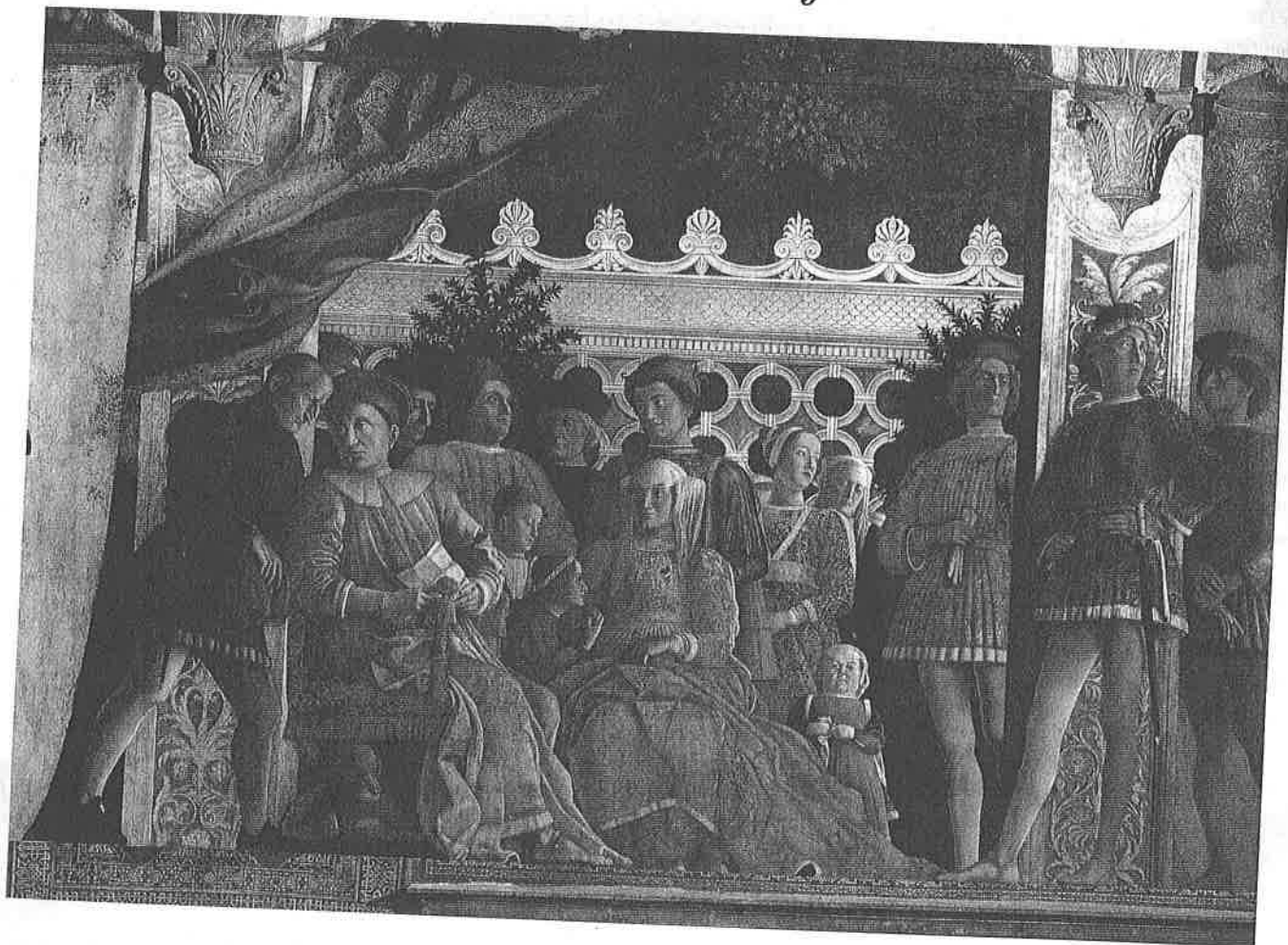


SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1607, MANTUA:

Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo*



CORE REPERTOIRE

- LG 10 Toccata
- LG 11 Opening Ritornello and Prologue
- LG 12 "Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi" (Orfeo's Song), Act 2

- LG 13 "Tu se' morta" (Orfeo's Lament), Act 2
- LG 14 "Possente spirto" (Orfeo's Song), Act 3

AUTHOR VIDEOS

- The use of basso continuo in *Orfeo*
- Rhythm in Orfeo's song, "Vi ricorda," from Act 2

Introduction

"Tomorrow evening the Most Serene Lord the Prince is to sponsor [a play] in the main room in the apartments which the Most Serene Lady of Ferrara had the use of. 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. No doubt I shall be driven to attend out of sheer curiosity, unless I am prevented from getting in by the lack of space. . . ."

— Carlo Magno, Mantua, February 23, 1607, to his brother Giovanni in Rome

By 1607 the forty-year-old composer Claudio Monteverdi was living in the city of Mantua, in northern Italy, with his wife, Claudia, a court singer, and his two surviving children. He had served the duke of Mantua as his chief musician for almost two decades, beginning as a string player and singer at court (see biography).

Although Monteverdi might have seemed to be enjoying the benefits of a successful life, in fact he had financial difficulties, and he felt underappreciated by his patron; his wife would die that year, leaving him with their small children to look after. But February 1607 also saw the first performance of his *Orfeo*, a play in which all the characters sang their parts. We call such a performance an **opera**; the term

Monteverdi in Mantua

CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI (1567–1643)



Claudio Monteverdi was born in Cremona, in northern Italy, the son of a physician. He was a musical prodigy; at about the age of twenty-three, having already published several musical collections, he moved to Mantua, where he served at the court of Vincenzo Gonzaga, duke of Mantua, until 1612. There, he married the singer Claudia Cattaneo. Monteverdi's duties as music director included composition, performance, and supervision of entertainments. While in Mantua he composed madrigals, instrumental music, ballets, and operas, and continued to publish his works and achieve substantial fame.

terpieces, both operas: *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (*The Return of Ulysses*, 1641) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (*The Coronation of Poppea*, 1642) on the life of Roman emperor Nero. Remarkably, Monteverdi wrote these operas while in his seventies, when the average lifespan was probably in the forties.

Monteverdi's music spans the Renaissance and the Baroque eras, beginning with expressive madrigals, and concluding with operas in the innovative **recitative style** (see p. 86). His careful attention to the meaning and expression of words, and his harmonic daring, give his music a characteristic lively quality.

To hear the full range of Monteverdi's expression, listen to selections from his *Scherzi musicali* (Musical Jokes) of 1607 and his magnificent *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin* (1610), composed for the full vocal and instrumental grandeur of the Mantuan

⑤ Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, "Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi"

did not exist in 1607, but this piece is one of the great foundations of that long tradition.

Presented in a small, narrow room at the duke's palace to an exclusive club of noblemen (a club called the *Accademia degl'Invaghiati*, or Academy of the Lovestruck), *Orfeo* was performed only twice, for small audiences. Monteverdi could not know that his musical play—which lasted all of ninety minutes—would become a key event in music history, and a beloved musical monument. We now think of it as the first great opera, the beginning of what would become a remarkable tradition combining drama and music.

The Setting

MANTUA IN 1607

In the beginning of the seventeenth century, Italy was made up of numerous and distinct geographical and political units (principalities, republics, and papal states), having their own currencies, capital cities, ambassadors, and governments. The balance of power was constantly shifting, with a seemingly endless series of wars and arranged marriages between princely families; those in power needed plenty of spies and armies to maintain (or extend) their position in the balance.

In Monteverdi's day, Mantua was one of the more important artistic and civic centers in Italy (see Figure 4.1, map of northern Italy, left) as well as the residence of the great Gonzaga family, which had ruled this northern city-state and its territories since the fourteenth century (see Figure 4.2). The city was rich;

commerce and trade flourished; and the substantial Jewish population added significantly to the city's cultural life. Today much of the city still retains its medieval and Renaissance flavor, and if you walk the streets of the city's center, you will see many of its old buildings, grand palaces, and private houses, alongside huge piazzas designed for markets, public gatherings, and evening strolls (see Figure 4.3).

In 1607 the duke of Mantua, Vincenzo Gonzaga, who was only three years older than Monteverdi, was the absolute ruler of Mantua. He led an indulgent life—hunting, gambling, traveling, and pursuing his other pleasures of theater, music, and women. Like many Renaissance princes of his day, Vincenzo showed off his grandeur and nobility by joining the Holy Roman Emperor on military campaigns, spending lavishly, and being a generous patron of the arts. He also succeeded in dissipating a substantial amount of the family fortune.

