

The First Operas

By Andy Glover-Whitley

The art form that became known as Opera originated in Italy in the late 16th and early 17th century although it drew upon much older traditions of Medieval and Renaissance courtly entertainments such as "*Ludus Danielis*" (see Medieval course) where sections of the story were acted out or spoken over an accompaniment. This in turn leads us back to the Dark Ages with the Scops/Skalds and Bards of the Northern lands, and even to the Roman and Greek ideas of music drama. This is actually how it came about, a reawakening of interest in the art form of the ancients and a wanting and yearning to return to this then only read about art form. The word 'Opera' means "work" in Italian and was first used in the modern musical and theatrical sense of the term in 1639 and soon spread to the other European languages. The earliest operas were modest productions compared to other Renaissance forms of sung drama, but they soon became more lavish and took on the spectacular stagings of the earlier genre known as Intermedio (Intermezzo). So it was actually an attempt to recreate something lost to antiquity and modern practices found in stage and music Intermedio.



"*Dafne*" by the Mantuan based composer Jacopo Peri was the earliest composition that can possibly be considered an opera, as understood today, although with only five instrumental parts it was more like a Chamber Opera than either the preceding Intermedi or the operas to come of Claudio Monteverdi. It was written around 1597, largely under the inspiration of a circle of literate Florentine humanists known as the Camerata (*this group you should have already researched*). "*Dafne*" was an attempt to revive the classical Greek Drama and was part of the wider revival of antiquity characteristic of the Renaissance period. The members of the Camerata thought that the "chorus" parts of Greek dramas were probably originally sung, and possibly even the entire text of all roles. Thus Opera was conceived as a way of "restoring" this antiquarian situation. Most of the music for "*Dafne*" is lost but the libretto was printed and does survive. One of Peri's later Operas, "*Euridice*" (a popular subject for Renaissance

composers) dating from 1600, is the first opera score to have survived to the present day intact and is performed occasionally at early music festivals.

The traditions of staged sung music and drama do go back to both the secular and religious forms found in the Middle Ages. Giulio Caccini and Jacopo Peri's works, however, did not just arrive as if out of a creative vacuum. It can be stated that an underlying prerequisite for the creation of opera was the practice of Monody. This is the solo singing or setting of a dramatically conceived melody that is designed to express the emotional content of the text it is set too which is then accompanied by a relatively simple sequence of chords rather than any other polyphonic part. Italian composers began composing in this style late in the 16th century, and it grew in part from the long-standing practise of performing polyphonic Madrigals with one singer accompanied by an instrumental rendition of the other parts. From this it was only a small step to a fully-fledged Monody and thus on to Opera in its crudest and most basic form. All such works tended to set humanist poetry of a type that attempted to imitate Petrarch. This was another element of the period's tendency towards a desire to restore the principles it associated with a rather mixed-up notion of antiquity.

The solo Madrigal, Frottola, Villanella and their type featured prominently in the Intermedio entertainment form of theatrical spectacles with music that were funded in the last years of the 16th century by the wealthy and more bourgeois, opulent and increasingly secular courts of Italy's city-states. Italy was still broken up into various states since the breakup of the Roman Empire in the mid-6th century. These entertainments were usually staged to commemorate significant state events such as weddings, military victories and other important happenings. They alternated in performance with the acts of plays. Like the later Opera, an Intermedi featured the solo singing, but also included Madrigals performed in their usual four or five part voice textures. Dancing also accompanied by the instrumentalists present in the court. These Intermedio were lavishly staged and tended not to tell a story as such but nearly always focused on some particular element of human emotion or experience, expressed through mythological allegory that was rife with illusion and social comment on the court and the State.



Giulio Caccini (1551 – 1618)

Giulio Romolo Caccini was not just a composer but a teacher, singer, instrumentalist and writer of the late Renaissance period. He was one of the founders of the genre that we now call Opera.

Little is actually known about his early life but what we do know is that he was the son of a carpenter, Michelangelo Caccini, who was the older brother of the Florentine sculptor Giovanni Caccini. Giulio studied in Rome taking the Lute, Viol and the Harp and acquired a reputation as a singer. In the 1560s, The Grand Duke Francesco de' Medici of Florence was so impressed with his talent that he took Caccini to Florence for further study.

By the year 1579 Caccini was singing at the Medici court. He sang at various entertainments, including weddings and affairs of state, and took part in the sumptuous and bombastic Intermedi of the time. During this time he took part in the movement of humanists, writers, musicians and scholars who formed the Florentine Camerata. They were the group that gathered at the home of Count Giovanni de' Bardi, and which was dedicated to recovering the supposed lost glories of ancient Greek dramatic music. With Caccini's abilities as a singer, instrumentalist, and composer added to the mix of intellects and talents, the Camerata developed the concept of Monody which was at the time a revolutionary departure from the polyphonic practice of the late Renaissance years.



