



Monteverdi's Tonal Language



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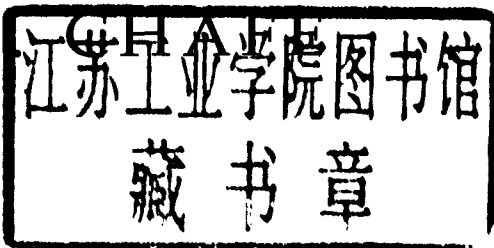
ERIC CHAFE

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Preface

The inspiration for this study was the unusually strong sense of purpose and richness of detail that Claudio Monteverdi's work exhibits in terms of its structural and musico-poetic intent, perhaps the same qualities that made such an "overwhelming impression" on Ferruccio Busoni in 1921 that he proclaimed, "This intensity of expression which breathes and speaks, and this freedom and beauty of form stand beside Bach and Mozart at the summit."¹ "Breathing" and "speaking" with particular intensity perfectly characterize not only the centering of Monteverdi's music on the voice but also its embodying a new aesthetic of word-dominated music, or music as *oratio*, one of the keys to its "freedom of form" as well. We perhaps expect Monteverdi's music to project a sense of newness and discovery because it appeared at such a momentous turning point for musical style; that it also exhibits lasting qualities attests to the strength of the discoveries themselves. Monteverdi's is a music that retains its intensity through many hearings because, like the music of Mozart and Bach, it is rooted in a strong sense of musical logic that transcends its historical position. One of the strongest manifestations of that logic is Monteverdi's secure grasp of tonality, in particular the quality this study emphasizes: his consistent treatment of tonality as a musical dimension of profound figurative potential, (as *tonal allegory*).²

Although Monteverdi's work has been described and analyzed in a variety of ways, study of the theoretical issues surrounding the emergence of tonality has never been combined with analysis and description of a wide range of the music. That fact is owing in part to a certain polarity in musical writings between theory and analysis on the one hand and history and criticism on the other. My aim is to unite the two as much as possible, an approach that demands setting forth its theoretical premises in advance of analyzing the works. The ensuing analyses attempt to provide a broad and

detailed coverage of Monteverdi's secular work from the standpoint of early seventeenth-century tonality and its relationship to the foremost ideal of the *seconda prattica* as defined by Monteverdi—that music should be dominated by *oratio* (interpreted in the broadest sense as extramusical meaning or musical allegory). These two great generative principles of the emerging Baroque style come into conjunction in the concept of tonal allegory.

It is axiomatic in the sciences that data have little meaning without a theory. And, however much we may wish to differentiate the so-called human sciences from the physical sciences in method (or lack of method), this axiom holds for music as well.³ While the intuitive approach to musical analysis is certainly necessary, in the case of music before 1700 it is all too easily invoked without regard for the appropriateness to the music of the theory it implies. It therefore runs the risk of assuming that all tonal music follows more or less the same principles, which therefore need not be set forth. In the case of music from later periods, we give a central role in our interpretations to tonal analysis, whose governing principles are well known in general, even though their application may vary widely among musical scholars. We are so familiar with tonal theory as set forth in the myriad textbooks of our own era that the particularity of their various explanations for different phenomena can take a back seat to the richness of intuitive knowledge on the subject that many musicians possess. Such is not the case, however, with Monteverdi's music, which is sufficiently far removed from the music and the texts on which our education is founded for our intuitive explanations to fall into frequent error. At the same time it is not distant enough; because we regard it as tonal and absorb it aurally into the much larger system represented by that word, we often let down the guard of historical awareness that is needed for its precise description. In order, therefore, to preserve the richness of understanding that cannot arise from purely historical knowledge, we must expand our conception of tonality with the vision that obtained in the seventeenth century, not approach such a distant style in the spirit of self-denial. We need a framework in which all the historical style elements can be shown to function musically and aesthetically in a way that satisfies our musical intuitions. Such a framework involves a constant awareness of the aesthetic premises of a word-dominated music and the need for a dual approach involving tonal theory and hermeneutics, even though the latter is generally viewed as being in direct opposition to systematic theory.