Painters, architects, poets, dramatists, and musicians had all been employed by the Gonzaga family for generations to decorate their palaces and to entertain the many people—family, nobles, administrators—who formed

FIG. 4.1 Map of northern Italy around the time of *Orfeo*, showing Mantua as well as other important artistic and civic centers.



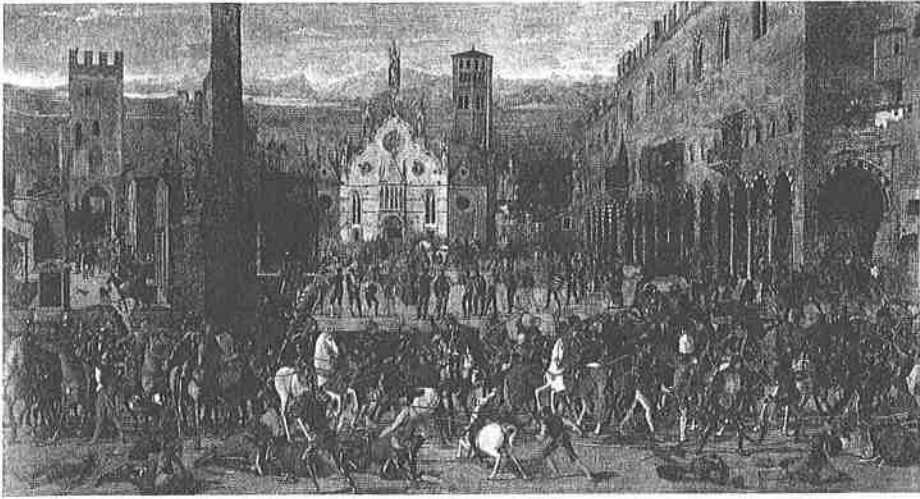


FIG. 4.2 A *The Expulsion of the Bonacolsi* (1494), by Domenico Morone, which shows the main piazza of the Ducal Palace in Mantua. The Bonacolsi were a noble family who were overthrown in a revolt backed by the rich and powerful Gonzagas.

the “court,” as it was called, of a great prince. The palace at Mantua (see Figure 4.4), thought by some to be the biggest building in the world at the time, had grown over the centuries, and it now incorporated a medieval fortress, a large and looming church, a separate floor on a reduced scale for the court dwarves (who performed a variety of duties, including entertaining and serving), a grand riding ring, many courtyards and gardens, and over five hundred rooms and apartments. The court was an enormous operation that hired a huge number of people, including footmen, physicians, pharmacists, barbers, tutors, stewards, waiters, cooks, wood gatherers, alchemists, clock-winders, falconers, and carvers of meat, to mention only a fraction of the in-house staff.

Duke Vincenzo had always been fond of music and the theater. He kept on staff a group of court musicians, led by Claudio Monteverdi, who was involved whenever music became a part of the many court entertainments. Monteverdi was constantly busy, said his brother Giulio Cesare Monteverdi,

because of his responsibility for both church and chamber music, but also because of other extraordinary services, for, serving a great prince, he finds the greater part of his time taken up, now with tournaments, now with ballets, now with comedies and various concerts, and lastly with the playing of the two *viole bastarde* [rare solo stringed instruments].

Palace at Mantua



FIG. 4.3 Modern-day Mantua during an evening stroll.

FIG. 4.4 The medieval Palazzo del Capitano, one of the many conjoined parts of the palace of the dukes of Mantua.



FIG. 4.5 Francesco Gonzaga, son of the reigning duke and the chief organizer of the first performance of *Orfeo*.

By 1607 Claudio Monteverdi was already a composer of some renown. He had published several books of music, and his reputation far exceeded the boundaries of Mantua. But he was still a servant. In 1608 he complained that “the fortune I have known in Mantua for nineteen consecutive years has given me more occasion to call it misfortune, and inimical to me, and not friendly.” The duke expected all of his musicians to perform not only at the highest level but also in a variety of jobs. A letter from Monteverdi to Prince Francesco Gonzaga, the duke’s eldest son (see Figure 4.5), gives us an idea of what was expected from these overworked court musicians: “His Highness the Prince . . . very much likes not only to hear a variety of wind instruments, he also likes to have the said musicians play in private, in church, in procession, and atop city walls; now madrigals, now French songs, now airs, and now dance-songs.”

THE BIRTH OF OPERA

As we have read in the previous chapter, music played an important role in the sacred, civic, religious, and courtly life of the Renaissance. It was also important in drama; plays often included music, be it song, dance, or instrumental interludes performed between acts. In addition, the courts created lavish spectacles that included song, dance, magnificent costumes and stage effects, and large instrumental ensembles, all for the benefit of a small noble audience. But music’s role in drama was about to become much more central.

In the late-Renaissance Florence of the 1580s and 1590s, a small select group of Italian poets, composers, and intellectuals met regularly to discuss trends in art. Led by the nobleman and composer Giovanni de’ Bardi, they sought to study and purify the arts of their day. Modern music had become corrupt, they decided, and their solution was to return to the style of ancient Greek tragedy, which some believed had been sung throughout. They believed that direct delivery of a text, through a single singing voice, would not distort the words or confuse the listener as to the emotional message of the text. As this group of experimenters expressed it, the singer became an orator, and the nuances of the music enhanced the rhetorical inflections of the text.

Greek tragedy and opera

Monteverdi was well aware of the current intellectual trends, and his *Orfeo* was based on these Florentine ideals. It was called a "fable in music," that is, a play in which "all the actors are to sing their parts" (as one of the people present at the premier wrote).

Imagine, for a second, what it must have been like in 1607, for the first time witnessing this scene of people standing on stage, looking at each other and singing. Somehow you needed to accept the idea of a world in which singing was the sound of speaking.

Why would anyone have sat through this new form of entertainment? We do now, of course, because we like the idea that music and drama can happen at the same time and that each can enrich the other. But in 1607, people were not accustomed to this concept, and they attended this fable in music as much out of curiosity as anything else.

This particular opera stands at the beginning of a long tradition; other representatives of this tradition will also appear in this book. Those works come from later times, when opera was the absolute height of the arts, when every city had its own opera house, and when high technology and fabulously expensive stars came together in major events at high prices. But it was this early fable in music (*favola in musica*; see Figure 4.6), this small, experimental piece, that would remain such a formidable and enduring monument.

THE STORY OF ORPHEUS (ORFEO)

Presenting an opera about Orpheus—the greatest musician who ever lived, according to the myths—was a good idea, for two reasons. First, the story was familiar. In 1607 every cultured member of society would have known about the legend of Orpheus, the demigod son of Apollo who falls in love with the beautiful mortal Eurydice. When Eurydice dies, the desperate Orpheus resolves to do what no human has ever done—descend to the world of the dead and bring her back to life. He crosses the River Styx, where the boatman Charon (Caronte) ferries the souls of the dead to the underworld, and succeeds, with the help of Pluto's wife Proserpine, in convincing Pluto to release his beloved Eurydice—but on one condition: Orpheus may lead Eurydice out, but he must not look back to see whether she is following him.

This is the critical issue at the center of the myth. Orpheus's head and heart are at war: his reason tells him that he must not look back, but his heart urges him otherwise. His passion ultimately gets the better of him, he looks back, and Eurydice disappears into eternal darkness while Orpheus is thrust back into the daylight in which he will have to wander alone, forever. We understand this story when we hear it, because we enact it every day—our heart tells us one thing and our head tells us another. (See Figures 4.7–4.9 for illustrated examples of the Orpheus myth through time.)

The other reason that makes the Orpheus myth such a good choice is that an opera about Orpheus is an opera about *music*. What better subject for a play in music than a story about the greatest musician who ever lived? Orpheus is the son of Apollo, who is the god of the sun but also the god of balance in all

FIG. 4.6 Title page of Monteverdi's 1615 publication of the score of *Orfeo*. It reads "The *Orfeo*, fable in music, by Claudio Monteverdi . . . presented in Mantua in the year 1607, and newly reprinted."





FIG. 4.7 A sixth-century mosaic from a church in Libya depicting Orpheus playing a four-stringed instrument.

things (note the connection: Apollo knows how to keep emotions in check) and the god of music (note the other connection: the greatest musicians of heaven and earth, Apollo and Orpheus). In addition, Orpheus is such a fine singer that birds fall silent and stones weep when he sings. What a challenge to a composer—to put music into the mouth of Orpheus!

