

Why Truth should treasure her disguise

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“And believe me that the modern composer creates on the fundamentals of truth”.¹

Thus, Claudio Monteverdi ends in 1605 his defense against the allegations of the theorist Giovanni Maria Artusi, who anonymously used the composer’s madrigals to prove that he had failed to master the rules of counterpoint. Basically, a conflict of tradition versus innovation. The quarrel between the two men has become a milestone in music history, articulating the beginning of a new era with the upcoming text-driven vocal style.

In Monteverdi’s times, truth was a standard for calibrating art. Hence, both the opponents at the beginning of the 17th century mobilized their share of truth in their work.

Truth is, of course, what research is aiming for, and even for quite some time, science has been judged entirely by its ability to verify the outcomes and prove the alternatives false. In my time as a student, that same principle was the model for musicological training. The path of a musicologist was, then, to reconstruct the contextual evidence around a problem such as the conflict described above.

In the 20th century, top musicologists did virtually everything to reveal the entire context that embeds the magic spell of Monteverdi’s scantily notated music.

Because notation was so much in need of additional information for the reconstruction of sounding music, from the revival’s beginning (around the year 1900), composers were involved in adding flesh and blood to the few notes on paper. Gian Francesco Malipiero and Vincent d’Indy colored the early attempts by making Monteverdi sound in versions they imagined truthful to the composers’ value in their own times.

A century later, we have no doubts identifying the music of Monteverdi when hearing it performed. He soon took a guiding position in the context of a general revival of music from the past and rediscovery of masterworks. In a simplified history of music, the public saw him as the inventor of opera, and his three extant works were regularly staged and have grown since then into the core repertoire of major opera houses. However, I am often suspicious about the truthfulness to the original vocal style in the way his operas are sung today. The characteristics of *parlar cantando* seem to be almost entirely neglected. I became curious about how to penetrate deeper into the heart of Monteverdi’s ideals and artistic convictions. Retrieving that information beyond his writings and entering the core of his practice with a gap of four hundred years is a real challenge.

1. “E credete che il moderno compositore fabrica sopra li fondamenti della verità”. Claudio Monteverdi, *Fifth Book of Madrigals*, 1605. Appendix with a letter to the “studiosi lettori”.

As a viola da gamba player in the modern world of early music, my radius of action has some similarities with Monteverdi's, who played the instrument in the improvising *bastarda* way at the Mantuan court. Those improvisations were never written down, nothing of that music which could serve as reference remained as they evaporated. It is a perfect example of the disappearance of completely embodied knowledge. This so-called tacit or implicit knowledge² dies with the owner and, thus, such a crucial element of the performance will be irretrievable forever. As a result, the explicit data – such as instruments, notations and treatises – on which historically informed practice is based, is by far outnumbered by all the guesses we have to make and the uncertainties that will remain while dealing with music from the past. When so much of it has to be reconstructed, who's music is it? And how much of it is the result of 20th-century projections that have been growing into solid performing conventions?

Artistic research as the third road

One way to step back from, or out of those new performing conventions occurred to me following the young academic discipline of artistic research. After being trained as a musicologist and a performing musician, there now is a third track that can innovatively merge both disciplines. The natural key to this innovation is creation, because only then, of course, something new is to be expected. Allowing oneself to create first requires the recognition of one's own imagination. The position and the role of imagination here are different from that of a historian – where the latter uses it for reasoning towards a plausible theory, the practitioner will need it in order to act.

By rereading all of Monteverdi's letters, I already had a feeling that his voice was not heard enough and that we were not paying attention to what he tells us apart from what we distill from his extant scores. If one ignores the obligatory courteous formulas in his letters, many in-your-face passages show a man of character and emotions, very well aware of his own qualities. The letters concerning the making of his opera *Arianna*, combined with all the contextual biographical facts, made me realize this material had the potential of a movie-script or an opera libretto. Fragments of dialogues were already there, be it in the shape of a letter that had to be transformed back into real-time speech.

The biographical facts of the year in which the opera *Arianna* was written have a dramatic content in themselves, so much that the resulting plot risks to be perceived as an exaggeration. To name some remarkable facts: the cumulation of the quarrel with Artusi, the death of Monteverdi's wife half a year after finishing *Orfeo*, the incredible pressure to write a new opera while plagued by migraines and eczema, and the death of 17-year-old soprano Caterina Martinelli, leading role in *Arianna*. If it were fiction, we would criticize it for overdoing the fantasy and risking to lose credibility.

The decision to step away from musicological objectivity – without ignoring its benefits – paved the way to shape this plot into a libretto, which offered many possibilities as a research project. So, after reviving all those historical instruments that were muted for ages, why not also revive those who played, composed, or sung that music?

