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Abstract

Late Renaissance composer Claudio Monteverdi is known by scholars as the father of opera. While Monteverdi did not directly invent the production, we honor him as the first to successfully produce three major operas that have survived to this day. His works set the stage for future opera composers, and he drastically influenced the rise of such a large scale production. He is most known for his opera "Orfeo," which has continued to be adapted to the modern stage, and performed frequently in several opera houses. What led to the creation of such an extravagant production and never before heard musical ideas? The rise of the philosophy of humanism through discovered ancient Greco-Roman scrolls provided the foundation for new thoughts and perspectives on music and human life. Monteverdi meticulously and skillfully blended these new found ideas with rising Renaissance musical forms, creating an influential art form that is still being recreated to this day.

Keywords

Monteverdi, Claudio Monteverdi, Orfeo, Opera, Renaissance, Humanism, Aria, Recitative, Monody, Greco-Roman, Philosophy, Ancient Greek

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The Rise of Opera in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*

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Throughout the Renaissance, there emerged a desire to better understand humanity through a philosophy that came to be known as humanism.¹ Renaissance scholars reflected on the ancient Greek and Roman lifestyle with the help of newly discovered writings.² Their aim was to use past philosophy and perspectives to help better understand and grow human potential. The philosophy of humanism is applied to practically every practice during the Renaissance period, such as the sciences, literature, and music. The ancient perspectives of great thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and the like were not seen as outdated and irrelevant, but rather notable ideas that were crucial to the development of music, specifically during the Renaissance. Throughout this musical development began the rise of opera. While there were several key composers that led in the creation of opera such as Jacopo Peri, Claudio Monteverdi received praise as the first major opera composer, having three major operas that have survived to this day.³ These humanistic ideals and Greco-Roman philosophies are the grounding for his compositions. Opera historian Mark Ringer explains, "Monteverdi's music speaks to us with unparalleled directness. He found the means for the first comprehensive portrayal of the human subject in music. He taught humanity what we look and sound like on the operatic stage."⁴ Without the revival of ancient Greco-Roman ideas and the desire to learn more about human thought and emotion, opera may have never emerged. New Renaissance musical qualities combined with humanism

¹ Burkholder, 139.

² Burkholder, 138.

³ Ringer, ix.

⁴ Ringer, x.

and ancient Greco-Roman ideals led to the creation of opera as seen specifically in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*.

Humanistic concepts were synthesized with new Renaissance musical traditions to create the grounding for opera in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. In order to examine Monteverdi's use of Renaissance musical qualities in *Orfeo*, one must also survey his prior impactful compositions. In his early years as a composer, Monteverdi used the Renaissance polyphonic writing style to create what is known as the madrigal.⁵ A madrigal is a vocal work generally for two to five voices that is usually polyphonic and contrapuntal.⁶ His first book of madrigals was published in 1587 when the Renaissance was at its peak.⁷ These madrigals were put together in books such as *Madrigali, libro primo*, containing seventeen madrigals, and *Il secondo libro de madrigali*, containing twenty. These vocal works were the basis for Monteverdi's career, and these writings served as a vehicle for his other compositions. Not only were they impactful musically, but they also held the Renaissance quality of humanism and the expression of emotion. Opera expert Silke Leopold explains, "The inner balance and the lively composure of this madrigal represent the culmination of the Renaissance spirit, the outcome of an emotional attitude towards life which derives its strength from the consciousness of having a fixed place in the universe."⁸ *Orfeo* uses Monteverdi's madrigal and contrapuntal style several times. For example, the chorus (coro di spiriti) at the end of Act III sings a madrigal for five voices that creates "one of the richest textures" in the entire opera.⁹ The madrigal is contrapuntal, but mostly homophonic with a few moments of polyphony in order to directly portray the text. Madrigals also contained an imitative feature called madrigalisms, in which striking musical moments depict the text almost literally.¹⁰ This was very effective in portraying the deep emotion present in opera. There is a madrigalism in Act II in "Ahi caso acerbo" with a diminished, dissonant chord on the word "acerbo," which means bitter.

