

U6 Music & Humanism Revision 1

I've prepared a list of themes and areas for you to get started on revision of our 17th-century topic. Obviously it's very important to familiarise yourselves with the topic to a degree where you have a good understanding of the overall picture. It's obviously important to have a good factual knowledge, but this on its own won't get you the highest mark, and so the following should help you to *organise* the material you've collated over the past 18 months. Perhaps the best starting point would be to look at the historical, social and intellectual features of Monteverdi's world, and how these helped shape his style and output.

1) Monteverdi's personal and professional circumstances

Monteverdi was born in Cremona, where he was trained at Cremona Cathedral (northern Italy: he spent all his working life in northern Italy), but his first real professional work was undertaken in Mantua (from 1592), where his patrons were the ruling Gonzaga family. He became *maestro di capella* at Mantua in 1602. This was a church position, and his sacred music of this time was written for the ducal chapel. *Orfeo* was written for performance at Mantua in 1607. It's important to remember that the 1610 Mass and Vespers were written whilst Monteverdi was still at Mantua, NOT for performance at Venice!

In 1613, after the death of Giovanni Gabrieli, Monteverdi became *maestro* at St Mark's, Venice, the most highly sought-after musical position in Italy at the time. All his church music from this date until his death in 1643 was written for performance at St Mark's, some of it being liturgical and some non-liturgical (e.g. motets). Vespers would have been sung to plainchant on ordinary days, with the grander settings being used only on special feast days.

Monteverdi's position in Venice meant that he was at the centre of the

world's opera production at the time, and it was for Venetian theatres that his public operas were written. It's important to remember that composers of this time would not have written music simply because they loved it: it was all commissioned, and if there wasn't a patron, the music would be written for public consumption.

2) The intellectual climate of the day

The Renaissance was a time of 'rebirth' – the discoveries of ancient classical literature renewed an interest in the culture of the ancient Romans and Greeks, and this informed most intellectual issues of the time. Renaissance scholars were very aware of the issues of old and new which have pervaded our study of this music. The Middle Ages (so-called because they fell between antiquity and the Renaissance) were seen to be all but devoid of cultural interest, and certainly didn't seem to measure up to the high level of civilisation which the ancients had established.

The obsession with all things classical is strange in some senses, because it informed what was to become the 'new' music, or music of the *seconda prattica*. However, no primary source material of ancient music actually exists, only secondary descriptions of what the music sounded like. So, the theories of organisations such as the Florentine Camerata, which affected the practical business of writing music, were *describing* the music of the ancients. As a result, the music was modern, but actually based on contemporary opinion of ancient music.

This entire issue is obviously set against the old-fashioned style of Counter-Reformation polyphony, informed by the European Scholastic tradition.

2) Madrigals

Monteverdi wrote 8 books of madrigals. In many senses the madrigals show most clearly Monteverdi's development in secular vocal technique. This is closely linked to the *seconda prattica* 'doctrine of the affections', where musical techniques attempt to change the way the listener feels by techniques such as conceit.

For example the 'stile concitato' ('agitated style') was used in Monteverdi's *Madrigali guerrari e amorosi* of 1638 ('madrigals of love and war'), where the dactylic rhythm is used to represent war-like sentiments. The 'stile concitato' was a term used by Monteverdi when explaining his interpretation of Plato's 3 categories of music (anger, moderation, humility). Note the very heavy neo-Platonic (humanist) overtones of this.

This should keep you going over half term. Remember, this is not an exhaustive list, and is intended to guide your own personal revision programme. There are huge topics implied in this rather condensed list – remember to be thorough!