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The Budget: *Il Trittico* Encore

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Overture

Good evening. We have dubbed tonight's tripartite budget *Il Trittico*, The Triptych, stealing Giacomo Puccini's title for three short operas he banded together, including the hilarious farce *Gianni Schicchi.* Perhaps the passion of three would be divos will allay the discomfort of any unrepentant operaphobes in the audience. We have pledged to control the urge to sing! Our *primo scrittore*, an Opera Board President, will enter stage right to introduce you to Opera in Cincinnati from his remarkable perspective. Next our *autore profundo* returns us to those thrilling days of----Baroque Opera, and what it took, or took away, to be a star. The last of our trio will conclude with a mystery story of murder most premeditated.

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Act One

Who Killed *Da Capo*?

Pope Benedict IV made our Destroyer a Knight of the Golden Spur. His notoriety in Paris prevented the young Mozart from making an impression in the City of Light or obtaining a court appointment in Vienna. [1] This murderer awoke every morning to be greeted by a portrait of his friend Handel at the foot of his bed. His influence on Schubert, Beethoven, Liszt, Berlioz and Wagner was significant.

Not only did my protagonist kill d*a capo*, but also a cast of characters with whom you may be vaguely (or intimately) familiar: the glamorous melisma, the dry *secco* recitative, and even old *opera seria*. Who, or what, are these terminological antiques? First, meet their Eliminator.

Our villain, or perhaps actually a hero, is Christoph Willibald Gluck, born in Bavaria in 1714. His influence on opera was so significant that the Oxford University Press has referred to him as

“opera’s second founder.”[2] With a series of radical new works in the 1760’s and 1770’s, including *Orfeo ed Euridice* and *Alceste,* he broke the virtual artistic monopoly of the dominant Baroque opera form. To appreciate this accomplishment let’s look back at the musical environment he inherited.

“Modern” music at the opening of the seventeenth century was, as always, under ferocious attack. One of the most annoyed, if not dyspeptic, critics wrote of this music that there were too many wrong notes, and it all sounded like so much noise. Not much has changed in four hundred years! There was considerable agreement from a group of Florentine Renaissance intellectuals and musicians. The group invented themselves as the Florentine *Camarata* and, led an uprising against the music of the day. Why? It was impossibly polyphonic. Such a musical texture carried so many lines of independent words and melody that it sounded as inharmonious as Fox News debating MSNBC on Obamacare. The listener could distinguish neither words nor individual musical themes, resulting in general bewilderment…..kind of like rap. Polyphonic musical dramas were becoming unintelligible.

The Renaissance Camerata, and Florentine intelligentsia in general, were deeply intrigued, if not consumed, with the culture of the ancient Greeks, which was just arriving in Italy thanks to its valiant preservation by the Byzantines. Although no one had yet come upon a shred of Greek musical notation, the Camerata determined that “modern” music should mimic ancient Greek roots, as it was believed that the Greeks used a musical style somewhere between speech and song……...kind of like rap!

Composers Jacopo Peri, known as Il Zazzerino (“long hair”) for his long blond locks, and Jacopo Corsi, with librettist Ottavio Rinnuccini wrote and produced a “recreation” of Greek tragedy as it was then understood. They built upon a musical style produced by the Camerata over the previous decade known as monody, solo song delivered over *continuo* bass accompaniment. Monody soon developed into both the half-sung *recitativo*, using the rhythms of ordinary speech, and the fully sung, melodic aria. In 1597 these three presented what could be considered perhaps the first opera, *Dafne.* Three years later, in 1600, Peri and Corsi, with another librettist, created a modest musical drama from the Orpheus and Eurydice tragedy,

the first to actually use *recitativo*. However, these first so-called operas did not fully integrate music and drama, since *recitativo* alternated with orchestral interludes and choruses that commented on the dramatic events.

Act Two

Claudio Monteverdi of Cremona produced another version of *Euridice* in 1607, with fully sung arias and a larger, richer-sounding orchestra, and announced, with characteristic immodesty, that he had created the first simplified musical drama,[3] probably the first opera. Monteverdi also decided it was time to change the Orpheus myth and convinced his librettist to write a happy ending. This included a literal *deus ex machina,* in which the Sun God Apollo was reduced from riding his fiery chariot across the sky to descending onto the stage in a basket lowered from a "cloud machine" above the proscenium arch to reunite Orpheus and his beloved Eurydice in the grand finale.