Another musical development in the late Renaissance present in *Orfeo* is the basso continuo. The basso continuo is one or more low instruments playing the bass line, and then another instrument playing improvised

⁵ Ringer, 4.

⁶ Ringer, 5.

⁷ Ringer, 4–5.

⁸ Leopold, quoted by Ringer, 6.

⁹ Ringer, 73.

¹⁰ Burkholder, 218.

chords over top.¹¹ The use of the bass was the foundation of instrumental music in the Renaissance. In his orchestra, Monteverdi had plenty of chord-playing instruments that could realize the figured bass, such as harps, lutes, harpsichords, and organs.¹² These instruments playing the basso continuo were present in almost every song during *Orfeo*. Monteverdi wrote for a variety of soloists and a richly varied orchestra, but not for both together. For him, as for the members of the Camerata, or the Italian society of poets and musicians, the solo voice was to be supported as lightly as possible, with continuo only.¹³ For example, Orfeo's aria "Scorto da te mio nume" at the beginning of Act III is accompanied simply by a basso continuo.¹⁴ Plucking the bass line on stringed instruments allowed for adequate text declamation (Example 1).

Example 1: "Scorto da te mio nume," mm. 1–5.¹⁵

ORFEO

Scor - to da te mio nu - me Spe - ran - za, Spe - ran - za u - ni - co - be -
ne de gl' afflit - ti mor - ta - li O - mai son giun - to

Another development of late Renaissance music present in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* is the use of purely instrumental music such as the toccata. Instrumental music and instruments accompanying soloists and singers were on the rise during the Renaissance. There were several common instrumental genres throughout this period such as the *ricercare*, the

¹¹ Hamm, 126.

¹² Hamm, 128.

¹³ Hamm, 129.

¹⁴ Monteverdi, 72.

¹⁵ Monteverdi, 77, <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/310353>.

canzona, the toccata, the variation, dance types, and the fantasia.¹⁶ That being said, instrumental music was still taken from vocal music, and adapted for instruments. Nonetheless, treatises were being written on how to properly compose for instruments and what their role in music should be. As Howard Brown, American musicologist explained, “By the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, composers like Giovanni Gabrieli and Claudio Monteverdi were beginning more regularly to offer advice about instrumentation.”¹⁷ In almost every opera, the orchestra plays preliminary music before the dialogue and singing begins.¹⁸ This instrumental music, or prelude, serves to give a clue about what the composer has written, and set the tone for the drama. Monteverdi used instrumental music exactly in this way as the call to action in *Orfeo*. The opening toccata in the opera is set to play three times before the curtain rises and is scored for brass.¹⁹ This piece sounds similar to a fanfare, and while it has no relation to the rest of the music in the opera, it could stand alone and function as a prelude to the opera (Example 2).

Example 2: *Toccata*, mm. 1–2.²⁰

(Allegro)

Monteverdi skillfully used these Renaissance musical inventions to portray the ever-present philosophy of humanism, which focused on persuasion. Rhetoric is the art of persuasion and was a concept that humanists began to understand through the thoughts of ancient

¹⁶ Brown, 257.

¹⁷ Brown, 261.

¹⁸ Hamm, 159.

¹⁹ Hamm, 160.

²⁰ Monteverdi, 1, <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/310353>.

thinkers.²¹ The act of expressing emotion and convincing the audience of an idea was a large part of the humanistic movement. Composers of the day believed the current style of music was not capable of adequately arousing the emotions of the audience, and according to both Aristotle and Plato, catharsis is to be achieved through music.²² Catharsis is considered to be the process of releasing and expressing emotions, which greatly reflects being in touch with humanity and oneself. The composers had the job of persuading the audience to experience these emotions and feel what the story was expressing. The ancient Greeks were convinced everything they did needed to have a purpose, and some sort of connection with their emotions. Imitation or representation of humanity needed to be present in art. They believed if music did not express human understanding, deepen one's perception of themselves or persuade the audience to feel a certain way, then it should not be played. This followed the Greek ideal that man is the measure of all things. Music was not simply art for pleasure but needed to have a purpose.²³ The beliefs of these ancient philosophers was reflected in the musical progress of opera.

