

Cover sheet

Title: Relocating *Iphigénie en Tauride*

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Abstract:

This article reflects upon the director's experience of directing Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* with a student opera company (Byre Opera) in June 2015, and in particular, insights gained about the topical issues raised by this work. Discussion of this particular production is laid alongside reviews of other, professional productions of this piece in the same year, which reveal a range of possible reactions to the potential for Gluck's composition to be read as reflecting contemporary anxieties and concerns. The article engages with an earlier essay by Michael Ewans in SMT 9(2) 2015, developing and qualifying suggestions made by Ewans about the classical framing of Gluck's opera to make the work relatable for modern audiences. It concludes that the classical location is used to position a very specific and not necessarily trans-historical set of topical and political resonances; this places a gap between mimetic representation and reality that should be carefully considered by any company hoping to produce the work using a contemporary realist staging.

Keywords: opera; Gluck; topicality; Iphigénie; Euripides; education.

Relocating *Iphigénie en Tauride*

Introduction

How can a modern production of Gluck's Greek operas persuade modern audiences that these stories are vital and emotionally engaging, and not merely pretty museum pieces? As Michael Ewans, writing in this journal in 2015 argues, Gluck's four 'Greek' plots are 'intense psychological music-dramas that were far ahead of their time' (Ewans 2015: 162). Ewans's essay explored the particular production decisions taken by Pierre Audi's hard-edged staging of *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774) and *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) on an unconventional scaffold stage with De Nederlandse Opera in 2011. Audi's ambitious project allowed audiences to experience these works sequentially, making clear that ritual violence has power to do lasting psychological damage in ways that made an easy 'happy ending' equally inappropriate for either half of the story. Furthermore, Audi's productions allowed audiences to draw parallels between these ancient sacrifices and the contemporary world: 'Gluck's version of these episodes from ancient Greek myth dramatizes situations and feelings to which audiences can and should relate today' (Ewans 2015: 163). Audi's production, argued Ewans, was powerful because it jettisoned the trappings of 18th century 'classical' prettiness, replacing these with a return to a staging that was ultimately faithful to the core spirit of the Greek original.

While agreeing with Ewans, and in particular, his point that drama is at its most powerful as social ritual when it engages with its contemporary 21st century audience's fears and anxieties, I propose to discuss my experience of directing a student production of *Iphigénie en Tauride* in 2015 as it highlights, I believe, some issues of critical response to opera in general, and to this work in particular, which can destabilise classical productions of these ostensibly 'timeless' plots and characters. As an amateur production, put on with a tiny budget with a mainly student cast with limited experience of opera, our production was necessarily less ambitious than the Dutch one, but as a teaching and research experience, it revealed a great deal about operatic hermeneutics as a tussle between competing interests and expectations. This article's reflection on our experience, together with the accompanying research on audience reception and critical

engagement with other productions of this work, may suggest ideas and possible strategies for other productions.

[IMAGE 1 HERE]

Image 1: Opening sequence showing reduced stage space in relation to orchestra pit. Movement blocking was necessarily cautious. (Photo credit: Ben Goulter Photography)

The Ethics of Topicality

The University of St Andrews does not currently run music degrees, but does have a strong and vibrant tradition of singing and student-led drama, which helped Michael Downes (Director of Music) and myself to form a University opera company in 2009: St Andrews Opera, renamed Byre Opera when the University took on the lease of the Byre Theatre in 2010. Since then, the company has put on one annual production, led musically by Michael Downes, and alternating between in-house direction by me and direction by outside professionals as the budgets allow.

When deciding on a suitable production for the University's opera company each session, the casting needs to reflect the availability of potential leads from the current student body, which means it needs to be sympathetic to the youthfulness of the available singers. Byre Opera is subsidised by a publicly funded University, and so also has a responsibility to develop and educate its cast and, potentially, to provide opportunities for academic research. The projects I have directed for this group (Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*, Eccles *The Judgement of Paris*, and Handel's *Acis and Galatea*) have all involved small but important choruses, and have all involved some degree of academic backroom input. When I rather naively proposed in autumn 2013 that we should attempt Gluck's last great reform opera, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, it was Pierre Audi's productions – by then available on DVD – that attracted me to the piece, and in particular, the dramatic interactions between oppositional choruses and the isolated and damaged eponymous heroine. Both of Gluck's *Iphigénie* operas show the capacity of crowds to use ritual to normalise

violence, and for women in particular to internalise this: in *Aulide*, the Greek people constantly remind Agamemnon that his rule depends on leading the ships against the Trojan enemy and Iphigénie becomes convinced that it is right and proper that she should be sacrificed to achieve this end, while in *Tauride*, the division of the chorus into gendered groups puts a particularly gendered inflection on the collective dynamics of human sacrifice that underpin these societies.¹ Indeed, it was the gender dynamics that attracted me initially to the *Tauride* plot, as I could imagine a student body readily being able to relate to this, and believed that it could help the cast explore ways in which violent cultural norms implicate both men and women using similar but subtly different mechanisms of engagement. Moreover, it seemed to me that these issues were becoming topically urgent as religious and ethnic divisions in our contemporary world are throwing up opportunities for both young men and young women to become ideologically radicalised and thus potentially to engage in acts of destruction in defiance of western liberal mechanisms intended to contain and limit political violence. In short, initially the plot suggested issues to me that were not simply timeless, but which were urgently topical.

