



Significations of Religious Desire in Louise Talma's *The Alcestiad*

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Abstract

American composer Louise Talma's opera *The Alcestiad* can be read as a highly autobiographical work; its themes can be understood as crucial elements of Talma's own life. These correlations include: the demands and restrictions of society upon women's behavior and desires, particularly its emphasis upon conforming to heteronormative performance, represented by Alcestis's hesitant acceptance of marriage and motherhood, and Talma's reluctant career as a pedagogue and internal conflict over her relationship with Nadia Boulanger; and the yearning for a life of devotion to a religion and a single art, in which Alcestis's desire to serve as an oracular priestess of Apollo and Talma's desire to dedicate herself to her work as a Catholic and as a composer are parallel tropes. This essay explores these parallels and demonstrates the ways in which the close relationships between *The Alcestiad* and Talma's life are manifested in Talma's use of rhythm in text-setting within the work.

Keywords

Louise Talma, American opera, Catholicism, musical symbolism, atonality, autobiography

IN 1935, American composer Louise Talma converted to Catholicism under the guidance of her close friend and godmother Nadia Boulanger. She began working on a number of religious or sacred works, which like her earlier compositions were often autobiographical in nature (Leonard 9). Talma's sole full opera, *The Alcestiad* composed between 1954 and 1958, is perhaps one of the best examples of autobiographical composition in her output. *The Alcestiad* contains several layers of what Christopher Moore, in writing about Poulenc, terms "uncanny echoes in the composer's life." Although the libretto was written by noted author and playwright Thornton Wilder, the entire scenario of the opera functions as an allegory for Talma's personal anxieties and conflicts, and her setting of the text reflects this.

Talma's friendship with Wilder began in 1952, when both artists were in residence at the MacDowell Colony for the summer. Wilder, a highly accomplished amateur pianist, had first heard Talma's work in a recital more than a decade earlier, and admired her compositions. Although Wilder had previously turned down composers who had asked to set his work for the opera stage, most notably refusing Aaron Copland's request to adapt his famous play *Our Town*, by 1953 Wilder was thinking of writing an original libretto, and selected Talma as his ideal co-creator for an opera. After rejecting a plan for a short, romantic opera, Talma attended a public reading Wilder gave of his play *The Alcestiad*, and later stated that she could hear the music for the words even as Wilder was reading them (Letter to Thornton Wilder, 3 May 1955). She asked Wilder to consider using the play as the libretto and he agreed, re-working it to make the language a better fit for the operatic stage.

In the first Act of *The Alcestiad*, its central character experiences what modern audiences would call a panic attack on the night before her wedding to King Admetus of Thessaly. This crisis, expressed textually and rhythmically, forms the centerpiece of the Act and is a character-defining moment in the opera. Alcestis's panic is not the usual jitters of the bride-to-be, worried about appearances, her husband-to-be's dedication, or even sex; rather, Alcestis is desperate to be called as a priestess of Apollo, something she cannot be if she weds in the morning. Alcestis's desire to serve as a chaste oracle at Delphi, her anxiety, and ultimate resignation to becoming a wife and mother are all clearly expressed in Talma's musical language and text-setting practices in the work, which include: extra-musical metrical signifiers; dense, often symbolic orchestration; and a crucial attention to the libretto. In particular, reading Talma's use of both rhythm and meter in this work also uncovers musical intimations of Talma's own anxieties concerning society's expectations of her as a woman and her fairly new-found desire to commit to an ascetic life dedicated to composition.

In order to understand Talma's approach to setting the libretto, and Alcestis's text in particular, it is important to consider Talma's own desires during this period to withdraw from the world to focus on her composition. Talma, rejected by Nadia Boulanger as a potential lover and as a composer (due to her movement away from the French neo-classical approach and her adoption of serialism), considered unimportant by her male peers (who viewed her as an anomaly outside of the circles of American composers), and resentful of the time teaching took from her composition, wanted little more than to escape from the outside world to work by herself without

interruption. In her correspondence with Wilder, Talma writes repeatedly of her psychological requirements during her composition of the opera, particularly her need for long periods of isolation and a stable atmosphere. She decided that she could not work in her New York apartment because of several potential distractions, including communications with her employer, Hunter College, and the possible intrusion of students and performers calling her or wanting to play for her. To remove herself from these concerns, Talma sought residencies away from New York for the duration of the opera's composition in order to work on her own terms without teaching or public commitments to interrupt her: "People just don't understand how much isolation one needs really to get into a work, and how disturbing it is to be pulled out. I've only just succeeded in getting a decent momentum going, and I deeply resent any interruption" (Letter to Thornton Wilder, 19 Jan. 1956). These concerns and desires surrounding solitude and the ability to work at one's perceived calling without interruption, or other more mundane obligations, were mirrored closely in *Alcestis* throughout the opera.

It is equally clear that Talma experienced considerable anxiety about her perceived position as a teacher and mentor, as *Alcestis* does in regard to serving as the queen of Thessaly and the mother to its heirs. Although teaching served as Talma's primary means of support for most of her life, her letters make it obvious that she detested it and chafed at the requirements of her appointment at Hunter College. She wrote of her employer as an enemy, and both feared and scorned her colleagues there (Letter to Thornton Wilder, 4 June 1959). Talma's wish to retreat from teaching to compose full-time is plainly articulated in her writing, as is her rejection of serving as a mothering figure to her students or conforming to traditional gender roles as a female instructor. She dreaded working with young musicians interested in performing her works to the point of inventing excuses not to hear them and actively dissuading them from playing her works in public (Letter to Thornton Wilder, 22 Feb. 1956). Talma further discouraged younger fellows and students from approaching her by simply ignoring them: "This is the time of year I hear from my former pupils," she wrote to Wilder one December. "I just hastily shut the door on it as one does on a desk full of unanswered mail" (Letter to Thornton Wilder, 20 Dec. 1956).

