

THE GRAMOPHONE COLLECTION

The transcendent powers of music

Orfeo ed Euridice, the opera in which Orpheus placates the Furies with his lyre to rescue his beloved, exists on many recordings in at least two versions. In **Gluck's** tercentenary year, **Richard Wigmore** picks the best

When the Habsburg imperial couple Maria Theresa and Francis I paraded into Vienna's Burgtheater on October 5, 1762, for the premiere of Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* they were doubtless anticipating a lightweight pastoral entertainment. The occasion – Emperor Francis's name day – and the opera's billing as an *azione teatrale* (literally 'theatrical action') promised as much. The imperial audience got their *deus ex machina* happy ending. But for the first two acts, at least, they experienced a work of startling intensity and novelty that integrated chorus, soloists and ballet in dramatic complexes and broke down the division between recitative and aria. One admiring reviewer wrote of the premiere, 'The action and music are highly effective and induce a sadness which penetrates deep into the soul.'

Orfeo's librettist, Ranieri de' Calzabigi, was an opportunistic adventurer and 'a great lover of women', in Casanova's expert judgement. He was also a passionate disciple of the French Enlightenment and, by 1760, an avid opponent of the excesses of Italian opera. His ideas chimed perfectly with Gluck's search for 'beautiful simplicity' and dramatic truth. Calzabigi took the archetypal story of Orpheus's descent to Hades to rescue Eurydice and pared it down to essentials. From the opening chorus of mourning, through the elementally moving contrast between Stygian darkness and dazzling light in Act 2, to Orpheus's famous climactic lament, 'Che farò senza Euridice?', Gluck created a drama of swift, shattering economy: a myth on the transcendent powers of music, and a milestone in operatic history.

Gluck, though, was one of those revolutionaries capable of betraying his own ideals. Twelve years later, he and librettist Pierre Louis Moline reworked *Orfeo* as *Orphée et Eurydice* for the Paris Opéra. Gluck added new arias and ballet numbers for dance-mad Paris – including the

torrential 'Air de Furies' and the otherworldly flute solo in the 'Ballet des ombres heureuses' (Dance of the Blessed Spirits) – and modernised the orchestration. In the opening tableau, the chalumeau and the cornett, with their fragile, other-worldly timbres, were replaced by the oboe and the clarinet. In Vienna the hero had been sung by the castrato Gaetano Guadagni, fêted for his delicacy of nuance and subtlety of declamation. The French, rational to the last, deemed castratos an offence against nature. So Gluck duly reworked the role for an *haute-contre*, a peculiarly French type of high tenor with falsetto-ish top notes, adding a bravura aria at the end of Act 1, 'L'espoir renaît dans mon âme' – just the sort of 'gothic and barbarous extravagance' that he and Calzabigi had sought to purge from opera.

The earliest opera to survive two generations of changing tastes, *Orphée* held the Paris stage for 60 years. By the mid-19th century, though, it had slipped out of the repertoire, not least because the *haute-contre* voice was now almost obsolete. Enter that passionate Gluck champion Hector Berlioz. In 1859, shortly after completing *Les Troyens*, he was engaged to prepare a production of *Orphée* for the prodigiously gifted mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot. Restoring Orpheus's vocal line to its original pitch, Berlioz tweaked the orchestration, jettisoned most of the 1774 ballet music and replaced the final chorus with the finale of Gluck's last opera, *Echo et Narcisse*. The Gluck–Berlioz–Viardot combination caused a predictable sensation. As the singer recorded, 'People embraced each other in the passageway during the intermissions, they wept, they laughed with delight, they trampled the floor . . . in a word, there was a turmoil, a jubilation such as I have never seen in Paris.'

MEZZO-SOPRANOS REIGN

In essence it was the Berlioz version, in French or back-translated into Italian and

mingled with bits of the 1762 original, that held sway for more than a century. The title-role was still occasionally taken by a tenor, but with Viardot as imposing precedent, Orpheus became the province of mezzos and contraltos. On a 1940 broadcast from the Met, ponderously conducted by **Erich Leinsdorf**, the title-role is taken by the Wagnerian mezzo Kerstin Thorborg: dignified, very feminine-sounding, not always ideally steady. This may have its attractions as a period piece, but the sound is poor-to-excruciating, with pitch distortions, a murkily distant chorus, constant stage clatter and an irritatingly intrusive prompt (did anyone actually know their words?).

