

Ten years after the publication of Striggio and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, Stefano Landi's *La Morte d'Orfeo* continues the hero's story according to Ovid's myth, but with some additional metamorphoses to delight the 1619 audience.

Landi's work is not called 'opera', nor *favola in musica* (a Story in Music, Monteverdi's designation), but *Tragicomedia*. Orpheus' tragic destiny is contrasted with the joy of his birthday celebrations; the exquisite drama of his search through Hell for Eurydice is mocked by Charon's rough humour.

Landi develops the importance of the Chorus, both dramatically and musically. Formally, the entrance of the choir marks the conclusion of each Act, commenting on the action like the chorus in a Greek drama. Sometimes the chorus represents the Shepherds of Arcadia, but in Act II they are forest-folk, the playful Satyrs. In the finale, choirs of Shepherds and Gods unite Earth with Heaven.

But the chorus appears at other moments too. At the beginning of Act IV, the Gods descend to Earth to celebrate Orpheus' birthday, and a chorus of female Maenads are a malevolent presence throughout Acts III and IV. Musically, Landi expands the chorus polyphony to eight voices, divided into two choirs.

As we watch Orpheus' adventures, the dramatic intensity is increased by the appearance on stage of the principal antagonists. The serene calm of Apollo (God of Music) is challenged by Bacchus, God of Wine. Wild women, the Maenads, oppose naïve men, the Shepherds. Fury escapes from Hell to lead the attack on Orpheus. The Sun is hidden behind a dark Cloud.

Characters deliver their speeches as *recitar cantando* (acting in song), to the steady rhythm of the *continuo* band – keyboards, lutes and harps. Strings represent the lyre of Orpheus; recorders are pastoral; cornetti and sackbuts symbolise magic and mystery, Heaven and Hell.

In the 17th-century theatre, as at a renaissance court, princes reign from a central position on high. Nobles stand to the right, servants to their left. Watching from the audience: heaven is high up; the sea is low down; heroes and the noble string instruments are to the left; villains and the weird cornetti are to the right.

As in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, as in the ancient Greek dramas, the moment of death itself is not seen on stage. Rather, a Messenger narrates the tragic news, and pitiful objects – Orpheus' decapitated head, his abandoned lyre, the ruined crown of flowers – are shown. Landi's Messenger in Act IV, the shepherd Fileno, begins his narration in the conventional manner, reciting on one note, which the composer then transforms into an elegiac strophic song.

There are arias also for Orpheus, celebrating his birthday in Act II; for Fosforo, spirit of light, as well as Charon's drinking song, in Act V; and Teti's strophic prologue to Act I. Only Act III has no aria, because the early-17th-century *aria*, a strophic song structured over a repeating bass-line, epitomises Apollonian order and control.

In contrast, Act III is dominated by Bacchus and his female devotes, Nisa and the Maenads. Instead of singing a structured aria, Nisa communes with the spirits of the forest in a dialogue with double echos. Echo scenes were very fashionable in early operas, and conventionally the Echo is benign, offering wise advice. But Landi's malevolent echoes twist Nisa's words and sway the Maenad's emotions, turning their lamenting sadness into violent anger.

Muovere gli affetti - moving the passions of the audience was the raison d'etre of 17thcentury music-drama. The anonymous circa 1630 guide for an Artistic Director, *Il Corago*, directs singers to deliver their texts like fine actors in a spoken play. The secret of delivery is what Shakespeare calls *Action* - body posture, facial expression, tone of voice, passionate gestures – suited to each Word of the poetic text. In this period, poets and actors, orators and singers united structure and inspiration, composition and performance. The spirits of passion are moved by rhetorical force, uniting logical argument, emotional appeal and dramatic characterisation to entertain the mind, inspire the soul, and touch the listener's heart.

These spirits of passion communicate between performer to audience, and also between Mind and Body. According to period Medical Science, emotional feelings produce physical effects by changes in the balance of four body liquids, the Four Humours. Red Blood is the sanguine Humour, flowing outwards from the heart to make your face warm and red. If it retreats inwards again, you go pale as you are overwhelmed by Black Melancholy. Yellow gall is the bitter fluid of anger, the Choleric Humour, hot and dry. Its opposite is Green Phelgm, cold and wet, an absence of energy or desire.

Various liquids assume great importance in Landi's *Tragicomedia*. Teti, Queen of the Sea, sings her prologue from the river Ebro, personified in the next scene by the character Hebro. Fate commands her from Heaven not to land, setting up three symbolic levels in the stage-picture: Heaven, Earth and Water. In Act V, these levels are transmuted into Heaven, Earth and Hell. But as that Act begins, Orpheus waits on the banks of another river, the infernal Styx, hoping that Charon will ferry him across to the Elysian Fields.

In the hope of forestalling Orpheus' tragic destiny, Mercury brings him in Act II glasses of heavenly *ambrosia*, the divine Nectar of the Gods. But somehow this precious gift is forgotten, and the Satyrs find red Wine instead. Thus these forest creatures evoke the dangers of the dark wood, and invite Bacchus himself to appear. Nectar preserves a perfect balance of the Four Humours, but Wine leads to an excess of the red, Sanguine Humour: too much courage, love and hope, over-confidence, excessive happiness.

Of course, it soon ends in tears. The Maenads lament for Orpheus, who has abandoned them. Orpheus laments for his lost Eurydice. Now their hearts, previously warm and expansive, are squeezed by grief. They cry bitter tears of black Melancholy. But Bacchus has another aspect, terrible and destructive. He poisons the Maenad's hearts with Fury, the yellow gall of the Choleric Humour, associated also with strong liquor. Orpheus ends his drinking career with the Water of Lethe, another infernal river. This last drink brings forgetfulness, and sets him on the road to heaven. But has he achieved an Apollonian balance of the Humours, or just damped down his emotions with green Phlegm?

The abrupt changes from exaggerated happiness to tears or to anger, and finally to oblivion are typical true-to-life effects of excessive indulgence in Bacchus' liquids. But the changing Humours also work to destabilise the audience's emotions, making listeners more susceptible to the tragedy, comedy, pathos and joy that they are experiencing.

Almost three centuries before Nietzsche's analysis of Apollonian and Dionysian influences in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Apollo and Bacchus were the opposing Spirits of Music that brought about the birth of Landi's Tragicomedy. In modern-day Early Music too, the cool, intellectual discipline of historical investigation should – at its best – serve to fuel the fire of artistic energy. In any performance, there should be an artistic tension between technical control and wild inspiration. And as performers and audiences respond to this 17th-century music with their minds and their passions today, Apollo and Bacchus are still amongst us!

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