

Orpheus: a Figure of the Marvelous in Baroque Opera ¹

Orfeu, Figura do Maravilhoso na Ópera Barroca

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Abstract: Orpheus's character is present in major lyrical works from the beginning and the end of the Baroque period (Peri, Caccini, Monteverdi, Gluck). He also appears in the operas (Rossi, Charpentier, Louis de Lully), ballets (Jean-Baptiste Lully) or cantatas (Rameau) in which the various modalities of marvelous Baroque musical are expressed through this polymorphic myth. Orpheus can also be seen as a metaphor for the synthesis of the arts, which is proper to opera.

Keywords: Baroque cantata; the marvelous in Baroque music; Baroque music; Orpheus in opera.

Resumo: O personagem de Orfeu está presente em importantes obras líricas do início e do final do período barroco (Peri, Caccini, Monteverdi, Gluck). Ele aparece também em óperas (Rossi, Charpentier, L. de Lully), balés (J. B. Lully) ou cantatas (Rameau), nas quais as diversas modalidades do maravilhoso musical barroco se expressam por meio deste mito polimorfo. Orfeu pode também ser visto como uma metáfora da síntese das artes, própria da ópera.

Palavras-chave: cantata barroca; o maravilhoso na música barroca; música barroca; Orfeu na ópera.

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1 – Introduction ²

Amidst all the heroes and heroines, mythical or historical, summoned to the stage of lyric theaters, Orpheus is probably the most emblematic character from the marvelous³ musical. His

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² This text was conceived as a spoken-word presentation of Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *La Descente d'Orphée aux Enfers*, in October 27th 2009 at the Sabará theater, in Minas Gerais, during the II Semana de Música Antiga da UFMG [2nd Week of Ancient Music] conference and was published on the *Per Musi* journal in 2011 under the title "Orphée, figure du merveilleux dans l'opéra Baroque" (n.24, p.30-34).

³ Translator's Note: According to James Stark (*Bel Canto: a history of vocal pedagogy*, 1999, p. 160), "contemporary accounts of Caccini and other singers of the early Baroque period describe an aesthetic performance known as *meraviglia* (the marvelous), that was characterized by wonder, surprise, the unexpected, the extraordinary, and the supernatural. This is a central theme in Celletti's *History of Bel Canto* (1991). The term *meraviglia* was used referring to the poetic concepts and artifices of Giambattista Marino [...] it was also used to describe the marvelous effect (*effetti meravigliosi*) of virtuoso singers. For example, Victoria Archilei, a singer in Caccini's circle, was praised by Alessandro Guidotti in 1590 for marvelously moving her audience to tears (*mosse meravigliosamente a lacrime*) [...]. She was also admired by Caterina Guidiccioni, who praised Archilei's ability to stupefy everyone (*fa stupir tutti*) [...]. In 1608 Marco da Gagliano lauded both Antonio Brandi for 'the grace of his marvelous singing' (*la grazia del cantare meravigliosa*), and Caterina Martinelli, who 'filled with delight and wonder everyone at the theatre' (*ch'empie di diletto e di meraviglia tutto il teatro*) [...]. In 1634 Pietro de Bardi (the son of Giovanni) wrote a letter to G.B. Doni in which he

magical song enables him to transgress the law of mortals, to move from one world to another, and to soften up infernal divinities. And it is probably not a coincidence that the myth of Orpheus is present both at the time of the birth of opera, in Italy at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and when Gluck produced a radical transformation between the aesthetics of passions and that of the feeling, in the middle of the eighteenth century. From both of the Florentine *Euridice* and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* to Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, Orpheus's character is a good guide to contemplate and understand the marvels of the Baroque musical.

2 – The power of a polymorphic myth

Orpheus legend was known by poets and musicians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through two great texts: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Virgil's *Georgics*. The same essential elements can be found on both versions: the wedding of Orpheus and Eurydice interrupted by the death of the young woman, bitten by a serpent; Orpheus's descent into the Underworld, where the power of his song moves Proserpina and Pluto; the condition imposed upon him to bring Eurydice back to the world of the living (not to look at her during his way back); the harsh return, Orpheus's impatience that looks back and, once again, loses his beloved wife; the musician's desperation who then renounces the conviviality with the women; his death, torn apart by the Bacchantes who take revenge on his indifference. Virgil, however, introduces a new element. According to him, Eurydice was bitten by the serpent when she was fleeing from Aristaeus. On the other hand, Ovid, unlike Virgil, concludes with the final meeting of the lovers in the kingdom of the dead. And the two accounts diverge slightly on other aspects.

