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"The Cult of the Diva" – Rufus Wainwright as Opera Queen

Oliver C. E. Smith

- ¹ Rufus Wainwright (1973–), the firstborn of folksong royalty Kate McGarrigle (1946–2010) and Loudon Wainwright III (1946–), enjoys a distinguished reputation as a songwriter/composer and performer. "Lauded by his peers as the most extraordinary songwriter of his generation"¹ and hailed affectionately by Sir Elton John as "the greatest songwriter on the planet",² Wainwright has achieved a cult-like following consisting of not only the everyday music-lover, but some of the most respected names in the music industry.
- ² Wainwright came out to his parents at the age of eighteen and has refused to compromise his sexual identity since, despite entering an industry for which image is fundamental. It is the unusual candor with which Wainwright treats (homo)sexuality in his songs that has led to much critical acclaim. He demonstrates an understanding of heteronormativity and seeks to assert an authority of difference for an identity which is contrary to cultural expectations. As a result, his music often serves as a commentary on aspects of both society at large and queer identity and culture by employing, and sometimes recontextualising, historical tropes; Wainwright seeks to challenge the dominant (hetero)norm constructions of masculinity in popular music and incorporates his own queerness into his music as a creative authority by drawing on his knowledge of the Western classical tradition and of historical modes of queer masculinity.
- ³ Operatic references can be seen littered throughout Wainwright's work, demonstrating a unique affinity between the singer and this high art form. This article explores Wainwright's relationship with opera through a particular historical trope of gay masculinity and addresses how the singer manipulates an operatic staple, the Orpheus myth, in his music for a specifically queer appropriation of the legend.

Opera has been my religion and saviour. It has saved my life, guiding me through some pretty tough junctures.³
- ⁴ The opera queen is a gay man who explicitly "defines [him]self by the extremity and particularity of [his] obsession with opera."⁴ These "voice fetishists"⁵ are specifically preoccupied with operatic singing and unconcerned by the myriad other aspects of

operatic production.⁶ They are the members of the "cult of the diva"⁷ whose allegiances lie solely with the inevitably tragic female protagonists of nineteenth and early twentieth-century opera and the sopranos who play them. According to most accounts of the opera queen, this "reveling in moments of sonic beauty [...] enables powerful connections between subjective responses to the female singing voice and the experience of a socially-marginalized sexual identity."⁸ The identity of opera queen is itself often cast in tragic terms, as a further marginalized individual; a man who is lonely because he listens to opera and, in doing so, ostracizes himself from the sexual marketplace.⁹ Even the term "queen" "in gay argot [...] has not so subtly negative connotation. It is used to stigmatise homosexuals judged to be effeminate, often flamboyantly effeminate"¹⁰ and who are therefore discriminated against within the gay community due to their supposed lack of masculinity.

5 Wainwright is himself a self-identified opera queen, and one who has attained what might be considered the holy grail of operatic-queendom, having actually written his first opera, *Prima Donna*, which opened in April 2009 at Manchester's International Festival. Originally commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera, the work came to the UK after Wainwright refused, as only an opera queen would, to translate his French libretto into English¹¹ and tells the tragic story of an ageing soprano preparing to make her comeback.¹² However, many of Wainwright's popular songs also betray his penchant for opera: all from his eponymous debut album (1998) for example, the track "Barcelona" features text from the libretto of Verdi's *Macbeth*; "April Fools" accompanying video portrays comically adapted deaths of five of opera's most famously doomed heroines, Tosca, Cio-Cio (*Madame Butterfly*), Carmen, Gilda (*Rigoletto*) and Mimi (*La Boheme*); and the song *Damned Ladies* is Wainwright's pleading with various operatic heroines in an attempt to intervene in the plots which will inevitably culminate in their deaths. It is also at the conclusion of this track that Wainwright refers to these divas as the "Damned ladies of Orpheus." This suggests that he acknowledges the mythological Orpheus' strong associations with the birth of opera as an art form itself and his resultant status: "Orpheus is opera's founder, and he presides over it throughout its subsequent history".¹³

6 The vicarious identification of an opera queen with that of the tragic female characters of opera is, in Wainwright's case, even more explicit and personal; growing up in the mid-1980s, the young Wainwright was experiencing the AIDS crisis whilst trying to come to terms with his own sexuality which "[might] sentence him to a life of either virtual celibacy or inevitable infection":¹⁴

It came at a junction in my life where I was completely hit at simultaneously by different things. One was that I was gay, two being that AIDS was on the scene. This thrilling and consoling music [opera] immediately hooked into all the emotions I was feeling.¹⁵

7 Despite having previously discovered classical music, it was a 1959 Fritz Reiner recording of Verdi's *Requiem* which specifically instigated Wainwright's musical epiphany, as he "relat[ed] its treatment of death and the drama of love with his own nascent sexuality and fear of disease."¹⁶

