

RCA
VICS-1435

VICTROLA
STEREO

GLUCK
ORFEO ED EURIDICE
Complete Orchestral Music

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Rome Opera House Orchestra  
**MONTEUX**





**Side 1** Overture (3:14)

Act I: Pantomime (2:16)

Moderato (1:08)

Act II: Dance of a Fury

Dance of the Furies (4:54)

Dance of the Blessed Spirits (7:54)

Air (2:06)

Assez lent (2:42)

**Side 2**

Act III: Ballet Music

Gracieux

Gavotte

Air vif

Menuet (10:33)

Maestoso

Très lentement

Chaconne (7:55)

The Orpheus legend is bound up with the history of opera from the very beginning. *Euridice* by Peri is the first opera whose music is extant. It was first produced at Florence in October 1600 as part of the festivities in honor of the marriage of Henry IV of France to Maria de' Medici. Those who attended the royal wedding went back with glowing accounts of the wonderful new art form, but *Euridice* did not reach Paris until 1647.

Meanwhile in Italy, Claudio Monteverdi was creating all kinds of innovations. His *Orfeo*, produced in 1607, had two things never before tried—a duet and an orchestra of the unheard-of size of 38 pieces. The furor that Richard Wagner created was no more sensational; in fact, Monteverdi's preludes to *Orfeo*, with one note sustained throughout, have been compared with the Prelude to *Rheingold*. Before he was through, Monteverdi had introduced violins into the orchestra, an appropriate gesture for a native of Cremona, and the startling novelty of a tremolo, which the musicians at first refused to play, to underscore the dramatic effect of a duet.

All this was a hundred years, more or less, before Gluck was born. Opera had spread—to France (Lully and Rameau) and England (Purcell and Handel)—but the art itself was becoming stultified, moribund. It had degenerated into a string of recitatives and arias held together by a few duets and choruses. Worst of all, singers had gotten completely out of hand. A vain lot at best, they were not only permitted but were expected to embellish an aria with any vocal gingerbread they were capable of, whether or not it had anything to do with the meaning of the text. In *Orfeo* Gluck rebelled against all this excess.

Like several other masterpieces in the world of opera, *Orfeo* evolved through several phases, some related to the composer's own intensifying view of the subject, some to customs of the day and their changes. Actually, there is not merely one Gluck *Orfeo* (or even, as in the instance of Beethoven and Verdi, an earlier and later *Orfeo*), but an *Orfeo* and an *Orphée*. As originally con-

ceived, the opera was written to be performed as part of a name-day celebration for Emperor Francis I of Austria, in Vienna, on October 5, 1762. That, in itself, does not distinguish it greatly from many other compositions of the period, which had a time and place (frequently royal) of origin. But every one of the details set forth just above played a part in the kind of work Gluck wrote. As a composition for the joyous occasion of a name day, it could not have a tragic ending, hence *Orfeo* and *Euridice* are reunited. Being part of an observance, it could not be overlengthy. Finally, as a composition for Vienna, in 1762, Gluck could utilize the services of the internationally celebrated castrato Gaetano Guadagni.

When Gluck was invited to prepare the work for performance in Paris in 1774, circumstances changed along with locale. His opera was no longer part of a program, so he could extend its length. The artificial soprano was not favored in Paris, so he rewrote the principal role for high tenor. The interest of the Parisian public in ballet already long established, he was at liberty to expand the pantomime and dance. It is due to this expansion that *Orfeo* is one of the few works in the repertoire to contain such an abundance of purely orchestral music, music that surrounds the vocal drama and sets it off in much the same manner that baroque statuary and painting adorn the architecture of 18th-century European churches and palaces.

It is music typical of its era, classically restrained in form but within that framework frequently audacious in its excursions into the realms of pure fantasy and poetry. In an age that liked to order and categorize, that preferred its pleasures varied and frequently fantastic, Gluck's music epitomized the reawakened interest in mythology and antiquity in a way that afforded his audiences a complete emotional experience. It represents one of the first attempts to fuse all the arts—music, poetry, painting, architecture and dance—a blending which Wagner nearly perfected a century later.

Considering the modest resources of Gluck's orches-

tral palette—strings, woodwinds, brass occasionally and timpani—the emotional range of his music borders on the gigantic. In its expressive and descriptive quality it fills the standard musical forms of the day with an emotional variety that few composers before or since have equaled.

The *Overture* establishes the dramatic tension of the story without bearing any direct relation to later musical themes, but the succeeding *Pantomime* and *Moderato* are marvelous examples of the pathos inherent in the Act I mourning at the grave of *Euridice*.

The second act represents the height of the dramatic situation, as *Orfeo* invades the underworld to redeem *Euridice* and is confronted by the Furies, who in their demoniac anger are only gradually subdued. With *Euridice's* release, the music offers a magical change in the *Dance of the Blessed Spirits* followed by the tender *Air* and *Assez lent*, in which reassurance and comfort keynote the melodic line.

It is, however, in the Act III ballet music that Gluck exceeds himself. Ballet as *divertissement* was an expected part of 18th-century French opera, and Gluck was true to the convention of the day—true but not confined by it. Within the customary dance patterns of *menuet*, *gavotte* and *chaconne* Gluck adheres to the standard repetitive devices but at the same time rounds out the emotional triumph of the reunited lovers.

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