

# 1 Approaching Monteverdi: his cultures and ours

ANTHONY PRYER

In an anonymous letter, written just two years before Monteverdi died, and printed with the libretto of his opera *Le nozze d'Enea con Lavinia*, the author recommends the composer to the audience and imagines the fate of his music in the far-distant future:

Enjoy the music of the never-enough-praised Monteverdi, born to the world so as to rule over the emotions of others . . . this truly great man . . . known in far-flung parts and wherever music is known, will be sighed for in future ages at least as far as they can be consoled by his most noble compositions, which are set to last as long as they can resist the ravages of time.<sup>1</sup>

The future predicted in this letter seems substantially to have come true. Centuries after his death Monteverdi's works continue to be appreciated in far-flung parts of the world, they continue to console us, and we still think of Monteverdi as a great musical figure. As for the ravages of time, over three hundred of his works have managed to survive<sup>2</sup> together with one hundred and twenty-seven of his letters<sup>3</sup> and numerous other documents directly relevant to his life and times.

The mere fact of the survival of many of Monteverdi's compositions would be remarkable, but his music has also accomplished something else: it has reached out to exert a formidable influence on the imaginations of many recent composers. Numerous adaptations and arrangements of his works have appeared over the past hundred years (those by D'Indy, Orff, Respighi, Hindemith, Maderna and Henze are only the most famous), and his musical procedures have shown a remarkable capacity to insinuate themselves almost seamlessly into the creative fabric of our modern musical languages. This can be seen, for example, in works as contrasted as Strauss's 1935 opera *Die schweigsame Frau* (where a section of *Poppea* is transformed into material for a singing lesson in Act III), the jazz piece by the American composer Harold Shapero entitled, in honour of Monteverdi's name, *On Green Mountain* (1957), and the recent compositions by the English composer John Woolrich (*Favola in Musica*, *Ulysses Awakes*, *Ariadne Laments*) where fragments of Monteverdi's works are transliterated into a post-modern idiom.

To these musical signs of assimilation and integration one might add examples from other fields. For example, Monteverdi has featured in

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literary works both as a subject for discussion amongst the protagonists (as in *Il fuoco*, 1898, by the Italian novelist Gabriele D'Annunzio), and as a participating character (in *Masque of the Gonzagas*, 1999, by the British writer Clare Colvin). Moreover, both he and his works perform a notable role in the constant play of allusions to be found in *La Carte postale* (1980), a study of the exchange of messages between past and present by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this ability to form part of the easy currency of shared reference and communication, without the need for self-conscious explanation, that most sociologists and anthropologists would take as a clear sign of 'belonging' to a culture, and in that sense Monteverdi belongs to ours – as well as his own.

But the constructive link between identity and culture is potent, and it would be very difficult for a person to become deeply embedded in more than one culture and remain unchanged.<sup>5</sup> If we are really concerned to approach Monteverdi a little more closely then we have to begin by understanding something of the grids of meaning from our own culture that we have thrown across his (rather different) social practices and attitudes. The notion of 'cultural meaning' is itself of relatively modern origin and academic analyses of it are still ongoing. In the brief space of this chapter, we can merely pick out some particularly established and influential interpretations of the term 'culture' – those connected with national identity, the art world, popular interests, and technology and progress – and investigate how these recent perspectives may have transformed (or even obscured) Monteverdi's practices in our modern retelling of them.

### Cultural perspectives

Modern conceptions of culture mostly have their roots in the revolutionary account of the topic developed by the eighteenth-century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. In his *On German Character and Art* (1773) he established the highly influential notion of the 'Volksgeist' – the spirit of the people – which, he claimed, unified and underpinned the history, destiny, and attitudes of a nation. He also distinguished between 'Culture' and 'Civilisation', the former comprising the spirit that holds a society together in a distinctive way, and the latter being a veneer of technology and social practices that may be shared across many societies.

The German Romantics and, after them, the early anthropologists, took from Herder his central idea that culture was the defining essence of

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a nation – the same thought that persuades some to think of Monteverdi as an essentially Italian musician, with all that that might entail. Others of a more classical persuasion, such as the pioneering German educationalist Wilhelm von Humboldt, borrowed from Herder an interest in culture as the supposed fiefdom of an educated elite who produced ‘improving’ works which were assumed to require intellect and study for their meaningful appreciation. Out of this tradition comes the view of Monteverdi as a creator of original, cultivated art music in the written, western tradition. As for ‘popular culture’, Herder himself famously published some early collections of folksongs (1778–9), but the use of the term as indicating a concern with the widely shared interests and tastes of the common *populus*, and acting in some senses in opposition to so-called ‘elite’ cultures, gained a firm foothold in the 1960s among sociologists and those concerned with the academic discipline of ‘cultural studies’. Little has been said about Monteverdi from this perspective, though there is some scope for discussing the influence on his works of the ‘popular’ music of his time (whatever Monteverdi and his contemporaries might have construed by such a term).

