Assignment I: L’Orfeo Worksheet

Answer each of the following questions in the space provided. Often, you’ll just report what you find on the website, in the book or sourcebook — that’s fine. You may need to consult some of the tutorials on the website so you can fully understand some of the questions. It will take a lot of time to do this worksheet, but realize that it’s important to really jump in and start learning some terminology and music. You are welcome (and encouraged!) to work with your classmates. The goal is to get you thinking about many aspects of the opera that you may not have considered; thus, it should prepare you for the midterm and your first paper. We will briefly discuss this in our second section meeting, but it will not be due until your third sectioning meeting.

1. What is the full, official (Italian) title of L’Orfeo? Who composed the music? Who wrote the libretto?

* L’Orfeo, Favola in Musica. Claudio Monteverdi was the composer. Alessandro Striggio was the librettist.

2. When and where was L’Orfeo first performed? In whose residence? For which learned academy?

Saturday, February 24, 1607, in the camere lunghe of Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga’s palace in Mantua, Italy, before the Accademia degli Invaghiti.

3. What is the main difference between the 1607 libretto, which was used at the first performance, and the libretto published in the score of 1609?

The 1607 libretto has a bacchanal ending with a band of angry women attacking Ofreo. The 1609 libretto ends with Apollo flying down and saving Orfeo from his own madness; then they fly up to heaven, and a moresca concludes the production.

4. Much of the information we have about the first performance of L’Orfeo comes from the 1607 correspondence between which two men?

Francesco Gonzaga and Ferdinando Gonzaga.

5. What is a sinfonia? How many different sfonias are there in L’Orfeo? Provide the page numbers of the original score (i.e., those at the top of the page in the sourcebook) for when each one appears and reappears. (So for Sinfonia 1, you’d give all the pages on which it appears, and you’d do the same for Sinfonia 2, and so on.) Hint: use the webpage!

A Sinfonia is an instrumental introduction to (or postlude to or even interlude in) a vocal work; it is typically unrelated thematically to the music that follows. There are five in L’Orfeo:

- sinfonia 1 – p. 26
- sinfonia 2 – p. 42
- sinfonia 3 – pp. 47, 68-9, 73
- sinfonia 4 – pp. 51, 67, 93
- sinfonia 5 – pp. 82-83, 87

6. What is a toccata? Where does it appear in L’Orfeo?

Typically a short keyboard piece with much improvisation and ornamentation. In L’Orfeo, it refers to the trumpet fanfare written in toccata style (mostly because of all the scales) that appears at the very opening; it likely heralded the entrance of the Duke.
7. What is a moresca? Where does it appear in L'Orfeo?

A type of dance in two parts (binary form) often in duple meter. One appears at the very end of the last act of L'Orfeo.

8. What is the difference between an opera and an oratorio? Which would L'Orfeo be considered? The Messiah?

Opera and oratorio both make use of instrumental and vocal music, the latter of which include recitatives, arias and choruses; also, both typically have a dramatic text. Opera, however, uses sets, scenery and costumes, while oratorio does not; moreover, oratorio is more commonly on biblical subjects while opera usually employs secular themes.

9. What is the difference between instrumental and vocal pieces? Is there any crossover between the two?

Instrumental pieces do not utilize the human voice, while vocal pieces do. There is crossover between them because vocal pieces usually use instruments to provide contrasting sections (e.g. ritornellos) and accompany the voice. (Occasionally, vocal pieces are a capella, meaning they have no instrumental accompaniment, like the chorus “Ahi! Caso acerbo” of Act II, p. 40 of the original score.)

10. What is a recitative? Give an example from L'Orfeo.

Recitative is a way of setting text to music; it employs a declamatory style that imitates the rhythms and cadences of speech (so there is usually no set meter, or at least no feeling of a set meter). Typically, only one person sings, and instruments accompany the vocal part and provide harmonic support for the melody. Example: “Ahi, caso acerbo” sung by Sylvia / Messagiera in Act II.

11. What is an aria? What does strophic mean? Give an example from L'Orfeo.

An aria is a song for a single vocalist. It is usually strophic, meaning that each verse of text is sung to the same tune). Repeated text, melodic ornamentation, ritornelli and regular meter are often common features. Example: “Vi ricorda, o boschi ombrosi” sung by Orfeo in Act II.

12. What is a duet? a trio? Give an example of each from L'Orfeo.

A duet is typically a vocal song (occasionally an instrumental piece) consisting of two melodic lines sung (or played) simultaneously and/or successively, while a trio would have three melodies. Duet Example: “Saliam” sung by Orfeo and Apollo in Act V. Trio Example: “Che poi che nembo” sung by the Ninfa and Pastori in Act I.