Religion also plays an essential role in understanding Talma's approaches to *The Alcestiad*. After her conversion, Talma had written more than a dozen religious works exploring and celebrating her newly adopted Catholicism. Talma had first channeled her desire for love that could not be

physically expressed into secular songs, then into religious works. In *The Alcestiad* she finally concentrated them into Alcestis, who also loves an unattainable entity who refuses to answer her pleas for recognition and refuses to accept her as a dedicated worshipper. The two situations form mirror images: Talma initially entered into religion to connect more strongly with Boulanger, and later focused the desire she had for Boulanger into her religious practices. Alcestis seeks to reject mortal love in order to serve Apollo, and then finds that she must marry Admetus in order to serve the god. Thus, she sublimates her religious desire into her role as wife and mother. Like Talma, Alcestis comes to realize that she must compromise and conform to the expectations of society. Talma had outwardly presented herself both as a dedicated teacher despite her intense dislike of the profession, and as a single woman content not to enter into a relationship, despite her clear desire for at least Boulanger. Finally, she appeared to be highly devout, although underlying her faith was the likely sublimation of same-sex desire into religious devotion, exchanging one idol for another and continuing to revere that figure through music. By following societal norms for women of her generation, Talma also censored her own actions and words in order to both be accepted by her contemporaries and also not to sin in the eyes of her new-found faith. Seeking a forum in which to express her emotions, her compositions turned from settings of love songs to religious works and works in which she could more subtly speak, if not act, through text-setting and other compositional elements. Talma created herself as a kind of priestess of music to escape from the pain of unattainable love; Alcestis accepted unwanted marital love to escape the pain of not being called as a priestess. This not to say that Talma's self-established mid-life identity as a devout Catholic seeking to praise her God is disingenuous or false: she clearly embraced the tenets of her adopted religion, and found the symbolism of her faith important in signifying her own emotions in *The Alcestiad*.

In giving Alcestis a voice, Talma could express her own desires to serve as a conduit of sound in order to glorify or explicate the desires of the divine. As a priestess, Alcestis (like Talma as a stereotypical “spinster schoolteacher”) could become the ultimate “not a woman”—someone revered but exempt from the duties expected of a single woman (marriage), part of a married couple (motherhood), or mother (child rearing) by others living in a heteronormative society. Carolyn Abbate writes of such priestesses that “these women were seen as ‘bodies in tune and capable, like a musical instrument, of a full and faithful rendition’; but once removed from

their proximity to Apollo, the instrument-woken remained ‘hermetically sealed, untouchable, and silent’ (8). Neither Alcestis nor Talma received her wish to live removed from the world, serving her chosen deity by staying close to him, giving voice to his words, and erasing all other desire. However, in composing *Alcestis*, Talma did make her own wishes public—albeit in a subtle manner—in the score.

Although Talma had been working with serial techniques since 1952, and had completed her serial *String Quartet* (1954), the *Six Etudes for Piano* (1954), and *La Corona* (1955) prior to proceeding fully with *The Alcestiad*, she found while composing the opera that she enjoyed using serial techniques more for her own intellectual pleasure than as a true compositional tool. She later described her use of twelve-tone techniques as eclectic, commenting in an interview with Susan Teicher that, “I like to use serialism as a tool and to incorporate it with the other modes in music. I see no reason for chopping off what has developed simply because something new has come along. I believe in using all the tools available” (Teicher 132).

This incorporation of “other modes” is critical: close analysis of *The Alcestiad* indicates that Talma sought to combine traits of her tonal, French-influenced first period with serialism without dismantling her own sense of what is aesthetically important. In early 1957 she wrote to Wilder that her use of serial elements was “not in any sense intended to be perceived by the listener like the Wagnerian leitmotifs” (Letter to Thornton Wilder, 7 Jan. 1957). Repetition and skipping over pitches only to come back to them later are both common characteristics in the opera, particularly in choral writing, where Talma frequently appears to be working for mirroring effects between the voices. In one passage, for example, Talma alters Apollo’s row, {E F C# D G A F# A# C B G# D#}, by “taking the notes in the order of every fourth one,” although she necessarily must break the pattern after only three iterations, resulting in {E D F# B F G A# G# C# A C D#}, creating a new variation that would most likely go unnoticed without foreknowledge (Letter to Thornton Wilder, 25 Mar. 1957).

Most melodic material begins with a straightforward statement of the character’s pitch-class row, often followed by repetition of subsets or variations subsets of the row. As in her tonal works, Talma employs the “sigh” motif of a descending semi-tone or whole tone in places fraught with emotion, using pitches already aligned intervallically to produce the desired linear intervals; the same holds true for her use of {0, 6} sets/tritones and {0, 7} sets/perfect fifths to suggest tonal relationships. In other instances, one character’s row is accompanied by a transformation of that same row

or by another character's row in the accompaniment. Through these transformations, too, Talma creates fleeting tonal centers within her ostensibly non-tonal works. Talma also rearranges the pitch set into its chromatic order starting with the first pitch used and reading every other pitch until reaching a final semi-tone resolution in order to create new material that often references functional harmony. Applying this to Alcestis's row results in two hexachords, each with the pattern tone-tone-tone-tone-semitone: {D E G \flat A \flat A \sharp B} and {E F G A B C}. Each hexachord also outlines minor-major seventh chords, which Talma uses as functional harmony, suggesting that Talma had not abandoned her training in the French impressionistic and neo-classical styles as much as a cursory glance might assume.

