

# The Orpheus Legend in Opera

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## Monteverdi and the Birth of Opera

### The First Performance

Universally held as 'the first true opera in the history of music', the first performance of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* took place 400 years ago at Mantua, within the Ducal palace of the Gonzagas, on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1607. Other than the fact that it was written under the auspices of the Accademia degli Invaghiti (a group of gentlemen amateurs) for the entertainment of the Mantuan court during the carnevale season of 1607, surprisingly little is known of its origins. As was customary with the later operas of Monteverdi, there seems to be no published description of the work or any surviving costume drawings, property lists or commemorative engravings of the sets, a practice common in the period. Nor do we know in which room of the palace the performance took place, although tradition has it that it was performed in either the Galleria degli Specchi or the Galleria dei Fiumi. Wherever it was performed, we do know from correspondence of the period that space was limited.

The cast list of this first performance is also sketchy. We do know however that the title role was sung by Francesco Rasi, a member of the Mantuan ensemble, who according to one contemporary source was praised for his ability to "sing in both tenor and bass ranges with exquisite style and passage work and with extraordinary feeling and a particular talent to make the words clearly heard." The female roles were sung by castrati. In fact most of our information about the first performance comes from correspondence between Francesco Gonzaga and his brother Ferdinando (in Pisa) regarding the loan of one of his Grand Duke's court castrati, because as he said, he had "very few sopranos here, and those few were not very good." The Grand Duke did indeed lend a castrato for the performance but the many letters that subsequently changed hands relate the saga that ensued. The soprano who finally turned up, in the nick of time, was Giovanni Gualberto also known as Magli.

### The Two Endings

The only surviving document from that first performance on 24<sup>th</sup> February 1607, was the libretto – it was customary to distribute these so that the audience could more easily follow the story. The ending in this document is at odds with the score of the work published two years later in 1609. The former has Orpheus, having sworn off and at womankind in general, being attacked and torn apart by the Bacchantes, a tribe of irascible females devoted to Bacchus. Legend has it that his dismembered head floated down the river Hebrus, still singing until it reached the island of Lesbos where it was taken by the Muses and buried. No music survives of this ending.

The published version of the opera, however, the one we perform today, has a 'lieto fine' (happy ending). Here Apollo, the father of Orpheus and a god associated with reason and intellect descends from heaven, chides Orpheus for his self-pity and finally takes him up to heaven amid general rejoicing.

The reason for the two endings is unclear but there are several theories. For some of these and for greater in-depth discussion of the opera in general, I would strongly recommend that you read *Orfeo* by John Whenham, a copy of which is available in our library.

### Monteverdi's Orchestra

Compared with his later operas, the orchestra that Monteverdi used for *Orfeo* was huge with a diverse range of instruments. This was no doubt made possible by the fact that the performance was sponsored by the Ducal Palace, while the latter operas were commercial enterprises where cost and budget was a constant concern. Monteverdi lays out his orchestral requirements at the front of the published score but there are anomalies, as the list there does not always tally with the requirements in the musical score. While some instruments are well known to us today, other may seem very exotic indeed.

Here is the list as prescribed by Monteverdi:

***Duoi Gravicembani*** – "two harpsichords".

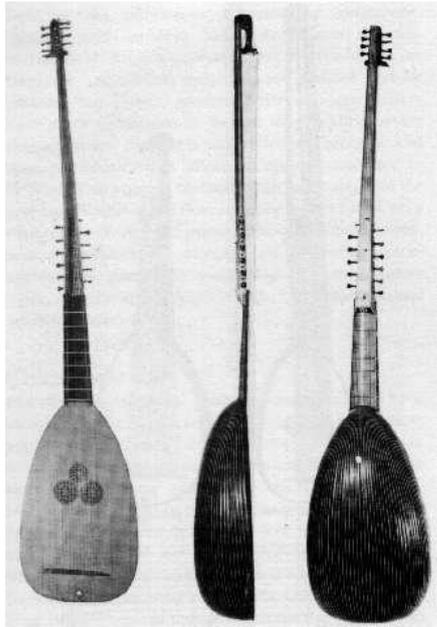
***Duoi Contrabassi de Viola*** – "two double-bass viols"

**Dieci Viole da Brazzo** – “ten arm-viols” or violins.

**Un Arpa doppia** – “one double harp”, an ancient harp with a double set of strings.

**Duoi Violini piccoli all Francese** – “two small French violins”. These are featured in important solo passages.

**Duoi Chitaroni** – “two chitarones”. The chitarone is a bass member of the lute family used for continuo, distinguishable by its long neck to accommodate the bass strings. The theorbo is another member of the family which you will see featured in our July production.



The Theorbo



Three members of the Cornetto family

**Duoi organi di legno** – “two organs with wooden pipes”.

**Tre Bassi da gamba** – “three viole da gamba”. The viola da gamba was the bass member of the viol family and formed the foundation of a continuo group. The fact that three are stipulated would indicate that Monteverdi intended three distinct continuo groups to be used in the opera. This would have allowed for a wide variety of instrumental combinations and tonal colours, as well as a sort of stereophonic effect, as one group took over from another or strategically followed the singers as they moved around the stage.

