

## **Ars Polemica:**

### **Monteverdi's *Orfeo* as artistic creed**

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The story of Orpheus is the ultimate test for any musician's skill. By choosing to set this myth to music, composers declare themselves capable of creating music that would credibly seem to melt the hearts of beasts, humans and gods. They also reveal which style of musical writing is best suited, in their view, for expressing the most intense emotions.

Three of the earliest operas are based on this myth. There is, however, a crucial difference between Ottavio Rinuccini's *Euridice*, which served as libretto for two operas (by Jacopo Peri in 1600, and by Giulio Caccini in 1602), and Alessandro Striggio's *Orfeo*, the libretto for Claudio Monteverdi's first opera (1607). In the Prologue that opens Rinuccini's opera, the Muse of Tragedy sings the virtues of pastoral dramas with happy endings. In Striggio's Prologue, La Musica proclaims her powers to move human souls. In both cases, the prologues set the tone for the remainder of the drama: music and its power are much more central in Striggio's libretto than they are in Rinuccini's.

Striggio's emphasis fitted well with Monteverdi's own philosophy. At the time of *Orfeo*, the composer was participating in a heated debate on the nature and power of music. He did so concisely and reluctantly, promising a theoretical treatise and then failing to deliver. His theoretical statements, then and later, are complemented by his settings of several texts that focus on music, its style and its powers, *Orfeo* being the most ambitious. These works are not explicitly polemical: unlike Bach in *Phoebus und Pan*, Wagner in *Die Meistersinger*, or Strauss in *Capriccio*, Monteverdi did not create characters that engage in aesthetic debates. Nonetheless, his works on the power of music can be read as the artistic creeds of a composer whose position was difficult to theorise.

## **The background**

Standard accounts of music history describe the period around 1600 as the transition between the Renaissance and the Baroque. Monteverdi and his contemporaries did not use these terms, but some of them, at least, were conscious of being part of major upheaval. Monteverdi was right in the middle of this upheaval, his style a potential target for conservatives and revolutionaries alike.

This was also the golden age of the madrigal. Starting with composers like Cipriano de Rore (1515/6-1565), and continuing with Luca Marenzio (1553/4-1599), Giaches de Wert (1535-1596), Carlo Gesualdo (c1561-1613) and others, the madrigal reached a peak of dramatic expression, combined with harmonic and textural complexity; younger composers like Monteverdi seemed set to perpetuate and enrich this tradition. Yet the genre was already under a two-pronged attack. Conservative theorists, appalled by the madrigals' excessive dissonances, demanded an adherence to older, calmer style perfected in Italy by Franco-Flemish composers from Josquin Desprez (c1450/55-1521) to Adriano Willaert (c1490-1562), and codified by Willaert's student Gioseffo Zarlino (1517-1590). Meanwhile, enthusiastic innovators – or rather self-styled revivers of ancient Greek traditions – advocated the abandonment of the Franco-Flemish tradition in favour of a simpler, rhetorical style.

## **The Artusi-Monteverdi controversy**

In 1600, Monteverdi's own madrigals became the subject of a scathing critique by Giovanni Maria Artusi (c1540-1613), who studied with Zarlino and defended him against the attacks of Vincenzo Galilei (see below). In the Second Discourse of his *Artusi, or, Of the Imperfections of Modern Music*, he criticises nine short passages drawn from two of Monteverdi's madrigals. He does not mention Monteverdi's name, or the titles of his works; instead, he presents them as typical products of the time. He chose unpublished madrigals, and omitted the words. This had a dual advantage: it made it harder to identify the works and their author – and easier to ridicule these passages. Monteverdi's harsh, unprepared dissonances reflected the powerful emotions expressed in the text; in its absence, they might appear arbitrary.

