

Innovation and Tradition: Charon in the Libretto of Claudio Monteverdi's Opera, *Orfeo*

In 1607, almost at the beginning of the history of opera, Claudio Monteverdi created a musical masterpiece, *L'Orfeo, favola in musica* on a libretto by Mantuan court official, Alessandro Striggio. Monteverdi's astonishing music tends to overshadow Striggio's libretto, but the opera's version of Eurydice's death and Orpheus' attempt to bring her back from Pluto's realm is remarkable in its own right. Striggio's retelling strongly evokes classical precedents and the classical form of the story (unlike many Orpheus libretti), but the libretto also makes highly original changes to the ancient narrative. Some of Striggio's most original alterations appear in his treatment of the infernal boatman, Charon. The changes not only heighten dramatic tension and plausibility but also provide Monteverdi great musical opportunities such as the text of Orfeo's aria "Possente Spirto," which lies at the heart of the opera. Despite these innovations, however, the libretto manages to convey the mood and 'feel' of the classical story.

To fully appreciate Striggio's treatment of Charon, three topics must be addressed: classical and contemporary influences, the alterations themselves, and the effects of these changes on the drama. Although the Orpheus story is much older, the versions by Ovid and Vergil together became the standard 'classical' form of the legend. Ovid, however, was himself reacting to Vergil's earlier treatment and changed not only details of the narrative but also its tone and mood. Thus, the principal of change and modification entered early into the long line of Orpheus stories that continued right up to Striggio's time and well beyond. Ovid and Vergil, however, were not Striggio's only precedents. Contemporary works also influenced the libretto of *Orfeo*, and the most important was another early opera (1400), *Euridice* by composer Jacopo Peri and librettist Ottavio Rinuccini. A comparison of the two operas reveals that both Striggio

and Monteverdi carefully studied the Peri/Rinuccini opera and used it extensively as a road map or working template. The parallels make the changes in *Orfeo* stand out all the more clearly.

One critical change in Striggio's libretto is his repositioning of the encounter between Orpheus and Charon. Both Vergil and Ovid place the confrontation *after* Orpheus loses Eurydice and then attempts to reenter Pluto's kingdom. In both ancient accounts, Charon implacably bars his way. Striggio, however, places the encounter *before* Orpheus enters the death realm. The rearrangement may seem slight (Charon is still not won over, and the meeting also fits Orpheus' descent), but the change triggers new plot elements and creates new dramatic possibilities. Striggio departs even more decisively from the precedent of Rinuccini's *Euridice*. Rinuccini has Venus appear to Orpheus and guide him to the Underworld. Striggio rejects this unclassical use of Venus and gives Orpheus a more plausible companion, the allegorical figure Hope. Striggio's solution has an even more classical "feel" since Orpheus and Hope closely resemble Aeneas and the Sibyl from *Aeneid* 6. Similarly, Striggio's Charon parallels Vergil's underworld boatman from later in the same passage. At the end of the Charon scene, Striggio makes a change that seems entirely his own. Orpheus does not persuade Charon but instead lulls the boatman to sleep, 'borrows' his boat, and enters Pluto's realm. The startling change is motivated by Charon's earlier placement, but the new element manages to seem quite classical because it recalls the scene, again from *Aeneid* 6, where the Sibyl puts to sleep the fearsome guardian, Cerberus.

Striggio's changes are greatly advantageous for the stage. Orpheus's dialogue with Hope externalizes his fear and motivates evocative place descriptions of the Realm of the Dead. Orpheus' exchanges with Charon show his desperation and daring and provide singing opportunities that Monteverdi utilizes to maximum effect. The dramatic exchange with Charon

also preserves the numinous dignity of Pluto since Orpheus bandies words not with the King of the Underworld but with his boatman. While Striggio changes the Orpheus story, sometimes radically, his alterations arise out of clear classical precedent. Striggio, therefore, brings about his striking innovations in the Orpheus story by scrupulously observing the classical tradition.