



When Monteverdi composed *L'Orfeo* he had a thorough grounding in theatrical music. He had been employed at the Gonzaga court for 16 years, much of it as a performer or arranger of stage music, and in 1604 he had written the ballo *Gli amori di Diane ed Endimone* for the 1604–05 Mantua Carnival. The elements from which Monteverdi constructed his first opera score—the aria, the strophic song, recitative, choruses, dances, dramatic musical interludes—were, as conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt has pointed out, not created by him, but "he blended the entire stock of newest and older possibilities into a unity that was indeed new". Musicologist Robert Donington writes similarly: "The score contains no element which was not based on precedent, but it reaches complete maturity in that recently developed form ... **Here are words as directly expressed in music as the pioneers of opera wanted them expressed; here is music expressing them ... with the full inspiration of genius.**"

Historical background

Claudio Monteverdi, born in Cremona in 1567, was a musical prodigy who studied under Marc'Antonio Ingegneri, the *maestro di cappella* (head of music) at Cremona Cathedral. After training in singing, string playing and composition, Monteverdi worked as a musician in Verona and Milan until, in 1590 or 1591, he secured a post as *suonatore di vivuola* (viola player) at Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga's court at Mantua. Through ability and hard work Monteverdi rose to become Gonzaga's *maestro della musica* (master of music) in 1601.

Vincenzo Gonzaga's particular passion for musical theatre and spectacle grew from his family connections with the court of Florence. Towards the end of the 16th century innovative Florentine musicians were developing the *intermedio*—a long-established form of musical interlude inserted between the acts of spoken dramas—into increasingly elaborate forms. Led by Jacopo Corsi, these successors to the renowned Camerata were responsible for the first work generally recognised as belonging to the genre of opera: *Dafne*, composed by Corsi and Jacopo Peri and performed in Florence in 1598.

L'Orfeo is a late Renaissance/early Baroque *favola in musica*, or opera, by Claudio Monteverdi, with a libretto by Alessandro Striggio. It is based on the Greek legend of Orpheus, and tells the story of his descent to Hades and his fruitless attempt to bring his dead bride Eurydice back to the living world. It was written in 1607 for a court performance during the annual Carnival at Mantua. While Jacopo Peri's *Dafne* is generally recognised as the first work in the opera genre, and the earliest surviving opera is Peri's *Euridice*, *L'Orfeo* is the earliest that is still regularly performed.

By the early 17th century Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* provided the first fully developed example of the new opera genre. After its initial performance the work was staged again in Mantua. After the composer's death in 1643 the opera went unperformed for many years, and was largely forgotten until a revival of interest in the late 19th century led to a spate of modern editions and performances.

Synopsis: L'Orfeo

from [Claudio Monteverdi](#)

PROLOGUE

The spirit of music invites the audience to listen to the story of Orpheus (Orfeo), whose music could tame wild animals and conquer the underworld.

ACT I

In the fields of Thrace the marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice (Euridice) is being celebrated. Orpheus sings a song of love and praise. The nymphs and shepherds share in his joy as they accompany him to the temple.

ACT II

Orpheus sings to the woods, but his mood of celebration is ended by the arrival of Sylvia, who tells him of Eurydice's death from a snake bite. He is overcome with grief, but resolves to bring Eurydice back from Hades.

Interval

ACT III

Orpheus is led by Hope (Speranza) to the gates of Hell, where she leaves him. At the River Styx he sings to the boatman Charon (*"Possente spirito, e formidabil nume"* - *Powerful spirit, formidable god*), who pities him but does not let him cross. After more singing from Orpheus, Charon falls into a deep sleep. Orpheus takes the oars and crosses the river.

ACT IV

In Hades, Proserpine (Proserpina), who has heard Orpheus's music, begs her husband Pluto to allow him to return to earth with Eurydice. Pluto agrees on condition that Orpheus leads her out of the underworld without once looking back. On their journey home, Orpheus begins to doubt that Eurydice is behind him and, hearing a sound, he turns back and Eurydice vanishes before his eyes. Orpheus continues alone, accompanied by the lamentations of the chorus.

ACT V

In the fields of Thrace, Orpheus pours forth his grief, but is answered only by Echo. He vows to renounce women. His father, Apollo, descends from the skies in order to console him. Together they ascend to the heavens, where Orpheus will once again see Eurydice in the sun and the stars.

Orfeo – Cast List

Orfeo	John Mark Ainsley
Eridice	Juanita Lascarro
La Messagiera	Brigette Balleys
Apollo	Russel Smythe
La Musica	David Cordier
La Speranza	Michael Chance
Caronte	Mario Luperi
Proserpina	Berarda Fink
Plutone	Dean Robinson
Pastore I (Eco)	Jean-Paul Fouchcart
Pastore II	Russel Smythe
Pastore III	Douglas Nasrawi
Pastore IV	Dean Robinson
Ninfa	Susie Le Blanc
Spirit	Jean-Paul Fouchcart

Recorded Live at Muziktheatre Amsterdam July 1997 [120 mins overall]