

Chapter 7: Humanism and the Emergence of Opera in Italy: 1590–1640

I. Introduction

- A. Groups of humanists flourished in Italy during the Baroque period.
 - 1. New ideas included *stile rappresentativo* (representational style), monody, and recitative.
 - 2. Early plays featuring music in this new manner included *intermedia* (singular: *intermedio*). Musical plays called *favola in musica* (fable in music) are now considered the first operas.
- B. An important figure was Claudio Monteverdi, who explored the *seconda pratica* (second practice), claiming, “the words are the master of the music.”

II. The Baroque era

- A. The word Baroque is used to cover music from 1600 to 1750. It was applied to music later and used to describe the music as overly decorated and ornate.
 - 1. It could be referred to as the Italian age because most of the musical innovations during the time took place in Italy. It could be called the Galilean period, because of Galileo Galilei’s work, along with other developments in science, or the Cartesian period after Descartes.
 - 2. Theatrical age, instrumental age, and continuo age could also apply because of developments.

III. Humanism and the Greek past

- A. During the sixteenth century, academies formed in Italy, modeled loosely on the academies of ancient Greece.
- B. The most important academy was in Florence.
 - 1. This group considered the performance of Greek drama and poetry a musical event.
 - 2. These ideas were adopted by a group of humanists known as the Camerata.

IV. Monody and the representational style

- A. Galilei thought that music should represent the meaning or emotion.
 - 1. He arrived at this concept through Plato.
 - 2. This is known as *stile rappresentativo*, which Galilei felt could be best expressed by a single voice (monody).

V. The *Intermedio*: An allegorical pageant with music

- A. *Intermedii* were allegorical pageants performed between acts of spoken comedy.
- B. The *intermedii* performed at a wedding in 1589 experimented with the ideals discussed by Galilei.
 - 1. They included pieces by Giulio Caccini (1551–1618), a singer and member of the Camerata.

VI. The triumph of monody

- A. Cavalieri’s *Rappresentazione di Anima, et di Corpo* (1600) included solo music that we would recognize as recitative. It included figured bass.
- B. In 1601, both Caccini and Peri set Rinuccini’s drama *Euridice*.
- C. In 1602, Caccini published *Le nuove musiche*, a book of solo songs with figured bass.

- D. The move to monody happened gradually and over time, not at midnight on 1 January 1600.
- VII. Madrigals and arias revisited
 - A. *Le nuove musiche* includes a large proportion of songs to be performed in an “aristocratic” manner.
 - 1. The songs are of two types: a strophic air, or *aria*, and a through-composed madrigal.
 - 2. The experimental madrigals were for solo.
 - B. Caccini instructs the reader how to embellish for the correct affects.
 - 1. These include mirroring various types of speech.
 - 2. He also discusses ornaments.
- VIII. The birth of opera
 - A. The style of music developed by Caccini soon found its way to the theater.
 - 1. Several early songs in this style existed in *intermedii*.
 - a) The *Fabula di Orfeo* served as the base story for numerous early musical plays.
 - b) None of these survives intact, only fragments.
 - 2. The first true opera, *La Dafne* by Peri and Rinuccini, does not survive.
 - 3. Gagliano called this genre *favola in musica* (musical tale).
 - B. Establishing operatic conventions: “heard and unheard music”
 - 1. Opera was the first large-scale secular genre typically discussed in European music history, but the earliest practitioners did not use that word.
 - 2. The idea of recitative—speaking from stage in song—did not win universal approval.
 - 3. Opera had to operate on two levels: speech and music.
 - a) The music held underlying codes that the audience was supposed to understand.
 - 4. Sometimes the music was only meant for the audience, not the characters.
 - C. In Peri’s *Euridice*, long passages of *stile rappresentativo* provide intense drama to the performance.
 - 1. The bass line does not move frequently, which frees the singer to express the text as appropriate.
 - 2. The music is unpredictable, which means the drama is not interrupted.
 - 3. The most intense scene in *Euridice* occurs when Orpheus learns of Eurydice’s death.
- IX. Monteverdi’s operas: from court celebrations to commercial entertainments
 - A. Monteverdi was the first great opera composer.
 - 1. His first contribution, a *favola in musica*, dates from 1607 and was performed in the Mantuan court for invited guests.
 - 2. His last work, an *opera regia*, was performed thirty-six years later for a paying public in Venice.
 - B. Monteverdi’s first *favola in musica* was *L’Orfeo*.

