

# VOX IMAGO

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CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI  
ORFEO

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## ORFEO

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### LISTENING GUIDE

Philip Gossett

Claudio Monteverdi's first opera, *Orfeo*, to a libretto by Alessandro Striggio, had its earliest performances in Mantova during the Winter of 1607, initially at the Accademia degl'Invaghiti (24 February 1607), then at the Court of Mantua (1 March 1607), at the invitation of his patrons at the time, the Gonzaga rulers of Mantua, Vincenzo and later his brother Francesco. Its success was so great that it was soon taken up again and performed in other Italian cities and as far away as Salzburg. And two years later it was published in a luxurious edition, dedicated to Francesco Gonzaga, which allowed the work "comparire nel gran Teatro dell'universo a far mostra di sé a tutti gl'uomini".

By 1607 Monteverdi, born in Cremona in 1567, was well known, primarily for the several books of madrigals he had published, and Monteverdi (even if not so named) had been the object of a particularly pointed critique in the two parts of Giovanni Maria Artusi's *L'Artusi, ovvero Delle imperfezioni della moderna musica* (1600 and 1603), in which the composer was said to be representative of a "seconda prattica" in music, one in which ugliness and dissonance were allowed to triumph over the stylistic perfections of an earlier style (what Artusi referred to as a "prima prattica"). But the success of Monteverdi's dramatic works was of particular importance. He wrote and performed (on 28 May 1608) another opera for Mantua, *Arianna*, but of it only the *Lamento of Arianna* ("Lasciatemi morire") survives. By mid-year in 1613 his base of operations moved from Mantua to Venice, where he became music master of the cathedral of San Marco, a position he held until his death on 29 November 1643. He continued to write operas, often for Mantua, but only two works have survived, two of the three operas he composed near the end of his life for Venice's new public theaters, *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* (first performed at the Teatro San Cassiano during the Carnival season of 1639-1640) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (first performed at the Teatro dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo during the Carnival season of 1642-1643).

There is considerable debate still as to whether *Orfeo* of Monteverdi should be considered to be one of the earliest operas or whether its nature as a "favola in musica" drawing as it does on many different kinds of vocal styles and vocal compositions places it outside the normal range of pieces that count as early operas. Certainly the theatrical recitative style (the *stile rappresentativo*) that developed in the work of Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*, to a libretto by Ottavio Rinuccini, first performed in 1600, or Giulio Caccini's setting of the same libretto, first performed in 1602, continues to be present in Monteverdi's earliest stage work, and Peri and Caccini also used strophic song and choral numbers to gain some variety in their surviving operas. But it is also true that the extent to which Monteverdi's *Orfeo* is a kind of compendium of many compositional styles from the first decade of the seventeenth century is unprecedented. Similarly, the variety of instruments required by the composer for its performance is thoroughly new (a list of required instruments is appended to the printed edition of the score). Much remains uncertain as to how and when these instruments actually played, however, despite Monteverdi's many explicit indications, and part of the art of rendering the opera in modern times consists of imagining its sonic realization.

### Prologue

Most early operas, in both Italy and France, featured Prologues that were intended either to provide a straightforward introduction to the following work or to offer an allegorical statement about it (sometimes with barely-disguised praise of the ruler who had commissioned the work or made its performance possible). In *Orfeo* Monteverdi begins with a short instrumental "Toccata" – played three times "con tutti li stromenti" in a luminous *C major*. It is followed immediately by the Prologue, sung by Musica. Already here the composer's interest in often placing his recitation within a larger musical framework is clear. The scene begins and ends with an instrumental "Ritornello" in *D minor*. Then "Music" steps forward. All in all she will sing five passages in *stile rappresentativo*. Although different in detail, they are all based upon a similar pattern in the bass (a single melodic line, but meant to be a guide for a so-called "continuo" group of instruments who would accompany the recitation). In this case, the "strophes" usually begin in *D minor* and conclude in *A minor*. These five vocal sections are separated by

four instrumental ritornellos similar to (but somewhat shorter than) the beginning and ending ritornello, each beginning in *A minor* and bringing the music back to *D minor* for the next vocal section. After addressing respectfully the audience of “incliti eroi, sangue gentil de Regi” and then introducing herself, Music explains that the subject of this entertainment will be the story of Orpheus, whose song could sway the beasts and even bend Hades to his wishes.

