

# Staging Liquid Modern Communities in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*

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After a long gap in their reception history, Claudio Monteverdi's operas have since the early twentieth century become iconic symbols of the early music movement and have entered the canon of so-called great operas.<sup>1</sup> This is especially true of *Orfeo*, a setting of a libretto by Alessandro Striggio, first performed in Mantua in 1607. The conventional explanation for their iconicity is that they are historically important works, the first to realise fully the potential of the operatic genre, and that, like Shakespeare's plays, they speak to modern audiences and relate to contemporary concerns while also displaying an atemporal sense of 'greatness'. These explanations, though, are contingent on surrounding socio-cultural factors. Rather than trying to analyse their immanent greatness, it is more revealing to examine how Monteverdi's operas have been received and performed on stage, going beyond mere chronicle and providing a deeper analysis of the political, cultural, and social contexts of their performative instances. This article demonstrates that by 'thinking through' five recent stagings of *Orfeo* we can come to an enriched understanding both of Monteverdi's work and of contemporary theatrical concerns.

Since the 1970s, stage directors have consistently seen the opera stage as a site for social commentary, a locus in which to express their ideas about social interaction, and have brought to it contrasting notions of community.<sup>2</sup> *Orfeo* provides

an example through which to follow the concept of community on stage from the 1970s to the present. By tracing the realisation of community through five filmed productions of the opera, my aim is to elucidate the way that the stage conception of early opera has developed over the last few decades, a period sociologist Zygmunt Bauman labels 'liquid modernity'.<sup>3</sup> When they portray communities onstage, stage directors allow audiences to reflect upon their own communities, and by using *Orfeo* as a site for their theorising they give modern audiences the opportunity to connect with art far removed from their own aesthetic backgrounds. While many critics have characterised the early music movement as a monolithic attempt to regain or appropriate the past, these directors show how much early music can be re-rooted in the present while also being allowed to speak on its own terms.<sup>4</sup> Far from being fixed, the meanings of this music shift depending on who is interpreting it, and in what context.

The performative field we call 'Monteverdi opera' is now, as it was in the seventeenth century, notably 'liquid'. The surviving seventeenth-century performance material is full of gaps: while most of the operas' notes and words survive, we know little about their performance style. There are as many different interpretations how these operas should 'go' as there are performances of them, as each group of performers must make fundamental decisions about instrumentation, casting, design, and musical interpretation. Evidence shows that even in the seventeenth century, performance styles were very fluid, depending on performers and circumstances.<sup>5</sup> The fluidity and lack of single answers that Bauman refers to as liquid modernity is especially apparent in present-day operatic performance, as stagings of the same opera can vary extraordinarily widely in their scenic content. But where Bauman sees liquid life as a mostly problematic state, reflective of the challenges faced by post-industrial society, in early opera not having one answer leads to great invention and thoughtful engagement with the contexts of the past and the present. Liquidity here is not necessarily a bad thing.

### I. *Orfeo* as a Stage for Community

Monteverdi's and Striggio's *Orfeo* tells the mythological story of Orpheus's attempt to rescue his deceased wife Eurydice from the underworld.<sup>6</sup> The opera is in five acts: acts one and two are set above ground at the wedding festivities of Orfeo (Orpheus) and Euridice (Eurydice), which become a funeral when a messenger relays the news of Eurydice's death. Acts three and four take place in the underworld, as Orpheus pleads with Styx ferryman Caronte (Charon) and Plutone and Proserpina (Hades and Persephone) to allow him to take Eurydice back above ground with him, with the

caveat that he cannot look at his wife on the way. Act five takes place back above, as Orfeo laments his sad fate (having of course looked at Euridice) but is rescued from his sorrow by his father Apollo, who promises that he and Euridice will be reunited in Heaven.<sup>7</sup> While much hermeneutic analysis of *Orfeo* from within musicology focuses on the authors' construction of Orfeo's gendered or politicised subjectivity,<sup>8</sup> formalist analysis has examined the carefully-planned and often symmetrical harmonic and strophic structures of the opera's music and libretto.<sup>9</sup>

*Orfeo's* historical position at the beginning of the development of the operatic genre as well as its musical variety and mythological subject matter has made it an attractive locus for many different types of staging. Composer Monteverdi and librettist Striggio present various challenges to the modern stage director, many of which involve notions of community. The first half of *Orfeo* is structurally quite different from the second, as in the first two acts Orfeo is surrounded by nymphs and shepherds and the dramatic focus lies on his interaction with them, while in the second half, entailing his quest to regain Euridice from the underworld, his interactions occur with a series of specific individuals: Speranza (Hope), Caronte, Proserpina and Plutone, and finally Apollo. The chorus, still representing a wider community, does not disappear, but their role changes to one more like the ancient Greek chorus, commenting on and moralising about the action. They have transferred from 'coro mobile' (choir in motion) to 'coro stabile' (stable choir).<sup>10</sup> Because our modern idea of community is based around the relationship of the individual to the group, it would be tempting to read this structural shift of the role of the chorus from the first to the second part of the opera as a disappearance of community, but actually this simply represents a different idea of community that would have been more easily acceptable to a seventeenth-century audience. In a pre-capitalist society that retained vestiges of a feudal political system, where people still owed allegiance to prince and/or Church, a chorus moralising from 'above' would have been more likely received as a reflection of society's hierarchy, a class structure deeply ingrained within the community.