[IMAGE 2 HERE]

Image 2: Ethnic confrontations in Act 4 (Photo Credit: Ben Goulter Photography)

With these high-minded ambitions in mind, I hoped that this production would explore the sorts of contemporary resonances that I could sense had been implicated by Audi's production. By the time 2015 arrived, this had gained even more urgency as the precise issue faced by the Tauridians – that is, how to react to the arrival of strangers on their shores – was the subject of hot debate by European liberal democracies faced with the arrival of refugees from war-torn areas of the middle east and north Africa. Indeed, the topicality was almost too obvious.

¹ A note on names: The English translation used for our production, prepared by Dr Julia Prest (School of Modern Languages, University of St Andrews), opted to retain the French 'Iphigénie' rather than the Anglified 'Iphigenia' as this corresponded better with Gluck's 4-syllable rhythms and melodic accents.

I began to have an awareness of this when I started to prepare the image sequence that I used to frame the opening of our production. One challenge for a modern audience is that the back-story of the house of Atreus, which would have been well-known in the 18th century, is far from universally known even to an audience in a university community. At the suggestion of Jonathan May, an associate teacher of singing at the University Music Centre and the vocal teacher of several of our student principals, I put together a 'newspaper page' sequence of images which provided a quick digest of the major events preceding the Tauride plot. This was placed immediately prior to the playing of the overture and described in headlines the main prequel events: gathering troops to sail on Troy; the disappearance of Iphigénie and rumours of her sacrifice; Clytemnestra's fury, and Agamemnon's assassination; the murder of Clytemnestra and her lover by a distraught Orestes, and Orestes's subsequent flight. The layout of the news-sheet used fonts and broad design elements drawn from British contemporary low-budget urban newspapers, and the headlines were accompanied by images intended to align this ancient Greek story with modern press stories of troop interventions, civil wars and domestic violence.

And this is where I hit my first dissonant moment. Before even needing to tackle any practical issues of copyright image clearance, as I researched possible contemporary images for my newspaper I became increasingly uncomfortable about using the personal tragedies of real lives in such a direct way to illustrate what would be, for most if not all of the audience, an ephemeral piece of entertainment. Real murder stories – real civil wars – real massacres – these felt too real for appropriation for my art project. This seemed to be potentially a misappropriation of the identities of 'Others' that would at least make nervous any modern academic with an elementary awareness of post-colonial theory. Discussing this with colleagues at a seminar after the event reinforced my sense that had I used real contemporary news photographs or even worse, film footage, the result would have been simply offensive. Instead, I went to the University of St Andrews' archive of historical photographs and used images that seemed to suggest parallel situations but which were sufficiently remote in time so as to create a buffer between an imaged past and the contemporary reality. A distant and less than distinct

image of a first world war troop review stood in for Agamemnon and the Greek army at Aulide; one of a corps of army nurses from the same period, blurred faces floating above standard issue uniforms, flanked a story about the disappearance of Iphigénie and other women serving in the war effort; a postcard image of the room in Holyrood Palace where Mary Queen of Scots' secretary and alleged lover, David Rizzio, was murdered; these stood in for the cycle of sacrifice and revenge that destroyed Iphigénie's family and threatened ancient Greek public life in Euripides's plays. One image, from a public creative commons site, of UN troops in a contemporary war zone, was used, but this had the faces of all the troops reduced to anonymity using balaclavas and generic 'army fatigues'. Two final images – one of a knife, and another of abstracted dismembered limbs taken from plastic toys – were impersonal symbols rather than literal representations of real-world human lives. Before the opera proper began, in other words, I had started to de-localise the production in a zone of protected historicism that on the one hand was a necessary gesture of respect to the sufferings of actual people, but which on the other hand, necessarily reduced the contemporary topicality of the piece.

[IMAGE 3 HERE]

Image 3: First and last slides in opening 'newspaper' sequence.

The second moment of cognitive dissonance was hit in rehearsal when the female chorus were being briefed on plans for costumes. I had planned to reference the radicalisation of some contemporary Muslim women by using plain black all-in-one dresses and plain black headscarves. My cast were happy with the dresses, which fitted everyone in ways that made movement and singing easy. But they were most unhappy with the headscarves. Discussion made it clear that using a particular ethnic dress to make a critical comment about the use of ritual violence in this particular and, actually, non-Muslim, context was just too close to becoming in itself racist: I realised this would not be appropriate and respected the instincts of my intelligent students.

[IMAGE 4]

Image 4: Female Chorus of Priestesses, Act 1 scene i

But topicality is what clearly resonated with many other productions of this work in 2015, and press reviews of professional productions around the world made it clear retrospectively that my cast's queasiness with locating the ethnic 'Otherness' of Scythian religious fundamentalism had also raised aesthetic questions elsewhere. A 2015 production by Pinchgut Opera (Sydney) was reviewed thus in the Australian arts magazine *Limelight*: 'soldiers, replete with beards, turbans and Kalashnikovs, have more than a suggestion of I.S. fanatics about them in their lust to sacrifice any foreigner who falls into their hands (the piratical laughs, though, are a little dubious),' (Clive Paget 2014). Another review of the Pinchgut production, by Janet Wilson writing in the *Canberra Times*, includes an interview with the production's associate conductor, Erin Helyard: 'Helyard says that *Iphigénie* [sic] is really very topical. "Crazy religion bent on killing people – that's the Scythians. We didn't do this deliberately but there is a resonance with what's going on in the Middle East at the moment. This opera is an intriguing trans-historical object.'" (Wilson 2015). Given that Wilson's article is sub-headed 'an opera by the composer Gluck is still very topical', there is a clear message to potential ticket-buyers that this work engages directly with modern-day international terrorism and specifically, unrest in the Middle East. However, Helyard's topicalising comments are placed tactfully after several paragraphs dealing with the music; a biography of Gluck; the performance of the orchestra under the baton of principal conductor Antony Walker; and promoting the stellar performance of Lindy Hume who led the cast as Iphigénie. Even details about the costumes, and set design, are provided before the associate conductor (not the Director, whose conceptual frame might have been less plausibly deniable) enthuses about possible reception hermeneutics. Moreover, Helyard's comment is then followed by more information about the music, the chorus, the libretto, the raw emotional punch. Finally, says the reviewer, 'you'll need your glass of champagne at interval but in the end everything is saved'. In other words, the opera's topicality – which clearly must have been part of the production vision of those commissioning and ordering up the cast's Middle-eastern costumes – is safely sanitised