Artusi's Discourse is a fictional dialogue between Luca, who dislikes Monteverdi's madrigals but tries to give him the benefit of the doubt, and Vario, who rejects these works unequivocally. Luca claims to know how composers like

Monteverdi justify their violation of Zarlino's rules; he presents their arguments to Vario, who demolishes them. But the arguments Luca quotes are purely musical – the text, or the emotions expressed in it, are never mentioned. Artusi, it seems, felt that any argument that does not arise from the music itself is not even worth mentioning. For Monteverdi, however, the expression of the words was the most important reason for violating the old rules.

Monteverdi took his time in announcing his position. At first, he allowed other writers to defend him; for his part, he simply published one of the offending madrigals, “Anima mia perdona”, in his Fourth Book (1603), without comment. Two years later, he opened his Fifth Book with the other madrigal that Artusi attacked, “Cruda Amarilli”. In the introduction to that book, Monteverdi explained that he was unable to respond to Artusi's accusations since, as the servant of the Duke of Mantua, “I am not master of the time I would require”.

Nevertheless, I wrote a reply to let it be known that I do not do things by chance, and as soon as it is rewritten it will see the light under the title *The Second Practice* [Seconda Pratica], or, *the Perfection of Modern Music*. Some will wonder at this, not believing that there is any practice other than that taught by Zarlino. But let them be assured concerning consonances and dissonances that there is a different way of considering them from that already determined, one that defends the modern manner of composition with the assent of reason and of the senses. (Treitler, *Source Readings*, p. 536)

In itself, this response amounts to little more than saying, “trust me, I know what I'm doing”. Two years later, however, Monteverdi republished it with elaborate clarifications by his brother Giulio Cesare, who provided a clear definition of the Second Practice:

By Second Practice – which was first renewed in our notation by Cipriano de Rore [...] and was followed and amplified by [composers such as] Ingengneri [Monteverdi's teacher], Marenzio, Giaches de Wert, Luzzasco, and likewise by Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini, and finally by loftier spirits with a better understanding of true art – he [Claudio] understands the one that turns to the perfection of *melodia*,<sup>1</sup> that is, the one that considers harmony commanded, not commanding and makes the words the mistress of the harmony. For such reasons, he has called it “second” and not “new”, and has called “practice” and not “theory”, because he understands its explanation to turn on the manner of employing the consonances and dissonances in actual composition. (p. 540)

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<sup>1</sup> *Melodia* does not mean “melody” in the modern sense; for Giulio Cesare, relying on Plato's definitions, “*melodia* signifies the totality of a composition”, encompassing “harmonic relation, rhythm, and text” (Treitler, *Source Reading*, p. 535).

Judging from the list of composers, Monteverdi's Second Practice encompassed a wide range of styles – from the many-voiced madrigals to the new-fashioned, one-voice-with-continuo monodies. While praising the Second Practice, the Monteverdi brothers do not deride the First Practice – “the one that considers the harmony not commanded, but commanding, and not the servant, but the mistress of the words” (ibid, pp. 539-540). This open-minded approach is highly significant at a time when prominent innovators treated all forms of vocal polyphony with derision.

### **Galilei vs. Monteverdi: the debate that didn't happen**

16 years before Artusi, another musician and theorist issued his own scathing denunciation of the polyphonic madrigal. Vincenzo Galilei (late 1520s-1591) did not reject harmonic innovations – on the contrary, his unpublished counterpoint treatise was intended to provide a theoretical framework to justify them. The musicologist Claude Palisca claimed that this treatise can be viewed as a substitute to the one Monteverdi promised to write on the treatment of dissonances; on this particular issue, the two musicians held similar views. In other respects, however, Galilei's aesthetics were fundamentally opposed to Monteverdi's.

While approving polyphonic textures in instrumental music, Galilei dismisses vocal polyphony as one of several misplaced modern inventions. The ancients Greeks and Romans, he contends, valued solo singing above the use of many voices, “and if the singing of many together was also esteemed, it was the singing of one melody and not of so many”; he particularly objects to canonic imitation, which “interfered with the comprehension of the words”. He also condemns the repetitions of individual words – especially when it destroys the poetic metre, making poetry sound like prose; and rejects the excessive employment of “runs of *gorgia* and many other artifices” (see excerpt from Galilei's counterpoint treatise in Carter, pp. 185/6).

