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The contrast between lyrical arias and speech-like recitative is a basic convention that shapes the relationship between text and music in opera. As one of the earliest operas, and a pioneer in establishing the tradition of aria-recitative division, Claudio Monteverdi's *Orfeo* (1607) introduced a duality between two distinct vocal styles to the genre of opera. In her article "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem," Susanne Cusick identifies a mind-body duality in music between music as a bodily performance and music as an intellectual art, and associates Monteverdi with this mind-body dualism. Cusick asserts that, in their debate, Monteverdi and Giovanni Artusi both demonstrate a conception of musical sound as a bodily entity that is distinct from the soul.[1] Cusick refers to Monteverdi to argue that the difficulty of decoding the feminine aspects of music can be attributed to the scholarly tendency to view music as a product of the mind rather than a performing art designed for the body. Although Cusick only briefly mentions Monteverdi in her article and restricts her discussion of Monteverdi to his

[1] Susanne Cusick, "Feminist Theory, Music Theory, and the Mind/Body Problem," *Perspectives in New Music* 32, no. 1 (1994), 22.

theoretical writings on music, the ideas of mind-body duality are also manifested in Monteverdi's compositions; in particular, concepts of mind-body dualism appear in his setting of *Orfeo*.

Just over three decades after Monteverdi established the aria-recitative duality in *Orfeo*, French philosopher René Descartes detailed his theory of the duality between the human mind and body in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). Notions separating mind and body are expressed by earlier philosophers; in fact, both Plato and Socrates dissever these two human components.[2] However, Descartes placed an unprecedented significance on mind-body dualism, and its implications extend to his philosophy of knowledge and the nature of the individual. Bertrand Russell explains that, "Descartes' originality, therefore, should be admitted, though it consists less in inventing the argument that in perceiving its importance."[3] Descartes' belief in the duality of human nature profoundly influenced his concepts of emotion and identity, which he also discusses in *Meditations*.[4] The dualistic representation of the individual that Descartes describes is analogous to the dualism in Monteverdi's musical style. The aria-recitative division in Monteverdi's work not only creates a mind-body duality similar to the one illustrated by Descartes, but, more remarkably, the roles of aria and recitative in *Orfeo* and the interaction between these two monodic styles closely resemble Cartesian beliefs about the roles of the mind and body and their interaction with each other. By establishing a relationship between the musical contrast of lyricism and declamation on the one hand and the theatrical juxtaposition of

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[2] Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy: And its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945), 134.
[3] Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 564.
[4] Gordon Baker and Katherine J. Morris, *Descartes' Dualism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 17.

action and emotion on the other, Monteverdi creates a dualistic representation of his human characters.

Monteverdi's *Orfeo,* popularly referred to as 'the first true opera,'[5] established many of the genre's stylistic conventions. In particular, Monteverdi developed a clear division between the recitative and aria styles, and emphasized the importance of conveying emotions through music. Previously, Jacopo Peri had employed a variety of monodic styles in his version of the Orpheus story, *L'Euridice.* In *Orfeo,* however, Monteverdi created a greater contrast between lyrical and declamatory styles, which generally coincide with emotional and narrative sections of the drama, respectively. Monteverdi heightens this dramatic effectiveness by incorporating a greater variety of musical forms in his own setting of the Orpheus story. Tim Carter notes:

> Monteverdi manages to outdo Peri at just about every point…And although it is obvious that he understood the workings of Peri's recitative, he also drew upon other forms of 'musical speech' developed in the genre of the polyphonic madrigal.[6]

Carter recognizes Monteverdi's musical dramatization as an improvement upon Peri's, and attributes Monteverdi's success to his integration of diverse musical styles. In addition to increasing musical variety in opera, Monteverdi assigns a greater importance to the portrayal of emotions in his music, diverging from the Florentine Camerata's emphasis on imitating the inflections of spoken text. One of his librettists confirms Monteverdi's desire to musically depict the emotions of his libretti, claiming that "[c]hanges of emotions[…]greatly please our Signor Monteverd[i]

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[5] Claude Palisca, "The Artusi-Monteverdi Controversy," in *The New Monteverdi Companion* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985), 77.
[6] Tim Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 61.

since he has the opportunity with emotional variety to show the wonders of his art."[7] Here Monteverdi's collaborator recognizes both the composer's interest in portraying emotions and his gravitation towards those libretti that allowed him to do so. Descartes, for his own part, also believed that music had the potential to inspire emotions:

> The basis of music is sound; its aim is to please and to arouse various emotions in us. Melodies can be at the same time sad and enjoyable; nor is this so unique, for in the same way writers of elegies and tragedies please us most the more sorrow they awaken in us.[8]

Monteverdi's contribution to the genre of opera incorporated an assortment of musical styles and reflected a fascination with the musical depiction of human emotions. It is the interaction of these two developments that creates a dualistic separation between the mind and the body in Monteverdi's operas.