In England, with its enduring oratorio tradition, the part of Orpheus was long associated with the maternal contralto, a breed represented, supremely, by Kathleen Ferrier. The 1951 performance from Netherlands Opera, conducted by **Charles Bruck** and recorded in just-passable sound, remains an eloquent monument to the mingled warmth and grandeur of Ferrier's timbre and her expressive range. Orpheus's pleas to the Furies have an intense pathos, while 'Che farò' veers between anguish, outrage and haunting inwardness. On the downside, Ferrier's vibrato, as caught by the microphone, can be uncomfortably wide for modern tastes; Bruck's tempos are often sluggish; and neither the Cupid (Amor; or Amour in French versions of the opera) nor the Eurydice are remotely in Ferrier's vocal league. If you want Ferrier's Orpheus, go for this rather than the heavily cut 1947 Glyndebourne performance conducted by Fritz Stiedry.

In the late 1960s the Royal Opera House mounted a composite *Orfeo* (part-1762, part-1774, part-Berlioz) for Marilyn Horne, with her darkly brilliant timbre, huge range and spectacular coloratura technique. A latter-day Viardot, Horne is indeed mightily impressive, imperious in her bravura showpiece, complete with the

surreal two-octave cadenza concocted by Viardot and Saint-Saëns, passionate in her encounter with the Furies. There is, though, a want of tenderness, both in Horne's singing and in **Sir Georg Solti's** conducting, by turns fiercely driven and heavily romanticised. Pilar Lorengar makes a sympathetic, if slightly fluttery, Eurydice, Helen Donath a charming Cupid.

Orpheus was the role of Janet Baker's operatic swansong at Glyndebourne, in a version conducted by **Raymond Leppard** which is essentially Berlioz translated into Italian, plus all the ballet music. By 1982 there was more than a dash of vingar in Baker's tone. Yet, as ever, she sings with profound insight and understanding. No one quite matches Baker's mixture of other-worldliness and strange sadness in the sublime Elysian tone poem 'Che puro ciel', or distils such a mounting sense of panic in the Act 3 recitatives. While the Glyndebourne Chorus are splendid, neither the Eurydice (the edgy Elisabeth Speiser) nor the Cupid is memorable. Leppard coaxes lithe playing from the LPO; and if some of the ballet numbers sound over-fragrant, the 'Dance of the Blessed Spirits' – the most unearthly minuet in existence – and the flute solo are ravishingly beautiful.

BERLIOZ REVIVED

After these mix-and-match versions, two recordings appeared in French, based more or less faithfully on the 1859 Berlioz edition. Both are good. **John Eliot Gardiner's** Orpheus is Anne Sofie von Otter who, with her soft-grained mezzo, gives a subtle, introspective performance. Barbara Hendricks makes a fiery Eurydice, Brigitte Fournier a slender-toned Cupid. Gardiner conducts with a powerful dramatic sweep, drawing supple playing from the Lyons Opera Orchestra and bringing a sharp

feeling for gesture to the ballet numbers. In the opening tableau he restores Gluck's original chalumeau and cornett, obsolete by 1859. Also included from the 1774 version are the 'Air de Furies' (which Berlioz deemed dramatically nonsensical after Orpheus has reduced the Furies to pussycats) and the bittersweet trio 'Tendre Amour', filched by Gluck from his *Paride ed Elena*.

While von Otter exhibits a Classical restraint, Jennifer Larmore, in the recording conducted by **Donald Runnicles**, is ardent and forthright – closer, one imagines, to how Viardot would have sounded. She brings a steely determination to 'L'espoir renaît' and softens her naturally robust tone for an affecting 'J'ai perdu mon Eurydice' (ie 'Che farò'), the final verse tastefully ornamented. Dawn Upshaw makes a light-toned but spirited Eurydice, and Alison Hagley is a sparky Cupid. Runnicles gives the music a faint Romantic gloss, reasonable enough since this is Gluck viewed through a Berlioz prism. The one serious drawback is the recessed recording of what sounds like a vast chorus.