As it is presented in the Latin sources, Orpheus's legend has clear and dark areas; and the character is not free from contradictions. Orpheus can be seen as a courageous hero who faces the worst dangers, but also as a man who lacks control over his passions and who loses all the benefit of his heroism due to his excessive impatience. Orpheus can equally be seen as the model for a faithful husband, who puts his life in risk to save the woman he loves, renouncing all other loves. He is also presented by Ovid as the inventor of male homosexuality. He is the one whose magic voice moves gods, men and shadows, charms animals, plants and rocks, blurring the boundaries between animate and inanimate, between life and death. He is finally shown as a propagator of the mysteries of Bacchus, although being protected by Apollo.

In the Baroque era, therefore, it was a matter of choosing what was appropriate from this polymorphic myth, which could be adjusted to Christian morality and to a satisfactory outcome. Transforming this myth into a coherent dramatic structure implied making choices and distortions. Hence, the episode of the bacchantes was rarely performed on stage. Sometimes, it was preferable to give up Eurydice's second death (thus, cleansing Orpheus of any fault) or, more often, make a god intervene – Apollo, Jupiter or Love – to save the unfortunate lover, who was tempted by suicide, and propose to him a sublimation of his pain, or even to elevate him to the rank of constellation. However, such corrections made to the accounts of Ovid and Virgil did

described the singing he had heard in his father's Camerata. He recalled that the Young Caccini sang 'to the wonder of his listeners' (*con meraviglia di chi lo sentiva*), and that the singing of Jacopo Peri left him 'speechless with wonder' (*stupido per la meraviglia*) [...] Similar remarks are found in numerous other works of this period."

not prevent the audience, who were perfectly acquainted with ancient sources, from overlaying the different versions in their minds in a game of double meanings to which they were accustomed and which escapes us often.

Regardless, Orpheus's adventures – with the opposition of the pastoral world of the living and the underworld of the dead, the profusion of divine or legendary personages, and the magic voice of the singer of Thrace – accumulate sufficient marvelous elements to create magnificent performances.

3 – Musical declinations of the myth

Orpheus's character is, therefore, present at the very moment when opera is invented in Florence and Mantua. In fact, the first preserved operas tell the story of the famous singer: both *Euridice* by Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini, from 1600 in Florence, were composed based on the same poem of Ottavio Rinuccini; Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, from 1607 in Mantua, was based on a poem by Alessandro Striggio. If one keeps track of the previous performances, such as *Dafne* by Rinuccini and Peri in 1598, based on another episode of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (whose the music is lost), the fate of Orpheus and Eurydice remains the main subject of the first operas, resulting from researches, debates and erudite dreams of humanists who thought to be reviving the ancient tragedy, but which in reality invented a new aesthetic continent: the Baroque musical.

These operas were considered Baroque mainly due to the use of recitation, musical declamation accompanied by continuous bass. It is necessary to measure the innovative force of this solo singing in the context of the polyphonic tradition, in which one's feelings were expressed by four or five sung parts. Hence, the singer-actor presents himself as an isolated individual, and, through the force of theatrical illusion, the passions that he assumes seem to be his own, just like those of the public, who sympathize with his misfortunes. It is understandable that the character of Orpheus, a fabulous singer who also presents himself armed with his lyre before the gates of the Underworld to enter it thanks to the power of his art, was the emblematic figure of this musical mutation.

Both of the Florentine *Euridice* and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* are also court performances, presented before a restricted and cultured audience. These works are impregnated with neo-Platonic philosophy and music plays a distinguished role: that of a harmony as terrestrial as divine, which Orpheus also symbolizes. The prologue of Rinuccini's *Euridice* presents the character of the Tragedy, but that of Striggio and Monteverdi's highlights the allegory of Music, which governs souls and heaven. In this aspect, too, these operas are typically Baroque, due to their desire to incarnate a philosophical thought, to stage it, to transform it into images, gestures and sounds, to better persuade the audience.

Rinuccini's *Euridice*, set to music by Peri and Caccini, develops in a simple structure in three acts. The first act presents, in a pastoral context, the joy of the Orpheus's nuptials, suddenly disturbed by the account of the Eurydice's death; the second act presents Orpheus affecting the infernal gods; the third act retrieves the initial framework for a triumphal return of the two lovers. In its simplicity, the plot favors the poetic effusions of the characters and the chorus (very present) in a style that is more lyrical than dramatic.