13. What is a chorus? Give an example (other than “Lasciate i monti”) from L'Orfeo.

A chorus is both a musical piece and the ensemble that sings it. The composition is characterized by having multiple vocal parts (e.g. soprano, alto, tenor and bass) singing simultaneously and/or successively. A chorus appears at the end of each act of L'Orfeo to comment on the action (as a Greek chorus did). Example: “Ahi! Caso acerbo!” sung by the chorus of Ninfe and Pastori (Nymphs and Shepherds) of Act II.
14. In the chorus “Lasciate i monti,” there are two sections demarcated by a change from duple to triple meter. The sections are also distinguished by their contrasting texture. What is texture? What are the two terms used to described the two different textures in “Lasciate i monti,” and what do they mean? There is a third commonly used term for texture; what is it, and what does it mean?

Texture is the way instruments and voices play or sing together. The two textures in “Lasciate i monti” are polyphonic and homophonic; the former is when melodies (similar and/or dissimilar) sound at different times, while the latter is when the melodies (typically dissimilar) sound at the same time with roughly the same note values (or rhythms). A third term for texture is monophony, which results from only one melody sounding (either in one vocal and/or instrumental part or the same melody in many parts).

15. What are the instruments Monteverdi prescribes in L’Orfeo? Provide their names in English and Italian (singular as well as plural when appropriate). The webpage and sourcebook can help you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITALIAN</th>
<th>ENGLISH</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 gravicembano/i [gravicembalo/i]</td>
<td>harpsichord/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 contrabasso/i de viola</td>
<td>double bass viol/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 viola/e da brazzo [braccio]</td>
<td>violin/s (not modern, but not a viol either)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 arpa doppia</td>
<td>harp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 violino/i piccolo alla francese</td>
<td>kit/s (dancing master's violin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 chitarrone/i</td>
<td>chitarrone (theorbo-like, a.k.a. lute/s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 organo/i di legno</td>
<td>small organ/s with wooden pipes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 basso/i da gamba</td>
<td>bass viol/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 trombone/i</td>
<td>trombone/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 regale</td>
<td>regal (small organ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 cornetto/i</td>
<td>cornett/s (not a cornet, a kind of trumpet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 flautino alla vigesima seconda</td>
<td>soprano recorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 clarino</td>
<td>long trumpet, played high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 tromba/e sordina</td>
<td>trumpet/s (muted, no valves)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drums were also likely included, since they typically were used when trumpets were used.

N.B. Plural forms terms are given after the slash (/); in Italian, they replace the letter before the slash.

16. Which instruments are associated with the infernal scenes of L’Orfeo?

Trombones and bass viols especially. Trombones, cornetts and regal are indicated at the opening of Act III.

17. With which instrument is Caronte associated?

The regal.

18. Name four of the “basso continuo” instruments. Do they always play together?

“Gravicembali, Organi, Chitaroni, Bassi da Gamba.” (= Harpsichords, organs, lutes, bass viols.) No, they do not always play together; usually (tho’ not always) it's a bass instrument plus a chordal instrument, such as a viol and a harpsichord.
19. Investigate the bass line of Orfeo's aria “Possente spirito” and describe what happens to it over the course of the six verses (and beyond). In addition to the opera itself (recording, score, libretto), the webpage has the information you need.

The bass line of “Possente spirito” repeats for most of the six strophes. The pattern of notes G D G F C G D B F G C A G D is repeated in each of the first four strophes with different rhythms; strophe four is interrupted and strophe five is different, while the pattern returns for strophe six.

20. Why does “Possente spirito” have two lines for Orfeo to sing? Does he sing both? What is the difference between them?

Monteverdi provided simple and ornamented melodies for the role of Orfeo. He does not (did not, could not) sing both at the same time. Rather, they were there as a choice. Perhaps at the first performance Rasi took the simple version and ornamented it in the style typical of the time, and so Monteverdi recorded that in the score. Another possibility is that Monteverdi provided the ornamented version as a possible realization. Still another way to interpret it would be that they are two different ways to express musical talent — dazzlingly technical (the ornamented version) or intimately passionate (the simple version) — and thus there for symbolic value as well as a practical choice.

The following are study questions focusing on Act II:

21. How would you describe the ritornelli and the solos and duets of the Pastori that follow (pp. 28-30)? A more difficult line of questioning: What is the meter here? Does it change in these passages? (Hint: Professor Kelly discussed this bit in lecture.)

The first two Pastore solos have the same tune to different words while there are three ritornelli surrounding them: one that precedes the first solo and then is repeated after it (hence between the two solos), and a different one that follows the second solo. The duets are structured similarly: the music is the same in each while the ritornelli differ. The previous ritornello that followed the second solo is repeated again between the duets, and then a new ritornello appears that precedes a third (but different) duet. After that new duet the most recent ritornello is played prior to a piece for the chorus. The series of events could be represented thus: Rit. A – Solo – Rit A – Solo – Rit B – Duet – Rit B – Duet – Rit C – Duet – Rit C – Chorus....

The passages alternate between triple and duple meters, but the difference is subtle because they both are simple meters (i.e. subdivided into two beats).

