

7. Claudio Monteverdi: What was expected from the harp?

Claudio Monteverdi's (1567-1643) opera *L'Orfeo, favola in musica* provides an excellent example of what was expected from the harp in a Baroque performance. The average twentieth century listener expects harpists to provide heavenly, soothing, ambient music, usually glissandos and arpeggios. But what did Baroque listeners expect from the harp? *Possente spirto*, the central aria from Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, contains an insightful harp **ritornello**.

L'Orfeo first premiered in Mantua in 1607 for the Accademia degli Invaghiti and was then presented at the court of D. Francesco Gonzaga, Prince of Mantua, in that same year. The libretto, by Alessandro Striggio the Younger (ca. 1573-ca. 1630), was published in 1607 (Mantua, 1607), and the first edition of the music for *L'Orfeo* was published in 1609 (Venice, 1609). Continuing to enjoy success, the opera was published a second time with moderate revisions (Venice, 1615). The opera made an immediate impact on the seventeenth century Italian music community, but faded markedly with time. The twentieth century interest in this work has inspired nearly a dozen full-score editions. Note that the harp ritornello does vary slightly within these current editions, particularly the accidentals.

Monteverdi strategically placed the aria *Possente spirto* at the center of the opera, and the harp ritornello is then placed at the center of this aria. The impression of this design in performance is that of perfect balance. Orpheus sings six stanzas in strophic variation, accompanied in each respective stanza by two violini, two cornetti, one arpa doppia, two violini and a basso da braccio, continuo only and a viol quartet. Monteverdi punctuates

each stanza with a ritornello played by the appropriate accompanying instrument(s).

The entire aria is organized by the continuo accompaniment, played by organo di legno and chitarrone throughout, and only the fifth stanza strays from the harmonic bass pattern. The instrumentation alone creates a strong musical structure that is strengthened by the repeated melodic and harmonic foundations.

The strophic variation framework allows Monteverdi to alter the vocal line and ornamentation with the impression of symmetry, and yet without monotony. The instruments gracefully accompany Orpheus, intertwining with each line. The instrumental accompaniments mimic one another, and yet remain idiomatic for each specific instrumental grouping. The continuo accompaniment consists of long sustained harmonies; g minor sustains for two measures, D major for two measures, and after a brief g minor chord, F major sustains for two measures. This slow harmonic motion opens each stanza and continues throughout. All of these details combine to fashion an intricate musical architecture, worthy in proportion and beauty to the great Orpheus.

The aria is a dramatic representation of Orpheus' plea to Charon in hopes of entering the underworld to retrieve his bride, Euridice. Orpheus is a legendary musician, a mortal considered to have great power through his music. The harp represents Orpheus' lyre, and the ritornello is the focal point of Orpheus' impassioned plea. It is filled with trills and arpeggios, with the right and left hands echoing one another. Both of the vocal lines presented in the score below are designated for Orpheus. A detailed discussion of these vocal lines, one simple and the other heavily ornamented, follows the example.

System 1: Three staves (Soprano, Alto, Bass). Soprano: A lei. Alto: A lei. Bass: Sustained notes.

System 2: Three staves. Soprano: vol. Alto: Rapid sixteenth-note runs. Bass: Sustained notes.

System 3: Three staves. Soprano: t'ho il ca. Alto: Rapid sixteenth-note runs. Bass: Sustained notes.

Arpa doppia

min

min

#

per l'a er cie -

per l'a er cie -

The first system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top two staves are for piano accompaniment, with the right hand playing a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, and the left hand providing a steady bass line. The bottom three staves are for vocal parts. The vocal staves are in a lower register, with the lyrics "co," appearing under the notes.

The second system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top two staves are for piano accompaniment, which is mostly silent in this section. The bottom three staves are for vocal parts. The lyrics are "A l'In-fer - no non già, ch'o - vun - que stas - si". The vocal lines are in a higher register than the first system. The bottom staff has a sharp sign (#) at the end.