One of these changes clearly observable in Renaissance music and early operas was the divergence from the concept "music of the spheres." This was the ancient Greek belief that the universe is logical and parallels the characteristics of musical harmony.²⁴ While many ancient Greek philosophies were used in Renaissance music, the strictly mathematical approach was left as music became more emotional. Ancient philosophers saw and made connections between music, mathematics, and astronomy. Astronomers believed that the harmonies from the spheres provided a model for how earthly music should sound.²⁵ For example, professor of music education George Rogers explains, "Pythagoras discovered that musical intervals, and hence all harmony, are based on mathematical ratios, ratios that also, amazingly, appear in astronomy."²⁶ Music was strictly a mathematical concept for the ancient Greeks, and it appeared to them that the universe naturally ordained musical harmony. Renaissance music, however, shifted from this cosmological view of music to an anthropological one. Music was viewed as less nebulous and from the heavens and became something

²¹ Cohen, 14.

²² Cohen, 15.

²³ Cohen, 16.

²⁴ Rogers, 41.

²⁵ Rogers, 41.

²⁶ Rogers, 42.

humanistic and man produced. Composers developed a desire to write music that was inspired by the words and represented the meaning of the text well.²⁷ Instead of revolving the words around the music, the words became of primary importance. This is what Monteverdi called *seconda prattica*, or the necessity of breaking musical norms in order to express the emotion. This was a new musical idea that was vitally important in shaping opera. While Renaissance composers took many elements from the Greco-Roman times and applied them to their compositions, they also took these ideas and shifted them to embody humanism. Brown explains, “The emancipation from medieval ways of thought and the restrictions of pre-formed structure meant that music became for the first time a self-sufficient, self-generated art.”²⁸ This transition to an anthropological view of music emphasizes the philosophy of humanism and paved the way for the creation of opera.

Monteverdi's *Orfeo* is a prime example of these humanistic qualities coming to life through music. Using the human voice in specific, musical ways, and declaring the words clearly was a way to achieve catharsis. In *Politics of Opera*, Mitchell Cohen explains, “A solo voice or choral music could declaim words in a powerfully communicative way, provided they were composed in a certain way. There had to be a single melodic line and simple accompaniment. Called ‘monody’ in the next century, it became a key expressive aspect of early opera.”²⁹ The use of monody in *Orfeo* helps convey the emotions and better persuade the audience of the emotion of the scene. For example, in the opening of Act I, Monteverdi uses clear and syllabic text declamation for the second shepherd to set the scene and explain the emotional state of the drama.³⁰

The shepherd sings on a single melodic line with a simple, chordal accompaniment of harpsichord, double bass, and viola. This approach directly highlights the text and plot of the opera. The shepherd is singing about a joyous day, and the sweet melodies in the air. Monteverdi uses a simple accompaniment consisting of just a basso continuo all throughout the opera, emphasizing the text of the story (Example 3).

²⁷ Brown, 3.

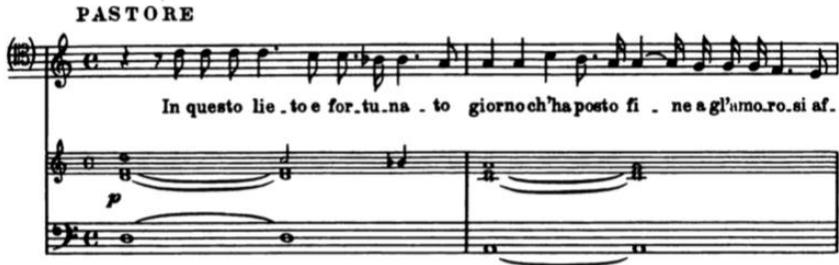
²⁸ Brown, 3.

²⁹ Cohen, 15.

³⁰ Monteverdi, 9, <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/310353>.

Example 3: “In questo lieto e fortunato giorno,” mm. 1–2.³¹

PASTORE



In questo lie . to e for . tu . na . to giorno ch'ha posto fi . ne a gl'amo . ro . si af .