Striggio and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is more ample than the Florentine operas. Their work develops on five acts preceded by a prologue, organized according to a symmetrical structure and a taste for the poetic and sonorous architecture that is found even in the detail of the musical forms. The first act shows the joy of Orpheus and Eurydice's nuptials in a pastoral framework. The second act is devoted to the death of the young woman, in a recitative format, and the determination of Orpheus to go and look for his wife in the kingdom of the dead. The third is the center of the opera, the confrontation between Orpheus and Charon, and the display of virtuosity and expressiveness of the singer in his "*Possente spirto*" invocation. The fourth act is symmetrical to the second: Orpheus disobeys, looks back and loses Eurydice again. The last act is that of a sublimation: a first version in which the musician was killed by the Bacchantes (whose music is lost), is followed by a second in which Apollo intervenes to stop the suicide of the weeping lover and invite him to overcome his grief, and even his earthly love, to rise with him to the spiritual world and to ascend to true and pure love.

After the three initial operas, the genre would quickly spread throughout all Italy. Theaters especially devoted to operas were built. In Venice, the opera opens itself to a larger audience; in Rome, operas are staged with pomp by ecclesiastical dignitaries who do not shy away from writing librettos. The comic, then, mixes itself with mythological references, secondary characters multiply, plots are of an extreme originality and, the episodes that are commonly known to their audience, are enacted with great resourcefulness. The marvelous is at the same time summoned and set at a distance, with a rare subtlety. The most contrasting passions rapidly succeed one another: one continuously laughs, weeps, and is surprised.

In this regard, it is necessary to mention *Orfeo* of Luigi Rossi, whose libretto was written by Francesco Buti, an opera in the purest Roman tradition, possibly created in Paris in 1647 at the request of Minister Mazarin. The simple history of Orpheus is enriched through numerous episodes. The first two acts, in an opera which is composed of three acts, are thus devoted to the attempts of Aristaeus to prevent the wedding of Eurydice with Orpheus. One sees, for example, Venus disguising herself as an old woman trying to convince the young bride to be unfaithful. On the other hand, Orpheus's lament is a truly poignant episode. The multiplication of characters, gods, allegories and comic figures creates a profusion effect which is also one of the particular features of the Baroque.

In France, the Orpheus's character appears occasionally in a court ballet in which Louis XIV dances, the *Ballet des Muses*. Orpheus sings a "lament" which shows the capacity of the Florentine Jean-Baptiste Lully, future creator of the French opera, to write in Italian pathetic style.

Jean-Baptiste Lully, however, will not choose the subject of Orpheus for his musical tragedies, generally preferring warrior heroes; thus, offering the Sun-King the heroic and gallant image he seeks to promote. It is perhaps not by chance that the theme appears in the public French opera at a time of crisis, shortly after Jean-Baptiste Lully's death; a moment when Louis XIV lost his interest in the shows and the lyrical genre must find other reasons to continue existing. It was only in 1690 that Louis de Lully, one of the young sons of the famous Superintendent of Louis XIV, composed an *Orphée* (based on a libretto by Michel du Boullay) which, even if it was

not met with great success, was very representative of the operas of that time, with its tragic finale – Orpheus being killed by Bacchantes.

A few years earlier, between 1686 and 1687, Marc-Antoine Charpentier dealt with the subject, first in a brief cantata (*Orphée descendant aux Enfers*, H 471), then in a small opera, *La descente d'Orphée aux Enfers* [*The descent of Orpheus to the Underworld*] (H 488), both were composed based on poems that remained anonymous. *La descente d'Orphée aux Enfers* was envisioned for private performances at Madame de Guise. If Charpentier takes up specific Jean-Baptiste Lully's French opera features, particularly the presence of ballets, he uses it with skill and freedom in this play: the instrumentation is light but varied (note the use of violas to represent the Orpheus's Lyre) and Charpentier brilliantly controls the fusion of French and Italian styles. Far from the great apparatus of public Parisian opera, the Royal Academy of Music, this small-scale opera expresses the vitality of musical creation outside the major official centers. The two acts of *La descente d'Orphée aux Enfers* represent the death of Eurydice, her life cut short in the climax of her happiness, then Orpheus's journey to the Underworld and his magnificent prayer to Pluto. The work ends before the return journey, which Orpheus approaches with fear, the condition imposed to him is very hard for a lover. It is easy to imagine that a third act might have been conceived – and was later lost –, completing the story.