**Quattro Tromboni** – “four trombones”. Actually sackbuts, the precursor of the modern trombone, having a narrower bore than its offspring. Here is another anomaly in Monteverdi’s list, as there are actually parts for five trombones written in the score.

**Un Regale** – The regale was a small portable organ with a distinctive, reedy quality. Monteverdi reserves its use for the underworld scenes only & is particularly associated with Caronte.

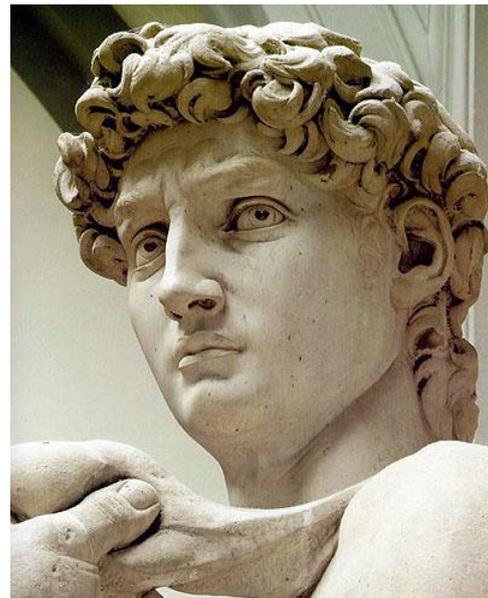
**Duoi Cornetti** – “two cornetts”. The preferred choice of instrument for accompanying trombones, as it was capable of playing diatonic melodies – unlike the Baroque trumpet which could only follow the harmonic series. The word literally means ‘horn’, a description dictated by its shape (see above illustration). They were, and are, notoriously difficult instruments to master.

**Un Flautino alla vigesima seconda** – For all intents and purposes, a recorder. However, here is another anomaly as there are parts written for two instruments.

**Un clarino con tre Trombe sordine** “one clarino trumpet with three muted trumpets”. These are used in the opening toccata movement only.

## The Impact of Humanism on Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*

Humanism was a movement which we identify chiefly with the Renaissance and which grew out of the writings of the 14th Italian poet and philosopher, Petrarch. It exalted mankind's relationship with God, emphasised his free will and his superiority over Nature. The Humanist slogan could best be summed up in the phrase coined by the Greek philosopher Protagoras " ...Man, the measure of all things." Following the superstition, fear and religious persecutions that dominated the previous centuries, where earthly existence and achievement was perceived as insignificant compared to the afterlife, the Renaissance was characterised by a new found confidence and optimism in Man's potential. We see a wonderful example of this in the art of the period. Just look at the famous sculpture of David by Michelangelo.



**Michelangelo's 'David'**

The figure is vast, perfect in its dimensions and confident in its stance. His face, defiant and intelligent, seems to look beyond the temporal as if to defy the forces of Fate. He is totally at ease with himself.

We see the influence of Humanist thought in spiritual matters also. For example, the seeds of the Reformation were sown by Humanist philosophy. Now the pursuit of human values was advanced ahead of abstract reasoning, restrictive philosophies and religious dogma.

It is not unexpected that the movement drew much from the writings of the ancient Greek and Roman thinkers. Such philosophers and thinkers as Plato, Aristotle and Virgil were rediscovered, as it were, their writings becoming the catalyst for new ideas and the source that provided Renaissance man with inspiration in their personal quest for truth and goodness.

(It is significant of course that the story of Orpheus and Euridice is drawn from an ancient Greek myth.)

However, it seems to me that Striggio's libretto owes much to the writings of a more contemporary humanist thinker – the quirky Michel de Montaigne<sup>1</sup> (1533-92), whose famous 'Essays' are a landmark of the C16th. Montaigne was not your typical humanist – if there was such a thing - and in his essays, where he makes himself the subject of his study, he takes a more realistic stance regarding 'this miserable and wretched creature, who is not even master of himself ... and yet dares to call himself lord and emperor of this universe.' Taking this standpoint, he draws some illuminating, humbling yet ennobling conclusions regarding human nature. While this is certainly a less optimistic view of man's place in the natural order than that espoused by Protagoras, he does concede that man is indeed capable of dignity but that such is achieved not so much by conquest and heroic deeds as by painfully won self-knowledge.

*There is nothing so fine and so legitimate as to play the man well and properly, nor is there any science so difficult as to know how to live this life well and according to nature. (3.13)*

It is this realisation that has a profound resonance in *L'Orfeo*, for the work is less about Orpheus's courage in confronting the forces of the Underworld than the confrontation of his own emotions and the discipline needed to control them. As the chorus declaim following his final loss of Euridice...

*Orpheus conquered Hades  
and then was conquered by his emotions.  
Only he who has gained victory over himself  
is worthy of eternal glory.*

In the final scene, Orpheus has still not learnt his lesson and in an extended soliloquy bewails his lot. Apollo (the symbol of rationality, constancy and equanimity) descends from heaven and chides his son for his brooding and self-pity.