Finally, we come to ‘civilisation’ and its associations with technology, urban society and industrialisation. This perspective (or, rather, this antithesis to culture as Herder saw it) – with its interest in the depersonalised functions of human beings, the operations of the market place, and technological innovation as a sign of progress – has attracted a good deal of analysis and negative criticism from theorists, particularly those of the twentieth-century Frankfurt School such as Adorno, Benjamin and Horkheimer. From these viewpoints we may learn something about Monteverdi’s music as an economic commodity (then and now), about the uneasy tensions he felt between his functional roles (as courtier and servant) and his special gifts as an individual, and also about the nature of his innovations in musical technology (new instruments and notational devices) and the mechanics and devices of musical expression. What follows is a brief account of these modern ways of construing Monteverdi as a ‘cultural phenomenon’, together with comments on some of their consequences for his realistic survival in our imaginations.

### **Monteverdi as an Italian: national cultures and nationalism**

To have called Monteverdi an ‘Italian’ composer in the seventeenth century would not have been inappropriate even though Italy (as a country) did not become politically unified (as a state) until 1861. ‘Italy’ was the place where the ‘nation’ of Italians lived and where they spoke, more or less, a common

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language and shared a history – but they did not yet share a central, guiding legislature nor a corporate political autonomy, both of which are key ingredients of statehood. These distinctions between country, nation and state are important because they help to explain the allegiances and antagonisms that arise in the lives of communities and individuals.

In Monteverdi's time citizens of the country of Italy were subject to at least two levels of statehood. The first came from the local 'city-states', most of which were ruled by dynastic families such as the Medici (Florence), the Gonzagas (Mantua), the Farnese (in Parma and Piacenza) and the Este family (in Ferrara and Modena). Monteverdi, at first as an instrument of Gonzaga influence, and later in his own right as a famous composer, wrote works for many of these families. Interestingly, there seems to have been a complete absence of commissions from the Medici for pieces to be performed in Florence, though in 1614 Francesco de' Medici asked to borrow the score of *Arianna*,<sup>6</sup> and Monteverdi hints at an invitation to go to Florence in a letter of 20 January 1617. Complicated rivalries and hierarchies may lie behind this situation.

The second level of state control in Italy came from the Holy Roman Emperors (the Habsburgs) based in Vienna and Innsbruck. They were, at least nominally, the military defenders of the Pope and the Catholic Church, and they intervened regularly in the affairs of Italy. Monteverdi himself gives a small example of this in a letter to Alessandro Striggio of 10 September 1627, where he tells us that his problems over a church benefice could be solved 'at once by means of an order from Her Majesty the Empress to the Governor of Milan or to the Cardinal of Cremona'. His connections with the Habsburgs are demonstrated by the dedication of his Eighth Book of Madrigals to Emperor Ferdinand III, and his *Selva morale* collection of sacred music to the Empress Eleonora (formerly a Gonzaga princess).

Additionally, a portrait of Monteverdi now in Innsbruck (Fig. 1.1(a)) may have some direct connection with the Habsburg court. It is apparently a copy of a picture now in Vienna<sup>7</sup> but, rather oddly for a copy, someone has made an incomplete and slightly incompetent attempt to add musical notation to the book held by Monteverdi. This music, even as it stands, is intriguingly very close to a section in the sole surviving manuscript source of his opera *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* – the point in scene 7 of the final act where Giunone (Juno) sings the words 'Gran Giove' (Great Jove) (Figs. 1.1(b) and (c)).<sup>8</sup> The 'G' for the character of Giunone is particularly clear in the painting. The Holy Roman Emperor and Empress were often allegorised as Jove and Juno, as we can see from the *intermedi* composed by Monteverdi for the wedding of Eleonora and Ferdinand II in 1622,<sup>9</sup> and from a ceiling painting in the Sala dei Giganti in the Palazzo Te in Mantua. The Innsbruck portrait seems also to be attempting to make

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Fig. 1.1a Portrait of Monteverdi, after Bernardo Strozzi

this link. It may be significant, too, that, in the final act of *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* (at least in the version as we now have it), the Imperial Eagle is made to sweep across the stage, which may indicate a connection with the Habsburgs for the opera itself.

