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Mythical Musical Drama in Monteverdi

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Wandelt sich rasch auch die Welt
wie Wolkengestalten,
alles Vollendete fällt
heim zum Uralten.

Über dem Wandel und Gang,
weiter und freier,
währt noch dein Vor-Gesang
Gott mit der Leier.

Nicht sind die Leiden erkannt,
nicht ist die Liebe gelernt,
und was im Tod uns entfernt,

ist nicht entschleiert.
Einzig das Lied überm Land
heiligt und feiert.

—Rilke, *The Sonnets to Orpheus*, XIX

Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643) can rightly be considered the father of dramatic opera.[1] The beginning of opera, chronologically, may be credited to the Florentine Camerata, with Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini's *Euridice* (1600), which still survives. And there were still earlier innovators: Andrea Gabrieli's version of *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1585), and Jacopo Peri and Jacopo Corsi's *Dafne* (1597–98). Monteverdi, however, is the father who perfected the form for his period—and showed a way beyond—realizing with consistency the concord of words with music as well as expressing the human range of feeling and mood.[2] "I vary my songs, now happy, now sad," La Musica sings in *Orfeo*—and Monteverdi makes of those varied songs a work that heightens for us the sense of life.

While many scholars have concentrated on his musical values and his formal innovations as the Renaissance morphed into the Baroque, the meaning and the dramatic impact of his operas illustrate what Richard Strauss (1864–1949) himself fully achieved in his final opera (*Capriccio*, 1942), namely, the perfect marriage of music and words. Monteverdi's great sense of drama, of art reaching out to the audience beyond its framework, lies in the psychological and semantic range that music can achieve itself as well as in how words and music interact, enhancing and extending each other, and it is this total sense of dynamic meaning (whether in speech, song, sound or gesture) that makes for the modernity of all his compositions. As Bernard Williams heard Monteverdi's music, he understood that it expressed "feeling that cannot be fully captured in words, a power which underlies the special opportunities that opera possesses as a form of drama."[3]

The High Renaissance truly entered the Baroque in Monteverdi's work. Drama and the dramatic mark the Baroque and the transition to it. Masques, ballets, and *intermedi* between the acts of plays were performed into the Baroque period; they were a welcome part of the entertainment. Madrigals as a musical form also had dramatic elements, as Monteverdi's own nine books of them, on a variety of themes, demonstrate. His eighth book centered on the themes of love and war, both of which featured prominently in his work while he was at the Gonzaga court in Mantua and later, when he became the conductor at San Marco in Venice. His church music was also dramatic, as the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (1610) clearly shows. There Monteverdi wrote for the overlapping of notes that occurs in every basilica. With singers stationed at various points, the acoustics of the cathedral and its echoes add an unearthly quality, as if eternity had entered a moment in time and could actually be *heard*. Such an effect, call it religious or metaphysical, was fully consonant with the theme and the setting of the music, but it was also an effect that was deeply personal to Monteverdi, something that carried over into his treatment of operatic form.

For his operas the narratives, however adapted, came from classical Greece and Rome, especially from the ancient Greek myths; but Monteverdi's glorious music came from Italy alone. *Orfeo* was first performed in 1607, in ducal Mantua, and first published in 1609. *Arianna* followed (1608, revived in 1940 in Venice), and then, after more than three decades, came *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (1640) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642). (*Le nozze d'Enea e Lavinia*, the middle opera of the "Venetian trilogy," was performed at the Teatro Grimani, but the music has been lost.)[4] These last operas trace the fall of Troy, with Odysseus and his wife reunited; the escape to Italy, with Aeneas' marriage to Lavinia; and the corruption of Nero's court, as displayed in a new libretto by Gian Francesco Busenello, which played freely with history. The authenticity of *L'incoronazione* has been questioned, given its endorsement of a secular marriage unblessed by heaven, an approach so antithetical to the ideas expressed by Monteverdi in his earlier operas.[5] But that opera might just function as a warning to those who would assume power without ethics, something that Monteverdi, looking back half a lifetime, experienced at the hands of the whimsical Gonzagas, his sponsors in Mantua.

There is a lot of improvisation for each of the singers (for instance, in the coloratura passages of the gods). Various directors also freely alter the libretto, omitting certain passages, or even changing their order.

Since the scores are in outline, there is also a great deal of freedom for each conductor to allow musicians to change the instruments they use.[6] Combinations of harps, citterns and viols accompany the upper world, whereas bass instruments, trombones and a rasping organ typify the underworld and the ocean. Drums accompany dances, but so do trumpets, besides the violins in the staccato *stile concitato* (fight music). Harpsichords, lutes, organs and harp are good for the continuo. The woodwinds populate the country (see Minerva as a shepherd playing on her panpipe when she first greets Ulisse on his arrival back in Ithaca). The scores contain a list-

ing of the instruments used, but how they were used and in what precise numbers were only revealed in rehearsal.

There are three main solo vocal techniques in his operas: the recitative, or free-flowing musical declamation; the more defined aria, which is shorter and musically defined; and arioso passages, which are more lyrical and impassioned sections of the recitative. Certain arias also have ritornellos, e.g., Penelope's *Torna il tranquillo al mare,* a "return" which she hopes Ulisse will make. This beautiful, albeit brief, aria provides momentary—and to the audience, vital—relief to Penelope's lament.

Just listen to the alternation of the gods and mortals in *Orfeo*, with the gods and their particular music (brass) and coloratura, and their voices which reflect both the heights (Giove) and the depths (Plutone, Nettuno), the cruelty, but also the intensity as well as the justice, of their vendettas. However, Giove would prefer to be known for his mercy, rather than by his bolts. (No gods in *Poppea;* just a tyrant who thinks he's God.) In *Orfeo*, even the gods of the underworld can feel love.

Love is the true subject of all Monteverdi's operas. In *Orfeo* we have devoted love transformed into music: the hell of the eternally lost beloved is transcended and Orfeo's pain leads him to heaven.[7] In *Ritorno,* faithful love is more tangibly rewarded. *Arianna* depicts the beloved once more lost, this time abandoned, and *Poppea* shows what happens when *every* passion is indulged without concern for justice or the gods: love but with the strife that comes of lust for power, and fidelity rewarded by betrayal. Nero is the new God, and Poppea loves him as well as his power.[8] To generalize, this is a composer who at his greatest can absorb the discords of suffering and loss into a harmonious, redemptive vision. In both *Orfeo* and *Ritorno* Monteverdi stresses the soul's hope of returning to God.

All his dramas—whether operas, *intermedi* or religious music—show him to be a master of tragedy, especially (as I have suggested) tragedy that can be redeemed by heaven. His operatic *scena*, *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*

(1624), is based on the twelfth canto of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*.[9] This features a fight between lovers who do not recognize each other in their armor. Part of the fight is conveyed by Monteverdi's repeated staccato chords, the *stile concitato*, and a new use of the pizzicato. The defeated Saracen Clorinda asks the Christian soldier Tancredi to convert her. At the end, she sings in gasps with her dying breath (reflected in the music through pauses and a rising theme): *S'apre il ciel; io vado in pace* ("The gates of heaven are open; I go in peace"). According to the stage directions, two fires burn on stage, as if to signify hate and love; as Tancredi and Clorinda fight one could ask: "Are they fighting or making love?" The fires also convey the rising heat of redemption on a darkened stage, and the soul rising to heaven.

