

CHRISTOPH WILLIBALD VON GLUCK AND THE DAWN OF THE REFORM OF OPERA

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SUMMARY. The aim of this paper is to present the historical, cultural, aesthetic and musical circumstances that led to the gradual unfolding of the reform process of the opera as an art form. The state in which music drama found itself at the beginning of the 18th century contributed to the formulation of essential principles that could guide the composition of a music drama, a work of art which had to transmit true feelings and emotions. The philosophical ideas expressed by the intellectuals of the Enlightenment are echoed in the musical works of Ch. W. von Gluck and mirrored in *Orfeo ed Euridice*, the unfolding of the reform of opera and the first of Gluck's works in which the composer strives to place the words before the music, relinquishing the old compositional methods.

Keywords: Gluck, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, reform, principle, opera, declamation.

Introduction

The composer Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714–1787), born in Erasbach, near Neumarkt (today a district of Berching, Bavaria), son of a forester, was a literate and a poet, a man gifted with an uncommon intelligence, admired and appreciated by his contemporaries, a truly revolutionary soul who only acknowledged the superiority of the spirit. To his wandering life he owed the knowledge of philosophy, music and arts as they were in 18th century Europe. In his works Gluck succeeded in capturing the essential cultural features of the countries he had visited, he was able to write music which did not submit itself to the passive fancies of the public, neither French, nor Italian, nor German. The years spent in Italy awakened in him the love for the pure melody, in Germany and Austria he studied musical harmony and orchestration, while French music revealed to him the

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truthfulness of the *opéra comique* (the French term for the Italian *opera buffa*) and the importance of declamation, which lied at the core of the French musical aesthetics.

Although at first his art was considered by the Parisian public either „too Italian” or „too German”, Gluck strived to bring to life works which he considered to be international, as belonging to all the cultures that inspired him: „*I am striving, through a noble, sensitive and truthful melody, with an exact declamation that is true to the nature of each tongue and the individual character of each culture, to find a way in which I can write a music that belongs equally to all the nations and make the differences in music disappear.*”²

The outlining of the principles that leads to Gluck's operatic reforms

In the 16th century, between 1573 and 1582, the Florentine Camerata (also known as the Camerata de' Bardi), a group of musicians, poets and intellectuals in Florence, organized meetings at the house of count Giovanni de' Bardi. The aim of these gatherings was the creation of such an art form which could revive the Greek tragedy, considered by the members of the Camerata as the higher form of syncretic art. The group included distinguished figures, such as Giulio Caccini, Pietro Strozzi, Vincenzo Galilei, Ottavio Rinucini or Emilio de' Cavalieri. The musical experiments of the Camerata led to the development of a more dramatic manner of delivering human speech, the *stile rappresentativo* and the cultivation of the *recitar cantando*, a style of singing ruled by the accents and expression of the text. The ideas which guided the members of this group could be synthesized as follows: „*prima le parole, dopo la musica*” (first the words, then the music) or “the music under the patronage of the words”. The Florentine Camerata influenced the composer Jacopo Peri and the poet Ottavio Rinucini who produced around 1597 *Dafne*, the first work considered to be an opera. Unfortunately, the music of this opera has been lost, only the libretto has survived the passing centuries.

Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643) is the first opera composer whose works are considered among the most significant in the transition from late Renaissance to early Baroque. His first opera *L'Orfeo* (1607) was composed in the manner referred to by the composer, in his theoretical writings, as *seconda prattica* (the second method), a „spoken singing” or a style of delivery in which the music yields to the text, expressing the deepest meaning of the words.

² Rolland, Romain, *Călătorie în țara muzicii (A Musical Tour Through the Land of the Past)*, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, București, 1964, p.211

Opera as an art form spread throughout Europe, in the cities of Italy, France, Germany and England, its evolution being marked by social and cultural influences and by the demands of the public. At first, operas were represented to members of the upper class, but in 1637 the first theatre which could welcome a paying public was opened in Venice, where towards the end of the 17th century almost 200 opera houses were created³.

