

Program Notes by Martin Pearlman

Gluck, a composer esteemed by Berlioz and admired by Wagner, whose name is engraved next to Beethoven's and Mozart's on many nineteenth-century concert halls, is sadly neglected today. Histories of music grant Gluck a prominent place as an important mid-eighteenth-century revolutionary, who gave opera a new breath of life, broke down formal conventions to make opera dynamic and truly dramatic, and influenced the course of opera into the nineteenth century. Rousseau spoke for many when he described Gluck's operas as the beginning of a new era, and audiences of the time found the operas unprecedented in their dramatic impact. Yet today, his best known opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, is heard only occasionally, and his later works—including *Iphigénie en Tauride*, which is widely considered his greatest achievement—are rarely performed.

The music itself, considered apart from the drama, is very attractive, but relatively simple. Heard in its dramatic context, though, we feel Gluck's real genius. He was first and foremost a dramatist, aiming everything in the music toward characterization and powerful dramatic effects. "I believed," he wrote in his preface to *Armide*, "that my greatest labor should be devoted to seeking a beautiful simplicity...There is no rule which I have not thought it right to set aside willingly for the sake of an intended effect." For that reason, a performance of his late operas must not only have the transparent textures that such a "beautiful simplicity" requires but also project the large sweep of the drama, always maintaining a forward movement. The effectiveness of this music therefore relies heavily on how it is interpreted. Winton Dean, in *The New Grove Dictionary*, has put it more bluntly: "No other great composer's work can sound so impoverished when insensitively performed."

Gluck's stated intention was no less than to resurrect the drama of the ancient theater, a goal which had given impetus to the creation of opera more than a century and a half earlier. To invoke the ancients implied a return to a kind of universal style, a return to what is natural and true. "If my plans are realized, your old-fashioned music will be forever destroyed," Gluck wrote. It would be necessary to dismantle what he saw as the rigid, formalized conventions of opera—the ubiquitous *da capo* arias, in which a singer predictably repeated the entire opening section of an aria; the regular alternation of arias with *secco* recitatives; the frequent cadenzas and other virtuoso displays for singers. All these he saw as impediments to the natural flow of the drama. He proposed instead to "confine music to its proper function of serving the poetry and expressing the situations of the plot."

With Gluck's statement, "Before I begin my work, I try to forget that I am a musician," he makes clear that he considers the music to be the servant of the poetry and of the drama. Music, of course, is not truly the servant of the libretto. It does dominate our experience of the drama, and that is why we listen to these operas. But, in his sensitivity to the drama, Gluck evolved new and flexible musical forms to suit the characters and dramatic situations. As he moved from his early *opera seria* through his reform operas of the 1760s (beginning with his famous *Orfeo ed Euridice*) to his late masterpieces of the 1770s, the music becomes more continuous, more wedded to the drama, and increasingly free from traditional forms. A composer's intuition and

sensibility—or as writers of the time began to call it, a composer's unique genius—could guide him.

Gluck's first opera written for French audiences was *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1773), which had been produced only with the intervention of Marie Antoinette on his behalf. That opera was a triumph and was followed by a highly acclaimed French version of his earlier *Orfeo*. By the time of *Alceste*, his second Parisian opera, Niccolò Piccinni had established himself as Gluck's principal rival in Paris, and Gluck and his music became embroiled in the musical feud between the Gluckists and the Piccinnists. Gluck angrily stopped work on a new opera, *Roland*, when he learned that Piccinni had been given the same libretto to set to music. Shortly thereafter, partisans attempted to set up another contest, commissioning both composers to set the story of *Iphigénie en Tauride*. This time, however, Gluck managed to arrange for his version to be produced first, and, in the end, the work made such a sensation that even his enemies had to admire it. Piccinni's *Iphigénie* was not produced for another two years and proved to be a flop.