Men seem transformed into gods, even the rustics and servants, when they sing of joyous love: nature echoes their happy songs both in *Orfeo* and *Ritorno*. The alternation of music describing love fulfilled and also love unfulfilled adds an important element to these operas' dramatic power. Even Penelope changes her sad song to cheer herself and Ericlea with the hope of Ulisse's return. If there are gods on your side, the libretto tells us in Ulisse's duet with Telemaco, man will win:

> Mankind, be ever trustful, ever hopeful;
> All earthly laws are subject
> To heaven's eternal edict.[10]

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ORFEO WAS FIRST PERFORMED in the ducal palace in Mantua for only about two hundred people. The *Accademia degli Invaghiti* (1566–1752) comprised the first audience and their intellectual ideas helped shaped the production. This *Accademia*, one of many that flourished in Renaissance Italy, used as its emblem an eagle looking at the sun, with the motto *Nihil Pulcherius* ("nothing more beautiful"). The eagle and sun motifs, which also appear in Monteverdi's other operas, are especially prominent in *Orfeo*. The sun here represents

truth, beauty and virtue, which the members strive in their flights to reach.

This first performance was supervised by Francesco Gonzaga with the intent of outshining his brilliant and accomplished younger brother Ferdinando, through whom he had borrowed a singer, a gifted *castrato*, from the Grand Duke of Florence; because *Orfeo* was composed for the Mantuan *Accademia*, men sang all the women's roles. It is likely that, in the original, La Musica (i.e., Music) was played by a "gifted boy singer," who could deliver "a disembodied, spirit-like, choirboy sound."[11] The role of Euridice, with her "virginal *vocalizes*" were rendered by a little priest (*pretino*).[12] There were four *castrati* in the original production.

Duke Vincenzo died in 1612, and Francesco succeeded his father as ruler. He dismissed Monteverdi, who in 1613 became Director of Music at the Basilica of St. Mark. Later he composed for public opera houses in Venice and Bologna. He suffered from personal loss (his wife and his brother), and from wars, and in 1630 witnessed the plague killing about a third of Venice's population, close to fifty thousand people. These experiences might well have influenced his choice to become a priest in 1631; but even earlier, religious themes and religious music had become intimately mixed with dramatic narrative.

Musica appears in the prologue to say that she, music, can not only calm, but can also arouse both love and noble anger. But she is heavenly music. Passion and anger will be the masters of Orfeo's music, his downfall. Orfeo rejoices too much (for a happiness which never lasts, given the human condition), loves too much (he breaks Plutone's command not to look back at Euridice until he has left the underworld), and then he grieves too much, weeping fountains of tears, shifting into anger at his fate. However, Apollo counsels him and leads him to redemption in heaven, along with the music he represents. Both the chorus and Apollo stress that earthly happiness is transient, and that the only trustworthy joy comes from obeying mandates of

heaven based on virtue and goodness. Only virtue deserves redemption. Orfeo learns the hard way.

This myth illustrates that death is inevitable, and that if even one person returned (viz., Eurydice), the cosmic order would be destroyed. Likewise, in the Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh* (ca. 1300–1000 BC), Gilgamesh futilely searches for immortality after his beloved Enkidu is killed by a jealous Ishtar. Gilgamesh laments, calling on the places to which they traveled to witness his sorrow and then weeping endless tears.

Urshanabi, the ferryman to death, takes him to Utnapisthim, who himself was granted immortality after the great flood. He tells Gilgamesh he will gain immortality if he stays awake six days and seven nights. Like Orpheus, Gilgamesh—a classic hero—fails. One of the epic's tablets offers the laconic summary that "when the gods made man, they kept immortality to themselves."[13] Every pleasure is fleeting, and Monteverdi's asymptotic convergence with this ancient truth—never to be total since his knowledge of the classics and grasp of such wisdom as Gilgamesh's could not but give way to his religious, redemptive vision of the ideal—is one indicator of his relevance to our human legacy.

Act 1 shows peasants celebrating Orfeo's good fortune, and this continues throughout the act. They seem to live in an Arcadian paradise. Songs and dances celebrate a happiness now doubled on account of Orfeo's previous sorrow, before he knew they could be wed: "Here let the sun gaze at your dances, more charming still than those which to the moon on a dusky night the stars dance in heaven."[14]

Orfeo's first song, "Rose of Heaven," delightedly proclaims to the sun his love for Euridice. Orfeo praises Euridice and she professes her love, but there is a discordant tritone (D-G sharp), which implies some of the tragedy to come. Dance rhythms predominate in 6/4 rhythm. A shepherd points out that they must go to the temple to thank heaven with incense and prayers for their joy (a dramatic way to separate the lovers). Euridice goes ahead with her friends.

The chorus of shepherds then sing about Orfeo's former suffering, now transformed into reciprocated love, and compare it to the sun's appearance after storms, shining even more brightly. After winter comes the spring, and the music describes winter in slow descending notes, and spring with melismata and flourishes that suggest the flowers bursting out of the ground. Here is life as we know it: however transitory, it is here and now, as variable as the seasons, as enlivening as the beloved's touch.

Monteverdi's creation was significant *dramma per musica*. His music is always on a par with his text, elucidating it and sometimes foretelling in the midst of joy the sorrow to come, as he does in that happy song by Euridice against a descending base, a theme that will later reappear in the news of her death. This sinister tritone will appear yet again at the fatal moment when Orfeo doubts Euridice is following him, when he turns around to lose her forever, and it will also appear afterwards in Orfeo's laments. Words are married to music, but music also gives its own prophetic commentary, and is like a Greek chorus in this way.

Dances and rejoicing continue into Act II, and reference is again made to the sun: Orfeo returns to the woods and shores, blest because the sun has made his nights day. He plays on his lyre and sings his happiness. Suddenly there is a messenger (Sylvia, Euridice's best friend) and the music turns as dark as her costume. Her first phrase, *ahi caso acerbo*, "O bitter misfortune," has a sharp dissonance that well relays the meaning of *acerbo*. It is minor and a clear lament, with slow descending notes and organ accompaniment. She tells her dire news with a phrase that begins with a slight rise, followed by a descending tetrachord (four descending notes) famous in lamentation: *La tua diletta sposa è mor-ta*. (This recitative "rivals the *Lamento d'Arianna* as the most famous passage of lamentation in early Italian opera.")[15] Orfeo can only say *Ohi me*, also descending, with stinging dissonance. Euridice's death has temporarily silenced him. Her death truly came from a snake in the grass, according to the li-

bretto. Orfeo pledges to go to the underworld to bring her back or remain there himself. The shepherds join in a lament, which ends with Sylvia saying she now will retire to a lonely cave to mourn the loss of her friend who died in her arms. The shepherds leave to bury the body as Orfeo leaves the upper world, shunning earth and its light without his bride.

Again, light and dark alternate throughout the text and music (with more somber tones after celebrations, and vice versa). The shepherds and nymphs say they are now deprived of their two shining lights: Orfeo and Euridice. Sylvia, after her sad message, condemns herself to a life in the dark. She looks a little like Maleficent in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, and as she moves towards the shepherds they draw back. In the production she is truly pitiful and one sees tears streaming down her cheeks.[16] She is also dressed in dark clothes in the Ponelle-Harnoncourt version, and the chorus draw back from her as if she were queen of the night and death.

