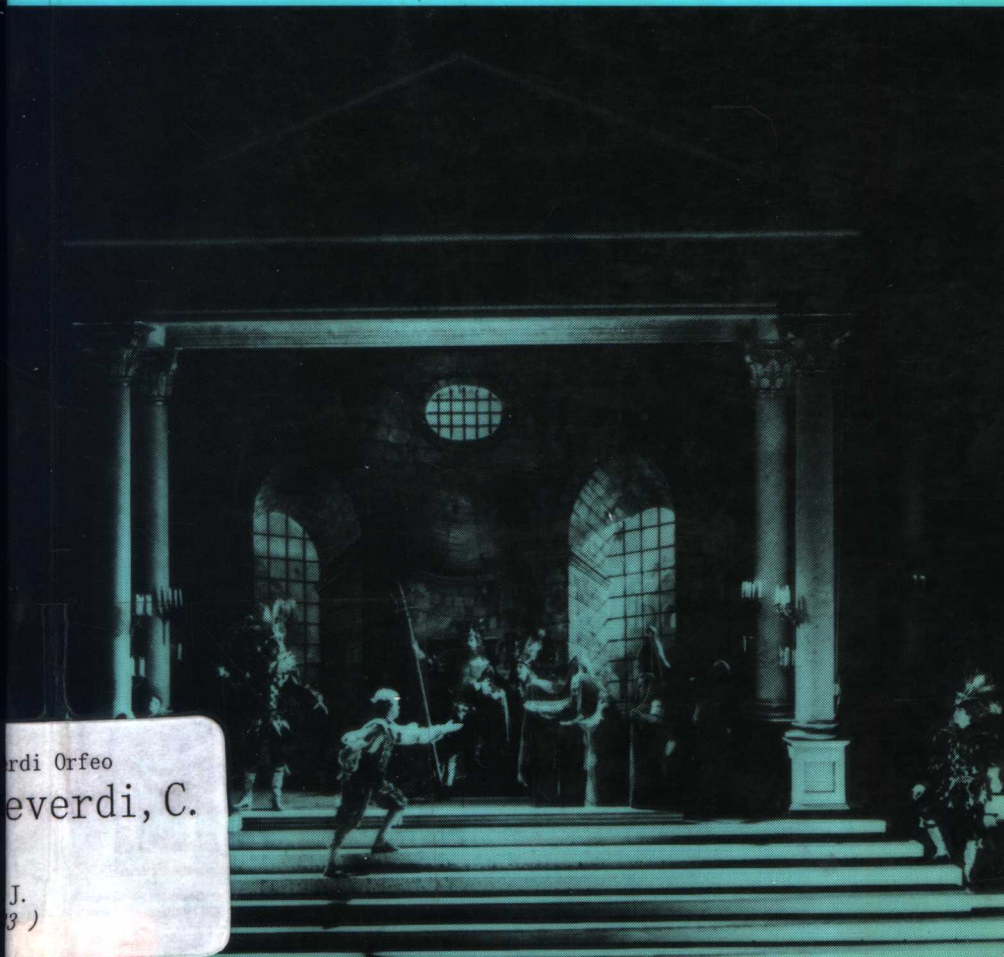
CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

Claudio Monteverdi

Orfeo

JOHN WHENHAM



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Edited by

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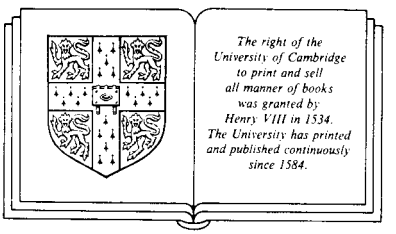

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CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

General preface

This is a series of studies of individual operas, written for the serious opera-goer or record-collector as well as the student or scholar. Each volume has three main concerns. The first is historical: to describe the genesis of the work, its sources or its relation to literary prototypes, the collaboration between librettist and composer, and the first performance and subsequent stage history. This history is itself a record of changing attitudes towards the work, and an index of general changes of taste. The second is analytical and it is grounded in a very full synopsis which considers the opera as a structure of musical and dramatic effects. In most volumes there is also a musical analysis of a section of the score, showing how the music serves or makes the drama. The analysis, like the history, naturally raises questions of interpretation, and the third concern of each volume is to show how critical writing about an opera, like production and performance, can direct or distort appreciation of its structural elements. Some conflict of interpretation is an inevitable part of this account; editors of the handbooks reflect this – by citing classic statements, by commissioning new essays, by taking up their own critical position. A final section gives a select bibliography, a discography and guides to other sources.

