

Gluck and Lemoyne

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GLUCK, A SWORN OPPONENT OF LEMOYNE?

The music of M. Le Moine, whom the Chevalier Gluck refuses to acknowledge today as his pupil, is merely an exaggeration of the principles of that illustrious composer, and the clumsiest exaggeration in the world.

The *Correspondance littéraire*, in a highly critical notice of Lemoyne's *Électre*, which had just been premiered on 2 July 1782, here invokes the tutelary figure of French opera in order to lend credence to its opinion. Yet there is nothing to guarantee that Gluck actually pronounced these words. His correspondence for the year 1782 is almost entirely lost, and no other document of the time confirms this anecdote. In any case, even if Gluck did inflict this terrible snub on the young Lemoyne, we must seek to place it in context.

In 1782, no French composer had yet openly claimed to be the heir to the Gluckian reform. Admittedly, the keyboard composer Edelmann had shown his interest in his Austrian colleague by arranging excerpts from his operas for the harpsichord, but no one had dared openly to assert his filiation with Gluck as Lemoyne had done in the preface to his opera. Far from flattering the older composer, the tribute could only irritate one who still harboured ambitions to work for the Paris Opéra again. After the resounding failure of his last opera, *Écho et Narcisse*, in the autumn of 1779, Gluck had fled the capital and vowed never to return. Nevertheless, he agreed to revise the opera, and it finally met with success in its run in 1781. The premiere of *Électre* therefore took place less than a year after

this episode, when Gluck still considered that he held the monopoly at the Académie Royale de Musique. Why should the Austrian composer, who still considered returning to the capital, take the trouble to defend an unknown artist whom the press seemed to hold in low esteem?

Moreover, we may safely assume that Gluck was offended that Nicolas-François Guillard, the librettist with whom he had collaborated on *Iphigénie en Tauride*, had entrusted his libretto of *Électre* to another composer. It so happens that a memorandum written by Gluck a few months before the Paris premiere of *Alceste* envisages the composition of an opera on the subject of Electra, and we know that Guillard had initially offered the libretto to Gluck. Compared with the unflinching loyalty of his librettists Du Roulet and Tschudy, Guillard's casual attitude certainly displeased the Viennese composer. It is even to be doubted whether Gluck read the score of *Électre*. In a letter dated 31 January 1781, he apologised for not having yet read a libretto sent by Tschudy – certainly that of *Les Danaïdes*, premiered in 1784 with music by his protégé Salieri – and, at the same time, he declined the proposals for librettos addressed to him. Gluck's attitude was ambiguous, to say the least, because while he expressed the wish to return to Paris, he complained of a certain melancholy and showed no interest in the literary and musical creations that were offered to him.

In this context, was Lemoyné's score acceptable to Gluck? In other words, did the young French composer's interpretation of Gluckian drama conform to the reformer's ideas?



THE EMERGENCE OF A LOUIS XVI STYLE

Haydn's String Quartets op.33 and Mozart's *Idomeneo* mark the beginning of Viennese musical Classicism, while simultaneously eclipsing the renaissance experienced by Paris during those same years, 1781-83. From the political point of view, the deaths of the First Minister Maurepas (1781) and the Empress Maria Theresia (1780), mentors of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette,

encouraged the royal couple to undertake more personal projects. The Hameau de la Reine at Versailles, mainly designed during the winter of 1782/83, is a perfect illustration of this. It is unlikely that Marie-Antoinette would permitted herself to create something like this during her mother's lifetime, because it represents, much more than a mere whim, a genuine fracture between two eras, two ways of conceiving the arts and society.

The advent of a new era, or more precisely the emergence of a philosophy that was fully at ease with itself because it had reached a stage of excellence and maturity, was especially apparent in the field of the arts. The Salon de Peinture of 1781 exhibited Jacques-Louis David's *Belisarius Begging for Alms*, a work considered as marking the birth of French neo-classicism. A year later, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* was published; in 1783, two women painters, Élizabéth Vigée-Lebrun and Adélaïde Labille-Guiard, entered the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. Finally, in opera, the Gluckian era – which, as we have seen above, ended in 1781 rather than 1779 – made way for new personalities. Gossec attempted a comeback with *Thésée* in 1782, while Edelmann, Le Froide de Méreaux and Piccinni finally achieved unqualified successes with *Ariane* (1782), *Alexandre aux Indes* (1783) and *Didon* (1783) respectively.

