

Iphigénie en Tauride

Music by Christoph Willibald Gluck (Sung in French)
Libretto by Nicolas-François Guillard

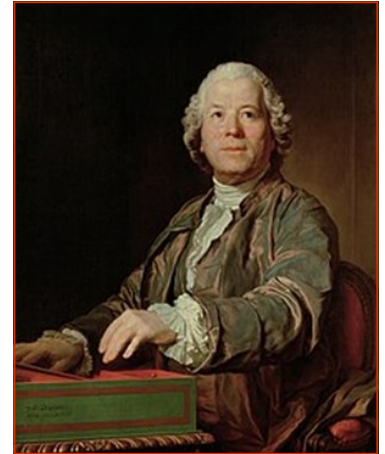
Study Guide to the Opera

Seattle Opera Production Photo:
William Burden (Pylades) and Brett Polegato (Orestes)
in Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, 2007 © Rozariti



Why are Gluck's operas important?

Christoph Willibald Gluck was a composer of Italian and French opera in the early classical period. He was raised in Bohemia by a family whose name has been spelled Gluckh, Gluck, Klugh, and Kluch (likely from the Czech word for boy—*kluk*). Though Gluck's father was a forest master and planned for his son to succeed him, Gluck excelled so much in the music practiced in the village that he dreamed only of singing and playing violin, cello, and organ. He studied in Prague, and then worked as a musician, teacher, and composer in Vienna, Italy, London, and Paris (where *Iphigénie en Tauride* premiered).



Gluck playing his clavichord
1775 portrait by Joseph Duplessis

Gluck's native language was Czech but was able to communicate in English and German (with George Frideric Handel in London), in Italian (with Antonio Salieri), and in French (with Marie Antoinette). Under her patronage, Gluck composed *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774), an opera that demonstrated the composer's intent to return opera to its origins, focusing on human drama and making words and music equally important. He had begun to craft a Neo-Classical style with *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) by eliminating dry recitative that broke up the action. With *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779), Gluck took his operatic reform to its logical conclusion. Often considered his finest work, its music is simple and direct, its drama fluid and continuous. Arias and ariosos mostly run into recitatives and the orchestra plays throughout.

Although only half of his work survived after an 1809 fire, Gluck's musical legacy includes approximately 35 complete full-length operas, as well as shorter operas, numerous ballets, and instrumental works. Martin Pearlman, music director of Boston Baroque, wrote, "Gluck, a composer esteemed by Berlioz and admired by Wagner, 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."

Iphigénie en Tauride Synopsis

In Tauride after the Trojan War

There is no overture; the opera begins with a short passage evoking calm before turning into a depiction of a great storm at sea.



Ancient Greek vase showing Orestes and Pylades meeting Iphigenia in Tauris

ACT I

A storm batters Diane's temple at Tauride. Iphigénie and the other priestesses—all of them captives from Greece—ask the gods for safety and peace from the storms raging both outside and within their hearts. Iphigénie relates a dream: her home was destroyed; her father was killed by her mother, Clytemnestre, who gave her a dagger; her brother Oreste cried out to her for help, but she was forced to kill him. The priestesses grieve with Iphigénie and urge her not to lose hope that she will see Oreste again, but she prays to Diane to end her life ("Ô toi qui prolongeas mes jours").

The Scythian king, Thoas, comes to Iphigénie in despair, followed everywhere by omens and voices calling for his downfall. Oracles have ordered him to sacrifice every stranger to the country to end his torment. His soldiers come with news of new captives—two Greek men—and Thoas orders Iphigénie to kill them on the altar. The Greeks are brought in: one is half-mad, haunted by past crimes, the other defies Thoas. They are imprisoned as the Scythians call for blood.

ACT II

The strangers are Oreste and his lifelong friend Pylade. Oreste, who has killed his mother and is being pursued by the Furies, lives on the edge of madness; now he feels responsible for Pylade's imminent death ("Dieux qui me poursuivez"). Pylade calms Oreste with the pledge that they will die together ("Unis dès la plus tendre enfance"). Pylade is taken away, and Oreste sinks gradually into sleep ("La calme rentre dans mon cœur"). But the Furies stalk him even in his dreams. He awakens from a nightmare to find Iphigénie standing before him. Without revealing her identity she questions him about the royal family in Mycènes, and he tells her all: Clytemnestre murdered Agamemnon to avenge the death of Iphigénie, Oreste struck down Clytemnestre to avenge his father and then, he adds, Oreste killed himself. Iphigénie sends the stranger to be shackled to the altar, and—now without country, kindred, or hope—mourns the loss of her family ("Ô malheureuse Iphigénie").

