

b Erasbach, Upper Palatinate, July 2, 1714; *d* Vienna, November 15, 1787

Christoph Willibald Gluck was a radical reformist whose contributions pave the way for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Like many of his 18th-century contemporaries, little is known about his childhood. Born to a forester, Gluck made the break from country life in his early teens, escaping to Prague, and appears to have been largely self-taught as a musician. In the employ of Prince Lobkowitz, he made his way to Vienna and fell under the influence of court composers Johann Joseph Fux and Antonio Caldara. A trip to Milan cemented the Italian influence in his music, yielding his first opera *Artaserse* in 1741, with *Demetrio* (1742) and *Demofonte* (1743) to follow. A journey to London in 1745 put him in touch with George Frideric Handel, later to become a hero and role model.



For six years Gluck continued to exist as a wandering musician. He married the well-connected Maria Anna Bergin, who would be his faithful companion to the end of his life. He went into the service of the Prince of Saxe-Hildburghausen and one of his compositions, *Le nozze d'Ercole e d'Ebe*, attracted the attention of visiting Prince Nikolaus Esterházy, Austrian ambassador to the Saxon court. As a result, Gluck was commissioned to write *La Semiramide riconosciuta* for the reopening of the Burgtheater in 1748, an event that cemented the tenuous reign of Archduchess Maria Theresa, Austria's first and only female Hapsburg ruler. As her husband Francis I was

from Lorraine, a French theatrical troupe was at residence in the imperial city, and Gluck was further engaged to write seven opera comiques (as the more expensive opera seria had been suspended due to the Seven Years War), his most famous to become *La rencontre imprévue* (1764). The composer was also hired to write ballets for Viennese theaters, the most important being *Le festin de pierre, ou Don Juan*. The arrival of Italian expatriate Ranieri de' Calzabigi from Paris, brought a further influx of the French style, but his most significant contribution was his collaboration as Gluck's librettist for *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762), *Alceste* (1767) and *Paride ed Elena* (1770), a trio of works heralding the "reform" for which these artists would soon be known.



Gluck began to study the operas of Jean-Baptiste Lully and Jean-Philippe Rameau in earnest. Upon a suggestion by the French ambassador in Vienna, he embarked on his first *tragédie lyrique* for the French stage, *Iphigénie en Aulide*. Gluck had a powerful ally



in Paris, his former singing student, Dauphine Marie-Antoinette (the daughter of Maria Theresa and ill-fated future queen of France). Preparing for the boldness of Gluck's new style, the leaders of the Académie Royale de Musique requested that he prepare five new works, as they feared the popularity of *Iphigénie* would drive all other operas from the stage.

Their fears were well founded – *Iphigénie en Aulide* was a tremendous success, though its run was cut short with the death of King Louis XV and the closing of all theaters for a period of mourning. During that time, Gluck had a chance to revise his *Orfeo ed Euridice* in the French style. When it premiered in 1774, the opera was received with great enthusiasm and the new queen awarded him a generous pension. Gluck returned to Vienna, but still kept his eye on Paris for future productions.

In due course, Gluck found he had a rival composer in French capital, Niccolò Piccinni, and soon two factions evolved into “Gluckistes” and “Piccinistes.” Gluck

quickly produced *Armide* to defend his new style, angering both the French traditionalists and supporters of the modern Italian style who had chosen Piccinni as their champion (even though he had yet to produce his first work for Paris). At the height of this *Querelle des Bouffons* (Battle of the Jesters), the Académie went as far as to commission each composer to write an opera on the same subject. Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* was the first to be presented in 1779, with Piccinni's version appearing two years later.

Gluck unfortunately experienced a series of strokes and ceased composing major works. Feted by his fellow Viennese, he retired to living in a gluttonous style. Gluck's music had long become a staple of the Hapsburg court, and in 1781, his career was celebrated during a state visit by the Russian Tsar and Tsarina (delaying the premiere of Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, though the younger composer still held him in high regard). Four of his works were mounted by the Burgtheater – *Orfeo*, *Alceste*, *Iphigénie auf Tauris* (the Vienna premiere in German) and *La rencontre imprévue*. Settling into the comfort of old age and venerated by composers and royalty alike, Gluck would die six years later, drinking alcohol in defiance of his doctor's orders, thereby succumbing to his final apoplectic stroke.



set model by Adrian Linford