### Act I

The first act of *Orfeo* is an act of rejoicing at the impending marriage of Orfeo and Euridice. It is largely focused on the shepherds, although at its center is the appearance of the two lovers. The shepherds celebrate their beloved Orfeo with a series of recitations and choruses, all laid out in masterly fashion to produce the maximum of variety and at the same time a sense of structural regularity. A single shepherd (tenor) begins the act with recitation (“In questo lieto e fortunato giorno”) focused on *D minor*. It begins with a seven-measure phrase that is repeated identically at the end of the solo (words and music, although the notation is displaced rhythmically), with a contrasting middle section. This shepherd encourages the other shepherds to sing in “soavi accenti che sian degni d’Orfeo” of their joy at the impending marriage of “nostro semi deo”. The shepherds and shepherdesses respond with a stately mixed, five-voice chorus, “Vieni Imeneo”, in *G minor* and *G major*, which – according to the printed edition – “fu concertato al suono de tutti gli stromenti”. A nymph (soprano) invites the assembled throng now to sing in gladder tones of their hopes for the happy couple. They do so to one of the most delightful madrigalesque passages, “Lasciate i monti”, in which they invite all shepherds and shepherdesses to celebrate with them. The imitative “balletto”, in *G major*, is followed by a slower portion in *G minor* for massed voices. These opening festivities conclude with an instrumental “Ritornello” in *G major*.

The solo shepherd now introduces the protagonists, and Orfeo steps forward to sing his first masterful recitative in *stile rappresentativo*, “Rosa del ciel”, which is certainly the centerpiece of the act. He addresses the sun and asks it if it has ever seen anything like his Euridice. The apostrophe to the sun is all sung to a *G minor* harmony, without harmonic changes, but with constant melodic inventiveness. Only when Orfeo asks the sun whether it has ever seen anyone as happy and fortunate as himself does the music begin to move with the changing vocal patterns. In a much briefer passage of recitative Euridice responds with similar joy.

Having introduced the protagonists, Monteverdi returns to the shepherds and shepherdesses. They repeat unchanged the “Lasciate i monti” chorus, with its instrumental ritornello, and then immediately the “Vieni Imeneo” chorus. The act concludes with a further solo for the shepherd, followed by another “Ritornello”, this one in *G major*, alternating with passages for different groups of singers (two or three), each different in scoring and detail. An “Ecco Orfeo” ensemble concludes the act.

### Act II

Although a “Sinfonia” (*Allegro energico*) seems to conclude the first act in the printed edition (similar pieces occur apparently at the end of several other acts), musically it seems more likely to open the second, which after a scene of rejoicing turns dark indeed as the death of Euridice is reported and Orfeo determines to descend to Hades in order to bring her back to life.

Introductory music of rejoicing is led by Orfeo (“Ecco pur ch’a voi ritorno”) in a passage that – while not fully a tune – is rhythmically so alive and melodically pregnant that one can hardly call it recitative. And like other passages of this kind, it is built as an ABA form. But this is only an introduction to a series of Ritornelli and vocal music for one or more shepherds that follows. The first Ritornello “fu suonato di dentro da un Clavicembalo, due Chittaroni e due Violini piccioli alla francese”. It alternates with a repeated vocal passage for the shepherd. A different ritornello follows, this one “fu suonato da due Violini ordinari da braccio, un Basso de Viola da braccio, un Clavicembalo e due Chittaroni”. It alternates with a repeated vocal passage for two shepherds (both tenors). Then a third ritornello follows, this one “fu suonato di dentro da due Chittaroni, un Clavicembalo e due Flautini”. It leads first to a new passage for the two shepherds (both tenors), then to a five-part texture using music similar to the passage sung by the two shepherds. All of this, though, is preliminary to one of the most memorable moments of the score, Orfeo’s jubilant “Vi ricorda o boschi ombrosi”, a series of strophes, each with a different text, with a *G major* Ritornello interspersed (according to the printed score it was played “di dentro da cinque Viole da braccio, un Contrabasso, due Clavicembali e tre Chittaroni”). This passage has all the characteristics of a strophic song, in which Orfeo sings of how he used to lament to the woods of his unhappiness and how all that has changed with his love for Euridice: his last strophe apostrophizes her directly (“Sol per te bella Euridice”).

