

GLUCK AND THE COMIC OPERA

By Dr. Thomas Hauschka

Gluck's *L'île de Merlin* explores the social conditions and injustices of its day, holding them up to the mirror of parody and satire: things that are properly ordered in the upside-down world, we are plainly led to believe, are out of joint in the real world. Between 1758 and 1764, Christoph Willibald Gluck created a number of *opéras comiques* for the Vienna stage that proved equally significant to his artistic career and to the evolution of a genre firmly committed to realism, parody, and social critique. Gluck was the only composer in the German-speaking countries to compete in this genre with his Parisian colleagues, who numbered scarcely half a dozen. Eventually it would become the prototype of German comic opera.

Opéra comique emerged from the vaudeville comedy of Paris' suburban theaters, and thus from a largely unwritten and partly improvised genre traditionally performed on fairground stages. Originally, it made use of French folk songs and ditties, generally referred to as *airs*, *ariettes*, or *vaudevilles*, but in the 1750s, these pieces gradually gave way to new compositions—*airs nouveaux*—in which dialogues by seasoned librettists were introduced into well-constructed plots. The works that the Italian theater director Count Giacomo Durazzo and French librettist Charles-Simon Favart imported to Vienna had to be adapted to suit local conditions and dialect passages with allusions to Parisian affairs, unknown in Vienna, expunged.

Gluck, having already been involved in the adaption of several *opéras comiques*, presented his first original work in this genre, *La fausse esclave*, at the Burg Theater on January 8, 1758. In the same year he created *L'île de Merlin ou Le monde renversé*, a work conceived on a much broader scale, and the first to include vocal ensemble numbers.

L'île de Merlin owes its origins to the vaudeville comedy *Le monde renversé*. Composed by Jean Gilliers, *Le monde renversé* premiered at Paris' Saint Laurent Fair in 1718. Gluck became acquainted with the text in a revised French version of 1753 by Louis Anseume. The libretto was probably recommended to Gluck by Count Durazzo, or perhaps by Favart, who may have also been responsible for several changes and the choice of title, *L'île de Merlin ou Le monde renversé*. Gluck's one-act opera, consisting of 24 musical numbers, premiered at Schönbrunn Palace on October 3, 1758 during the preliminary festivities for the name-day of Emperor Franz I.

In *L'île de Merlin*, the spectator is transported to the desert island of the sorcerer Merlin, where Pierrot and Scapin have been shipwrecked. Argentine and Diamantine, both nieces of Merlin, explain to the two survivors that, on this island, unfaithful men are thrown into prison. Gradually the two heroes meet other denizens of this upside-down world. An elegant cavalier turns out to be a philosopher who far outshines his narrow-minded French colleagues. He explains that there are no villains on the island: court cases are tried on the basis of common sense, notaries are honest and upright, and merchants are fair dealers. The physician Hippocratine espouses the teachings of nature, and Chevalier de Catonville reports that love on this island means lifelong fidelity.

Gluck's *L'île de Merlin* is his first *opéra comique* to open with a musical storm *sinfonia*, a device that subsequently found many imitators. Gluck later reused the *sinfonia* as an introduction to his opera *Iphigénie en Tauride*, an indication that he held it in especially high esteem. The *sinfonia* and the likewise bipartite penultimate number heralding Merlin's arrival (No. 23) are the only purely instrumental items. In the 12 loosely constructed burlesque scenes, situational comedy takes precedence over consistency

of plot or delineation of character. Especially effective is the juxtaposition of mythological figures (Merlin, nymphs), realistic characters (notary, philosopher, *bon vivant*), and figures drawn from the *commedia dell'arte* (Pierrot, Scapin). In keeping with these contrasting character types, Gluck reveals a consummate mastery of a wide array of musical forms, ranging from vaudeville tinged and traditional *da capo* arias to short ensemble numbers. Following conventions of the day, the performance did not end with the concluding chorus (No. 24); the final stage instruction refers to a concluding dance. In all likelihood the ballet music belonging to the *L'île de Merlin* is preserved in the former Schwarzenberg Archive in Cesky Krumlov, where it bears the title *Le monde renversé*, containing 11 numbers, and probably stems from Gluck himself.

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