The music throughout Monteverdi's *Orfeo* is glorious, and the message, addressed to the learned members of the Academy, is emotional but also philosophical: balance in all things. Orpheus loses when he lets his heart overpower his reason. He lives, as we all do, in a world between reason and passion. Overhead, in the heavens, where Apollo drives the chariot of the sun through the skies every day, is the realm of purity and light, of reason and balance. And below our feet is the underworld, ruled by passionate Pluto, who long ago snatched Proserpine from the world of the living because of his lust for her. In Monteverdi's opera, she pleads for the lover Orpheus, understanding his plight only too well.

Orpheus is like us in living in the world between. He looks back when he shouldn't, and the result is the loss of everything he cares about. He is out of balance at the end, and his father Apollo rescues him, bringing his inconsolable son up to heaven.

Orfeo is about classical figures, but it is also about human beings, and that was part of its appeal to the noblemen of Mantua, and why it still appeals to us today. The author of Monteverdi's text, Alessandro Striggio, was a poet, and also a lawyer, a musician, and a diplomat who had served the duke as ambassador. He was well educated in the classics, and he was particularly aware of the work of Ottavio Rinuccini, the Florentine nobleman who had been one of the early experimenters in writing poetry for singing. Rinuccini had written a drama about Orpheus and Eurydice, which Striggio knew and tried to emulate.

Striggio took great care to make sure his play resembled a familiar (to that elevated audience) classical Greek or Roman tragedy, complete with prologue,

FIG. 4.8 Orpheus rides over the Styx, by Eduard Engerth (1818–1897), from the Vienna Opera House.



long poetic speeches, and a chorus that comments on what is happening. Sometimes the chorus members are the nymphs and shepherds who inhabit the pastoral scene, and sometimes they are the spirits of the underworld. But in either case, they all participate in the action and comment on it: at the news of Eurydice's death, the chorus cries out "Ahi! Caso acerbo!" (Oh, bitter fate!); but they follow this outburst with a little lesson: "Mortal man should not trust frail joy; it suddenly flees away, and often at the greatest height the precipice is nearby." Monteverdi displays his musical wit in portraying the sudden fleeing away, the great height, and the deep plunge; it's a little madrigal, of the sort he was already famous for.

As in a Greek tragedy, each act of the play ends with a great choral ode—a series of pieces for chorus and soloists that brings each of the five dramatic units of the play to a close. There is action followed by reflection, which would become a time-honored device in later opera.

Ironically, this effort at historical re-creation, the attempt to present drama as it had been presented to the ancient Greeks, had the contrary effect: it created a new cutting-edge art form.

The Performance

PREPARATIONS

You might imagine that Francesco Gonzaga, as eldest son of the duke of Mantua, and the one organizing the production of *Orfeo*, would not have had any trouble gathering the singers and the musicians or creating the sets and the costumes that were needed to present this play for the Academy, but it was not so easy. A temporary theater had to be built in the palace, sets constructed and painted, costumes made, and rehearsals held. And most problematic of all was getting the right singers.

We actually know more about the first performance of *Orfeo* than we do about almost any other performance of its time because Monteverdi's published score survives; it is really a memory book, a souvenir program for those who were not fortunate enough to be there. It describes what actually *happened* on that particular occasion, rather than how one should perform the piece in the future. There are many little references scattered throughout the music. "This sinfonia [an instrumental piece] was played very quietly," reads one typical remark, "with *viole da braccio*, and organ, and a *contrabasso de viola da gamba*."

We also have information about some of the musical personnel who were employed by the duke and who must have taken part in the performance. In addition we have a series of letters from Francesco Gonzaga—as he tries to organize the performance—to his brother Ferdinando. We know where the performance was given and who must have created the sets. And yet there is still a lot we will never know.

What might seem to us the strangest of all the circumstances that we do know about is that *Orfeo* was sung by an all-male cast. The beautiful Eurydice, on whom the plot turns; Proserpine, queen of the underworld; the feminine Music (*La Musica*), who sings the prologue; and the female personification of Hope



FIG. 4.9 *The Song of Orpheus*, by twentieth-century American artist Barnett Newman (1905–1970).

All-male cast

Plot of *Orfeo*

Orfeo is based on the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus, who tries to rescue his deceased lover, Eurydice, from the underworld.

- Opening Toccata. **LG 10**

PROLOGUE

- Prologue (La Musica) invites the audience to hear the story of Orpheus (Orfeo) and his powers to tame the world with his singing and playing of the lyre. **LG 11**

ACT 1

- Orpheus and Eurydice celebrate their wedding, each singing a song.
- The act ends with the chorus singing "Ecco Orfeo" (Here is Orpheus).

ACT 2

- The Chorus continues in celebration, and Orpheus sings his song "Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi" (Do you remember, o shady woods). **LG 12**
- A Messenger tells Orpheus that Eurydice has died.
- Orpheus sings his poignant "Tu se' morta" (You are dead) about the impermanence of happiness. **LG 13**
- Orpheus vows to go to the underworld to rescue Eurydice by using his power of love through song to convince Pluto (god of the underworld) to free her.
- Act 2 ends with the Chorus singing "Ahi! Caso acerbo!" (Oh, bitter fate!).

ACT 3

- Hope guides Orpheus to the entrance of the underworld, where at the River Styx he meets Charon (Caronte), the ferryman, who carries souls down to the underworld.
- Orpheus attempts to charm Charon by singing "Possente spirto" (Mighty spirit), but to no avail. **LG 14** Charon falls asleep to soft music and Orpheus steals Charon's boat.

ACT 4

- Pluto's wife Proserpine is moved by Orpheus's plight, and convinces her husband to release Eurydice.
- Pluto agrees, but on one condition: that Orpheus not look back.
- Orpheus and Eurydice begin their ascent from Hades.
- Impelled by doubt, Orpheus looks back; Eurydice vanishes before his eyes.
- Orpheus is ejected, against his will, into the upper world.

ACT 5

- Orpheus, consumed by grief, cries out and is answered by the lone voice of Echo.
- Orpheus becomes angry, vowing to reject all women.
- His father, Apollo, descends from the heavens to console his son. He promises to take Orpheus to the heavens, where his disconsolate son can look forever upon the image of Eurydice in the stars.
- Father and son ascend to heaven. A final chorus and dance.

(La Speranza), who leads Orpheus to the edge of the underworld, were all sung by men. (See Plot of *Orfeo*, above.)

Women singers at court

It is not that there weren't spectacularly good women singers in Mantua. The duke had gathered together a famous group of women singers like the similar *concerto delle donne* in Ferrara (a group of professional female singers renowned for their technical and artistic virtuosity, whose signature style of florid, highly ornamented singing brought prestige to Ferrara and inspired composers of the time). Not only was Francesco's father, Vincenzo, a competitive man, wanting to keep up with rival courts, but he was known to have a weakness for the ladies, so it might seem strange that he would not employ some of his outstanding women singers. But on this occasion, and apparently on all previous occasions, the duke refused to allow his women singers to appear before a public audience. Only a year later, in 1608, did he allow a woman to appear in an opera.

With the shortage of singers for women's roles in *Orfeo*, Francesco Gonzaga sought to "borrow" a **castrato** from the Grand Duke of Tuscany by way of his brother Ferdinando. (A castrato was a male singer who was castrated before his voice changed—such singers were in great demand and were famous for their powerful voices. Today castrato roles are usually sung by women or by countertenors.) On January 5, 1607, Francesco Gonzaga wrote a letter to his brother requesting to borrow a castrato from the Grand Duke's stable of singers:

Castrato

I have decided to have a play in music performed at Carnival [the festivities before the beginning of Lent] this year, but as we have very few sopranos here, and those few not good, I should be grateful if Your Excellency would be kind enough to tell me if those castrati I heard when I was in Tuscany are still there.

Ferdinando succeeded in locating a good singer; but he was slow in arriving, wrote Francesco:

Arranging for the singers

February 9: . . . I had expected that the castrato would have arrived by now, and indeed it is essential that he should be here as soon as possible. He will now have not only to play the part that was sent to him, but also to learn that of Proserpine, as the singer who was to take the role can no longer do so. So I am awaiting him from day to day with great eagerness, as without him the play would be a complete failure.

Francesco was frantic; but finally the singer—Giovanni Gualberto Magli—arrived to sing the roles of Proserpina and the Prologue (*La Musica*), and at least one other female role in the play.

February 16: . . . the castrato arrived yesterday. . . he knows only the prologue, and seems to think that he will not have time to learn the other part before the Carnival; in which case I shall have no choice but to postpone the performance of the play until Easter. This morning, however, he began to study not only the music, but the words as well; and if he were able to learn the part (although it does contain too many notes ["troppo voci"], as Your Excellency says), he would at least know the melody, the music could be altered to suit his needs, and we would not waste so much time ensuring that he knows it all by heart. . . .

