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Alceste

Tragédia-opéra en trois actes

a revisitation

by

Randall Snyder

1970

under the supervision of Miloš Velimirović

revised

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“*Opera is the drama’s natural enemy*” Alfred Einstein

The history of opera constantly swings from emphasis on drama to that of music. In developing opera based on their interpretation of Greek drama, the Florentine Camarata stressed the dramatic element. The idea that words must have dramatic purpose and clearly understood were impulses moving music away from the polyphony of the late Renaissance to the monodic writing of the early Baroque. During the subsequent century the theatrical and virtuosic elements were emphasized at the expense of their dramatic relevance. . . With Gluck’s reform operas the focus once more shifts to the dramatic.

The opera *Alceste*, with music by Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) and the Italian libretto by Ranieri Calzabigi (1714–1795) after the play by Euripides, was premiered in Vienna December 26, 1767. The famous preface¹ to the opera outlining Gluck’s aims of reform opera appeared in the printed score in 1769, and has in some respects become better known than the work it prefaces. Gluck waited seven years after his first reform opera (*Orfeo ed Euridice*) before asking Calzabigi to codify his ideas concerning the relation of drama and music in opera. They may have waited to find out how successful *Orfeo* would become or perhaps they felt *Alceste* more fully exemplified their ideas.

The preface by stating that he “resolved to divest it entirely of all those abuses, introduced into it either by the mistaken vanity of singers or by the too great complaisance of composers....”. He then proceeds to enumerate some of those abuses which had become stock and trade devices in mid 18th century Italian *opera seria*:

problems created by the da capo aria, tiresome *ritornelli*, extended passages designed to display vocal virtuosity, and meaningless repetition. Gluck feels more attention should be paid to the middle section where words are “perhaps the most impassioned and important. Like Wagner a century later, Gluck maintains that the overture should begin the drama by establishing the mood and preparing the audience for the opening scene. He maintains the importance of matching instruments to fit the mood of the text, anticipating Weber. Gluck concludes by thanking Calzabigi for providing him with a dramatically sound libretto. A great deal of credit for the reform opera goes to Calzabigi. As Paul Henry Lang puts it, “There can be no question that it was this clear-headed man of letters who steered Gluck towards his goal, and there is little doubt that he was responsible for the whole idea of reform as far as Gluck was concerned”². Opera in the Metastasian sense perpetuated predictable plots and stock characters. Calzabigi took these stereotypes and created real human individuals like Admetus and Alceste.

Like many “revolutions” in music, the preface had many precursors, the most immediate being the ideas of Pietro Metastasio, one of Italy’s most important poets. In a letter to Francois-Jean de Beauvoir, Chevalier de Chastellux, a French intellectual and soldier (who served as translator for the Continental Army during the Revolutionary War), he writes:

”In opera...when music vies with the poetry to take the principal role, it achieves the destruction of both. In its pride, modern music...has audaciously rebelled against poetry to the neglect of all its true expressive powers, has treated the words as a slavish

foundation for itself, and obliged them to lend themselves, regardless of common sense, to every kind of extravagant whim”³.

Gluck was certainly aware of Metastasian theory, having used his libretto for a 1752 of his opera, *La clemenza di tito*. Metastasio’s libretto was very popular, used by nearly 40 composers, most famously Mozart (K. 621). Other reform ideas include Marcell’s *Testro all moda* (1721), *Soggia sopra l’opera* (1755)⁴ of Francesco Algarotti and Goldini’s preface to *Statira* (1756). In the French tradition Rousseau and the Encyclopedists were critical of the complexity of Rameau and espoused a return to simplicity and innocence. Their model work exemplifying these sentiments was Rousseau’s *Le Devin du Village* (1752).

Two earlier versions of *Alceste* were composed by Lully (1674) and Handel (1750). It is difficult to determine to what extent these operas influenced Gluck. He visited England where he met Handel (who was reputed to have said that his cook knew more about counterpoint than Gluck) and certainly became acquainted with the older composer’s late baroque style. Writing for a French audience, Gluck must have been sensitive to the influence of Lully still influencing Rameau and his followers.