BACK TO 1762

Astonishingly, the original Italian *Orfeo* was only published in 1963. The earliest studio recording based on Gluck's 1762 score (plus the 'Air de Furies'), conducted by **Karl Richter**, is a travesty. As in German performances of Handel opera in the 1960s and beyond, the alto lead is transposed down an octave. The baritone hero is the omnivorous Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau at his most knowing and imposing. The infernal spirits never stand a chance here. Beyond this, the baritone voice sounds plain wrong, jarring with Gluck's delicate orchestration. Gundula Janowitz is the most limpid of Eurydices, Richter the most Teutonically marmoreal of conductors.

Although it in no way corresponds to the castrato in range or power, the countertenor voice, with its disembodied, other-worldly timbre, is apt for the symbolic nature of the hero, son of Apollo and god of song. The first countertenor Orpheus on disc, a decade before he swapped the larynx for the baton, was René Jacobs, with La Petite Bande under **Sigiswald Kuijken**. It's not a version that's worn well, despite some fine playing. Jacobs's tone is hooty and constricted, and he balloons into individual notes in a way that now sounds precious. Nor is the recording with James Bowman, conducted by **Jean-Claude Malgoire**, any better. Often an admirable singer, Bowman here sounds frail and detached. In fairness, Malgoire's clipped, plodding beat does him and his soprano colleagues few favours.

Far more compelling is the recording directed by **Hartmut Haenchen**. His Orpheus is Jochen Kowalski, whose countertenor in the 1980s was nonpareil in its resonance and almost-feminine sensuousness. Kowalski is especially impressive in his scene with the Furies, building the intensity gradually to a searing final plea. The boy singing Cupid sings brightly and neatly, but characterises blankly, while Dagmar Schellenberger-Ernst's Eurydice is long on indignation, short on tenderness. With his penchant for extreme speeds and stabbing accents, Haenchen is a controversial conductor, excitingly urgent in the Furies scene, blunt and graceless in the ballet numbers.

The most rarefied Orpheus on disc is Michael Chance, in a recording conducted by **Frieder Bernius**. Commentators in the 18th century wrote of the other-worldly beauty of Guadagni's voice, a description that could equally apply to Chance, who makes the hero as much mythical demigod as human lover. Frustratingly, Bernius's



TOP COUNTERTENOR (1762 VERSION) Derek Lee Ragin, Sylvia McNair, Cyndia Sieden, English Baroque Soloists / John Eliot Gardiner

Decca © 2 478 3425DMO

Ragin (above) sings the title-role with a daring, no-holds-barred intensity, while Gardiner has an unerring feel for the pacing and unique *tinta* of Gluck's revolutionary opera.



TOP TENOR (1774 VERSION) Richard Croft, Mireille Delunsch, Marion Housseau, Les Musiciens du Louvre / Marc Minkowski

Archiv © 471 582-2AH2
Purists tend to regard the French *Orphée* as more dramatically diffuse than the original *Orfeo*. This exciting performance, with Richard Croft (above) both lyrical and heroic in the title-role, may make them think again.



DVD CHOICE (BERLIOZ VERSION) Magdalena Kožená, Madeline Bender, Patricia Petibon, ORR / John Eliot Gardiner

EMI © DVD 216577 9

Despite controversial details, this stark, stylised production is true to the opera's Classical spirit. Cast, chorus and orchestra are superb, with the young Kožená a charismatic Orpheus, vocally and dramatically.

direction can be unfeelingly brisk, as in the pair of celestial choruses that close Act 2. There's another boy soprano as Cupid, and a sweet-toned but emotionally cool Eurydice in Nancy Argenta.

