

A Monty Python approach to the father of opera

Claudio Monteverdi laid the template for an art-form but, says Jessica Duchen, now his own tragic life is taking centre-stage



Monteverdi circa 1620 (by Domenico Fetti), when the composer was 53, and 20 years before he created two of his greatest works

This year Claudio Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610* hits a whopping 400-year anniversary. Even after four centuries, its power is such that it proved a highlight at this year's Proms, wowing a packed, enthralled audience on the penultimate night.

Indeed, it seems that Monteverdi's reputation has never been stronger. The Italian musical titan (1567-1643), born three years after Shakespeare, was as seminal to music as the Bard was to theatre. His *L'Orfeo* has set the pattern for the art-form of opera ever since; and his musical voice characteristically mingles the austere, the streamlined and the intensely sensual. But who was Monteverdi the man? As the Armonico Consort, the acclaimed vocal ensemble, puts it, he was caught "between Baroque and a hard place".

Now a new stage work is set to bring his thorny personal history to life. Performed by the Armonico Consort, it is called *Monteverdi's Flying Circus*. You won't find John Cleese, but there is an appropriately sparkling script by Kit Hesketh-Harvey, and Philip Madoc will play the composer himself.

For Christopher Monks, artistic director of the Armonico Consort, it's the fulfilment of a long-held dream. "We first had the idea in 2004," he says. "I'd been trying to gather the best music from all Monteverdi's operas, planning something like the Reduced Shakespeare Company in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*

(Abridged). But when I spoke to Kit about it, he came up with a plan that was far more elaborate and intelligent."

Mingling music, drama and stunning visuals, Monteverdi's *Flying Circus* tells the story of the composer's final years and evokes the way that his operas elliptically reflect his life: from the death of his young wife to how Monteverdi, like an ageing Ulysses, ultimately returned to the Penelope that was his own music. Along the way he often fell into conflict with the establishment; his younger son, Massimiliano, was arrested by the Inquisition for having "heretical" literature.

Harvey, a former pupil of Stephen Sondheim, is more often discovered starring in his musical comedy duo *Kit and the Widow* or appearing on comedy shows like *Just a Minute* and *Quote, Unquote* on BBC Radio 4. But he has been a Monteverdi devotee ever since singing in the *Vespers of 1610* with his college choir in the Basilica di San Marco, Venice, where Monteverdi was once in charge of music.

"We were up in the galleries, singing these antiphonal anthems in the building for which they were written, and the music was bouncing back and forth around the space," Harvey says. "It felt like the music of the spheres. I wanted to listen to it so much that I faked a headache and went downstairs to hear the second half. Pope John Paul I, during his one-month papacy, was in the congregation. And the Pope and I exchanged a glance of sheer wonder over this incredible music."

He had known little about Monteverdi the person: "I'd seen a famous portrait where he stares out at you, looking a bit like Machiavelli," he says. "Having started to scratch the surface I realised he wrote two of his greatest operas, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, in his late seventies, which then was a stupendous age, equivalent to one's late nineties now. It was astonishing that after composing no opera for many years he should suddenly pull these two out of the hat."

Harvey read Monteverdi's letters and realised that, in his youth, the composer had clashed with the authorities over particular musical intervals and harmonic progressions that were regarded as counter to the "divine order". "I began to see the parallels between that and his son's experience," Harvey says. "I loved the subtext of *The Prodigal Son*, the good brother and the bad brother.

"Monteverdi, like most musicians, existed in a permanent state of financial panic and had to flog a precious necklace that a duchess had given him in order to secure his son's bail. That became a far more interesting story than perhaps our title suggests."

But the drama wouldn't be complete without its tragic love story. Monteverdi wrote his first opera, *L'Orfeo*, in 1607 for the court of the Gonzagas, the dukes of Mantua, where he was employed for many years first as a singer and viol player and later as conductor and composer. The myth of Orpheus, whose sublime music enabled him to cross into the Underworld in an attempt to bring his wife back from the dead, bore a striking parallel with Monteverdi's personal history.

His wife, Claudia, died the same year that *L'Orfeo* was written. He never ceased to mourn her. "They were so poor that they couldn't afford the heat to keep her alive when she fell ill," Harvey explains. "Monteverdi blamed the Gonzagas because they

had promised to give her a coat and it never arrived. Despite their swagger, they were pretty cavalier." Monteverdi eventually left Mantua in 1613 to take up a post in San Marco, Venice, which brought him a guaranteed income and a house, though too late to save Claudia.

Monteverdi's Flying Circus should win new friends for a composer who can sometimes seem a tad unapproachable. Recitative – essentially, speech that is sung – was new and exciting to Renaissance ears but, says Monks, it's not always so today: "We talk to our audience about what they like and they're honest: recitatives half-an-hour long put them off." The show therefore involves the most catchy and melodic extracts from Monteverdi's operas and madrigals, interleaved with the exuberant drama and set against the background of carnival time in Venice. As Monks says: "It's great to find a new way to bring people into the music, while creating a work that is a stunning piece of theatre in its own right."

Monteverdi's Flying Circus, Bridge House Theatre, Warwick (01926 776438) 24 and 25 September, then Yeovil and Shrewsbury