Books published

Richard Wagner: *Parsifal* by Lucy Beckett
W. A. Mozart: *Don Giovanni* by Julian Rushton
C. W. von Gluck: *Orfeo* by Patricia Howard
Igor Stravinsky: *The Rake's Progress* by Paul Griffiths
Leoš Janáček: *Kát'a Kabanová* by John Tyrrell
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Giacomo Puccini: *Tosca* by Mosco Carner
Benjamin Britten: *The Turn of the Screw* by Patricia Howard
Richard Strauss: *Der Rosenkavalier* by Alan Jefferson

Other volumes in preparation

Preface

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. These considerations alone would justify its inclusion in the present series of Opera Handbooks. There are, however, other reasons which prompt a new study of the opera, among them the fact that the past twenty years have seen a broadening of our knowledge of the social and musical context in which *Orfeo* was created, an increasing refinement of approach to its performance and fresh interpretations of the evidence surviving from the seventeenth-century Mantuan productions. The invitation to compile a Handbook to *Orfeo* thus offered an ideal opportunity to draw together established facts, to clear away some of the unjustifiable conclusions and speculations that have accumulated over the course of time, and to add new material. In this last respect, a request to Iain Fenlon to see whether any further information on the opera survived in the Mantuan archives bore unexpected fruit in his discovery of hitherto unpublished correspondence over the early performances, which is discussed in Chapter 1 and reproduced in Appendix 1.

The book conforms, in its broad outlines, to the general plan of the Opera Handbooks series, though in order to confine discussion to issues that are still open to debate, it contains more newly commissioned essays than reprinted material. The first section of the book is concerned with *Orfeo* in its seventeenth-century context. It includes an account of the first, Mantuan, stage of the work's theatre history, a study by F. W. Sternfeld of the sources of its libretto, and an analytical synopsis. Also included in this section is the text of Act V transmitted by the librettos printed for the performances in 1607. This text is considered by most commentators to

represent the original ending of the opera, an ending which was changed at some point before the publication of the score in 1609.

The second section of the book is devoted to the rediscovery of *Orfeo* by historians, performers and critics. The performance history of the work during the twentieth century is particularly complex, since in many cases the versions of the opera heard by critics and public scarcely represented the work conceived by Monteverdi and Striggio. Nigel Fortune's essay, then, covers both performances and editions of *Orfeo*. The two other essays in this section, by Romain Rolland and Joseph Kerman, also represent stages in the rediscovery of *Orfeo*. Rolland, whose essay is ostensibly a review of the first modern performances of the opera, was in fact closely involved with Vincent d'Indy in preparing the edition used for those performances. Joseph Kerman's 'Orpheus: the neoclassic vision', slightly revised by the author and reprinted here without its complementary discussion of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, was the first critical essay aimed at a wider opera-going public to treat Monteverdi's *Orfeo* seriously, and with real understanding, as a work of musical theatre. It remains, today, the finest short introduction to the opera.

The final section of the book contains two essays, one by a musician and one by a producer, on the processes involved in re-creating *Orfeo* for the modern stage. Jane Glover, who directed performances at Oxford in 1975, writes about the problems to be solved in editing and performing the music in a manner as close as possible to Monteverdi's original intentions. David Freeman, whose controversial production was staged by the English National Opera in 1981 and revived in 1983, writes about his approach to the opera. Now that it is generally accepted that an 'authentic' interpretation of the music is necessary to release the full expressive power of Monteverdi's score, Mr Freeman's essay raises the important question of whether 'authentic' productions are either necessary or desirable.