By the eighteenth century (1710-1770) Baroque opera had been divided into *opera seria,* the noble and "serious" style of Italian opera predominating in Europe up to about 1770, and *opera buffa*, comic opera developed from the improvised *commedia dell'arte. Opera seria* had evolved by the eighteenth century into a long series of exhaustingly florid arias written to display the talents of superstar singers, among whom were our famous *castrati.* The most common, and sometimes wearying, Baroque aria form was the three part *da capo,* Italian for "from the head" or "from the beginning"*. Da capo* arias consist of an opening theme, a second, complementary one, and then the third part of the *da capo* aria bursts forth. At this point the singer, now unbridled by any exact score, had arrived at his long awaited moment of operatic radiance. He (not she) was now expected to repeat that first theme using his most extravagant elaboration and ornamentation of the music, with a spectacular combination of speed, technical prowess, split-second timing and overarching elegance. The vocal lines had become so excessively decorated with astonishing trills and other vocal acrobatics, which, by the way, the composer had nothing to do with, that the original melody could be unrecognizable. This could last a while, especially because of the musical device known as melisma, the singing of a single syllable of text over a series of notes. And that series could be long. I mean *really* long. One

hears melisma in solemn Gregorian chant beginning in the ninth century C.E., and even in pop music since the 1980's, especially in rhythm and blues singers. You have probably sung melismatically in the last month or so! The carol "Angels We Have Heard on High" requires sixteen notes to complete the "o" in the word "Gloria"! That same letter "o" requires an even longer melisma of thirty-one notes in the carol "Ding Dong Merrily on High." Not to be outdone, Handel composed a fifty-seven note melisma in a section of *Messiah*, "For unto us a child is born", on the word "born." Recitatives were usually delivered *secco,* literally "dry", with accompaniment by an often improvised solo harpsichord or cello *continuo.* "It is all very fine", Gluck said of the *opera seria* of his day, "but it doesn't draw blood." With these ominous words the stage was now set for this favorite of popes, this future toast of Paris, this "perhaps" villain (perhaps not!), to commit his act of musical mayhem.

Act Three

About his studies in Vienna in 1736, Gluck wrote, "At that time music was all the rage….. inflamed with a passion for this art, I soon made astounding progress and was able to play several instruments. My whole being became obsessed with music…."[4] The musical traditions and creativity fermenting in Milan attracted Gluck in 1737 at age 26. Here Gluck was exposed to a vibrant opera scene and had his own first opera, *Artaserse*, produced four years later, in 1741. This, and subsequent new operas, began to attract attention in Milan, Venice, Turin and Cremona.

This success led to an invitation to London in 1745 to compose for the Haymarket Theater and, rather subversively, to become a serious rival to Handel. But Gluck was still enmeshed in the older style of composing and had little success, leaving in a year or so. He did, however, develop a friendship with the great Handel, lasting until the latter's death in 1759. Handel advised the younger composer to "bang out everything he wrote on the bass drum", in order to reach the dull British sensibility. He also gave Gluck the portrait of himself which Gluck always kept on the wall at the foot of his bed.

Returning to Vienna Gluck became progressively disturbed that the opera format to which he himself had given credence for so long had wandered far from what he felt it should be.

Melisma and *da capo* arias were exhausting the audience. Form, with florid superficial effects had overwhelmed content. And content had become dull, conventional, fossilized. Gluck determined to return to the origins of opera with its focus on human drama and passions, writing words and music of equal importance. In Vienna he began an important collaboration with librettist Ranieri de'Calzabigi, and together they signed an artistic manifesto of how opera should be changed or renovated.[4] Gluck dropped one "o bomb" after another as his ideas began the crucial transition from Baroque to what is referred to as the Classic Period of Opera:

- down with *da capo…*bind and gag it;
- power down the operatic vocal embroidery; goodbye and farewell Mme. *melisma;*
- a more predominantly syllabic setting of the text to make the words more intelligible;
- far less repetition of the text within an aria;
- less *recitative*, with less distinction now between *recitative* and aria;
- more instruments accompanying recitative—give that dry, *secco* guy a drink!
- simpler, more flowing melodic lines;
- finally linking overture by theme or mood to the ensuing action;
- more prominence to the chorus and its role as commentator on the events of the plot.