In stark contrast is **John Eliot Gardiner's** recording with countertenor Derek Lee Ragin. Where Chance's hero sublimates his grief in elegiac lyricism, Ragin conveys an almost shocking sense of Orpheus's pain. In his pleas with the Furies, some may find his sobs and plunges into a harsh chest register overdone. But Ragin's singing has an abandoned intensity unmatched by any other countertenor. Even in 'Che farò', Orpheus's self-control threatens to crack under the force of his anguish. His Eurydice, Sylvia McNair, is uncommonly feisty and word-alive. Gardiner's direction has far greater colour and atmosphere than Bernius's, with thrillingly incisive choral singing and an unflinching control of dramatic tension.

Countertenor hegemony is challenged by three versions of the original 1762 *Orfeo* with a mezzo-soprano hero. Two are instantly dispensable. In a Capriccio recording from Budapest, Júlia Hamari is a plummy-toned Orpheus, and **Ervin Lukács** conducts stodgily. Conversely, on the Naxos version recorded at performances in Drottningholm, **Arnold Östman's** tempos can be brisk to the point of impatience. To fit the performance on to a single CD, the final ballet sequence is cut, making the *lieto fine* seem more perfunctory than it need. Ann-Christine Biel – a pushed-down soprano rather than a true mezzo – is a dramatically pallid Orpheus. 'Che puro ciel' here sounds like a routine stroll through the local park rather than an expression of wonderment at the Elysian Fields.

Whereas Biel seems matter of fact in 'Che puro ciel', Bernarda Fink, on a Harmonia Mundi recording conducted by **René Jacobs**, conveys a sense of dazed ecstasy tinged with yearning. Fink's mezzo is pure, even and gently rounded; and throughout the opera her palpable dramatic involvement is tempered with Classical restraint. Her poignant pleas to the Furies suggest a surface control constantly threatened by barely suppressed passion; and her elegiac singing of 'Che farò', using Guadagni's own ornamentation, is one of the most beautiful on disc. From the explosive overture – written off by Berlioz as 'that incredible inanity' – Jacobs directs an urgent, pungently characterised reading. The RIAS Chamber Choir is a match for Gardiner's Monteverdi Choir, and both soprano soloists are excellent. Veronica Cangemi is a sensuous Eurydice; and Maria Cristina Kiehr injects a touch of



Christoph Willibald Gluck: born 300 years ago

coquettish spite into Cupid's song – this is Shakespeare's 'knaveish lad', relishing his power over poor helpless mortals.

THE HAUTE-CONTRE REVIVED

Contemporary reports suggest that the *haute-contre* Joseph Legros, for whom Gluck reworked the title-role in 1774, sang the part in full voice and with a 'heroic frisson'.

His successors, understandably, had to transfer some of Orpheus's crucifixingly high lines downwards, a practice followed in three of the five available versions with a tenor hero. The 1956 *Orphée* conducted, rather reverentially, by **Hans Rosbaud** is still cherishable for Léopold Simoneau's serene, elegantly moulded singing. In the tenor version Orpheus becomes a more heroic figure. With Simoneau, though, heroism is always tempered by dignity: and he wins over the Furies not by desperate entreaty but by gentle lyricism. But Simoneau and his Eurydice, Suzanne Danco, are surely too equable in their tense Act 3 exchanges.

Altogether more impassioned and assertive is the Orpheus of the young Nicolai Gedda in a recording assembled from performances in Paris in 1957. Like Rosbaud, conductor **Louis de Froment** chooses old-fashioned, stately tempos and makes various unsanctioned cuts. Ensemble is sometimes rocky, and the chorus sounds mushy. But the recording is worth hearing for Gedda's ardour (high notes ring gloriously) and the distinctive Gallic timbres of Eurydice (Janine Micheau) and Cupid (the charming Liliane Berton).