Rhythm and the use of meter to create rhythmic patterns are primary forces for *The Alcestiad's* action and characterizations. Close examination suggests that Talma creates two rhythmic and metric distinctions for the characters and action in the opera, based on attributes traditionally assigned by composers working for the Church during the medieval, early modern, and baroque periods. Like Monteverdi and Bach, whose triple/compound meters and constructions invoke the perfection of the Trinity, and whose duple/simple meters and constructions signify the heartbeat of mortal life, Talma employs triple/compound rhythms and meters to signify mortals thinking about the divine/desired, and duple/simple rhythms for their considerations of the mortal or mundane, that which Alcestis—and Talma, as outlined above—find repellent (Bartel 50). Throughout the aria, words that can be used to express duties Alcestis would perform *either* as Apollo's priestess or as Admetus's wife are set in irregular meters, indicating that while the tasks may be similar, such as caring for the poor, Alcestis views them as having different significance based on the role in which she would perform them; and that her desire to undertake them depends on this difference. This device occurs throughout the opera.

Talma's use of certain pitch-class sets also provides structure for *The Alcestiad*. Talma regularly uses the {0, 1} and {0, 2} sets as the "sigh" motif; she also frequently employs {0, 1, 2} linearly at the beginning of a character's entrance and at the climax of an aria or extended section while using the remainder of the character's assigned row in the surrounding orchestration. In Alcestis's first act aria, she expresses her yearning to be called as a priestess of Apollo:

I have offered you my life and all the days of my life.
Oh, call me. Send for me.

Not to live here among men, but in your house,—
 At Delphi! At Delphi!
 There before dawn, Oh Apollo, to await the sun,
 Silent before you.
 With laurel boughs to sweep the steps of your temple
 And with water—with cold and pure water, silent before you.
 To lead the sick and the broken into your house —
 To hear the words of the sibyl—
 To serve her
 To serve you
 Silent before you,—at Delphi.
 The day has come, the last day when all my life can be given to you,—
 Surely, you hear my voice.
 Send me the sign I have waited for.
 Call me. Call me.
 (Pause.)
 Then are we abandoned? Are we left to ourselves?
 (Pause.)
 You have placed in my heart this desire
 Give me the life, Oh Apollo, for which you first gave me the longing.
 (Wilder 3)

The aria's introduction begins at three measures before I:38¹ with a statement of the first five pitches of Alcestis's P₅ row across four measures that move from 2/2 to 3/4 and end on a three-beat F# as she pleads for "one sign." This alternation of meter indicates Alcestis's uncertainty about her path on the night before her wedding, but the choice of a triple meter for the remainder of the aria signifies her position of devotion to serving Apollo. At I:40, the aria proper begins with the linear statement of the first nine pitches of Alcestis's P₄. During the aria, the words associated with the human demands on Alcestis are set in simple meters, but when she returns to text referring to the divine and her desire to escape others' expectations of her, her music is set in compound meters. This distinction is solidly established in this aria, the first of the opera. Both iterations of the word "life," with its mortal implications, are moved into 4/4, but the surrounding

¹ All numbers refer to rehearsal numbers in the score by Act and number of Talma's *The Alceste*, published as a manuscript facsimile by Carl Fischer, New York. Rehearsal numbers begin at 1 again at the beginning of each act, thus I:40 is Act I, rehearsal number 40.

text (“I have offered,” “call me,” “send for me”) imploring the god, is all set in either $3/4$ or $3/2$. These phrases are further emphasized by groupings of three in the piccolo and flute on the first beat of the measure at one before I:41 and in the strings on the second beat of the measure starting at I:41 and continuing until three after I:41.

Alcestis continues, “Not to live here among men,” with “Not” placed on an F \sharp , the highest pitch in the aria thus far, sung without any accompaniment and placed on the first beat of the measure. Following the emphatic “not,” Talma groups the pitches in the accompanying strings in duples to underscore “to live.” As Alcestis sings, “here among men,” the strings are split: the upper voices have a three-pitch slur while the lower voices have a single pitch followed by movement in sets of {0, 1} and {0, 2}, maintaining an unchanging set even while the meter shifts. When Alcestis pleads to be called to Delphi at the end of the phrase (two before I:42), both her meter and the groupings of pitches in the strings return to $3/4$ time, and the strings accompany her desire with a three-note figure. At I:42, Alcestis begins a phrase that leads her to the highest pitch of the aria, an A \flat on “sun,” held over three full measures. This sustained A \flat is prefaced by a run by a solo violin of semi-tone and whole tone pairs descending from a D \flat to an E \flat just before Alcestis makes a leap from B \flat to the A \flat . The pairs comprise a linear statement of the first two pitches of Alcestis’s P $_3$, P $_0$, and P $_6$, followed by 0–3 of P $_5$ and then pitches 2–3 of P $_6$. As Alcestis attacks the A \flat , the celesta takes over from the solo violin with another passage of semi-tone and whole tone pairs.

At I:43, the meter changes almost every measure as Alcestis lists the tasks she could perform for the god, a litany that comes to small internal climaxes in triple as she states that such work would be done “silent before you” and to “serve [Apollo]” “at Delphi.” A single interpolation of two measures in duple are phrased as two measures of $3/4$ rather than one of $4/4$ and one of $2/4$ in both the vocal line and the supporting clarinet accompaniment. Continuing in this vein, Alcestis sings of leading “the sick and the broken into your house.” This task would also be among her duties as Queen, and this is recognized by the use of quickly shifting meters at the start of the passage, from $2/4$ to $3/4$ to $7/8$. The accompaniment in the strings is irregular within the given meters, disrupting any previously established sense of continuity and further throwing off easy identification; however, a violin solo is set in sixteenth-note triplets, later picked up by the celesta, creating a strong undercurrent of divine signification. When Alcestis makes it clear that she wants to perform this service not at Thessaly or

for Admetus, but “in your [Apollo’s] house,” the rhythm includes a pickup of three eighth notes (in a 7/8 measure) before shifting to 3/4 meter and three sets of paired eighth notes in the strings clearly marking the beats of the measure.

