Orfeo ed Euridice

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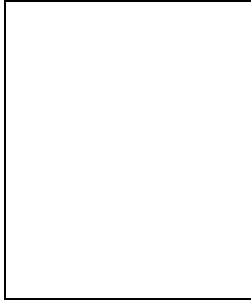
In 1762, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, an opera composed by Christoph Willibald Gluck, changed the face of opera in the eighteenth century. The Italian opera reform movement was inevitable and undeniably necessary, yet it wasn't until the creation of Gluck's *Orfeo* that such reforms were accomplished in a musical creation of such beauty, passion, and simplicity. It was both magnificent poetry and musical genius that gave rise to such a fascinating and influential masterpiece, for without one, the other may not have enjoyed such splendid realization. Some claim to have foreseen such possibilities in Gluck's earlier works, however none can attest to have envisioned such a breakthrough in opera reform from this classically trained composer restricted by the conventionality of the time. In spite of this environment, Gluck was able to replace the complicated plots and musical style of opera seria with continuous dramatic action of superb musical quality, and has thus become known as the father of Italian opera reform.

Controversy and disputes about the life and creations of Christoph Willibald Gluck begin with the question of the time and place of his birth. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century it was believed that Gluck was born on March 25, 1700, at Neustadt on the Waldnaab, and bore the baptismal names of Johann Christoph (1). For a time, the neighboring village of Wiedenwang claimed to be the place of Gluck's birth, however, Gluck was born on July 2, 1714 at Erasbach, near Beilngries and was christened at Wiedenwang, both villages being in the Upper Palatinate near the small

town of Berching. Gluck was the first-born son of Alexander Johannes Gluck, a forest master of Erasbach and the wealthy monasteries of Seligporten and Plankstetten. As a child Gluck was accustomed to a life of poverty, as he helped his father throughout the year in the woods barefooted and barely clothed. It has been speculated that Gluck's father intended for him to become a forest master, following in his footsteps and those of his ancestry. However, his father's choice of educational program for his first son implies recognition on his part to the special gift that Gluck possessed for music. It is strongly believed, yet unproven, that Gluck was educated at Kamnitz and at Albersdorf and in his twelfth year attended a Jesuit seminary at Kommotau (1726-1732) (2). Here he is said to have learned to play the violin, cello and organ, however it is certain that he was introduced to the study of music during his childhood education, as Bohemia is testified to have been at the time the most advanced in terms of music education where children were taught the principles of singing and playing of instruments. Gluck was witness to the dissolution of the Jesuit order and entered into the university at Prague in 1732, where he gave lessons in violin, cello, and singing and played in churches. He received a small monthly salary at the Teinkirche under the control of Czernohorsky (2). He often toured while on vacation and performed waltzes and polkas for the peasants, for which he was paid in eggs. He would exchange the eggs for cash at the closest town where he would also perform. At the age of twenty-two Gluck left Prague for Vienna where he was befriended by Prince Ferdinand Philipp Lobkowitz, his fathers' youthful employer, for whom he became chamber musician. He gained acquaintance of the court musicians of Charles VI one of which, Count Melzi, engaged him in his own service and took him to Milan where he was placed under the tuition of Sammartini until 1741.



At the age of twenty-seven Gluck began working independently of Sammartini on *Artaserse* of Metastasio, commissioned likely through Count Melzi (2). The opera was performed in Milan in 1741 and immediately earned Gluck the commissions-the *scrittura*- for further operas (1). In the next three and a half years, from the end of 1741 to the beginning of 1745, Gluck wrote ten operas, of which only one, *Ipermestra*, has been completely conserved. Most of these operas have been conserved in bits and pieces and it is by this incomplete framework that we gain an understanding of Gluck's early operatic achievements. Although far from revolutionary, and perhaps not even intent on reform, Gluck's success next to rivals such as Hasse, Vince, and Leo and amidst a sea of talented young composers must be attributed to the modernity and energy of his melodious arias. Despite conventionality, the *opera seria* arias of Gluck professed a greater melodic freedom and unfettered expression, which further engaged the orchestra in the dramatic art as well.

