

MONTEVERDI'S THE CORONATION OF POPPEA

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Background to Monteverdi

Whether *L'incoronazione di Poppea* illuminates Monteverdi's genius is definitely debatable. It is either a synthesis or some mixture hybrid from influences. Some mention he had nothing to with the composition others enjoy the debate. As a composition in whole, Monteverdi was especially interested in the works of Marc'Antonio Ingegneri of his tutelage.¹ Monteverdi has described two compositional styles as *prima prattica* which is a music dominating text as well as *secunda prattica* which is a text dominating music. The first of which is the old style of Palestrina as well as being in the Renaissance era and the second describes the need to write in opera form which turns out to be a new attitude to being very expressive through music.² *The Coronation of Poppea* is made up of a Prologue and three very full acts. In the 1650s, Monteverdi composed the piece alongside Giovanni Tranceso Busenello who wrote the libretto.³ The piece has on two surviving publications along with the one edited libretto. Both of the surviving scores happen to have very similar music written in them though has unique edits to the libretto throughout each piece. Within each, one will notice the difference in how a scene is set-up with solo lines being performed then the ritornello coming in. The other publication may have it as the inverse. There may be the ritornello work first followed then by the solo. Some may find it difficult in today's society to leave a piece with such open ended questions regarding which instruments will be performed on this work but Monteverdi scholars find it the norm of

¹ Fabbri, Paolo. "38." In Monteverdi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 259-265.

² Redlich, Hans Ferdinand. "The First Opera Composer." In Claudio Monteverdi. London: Oxford University Press, 1952. 112-116.

³ Redlich, Hans Ferdinand. "The First Opera Composer." In Claudio Monteverdi. London: Oxford University Press, 1952. 112-116.

the time for this great composer to leave such amazing music making up to the performers.

Through research, these scholars have also found that the entire piece wasn't written in full by Monteverdi himself but with the possible inspiration from Francesco Sacati.⁴ Research shows that Monteverdi was more of a guiding role in most of the composition similar to how Mozart dictated passages of his *Requiem* to his student Franz Xavier Sussmayr during his final days.⁵ In the last years of Monteverdi's life, he composed two operas, *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* and *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. Monteverdi then passed away in November of 1643 where was buried in the church of the Frari in Venice.

Sources and the Librettist

Not until 1888 was the score discovered by Tadeo Wiel under the deceptive title *Nerone*, and after comparison was Busenello's printed libretto. This libretto was identified to be from Busenello with little to no doubt to scholars. The library of San Marco owns two versions of Busenello's libretto. One is in a manuscript form which is mentioned to be used mostly during the composition by Monteverdi the other being printed in 1656. A second manuscript of the music was found by G. Gasperini in Naples in 1930.⁶ This manuscript differs from the Venetian manuscript in many areas, principally in including a large number of additional new instrumental symphonies as well as new versions of several important vocal items that weren't there before in the previous manuscript found. The two scores of the opera that have survived are both untitled and anonymous, descending from the same source which is now missing; one in Venice and

⁴ Redlich, Hans Ferdinand. "The First Opera Composer." In Claudio Monteverdi. London: Oxford University Press, 1952. 112-116.

⁵ "L'incoronazione di Poppea." L'incoronazione di Poppea - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27incoronazione_di_Poppea (accessed November 25, 2013).

⁶ Fabbri, Paolo. "38." In Monteverdi. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 259-265.

prepared under the supervision of Francesco Cavalli who originally owned the score and the other in Naples. Both scores transmit only the vocal lines plus basso continuo. The sinfonie and all ritornellos are given in three parts in the Venice transcript and for the most part in four in the Naples scores. Monteverdi's name begins to become associated with the work in the late half of the seventeenth century, not least on the Venetian score formerly owned, as mentioned, by Cavalli which then passed into Marco Contarini's collection.⁷ In Fabbri's *Monteverdi*, they mention that it's very difficult to identify which manuscript is the true manuscript of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*.⁸