At I:47, Alcestis realizes that this is “the last day when all my life can be given to you.” A run of sixteenth notes in 3/4 suggests her panic at possibly losing the chance to become an acolyte of Apollo, and as she sings “last,” the viola line accompanies her with three-note motives in a repeated pattern of two thirty-second notes a descending semi-tone apart, followed by a dotted eighth on the same pitch as the first thirty-second note—another instance of the sigh. As she sings “Surely, you will hear my,” the motif is taken up by all of the strings, ending as she sings “voice” at the end of the phrase. She reiterates her plea, “Call me,” as the solo violin line of sixteenth triplets returns, providing continuity, but the rest of the strings now (three after I:49) have four-note patterns, signifying that her desires for sacred service are undermined by the fact that she will not be called away from her ordinary life and interrupting the previous stability of her aria. Apollo joins Alcestis in a contrapuntal duet, very firmly set in 3/4, at I:55. Alcestis’s text, focused exclusively now on her love for and devotion to Apollo, lacks the metrical uncertainties that colored the earlier setting of concepts associated with serving both Apollo and/or Admetus/Thessaly. However, the orchestral accompaniment throughout the duet, set mainly in the strings, continues to hint at the eventual outcome of Alcestis’s desires: Talma uses syncopation and constantly changing groupings of notes in order to introduce instability beneath the vocal line.

Even after Alcestis leaves the stage at the end of the duet (I:59), Talma continues to leave the listener uncertain as to the outcome through the use of alternating emphases shifting between duple, triple, and irregular patterns. She has the upper winds prominently state Apollo’s I₁₁ row at three after I:60, suggesting his dominance over the scene. Talma employs the figure of triplet sixteenths again after the end of the duet until I:61, when Death enters and is challenged by string quintuplets playing Apollo’s I₅ row, followed by return to his stuttering sixteenths in 4/4 meter at I:62. The triplet sixteenths continue as Apollo argues with Death about the possibility of the gods to change and to effect change. As Death becomes more frenetic in his argument, the duple eighths become triplet sixteenths on unchanging pitches, placed in counterpoint to continued triplet flurries of Apollo’s rows in the upper winds, destabilizing the scene’s rhythmic structures. The scene ends with Death running to his cave and Apollo entering

Admetus's palace to the unmistakable rhythm of triplets in all of the active voices and fragments of Apollo's row in the flutes. As Apollo's presence fades from the stage, Talma drops the middle note of each triplet, and sustained pitches from the harp, vibraphone, and glockenspiel mark the change of scene. This affirmation of divinity at the scene's end signifies Apollo's continued presence in Thessaly, and comes into play in the following scene. Alcestis will not be rescued by religion or supernatural forces from her unwanted pedestrian life, but her god remains close by.

Alcestis states that she loves Admetus, but that "there is one I love more" (one after I:87). Her words on Admetus and her mortal marriage are again set in duple, while her confession of the one she loves more is stretched into a triple effect by extending her line through two measures: one in 7/8 and one in 2/2, in which her attacks nearly evenly divide the space into three (three after I:87). On the long held note of "more," alternating pitches of Apollo's Io row and fragments of his R6 row are played by the flutes and clarinets, signifying his presence in her thoughts. Alcestis recounts her life-long dream to serve in duple, a recognition of her desire to serve as a mortal, but syncopated rhythms in the upper strings complicate the texture and beat, subverting the sense of meter. This destabilization increases at I:93, where Alcestis, using fragments of her I9 row, first professes her desire to "live in the REAL" of Apollo's service.² The addition of winds playing syncopated rhythms continue to make the meter difficult to parse, but when Alcestis reiterates her desire five measures later, Talma changes the meter formally to 3/4 for one measure. However, she continues the metric disruption by shifting the strings' patterns to emphasize two beats across the 3/4 measure as if it were a 6/8 measure. After this 3/4–6/8 measure, as Alcestis sings of "the lives we see about us: fear and pride and possessionship," Talma again formally changes meter, returning to the mortal heart-beat of 4/4. Alcestis continues, "Any woman can be wife and mother, and hundreds have been queens. *My* husband, *my* children. To center one's life about these five or six—Bound and SHUT IN with all that concerns *them*. No! Not here, but where Apollo is" (I:93). These words echo Talma's own attitudes towards Hunter College and her students: she did not want to be owned by the institution or be obligated to center her life around it and her pupils. Yet she found them, as Alcestis did, to be the only suitable solution for a woman in her position.

² I have retained the all-capital emphases in the libretto and score.

As Tiresias approaches the palace (I:112), the chorus's text is set in broad triplets across two beats, while in the low strings each quarter note is divided into triplets, all indicating the priest's holy status. When Tiresias himself enters, Talma increases the density of the triplets in the orchestra and chorus, adding the winds and upper strings. Tiresias's own text, starting at I:126, is also set in triplets both across half notes and quarter notes. Talma also uses a three-note motif using {0, 1, 2} and two thirty-second notes and an eighth note—similar in rhythm and pitch to those used in Alcestis's aria at I:47—throughout Tiresias's appearance to emphasize his connection to Apollo and thus the divine. To further equate Tiresias with holiness, Talma assigns the chorus a hymn to sing once they recognize him (I:130). The hymn, for all four voices of the chorus, alternates between 6/8 and 9/8 in meter, with the beat falling on the dotted quarter note, creating groups of threes. Talma hints at tonality in the hymn by creating what sound like triadic relationships, but they are drawn out of Apollo's P8 row, creating a {0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 7} set in which {0, 4, 7} is emphasized through repetition and linear movement without the presence of functional tonal harmony. However, at one before I:134 and again at one before I:138, Talma brings the hymn to recognizably tonal cadences resulting in a B \flat minor 7 chord in second inversion. With Tiresias's departure at I:185, Talma again invokes the triple/holy connection, placing triplets in the upper strings and creating a rhythmic texture that emphasizes every third sixteenth note in the winds and lower strings.

