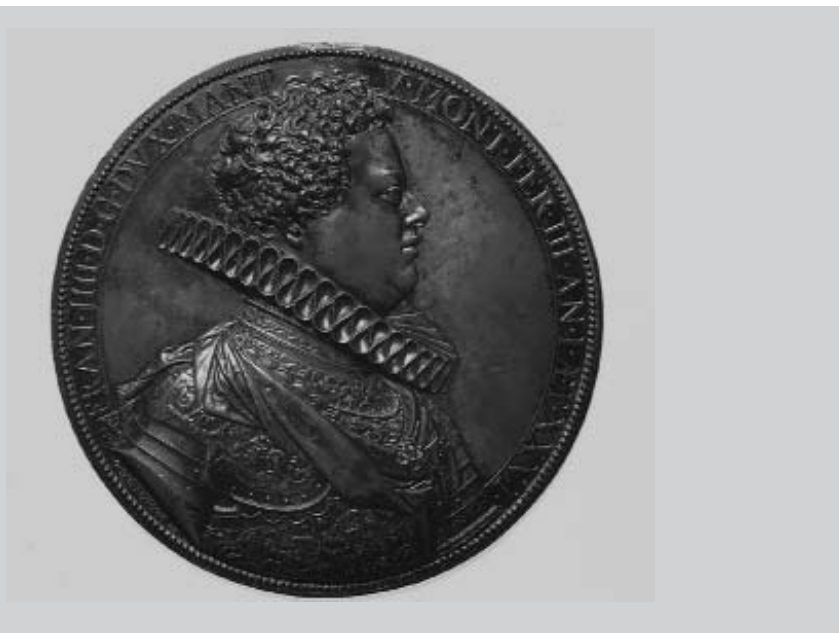


Orfeo: Gritty Pastoral



Monteverdi's great pastoral opera **Orfeo** was first performed in a relatively small room in the Gonzaga palace in Mantova in 1607. The Gonzagas were notable patrons of the arts – among others, Pisanello, Donatello, Mantegna, Leon Alberti and Giulio Romano had been employees of the family, and Francesco IV, for whom **Orfeo** was written, was a particular patron of Rubens – and exceptionally successful warriors. At the time he composed **Orfeo**, Monteverdi was in the service of Francesco's father Duke Vincenzo and his Medici wife. Although Francesco dispensed with Monteverdi's services in some 'economising' (I wonder if he had a consultant...) when he came to power, the 1607 carnival performance of **Orfeo** was a sign of his taste and refinement, used in his competition for cultural superiority with his

brother – and successor – Ferdinando. It is important when visualising the august young audience to recognise there the marriage of culture and martial power, of wealth and conquest, of security and politics; the Gonzagas were bound closely to the Este, Medici and Habsburg families, and Francesco's younger sister was recently married to the Holy Roman Emperor, Ferdinand II, whose reign coincided with the terrible Thirty Years' War.

The performance of **Orfeo** was, then, an entertainment for the noble class, attended by invitation, celebrating the court's patronage of elite artists and scholars (poets and philosophers) and craftsmen (musicians, painters, architects). Within 50 years the opera became a preferred entertainment of the middle

class as well, and it thrived as a business in Venice while it enjoyed princely patronage elsewhere. This 'mercenary' opera - exemplified in **Erismena**, produced by ETO in this same season - became the opera that we know, responding to commercial pressure rather than princely whim (or in addition to it, as Handel found in London in the 1720's – see **Tolomeo!**), while **Orfeo's** successors may be the great French court operas of the 17th century.

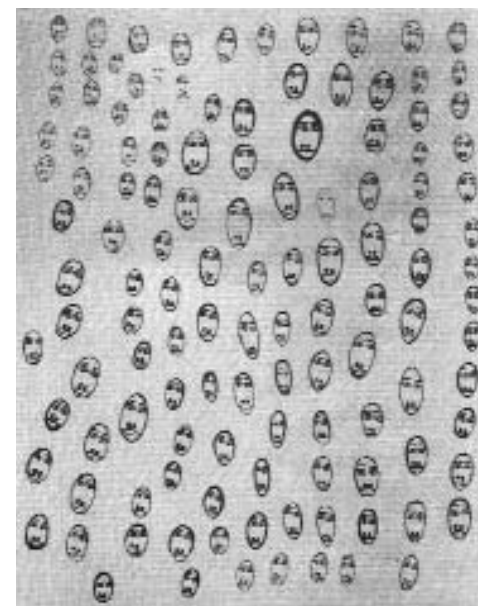
The first published version of **Orfeo** in 1610 ends with Apollo raising his miserable son to heaven, but there was another ending for which no music by Monteverdi has been found (though it has since been set by other composers). In this other ending a group of angry women – *bacchantes* – tear **Orfeo** apart, and send his still singing, dismembered head floating down a river. The less picturesque, surviving ending has been criticised as a bland, Christianised (more neoplatonised) version of the myth – but I wanted to see a way of producing it so that this was the necessary ending of the opera. I wanted to address the grim survivor in the Gonzaga prince as well as the aesthete.

At the same time I wanted to perform it with a scant nine singers, allocating the smaller dramatic roles and the large chorus commentary roles to eight of them. This was less an expedient than a way to find dramatic urgency at the same time as the truth of the myth, and the essential message of renaissance pastoral – that social and personal survival can be achieved in the tension between hot (but sterile) passion and

cold (but nurturing) logic, between rhapsody and reason, imagination and necessity.

The work of artist Kathy Prendergast set me out on this course. Our mutual interest in shamanism was a guide of sorts. Like **Orfeo**, the shaman sings/ dances for his/ her tribe, travels to the underworld and flies to the sky, has a particular understanding of the natural world and an affinity with fire, and cures the ill and imbalances of the tribe through sacrifice and isolation. This gave me a sense of the possibility of the pastoral now, in which the pastoral ideal is defined by brutal necessity – and the *moresca* (wild dance) which is the final movement of Monteverdi's masterpiece makes sense.

James Conway
General Director



Images: left – The National Gallery of Scotland, Guillaume DuPre, Francesco IV Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua (1585-1612), Catalogue Number: NG2504; right – A copy of a Baker Lake Eskimo drawing of a community entranced by the shaman's drum. Original drawing by Luke Anguhadluq, copy John Halifax (Shaman, the wounded healer)