The Imperial family and the Gonzagas have received much attention in our usual approaches to Monteverdi, but the influence of Spain, cutting across our modern comfortable style-and-place organisation of his life (Cremona, Mantua, Venice), requires a special effort to bring into

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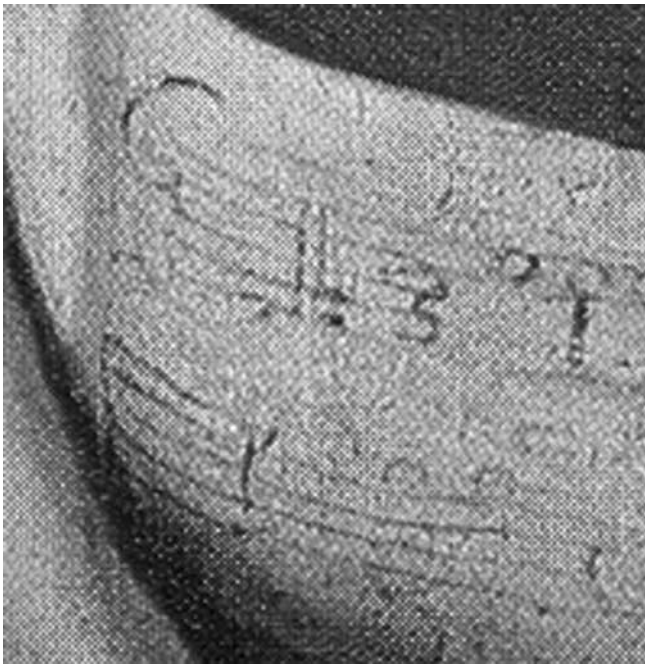


Fig. 1.1b Detail of music in Fig. 1.1a

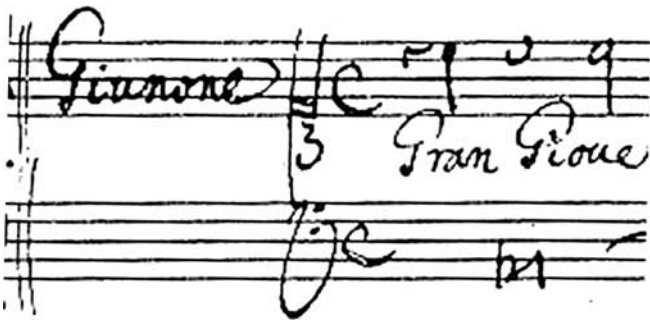


Fig. 1.1c Detail from Vienna manuscript of *Il ritorno d’Ulisse in patria*

focus. Spain, through the Spanish branch of the Imperial Habsburg family, controlled both the Kingdom of Naples in the South and Milan and its territories in the North. Monteverdi’s birthplace, Cremona, lay in the territory of Milan, which was a Spanish possession, and so, in effect, he was born a Spanish citizen. His father organised the Spanish census in Cremona in 1576,<sup>10</sup> and the Monteverdi family showed a strong preference for imperial names, whether of ancient Roman origin (Claudio and his brother Giulio Cesare), or of the Habsburgs (Monteverdi’s son Massimiliano was named after the Holy Roman Emperor at the time of



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his birth). When Monteverdi died he was buried in a chapel of the Frari church in Venice reserved for Milanese citizens, since, as a ‘foreigner’, he was not allowed to be interred in S. Marco. Perhaps we should not be surprised that a document survives in which Monteverdi is accused of making traitorous remarks about the Republic of Venice, allegedly hoping that it would one day be ‘subjugated to the King of Spain’ and that the ‘Imperial Eagle’ would rule there.<sup>11</sup> In Mantua there was a steady flow of musicians with connections to Spanish Naples (for example, Giaches de Wert, Adriana Basile, and the guitarist Pedro Guterrez), as well as Southern poets (Tasso, Marino), and Duke Ferdinando Gonzaga was said to speak Spanish with as much facility as Italian.<sup>12</sup>

The effects of these Spanish cultural connections on Monteverdi’s music have yet to be fully studied. It is clearly relevant to this perspective, for example, that *Fumia la pastorella* in his First Book of Madrigals (1587) is apparently in praise of a Neapolitan gentlewoman, and that several manuscript copies of Monteverdi’s works survive in Naples – those for ‘Voglio di vita uscir’ (SV337), a Gloria for eight voices (SV307), and one of the scores of *Poppea* (SV308). There is also a work for Spanish guitar published in Rome in 1637 which is probably an arrangement of a dance by Monteverdi (the ‘Ballo del Monte Verde’, SVA1), and seems to reflect southern traditions.

