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**Female Self-Sacrifice
in Classic Opera:
CHERUBINI'S MEDEA**

Compared to
Gluck's Alceste and Beethoven's Leonore

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THE ESSENCE OF DRAMA SURROUNDING THE MAIN HEROINE

The Three Heroines in the Light of Sacrifice and the Supernatural

It is the great sacrifice of a woman – the main heroine in each case – that unites the three operas: Gluck's Alceste (Vienna, 1767), Cherubini's Medee (Paris, 1797) and Beethoven's Fidelio¹ (Vienna, 1805–6; Prague, 1814). Orfeo by Gluck (Vienna, 1762), although also based on a Greek myth, and Idomeneo by Mozart (Munich, 1781), cannot support the type of thorough comparison we are looking for; the quality of the latter two operas differs from the essence emphasized in the opening sentence of this paragraph: there the sacrifice is made by the chief masculine figures. Alceste and Medee both find their origin in Greek tragedy. This research sheds new light on the important point in the history of music regarding Cherubini as a successor to Gluck, and provides an insight into the process of continuity of Gluck's tradition. The challenge that Cherubini took upon himself when deciding to compose a new Medee was so extremely demanding – especially in the psychological sense – and his musical achievements so tremendous, that we have come to accept that Medee cannot possibly be compared to any other operatic work; we are prejudiced in thinking that no other operatic character can be compared to Cherubini's delineation of Medea. At this point it is worth mentioning that Cherubini is considered

1 The differences between the three versions of Fidelio, the four overtures and the sketches, are not treated.

a far better vocal composer than his contemporary, Beethoven, who was a great admirer of his. In addition, Cherubini's orchestral technique in his operas is a great achievement in the world of sound, drawing its energy from the drama itself.

The female protagonists in these three operas are of greater interest than their male counterparts. This aspect is particularly prominent in the case of Cherubini: although Jason and Creon are given considerable exposure, no facets of their personalities evoke admiration. We remain somewhat apathetic to them. Admetus in Alceste is kept relatively far from the drama and we cannot identify with him;² as to Fidelio, Florestan is the typical long-suffering individual - we can sympathize with his torment but it is the brave Leonore who captures our imagination.

The three heroines - Alcestis, Leonore and Medea, are unique in the mixture of human and supernatural in their profiles. Leonore, of the three, is a more natural, approachable figure; the supernatural side of Medea and Alcestis stems from Greek mythology and by their very origin, these two relate more to the abstract world.

Torment, which leads to the act of sacrifice, is more similar in Alceste and Fidelio: the flame of a pure, strong love that Alcestis and Leonore harbour for their husbands, leads them to their inevitable deed of rescue. The element of revenge does

2 Martin Cooper, in introduction to brochure for Alceste (London Records XLLA 49), refers to him as a weak figure: the audience cannot identify with him as a person who needs to be rescued; he also does not show any real anxiety when told that the oracle has demanded that someone else die in his place.

not exist at all in the pure soul of Alcestis, and as to Fidelio, it penetrates the heart of Leonore as a natural emotion against the cruel Pizzaro (and her success is a slight gesture of revenge on him); in these two operas, the deus-ex-machina helps to lighten some dark moments towards the end of the opera. The case of Medea in this sense is more complicated: revenge against her husband, in spite of her love for him, is taken by the murder of their two sons, a deed which sustains the whole plot, torturing all the characters without the resolution of a releasing rescue at the end. Further on, in Medee, we grope deeper into the gloomy, pessimistic end; the pervading darkness only becomes darker towards the end.

In this context of revenge, Alcestis appeals to the gods - she starts out quite often with the words "O Grands Dieux" in order to gain courage; Leonore responds against her enemy Pizzaro in her famous aria, "Abscheulicher, wo eilst tu hin?" in a most human manner of expression, but Medea commits an unbelievable, inexcusable murder. She needs far greater courage for the murder of her sons than that needed by Alcestis and Leonore for their acts of rescue. And nothing like a deus-ex-machina comes to solve her problems.

When taking into account all these points, the contrasts in the character of Medea, woman and maga at one and the same time, are more easily perceived. It is most interesting to follow the development of the element of sacrifice in Greek mythology itself as regards Alcestis and Medea. Alcestis acts, still in a vital,

understandable manner, but in the frame of the distant worlds of mythological gods. This atmosphere rules in her aria emphasizing the term 'sacrifice': it is taken from the world of religious rites and she tries to persuade her people that her approaching sacrifice is of a non-physical value ("Non, ce n'est point un sacrifice!" in her aria in Act I, Scene 5) and that her super-human sacrifice is of a higher level than what her people are accustomed to in their feasts. Medea is planning another sacrifice, stemming from a completely different source – the emotions of strong revenge against a husband who has betrayed her. And as to Leonore, her courageous spirit connects up with glory and heroism, essential ingredients of the revolutionary ambience. She finds herself in a life-threatening situation, and has no option but to expose herself to danger; only Alcestis is prepared to take upon herself so noble a deed for the love of her husband, and the feast-sacrificial background underlines this decision very strongly. Medea sacrifices her sons, a step further away from sacrificing herself, according to the plot of Hoffmann. Leonore, the most recent figure of the three, is considered to be incredibly courageous and assertive, struggling for the release of her imprisoned husband with consistent strength and ingenious strategies.

It is interesting to remember that in all three operas, the main heroines function as married women, and the drama takes place by the side of their husbands. In this sense Alcestis and Leonore resemble one another and differ from Medea: they demonstrate complete loyalty to their husbands. Medea, reflecting such

loyalty at the beginning of the opera, confronts her husband's betrayal during the course of the drama: she will never forgive him. One of the dilemmas concerning her inner conflicts is: does she still love Jason while murdering their sons; or, a relatively more familiar dilemma: her love for her children as against her decision to kill them. Her recitative in the last act, exposing her in the moments of her fatal decision, obviously treats the second dilemma. The first one, flowing as an ever-present undercurrent, is even harder to solve. The underworld of evil in Medea's fate is a more complicated emotional version of the Underworld-idea represented in *Alcestis* by the mythological Styx, or by the extremely tense Dungeon Scene at the beginning of the second act of *Fidelio*. The start of the third act of *Medee* with its mystery leads us into the strange area where mysticism and supernaturalism rule; and the end leaves us in an unknown Underworld – when leaving the opera house we ask ourselves: "Did it really happen or not? Could it really have happened or not"?

Of the three, the most difficult emotional nut to crack is undoubtedly Medea. The typical musical qualities of the three heroines, described in the second subchapter here, will illustrate each composer's approach. The rich musical language of all three composers is successfully harnessed when portraying their dramatic heroines. Yet Cherubini, driven by the most difficult task, is pushed to further stylistic achievements in the operatic style. It seems that the challenge of Medea's character and its course of development throughout this opera plus Cherubini's innate potential, resulted in this phenomenon.

The Process of Drama in the Three Operas and
Exposure of the Main Heroine Onstage

A. Alceste - by Gluck (1767)

The scheme of the opera Alceste consists of many small numbers including one ballet, three pantomimes and several dances and choruses. There are also two double chorus sections. Each act starts with a relatively short opening scene (containing only two or three numbers). The only longer numbers are the arias, especially those of Alcestis which are always linked to their introductory recitatives. The backbone of this whole opera consists of Alcestis' appearances in her arias and recitatives; the duets are relatively short, almost always in the recitative style, remote from a real dramatic function in comparison to the duets in Medee. It is chiefly Alcestis who speaks dramatically by means of her arias. Berlioz³ praised Gluck highly for enabling Alcestis to express her faith in Admetus. The whole opera revolves around the fact that Alcestis is going to die: this is emphasized by her many protestations of it, by her people trying to avoid her anticipated noble deed, and by the appearances of Admetus with her in the duets or alone in his arias.