These reflections bring up the question of how modern productions of earlier stage works should reflect the origins of these works. A musical or dramatic 'work' is really the set of all of its performances, so any given production is a particular actualisation of *Orfeo*, an instance of the work as conveyed to an audience, rather than a reproduction of an ephemeral original. This attitude towards musical works, one broadly shared by the productions to be discussed, could be called 'postmodern' in the Lyotardian sense: the productions reflect an aesthetic state where teleological narrative is questioned, where an unstable, liquid concept of truth and value governs artistic and social interactions, and where the past is evoked in dialogue rather than

dictated from the present subject-position.<sup>11</sup> Bauman explains why he prefers to call this mode 'liquid modernity' rather than 'postmodernity': liquids are a useful metaphor because they 'make salient the brittleness, breakability, ad hoc modality of inter-human bonds.'<sup>12</sup> Especially relevant to art forms like opera that exist in time, liquids have 'time-sensitivity [...] contrary to the solids, which could be described as contraptions to cancel the impact of time.'<sup>13</sup>

I will focus here on the staging of *Orfeo's* second act in productions directed by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Pierre Audi, Trisha Brown, Gilbert Deflo, and Pier Luigi Pizzi. These five directors find a variety of strategies for dealing with the distance between twentieth/twenty-first- and seventeenth-century notions of community. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle was one of the first opera directors to apply the new conventions of a politically engaged *Regietheater* to Monteverdi's operas, as the 1978 film of his production of *Orfeo* at the Zurich Opera demonstrates.<sup>14</sup> He gives the opera a doubly historicist Marxist interpretation, setting his production in a late-1970s version of 1607 Mantua and emphasising class relations within the community he places on the stage. Following the example of Ponnelle and other critically engaged directors like Patrice Chéreau, a younger generation has taken *Orfeo* in many different directions, all of which say a great deal not only about their creators but about the societies in which they were working. In a 1994 production at the Nederlandse Opera in Amsterdam, Pierre Audi emphasises the mythical and mystical qualities of the Orpheus story, presenting an ideal 'primitive' community as it might have been imagined in contemporary Europe.<sup>15</sup> Trisha Brown in her 1998 Brussels production abstracts the opera's community to such a degree that it almost ceases to exist, focusing instead on the individual body in space.<sup>16</sup> This could reflect what some commentators in the late 1990s, like Robert Putnam in his influential book *Bowling Alone*, saw as a late modern degradation of community in Western societies.<sup>17</sup> In his 2002 Barcelona production, Gilbert Deflo attempts an 'authenticist' reading of *Orfeo*, taking influence from the way the opera might have been staged in 1607.<sup>18</sup> Like Ponnelle and Deflo, Pier Luigi Pizzi in his 2008 Madrid production sets the opera in 1607 Mantua but his approach displays a non-ideological yet self-reflective optimism, very much at one with the concept of community in the European Union of the early twenty-first century.<sup>19</sup>

This emphasis on community is an inseparable aspect of the opera, both in its musical structure and in its staging possibilities. Over the course of the opera the title character interacts with a variety of communities: the nymphs and shepherds among whom he lives, the denizens of the underworld, and various gods. The carefully-planned symmetrical structure of the first two acts of the opera sets Orfeo against the background of nymphs and shepherds, highlighting the individual's relation to the

wider community. These acts, with their alternation of solos and small ensembles with choruses, stage an imagined harmonious community where the individual is part of a higher-functioning whole, a taxonomy that the Mantuan courtiers at the opera's first performance in 1607 might have recognised as a reflection of their own social structure.<sup>20</sup> Striggio's libretto and the way Monteverdi set its words attests to careful consideration of this taxonomy, showing Orfeo first as part of a community, then as an exceptional individual during his trip to the underworld, and finally as having broken his bond with community, left alone to lament his fate until rescued by his father Apollo. Orfeo's trajectory goes from a positive kind of individualism, in which he stands out from the crowd and acts as its figurehead while still conforming to its social mores, to a negative kind, renouncing his social duties and ignoring his role. Orfeo can therefore be seen as a cautionary example for the model Renaissance prince.<sup>21</sup> According to Bauman, community within liquid modernity is 'numb – or dead', as the ties that created communities in pre-modern times have melted, leaving behind an unfulfillable desire for connection.<sup>22</sup> These opera productions use *Orfeo* to stage the resultant search for a chimeric wholeness, seen within the narrative trajectory of the title character, and are thereby very illustrative of their liquid modern times. They vary considerably as to whether this is an optimistic or a futile search.

For each of the five productions, I will give an overview of the director's aesthetic aims and their effects, focusing closely on a single sequence, in which Orfeo is told of his wife's death in Act Two. It is in this sequence that community comes to the fore, as it is here that the director must show most clearly how Orfeo relates to the society that surrounds him, how he relates to another individual (Silvia, the messenger, as well as to the absent Euridice), and how the nymphs and shepherds relate to him and his strife, and to Silvia and her news.<sup>23</sup> The sequence to be analysed begins with Orfeo's aria 'Vi ricordo o boschi ombrosi', in which Orfeo praises the woods and fountains. After this aria, a shepherd announces the arrival of Silvia, who prepares Orfeo for the catastrophic news she must relate. She describes how Euridice was killed by a snake. The first to react to the narrative are two shepherds, then Orfeo sings his lament 'Tu sei morta'. The choral lament 'Ahi caso acerbo' follows, after which Silvia explains that she must hide herself from the communal grief and become a hermit.<sup>24</sup> Over the course of approximately fifteen minutes, we witness Orfeo's trajectory from great joy to seemingly endless sorrow, and we see how the community that surrounds him makes sense of what has happened.

