

The noted German-American musicologist Manfred Bukofzer once described Claudio Monteverdi's early Baroque opera *L'Orfeo* as the "first masterpiece of operatic history".¹ While this was clearly a bold statement upon Bukofzer's behalf, the statement resonates a great amount of truth by not only illuminating Monteverdi's contributions to the development of the opera genre, but also through his masterful interpretation of the Orpheus myth. This discussion will attempt to examine the various compositional aspects of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* that ultimately solidified his place within the history of the operatic genre.

One of the first aspects worthy of mention when examining the work of Claudio Monteverdi is that he was essentially a type of transitional figure, bridging the musical forms of the late Renaissance to that of the early Baroque period. While his much renowned operatic work of *L'Orfeo* was premiered in 1607, Monteverdi was already quite a formidable, well-established composer by this period of his life. He had previously distinguished himself through the position of chief cathedral musician in Venice; having undertaken this position for over three decades,² and was also known as the leading composer of madrigals at the time³ Under the direction of Monteverdi's artistic vision, the realm of opera would burgeon from a courtly affair within the realm of nobility to that of the commercial public space.

Monteverdi was neither the first, nor the last to apply a musical setting upon the myth of Orpheus. Peri and Caccini composed *Eurydice* several years previously in 1600, while subsequent composers of later generations also wrote variations such as Gluck's *Orfeo ed Eurydice* in 1762, along with Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* in 1858. With this stated, it was not as much the Orpheus myth itself that made *L'Orfeo* so significant, but rather Monteverdi's treatment of it. Perhaps the greatest contribution of Monteverdi to the operatic genre was his act

of effectively taking textual narratives and breathing into them an entirely new sense of dramatic representation. He created in a sense, a set of expressive conventions representing emotions in the musical theater that would forge a new type of connectedness between the composer and audience.⁴ Through his controversial and bold new style of *seconda prattica*, he would execute compositional techniques such as dramatic musical shifts to depict changes in the text, while this new style embodied a rather bold use of polyphony for the period, with applications of dissonance that were often not only less-constrained, but also less-predictable to the listener of the time. It is through this stylistic complexity that Bukofzer states a sharp contrast between *L'Orfeo* and earlier operatic works. By utilizing the modernist Florentine *stile rappresentativo* with pathos, Monteverdi made very effective use of devices such as closed musical and arioso forms, the strophic aria, the chamber duet, the madrigal, the dance song, and even the often previously discarded instrumental interlude.⁵ Monteverdi also made clever use of the basso continuo and recitative passages, utilizing a type of median between spoken word and sung verses. Despite the skilled employment of these various techniques, they were always second to the expressive drama of the production; ensuring the music would be reflective of the text, foreshadowing the later dominance of the "affections" which expressed states such as fear, anger, hate, love and joy that would become a fixture of the Baroque tradition.⁶

While Monteverdi's innovative contributions clearly set him apart from the stylistic ideals of the Florentine Camerata, they are also relevant upon even the more aesthetic level in relation to the instrumental performance. For example, Monteverdi's operatic work *Arianna*, set for thirty-six instruments, was the first known to employ bowing techniques upon the strings which greatly affected the notion of a dramatic orchestra in contrast to previous works of this nature that utilized plucked string techniques instead. Clearly, this innovation greatly

augmented, and solidified the expressive nature of the operatic genre.⁷ By utilizing sustained string parts through bowing techniques, greater intensity and expression could be drawn out of the text. It should be also noted upon the score that certain instruments in *L'Orfeo* are assigned during specific dramatic segments.⁸ Monteverdi was also an innovator in terms of creating a more discriminating, tonal palette of orchestral variety in the genre.

