

IPHIGÉNIE EN TAURIDE

Music by Christoph Willibald Gluck

Libretto by Nicholas-Francois Guillard, after Claude Guimond de la Touche's tragedy and Euripides

First performed May 18, 1779 in Paris

Characters

Iphigenie (soprano), daughter of Agamemnon -- King of Mycenae

Thoas (bass), King of Scythia

Orestes (baritone), brother of Iphigenie

Pylades (tenor), friend of Orestes

Two Priestesses (soprano)

Diana (soprano), Goddess of the Moon, Sister of Apollo

Temple Servants (bass)

Chorus of Priestesses, Scythians, Greeks, Thoas' guards, Furies.

At the start of the Trojan War, the Greek armies prepared to sail under Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, but were stranded in the harbor of Aulis unable to depart for lack of a wind. To appease the Gods, Agamemnon's daughter, Iphigenie, still a young girl, was offered as a sacrifice to Diana. Taking pity on the frightened child, the Goddess substituted a stag for the slaughter and secretly spirited away Iphigenie and her attendants to Tauride where she became a high Priestess of Diana's temple.

When Agamemnon returned home at the end of the ten-year war, his wife Clytemnestra murdered him in revenge for the supposed death of their daughter. Clytemnestra, in turn, was slain by her son Orestes, avenging his father's death. Guilt-stricken, Orestes went mad; in search of help in regaining his sanity, he consulted the Delphic Oracle at the temple of Apollo, who told him: "A sister in Tauride longs to return to Greece." Knowing nothing of Iphigenie's existence, and thinking the Oracle meant a famous statue of Diana, Apollo's sister, which had been stolen by the Scythians and taken to Tauride where it was considered to have been profaned by human sacrifice, he sailed with his friend Pylades to recover the statue.

Act I

In the midst of a violent storm, Iphigenie and the Priestesses beg the Gods to protect them ("Grand Dieux! soyez-nous secourables" -- Great Gods, assist us). The storm subsides, but Iphigenie is still deeply troubled. She recounts a terrible dream in which she sees her mother standing over the bleeding and dying figure of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra thrusts the murder weapon upon Iphigenie and she, as if possessed, stabs her brother. ("Cette nuit j'ai revu le palais de mon père" -- Last night I saw my father's palace). She prays to Diana ("O toi, qui prolongeas mes jours" -- O you, who lengthen my life), asking for death, so that she may join Orestes. Thoas enters and describes his own fears -- superstitious dread of a prophecy that his life is threatened by any stranger present in his kingdom ("De noirs pressentiments" -- My spirit frightened by black forebodings). Two foreigners who have been shipwrecked by the storm (actually Orestes and Pylades) are brought in by guards and presented as victims for the sacrifice. They are not recognized by Iphigenie, nor do they recognize her. When they refuse to tell Thoas why they have come to Tauride, he decrees they both are to be sacrificed to Diana. Despite her abhorrence of the task, it is Iphigenie's role as High Priestess to conduct the sacrifice ("Dieux, étouffez en moi le cri de la nature" -- Gods, stifle nature's voice in me). The Priestesses prepare.

Act II

Pylades and Orestes are alone, contemplating their destiny. Orestes, already tormented by guilt for the murder of his mother, despairs as he blames himself for causing the death of his friend as well ("Dieux! qui me poursuivez" --- Gods who pursue me). Pylades in turn tells Orestes of his love for him and his willingness to die in his place ("Unis dès la plus tendre enfance" -- Together since early childhood); the Scythian guards interrupt and lead Pylades away.

Alone, Orestes cries again to the Gods ("Dieux! protecteurs de ces affreux rivages" -- Godly protectors of these abominable shores), and, exhausted, slips into a disturbed sleep. The Furies torment him, and his nightmare ends with a vision of his mother, which, as he awakes, he confuses with the strangely familiar face of Iphigenie, who has come to talk with him. Iphigenie discovers he is from Greece and, horrified, learns of her parents' fate, foretold by her dream ("Je vois toute l'horreur" -- I see all the horror). They do not discover each other's identities, however, because he tells her that Orestes has met death in a foreign country as punishment for murdering his mother. Iphigenie, overcome with grief, laments the loss of her family ("O malheureuse Iphigenie" -- O unhappy Iphigenie). Aided by the Priestesses, she begins a funeral ritual in memory of her supposedly dead brother.

Act III

As Orestes and Pylades are brought in, Iphigenie resolves to free one of the captives to take a message to her sister Electra. She is struck by Orestes's resemblance to her brother. She explains that she, too, was born in Greece, and she will arrange Orestes' escape so that he can take a letter from her to her family; she departs. The two men cannot agree on who is to be saved. When Iphigenie returns, Orestes tells her that she must save Pylades or he will kill himself. Pylades is overwhelmed by his friend's devotion; he plans to prove worthy of it by seeking help and attempting a rescue ("Divinité des grandes âmes" -- Divine quality of noble truth).

Act IV

The Priestesses ask Iphigenie to resign herself to the sacrifice, but Iphigenie prays for release from her hated duty. The Priestesses lead Orestes to the sacrifice. Just as Iphigenie begins the ritual, she cries out, and brother and sister recognize each other. The Priestesses interrupt to warn that Thoas has learned of Pylades' escape and is on his way to the temple. Iphigenie directs the Priestesses to protect Orestes. Thoas enters in a rage, with troops, and demands that the sacrifice continue. Pylades appears with Greek soldiers; they struggle with the Scythians and Thoas is killed. Miraculously, the goddess Diana appears and decrees that her statue must no longer be profaned by human blood ("Arretez! écoutez mes decrets éternels!" -- Stop! Hear my eternal decrees!). She tells Orestes that his guilt has been purged by his remorse and that he must return to Greece with Iphigenie and rule as king.