



GUIDE



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Claudio Monteverdi

Life, spaces and sources in Mantua



MANTOVA CITTÀ D'ARTE E DI CULTURA



Mantua is a Monteverdian city.

Claudio Monteverdi (born Cremona, 15th May 1567 – died Venice, 29th November 1643) lived in Mantua for twenty two of his most decisive artistic years: here he took the madrigal* to the heights of experimentation, here he showed what dynamic intensity the newborn opera in music could reach, here he expressed the principles of his own poetics and here he explored the complicity between ancient and modern in sacred music with results which are still astounding even today. Inspired moreover by the intellectual vivacity of the Gonzaga court, Monteverdi delved into the most recondite potential of the vocal and instrumental languages of his time, revolutionizing music from within, just as Bach and Mozart would do in their own respective eras. *La favola d'Orfeo* (1607), and

La messa e i vesperi della Beata Vergine (1610) are masterpieces that are inextricably linked to Mantua. Musicophiles also come to the city to seek for the signs of the genius who wrote these masterpieces and the environment that favored their composition. Understanding the characteristics of where a composer lived helps us to comprehend his personality and to reconstruct the conditions under which his music was staged and listened to. The city of Mantua dedicates this guide to the “creator of modern music” to help the visitor trace Monteverdi’s legacy, not only in the places in which he worked during his lifetime, but also in today’s urban context, in which investigation into his impact continues and his genius is remembered.

**Madrigal*: polyphonic vocal composition on poetic texts of varying nature.

Career and private life

Claudio Monteverdi arrived in Mantua at the age of twenty-three (around 1590), employed by the Gonzaga Duke, Vincenzo I, as a viola player and singer. He came from Cremona, where he had trained in the school of Marcantonio Ingegneri and had published five collections of music. Despite a brilliant career in the Duke's service in Hungary (1595) and in Flanders (1599), he had, nonetheless, to wait until the deaths of four preceding Masters of Music, Alessandro Striggio sr (1592), Giaches Wert (1596), Francesco Rovigo (1597) and Benedetto Pallavicino (1601) before receiving the long desired appointment as "Master of Music for the Chamber and the Church" («maestro e de la Camera e de la Chiesa sopra la musica») in 1601. In his Mantuan period the madrigal collections the *Terzo Libro* (1592), *Quarto Libro* (1603) and *Quinto Libro* (1605) were printed, together with the *Scherzi musicali* (1607), *La favola d'Orfeo* (1609) and *La messa e i vespri della Beata Vergine* (1610). He further composed the *Arianna* and the *Ballo delle Ingrate* (written for the wedding between Francesco Gonzaga and Margherita of Savoy in 1608) and other musical pieces which are either lost to us or were later edited. He successively defended his own musical choices declaring in the preface to the *Quinto Libro* and in the *Scherzi musicali*, that he was the creator of an evolution in composition style, using a novel technique, which he called the «seconda pratica»; a style which arose from research into the profound sense of poetry



Fig. 1 Alley Freddo (once Alley of San Tomaso), view

(*oratione*) and of human passions (*affetti*).

In Mantua he was also to create his life as a private individual. On the 20th of March 1599 he married the court singer Claudia Cattaneo, daughter of a violist colleague, in the Church [1] of SS. Simone and Giuda (Domenico Fernelli street). With her he had three children: Francesco (1601), Leonora (1603) and Massimiliano (1604) but was soon left a widower (1607). Having little patience with the intrigues at Court, he chose to live outside the palace. Up to the birth of his first child he lived in the district known as the *contrada del Mastino*, in a house (not currently identifiable) located in the area of the modern [2] Freddo alley (Fig. 1), which was part of the parish of SS. Simone and Giuda. Shortly after his promotion, he moved to another (unknown) house under the jurisdiction of the cathedral of S. Pietro, and the cost of the rent was added to his salary. Following the death of Vincenzo I his relationship with the Court, already laden with incomprehension and fraught with economic questions plummeted, leading to his sudden dismissal in 1612.



