IFIGENIA IN TAURIDE: Music, Tommasso Traetta; Libretto, Marco Coltellini

By Charles Jernigan, Guest Reviewer for *Opera con Brio*

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CHARACTERS
Toante, King of Thrace [sic.], *tenor*
Oreste, son of Agamemnon, brother of Ifigenia, *countertenor*
Ifigenia, Priestess of Athena , *soprano*
Pilade, friend of Oreste, *soprano*
Dori, friend of Ifigenia, assistant in Temple of Athena, *soprano*

Les Talens Lyrique, cond. Christopher Rousset

Two tragedies by the ancient Greek dramatist Euripides have come down to us on the subject of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia, one of the many stories that pertain to the tragic House of Atreus. The second part of the myth is narrated in his second play on the subject, *Iphigenia in Tauris.* Ifigenia, has been saved from the sacrifice demanded by the Goddess Diana in the first part of the story and spirited away to Tauris (today's Crimea). There she has become the Priestess of Athena in a country under the rule of the despotic Toante. Toante demands that foreigners be ritually sacrificed to the goddess and the Priestess must carry out the sacrifices in spite of her misgivings.

At the beginning of the opera Oreste (Italian versions of the names are used for characters in the opera) arrives on the scene with his faithful companion Pilade. Oreste has slain his mother, Clitemnestra, for her murder of her husband, Agamennone, the children's father. Pursued by the vengeful Furies for the matricide, he has come to Tauride to take the sacred simulacrum of Athena back to his home in Argos and in this way atone for the murder and free himself of the Furies. He is captured, and Toante orders that he be sacrificed, but Iphigenia, who does not know who he is, feels a kinship with him and puts off the act. Dori tries to help Pilade rescue Oreste, but they too are captured and Toante orders all three to be sacrificed. At the last minute, Ifigenia, charged with the ritual murder of her own brother and her only friend, takes the sacred knife and stabs Toante instead. The Greeks, now freed, can take the sacred image of the Goddess and return to Argos.

The Iphigenia myth was extremely popular among Italian composers of the eighteenth century. Some 70 Italian operas on the subject were composed between 1700 and 1809 (and additional ones in French and German), but most of them used the story of the earlier part of the myth, set in Aulis. About 18 composed works based on the Tauris

story. C.W. Gluck, notably, composed operas on both stories, and, indeed, he was the conductor at the first performance of Traetta's work in Vienna in 1763. His own Aulis opera comes in 1774 and his version of the Tauris story comes five years later in 1779.

Traetta, born in Puglia studied in Naples, but spent much of his opera career outside of Italy, at the Imperial Court in Vienna and then in St. Petersburg at the Russian court of Tsarina Catherine II. Like Gluck, his operas reflect the gradual change from the earlier baroque, based almost entirely on *da capo* arias and an emphasis on extremely virtuosic singing, to works suggesting a deeper psychology in a variety of musical forms. *Ifigenia in Tauride* contains many striking examples of choral music and several duets in addition to the *de rigeur da capo* arias. He is not Gluck, however, and his work does not always capture the depth of character or evoke deep emotional reaction, although he is striving in that direction. Gluck, at his best, achieved that goal, and we care about his characters. Traetta also misses several opportunities which later composers would have seized for their dramatic import: the theft of the sacred image and the capture of Oreste and Pilade take place off stage, and the recognition scene between Oreste and Ifigenia is handled in brief recitative. The musical sections are mostly reflective or comment on events like earlier baroque opera, and do not forward the action.

An exception to the rule is the great scene for Oreste in Act 2 when he is tormented by the Furies in his sleep, which Traetta handles in dramatic accompanied recitative with choral intrusions from the Furies. Gluck certainly remembered Traetta's setting when he composed the same scene for his own *Ifigenia in Tauride.* In Traetta, however, the Furies are mellifluously melodic, and not very menacing. The best of the new style of music is in the duets for Dori and Ifigenia, wonderful vocal combinations for two female voices which foreshadow Rossini and Bellini.