Upon examination of its score, one notes that the Jacopo Peri's *Eurydice* (the precursor to *L'Orfeo*) differs as it consists of a prologue and only two acts. As the earliest extant opera,⁹ it consists almost entirely of recitative, and very comfortably resides within the conventions of the seventeenth century style.¹⁰ Peri's librettist Ottavio Rinuccini adhered to the proposed forms of Giovanni de' Bardi, utilizing choruses to separate each episode of action, while in the technical aspect, *Eurydice* contained choruses that were strophic, which could be described as brief and rather bare, along with instrumental ritornelli. Peri also attempted to embody a type of musical recitative that was between speech and singing. Aiming to reflect an aesthetic of the ancient Greeks, he practiced a more free style of writing for the voice and basso continuo parts which attempted to closely follow the text of Rinuccini. While the work's aim was to reflect that of the classical tragedy, Peri conceded in the score's preface that these parallels were tenuous at best.¹¹ With this said, *Eurydice* seems to lack the same melodic flow and lyrical strength of *L'Orfeo* in this regard

There are various musical elements which contrast Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* from Peri's *Eurydice*. One of the first noticeable aspects upon listening is that *Eurydice* lacks an instrumental overture; instead employing a type of single melody-based prologue from a vocalist presenting the Tragic Muse. When compared to *Eurydice*, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* could be

described as a more evolved version of the Orpheus story. While Monteverdi employed a large and varied orchestra of approximately forty instruments, Peri's *Eurydice* was performed in an apartment with only a small number of lutes and singular instruments, accompanied by a harpsichord.¹² For Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, his librettist Alessandro Striggio clearly appears to have borrowed from the work of Rinuccini, though his treatment of the libretto appears and also sounds more comprehensive to the listener. While both librettos begin in a relatively similar fashion, they begin to diverge with Rinuccini's use of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* for his libretto. Striggio appears to have used additional content from the *Georgics* of Virgil; creating a more dramatic return to the living world, and a more climatic death of Orpheus. The nature of the text also allowed for Monteverdi to maintain a more continuous rhythm through his work.¹³ He also used dissonant tones more freely than Peri, through leading or anticipatory notes, while creating harmonic motion that was much less stagnant.¹⁴ With this said, Monteverdi appears to have captured the spirit of the Orpheus myth with greater finesse and unity, both within the melodic sense as well as the expressive, with various scholars agreeing that *L'Orfeo* was a superior operatic work to *Eurydice*.^{15 16}

In context, the operatic work of *L'Orfeo* not only solidified Claudio Monteverdi's historical place within the realm of the early Baroque period, but it also proved to be the most significant piece of early operatic mastery known to date. As shown in this discussion, the notion of placing a musical setting upon the myth of Orpheus was not a particularly unique concept, yet Monteverdi utilized it as a vehicle to showcase his innovative contributions, as well as his ability to embody the most accurate expression of the text through his skillful embodiment of the *seconda pratica* idiom.

Footnotes

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- ¹ Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 58.
- ² Katz, Ruth. *A Language of its Own: Sense and Meaning in the Making of Western Art Music*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago Illinois. 2009. P. 131.
- ³ Taruskin, Richard. *Music in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. Oxford University Press. New York, New York. 2010. P. 9.
- ⁴ Katz, Ruth. *A Language of its Own: Sense and Meaning in the Making of Western Art Music*. The University of Chicago Press. Chicago Illinois. 2009. P. 132.
- ⁵ Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 58.
- ⁶ Palisca, Claude V. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. P. 1.
- ⁷ Oldmeadow, Ernest. *Great Musicians*. Forgotten Books. Charleston, South Carolina. 1908. P. 126.
- ⁸ Monteverdi, Claudio. "http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/e/e7/IMSLP30835-PMLP21363-Monteverdi_Orfeo.pdf." Wroclaw University. Accessed February 8, 2012.
- ⁹ Randel, Don. *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1986. P. 301.
- ¹⁰ Peri, Jacopo. "http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/1/15/IMSLP84138-PMLP62879-Peri_Euridice.pdf." Wroclaw University. Accessed February 9, 2012.
- ¹¹ Holden, Amanda. Kenyon, Nicholas. Walsh, Stephen. *The Viking Opera Guide*. Viking. London. 1994. P. 769.
- ¹² Grout, Donald. *A History of Western Music*. W.W. Norton & Company. Toronto, Ontario. 2002. P. 272.
- ¹³ Palisca, Claude V. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. P. 41.
- ¹⁴ Palisca, Claude V. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. P. 43.
- ¹⁵ Bukofzer, Manfred. *Music in the Baroque Period*. W.W. Norton & Company. New York, New York. 1947. P. 60.
- ¹⁶ Oldmeadow, Ernest. *Great Musicians*. Forgotten Books. Charleston, South Carolina. 1908. P. 124.