It is interesting to note the differences in these various operas from the original Euripides. The classicism of the Enlightenment represented, consciously or not, a distorted view of the classicism of antiquity, revisiting subject matter in a syncretic manner – operas based on romantic idealizations of Greek drama. For example, the representation of Admetus:

Euripides makes him a quasi-heroic figure, the hospitable gentleman that, in spite of his grief, greets his old friend Hercules, inviting him to stay and drink his wine

While other composers (most notable Mozart) worked primarily in the *buffo* medium, Gluck's past experiences and musical inclinations led him to *opera seria*, finding subject matter in the calm, austere beauty of Greek Drama. French opera was particularly open to classical influence. There is a direct line from *Alceste* to *Les Troyens*. As a composer of Italian opera he could equal but not surpass contemporaries such as Nicolo Jommelli (1714-1774) or Tommasi Traetta (1721-1779) but by combining Italian melodic directness (Gluck studies with Sammartini), dramatically sound libretti, and well-established French conventions such as the use of chorus the dramatically accompanied recitative, Gluck was able to amalgamate a new reform style replacing the Lully-Rameau heritage. Gluck's identification with the French approach is confirmed by one of Mozart's collaborators, Lorenzo Da Ponte who disparagingly writes: "Salieri came back from Paris with his arms full of Gluck, of Lais, of Danaids, of a shrill screaming music. He was writing in an entirely French style, and the beautiful melody and song whereof he was once so fertile he had drowned in the Seine."⁵ In fairness to Gluck it needs mention that he resisted pressure to end the opera with a ballet.

As an aside, it is interesting to compare Gluck's relationship to the libretto with those of Mozart and Wagner. While Mozart certainly appreciated a well-written libretto, his extended musical resources could solve many a dramatic problem. When Wagner the poet (who wrote the words to all his mature music dramas) lapses into a weak dramatic situation, it is Wagner the composer that saves the day with his rich harmony and use of

the orchestra, which at times minimizes the vocal element. Gluck was not the musical equal of a Mozart or Wagner, but shrewd enough where his gifts of simplicity, melodic grace and intrinsic good sense could best be employed. The libretti of his reform operas gave him many opportunities to exhibit these traits. Rather than a typical Italian “numbers opera, Gluck’s operas are laid out in vast scene complexes. The merging of the recitative and the aria into hybrid ariosos further strengthens interrelationships of the scenes.

On April 23, 1776, the French version with the libretto by du Boulet was introduced in Paris in the Salle du Palais-Royal with Marie Antoinette in the audience. Francois Louis Gaud Le Bland du Boulet first collaborated with Gluck, adapting Racine’s *Iphigenia* in 1772, finished revising *Alceste* in 1776. This version differs in many important aspects from Calzibigi’s Italian version of 1767.

A comparison of the voices used in the 1767 and 1776 versions illustrate some of these differences. The role of Admetus in the earlier version was written for a castrato, in the French version, for tenor. While this may appear as another reform element, it is more likely it was dictated by French taste. As another example, the first *Orfeo*, Gaetano Guadagni, was a castrato known for his strict interpretation of the score, but in the French revival of *Orfeo* in 1774, the role was sung by a tenor. There are no bass voices in the Italian version while Hercules, the Oracle, and the Priest are basses in the French version.

This French *Alceste* is scored for an orchestra rich in timbre: Gluck's deft handling of it is one of the more appealing aspects of the work. It is particularly noted for its robust woodwind and brass components. Following the precedents of Lully and Rameau, Gluck adds two clarinets to the customary two flute and two oboes (Rameau first used clarinets in 1751 for the pastorale, *Acanthe et Cephis ou la Synpathis*⁶). The clarinets may have been a substitute for the English horn part in the Italian version. The score indicates two bassoons however the writing throughout is unison. The brass are comprised of two Horns in D, two trumpets, and three trombones - unquestionably the most unique aspect of the scoring. In large orchestral tutti and in exposed passages like the first recitative of the High Priest, they provide a dark and dignified color perfectly the context. The string component consists of two sections of violins and viola. The only component of a continuo is the bass part; a harpsichord may have been improvised, but since all the recitatives are accompanied by the orchestra, a cembalo part is not absolutely necessary (while later revivals of *Alceste* do not lie within the scope of this paper, mention needs to be made of the 1861 performance where Berlioz, a fervid admirer of Gluck, conducted an orchestra of 100 with 150 in the chorus).

Parametric analysis of Gluck - du Boullé's *Alceste*:

Overture

The intense d minor chord that begins the opera is in some respects the most outstanding moment of the entire work, its incisive directness and simplicity the epitome of Reform Opera. It is interesting to note that the Overture was imported, unchanged, from the earlier Italian version (called *Intrada*). It begins the dramatic process by preparing the audience for the grief stricken entry of the chorus as well as introducing several motives that will occur throughout the opera: the opening tightly voiced d minor sonority with the bass outlining the chord in descending quarter notes, syncopated rhythms played by the violas that underpins several *agitato* sections, and the ascending minor third, acting as kind of proto *leitmotiv* representing grief in many of the recitatives. The short *Lento* opening statement is followed by a faster, rhythmically active *Andante* that dominates most of the overture. The phrasing is very regular, its symmetry emphasized with Baroque terraced dynamics. After all the *strum und drang* the minor tonality eventually yields to major. Gluck may in a sense, with the progression of the static opening followed by active sections in minor then major suggesting grief, conflict then resolution, is giving us an encapsulated synopsis of the emotional progression of the entire opera. The overall form of the Overture is binary, the second half (beginning in m. 61) an almost exact repeat of the first, transposed to start in a minor this time, cadencing back to d minor and directly segueing into scene i.