I stress the importance of a systematic approach because it is not unusual in the Monteverdi literature to encounter casual references to keys (E and f, for example) whose existence in Monteverdi's music demands such a degree of qualification as to render the meaning of the word *key* doubtful.⁴ In the absence of a widely understood tonal theory for this music the norms of the style are unclear. Many of the most striking moments—such as the well-known E/g harmonic juxtapositions in *Orfeo*—can be explained only in terms of their shock value or as the manifestation of influences from other composers in whose works their presence is no better understood. When, for

example, we find harmonic and tonal parallels between Jacopo Peri's *Euridice* and Monteverdi's *Orfeo* in addition to those of the two libretti, certain questions follow almost as a matter of course. What was the basis for Peri's choice of particular harmonic effects in the first place? Why does Monteverdi emulate them, if in fact that is the best way of describing the relationship? And how do they relate to the style of *Orfeo*, as well as to the rest of Monteverdi's work and to the style of the age in general? While influences are certainly present, without a framework to render them meaningful they are incidental and isolated—aspects of history, not aesthetics—and unrelated to Monteverdi's style as a whole and to its consistent development. The danger in emphasizing influences is that we overlook the inner coherence and consistency that is such a prominent feature of Monteverdi's style despite its enormous development over a sixty-year compositional life. To the extent that we can view such style features within a theoretical framework, however, we may better understand the place of Monteverdi's style within the more general tendencies of the time. From that standpoint those style features contribute to an understanding of the aesthetics of his work and the magnitude of his achievement. The present endeavor is less an attempt to describe a system according to which Monteverdi composed than to set forth the systematic features of the tonal language of his time in general and describe his particular version of it.

The writings of Monteverdi's contemporaries on the subject of tonality (that is, on mode, transposition, and related issues) present what to us appears a peculiar mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar, as does the music itself. We cannot ignore the unfamiliar and inconsistent in the older theory on the grounds that it is inadequate to describe the music. Though Monteverdi himself stated in a letter that he found nothing in the theory of his time that aided him in his quest for musical "imitation,"⁵ he nonetheless made clear his belief that a rational theory for the *seconda prattica* was possible, and he apparently undertook to set forth such a theory himself, giving a central place to text-music relationships and the concept of *melodia*. Although it is generally accepted that Monteverdi never got to the point of writing a theoretical treatise, his music often suggests that in some sense he composed as a kind of "unconscious theorist," thinking in tones and in text-music relationships. Our task is to interpret the evidence of his thought patterns—the music itself—so as to gain insight into its theoretical workings. We are obliged to deal with the music directly, searching out its rational, systematic features, using the theory of the time as a guide to how those features were understood, and also considering at every stage our own relationship and the relationship of later tonal theory to this music. This is the hermeneutic premise on which this book is founded.

Discussion of tonality in the seventeenth century necessarily involves a consideration of the more fully developed tonal theory of the early eighteenth century, a situation that presents no pitfalls as long as we keep in mind the major differences. One premise of this study is that the tonal language of the seventeenth century—and Monteverdi's perhaps more than

any other—combines its past and its future in changing yet balanced proportions, rather than proceeding in a direct line from the one to the other. That past is the modal and hexachordal theory of the sixteenth century, which survived well into the seventeenth century in a form that for convenience I will call the “modal-hexachordal” system; the future is, of course, the tonal theory that surrounds the appearance of the circle of major and minor keys in the early eighteenth century. There is no unassailable reason to prefer the past, to give it logical as well as chronological priority. We can choose instead to operate within a larger framework in which past and future exist simultaneously, as they do in our minds. For this reason I examine in Chapter Three the manner in which particular concepts of early seventeenth-century hexachord theory fed into the first systematic presentation of the circle of keys in the early eighteenth century.⁶ It is necessary, of course, to keep the two systems as distinct as possible from each other so as to enrich our understanding of the compositional intent with which Monteverdi’s work fairly bristles, as well as to avoid describing his tonal procedures in anachronistic terms.

It would exceed the scope of this book to undertake the presentation of a detailed tonal theory for even the first half of the seventeenth century. Not only do the many theorists reflect contrasting viewpoints on a phenomenon that was too new and, for many, too uncertain to submit to authoritative treatment, but our own investigation of the music and theory of this age has not yet laid a sufficiently firm foundation. And the problem of doing so, even for Monteverdi alone, is compounded by the staggering changes that Monteverdi’s style underwent from the beginning to the end of his long career. I have nevertheless allowed the advantages of considering theory and music together to outweigh all other considerations, and I have therefore selected those writings of contemporary theorists that have seemed to me to reflect the struggle to describe the newly emergent tonal style within the framework of inherited theoretical concepts that were not designed for that purpose. Though past concepts, were often inadequate to describe the practice of tonal composition, those theorists obviously could not draw upon future concepts. The result was that the music often tended intrinsically toward the future, but was regulated conceptually by the past. The resultant conflict or dialectic of old and new is, in my view, intimately related to why we perceive the music of the early seventeenth century as transitional.