Act I has seven scenes (in the basic key of E-flat major) of which the seventh forms the climax; this is the famous aria of Alcestis, "Divinites du Styx" (analyzed in the special Timeline

³ Hector Berlioz, Gluck and His Operas, trans. by Edwin Evans; (London: Greenwood Press, 1976); reprint of edition (London: W. Reeves, 1915), p.100, says: "This profession of faith seems to us on the whole admirable".

with musical phrases inserted, on p. , here), considered as the dramatic peak of the whole opera. The scenes are the important structural units for this opera, recognizable by their heroes. It is very interesting to observe the entrance of Alcestis onstage. This happens already in Scene 2 of the first act, with Alcestis addressing the gods for the first time as "Grands Dieux", a type of verbal marking which will accompany most of her opening sentences. She is still very much in the background of the drama at this point. The remarkable figures appearing onstage now are the Grand Priest and the oracle who have expressive musical profiles: the Grand Priest, thanks to his energetic motive with its vital rhythm (in the instrumental bass and in the singing line) and the oracle with the key of B minor which is bold in the harmonic context of basic E-flat major. These two figures convey the message that Admetus will be returned to life if someone else will die in his place. Alcestis expresses her intentions warmly and originally in Scene 5 of this act: "Non, ce n'est point un sacrifice! Eh! Pourrais-je vivre sans toi?" ("No, this is not a sacrifice! Would I be able to live without you?"). In this aria she explains that her sacrifice of her own self is an essential, emotional act, inspired wholly by her eternal love for Admetus; it differs greatly from the feast-sacrifices, the image of which weighs upon her people's conscience. The arias in Scenes 2 and 5 prepare for her big aria in Scene 7.

Admetus' entrance with his first aria, "Bannis la crainte", occurs only in the middle of Act II, in Scene 3. This scene revolves around Admetus, while Scene 4 immediately after is

strongly focused on Alcestis. Act II, the shortest of the three, still has her firmly onstage, counteracting the prominent appearance of Admetus; she is the only figure functioning at the conclusion of this act - in Scene 4 - but the role of drama has begun to weaken: we all know of her intention to save the life of her beloved husband by sacrificing herself (this was all worked out intensively in Act I), and she expands the expression of her main message in Act II in various ways; for example, in her second aria in Scene 3, "Je n'ai jamais cheri la vie" ("I have never appreciated my life for anything else than to prove my love to you").

Act III, again a long one, is marked by the release of tension. It does, however, contain two important arias by Alcestis, one in Scene 3, "Ah, Divinites implacables" ("Implacable gods, do not fear that by my tears...") and the second in Scene 4, "Vis, pour garder..." ("Live! only to keep the memory of a woman who lived only to please you"). The second aria forms a suitable introduction to the love duet between the two protagonists later on in this scene. The element of the Underworld which had already been introduced in Act II with its dark woods, invisible waterfalls and the scenery of the Grove of Death, is changed in Act III with the appearance of Hercules. The latter turns the depth of darkness into the light of the deus-ex-machina. Alcestis disappears as Hercules arrives, her expressions of courage dissipating as the drama collapses. The whole harmonic plan here is one of non-concentration: there is no more a central

key nor are there central home-keys. With the completely non-dramatic orchestral Divertissement at the end of the opera, all sinks down in uncertainty and vagueness.

B. Medee - by Cherubini (1797)

The three acts of Medee are also divided into scenes, but these, according to the tradition of the opera comique to which Cherubini adhered formally, separate into totally spoken or half-spoken scenes side by side with the sung ones. For the purpose of musical analysis, in this thesis we treat only those set to music. The scenes are subdivided into sections, much longer than the numbers in Gluck's scenes and thus there are not so many sections (16 in all). Cherubini is strict in maintaining a single continuity as regards the size of acts: Act I is the longest (Scenes 1 and 3, its first scenes containing the largest number of sections - three); Act II is shorter, and Act III is the shortest. The duets are of far greater importance in this opera than in Alceste. This is because Cherubini wished to emphasize the strong antagonism between Jason and Medea, and was able to do so by developing a new rhetoric of enraged interplay between the two figures, characterized by rich vocal texture shaped into various types of musical dialogue.

The drama is gradually intensified with the shortening of the acts. This is basically the opposite to what we observed in Alceste: Act III is the most tense, containing as it does the peak of horror; it deals with Medea's crime, including the revelation of her extreme emotional dilemmas within herself and

reaching its climax in her recitative, the only recitative in the opera, used by Cherubini for what he considered to be a very high level of dramatic expression at a certain moment. In this context we would like to stress the considerable disparity between the two composers as regards the role of the recitative: Gluck used it a great deal in Alceste - it may even be considered his most regularly used form and vocal texture; his duets are usually included in the recitatives without any specific indication in the title of these recitatives. But in Medee Cherubini used a single recitative only; spoken dialogues take the place of Gluck's sung recitatives.

The place of the arias of the main heroines can be regarded in a similar manner in both operas: Cherubini also pays much attention to Medea's arias. These are used to foster the heroine's dramatic expression, but they do not lie at the heart of the drama. In Medee Cherubini chooses to emphasize the duets of Medea and Jason, as well as those of Medea and Creon and Medea and Neris. The psycho-drama forces him to place these duets at the centre of interest. In addition, he is aiming at the grandness of scene, both as a part of the general tendency in opera at the time, which succeeded in attracting audiences by the spectacle element, and for balance and relaxation (the March of the Argonauts, for example, in Act I, Scene 3). The grand stage provides static tableaux reflecting the dramatic situation rather than action which propels the drama forward by a psychological confrontation, which is what the duets achieve in this opera.

Medea's exposure onstage resembles that of Alcestis' to some

extent and at the same time also differs from it. Cherubini sustains the long first act without Medea, only introducing her in the last scene (Act I, Scene 7). He focuses our interest on Medea by concealing her from our eyes till then. But as a great dramatist, he already provides hints and suggestions of her image in the musical numbers of Dircea, Jason and Creon in Act I. Then, towards the end of this act, Medea makes her first appearance, astonishing us by her sensitive aria, proclaiming her love for Jason. Cherubini gives Dircea, Jason and Creon an opportunity to sing expressive arias of highly dramatic value already in the opening scenes: he lets his audience become accustomed to the generally tense atmosphere, conserving his maximal dramatic rhetoric for the later acts.

Act II, in which Medea is informed that she is forbidden to remain in Corinth, prepares for the final tragedy. In Neris' aria (Scene 4), Medea's quivering, unstable emotions are reflected; she has begun to plan her evil crime. The ensemble sections at the beginning and end of this act create some suspense, balanced by the crowd scenes.

Act III, the apex of the pyramid, as it were, deals with the human-inhuman Medea, herself torn apart in deep suffering. She has three long appearances in this act – two arias and one recitative, anticipating the stormy Finale.

In summary at this point, the main difference between Alceste and Medee would appear to be the opposite direction of flow in these two plots: Gluck causes Alcestis' figure to vanish

in the third act (adding some length to that act) whereas Cherubini sharpens the lifted sword of Medea in his third act; in Medee the concentration of drama is at its peak: the shortest act includes the murder of the boys plus the heart-rending psychological stress which Medea undergoes.