behind the necessary ingredients for a good night out at the opera: a passionate story, skilfully performed, an exciting visual spectacle, and an assumption of a comfortable viewing environment. A tragedy of ‘Others’, not of ourselves. (This may, I acknowledge, be doing the Pinchgut production a disservice: a thoughtful audience member is perfectly able to reflect whether the issues are closer to home, and a reviewer may be hampered by what is thought tactful and appropriate to remark upon in press publicity).

But this evasiveness does ask to be explored: why does a production so evidently designed to be dangerous turn into something much more decorous? One reason may well be the conservative expectations of the core audience base. Opera, more than many other cultural products, is an art form that targets elites: tickets are traditionally expensive (and this perception continues despite the efforts of many fine companies to develop cut-price ticketing blocks), and audience tastes are finely honed and carefully educated. Opera lovers know what they expect to find and to appreciate, and virtuosity rather than tough realism is often a key critical concern. Other productions in 2015 included one at the Salzburg Festival, starring Cecilia Bartoli, when the big draw was this renowned artist’s fabulous performance. The response of amateur online blogger and opera enthusiast Daniel Url evidences one possibly mainstream reaction: praising Gluck’s work for ‘great dramatic moments’, the writer goes on to comment on the set and costumes which ‘helped to create an atmosphere that is really depressing and unpleasant’ (this seems to have been a good thing) and, on Cecilia Bartoli, that ‘even though she looked horrible (which of course is a way of interpreting her life in the foreign country) she was just magnificent’ (Url 2015). The author loved the production, but not in any way for its political topicality: for its simple ‘operatic’ performance of supremely beautiful music which uses a carefully constructed scenic nastiness to locate the story in a place of vaguely ‘foreign’ Otherness.

Another production in the Grand Théâtre de Geneva directed by Lukas Hemleb deliberately shifted the staging away from any specific topicality by using Brechtian alienation techniques to place the story in an abstract and highly stylised space. As

described by a review in *Opera News* magazine, ‘the characters had Kabuki-style makeup and flowing traditional costumes. The chorus held puppet doubles of themselves, while the soloists enjoyed the luxury of having their doubles manipulated by puppeteers. This gave the evening a hybrid quality, somewhere between a Greek tragedy and a masked Noh drama’ (Mudge 2015). Clearly the Genevan production was both visually and musically beautiful, although its move away from naturalism gave this particular reviewer, Stephen Mudge, some reservations about the tension between the stylised artificiality of the staging and the ‘pulsing realism of the score’ (Mudge 2015). Hemleb was attentive to the danger that the Kabuki concept might construct the strange violence of Tauride as an orientalist ‘Other’ for his Genevan audience. The wide-eyed stares of the puppets and the strategic use of Greek helmets for Pylades, Orestes and Diana helped to position Scythia within the classical, occidental tradition of masked theatre, although it might be argued that a spectator sensitised to the post-colonial critique of opera by new musicologists such as Susan McClary might still interpret the Kabuki design as an orientalist rather than entirely ideologically neutral form of de-localisation. Aesthetically, nevertheless, the design was highly effective.

Mudge’s concern that this visually beautiful production inhibited the ability of Gluck’s music to convey human emotion are more problematic: opera audiences look to opera to deliver, above all, a performance of beautifully sung music, and part of this expectation is that the music should be capable of being read as expressive of highly refined and exquisitely wrought emotional states. This might appear to be naturalistic at least in intention: however, sound that might truly ‘represents’ emotional *agon* is far from being ‘naturally’ easy on the ear. All song is inherently artificial; the more beautiful, the greater the gap between the performance and nature. Mimesis is not, ultimately, the same world as the world outside the theatre. Productions that acknowledge this necessary gap – as in Geneva – may unsettle a listener who expects that a beautiful performance will also excite an empathetic reaction; in the case of a serious story, the response to serious drama that Aristotle called *pathos*.

The music in opera is what makes opera; without music, there is no opera. Yet the aesthetic priority of operatic music, particularly music of the pre-modern period, demands that it reconcile beauty with emotion; that the dramatic narrative has sufficient to connect it with human nature to be moving, but that the performance is pleasurable even when handling painful subjects. This should put up a significant flag for any director hoping to stage a work like *Iphigénie en Tauride* with rougher, more realistic edges, even though Gluck's writings may seem to promote a greater interest in aligning music and nature. Outlined in the famous preface to *Alceste* (1769) penned by his librettist for that work, Ranieri de' Calzabigi, Gluck's later works avowedly tried to ensure that the music in opera abandoned the more obviously artificial formal structures of *opera seria* in order to achieve a more naturalistic balance between music and dramatic mimesis. His arias are therefore through-written rather than *da capo*, and the music develops in line with the logic of the dramatic plot, even sometimes (as, famously, in Orestes' central mad scene in Act 2 scene iv of *Iphigénie en Tauride*) revealing a psychological reality that runs counter to the surface meaning of the libretto. Orestes' imminent psychosis is externally restrained by a circling chorus of Furies who sing in clear, balanced phrases using only slight contrapuntal asymmetries, a coherent musical frame against which the less formally structured – but still skilfully sung – outbursts from the male protagonist can be heard as a rationally controlled counter-melody. This is an artful abstraction of a complex mental state; it is not naturalistic. Indeed, opera is necessarily reliant on formal conventions and collaborative audience reactions to these conventions in order to work its magic.