These overlapping notions of statehood and nationhood in Monteverdi’s life cannot be related in any simple way to our more modern concept of ‘nationalism’. This last term does not just imply a sense of attachment to a nation, which Monteverdi might well have had, and which we should properly call ‘patriotism’. It also involves a conscious ‘ideology of attachment’ which tends to suggest that deep spiritual and racial causes lie behind the special characteristics of a nation, that their individual members inescapably exemplify those attributes, and that, under certain conditions, those same individuals have self-denying responsibilities in the service of the nation’s prestige and destiny.<sup>13</sup>

Nationalism has now been around for some two hundred years, but it has undergone various changes in interpretation and implementation. These changes are not reflected very clearly in the story of the reception of Monteverdi’s compositions simply because most of his works were not recovered until a fairly late stage of nationalism, that of Italian Fascism in the 1920s and 30s: Malipiero’s complete edition dates from 1926–42. However, one interesting exception to this (there are others) concerns the modern rediscovery of Monteverdi’s lament from his opera *Arianna* (1608).

In the early phase, nationalist historians were most concerned to gather documents relevant to the history of a nation and to codify and

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preserve them. This approach was carefully theorised by the German historian Leopold von Ranke in the early nineteenth century: he argued that the historian should be objective, that facts should have primacy over theories, and that the past should be understood in its own terms.

The earliest modern references to Arianna's lament show some signs of reflecting these principles. Esteban de Arteaga, in his history of Italian opera of 1783, carefully notes the importance of *Arianna* for the Italian tradition (he talks of its influence on Pergolesi), and quotes verbatim six lines of text from the lament, beginning not with the opening words but with 'O Teseo, O Teseo mio / Se tu sapessi, oh Dio!' from the middle of the second section.<sup>14</sup> Carl Winterfeld, in his 1834 work on Giovanni Gabrieli and his times, provides some of the music, replicating the clefs and the bare bass-and-voice of the original notation.<sup>15</sup> His edition is without the addition of expression and dynamic markings, and like Arteaga he gives only a tiny fragment of the work, since he reproduces only the opening section of the lament. This incompleteness was remedied first by the German musicologist Emil Vogel in his pioneering and extraordinarily professional study of Monteverdi published in 1887.<sup>16</sup> Vogel's completion of the music was replicated in Angelo Solerti's history of early seventeenth-century opera issued in 1904.<sup>17</sup> Both Vogel and Solerti retained the original clefs and the bare notation, but neither of these 'objective' historians was quite able to resist subtly re-barring the piece so as to make it conform to 'logical' accentuation and regular divisions of the beat. In their scholarly endeavours the 'scientific' understanding of music took precedence over mere antiquarianism.

In the late nineteenth century in Italy, in parallel to the reconstructive work of Vogel and Solerti, another kind of nationalism was gaining ground, one based not just (or even) on the responsible recovery of national documents, but rather on the demonstration that there were unifying, distinctive and prestigious national characteristics, and that their 'innateness' was proved by their continuous existence throughout the history of the nation.

An interesting demonstration of this principle can be seen in Alessandro Parisotti's famous version of Monteverdi's lament in the second volume of his collection called *Arie antiche* (1890). Parisotti provides only the opening section (in which truncated version it was frequently performed in recitals up to the 1950s), though he knew about the rest since he tells us that lament was complete in the manuscript source in Florence he had used for his publication. To make the piece palatable to his contemporaries, he provided modern clefs, a slightly over-chromaticised piano accompaniment, and 'expressive' articulation and dynamic markings (from *piano* to *forte*). No phrase marks were added to the voice part, but they are everywhere in



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the accompaniment, evoking what Parisotti apparently considered to be the lyrical flow of the music.

