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ARTICLE

## Music and Narrative in the Eighteenth Century: Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* as Dramatic Tableau

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This article puts forward a new theory for discussing eighteenth-century music as narrative by combining literary theories of narrative with an analytical and historical exploration of the eighteenth-century opera overture. Through a consideration of how the overture to *Iphigénie en Aulide* prepares spectators for the ensuing drama and through a reconsideration of the role of (often ignored) devices such as musical repetition, this article shows how theories of theatre, drama, and narrative can inform our understanding of how music can be thought of in narrative terms and how eighteenth-century music was able to express a dramatic argument akin to that of a literary narrative. A hermeneutic approach is taken throughout that combines a (structuralist) analysis of the overture with a (poststructuralist) investigation into the overture's reception history and of eighteenth-century literary and dramatic theory. By proposing that music has a narrative potential, rather than an explicit structural narrative, the article seeks to provide a theoretical bedrock for future studies that place the 'reader' or listener as participant.

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Studies of music as narrative have tended to focus on nineteenth-century works and, in particular, those that playfully engage with formal musical expectations and toy with the idea of thematic transformation. Anthony Newcomb's theory of music (1984; 1987) as narrative is based on the notion that a listener follows the main musical theme through a linear and temporal sequence of musical events and actions, as if it were the main character in a novel. Susan McClary (1991) argues that music can foster a narrative through the manipulation of harmonic expectations and the listener's desire for tonal closure and resolution. And Carolyn Abbate (1991) suggests that music narrates temporarily, at moments of rupture and noncongruence. Although each scholar takes a different stance, Newcomb, McClary, and Abbate all associate music's narrative ability with compositional techniques such as thematic transformation and formal and harmonic manipulation, techniques typically associated with nineteenth-century symphonic and operatic composition. This connection is most explicit in an article by musicologist and narrative scholar Vera Micznik (2001), who compares the narrative of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony to that of Mahler's Ninth Symphony. Micznik asserts in her article that Mahler's symphony has a greater degree of narrative than Beethoven's because Mahler employed more complex musical structures and procedures. As she states: 'the more the sequence of events in the discourse relies on predictable, purely musical syntactical procedures (such as traditional tonal and formal sequence of events), the less narrative the result will be' (Micznik, 2001: 246). As such, studies of music as narrative have focused almost exclusively on large-scale and teleologically driven works. This has resulted in the sidelining of musical works with conventional, cyclical, and/or repetitive structures, meaning that a large proportion of eighteenth-century music has been omitted from narrative studies of music.<sup>1</sup>

To study eighteenth-century musical works from a narrative perspective is not necessarily a simple task, especially since the music of this period has often been regarded as highly stylised and based upon so-called purely musical structures, such as dance and sonata forms. As McClary observes:

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is the work of Susan McClary, who has attempted to tackle the issue head on by analysing the narrative merits of instrumental works by the likes of Johann Sebastian Bach and Mozart. See McClary (1986, 1987, 1991, 2000).

many “cultivated” people (even – perhaps especially – humanities scholars) by and large regard the eighteenth century as a kind of rationalist’s Garden of Eden before the fall into subjectivity, and that music of that time (particularly that of Mozart) is considered to be the articulation of perfect order – abstract, universal, free from the stain of human interests (1986: 130).

According to McClary, there is an underlying resistance to understanding the works of composers such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven as historically and culturally informed products. Thought to have little or no bearing on either the form or content of the work, extra-musical elements to these works are frequently ignored by scholars and narrative readings are deemed irrelevant or unnecessary glosses on these purely musical (read: formal) works. In effect, eighteenth-century music is understood as the centrepiece to Lydia Goehr’s (1994) imaginary museum of musical works. Detached from their cultural and social context, these pieces are understood in isolation, as works of ‘pure’ genius.

This article attempts to dispense with some of that mythology by taking an interdisciplinary approach that brings together literary theories of narrative with an analytical and historical exploration of the eighteenth-century opera overture. Building on James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy’s work, that asserts that ‘the sense of drama within eighteenth-century sonata practice is ingrained in the genre’s striving to articulate cadences in a spotlighted, quasi-theatrical, or narrative way’ (2006: 281), this article seeks to put forward a new theory for discussing eighteenth-century music as narrative. Taking as my starting point the comments in the dedicatory preface to Gluck’s *Alceste* (1767) that state that a musical overture ‘should inform the spectators of the subject that is to be enacted, and constitute, as it were, the argument’ (Howard 1995: 85), this article examines how music might function as narrative, using the opera overture in particular as a crucible in which to investigate the overture’s ‘narrative potential’, a term I will discuss later in this article.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Although it is Gluck’s name that is attached to the preface, it was most probably written by his librettist Ranieri de’ Calzabigi. Gluck, however, would certainly have been consulted.

## The Emergence of the 'Dramatic' Overture

Although the preface to *Alceste* seems to demarcate a caesura in the history of the overture, this is not actually the case; the preface is only one of a number of theoretical writings written during the eighteenth century that suggested the overture should take on a more dramatic function (Taïeb, 2007; Stollberg, 2014). Johann Adolph Scheibe was possibly the first to put forward the idea of a 'dramatic' overture. In an article published some 30 years before Gluck's Preface, Scheibe wrote:

All symphonies that are composed for a play should concern themselves primarily with its content and nature. Necessarily therefore, different types of symphony are appropriate for tragedies than as for light-hearted or comedic pieces. The music which is appropriate for tragedy must be different to that appropriate for comedy as the two genres are from each other. In particular, one must ensure that each section of the music fits each individual section of the play. The opening symphony must complement the first scene of the play, therefore, but by the same token, the symphonies which occur in between the various scenes must complement both the end of the preceding scene and the beginning of the following (1970: 614, translation mine).

Although Scheibe uses the term 'symphony' to refer to any instrumental music used within a play, he does note there is a difference between symphonies that open a drama and those that occur between the acts. On the opening symphony, in particular, he states that it should prepare the spectator for the drama of the opening scene. Scheibe's most intriguing remark, though, concerns a composer's understanding of the literary drama for which the accompanying music is intended:

Concerning the dramas, a composer must fundamentally understand not only how they are constructed but also how each drama differs from another. He must also know exactly the individual and innate character of each type of play, so that he can differentiate between them, each by its own characteristics, by its own content, by its sections and all the other contributory factors (1970: 614–615, translation mine).

He argues that composers should have an understanding of the literary work and that the nature and design of that work should inform, and perhaps even determine, the character and structure of the overture and entr'acte. In short, Scheibe draws a direct connection between the narrative of the literary drama and the structure and content of the musical work.

