Changing the Catastrophe

The Political Context of Gluck’s *Orfeo*

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Following divine commands we are come, to seek here oracular counsel for a worn estate.

Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) is "...the earliest [opera]--at least until the mid-20th century--to be fully recognized as part of the standard repertory..." Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, which premiered 24 years later on the same stage, is the first opera which never has had to be revived. While *Orfeo* has been recognized, almost from the first moment, as an important turning point, its hold on the repertoire has been tenuous, perhaps because it remains poised between old and new:

... to appreciate the music of the 1760s, we need all our historical sympathy ... On the other hand, from 1780 onward we have only to sit back ... We do not have to call upon any historical sympathy to appreciate the work of Mozart and Beethoven and the late works of Haydn: they are still in the blood of most musicians today.

Because Gluck's music is almost familiar, it sometimes fails to receive the historical sympathy which it deserves. A thorough examination of the historical context reveals aspects of *Orfeo* which can deepen our appreciation of this work.

The traditional criticism is that Orfeo is disfigured by the occasion for which it was composed, the name day of Emperor Francis I:

... two incongruous features--the irrelevant overture and the artificial happy ending (both due to the festive occasion for which the opera was written, where too much tragedy would have been out of place) ...

... the conclusion is worse than irrelevant, for it tries to deny that there ever had been any drama.

The opera dissolves into agreeable divertissement, with choruses and dances in plenty but nothing in either words or music to satisfy the deeper values of the myth. ... Calzabigi made shallow work of it; and Gluck seemingly desired no more.
The opera's conventional overture and *lieto fine*, with a vaudeville ensemble, are doubtless to be seen as products of the occasion for which it was composed.\(^8\)

I shall argue from the historical context of Orfeo that the happy introduction and finale are not incongruous afterthoughts but are essential to the fundamental conception of the work.\(^9\)

The traditional criticism of Orfeo may have derived from remarks made by the librettist, Raniero Calzabigi. The *argomento* of the original libretto ends with following statement:

*Per adattar la favola alle nostre scene ho dovuto cambiar la catastrofe. Leggasi Virgilio al libro IV. delle Georgiche, al 6to dell' Eneide.*\(^10\)

Note that Calzabigi uses the plural "scene," a word which may refer to the various episodes of a theatrical presentation, where a new scene begins whenever a character enters or leaves the stage. The libretto itself is divided in this fashion. On this interpretation, the schema of scenes exists before the libretto is written, and Calzabigi has changed the fable to fit a dramatic or musical imperative, for example, to provide for a *divertissement* in the appropriate place. This view finds some support from a letter in which Calzabigi expresses his frustrations over his attempts to realize his dramatic goals: \(^11\)

However, "scene" also can refer to the theater in general, and "nostre scene" might mean something like “our theatrical scene.” Calzabigi then refers to Vergil, attempting to provide a further explanation, but this only seems to deepen the mystery. In order to better understand and appreciate this work, let us consider the Austrian "scene" in its broad historical context.

In monarchy, persons are states. The integration of art, politics, and life at an absolutist court is now difficult to appreciate. Personal and political influences upon the course of events may be so entwined that the question of their relative importance cannot even be formulated.

\(^8\) Sadie, *loc. cit.*


\(^11\) "Il confesso . . . di annacquare in un immancabile matrimonio vicende di aspra tensione drammatica." [He confesses to watering down, in an invincible matrimony, the astringent vicissitudes of dramatic tension.] Paduano, *op. cit.*, p. 360.
In 1736, Maria Theresa married Francis Stephen, duke of Lorraine, who did not speak German. After 1740, when Maria Theresa assumed the throne, the Austrian court spoke only French. The happy marriage of the royal couple was a personal source for the rise of French cultural influence in Austria; yet the marriage itself was in part the result of political considerations. The history of monarchy, indeed, the history of diplomacy, is rich with examples of attempts to exploit the overlap of personal and political relations.

Wenzel Anton von Kaunitz, the diplomat who became the head of the Austrian State Chancery in 1753, is the Austrian most closely associated with the "diplomatic revolution," the historic alliance between the former enemies, France and Austria. The idea was not his alone; Maria Theresa was favorably disposed towards improving relations, especially as the power of Prussia rose, but it was Kaunitz who realized the objective by overcoming opposition and supervising the treaty negotiations.

The Wars of Austrian Succession, in which various powers sought to establish their claim to parts of Austrian territory, lasted from 1740, when Maria Theresa assumed the throne, until 1748. In this conflict, Austria and England contended against France and Prussia. Prussia was the main beneficiary of the outcome because it seized the economically important province of Silesia from Austria.