“However, most recently some concern has grown over the final duet for Nero and Poppea, ‘Pur ti miro-Pur ti godo’, which is present in the score and in the manuscript librettos, but not in those printed (all after the premiere; the Scenario, which was published at the time of the first performance, seems not to refer to the duet). This text had already appeared in the Bolognese revival of *Il pastor fido* by Benedetto Ferrari...at this point it might be tempting to suggest that Ferrari also wrote the music, the situation is complicated by *Il trionfo della fatica* which concludes with the duet in question sung by Ricchezza and Valoriano. Since only the text has survived, it is impossible to say whether the music was the same as in the score of *La coronazione*.”⁷

There has been one character that has been mentioned time and time again by the name of Busenello. Mr. Giovanni Francesco Busenello was the librettist for *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, born in September of 1598 into a high-class family in Venice which sent him to law school

⁷ Fabbri, Paolo. "38." In *Monteverdi*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. 259-265.

⁸ Ringer, Mark. "Chapter 7: "Nothing Human is Alien to Me": *L'incoronazione di Poppea*." In *Opera's first master: the musical dramas of Claudio Monteverdi*. Pompton Plains, N.J.: Amadeus Press, 2006.

where he then was profound in compositions of poetry which got him started with composing libretti.⁹ Monteverdi wrote music only for the words of Amor and Venus but left the choral parts uncomposed. He subsequently changed his mind and eliminated the gods altogether from the closing scene. In their place he put the magnificent final duet 'Pur ti miro', which are not to be found in Busenello's libretto and are apparently attributable to Monteverdi himself. Almost everything else is attributable to Busenello. Busenello drew a lot of his work from the roman first century tragedy Octavia.¹⁰

Characters and Synopsis

Ottone found Poppea had ran off with Nerone. He asks Poppea not to leave him. She ends up leaving him which ultimately leads Ottone draw closer to Druisilla. Due to vengience, Ottone then wants to kill Poppea for what she has done. He devises a plan with Druisilla to dress in her cloths to then sneak into her apartment and murder Poppea. Amor enters to wake Poppea up before she is murdered. Ottone scrambles off into the distance which leaves Druisilla looking like the culprit to the tried scene. Ottone then later confesses to attempting the murder of Poppea which in turn sent him into exile with Druisilla. Nerone is the man Poppea ends up falling in love with to be seating next to at the throne of the empire. Poppea helps Nerone in getting rid of Seneca as the philosopher and from Nerones rule. Poppea is noted as the noble lady. She left Ottone to be with Nerone so that she can sit next to him on the throne as previously mentioned. Poppea is almost murdered when Amor comes to wake her from her sleep to then find someone dressed as Druisilla. The man dressed as Druisilla happened to be Ottone who then who confessed his crimes after Druisilla is sentenced to exile. Ottone then follows shortly thereafter.

⁹ "L'incononazione di Poppea." L'incoronazione di Poppea - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27incoronazione_di_Poppea (accessed November 25, 2013).

¹⁰ Redlich, Hans Ferdinand. "The First Opera Composer." In Claudio Monteverdi. London: Oxford University Press, 1952. 112-116.

Arnalta may not be a largely main role but she is quite important. Arnalta is Poppeas confidant and nurse who tries to get Ottavia to sleep with other men after Ottavia finds out Nerone is sleeping with Poppea. Ottavia is the current reigning empress with Nerone who finds out Nerone is sleeping with Poppea. She then listens to her nurse as her nurse tries to tel her to sleep around to get back at him. Ottavia encourages Nerone to kill Poppea which doesn't end up working. Ottavia is repudiated and ultimately sentences to exile.¹¹

As one progresses through the opera, one will find themselves hearing recitative multiple times within one particular piece as well as many times a main ritornello. Below is a full scene by scene play of the opera. Briefly will the music be touched on for Act I, Scene II, IV and V as well as Act II, Scene III. As you read through each scene, don't be alarmed when you see more musical gestures on those particular scenes.

