

**Concerts of Thursday, May 11, and Saturday, May 13, 2017, at 8:00p**

**Robert Spano, Conductor**

**Atlanta Symphony Chamber Chorus,**

**Norman Mackenzie, Director of Choruses**

**glo**

**Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787)**

***Orfeo ed Euridice (Orpheus and Eurydice) (1762)***

**Cast (in order of appearance):**

**Orfeo: David Daniels, countertenor**

**Amor: Janai Brugger, soprano**

**Euridice: Susanna Phillips, soprano**

**Act I—A grove of laurel and cypress trees, surrounding Eurydice's tomb**

**Scene I**

**Scene II**

**Act II**

**Scene I— Before the entrance to Hades**

**Scene II—The Elysian Fields**

**Act III**

**Scene I—A dark cavern**

**Scene II**

**Scene III—A magnificent temple, dedicated to Love**

**These concerts are performed without intermission.**

**Scenography by Daniel Arsham**

**The scenography by Daniel Arsham for *Creation/Creator* and *Orfeo ed Euridice* is sponsored by a deeply appreciated gift from the Antinori Foundation.**

**English surtitles by Ken Meltzer**

## Notes on the Program by Ken Meltzer

### *Orfeo ed Euridice (Orpheus and Eurydice) (1762)*

Christoph Willibald Gluck was born in Erasbach, Germany, on July 2, 1714, and died in Vienna, Austria, on November 15, 1787. The first performance of *Orfeo ed Euridice* took place at the Burgtheater in Vienna on October 5, 1762. *Orfeo ed Euridice* is scored for alto and two soprano solos, mixed chorus, two flutes, two oboes (both doubling English horn), clarinet, two bassoons, two horns, two cornets, three trombones, timpani, harp, harpsichord, and strings. Approximate performance time is one hundred and ten minutes.

### **These are the First Classical Subscription Performances.**

In 1761, German composer Christoph Willibald Gluck, and Italian poet and librettist Ranieri de Calzabigi met in Vienna. Both Gluck and Calzabigi were troubled by what they perceived as Italian opera's preoccupation with artifice and vocal display at the expense of drama.

A typical Italian-language opera of the time alternated recitatives and arias, with the occasional appearance of ensembles and choruses. The recitatives—pitched and sparsely accompanied declamation—advanced the plot. The arias (predominantly in A—B—A form) provided the opera's melodic content. The singer's entrance was often preceded by an extended orchestral introduction, or *ritornello*. Focusing upon the character's emotional state, the arias were designed to showcase the singer's virtuoso technique, particularly with florid, bravura writing, and ornamentation of the vocal line. Indeed, it was not unusual for a singer to incorporate arias from another opera into the one he was then performing, if the artist felt they offered greater opportunities to display his vocal strengths.

In his 1755 *An Essay on the Opera*, the Italian writer Francesco Algarotti offered these observations:

arias are overwhelmed and disfigured by the ornaments in which they are increasingly embellished. The ritornellos that preceded them are much too long and often superfluous. In arias expressing rage, for example, verisimilitude is stretched to the breaking point: how can a man in a fit of rage wait with his hands in his belt until the aria's ritornello is concluded before venting the passion seething within his heart?

Gluck and Calzabigi vowed to attempt a reform of opera, and to fashion an approach to lyric theater that would give full value to both the musical and dramatic elements. The preface to the score of their 1767 opera, *Alceste*, sets forth Gluck's (and Calzabigi's) goals:

I decided to divest it wholly of all the abuses which, introduced either by the ill-considered vanity of the singers or by the expressive indulgence of the composers, have for so long

disfigured Italian opera...I thought I would restrict the music to its true function of serving the poetry in the expression and situations of the story, without chilling it with useless and superfluous ornaments...I decided not to stop an actor in the heat of the dialogue, forcing him to wait out a tedious instrumental introduction, nor to stop him in mid-sentence over a favourable vowel, nor to display the agility of his fine voice with a lengthy ornamental passage, nor to let the orchestra give him the time to catch his breath for a cadenza. I did not feel obliged to hurry through the second part of an aria, though it was the more impassioned and significant, in order to be able to repeat four times the words of the first part, finishing the aria where the sense was left unfinished, all so the singer might have the leisure to show the many ways in which he can vary a ornamental passage at will.

