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The tacit knowledge of Claudio Monteverdi as expressed in the opera La Tragedia di Claudio M

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The Making of the Opera

The Concept

Writing the Libretto

The Concept

Concept of the opera within the research project

Many people occasionally silently wish to experience what it would be like to meet an important artist from the remote and buried past. The desire is most felt in the realm of ephemeral arts like music or theatre. True, there are the extant notes that represent the sounds of musical action or the written language that contains clues of emotional declamation. How would it be to know how they did what they did and what their main goal was? The voice is lost, and so is the knowledge that lived exclusively inside the artist.

For historical music performances, old instruments are copied, or extant originals are reanimated by specialists. By playing them again, that vanished sound is partly back or at least pointing in an unusual direction. After handling the instrument for some time, knowledge about the meaning or possibilities of ancient musical messages is tacitly (re)gained.

Singers never, or always, have this opportunity. The living voice is flexible and moldable in all sorts of directions by a plethora of training methods. Most of them are based on an epistemic archive combined with cultural predestination. It is hard to liberate oneself from these biases. On top of that, mechanical boundaries, which always limit the musical instrument, fail for the voice, so in that sense, there is no signposting to the past.

Ironically, in many methods and player instructions of that remote past, one was often recommended to pay attention to singers for good performance. They were the best example of tasteful and expressive music making, and by imitating them, one was told to come closest to a perfect performance.

It is very intriguing to read about the achievements of those singers, and beyond praise, there are some small clues in those texts that trigger our imagination. With some phantasy

and the orientation of acoustic bedding of the appropriate instruments and their sounding space, it should be possible to approach, at least to some extent, the vocal centre of it all.

This mainly happened in the second half of the last century. All kinds of wonderful results can be admired on recordings, but also in live performances offered as a mature segment of the classical music industry.

But still, if I start comparing the way of singing early opera with late opera, the differences in vocal delivery nowadays are getting increasingly smaller. How can this be if the historical instruments are so different from their descendants? Why do I have the impression that singing in speech or speaking while singing is now so often lacking the intended declamation with all its nuances and subtleties?

I decided to feign asking the specialists, the creators and performers of the time when this was the most urgent question in the avant-garde of the musical world. The time that particular style of 'parlar cantando' was born.

I needed Claudio Monteverdi, who, according to his competitors, was the most successful composer in this field, to tell me directly. For that purpose, he needed to be embodied first, and preferably also his best singers, who supported him while he made the most important discoveries of his life. Only by creating an opera again for these singers and evoking its composer might they be able to tacitly reveal a part of the knowledge they had been buried with.

Reliving the year that brought the essential transformation to Monteverdi, the year between his two first operas would be the ideal space to dwell in for my research. But, not alone. A collective of searchers was essential to arrive at a broad scope of reliving experiences. Five composers, five singers, seven actors, ten historical instrumentalists and an entire professional opera crew were needed to embody the tragedy of Claudio and discover its meaning.

Writing the Libretto

The letters

In 2013, the Dutch *Muziekcentrum van de Omroep* library had to close down due to budget cuts by the Culture Secretary of State, Halbe Zijlstra. A unique collection of 5 kilometres of sheet music and a rich library of musicological works, biographies, monographs and international music journals had to be removed from the public domain. A team of librarians carefully selected to preserve rare books that were unique in The Netherlands and should be safely stored. Nevertheless, books also available in other Dutch libraries risked being destroyed.

Because the chief librarian is a good friend of mine, a rare book from the collection escaped the shredder and came my way. It concerns Henry Prunières, *La Vie et L'Oeuvre de Claudio Monteverdi*, 1926, with engravings by Maxime Dethomas. This bibliophile edition contained a substantial part of Monteverdi's extant letters in their original language.

Prunières biography was the first twentieth-century attempt to tell the story of Monteverdi's life based on all the accurate musicological information available at his time.

Significantly, he offered a well-chosen anthology of Monteverdi's letters as an appendix to his book, with very reliable reading and factual information that found its verifiable way into this biography. Prunières' imaginative writing inspired me to think along his lines, which were freer than those of the generations of critical musicologists after him. Just like the engravings of Maxime Dethomas reflect the spirit of his time with their hint of romanticism mixed with art nouveau, so does the narration in this book. An inkling of the composer's daily reality formed the basis of this book, bringing the protagonist closer to the reader as a human being of flesh and blood.

