

Dramatic Music in Italy 1560–1607

As you know from Monteverdi's dealings with Artusi over the *Seconda Prattica* dispute, dramatic music at this time (and indeed for a long time afterwards) was subject to a great deal of theorising about its very existence for being. During our period this was because the academic orientation of intellectual life in the courts of late Renaissance Italy generated an almost obsessive need to document, explain and debate (and therefore validate) the issues in contemporary cultural life). Let's not forget that many of these wealthy theorists had plenty of spare time on their hands.

Music had its place in the theatre long before opera reared its head, and in Italy in particular it had a significant role to play in a culture which revolved around splendour (this is considerably developed when opera goes public later in the 17th century in Venice). Events such as the birth of an heir, or indeed a death, required music which paid its dues to both private celebration and to public protocol. In the courts, dramatic music was a very important way of providing a public face for the permanence and glory of the ducal state.

As you already know, many of the plays and entertainments of the northern courts were inspired by the Humanist emulation of all things classical. Pastoral plays (shepherds, nymphs, satyrs, etc.) were also popular and classical in origin. An important point is the pastoral's celebration of the Age of Gold (the time of prosperity and peace), which was readily susceptible to allegorical interpretation. This made dramatic music and entertainments a powerful tool in the hands of Renaissance princes. As you now know, *intermedi* (performed with both tragedies and comedies) became very significant in the development of early opera when they assumed a much grander function, especially in Florence. The rich display and erudite symbolism made the *intermedi* an ideal projection of princely magnificence. The Medici dukes and grand dukes of Florence

are known to have exploited such entertainments for political ends.

Early Opera in Florence

Those in charge of the 1589 intermedi for *La Pellegrina* included Giovanni de' Bardi (whom we discussed in relation to the Florentine *Camerata*) and Emilio de' Cavalieri (c. 1550–1602), an important Roman musician, with the bulk of the music being composed by Cristofano Malvezzi and the famous madrigalist Luca Marenzio. These artists (as well as a good deal of others) were involved in the experience which became true opera in the succeeding decades.

The poet Ottavio Rinuccini (1562–1621) and the musician Jacopo Peri (1561–1633) were closely associated with the Florentine patron Jacopo Corsi. Their idea of applying music to drama in the manner of the reputed performances of the Greeks probably took root in the 1590s. The first result of their collaboration was *Dafne* (the subject matter nods to the third of the 1589 intermedi), which was first performed in 1598. The music to this is almost entirely lost. Corsi then offered a second music-drama to the court for the celebrations of an important Medici wedding in 1600. *Euridice* was first performed at the wedding in 1600, and Peri's score was published in 1601. The subject matter of these operas is significant. The Florentines turned to classical myth both as a source of inspiration and as an attempt to justify the power of music (a theme to which we'll return again and again). Apollo and Orpheus, the protagonists of the first operas, were renowned for their musical prowess. Such subjects could also counter the accusation that having characters sing, rather than speak, was essentially irrational: verse, not prose, and music, not speech, formed the natural language of the gods.

Mantua

Vincenzo Gonzaga, duke of Mantua, attended the 1600 Medici wedding:

among his entourage was the court secretary and poet, Alessandro Striggio (?1573–1630). In 1607 (as you now know), Striggio collaborated with the duke's *maestro di cappella*, Claudio Monteverdi, on the new opera *Orfeo*.

Orfeo refers back to the Florentine models, particularly the intermedii. There are spectacular stage effects, mythological subject matter, allegorical figures, the use of instruments, and the extended choruses. In a similar way, Monteverdi's music is redolent of older techniques: even in the 'modern' recitative, he exploits expressive devices first explored in the more old-fashioned 5-part madrigals, including carefully prepared dissonances (you see, I didn't bang that into you for nothing!) and chromaticism. These older 'Renaissance' aspects of the opera are reinforced by its various humanist messages about the power of man and music.

Orfeo, however, looks forward in many respects. Monteverdi demonstrates his openness to the styles developed by his contemporaries, particularly in his use of new kinds of aria and duet writing:

*The opening of Act 2 has a succession of arias (for Orfeo), duets and choruses—cued by changing metres and rhyme-schemes in Striggio's verse—that serve to highlight the dramatic reversal at the arrival of the messenger to announce the death of Euridice.

* Orfeo's lament at the gates of Hades in Act 3 (the centre of the opera—remember what I was telling you about classical symmetrical structure) is an elaborate set of strophic variations with instrumental accompaniment, exploiting vocal virtuosity to evoke Orfeo's magical powers (the precedent can again be found in the 1589 intermedii).

* Act 4 has an aria of celebration for Orfeo, 'Qual onor di te fia degno'

(with obbligato parts for two violins over a 'walking bass') which are reminiscent of Monteverdi's later *Scherzi musicali* (also 1607).

Other more general 'forward looking' aspects are Monteverdi's use of large-scale formal planning (with ritornello and refrain patterns) and the detail with which he notes his intentions in matters of scoring and ornamentation.

Having explained at some length the newness of this new form of music, it would not be fair to let you think that opera took off in any considerable way in the north Italian courts at this time. In the true spirit of, er, human unselfishness and development (I don't think), the powerful northern princes wanted to protect what they had. In our 20th-century obsession with history, of our nosiness regarding the lives of those who lived before us, we have a tendency to pigeon-hole historical or aesthetic happenings and furnish them with a bit more significance than they deserve. As academic musicians we consider the musico-dramatic developments of the time in Florence and Mantua to be remarkable (as well they are), but only in the light of what we have gleaned in the 400 years since. Remember that old habits die hard, and that the north Italians were only human, and most humans are by habit (I hate to say by nature) very conservative.

Intermedi remained very popular, especially in Florence, while a number of courts (such as Savoy) focused on tournaments and ballets. Here princely messages could be more easily conveyed by military skills (the USSR didn't gain such a huge hold on its people by showing them operas), and social skills via dance. On the whole, the north Italian courts felt little sympathy with musico-dramatic experiments, as they were fundamentally ill-equipped to cope with traditional modes of princely celebration.