

L'Orfeo, Favola in Musica di Claudio Monteverdi

Notes to the transcription of the 1609 Venetian score

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Historical background

Commissioned by Francesco Gonzaga, the heir of the duke of Mantua, Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (*L'Orfeo, favola in musica*) was first performed in that city during the carnival of 1607, and the 24th of February in the Gonzagas' court. *L'Orfeo* is one of the earliest operas, composed along the theoretical lines for musical drama drawn by the Florentine Camerata at the end of the sixteenth century. The five-act libretto, by Alessandro Striggio, is based on the Greek legend of Orpheus, Pindar's "father of songs", mythical poet and musician of Antiquity, and inventor of the lyre.



Fig. 1. Frontispiece of the 1609 edition.

The printing of operas in full score remained a rarity until the nineteenth century. However, *L'Orfeo* was published in Venice in 1609. This exceptional circumstance is surely due to the ample resources of Francesco Gonzaga, to whom the printed opera is dedicated (Fig. 1). A second edition appeared in 1615, after Francesco's death. The text of the printed version differs from the 1607 libretto mainly in the fifth act. It provides a different, happy end, where Orfeo –after the unsuccessful visit to Hades in search of his beloved Euridice– is offered immortality and taken to the heavens by his father Apollo, instead of dying by the bacchants' hands. The music of the original fifth act is lost.

The 1609 Venetian score was reproduced in a facsimile version by the *Archivium Musicum* of the *Studio per Edizioni Scelte* (S.P.E.S., Florence, 1993). This facsimile reproduction was the basis of the transcription now deposited in the Werner Icking Music Archive (WIMA, <http://icking-music-archive.org>). The following notes summarize the criteria used to bring the original score to modern notation.

General structure

In the 1609 score, big titles identify the beginnings of the Prologue –just after the introductory *toccata* and *ritornello*, (Fig. 2)– and of each of the five acts. Within each of these parts, different sections are often indicated by small titles placed between staves (Fig. 3), such as *choro* or *coro* (both for choruses and small vocal ensembles), *sinfonia* (for purely instrumental sections), and *ritornello* (for relatively short instrumental introductions or insertions in sung sections). Many of these sections are preceded by prescriptions on instrumentation. Such indications establish natural divisions, which have been used to organize the transcription in sections as presented

in WIMA. Small titles and instrumentation prescriptions have been fully preserved in the transcription.



Fig.2. The first two lines of the prologue.

On the other hand, recitatives and arias are not indicated as such, but the names of the intervening characters is given (Figs. 2 and 3), so that the identification of those sections is also straightforward. A few long recitative sections have been divided on the basis of their dramatic contents and/or of the characters' relevance (for instance, in the second act, the *Messaggiera's "Ahi caso acerbo"* and the ensuing *Orfeo's "Tu se' morta"*).

It must be pointed out that, in spite of the big titles, the exact starting point of each act is uncertain. Each act's title occurs at the beginning of a new page, and heads the first vocal section of that act. This section, however, is always preceded by an instrumental number –*ritornello* or *sinfonia*– which is difficult to assign either to the previous act or to the new act. Most probably, these numbers had the role of interludes between acts in representations without intervals. The only exception is the *ritornello* preceding the aria "*Ecco pur ch'a voi ritorno*", which opens the second act. Obviously, this *ritornello* is the instrumental introduction to the aria. Except for this case, the transcription assigns the opening of each act to the first vocal section –a recitative for all the other acts.

Clefs

Following common Baroque practice, Monteverdi employs a variety of clefs. Except for a few cases, the bass stave is written in the standard fourth-line F clef (Figs. 2 and 3). Exceptions are, for instance, the introductory *Toccata* and the chorus "*È la virtute un raggio*" in the fourth act, whose lowest staves use the (tenor) fourth-line C clef. Bass vocal parts (one of the *Pastore* soloists, *Caronte*, *Plutone*, and chorus basses) are also written in the usual F clef.

