

John Louis Miller
email: j5miller@charter.net
Copyright 2001 John Louis Miller

RITTER GLUCK

A Recollection from the Year 1809

by

E.T.A. Hoffmann

trans. John Louis Miller

Late autumn in Berlin usually has a few beautiful days in store, when a friendly sun makes its way through the clouds to chase dampness from the balmy air wafting through the streets. You see a colorful stream of people walking through the linden trees toward the *Tiergarten*: dandies in fancy dress, solid citizens in their Sunday best parading with wives and children, priests and nuns, Jewish girls, law clerks, prostitutes, professors, cleaning women, dancers, officers in the military--on and on. Soon there's not a place to be had at any table at *Klaus und Weber's*. The smell of coffee fills the air; dandies light their cigarillos; people talk, argue over war and peace, over whether Madame Bethmann's shoes at her latest stage appearance were grey or green, over current philosophies, the weak *Groschen* and so on and on, until everything mingles and is absorbed into an aria from the latest musical--an out-of-tune harp, a couple of never-tuned violins, a tubercular flute and an asthmatic bassoon assaulting the ears of those nearby. I'm sitting close to the guard-rail separating the Weber District from the *Heerstraße*. There are a couple of small, round garden tables and chairs here and it's far enough away from the din of that accursed orchestra that I can get my breath and let my imagination roam. I fantasize friendly figures with whom I can discuss science, learning--things that people really should think about. My imaginary companions aren't troubled by the jostling wave of passers-by,

though they become increasingly varied and colorful. The strollers don't disturb me, either; it takes the *trio* section of that trashy waltz to bring me out of my dream world. All I can hear is the shrieking upper voice of violin and flute and the nasal bass of the bassoon, locked together in unrelenting octaves, slashing my ears like a hot knife. I hear myself crying aloud: "That outrageous music! Those abominable octaves!" when right next to me there is a murmured

"Just my luck! Another octave-chaser!"

I look up and am suddenly aware of a stranger who has joined me at my table. He stares straight at me and I find, once in eye contact with him, that I can't look away.

Never before had I seen a head, a figure that made such a strong, immediate impression on me. A gently contoured nose joined a broad, noticeably rounded forehead. Bushy, greying eyebrows arched over eyes that blazed with almost wild, youthful fire, though the man must have been more than fifty years old. The somewhat weak chin contrasted starkly with the firm mouth and sunken cheeks, and a strange play of muscles produced something like a roguish smile--a counterpoint to the melancholy heaviness of the brow. Sparse, grey locks of hair lay behind the large, protruding ears and a bulky, modern overcoat enveloped the gaunt body. The instant my eyes fastened on the man he lowered his gaze and went on with the activity my outcry had interrupted. With obvious pleasure he was sprinkling tobacco from various small bags into a large container and moistening it with red wine from a half-decanter standing on the table before him.

"It's good that the music stopped," I said; "it was unbearable."

The man threw me a hasty glance and emptied the last little sack.

"It would be better if they didn't play at all," I went on. "Don't you agree?"

“I have no opinion one way or the other,” he said. “You’re the musician, the experienced professional.”

“You’re mistaken; I’m neither. At one time I took piano lessons and studied thoroughbass, merely as the adjunct to a good education, and among other things they told me that nothing sounds worse than bass and upper voice marching along in parallel octaves. I took it on faith then and have subsequently seen it proven over and over.”

He broke in with “Really?” then stood up and walked slowly and thoughtfully toward the musicians, gazing upward and tapping himself on the forehead with an open hand, like someone trying to refresh a memory. I saw him speaking with the musicians, treating them with dignified self-assurance. He came back had scarcely taken his seat when they began to play the overture to Gluck’s masterpiece, *Iphigenia in Aulis*.