We also know the names of some of the other singers. The role of Eurydice was most likely played by Girolamo Bacchini, a *soprano castrato* who was a composer and also a priest. He may have been hired because he had a beautiful voice—Eurydice's role, though brief, has two exquisite speeches—or perhaps because he was short and therefore fit the part. We do know that he was later referred to as that "little priest [*pretino*] who played Eurydice in the *Orfeo* of the Most Serene Lord Prince."

The singers

The star of the show, however, was Francesco Rasi, a singer in the employ of the duke of Mantua. Rasi was not only a famous singer but a published poet and composer as well. He was described in his role of Orpheus as "that signor Francesco Rasio, so famous for his excellence in his profession that everyone agrees that there are few in the world who can excel him." He was a handsome, jovial man, with a strong voice; his singing was sometimes described as angelic. Rasi sang, according to one critic, "with a range consisting of many notes, and with exquisite style and passage-work [rapid ornaments], and with extraordinary feeling and a particular talent to make the words clearly heard." Monteverdi surely had Rasi in mind when composing the role of Orpheus.

THE INSTRUMENTS

Although Monteverdi was creating a play for a small, elite audience, he did so for one of the richest court establishments in the world. No expense, apparently, was spared, and in the arena of instrumental colors, *Orfeo* is much richer than almost anything else we know of from the period, except for the entertainments written for the grandest princely events.

The instruments in *Orfeo* represent a panorama of the sounds of the time. Monteverdi followed two basic principles: (1) that instruments be used in groups of similar sound (a group of strings, or flutes, or trombones, for example—rather than a mixture of different types) and (2) that melody instruments not play while characters are singing. The instruments that played in groups were usually either in pairs or in groups of five, as outlined below:

Paired instruments

Recorders ("flautini"), used in Acts 1 and 2, suggestive of shepherds' pipes in the charming ritornello.

Violins, as well as a pair of "violini piccioli alla francese," probably little dancing-masters' pocket violins, used just once, in the sequence of songs in Act 2.

Cornetts, used in the underworld acts, sometimes to enrich the ensemble of trombones, and on one occasion heard by themselves in "Possento spirto," Orfeo's virtuoso appeal to Caronte. Cornetts—not to be confused with the modern trumpetlike instrument—are a family of wooden instruments with finger holes like a clarinet or other woodwind but with a small cupped mouthpiece like a trumpet's. A cornett has a beautiful silvery sound that some likened to the human voice.

Groups of 5

Trumpets, used in the opening Toccata.

Stringed instruments, two groups of five, one in the front and one backstage, each group ranging from high (violin) to low (cello).

Trombones played in the underworld scenes, Acts 3 and 4.

Three viole da gamba are sometimes added to one of the string groups. In Orfeo's song "Possente spirto" there is a splendid solo for harp, which is the earliest surviving solo music for that instrument. Perhaps this represents Orpheus's lyre. Monteverdi calls for an "arpa doppia," a double harp that has some extra strings so that it can play sharps and flats.

And then there were the instruments that played the accompaniment, the basso continuo (see p. 101), comprising at various times harpsichords, wood and reed organs, chitarroni, harp, viole da gamba, and contrabasses (see pp. 72 and 156).

Later in his life, when Monteverdi lived in Venice and wrote opera for commercial opera houses, his orchestras were very small: four or five string players and a harpsichord would often be enough. But here in Mantua, where Monteverdi was at the head of a large musical establishment, and where splendor was expected, the array of instruments was as grand as anyone could imagine.

It was a group of instruments specific to the musical personnel of Mantua. We know the names of some of the expert performers who worked for Monteverdi,

and, as if happens, they correspond almost exactly with the virtuoso parts in *Orfeo*. The two Rubini brothers were accomplished violinists; Monteverdi's pupil Giulio Cesare Bianchi was an expert on the cornett; and there was a consummate harpist named Lucrezia Urbana who was probably present (she appears in payment records from 1603 to 1605, although the ones from 1607 are missing). These are precisely the solo instruments that Monteverdi used in his virtuoso songs for Orpheus.

THE VOICE AND ITS ACCOMPANIMENT

When any of the characters on stage sang, they were accompanied by one or more instruments that could play chords—the lute, organ, harpsichord, or, as in Act 3, a buzzy reed organ called a **regal**. But the actual *notes* for these instruments were not written out by Monteverdi. Instead, he provided a kind of shorthand in the score: a series of bass notes, which gave the player a sense of the required harmony. The player was expected to improvise an appropriate chord for each bass note. When Monteverdi thought there might be some confusion on what exactly he wanted, he gave extra signs to indicate, for instance, a major chord or a minor chord (see Appendix, pp. A-6–A-7 or how the notes should be arranged in the chord. This shorthand notation was called **figured bass**, and the continuous bass melody to represent chordal accompaniment was called **basso continuo**, as we mentioned in the Part Opener. These were techniques used not only by Monteverdi but by many other composers and performers of the day (see Figure 4.10).

While sometimes Monteverdi specified what the accompanying instruments should be, most of the time he did not. But we do learn a couple of things from his indications in the score: one is that characters were not specifically associated with one instrument or another (except for Caronte, who is accompanied by the regal). Another is that sometimes a melody instrument—usually a cello—played the bass notes along with the chordal “continuo” instruments. (We will see later that the music of Handel and Bach always used a melody instrument—again, usually the cello—to accompany the chord-playing instrument.)

Speaking and Singing The singing itself presented another kind of problem: if all the characters are singing their parts, what happens when one of the characters wants to “sing” a song—how is that to be distinguished from speaking? How can a character sing, as it were, more? It is a problem that all opera composers face in one way or another, and how they work this out is one of the more interesting things to listen for.

In the case of the story of Orpheus, it is particularly important because Orpheus himself is a singer. So how does Monteverdi make a contrast between speaking and singing? Songs tend to be rhythmic, fall into regular phrases, and

Figured bass and basso continuo

 The use of basso continuo in *Orfeo*



FIG. 4.10 Orfeo's song at the beginning of Act 2, from Monteverdi's original printed score. Orfeo's music, with its words, is the top line of music; below it is a series of notes that provide the basso continuo for accompanying instruments.

⑤ Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, "Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi"

⑤ Monteverdi: *Orfeo*, "Ah! Caso acerbo"

often repeat the words. They *sound* like songs. In *speaking*—even in opera—the words are recited, without repeating them, in a rhythm designed to make them understood. In a song like Orfeo's "Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi," from Act 2 (we will hear more of it, in detail, in LG 12), Monteverdi has given us a lively tune, many repeated lines, and a characteristic rhythmic pattern that repeats. The musical contrast between "Vi ricorda" and the Messenger's announcement of Eurydice's death ("Ah! Caso acerbo!") could not be stronger. The Messenger has an angular, nonrepeated melody that reflects her anguished emotion. The words are delivered as if she were crying out in anguish, and aside from the rhetorical repetition of the exclamation "Ah!", there is no repetition of either words or of musical phrases.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1607

Arriving for the performance, if we were members of the Academy, we would have entered the palace from the public square, going into the ground-floor rooms that served as a sort of transitional space between the public and private parts of the palace. We would then have entered the room where the musical play was about to take place.

The "theater"

There is some good historical evidence on where the performance was given—in a room measuring about twenty-eight by thirty-nine feet—with its vaulted ceiling still intact. It was fitted up as a temporary theater and was barely large enough for the small membership of the Academy (see Figure 4.11). The room is still part of the palace, although it is now used as commercial and office space.

For the production, three windows on the right were curtained to enhance the theatrical lighting created by candles and reflectors; these provided the proper atmosphere for *Orfeo*. At the far end of the room was a proscenium stage covered with a curtain, in front of which a large number of instrumentalists were seated and behind which, presumably, the costumed players and backstage instrumentalists were preparing.