In 1749, Kaunitz proposed that the recovery of Silesia was Austria's primary foreign policy objective. England could assist Austria only to a limited degree because England's main adversary was France, and because the ancestral domain of George II, the British king, was Hanover, whose proximity to the growing Prussian power made him increasingly reluctant to antagonize Prussia. Therefore, Kaunitz argued that even though Austria and France had waged intermittent war against each other for over two centuries, only an alliance with France held any hope of recovering the Silesian territories. After presenting his ideas in a foreign policy conference, Kaunitz gained Maria Theresa's approval and was appointed ambassador to France in 1750 in order to implement his proposals. He maintained an extravagant lifestyle while vigorously pressing his cause. Although he could not achieve the diplomatic

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13 According to Pompadour, it was three centuries. See her letter to Starhemberg, below.
agreements he sought, he laid the groundwork in his promotion of the Austrian cause and in his careful observations of the French court. He summarized his impressions in a secret Memoire of 1752 for Maria Theresa as he prepared his return to Vienna.\(^{15}\)

In the same year, there is an increase in the tempo of the efforts orchestrated by Kaunitz to promote the influence of French culture in Vienna itself. In addition to his growing diplomatic and political responsibilities, Kaunitz was becoming a kind of cultural prime minister, the "Directorial Praesidenten" with oversight responsibility for all Vienna theaters.\(^{16}\) In 1750, after the Staatskonferenz but before his departure for Paris, Kaunitz, acting on the instructions of the empress, drafted a "Memoire sur l'Entreprise des Spectacles dans la Ville de Vienne . . ." which details plans for a state-supported French comedy. He also arranged for the 1749 appointment of the Francophile Count Durazzo as the Genoan ambassador to Austria. Although Maria Theresa had bitter memories of Genoa's role in the War of Austrian Succession, Kaunitz overcame her objections and secured Durazzo's appointments in 1752 as assistant to Count Franz Esterházy, director of entertainments, and, upon Esterházy's resignation, as director in 1754.\(^{17}\)

1752 also marks the arrival in Vienna of a company of French theatrical performers, engaged at Kaunitz' request, which formed the nucleus of a permanent repertory company of actors, dancers, and musicians specializing in French dramatic forms. Durazzo produced a long series of French theatrical works in Vienna, primarily at the Burgtheater, which also was known as the French theater. Most of the opera was comic opera, but the repertoire is remarkably diverse: the classic French drama, the works of Corneille, Molière, and Racine, are thoroughly represented, as are recent works of Voltaire and a liberal helping of anonymous “Hans Wurst” farces. The receipts show that Corneille and Hans were equally

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popular. In later years, both *Orfeo* and *Figaro* premiered in this theater, performed by the successors of the company which first arrived in 1752.

Vienna also was becoming a center for the publication of books in the French language. Again, there is a notable increase in activity in the year 1752:

Avec l'organisation du théâtre français ... Vienne, l'influence français commense ... se faire vivement sentir. Nous en trouvons la preuve en même temps que l'origine dans le grand nombre des œuvres publiées ... partir de 1752. Les pièces de théâtre ont formé, la majeure partie de ces impressions. Au cours de l'année 1752, on imprima même uniquement des œuvres dramatiques, au nombre de 81....

Kaunitz' report on the French court includes a detailed account of Madame la marquise de Pompadour, the mistress and confidante of Louis XV:

... sans contredit une des plus belles femmes de la Ville et de la Cour. Ses yeux sont bleus, bien fendus, assez grands, son regard charmant. Le tour de son visage est ovale, la bouche petite, le front joli, le nez surtout fort agréable.

He also describes the private opera company which Pompadour organized to amuse the king:

On y [. . .  Bellevue] a construit un petit théâtre... Les opéras et les comédies qu'on y donne sont exécutés par la Marquise, mesdames de Brancas et d'Estrades et les courtisans. On dit que la Marquise joue ... merveille; en général cette troupe composée de seigneurs passe pour excellente. 20

The repertoire of this company, which was active from 1747 to 1752, may have influenced that of the *Burgtheater* in Vienna. Both Vienna and Pompadour's *Théâtre des Petits Cabinets* performed works by Molière, Dancourt, Voltaire, and Favart. 21 In 1759, Favart became Durazzo's Parisian agent, supplying theatrical works by French authors. Durazzo employed other artists to adapt these works to the Vienna stage.