Iphigénie en Tauride was premiered in Paris on May 18, 1779. It was Gluck's greatest success and the culmination of his operatic reforms, and it continued to be performed as a classic in the nineteenth century. The music is simple and direct, and the drama is fluid and continuous. Arias and ariosos run into recitatives, for the most part without breaks, and the orchestra plays throughout the opera. Even the convention of the opera overture has been sacrificed: following a brief, calm introduction, there is storm music which leads directly into singing. In Gluck's earlier reform operas, even in *Orfeo* (1762), the choruses and ballets grow out of the drama, but here they are more fully integrated into the story. The Scythians perform their wild ritual dances between choruses in which they anticipate bloody sacrifices, and the chorus of priestesses converses with Iphigenia and participates in the cultic rites of Artemis (or Diana, to use the libretto's Roman name).

Gluck eventually made a revised German version, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, for performances in Vienna in 1781. It was this German version which Goethe, who had written his own *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, and Schiller later produced in Weimar. On that occasion, Schiller wrote, "Never has a work of music moved me with such purity and beauty as this one. It is a world of harmony, which goes directly to the soul and dissolves it in a sweet and noble sadness."

The exceptionally fine libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard is based on plays by Guymond de la Touche and Racine, but ultimately it derives from the play by Euripides. It tells a story which forgoes the traditional pair of operatic lovers, focusing instead on the relationship between sister and brother and on the love between two close friends, Orestes and Pylades. With his extraordinary characterization of these two relationships, Gluck builds a powerful drama, which culminates at the point when the original ritual sacrifice of Iphigenia is almost repeated with the sacrifice of Orestes. The opera has sometimes been criticized for its surprise happy ending to a "realistic" tragedy, but in fact the ending follows the original Euripides play. In any event, Gluck staunchly defended his right to tell the story as he wanted and, in this instance, he did not challenge convention but fulfilled the expectations of the French opera audience of his day.

Concert Talk
by Martin Pearlman

Synopsis

by Laurence Senelick

Gluck's opera, based on a play of Racine, is a sequel to his *Iphigenia in Aulis*. In the earlier opera, King Agamemnon, on his way to fight against the Trojans, found his fleet becalmed in Aulis. To assure favorable winds, he was constrained to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia on the altar of the goddess Diana. At the critical moment, Diana whisked Iphigenia to the barbarous land of Tauris to become her priestess, along with other exiled women. Come home after winning the Trojan War, Agamemnon is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, ostensibly to avenge the sacrifice of Iphigenia. After some time in hiding, his son Orestes slays his father's slayers and is then driven into exile by the Furies, who torment matricides.

ACT I

The action begins five years after the Trojan War, in a grove of the temple of Diana in the land of the brutal Scythians. A violent tempest is reflected in stormy thoughts that wrack Iphigenia's mind. Unnerved by a dream of her father's murder by her mother, she prays to Diana to grant her the peace of an early death. The barbarian king Thoas has also been visited by dreadful forebodings. He hopes to pacify fate and forestall any attempt on his life by sacrificing all shipwrecked foreigners come ashore in Tauris.

ACT II

Two newly captured castaways turn out, unbeknownst to Iphigenia, to be her brother Orestes and his bosom friend Pylades. They are awaiting their execution in a cell in the temple. Orestes is in a state of black despair, but his companion is more resigned to his fate. When they are separated, the exhausted Orestes is harried by a vision of the Furies. Their vengeful apparition of his murdered mother is dispelled by the entrance of the high priestess who is to officiate over his immolation, namely Iphigenia. Neither recognizes the other, but Iphigenia learns for the first time that her murdered father has been avenged by Orestes. Appalled by this news, she becomes desperate. In the belief that Orestes is already dead, she prepares to honor his memory with a religious ceremony.