Knowing of Dennis Stevens' translation and comments on the complete letters of Monteverdi, I started curiously rereading them. Soon, the content appeared to me as material for a film script or theatrical play. The idea to write an opera about Claudio Monteverdi emerged from reading several of his most personal letters. A letter like the one sent to his patron Vincenzo Gonzaga on 2 December 1608 is so rhetorical and close to direct speech that one feels implicitly the dramatic potential underneath. The tone directed at his superior is as straightforward as his music, arguing with solid reasons why he rejected the command to return to Mantua. This letter marks a culmination point in a troubled relationship with Vincenzo Gonzaga and his administration. A bit more than a year after the death of Claudia Cattaneo, Monteverdi's wife, the composer was looking back on a chain of disasters and harsh experiences mixed with great moments of triumph.

Not all letters inform us so explicitly about the emotional life of Monteverdi and others. But the majority gives us at least a glimpse and often more while dealing with practical information. There are many examples of practical or artistic discussions around singers and what is expected from them. About the style and technique of performing and the nature of the voice, we have first-hand information that leads us to impressions of the declamatory aspects and theatrical priorities. In this sense, Monteverdi's 127 extant letters are a vital addition to the treatises, prefaces and letters of his contemporaries.

For instance, about the favourite tenor of his time, Francesco Rasi, we learn that Monteverdi considered him capable of composing his own part for an opera that the court demanded but for which he saw no point in writing himself. Via others, we learn that Rasi was not very faithful to his patron, Vincenzo Gonzaga, and performed without permission for Aldobrandini in Rome. Rasi's own letter about his discussion with Caccini about Martinelli portrays him as a very self-confident tenor.

An intensive exchange of letters from the Mantuan court to their connections in Rome aimed to convince the parents of 13-year-old Caterina Martinelli to allow her to leave Rome for the court music of the Gonzaga's. They are revealing a glimpse into the recruitment of young singers. Several of the discussed organisational practicalities initially only seemed to be minor obstructions but, after further thinking, appeared to be dramatic experiences for the young girl. Without the many letters reporting its circumstances, her early death would have been more difficult to work out with such emotional impact for staging.

The efforts made for her replacement as the main singer in Monteverdi's *Arianna* could be reconstructed by an intensive exchange of information between the members of the ducal family and their administration. Significantly, this coincided with the birth of opera in the modern sense: the creation and production of *Arianna*. About the successful audition of the commedia actress Virginia Andreini Ramponi, we read the detailed reports that secretary Costanini and the court general Carlo Rossi have written.

Without all these personal reports and their expressive word choices, it would be difficult to have a proper idea of the atmosphere and feelings of urgency that surrounded the growth of a legendary opera.

Because *L'Arianna's* score (or rather the set of parts) is lost, its artistic value can only be estimated by the information from the extant letters, the libretto and the iconic *lamento*.

The plot - a sequence of historical facts.

There was no need to invent a plot. The circumstances during the period from the first performance of *Orfeo* until the completion of *Arianna* and *Ballo delle Ingrate*, were unique and full of drama.

In the summer of 1607, Monteverdi needed all his attention for the aftermath of *Orfeo* and the publication of the *Scherzi musicali* with its famous [*Dichiarazione*](#) as a final blow in the Artusi polemics. Shortly after, Claudia fell ill and died at Monteverdi's parental home in Cremona, soon followed by a letter with a call to return to Mantua and prepare an opera for the wedding of crown prince Francesco Gonzaga. The commission for this opera to Ottavio Rinuccini and Monteverdi was not immediately sure; others attempted to get this honourable commission. When both men had finished the work with great haste, the court postponed the wedding for political reasons, and thus, the opera performance was delayed as well. A competing opera by Marco da Gagliano, *La Dafne*, was performed during the carnival in Mantua, using the singers intended for *Arianna*. One of them was the 17-year-old Caterina Martinelli, Monteverdi's star soprano and pupil who had lived three years in his house. After successfully making her debut in the *Dafne*, she contracted smallpox and died soon after. Everyone felt the loss, but Monteverdi expressed it only two years later in six madrigals he wrote (*La Sestina*), commissioned by Duke Vincenzo.

The court was in need of a new soprano to take the role of Arianna. Fortunately, in the visiting troupe of comedians, I Comici Fedeli, there was a prima donna who was not only a great actress but also had a good singing voice. Her audition in front of Duchess Eleonora was nothing short of sensational. Virginia Andreini Ramponi's acting prowess brought a new dimension to the musical drama. The culmination of these events was marked by legendary festivities (*le sontuose feste*), providing several opportunities for this star to shine. While Claudio Monteverdi composed most of the music she sang at the various representations, it was his lamento that moved the audience to tears.