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19 "With the organization of French theater in Vienna, the French influence begins to be felt in a lively manner. We find the proof in the great number of [French] works published there beginning in 1752. Most of these publications are theatrical works. In 1752, dramatic works alone account for 81 unique publications." Vera Oravetz, "Les Impressions Français de Vienne," *Etudes Françaises III*, 1930 (Szeged: L'Institute Français de l'Université de Szeged) p. 19.
20 "Without a doubt, one of the most beautiful women of the city or the Court. Her eyes are blue, well formed, very large, her countenance is charming. The shape of the face is oval, the mouth is small, the forehead beautiful, the nose above all very arguable... there [at Bellevue] they have constructed a little theater...The operas and comedies given there are performed by the Marquise, Mesdames Bracas and d'Estrades and the courtesans. They say that the Marquise plays beautifully; in general, this aristocratic troupe is known to be excellent." Kaunitz, France 1752, p. 447, 453. Kaunitz' phrase "On dit" indicates that he was not invited to these intimate events, where admission was by invitation of the king.
21 This list of examples is not intended to be comprehensive. For the repertoire of these theaters, see Adolphe Jullien, *Histoire du Théâtre de Madame de Pompadour. dit théâtre des petits cabinets.*
Gluck composed music for several of these, including Favart's own *La Cythère assiégée* in 1759. From 1762-1764, Favart supervised the publication in Paris of the score of *Orfeo*, using funds supplied by Durazzo.22

There are significant parallels between the aesthetic styles and political objectives of the programs of state-supported art in Paris and Vienna during this period. The neoclassic style in architecture is exemplified in Paris by several buildings of Gabriel, where ornament was eliminated in favor of simplicity, economy, and high moral purpose. The overall program of government commissioned art was supervised by the Comte du Marigny, Pompadour's brother. At about the same time, Gabriel's teacher, Nicholas Jadot, executed similar buildings in Vienna. The Burgtheater itself, whose major renovation was designed by Jadot, was intended as a low cost replacement for a more elaborate building which housed the expensive grand opera of Maria Theresa's predecessors. The themes of simplicity, economic constraints, and high moral purpose were evident in both courts.23

Kaunitz finally achieved his alliance in 1756. When Maria Theresa gave her approval for a new diplomatic initiative in 1755, Kaunitz instructed Starhemberg, the Austrian ambassador to France, to bypass normal diplomatic channels and communicate with Louis XV through either the prince of Conti, confidential adviser on foreign affairs, or through Pompadour. Starhemberg chose Pompadour.24

As early as 1748, Pompadour was sympathetic towards the Austrian cause. In a letter to Comte d'Argenson in which she supports a proposal for a new *École Militaire*, she describes France's real enemy:

Considérez, Monsieur, que nous sommes en guerre avec les Anglais, & que nous y serons presque toujours par la rivalité & l'antipathie des deux nations. Ce sont les seuls ennemis qui soient … craindre pour la France, & contre lesquels elle ne saurait trop bien se préparer. Nous faisons la guerre avec les autres peuples pour la gloire, mas avec les Anglais pour notre conservation. On ne saurait donc prendre trop de précautions contre de pareils rivaux, qui veulent à toute force tenir la

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balance de l'Europe, & qui par leur valuer & leurs richesses sont bien plus à craindre que la Maison d'Autriche ne le fut jamais. 25

After the successful conclusion of negotiations, she congratulated Starhemberg for his integrity and zeal:

Il y a plus de trois cents ans que les Augustes Maisons d'Autriche & de France sont ennemies. . . . ce nouveau système, quoique extraordinaire, est juste & naturel, parce qu'il est nécessaire...Quand au succès de nos armes, il est entre les mains de la Providence: mais si le Ciel protège la justice & la bonne foi, il se déclarera pour nous. . . 26

If the date of this letter is accurate, then Pompadour understood that the supposedly defensive alliance, concluded on May 1, would soon lead to war. Austria had sought, without success, a treaty whereby France agreed to join in an offensive campaign against Prussia. It was not until August that Frederick II, having learned of the new alliance, began the Seven Years' War with a preemptive attack on Saxony. It is possible that Kaunitz deliberately caused information to be disclosed to Frederick in order to provoke an attack that would activate the defense treaty. The point is that Kaunitz wanted war:

Tout ce que nous pouvons proposer c'est, d'affirmer nôtre Sûreté, et decent à s'il etoit possible, le Roy de Prusse. En nous rapprochant de la France, nous pourrions du moins éviter la Guerre, quôque nous ne parviendrions pas . . humilier le Roy de Prusse....

Parceque nôtre Sûreté et nôtre Conservation dependant aujourd'hui du plus ou moins de force du Roy de Prusse, toute Guerre, qui n'a pas son abaissement pour objet, est diamétralement opposée ... nos interets. 27

25 “Consider, sir that we are at war with the English, and that this is due to the rivalry and antipathy between these two nations. These [English] alone are the only credible enemies of France, and the only ones for whom France is ill-prepared. We wage war against others for glory, but we fight the English for our very lives. We need not take equivalent precautions against any other power, for the English wish to hold the balance of power in Europe, and, because of their valor and wealth, have a credible chance of doing so, in a way which the Austrians never have and never will.” The pro-Prussian Argenson was an opponent of Pompadour. "Lettre XXX Au Comte d'Argenson," Lettres de Madame La Marquise de Pompadour, Depuis 1746 jusqu'a 1752, inclusivement, (Premier Partie; London: G. Owen & T. Cadell, 1776; Troyes: Amis des Cahiers Bleus, 1985) pp. 58-59.