Lemoyne's *Électre* too, although heir to the Gluckian model, illustrates the manifestation of a new aesthetic that might be described as 'Louis XVI sensibility'.



COPYING GLUCK: *ÉLECTRE*

Lemoyne's work was heavily censured for its 'severity' (*Mercur de France*). The *Almanach des Muses* regretted the 'continual cries' and 'sadness' of the whole score, and the *Correspondance secrète* observed:

The music is a succession of plaintive melodies, sharp or tearful accents, and accompaniments as brusque as they are outlandish.

The *Correspondance littéraire* was even more crushing:

Here are continual, agonising cries, heavy harmonic effects, without any sustained melody, without any feeling for what is the true charm of music.

Électre also surprised commentators by its ‘singularity’ (*Correspondance secrète*). The *Mercure de France* spoke of ‘extensive innovation’, *Le Journal de Paris* of an ‘absolutely new’ language, and the *Almanach musical* commented, in sibylline fashion, that ‘this opera does not resemble in the slightest all the works in whose company it must take its place’. Yet the impression of novelty it made is somewhat surprising, since the powerful and expressive orchestration, the tortured harmony, the careful word-setting and the dynamic, obsessive use of rhythm leave no doubt as to the work’s Gluckian heritage. Similarly, the interest in pathos, whether expressed in *Électre*’s fury or in the tenderness of her sister Chrysothémis, recalls the dramaturgy of reform opera, and the deployment of large-scale tableaux encompassing airs, recitatives and choruses undeniably testifies to Lemoynes’s careful study of the composer of *Alceste*.

It is true, though, that Lemoynes’s interpretation of Gluck betrays awkward touches. The first reason lies in the defects of the text, which is excessively influenced by the poet’s previous libretto, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and prevents Lemoynes from making reform dramaturgy fully his own. In addition to the fact that the myths of Electra and Iphigenia have a number of protagonists in common (notably Orestes and Pylades), the overall character of the libretto of *Électre* is too closely aligned with that of *Iphigénie en Tauride*. For example, the absence of a love plot, which represented an individual gesture in 1779, seems, in 1782, to be academic, or at any rate a reminiscence of the previous libretto. Specific scenes from *Iphigénie* may even be glimpsed in the background: *Électre*’s visions (I, 5) recall Iphigénie’s dream (I, 1); Clytemnestre’s terror (II, 1) evokes the anguish of Oreste (II, 1); and the funeral rites that Iphigenia performs for Oreste, whom she believes dead (II, 6), are reprised when Electra pays tribute to this same brother for the same reason (III, 1-2). Setting

aside the spectre of *Iphigénie en Tauride*, Guillard did not simplify Lemoigne's task with his rather clumsy psychological treatment of the characters, and especially of Oreste. While Guillard gives each protagonist an indomitable strength of character, he chose not to have Oreste deliberately murder his mother. He opts instead for a grotesque denouement in which he kills her inadvertently, at which point, despite having been an abhorred figure since the start of the drama, she suddenly becomes worth weeping over. Even if the rules of stage decorum required Guillard to modify the terrible matricide, other dramatic solutions were open to him. In the same year, for example, Guillaume Dubois de Rochefort proposed a much more effective variant in the spoken theatre. The wretched, maddened Clytemnestre seizes Oreste's sword with both hands and thrusts it into her own breast in front of the other characters, who are terrified and shocked by her act.

This awkwardness on Lemoigne's part may perhaps derive from a neo-classical reading of Gluck. With the aim of making reform opera a vehicle for moving pathos and praise of edifying virtue, he gave the noble Alceste and the two Iphigénies a heroic dimension. As a man of his time, Lemoigne played a part in the new approach to Gluck's works that led to the Revolutionary operas of Méhul and Cherubini. This attitude is seen in a refusal of equivocation, a moral intransigence that leaves no room for doubt or ambiguity. Gluck's characters were henceforth interpreted in the image of David's striking depiction of the Horatii, virtuous, upright and unshakeable. Lemoigne materialises this conception in tense harmony, rigid or concise melodic phrases, and broken or aborted forms. Added to this is the interest he shows in uncompromising characters who suffer from maltreatment. Hence *Électre* is the object of the composer's undivided attention, giving free rein to her unquenchable anger right at the start of the drama, in an air with a degree of fury that Gluck keeps back for Iphigénie until the end of his opera ('Je t'implore et je tremble', IV, 1). This violence is all the more striking for being head-on: while the savagery of the Furies is acceptable because it passes through the intermediary of Orphée (*Orphée et Eurydice*, II, 1) and Clytemnestre's outrage

remains conceivable because she is in the grip of madness (*Iphigénie en Aulide*, III, 6), the violence of Électre, hurled directly in the spectator's face, is intolerable. However, it is only the manifestation of a general phenomenon of amplification that affects every parameter of the opera, starting with the orchestra and the volume of sound.

