

...I hope nevertheless to recover...and when this comes about...I shall then beseech Your Highness for the love of God never to burden me again either with so much to do at once or in so short a time, for it is certain that my great desire to serve you and the great exertion involved would inadvertently draw me to my life's abridgement; but this life being prolonged will serve Your Highness and benefit my poor children...do not blame my good will or my inclination...Your Highness may be so kind as to command them, to whom bowing down I make the most humble reverence... Your Most Serene Highness's most humble and grateful servant...

Claudio Monteverdi, Cremona; to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga, Mantua, December 1604

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643): Life

The composer Claudio Monteverdi was born in Cremona, Italy, on May 15, 1567, the son of a barber-surgeon (and later, doctor), Baldassare, and his wife, Maddalena. She is thought to have died before he was ten years old. The boy studied counterpoint and composition (as well as viol and singing) under Marc'Antonio Ingegneri, the *maestro di capella* of Cremona Cathedral. Claudio demonstrated his gifts early, publishing his first works, a book of three-part motets, at the age of fifteen. By the time he was twenty-five, three books of madrigals had been added to this early body of work. The expense of these costly volumes was, no doubt, assumed by patrons in Cremona whose encomiums they bear. By now, however, Monteverdi was working in Mantua, in the employ of the Gonzaga duke, Vincenzo I. The small but opulent Gonzaga court provided a setting where Monteverdi performed on viol and violin in weekly concerts and, upon his arrival, began to compose madrigals for these gatherings. He soon became highly regarded, enough so as to accompany the duke, in 1597, on military expeditions against the Turks in Austria and Hungary. On his return to Mantua two years later, he married Claudia de Cattanei, a court singer, with whom he had three children.

We know that by 1600, Monteverdi was an established name, not least because that is when the attacks on the composer's alleged musical transgressions, by the music theorist Giovanni Maria Artusi, began. From that point on, Monteverdi was considered what we today might call a 'modernist' in textual expression. The next year he was named Mantua's *maestro de capella*, or music director, and more books of madrigals followed. But it was the year 1607 that proved decisive for the composer, as the ongoing in-print debate with Artusi stimulated widespread interest in his work. This culminated in Monteverdi's well-known refutation of his critic, the *Dichiarazione* (Declaration), which was completed from the composer's notes by his brother, Giulio Cesare.

That same year *L'Orfeo*, Monteverdi's first opera, was staged in Mantua before the Accademia degli Invaghiti, one of Italy's ubiquitous and influential learned societies. Each of these groups cultivated its own niche artistic interest, and the latter one was dedicated to promoting the love of

music. Alessandro Striggio, Monteverdi's noble-blooded librettist for *L'Orfeo*, was himself a member of the *Invaghiti*, while the commoner Monteverdi was inducted into Cremona's *Accademia degli Animosi*, which performed selections from the work in the city of his birth. Sadly, that same year, Claudia Monteverdi died in Cremona, and the distraught widower refused to go back to Mantua.

It was only when another of Monteverdi's operas, *L'Arianna*, was in production for a court wedding at Mantua, did he agree to relocate once more. But this move too was marked by misfortune. Before the event could take place, Caterina Martinelli, its leading singer and an intimate both of Monteverdi and his departed wife, died of smallpox. Finally however, the imminent performance took place. It was very well received, resulting in a period of unremitting work and artistic outpouring on Monteverdi's part. After *L'Orfeo*, the composer's creations in 1608 included an intermezzo and a *licenza* (paean to a royal audience member) for G.B. Guarini's drama *L'Idropica*, and the full-length ballet, *Il ballo delle ingrato* (Dance of the Ungrateful Women) for the wedding festivities of Duke Vincenzo's son, Francesco Gonzaga. The music from *L'Arianna* has been lost, save for the renowned madrigal usually known as *Ariadne's Lament*, which is included in the sixth book of madrigals. The libretto by Ottavio Rinuccini also survives.