With half-closed eyes, arms folded and resting on the table, he listened to the *andante*, marking entrances of voices with a slight motion of his left foot. He lifted his head and threw a glance into the space surrounding him, extending his right hand above his head and gripping the table with the outstretched fingers of his left as if striking a chord on a keyboard. He was a *Kapellmeister*, giving his orchestra the cue for a change of tempo. The right hand falls and the *allegro* begins! The pale cheeks flush red; the brows pull together on the taut forehead; an inner fury adds fire to his wild glances, stifling the smile that plays on the half-open mouth. Now he leans back; the eyebrows rise; the muscle-play of the cheeks resumes; the eyes flash; a deep, inner pain becomes joy in every trembling fiber. Breathing heavily, perspiration dripping from the forehead; he signals the *tutti*, then each major section, his right hand never losing the beat, his left drawing out a handkerchief to wipe his face. Those few violins could

give only a bare skeleton of the overture, but my strange table partner so enlivened their effort, gave it such substance and color, that when the storm of violins and basses, the thunder of the kettle-drums subsided I heard gentle, melting laments rising from the flute, while throbbing tones of cellos and bassoons filled my heart with indescribable melancholy. Then another *tutti*, like a tall, noble giant striding forth, *unisono*, crushing the muted lament with his footsteps.

The overture was over; the man let both arms fall and sat with closed eyes, as if exhausted from the exertion. His bottle was empty, so I filled his glass with the Burgundy standing before me. He sighed deeply, as if awakening from a dream. I urged him to drink, which he did at once, swallowing the full glass in a single draught. He exclaimed:

“I’m satisfied with the performance! The orchestra outdid itself!”

“But yet,” I added, “we heard only pale outlines of a masterpiece that’s supposed to be full of vibrant color.”

“Let me guess. -- You’re no Berliner!”

“Quite right; I’m here only now and then.”

“The Burgundy is good, but it’s getting a bit cold here.”

“Why don’t we go inside and finish the bottle?”

“Good idea. I don’t know you, but it’s all right because you don’t know me, either. Let’s not ask for names; they can be a bother. I’m drinking good Burgundy, it’s costing me nothing, we seem to get along and let’s leave it at that.”

He said all this with hearty good humor. Once inside, taking a seat, his overcoat fell open and I was astonished to see an embroidered vest and frock-tail coat, black velvet breeches and a tiny silver

dagger. He pulled the coat together and carefully buttoned it.

I began: "Why did you ask me if I was a Berliner?"

"Because in that case we would have had to part company."

"That sounds odd."

"Not in the least, when I tell you that I'm a composer."

"I still don't get your meaning."

"Please forgive my outburst a while ago. I see that you know nothing at all about Berlin and the Berliners."

He stood up and paced back and forth. Then he went to the window and sang, barely audibly, the priest's chorus from *Iphigenia in Tauris*, tapping on the windowpane now and then to indicate the *tutti*. I was surprised to note that he made certain modifications in the melodies, giving them new strength and vitality, but I didn't comment, letting him have his way with the music. He finished and came back to his chair. I couldn't say a word, I was so enthralled by the man's peculiar behavior and the manifestation of such rare and inventive musical talent. After a while he began:

"Have you never composed?"

"Yes, I've tried my hand at it, but I found the things I wrote in moments of enthusiasm dull and boring afterward, so I gave it up."

"You shouldn't have done that. The fact that you threw away some of your attempts is a sign of talent. You study music as a boy because Papa and Mama wish it. You tinkle on the piano or play on the violin and gradually the sense of melody develops. The first original thought might be the half-forgotten theme of some little song that you sang somehow differently from the original, and this little