C. Fidelio - by Beethoven (1805-6)

Fidelio consists of only two acts. Its numbers are long and serve as the essential units for form-building. There are no scenes whatsoever, and the sixteen numbers, more or less equivalent to the sixteen musical sections of Medee, are of great structural power: these enable the drama to proceed onstage very clearly. As we recall, Alceste's formal shaping is of a different kind: there is an abundance of many small numbers in the course of the three acts. Having designed his opera so lucidly, Beethoven pays attention to the subject of keys in the light of dramatic symbolism, and this adds to the specificity of each musical number; we are able to follow the machinations of Leonore's mind and her actions as if we were involved in a detective story. Leonore is the most human figure of the three and the audience may easily identify with her courage in comparison to its attitude towards Medea or Alcestis. Let us not forget that one may admire Alcestis yet feel at a certain distance from her, and as for Medea - she has always been a most controversial figure.

Leonore's first entrance takes place in the quartet in No.3. This is a gentler way of presenting the main heroine, in

comparison to Alcestis and Medea who made their first entrances with an aria. However, when we have Leonore onstage for the first time, we enter the actual drama and leave the relatively folkloristic atmosphere of the quasi-Singspiel which has prevailed till now. After this Leonore lays her plan to gain admission into the dungeon of the prison, in order to ascertain whether Florestan is among the inmates. Her admirably ingenious mind has already started to function in the trio (No.5) and towards its end Beethoven depicts the contest between the innocent Marzelline and the grief-stricken Leonore. This relatively tense number in the middle of Act I is followed by a short, balancing march of officers and soldiers (No.6) who enter the stage.

Leonore's formidable debut comes in No.9 with her famous recitative and aria "Abscheulicher! Wo eilst du hin? Was has du vor?" ("Loathsome creature! To where do you hurry? What is on your mind?"). When pouring out her loathing of Pizarro, her own innate courage emerges. Most of her utterances later in her aria deal with her determination to allow nothing to weaken her resolve to find and rescue her beloved Florestan.

The second act, well-known for its descent into the dungeon where Florestan is immured, in its dark, sombre atmosphere, brings to mind the opening of Act III of Medee and also to some degree, the invisible sights of the gloomy forest in Act II of Alceste. This particular mood adds to the great tension surrounding Leonore's rescue operation. At the end of No.11, Florestan's important aria, Fidelio (= Leonore) and Rocco gain

entry into the dungeon. The Melodrama (i.e., No.12 with its actions carried on in speech, the orchestra joining in here and there descriptively) has Leonore underground in the deep, cold dungeon, fearing that her husband, Florestan, is dead. The process of her search for Florestan reaches its most tense moments when she helps Rocco to the best of her ability to dislodge a heavy stone. She is then both Fidelio, the man, and Leonore, the woman who contains within herself this unbelievable force. The dramatic scenario starts to move fast with tense moments following each other rapidly from now on.

The act of rescue, the exciting moment which the audience awaits, arrives in No.14; Leonore halts Pizarro by drawing a pistol and aiming it at him, and the quartet of voices rises to its climax. Another quartet, still in this number, gives ecstatic expression to the joy and triumph of love over hatred and revenge. No.15 is the well-known duet between Leonore and Florestan, "O namenlose Freude", and this is the last appearance of Leonore onstage. The Finale coming immediately after will only function as an echo of Leonore's great triumph.

Observations on the Other Characters

Most of the other characters are also of a remarkable presence, for example, secondary heroes such as Jason or Florestan. The dramatists and composers are aware of the dramatic presence of these characters and bring to our notice the strong impression of their images throughout the progression of the drama. These characters function in connection with the main

ones, and strongly influence the course of the plot by creating dramatic anti-climaxes. Cherubini is more partial to his female secondary figures, and in Medee he pays far more attention to representing them in an attractive manner than his male figures. In addition, as we have come to realize, the main heroine in all three operas is the most appealing, functioning always at a higher level than the secondary male hero at her side, however negative or positive he may be.

The secondary male hero is always the husband of the main heroine: Jason-Medea, Florestan-Leonore, Admetus-Alcestis. Jason and Florestan differ from one another from the aspect of Good and Evil: Jason is the career-oriented opportunist whose love is fickle; Florestan is the suffering lover who deserves to be rescued. As a result, the relations between Florestan and Leonore are always pure expressions of devotion, whereas the combined appearances of Medea and Jason are raging duets. There is a single utterance of love of Medea for Jason in her aria in the first act of Medee, but this idyllic mood is extremely rare. Jason disappoints her, and besides some moments of human suffering with which we can empathize, his image is dwarfed by the flame of love bursting from Medea. His character is not of heroic proportions. His co-sufferer's grief is of a much higher value: the suffering Florestan in the dungeon (No.11 in Fidelio) captures our heart, and his declamatory style with its agitated accelerations towards the end of his aria, persuades us of his complete loyalty to Leonore. Yet Leonore has the opportunity of strongly opposing another male hero – Pizarro the Evil, pitted

against herself as Good personified.

The case of the relationship between Alcestis and Admetus is of a fairly different kind: there is some imbalance between them. Alcestis is a vital personality, filling the stage with her declared desire to sacrifice herself, while Admetus shuns any positive feelings or any emotion whatsoever: he does not even show real anxiety when told that the oracle demands that someone else die in his place. We are disappointed by his lack of emotional reaction, knowing as he does of his dear wife's intended deed; she then remains constant to the gods, expressing her suffering. The duet of Admetus and Alcestis in Act III, Scene 4, "Aux cris de la douleur", (the only one in the whole opera), full of painful outcries from both, sounds somewhat superficial; Admetus can hardly be rescued. At this point it is worth mentioning once more that the use of the duet in Gluck's style is at its very inception.

Regarding the deus-ex-machina element presented in Alceste and Fidelio, in spite of the extraneousness and the superiority of both figures who serve as the deus-ex-machina, there is a great disparity between them: Don Fernando (in Fidelio) is the governor, an esteemed human figure, whereas Hercules (in Alceste) is a mythological, symbolic figure. Both serve on the side of Good; they rescue the main heroine who was already close to death's door.

The Announcer is another type of interesting external figure in ancient symbolism. With Gluck, this symbol is the most

authentic, whereas with Beethoven and Cherubini, it appears in interesting transformations. The oracle and the Grand Priest serve as the Announcers in the first act of Alceste. As to Fidelio, the image of the Announcer is marked by the trumpet fanfare in No.14 (Ex. V-1):

Example V-1. Fidelio, trumpet fanfare in No. 14 (quartet).



In Medee there is another aspect of the Announcement element - reflected strongly at the psychologically-charged moment when Creon gives Medea permission to stay on in Corinth for another day. Creon, the announcer, is limited by Medea's desire to remain with her sons, and his announcement is an integral part of the events onstage.

The figures of servants and maids are present in all three operas, and they are delineated as the most human of characters. The only classical pair of servants, a couple who fall in love with each other, is to be found in Fidelio: these are Marzeline and Joacquino. This secondary couple is depicted as human beings without any supernatural attributes. The wonderful hand-maidens in Medee and Alceste are, on the other hand, delicate yet sombre individuals, very similar to one another. Ismene, Alcestis' handmaiden, was undoubtedly a source for Medea's Neris. Both maids reflect their mistresses' trembling when imagining the loss

of their children. Alcestis is not about to kill her children, but they are brought to her by Ismene. The reflection of the difficult emotional soul-searching and dilemmas about the potential loss of Medea's sons by her own hand, is the trait chosen by Cherubini for the essence of Neris' onstage existence. Her profile mirrors Medea's pain in her (Neris') aria in Act II, Scene 4. Neris, who is far more visible than Ismene, has a most interesting profile and is far from being a mere servant. She reflects, according to Cherubini's concept, both the human approach and loyalty to her controversial mistress; she has the courage of a humble person, so different from that of Medea. Without Neris, Medea's impact would have remained somewhat diminished.

