



Claudio Monteverdi

1567-1643

Why is Claudio Monteverdi considered to be a revolutionary in the field of music?

Because both modern Opera and the Orchestra itself owe their beginnings and structure in the classical age to him.

In other words, Monteverdi invented both the Opera and the Orchestra as we know them!

The entire purpose of the Renaissance in Italy was to restore the glory of Greek and Roman classical literature, art and music to their previous grandeur. The earliest Greek plays, it was believed by those who studied, not only those plays but the commentaries on them written by Greek philosophers and historians, were a combination of drama (especially Tragedy; the Romans preferred Comedy) poetry, dance, rhythm, melody and song.

Florence was the cauldron for the emergence of most of the innovations and creations we refer to as being constructed during the “Renaissance” (especially elaborate pageants to celebrate special events), and it was there the “Camerata” (Salon) of amateur

musicians, poets and dramatists was established. The sole mission of the Camerata was to determine the nature of and to re-create, as closely as possible, some of those ancient performances. The very first “opera” (from the Latin: opus, opera) was produced by a tenor, Jacopo Peri in 1598, *Dafne*, (half spoken, half sung) for a private audience. Little of the original survives today; nevertheless, it was considered so stilted and “boring” by those who witnessed it that the form might not have survived were it not for the later performance of Peri’s *Euridice* to help celebrate the wedding of Maria dei Medici to Henry IV of France in 1600. The Duke of Mantua and his court composer, Claudio Monteverdi, were in the audience for that performance.

A native of Cremona, where the first modern violins were constructed by Andrea Amati and his family (Niccolo`, etc) and their students, especially Stradivarius and Guarneri, Monteverdi had originally concentrated on composing Madrigals for Church functions as well as for secular entertainment, polyphonic at first, and eventually, harmonic, complete with dissonances of various sorts.

After hearing *Euridice* and grasping the principles behind it, Monteverdi decided to concentrate on telling stories by moderating the use of the spoken “recitative” and concentrating principally on dramatic action and music, using the new harmonics he had adapted for his Madrigals. Monteverdi appreciated Renaissance polyphony as the voice supporting the music (*prima prattica*), but for dramatic effect, he preferred the Baroque form of harmony where the music supported the voice (*seconda prattica*), a distinction he attributed to Plato.

It was this innovation, produced in his work *La Favola d'Orfeo* (“The Legend of Orpheus”: same theme as *Euridice* but totally different in presentation) in 1607, that marks the beginning of what we recognize today as *il dramma per musica* or “Opera”. The members of the Florentine Camerata travelled to Mantua for this performance and what they heard amazed them: thirty-eight instruments (the first full “orchestra” as we know it), a chorus and ballet, and eleven principal singers, with female voices provided by *castrati*. There were no arias or solo performances in this piece, but the score and libretto were published and it remains the oldest opera still being performed today.

Shortly afterwards, he returned to Cremona where his wife died and left him in a deep depression. When Mantua asked him to return to produce another opera to celebrate the wedding of Francesco Gonzaga to Margaret of Savoy, he reluctantly did so. It was at that time he composed *Arianna* (Ariadne) with the first and most compelling aria, the “Lament”.

Eventually Monteverdi left Mantua (where many of his unpublished manuscripts were lost) and became the *maestro di capella* at St. Mark’s Basilica in Venice in 1613, possibly the most important such position in Italy. There he worked for over thirty years, producing vast quantities of liturgical and secular music including ballets and cantatas as well as Madrigals once again, and becoming a priest.

The increasing prosperity of the city of Venice and the popularity of its Carnival season saw an increase in musical innovations, so much so that Monteverdi returned to the production of musical dramas, including two while in his seventies. His last work, *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppea, 1642) “turned the nascent world of opera upside down and set a standard for posterity” as the

“first great operatic masterpiece.” (Richard Summerset-Ward, The Story of Opera, Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998/2006, p. 22). Venice reacted by opening the first opera house in the world at Teatro San Cassiano, (reputedly larger than even the Metropolitan Opera House in New York today), and later the Teatro San Moise`, much praised for its acoustics.

Monteverdi’s student and collaborator, Francesco Cavalli, continued the tradition for the next thirty years, eventually causing the operatic form, and the orchestra it fostered, to be exported all over Europe.