

Introduction

Monteverdi's Modes of Representation

*Il mio passato ben quasi presente*¹

– Marino

In his magisterial study of the Italian madrigal, Alfred Einstein carved out the historical space that the composer Claudio Monteverdi has long occupied. ‘Monteverdi’s case is in fact a rather special one’, Einstein writes; ‘he is not only one of those latecomers who perfected the madrigal, he is also the man who destroyed it’.² Einstein paints the composer’s character as demonic, destructive, bent on destiny. His exceptional status was created by lifting both the man and his music above his own time. That he came late implied that his artistic allegiances were with the past. If he destroyed the madrigal, then it was for good reason. Monteverdi was unique, iconoclastic, and bold because, at his best, he was resolutely out of step. Only such independence could have led him to be, in Leo Schrade’s words, ‘the creator of modern music’. As much as this characterization of Monteverdi is anachronistically Beethovenian, it has had lasting consequences for scholarly perceptions of the composer’s personality and the way in which his music has been heard and understood. Even as more recent studies have shown that Monteverdi lived and worked within vibrant musical, literary, and cultural circles – that he was not somehow before, above, or after his time – he was never, by any means, ordinary. It is no easy task to contextualize the work of an artist who lived such a varied and long life. But if the composer’s intentions, so much as they might seem seductively to conceal the secrets of his art, cannot fully explain why Monteverdi continues to

¹ ‘A quest’olmo, a quest’ombre, et a quest’onde’ (in which ‘il mio passato ben quasi presente’ is line 6) was set to music by Monteverdi in his Seventh Book (1619); see Giambattista Marino, *La lira* (1614), ed. Luana Salvarani (Lavis: La Finestra, 2012), p. 102.

² Alfred Einstein, *The Italian Madrigal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), ii, p. 608: ‘There is something demonic in him, something bent on destruction: he is a man of destiny in the history of music, in an even more fatal sense than Beethoven is.’

inspire new generations, his music may yet reveal how a vivacious balance between words and tones can speak profoundly to the contradictions of the human experience. This is the subject of the present book.

Monteverdi's place in the history of music has long had its roots in text-music relations. His poetic choices, to echo the title of Nino Pirrotta's seminal essay, have been scrutinized as closely as his musical techniques.³ These discussions in modern scholarship have in some ways mirrored the contemporary debates about music and poetry at the end of the sixteenth century, namely the controversy over what Monteverdi called the *seconda pratica*. In his 'Dichiaratione', a rebuttal of Giovanni Maria Artusi's theoretical grievances against Monteverdi's music, the composer's brother Giulio Cesare famously wrote that in this new practice the 'words [*oratione*] be the mistress of the music [*armonia*] and not its servant'.⁴ This phrase continues to inspire debate and disagreement. Despite its origins as a technical term to describe the treatment of dissonance in counterpoint, the *seconda pratica* has also come to imply, through decades of scholarly discourse, a humanistic and fundamentally literary leaning: a sensitivity and respect for the meaning and structure of poetic texts. As Gary Tomlinson argued in his highly influential *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance*, the *seconda pratica* could be an artistic and aesthetic ideal that connected Monteverdi's musical practice to larger intellectual and philosophical trends; it was a fundamentally humanistic approach to the interpretation of poetry in which music and text are united in a single expressive language. As an artistic agenda in which music served to convey a poetic message, the *seconda pratica* became the primary impetus for the historical shift away from the artifice of counterpoint towards the verisimilitude of solo song and dramatic recitative. Tomlinson effectively fulfilled Einstein's Monteverdian prophecy; on the one hand, Monteverdi was 'late' in that his true allegiance was with the humanism of the Renaissance, and on the other, he could not truly achieve the musico-poetic ideals of the *seconda pratica* without effectively 'destroying' the polyphonic madrigal.

Few would dismiss Monteverdi's madrigals simply as preambles to his greater achievements in song and opera. But this idea, that by the end of the sixteenth century counterpoint simply got in the way of expressing poetic texts, has persisted in one way or another. Much of this book will argue that

³ Nino Pirrotta, 'Scelte poetiche di Monteverdi', *Nuova rivista musicale italiana* 2 (1968), 10–42, 226–54.