But, after a brief solo by the shepherd who has superintended all this rejoicing, the mood is completely altered by the arrival of a messenger, “Silvia gentile, dolcissima compagna della bell’Euridice”. She sings

a moving recitative in *stile rappresentativo*, in which she narrates that Euridice was bitten by the “velenoso dente” of a serpent. Her touching three-fold opening phrase (“Ahi caso acerbo | ahi fat’empio e cruele | ahi stelle ingiuriose, ahi ciel avaro”), in *A minor* with three related musical phrases, is later quoted exactly by the shepherd and similarly by the chorus. She then tells the shepherds to sing no more. Orfeo has only a few words seeking an explanation: “D’onde vieni? Ove vai?... Ninfa che porti?”). The parallelism musically from one phrase to the next makes clear that a musical mind is ruling over this recitative. Likewise, when the messenger sings “la tua bella Euridice”, to be followed by Orfeo’s question (“Ohimè che odo?”), the messenger’s repetition (“La tua diletta sposa”) is set to similar music, before leading to the fatal words, which musically again rejoin *A minor* (“è morta”). When she finishes her narration, it is the shepherd who first responds, by repeating her “Ahi caso acerbo | ahi fat’empio e cruele | ahi stelle ingiuriose, ahi ciel avaro”, then addressing a few words to Orfeo.

But the central moment of the act is unquestionably Orfeo’s magnificent recitative (accompanied by “Un organo di legno e un Chittarone”), “Tu se’ morta, se’ morta mia vita”. It is one of those passages that sums up an entire art (much in the way that the Tristan chord will for Wagner several centuries later): the opening interval is noteworthy (a highly-expressive diminished fourth from B flat to F sharp, which resolves up to G and *G minor*). Even on the level of the individual musical gesture, Monteverdi’s technique is sure. So, at the end of Orfeo’s “se’ da me partita per mai più”, the composer concludes with an ascending minor third (from A to C) for “mai più”, then repeats the same interval a step higher (from B to D) for the next verse “mai più non tornare”. He concludes his recitative determining to search for his Euridice even in the realm of death, and the recitative ends with similar phrases (“a dio terra, a dio cielo, e Sole, a dio”).

The remainder of the act is given over to choral and solistic responses (from the shepherds) to the tragedy. Their choral response begins with a five-part setting of the same words we have already heard twice (“Ahi caso acerbo | ahi fat’empio e cruele | ahi stelle ingiuriose, ahi ciel avaro”), with similar but not identical music, always in *A minor*. The solo passages are sung, respectively, by the messenger and by two shepherds (both tenors). The act concludes with the choral “Ahi caso acerbo” and a repetition of the complete Ritornello from the Preludio, in *D minor*.

### Act III

In the third act, Orfeo – after a dialogue with Hope – descends to Hades and attempts to charm the guardian, Caronte (Cerebus), into allowing him to pass, alive, into the lower regions.

While the central music of Act III is the strophic aria sung by Orfeo in his effort to charm Caronte, “Possente spirto”, this central episode must be prepared sufficiently and must lead afterwards to a resolution of the dramatic situation. The music begins with a Sinfonia in *Sol maggiore* for seven parts and “continuo”. It leads directly into a dialogue in expressive recitative between Orfeo, Hope (Speranza), and Caronte, in which Orfeo first expresses his plan to find his beloved Euridice and return her to the land of the living. But Speranza is more realistic: they have arrived at the fetid water that protects the realm of Pluton, who reigns over those “campi di pianto e di dolori”. And she cites twice the famous lines from Dante’s *Inferno*, “Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch’entrate”, first moving to a cadence in *Sol major*, then a tone higher to *La minor*. But she takes the words literally: Speranza cannot follow you there, she says. While Orfeo laments that he must leave Speranza behind, Caronte (“al suono del regale”) makes it clear that the singer cannot hope to accomplish his task.

