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Winter 2019

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Zoe Haenisch

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Elliott Peterson

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Luke McMillan

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

Sam Wagner

Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois

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Haenisch, Zoe; Peterson, Elliott; McMillan, Luke; and Wagner, Sam. "Musical Drama in Monteverdi's L'Orfeo: How Aria, Recitative, and Ritornello Shape Drama" (2019). *2019 Festschrift: Claudio Monteverdi's Orfeo*.

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Musical Drama in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*: How Aria, Recitative, and Ritornello Shape Drama

Zoe Haenisch

Luke McMillan

Elliott Peterson

Sam Wagner

Augustana College

MUSC 313--Styles and Literature of Music I

December 11, 2019

Abstract:

Composers of early operas faced the unique challenge of using their music as a dramatic form of entertainment. This idea of drama linked with music was relatively new, so these composers had to develop entirely original concepts.

One such composer was Claudio Monteverdi, who built the foundation of modern opera's three main musical forms: aria, recitative, and ritornello. An early example of the dramatic use of these musical forms can be seen in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*. In this opera, Monteverdi used the aria to convey emotions, the recitative to transmit information, and the ritornello to unify the plot.

Keywords:

Monteverdi, Claudio, Aria, Recitative, Ritornello, *L'Orfeo*, Opera, Drama, Music and Drama

Now often credited with being the first great opera composer, Claudio Monteverdi made significant developments in the now well-recognized genre. Composers from Monteverdi's time had the daunting task of taking familiar stories and putting them to music in a way that entertained its viewers. For one of his earliest operas, Monteverdi chose none other than the myth of Orpheus, a well known Greek legend about a musician who loses his beloved. The question standing before Monteverdi was how to use music as a means of developing drama and conveying information as effectively as possible. His answer to this question was the invention of distinct musical forms that each served individual purposes while simultaneously working together to establish a cohesive story. These forms, which are still used in operas today, consist of aria, recitative, and ritornello. Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* became the vessel in which these forms developed because they were used so effectively to shape the drama of his opera. In *L'Orfeo*, the drama was shaped effectively by the way Monteverdi used arias to convey the intense emotions of the characters through the use of ornamentation, recitatives to efficiently relay information, and ritornellos to unify the plot through the use of musical motives and repetition.

The Orpheus myth originated in Ancient Greece, and while there are some subtle differences between versions and translations, they are relatively minor. According to the version in *Mythology* by Edith Hamilton, the gods were the original musicians. They had musical gifts beyond anything a mere mortal could accomplish, but certain mortals were able to come close to matching their skill. Orpheus, the demigod son of a muse, was the best of these mortals. He played the lyre so beautifully that he was able to move mountains and redirect streams; amazing feats of nature that were otherwise deemed impossible. He sailed with Jason on the *Argo*, where he met Euridice. They were married soon after, but before going on their honeymoon, Euridice went to a meadow with her bridesmaids and was bitten by a snake. She died soon after, and Orpheus was so upset when he found out that he went to the underworld to try to bring her back from the dead. Using his lyre, he was able to get past the underworld's defenses, including Cerberus, the three-headed dog, and Charon the ferryman. Even Pluto, the god of the dead, wept at the beauty of the music Orpheus created. It was because of that beauty that Pluto allowed him to take Euridice back to the world of the living, but there was still one condition: he wasn't to look back at her while they made the journey. Orpheus had almost finished his quest back to the land of the living, but before he crossed the threshold, he began to doubt that his love was following him. He succumbed to the temptation to look behind him. Because of the stipulations set forth by Pluto, Euridice was then forced to return to the underworld. Left in the

wake of his sorrow, Orpheus wandered with his lyre until he was killed by Maenads. To this day, the birds still sing more sweetly in the place he died than they do anywhere else on earth.¹

Operas such as *L'Orfeo* attempted to revive the ancient Greek tragedies, and many believed that the original performances of these plays would have been almost entirely musical. There is no concrete evidence as to exactly how they sounded, but they also could not prove that these performances of the story were not accurate. However, there was one important way that many of the operas, including *L'Orfeo*, purposely differed from the original myths. Some composers felt that the tragic endings would not resonate with audiences, so they rewrote them with more uplifting endings. In the case of *L'Orfeo*, Orpheus still fails to save Euridice from the underworld, but the opera does not end on this somber note. Instead, Monteverdi had Apollo descend from Olympus and offer Orpheus the gift of immortality. Orpheus accepts and joins Apollo as he ascended back to Olympus, leaving the audience with an uplifting and hopeful ending.

