Christoph Willibald Gluck’s Reform Operas 1762-1778

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Christoph Willibald Ritter von Gluck
1714- 1787

• Gluck is the composer of the Reform Operas of the second half of the 18th Century that bridge the Operas of the Baroque period of the 17th and 18th century to the Romantic Operas of the 19th Century.

• He was born in Weidenwang Bavaria. His father, who was a hunter and would be today considered a conservationist, was in the services of Prince Lobkowitz in Bohemia. Bohemia was a cultural rich part of the Austrian Hungarian Empire.

• Gluck was educated from 1726-32 in the Jesuit seminary in a neighboring town. He learned to sing, play the violin, cello and organ. His father had a large family and limited means to support them, so Gluck had to earn money by giving music lessons and playing in churches.
Gluck’s Life continued

- In 1736 he went to Vienna and was befriended in a very cordial manner by the house of Lobkowitz. Musicians and other artists depended on the patronage of aristocratic houses.
- His new patron was Count Melzi, who carried him off to Milan, where he was placed under the tutelage of the celebrated Sammartini until 1741.
- Gluck was exposed to the Italian manner of Opera tradition and started to compose. His first Opera was *Artaserse* with a libretto by the celebrated Metastasio.
- In 1746 he worked in London and befriended the English musicologist and critic Burney.
He subsequently returned to Germany, passing through Hamburg, my home town, which was celebrated for its operatic performances and had one of the oldest citizen sponsored opera houses since 1678. Gluck finally settled in Vienna, where he was appointed director of the Friday concerts in the Rofranol palace.

Between 1741 and 1762 Gluck composed 32 dramatic works. During these years the Baroque Opera stagnated with presentations of long arias embellished by castrati, who took liberties to show off their art, often to the neglect of the original work’s music. The Italian Opera style of the Comedia del Arte and the hollow stage-imitations of antiquity that made up the average Opera Seria, had little
Gluck’s Life continued

resemblance with the connection of the drama of the words expressed in the music.

• In 1762 in his 48th year, after having studied for 10 years literature and art, Gluck was now asking the aesthetic question of the natures of the poetry and music and their combination in Opera.

• In the 18th Century the musician was generally held in low esteem. He or she depended on the patron and the artist had little actual relation to the world. The artist had to minister to the enjoyment of the often ignorant and selfish wealthy and often had no more social status than a servant.

• Gluck lived through these conditions and out grew them. He set himself to make his music truthful to the words.
Gluck’s Life continued

• In 1762 he chose Raniero di Calzabigi to be co-adjutor in the reform of the Opera. In the next 20 years he composed 6 operas, which conformed to his new idea, how poetry of the word should be expressed in Opera.

• Gluck presented his new works in Vienna in German and Italian language.

• By 1769 he received invitations to Paris and now presented his operas also in French and composed new operas in French. His first French librettist was Bailly Du Roullet, who did not write with the lyricism of Calzabigi.

• Gluck’s life was not easy. In Paris 2 groups of fans formed: the Gluckists and a group Italian Opera fans of Piccini, the Piccinists. Gluck did get support from the great Rousseau.
Gluck’s life continued

- In 1779 Gluck left Paris for the last time and took up residence in Vienna. He was friends with many of the great artists of his time such as the German poet Klopstock and the Italian composer Salieri. Gluck died on November 15th, 1787 from a stroke.
Gluck’s 6 Reform Operas
1762-1778

I. Orfeo ed Euridice 1762 Vienna  DV D
   Libretto: Raniero di Calzabigi
   French version Orphee et Eurydice 1774 Paris DVD
   Libretto: Pierre-Louis Moline

II. Alceste 1767 Vienna
   Libretto: Raniero di Calzabigi
   French version 1776 Paris DVD
   Libretto: Bailli Du Roullet

III. Paride ed Elena (Paris and Helena) 1769
    Libretto: Raniero di Calzabigi

IV. Iphiginia in Aulis 1769’ 72 Vienna
    French version 1774 Paris
    Libretto: Bailli Du Roullet, based on Racine and Euripides
Gluck’s 6 Reform Operas continued

V. Armida 1777 Paris based on a poem by Quinault and Torquato Tasso
VI. Iphigenie en Tauride 1778 Paris DVD
   Libretto : Nicolas-Francois Guillard

Of these 6 opera only 4 are on DVD and are still in the repertory.

