



# Baroque Beauty: Musical Aesthetic Features of Monteverdi's Orfeo

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**Abstract.** Monteverdi's first opera, *Orfeo*, was completed in 1607 and is one of the most representative. Although it was completed after the release of Peri and Caccini's *Eurydice*, it was far ahead of its predecessors in terms of structure and orchestration and is one of the most artistic of the early operas. *Orfeo* is an opera in five acts written by the playwright Alessandro Strevio in collaboration with the composer Monteverdi. The tragic ending of the early Japanese version of *Orfeo* on VCD shows that Monteverdi's approach is quite different from that of the Peri and Caccini's *Eurydice*. Monteverdi uses a large number of monophonic arias, pastoral songs, and a great deal of instrumental music in this work. An aria is a form of expression between an aria and a cantata. Through the singing of the musical goddesses in the prologue, the audience is informed of the story of the opera, and the whole work is a representation of Monteverdi's bereavement through the singing of the characters. At a time in history when the term 'pera' had not yet become commonplace, Monteverdi describes *Orfeo* as a 'musical story' that expresses his longing for his wife. The work also features a large number of instrumental arrangements at the opening of the opera, including over forty different instruments. These include small violin, old viola, old cello, double bass, trombone, cornet, soprano recorder, trumpet, harp, large guitar, as well as a harpsichord and lute.

**Keywords:** Baroque · *Orfeo* · Monteverdi

## 1 Introduction

The word "baroque" is derived from the Portuguese word "barroco", which means "irregularly shaped or imperfect pearl" [1]. In the 16th century, the French used the term in an ironic sense to describe the pearls collected by the then Emperor Charles V. The first use of the term "baroque" to describe anything other than pearls was in 1734 in a French art review [2–4]. It was a review of the opera *Hippolytus and Arikié* by Rameau, a French composer of the time. The work was called "baroque" because it did not conform to the artistic aesthetic standards of the time and the melody of the work sounded very disjointed and clear. It was not until 1878 that the term "baroque" was included in the French Academy, indicating that its negative connotations had been erased and transformed into a technical term [5, 6].

The Baroque period, which dates from the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th centuries, belongs to the transition between the Renaissance and Classicism in the history of European civilization. The artistic field was mainly characterized by continuous exploration and progress during this period, a true transition between the Renaissance and the Classical period. By the end of the Baroque period, European classical thinking had reached its peak, giving direct impetus to the art of classical music. It was a period of transition from feudalism to capitalism, and it was a period of transition that laid the foundations for the European musical art scene.

## 2 The Art of Opera in the Baroque Period

With the release of *Eurydice*, the starting point of Baroque music is set in 1600, and the emergence of opera marks the progress of Baroque music. Opera first originated in Florence, Italy. An unofficial group of musicologists, mainly nobles, poets, and composers, emerged at the time. The group was called the "Florentine Camerata Society". The emergence of this group marked the rise of opera. Although it was not limited to the study of music, it did contribute to the development of music, including opera. In the early years of the art of opera, most of the themes were based on religious and ancient Greek myths and legends. Around 1600, for example, *Daphne* was composed by Peri and Caccini [7].

Most of these works originated in Florence, Italy, and have an idyllic and fresh artistic style. After this, the development of opera gradually shifted from Florence to Rome. As Rome was the center of the Papacy and the Crown, its operas had a particularly 'extravagant' character, which was more in keeping with the aesthetic needs of the aristocracy. An example of this is the production of *The Chains of Adone*, which was screened in Rome in 1662. The aesthetic needs of the aristocracy were also limited by the fact that the general public did not have the opportunity to enjoy and experience opera, and that the 'extravagant' character often overwhelmed the creativity of the opera, leaving no room for creativity. In the 1930s and 1940s, the center of Italian opera gradually moved to Venice. The city's strong commercial tradition led to a more democratized opera culture in Venice, where both aristocrats and ordinary citizens could attend opera in the opera houses. This had the advantage of not only increasing the genre and style of opera but also the aesthetic ability of the public. By the 1780s the center of Italian opera had moved from Venice to Naples. The overall style of opera in Naples was *commedia dell'arte*. For example, Alessandro Scarlatti's *The Fault of Ignorance* and others. These works reflect the fact that opera is centered around music, and that the emotions of the characters can be fully expressed in music. The development of opera in Italy culminated in Naples, where the art of opera was perfected and began to influence other countries.

