*La favola d'Orfeo: Music and Rhetoric**

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If one approaches Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* as a discourse about the "spirit of music" (which is one of the possible legitimate readings, as the original title suggests),¹ one will be struck by the role that Orpheus plays in it. As one would expect, Orpheus appears in the text as an emblem, marking an important genealogical articulation. The kind of difference that this emblem traces, however, is somewhat more surprising.

Toward the end of Section 12, he is a *figura Socratis*, Socrates being described as "the new Orpheus who, though destined to be torn to pieces by the maenads of Athenian judgment, succeeded in putting the overmastering god [i.e. Dionysos] to flight."²

In Section 19, Orpheus is one of the ideal models for the Italian inventors of *stilo rappresentativo*, that is, those poets and musicians who turned music into '*serva della poesia*.' "They, and their age with them, thought they had discovered the secret of ancient music, that secret which alone could account for the amazing feats of an Orpheus or an Amphion or, indeed, for Greek tragedy."³

But instead of reproducing Greek tragedy, they produced Italian opera, with all its reassuring and inauthentic pastoral scenarios. Orpheus, the hero of early opera, the pastoral demigod, is therefore the marker of "socratism," the signal of philosophical and artistic degeneration: on one side is music as the immediate intuition of truth and the fundamental element of tragedy, on the other side are the idle and opaque constructions of *melodramma*.

This Nietzschean discourse is a philosophical *favola*, a rhetorical construction, as the brilliant readings of Paul de Man have shown,⁴ and the Orphic emblem is an elegant detail of it. I intend

to show how productive such a detail can be, by amplifying Nietzsche's emblem into an outline of the phenomenology of 'orphic' music. I call this new text "*La favola d'Orfeo*."

The fable of Orpheus begins with an examination of some operatic representations of our hero in action. Let us observe him.

Sometimes he sings, sometimes he recites through singing (*recita cantando*), as his companions, the nymphs and shepherds, also do. He recites through singing in the more conversational communications; he sings properly in the more lyrical moments.

In *recitar cantando*, the musical diction imitates the inflections of the speaking voice, thus constructing a sort of prolonged onomatopoeia. The melodic arioso, on the other hand, imitates, through a more sophisticated mechanism, the affections and the very movements of the soul of the characters acting on the stage. A melody that would arouse melancholy in the audience signifies the melancholy, the sadness of the character who performs it, while on the other hand, a melody meant to induce gaiety and cheerfulness signifies the joyful feelings of the character.

The poetic of imitation or representation, marked by the lucid style of classical reason, is based on such principles; in more familiar terms, it could be called a poetic of signification and transparency. The codes which form the musical discourse are used as symbolic apparati signifying things that do not belong to music.

Musical expressions are therefore like words, nouns. There is an important difference, however, between musical and linguistic signs: as far as the latter are concerned nobody doubts their arbitrariness, whereas musical expressions are posited and perceived as icons and consequently present themselves as strongly motivated, natural, universal. Even opera tends toward realism.

Onomatopoeia and motion of affects are then the expressive tools belonging to anyone who wants to convey meaning from a musical stage: Mimí, Violetta and Siegfried, as well as other theatrical characters such as Beethoven, Chopin and Berg. Being indeed a theatrical character, Orpheus shares their idiom. However, the Thracian bard happens to occupy a somewhat higher position in the hierarchy of being: he is a demigod, a sort of shaman, for whom music is not only an idiom, but also a weapon and a tool for incantations. And this must necessarily appear on the stage, since the most important scene in the plays about him is the one in which he descends to Hades and succeeds in imposing his will on the gods of the underworld, precisely by means of music. His antagonists, Charon, Proserpina and Pluto could not care less whether he adequately conveys his affections or constructs ele-

gant onomatopoeias. In difficult situations like these, a music that expresses non-musical contents is of no use. What is needed instead? Orpheus knows exactly what is needed: a song to gather lions, rabbits and deer, another to set in motion trees and stones, another to hypnotize Charon and another to force the masters of Hell to release the fair Euridyce.

Incantations are neither orders nor prayers; magic operates without mediation. Orpheus' utterances are not signs but signals,⁵ working like the buzzers of Pavlov, which made dogs salivate, without, however, semiotically referring to the bowl of soup that had been used in the process of conditioning. In other words, Orpheus uses non-representational music for his incantations.

At this point, the problem of the operatic composers of Orphic *melodrammi*, becomes apparent. Since their compositions were proposed as signifiers of non-musical objects, how was it possible then to signify Orpheus' magic song, that is, that kind of Pavlovian signal which properly belongs to him?