In his dualistic vision of the individual, Descartes conceived of emotions as belonging to the mind, but associated these emotions with certain physiological reactions. He believed that the creation of emotions occurs in the mind, since – for Descartes – emotions are thoughts. As Desmond Clarke explains,

> Because we do not conceive of the body as thinking in any way, we have reason to believe that every kind of thought that occurs in us belongs to the soul. Without further argument, it is assumed that all thoughts- or, at least, all human thoughts- are attributable to the mind rather than to bodies….The status of human passions,

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[7] Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre*, 49.

[8] René Descartes, *Compendium of Music*, trans. Walter Robert (Rome: American Institute of Musicology, 1961), 11.

> then, in so far as they are thoughts, is that they are caused in the mind.[9]

Despite his association of emotions with the mind, Descartes also recognized a fundamental connection between the mental stimulation of emotions and the resulting physiological reactions to these feelings. Deborah Brown acknowledges the importance of the body in Descartes's beliefs about emotion, stating,

> It is crucial to note that it does not follow from his account that the passion of the soul is really distinct from the action of the body. The passion is the whole, which is not really distinct from its parts, the motions of the animal spirits and their effects on the soul, and were we to try to conceive of a passion just in terms of one of its parts, our idea of it would be essentially incomplete. Saying this whole consists of separable parts is not the same as saying that actions and passions can exist apart.[10]

Although Descartes separates the mind from the body, essentially viewing the creation of emotion as a function of the mind, he unites these two distinct elements by asserting that they play an interactive role in a person's emotional experience. Likewise, the interrelation between Monteverdi's contrasting musical styles and the emotional content of the corresponding text conveys a relationship between his characters' emotions and their bodily response to these emotions. Monteverdi separates emotion from action by assigning lyrical arias to moments of

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[9] Desmond Clarke, *Descartes's Theory of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 113.
[10] Deborah Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 133.

emotional expression while setting physical plot action to recitative. However, more locally, Monteverdi uses the aria-recitative division to depict the emotional response to a physical event, reflecting a dualistic viewpoint. In particular, Orfeo's vocal style represents his bodily reaction to his emotions. Orfeo's position in the opera's plot makes him subject to powerful and polarized emotions as the drama unfolds. Although Orfeo's elevated social status contributes to his propensity for arias, as the character faced with the most severe emotional circumstances in the opera, Orfeo's music has a natural association with an expression of the passions. In the first act there is only a single aria, in which Orfeo reflects on his love for Euridice. As a highly emotional moment, this aria contrasts with the more descriptive remainder of the act in both vocal style and emotional substance. Further, the musical characteristics of aria are appropriate for depicting Orfeo's physical composure, a result of his balanced emotional state. The lyricism and metrical regularity of this first aria mirror Orfeo's contentment; consequently, his music serves both to express a mental state and to represent Orfeo's physical response to his emotions.

The shifts in Orfeo's vocal style consistently coincide with changes in his emotional state. The two instances in the opera in which Orfeo sings in recitative correspond with the two instances in which he loses Euridice. His initial reaction to the news of Euridice's death in "Tu se' morte" establishes his disorientation and grief through its contrast to the statements in his previous arias. At this point he sings in recitative, breaking the regularity and lyricism of his musical vocabulary concurrently with his emotional stability. As Susan McClary observes, this transformation of Orfeo's vocal style represents the bodily effect of his unsettled emotional state:

> Orfeo's version of madness is defined precisely in opposition to his former rhetorical prowess. His speech

> remains affectively heightened, but now the gestures that once persuaded us have become unglued from their sustaining logic. He can no longer assemble those shards and fragments rationally, and the illusion of secure reality his oratory had previously created is literally deconstructed before our ears.[11]

Orfeo's musical utterances are physical responses to his state of mind. The distinction between Orfeo's musical styles highlights the contrast between the two opposing emotions that he experiences. Similarly, a shift from aria to recitative creates a physical reaction to Orfeo's emotional change when he is about to lose Euridice a final time. In Act IV, when Orfeo begins to leave the underworld followed by Euridice, his music begins with the lyricism and regularity of aria. However, his style changes drastically to recitative once he begins to doubt whether Euridice is behind him. The emotional significance of this shift is frequently discussed in *Orfeo* scholarship. Tim Carter considers this instance to be a turning point in the opera and notes that it is also critical to Nino Pirrotta's interpretation of *Orfeo*:

> Striggio's handling of Orfeo's passage from Hades, the moment in the libretto that, according to Pirrotta,…proves his general law 'that only in the very rarest cases does opera succeed in expressing action musically, not just the aura of affective reactions that accompany action.' This is a key point in the opera, marking the abrupt transition between Orfeo at the height of his powers…and his plunge from grace because

[11] Susan McClary, "Constructions of Gender in Monteverdi's Dramatic Music," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1, no. 3 (1989), 216.