English Touring Opera's production of this work in spring 2016, directed by James Conway, seems to have achieved a near-perfect balance between dramatic punch and musical refinement, praised by Tim Ashley in *The Guardian* in a review strap-lined with the Aristotelian keywords "fierce passion, pity and terror" (Ashley, 2016). It delivered, in short, the emotional response implied by the classical idea of *pathos*. Moreover, it did this not because the staging was topically realistic, but rather through aesthetic distancing of overt aggression. An initial mimed scene during the overture staged an execution (in other words, before the action proper was underway), but once the singing started, the

production honoured the classical convention that violence should be off-stage. With some small qualifications, Ashley concluded ‘musically it’s terrific’ and in particular, that Catherine Carby in the role of Iphigénie was ‘extraordinary beautiful as her voice cleaves through Gluck’s soaring lines’. This production did not try to find a modern location for Scythia; it was positioned in a classically neutral setting. Significantly, it met the key criteria for operatic performative success: it was beautiful rather than brutalist.

These 2015/2016 productions, known to me only after the doors had closed on our June 2015 performance, highlight the difficulty of looking to use opera as a vehicle for topical comment. Audiences of opera look in the first instance for a beautiful and skilful musical performance: this is, possibly, the primary aesthetic requirement for the genre, even for amateur productions. Obvious topicality makes reviewers, performers and possibly audiences nervous if they notice it at all, particularly if this introduces a roughness that damages the musical texture of the work. The most successful productions of this work seem to have honoured Gluck’s ostensible classicism. The ugliest aspects of the story – blood sacrifice, xenophobia, shame, and madness – are not, cannot, be given music that is as ugly as what is represented by these ideas. The classical ideal – the operatic ideal – may imply these concepts, but at least in this style of opera, classical mimesis is consciously different from the reality of what is being represented. This puts up significant aesthetic barriers to any attempt at more realistic and possibly topical staging.

Ironically, Gluck’s 1779 production may well have been immediately topical to its original audiences in ways that modern productions would find it hard to reproduce. For Gluck’s mob was, I suspect, much closer to home: not oriental, but roaming the streets of Paris. While Gluck’s opera sought to return to the pure conditions of Greek drama, in this particular work Gluck and his librettist Nicolas Francois Guillard were also tuning into his own contemporary and extremely elite audience’s fear of popular crowd direct action. The story of Iphigénie was popular in the 18th century, but different versions of the story suggested different conclusions about the serviceable hermeneutics. Goethe’s play *Iphigénie auf Tauris*, written in the same year as Gluck’s opera, reflects Goethe’s cosmopolitan if sentimental vision of an international brotherhood facilitated by a good

woman: Thoas in Goethe's version survives to give his blessing on the Greeks, and, because he loves Iphigénie, allows her and her brother to return home safely. Taking an entirely different approach, Gluck and Guillard's much darker libretto looks likely to have engaged with a 1757 French play by Guymond de la Touche, which Derek Hughes has suggested had staged an implicit criticism of the arbitrary power of the *ancien regime* over the bodies of its subjects: 'writers were revisiting the Iphigenia stories in order to explore the tensions within absolute monarchy' (Hughes 2007: 106). Gluck's patrons in the 1770s included Queen Marie Antoinette, and his agenda surely was to question de la Touche's earlier critique: both Agamemnon in Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* and Thoas in *Tauride* are put under pressure to commit violence by popular forces they can barely control. Gluck's Iphigénie operas, therefore, stage topical and very particular contemporary 18th century fears of mindless mob violence and the problematic relationship between demagogues and irrational crowds. These fears were all too predictably realised in the form of the revolutionary *sans culottes* within a few years of these works being performed. But these 18th century topical concerns are difficult to map cleanly onto modern anxieties: they risk being read as reactionary and anti-democratic. Although, possibly, similar political questions about populist politics may still be relevant, these questions are becoming more often articulated in political commentaries as we move through 2016 than they were when I first began to think about them in 2013 for a 2015 production.

