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Claudio Monteverdi

1567-1643

Italian

Late Renaissance/Early Baroque



Portrait by Bernardo Strozzi, circa 1640

“The end of all good music is to affect the soul.”

Specialist Genres: Opera, madrigals, motets

- He was born in Cremona, Italy and died in Venice.
- His father was a chemist who practiced medicine as a barber-surgeon.
- He began his musical education (theory and singing) from early childhood under Ingegneri as a boy chorister in the cathedral of Cremona.
- In 1599, he married and had two sons, but lost his wife in 1607 from a long illness.
- Duke of Mantua was his great patron. Monteverdi accompanied the Duke to military expeditions to Danube and Flanders in 1595 and 1599. The Duke got opportunities for Monteverdi to listen to Florentine operas of the Camerata during this trip.
- In 1613, he became Maestro di Cappella at St. Mark’s Cathedral in Venice where he remained for the rest of his life.

Birth of Modern Opera

Monteverdi established the modern style of opera by:

1. Using greater dynamic expression by enlarging the orchestra and skillfully combined the instruments accompanying the voices.
2. Using dissonances to emphasize the texts, which was against the musical rules at that time. This created dramatic tension.

Venice, Italy was one of the central places where opera developed.



📖 Link up to learn more about Monteverdi!
<http://www.classicalarchives.com/bios/codm/monteverdi.html>

Lesson plan for Orfeo: Sinfonie e Ritornelli
by Claudio Monteverdi
(1607)

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The Development of Early Opera

Around the year 1600, a group of intellectuals introduced a new concept of "opera," which began as an imitation of **ancient Greek drama**.

In 1607, **Monteverdi** took this simple approach and expanded on it by creating **the first true opera, "L'Orfeo."** His revolutionary debut defied all existing musical convention. The first performance of *L'Orfeo* was on Feb. 24, 1607 at the Accademia del Invaghiti in Mantua, Italy. It was an instant success.

At that time, the term "opera" did not exist, so Monteverdi called *L'Orfeo*, "**story music.**"

Story

L'Orfeo, favola in musica, is based on the ancient Greek myth of **Orpheus**, son of **Apollo** and **Calliope**. Orpheus (Orfeo) is happily married to **Euridice**, but when she dies by snake bite, Orpheus is so grief-stricken that he approaches **Pluto**, god of the Underworld. He plays his **lyre** so beautifully that Pluto grants Orpheus the opportunity to descend into Hades to find and return with his beloved Euridice. One condition is made: Orpheus must not look at her as he returns with her to the world of the living. During the return, Orpheus doubts that Euridice is following him, and he looks back at her. As he does so, she vanishes into the shadows of Hades forever.

(**Lyre** = an ancient harp made of a tortoise shell)



Calliope

The eldest and most distinguished of the nine Muses. She is the Muse of eloquence and epic or heroic poetry. Calliope ("beautiful voice") is the mother of Orpheus and Linus with Apollo. Orpheus inherited his musical talent from his mother.

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Orchestra Settings for L'Orfeo

In Monteverdi's time, most people were listening to small groups of instruments (chamber music). But he expanded the orchestra when he composed the opera, *L'Orfeo*, so he was able to create dynamic expression within the piece.

A typical example of an early orchestra setting would be: **Strings** (2 violins, 10 violas, 2 contrabasses, 7 other string instruments), **Woodwinds** (2 recorders and 2 cornets), **Brass** (4 trumpets and 5 trombones), and **Others** (1 harp, 2 harpsichords, and 3 small organs).

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Ritornello - Orchestra section that returns periodically during the work

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NYS Standards Addressed:

- Standard 3 Responding to and Analyzing Works of Art
- Standard 4 Understanding the Cultural dimensions and Contributions of the Arts

Performance Indicators:

- 3b. Students describe the music in terms related to basic elements such as melody, rhythm, harmony, dynamics, timbre, form, style, etc.
- 3d. Students describe the music’s context in terms related to its social and psychological functions and settings (e.g. roles of participants, effects of music with other events or objects, etc.)
- 4c. Students identify the primary cultural, geographical, and historical settings for the music they listen to and perform.



Objectives: Students will identify the dramatic expression made by performance and how it relates to the content of the story, *L'Orfeo*.
Students will identify the form of orchestra and each instrumental group within the orchestra for this piece.

Materials: Pictures of orchestral instruments and a world map

Vocabulary: Orchestra
Opera
Ritornello

Listening Repertoire: Recording of “*L'Orfeo*”

Procedure:

1. On the blackboard, list the instruments that students think are part of the orchestra. Then divide the instruments into four families (strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion). You may want to have them look at the orchestra diagram on pg. 5 of this teacher’s guide, “*What is an orchestra?*”
2. Share the story of *L'Orfeo* and where the story came from and the composer’s home country by showing a world map.
3. Play *L'Orfeo* and ask what instruments they heard in that particular scene.
4. Teach them the early orchestra setting and ask them what instruments are missing from the previous list.

Extensions:

1. Teacher shows video of *L'Orfeo* (can be found in the Monroe County Library System).