As he sang these words to the music of his lyre…the king and queen of the underworld could not bear to refuse his pleas. They called Eurydice…through the mute silence they made their way…the lover looked behind him, and…Eurydice slipped back into the depths.

Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book X, 1-85

*L'Orfeo'*s Journey

In 1565, Giovanni Battista Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* made its debut in Turin. This tragicomedy would prove the touchstone for pastoral works from Monteverdi's madrigals to Handel's 1712 *opera seria* of that name. Guarini's play prompted a seven-year pamphlet war and a hundred more editions after its initial publication of 1602. The contentious and omnipresent *Pastor* was the vital current in the cultural waters where, in the late Renaissance, Orfeo set sail.

Prior to the *L'Orfeo* of Monteverdi, there were at least two earlier musical productions of the Orpheus tale, both entitled *Euridice*. The first was by the Italian composer Jacopo Peri, with added music by Giulio Caccini, a musician attached to the Medici court. The Florentine Ottavio Rinuccini's pastorale of the same name was used as the libretto, and is generally considered to be the earliest opera still extant. The work was first performed in Florence at the Palazzo Pitti, on October 6,1600, for the proxy wedding of Henry IV of France and Marie de Medici of Florence. Peri himself sang the role of Orfeo, but other roles were filled by associates of Caccini, including his daughter, Francesca, who was also a composer.

A second *Euridice* by Peri's collaborator Caccini has a slightly shadier backstory. Alhough Peri composed all the music for the initial performance of his *Euridice*, because Caccini's 'people' were esssential to the production, some of the latter's pieces replaced those of Peri. But when Caccini learned that Peri was about to include his music in the work's forthcoming publication, he huriedly published his own version, also with Rinuccini's libretto, six weeks ahead of Peri's. In turn, Peri wrote a preface to his *Euridice*, claiming that, as all the music had been written by the first performance date, his was to be named the *Prima Euridice*. Caccini's version of the work was first seen at the Palazzo Pitti in Florence on December 5, 1602. In it, Orfeo manages to rescue Euridice, providing the story with a happy ending,

Initially, however, there was to be no happy ending for Orfeo, not in the Monteverdi-Striggio version of the tale, and certainly not in the ancient sources of the story, as told by the Roman poets Virgil, and more important, Ovid. In the latter, after the final loss of his wife, Orfeo returns to the halcyon groves of shepherds and nymphs, where he first found music and love with Euridice. But as his beloved was without equal, Orfeo now saw every woman as wanting, and so renounces all women. In his wanderings, he encounters a band of drunken maenads, devotees of the wine god Bacchus and of his 'divine madness.' The crazed revelers, enraged by his rejection of the female sex, set upon Orfeo and tear him limb from limb. His head, tossed into the River Hebrus, floats

downstream singing, accompanied by his lyre. He drifts to the sea and the island of Lesbos, where he goes 'under the earth' and finally, is united in death with Euridice. The maenads are turned into oak trees by Bacchus as punishment for their destruction of the poet who 'sang his mysteries' in the Orphic cult.

L'Orfeo was commissioned by Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga's eldest son, Francesco, for the Carnival season of 1607 in what was something of an ongoing friendly competition between the Mantuan Gonzaga and the Florentine Medici. Vincenzo, and perhaps Striggio and Monteverdi as well, had probably seen the Peri offering, and were aware of this rivalry.

The gory denouement offered by both Virgil and Ovid was no more appropriate as a Carnival entertainment than it was for a Medici wedding. Like Rinuccini, though not so whimsically, Striggio softened Ovid's ending to suit the occasion. When confronted by the murderous maenads, Orfeo flees their wrath and disappears. It is implied that the women will indeed wreak vengeance upon him, but they will do it off-stage. This version was published in Mantua in 1607 to coincide with the original production for the Accademia degli Invaghiti. However, in the ending of 1609 published in Venice two years later, Orfeo is instead transported to Heaven by his father Apollo, the same ending that we see today. There is still speculation as to which version was performed for the Invaghiti and the Mantuan court. It is possible that the answer is both, with the unseen punishment ending the initial production on February 24, 1607, and the Apollonian deus ex machina concluding the presentation two days later, with court ladies in attendance.

The Accademia degli Invaghiti was founded in Mantua in 1562 by Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga, and operated under that ruling family's aegis until the early eighteenth century. As a reflection of their original patron, the group was generally conservative in matters of morals and the arts. This was true in the sense that they felt a work or stylistic rendering should remain within boundaries set by social class, literary tradition, or moral convention. Under Guglielmo's son Vincenzo, however, the Gonzaga's traditionalism (and thus the Invaghiti's) began to ease, at least regarding musical style. However, the family was closely allied with the papacy by marriage, and through this connection, the Invaghiti were granted a number of privileges, which they would not wish to jeopardize. (They were, for example, officially recognized and granted the authority to confer academic degrees as would a university.) Furthermore, their sensitivity to the Council of Trent's Counter-Reformation edicts, and the presence of a Mantuan Inquisitor, set a cautious moral tone.

Thus, in Mantua, the pastoral play genre was not regarded as simple entertainment, but as a vehicle for 'moral instruction.' As such, it was accepted as 'useful,' providing an object lesson and a 'remedy' for the 'malady' of love. With the character of Orfeo in particular, the audience was pinioned by the moral trident of Cicero's rhetorical rules, Ficino's compassionate humanism, and Castiglione's model for courtly conduct. Not only was Orfeo an intemperate lover, but a prototypical artist inspired by 'divine furor,' whose excess of feeling and rash behavior defied the

humanist values of restraint and reason: following his initial passionate inspiration, the artist is to achieve his goal through rational intellectual endeavor. In this, Orfeo has failed. Despite himself, however, he is finally redeemed by the virtues of harmony, reason, and moderation, in the person of his father, Apollo. Ultimately, he embodies not only the Renaissance ideal of lover and artist, but also of the aristocrat, just as the Accademia degli Invaghiti would have wished.