

Historically Informed Performance and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*

Marissa DeVeau
Music History Seminar: Baroque Opera
May 7, 2018

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is first to research and discuss the field of historically informed performance. Then, the purpose is to research specific performance practice considerations that come into play with Monteverdi, and specifically with *L'Orfeo*, and then to offer strategies and considerations for how to compare two different recordings of *L'Orfeo* for their musical aspects and the performance practice.

Historically Informed Performance (HIP)

“Music notation, by its very nature, is inexact.” -Mary Cyr, Performing Baroque Music, p. 21

What Is It?

Historically informed performance practice (HIP) in Baroque music is an attempt to recreate a performance that would've been composer-approved. For the purposes of this paper, Baroque music western classical music composed between the years of approximately 1600-1750. Since primary source recordings of Baroque music do not exist, and nobody can be sure exactly what would have happened in performance, performance practice is speculative.

A Brief History of HIP

The field of performance practice is only a little over a century old.¹ Musicologists, conductors, and performers combine factual information and educated guesses to recreate performances as accurately as possible, because the information available is typically fragmented and often conflicting. They look at things such as treatises that existed at the time as well as manuscripts and urtext editions of scores to try and distill a concentrated amount of highly accurate information on what would've been happening at the time of composition and premiere. An urtext edition of a score is intended to reproduce the original intention of the composer as exactly as possible without any added or changed material.

¹ Frederick Neumann and Jane Stevens. *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. (New York, NY: Schirmer Books, 1993), page 2

“Historically Informed” vs. “Authentic”

Historically informed performance is extremely product-based. This is where the issue of “authentic” performance comes into play. I would like to propose that authentic performance does not stem from the product itself, but rather from the process of preparing the performance.

A prime example of the difference between historically informed and authentic performance lies in the venue in which music is performed and how performers adapt to that. Historically informed performances strive to use, for example, the same number and type of instruments as the original performances of a work. Someone crafting a historically informed performance would do this regardless of the venue in which the work was originally performed and the venue in which it is being revived. An authentic performance, however, would take this difference in performing space into consideration and, rather than using the same number and type of instruments as original performances, would use the number and type of instruments that the composer and performers may have used had the venue of the revival been the venue of the original performances.

While both types of performance are based in research and speculation, they are different. Historically informed performance uses what had occurred in a specific performance in a specific location at a specific time as the basis for the final product. Authentic performance uses the conventions of the time in combinations with the conditions of the revival to create a product that may not be exactly like the original, but is true to the process of putting together the original production.

In short, authentic performance should be a field considered completely different from the field of historically informed performance, as authenticity is derived from the process, and historically informed performance is derived from the product.

Why is HIP Important?

In the Baroque period, performer interpretation was just as important, if not more important, than what is actually written in the score. That being said, it makes sense that a lot of the scores from this time period do not have a ton of markings because things like articulation, dynamics, and ornaments would have been the responsibility of the performer.²

Common Considerations

There are many aspects of performance that must be taken into consideration when attempting to create a historically informed performance. A nonexhaustive list of these considerations includes:

- Tempo
- Dynamics
- Pitch
- Tuning and temperament
- Articulation
- Phrasing
- Rhythm and rhythmic notation
- Ornamentation
- Accidentals/ficta
- Instrumentation

How Important is HIP?

The importance of historically informed performance is debatable. Some musicologists argue against the idea of historically informed performance practice, saying that the conventions of performance practice are too restrictive or by pointing out that it is nearly impossible to create

² Robert Donnington. *Baroque Music: Style and Performance: A Handbook*. (London: Faber Music, 1982), pages 6-7.

a performance completely accurate to the original. Other musicologists and performers believe that the hallmark of a quality performance or recording is one that is historically informed. There is no set answer on the importance of historically informed performance practice, as it is a subjective quality.

HIP in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*

A History of *L'Orfeo*

L'Orfeo is considered by many to be the first surviving opera (that is still regularly performed) to ever be composed. It was composed by Claudio Monteverdi, with a libretto by Alessandro Striggio.³ The premiere performance of *L'Orfeo* took place in 1607 in Mantua.⁴

L'Orfeo is based off of the Greek legend of Orpheus, who descends into Hades and attempts to bring his wife, Eurydice, back to the world of the living. Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is composed in five acts. Each act concludes with a chorus, but the opera itself was likely performed as a continuous entity, as that was the convention at the time.