The forces of Good and Evil are highlighted by the confrontation between men and women in these operas. The women are personified as Good; there is no bad woman, except for those nuances of revenge in Medea's character. But this revenge, leading to the act of murder which arouses negative sentiments against Medea, is strictly limited by her reasons for the murder and her great suffering as a result thereof. Dircea is, naturally, the reflection of Good. Pizarro and Jason are the Evil male characters of the opportunistic type - a young governor or a man who energetically aims at fulfilling his selfish desire to rule. When Leonore sings her recitative and aria (No.9) - "Abscheulicher!", she succeeds in putting Pizarro's cruelty into words. The ambivalent Medea, both loving Jason and jealous of him, provides the best evidence of Cherubini's perception of him as an evil character. The more neutral figures are the high-ranking characters who are not struggling for position any longer and thus generate less tension: in spite of his declamatory aria

against Medea, Creon succeeds in keeping his distance as the authoritative king- and father-figure above all, and Don Fernando is the typical magnanimous ruler, even identified with Good and Morality. Rocco is a different type of Good - the simple and innocent - recognized by his aria (No.4 in Fidelio: "Hat man nicht Gold beineben" ("Money more than love makes the happy marriage"). His mediocracy and simplicity, marked by the 6/8 meter, may be said to have an ironic significance for Beethoven who was himself at so far a distance from this approach to life, and who probably identified strongly with the spiritual suffering of Fidelio.

Although the inner-relationships between the secondary figures and between them and the main figures, are not at the center of this discussion, it is worth mentioning, for example, the marriage of Dircea and Jason (see their love-duet in Act I, Scene 3 "Doux hymen" of Medee) as a background to the presentation of Medea. Creon's contact with Medea enables him to move about onstage in majesty and dignity. The way in which Creon speaks to Dircea, his daughter, or to Medea, her rival, provides another facet of the difference between these two women; one cannot but wonder why Cherubini did not introduce a direct confrontation between Medea and Dircea; the reason may be the extreme imbalance between the two characters, the great disparity between the most and least complex characters. Fidelio actually contains the largest number of secondary figures, some of whom are relatively well-based in reality, like the pair of servants, Marzeline and Joacquino. The number of secondary characters in

Alceste is minimized and for most of the opera, Alcestis remains in opposition to her people and to the gods. The most compelling network of secondary figures from this aspect is furnished by Medee where the characters have strong interrelationships, both between themselves and between themselves and the main heroine, Medea. The massivity of the duets between Jason and Medea is the best evidence of this unique dramatic-musical coherence created by Cherubini.

MUSICAL TYPOLOGY OF THE HEROINES (MAINLY IN ARIAS AND RECITATIVES)

Vocal lines of Alcestis

Alcestis' most important aria (in Act I, Scene 7), will be introduced by a detailed Timeline after a brief mention of other melodic contours of hers throughout the opera, which provide a reliable picture of the nature of singing as a whole.

The keys of the arias change according to Gluck's concentration on specific key-centers for each act (E-flat major for Act I, G major-minor for Act II; Act III is not key-centralized any more).

Dance-like rhythms and meters are typical of Alcestis' arias, more markedly so in the second and third acts, a fact which signifies the lessening of dramatic expression, compared to her arias in the first act. All are in major keys, as if to consolidate her powers - with one exception: this is the G minor aria in Scene 3, Act II (her first in this act) which plays an

integral part in the G major-minor central tonic of this act.

Gluck already provides remarkably bold vocal contours for both of Alcestis' arias in Act I; this melodic bravura with its huge descending intervals in her aria in Scene 2 and the rapid scales of the melodic curves in her aria in Scene 5, are admirably suited to her vital temperament, expressed in her words as well (Exs. V-2a, V-2b; see also the text). She astonishes us by quickly reaching the high tessitura notes. Her singing is accompanied by consistent symmetrical rhythms in the orchestra.

Example V-2a. The beginning of Alcestis' vocal line in her aria "Grands Dieux!" (Act I, Scene 2).

Moderato

(p) Grands Dieux! Du destin qui m'ac-ca-ble sus-pen-

-dez du moins la ri-gueur sus-pen-dez du moins-la-ri-gueur

English translation { Great Gods, suspend (stop), at least, the rigour of the destiny which burdens me

Example V-2b. The beginning of Alcestis' vocal line in her aria "Non, ce n'est point un sacrifice!" (Act I, Scene 5).

Moderato

Non ce n'est point un sac-ri-fi-ce! Eh! Pourrais-je vi-vre sans toi?

Sans toi cher Ad-mè-te! Ah! Pour moi la vie est un af-freux sup-pli--ce

English translation { No, this is not a sacrifice! Would I be able to live without you?

Act II presents four (!) arias of less importance; here Alcestis is overcoming the dark spirits lurking in the invisible waterfall and the grove of death, telling of her desire to sacrifice herself. See, for example, two of her prominent vocal lines in this act (Exs. V-3a, V-3b). The orchestral texture becomes dense when Alcestis intensifies her description to the gods of her grievous suffering.

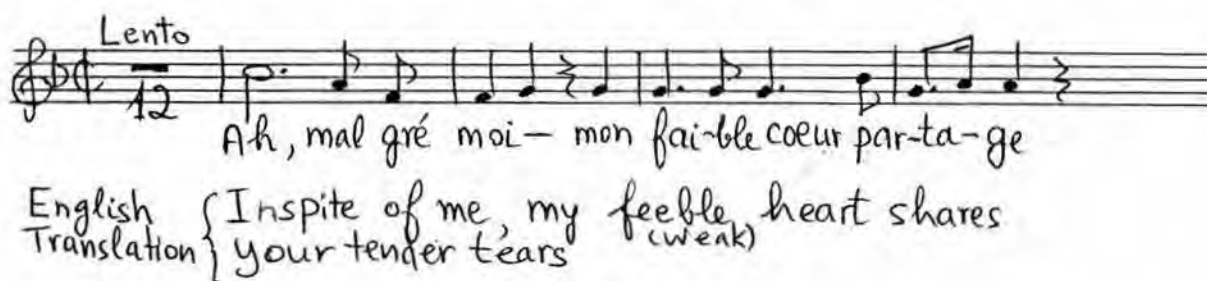
Example V-3a. The beginning of Alcestis' vocal line in her aria "O Dieux" (Act II, Scene 3).



pp O Dieux! Sou-te-nez mon cou-ra-ge! Je ne puis
plus ca-cher l'ex-cès

English Translation { Oh Gods, sustain my courage!
I can no longer hide the excess of my pain

Example V-3b. The beginning of Alcestis' vocal line in her aria "Ah, malgre moi" (Act II, Scene 4).



Lento Ah, mal gré moi - mon fai-ble cœur par-ta-ge

English Translation { In spite of me, my feeble heart shares
your tender tears (weak)

Act III contains Alcestis' last two arias. She again addresses the gods, and sings moving melodies to Admetus. As her dramatic role in this act collapses, her singing similarly moves more moderately by many intervals of seconds with several intervening triads, accompanied by a small chamber orchestra. See, for example, her vocal line in Ex. V-4.

Example V-4. The opening phrase of Alcestis' only aria in Act III, Scene 3, "Ah, divinites implacables" (Scene 3).