Although Apollo will arrive in the form of a shepherd, the more obvious incarnation of the god has clearly left the palace. To reinforce this absence and the disturbance in the continuity of the Act, Talma immediately changes the meter to a clear 4/4 and uses a fragment of Admetus's P6 row to set his text as he begins to address the herdsmen. However, as he asks for the god's continued blessing, Admetus sings in triplets spread across two beats. Admetus addresses Alcestis, singing a straightforward statement of his P5 row; he then addresses the herdsmen, using his P11; and then departs, leaving Alcestis with the herdsmen. Throughout Admetus's appearance at this point, he is accompanied by "sigh" figures in the winds, signifying his own sadness at the imminent departure of his bride on their wedding day. As Alcestis, singing to the herdsmen, addresses Apollo one final time, Talma sets her words in a 6/8 accompanied by three-note motifs across the orchestra.

Talma begins a long section at I:201 in 2/4 in which the herdsmen question themselves about their identities. While the low strings have steady

staccato eighth notes, the violins state Apollo's P4 row followed by fragments of other rows in a wandering mix of sixteenth and eighth notes, suggesting that the god is indeed present but exists in a confused and changing state himself. The first Herdsman's text is set to part of Apollo's P2 row, and when Alcestis insists, to the herdsman's denials, that the god is present, Talma sets her text to fragments of Apollo's R3, I6, and RI6. The rhythm throughout this dialogue is heavily syncopated, obscuring meter. At I:207, the first Herdsman begins identifying traits in each of his fellow shepherds that are common to Apollo, including healing, drinking, navigating, and music-making. Each trait is set to a different fragmented form of Apollo's row, and the meter shifts rapidly. In addition, Talma uses very few triplet figurations here; when she does, they are often fleeting—lasting only one or two beats—and are broken up with rests. She will not disclose which of the men houses the god through the by now well-established triplet signifier. The herdsman most associated with triplets is the one with musical gifts, but even in this characterization (beginning at five after I:215) the triplets are quick—triplet sixteenths followed by an eighth—and positioned against duple eighth notes in the winds. Finally the herdsman decide that Apollo does not live among them, despite Tiresias's claims, but their final statement is rebutted by Talma's use of two measures of $5/8$ full of triplet sixteenths and Apollo's P7 row in a flurry that marks the end of the section.

At I:225, the First Herdsman suggests that Apollo is in Admetus, rather than one of the shepherds, on Admetus's I_o row. Talma provides continuity to this idea by using Apollo's I₄ row in the strings. Talma then accompanies the First Herdsman's lines with pitches that occur in order in both Apollo's and Admetus's RI₁₀ rows. During the Herdsman's conjecture, the scoring is sparse and all sense of meter, and in some cases even rhythm, is obscured, preventing identification of the shepherd with the mortal or the divine. The Herdsman's line shifts through several permutations of Apollo's row, suggesting that at this particular moment, *he* is Apollo, or that Apollo speaks through him, and that this possession has been constructed to further encourage Alcestis that Apollo's will is for her to marry Admetus. At the end of the scene (I:227), the First Herdsman offers a blessing to Admetus, still employing fragments of rapidly changing permutations of Apollo's row.

Admetus bids Alcestis farewell, granting her permission to leave as she wishes. His aria, using fragments of his own row, is supported by sustained pitches in the orchestra; the meter changes every few beats and Admetus's

line is highly syncopated, perhaps signifying his fractured plans and uncertainty for the future. As he sings of how he initially won Alcestis as his bride, however, his pitches and those of the accompanying strings shift to Apollo's Ito row, and when he sings that, "I never doubted that a God was near. / It seemed he came today," Talma sets the text in 3/4, in contrast to the previous measures. However, Talma ends this stability as Admetus continues, breaking down over the apparent imminent departure of Alcestis, returning to quickly changing meters and complex syncopations.

After Admetus's aria ends, Alcestis requests that Admetus ask her to marry him again (I:239). Her *tessitura* is lower than at almost any previous point in the Act, the dynamic indication is *piano*, and the meter moves from the 3/4 of Alcestis's divine longings to 2/4 to a staunch 4/4 (4 before I:240). Alcestis's following aria recounts the duties she will have as a woman conforming to the norms of society: to love the things her husband loves, to bear his children, to represent him properly in public, to serve him, and to live not for herself but for him and their children—all duties she does not want. Although there are brief moments scored in triple, Alcestis's aria of defeat drags her inexorably away from triple to duple: she is sacrificing the third beat that signified the divine for the duple of the prosaic, the unwanted life. Accompanying figures are set resolutely in duple, including syncopated half notes emphasizing groupings of two.

However, there is an out for Alcestis, which foreshadows the action of Act II. The climax of her capitulation focuses on her duty to die for Admetus if necessary. Her words, "Though each moment I were to die for you" (I:245), are set over two measures, one in 5/4 and one in 5/8, and Talma's phrasing divides the crucial words into two groups of three: "Though" is over three eighth notes; "each moment" is set syllabically on eighth notes, as is "I were to." "Die" is a G held for the equivalent of three slightly unequal beats (quarter, dotted-quarter, quarter) before dropping more than an octave to a G \flat on "for," which marks a return to duple. "For you" is set over four eighth notes; the octave drop and movement from tripe to duple results in the implication that Alcestis is almost hurriedly tacking them on for Admetus's benefit. Leading up to "die," Talma puts triplet thirty-second notes in the strings, which are followed by triplet eighth notes in the strings and horn 5/8 as Alcestis sustains "die" one measure after I:245.

Given Talma's setting of Alcestis's previous statements within a framework of meters representing the divine and the mortal, this statement functions as a realization for Alcestis that death, particularly to save another in a sacrificial manner, could be a way for her to achieve the recognition and

love of Apollo she desires and to release herself from the confines of the normative life she finds so distasteful without dishonoring herself or her family. The triplets in the strings and horn reinforce the interpretation that Alcestis is thinking of the divine rather than the mortal.

