

OPERA ORIGINS

by

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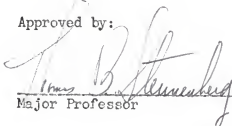
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INTRODUCTION

In trying to reconstruct and assess the main features of any historical event, it is difficult to find the starting point. The history of opera is no exception. We find varying degrees of importance given certain events by different writers. We find writers who see the music and drama combination of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as seeds of opera, and others feeling there is no significant connection. However, in the minds of the members of the "Florentine Camerata," long since recognized as the originators of opera, there was no doubt as to the origin of their idea. Greek tragedy, as they understood it, was the sole basis of their experiments. And yet, little is known of the part music really played in Greek drama, the one extant example being a very short mutilated fragment of unison melody from a chorus of Euripides' Orestes (408 b.c.), and even this was not known to the early opera composers. It was, however, this supposed music of Greek tragedy which they were seeking to revive in their "monodic" style. To whatever degree their conclusions were right, the student of the history of opera must know something of the history, literature, and mythology of the ancient world, because of the very fact that to the originators it was so vital, and also because so many opera subjects have been drawn from these sources.

This study, ignoring modern scholarship, reflects only the viewpoint of the Camerata who believed they had revived the true Greek tragedy. However, a study of the forms of music and drama in the Medieval and Renaissance periods will precede the study of the "Camerata" itself so that their possible merit in relation to the birth of opera can be studied.

CHAPTER I

THE FORMS OF MUSICAL DRAMA BEFORE 1594

Through the centuries, many attempts were made at combining drama and music. For the present, we will take for granted the use of combinations of poetry, music, and dancing in Greek drama and its later Roman imitations, and look back in time to approximately the eleventh century.

As is well known, all significant music in the Middle Ages came from the church. So also, as far as is known, the significant theatre of the Middle Ages is religious. Ancient drama seems to have disappeared. It is possible that traces of Roman comedy may have been retained in the popular farces and other pieces performed by strolling bands of players, and later by the jongleurs, but historically recorded drama, developing within the liturgy, emerged only partially from the church in the fifteenth century.¹

In the West, two stages of this religious theatre are to be distinguished: The Liturgical Drama (from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries and later) and the Mysteries (mainly from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries with some later survivals).

LITURGICAL DRAMA

The religious theatre, now called Liturgical Drama, appears to have originated through the practice of performing certain portions of

¹Donald Jay Grout, A Short History of Opera, New York: Columbia University Press, 1947, p. 16.

the liturgical service as a drama. Tropes, textual and musical additions to regular chants, were the portions of the service being dramatized. The officiating priests actually represented the characters rather than just narrated the events. The story to which this technique was first applied was the story of the Resurrection, and soon after, to that of the Nativity. Soon the original stories were extended backwards to include earlier events, considerably increasing the length of the drama. In the beginning, they were acted in the church as part of the liturgy. Eventually, because of the increase in size, and because the stage properties, and costumes were becoming more elaborate, they were taken to places outside and acted in the vernacular by lay actors. In the earliest of these dramas, everything was sung; but the more these plays grew away from the church, the more speaking and the less music they included, which led them to resemble the form of the later Mysteries. When these dramas became established in the vernacular, they were entirely spoken.²

In these dramas, there are songs for both soloists and chorus. In the earliest of the dramas they may have been accompanied by the organ; occasionally, other instruments are mentioned, and it is probable that instruments of many kinds were used much more extensively in performance than the manuscripts themselves indicate. Most of the music is written as a single line melody, though there are occasional passages in two or more parts.³

²Percy C. Buck, The Oxford History of Music, London: Oxford University Press, 1929, p. 193.

³Grout, op. cit., p. 17.

Two kinds of music are to be found in the Liturgical Dramas. The first, and by far the most prevalent, is the non-metrical plainsong of a simple, though not purely syllabic, type. The second, which is metrical, is usually strophic with two to fifteen verses.⁴

It is clear that these dramas were primarily of musical origin. They seem to have begun more in the fashion of oratorio than of opera, but as the symbolical acts which accompanied them were elaborated, the transition to drama with dramatic action and costume, as well as with some sort of scenery, was an easy one.⁵

MYSTERIES

The Mysteries, which were probably an outgrowth of the Liturgical Dramas, began to flourish during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They were different from the earlier Liturgical Dramas, as music had no leading part, but served merely as an adjunct to the often brilliant spectacles. The use of motets, chansons, plainsong, and instrumental music simply helped to make the dramas more impressive. Without music, they would not have been much different, only a little less spectacular. They were not musical plays; they were plays with incidental music.⁶

The Mysteries, known as sacre rappresentazioni, are not only generally regarded as the forerunners of the oratorio; their influence is also apparent in some seventeenth century Italian operas as well.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Buck, loc. cit.

⁶Howard Mayer Brown, Music in the French Secular Theater, 1400-1550, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 42-57.

The subjects of the Mysteries are sacred but of much greater scope than those of the Liturgical Dramas; thus the Mystery of the Old Testament ran for twenty-five consecutive days, and the Mystery of the Acts of the Apostles lasted forty days.⁷

Though the church still collaborated in the production of the Mysteries, and the Bishop's permission was necessary for a performance, the sponsor was the community as a whole and the actors were recruited from professional guilds. The vernacular was used consistently.⁸

According to Brown, in his Music in the French Secular Theatre, the sources are remarkably consistent about what musical forces were necessary to perform a Mystery with suitable pomp and pageantry. The mainstay of any of these municipal undertakings would have been the choir of angels, capable of singing plainsong, but with enough soloists for part music. An organist would have been associated with the chorus. A few trumpets and drums, a pipe and tabor, and one or two miscellaneous wind instruments complete the customary performing ensemble.⁹

Music was used in several traditional kinds of scenes: celestial, pastoral, demonic, and regal, as well as with the transitional "pauses" where it filled in until the next scene on another platform. It appeared only occasionally outside of these rather rigidly defined limits.¹⁰

These medieval Liturgical Dramas and Mysteries, then, although they did not lead directly into opera, hold some importance in its

⁷Grout, op. cit., p. 18.