*As great as your joy was... so is now your sorrow!  
Have you not learnt that no delight here is lasting?*

Apollo invites Orpheus to accompany him to the celestial realm, which in the light of Humanist thinking could be seen as the invitation to embrace the light of reason and aspire to that god-like (human) dignity, which has been achieved through "painfully won" self-realisation. The answer to the 'divine' call is symbolically Orpheus's aspiration to Virtue. It is this, more than his physical courage, or even the power of his music, that is his greatest achievement. Apollo's descent and Orpheus's apotheosis is also strongly linked to the concept of Jacob's Ladder – that conjoining of heaven and earth and the means by which man may aspire to heavenly virtue and the divine enter the terrestrial realm. (See 'Symbolisms' below).

Now, of course, such conclusions are less convincing when one considers the alternative ending to the opera (see above). In the extant version, Orpheus's self-realisation and subsequent apotheosis is abrupt. In fact if one is to point to a single weakness in the work, it is this ending. The surviving text of the alternative ending would seem to provide a conclusion of more balanced proportions structurally but then, is less satisfying to the philosophical argument laid out above. The shorter surviving ending, while having its importance diminished by its brevity does, however, seem more consistent with contemporary Humanist thought.

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<sup>1</sup> Michel de Montaigne asked a single question over and over again in his *Essays*: "What do I know?" By this he meant that we have no right to impose on others dogmas which rest on a cultural habit rather than absolute truth. Powerfully influenced by the discovery of thriving non-Christian cultures in places as far off as Brazil, he argued that morals may be to some degree relative. Who are Europeans to insist that Brazilian cannibals who merely consume dead human flesh instead of wasting it are morally inferior to Europeans who persecute and oppress those of whom they disapprove? This shift toward cultural relativism was to continue to have a profound effect on European thought. Pity that it has had no effect whatsoever on George W. Bush's foreign policy!!!!

## SYMBOLISMS, DEITIES and PERSONIFICATIONS

in

### Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* and Gluck's *Orfeo e Euridice*

#### **The Symbolism of Jacob's Ladder.**

While not explicitly named as such, this symbolism is inferred in both operas via the link between the divine and the temporal.

The story of Jacob's Ladder is found in the Book of Genesis (28:12)

*"... and he dreamed and behold a ladder set up on the earth and the top of it reached to heaven and behold, the angels of God ascending and descending upon it."*

This interchange of heaven and earth, emphasizing man's ability to aspire to the divine, was seized upon by the Humanist movement as a symbol of cosmic harmony and was a common theme in the art of the period.

However such symbolism is not unique to the Bible and is found in the writings of many cultures and periods in history. For example, the Greeks talked about the Golden Chain of Zeus as a link between the celestial and earthly realms and we see parallels in folk culture and even traditional children's stories such as Jack and the Beanstalk!

In keeping with the Renaissance/Humanist promotion of man's free will, it was the choice of the individual to ascend to 'higher' things. There is an apt passage supporting this in the writings of the 15th philosopher Pico della Mirandola, where he places these words in the mouth of God:

*We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honour, as though the maker and moulder of thyself, thou mayst fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. Thou shalt have the power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Thou shalt have the power out of thy soul's judgement to be reborn into the higher forms, which are divine.*

#### **The Symbolism of the Sun**

The sun features strongly in the text of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. The very first chorus, which invokes the blessings of Hymen upon the happy couple, says

*Let your fiery torch be like a rising sun  
To bring these lovers peaceful days.*

This image of the sun as a source of benevolence and consolation is by no means a new one. The sun, as a giver of life, warmth, light and the ruler of the days and seasons has led to its deification in many cultures throughout history. It has particular significance in *L'Orfeo* because of Apollo, the Sun god and father of Orpheus. It is no surprise that Orpheus's first utterance in the opera is a prayer to the sun, in effect to his father.

*Rose of heaven, life of the world  
And worthy offspring of him who holds the world enslaved..  
O Sun, who encircles us all and sees all...  
Tell me, have you ever seen a more happy lover than I?*

Awareness of this significance adds a real pathos to his sad farewells at the end of Act II, as he vows to descend to Hades:

*Addio terra...  
addio cielo ...  
e sole.. Addio!*

Note that Monteverdi writes this triple farewell as a tiered refrain at one and the same time satisfying the baroque convention of the Doctrine of the Affections (that of placing the sun in a musical position in keeping with its importance) as well as injecting the utterance with an overwhelming feeling of paternal loss.

The appearance of Apollo at the end of the opera is, of course, as a father figure but probably more importantly as a symbol of Wisdom and Enlightenment. (See article on 'Humanism' above)

## **La Musica (Music)**

This personification introduces the evening and because of her important relationship with the character of Orpheus, her spirit permeates the proceedings.

As there is no specific Muse for music, she is sort of a collective representation of the nine Muses. These Muses were the daughters of Jupiter (also known as Jove or Zeus) and Mnemosyne and each presided over some department of literature, art or science. In Striggio's libretto for *L'Orfeo*, La Musica informs us that she comes from her "beloved Permessus", a river that rises in Mt Helicon, part of the Parnassus range, an area sacred to the Muses.

## **La Speranza (Hope)**

This important personification takes on greater significance if we are more familiar with ancient myth specifically, the story of Pandora and that box!