26 “For more than three centuries, the august houses of Austria and France have been enemies...this new system, far from extraordinary, is rather just and natural, because it is necessary...As for the success of our arms, it is in the hands of Providence: but if Heaven protects justice and good faith, it will declare itself for us...” Idem., "Lettre XXII Au Comte de Starhemberg, Juin 1756," Lettres de Madame La Marquise de Pompadour, Depuis 1753 jusqu'a 1762, inclusivement, (Seconde Partie; London: G. Owen & T. Cadell, 1776; Troyes: Amis des Cahiers Bleus, 1986) p. 52.

27 “Everything we propose has aimed at affirming our security and eradicating, to the extent possible, the King of Prussia. In approaching France, we cannot avoid war, because we cannot avoid humiliating the Prussian King... Because our security and our salvation today depends, more or less, on the power of the Prussian King, all war which does not have the overthrow of that king as its object is diametrically opposed to our interests.” Wenzel Anton Kaunitz, "Gründe für und wider die Allianz mit Frankreich, 26 Nov. 1755." in Adolph Beer, (ed.,) Denkschriften, loc. cit., pp.57-58, 60.
In the Seven Years' War, Austria, France, Russia, Sweden, and most of the independent German states fought Prussia and England. Although outnumbered and surrounded, Frederick II repeatedly defeated superior forces. Yet the Prussians also lost many battles, and were forced to rush to the far corners of their territory as the armies of their various opponents moved against them. In 1761, Prussia and England sued for peace, but their proposals were rejected.

This war is the immediate political context of Gluck’s 1762 *Orfeo*. The librettist, Ranieri Calzabigi, had recently arrived in Vienna after spending a decade in Paris. His exotic career illustrates the fascinating overlapping network of personal relationships through which the political and cultural affairs of Vienna were conducted.28 From a well-known family in Livorno, Calzabigi studied at the university in Pisa. By the age of 29, he was pursuing a career as both a poet and a diplomat in Naples. While serving as the secretary to the Marquis d'Hospital, French ambassador to Naples, Calzabigi was implicated in a poisoning and fled to Paris, where he cultivated Madame Pompadour. She is the dedicatee of the edition of Metastasio's poems edited by Calzabigi which appeared in Paris in 1754.

Calzabigi was forced to flee Paris in the spring of 1760 as the result of financial irregularities in a lottery scheme.29 The lottery was undertaken for the benefit of the construction of the École Militaire, the same charitable undertaking endorsed by Pompadour in her letter of 1748, but which had been delayed by the difficulties of raising funds during this period of massive government deficits.30

In the following year, Calzabigi appears in Vienna as a protege of Kaunitz, and is retained as "imperial and royal titulary councillor at the Netherlands Chamber of Finance."31 Why the Netherlands? Perhaps because they represented a political and financial link between Austria and France. In the Fountainbleau Convention of 1758, France and Austria agreed that the Austrian Netherlands were to be awarded to France in the event of victory in the ongoing Seven Years’ War, as a consideration for France's extensive military and financial assistance to Austria.

30 "Lettre XXX Au Comte d'Argenson," 1748, *loc. cit*.
31 Calzabigi's title as it appears in a review of the first performance of *Orfeo*, *Wienerisches Diarium No. 82*, 13 October 1762 (Wednesday supplement), quoted in Hans Heimler, "First performance:
In 1784, Calzabigi recalled the circumstances of Orfeo:

I arrived in Vienna in 1761, full of these ideas [for a new kind of opera based on declamation]. A year later, Count Durazzo, the then director of entertainments at the imperial court and today its ambassador at Venice, to whom I had recited my poem Orpheus, persuaded me to have it performed in the theater. I agreed on the condition that the music should be written according to my ideas. He sent me M. Gluck, who, he said, would suit my taste.  

Calzabigi is writing two decades after the fact, but if he was correct about the year in which Durazzo approached him, then Orfeo almost certainly was commissioned during the time of greatest crisis in the war. On January 5, 1762, Austria's defeat was assured by the death of the Russian empress, Elizabeth. Her successor, Peter III, idolized Frederick and reversed Russia's allegiance by sending troops to help the Prussians, before he was deposed and murdered by Catherine II. Although Catherine recalled the Russian troops, she did not resume the alliance with Austria, but remained neutral in the conflict.

Freed from the need to defend the Russian front, Frederick began to win decisive victories, and achieved the virtual collapse of his opponents by the time of the annual cessation of hostilities for the winter months. The final peace treaties were concluded in February of 1763.