Gluck's resultant landmark, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, libretto by Calzabigi (again with that weird happy ending), burst forth in 1762 in Vienna and has remained in the standard repertory for 250 years. Other than using a *castrato* as Orfeo (replaced by a high tenor six years later), everything else in this opera is "refreshingly new. The music is simple but elegant, the action clear and uncluttered by the usual extravagant special effects."[5] The Metropolitan Opera performed *Orfeo* as recently as 2009, seen in HD in movie theaters around the world.

Composer Carl Maria von Weber, looking back from the perspective of 1817, wrote that "…nothing could seem more improbable than Gluck's works at a time when all sensibilities were overwhelmed and unmanned by the flood of Italian music, with its powerful sensuous charm." However, Gluck knew that if he were to change the art form he loved so passionately, he had to be successful in Paris, the cultural capital of Europe. Most Parisians welcomed Gluck

with open arms, especially because the dauphine, Marie Antoinette, who had been Gluck's pupil in Vienna, became his patron in Paris. There did remain a group of jealous, zealous Italian diehards in Paris who convinced the mistress of Louis XV, Madame du Barry, for whom Marie Antoinette had an intense dislike, to import Nicolo Piccinni (not Puccini!), popular composer of *opera buffa* and the florid old school of opera which she loved, to square off with Gluck in a musical duel. The two composers were hounded on and urged to animosity against each other by the nobility. These two never exactly clashed swords or batons, but they did compose at least two operas on the same theme, because when one heard of the other's title, he started work on the same subject. However, Gluck and Piccinni became good friends and were most amused that most Parisians, barbers and shop keepers, as well as nobility, were divided into passionate Gluckiste or Piccinniste factions, and would argue vociferously about the merits of one's favorite.[2] Piccinni lost the battle when the *prima donna* in his opera *Iphigenia in Tauris* tried to sing the role dead drunk, slurred or forgot her lines, yet could not be persuaded to leave the stage. "This is not *Iphigenia in Tauris* but Iphigenia in Champagne" yelled one wit. [(.5)] Unfortunately Louis XVI was in attendance, humiliating Piccinni and the Piccinnistes, whose prestige never quite recovered.

Gluck did have a few encounters with French musicians when he thought they were not up to his standards. In a 1774 rehearsal for his *Iphigenie en Aulide,* the singer of the *Orestes* role was declaiming that "my heart is calm", just as the violas began playing an obsessive, almost frantic figure. The orchestra, looking at this highly emotional music of anguish, assumed there had been an error in copying the part and broke off, and Gluck had to yell at them that there had been no such error. "He's lying!" Gluck roared, of Orestes, "He killed his mother! Keep playing." In Gluck's revolutionary concept the orchestra played a significant role in telling the story and was not mere accompaniment for the singers. Richard Wagner grasped this insight a century later and cited Gluck as a major influence in this regard.

Finale

The triumphant maestro retired to Vienna in 1780 after bringing his protégé, Antonio Salieri, from the Vienna court to Paris as his musical heir. He died from a stroke only eighteen months

before the French Revolution began. Salieri's pupils included Schubert, Beethoven, Meyerbeer, and Liszt. (And Salieri didn't poison Mozart!)

And so Christoph Willibald Gluck's influence reaches us not only through *Orfeo* and his other great operas, but also from the many musical immortals of the nineteenth century who, for decades, mined his music for its intense narrative concentration and masterful blending of opera's distinct elements.

With the elimination of the notorious Baroque gang, led by the aria *da capo*, melisma, and *secco* r*ecitativo*, Christoph Williband Gluck did make the most wanted list---- of great composers, and became, not so arguably, the founder of modern opera.

Fine

References

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