In the early performances, M. Le Moine used up to seven pairs of kettle-drums. A cavalry squadron requires only one pair. Imagine the effect of such an overwhelming din in a theatre.

(*Correspondance secrète*)

This neoclassical interpretation of Gluck's works, accompanied by the best of intentions, produced a drama in which one may regret a certain curtness: whereas the sorrows of Oreste and Iphigénie are softened and balanced by the tenderness they feel for each other (and by Pylade's kindness), Électre's fury crushes everything else, even her sister Chrysothémis' attempts at gentleness (II, 5). Such over-zealousness also leads the young composer to be too concise, if not self-censoring, as in his inability to compose a big funeral scene when Électre mourns the supposedly dead Oreste. The absence of a concluding ballet, inherited from Gluck's plans for the genre and also imitated by Edelmann the same year in his *Ariane*, falls into this same category.



IMITATING GLUCK: PHÈDRE

In 1786, Hoffman dedicated an ode to the creator of the role of Phèdre, Mme Saint-Huberty, after being enraptured by her interpretation of the role of Alceste. Gluck's works remained a very palpable presence on the stage of the Académie Royale de Musique in the 1780s, and it would appear that Hoffman moulded the role of Phèdre using the great Gluck heroines as a model. The audience also took for granted the links between Reform

operas and other contemporary works, as did the Baron de Thunder, who observed in the *Calendrier musical universel*:

One drawback [...] is to have as neighbours annoying mortals who, during Alceste's procession, continue to talk about their estates in Brittany, or antiquated beauties who, during the heartbreaking remorse of Phèdre, indulge in detailed discussion of the true colour of the poppy.

Lemoyne's *Phèdre* not only retains an attachment to Gluck, but also reflects a finer and more pertinent interpretation of operatic reform. For example, the interest in tender sentiment in Phèdre's air 'Ô jour cher et terrible' (I, 4) recalls Gluck's care over the internal balance between the passions in his works. In this respect, the *Mémoires secrets* remarked:

We thought [Lemoyne] was capable only of powerful and profound expression, only of outbursts of grief. [...] In his opera today, he expressed sweet and tender passions, in so far as the author of the words gave him the wherewithal to do so.

The reinterpretation of Gluck also involved an acceptance and integration of diverse influences. The reform, far from being built on a restriction of language, crossbred the different European operatic forms then current, blending at will the vitality of *opéra-comique* with the evocative music of ballet and pantomime, the splendour and luxury of *opera seria*, and the sumptuousness and supernatural elements of *tragédie lyrique*. With *Phèdre*, Lemoyne proceeds in the same way, combining reform opera with the melodic inventiveness of *opéra-comique*, the power of Rameau's *airs de tempête* and the Italian idiom of Sacchini and Piccinni. The reviewer in the *Mémoires secrets* was not mistaken, for the inventory of the scenes most admired at the work's premiere illustrates the composer's musical eclecticism: Hippolyte's departure for the hunt (I, 1), the sacrifice to Venus (I, 3) and Hippolyte's farewell to his companions (III, 4). Moreover, Lemoyne's points of reference in Gluck by are no longer the same, for

while *Électre* gave a new lease of life to *Alceste* and *Iphigénie*, *Phèdre* explores the sensuality of *Armide* ('Il va venir', II, 2; 'Hippolyte succombe', III, 7) and the evocative tone-painting of *Orphée* (Prelude to Act Three).

The element that owes most to Gluck is the effort of invention made by Lemoyné, an attitude that Gluck celebrated in that same year of 1786 when he congratulated Vogel for following, in *La Toison d'or*, the power of his imagination and his genius rather than the systems then current. It is through this attention to 'genius', that is, to invention, that Lemoyné turns the duet of Phèdre and Hippolyte (II, 3) into a laboratory for the representation of madness and anguish, and a reflection on the expression of discord in music. As if to demonstrate the success of this approach, of all the works premiered in 1786, it was *Phèdre* that received the most praise from the *Almanach des muses*: 'great beauties in the music'.



Portrait of Gluck par Greuze.
Leduc Archives.

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