

*I promised, as I said before, in a printed work of mine, to let a certain theoretician [G.M.Artusi] of the First Practice know that there was another way (unknown to him) of considering music, and this I call the Second Practice. The reason for this was that he had been pleased to criticize (in print!) one of my madrigals [Cruda Amarilli, Book V] as regards certain of its harmonic progressions, on the basis of tenets of the First Practice (that is to say, the ordinary rules, as if they were exercises by a youth beginning to learn the first species of counterpoint) and not according to a knowledge of the melody.*

Claudio Monteverdi, Venice; to G.B. Doni, Rome, 22 October. 1633

### *Prima Pratica, Seconda Pratica*

The terms *Prima Pratica* and *Seconda Pratica* entered popular musical parlance in the 1630s, during the public controversy over musical usage in the work of Claudio Monteverdi. His adversary, the music theorist and composer Giovanni Maria Artusi, was a proponent of the *Prima Pratica*. Signifying its ancient or classical Greek origins, the *Prima* was also known as the *Stile Antico*. It was the established compositional style of the day, dating from the early sixteenth century, and exemplified by the work of the composer Giovanni Palestrina (1525-1594). One of its main tenets concerned harmonic progression, or the advance from dissonance to consonance (harmony) in music.

According to the *Prima Pratica*, such movement was to be achieved through ‘prepared dissonance,’ a system that initially appears straightforward: Play the pleasing ‘consonant’ to prepare the listener for the harsh ‘dissonant’ that follows, then ‘resolve’ the unpleasantness by alighting on another sweet consonant as a welcome return to beauty after the ‘ugly’ dissonant tone. However, this apparently simple prescription was buried beneath a ponderous mass of cultural and philosophical history, newly-resurrected in the Renaissance. The primacy of mathematical relationships (the *sine qua non* of ancient music) as the building block of musical composition was rooted in a ‘Hierarchy of Harmonious Orders.’ The latter reflected the structure of the Cosmos, and thus was the model for harmonic development in music, according to the Neoplatonist philosopher Marsilio Ficino.

Everything from the symmetry of the human body to the shifting position of a star in the firmament confirmed this paradigm. Each ‘order’ in the system, from that of inanimate rocks to plants, animals, and humans on an ascending scale of social rank, finally converged in perfect unity from their imperfect multiplicity. The ultimate musical union was the ‘Music of the Spheres’, unheard but intuited through the logic of mathematics. From this ordered logic, the Universe, and consequently, Nature, were created. Thus music, the offspring of mathematics, must be made to ‘imitate nature.’ But this imitation did not imply the sounds of twittering bird and babbling brook, but nature’s cool mathematical order. The ultimate harmonic unity, where the hierarchy of orders summited and converged as One, was the Creator.

Needless to say, this was a heavy burden for the working composer to carry, and how much each one was willing to shoulder is open to question. Still, the philosophical heft of this belief system served to buttress the authority of theorists such as Ficino, Artusi, and Gioseffo Zarlino, enough so that artists were obliged, even as they grimaced, to carry their tune. Just as Shakespeare's cosmological backdrop for *Romeo and Juliet* was the hierarchic Great Chain of Being, so too was the celestial setting for Renaissance composers that Great Hierarchy of Harmonious Orders, voiced in whispered directives by, yes, the 'Music of the Spheres.' Such arcana provided clout for the tomes and pronouncements of the theorists who, more often than not, were clerics of stature and therefore moral arbiters. Ultimately however, though still perhaps cosmologically and intellectually fertile, such ponderous over-determination became musically barren, and sank under its own weight. On the cusp of the seventeenth century, composers were ditching that cumbersome portmanteau of theology, cosmology and pure mathematics. It was the dawn of the Baroque, and of Monteverdi. They were restless, and beginning to travel light, or at least, lighter.