Prometheus had stolen fire from the gods and had given it as a gift to man. Zeus was furious and in retaliation and as a punishment to mankind, created woman!

Her name was Pandora and all the gods contributed to her accomplishments by giving gifts of beauty, charm etc. Zeus in turn presented her with an ornate box that she was forbidden to open. At length, curiosity got the better of her and she gave in to the impulse to look inside. Immediately there escaped a multitude of diseases and sorrows to plague mankind. She hastened to replace the lid but it was too late, the contents had quickly spread far and wide. Only one thing remained – at the bottom of the box lay HOPE.

The allegory is clear. No matter what evils beset us in this life, Hope remains. As long as we have that, nothing can make us completely wretched. In Striggio's libretto, there stands at the gates to the Underworld a sign carved in stone, *Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate*<sup>2</sup> (Abandon all hope, you who enter). The fact that Orpheus must even forsake Hope – the last recourse of mankind - in his quest for Euridice, adds a particular poignancy to his endeavour.

## **Pluto (also known as Hades)**

After some family disfunction, Pluto and his siblings, Zeus and Neptune (sons of Kronos and Rhea) each took a part of creation to rule over, gratefully making Zeus their leader. Zeus got the heavens and Mt. Olympus, Neptune the sea and Pluto the underworld.

Pluto was not regarded as an evil god – he should not to be confused with Satan or the devil in Christian teachings - but he was viewed as grim and implacable, and worshippers would avert their eyes from his image when making sacrifice.

The name comes from the Greek word *Ploutos* meaning 'wealth', indicating that his realm is not only the spiritual abode of the dead but also the source of gold and other precious metals able to enrich the living. His consort was Proserpina. (see below)

## **Proserpina (also known as Persephone)**

The daughter of Demeter (which means 'earth-mother' but also known as Ceres, from which we get our word 'cereal') Proserpina shares her mother's association with fertility, crops and Spring. Pluto, the god of the underworld, seeing her in the fields one day was so entranced with her beauty that he abducted her, carrying her off to his dark kingdom, there to make her his consort. There follows a rather involved story of Demeter's search for her daughter. Suffice to say, that at length she did indeed locate her and found to her dismay that she was not at all discontented with her dismal surroundings or her sombre captor. To cut a very long story short, Pluto allowed Proserpina to return to the upper world once a year. Her return heralded new life and fertility and is the reason why she is strongly identified with the season of Spring and rebirth.

## **Caronte (or Charon)**

Caronte was the Ferryman who bore souls across the River Styx (Acheron in some accounts) to the Underworld. He was quite selective as to who was eligible to pass over – only dead souls who had received due burial rites would be given passage. This is why Orpheus is denied access. His rules of passage also explain why Grecian generals insisted upon their dead being properly prepared at burial.

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<sup>2</sup> The original source of this proclamation is found in Canto III of Dante's *Inferno*

The tradition of placing a coin under the tongue of the deceased, as payment to the Ferryman, was also a requirement of passage.

## Eco (Echo)

Eco was a beautiful maid, favoured by the goddess Diana, who was very fond of talking and getting the last word in an argument.

One day Hera (Juno) was looking for Jupiter (Zeus), her husband, whom she suspected was having one of his usual dalliances with some wood nymphs. Eco, by her talking, contrived to detain the goddess until the nymphs made their escape. As punishment, Hera struck her dumb except for that facility of which she was so fond – that of reply. She would have the last word but never the power to speak first.

*That tongue of yours, by which I have been tricked, shall have its power curtailed and enjoy the briefest use of speech." [Hera to Echo. Ovid, Metamorphoses 3.365]*

This punishment had tragic results when Eco met and fell in love with the youth Narcissus. She longed to address him to win his heart by her soft appeals but now had no power to do so - she would have to wait impatiently for him to initiate the conversation. One day Narcissus, separated from his companions, shouted "Who's here?" Eco replied "Here." Turning and seeing no one, he called again "Why do you shun me?" and Eco repeating the question. "Let us join one another" called Narcissus and the maid replied enthusiastically the same words and ran to embrace him.

Narcissus however repulsed her advances saying "I would rather die than you should have me". Eco could only cry "Have me" as Narcissus ran from her.

In her abandonment, Eco withdrew to the caves of the mountain top and as time passed, her form faded with grief, her flesh dissolving and her bones changing into rocks until nothing was left of her except her voice. With that she is still willing to reply to anyone her calls her.

The association of this character with grief and loss meant that musical 'echos' were exploited by composers for dramatic effect. Both Monteverdi in *L'Orfeo* (Act V) and Gluck<sup>3</sup> in *Orfeo ed Euridice* (Act I) use echo effects. In Monteverdi's opera it is particularly poignant as Eco gives back the final syllables of each phrase, subtly changing their meaning so that it supplies words of sympathy. For example:

Orpheus: *E mai sempre darommi ahi doglia, ahi pianto*

Eco: *Hai pianto*

Orpheus: *Non ho pianto pero tanto che basti*

Eco: *Basti*

Orpheus: *Non saro il duol conforme a tanti guai*

Eco: *Ahi!*

## Fate

Generally referred to as a single personality but in fact there were three Fates. The daughters of Zeus and Themis, their names were Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Their task was to spin and control the thread of human destiny. Clotho spins the thread of life, Lachesis determines the length of the thread and Atropos cuts the thread when the proper time has come for death. Thus in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, Speranza's reference to 'destin crudele' (cruel fate) would seem appropriate.