⁴ Giulio Cesare Monteverdi, 'Dichiaratione' in *Source Readings in Music History: The Baroque Era*, trans. Oliver Strunk (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), p. 49; see also Massimo Ossi, *Divining the Oracle: Monteverdi's 'Seconda Pratica'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 195.

polyphony, far from being a yoke of the past, was one of the most important means by which Monteverdi, from his early years to his late, crafted a complex dynamic between poetry and music. Implied in this argument is the notion that counterpoint need not be effaced for a composer to craft a musical representation that effectively served the text. The importance of creating distance between text and music was given serious consideration by Massimo Ossi, who observed that rooted in the *seconda pratica* polemic was this paradoxical idea: ‘in order for music to truly serve the text, it first had to become independent of it.’⁵ In her extensive writings on Monteverdi, Ellen Rosand has likewise suggested that an ideal relationship between music and poetry in this period was not strictly speaking one of ‘mastery’ but rather of siblings; as Giulio Strozzi writes in his preface to *La Delia*: ‘Music is only the sister of that poetry that wishes to enjoy a sibling relationship to it.’⁶ The complexities of time and voice so apt to the polyphonic madrigal – the most ubiquitous musical genre of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries – were most directly expressed when the respective materials of music and poetry were placed in concert. This material balance of contrasts reflects the ambiguities and paradoxes Monteverdi read in his poems. It is also the mechanism by which music could create the marvellous.

Scholars of Monteverdi’s music have perhaps been too quick to explain perceived tensions or inconsistencies between text and music in Monteverdi’s madrigals as youthful emulations of his forebears, begrudging concessions to new poetic trends, or simply as mistakes.⁷ What is more is that these very same tensions, or lack thereof, have occasionally been taken as proof of Monteverdi’s own literary allegiances: Petrarchan, Marinist, or otherwise. But Monteverdi seems to have been less concerned with matching poet to poetics as he was with exploring the representational potential of musical technique and poetic voice. He was as deliberate as he was meticulous. It is perhaps no surprise that in his *Divining the Oracle: Monteverdi’s ‘Seconda Prattica’*, Ossi points to an amusing but striking phrase written by the composer himself: ‘non faccio le mie cose a caso’ (‘I do not go about my work haphazardly’).⁸ The line is no mere quip. It was

⁵ Ossi, *Divining the Oracle*, p. 249.

⁶ Ellen Rosand, *Monteverdi’s Last Operas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), p. 195.

⁷ Pirrotta, ‘Scelte poetiche di Monteverdi’; trans. as ‘Monteverdi’s Poetic Choices’ in *Music and Culture in Italy from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*, 271–316 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 304–5; Gary Tomlinson, *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 167.

⁸ The quotation is from the composers’ postface to his Fifth Book of 1605.

reiterated by Giulio Cesare immediately preceding the passage quoted above from the ‘Dichiaratione’.⁹ While the tracing of literary variants and, indeed, potential misreadings of text on Monteverdi’s part has opened some fascinating avenues of research, one may reasonably ask if an assumed error or lack of conviction is the best place to begin. It may be that Monteverdi occasionally created a Petrarchan anachronism, that he misread poetic voice in Marino’s convoluted verse, or reversed the chronology of a passage of Tasso, but, with some exceptions, he could just as easily have done these things deliberately. After all, the composer’s intent is but one part of the story. How, then, might such curiosities, intentional or not, affect the listeners’ experience?