Act III begins with the brass once again, particularly the trombones, as Orfeo approaches *Inferno*. The trombones are associated with the underworld, as they will be by Mozart in *Don Giovanni*. Cornettos and an organ-like near-harmonium add to the infernal suggestions. The theme of death's inevitability is again sounded. La Speranza was a guide but she has to leave him by the entrance to *Inferno*, quoting Dante's *Inferno*: *Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate*, "Abandon all hope who enter here." Even Dante's meter is used (*terza rima* with three lines followed by four in conclusion: aba, bcb, cdc, yzyz). The last line of Dante's *Inferno* talks about the contrast between hell and the stars of heaven; Christian allusions inform ancient myth, as so often in Renaissance poetry—and always in Monteverdi.

Orfeo refers to hope as the one refuge for man in the midst of sorrows, and one thinks of the Pandora myth in Hesiod (*Works and Days*) and the box of evils that she opens (although forbidden, another one of those impossible commands). After everything else flies out, Hope is the last in the box. (Is this a refuge, or the worst evil of all?)

Orfeo meets Caronte who blocks his way, thinking he might kidnap Proserpina (think Pirithous), or steal Cerberus (think Heracles). Ringer tells us that Caronte has the "lowest voice yet heard in opera,"[17] a voice programmatically appropriate for this god of the underworld.

Here Orfeo sings his greatest recitative/aria in this opera, *Possente spirto,* trying to win over the ferryman (he is unsuccessful, but finally succeeds in putting Caronte to sleep, and so can ferry himself across). Woodwinds (conventionally signifying the underworld, as in the *intermedi* from which this borrows) are heard here, with echoing phrases, suggesting the vast area of the *Inferno*. His lament is filled with melismata and repeated notes, a musical device revealing Orfeo as the son of a god. But the lament also shows the human voice as the greatest musical instrument: it can win over gods.

The underworld also echoes, so that his plea carries and has been heard by Proserpina and Plutone. (In the Ponelle production, it is Proserpina who is won over, and who stretches out her hand, sending Caronte to sleep.)

After Orfeo is successful in crossing the Styx, the chorus congratulate mankind on his prowess, conquering nature, sailing the seas, and reaping the harvest of the fields he has planted. Their words recall Sophocles' ode (*Antigone*, 332–75) to the prowess of man, "There are many wonders in the world, / But nothing more amazing than man," but which ends in a limitation which this chorus fails to note:

> He is ready for all that comes,
> As he goes out to meet the future;
> He can cure terrible diseases;
> Only death he cannot escape.[18]

In Act IV, Proserpina appeals to her husband, citing the love he himself has for her. Plutone gives in with the stipulation that Orfeo not look back at Euridice. So Orfeo is joined with her, but hears a noise and says, "What the king of Hell

forbids, love commands, and love is the more powerful god." Yes, love will triumph in the *Ritorno* and also *Poppea,* but here death is more immediately powerful, and Euridice sinks back into darkness, after singing, "Oh sight too sweet and too bitter, am I lost because of too much love?" The phrase is dissonant and descending.

Orfeo is forced back to earth. The chorus sing that though he conquered hell, his passions countered him. True fame comes from self-control. The Platonic and Christian messages are reiterated.

Plutone in the Ponelle production looks like Ming the Merciless in the Flash Gordon series, and his wife like the Bride of Frankenstein with her towering red fright wig—the flames of *Inferno*? Both convey the underworld qualities well, and Plutone is truly menacing in Ponelle's DVD; on the other hand, in Deflo's he is rather charming.

Act V shows Orfeo lamenting in his Thracian fields, as he was described in the beginning, singing his woes before Euridice returned his love. One hears the dramatic rhythms: sorrow into joy, joy into sorrow, then a temporary triumph, followed by defeat and lamentation. For chopping up his phrases, Orfeo even blames Echo, who laments with him even as she subtly changes the direction of those laments.

In Monteverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (1610) there are also significant echoes at the ends of lines,[19] strengthening claims that it was written at the same time as this opera, given the many other similarities (love songs from Solomon, laments and programmatic music; as well as the fanfare motto of the opening toccata in *Orfeo* that underlies the first chorus of *Vespro*). The echo lines are in *Vespro* 9, which features a prayer to heaven to listen (*audi coelum*, "hear me, heaven"), and in the concluding *Magnificat* in the *Gloria,* the *Spiritus Sanctus* answering from another part of the cathedral. Here the echo is a sonorous affirmation that heaven does indeed hear man's prayer (as Odysseus and Penelope will learn and heaven affirm, that all men need is to pray). So also in *Orfeo,* Echo's chosen words cleverly tell

Orfeo to put an end to his sorrow and have patience. Heaven will soon give him a place in the stars.

Meanwhile, he blames all women, by comparison with Euridice, for their perfidy. Ringer says that here "Striggio's words subtly hint at Orfeo's shift to homosexuality . . . recorded"—as we shall see—"in Ovid and Virgil."[20]

But here Orfeo asks his father and counselor Apollo, "But where is Euridice?" Apollo answers that Orfeo shall spend eternity contemplating Euridice's beauty in the sun and stars. Monteverdi's Orfeo, then, is also redeemed in heaven. Yet this is a rather cold Platonic ending, with eternal contemplation of the beautiful in what increasingly sounds like heavenly abstraction, a far cry from Orfeo's own earlier song to the Rose of Heaven.

In the Ponelle-Harnoncourt version, the final duet between father and son (Roland Hermann as Apollo and Philippe Huttenlocher as Orfeo)—the first duet in opera proper—shows the son's obvious dismay.[21] We should pause to reflect on Monteverdi's original audience, Mantua's *accademia* of learned men, to whom this wisdom was directed.

The *Accademia d'Invaghiti*, of which Striggio the librettist was a member, was associated with neoplatonism.[22] The sun was for them a sign of rationality. (It was also the symbol of the Gonzaga family; Striggio would have realized that this myth complimented the Gonzagas.)

If *Invaghiti* comes from the Italian verb meaning to love, one can see this in the Platonic sense as expressed in the philosopher's *Symposium*: a love for knowledge and the humanist ideals of the period. This is an Academy whose members are enchanted by knowledge, which was the intent of Plato in founding the first Academy (ca. 387 BC). This certainly describes Orfeo's own progression from a baser love to one that is more abstract: Euridice's beauty as reflected in the sun and stars. In the prologue, Music claimed that by charming mortal ears she accustoms the soul to the music which can eventually be heard in heaven—eventually, that is, when attained by the soul's virtuousness.

Orfeo is a true merging of drama, myth and music, with parables woven in. It is also a truly courtly drama in featuring choruses and a large variety of instruments. Structured in five acts, its "episodes" are punctuated with choral commentary (often philosophical), as in Greek tragedy. (In the Ponelle version the chorus are members of the Mantuan court, who observe what happens and offer their opinion as needed.) The dramatic structure is further enriched by the inclusion of ancient Italian dances (*Frottole)* and Flemish madrigal forms. Continuo-accompanied recitative alternates with sung sections, but both are, technically, sung. Yet the recitative form allows for dramatic emphasis and declamation.

A fanfare of brass (a toccata) introduces various entrances (usually of gods or nobles), and it is likely that the three repetitions at the beginning probably introduced the Duke, and this is the way that Ponelle staged it. Since this was a court entertainment, it is likely that Francesco Gonzaga himself introduced it, leading in the character of La Musica to announce the subject. She then would address some of her flattering remarks to him.

