

August 6, 2020 – Christoph Willibald Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* & *Orphée et Euridice*

On this week’s Thursday Night Opera House, we’ll hear two different versions of the classic Orpheus and Euridice story by the same composer. *Orfeo ed Euridice* was the first of Christoph Willibald Gluck’s three so-called “reform” operas (the others were *Alceste* and *Paride ed Elena*), in which a “noble simplicity” was intended to replace the complicated plots and florid musical style of opera seria. The original version, in Italian and set to a libretto by Ranieri de’ Cazabigi, was first performed at Vienna’s Burgtheater on October 5, 1762, where Orpheus was sung by an alto castrato. Gluck’s revised *Orphée et Euridice* was premiered on August 2, 1774 at the Royal Academy of Music in Paris, in French and with Orpheus sung by a tenor. When the original Italian version of the opera was revived in the 1920s the role of Orpheus was generally sung by mezzo-sopranos, but nowadays it’s generally sung by countertenors.

The musician Orfeo/Orfée (mezzo-soprano **Maureen Forrester**/tenor **Jean-Paul Fouchécourt**) mourns the death of his beloved wife Euridice (soprano **Teresa Stich-Randall**/soprano **Catherine Dubosc**). Amore/L’Amour (soprano **Hanny Steffek**/soprano **Suzie Le Blanc**) tells Orpheus that Zeus will permit Euridice to return to Earth from Hades but if she is released, he must not look back at her until they have returned to the living world. Orpheus charms the Furies with the beauty of his singing and finds Euridice among the Blessed Spirits. He leads her away from Hades but his seeming indifference in not looking back makes Euridice threaten to return. Her distress finally causes Orpheus to look back at her, whereupon she immediately sinks into the shadows. Orpheus laments his loss of Euridice. Amor, taking pity on him, once again brings Euridice to life. A happy ending!

In the original 1762 Italian version, **Sir Charles Mackerras** conducts the chorus and orchestra of the Vienna State Opera in this 1966 Vanguard Classics recording. **Ryan Brown** conducts the Opera Lafayette Orchestra and Chorus in the 1774 French revision, released in 2005 by Naxos.

From the Royal Opera House Covent Garden’s 2010 production of Gluck’s *Orphée et Euridice*, tenor **Juan Diego Flórez** sings Orphée’s lament, “J’ai perdu mon Euridice”: <https://youtu.be/3MCOKMuwKkA>.

Please join me next Thursday, August 13th, for Peter Tchaikovsky’s adaptation of Alexander Pushkin’s poem *Eugene Onegin*, with **Dmitri Hvorostovsky** in the title role, **Nucia Focile** as Tatiana, **Neil Shicoff** as Lensky, and **Olga Borodina** as Olga. **Semyon Bychkov** conducts this 1994 Philips recording.

The Thursday Night Opera House is heard every Thursday evening at 7 o’clock in the Eastern time zone on 89.7 FM in central North Carolina, and we’re streamed online at <http://www.theclassicalstation.org>, and you can listen on WCPE’s Android or iPhone apps.

Bob Chapman

W. Robert Chapman, Host of the Thursday Night Opera House