One of the central questions addressed here is what it means for a composer to be ‘faithful’ to a text. Tim Carter and several others have acknowledged the extent to which this idea has informed musicological methodology, both recently and in decades prior. ‘We have collectively invested a great deal’, Carter writes, ‘in the notion that Monteverdi was somehow thoroughly and uniquely sensitive to the poetry he set.’¹⁰ In the most comprehensive recent study of Monteverdi as an interpreter of literature, Christophe Georis has shown that in many cases Monteverdi’s texts are not always identical to printed and manuscript sources of the poetry.¹¹ The portrayals sketched above of Monteverdi as an interpreter of literature result in a rather split personality: on the one hand, Monteverdi is an iconoclast tearing his models apart to create something new, while on the other, he is a humanist placing the idiosyncrasies of music at the service of rhetoric. These two views of Monteverdi’s literary personality have inspired vastly different interpretations of the music itself and, consequently, revealed unresolved conflicts that do not seem to square with the supposed clarity of artistic purpose of either view. Carter explains with characteristic acuity:

But side-by-side with the image of Monteverdi, faithful servant of his poetry, is another common construct of the composer, as someone ferociously committed to his craft, sternly resisting modern trends for easy, instant gratification, and exploiting all the resources of his art in search of an intense – and intensely musical – expression. The question of how these two images of Monteverdi can co-exist – of

⁹ See Ossi, *Divining the Oracle*, p. 195.

¹⁰ Tim Carter, ‘Two Monteverdi Problems and Why They Matter’, *Journal of Musicology* 19, no. 3 (2002), 419.

¹¹ Christophe Georis, *Claudio Monteverdi ‘letterato’ ou les metamorphoses du texte* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2013), p. 47.

how well he could serve both mistresses – has scarcely received an effective response in the literature and inevitably leads to unresolved tensions within it.¹²

The search for a consistent and clearly executed approach to the musical interpretation of text is unlikely to succeed for Monteverdi, or indeed for most musicians. Monteverdi changed his methods at various points in his life, adapted, and created new ways of uniting the two art forms. But Carter's notion of the coexistence of 'mistresses' suggests that at any one point in his career Monteverdi could have seen fit to employ multiple, apparently contrasting approaches to text setting depending on the subject, the genre, or indeed the poet in question. He may not, in other words, have succumbed to what C. S. Lewis would centuries later call 'the personal heresy'.¹³ Perhaps it rather misses the point to argue over whether Monteverdi was faithful or not faithful to the texts he set to music. Rather, it is more rewarding to explore what 'faithfulness' to text could look like at the turn of the seventeenth century. Here, the poetics of the marvellous, or *meraviglia*, may be the missing piece of the puzzle. As Chapter 1 ('The Sound of the Marvellous') explains, the marvellous was characterized by the coexistence of contradictions, a balance between credibility and incredibility, and, indeed, between faithfulness and unfaithfulness. In engaging musically with *meraviglia*, Monteverdi left some contraries unresolved. For, in his own words, 'it is contraries that greatly move our minds'.¹⁴

The title of this introduction – 'Monteverdi's Modes of Representation' – is significant for what follows and therefore requires some clarification. The words 'mode' and 'representation' may sound unnecessarily loaded. I would argue, however, that in conjunction with the idea of musical *meraviglia* – the sound of the marvellous – a mode of representation may come the closest to capturing the complex manner in which Monteverdi transformed his madrigal texts.

By 'mode' I mean in its most general sense, as a particular manner or method of approaching musical setting. While musical mode and poetic mode are certainly very specific things, I have chosen in this case to use the word more generally and pragmatically. In conjunction with the act of

¹² Tim Carter, "'Sfogava con le stelle" Reconsidered: Some Thoughts on the Analysis of Monteverdi's Mantuan Madrigals' in Paola Besutti, Teresa Gialdrini, and Rodolfo Baroncini (eds.), *Claudio Monteverdi: Studi e prospettive: Atti del convegno, Mantova, 21–24 ottobre 1993* (Florence: Olschki, 1998), p. 156.

¹³ C. S. Lewis and E. M. W. *The Personal Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939).

¹⁴ Preface to *Madrigali guerrieri, et amorosi* (1638) in *Source Readings in Music History*, trans. Strunk, p. 53.