Upper instrumental and vocal parts use C clefs in different positions: fourth line for tenors (two of the *Pastori*, *Orfeo*, *Apollo*, *Spirito* soloists, and chorus tenors; Fig. 3); third line for altos (one of the *Pastori*, and chorus altos); and first line for sopranos

(La Musica, Ninfa, Euridice, Messaggiera, Speranza, Proserpina, and chorus sopranos; Fig. 2). Only exceptionally, the (treble) second-line G clef is used for upper instrumental parts. It only occurs in a few *ritornellos* and *sinfonias*.

In the transcription, only the modern treble and bass clefs are used. In tenor staves, an “8” under the treble clef indicates the standard octave transposition. However, due to limitations of the music editor, when the same staff is used for two or more different voices in a recitative (for instance, Caronte and Orfeo’s “*Ben mi lusinga alquanto*” in the third act), it was not possible to include the “8” under the clef. The necessity of octave transposition is in any case clear when the character is a tenor.



Fig. 3. Beginning of the aria “*Mira ch'a se n'alletta*” and its *ritornello*.

Keys and accidentals

Just two key signatures are used throughout the whole score, corresponding to the modern C major/A minor (no sharps or flats, Fig. 2) and to F major/D minor (B flat, Fig. 3). The key signature has been preserved in the transcription, in spite of the fact that many sections are obviously written in what in modern tonal music would be interpreted as other tonalities. For instance, in the first act, the first part of the chorus “*Lasciate i monti*” is in G major, while its key signature corresponds to C major; its second part (“*Qui miri il Sole*”) starts in G minor and modulates to B flat major, but the key signature is that of F major.

This divergence between the key signature and the actual tonality implies a frequent occurrence of accidentals. This is also the case in recitatives, where modulation is ampler and freer. The score uses two accidentals, corresponding to the modern sharp (a symbol similar to an “x”, drawn with double lines; Fig. 2 at “*Di cui narra*”) and flat (similar to a “b”; Fig. 2 at “*vegno*”). Their function, however, is different to that of modern accidentals. Specifically, the sharp-like accidental raises both natural and flat notes. If, for instance, the key signature indicates B flat, a B note preceded by the

sharp-like accidental should be played as B natural. On the other hand, a sharp-like accidental preceding an F note simply indicates F sharp. Analogous rules hold for the flat-like accidental. Another difference with the modern custom (also illustrated in Fig. 2 at “*Di cui narra*”) is that accidentals on the same note are repeated within the same measure as many times as they are used. In the transcription, all these peculiarities have been transformed to the modern usage.

The 1609 score has a limited number of typographic errors in the use of accidentals. For instance, on a few occasions, accidentals are positioned *to the right* of the note. This has been corrected in the transcription. In other places, accidentals seem to be missing. Replacing missing accidentals in *L’Orfeo*’s score is, however, a delicate matter. In fact, an accidental may appear as missing from a tonal viewpoint, but from the perspective of modal music it may be perfectly acceptable that the accidental in question is not used. The criterion used in the transcription is that a missing accidental is replaced only when the error is absolutely obvious from comparison with other staves, to avoid unnatural dissonances (typically, diminished seconds). This criterion solves essentially all uncertainties. It must be pointed out, nevertheless, that in some dramatic passages during recitatives, Monteverdi uses rather strong dissonances and unprepared, distant modulation (for instance, in “*Ma mentre io canto*”, fourth act), following what would become his *seconda prattica*. At such points, the doubt about typographic errors on accidentals may persist.

Finally, there are a few scattered unexpected accidentals (for instance, E#) which cannot be explained except as edition mistakes. These have been corrected.

Figured-bass indications –including both accidentals and figures– are rare, and seem to be restricted to the initial recitative of each act and to especially dramatic recitatives (such as the Messaggiera’s “*Ahi caso acerbo*”, in the second act). They follow the usual conventions and had been literally transcribed.

Note values, time signature, and other rhythmic issues

As illustrated in Figs. 2 and 3, note values are typographically similar to those used today. In the transcription, each note value of the 1609 *L’Orfeo*’s score has been replaced by its modern like. The most used are semibreves to semiquavers (whole to sixteenth notes), although breves (double whole notes) and longas are frequently found in closing bars and in the bass stave. Demisemiquavers (32nd notes) are only used in *Orfeo*’s accompanied recitatives, during the third act, where Monteverdi has explicitly written out ornamentations. Following early Baroque practice, some unusual note types, such as “filled” breves and semibreves, are found in ternary times. Taking into account the time signature, however, their interpretation for transcription to modern types is transparent.