Scheibe's comments on the overture were echoed throughout the eighteenth century by a variety of theorists from all over Europe. (The preface to *Alceste* is, in a way, an extension of Scheibe's original theory.) Johann Joachim Quantz's *Essay on a Method for Playing the Traverse Flute (Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen, 1752/1966)* is one such example, in which Quantz claims that 'a sinfonia should have some connection with the content of the opera, or at least with its first scene, and should not always conclude with a gay minuet, as it usually does' (1966: 316). Although adding a caveat that drama is too various to provide a definitive model for the dramatic overture, Quantz goes on to explore how a composer might achieve this effect. Questioning whether an opening sinfonia necessarily requires three movements, he considers whether, in some cases, it would be more suitable for the sinfonia to end with the first or second movement. He writes:

For example, if the first scene were to contain heroic or other fiery passions, the sinfonia could conclude after the first movement. If melancholy or amorous sentiments occur in the scene, the composer could stop with the second movement. And if the first scene contains no marked sentiments, or if these appear only in the course of the opera or at its end, he could conclude with the third movement of the sinfonia. In this fashion the composer could adjust each movement to the situation, and the sinfonia would still retain its usefulness for other purposes (1966: 316).

For Quantz, the traditional three-part structure of the opening sinfonia should be adapted to suit the nature of the drama it introduces and, in particular, the dramatic action of the opening scene.

Francesco Algarotti's comments on the overture take the ideas of Scheibe and Quantz a step further and his theory can be said to directly anticipate Gluck's

statement about the overture in the preface to *Alceste*. In his *Essay on Opera* (*Saggio sopra l'opera in musica*, 1755/2005), Algarotti states that 'the main drift of an overture should be to announce in a certain manner the action of the drama, and consequently prepare the audience to receive those affecting impressions that are to result from the whole of the performance' (2005: 20). Algarotti, while suggesting that the overture should focus upon the drama's affecting impressions, also suggests that it should prepare the listener for the action of the drama, implying that, like the preface, it is possible for the overture to host a kind of dramatic argument. Unlike Quantz, though, Algarotti does not go into any detail as to how a composer might achieve this effect.

Perhaps the most informative commentator on the dramatic potential of the overture is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In his review of Voltaire's *Semiramis*, which followed a performance of the play at the Hamburg Theatre in 1767, Lessing discusses the incidental music that was provided by Johann Friedrich Agricola. Lessing states that an

overture must only indicate the general tendency of the play and not more strongly or decidedly than the title does. We may show the spectator the goal which he is to attain, but the various paths by which he is to attain it, must be entirely hidden from him (1962: 74).

Lessing was familiar with Scheibe's writings and, in fact, quotes several extensive passages from Scheibe's essay in his review. While agreeing with Scheibe that the overture should hint at the nature of the drama, he stresses that the overture should avoid revealing to the spectator how the drama is to unravel. Lessing argues that the overture should be limited to providing an outline of the general mood of the play or opera, so as not to weaken the effect of the drama to follow. What is significant about this review is that Lessing then goes on to provide a description of Agricola's overture and highlight what he thought the overture sought to express. Lessing writes:

The opening symphony consists of three movements. The first movement is a largo with oboes and flutes beside violins; the bass part is strengthened by bassoons. The expression is serious, sometimes wild and agitated; the

listener is to expect a drama of this nature. But not of this nature only; tenderness, remorse, conscience, humility play their parts also, and the second movement an andante with muted violins and bassoons, is occupied with mysterious and plaintive tones. In the third movement the emotional and the stately tones are mingled, for the scene opens with unusual splendour; Semiramis is approaching the term of her glory and as this glory strikes the eye, so the ear must also perceive it (1963: 73–74).

For Lessing, Agricola's multi-movement overture conveys an array of moods and sentiments, each of which he claims corresponds to a different emotional aspect of Voltaire's play. Interestingly, his reading of Agricola's overture seems to overstep his own theoretical assessment of what an overture should or should not do. According to Lessing, the overture not only outlines the general tendency of the play, but also provides a musical exploration of the different and contrasting moods that are to appear later in Voltaire's play. As Agricola's incidental music is lost, we cannot probe Lessing's comments any further and assess whether the overture's series of musical images can be said to constitute an argument that parallels that of the play it introduces. His review, though, remains important as it provides an insight into how overtures were perceived to function in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The musicologist Reinhard Strohm (1997) has suggested that the term 'argomento' employed in Gluck's preface denoted, during the eighteenth century, a type of printed introduction that was commonly handed out before the performance of a play or opera. As Strohm states:

The term 'argument' was, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, familiar to theatregoers as a printed introduction to the subject matter of a drama or opera libretto. It was not a preface, nor necessarily a synopsis of the plot; more often the author concentrated on the prehistory of the action in order to prepare the spectator for basic conflicts and constellations between characters. Rarely did an *argomento* give away the turning points of the dramatic intrigue (1997: 239).



Strohm's reading of this term, and of Gluck's preface, suggests that he understands the overture (and in particular the overture to *Alceste*) to familiarise the listener with the prehistory of the drama and with the basic 'conflicts and constellations' that exist between the main characters. Strohm's theory is supported to some extent by Bernard Germain Lacépède near-contemporary treatise *The Poetics of Music (La Poétique de la musique, 1785)*. In his discussion of the overture, Lacépède claims that the best type of overture is one that reveals to the spectator the prehistory of the plot (Deane, 1972). While Strohm's definition of 'argument' is convincing from a linguistic perspective, his reading of the preface seems to jar with the aforementioned theoretical writings, which all refer to the overture preparing the listener for what is to follow and not what has happened. In fact, the preface is the only theoretical writing to use the term *argomento*. And while Lacépède does state that there are overtures that present the listener with a prehistory of the opera, he also discusses several other types of overture: those that offer a condensed portrait of the entire piece (although these detract from the impact of the opera); those which prepare the listener for the main sentiments of the opera (although not necessarily in all their detail); and those that anticipate the drama's overall mood.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the differences in their approach and terminology, the writings of Algarotti, Lacépède, Lessing, and Quantz all agree on one point: that the overture has the capacity to prepare listeners for the drama of the opera, implying, therefore, that music has the potential to communicate a literary idea. To propose that an eighteenth-century overture takes on a dramatic function that, in a way, parallels literary poetic modes may seem like a large claim – especially in view of the fact that dramatic instrumental music is more often associated with the music of the nineteenth century. However, it is important to note that Gluck's preface does not state that the overture constitutes the argument of the opera, but that it should constitute 'as it were' the argument of the opera (Howard 1995: 85). Gluck's turn of

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<sup>3</sup> One other alternative suggested by Lacépède is that the overture can be dispensed with altogether. Interestingly, in *Iphigénie en Tauride* Gluck chooses not to begin with an overture in the traditional manner but with a musical storm that flows directly into the troubled events of the opening scene. On Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* overture see Howard (1963) and Rushton (1972).

phrase here directly acknowledges the disparity between the communicative ability of a literary text and that of instrumental music. Indeed, unlike an opera aria, the overture is not accompanied by spoken word and, therefore, is limited in what it can tell a listener. As composer Hector Berlioz states in his assessment of Gluck's *Alceste*:

the overture to *Alceste* may foreshadow scenes of sorrow and of love, but it can indicate neither the object of this love nor the cause of this sorrow. It can never inform the listener that Alceste's husband is King of Thessaly and condemned by the gods to die unless someone undertakes to die for him (1994: 103).