Another marvelous Baroque is summoned in this delicate miniature: less impressive than the other works which we mentioned until now, orienting itself towards the more lightened and more intimate style which will prevail in the eighteenth century, but equally moving. Thus, in the Underworld, the song of Orpheus does not only move the local deities, it also eases the pains of the damned, even if momentarily, like Tantalus or Ixion, who will bid him farewell with nostalgia when he returns to the world of the living. Finally, Orpheus's plea before the god of the Underworld is constructed according to a wise rhetoric, starting from the silence of the voice – which is lacking to the anguished lover – in order to gradually arrive at a triumphant argument availing himself of Proserpine's intercession to move the dark Pluto.

This style precedes the success of the myth of Orpheus in the French cantata from the first decades of the eighteenth century as certain works – for a solo voice and some instruments – by Nicolas Bernier, Louis-Nicolas Clérambault, Jean-Philippe Rameau and other less known composers. In these short and not staged chamber plays, it is the recitative who assumes the narration, sets the stage, and recalls the situation to an audience who perfectly knows the sources. The action crystallizes in three or four airs in which the characters express themselves in direct style. Rameau's cantata, *Orphée*, from 1721, plays on the most absolute contrasts. The episode retained by the anonymous poet is precisely the one missing from Charpentier's little opera: encouraged by a "merry air" showing a group of Loves singing his victory, Orpheus leaves Hell followed by Eurydice. But one quickly sinks into the drama: in a powerful accompanying recitative, Orpheus becomes troubled, turns around, and sees Eurydice dying. His appeal to Love is of no avail, the only option left to him is to die. But while we are deeply moved by the evocative power of the Rameaunean harmony, the final air proposes, with detachment, a libertine morality, which, in an ambiguous way, manipulates the mastery of time that characterizes the perfect lovers. Once again, the marvelous (here evoked rather than represented) is both necessary and put at a distance. It is proper of Baroque aesthetics to create the illusion, then to raise the veil on the machinery that made it possible, to drive the passions and to oblige the spectator or the listener to analyze the phenomenon in themselves. There is a

very particular intellectual enjoyment, a teaching that takes the mask of entertainment and elegantly covers its didactic scope with ornaments which are, apparently, of pure fantasy. Please, move and instruct – the displayed goals of rhetoric – are constantly refined in Baroque musical performances, in the most ostentatious opera as well as in the little imaginary theater represented by the cantata.

It is this playful and deep distancing that will be radically challenged by Christoph Willibald Gluck and his librettist Ranieri Calzabigi reform. Paradoxically, Gluck and Calzabigi seem to return to certain traits of an ancient Baroque tradition, in their *azione teatrale* created at the court of Vienna in 1762, *Orfeo ed Euridice*. In order to regenerate the opera *seria*, triumphant in its time and which replaced the mythological subjects with historical episodes as well as dismissed the chorus and ballet for the benefit of solo singers, Gluck seems to refer to the first operas of the seventeenth century and to the archaisms that French opera of his time could contain. But this return to the origin of opera and its myths is not a restoration: Gluck (and other reformers like Jommelli and Traetta) does not situate himself in the profusion, in the ornamental, in the rhetoric and in the distancing. For him, the myth is, before all, simplicity and nudity. He stretches the episodes in which the choir and the ballet surround the soloist to create long temporal ranges, static ones, but of a very powerful scenic effect, according to the overall aesthetics that was beginning to prevail in the theater. As an example there is the confrontation between Orpheus and the specters which guard the gates of the Underworld, in which the suave and tenderizing melodies of the singer oppose the brutal refusals of the chorus. This episode fills half of the second act. Not satisfied with summarizing this conflict, Gluck, with a very neo-classical concern, purifies the melodic lines of the soloists while treating the choral and orchestral groups with simplicity and efficiency. He does not seek to cause the enchantment of the Baroque marvelous, but the empathy with a character through which inner theatricality is evoked: it is Love that comes to advise Orpheus, the only messenger of a remote Olympus, is it a god or merely an allegory? Are the guardians of the gates of the Underworld specters or a metaphor of the obscure movements of the soul? The theater of the passions becomes that of feeling, an open way towards the evolution of opera in the nineteenth century, always seeking more realism and orienting itself towards psychological analysis.

4- Orpheus, metaphor for the marvelous lyric

If it were necessary to synthesize the uses of the marvelous in these various Orpheus, we might begin by the scenic spaces opened up through the myth. The Baroque operas that summon the gods often overlap three spaces: mortals move around the stage and enter it through the drapes, in a horizontal movement; the gods occupy the space above the stage, since they descend from the ceiling and go back there on their flying machines in a vertical or, sometimes, oblique movement; the infernal divinities occupy an imaginary underground and emerge from the lower parts of the theater through trap doors. All the space, onstage and offstage, is saturated with characters, but following a meticulous hierarchy.

