



## From madrigals to opera

A music without its text is for Monteverdi *a body without a soul*. This is why the *harmonia* becomes the *servant of the oration* in an entirely new way compared to the 16th century, laying the foundations for Monteverdi's *seconda prattica*. Around 1620, the Renaissance madrigal suddenly fell into disuse, due to the economic and political crisis, which, as Lorenzo Bianconi points out, 'led to the collapse of the sixteenth-century image of a social harmony [...] that could be reproduced in the chant of four or five voices'. Monteverdi, in spite of this crisis, and taking advantage of the variety of polyphonic procedures allowed by the genre, composed madrigals for almost sixty years. During that time there was a gradual evolution towards the concertato style and monody accompanied by basso continuo, almost to the point of mini operas. The title of the Seventh Book of Madrigals, *Concerto*, is emblematic; it opens with the 'proemio' *Tempo la cetra*, a sort of invocation to the Muse on a text by Marino in which four stanzas for solo tenor on basso continuo are alternated with refrains and framed with opening and closing symphonies. *Con che soavità, labbra adorate* belongs to the same book. It is a monody accompanied by three instrumental *Chori*: the first consisting of two chitarroni, a harpsichord and a spinet; the second of two violins, an alto viola and a harpsichord; the third of a tenor viola, a *Basso da Braccio overo da Gamba*, a double bass and an organ.

In all the pieces presented this evening, one can appreciate Monteverdi's ability to fully adhere to the texts with all the means provided by the music of the time and his own elaboration. There is the famous 'excited style', which already appears in embryonic form in the dialogue with seven characters in *Presso un fiume tranquillo* (from the Sixth Book) in the invitations '*a le guerre*' of the two lovers Filena (Canto) and Eurillo (Tenor), accompanied by five other voices with narrative function. In *Zefiro torna* (from the *Scherzi musicali* of 1632), for two tenors on ostinato ciaccona bass, the density of madrigalism musically emphasises the text by Ottavio Rinuccini (a Florentine poet and one of Monteverdi's historic collaborators); for the last three verses, in stark contrast to the preceding ones, the ostinato is abandoned in favour of a freer progression that emphasises the meaning of the words. In *Or che 'l ciel e la terra* (from the Eighth Book), despite the small number of verses from Petrarch's sonnet, one can hear a great variety of affections musically punctuated by homorhythmic-chordal sections and by sections excited by imitative cues. They represent, on the one hand, the nocturnal stillness of a sleeping nature and, on the other, the characters' inner torment. As in almost all the *Madrigali guerrieri* in the Eighth Book (with the sole exception of the famous *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*), war is an allegory of spiritual and amorous suffering. This Book is dedicated to the Habsburg Emperor Ferdinand III, whose chapel master in Vienna was Antonio Bertali (1605-1669); his innovative and virtuosic *Sonate a 6* serve as instrumental interludes throughout the concert. Bertali is considered one of the most significant composers of the time, but most of his works have been lost. He was fascinated by musical theatre and the tendency towards dramatisation typical of the 17th century, so much so that he was considered one of the promoters of the court opera, which was to play an indispensable role in the Viennese theatrical system for a long time.

The last two pieces of this evening's programme belong to the '*opuscoli in genere rappresentativo*' of the Eighth Book, which, on Monteverdi's instructions, are to be preceded by madrigals '*senza gesto*' (i.e. those that will be heard in this evening's setting), in order to create a surprise effect. The *Lamento della Ninfa* is an *ode-canzonetta* by Rinuccini, considered experimental since the 17th century. The text is composed of flat and truncated septenaries plus a refrain, and the themes are treated with more drama than in the canzonetta. The protagonist is a nymph pining for love. What Monteverdi creates from this poetic text is totally innovative

compared to his contemporaries and probably in keeping with the poet's desire to experiment. Rather than entertaining music in strophic form with a soloist accompanied by basso continuo, we are witnessing something far more complex: in ternary form, the composition consists of two frame sections, in which a male trio is accompanied by a following bass (i.e. doubling the lower voice), and a contrasting central section, the actual Lamento, on a *passacaglia* ostinato bass, the latter formed by a descending tetrachord. Monteverdi's association of the Lamento with the *passacaglia* bass would later become a topos especially in the operatic genre. In the frame sections the writing is predominantly homorhythmic-chordal with some imitative cues, in binary metre and is sung '*al tempo de la mano*', as Monteverdi himself declares. The central Lamento is instead an accompanied monody in ternary metre '*a tempo del'affetto del animo*'. It should also be noted that while the refrain '*Miserella ah più no, tanto gel soffrir non può*' is missing in the marginal sections, in the central part it can only be heard three times in its entirety.

According to Mauro Calcagno's interpretation, at the apex of the path from madrigal to opera is the *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*. Monteverdi devoted almost his entire attention to the *Combattimento* in the 'Introduction' to the *Eighth Book* itself, claiming paternity of the excited style, characterised by repeated semiquavers associated with the theme of wrath, easily found in Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*. We can hear this style from the '*Principio della Guerra*' with Testo's words '*l'onta irrita lo sdegno alla vendetta*' (shame irritates indignation to vengeance) and from this point on it becomes an essential element. There are three characters: Testo, the narrator; Tancredi, a Christian paladin; Clorinda, a Muslim warrior. Through the expedients of musical descriptivism that anticipate the narration, one can perceive, even before Testo speaks of it, Clorinda's wandering in the continuous musical ups and downs, the *Motto del cavallo* in the written accelerando and the '*late and slow steps*' in the progression of the rhythmic figuration. From this point of view, what happens at the end of the first clash is emblematic: just as the two warriors, by now exhausted, begin to fight in an unconventional manner, striking each other with hips, helmets and shields, so the strings '*strappano le corde con duoi diti*', probably producing one of the first examples of pizzicato in the history of western music. In this long and complex work, the characters are not static, but evolve in the course of the composition. Testo is entrusted with two solos: in the first, where he addresses *La Notte*, he is heard for the first time making *gorghe* and *trilli* in homage to the poet Tasso; starting from the second solo, a moving prophecy, we witness instead a gradual transformation of Testo who, at first a detached narrator, empathises more and more with the other characters. Testo empathises to such an extent that he becomes a vessel for Tancredi's emotions: it is he who remains '*without voice or motion*' at the moment of the revelation of Clorinda's identity, now struck dead, taking the audience's breath away hearing the cry of '*Ahi vista, ahi conoscenza!*'. Quoting Testo, the '*opre memorande*' of the two warriors are '*degne d'un chiaro Sol, degne d'un pieno teatro*'. According to Mauro Calcagno, Monteverdi, thanks to his skill as a narrator, takes this statement literally and triggers a process of contamination between genres. Through small but significant textual changes, the composer stages not a mini opera, but rather the entire process of transformation from madrigal to opera, taking from Testo the last words ('*S'apre il ciel, io vado in pace*') and entrusting them to Clorinda who, paradoxically and symbolically, dies at the very moment she is born as an opera character.

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