Rafael Tomkiewicz as Oreste; Rocío Pérez as Ifigenia Photo: © Birgit Gufle

The Innsbruck production by Nicola Raab was well wrought, using the "concept" of a museum setting (and not the first time that concept has been used for reimagining baroque opera). The vast revolving stage revealed a museum gallery with a rather abstract "Greek" sculpture taking the place of the sacred image of Athena, spaces which seemed to be storage rooms for art works and even the spaces between the walls with pipes and the "guts" of the building. One of the scenes was on two levels, with a storage room on top where Oreste is hiding and a small work room beneath. Athena's temple was a high walled precinct with the Greek letters Alpha, Theta and Eta, the start of the name of the Goddess. The director avoided stasis during the long baroque arias by continually moving the characters around or revolving the stage and moving the singers from space to space as the stage turned. Singers climbed up on crates, up and down ladders, lay on the floor and fell over (good thing they were all young). Nobody "parked and barked." Thus, an opera with little real action seemed always to be in movement. Characters were generally dressed in modern clothes, but a sleeveless white dress with pleats worn for most of the evening by Ifigenia looked "Greek" though contemporary, while Dori's costume was authentically ancient Greek. Toante and Ifigenia herself wore eighteenth century costumes for the final scene when Ifigenia stabs Toante and liberates the Greeks. So a costuming era mix.

Toante's simile storm aria in the last act, "Vedi, grave di nimbi," is an angry tirade at Ifigenia for rejecting him, telling her not to expect any mercy from him. The stage director chose to stage it as a very mild attempt at rape while he is singing his aria, but she repulses him. Onstage, he straddles her and begins to unzip his pants, but he never takes them off and she remains fully dressed. Nonetheless, the Innsbruck folks warned people who might be upset about the "graphic" sex, suggesting that they turn to the Red Cross, who would be in attendance. I didn't find it particularly offensive or graphic, and besides, how could a tenor singing the runs and trills of a baroque storm aria manage to rape anyone at the same time. This aria, by the way, shows Traetta's attempt to turn a traditional baroque form (a storm simile aria) into a psychological exploration of Toante's state of mind.

Rocío Pérez as Ifigenia; Karolina Bengtsson as Dori Photo/© Birgit Gufler

The singers were very good. Ifigenia, Spanish soprano Rocio Perez, had a crystalline and very 'pure' voice, most effective in the lamenting arias when she wonders what she can do and in her dulcet duets with Dori, but she also rose wonderfully to her one really virtuosic aria "Che mai risolvere," with which Innsbruck chose to end the first part of the performance (it comes towards the beginning of Act 2 in the libretto). She took this one on with a vengeance, rising to beautiful clear and solid high notes and navigating the impossibly difficult coloratura with brilliance. She was matched in bravura by Suzanne Jerosme as Pilade, who has a technically spectacular aria almost immediately in Act 1, "Stelle irate." Karolina Bengtsson as Dori has some of the loveliest music in the score and she made the most of it. Toante was sung by Australian tenor Alisdair Kent He had ringing high notes, but did not really convince as a villain, and his coloratura seemed somehow to be an appliqué on the vocal line rather than an integral part of it. Countertenor Rafael Tomkiewicz sang the role of Oreste, originally written for the alto castrato Gaetano Guadagno, for whom Handel wrote and who had sung the role of Orfeo at the premiere of Gluck's opera. He was superb. One oddity of the opera is that there are no low voices; in our production there were three sopranos, a tenor and a countertenor. I missed the lower registers!

The NovoCanto chorus was usually placed offstage, barely visible to the audience through black scrims, with women on one side, men on the other. When they had an active role rather than singing commentary or the part of the Furies in dreams, they came on stage dressed in black. Needless to say, the 24 person Les Talens Lyrique under Christophe Rousset did a wonderful job bringing this music back to life. Madeleine Boyd was responsible for the costumes and the elaborate "museum" set. It was a good evening.

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