The earliest known performance of Orfeo was at a private gathering in Vienna on July 8, 1762, reported in the journal of Count Zinzendorf. Even if Gluck composed very quickly, (and we also must allow him time for the arrangement of the music for Migliavacca's Arianna in May of 1762), the commission of Orfeo must have followed very soon after the death of the Russian empress.

The seriousness of the consequences of Elizabeth's death was appreciated immediately in Paris and Vienna. Louis XV had been so concerned for the health of the ailing Elizabeth that he had sent Poissonnier, "premier médecin des armées du Roi," to attend to her in 1758. The suggestion for this medical diplomacy came from none other than the Marquis de l'Hôpital, who had been Calzabigi's employer in Naples in the 1740's and who was now the French ambassador to St. Petersburg. Bernis, the close friend of Pompadour who was then the French foreign minister, replied to the suggestion:


33 Robert Haas, Gluck und Durazzo, p. 61. For a biographical sketch of Zinzendorf, see Erzsébet-Magda Langfelder, "Les séjours en Suisse, en France et en Belgique de comte de Zinzendorf d'apres son Journal (1764-1770)," Etudes Français IX (Szeged: L'Institute Français de l'Université de Szeged, 1933).
La santé de l'Impératrice de Russie est, Monsieur, trop précieuse pour que je ne m'occupe pas sans cesse de ce qui peut y avoir rapport. Je sens combien il seroit important que M. Poissonnier fût à Pétersbourg. Je ne perdrai pas un instant pour procurer le soulagement de l'Impératrice....

Letters of de l'Hôpital from this period describe the "enthousiasme pour le roi de Prusse" [enthusiasm for the King of Prussia] of the future czar. "Voilà, Monsieur, l'héritier présomptif de trône de Russie." [Take a good look at the heir apparent of the Russian throne]. As Calzabigi is raising funds in Paris for Pompadour's project, his former employer and her protege are corresponding about the critical importance of Elizabeth's health.

The news of Elizabeth's death reached Paris on January 28, 1762 via one of Kaunitz's couriers, who arrived with letters from the French ambassador to Vienna one day before the direct French diplomatic dispatches from St. Petersburg. There is a hint of indignation about this in the return letter from France to Russia, but the assessment is clear: the French foreign minister, comte de Choiseul, speaks of "la catastrophe arrivée en Ruisse."

Kaunitz hoped that bribery might keep the Russians fighting, and authorized his ambassador to offer fantastic sums:

Der Krieg kostet uns das Jahr hindurch Über vierzig Millionen; es wäre also noch ein Gewinn dabei, wenn wir unseren Alliirten zwanzig und mehr Millionen allmälig auszahlen würden, um wo nicht ganz Schlesien, so doch einen betrüchtlichen Theil davon zu erhalten.

Nevertheless, the gradual progress of Frederick's victories in the spring campaigns made the likely outcome clear to all experienced observers. An interesting consequence of Elizabeth's death is the change in the relative desire for peace of France and Austria. In the previous year, France desired a negotiated settlement, since Frederick's fortunes were declining and it seemed possible to negotiate a

34 "The health of the Czarina is so precious, Monsieur, that I occupy myself with it incessantly. I know how important it is that M. Poissonnier should go to Petersberg. I will not lose an instant in obtaining the relief of the Empress . . ." M. de Bernis au Marquis de l'Hôpital, 28 janvier 1758, in France, Commission des Archives Diplomatiques, Recueil des Instructions Données aux Ambassadeurs et Ministres de France, T. II: Russie, Alfred Rambaud, ed., (Paris: Ancienne Librairie Germer Baillière et Cie., 1890), pp. 76-77.

35 M. de l'Hôpital . . . M. de Bernis, 22 mai 1759, Ibid., p. 74.

36 "The catastrophe which has occurred in Russia." Le comte de Choiseul au Baron de Breteuil, 31 janvier 1762, Ibid., p. 183.

37 "This year, the war cost us over forty million; if only we could manage to gain a victory thereby, when we, with our allies, slowly count out another twenty million or more without gaining Silesia, you can imagine what a considerable commision might be received in this regard." Kaunitz to Mercy-Argenteau, February 2, 1762. Quoted in Alfred Ritter von Armeth, Geschichte Maria Theresia's. Sechster Band. 1759-1763. Maria Theresia und der siebenjährige Krieg. 1756-1763. Zweiter Band. [sic.] (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1875) p. 287.
favorable treaty with France's main adversary, England. At that time, Austria resisted because it did not control its primary objectives in Silesia. In the following year, it became clear that the conquest of Silesia was impossible after Elizabeth's death; Austria, exhausted and bankrupt, now desired peace. However, these new conditions made it much more difficult for France to achieve a successful negotiation with England. The French urged the Austrians to keep the pressure on while France sought a better deal. This was the cause of some friction between Choiseul and Starhemberg, who was still the Austrian ambassador to France, in early February:

Starhemberg objecta que refuser des ouvertures de paix, 'ce serait faire la guerre sans object...' Choiseul de répliquer non sans …-propos: 'Eh bien!... ce serait l'avantage que vous retireriez de la guerre.... Vous verrez que cela nous fera faire notre paix avec l'Angleterre.'