The first system of the musical score consists of five staves. The top two staves are a grand staff for piano, with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The piano part features a complex, rhythmic accompaniment with many sixteenth notes. The third staff is a vocal line in a soprano clef, which is mostly empty with a few notes at the end of the system. The fourth staff is a vocal line in an alto clef, also mostly empty with a few notes at the end. The fifth staff is a bass line in a bass clef, containing a few long, sustained notes. The word "Tan" is written below the fourth staff.

The second system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in a soprano clef with the lyrics "Tan - ta - bel -". The middle staff is a piano accompaniment in a treble clef with a complex, rhythmic pattern. The bottom staff is a bass line in a bass clef with a few long, sustained notes. The word "Tan" is written below the top staff.

The third system of the musical score consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in a soprano clef with the lyrics "lez - za il pa - ra -". The middle staff is a piano accompaniment in a treble clef with a complex, rhythmic pattern. The bottom staff is a bass line in a bass clef with a few long, sustained notes. The lyrics "lez - za il pa - ra - di" are written below the top staff.

di - so hà se -

so hà - se -

#

Detailed description: This system contains a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. It features a dotted quarter note 'di', a half note 'so', and a quarter note 'se'. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves: a right-hand staff with a treble clef and a left-hand staff with a bass clef. The right hand plays a complex rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes, while the left hand plays a simple bass line with a few notes, including a sharp sign (#).

Ritornello

Arpa

Detailed description: This section is titled 'Ritornello' and is marked 'Arpa'. It features a piano accompaniment for the harp. The right-hand staff has a treble clef and contains a melodic line with various ornaments and a key signature change to two flats. The left-hand staff has a bass clef and contains a rhythmic accompaniment. Below the piano part are four empty staves, two in the treble clef and two in the bass clef, with the letter 'C' written on each, indicating a C-clef position. At the bottom of the system, there are two notes: a sharp sign (#) and a flat sign (b).

Detailed description: This system shows the final part of the piano accompaniment. It consists of two staves: a right-hand staff with a treble clef and a left-hand staff with a bass clef. Both hands play a dense, rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes. The right hand has a key signature change to two flats, while the left hand remains in one flat. The system concludes with a few final notes in both hands.

Figure 58. Harp ritornello from *Possente Spirto*.⁷⁰ Reprinted, by permission, from Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, (Wyton, England: King's Music, 1993), page 70-73.

A lei volt'ho il camin per l'aer cieco,
 A l'inferno non già, ch'ovunque stassi
 Tanta bellezza il paradiso hà secco.

⁷⁰ Claudio Monteverdi, *L'Orfeo*, edited by Clifford Bartlett (Wyton, England: King's Music, 1993), 70-73.

I walk towards her in the darkness,
 But not to Hell, for where
 Such beauty lives is Heaven.⁷¹

Imitating the introduction of the violins and cornetti just a few moments prior, the opening scales of the harp solo draw attention to the full range of the harp. Three and a half octaves are utilized in just one measure, responding to the text “A lei volt’ho il camin.” The next line of text uses the Italian word “cieco,” which can be translated as “blindly” in English. Interestingly, the solo harp line requires visual contact with the harp, leaping from octave to octave on the instrument. The line gradually rises in pitch and is decorated with elegant trills. “A l’inferno non già, ch’ovunque stasis” elicits a strong statement from the harp, again covering three and a half octaves. The final line “Tanta bellezza il paradiso hà secco” introduces the substantial harp ritornello, which is indeed both beautiful (“bellezza”) and heavenly (“il paradiso”).

The opening arpeggio covers four full octaves, emphasizing the recent expansion of the harp’s range. The effect of the following one and two handed trills is dizzying, conveying Orpheus’ virtuosity and his passion. Monteverdi’s continued use of the harp’s range provides a depth to the harp ritornello that is lacking in the prior violin and cornetti ritornelli. Unexpectedly, the rhythm switches from thirty-second notes to sixteenth notes in the middle of the ritornello, but the music does not lose momentum. On the contrary, a certain sense of confidence is gained by the slower rhythm, while the momentum pushes forward to the final trill, led by a powerful bass line. Monteverdi’s use of the harp is exceptionally idiomatic. He utilizes both the depth and elegance of an Italian triple harp, and he provides dramatic insight into the character of Orpheus.

