the libretti to explain an *Unexpected Death*. We have tried to be inclusive but have been somewhat limited by the 'canon' of works that have held critics and audiences' attention over time. We assume that this is so because these operas, their themes and music, and the effects they have on us, contain and retain special features and emotional resonances which resound within the human spirit.

Whether we succeed in explaining the *Unexpected Deaths,* only further examination of this theme by others will tell. In any case, we hope that our embrace of the theme of *Unexpected Death* within cultural, scientific and political events related to the composers and their compositions will help those who want to explore further some of the greatest works of music ever composed. Opera, bringing life even to death, renders comprehension about what it means to be a human being, offering an unfolding of self-knowledge and feelings perhaps greater than any other art form.

## Notes

[1] Conrad, P., *A Song of Love and Death: A Meaning of Opera* (New York, Poseidon Press, 1987), 356.
[2] This history is nicely outlined by Mauceri, J. *For the Love of Music: A Conductor's Guide to the Art of Listening*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019).
[3] An excellent text, with special emphasis on German music and opera is: Eichner, B. *History in Mighty Sounds: Musical Constructions of German National Identity, 1848-1914* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012).
[4] *Die Sarazenin* (Saracen Girl) and *Die Bergwerke zu Falun* (The Mines of Falun, from a Hoffmann story.)
[5] See for example: Glasenapp, C. F., *Das Leben Richard Wagners*, trans. Ashton Ellis, W.M. (London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, Ltd 1900), 142-3. The links from *Die Hochzeit* to *Die Feen* include old Germanic and Norse names, end-rhyme and alliteration, and an early example of a *Leitmotiv.* Not much music was written, but his sister Rosalie thought it was terrible, and told Wagner to destroy it.

# PART 1:

# ORIGINS

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION TO DEATH AND OPERA

THROUGH the soft evening air enwinding all,
Rocks, woods, fort, cannon, pacing sentries, endless wilds,
In dulcet streams, in flutes' and cornets' notes,
Electric, pensive, turbulent artificial,
(Yet strangely fitting even here, meanings unknown before,
Subtler than ever, more harmony, as if born here, related here,
Not to the city's fresco'd rooms, not to the audience of the opera house,
Sounds, echoes, wandering strains, as really here at home,
Sonnambula's innocent love, trios with Norma's anguish,
And thy ecstatic chorus Poliuto;)
Ray'd in the limpid yellow slanting sundown,
Music, Italian music in Dakota.

While Nature, sovereign of this gnarl'd realm,
Lurking in hidden barbaric grim recesses,
Acknowledging rapport however far remov'd,
(As some old root or soil of earth its last-born flower or fruit,)
Listens well pleas'd.

(Walt Whitman, *Italian Music in Dakota*)[1]

## The Theme

"And the secret of love is greater than the mystery of death" [*Und das Geheimnis der Liebe ist grösser als das Geheimnis des Todes*]. In 1901, the composer Richard Strauss (1864-1949) came across the German translation of Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*, and the opera, with the libretto by Hedwig Lachmann (1865-1918), was premiered in Dresden in 1905. The play was a cynosure of the prevailing *fin-de-siècle* art, closely entwined with late Gothic symbolism, decadence, and aestheticism. Wilde probably was inspired by the novel *À Rebours* (1884) by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) in which the decadent Des Esseintes slavers over two paintings by Gustave Moreau (1826-1898) depicting Salome. One, *The Apparition* (1876), shows the head of John the Baptist hovering in

front of her, eyes staring down on the near naked dancer, dripping blood surrounded by a halo.

