

U6 Music & Humanism Revision 4

Early Opera Proper

As we have discovered, opera has a number of different fore-runners. We now move to the earliest true operas – dramas that were sung entirely. Both Peri's and Caccini's versions of *Euridice* were written in 1600. The subject-matter of these early operas is significant. The Florentines, like a good number of their successors through the centuries, turned to classical myth for a number of reasons:

- 1) A source of inspiration (as it has long been for the Renaissance Humanists);
- 2) As an attempt to justify their new revelation of music's power (Apollo and Orpheus, the heroes of the first operas, were renowned for their musical prowess).

Turning to this last point, what do we mean by music's 'power'? This is a recurring feature in theoretical treatises of the time, and a hotly debated issue. Humanists believed that music had the power to move the emotions (linked to their elevation of the status of rhetoric in non-musical life): the first character we meet in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* is "La Musica" – the *spirit*, or essence, of music. She sings:

I am the Spirit of Music, who, in sweet accents,
 Know how to calm every troubled soul
 And, now with noble anger, now with love,
 Can inflame the most frozen hearts.

(Prologue, *Orfeo*)

This is a major claim, but it is central to the tenets of Humanist thought. Although the Florentines made this claim to the power of music, they came under attack from other intellectuals. Their accusation that having characters sing, rather than speak, was essentially irrational: verse, not

prose, and music, not speech, formed the natural language of pagan gods. The very function and validity of opera was questioned from the outset, such was the climate of humanistic intellectualising.

The use of myth in early opera made it more than mere entertainment. Those involved in the first operas believed they were making a powerful statement both about their times – when the arts had reached such a peak that Orpheus himself could be brought back to life – and about their princely patron, the Apollo/Sun-King around whom the political, social, and cultural world revolved.

Peri's and Caccini's versions of *Euridice* were written entirely in the monodic, or *arioso* style, part-way between true recitative and aria. In his preface to *Euridice*, Peri explained how he came to the conclusion to use this style of vocal writing:

I judged that the ancient Greeks and Romans...used a harmony [i.e. singing style] which, going beyond that of ordinary speech, fell so short of the melody of song that it assumed an intermediate form... Therefore, rejecting every other type of song heard up to now, I set myself to discovering the imitation necessary for these poems [i.e. the text of the opera], and I considered that the type of voice assigned to singing by the ancients...[would suit] my intention...

We can learn much about the general outlook of intellectuals towards the arts during the period. Peri's subject-matter was classical, so he looked for an appropriate style of singing. He speaks in terms of 'imitation' and 'discovery', shades of the 'old' and 'new' we see in many areas of this topic. Peri ends his prologue with the following:

And so (even though I would be reluctant to claim that this was the type of song used in Greek and Roman plays), I have thus believed it to be the only type that our music can give us to suit our speech.

We can learn, too, from this: this sentence, in some senses, invalidates the notion that early operas were entirely antiquarian affairs. Certainly Peri

and Rinuccini (Peri's librettist) were anxious to associate their work with the classical revival, but the Humanist overtones seem designed to give the work an air of academic respectability to a modern enterprise (and one which was essentially modernist, and progressive). *Euridice* owes more to pastoral than classical tragedy, though, and sits squarely in the tradition of the Florentine *intermedi*, even if it was on a smaller scale and without the use of grand stage machinery.

What was the practical function of *Euridice*? It was part of the entertainment for the wedding of Maria de' Medici and Henri IV of France (which, incidentally, re-oriented Florentine foreign policy away from Spain and the Empire, a considerable political coup). *Euridice* was not the most important part of the entertainment: this role was played by Caccini's *Il rapimento di Cefalo*. *Il rapimento* seems to have been set entirely to music (it is mostly lost, but one section survives as *Le nuove musiche* (1602), which we have looked at), but the libretto suggests that it was more like a string of spectacular *intermedi* loosely linked by a dramatic thread.

How does Monteverdi's *Orfeo* emerge from this general picture? Vincenzo Gonzaga (duke of Mantua, where Monteverdi was *maestro*) attended the wedding of Maria de' Medici in Florence in 1600. Alessandro Striggio (*Orfeo*'s librettist) was with him as a member of court. The 1607 collaboration with Monteverdi was probably an attempt to compete theatrically with Florence, as there were close political and artistic ties between the two courts. The opera was called a *favola in musica* (a 'play in music'), and was a court entertainment. Significantly, it was first performed within the confines of the *Accademia degli Invaghiti*, and thus in an atmosphere more amenable to its Humanist pretensions.

Orfeo looks back to traditions of Florentine dramatic music (especially *intermedi*) in a number of ways. There are the spectacular stage effects, mythological subject-matter, allegorical figures, the use of instruments (lacking in earlier operas), and the extended choruses. There is also the obvious connection with classical tragedy and, as with *Euridice*, the recent

pastoral dramas of Tasso and Guarini. Monteverdi's music is also redolent of older techniques: even in the 'new' recitative, he exploits 'old-fashioned' expressive devices first seen in the 'old' 5-part madrigals, including carefully prepared dissonances and chromaticism. These 'old' features are offset in the opera by its messages of the power of man and music.

In what ways is *Orfeo* progressive? Monteverdi shows his awareness of newer styles developed by his contemporaries, such as his use of new kinds of aria and duet writing. We can see this in a number of places:

- Opening of act 2: a succession of arias (for Orfeo), duets and choruses – cued by changing metre and rhyme schemes in the libretto – which highlight the dramatic reversal at the arrival of the messenger to announce the death of Euridice. Also note the bizarre tonality of this section: the interplay of G major and E minor to indicate grief.
- Orfeo's lament ('Possente spirito') at the gates of Hades (act 3, the centre of the opera) is an elaborate set of strophic variations with accompaniment. It employs vocal virtuosity to evoke Orfeo's magical powers.
- Orfeo's air of celebration in act 4 ('Qual onor...'): with obligato parts for 2 violins over a walking bass. A newer technique seen in *seconda prattica* motets.

We can see, therefore, that *Orfeo* has an interesting mix of old and new. Monteverdi did not write his music for mere novelty, but included old techniques *in the light* of the new.