There were many composers at the time who disapproved Monteverdi's works; in particular, Monteverdi received much criticism from composer Giovanni Maria Artusi. According to *The New Monteverdi Companion*, Artusi's dislike for Monteverdi's compositions could be reduced to generational dispute². For example, Artusi was a generation older than Monteverdi, and he believed that dissonances and leaps should be treated contrapuntally, a rule that Monteverdi often broke. Monteverdi was unwilling to compromise his artistry, since his decision to defy the rules of counterpoint stemmed from what he felt would best convey the music's meaning. Monteverdi later addressed these concerns and critique, beginning the *seconda prattica*. With these same ideas of using musical elements to convey meaning and emotion in music, Monteverdi composed *L'Orfeo*.

The term aria has had many meanings since its birth in the sixteenth century. The first and most common definition of aria is a musical genre with subsets like strophic arias. An aria can also be used to describe a melody or a specific mood, manner, or demeanour.³ While there are many definitions for this one musical term, all of these definitions are connected. For example, there are many different moods that can be portrayed through an aria; if a character is angry, he or she might be given a rage aria. If a character is infatuated with another character, they

¹ Edith Hamilton, "Mythology" Orpheus and Euridice, pg. 103-105.

² Denis Arnold, and Nigel Fortune. *The New Monteverdi Companion*. London: Faber and Faber, 1985.

³ Tim Carter, "An Air New and Grateful to the Ear": The Concept of 'Aria' in Late Renaissance and Early Baroque Italy." *Music Analysis* 12, no. 2 (1993): 127-45. doi:10.2307/854269

would sing an aria describing in exaggerated detail how much that person means to him or her. Unlike recitatives, arias are not meant to propel the plot by offering context or dialogue. Arias are set for solo singers, and mostly exist solely to develop and display the emotions of the character singing them.

Monteverdi used aria as a means of conveying the intense emotions of his characters. He realized there was no greater way to display both his mastery of the traditional form as well as his ability to write various virtuosic compositional techniques than in an aria. His arias were of a new variety; they could portray the extremes of sorrow and joy, sometimes all in the same aria. His compositions gave rise to new techniques and “new appeal(s) to the ear struck by fast and slow movement, and now roughly and now sweetly according to the aria.”⁴ The opening aria sung by the character ‘La musica,’ who is meant to represent music, is a perfect representation of this. In this aria, the character is introducing the audience to the story of Orpheus and her role in the opera. The libretto often pairs opposite emotions like anger and love or happiness and sadness in the same line, allowing Monteverdi to take these contrasting emotions and create a musical line that encompasses both feelings. For example, the second phrase of the aria contains a line discussing the way music can stir in the spirits of the people who listen to it, through anger and love. The portion about anger features quick, dotted rhythms in contrast with the lines preceding it and the line following it that discusses the love aspect.⁵ The other example of this emotional juxtaposition in the aria comes in the final verse. The character of Music is declaring that while she, representing the rest of the music in the opera, is playing in her various emotional states of song, namely joy or despair, that nothing on earth or in heaven is to interrupt her. Monteverdi uses the traditional ‘sigh motif,’ a descending minor second, that has been made common in earlier compositions to represent a despairing attitude when Music is referring to her songs of sadness in measures forty seven and forty eight.⁶

The literal and dramatic center of the opera is Orfeo’s Act III aria, *Possente spirto*. This work is the most elaborate aria in Monteverdi’s opera. It features exceptional ornamentation that allows for the unfolding of the all-consuming despair and desperation Orfeo feels when he is pleading for his lost love to be returned to him. At this

⁴ Tim Carter, “An Air New and Grateful to the Ear: The Concept of ‘Aria’ in Late Renaissance and Early Baroque Italy.” *Music Analysis* 12, no. 2 (1993): 127-45. doi:10.2307/854269

⁵ Claudio Monteverdi, *L’Orfeo: favola in musica* (London, ENG: J. & W. Chester, ©1923), 4.

⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

point in the myth, Orfeo is appealing to the guardian of the underworld Charon. Since this aria is the pinnacle of drama in the opera, it allows for a great deal of virtuosic vocal techniques displayed through ornamentation.