22. The chorus “Dunque fa degni Orfeo” follows the repetition of Ritornello is almost entirely homophonic. Which voice carries the melody? Is your ear drawn to any other voice part or instrument? How does this other voice or instrument function within the homophonic texture?

The top, or soprano, line carries the melody. (While it may be difficult to pick it out, note that it is the same as the Shepherd's tune that was just heard.) The bass, or bottom, line is also prominent, and it anchors the harmony and acts as a counter to the soprano line.

23. Is Orfeo's song (beginning p. 33) an example of stile recitativo or is it an aria? Why?

“Vi ricorda” is an example of an aria because it is set strophically (i.e. when each verse of text is sung to the same tune), has repeated text, has a mostly regular meter and includes some ornamentation.
24. Why is the entry of the Messaggiera (p. 36) so jarring? Consider the text and the dramatic impact of her message. How does Monteverdi create the dramatic shift through music?

For the first time, a character sings in the stile recitativo instead of aria or chorus. Her opening note is quite high, and the melody is more angular than what’s come before now. The sudden contrast of harpsichord and organ with citharone is noteworthy. The lilting triple meter of the Shepherd’s singing, which we just heard, is contrasted with the Messaggiera’s more speech-like recitativo.

25. At what point in the ensuing passages does Orfeo comprehend that Euridice is dead? How does Monteverdi convey the meaning of the words?

After Orfeo has stopped asking questions and Sylvia says “La tua diletta sposa è morta” to a descending line, Orfeo responds with a profoundly simple statement of “Ohime.” He sings only two notes (descending a semitone, the smallest regular musical interval), but he holds them each for a long time. It is at that moment that Orfeo comprehends the gravity of Sylvia’s message. The contrast between the two voices and the lack of accompaniment for Orfeo places his statement in relief.

26. How is the refrain “Ahi! Caso acerbo!” — first sung by the Messaggiera — used throughout the rest of the act? What is the function of the chorus once the message has been delivered?

It is later echoed by the Shepherds and chorus (which continues the lamentation and adds commentary).

27. What happens to the score excerpts from Act II on the website section for L’Orfeo entitled “Playthrough”? In particular, why do various parts of the score change color?

As the music plays, sections of the score change color (from shaded to clear, and from black to red). The music playing is represented by the music on the page, and the changing colors are meant to guide your eye to the notes representing the sound. Also, the Italian text is simultaneously translated into English.

28. That same section of the score (original pages 35 and 36) has a number of features that are informative. Answer the following based on those pages (and the webpage!):

a) On the first staff on page 35, there is a vertical line after 12 notes. What is this line called?

A “bar line.”

b) What does “Ritornello” mean literally in Italian? What does it refer to on page 35?

It means “little return.” It refers to the music that reappears between other contrasting vocal sections (verses) and helps to create a recognizable form.

c) What is a sharp? Where on page 35 does one appear (in which measure)?

A sharp is a symbol of music notation that indicates the raising of a note by one semitone (the smallest normal musical interval). One appears in the first measure at the top left of the page. (There are others.)

d) What is the significance of the dot occurring after a note?

It is a symbol of music notation that indicates a lengthening of a note (to which the dot is attached) by one half.
e) What is a clef? How many different ones appear on page 35?

A clef is a symbol of music notation that indicates where the note middle C is found on the staff. There are four different clefs on page 35. [There are two styles of clef (C and F). While there are five clefs on page 35, only four are different from each other: three of the four are the same figure, but they are found on different staff lines thus signifying different things; two of the five are the same figure and on the same line.]

f) What is a custos line?

A custos line appears at the very end of most staffs in order to anticipate the first note of that part on the next staff (which is elsewhere on the page or on the following page). It's old-fashioned and not used any more.

g) On the bottom, left-hand side of page 35, what does “Pastore” mean?

It refers to the character in the opera, the Shepherd.

h) Below the “e” of “Pastore” and on the staff next to a note, there is a small figure that resembles a “b”; what is it?

It is a flat — a symbol of music notation that indicates the lowering of a note by one semitone (the smallest normal musical interval).

i) Below the “a” of “Pastore” there are the numbers 3 and 2; what do they signify?

The time signature indicates the number of beats in a measure and the basic unit of one of those beats; thus, there are three half notes in each measure, resulting in triple meter. [The measures here are irregular, however, with some in 3/2 and some in 3/1, with the half and whole notes, respectively, getting the beat.]

j) Who is the first character to sing in the stile recitativo? (Hint: It happens on these pages.)

The Messaggiera (Sylvia).

k) What instruments play when the Messaggiera begins to sing?

“Un organo di legno & un Chit[arrone].” (An organ with wooden pipes and a lute.)

l) What does “common time” refer to? What symbol represents it?

It is represented by the symbol C, meaning the meter is duple.

m) What is a “tie”? Draw two examples (i.e., two different kinds) from p. 36.

A tie is a symbol of music notation links two notes of the same pitch. [See the ties under the words “Ahi!” and “Qual fuó.”]