

**GLUCK'S *ORFEO ED EURIDICE*  
AND THE CLASSICAL MYTH OF ORPHEUS**  
by Lorenzo Mitchell

In adapting the classical myth of Orpheus, Cazalbigi and Gluck make three major changes to the traditional story. Are these arbitrary and capricious departures from the myth, or do librettist and composer have good reasons for making them? We know for sure that the changes cannot result from ignorance. Cazalbigi was a man of culture, and the original myth was common knowledge at the time.

**THE CHANGES**

- I. **HAPPY ENDING.** In the myth, events proceed from joyful celebration at the start to tragic lamentation. Cazalbigi and Gluck flip this neatly around, starting their opera with lamentation and loss, and ending with joyful celebration.
- II. **MUCH REDUCED NUMBER OF CHARACTERS.** In the opera, the myth is modified to require only three solo characters, Orpheus, Eurydice, and Cupid. In comparison with Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, for example, gone are various individual shepherds and nymphs, the boatman of the underworld Charon, Pluto and Proserpine, Apollo, and the allegorical figures of Music and Hope. Some versions of the traditional myth also include Jupiter and Mercury.
- III. **CHANGED CONDITION PLACED ON ORPHEUS.** In the myth, the test that Orpheus fails is having faith that Eurydice is still behind him, and not turning around too soon to check. In Cazalbigi's treatment, the new added requirement is not letting Eurydice know why he is acting as he does, and ignoring her distress.

I believe that most of the opera's other departures from the ancient story flow from these big ones, that they are interrelated, and that Cazalbigi and Gluck had well thought-out, practical reasons for each of them. Let's examine the three in more detail and speculate a bit about why these changes were made.

**HAPPY ENDING**

This one was an inflexible given. The tragic ending of the myth would have not been acceptable to the intended audience at a festive court entertainment. Moreover, it was out of step with the prevailing optimism of the Enlightenment, as well as Christian ideas of God as merciful. As Cazalbigi writes in his introduction to the libretto, "in order to adapt the legend to the modern stage I have had to change the denouement." Even if they had been at liberty to do otherwise, it seems unlikely that Cazalbigi and Gluck would have been in sympathy themselves with a tragic ending.

In the first great opera based on the Orpheus myth, Monteverdi also added a happy ending. However, while Monteverdi's ending seems rather perfunctory and tacked-on, I believe Gluck and Cazzaniga took considerable pains to integrate their happy ending with the whole opera. The joyous last scene at the Temple of Cupid lasted pretty long even in the original Vienna version, and for Paris it was considerable expanded, with additional dances and a vocal trio bringing it to nearly half an hour. Though not much happens dramatically, this scene has enough weight that it balances with the other big sections of the opera. It seems clear to me that this is why Cazzaniga and Gluck start Act I with the funeral rites for an already dead Eurydice, skipping any scene of the two young lovers celebrating their love and happy nuptials. This would be too close to how the opera would end, and risk making the last scene seem anticlimactic and redundant. Better to save the mood of joyous celebration as something new and fresh at the end. They also knew that they had to keep the whole opera relatively short and compact, as it was only part of the evening's program.

Also, in crafting the large-scale structure of the whole opera, Cazzaniga cleverly sets up a symmetrical pattern that quietly, but inexorably, seems to demand a happy ending (see attached diagram). We have three acts, and each of them breaks neatly into two contrasting scenes. In each case, a darker, more troubling scene is followed by a lighter, more optimistic scene. After two acts following this pattern, it feels subtly inevitable that the last act will behave this way as well.

Another way that Cazzaniga adjusted the narrative to lead more convincingly to a happy ending will be pointed out in the discussion of the CHANGED CONDITION.

