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La Favola d'Orfeo and the Role of the Operatic Orchestra

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One of Claudio Monteverdi's greatest contributions to the opera was his unification of musical ideas and theoretical philosophies passed down from his predecessors. These ideas were mostly concerned with the way in which a composer could manage instruments and voices in a dramatically satisfying way. Monteverdi's operatic orchestra was grandiose for his time, but his management of the different colors of the orchestra to heighten the drama on the stage was the more important contribution to musical history. Monteverdi's *La Favola d'Orfeo* was the first opera to employ new musical philosophies that would come to characterize the genre; Monteverdi's style of orchestration was essential to the popularization of those philosophies. In this essay, we will outline operatic orchestration practices before Monteverdi and connect them to the *La Favola d'Orfeo* to demonstrate the profound shift that Monteverdi brought to the development of modern opera.

Monteverdi wrote *La Favola d'Orfeo* while he was in Mantua, where he had moved from his hometown of Cremona several years before writing this influential opera in 1607.¹ He had received an appointment to the court of Mantua by Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga in 1591. Gradually through the years of his employment there, he ascended the musical ranks in that court to become the *maestro della musica* of the court in 1601. While in Mantua, Monteverdi was greatly influenced by a master composer of madrigals, Giaches de Wert, who was well known for setting text in a way that appealed to the emotions in an elegant manner and style.² The influence of Wert's style is apparent in many of the madrigals that Monteverdi composed. This style also later impacted *La Favola d'Orfeo* in that the opera contains madrigals that are written with emotional sensitivity to the words along with the orchestration.³

Although the body of instruments that accompany an opera is considered an orchestra today, it was not referred to as an orchestra in Monteverdi's time. This group of instruments was not an independent institution as it is viewed today with four sections of standard instruments playing different parts all together, but rather a conglomeration of undefined parts meant for whatever instruments were available at the time of the performance in order to accompany the singers.⁴ There are not many scores that survived from the time before Monteverdi, and most of the ones that are available today do not specify which instruments play which part. When Monteverdi wrote his *La Favola d'Orfeo*, he ventured off this path of ambiguous instrumentation and helped to establish a more

¹ Tim Carter and Geoffrey Chew. "Monteverdi [Monteverde], Claudio." Grove Music Online. 2001, (accessed 30 Nov. 2019).

² Iain Fenlon. "Wert [Vuert], Giaches [Jaches] de." Grove Music Online. 2001, (accessed 1 Dec. 2019).

³ Carter and Chew, "Monteverdi [Monteverde], Claudio."

⁴ Silke Leopold and Irene Zedlacher. "The Orchestra in Early Opera." *The Musical Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (1996): 265-68.

standard system of writing parts that pertained to certain instruments. This distinction of part writing affects the color and sound of the overall music.⁵

The most fundamental change Monteverdi brought to operatic orchestra was its size. Operas written in the decades before *La Favola d'Orfeo* were written for small chamber orchestras made up of a basso continuo and a few solo instruments. Conversely, *La Favola d'Orfeo* is scored for an orchestra of at least forty instruments.⁶ Members of Monteverdi's orchestra fell into three groups: fundamental, stringed, and wind instruments. The fundamental group was responsible for filling out the chords. Instruments included in this group were keyboard or stringed instruments that could play chords. Instruments that have since been removed from the modern orchestra were used, such as the chitarrone and clavicembalo. The stringed and wind instrumental groups were used to change the color of the orchestra in order to match the mood of the text, and they were only sparingly employed simultaneously. The string section was made up of violin family instruments and contrabass viols, while the wind section mostly included brass instruments and a couple of recorders.⁷ This expanded instrumentation of *La Favola d'Orfeo* closely resembles that of *intermedii*, which had lost its popularity in the decades preceding *La Favola d'Orfeo*. Hans Ferdinand Redlich compellingly makes this point in his book, *Claudio Monteverdi: Life and Works*. According to Redlich, other composers had used large instrumentation in theatrical drama before Monteverdi, but Monteverdi's application of an expanded orchestra in opera was more dramatically effective than his predecessors. Monteverdi was the first composer to use instrumentation to alter the mood of the drama on stage, which would become a staple technique in later operas.⁸