Act I

Scene 1. *Outside Poppea's House in Rome.* Although Poppea has left him for Emperor Nerone, Ottone still loves her. Nerone and Poppea bids each other a tender farewell.

Scene 2. *Inside Poppea's House.* Nerone promises Poppea she will be empress. Her slanders convince Nerone to order Seneca's death.

Scene 3. *Ottavia's apartment in the Palace.* Ottavia resents her Nerone's mistreatment of her. Seneca consoles her. Seneca is heard imitating Ottavia musically. They recite back and forth many times through solo imitation. The vocal solo lines appear to the ear as minor but when the ritornello enters, it sounds almost happy and in a much more major key. They speak back and forth about what to do with Nerone and how she is to deal with everything. The melisma Ottavia

¹¹ Parakilas, James. "Part II Chapter 6: Opera in Commercial Houses." In *The story of opera*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2013. 121-143.

uses throughout is essential in the frustration she feels.

Scene 4. *Inside Poppea's House*. Poppea's nurse, Arnalta, reminds her that she is playing a dangerous game since the empress Ottavia knows of Nerone's infidelity.

Scene 5. *Inside Ottavia's House*. Ottavia curses Nerone for his infidelity. By doing so you hear a ritornello at the beginning of the scene then to hear Ottavia come in low in her tessitura with her cursing proclamation of hatred for Nerone. This scene has the nurse and Ottavia switching back and forth with the nurse giving Ottavia advice that maybe she should go out and sleep with other men in spite of Nerone. By doing so, musically, her part gets higher and higher in her range becoming more excited with accents in a very marcato style.

Act II

Scene 1. *Seneca's Garden*. Seneca follows Nerone's order and kills himself.

Scene 2. *Nerone's apartment in the Palace*. Nerone revels in Seneca's death, at the same time, of Poppea's beauty.

Scene 3. *Seneca's Garden*. Seneca has been tasked to kill himself and during this scene he does just that. Throughout this piece there are three separate musical entities one will hear. The first is Seneca proclaiming his crime and pronouncing his death to family and friends asking them to prepare his death bed. By doing so he sings in a very low relaxed tone that reflects how he is feeling at the moment, very distraught and ready for death. The second entity one will hear is the ritornello enter that sets up the chorus. When the chorus enters, the lines are very chromatic and almost imitative. They tend to lead to each other but never follow each other directly.

Monteverdi could have used this chromaticism as a way of showing hysterics for Seneca's imminent death. The ritornello appears once more followed by Seneca's one final solo

announcing he is ready for death.¹²

Scene 4. *Poppea's House*. Amore, the god of love, prevents Ottone from murdering Poppea.

Act III

Scene 1. Drusilla is arrested for the attempt, but Ottone confesses he's the guilty one. Nerone proclaims his divorce from Ottavia, and orders the banishment of Ottone and Ottavia.

Scene 2. Poppea's old nurse, Arnalta, looks forward to her mistress's fortune. Poppea is crowned Empress.¹³

To sum up the plot of the entire opera, below is a more detailed description as to how each act plays out throughout the opera.

I. Prologue

Fortune and Virtue discuss which of them has most influence on men. The god of Love, Amor, arrives to affirm his own primacy; even the others end up acknowledging it, and Amor proposes to show it yet one more time.

II. Act I

Returning from the fields of Lusitania, Ottone comes to discover that his adored Poppea has in the meantime become the lover of Nero, with the secret ambition of placing herself at his side on the throne. Meanwhile Ottavia, the legitimate and unfortunate empress, spurns with scorn the encouragements of her Nurse to repay her traitorous husband in the same coin, and she incites the imperial counsellor, Seneca, to follow his fine words of consolation with some concrete act to prevent Nero repudiating her. Meeting the

¹² Curtis, Alan. Claudio Monteverdi. *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. London: Novello Publishing Limited, 1989.