As early as the 1640's the theatres were provided with various machines, a fact that made the shows even more impressive: flying machines, revolving stages, technology which could rapidly change scenery. Gradually, operas began to lack dramatic unity and coherence, the music became an excuse for the composers to write endless vocalises for the famous virtuoso singers acclaimed by the public (mainly the castrati), the ballet scenes introduced at various moments had nothing to do with the dramatic context, the true meaning of the words and the feelings were sacrificed for the sake of virtuosity. Added to these was also the fact that rarely could composers write operas based on librettos with literary merit, such as those written by Pietro Metastasio (1698 – 1782) or Apostolo Zeno (1668 – 1750).

The purification and transformation of the opera was essential. The greatest artists have struggled for the truth to be expressed through the operas, they asked for the reform of the musical execution, of the singing and acting, of the librettos, the reform of the music drama itself, which lacked unity of action and smoothness in transition from one scene to the other. Towards the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th century the philosophical ideas of the Age of Enlightenment gradually began to be reflected in the musical world as well, in the musical reform artists and philosophers alike sought for, rising against the frivolity, the excess and the decadence in opera. The ideas of the Enlightenment urged the artists to create works which were truthful and simple, based on sincere emotions, qualities which were asked for in the opera and theatre alike.

The musical reform desired by the musicians and intellectuals of the 18th century is synthesized by the French philosopher Denis Diderot (1713 – 1784), chief editor and contributor to the *Encyclopédie*⁴, the general encyclopaedia published in France between 1751 and 1772. The principles, or basic truths, regarding the reform of the music drama as they were synthesized by Diderot are the following:

³ Riding, Alan & Dunton-Downer, Leslie, *Opera*, DK Publishing, New York, 2006, p. 51

⁴ *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers (Encyclopaedia, or a Systematic Dictionary of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts)*. Many intellectuals of the French Enlightenment have contributed to the creation of this work, among them Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778), Montesquieu (1689 – 1755) and Voltaire (1694 – 1778)

- the man of genius is summoned who is able to endow the music drama with real tragedy and real comedy;
- the imperious need for the reform of music, theatre and music drama itself;
- the poetry, music and dance must contribute to the unity of action.

The Encyclopaedists emphasized the importance of coherence and unity⁵, they regarded opera as a syncretic form of art in which music, dance and visual arts join into one, a unity which had to be carried out by a great musician, who is at the same time a great artist and a great poet. These intellectuals also demanded the reform of the libretto, honesty and naturalness in the subjects and music of the operas, principles inspired by Rousseau's philosophy and theories of the natural human and the state of nature⁶.

„It appears that King Louis XVI and Mr. Gluck will be taking us into a new era”⁷, believes Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), the great philosopher and writer of the 18th century, who was also a refined musician and opera composer, the ideas of whom have also marked the reform of opera. His desire for a change in the manner in which operas were composed is echoed in the musical activity of Gluck and the librettist with whom he worked with, Ranieri de' Calzabigi. Gluck refuses to consider the words of a libretto as a pretended reason to write endless vocalises briefly interrupted by recitatives or ballets, instead he returns to the ideals of the Florentine Camerata and Monteverdi about music: the music drama must be built upon the true and profound meaning of the words, the composition of an opera must try to follow the pattern of the Greek Tragedy. Gluck's new way of viewing the text and the orchestration opened the way for the opera of the Classical period⁸. The great Rousseau was thus right, Gluck was about to take music to a new era.

Gluck's reform did not seek to expel what was truly valuable in the works of his predecessors or contemporaries, but to put an end to the excesses which had slowly crept into Italian opera. He did not wish to create the false impression that he was writing a new music, his reform was about a new music drama, a *dramatic* reform in the first place and not a musical one, as it could mistakenly be thought.

⁵ Rolland, Romain, *Călătorie în țara muzicii (A Musical Tour Through the Land of the Past)*, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, București, 1964, p.195

⁶ Idem, p. 189

⁷ Riding, Alan & Dunton-Downer, Leslie, *Opera*, DK Publishing, New York, 2006, p. 96

⁸ Idem, p. 53

***Orfeo ed Euridice* – the first steps in the reform of opera**

In the 1750's, almost twenty years before Gluck's arrival to Paris, the French intellectuals expressed their desire for opera to be reformed, but without them knowing it this reform had already begun. When he composed *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) Gluck followed the principles of reform he would later synthesize in the dedication of his opera *Alceste* (1767). This Italian dedication, which can be considered an art manifesto⁹, was written by the librettist of the opera, Calzabigi and was signed by Gluck. Musicologist Alfred Einstein considers that this dedication „is the document of accomplished revolution in operatic history, or rather the reinstatement of opera on the throne of its earlier dignity”¹⁰.

