Iacopo Peri

L’Euridice

(1600)
Dedication
&
To the Reader

Translated by Sion M. Honea
Peri’s remarks to the reader at the opening of his score for *L’Euridice* constitute one of the most important documents in music history. Together with Caccini’s similar address in *Le Nuove musiche* (1601), it forms a pair of seminal texts for understanding the origins of the baroque style in its earliest years.

Unfortunately, the importance of the text is matched by the difficulty it presents for translation; this is in two ways. First, Peri’s personal style, like Caccini’s and most authors in any language at this time, is not the kind of highly ordered prose that exists today and that so greatly facilitates understanding. The humanists’ revival of classical Latin, and especially of Cicero’s measured and orderly syntax, had not yet spread by imitation to the vernaculars. This is simply a fact of life in translation of prose in this period; more important is the second factor, which is present in virtually all the texts in the series of translations presented here.

The texts in this series are almost exclusively chosen for the fact that they are seminal in some particular subject area of music history. This means that the authors are grappling with expressing complex new concepts with a language and terminology that has not yet developed to communicate those new concepts. Indeed, it is these very authors who are initiating and formulating the technical linguistic evolution capable of describing these ideas with stabilized and standardized modes of expression and terminology. The difficulties of this early stage are very evident in Peri’s text. This is by far the greater challenge for translation. Because of this difficulty and many readers’ need and desire to consult the original, I have numbered the original text in units of ten lines and placed corresponding numerals in the translation.

In this case, as always, I have followed the practice of completing a first and second translation and revision before consulting any other translation. In this case I compared my own to that by Tim Carter in the Strunk/Treitler *Source Readings*. I owe to Carter my basic understanding of what I find the rather exceptionally convoluted and elliptical statement at the end regarding Caccini’s participation in the work. Even there I have chosen some different wordings in specific instances. Otherwise, I feel that this translation and his are in substantial agreement, again excepting word choices.
To the Most Christian Maria Medici  
Queen of France & Navarre

Since the new music made by me for the wedding of your majesty (most Christian queen) received such great favor by your presence, which cannot only compensate for any defect in it, but infinitely surpasses all the beauty and goodness it could otherwise receive. I come confidently to dedicate it to your glorious name. And if you will not recognize in it something either worthy of you or at least suited to the perfection of this new poem—in which Sig. Ottavio Rinuccini, both in the arrangement and the unfolding so noble a tale, adorning it with a thousand graces and a thousand ornaments, in a marvelous union of the two, because seriousness and sweetness join together with such difficulty, he has shown himself just like the most famous ancients, a poet admirable in every part—[then] you will at least discern in it that noble quality, which resembles your person, when you would please to listen to it, and to hear my song in the guise of the person of Orfeo. Receive it, then, with favor, your majesty, as noble and worthy as no other than the greatness of yourself, who has honored it. And accept in this a humble sentiment of my long-standing service, with which together with this music I dedicate myself anew to you, and I pray for you from God the summit of his grace and favor.

At Florence, 6th February 1600.

The most humble servant of your most Christian majesty,

Jacopo Peri.
[1] Before I offer to you, kind readers, this my music, I think it befits me to make known to you what has induced me to invent this new style of song, since of all human activities rational discourse\(^1\) ought to be the origin and source. He who is not able to render it easily gives cause for believing that he acts by chance. Although before any other whom I know, our music had been presented for hearing on the stage by Sig. Emilio del Cavaliere with marvelous ingenuity, nonetheless it pleased Sig. Iacopo Corsi and Ottavio Rinuccini, at the end of 1594, that by my adapting it to other manner, should put to music the story of Dafne, as composed by Sig. Ottavio, so as to make a simple test of what song could be in our time. Whence it was seen that it was a question of [10] dramatic poetry, and that on that account one had to imitate in song the one who speaks—and there is no doubt that speech was never sung—I concluded that the ancient Greeks and Romans, who according to the opinion of many used to sing the entire tragedy on stage, had made use of a harmony that by surpassing the nature of ordinary speech, it would decrease so much from the melody of singing that it would take the form of something in between. And this is the reason by which we see in that poetry that the iamb has held a place, which not so exalted as hexameter, but indeed is said to have advanced beyond the limits of familiar discourse. And for this reason such other styles of song heard up till now were put aside and I gave myself to searching for the imitation that was necessary for these poems. I considered that that kind of voice which was appointed for singing by the ancients, which they were calling diastematic, as though restrained and suspended, would be able to hurry in parts and to take the temperate pace in slow and suspended movements of the song, and those [that were] hurried and fast in the story [20] [and so to] be accommodated to my purpose, just as those also who read poetry and heroic verse could accommodate it, coming close to something other than speech, which they call continuous (continuata), the one that our contemporaries—although perhaps for a different purpose—have even made in their music. I recognized similarly in our speech some sounds (voci) are tuned in a way that one can base harmony on them, and in the course of the story pass through many others [sounds] that are not so tuned until it returns to the other potential movement of a new harmony. And I had regard to those manners and those accents that in causing us pain or gladden us, and serve us in similar things. I made the bass more in tempo to those—now more now less—according to the affect, and I held steady in the dissonant and in the consonant intervals (tra le false, e tra la buone proporzioni), until the voice of the one discoursing runs over various notes could arrive