The strategies used by Gluck in 1770s France – his deployment of a rational, classical musical style to disempower and discredit mob rule – are difficult to relocate as simply 'topical' for a modern audience, particularly an audience in a small and liberal University town, who might be expected to prize liberal democracy as the only possible ethical alternative to various forms of dictatorship. The anti-democratic attitudes of Gluck's aristocratic patrons are not trans-historical. Indeed, some of Gluck's music is already difficult to interpret even before its edges might be given a rougher, naturalistic patina by any modern topicalized performance, by any audience who looks to opera to deliver beautiful music. Scenes iii through to scene vi of Act 1 of *Tauride* give the male chorus music that parodies 18th century French ideas of Turkish street music. Incessant

percussion rhythms and homophonic declamatory chants sonically position the male chorus as a ‘mob’. March-like metres in duple or quadruple time, simple conjunct melodies, and pitch ranges that push the tenors and baritones into uncomfortably high parts of their voices connect with a libretto that recycles primitive and unappealing thoughts of blood sacrifice. On first listening, our production team – musical director, director, and libretto translator - all found the basic musical material sung by the men in Act 1 to be crude to a point close to comedic (although we didn’t want to play it as humorous). This is not sophisticated music, and not even particularly beautiful music: it reveals the ugliness of popular, mass emotion, albeit clothed in a classical style that puts a refined distance between the expression and nature. Indeed, a style that weakens the threat, and one that for Gluck’s aristocratic audience might have helped musically to neuter the many headed monster. If sung by a large chorus at a spectacular volume, they might still sound threatening. But these choruses are rather difficult for amateur – and in our case mostly very young – male chorus members to sing without straining their voices. Older, more developed, professional voices might achieve more convincing levels of raw masculine aggression without compromising the health of the performers. In our production, an inevitably slightly limited male chorus was compounded by a small stage and budget, which meant that we had in total of mob of seven men, and could only deploy one percussionist. With the permission of the musical director, the men were given various percussive items (wooden and metal) to bang as directed in the score as substitutes for the *tamburo* and *piatti* requested by Gluck. They were musically supported by a professional baroque timpanist positioned at the side of the stage, and I hoped that the visible physicality of the percussion work might suggest the possibility that these implements might eventually be applied as torture tools. In performance, this was not particularly menacing, with one audience member commenting sardonically in the survey sheet on the men’s ‘little sticks’. Other productions attempting to put a modern topical veneer on the 18th century mob have used guns: this was done with some success by Pierre Audi’s 2011 Dutch production. Realistic guns are expensive budget items, and for our low-budget student production, not available. I still think that our attempt to frame the action in these scenes as at least partly ironic was not entirely against

the spirit of Gluck's suggestive musical irony, but this is – for modern audiences – hard to de-code, and even harder to stage effectively.

One section of our staging did, I think, succeed rather better in communicating the ironic tension between refined music and implicit violence. Eighteenth-century French opera makes considerable use of dancing, and this work is no exception, presenting companies with less expertise in choreography with some challenges, and adding to the staging complications for any production that might be attempting topical naturalism. The 'street mob' scenes of Act 1 insert four short dance movements into scene 4 as musical responses to King Thoas's direction of popular aggression towards the external target of captured foreigners. At some point during this sequence, the captured Pylades and Orestes need to be brought onstage. This scene should communicate barely containable nastiness and the controlling narrative of Scythian traditional power structures. However, the music delivers this message packaged in formal, baroque-style binary dance forms using highly conventional tonal journeys. The score we used had very restrained dynamics except in the short third dance, and at points indicated detached articulations that sound rather more artfully precise than atavistic, particularly when using (as we did) refined period timpani. My decision as stage director decided to read this music ironically, a tactic used by Quentin Tarantino in the film *Reservoir Dogs*. Gluck's baroque-style dance music accompanied a sequence of mimed torture and humiliation moves targeted against the Greek prisoners. This was not strictly choreographed dance, but was the most carefully structured and timed series of movements in the production. The shortest central dance – comprising two short repeated 4 bars phrases lightly scored for reeds and string – shifts momentarily from the double sharp keys that dominate these scenes (D major and the relative B minor) to the parallel key of D minor, and initially uses a diminished chord and imperfect cadence sequence that marginally weakens this tonal centre. It also uses abrupt shifts between loud and soft dynamics in successive phrases. The centre of the action, in other words, is a noticeably volatile musical fragment, and can suitably frame some volatile and unpleasant stage business. In our production, this window accompanied a series of choreographed punches, prepared and released in a manner that suggested a much-practised procedure, that floored Orestes and

Pylades prior to them being forced to put on into what one audience member referred to as ‘the inevitable Guantanamo dungarees’. The intention was to use the relative roughness of this central short dance to promote, momentarily, a rougher section of stage business. The subsequent return to more refined dance music played by confident wind and brass in D major (a clear and easy key for natural brass instruments in a period orchestra) showed how, in these scenes, musical formality might imply patterns of violence that had become socially normalised.

This mimed section was more physically energised than most of the stage business in our production. However we attempted to brutalise our male chorus, and however successful or unsuccessful the actual performance delivery of this might have been, what I discovered as we worked through from rehearsal to opening night was that most of the musical material lay in constant tension with any naturalistic physical staging. Gluck’s musical agenda - to make the mob less threatening than in reality, in the streets of Paris, they were beginning to be – presents challenges to any production attempting to represent this mob as dangerous in any markedly modern topical sense. The music, in other words, seems to work against a fully ‘realistic’ topical reading of mob violence, and certainly pulled against any attempt to mobilise strong audience emotions in reaction to gestures of outward aggression. Gluck’s music distances audience reaction from close engagement with physical violence; the Scythians are safely ‘not us’, and their curious actions are difficult to read as in any way relatable to the sorts of actions ‘we’ might perform.