I will present to you these 4 Operas with the excerpts from the DVDs.
Orfeo ed Euridice 1762

• The part of Orfeo was sung by Guadagni, a castrato, who entered into the spirit of Gluck’s work with perfect comprehension and refrained from defacing the music with any of the customary “embellishments”, the employment of which, due in the first instance to the vanity and vulgarity of the singers, had been so long consecrated by customs. The chorus in this opera is not just commenting on the events but is moving them forward.

• After Berlioz almost 100 years later arranged the 1762 version for a Mezzo Soprano, Orfeo was sung first by the famous Pauline Garcia Viardot. In this production the role is sung by the legendary Janet Baker.
Orfeo ed Euridice continued

- Orfeo laments the death of his beloved wife Euridice in a grove by her tomb

Act I, Chapter 4

"Chiamo il mio be cosi"

- Amore appears and tells him that Jupiter heard him and Euridice will be returned to him, but he can not look at her, when he leads her back to earth from Hades. Orfeo exclaims, he is ready for the test. Life is unbearable without Euridice.

- Orfeo descends to the Gates of Hell with his Lyre. The furies and specters attack him, but his pleading with them, placates them and they let him enter
Act II, Chapter 8
“Deh! Placateri con me”
stop when the gates of Hell open

• Orfeo enters the Elysian fields where the happy spirits dance and Euridice is restored to him. Orfeo tries to lead Euridice back to earth and does not look at her. She is heart broken, thinking he does not love her any more and pleads with him to look at her.

• Finally Orfeo can not take her pleading any longer and turns around and Euridice dies again. Orfeo sings his heart broken lament;

Act III, Chapter 17
“Che faro senza Euridice”
French Tenor version of the Lament

• In the French version for Paris from 1774 Du Roullet and Gluck changed Orfeo to a Tenor role, since castrati were not part of the Paris Opera. Here is the same aria in the tenor version, sung by Roberto Alagna in a modern European production from Bologna

Act III, Chapter 22
“Jai perdu non Euridice”

• Amore returns and tells Orfeo that Jupiter accepts his fidelity to Euridice and will let her live again. Orfeo, Euridice, the heroes and heroines dance before the temple of love, singing praise to the god of love.

• This happy version was created for the name day celebration of the future Austrian Emperor Joseph II.
This is a Robert Wilson production from the Chatelet in Paris and conceived with stereo typed, static gestures like in a Greek chorus presentation. These are not Gluck’s instructions.

King Admete, Alceste’s husband is dying and the people and Alceste are overwhelmed with grief and despair. Alceste and the people pray to the god Apollo for Admete’s life. Apollo’s oracle speaks, that the god has heard them and Admete can live if another sacrifices himself in his place. Nobody comes forward.

Alceste is willing to give up her life for love. She is crying out in triumph her decision to the gods of Styx.

Act I, Scene 7

“Ombres, larves pales compagnes de lamort”
Alceste continued

• Admete is crest fallen, he does not want to loose his beloved wife and begs her, not to leave him, he would rather die.

Duet Alceste and Admete
Act II, Scene 3

“Bannis la clainte e les alarmes”

• Hercule, Admete’s friend and the son of Jove (Jupiter) appears and offers to save him. He will go to Hades. Apollo appears and tells all that Admete will live.
This is the French Version presented by the Nederlandse Opera with a production by Pierre Audi which omits the Ballets demanded by the Paris Opera, concentrating on the emotions of the characters of the legend expressed in the music they are singing and the orchestra.

The Paris Opera wanted a happy ending. The goddess Diana lets Iphigenie live and Achille and Iphigenie can marry. In the legend Diana takes Iphigenie to Tauris to serve her and where Iphigenie is forced to sacrifice the victims brought to her temple.

Gluck had to oversee every detail of the first production and teach the singers to express the emotions presented in the music simple and straightforward without the customary embellishments.
The chorus of the Greek soldiers moves the action forward crying out for the sacrifice of a victim, so that they can have the wind to sail to Troja.

I will present two excerpts from this opera, which are characteristic of Gluck’s musical expression of the words in the libretto.

In act I Agamemnon, Iphigenie’s father, is grief stricken that the goddess Diana demands the sacrifice of his daughter, before the Greeks can sail to Troja. The natural feeling of the father wins over the religious duty to obey the goddess. He sends Arcas, his servant, to give his wife Clytemnestra a letter to turn back to Argos with Iphigenie under the pretext that Iphigenie’s fiancee Achille has
Iphigenie en Aulide continued

- Another love. The letter reaches them too late and they both appear in Aulis both heart broken by the presumed betrayal of Achille.