seed, nurtured by energy unrelated to its origin, draws from every source imaginable and matures into a giant with newly-charged flesh and blood! But it's impossible even to hint at the diverse paths leading to composition! It's a broad highway where everyone bustles along, bumping into one another, rejoicing and shouting: "We've been chosen! The goal is in sight!" One enters the realm of dreams through an ivory gate. Few ever see that gate; still fewer pass through it. Everything inside looks different, exotic! Mad figures float to and fro, each with its own character, each distinct from the others. You can't see them on the highway, but only beyond the ivory gate. Returning from this realm is difficult; monsters like those guarding a sorcerer's castle bar the way. --Whirling, spinning figures-- many a dreamer dreams his life away in this realm of dreams, never casting a shadow, for if they saw a shadow they would be aware of the light streaming through the realm. Only a few awaken from the dream, rise up and walk through the dreams and find Truth. The ultimate moment is right there: a brush with the eternal, the inexpressible! Look at the sun! It is the triad from which chords, like stars, shoot forth and enfold you in their fiery web. You lie there, transfigured in flames, until Psyche, beloved of Cupid, soars up to join the sun.

With these last words he leapt to his feet, raising a hand and turning his gaze toward the heavens. Then he sat down and quickly emptied the glass I had filled for him. A silence ensued, which I didn't want to break for fear of diverting the extraordinary man from his train of thought. Finally, more calm, he continued:

"When I was in the realm of dreams I was tormented by a thousand fears and afflictions. It was night, and grinning monster-masks rushed toward me, taking me by surprise, plunging me to the bottom of the sea and then throwing me high into the air. Beams of light pierced the night, and the beams were

musical tones that surrounded me with lovely clarity. I awakened from my torment and saw a great, bright eye, gazing into the pipes of an organ, and as it gazed, shimmering tones came forth and embraced one another in splendid chords such as I had never imagined. Melodies streamed forth and I swam in the flood of tones. When I started to sink the great eye looked down at me and lifted me above the roaring waves. It grew night again, and two titans in gleaming armor approached me: the Root and Fifth of the triad. They lifted me up as the eye smiled: "I know the longing that fills your soul. Third, that soft, gentle youth, will step between the titans. You will hear his sweet voice. You will see me again, and my melodies will be yours."

He went silent.

"And you saw the eye again?"

"Yes, I saw it again! Year after year I languished in the realm of dreams. Oh, yes! I was there! I sat in a magnificent valley and listened as the flowers joined each other in song. Only the sunflower was silent, sorrowfully leaning her folded calyx toward the earth. Invisible threads drew me toward her; she raised her head, the calyx opened and from it the eye cast its beam on me. Then rays of light streamed from my head to the flowers, which drank the light thirstily. The sunflower leaves grew larger and larger; sending out a warm glow. It flowed around me, surrounded me, the eye vanished and I found myself inside the calyx.

With these words he sprang up, and with quick, youthful strides rushed out of the room. In vain I waited for his return, and eventually decided to go back into the city. I was near the Brandenburg Gate when I saw a tall figure coming toward me in the darkness. Immediately recognizing my eccentric, I spoke to him:

“Why did you leave so quickly?”

“It was getting too hot, and my muse was beginning to sing.”

“I don’t understand.”

“All the better.”

“All the worse, because I would very much like to understand you.”

“Do you hear something?”

“No.”

“ . . . It’s stopped now! Let’s go. I don’t usually like company but . . . you don’t compose . . . you’re not a Berliner . . . ”

“I don’t understand why you’re so against the Berliners. I would think that a person with your artistic temperament would feel at home here, where art is so prevalent and so appreciated!”

“Not so! My curse is to wander in this barren place--restless, tormented, damned, like a disembodied spirit.”

“Barren place? Here--in Berlin?”

“Yes--it’s barren for me because there’s no kindred spirit to greet me. I’m alone.”

“But the artists! The composers!”

“Hmph! They cavil and deride; they refine and analyze to the tiniest detail; they burrow and rummage through everything in search of a single miserable thought. They spend so much energy prattling about art and artistic sensibility and who knows what else that they never get around to creating anything. --And if a couple of thoughts *did* see the light of day the frightful cold here, the distance from the sun would freeze them. They might just as well be working in Lapland.”