## Furies

Probably the most fearsome creation of the Greek mind, the Furies were the avengers of those who had escaped justice, particular those culpable of patricide or matricide. Their appearance was revolting with blood dripping from their eyes, whips in their hands, snakes in their hair and they stank! Their names were Alecto, Tisiphone and Megaera. In keeping with the misogyny in Greek myth, they were female! They are sometimes referred to collectively as Eumenides, as in Calzabigi's libretto for Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*

## Orpheus

Orpheus, the famous musician of Greek legend, was the son of Apollo and the Muse Calliope. So great was his skill that it was said that his singing could soften the rocks and tame the wild beasts. Prior to the story of the rescue of his wife, Euridice from the Underworld, his legend also has him accompanying Jason as one of the Argonauts in his eventful expedition to find the Golden Fleece. His

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<sup>3</sup> Gluck also wrote an opera based on this legend called *Écho et Narcisse* It is hardly ever performed.

skills saved the crew at least once when he subdued the terrible Sirens by singing more beautifully than them.

In the early days of Christianity, Orpheus surrounded by the wild animals was a symbol for Christ, the motif of which can be found on the walls of the catacombs. Orpheus's ability to tame wild animals, his heroic journey to the underworld, and his violent death all would have reminded early Christians of Jesus.



This 4th-century fresco of *Christ as Orpheus* is in the catacombs of Peter and Marcellus in Rome

### **Amor (Also known as Cupid and Eros)**

There are several versions of this character in his many guises. The most popular version is that of the winged baby or youth shooting arrows into people's hearts, making them fall in love. This was probably also the model for the Christian cherub.

His mother was Aphrodite and traditionally, it is the son that symbolised the crazed, many times blind love, and Aphrodite the deeper, more meaningful love. However, sexual lust maintained an association with both mother and son.

## **Monteverdi and the 'Reciting' Style**

We have become very used to the 'aria' as being the bedrock of opera - it has been the passionate heart of the genre since Handel's time. Yet when Monteverdi and his contemporaries launched opera in the early part of the seventeenth century, it was virtually unknown. Here at the birth of the baroque period a totally new style derived from the rhetorical principles of oratory was developed by a group of artists called the Camerata of Florence, led by the famous composer and singer Giulio Caccini. This 'stile nuovo' sought to illuminate the passionate and dramatic character of poetry and in order to do this the dominant polyphonic style of the previous century, with its tendency to conceal the text amidst its many contrapuntal lines, had to be abandoned for a radically different format. Polyphony thus gave way to the single line of monody – dramatic recitative.

Today we tend to think of recitative as second best, something to get out of the way so that we can get on with the aria! In fact even with Monteverdi's pupils the convention had begun to move in this direction and was certainly never used again with his confidence and imagination. For Monteverdi and his contemporaries, monodic recitative was at the absolute heart of his dramas. Music followed the rhetorical practices of the time and by thus inflecting the text, enhanced its power.

*“ Music should follow the cadence and thus the moving implication of the individual word with little heed to the phrase, the sentence, or even the total feeling. The result was recitative – tumbling emotion, a continuing heart-cry, undistanced, ‘the naked human voice’ behind the measured voice of the poet.”<sup>4</sup>*

A cursory look at a Monteverdi score can be bewildering, for there seems to be nothing there, a vocal line and a bass line, that's all – and even the vocal line does not look that interesting! Of course, closer study reveals the genius behind it and, as expected, it all stems from the text and the poetic idea. For Monteverdi, words formed musically. In what seems the most natural manner, he was able to extract the passion and tension of a poetic character by the perfect inflection of the vocal line and the subtle employment of harmonic and rhythmic juxtaposition.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Orpheus: the neoclassic vision' by John Kerman. This article can be found in John Whenham's *Claudio Monteverdi, Orfeo* in our library. Call number is ML410.M77 C55 1986

These early operas were indeed plays set to music and the performer who fails to make the text the first and constant focus of his/her study will never 'get' it and their performances will never convince, even though they may possess the most beautiful of voices.

This poetic focus, as well as the novelty of the genre in the early years of the seventeenth century, was recorded by one Carlo Magno, a Mantian court official, writing to his brother about the forth coming premiere of *L'Orfeo*.

*"Tomorrow evening the Most Serene Lord the Prince is to sponsor a play in a room in the apartments ... it should be most unusual, as all the actors are to sing their parts: it is said on all sides, that it will be a great success"*

## Vocal Production & Style in the Seventeenth Century

While many practitioners and scholars can become over zealous when discussing and executing issues of baroque vocal production, there are some important factors to be aware of that will enhance the listeners appreciation as well as the practitioner's preparation and delivery of these works. There are two main areas to consider:

- the production of the vocal tone and
- the phrasing and articulation of the musical line.