In the event, the Austrians kept fighting. On September 2, 1762, the duc de Nivernais finally received his commission from Louis XV to negotiate a peace treaty with England. On the subject of Austria, his instructions were explicit:

La Cour de Vienne ... paroit fort disposée ... la paix...l'état de ses finances ne lui permet pas de continuer la guerre...elle a perdu toute espérance de conquérir la Silésie....

On October 5, *Orfeo ed Euridice* premiered in the Burgtheater.

On October 29, the Austrians suffered their worst defeat of the war at Freiberg, a battle which effectively ended their resistance.

On November 3, France and England signed a preliminary treaty of peace.

In 1762, Kaunitz had many causes for concern. Not only was Austria losing the war, it was losing his war. Between the loss of Silesia and the disruptions in the economy, the state income, which

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38 "Starhemberg objected that to refuse overtures of peace, 'was to make war for its own sake.' Choiseul's pointed reply was, 'Very good! It is to your advantage to withdraw from the war now...You see that this will force us to make peace with England.' Related by Starhemberg to Kaunitz in letters of February 8 and 9, 1762, as quoted in Richard Waddington, *La Guerre de Sept Ans. Histoire Diplomatique et Militaire*, (5 Vols.; Paris: Librairie de Paris, Firmin-Didot et Cie., 1899-1919), Vol. 5., p. 284.

had been 40 million florins in 1736, would shrink to 23.5 million by 1763; the deficit, at 118 million in 1756, increased to 271 million in 1761.  

Calzabigi, Gluck, and Durazzo certainly would have understood the difficulties of the situation. Kaunitz protected all of them. As recently as 1761, he had hired Calzabigi and had managed to get Durazzo reinstated after he was forced out of his job. He was not only Gluck's patron, but his patron's patron. The Lobkowitz family had employed Gluck's father as a forester; in 1766, Kaunitz intervened with Maria Theresa to get a raise for Prince Lobkowitz, ambassador to St. Petersberg, who already was the second highest paid Austrian official with a salary of 43,000 florins. (Starhemberg received 60,000). The entire salary budget of the University of Vienna was only 30,000 florins in 1761. Kaunitz had a network of allies in the diplomatic corps, usually members of the nobility, for whom he secured salaries far above the level of other diplomats by intervening directly with Maria Theresa.

There were similar considerations for artists. The French theater was favored over the German Kartnerthor:

Un acteur français recevait des appointments trois ou quartre fois supérieur . . . ceux de ses collègues allemands.

To this point, I have described the state support of the arts in the Vienna, the close involvement of the Prime Minister in cultural affairs, and the combination of diplomacy, poetry, and intrigue which characterized the career of Orfeo's librettist. I also have shown the close correspondance in time between the comission of the opera and the sudden discovery that Austria, its allies, and in particular, its Prime Minister, faced the disaster of a virtually certain military defeat. We do not know exactly what conversations passed between the composer, the librettist, and their patrons, but the sources are remarkably rich in detail, and have preserved a great deal of information about the circumstances of the time.

The final source of evidence for the context of Orfeo comes from the librettist himself.

Calzabigi’s remarks are ambiguous and somewhat cryptic, but they invite exegesis, as if this veteran diplomat and spy were setting out a puzzle for posterity to solve. Although he cites Vergil in the

42 "A French actor received a stipend three or four times that of his German colleagues." Julia Witenetz, *Théâtre Français*, p. 12.
introduction to his libretto, the story actually comes not from Vergil, but from Ovid (Metamorphoses Book X). Furthermore, Calzabigi’s reference to Vergil’s Aeneid seems even more surprising when we consult Vergil’s work, only to find that the discussion of Orpheus myth in that source is less than a sentence:

quando hic inferni ianua regit et tenebrosa palus Acheronte refuso, ire ad conspectum cari genitoris et ora contingat....

si potuit Manis accersere coniugis Orpheus Threicia fretus cithara fidibusque canoris; si fratrem Pollux alterna morte redemit itque reditique viam totiens—quid Thesea magnum, quid memorem Alciden?—et mi genus ab Iove summo.44

What Vergil gives us in the Aeneid VI is not a retelling of the Orpheus myth but his own vision of a journey through the underworld, with Aeneas searching for his father Anchises. Calzabigi gives us an additional hint regarding the interpretation of this obscure reference in this description of the third ballet:

TERZO BALLO. D'ombre fortunate negli Elisi. L’Idea di questo Ballo è presa da Virgilio al libro VI. dell’ Eneide.45

In the Orpheus story as it appears in Ovid’s Metamorphoses X and in Vergil’s own Georgics, there is no episode which corresponds to that of the Aeneid VI 637 ff.