Since the main focus of this book is Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, discussion of the creation of opera at Florence has been kept to a minimum. Readers interested in the early history of opera are referred to the chapter 'Early Opera and Aria' in Pirrotta and Povoledo, *Music and Theatre*, pp. 237–80. Debates over terminology have been avoided by accepting the preferences of individual contributors. Thus, *Orfeo* is called both an 'opera' and, more properly, a 'favola in musica'; and both 'recitative' and 'arioso' are

used as alternative terms for Monteverdi's solo writing. The term 'aria' has, however, been restricted as far as possible to designating a strophic song, its most common early-seventeenth-century musical usage. Short-title references in the text and footnotes are used for books and articles included in the Bibliography.

I should like to thank all the contributors to this book for their willing co-operation, for the free exchange of information and opinions which has made it a genuine collaboration, and for agreeing to disagree in public over contentious issues. For help of various kinds, in addition to that acknowledged elsewhere in the text, I am grateful to Tim Carter, Eric Hughes, Roger Nichols, Andrew Parrott, Harold Rosenthal O.B.E., G. W. Slowey and John C. G. Waterhouse. Dr Hans Haase of the Herzog-August-Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, kindly drew my attention to the existence of a second printing of Striggio's libretto. Michael Black and Rosemary Dooley of Cambridge University Press made invaluable suggestions and offered encouragement during the gestation of the book, and Eric Van Tassel lent his expertise during its final stages. Thanks are due to Ailsa Read, who typed early drafts of several sections of the book. Last, and by no means least, my gratitude goes to Jenny, Nicholas and Christopher for their patience and understanding.

Birmingham
Summer 1984

John Whenham

Abbreviations

AG	Archivio Gonzaga
AM	Archivio Mediceo
ASF	Archivio di Stato, Florence
ASL	Archivio di Stato, Lucca
ASM	Archivio di Stato, Mantua

Contents

Re-creating *Orfeo* for the modern stage

Appendixes

The text of Chapter 7 is reproduced from *Opera as Drama* by Joseph Kerman, by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Illustrations

TEXT AND CONTEXT

1 *The Mantuan 'Orfeo'*

IAIN FENLON

[Monteverdi] has shown me the words and let me hear the music of the play [*comedia*] which Your Highness had performed, and certainly both poet and musician have depicted the inclinations of the heart so skilfully that it could not have been done better. The poetry is lovely in conception, lovelier still in form, and loveliest of all in diction; and indeed no less was to be expected of a man as richly talented as Signor Striggio. The music, moreover, observing due propriety, serves the poetry so well that nothing more beautiful is to be heard anywhere.

This enthusiastic view of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* was written in August 1607 by Cherubino Ferrari, Mantuan court theologian, poet, and friend of the composer (see Appendix 1, letter 13).* Whatever Ferrari's motives for eulogy it seems likely that he, in common with other contemporary observers and listeners, was much taken by the novelty of the work. Few of those present at the first performance of *Orfeo* at Mantua on 24 February 1607 would previously have heard even the new recitative style, let alone some two hours of continuous musical theatre. As one court official, Carlo Magno, wrote the night before the performance: 'Tomorrow evening the Most Serene Lord the Prince [Francesco Gonzaga] is to sponsor a performance . . . It should be most unusual, as all the actors are to sing their parts' (Appendix 1, letter 8).[1]

Strictly speaking, of course, *Orfeo* is not the earliest opera, a distinction which belongs to the setting of Ottavio Rinuccini's *Dafne*, begun by Jacopo Corsi, completed by Jacopo Peri, and first performed at Florence in 1598.[2] The earliest operatic scores to survive in their entirety – Emilio de' Cavalieri's *Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo* (first performed at the oratory of the Chiesa Nuova, Rome, in February 1600), Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* (first performed at

* Appendix 1 (pp. 167–72) gives the original Italian texts and English translations of some thirteen letters, in the Florentine and Mantuan archives, that are pertinent to the earliest production of *Orfeo*.

the Pitti Palace, Florence, on 6 October 1600, and the most important precursor of *Orfeo*) and Giulio Caccini's *Euridice* (published 1600, but not performed until 1602) – were also the products of composers associated with Florence. These works form the earliest phase of opera, though one that has often (unjustly) been characterised as theatre monody of an experimental and amateur kind rather than 'true' opera. According to this interpretation, Monteverdi's *Orfeo* is the first fully fledged opera, for all that Monteverdi himself was so clearly indebted to Florentine precedent. Certainly there can be little doubt of the impact made by *Orfeo*, which effectively heralds the spread of the new theatrical, or 'representative', style (*stile rappresentativo*) outside Florence. Nor can there be much question of the originality of Monteverdi's piece, particularly in matters of formal design, or of his powers of synthesis, which forged the language of the work from a wide range of musical resources and expressive techniques drawn not only from the new style of theatrical recitative created by Peri, but also from the traditional forms of madrigal and *intermedio*.