Now an orchestral Sinfonia in *G minor* sets the scene for Orfeo’s solo, “Possente spirto”, a series of variations on the same basic material. This is a fascinating composition, printed in the 1609 edition both with a simple vocal line and with a much more elaborate and ornamented version, surely reflecting what Orfeo actually sang (the piece, after all, celebrates the power of music). The “continuo” is provided by an “Organo di legno e un Chiattarone”, but each strophe also has a melodic accompaniment for two or more instruments, playing contrapuntally. In the first strophe, we hear two solo Violins, in the second two Cornetti, in the third a Double Harp, and in the final strophe two Violins and a “Basso da braccio”. All the music is in the same key, *G minor*, and all has the function of trying to seduce Caronte into allowing the singer to pass. Only in the last strophe does Orfeo specify: “Orfeo son io che d’Euridice i passi segue”.

In a final passage he begs Caronte to allow him to proceed. First he sings in recitative (“O de le luci mie”), then in a more tuneful passage (accompanied by “tre Viole da braccio, ed un Contrabasso de Viola”), “Sol tu nobile Dio”, which concludes with a florid prayer to the gatekeeper. But Caronte is unmoved: though he appreciates Orfeo’s art, there is no pity in his breast. And Orfeo again attacks a passage of expressive recitative (“Ahi sventurato amante”). It concludes with his heart-rending three-fold plea: “Rendetemi il mio ben, rendetemi il mio ben, rendetemi il mio ben, Tartarei Numi”. By now it should come as no surprise to learn that the three statements of “Rendetemi il mio ben” are melodically similar, but in a rising sequence (moving, respectively, from B flat to B natural, from C to C sharp, and

then on D as dominant to *G minor*. The same Sinfonia is now heard as immediately preceded “Possente spirto”, still in *G minor*. It is at this point, though, that Caronte falls asleep (one hopes Monteverdi is not commenting on the effect the *stile rappresentativo* might have on an audience...), and so Orfeo, in recitative accompanied by the “suono del organo di legno solamente”, enters the boat and passes to the other side, while singing again the same music as the passage that completed his earlier recitative (“Rendetemi il mio ben, rendetemi il mio ben, rendetemi il mio ben, Tartarei Numi”). An elaborate Sinfonia in seven parts with “continuo” now concludes this extraordinary scene: it is the same music we heard at the beginning of the act, used here to bring the main business to a close.

But Monteverdi is not quite finished. A chorus of spirits (only tenors and basses) sings a new passage, a kind of slow and serious madrigal (“Nulla impresa per uom si tenta invano”), “al suono di un Regale, Organo di legno, cinque Tromboni, due Bassi da gamba e un Contrabasso de viola”, celebrating what man can accomplish against all odds. Again the music we heard at the beginning of the act in the orchestra recurs to bring the act to a conclusion.

#### Act IV

The fourth act introduces us to Prosperina (mezzo-soprano) and Plutone (basso), the rulers of Hades, who resolve the problem of the two lovers by allowing Orfeo to lead Euridice out of Hades on the understanding that he may not look back at her until after they emerge into the light: if he fails to follow their command, she will be returned forever to the nether regions. Orfeo agrees to this test, but fails it, and so Euridice dies a second time, and now forever. The act has some wonderful music, but it lacks the coherence of the first three acts or the extraordinary presence of Gluck’s later “Che farò senza Eurydice”, which by itself justifies all the rest of the scene.

Prosperina (a mezzo-soprano), in an expressive recitative, begs her husband Plutone (a bass) to allow Euridice to follow Orfeo to the land of the living. He, responding also in recitative, agrees on the understanding that Orfeo will not look back at her until they reach earth. Continuing in recitative, a spirit from the chorus repeats the sentence, as do Prosperina and Plutone. A chorus of spirits closes the scene (“Pietade oggi e Amore trionfan ne l’Inferno”). A spirit comments that Orfeo approaches, leading his Euridice from Hades.