Berlioz asserts that the argument of an overture cannot replicate exactly the dramatic argument of the opera as music cannot communicate the details and specificities of the narrative. If this is the case, what is an overture able to communicate to a listener and to what extent is music able to communicate a narrative?

### **Navigating Though Theories of Narrative**

To assess effectively the narrative merits of the eighteenth-century opera overture and its possible relationship to the dramatic work it introduces requires not only a study of the musical structure and attributes of the overture – or even of the overture and the opera – but also an exploration of contemporary writings on drama and on narrative. The terms 'dramatic' and 'narrative' need to be used with caution here, as they have undergone various redefinitions. Within the field of literary criticism alone much ink has been spilt on defining these two words and their relationship to one another and it is, therefore, worth mapping briefly the theoretical terrain and the terminology I will employ before continuing with my inquiry.

My understanding of music as narrative develops out of the work of Seymour Chatman, who argues that narrative discourse is not solely concerned with structure, but also how that structure is manifested and expressed. According to Chatman, a narrative can be made 'real' (1978: 26) through a range of different media and it is up to the reader to 'unearth the virtual narrative by penetrating its medial surface' (1978: 27). For Chatman, the narrative of a literary musical or dramatic work resides

deep within a work and can only be uncovered by the reader through a careful, almost archaeological approach. It is on this point that my theory of narrative diverges from that of Chatman. While I share the understanding that narrative is an umbrella term that covers a range of presentational manifestations or modes, I do not perceive the reader as an external agent, but a core component in the formation of the narrative. To my mind, the reader does not simply unearth the narrative, but is directly responsible for piecing it together from a series of culturally and historically specific signs, codes, conventions and devices that prompt the reader to interpret the work in a particular way. As such, I understand narratives to be fluid, dynamic, and transactional in nature, and it is for this reason that I prefer to say that a work has a narrative potential rather than a realised narrative. The notion of narrative potential is, perhaps, more pertinent when considering music, rather than, say, the novel, because as Berlioz notes music cannot communicate all the details and specificities of a story, only a series of evocative musical images. In this article, my aim is not to reconsider the much-debated question of whether music can communicate a narrative in same way as a literary text can, but to understand how music has latent narrative potential.

### **Gluck's overture to *Iphigénie en Aulide***

Gluck's experimental overture to *Iphigénie en Aulide* (1774) has a fervent reception history with commentators frequently discussing the overture in programmatic terms. As such, this overture makes for an interesting point of study as it allows for a hermeneutic approach that combines a (structuralist) analysis of the overture with a (poststructuralist) investigation into the overture's reception history. Drawing on theories of drama expounded in Denis Diderot's theory of the dramatic tableaux (*Entretiens sur 'Le fils naturel'*, 1757) and through a detailed investigation into Richard Wagner's writings on Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* overture (*De l'ouverture*, 1841; *Gluck's Ouverture zu 'Iphigenia in Aulis'*, 1851), I argue that 1) the *Iphigénie en Aulide* overture presents the spectator with a series of musical images that are indicative of the main characters and situations in the opera and that 2) the arrangement of these images *side by side* furnishes the overture with a pictorial narrative potential that depicts the opera's most 'pregnant moment', in Lessing's words.

Shortly after the first performance of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide*, the music critic François Arnaud wrote (1776):

The overtures which in your [Italian] Operas do not have any relationship with the drama, this skilful [sic] Artiste [Gluck] always relates to the action: thus the overture of his *Iphigénie* announces a religious action, a great action, a warlike action, a pathetic action, and all the characters are expressed in a fashion that I dare to characterize as a divine one (Lesure, 1984: 246).

Arnaud's comments on Gluck's overture raise two important points: firstly, that the overture to Gluck's opera forms part of the dramatic action of the opera; and secondly, that the overture consists of a series of musical passages that anticipate some of the dramatic situations and characters in the opera.

Later writers have rearticulated Arnaud's programmatic description of the overture. Wagner perceives the overture to be 'Gluck's most perfect masterpiece of this description' because of the way in which 'the master draws the main ideas of the drama in powerful outline, and with almost visual distinctness' (volume 7, 1898: 155).<sup>4</sup> Frederick Niecks argues that the overture 'is modern in form and more especially in spirit, namely in the striving to be truly introductory to and premonitory of a particular drama' (1906: 389). And Patricia Howard has written more recently that in the *Iphigénie en Aulide* overture all the 'tendencies that had begun to appear in [Gluck's] *Alceste* and *Paride* here assert themselves as part of the whole dramatic plan of the opera' (1963: 93). Wagner's writings, in particular, warrant further consideration as he wrote two detailed essays that explore the overture's musical and dramatic structure.<sup>5</sup> For Wagner, the dramatic power of the overture was a result of the clear depiction of the main characters and conflicts presented in the opera:

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<sup>4</sup> The essay 'De l'ouverture' was originally published in the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* (1841). Vol. 8, 10–17 January: 7–19, 28–29 and 33–35.

<sup>5</sup> See Wagner's article in the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* (1841). Vol. 8, 10–17 January: 7–19, 28–29 and 33–35; and his article 'Gluck's Ouverture zu *Iphigenia in Aulis*' in *Zeitschrift für Musik* (1854): 1–6. See Grey (1988) for a discussion of Wagner's writings on the overture.

It is a contest, or at least an opposition of two hostile elements, that gives the piece its movement. The plot of *Iphigenia* itself includes this pair of elements. The army of Greek heroes is assembled for a great enterprise in common: under the inspiring thought of its execution, each separate human interest pales before this one great interest of the gathered mass. Now this is confronted with the special interest of preserving human life, the rescue of a tender maiden. With what truth and distinctness of characterisation has Gluck as though personified these opposites in music! In what sublime proportion has he measured out the two and set them face to face in such a mode as of itself to give the conflict, and accordingly the motion. In the ponderous unison of the iron principal motive we recognise at once the mass united by a single interest, whilst in the subsequent theme that other interest, that interest of the tender, suffering individual, forthwith arrests our sympathy (volume 7, 1898: 161–162).

In this essay, published in 1841, Wagner argues that ‘a solitary contrast is pursued throughout the piece’ that ‘gives into our hands the broad idea of old Greek Tragedy, for it fills us with terror and pity in turn’ (volume 7, 1898: 162).