Let us now examine the specific instrumentation that Monteverdi employed in *La Favola d'Orfeo*. Scholars disagree about the type of stringed instruments used in *La Favola d'Orfeo*. The disagreement stems from translations of Monteverdi's instrumentation page to the score. The phrase of contention is *Dieci Viole da Brazzo*, which has been translated as violin family instruments and viol family instruments by different scholars. Adam Carse, author of *The History of Orchestration*, translates *Dieci Viole da Brazzo* as being various types of arm-viols.⁹

⁵ Ibid. 267

⁶ Hans Ferdinand Redlich, *Claudio Monteverdi: Life and Works*, trans. Kathleen Dale, Oxford University Press (London: 1952), 96-97.

⁷ Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera; 4th Ed.*, Columbia University Press (New York: 2003), 52.

⁸ Hans Ferdinand Redlich, *Claudio Monteverdi: Life and Works*, trans. Kathleen Dale, Oxford University Press (London: 1952), 96-99.

⁹ Adam Carse, *The History of Orchestration*, Dover Publications, Inc., (New York: 1964), 39.

However, in J. A. Westrup's article, "Monteverdi and the Orchestra," he describes this translation as a mistake that has been widespread in music history literature. Westrup claims that the *Dieci Viole da Brazzo* used in *La Favola d'Orfeo* were violin family instruments, specifically the violin, viola, and violoncello. Westrup argues that the clefs of the string parts may seem to indicate that *viols* were used instead of violins, but the ranges of the instruments still correspond perfectly with violin family instruments. He also disproves the notion that the clef used always correlated with the size of the instruments used by showing that violins were often written in soprano clef and treble clef.¹⁰ Westrop's argument is convincing, but the matter is still not resolved. Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, authors of *A Short History of Opera*, describe *Dieci Viole da Brazzo* as "possibly" violin family instruments, but they do not make a definitive stance on a translation.¹¹ *La Favola d'Orfeo* was written in a time when both viols and violin family instruments were popular and instrument names were not standardized as they are today, so making distinctions between the two are not easily done.

The other instrument groups are more clear in their descriptions, so there is more agreement among scholars regarding these groups. The score instructs the use of clavicembali, double harps, chicharrones, bass cithers, bass *viols*, organs with wood pipes, an organ with reed pipes, strings (as mentioned before), trombones, cornetts, recorders, and trumpets. Overall, forty-one separate instruments are called for in the score, but it is unlikely that the orchestra would have consisted of forty-one players. Instruments such as the *violini piccoli* were likely doubled by string players. The orchestra that Monteverdi used was not unique for its day, but it was new to the opera. The exact instruments for which *La Favola d'Orfeo* written for was likely decided upon based on the instruments at his disposal at the time.¹²

While Monteverdi's instrumentation for *La Favola d'Orfeo* was only new in the realm of opera, his orchestration techniques were groundbreaking. At first glance, Monteverdi's orchestration in *La Favola d'Orfeo* shared many characteristics to those of his predecessors and contemporaries, though he made many departures from them. 16th century composers typically refrained from attributing an instrument to a staff. These composers often didn't specify instrumentation when they did, it was still not clear as to which instrument should play which line of music. Therefore, the concept of blending between instruments of different timbre was not a concern. Instruments or

¹⁰ J. A. Westrup, "Monteverdi and the Orchestra." *Music & Letters*, 21, no. 3 (1940): 230-45.

¹¹ Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera; 4th Ed.*, Columbia University Press (New York: 2003), 52.

