

## NOTES ON GLUCK'S ARMIDE

By CARL VAN VECHTEN

RICHARD WAGNER, like many another great man, took what he wanted where he found it. Everyone has heard the story of his remark to his father-in-law when that august musician first listened to *Die Walküre*: "You will recognize this theme, Papa Liszt?" The *motif* in question occurs when Sieglinde sings: *Kehrte der Vater nun heim*. Liszt had used the tune at the beginning of his *Faust* symphony. Not long ago, in playing over Schumann's *Kinderszenen*, I discovered Brunnhilde's magic slumber music, exactly as it appears in the music drama, in the piece pertinently called *Kind im Einschlummern*. When Weber's *Euryanthe* was revived recently at the Metropolitan Opera House it had the appearance of an old friend, although comparatively few in the first night audience had heard the opera before. One recognized tunes, characters, and scenes, because Wagner had found them all good enough to use in *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. But, at least, you will object, he invented the music drama. That, I am inclined to believe, is just what he did not do, as anyone may see for himself who will take the trouble to glance over the scores of the Chevalier Gluck and to read the preface to *Alceste*.

Gluck's reform of the opera was gradual; *Orphée* (in its French version), *Alceste*, and *Iphigénie en Aulide*, all of which antedate *Armide*, are replete with indications of what was to come; but *Armide*, it seems to me, is, in intention at least, almost the music drama, as we use the term to-day. The very nature of the characters and scenes confirms my amiable suspicion regarding Wagner.

What is the character of Armide herself but that of a wilful Kundry? Her father, Hidraot, is certainly the counterpart of Klingsor. Renaud, too, who will have none of her, we seem to have seen since as Parsifal. Ubalde and the Danish Cavalier will be familiar figures to anyone who has attended a performance of *Lohengrin*. The scene of the Naiad certainly suggests the scene between Siegfried and the Rhine maidens in the third act of *Die Götterdämmerung* and the scene at the end of the work, in which Armide sets fire to her palace and flies away on a hippogriff, may have been in Wagner's mind when he penned the conclusion

to the last *Ring* drama in which Brünnhilde on her horse mounts the funeral pyre of the hero while the Gibichs' palace is destroyed by flames. To cap the climax, the overture begins with exactly the same theme, note for note, as that which opens the prelude of *Die Meistersinger*. But subtler evidence than this of Wagner's debt to Gluck is to be found in the conclusion of the final act, in which one theme, in recitative form, is dramatically extolled by voice and orchestra in a manner which foreshadows exactly the later love death of Isolde and Brünnhilde's self immolation. That Wagner was familiar with the Gluck scores is not in doubt. He made a concert ending for one of the *Iphigénie* overtures (because he was displeased with the one which Mozart had already made, as he signified with reasons in an article published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, July 1, 1854), and somewhere in his writings he gives Gluck the credit for the invention of the *leit-motiv*. "With what poignant simplicity, with what truth has Gluck characterized by music the two elements of the conflict," he writes, concerning the overture to *Iphigénie en Aulide*. "In the beginning one recognizes in the marvelous vigor of the principal theme, with its weight of brass, a compact mass concentrated on a unique interest; then, in the theme which follows, the opposed and individual interest of the victim moves us to tenderness." (Indeed, in the article in the *Neue Zeitschrift* he indicates four themes in this overture, each of which he calls by a name.)

But it is for more essential reasons that one names Gluck the father of the music drama as we understand it to-day. In *Armide* he does away with recitative accompanied by the clavichord. The music of this work forms a continuous whole, made up, to be sure, of distinguishable pieces and melodies, separated by recitatives; but these recitatives, always accompanied by the orchestra, are the dramatic backbone of the drama. Nor is there repetition of words, a favorite device of opera composers of the period (and of periods to follow), who often repeated a phrase several times in order to effectively melodise over it. "I have tried," says Gluck himself, "to be more of a painter and poet in *Armide* than musician." More of a painter and poet than musician! Might not Wagner have said this? He was painter and poet and musician. Wagner, as a matter of fact, wrote to von Bülow: "One thing is certain: I am not a musician."

