

No opportunity for vocal improvisation or virtuoso displays of vocal agility or power...no long melismas...a more predominantly syllabic setting of the text to make the words more intelligible...a blurring of the distinction between recitative and aria, declamatory and lyrical passages, with altogether less recitative...simpler, more flowing melodic lines...

Ranieri de' Calzabigi's reforms of opera, signed by Christof Willibald Gluck, Vienna, 1767

From Monteverdi to Gluck

As Joel Schwindt wrote in his *Orpheus in the Academy*, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* was as much a product of Mantua and its Gonzaga rulers, of the intellectually elite Accademia degli Invaghiti, and the competing court entertainments and polemics of the era, as it was of the creativity of Claudio Monteverdi. Clearly, Monteverdi hardly had complete autonomy over the direction of his creative output. This is especially true regarding his librettist Alessandro Striggio, who was a nobleman and court official, while as a musician, Monteverdi's status was that of lowly 'professional' and 'servant' of the court. Schwindt concludes that later, *L'Orfeo* 'exited the academy' and that creature of its time morphed into something new. As W.H. Auden said of the poet Yeats, upon his death 'He became his admirers.' No longer did Yeats control his own identity, nor did Monteverdi, or his opera.

After centuries-long oblivion, *L'Orfeo* and its composer were resurrected by nineteenth-century music historians, leading to the Paris performance of 1911 and continuing revivals. Less felicitous was the casting of Monteverdi as a 'mystically' inspired genius in the Romantic mode, which the Italian nationalist Gabriele D'Annunzio re-purposed as a symbol of Italian superiority in support of Mussolini's fascist regime. (The Nazis did much the same with Wagner, but in Monteverdi's case, there was no evidence of the Italian composer's complicity in such views.)

After Monteverdi, the most prominent name to tackle the Orpheus story was the German composer Christoph Willibald Gluck, in his *Orfeo ed Euridice* of 1762. The production was to premiere in Vienna under the patronage of Empress Maria Theresa. But the Roman poet Ovid's notoriously grim conclusion to the tale – Orfeo's violent dismemberment by inebriated female revelers – was not deemed celebratory fare. Gluck was reluctantly obliged, as was Monteverdi, to provide a happy ending for the tale. So, as Orfeo is on the brink of suicide after Euridice's dispatch to the Underworld, Amore appears to him and rewards his undying devotion: Euridice is returned to the living, as all gather at The Temple of Love to celebrate love's power.

Like Monteverdi, Gluck was a reformer and innovator. And just as the composers of Monteverdi's day were inspired by Renaissance humanist ideals, so too did Gluck hear the call of French Enlightenment principles, this despite a stint as music master to the French queen Marie Antoinette. Creating his *Orfeo ed Euridice* shortly after the death of Handel (1759), Gluck's

mission became an overhaul of Baroque excess and fossilized practice. Furthermore, he wished to overthrow the decades-old dominance of the poet-librettist Pietro Metastasio and the rigid formulae of the reigning *opera seria*, now little more than a showcase for the vocal acrobatics of castrati idols. Gluck set out to cleanse opera of the Baroque's rampant ornamentation, which had become its *raison d'être*. As did Monteverdi, Gluck wished to re-establish the primacy of poetry, drama, and narrative, with music that supported their meaning and emotional resonance.

Gluck was not alone in this undertaking. Following his move to Vienna, he met like-minded artists who became his allies. Among these was Ranieri de' Calzabigi, the librettist who provided Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* with the libretto's joyful finale, and who would go on to write a precise nine-point manifesto of operatic reforms that Gluck and his colleagues would adopt. To be reckoned with were the long *secco*, or dry, (unaccompanied) recitative passages employed in the Baroque to move the plot, interrupted by lengthy, ornate *da capo* (repeated) arias sung to convey emotion. Gluck exchanged the *secco* recitatives for aria-like pieces accompanied by full orchestra. Meanwhile, the lengthy *da capo* was replaced by an abbreviated aria, emotionally expressive and sensitive to the text. In this way, interminable recitatives and extravagant solos no longer obstructed the flow of music or drama, and works such as Orfeo's great lament, *Che farò senza Euridice?* were made possible.