The opera indeed brought Monteverdi unprecedented fame, but there was no reason for joy because he had worked himself into what we now would call a burnout. His repetitive pleas for proper payment remained unanswered, and half a year after the triumph of *Arianna*, he begged his patron Vincenzo Gonzaga to grant him resignation. The expectations that had been raised since *Orfeo* had been proven illusory and fallen flat, and he chose to remain true to his dignity and acknowledge this truth.

Shaping the libretto

With all the things that happened in one year, the libretto as I imagined it, needed to be multilayered to cover as much as possible of the coherence between history, mythology and artistic representation. The storyline was already provided by a convincing historical narrative track. Locations and dramatis personae did not need much thinking either, and after visiting several times the original locations in Cremona and Mantua, all my imagination was incited to determine (virtual) stage settings.

Prologue

As a 'primal scene' – the igniting incident- I chose the death of Monteverdi's wife, Claudia. The mirroring of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, which was presented in a sensational composition by Claudio half a year earlier, was a very strong stroke of fate. Reality had taken revenge on fiction. Of course, my libretto had to start with a bit of *Orfeo*.

Initially, I had in mind having Monteverdi conduct a performance of his opera. When it came to the moment that Orpheus turned his head, we should suddenly see Eurydice as Claudia. The upheaval caused by that tragic moment should have triggered the drama.

After discussing this opening with the composers, the idea was rejected as too much drama at the beginning, with complicating consequences for all other theatrical parameters.

Finally, *Orfeo* entering into a dream of Monteverdi was a more workable option with more suspense. The revelation of Claudia as Eurydice could be maintained and the drama could be built up gradually.

I. The act of *Ragione*

The next image I had was a remorseful Monteverdi talking softly to his dead wife in the church, from where she would be buried. His confusion came out through incidental quotes from his own *Orfeo*, with a mixture of consolation and a reflex of burying his sorrow in his art.

Immediately at the start of the opera, the importance of letters had to be stressed.

This was solved by a time contraction and have the letter by the Mantuan court come in at this moment of farewell to his wife. The letter contained a request to return, an order that would in reality arrive two weeks after Claudia's death.

This opened the opportunity to share with the audience a lot of background information concerning the bitterness of life (hard work, poverty by delayed payments, illness), accompanied by Monteverdi's full emotional palette quoted from his letters.

A first *coup de théâtre* is the voice of Caterina Martinelli suddenly being heard in the complaint of the nymph. It functions as a call from Mantua (aligning the order from the letter that just arrived), and introduces the vulnerability of the young singer, being without the protection of her master subjected to the amorous whims of her patron, Vincenzo Gonzaga.

The return to Mantua against his will is symbolised by arriving at a labyrinth. The representation of struggle for transformation and quarrel with real or imaginary opponents. Not seeing his familiar city of Mantua, the way he left it with his wife and children, to go spend his vacation with his father in Cremona, is bringing Monteverdi in a state of confusion. Dedalus, the architect of the labyrinth, sounds like an oracle and is of no help. In this exteriorised inner struggle, the existential fight of creating something completely new, he meets his challenger in the person of Artusi. The insensitive theorist fires all his rational arguments like unguided missiles of accusation on the composer.

Finally, Monteverdi turns his back on the self-indulgent intellectual. By making this decision, he is confronted with the Minotaur of the labyrinth. Witnessing the beheading of the Minotaur by the hero (who might be Theseus), Monteverdi is overwhelmed by this prophecy and collapses. It is the prediction of the transformational work in the year to come.

II. The act of *Piacere*

Caterina Martinelli is the central figure in the second act of the opera. She represents youth, innocence, the potential of the new, awakening sensuality and agility, and, of course, vulnerability. In the subtext, there is a threat that is not yet manifest but always present. This suspense is caused by the possessive but hidden amorous attention of the Duke. Because of the mentioned qualities, Caterina opposes the intellectual poet Ottavio Rinuccini, who has a serious mission with his opera *Arianna*. It must evoke ancient Greek tragedy. When the vain tenor Francesco Rasi makes his bombastic entrance, all the ingredients are there to generate an atmosphere of frantic confusion.

Here is the moment for Duchess Eleonora to expose her power and take the lead in preparing for the upcoming festivities. Her entrance is well articulated by her grand voice, which symbolises her superiority. Her message does not stop the confusion but makes it even worse, although the artists suppress it. The announcement that the preparation of *Arianna* will have to be put on hold, is highly frustrating and humiliating to Monteverdi. He chooses not to partake in this jolliness and to wait for his moment, witnessing the loss of his protégée Martinelli.

