



Review of “Kleines Buch zu Goethes Iphigenie auf Tauris“

(Oberlin College, Steven R. Huff)

Ulrich Klingmann. *Kleines Buch zu Goethes Iphigenie auf Tauris. Zum Lesen—Zum Spielen*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2022. 61 pp.

The modest title of this slim book is needlessly misleading. True, it is a “kleines Buch”—a mere 61 pages. Yet as its subtitle alludes, a twofold impetus inspired Ulrich Klingmann to construct an Iphigenie text that is “zum Lesen” and “zum Spielen.” The initial plan was to create a long overdue German libretto that will, one hopes, inspire a contemporary composer to supply a musical setting worthy of Goethe’s drama. Aware of the tendency to discount librettos as a mediocre literary genre, Klingmann opts to fashion a text based entirely on Goethe’s sublime drama. Though it is not obvious from the title, albeit hinted at in fine print on the front cover, Klingmann significantly enhances the book’s value by providing his English translation of the German libretto.

A brief historical overview will help delineate the torturous path that ultimately led to the Goethe-Klingmann Iphigenia libretto. During the latter decades of the eighteenth century, and on and off during the nineteenth, there were a number of Iphigenia in Aulis operas, all based on Euripides’s drama. These were, for the most part, courtly performances and primarily in French or Italian. Some of the composers drew on poets for their libretti. The musically most meritable Iphigenia opera was composed by Christoph Willibald Gluck and is still occasionally performed today. Although sometimes incorrectly referred to as a German opera, Gluck’s setting, as its title—*Iphigénie en Tauride*—makes clear, was composed while Gluck was, for a time, a favorite of the French court. Nicolas-François Guillard penned the French libretto. The opera premiered on May 18, 1779, at the Salle du Palais-Royal and received an enthusiastic

reception. Coincidentally and perhaps adding to the confusion, this is the same year that Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* premiered. Also complicating the history of Gluck's *Iphigénie* is that a German version of his opera also exists as *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Ein tragisches Singspiel. Gluck's only German opera, this first German version premiered in Vienna in 1781, but this was simply a translation of Guillard's earlier French libretto by Johann Baptist von Alxinger.

Inspired by the quality and enthusiastic response to opera elsewhere in Europe, Goethe, himself director of the Weimar Court Theater, tried his hand at musical drama. His Singspiele however have left a minimal impression on composers, audiences, and scholars. Yet they do reflect his serious interest in developing and advancing German opera to the level of Italian and French opera. Among the Singspiele Goethe created (perhaps out of envy) is an unfinished sequel to Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, titled *Der Zauberflöte zweiter Theil*, that has had little resonance even in academic circles. Emanuel Schikaneder's libretto for Mozart's *Zauberflöte*, in contrast, remains as present as ever on opera stages and in music conservatories.

In the foreword to his book, Klingmann outlines his process of transforming *Iphigenia* into a libretto that remains essentially true to Goethe's original. He first created an abbreviated text, as is typical of most musical adaptations of dramatic and poetic genres. The reshaping contains ca. one fifth of Goethe's original text, more precisely 442 of the original 2174 verse lines. The majority of these—387 in total—correspond exactly to the original, and 47 lines have been slightly shortened. Each of the latter is marked with an asterisk. Typical of many musical settings of both librettos and *Lieder*—a few of the lines are reordered so as to effect a more natural flow of the text. A few verses have been shifted for the purpose of maintaining the logic of the plot. This is all done with surgical precision. Each word, each metrical line is Goethe's own. Klingmann notes that despite the reductions, all the contextually essential verse groupings and well-known lines have been retained. Goethe's thematic structure remains untouched.

In the course of the project, it occurred to Klingmann that the abbreviated text might serve additional purposes. For instance, the shortened text could also provide a means to aid those who may have found it difficult to read Goethe's original as well as those who have not previously encountered the drama and who may therefore be surprised at the extent to which Goethe's version still maintains its relevance. One byproduct of the shortened text is that it facilitates greater focus on topics with more resonance for contemporary readers and audiences. Klingmann explains: "Goethe geht es um Fremd- und Selbstbestimmung in der Spannung zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Das 'Kleine Buch' weist deutlich patriarchalische Machtansprüche zurück, macht ideologisch verzerrte Glaubensinhalte transparent und fordert dazu auf, sich für eine freie und offene Gesellschaft zu engagieren."

An especially welcome component of the book is the complementary inclusion of Klingmann's own superb line-by-line English translation, with English libretto on the left, German on the right. The result—whether in the revised German form or the English translation—is a gift to Germanistik on both sides of the ocean. Its content and purposes portend an inestimable windfall for multiple constituencies. These include librettists, composers, scholars, teachers, students, and audiences.

Meanwhile, the publication of Klingmann's "Kleines Buch" was followed a few months later by a remarkable stroke of serendipity. A contemporary transformation of Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* as an opera premiered at the Cutler Majestic Theater in Boston, followed by performances at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and elsewhere. The composer was none other than Wayne Shorter, one of the most gifted and lauded American jazz saxophonists and an accomplished composer of contemporary jazz and classical music. Celebrated singer, composer, and jazz bassist Esperanza Spalding crafted the libretto and sang the lead role, with Frank Gehry as stage designer. The *New York Times* review of the production used the word "landmark." Shorter passed away on March 2, 2023, at the age of 89. All this seems to point to a resuscitation. *Iphigenia*, whether in Taurus or Aulis, is alive and well.