Given the importance of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in the early history of opera, it comes as something of a surprise to realise how little has been discovered about the origins and first performance of the work, and in particular how little that bears directly on attempts at historical and musical reconstruction. Before introducing some new evidence which throws considerable light on the first performance, it might be useful briefly to recapitulate the known facts, the archaeological evidence with which music historians have previously worked, and some of the problems involved in interpreting this evidence.

Orfeo was written under the auspices of an academy (a more or less formal gathering of gentlemen amateurs), the Accademia degli Invaghiti, to be performed by the musicians of the Mantuan court during the Carnival season of 1607. As such it was only one of many essentially ephemeral works created to entertain the members of the Mantuan aristocracy. There is, thus, no published description of the work and its first performance such as we have for Peri's *Euridice* and for Monteverdi's second opera, *Arianna*, both of which were written for princely weddings and described in the volumes issued to commemorate these events.[3] The only commemorative volume issued in connection with *Orfeo* was the score of the opera itself, which was published twice during Monteverdi's lifetime: first in 1609, two years after the first performance (with a

dedication to Francesco Gonzaga), and then again in 1615 (with no dedication).[4] The two editions were brought out by the same Venetian publisher, Ricciardo Amadino, but they differ in matters of textual detail as one might expect. Over questions of instrumentation and the allocation of voice-types to certain roles, neither is to be preferred. Both give the same list of instruments required in the prefatory matter. The list is incomplete (despite superficial appearances to the contrary), and extra instruments are called for in the course of the piece. Similarly, while in some passages the instrumentation is marked clearly, in others the indications are ambiguous, and in some cases there is no information at all (see below, Chapter 8). There is a list of characters printed at the front of the work, and the vocal lines are, for the most part, accurately labelled. But while it is evident which voice-types are required for the lower-voice roles, it is not clear for the upper ones, which could have been sung by either male or female performers.

Other than the two editions of the score, the surviving historical evidence is slight. Unlike so many of the Medici *intermedi*, for example, there are no surviving costume drawings, property lists or commemorative engravings of the sets for *Orfeo*.[5] It is not definitely known where the first performance took place, despite strong and unfounded traditions which place it either in the Galleria degli Specchi or in the Galleria dei Fiumi of the ducal palace. Equally questionable is the theory that the first performance of *Orfeo* took place earlier than 24 February 1607. This theory is based on a reading of the first phrase of Francesco Gonzaga's letter of 23 February 1607 (Appendix 1, letter 9) which would render 'Dimani si farà la favola cantata nella nostra Accademia' as 'Tomorrow there will be a performance of the play [already] sung before our Academy'. 'Favola cantata' could, however, also be taken as the equivalent of 'favola in musica' (musical fable/play), the designation which Monteverdi himself used on the title-page of the published score; and a literal translation of the letter could, thus, begin 'Tomorrow there will be a performance of the sung play before our Academy'.[6] That this is the more likely reading will become apparent in the third section of this chapter, where Francesco's letter is placed in the context of a more extensive correspondence over the opera.

With two exceptions, the names of the original performers are unknown. Eugenio Cagnani's *Lettera cronologica*, published at Mantua in 1612,[7] notes merely that the distinguished singer–composer Francesco Rasi took part: presumably he sang the title-

role. In his letter of 23 February 1607, Francesco Gonzaga notes that he is satisfied with Giovanni Gualberto [Magli], who not only had learnt his part by heart in a short time, but sang it 'with much grace and a most pleasing effect' (Appendix 1, letter 9). The identity of a third singer is hinted at in a letter dated 28 October 1608 from Gabriele Bertazzuolo, the Mantuan agent at Florence, to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga.[8] Discussing the music provided for a banquet at Florence in 1608, Bertazzuolo mentions that one of the singers was 'that little priest who performed the role of Eurydice in the Most Serene Prince's *Orfeo*' ('quel Pretino che fece da Euridice nel Orfeo del Ser.^{mo} S.^{r} Prencipe').[9] Although the identity of the 'little priest' cannot be firmly established, this passing reference does suggest that the role of Eurydice was originally sung by a castrato, perhaps by Padre Girolamo Bacchini, a castrato known to have served at the Mantuan court at various times between 1594 and 1605.[10]