Alcestis's final statement of the Act is metered in 3/4. The accompanying winds have an ambiguous rhythm that could be heard in duple, but given the significance with which Talma has imbued the metrical materials of the opera up to this point, it can be read as a subtle undermining of Alcestis's own positive answer to Admetus's proposal. Her mind is still focused on service to the god, albeit service to be achieved in an unexpected manner. Alcestis and Admetus exit the stage. Apollo returns as himself, marked by the same triplets that accompanied him earlier, and calls for Death to pay attention to what is going on in Thessaly. Apollo's call to Death is underscored with oscillating {0, 1} sets throughout the orchestra, recalling Death's earlier stuttering text-painting, and the Act ends in 4/4 with a frenzy of sixteenth notes in the strings and clarinets, reminding the audience of Alcestis's earlier panic and foreshadowing her sacrifice in the second Act. Talma's construction here of Alcestis's agreement resonates with the ways in which Talma, who hated teaching, an activity that is often equated with support, care, and motherly nurturing, nonetheless presented herself to almost everyone as a dedicated pedagogue while internally longing for a very different kind of life.

The second Act opens with the announcement by the Watchman that Admetus has been accidentally wounded by one of the Herdsmen. The Herdsman's text is set to fragments of Apollo's rows (II:10) and accompanied by triplets throughout the orchestra, usually with rests on their second space, signifying that he may be an imperfect incarnation of the god. Admetus is dying when a messenger arrives from Delphi (II:19) with a letter and an amulet: if someone else will give up his or her life for the King, Admetus will be spared.

The arrival of the letter coincides with that of Alcestis, whose entrance is marked by a repeated motif in the violas, which establishes a continuity that Talma will break when Alcestis finds her opportunity to die. Her text is set in alternating 4/4 and 5/4 measures, and she performs the wifely duty of asking the Watchman, Herdsman, and others to be quiet so that Admetus can rest. When two palace guards and Alcestis's maid Aglaia recognize that the message is from Delphi itself, Aglaia's announcement of its arrival is the first extended instance of 3/4 in the Act (one measure before II:19), and is made over broad triplets, connecting the message to the holy place from

which it comes. Alcestis, recognizing the seal on the letter, sings in triple of the “sign of the sun,” and the laurel and the spring, holding “sign” for the duration three eighth notes and “spring” for three quarter notes (II:24).

Alcestis sings of “the home I have never seen” with the text set to highly syncopated rhythms and accompanied by the same, mixing duple and triple emphases to signify Alcestis’s lingering desire to serve at Delphi and the reality of her life as the Queen. Indeed, Alcestis speaks to Apollo (two before II:26), asking if this message is his call to her, but the rows Talma uses here are all variations of Admetus’s, and are frequently arranged in groups that move in half-steps or whole steps, providing a linear continuity in contrast to the disjunctive quality of the mixed meters. As in the first Act, metric qualities play an important role in parsing Talma’s autobiographical interpretation of the text. Alcestis sings, “Oh, Delphi,” giving both syllables of “Delphi” three eighth notes’ duration; the accompanying strings reinforce the feeling of equal, three-beat notes with staccato sixteenths. Recalling her thwarted desire to serve and live in partial solitude, she then mourns her lost opportunity in 4/4, calling Delphi the “home that I have never seen, that I shall never see” (II:25). She continues, “Is *this* in my great grief a word from you? Has so much longing, so much prayer found answer?” “*This*,” elided with “in,” “word,” and “longing,” are all stressed by being set in three eighth-beat constructions; “so much” serves as an anacrusis to “prayer” stretched across two quarter notes, creating another three-beat phrase.

The Herdsman translates the letter, and explains that Admetus will not die if “another longs to die in his place” (II:34). Here Talma employs melodic {0, 1} sets in the Herdsman’s line to heighten the tension of the proclamation, and after he has sung, the strings enter with steady sixteenth notes in the upper voices and hurried gestures of slurred thirty-seconds in the cello, echoed in the flutes. This accompaniment continues as the Herdsman makes his case to be the one to die, and then Talma transfers it to the low winds for the Watchman’s similar declaration. A trio develops at II:37, where Talma creates a thick contrapuntal texture between Alcestis, the Watchman, and the Herdsman, full of {0, 1, 2} sets. The texture continues to thicken with the addition of more instruments until Alcestis cries for silence. Alcestis, accompanied first by winds and then by an agitated string motif (II:43–II:46), realizes her opportunity to die and escape her unwanted mortal duties. She accuses the others of being unworthy, set above a repeated three-note bassoon line. Using Alcestis’s Act II P₁ row, Talma writes a line very much like the one that occurs at I:245: Alcestis will die for Admetus and, because it is sanctioned by Apollo, receive recognition from

the god. She performs a ritual accompanied by “sigh” motifs, and Talma underscores her immediate post-ritual words with triplet sixteenths in the low strings. Her *arioso* climaxes on a six-beat melisma with the strings providing an intimation of groupings of threes, spread out over beats between measures of $3/4$ and $5/4$. Outwardly, Alcestis vows that she dies to save her husband, but inwardly she is still trying to follow a divine calling. Although Alcestis claims at II:55 that, “I dread and fear to die,” the music supporting her outward rationalization of her act is driven by triple groupings, signifying her true motivation. At II:57, Alcestis questions *why* she must die to serve Apollo, rather than have been called to serve in life. The meter here is $6/8$, with the strings playing quarter-eighth rhythms, which indicate with their duple groupings a mortal moment of uncertainty, and during Alcestis’s long (14 eighth note beats) “why?” the first violins and violas have duple thirty-second notes in opposition with sixteenth note triplets in the second violins and cellos. The issue is not fully resolved either metrically or emotionally for Alcestis until her actual death.