#### MUCH REDUCED NUMBER OF CHARACTERS

I assume this was driven by two very practical considerations, cost and time. With a full chorus and *corps de ballet*, was there any budget for more than the bare minimum of solo vocalists? And trimming the narrative to just three characters certainly helped keep the opera brief. Esthetically too, Cazzaniga and Gluck may have found the simplicity and concentration of distilling the story down to three soloists attractive. We have the two lovers, can't do without them. Cupid (not even mentioned in the ancient myth) becomes the stand-in for all the other gods. And the chorus takes on a hugely important role, harking back to ancient Greek drama and its central use of the chorus. *Orfeo ed Euridice* was a bold departure from typical operatic practice at the time, which used choruses only minimally. Here the chorus, in its three different guises as shepherds and nymphs; furies; and blessed heroes and heroines, does much to make up for the absence of other solo characters.

#### CHANGED CONDITION PLACED ON ORPHEUS

I think this is the most surprising and interesting alteration. Why mess with this part of the myth? I think Cazalbigi had two important reasons. The first is that it allows for a much more dramatic and compelling theatrical experience. Consider the alternative, if staged according to the original myth. Orpheus makes his way through some sort of set, traveling gradually upward towards the light of the everyday world. Eurydice follows silently behind him. This only allows for an extended solo for Orpheus, his joy at success turning gradually to uncertainty and the final calamity of looking back too soon. Eurydice is just a passive presence till the end, when she mournfully disappears. On stage, it would be hard to make this very exciting.

In contrast, the way Cazalbigi reshapes things renders this scene as the dramatic crisis and climax of the whole opera. Eurydice participates very actively and even really drives the situation. The two lovers, hampered by the condition placed on Orpheus that he may not explain his seeming coldness, engage in an extended duet of mounting confusion, misunderstanding and distress. Only this scene in all the opera has no chorus and no dancing, just the two lovers struggling helplessly with each other through an extended sequence of recitatives and concerted numbers. The audience watches in horror as, on the seeming brink of success, they move with tragic inevitability toward the fatal moment. Clearly a big gain in dramatic interest is achieved.

Still, I think the second reason for the switch is even more compelling. Cazalbigi knows he has to be moving towards a happy ending. I believe this change makes that new denouement much more palatable, and even appropriate. Instead of coming off as a jarring last minute switch, the *deus ex machina* arrival of Cupid seems right and actually inevitable. Let me explain:

Let's first take a look at the psychology of the original myth. Orpheus is a tragic hero, capable of miraculous deeds but harboring a personal flaw that will prove his undoing. He shows that he has great power over all kinds of external obstacles, but his final destruction comes when he cannot master himself. His music changes the hearts and minds of others, but it does not help him overcome his own gnawing fear, doubt and impatience. In most versions of the story, it is Pluto who places the condition on Orpheus of not looking back, perhaps shrewdly sensing the hero's weak point. Confronted with the ancient myth, we grieve for Orpheus and his tragic end, but also accept the psychological truth and justice of that end. The essential story line of great hero brought down by a fatal flaw in his own nature is a sad but central theme of the human experience. Cazalbigi realizes you can't just stick a happy ending on that one, so he recasts the underlying plot to the very different themes of *true love triumphs over every adversity and it's always darkest before the dawn*.

Now it is a compassionate, Christianized Cupid (supposedly as the messenger of Jove) who communicates the conditions to Orpheus. As the god of love, we accept that he has no reason to desire any other outcome than the two lovers happily reunited. The condition placed on Orpheus this time is not for real; it is a test he is supposed to fail. In other words, by failing the literal test he actually passes the more important test of true love. In the opera, when Orpheus at

his wit's end finally breaks down and turns to embrace his distraught wife, he is doing the right thing that he needs to do as a loving husband. This is no inner weakness or character flaw at work; his distress is appropriate at the cruel anguish he has been forced to cause Eurydice. No matter what he believes the price may be, he has to turn and comfort her. Despite breaking the god's prohibition, he has acted virtuously and earned his happy ending. Cupid lets his suffering take him to the brink of suicide and then intervenes to make things right. Orpheus has literally been through heaven and hell and lost his beloved twice, but his unflinching virtue is now rewarded with great happiness and triumph. It's not the way the Greeks saw it, but in the context of this beautiful opera from the period of the Enlightenment, I think it works pretty well.