

*Orfeo* was composed in 1607 for the Mantuan court, and no expense was spared to make it a lavish production. There were star soloists, a chorus, dancers, and a large orchestra of about forty players. The aristocratic audience was wildly enthusiastic and recognized the historic significance of the performance.

Monteverdi creates variety in *Orfeo* by using many kinds of music—recitatives, arias, duets, choruses, and instrumental interludes. He uses the opera orchestra to establish atmosphere, character, and dramatic situations. With the simplest of musical means, Monteverdi makes his characters come alive. Through vocal line alone he quickly characterizes the hero's joy and despair. Monteverdi sets his text in a very flexible way, freely alternating recitatives with more melodious passages, depending on the meaning of the words.

We'll now consider one well-known passage from this opera, Orpheus's recitative *Tu se' morta* (*You are dead*).

### Act II:

#### Recitative: *Tu se' morta* (*You are dead*)

Monteverdi's mastery of the then novel technique of recitative is shown in *Tu se' morta*, sung by Orpheus after he is told of Eurydice's death. Orpheus resolves to bring her back from Hades, and he bids an anguished farewell to the earth, sky, and sun. His vocal line is accompanied only by a basso continuo played by a small portable organ and a bass lute. (In modern performances, other instruments are sometimes substituted.)

The texture is homophonic: the accompaniment simply gives harmonic support to the voice. The vocal line is rhythmically free, with little sense of beat or meter, and its phrases are irregular in length. This flexible setting of text is meant to suggest the passionate speech of an actor declaiming his lines.

Monteverdi frequently uses word painting, the musical representation of poetic images that was favored by baroque composers. For example, words like *stelle* (*stars*) and *sole* (*sun*) are sung to climactic high tones, whereas *abissi* (*abysses*) and *morte* (*death*) are sung to somber, low tones. Three times during the recitative the melodic line rises to a climax and then descends. Through such simple means, Monteverdi expresses Orpheus's passion.

Brief Set:  
CD 2 **9**

Basic Set:  
CD 2 **20**

## VOCAL MUSIC GUIDE

### MONTEVERDI, *Tu se' morta* from *Orfeo*

**9** **20**

*Tu se' morta, se' morta, mia vita,  
ed io respiro; tu se' da me partita,  
se' da me partita per mai più,  
mai più non tornare, ed io rimango—  
no, no, che se i versi alcuna cosa  
ponno,*

You are dead, you are dead, my dearest,  
And I breathe; you have left me,  
You have left me forevermore,  
Never to return, and I remain—  
No, no, if my verses have any  
power,

*n'andrò sicuro a' più profondi abissi,  
e, intenerito il cor del re de l'ombre,*

I will go confidently to the deepest abysses,  
And, having melted the heart of the king  
of shadows,

*meco trarotti a riverder le stelle,  
o se ciò negherammi empio destino,*

Will bring you back to me to see the  
stars again,  
Or, if pitiless fate denies me this,

*rimarrò teco in compàgnia di morte.*

I will remain with you in the company  
of death.

*Addio terra, addio cielo, e sole, addio.*

Farewell earth, farewell sky, and sun,  
farewell.

1:12 Low tone on *abissi*.

1:38 High tone on *stelle*.

2:00 Low tone on *morte*.

2:17 High tone on *sole*.