## II. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and Hierarchy

In the late 1970s, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle (1932-1988) directed and designed a cycle of Monteverdi's three surviving operas for the Zurich Opera, in collaboration with conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt. At the end of their performance run in Zurich, Ponnelle directed studio films based on the three productions, which were then broadcast on television throughout Europe and America. His *Orfeo* in 1978 was the first production of the opera to be disseminated beyond the opera house via television, and also the first directed by a major figure of the new politically-engaged opera directorial school that emerged in the 1970s. Throughout his productions, Ponnelle closely read the works he put on stage and attempted to uncover their sociopolitical layers.<sup>25</sup> He was also one of the first stage directors to frequently use television as a medium, adapting his stagings for the small screen. Marcia Citron sees Ponnelle's filmed opera productions as emphasising the characters' subjectivities, featuring subjects who 'inhabit a specific socio-cultural milieu and [who] may embody elements from the literary source or the era in which the opera was set or composed'.<sup>26</sup> His Monteverdi films are no exception.

Ponnelle loosely sets his *Orfeo* in the time and place in which the opera was first performed, 1607 Mantua. Asked whether he agrees with director Vsevolod Meyerhold's idea that dramatic works must be viewed through the 'prism of the age in which the work was written', Ponnelle responds that, at least for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera, such a prism 'lets us understand *why* people have these and those attitudes, *why* they behave in such a way to one another, *what* sort of etiquette and gestures govern them. Lots of things like that. And, I'm sorry to say, a great many modern designers and directors have no idea whatsoever about that kind of culture. So the result is a sort of vulgarisation – a comic strip of the work.'<sup>27</sup> Ponnelle stresses that the reasons underlying the various interpersonal relationships within the community from which the opera stems must be uncovered and displayed to the modern audience.

From the beginning of the production, a sense of community among the performers is achieved as we see the orchestral musicians chatting to the singers informally, out of character, implying a sort of non-diegetic community. When the performance begins, the Duke of Mantua (portrayed by Roland Hermann), who takes the role of Apollo at the end of the opera, and his wife (Trudeliese Schmidt), who sings the part of *la Musica* and later *Speranza*, take their places on thrones at the side of the stage. The setting shows a fantastical glam-rock Baroque, as does conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt's elaborate orchestral re-scoring of the music, which goes even beyond the myriad instruments Monteverdi indicates in the published score. Intercutting throughout the film between the singers and the

instrumentalists reminds us of the theatricality of the performance event, especially important for Ponnelle in structuring this studio film, by default removed from the 'live' theatrical experience.

The key to the community Ponnelle puts on stage is the stratification of social classes. The Duke and Duchess sit separately from the others, overseeing proceedings, but they also participate in singing the roles that are marked as upper-class or allegorical: Apollo, la Musica, Speranza. A group of seventeenth-century courtiers, acting as the chorus, stands in galleries above the main performance space looking down on the characters in the drama. While the courtiers sing, the corps de ballet, dressed as nymphs and shepherds, dances. This separation of choric function sets up a stark class distinction between the singing courtiers, who remain in their balconies, and their more embodied dancing vassals. Between these two groups stand Orfeo (a demigod, or prince) and Euridice. Their costumes are silver and white, made of rich fabrics, different from the animal skins of the fantastic baroque peasants but not as formal and confining as the garb of the Duke and Duchess and their courtiers.

This staged world of 1607 Mantua is one of stark class distinctions and idealised representations of rural life. Reaction shots of the courtiers amused and almost embarrassed by the japes of the dancing chorus remind the audience of this class separation. At the beginning of Act Two, Orfeo changes from his silver and white garb to a different costume, more like that of the other peasants yet still made of rich fabrics, indicating that he is now closer to them but still in charge. All lie on the ground in a circle with Orfeo in the most prominent place downstage at the centre (along with an orchestral lutenist, whose costume makes him seem out of place) in an image reminiscent of hippie culture (see figure 1). This being a studio production, the camera is able to view this tableau from above and further emphasise the spatial form and Orfeo's prominence within it.



Figure 1

In his aria 'Vi ricordo, o boschi ombrosi', Orfeo dresses one of the peasants as himself, with his breastplate and a mock lyre made of branches and twigs, and another woman portrays Euridice. Although this demonstrates the blurring of class boundaries between the peasants and the more noble Orfeo, it is all enacted on Orfeo's terms: it is he who leads the action, inviting the sung and danced responses of the nymphs and shepherds, and he remains centre stage and most consistently within the camera's frame.

The centrality of Orfeo himself in the social structure enacted on Ponnelle's stage and screen becomes yet more obvious in the subsequent series of laments, where there is little sense of real community mourning, probably because Orfeo and Euridice are not in the same class as the would-be mourning proletariat. When Silvia enters suddenly from the rear of the stage, the lights quickly fade and a black backdrop is flown in, covering the pastoral set from the first part of the opera. Although this emphasises Silvia's role in the change of mood, she remains upstage for the first part of her monologue, not moving to centre until Orfeo invites her to do



so, asking her who she is. Her relationship to Orfeo, like that of the other shepherds, is not one of friendliness so much as vassal to lord. She does not comfort Orfeo directly, but rather tells her sad narrative to the nymphs and shepherds. The chorus reacts melodramatically and artificially to the events she describes: in the first choral rendition of 'Ahi caso acerbo' some of the courtiers come down onto the stage and all sing with exaggerated, stylised gesture (physical as well as musical). They move only on each repetition of 'ahi', quickly changing from one pose to another, clearly meeting pre-determined marks. This is self-conscious and choreographed 'stage' mourning, rather than a scenic representation of 'real' mourning. One gets the impression that the peasants are playing the role of mourners in order to please the upper class, rather than out of any genuine grief. Ponnelle's use of suddenly shifting camera angles in this sequence to cover the nymphs and shepherds, along with the stylised gesture and the separation of singers from the dancer/actors, pointedly mediates this community, making it seem artificial in an almost Brechtian way, the emphasis on form rather than content. Through these devices, Ponnelle implies that the chorus does not relate on a deep level to Orfeo; instead, it is only a structural device, a lower class to be used to do the bidding of the upper class.