Following his 1847 adaptation of Gluck’s opera, Wagner published a follow-up essay on Gluck’s overture in which he amended his view of the overture. He now argues that the overture is not constructed from the opposition of two musical ideas, but a number of different motifs:

the whole content of Gluck’s overture, then, appeared to me as follows: (1) a motive of Appeal, from out a gnawing anguish of the heart; (2) a motive of Power, of imperious, overbearing demand; (3) a motive of Grace, of maidenly tenderness; (4) a motive of sorrowing, of agonising Pity. The whole compass of the overture is filled by nothing but the constant interchange of these (last three) chief-motives, linked together by a few subsidiary motives derived from them (volume 3, 1898: 162).

As a result of editing and adapting Gluck's opera, Wagner's view of the overture changes. Moving away from his view of the overture as expressing a binary conflict, Wagner now perceives the overture to consist of a number of different musical and dramatic ideas, ideas that bear a marked similarity to Arnaud's aforementioned interpretation of the overture.<sup>6</sup> **Table 1** provides a structural overview of the overture, identifying the passages of music to which I think Arnaud and Wagner refer.

The musical structure of the *Iphigénie en Aulide* overture is unusual for the time, consisting of five sections: an opening statement, a preliminary presentation of four musical ideas, a modified presentation of three of these ideas and a slightly altered presentation of the original four ideas, followed by a brief closing passage. I have numbered each of the main sections and given each musical idea a letter. The dashes added to each letter denote a modification in the presentation of the material. The following discussion will consider each of these sections in relation to Wagner's writings and, where appropriate, draw on eighteenth-century theories and understandings of music and drama to situate the findings in a broader context.

### **Agamemnon's Melancholy: an Emotional Opening (Idea A)**

The overture to *Iphigénie en Aulide* begins with a contrapuntal melancholic theme for strings and woodwind in C minor. Peppered with sighing figures (*pianto*), the overture makes reference to musical devices typical of a Baroque lament, a musical topic with which the audience would likely have been familiar.<sup>7</sup> As Raymond Monelle states, the *pianto* has been used to signify a lament since the sixteenth century: 'at first it always accompanied the textual idea of weeping – words like "pianto" or "lagrime" – but it soon began to signify merely grief, pain, regret, loss – in other words, the indexicality of its immediate object' (2000: 17). In his discussion of the

<sup>6</sup> On the *Iphigénie en Aulide* overture see Rushton (1992), who identifies some of moments in the overture that draw on music or musical ideas from the opera.

<sup>7</sup> Eighteenth-century musical topic theory has been much discussed and my intent is not to go over debates here, but to focus upon how musical topics help to foster a sense of narrative. On musical topics see: Agawu (1991); Hatten (2004); McClelland (2012); Mirka (2014); Monelle (2006); and Monelle (2000).

**Table 1:** Structural Overview of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide Overture*.

| Section   | Idea | Bar No. | Harmony  | Arnaud's Comments   | Wagner's Comments  | Description   |
|---|------|---------|--|---------------------|--|---|
| Section 1:<br>Opening Statement                 | A    | 1–19    | C minor  | A religious action. | A motive of Appeal, from out a gnawing anguish of the heart. | Lyrical lament-like theme, presented in imitation.                              |
| Section 2:<br>Four themes                       | B    | 20–28   | C major  | A great action.     | A motive of Power, of imperious, overbearing demand.         | Martial theme in octave unison. Tempo change.                                   |
|   | C    | 29–39   | C major  | A warlike action.   |  | Semi-quaver passage with timpani.   |
|   | D    | 40–49   | C major  |                     | A motive of Grace, of maidenly tenderness.                   | Lyrical passage – no obvious connection to opera.                               |
|   | B'   | 50–62   | G major. Harmony begins to move towards G minor. | A great action.     | A motive of Power, of imperious, overbearing demand.         | Now with repeated semi-quaver accompaniment in violins, thicker orchestration.  |
|   | E    | 63–85   | G minor (moving to A minor at bar 73)            | A pathetic action.  | A motive of sorrowing, of agonising Pity.                    | Plaintive oboe melody – sighing figures.  |
| Section 3: Modified presentation of B, C, and D | B''  | 86–94   | D minor  | A great action.     | A motive of Power, of imperious, overbearing demand.         | Orchestrated differently to B and B' with theme imitated by basses and bassoon. |
|   | C''  | 95–101  | D minor  | A warlike action.   |  | Increased syncopation.  |
|   | D'   | 102–111 | F major  |                     | A motive of Grace, of maidenly tenderness.                   | Presented as in section 2, but in key of F.                                     |

(Contd.)

| Section   | Idea | Bar No. | Harmony   | Arnaud's Comments | Wagner's Comments                                    | Description                            |
|---|------|---------|---|-------------------|--|--|
| Section 4:<br>Repetition of section 2 with slight alterations | B''' | 112–120 | C major   | A great action.   | A motive of Power, of imperious, overbearing demand. | Orchestrated as in B'', but curtailed. |
|   | C    | 121–130 | C major   | A warlike action. |  | Presented as in bars 29–39.            |
|   | D    | 131–140 | C major   |                   | A motive of Grace, of maidenly tenderness.           | Presented as in bars 40–49.            |
|   | B'   | 141–154 | G major moving toward G minor                               | A great action.   | A motive of Power, of imperious, overbearing demand. | As in bars 50–62.                      |
|   | E'   | 155–167 | G minor   |                   | A motive of sorrowing, of agonising Pity.            | As in section 2, but shortened.        |
| Section 5: Closing passage or Coda                            | F    | 168–188 | G major to C minor to C major, closing on dominant note (G) |                   |  | Hints of C, E, and then B.             |



overture, Wagner refers to the opening passage as a 'motif of Appeal' and notes that the music is derived from Agamemnon's arioso that opens the first act of the opera.<sup>8</sup> In the arioso, a distraught Agamemnon invokes the goddess Diana, who has asked for this sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter in exchange for the necessary winds to send Agamemnon's army to Troy. Exposing Agamemnon's tragic dilemma that puts his love for his daughter in conflict with his duty towards his soldiers and his people, this opening arioso plunges us immediately into the opera's tragic narrative. By drawing on musical material from the opera, Gluck connects the music of the overture to the tragic drama of the opera.<sup>9</sup> Although on a first hearing the listener would be unaware of the explicit connection (unaware that the opening bars of the overture will later accompany Agamemnon's grief), the musical references to the lament topic help to establish a sense of grief and, perhaps, also of tragedy.

The opening passage, therefore, has three functions: 1) to suggest to the listener that the ensuing opera is concerned with death and sorrow; 2) to create a foreboding atmosphere, the opera suggesting a potentially tragic situation or outcome; and 3) to familiarise the listener with the music of the opera, imbuing the opening passage with a sense of history, so that when it returns it has a potent effect on the listener.<sup>10</sup> Gluck's use of quotation also blurs the boundary between the overture and the opera and, perhaps more significantly, between music with and music without words. The overture is used here not simply to quieten the audience, but to signal the beginning of the dramatic action. It is used to establish a tragic atmosphere, placing the listener in a state of dramatic expectation.