¹³ "L'incoronazione di Poppea." *L'incoronazione di Poppea* - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27incoronazione_di_Poppea (accessed November 25, 2013).

emperor, the philosopher succeeds only in making him angry and in having himself dismissed. Considering him an impediment to the repudiation of Ottavia and this to her own marriage to the emperor, Poppea succeeds in extracting from Nero the order to rid himself of Seneca. In vain, Ottone begs his beloved Poppea not to abandon him; now her sights are set much higher. To assuage his own grief, Ottone turns his affection to the young Drusilla.

III. Act II

First Mercury and then Pallas Athene announce to Seneca that his death is imminent, and in fact shortly thereafter arrives a freedman bringing him Nero's order that forces him to kill himself; the philosopher obeys, stoically consoling his friends who try to prevent him from making this final act upon himself. Ottone gives way to the idea of revenge, and indeed of killing Poppea; in this he is encouraged also by Ottavia, who suggests that he should approach her dressed in women's clothes so as not to be recognized and as to have easier access. Drusilla, informed by Ottone of his plans, herself provides the clothing, with which Ottone, armed, enters Poppea's apartments while she sleeps. But Amor rushes to arouse her, this succeeding in preventing the violent act. While Poppea cries for help, Ottone, mistaken for Drusilla, flees.

IV. Act III

Drusilla is captured and tries but, despite torture, does not reveal the truth so as to save her beloved Ottone. Moved by such love, he confesses all and is sent to exile with Drusilla. Ottavia, implicated in the plot, is conveniently repudiated and sent herself, too, into exile. Nero can thus finally marry Poppea, who in triumphal finale is crowned empress.

Performances

L'incoronazione di Poppea was first performed at the Teatro Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice as a part of the 1642-43 carnival season.¹⁴ The true date of the first performance appears to have gone missing and isn't able to be traced back to any specific date. As previously mentioned, there was one particular occasion on which there was a record shown for a performance. Seeing as it was one year before Monteverdi's unfortunate death, the record of this performance is still vague but scholars believe it to be around 26 December, 1642.¹¹ Still today there is very little record over 250 years later as to any performances of any kind relating the *L'incoronazione di Poppea*. As mentioned, it had been over 250 years since the last performance had been heard. Finally, in 1905, in Paris, Vincent d'Indy decided to put together a concert consisting of "the most beautiful and interesting parts of the work." In 1926, Werner Josten decided to direct the opera's first American performance of *L'incoronazione*. This performance was set in the Smith College in Massachusetts.

"Until the 1960s performances of *L.incoronazione* were relatively rare in commercial opera theatres, but they became increasingly frequent in the decade that saw the quartercentenary of Monteverdi's birth. ... The 1962 Glyndebourne Festival anticipated the quartercentenary with a lavish production using a new edition by Raymond Leppard."¹¹

There came a time in 1993 where Monteverdi rolled over and turned 350 years old. With this age, it sparked many more peoples interest in truly understanding and getting a grapple on this piece of work. Not many have truly stopped to deeply understand the piece conquered by few but

¹⁴ "L'incononazione di Poppea." *L'incoronazione di Poppea* - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27incoronazione_di_Poppea (accessed November 25, 2013).

now it had become time for schools across the globe to give it shot. The Juilliard School in New York presented a version based on Curtis's edition back in 1994.¹⁵ This edition included an orchestra that mixed baroque and modern elements to it. As mentioned before, this work started to hit the road making its way around the world and to new stages. One stage of which is located in the Royal Albert Hall stage. On August 19, 2008 Emmanuelle Haim led singers and orchestra musicians to a world renowned performance.¹⁶ The great Monteverdi continues to live on and stands the test of time. Even though he may not have had much to say about his own opera prior to his death, he has a legacy of one very unique and twisted opera that lives on.

¹⁵ "L'incononazione di Poppea." *L'incoronazione di Poppea* - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L%27incoronazione_di_Poppea (accessed November 25, 2013).

¹⁶ Rose, Michael. "Chapter 1: L'incoronazione di Poppea." In *The birth of an opera: fifteen masterpieces from Poppea to Wozzeck*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013. 1-25.

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