A comparison of this overture with Lully's and Handel's shows some interesting similarities. Handel's also opens in d minor. The 1687 score of Lully opens in e minor before quickly modulating to d minor in the second measure. Both overtures follow the standard slow-fast-slow arrangement of the French Overture popularized by Lully. The other type of overture, which became popular in the early 18th century, the Italian, follows a fast-slow-fast pattern. Although Gluck's binary form overture cannot be considered a French Overture, it does follow the slow-fast-slow sequence of tempi.

Act One

scene i

The opening chorus imploring the gods to save their king and father begins on a fully diminished chord, a standard operatic trope for grief and pain with the sopranos singing the significant minor third interval. After this short lamentation (only five measures) a fanfare played by two trumpets (the only appearance of these instruments in the entire opera) introduces the Herald, who in simple and dignified recitative, announces that of Admetus, king of Thessaly, is dying (in the Italian version, this opening sequence is reversed, beginning with the Herald's announcement). In general, Gluck writes rather unadorned music for minor roles such as the Herald, the Oracle and others, saving the more expressive and richly accompanied ones for Alceste and Admetus. In this first recitative there are examples of word painting: the text "redouble your tears," outlines a descending diminished chord, and "*mort*" harmonized by a diminished sonority in the strings. The chorus that follows sings "Oh gods, what will become of us" is the first

extended passage in a major key. This may seem like an inappropriate choice given the text, but Gluck felt a contrast was needed. This chorus is in a modified ternary form, the first andante section homophonic and diatonic. The faster “B” section with the text “Never have mortals been struck with such celestial wrath” is more contrapuntal. At the height of this passage, Evandre, a confidant of the king appears singing “suspend your cries, the palace doors are opening...the queen is coming”.

scene ii

Scene ii continues with the choral music. The imbrication mirrors the linkage between the overture and scene i. The chorus seeing Alceste and her children, now divided into two choirs, sing “O unfortunate Alceste”. There is much chromatic writing in this emotional section, using neopolitan and diminished harmony. The use of the chorus as a reform vehicle is head quite clearly in its interaction with Alceste’s recitative and aria that follows, making the role of the chorus more believable and dramatically significant.

Alceste’s recitative share in the tears of the chorus and laments the destiny of herself and her children; its chant-like melody limited in range well suited for the gravity of the text. The melodic content of the recitative is built around the minor third interval, first heard in the Overture and by the chorus at the beginning of scene i, beginning and ending many phrases, occurring altogether 12 times in the first 20 measures. There is only one perfect interval, a fourth, on the word “virtue”. Her impassioned message is accompanied

by motionless strings. It is obvious that for Gluck the recitative was no mere convention that could be tossed off without care, His setting of the text, accompaniment and melodic shape all exhibit an awareness of its dramatically expressive potential. One must always remember that early 18th century opera emphasized the aria, not the recitative. In the first act of *Alceste* the recitative assumes greater sensitivity with the interaction of the chorus and the psychological development of the heroine.

The aria that follows is in three rhythmically contrasting sections, prefaced by a seven-measure introduction featuring the oboe accompanied by pizzicato strings. This type of introduction appears again in the fourth scene of Act Two where Alceste expresses similar thoughts of grief. Her aria is more varied intervallically with even a hint of coloratura. The third section of the aria contains a relatively large number of modulations. Gluck has up to this point refrained from using such frequent key changes matching the continuous, almost monotonous emotion declaimed by the chorus. In the part of her aria however, Alceste's general expression of grief become particular when speaking to her children, reflecting her humanity. After her climactic singing "my torments, my bitter pain", the music segues into the next choral passage, a reprise of the opening music of this scene, this time in minor, presumably reflecting their greater sorrow after the queen's passionate aria. The use here of the dark key of eb minor exhibits Gluck's psychological association of utmost grief with tonalities of many flats. The scene concludes with Alceste asking the chorus to follow her to the temple and offer sacrifice to the gods. This is the first time since the Overture that the full orchestra plays, making an impressive closing to the first part of the opera.