⁸Brown, Ibid.

⁹Brown, op. cit., p. 57.

¹⁰Ibid.

development. The Italian sacre rappresentazioni were the models from which the first pastoral dramas with music were derived, and as was mentioned earlier, their influence was to be felt in some operas of the seventeenth century. However, their music was completely unsuited to dramatic expression, and the immediate predecessors of the opera must be sought in the secular theatre of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance.¹¹

SECULAR DRAMATIC MUSIC

Except for the dramas of antiquity, the earliest known secular play with music is Adam de le Halle's Li Gieus de Robin et de Marion, given at the court of Charles d'Artois in Naples, probably in 1285. According to Apthorp in his Opera Past and Present, research has proved beyond a doubt that neither the music nor the rest of the songs was written by Adam, but only the connecting dialogue. As was the fashion of the day, he took certain popular ballads, constructed a dramatic story out of them, and bound them into a play with spoken dialogue of his own invention. Although this work has sometimes been called "the first opera comique," it actually has no historical connection with the latter form and, at the very most, can only be called an "operatic symptom."¹²

With the coming of the Renaissance, interest in all forms of non-church music increased. Throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, music was a main feature of courtly entertainments, banquets, festivals,

¹¹Grout, op. cit., p. 21.

¹²W. F. Apthorp, The Opera Past and Present, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901, p. 4.

triumphal entrances and the like. This music cannot be properly called "dramatic" since it does not seek to carry on the action of a drama; nevertheless its connection with the history of opera is important, for these courtly displays established the practice of bringing together many different artistic resources such as singing, playing, dancing, scenery, costumes, and stage effects. This kind of scene, non-dramatic displays with music accompaniment, came into the opera early in the seventeenth century, and have remained as characteristic of opera ever since. In the sixteenth century, the most important of the many types of entertainment in which music served were the ballet and the inter-medio.¹³

Mascherata, Masque, and Ballet

The ancestor of the ballet was the mascarade (Italian *mascherata*, English *masque*). Originally a popular spectacle associated with carnival time, the Italian *mascherata* had developed into a favorite court amusement which was imitated by the French and English in the sixteenth century. The French *mascarades* frequently formed part of the ceremonies of welcome to a distinguished visitor. Various allegorical and mythological characters paying homage to the visitor were combined with music and dancing and presented more "lavishly than logically."¹⁴ It was *mascarades* of this sort that became models for French Opera prologues. In another type *mascarade*, created for the entertainment of an entire company, dancing was the chief attraction. It was from *mascarades* of this

¹³Grout, op. cit., p. 23.

¹⁴Willi Apel, Harvard Dictionary of Music, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 70.

sort that the characteristic French form of the ballet was derived. The English masque, developed later in the century, was quite similar to the French masquerade.¹⁵

One of the most sumptuous productions of this type work was the Ballet Comique de la Royne, which was written and performed for the marriage of Margaret of Lorraine to the Duke of Joyeuse, at Versailles, in 1581. It is the earliest for which the music is preserved and is especially remarkable on account of its inclusion of two monodic songs. This ballet was produced by an Italian string player named Baltazarini, who was "Valet de chambre" to Catherine de' Medici. Poetry, music, dancing and dramatic action were associated in a manner miraculously close to the operatic experiments which the Florentines were already making.¹⁶

The music to Baltazarini's ballet was by Beaulieu and Salmon. It consists of six choruses, two dialogues with choral refrains, two solos, and two sets of instrumental dances. The choruses are strictly homophonic and rather dull, partly because their musical rhythm is slavishly bound to that of the words by long and short notes for the long and short syllables according to the principles of "musique mesuree a l'antique." The bass solos, as was customary in the period, simply follow the bass of the harmony. Some of the soprano airs are highly ornamented--a style of writing frequently found in solo madrigals and also used by Monteverdi for one aria in his "Orfeo." The most interesting pieces are the dances,

¹⁵Grout, loc. cit.

¹⁶Theodore Finney, A History of Music, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1951, p. 269.

with their formal, stately, geometrical rhythms. One of them, "Le Son de la Clochette," is still played today.¹⁷

Had Baltazarini continued in the same direction to the discovery of the recitative, it is altogether possible that true opera might have been invented in two places at once. But the expense of one such evening's entertainment was too great and neither his interest nor that of his audiences lay in this direction. The dramatic ballet survived for a few decades in France, but by 1620, all pretense of a unified plot was abandoned, and the ballet reverted to a more diversified spectacle for the amusement of the court.¹⁸

Intermedio

It will be observed that in pieces such as the mascarades and ballets, the function of music was still primarily adjunct to that of a visual spectacle. There is another class of sixteenth century works in which the role of music was to offer diversion in connection with a regular spoken play. This type of entertainment is called Intermedio. It is a theatrical entertainment of light character, introduced between the acts of a serious play. (Interpolations consisting only of instrumental music are more properly termed Entr'actes.) Many new plays were being written in Italy, in Latin or Italian in imitation of classical models, including them in the "humanistic" movement. Practically all these plays made use of music to some extent, but in a subordinate fashion. The general tendency was to separate the musical numbers from

¹⁷Grout, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁸Finney, loc. cit.

