

Aspects of Late-Renaissance Thought

The primary occupation of a music historian is to focus on works of music—these texts are his or her primary texts and are ordered symbols of a linguistic system, that of musical notation. It is essential that these carry the same degree of importance as a scholar of literature, paintings, or any other text would ascribe to their text. Whatever else the music historian uses in his work, background knowledge, received wisdom, anecdote or gossip, he must return again and again to these texts in the final evaluation. The task of any historian is to describe what he takes to be the meanings of these texts.

As you will now be aware, Italian culture of the late-16th and early-17th centuries (sometimes called the *cinquecento* and *seicento*), offers a picture of sharp philosophical contrasts and eclecticism. Some of the most significant happenings of our period include the massive growth in the printing industry, the conflict of classical versus Christian tradition, Aristotelianism versus Platonism, sacred versus secular, logic versus rhetoric, feudalism versus capitalism. However, perhaps the most significant of these to us is the dichotomy between SCHOLASTICISM and HUMANISM as expounded originally by Aristotle and Plato.

What's so important about printing? It was a fast way of reproducing information. What's the implication of this? It meant information could get to a lot of people very quickly. What is the importance of this? It meant that people quickly learned about every different subject one *could* learn about. This developed cultures, republics, monarchies, civilisations. People became aware of their own existence and the vast implications of that awareness.

Scholastic thought arose in the universities of the late Middle Ages and was closely associated with the teaching there of theology, philosophy, natural philosophy, medicine and law. Scholasticism was characterised by

two tendencies: a reliance on authority and a faith in the absolute truth of knowledge gained through rigorous logical deduction (but you already knew that). The scholastics accepted as authoritative the major ancient texts which concerned them Justinian's *Corpus iuris civilis* (law), and Aristotle's *Physica* (science). The reliance on these texts suggests an answer to the medieval vision in general. The texts provided and organised and comprehensive world-view. To some it provided a system to explain the full potential of human reasoning. Think about that for a moment. A system which provided for a people coming out of the Dark Ages (they were called that for a reason) in many ways an *explanation* of the very existence of Man. That's a pretty tall order. Scholasticism came late to Italy, imported from France in the decades before 1300.

Unlike Scholasticism, Humanism was native to Italian soil. The complex network of responsibilities and dependencies necessary to run the cultures created out of scholasticism led to a pragmatic view of the uses and ends of knowledge. One interesting aspect of this is that, long before the Renaissance, a professional class of *dictatores*, notaries hired to write speeches and the like, were made use of. This should make alarm bells ring in your mind as the skill of RHETORIC is one of the most important aspects of the humanist's education. This worldly use of knowledge came about in a manner which was totally foreign to scholastic thinkers.

By the 15th century, certain scholars (called *humanisti*), had stressed the importance of the studia humanitatis, a group of disciplines which scholastics considered inferior to more systematic studies. The *humanisti* valued moral philosophy over Aristotelian natural philosophy and celebrated the moral teachings derived from poetry and history. Instead of the logical disciplines of the scholastics, the humanists pursued the more modest end of swaying their fellow men to morally and politically right actions in the real. Do you now see how Monteverdi, as a practical musician, fitted into this scheme of learning? Humanist regard for Man's will, like the pragmatic humanist view of knowledge and dialectic, arose in

interaction with the requisites of communal self-governance. Through the will, more than Man's intellect, Man's passions could be swayed and channelled to result in doing right.

It would not be accurate to suggest that the humanists abandoned the quest for philosophical truth in utilising the power of rhetoric. Instead they strove to utilise the limited truths available to them to shape their own and others' responses to the vagaries of life. The unity of philosophy and eloquence, not the abandonment of philosophy, was the central message of Renaissance humanism.

However, come the end of the 16th century, these systems, like all others, began to fragment. Voyages of discovery exposed the limitations of ancient knowledge, and weakened European Man's traditional notions of his central place in Europe. At the same time, religious struggles throughout Europe struck at long-held conceptions of Man's relation to God. In Italy, attempts to regain some kind of systematic order and rationalise the fragmented intellectual, social and religious structures of 16th-century life sometimes relied on an authoritarian dogmatism, a coercive intellectual force descended from an earlier, healthier scholastic reliance on authorities.

Ultimately, these forces combined with others to snuff out the last vital flames of humanism in Italy, to break the bond humanists had forged between eloquence and meaningful human thought and action, and to leave behind a post-Renaissance conception of rhetoric as virtuosic word manipulation and display.

I hope this gives you a little bit of background to the world into which Claudio Monteverdi was born, and which changed rapidly around him during his life. You will remember that the title of this course concerns music in the time of humanism. Well, what I've covered gives you some of the main ideas floating around with the *intelligenza* in Italy. I hope it also

goes some way to explaining the world into which they, too, were born, and some of the reasons that they implemented the changes they did.