"...devenere locos laetos et amoena virecta," ["they came to a happy place of pleasant greenery."] 'hic manus ob patriam pugnando volnera passi," [660] ["here dwell those who suffered wounds fighting for the fatherland."] How many of these had Austria lost by 1762! Calzabigi pays them his respects: Che puro ciel, che chiaro sol, che nuova serena luce È questa mai!...Questo è il soggiorno de' fortunati Eroi! [What beautiful skies, what a clear sun, What means this new serenity?...This is the land of the fortunate Heros!] (II,ii).

43 One of the first to examine this point was Lionel de la Laurencie, Orphée de Gluck, (Paris: Melottee, 1934) p. 189.
44 Vergil, Aeneid VI, 106-109; 119-124. "since here is the famed gate of the nether king, and the gloomy marsh from Acheron's overflow, be it granted me to pass into my dear father's sight and presence...

45 "Third Ballet. The fortunate shades of the Elesian Fields. The Idea of this Ballet is derived from Book VI of Vergil's Aeneid." From the Paris score, 1764. Quoted in Gluck, loc. cit., p. xxiii. (See note 10).
Similarly, Aeneas and his men must perform a massive funeral before he can make his journey to see his father, "cineri ingrato suprema ferebant." [213] ["paying last dues to the thankless dust."] When Aeneas finally meets Anchises, his father tells him of the trials that have past, the trials to come, and the glories thereafter.

Calzabigi's reference to *Georgics* IV, like that to the *Aeneid*, does not seem to be a citation for the source of his narrative details, although here the tale is longer, running for 50 odd lines. In the *Georgics*, the Orpheus story erupts rather suddenly into the middle of a poem about beekeeping. After giving much advice about bees, Vergil discusses what to do if the events of life go very wrong. He tells of Aristaeus, whose brood of bees was lost to famine; his mother, the goddess Cyrene, advises him to force Proteus to reveal the causes of his plight. As it turns out, this cause is the unhappy wailing of Orpheus, which has put all nature out of joint. Aristaeus is advised to make a suitable offering, and the shades of Orpheus and Erudice are mollified. But why has Calzabigi directed our attention here?

I have chosen Aristaeus' appeal to Proteus as an epigraph:

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. . . deum praecepit secuti
venimus hinc lassis quaesitum oracula rebus. [448-449]
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Mackail's translation, "Following divine commands we are come, to seek here oracular counsel for a worn estate," 46 fits the sense of Calzabigi's Vienna, which was as worn an estate as any. However, especially for a modern reader, an ambiguity in Vergil's text may suggest an alternative reading.

Latin is an inflectional language, employing affixes to signify the relations between words, with the result that Latin word order can be quite flexible. Meter is a virtue of and resource for Vergil; he takes advantage of the flexibility of Latin to order his words so as to maintain the dactylic hexameter of his poem. Nevertheless, Latin case declensions do not always resolve the syntax completely, as in this example where the words *lassis*, "weary," and *rebus*, "things," could be of either dative or ablative case. The dative would indicate a “for” relation, while the ablative implies “by means of.”

Aristaeus is clearly seeking oracles, since *oraclua* is accusative plural. *Lassis*, an adjective, must modify *rebus*; there is no alternative, but the case of both words is left in doubt.

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46 See note 1.
Faced with the word sequence, “we come hence weary seeking oracles (for/by) things,” translators assume the dative, yielding "we come hence, seeking oracles for our weary things," or "weary fortunes," or "worn estate."

Especially for the reader who thinks in a modern language, where the order of words is highly significant, the displacement of the word *rebus* away from *lassis*, which must modify it, to a position after *oracula*, which *rebus* could possibly modify (if *rebus* is ablative,) may suggest an alternative reading. Interpreting *rebus* as ablative yields "seeking oracles by means of things." Consider the auguries, where priests fortold the future by examining – things, in particular, the entrails of an animal sacrifice. When Aristeus offers an ox to the shade of Orpheus, the entrails are swarming with bees.

This is literally a *locus classicus* of the later meaning of "rebus:" a kind of picture puzzle in which meaning is suggested through representations of things rather than by a literal statement.\(^{47}\) Indeed, since a rebus may be created by the physical position of words on the page, this line of Vergil’s, all by itself, can be a rebus for the reader.

Although Calzabigi, a classical scholar and a translator of English poetry, was extremely erudite, no one can say whether he noticed the implications of Vergil’s rebus. It does not matter whether Vergil intended this puzzle, or whether Calzabigi noticed it. The idea of the rebus serves nicely as coat-of-arms, signifying an aesthetic principal dear to Vergil, and newly embraced by Calzabigi and Gluck.