She proclaims that her cittern instills in the soul an aspiration to the heavenly lyre (thus predicting the conclusion at the start). Melismatic flourishes and repeated notes show that we are in the presence of a god. The royalty of both earth and heaven—with La Musica—are the leading guides. (The shepherds have more limited ranges.) La Musica also has a ritornello, mainly on strings, following or replacing the brass fanfare, and which functions as an introduction to each act. An ascending and descending phrase is featured that recurs as a unifying theme throughout the drama. It also depicts Orfeo's own journey, with his descent to the underworld and ascent to heaven. Thus, it also conveys joy and sorrow—a power that music has, as transformed by man's feelings—even though the notes are the same.

Harnoncourt and Savall use period instruments to feature a purity that I think surpasses the lush sounds of the nineteenth century orchestra. The organ and *Chitarrone con-*

tinuo give a distinct flavor to the *Possente Spirto*. Tonalities have not been fixed as yet, and Susan McClary's dissertation points out that this gave the composer a greater freedom and more dramatic method of expression than some of the more coercive modalities.[23] Contrary to Catherine Clément who claims that women in opera were sacrificed on the altar of the male ego, McClary sees that Monteverdi celebrates his women musically as well as dramatically, particularly in *Arianna, Il Ritorno,* and *Poppea.*[24]

While Orfeo is clearly unhappy with this eternal life of contemplation in the Ponelle production, in Deflo's production he rejoices, and his glorious voice joins with his father's in heavenly flourishes. The nymphs and shepherds have heard the news and join in the festive dance, a sprightly *Moresca* (a Moorish dance popular in Spain and Italy). These verses were not orchestrated, probably out of a tasteful decision by Monteverdi, but some versions add music from elsewhere in his oeuvre.

Monteverdi's later operas in Venice did not feature such large choruses, nor the great variety of instruments, but other dramatic effects were in demand since three public theatres were competing with each other for audiences.

MONTEVERDI'S *Orfeo* is based in part on the Orpheus myth as alluded to in several Virgilian eclogues.[25] *Georgics* IV elaborates by telling the story of Aristaeus and of his bees that died near the river Peneus. Proteus reveals to Aristaeus that their death was a result of Orpheus' vengeance: Eurydice was running along a riverbank to escape Aristaeus' advances when a huge snake bit her and she died. Orpheus braved the monsters in Hades and charmed them all with his lyre and with a lament that came from his heart. He won the return of his beloved, with the usual proviso that he not look back at her before they reached the upper world.

He failed, or as Virgil says, *subita incautum dementia cepit amantem, / ignoscenda quidem, scirerent si ignoscere Manes* (*Georgics* IV.488–89): "A sudden Madness seized the

unwary lover (a fault to be forgiven, if only Hell could forgive)." Orpheus raged throughout Greece lamenting his loss, but some Ciconian dames, resenting his devotion, tore him to pieces; these they scattered about the country fields he used to charm. But the river Hebrus swept Orpheus' head away, still singing and weeping for "Eurydice, my poor Eurydice," and an echo was heard of his lament.

The Nymphs, Eurydice's friends, took their vengeance on Aristaeus' beloved bees. Now, he is told, he must appease them, Orpheus, and Eurydice with sacrifices. Thereupon, bees come flying out of the sacrificial victims, signaling acceptance.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (books x and xi) provides even more scene painting than Virgil. The marriage was beset by bad omens, something that Ponelle played on in his production. Hymen was summoned but arrived with sputtering torches, and Euridice gave Orfeo a blue rose, pale as death. Ovid's tale has him descending into Hades and appealing to Persephone and Hades' own love for each other. He observes that mortals spend more time in the underworld than in life. He does not resent this, but only asks that Eurydice be granted a ripe age. This appeal, made irresistible by the charm of his lyre and his song, prevails and he wins back his bride, still limping from her wound. He must not look at her before he reaches the top. He cannot wait, though, and she fades away. She cannot reproach him because what he did was out of love. Orpheus wanders in grief: "Tears and sorrow fed him."

Ovid's Orpheus rejects all women, turning his affection to young boys. He sits on a hill and sings. Some Thracian Bacchantes kill him; in Ovid's bloody description, they tear him to pieces, scattering these over the fields. The Hebrus shows some mercy and lets Orpheus' head roll downstream with his lyre, while the head continues to murmur its songs. It is washed onto a foreign beach and just as a snake is about to bite, Phoebus appears and turns the snake to stone. Orpheus the shade goes down to the underworld and finds his Eurydice. Now they walk side by side, and if Orpheus goes

ahead, he can turn back and see her, without fear and without loss. This is a happier ending, but lacks the philosophical conclusion that Striggio provided, and which Monteverdi welcomed for its religious message. Striggio and Monteverdi's classical foray had to incorporate, if at all possible, their Christian values: the opera emphasizes the inadequacy and transiency of an earthly paradise devoid of heaven.

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AFTER THE FIRST performance of *Orfeo* in February 1607, Monteverdi's beloved wife died in July. *L'Arianna* was Monteverdi's second opera, written in grief after her death and in haste for the upcoming marriage of Francesco, the heir to the Gonzaga throne, and Margherita of Savoy; and he nearly died from sorrow and the pressure. Then, the singer Caterina Martinelli, who was to play Arianna, also died; but he was fortunate enough to get Ramponi Andreini, a gifted actress and singer, to master the role in six days. She delivered an acclaimed performance, which established Arianna as the first great female role in opera. Andreini went on from that to a role in Monteverdi's *Il ballo delle ingrate* (just following *Arianna* in 1608) which takes place in the underworld and features Plutone again as a bass, as in *Orfeo*. This *ballo* or ballet is a nostalgic piece that conveys all the pain of lost opportunities in life and the brevity of human existence.

L'Arianna was performed on May 28, 1608, to celebrate the newlyweds' arrival in Mantua. Ottavio Rinuccini wrote the libretto, which survives, but only the music for the famous lament was saved. That was published in 1614 in Monteverdi's sixth book of madrigals in a five-part arrangement. In the 1640–41 *Selva morale e spirituale*, it became a lament of the Virgin Mary for her dead son; so once again, Monteverdi took a secular masterpiece and showed its spiritual side. The *Lamento d'Arianna* became a model for all laments of the time, even though he had already used something comparable in *Orfeo,* particularly in *Possente Spirto*.

In each case, *Orfeo*, *L'Arianna*, and *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, Monteverdi was blest with gifted librettists, but it is important to bear in mind that he always had the final say over the shape of the drama, not only the music but *also the words*. That is why it is especially important that Monteverdi promised a treatise on *la seconda practica,* defending the dramatic text: its meaning was to take priority over the music, while melody and harmony were to be willing servants of the words. (Polyphonic Renaissance music in which harmony and interplay dominated the text was called *la prima practica*.)

As a composer-poet, he also defended his use of dissonance to elaborate on the text; he understood how to take liberties with the musical expectations of his audience on behalf of the integrity of the work of art that is (or ought to be) a marriage of the arts of drama and music. His lament, for example, shows his expertise at conveying the words, while writing exceptional music. Yet even when it was a basso continuo (or repeated bass), Monteverdi's music offered informed commentary on what the lyrics were saying.

Rinuccini based the libretto on Ovid's *Heroide*s, the *Metamorphoses,* Catullus 64, and other classical sources, including Homer's *Odyssey*. Ariadne has been abandoned on the beach of Naxos while she slept, after having saved Theseus's life in his battle with the Minotaur. She is found by Dionysus and there is the usual happy ending with Ariadne's crown (a gift of Dionysus) becoming a constellation.