ACT III

Somehow the foreign prisoner calls to Iphigenia's mind her beloved brother. In hopes of saving him and at the risk of her own life, she offers the two friends the chance of choosing which of them is to die. The other will be sent to Greece to make contact with her sister Electra. Each of the devoted friends is eager to die to save the other, so that Iphigenia finally has to single out Orestes as the one who will be spared. But he swears, in that case, to kill himself. To prevent the suicide, Pylades agrees to go to Greece, intending to collect his shipwrecked companions and somehow find the means to save his friend.

ACT IV

As the time for the sacrificial ceremony draws near, Iphigenia prays to the goddess Diana to deaden all human feeling in her heart. Then she steels herself to carry out the deadly rites. Orestes is brought in, arrayed for sacrifice, as the chorus of priestesses intones a hymn to Diana. Just as the blade is to plunge into his breast, Orestes recalls his sister Iphigenia's similar fate years earlier and thus involuntarily reveals his identity. Iphigenia falls into his embrace, but the furious tyrant Thoas has meanwhile learned of her treason. He is about to carry out the execution himself when Pylades returns at the head of a troop of Greeks. In the ensuing fight Thoas is slain. The sudden appearance of the goddess Diana stops the fighting. She chides the Scythians for their bloodthirsty practices, vows to protect the Greeks on their homeward voyage and frees Orestes from the Furies. The opera ends in rejoicing.

Orchestra

VIOLIN I

Christina Day Martinson, *concertmaster*

Jesse Irons, *assistant concertmaster*

Susannah Foster

Kako Miura

Lena Wong

Francis Liu

Laura Gulley

VIOLIN II

Sarah Darling*

Julia McKenzie

Asako Takeuchi

Jane Starkman

Emily Dahl Irons

Etsuko Ishizuka

VIOLA

Jason Fisher*

Barbara Wright

Lauren Nelson

Susan Fiore

CELLO

Michael Unterman*

Matt Zucker

Ana Kim

VIOLONE

Motomi Igarashi*

Nathan Varga

FLUTE

Bethanne Walker*
Wendy Rolfe
Na'ama Lion

PICCOLO

Bethanne Walker
Wendy Rolfe

OBOE

Margaret Owens*
Alison Gangler

BASSOON

Stephanie Corwin*
Allen Hamrick

CLARINET

Thomas Carroll*
Diane Heffner

TRUMPET

Jesse Levine*
Bruce Hall

HORN

Todd Williams*
Robert Marlatt

TROMBONE

Liza Malamut*
Ben David Aronson
Brian Kay

TIMPANI

Jeffrey Bluhm*

PERCUSSION

Robert Schulz
Jeffrey Bluhm

HARPSICHORD

Michael Beattie*

REHEARSAL ACCOMPANIST

Ian Watson

**Principal*

The orchestra performs on period instruments.

Chorus

SOPRANO

Emily Bieber
Kelley Hollis
Sabrina Learman
Aurora Martin
Emily Siar
Logan Trotter

ALTO

Alison Cheeseman
Elizabeth Eschen
Meghan Ryan
Elena Snow
Kamala Soparkar

TENOR

Corey Dalton Hart
Michael Sansoni
Connor Vigeant
Jason Wang
Patrick Waters

BASS

Jacob Cooper
Daniel Fridley
Will Prapestis
Nathan Halbur

Production Team

Camilla Tassi, Projection Design
Fred Young, Lighting Design
Neil Fortin, Costume Design
Alycia Marucci, Production Manager
Patrick Phillips, Stage Manager
Wesley Scanlon, Assistant Stage Manager
Rachel Padula-Shufelt, Wig Design
Seams Unlimited, Costume Shop, Racine, WI

Brian Choinski, Wardrobe Supervisor
Michelle Villada, Stitcher
Jackie Olivia, Hair and Makeup Technician
Bill O'Donnell, Projections Operator
Kenneth Chalmers, Supertitle Translation
Supertitles by ConcertCue
Eran Egozy, ConcertCue Founder
Danielle Shevchenko, ConcertCue Operator