‘representing’, mode can convey the conscious fluidity between style and content in the poetry and music at the turn of the seventeenth century. ‘Style’ alone would not be sufficient, for this is of the slipperiest words in the early modern lexicon, as Philip Sohm has shown in the context of art theory.¹⁵ In any case, I do not think that one can truly speak of Monteverdi’s having a ‘heroic style’, ‘lyric style’, or ‘pastoral style’; he does not adopt a consistent approach to one type of poetry or another: quite the contrary, in fact. In this book I argue that Monteverdi uses poetic voice – the very element that defines poetic modes – to transform poetry by musical means: it may read one way, but it is heard in another. When set as a polyphonic madrigal, epic may become lyric, lyric may become pastoral, and pastoral may be transformed back into epic. A similar line of inquiry was taken by Mauro Calcagno, who brought these issues of voice to the forefront of Monteverdi studies in his *From Madrigal to Opera: Monteverdi’s Staging of the Self*.¹⁶ While epic, lyric, or pastoral poetry might present distinctive approaches to poetic voice, Monteverdi uses the plurality of perspective possible in the polyphonic madrigal to shift listeners’ understanding of those voices both spatially and temporally. It is for this reason that the chapters of this book are only loosely organized by type of poetry – pastoral, lyric, epic. Neither is the book delineated by poet; Giambattista Marino, Battista Guarini, and Torquato Tasso are the most influential poets covered in this study, but, as mentioned, Monteverdi did not always use the same approach in setting one poet versus another. A ‘mode’ therefore is sufficiently flexible a term to allow for, on the one hand, the cross-fertilization of formal, stylistic, and structural elements in Monteverdi’s madrigals and, on the other, a traversing between the composer’s method and the listeners’ experience.¹⁷ It can, in this sense, capture the dynamic relationship between artist and audience.

‘Representation’ presents a far greater terminological challenge. The verb *rappresentare* as employed in contemporary art theory and literary criticism is about as hard to pin down as is the musical designation *in genere rappresentativo*. I do not intend to provide any simple solutions to

¹⁵ See Philip Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Mauro Calcagno, *From Madrigal to Opera: Monteverdi’s Staging of the Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

¹⁷ There is a historical and specifically early modern precedent for using ‘mode’ in this manner. As Philip Sohm has discussed, the painter Nicholas Poussin borrowed the term from Gioseffo Zarlino’s musical treatise and extended its meaning into the art of painting and, in so doing, included in it a nexus of different kinds of stylistic and structural markers; Sohm, *Style in the Art Theory of Early Modern Italy*, p. 137.

these complex problems. Rather, I would like to expand our understanding of what it means to ‘represent’ in music at the turn of the seventeenth century and shift the discussion away from the idea of imitation or mimesis towards that of marvels and marvelling. In other words, I wish to imply that in order to understand early modern representation, we should focus less on *what* is being represented and rather on *how* it represents. When that which is represented is inherently fluid – a thought, a character, an emotion, a relationship – the manner, the mode of its representation, takes on an even greater importance. As seen in Chapter 1, theorists of the late sixteenth century went so far as to say that the aim of poetry was not to imitate, as Aristotle and countless others had maintained for centuries, but rather to marvel. In his treatise *La deca ammirabile* (1587), Francesco Patrizi da Cherso explains that the marvellous is not a thing, nor is it even a feeling; it is rather a particular faculty of the mind that moves between the senses and temporal perspectives. To create the marvellous in music therefore requires a mixing of perspectives, what Patrizi refers to as an oscillation between disparate elements, and a union of possibilities with impossibilities.¹⁸ The sound of the marvellous therefore encompasses modes of representation that lend a multivalent temporality to the contradictions and ambiguities typical of poetry in this period.