In the 1890s the question of the distinctive musical identity of Italy rested very strongly on the achievements of Giuseppe Verdi and the claims of Italian opera as against those of Wagner and the German tradition. This is exactly the argument that plays such an important part in Gabriele D'Annunzio's 1898 novel *Il fuoco* mentioned earlier. In that novel Monteverdi is invoked as a proto-lyricist, the possessor of an 'heroic soul, purely Italian in essence'. At a crucial moment towards the end of Part I of the book, it is precisely a performance of Arianna's lament that awakens the protagonists to a continuous line of expressive beauty and drama that links the past to the present and the future.<sup>18</sup> Once this trans-cultural view of the lyrical 'essence' of Monteverdi's music became accepted, its 'objective' historical integrity was in jeopardy – the supposed 'long line' of the melody became as important as the localised moments of rhetorical intensity, and the concentration on emotional expression seemed to justify a link between past and future based on a notion of 'trans-historical humanness'. This viewpoint also, incidentally, established a still discernible bias (with some notable exceptions) towards an interest in Monteverdi's secular, rather than his sacred, music.

Respighi's arrangement of Arianna's lament in 1909 was one of the more extreme manifestations of these tendencies. Its heavy orchestration, extra chromaticism and complete re-ordering of the sections so as to begin with Arianna yearning directly for Teseo by name, now allowed the piece to proceed rather like a *verismo* aria. This trend towards lyrical intensification can also be seen in Pietro Floridia's edition of 1923.<sup>19</sup> Unlike Parisotti, he added lyrical phrase marks to the vocal line, and drove up the dynamics to *fortissimo*, while adding *affrettando* and *ritenuto molto* to the expression marks. When Malipiero came to publish the work in the complete edition (Volume XI in 1930), he supplied some very subdued dynamic marks (mostly *piano* with one moment of *forte*), which seem, if one is to add such marks at all, curiously over-cautious. After all, from the accounts we have of vocal performances in Monteverdi's time (including *Arianna*) they could sometimes be what we might want to call melodramatic, though usually within the confines of a chamber-music environment.<sup>20</sup> Malipiero's subdued dynamic markings seem to have been his way of controlling the perceived excesses of his own contemporary performers – his 'inauthentic' notation was perhaps designed to manipulate the singers into rendering scaled-down, more 'authentic' performances. The clash of cultures between Monteverdi's music, Malipiero's scholarly traditions and the performance practices of the early twentieth century can be read off the pages of that first complete edition.

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## Monteverdi as a composer: artistic cultures and popular cultures

Monteverdi was valued as a composer in the seventeenth century, and so he still is in the modern world. Moreover, the reasons behind these two judgements seem, at first glance, to be reassuringly similar. In the seventeenth century Monteverdi was praised for the ‘variety of his compositions’, for their ‘musical way of moving some particular emotion in the breasts of men’ (both remarks from Matteo Caberloti),<sup>21</sup> and for his ability to outshine his contemporaries as the sun does the moon (so described in a letter published with the scenario of the opera *Ulisse Errante*, 1644).<sup>22</sup> The implied criteria here of diversity of output, artistic power and comparative worth are ones with which we might easily agree today – and which seem to have engendered his popularity within the present early music field. Moreover, it is clear that his creative abilities inflected the decision-making processes in his appointments. For example, in the dedication to his Fifth Book of Madrigals (1605) he tells us that it was his compositions, welcomed with ‘singular favour’, that had led to his heading the musical establishment at Mantua. Similarly, when the Procurators of S. Marco appointed him *maestro di cappella* in August 1613, their official acceptance commended him as a ‘most outstanding individual’ whose ‘quality and virtue’ was evidenced by his ‘works which are found in print’ as much as by the way he directed performances.<sup>23</sup>

Once employed, however, Monteverdi seems to have been a performer, director and servant first, and a composer only second.<sup>24</sup> At first glance, that functionary aspect to his work may not seem to distinguish him radically from the modern world in which composers also find themselves working under contract. However, our contract law is underpinned by an important modern moral precept – that a contract can only be undertaken by an autonomous agent who, by acting voluntarily and with full knowledge of the implications, thereby creates the conditions of his or her obligations. These modern ideas are derived partly from political notions of a social contract between free citizens as developed by Rousseau in the eighteenth century. It is doubtful that Monteverdi’s situation matched those conditions of freedom, since he seems to have felt an inescapable obligation towards the Gonzagas even after he left Mantua, and at one point cryptically remarks that the duke was responsible for his marriage.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the unpredictability of his patrons never really allowed him to know the implications of his commissions. The Gonzagas, for their part, were concerned with what seemed to them to be issues concerning the natural order of things: hierarchy, respect and the obedience of functionaries. When Francesco became duke he wrote