In his 1581 *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music*, Galilei also criticised the use of musical word-paintings, which madrigalists often employed to illustrate and intensify the words. Instead of arousing the emotions connected with the graphically-depicted words, he claims, these word-paintings “have aroused laughter and at other times contempt in the listeners, who felt they were being ridiculed” (Treitler, *Source Readings*, p. 464). Instead of indulging in such word-paintings, he wrote, composers would do well to attend theatrical performances, and observe how they differentiate between characters and situations:

in what manner [the actor] speaks, how high or low his voice is pitched, with what volume of sound, with what sort of accents and gestures, and with what rapidity or slowness his words are uttered". [...] From these variations of circumstances [... composers] will be able to select the norm of what is fitting for the expression of any other conception whatever that can call for their handling. (ibid, p. 466)

Thus, according to Galilei, vocal music should emulate the art of actors and orators, and adhere strictly to the rhythms and structures of the poetic text. This allows the use of harsh harmonies for expressive emphasis, but disqualifies distracting word-paintings. Polyphony, which obscures the text, must be shunned.

Jacopo Peri, in the introduction to his 1600 opera *Euridice*, expressed a similar view:

Seeing that dramatic poetry was concerned and that it was therefore necessary to imitate speech in song (and surely no one ever spoke in song), I judged that the ancient Greeks and Romans (who, in the opinion of many, sang their tragedies throughout in representing them upon the stage) had used a harmony surpassing that of ordinary speech but falling so far below the melody of song as to take an intermediate form. [...] For this reason, discarding every other manner of singing hitherto heard, I devoted myself wholly to seeking out the kind of imitation necessary for these poems. (Strunk, *Source Readings*, p. 374)

Peri belonged to a Florentine group of intellectuals and musicians that experimented with the revival of Greek drama; Galilei was associated with a rival group with a similar agenda, known as the Florentine Camerata, as was Peri's rival Giulio Caccini. Both groups have inadvertently created the genre we now know as "opera" and the style of speech-like solo singing that would later be known as "recitative". The term "recitative" itself was invented shortly afterwards (according to Dale Monson in *New Grove Online*, it was first used by Domenico Mazzochi in 1626); distinctions between *recitativo secco* and *accompagnato* would only become relevant decades later. However, there was already a gap between two types of monodic writing. The musicologist Nino Pirrotta (cited by Barbara Hanning, in her *New Grove Online* entry on Caccini) described Peri's style as *recitar cantando* (speech modified by singing), as opposed to Caccini's *cantar recitando* (song modified by speaking).

The Peri-Caccini rivalry is reflected in their respective settings of Rinuccini's *Euridice*. I am not familiar with Caccini's setting; but by all accounts, Peri's was the more austere and dramatic. Peri's claim that he has discarded "every other manner of singing hitherto heard" is exaggerated; but he reserved his most declamatory, speech-like style for the most intense scenes. Caccini, on the other hand, had greater faith in

the expressive potential of vocal virtuosity and lyrical melody, though he shared Peri's and Galilei's suspicion towards for vocal counterpoint.

Monteverdi did not write an introduction to his *Orfeo*, but his method in practice was almost the opposite to Peri's theoretical stance. Where Peri rejected previous manners of singing, Monteverdi studied and emulated all of them – from *prima pratica* polyphony to Peri-like recitatives. Where Peri sought to write music that resembled speech, Monteverdi sought to demonstrate music's own unique powers.

### **Orfeo as the ideal musician**

Whether Monteverdi intended *Orfeo* as a polemical or philosophical statement is a moot point. Striggio's libretto is a complex, multi-faceted drama with several emotional and symbolic levels. The Prologue, however, unambiguously declares that the story of Orpheus is presented primarily as an illustration of music's power. And it is indeed **music's** power. Caccini, in the Preface to his 1602 treatise *Le nuove musiche* (Treitler, *Source Readings*, p. 608), claimed that instrumental and polyphonic music offer “no pleasure other than what harmony grants to the ear alone (since the mind cannot be moved by such music without understanding the words)”; Striggio's *Musica*, on the other hand, claims that she can calm agitated souls and enflame frigid ones with her lyre – without the aid of words. Monteverdi's lavish and detailed orchestration can be linked to this proclamation.