Following his unceasing labors, Monteverdi returned to Cremona exhausted and despondent, so much so that he enlisted his father's aid in obtaining a release from service to Mantua. Accusing the Gonzaga of maltreatment and lack of respect, he began, in 1610, to seek a new position. This objective was the likely motive for his trip to Rome, and perhaps that to Venice. There, supervising a printing of his church music, he chose a typeface that would appeal to the administrators of St. Mark's Cathedral. Monteverdi's situation in Mantua was resolved when, in 1612, Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga died. His son and successor, Duke Francesco, dismissed Monteverdi and a number of other court artists, and the composer returned to Cremona. About a year later, upon the death of the *maestro di capella* of St. Mark's, Monteverdi was invited to Venice for what was, essentially, an audition before the cathedral's procurators. He was accepted, with a generous salary of three-hundred ducats a year. Monteverdi went back to Cremona to settle his affairs, and on the return journey to Venice was set upon by highwaymen and robbed. Fortunately, (unlike some other musicians in those treacherous times) he survived the assault, and continued on to Venice, where he would remain until his death in 1643.

Venice

Monteverdi's first order of business as a Venetian administrator was to engage virtuoso singers and full-time musicians. In addition, he purchased new music, and began using works by sixteenth-century composers (de Lassus and Palestrina among them) for celebration of the Mass. Once again in the good graces of the Gonzaga court, he continued to produce music for Mantua. A number of

these Mantuan works remained unfinished, however, with Monteverdi's excuse that the burden of responsibility for St. Mark's left him insufficient time to complete additional commissions. It seems also that his ill-treatment at the Gonzaga court had occasioned a lasting rancor. When offered a new position at Mantua in 1620, he refused it in no uncertain terms.

Moreover, Monteverdi's talents were in great demand in Venice. He was earning lucrative commissions from various religious confraternities, while at the same time composing secular music. This last activity is borne out by the appearance of his seventh book of madrigals, *concertato* pieces in the 'modern' style. The *concertato* was a genre born of the unique auditory properties of St. Mark's Cathedral, whose 'live' acoustic spaces made musical unison difficult. However, separate choirs (*cori spezzati*, or broken choirs) were organized to sing to one another across the great nave's expanses. Accompanied by instruments playing equally for each group, they produced dramatic and powerful antiphonal music. This successful innovation spread throughout Italy, then became popular in other parts of Europe.

In 1624, Monteverdi was commissioned by the Venetian noble Girolamo Mocenigo to write music for the drama *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* by the poet Torquato Tasso. (This was later published in Monteverdi's *Madrigali guerrieri e amorosi* of 1638.) During this period, Monteverdi also composed a complete opera, *La finta pazza Licori* (1627), which was intended for Mantua but never performed, and is now lost. However, there is no doubt that the work was of some significance to Monteverdi, as he discusses it at length in his correspondence with his *L'Orfeo* librettist, Alessandro Striggio. Shortly thereafter, the composer was allowed a brief leave to work at the Farnese court in Parma.

Meanwhile, Monteverdi's son Massimiliano, a medical student, was arrested by the Inquisition for reading forbidden books. He was acquitted, but not before his father was forced to raise bail to have him released, which he did by selling a precious pearl necklace given him by Caterina de Medici, Dutchess of Mantua. Monteverdi's elder son, Francesco, whom he hoped would enter the law, became a singer at St. Mark's and would follow a career in music. Around the year 1629, when he received no more commissions from the war-beset Mantuans, Monteverdi's creative activity waned. But the Mantuan decline was nothing in comparison with what was to come. In the years 1630-31, Venice was again beset by the plague, which killed one-third of its population. As did most public and commercial life, music publishing in Venice ceased. Nor was Monteverdi himself spared loss. Among the plague's casualties were his assistant, the composer Alessandro Grandi, and Monteverdi's *L'Orpheo* librettist, collaborator, and correspondent, Alessandro Striggio. Monteverdi's younger brother and champion, Giulio Cesare, died during this time as well, probably also taken by the plague.

Monteverdi, however, survived, and in November of 1631, he published a mass of thanksgiving in gratitude for his deliverance. Then, upon his return from another journey to Cremona on family

business, he took holy orders, and in 1631, was ordained a deacon. In 1638 and 1641, he published editions of his secular, then religious, music. With the opening of opera houses in Venice during this period, Monteverdi continued to produce operas: *L'Arianna* (a revival, 1740); *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (1640); *Le nozze d'Enea con Lavinia* (1641, now lost), and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642).

After another brief visit to Cremona in 1643, the composer returned to Venice, where he died on the twenty-ninth of November. Claudio Monteverdi is entombed in the Basilica of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, where a chapel bears his name still.