Antonio Maria Viani, the painter, architect, and Prefect of the Ducal Fabric (he was in charge of all the buildings), was famous for his skill in constructing theaters

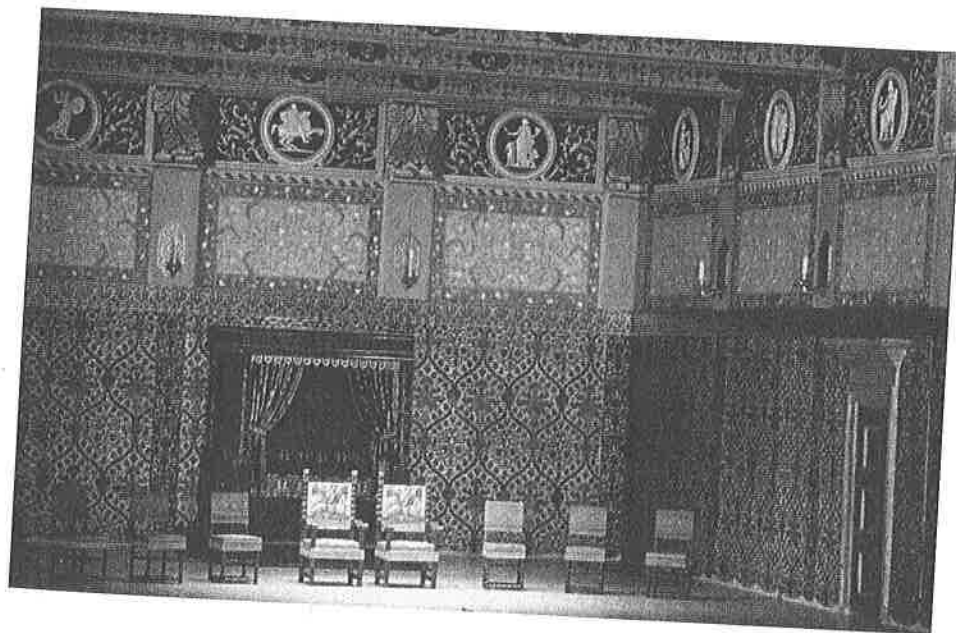


FIG. 4.11 A reconstruction of the room in which *Orfeo* was performed, created by P. Guillou for the Musée de la Musique, Paris. Recent research suggests that the stage was at the short end of a room on the ground floor of the palace.

and machines (such as flying clouds) for the court; he was surely the designer of the platforms, the scenery, and the decorations.

The performance began when the lights were lowered, the candles behind the stage were lit, and the audience was in place.

We do not have any pictures of how the stage was arranged or of the costumes or the performers. The sets do not survive, but they are described for us by the singers.

"Be silent," says the Prologue, "let this river, these hills, these trees, all attend to the story of Orfeo." And later, when Orpheus is ejected from the underworld after he loses Eurydice forever, he too describes the fields and rocks and mountains that he once loved and now hates.

In the middle of the play, the set changes to depict the underworld (the instrumentation changes as well, from the light timbre of violins to the deeper, darker trombones and cornetts). The new scene is described to Orpheus (and to us) by La Speranza (Hope), who leads Orpheus to the boundaries of the lower world. Here are the dark marshes, she says, there is the boatman who rows the dead across the river; and over there is the realm of Pluto.

It was all there on the stage (or more likely, painted on the set). Two relatively simple sets, two set changes (probably done with a quick change of painted side panels and backdrop), and perhaps one machine: Apollo's "flying cloud."

There are ongoing debates as to whether or not the small room would have allowed for a *deus ex machina* (literally, a god from a machine), in this case a crane-like machine allowing Apollo to descend from the heavens to rescue Orpheus from his madness, at the end of his increasingly unbalanced soliloquy. Orpheus, towards the end of his dialogue with the mountain echo, rejects all womankind forever because the one woman he loves is lost. Apollo comes down in a cloud to save his son from the irrationality of imbalance. He takes Orpheus with him into the heavens, where he can contemplate Eurydice's beauty in the sun and the stars. They sing a dazzling duet as they rise in Apollo's cloud; the shepherds sing a chorus and perform a final dance. If indeed there was a *deus ex machina*, it would only have added to the breathtaking spectacle of this first production.

Deus ex machina

According to what we know, the performance went well, despite the slightly rushed rehearsals. There was a small cast, on a small stage, in a small room. Even though there are many characters in *Orfeo*, there were surely not many singers. We know that Magli sang three roles, and other singers probably performed more than one role, given how many characters appear only once and never return: La Musica, La Speranza, Caronte, Plutone (Pluto), Proserpina, and Apollo. The chorus, too, is not really a chorus (which we would normally define as a vocal ensemble with several singers on each part) but an ensemble made of those people who are on stage—never more than six or seven at a time. The whole play could be acted and sung by a group of nine singers, and might have lasted about ninety minutes. In such a small room most of the audience would probably have stood, but it would have been considered a privilege just to be there.

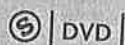
Listening to the Music

TOCCATA

Orfeo begins with a blast from the trumpets, a fanfare. Monteverdi calls it a *toccata*, a word meaning "touched," a term (more often used for a keyboard work)



LISTENING GUIDE 10

Monteverdi *Orfeo*, Toccata

1:36

DATE: 1607

GENRE: Fanfare, played three times

LISTEN FOR

HARMONY: A single harmony throughout the entire piece

FORM: Opening, martial-sounding toccata played by trumpets; repeated by strings and recorders, then by all the instruments

SCORING: The same music played three times but with varied instrumentation for each playing

TIME	FORM	DESCRIPTION
0:00	Toccata, 1st time	Five trumpets.
0:30	Toccata, 2nd time	Strings, recorders, lutes, and keyboards.
0:59	Toccata, 3rd time	All instruments together.

suggesting that the performers need to “touch” their instrument with great dexterity, in other words, to create a kind of showpiece.

Monteverdi tells us in the score that the toccata should be performed three times: the first is surely to call the audience to attention, the second to announce the arrival of the duke, and the third to signal the start of the play (see LG 10, above). The curtain rises, and the Prologue begins.



LG 11

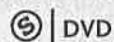
PROLOGUE

Ritornello

In a play, especially one modeled on classical antiquity, a prologue is a device that introduces the audience to the action that will follow. In this case the Prologue is a *person* (La Musica), the personification of Music. She addresses the audience (“You noble descendants of kings”); calls for their attention; tells what the story will be, specifically about the power of Orpheus, whose music is so commanding that it can move the gods; and describes the set. She sings five varied verses of a song, alternating with an instrumental piece (a **ritornello**) played by stringed instruments (violins, violas, violoncellos) with lute and harpsichord. Monteverdi calls these short pieces ritornellos because they continue to “return” throughout the opera. We hear this particular ritornello five times in the Prologue, so we become quite familiar with it. This ritornello comes in two versions, long and short. Before and after La Musica sings, we hear the long version (four phrases), like bookends; and between stanzas, we hear the short version (three phrases), as interludes.

The Prologue introduces us to the basic premise of Monteverdi’s musical plan: a character has a line of poetry to deliver; she will sing it in more or less a spoken rhythm, with an accompaniment that provides a harmonic foundation but does not intrude by playing anything that might distract from the speaker/singer. The speaking/singing alternates with music played by groups of instruments, often in the form of recurring, easily recognizable ritornellos. (See LG 11, p. 105.)

LISTENING GUIDE II

Monteverdi *Orfeo*, Opening Ritornello and Prologue

5:53

DATE: 1607

FORM: Strophic variation

LISTEN FOR

MELODY: Melody is similar, but not identical for each strophe**TEXT:** Lines of 11-syllable Italian poetry. Text delivered in a spoken rhythm**HARMONY:** Harmony is the same for each strophe

La Musica sings five verses; each verse uses **strophic variation**: the same basic melodic shape and the same series of harmonies, with variations.

TIME	FORM	TEXT	TRANSLATION	DESCRIPTION
0:00	Ritornello A			Ritornello made of 4 similar phrases.
0:15	Ritornello A	Repeated		Ritornello repeated.
0:33	Verse 1	Dal mio permesso amato a voi ne vegno, Incliti eroi, sangue gentil de Regi Di cui narra la fama eccelsi pregi, Né giugne al ver perch'è troppo alto il segno.	I come to you from my beloved River Permessus, Renowned heroes, noble blood of kings Whose high praises are told by Fame, Nor do they reach the truth, since the standard is too high.	Prologue accompanied by harpsichord. Note that she sings with the same rhythm an actor might use if speak- ing these lines.
1:20	Ritornello B			This ritornello consists of phrases 2–4 of Ritornello A.
1:33	Verse 2	Io la Musica son, ch'ai dolci accenti So far tranquillo ogni turbato core, Ed or di nobil ira, ed or d'amore, Posso infiammar le più gelate menti.	I am Music, who in sweet accents Know how to calm any troubled heart, And now with noble anger, now with love, I can inflame the coldest minds.	In this verse, singer accompanied by harpsichord. Melody is a varied version of the other verses.
2:15	Ritornello B			
2:28	Verse 3	Io su cetera d'or cantando soglio	I am used to singing with golden lyre	In this verse, singer accompanied by harpsichord.