8 Wainwright openly cites two points in his life at which opera "saved" him, the first his picking up of and subsequent rape by an older man whilst staying in London with his father at the age of 14;

[...] [Wainwright] would dance naked to the voluptuous strains of the "Dance of the Seven Veils" from Strauss' *Salome* and blast Verdi and Wagner into the quad, where

his uncomprehending classmates played lacrosse. During this period, he was secretly convinced that the sexual incident had left him H.I.V. positive. (It had not.) "With opera I could relax and relate to that kind of despair and fear," he said, yet "regain some innocence."¹⁷

- 9 The second was his descent into crystal meth (amphetamine) addiction. It was only after a particularly dangerous binge that Wainwright was put in touch with Elton John who helped him to enter rehab. He later returned after a month of treatment to attend a Met production of Strauss' *Elektra*. This proved revelatory to the singer as he found the opera "transcendent and uplifting, even without drugs";¹⁸ "When music is potent, it doesn't matter what state you are in, it will uplift you."¹⁹
- 10 Additionally, in Wainwright's "Beauty Mark" (*Rufus Wainwright*) he sings of his own operatic allegiance to the dramatic and expressive Maria Callas via delicate lyrics that connect this penchant to both his sexuality and relationship with his mother Kate McGarrigle: "I think Callas sang a lovely Norma, you prefer Robeson on "Deep River", I may not be so manly, but still I know you love me." This may draw attention to Wainwright's homosexuality, but simultaneously asserts a mother-son relationship as one that remains marked by love despite his sexual difference. This deeply personal connection Wainwright has to opera provides a rich source of inspiration for his music and is an important aspect of his stylistic diversity.
- 11 It may be considered surprising, however, that Wainwright chooses to appropriate Orpheus into his songs at all since he, like the entire myth, essentially disappears from nineteenth-century opera, the repertoire often central to an opera queen's interest. One might expect Orpheus' bride Eurydice most likely to assume the role of diva, being a suitably (twice-) doomed female, but in fact her character is given little opportunity for moments of real emotional or musical excess, "[Eurydice] does little but passively die – twice."²⁰ Consequently, it is instead Orpheus who is afforded the moments of dramatic tension usually associated with a diva role. Additionally, Gluck's original Orpheo from his *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) is sung by an alto castrato and so, in contemporary productions, allows flexibility in casting which might elect to place an alto in the male protagonist's role – this has resulted in queer, specifically lesbian, readings of the myth. However, in doing so, Orpheus' female love-interest renders diva-identification difficult for gay men.²¹
- 12 When looking at the myth of Orpheus, it comes to light that the plot, as derived from Ovid – the main source for librettists – itself culminates in a disruption of sexual status quo and an explicitly queer one at that; after Orpheus' bride Eurydice has died for the second time, in the ensuing grief Orpheus declares that he can never again love another woman, thus "raising the possibility that Orpheus either loses sexual interest in women, or that his rejection of heterosexual relationships is driven by continuing devotion to Eurydice."²² Regardless of the motive, Orpheus' sexual attention turns to young men:
 [...] Orpheus has fled completely from the love of women, either because it hadn't worked for him or else because the pledge that he had given to his Eurydice was permanent; [...] Among the Thracians, he originated the practice of transferring the affections to youthful males, plucking the first flower in the brief springtime of their early manhood.²³
- 13 Wainwright's 2004 album *Want Two* contains two songs for which he appropriates the Orphic myth and, in turn, onto which he superimposes his own analogous experiences. In this casting Wainwright himself becomes Orpheus and singer/songwriter Jeff Buckley plays the doomed part of Eurydice.