Musical speech was the voice of a drama, and the only way to express the text successfully and clearly.³² Rhetoric, one of the most prominent characteristics of humanism, is seen all throughout Monteverdi’s *Orfeo*. The rhetorician is focused on expressing a particular point of view to the public through the patterns of speech and form of delivery.³³ If music is to be used to depict a story, then it can be very effective in evoking emotion from an audience if delivered clearly. The consistent use of recitative, which is a form of musical speech, and clear, syllabic text declaration throughout the opera helped Monteverdi persuade the audience. For example, in the recitative with the shepherd in Act I mentioned above, he makes the audience believe the day is joyous as Eurydice and Orpheus are to be wed. There is little polyphony, which can be distracting. When the few choral works or polyphonic textures are used, it is generally to emphasize the climax or the overall emotion of a scene. Monteverdi uses polyphonic texture and multiple voices at the end of Act II with “Ahi, caso acerbo,” which means “Ah bitter chance.” This piece is discussing the cruel fate of Eurydice and Orpheus, and to aid the climax of the story, Monteverdi adds multiple voices.

Another way Monteverdi’s work embodies the philosophy of humanism and persuades his audience is by highlighting emotion in the text through instrumentation. Monteverdi’s mixture of different instruments accompanying the singers in *Orfeo* is the first time this variety was seen. For example, in Peri’s opera *Euridice* written seven years prior to *Orfeo*, he simply used four instruments: the harpsichord, two large lutes, and a lira, or a bowed string instrument.³⁴ In *Orfeo*, the orchestra is very large,

³¹ Monteverdi, 9, <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/310353>.

³² Cohen, 70.

³³ Mack, 2.

³⁴ Hamm, 126.

including instruments of different timbres, for different purposes.³⁵ Monteverdi also specifically notated which instruments he wanted to play during the opera, which was a new concept to the Renaissance era. However, as musicologist Charles Hamm detailed, “Despite the size of the orchestra, solo singers (singing alone, or in duets or trios) are accompanied only by a basso continuo.”³⁶ This put an emphasis on the libretto, or text of the opera, while also highlighting the emotions Monteverdi wanted the audience to feel through a rich, instrumental texture. Monteverdi was keenly aware of the effect that the orchestra and specific instrumentation could have on the emotions of the audience.³⁷ For example, the instrumentation of the pastoral scenes include flutes, and other lighter instruments, which are known as *bas*, or soft instruments. This makes the pastoral scenes very light, happy, and joyful. In contrast, the scenes that take place in the underworld contain dark instrumentation, with instruments known as *haut*, or loud, such as the trombone.³⁸ This adds to the stress, pain, and agony that Orpheus is feeling. There is only one time that Monteverdi uses heavy instrumentation and solo voice together, and this is in Orpheus's aria “Possente spirito.” Even then, the voice and instruments do not compete, but the instruments play in between the soloist to add extra emphasis, or lightly play underneath the soloist. The instruments also serve as an echo figure, making them secondary. The echo figure in the instrumentation serves to portray the loneliness and fear Orpheus was feeling as he entered into the underworld. All of these musical elements work together to clearly portray the emotion and human struggles involved in *Orfeo*.

Along with the philosophy of humanism, Monteverdi adapted *Orfeo* as a whole from Greco-Roman drama. While ancient Greek music was not directly influential to Renaissance composers such as Monteverdi, their dramas did impact his writings.³⁹ The ancient Greeks celebrated an art form known as the Greek tragedy, and through this, they were effective in portraying human emotions on the stage. Greek tragedies were simply a dramatic form of art and were similar to what one would consider a play today. Greek tragedies were based on the ideas of Greek mythology and Greek gods and goddesses, making the story of Orpheus who was a legendary musician in Greek mythology a prime candidate for early opera. These Greek dramas became the basis for the idea of opera as

³⁵ Hamm, 127.

³⁶ Hamm, 128.

³⁷ Hamm, 130.

³⁸ Hamm, 130.