the play itself by placing them in the prologue and at the ends of the acts, so that each appeared as something intermediate in the action of the play. Their subjects were as a rule, connected in some allegorical way with the subject of the drama. Il Lasca, in the foreward to the intermedi Psyche ed Amore, said: "That which is enacted by the Gods in the fable of the Intermedi, is likewise enacted--as it were, under constraint of a higher power--by the mortals in the comedy."¹⁹

On especially festive occasions, such as marriages, the intermedi might be very elaborate. Striggio's intermedi for L'amico fido given in Florence, in 1569, were presented with a pomp of staging and music that foreshadowed many seventeenth century operas.²⁰

Perhaps the most elaborate of the intermedi of the sixteenth century were those for Bargagli's comedy La Pellegrini, performed at Florence in May of 1589 as part of the festivities attending the wedding of the Grand Duke Ferdinand de' Medici and Christine of Lorraine. There were six intermedi, planned by Count Giovanni Bardi; some of the texts were written by Rinuccini, and the music was by several composers, including Marenzio, Cavalieri, and Malvezzi. (Bardi and Rinuccini are to be recognized as members of the Florentine Camerata who were soon to bring Opera into being.) There were five and six part madrigals, double and triple choruses, and a final madrigal calling for seven different vocal ensembles in a total of thirty parts, each part sung by two voices. Three of the six solos are in ordinary madrigal style with the lower voices played

¹⁹Grout, op. cit., p. 26.

²⁰Ibid.

by instruments. The others exemplify the florid solo style prevalent in the sixteenth century, the voice ornamenting a melodic line which is given simultaneously in unornamented form in the accompaniment. These songs were accompanied by various groups of instruments, which also played several "sinfonie." The "sinfonie" were of no fixed form, and were usually used as introductory pieces. The orchestra included organ, lutes, lyres, harps, viols, trombones, cornetts, and other instruments used in different combinations for each number, foreshadowing the style of orchestration used by Monteverdi in his "Orfeo." Unlike most sixteenth century intermedi, the music of these was deemed important enough to be printed in Venice, in 1591.²¹

Rubsamen, in his book, Literary Sources of Secular Music in Italy,²² tells us that there were many secular dramas, both comedies and tragedies, pastoral eclogues, and other genres of representation in which music played a sufficiently important role to warrant their consideration as precursors of the opera. The coming of opera did not put an end to the intermedi and similar spectacles; they remained popular at Italian courts well into the seventeenth century. But the opera eventually took over many features of the earlier forms, and eventually supplanted them. The intermedi particularly is important as a forerunner of opera for two reasons: first, because it kept alive in the minds of Italian poets and musicians the idea of close collaboration between drama and music; and second, because in these works as in French Dramatic Ballet, the external

²¹ Grout, op. cit., p. 28.

²² Walter H. Rubsamen, Literary Sources of Secular Music in Italy (ca 1500), Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1943, p. 163.

form of future opera is already outlined--a drama with interludes of music, dancing, splendid scenery, and spectacular stage effects.²³

Madrigal Forms

Most of the leading Italian madrigal composers of the sixteenth century were writing music for these intermedi, and because of the trend toward drama and expressiveness in music, these composers began trying to instill dramatic motifs into the madrigal itself. These sixteenth century composers were still assuming that thoughts and emotions could be expressed by a group. The representation of feeling was reinforced by musical means which suggested such acts as sighing, weeping, or laughing. The most thorough-going attempts to adapt the madrigal to dramatic purposes, however, were madrigal comedies. They were an early attempt to combine farce with music, but they were merely suites of madrigals, not theatrical music. The most famous of these madrigal comedies was Vecchi's Amfiparnaso, published in 1597. (It has been surmised by some that Vecchi intended the Amfiparnaso as a satire on the early attempts at operatic music.) The Amfiparnaso was not staged, but sung as a madrigal cycle. In this composition there are eleven dialogues and three monologues, the same kind of musical setting being used for all, namely five part madrigal ensembles. In the monologues, all five voices sing; in the dialogues, the differentiation of persons is commonly suggested by contrasting the three highest with the three lowest voices, though at times all five are used even here. The music of the comic characters is mostly in simple note against note style, with a fine sense of the animation of

²³ Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music, New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1960, p. 276.

comic dialogue. On the other hand, some of the five voice pieces are beautiful examples of the serious Italian madrigal style. As far as their contribution to opera is concerned, their chief usefulness may have been to prove that madrigals alone were not suitable for dramatic purposes. In the hands of Banchieri and other later composers, the madrigal comedies soon declined and eventually disappeared.²⁴

By the last decade of the sixteenth century, Europe was on the verge of opera. It remained only to transform the relation between drama and music from a mere association into a "chemical union." For this end, two things were still necessary: a kind of drama which would be suitable for continuous music, and a style of music capable of dramatic expression.²⁵

Pastorale Drama

Toward the middle of the sixteenth century, the pastorale began to displace all other types of dramatic poetry in Italy. So complete did its dominance become that Angelo Ingegneri, the foremost writer on the theatre in the latter part of the century remarked that, "If it were not for the pastorales, it might almost be said that the theatre was extinct."²⁶

A dramatic pastorale is a poem, lyric in substance but dramatic in form, intended for either reading or for stage presentation. The chief characters are shepherds, shepherdesses, and sylvan deities. For

²⁴Grout, Ibid.

²⁵Grout, History of Opera, p. 30.