The story of Orpheus has the advantage of justifying an entire act in the Underworld. The rupture of spaces (human world and underground world) is then projected in time, in the succession of the acts, in the journey of Orpheus from one world to another. In Monteverdi and Rossi's *Orfeo*, the ending also summons the space of the gods, whether Apollo elevates Orpheus

(in every sense of the word), whether the singer and his lyre are transformed into a constellation.

The natural world (that of the mortals) could then be opposed to the supernatural world (that of the dead), but actually the pastoral climate in which humans live is not exempt from marvels either. Virgil's insertion of the episode of Orpheus in his *Georgics* prompts the Baroque authors to describe at length the happiness of Orpheus and Eurydice in a rural setting. But without realism: the nymphs, and sometimes even the satyrs, mingle with the shepherds, for the pastoral, at this time, represents a kind of Golden Age, a lost Arcadia where love is durable and free of dark clouds. Therefore, this pastoral atmosphere must be understood as a metaphor for the happy and sincere love of Orpheus and Eurydice, broken by death. The question will be whether the ending brings the lovers back to the idyllic place of their loves (Gluck), or whether the trials of the journey to the Underworld directs Orpheus towards another destiny, either tragic (Louis de Lully) or glorious (Monteverdi).

Another approach to the marvelous, more specifically the musical, would be to examine Orpheus's singing. As vector for Orpheus's art, his voice is marvelous in itself, his voice performs prodigies. The difficulty, for composers, is to make it heard as a singing, in a fully sung show. It is possible to write a very exceptional air to it, in its dimensions, style and ornamentation, like Monteverdi's "*Possente spirto*", which contrasts with what precedes and what follows. It is also useful to call upon a renowned interpreter, such as the famous *castrato* Atto Melani in Rossi's *Orfeo*. For the legendary Orpheus is at once a poet, a musician, and a singer. Like the ancient poets, he improvises verse and music by accompanying himself on the lyre. On the stage of a Baroque opera, this unified function is fragmented: it is simultaneously assumed by the poet who conceives the libretto, by the composer who invents the music, by the performer who incarnates the character and even by the instrumentalists who, like the two violas of Charpentier's *La Descente d'Orphée aux Enfers*, have the task of evoking the accompaniment of the lyre. It is a group of creators who are in reality "Orpheus" (a fragmented Orpheus, as if dismembered by the Bacchantes), while the performer on stage must give the illusion of a unified creation, the spontaneous improvisation of a magic singing (an Orpheus reunified and deified under the aegis of Apollo). This division of tasks and this fictional unity is a fine metaphor for the opera. When tracing the history of genre, when recounting the adventures and incidents of the conception of a lyrical work, or when analyzing its scores, we too often oppose the parts of the librettist and the composer, and even that of the first interpreter. We too often separate words from the sounds to look for how the music "illustrates" the words. And in front of the score, one is caught in the trap of Western notation: one line for the notes, one line for the words, and one or more lines for the instruments. But the experience of the spectacle is not that: in performance, the word is music, the voice is married to the instrument, and the song is incarnated and underlined by the gesture. Through theatrical illusion, it is the magic of Orpheus that is at work and unifies a collective spectacle, amalgamating the arts.

It is therefore a body – that of the interpreter, that of the modern Orpheus – which assumes the collective task. This Baroque invention of the opera singer (male or female) is fundamental and it guides much of the music that followed, for even the instrument soon will have to transform itself into a singer and mimic the singing to evoke emotions. And it is no coincidence that the evolution of Baroque opera tends towards an ever growing vocal virtuosity. We have all too often given credit to Gluck and Calzabigi's remarks in their famous preface to *Alceste*, in which

the Baroque *dramma per musica* is criticized in order to promote a new aesthetic. And Baroque opera has been seen as excessively ornamented, artificial, and subjected to the tyranny of the singers. Today, the performance of Baroque works and the discovery of their theatrical effectiveness show us the opposite. The amazement which Orpheus's singing must cause is not incompatible with the theater – quite the opposite – as well as with the virtuosity or with the emotion. However, too often it was forgot, in the search for realism in the opera of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, that lyrical singing is in itself marvelous, magical, and that it opens, such as Orpheus, passages between the worlds.

Reference

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