Claudio Monteverdi

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) was an Italian composer who was also an instrumental musician and a choirmaster. Monteverdi is considered a bridge or transition composer between the Renaissance and Baroque eras, as his musical output, as a whole, contains elements and conventions of both the Renaissance and the Baroque, evolving from one era to the next as time progresses.⁵

To the disappointment of musicologists, performers, and Monteverdi enthusiasts alike, much of Monteverdi's output has been lost. His surviving works include nine books of

³ Claudio Monteverdi. *L'Orfeo*. (New York: Bärenreiter, 2012), VII-VIII

⁴ Claudio Monteverdi. *L'Orfeo*. (New York: Bärenreiter, 2012), VII-VIII

⁵ Tim Carter, and Geoffrey Chew. "Monteverdi, Claudio." 2001. doi: 10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.44352

madrigals, large-scale sacred works (i.e. *Vespro della Beata Vergine*), and 3 complete operas (i.e. *L'Orfeo*, *L'incoronazione di Poppea*).⁶

Monteverdi and the *Seconda Pratica*

Seconda pratica translates, quite literally, to “second practice.” In the *seconda pratica*, *orazion* is given priority over *armonia*, which is to say that importance is granted to poetic text rather than harmony. Composers begin to use the power of dissonance to convey emotion. There begins to be a rise in the use of *basso continuo* accompaniment and *obbligato* instruments.⁷

In 1605, Monteverdi distinguishes between the *prima* and the *seconda pratica*.⁸ *L'Orfeo* can be considered one of the first experiments in the *seconda pratica*, due to its composition and premiere dates as well as the fact that it contains much solo singing accompanied by sparse *basso continuo* accompaniment.

Tuning and Temperament

When considering performance practice issues such as tuning and temperament, musicologists must be very specific in their research. As performance pitch varies both by location and by time, musicologists can only consider information from the specific location and time period in which the work being considered existed.

Monteverdi was the *maestro di cappella* at the Mantuan court from 1601 to 1612.⁹ When looking to find the pitch and temperament used by Monteverdi when composing *L'Orfeo*, musicologists often look at the tuning of the organ at the Basilica of Santa Barbara in Mantua, which was built in 1565 and restored to its original pitch in 1997. This organ was tuned at A+1

⁶ Tim Carter, and Geoffrey Chew. “Monteverdi, Claudio.” 2001. doi: 10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.44352

⁷ J. Peter Burkholder, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca. *A History of Western Music*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), A17.

⁸ *Ibid*, 290-300.

⁹ Tim Carter, and Geoffrey Chew. “Monteverdi, Claudio.” 2001. doi: 10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.44352

and using quarter-comma meantone temperament.¹⁰ This being said, it is safe to assume that this pitch and temperament were the same as that of the Mantuan court *cappella*, and, thus, were used by Monteverdi in composing *L'Orfeo*.

According to Bruce Haynes in *The Story of A*, A+1 means that A is tuned about one-half step higher than modern A440 tuning. Haynes offers the value of A+1 to be 464Hz (see *Figure 1*), however the acceptable level for A+1 is anywhere from 464-466Hz.¹¹ The exact pitch of the organ restoration at the Basilica of Santa Barbara, A equals 466Hz, so this is the accepted tuning of A in the performance of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*.

Pitch name	Hz value for A	Frequency range for A	Commas from 440
A+3	521	509-531	13
A+2	495	480-508	9
A+1	464	453-479	4
A+0	440	428-452	0
A-1	413	409-427	5
A-1½	403	398-408	7
A-2	392	384-397	9
A-3	373	361-383	13

Figure 1. From Bruce Haynes' *The Story of A*. Chart depicting different tunings of A4.

Performance Practice Considerations in *L'Orfeo*

In terms of the score, some of Monteverdi's indications have to be respected; otherwise one risks being criticized for misinterpreting the score and the production. This is especially

¹⁰ "The Refound Organ." Music at Santa Barbara. <http://www.antegnatisantabarbara.it/en/organ-antegnati.asp>.

¹¹ Bruce Haynes. *A History of Performing Pitch: The Story of "A"*. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002), page li.

important when the indication is related to expression and text because, considering *L'Orfeo* to be composed in the second practice, there is an emphasis on text, expression, and affect.

In terms of casting, *L'Orfeo* includes roles written for castrati, which raises concerns on modern-day performance. The sound of a countertenor is less like the sound of a castrato, who would have sounded much more like a stereotypically female voice. This being said, it also poses a problem to cast a someone who presents as female the role, as it was written to be performed by a someone who presents as male.

Something recently coming into the picture in opera is the fact that some people's voices no longer fit the conventional "genderings" of voice parts. There are transgender females who may have singing voices that sound stereotypically "male" (i.e. a tenor, bass, or countertenor sound), and there are transgender males who may have singing voices that sound stereotypically "female" (i.e. a soprano, mezzo, or contralto range that is not that of a countertenor). There are also nonbinary-identifying individuals, whose gender identity and/or expression does not match that of "male" or "female," however, these people still have the ability to sing. There is still a lot of research to be done, but this is a potential solution to the problem of filling castrato roles.

