

I have nothing to tell your lordship except about Orfeo: I hope that tomorrow...my brother will receive the finished publication from the printer, who will send it to him from Venice and...give it to his highness [Vincenzo, Duke of Mantua] ...so I beg your lordship to put in a few words with the Prince, conveying the great desire I have in my heart to prove what a very devoted and humble servant I am...

Claudio Monteverdi, Cremona; to Alessandro Striggio, Mantua, 24 August 1609

L'Orfeo: Birth and Rebirth

Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* made its quiet debut on the twenty-fourth of February in 1607. On that day, the Thracian Bard and his rarefied pastoral entourage descended on the equally rarefied court of Vincenzo I Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua. Precisely where Monteverdi's most renowned work premiered remains a mystery: the Accademia degli Invaghiti, which hosted the work, had no official quarters at the ducal palace. While a gallery in the palace remains a possibility, no actual record of such a performance exists. The setting where the audience of cognoscenti welcomed *L'Orfeo*'s fleeting appearance was probably a modest hall. The work's unveiling was an intimate event.

The Accademia degli Invaghiti, *L'Orfeo*'s original audience, was typical of such societies flourishing in Italy during the Renaissance and well into the eighteenth century. They were composed of the nobility and a learned upper echelon, often high-ranking clerics and university luminaries. The young poet-aristocrat Alessandro Striggio, *L'Orfeo*'s librettist, was himself a Mantuan diplomat and court secretary. As such, he was a typical Invaghiti member. These individuals would gather to discuss and debate the arts: music, poetry, rhetoric, and the moral-philosophical topics of the day. As the name suggests – Academy of the Enamored, or besotted – they were passionate in their pursuits, and as their defining purpose, the Invaghiti chose to advocate for Music. Thus, as one might expect, with their status and expertise, they were highly influential in the era's intellectual circles, tending to the more conservative side of its cultural equations. Moral edification and comportment exemplified by Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* were the Invaghiti's guiding lights.

These men (and men they were, until years later, almost exclusively so) were also artists, poets, 'natural philosophers', composers, and accomplished musicians in their own right. Thus, perhaps unlike in our own day, they were thoroughly conversant with the historical, philosophical and musical underpinnings of *L'Orfeo*, as well as the controversies attending its musical style. When a personification of Music sang the prologue, they knew they were about to witness a classical Greco-Roman drama, though subtly transformed from the expected tragedy to the *favola in musica* commissioned by Francesco Gonzaga, the eldest son of Duke Vincenzo. The drama's bucolic ambience and its significance would be recognized from the Renaissance revival of Classical

Antiquity and the pastorale: in Arcadia, they beheld an idyllic landscape for exploring the delights and dangers of love, and a ‘tonic’ for ‘purging’ its youthful excesses – a moral lesson. They also saw an instructive panorama of noble comportment and civic virtue in the manner of Castiglione; finally, they were to be moved to act upon the lessons presented. Thus would the ‘Ciceronian Triumverate’ of dramatic purpose – *docere, delectar, movere* (teach, delight, move) – be experienced by the audience at Mantua.

Moreover, this audience knew that the work’s archaic power came from the actors singing, rather than speaking, their parts. For this they employed a type of sung recitation, or *recitative*. Monteverdi, while incorporating this single-voice recitative, retained the then-current practice of multi-voice polyphony. At the same time, he made bold advances in polyphonic structure, pushing and expanding the rule book of the doctrinaire Palestrina. He rejected, meanwhile, the Ancients’ view of music as an essentially mathematical endeavor, thus freeing it for a richer, more nuanced range of expression. His bow to the new Renaissance humanism was to privilege the centrality of human experience over a cerebral attachment to form. Consequently, his approach was neither a static embrace of the current style, nor was it a period imitation of Antique musical composition. It was, instead, something akin to the Ancients’ art of rhetoric: music as a means of persuasion, as well as of expression. Of the three musical pillars embraced by Monteverdi, *Oratio* – the text – was given pride of place. It governed the music, and persuaded audiences to heed the meaning of the word.

Shortly after its premiere, a second presentation of *L’Orfeo* followed, on the first of March, 1607. Perhaps this event was planned with the express purpose of inviting the women of the Duke’s household, and those affiliated with the *Invaghiti*, to the performance. These ladies were more fortunate than they might have imagined, for Monteverdi’s *favola in musica* slowly faded from memory, as did, finally, its celebrated composer. *L’Orfeo* was rarely performed again for more than three centuries: only a nineteenth-century revival of interest in Monteverdi and his oeuvre prompted *L’Orfeo*’s next known staging, at the Theatre Rejane, in Paris, on May 2, 1911.

Thus, *L’Orfeo*’s rebirth began. And so it would proceed, as Monteverdi’s youthful Bard played great opera houses and a sprinkling of small halls like those of its origin, staged by present-day ‘*Invaghiti*’ striving for historical veracity. On its travels, the seventeenth-century opera would encounter Gluck’s high revisionism, culminating in the eighteenth-century *Orfeo ed Euridice*. In our own era, meanwhile, we are gifted with Matthew Aucoin’s *Eurydice* at The Met, a poignant *memento* of Death and forgetting. Finally, Anais Mitchell has hit the bright lights with her bluesy, steampunk *Hadestown*. *Orfeo and Company* – Euridyce, Persephone, Hades, Hermes, and The Fates – have arrived on Broadway, where the ‘sad song’ of *Orfeo* is heard each night, and once again, never fails to move its audience.

But now, welcome to Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* of 1607, his timeless *fable in music*.

Valerie Ceriano