The preface to *Alceste* contains so adequate a statement of Gluck's intentions that I cannot do better than transcribe that admirable document here (the translation is that which appears in Grove's Dictionary):

When I undertook to set the opera of *Alceste* to music, I resolved to avoid all those abuses which had crept into Italian opera through the mistaken vanity of singers and the unwise compliance of composers, and which had rendered it wearisome and ridiculous, instead of being, as it once was, the grandest and most imposing stage of modern times. I endeavored to reduce music to its proper function, that of seconding poetry by enforcing the expression of the sentiment, and the interest of the situations, without interrupting the action, or weakening it by superfluous ornament. My idea was that the relation of music to poetry was much the same as that of harmonious coloring and well-disposed light and shade to an accurate drawing, which animates the figures without altering their outlines. I have therefore been very careful not to interrupt a singer in the heat of a dialogue in order to introduce a tedious ritornelle, nor to stop him in the middle of a piece either for the purpose of displaying the flexibility of his voice on some favorable vowel, or that the orchestra might give him time to take breath before a long-sustained note.

Furthermore, I have not thought it right to hurry through the second part of a song, if the words happened to be the most important of the whole, in order to repeat the first part regularly four times over; or to finish the air where the sense does not end in order to allow the singer to exhibit his power of varying the passage at pleasure. In fact my object was to put an end to abuses against which good taste and good sense have long protested in vain.

My idea was that the overture ought to indicate the subject and prepare the spectators for the character of the piece they are about to see; that the instruments ought to be introduced in proportion to the degree of interest and passion in the words; and that it was necessary above all to avoid making too great a disparity between the recitative and the air of a dialogue, so as not to break the sense of a period or awkwardly interrupt the movement and animation of a scene. I also thought that my chief endeavor should be to attain a grand simplicity and consequently I have avoided making a parade of difficulties at the expense of clearness; I have set no value on novelty as such, unless it was naturally suggested by the situation and suited to the expression; in short there was no rule which I did not consider myself bound to sacrifice for the sake of effect.

Gluck had indeed determined to unite the arts of speech, painting, and music in the same work long before Wagner attempted to do so. He even went further (following, it is true, a custom of the period) and made the art of the dance an essential part of his scheme. Any adequate production of *Armide* or *Iphigénie en Aulide* cannot be made without taking this fact into account. The ballet requires as much attention as the orchestra or the singers. The ballet, in fact, in these music dramas and in *Orphée* is an essential part of the action. It may be said that the inadequate dancing in the production of *Armide* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York militated against the permanent

success of the work there, in spite of Mme. Fremstad's remarkable performance of the title part and Mr. Caruso's lovely singing (the best he has done here) of the music of Renaud.

*Armide* served to open the New York opera season of 1910-11. The exact date of the performance (the first in America) was November 14, 1910. This reads like a simple enough statement unless one remembers that *Armide* was produced at the Académie Royale de Musique in Paris on September 23, 1777. In other words this opera, which by many is considered the masterpiece of its composer, had to wait for over a century and a quarter for a hearing on these shores. The year 1777 was history-making for the United States, but Marie Antoinette, shortly after the production of *Armide*, wrote a friend that no one in Paris was thinking any more about America. Everybody was discussing Gluck's new opera. Why was the New York production so belated? There were many reasons: the Gluck renaissance in Europe is of comparatively recent date. *Armide* has been performed recently in London; Paris has seen many revivals of it; several German cities and Brussels have produced it. A decade ago both Oscar Hammerstein and Heinrich Conried promised *Armide* to New York, but the promise was not kept. The Metropolitan production was made after Mr. Conried's death, by Giulio Gatti-Casazza and Arturo Toscanini.