Whatever the intentions behind it, *Orfeo* clearly embodies Monteverdi's eclectic, polystylistic conception of the Second Practice. Writers like Artusi, Galilei and Peri sought to limit music, to determine pre-set boundaries for it; Monteverdi sought to unleash all its powers, wherever they might reside.

This is particularly evident in his characterisation of the title role:

Orfeo himself can be interpreted as a musically symbolic self-portrait of Monteverdi. Like Monteverdi, Orfeo is a composer; and [...] he shows himself highly proficient in a variety of types of musical expression. Unlike Peri's and Rinuccini's Orfeo, Monteverdi's protagonist dominates the entire opera, his songs, laments, and recitatives serving as the focal point of each act. Each of Orfeo's scenes portrays him in a different affective, or emotional, situation; each of these scenes requires a different kind of music. (Newby, p. 308)

In some cases, Orfeo's singing seems almost speech-like, adapting itself to Galilei's and Peri's exacting standards. “Rosa del ciel”, his ecstatic hymn to the Sun and to Euridice in Act I, illustrates that “intermediate form, surpassing ordinary speech but falling below the melody of song”, that Peri described – as does most of

his Act V lament after he loses Euridice for the second time. The opera also contains outbursts of anguished, impassioned speech – for example when Euridice is taken from him in Act IV and he tries (and fails) to follow her into Hades. All these speeches – be they ecstatic, impassioned or resigned – are the works of a very sensitive musician; but they retain a speech-like flexibility that the Florentines might have approved.

At the other end of the spectrum are Orfeo's actual songs. At the beginning of Act II, for example, the shepherds and nymphs ask Orfeo to sing and play in honour of his love; he responds with a boisterously tuneful, strophic piece, similar in style to the shepherds' own. But Orfeo also adopts a distinctly musical style at moments of high dramatic intensity. A prominent example is "Tu se' morta", the centrepiece of Act II, which Orfeo sings shortly after learning of Euridice's death. In it, he expresses his profound grief – but also expresses confidence in his musical abilities, resolving to use them in order to rescue his beloved.

In expressing his resolve to use his own musical powers, Monteverdi's Orfeo adopts madrigalesque techniques that Vincenzo Galilei had mocked 26 years earlier:

finding the line: "He descended into hell, into the lap of Pluto", they [the madrigal composers] have made one part of the composition descend in such a way that the singer has sounded more like someone groaning to frighten children and terrify them than like anyone singing sense. In the opposite way, finding [the lines] "This one aspires to the stars", in declaiming it they have ascended to a height that no one shrieking from excessive pain, internal or external, has ever reached. (Treitler, *Source Readings*, pp. 464-465)

Monteverdi clearly does not share this contempt for word-paintings. Finding the line "I will surely descend into the deepest abyss", he sets it to a descending line. When his Orfeo sings "I will bring you [Euridice] to see the stars", he rises to a noticeably higher register. "Farewell, earth", he sings, his voice drooping; at "farewell, sky" it rises again, ascending even further as he mentions the sun; then it droops again for his final "farewell". These word-paintings are supported by harmonic and rhythmic subtlety that lends them eloquence and poignancy; but the same is true of the best madrigals. What Galilei denounced as artifice is, for Monteverdi's Orfeo, an instinctive, natural response.