In a letter to the Florentine Giovanni Battista Doni from 22 October 1633, Monteverdi communicated his unease about the way in which a musician could be an imitator and the extent to which his musical imitation could be natural:

I found in practice that when I was composing the lament of Ariadne, not finding any book which explained to me the natural path to imitation [*la via naturale alla immitatione*], nor one which told me what an imitator should be – except Plato, who shed so dim a light, that I was scarcely able to see with my weak vision what little he showed me – I found, I say, what hard work is necessary to do even what little I did in this matter of ‘imitation’.¹⁹

While Tomlinson read this passage as a confirmation of Monteverdi’s achievement in the nearly lost opera *L’Arianna* (1608), Tim Carter detected a certain reticence in the composer’s words about the possibility of

¹⁸ This comes fascinatingly close to an alternative definition for ‘mode’ from the discipline of physics given in the Oxford English Dictionary: ‘Any of the distinct kinds or patterns of vibration that an oscillatory system can sustain.’

¹⁹ Claudio Monteverdi, *Lettere dediche e prefazioni*, ed. Domenico de’ Paoli (Rome: De Santis, 1973), p. 321; Gary Tomlinson, ‘Madrigal, Monody, and Monteverdi’s “via naturale alla immitatione”’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 43, no. 1 (1981), 81.

imitating ‘naturally’. Carter writes that Monteverdi ‘must surely have realized that his “via naturale alla immitatione” was scarcely “natural” in any realistic sense: his task, too, was to use art to improve upon nature’.²⁰ The implication here is that to represent in music was not merely to imitate through resemblance, or, in other words, to unify through verisimilitude. Equally important was difference, inverisimilitude, a perceptible contrast between the materials of poetry and the materials of music that created in the listener a no less potent means by which to feel and be moved. Although Monteverdi does not say it explicitly, it is in this balance between resemblance and difference that the musician can both express and surpass a text being set, and the mechanism for this is the marvellous. In his discussion of dissonance within the *seconda pratica* debates, Massimo Ossi has suggested precisely this: ‘The composer’s target has shifted from approximating as closely as possible this abstract “ideal form” to creating an intentionally distorted version of it, and that the listener’s satisfaction results not from matching the two exactly but from recognizing just where and how the distortion has been effected.’²¹

Marvel and wonderment can therefore provide a missing link in understanding the complex dynamic between music as composed and music as heard. Just as the music does not ‘serve’ the text merely by resemblance, so too is the dynamic between the technical aspects of the music and the way they are heard as much about difference as it is about likeness. It is along these lines that John Butt has recently encouraged a reconsideration of the word ‘representation’ in Monteverdi’s music: ‘the music does more than act as the form of “representation” that is so often seen as the essence of seventeenth-century music, since it has the potential to turn that representation into a closer awareness of the experience one is actually having, quite independently of what the music might signify or affectively magnify’.²² This kind of perceived distance between ‘the experience one is actually having’ and ‘what the music might signify’ is in fact one of the primary ways in which *meraviglia* was understood at the turn of the seventeenth century. It is not that the experience is completely divorced from what the music seems to communicate – it is, after all, the initiator of that same experience; instead, the music seems to encourage some independence and

²⁰ Tim Carter, ‘Resemblance and Representation: Towards a New Aesthetic in the Music of Monteverdi’ in Tim Carter and Iain Fenlon (eds.), *Con che soavità: Studies in Italian Opera, Song, and Dance, 1580–1740* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 134.

²¹ Ossi, *Divining the Oracle*, p. 56.

²² John Butt, ‘Monteverdi, the 1610 Vespers and the Beginnings of the Modern Musical Work’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 143, no. 1 (2018), 43.

plurality in the listeners' experience. That the listener is pushed to navigate contrasting, disparate, or ambiguous elements in Monteverdi's music leads to the conclusion that its representational abilities are not purely mimetic but, rather, discursive.

How, then, can we approach the marvellous in music? The present book proposes two primary strategies by which Monteverdi created *meraviglia* in his madrigals, each resulting in a mixing of multiple perspectives that can alter the way poetic texts are understood. The first involves a sensory transformation: a striving for the visual through the aural, which vivifies elements of the text by bringing them 'before the eyes'. This idea has its roots in Greek antiquity and betrays the close connections between the sense of sight and the etymological roots of *mirabile*, *meraviglia*, and *ammirazione*. The second involves a manipulation of time: Monteverdi superimposes different temporal perspectives and effectively transforms the sense of chronology and sequence into one of space and place. By making different times 'visible' through sound, the past, present, and future can not only coexist, they can be considered simultaneously and at different 'speeds'. Essentially, the marvellous in music brings the ultimate impossibility – stretching, compressing, and seeing time – into the realm of possibility.

