

Christoph Willibald Gluck and Operatic Reform – Week 8

- Context of Opera up to mid-century – decline of serious opera and rise of comic forms across Europe.
- Gluck's life and context.
- His reforms
- Orfeo and Iphegenie en Tauride

Comic Opera Traditions

- Tradition of Comic Opera going back to the *intermezzi* of Venetian operas lead to a separate tradition with its own specialist composers.
- 1709 Neapolitan opera companies start tradition of *opera buffa* as a full-length entertainment. It used local characters and was set in the locale.
- *Opera buffa* taken up in other Italian cities and by 1730 was increasing in popularity as *Opera seria* declined.
- In *opera buffa* not all the characters were comique. There were also *parti serie* characters with semi-heroic qualities – respectable middle-class types.

Outside Italy

- In Paris the tradition of *opera-comique* was developing in the period between Lully and Rameau. Operas full of *vaudevilles* (popular songs both traditional and composed).
- England a big tradition of comic afterpieces and pantomimes. Then start of **ballad opera** (1728/9) and burlesque.
- In Germany the equivalent was *Singspiel* – performed in the vernacular with spoken dialogue and catchy tunes.

Mid-Century Developments

- Development in the operas of Piccinni and Galuppi of extended ensemble sections for two or more parts that allowed for sections in different tempos. Any number of sections could be added as the dramatic situation demanded (in place of the recitative/aria interplay).
- Mozart later to fully develop this type of composition in his *opera buffa*.

Guerre de Bouffons - again

- Mid-century dispute over opera.
- Set off by Italianisation of *opera-comique* following the exceptional success of Pergolesi's *La serva padrona* (1746) by a visiting Italian troupe. Later also performed in French.
- The shortcomings of French traditions (of Rameau in particular) were exposed.
- Pro-French and pro-Italian groups took sides and started the pamphlet war – *Guerre des Bouffons*.
- J. J. Rousseau's *Le devin du village* (1757) composed to show the way forward.

Gluck (1714-1787)

- Quintessential 18th century cosmopolitan composer.
- Born in upper Palatine, son of a huntsman/forester.
- 1726 went to Jesuit college and received basic musical training.
- 1732 to Prague University and learns the violin, cello and keyboard.
- 1736 to Vienna as chamber musician to Prince Lobkowitz.
- 1737 to Milan with Sammartini.
- 1740s periods in Paris, London and Dresden. Knows Handel and Rameau.
- 1741 first opera.
- 1750s travels with Mongotti's opera company.
- 1760s no longer with a single patron or company and produces comique operas in Austria.
- 1762 Orfeo ed Euridice with libretto by Calzabigi.
- 1774 in Paris

Reform of Italian Opera

- Undertaken with Calzibigi and in opposition to Metastasio's conception of Italian opera.
- First experience of *opera-comique* as the Imperial Court in Vienna when a French group performed there.
- His reform of French opera started another operatic feud in Paris. **Gluckists** verses the **Piccinnists**. Enlightenment ideals verses court convention.
- After reform of Italian opera (re-inventing *opera seria*) with *Orfeo* he turned to French opera and reinvented *tragedie lyrique*.

Characteristics of Reform

- Protest at the stupidity of the happy end – wanted more realism in the plot.
- Action to develop as an on going drama and not in the recitatives and dialogues.
- End of *recitativo secco* – gradually the need to a keyboard player was reduced and then got rid off altogether.
- Work to be closely grown from the text such that the libretto was developed for and with the composer as a unique entity. And not to be re-used by other composers.

Aria

- Developed into an extended structure in place of the uniformity of the *da capo* form.
- Small arias occur in a genuine aria context and allow character to reveal himself/herself from external motivation.
- Richness of characterisation of emotion.
- Greater realism and dramatic sense.
- Not just put in to placate the *prima donna* and the formal hierarchy among singers.

Recitative

- Arioso style of earlier operas (1600-40) eroded in the later 17th century.
- *Recitativo accompagnato* experimented with by Gluck in his early operas.
- Increased use of dialogue and *recitativo* to interspace sections of an aria.
- Characterisation in recitative is introduced.
- Melody line in *recitativo* nearer to aria.

Chorus and Ensemble

- Chorus had been maintained in the French tradition – though limited in use.
- With Gluck they return and given role of establishing mood and atmosphere.
- Occur mostly at the beginning or end of acts or whole operas, or when the chorus takes part in the physical action on stage – crowd scenes.

Overture

- Expansion of scoring and orchestration.
- Linked to the first scene.
- Freed from traditional binary form and moves to something more symphonic.
- Use of sonata form.

1774 Iphégenie en Aulide

- Gluck's first grand opera in French. Reforming *tragedie lyrique*. Same year as French version of *Orfeo*.
- Based on text by Racine.
- Greater use of chorus, exploitation of conflict in and around characters, use of strings to accompany recitatives.
- Did not use da capo arias as means of excessive display of virtuosity.
- Beginnings of complex character portrayals.
- Orchestra may be depicting a more subtle emotion beneath the surface while the singer seems outwardly happy.

1779 Iphégenie en Tauride

- Goethe also working play on *Iphégenie auf Tauride* in Weimar.
- Plot in Paris to put on version by Piccinni.
- Story from classical legend and linked to the previous *Iphégenie* opera. After the conquest of Troy.
- The cruel practices of barbaric people led by King Thoas are purged by humanity of Iphégenia.
- Text by Nicolas Francois Guillard with help of Gluck.
- For the first time – **no recitatives** – but dramatic scenes intersperced tih arioso structures.

Orfeo ed Euridice (1762)

- First of the three reform operas (others *Alceste*, *Paride ed Elena*). All with Calzabigi.
- Aim for 'beautiful simplicity'. Direct plain speech and overwhelming impact.
- Put on first in Vienna. Then put on all over Europe. Many versions (3 by Gluck)
- It is short (hardly more than an hour), only 3 principle roles (usually 6 in *opera seria*)
- Revolutionary use of chorus.
- Reworked for Paris in 1774 and then *Alceste* 1776.
- Played in Paris until the revolution. Then revived in revolutionary era and played until 1838 (299 performances).
- Reworked by young Berlioz in 1859. Given new lease of life and has never been lost from the operatic repertory. First opera to do so.