In truth, as the best discussions of this work have always acknowledged, the mimetic thrust of this particular work is directed not towards outward action but aims instead to explore the inner workings of human psychology. The central ‘Furies’ scenes (Act 2 scenes iii and iv) mentioned earlier in this essay are rightly celebrated for their psychological perspicacity as Gluck’s agitated music reveals more of Orestes’s unsettled mental condition to the audience than he himself is capable of rationalising. Significantly, the stage action at this point is not ‘real’ at all, but instead represents a dream state; the chorus are not realistically human, but are demonic. Different productions, and indeed audience members, can make their own choice to interpret these demons either as

supernatural spirits, or as part of Orestes's hallucinatory state (the work permits either reading). While it might be possible to find a brutal, topical analogy for this - for example, if Scythian torture techniques involved the administration of psychosis-inducing drugs – their appearance is unnatural. Our production played this scene as a straightforward nightmare, the audience seeing and hearing the Furies, as Orestes does, as threatening and confining shadows: in other words, we avoided topical mimesis.

The climactic moment in a classical tragedy is conventionally the moment of anagnosis (or recognition) in the final act, when the protagonist confronts his or her place in the inevitably unwinding tragic plot; there is no way out of the tragic ending. Except that this work is not, ultimately tragic, especially as presented in the classical source; the plot achieves against all odds a happy (or fortunate) outcome using manoeuvres that critics of Euripides from Sophocles to Nietzsche have suggested are at best stylistically mixed and at worst, if you join the detractors, aesthetically flawed. More generously, it should be understood that Euripides' dramatic style makes space for irony; tragedy gives way in the original Greek play to stage business in the closing scenes that is close to comic, and the audience comes to see the discomforts of Euripides' characters as passing interruptions in a destiny that is ultimately designed to work out favourably.

Gluck's opera does not go this far; it retains a profound seriousness, which makes the miraculous ending, with its sudden redirection of the emotional arc away from tragic *pathos*, difficult to read. Indeed, the whole of Act 4 has a conspicuously uneven texture, both musically and dramatically, that is very difficult to control and focus. Moments of potentially powerful emotion are composed as a series of strong pulses cut across by interruptions, anti-climaxes and changes of direction. The significant exception to this is the very first scene of Act 4, a solo scene for Iphigénie. This, marked 'fièrement, sans lenteur', allows Iphigénie the space of a dramatic monologue to express her agonised response to the sacrificial rites that seem at this stage to be inevitable. At this point, she still does not realise that the intended victim is actually her brother. This is, in other words, prior to the moment of critical recognition; the connection between classical *agon* and the moment of *anagnosis* is structurally deferred. As in Orestes's nightmare scene,

this is a scene where the action is essentially internal: Iphigénie's most agonised singing is placed when she has no physical interaction with any other character on stage, and indeed which voices her inability (at this point at least) to act at all. She may sing beautifully, but it is difficult to block this as frantic action without this seeming rather pointless and frankly, undignified – which for this character, would be unhelpful.

Following this scene, the musical material cools the emotional mood on the stage, as Orestes's calm, suicidal fatalism and the priestess' ritual formality unfold through a series of tonal shifts away from Iphigénie's emotionally expansive scene, through A minor key and thereafter down through lower dominant and related minor keys as Orestes resolves to die. His use of D major to B minor seems to echo the formalised violence, now internalised, of the male chorus dances in Act 1. This sequence of action ends with a second ritual hymn sung by the female chorus in the tonally stable but emotionally flat key of G major: Iphigénie's A major solo aria gives way with a sigh to this lower key. The ritual itself is handled using a musical texture that suggests a much weakened version of the earlier Furies scene, repositioned in a feminised sphere with all fire burnt out, but echoing that earlier scene's lucid choral texture offset by declamatory interjections from the principals – here, Orestes and Iphigénie. This is not naturalistic action: it is ritual action accompanied by ritual music that contains and restricts Iphigénie's agency. I found it quite challenging to direct Iphigénie in this part of the opera. The point of these scene is that she can't act as her instincts suggest she would like to act; vigorous movement seemed counter-intuitive. I asked her to attempt a kind of frozen stillness; other directors might opt for a more frenetic pacing of the boards.

Following Orestes' and Iphigénie's mutual recognition, however, formal stability breaks down, and indeed breaks down so radically that it strains Gluck's classically formal style. From this point to the end of the work, the rate of change both musically and dramatically accelerates noticeably. The effect on the audience is unsettling: as the emotional arc is further disrupted by discontinuities, the work becomes progressively less 'serious' in its effect on the audience; at least, directing the piece, I found the busy-ness of the music and stage business in these scenes was particularly difficult to focus. Immediately following

the siblings' recognition, a brief, joyful arioso from Iphigénie reaches towards the stability of C major. In rehearsal we concluded that this sounded very much like the musical 'set up' for what an audience might have expected to follow: namely, a duet between the reunited siblings. However, there is no time for a happy duet. Instead, an abrupt shift to D minor (the tonality of the Act 1 scene iv central dance) brings a messenger onstage with news that Troas knows that Orestes is alive and is approaching intent on securing a sacrifice. Thoas is given a short moment in which to menace both siblings, but is abruptly silenced by the arrival of the Greek rescue party led by Pylades. This is unheralded and momentary: Pylades is given two bars in which to run onstage and stick a knife into Thoas with the words 'No, it's you who must die' (Julia Prest 2015: translation). A very short scene ensues when the chorus rapidly divides into Greeks (Iphigénie, Pylades and the tenors), Scythians (Thoas and the basses), and the female priestesses. Both musically and dramatically, this section of the work strains at the boundaries of coherence. Pylades's stirring aria at the close of Act 3 set up this character and his supporters in the audience to expect heroic action in this final act. Instead we have this chaotic and over-compressed battle scene, which leaves no clear space for epic deeds, and which ends in stalemate. We were grateful for the assistance of a professional fight director (Janet Lawson, of Stagefight Scotland) who helped ensure nobody ended up in the pit. In a rapid sequence of moves, Orestes is taken hostage by the Scythians in a move to check Pylades from committing genocide: there are two Greek tenor parts to one bass Scythian part, which even for our small chorus meant that the Scythians were outnumbered and were relying on holding Orestes hostage to give them some control over the situation. Iphigenia and the Priestesses, after a brief moment of attempted female assertiveness, are pushed to the side of the battle to wail for divine intervention. Directing this so as to allow this provisional, makeshift nature of the engagement to shine through was uncomfortable for the cast who instinctively wanted a cleaner structure. Our Thoas was particularly discomfited, finding himself rather puzzled in rehearsal with the stock problem of how to get a dead body offstage (his own), a problem complicated by our very small stage and the fact that the action in the opera simply has no use for him once he has been dispatched. Reluctantly, he scrambled off on hands and knees, trying to avoid being trampled by either side, to die just off-stage. Iphigénie's earlier defensive

