Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787)

*Iphigénie en Tauride (Iphigenia in Tauris)*

Opera in four acts
Libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard
First performance: Paris, May 18, 1779

**Cast:**

Iphigénie, priestess of Diana .......... soprano
Oreste, her brother .......... baritone
Pylade, friend of Oreste .......... tenor
Thoas, king of Tauris .......... bass
First priestess .......... soprano
Second priestess .......... soprano
A Greek woman .......... soprano
A Scythian .......... bass
Minister of Thoas .......... bass
Diana, the goddess .......... soprano
Choruses of priestesses, Scythians, Furies, Greek warriors

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**Program note by Martin Pearlman**

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Gluck, a composer esteemed by Berlioz and admired by Wagner, whose name is engraved next to Beethoven's and Mozart's on many nineteenth-century concert halls, is sadly neglected today. Histories of music grant Gluck a prominent place as an important mid-eighteenth-century revolutionary, who gave opera a new breath of life, broke down formal conventions to make opera dynamic and truly dramatic, and influenced the course of opera into the nineteenth century. Rousseau spoke for many when he described Gluck's operas as the beginning of a new era, and audiences of the time found the operas unprecedented in their dramatic impact. Yet today, his best known opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, is heard only occasionally, and his later works-- including *Iphigénie en Tauride*, which is widely considered his greatest achievement-- are rarely performed.

The music itself, considered apart from the drama, is very attractive, but relatively simple. Heard in its dramatic context, though, we feel Gluck's real genius. He was first and foremost a dramatist, aiming everything in the music toward characterization and powerful dramatic effects. "I believed," he wrote in his preface to *Armide*, "that my greatest labor should be devoted to seeking a beautiful simplicity. . . There
is no rule which I have not thought it right to set aside willingly for the sake of an intended effect." For that reason, a performance of his late operas must not only have the transparent textures that such a "beautiful simplicity" requires but also project the large sweep of the drama, always maintaining a forward movement. The effectiveness of this music therefore relies heavily on how it is interpreted. Winton Dean, in *The New Grove Dictionary*, has put it more bluntly: "No other great composer's work can sound so impoverished when insensitively performed."

Gluck's stated intention was no less than to resurrect the drama of the ancient theater, a goal which had given impetus to the creation of opera more than a century and a half earlier. To invoke the ancients implied a return to a kind of universal style, a return to what is natural and true. "If my plans are realized, your old-fashioned music will be forever destroyed," Gluck wrote. It would be necessary to dismantle what he saw as the rigid, formalized conventions of opera -- the ubiquitous da capo arias, in which a singer predictably repeated the entire opening section of an aria; the regular alternation of arias with secco recitatives; the frequent cadenzas and other virtuoso displays for singers. All these he saw as impediments to the natural flow of the drama. He proposed instead to "confine music to its proper function of serving the poetry and expressing the situations of the plot."

With Gluck's statement, "Before I begin my work, I try to forget that I am a musician," he makes clear that he considers the music to be the servant of the poetry and of the drama. Music, of course, is not truly the servant of the libretto. It does dominate our experience of the drama, and that is why we listen to these operas. But, in his sensitivity to the drama, Gluck evolved new and flexible musical forms to suit the characters and dramatic situations. As he moved from his early opera seria through his reform operas of the 1760s (beginning with his famous *Orfeo ed Euridice*) to his late masterpieces of the 1770s, the music becomes more continuous, more wedded to the drama, and increasingly free from traditional forms. A composer's intuition and sensibility -- or as writers of the time began to call it, a composer's unique genius -- could guide him.

Gluck's first opera written for French audiences was *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1773), which had been produced only with the intervention of Marie Antoinette on his behalf. That opera was a triumph and was followed by a highly acclaimed French version of his earlier *Orfeo*. By the time of *Alceste*, his second Parisian opera, Niccolò Piccinni had established himself as Gluck's principal rival in Paris, and Gluck and his music became embroiled in the musical feud between the Gluckists and the Piccinnists. Gluck angrily stopped work on a new opera, *Roland*, when he learned that Piccinni had been given the same libretto to set to music. Shortly thereafter, partisans attempted to set up another contest, commissioning both composers to set the story of *Iphigénie en Tauride*. This time, however, Gluck managed to arrange for his version to be produced first, and, in the end, the work made such a sensation that even his enemies had to admire it. Piccinni's *Iphigénie* was not produced for another two years and proved to be a flop.