To understand the development of what became known as the reform movement in Italian opera, it is necessary to examine causes within all factions of artistic expression of the eighteenth century. Although Gluck is often credited as being the father of this movement, the Italian opera reform movement should be viewed in context of a more expansive effort, led more in part by literary intellectuals decades before the opera reform movement took hold. In fact, Metastasio's *Estratto dell'arte poetica d'Aristotle*,

published in 1772 yet written over several decades, called for many of the same reforms to which Calzibigi's librettos attested. In spite of his pleas that singers exercise restraint, Metastasio's librettos were nevertheless constructed to cater to singer's indulgences. It wasn't until the marriage of Raniero di Calzibigi's poetic strength and beauty and Gluck's musical genius and simplicity that the perceptions of the need for reform of the Italian opera were realized and dramatically translated. Gluck had given insights to his rich creative energy and proof of strong dramatic capacity in *Semiramide*, *Telemaco*, and elsewhere (2). The collaboration of Gluck and Calzibigi brought about a far more vast and effective framework for reform and Viennese opera reform in general represented a far more radical cure than Metastasio had imagined. Given the conventionalities and musical rigidity to which composers of the eighteenth century were bound, it appears to be rather magnificent the way Gluck found the inspiration to bring his music to bear upon expression of truth, feelings, and thought. For the most part, the eighteenth century musician was held in very small esteem and his music was born more out of the desires of his employer or the necessities of theatrical performance. Many people attended the opera merely to hear their favorite singer, and rather than focus on the ensuing music, often involved themselves in a quick game of cards or chess during recitative (2). There exists evidence of the opinion during this time of musical imagination being distinctly below imagination of other form (2). Amidst this environment, Gluck's first of his three so-called reform operas, *Orfeo ed Euridice,* was conceived. The collaboration of Gluck and Calzibigi was encouraged by Count Durazzo, lieutenant of Viennese theaters, despite the severe language barrier that existed between the librettist and composer. Gluck comprehended little Italian and Calzibigi attempted to express to him the poetry through

symbols he placed in the libretto. The degree to which they could directly communicate was such that when upon first performance the audience conveyed mixed reactions, Gluck blamed Calzibigi for the operas mediocre reception (3).

Gluck's contributions to the composition of the libretto are unknown, yet despite the language barrier between the two cohorts it is believed that he would have had a large role in determining the final outcome and that he would have embedded sense and dramatic interest of the recitative, truly lyrical portions, and stressed importance of choral text (2). Calzibigi's intent is made evident in a letter written to Mercure de France, Naples, 15 June 1784:

'I read him my *Orfeo*, showing him, by repeating several passages, the nuances that I put into my declamation and that I wanted him to make use of in his composition: the pauses, the slowing down, the speeding up, the sound of the voice now strong, now weaker and in an aside. At the same time I begged him to forgo passage-work, cadenzas, ritornello, and all that is gothic, barbaric, and extravagant in our music. M. Gluck went along with my ideas.' (3)

The libretto indeed was not ambiguous in its anti-Metastasio aims. It contained not a single simile or metaphor and action was reduced to the essentials. It begins, for example, with the curtain rising immediately upon Orpheus' mourning. The poetry ingeniously placed a mere 3 characters in a fluid context of dances and choruses (or both simultaneously) (4). Gluck did not make such a clear declamation of intent until in the preface of *Alceste*, which with exception to the remarks on the overture, could as easily apply to *Orfeo*. However, one can argue that the music itself speaks to the principles of simplicity, naturalness, and beauty for which Gluck later admitted to be striving and his

approach appears to be no less radical. There is near-complete elimination of coloratura and of opening ritornellos in the solo numbers while emphasis is strongly placed on continuity. This continuity was realized musically by the enchaining of harmonically open-ended sections of music. Sharp contrast of texture was avoided by employing orchestral accompanied recitatives in place of recitative simplice. Continuous, syllabic vocal writing averted applause and promoted prolonged audience absorption and assimilation. Such innovative techniques have proven to be timeless, as it has been said, "the skill with which choral, orchestral and balletic forces were integrated with solo song in *Orpheo* has scarcely been equaled in the subsequent history of opera" (4).

It has been viewed as both ironic and paradoxical that Gluck chose a prehistoric sun-myth to serve as the groundwork for his first reformation opera, however it was nearly universal custom to use classical stories and mythology for the opera and Monteverdi had chosen the same myth in the previous century at the onset of opera history (2). In fact, it can be said that the classic myth is well suited as a reform opera, as Orpheus' power come from no other source than the pure beauty of the music that he creates. The story of Orpheus is referred to in Greek literature as early as the seventh century B.C., and is subsequently retold, briefly or at length, by poets and dramatists as far removed in time as Ovid, Virgil, Pindar, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Rilke, Valéry