Another Gluck ally was the celebrated castrato Gaetano Guadagni, who took the leading role in the initial *Orfeo ed Euridice* production. Felicitously, Guadagni had trained with the Shakespearean actor David Garrick, the proponent of a realist acting style that was replacing the bombast of earlier stage performance. Garrick's style was a perfect complement to Gluck's operatic streamlining. The director (Count) Giacomo Durazzo and the set designer Giovanni Maria Quaglio completed the partnership. All were under the spell of Johann Winkelmann, whose directive to pursue the 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' of Greek sculpture and architecture became the byword of eighteenth-century Neo-classicism. Winkelmann, a pioneering art historian and archaeologist, saw Pompeii and Herculaneum when first excavated. Now, the newly-discovered works of the Ancients could be examined in person and in widely-circulated engravings. These fresh encounters offered a real-life antidote to the exhausted repertoire of Baroque ornament, and provided the impetus for reform in every branch of the arts.

Both Gluck and Monteverdi turned to the Ancients for guidance and inspiration in their music, and both lit upon Orpheus. However, for Gluck in the eighteenth century, Antiquity transposed to music meant the unadorned clarity and spiritual-material union of Greek artifacts. Such was the vision of Johann Winkelmann's Neo-classicism. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries of Monteverdi, Antiquity signified the 'simple' pastoral haunts of nymphs and shepherds inlaid with moral illumination, and underscored by the tenets of Neo-Platonism. Each of these perspectives was engendered by, and engendered, an era's creative regeneration, and with it some of our most exquisite music.

Orpheus Today: The ‘Hundred-Eyed Argus’

A recent production of Gluck’s *Orfeo ed Euridice* by the Metropolitan Opera has remained faithful to the 1762 Calzabigi libretto. It has, in fact, gone so far as to excise features, such as The Dance of the Furies, which were added to later Paris productions. The staging, however, has been dramatically transformed by its designer and choreographer, the dancer Mark Morris. In Morris’s re-envisioning, the action is carried out by dancers, while the hundred-member chorus is seated onstage in three tiers, facing the audience. Chorus members have been costumed by the fashion designer Isaac Mizrahi as characters ranging from George Washington and Josephine Baker to Gluck himself. The drama of the main characters is heightened by their isolation amid the dancers’ expressive contemporary gestures. Meanwhile, the timeless nature of the tale is conveyed by the chorus of historically diverse spectators. In the 2007 staging, the countertenor David Daniels was the Met’s first male Orfeo. The mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe followed in this role (with soprano Danielle DeNiese as Euridice) in 2009, and in 2024, the countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo (with his Euridice, soprano Ying Fang).

Currently, an array of recorded Monteverdi *L’Orfeos* in a variety of styles can be seen on YouTube. Among these is a performance by Profeti della Quinta, a male sextet specializing in the Italian madrigal repertoire. Their *Orfeo* (2020) is musically adept and engaging, though the staging is visually dim, with low lighting and contemporary black costumes variously suggesting fifties gang guys and eighties goth girls. (When the stage *is* well-lit, it is in the bleak Underworld scenes rather than in the earlier, celebratory first act, a rather odd choice.) Because of this partiality for the somber, the production misses visualization of some important contrasting ideas in *Orfeo*’s poetry: the darkness of the infernal regions versus the light of Heaven, immoderate joy versus extreme grief, and the final lesson of Dionysian excess opposed to Apollonian restraint, all of which are key themes of the drama. These contrasts are visually missing in the Profeti production. But this lack is a hint to the nature of contemporary *Orfeos*: No matter how deft or pleasing, without a Gonzaga duke or an Invaghiti prelate at the helm, these productions are no longer morality plays.

Then there is *L’Orfeo – Der Opernfilm* from the Staatstheater Nürnberg (2020). This production escapes the Profeti’s muted landscape with contemporary staging in living color and deliriously busy use of video backdrops. The characters are constantly in motion, dancing, flirting, and yes, brandishing phone cameras on selfie sticks as they sing of Nature and the lives of shepherds. Orfeo, a wide-eyed naif addled by love, does indeed journey to retrieve Euridice from the Underworld. Here, we see her laid out dead on a dining table between Hades and Proserpina, who scramble over her in a lubricious seduction scene before they release her to Orfeo.