- 14 Buckley drowned in Memphis in 1997 and is well known for his covering of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" (*Various Positions* 1984). Wainwright only discovered Buckley's track years later when recording his own version of the song for the feature film *Shrek's* soundtrack. Buckley's "hallelujah to the orgasm"²⁴ significantly contrasts with Wainwright's "purifying and almost liturgical interpretation to the song"²⁵ and upon hearing it caused Wainwright great distress, describing it as an "out of body experience"²⁶ and one in which he "felt the loss of his voice."²⁷ The subsequent personal and unrequitable passion Wainwright has for Buckley might be said to mirror that of Orpheus and Eurydice – both condemned to endure the tragic circumstances resulting in the death (s) of their would-be lovers.
- 15 "Memphis Skyline" opens with the lyrics "Never thought of Hades under the Mississippi, but still I've come for to sing for him." Here Wainwright's intended mythological reference is made unequivocal from the outset – a reference to both Jeff Buckley's unfortunate demise in a slack water channel of that particular river, and the River Styx, over which Orpheus must cross to reach Hades' kingdom. The song itself is clearly sectional, but does not conform to the conventional verse/chorus structure of most pop songs. Instead it alternates between two distinctive musical ideas, which together help to portray Wainwright's narrative rewrite of Orpheus' tale – specifically his journey to the underworld and the second death of Eurydice.
- 16 "So Southern furies prepare to walk, for my harp I have strung and I will leave with him" follows the opening lyrics and serves to demonstrate Wainwright's resolve on being reunited with Buckley even despite the presence of the Furies, the terrible guardians to the Underworld and Wainwright's love. Both of these lines are accompanied simply by the piano, which assumes a subservient role "tracing [Wainwright's] voice in parallel thirds with subtle, unobtrusive elaborations."²⁸ As a result, emphasis is placed squarely on the words being sung.
- 17 Following this is the first occurrence of what would be considered a second section. Texturally, the accompaniment becomes much broader, with the piano line playing oscillating chords that consist of rich tertian harmony based around the keys of E minor and C major. Although not derived from an Aeolian mode, the resultant modal feeling might be a further allusion not simply to Orpheus, but Orpheus as Harpist. This becomes increasingly salient when noting the autonomous nature of the Aeolian harp, which itself requires no human operation and relies instead on the wind to produce its sound, and the magical, self-playing harp of Orpheus, which strangely continues to make music whilst floating down the Hebrus river alongside Orpheus' singing decapitated head²⁹ (Perhaps it is the current from the water, like the wind, which operates the harp.)
- 18 The opening material then returns with some development, and without the assistance of the sustained strings previously supplementing the accompaniment as Wainwright sings: "Relax the cogs of rhyme over the Memphis skyline, turn back the wheels of time". Here, Wainwright instead tells of his resentment towards Buckley prior to hearing his "Hallelujah"; "Always hated him for the way he looked in the gaslight of the morning. Then came Hallelujah, sounding like mad Ophelia for me in my room living", and also makes apposite reference to Shakespeare's Ophelia, the mad lover and potential wife of *Hamlet*, and another character who tragically meets death in a river. It is then that Wainwright employs the mythological concept of Orpheus' autonomous lyre, and recapitulates the accompanimental chordal patterns of the second section. This time, however, it is without any vocal line; Wainwright's piano plays by itself. The similarities

between the myth and Buckley's drowning are inescapable; Buckley was singing (Led Zeppelin by all accounts) whilst swimming in the river that night in May, before drowning in the wake from a passing tugboat.

- 19 After a brief return to the accompaniment from the opening of the track, Wainwright creates an almost Romantic swathe of textural harmony through the full use of strings and a multi-tracked piano. This produces a very expansive accompaniment with which to serve the song's narrative requirements. It is here that his voice re-enters for what becomes the moment of greatest Orphic tension, when Orpheus/Wainwright and Eurydice/Buckley are reunited for the last time before their inevitable and permanent separation: "So kiss me my darling, stay with me 'till morning." It is this simple act of kissing which of course violates the terms of Buckley's return and so condemns him to the underworld for the final time: "Turn back, and you will stay under the Memphis skyline."
- 20 Although "Memphis Skyline" is an independent song in live performances and in its own right, the album version found on *Want Two* uses its orchestral accompaniment as a segue into the next track, "Waiting For A Dream". Consequently, it is worth looking at this second track in the same context, despite there being no explicit references to the Orphic myth.
- 21 One of the most noticeable differences between the songs is the treatment of Wainwright's voice; "Memphis Skyline" does not seem to alter the vocal line in any way, which results in a very present, almost personal performance of the song. "Waiting For A Dream", however, makes use of studio effects to disembody Wainwright's voice and in doing so gives it a sense of distance and echo. These differences are also extended to the vocal line's relationship with the piano, the most important and prominent accompanying instrument in both songs. As previously mentioned, the use of the piano in "Memphis Skyline" suggests an intricate link with the vocal line as both parts share musical contribution fairly equally. This change therefore becomes even more apparent in "Waiting For A Dream" as the piano reverts to playing a simple chordal accompaniment and is effectively independent of the voice, almost as if Wainwright has lost control over the instrument or is no longer playing it. This would support an Orphic reading of the song as Orpheus'/Wainwright's head is now separated from his lyre/piano and it is simply the magical current of the river which causes the instrument to continue playing independently of its master and his voice. This is supplemented by Wainwright's later use of low timpani rolls which convey a clear aural depiction of rippling water and waves, and also his lyric reference to water; "Diving through the rising, through the rising waves of night, keeping a reflection of you in hindsight, but in turning back the brackish waters will not reflect you [...]" Similarly, the opening lyrics of "You are not my love and you never will be, 'cause you've never done anything to hurt me" allude to Wainwright's casting of himself as Orpheus and Buckley as Eurydice, and suggest something of a lament towards his lover, but also an acknowledgement that in reality they never were lovers.
- 22 Lyrically, "Waiting For A Dream" ends with Wainwright referencing a real-world political authority that disrupts his Orphic dream; "There's a fire in the priory, and it's ruining this cocktail party. Yesterday I heard the plague is coming once again, to find me", Wainwright seeks to rebuke America's then recently elected government, led by George W. Bush who endorsed homophobic religious fundamentalist policies.³⁰ Wainwright then makes this explicit when he sings "There's a fire in the priory and an ogre in the Oval

Office." This political administration is one which threatens Wainwright's sexual identity and so disturbs his dream as Orpheus.