## 3 The Musical and Aesthetic Characteristics of the Opera Orfeo

### 3.1 The Plot of the Opera

*Orfeo* is an opera based on ancient Greek mythology, with Orfeo and *Eurydice* as the main characters [8]. The story is that Orfeo, the son of the sun god, is to be married to *Eurydice*. After their brief separation, a female messenger delivers the sad news to

Orfeo that Eurydice has been poisoned by a snake. He was so distraught that he asked the goddess to take him to the underworld, where he found Pluto and asked him to bring Eurydice back to earth. Orfeo impressed the Queen of the Underworld with his beautiful song, and the King of the Underworld agreed to take Eurydice back to Earth, but only on the condition that he would not look back at her on the way back to the earth, otherwise, she would return to hell and never be reborn. However, on the way back, because of his love for his wife, Orfeo could not control himself from seeing her. As the King of the Underworld had said, Eurydice's figure slowly disappeared and she returned to hell again. Orfeo was banished back to earth, where he grieved and thought of his wife day and night. Apollo, the sun god, comes down from the sky and teaches his son that there is no eternal life on earth, that he must be positive and forget his sorrow, and that although he cannot see Eurydice on earth, he can see her in heaven. At the end of the play, Orfeo goes up to heaven with his father.

### 3.2 The Beauty of the Imitation

The video recording shows that Monteverdi uses a lot of polyphony in his opera Orfeo, both in the scenes and in the instrumental music. Polyphony is a technique in which two different voices follow each other, imitating each other's beauty [9]. Polyphony first appeared in folk music in the 13th century and was not widely used until the 16th century. "The concept of 'polyphony' is often used to refer to the polyphonic form developed in European music history, based on Gregorian chant and culminating in the development of Bach and others."

The opera scenes imitate real-life rural weddings. In Act I, Act II, and Act V of the opera, it is found that the setting of the opera takes place in a natural forest environment, and by imitating scenes from ancient Greek mythology, the main character weds Eurydice in a lush natural setting, reflecting the beauty of nature.

The instrumental aspects of the imitation are mainly in the different instruments used to create the atmosphere of the scene. For example, the violin, the harp, and the harpsichord are used to create a sense of joy when the main character is on earth and at the wedding of Orfeo and Eurydice. The trombone, the bass lute, and the small organ, which play the bass part of the piece, create an eerie effect by imitating the hero's arrival in hell.

## 4 The Beauty of Movement

During the Baroque period, discoveries were made in both the scientific and artistic fields, and the music of the Baroque period was more lively than that of the Renaissance, breaking away from the relatively stable structure of the Renaissance and reflecting the dynamic effects and fluidity of the music, with more dynamic contrasts in speed and volume [10].

Monteverdi's Orfeo, on the other hand, is characterized by its uninterrupted, continuous music. Initially, the opera uses the sound of horns to create a lively scene. The brightness of C major is used to bring the work to life, followed by the musical goddess's

elaboration of the storyline. The beauty of the movement refers to the good melodic articulation in this work. The opera video shows that a good melodic connection not only draws the audience into the storyline but also moves the plot forward. The chorus also sings with a different and more expressive attitude. The opera is in five acts, and each act is particularly well connected, with the orchestra and dancers behind the scenes acting as a link to the melody even after the singers have stopped singing, a skill that enhanced the integrity of the opera at the time.

#### **4.1 Beauty in Contrast**

The concept of contrast was an important innovation in the Baroque period. In comparison with the Renaissance, the concept of contrast was relatively lively. Baroque composers, including Monteverdi, were very good at using contrast to highlight music or drama, and there are many different types of contrast, such as rhythmic contrast, melodic contrast, tempo contrast, intensity contrast, timbral contrast, tonal contrast, and so on.

First of all, an analysis of the opera video reveals that the opera uses contrast in scenes and costumes. In the second act of the opera, the curtain is suddenly changed to black and the theatre lights are suddenly dimmed as Orfeo and the shepherds and fairies celebrate their wedding to Eurydice in an idyllic countryside wedding. The change of scene from a cheerful and idyllic wedding to a black sky indicates that bad news is coming, in contrast to the vibrant and idyllic scene before.

In the third act, the scenes of Orfeo's journey to hell are in stark contrast to his life on earth. On earth, for example, there are many elves, shepherds, and fairies to bless them, while in hell the actors' costumes change from shepherd's dress to that of a skeleton, a stark contrast between hell and earth. Different costumes are used to reflect different scenes and character traits. For example, the costume of Orfeo's father, the Sun God, is a gorgeous golden color, reflecting his gentle and forgiving nature. Proto, the king of the underworld, is dressed in a black robe, which contrasts sharply with Apollo's cold and eccentric character.

Secondly, the contrast between the soloists, the chorus, and the instrumental music. Monteverdi transforms the solo cantata into a choral cantata in *A. Miserere*. By comparing the solo and the chorus, the choral cantata is more acoustically full than the solo, and the acoustics are more reflective of Orfeo's longing for his wife.

Finally, in the Baroque period, composers used to apply the acoustic concept of strong contrast between high and low voices. Works under this influence are often performed between instrumental and vocal music. When a singer or actor sings, the instrumental music lowers the volume of the accompaniment to set off the main theme of the song. Conversely, when the singing stops, the chorus members and the instrumental music come to the fore.