Monteverdi was known for writing out the ornamentation in his scores; in fact, he wrote two different vocal lines in Orfeo's aria *Possente spirto*: one with ornamentations that displays virtuosic talent, and another with simply the bare melodic line. (Fig. 1)⁷ Ornamentation was commonly used to emphasize the text; melismas or trills were used to draw attention to the words they were written for. While Monteverdi often indicated where he wanted ornamentation, the singer was able to decide whether or not they wanted to sing the embellishments provided by the composer. *Possente spirto* is the most ornamented aria in the entire opera. The work was written in strophic aria form; a strophic aria is a solo melodic line is set over a repeated figured bass. This compositional technique calls for simplicity in the accompaniment that allows for the singer to take the melodic line and ornament it to their desire. A musician may be worried that intense ornamentation could take the listener away from the aria itself and instead focus solely on the skills of the singer, but the ornamentation in Monteverdi's arias managed to convey the character's words in a cohesive way while also expressing the intensity of the emotions the character is feeling. These emotions were typically exaggerated and dramatized to be as extreme as possible, and the main way these emotional pits and peaks are represented in the performance is through the performer's ornamentation.

The vocal line of *Possente spirto* begins with a long melisma that starts in the fourth measure and continues for the next two measures. This display by Orfeo is meant to impress the guardian of the underworld; the first few phrases of music feature Orfeo pleading with Charon while also flattering him as the supreme ruler of the dead. When looking through the score of the entire aria, there are never more than three consecutive measures without a melisma or trill. The contrast between the unornamented line and the heavily ornamented line is staggering. There are instances in the score where the ornamented line will enter earlier to allow for a longer melisma that spans two measures while the unornamented line takes two beats to set the same text. The unornamented line often features longer note values that allow for the ornamented line move with it. All of these characteristics can be seen in measures thirty-six through forty. In measures thirty-six and thirty-seven alone, there is a long melisma on the ornamented line while the unornamented line sustains one note, and there is an early entrance to allow for

⁷ Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo: favola in musica* (London, ENG: J. & W. Chester, ©1923), 90

ornamentation in the second line. (Fig. 2)⁸ Finally, throughout the entirety of the phrase, there are only two beats where the unornamented and ornamented lines are the same, showing there are almost no instances where the ornamented line does not have some variation of the unornamented line.

At the time of Monteverdi's composition of *L'Orfeo*, recitative was an already developing practice. Generally these were passages of music meant to represent speech, where the rate of harmonic change varied with the text. Overall, this involved a slower harmonic rhythm over a static bass line. These elements gave an impression of declamatory freedom, allowing the plot to develop in a way that felt natural to the listener. To further emphasize the drama of the myth of Orpheus, Monteverdi uses recitative as a means for conveying the dialogue of the characters and efficiently telling the story through conversational styles of composition. All of the musical elements involved worked together to develop the idea of speech and propel plot development.⁹ Monteverdi is known for his deliberate expression of the dialogue through recitative. He sought to not only imitate speech, but to make the sung lines indistinguishable from speech the audience would expect to hear in day to day conversations. This imitation of natural phrasing creates a fuller understanding of character relationships, along with a greater development of their emotions. As Rothenberg and Holzer write, "recitative hoped to emulate the way humans would have expressed these emotions if they were really happening to them, and not imitating human speech with recitative would have been unnatural."¹⁰

Beyond the development of music representing spoken word, Monteverdi's use of recitative focused less on larger phrases and more on individual words or expressions. The music rhythmically and tonally expressed the implications of individual words, leading to a grand expression of poetic emotion. Each word was written to convey its full emotional meaning, enhancing the overall impact of larger phrases. In the same way, this made the text feel natural, with a lack of premeditated structure. The character's feelings were made more authentic, and the audience's understanding of the drama of the story is propelled forward by the intensity created by recitative. Quick rising or

⁸Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo: favola in musica* (London, ENG: J. & W. Chester, ©1923), 93.

⁹Dale Monson, Jack Westrup, and Julian Budden. "Recitative: Grove Music." Recitative | Grove Music, July 30, 2019.

<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000023019?rskey=Np0Rmk&result=1>.