In all, Ponnelle's film is somewhat confused as to what it is trying to say about 1978 theatre and about 1607 society as portrayed in Monteverdi's opera. Ponnelle's show (the opera *Orfeo*) within a show (the 1607 production of that opera in Mantua) within a show (a production in Zurich in 1978) within a show (a filmed studio recreation of that production) is so thickly layered that it loses clarity. Ponnelle's Marxist reading, while at one with the European intellectual climate of the late 1970s, does not permit true community interaction. By having his singers employ exaggerated and artificial gestures and by imposing stark separation of classes, Ponnelle attempts to demonstrate the artificiality of inter-class community in the early seventeenth-century Mantua of the opera's origin and, by extension, late 1970s Europe.

### III. Pierre Audi and Myth

In 1994 Pierre Audi staged *Orfeo*, in collaboration with lutenist Steven Stubbs and his ensemble Tragicommedia, at the Nederlandse Opera (today called the Nationale Opera) in Amsterdam. The stage design is abstract, featuring a large circular pool, a crumbling fragment of a brick wall, and a teepee-like structure made of wood. While Ponnelle's staging makes references to 1607 Mantua, Audi emphasises the mythical and ritualistic nature of the story, placing it in a non-specific time and place. La Musica, who begins the opera with an allegorical prologue, is here a shaman-like

figure carrying a crude wooden lyre, accompanied by figures wearing animal masks who enact a silent version of the Orpheus myth while she sings. The various solos in the first two acts are given to singers of different ages, staged as having varied roles within this society: young couples, village elders, etc. The spousal actions of Orfeo and Euridice, and then the mourning of Euridice's death, are staged as rituals, with an enforced separation of the bride and groom (which also makes it convenient for Euridice to leave the stage to be bitten by the snake). The community here is small and rural, in contrast to Ponnelle's larger urban society. Still, like Ponnelle's, Audi's conception of community could also be seen as Marxist in orientation: he presents an idealised society as it may have been before the arrival of capitalism differentiated it into a rigid class system. It also represents a 'back-to-basics' view of society idealistically removed from modern life, in which everyone has a role to play.

Audi's staging of the second act centralises integration rather than highlighting separation, as Ponnelle had done. When Orfeo sings 'Vi ricordo o boschi ombrosi' he seems almost alarmed by Euridice's absence, especially when he specifically mentions her name, and he searches for her across the stage. The solo shepherd who responds is cast as an older man who tries to comfort Orfeo. Rather than being the dominant figure on stage, Audi's Orfeo is less sure of himself in his new role as married man, and he looks to his surrounding community for support. In this production the Messenger, Silvia, is highly personalised, almost distracting from the main dramatic thread. Like Ponnelle, Audi keeps her upstage during her first speech, removed from the main action. But it seems here that she stays to the side because of the bad news she must impart, rather than out of deference to Orfeo, for when she moves downstage it is of her own volition rather than on his invitation. As she begins her narrative of Euridice's death, Orfeo cradles her in his arms from behind. She breaks from him when she first mentions the serpent, then Orfeo falls to the stage floor when she says that the serpent's bite killed Euridice. At the end she goes to him and cradles him. By allowing Silvia and Orfeo to touch and comfort each other, thereby bringing out a strong relationship between the two, Audi infuses the characters with realistic feelings. Because his characters can interact on a close personal level, unlike Ponnelle's, Audi's vision of community seems more positive. After the monologue, though, the chorus directs 'Ahi caso acerbo' directly at her, as if blaming her for Euridice's death. During her final ritornello she looks to the soloists for comfort but they all recoil from her. Silvia's stated intention to become a hermit seems incongruous in many productions, but in Audi's ritual-infused world it makes sense that as the witness to such grief she would exile herself, having become taboo within this society.

Audi's strongest articulation of the interaction between Orfeo and the wider community closes the act. During the shepherds' duets, Orfeo slowly walks into the pool at the rear of the stage, carrying Euridice in a white winding sheet, where he stands until the final 'caso acerbo' chorus. The chorus walks into the pool as group to join him, as if to share and support his grieving (see figure 2).



Figure 2

But when the others have all reached the pool at the end of the chorus, Orfeo departs, carrying Euridice into a crevasse that has emerged on the stage. This literalises his departure from the wider community, setting the scene for his solitude during the rest of the opera. The act ends with nearly two minutes without music, as the chorus slowly leave the pool and walk off stage, accompanied only by the sounds of distant thunder. The first half of the opera also began in silence, as does the second half, another way in which Audi transforms *Orfeo* into ritual theatre. This use of framing silence makes the action on stage seem like a ceremony, with a certain amount of 'paratextual' time before and after to prepare the conditions under which the performance of this pre-modern community can take place.