2. Michael Polanyi introduced this term in his book *Personal Knowledge* (1958).

The result turned out to be a kind of reenactment of a moment in the history of music (the “invention” of opera); a narrative procedure that could be labeled as dramatized research.

Beyond method

My proposal to make an opera as an experiment in artistic research was welcomed with some skepticism by the PhD-jury. There were doubts about whether my estimations for undertaking such a project were realistic. Afterward, it turned out they were not, but the warning did not prevent me from going on. In the end, the question remains if realism is at all a decisive criterium in artistic research.

It is difficult to describe this whole enterprise in terms of methodology because all sorts of incidents influenced the way of making it, and creative or opposing ideas were interfering with the progress. Even the final goal was eventually split in at least two directions. One was the intended production of this new opera, the first in history about Claudio Monteverdi (as opposed to the twelve operas about Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa). On the other side, there was the disclosure of artistic phenomena that appear during a present-day creation of music theatre and the way these phenomena mirror their equal of four hundred years ago.

The only way to make this approach methodologically healthy was to abandon the idea that proof should be an outcome of research, or that a systematic account was needed. Paul Feyerabend’s rigorous rejection of the old model of research with an intellectual concept as a backbone in *Against Method* (1975), encouraged me to follow an atypical experimental path of investigation.

I have chosen to characterize my narrative research as “dramatized” to accentuate that its content is communicated in the most direct way. As such, this opera describing and representing one miserable year in the life of Claudio Monteverdi tells parallel stories, and at the same time, reflects upon them.

For instance, the scene of Orpheus being killed by the furies refers to the original libretto of Alessandro Striggio (Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* in its first version), using his text set on new music. At the same time, this Orpheus is also the allegory of Vanità in the dramatic context and, as such, impersonated by Francesco Rasi, Monteverdi’s first Orfeo. This Vanity/Rasi character evokes a tenor-composer at the beginning of the 17th century in Italy and his significance in the history of opera stardom. But the multiplicity in representation does not end here. Because now, in the 21st century, we have a particular expectation of a “Monteverdi-tenor”, cultured during the revival that took place throughout the previous century from Vincent D’Indy to Arpeggiata, my opera plays with the connotations of these recent historical performance conventions. By linking this tenor role to the allegory of Vanity, I gave space to my colleagues to compose a score for him that presented these conventions a bit as a caricature.

So, all these layers are packed as one musical event that can be appreciated as a whole, but also pass unnoticed in its complexity and consumed only in the narrative top layer. This character symbolizes the ephemeral aspect of music as a metaphor of human life as in the original Orpheus myth. We can laugh at his vanity, but at the same time, he is showing us the way to the essence of life.

But how did a tenor sound in 1608 Mantua, and how does this relate to us four centuries later? This could be treated as a purely musicological question that would lead to some hypothetical answer. Evoking Francesco Rasi through a form of re-enactment is using the same musicological information but, as always in historical performance, adding the extra dimension of embodying the past in an effort to close the gap. The condition is that the attitude remains experimental and not a repetition or imitation of a previous attempt. This is where the new music comes in and paraphrases the style of ornamentation, rhetoric, and improvisation left to the initiative of the performing tenor. The "new" invites the audience to wash their ears of the old or familiar style.

In this way, artistic research makes it possible to say a lot in a format that exceeds many conventional academic articles or books. But that does not mean neglecting academic achievements. The whole libretto depends to a great extent on the meticulous work of specialized musicologists and historians.

Playing with history

The production of *La Tragedia di Claudio M* – the title of the opera – was bound to specific rules in order to function as a research project. The most important one was that of being faithful to all biographical or other historical facts. The other condition was that the instrumentation remained as close as possible to the period, or at least to that of the early 17th-century Mantua. But from there starts the playing with all these facts and fantasizing a reality that has something to say on the levels described above. Impersonating historical figures today has some similarities with the way in which gods or mythological beings were represented in the early plays and operas of the 17th century. Still, there is no obligation to include all known historical details, which gives the whole enterprise a lightness or effortlessness characteristic of playing.³

The composers involved set themselves the task of making new music that was reminiscent of the forms, shapes, and rhetorical figures of early 17th-century style. In this way, they were playing with history just like a performer, who does this subconsciously on a meta-level when performing along the lines of historically informed practice.⁴

Apart from these rules, to stay within the definitions of play, also time and space were set within boundaries. This playground of our experimental set up was manifold, because until the final shape of the play – that is, the actual performance of the opera – many stages of the process of making it constituted their own little universe. According to the definition of Johan Huizinga, the playground is a temporary sacred world – within the ordinary world – dedicated to the performance (1949 [1938]). In this case, the performance is not just playing the opera for an audience, but also the whole experiment as research, with all its subdivisions. These comprise rehearsals by the performers and the stage director, or meetings between composers discussing decisions about the libretto, and working out their ideas. In the end, all were playing with the historical facts and artifacts as material. Finally, it was up to me as a researcher who started this project to make sense of this chain of events and contemplate an

3. On playing, see Gadamer in his book *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960, 110).

4. The term is borrowed from Butt (2002).

interpretation of the many-sided outcomes, even though during the opera performances these have already spoken for themselves. More eloquently, even than would be possible in words, since the essence of any artistic expression is ineffable in its full complexity.

