

OPERA NEWS

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Iphigénie en Tauride

Boston Baroque
Calderwood Studio at WGBH
BOSTON

CHRISTOPH WILLIBALD GLUCK wanted to innovate. He succeeded.

The eighteenth-century composer invested his operas with sustained dramatic tension, easing ornament and excess out of his score. His goal was to present unbroken narrative—compelling stories from start to finish—with a complementary mix of instruments, voice and words, a century before Wagner would develop those principles. Gluck’s insights were realized propitiously by the Boston Baroque orchestra

and chorus, conducted by founding music director Martin Pearlman, in a semi-staged Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* presented on April 20 in the Calderwood Studio at WGBH in Boston.

Boston Baroque first presented the 1779 opera more than twenty years ago, performances that resulted in a Telarc recording starring soprano Christine Goerke. This new production pivoted around Canadian-Greek soprano Soula Parassidis, who stepped into the title role for an injured Wendy Bryn Harmer just one day before opening night. Fortunately for Boston Baroque, Parassidis had sung the role just weeks ago, in Athens during a celebration of the centennial of Maria Callas's birth. A dramatic soprano of infectious intensity, Parassidis was a god-send as a last-minute sub, thoroughly prepared and radiating confidence. The trio of Parassidis's Iphigénie, baritone Jesse Blumberg, as her unrecognized brother Oreste, and tenor William Burden as Pylade, Oreste's beloved companion, made this taut production memorable.

The plot derives from Euripides. Iphigénie has been hidden in Taurus, to avoid being sacrificed by her father Agamemnon. Before the action of *Iphigénie* begins, Agamemnon has since been killed by his wife, Clytemnestra, and Oreste has avenged his father's death by killing his own mother, Clytemnestra. When Oreste and Pylades are shipwrecked on Taurus, they are brought before Iphigénie as trespassers who must be put to death. The siblings, separated for years, recognize each other only gradually. The opera focuses touchingly on love between friends, and love between siblings.

This new production is a made-for-streaming experience. Hosted in WGBH's tech-heavy Calderwood Studio, the singers had a narrow stage lip to walk on, in front of the orchestra, with pathways and risers along the sides and back. Movements were compact, props nearly non-existent. Little distracted from the singers' faces and gestures. The limited space restricted physical movement, but enhanced concentration.

The three major roles were well-served musically. Parassidis may not have an early-music voice—it is more Straussian in color and force—but this was not a typical early-music score. Dramatic, with exceptional acting skills and impressive vigor, Parassidis

owned the role and the evening. The friendship of Oreste and Pylade is profound enough for each man to sacrifice his life for the other, and Blumberg and Burden's singing reflected that shared devotion.

Separated men's and women's choruses flanked the stage. Their participation—as various priestesses, Furies, warriors—included multiple solos, and clever interactions with the soloists. Baritone David McFerrin sang impressively as the authoritative tyrant Thoas, and forceful soprano Angela Yam stole the concluding scene in a deus-ex-machina appearance as Diana.

The instrumental score has little counterpoint; it is spare to the point of transparency, and it is as wedded to the libretto as possible. There are multiple extended arias but no coloratura passages—the composer avoids repeats, and librettist Nicolas-François Guillard avoids repeated lyrics.

Atmospheric video projections by Camilla Tassi surrounded the action, a subtly shifting backdrop. A huge globe hung over the orchestra, changing colors to reflect various moods. Neil Fortin's costumes—informed by antiquity, including extravagant togas, some dripped liberally in blood—successfully conveyed ancient-but-yet-relevant visuals.

Mo Zhou's direction probably shows best in the livestream, which is available through Idagio. (Boston Baroque made a robust commitment to live-streaming during the pandemic, and has continued to do so.) Zhou kept the forward energy constant, and the production benefited from her subtle blocking and directions for stylized, emotionally charged acting. —*Keith Powers*