Frontispiece of the published score of "Euridice"

Caccini's character seems to have been less than good and was blighted by envy and jealousy, not only in his professional life but for personal advancement with the Medici personages. His rivalry with both the composers Emilio de' Cavalieri and Jacopo Peri appears to have been very intense. It is believed that he may have been the one who arranged for Cavalieri to be removed from his post as director of festivities for the wedding of Henry the IV of France and Maria de' Medici in 1600. This caused Cavalieri to leave Florence in quite a rage. He also seems

to have rushed his own version of the opera “*Euredice*” into print before Peri's opera on the same subject could be published, while simultaneously ordering his group of singers to have nothing to do with Peri's production. Spite and vindictiveness leaving a bad taste in everyone's mouths.

Caccini wrote music for only three known Operas, “*Euridice*” (1600) in collaboration with Jacopo Peri, “*Il Rapimento di Cefalo*” (1600) and another version of “*Euridice*” in 1602. He published two collections of songs and solo Madrigals in 1602 and 1614 respectively. Most of the Madrigal settings are through-composed and contain little repetition, but some of the songs, however, are strophic in their design. Among the most famous and widely disseminated of these is the madrigal “*Amarilli, mia bella*”.

LISTENING

L'Euredice (1600)

<https://youtu.be/2lq6bB4kE8s>

Nuovo Musiche

<https://youtu.be/n-qJx1fnycU>



Jacopo Peri (1561 – 1633)

Jacopo Peri was a composer and singer on the cusp between the Renaissance and the baroque styles just like his near contemporary Monteverdi. He is nearly always referred to as the inventor of Opera and wrote what is commonly called the first opera in the sense that we would recognise it today. That Opera was “*Dafne*” and also the first opera to have survived through to the present day, “*Euredice*” in 1600.

He was born in Rome and studied in Florence with Cristofano Malvezzi. He worked in a number of Churches there as an organist and a singer. He subsequently began to work in the Medici

court, first as a Tenor singer and keyboardist and later as a composer. His earliest works were Intermedi and Madrigals. In the 1590s, Peri became associated with Jacopo Corsi who was the leading patron of music in Florence. They believed contemporary art was inferior to that of the past particularly that of classical Greek and Roman works. With this concept in mind they decided to attempt to recreate Greek Tragedy in the same manner as the Ancients but from their limited understanding of the ideas of the art form. Their work added to that of the Florentine Camerata of the previous decade, which produced the first experiments in Monody. Peri and Corsi brought in the poet Ottavio Rinuccini to write a text, the result being “*Dafne*”. Nowadays understood to be a long way from anything the Greeks would have recognised or understood it is none the less the first work in a new form; Opera.



The first page from Peri's "Euridice"

Rinuccini and Peri next collaborated on “*Euridice*”. This was first performed in 1600 at the Palazzo Pitti. Unlike “*Dafne*”, the parts have survived history to the present day. It is extremely rarely performed and when it is it is usually done so as some vague historical curio. In the work use of recitatives, a new development which went between the arias and choruses helped to move the action along at a much more smooth and paced speed than jolts of individual songs/Monodies which were separate from the story around them.

Peri produced a number of other operas, often in collaboration with other composers (such as “*La Flora*” with Marco da Gagliano and “*Euredice*” (1600) with Giulio Caccini). Peri also wrote a number of other pieces for various court entertainments as was expected of an employee of the court. Few of his pieces are still performed today, and even by the time of his death his operatic style was looking old-fashioned and anachronistic in comparison to the work of younger, more reformist composers such as Claudio Monteverdi. Peri's influence though on the later composers was large.



Peri's Grave marking in the Santa Maria Novella

LISTENING

Euredice

<https://youtu.be/wNlv0gQMLQA>

Hor Che Gli Augelli

<https://youtu.be/lHoPcorqWZA>

Tu Dormi, e' l Dolce Sonno

<https://youtu.be/JbaL-RVwdbw>



Claudio Monteverdi (1567 – 1643)

(For a fuller biography revisit the same composer in the material earlier.)

Monteverdi was often ill during the last years of his life, which he always attributed to his time in the Mantuan Court which was based in the damp swamp lands of the region. During this

In 1607, his first opera, “*L’Orfeo*”, was premiered in Mantua. It was normal at that time for composers to create works on demand for special occasions, and this piece was no exception. It was part of the ducal celebrations of Carnival for that particular year. “*L’Orfeo*” has a dramatic power combined with a brilliance of orchestration that made the work unique from its opening fanfares and almost military pomp. It is the first large composition for which the exact instrumentation of the premiere is still known. Up to that point only a vague suggestion of instrumentation was ever given so our knowledge until then is quite sketchy as to the line-ups used. With this opera Monteverdi created an entirely new style of music, he took a step further than any of his contemporaries and so the *dramma per la musica* or musical drama was born.