***Sprezzatura*, resistance and reality**

The practical outcomes of this artistic research are centered on the performance of early 17th-century style in Italy, in confrontation with new music that adopts certain principles of that style, such as *parlar cantando* or *basso continuo*. Also, the huge influence of *commedia dell'arte* in the rhetorical and dramatic character of the early *seicento* monody has been a guiding principle for us. One of the main issues here is the musical delivery, with apparent ease and freedom for the performers, the so-called *sprezzatura* – a kind of virtuosity mingled with contempt for effort – which defined the *noblesse* or joy of playing.

Embodying the vanished past – the final goal of historical performance practice –, often results in new insights on the aesthetics of sound concerning its functionality but without having any certainty about these effortless gestures. The theories about tacit or implicit knowledge shed some light on a different approach to what otherwise remains an intellectual exercise.

Reincarnating the mummified artifacts of the distant past requires a learning process that follows the living body. This is a subjective experience, and many decisions in the process are taken on a subliminal level. Reasoning is an auxiliary tool in that whole process but certainly not the foundation of its original ideas.

One could see the entire opera or research project as an enlargement of Polanyi's probe stick metaphor, which describes the search strategy on a subliminal level as seeking information of the material world with a blind man's probe stick. This compass is navigated by detecting resistance (Polanyi 1966, 12). Resistance in the creative dimension of the research project existed on both sides. The historical facts left gaps of information that would have helped in completing the biographical narrative: for instance, the uncertainties about the missing part of Monteverdi's opera *Arianna*. On the other side, the trouble to find a new way of realizing *parlar cantando* with the composers that would make a convincing unity with the historical passages. Their frame of reference was so totally different from the historically informed musicians that it took a very long time to develop a new musical language of speaking-singing that kept the text intelligible. In the end, the sextet by Georges Aperghis, *L'origine des espèces*, was an inspiration to find the right approach to materialize a 21st-century *parlar cantando*, but only after working for two days with composers and singers in a specially arranged workshop by Aperghis-specialist, soprano Donatienne Michel-Dansac. The physical realization and the act of performing a text helped to discover the necessary resistances to make a dramatic enlargement of the *libretto* possible, without falling back into a Pavlov kind of opera vocalizations with too much sound production and loss of language.

It was my goal to stay close to the flexibility of the *commedia dell'arte* delivery of texts. Light and very much guided by body movement in a staging of vicinity with the audience. The reality of human voices and gestures that are not amplified or technologically blown up, but on the contrary, maintain the intimacy of real life, was one of the rules that dictated the staging. In this way, the playground could function ambiguously, both as reality and theatrical imagination.

The ineffable truth

My main attempt with music theatre constructed in this way was to prove my statements without delivering intellectual arguments. Art speaking uniquely through art. Like Monteverdi's words at the beginning of this article: truth as the fundament on which the creation takes place. The result does not claim to be truth itself; at its utmost, it is just manifested in disguise. When I had already decided to cluster the characters of the opera in allegories and that the role of Virginia Ramponi – the actress who performed the role of Arianna in the 1608 première – would be the allegory of Verità, I found a dialogue written for her. *Il dialogo fra Momo e Verità*, written by her husband, the actor and comedy troupe leader Giovanni Battista Andreini, might have grown out of their improvisations. In that dialogue, the actress explains that she is not just what she seems to be, a woman of the *commedia*. Underneath her costume and makeup, she says, she actually is Truth, but if she would show herself as such, the people would never accept her.

I gratefully used that dialogue in the opera as a crucial exchange between Virginia (representing *commedia dell'arte*) and Monteverdi (representing music). However, part of the game is that the audience knows it is all play, and therefore they can submit to the ritual of performance. Harsh truths about humankind can be accepted and are even welcomed in this way. The merge of theatre and music resulted in *Arianna* with its famous lament, according to many, the first step towards opera in the modern sense. So much has been written about this icon in the history of music. In the end, I think no words, nor analyses or other attempts to make its meaning explicit, will bring us closer to reveal the true reason for its impact. When artistic research resists the temptation to serve as a way of making art accountable, or even worse, to suggest it can philosophically explain art, then it most likely will have to choose the costume and accept that this discipline also depends on man's ability to play.

docARTES PhD project

Opera production *La Tragedia di Claudio M*, performed seven times in 2018.

Vimeo link (English subtitles): <https://vimeo.com/411418830>.

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