The first two scenes reveal a tight structure that could be diagrammed: a-b–recit.; c-b recit; a, resulting in a modified arch form. The main sequence of primary key centers are Eb, g minor, and eb minor. The continuously developing drama is almost Wagnerian (although Wagner, in his *Das Kunstwerk der Aukunft* fails to mention Gluck as one of models)⁷.

scene iii

The setting of the third scene is in the temple of Apollo, priests and priestesses dancing around a statue of the god, the music dignified and smoothly flowing. Its key of G major contrasts with the previous use of flat keys, and also serves as the dominant for the following recitative. A nice orchestral effect is the softening of the melody by doubling the flutes with the first violin (perhaps influencing the slow movement of Haydn's op. 77, no. 2 written in 1799). The high priest's recitative "Powerful god, take away from the throne the terrifying sword of death", follows, accompanied by an ensemble of bassoons, horns and trombones, an effective orchestration matching the solemnity of the occasion. His recitative, similar to the Herald's in scene i is much less adorned than those of Alceste, all but one note part of a C major triad. The ensuing chorus joins the Herald in c minor, singing in a faster in 6/8 time, and presents, outside of the Overture, the most powerful music thus far. The opening leap of a fourth followed by a descending fifth is the most important melodic shape. Gluck creates tension by an extended pedal before the resolution in the last measure.

The succeeding solo by the High Priest contains several examples of text painting as well as Gluck's flexibility and imagination in designing background accompaniments for recitatives. The syncopated line (derived from the Overture) that begins the introduction is an inverted foreshadowing of the High Priest's aria in scene iv. When he addresses Apollo calling him an ornament of heaven, the music switches from minor to major and the violins play a graceful melody. For the text "radiant chariot" the strings play *tremolo*. The remainder of the recitative alternates between the syncopated and tremolo backgrounds. The scene ends with the return of the chorus and dance music. This repetition rounds out the third scene into an ABA form.

scene iv

Alceste offers gifts to Apollo, singing in an arioso style, combining aspects of recitative and aria. She begins with the interval of a fourth, another proto leitmotive used before when succor from the god was sought. With the words "pierce the obscure night", the music plunges into the remote key of ab minor. There follows a dance sequence where Alceste's gifts are presented. Terraced dynamics are used for the first time since the Overture. The following passage, when the High Priest calls on the Oracle to speak contains perhaps the most obvious examples of text painting in the entire opera. With "Let the bursting light surround the statue", the macro rhythm in the accompaniment increases from 8th notes to triplets to 16ths, a stock-in-trade for increasing tension. The instrumentation builds up until the trombones enter with the words "He will speak". A solemn half-note passage for muted strings, bassoons and trombones usher in the words of the Oracle in the unearthly key of b minor. The *deus ex machina*, chanting on a single

tone, reveals that the king will die today unless someone is willing to die in his place.

Mozart was certainly familiar with *Alceste*⁸ and may have influenced a similar episode in *Don Giovanni*. Composed a decade later.

scene v

With the chorus tacit, the remainder of Act One consists only of singing by Alceste and the Oracle. This version exhibits a great deal of independence from the original Euripides who begins the play with a dialogue between Apollo and Death, Alceste already having consented to her sacrifice. As we shall observe in Act Two, the character of Admetus is portrayed with more nobility in the opera than in the play.

After pondering her situation in a harmonically shifting recitative, Alceste makes her fateful decision. This critical moment is marked “*avec resolution*” and sung *ff* on an A⁵, her highest note in the opera. Harmonized with a diminished chord, she sings: “Oh, my dear sons, I will never see you again”. This remarkable section, with its quickly alternating recitative and aria style, anticipates Wagner’s “endless melody” by 75 years.

scene vi

Beginning with the c# minor chord that ended scene v, the High Priest acknowledges the sacrifice of Alceste. A violin background derived from Alceste’s previous aria propels the middle section with a modulation from Eb to eb minor.

scene vii

The first Act closes with Alceste's famous aria: "*Divinities du Styx*". While not of crucial dramatic importance, the aria has become a staple in operatic repertory. Berlioz wrote of this aria "the most astonishing inspiration of tragic art"⁹. Of all the arias in the first act, it comes closest to the *da capo* pattern. It can be diagrammed:

A (mm. 10-33), B (mm. 34-91), A (mm. 92-115).

The tonal scheme is essentially I – V- I. What somewhat complicates this straightforward analysis is that in text from "A" " is imbedded within "B" (mm. 44-51).