> of his inability to exercise the Humanist virtue of self-control.[12]

Carter subsequently observes that this pivotal moment is accompanied by a radical and permanent change in music, stating that, "Orfeo has explicitly moved from singing to 'speaking,' and he, the spirits and Euridice remain speaking until the end."[13] Orfeo responds physically to his irreversible loss of Euridice with an irreversible divergence from the aria style in his musical vocabulary. The interdependence of Orfeo's emotional state and his physical response through music is reminiscent of the Cartesian belief in the interaction between the separate components of mind and body. Monteverdi's choice to switch from aria to recitative at the two particular instances when Orfeo is overcome with grief suggests a connection between action and passion. Both Descartes and Monteverdi convey a mind-body dualism that allows for the interaction of these distinct elements.

It is significant that the changes in Orfeo's emotional state during both losses of Euridice generate similar musical responses, namely a shift from aria to recitative. Descartes held that different emotions inspire distinct bodily reactions, and believed that

> There is a complete parallelism between thoughts and bodily states, and […] that the body can undergo a sufficiently wide range of distinct states to correspond to the range of thoughts we may have[…]the first part of the principle assumes some kind of innate programming of certain passions with specific physical actions, while the second part allows for establishing new mind-body connections as a result of experience.[14]

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[12] Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre*, 52.
[13] Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre*, 55.
[14] Clarke, *Descartes's Theory of the Mind*, 131.

The association of recitative with the sentiment of grief and arias with the feeling of love in Orfeo's music reflects this idea of distinct physiological responses to certain emotions. Not only does Monteverdi distinguish between emotions by changing vocal styles, but he consistently represents certain emotions using particular vocal styles. Monteverdi therefore echoes Cartesian ideas by representing similar bodily responses with certain emotions.

Pirrotta observes that the events that are most important to driving the plot of the opera forward are not represented musically.[15] Specifically, it is an offstage noise rather than a musical event that compels Orfeo to look back at Euridice and lose her forever. In this instance, the action occurs externally to the body or soul of any character, and its impact on Orfeo can only be ascertained after reflection. Since this noise is not a human act, it is consistent with Cartesian beliefs that it should not be associated with the bodily response of music. Descartes viewed action and reaction as having properties of the mind and soul only when directly linked to a person. As Deborah Brown asserts, "[Descartes] also suggested that, when applied to immaterial things, the terms 'action' and 'passion' are used only by analogy with physical agency."[16] Thus, the external distraction of the offstage noise has a bodily reaction only after its effect on Orfeo can be perceived. As Monteverdi musically represents the reaction to this event, with Orfeo's shift in vocal style, but not the event itself, he demonstrates an understanding that music is not only related to but inherently connected with the body.

The role of the chorus in *Orfeo* adds another layer to the mind-body duality created in the opera. Descartes clearly

[15] Carter, *Monteverdi's Musical Theatre*, 52.
[16] Clarke, *Descartes's Theory of the Mind*, 113.

separates the perception of action from the resulting emotions, believing that perception is strictly a bodily process and can be divorced from its affective reaction:

> Descartes distinguishes […] three classes of ideas that are caused by the body: perceptual ideas are referred or attributed to their external causes; bodily sensations are referred or attributed to our own bodies; and passion-emotions (narrowly speaking) are referred to or attributed to the soul, but caused by physical objects acting on our bodies.[17]

In this sense, the chorus, perceiving the actions of the opera but not emotionally invested in its outcome, represents the first of these classes – that of perception. The chorus has a unique musical role in the opera as an imitator of bodily reaction that does not interact with the drama. The sentiments of the chorus depend entirely on those expressed by the characters and, unlike the emotional fluidity of Orfeo's music, they remain static throughout any choral piece. By assigning this moralizing reflection on the plot to a group rather than an individual narrator, particularly within a work that otherwise contains only solo and duet pieces, the contribution becomes impersonal and removed from the emotional events of the opera. Monteverdi's incorporation of the dramatically detached chorus in *Orfeo* resembles the Cartesian separation of perception from emotion, reinforcing the dualistic views present in his character portrayal.

Monteverdi's employment of a dualism between lyricism and declamation, music and noise, and solo and chorus in *Orfeo*

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[17] Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, "Descartes on Thinking with the Body," in *The Cambidge Companion to Descartes*, edited by John Cottingham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 372.

parallels the Cartesian separation of a person's mind from her body. The recitative/aria division that Monteverdi expanded delineates the distinction between physical action and emotional reflection. The offstage noise, one of the most significant events in the opera's plot, is not directly reflected in Monteverdi's music, which further indicates that Monteverdi thought of music relative to the portrayal of human actions, and believed that music is not necessary to depict events that are external to the body. Finally, the incorporation of the chorus, with its role of overlooking but not participating in the opera, evokes the Cartesian distinction between perception and emotion. These dualities within the musical setting of a dramatic work have become so idiomatic to the operatic form that their intrinsic philosophical implications are often left unquestioned. Yet any attempt to use music in a portrayal of drama will contain some evidence of the composer's understanding of human nature. Monteverdi's use of aria and recitative in *Orfeo* created a precedent for its genre. Underlying these fundamental operatic conventions is the philosophical idea of mind-body duality.

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