Andante

Ah! Di-vi-ni-tés im-pla-ca-bles! Ne craignez

pas que par mes pleurs

English Translation { Implacable Gods! Do not fear that with my tears I am trying to move your cruel hearts

Alcestis' well-known and extremely dramatic aria, "Divinites du Styx" (Act I, Scene 7), considered her most important one, is distinguished by its decisive rhetoric. She refuses to ask for mercy from the gods. In this 'hymn of courage' in which she is preparing to sacrifice herself, Gluck intentionally uses diverse dynamics and syncopations in the violins and violas for the intensification of drama. The bass, progressing in quarter-notes, adds greatly to this impression of deliberate forcefulness. The woodwinds fill in with whole-notes and enrich the spectrum of sound. The words "la mort" sinking down to low pitches, the pianissimo dynamics and the minorized harmonies - all come together to support Alcestis' expression at this point.

Example V-5. Alceste, vocal score, beginning of Alcestis' famous aria, Act I, Scene 7.

Andante

Di-vi-ni-tés du Styx, di-vi-ni-tés du
(Heavenly Sty-gian Gods, heavenly Sty-gian

Adagio

Styx, Mi-nis-tères de la mort.
Gods, Oh, har-bin-gers of death)

The importance of this aria, both in Gluck's operatic style generally and for the definition of Alcestis' figure, necessitates a detailed description in the basic manner of a special combined timeline (Fig. V-1). The ternary form follows the text in a completely organic manner.

Figure V-1. Special combined Timeline for Alceste, Act I, Scene 7, Alcestis' aria "Divinités du Styx".

Text (in English) mm

Gods of the Underworld

ministers of death

Andante

4 15 17

Di-vi-ni-tés du Styx

mi-nis-tres de la mort

Dynamics ⑤

Remarks about nature of the music, orch. decisive, march-like, heavy trombones

The matic elements a

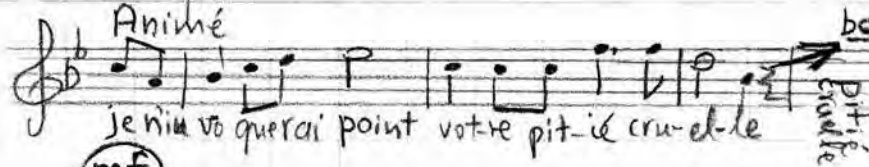

Form A

Harmony Bb

Orch. complements the vocal line

$\frac{V}{dim}$ $\frac{V}{dim}$

Fig. V-1 con'd

Text (in English) <u>m.m</u>	I do not ask you for cruel pity 17 con'd 18	26 33	I save my dear husband, it is natural for me
	<u>Animé</u>	<u>Andante un poco</u>	
			
	Je n'en vo querai point votre pit-é cru-elle	j'en le ve un tendre é-poux	
Dynamics	<u>mf</u>	<u>p</u>	
Remarks about nature of the music, orch.	orch. fanfares illustrate fanfares of Tartar, small orchestra (pairs of w.w.)	delicate, descriptive, sombre, mystic	
Thematic elements	<u>a</u>	<u>b</u>	
Form	con'd A con'd	<u>B</u>	
Harmony	<u>Bb</u> Va I6	<u>F</u> IV I6 II → I	


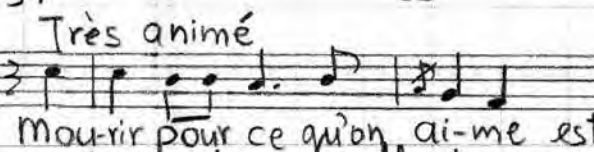
Gods of the Underworld 44	...to die for a loved one is a sweet effort 51 53
<u>Animé</u>	<u>Très animé</u>
	
Di-vi-nités du Styx	Mourir pour ce qu'on ai-me est un trop doux effort
<u>f</u>	
quasi Dev. [nature of the very beginning]	
(a)	
<u>c</u>	<u>d</u>
<u>B</u> con'd	
<u>F</u> I	

Fig. V-1 - end

Text (in English)	g, sense a new direction for my love
<u>mm</u>	65 68
	Très Animé
	Je Sans une force nou-vel-le
Dynamics	(p) ————— (f)
Remarks about nature of the music, orch. →	agitated, dramatic with stacc.
Thematic elements	e
Form	B cond
Harmony	modulatory → Bb

92	108	115
Gods of the Underworld		
Tempo Primo	<u>p.o</u>	
Di-vini-tés du Styx	→ pitié cruelle (text repetitions)	
(p ↔ f)	(mf) ————— (f)	
decisive...		
<u>a</u>	<u>a^k</u>	<u>a</u>
A		
Bb		
Tonic		Codetta

Leonore's Presence Onstage

Leonore's first appearance onstage is made in the quartet, No.3 (Marzelline, Leonore, Joaquin, Rocco). It begins with the texture of a canon where the entrances of the women are accompanied by strings, and the men by bassoons and horns. This is a successful ploy which provides the first opportunity for noticing Leonore - although Beethoven prefers not to emphasize her presence too much at this moment; having her onstage is sufficient for the expansion of the dramatic drive.

The trio, No.5 (Marzelline, Leonore, Rocco), already introduces us to Leonore's scheming mind, but not as yet by a prominent vocal motive to indicate her specifically. Later she declares that she will brave any horror that may confront her in the execution of her duties, a recurrent orchestral figure supporting her statement; see Ex. V-6.

Example V-6. Fidelio - orchestral motive from No.5, (trio).



After Rocco and Pizarro leave the stage (No.8), Leonore steps forward; she realizes that a murder is about to be committed in the dungeon and for the first time, reveals herself in her full stature, expressing what true love can achieve. This great aria, the only one given to Leonore in Fidelio, follows a recitative to which it is attached, in which she first points at Pizarro: "Abscheulicher! wo eilst du hin?" ("Loathsome creature! To where are you hurrying?"). The aria itself consists of an Adagio and an Allegro in A-B-A form. See the Timeline of the whole number (Fig. V-2).

Figure V-2. Fidelio - Timeline for No. 9 (Leonore's recitative and aria "Abscheulicher!")

Recitative : mm. 1-32; various tempo designations; meter changes. Non-repeated text.
g (\rightarrow C \rightarrow E)

I	Allegro agitato	Poco adagio Più moto	Allegro
	a	b	c
	1	11 12 13	15
	g	F B \flat	A IV/E
II	Adagio	9/8 3/4 Poco sostenuto (a tempo)	3/4
	d	e	
	21 22	25	31 32
	C (VI \flat /E)		E

Aria : mm. 33(34)-150. **I**: Through-composed harmonically bi-partite form; **II**: ABA' form.
E

TEXT	A "Komm \rightarrow erreichen"	A' (same text, different word repetition)				
I	Adagio: 2/4					
MUSIC	a b c d e f					
	33 34 41 46 54 57 61 62					
	link E B E A					
TEXT	B "Ich folg' \rightarrow Liebe"	B' (beginning shortened: "Ich wankte")	C "O du \rightarrow bringen"	C' (end shortened: \rightarrow "dringen")	B (as before)	B
II	Allegro con brio: C					
MUSIC	A a	b	B a	b	A' a'	c
	70	82	89 91	98-99-101 104	110	116 130
	E		A	$\frac{1}{2}$ C# g# e G	e	E

150

Text-expression here is intense: after a short Adagio orchestral introduction which pictures the rainbow that Leonore sees rising (horns with their prominent melodic part), Leonore's declamatory vocal part is assisted by rapid changes in orchestral texture and dynamics and unstable tonality abounding in chromatic notes; the vocal contours contain intensified rhythms and range from monotone to huge leaps. The nervous, agitated mood pervades the whole number, expressed by singer and orchestra alike.