#### IV. Trisha Brown and Motion

Choreographer Trisha Brown's 1998 production of *Orfeo* for Brussels' Théâtre de la Monnaie is a striking contrast to the others examined here. This *Orfeo*, by nature of Brown's background as a choreographer, becomes as much ballet as opera, liquifying the seeming distinction between the two genres. While recent studies have shown that there was likely a great deal of dancing in early opera,<sup>28</sup> Brown's

emphasis on dance here is not historical but instead reflects her personal aesthetic. Brown's non-narrative modern dance work is focused on the body and its relation to the forces surrounding and acting upon it. She brings out certain emotional moments in the music through solo and group movement, rather than creating a danced narrative parallel to the musical one. She says, however, that she 'tried to make it dramatic. I couldn't stand the lack of energy on the opera stage, so I began to make forms that informed the audience of the story and the music. My boldness was replaced by innocence, knowing by not knowing. Can a singer do this?... I thought if I got the gestures right I could empower them as performers.'<sup>29</sup> When she was approached by the Théâtre de la Monnaie to stage *Orfeo* she insisted on and was granted a long rehearsal period and was given the role of both director and choreographer. Brown created the dances with her own company, then she and her colleagues taught them to the singers in a two-week workshop, in addition to the standard six weeks of rehearsal.<sup>30</sup>

The non-narrative nature of Brown's *Orfeo* is a reflection of her conception of the body as an object in space influenced by surrounding physical forces rather than by mental intentions. Guillaume Bernardi writes that Brown 'created a machine that moved singers and dancers around the stage in a continuous flow'.<sup>31</sup> Creating a sense of community is simply not on Brown's agenda: the bodies on her stage, including those of the opera's protagonists, appear as objects without intentionality, as purely formal entities. Bernardi asserts that Brown's approach 'freed the spectators from the intense, obsessive emotions of opera: it allowed them to see and relate to the singers in new ways'.<sup>32</sup> Brown's production is therefore radical in its rethinking of what opera is meant to do, applying to opera the discoveries made in modern dance over the previous decades. The conventional wisdom of opera as an 'extravagant art' is here called into question, in contrast to the other productions I examine, which in their various ways retain the notion of opera as a narrative art form to which the audience should somehow relate, whether politically or emotionally.<sup>33</sup> Movement becomes an embodiment of a fight against narrative, insisting on being in the single affective moment brought about by particular events rather than referring to past or future events. By the 1990s this approach had become commonplace in modern dance and experimental film, and by applying it to opera Brown attempts to bring the genre up to date with other art forms.

This anti-narrativity has especially arresting implications for the second act of *Orfeo*, which in Striggio's libretto traces Orfeo's place in society and his character trajectory from rejoicing spouse to mourner through the use of mood-setting solos, ensembles, and narratives. Where Ponnelle and even Audi focus on the chorus as a group, Brown's choreography features heterogeneity of movement. Each dancer

moves differently from the others, until their movement reaches a kind of tipping point and they link arms for a round dance or move across the stage in a line, rather like the emergent composition of schools of fish or bird flight formations. The dancing happens not only during orchestral ritornelli, but also during vocal solos and choruses. The soloists often dance themselves, and Orfeo in Brown's conception becomes a dancing role almost as much as a singing one (her Orfeo, baritone Simon Keenlyside, actively collaborated with Brown on his movements). During his solos, especially 'Vi ricordo', Orfeo stands out from the crowd because he is singing as well as dancing, and because he wears a yellow suit while the rest of the cast wear identical white costumes. While in Audi's production the chorus relates to Orfeo emotionally, in Brown's the relationship is simply spatial. When they touch, it is only to use the gravitational pull and forces of each other's bodies, not to form an emotional connection.

When Silvia enters the change of mood is accomplished through a different kind of movement: both she and the dancers slow down and remain in place, moving only their upper bodies (see figure 3). Orfeo's reaction to her news is shown in his body, while his face remains neutral, staring into the middle distance.



Figure 3

In this production no one sings directly to anyone else. Orfeo begins his lament 'Tu sei morta' lying on his stomach and gradually stands as Monteverdi sends him higher in his range and uses higher parts of the musical mode. As with Audi's,

Brown's messenger becomes an outcast at the end of the scene, but she expresses this through spatial cues rather than emotional beats. She begins to move with the rest of the chorus, but then runs out of the formation and lies on the floor downstage left to sing her final moments. At the end she falls forward into the orchestra pit. Because the chorus does not look at Silvia or show any emotion as she leaves them, her departure is implicated as more physical than emotional, an alteration to the physical composition of this society. This demonstrates that for Brown, the sign system of music refers not to emotional or narrative tropes, but to bodily movement. Music becomes a spatial, embodied art, very different from Ponnelle's and Audi's view of opera as politically- and socially-encoded narrative. The form of this community is more important than its content.

### V. Gilbert Deflo and Authenticity

Gilbert Deflo staged *Orfeo* in 2002 in collaboration with Jordi Savall and his orchestra Le Concert des Nations at the Liceu opera house in Barcelona. Like Ponnelle, Deflo sets *Orfeo* in the place and time of its creation, 1607 Mantua. In a filmed interview, Deflo explains that he was inspired by the mirrors of the Sala degli Specchi, alleged location of the opera's first performance in the Ducal Palace in Mantua, and he uses a large mirror in place of a show curtain to reflect the audience, helping them to see themselves as the 1607 audience. He further attempts this identification by costuming conductor Jordi Savall as Monteverdi (as portrayed in a portrait by Giulio Strozzi) and having him process through the stalls to take his place before the orchestra at the beginning of the opera. During *la Musica's* prologue, a slide of the title page of the 1609 publication is projected on a backdrop behind her, placing an emphasis on the written text. The opera itself, the composer, and the conductor (along with the large band in the raised orchestra pit) are most important for Deflo, and everything else on stage (including community) seems subordinate.

Deflo's sets and costumes reference early sixteenth-century European painting, especially the aesthetic of Rubens (who probably knew Monteverdi). The chorus stands to the side of the orchestra, leaving the stage space open for the soloists and dancers. The soloists use stylised gestures reminiscent of the very little we know about early seventeenth-century stage movement, and the loose, flowing dances are more faithful to the spirit than to what is known of the letter of early sixteenth-century dance. The singers mostly look at Orfeo from the side of the stage, not engaging with him or each other through anything more than simple eye contact. In spite of the mirror effect of the curtain, these techniques indicate a rather superficial community and make the stage action seem somewhat distant for a modern audience.