The aria begins with a nine-measure introduction containing elements from the Overture - - sustained chords in the winds, string syncopated figures, with the bass outlining arpeggiated triads. One important difference from the Overture is that the music is in Bb major rather than d minor. The music closely matches Alceste's stream of consciousness ruminations. She begins by addressing the gods of the underworld with the perfect fourth. When calling them ministers of the dead, the music slows to a half cadence in bb minor. As she regains her royal pride the music becomes more straightforward, returning to major. In the "B" section with increasing resolve she sings: "I feel a new strength and go where my love calls me". This passage, marked *tres animé*, is, with its rhythmic regularity and crisp articulations, almost festive.

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Act Two

In the du Boulett's French version, the beginning is a mirror image of Act One, with the chorus joyfully thanking the gods for their merciful clemency. What they as yet do not know is the identity of the hero whose life will be traded for the King's. This opening of

Act Two represents one of the major changes du Boulet made from Calzibigi's 1767 version. In his Italian version it is night and Ismen, a minor character, is questioning Alceste. Gluck biographer Alfred Einstein considers this a concession to the Metastasian tradition¹⁰. In du Bullet's version, the opening chorus is followed by five dances of various tempi and styles

scene i

Act Two opens with a festive 6/8 Allegro in G major for chorus, a more complete contrast from the preceding events could scarcely be imagined. The thematic material in the ten measure introduction is in a *galant* and pre-classical style, featuring scale passages, repeated notes in the inner voices, parallel writing in thirds, and constantly moving bass 8th note bass line. The chorus sings joyfully of their King's deliverance, ignorant that Alceste must die in his place, a macro-rhythm of 16th notes emphasizing the breathless joy of the chorus. There is no apparent thematic connection with music from the first act.

Five dances, in a fast-fast-slow-fast-slow sequenced follows, that while not furthering the drama, show the grace and eloquence Gluck was capable of. They may represent a concession to the French love of dance. The first dance is rather short and scored for strings, in a style reminiscent of a last movement of a Haydn string quartet. The second dance is considerably longer. The writing, with its reliance on repeated notes and unison passage seems at times a bit stiff, perhaps composed earlier than the other dances. The third dance is the only one in minor and contains a duet for bassoon and viola. The fourth

dance in 3/4 is close in style to a minuet from a symphony of Sammartini or early Haydn. The opening horn melody resembles music from Handel's *Water Music*. The last dance scores a flute-violin line against a triplet background. The chorus returns singing the same text as before, this time set to different music. The key remains in G, with 16ths played in every measure except the last.

scene ii

Scene two plunges back into high drama. Evandre and anonymous voices introduce the recitative of Admetus whose words are joyful, still unaware of his wife's approaching doom. The first arioso passage in d minor and his first phrase related to the motive sung by Alceste in scene v of Act One when she makes her fateful decision, contradicts this sentiment. Evandre informs Admetus of the Oracle's message and how an unknown hero has agreed to take his place. The following chorus sings the praises of the king and honors his unknown savior, the soprano line at that moment, again referencing scene v. The scene ends with the return of conversation between Admetus and Evandre, casting the scene in a ternary form.

scene iii

In scene iii, the longest (31 pages of full score) and most psychologically complex of the opera, the dramatic heart of the opera, Admetus and Alceste appear together for the first time and the horrific truth of Alceste's sacrifice is disclosed to Admetus. The gradual

increase in tension in the recitatives alternates with joyful choruses who remain pathetically ignorant of the drama unfolding between their beloved king and queen. We have already noted this juxtaposition of simultaneous contradictory dramatic strata in scene ii. The expansion of this conceit in the third scene is one of the masterstrokes of the opera.

Their first entrance exploits this dual dimensionality. Admetus greets Alceste with an upward major third while Alceste replies with a descending minor third. They are both being truthful when they sing, “I no longer fear the obstinate fate of small wrath”. An extended joyful chorus and dance ensues. Alceste comments, “these songs rent my soul” momentarily drag the music to c minor/ eventually the effect of her utterance is forgotten and the music ends happily in Bb major. In the following recitative, Admetus shares the sentiment of the chorus, believing that all is well. Instead of using tonality to imply the king’s delusion, Gluck uses melodic means. Almost half of the intervals used in this recitative are minor thirds. With rococo elegance and charm, the chorus remains oblivious to the mounting drama. The 16-measure pizzicato string introduction provides a nice contrast. Alceste follows this chorus with a mournful lament in g minor, her grief reinforced by a passacaglia- like bass line. Trills in the flute and lower strings mirror the words “in spite of me tears escape from my eyes”. The chorus returns in G major with the pizzicato strings.