Other remarkable appearances of Leonore take place quite soon after in Nos. 10 and 12. Her rhetoric style here includes spoken sections side by side with assertive virtuoso singing. Her presence onstage is continuous from now on, in order to control the progress of the plot by her actions and emotions. Her last important expressive appearance, after she has released Florestan and has herself been saved by the miracle of Don Fernando's arrival, is in her famous duet with Florestan "O namenlose Freude", which makes for a considerable change in the atmosphere.

The Role of Medea

Medea, the central pivot around whom Cherubini's entire opera revolves, is an incredibly vigorous human dynamo and, at the same time, the supernatural force generating the whole of this psychodrama.

She does not appear immediately, but only towards the end of Act I, in her first aria in the first section of the seventh scene. There her singing still reflects a sensible human being, expressing her love for Jason in a Larghetto F major aria. In the following duet between herself and Jason, at the end of this first act, she avails herself of a more tragic vein. This doom-laden mood continues to rule in her singing at the beginning of Act II (Scene 3) when she begs Creon to allow her to stay one more day in Corinth.

With her first appearances she gains center stage instantly, attracting attention by the sharp ascending contours in her vocal line, even though she might make a fast downwards leap immediately after her first upwards outburst. In these three sections, her having reached the high limits of her tessitura, ^{2 2 2}g , a , b , is emphasized. For these melodic traits, see Ex. V-7.

Example V-7. From the beginnings of Medea's important vocal lines in Acts I and II.

Example V-7a. The beginning of Medea's vocal line in her aria "Vous voyez de vos fils" (Act I, Scene 7, Section 1).

Larghetto

Vous vo-yez de vos fils

"You see the unfortunate mother of your sons"

Example V-7b. Medea's first entrance in the first Med.-Jas. duet "Perfides ennemis" (Act I, Scene 7, Section 2).

Allegro

Per-fi-des en-ne-mis Per-fi-des en-ne-mis

"Oh, perfidious enemies who conspire to my suffering"

Example V-7c. The beginning of Medea's singing (to Creon) in the March + Ensemble "Ah! du moins a Médée accordez" (Act II, Scene 3).

Allegro

Ah! du moins à Mé-dée a-c-cor-dez, un a-zi-le

"Ah! at least grant Medea asylum"

The vocal phrase illustrated in Ex. V-7c is the first in Act II, Scene 3, reflecting the thematic coherence uniting this entire scene.

From now on the dramatic role of Medea's figure is divided into two channels: the continuous confrontation with Jason (expressed in their stormy duets), and her own inner psychological conflict. Minor keys are used regularly for these duets and major keys for Medea's arias. The table of dynamics applied to her appearances till now shows a gradual development from the piano dominating her first aria to the aggressive fortissimo when she listens to Creon; yet Cherubini could not allow Medea to give vent to all her energy so early.

In her duet with Jason in Act II, Scene 5, Medea is commanded to leave her children. The tragic, 'horror' key of D minor is used here, and all the intervallic and rhythmic qualities typical of Medea's singing, such as the dotted quarter-notes in many variants and combinations, and the ascending fourth and descending broken chords, are much in evidence here. The significant, chilling piano with low-lying orchestral motive

at the start of this duet, creates a certain mood which pervades Medea's struggle against Jason. According to her conception, he is to blame for her tragic fate as a mother, subject to his will, doomed to leave her children (Ex. V-8).

Example V-8. The beginning of Act II, Scene 5, mm.1-11 (second Med.-Jas. duet "Chers enfans").

moderato

p

Chers en-fans chers en-

fans il faut donc que je vous a-ban-don-ne

Dear children,
I have to
leave you!

Medea's sudden admission of her crime-to-be sheds a new light on the Medea described earlier. In her second aria (Act III, Scene 2), her melodic norm is altered by striking downwards leaps, side by side with the continued high tessitura in her anguished voice (reaching $\overset{2}{a}$ -flat and $\overset{2}{b}$ -flat), piercing the musical texture. It seems as if Cherubini expresses by these means the pessimism and depression by which Medea is overtaken. The forte-piano alternations throughout the aria emphasize Medea's emotional instability, and the general smoothness of effect of the traditional major keys for Medea is forcefully interrupted by the minor-sixth downward leaps and the astonishing tone c -flat when she begins to sing this aria. She almost admits here that she intends to kill her children, and Cherubini chooses a strong harmonic effect to introduce the human dilemma (Ex. V-9).

Example V-9. The beginning of Medea's aria "Du trouble affreux" (Act III, Scene 2).

Largo sf-p

Du trouble affreux qui me dé-vor-e | Rien ne peut | é-ga-ler

English: Nothing can be compared to the horror of the anxiety which devours me

These harmonic revelations are only hints of the concentrated harmonic activity which will take place at Medea's most difficult moment psychologically, in her recitative in Act III, Scene 3, "Eh quoi!".

Medea, in her last aria, the well-known "O Tisophone", radiates self-confidence about her imminent crime. In comparison to its \underline{E} , consisting of broken triads, the \underline{S} is of a chromatic nature and reflects her ever-present irritation with Jason: she will never be able to gain tranquility after having taken the courageous step to murder her two sons, having gathered all her forces in order to execute the crime. These opposing intervallic ideas symbolize the torn soul of Medea. As she is linked to Jason from the last scene of Act I and in their raging duets throughout the opera, the conflict between these two principle figures affects the atmosphere of the entire Finale. The prominent key of B minor here fits the tradition of minor keys for the duet sections in this opera. Medea's uncontrolled nervousness, underlined by relatively more sixteenth-notes in her vocal part, in addition to her continued high tessitura ($\overset{2}{a}$, $\overset{2}{b}$, $\overset{2}{b\text{-flat}}$) and coherence of thematic material, stretches her strength to its utmost at the end of this opera.

The Main Musical Features of the Three Operas: A Comparative Study

Introduction

The truth uniting the three operas under discussion is the tremendous force of expression inherent in the main heroines who are superior by far to all the other characters. Also, there is a true dramatic-musical coherence much in evidence in each opera per se. Yet it is interesting to make distinctions according to the dramatic essence of each opera and the individual musical style of each composer.

Medea, in spite of her ongoing struggle against the other characters, overcomes all obstacles and emerges as the most dominant personality in the opera. Alcestis almost monopolizes the stage completely. Leonore is the one who interacts the most in combination with the other characters. It is interesting to note that only in Medee is there a conflict such as that between Medea and Dircea. There is no confrontation of this sort in the other two operas (Marzelline has a negligible profile alongside Leonore).

Inner Form of Numbers

It appears that ternary (da capo) form is most common for Gluck, and the through-composed is very typical for Cherubini. The repetition of the binary sonata form for arias is usual with Cherubini: see Dircea's aria in Act I, Neris' aria in Act II, and Medea's first aria in Act III. Beethoven approaches his opera by means of big numbers made up of complex forms. As regards the

elaboration of the large forms with Beethoven and Cherubini, mention should be made of two important similarities for these two composers: both treat \underline{E} by many derivations of thematic material and also prefer extended \underline{K} areas. An overview of the place of recitative in these three operas leads us to distinguish a certain gradual process starting with Gluck, continuing with Beethoven and ending up with Cherubini. In Alceste the recitative flourishes, Beethoven uses it a few times for dramatic purposes; Cherubini considers the recitative to be the most effective strategy for creating an emotional crisis.

An observation on the duets resembles that on the recitatives to some extent. Gluck's duets are rare, and they provide one of the ways in which Alcestis expresses her devotion to Admetus; Beethoven uses the format of the duet in order to evoke a unique moment and mood; Cherubini turns the duet into a unique unit of the most powerful drama. Because of the raging duets of Medea and Jason, Cherubini's Medee becomes an outstanding dialogue-opera of a psychological, cathartic nature.