²⁶Ibid.

backgrounds are field, forests, or other idyllic and pleasant natural scenes. The dramatic action is restricted to mild love adventures and a few incidents rising out of the circumstances of pastoral life, and usually ends happily.²⁷

The sources of the pastoral ideal lay partly in literary studies (Theocritus, Vergil), but it was redeemed from affectation by the sincere profound Italian feeling for the beauties of "nature humanized by industry."²⁸

The finest examples of the pastorale, and two of the most beautiful poems in all sixteenth century Italian literature, are Aminta and the Pastor Fido. "These pastorales lent themselves naturally to musical treatment, not only because of their preponderantly lyric content, their brevity, and their use of choruses, songs and dances, but also because of the very language. In Aminta, the words are hovering on the edge of song every minute; every phrase is filled with unheard music which Tasso himself called 'the sweetness and, so to speak, the soul of poetry.'²⁹

Great tragedy and great comedy were denied to the Italians. But they produced a novel species in the pastorale drama, which testified to their artistic originality, and led by natural transitions into the opera. Poetry was on the point of expiring; but music was rising to take her place. And the imaginative medium prepared by the lyrical scenes of the Arcadian play, afforded just that generality and aloofness from actual conditions of life, which were needed by the new art in its first dramatic essays... "Aminta" and the "Pastor Fido"...complete and close the Renaissance, bequeathing in a new species of art its form and pressure to succeeding generations."³⁰

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰J. A. Symonds, Renaissance in Italy, London: Smith, Elder and Co., pp. 241-242.

Because of our knowledge of the form of the original opera, we can see that the kind of drama suitable to continuous music has now been found in the pastorate. We can also see that what is now needed to complete the "chemical union" of music and drama is a style of solo singing that can be used dramatically. We must not assume, however, that opera was being systematically searched for through these early combinations of drama and music. We can assume, though, that in any art, or for that matter, any area of invention, better ways are constantly being sought to present the material at hand.

CHAPTER II

THE EMERGENCE OF OPERA THROUGH THE CAMERATA

A group commonly known as the "Florentine Camerata," and one accepted by most as the originators of the opera, began merely as a group interested in all the arts and sciences. They have been called "dilletantes"; those interested in knowledge for knowledge's sake. So the inspiration for the form of opera itself may have come about, even accidentally, through knowledge brought to light in their study of ancient Greek and Roman literature, a sixteenth century preoccupation.

The palace of Count Giovanni de Bardi became the meeting place for this group composed of poets, musicians, astrologers, mathematicians, and others. Count Bardi opened his home so these men could come and discuss and receive instruction in these various arts and sciences.

Bardi himself was a philosopher and mathematician; he had an enthusiastic love for Dante, and a general love for learning. According to Pietro de Bardi, son of Giovanni, his father also took great delight in music and "was himself a composer of some reputation."¹

During the course of these group studies and discussions, an awareness of the mutual discontent regarding the musical language of the times began making itself apparent. In the sweeping tide of the "humanistic" movement, the desire for individualism in art, and a growing desire for expressiveness was developing. To be un-hellenic was to be inartistic;

¹Pietro Bardi, "Letter to G. B. Doni," translated and reprinted in Oliver Strunk's, Source Readings in Music History, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1950, p. 363.

the awareness that counterpoint was clearly and irredeemably un-Platonic and un-Aristotelian, and the realization that polyphony, the only form of music then known, was not the answer to their dilemma, must have been an earth-shaking discovery. But once awake to the fact, they determined to act upon it. Under the sponsorship of Bardi, this study of Greek and Roman literature was extended by one of the members of the group, Vincenzo Galilei, to include the style of Greek music. An historic reform was in the making. One that would bring music for the first time under the sway of Renaissance principles, it was truly the Renaissance of the art of music!²

One point that should perhaps be made clear before going on is, that as far as opera is concerned, there is no mention of the problem of tragedy in the writing that Galilei will do. This is particularly interesting because Galilei must have known that at the time the literary world was loud with heated arguments about tragedy, the educational tendencies that it ought to show, and the rules of Aristotle. The idea of reviving classical drama had been taking root in other places; but it seems to have been far from the thoughts of the earliest members of the Camerata. The reform that they were to propose affected not music in the theater but music in general. They were critical of their form of music, not because they wanted to do away with it but because they wanted to reform it and give it new life.³

²Apthorp, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

³Nino Pirrotta, "Temperaments and Tendencies in the Florentine Camerata," Musical Quarterly, April 1954, p. 171.

An example indicative of the feeling of this particular group against modern polyphony might be the thoughts of Giralamo Mei, mentor to Galilei in his studies.

MONODY - THE GREEK WAY

Mei compared the effect of modern polyphony on the soul to the vain efforts of several men straining to pull down to the floor a stable pillar by tugging at it with ropes from opposite directions, failing despite all their forces to budge it. He judged that all those who wrote counterpoint were traveling in a direction that would never lead them to the perfection Greek music had known. He saw proof of this in the absence, when modern music was played or sung, of any of the marvelous effects the Greek musicians had achieved. He felt very strongly that composers were careless about suiting the rhythm and tempo to the meaning of the words, "for at times, the soprano will hardly move, while the tenor will fly and the bass will be strolling along practically barefoot...." He also criticized the introduction of "passagi" where they interfered with the declamation of the words. "Almost in despite of nature, God's minister, which perfected man by giving him speech so he could make his own understood, they prefer to strive to imitate the warbling and lowing of beasts."⁴

For Mei, a firm believer in Aristotle's theory of catharsis, (emotional purification through the study of the arts, particularly tragedy), the failure of modern music to produce any emotional effects in the

⁴Claude Palisca, "Giralamo Mei, Mentor to the Florentine Camerata," Musical Quarterly, January 1954, p. 16.

listener was a grievous shortcoming. Therefore, it was important to know why Greek music was so much more stirring. Mei was confident that his reconstruction of the ancient practice had taught him the answer. He was certain, first of all, that Greek music, choral as well as solo was almost always monodic. The main thing that convinced him of this was the fact that according to the many incidents related by the ancient writers, music was felt to be a valuable medium for moving the affections, and that by logical thinking, one would realize that voices moving in all directions at once, and at all levels of pitch, could not possibly have these effects on the emotions. As further proof that Greek music was always monodic, Mei stated the fact that in all his reading of the ancient sources, he had not encountered any mention of parts such as tenor and bass, or any account of how parts might be sung together. Secondly, he was convinced that the essential practice of the Greek tonal system was the transposition of the entire system up and down. He deduced that the various qualities of the voice being distinct, each should be appropriate for expression of certain determinate states, and that each should express easily its own, but not that of another.⁵

The tones intermediate between the extremely high and the extremely low are appropriate for showing a quiet and moderate disposition of the affections, while the very high are signs of a very excited and aroused spirit, and the very low, of abject and humble thoughts. In the same way a rhythm intermediate between rapid and slow shows a poised spirit while a rapid one manifests excitement, and a slow one, sluggishness and laziness.⁶

⁵Palisca, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 11.

