

Monteverdi – Sacred Dramatist.

Workshop for singers and instrumentalists, tutor Justin Doyle, 19 Sept 2015

L'Orfeo ~ L'Arianna ~ Il Ballo Delle Ingrate ~ Mass for 4 voices ~ Adoramus te

I recently bought a new edition of Kobbe's Opera Book, and compared its coverage of Monteverdi with that of my old edition. In 1976, he was placed at the very beginning of the contents list, in the rather slim category "Opera Before Gluck". By 2000, he was part of the alphabetical mainstream, coming just before Mozart. A sure sign of early music's progress!

There is, of course, a good chronological argument for listing Monteverdi first among composers of opera. He had intelligent predecessors, not least Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini, who both wrote music dramas on the theme of *Euridice* in 1600. Their works, however, are by common consent thin and dull when compared with *La Favola d'Orfeo*.

Orfeo was Monteverdi's first opera, written in 1607 for performance in the ducal palace in Mantua and is perhaps still his best-known. Based on a text by Alessandro Striggio, it has a range of emotion and musical subtlety that far surpasses anything which came before. Our workshop with Justin will cover several choruses, some rejoicing in the wedding of Orfeo and Euridice, others lamenting her death.

Orfeo survives complete, but all that is left of the one-act *L'Arianna* (composed for the wedding celebrations of Francesco Gonzaga and Margaret of Savoy in 1608) is Ariadne's glorious Lament at her abandonment by Theseus. Fortunately, Monteverdi published the music of the Lament in different versions - independently from the opera - as a madrigal and as the *Pianto della Madonna* in the *Selva Morale e Spirituale* in 1640-41.

Also written for the Gonzaga wedding was *Il Ballo Delle Ingrate*, a semi-dramatic ballet. Its theme is the punishment of ungrateful women who refuse love. Monteverdi published it in a revised version in his *Madrigali guerrieri et amorosi* in 1638. We shall sing excerpts from *Il Ballo*. We don't plan to dance, not least because according to Naxos, "the ladies' actions, a mixture of tenderness and anger, asking each other's pardon or striking one another, form the substance of the ballet".

Orfeo, *L'Arianna* and *Il Ballo*, composed for court occasions. *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* and *Poppea*, written later for the commercial theatre and with arguably more realistic expressions of human passions. Here we have Monteverdi the dramatist – but what of the "sacred" in our workshop title? How do the operas link to the pieces written for the church which we shall study, such as the *Mass for 4 voices* and the motet *Adoramus te*?

At an obvious level, there are occasions when Monteverdi uses the same music in both contexts – Ariadne's lament becomes the Madonna's, the Toccata that opens *Orfeo* so memorably rings out later for the 1610 Vespers. But for an informed study of these overlapping and connecting threads, we can look forward to a workshop with Justin Doyle full of magnificent music.