“I find your judgment a bit harsh. At least you must enjoy the wonderful theatrical productions.”

“I did bring myself to go to the theater once, to hear an opera by a young friend of mine. What’s it called? -- Ah, the whole world is in that opera! The shades of Hades penetrate that motley band of grease-painted performers. Everything finds voice and resonance in that mighty work. What was it? . . . Of course! I mean *Don Giovanni!* But I couldn’t endure it even through the overture. It was played *prestissimo*, sprayed out like seltzer water, no sense, no understanding-- and I had prepared myself through fasting and prayer because I know the crowds here make the muse so uncomfortable she never speaks clearly to them!”

“I have to admit they neglect Mozart’s masterpieces here, for reasons that escape me, but Gluck’s works certainly enjoy respectable performances.”

“You think so? -- Once I wanted to hear *Iphigenia in Tauris*. As I entered the theater I heard them playing the overture to *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Hmm, I thought, they’re playing *this* Iphigenia! I was dumbfounded when the *andante* began, followed by the storm. Twenty years separate the two works! The whole effect, the whole well-calculated presentation of the tragedy was spoiled. A quiet ocean, then a storm, then the Greeks are thrown onto shore--*that’s* the opera! Huh! Did the composer write in the score that you could do anything you want with it, like some little trumpet ditty?”

“A blunder; I’ll admit. All the same, they do everything possible to promote Gluck’s works.”

“Yes, indeed,” he said drily, and his smile grew more and more bitter. Suddenly he jumped up, made off and nothing could stop him. It was as if he vanished in that instant, and for several days afterward I went to the *Tiergarten*, searching in vain for him.

Several months had gone by and I was in a distant part of the city, well behind in my schedule. It was a cold, rainy evening and I was hurrying toward my apartment on *Friedrichsstraße*. As I passed a theater I heard music pouring forth--trumpets and drums--and I remembered that Gluck's *Armida* was being performed. I was half thinking of going in when I heard someone talking to himself--a weird effect--close to the windows where almost every tone of the orchestra could be heard.

"This is where the King comes in--they're playing the march. Beat, drums, beat; it's quite jolly! Oh, my! Today they have to do it eleven times, otherwise the procession doesn't have time enough to *proceed!* Ha-ha! *Maestoso!* Move along, boys. Look, there's a walk-on fellow with a shoe-string hanging loose. Right! -- for the twelfth time! And don't forget to bring out the Dominant. -- Oh, you eternal powers--it never ends! Now he's taking his bow. *Armida* thanks you most humbly. Again? Right! . . . two soldiers still haven't come on. Now someone rattles off the *recitative*. What malevolent spirit binds me to this place?"

"The bond is broken," I called. "Come with me!"

I took the arm of my *Tiergarten* eccentric (for the speaker was none other than he) and drew him along. He seemed surprised but followed me without a word. We were in the *Friedrichsstraße* when he suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"I know you," he said. "You were in the *Tiergarten*; we talked a long time. I drank wine and got overheated. Afterward I heard harmonies for two days. I suffered much . . . now it has passed!"

"I'm glad chance brought us together again. Let's get better acquainted. I don't live far from here; how would it be if . . ."

"I cannot. I'm not permitted to go to anyone's lodgings."

“All right, but you won’t get away from me. I’ll go with you.”

“Then you’ll have to walk some distance with me. But you didn’t want to go into the theater?”

“I wanted to hear *Armida*, but . . .”

“You *shall* hear *Armida!* Now!” Come along.”