The most frequent time signature in the 1609 score is indicated by the familiar C-like common-time symbol (Figs. 2 and 3) but, in contrast with the modern convention, it corresponds to four half notes by measure. Consequently, the most frequent time signature in the transcription is 4/2. Irregularities are not rare: two, three, or five half-note measures occur from time to time during recitatives, without any change of time signature. In the transcription, these changes have been explicitly indicated.

Overall, ternary times are much less frequent than binary times. Their time signatures do not follow the same systematics as in the modern usage. Specifically, 3/2 indicates three-semibreve measures, while 6/4 indicates six-crotchet measures. Following the above-described transcription criterion for note values, 3/2 has been changed to 3/1, while 6/4 has been left unchanged (as, for instance, in first act's "*Lasciate i monti*"). In two special cases of ternary time, further edition was necessary. The first case is the *duetto* "*In questo prato adorno*", in the second act. In the 1609 score, the time signature of the introductory *ritornello* is 3/2, while for the *duetto* itself it indicates common time. Each measure, however, contains six crotchets, and the prosody of the *duetto*'s text is consistent with a six-beat measure. Therefore, the transcription uses 6/4. The second special case is Orfeo's aria "*Vi ricorda o bosch'ombrosi*", also in the second act. Here the score indicates common time, and some "3" figures are occasionally inserted in the staves. This peculiar notation may be indicating triplets or compound time. In any case, each measure contains twelve quavers, and the text prosody is consistent with a twelve-beat time. The time signature in the transcription is, consequently, 12/8.

A peculiarity related to rhythm worth to be pointed out is the fact that identical bass notes within the same measure are often connected by square (Fig. 2) or curved ties. The meaning of these ties, and the possible difference between the two types, is not clear. In the transcription, tied identical notes within the same measure have been replaced, for clarity, by the resulting total note value. Usual practices in the bass realization make the difference irrelevant.

Another rhythmic peculiarity is illustrated in Fig. 3. The dot at the beginning of the second measure, indicates a crotchet tied to the ending minim of the preceding measure. Note that this is a generalization of the modern use of the dot, allowing the additional half-value note to occur in the beyond the measure bar. In the transcription, this has been cast using tied notes.

Text items

In *L'Orfeo* score, text items comprise titles of sections, instrumentation and scenic prescriptions, indications of intervening characters, and lyric lines. The transcription has preserved, as closely as possible, the relative position of each text item with respect to stave systems.

Texts are always printed in roman typography. Following the classical custom, "U" and "V", both capital and lower case, are often exchanged by each other. Also, the single "s" is usually written as "f", while "ss" appears as "fs". For clarity, all these typographical peculiarities have been changed to modern typography.

In contrast with the printed music –which, except for the sparse typographical errors referred to above, is of consistently good quality– the quality of text items is less homogeneous. Typos are rather common, the spelling of many words varies considerably throughout the score, and even the same word is written differently in parallel voices of certain choruses. The 1607 Striggio's libretto cannot be used as a systematic reference to correct typos, as it does not coincide with the text of the 1609

score. Besides the completely different fifth act's second part, many smaller differences occur at other places.

Divergences between the score's texts and modern Italian are to be ascribed to several factors. First, there are genuine archaisms, such as *vegno* instead of *vengo* (Fig. 2), *varij* instead of *vari*, *hà* and *hò* instead of *ha* and *ho*, *all'hora* instead of *allora*. Archaisms also include words whose spelling was not settled down by the seventeenth century, and appear in various forms in the score. Examples are *choro/coro*, *gravicembano/clavicembano*, and *spirito/spirto*. Some forms, such as *verno* instead of *inverno* and *ignudo* instead of *nudo*, are either archaic or poetic.

A second class of divergences with modern Italian can be attributed to dialectic corruptions. Quite likely, the typographers of the 1609 *L'Orfeo* score spoke, in everyday life, something between pure Italian and pure Venetian dialect –as any Venetian does today. It is only too natural that certain stereotyped peculiarities of the dialect were transferred to the score. A ubiquitous example is the disappearance of double consonants, which tend to be ignored in the dialect: *messagiera* instead of *messaggiera*, *de la* instead of *della*, *chitarone* instead of *chitarrone*.

