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

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Citation

Boer, J. (2024, November 28). *The tacit knowledge of Claudio Monteverdi as expressed in the opera La Tragedia di Claudio M*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4170091>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Conclusion

In the light of the present study Claudio Monteverdi's statement in his letter to the studious readers of 1605 that he did not compose his work haphazardly is most revealing. The fact that he thought he needed to make this statement implies that there was more than just a suggestion of the contrary. The knowledge and craftsmanship of the master were doubted, but he could not explain his truth. Monteverdi's belief is best formulated by this quote from the American philosopher Caputo: 'Knowledge is never more itself than when it stands exposed to the unknown.'¹ The complexity and the ineffability of what Monteverdi tacitly knew was never to be published in a book, as he had unknowingly promised in vain. The ambition of this research project was to illuminate that this was actually the truth he was looking for, the proof that could only be told through his music.

Staging Monteverdi's defence against Artusi's attacks worked out in our opera as the vocalisation of words that, when only read on paper, remain just a part of reasoning and argumentation. Now embedded in the emulated environment of their own times, the absurdity and exaggeration of the chosen words are presented as embodied emotions, all with their own sonic conviction and, through its rhetoric, on the verge of being music in itself. The drama that has been studied by a long chain of musicological readers and writers remained limited to a primarily intellectual rendering of the conflict. At the instigation of the composer himself (hinting to '*litigare*'), the passionate element in the labyrinth as a symbol of quarrel allowed us to experience a surreal amplification of the commitment of both parties.

By searching for quotes that would fit in the dynamic of the heated debate, I made contact with this persistence, thus reinforcing the virtual probe of my research project, the Polanyian interpretative framework. Unlike Monteverdi's monologue in the first scene, next to the bier where his wife was laid out, the dialogue in the labyrinth with *Ragione* finally led to creation. But what drew him really out of his anger and frustration? The distant call from Martinelli with her *Lamento della Ninfa* in an adaptation by our composers, suddenly reminds us that music is for Monteverdi the only way out. The girl knows to hush the enraged composer with his own creation in a rejuvenated shape, for him, as well as for us who know this famous lament so well. Here, the probe starts doing its work because we dwell in the connection between the time of origin and the present, not knowing where this will lead.

Ultimately, this led to the young singer's death at the end of Act II. The historical layer is prominent here because it touches on the factual truth. The dialogue with Duchess Eleonora enhances the drama through her denial of the situation and builds up to a highly emotional farewell of the young star. Almost all the text of this scene consists of quotes from letters about Caterina Martinelli's dramatic situation. Those letters make the realism of this story

¹ John D. Caputo, *Truth, Philosophy in Transit*, (London, Penguin Books, 2013), p. 93.

palpable because they had the function, which nowadays is performed by the new media. A direct line with things happening in court.

In contrast with this realism is the mythological layer represented by the words of Caterina. On her deathbed, she quotes a text from *Arianna*, which is the future she will not live in. And 'I am going in peace', the final words of *Clorinda*,² allude to the drama Monteverdi would write much later. Despite these anachronisms, the quotes are an organic part of the whole. For most of the opera narrative, I pursued historical fidelity to guarantee a backbone, a rigorous structure of this research component in the entire project. This historical rigour is, so to speak, the firmness of the probe stick, while other layers are needed for creative flexibility. Timeless aspects of mythology, however, such as those represented in all the musical works generated by the stories of *Orfeo*, *Dafne* and *Arianna*, tolerate more versatile complexities. In the theatrical meta-realities of the myths, a parallel story can be told in more depth. Martinelli's shining appearance in her performance of *Dafne* ended in a metamorphosis into a laurel tree. This symbolic death was followed by her actual death³, and she left an impression of folly, underlined by the superficiality of Gagliano's music. Her last words are her most touching contribution to the opera, subtly set to new music by allowing the utmost piano level of *parlar cantando*. Monteverdi's madrigal that follows her passing away, *Darà la notte il sol lume alla terra*, was written as in memoriam Caterina Martinelli. In this setting, it has an unprecedented impact. The tacit voice of the madrigal's compositorial beauty is almost indifferent to the vehicle of the words, though they are fully integrated. Even the deconstructing interruptions by the newly composed formel are not affecting the essence of Monteverdi's music.

On the contrary, just like the *Lamento della Ninfa*, the madrigal reveals in this way something of that essence, which usually remains hidden in the subconscious domain. A theatrical layer provided by the actors accentuates its dramatic power in a most natural connection. Though we touched the essence of Monteverdi's music with our probe, we can and should not lay it bare by analysis. The original expression should remain embedded in its totality, and explication would only cause impoverishment by narrowing the magic down to the analysable. Artistic truth will only reveal itself in the heat of the theatrical momentum.

The question arises: is this revelation not always happening when we perform Monteverdi's music in the most dedicated and committed way, without an articulated research goal? What is the difference between being touched by the madrigal in this way or a regular but excellent concert performance?

My answer would be that, although every artistic research project is different, they nevertheless all have in common that there is a fundamental resemblance by indwelling in the studied subject, which demands a special kind of commitment. This commitment demands a frank attitude towards the unknown, which is not welcome in the regular

² From the *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, performed during carnival in Venice, 1624.

³ The death of Caterina echoes Monteverdi's wife Claudia at the beginning of the opera. Both mirror a mythological precursor, the first death Eurydice and the second Dafne.

performance practice. In research, we submit to unexpected manifestations, which are intangible. This is how I understand Giulio Cesare's words in the *Dichiaratione*, which, to my feeling, must have been an input of his brother: 'True virtue requires the whole human being.'⁴

In artistic research, the unknown is as welcome as the known because it includes the potential of new knowledge. The advantage of my project is that I could give space to this potential knowledge and was sometimes rewarded by discoveries.

For instance, in all the relevant literature I consulted, Giovanni Battista Andreini's Prologue in a dialogue between Momo and Verità was not mentioned. However, after attributing allegorical names to all five characters for the consistency of the libretto, this play confirmed my choice for La Florinda as Truth.

One of the several subquestions that accompanied my research was the importance of Commedia dell'arte in the development of opera. I could not have found out what this role contained without making their practice part of the opera. Even more than singers and instrumentalists, these actors embodied the know-how of their tradition. By using their own traditionally fabricated masks, an extra component of theatrical presence elevated their supporting energy and meaning. This is very convincingly demonstrated in the scene of the dying Martinelli, as well as in the preceding burlesque act of Zanni and Arlecchino. All participants experienced the intensity of these scenes and their complete merging into the whole discourse of the opera as heuristic moments of recognition.

Finally, the question is whether new knowledge about Monteverdi himself emerged from this large experiment to represent him on the stage. The answer to this question is only complete in the performance of his *Tragedia* and vanishes as soon as the masks go off. The comparison of the portrait and its copy may function as a lead. I see the copy as a mask that urgently must be removed to reveal the face it has been hiding for too long. During the whole research, my conviction increased that Monteverdi's many statements about being a practitioner and his references to understanding things mainly by their practical evidence point to him as an active musician, in addition to his status as a composer. Particularly, his command of the viola bastarda deserves investigation, preferably in a practical way and in connection with an improvised counterpoint. The prominent position of a viola bastarda on the cover of Monteverdi's obituary *Fiori Poetici*, is for some reason overlooked by musicologists. The reference to him as the Orpheus of his time by his unequalled playing on the viol is reduced to an ornamental anecdote. If we want to reconnect to his vanished knowledge, this might be the next adventurous challenge.

⁴ 'la verità della virtù vol tutto l'homo', See Chapter 2, *Dichiaratione* p. 76.