The story of the opera is well known even if it seems to have no biblical equivalent. The imprisoned Jokanaan (John the Baptist) rails against Salome's mother and her incestuous marriage to Herod. Salome persuades the captain of the guard, Narraboth, to let her see Jokanaan, and he is brought from prison. She is besotted by him, he refuses to kiss her, she develops a passion which rapidly becomes an obsession. Herod's own lust for Salome leads him to ask her to dance, for which he will offer her anything she desires. After the seventh veil has fallen, it is the head of Jokanaan on a silver dish. She kisses the lips of the severed head, his lips and blood tasting bitter, the taste of love. [**Fig. 1.1** Moreau, *Salome*]

Not to be confused with Mary Salome, present at Christ's crucifixion (Mark 15:40-41), here Salome is portrayed as "the symbolic incarnation of undying Lust…the accursed beauty…like the Helen of ancient myth".[2] The music is intoxicating, and in this short story there are three deaths (Narraboth, Jokanaan and Salome). The story also includes a suicide, incest, a curse, religion, a fascination with the East, obsession, madness and altered mental states, eroticism, necrophilia and a *Liebestod.* The encounter between Salome and Jokanaan functions at a deep Biblical level. There are sacred and profane implications, along with Salome's erotic language and imagery of the Song of Songs.[3] Salome's obsession with Jokanaan is paralleled by Narraboth's and Herod's for her. Her descent into madness activates her already overexcited body. Salome is swiftly executed; there is only the bitter sweet of tragedy to savour, no redemption or salvation—but there is the music.

The closing scene of the opera, with the Dance of the Seven Veils, the fatal request, the execution of Jokanaan, the presentation of his head, and the extended soliloquy as Salome indulges her lust, conjure up a claustrophobic atmosphere, a sultry intensity of torrid heat and moral torpidity. The atmosphere is sustained by the tonal language, with its subdued intensity, its constant background of shimmering violin tremolos and a reiterated three-note motif, quiet but obsessively insistent. It generates unease and fearfulness, representing as it does the nauseous fixation of Salome's perverted desire.

Salome is one epigone of a *femme fatale*, which fascinated the artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, with a historical resonance going back to Eve, Circe, Cleopatra, and many others, whose existence hovers between reality

and mythology, often with supernatural overtones. In the 12th and 13th centuries, courtly love within the Troubadour tradition vies with eroticism and the fearful embrace. Passion undermining social conventions is a theme well represented in poetry and literature, especially reinvigorated in the Romantic era. John Keats's (1795-1821) *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *Lamia,* Gustave Flaubert's (1821-1880) *Salammbô,* Anatole France's (1844-1924) *Thaïs,* compete with Algernon Swinburne's (1837-1909) *Dolores* and *Faustine*, and images portrayed in the paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and Moreau. Such depictions provide dramatic potential and find expression in opera. [**Fig. 1.2** *Salome*]

Wilde's Salomé is a reflection of the moon, pale and ever-loitering, a daughter of Babylon. Along with others such as Frank Wedekind's (1864-1918) *Lulu* "…created for every abuse,/To allure and poison and seduce,/ To murder without leaving trace",[4] they portray myths which segue with the more Romantic concerns of the female and powers of love and loss which emerged with opera of the 19th century. This book is concerned with the different physical and psychological congeries which abound in Strauss's *Salom*é.

As a younger composer, Strauss had described himself as a complete Wagnerian. But even if later he made "a detour round him", the ideas and works of Richard Wagner and the *Liebestod,* quite different from some of the other songs of love and death that we discuss later, will be central to the themes of our work.[5]

## A Song of Love and Death

Peter Conrad, in *A Song of Love and Death* (1987), refers to opera as "an art devoted to love and death".[6] From the earliest operas, portraying the plight of Orpheus and his loss of Eurydice, death by one means or another, so often forms part of the drama. Orpheus—the son of Oeagrus the Greek river god (or Apollo) and the muse Calliope—was a singer of holy songs, performed with a lyre or cithara, mastered harmony, charmed the flora and fauna and fell in love with Eurydice. She was bitten on the ankle by a serpent, when alone and possibly running away barefoot from the shepherd Aristaeus, who was chasing her (according to Vergil), perhaps before the marriage to Orpheus was consummated. The virgin could not be revived by the songs of Orpheus, and died.[7]

The idea of drama being performed with music emerged in Florence in the 1590s and the first opera to survive intact was Jacopo Peri's (1561-1633)

*Euridice* (1600, libretto by Ottavio Rinuccini, 1552-1621). The score was probably known to Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) whose opera *La favola d'Orfeo* (1607) is considered as the first great opera. Here was a statement of the power of music to arouse emotion, reflecting on the glorious past of Classical Antiquity [**Fig. 1.3-4**, Orpheus, mosaics]

At the end of Peri's *Euridice*, Orpheus and Eurydice embrace. Monteverdi has Apollo descending, assuring Orpheus that he will be immortal and see Eurydice again among the stars. Orpheus wants his lamentations to be heard by all.