Third, the score contains frequent plain typos, which are particularly apparent when the same text is repeated for each voice in a chorus or ensemble. Stress glyphs are often missing, single and double consonants, as well as capital fonts, are used inconsistently, and punctuation is not homogeneous. A few words are completely changed, so that the text makes no sense.

Because of their historical interest, archaisms and dialectic corruptions have been maintained in the transcription. Obvious plain typos, on the other hand, have been corrected to facilitate the reading.

In the score's lyric lines, with respect to the standard Italian usage, there is a clear abuse of apostrophes. For instance, “*de gl'affan'e del duol gl'orror'e l' òbre*” would normally read “*degli affani e del duol gli orrori e l'ombre*”. This shortening is useful to adapt the text to the compact succession of notes on the staves –in order, presumably, to save space. Abusive apostrophes have been preserved in the transcription.

The same example illustrates the use of the special character *õ* instead of *om* (in *õbre/ombre*). This shortening device is ubiquitous in the score, as in many other printed texts of those times. Instances in *L'Orfeo* are *armã* instead of *arman*, *mẽtre* instead of *mentre*, and *giũge* instead of *giunge* (Fig. 2). To avoid the use of special characters of difficult reading, they have been replaced by their regular form.

Finally, hyphens separating syllables are practically absent in the score's lyric lines. In the transcription, they have been added for clarity.

Particular comments

Due to various reasons, at some specific parts of the score, it was necessary to apply particular transcription criteria, not discussed above. They are summarized in the

following.

1. In the first occurrence of the chorus “*Lasciate i monti*”, during the first act, its second section (in three-beat time) has a double lyric line to accommodate, in addition to “*Qui miri il Sole...*”, a second strophe:

*Poi di bei fiori
Per voi s'honori
Di questi amanti il crine
C'hor dei martiri
De i lor desiri
Godon beati al fine.*

However, the score does not indicate where the repetition of the music begins or ends. Due to limitations in the music editor, it was not possible to include the second lyric line in the transcription.

2. In the chorus “*Ecco Orfeo*”, at the end of the first act, some repetitions of the text are indicated in a shortened form, presumably, to save space. For instance, the initial “*Ecco Orfeo, Ecco Orfeo*” is written as “*Ecco Orfeo ij*”. For clarity, this shortened forms have been eliminated in the transcription.

3. In Orfeo’s aria “*Vi ricorda o bosch'ombrosi*”, in the second act, the 1609 score does not have multiple lyric lines, as used in the transcription to save space. Successive strophes and *ritornellos* are written *in extenso*.

4. In the *sinfonia* of the third act, the heading text “*Questa Sinfo. si sonò...*” appears in the second occurrence only, just after the recitative “*Ben mi lusinga alquanto*”.

5. For the accompanied recitatives of the third act, Monteverdi provides two versions of Orfeo’s part, one of them considerably more complex than the other. The transcription gives the two versions in separate staves, exactly as in the 1609 score.

6. The ornamentations in the Orfeo’s accompanied recitatives of the third act are explicitly written out. They use very short notes, including long sequences of demisemi-quavers. This makes many measures extremely long; some of them, in fact, cannot be fitted in the transcription page width. To avoid this problem and to facilitate the reading, the time signature has been occasionally changed from 4/2 to 2/2.

7. The time signature of the recitative immediately following the chorus “*Pietade oggi et amore*”, in the fourth act, is the C-like symbol which indicates 4/2. However, all its measures correspond to 2/2. In the transcription, the time signature has been changed accordingly.

8. The two violin parts accompanying Orfeo’s aria “*Qual honor di te fia degno*”, in the fourth act, are written on separate staves. In the transcription, they have been collapsed to a single staff.

9. The second strophe of the final chorus “*Vanne Orfeo felice a pieno*”, “*Così vâ chi*

no s'arretra...”, is not written on the stave, but below the stave system, just preceding the Moresca. In the transcription, it has been included *in extenso*.

10. The time signature of the closing Moresca indicates common time (4/2), but the music is clearly in ternary time. The correct time signature is provided in the transcription.

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