Fig. 2 Ducal Palace, Hall of Mirrors



Fig. 3 Ducal Palace, Equestrian courtyard

Public Spaces: Sacred and Profane

The labyrinthine Ducal Palace [3] was the centre of Monteverdi's activity and in some cases it is possible to document precise locations. The only space he actually wrote of is the [3a] Hall of the Mirror or Mirrors (*sala dello Specchio o de' Specchi*) (Fig. 2), which can be visited on request. He wrote of it thus (1610-11): «*Ogni venere di sera si fa musica nella Sala de' Specchi*» («Every Friday in the evening music is made in the Hall of Mirrors»). Part of the apartments designed and built (1582-85) for the composer-Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga by Bernardino Facciotto, the *Sala de' Specchi* later partially collapsed and was then divided into two floors, becoming unrecognizable. Destined for varied use, it was forgotten and then confused with the «*Logion serato*», (or large closed

loggia) which was later also called the (1779) [3b] *Galleria degli Specchi*. Monteverdi's mention of the location has stimulated studies which have led to the rediscovery of the original chamber (1998), to a virtual reconstruction of its bizarre umbrella shaped roof and lastly to its restoration. A species of intimate, precious soundstage, the chamber had optimum acoustics and a suave toned organ with wooden pipes. Monteverdi said that the best of the court musicians performed there, such as the diva Adriana Basile, accompanied on the *chitarraone* (an early musical stringed instrument of the lute family with a long neck and two peg boxes, one above the other) by the brothers Giovan Battista and Orazio Rubini from Casale Monferrato. In this chamber too, on the 14th of March 1608, the

famous rehearsal for the *Arianna* took place, in which Virginia Andreini performed the part she had just learned, substituting for Caterina Martinelli who had died of smallpox. Today only the *Lament* from this opera is left to us. During the sumptuous celebrations for the wedding of Francesco Gonzaga to Margherita of Savoy (1608), the *Arianna* was performed in a capacious temporary theatre, built in the [3c] *Cortile della Cavallerizza* (Fig. 3). *La favola d'Orfeo* (24th February 1607), commissioned for Carnival by the *Accademia degli Invaghiti* was instead staged in a Hall (unknown today) which was part of the apartments temporarily assigned to the widowed Margherita Gonzaga d'Este, situated on the ground floor near [3d] the chapel of Santa Croce, the Court private Chapel, today remodeled and used for temporary exhibitions. It is likely that the music for dancing, collected in the *Scherzi musicali* (1607), enlivened the celebrations in the [3e] «Salon dove si balla» («hall where we dance» - now called the *Sala degli Arcieri*), situated in Vincent I's apartments, where today the visitor can admire the altarpiece by Pieter Paul Rubens which shows the Duke and his family in adoration of the Holy Trinity, a masterpiece perhaps linked to the *motet* Duo Seraphim*. Many of Monteverdi's compositions, written for the theatre were performed in the [4] *Teatro Grande di corte* (Fig. 5). Amongst the oldest of non itinerant theatres, it was built on the left-hand side of the present day piazza Castello, in the area currently occupied by the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale*. During the celebrations in 1608 in this theatre there were also performances of: *Manto*, prologue (now lost) to the *L'idropica* by Battista Guarini (2nd June); *Ballo delle Ingrate* on verses by



Fig. 4 Palatine basilica of S. Barbara

O. Rinuccini (4th June), which was later printed in the madrigal collection *Libro Ottavo*. It is likely, too, that other “representative” pieces of his music were performed in the *Teatro Grande*, amongst which we may posit the madrigals for the pastoral by Guarini *Pastor Fido* (1598, 1600); the ballet *Endimione* for the comedy *Acessi de amor*, acted by Jewish comics (1605); and perhaps a repeat performance of the *La favola d'Orfeo* (1607); and, after his dismissal, the ballet *Tirsi e Clori* (1616), and the interludes for the comedy *Le tre costanti* (1621) by Ercole Marliani. In the *Teatro Grande*, the position of the orchestra was adapted to the needs of the drama: in the *Ballo delle Ingrate* they were, for example, placed in view on a side balcony, between the stage and the audience. Within the palace there was also (possibly from 1594) a [5] *Teatro Piccolo* (Fig. 5) located at the end of the

