…Once Holy Week is over I shall send a couple of madrigals, and anything else that I understand may be to your Highness's taste. You will do me a special kindness by letting my brother see these compositions a little before Your Highness may condescend to hear them…so that the players can...get acquainted [with them and] Your Highness will be less offended by this feeble music of mine…

Claudio Monteverdi, Mantua; to Prince Francesco Gonzaga, Casale Monferrato, 26 March 1611

Madrigals I

The madrigal was the most important form of secular music in Renaissance Italy, flourishing in Western Europe from the fifteenth through the mid-eighteenth centuries. The secular character of the madrigal is relevant, and particularly so in regard to Claudio Monteverdi: as a non-sacred genre it was free from the papal, clerical, and other traditional restrictions pertaining to religious music, which was typically more conservative in its expression, content, and form. Thus, the madrigal was more available to evolving trends in musical taste and fashion than her more rule-bound religious sisters. Thus, in part, did opera germinate from the madrigal, with Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* often cited as among its first yield.

Madrigals were customarily sung *a cappella*, with each voice adding its line to the polyphonic harmonies. The *madrigalism*, a device whereby the music replicates the meaning of a word – a tinkling arpeggio for the word *tremolare* (tremble) – could also be used to advantage where an emphasis on text was valued, as it was by Monteverdi and other humanist composers of the late Renaissance. Another feature is that the madrigal is 'through-composed', meaning the music doesn't repeat in a typical ABA form, but continues with new music through to the end (ABCD).

In the first quarter of the sixteenth century, Italianized Franco-Flemish composers were creating madrigals based on the Italian *frottola*, a kind of comic song for three or four voices. These artists were lured to Renaissance Italy by its rich culture and opportunities for service in opulent Italian courts or the powerful Roman Church. Changing tastes in poetry, meanwhile, were also driving the madrigal's efflorescence, as the humanist interest in Italian vernacular poetry was taking hold. These developments were fueled by the more serious verse of of the Venetian scholar Pietro Bembo, who promoted the Tuscan dialect and the work of the proto-humanist Petrarch, whose Italian language poems were foundational. Bembo's literary ventures, meanwhile, also influenced musical composition, and led to the ascendancy of the madrigal in Italian secular music. As the innocent *frottola* proved an inadequate vehicle for the poets' complexities, it was invigorated by those composers from 'beyond the Alps' with an infusion of motet polyphony and a soupçon of the French *chanson.* By the 1520s, as the *frottola* waned, the madrigal reigned. During the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the madrigal form spread to Germany and England,

while in Italy, it was merging into the cantata and the dialog. In opera, the madrigal was eclipsed, finally, by the aria.

Prior to this, however, by the mid-sixteenth century, a thriving music publishing industry in Venice (the epicenter of European print production) had helped shift the locus of madrigal-making to that city from Florence and Rome. Books of madrigals poured from the Venetian presses, including the most reprinted volume of its time, *Il primo libro di madrigali* (1539), by Jacques Arcadel. In 1529, Pietro Bembo was once again in his natal city of Venice, surrounded by a cadre of pan-European and Italian musicians ensconced in St. Mark's Cathedral. The Franco-Flemish artists heeded Bembo's text-setting directives and through-composed their music. Among these individuals was the great madrigalist Cipriano de Rore, briefly the Cathedral's *maestro di cappella*, who brought to bear clever word-painting madrigalisms, quirky chromatic progressions, and lush five-voice textures. Of the sixteenth century's 'greats,' Palestrina was to become canonically conservative; de Lassus would, in 1556, move his wide-ranging gifts to the court of Albrecht V of Bavaria; and Tomas de la Victoria, following a twenty-year career in Rome, where he composed sacred music of a sometimes venturesome nature, returned to Spain in 1587. The bold incursions of Cipriano de Rore, which came to exemplify the madrigal style, were fully realized in the ground-breaking genius of Rore's most worthy successor, Claudio Monteverdi, on the high road to the Baroque.