The music of Christof Willibald Gluck's (1714-1787) *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) has him mourning by the side of Lake Avernus, a portal to the underworld. As in other versions of the story, he descends to Hades to recover Eurydice (in some to redeem her) and to recover his lost self. After all, he was not the first to go to Hades (the *katabasis*): Hercules had been there. But Pluto laid down the law and stipulated that Orpheus could take Eurydice with him as long as he did not look back at her until he had returned across the Avernus. Gluck's Eurydice implored him to turn to her; Monteverdi pitted love against death, but he looked, and she disappeared [**Fig. 1.5-10**, Orpheus in the Underworld, *Orpheus and Eurydice*].

Luigi Rossi's (1597-1653) *Orpheus* (1647) and Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* gave us happy endings. Orfeo's lament in Gluck's music *"*Che farò senza Euridice*"* (What will I do without Eurydice) is of such beauty that Amor appears and restores her to life. Orfeo and Eurydice return from the underworld and there is general rejoicing. In Joseph Haydn's (1732-1809) *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1791), on the ascent, Eurydice places herself directly in front of Orfeo and removes her veil. He sees her 'gracious face', but the Furies seize Eurydice. A bacchante (follower of Dionysus) offers Orfeo a drink—the nectar of love, which is a poison—and he dies. In Ovid's tale, Orpheus was subject to *sparagmos,* being torn asunder by the Maenads on account of rejecting women.[8] The happy endings rather give way to a developing Romanticism and the destructive influences of Dionysus. However, whichever version of the myth is adopted, the ability of music to elevate souls and overcome death is poignant. Conrad insists that "Orpheus is opera's founder, and he presides over it throughout its subsequent history".[9] [**Figs. 1.7-10,** The Death of Orpheus]

## The Birth of Tragedy

Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (*The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, 1872) has been read in many ways. It can be seen as a diatribe against the decline of German culture from the high standards of Classical Greek ideals, within which is an appeal for a regeneration of the former, focussed on works of poet and composer Richard Wagner. It is surely an encomium to Wagner, who at the time of its publication was a confidant as well as a reflective mirror for Nietzsche's ideas, musical and classical. However, Nietzsche's book is also a serious attempt to examine the birth and then decline of Tragedy as an art form. It is one opening to examining the question of why Tragedy is somehow pleasing to us as an aesthetic art-form. What is the pleasure we get from seeing Tragedy on the stage, in the opera house, at the cinema or on the television? Just why do we have the response we have to Tragedy, which often involves crying, and a consolation of the falling tears? **[Fig. 1.11** Nietzsche]

Three aspects of Nietzsche's theories are pertinent to the ideas opening up in him and this book. Firstly, the full title—*The Birth of Tragedy, out of the Spirit of Music*—affirms music as central both to his thesis but also to the questions posed above. Secondly, he introduces the interplay between the two iconic Greek gods, Dionysus and Apollo. These cannot be taken literally, and are used by him as emblems for his theories. We will meet them again later. Thirdly, and much less commented on, is Nietzsche's use of physiological and psychological ideas that were current at the time of his composition.[10]

Nietzsche was a scholar of Greek culture, and as a frequent visitor to Wagner's house at Triebschen he was well acquainted with Wagner's ideas. The latter was incorporating Greek theatrical concepts and models into the plots of his operas. Music was played and philosophy discussed. The intellectual *Zeitgeist* had heralded a return to the ideas of Ancient Greece, inspired by despair at the lack of a defined German theatrical and cultural tradition.

## The Desires of Eros

Ever since our species began to tell stories, the awareness of, and later the conflict between the world of nature and that of human consciousness became one avenue of exploration. So did the clash between consciousness and social conventions. The enclosed intellectual world of the Middle