and Cocteau. It has attracted composers of lyric drama since the beginnings of the art form in the late fifteenth century (5). The legend varies in detail, however the outline of the story as narrated by Virgil in the *Georgics* Book IV (written about 35 B.C.) is as follows. Eurydice, wife of the singer Orpheus, is bitten by a snake while attempting to escape the attractions of a suitor. She dies and Orpheus follows her to the underworld where Proserpine authorizes her release on the account that Orpheus does not look back at her until they have reached the light of day. Near the end of their journey, Orpheus, unprovoked by Euridice, in a moment of passion looks back at her. Euridice reproaches him bitterly as she turns irrevocably to Hades (5). Orpheus weeps for months as he plays his lyre, surrounded by the trees and animals that gather to hear his beautiful music. The Circonian women, insulted by his mourning in the midst of their Bacchanalian rites, tear him to pieces. His dismembered body is thrown in the river Hebrus as the river flows downstream, his voice is heard calling the name of Euridice as the banks echo the dying sounds (5). Calzibigi's libretto follows a variation in which the mistrust is transferred to Euridice, who provokes Orpheus to look at her with her insistent questioning of his faithfulness. The opera is modified again at the end to have a happy reunion of the two lovers. The drama is scaled down to include only three principles, Orpheus, Eurydice, and Cupid, and the action is continuous and refrains from embellishments. This unity of action is reminiscent of the conventions of Greek tragedy (5).

The opera begins with a lively overture in which are claimed to exist traces of Sammartini's influence. A short orchestral prelude precedes the opening chorus and the curtain opens to the open tomb of Eurydice around which are moving the shepherds and girls bearing flowers and myrtle twigs, singing a chorus of yearning. A broad, sad theme

is sung by the chorus with Orpheus joining to cry, “Euridice!” which is twice repeated. Orpheus sings higher on the third cry for his beloved against a moving background of diminished intervals, rather than blending as before with the chord of the minor third of the dominant (2). The chorus concludes their plea for the return of Euridice and Orpheus addresses them in recitative: “Enough, my companions! your grief increases mine. Strew flowers about the marble tomb and leave me; here will I remain, alone with my sorrow” (2). The crowd silently circles the tomb in procession to solemn orchestral music, crowning with flowers the grave of Euridice. The crowd breaks into their first chorus, to which they make their exit, leaving Orpheus alone at the tomb. In a short, beautiful air, he calls for the return of Euridice. Three times there is an echo of the theme heard from a small behind-scenes orchestra. In the following recitative, expression in the vocal part is sought carefully and patiently while the orchestra helps to achieve the dramatic effect. Orpheus calls for his beloved, “Euridice! Euridice! dear shade, where art thou?” He then repeats his aria to slightly different words, the third time breaking into a more passionate recitative of almost lyrical character (2). He thus declares his resolve to descend into the underworld to recapture Euridice. Cupid appears and tells him that he has the sympathy of the gods and that Jupiter pities him. He advises Opheus to descend to the kingdom of the shades where by the magic of his harp he may reclaim his love. This recitative is short- 15 bars- yet exemplifies the way in which Gluck used the orchestra to illustrate the libretto, as the gloom of the river is suggested in the accompaniment to the words, “Lethe’s dreadful strand” (2). In recitative Cupid tells Orpheus the conditions under which he may bring back Euridice from the underworld. He is not to look at her until in the light of day. “Think it over,” he says; “Farewell!” Cupid proceeds to then sing an

aria which in the first part depicts the happiness of a man who bows patiently to the will of the Gods. This is a broad melody in 3/4 time, in the key of G, *sustenuto* (2). The second part of the aria has Cupid telling Orpheus of the joys that await him; the *sustenuto* is converted into an *andante* (*piano*), the key changes to D, and the time is converted from 3/4 to a tripping 3/8. A strong accent is placed on the first note of each phrase and ornamental triplets serve as prefixes to nearly every bar. This change from one theme to another occurs five times and exemplifies the eighteenth century method of "painting" in music, where a change in the sense of the words brings about a shift in the material characteristics of the music (2). Awkwardness has been observed in the conclusion of the second theme. Because of the 3/8 time signature, the last words leave the singer one step away from the tonic conclusion of his theme. The result being that a bar is added to conclude the 4 bar sweep, which has been criticized as leaving the piece in an unbalanced manner. Cupid exits at the conclusion of the theme and Orpheus remains onstage, debating with himself in recitative that closes the act. Dramatic intent is clear in this recitative as intervals between notes are larger than in any previous recitative and the accompaniment is orchestrated very descriptively (2). A florid rush of the strings depicts his descent into Hades.