Admetus sings more words of happiness, but the unsteady harmony and chromatic line give the audience the real picture. Over an inverted 7th chord asks Alceste why there is sadness in her eyes. Answered with a semitone sigh. Admetus sings an aria, marked “*d’un air D’assurance*” asking the queen to banish these dark thoughts. His melody

begins with an ascending perfect fifth, a strikingly new interval reflecting the “assured” direction in the score. Syncopated rhythms, first heard in the Overture and later in “*Divinities du Styx*” are played in the violas. The climax of the aria is reached at measure 393, a high A⁴ on the word. “Alceste”.

His aria only serves to increase Alceste’s unhappiness. With a background of *tremelando strings*, the agitated Admetus questions Alceste. She tries to placate him, singing that the joy of life comes in loving him until the eternal night. While the style of her aria is essentially lyric, large vocal leaps and the 16th note passage background lend the music a troubled quality. Alceste asks Admetus if he has heard the dictate of the Oracle, singing in b minor, same key of the Oracle in the first act. After further interrogation, she finally relents: “who but Alceste could die for you”. As one would expect, this long awaited disclosure elicits an immediate response from the chorus and Admetus “O god!...You, heavens...O unhappy Alceste...”. The music cadences to d minor and the grief-stricken pair continue their melodramatic dialog.

The scene concludes with an aria by Admetus, most of which is in major, an odd choice given the circumstances. Perhaps Gluck is reversing the relationship between text and tonality, the words speaking of sadness, the tonality anticipating the eventual triumph in the third act. The aria is in two parts with contrasting meters, a moderate 3/4 followed by an animated cut time. Admetus vows he will not live without her.

scene iv

Alceste implores the chorus to help her husband after she is gone. After all the excitement of the previous scene, her recitative, accompanied with simple, sustained strings, suggests she has regained her composure. In the short chorus that follows, many of the melodic motives are present: the ascending minor thirds and half steps, and the rising fourths when referring to the gods.

The F major aria that follows is related to her aria in scene ii Act One: the same violin background figure and flute introduction contrasting long held notes with fast ornamental figures. Colors are added with sustained horn and string pizzicato. Its binary metrical layout mirrors Admetus' last aria, this time 6/8 following $\frac{3}{4}$. Alceste solo is almost Mozartian in its lyricism, undulating gracefully, reaching a high G at measure 89. The music turns more agitated in the second section of the aria as she considers what must be done. The vocal line sequentially rises every two measures, reaching a high Ab with the words "this torment tears me apart". The chorus responds with dirge-like descending quarter notes. Scene iii ends on an f minor chord desolately as the chorus intoning a message of grief.

Act Three

scene i

The outpouring of grief continues, inheriting the slow quarter note rhythm in f minor from the second act. The *timbre* of the oboe adds to the dolorous atmosphere as Evandre

mourn the fate of the queen. The next chorus is an exemplary illustration of “beautiful simplicity”, cited in the preface. With all hope gone, they chant on a c minor chord “Cry, O country of Thessaly, Alceste is going to die”. In the first seven measures, the only harmonic change is to the subdominant, the soprano part never changing pitch. The passage is repeated by a second offstage choir, this time with added trombones, making their message, even sadder and more irreversible. Berlioz wrote of this moment, “the palace thus entirely resounds lamentations; for mourning is within and without; in the court, and the balconies, in the halls – everywhere”¹¹.

scene ii

Fast scale passages in the violins and oboes greet the arrival of Hercules, completely changes the mood. Gluck’s portrayal of Hercules is not as effective as those of Alceste or Admetus. While both of these characters have well defined dramatic and musical personalities, the material given Hercules is somewhat dull, stereotyped, and sometimes even comic.

The despondent atmosphere puzzles Hercules, back from a long series of heroic works, anticipating the hospitality of his friend, Admetus. When informed by Evandre and the chorus of the unfolding events, the hero confidently tells the assembly he will rescue Alceste from the underworld. Hercules’ aria that follows was claimed by Berlioz to be composed by Francois-Joseph Gossec (1734-1820)¹¹. I have not discovered a reason for this insert. It is interesting to note that in his oratorio, *La Nativité*, performed in 1774, Gossec included an offstage choir of angels. In this aria Hercules reiterates his resolve to

rescue Alceste. Large leaps of 6ths, 7ths, and even a minor 9th are distinctive shapes in the opera.