The chapters that follow will consider each of these two strategies through a cross-section of Monteverdi's madrigals. The repertoire considered here spans the gamut of Monteverdi's career; it traverses his early and late madrigals, the different poets, and types of poetry he set to music. The selections are united by Monteverdi's approach to the musical interpretation of poetry – his modes of representation – which serve in various ways to create musical *meraviglia*. Chapter 2, 'Marino and the *Rime boscherecce*', begins with a discussion of Monteverdi's relationship with Giambattista Marino, the controversial poet whose name is nearly synonymous with the poetics of *meraviglia*. This chapter is concerned with the way in which Monteverdi transformed the already ambiguous pastoral poems of Marino in his Sixth Book (1614); in these madrigals, Monteverdi reconfigures the presence and absence of characters and events by manipulating poetic voice by musical means. Chapters 3 and 4 are centred around erotic lyrics and, in particular, the temporal paradoxes of desire. Chapter 3 ('Monteverdi's Contradictory Kisses') traces the classical roots of the intriguing poetic trope of the kiss and examines the lyric poems from Monteverdi's Second Book (1590): his early interaction with the poetry of Torquato Tasso. Chapter 4 ('*Il bacio mordace*: Of Kissing and Biting') explores the vastly different approach Monteverdi employed in his

much later madrigals on erotic subjects: the kiss madrigals of the Seventh Book (1619) by Battista Guarini and Giambattista Marino. The last two chapters concern the literary genre most often associated with the marvellous: epic. Chapter 5 ('Tasso and the Music of Epic') begins with the reinterpretation of the Greek rhetorical figures of *energeia* (actualization) and *enargeia* (vivification) by the criticism of the late sixteenth century; the effect of this reinterpretation led to the earliest settings of epic verse by Monteverdi's contemporaries Giaches de Wert and Luca Marenzio. Finally, Chapter 6 ('Monteverdi's Earliest Laments') examines Monteverdi's settings of Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* of the Third Book (1592); in these madrigals, Monteverdi creates a sense of wonder by using the materials of music to bring the action of an event, real or imagined, into otherwise impossible proximity to the contemplation of it.

The experience of listening to Monteverdi's music is truly astonishing. It is, however, very difficult to describe. Writing about it always seems imprecise, subjective, or even ahistorical. But I think there is something to be said for how Monteverdi's music is crafted to teach one's ears how to listen. One feels by instinct that Monteverdi was very much concerned with the practicalities of listening, the psychology of perception, and the way in which emotion could be woven into both. The role of the listener has, as Andrew Dell'Antonio has convincingly argued, been somewhat underestimated in our discussions of early seventeenth-century music.²³ The visual, spatial, aural, and even tactile transformations so central to musical marvels are effective only when they are navigated, traversed, and retraced in the mind of the listener. The marvellous in music is, true to its roots, a paradox of phenomenology; it is both the cause and the consequence of the greatest of all impossibilities: the controlling of time. In a reflection on Monteverdi's music John Butt so eloquently writes: 'The early modern self is therefore defined in terms of consciousness over time, involving continuities, breaks, recollections and memories. It is performative rather than substantial and therefore particularly suited to an affinity with music as an art of performance and listening.'²⁴

The historical connection between time, memory, and marvels is long-standing. The Italian physician, mathematician, and astrologer Girolamo Cardano wrote about the experience of time as the supreme mystery of the human condition. The remarkable passage that follows, singled out by

²³ Andrew Dell'Antonio, "'Particular gusto e diletto alle orecchie': Listening in the Early Seicento" in Massimo Ciavolella and Patrick Coleman (eds.), *Culture and Authority in the Baroque* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 106–21.

²⁴ Butt, 'Monteverdi, the 1610 Vespers', p. 45.