The ultimate test of Orfeo's musicality, however, is "Possente spirto", the mesmerising aria in which he attempts to persuade the boatman, Caronte (Charon), to allow him to cross the river Styx and enter the realm of the dead. Newby stresses that, at this crucial juncture, Orfeo requires "total control of his resources" (p. 320). The

improvised musicality of “Tu se’ morta” is not enough; instead, Orfeo addresses Caronte with a carefully-planned prayer. Of the six verses of “Possente spirto”, five are built upon the same ground bass, forming a series of strophic variations, into which he incorporates a skilful alternation of vocal and instrumental phrases. The response is primarily musical: “Monteverdi seems to have decided to ignore the formal scheme of [Striggio’s] verse, and imposes his own musical structure upon it” (Newby, p. 313).

“Possente spirto” also reflects Orfeo’s skill as “a singer schooled both in the older art of complex ornamented song and in the newer Florentine art of passionate rhetorical declamation” (Whenham, *Cambridge Opera Guide*, p. 68). The first four verses are given in two different versions: plain and ornamented. The former was probably written for singers who wished to improvise their own ornaments, rather than follow the model suggested by Monteverdi. The dual option is dropped at verse five, which is also unusual in other respects. It is addressed, not to Caronte, but to Euridice; Orfeo, momentarily lost in his emotion, strays from his fixed bass line. The obbligato instruments are silenced; perhaps Orfeo stopped playing his lyre. The cessation of virtuoso ornamentation, suggesting a more introverted style, might be part of the same pattern. In the next and final verse, he regains his poise and renews his prayer to Caronte. The bass line returns, as does the orchestra – now playing sustained chords, rather than ornamented lines. Orfeo’s line, similarly, retains the introverted character of the previous verse. But in the last line, where Orfeo boasts in the power of his lyre, both he and his accompanists burst again in virtuosic ornamentation.

The ornaments can thus be viewed as representations of Orfeo’s controlled virtuosity; this interpretation is implicit in Anthony Rolfe-Johnson’s rendition of “Possente spirto” for Gardiner. Rolfe-Johnson’s ornamentations becomes increasingly harsh and brilliant, reaching the height of brittleness when Orfeo introduces himself in verse 4. This accentuates the introverted, lyrical and pained character of unornamented portions. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Victor Torres (in Garrido’s recording) adopts a soft, mysterious reading, implying that Orfeo is attempting to hypnotise Caronte with his mesmerising technique. In any case, Monteverdi clearly uses the ornaments to emphasise a few madrigalesque word-paintings – once again incorporating the techniques of the older genre into the new.



As already noted, “Possente spirto” includes richly ornamental obbligati for various instruments. In Renaissance iconography, Orfeo is often depicted holding a bowed string instrument. Silke Leopold believes that this iconography is reflected in Monteverdi’s orchestration: violins appear almost every time the lyre is mentioned. Other instruments, she argues, were chosen because of what they symbolised in late 16th century court *intermedi* (depictions of dramatic, usually mythological scenes which clearly influenced the earliest operas). According to this interpretation, the violins in verses 1, 4 and 6 represent Orfeo’s lyre; references to death in verse 2 invoke the cornetti, references to heaven in verse 3 invoke the harp (“Orpheus 1607”, p. 14).

Other scholars are sceptical about such symbolic interpretations for individual instruments. Thus, Stephen Stubbs (p. 96) suggests that

all the string instruments in *Orfeo* (violins, viole da gamba, chitarroni, ceteroni and harp) together and separately, represent the ‘Armonia sonara de la lira del ciel’ with which ‘La Musica’ promises from the beginning to enchant mortals’ ears and arouse their souls.

John Whenham (*Cambridge Opera Guide*, p. 68) similarly argues that the obbligato instruments in “Possente spirto” represent the power of Orfeo’s lyre to imitate all existing instruments. According to this interpretation, Monteverdi treated Orfeo’s lyre as a supernatural, all-embracing instrument, which encompasses a variety of timbres, just as Orfeo’s singing technique comprises a variety of styles.

Curiously, “Possente spirto” is not a resounding success: Caronte, though moved, still refuses to allow Orfeo to pass. Orfeo resorts to a passionate outburst in the new recitative style, which concludes, however, with a more measured, clearly-structured plea – “Give me back my love, Gods of Tartarus”. But even this does not work, and Orfeo finally wins an ambiguous victory by lulling Caronte to sleep with his lyre.