Knowledge of these two key factors is what essentially constitutes what we call 'style' – for all periods of music, not just baroque.

Here are just a few general comments about both when singing early music.

As a rule, tone production in the baroque was produced with less force and weight than would be so in the later romantic period.<sup>5</sup> This had much to do with the way **breath pressure** was used in producing the sound. When contemporary sources write on the subject, nearly all make an association with speech. For example, the famous French composer Rameau, writes in his treatise on performance:

*.. all our attention, all our desire should be simply to train oneself to expel the breath more or less in the same fashion as when we go to speak. Preoccupied by the single thought one wishes to express, the voice is heard without costing the least effort. It should be the same for the singer. Preoccupied only by the feeling he wishes to convey, all the rest should be so familiar to him that he not longer is obliged to think about it.*

Such production has implications for **vibrato** which you may recognize as being pretty much a constant when listening to today's professional singers. In baroque singing, vibrato was certainly used but more as an ornament than a constant. Without going into too much technical detail, the principle reason for this is that modern singing uses greater air pressure than would have been used in the baroque. Students wishing to achieve an authentic baroque sound will often take a modern production and 'straighten' it. However if you try to suppress vibrato without changing the air pressure, you will have to use some kind of constriction of the vocal tract, leading to tension and fatigue and a production that is anything but the easy production that Rameau speaks of.

**Registration** was a very important aspect of vocal technique. This allowed not only an access to a wider range but also a tonal palate that could be employed in varying the delivery of the text.

**Throat articulation** is a specialization restricted to the early baroque and I mention it because you will hear it featured prominently in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. It was specialized technique used for singing rapid passages and ornaments.

With an understanding of these general principals of tonal production, we can move to stylistic matters of phrasing.

Nicklaus Harnoncourt, the famous conductor and Early Music scholar, has succinctly described the difference between baroque and romantic music<sup>6</sup>.

*Baroque music speaks - Romantic music paints.*

One may go into the implications of this statement in some detail but I think it is suffice to say as an introduction that this articulateness is at the very heart of the delivery of baroque music - whether vocal

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<sup>5</sup> The Enlightenment opened up music to the middle classes, increasing the size of performance venues. This, combined with the inherent 'heroic' ideals of the romantic period, demanded vocal techniques that exploited the full dynamic potential of the human voice.

<sup>6</sup> See his excellent book on baroque style *The musical dialogue : thoughts on Monteverdi, Bach, and Mozart* a copy of which can be found in our library. Call number ML60 .H33713 1989

or instrumental. Where the Romantic phrase is long and arching often peaking dynamically as it rises, the baroque phrase - while it can have the appearance of being unending - is constructed of smaller articulate cells inflected in much the same manner as is our speech. Learning and honing this skill is one of the most challenging tasks for the baroque musician but ultimately one of the most rewarding.

## Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* and the reform of opera.

When Gluck came to write his *Orfeo ed Euridice*, opera had been flourishing in Europe for 150 years and had undergone many changes and developments. Many of the ideological premises laid down by Caccini and his Camerata and so perfectly executed by Monteverdi in giving birth to the artform had, by now, evolved into a format that these 'founding fathers' would not recognise. Probably the most influential diversion had been the advancement and celebration of the solo voice for its own sake. We can point to one voice type as the quintessential icon of this period - the castrato<sup>7</sup>. Their legendary virtuosity would play a big role in dictating the way the genre was to evolve. By the middle of the C17th their skills had played a large part in sowing the seeds of what was to be known as *opera seria*. At its heart lay the *da capo* aria, with its defined structure of A-B-A, providing the ideal display vehicle for these celebrated vocalists to dazzle with their prodigious feats of ornamentation and breath control. Their skills would ensure the flourishing of the genre through several decades of the new century particularly, when supplied with first rate material by such great composers as Handel. However, by the middle of the C18th, the philosophies of the Enlightenment<sup>8</sup> were spreading far and wide and these dramas, so often inhabited by mythical characters, gods and kings and whose narratives had become convoluted and emotionally constrained, were seen as old hat and out of touch. And so, steps to reform the art form got underway.

Two of the leading figures in this movement were Christoph Willibald Gluck and the dramatist Raniero de Calzabigi who independently worked on reform ideologies even before they were brought together for their collaboration on *Orfeo ed Euridice*. As Gluck later declared in his preface to *Alceste*, his aim was to "divest [opera] entirely of all those abuses, introduced into it either by the mistaken vanity of singers or by the too great complaisance of composers, which have so long disfigured Italian opera and made of the most splendid and beautiful of spectacles the most ridiculous and wearisome". It was no secret that Gluck had been experimenting with the French model of *tragédie lyrique*, whose style allowed for greater dramatic continuity than the dominant Italian style of recitative and aria. And although Calzabigi had just published a French edition of the works of Metastasio, the celebrated *opera seria* librettist of the Vienna court opera, it could have been viewed as a cunning way to have his own ideas disseminated, for the publication contained a 200 page preface, expounding his own reform ideology, also based on the *tragédie lyrique*.

