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From Modal to Tonal: The Influence of Monteverdi on Musical Development

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From Modal to Tonal: The Influence of Monteverdi in Musical Development

Musical transitions: they have been observed from brilliant fugal counterpoint of the Baroque era to the simplicity in homophony of the Classical age, from the emotionless Medieval Gregorian chants to the embodiment of feelings based off of the Doctrine of Affections, and even from through the structured harmonic progressions of the Classical era to the expansion of chords in the Romantic period. This type of musical development is no different in the shift from modality to tonality in the late Renaissance and early Baroque era. This transition revolutionized the theory behind the sounds and structures of music. While both terms imply the organization of pitches within a given piece, modal and tonal are only broad terms which require further explanation in order to evaluate the transition between modality and tonality.

To comprehend the development, it is essential to simply understand what the terms modal and tonal mean within music. Modality has proven to be a difficult concept to explain on its own. Many studies evaluate modality in terms of the later established tonal system and define modality by comparing the two systems to one another. Modern studies also explain modes in terms of the scales. Susan McClary states, “Modern definitions frequently are tied to the octave scales associated with the various modes. Thus, dorian differs from aeolian only in that its fifth and sixth degrees are a whole step apart rather than a half step.”¹ This explanation only allows for an extremely narrow and slim selection of music due to the low amount of music written in such a way that this can be proved. If a piece seemingly contains two different modes, score studies and evaluations of music can become confusing and difficult. Therefore, the modern view of modes does not provide the best means of analyzing music.

¹ Susan McClary, *The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization in the Works of Monteverdi* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University, 1976): 18.

However, the Renaissance definition offers substance to proving modality. Established by Zarlino, a Renaissance theorist, this definition states that modes are either authentic or plagal. McClary explains, “In an authentic mode, the octave is divided harmonically, and the dividing pitch is a fifth above the lowest pitch of the octave. In a plagal mode, the division is arithmetic, and the dividing pitch is a fourth above the lowest pitch of the octave. In both cases, the final is the lowest pitch of the species of fifth.”² This definition is especially helpful in determining the theoretical view of modes in how they are divided harmonically as opposed to simply how they are as a scale pattern (Ex. 1). In conclusion to defining modes, McClary paraphrases Zarlino by saying, “Therefore a better concept of mode includes the idea of a whole system of pitches, organized patterns of sound, and complete structures, all controlled by considerations of consonance.”³ Thus, the modal system is essentially a set of rules which composers are to follow in order to create music in consonance. This formed the foundation of music in the late Renaissance era.



Example 1 The division octaves in authentic and plagal modes

Tonality, on the other hand, is significantly less complicated to prove. It is the basis by which musicians use major and minor keys or cadences. In discussing the studies of tonality, McClary claims, “These concentrate on the origins of certain chordal progressions at the cadence, the development of these patterns in popular music of the sixteenth century, indications of possible harmonic-vertical orientation (as opposed to linear) in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-

² McClary, *The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization*, 20.

³ *Ibid*, 21.

century repertoires, and the apparent awareness by Renaissance theorists of these changes.”⁴

These characteristics are evident in modern music and music dating back to the late Renaissance and early Baroque era.

These two different systems of composing music form the theory behind the sound of Western music. However, while the two systems are important in themselves, the transition stage between modality and tonality is especially intriguing. During the time when these changes were occurring, Claudio Monteverdi made his rise as a composer in madrigals and later in operas. The evolution from modality to tonality can be seen in his works. A change which did not occur quickly, tonality developed slowly and gradually, which can be observed in an evaluation of Monteverdi's early works in comparison to his later musical achievements. Claudio Monteverdi was a key composer in the transition of music from modality to tonality in the late Renaissance era due to his background in music theory, his use of modality within his early madrigals, and his use of tonality in the opera *L'Orfeo*.

In observing the development of tonality in the works of Monteverdi, one must examine the musical and theoretical background of the composer to understand what and who influenced him as a composer. Monteverdi's musical career began in Cremona, Italy, a small town in close proximity with Milan. Cremona provided Monteverdi with an abundance of resources for musical training. In Hans Ferdinand Redlich's biography of Monteverdi, he states, “It was the home and the sphere of activity of Andrea Amati, the founder of the great family of violin

⁴ McClary, *The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization*, 2.

makers. . . . Costanzo Porta, the oldest Italian madrigalist. . . . [and] Benedetto Pallavicino.”⁵

Whether big or small, each of these people played a role in Monteverdi’s musical development.