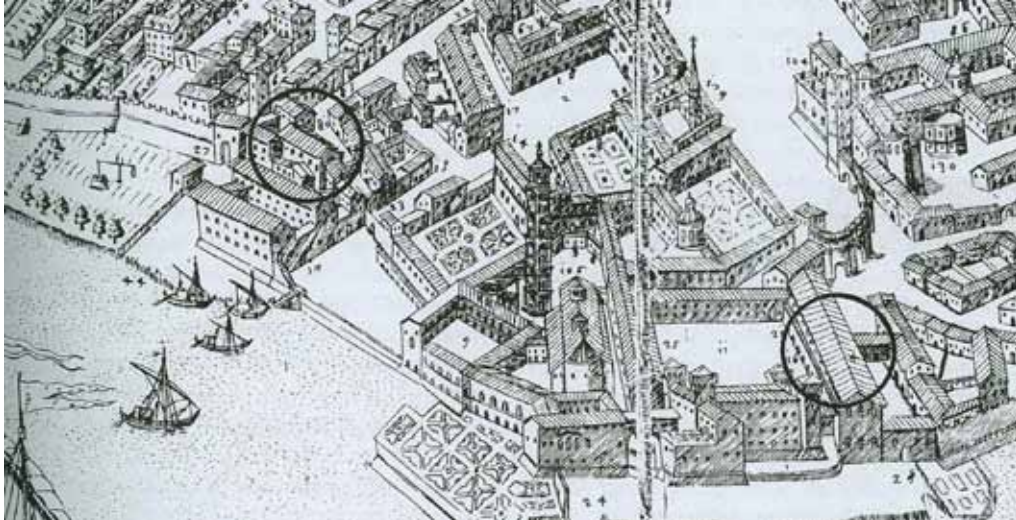


Fig. 5 Gabriele Bertazzolo, View of Mantua, 1628: the Theatres (Teresiana Lib.)

present day Teatro Vecchio street, in the area occupied by the *Museo dei Vigili del fuoco*: certainly, as we know from secondary sources, some of his compositions were performed there but there are no sources that identify precisely which pieces were played. Monteverdi was in charge of all the Duke's music, including the sacred. The Gonzaga influence extended over all the principal churches in the city, which, despite having their own music masters, occasionally also used Monteverdi's compositions. In this case too we have documented use of certain locations and others which we may hypothesize. The hymn *Ave maris stella*, composed on the restyled plainchant** in use in the Palatine Basilica of S. Barbara [6] (Fig. 4), was surely written taking into consideration the sonorous capacity of the interior of the church and the magnificent organ built by Graziadio Antegnati (1565), restored in 2006 by Giorgio Carli; and, in all probability, many other

pieces, published in the *La messa e i Vesperi della Beata Vergine* (1610), were composed for the selfsame church. Probable, though not attested to, is the performance of his music in S. Croce in Corte, the court chapel, and in the other private chapels in the palace complex. In 1611 his Vespers were performed in the co-cathedral of S. Andrea [7]. According to an intriguing hypothesis, the Trinitarian motet *Duo Seraphim* might have been composed for the ceremonial placing of the afore mentioned Rubens altarpiece (1605) above the altar [8] of the Jesuit Church of the Holy Trinity, which is now the muniment room for the Mantua State Archives (Roberto Ardigò street). The Church still preserves elements from the facade, much remodeled, and some of the interior decoration.

* *Motet*: vocal polyphonic composition on a sacred subject.

** *Plainchant*: monodic Christian liturgical singing.

Research and documentation

The archives, libraries and the city institutions do not contain Monteverdian sheet music; instead they hold documents and other sources of vital relevance that testify to his presence. [9] The State Archive (Roberto Ardigò street, 11), possesses almost 90% of his signed letters (Fig. 7). Translated and published in various languages, these constitute the principle source for studies on the composer. [10] The elegant Biblioteca Teresiana (Ardigò street, 13), holds the *libretto* for the *La favola d'Orfeo* (Mantova, Osanna, 1607; Fig. 6) and the *Compendio delle sontuose feste* (Mantua, Osanna, 1608) by Federico Follino, in which we find the transcript of the text for the *Arianna* and the description of the *Ballo delle Ingrate*. [11] The Virgilian National Academy (Accademia street, 47), is heir to the *Accademia degli Invaghiti*, which commissioned the first performance of the *Orfeo*. Today it is located in the building (largely restructured in the eighteenth century) in which the *Invaghiti* originally met. The Teatro Accademico, too, (1769) was rebuilt by Antonio Bibiena on the same area as the preceding small theater of *Invaghiti*. The Virgilian National Academy was presided over for a long time by the scholar and Mantuan musician Claudio Gallico (1929-2006), a pioneer in research into Monteverdi. [12] The Diocesan Historical Archive (Sordello square, 15), has sources which are only apparently secondary. The analysis of the manuscripts containing the plainchant in the basilica of S. Barbara has allowed us to contextualize the Monteverdi hymn *Ave maris stella*; furthermore, the parish documents have led to the identification of the places in which the composer lived while the diaries have revealed the performance of the Monteverdi Vespers in S. Andrea. In the last few decades Mantua has given increasing importance to its



Fig. 6 *La favola d'Orfeo*, libretto (Teresiana Lib.)

The image shows a handwritten signature in dark ink. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style and reads 'Claudio Monteverdi'.

Fig. 7 Claudio Monteverdi, signature

role as a Monteverdi city. In 1993 an urban area was dedicated to the composer: [13] Claudio Monteverdi street, on one side of the church of SS. Simone and Giuda and in the new home of the “Lucio Campiani” Music Conservatory (Conciliazione street, 33), which is the result of the restoration of a fifteenth century convent, [14], the 180 seat auditorium has been named for Claudio Monteverdi.

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