This production is a paradigmatic example of what Richard Taruskin labels 'authentistic'. This term, which Taruskin discusses in *Text and Act*, was formed through analogy with 'scientistic' as used by Friedrich von Hayek and Karl Popper, describing a discourse in which the scientific method of experimentation and data analysis is forced uncritically onto the social sciences and the humanities, trying to make them fit into a positivist discourse at odds with socially observed phenomena.<sup>34</sup> In opera, an authentistic stance tries to force all aspects of a production into a somewhat misconceived notion of 'solid' historical authenticity. The result of this approach to *Orfeo* is a surface-level engagement with Monteverdi and his time, which probes deeper neither into the socio-cultural conditions under which Monteverdi and Striggio wrote the opera, nor into the potential ways in which a modern audience might interpret it (as Ponnelle attempted), nor indeed into the piece's operation on a structural level (part of Audi's project).<sup>35</sup>

The previous three productions used the lament sequence of Act Two as the crux of the opera in the way that Monteverdi and Striggio imply, and also as the most articulate site for their particular ideas about community and their overall goals in directing the opera. Deflo stages the act with facile means and does not seem to engage very deeply with the text. Dancing and singing here are entirely separated activities, not only regarding who is doing the singing and dancing, but also when it occurs. While Ponnelle, Audi, and, especially, Brown have dancing and singing happen simultaneously, Deflo limits the dancing to orchestral interludes (*ritornelli*). During Orfeo's 'Vi ricordo', the singer stops moving when he is not singing in order to allow the dancers to dance in a circle around him, then they run to the side when he sings another verse. The choruses are sung from the far sides of the stage, below the auditorium's side boxes, and the chorus is therefore rarely on camera. This part of the scene is also intercut with shots of Savall and the orchestra, resulting in three different sets of people at work (dancers, chorus, and orchestra), each in their own space with little interaction between them. The result is a choppy series of small set pieces, which does indeed appear as such in the score but which does not help the audience recognise the symmetry of the act's musical and dramatic structures. The community presented here is a simplistic and stratified one in which each group knows its role and sticks to it unquestioningly.

Yet another spatial layer is added with the entrance of Silvia. She walks slowly down the centre aisle of the stalls and sings her first monologue from the front of the auditorium, taking her place on the stage later (see figure 4).



Figure 4

As we will see with Pier Luigi Pizzi's production, movement within the audience space can have deep meaning, but here it only seems like one layer too many. She and the other soloists do not make direct eye contact; while in Brown's production this was a meaningful choice to focus attention away from intentionality and onto the performers' bodies, here it only serves to confuse the directionality of speech- (or sung) acts. Because their words and gestures are not directed at anyone in particular, the characters cannot seem part of a world like the audience's, full of indicational and interpellative units of discourse.<sup>36</sup> Silvia exits in the same way, leaving slowly through the stalls, followed by the camera in a backward tracking shot. The act finally ends with a ritual movement somewhat similar to Audi's, but in this production such movement is more difficult to interpret because nothing like it has come before. Two dancers carry in a small pyre, upon which two laurel wreathes are burned. With dimmed lights this makes an aesthetically-pleasing stage picture, but the sense of community mourning that Deflo may have wished to infer is undermined by the lack of signs of community earlier in the act.

Deflo's version of community stops at polite groups of singers and dancers performing the music and movements placed before them by conductor and director. Absent is Ponnelle's critical engagement with his own society, Audi's assertion of universal myth, or Brown's radical re-reading of opera's goals. Deflo's view of the opera is much more akin to stagings from earlier in the twentieth century, with their focus on the supposed integrity of the 'work' rather than on critical



engagement with the surrounding society of either the opera's origin or of the present. The production, though, was successful at the Liceu and has been revived in other opera houses, an indication that audiences value musical excellence and authentic stage pictures as much as they do more critically engaged directorial visions. However, of the eight productions of the opera easily available on DVD,<sup>37</sup> this is the only one that fits the monicker 'authentic', implying that opera houses are engaging increasingly rarely with this type of theatrical discourse.

## VI. Pier Luigi Pizzi and Ensemble

Pier Luigi Pizzi's 2008 production at the Teatro Real in Madrid, a collaboration with William Christie and Les Arts Florissants, makes reference to the 1607 Mantua premiere as Ponnelle and Deflo did, and on the surface some elements of the production look very similar to both of these. Like Ponnelle, Pizzi uses an actor representing the Gonzaga duke and gives him some courtiers, who contrast with Orfeo's nymphs and shepherds. During the opening fanfare, a set representing a palace's courtyard rises out of the stage floor, revealing a brass ensemble. They, along with the orchestra in the pit, the dancers, the singers, and conductor William Christie, wear costumes in the style of 1607, more historically accurate than Ponnelle's fancy-dress creations. Orfeo and the other soloists watch *la Musica's* prologue from a balcony at the rear of the set. She addresses the audience (both the real Madrid audience and the cast) directly and uses stylised rhetorical gestures, another similarity to Deflo's production, although here the gestures have clearer directionality. But the way the character interactions play out sets Pizzi's production starkly apart from both Ponnelle's and Deflo's. Because Pizzi has taken the decision to raise the orchestra pit and costume the orchestra, they and their instruments become a part of the action in a way that seems much less forced than Ponnelle's merry lutenist, or than Deflo's conductor-led hierarchy. Pizzi portrays a society more varied than Ponnelle's. The first section of the opera, in spite of its historical setting, feels like a real (modern) wedding celebration, in which actors, dancers, courtiers, and orchestra all participate on an equal level. In Pizzi's version, the nymphs and shepherds are not seen as a homogenous group, but rather as individuals. Though the specifics of the staging are not historically-informed, the linkage of historical costumes with modern movement provides a bridge for the audience for an informed listening and viewing experience, liquifying the barriers of time. Pizzi explains his conception of the set design in a video interview on the DVD of the production, saying that he wanted to evoke the original performance space in a 'theatrical' manner, hence raising the stage at the beginning in a way somewhat reminiscent of Baroque machine-theatre. He also took the decision to raise the

orchestra pit, not only for acoustic reasons (the Teatro Real is a large modern opera house in which Monteverdi's orchestra, as interpreted by William Christie, might not be heard adequately if relegated to a pit) but also to allow for more interaction between the orchestra and singers.

