The new style of music, introduced most famously by Monteverdi and championed by Vincenzo Gallilei, was called the *secunda practica*. They thus distinguished it from the earlier style of music, the *prima practica*, the graceful use of dissonance and consonance among many voices, the art refined by several generations of composers and perfected by Palestrina. The new style was also known as the *stile rappresentativo* because it claimed to achieve in music what today we take for granted: the representation of human drama and the emotional impact of real speech. Thus Monteverdi's brother wrote, in a preface to the composer's Fifth Book of Madrigals (1607), that *prima practica* "…allows the harmony [dissonance and consonance] to command the words, as if the words were merely the servant and harmony the mistress." *Secunda practica,* founded on the modulations of the natural voice, lets the words guide the composition. The conventions of counterpoint should not apply to music that is meant to dramatize a text and make passionate speech into song.

Monteverdi practices both musical arts in his opera *Orfeo*. The new *secunda practica* is most easily distinguished in his employment of *monody*. Monody sets the solo voice, in monologue or dialogue, above a bass line. The bass, also called *basso continuo*, is played continuously under the song by a few instruments, while others improvise chords, usually triads, built on the bass's crucial note. (See the examples that follow this introduction.) Beginning in Act II, for example, once the Messenger brings the bad news, we hear the triads shift in unusual and even jolting ways, according to the modulation of feelings on stage. We also begin to notice new dissonances between the voice and the accompaniment, some direct and deliberate, others seemingly haphazard – as when the score makes the singer rush ahead or lag behind the background harmony. Rather than respecting a strictly musical logic, Monteverdi obeys a law of rhetoric. He adapts his accompaniment and vocal line to impart immediacy to the words declaimed. He can even suggest an irregular pace to imitate emotion-driven utterance. Monteverdi thus writes more life into music than his predecessors. His character Orpheus, full of pleas and persuasions and complaints, affords the composer plenty of opportunity to exhibit his new representative style.

This is not to say that Monteverdi (or his librettist Striggio) is recommending the extravagant moods of this hero, the archetypal Musician. For part of what makes *Orfeo* the first of the greatest operas is that Monteverdi has created not only a more passionate music but also the essential drama about the passionate musician. Music may have its own tale of original sin. Monteverdi, while setting music on its modern course and enlarging its expression of feelings, well understood the dangers of a psychologically penetrating art. As music explores techniques for moving listeners, musicians themselves may be seduced by their own new powers, their own ambiguous gifts. The drama of the godlike artist-genius now appears on the horizon of classical music.

Hence when the figure of La Musica descends from Parnassus to introduce the fable of *Orfeo*, we should not mistake this opening for a quaint formality. However we decide to interpret it, the allegorical preface at least declares that this opera concerns music as a higher power, a power most fateful in the musican's own soul. Later we shall see that two other operatic masterpieces, Mozart's *Magic Flute* and Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, employ *Orfeo*'s device of setting Music itself on the stage. These great works too will make Music an essential character in the drama, a character with a mysterious life of its own.

From this background some questions naturally follow, which may be useful to reflect on while listening to the opera with the libretto:

1. What is Orpheus's relation to his sonorous art? For example, is his opening song, invited by the shepherd, what you expected? And his relation to his beloved Eurydice: how does she figure into his musical inspirations? How well-drawn musically is she? Consider, for instance, the interval through which her first sung phrase falls (also in the excerpts that follow). In the long run, one wants to understand the relation of art and erotics – the artist as lover.

2. As Orpheus makes his way toward the Underworld, when is his singing and playing most impressive or moving? How does it strike you, for example, when he is self-conscious of his power versus when he is vulnerable or caught unawares?

3. Perhaps it is obvious that Orpheus's attempt to retrieve Eurydice from the Underworld, under the injunction not to look back upon her as they ascend, carries no small symbolic weight. Why this particular prohibition? What is the significance of the "noise" (written into the musical score), which we hear in Act IV when Orpheus decides to listen to what Cupid commands rather than what Pluto forbids?

4. Other points in the opera may seem simply confusing, especially for first-time listeners – the way Act IV opens unexpectedly with Proserpina, eavesdropping on Orpheus's song in the Underworld, for example. Similarly, what should we make of the fact that Orpheus plainly contradicts himself in his estimations of his lyre's power? Such incongruities might turn out to be clues to a deeper reading of this classical *mythos* in music.

5. As this is the first large scale work we study, it is well to listen for ways in which Monteverdi unifies his vast musical material. How are we to interpret any common motifs that we hear? That is, what role does the repetition of some melodic phrase serve – whether in a solo or chorus or orchestral number? Why does Monteverdi sometimes remind us of an earlier moment in the opera? For example, after the Messenger completes her lament in Act II, the orchestral *sinfonia* that follows has a ring of familiarity.

6. Orpheus's consolation by Echo in Act V cries out for interpretation. Why does Apollo, interrupting this episode, come to the rescue? What do we learn from the music of the duet during which Orpheus and his father rise to heaven?