Of the three modern recordings of the 1774 French *Orphée*, the US

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

DATE / ARTISTS	RECORD COMPANY (REVIEW DATE)
Orfeo ed Euridice	
1940 Thorborg ^o , Novotna ^a , Farelli; NY Met Op / Leinsdorf	Guild (B) (2) GHCD2317/18
1951 Ferrier ^o , Koeman ^f , Duval ^f ; Netherlands Op / Bruck	EMI (S) (3) 956284-2 (4/78*)
1967 Fischer-Dieskau ^o , Janowitz ^f , Moser ^f ; Munich Bach Orch / Richter	DG (B) (2) 453 145-2GTA2 (5/69*)
1969 Horne ^o , Lorengar ^f , Donath ^f ; Royal Op / Solti	Decca (B) (2) 417 410-2DM2 (6/70*)
1978 Hamari ^o , Kincses ^f , Zempléni ^f ; Hungarian St Op / Lukács	Capriccio (M) (2) C51192
1982 Jacobs ^o , Kweksilber ^f , Falewicz ^f ; Petite Bande / S Kuljken	Accent (M) (2) ACC30023 (1/90*)
1982 Baker ^o , Speiser ^f , Gale ^f ; LPO / Leppard Erato (B) (2) 2564 68289-3 (2/83*, 5/93*)	Warner (F) (2) 5046 73921-2 (1/05)
1989 Kowalski ^o , Schellenberger-Ernst ^f , Fliegner ^f ; CPE Bach CO / Haenchen	Capriccio (M) (2) C60008 (1/90)
1991 Ragin ^o , McNair ^f , Sieden ^f ; EBS / Gardiner	Decca (S) (2) 478 3425DMO (2/94*, 9/97*)
1992 Chance ^o , Argenta ^f , Beckerbauer ^f ; Tafelmusik / Bernius	Sony (F) (2) SX2K48040 (8/92 - n/a)
1994 Bowman ^o , Dawson ^f , McFadden ^f ; Grande Ecurie et La Chambre du Roy / Malgoire	Auvidis (F) (2) E8538 (1/95 - n/a)
1998 Biel ^o , Boog ^f , Averno ^f ; Drottningholm Th Orch / Östman	Naxos (S) (8) 660064
2001 Fink ^o , Cangemi ^f , Kiehr ^f ; Freiburg Baroque Orch / Jacobs	Harmonia Mundi (M) (2) HMC90 1742/3 (A/O1)
Orphée et Eurydice	
1956 Simoneau ^o , Danco ^f , Alarie ^f ; Lamoureux Orch / Rosbaud	Phillips (B) (2) 468 537-2PM2 (1/60*, 5/93*)
1957 Gedda ^o , Micheau ^f , Bertoni ^f ; Paris Cons Orch / Froment	Profil (M) (2) PH09021
1989 Von Otter ^o , Hendricks ^f , Fournier ^f ; Lyons Op / Gardiner	EMI (F) (2) 769834-2 (2/90 - n/a)
1996 Larmore ^o , Upshaw ^f , Hagley ^f ; San Francisco Op / Runnicles	Teldec (F) (2) 4509 98418-2 (7/96 - n/a)
1999 Kožená ^o , Bender ^f , Petibon ^f ; ORR / Gardiner	EMI (F) (2) 216577-9 (6/09)
2002 Fouchécourt ^o , Dubosc ^f , LeBlanc ^f ; Lafayette Op Orch / R Brown	Naxos (S) (2) 8 660185/6
2002 Croft ^o , Delunsch ^f , Harousseau ^f ; Musiciens du Louvre / Minkowski	Archiv (M) (2) 471 582-2AH2 (11/04)
2003 Kasarova ^o , Joshua ^f , York ^f ; Bavarian St Orch / Bolton	Farao (F) (2) D108045 (1/05)
2008 Alagna ^o , Gamberoni ^f , Barrard ^f ; Bologna Comunale Th Orch / Bisanti	Bel Air Classiques (F) (2) BACO52; (F) (2) BAC452 (3/10)
2008 Wesseling ^o , Kleiter ^f , Im ^f ; Paris Op / Hengelbrock [sung in German]	Bel Air Classiques (F) (2) BACO44; (F) (2) BAC444
2008 Flórez ^o , Garmendia ^f , Marianelli ^f ; Real Th, Madrid / López-Cobos	Decca (M) (2) 478 2197DH2 (6/10)

Key: ^oOrpheus ^fEurydice ^cCupid