In the dedication Gluck argues that *Orfeo ed Euridice* and *Alceste* represent „the new type of Italian opera” and believes that the most important role in the development of these works belongs to poet and librettist Ranieri de' Calzabigi.

The principles¹¹ of Gluck, such as they were formulated in this dedication, are the following:

- the music must be subordinated to the poetry, it must follow the storyline of the libretto, without interrupting the action which unfolds on stage with useless ornaments
- pages of vocal virtuosity must be omitted when these do not emphasize the meaning of the text
- the second section of an aria gains more importance, while the *da capo* structure is gradually forsaken
- the *ouverture*, the summary of the whole opera, should be linked to the work through specific themes and through its sonority
- emphasis should be placed on the importance of the recitative in order that the contrast between recitative and aria may be smoothed away; for this purpose, Gluck prefers the use of the accompanied recitatives (*recitativo accompagnato*)
- the urge ensures the flow of the dramatic action, avoiding to interrupt the declamation of a recitative with a *ritornello*, as was fashionable in Gluck's time
- the instruments used should be in proportion to the meaning and intensity of the words
- the chorus is treated in a manner which reminds of the Greek tragedy, its role is to comment on the dramatic action

⁹ Einstein, Alfred, *Gluck*, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., Aldine House Bedford St. London, 1936, p. 98

¹⁰ Idem, p. 98

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 98 - 100

- „*the greatest labour should be devoted to seeking a beautiful simplicity*”¹²

The composer believes that music must bring characters to life without altering their shape, he emphasizes the importance of a libretto of high literary quality in which sincere emotions are displayed. Gluck believes that simplicity, truth and naturalness should govern the beauty in any artistic manifestation.

Dramatic effect is the main objective of Gluck's creation, the composer himself underlining the fact that his music receives a deeper meaning when it is represented on stage, closely linked to the unfolding action. The music Gluck wrote is more appropriate for large acoustic spaces, this is why some of those who listen to it might find it too harsh, too moving or too disturbing. His contemporary and admirer, the composer Grétry understood Gluck's visionary ideas: „*Everything must be grand here; it is a painting made to be viewed from a great distance. The musician will only work with imposing effects (...) The harmony, the melody, everything must be ample; (...) This is like a painting made with a roller. (...) Gluck was truly great when he constrained the orchestra or the song with a single movement.*”¹³

Gluck's opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, set to an Italian libretto written by Calzabigi, together with the French version of the opera, *Orphée et Eurydice* can be considered one of the most important musical works of the 18th century. The work was first performed on 5 October 1762 at the Burgtheater in Vienna in the presence of Empress Maria Theresa. In this version of the opera the role of Orfeo is assigned to the alto castrato voice of Gaetano Guadagni. In 1774 Gluck rewrote the opera in order to suit the taste of the French audience at the Académie Royale de Musique. The French libretto was written by Pierre-Louis Moline and although it seems to be a translation of the Italian text it contains many changes. In addition, changes were made in the orchestration and vocal casting as well, the role of Orfeo was re-written for the haute-contre (high tenor) voice. The French score was later revised by Hector Berlioz who adapted the role of Orfeo to the contralto voice of Pauline Viardot, daughter of the prestigious singer and voice teacher Manuel Garcia.

The composition of the overture of *Orfeo ed Euridice* reflects the composer's reform ideas: this orchestral introduction, summary of the whole work, contains the themes which will be heard throughout the opera and anticipates the events through the specific mood it creates.

¹² Idem, p. 99

¹³ Rolland, Romain, *Călătorie în țara muzicii (A Musical Tour Through the Land of the Past)*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1964, p. 208

The *beautiful simplicity* Gluck was seeking is one of the central ideas of the Enlightenment and the very essence of this process of operatic reform. One of the principles formulated by Calzabigi and Gluck point to the use of the recitatives, underlining the importance of the literary quality of the libretto. The story told through the lines of a libretto should have a deeper significance, other than being a reason for composing a beautiful music which can easily be remembered by the audience. Gluck desired to revive the essence of the Greek Tragedy, to express sincere human emotions through his music which follows the hidden meaning of the words.