Intermission

ACT III

Iphigénie feels a strong kinship for the prisoner ("D'une image, hélas!"). She resolves to save at least one of the captives and to send the survivor to Mycènes with a letter for her sister, Electre. Pylade, who has been tortured, is reunited with Oreste, and Iphigénie tells them Oreste must live and carry the sealed letter (Trio: "Je pourrais du tyran"). Pylade is happy to die for his friend's life ("Ah! mon ami"). Oreste, determined that he himself should die, seizes the sacrificial knife and threatens to take his own life if Iphigénie will not spare Pylade. Iphigénie gives Pylade the letter and helps him escape.

ACT IV

Iphigénie tries repeatedly to perform the sacrifice, but she cannot bring herself to harm the stranger and cries out angrily against Diane ("Je t'implore et je tremble"). Oreste is brought in ("Que ces regrets touchant"). Touched by Iphigénie's sadness and her concern for him, he tries to encourage her to do her duty, calling out in the final moment, "Iphigénie, beloved sister, thus also did you perish at Aulide." Sister and brother realize the truth. Thoas bursts in: Iphigénie's plot has been discovered. He orders the Greek killed immediately and is about to sacrifice Oreste himself when Pylade returns with Greek soldiers to save his friend. Thoas is killed in the fray, which is halted when Diane herself appears to pardon Oreste, set the Greek women free, and send prince and princess home to Mycènes—and the first happiness they have known since before the Greeks set sail for Troy.

How to pronounce:

Iphigénie en Tauride

ee-fee-zhay-NEE ah(n) tohr-EED

Christoph Willibald Gluck

GLOOCK

Characters

Iphigénie (Iphigenia) *soprano*

Priestess of Diane who had been magically transported to the temple in Tauride when her father Agamemnon offered her as a sacrifice

Oreste (Orestes) [oh-REST] *baritone*

Iphigénie's brother, a Greek who was shipwrecked on Tauride after coming to retrieve Diane's statue

Pylade (Pyllades) [pee-LAHD] *tenor*

Oreste's friend, who is not dispirited for they will die united

Thoas, King of Scythia

[toh-AHSS] *bass-baritone*

King obsessed with dark thoughts because the oracles predict doom for him if a single shipwrecked stranger escapes with his life

Diane (Diana) [dee-AHN] *soprano*

Greek goddess who had sent unfavorable winds to prevent the Greeks from sailing before the Trojan War. Her oracle required Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter Iphigénie, but Diane saved her

Priestess *mezzo-soprano*

Captive priestess in Diane's temple

Coro (Scythians, Priestesses, Greeks)

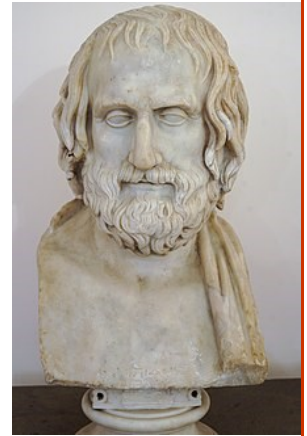
Gluck's operatic reforms:

- no *da capo* arias
- no opportunity for vocal improvisation or virtuosic displays
- no long melismas
- a more predominantly syllabic setting of the text to make the words intelligible
- far less repetition of text within an aria
- a blurring of the distinction between recitative and aria, declamatory and lyrical passages
- accompanied rather than *secco* recitative
- simpler, more flowing melodic lines
- an overture that is linked by theme or mood to the ensuing action

The three creatives behind *Iphigénie en Tauride*

TRAGEDIAN

Euripides wrote more than ninety tragedies about classical Athens. His theatrical innovations have profoundly influenced drama; he represented traditional, mythical heroes as ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. His *Iphigenia in Tauris* appealed to 18th-century proponents of Neoclassicism, including Goethe and Guimond de la Touche, whose spoken tragedy premiered in Paris in 1757. In 1763 a "reform opera" on the Tauris subject by composer Tommaso Traetta and librettist Marco Coltellini, *Ifigenia in Tauride*, appeared in Vienna.