It is difficult to believe that Monteverdi meant “Possente spirto” to represent an artistic failure on Orfeo’s part. More likely, he wanted his listeners to be moved by Orfeo’s plea; Caronte’s stony reaction only reveals his own unfeeling nature. Despite the dramatic situation, then, “Possente spirto” represents Orfeo’s musical powers at their highest. Monteverdi’s Orfeo, unlike Peri’s, has no inclination to disavow previous singing styles; even when he comes close to imitating speech, he never forgets that he is a musician. He uses his art in all its variety; he withholds nothing, yet still succeeds in creating an aria of remarkable cohesion and integrity.

## **Musical structures and stylistic eclecticism**

Monteverdi's Orfeo is not a lone musician in a world of speakers; rather, he is the most inspired singer in a world suffused with music, a world which matches his own stylistic diversity. There are many dance sequences, tuneful melodies and madrigal-like choruses in Acts I, II and V; Acts III and IV both end with polyphonic, *prima-pratica*-style choruses, proving that even this ostensibly inexpressive style has its uses in musical drama.

One potential pitfall in such eclecticism is disintegration. Throw several styles together, and you risk creating an incomprehensible mishmash. One answer is that the text provides the backbone – the audience can follow the coherent dramatic narrative, and thus assimilate the great diversity of musical styles. Monteverdi, however, was clearly not content with this answer. Instead, he created musical structures that give coherent shape to his rich stylistic mosaic.

Act II, for example, is built in two broad parts, each with its own internal shape. The first part is written as a relatively simple series of strophic, dance-like songs, sometimes separated by short ritornelli. The second part is more complex. It begins with the arrival of the Messenger announcing Euridice's death. Her recitative "Ahi caso acerbo" ("Ah bitter blow"), which shatters the carefree simplicity that opened the Act, becomes the refrain for the rest of the Act.

At first, "Ahi caso acerbo" seems to epitomise the Florentine style – richly expressive, yet speech-like and devoid of distinctive melody and word-paintings. After Orfeo's departure, however, the shepherds transform it into a five-part chorus. This chorus is indistinguishable in style from Monteverdi's polyphonic madrigals, making extensive use of techniques that the Florentines rejected; yet it emerges naturally from a Florentine-style recitative. A few moments later, "Ahi caso acerbo" becomes the refrain in an extended, madrigal-style duet. Monteverdi thus demonstrates that the madrigal – both in the time-honoured polyphonic tradition and in the newer, sparser textures – is as appropriate a vehicle for musical drama as the new recitative; and that the two genres can be linked together into a continuous yet variegated structure.

## The overall message

Monteverdi paid little heed to those theorists who tried to tell composers what **not** to do – be they conservatives who abhorred harmonic freedom or innovators who rejected counterpoint. It is not hard to understand why he never wrote the theoretical treatise he promised; among other things, his position was difficult to theorise. It looked as if he simply believed that “anything goes” – no technique should be ruled out, no style is beyond the pale.

Yet the message of *Orfeo* is more complex. This intense drama covers a wide expressive range, from carefree happiness to desperate grief, from numb passivity to bold action. Its characters include gods, demigods, spirits and ordinary humans. At its heart is an inspired artist whose awareness of his own skill is linked with an exaggerated confidence bordering on arrogance. No single style, Monteverdi seems to suggest, can encompass all this; yet the composer must be careful in matching particular styles to specific scenes. The choices cannot be determined by a set of *a priori* rules: the composer must proceed pragmatically.

Many of Monteverdi's later works differ markedly from *Orfeo* in stylistic particulars. Yet the overall message remains unchanged: to best serve the expressive demands of the text, music must remain music, and no prior limits should be set.

In his attack on Monteverdi, Artusi stated:

Through ignorance a man is unable to distinguish which activities are better and which worse, and as a result of this inability he commonly embraces many things from which he should flee and flees from many which he should follow and embrace. (Treitler, *Source Readings*, p. 534).