Intervals, Rhythm, Contours, Tessitura

Is there any motivic unity between the three heroines? There are certainly common principles regarding the usage of intervals, mainly the triad chord and its intervals, including inversions. The progression of seconds is not too prominent in the shaping of the heroines' vocal contours, since this moderate type of melodic movement is of less significance for highly dramatic expression. The intervallic basis for Medea and Alcestis is the leap of a

third or a fourth balanced by seconds. The fourth upwards is especially typical of Medea. Leonore's melodic contours swing up most frequently on the broken triad. However, when the emotional tension is intensified towards the main goal of sacrifice, larger intervallic leaps are inevitable.

As regards the element of rhythm, it should be noted that the dotted rhythm appears in many versions (diminution and augmentation) in Medee. On the other hand, Gluck and Beethoven are notable for their sensitivity to the type of meter as an important component in the evoking of atmosphere. In Alceste we find 6/8 and 3/4 meters typical of the less dramatic arias in Acts II and III, while the quadruple meters signify a more dramatic situation in Act I. Beethoven alternates between 3/4 and 4/4 in his large forms together with changes in tempi (see the Timeline of No.9 introduced above, p. 28). Cherubini prefers the duple meter, but pays attention to the many changes of mood in the same framework: Andante, Allegro, Adagio, etc. See, for example, Medea's recitative "Eh quoi!" in Act III, Med.-Jas. duet "Chers enfans" in Act II.

When considering tessitura, the result of the physical strain imposed on all three heroines in their dramatic-emotional role is amazing: all three stress $\overset{2}{g}$, $\overset{2}{a}$, $\overset{2}{b}$ and surround these heights with a variety of melodic elaborations and ornamentations.

Dynamics

There is a certain order in which the field of dynamics for these three composers may be observed, and the three operas are ideal for this purpose. In Gluck's Alceste, the general values of dynamics are still undeveloped. In Cherubini's Medee they play a more active role: the basic values shift between piano and forte, with few fortissimos and pianissimos, and within the sections themselves the dynamics curve becomes more intense in correlation with the intensification of the drama. Of the three composers, Beethoven is generally well-known for his intensity and polarity in the field of dynamics; as was to be expected, in Fidelio he also uses rapid alternations between piano and forte, pianissimo and fortissimo, sforzando and piano. Of the three, Cherubini should be mentioned as the one who, in order to create sharp dramatic shifts in the soul of his heroes, does not attach too much importance to dynamics as such, but rather connects it organically to the melodic contour and to the vocal tessitura. However, the piano and pianissimo evoking a mysterious dark mood, are common to Beethoven and Cherubini (the beginning of Act III of Medee and the Dungeon Scene at the beginning of Act II of Fidelio).

Keys (Symbolism and Non-symbolism, Similarities and Differences

4 5
Among the analyses and observations of Shamgar,⁴ Tovey⁵ and
6 Seter,⁶ there are many noteworthy assumptions regarding the
larger tonality, as applied to the music of Beethoven and
Cherubini at the turning point between the end of the 18th
century and the beginning of the 19th century. Let us define the
main harmonic profile for each of the three operas under
discussion.

Alceste demonstrates a gradual harmonic development with
typical keys for each act – a process which is marked by loose-
ness of tonal centralization in the last act, identified with
reduction of the dramatic tension. The array of keys presented in
Medee is mainly a result of the key-predominated relations from
one scene to another: Cherubini desires to create dramatic
changes between scenes in the course of the opera, and according
to these dramatic nuances, he chooses his central keys one after
the other. For example, there are harsh transitions by a tritonal
relationship for the bold declamatory aria of Creon and the
musical numbers surrounding it in Act I. The symbolic keys for
various numbers, as described in detail further on, interweave

4 Beth Shamgar, "Dramatic Devices in the Retransitions of
Beethoven's Piano Sonatas", Israeli Studies in Musicology, II
(1980), pp.63-75; also "Perceptions of Stylistic Change: A Study
of the Reviews of New Music in the Harmonicon", Current
Musicology (1986), pp.20-31; and "Romantic Harmony through the
Eyes of Contemporary Observers", The Journal of Musicology, VII
(Fall 1989), pp.518-39.

5 Donald Francis Tovey, "The Larger Tonality", Beethoven
(London: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp.29-40.

6 Mordecai Seter, in a lecture on Beethoven's Quartet Op. 95,
course in "The Elements of Form, Texture and Polyphony", the
Rubin Academy of Music, Tel Aviv, 1983.

within the main scheme of keys and broader tonal concept.

Of the three, Beethoven is the composer most aware of the use of key-symbolism. This applies to the shaping of Fidelio as a whole with each musical number having its unique dramatic essence worked out by key, form and typical protagonist(s). For example, Pizzaro's figure stands out because of his aria in No.4 with D minor turning into D major; Leonore has left her mark on the world of opera with her recitative and aria ("Abscheulicher", No.9 in Act I), starting in G minor and shifting to E major.

There are some differences between key-symbolism discussed in the Harmonicon of 1828 and that presented in the Harmonicon of 1832⁷; there are a few of these which apply admirably to our three operas. There is, for example, D minor for the 'ghost-like' mood (see the tragic overture of Alceste and Pizzaro's 'horror'-aria (No.7) in Fidelio both in this key, as well as the same key's appearances in Acts II and III of Medee - in the Medea-Jason duet in Act II, Scene 5, and Medea's recitative and Finale in Act III). F minor stands for 'ghosts', 'sorrow', pathetic or mournful moods in the extreme and it serves perfectly for the overture of Medee and the Dungeon Scene at the beginning of Act II in Fidelio. B minor, considered as the blackest key in Beethoven's key symbolism, does not appear too often in Fidelio, but it does assert itself in Medee, both for Creon's aria in Act I, Scene 6, and at the beginning of the Finale in Act III. G

7 All the references in this paragraph are taken from Shamgar's article in The Journal of Musicology (Fall 1989).

minor, characteristic of "dissatisfaction, uneasiness, the anguish of disappointment" is perfectly suited to Neris' aria in Medee, Act II, Scene 4, as well as to the beginning of Leonore's recitative and aria (No.9) of Fidelio in Act I - "Abscheulicher". The key of B-flat major, for "happy, tranquil love, peace of mind, hope and longing for a better world", applies to Dircea and her women right at the beginning of Medee.

Shamgar's quotations in her article of 1986,⁸ dealing broadly with the epoch discussed, reflect Cherubini's harmonic devices extremely well: "transitions to remote keys include step-wise chromatic passages in unison or in a single part of the score and interrupted cadences;...harmony registered the gradual coalescence of the new Romantic aesthetic" and "an overall atmosphere of stylistic unrest prevailed",⁹ while the "detail of declamation"¹⁰ dominated French Opera, merging with the early Romantic "general spirit of the times, with its inordinate desire of stimulus and increased excitement".¹¹ Medee and Fidelio, provide evidence of these assumptions and fit very well into this framework of "expanding harmonic horizons of the new operatic repertoire..., of more chromatic language and wide-ranging modulations, often based on third relationships..., and the gradual weakening of the centripetal force of the tonic".¹² The third key exposition, an important Romantic characteristic, is found more

8 See "Perceptions of Stylistic Change" in Current Musicology (1986), p.26.

9 Ibid., pp.28-31.

10 Ibid., p.24.

11 Ibid., p.26, according to the Harmonicon of 1829, quoting Fetis' evaluation of Delaire.

12 Ibid., p.22.

frequently in Cherubini than in Beethoven (the best numbers for comparison of this issue are Cherubini's overtures).