The time period of Monteverdi’s musical training also influenced his early compositional style. The Counter-reformation occurred during the mid-1500s. It was a time of reform in the church and was led largely by the Council of Trent who declared that the sacred music of this time was impure. Hugo Leichtentritt quotes Erasmus of Rotterdam, a famous theologian who criticized church music, by citing, “‘We have introduced’, he says, ‘an artificial and theatrical music into the church, a bawling and an agitation of various voices. . . . Horns, trumpets, pipes vie and sound along constantly with the voices. . . . [and] the people run into the churches as if they were theatres, for the sake of the sensuous charm of the ear.’”⁶ Through this rise in agitation towards sacred music, the Council of Trent encouraged a change in the meaning of the text in church music and discouraged the use of secular polyphony. During this time, many composers sought to follow the dictates of the reform while also introducing a greater understanding of musicality and emotions within music. Such composers include Vincenzo Ruffo, Maestro di Cappella of Verona Cathedral and later chapelmaster at the Duomo in Milan,⁷ and his student Marc’ Antonio Ingegneri, the instructor for Monteverdi. Ruffo began by creating a new style in the music. He followed reforms in his music by creating “clear enunciation of the text, achieved by homophonic procedures. . . .with several voices of his music tightly bound in chordal progressions fitted to the rhythm of the text. . . .”⁸ Ruffo then influenced Ingegneri in his

⁵ Hans Ferdinand Redlich, *Claudio Monteverdi: Life and Works* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1952), 4.

⁶ Hugo Leichtentritt, “The Reform of Trent and Its Effect on Music,” *The Musical Quarterly*, no. 3 (July 1944), 319.

⁷ Redlich, *Claudio Monteverdi: Life and Works*, 5-6.

⁸ Lewis Lockwood, “The Sacred Music of Vincenzo Ruffo,” *Renaissance News* 8, no. 2 (Summer, 1955), 106.

compositions as the Counter-reformation continued. Ingegneri composed simple and typically homophonic works to align with the reforms.

Being his instructor, Ingegneri greatly influenced Monteverdi's early life. He held the position of church cantor at the cathedral in Cremona and was "chiefly responsible for Cremona's rapid rise as a center of musical culture."⁹ Music in Cremona was centered around the church. Leo Schrade explains in his book, *Monteverdi: Creator of Modern Music*, that while there is no record of Monteverdi being a part of a choir in the church, Ingegneri provided him with access to the church and its music. He received choral and compositional training from Ingegneri, which would develop him into the magnificent composer that he quickly became.¹⁰ Involving the studies of modality, Monteverdi's music theory background helped him to compose his early madrigals using the modal system.

Monteverdi's musical progress continued as he studied at the University of Cremona. It was there that he developed a sense of the humanities. "It is more than likely that the man who was to vie with the musical artists of antiquity, who was to conceive of the liberal arts as the basis of his work, who was to distinguish himself by profundity of thought and breadth of knowledge, took advantage of the opportunities furnished by the university."¹¹ Monteverdi developed the art of humanism and translated this into his compositions. This had an effect on his operas as they portrayed the human emotions, varying the keys between major and minor to create a specific mood. Monteverdi's study within the University of Cremona further advanced his skill as composer.

⁹ Leo Schrade, *Monteverdi: Creator of Modern Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1950), 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 78.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 80.

This background created Monteverdi into the musician and composer that he would later become. His experience with Ingegneri and training in the church allowed him to be immersed in the theory of music. As his musical works developed, he became called the ‘Father of Opera’ due to his innovations in this genre of music. He stepped out of the previous confines on music and used chromatic harmonies, more accompanying instruments, and tonal qualities to create music that was inspiring and moving to listeners and audiences of the day.¹² Overall, the background Monteverdi received formed a solid foundation for the theoretical structure of his music to come.

Monteverdi’s earliest famous works were his madrigals. These were composed and published in nine books over a time span of about forty years. The first book of madrigals was published in 1587 and easily shows modality in Monteverdi’s music. Falling close to the transition to tonality, these madrigals are some of the last works which can be analyzed in the modal system. Providing a means of observing the modal system, these works help support the case of the transition from modality to tonality in this late Renaissance and early Baroque era.