H. T. Parker, in an article which appeared in the *Boston Transcript* in 1906, outlines a few of the reasons why an impresario might not face a production of *Armide* with equanimity:

There are thirteen important parts in *Armide* in the shortened version used in the recent European revivals. Except *Armide* herself not one is a star part; yet every one, if the opera is to keep its charm, must be sung with qualities of voice, artistry, imagination, and restraint that are rare among our generation of singers, major or minor. In Gluck's day two tenors in a single opera was a trifling demand for a composer to make. Outside Wagner it alarms the modern manager when both these tenors have considerable parts. Again *Armide* requires eight different settings—an Oriental palace, enchanted glades and gardens, the mouth of Hades, and sombre and fantastic nowheres. A flowery couch that bears *Armide* and her knight through the air and the enchantress's chariot, likewise for aerial journeys, are incidental pieces of machinery. Above all, in five of the eight scenes, a ballet appears, not for ornamental dances, or showy spectacle, but for intimate and delicate illustration of the situation and the music.

When the work was to be presented in Paris Gluck wrote his friend Du Roullet that he would let the Opéra have it only on

certain conditions, of which the principal ones were that he should have at least two months for preparatory study; that he could do what he pleased at rehearsals, and that there should be no understudies; the parts should be sung by the first artists.

"Unless these conditions are acceded to," he wrote, "I shall keep *Armide* for my pleasure," and he terminated the letter with: "I have written music which will never grow old."

The Académie Royale very sensibly let the composer have his way about rehearsals and singers and the work was produced there. It was revived in 1805, in 1811, and again in 1825. Later performances have been rare until within the last few years. F. A. Gevaert, the Director of the Conservatory of Brussels, who died in 1908, has been largely responsible for the renewed interest in this great composer. In his preface to *Armide* he relates an interesting incident in connection with the projected attempt to perform the Opera in Paris in 1870. It seems that in 1858, when Meyerbeer was throned without a rival at the Paris Opéra, an event occurred which caused a sensation in the musical world—the publication in the *Revue Contemporaine* of a study of Gluck's *Armide* signed by the name of one of the highest personages in France. It again became the fashion to praise the work of Gluck. The act of Hate from *Armide* was played and sung at one of the concerts of the Société des Concerts, and the piece itself was inscribed in the list of lyric dramas to be performed at the Opéra. However, as often happens in such matters, the director did not keep his promise in spite of the example of the enormous success of the revival of *Orphée* at the Théâtre Lyrique in 1859 when Mme. Pauline Viardot-Garcia sang the title part.

Finally Emile Perrin, who became director of the Opéra in 1862, took the matter to heart. In 1866 he asked Gevaert to become general director of music in the theatre. Knowing Gevaert to be a fervent admirer of Gluck, for he had studied the five French works of the composer since his youth, Perrin often asked him to play the score of *Armide* on the piano. In 1868 Perrin decided to prepare the work for production during the winter of 1870-71. He went to the most extraordinary pains about the scenery, costumes, and machinery, and he sent to St. Petersburg for a ballet master. He entrusted the principal rôles to the first artists of the Opéra whose *répertoire* at this period embraced works by Halévy, Meyerbeer, and Rossini. He allotted *Armide* to Mme. Sasse; Hate to Mme. Gueymard; Renaud to Villaret; and Hidraot to Devoyod. The fourth act, however, in which none of the principal characters of the piece appears, he

did not cast at once. He recognized this act as the most dangerous point in his enterprise.

To present to the public toward the end of the evening an entire act sung by secondary artists is to run a chance of failure, he said. On the other hand to cut three-quarters of the act, as one has done at many of the revivals of *Armide* is to discredit in advance the work which one has pretended to honor. Well, I will have this act, which is a veritable musical intermezzo, sung by the stars of the troupe, by the artists who actually have the highest standing with the public. Faure will sing Ubalde, Miss Nilsson will sing Lucinde (both of whom were at that moment having the greatest success in *Hamlet*), Mme. Carvalho (who created the part of Marguerite in *Faust*) will take the part of Mélisse, and Colin (a young tenor who had just sung the part of Raoul in *Les Huguenots* with success) will play the part of the Danish Knight. As this act may be detached from the rest of the piece we will rehearse it separately.

