

*Signor Conte Alessandro Striggio From Venice, 11 July 1620...My Most Illustrious Lord and Most Respected Master, ...by way of ending I make a humble reverence and kiss your hands... Your most illustrious lordship's most devoted and most grateful servant, Claudio Monteverdi*

Claudio Monteverdi, Venice; to Alessandro Striggio, Mantua, 11 July 1620

Alessandro Striggio the Younger (ca. 1573-1630)

In his letters, Monteverdi addressed his librettist, Alessandro Striggio (the Younger), in much the same exalted and self-effacing terms as he did Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga of Mantua. No doubt this was in part due to the period's florid style, but it is also because Striggio was an aristocrat, and Monteverdi was not. As a musician and composer, he was only a common worker. Striggio's father, (also Alessandro) was a well-known composer of madrigals and inventor of the 'madrigal comedy' genre, considered by some a sort of proto-opera. The elder Striggio's noble roots were Mantuan, but through connections in Florence he began working for Cosimo de Medici as a court musician and diplomat. Later, at the Este court in Ferrara, he composed in a musical culture that was ahead of its time. In 1586, while maintaining ties with the Medici court in Florence, the elder Striggio returned to Mantua, where he would remain.

The younger Striggio was born into his father's patrician milieu, and first appears in Florence as a performer in the legendary Medici wedding celebrations of 1589. Alessandro was sent to law school, and put this training to use in the Mantuan court. Over a twenty-year period, he served as secretary to Duke Vincenzo, as Mantuan ambassador to Milan, and Chancellor. Like many contemporaries of his class, he was also a poet, composer, and musician. With his family pedigree, devoted service to the court, and artistic gifts, Striggio was an exemplar of Castiglione's *Il Cortigiano (Book of the Courtier)* and model member of the exclusive Accademia degli Invaghiti. As such, he was the perfect librettist for Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. The work was hosted by that society on behalf of Duke Vincenzo, commissioned by his son Francesco, and dedicated to him as one of the Invaghiti's leading members. Striggio knew the tastes of his patrons, their musical and philosophical leanings, their idiosyncrasies, their prejudices and their politics. He was one of them, and moreover, a diplomat. Through Striggio, Monteverdi would create an *Orfeo* mirroring the values of the Invaghiti's select and singular realm.

In the final decade of the sixteenth century, Striggio was busy negotiating publication of his father's final, posthumous volume of madrigals. In 1608, the year after *L'Orfeo*'s staging, Striggio wrote two opera libretti for Marco da Gagliano, a Florentine composer who worked briefly in Mantua. Two more libretti for Monteverdi followed; *Apollo*, a 'dramatic cantata', never completed and now lost; and a *ballo*, or sung ballet, *Tirsi e Clori*. The latter was composed by Monteverdi and Striggio for the February 1616 coronation of Duke Ferdinando Gonzaga.

December of 1627 brought with it the death in Mantua of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga II, the dynasty's last direct male heir. The event gave rise to the War of the Mantuan Succession, which dovetailed with the interests of the combatants in the Thirty Years' War: the Imperial forces of Hapsburg Spain were pitted against the Duke of Nevers, whose supporters were France, Venice, and Mantua,. In 1630, Alessandro Striggio was dispatched by Mantua as an envoy to Venice, where he was to convince the Doge and the Venetian Senate to send money and troops in support of his city, which was under siege by Spanish forces. The journey from Mantua to Venice was a treacherous one, beset not only by marauding troops of the Imperial commander Johann von Aldringen, but also by the virulent disease they carried, which had already gripped Mantua and Milan. Striggio made it to Venice. But on the night of June 16, 1630, he succumbed to the plague, contracted on his mission of mercy for Mantua.

Striggio died before learning that Mantua had capitulated to siege and sack by Imperial forces on July 18, 1630, just one month after his journey to Venice on her behalf. Nor did he know that Aldringen, the victorious commander, had plundered the Duke of Mantua's coffers, pocketing from them over eighteen-million ducats. Between 1628 and 1631, pillage and plague had decimated Mantua's population by seventy percent of its former number. The city was destroyed.

It is not known whether Striggio met with Monteverdi during his final stay in Venice. Between 1608 and 1628, their extant correspondence alone numbers at least seventy letters from Monteverdi to Striggio. With his death, Monteverdi had lost his friend, ally, and advocate, as well as his co-creator of nearly forty years. And finally, he had lost his *'Most Illustrious Lord and Most Respected Master.'*