As in the other productions, when Silvia enters she destroys the Dionysian mood. But the reaction to the news by the Duke and the courtiers seems natural and dramatically motivated, not as if they were watching a performance by an underclass. Pizzi's staging of this scene is more emotionally intense than either Ponnelle's or Deflo's. The clear class-lines of Ponnelle and the distinctions between chorus, soloists, and dancers of Deflo are blurred, and what is on stage is instead a community trying to come to grips with a crisis. Silvia delivers her monologue directly to the audience, the orchestra, and the stage characters, involving everyone present in the collective grief (see figure 5).



Figure 5

Where Deflo's Messenger breaks the fourth wall only by entering and exiting through the stalls, Pizzi's actively engages the audience through eye contact and physical gesture. In this production, therefore, when Silvia exits through the stalls it does not seem incongruous to the rest of the action. Both the vocal production of the singers and their gestures are freer than Ponnelle's stylised motion or Deflo's cleanly authenticist propriety. The mourning is more emotionally abandoned and, for a modern audience, seems more real because it is closer to what would be their own experience.

Perhaps the pan-European production team (Italian director, French orchestra, Spanish opera company, German Orfeo, etc.) implies a kind of Eurozone in microcosm. At the end of the opera, the singers, dancers, orchestra, and by extension the audience, all join in the celebration. The intensity of what has gone before is not so much weakened as released cathartically, allowing for an optimistic explosion of community-based well-being.

## VII. Conclusions

This discussion of five productions of *Orfeo* has demonstrated the variety that directors have found in the stage possibilities of this opera. All of them engage critically with the idea of community in liquid modernity and how it can be shown on stage (or in Brown's case, its absence shown) through movement, gaze, and touch, as well as through the spatial disposition of singers and dancers. These productions of *Orfeo* show that the work-concept that lies at the foundation of 'solid' modernist musicking in the industrialised West, especially as manifested in the early music movement of the first three quarters of the twentieth century, has over the last few decades liquified. Works are leaving the 'imaginary museum' and are increasingly becoming texts that live in many different forms on the opera stage.<sup>38</sup> Practitioners have moved away from the positivistic idea of a single 'correct' text for these early operas, as better understanding of the society of seventeenth-century Europe and the way its documents reflect that society implies that such a 'solid' text never actually existed. At least until the aesthetic upheavals of Richard Wagner, all opera was 'liquid', as prior to Wagner's insistence on *Werktreue* audiences would not have expected to hear even a very successful opera the same way in every production. Documentary evidence of scores and libretti shows that Monteverdi's operas *Orfeo*, *Arianna*, and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* were revised when they were revived during or shortly after the composer's life, and later canonic warhorses like Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Verdi's *Don Carlos* show a sometimes dizzying multiplicity of 'authorised' versions.<sup>39</sup> For most present-day performers and musicologists, opera is no longer something that exists abstractly outside of time, but is rather an art form that exists only in the real time of performance. There is no such thing as a Platonic ideal *Orfeo*. Rather, our notion of what the opera 'is' is a liquid set of notes and words on various pages along with an accumulated performance and reception history that living, breathing performers, scholars, and audiences take account of in myriad ways. Liquid modern communities can be seen in all of their variation in the world's opera houses, onstage and off.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Orfeo* was probably not performed at all between the early seventeenth century and a revival at Paris's Schola Cantorum in 1904, and Monteverdi's two later Venetian operas *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (1640) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642) had to wait even longer. For more on the reception history of Monteverdi's operas, see Gregory Camp, 'Monteverdi on the Modern Stage', DPhil diss. (Oxford University, 2012). The most comprehensive general overview of Monteverdi's operas is Tim Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> On this trend, see David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Taruskin's *Text and Act* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) is the classic interpretation of the early music movement as a modernist attempt to force the past into the present. See also Nick Wilson, *The Art of Re-Enchantment: Making Early Music in the Modern Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Historical performance is a vast field. One general study is Richard Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music* (New York: Norton, 1989), although each individual period and genre has its own history of stylistic debates. On seventeenth-century music, see Stewart Carter, ed., *A Performer's Guide to Seventeenth-Century Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> This is of course only one of many musical settings of the myth, which range from the earliest extant opera, Jacopo Peri's 1600 *L'Euridice*, through to Anaïs Mitchell's recent Broadway hit *Hadestown*. Carolyn Abbate discusses the attraction of the story to the sage in *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> The opera has two surviving endings, one for which only the words survive and so which cannot be performed: in the very different alternate ending Orpheus is ripped to shreds by jealous Bacchantes. For more on these endings and the opera in general, the most accessible source is John Whenham, *Orfeo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>8</sup> See Susan McClary, 'Constructions of Gender in Monteverdi's Dramatic Music', in *Feminine Endings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 34-52; John Bokina, 'Deity, Beast, and Tyrant: Images of the Prince in the Operas of Monteverdi', *International Political Science Review* 12:1 (1991), 48-66; and Mauro Calcagno, 'Performing the Self', *The Opera Quarterly* 24:3-4 (2009), 247-274.

