



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Charles Burney on Gluck's Reform of *Opera Seria* (1773)

Christoph Willibald Gluck's first reform opera was *Orfeo*, which premiered in Venice in 1762 and then in Paris, in a revised French-version, in 1774. In the preface to his second reform opera, *Alceste*, Gluck states clearly what he had found objectionable in the *opera seria* of the day. Extrapolating from this document as well as from Gluck's scores we see that he viewed the pernicious elements within opera to be the excessive number of characters and complexity of plot, excessive vocal ornamentation, the fundamentally undramatic process inherent in the *da capo* aria (it is difficult for the action to push forward if the singer must return to the beginning), overtures having nothing to do with the music that follows, and instrumental ritornellos that interrupt the flow of the dialogue.

The following English version of Gluck's manifesto is drawn from Charles Burney's *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and United Provinces* (London, 1773). By the summer of 1771 Burney had made his way to Vienna, where he conversed at length with librettist Metastasio as well as composers Hasse and Gluck. When Burney visited Gluck's home, the latter played for him portions of his opera *Alceste*. Burney thought Gluck's preface, in which Gluck gives his "reasons for deviating from the beaten track," important enough to give it almost in its entirety.

M. Gluck has developed his ideas of the necessary requisites of dramatic music so fully, in his dedication of *Alceste*, to the grand duke of Tuscany; and has given his reasons for deviating from the beaten track, with so much force and freedom, that I shall make no apology for presenting my readers, with an extract from it.

When I undertook to set this poem, it was my design to divest the music entirely of all those abuses with which the vanity of singers, or the too great complacency of composers, has so long disfigured the Italian opera, and rendered the most beautiful and magnificent of all public exhibitions, the most tiresome and ridiculous. It was my intention to confine music to its true dramatic province, of assisting poetical expression, and of augmenting the interest of the fable; without interrupting the action, or chilling it with useless and superfluous ornaments; for the office of music, when joined to poetry, seemed to me, to resemble that of colouring in a correct and well disposed design, where the lights and shades only seem to animate the figures, without altering the out-line.

I determined therefore not to stop an actor, in the heat of a spirited dialogue, for a tedious *ritornel*; nor to impede the progress of passion, by lengthening a single syllable of a favourite word, merely to display agility of throat; and I was equally inflexible in my resolution, not to employ the orchestra to so poor a purpose, as that of giving time for the recovery of breath, sufficient for a long and unmeaning cadence.

I never thought it necessary to hurry through the second part of a song, though the most impassioned and important, in order to repeat the words of the first part, regularly four times, merely to finish the air, where the sense is unfinished, and to give an opportunity to the singer, of shewing that he has the impertinent power of varying passages, and disguising them, till they shall be no longer known to the composer himself; in short, I tried to banish all those vices of the musical drama, against which, good sense and reason have in vain so long exclaimed.

I imagined that the overture ought to prepare the audience for the action of the piece, and serve as a kind of argument to it; that the instrumental accompaniment should be regulated by the interest of the drama, and not leave a void in the dialogue between the air and recitative; that it should neither break into the sense and connexion of a period, nor wantonly interrupt the energy or heat of the action.

And, lastly, it was my opinion, that my first and chief care, as a dramatic composer, was to aim at a noble simplicity; and I have accordingly shunned all parade of unnatural difficulty, in favour of clearness; nor have I sought to studied novelty, if it did not arise naturally from the situation of the character, and poetical expression; and there is no rule of composition, which I have not thought it my duty to sacrifice, in order to favour passion, and produce effects.

[Burney then goes on to observe:] From this extract, the reader will infer, that the symphonies to the songs [instrumental interludes between the vocal numbers] in his opera of *Alceste*, are few and short; that there are no divisions [ornamented repeats] in the voice-parts; no formal closes [cadenzas] at the end; scarce any but accompanied recitatives, and that not one *da capo* is to be found throughout the piece; which, say those who have seen it represented, was so truly theatrical and interesting, that they could not keep their eyes a moment off the stage, during the whole performance, having their attention so irritated; and their consternation so raised, that they were kept in perpetual anxiety, between hope and fear for the event, till the last scene of the drama; so that the music only gave energy or softness to the declamation, as the different situations of the several characters required. The syllables were indeed lengthened, and the tones of speech ascertained, but speech it still was, even in the airs, which are almost all of what the Italians call the *Parlante* or speaking kind.

But though M. Gluck studies simple nature so much in his *cantilena*, or voice-part; yet, in his accompaniments, he is not only often learned, but elaborate; and in this particular, he is even more than a *poet* and *musician*, he is an excellent *painter*; his instruments frequently delineate the situation of the actor, and give a high colouring to passion. (Vol. 1, p. 264ff)