

Gluck's Iphigenia in Tauris [Act I] (Part III)

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*ô songe affreux! nuit effroyable!
ô douleur! ô mortel effroi!
Ton courroux est-il implacable?
Entends nos cris, ô ciel, apaise-toi.*¹

This chorus is beautiful in its audacious simplicity. It has neither melody nor elaborated accompaniment. Gluck limited himself to chords emitted by the voices and by the orchestra, and he depends, for the rhythm, on following the well-declamed text.² He also presents an oddity that the *professors* will dub, as usual, a wild error: he begins in E minor and concludes in A. This is *not allowed!*

The recitative that follows is entirely too long. The monotony is further increased by the composer's choice of accompaniment: four-part holds in the strings. It is really hard to imagine anything more trying for the singer and more tiresome for the listener. Such static harmony soon gives rise to an almost irresistible somnolence. This is nevertheless how Gluck accompanies all his *ordinary recitatives*. He doesn't give up his long holds until the scene livens up and the dialogue becomes interesting enough [to approach] an obligato recitative. We saw earlier how he can then make the orchestra speak. At last, we hear the first aria, "ô toi qui prolongeas nos jours."³ It is very

1. "Oh, horrible dream! frightful night!/Oh, woe! oh, fatal fright!/Is your wrath implacable?/Hear our cries, o heaven, be calm."

2. According to Classical doctrine, melody (and thus music itself) derived from the rhythms and intonations of the well-spoken word.

3. "O you who prolonged our lives"

beautiful, very noble, very moving. The augmented fourth chord set to the words “je t’implore” is profoundly dramatic: Iphigenia makes you actually feel that she is asking for death as the one and only favor she can now hope for. This nuance could not escape a man like Gluck, and he succeeds in bringing it out with his usual deftness. The rest of the phrase is magnificent; it is ancient woe in all its majestic beauty. The second part of the aria turns a bit toward recitative style; the accompaniment is quite ordinary; on the last two lines of verse, however, the graduated effect expresses true feeling:

*J’ai vu s’élever contre moi
Les dieux, ma patrie et mon père.*⁴

Up to the word “patrie” the voice rises in a crescendo; then it suddenly drops, as if choked by tears, on the word “et mon père.” The cadence occurs in C-sharp minor, thus preparing the way for the return of the original theme, which is in A.

This is followed by a second chorus of priestesses, composed in only two parts, like the first, but accompanied by sustained chords in the woodwinds and, in their midst, the groans of the bassoons. The scene then shifts to a new spiritedness. Thoas, the fierce king of Tauris, comes to seek from Iphigenia a means of deliverance from the terrors that beset him. This role, like all that Gluck composed for the bass voice, is fairly unsingable today. It is constantly centered in the upper register, in C-sharp–D–E–F-sharp, and even G, the last two of these notes completely outside the natural range of the bass. The composer cannot be defended by claiming that the tuning in his time was one tone lower than today; this does not prevent everything from still being too high to be sung by an ordinary voice. Agreed, the tuning was lower, but all you gain thereby is that the Gs become Fs and the F-sharps become Es.

It is more likely that Gluck wrote that way only to force those bass notes, since, produced by a well-trained singer, they sound particularly fierce. The rough, harsh timbre offers great advantages in certain cases, and it is easy to see how the composer felt inclined to make use of it. But that produced the howls that for so long turned certain parts of the vocal performance at the Opéra into objects of ridicule.⁵ From there, too, came another regrettable

4. “I have seen rise up against me/the gods, my country, and my father.”

5. See *Berlioz on Music*, #1 for a sample of such criticism, which Berlioz acknowledges here as partly justified.

development: singers took to training their voices only from the midrange upward, thereby gradually losing all their low notes and becoming incapable of singing within the true compass of the bass voice when the opportunity came along. Thoas's aria, which we'll discuss later, is notable in this respect. The voice covers only a diminished tenth, from the middle E-sharp to the high G, so that a true bass could sing it one octave lower from beginning to end with infinitely less difficulty than what is actually written.

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