E.g. 1

The image shows a musical score excerpt for a recitative. It consists of two staves: a vocal line (soprano) and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Andante'. The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The lyrics are written below the vocal line. The lyrics are: 'heart. O my un-hap-py wife, thou wilt be seized with unwont-ed pain: I / sen! Spo - sa in - fe - li - ce! Che di - rà mai, che pen - se - rà! Pre'.

Excerpt from Orfeo's recitative „Che disse? Ch'ascoltai?” (Act I)14

The contrast between aria and recitative is gradually smoothed through the use of accompanied recitatives, the importance of a perfect declamation is emphasized. Recitatives are no longer the reason for a new aria to be sung, the words are able to name what the music alone cannot. The tragical story of Orfeo can only become believable when the music „serves” the words through which the poet and the composer strive to paint the desperation, pain and sadness of the character. The words have their own colour and shape, which the music must not alter, but clearly express. The contrast between recitative and aria is thus gradually diminished in the works of Gluck, the *arioso* parts in the recitatives placing the composer's operas in a different light than those of Vivaldi, Porpora or Händel.

¹⁴ The examples were taken from the score which can be found at the following source:
Ch. W. Von Gluck — *Orpheus*, Edwin F. Kalmus, Publisher of Music, New York, 1933
(http://imslp.org/wiki/Orfeo_ed_Euridice%2C_Wq.30_%28Gluck%2C_Christoph_Willibald%29,
page accessed on 14.07.2017)

The three stanzas of Orfeo's aria "*Chiamo il mio ben così*" are interrupted by recitatives full of expression, but this new composition technique proved too radical for the composers who followed on Gluck's footsteps, the majority of whom decided to focus on the unity of the aria. This aria, written in F Major is remarkable in its simplicity, clarity of the musical discourse, the voice and the orchestra completing the discourse of one another. The „echo” between voice and instruments, the dynamic contrasts evoke the vain struggle of Orfeo's pain: his beloved one answers not, only nature does.

E.g. 2

Excerpt from Orfeo's aria „*Chiamo il mio ben così*” (Act I)

Equally interesting are the recitatives which interrupt this aria: in these the innovation of the composer is distinct. The expression is remarkably brief and simple, the profundity of the text serves as a basis for the musical discourse, the declamation is harmoniously united with the accompaniment of the orchestra, the voice and the instruments blend to form a whole.

The musical score shows a vocal line with the following lyrics: *Fu - ries, spec - tres, phan - - toms ter - ri - fic, O* / *Fu - rie, lar - ve, om - - bre sde - gno - se, vi*. Below this is a chorus line with the word "No" repeated four times, and a piano accompaniment with dynamic markings *f* and *p*.

Excerpt from the aria “*Deh, placatevi con me*”, Orfeo and the chorus (Act II)

The second act of the opera, with the wonderful contrast between Hades and the Elysium has been considered a masterpiece, the simplicity and rigour of the ancient art united with a true portrayal of the human soul. The dance of the Furies is followed by the chorus „*Chi mai dell'Erebo*”, the menacing Furies, disturbed by the intrusion of a mortal, refuse to admit Orfeo in the Underworld. Musicologist and music critic Ernest Newman considers the following dance of the Furies „*one of the most effective ballet-music*”¹⁵.

The principles through which Gluck aimed to achieve the reform of the opera as an art form are reflected in this act of the opera as well: the unity and succession of the action is unhindered, the ballet parts have a justification in the context of the plot, the music evokes the place where the action is happening (the Underworld) and the feelings linked to it.