(continued)

TIME	FORM	TEXT	TRANSLATION	DESCRIPTION
		Mortal orecchio lusingar talora,	And charming every mortal ear,	Melody is a varied version of the other verses.
		E in guisa tal de l'armonia sonora	And in this way to inspire souls to long	
		De le rote del ciel più l'alme invoglio.	For the sonorous harmonies of heaven's lyres.	
3:10	Ritornello B			
3:23	Verse 4	Quinci a dirvi d'Orfeo desio mi sprona,	Thus desire urges me to tell you of Orfeo,	In this verse, singer accompanied by harpsichord.
		D'Orfeo che trasse al suo cantar le fere,	Of Orfeo who attracted wild beasts with his singing,	Melody is a varied version of the other verses.
		E servo fe' l'inferno a sue preghiere,	And made Hades his servant with his prayers,	
		Gloria immortal di Pindo e d'Elicona.	The immortal glory of Pindus and Helicon.	
4:03	Ritornello B			
4:17	Verse 5	Or mentre i canti alterno, or lieti, or mesti,	Now, while I alternate happy and sad songs,	In this verse, singer accompanied by harpsichord.
		Non si mova augellin fra queste piante,	Let no bird move among these trees,	Melody is a varied version of the other verses.
		Né s'oda in queste rive onda sonante,	Nor let any wave make a sound on these banks,	
		Ed ogni aurette in suo camin s'arresti.	And let every breeze halt in its course.	
5:14	Ritornello A			Note that verse ends with a suspended effect.
5:30	Ritornello A	Repeated		

 LG 12

 The use of basso continuo
in *Orfeo*

 Rhythm in Orfeo's song "Vi
ricorda," from Act 2

SONG: "VI RICORDA"

The action proper takes place in the fields of Thrace (in Greece) where nymphs and shepherds have few cares and many delights. The pleasures of this ideal world are depicted by Monteverdi in songs, and those songs allow him later to make a stark contrast between singing and speaking, and between happiness and its opposite.

In order to understand and appreciate the contrast, let us begin with a song. In Act 2, Orfeo sings a song with four verses, in which he describes how happy he is now (he is in love with Eurydice), and how it contrasts with his former unhappiness.

The poet gives Monteverdi a four-line stanza for the first verse:

*Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi,
De' miei lung'h'aspri tormenti,*

*Do you remember, shady woods,
My long and bitter torments,*

*Quando i sassi, ai miei lamenti,
Rispondean fatti pietosi?*

*When the stones, at my lamenting,
Replied with their own sadness?*

If the vowels are elided as marked below (which is how they would be sung, and how Italian poetry is scanned), it's clear that each line has eight syllables, alternately stressed and unstressed:

VI riCORDa o BOSchi ombROsi,
DE' miei LUNGH'asprI torMENTi,
QUANDo i SASSi ai MIEI laMENTi
RisponDEAN fatTI pieTOsi?

But Monteverdi makes a longer song out of it, by repeating some of the lines. Here is the text as Orfeo sings it:

*Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi,
Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi,
De' miei lung'h'aspri tormenti,
Quando i sassi, ai miei lamenti,
Rispondean fatti pietosi?
Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi,
Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi.*

You'll hear that the first line of text is sung to two different melodies, and that Monteverdi makes a refrain out of those two phrases by repeating them at the end of the verse. You could make a musical diagram of the song as **AB cde AB** (where capital letters are used for music that is repeated).

Interestingly, Monteverdi makes this song out of only two note lengths: a short note, and a note twice as long. So, using the symbols S and L for the notes, we could sketch the rhythm of the first line as SSLSLSLL.

Each verse is preceded by a ritornello in the same characteristic rhythm as the verses. It's the same sort of alternation we know from the Prologue (except that here there are not two forms of the ritornello; see LG 12, p. 108).

LAMENT: "TU SE' MORTA"

We focus here on Act 2, where Monteverdi makes the stark contrast between song and speech. Shepherds sing and dance, but the celebration is interrupted when Silvia, a friend of Eurydice's, rushes on stage with terrible news, describing how Eurydice has been bitten by a serpent and is dead. Orfeo, overcome with grief, finally speaks: in the heart-wrenching lament "Tu se' morta" (You are dead) he addresses himself to Eurydice, even though she is not there. He seems to be in a state of disbelief. He then vows to go to the underworld to rescue his beloved. In this speech, one of Monteverdi's finest examples of recitative style, Orfeo is using poetic rhetoric, and Monteverdi uses striking harmonies, a variety of jagged and smooth melodies, and changing rhythms to give as much added emotion as he can to what is a speech, not a song. Orfeo speaks more or less in the rhythm that an actor would use in speaking this text, but the value added by the music is incalculable (see LG 13, p. 109).

As Orfeo's world literally breaks apart, the chorus joins in a final ode of lament that combines madrigal and recitative styles. Pages 113–15 provide a map to the whole of Act 2, which should allow you to follow the sudden shifts in musical styles.



LG 13

The use of basso continuo in *Orfeo*

LISTENING GUIDE 12



Monteverdi *Orfeo*, "Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi" (Orfeo's Song), Act 2

2:38

DATE: 1607

GENRE: Strophic song with ritornello

LISTEN FOR**RHYTHM:** Lively rhythm made of long and short notes**FORM:** Repetition of opening lines and music at the end of each verse, as a refrain**TEXTURE:** Alternation of music for strings with music for voice and basso continuo**TEXT:** Song text in 8-syllable poetic lines

TIME	FORM AND TEXT	TRANSLATION	DESCRIPTION
	<i>Orfeo returns to the stage, and with this song Act 2 begins.</i>		
0:00	Ritornello		Ritornello made of 4 phrases with different melodies but very similar rhythms. Meter alternates 2 and 3.
	Verse 1		
0:12	Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi, Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi,	Do you remember, shady woods, Do you remember, shady woods,	Opening words are repeated to a new melody.
	De' miei lung'h'aspri tormenti, Quando i sassi, ai miei lamenti Rispondean, fatti pietosi? Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi,	My long and bitter torments, When the stones, at my lamenting Replied with their own sadness? Do you remember, shady woods,	
	Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi?	Do you remember, shady woods?	Opening words are repeated to the original melody. Second phrase of melody, slightly varied.
0:37	Ritornello		Same ritornello as before.
0:50	Verse 2		
	Dite, allor non vi sembrai Dite, allor non vi sembrai Più d'ogni altro sconsolato? Or fortuna ha stil cangiato E ha volti in festa i guai. Dite, allor non vi sembrai Più d'ogni altro sconsolato?	Say, did I not seem to you Say, did I not seem to you More desolate than anybody else? Now fortune has changed her style And had turned troubles into a festival. Say, did I not seem to you More desolate than anybody else?	Same melody as verse 1.
1:15	Ritornello		Same ritornello as before.
1:28	Verse 3		
	Vissi già mesto e dolente, Vissi già mesto e dolente, Or gioisco e quegli affanni	Then I lived sad and sorrowful, Then I lived sad and sorrowful, Now I rejoice, and those worries	Same melody as verse 1.

Che sofferti ho per tant'anni
 Fan più caro il ben presente.
 Vissi già mesto e dolente,
 Vissi già mesto e dolente.

That I suffered for so many years
 Make my present joy more precious.
 Then I lived sad and sorrowful,
 Then I lived sad and sorrowful.

1:53 **Ritornello**

Same ritornello as before.

2:06 **Verse 4**

Sol per te, bella Euridice,
 Sol per te, bella Euridice,
 Benedico il mio tormento:
 Dopo 'l duol viè più contento,
 Dopo il mal viè più felice.
 Sol per te, bella Euridice,
 Sol per te, bella Euridice.

Only through you, beautiful Eurydice,
 Only through you, beautiful Eurydice,
 I bless my torment:
 After sorrow there's more contentment,
 After evil, more happiness.
 Only through you, beautiful Eurydice,
 Only through you, beautiful Eurydice.

Same melody as verse 1.

The piece is brought to a close.

LISTENING GUIDE 13



Monteverdi *Orfeo*, "Tu se' morta" (Orfeo's Lament), Act 2

2:43

DATE: 1607

LISTEN FOR

HARMONY AND MELODY: Recitative style uses harmony and melody to emphasize emotional moments

THEMES: Text painting: low notes for "abysses," high notes for "stars"

EXPRESSION: Change of mood: lament at first, resolution later

TEXTURE: Solo voice with basso continuo

TIME

TEXT

TRANSLATION

DESCRIPTION

Orfeo, having learned the news of Eurydice's death, laments in a speech addressed to his departed beloved.