The lament is a model of the expressive outpouring of an abandoned and betrayed woman. It begins with Arianna asking to die (*lasciatemi morire*), on a dominant seventh chord with its musical suggestion of misery. This phrase is repeated at the beginning and at the end of the stanza. It rises, only to descend, as her life had. The continuo features the descending tetrachord, so apt for laments. This repeated ground bass unifies and adds to the counterpoint of the text. The next section calls out the name of Teseo, which she repeats, praying to him to return. Next, the music becomes

lighter as she envisions the parades waiting for him in Athens, then it subsides in *misera* again as she thinks she will be a prey for beasts and never see her parents again.

She reproaches him for his pledges of love—the scepters, jewels and gold he promised her. The music surges again, over triplets in the bass suggesting dances of celebration, only to end again in a reproach, the repetition of Teseo's name, and that he abandoned her. The falling notes return.

Then her complaints turn into passionate anger because he is deaf to her. She loudly calls on the winds and storms to drown him, ship and all. She summons monsters of the deep to attack him. Then she stops herself with intoning his name again like a mantra. She says the tongue spoke, not the heart (varying Euripides' *Hippolytus* 612: "my tongue swore but my mind remains unsworn").

In the last verse Arianna admits that she still loves him, and returns to her opening plea: for death to liberate her from her pain. Like Hecuba in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, she recalls her former glory claiming it intensifies her misery. Some criticize Monteverdi's intellectual summations: "Not much occurred to Monteverdi in the last, the rhetorical stanza, lacking as it does the immediacy of the first four sections."[26] However I find it all apt, particularly the conclusion: "This is what happens to one who loves and trusts too much."

By now, Arianna seems to be trying to rationalize her misery; nonetheless her words are something the heart can feel. This *recitare cantando* conveys the fluctuating emotions in a way that intensifies the drama by marrying voice to music. The musical sobs resonate down the centuries, and their source is probably to be found in personal experience—the loss of his own wife. Monteverdi freely edited his librettist's text to shape and intensify Arianna's lament, and then married his music to it.

Monteverdi said in 1633 that he wanted to convey the passions in *Arianna*. Chafe has noted how the moods fluctuate as do the tonal changes, so the lament becomes a musi-

cal microcosm for the whole opera. He particularly noted how "Arianna's final call to Teseo moves again to the flat hexachord before resolving the tonality to d. Even as she recognizes Teseo's cruelty as the cause of her anger and desolation, Arianna acknowledges her love; its musical equivalent is the ability of the *cantus durus* d mode to incorporate sharp and flat elements that might otherwise seem irreconcilable."[27]

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TO CALL *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* the first opera, as some have, is to ignore Monteverdi's prowess in the creation of *Orfeo*. However, it is here that his powers as a dramatic composer reach a type of secular perfection.[28] *Ritorno* is not only a larger work but takes new turns, developing much more into what we expect from the Baroque opera. For example, whereas the madrigal still shaped *Orfeo*, the dramatic recitative dominates *Ritorno*.

Il Ritorno has three acts, reduced from the five-act form of *Orfeo*. This possibly suited contemporary Venetian taste, though Monteverdi did apparently premiere a five-act version. There has been some doubt about whether this opera indeed *was* by Monteverdi, but I follow Gary Tomlinson's assessment that it could only have been written by him.[29] It was likely first performed in 1640 at the first opera house in Venice, the Teatro Santi Giovanni e Paolo. The libretto was by Giacomo Badoaro, a member of the *Accademia degli Incogniti,* and many copies exist, with discrepancies. The score, as was not uncommon, gives only the voice and bass, allegedly to prevent plagiarism; Monteverdi's own musicians had his training to fill out the chords from a figured bass. But this also allows a freedom to modern productions, which might or might not use ancient instruments, and might or might not want to elaborate in creative yet authentic ways—important inasmuch as *Ritorno* has become much more popular since the 1970s stagings in Vienna and at

Glyndebourne, for instance the popular Henze-Hampe 1985 production at Salzburg (see below).

The opera shows the gods shaping events, but they also reflect the choice of man and, now even more than in Homer, woman. The action is set in three locations—a palace, the sea, and a grove—but there is room for creative expansion, for example, when the gods speak together, say, Nettuno from the sea, while Giove's heavens open above; another example, when a shepherd turns into Minerva; and then later, when Minerva flies in a chariot with Telemaco.

Monteverdi discarded many sections of the libretto, episodes he did not consider dramatically effective, or commentary that was pretentious.[30] For example, a chorus of Nereids (Coro di Naiadi) which Badoaro served up was cleverly *not* set to music by Monteverdi. Badoaro is reported to have said, with only slight overstatement, that "I no longer know how to recognize this work as mine."[31]

The opera of course shows many period characteristics. There is a prologue with supernatural figures determining the fate of man. The gods appear with their flourishes in scenes that take us to their abodes, as they did in *Orfeo* (but there in Hell, here to the heavens and the ocean). An eagle of Giove flies over the heads of the suitors to warn them off their murderous enterprise.[32] A light love pairing (Melanto and Eurimaco) contrasts with Penelope and Ulisse's marriage of true minds. There is the requisite comic figure in the stuttering Iro and the bustling nurse, Ericlea.

Operas need to justify divine punishment in a way that is foreign to Homer and Greek tragedy. Monteverdi's mythological deities are masks for a Christian God who guides the affairs of men with divine justice, which mortals violate at their peril. The trio of Phaeacians (alto, tenor, and bass) sport their lawlessness boldly (prefiguring the three suitors who are punished later) and justify Nettuno's turning them and their ship to stone.

Monteverdi's *Ritorno* differs strikingly from Homer (*Odyssey* 13–23) in that it deals with courtly as well as

Christian love, whereas Homer's *Odyssey* tolerates more cruelty: the unfaithful maids are hanged, for example, and Antinous promises Irus that if he is beaten by the beggar (the disguised Odysseus), he will be sent to King Echetus, "the maimer of all men," who will cut off his nose, ears and his genitals, the last of which will be thrown to the dogs to eat. Irus is promptly beaten to a pulp by Odysseus and propped bleeding against the wall as a warning to stray dogs and pigs (*Od.* 18.1–107).[33] Then the *courtoisie* of the courtly lover is inconceivable: Homer's Odysseus outlines his infidelities in detail, whereas in the opera one gets the impression that Ulisse has been totally faithful to Penelope. Theological differences are also unbridgeable: the vision of heaven and redemption at the end of *Ritorno* is totally different from Homer's bleak view of the afterlife.

In Homer, both Odysseus and Penelope tell lies and act deceptively (Penelope, with the weaving she undoes every night), but in Monteverdi's opera, Penelope refuses to lie, and Ulisse only deceives for his own safety, to avoid being recognized. Penelope and Ulisse are both good protégés of Minerva the warrior goddess, but they also epitomize her patronage of wisdom.

The Prologue dramatizes Human Fragility (*L'Umana Fragilità*) as besieged by three threats: Time, Fortune, and Love (*Il Tempo, La Fortuna* and *Amore*). Time is a limping creature with wings—one imagines they are for use when old age approaches. His theme is ponderous, with an impressive bass to convey his power and authority. The music limps to illustrate this point, and then soars to convey that he has wings. Fortune is a soprano: her theme features a triple rhythm, which usually signifies celebration, and it plays against a duple one that she ignores, an illustration that she is as truly blind and deaf as she claims. She distributes her wealth gaily and randomly, with no sense of its being deserved. Love, always a soprano if sometimes played by a cupid-like young boy or a young girl, is the last to assail Human Fragility.