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<sup>8</sup> The quotation is not exact. As the overture presents a purely instrumental version of the arioso, it is orchestrated differently. In addition, the opening passage of the overture is in C minor, whereas in the opera it is in G minor. The melodic and harmonic contrapuntal construction in both cases is the same.

<sup>9</sup> Although we do not know whether the overture was composed, before, after, or alongside the opera, the connection between the two remains explicit.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that this motif also has a history outside of the overture and opera, the music for Agamemnon's arioso taken from Gluck's opera *Telemaco* (Vienna, 1765). In its previous incarnation the music had been used to accompany Telemaco's fears for the safety of his father. Although this reference to *Telemaco* would not have been known to the Parisian audience for which *Iphigénie en Aulide* was written, the fact that Gluck uses this musical fragment to accompany a similar dramatic moment in both operas suggests that he felt the music was particularly well suited to the depiction of familial pain and suffering.

### **A Portentous Passage: the Barbaric Greek Chorus (Idea B)**

Bar 19 of the overture introduces its next main musical idea. This passage provides a stark musical contrast to the tragic and melancholic music associated with Agamemnon's arioso. For Wagner, this passage consists of 'a motive of Power, of imperious, overbearing demand'.<sup>11</sup> The passage's march-like staccato quaver movement, its unified homophonic texture, and its major key are indicative of the eighteenth-century military musical topic.<sup>12</sup> The fact that this passage bears a remarkable similarity to music that accompanies the Greek army in the opera corroborates this military musical association, which would likely have been recognised by eighteenth-century listeners.

Although the overture does not quote music from the opera exactly, the musical passages of the overture are similar in terms of textures, timbres, and rhythmic ideas. For example, the chorus that opens Act 1 Scene 2 and the choruses of Act 3 all share a marked resemblance. Interestingly, in terms of the dramatic action, these choruses are exclusively concerned with the Greek army's need for sacrifice. The Act 1 Scene 2 chorus, for instance, demands that Calchas reveals the name of the person that is to be sacrificed so that they can continue their journey to Troy. In the Act 3 chorus, the army repeatedly calls out for Iphigénie's sacrifice. With respect to these choruses, Olivier de Corancez recollects a conversation with Gluck in which he discusses the use of musical repetition and how it serves to intensify the dramatic action:

I also complained to M. Gluck that, in the same opera Iphigénie, the chorus of soldiers, who come forward so many times to demand loudly that the victim must be given to them, not only offers nothing outstanding from the point of view of melody, but is also constantly repeated, note for note, even though variety is so desirable a quality. 'These soldiers', he told me, 'have left all they hold most dear, their country, their wives, and their children, in the

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<sup>11</sup> The military passage is repeated several times during the overture, although with some modifications. The first repetition, for example, adds a tremolando figure in the upper strings (bars 50–57) and the second presents the theme in free imitation with the upper strings continuing the tremolando accompaniment (bars 86–94).

<sup>12</sup> On military musical topics see, in particular, Monelle (2006).

sole hope of attacking Troy. They are becalmed in the middle of their journey, and forced to remain in the port of Aulis. A contrary wind would be less disastrous for them, because at least it would enable them to return home. Suppose', he added, 'that a large province experienced a terrible famine'. The citizens assembled in large numbers, and went in search of a ruler of the province, who addressed them from his balcony: 'My children, what do you want?' All would reply together, 'Bread.' 'But is this how...' 'Bread.' 'My friends, we're going to provide...' 'Bread, bread!' To every speech, they reply 'bread'; not only do they pronounce nothing but one laconic word, but they say it always on the same note, because great emotions have but one accent. Here the soldiers ask for the victim; all the circumstances are as nothing to their eyes; they see only Troy, or a return home. They can only utter the same words and always with the same accent. I could have doubtless composed a musically more beautiful chorus, and gratified the ears by varying it. But then I would have been only a musician, and I would have departed from Nature, which I never must do (Howard, 1995: 246).<sup>13</sup>

According to Corancez, Gluck's use of repetition in the third act of his opera was an attempt to musically depict the increasingly tense dramatic situation. Representative of a force that stands in direct conflict with Agamemnon's love for his daughter, the choruses of Act 1 and 3 intensify the tragic narrative of the opera, repeatedly reminding the listener of the altar that awaits Iphigénie.

As with Agamemnon's arioso, the militaristic 'motive of Power' in the overture anticipates the narrative role the music associated with the Greek army is to play in the opera. Repeated six times in the overture, with each statement (except the last) intensified through the addition of tremolandi and imitation, this passage captures musically Susanne Langer's idea of tragedy as a 'form in suspense'. As she states:

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<sup>13</sup> This anecdote was originally published in the *Journal de Paris*, (volume 231, 1788: 1010).

intensification is necessary to achieve and sustain the 'form in suspense' that is even more important in tragic drama than in comic, because the comic denouement, not making an absolute close, needs only to restore balance, but the tragic ending must recapitulate the whole action to be a visible fulfilment of a destiny that was implicit in the beginning (Langer, 1953: 357).

This passage is used throughout the overture, not simply to announce the opera's military topic, but to create a sense of dynamism, an increasing intensity that musically mirrors the repeated calls for Iphigénie's sacrifice later in the opera. If tragedy is, indeed, a 'form in suspense', then the overture is crucial in preparing the listener for the opera's narrative by placing the listener in a state of tragic expectation.

### **Achilles and his Heroic Vision: the source of hope (Idea C)**

The next musical idea presented in the overture bears a marked similarity to the music that is associated with Iphigénie's beloved, Achilles, in the opera. The passage again invokes the military musical topic, although this is the only moment in the overture to employ the full orchestra and, in particular, the brass and the timpani. In the opera there are only a few occasions where this texture is also employed: the celebratory music of Act 2 Scene 3 (*Chantez, célébrez votre reine*), the chorus that follows shortly after (*Ami sensible, ennemi redoutable*), and Achilles's aria of Act 3 Scene 3 (*Calchas, d'un trait mortel percé*). The orchestration of all these musical numbers is remarkably similar: they each host a near-identical rhythmic figure played on the timpani and brass and, most importantly, all have texts of a similar dramatic nature. Specifically, the musical numbers are associated with Achilles's love for Iphigénie, his heroic nature and strength, and his vow to rescue Iphigénie from the altar.