The following aria of Orfeo, “*Deh, placatevi con me*”, is considered by Newman one of the most beautiful musical pages of Gluck's opera: „*This is the marvellous scene that after the lapse of a century and a quarter has not lost one atom of its original force and beauty: that is among the most remarkable dramatic productions of that or any other age; and which alone would suffice to give to future generations some indication of the wonderful power of Gluck, if all were lost of his work but this.*”¹⁶

¹⁵ Newman, Ernest, *Gluck and the Opera. A Study in Musical History*, Bertram Dobell, London, 1895, p.61

¹⁶ Idem

Gluck's reform is evident here also: the instruments used and the intensity of the orchestration are proportional with the meaning of the text, the music follows the words, without interrupting the flow of the phrases with ornaments or vocalises. The composer views the chorus in a manner that reminds of the Greek Tragedy (E.g. 3 — Excerpt of the aria „*Deh, placatevi con me*”, Orfeo and chorus – Act II).

The poetry of the third act of the opera is extremely complex: the dialogues between Orfeo and Euridice are filled with such intensity that the composer seems to be struggling to evoke the depth and the feelings of the characters. In this act Gluck creates a characterisation of Euridice through a duet and an aria which present us with the portrait of a reproachful and furious woman, unable to understand the behaviour of Orfeo, and unwilling to follow him. The composer and librettist depict Euridice not as an ideal woman and loving wife, the lost muse, but in a rather realistic manner through the image of a woman blinded by jealousy, superficial, suspicious and even violent (this violence is evident especially in the piercing tessitura of some of her parts), her attitude standing in contrast with the pain and resignation of Orfeo.

E.g. 4

The musical score consists of three systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the first part of the aria. The tempo markings are *Lento. rit.* and *Allegro.*. The lyrics are: "prese I am leav - - ing, Once more to be griev-ing At life and its pain; A bar - ba - re sor - - ta, pas - sar dul - la mor - ta a tan - to do - lor! Che". The second system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the second part of the aria. The tempo markings are *Lento. rit.* and *Allegro.*. The lyrics are: "A change how do - ceiv - - ing! Re - che ste - ro mo - nien - - to, che". The third system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the third part of the aria. The tempo marking is *Allegro.*. The lyrics are: "A change how do - ceiv - - ing! Re - che ste - ro mo - nien - - to, che".

Excerpt from Euridice's aria „*Che fiero momento*” (Act III)

The musical parts in which Orfeo and Euridice appear together on stage are filled with tension and pain. The dialogues of the two characters reflect the greatness of Gluck's artistic skills: Orfeo and Euridice are true human beings, not mythological heroes, they address one another using a sincere language, the audience can recognize their own life in the action unfolding on stage and in the emotions the characters bring to life. The two lovers unite in a wonderful duet with polyphonic texture, "*Vieni, appaga il tuo consorte*", the musical language of which abounds with imitations.

„*Che farà senza Euridice*” is perhaps the most well known musical moment of the entire opera, Orfeo's aria written in rondo form distinguishing itself through its simple and elegant melody. *Orfeo ed Euridice* is the composer's first reform opera, thus the rondo form retains some of the characteristics of the Baroque rondo, but at the same time anticipates the rondo of the Classical period. The melodious theme (refrain) alternates with the more or less contrasting episodes (couplets), which are written in neighbour keys to that of the main theme and can be considered extensions of this because they lack thematic individuality. The transitional segments, which link the episodes to the theme and then introduce the theme again, can be considered an innovation. The theme is always brought back complete and in the same key after these contrasting interventions, only the last refrain is varied through augmentation and followed by a coda.

Conclusions

*“The music of Gluck is filled with powerful intensity and at the same time with the tenderest lirism. It is, despite its age, a musica viva in the purest sense.”*¹⁷The myth of Orpheus represents man's powerful desire to overcome obstacles, to make the impossible possible by unleashing the song that is hidden in the depths of one's heart. Situated between Händel and Mozart the creation of Gluck may call forth many questions with regard to his style: what does his reform of the opera truly mean, which are the elements he considered genuinely valuable in the works of his predecessors and which are the „purifying” aspects of his art? Understanding the historic, cultural and social context which has led to the reform of the music drama carried out by Gluck, a reform that is illustrated in his opera *Orfeo ed Euridice*, may become the starting point for new reflections regarding the evolution of Gluck's style and the importance his works have in the evolution of opera.

Translated in English by the Author

¹⁷ Oltean, Tatiana, *Avatarurile mitului lui Orfeu în istoria muzicii (The Avatars of the Orpheus Myth in Music History)*, Editura Media Musica, Cluj-Napoca, 2012, p.142

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