The solution was not easy. Monteverdi's predecessors, Giulio Caccini and Jacopo Peri (each of whom, independently, set to music the same libretto, *Euridice*, by Ottavio Rinuccini, in 1600) apparently did not even consider the problem. To the *recitar cantando* of the Infernal gods the bard responded with an equally stylized *recitar cantando*. That is why the effect of the two *Euridices* is one of a certain stylistic flatness, in the end decidedly boring.

Monteverdi, on the contrary, belonged to a different species of theatrical geniuses. We will now approach his text and observe the way it works. The episode is in the third act of this *Orfeo*, *favola in musica*, represented in 1607.⁶

After Euridyce's death, our hero crosses the threshold of Hell and wants to cross the infernal river; Charon the ferryman arrives on his little boat and fiercely confronts the intruder.

In the Monteverdian opera this episode, at the beginning of the catabasis, is greatly amplified, to the point of extending to a large section of the third act. Differently from other versions of the myth, the confrontation between Orpheus and the infernal spirits is centered on this scene. In the traditional representations, the central confrontation was the one with Proserpina and Pluto, which naturally followed the crossing of the river, and usually emphasized the rhetorical rather than magical skills of the hero, who managed to persuade his antagonists by means of his well organized and convincing eloquence.

Such an episode does not even appear in the Monteverdian text: the fourth act opens with a dialogue between Proserpina and

Pluto, and Orpheus is not even in their presence. They reveal their emotions about what they just saw, Pluto decides and orders that Euridyce be set free and the infernal couple ends the scene by declaiming their gentleness and mutual love. What marvelous event could have induced the two gloomy and usually unshakable gods to break the fates' decrees? What kind of scene did they witness?

The scene was, of course, the final one of the preceding act, the confrontation with Charon, which had been watched not only by the infernal masters, but by us, the audience, as well. In that confrontation, Orpheus displayed what properly belongs to him, namely the power of his music and singing. Against the diction of Charon, a plain *recitar cantando*, he opposes the most spectacular *bel canto*, accompanied by the most precious and sophisticated instrumental ornamentations.

This air, "*Possente Spirto*," consists of six stanzas. The continuo is quite sweet and discreet, a wooden organ and a chitarrone. Different high instruments accompany the various stanzas and perform, between stanzas, soloistic pieces, called *ritornelli* in the score, thus alluding to Orpheus' instrumental mastery and signifying the magic powers of his music making.

In the first stanza, two violins reproduce the timbre of the *lira da braccio*, that is, the Renaissance version of the classical instrument of Apollo and Orpheus, that can be seen (let me cite a pair of very famous examples) in Raphael's *Parnaso* in the Vatican, and in Luca Signorelli's *Final Judgment* in the Cathedral of Orvieto.

In the second *ritornello*, two agile and sweet cornettos imitate the quality of human voice.

In the next stanza another typical instrument is introduced, the harp, whose timbre reminds one of the classical cithara, but which (more importantly) is the traditional tool of exorcism: the Biblical hero David is the most famous historical exorcist who used the harp as a tool.⁷ Monteverdi writes in full a long *ritornello* for the harp, in a brilliant style that is reminiscent of the Roman virtuosi of his time.

In the following stanza, Orpheus' *bel canto* becomes less agile, softer and slower, until the end of the air; the accompaniment is played by four violas "*tocche pian piano*," as the score notes: after the most marvelous display of virtuosity, the suavity of the music is now even more striking. The incantation is about to be accomplished: at a symphony of two violas and wooden organ, Charon falls asleep and the exorcist crosses the infernal river.

Such an incantation has been witnessed, off-stage, by the infernal spirits, which have been vividly touched by its power, as I have said.

Let us now examine the text which I have just described, from a critical and structural point of view. Differently from what happened in the two *Euridices* of Caccini and Peri, Monteverdi avoids here the effect of stylistic flatness: Orpheus' performance is fully differentiated from those of his antagonists, which imitate dictions and passions (according to the poetic of the affections outlined above), whereas the former clearly signifies a magic spell accomplished by means of music. This is the sense of Monteverdi's exceptionally precise and uniquely detailed intervention.

The magic song has been listened to by a threefold audience: in the first place, by Charon, to whom the exorcism was addressed; in the second place, by the infernal spirits and gods, who are moved by the performance and by its effectiveness; the third category of witnesses is constituted by us, the theatrical audience.

The manner in which the scene is perceived, however, naturally varies for the three different categories of listeners. To Charon, Orpheus' performance is a signal, not differently from what the buzzer was to the conditioned dogs; to the infernal gods, the same signal is part of a more complex semiotic context, which encompasses Charon's falling asleep. Finally, to us, the performance presents itself, for the allusions contained in the instrumental interventions and for the astonishing quality of its virtuosity, as a rhetorical figure, precisely as a metaphor: marvel is, in fact, the mark that Baroque virtuosity shares with the magic of an exorcism.