There is no mention of this passage in Wagner's discussion of the overture, whereas Arnaud's refers to a passage with a 'warlike action'. Wagner's omission is perhaps not surprising given that in his adaptation and revision of the opera,

Achilles' role is drastically cut, as are the choruses associated with Achilles' efforts.<sup>14</sup> It seems, for Wagner, that either Achilles was not an important dramatic character and worth mentioning in his discussion, or that the two military-like passages in the overture were not in his opinion significantly different. I would argue that this passage is an important part of the musical narrative of the overture as it provides a more nuanced musical perspective on the military conflict in the drama, the driving rhythms combined with the major key suggesting an heroic plight or military figure that stands in opposition to the more sombre and daunting unison passage that represents the repeated calls for sacrifice of Iphigénie discussed above. Monelle's (2006) suggestion that the trumpet fanfare at this time was indicative of chivalry and nobility is additional evidence that the passage is not representative of the increasingly desperate military army, but the heroic figure of Achilles who opposes Iphigénie's sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Cry of Nature: Iphigénie and the Oboe (Ideas D and E)**

Two musical ideas from the overture remain to be discussed, although both I believe are representative of the same character: Iphigénie. The first of these passages is found at bars 40–49 and has a lyrical quality that is quite unlike the rest of the overture. According to Wagner, this motif has a graceful quality and is representative of 'maidenly tenderness'. Like the examples above, this passage draws on a familiar eighteenth-century musical topic, in this case the pastoral.<sup>16</sup> The passage is for flute, predominantly stepwise and songlike in nature, and has a relatively simple harmonic framework. As with the other passages discussed here, a musical parallel can be found in the opera. The chorus that opens Act 1 Scene 5 shares a similar musical texture and also provides a moment of contrast and calm. It is light and simple, thinly orchestrated, and has a pastoral-like character that is reminiscent of the passage for flute and violins in the overture. Removing the listener from the dense tragic soundworld that has, up until this point, subsumed the opera, this

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Wagner's 1854 adaptation of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* see Whittaker (1940).

<sup>15</sup> On the trumpet and chivalry see, in particular, Monelle (2006).

<sup>16</sup> On pastoral musical topics see, in particular, Monelle (2006).

chorus announces the arrival of Iphigénie and her mother, Clytemnestra, to Aulide and describes their majesty and beauty. As Monelle suggests, the pastoral topic was usually used to depict a natural simplicity (2006).

Gluck's use of the pastoral topic to depict Iphigénie as innocent and close-to-nature in both the opera and the overture aligns with the way in which many eighteenth-century writers, philosophers, and artists perceived ancient Greece and its art. For example, in his widely-disseminated essay *Thoughts on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (*Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerey und Bildhauerkunst*, 1755), Johann Joachim Winckelmann states that artists should follow the Greek examples and represent emotion in a restrained and stoic manner. For Winckelmann, 'the calmer the state of a body, the fitter it is to express the true character of the soul' (Nisbet, 1985: 43). The Lydian fourth at bar 39 of the overture could be an attempt to give the passage a Grecian quality. Indeed, the eighteenth-century theorists Johann Mattheson and Johann Philipp Kirnberger both understood the modal system to have its roots in ancient Greek music.<sup>17</sup> And, as suggested more recently by James O. Young, the Lydian mode was, in particular, connected to ideas of 'ease and soft pleasure' and often associated with 'high pitch and best sung by women' (1991: 235–36). Perhaps the reference to the Lydian mode in this passage alludes to both Iphigénie's Grecian heritage and her feminine nature. In his opera, Gluck appears to have carved the character of Iphigénie in Grecian fashion. The simple and restrained style in this aria is an attempt to depict musical beauty and emotion in its purest form; the artifices of music in Iphigénie's aria, and indeed in the passage in the overture, recede into the background.

The second passage in the overture associated with Iphigénie is of a completely different nature and stands in stark contrast to the light and airy texture of the aforementioned pastoral passage. As Wagner says, it is 'a motif of sorrowing, of

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<sup>17</sup> Although the newer, tonal system predominated in the eighteenth century, compositions based upon modal scales and modal theory persisted. On the use of modes in eighteenth century see Lester (1989) and Steblin (1983).

agonising Pity'. The motif to which Wagner refers is found in the final part of the second section of the overture and is almost twice as long as some of its other passages. I believe the passage to anticipate the troubled situation that awaits Iphigénie later in the opera, the plaintive oboe melody serving as a musical symbol for her pending sacrifice.

The oboe is an instrument employed to represent Iphigénie's plight several times in the opera and is featured prominently in Clytemnestra's Act 2 Scene 4 aria, which follows the revelation that her daughter is to be sacrificed. The oboe reappears again in an Act 2 duet in which Achilles confronts Agamemnon about the decision to sacrifice Iphigénie. Perhaps intended to represent Agamemnon's guilt, the oboe's melodic line here corresponds closely to oboe's melodic line in the overture. The most cited example of Gluck's symbolic use of the oboe, though, is found in Agamemnon's Act 1 Scene 3 aria. In this aria, Agamemnon questions Diana's request for sacrifice and refuses to obey their commands. The oboe appears as Agamemnon sings of the 'plaintive cry of nature' and how nature's 'voice rings more true than the oracles of destiny'. For Alfred Einstein, the oboe melody has an almost metaphysical resonance in this aria:

That lamentation of the oboe, which cuts Agamemnon to the soul, is not only an innovation in opera, but in the whole dramatic art. For the first time opera demonstrates its superiority over the spoken drama; for the first time the orchestra recognizes its function of saying things and evoking conceptions not to be expressed in words and stirring only in the subconsciousness of the soul (1964: 141).

While Einstein's statement may seem a little grand, it does touch upon an important point. As he notes, the oboe does not just reinforce the meaning of the text, but adds an extra narrative layer that presents the listener with a musical vision of Iphigénie at the altar. For Geoffrey Burgess, 'resembling a disembodied voice, the oboe is not unlike the "cry" of a singer's ecstatic high note when text dissolves into pure sound' (2004: 234). The connection Burgess makes between the sound of the oboe and the cry of a singer's high note is interesting. Is it possible that the oboe passage in the overture was intended to represent Iphigénie's desperate cry at the altar? When

evaluated against a background of eighteenth-century aesthetic ideas concerning music and the depiction of primal emotions, this reading of the oboe passage is, perhaps, more compelling.

During the eighteenth century a number of writings appeared that made a direct connection between music and the language of primitive man. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages and Writings Related to Music* (*Essai sur l'origine des langues, où il est parlé de la mélodie et de l'imitation musicale*, 1753/1998) and Johann Gottfried Herder's *Excerpt from a Correspondence about Ossian and the Songs of the Ancient People* (*Auszug aus einem Briefwechsel über Ossian und die Lieder alter Völker*, 1773) are two well-known examples. For Rousseau, language originated as a series of sounds and gestures. He claimed that 'in all languages the most lively exclamations are unarticulated; cries and groans are simple voices' (Rousseau, 1998: 295). Johann Gottfried Herder's essay makes a similar point, although Herder draws the reader's attention specifically to the emotional power of primitive song. For Herder, the more primitive a song, the more potent effect it has on the senses. As he states: 'know then, that the more barbarous a people is – that is, the more alive, the more freely acting (for that is what the word means) – the more barbarous, that is the more free, the closer to the sense, the more lyrically dynamic its songs will be, if songs it has' (Nisbet, 1985: 155–56). This idea that music's origins lay with the powerful and emotive language of primitive man was something that also keenly interested Gluck.<sup>18</sup> At the time Gluck was composing *Iphigénie en Aulide*, he was also engaged with setting Klopstock's *Hermannsschlacht* (1769), a tragedy based upon a series of bardic songs that attempted to depict a more primitive and natural vision of man. Although the music never reached written form, Johann Friedrich Reichardt's autobiography does provide us with a description of Gluck's work: 'Several times during the songs from *Hermannsschlacht* Gluck imitated the sounds of horns and the cries of swordsmen from behind their shields; once he interrupted himself saying that he must invent his own instrument for the work' (Howard 1995: 235).