Instrumentation

Monteverdi lists about 41-ish instruments to be deployed in the performance of *L'Orfeo*, with distinct

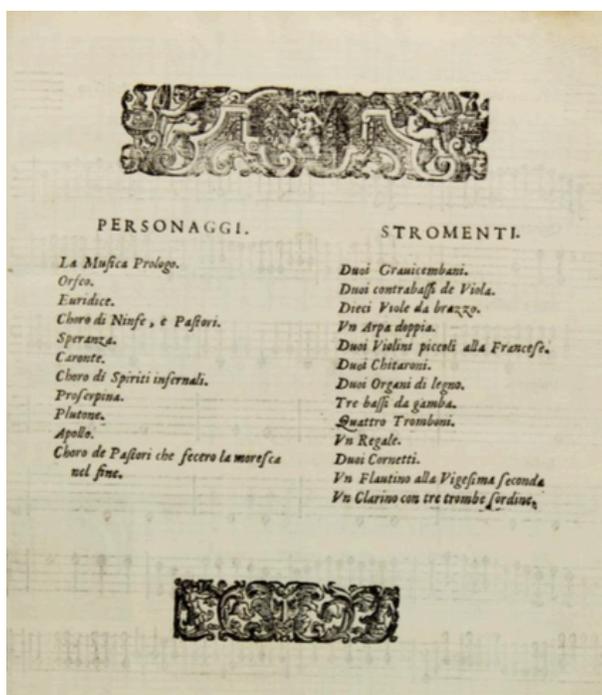


Figure 2. Early edition of *L'Orfeo* score. On one of the first pages, there is a list of characters and instruments that Monteverdi calls for.

groups used to depict particular scenes and characters (see Figure 2).¹² In performance practice, it is important to take these considerations and figure out what instruments would most likely have been used to convey different scenes. This is accomplished by looking at the things Monteverdi wrote and how he grouped the instruments. For example, there are some specific markings to indicate when specific instruments are played in *Orfeo*. At the beginning of the third act, which takes place in Hell, Monteverdi specifies that cornettos, trombones, and regal are to enter. Musicologists and performers take that information, place those instruments at the beginning of Act III, and infer that those instruments were excluded prior to act three.

Ornamentation

Figure 3. Modern score of “Possente spirito.” Depicts two vocal lines, one ornamented and one plain.

In the score to *L’Orfeo*, there is some written-out ornamentation, specifically in the aria “Possente spirito.” In the 1609 score, and the first printed editions of the score, two separate vocal lines are provided, but Monteverdi indicates that Orfeo is to sing only one of them.¹³ One of the lines is left completely plain and the other

is completely ornamented. The modern and early editions of the score contain both lines of music for this aria (see Figures 3 & 4).¹⁴ This is not seen in every piece of Baroque music, but does occur in *L’Orfeo*.

¹² Claudio Monteverdi. *L’Orfeo*. (Venice, 1609.)

¹³ Claudio Monteverdi. *L’Orfeo*. (Venice, 1609.)

¹⁴ Mary Cyr. *Performing Baroque Music*. (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1992), pages 215-232.

music revival was just getting started. This disparity in the years of recording certainly impacted the performance practice. In 14 years, a significant amount of research into early music and performance practice can occur. Though this research is fairly slow-moving, 14 years is enough to change the playing field in terms of the research that is available to performers, musicologists, and conductors. This being said, it is likely that Savall has access to more research, resources, and knowledge to produce a historically informed performance.

Conclusion

So, to wrap it all up, when performing or comparing recordings of Baroque opera, or any early music, it is important to take into consideration all of the performance practice put into place in each. It is clear when looking at the Savall and Harnoncourt recordings of *L'Orfeo*, it is clear that each set of performers and creative teams had a different vision of what *L'Orfeo* should be, both in terms of performance practice and creative liberty. That being said, it is important to take into account the fact that these differences happen for a reason: the two recordings were made decades apart, and that this has an impact on knowledge and research available to research and perform early music. Which recording is better? There is no one answer to this question. The answer depends on who you ask and what their priorities in making and listening to early music are.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Nicholas. "Harnoncourt, Nikolaus." 2002. doi: 10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.12402
- Burkholder, J. Peter, Donald Jay Grout, and Claude V. Palisca. *A History of Western Music*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.
- Carter, Tim, and Geoffrey Chew. "Monteverdi, Claudio." 2001. doi: 10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.44352
- Cyr, Mary. *Performing Baroque Music*. Portland: Amadeus Press, 1992.
- Donington, Robert. *Baroque Music: Style and Performance: A Handbook*. London: Faber Music, 1982.
- Gómez, Maricarmen. "Savall, Jordi." 2001. doi: 10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.44047
- Harnoncourt, Nikolaus. *Monteverdi - L'Orfeo*. Deutsche Grammophon, 2007.
- Haynes, Bruce. *A History of Performing Pitch: The Story of "A"*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2002.
- Monteverdi, Claudio. *L'Orfeo*. Ed. Rinaldo Alessandrini. New York: Bärenreiter, 2012.
- Monteverdi, Claudio. *L'Orfeo*. Venice, 1609.
- Neumann, Frederick, and Jane Stevens. *Performance Practices of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. New York, NY: Schirmer Books, 1993.
- Savall, Jordi. *Monteverdi - L'Orfeo*. Alliance, 2003.
- "The Refound Organ." Music at Santa Barbara. <http://www.antegnatisantabarbara.it/en/organ-antegnati.asp>.