

MONTEVERDI'S L'ORFEO

You have already been introduced to Claudio Monteverdi, whose music straddles the late Renaissance and early Baroque. Now let's explore one of his most significant compositions, *L'Orfeo*, the first opera considered to be a masterwork.

Introduction

L'Orfeo (SV 318), sometimes called *La favola d'Orfeo*, is an early Baroque *favola in musica*, or opera (sometimes considered late Renaissance), by Claudio Monteverdi, with a libretto by Alessandro Striggio. It is based on the Greek legend of Orpheus, and tells the story of his descent to Hades and his fruitless attempt to bring his dead bride Eurydice back to the living world. It was written in 1607 for a court performance during the annual Carnival at Mantua. While the honor of the first ever opera goes to Jacopo Peri's *Dafne*, and the earliest surviving opera is *Euridice* (also by Peri), *L'Orfeo* has the honor of being the earliest surviving opera that is still regularly performed today.

During the early seventeenth century, the traditional intermedio—a musical sequence between the acts of a straight play—was evolving into the form of a complete musical drama or “opera.” Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* moved this process out of its experimental era and provided the first fully developed example of the new genre. After its initial performance the work was staged again in Mantua, and possibly in other Italian centres in the next few years. Its score was published by Monteverdi in 1609 and again in 1615. After the composer's death in 1643 the opera went unperformed for many years, and was largely forgotten until a revival of interest in the late nineteenth century led to a spate of modern editions and performances. At first these tended to be unstaged versions within institutes and music societies, but following the first modern dramatised performance in Paris, in 1911, the work began to be seen increasingly often in theatres. After the Second World War most new editions sought authenticity through the use of period instruments. Many recordings were issued, and the opera was increasingly staged in opera houses. In 2007 the quatercentenary of the premiere was celebrated by performances throughout the world.

In his published score Monteverdi lists around 41 instruments to be deployed, with distinct groups of instruments used to depict particular scenes and characters. Thus strings, harpsichords and recorders represent the pastoral fields of Thrace with their nymphs and shepherds, while heavy brass illustrates the underworld and its denizens. Composed at the point of transition from the Renaissance era to the Baroque, *L'Orfeo* employs all the resources then known within the art of music, with particularly daring use of polyphony. The work is not orchestrated as such; in the Renaissance tradition instrumentalists followed the composer's general instructions but were given considerable freedom to improvise. This separates Monteverdi's work from the later opera canon, and makes each performance of *L'Orfeo* a uniquely individual occasion.

Historical Background

Claudio Monteverdi, born in Cremona in 1567, was a musical prodigy who studied under Marc'Antonio Ingegneri, the *maestro di cappella* (head of music) at Cremona Cathedral. After training in singing, strings playing and composition, Monteverdi worked as a musician in Verona and Milan until, in 1590 or 1591, he secured a post *assuonatore di vivuola* (viola player) at Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga's court at Mantua. Through ability and hard work Monteverdi rose to become Gonzaga's *maestro della musica* (master of music) in 1601.

Vincenzo Gonzaga's particular passion for musical theatre and spectacle grew from his family connections with the court of Florence. Towards the end of the 16th century innovative Florentine musicians were developing the *intermedio*—a long-established form of musical interlude inserted between the acts of spoken dramas—into increasingly elaborate forms. Led by Jacopo Corsi, these successors to the renowned Camerata were responsible for the first work generally recognized as belonging to the genre of opera: *Dafne*, composed by Corsi and Jacopo Peri and performed in Florence in 1598. This work combined elements of madrigal singing and monody with dancing and instrumental passages to form a dramatic whole. Only fragments of its music still exist, but several other Florentine works of the same period—*Rappresentazione di Anima, et di Corpo* by Emilio de' Cavalieri, Peri's *Euridice* and Giulio Caccini's identically titled *Euridice*—survive complete. These last two works were the first of many musical representations of the Orpheus myth as recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and as such were direct precursors of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*.