Paradoxically, this statement reflects Monteverdi's views more than Artusi's own; after all, Artusi wanted composers to ignore new styles, just as Peri took pride in discarding old ones. Monteverdi, by contrast, studied old and new styles alike while remaining constantly inventive. His *Orfeo* illustrates this pursuit of all-embracing knowledge, and demonstrated that a judicious and inspired combination of all available styles can reach deeper than the single-minded adoption of one particular style.

## Bibliographical note

This article complements Sophie Roughol's article in *Goldberg* 4 (September-November 1998; [http://snipurl.com/sr\\_orf](http://snipurl.com/sr_orf)). I also recommend the *Cambridge Opera Handbook* to this opera (Cambridge University Press, 1986), edited by John Whenham, and *The New Monteverdi Companion*, edited by Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (Faber and Faber, 1985); both guides contain contributions by their respective editors and other leading scholars. The idea that Monteverdi's *Orfeo* might have been a conscious contribution to the polemics of the time is discussed extensively and insightfully in Elizabeth Newby's *A Portrait of the Artist: The Legends of Orpheus and Their Use in Aesthetics* (Garland, 1987).

Most of the historical documents quoted in this article appear in *Source Readings in Music History*, both in the original edition, edited by Oliver Strunk (Norton, 1950) and in the revised edition, edited by Leo Treitler (Norton, 1998). Most of the quotations in this article are taken from the revised edition; in the case of the introduction to Peri's *Euridice*, however, I quoted the 1950 translation. I should also note that, in several cases, the older edition provides more extensive extracts than the newer edition.

Other sources cited in this article include:

Carter, Tim. *Music in Late Renaissance and Early Baroque Italy*. London: Barsford, 1992.

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———. "The Artusi-Monteverdi Controversy". In *Monteverdi Companion*, pp. 127-158, and in his *Studies*, pp. 54-87.

Stubbs, Stephen. "*L'armonia sonora*: Continuo orchestration in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*". *Early Music* 22 (1994): 87-98.

## Discography

### Philip Pickett

John Mark Ainsley, Julia Gooding, Catherine Bott, Simon Grant, Michael George and others/ New London Consort/ Philip Pickett

Decca L'Oiseau-Lyre 433 545-2; 2 CDs, 48:26 + 59:25; recorded 1991

Also available as part of an 8-CD set of works by Monteverdi (alongside Pickett's *Vespro della Beata Vergine* and *Combatimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, and madrigals directed by Anthony Rooley and Roger Norrington): Decca 470 906-2

Rating: 4 stars

This performance treats *Orfeo* as a chamber opera. Pickett employs his resources sparingly, often using only one or two continuo instruments at a time. Different characters might be distinguished by different timbres, but alterations during monologues are relatively rare. The choruses are mostly sung one-to-a-part: the singers, most of whom possess sharply-focused, clean voices, blend into textures of crystalline clarity and purity.

At times, these factors combine into a somewhat anaemic rendition. Simon Grant's Caronte and Michael Georg's Plutone, for example, sound too relaxed and polite, an impression further exacerbated by their reticent accompanists. John Mark Ainsley, as Orfeo, is superbly controlled and moving in "Tu se' morta" and "Possente spirito", but some of his more impassioned outbursts sound too inhibited to my ears.

In other scenes, however, the sparse, soloistic approach facilitates the achievement of improvised flexibility, which enhances the drama. Dance sequences are delivered with irrepressible energy, intensified by the bright, incisive sonorities. In the tragic portions of Act II, Pickett's sense of timing, and the musicians' convincing theatrical interaction and profound expressiveness, create the impression that we are eavesdropping on real events. Catherine Bott is especially heart-rending as the Messenger (she is equally convincing as La Musica and Prosperina). The soloistic textures also emphasise the opera's links with the madrigal. An uneven performance, then (compare, however, Brian Robins' 5-star review in *Goldberg* 18, and his interview with Pickett in the same edition), but at its best offering a compellingly sharp yet intimate view of the score.