For many musical scholars these developments represent the change from modality to tonality, or more generally from Renaissance to Baroque style. This study takes the position that the dialectic of old and new is not the equivalent of a simple transition from modality to tonality. Monteverdi’s music is tonal, not modal, but its versions of tonality are substantially different from those we know from later music. One of the most important differences is the separation of mode from “system” (the basic pitch content as defined by the choice of either *cantus durus* or *cantus mollis*). Modal theory hardly accounted for the harmonic content of the music, even though it can

be demonstrated that some of the concerns of modal theory carried over into the emerging tonality. For this reason I have centered the second chapter of this book primarily on the rationalization of the range of chords available in the new style according to the seventeenth-century version of the old hexachord theory, confining discussions of "mode" (Chapter Three) to systems, such as Athanasius Kircher's, that deal conspicuously with the reinterpreting of mode within frameworks that are patently tonal.

After discussing the implications of tonal allegory within the framework of the concepts used by Monteverdi in his debate with Giovanni Maria Artusi (Chapter One), I attempt at the outset to introduce the outlines of a tonal theory that is rooted in Monteverdi's work around the time of the fourth and fifth madrigal books, *Orfeo*, and the "Lamento d'Arianna" (that is, the music written or published in the first decade of the century). This takes the form of a hypothesis that in turn is tested in the chronological examination of the works that follows.⁷ Because of the transitional nature of tonal theory in that era and the enormous development of Monteverdi's style, it is necessary first to freeze one relatively consistent phase in the tonal language, then, with that phase as a basis, to undertake a chronological coverage of the major works, showing how the style changed and developed. I have therefore set forth what I call a "modal-hexachordal" system (more precisely, a framework of two such systems) in which I believe Monteverdi's music to be rooted. Such a system is not described per se in any seventeenth-century writings, but is implicit in their discussions of the various aspects of tonality and, of course, in the works themselves. The idea of such a system comes from Carl Dahlhaus's serious and provocative attempt to analyze a selection of Monteverdi's madrigals within the context of emerging tonality; I have essayed to expand his work to the outline of a system that can be adopted as a guide to the understanding of that emerging tonality.⁸

Dahlhaus's analysis, although of pivotal importance, represents a beginning, a basis upon which to build our understanding of Monteverdi's style; it is not a finished theory. The most significant of its limitations is its failure to deal with text-music relationships and to cover a sufficiently large and representative amount of Monteverdi's music. As a result some of his most general observations on the style derive from pieces that are in some respects exceptional rather than typical, such as "O Mirtillo" from Book Five. Dahlhaus undoubtedly chose that piece because its discussion by Artusi and its ensuing mention at the close of the famous manifesto appended by Monteverdi's brother to the end of the *Scherzi musicali* of 1607 highlighted the problems surrounding modal usage in Monteverdi's work. But without an interpretation of Giulio Cesare Monteverdi's remarks on the meaning of the "mixed modes" as exemplified in "O Mirtillo" and without the context of both its text and the madrigal book that preceded Book Five, Dahlhaus's discussion of "O Mirtillo" is incomplete.⁹ I have devoted Chapters Three and Four to these questions. Moreover, a host of related questions regard-

ing tonal occurrences, such as shift of key signature within madrigals, the initial choice of key signature and "key," and the like, are not addressed in Dahlhaus's analysis. Dahlhaus cannot be faulted for this, since his aim was to indicate new directions, and his subject was not limited to Monteverdi. It is necessary now to take up where he left off, to expand the scope of his work in reference to Monteverdi's development of the tonal language. My viewpoint has many differences from Dahlhaus's while moving toward the same basic goal: a description of Monteverdi's tonal style from a theoretical standpoint derived from theory and analysis together.