Together with Carlo Magno's letter written to his brother Giovanni, Francesco Gonzaga's letter of 23 February is the only contemporary report of the first performance of *Orfeo*. Incidentally, Francesco's letter also reveals that the literary text of the *favola* had been published so that each spectator could read the words while they were being sung. A small number of these printed librettos have survived.[11] They add no new information about musical aspects of the performance, but they do transmit a quite different ending to the final act from that given in Monteverdi's score. Whereas Striggio's libretto adheres closely to the ending employed for Poliziano's *Orfeo*, an earlier Mantuan pastoral based on the Orpheus legend, the score of 1609 substitutes a happy ending based on the *Astronomia* of Hyginus: through the intervention of a *deus ex machina*, Apollo descends to rescue Orpheus, if not from the Bacchantes then at least from his own self-pity.

The established facts are, then, few. The discussion which follows attempts to enlarge this picture first by placing *Orfeo* in the context of Monteverdi's output and of music-making at the Mantuan court, then by introducing a number of hitherto unpublished letters which relate to the preparation of the first performance, and finally by suggesting a possible reason for the substitution of a happy ending for the ending transmitted by the libretto.

*

* *

I remarked earlier that the score of *Orfeo* represents a highly original synthesis of elements drawn from the new style of theatrical

recitative with elements drawn from the traditional forms of madrigal and *intermedio*. In his treatment of traditional forms Monteverdi was clearly influenced by the example of his Mantuan colleagues and by the experience of having been a member of the Mantuan court musical establishment for almost twenty years by the time he came to write *Orfeo*. He had first arrived at the Gonzaga court in 1589/90 and was taken on as 'suonatore di Vivuola': that is, as a player of either the violin or the viola da gamba. His career at Mantua not only brought him to an important musical centre with a distinguished tradition, but also began at a time when that tradition was undergoing a considerable change.

Only a few years before the composer's arrival in the city from his native Cremona, control of the Mantuan duchy had passed to Vincenzo Gonzaga, whose enthusiasm for both music and theatre was pronounced. As a young man, Vincenzo's tastes had been largely formed at the courts of Ferrara (where his sister Margherita was married to the reigning duke) and Florence (the home of his second wife, Eleonora de' Medici). It was the influence of both these courts that in turn helped to shape Vincenzo's attitude to the patronage of music at Mantua after his accession in 1587.

At the centre of musical life at Vincenzo's court were a small group of instrumentalists and an ensemble of virtuoso singers modelled on the famous Ferrarese *concerto di donne* (consort of singing ladies).[12] A description of the Ferrarese and Mantuan ensembles, written around 1628 by the Roman commentator Vincenzo Giustiniani, shows that their members not only cultivated the practice of concerted virtuoso ornamentation, but also performed madrigals in a markedly theatrical manner:

> . . . they moderated or increased their voices, loud or soft, heavy or light, according to the demands of the piece they were singing; now slow, breaking off sometimes with a gentle sigh, now singing long passages legato or detached, now groups, now leaps, now with long trills, now with short, or again with sweet running passages sung softly, to which one sometimes heard an echo answer unexpectedly. They accompanied the music and the sentiment with appropriate facial expressions, glances and gestures, with no awkward movements of the mouth or hands or body which might not express the feeling of the song. They made the words clear in such a way that one could hear even the last syllable of every word, which was never interrupted or suppressed by passages [*passaggi*] and other embellishments.[13]

After 1598 the Mantuan ensemble also included Francesco Rasi who, as Giustiniani remarked, could sing in both the tenor and bass ranges 'with exquisite style, and passage-work, and with extraordi-