In his published score Monteverdi lists around 41 instruments to be used and deployed, with distinct groups of instruments used to depict particular scenes and characters. This had never been done to anyone’s current knowledge before. So in his concept strings, harpsichords and recorders represent the pastoral fields of the stories setting, Thrace, with their nymphs and shepherds, while heavy brass illustrated the underworld and its creatures and demons. Composed at the point of transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque era, “*L’Orfeo*” employed all the known resources known at the time. The work is not orchestrated as we would know it today but was in the Renaissance tradition where instrumentalists followed the composer’s general instructions but were given considerable freedom to improvise upon the material to enhance it further.

Instrumentation

Some comment on the instrumentation will enhance the listeners approach to this wonderful work of genius.



Monteverdi's listing of instruments is shown on the right.

For the purpose of a more easy analysis the line-up has been divided up by scholars so that Monteverdi's list of instruments is divided into three main groups: Strings, Brass and Continuo, with a few further items as usual that are not easily classifiable under any of these categories. The strings grouping is formed from only ten members of the Violin family (*viole da braccio*), two Double Basses (*contrabassi de viola*), and two small Violins (*violini piccoli alla francese*). The *viole da braccio* are in two five-part ensembles, each comprising two Violins, two Violas and a Cello, so could actually be classed as two String Quintets. The brass group contains four or five Trombones or as would have been in use at the time probably Sackbuts, three Trumpets and two Cornett (Cornettos) (See instruments later on). The continuo forces include two Harpsichords (*duoi gravicembali*), a Double Harp (*arpa doppia*), two or three Chitarroni as was would have been usual for the time, two Pipe Organs (*organi di legno*), three bass Viola da Gamba and usually a Regal or Small Reed Organ possibly even a portative organ if the former were not available. Beyond this there are two Recorders (*flautini alla vigesima secunda*), and possibly one or more Citterns which Monteverdi forgets to mention in the list of instruments but are included in instructions relating to the end of Act 4.

Instrumentally, the two worlds represented within the opera are distinctively separated and portrayed in their own unique ways. The pastoral world of the fields is represented by the strings, harpsichords, harp, organs, recorders and chitarroni. The remaining instruments, predominantly brass, are associated with the Underworld of Hades. There is not an absolute distinction in this and so it allows Monteverdi a very good pallet to colour his world. Strings appear on several occasions in the Hades scenes thus not making it a strict rule. Within this general ordering, specific instruments or combinations are used to accompany some of the main characters. For example Orpheus is represented by harp and organ, shepherds by harpsichord and chitarrone, the Underworld Gods by trombones and regal etcetera. Something that would not truly be explored or developed further until the mid 19th century with the ideas of Richard Wagner.

Monteverdi instructs his players generally to:

"[play] the work as simply and correctly as possible, and not with many florid passages or runs".

Those playing ornamentation instruments such as strings and flutes are advised to:

"play nobly, with much invention and variety",

but are warned against overdoing it, whereby:

"nothing is heard but chaos and confusion, offensive to the listener."

Since at no time are all the instruments played together, the number of players needed is less than the number of instruments and some players can be changing to other instruments fairly often and fairly quickly. This allowed for an expansive sound world to populate the work without the expense of lots of players.

LISTENING

L'Orfeo

<https://youtu.be/0mD16EVxNOM>

This particular live version is done by the exceptional, early music specialist, Jordi Savall and his ensemble and is probably the closest we will ever get to the actual type of performance that Monteverdi would have been involved in in the Mantuan Court in 1608



L'Incoronazione di Poppea

L'incoronazione di Poppea (The Coronation of Poppaea) was first performed at the Teatro Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice during the carnival season of 1643. It is one of the first operas to use historical events and people and describes how Poppea, mistress of the Roman Emperor Nero is able to achieve her ambition and be crowned empress. The opera was revived in Naples in 1651, after Monteverdi's death, but was then neglected until the rediscovery of the score in 1888, after which it became the subject of scholarly attention in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Since then it has been performed on many occasions.

The original manuscript has been lost and our knowledge of it comes from two surviving copies from the 1650s and each differs from each other, in some cases quite drastically, and also to some extent from the libretto that has survived. How much of the music is actually Monteverdi's, and how much the product of others, is a matter of debate.

In a departure from traditional literary morality, it is the adulterous liaison of Poppea and Nero which wins the day, although this triumph in actual history did not last. Written when the genre of opera was only a few decades old, the music for "*L'incoronazione di Poppea*" is praised for its originality, its melody, and for its reflection of the human characteristics of its characters. The work helped to redefine the boundaries of theatrical music and established Monteverdi as the leading musical dramatist of the Renaissance transitional period.