The gains from this procedure are considerable and immediate. The tonal language of *Orfeo*, for example, can be explained in far greater detail than before, and many of its most characteristic devices, including the choice and organization of keys, emerge as basic properties of the modal-hexachordal system itself (Chapter Seven). Within shorter works, such as individual madrigals, this system provides a means for understanding the initial choice of mode or key, the normal chordal content of the key signature and the mode, and the dynamic quality of the new tonal forms. In the case of a work such as *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, an understanding of the norms of the relatively closed two-system framework enables us to contribute to the question of the authenticity of many disputed parts of the work (Chapter Thirteen). Developing this system within the context of Monteverdi's work has the advantage of distinguishing his work from that of many of his contemporaries with respect to its extraordinary logic. The system, in fact, is a means of describing how the harmonic features of Monteverdi's work relate to emerging tonality rather than to "mannerist" harmonic and tonal devices. It therefore serves as a guide for understanding how the more secure major/minor tonality of the early eighteenth century and its organization according to the circle of keys developed.

In the area of text-music relationships the modal-hexachordal system comes into its own, since many of the very terms on which the system is founded (*durus*, *mollis*, *modi*, *muta*, *chiave*, and the like) appear as musical puns within the texts of madrigals and dramatic works. Often Monteverdi and his contemporaries set these words and a host of related metaphorical interpretations of the texts in ways that tell us a great deal about the tonal system itself. A shift from *g* to *G*, for example, has practically the opposite meaning in Monteverdi's fifth and sixth madrigal books from its associations in later tonal music, even Monteverdi's later music. Understanding these differences will enable editors and performers to make better judgments regarding the harmonization of unfigured basses, and to correct the common error of interpreting the *quadro* sign as a natural sign rather than a sharp, which leads to impossibly anachronistic harmonies (e.g., *b*, *d#*, *f#*) where simple triads are intended (*b*, *d#*, *f#*). It will, I hope, lead to a more widespread practice of retaining the original key signatures in modern editions and studies of this music.

Certain topics relating to seventeenth-century tonal theory will appear to the modern reader as historical arcana. I have included two of these—the

above-mentioned *quadro* sign as notational reflection of the modal-hexachordal system and the theorist Giovanni Battista Doni's presentation of his versions of the Greek dorian and phrygian modes within the modern madrigal style—as Appendixes A and B. Some readers may wish to consider these matters in the context in which I wrote them, that is, as parts of Chapters Two and Three. On the other hand, I have included a discussion of how I think Monteverdi arrived at the concepts he introduced in the preface to the *Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi* (1638), especially the *stile concitato*, within Chapter Eleven, which is devoted to the works themselves. Despite the inclusion of such historical subjects, I hope I may be forgiven for writing a book that is in fact often ahistorical in outlook. This contradiction is the result of my belief that not only the works themselves but what we call “historical theory” as well can never be understood primarily in historical terms. Theory, regardless of when it was conceived, either explains (or at least illuminates) the works or it fails to do so. Our effort to penetrate the meaning of past theoretical writings has both historical and ahistorical aspects. In the final analysis the relationship of theory to the art it purports to explain or describe is the principal justification for the undertaking. I hope I have not allowed the effort to explain to obscure the understanding itself.

Finally, in my view it is far less important to our appreciation of Monteverdi's work to view him as the *first* to do anything in terms of chronological priority than to perceive the depth of his work as the reflection of a musically and intellectually consistent mind intent from the beginning to the end of his career on the ideals of “imitation” and “representation.” In this light I hope to describe a kind of “hermeneutic matrix” for Monteverdi's works founded in the idea of tonal “language” both as tonal *system* and as a repository of relationships between music and extramusical concepts. My primary goals are both to illuminate the direct questions of text setting and to indicate the richness of Monteverdi's tonal language, while providing a more secure basis on which future studies of the early history of tonality can build.

In order for this study to attempt a broad but manageable consideration of Monteverdi's text-music relationships within the framework of tonal theory, I have had to impose certain obvious limitations. The most important of these is the omission of Monteverdi's sacred music from the discussion; others are the range of music theory and of the music of other composers that could be included. Although the principal argument for not covering a wider range of related music and theory must be simply lack of space, one that influenced my decision to omit sacred music is the more intricate range of tone in Monteverdi's secular as opposed to his sacred works, a quality that reveals ambiguities and potential levels of text-music interpretation that do not arise in the sacred music. In particular, the undercurrent of sexual imagery and content in many madrigals, whether serious or comic in tone, prompted many musico-dramatic qualities that do not readily transfer to the religious sphere. These qualities come to the fore in the amoral world of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, but they run throughout the secular work. In the

range of theory and other composers' music included I have been guided by my perception of the relevance of such discussions to the goal at hand, revealing the interaction of tonality and "word" in Monteverdi's music.