weapon of choice – the sacrificial syringe (in our production) – became a loose prop constantly in danger of being misplaced or trampled on.

This battle (Act 4 scene v) abruptly shudders to a halt and scene vi brings on the plot's *deus ex machina* in the figure of Diana. The musical negotiation of this transition from natural to supernatural action is markedly abrupt. The fast duple time of scene v changes to a much steadier common time in scene vi, and with a sudden key change that gradually works through an admonishing C minor to end in the conventionally happy, stable key of C major. I should say that I warn students against applying the sad-minor happy-major binary formula, but this is one case where the extreme conventionality of this particular tonal shift seemed to be to be deliberately naive. A director needs to make early decisions about the representation of supernatural forces: within any realistic production, this presents practical limitations. The score also places some restraints on what can be achieved. With the benefit of a more spectacular staging than we had at our disposal, a non-naturalistic staging might chose to make Diana's arrival a spectacular moment of effective magic: however, in duration, the musical material is so compressed that the Goddess has little time to become a commanding presence. Our production left it ambiguous whether or not this was indeed divine intervention or merely a pragmatic piece of opportunistic role-playing by one of the supporting priestesses, seized on gratefully by those embroiled in an unwinnable war as a plausible fiction. It was purely serendipitous that the singer of our Diana role was going on to postgraduate study in the field of international conflict resolution. She may find this manoeuvre more difficult to replicate in the field. I noted with interest that the praised 2016 production by the English Touring Opera company similarly avoided stage spectacle, using a child actor at this point to suggest an anti-naturalistic regression to a state of childlike innocence.

The aftermath of Diana's intervention is also complex because the stage action seems to over-simplify the human questions raised by everything that has gone before. Indeed, before the final scene can get fully underway, it first calls attention to an unresolved and naturally relatable psychological problem: how Pylades would reposition himself within this adjusted reality. Would that shift to C major really work its magic? In rehearsal, we

wondered whether Pylades would resent Iphigénie. Would a modern-day Pylades settle down to a peaceful life or head off elsewhere to sign up for a new cause that might make use of his frustrated heroic ambitions? Does he simply join in with the happy chorus, or walk offstage? I left this undecided until very late in the day, and in the end, after some discussion with the singer playing Pylades, it was decided that Orestes would orchestrate a mutual handclasp between his sister and his friend, something that the music in fact ‘cues up’ at the end of the recitative immediately before the final chorus through a short call-and-answer pair of phrases using a questioning rising motif. This moment can either be read as an ironic highpoint – Orestes’s manipulative use of a highly public occasion to enforce a settlement which in private, as in the confrontations between these friends that dominated Act 3, might not have been quite so consensual – or as Pylades’s graceful and loving final deferral to his dominant and now thankfully sane friend.

Both Diana’s ambiguous intervention and Orestes’s assertive stage managing of a peaceful outcome make it difficult, I think, for a modern audience to read the final ‘happy’ chorus as being entirely free of irony. The ending of this work might be best described using a term from 17th century Dutch dramaturgy as a ‘bly-eynde-spel’, or ‘happy ending play’, a word that has no serviceable English language equivalent and which describes a dramatic piece that managed to wrestle a tragic arc into a happy outcome. In eighteenth century French drama, particularly the melodramatic *dramas bourgeois* of Gluck’s contemporary the playwright Denis Diderot, such endings might be indulged and indeed welcomed by sentimental audiences as a necessary function of art. However, for a 21st century production, this turn away from hard realism once again pulls against a harder-edged, topicalised staging. Modern realists resist happy endings, and topical stagings make it difficult to respond to fantasy un-ironically. One particularly pragmatic and worldly member of our cast made a late suggestion (which was quashed by the by-then more than slightly neurotic director) that he might be allowed to track down one of the weapons set aside in scene vi, in order to start up the fighting again. The musical director commented that he found the final chorus dramatically unconvincing, and I think he was, like our belligerent chorus member, resistant to its resolutions. The final chorus deploys musical techniques that can, to modern ears, appear to be trite:

confident homophonic textures; smooth melodic symmetrical phrases, and in our production at least, a piece of enthusiastic folk-choreography that was worked out by the chorus in rehearsal using social dance steps familiar to students who have been through Scottish schools. If there is a topical, naturalistic analogy to this, it may be that the only imaginable check on instinctive aggression is, in fact, a turn towards artful fantasy and away from realism. If this work still has some topical resonance, it may be to remind us that the human capacity for violence has no ‘realistic’ checking mechanism: that only in the highly artificial world of classical opera, where all things come to an end after 4 acts, is a *deus ex machina* able to put an end to the human capacity to proliferate violence. Opera, ultimately, isn’t real life, although it may help us to see that social and collaborative pressures have the power to produce positive as well as negative outcomes.