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<sup>18</sup> Gluck was probably familiar with Herder and his writings. In fact, Herder sent Gluck a letter (dated 5 November 1774, Bückeberg) asking him to consider setting his libretto, *Brutus*. Sadly, Gluck's reply is lost. See Howard (1995:128–29).



From Reichardt's observations it seems that Gluck used Klopstock's bardic odes to help forge a new, primitive musical style that was intended to present the listener with a series of powerful and raw human emotions. A parallel can certainly be made between what Reichardt has to say about Gluck's *Hermannsschlacht* and the oboe section of his *Iphigénie en Aulide* overture in which Gluck attempts to portray pain at its most raw and primordial level.

The depiction of pain (and death), it seems, was aesthetically problematic during the eighteenth century, which may seem strange given that Greek tragic drama that had preoccupied playwrights, librettists, artists, and composers since the beginning of the century.<sup>19</sup> Although many artists wished to portray emotion in its most intense and natural form – as Lessing says, 'to cry out is the natural expression of bodily pain' (quoted in Steel, 1930: 13) – they did not wish to present the horrific and the ugly. For Lessing, the artist needed to balance beauty with real emotion. As he states in his *Laocoön* (1767):

Let one only, in imagination, open wide the mouth in Laocoön, and judge!  
Let him shriek, and see! It was a form that inspired pity because it showed  
beauty and pain together; now it has become ugly, a loathsome form,  
from which one gladly turns away one's face, because the aspect of pain  
excited discomfort without the beauty of the suffering subject changing this  
discomfort into the sweet feeling of compassion (Steel, 1930: 13).

According to Lessing, an element of beauty should be retained when depicting pain and the depiction of suffering left to the imagination. As Matthew Schneider notes:

the need to avoid explicit depiction of violence re-creates the double,  
even paradoxical character of sacrificial ritual [...] The painter's sacrifice of  
mimetic faithfulness to the Law of Beauty thus conceals. It spares the viewer  
a potentially disturbing glimpse (1999: 280–81).

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<sup>19</sup> On the depiction of pain and suffering eighteenth-century art see Gustafson (1999), Richter (1992), and Schneider (1999).

It appears that the problem that faced the eighteenth-century artist was in finding a balance between faithfully representing the tragic moment and creating a beautiful and pleasant work of art.<sup>20</sup> Carle van Loo's painting of Iphigenia's sacrifice, which was exhibited at the Parisian Salons of 1757, presents an interesting case in this respect. His rendering of the scene caused much debate at the time as he had chosen to depict Agamemnon's pained expression at the altar, an expression that many critics thought could not be captured without offending the eye.<sup>21</sup>

The way in which Gluck (and librettist Du Roullet) tackled the problem of portraying the tragic suffering of Iphigénie was, in a way, ingenious. In both versions of their opera, Iphigénie's sacrifice never actually takes place, Diana intervening in the 1775 version and Achilles saving her from her fate in the 1774 version. George W. Harris (2006) has written extensively on how tragic drama and tragic events are perceived and understood. According to Harris, tragedy is defined by suffering and loss, the climatic moment of the tragic action occurring at the point when it becomes vividly clear to both the on-stage characters and the spectators that there is to be no satisfactory solution to the situation; suffering and loss are absolutely necessary. While the decision to replace the expected tragic close with a happy ending might seem to negate this effect, Gluck creates the sense that all will not end well through an intense portrayal, both musical and dramatic, of suffering and loss. The oboe passages are particularly important in this respect as they direct the listener's attention to the moment of sacrifice, allowing them to imagine (and perhaps experience musically) Agamemnon's loss. In a sense, Gluck and Du Roullet paint a dramatic picture that parallels the effect created by the Greek painter Timanthes in his much-discussed painting of Iphigenia's sacrifice (c. 406 BC). Timanthes' painting concealed Agamemnon's face with a veil so that his intense, emotional torment was

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<sup>20</sup> It is interesting to note that, given Lessing's comments above, in his *Emilia Galotti* Emilia is sacrificed on stage. However, there were different attitudes towards what was expected of stage drama and what was expected of opera.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of this painting and several other paintings that depict the sacrifice of Iphigenia, see Fullenwider (1989). An image of the painting can be found here: <http://sites.univ-provence.fr/pictura/GenerateurNotice.php?numnotice=A5290>.

not portrayed directly to the spectator. By presenting the spectator with a musical portrayal of Iphigénie's sacrifice and by averting the sacrifice at the end of the opera, Gluck and Du Roullet allow the spectator a glimpse of the tragic altar scene at a 'safe' and aesthetically pleasing distance.

### **Pictorial Narratives: Dramatic Tableaux and the Idea of Absorption**

Through an examination of the connections between the overture and the opera in relation to the writings of Arnaud and Wagner, the above discussion has shown how the overture alludes to particular characters and emotional situations within the drama. This, however, doesn't answer the question of how the overture enables listeners to read a narrative into the work. Wagner's writings offer some further insight on this matter, his second essay discussing in detail the way in which the various musical passages are arranged and how this helps to create, in his terms, a dramatic argument.

For Wagner, the overture's narrative does not arise from the sequential, linear development of musical motifs, but from the presentation of contrasting ideas side by side. As he states: 'I say: side by side; for one can scarcely call them evolved *from out* of each other, saving insofar as each unit drives its impression home by having its antithesis placed close beside it' (volume 3, 1898: 162, italics original). The notion that the overture presents a series of ideas side by side, when taken alongside Wagner's earlier assertion that the overture has 'an almost visual distinctness', leads me to question whether the music, in the case of Gluck's overture, is better understood as functioning in a spatial and pictorial manner, rather than in a linear or temporal one. While this view of music may seem to go against music's innate temporal nature, it does align with eighteenth-century theories of drama, particularly those of Diderot and Lessing.