¹² J. A. Westrup, "Monteverdi and the Orchestra." *Music & Letters*, 21, no. 3 (1940): 239-240.

instrument groups typically doubled voices simply to create a larger sound. Parts were not written idiomatically as they would be later, allowing any performer to play the line of their instrument's range.¹³ *La Favola d'Orfeo* was much more specific in its instrumentation and orchestration than these 16th century composers, but remnants from the older style remained. While Monteverdi did call for specific instruments in specific places, his staves were often devoid of instrumentation specifications. Due to the performing practice of the time, performers likely knew what lines to play without always being told.¹⁴

The number of parts used throughout *La Favola d'Orfeo* was also fairly similar to that of other composers. Monteverdi's contemporaries almost always wrote in either three or five parts, both of which are common throughout *La Favola d'Orfeo*. The opening Toccata of the opera, as was common with Toccatas, *Ritornelli*, and *Sinfonie*, was in five parts, while most of solo vocal sections were in three parts.¹⁵ Other stylistic characteristics connect *La Favola d'Orfeo* with earlier operas, such as monody, form, and text. While Monteverdi was clearly operating within the traditions of his time, he provided innovations to the genre that changed opera as we know it. The most impactful of these innovations was his orchestration, which not only changed the techniques of performance, but also changed the relationship between music and drama in opera.

Monteverdi's orchestration in *La Favola d'Orfeo* was an unprecedented manipulation of musical mood and symbolism. The idea that instrumental accompaniment could change the mood of a drama was not invented by Monteverdi, but his *La Favola d'Orfeo* was the first opera to compellingly put the idea into practice. The two notable *Euridice* operas by Peri and Caccini that predated *La Favola d'Orfeo* lacked the dramatic relationship between orchestral timbre, mood, and character development. These works are important because they were the first monodic operas, but their homogeneous orchestrations would soon be eclipsed by Monteverdi's contributions to the genre. The main difference in orchestration between earlier operas and Monteverdi's is that Monteverdi provided more specificity and variation in instrumentation, which he utilized to change the musical mood to match the drama on stage.¹⁶ Emilio de Cavalieri introduced the idea of modifying the orchestration to symbolize a particular character or emotion in the forward to his 1600 publication, *Rappresentazione di Anima, et di Corp*. In his forward, Cavalieri

¹³ Adam Carse, *The History of Orchestration*, Dover Publications, Inc., (New York: 1964), 23-26.

¹⁴ Ibid., 40-41.

¹⁵ Ibid., 32-34, 41-43.

¹⁶ Ibid., 37-38.

put forth the idea that the role of the orchestra is to contribute to the *affetto* of the piece. According to Cavalieri, the many elements of a theatrical drama should converge to create multiple *affetti* for the audience to enjoy. These *affetti* should contrast with one another, as should the orchestration. While *Rappresentazione di Anima, et di Corp* was written seven years before Monteverdi's *La Favola d'Orfeo*, it was Monteverdi who put these ideas into practice. Cavalieri's music was similar to Peri and Caccini's in that the orchestration was vague and ultimately homogenous. *La Favola d'Orfeo* the first effective implementation of Cavalieri's musical philosophies.¹⁷

Monteverdi used orchestrational techniques in the basso continuo to manipulate the *affetti* of the music in *La Favola d'Orfeo*. One of the most effective examples of this from the opera is the change in basso continuo instrumentation during the announcement of Euridice's death in Act II. The mood of the first act and the beginning of the second act is celebratory. Orfeo and Euridice's wedding day is accompanied by songs and dances containing themes of happiness, beauty, and nature, which is reflected in the music through the instrumentation and a pastoral mood. The basso continuo instrumentation preceding the entrance of the messenger in Act II contains chitarrone, harpsichords, *violone*, and double harp. These instruments in combination produce timbres that likely would have been interpreted as joyful by the Arcadians during Monteverdi's time. The mood of the text changes dramatically at the entrance of the messenger who announces that Orfeo's bride has just been killed by a snake. Previous operatic composers would have likely kept the same instrumentation during a dramatic shift like this, but Monteverdi followed Cavalieri's dictum of matching the orchestration to the dramatic situation. Monteverdi removed the lush and joyful instrumentation of the wedding party at this point in the opera to create a somber mood. Instead of retaining the use of harpsichords and double harp, Monteverdi scored the messenger's entrance with wood organ and chitarrone. The timbral difference between these instrumental combinations create a new musical mood that creates a new *affetto* for the audience. Harpsichords and double harps create sound through the plucking of strings, which hinders their ability to sustain tones. The wood organ, on the other hand, can sustain pitches, creating a darker timbre more suited for a melancholy mood. The combination of chitarone and wood organ was described by Cavalieri as being effective for creating somber *affetti*, so it is likely that Monteverdi felt the same and utilized them for this purpose.¹⁸

