

Overture to "Orpheus and Eurydice"
Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714–1787)

Written: 1762–74

Movements: One

Style: Classical

Duration: Four minutes

"My cook understands more about counterpoint than he does." That was how Handel felt about the music of Christoph Gluck. Handel's assessment is a bit harsh, because Gluck wasn't trying to write in the complex and ornate style of the Baroque (all those interweaving melodic lines are called "counterpoint"). Instead, Gluck was writing in a new style: simple and direct.

Actually, Gluck was on a mission to reform opera. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Italian opera was a mess. Harold Schonberg, in his wonderful "Lives of the Great Composers" describes opera of that time as a

succession of solos and duets dominated by singers who incessantly bawled improvised roulades on a few vowels. . . . All stage action would come to a stop while they approached the footlights and astounded the audience with vocal pyrotechnics.

This is what Gluck tried to do about it:

I have striven to restrict music to its true office of serving poetry by means of expression and by following the situations of the plot, without interrupting the action or stifling it with a useless superfluity of ornaments . . . in short, I have sought to abolish all those abuses against which good sense and reason have cried out in vain . . . I have felt the overture ought to apprise the spectators of the nature of the action that is to be represented and to form, so to speak, its argument . . . I believed that my greatest labor should be devoted to seeking a beautiful simplicity, and I have avoided making displays of difficulty at the expense of clarity.

Gluck was born in Bavaria and spent his childhood in Bohemia where his father was a forester. Not much is known about his early musical education, but in his mid-twenties he travelled to Italy where he studied under the influential Sammartini. Next stop was London where he was house composer at the King's Theatre. Eventually he landed a job as Kappelmeister in Vienna. It was there that he wrote his first great reform opera, *Orpheus ed Euridice*. It was there—after a few years in Paris, championed by his student Marie Antoinette—that he eventually died from a stroke. The overture to *Orpheus and Eurydice* perfectly exemplifies Gluck's reforming principals.

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Chamber Dance

Joan Tower (1938–)

Written: 2006

Movements: One

Style: Contemporary

Duration: Sixteen minutes

Joan Tower spent her childhood in South America, where her father was a mining engineer. In an interview with Brenda Sokolowski she explained:

South America is a dancing culture and, also, if you're in the Catholic areas, they're celebrating every saint's day, which is about every three days. . . . My nurse was a young Inca Indian, looking for a man. She'd drag me to these festivals and toss me a percussion instrument to get rid of me. I had a ball! I would be playing maracas and castanets. That

started a real love for percussion, for dancing, for rhythm. My music is basically rhythm. The action is the rhythm. In my orchestra music, it's all over the place.

After returning to the United States, Joan studied at Bennington College in Vermont and then Columbia University where she received her doctorate in 1968. She is the first woman to receive the prestigious Grawemeyer Award, and the first composer to be commissioned by the Ford Made in America consortium commission. She is currently Asher Edelman Professor of Music at Bard College.

Speaking to Ann McCutchan she recalled when she wrote something as a “real honest-to-God, raw attempt at being myself . . . it was a real gutsy move for me. It meant that I had to stand up for myself and say, “Hey, I like drums—I like rhythmic energy—I like simple colors!” It was a real door opener for me, because after that my own voice started to take shape.”

Tower wrote *Chamber Dance* on commission from the Orpheus Chamber Ensemble. This is what she has to say about the piece:

It is chamber music in the sense that I always thought of Orpheus as a large chamber group, interacting and "dancing" with one another the way smaller chamber groups do. Like dancers, the members of this large group have to be very much in touch with what everyone else is doing, and allow for changing leadership to guide the smaller and bigger ensembles. *Chamber Dance* weaves through a tapestry of solos, duets, and ensembles where the oboe, flute, and violin are featured as solos and the violin and clarinet, cello and bassoon, two trumpets, and unison horns step out of the texture as duets. The ensemble writing is fairly vertical and rhythmic in its profile, thereby creating an ensemble that has to "dance" well together.