0:00

Tu se' morta

You are dead,



Accompaniment is sustained chords played by organ and chitarrone. Orfeo begins with a highly dissonant interval (1), a diminished 4th. His second note (2) creates dissonance with the accompaniment as well. Both show his bitterness and anguish.

0:14

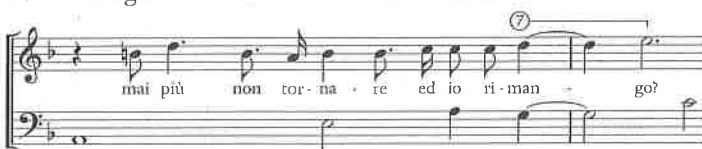
se' morta, mia vita

dead, my life,



Repetition of "se' morta" (3) has similar dissonance but with new chord; "vita" (life) (4), however, is a bright, shining major chord.

(continued)

TIME	TEXT	TRANSLATION	DESCRIPTION
0:25	ed io respiro?	and I breathe?	
			Sudden shift of harmony (5) from bright major (life), recollecting the beautiful Eurydice, contrasts with Orfeo's own situation (minor chord).
0:31	Tu se' da me partita,	You, gone away from me,	
			Orfeo rephrases the same question, but with greater emphasis. He speaks faster and starts on higher note (6) than before, but drops to same dissonant note as in first phrase.
0:39	se' da me partita, per mai più,	gone away, and never,	
			Repetition of "sei da me partita" has similar dissonance as before, but with new chord.
0:51	mai più non tornare ed io rimango?	never more to return, and I remain?	
			On last word (7), bass lags behind—a picture of "remaining" behind.
0:56	No! No, che se I versi alcuna cosa ponno	No! No, if verses can do anything	Orfeo changes from grief to resolve—in middle of his second "No," he decides what to do.
1:06	n'andrò sicuro a più profondi abissi,	I will surely go down to the deepest abysses,	Descending melodic line and low notes on "abissi."
1:13	e intenerito il cor del re del ombre	and having softened the heart of the king of darkness	Chromatic melody (descending half steps) on "intenerito" represents his softening.
1:27	meco trarrotti a riveder le stelle;	I'll draw you up with me to see the stars again.	Ascending melody, high notes on "stelle" (stars).
1:39	o se ciò negherammi empio destino	Or if cruel fate denies this to me,	Dissonant note on "empio" (cruel).
1:48	rimarrò teco, in compagnia di morte.	I'll remain with you, in the company of death.	Low melody for Hades; unusual ("blue note") effect just before "morte" (death).
2:03	Addio terra, addio cielo, e sole, addio.	Farewell heaven, farewell earth, and sun, farewell.	His farewell salute, each time higher as he addresses earth, sky, sun.



LG 14

SONG: "POSSENTE SPIRTO"

Act 3 opens on the banks of the river that leads to the kingdom of Pluto, the underworld where the spirits of the dead reside. Orpheus, abandoned by his guide Hope (La Speranza), tries to convince Charon, the ferryman, to take him across to Eurydice, even though mortals are not allowed to cross the river.

Monteverdi saves his most dazzling music for this moment; Francesco Rasi, the singer of the role of Orfeo, has the task of creating his most persuasive musical argument. In his song "Possente spirto," he summons up all of emotion, and all of music, in his plea. Striggio provides a classic poetic form, a *capitolo*, of five three-line stanzas and a final four lines; Monteverdi gives Rasi stupendously difficult and virtuosic music, and the superb instrumentalists of the court of Mantua are engaged in embellishing his music; violins, cornetts, harp, and a trio of strings, insert commentaries, interludes, and ritornellos between the lines of his song and at the ends of the verses. As Orfeo reaches his intense conclusion, he is accompanied by a quartet of strings—the only place in the opera where singing is accompanied by anything other than the instruments of the basso continuo. The song is virtuosity at its height, Monteverdi's and Rasi's expression of what the greatest singer of myth can do (see LG 14, below).

LISTENING GUIDE 14

Monteverdi *Orfeo*, "Possente spirto" (Orfeo's Song), Act 3

8:49

DATE: 1607

LISTEN FOR

SCORING: Rich variety of solo instruments. In the last verse, strings accompany Orfeo

FORM: Melody instruments punctuate the lines, and perform a series of ritornellos

EXPRESSION: Highly virtuosic singing; this is one way to impress Charon

TIME	TEXT	TRANSLATION	DESCRIPTION
	Verse 1		
0:00	Possente spirto . . .	Powerful spirit . . .	First line interrupted by pair of solo violins, one following the other.
0:16	. . . e formidabil nume,	. . . and formidable deity,	Virtuosic fast notes in violin.
0:33	Senza cui far passaggio a l'altra riva	Without whom a soul loosed from its body	Virtuosic violins again.
0:50	Alma da corpo sciolta in van presume,	Presumes in vain to cross to the other shore,	Vocal line is even more virtuosic, with more fast notes.
1:16	Ritornello		Violins, now playing together, close the verse with what Monteverdi calls a ritornello (even though it does not return).
	Verse 2		
1:45	Non viv'io no . . .	I am not alive, no, . . .	First line interrupted by a pair of cornetts, one following the other.
1:57	. . . che poi di vita è priva	. . . since my beloved wife	Cornetts.
2:09	Mia cara sposa, il cor non è più meco,	Is deprived of life, my heart is no longer with me,	

(continued)

TIME	TEXT	TRANSLATION	DESCRIPTION
2:25	E senza cor com'esser può ch'io viva?	and without a heart, how can it be that I live?	Cornetts.
2:43	Ritornello		Cornetts, now playing together, close verse with ritornello (that does not return).
	Verse 3		
2:59	A lei volt'ho il cammin . . .	I have turned my steps toward her . . .	First line is interrupted by solo harp ("arpa dopia")
3:20	. . . per l'aër cieco,	. . . through the blind air,	
3:34	A l'inferno non già, ch'ovunque stassi	Not yet to Hades, for wherever is found	Harp.
3:55	Tanta bellezza il paradiso ha seco.	Such beauty, Paradise is there.	Harp.
4:25	Ritornello		Harp closes verse with ritornello (that does not return).
	Verse 4		
5:19	Orfeo son io . . .	I am Orfeo, . . .	First line interrupted by trio of two violins and cello.
5:47	. . . che d'Euridice i passi	. . . who follow Eurydice's steps	
6:02	Seguo per queste tenebrose arene,	Through these shadowy sands,	Trio.
6:17	Ove già mai per uom mortal non vassi.	Where no mortal man has yet trod.	Instruments do not provide an interlude between these two lines. Instead, trio accompanies close of Orfeo's last line. No ritornello at end of this verse.
	Verse 5		
6:39	O de le luci mie luci serene;	O serene light of my eyes;	Verse sung straight through, without the vocal fireworks of preceding verses.
6:52	S'un vostro sguardo può tornarmi in vita,	If a glance from you can return me to life,	
7:04	Ahi, chi nega il conforto a le mie pene?	Ah, who denies comfort to my pains?	Orfeo repeats this passionate last line. Again, no ritornello at end of verse.
	Verse 6		
7:48	Sol tu, nobile dio, puoi darmi aita,	Only you, noble god, can give me help,	Singing even more simply, Orfeo is accompanied by "halo" of four strings.
8:04	Né temer déi che sopra un'aurea cetra	Nor should you fear, since I arm my fingers	
8:12	Sol di corde soavi armo le dita	Only with sweet strings on a golden lyre	Note that this verse has four lines, while the others had three.
8:28	Contra cui rigida alma invan s'impetra.	Against which a rigid soul arms itself in vain.	