The Gonzaga court had a long history of promoting dramatic entertainment. A century before Duke Vincenzo's time the court had staged Angelo Poliziano's lyrical drama *La favola di Orfeo*, at least half of which was sung rather than spoken. More recently, in 1598 Monteverdi had helped the court's musical establishment produce Giovanni Battista Guarini's play *Il pastor fido*, described by theatre historian Mark Ringer as a "watershed theatrical work" which inspired the Italian craze for pastoral drama. On 6 October 1600, while visiting Florence for the wedding of Maria de' Medici to King Henry IV of France, Duke Vincenzo attended a production of Peri's *Euridice*. It is likely that his principal musicians, including Monteverdi, were also present at this performance. The Duke quickly recognised the novelty of this new form of dramatic entertainment, and its potential for bringing prestige to those prepared to sponsor it.



Figure 1. Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga, Monteverdi's employer at Mantua

Composition

When Monteverdi wrote the music for *L'Orfeo* he had a thorough grounding in theatrical music. He had been employed at the Gonzaga court for 16 years, much of it as a performer or arranger of stage music, and in 1604 he had written the ballo *Gli amori di Diane ed Endimone* for the 1604–05 Mantua Carnival. The elements from which Monteverdi constructed his first opera score—the aria, the strophic song, recitative, choruses, dances, dramatic musical interludes—were, as conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt has pointed out, not created by him, but "he blended the entire stock of newest and older possibilities into a unity that was indeed new." Musicologist Robert Donington writes similarly: "[The score] contains no element which was not based on precedent, but it reaches complete maturity in that recently-developed form. . . . Here are words as directly expressed in music as [the pioneers of opera] wanted them expressed; here is music expressing them . . . with the full inspiration of genius."

Monteverdi states the orchestral requirements at the beginning of his published score, but in accordance with the practice of the day he does not specify their exact usage. At that time it was usual to allow each interpreter of the work freedom to make local decisions, based on the orchestral forces at their disposal. These could differ sharply from place to place. Furthermore, as Harnoncourt points out, the instrumentalists would all have been composers and would have expected to collaborate creatively at each performance, rather than playing a set text. Another practice of the time was to allow singers to embellish their arias. Monteverdi wrote plain and embellished versions of some arias, such as Orfeo's "Possente spirito," but according to Harnoncourt "it is obvious that where he did not write any embellishments he did not want any sung."

Each act of the opera deals with a single element of the story, and each ends with a chorus. Despite the five-act structure, with two sets of scene changes, it is likely that *L'Orfeo* conformed to the standard practice for court entertainments of that time and was played as a continuous entity, without intervals or curtain descents between acts. It was the contemporary custom for scene shifts to take place in sight of the audience, these changes being reflected musically by changes in instrumentation, key and style.

Synopsis

The action takes place in two contrasting locations: the fields of Thrace (Acts 1, 2 and 5) and the Underworld (Acts 3 and 4). An instrumental toccata (English: *tucket*, meaning a flourish on trumpets) precedes the entrance of La musica, representing the “spirit of music,” who sings a prologue of five stanzas of verse. After a gracious welcome to the audience she announces that she can, through sweet sounds, “calm every troubled heart.” She sings a further paean to the power of music, before introducing the drama’s main protagonist, Orfeo, who “held the wild beasts spellbound with his song.”

Act 1

After La musica’s final request for silence, the curtain rises on Act 1 to reveal a pastoral scene. Orfeo and Euridice enter together with a chorus of nymphs and shepherds, who act in the manner of a Greek chorus, commenting on the action both as a group and as individuals. A shepherd announces that this is the couple’s wedding day; the chorus responds, first in a stately invocation (“Come, Hymen, O come”) and then in a joyful dance (“Leave the mountains, leave the fountains”). Orfeo and Euridice sing of their love for each other before leaving with most of the group for the wedding ceremony in the temple. Those left on stage sing a brief chorus, commenting on how Orfeo used to be one “for whom sighs were food and weeping was drink” before love brought him to a state of sublime happiness.