Chapter 4 and part 5
Agamemnon’s lament, stop when Calchas lifts his stave

- The next excerpt is the duet between Achille and the crest fallen Iphigenie. It shows that Gluck foreshadows the Classical Period of Mozart like in the *Abduction from the Seraglio* and the Romantic Period of Weber’s *Der Freischuetz*. Achille is surprised to see his fiancee in Aulis and in the duett finally convinces her that he loves her and was true to her.

Chapter 14, 15, 16, 17, Stop after they exchanged their rings
Iphigenie en Tauride 1778 Paris

- This is considered Gluck’s master piece. While Du Roullet’s translations were stiff in expression compared to the Italian Calzabigi, Guillard’s French was again lyrical.
- This production from the Zurich Opera accompanies the singers with a pantomime which suppose to express their thoughts and distress.
- This opera has in the highest degree the combinations of high dramatic power with genuine musical sufficiency. Gluck gives greater unity to his scenes, carrying out one dramatic idea from the beginning to the end.
- In the first act Iphigenie and the priestesses of Diana entreat the gods to moderate their anger against the Scythian people and their obsession with human sacrifice.
Iphigenie en Tauride continued

• Iphigenie tells the priestesses of her terrible dream of the death of her father Agamemnon by the hand of his wife Clytemnestra.

• King Thoas of Taurus appears and demands more human sacrifice. An oracle had prophesized his life was in danger, if a stranger came to their shores and two strangers had been taking prisoners, who turned out to be Orestes and Pylades.

• In the dungeon of Diana’s temple, Orestes is in despair, tormented by the furies for his mother’s murder. He blames himself, that he will be the cause of his friend’s Pylades’ death.
Iphigenie en Tauride

- Pylades sings about their friendship and childhood and how he hopes they will be united in their fate.

Act II, chapters 14 and 15

“Dieux! Qui me pour suiviez”

Unis des la plus tendre enfance”

- The minister of the sanctuary separates Pylades and Oreste against their protests. Orestes is alone, first he falls asleep but then the furies pursue him in his sleep for the murder of his mother.
Iphigenie en Tauride

• Iphigenie asks Orestes about himself trying to find out some news from her homeland. He tells her, he is from Mycenae and that Agamemnon is dead, killed by his wife Clytemnestra and that Orestes killed her to avenge the death of his father, but he tells her, he is dead.

• Iphigenie and the priestesses mourn the loss of their homeland and her family

Act II, Chapter 23

“O malheurese Iphigenie!”

• Iphigenie tells Pylades and Orestes she can safe one of them and the one saved can carry a letter to her sister Electra. Orestes and Pylades quarrel, who should die. Orestes finally wins and Pylades goes off with the letter.
Iphigenie en Tauride

- Orestes is blind folded, prepared for the sacrifice. Iphigenie prays to Diana in despair to steady her hands holding the sacrificial sword. Orestes blind folded expecting the sword cries out: “So did you die Iphigenie, my sister”. Iphigenie suddenly recognizes her brother Orestes.

Act IV chapter 37, Recognition scene
“Chaste fille de Latone”

- Thoas suddenly appears and demands she sacrifices the prisoner. She tells him, it is her brother. Pylades arrives with Greek soldiers and kills Thoas with the sacrificial sword.

- Diana appears and tells Orestes, he is saved and tells the Scythians to look forward to a better future.
Iphigenie en Tauride

• Diana tells Orestes to go back to Mycenae and be King. Orestes, Pylades and Iphigenie are going to the shore for their journey home.

• Even in Gluck’s Reform Operas the stories are going back to the Greek myths with the gods determining the fate of the humans.

• Not until the 19th Century and the Romantic period did the humans finally are responsible for the outcome of their fate.
I. Christoph Willibald Ritter von Gluck
Dessen Leben und Tonkünstlerisches Wirken (1854)
Author: Anton Schmid, Custos der k.k. Hofbibliothek in Wien
Leipzig, Friedrich Fleischer 1854

II. Gluck and the Opera: A Study in Musical History
Author: Ernest Newman
London: Bertram Dobell, 77 Charing Cross Road 1895