This splendid idea of Perrin's, however, was never to be carried out. Ten days before the date set for the opening performance war was declared between France and Germany and *Armide* was sent to the storehouse. It was not until 1905 (thirty-five years later!) that the music drama finally appeared on the *affiches* of the Opéra when Mme. Bréval enacted the title part; Mr. Delmas sang Hidraot; Mr. Affre, Renaud; Mlle. Alice Verlet, a Naiad; Mlle. Féart, Hate; Mr. Gilly, Ubalde (the part which he sang in New York); and Mr. Scaramberg the Danish Knight. Since then *Armide* has never been long absent from the *répertoire* of the Opéra. I have heard Mme. Litvinne there in the title part, and Mmes. Borgo and Chenal have also appeared in it.

Quinault wrote the tragedy of *Armide* after an episode to be found in Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*. Quinault's book was originally set by Lulli and first represented in Paris in 1686. It was revived in 1703, 1713, 1724, 1746, 1761, and 1764. Gluck's first work for the Paris Opéra was *Iphigénie en Aulide*. Later he arranged *Alceste* and *Orphée* for presentation at that theatre and wrote some smaller pieces for performance at Versailles to please Marie Antoinette. In composing *Armide* Gluck followed the original book with slight alterations, in spite of the fact that, as Gevaert says, the poetic form of the text, excellent for the recitative in vogue in Lulli's time, lends itself as little as possible to purely musical voice writing, on account of the mélange of different meters and the irregular return of the rhyme. Gluck might easily have altered the verses and omitted some of the prolixities of the plot, as had been done when Lulli's opera was revived, but he did not seem to wish to do so, counting on the re-



sources of his art to sustain the attention of the auditor in the moments when the action slackened, or indeed, ceased altogether. The lack of symmetry in the verses of Quinault the composer found altogether to his liking and proposed to draw from it some entirely new effects. In consequence he resolved to put the poem of 1686 from the first to the last verse, with the exception of the prologue, to music. The only modification that he permitted himself was an original termination to the terrible scene of the third act, which ends, in Quinault's play, with Hate returning to her cavern, after having abandoned *Armide* to her fate; Gluck added four lines:

O ciel! quelle horrible menace!  
Je frémis, tout mon sang se glace.  
Amour! Puissant Amour! viens calmer mon effroi!  
Et prends pitié d'un coeur qui s'abandonne à toi!

In order to appreciate the superiority of Gluck's work to Lulli's it is only necessary to compare the two settings of *Armide's* arioso, "*Enfin, il est en ma puissance.*" Twenty years before Gluck composed *Armide* J.-J. Rousseau wrote an article about the ridiculous weakness of Lulli's setting of these words and the unsuitability of the musical treatment.

The story of the play, simply told, follows: After a short prelude the curtain rises upon *Armide* enthroned on the terrace of a palace with the white round domes of Damascus stretching away under the dense blue of the oriental sky. Renaud, the unconquered, haunts the princess. In vain her waiting maids soothe and flatter her; in vain the king, her father bids her to wedlock; in vain the people rejoice in a new victory for her soldiers. On its heels treads defeat: the dying soldier tells it; Renaud has wrought it; and *Armide* rises to vengeance.

Renaud wanders in a desert solitude, which is transformed by *Armide* into an enchanted glade. Naiads caress him to sleep on a flowery couch. With drawn dagger *Armide* hesitates. Love kindles as she looks and she invokes the spirits of the air to bear her and Renaud away on the breezes.

Before the gates of Hades *Armide* struggles between love and implacable bitterness. Out of the depths rises Hate to exorcise love, but also to warn *Armide* that Renaud shall yet escape, whereat, since *Armide* is woman as well as enchantress, love is awakened again.