[IMAGE 5]

Image 5: Happy ever after? Start of the ambiguous final scene. Pylades (in white, left) has some lingering doubts about Iphigénie, despite her winning smile.

Retrospective

So what of the reviews of our production? Local and Scottish press reviews were supportive of the youthful cast, and gave credit to some very fine singing from principals Caroline Taylor (Iphigénie), Chris Huggon (Pylades), Ranald McCusker (Orestes) and Andy McTaggart (Thoas). In truth, this work pushed us close to the limit of what an inexperienced and student cast should sensibly attempt, although we were wonderfully supported by a small professional orchestra in the pit, comprising the combined forces of the Fitzwilliam Quartet (quartet in residence at our University Music Centre) and Ars Eloquentiae, an early music specialist London-based group. I was particularly heartened by the review by *The Scotsman* which commented that the production was ‘wisely unpretentious’ with the caveat that the ‘spareness of the set and slow, stylised choreography was an overcooling factor’. True: by the time the production hit the stage, my initial intention to produce something that felt contemporary and political had been

reigned in, and re-focussed to examine how Iphigénie, Orestes, Pylades and Thoas had been restricted by their controlling social contexts, and indeed by the cool, ironic classical formality of Gluck's work. These contexts were as de-localised as I could achieve: although the soldiers were in modern generically militarised dress, and Orestes and Pylades both wore the inevitable jumpsuits associated with modern internment camps, there was little else on stage to place the story either at home or in a particular foreign locale. This was the closest we could get to a modern streamlined classicism, and my determination to inject a note of ironic detachment was, for some, a flaw. One review – from Andrew Clark in *Opera* magazine – was critical of both production and music, particularly wishing for a more dramatic vocal presence at moments of emotional intensity such as Iphigénie's solo aria at the start of Act 4. Although Clark's expectations of what a very young and low-budget company can be expected to deliver were rather uncompromising, his comments about the production's lack of grand ambition (his words were 'traffic direction') reflected the director's journey from bold and confident topical excitement to nervousness about staging what I had come to realise were rather reactionary ideas about popular democracy. Putting aside my own moments of ineptitude, however, I suggest that the sensation of 'coolness' experienced by both Clark and the more sympathetic Scotsman reviewers were reactions to the difficulty I experienced translating disparate elements that are not fully resolved in Gluck's work: Euripides' residual and profoundly anti-climactic irony, filtered through the *ancien regime's* sentimental attachment to artful simplicity, leaves traces of mixed dramatic conventions that are far from being 'trans-historical' for modern opera audiences.

Reflecting on the reviews of the various production companies who attempted this work in the same year as we did, I think we were all fortunate to have been given the opportunity to experience this remarkable work at all. If I had known then what I know now we probably wouldn't have attempted it – but that would have been a pity, not least for the principal singers. When we originally picked the work (at my suggestion) in 2013, I had in mind a trio of young singers who I thought could attempt the parts of Iphigénie, Orestes and Pylades, and who would learn and grow from these roles in both vocal and dramatic capability. After auditions, and with advice from various voice

teachers of the students concerned, we cast Orestes using a young college student from outside our own campus and we hired-in a professional Thoas in the figure of Andy McTaggart, a young professional baritone with a growing reputation in Scottish operatic circles, who brought to the production a confidence that helped to develop the stagecraft of the rest of the cast. The chorus parts, and the small but important roles for supporting priestesses, Diana and Henschman, were all within the vocal capacity of our own students; however, for an inexperienced cast used to cheerful Gilbert and Sullivan choruses, enacting either drilled thuggery (the men) or traumatised masochism (the women) was a challenge. I can confidently say that what went on stage was a huge improvement on what we started with, and that nobody fell in the pit during either the congested Furies scene or the final fight scene.

Because this was a University production and all academics these days look to measure 'impact', we worked with a student intern (Tru deBolt) who designed and distributed a short questionnaire to audience members. Ninety-one people took the trouble to fill this in, a return rate of just under 15% of the total ticket sales, for which we are grateful. The audience were mostly local to our area, and comments reflected a sense of collusiveness that community theatre often possesses: we had a sense that we were performing to friends, although friends can be blunt in sharing their opinions. Only one return made any reference to perceived topicality as a factor that had enhanced their engagement with the performance. Overwhelmingly, clarity of storytelling, and hearing singers over the orchestra, were the factors that led to a positive experience or otherwise. The first specific question invited comment on the new libretto translation produced by Dr Julia Prest of the University of St Andrews Department of French. This was firmly praised by over 50% of the audience, particularly the younger members of the audience (80% of those aged 40 and under), and of the 35% who answered 'yes' to the next question concerning whether the production had changed their views about opera, most explained that telling a clear story using English words had increased their enjoyment of a work – and medium – that had been previously unfamiliar to them. The third question, about the choreography, had divided the audience roughly into 2/3 who liked it and 1/3 who didn't, although several commented that a large chorus on a small stage made simplicity

the only practical response. Negative comments from the audience about movement intersected with the reviewers' reservations. Early opera – particularly French opera – has a lot of implied dance, which needs either to be staged as dance, or directed into other forms of structured movement. My own personal tip from the project is that more specialist support would be useful in managing choreography so that it is sympathetic to the skill level of the cast while still providing variety and interest for the audience.

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