

OEDIPE

Tragedie in 4 acts and 6 scenes

Music by Georges Enescu

Libretto by Edmond Fleg

First Performance: Opéra, Paris, March 13, 1936

Act I (Prologue) - In the royal palace of Thebes, the people (warriors, shepherds, women) join in the festivities given in honor of the birth of King Laius's and Queen Jocasta's son. Just as the royal couple, at the High Priest's request, are about to name the infant, the aged and blind Tiresias interrupts the merry-making. Reproaching Laius for having disobeyed Apollo's injunction to bear no descendants, he reveals the gods' hideous punishment: one day, the new-born babe will murder his father and marry his mother! Appalled, Laius summons a shepherd and orders him to abandon the infant in the mountains.

Act II - Scene One - Twenty years later. In King Polybus's and Queen Merope's palace in Corinth, the young Oedipus, filled with dark forebodings, refuses to take part in the games and the singing: he has just returned from the Delphic Oracle, who has revealed to him his terrible fate. He longs to flee the palace of his adoptive parents (whom he believes to be his actual mother and father). The queen sends her counselor, Phorbos, to him, but Oedipus refuses to reveal the cause of the torment. To Merope herself he expresses his doubt: someone had once called him a foundling. Merope protests; she is not to know that her true son died at birth and was replaced by Oedipus, whom the Shepherd had not the heart to abandon. Oedipus's desire to flee Corinth grows more intense, and he confides the real reason to Merope, who flees, appalled. Oedipus, left alone, decides to confound Destiny; he will leave Corinth and do his utmost to prevent the ghastly prophecy from coming true.

Scene Two - At the crossroads guarded by the statue of Hecate, the Shepherd who once saved Oedipus's life tends his herd under a menacing storm. Oedipus appears, and hesitates over which road to take. He is even tempted to return to Corinth, since for three nights now he has no longer been visited by terrifying dreams. A violent flash of lightning brings him to a standstill: he suspects a trap, and brandishing his club, curses the gods who persecute him. At that moment, Laius emerges on his chariot from one of the roads; roughly demanding right of way, he insults and strikes Oedipus, who in self-defence brings the club down and kills Laius and his two companions. As the storm finally breaks, he takes flight. The awestruck Shepherd takes stock of what has happened.

Scene Three - Outside the date of Thebes, the Sphinx, a blood-thirsty monster in the form of a winged lioness with a woman's head, crouches. She exacts tribute from the Thebans, and kills all those who cannot answer her riddle. Oedipus offers to confront her, and thus save the city. The watchman reveals to him that he who defeats the Sphinx shall be made King of Thebes and receive Laius's recently widowed queen, Jocasta, as wife. Oedipus rouses the Sphinx, who asks the perennial question: what is greater than Destiny? Oedipus, filled with courage, does not hesitate; man is stronger than Destiny! Mortally defeated, the Sphinx breaks into a deathly laugh and dies uttering the disquieting phrase, 'The future will tell thee whether the dying Sphinx weeps in her defeat or laughs in her victory!' But the city celebrates its liberation with a triumphant reception for Oedipus, who is offered the crown; and with it Jocasta's hand.

Act III - Another twenty years have passed. Having thrived under Oedipus's reign in peace and prosperity, Thebes is now stricken with the plague. Jocasta's brother, Creon, sent to Delphi to consult the Oracle, returns with the gods' verdict: the plague will only stop when Laius's murderer,

who is actually in the city, has been unmasked and punished. Creon has also summoned the old Shepherd, witness of the crime, as well as the soothsayer Tiresias. Oedipus swears to uncover the culprit, who will be exiled if he gives himself up, but otherwise cursed and thrown to the wrath of the gods. Tiresias, disturbed, remains silent. But when Oedipus's suspicions fall on him, the blind old soothsayer points at Oedipus himself. Oedipus, believing this to be a plot hatched by Creon to usurp the throne, drives both Tiresias and Creon away. Meanwhile, Jocasta, as she tries to soothe him, describes the place and circumstances of Laius's murder, and thus plants in Oedipus a horrible suspicion of the truth. The Shepherd confirms this, and then Phorbas, come to fetch Oedipus to succeed Polybus in Corinth, reveal that Polybus and Merope were only his adoptive parents. With all the pieces of the infernal puzzle now assembled, Oedipus at last understands. After Jocasta, horrified at being her son's wife, has committed suicide, Oedipus emerges from the palace with his face smeared in blood: to punish himself for these abominable crimes, even though he does not bear the guilt for them, he has plucked out his eyes. Condemned to exile by Creon and his men - for this is the only way to save the city - Oedipus accedes, but he does not depart alone: Antigone, his favorite daughter, will share his wanderings and guide his footsteps.

Act IV (Epilogue) - More years have passed. The scene is a flowery grove near Athens, where peace and justice reign under Theseus the Wise with the protection of the benevolent Eumenides, once the ferocious Furies. Bent with age, Oedipus appears, led by Antigone, who describes the spot to him. He senses that it is the end of his long road: here he will peacefully die. Suddenly Creon bursts in: Thebes is again under threat, and he offers Oedipus the throne back. When Oedipus indignantly refuses, Creon seizes Antigone as hostage. She is saved by the arrival of Theseus and the Athenians. Creon then attempts to smear Oedipus with insults, but Oedipus protests; always with all his might, he has fought the infernal trap laid by the gods; he is innocent, he has conquered Destiny. The wise men of Athens drive Creon away, give justice to Oedipus and allow him to end his days peacefully with them. Oedipus then takes leave of everyone, even his beloved Antigone: followed only by Theseus, he walks through the moss and the flowers, his eyesight restored ('I, who had to be led, shall lead in my turn'), to the spot where he will die in a blaze of light.