Amore's arrow allows no escape, therefore Penelope laments and Melanto plots. The ending of the opera will show, however, the conquest of faithful love; the escalation of Penelope's usual recitative (with occasional lyric flourishes) to complete song, in an aria and a duet with Ulisse, makes them the equal of the gods—and with heaven's blessing. The libretto refers to all three, Time, Fortune and Love in the course of the musical unfolding of the drama. Ultimately, Human Fragility will win: time brings about Ulisse's return, he is blest by fortune and Minerva, and Penelope gives the crowning gift of love.[34]

Penelope, lamenting her loss in her *recitar cantando*, says she has been a victim of time and fortune, and that her love for the absent Ulisse is torture. This opening lament, directly following the Prologue, is very much like Arianna's lament. It has a descending figure to begin with, typical of the lament and its sorrow. It too is punctuated with blame and anger—at Ulisse but also the gods, fate and time. The way she speaks borders on the blasphemous until the end. She prays for Ulisse's return in a lyrical section, and also weaves in the theme of all things returning, beginning with the pastoral and the seasons. But then she includes the return of the soul to heaven: Penelope is a combination of Greek heroine and Virgin Mary.

The Marian cult inspired the courtly song of the time. And in the opera, Ulisse must cite Penelope's bed covering, crafted in honor of the virgin goddess Diana, to finally convince her that he is worthy of her fidelity—a change from Homer, where Penelope tested Odysseus' knowing his bed was constructed around an immovable tree trunk (certainly a phallic symbol, rather than the virgin Artemis). We will see more of this Marian influence later.

The music is as dramatic as the libretto and offers its own dramatic commentary. Even the orchestration is theatrical (brass for the gods), the different voices and how they interweave in dialogue and chorus, the deep basses and tenors, mezzos and sopranos. After Penelope's lament, it is a good dramatic move to show love at its early passionate stages in the

joyful songs exchanged by Eurimaco with Melanto (these owe much to Monteverdi's madrigals). Their opening love song has been called "the first great love duet in operatic history."[35] The music is also programmatic, so that fire can rise and swirl in the notes. In Penelope's lament, on the other hand, and Time's threats, and Iro's comic suicide song, the themes descend ponderously, and tears fall. Joyous music tends to be in triple rhythms and harmonious, whereas the sorrowful can be dissonant, and in duple rhythms. There also are monotonal themes: for instance when the Phaeacians leave Ulisse asleep with a soft sinfonia to avoid waking him. A more persistent monotonal theme suggests the knot of love that should remain untied (in the celebration of love by Melanto and Eurimaco), and on a loftier note the final held note of the *si, si, si* duet by Penelope and Ulisse at the end. Happiness throughout elevates the human characters to the level of gods in their singing ability, and often this happiness is joined with love.

Then Nettuno rises from the deep (or at least appears in some appropriate sea attire plus trident, depending on the production's budget and taste), and complains about how man is now defying the gods, one of the major themes in Monteverdi's dramatic works.

Giove shows the new religious flavor, totally alien to the Greeks' gods, saying that it is better to be merciful than use force: compassion, he claims, is more effective than his thunderbolt. If the prologue's Time, Fortune and Love show no mercy to man, still, Nettuno can be persuaded to spare Ulisse (and Giove's thunderbolts are seen but not used).[36]

We remember the ending of *Orfeo* with its reiterated theme of compassion and mercy. Nettuno in a sense represents the ancient gods by claiming that Giove shows his weakness, allowing himself to be defeated by man. Yet Giove does allow Nettuno to punish the Phaeacians' sinfulness, bragged of in their song, that they can act with impunity, doing what they like, careless in their assumption that the gods take no notice. It is a fancy-free sea ditty; and the last words they will ever utter.

If Monteverdi created opera for his time, he also bequeathed forms that can spark the creativity of today's directors and conductors. Especially given the renewed interest over the past few decades in producing Monteverdi, it is fair to say that his operas are now part of our living tradition. In one of the most lavish productions, Michael Hampe's production of Henze's new realization at the Salzburg festival in 1985, Giove appears in heaven in sparkling gold, rays darting from his head to rival his thunderbolts, and a Nettuno emerges dramatically from the depths of the sea with mermaids dancing round.[37] In one of my favorite productions, Klaus-Michael Grüber shows only a dash of paint on the gods to distinguish them (blue for Nettuno, gold for Giove): they are both gossipy old men, and as Nettuno bitches about man getting off lightly, Giove speaks to him like Obama to Putin (two grey-haired war-weary men), "Let's compromise . . . I give you your vendetta and you give Ulisse his safe return" and they part amicably, as they split half the world between them yet again.[38]

In Hampe's Salzburg production, when Ulisse reveals himself to Telemaco, lightning strikes and reveals the father in all his Trojan armor. So also at Glyndebourne (reflecting its unusually large festival budget). In Grüber's 2002 version, however, he appears only slightly altered, and son and father embrace immediately, exemplifying the *théâtre pauvre*'s new and contrasting approach: its simplicity makes the reunion more heartwarming. The effects here are few, but the emotions are strong. In all these variations, the heartfelt (and florid) duet is probably the warmest recognition and reunion of father and son in opera, and dramatically prefigures the reunion of Penelope with her husband at the end.

We saw Giove claim support for a just vendetta; Minerva also claims that Troy merited a just vengeance, as will the suitors. Both feature Monteverdi's characteristic and dramatically effective fight music, his *stile concitato*: a repeated staccato with fast rhythms and forceful theme in a major key. Triadic fanfares accompany it, whenever war or conflict

is mentioned. It appropriately punctuates the aria Minerva sings in alternation with melismatic runs, an exercise to test the vocally gymnastic capabilities of any coloratura soprano. One can imagine this aria inspiring Mozart's glorious aria for the Queen of the Night in his *Magic Flute*.

The *stile concitato* appears in Melanto's *recitato* urging Penelope to give up her sorrow, when she claims that "Strife will spring from great beauty" and then follows it with a descending theme to describe the dead who now loathe strife because they have peace and are tranquil. She then follows this with an animated song about love, *ama dunque*, because love and beauty are divine (the song appropriates the flourishes associated with the gods, and with Penelope and Ulisse when they are reunited, their love elevating so that they finally sing like gods).

In a comic way the *stile concitato* provides background to Ulisse's wrestling match with Iro, as it will, more seriously, when he kills the suitors at the end of Act II. Monteverdi claimed he developed this style from Plato's *Republic* 399a which suggests that an agitated style reproduces the speech of a brave man engaged in warfare: "Sixteen semiquavers, struck one after the other, and combined with words expressing anger and disdain, I recognized in this brief sample a resemblance to the passion which I sought, although the words did not follow metrically the rapidity of the instrument."[39] A perfect example of how Monteverdi sought dramatic effect in his works.

There are at least three types of characterizing styles—each to describe the gods, the palace, and the country. The gods' features elaborate singing techniques, particularly by the gods of Olympus (Nettuno is rougher and is a *basso profondo*, as would be expected for this god of the deep). Eumete the shepherd sings simple songs, sometimes in triple rhythms, when he expresses joy and to accompany dances. The suitors' style is characterized by madrigals and also features more sophisticated dance rhythms than the rustics. Their virtuosity and stilted presentations contrast with the sincerity of the love

songs sung by the reunited couple. The suitors' songs contain threats against Penelope: if she does not graft herself to one of them as do the grape, the citrus, or the vine in nature, she will be plucked, trampled and destroyed.