The Ritornelli (for two Violins and continuo) and vocal periods that follow for Orfeo have much the same structure as “Vi ricorda o boschi ombrosi” but the music (“Qual honor di te sia degno”) is less memorable. As Orfeo sings, however, his self-assuredness diminishes and the vocal periods become more recitative-like, especially after he hears noises from off-stage. He knows of Plutone’s commands, but he fears that someone or some spirit is trying to circumvent Plutone’s promise for Euridice, and ultimately turns back to be certain she is following him. At that point a spirit, in recitative explains that “rott’hai la legge” and Euridice herself speaks of the “vista troppo dolce, e troppo amara”. She must return to Hades, a spirit explains, leaving a miserable Orfeo to lament his fate, as he is forced to return alone to the hated light (“Dove te ’n vai mia vita?”). The whole scene is in highly expressive recitative, but Monteverdi seems to set the text word by word, line by line, rather than attempting to impose a larger musical structure on the material.

A sad Sinfonia with seven independent parts over the basso continuo frames the conclusion of the act, with a chorus of spirits (tenors and basses), between these passages lamenting Orfeo’s fate (“È la virtute un raggio di celeste bellezza”). Orfeo, it sings in music clearly influenced by Monteverdi’s work as a composer of madrigals, could vanquish Hell, but not his own emotions. It is highly characteristic of this scene and of the entire opera that the chorus frequently fulfills this function, almost as a kind of Greek chorus, commenting on the action in a metaphorical manner.

#### Act V

There is some uncertainty about how the opera should end. The original printed libretto from 1607 provides text for a final chorus of Bacchanti, whom Orfeo describes as “ecco stuol nemico di donne amiche a l’ubriaco Nume”. They will ultimately produce a tragic ending, by tearing Orfeo to pieces. But the music for this final chorus does not seem to survive. Instead, in the printed edition of 1609, Apollo, the father of Orfeo, descends and leads his son into the heavens, where he becomes a constellation, a happy ending of sorts.

After a repetition of the Ritornello in *D minor* that opened and closed the Prelude, we find Orfeo alone on the plains of Thrace. In a long, expressive recitative (featuring a female echo that responds to him at crucial moments), he sings of his sadness and loneliness. At times the music begins to take an even more expressive, almost lyrical tone (“Tu bella fusti e saggia”), with some partial parallelisms (compare “mentre ad ogn’altra dei suoi don fu scarsa” with “fastosa men quanto d’honor più degno”). But his deep emotion

does not permit him to do more than sing his complaints in *stile rappresentativo*, of which here Monteverdi writes a superb example.

It is at the end of this long solo scene that the chorus of Baccanti appeared, but as the music survives an instrumental Sinfonia leads to the descent of Apollo (a true “Deus ex macchina”). Apollo can offer his son a different fate, despite his sadness at losing Euridice. Although initially Orfeo sings of his “estremo dolore”, he cannot be indifferent to Apollo’s claim that first he was too happy over his love, and now too sad over his loss. Arguing for a less emotive approach to life, Apollo promises that his son will see the image of his beloved “nel sole e nelle stelle”, and Orfeo accepts his father’s offer. The two of them in a most beautiful, imitative and florid passage “ascendono al cielo cantando”. As they disappear, an instrumental ritornello introduces a mixed chorus (“Vanne Orfeo felice a pieno, a goder celeste honore”), both in *G major*. A dance (a Moresca) concludes the opera in *D minor*, although a major third at the very end (the so-called “tierce de Picardie”) restores the hopeful mood of the final scene.

As in the case of the fourth act, this fifth act has some stunning moments but lacks the kind of over-all structure that made the first three acts so powerful. At the beginning of the history of opera, even one of the greatest of composers, and Claudio Monteverdi certainly can be described in these terms, was still feeling his way.