Euripides
(c. 480–c. 406 BC)

COMPOSER

Christoph Willibald Gluck may have wanted to compose his own reform opera on the Tauris theme, but Traetta's opera made this impossible for a time. An operatic composer in the early classical period, Gluck revolutionized the operatic form by introducing more drama and cutting the usually long *da capo* arias, resulting in operas that were half as long as typical Baroque operas. Future composers like Mozart, Schubert, Berlioz, and Wagner revered Gluck. In 1773 in Paris, Gluck fused the traditions of Italian and French opera into his own unique style. Gluck finally had the opportunity to set the Tauris story after he had composed another opera on the Iphigenia theme, *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774).



Christoph Willibald (Ritter von) Gluck
(1714–1787)

LIBRETTIST

Beginning in 1778, Gluck collaborated closely with the young French poet **Nicolas-François Guillard**, who based his libretto on Guimond de la Touche's play. De la Touche's work had been praised for its simplicity, but Gluck and his librettist simplified the drama even further. Their main innovations were to begin the opera with a storm (which would have been more difficult in a spoken drama) and to delay the recognition until the finale. *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) was a great success and is often considered to be Gluck's finest work.



Nicolas-François Guillard
(1752–1814)

The Greek Backstory

Trojan War: In Greek mythology, King **Agamemnon** of Mycenae (Mycènes) commanded the Achaeans (Greeks) during the Trojan War, which was waged against the city of Troy after Paris of Troy took Helen from her husband Menelaus, King of Sparta. The war is one of the most important events in Greek mythology, and it has been told through many works of Greek literature, most notably Homer's *Iliad*.

Before the Trojan War, Agamemnon gathered the Greek armies at Aulis (Aulide). The goddess **Diana** (Artemis) sent unfavorable winds to prevent the Greeks from sailing because Agamemnon had offended her by killing a deer in her sacred grove. Her punishment for Agamemnon: in order to sail, he must sacrifice his own daughter. Agamemnon accepted the terms and killed his young daughter **Iphigenia** on the altar. In his play *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Euripides imagines that Diana moved Iphigenia from the altar to a temple in Tauris (Tauride), where she served the enemy Scythians as Diana's high priestess—all the while Iphigenia's family believing her dead.

Gluck's Innovative Features

INNOVATIVE LIBRETTO WITH NO LOVE INTEREST

Michael Ewans wrote that "Gluck's most radical 'reform opera' even dispenses with a love interest. Romantic interest is peripheral to Greek drama, but *Iphigénie en Tauride*, 'the first opera without love to exist in our theatres' must be one of the few major operas to forego the theme altogether."

ONLY ONE SHORT DANCE

Most French operas include dance and spectacle, but *Iphigénie* includes only one divertissement in Act I. This was so unusual that, after five performances, with Gluck's acquiescence, the authorities of the Paris Opéra added ballet music by François-Joseph Gossec to the finale.

PSYCHOLOGICAL INSTRUMENTATION

Gluck used the orchestra to reveal the inner truth of Oreste's aria "Le calme entre dans mon cœur." In a stupor, he sings about the feeling of peace that descends on him, but the accompaniment—with its agitated sixteenth-note reiteration on one note and *sforzando* accents on the first beat of each measure—betrays his troubled state of mind and remorse for his past crime. When a critic complained about the contradiction between Oreste's words and the musical accompaniment, Gluck replied, "He's lying: he killed his mother."



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Operatic Reforms

Gluck wanted to return opera to its origins, focusing on human drama and passions and making words and music of equal importance.

*Today, he would
be called a changemaker.*

For more information on Pittsburgh Opera's education programs, please contact:

Marilyn Michalka Egan, Ph.D.
Director of Education
megan@pittsburghopera.org

Pittsburgh Opera
2425 Liberty Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15222
412-281-0912
www.pittsburghopera.org