- 23 In both "Memphis Skyline" and "Waiting For A Dream", Wainwright asserts his authority as opera queen to claim the myth of Orpheus as one of queer love; Jeff Buckley is a male Eurydice and Orpheus, Wainwright himself. The story is then rewritten without the preexisting sexual prescription of a heteronormative cultural framework, a dream from which Wainwright is only awoken by the anti-gay agenda of a real-life political power. However, Wainwright's dream clearly represents what is an ideal reality for the singer and one for which he has to wait to come into being. In the meantime, Wainwright can reside as Orpheus, the operatic authority with the power to reinterpret and reclaim these fantasy worlds. Additionally, with queer Orpheus, Wainwright seeks to revise the historically dejected and maudlin stereotype that is the "opera queen", the condescension of whom is "based on an internalization of the macho values of the dominant heterosexual culture."³¹ Through his own personal and queer affinity with opera, Wainwright seeks to revise this trope which is so often seen as tragic, and culturally and socially shameful through his appropriation of Orpheus' authority within opera itself. Wainwright reestablishes this gay connection as one of empowerment, understanding that "unlike the majority of gays who [are] so eager to pass, the queen openly [challenges] the closet"³² and refutes the concept of masculinity which has been prescribed and embraced through heterosexist dominance. Using his prolific identity as an opera queen and through his music, Wainwright manages to reclaim a figure of operatic authority as one of queer power through the absence of a cultural framework imposed by heteronormativism. Drawing from his own relationship with opera, Wainwright exploits the right this gives him to reinterpret cultural history and revise the pejorative stereotype that is an opera queen.

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26. SCHWANDT, Kevin, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
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29. It is during Orpheus' grief at Eurydice's second death that he sings a lament. This attracts the Thracian women who, when he rejects them (staying true to his declaration never to love another woman) brutally kill him, throwing both his head and lyre into the Hebrus.
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ABSTRACTS

The music of Rufus Wainwright has been afforded much critical acclaim thanks to the singer-songwriter's understanding of Queer cultural history, and the candor with which he explores (homo)sexuality in his music. This case study seeks to examine his use of opera in particular, and how Wainwright uses the historical trope of the opera queen to incorporate his own queerness into music, thus asserting an authority of difference and challenging the dominant (hetero)norm constructions of masculinity in popular music. Wainwright disregards any cultural framework imposed by heteronormativity, and reclaims the Orphic figure of operatic authority as one of queer power through this absence. By drawing on his own relationship with opera, Wainwright exploits the right this gives him by reinterpreting cultural history, and revising the pejorative stereotype that is an opera queen.

Le succès critique de la musique de Rufus Wainwright s'explique en grande partie par sa compréhension de l'histoire culturelle *queer* et par la sincérité avec laquelle il explore l'(homo)sexualité dans ses productions. Cette étude de cas examine son utilisation de l'opéra et en particulier la manière dont il s'appuie sur le trope historique de l'« opera queen » pour affirmer musicalement son identité *queer*, imposant ainsi une autorité de différence défiant la norme masculine dominante (hétéro) dans la musique populaire. Au mépris des cadres culturels imposés par l'hétéronormativité, Wainwright fait d'Orphée, figure d'autorité dans le domaine de l'opéra, un personnage doté d'une aura *queer*. Attirant l'attention sur sa propre relation avec l'opéra, Wainwright exerce ainsi son droit de réinterpréter l'histoire culturelle et de réviser le stéréotype péjoratif qu'est l'*opera queen*.

INDEX

Keywords: heteronormativity, identity, masculinity, opera, diva, Eurydice, gay, Hallelujah, Jeff Buckley, Memphis Skyline, queer, Rufus Wainwright, stereotype, Waiting For A Dream, Want Two

Mots-clés: hétéronormativité, identité, masculinité, opéra, diva, Eurydice, gay, Hallelujah, Jeff Buckley, Memphis Skyline, queer, Rufus Wainwright, stéréotype, Waiting For A Dream, Want Two

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Oliver C. E. Smith studied as an undergraduate at the Birmingham Conservatoire, UK, and graduated with first class honours. He developed an interest in Queer Theory and its musicological application in his fourth year, submitting his final dissertation on the topic of queer masculinities and the construction of identity in the work of Rufus Wainwright, of whom he has always been a fan.