<sup>9</sup> See Eric Chafe, 'The Tonal Structure of *Orfeo*', *Monteverdi's Musical Language* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992) and John Whenham, 'Five Acts, One Action' in Whenham, *Orfeo*.

<sup>10</sup> c.f. Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre*, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, three lines cannot do justice to Lyotard's theories, which he discusses most succinctly in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> 'This is a 'liquid modern' world: Zygmunt Bauman in conversation with Nicholas Gane', in *The New Bauman Reader*, ed. Tony Blackshaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> Bauman, 94.

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- <sup>14</sup> Monteverdi, Claudio, *L'Orfeo*, Opernhaus Zürich, dir. Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, cond. Nikolaus Harnoncourt (Deutsche Grammophon DVD, 00440 073 4163, 1978/2006).
- <sup>15</sup> Monteverdi, Claudio, *L'Orfeo*, De Nederlandse Opera, dir. Pierre Audi, cond. Stephen Stubbs (Opus Arte DVD, OA 0928 D, 1997/2005).
- <sup>16</sup> Monteverdi, Claudio, *L'Orfeo*, Théâtre de la Monnaie, dir. Trisha Brown, cond. René Jacobs (Harmonia Mundi DVD, 9909003.04, 2006).
- <sup>17</sup> New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.
- <sup>18</sup> Monteverdi, Claudio, *L'Orfeo*, Gran Teatre del Liceu, dir. Gilbert Deflo, cond. Jordi Savall (Opus Arte DVD, OA 0842 D, 2002).
- <sup>19</sup> Monteverdi, Claudio, *L'Orfeo*, Teatro Real, dir. Pier Luigi Pizzi, cond. William Christie (Dynamic DVD, 33598, 2009).
- <sup>20</sup> Various scholars have dealt with the Mantuan context of *Orfeo*, among them Tim Carter in *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre* and Iain Fenlon in 'The Mantuan *Orfeo*' in Whenham, *Orfeo*.
- <sup>21</sup> My reading, aligned to Susan McClary's conception of Orfeo's development as a trajectory from strong hero to weak lamenter in 'Constructions of Gender in Monteverdi's Dramatic Music', is in disagreement with John Bokina's, who regards Orfeo's association with commoners as his tragic flaw, and sees his apotheosis with Apollo in a positive light in 'Images of the Prince in the Operas of Monteverdi'.
- <sup>22</sup> Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 11.
- <sup>23</sup> Commentators usually call Silvia simply 'Messenger', and she is 'Messaggiera' in the score and libretto, but a shepherd announces her as Silvia. Her role is greater than that of the classical messenger, for she is presented as a friend of Euridice and she is granted a monologue after her narrative in which she expresses her feelings of guilt about the news she has imparted. For these reasons I prefer to call her by her name.
- <sup>24</sup> The libretto and an English translation can be found on the Monteverdi Choir and Orchestra website at [https://monteverdi.co.uk/downloads/Monteverdis\\_Orfeo\\_-\\_Libretto\\_and\\_translation.pdf](https://monteverdi.co.uk/downloads/Monteverdis_Orfeo_-_Libretto_and_translation.pdf) (accessed 7 November 2021).
- <sup>25</sup> See Kristina Bendikas, *The Opera Theatre of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 2004); Alessandra Lippucci, 'Social theorizing on the operatic stage: Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's postmodern humanist production of *La Traviata*', *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12:3 (1992), 245-273; and Marcia Citron, 'Subjectivity in the Opera Films of Jean-Pierre Ponnelle', *Journal of Musicology* 22:2 (2005), 203-240.
- <sup>26</sup> Citron, p. 204.
- <sup>27</sup> Frederick and Lise-Lone Marker, 'Rethatricalizing Opera: A Conversation with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle', *Opera Quarterly* 3:2 (1985), 30.
- <sup>28</sup> See, for example, Virginia Christy Lamothe, 'Dancing at a wedding: some thoughts on performance issues in Monteverdi's "Lasciate i monti"' (*Orfeo*, 1607), *Early Music* 36:4, 533-545.

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<sup>29</sup> Brown on *Orfeo* in *Trisha Brown: Dance and Art in Dialogue*, ed. Hendel Teicher (Andover, MS: MIT Press, 2002), p. 209.

<sup>30</sup> Brown and some of her singers discuss this creative process in an interview on the DVD.

<sup>31</sup> Guillaume Bernardi, "'The Voice is a Muscle': Trisha Brown and Opera', in Teicher, 254.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Michel Poizat, *The Angel's Cry: Beyond the Pleasure Principle in Opera* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). For Poizat, the opera house is a place where audiences can give in to their emotions.

<sup>34</sup> Taruskin, 99.

<sup>35</sup> This kind of opera staging relates to John Butt's conception and criticism of the unthinking 'heritage industry', where the past is fetishised with little thought as to what it means to be involved with 'heritage' today. See *Playing with History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> On units of discourse in *Orfeo*, see Mauro Calcagno, *From Madrigal to Opera: Monteverdi's Staging of the Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> In addition to the five discussed here, these are Jean-Claude Malgoire's 2004 production in Tourcoing (Dynamic DVD 33477, 2005), Robert Wilson and Rinaldo Alessandrini's 2009 production at La Scala (Opus Arte DVD 1044, 2011), and Paul Agnew and Les Arts Florissants' 2017 staging at the Théâtre de Caen (Harmonia Mundi DVD 980906263).

<sup>38</sup> The classic study of how the work concept developed in Western music is Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>39</sup> Many recent musicological studies have examined this liquid state of affairs. On nineteenth-century Italian opera, see Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars: Performing Italian Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).