scene iii

The third scene begins with one of the most vivid tone paintings in the opera: Alceste approaching the river Styx (this, in essence, was Calzabigi's opening scene of the second act). A slow string introduction leads to Alceste's plea, "Please God, hold up my courage", the melody beginning with a by now expected upward fourth. After a brief agitated outburst by the strings, she sings "Let us advance", the music cautiously tip toeing forward. With growing trepidation she describes the eerie, unfolding landscape: dried up trees, menacing rocks, and arid earth; "the horrible noise of murmuring birds" answered by minor thirds in the clarinets and bassoons. She stands before the altar of death: "ah. Love. Give me strength". Her solo ends with the oboe poignantly her last phrase, cadencing from an Italian 6th chord to C major. A chorus of underworld gods, chanting on a single note, tells Alceste she has not long to wait. She concludes scene iii with an aria in F major. Like her other F major aria in Act Two, this graceful and melodic solo with its understated tone evokes the classical dignity of tragedy. This restraint makes the modulation to g minor, beginning in m. 107, all the more effective. This aria, with its 6/8 phrasing is also related to her D major in third scene of the second act.

scene iv

The action picks up with the arrival of Admetus, now only wishing for death, reaching a melodramatic climax as Alceste and Admetus argue over who is going to die - this in

spite of the fact the chorus reminds the king he cannot meddle with the decree of the oracle. There follows a lengthy (23 pages) duet in which Admetus tries to change Alceste's mind. Their exchange is interrupted by a swirling 16th note passage introducing the horn call representing Charon. In the most agitated episode of the entire opera, with strings playing 32nd notes, Alceste cries. "Let him live, and open the passages of hell to me". "O despair" shouts Admetus on a high Ab. Fortissimo Gbs introduce the chorus of infernal deities calling for Alceste in a dramatic unison. Now in the key of Eb, Admetus angrily rages at the deities, the accompaniment thumping along in an almost comic after beat pattern, crying, "I will follow her steps into hell, leading directly into the next scene.

scene v

A dramatic ascending passage heralds the arrival of Hercules contending with infernal deities: "My friend, their rage is in vain, count on my valor!" the music exploding in c minor fury. Finally, after a long pause, in the first extended passage in C major, the long awaited *denouement*: "our fury is in vain, let us give in to him", sings the furies. In choosing C major, Gluck utilizes the standard minor - major sequence expressing the progression from suffering to eventual triumph. The prevalence of 3 flat signatures and G major sections in the second act leading to eventual C major shows a well-thought large scale harmonic plan consistent in musical and dramatic logic. The thankfulness of Admetus segues into scene vi.

scene vi

Apollo appears, accompanied by the high strings creating a shimmering celestial effect. The sun god congratulates Hercules, assuring him his heroic place is secure. He then charges Alceste and Admetus to live as a model for all mortals.

scene vii

Apollo now speaks to the people, admonishing them to rejoice. There follow the only trio of the opera in which Alceste, Admetus and Hercules express their joy. This trio is unfortunately rather plain and not one of the better pieces in the opera, certainly lacking in musical and psychological depth of a Mozart ensemble. The 6/8 finale is a song of thanksgiving, and the opera ends on a glorious C major chord.

Perhaps, functioning as applause background, Gluck includes a divertissement of six dances, the last being a lengthy chaconne. These do not seem to be any thematic relationship between these dances and the opera. They may have been composed at an earlier date.

summary

Viewed in an overall context, *Alceste* is a curious, hybrid work. At times the key structure is highly organized and the melodic development shows a consistent and sophisticated evolution. Then there are those moments, as in the third act, where the

system appears to break down. Gluck was not the musical genius that could avoid all formal problems. The main difficulty lies in the similarity of emotional content throughout the lengthy work. Problems in the role of Hercules have already been mentioned. There is not as much formal control in the last two acts as in the tightly organized first. The long duet in the third scene of Act Three becomes almost comic in its endless repetition of exaggerated emotional rhetoric.

Positive aspects of the work are the noble choruses and the flexible, imaginative recitatives. The chorus dominates the first act, stay in the background in the second, and except for a few measures, and remain subordinate in the third act. The choruses give much of *Alceste*, especially in the first act, a sense of oratorio; switching to more traditional operatic approach in acts two and three tends to break the continuity of style and purpose¹². The choruses achieve Gluck's stated goal: "Furthermore, I believe that my greatest labor should be devoted to seeking a beautiful simplicity, and I have avoided making displays of difficulty at the expense of clearness; nor did I judge it desirable to discover novelties of difficulty if it was not naturally suggested by the situation and the expression"¹³.