13

On reading Shamgar's summary, we are immediately aware once again of Cherubini's main harmonic characteristics as part and parcel of the significant procedures that occurred at the turn of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, thus pointing towards early-Romantic style.

It is important to mention a few memorable points regarding the usage of major versus minor keys. Both in Medee and Alceste, the main heroines sing arias in major keys: Alcestis has her arias in B-flat major (Act I, Scene 7), F major (Act II, Scene 4, more than once, and Act III, Scene 3) and G major (Act III, Scene 4). Medea employs F major (Act I, Scene 7), E-flat major (Act III, Scene 2) and D major (Act III, Scene 3). In our opinion, this intriguing similarity reflects an undeniable strength of character in these two main heroines and supports the general consensus that Cherubini and Gluck had a similar attitude to drama.

In this context, minor key utterances hint at some basic suffering in contrast to the major key strength of character. For that, see the effect of Alcestis' addressing herself to the mercy of the gods; she emphasizes her suffering by an outburst reflected in melody, harmony and tessitura (a-flat). See below the beginning of her aria in Act II, Scene 4 of Alceste, "Ciel! Quel

13 Shamgar, "Romantic Harmony through the Eyes of Contemporary Observers", JM, (Fall 1989), pp.538-9.

supplice" (Ex. V-10). In m.110 this outburst occurs on a diminished seventh chord on the raised fourth tone, on the word "m'arrache" ("[my suffering] tears from me [my heart]"), a sharp minorization on the background of a sustained dominant in F major from the beginning of her aria. This is an extreme expression of Alcestis' pain, after a more tranquil beginning to her aria. There is also a thundering intensification of the general texture, in order to assist Alcestis in her appeal to the gods. In Leonore's recitative in No.9 of *Fidelio*, she also starts out in a minor key (G minor), and later shifts to the major (E major), still in the same number.

Example V-10. Gluck's *Alceste*, full score, mm.99-110, Act II, Scene 4, beginning of Alcestis' aria "Ciel! Quel supplice".

Full score, P. 240

Andante

99 (a2)

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello/Contrabass

Voice

Ciel! Quel supplice, quel tourment! Il faut que je me quitte.

mir! Wel-che Mar-ter, o welch ein Schmerz, ge-trennt zu

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Oboen
Hörner
in C
Violine I
Violine II
Viola
Alceste
Albæstis
Violoncello
Kontrabass

ter-tout ce-que j'ai- - me Cet ef- fort, ce tour-ment ex-
sein- von mei- nen Lie- - ben! Qual und Jam-mer, die mir ge-

107

Ob.
Hrn.
Vn.
Vn.
Vla.
Alc.
Alb.
Cello
Kb.

tré- - me et me de- chi- - re et ma- ra - - - - che le
blie- - ben, ach, sie zer- rei - - - - - ten mein

The phenomenon of tonal instability for Cherubini and Gluck in the last acts of both Alceste and Medee (see Medea's recitative in Act III and the Divertissement at the end of Alceste), signifies contrasting dramatic attitudes for the two composers: Gluck employs it for the collapse of tension, whereas Cherubini emphasizes the apex of Medea's emotional strength.

The general subject of the larger tonality is also an issue of pure harmonic tension creating its own drama, sometimes combined with a Romantic mood - which is also related to pure vocal sound or orchestration. This may be applied to instrumental¹⁴ music as well as to specific gestures of vocal timbre. Let us remember the effect of a suffering human being which is created by the specific tessitura of the solo tenor and the chorus of prisoners in Fidelio, where the extreme changes in dynamics add to the mood of horror and sorrow. In the same context, mention should be made of the mysterious atmosphere evoked by the extreme timbres of the piano in Beethoven's Appassionata as well as by those gestures in peaks, underpoints, texture and orchestration at the beginning of Act III in Cherubini's Medee. This relates to the following brief presentation of the role of the orchestra immediately below.

14 Tovey, Beethoven, pp.29-40.

The Orchestra

In spite of differences in their concept of orchestration, the role of the orchestra is of significant importance for all three composers. Yet Cherubini is known as being the most sensitive of the three in the creation of orchestral sound to complement the drama.

In Alceste, the instruments are still subordinate to the main happenings and the regular orchestral effects consist chiefly of the strings plus various additional woodwinds, and the celli and double-basses are relatively steady.

No doubt the changes in orchestral concept towards the turn of the eighteenth century - introduced to the musical scene by the brilliant Mannheim School of instrumental technique - inspired composers such as Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven and Cherubini to start investing much more power and variety in the orchestra. Cherubini was extremely interested in the creation of an emotional ambience out of which dramatic events could emerge; his insight into instrumental tone colour, both for solo fragments and for interesting groupings, must be cited as a pioneering achievement. Let us recall, for example, the obbligato of the flute in Dircea's aria in Act I and that of the bassoon in Neris' aria in Act II: both of these contribute immensely to the specific atmosphere of each of these arias. The unison effect is prominent for formal punctuation, and the low timbre of strings or winds for certain introductory gestures working up towards a dramatic situation (see especially the beginning of Act III in Medee).

Beethoven's contribution lies in the integrated way in which he uses the instruments throughout Fidelio. These function as actors, appearing onstage. Two examples that spring to mind are: the short march with a military-sounding after-theme in No.6, accompanying the officers and soldiers; the sinister-sounding double bassoon which underlines a throbbing, triplet figure in the strings while Rocco begins to search for the opening of an old well in the dungeon.

At this stage, let us recall the frequency of ϕ orchestral motives in Medee. These motives are used both for syntactic aims (serving for the basic inner structure of a number) and dramatic ones (helping to create a specific, focused mood). This is one of the most forward-looking characteristics in Cherubini's textural language, causing it to have great rhetorical power. See, for example, the distribution of ϕ which divides up into a number of recurring sub-motives in the duet of Medea and Jason "Chers enfans" in Act II, Scene 5, or even in a more extreme fashion in Medea's recitative "Eh quoi!" in Act III, Scene 3.

A significant observation emerges when considering that these two numbers have already been mentioned as examples of the inner tempi changes (see p. above). The richness of activity of the various components (in the harmonic structure as well as in the thematic plan, tempi and rhythms), results in their forming climaxes of tension; this is the musical Concinnity which Cherubini recruits so well in the service of drama.

The Declamatory Style

The most typical declamatory sections in Medee are the duets of Medea and Jason in Act I, Scene 7, and Creon's aria (Act I, Scene 6). Beethoven's Fidelio has three typical declamatory musical numbers: No.7 (Pizarro's aria), No.9 (Leonore's big aria) and No.11 (beginning of Act II - Florestan's aria including an introduction and a recitative). Gluck, however, without being familiar with the declamatory style, creates most of his dramatic highly-tense moments in Alceste by melodic contours; we may view in this way the effective appearances of both the Grand Priest (by his energetic bass, Act I, Scene 3) and the oracle (by his astonishing B minor key, Act I, Scene 4).

15

An interesting statement was made by Irmen¹⁵ who endeavoured to relate Beethoven's Pathetique to Cherubini's Medee, relying mostly on Medea's pathetic yet unique character; in his opinion, this basic psychological essence was very influential on Beethoven while he was composing his Pathetique. Irmen is of the opinion that in this piano sonata, Beethoven succeeds in incarnating the pathetic nature of Medea, as revealed in the three acts of Cherubini's opera.

15 Hans-Joseph Irmen, "Beethoven's Pathetique und Cherubini's Medea", in Bericht über den internationalen musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress, Berlin, 1974, edited by Helmut Kuhn and Peter Nitsche (Kassel, 1980).