

When examining the vast creative output of the musical period known as the Baroque, one might note that it was during this point in history that the genre of opera began to develop and flourish as a musical form. To illustrate contrast and form a stylistic comparison between the early and late phases of this period, the works of Claudio Giovanni Antonio Monteverdi's *L'Orfero*, and George Frederic Handel's *Giulio Cesare* will be examined in this discussion.

In his publication *Baroque Music*, musicologist Claude Palisca describes numerous attributes which came to be pivotal in regard the aesthetics of the Baroque period; the most relative to opera being that of the basso continuo, ritonello, aria, strophic variation and recitative passages. These functions were coupled with an increasing tendency towards chordal structure, ornamentation, and metric control over rhythmic function. All of these devices were also dominated by the "affections"; an expressive concept derived from Aristotle's Rhetoric, which attempted to express various states such as fear, anger, hate, love and joy.<sup>1</sup>

The first work to be examined will be *L'Orfeo*, composed by Monteverdi who was essentially a type of transitional figure from the late Renaissance to the early Baroque period. The innovative compositional style of Monteverdi solidified his reputation as one of the key figures of the early Baroque, who would also be influential upon later composers of the period such as J.S. Bach and Handel. His 1607 opera *L'Orfero*, which expanded upon the earlier work of Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*, was inspired by the Greek mythic story of Orpheus. It was not only one of the earliest operas to be composed, but also one of great popularity during this time. Though it would fade into obscurity after the Baroque period concluded, it would ultimately be revived as one of the great works of its period when interest in Baroque period would be rekindled in later centuries.

Upon examination of its musical score, *L'Orfeo* employed various notable structural parameters of the Baroque style mentioned previously, such as a very evident execution of the basso continuo technique, serving as a type of skeletal foundation for the chordal improvisation of the performers' instruments.<sup>2</sup> This early work also employed a number of vocal techniques which would later become fixtures of the Baroque period such as recitative passages by soloists (a type of median between spoken word and singing), as well as use of the aria and arioso forms, with instrumental interlude passages known as ritornelli.

Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* also employed compositional techniques such as dramatic shifts in the musical expression to reflect changes in the text; often utilizing less-constrained, and unexpected dissonant departures, with a rather bold execution of polyphony for the early seventeenth century. Monteverdi used his modernist techniques to augment the intensity of certain plot aspects for more effective expressiveness. This technique which allowed for the text to dominate influence over the musical composition demonstrated what Monteverdi described as "seconda pratica" (second practice).<sup>3</sup> The seconda pratica would evolve further to express the notion of the "affections", which would become a commonplace theme throughout the development of this period. While Monteverdi brought the second practice into fruition, it is interesting to note that his brother, Giulio Cesare Monteverdi traced this technique back to the sixteenth century composer Cipriano de Rore, whom he referred to as "the first renovator of the second practice".<sup>4</sup> It should be also noted that while aesthetically, this was certainly not the first instance of specifying instrumentation within a given piece, Monteverdi carried out this aspect of composition for the approximate forty instruments at hand; also illustrating a departure from the common style of the Renaissance period (during this time, requests for certain instruments were a much less common practice for composers).

The second work to be examined in this discussion is that of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, first performed during 1724. While this work contrasts *L'Orfeo*, being of the late Baroque period, it does contain certain similarities in regard to its basic form and some aspects of instrumentation, although through differing means of execution. While *L'Orfeo* was composed of a prologue and five acts, *Giulio Cesare* was of the late Baroque genre Opera Seria, which contained three acts, and relied heavily upon alternating recitatives and arias, such as the ABA form of the da capo aria. Like *L'Orfeo*, *Giulio Cesare* contains many of the same fixtures of the baroque period such as the basso continuo, arias, and recitative passages, though *Giulio Cesare's* rhythmic composition is often steady and consistent, exercising a driving force throughout the work; typical of later Baroque pieces. One might also note that the use of the French horn during the aria of Caesar in the first act is a feature more typical of the late Baroque; often coinciding with introductions, endings, and scenes of epic war or conflict. It is also worthy of mention that while Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* made use of about forty performers, they were utilized in an intermittent fashion. It seems very unlikely that all of these forty performers ever played together simultaneously during the acts. This illuminates a differing method of production from the larger, more standardized scale of Handel's operas. Through *Giulio Cesare's* form and significant construction of arias (predominately in da capo form) with recitatives situated between them, this particular opera seria work resides comfortably within the late Baroque Period in which Handel was a dominant figure.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most notable element of contrast between these two works is that *L'Orfeo* was essentially an experimental work of early Baroque opera, composed during a transitional phase from the polyphony of the late Renaissance during the genre's infancy, while *Giulio Cesare* on the other hand, was a work of late Baroque opera seria. It could be said that *Giulio*

*Cesare* was a product of the period's more established and structured phase of 1680-1760.<sup>6</sup> Palisca also described this later period as having more generally fixed rules and standards.<sup>7</sup> With this said, *Giulio Cesare* was comprised of a much more standardized form, especially in relation to chordal harmony, and rhythmic motion.

In context, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* and Handel's *Giulio Cesare* are fine examples of both early and late Baroque opera forms. While Monteverdi forged new ground from the previous age of polyphonic modes in the Renaissance through his use of second practice, Handel created a masterful work within the conventions of opera seria through *Giulio Cesare*. Both operas contain many of the same musical building blocks common to the Baroque, though utilized within a differing fashion of execution. There is also a definite type of noticeable evolution within the genre of opera from the work of Monteverdi to that of Handel. However, despite their contrasts, they both manage to still emanate many of the finest expressive qualities of the Baroque period

## Footnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Palisca, Claude V. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Monteverdi, Claudio. "[http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/e/e7/IMSLP30835-PMLP21363-Monteverdi\\_Orfeo.pdf](http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/e/e7/IMSLP30835-PMLP21363-Monteverdi_Orfeo.pdf)." Wroclaw University. Accessed January 19, 2012.
- <sup>3</sup> Grout, Donald. *A History of Western Music*. W.W. Norton. Toronto. 2002. p. 255.
- <sup>4</sup> Palisca, Claude V. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. p. 12.
- <sup>5</sup> Sadie, Stanley. Latham, Alison. *The Cambridge Music Guide*. Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge. 2000. London. P. 209.
- <sup>6</sup> Randel, Don. *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1986. p. 593.
- <sup>7</sup> Palisca, Claude V. *Baroque Music*. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey. 1991. p. 5.