Madrigals II: Monteverdi

It is our good fortune that Claudio Monteverdi was his own best archivist. By the time of Book Nine, the final, posthumous collection of his madrigals published in 1651, the composer himself had already printed all that he wished to bequeath to posterity. Thus do we have, virtually at our fingertips, his entire oeuvre of some two-hundred and fifty madrigals. These are often divided temporally by the three cities where Monteverdi spent his life: Cremona (b. 1567–1590); Mantua (1591–1612); and Venice (1613–d. 1643).

Monteverdi's early training at Cremona Cathedral, with *maestro di capella* Marc'Antonio Ingegneri, bore fruit early. A year after publishing a book of motets, in 1583 the fifteen-year-old Claudio produced a collection of sacred madrigals (*madrigali spirituali*), for which genre there was a vogue. Four years later, another book of madrigals appeared. While Monteverdi was at the same time traveling and working outside of Cremona, his musical style was that of his teacher Ingegneri, traditional in the manner of the early 1570s**.**

Monteverdi's first collection of secular madrigals (1587), while exhibiting Ingegneri's immersion in counterpoint, was inflected by the now-au courant, widely popular style of Luca Marenzio. The latter's work was characterized by the setting of fashionable pastoral verse and the extended use of rhythmic patterns based on musical motifs. Though Monteverdi still heeded the obligatory

formulas of the theorist Zarlino, his use of dissonance was now more persistent. It is in the second book of madrigals (1590) that the urbane style of Luca Marenzio has overtaken that of the more provincial Cremona *maestro* Ingegneri. Torquato Tasso's pastoral poem *Ecco Mormorar L'Onde* exemplifies this sea change, with its rich use of *imitatio* (repetition in different voices) and new tonal associations. In Book Two, Monteverdi has mastered expressive devices such as 'broken melody' and simultaneous rising/falling motifs, and has added a more brilliant sound, achieved by the employment of soprano voices. This last development demonstrates a familiarity with the music of the Este court at Ferrara, whose bravura female ensemble, the *concerto delle donne*, was renowned for its expert, extravagantly ornate singing.

By 1591, Monteverdi was installed at Mantua under Duke Vincenzo I Gonzaga, and significantly, it was there that he soon produced his modernizing third book of madrigals (1592), which he dedicated to the duke. While Vincenzo's father, Guglielmo Gonzaga, had been a musical traditionalist who favored religious music**,** Vincenzo was an advocate of modern styles and works heard during sojourns in Ferrara. Early on, composers such as Giaches de Wert and Benedetto Pallavicino, who had worked for Guglielmo, had updated their styles and, like Monteverdi, dedicated these more modern madrigal books to Vincenzo.

Among the changes to these revised compositions were those 'unprepared dissonances' which would emerge as the battleground in the decades-long clash between Monteverdi and the theorist Giovanni Maria Artusi. Monteverdi, meanwhile, had absorbed the lessons of Marenzio, and demonstrated his command of the 'modern' style, being among the first to do so. It was a decisive shift. Still, he avoided Marenzio's melodic 'hedonism', a musical and literary development akin to the distorting Mannerism seen in painting of the period. His purpose instead lay in the third rule of Cicero, to 'move the affections' or emotions, rather than the second, simply to 'delight', as did the décor-driven hedonist or mannerist composers of Marenzio's camp. Still, this period of Monteverdi's development is often referred to as mannerist because of its Marenzian flair.