1. By the time of *L'Orfeo*, Monteverdi had established himself as a madrigalist and was seen as the primary composer associated with *seconda pratica*.
2. When his brother Giulio Cesare defended Claudio against Artusi's condemnations, he claimed that the composer was reaching back to Plato, via de Rore. By claiming a descent from Plato, he trumped those who favored *ars perfecta* with humanism.

C. *L'Orfeo*

1. An academy produced *L'Orfeo*.
 - a) The occasion was carnival season in 1607—a time of spectacle.
2. Outline of analysis:
 - a) Instrumental toccata lets the audience know it is time to begin.
 - b) La Musica sings a five-verse aria (with instrumental ritornello) that demonstrates the power of music.
 - c) Act II
 - (1) Orpheus sings happily of his love for Eurydice.
 - (2) The Messenger (a nymph) arrives and announces Eurydice's death. The happy song-and-dance music is replaced by *stile rappresentativo*. Only continuo instruments play, which suggests that those on stage do not hear the instruments—it is “unheard.”
 - (3) Analysis of the music demonstrates the tensions created by Monteverdi and their purpose in the drama.
 - d) The last two acts take place in the underworld.

X. Monteverdi's later career in Venice

- A. Monteverdi was rudely dismissed from his post in Mantua.
- B. His career ended in Venice at St. Mark's, from 1613 until his death.
- C. All of his Venetian compositions include instruments with voices.
 1. From this collection, *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* tells the story of a ferocious battle. To represent the battle, Monteverdi invented a new style of music known as *stile concitato*: agitated style.
 2. Another piece from the publication, *Lamento della ninfa*, is a dramatic narrative, set as an aria. It uses a descending tetrachord, which has since been associated with the lament.
- D. In the post at St. Mark's, Monteverdi composed a substantial amount of sacred music.
- E. Opera and politics
 1. In 1637, Venice saw the opening of the first public opera house in Western Europe.
 - a) When thinking about the significance of this event, we should think not only of the composers who used it, but also of the audience in attendance.
 2. The Italian court spectacles necessarily included homage and praise of the princes in attendance.

- a) The virtuosity of performers could have been viewed as a threat because they upstaged whatever political event was being celebrated in the first place.
 - 3. When opera moved to a more public venue, the virtuoso performers thrived, an aspect of opera that has continued to this day.
 - a) The most virtuoso singers were *castrati*, opera's first stars.
 - 4. Women who sang in operas were seen as threats in several ways.
 - a) Some considered them provocative and therefore immoral.
 - b) The roles some women sang positioned them to insult, degrade, outwit, and humiliate men—clearly a role reversal.
 - 5. Opera has always had the potential to be disruptive to traditional values and has been associated with destabilization throughout its history.
- F. Monteverdi's final opera: *L'incoronazione di Poppea*
- 1. Monteverdi came out of retirement to compose *L'incoronazione di Poppea* for another public opera house in Venice, the Teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo.
 - a) *L'incoronazione di Poppea* was the last of these.
 - (1) It was an unusual opera subject that champions vice over virtue.
 - (2) It carried favor with Venetians because it valued their republic over Imperial Rome.
 - (3) Monteverdi includes a variety of styles in this work, often juxtaposing low style/characters with high ones.
 - (4) There are several uncertainties concerning differing versions of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*; these involve order of pieces, inclusion of pieces, and intentions.
 - b) The political tensions inherent in *L'incoronazione di Poppea* can be seen in operas composed since 1637.