Two knights come to the walls of the magic garden in quest of Renaud. Neither awesome beasts nor shadowy phantoms have

power to frighten them when they lift the golden sceptre and raise the diamond shield. In the garden is Renaud, enchained in its pleasures, subdued by Armide. For a moment she leaves him and that moment the knights stand beside him. In the shield, as in a mirror, Renaud sees himself again as a warrior. Armide returns and, in despair, entreats, and curses by turn. The knights drag Renaud away while Armide consigns the garden to flames and escapes in a magic chariot through the air.

All the later works of Gluck were enriched by many numbers which had done service in operas he had written in earlier days, which were quickly forgotten then, and have been entirely forgotten to-day, except by the compilers of musical biographies and the makers of thematic catalogues. Wotquenne, in his thematic catalogue of the works of Gluck, indicates what melodies in *Armide* are second-hand, so to speak. The overture, it seems, was originally employed for *Telemacco* (1765) and was again used before *Le feste d'Apollo* (1769). The Dance of the Furies and the Sicilienne had previously done duty in the ballet *Don Juan*. The other numbers which had been used before were very much modified in their new positions. It may be noted that the entire scene of Hate is little more than a mosaic of various themes from earlier operas of Gluck. Armide's appeal to Love at the close of the third act is accompanied by a rhythm is the second violins which closely resembles a passage in *Paride ed Elena*. Julien Tiersot has an interesting theory to account for these self-borrowings:

Certain scenes in *Armide* belonged to the order of ideas which in other times had already interested Gluck. In his youth he had depicted musically many scenes of invocation and evocation. Certain figures, certain rhythms, certain sonorities, had imposed themselves upon him in this connection and he had already made use of them in many of his operas. He found himself thus on familiar ground when he had to put to music the duet by which Armide and Hidraot evoke the spirits, and all the scene with Hate.

I can never glance into the score of this remarkable work, or hear it performed, however indifferently, without feeling a very sincere emotion. The melodies of Gluck's immediate successors charm one; Mozart more than charms, for he succeeded in painting the characteristics of his personages in tone, but even in Mozart's most dramatic score there lies no such clear indication of the way of the modern music drama as may be found in *Armide* on almost every page. I do not dwell on the overture, for that to me is but a futile preparation for the drama which is to



follow, and for which it was not written. But from the rise of the first curtain I can only follow the progress of the work with increasing admiration. The pride and despair expressed in *Armide's* opening scene are vastly more successful than the overture in evoking the proper atmosphere, but it is with the entrance and sudden death of Aronte, after his short announcement, that the real drama begins, and it is with *Armide's* exclamation, "O ciel! c'est Renaud!" that music drama becomes an established fact and not a theory. The finale of the first act is a whirlwind and should be treated as such in performance. The second act is one of violent contrasts: pastoral scenes alternate with stormy invocations. So, by means of his magical background, Gluck emphasizes the contrasts in his heroine's nature, in which love of Renaud is struggling with her hatred of him as the enemy of her country. Love conquers and in *Armide's* appeal to the spirits of the air to bear her and her lover away one may find as noble a piece of music, as beautiful an idea completely realized, as Wagner's conception of Wotan's appeal to Loge at the close of *Die Walküre*. The third act begins with the most famous air of the piece, *Ah! si la liberté*—*Armide's* soliloquy before her appeal to Hate to rescue her from the bonds of love. The ensuing scenes are replete with dramatic expressiveness and I do not know of a moment more moving, in its effective and beautiful simplicity, in the whole range of music drama (nor am I forgetting the poignancy of several episodes in the lyric dramas of Moussorgsky, arrived at, by the way, by similar means) than the appeal to Love with which the act closes. The fourth act is an interlude, filled with charming music, to be sure. And in the fifth act, in the duet between *Armide* and Renaud, and more especially in the dramatic recitative with which the work ends, may be found the seed from which grew the great trees of the nineteenth century.