*Iphigénie en Tauride* was premiered in Paris on May 18, 1779. It was Gluck's greatest success and the culmination of his operatic reforms, and it continued to be performed as a classic in the nineteenth century. The music is simple and direct, and the drama is fluid and continuous. Arias and ariosos run into recitatives, for the most part without breaks, and the orchestra plays throughout the opera. Even the convention of the opera overture has been sacrificed: following a brief, calm introduction, there is storm music which leads directly into singing. In Gluck's earlier reform operas, even in *Orfeo* (1762), the choruses and ballets grow out of the drama, but
here they are more fully integrated into the story. The Scythians perform their wild ritual dances between choruses in which they anticipate bloody sacrifices, and the chorus of priestesses converses with Iphigenia and participates in the cultic rites of Artemis (or Diana, to use the libretto's Roman name).

Gluck eventually made a revised German version, *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, for performances in Vienna in 1781. It was this German version which Goethe, who had written his own *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, and Schiller later produced in Weimar. On that occasion, Schiller wrote, "Never has a work of music moved me with such purity and beauty as this one. It is a world of harmony, which goes directly to the soul and dissolves it in a sweet and noble sadness."

The exceptionally fine libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard is based on plays by Guymond de la Touche and Racine, but ultimately it derives from the play by Euripides. It tells a story which forgoes the traditional pair of operatic lovers, focusing instead on the relationship between sister and brother and on the love between two close friends, Orestes and Pylades. With his extraordinary characterization of these two relationships, Gluck builds a powerful drama, which culminates at the point when the original ritual sacrifice of Iphigenia is almost repeated with the sacrifice of Orestes. The opera has sometimes been criticized for its surprise happy ending to a "realistic" tragedy, but in fact the ending follows the original Euripides play. In any event, Gluck staunchly defended his right to tell the story as he wanted and, in this instance, he did not challenge convention but fulfilled the expectations of the French opera audience of his day.
Iphigenia has a recurrent dream: a loving father who, laying his hand on her, finds himself covered in blood, her mother holding a knife and Iphigenia herself raising a knife against her brother Orestes. The storm abates and Iphigenia recounts her nightmares. Cursing her destiny she begs Diana to grant her freedom through death. Thoas, the king of Tauris, tyrannizes Iphigenia. He can no longer sleep and suffers from a persecution complex.

Iphigénie en Tauride (French: [ifiÊ'eni ɑ̃ Ếf toÉd], Iphigenia in Tauris) is a 1779 opera by Christoph Willibald Gluck in four acts. It was his fifth opera for the French stage. The libretto was written by Nicolas-François Guillard. In the event, Piccinni's Iphigénie en Tauride was not premiered until January 1781 and did not enjoy the popularity that Gluck's work did. [1]. In 1781 Gluck produced a German version of the opera, Iphigenia in Tauris, for the visit of the Russian Grand Duke Paul to Vienna, with the libretto translated and adapted by Johann Baptist von Alxinger in collaboration with the composer. Among the major changes was the transposition of the role of Oreste from baritone to tenor and the replacement of the final chorus of Act 2 with an instrumental movement. Genre aside, Iphigenia in Tauris works not only as a sequel to Euripides' later play, Iphigenia at Aulis, but also as a sequel to Aeschylus' Oresteia as well: at the end of the Eumenides, it is clear that not all of the Erinyes acquiesce in the verdict of Athena, and it is because of this that Orestes is sent on another mission by Apollo. The mission itself offers an interesting brother-sister parallel that Euripides certainly intended: Orestes is sent by Apollo to return his sister Artemis' sacred image back to Greece, and inadvertently ends up returning his birth sister, Iphigenia, as well.