¹⁰David J. Rothenberg, Robert R. Holzer, M6ricz Kl6ra, and David E. Schneider. *Oxford Anthology of Western Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

descending melodic lines, unexpected changes in harmonic rhythm, emphasized dissonance, and sudden departures from the key area all amplified emotional tension.¹¹

The drama of Monteverdi's operas that happens on stage is a direct reflection of real human emotion, and composers attempt to emulate that emotion as much as possible. This is illustrated when the messenger brings news of Eurydice's death to Orpheus. The first line the messenger sings is exemplary of Monteverdi's use of recitative. The line begins with an exclamatory 'ah' exhibiting the emotional intensity of the situation. Then, Monteverdi deviates from the tonal structure on *crudele* (cruel).¹² Both of these instances show Monteverdi's work to create recitative that delivered essential plot information while still emphasizing the emotional effect of the situation. After hearing this news, Orpheus is left in a state of intense grief. During this emotional moment within the plot, this recitative is accompanied by basso continuo, leaving the vocal line exposed. While emphasizing the raw emotional state of each character, the sparse accompaniment allows the listener to focus on the singer's performance. This also enabled each singer to display the intense emotions of their character with great rhythmic and melodic freedom. When comparing Monteverdi's recitative style to the style of other composers of the time, it is apparent that Monteverdi's style allowed for more flexibility and expressivity in the vocal line¹³

Like aria and recitative, Monteverdi uses ritornello to further the drama of the opera. A distinct feature of Monteverdi's ritornello is its clear separation from the vocal sections. Both the ritornello and strophic sections are tonally independent. This lack of connection helps section the pieces from one another, and make the recurring melodic ideas more evident. Monteverdi also uses ritornello within *L'Orfeo* to further the plot. This can be seen as the main musical themes of the prologue are continually brought back throughout the piece. The prologue tells the story of a strong and triumphant Orpheus, and sets up the audience's understanding of the character. The ritornello from the prologue then comes back after Orpheus is told of the death of his wife. In a moment of intense sorrow, the same musical motives that were present during the description of his strength return. Even in his horrible sadness, the audience is reminded, through the ritornello, of the greatness that has been promised for him. Here, the ritornello informs the audience's view of the story, shaping the understanding the plot.¹⁴

¹¹ Joseph Kerman. "Orpheus and the Neoclassic Vision of Opera." *The Hudson Review* (1956): 250-267.

¹² Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo: favola in musica* (London, ENG: J. & W. Chester, ©1923), 56

¹³ Denis Midgley Arnold. "Claudio Monteverdi." Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., November 5, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Claudio-Monteverdi>.

¹⁴ Mark Ringer, *Opera's First Master the Musical dramas of Claudio Monteverdi*. New Jersey: Amadeus Press, 2006.

To conclude, Monteverdi made tremendous contributions to the art of opera and the musical styles used within it. Working with stories as dramatic as the myth of Orfeo, composers had to revolutionize elements of music and bend them to their will to truly depict the drama of the story. Monteverdi pioneered the use of aria, recitative, and ritornello in his opera, *L'Orfeo*. His arias used ornamentation to convey the intense emotional reactions of the characters, the recitatives efficiently conveyed information, and the ritornellos used structure to unify the plot. One of the main purposes of an opera is to communicate the drama effectively to the audience. Using aria, recitative, and ritornello, Monteverdi found great success in this communication. Composers after him followed in his footsteps and further evolved opera's musical structures to dramatize their works even more. Still, the main elements of opera have remained relatively static to this day. For this reason, it can be concluded that Monteverdi's contributions to opera were extraordinary and enduring.

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The image shows a musical score for Orfeo, Act 3, measures 133-136. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has three staves: a vocal line for Orfeo, a lute line, and a bass line. The vocal line has the lyrics "A lei vol -". The lute line has the lyrics "A lei". The second system also has three staves: a vocal line for Orfeo, a lute line, and a bass line. The vocal line has the lyrics "t'ho il ca - min". The lute line has the lyrics "vol - - - t'ho - il ca - - - min".

Figure 1: Excerpt from “Possente spirto.” L’Orfeo, Act 3, mm. 133-136. (Claudio Monteverdi. *L’Orfeo: favola in musica*. London, ENG: J. & W. Chester, 1923.)

The image shows a musical score for Orfeo, Act 3, measures 36-37. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system has three staves: a vocal line, a lute line, and a bass line. The vocal line has the lyrics "tan . . . ta bel .". The lute line has the lyrics "tan . . . ta bel .". The second system has three staves: a vocal line, a lute line, and a bass line. The vocal line has the lyrics "tan . . . ta bel .". The lute line has the lyrics "tan . . . ta bel .". The third system has three staves: a vocal line, a lute line, and a bass line. The vocal line has the lyrics "tan . . . ta bel .". The lute line has the lyrics "tan . . . ta bel .".

Figure 2: Excerpt from “Possente spirto.” L’Orfeo, Act 3, mm. 36-37 (Claudio Monteverdi. *L’Orfeo: favola in musica*. London, ENG: J. & W. Chester, 1923.)