The exhaustive scope of Mei's researches into Greek music surpassed anything previously attempted in this field. Valori, the younger, testified that Mei had spent ten years studying just the Greek musical codices of the Vatican library. Almost every theoretical work known to present-day specialists on Greek music appears on a list of sources sent by Mei to Galilei.⁷

Galilei was completely won over by Mei's arguments, in spite of the fact that they were in total opposition to the teachings of Zarlino, his teacher of many years. Galilei reiterated the accusations against polyphony with a vengeance, seemingly forgetful of the fact that he himself had contributed many instrumental works and a book of madrigals to this very school of writing.

After his conversion to the "pro-hellenic camp," Galilei rated all counterpoint an "impertinence," and made this the premise on which his "Dialogo della musica antica e della moderna" was based.⁸

Convinced that monodic writing was the key to the dilemma they were feeling in their music, Galilei therefore began to experiment with the new style, using his correspondence with Mei as his guiding principle. According to Pietro Bardi, Galilei was the first to create music for the "stile rappresentativo." Pietro states that it was an arduous undertaking considered to be almost ridiculous. However, he was encouraged and assisted by Giovanni Bardi, "who toiled entire nights and incurred great expense for the sake of this noble discovery."⁹

⁷Ibid., p. 8.

⁸Ibid., p. 17.

⁹Bardi, op. cit., p. 364.

The argument of Galilei was, in brief, that for every phrase of poetry there was but one unique melody of tones and rhythms that perfectly expressed it. Word-painting, imitations of sighing, and the like, so common in the sixteenth century madrigal, Galilei dismissed as childish. The correct way to set the words, Galilei said, was to use a solo melody which would merely enhance the natural speech inflections of a good orator.¹⁰ Galilei tried his hand at monodies of this sort, setting some verses from Dante's "Inferno" for tenor solo with accompaniment of viols. It was very favorably received at Count Bardi's and so Galilei continued his undertaking by setting to music a part of the Lamentations and Responds of Holy Week, and these were sung to the same company in the same manner as the first compositions. These two compositions have not survived and so we cannot assess their value as works of art. The younger Bardi does state that even though they were accepted favorably, they contained a certain "roughness and excessive antiquity" which was sweetened by the next composers to attempt the style, Giulio Caccini and Jacopo Peri, also members of the "Bardi coterie."¹¹

Giulio Caccini, considered a singer of rare talents, although very young, was at this same time in the Camerata. He felt himself inclined toward this new music and began, under Giovanni Bardi's instructions, to sing ariettas, sonnets, and other poems suitable for reading aloud, to a single instrument in a manner that astonished his hearers.¹²

¹⁰ Pirrotta, op. cit., pp. 187-188.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 171.

¹² Bardi, loc. cit.

In Giovanni Bardi's "Discourse on Ancient Music and Good Singing," addressed to Giulio, we find these instructions and comments. The first part of the letter defines his thoughts of music and what it should be, re-expressing the thoughts of Mei and Galilei, however more superficially. Bardi paraphrased a quotation of Aristotle, saying that he felt a man cannot be called a good musician who lacks the power to dispose the mind of another with his harmony, to any moral quality. He also mentioned Plato, who said that the melody ought always to follow the verse that the poet has composed.¹³

As his own suggestion to Caccini, Bardi asked that Caccini make it his chief aim to arrange the verse well and to declaim the words as intelligibly as possible, not letting himself be led astray by the counterpoint. He supported this suggestion by stating that just as the soul is nobler than the body, so the words are nobler than the counterpoint.

Then you will bear in mind that the noblest function a singer can perform is that of giving proper and exact expression to the canzone as set down by the composer, not imitating those who aim at being thought clever and who so spoil a madrigal with their ill-ordered passages that even the composer himself would not recognize it as his creation. Finally, the nice singer will endeavor to deliver his song with all the suavity and sweetness in his power, rejecting the notion that music must be sung boldly, for a man of this mind seems among other singers like a plum among oranges....¹⁴

Again, Bardi mentions Aristotle: "Youths should be taught music as a thing seasoned with great sweetness," Plato: "Thales the Milesian cured illness with his sweet manner of singing," and Macrobius: "On leaving the body, the soul returns to its origin, which is heaven,

¹³Palisca, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁴Giovanni Bardi, "Discourse on Ancient Music and Good Singing," Strunk's, Source Readings in Music History, New York, W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1950, pp. 295-6.

through the sweetness of music."¹⁵

One last suggestion was that Caccini should not imitate those who, with much ado, begin tuning their voices and recounting their misfortunes, saying that they have caught cold, that they have not slept the night before, that their stomach is not right, and other things of this sort, so tedious that before they begin to sing they have cancelled the pleasure with their exasperating excuses.¹⁶