The second act opens to the underworld where the ground is broken with abysses and heavy clouds float above. The act begins with a ballet after which the Furies break into chorus in octaves, "Who is the mortal that dares to approach this place of dread?" Another ballet is performed and the question of the chorus is repeated with an extension. "Frighten him with the howls of Cerberus if he not be a god." Through the symphony of terror one indeed hears the howling of the three-headed guard dog of

Hades. Without pause the music leads to a short harp prelude and Orpheus lifts his voice in entreaty. The following scene has been described as a timeless representation of genius dramatic composition on the part of Gluck. Orpheus's fluent melody and piercing anguish of entreaty lead up time after time to the word of supplication to which the Furies respond decisively, "No!", in unison, irregular in notation and resolution (2). In spite of their repeated denial the Furies are susceptible to the beauty of Orpheus's voice. Abandoning their attempts to ward him off, the warn him of the suffering that fills the underworld. Orpheus replies, "In my breast are a thousand torments; hell itself is within me, its fires are burning my heart." The Furies are moved by his gentleness and slowly revert to a hushed chorus expressing their pity for him. Orpheus's beautiful pleading becomes more agitated: "Ah, you would be less cruel to my tears and my grief if you had felt for one single moment what it is to die of love." The hushed chorus of the Furies rises to a climax as the gates are opened and the Furies fade away into the distance (5). The marked dualism of this act is unforgettable in opera; after the underworld, the splendor of the Elysian fields, darkness and terror contrasted by light and beauty. The ballet of spirits that opens the scene is a remarkable depiction of the paradisal landscape, tones, and colors. Euridice and the chorus sing of the joys of their abode. Two flutes and the upper strings weave a descriptive dance to which Orpheus expresses his marvel at the scene. His entrance, *quasi-recitativo*, and subsequent air exhibit the unity and consistency that become so notable in Gluck's later works (2). In fact, eight of the thirteen numbers of the act are open-ended, or rather they finish on an imperfect cadence or pass imperceptively into the following piece (5). It is this unity that contributes infallibly to the unforgettable drama of the second act. In the aria 'Che puro ciel', the

prominent melody is given to the oboe, while Orpheus interjects phrases of recitative (5). Over constant modulation of the oboe theme Orpheus asks the spirits for Euridice. The chorus replies, “Cupid gives you back your Euridice”, however another ballet yet ensues. Orpheus, becoming restless, pleads with them, “Fortunate spirits, ah, bear patiently my impatience! If you were lovers, you would know yourselves what burning desire torments me and overmasters me.” During a reprise of their chorus, the spirits restore Euridice to Orpheus: “Do not regret your fate; so faithful a husband may be called a second Elysium.” Orpheus seizes the hand of Euridice without looking at her face, and the act closes with a beautiful ballet.

In Act III, the essential action takes place between Orpheus and Euridice alone. The scene is set in a dark labyrinth cavern strewn with fallen rocks and wild vegetation. The scenery, opening string passage, and the fact that the scene begins with recitative, all insinuate that this is a time and place to hurry through (5). Orpheus leads Euridice by the hand without looking at her. Euridice walks slowly, almost trancelike, delays and questions Orpheus: “Not embrace me? Not speak? At least look at me. Tell me, am I still as beautiful as I once was?” Here the doubt and mistrust is transferred to Euridice, an apparent deviation from the classic myth. Orpheus repeatedly tells her to hasten, and to follow his steps quickly. Tension mounts as Euridice’s pleas become ever more

inquisitive and Orpheus's evasions ever less credible. The duet that ensues has been criticized as portraying Euridice as unworthy of Orpheus's heroism and as being blinded by jealousy (1). However, her passion can be seen as representative of her love for Orpheus and necessary to bring about the catastrophe that follows. She eventually breaks loose from Orpheus, and bursts into an aria which is altered musically every moment; *allegro*, *lento*, *allegro*, *andante*, second *andante*, and *allegro* (2). Orpheus eventually succumbs. Euridice, whether by trick or genuine emotion, feels faint and as her husband turns to her, she falls dead. Orpheus desperately tries to revive her but without success, and echos Cupid's words in Act I, "I lose her, once more, and forever." He breaks into the musical climax of the opera, the aria 'Che faro senza Euridice?' ('What shall I do without Euridice?') This aria, in its simplicity, has been said to distance Orpheus's emotions by containing them within a musical form and language of deceptive accessibility (5). In spite of detailed tempo and dynamic markings in the score, the singer's interpretation determines greatly the impact of this aria (5). It also serves as an example of why *Orfeo* quickly became a singer's opera despite its intention to avoid the domination and abuses of singers (5). Inconsolable, Orpheus prepares to kill himself but is interrupted by Cupid who declares that Orpheus has adequately demonstrated his love and restores Euridice to her faithful husband. Cupid leads them to the Temple of Love where dancing and singing celebrate the happy fate of the two lovers. A charming gavotte, perhaps reminiscent of Gluck's wanderings in the countryside, gives way to an *andante* in D, and a trio and chorus conclude the opera.