## **René Jacobs**

Laurence Dale, Efrat Ben-Nun, Jennifer Larmore, Paul Gérimon, Harry Peeters, Bernarda Fink and others/ Concerto Vocale/ René Jacobs

Harmonia Mundi 901553.54; 2 CDs, 55:27 + 64:22; recorded 1995

Rating: 5 stars

Jacobs' approach is very similar to Gabriel Garrido's in his K617 recording. Both directors employ large orchestras, with varied and sumptuous continuo accompaniments; obbligato instrumental lines are added above the continuo even where not specified (Jacobs offers historical arguments in support of this feature). Within these rich textures, both directors still guarantee textural clarity in the more complex portions. The voices are rounded and sensuous, the interpretations largely lyrical.

There is a considerable emphasis on sheer sonorous beauty in these performances. However, neither Jacobs nor Garrido ignore the music's expressive range and theatrical effectiveness; their renditions are gentle but not genteel. Both have assembled a superb cast of singers, with complementary strengths and weaknesses. Many listeners might prefer Garrido's Orfeo, the baritone Victor Torres, for his rich voice and his improvisatory suppleness; but Jacobs' Orfeo, the tenor Laurence Dale, is also superb, and his sharper approach has its advantages in more dramatic passages.

My preference for Jacobs is related primarily to his use of the orchestra. The melodic instruments he adds above the continuo line mostly play discreet chords or gentle ornaments, extending and enriching the continuo section. Garrido's players occasionally add independent melodic lines, and some listeners (myself included) find the effect fussy and distracting. English-speaking readers might also be put off by the absence of an English libretto in Garrido's booklet. That said, Garrido's richer textures and more resonant recording have their advantages (see also the discography in Roughol's article). Ultimately, both Jacobs and Garrido offer beautifully moving renditions of this opera.

## **John Eliot Gardiner**

Anthony Rolfe-Johnson, Julianne Baird, Lynne Dawson, Anne Sofie von Otter, John Tomlinson, Willard White, Diana Montague and others/ The Monteverdi Choir/ The English Baroque Soloists/ His Majesties Sagbutts & Cornetts/ John Eliot Gardiner.

Archiv Produktion 419 250-2; 2 CDs, 48:23 + 57:20; recorded 1985

Rating: 5 stars

Gardiner's version is powerfully theatrical, boldly highlighting features that are more gently underlined in other versions. To my ears the results are compellingly expressive, though other listeners might find Gardiner's dramatic gestures exaggerated.

In his approach to instrumental textures, Gardiner occupies a middle ground: more rounded and sumptuous than Pickett's, more incisive and energetic than Jacobs' and Garrido's. Like Pickett, Gardiner avoids unnotated instrumental obbligati. However, he obtains richer sonorities from his continuo section, and introduces more frequent changes in continuo instrumentation (sometimes adding or removing an instrument to emphasise individual words). His continuo section thus takes an active part in shaping the drama.

In most recent recordings of *Orfeo*, the choruses are relatively small (1-2 per part) and are primarily comprised of the soloists who sing the smaller roles, creating a sense of intimacy and continuity. Gardiner employs his excellent Monteverdi Choir as a distinct body. However, thanks to his sense of dramatic timing, the opera is still projected as a single, compelling narrative.

Anthony Rolfe-Johnson offers an exceptionally rounded portrayal of the title-role. Many interpreters emphasise the gentler, lyrical side of Orfeo's personality; Ian Bostridge, in Emmanuelle Haim's version, emphasises his virtuosity, impetuosity and almost arrogant self-confidence. Rolfe-Johnson succeeds in balancing both aspects, revealing Orfeo's complex character without seeming incongruous. Gardiner's overall approach similarly emphasises the myriad expressive and stylistic contrasts that characterise this opera; his performance reveals, and revels in, Monteverdi's union of disparate and seemingly incompatible stylistic influences.