In the brilliant text of Monteverdi, the immediacy of magic takes place (differently from what used to happen in the historical performances of a David in front of king Saul), beyond the lime-light only. On our side of the lime-light, instead, prevails the sun of rhetoric, whose light hides everything else from sight.

Let me now exploit the metaphor which I just happened to pronounce (rhetoric as the sunlight that hides), and let me show what kind of objects can be occulted in such a heliacal setting. I shall mention two, and the first I call the Orpheus effect. I am thus referring to the real possibility of manipulating human behavior by means of music. Such an effect has always been noticed and described in our culture, with an understandable mixture of awe and apprehension. I refer here to the numerous semi-historical feats, often quoted, in particular, by the Neo-Platonic traditions. The ones of Orpheus and David are precisely two instances.

Now, what happens if these feats are depicted through the avowedly rhetorical devices of *stilo rappresentativo*? and what happens if music is presented as expressive through a consistent use of the poetic of transference?

If the Orpheus effect is a fact, if music is actually used to modify human moods, behavior and attitudes, then to propose it as an expression of non-musical contents is indeed a mystifying gesture of repression.

We are undoubtedly confronted, in our everyday life, by great amounts of manipulative music: in supermarkets and department stores, in hospitals, political rallies and religious gatherings, commercial TV, news broadcasts, factories and so forth. But it is quite difficult to consider all this material critically and analytically: as a matter of fact, 'muzak' is not only not perceived as a manner of music, but the term 'muzak' does not even appear in modern dictionaries, as, in our culture, the only art of sounds and rhythms which deserves consideration is the one invented by the founders of *stilo rappresentativo*.

Besides, *stilo rappresentativo* has a further ideological signification. The theatrical art of an interpreter of Orpheus requires a superior brand of professionalism: only superlative, matchless technical qualities can set in motion the rhetorical mechanisms in an adequate and perspicuous manner. As Giulio Caccini said, this is an art that does not suffer mediocrity.⁸

Consider now again the symbolic powers of the lime-light. An analogy can be easily posited, between this fracture separating the world of fable from the one of everydayness, and the fracture which divides the place of the constitution of the text from the place of its fruition. On the one side is the matchless team of the artists, namely, the invisible composer and the more exposed singer; on the other side is the unskilled audience.

The ideologeme of otherness was eventually emblematically reinforced, in particular within the operatic surroundings, by castrating (and this time, for a change, I am not talking symbolically) the singer, that is, the more exposed member of the matchless team. Such a threatening gesture was radical and quite effective. No doubt was possible about the structural separation between music-makers and listeners.

Thus a great many of us renounced music and remained deprived of the experience of poetic practice. An important experience indeed: even if one does not believe (as Romantic tradition does) in the revealing powers of artistic practice, it could, at least,

provide some useful critical insights about how texts are built, and how materials and codes are manipulated.

Now, to go back to the metaphorical sun of rhetoric, the possibility of artistic practice is the second object occulted by *stilo rappresentativo*.

La favola d'Orfeo is therefore the story of an exorcism, which can be easily embedded in the tradition rooted in classical culture, which regarded music-making as an irrational and subversive activity. This was not the only exorcism, I could mention at least two more: one is the political, conscious control advocated in some well-known pages of Plato's *Republic* and Augustine's *Confessions*;⁹ the other is the mathematical interpretation of the very materials of music, constructed by Pythagoreanism.

One could now still wonder whether and what would be there to be learned from a music devoid of representational claims. What kind of metaphysical traps and political blunders would be risked in the leaps into a freefalling regression?

Such questions would transcend the limits of this paper: *La favola d'Orfeo* is thus ended. On the next page, you may find *La favola di Dioniso*.

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NOTES

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1 *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* was the title of the first edition of 1872. Later editions were titled *The Birth of Tragedy or: Hellenism and Pessimism*.

2 Translation by F. Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 82.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

4 See, in particular, the chapter "Genesis and Genealogy," in *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 79-102.

5 The distinction between sign and signal is discussed by Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale* (Milano: Bompiani, 1975), 0.7.1-2, pp. 33-35.

6 *L'Orfeo, favola in musica da Claudio Monteverdi rappresentata in Mantova l'anno 1607* (Venice: Amadino, 1609). Modern edition by G.F. Malipiero, in *Tutte le opere di Claudio Monteverdi*, Vol. XI, pp. 81-106.

7 The parallel between the mythical Orpheus and the historical David was a topos in the culture of the Counter-Reformation. Cf. for example, A. Kircher, *Musurgia Universalis* (Rome 1650), I, p. 63.

8 G. Caccini, *Le Nuove Musiche*, ed. and transl. H.W. Hitchcock (Madison: A.-R. Editions, 1970), p. 48.

9 *Rep.*, IV, 424, b-d. *Confessions*, X, 33.