As Alcestis begins to die, Talma brings back the eighth notes used to mark Death’s presence in Act I. Throughout Alcestis’s death scene, Talma changes the texture and meter frequently as Alcestis grapples both with her desire to escape her mortal life in an honorable, even religious way, and also her fear of death. When Alcestis makes a final request of Aglaia that her maid sing “the song of sailors putting out to sea” to Alcestis’s children, Talma again returns to the “sigh” motif (II:68). Following Aglaia’s performance of the sailors’ song, Alcestis states that the “word I awaited so long is here” (II:76), and exits the stage to the accompaniment of triplets in the upper strings (II:81). She tells Admetus “I give my life” over triplet sixteenth notes in the strings and triplet figurations in the winds, consecrating her death to Apollo (II:132). She repeats her plea from the first Act (“Call me. Send for me. Oh, call me”) with each phrase set over three beats (II:142). Just before her death, the meter formally shifts to $3/4$, heard clearly in the strings, where Talma evokes a funeral march by placing *sostenuto* quarter notes on the first two beats of each measure (II:147).

Triplets next herald the arrival of Hercules, the son of the god Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. Talma shifts this rhythmic signifier from the strings to various vocal lines, and changes the meter rapidly between duple and triple, implying the conflicting or coinciding natures present in the hero. Learning that Alcestis is dead, Hercules storms about the stage, and plans to enter the Underworld to return Alcestis to the mortal world. Talma sets Alcestis’s name in triplets for Hercules, as well as the phrase “in the

Underworld.” It is, after all, a realm ruled by the gods, and Talma’s rhythmic language distinguishes it as such. Before entering the Underworld, Hercules states that he will show the world what men and gods together can do—in the form of his own demi-god status (three and four measures after II:203). Talma’s use of Hercules’s own row depicts the demi-god’s mental state. It is fragmented when he arrives, drunk, at the palace, but as he builds up his courage to enter the Underworld and save Alcestis, Talma includes longer sets of the full row.

In his rescue of Alcestis from the Underworld, depicted by an orchestra-only block, Hercules is unquestionably determined—by Talma at least—to be a god. This is made clear by the result of the rhythmic war that takes place during the Underworld interlude—a section of thirty-two measures in which duple and triple meters are in near-constant opposition, or in which duple constructions are stated and then subdivided into triple (II:206), which occurs just after Hercules has entered the Underworld. Hercules enters the Underworld in 4/4 with contrasting duple eighth notes and fragments of triple sixteenths dogging his steps. A syncopated duet between the clarinet and bassoon further blurs the sense of meter and rhythms. Triplet sixteenths at II:207 are halted by an unexpected rim shot at II:208 and a march-like duple meter takes over for nine measures before Talma makes another abrupt change of rhythmic emphasis by adding triplet sixteenths played *piano* against syncopated beats at II:210. Talma increases the incidence of triplets throughout the orchestra, starting in the strings and moving into the winds until finally coalescing at II:211, which is both set in 3/4 meter and employs triplets in every level of the orchestration. While this interlude is brief—about one and a half minutes’ duration in the 1962 Frankfurt premiere performance recordings—it is an intense rhythmic battle. Triplet drumming in the percussion and triplets in the horns and strings build to a triple *forte* (four measures before II:213) followed by a repetition of the quarter note pulses (still in 3/4) that accompanied Alcestis’s death. At this point, Hercules emerges from the Underworld with Alcestis in his arms. He has overcome the duple of mortality and performed an immortal deed, signified by the strength of overwhelming rhythmic impulses in triple. Alcestis’s plan to die in the service of Apollo has been thwarted. As in Talma’s Catholicism, life (even when given to save another) and death (at least in the case of what is suicide for selfish, albeit religious reasons) fall under the purview of the divine, not the mortal: mortals should not choose when to die. As she emerges from the Underworld and is received by Admetus, Alcestis is accompanied by an iteration of her first

Act row in the clarinet, flute, and piccolo. She has not been called by Apollo, and she has not been allowed to die.

In the third Act, which takes place twelve years after Alcestis's return from death, she is a slave in the palace—the servant of Agis, a tyrant who has slain Admetus and taken control of Thessaly. Thessaly is ravaged by a deadly plague, and citizens cite Alcestis's unnaturally extended life as its cause. Alcestis's son Epimenes, who fled when Agis seized power, has returned to Thessaly to kill the usurper. Alcestis remains a devotee of Apollo, praying to him and praising him as she cleans the palace and is scorned by its inhabitants. Alcestis's significations have changed since her supernaturally-aided return from death: when the Watchman and others speak to or of her (III:13), Talma accompanies their words with triplets, often with a rest on one part, suggesting that she has been altered—that she is no longer completely mortal. As the Act plays out, this becomes clearer, even to the point where she does not suffer a mortal death but rather an immortal end of life represented in a similar fashion to the Christian account of the bodily ascension of Mary into heaven.

Alcestis's row in this Act is full of potential for tonal implications: {B \flat E A D \sharp B C \sharp F \sharp G \sharp D G F C}. In this row, more than the previous two, Talma creates both linear and vertical constructions that suggest and function as diatonic harmony, most frequently at points where traditional cadences help establish the end and beginning of new thoughts and sections. Consequently, there is an air of resignation throughout the Act, as lines Talma would have previously set with a sense of continuity (or that would have avoided tonal implications of closure) come to more distinct ends, musically speaking. The first instances of these appear in the accompaniment of Alcestis's lines at two measures before III:20 and three measures before III:23, and continue through the Act.

In this final Act more than the others, Wilder couches Alcestis's words for Apollo in the language of Christianity. While before he has been "the healer" or simply "Apollo," in this Act he is the "shepherd of life," the "giver of gifts," and "the shining one" (III:23–III:25). Responding in a manner in keeping with Acts I and II, and continuing to reflect the traditions of sacred music and her own faith, Talma sets these words and Alcestis's call for Apollo's return to save her as a reward for her faithfulness in triplets and accompanies them with triplet figures in the orchestra. Increasingly, Talma abandons the use of rows entirely. In Acts I and II her use was generally identifiable if never very strict; here she constructs her vocal and orchestral

lines more around small pitch sets representing specific intervals and manipulates these to create linear and vertical tension.