The Gordian Knot Untied, Suite No. 1

Henry Purcell (1659–1695)

Written: circa 1691

Movements: Five

Style: Baroque

Duration: Nine minutes

“One of the most celebrated masters of the service of music in the kingdom, and scarce inferior to any in Europe.” That was the obituary for Henry Purcell. The poet John Dryden called him “An Englishman equal to the best abroad.” Charles Burney, the English historian who wrote contemporaneous accounts of music and musicians in the eighteenth century said that Purcell was “as much the boast in England in music as Shakespeare in the drama and Milton in Epic poetry,” and “of more extensive genius than perhaps our country can boast at any other period of time.” Indeed, Henry Purcell was one of the greatest of all English composers.

For such a great reputation, we know surprisingly little about his early years. We know he studied under John Blow because “Master to the famous Mr. Henry Purcell” was inscribed on Blow’s tombstone. He was “keeper of the king’s instruments,” and eventually became organist at Westminster Abbey—succeeding John Blow— as well as the Chapel Royal. In twenty-five years of royal appointments, he served three kings. He wrote hundreds of pieces for the church (anthems, hymns, etc.) as well as even more hundreds of secular songs. One of his most famous works is his only full-blown opera, *Dido and Aeneas*. He also wrote “incidental music” (overtures, interludes, airs, songs and dances) to many plays.

After his death, that incidental music was collected into a publication called “A Collection of Ayres, Compos'd for the Theatre, and upon other Occasions,” the purpose of which was to provide written instrumental music for amateurs (and professionals) to play. As for the play “The Gordian Knot Untied,” we know very little. It was produced in 1691. The author may have been William Walsh. Could the play have anything to do with Walsh’s poem

“An Epistle to a Lady who had Resolved Against Marriage”?

If once you let the Gordian knot be ty'd,
Which turns the name of virgin into bride;
That one fond act your life's best scene foregoes,
And leads you in a labyrinth of woes,
Whose strange meanders you may search about,
But never find the clue to let you out.

When Purcell was writing instrumental music, “symphonies” hadn't been invented yet.

What you hear in the Gordian Knot Untied, is a standard form overture, and then a succession of short pieces based upon well-known dance rhythms.

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Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major, D. 485

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Written: 1819

Movements: Four

Style: Romantic

Duration: 30 minutes

Franz Schubert was one of the greatest child prodigies, rivalled only by Mozart. When he died at the age of 31, he had written nearly one thousand works. Mozart lived five years longer, but “only” wrote 630. He was the son of a teacher and the twelfth of fourteen children. He started piano when he was five and violin when he was eight. He sang in the boy-choir at the church in Liechtental and later in the Imperial and Royal Chapel. When he was eleven, he

became a student of the powerful composer Salieri, that notorious nemesis of Mozart so ably depicted in the film *Amadeus*. He trained to become a schoolteacher like his father, but music had the stronger pull. It was when he was in his twenties, still producing prodigious amounts of music, that he lived the life of a “bohemian.” Rarely having very much money, he would move in with various friends and somehow manage to get by, without seriously pursuing a “career” in music. When he did play or compose, it was for his friends. Their evening gatherings, called “Schubertiades,” were nineteenth century versions of today’s jam sessions. The first public performance of his music in Vienna was in February, 1828. Nine months later, the venereal disease that he contracted five years earlier claimed his life.

Schubert wrote his *Symphony No. 5 in B-flat Major* when he was all of nineteen. Throughout, the music is infused with what Schubert called the “magic sound of Mozart, the immortal.” But perhaps more than Mozart, melody of ineffable grace permeates the symphony. The principle themes of the first movement are light in character, with only momentary drama. The second movement is the longest of the four. Its principle theme is somewhat melancholic, while the second theme shows a bit more angst. The third, in minor, mimics the seriousness and form of the minuet in Mozart’s *Symphony No. 40 in G minor*. The sunny trio section brings relief to the solemnity. All is joyful and light in the last movement, except for occasional forays into storminess.

The first performance of this symphony took place in the house of his friend Otto Hatwig, a violinist in the Burgtheater orchestra. All of the other musicians were amateurs. Its first public performance was in 1873—forty-two years after Schubert’s death.