Silently we walked up *Friedrichsstraße*. He took a sudden turn into a cross street and then ran down it so fast that I could hardly keep up with him. He finally stopped in front of a nondescript house, knocking for some time before the door finally opened. Feeling our way in the darkness we reached the staircase and then a room in the upper storey, my guide carefully locking each door behind us. I heard another door opening and soon afterward he came in with a lighted candelabra. I was surprised to find myself in a curiously-furnished room. Old-fashioned, richly ornate chairs, a wall clock with a gilt case and a broad, heavy mirror created an air of gloomy, outmoded splendor. In the middle of the room was a little piano on which stood a large porcelain ink-pot and some sheaves of music paper. Looking more closely, I saw that no one had composed there for a long time--the paper was yellowed and a thick spider web covered the ink-pot. In the corner of the room was a cabinet that I hadn’t at first noticed. The man went directly to it, drew back a curtain, and I saw a row of beautifully bound books with golden titles: *Orfeo*, *Armida*, *Alceste*, *Iphigenia*, among others--in short, Gluck’s collected works.

“You own Gluck’s complete works?!” I exclaimed.

He didn’t respond, but the play of muscles in his sunken cheeks transformed his smile into a frightful mask. His somber stare fixed on me, he seized one of the books (it was *Armida*) and strode ceremoniously to the piano. I hastened to raise the lid and fold open the music desk, which seemed to

please him. He opened the book and I was astonished beyond words to see that there wasn't a single note on the music staves!

He began, "Now I shall play the overture. Turn the pages for me, and at the proper moment!" I promised to do so, and he played the majestic *tempo di marcia* that opens the overture--splendidly, masterfully, with full chords--almost completely true to the original. The *allegro*, however, was merely drawn from Gluck's main ideas. My amazement redoubled with each new, wonderfully appropriate variant he wove into the music. The modulations were excellent--striking without being harsh, and he enriched the melodic lines with *melisma* after *melisma*, giving the composition a fresh, rejuvenated aspect. His face glowed; his eyebrows knotted as he gave vent to long-repressed fury, then his eyes would swim in tears of deepest pain. At times he would sing, in a pleasant tenor voice, while both hands worked out artful details in the music. Then, using his voice in a quite particular way, he would indicate the deep tone of the kettle drum. I turned the pages diligently, following the direction of his eyes. The overture came to an end and he fell back exhausted, eyes closed, into the armchair. After a bit he recovered sufficiently to flip through several blank pages in the book and say in a husky voice:

"I wrote all this, Sir, when I returned from the realm of dreams. But I broke faith with the Most Holy by revealing to the unworthy what I had learned, and an ice-cold hand seized this passionate heart! It didn't break, but I am now cursed to wander among the damned like an unwelcome guest--without form, so that none can recognize me, until the sunflower once again turns its face toward the eternal. Enough! Now let us sing Armida's scene!"

Then he sang the final scene of *Armida* with such expression that it penetrated my very being. Here, too, he deviated from the original, but his variants were absolutely true to Gluck's style, only with

heightened potency. He gathered into powerful tones everything expressing extremes of hate, love, desperation, rage. At times his voice seemed that of a youth; then it would rise from the darkest bass, swelling into tones of penetrating power. Completely beside myself, I was trembling in every fiber. When he had finished I threw myself into his arms and managed to gasp: “What *is* that? Who *are* you?”

He stood up and measured me with a solemn, penetrating look, and when I wanted to enquire further he took the candelabra and disappeared through the door, leaving me in darkness. I was alone almost a quarter-hour and was beginning to despair of seeing him again. Orienting myself by the position of the piano I was groping my way toward the door when he suddenly reappeared, holding the candelabra. He was in full gala attire: richly embroidered vest, the dagger in his sash.

I froze as he solemnly approached me, took me gently by the hand and said with a strange smile:

*“I am Ritter Gluck!”*¹

¹(Translator’s note): Christoph Willibald von Gluck (1714-1787) was knighted in 1756 and thereafter insisted on being addressed with his title (in German: *Ritter*). Hoffmann’s story first appeared in 1809, in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, then the most authoritative music journal in Europe. Readers of this journal would have been familiar with Gluck’s music and also would have been aware that in 1809, the date Hoffmann specifies for the incident reported, the composer had been dead for twenty-two years.