The source of the *Prima Pratica*'s intellectual framework was the *Institutione Harmoniche* by the aforementioned Zarlino (1517-1519), composer-theorist and maestro di capella at St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice. More important, he had been the teacher of Artusi, Monteverdi's arch critic, and revered by him as such during their long and storied dispute. Monteverdi, by contrast, in what he named the *Seconda Pratica*, or *Stile Moderno*, advocated for the employment of dissonance as a device to enhance verbal and emotional clarity. In his schema, the burdensome mathematical rules for the use of dissonance could be modified or suspended. Instead of the needless complexity and rigidity of the *Prima Pratica*, Monteverdi asserted that, for example, simply rising after a flattened note, or descending after a sharpened one, was permissible in the interests of emotional truth or intensity, aural verisimilitude, and textual lucidity.

It may come as a surprise to learn that Artusi and Monteverdi were, finally, reconciled. Monteverdi writes, in the same letter to G.B. Doni, above:

*But on hearing of a certain difference of opinion published in my defence [sic] by my brother [Giulio Cesare Monteverdi], he [Artusi] calmed down in such a way that from thence forward not only did he stop over-ruling me – turning his pen in my praise – but he began to like and admire me.*

Much had transpired by the time of Monteverdi's letter to Doni in 1633. It had been thirty-five years since Artusi issued his book on dissonance, *L'Arte del contraponto*, followed closely by others 'on the imperfections of modern music.' When Monteverdi produced his fifth book of madrigals in 1605, he included with it a defense against Artusi's fractious arguments. Two years later (the year of *L'Orfeo*), with the publication of the composer's *Scherzi musicali a tre voci*, his brother, Giulio Cesare, delivered on his behalf a new defense against Artusi's ongoing attacks. This was the widely-read *Dichiarazione*, a cogent argument for the equal value of music and text in

song. Regarding the *Prima* and *Seconda Practica*, again it seemed that the discord lay in the modern (*Seconda*) emphasis on word meaning and the flexible new use of dissonance to enhance text. Claudio and Giulio Cesare's *Dichiarazione* was based on Neoplatonic precepts, just as were the theoretical frameworks of Zarlino and his pupil Artusi. But perhaps Monteverdi wore Neoplatonism, as a new generation might, in a svelte makeover, one that spoke to fashionable cultural trends.

Indeed, his approach garnered favor in aristocratic circles like that of the scholarly society of the Accademia degli Invaghiti. Though they were often on the more traditional side of such debates, their membership, it has been noted, was getting younger. Moreover, the group counted *L'Orfeo*'s librettist, Alessandro Striggio, among its members. Monteverdi's work, meanwhile, was by this time already inflected by the novel settings and catchy rhythms of Luca Marenzio, whose stylish madrigals were widely admired. Interestingly, Monteverdi's playful *Scherzi Musicali* were composed as early as 1599, after the composer's travels with Duke Vincenzo's military campaigns. Visiting Flanders during these ventures, Monteverdi learned of the 'song in the French style' (*chanson*), which was also reaching Italy via the influx of Franco-Flamands at Italian courts. The novel polyphonic sound earned the approbation of the Duke and his entourage, whose lordly stamp of approval would not have been lost on the Mantuan court. Nor would the Duke's endorsement have gone unnoticed by the Invaghiti, regardless of their conservative bent in such matters.

Artusi, meanwhile, was no longer attacking the 'crudities' and 'license' of Monteverdi's work. He had come to acknowledge that the major differences between his *L'Arte del Contrapunto* conventions and Monteverdi's *Seconda Pratica* reimaginings were, for the most part, only a question of emphasis on different voices and melodic intervals. Probably, the traditionalist cleric had finally accepted 'modern' music because, by the time of Monteverdi's 1633 letter to Doni, the *Seconda* had long since become standard musical practice. Though Monteverdi still protested that he was about to publish his long-promised treatise *Melody, or the Second Musical Practice*, he must have known that his effort was now beside the point. Time itself had laid to rest the controversy. And as every Renaissance scholar knows, the Daughter of Time is Truth.