The others are satisfied, all for their own reasons, but mainly because all of their work will receive the full attention in the opera *Dafne*, staged at the occasion of the carnival.

Here, the second act develops in the direction of superficial pleasure, which is enhanced by the intermezzo of the Commedia dell'arte company, I Comici Fedeli.

After *Dafne* (Caterina) metamorphoses into a tree, the culmination of rough entertainment reaches the top when drunken carnival revellers interrupt a subtle aria of Apollo, roaring *L'Innamorato*, a song dedicated to Duke Vincenzo. There is a relation to this song and what follows. Right after her moment of triumph, with a virtuosic aria, Martinelli loses all her energy and becomes increasingly ill. Two drunken comics (Zanni and Arlecchino) create a long painful contrast, only later discovering the poor girl after urinating, thinking she was a tree. A sudden awareness of the helplessness of the fragile singer determines the course of all the events that follow in the opera.

The severity of Caterina's suffering increases, and finally, when a (comic) doctor arrives, she is diagnosed as having contracted smallpox. Not only are all bystanders shocked, but the duchess is even working herself in a state of hysteria by denying the verdict and accusing the girl of inordinate drinking during the carnival. Monteverdi cannot believe he is losing Caterina until denial is no longer possible. The end of Martinelli is, as her entry at the end of Act I, another coup de théâtre, now through a madrigal that has been composed by

Monteverdi and commissioned years later by Vincenzo. This time contraction on the historical level elevates the sacrifice of youth at this point of the drama.

III. The act of *Verità*

The dramatic and silent ending of the second act is followed by the comedians' extreme liveliness in their rehearsal of *L'Idropica*, the play they will perform at the wedding festivities. Somehow indifferent to the bewildering circumstances after the heart of the opera in the making passed away, the actors' energy points out that life goes on.

For the third time, the duchess manifests herself as the representation of power and summons the comedians to stop their nonsense. She orders the leading lady, nicknamed 'la Florinda', to audition for the role of *Arianna*. This underlines that the structure of power makes things possible in developing art that otherwise would have been withheld from the creative process.

The actress's audition astonishes everyone present with her command of the words and the dramatic impact of acting through singing. The tenor's vain attempts to outshine his counterpart crumble and reduce his performance to a pale presence. At the same time, Florinda's intensity of expression raises an unprecedented curiosity in Monteverdi.

A dialogue between the two reveals the true nature of the actress, whose mission is to go far beyond entertainment in her profession and bring her audience in contact with the truth.

This moment of vital recognition stimulates the composer to pick up his work again and finish the opera with an extraordinary imagination. This is the point where the narrative is transposed into a temporarily different time experience. The audience is taken into the timeless reality of Monteverdi's art, given voice by the actress, a viol and a theorbo.

At the end of *Arianna's* long monologue, that atmosphere is broken by jealousy and the frustration of Orpheus's vain personification. Whispered by reason (Ragione in the person of Rinuccini, the architect of psychological drama), Orpheus calls on women to learn to show compassion and empathy while he encourages the present men to dominate them. Florinda stands up as *Verità* and warns about the possible escape of Orpheus, which would recycle the endless projection of ideals on women and prolong their suppression. Monteverdi ratifies the decision to finally silence his voice. Consequently, in an orgiastic dance, the half-god is torn apart by the furies.

After this third death in the opera, a conclusive ceremony brings all forces together and unites them for one goal only: Monteverdi's surrender to *Verità* and acceptance of his mission to serve her for the rest of his life.

The dialogues

As mentioned above, those who want to dig deeper into Claudio Monteverdi's life and circumstances are blessed with his 127 extant letters. If we read them out loud, as was the habit until the far in the 19th century, we can imagine hearing his voice again. He was, most of the time, very direct in his formulations and, consistent as he was, did not avoid 'dissonances' in his wording. Luckily, the larger picture can be reconstructed thanks to the ecological environment of the people with whom he was in direct contact. One of them is the librettist of his *Orfeo*, Alessandro Striggio jr. Most (82) of the letters are addressed to him in his function as the duke's secretary.¹ I suspect that the tone of writing was influenced by Monteverdi's close contact with Striggio. Those letters deal with a wide variety of subjects, many of them providing relevant information about artistic matters. Apart from Monteverdi's letters, some others, such as those by the Duchess Eleonora de Medici, Federico Follino, Claudia Monteverdi and Secretary Antonio Costatini, were very useful for the dialogues of the libretto.

Verbatim

Because letters were meant to be read by only one or two persons, they carry a certain intimacy mixed with a more distant and formal attitude. After a targeted search through the most relevant letters, I collected highlights of quotations that were both expressive and informative. A collage of these quotations was the basis of my script.