#### **4.2 Emotional Beauty**

In the Baroque period, musicians sought a passionate beauty that added emotion to every note. Therefore, it was common for composers of this period to emphasize the emotion of their works and to try to make them more vivid so that they could infect

the audience during performance. Monteverdi's work exemplifies the emotional musical aesthetic typical of the Baroque period. He called his style of opera "Concitato". The meaning of this is to reflect the emotion of the opera in the work. In the opera *Orfeo*, his unique artistic aesthetic breaks away from the Renaissance style of reflecting the emotions of the libretto phrase by phrase, and instead strives to make each note and each movement express its inner activity, focusing on the emotions of the work [11]. For example, in the opera *Orfeo*, Monteverdi uses a large number of choral forms to enhance the opera's expressiveness, with the first chorus appearing when the music reaches 8:38. This is a chorus with a sacred air, and the chorus uses polyphony to reflect its solemn atmosphere. The second chorus comes in the second act, when *Orfeo* goes to hell in search of *Eurydice*, and the chorus enters powerfully into the main theme, with various expressions and movements of pain and sorrow. This chorus is sung repeatedly throughout the rest of the play, bringing the scene to its emotional peak. Secondly, as *Orfeo* is about to look back at *Eurydice*, the chorus immediately changes from a soothing expression to one of panic, with a simultaneous ahh! The chorus immediately changed from a soothing expression to one of panic, with a simultaneous ahh! When *Orfeo* is driven back to the earth by *Pluto*, the chorus' singing technique changes from an excited, panicked tone to one of a flower drying up, sounding extremely sad, with the whole body falling to the ground. The combination of vocal technique and physical movement of the actors expressed different emotions and created a very dramatic stage image for the audience. In addition to this, there were other moments of great emotional "excitement". For example, when *Orfeo* and the elves celebrated their wedding to *Eurydice*, the cast danced and did cartwheels. The chorus celebrates with each other and drinks together. They have become one with the main character, *Orfeo*, on stage, and are no longer able to distinguish between protagonists and supporting characters. Monteverdi's arrangement of this work is intended to reflect the importance and importance of Baroque music in terms of emotion and to bring the audience into the drama at the same time.

Monteverdi's *Orfeo* broke the bonds of Renaissance artistic pursuits and pioneered the art of opera in Europe. Since its first performance, it has been a benchmark for the art of opera, one of the resident classics of the world opera scene for over 400 years, and although the instruments used at the time have been replaced by modern symphonic instrumental music, its artistic style has managed to blend with modern art. The famous German art historian Kurt Sachs once said: "At the top of the rolling Baroque mountains stands Monteverdi's opera *The Orpheus Legend*." The ups and downs of fate, home, hell, and heaven, all these and people's feelings and premonitions, happiness and fear, are combined in a myth so grand and yet so simple, expressed through the power of music that transcends time and space. No matter how many generations have passed, if one has a relationship with music, one must look up to this peak, not to mention in our times when romanticism has been abandoned in favor of superhuman rational emotions and formalism. Without this work, therefore, the art of Baroque opera would not have flourished. Monteverdi, as one of the most outstanding composers of the Baroque period, has created an opera that is innovative from different angles, and that meets the aesthetic needs of the period while making full use of the aesthetics of movement, contrast, and emotion of the Baroque period. "In terms of musicianship, the opera is based on the *cantus firmus*, which is organized by the use of superimposed phrases, strokes,

rhythms, and different tonalities.” Monteverdi’s ability to use the resources of music and theatre effectively in the early Baroque period, when opera was just beginning to emerge, is truly remarkable work. As this work is dedicated to the memory of Monteverdi’s deceased wife, it expresses to a certain extent the author’s love for his wife, and the author elaborates the plot of the opera from a humanistic point of view. Humanism is the soul of Western opera, and without its activities, there would be no room for the development and progress of opera.

## 5 Conclusion

The whole work is based on the theme of humanity and human emotions. Whether it is the author’s love for his wife or the love between the hero and heroine across the boundaries of life and death, the kindness and compassion of the Hades couple who break the rules, or ultimately the forgiveness of Apollo, all are the strength of the human spirit contained in the works of art of the Baroque period. As Apollo says at the end: “No joy can last forever. This statement is extremely profound.” Although the work is about the love story of Orfeo and Eurydice, it does not confine itself to describing the true nature of love but conveys the beauty of human nature and the choices that can be made in the face of reality. What Monteverdi is saying is that, in the face of reality, love can transcend all the conventions of nature and the barriers of time and space. Due to the limited information available, it was not possible to study the aesthetic approach of the opera as a whole, and the examples given in the text are not particularly adequate. In the future, the study will continue to study the opera and its aesthetic aspects. If more videos or scores are available, It will be able to analyze the opera in more depth.

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