

# OPERA NEWS

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Features

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## Renaissance Man

This month Naïve Records commemorates the four-hundredth anniversary of the premiere of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* with a superlative new recording of the opera by early-music ensemble Concerto Italiano. ADAM WASSERMAN talks to conductor and Monteverdi scholar Rinaldo Alessandrini about the work that set the operatic canon in motion.



Rinaldo Alessandrini

**O PERA NEWS:** You've previously recorded quite a bit of Monteverdi - both the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* and the Sixth Book of Madrigals - but heretofore opted to leave this opera unrecorded. How did this disc come about?

**RINALDO ALESSANDRINI:** We made this recording mainly because this year was the anniversary of the first performance of the opera in 1607 in Mantua. So I was thinking that it was the right moment, having this very important anniversary. In fact, it has been dream of mine for some years to start work on a recording of *L'Orfeo*.

**ON:** You've recorded the opera in what is a new performing edition of the 1609 Venetian version. What's the difference between that version and what audiences would have heard during the 1607 premiere?

**RA:** The difference between the versions, mainly speaking, comes at the end of the fifth act. I suppose it was a really subtle decision for Monteverdi, because as we know, the first performance was done in a very small room. Probably what happened was that the stage was too small for the last scene, in

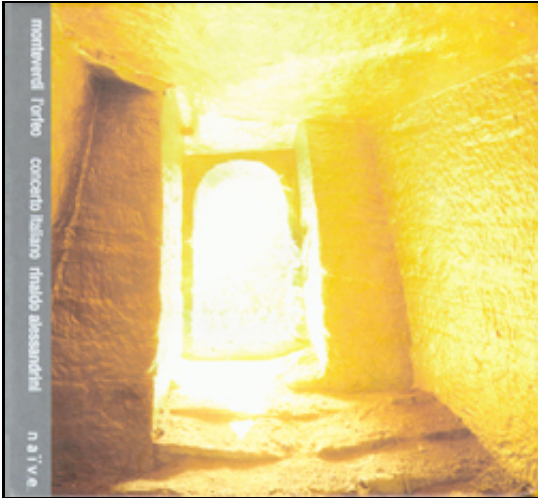
which Apollo descends from the heavens onstage. This was probably the reason that the finale was changed to a less complicated one - the common opinion was that it was a staging motivation that obliged Monteverdi to change the finale. We have the text of this finale from the original libretto that was printed in 1607. But in the first musical score edition, in fact, we have the finale with Apollo descending.

**ON:** You write in the disc's liner notes that Monteverdi and other composers who were exponents of the

*seconda pratica* were really much more inspired by speech and language - that they believed their operas were hearkening back to an almost Platonic synthesis of speech and music.

**RA:** Plato was absolutely convinced that music has a fantastic power for moving the human soul. Monteverdi especially was attempting to create an imitation of words in music that emphasized the power of the form.

**ON:** In your opinion, what is it about *L'Orfeo* that has allowed the opera to sustain itself as part of the repertory when so many other works from this period were lost or have been unable to hold the interest of audiences?



**RA:** Unfortunately, we have just three operas by Monteverdi. So our views of his operatic output cannot be complete, in fact. But I think that what was really very important was the quality of the libretto. If we take a look at *Poppea*, for example, it has one of the most perfect librettos in the history of the opera. And this is why the music, also, is so exciting, because it respects such a well-conceived libretto in terms of dramaturgical structure. The music also reflects this kind of skill, in manipulating the theatrical rhythm.

On the other hand, for example, the libretto of *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* has different characteristics. In this case, we have to work with a very Baroque libretto with a lot of very long parts. It's really in the true Baroque style. This is why

*Ulisse* is probably a little bit too difficult for the modern person's tastes. But hey, we're talking about music that was composed around 400 years ago. It is interesting to see how people were enjoying the theatre.

*L'Orfeo* is another case. It is a very short opera, in fact - it's one hour and a half, where normally opera in Venice was as long as three-and-a-half hours or four hours ... very, very long operas. In the Alessandro Striggio libretto we have both a fantastic dramaturgical structure in the first and the second acts - which are full of music, full of change, full of very short parts. The speed of the libretto is very fast. Then, in the third and the fourth and the fifth acts, we have some more philosophical information. Then the music still changes, especially in the long monologue of the fifth act. In our day probably it still maybe feels a little bit too long, but we should consider the expectation of this opera - that it was [composed as] high art. It was composed for the Duke of Mantua, so not for common people. So it was absolutely obvious to conceive of a philosophically difficult libretto. It's very important to consider the original conditions of listening for this opera, and everything will be clearer.