Act 2

Orfeo returns with the main chorus, and sings with them of the beauties of nature. Orfeo then muses on his former unhappiness, but proclaims: “After grief one is more content, after pain one is happier.” The mood of contentment is abruptly ended when La messaggera enters, bringing the news that, while gathering flowers, Euridice has received a fatal snakebite. The chorus expresses its anguish: “Ah, bitter happening, ah, impious and cruel fate!” while the Messaggera castigates herself as the bearing of bad tidings (“For ever I will flee, and in a lonely cavern lead a life in keeping with my sorrow”). Orfeo, after venting his grief and incredulity (“Thou art dead, my life, and I am breathing?”), declares his intention to descend into the Underworld and persuade its ruler to allow Euridice to return to life. Otherwise, he says, “I shall remain with thee in the company of death.” He departs, and the chorus resumes its lament.

Act 3

Orfeo is guided by Speranza to the gates of Hades. Having pointed out the words inscribed on the gate (“Abandon hope, all ye who enter here”), Speranza leaves. Orfeo is now confronted with the ferryman Caronte, who addresses Orfeo harshly and refuses to take him across the river Styx. Orfeo attempts to persuade Caronte by singing a flattering song to him (“Mighty spirit and powerful divinity”), but the ferryman is unmoved. However, when Orfeo takes up his lyre and plays, Caronte is soothed into sleep. Seizing his chance, Orfeo steals the ferryman’s boat and crosses the river, entering the Underworld while a chorus of spirits reflects that nature cannot defend herself against man: “He has tamed the sea with fragile wood, and disdained the rage of the winds.”

Act 4

In the Underworld, Proserpina, Queen of Hades, who has been deeply affected by Orfeo’s singing, petitions King Plutone, her husband, for Euridice’s release. Moved by her pleas, Plutone agrees on the condition that, as he leads Euridice towards the world, Orfeo must not look back. If he does, “a single glance will condemn him to eternal loss.” Orfeo enters, leading Euridice and singing confidently that on that day he will rest on his wife’s white bosom. But as he sings a note of doubt creeps in: “Who will assure me that she is following?” Perhaps Plutone, driven by envy, has imposed the condition through spite? Suddenly distracted by an off-stage commotion, Orfeo looks round; immediately, the image of Euridice begins to fade. She sings, despairingly: “Losest thou me through too much love?” and disappears. Orfeo attempts to follow her but is drawn away by an unseen force. The chorus of spirits sings that Orfeo, having overcome Hades, was in turn overcome by his passions.

Act 5

Back in the fields of Thrace, Orfeo has a long soliloquy in which he laments his loss, praises Euridice's beauty and resolves that his heart will never again be pierced by Cupid's arrow. An off-stage echo repeats his final phrases. Suddenly, in a cloud, Apollo descends from the heavens and chastises him: "Why dost thou give thyself up as prey to rage and grief?" He invites Orfeo to leave the world and join him in the heavens, where he will recognise Euridice's likeness in the stars. Orfeo replies that it would be unworthy not to follow the counsel of such a wise father, and together they ascend. A shepherds' chorus concludes that "he who sows in suffering shall reap the fruit of every grace," before the opera ends with a vigorous *moresca*.

Original Libretto Ending

In Striggio's 1607 libretto, Orfeo's Act 5 soliloquy is interrupted, not by Apollo's appearance but by a chorus of maenads or Bacchantes—wild, drunken women—who sing of the "divine fury" of their master, the god Bacchus. The cause of their wrath is Orfeo and his renunciation of women; he will not escape their heavenly anger, and the longer he evades them the more severe his fate will be. Orfeo leaves the scene and his destiny is left uncertain, for the Bacchantes devote themselves for the rest of the opera to wild singing and dancing in praise of Bacchus. Early music authority Claude Palisca believes that the two endings are not incompatible; Orfeo evades from the fury of the Bacchantes and is then rescued by Apollo.