Several persons have helped me to bring this project to completion. Vera Deak of the Brandeis University music library researched and acquired microfilm copies of the original printed editions and early manuscript copies of Monteverdi's works. Richard Farris was of invaluable assistance in preparing the musical examples. Adolph Watty, Alan Curtis, Beverly Stein and Harold Powers sent me copies of music and/or articles of great importance to the project. Larry Hamberlin was a very sensitive and knowledgeable editor. And the staff at Schirmer Books, especially editor in chief Maribeth Payne and managing editor Michael Sander, made the publication process a pleasure from start to finish.



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CHAPTER ONE



Introduction: Tonality and "Word"

Claudio Monteverdi's sixty-year compositional career spans one of the crucial cultural junctures in Western civilization, the beginning of what is often viewed as the modern age in science, philosophy, and art. The tremendous burgeoning of knowledge and discovery initiated by the great thinkers of the early seventeenth century led to the formation of the systems of thought that constitute our legacy from the Age of Reason. Music is no exception to this process, since it too gave one of the most enduring of such systems to the world, that of harmonic tonality, a model so all-pervading that it virtually defined the nature and limits of Western music until the twentieth century. In his various proclamations concerning old and new musical practices Monteverdi reveals a remarkable awareness of the momentous style change that ultimately ushered in a new era in music. And in his compositions Monteverdi laid the groundwork for tonal structures and figurative procedures with such purposiveness that we can speak of his role in the creation of the modern worldview as comparable to those of his contemporaries Galileo and Descartes in their respective fields.

The primary source of the expansive vitality of seventeenth-century thought was a new confidence in human rationality, a quality that is directly and immediately audible in Monteverdi's music. As an analogue of rational processes the most obvious feature of that music, and the one that diverges most sharply from Renaissance music, is its extraordinary wealth of pattern-

ing both in concept and in detail. The principal features of the new style (which did not, of course, appear all at once) all exhibit this fondness for patterns: sequences; ground basses; regularity of meter and phrase; specified dynamics, tempi, and instrumentation; classifications of figures, styles, affections, and instrumental idioms; and a hierarchical organization of chord progressions and cadences. Even the concept of the triad as harmonic entity and the representation of vertical combinations by number formulas in the figured bass attest to the urge to comprehend experience by means of categorizable units and subdivisions. The principal features of the new style can be said to represent the analytical, measuring character of rational thought to an extent that is astonishing to the hearer accustomed to the subtler unfolding of Renaissance sonorities, on the one hand, and the disruptive, harmonic effects of the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century "mannerist" tendencies on the other.¹ The music of Monteverdi and his contemporaries is, in fact, measured, subdivided, and regularized at all levels of detail, the multiplicity and variegation of patterns standing in opposition to the perfect wholeness and proportion that were closely identified with the ideal of *harmonia* in the sixteenth century.² Inevitably, therefore, this patterning leads to the perception of a difference between what we would call surface and structural aspects of the music. This dualistic quality not only was intuited at the time but was also indirectly related by Giulio Cesare Monteverdi to his brother's music.³

Renaissance style has no need of or desire for a highly patterned musical surface that would impede the sensuous flow of consonant sonorities that define its self-contained harmonic world. Baroque style, on the other hand, delights in a plethora of such patterns, largely as a means of explaining—that is, bringing under rational control—the relationship of music to the extramusical world. It creates therein a perfect analogy to the inner/outer dichotomy of contemporary philosophy. In this respect the fundamental musical "discovery" of the age is harmonic tonality, for it is not only the point of unity for these diverse aspects of the style but also a symbol of the confidence behind the new rationalism, the "Ariadne's thread"—to use a metaphor of the era—by means of which listeners orient themselves within the diversity of existence.⁴ While the multiplicity of figural patterns makes over the musical surface in the image of rational thought, tonality replaces *harmonia* as the aspect of music that binds the detail into a whole, its directed, dynamic character expressing a new era in human consciousness. If the self-contained quality of Renaissance style seems to parallel the static notion of man as the measure of all things, then the Baroque style introduces the more dynamic portrayal of man in the process of *taking* the measure of all things, or imposing measure on all things. A dramatic musical form such as opera is a natural mirror of the newly awakened desire to extend the human hegemony into hitherto unexplored regions.

The qualities of exploration and discovery in Monteverdi's music are closely bound up with the generation of dissonance and its rationalization, taking dissonance in the broadest sense to mean not just harmonic