Caccini, therefore, in imitation of Galilei, but in a more beautiful and pleasing style, (helped by the suggestions of Bardi), set many canzonets and sonnets written by excellent poets. The style which was soon developed by Caccini, while aiming first of all at clear and flexible declamation of words, nevertheless admitted certain embellishments of the melodic line at appropriate places; he thus introduced into monody an element of vocal virtuosity, which in the sixteenth century had been manifested by the improvisation of ornaments (scales, turns, runs, passing notes, and the like) on any note of a melody without regard to the character of the text. The texts that he chose show that he was careful to completely disassociate himself from the other composers of villanelles and canzonets. He had learned this much from the ideals of the Camerata: that the mood of the music must correspond exactly to that of the poetic texts; and that he must maintain a constant artistic tension in which the device of repetition, (traditional in canzone form), is inappropriate or is justified at only a few expressive moments. Caccini

¹⁵Ibid., p. 300.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 301.

also ignored the usual romantic, pastoral poets in favor of more classical ones like Sannazaro and Chiabrera.¹⁷

Caccini, in the foreword to his songs published as "Nuove Musiche," stated that the conversations held at the Count de Bardi's were of more use to him than thirty years study and exercise of his art. Here he also claims the merit of having first published songs for a single voice, which had indeed had great success.

In Charles Burney's History of Music, we find a quotation of music historian, G.B. Doni, (1593-1647), "...it must be confessed, that we owe to him, in a great measure, the new and graceful manner of singing, which at that time spread itself all over Italy, for he composed a great number of airs which he taught to innumerable scholars, and among the rest to his daughter, who became a famous singer."¹⁸

In his Nuove Musiche, Caccini said: "The idea came to me to introduce a kind of music whereby people could, as it were, speak in tones using therein a certain noble negligence of melody, now and then running over some dissonant tones, but holding firmly to the chord in the bass."¹⁹ Caccini also sets forth in his foreword, the views previously stated by Mei, Galilei and Bardi. He added instruction and examples making this a discourse of the Italian manner of singing newly conceived, "wherein is set down the use of those graces in singing, as the trill, and gruppo."²⁰

¹⁷Pirrotta, op. cit., p. 182.

¹⁸Charles Burney, A General History of Music, Vol. 2, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1957, p. 513.

¹⁹Giulio Caccini, "Nuove Musiche," (Foreword), Strunk's, Source Readings in Music History, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1950, p. 377.

²⁰ibid., p. 378.

I have found it necessary and also have been urged by my friends to have my said compositions printed, in this my first publication to explain to my readers in this discourse the reasons which led me to this manner of singing for a solo voice, and in this my discourse, since compositions of that complete grace which I can hear in my mind have been hitherto unknown in modern times (so far as I know), to leave some footprints that others may attain to this excellent manner of singing, for "a great fire follows a little spark."²¹

Jacopo Peri, also in Florence at this time, received high praise as a player of the organ and the keyboard instruments and as a composer of counterpoint, and was, according to Pietro Bardi, regarded as second to none of the singers in that city. This man, in competition with Giulio, brought the enterprise of the "Stile rappresentativo" to light, avoiding the "roughness and antiquity" which had been felt in the compositions of Galilei. Together with Giulio, he made this style "capable of moving the passions in a rare manner."²²

By so doing, these men acquired the title of inventors and first singers of this manner of composing and singing. Peri had more science, according to the younger Bardi, and having found a way of imitating familiar speech by using few sounds, and by meticulous exactness in other respects, won a greater fame.²³

The studies and experiments of these men on Greek art form, though approached in degrees of importance from different angles, brought about a similarity of ideas which led to the formulation of a basic principle, namely, that the secret of Greek music lay in the perfect union of words

²¹Caccini, "Euridice," (foreword), Strunk's Source Readings in Music History, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1950, pp. 370-1.

²²Pietro Bardi, op. cit., pp. 364-5.

²³ibid.

and melody, a union to be achieved by making the former dominate and control the latter. From this principle, three corollaries followed: first, the text must be clearly understood; therefore the performance must be by a solo voice with the simplest possible accompaniment, preferably a lute or similar instrument. Second, there must be no contrapuntal writing, for this distracts the mind and produces confusion owing to different words being heard at the same time with different rhythms in different parts, leading to distortion of pronunciation, and in general appealing not to the intelligence at all, but only to the sense of hearing. The third had to do with the relation between words and music. The melody must not depict mere graphic details in the text, but must interpret the feeling of the whole passage by imitating and intensifying the intonations and accents proper to the voice of a person who is speaking the words under the influence of the emotion which gives rise to them. These pronouncements were, of course, directed against certain aspects of textual treatment in the sixteenth century madrigals and motets.²⁴

DAFNE

As the new "Stile rappresentativo" achieved status as a pure musical style, great interest in the form was taken by the famous poet Rinuccini, also a Camerata member. He later stated in his foreword to Euridice, of which he was the librettist, that until the time that he heard this new form, he felt modern music completely incapable of being used for dramatic forms. He held to the opinion that the ancient Greeks and Romans, in

²⁴Grout, op. cit., p. 36.

representing their tragedies upon the stage, sang them throughout, and that until now this noble manner of recitation had been neither revived or even attempted by anyone. As his appreciation of this new form grew, Rinuccini wrote a libretto for Dafne and asked the help of Peri in setting it to music, "solely to make a simple trial of what the music of our age could do." He added that, "it gave pleasure beyond belief to the few who heard it."²⁵

This first operatic experiment was given at the house of Signor Jacapo Corsi, who is said to have taken over the heading of the Camerata after Bardi left for a new post in Rome. It was said of him that "his house was always open--it was almost a public academy to those who took a lively, intelligent interest in the liberal arts...and it teemed with nobleman, literary gentlemen, and eminent poets and musicians; Tasso, Chiabrera, Marino, Monteverdi, and Muzio Efrem were some of the famous guests who were entertained there...entertainments, and ballets with music were performed or tried out also."²⁶

The date when Dafne was conceived is still a matter of controversy, but it was probably in the winter of 1594-5. Corsi himself had started to compose the music before turning to Peri, and Peri's work too, had to be touched up and revised; and finally, as happened later with Euridice, it seems that Caccini managed to get some of his own music included in some of the performances that we know took place at carnival time three

²⁵Ottavio Rinuccini, "Euridice," (Dedication), Strunk's Source Readings in Music History, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1950, p. 386.

