

Gluck's Iphigenia in Tauris

[Act I] (Part II)

Following an introductory article (Berlioz on Music, #17) evoking his fervent early admiration for Gluck, Berlioz gives a critical analysis of the work he values as Gluck's masterpiece, commenting notably on musical expressiveness in relation to the words. Indeed the single most interesting moment of the commentary is the passing assertion that without the words, Gluck's music would be boring and insufferable—an extreme view reflecting Classical assumptions about the need for verbal reference in music and resonating with Berlioz's admission elsewhere that Haydn, though less powerful than Gluck as dramatist, was the greater musician of the two. With Beethoven, musical and dramatic power combined to form the ideal that Berlioz attempted to emulate; yet his Treatise on Instrumentation includes as many examples from Gluck as from Beethoven. His unwavering devotion to Gluck also manifests itself in his own operas, especially Les Troyens, and in his lifelong efforts as critic, conductor, and editor to preserve Gluck's legacy. Meanwhile his sensitive, technically precise responses to one moment after another of Gluck's score, not shying away from negative criticism, shows us how his careful study of Gluck's operas, which he came to know by heart, helped him master his own craft as a dramatic composer.



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You can see at first glance that this work is one of the few that composers write with passion. The subject could in fact not have been better chosen to bring out all of Gluck's genius for pathos. It is an admirable theme

for the dark and powerful imagination that had already produced *Alceste*, the Underworld act in *Orphée*, the character of Hidraot in *Armide*, and the marvelous concluding scenes of *Iphigenia in Aulis*.¹ And so, right from the start, the composer seizes the listener's attention. Instead of writing an overture, which no one before him would have ever dared omit, he presents us immediately with a scene of calm. Nature is at rest; the cold waters of the Black Sea ripple lazily; no storm threatens this wild and desolate shore . . .

Was it possible to give this musical tableau greater truthfulness and grandeur? . . . Were the means available to Gluck up to the task? . . . The two questions can only be answered in the affirmative. Yes, the mind is capable of imagining much more. This momentary sleep of the elements could have been rendered with far more compelling majesty than the graceful undulations of Gluck's melody allow. Still, we have to acknowledge great charm in the brevity and simplicity of his *andante*. The melodic line is pure, the harmony natural, the basses well designed. In addition, there is an instrumental effect that has never since been imitated: a dominant pedal, played *pianissimo*, by the two trumpets in unison. This instrument, normally used only for *forte* or *mezzo-forte*, conveys a particularly biting sound to this pedal, which significantly enhances the musical interest of the piece right at the start. The *allegro* that follows bears the title "Storm." It develops almost entirely through the contrastive alternation of *forte* and *piano* measures, and the strings play only ascending scales moving from one octave to another. Such repetition gradually turns tiresome. Let me note, however, an admirable episodic feature. A few measures before the entrance of Iphigenia, the basses hold an F-sharp in tremolo; the violins flutter around E and G, the seventh and ninth tones of the scale, while the piccolos wind around the first violin line, at a fourth or rather an eleventh above all the harmony, as they follow, four notes higher (becoming eleven, thanks to the instrument's high pitch), the progress of the first violins. The result of this strange arrangement of lines is a searingly wild effect as welcome as it is unexpected. It is surprising not to hear trombones in a piece of this type. Keeping them back for use only in the Eumenides scene, which doesn't come until the second act, Gluck gave proof of great willpower, but he was perhaps also pushing his system too far.² It is of course fine to know how to

1. These works appeared, respectively, in 1776 (*Alceste*), 1774 (*Orphée*), 1777 (*Armide*), and 1774 (*Iphigénie en Aulide*). *Iphigénie en Tauride* dates from 1779, the same year as *Écho et Narcisse*, Gluck's last opera. Berlioz is referring to scenes that he calls the "fantastic genre," namely scenes involving the supernatural.

2. Berlioz refers to Gluck's precept from the preface to *Alceste*, his statement of doctrine, whereby "the instrumentation should be kept in proportion to the degree of excitement and passion" (*Art of Music*, 101).

be sparing in the use of resources and to hold them in reserve for the most important moments, but being so miserly with them robs scenes of the sort that open *Iphigenia* of their most powerful supports. It is like lighting one corner of a painting while leaving all the rest in semidarkness. If there is any moment when blaring trombones are called for, it's in a storm, as Beethoven proved.³ Despite such extreme economy in the orchestration, despite the excessive number of ascending string scales, despite a noticeable lack of great contrasts, the piece is profoundly moving, no doubt because of its harmony and the expressive truth of its vocal parts. Few composers have been able to use the diminished seventh chord to such great effect. Gluck uses it with great skill, whether in its complete form or without one of its notes. Only rarely does he give the fundamental bass tone; generally he is apt to present the chord in its second inversion, which sounds incomparably more sinister. This harmonic arrangement is surely the composer's deliberate choice, as clearly proven by the words under which he puts this version of the diminished seventh. When, for example, Iphigenia enters with:

Grands Dieux, soyez-nous secourables!

the chord is A-sharp–C-sharp–E–G; the bass strikes the E. In:

Détournez vos foudres vengeurs

the chord is E-sharp–G-sharp–B–D; the bass strikes the B. In:

Si ces bords cruels et sinistres

the chord is D-sharp–F-sharp–A–C; the bass strikes the A. In:

Sont l'objet de votre courroux⁴

the chord is A-sharp–C-sharp–E–G; the bass, again, strikes the E.

