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NINO PIRROTTA AND ELENA PVOLEDO

TRANSLATED BY KAREN EALES
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The illustrations were collected and arranged by Elena Povoledo.
Preface

The starting point of the present book was a request we received from Professor Remo Giazotto for a work dealing with the Florentine Camerata, to be included in a series he was then editing for ERI, the press of the RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana). We had some qualms about assigning the Camerata a leading role in the creation of opera, but our counterproposal that we should aim at a broader survey of the period leading to the rise of the new genre was readily accepted.

We had already done extensive work in that direction – and indeed one of the chapters in the book had been published as a separate essay. We were eager to go back to materials already explored, to bring them into sharper focus, to look into new sources for new facts, and above all to clarify to ourselves and for our readers the emergence of various trends in the chronological succession of events. We relied heavily on contemporary documents so that the narrative is not encumbered with preconceived views. To be sure, the documents had to be selected and interpreted and a number of essential critical decisions had to be made. Not to speak of the translations needed for the present edition, but we hope that a clear distinction has been drawn between proven facts and interpretative suggestions. As one reviewer observed, we have even stressed the fact that we hold different views on a few points.

Li due Orfei, the Italian title of the book, obviously refers to the major works to which we have anchored the two ends of our narrative, Poliziano’s fabula of 1480 and Striggio and Monteverdi’s musical drama of 1607. In the preface to the first edition we remarked that other mythological figures, such as Apollo and Daphne or Cephalus and Aurora, are also prominent both in the theatrical repertory of the late fifteenth century and in the first decades of operatic activity. None of them, however, had been brought on stage as often as Orpheus, or by such outstanding artists; nor could any of them more readily suggest the intimate association of poetry and music which Poliziano achieved with natural ease and the creators of opera had achieved again with spontaneous immediacy, only clouding it in retrospect with theoretical justifications.

Between the two ‘Orphic’ periods we are mainly dealing with performances of comedies. We even came to think that the archaic note in our title (the use of an obsolete form of the article) recaptured the flavour of many a sixteenth-century title of comedy, only later to realize that we had subconsciously derived it from Li tre Orfei, a Venetian comic opera of 1787. Anyway, the increasing demands for scenic realism brought about by the vogue of comedy and soon epitomized in the rules of the so-called Aristotelian uniti
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were highly relevant to our work. Realism excluded music from the most essential sections of the play, reducing its eventual participation to what we would now term incidental music. Realism also had a strong influence on the staging of a play, fostering the creation of the perspective set, which in turn stressed the unity of the place in which, or near which, a unified plot was due to unfold within a reasonably short lapse of time. However, no measure of realism could suppress the fact that the plot, as well as its place and time, belonged to a world removed from the actual life of the spectators. Allegorical or mythological characters, acting in the intermedi before and after each act of the play, were called to obliterate everyday reality for a while, and thus help the transition to the presumed reality of fiction. Because of their fantastic nature the intermedi promoted the invention of ingenious mechanical devices to produce spectacular events: they also invited music matching the visual marvels with grandiose decorative effects, a varied display of choral and instrumental groups and additional contrasts resulting from the location of such groups in various places within and without the stage.

Early opera has been said to have derived from the intermedi, with which it shared the use of mythological plots as a justification for music. It also incorporated some of their grandiose scenic effects and choral displays, most usually in the prologue and at the end of acts, to function as built-in intermedi. But the similarities are outnumbered by the differences. In the intermedi impressive musical resources were called upon essentially to comment on physical action, on stylized gestures of individuals or groups. In opera, on the other hand almost complete reliance was placed on soloistic singing expressing the inner feelings of the characters. In the patent unreality of its being 'recited wholly in song' opera was mainly concerned with what we may call a psychological realism aiming to render the dialectics of passion.

This establishes another point of similarity with the mythological plays of the late fifteenth century, which had been essentially spoken but had made recourse to music to enhance the pathos of climactic situations. We have no direct knowledge of such music, due to its being part of an unwritten tradition still predominant at the time even in the most cultivated layers of Italian society. But the comments we read in contemporary sources leave no doubt about the variety and intensity of its emotional effects. That the concern for an affective content apparently declined in the theatrical music of the sixteenth century is only partially related to the advent of comedy and realism and to the later development of the intermedi. On the one hand, most of the information we have refers to exceptional theatrical performances, while ordinary performing practices also belonged to a kind of unwritten tradition. On the other, the written and printed tradition of music was dominated during most of the sixteenth century by the deliberate adoption of a polyphonic maniera, in which art for art's sake endeavours often obscured the direct expression of feelings.

As in the second edition of 1975, the main substance of the book has been left unchanged in the translation, while additions and revisions have been made in the footnotes, taking into account all that has been published on the subject to date. With so many quotations from old texts there is no way to avoid variant spellings, but readers already familiar with the field will understand this problem. For the musical examples we should mention that
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two madrigals by Verdelot and one attributed to him, which had been partially reconstructed, are now given complete and with the previously missing authentic Altus part. Thanks are due for this to Professor H. Colin Slim, whose contribution is more specifically acknowledged in the course of the book, and to the Trustees of Oscott College, Sutton Coldfield, England, where the missing partbook has been found. Finally, we gratefully acknowledge Karen Eales’ resourcefulness and flexibility in dealing with the many-sided specialization of our texts, as well as the precise, expert advice provided to us by the editorial staff of the Cambridge University Press, more particularly by Rosemary Dooley and Mary Baffoni.

February 1981

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