²⁶Pirrota, op. cit., pp. 183-184.

years running (1598-1600).²⁷

Caccini and Peri were under great obligation to Signor Ottavio, but under still greater obligation to Signor Jacapo Corsi, who "becoming ardent and discontented with all but the superlative in this art, directed these composers with excellent ideas and marvelous doctrines, as befitted so noble an enterprise."²⁸ These directions were carried out by Peri and Caccini in all their compositions of this sort and were combined by them in various manners.

This drama, Dafne then, written purely as an experiment, was so pleasing to the group to which it was presented that the librettist Rinuccini was encouraged to produce Euridice in the year 1600.

EURIDICE

The first Euridice was composed mainly by Peri, with a few numbers by Caccini. Peri states in his foreword to the composition that the numbers by Caccini were included because they were to be sung by persons under his directions. Even though Caccini participated in the composition of this first opera, and was given full credit for his part in both Rinuccini's and Peri's forewords to the opera, he became filled with a "jealous awareness" of Peri's artistic success. This awareness showed itself in the fact that, instead of publishing his music for Cefalo, a musical drama he had just written (more closely related to the madrigalian tradition), he hastily imitated his rival with a new Euridice,

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Pietro Bardi, loc. cit.

on the same text by Rinuccini. Then he hastened to have it published even before it was performed, thereby making his the first opera to be published. According to Pirrotta, in his article "Temperaments and Tendencies in the Florentine Camerata," although this opera slavishly follows the outlines of Peri's, it is inferior to it as a work of art. He feels that Caccini sapped the strength of his work by his preoccupation with various types of exclamation, and he tended to transform them into vocal embellishments which he later codified systematically and included in his publication, Nuove Musiche.²⁹

The two versions of Peri and Caccini are similar. Peri is somewhat more forceful in tragic expression, whereas Caccini is more tuneful, excels in elegiac moods, and Grout feels, as does Pirrotta, that it gives more occasion for virtuoso singing. Neither has an overture, and there is almost no independent instrumental music. At the first performance of Peri's work, as we learn from his foreword, there were at least four accompanying instruments, placed behind the scenes: a gravicembala (harpsichord), chitarrone (bass lute), lira grande (large lyre, a bowed chord-instrument with as many as twenty-four strings), and a liuto grosso (literally "large lute," that is, probably a theorbo). In accordance with the practice of the times, the score gives only the bass, with a few figures below the melody of the solo part, so the harmony is a matter of conjecture. In the case of Peri and Caccini, the probability is that the harmonies were simple, with few non-harmonic tones or chromatics. The bass has no importance as a line, as may be recognized not only by its

²⁹Pirrotta, op. cit., p. 182.

stationary, harmonic character but also by the absence of any sustaining bass instrument in the orchestra.³⁰

The action in both Euridice operas is carried on by solo voices in the new Florentine theatre style (*Stile rappresentativo*), consisting of a melodic line not as formal as an aria or even an arioso, yet on the other hand not at all like the recitative of eighteenth and nineteenth century Italian opera, which is characterized by many repeated notes and an extremely rapid delivery. The operatic monody of Peri and Caccini is different from all these. As we have seen, its basis is an absolutely faithful adherence to the natural rhythms, accents, and inflections of the text, following it in these respects even to the extent of placing a full cadence regularly at the end of every verse. Occasionally a solo will be given musical form by using the same bass for two or more strophes, and long scenes are commonly unified by means of choral ritornellos. But the prevailing impression in the solo portions is one of almost "rhapsodic freedom," as though the melodic line existed solely to add the ultimate fulfillment of song to a poetic language already itself more than half music. We read in Grout's History of Opera that rarely, too rarely, the song will rise to "picturesque and pathetic" expression, as at the end of the Messenger's narration of the death of Euridice in Caccini's setting, or the heartbroken exclamation of Orpheus in Peri's version.³¹

In contrast with the free-rhythmed portions are a few songs in regular metre, either solos or solos alternating with chorus. These songs

³⁰Grout, A Short History of Opera, p. 44.

³¹Ibid., p. 45.

are in the nature of lyrical interludes in the action; they are placed usually at the ends of scenes, where the effect of dropping into a metrical pattern is similar to the effect produced by a pair of rhymed verses at the end of a scene in Shakespeare, contrasting with the preceding blank verse. One such air is the well-known "Gioite al canto mio" of Peri's setting, sung by Orpheus in the closing scene.³²

The chorus, consisting of probably not more than ten or twelve persons, is on stage during nearly all of the action, and plays an important part both dramatically and musically. From time to time it engages in the dialogue, but its principal functions are to lend unity to a scene by means of short phrases in refrain and to provide sonorous and animated climaxes, with combined singing and dancing. Such a climax occurs, for example, with the choral ballet "al canto, al ballo" after the first entrance of Euridice.³³

With Peri's Euridice, opera was truly and completely established. But it is a mistake to suppose that those who were present when it was performed at the Pitti Palace on October 6, 1600, had even the remotest idea of what it was all to lead to. The performance occupied the humblest place in the series of festivities that celebrated the marriage of Maria de' Medici to King Henry IV of France; the major honors went to Caccini's spectacular Rapimento di Cefalo, mentioned earlier as having been written more in the madrigalian tradition. In the detailed accounts that ambassadors sent as a matter of course to their governments, Euridice is