Gluck and Calzabigi also pursued this artistic path in their first operatic collaboration, *Orfeo ed Euridice* (*Orpheus and Eurydice*). With a libretto by Calzabigi, and music by Gluck, *Orfeo ed Euridice* premiered on October 5, 1762, at the Burgtheater in Vienna. On that occasion, the title role of Orpheus was performed by Gaetano Guadagni, a castrato (male alto), and by all accounts a first-rate vocalist and actor (while in England, he was coached by the great Shakespearean, David Garrick). In 1774, Gluck created a revised French-language version of his opera, with a tenor singing the role of Orpheus. *Orphée et Eurydice* premiered at the Paris Opéra on August 2, 1774. With the end of the castrato era in opera toward the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the role of Orfeo became a vehicle for female artists (mezzo-soprano and alto), and later, male countertenors.

*Orfeo ed Euridice*'s natural and expressive vocal writing, wed to a rich and varied orchestral palette that illuminates the drama, exerted a profound influence on such 18<sup>th</sup>-century composers as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. That influence continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. German opera composer Richard Wagner praised Gluck's initiative: "he *spoke out with consciousness and firm conviction* the fitness and necessity of an expression answering to the text substratum, in aria and recitative..." French composer Hector Berlioz created his own performing version for a revival of *Orphée et Eurydice*, staged at the Paris Théâtre-Lyrique in 1859. In his discussion of that production, Berlioz reminded us that while Gluck composed a work that had a profound and revolutionary impact upon opera, he also created a theatrical experience of surpassing beauty and emotional impact:

What is genius? What is glory? What is beauty? I don't know, and neither do you, Sir, nor you, Madam, any better than I. Only, it seems to me that if an artist has been able to create a work that in all ages can inspire sublime emotions and rouse lofty thoughts in the hearts of people who we believe to be superior by the refinement of their senses and the cultivation of their minds, then it

seems to me that this artist has genius, that he is worthy of glory, that he has created beauty. Gluck was such an artist.

### **Act I**

After the brief orchestral Overture, the curtain rises on a grove of laurel and cypress trees surrounding Eurydice's tomb. The singer Orpheus, attended by nymphs and shepherds, mourns the death of his beloved wife. Cupid (Amor), the god of love, appears and tells Orpheus that Jupiter has taken pity upon his grief. Orpheus may descend into Hades and attempt to convince the demons to return Eurydice to him. However, if Orpheus either looks at or speaks to his wife while leading her from the underworld, he will lose Eurydice forever. Orpheus agrees, although he knows that the task will be of the greatest difficulty. Orpheus departs, as he prepares to descend into Hades.

### **Act II**

The first scene of Act II takes place before the entrance of Hades. The spirits and furies are moved by the beauty of Orpheus's singing, and allow him to enter the gates.

The scene changes to the Elysian Fields (*Dance of the Blessed Spirits*). Orpheus sees the blessed spirits and is overwhelmed by the beauty of the surroundings ("Che puro ciel!"). Orpheus begs the spirits to return Eurydice to him. Finally, the spirits deliver Eurydice to Orpheus, who leads his wife away.

### **Act III**

The curtain rises on a dark, mysterious grotto. Orpheus urges Eurydice to follow him. Eurydice does not understand why her husband refuses to look at her, and she cries. Finally, Orpheus can no longer bear his wife's misery. He turns to look at Eurydice, and she dies. Orpheus reflects upon a life without Eurydice ("Che farò senza Euridice?"), prepares to stab himself, so that he may be reunited with her. Suddenly, Cupid appears and stays Orpheus's hand. The god of love, moved by the singer's grief, revives Eurydice.

The scene changes to the Temple of the God of Love (Ballet). Shepherds and shepherdesses join in celebrating the power of Love, and Eurydice's return to Orpheus.