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\(^1\) It is really impossible to find a single English word that communicates the range of meanings in the Italian *ragione* used here. Very like the Greek *logos* it involves the ideas of speech, reasoning, explanation, logic, logical discourse, etc. For this reason it must in the course of this translation be handled different ways.
at that, which being attuned to ordinary speech, should open the way to a new idea. This\(^2\) is not only (1) because the progress of the speech [ought] not strike the ear as if finding obstacles in [30] encountering the repeated notes (because of the more frequent harmonies), (2) nor should it seem in a certain way to dance to the motion of the bass (and most of all [not] in the things either sad or serious, when others by nature require more joyful, more frequent movement), (3) but further because the use of the dissonances either decreases or covers up that advantage that is added by the necessity of sounding every note, (of which for this reason ancient music was perhaps able to have less need to do). But, since I am not determined to assert that to be the song used in the Greek and Roman stories, thus I believe to be that which alone can be permitted us by our music in order to accommodate our story. Whence having had those gentlemen listen to my opinion, I demonstrated to them this new manner of singing, and it pleased exceedingly not only Sig. Iacopo, who had already composed very beautiful songs for that story, but Sig. Piero Strozzi, Sig. Francesco Cini and many other most understanding gentlemen, who among the nobility today music flourishes, [40] as also that famous one, who can be called the Euterpe of our times, Siga. Vettoria Archilei, who has always made my music worthy of her singing, adorning it not only with those gruppi\(^3\) and those long vocal embellishments (giri di voce),\(^4\) simple and double, which by the liveliness of her genius are discovered on every occasion, more in deference to the usage of our time than because she thinks beauty and power of our song exists in them,\(^5\) but even with those embellishments and elegances that cannot be written, and if they are written one does not learn from the writings.\(^6\) Messer Giovanbattista Iacomelli heard and commended it, he who in all parts of music is most excellent, and has almost changed his cognomen for “Violino,” on which he is marvelous. For three successive years when it\(^7\) was represented in the Carnival, it was heard with greatest delight and received universal applause from everyone who was found there. But the present Euridice had a better fortune, not because those Signori and other excellent [50] men felt so, those whom I have named and further Sig. Conte Alfonso Fontanella and Sig. Orazio Vecchi, most noble witnesses to my thought,

\(^2\) I find this sentence so long and convoluted that the reader may well feel my own need to have some clarification. Thus, I have introduced the numbers and parentheses, hopefully, as an aid to understanding. It may help to understand that Peri is presenting three purposes for his invention of this new style of song, particularly in regard to movement of the bass.

\(^3\) The groppo is usually represented as a type of trill with an ornamented termination, but Peri probably means something more in terms of general ornaments.

\(^4\) This is a fairly common term for passaggi based on the diminution technique.

\(^5\) This is a subtle bit of diplomacy and flattery. Evidently Signora Archilei is renowned as a practitioner of the older style of diminution, which Peri’s new music effectively repudiates. Nonetheless, Peri clearly wishes not to alienate her, no doubt because he would like to continue to make use of her singing skill.

\(^6\) This is also a commonplace of the literature, that certain aspects of the style really cannot be learned from written examples but only from other singers in performance, “as one bird learns from another,” in the words of Praetorius in connection with learning the trillo.

\(^7\) As a reminder he is here talking about the earlier presentations of his earlier work Dafne in the new style.
but because it was performed for a queen so grand and to so many princes of Italy and France and was sung by the most excellent musicians of our time. Among these Sig. Francesco Rasi, noble of Arezzo, portrayed Aminta, Sig. Antonio Brandi was Arcetro, Sig. Melchior Palantrotti was Pluto. Behind the stage played Signori of noble blood and illustrious for excellence in music: Sig. Iacopo Corsi, whom I have so often named, played the gravicembalo, Sig. Don Grazia Montalvo, chitarrone, Messer Giovanbattista dal Violino played the great Lira, Messer Giovanni Lapi a great lute. Although up to that time I had produced it in the precise way that it comes to light now, nevertheless, Giulio Caccini, called “Romano,” whose highest excellence is known to the world, composed the arias of Euridice and some of the shepherd and nymph of the chorus and in the chorus “Al canto al ballo,” “Sospirate,” and “poi che gli eterni imperi.” And this, because they had to be sung by persons dependent on him, these arias are read in his composition and were printed later than this my [work] was performed to your Christian majesty.8

Therefore receive it kindly, courteous readers, and although I have not arrived by this way to the point where it seemed to me possible to reach, having been restrained in my course in respect of the novelty, receive it favorably at any rate, and perhaps it will happen that on another occasion I may demonstrate to you something more perfect than this. Meanwhile it will seem to me to have done enough having opened the path to someone else’s ability of walking in my footsteps to glory where it has not been permitted to me to be able to arrive.9 I hope that the use of the dissonances, played and sung without fear, discreetly and precisely, having pleased so many and so able men, [70] will not be an annoyance to you, especially in the more sad and serious arias of Orfeo and Arcetro and Dafne, performed with much grace by Iacopo Giusti,10 a young boy of Lucca. Farewell.

Notice

In the bass part the sharp joined to the 6 indicates a major sixth and the minor sixth is without a sharp, which when it is alone, it is the sign of the major third or tenth. The is the sign of the minor third or tenth, and it is never placed except on that note only where it is designated, however many more there might be of them in the same chord.

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8 Peri’s score represents the original without Caccini’s later additions.
9 I think that this comparison of himself to Moses must surely strike a modern reader as somewhat vainglorious.
10 A pleasant point of social standing, the young boy is not distinguished with title either of Signore or Messer, just as once in English lands a boy was meticulously not promoted from Master to Mister (or from short to long pants) until puberty.