Arias can be in more regular rhyme and vary their line lengths to five, six or eight syllables. Duple rhythms alternate with triple, and both alternate with the dramatically-driven recitative. This is the freedom of the new opera style that will continue for several centuries. Just as scenes change, and as comedy and tragedy alternate, so does the musical style for dramatic effect. Ritornelli tie together scenes and acts (like the *ama dunque* refrain, urging love, after the suitors have sung their warnings). The recitative verse, though, is mainly how the action unfolds—with free-rhyming seven and eleven syllable lines; recitative also highlights the importance of the text and drama in Monteverdi's operas.

We have mentioned the varying styles for the three threatening demi-gods of the prologue. So also Nettuno, Giove, Minerva and Giunone each have a characteristic style. Each has a realm, conflicts arise, and treaties are hammered out (like Giove with Nettuno). These negotiations are like the alliances the Gonzagas in actuality forged: two can be stronger than one.

Penelope speaks/sings in *cantar parlando*, which suits her lament, her alternation of sobbing grief with lighter arioso sections reinforcing the drama of both. Her lament echoes not only Arianna's but Orfeo's. She even includes some of Arianna's anger, as does Ulisse in his opening recitative blaming the Phaeacians. The way they both blame the gods borders on blasphemy.

Ulisse has come home to find himself abandoned on a strange beach (his lament, *misero abbandonato*, duplicates a phrase used by the abandoned Arianna).[40] He interrogates a shepherd boy who plays his rustic flute, celebrating his youth in a merry shepherd's tune and informing the lying Ulisse that he is in Ithaca. Then the boy reveals himself as Minerva, who has outsmarted this other master of deception.

She turns Ulisse into an old man to protect him. Ulisse then links up with his faithful shepherd, Eumete. Eumete praises the country over the city, echoing much in classical literature (Euripides' *Ion*, for instance, or Horace in Satire 2.6 about the country mouse and the city mouse, and also an Aesop fable).

Ulisse allows himself the privilege of rejoicing after Minerva's revelations and of singing and dancing with his shepherd. After all, in the country one sings and dances, as we saw in *Orfeo*. And this shepherd recalls Falstaff, jovial and charming; who wouldn't want to dance with him? Monteverdi creates dramatic fluidity here, in the action but also in the instrumentation and the staging.

The disguised beggar has been welcomed as a guest from the gods. This too is a classical value, as Odysseus tried to explain to the Cyclops in Homer's book 10 (i.e., that one should feed guests, not eat them). As for disguise, some productions do this minimally, though the 2002 Grüber Zurich production—performed entirely as comedy—has a mask truly transforming Ulisse and thus creating comic opportunities, such as Penelope's credible accusation of him as a sorcerer, there being no visible resemblance between the old man and her Ulisse.

The second act of *Ritorno* begins with Minerva transporting Telemaco through the air, another spectacular scene. Eumete is happy to see Telemaco and leaves to tell Penelope the good news of her son's return. Minerva then transforms Ulisse and there is a heartwarming scene of reunion between father and son. When Eumete appears at the palace with Ulisse, they both are mistreated and the suitors plot to kill Telemaco, until an eagle appears to warn them off, and they immediately turn to winning Penelope over with gifts as an alternative to their original plan.

The suitors (Pisandro, a high tenor; Anfinomo, a baritone/medium tenor; and Antinoo, a bass) add musical styles suitable to each: they end in a refrain (*ama dunque*) and deliver a trio (*All'allegrezze*) to lighten Penelope's mood—

which rarely happens in most productions. The suitors also try to cheer her up by performing a Moorish dance, which in most productions is filled with menace. In Hampe's production, they are accompanied by helmeted soldiers: protected by armor, how they are all killed when Ulisse strings his bow is another miracle.

The third act begins with a comic scene, Iro committing suicide—the mock heroic theme of suicide being a victory over his insatiable hunger—and his body consigned to the *tomba* in a descending motif. Instead of his feeding himself, his sarcophagus will eat his flesh. There is usually a solemn peacemaking scene between the gods on Olympus and Nettuno in his depths, but in the 2002 Grüber production Giove and Nettuno are two old men meeting as pals, and this final meeting of the gods (Minerva, Giunone, Giove and Nettuno) has them all meeting on the same level with few distinguishing marks of ceremonial reconciliation. This helps keep the tension that exists between the two.

Giunone has converted vengeful Nettuno, recalling the scene from *Orfeo* where Persephone convinces Plutone to give Orfeo a second chance with his Euridice. Giove reiterates his commitment to mercy, proclaiming that man has only to pray to the gods for his needs to be attended to. The chorus moralizes, *Giove amoroso / fa il Ciel pietoso / nel perdonar*, that a loving Giove opts for forgiveness rather than punishment, then a chorus from the sea chimes in accordingly and together they counsel, *Prega, mortal deh prega / che sdegnato e pregato un dio si piega*, "pray, o mortal, your prayers will be heard." Once more, Monteverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (1610) comes to mind from three decades before, and its concluding *Magnificat* promising that God shows *misericordia* to his creations, though He brings low the prideful (the suitors). Penelope, again, shows the virtues of the Virgin Mary, a fidelity in stark contrast to Helen's ruinous infidelity (she rebukes her son when he praises Helen) and as redemptive as Mary's undoing of Eve's defamation of womanhood.

We have, then, the final recognition scene, which is punctuated by a tedious *recitato*: Ericlea debating with herself about the virtues of silence over the values of the heart (her master forbade her to speak when she recognized his scar while he is in the bath, but she finally obeys her heart in revealing what she knows to Penelope). Ericlea is another comic figure, so this is another interlude, following the scene with the gods, to alternate with mighty humans, Penelope and Ulisse, now the rulers of Ithaca who have found each other through faithful love.

Penelope's somewhat monotonal lamentation changes at the end of the opera when she finally recognizes her returned husband and sings of her love in terms of the country and nature:

> Shine bright, O heavens,
> You meadows grow flowers again.
> Rejoice, you breezes.
> Merrily birds are singing
> And rivers softly murmur for joy.
> The grass grows green with hope
> The waters dance and laugh;
> A phoenix rises from Troy's fires
> To match my heart's joyful song.

Penelope and Ulisse conclude the opera by singing a duet worthy of the gods. The gods have had mercy on this couple and let them redeem their earlier suffering with song and love. In the meantime, the music imitates the florid activity of regeneration and song gives homage to the pastoral—earth demonstrating the compassion of the gods with its resurgence in spring.[41]

Love, not simply compassion, conquers all, and in this work it is human love that elevates man to more than the divine, possibly because of its transience. It is framed by mortality and thereby all the more meaningful (something the quintessential classic hero Achilles understood). The opera

concludes with the beauty of life, albeit short, filled with love, as Ulisse and Penelope sing:

Sì, sì, vita!
Sì sì, core, sì, sì!

Yes to life, and to the heart with love returned. So Monteverdi shows himself truly the master of dramatic opera and his use of myths resonates with the human heart. He not only mastered the music of his day, but also took it further, increasing the drama and significance of opera, mysteriously or magically striking the note of eternity as his mortal lovers find each other and us in a music of loving perseverance.

NOTES

1. Marc Ringer, for example, claimed that Monteverdi's operas "are the most innately theatrical in the world," *Opera's First Master: The Musical Dramas of Claudio Monteverdi* (Pompton Plains, NJ 2006), x.