LISTENING MAP OF ORFEO'S ACT 2

FORM	TEXT/TRANSLATION	PERFORMING FORCES	DESCRIPTION
PART I: SINGING			
<i>A. Orfeo returns</i>			
Song 1: Ritornello 1		Five-part strings, with basso continuo (= b. c.)	Slow triple meter, but with many syncopations and other devices to make it irregular.
Song 1: Verse (Orfeo)	Ecco pur ch'a voi ritorno ... I'm now returning to you ...	Orfeo, with b. c.	Begins like the sinfonia. Six musical phrases (4 text phrases, some repeated); each with almost the same rhythm.
<i>B. Invitation to music</i>			
Song 2: Ritornello 2		Two "little French violins" with b. c.	Duple meter; 4 violin phrases, each introduced by a series of quick rising notes in the bass.
Song 2: Verse 1	Mira ch'a se n'alletta ... Here is a shady place ...	A shepherd, with b. c.	Note the quick surprise of the last line.
Song 2: Ritornello 2		Two "little French violins" with b. c.	Repetition of ritornello 2.
Song 2: Verse 2	Su quest'erbosa sponda ... Here is a grassy bank ...	A shepherd, with b. c.	Same melody as verse 1.
Song 3: Ritornello 3		Two "ordinary violins" with b. c.	Quick triple time.
Song 3: Verse 1	In questo prato adorno ... Here's an enchanting meadow ...	Two shepherds	They sing in harmony, in the same rhythm; meter derives from the ritornello.
Song 3: Ritornello 3		Two "ordinary violins" with b. c.	Repetition of ritornello 3.
Song 3: Verse 2	Qui Pan dio de' Pastori ... Here Pan the God of Shepherds	Two shepherds with b. c.	They sing in harmony, in the same rhythm; meter derives from the ritornello.
Song 4: Ritornello 4		Two recorders with b. c.	Quick duple time.
Song 4: Verse 1	Qui le Napee vezzose ... Here the nymphs gather ...	Two shepherds with b. c.	They sing in harmony, in the same rhythm; meter derives from the ritornello.
Song 4: Ritornello 4		Two recorders with b. c.	Repetition of ritornello 4.
Song 4: Verse 2	Dunque fa degno Orfeo! ... So Orfeo, sing! ...	Chorus of shepherds with b. c.	They sing in harmony, based on the music of verse 1.
<i>C. Orpheo's song</i>			
Song 5: Ritornello 5		Five-part strings and b. c.	Meter alternates 2 and 3.
Song 5: Verse 1	Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi ... Remember, shady woods ...		Meter alternates like ritornello. Seven musical phrases, using 4 lines of poetry.

(continued)

FORM	TEXT/TRANSLATION	PERFORMING FORCES	DESCRIPTION
Song 5: Ritornello 5		Five-part strings with b. c.	Meter alternates 2 and 3.
Song 5: Verse 2	Dite all'hor non vi sembrai . . . Before, I was sad . . .	Orfeo with b. c.	Same music as verse 1.
Song 5: Ritornello 5		Five-part strings with b. c.	Repetition of ritornello 5.
Song 5: Verse 3	Vissi già mesto e dolente . . . I lived in sadness . . .	Orfeo with b. c.	Same music as verse 1.
Song 5: Ritornello 5		Five-part strings with b. c.	Repetition of ritornello 5.
Song 5: Verse 4	Sol per te, bella Euridice . . . But now I've met Eurydice . . .	Orfeo with b. c.	Same music as verse 1.

PART II: RECITATIVE

A. News and reactions

Recitative	Mira, deh mira, Orfeo. . . Orfeo, sing again . . . Ahi! Caso acerbo! Terrible news!	A shepherd with b. c. Sylvia, the messenger, with b. c.	In lyrical style, inviting Orfeo to sing again. Very angular melody, delivered in speech rhythm; a shepherd interrupts her twice.
Recitative	D'onde vieni? . . . Whence do you come? . . .	Orfeo, Sylvia with b. c.	A dialogue, in which Sylvia tells Orfeo that Eurydice is dead; quick, passionate lines.
Recitative	In un fiorito prato . . . In a flowery meadow . . .	Sylvia with b. c.	Messenger tells how Eurydice died. Her speech rises and falls, quickens and slows, to show her feelings and the nature of what she is describing.
Recitative	Ahi! Caso acerbo! Terrible news!	A shepherd with b. c.	Takes up Sylvia's cry.
Recitative	A l'amara novella . . . Orfeo is almost dumbstruck . . .	A shepherd with b. c.	
Recitative	Tu se' morta! . . . You are dead! . . .	Orfeo with b. c.	His bitter lament, and his resolve to rescue her.

B. Code ode of lament

Refrain:	Ahi! Caso acerbo! Terrible news!	Chorus of shepherds with b. c.	They take up Sylvia's cry, in recitative rhythm.
Chorus	Non si fidi uom mortale . . . Mortal man should trust fortune . . .	Chorus of shepherds with b. c.	The chorus continues with reflections on fate, in madrigal style.
Recitative	Ma io . . . I will hide myself forever . . .	Sylvia with b. c.	
Sinfonia: introduction to shepherds' lament		Five-part strings with b. c.	Slow duple meter; the whole thing repeats.

Lament, part 1	Chi ne consola . . . Who can console us . . .	Two shepherds with b. c.	A combination of recitative and madrigal style.
Refrain: Chorus	Ahi! Caso acerbo! Terrible news!	Chorus of shepherds with b. c.	Repetition of refrain.
Lament, part 2	Ma dove . . . But where is comfort?	Two shepherds with b. c.	A combination of recitative and madrigal style.
Refrain: Chorus	Ahi! Caso acerbo! Terrible news!	Chorus of shepherds with b. c.	Repetition of refrain.
<i>C. Closing ritornello</i>			
Ritornello		Five-part strings and b. c.	The same ritornello that began the Prologue now concludes the first part of the drama.

Orfeo Then and Now

The audience, in that ground-floor room in the palace at Mantua, knew their classical literature well. They knew how Italian poetry should sound, and their ears were accustomed to Monteverdi's music. They were acquainted with his *Scherzi musicali* ("musical jokes"—a collection of them had been published that same year, 1607); each of these little pieces alternates a lively ritornello with a tuneful song (like the songs in Act 2). They knew his famous madrigals, which were elaborately polyphonic settings of Italian poetry (like many of the choruses in *Orfeo*). They knew his sacred music, and much other music now lost to us. What they did *not* know—unless they happened to have been at a few experiments in Florence—was this new **recitative style**, the *stile recitativo*, in which actors sing their speaking parts. That focus on the voice, on the natural delivery of words in speech rhythm, would have far-reaching implications. The use of instrumental ritornellos as musical bookends would also have a long career in music. These elements, along with the basso continuo, the improvised chordal accompaniment to solo melodies, were part of the new experiment, and they were to become hallmarks of Baroque musical style.

But in Mantua, on that February day in 1607, it was all new. Nobody had heard this piece before, and they probably expected never to hear it again. A second performance was given ("for the ladies of the court"), and then the piece was retired. It was, after all, only a one-time composition for a specific occasion and a private audience.

We do not know much about how the spectators reacted to the two performances; but if two contemporary witnesses are typical, then it seems that people were fascinated by this new thing, not yet called opera, and that they thought Monteverdi's solution was beautiful and moving. Giovanni Striggio, the brother of the play's author, was captivated by the idea of *Orfeo* because it was something new. He wrote to his brother:

Having recounted as well as I know how the fable of Orpheus, your excellency's own work, to my wife, I have such a powerful desire to see it performed that I could not deny her such a just request to hear it, both because it is your honor's creation, and because it is a new thing.

The audience

Recitative style

Contemporary accounts

In the summer of the same year Monteverdi's friend Cherubino Ferrari wrote to the duke of Mantua:

Monteverdi is here in Milan, staying with me; and every day we talk about Your Highness and vie with one another in paying tribute to your virtues, your goodness and your royal manners. He has shown me the words and let me hear the music of the play which Your Highness had performed, and certainly both poet and musician have depicted the inclinations of the heart so skillfully that it could not have been done better. The poetry is lovely in conception, lovelier still in form, and loveliest of all in diction; and indeed no less was to be expected of a man as richly talented as Signor Striggio. The music, moreover, observing due propriety, serves the poetry so well that nothing more beautiful is to be heard anywhere.

It is only in the twentieth century that interest was revived in *Orfeo*, and gradually it has assumed a place of honor in the realm of opera—not as a museum piece, but as a passionate expression of a myth that continues to speak to us all.

Monteverdi, now thought of as the composer of the first great opera, might be surprised to know that we still love his piece four hundred years later. In music, change is not the same as progress. Many great operas have been written since, but musicians still agree with Ferrari: no music serves poetry better, or is more beautiful, than that of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*.

Chapter Review

Summary of Musical Styles

The main musical impact of *Orfeo* is the contrast between singing and speaking style.

- Singing style is accomplished by strophic songs, in which each verse uses the same music but with different words. Lively rhythms, regular phrases, and repetitions of words mark this style
- Speaking style (*stile recitativo*, or **recitative style**) is characterized by a delivery of the words in approximately the rhythm that an actor would use on stage; simple chordal accompaniment provides a setting, but not a distraction from the delivery of the text.
- A ritornello is often used to articulate larger forms. Ritornellos are short, usually lively instrumental pieces that introduce each verse of a song.

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What Do You Know?

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MUSIC THEN AND NOW

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