The pair were brought together by the forward thinking manager of the Viennese imperial theatres, Durazzo. Their collaboration on *Orfeo ed Euridice* would result in a musical continuity which

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<sup>7</sup> The 'primo' voice of the C17th & C18th, this unique voice was effected by the castration of gifted boys singers of 8-9yrs in order to preserve the male unbroken voice into adult life. The removal of the testes results in the absence of male-type growth of the larynx. In the only recorded post-mortem examination of a castrato the dimensions of the larynx were strikingly small, with the vocal cords the length of a female high soprano. However, in a castrato, normal physical growth continued unhindered, resulting in a voice very different from that of the prepubescent boy. Although there was the high pitch of the child, soprano, or contralto, it was associated with fully grown resonating chambers provided by the pharynx and oral cavity as well as an adult thoracic capacity, made even more effective by intensive voice training. Yet although the pitch may have been similar to that of a female, the timbre of the voice was different. A contemporary critic described the castrato sound as being "as clear and penetrating as that of choirboys but a great deal louder with something dry and sour about it yet brilliant, light, full of impact".

<sup>8</sup> A movement which evolved out of humanist thinking and coming to full flower in C18th. It was a movement that believed that human reason could be used to combat ignorance, superstition, and tyranny and to build a better world. Their principal targets were religion and the domination of society by a hereditary aristocracy. The French Revolution and the American war of Independence were direct results of Enlightenment ideals.

emphasised the scene rather than separate numbers. So, unlike the *opera seria* model, the orchestra would play throughout, adding weight and importance to the recitative and promoting the meaning of the text. This textural clarity would also be promoted by the employment of relatively simple melodic ideas which followed the inflections of the words, which were set syllabically. Ornamentation was to be used sparingly and then only in the cadenzas. The chorus too would take on a more important role akin to its role in Greek tragedy. The vocal writing for them would be homophonic<sup>9</sup>, again ensuring the clarity of the text. The influence of the French model was also apparent in the many dance elements that the work was to employ, these being used not for 'fill' but to further enhance the emotional heart of the story.

Gluck and Calzabigi simplified the Orpheus myth down to its basic elements. With just three characters (Orfeo, Euridice and the allegorical figure of Love) the opera runs about ninety minutes, well under half the duration of a standard *opera seria*. As products of the Enlightenment, they also took pains to play down the exotic and magical aspects of the legend, promoting Love as the omnipotent force in the tale. It is Love that suggests the descent into Hades and it is he that forgives Orfeo's (and by implication, humanity's) weakness and restores wholeness.

It should be said that it was not Gluck's intention to put the castrati out of business - his reforms were aimed at all singers, not just them – but his reforms did mean that he would choose his singers carefully. In fact, one of the many interesting things about *Orfeo ed Euridice* was that its initial success owed much to the famous alto castrato, Gaetano Guadagni, who first sang the role and went on to do so for the rest of his professional life. Guadagni was not your typical castrato, however. While he was no doubt capable of producing all the vocal excesses that *opera seria* demanded, his background and inclination was more along 'reform' lines. He had spent his early years at the court in Parma under another reform advocate Tommaso Traetta. When he was 19 he moved to England where he fell into favour with Handel, who featured him not so much in his operas but his oratorios, adapting roles in *Messiah* and *Samson* for the singer and also writing a completely new part for him - Didymus in *Theodora*. Just as important, perhaps, was the fact that while in London, Guadagni came under the influence of the greatest actor of the age, David Garrick, who coached him in acting and directed him at Drury Lane in a production of *The Fairies*, a musical version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

By the time he arrived in Vienna to sing for Gluck, Guadagni was thus singularly well equipped to provide the composer with both the musical and dramatic performance he was looking for. Much of the contemporary evidence suggests that while the opera's initial reception was moderate, Guadagni's performance caused a sensation. The beauty of his voice as well as his impressive acting was a revelation to the Viennese audience, especially in an opera whose every note was intended to convey a development of the action.

While *opera seria* was to linger on for a few more decades<sup>10</sup> the seeds of reformation were securely sown and opera was changed forever. The reforms effected by Gluck and his contemporaries, were to have a profound affect on the future of the art form and would be instrumental in the directions that such great opera composers as Mozart, Berlioz and Wagner would take.

## Which version?

One can get very confused when trying to settle on a performing edition for Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* for he and other composer's reworked the score at various times for various reasons. Below are the contenders:

First was the commissioned version for Vienna, first performed in **1762**. The libretto was in Italian and had a castrato in the title role, the famous alto castrato Gaetano Guadagni (See references to him in the above article). This original version is the one that we will be using in our September production - although obviously we will not be using a castrato in the title role!

In **1769** for a performance at Parma, conducted by the composer, Gluck transposed the role of Orpheus up for the soprano castrato, Giuseppe Millico, maintaining the libretto in Italian. This version has not been performed in modern times.

In **1774** Gluck reworked the opera for the French theatre, specifically the Académie Royal de Musique. A French libretto was written by Pierre-Louis Moline. It was a translation of and an expansion upon Calzabigi's original text. Gluck expanded the orchestration and rewrote parts of the

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<sup>9</sup> Vertical writing where all parts move together, compared with contrapuntal writing, where each part moves independently of the other within the harmonic structure.