First, Monteverdi’s madrigals contain modal techniques through the observation of the diapente, or the perfect fifth. Ultimately, the diapente reveals the means by which a modal piece can be analyzed harmonically. In modal works, the fifth scale degree provides a strong indication for the mode of the piece. Likewise, the scale degree on which a chord is placed has a large bearing on structure of a modal piece. Certain scale degrees can only be harmonized in certain modes. For example, “the fourth degree may be harmonized in ionian, mixolydian, and Aeolian by the triad on the fourth degree, although this harmony is more frequently used to represent the sixth degree as upper auxiliary to the diapente.”¹³ However, the diapente can be harmonized in

¹²Redlich, *Claudio Monteverdi: Life and Works*, 139-140.

¹³ McClary, *The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization*, 88.

any mode, revealing its strong importance within modal music. An example of this strong usage of the diapente can be found in the madrigal “Ah dolente partita” found in Monteverdi’s Book 4 of madrigals.¹⁴ Being in the aeolian mode, key notes will be the octave of a divided at e, the upper boundary of the diapente. Within the first and second motives, there is a clear establishment of e. Ultimately, the piece as a whole is based off of this establishment of e, which helps to show the modality in this madrigal.

Secondly, the linear pattern of musical lines in Monteverdi’s madrigals support the modal system. McClary explains, “The modal system, as it appears in the five-voice madrigals of Monteverdi, is essentially linear. That is, structural function is primarily projected through melodic gestures. Most of the pitches in the structural melodic line are articulated by harmonic collections that add interpretative dimension.”¹⁵ This means that instead of first composing vertically through the use of harmonies, pieces of music were produced horizontally, creating music based on the melody line. An example of this can be found in Monteverdi’s fourth book of madrigals in a piece titled “Anima mia perdona” within measures 19 and 20 (Ex. 2). Here, the function is based on the descent of the melody from the fifth scale degree to the final.¹⁶ The harmonic progression of the piece is added after the melody has been composed. This linear projection of melody and harmony is a facet of the modal system and can be seen clearly in Monteverdi’s madrigals.

¹⁴McClary, *The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization* , 114-16.

¹⁵ Ibid, 9.

¹⁶ Ibid, 10.



Example 2 Claudio Monteverdi, *Madrigals Book 4*, “Anima mia perdona,” mm.19-20
 (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1927. IMSLP,
[http://imslp.org/wiki/Madrigals,_Book_4,_SV_75%E2%80%93933_\(Monteverdi,_Claudio\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Madrigals,_Book_4,_SV_75%E2%80%93933_(Monteverdi,_Claudio)))

Likewise, in modal works, composers can use a linear motion in the bass line to articulate the coming pitch. This could be done through typical bass patterns such as the Romanesca. Essentially, these bass patterns extend the linear line and form a progression to lead to the final to harmonize the diapente. However, as McClary states, “The sense of progression does not come from the bass, however, but from the skeletal modal line that generates the bass. These patterns all derive from the diapente and simply represent various harmonizations of it.”¹⁷ Therefore, in this instance, the bass line works to emphasize the modal system being used in a piece. “Anima mia perdona” provides an example of this type of modal influence. In measures 13-22, the Romanesca pattern is used to harmonize the motive and therefore establish the mode. Beginning in measure thirteen, the ascent of the modal line in the top voice spans from e to a and then from a to d in the following measure. This is a reverse of the Romanesca pattern (Ex. 3). The following measures create a descent from d to a, establishing these two key notes in the

¹⁷ McClary, *The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization*, 37.

mode.¹⁸ The bass pattern in these measures, especially those in measures 16 and 17, follows the Romanesca pattern, which forms a clear basis for the modal system.

The image shows a musical score for Claudio Monteverdi's madrigal "Anima mia perdona" from Book 4. It features five staves. The top four staves are vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) with lyrics: "Do . ve pie . to . sa es . ser non può Do . ve pie . to . sa es .". The bottom staff is the basso continuo line. Dynamics include piano (p) and mezzo-piano (mp). The score is in a modal setting, likely Dorian or Mixolydian, as indicated by the text.