2. See Marianne McDonald, trans. *Sophocles' Antigone*. (London 2000), 10.

3. Williams claimed that Monteverdi was the earliest to express these powers in his music. Bernard Williams. *On Opera* (New Haven and London 2006), 9.

4. Ellen Rosand, *Monteverdi's Last Operas: A Venetian Trilogy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 2007).

5. Rosand (note 4), 238–39.

6. For a good description of the instruments of the period, see Robert Donington's "Monteverdi's First Opera," and Janet E. Beat's "Monteverdi and the Opera Orchestra of his Time," in Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (New York 1968), 257–76 and 277–301. See also Nikolaus Harnoncourt. Mary O'Neill, trans. *The Musical Dialogue: Thoughts on Monteverdi, Bach and Mozart* (Portland, OR 1989).

7. I shall use Orpheus to refer to the character in myth, but Orfeo, and the other Italian versions, to the characters in Monteverdi's opera.

8. Since *Poppea* is based on history rather than myth, the focus here will be on Monteverdi's other classical operas.

9. It was also the subject of Rossini's first *opera seria*.

10. Anne Ridler, trans. in Nicholas John, ed., *The Operas of Monteverdi* (London and New York, 1992), 107. I use Ridler's translations for my citations from the librettos. See also Whenham, who concurs with others: "Monteverdi's *Orfeo* has long been regarded as the first masterpiece in the

history of opera, and it is now widely accepted as a work whose portrayal of human suffering, daring and weakness speaks directly to modern audiences without the need for historians to act as its apologists," John Whenham, *Claudio Monteverdi: Orfeo* (Cambridge and New York 1991), xi.

11. Denis Stevens, ed., *L'Orfeo: Favola in Musica da Claudio Monteverdi* (London 1968).

12. Stevens (note 11).

13. One of the tablets recounting this myth differs from the others and in this Enkidu is told to go to the underworld, which he does, but he is kept there. Ea and Shamash help, and Enkidu's ghost jumps out of a crack and returns to Gilgamesh to tell him about what he saw.

14. Stevens (note 11), 16.

15. Eric Chafe, *Monteverdi's Tonal Language* (New York 1992).

16. Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*, DVD (Kulture Video, 2002), Conductor: Jordi Savall; Director: Gilbert Deflo; Performers: Montserrat Figueras, Furio Zanasi, Arianna Savall, Sara Mingardo, Cécile van de Sant, Antonio Abete, Adriana Fernández, Daniele Carnovich, Fulvio Bettini, Mercedes Hernández, Marília Vargas, Gerd Türk, Francesc Garrigosa, Carlos Mena, Iván García, Staged at Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu, 2002.

17. Ringer (note 1), 65.

18. McDonald (note 2), 15.

19. John Eliot Gardiner (2003, 1989) stages this in St Mark's Cathedral in Venice, where it may very well have had one of its earliest performances.

20. Ringer (note 17), 85.

21. Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*. DVD (London: Polygram Video, 1988). Jean-Pierre Ponnelle–Zurich Opera production, 1978. Director, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle; Conductor, Nicholas Harnoncourt, for the Zürich Opera house Performers: Philippe Huttenlocher, Trudeliese Schmidt, Dietlinde Turban, Francisco Araiza.

22. Robert Donington, *The Opera* (New York 1978), 21–22.

23. See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN 1991). See also Chafe, *Monteverdi's Tonal Language* (see note 15).

24. Catherine Clément, *Opera or the Undoing of Women*, translated by Betsy Wing, with a foreword by Susan McClary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988. See also McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (see note 23).

25. *Eclogue* III.46 describes a carving of Orpheus with his woods following him (cf. VIII. 56). IV.57 tells us that the muse Calliope was his mother, and he's called Thracian, after Thrace, his birthplace, with its river Ismarus (VI.30). The ending, with Orpheus entering the realm of the stars, derives from Hyginus' *Astronomia* (Venice 1482), (2.7).

26. Silke Leopold, *Monteverdi: Music in Transition*, trans. Anne Smith (Oxford 1991), 133.

27. Chafe (note 15), 167.

28. See McDonald 2001, 17–42. See also Michael Ewans, *Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation*. (Farnham, England 2007), 9–30. Heroines and goddesses now play roles even more important than in their originals, in this case mainly Homer.

29. Gary Tomlinson, *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance* (Berkeley 1987), 215, n. 1.

30. Some repetitions that remain also are nonsense, for instance Ulisse repeating "*O fortunato Ulisse*," celebrating his return to Ithaca, even while Minerva catalogues the excesses of the suitors plaguing his wife.

31. Tim Carter in Ringer 1992 (note 1), 79.

32. The DVD (2008) of the Pierre Audi-Glen Wilson production at the Nederlandse Opera, Muziektheatre Amsterdam in 1998, actually features a live eagle that enters on stage with his trainer dressed in black like the *kuroko* stage hands in Bunraku: that audience accept the convention that black makes those on stage invisible. The eagle was an impressive performer, opening his wings in a threatening way. In the Glyndebourne version (Hall-Leppard 2006 DVD of the 1973 production), what seems to be an eagle with realistic wings flies onto the stage and drops down a bleeding head over the suitors.

33. Some versions of *Ritorno* do restore some of the cruelty of the original, such as the slaughter of the lambs (by Iro) or Telemaco's killing Melanto (Audi 2008).

34. DVDs: In the Hall-Leppard 1973 production, Human Fragility is a naked blonde woman; in the Hans Werner Henze Salzburg festival production (Hampe-Tate-Viller 1985), the Orf Symphony orchestra features many modern brass and percussive instruments and Ulisse as Human Fragility appears in a loincloth; both these festival versions feature two acts rather than the usual three. In the Audi-Wilson 1998 production, Human Fragility is Brian Asawa, a counter-tenor clad in a tan tunic. In the Noble-Christie-Burton? production (2002) from the Aix-en-Provence festival performed at the *Théâtre du Jeu de Paume*, Human Fragility (Rachid Ben Abdeslam) is another counter-tenor and appears nude. This was one of the most satisfying productions from both the musical and dramatic aspects of their performance. Penelope is sung by Marijana Mijanavic, a Serbian, and Ulisse, by Kresimir Spicer, a Croatian, illustrating in their personal lives that love overcomes their differences. This successful production was taken on tour for over two years.

35. Ringer (note 1), 154.

36. See Ewans (note 28), 16 on the inconsistency between Monteverdi's replacement *Prologo* and the opera.

37. This version also adds incidents not in the libretto, but which are in Homer, namely, Penelope's ruse of weaving a shroud for Laertes each day and undoing it in the evenings. This Minerva, Dolores Zeigler, is one of the most colorful and gifted of the coloratura sopranos—probably so powerful

that that Giunone was eliminated for that reason: it would be hard to find two of that caliber.

38. This production (Grüber-Harnoncourt 2003) has been called "*Théâtre Pauvre*," and it comes up with some interesting dramatic values in a minimalist staging.

39. Oliver Strunk, ed. *Source Readings in Music History: From Classical Antiquity Through the Romantic Era*. New York, 1950; rpt. 1965.

40. Leo Schrade, *Monteverdi* (New York 1950), 352.

41. Manfred F, Bukofzer speaks about the new sophisticated rhythmic patterns (compared with *Orfeo*) "as can be seen in Penelope's great final aria with a five-voice ritornello," Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era* (New York and London 1947), 63.

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