³⁹ Brown, 4.

creators aimed to create a contemporary version of a tragedy.⁴⁰ “The history of the performance of Greek tragedy is wholly intertwined with the history of opera. From Monteverdi to Wagner, opera has seen itself as the reinvention of Greek tragedy,”⁴¹ as quoted from an article by a professor of Greek tragedy. In these tragedies, there was thought to be a chorus that sang to emphasize climactic moments, or comment on the current situation, which is where Monteverdi would have drawn his use of a chorus in *Orfeo*.⁴² The ancients would use a musical chorus to comment and express the overall feeling of a scene. Multiple voices present more urgency and are able to express emotions in a more dramatic way. The use of a chorus does not directly move the plot of an opera forward but adds commentary and emphasis. Poets and librettists were aware of this ancient Greek tradition and used it as an expressive musical tool.⁴³ Monteverdi did that in *Orfeo* and took musical inspiration from the ancient Greeks with the chorus commenting on the situation as seen with the choral madrigal mentioned earlier, “Ahi, caso acerbo.” There is a chorus in Acts III and IV as well, where they consist of the spirits of the underworld. They are strategically placed at the end for dramatic effect, and their anthem sets up for the entry of Plutone and Proserpina in the following scene.⁴⁴ (See Example 4).

Example 4: “Ahi caso acerbo,” mm. 1–4⁴⁵

(Andante)

The musical score is for five voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor 1, Tenor 2, and Bass. The tempo is marked (Andante) and the dynamics are *mf*. The lyrics are: "Ahi ca.so a.cer.bo, Ahi fat'em - pio e cru - de.le, Ahi stel.le ingiu.rio." The score shows the first four measures of the piece.

⁴⁰ Billings, 37.

⁴¹ Billings, 37.

⁴² Billings, 35.

⁴³ Hamm, 116.

⁴⁴ Ringer, 73.

⁴⁵ Monteverdi, 64, <https://imslp.org/wiki/Special:ReverseLookup/310353>.

Finally, Monteverdi drew from the pastoral drama and intermedio to create *Orfeo*. A pastoral drama is a play with song and music throughout.⁴⁶ Burkholder, Grout and Palisca write, "In a tradition derived from ancient Greece and Rome, pastoral poems told of idyllic love in rural settings peopled by rustic youths and maidens as well as mythological figures."⁴⁷ The first pastoral drama staged was also about Orpheus, entitled *Favola d'Orfeo* by Angelo Poliziano.⁴⁸ These became increasingly popular among courts during the Renaissance, and early opera composers took subject matter, personalities, music, and dance from these dramas. Monteverdi pulled from such plots and characters to write *Orfeo*. Another musical source was the intermedio, which, according to Burkholder, was a "musical interlude on a pastoral, allegorical, or mythological subject performed between acts of a play."⁴⁹ Intermedi could be very elaborate with choral music, solo songs, instrumental music, costumes, dance, and scenery. Monteverdi considered these Renaissance traditions throughout his composition of *Orfeo*, such as a scene depicting Orpheus entering Hades, or the joy of celebrating a wedding.

The synthesis of Renaissance musical qualities with ancient Greco-Roman humanistic philosophies led to the development of the art form opera. Monteverdi utilized these ideals to create the long lasting and iconic *Orfeo*. This opera shaped future ones and provided a reference for future composers to use. Not only that, but *Orfeo* is still being reshaped and performed on the stage in modern times. In a dissertation about Monteverdi's modernization, Gregory Louis Camp of Oxford writes,

Monteverdi's operas have continued to spread to America and the rest of Europe to the present day, when the most celebrated opera directors, conductors, and singers perform them and audiences become increasingly familiar with them. Over the past hundred years, the operas of Claudio Monteverdi have become iconic symbols of the early-music movement and have entered the canon of so-called great operas.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Burkholder, 298.

⁴⁷ Burkholder, 298.

⁴⁸ Burkholder, 298.

⁴⁹ Burkholder, 299.

⁵⁰ Camp, 1.

Orfeo is consistently being reproduced all around the world. Just as Monteverdi did with *Orfeo*, composers have taken from an earlier great work to create something new and unexpected such as the modern musical *Hadestown* that also explores the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Monteverdi's opera has immensely impacted the world of music, and it is incredible to see the continued success of a musical work four hundred years later.

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