⁷¹ Ibid., 71.

Both the vocal and instrumental lines have been written out, complete with ornamentation. Monteverdi also provides an unornamented version of the vocal line, which is printed directly above the ornamented version. These two vocal lines are the topic of controversy for modern music historians. Three basic schools of thought exist as to why Monteverdi printed both lines. The first approach is that the unornamented version is provided for less capable singers. If the extravagant ornamentation of the one line proves to be daunting, the singer can eliminate all ornamentation and sing only the bare framework of the melody.

Music historian Nino Pirrotta argues the second school of thought:

... the double version in the score provides us the privilege of catching some glimpse of the growth of a poetic conception. There is no doubt in my mind that the unornamented version of this piece is not a schematic one, to be embellished at will by the performer, but a full realization of the prayer following the oratorical principles of the early *stile rappresentativo*.⁷²

The most convincing argument against this theory is the complete loss of dramatic impact in the unornamented fifth stanza, for which Monteverdi specifically provides only one vocal line.

The third approach views the ornamented line as provided for those who are not skilled at embellishment or improvisation. This line serves as a model for more skilled vocalists, who can then improvise their personal embellishments in the style of Monteverdi's ornamented line using the unornamented version as the melodic foundation. Giulio Caccini's preface to his *Le nuove musiche* also defends this third school of thought. In reference to Caccini's unornamented and ornamented music, H. Wiley Hitchcock writes:

⁷² Nino Pirrotta and Elena Povoledo, *Due Orfei: Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi*, trans. Karen Eales (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 277.

... these [bare] manuscript versions, if not exactly "early experiments," represent the way Caccini first wrote out his songs, leaving the ornamentation to be improvised in performance, as was the practice of the later 16th century... Other singers must have ornamented the songs differently; they did so badly, according to Caccini's views, by adding "a multitude of *passaggi* on both short and long syllables" and by using other ornaments indiscriminately. This led Caccini to his "new way of writing" music and to the embodiment in print of his new kind of virtuoso song.⁷³

Caccini himself writes specifically, "Questa mia maniera di cantar solo, la quale io scrivo giustamente, come si canta."⁷⁴ Monteverdi may have been concerned that the improvised ornamentation would not suit his standards, but also that one fixed ornamented line would hinder the spontaneity of an accomplished singer. The part simply must be ornamented, whether improvised or studied, in order for the virtuoso instrumental lines to make musical sense. The second vocal line is provided when the instrumentation is virtuosic. The optional line is removed and an unornamented line remains only when the instrumental accompaniment matches the vocal simplicity. In addition, the dramatic impact of the sparse fifth stanza remains intact only if the vocal line is embellished.

Studying the above argument provides insight into what was expected of any performer in terms of improvisation, singer or instrumentalist. The *Possente spirito* ritornello portrays a virtuoso performer pleading with the listener to enter the underworld. The dramatic passage represents virtuosity, passion and an unearthly setting. Although the unearthly image has been sustained into the present day, Baroque harpists provided much more than soothing, ambient music. Experiment with different interpretations of the

⁷³ H. Wiley Hitchcock, "Vocal Ornamentation in Caccini's *Nuove Musiche*," *The Musical Quarterly* LVI (1970), 404.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 398.

ritornello, and try to present a different interpretation at each performance. Do not settle into a comfortable rut, but allow the music to seem organic and theatrical.

Suggested Readings:

Arnold, Denis and Nigel Fortune, eds. *The New Monteverdi Companion*. London: Faber and Faber, Limited, 1985.

Whenham, John, ed. *Claudio Monteverdi; Orfeo*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.