

Arion, the poet

by Ed Higgins

Nearly everyone knows of that celebrated poet's story coming down to us from classical Greek mythology: the tragic tale of Orpheus and his descent into the underworld to rescue his beloved Eurydice.

Well, there's a much lesser known story of a legendary 7th. Century Greek poet named Arion. Unlike the mythical Orpheus Arion was a real person whose singular magic in verse and song were renown. Although none of his work survives Herodotus, the Greek historian, claims Arion invented dithyrambic poetry, a kind of wild song or chant, describing the adventures of either Dionysus or Apollo. All this is to say not much is known about Arion except for a tantalizing story of his escape from certain destruction—told very much like a mythological story.

Arion it seems once traveled from his home in Methymna, near Corinth, to Sicily to compete in a kind of Olympic-level poetry contest. Like the mythic Orpheus, Arion was likewise a master of the seven string lyre. And in this case he was apparently a stirring writer-singer for he won the contest. The prize was a magnificent ten string lyre gilded in hammered gold which shone with the brilliance of the Mediterranean sun. And the tuned golden lyre played like a fine Stradivarius.

On the voyage home the sailors coveted Arion's valuable prize and planned to kill him for it. Apollo, the god who first gave the traditional lyre to Orpheus, and continued a kind of Guggenheim benevolence toward poets generally, told Arion of his danger in a dream. Apollo also revealed a plan of escape.

The next morning when the sailors attacked the poet, he begged as a last favor to let him play and sing before he died. Obviously, sailors aren't all that bright in the best of tales and—you guessed

it—just as the mythical poet Orpheus once mesmerized the dark forces of Hades itself so Arion stopped his assassins cold with his melodic playing, voice and verse.

Then, just as he finished his mesmerizing song, the poet sprang to the ship's rail and flung himself (golden lyre and all) into the Mediterranean. There a school of dolphins—friends of both Apollo and Dionysus, it so happens—had been drawn by the spell of Arion's voice and lyrics. The dolphins bore the poet and his golden instrument up as they sank and speedily carried Arion safely to land.

Naturally, no sooner had the poet's feet hit the water when Arion's enchantment left the murderous sailors. Total confusion and a babble of voices broke out on deck.

“Get him!” they roared.

“Where is he?”

“What happened?”

“Where's the poet?” some cried out.

“Where's the gilded lyre?” other voices joined the angry din.

Everyone ran about the small ship, overturning everything in sight, furious to recover their lost prize, even threatening one another.

From the shore where the friendly porpoise had transported him, the wry poet, just before heading inland, heard the faint drift of angry voices rolling like spent waves across the blue-green sea.

“...poet...lyre...poet...lyre...”

“lyre...poet...”