Orfeo ed Euridice was first performed on October 5, 1762, the name day of Emperor Francis I, in the old Burgtheater in Milan. The role of Orpheus was performed

by the castrato Gaetano Guadagni, who was said to have "proved the inherent power of melody totally divorced from harmony and unassisted even by unison accompaniment" (3). Euridice was performed by Marianna Bianchi and the role of Cupid was taken by Lucile Clavereau, a singer from the opéra-comique troupe. There exists a review of the opera in the official Viennese newspaper, *Wienerisches Diarium*, which concentrates mostly on the libretto with minimal coverage of the music. What review of the music exists is as follows:

"The music is by our celebrated Herr Cavalier Christoph Gluck who has surpassed himself in it. Perfect harmony rules throughout; both characters and passions are clearly and feelingly expressed; the emotions of the listener are constantly engaged, through judicious changes of speed and a good choice and variety of instruments…"(3).

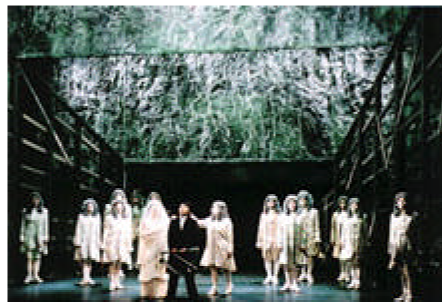
The 1762 production was revived in Vienna the following year and then wasn't again performed until 1769, where Gluck conducted it as part of a triple bill for "Le Feste d'Apollo" in Parma (6). In 1774 the opera was revised for performances at the Académie Royale de Musique; the role was adapted for an haute contre and vocal and instrumental pieces were altered and added to make the opera longer and more grand. This opera, Orphée et Eurydice, had a new French text by the young French poet, Maline. The performance was deemed a success, yet performances of *Orfeo* throughout Europe were most often the original Italian version. It was performed at the coronation of Archduke Joseph on April 3, 1764 at Frankfort on Main. Guadagni sang the title role at the King's Theatre in London in 1770 and *Orfeo* was conducted by Haydn at Esterhaza in 1776. The opera traveled through Germany and into Italy where "at Parma itself, Traetta, one of the greatest masters of the time, certainly the most pathetic and the most 'German' of

Italian composers, was unable to have his *Armida* performed; the public wished only to hear *Orfeo*" (2). In 1854, Listz conducted the opera at Weimar for which he replaced the overture with his symphonic poem 'Orpheus' and added closing music on the same themes (6). The role of Orpheus was first performed by a woman, Demoiselle Fabre, in Milan in 1813. The most famous female interpreter of the role in the nineteenth century was the contralto Pauline Viardot, for whom in 1859, Berlioz combined what he considered to be the best of the Italian and French versions. During the nineteenth century Orpheus was sung nearly as often by a tenor as by a contralto, and has even been transposed for baritone.

The accomplishments of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* are numerous and contribute to the reform of Italian opera in ways only he was capable of. The influence of French theater and opera are apparent and Gluck was able to manifest influences of both tragédie lyrique and opéra comique into his new Italian opera. Expression in lyrical form more greatly represented the emotional life of his time while his interpretation of antiquity both honored tradition and gave life to a myth ages old. Gluck addressed the dilemma between speech-like recitative and passionate lyricism by allowing for more open and free outpouring of emotion, which enabled a more direct and continuous form. This reform foresaw that of giving unity to drama by linking each successive piece to its predecessor (2). Gluck gave recitative purpose of development in *Orfeo*, instead of using it conventionally to fill space between airs. His use of accompaniment in recitative gave increased significance to the orchestra as part of the melodic drama and his relinquishment of the da capo aria gave way to innovations in opera form and style. Gluck's aspiration to blend music and drama to achieve a 'noble simplicity' was met in

Orfeo, as through this manifestation of Greek antiquity there exists a timeless, concentrated, and continually relevant quality about Orpheus's character. His style seems to anticipate Wagner's reasons for choosing classical and mythical subjects on which to base his libretti (5).

Orfeo ed Euridice served as a starting point for new developments in opera in the next century. However, let it not be believed that the magnificence of Gluck's *Orfeo* was unrealized by his contemporaries. The superintendent of engraving was moved to tears by the beauty of the score alone. Together, the glorious poetry of Calzibigi and the musical ingenuity, strength, and sheer beauty realized by Gluck have passed down to posterity an opera that will never be forgotten, and who's effects on the opera as we know it continue to resound today.



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