

## Concert Notes by Michele Pasotti

“Orpheus, a representative fable composed in graceful verses of Tuscan dialect, which was later set to music by the virtuoso Mr. Claudio Monteverdi, was performed in a grand theater with Mr. Francesco Rasio singing, so famous for his excellence in his profession, that everyone believes there are few others in the world who can surpass him”.

(“L’Orfeo, favola rappresentativa in leggiadrissimi versi di favella toscana composti, quale poi fu fatta in musica dal virtuoso sig. Claudio Monteverdi, in gran teatro fu fatta rappresentare, in quella cantando quel sig Francesco Rasio, per eccellenza in tale professione così famoso che ognuno tiene poter essere al mondo pochi altri che avanzar lo possano”.)

This is what Eugenio Cagnani, a courtier from Mantua, wrote in 1612, when the echo of the performances of five years earlier was still alive. L’Orfeo, with a libretto by Alessandro Striggio junior, was first performed in Mantua at the Accademia degli Invaghiti on the evening of February 24, 1607. Monteverdi, forty years old and in the service of the Gonzagas for more than fifteen years, had already published five books of madrigals and was certainly already among the most famous musicians of his time. A few years before he was harshly criticized by Giovanni Maria Artusi in his “L’Artusi ovvero delle imperfettioni della moderna musica”, in two volumes (1600 and 1603). Artusi, as it is known, pointed out some passages of his madrigals as examples of “abuses introduced by modern writers and composers”, errors in musical writing, in counterpoint – in particular in the treatment of dissonances. In the very concise Monteverdian response, entrusted to the introduction to his Fifth Book of Madrigals (1605), we can read some passages that help to reconstruct the environment and ideas in which *L’Orfeo* was generated. In particular, the claim for a “Seconda Prattica”, another way of understanding and practicing the art of music compared to the one codified in the mid-sixteenth century, by Zarlino (of whom Artusi was a student) first and foremost. This “Seconda Prattica” is centered on the fact that the “oratione (discourse, speech) is the master of armonia (music composition) not her servant”, as his brother Giulio Cesare Monteverdi wrote in the year of *L’Orfeo*, attempting to give more substance to the few lines that Claudio had written in his own hand two years earlier. By *oratione* Monteverdi meant the speech, the poetic verses in their metrics, prosody, meanings, while by harmony he meant the counterpoint or in general the musical composition.

The ideal pursued is therefore that music is created starting from the word, from the discourse, from its structure and from its affects. Monteverdi says that he is not the only one to follow this path. His

brother identifies a “heroic school” that, starting from the old Cipriano de Rore, counts among its

ranks Luca Marenzio, Luzzasco Luzzaschi, Jacopo Peri, Giulio Caccini, Gesualdo, Emilio de Cavalieri. Among these names we can discern the protagonists of the Florentine birth of opera. In addition to Emilio de Cavalieri, to whom both Peri and Doni recognize the primacy, Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini were in fact the singers/instrumentalists who first set to music that new representative style, the recitar cantando.

This new style received a fundamental impulse from the conviction that the music of their time (the seventies and eighties of the sixteenth century) was in a state of great decadence. Hence the dream of making it reborn. And as almost always happens in Western history, when something must be reborn, it is sought in the origin, that is, in Greece. When and where did music have great power, effect? When and where was it so powerful that it could attract and tame wild beasts, birds, move stones, build walls to the sound of an instrument? In Greece. We must return there. And Orpheus is the model. A singer, who “accompanies” himself with the cythara or the lyre. But not only that: we must also return to their musical theory, both technical and philosophical. Vincenzo Galilei (Galileo’s father) was the first to “try to extract the essence of Greek writers” (Bardi, 1634) and then in the Academy or Camerata of Count Bardi it was

discussed for years, trying to imagine a new music that had the nobility and power of the ancient one. Caccini, Peri, De Cavalieri were the first to experiment and find the form of this "Recitar Cantando" or "Cantar recitando" in their *Dafne*, *Euridice*, and *Rappresentazione di Anima et di Corpo*. Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* comes almost ten years after the first operas by Peri and Caccini, but it is directly linked to them. First of all for the performers: the main singers are in fact pupils of Caccini, the most famous singer of the last quarter of the sixteenth century. The choice of subject is then identical to that of Rinuccini's *Euridice* set to music by the two Romans active in Florence. It is precisely the power of music. Orpheus is the archetype of the musician who "enchants" the world with his art. But can his art go beyond the world? Can he, thanks to it, enter the kingdom of the dead while alive to bring his dead love back to life? Can his art win death? Yes, he can. But his psyche, his doubts or his curiosity (or according to Gesualdo Bufalino his narcissism) break the pact with Pluto and condemn him to solitude and Eurydice to eternal death.

*Orfeo* is a triumph of music and poetry, of invention and imagination like few others in history. The relationship between "oratione" and "armonia", between poetic word and music is close to perfection. Every nuance of the text, both from a structural point of view (metric, prosodic) and of meaning is "dressed" musically with perfectly fitting notes. The choir plays an essential role in presenting and commenting on the scenes sung by the characters. In our rendition, it is the most important character after Orfeo. For this reason the choir is formed by all the other characters, trying to reduce at the minimum the difference between soloists and choir.

*L'Orfeo*, as often in Monteverdi, is a very prescriptive score: the recitar cantando is translated into a very varied and complex rhythmic notation, to simulate the irregularity of speech. The instrumentation is extremely precise, also for basso continuo, and rich in meaning. The evolution compared to the Peri and Caccini's first *favola* is undeniable. From this *favola in musica* descends everything that today we call opera.