On other occasions the low note in the chord may well appear in the lower parts; but then it is evident that the harmony in the dissonances is not

3. In the storm of the "Pastorale" Symphony (fourth movement).

4. "Great gods! rescue us! / Turn aside your avenging bolts, / if these sinister, cruel shores / are the object of your wrath."

composed exclusively of diminished sevenths (as in the passages just cited); there are dominant sevenths there as well, which clearly shows that the composer decided to soften his harmonic treatment but at the same time preserve some level of harshness.

The return of calm strikes us as much better rendered than what came before and more satisfying in every way. Tonal gradation is handled more deftly; the orchestra, while maintaining its role as principal actor, still accompanies Iphigenia's voice very well and lets every word be heard. This is of no little importance, since to anyone unable to hear and understand the words, Gluck must be the most boring and insufferable of composers. The transition from measured song to recitative is so skillfully managed through the rest of this section that it is barely perceptible. Many composers would take this observation as a criticism full of irony, but if we keep in mind Gluck's ideas about dramatic song (ideas we consider largely right), it is essential that Iphigenia not appear to be ending her aria at the same moment the orchestra concludes its musical picture. She observes the return of calm and needs to avoid obvious musical forms in her speech perhaps even more than to sing simple filler notes, right through the orchestra, with no accentuation or melody. It is a double challenge, to be met only by the keenest feeling for expression. Gluck succeeded at it almost without thinking, so thoroughly was it natural for him to be expressive and true!

The two pages of recitative that follow, presenting a dialogue between Iphigenia and two priestesses, produce a glacial monotony, as always happens when choral singers are made to sing alone. Besides, such tiny roles are at least as ridiculous in opera today, aren't they, as confidantes seem to have been in old-style French tragic theater. Choristers are meant to sing in choruses; whenever you decide to hand them individual roles, even of the simplest sort, you're sure to make the audience either laugh or groan. The time may come when choruses will be performed by the beautiful voices of first-rank singers, but that time had not come for Gluck, as it has not for us. Until the advent of that golden age of music, it is prudent to entrust recitatives or important solos only to artists whose studies have prepared them to perform appropriately. But the moment's boredom caused by the conversation is fast forgotten once Iphigenia speaks.

I know nothing more stunning than this obligato recitative, justly famous as "Iphigenia's Dream." It is hard to know which to admire more: the unbelievable dramatic depth of the soprano role or the expressive fitness of the orchestral writing. The strings begin with four F-sharps in unison or at the octave. The key of F-sharp is thus already in place when the words "Cette

nuit” unexpectedly shift to the key of D by way of the diminished fifth chord of C-sharp in inversion. This is where you feel the first shiver.

J'ai revu le palais de mon père.

The orchestra sighs.

*J'allais jouir de ses embrassements,
J'oubliais en ces doux moments
Ses anciennes rigueurs et quinze ans de misère.⁵*

At the words “quinze ans,” the pounding of two heavy dissonant chords underscores the immense burden of woes that the unhappy daughter of Mycenae's king now painfully recalls. Further on, having described her father's palace set all ablaze, she is silent for an instant. The oboes and flutes, unheard till now, breathe out a dolorous sigh.

*Du milieu des débris fumants,
Sort une voix plaintive et tendre.*

Another sigh.

Jusqu'au fond de mon coeur elle se fait entendre.

Brief, rapid passage by all the strings in unison.

Je vole à ces tristes accents.

Second such passage, one note higher than the first.

À mes yeux aussitôt se présente mon père.⁶

5. “Last night / I again saw my father's palace. / I was going to enjoy his embraces; / I was forgetting, in those sweet moments, / his old hardships and fifteen years of privation.”

6. “From the midst of the smoking ruins / comes a plaintive, tender voice. / Down to the very bottom of my heart it makes itself heard. / I fly to these sad sounds. / My eyes, right away, see my father.”

A strong, brief chord given by the violas and cellos is answered by two soft notes in the violins in octaves and sixths. These isolated notes, coming from different parts of the orchestra, offer a uniquely truthful depiction of astonishment, sudden fright, stupefaction . . . “Sanglant”—same effect, a note higher; “percé de coups”—same effect, one note higher; “et d’un spectre inhumain”—same effect, a third higher; “fuyant la rage meurtrière”—same effect, even higher. The whole orchestra trembles. “Ce spectre affreux”—the trembling continues, as Iphigenia grows mute, too frightened by what she is about to say. Finally, she stammers: “C’était ma mère.” The word “mère” brings forth a loud diminished chord from the full orchestra. Silence. “Elle m’arme d’un glaive”—*pianissimo* passage, brief and very rapid. “Et disparaît soudain”—same, lower; “Je veux fuir; on me crie: ‘Arrête! c’est Oreste.’” With the word “arrête” come loud syncopated chords from the whole mass of instruments. New silence . . .

*Je vois un malheureux et je lui tends la main.
Je veux le secourir, un ascendant funeste
Forçait mon bras à lui percer le sein.⁷*

Two brief chords. Iphigenia falls onto the altar. Wondrous! wonderful! sublime! beyond compare! overwhelming! It leaves me speechless, breathless! I even recall that one day at the Opéra, when the singer had admirably rendered the crescendo in the words “Plaintive et tendre,” I let go a fearsome cry, a howl that produced laughter throughout the hall. Some readers, too, will no doubt laugh. Well, let them!

(Continued in the next issue.)

7. “Bleeding—pierced by blows—and of an inhuman specter—fleeing the murderous rage.—The frightful specter—was my mother.—She arms me with a sword—and suddenly disappears.—I try to flee; someone cries to me: ‘Stop! it’s Orestes.’ / I see a wretch and I hold out my hand to him. / I try to save him; a powerful force / forces my arm to stab his breast.”