Written in 1757 to accompany the publication of his play *Le Fils Naturel*, Diderot's Conversations on 'The Natural Son' (*Les Entretiens sur 'Le Fils Naturel'*, 1757) puts forward a new theory for stage drama. Arguing that theatre could learn much from painting, Diderot contrasts the effect of the pictorial tableau with that of the *coup de théâtre*: 'an unforeseen incident which takes place in the action and abruptly changes

the situation is a *coup de théâtre*. An arrangement of these characters on stage, so natural and so true that, faithfully rendered by a painter, it would please me on a canvas, is a tableau' (1994: 12). For Diderot, 'if a dramatic work were well made and well performed the stage would offer the spectator as many real tableaux as the action would contain moments suitable for painting' (1994: 13). Using painting as a way in which to rethink stage drama, he puts forward a theory of drama that is not based upon a series of abrupt actions and events, but a series of tableaux that focus the spectator's attention on the emotional states of the characters. Drawing on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* as a model example for the dramatic tableau, Diderot asks:

can there be anything more passionate than the behaviour of a mother whose daughter is being sacrificed? Let her rush on to the stage like a woman possessed or deranged; let her fill the place with cries; let even her clothes reveal her disorder: all these things are appropriate to her despair (1994: 13).

In his description of this scene, Diderot expands the dramatic moment by focusing on the emotional aspects of the situation and portraying Clytemnestra as a mother, rather than a queen.<sup>22</sup> The intricate verses of playwrights such as Jean Racine are replaced here with inarticulate cries and gestures. Diderot's Clytemnestra becomes enveloped entirely by her situation and by her maternal instincts. In short, Diderot turns Greek tragedy into domestic drama through a process of emotional absorption.

Michael Fried (1980) has argued that absorptive situations are frequently found in eighteenth-century French painting. He posits that from around the middle of the century there is growing interest in depicting subjects involved in absorptive actions, such as reading, writing, and thinking. According to Fried, the subject of the painting is so engaged in their activity and mental process that they are unaware they are the object of someone's gaze, whether that be the viewer outside the frame or another character within the frame. Fried understands the focus on absorptive states to contrast with previous approaches to painting that, more often than not, feature characters that look outside the frame and towards the viewer, or that consist

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<sup>22</sup> Hays (1983) has noted that the focus on emotion is a trait of much of Diderot's literary works.

of a number of characters unaware of the action that is taking place elsewhere in the frame. In Fried's opinion, paintings that depict absorptive activities are paradoxical in nature; while the viewer is drawn into the painting, seized by the character's intense state of absorption, they are also excluded, the character being unaware that they are the object of someone's gaze.

In his famous review of the Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *Young Girl Weeping for Her Dead Bird*, written for the Salons of 1765, Diderot engages with the idea of absorption in painting. Exploring the narrative potential of Greuze's absorptive painting, Diderot's review seeks to bridge the gap between object and viewer identified by Fried. Diderot takes the girl's dreamlike expression as a stimulus for his reading, her absorptive state enabling him to participate in the painting's narrative as if he were another character standing next to the girl in the room. As he states:

But, little one, your grief is very profound, and very thoughtful! Why this dreamy, melancholy air? What, all for this bird? You're not crying, but you're distressed, and there's a thought behind your distress[...] That morning, alas, your mother was out; he came, you were alone; he was so handsome, so passionate, so tender, so charming, there was such love in his eyes, such truth in his expression! He said things which went straight to your heart! (Diderot: 1994: 236–37).

The girl's intense mental state, begging more questions than it answers, furnishes the image with a narrative potential that affords Diderot the opportunity to enter into the picture and fill out the narrative. Indeed, his narrative does not just refer to the present, but speaks of events outside the temporal frame of the painting, of emotions past and present. Had the painting lacked the apparent introspection, the emotional space in which Diderot aimlessly wanders would perhaps have been limited.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> In his writings, Diderot refers to the painting he saw at 1765 Salon as Greuze's *Young Girl Weeping for Her Dead Bird*. From the description given, the image to which he refers is known today as Greuze's *A Girl with a Dead Canary*, which is held at National Galleries Scotland. An image can be found here: <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/g/artist/jean-baptiste-greuze/object/a-girl-with-a-dead-canary-ng-435>.

Diderot's theory of the dramatic tableau is, as Fried notes, closely connected to (and perhaps derived from) the pictorial depictions of absorption by painters such as Greuze. In his new theory of drama, Diderot suggests that playwrights should focus their attention upon powerful and emotive situations that overwhelm, envelop, and absorb the characters on stage. According to Langer, tragedy is fundamentally a genre of hyper-involvement; it is a genre that is ultimately absorptive, the emotional intensity of the situation enveloping all the characters on stage and, indeed, the spectators. In my opinion, Gluck's overture to *Iphigénie en Aulide* engenders Diderot's notion of the dramatic tableaux and Langer's idea of hyper-involvement, the overture presenting the listener with a repeated series of intense emotional images that envelop the listener and present the opera's most 'pregnant moment'.<sup>24</sup>

The term 'pregnant moment' was devised by Lessing to describe the moment in a painting that embodies the greatest dramatic potential. As he states, 'painting, in her co-existing compositions, can only use one single moment of the action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant, from which what precedes and follows will most easily be apprehended' (Lessing, 1962: 55). Perhaps the *Iphigénie en Aulide* overture is intended depict musically the opera's most pregnant moment, thus functioning in a narrative manner similar to that of Carle van Loo's painting? I like to think of the overture in this manner, the overture depicting the scene in which Iphigénie approaches the altar; I hear the violent cries from the army calling out for sacrifice, I hear the emotional torment of Agamemnon, and I hear Achilles' heroism as he attempts to save his beloved.

The pronoun 'I' is important here. As noted earlier, the overture does not present a self-contained narrative, but one that requires the listener to participate, through both the interpretation of the musical material and through their personal knowledge of the opera's subject matter. In this sense, the overture can be understood

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<sup>24</sup> Although there is no hard evidence that acknowledges their debt to Diderot, we do know that Gluck's librettists Calzabigi and Du Roullet were both actively engaged in the debates concerning opera in France and Italy and would have been familiar with many of the theoretical writings on both spoken and sung drama. For a discussion of Gluck, Calzabigi, and Du Roullet's involvement in these debates see Brown (1991), Hertz (1967–1968), and Sternfeld (1966).

as having a latent narrative potential. In Gluck's overture, a series of musical images are structured in a particular way to encourage the listener to read a narrative into the work. The images act as if narrative signposts and the way in which they are understood and processed by the listener can be refined and redefined through knowledge of the opera and its subject matter, as well as through an understanding of conventional eighteenth-century musical devices and theories of drama.

Through a consideration of how the overture to *Iphigénie en Aulide* potentially prepares spectators for the ensuing drama and through a reconsideration of the role of (often ignored) devices such as musical repetition, this article has shown how theories of eighteenth-century drama and narrative can inform our understanding of how music can be thought of in narrative terms and how music was able to express a dramatic argument that was, *as it were*, akin to that of a literary narrative. By sidestepping the claim that Gluck's overture communicates a specific narrative, there is hopefully still plenty of theoretical space to consider and discuss multiple, and perhaps conflicting, interpretations of this work. I hope that this article also provides a bedrock for future thinking about the 'reader' as participant, the possibility of conceiving of narrative in more fluid and dynamic terms, and the further explorations of the 'as it were', the uttered, and perhaps the unsaid.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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