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid., pp. 45-46.

either not mentioned at all or is recorded simply as "Signor Corsi's pastoral." The performance was Jacapo Corsi's generous tribute to the new queen. Only later on, when diplomatic considerations gave place to discussions about its merits, did Euridice come in for its share of contemporary admiration and became, along with Monteverdi's Arianna, the opera whose name was most frequently heard on people's lips.³⁴

MONTEVERDI AND ORFEO

Soon after, Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), the greatest composer of the early seventeenth century, took this new form out of the experimental stage, making it acquire a wealth of musical resource, a power and depth of expression, that make his music dramas still living works after more than three hundred years. Orfeo, his first opera, was performed at Mantua in 1607, just seven years after the first opera production. His Orfeo, with libretto by Striggio, was on the same subject as Rinuccini's Euridice, but considerably expanded and with a different ending.³⁵

Monteverdi's Orfeo, even though in the same general style as the earlier Euridice, shows notable advances both in dramatic characterization and in musical form. The harmony is incomparably richer and more varied than that of Peri or Caccini. The recitative is more expressive, and is frequently organized by means of repetitions, sequential passages, etc., into distinct musical patterns. In the first part of Act II is a little air by Orpheus in periodic phrasing and three-part form--a mini-

³⁴Pirrotta, op. cit., p. 188.

³⁵Grout, op. cit., p. 51.

ature "da capo" aria. The remarkable aria "Possente spirto," in Act III, consists of four strophes of elaborately ornamented solo, each with a different orchestral accompaniment. The large orchestra is another feature of this work, as well as the number of instrumental pieces (26 in all), including the introductory "toccata" (the earliest operatic overture) and the frequent ritornelli which by their recurrence serve to give musical unity to long sections of the opera.³⁶

In comparison then, the music of the Florentine operas, consisting of mostly recitative over a thorough-bass, seems somewhat colorless in its harmonies which were realized by only a four instrument group. Also, because of the close adherence to the dictates of the spoken word, even though flawless in declamation and occasionally expressive, it lacks the distinct melodic character and principles of musical organization found in the work of Monteverdi. The almost total exclusion of counterpoint, and the neglect of instrumental music, soon resulted in an unbearable monotony of effect, according to Grout in his History of Opera.³⁷

The Florentines believed that their discoveries had brought about a re-birth of Greek principles. Whatever their original intentions were in studying these principles, whatever their misconceptions about them, whatever expansions and improvements were made soon after; this small group called "dilletantes" were responsible for bringing music's newest child into the world, and from that day it was to mature and develop into full growth as one of the world's most beloved art forms.

³⁶Apel, op. cit., pp. 507-508.

³⁷Ibid.

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OPERA ORIGINS

by

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Through the centuries, many attempts were made at combining drama and music before the form we know as opera came into being. For the present, let us take for granted the Greek and Roman use of music and drama and look to the eleventh century for the first appearance of drama since its use by the ancients. A form known as Liturgical Drama appeared early in this century. It was the practice of the Priests, during the Liturgical service, to dramatically perform that portion known as the tropes. In the earliest of these dramas, everything was sung in plain-song form.

Out of these Liturgical Dramas emerged a form known as the Mysteries. The Mysteries differed from the Liturgical Dramas in that music was used only incidentally to make the drama more impressive. They were a larger presentation, performances being on outside stages and lasting as many as 40 days. A larger variety of music forms were used as motets, chansons, and instrumental music. These forms lasted well into the sixteenth century.

Secular music and drama forms do not gain real importance until about the sixteenth century, where they become a main feature of courtly entertainments. They evolve in many forms, the most important of which were the dramatic ballet, intermedii, and madrigal comedy.

The dramatic ballet made use of a unifying plot to tie together the forms of poetry, music, and dancing. The dancing was the most prominent feature. This form lost favor in the early 1600's.

The intermedii were used to offer diversion between acts of a more serious play. They were made up of music incorporated into light drama, one usually connected with the more serious drama in some allegorical way.

The role of music is still that of adjunct to a visual spectacle.

Madrigal comedies were an attempt to adapt the madrigal to dramatic purposes, but they merely became suites of madrigals.

The kind of drama suitable to continuous music was found in the form of the pastorale. The pastorale lent itself naturally to musical treatment because of its aloofness from the realities of life, its lyric content, its brevity and its use of choruses, songs, and dances.

The last ingredient to complete a "chemical union" between music and drama was to be "monody," a style of singing that could be used dramatically.

This discovery was made as a result of the studies of a group called the "Florentine Camerata," a part of the "humanistic" movement of the sixteenth century. Under the sponsorship of Giovanni Bardi, a study was made of the style of Greek music. This study was prompted by the discontent arising over the musical language of the time and its inability to meet the demands of expression and individuality becoming so prevalent in this century.

They were confident that their reconstruction of ancient practices had taught them the answer: they must devise a new form of composition, governed by the strictest and most uncompromising antique-hellenic principles. Music was to do nothing but help to express the sentiments of the poetic text: therefore it was to take its whole form from the text--from the natural accents of ordinary speech, the natural emotional rise and fall of the voice, from the metre of the verse, even from the very rhythm. Music was to become the hand-maid of poetry. The text must be clearly understood! Therefore, they concluded, the performance must be

by a solo voice with the simplest possible accompaniment.

These ideas were incorporated into a music and drama form by the musicians Peri and Caccini at the suggestion of the poet Rinuccini. This production of the year 1600 was "Euridice." The style was enlarged and improved soon after, into a form more nearly as we know opera today, by Monteverdi in his version of the same drama.