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Claudio Monteverdi Defines the Early Opera

Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643) was an Italian composer who paved the way for the opera. He composed both secular and sacred music at the beginning of the Baroque Music period. His surviving works include three operas and nine books of madrigals. Monteverdi was one of the first composers to include the basso continuo technique in his pieces, however he also included polyphony in many of his madrigals. His operas were unique and considered to be the original “modern” operas. His work was used as inspiration for many other composers that came after him. He is known for being the face at the end of the Renaissance era and the beginning of the Baroque Period. Monteverdi is famous for his work with madrigals and operas, going against traditional music styles and shaping the picture of operas and other vocal music throughout that time.

Claudio Monteverdi was born in 1567 in Cremona, Italy and baptized on May 15, 1567. Marc’Antonio, who is known as the maestro di cappella, taught him during his childhood. Monteverdi was a member of the church choir at the Cathedral of Cremona. Later in his life he studied at the University of Cremona. When he was fifteen years old he published his first works, a collection of vocal pieces called The Sacrae cantiunculae while he was a student at the Cremona Cathedral. In 1587 he published his first book of madrigals and in 1590, he published his second book.

Shortly after his time in Cremona he began working in. Mantua for Vincenzo I Gonzaga who was the duke of Mantua at the time. Monteverdi dedicated his third book of madrigals that was published in 1592 to the duke. In 1601, Monteverdi was appointed maestro della musica in Mantua. His fourth book of madrigals that he published in 1603 includes texts from poets such as Tarquato Tasso and Giambattista. His fifth book of madrigals was again dedicated to Vincenzo I Gonzaga.

In 1607 Claudio Monteverdi published his first Opera L’Orfeo or Orpheus, this marked the change from the Renaissance to the Baroque Period. L’Orfeo is based on Greek Mythology and tells the story of Orpheus and his journey into the underworld to retrieve his bride Eurydice back from Hades. It is told in five acts and traditionally only contains two different set changes. This story, while originating in Greek mythology, has been retold on many different platforms throughout history including the modern musical, ballets, and novels. However, while there have been these adaptations, L’Orfeo is one of the most famous and well known. L’Orfeo is not the first opera that we know of, the first opera is called Dafne composed by Jacopo Peri and was first performed in 1597 in Florence, Italy. L’Orfeo goes down in history as the most famous Opera and the one that really shaped the style of the Baroque Period.

Monteverdi included polyphony, which is combining multiple parts that all have their own melodies and come together to harmonize with each other, in L’Orfeo and this was one of the first instances that polyphony was used that we know of today. Possente spirto is an aria, which is a song from an opera or cantata, from L’Orfeo. Possente spirto is full of vocal ornamentation and has alternations of arias and ritornellos, which is another part of Monteverdi’s style that defines the early opera. A ritornello is short passage of instrumental music that happens between the songs in an opera. Ritornellos are helpful for the vocalists and actors on stage to move around to a new spot. Vocal ornamentation or trills is when a vocalist adds extra notes that usually happen quickly to the melody that has already been written down. Polyphony, ritornellos, and vocal ornamentation are the tree main ideas that Monteverdi introduced to the opera and are the reason why his work stands out in history.

Many individuals during this time thought his work was too modern and he received large amounts of criticism for his work. He used larger instrumental ensembles to play during the opera and used the orchestra to help set the tone for different parts of the story. He assigned specific instruments during different parts during the opera and was one of the first composers to do so. He created clear melodies that were linear as well and was the first composer to really combine all of these aspects together into an opera. L’Orfeo was the first in a long line of operas that defined the beginning of the Baroque Period.

 Monteverdi wrote eighteen total operas, however there are only three that survived and that we know of today. His second opera that we know of is Ulysses and was published in 1641. Ulysses is based off of the Ulysses that is in Homer’s The Odyssey, another Greek Mythology story. Many works from the early Baroque Period are based on Greek Mythology. This opera was similar to L’Orfeo in style, as is matched the compositional theses that are well known for the Baroque Period. Monteverdi added a larger orchestra and as he grew as a composer eventually made the orchestra a main part of the opera. His final opera that we know of is Coronation of Poppea in 1642 and instead o0f being based on Greek Mythology, this story was based on Roman Mythology that told the story of Neri and Poppea and follows them throughout their love story. At this point in his career he ensured that the orchestra was necessary to the telling of the story. He used the music to fully express the emotions of the characters in this opera and emphasized the dramas that they would face throughout the story. He also changed his focus from the Gods to the story of the people. His final opera shows how much he changed as a composer over his career. Monteverdi finished his career in Venice and wrote sacred music. In his seventies in 1640 he wrote an important collection of scared pieces known as Spiritual and Moral Forest. He continued composing until he died in 1643 in Venice, Italy.

Claudio Monteverdi is well known for his Madrigals and his operas. He is famous for polyphony, ritornellos and vocal ornamentation. However, he is also known for his use of monody. Monody is a decorated style of solo singing accompanied by an orchestra. He used monody in his operas and included them throughout his career. Monteverdi has a lasting impression on the history of the opera as he is known as “the inventor of the early opera.” He invented not the opera itself, but everything that makes the opera what it is today. He added character and solid storylines, orchestral music that plays a large role, and a style of composing that tells a story through music. While he was not the actual first composer of the opera, he was the inventor of the opera in the sense that he is the most notable composer and made the opera into something that appealed to a wide audience.

Monteverdi composed for the majority of his entire life and composed for many great historical features. He is most known for the opera; however, he was a composer for many different musical styles. He composed both secular and sacred music throughout his career and catered to different kind of audiences. The opera tells stories through music, both instrumental and vocal, it combines the two together to form a unique style of composition. Monteverdi was the first to bring that art to a new light and compose it in a way that brings the stories to life in a well-organized way. He paved the way for future composer and his stories live on to this day. He was a unique composer and his biggest contribute to music history is his invention of the early opera.

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