The two most important qualities of his recitatives are the careful setting of the text and the richly scored accompaniments. In a letter to a Parisian newspaper printed in 1772, du Boulet comments on Gluck's excellent feel for the French language: "although he speaks French with difficulty, he has made a special and thorough study of it. In short, he knows all its distinctions and especially its prosody, which he observes scrupulously"¹⁴

⁴. As numerous examples of word painting confirm, it is the text that shapes the nature of the music. In these recitatives Gluck helped begin the process that would preoccupy most 19th century composers, the merging of aria and recitative. Weber and Wagner will develop his nascent leitmotiv organization. His dramatic sense and orchestral sound will influence the coming generation of French composers.

Alceste is perhaps most important in its implications rather than its substance. Like most revolutionary compositions, its flaws are of form rather than content. The problems in *Alceste* result from the collision between theoretical concepts with practical musicality. Gluck, in attempting to avoid the Italian formula emphasizing arias and stage affects, perhaps reacted too much in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, these issues do not lessen the position of *Alceste* as one of the most influential compositions of the 18th century.

The French premier of *Alceste* was less than a spectacular success, prompting Gluck to write: “*Alceste* is not the kind of work to give momentary pleasure or to please because it is new. She is timeless; and I claim that it will give equal pleasure two hundred years from now hence...”¹⁴

Addenda

The Lully - Quinault Version

The libretto of Phillippe Quinault's *Alceste*, which Jean Baptiste Lully's used in the 1674 version⁶, is an interesting variant on the Euripides model. Their opera opens with a substantial prolog of dancing and the singing of nymphs of the Seine, Marne and Tuileries longing for the return of Louis XIV safe return from battle (a reference to the battle of Franche-Comté during the Franco-Dutch war¹⁵). All this non-essential activity is more easily understood if we realize that *Alceste* was only Lully's second opera, most of his stage music prior to 1674 being in the form of Pastorales and Comedia - Ballets. As mentioned earlier, ballet was always an integral part of French music. Gluck by his addition of dance sequences in the 1776 version (which will be discussed later) undoubtedly shows his knowledge and acceptance of this tradition (one of the reasons Wagner experienced difficulty in conquering the French capitol was his refusal to make similar concessions). Lully's version begins with *Alceste*'s decision to marry Admetus, rejecting two other suitors; Lycomedes and Hercules, here called by his French name Alcide. Filled with frustration, Lycomedes abducts and imprisons *Alceste* in his walled fortress Scyros. In storming the castle with Alcide, Admetus is seriously wounded. When *Alceste* is released and finding Admetus *hors de combat*, she volunteers to die in his place kills her and descends to Hades. Alcide realizing for the first time *Alceste*'s great love for Admetus follows, forcing Charon to ferry him across the Styx. Proserpine, moved by this act of heroism, persuades Pluto to allow both *Alceste* and Alcide to return

to surface, the king and queen once again reunited. So unlike the Calzabigi and the du Boullé versions, Quinault makes Alcide the man character with Admetus playing almost a minor role. Hence the opera is sometimes referred to as *Le triomphe d'Alcide*. version.

Other versions of *Alceste*

Handel's *Alceste*, with the libretto attributed to Thomas Morell, was originally composed as incidental music for a play by Tobias Smollet, but was never performed. Some of the music was later incorporated into a secular choral work, *The Choice of Hercules*, which was premiered in 1751. The surviving text reads more like an oratorio than an opera. In this version it is Apollo who is responsible for the happy ending. Another opera based on the Euripides, *Admetus*, was adapted by Nicola Francesco Haym from an Italian libretto by Aurelio Aureli and performed in London in 1727. This was about the time *the Beggars Opera* was changing the taste of English audiences, forcing Handel to focus on oratorio composition. In Haym's version, Hercules is the hero.

Notes

1. The preface is reprinted in Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History*, IV *The Classical Era*, pp. 99-101
2. Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* Norton
3. *Dreams & Fables, Gluck Italian Arias*. CD liner notes by Claudio Osele 2001
4. Strunk. pp. 83-98
5. Da Ponte, *Memoirs*, p. 138
6. Demuth, *French Opera*, p. 182
7. See Newman, *Wagner as Man and Artist*, p. 229 for some of Wagner's opinions on Gluck
8. K. 316, a recitative and scene for soprano, which Mozart composed in 1778 for Aloysia Weber, used the text "*Popoli di Tessaglia*", which appears in the Italian version of *Alceste*.
9. Berlioz, *Gluck and His Operas*
10. Einstein, *Gluck*, p. 125
11. Berlioz, op.cit. p. 114
12. For an interesting analysis of Stravinsky's working with a similar problem in *Oedipus Rex*, see Lang, *Stravinsky, a new appraisal*, p. 34
13. Gluck, preface to *Alceste*
14. Rolland, *Essays*, p. 179
15. See Demuth, op. cit., ., plate XII for an engraving of the first performance at Versailles.

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