Later, I found out that this method of compiling a text has been used in theatre in a genre that is called *Verbatim Theatre*.² Effects can be found in my libretto, that are comparable with this verbatim process. Certainly, in the scene of the dying Caterina Martinelli, it generated a sense of immediacy.

A second source for text to be spoken or sung is using quotations from treatises and prefaces. Though less personal, they still have a certain directness in the use of language. This counts for Artusi in the first place, a logical consequence of the fact that he used the style of dialogue in his treatises. Shaping a book as the conversation between a master and pupil is modelled after Greek philosophers. But in Artusi's case, the master's character is quite fierce, a welcome property for drama. Polemics such as his dispute with Monteverdi, who, together with his brother, offered many replies, are obvious subjects for theatre that do not need much more dramatisation.

A third source for the text is the libretti of relevant drama from Monteverdi's

¹ For my story, only Vincenzo I is relevant, but Striggio stayed in his function with the Gonzaga successors Francesco, Ferdinando, Vincenzo II, and Carlo I. Monteverdi's letters always address "Illustrissimo mio Signore et patron Collendissimo". The last letter was from 8 July 1628.

² The most recent and impressive play of that kind was *Is this a Room?*, about the FBI interrogation of Reality Winner, for which the transcript served as a direct feed into the script. Tina Satter wrote the play, which premiered in January 2019 in The Kitchen, New York. More information is on the University of Michigan's website.

contemporaries and texts from songs or madrigals. The latter are mostly used as pointers to subtext meanings for their implicit connotations. Gagliano's *Dafne* is represented by the two arias, both of which have an extra meaning in the narrative³ embedded in the creative use of fragments of recitative to sketch the story.

I allowed myself some borrowings from Emilio de Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione di Anima e di Corpo*.⁴ He is mentioned in many contemporary writings about the new style of recitar cantando and announced this way of performance on the front page of his print. For me, his use of allegories was most welcome. 'Piacere' comes directly from this example, and 'Intelletto' is an alias of 'Ragione'.

By coincidence, I found an important source for 'Verità' directly related to Florinda because it was written for her by her husband, Giovanni Battista Andreini.⁵ The discovery of the *Prologo in Dialogo fra Momo e la Verità* added substantially to the proposition of my libretto because in it, I found an articulated confirmation of Florinda's role representing 'Truth'.

The fourth part of the text is written by myself, often in a mock poetic style that suggests a 17th-century libretto without respecting the appropriate formal rules. The first monologue, "Cadavero infelice," has its borrowings, but because of the lack of any words from Monteverdi about his wife that could be of use, I had to invent them for him. The same goes for his dialogues with Caterina Martinelli, whose close relationship with her master is not reported anywhere. It was left to my imagination to fill this void, although, from the many reactions after her death, it is clear that 'Caterinuccia' (also La Romanina) was very much loved by everyone.

For the Comici Fedeli, the dialogues had to be close to classical Commedia dell'arte. I initially wrote a text for Zanni and Arlecchino in the scene with the tree. This was an attempt in modern Italian slang and did not work well in the historical setting. Keeping the narrative as I designed it, the actors invented their own words and expressions in improvisation sessions. The same procedure was applied in the adaptation of the scene of *L'Idropica*. The quote from the shocked Ambassador Annibale Roncaglia, who thought the play was done by rude people, and it made him turn red by the dirty humour was leading me to the right passage in Guarini's *L'Idropica*.⁶

Il Medico takes on a special position in the group. He rivals the serious act and balances on the threshold of ruining the moving end of Act II and lifting it to a higher level of engaging theatre. The gibberish culture in Comedia is well represented by this actor.

³ The aria "Chi da' lacci d'amor" was sung by Martinelli and praised by the composer in the preface of the edition of this opera. Apollo's aria "Non curi la mia pianta" is brutally interrupted by the balletto *l'innamorato* composed by Giovanni Giacomo Gastoldi for Vincenzo Gonzaga, whose spirit is thus represented.

⁴ Emilio del Cavalliere, *Rappresentazione di Anima e di Corpo*, (Rome, Nicolò Mutij, 1600).

⁵ Giovanni Battista Andreini, *Prologo in Dialogo fra Momo e la Verità*, (Ferrara, Vittorio Baldini, 1612).

⁶ Giovanni Battista Guarini, *L'Idropica*, dedicated to Cesare D'Este, (Venice, Ciotti, 1613). Atto primo, scena sesta, p.14v ff.