Example 3 Claudio Monteverdi, *Madrigals Book 4*, "Anima mia perdona" mm. 13-17 ((Vienna: Universal Edition, 1927. IMSLP, [http://imslp.org/wiki/Madrigals,_Book_4,_SV_75%E2%80%93393_\(Monteverdi,_Claudio\)](http://imslp.org/wiki/Madrigals,_Book_4,_SV_75%E2%80%93393_(Monteverdi,_Claudio)))

One final example of Monteverdi's madrigals is found in book five in a piece titled "Cruda Amarilli." This piece in particular creates a transition to tonality through its obscure use of dissonance.¹⁹ In Renaissance modal counterpoint, a key rule requires consonance, especially on strong beats. However, Monteverdi twists this piece by placing harsh dissonances on strong beats such as in measure two when the notes G, A, B, C, and D, the first five notes of the mixolydian scale, are all sung simultaneously, resolving to a G major chord on the following beat (Ex. 4). This breaks modal counterpoint rules of consonance due to the dissonance falling on beat three, a strong beat, and resolving on beat four, a weak beat. This example provides a transition into the tonal works that Monteverdi would soon produce.

¹⁸ McClary, *The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization*, 141-42.

¹⁹ Claudio Monteverdi, "Cruda Amarilli," in *Norton Anthology of Western Music: Volume 1: Ancient to Baroque*, eds. J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014): 430-34.



Example 4 Claudio Monteverdi, *Madrigals Book 5* “Cruda Amarilli,”
mm. 1-3 (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).

Monteverdi’s music made a strong transition into tonality through his operas. While opera did not contribute to a large portion of Monteverdi’s works, a study of this genre, specifically his opera titled *L’Orfeo*, reveals his in depth understanding of music. In its creation, opera was known as the “play in music” or a “musical play.”²⁰ This was a new drama for the stage that audiences had not experienced before. However, Monteverdi’s history and extensive study of madrigals helped him develop this new genre of music. As Mark Ringer states, “Like Beethoven’s piano sonatas, Monteverdi’s madrigals are an extraordinarily rich musical articulation of a great artist’s changing techniques and changing perception of the world.”²¹ Monteverdi’s madrigals reveal his creativity and his ability to compose music outside of what was considered normal during his day. This translates over into the development of opera. His operas are highly expressive, but more importantly, they display tonal qualities, revealing a transition from modality to tonality. An opera composed by Monteverdi illustrating tonal elements is *L’Orfeo*.

²⁰ Mark Ringer, *Opera’s First Master: The Musical Dramas of Claudio Monteverdi* (Pompton Plains, New Jersey: Amadeus Press, LLC, 2006), 31-32.

²¹ Ibid, 5.

Monteverdi's first opera, *L'Orfeo*, contains many of the new facets of the genre. It is the perfect balance of music, words, and drama which is the epitome of opera.²² Often times throughout the opera, the music depicts the words by using text expression. Furthermore, the development of the plot provides an incredible drama that was new to this time period. The plot itself is written in a way that allows art to take its full form. Ultimately, Orfeo, a demigod, aspires to save his love, Euridice, from the underworld. He even travels there to save her, but he is unable to do so. Monteverdi takes control of the audiences' emotions by allowing the music to represent the feelings depicted within portions of the opera. These aspects of *L'Orfeo* make it new and innovative to the music of this time period.

A concept found prominently throughout *L'Orfeo* is the idea of tonality. *L'Orfeo* can be viewed as one of the earliest tonal works due to the prolonged cadences and harmonic analysis of various portions of the opera. For example, *L'Orfeo* begins with a toccata, a rather improvisatory piece designed to open the opera until the curtain rises. This piece pulls strongly to the major key of C. As a shorter work, this piece is composed predominately around the I chord in C major.²³ This prolonged use of the C major chord allows an audience to hear an extremely distinct major sound, a sound much different from the modal system. Similar examples are found in other portions of the work.

²² Ringer, *Opera's First Master*, 43.

²³ Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*, ed. G. Francesco Malipiero (London: J. & W. Cester, Ltd., 1923).

Presented within the first scene of Act I, the piece titled “In questo lieto e fortunato giorno” produces sounds, which might confuse listeners due to the influence of modality and tonality simultaneously. A tonal concept found within this piece is the prolongation of a note to reveal a key area. The beginning of this piece is structured as the D dorian mode (Ex. 5). It maintains the lowered sixth scale degree with the Bb as well as the lowered seventh degree with the C natural. This forms the dorian mode.

Example 5 Claudio Monteverdi *L'Orfeo*, act 1, "In questo lieto e fortunato giorno" mm. 1-2 (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1930. IMSLP, http://ks.imslp.net/files/imglnks/usimg/2/21/IMSLP310353-PMLP21363-monteverdi_orfeo2.pdf)

However, although first presented as the ionian mode in C major, the piece transitions to D major through the use of the F sharp, C sharp, and strong harmonic progressions within the key (Ex. 6). The prolongation of the D major chord as well as the D in the bass help the structure of the piece to now establish tonal system. This short piece interestingly combines the theory of modes and tonality within a short section.