**ON:** What is it about the form of *L'Orfeo* that makes it sui generis?

**RA:** We really should consider *L'Orfeo* as the first and last Renaissance opera. *L'Orfeo* starts and concludes, at the same time, this tradition of Renaissance opera that, in fact, was not [otherwise] existent. It is an opera where the musical conception is really not very modern. If we compare, for example, the music of Monteverdi's Fourth and the Fifth Book of Madrigals [["Ch'io t'ami Più de la Mia Vita" from Monteverdi's Fifth Book of Madrigals as heard on the recording by Rinaldo Alessandrini & Concerto Italiano \(Naïve 30445\)](#)]

([http://www.operanews.org/\\_post/onsndbits/1107audiosamples/monteverdiexcerpt2.mp3](http://www.operanews.org/_post/onsndbits/1107audiosamples/monteverdiexcerpt2.mp3)), which were composed before *L'Orfeo*, they are really quite modern. In a certain way, if we compare all the ensembles

pieces in *L'Orfeo* [[🔊 "Ahi caso acerbo" from \*L'Orfeo\* as heard on the recording by Rinaldo Alessandrini & Concerto Italiano \(Naïve 30439\)](http://www.operanews.org/post/onsndbits/1107audiosamples/lorfeoexcerpt1.mp3)], they are composed in quite an old style, a real Renaissance style.

On the other hand, what is absolutely revolutionary in *L'Orfeo* is the way Monteverdi conceived the musical line. There are some incredible and extravagant lines in *L'Orfeo*. [[🔊 "Possente spirito" from \*L'Orfeo\*](http://www.operanews.org/post/onsndbits/1107audiosamples/lorfeoexcerpt2.mp3)] And if we compare this kind of writing with previous operas by Caccini and Peri, for example, this is probably one of the best ways to appreciate the incredible revolutionary *apporto*, or contribution, that *L'Orfeo* makes to the opera tradition.

**ON:** This recording imparts a real freshness to an opera that is 400 years old - no small feat. I was particularly struck by your choice of tempos. How did you go about choosing them so as to convey your idea of what the opera's dramatic arc should be?

**RA:** I think that what happens, very often, is that we lose the way to approach a score as well known as *L'Orfeo* with a sort of virginity. I think that most of the recordings and performances of *L'Orfeo* are very heavily influenced by a strong tradition in terms of speed, and in terms of general meaning of the music.

I think the most astonishing example here is the beginning of the second act [[🔊 "Ecco pur ch'a voi ritorno" from \*L'Orfeo\*](http://www.operanews.org/post/onsndbits/1107audiosamples/lorfeoexcerpt3.mp3)], where there is absolutely no change of tempo from the beginning until Orfeo's canzone. So if we keep exactly the same tempo as Monteverdi requires - because there is no different indication - this means that there is this sort of incredible and very exciting progression of speed until the last song of Orfeo [[🔊 "Sol per te, bella Euridice" from \*L'Orfeo\*](http://www.operanews.org/post/onsndbits/1107audiosamples/lorfeoexcerpt4.mp3)], which should be very, very fast and show the character's exploding joy. This makes a huge contrast with the entrance of the Messaggiera.

I've heard a lot of recorded versions of *L'Orfeo*. And, frankly speaking, I don't know and I don't understand why many of conductors like to change tempo when the unity of the meaning through something like 160 or 170 bars of music is one of the most exciting experiences in the opera. This is the only way to appreciate the variety of rhythms in this part.

**ON:** This must be one of the first times that the opera has been recorded with a cast that is completely Italian. Was that your decision?

**RA:** I was really interested in having an [all] Italian cast. It was very interesting work, because we really tried to open the score, and to look at the score exactly as it was the first time - to discover the possible tones, possible manipulations, new or undiscovered manipulations, of the text. It was very interesting because as you can well imagine, some singers had already sung in *L'Orfeo*. So it was, at first, a little bit complicated to try and change minds about some special passages. But I would explain this general idea that, in my opinion, is central to *L'Orfeo* - this very sophisticated style of *stile recitativo*, which has nothing to do with the *recitativo secco* of later operas. It was really very interesting to give information to the singers about how to manipulate the text, how to manipulate expression, how to slightly manipulate the tempo by using some rubato or some sprezzatura.

**ON:** How would you explain the difference between secco recitative and Monteverdi's use of this this

type of vocal writing - what's called *stile recitativo* or *retitar cantando*.

**RA:** The *recitativo secco* is a very simple formula of notation, a very simple writing of a text that should be treated as a spoken text. In this sense, the general speed of *recitativo secco* is normally quite fast, because this should respect the true nature of spoken speech.

The difference in *L'Orfeo* is that Monteverdi wrote many indications for types of ornamentation. Especially, there are some very interesting crossings of melodic lines and strange chords - this was all done by Monteverdi. It's a sort of ornamentation indicated in the score, exactly as Bach did in his score writing "in extensio" for ornamentation. So a lot of ornamentation reads for example, "anticipatura de la notae," or "ritardo de la notae" or some very old type of cadenza, and so on. This was possible with this kind of very, very precise writing. This is why in *L'Orfeo*, it is absolutely important to keep a certain uniformity of the minim [half-note]. Even if we can manipulate the speed of the minim in itself, but all values contained in the rhythm should be exactly respected, giving some rubato some times when the expression needs to be manipulated. And in my opinion, this is the real soul of this kind of *stile recitativo*.

Having an Italian cast it was easier because we had a lot of information from the spoken language. What we tried was to give to the spoken language, at normal speed, a certain atmosphere of nobility, because this opera was written for a court - it was not for a popular theater. The main concern was to have a certain *maestosità*, a certain atmosphere, that imparted a richness to the speed of the declamation, but respected the real nature of the declamation. This is not too easy. □

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