<sup>10</sup> Mozart would still be receiving commissions to write opera seria up until his death. *La clemenza di Tito*, *Idomeneo* etc

opera, changing the role of Orpheus from a castrato to one for high tenor or the so called haute-contre<sup>11</sup>. The singer was Joseph Legros. To appease the French taste for dance, he also inserted more ballet numbers.

In **1859**, Hector Berlioz made his edition of the work with a woman in the title role for the first time, the famous contralto **Pauline Viardot-García**. He followed the 1774 French score as a template, rearranging it into four acts. He also restored much of the key scheme and some of the original, more subtle orchestration of the Italian version.

In **1889**, the publisher Riccordi put out their edition which combined elements of both the Italian and the French versions and using a female alto as Orpheus. This proved extremely popular, and consisted largely of Berlioz's adaption condensed into three acts. It also re-incorporated much of the music of the 1774 French version that had been omitted by Berlioz.

## Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*

### Orpheus as parody

The word 'operetta' originally meant 'little opera' but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the meaning had evolved and thanks to such distinguished contributors as Johann Strauss in Austria, Gilbert and Sullivan in England and Jacques Offenbach in France, the genre had separated itself from its more serious sibling and had established itself firmly as the epitome of sophisticated, light entertainment. Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880) was actually born Jakob Ebst in Cologne in Germany, becoming a naturalized Frenchman in 1860. Alongside his brother, Offenbach studied music in Paris, and played the cello in the Opera-Comique, the operatic home of French operas which used spoken dialogue.

In 1850, Offenbach became conductor of the Théâtre Français. He had rented a tiny theatre near the Champs-Élysées and here he put on short comic pieces - opéra-bouffe, which featured spoken dialogue, not unlike the German singspiel that Mozart had perfected with *Die Zauberflöte* and *Die Entführung auf dem Serail*. These proved so popular that Offenbach was able to move to larger premises - the Bouffes-Parisiens - in the Rue de Choiseul, where he stayed until 1862. In this theatre and with the inspiration of other exponents of the genre such as Adolphe Adam (1803-1856), Albert Grisar (1808-1869) and particularly Adrien Boieldieu (1775-1834), Offenbach had his first international success in 1858 with *Orphée aux Enfers* (Orpheus in the Underworld).

The libretto by Hector Crémieux and Ludovic Halévy, was laden with satire directed at contemporary social mores and specifically the government of the day. Offenbach's music brilliantly supports this while parodying Greek mythology and the traditions of grand opera. In 1874, Offenbach expanded what was originally a two act satire, with much spoken dialogue and a small pit band and chorus, into a four act work complete with extensive ballets, much of the dialogue now set as music, a full orchestra, and a large chorus.

Offenbach's treatment changed the legend considerably and in so doing challenged the operatic tradition he inherited. Where Gluck's opera was about true love, Offenbach's has Orpheus and Euridice hating each other from the beginning, with Euridice extending her hatred to the artistic accomplishments of her husband, the premier musician of the classical world. The point is made most clearly in the second scene, where the revered lament of Gluck's Orpheus -- "*Che farò senza Euridice*" -- is directly quoted and immediately mocked. Offenbach, however, characteristically softens the cut of his satire by mocking his own music. In an early scene, the violin theme played by Orpheus and repeated throughout the duet that follows embodies Offenbach's substantial melodic gift. Offenbach has Euridice mocking this lovely theme and begging her husband to stop the infernal racket!

The inclusion of his now famous Can-Can, also ensured an 'anti-opera' stance. The very fact that this dance involved an indecorous throwing up of the legs made it entirely unsuitable for traditional opera houses - here, it is clear, all previous values are suspended.

French audiences of 1858 would obviously have been more aware than we would be today of the political satire imbued in the work. They would have easily seen that the character of Jupiter, alternately dictatorial, controlling, ineffective, and perplexed, is more than a little based on Napoleon III, then Emperor of the French. It is equally possible to imagine that the subversive and scheming

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<sup>11</sup> The French, who saw themselves as forward Enlightenment thinkers (Voltaire, Rousseau etc) never embraced the castrato voice. Instead they cultivated their own high male 'heroic' voice, achieved through technical manipulation of the natural male voice, not by castration.

Pluto, who ends up making trouble for himself by Jupiter's right to appropriate mortal women, as a portrayal of Prince Napoleon Joseph Charles Bonaparte (1822–1891), son of Napoleon I's brother Jerome Bonaparte. Prince Napoleon, nicknamed "Plon-Plon," was the other leading claimant to the Bonapartist legacy during the 1840's, and remained a thorn in the side of Napoleon III's family until he was disinherited by his son, the Prince Impérial. Offenbach portrays his court, the gods of Olympus, as overfed and unhappy—so unhappy that they revolt against Pluto's authority while singing the French national anthem!

Despite the differences in context and history between the 19th century and today, *Orpheus aux Enfers* conveys an ironic and critical spirit, entertaining even as it calls into question a received tradition and the powers that be. In keeping with this spirit, modern directors would seem justified in claiming a tacit licence to play with the original libretto, updating it to aim at new political and social targets.