Monteverdi moved to Venice to take up the position of director of music at St Marks's Basilica, His calling card being the famous "Vespers of 1610" A, where he remained until his death in 1643. Amongst his official duties at St Marks he maintained a strong interest in the new opera form and produced several stage works, including the substantial "*Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*" (The Battle of Tancredi and Clorinda) for the 1624/25 carnival season. In

1637 the first public opera house in the world opened in Venice and Monteverdi, by then 70, returned to writing full-scale opera. For the 1639/40 carnival season, Monteverdi revived “*L’Arianna*” and later produced his setting of “*Il Ritorno...*”

Composition of the Opera

As already stated two versions of the score of “*L’Incoronazione di Poppea*” exist, both from the 1650s just after his death. The first was rediscovered in Venice in 1888, the second in Naples in 1930. The Naples score is obviously linked to the revival of the opera in that city in 1651 and is probably containing additions that may or may not be by Monteverdi. Both scores contain essentially the same music but each differs from the printed libretto and has unique to each score additions and omissions. In each score the vocal lines are shown with continuo accompaniment which was becoming the norm of the time. In the Venice score the instrumental sections are written in three parts and four parts in the Naples version, without in either score actually being specific about the instruments. This probably allows for the then standard practice of leaving much of a score ‘open’ thus allowing for differing local performance conditions and what instruments were available. Neither the Venice nor Naples scores can be linked back to the original performance under Monteverdi so it is assumed that although the Venice version is generally the more authentic modern performances and productions use material from both.

The question of how much of the music is Monteverdi's is a hotly debated one and we really do not have enough clues or evidence to satisfy this question to any degree. Virtually none of the contemporary documentation mentions Monteverdi, and music by other composers has been identified in the scores, including passages found in the score of Francesco Saccati's Opera “*La Finta Pazzo*”. There are many passages and sections that are hotly debated as to their authorship but we shall never truly know as the original score where these alterations and additions would have been made is now lost, presumed destroyed.

Most modern scholars have now come to some type of agreement that “*L’incoronazione*” was more than likely the result of a collaboration between Monteverdi and other composers, with the old composer playing a guiding role and mentor. It is thought that some of the composers who may have assisted include leading lights of the next generation such as Benedetto Ferrari and Francesco Cavalli.

LISTENING

L’Incoronazione di Poppea

<https://youtu.be/rZZyySg6JZU>

Acts 1 & 2

<https://youtu.be/j650NanGNyk>

Act 3

The Lost Operas of Monteverdi

In addition to his large output of church music and Madrigals, Monteverdi wrote prolifically for the stage. His theatrical works were written between 1604 and 1643 and included ten

operas, of which only three (the two above and "*Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*") have survived the ravages of time. These do not include the eight other music dramas such as "*Il Combattimenti di Tancredi e Clorinda*". In the case of the other seven remaining operas, the music has disappeared almost entirely, although some of the original librettos do exist. The loss of these works, written during a critical period of early opera history, has been much lamented and cannot be blamed on any particular reason or period.

In the years following the success of "*L'Orfeo*" at Mantua, and in his later capacity as director of music at St Mark's Basilica, Monteverdi continued to write theatrical music in various genres, including operas, dances, and Intermedi. In Monteverdi's time music for the stage was thought to have much value other than as being utilitarian and so after its initial performance, much of this music vanished after its creation, either recycled or destroyed.

Most of the available information appertaining to the seven lost operas has been found in contemporary documents, including the many letters that Monteverdi wrote to various personages. These papers prove that at least four of the Operas, "*L'Arianna*", "*Andromeda*", "*Proserpina Rapita*" and "*Le Nozze d'Enea con Lavinia*", were completed and performed in Monteverdi's lifetime. Of these four only the now famous lament from "*L'Arianna*" and a trio from "*Proserpina*" are known to have survived the vagaries of time. The other three lost operas, "*Le Nozze di Tetide*", "*La Finta Pazza Licori*" and "*Armida Abbandonata*" were apparently abandoned by Monteverdi before completion. Just how much of the music was actually written is unknown. He may have destroyed these works at the time.

LISTENING

Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria

<https://youtu.be/DcUjrOnl-pA>



Part Opera, part Monody

Il Combattimento di Trancredi e Clorinda

<https://youtu.be/LUYpo-DzZs4>

This is probably one of the finest and most moving and artistic versions of this Monody Melodrama that is around and includes dancers as well as the main protagonists which enhances the understanding and flow of the action of the tale. The heart

wrenching tale is poetically and movingly told along with being sumptuously sung and performed. Listen out for the very first known use of *Pizzicato* in music in the ensemble.