Whereas most productions provide an explosive bang just before Orfeo turns for the fatal look, in *Der Opernfilm*, the orchestra makes of Monteverdi’s music a manic swing band jazz riff. They stop, Orfeo turns, and Euridice disappears. Musical humor has been interjected into Orfeo’s most

poignant moment, and it works. At the end, Apollo, dressed in a business suit, speaks to Orfeo over a microphone, and Orfeo listens to him – you guessed it – on his phone. When Orfeo is invited to Heaven, a video thicket of artists' statues appears, and Orfeo strikes a pose. The *L'Orfeo Opernfilm* is imaginative, irreverent and charming, yet a bit unsettling. One wonders what Monteverdi might have thought of it, and how a seventeenth-century audience might have responded to some of Monteverdi's own innovations. Did they ever view them as gimmickry?

Both the Matthew Alcoin-Sarah Ruhl *Euridice* at The Met (2021) and the currently-running Broadway production of *Hadestown* by Anaïs Mitchell leave Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* and its cultural agenda in the dust. Both, meanwhile, are told from the point of view of Euridice, with original contemporary music. Alcoin's dreamlike *Euridice* features a soundscape that channels Philip Glass and John Adams, while Mitchell's music is lush, blues-based Broadway, with an infusion of Weill-Brecht vibe for good measure. In Alcoin's work Euridice rues her love for a musician whose attention is always elsewhere. She runs to her death from another seducer (Hades), who carries a letter from her dead father. Euridice arrives, via a rainy elevator that obliterates memory, in the Underworld. There she meets her father, who rehabilitates her memory, but ultimately cancels his own in the 'river of forgetfulness.' Euridice remembers Orpheus, who comes for her but fails to restore her to the living. She writes Orpheus a letter for his future wife with instructions on his care, then immerses herself in the annihilating river. Orpheus descends once again to rescue her, but the leaky elevator erases his memory as well, and he can't read Euridice's letter. In the end, there is only death to quench sorrow and loss. With Alcoin's work, Orpheus has run the gamut from Renaissance apotheosis to modernist nihilism, beautiful, wistful, and dark.

For Broadway, Anaïs Mitchell has given us an Orpheus tale that trades moralizing for social commentary. *Hadestown* has rousing music and a stylish setting that conjures Catfish Row and *The Threepenny Opera* done over in post-industrial chic. Euridice meets Orpheus when she is down on her luck and homeless. They quarrel, she succumbs to a robber baron-type Hades, and ends up in the Underworld with Hades' captive workforce and a jealous Persephone. This *Hadestown* Orpheus also fails in his rescue mission, but the show ends on an upbeat, bittersweet note. Though love is a 'sad song', sings our guide, Hermes, it springs eternal, and because it is in our nature, we will always follow our hearts. Thus we have the anthem of the unsinkable Orpheus, Broadway baby.

The Ljubljana (Slovenia) Academy of Music performs its *L'Orfeo* in the Basilica dei Frari of Venice, where the ghost of Monteverdi presides over the performance. The nymphs and shepherds, draped in traditional garb, dance discreetly before a screen of saints sculpted in bas-relief, as they come and go through a high Roman arch at center. The lighting glows and the acoustics are gorgeous. Only Music, descending from Parnassus to tell Orfeo's story, shines in a gown of electric blue. A sense of innocence reigns, as it does in a good production of *Romeo and Juliet*. And like

Romeo, Orfeo is 'banished' because, as an infernal Spirit tells him, he has broken the law; meanwhile, another Spirit wisks Euridice to the 'shadows of death.'

In Shakespeare, it is the Prince of Verona who enforces the law and maintains order, while in Mantua, it is a Gonzaga prince. Both would have recognized Orfeo's demand – 'Give me back what is mine, oh Gods of Tartarus' – as an outrageous act of hubris, despite that it is segued by the Chorus's humanist hymn vaunting the deeds of man. Thus, in the Ljubljana *L'Orfeo*, historicity feeds the drama. A golden Apollo, framed by a solar corona, emerges from the darkness of that high arch, and singing with him in primordial harmony, translates Orfeo to Heaven. We experience justice done and the Cosmic order restored, as did, perhaps, that powerful Gonzaga prince.

Monteverdi's Orfeo protests that, had he as many eyes as Argus, his 'sea of weeping' would still not express his sorrow. Like the hundred-eyed Argus, Orpheus is a protean shape-shifter, whose myth accomodates a multitude of human ideas and passions, each congenial to its own time and place.