¹⁷ Stephen Stubbs, "L'armonia Sonora: Continuo Orchestration in Monteverdi's Orfeo." *Early Music* 22, no. 1 (1994): 88-91.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93-94

Another example of Monteverdi's use of basso continuo instrumentation to change *affecti* can be found at the end of Act III. Throughout Act III, Orfeo is attempting to gain passage into the underworld to see Hades in order to rescue Euridice. Between Orfeo and his goal is Charon, the guardian of the River Styx. Orfeo eventually uses his musical abilities to cause Charon to fall asleep, allowing Orfeo to pass. Monteverdi scored the passage in which Charon falls asleep for wooden pipe organ and strings who are instructed to play quietly. This instrumentation dramatically varies from the earlier instrumentation of the sinfonia to Act III and is used to create a dream-like *affecto* that correlates to the plot. As Orfeo leaves Charon behind, the strings drop out and he is only accompanied by the organ. This solo organ creates an *affecto* of solitude and contrasts greatly with the orchestration of the rest of the opera.¹⁹

Monteverdi's variation in orchestration was utilized to create musical symbolism, though the manipulation of *affecti* seems to have been a more important factor in his orchestrational decisions. Musical symbolism is best demonstrated in Act III, during which Orfeo enters the underworld. The beginning of Act III is marked by a change in instrumentation to denote the darkness of the underworld. This act features use of trombones, which are used sparingly throughout the work, cornetts, and regels. The act still utilizes strings and basso continuo instruments from the two previous acts, but they are not used during the opening sinfonia.²⁰ Trombones would have been particularly effective for creating the dark mood of the underworld in Monteverdi's time because the instrument was closely associated with solemn church music.²¹

La Favola d'Orfeo stands as a *tour de force* in the operatic canon. Monteverdi's realization of previous composers' theoretical philosophies on music changed the history of opera. The *intermedii* sized orchestra and the use of the various colors available in the orchestra to create multiple *affecti* remain as an integral aspects of opera to this day. The use of instrumentation as symbolism would become more important to later composers such as Wagner, but Monteverdi laid the groundwork for this vital development in opera. Overall, Monteverdi changed the way in which composers managed the operatic orchestra in relationship to the drama on stage though his opera, *La Favola d'Orfeo*.

¹⁹ Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera; 4th Ed.*, Columbia University Press (New York: 2003), 51.

²⁰ Stephen Stubbs, "L'armonia Sonora: Continuo Orchestration in Monteverdi's Orfeo." *Early Music* 22, no. 1 (1994): 96.

²¹ J. A. Westrup, "Monteverdi and the Orchestra." *Music & Letters*, 21, no. 3 (1940): 242..

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Abstract

One of Claudio Monteverdi's greatest contributions to the opera was his unification of musical ideas and theoretical philosophies passed down from his predecessors. These ideas were mostly concerned with the way in which a composer could manage instruments and voices in a dramatically satisfying way. Monteverdi's *La Favola d'Orfeo* was the first opera to employ new musical philosophies that would come to characterize the genre. In this essay, we will outline operatic orchestration practices before Monteverdi and connect them to the *La Favola d'Orfeo* to demonstrate the profound shift that Monteverdi brought to the development of modern opera.