Example 6 Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*, act 1, "In questo lieto e fortunato giorno" mm. 7-9 (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1930. IMSLP, http://ks.imslp.net/files/imglnks/usimg/2/21/IMSLP310353-PMLP21363-monteverdi_orfeo2.pdf)

Furthermore, Act II contains concepts supportive of tonality. The first can be found at the start of Act II in an aria titled “Ecco pur.” Strong cadences to the tonic are evident in this piece,

even in the midst of a modulation. Beginning in g minor, Monteverdi creates a work that follows the correct rules for modulation by transitioning to the relative major of Bb midway through the song and reverting back to g minor by the closing cadence (Ex. 7). Measure 4 begins in Bb major, and chords within the following two measures emphasize the tonic Bb major chord. The modulation occurs in measure 7 with a deceptive cadence in the key of Bb major by moving from the V chord, F major, at the end of measure 6 to a vi chord, g minor, in measure 7. This g minor chord is also the tonic of g minor key presented at the beginning of the piece. Monteverdi uses modulation to prove tonality in this short work.

The image shows a musical score for Claudio Monteverdi's "Ecco pur" from Act 2 of *L'Orfeo*. It consists of two systems of music, each with a vocal line and a lute accompaniment. The first system (measures 4-6) features the lyrics "da quel sol fat.te be.a.te per cui sol mie not.t'hangior.no". The second system (measures 7-9) features the lyrics "Ec.co pur ch'a voi ri.tor.no. Ec.co pur ch'a voi ri.tor.no.". The key signature is one flat (Bb), and the time signature is 4/4.

Example 7 Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*, act 2, "Ecco pur" mm. 4-9 (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1930. IMSLP, http://ks.imslp.net/files/imglnks/usimg/2/21/IMSLP310353-PMLP21363-monteverdi_orfeo2.pdf)

Likewise, a short song later in Act II titled "Mira, deh mira Orfeo" sung by the shepherds has the same approach. However, as the mood of the piece changes, so does the mood of the music and therefore the tonality. In happy sections, this piece is in a key closely related to C major. On the other hand, in more solemn sections, the piece is found in a minor, the relative minor of C major.²⁴ In chord analysis, the tonal system stands strong through the resolution of

²⁴ Claudio Monteverdi, "Mira, deh mira Orfeo," in *Norton Anthology of Western Music: Volume 1: Ancient to Baroque*, eds. J. Peter Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014): 473.

harmonic progressions. Chords which are labeled V/V resolve to V, and V eventually resolves to I (Ex. 8). Monteverdi's interesting use of tonality in this song allows one to see the transition between modality and tonality.

Example 8 Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*, act 2, "Mira, deh mira Orfeo" mm. 10-12 (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014)

As seen in Monteverdi's famous opera *L'Orfeo*, the transition from modality to tonality was a slow progress, but it is evident. In the examples given, Monteverdi approaches tonality in the correct way. He develops harmonies and cadences which point back to a home key within the tonal system. His prolongation of notes, especially the tonic of the key in the bass, also encourages the tonal system. While he uses modes such as hypoionian and hypoaolian, the connection these modes have to keys in the tonal system shows the slow transition into the new way of composing music. Monteverdi's composition of *L'Orfeo* encourages the development of tonality and the importance of the composer himself in the history of music theory.

In conclusion, Monteverdi's works, whether in the modality of his madrigals or the tonality of *L'Orfeo*, aid in proving the transition from modality to tonality in the late Renaissance and early Baroque era. Monteverdi's background in music theory formed a compositional foundation for him to produce works that aligned with the music theories of the Renaissance era. The influence of his geographical location and his teacher, Ingegneri, gave him a start to a successful future. Having observed Monteverdi's music chronologically through his lifetime, it is evident that his earlier works established modal qualities while his later works bring out the tonal

system. The madrigals establish modality and the rules this system requires by using a linear structure, an emphasis on the fifth degree, and a consonance in harmony. On the other hand, *L'Orfeo* finalizes tonality through a strong pull of cadences from the dominant to the tonic. Overall, through these examples, Monteverdi's influence on music launched the transition from modality to tonality, which radically changed the course of music.

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