At the same time, the pensive verses of G.B. Guarini, creator of the groundbreaking *Il Pastor Fido,* and the near-homophonic treatments of the Franco-Flamand de Wert, were added to Monteverdi's armory. Again, the influence of the Ferrarese court is clear, as in the virtuosic agility of his singers, while in some instances, extreme dissonances become the dominant feature of the music. That such works were produced fairly soon after Monteverdi's arrival in Mantua has given rise to speculation that his use of the 'modernist' idiom was meant to impress Vincenzo Gonzago, to whom the third book of madrigals is dedicated. It is also of interest that in 1600, even before the actual publication of the fourth and fifth madrigal books, Giovanni Maria Artusi first criticized Monteverdi in *Artusi: Overo le imperfettioni della moderna musica*, intiating their decades-long public feud.

It would be eleven years (1603) before Monteverdi issued his next collections of madrigals. These, Books Four and Five, represent the culminating achievements of his first half of life. In these books, the figure of Guarini dominates: over half the poems in Book Five are from *Il Pastor Fido*, the prototype pastoral play. A vigorous erotic element is evident, as well as an emphasis on the intelligibility of words. Monteverdi's expressiveness has become more natural, with a vast range of emotion, from the light-hearted to the tragic. Discords now are intense and irregular resolutions appear. The details of such effects still obey the conventions of sixteenth-century practice; however, the expansion of such systems and the free handling of major and minor chords has led some scholars to conclude that Monteverdi had invented a 'completely revolutionary idiom.' Furthermore, Monteverdi's treatment of chords is radically atypical in a manner that, finally, transgresses the imperatives of Zarlino. He is now disregarding conventional embellishment in favor of flagrant harshness. Still, his insight, balance, and painstaking musical elaboration are in control.

In the sixth book of madrigals, Monteverdi returns to the semi-mannerist forays of Book Three, but with a new, unbridled boldness. He has reworked *L'Arianna's [Ariadne's] Lament,* from the climactic scene of his 1608 opera, into a madrigal version for five voices, once again undertaking new developmental forays. Another dirge, *Incenerite Spoglie*, for Caterina Martinelli (lead singer and late pupil of Monteverdi's wife, Claudia), shows a recitative style wedded to the madrigal. The emotional verses are spare, the harmonies expressive. Climaxes of extreme yet restrained dissonance conclude with a wrenching *cri du coeur*. Book Six was to be the last steeped in sixteenth-century syntax.

The seventh book (1619) reveals a compendium of styles cultivated in the 1600s, and is notable for its diversity. Most of this book is comprised of duets in which deft emotional expression and rigorous word painting abound. Meanwhile, opportunities for virtuoso singing demonstrate a mastery of current fashions. There are parallels to former madrigal styles, but in Book Seven, a modern lexicon prevails.

Pieces collected in the 1620s continue in a similar vein, and the final (eighth) book under Monteverdi's own direction is a retrospective of thirty years' work. The composer adds the *arietta* to his musical vocabulary in 1632, and publishes the light-hearted *Scherzi Musicali* in the same year. He writes the 'first great vocal *chaconne*,' *Zefiro torna*, launching the chaconne style into the eighteenth century. The collection includes the *canti guerrieri* and *canti amorosi* (songs of love and war), and another dirge, *Lamento della Ninfa*, featuring a soprano melody sung *tempo rubato* over a trio of male voices in strict time. Another of Monteverdi's inventions, the *stile concitato,* is demonstrated here: inspired by 'Plato's concept of arousing the warlike or agitated state in Man,' a *semibreve* (prolonged) note [is] divided into 16 semiquavers repeated on that single note.' This device is also used in the setting of a Petrarch sonnet, in which three humors (*molle, temperato, concitato*) are contrasted.

Some have characterized Monteverdi's later works as a type of proto-cantata, with greater solo emphasis than in the true madrigal. Yet, Monteverdi preferred to write for ensemble singers rather than for soloists. Furthermore, the madrigal-derived and multi-voice word painting he absorbed from Marenzio continued to inform his solo pieces. He was still a being of the sixteenth century, despite his uncanny technical accomplishents, great emotional range, and audacious experimentation. These he deployed, as a Renaissance Neoplatonist, in an ambitious and largely successful project to 'affect the whole man.'