They championed the art of showing rather than telling, and the idea that the dramatic context of an element is as important as that element itself. Perhaps Calzabigi refers to Vergil not as a source for the myth, but to highlight the context in which it occurs. These are truths of art which Vergil knew, and which Calzabigi and Gluck were discovering again. Their style is called "classical" with good reason:

Matters are entirely different in the new plan of musical drama which has been, if not invented, at least first put into practice by me in *Orfeo*....

All is nature here, all is passion; there are no sententious reflections, no philosophy or politics, no paragons of virtue and none of those descriptions or amplifications which are only an avoidance of difficulties....The plots are simple...reduced to the dimensions of Greek tragedy, and therefore [excite] terror and compassion in the same way.\(^{48}\)

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\(^{47}\) This later meaning of rebus is current in English, Italian, and French by Calzabigi’s time.

The appreciation of context, the relation of one element to the next in a continuous dramatic movement, is a principal contribution of *Orfeo* to the emerging classical style. The relative success with which this new aesthetic was treated should not obscure the fact of the new goals themselves, lest we be blinded by a veneer of connoisseurship.

If the cheerful allegro of *Orfeo's* introduction plunges abruptly into the torment of the aria "Ah, se intorno," this correctly reflects the sudden change in fortunes of the Greek Orpheus, Vergil's beekeepers, and Kaunitz' alliance. After all, there was a snake in the pastoral grass, and the transition, in the style of the serial portrayal of baroque affections and of the *empfindsam* predilection for unexpected change, is meant to be unsettling.

The new aesthetic element, influenced by the *Aeneid*, is introduced in the second act of the opera. As the act begins, the same jarring contrasts return in the conflict between Orfeo's lyre and the dance of the furies. However, Orfeo's harmony begins to soften the furies, with the gradual result that he arrives at Vergil's Elisean Fields. This is no longer imitation, but the effect of art upon nature.

In the third act, Orfeo laments in the famous aria *Che faro*, but (let us gently remind the distinguished critics) in C major. His opening grief is now reinterpreted, happy and sad at the same time, prepared without realizing it for his eventual redemption. The opera aspires to the kind of emotional complexity described by Rosen:

> Orestes must be shown going mad without his being aware of it, Fiordiligi must desire to yield while trying to resist....

In their exploration of opposition, change, and reinterpretation, the three acts of *Orfeo* resemble a large scale sonata form. If one argues that the overture is "totally unrelated to the mood of the drama ... an enduring embarrassment," what about the C major of "*Che faro*?" Is this a disfiguring addition? Shall we excise it completely? Transpose it to a minor key? As it stands, this aria is the most dignified expression of grief in all opera, and that is precisely its lesson for Vienna.

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49 Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

Daniel Heartz quotes Zinzendorf's report of "la Princesse d'Esterhazy's" complaint that this aria was too gay to come from from the lips of a man intent on suicide.\textsuperscript{51} Heartz notes that aspects of the work which are criticized today were being identified soon after the premiere, but the remarks of the princess are really a sort of compliment. Not to put too fine a point on things, Kaunitz was trying to dispel the gloom, and look ahead.

Madame Pompadour's memoirs were published posthumously in 1766, in London. Her portrait of Louis XV is that of a man subject to deep depressions, who was keenly aware of the intractable difficulties he faced. She explains the reasons why she produced her private operas and other entertainments:

I made business, pleasure, and amusements, by turns succeed at Versailles, which still prevented the king's serious reflections. Lewis XV. existed, I may say, by a constitution which I communicated to him, and this factitious temperament hindered his own prevailing. I believe he would have been at length overcome without that art which I employed to repress nature.

Notwithstanding this precaution, there were moments in which he gave himself up to melancholy. It was then necessary to invent new pleasures, in order to excite fresh sensations.\textsuperscript{52}

The happy overture of Orfeo does not conflict with the prevailing mood of the opera,. It seeks to transform the audience through the catharsis of tragedy, and by revealing that through faith, "la bonne foi" as Pompadour called it, all will be redeemed.

As the final chorus sang of the triumph of love over tyranny, Maria Theresa planned the marriages of her many children. Her eldest daughter would soon be considered by Louis XV himself; her son Joseph already had married Louis XV's grand-daughter; her daughter Marie Antoinette would be Queen of France. Austria might not retake Silesia, but it would soon gain Galicia, in the partition of Poland.

According to Calzabigi, the emperor saw Orfeo 14 times and bestowed lavish gifts on the artists.\textsuperscript{53} Kaunitz kept his job for many, many years. They had changed the catastrophe. The opera was a great success.

\textsuperscript{53} Letter to Kaunitz, March 6, 1767, \textit{loc. cit.}