

# Gluck's Iphigenia in Tauris (Part IV)

December 7, 1834  
*Gazette musicale de Paris*

Toas's B minor aria is a model of grand and fearsome expression. The double basses play a *tremolando* accompaniment, while the rest of the orchestra strikes the same sinister rhythm that Mozart would employ so felicitously in *Don Giovanni* for the entrance of the statue.<sup>1</sup> It is wonderfully dramatic. On the words "Je crois voir sous mes pas la terre s'entrouvrir!",<sup>2</sup> the full orchestra suddenly bursts forth to startling effect, if you consider how moderately the passage is instrumented. This piece leads without interruption to the chorus of Scythians, whose key of D major, linked to B minor, gives this wild song a tremendous tonal strength. Here, for the first and last time, Gluck uses piccolos, cymbals, and *tambourin*.<sup>3</sup> When you see this troupe of cannibals come in, barking out their jarring syllables while the clashing of the cymbals seems to arise from the clanging forest of axes that the Scythians brandish threateningly overhead, you can't not feel a sudden rush of emotion.

The second chorus, "Il nous fallait du sang,"<sup>4</sup> is, if possible, still more thoroughly brutish. It is constantly centered on the keys of D major, B minor, and F-sharp minor. The melodic lines are heavy and coarse, fit for a chorus of drunken butchers. Tragic horror, raised to such a pitch by the voices, shows no abating when the orchestra alone appears. The ballet of Scythians is universally admired, and rightly so. The light, staccato music, accompanied by

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1. Berlioz enjoyed pointing out borrowings by the more famous Mozart from his more beloved Gluck.

2. "I think I see the ground open beneath my steps."

3. *Tambour de basque* or *tambourin*, "an oblong, narrow drum (about double as deep as wide) of Provençal origin . . . English: tabor" (Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 731).

4. "We needed blood."

a triangle, is played *pianissimo* by all the instruments, while the dancers, hideous to see, steal across the stage like shadows; it is frightening. You feel the full force of the fantastic genre. But I mustn't say so too loudly: some of Gluck's admirers might charge me with blaspheming and consider it a grave insult so to label one of his works.<sup>5</sup>

In the second act we witness the painful exchanges of Orestes and Pylades. The two Greek heroes each sing an aria, the somber and despairing nature of the one in admirable contrast to the mild, sad resignation of the other. What modern work could offer a more ravishing melody, truer and more tender than "Unis dès la plus tendre enfance"?<sup>6</sup> In particular, the sentence "La mort même est une faveur, puisque le tombeau nous rassemble" almost always draws real tears from the man singing Pylades.<sup>7</sup>

But a very different sort of scene is coming. Pylades has been torn from the arms of his friend. Orestes, overcome with pain and rage, shouts some blasphemous imprecations and collapses into utter despondency:

*Où suis-je? . . . à l'horreur qui m'obsède  
Quelle tranquillité succède?  
Le calme rentre dans mon cœur! . . .  
Mes maux ont donc lassé la colère céleste! . . .  
Je touche au terme de mon malheur. . .  
Vous laissez respirer le parricide Oreste.  
Dieux justes! ciel vengeur!  
Oui, oui, le calme rentre dans mon cœur.*<sup>8</sup>

What words could adequately praise this magnificent contradiction? Orestes falls asleep; the orchestra stirs restlessly; the singer speaks of calm; and the violins squeak little syncopated laments that the cellos answer with muffled beats every two bars at the beginning of the piece, then every third bar toward the end, while, cutting through these feverish pulsings, the mordantly sad sound of the violas mutters a sort of accompaniment very hard to

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5. With impish irony, Berlioz links this piece by the venerable Gluck to the much-decried genre most notoriously associated with his own *Symphonie fantastique*.

6. "United from the time of our tenderest childhood."

7. "Death itself is a favor, since the grave brings us together."

8. "Where am I? . . . / What tranquility now follows the horror that obsesses me? / Calm returns to my heart! / My woes have then exhausted the anger of heaven! / I am reaching the end of my misfortune. / You allow the parricide Orestes to breathe. / Just gods! vengeful heaven! / Yes, yes, calm returns to my heart."

characterize, since the composer wrote it mixing syncopated and detached notes in a rhythm never heard before and nowhere duplicated since. “Orestes is lying,” said Gluck; “he killed his mother.”<sup>9</sup> The chorus of Furies during the patricide’s sleep is an astonishing conception of Underworld grandeur. The vocal lines work almost constantly against a background of ascending and descending trombone scales; the effect is wondrous. The act concludes in a way that may seem awkward today, with an *andante moderato* in steady decrescendo. Iphigenia reflects upon her life, replaying in memory all her past misfortunes. Weeping with her women, she slowly walks off the stage, eyes lowered, while the orchestra fades under the final phrases of her noble lament.

“Oh, how boring! how cold! how monotonous!” many people might say today. “How beautiful! how noble! how true! what majesty in that grief! What heartbreak in the picture of the abandonment and isolation of that sad daughter of the king of Mycenae!” is what others might say. And I could hardly help sharing the latter view.

Everything else is at the same level. The duet of the two friends, the obbligato recitative of a furious Orestes, Pylades’s supplicating aria “Ah! mon ami, j’implore ta pitié,” his heroic cry “Divinités des grandes âmes”<sup>10</sup>—Iphigenia’s great aria, so dramatically accompanied by the cellos under a continuous tremolo in the second violins and violas—it is all a marvel of passion, melody, power, thought, seizing you and pulling you along. It is unclear whether the effect stems from the poetry or the action or the dance—or from the music, so intimately tied to the dance and poetry and action. And when, alongside the major traits we have just cited, you find the expression of religious calm developed so admirably in the chorus of priestesses “Chaste fille de Latone”<sup>11</sup>—when you hear those sublime hymns, imbued with an ancient melancholy that bears the listener off to the very temples of Greek antiquity, you don’t wonder whether Gluck was a poet or dramatist or composer. You just cry “Gluck was a great man!”

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9. This incident figures in the biographical entry of Michaud’s *Biographie universelle* that fired Berlioz’s enthusiasm as a boy (see *Mem.*, chapter 4); Berlioz first comments on this passage himself in a letter after seeing the work at the Opéra in December 1821 (*CG* 1:37). He also relates the incident with the orchestra’s uncertainty and Gluck’s reassurances in his biography of Gluck (see website piece on Gluck’s life). In the invocation of his *Damnation de Faust*, Berlioz exploits the same sort of contradiction between agitated accompaniment and words bespeaking calm.

10. “Ah, my friend, I implore your pity”; “Gods of great souls.”

11. “Chaste daughter of Latona.”