Apollo argues with Death, pledging that Alcestis will not die and return to the Underworld at the end of her life, but that Apollo will spare her from Death. Singing in $3/4$ with triplets repeating in the strings, Apollo decides that “Those who have given their lives for others shall not have *that* death. *One* ray of light has fallen, Death, where light has never fallen before” (III:30–III:34). Apollo is a stand-in for Christ—in addition to his roles as the shepherd and the giver of life, he now also represents salvation from death and the promise of a heavenly post-life existence. Talma firmly fixes this association by means of musical signifiers including not only triplets and $3/4$ meter throughout the entire Act for Apollo’s music, but also the use of ethereal string harmonics to denote a celestial existence and the manipulation of Apollo’s rows to create fleeting but stable tonic centers around $B\flat$ and F, representing the solidity of his power as one through whom the faithful may be saved.

Epimenes, whose row is a variation of Admetus’s, is concerned entirely with the mortal world and its troubles: he plans to kill Agis (III:38). Talma sets Epimenes’s text with sparse accompaniment from the orchestra, often setting his row in a canon. Because Epimenes believes that Apollo has turned his back on Thessaly, he never addresses the god or sings in triple constructions throughout his long first aria. Only when he sees his mother does Talma give him broad triplets, repeating the signification of her status as touched by the divine. Alcestis urges him to flee again, but Epimenes intends to trick Agis out of hiding so that he may kill the king. Their conversation is characterized by increasingly quick figures in the winds, Talma’s text-painting of Alcestis’s worry, and sustained minor and diminished triads in the winds representing Epimenes’s steadfastness. Talma also employs the “sigh” motif in this Act when Alcestis confirms her identity to her son: the clarinets and oboes play triplet and sextuplets oscillating between $\{0, 1\}$ and $\{0, 2\}$ sets, and Alcestis sings descending minor sevenths in announcing herself (one measure after III:60). The oscillating figures continue, shifting from instrument to instrument, until Epimenes also identifies himself (III:62).

Alcestis convinces Epimenes that Apollo will “bring things to pass in his own way” (III:69). There is a citizen’s uprising, set for the chorus. Here, Talma repeats short phrases and sets them for pairs of voices within the chorus, re-pairing them every so often to change the texture slightly. When

the chorus begins to pray, Talma shifts their meter to $3/4$ and assigns triplets to the strings (one measure before III:84). Agis, who sings for the vast majority of the time in a steady, unobscured $4/4$, condemns Alcestis for the city's ills; his meter changes to triple only when he asks Alcestis where her beloved god is and why he has not saved them.

When Agis must confront plague-infected guards and Epimenes takes control of the crowd, Talma's use of triplet sixteenth notes in the strings suggests that Apollo is present and working on the restoration of order to Thessaly (III:123). Alcestis begs Epimenes not to kill Agis, stating that it would be against Apollo's wishes. Agis flees, and Epimenes is restored to the throne. At the end of the opera, Epimenes declares that Alcestis herself is the sign she was so desperate to receive. Talma's stage directions state that, "Apollo comes forward slowly to the center of the stage, a slight smile of tenderness on his face. As Alcestis turns to go out the gate, he stands beside her. Alcestis appears to become of a great age and at once almost blind" (III:145). Her mortal ruin is depicted in steady off-beat pizzicatos in duple, until Apollo speaks to her. Urging her to take "another step," his words are accompanied by suddenly more lyrical lines in the first and second violins and violas, set in $3/4$ and $3/8$ and emphasizing the triple aspect that has also suddenly emerged from the plodding of the plucked strings just a measure earlier (III:146–III:147). Seemingly trapped in her mortality, Alcestis replies in duple that the goal to which Apollo guides her is, "So far . . . So high" (III:147). As Apollo coaxes her along, Alcestis's "Too far . . . Too high" migrates into $3/4$, representing the closeness of her reward (III:150). She struggles to name her husband, sung in $4/4$, but even as she asks Apollo his name, she refers to him in $3/4$ as "the shining one I wanted to serve?" After this long passage, which is written in $3/4$, the opera ends with a final measure of $5/4$, divided into $2 + 3$, the final signifier of Alcestis's journey from a disappointing but obedient life constructed by society's demands on her as a woman, to a divinely created afterlife similar to the Christian heaven and similarly reached through constant devotion and piety.

The Alcestiad, which received a standing ovation and critical praise at its 1962 Frankfurt premiere, is Talma's largest work, one of her most intricate, and like much of her output, highly autobiographical. In composing the opera, Talma found ways to express her deepening religiosity, her distaste for her position in life, and her fears of not being properly recognized for her own preferred methods of work and life: her music declares her Catholicism as well as her revulsion for teaching and the "womanly" or "motherly"

duties expected of her by society, including her peers in the composition world and her employers in education.

The large scale, both in terms of *The Alcestiad's* scope and the time she had to work on it, also allowed her to explore the widening vocabulary of her musical language: in her decision to use serial elements idiosyncratically, she laid the foundations for the musical language of the rest of her career, including her later serial and non-serial atonal works. Although *The Alcestiad* was not performed again during Talma's lifetime, it was clearly an important piece to Talma not only for the work she put into it, but also as a bellwether for the reception of her work in Europe and her continued success as a composer. It undoubtedly influenced the committee of the Sibelius Medal for composition, which was awarded to Talma in 1963, and appears to have been a work that helped Talma overcome many of her anxieties about her abilities and her standing as an American composer. Following its production in Frankfurt, Talma was eager to embark on another operatic project, which later became *Have You Heard? Do You Know?* for which she herself wrote the libretto. Her writing for voice in non-tonal approaches became more playful and characteristic with the experience of *The Alcestiad* behind her, and while she frequently continued to struggle with nearly every measure in a work, her letters indicate a level of confidence in her work she had not shown before. In writing *The Alcestiad*, Talma took her autobiographical composition to a wider audience, received immediate acclaim for it in its opening night ovations, and was bolstered sufficiently to continue composing in a strongly individual manner.

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