

## From the Letters of Monteverdi

We are indeed fortunate that over fifty letters survive from the greatest musical dramatist of the early Baroque. One of the most interesting is the rebuke Monteverdi sent Striggio (see p. 177) on receiving from him what he considered to be an inadequate libretto. This summation of the aesthetics of early opera was based on a misunderstanding: what Striggio had sent was in fact a set of *intermedii*, traditionally decorative and dramatically inconsequential. Once this had been cleared up, Monteverdi expressed his willingness to set the text to music (though his music, if it was in fact written, has not survived). But as long as he envisioned the work as an opera, Monteverdi insisted on a certain realism, a strong focus on human characters and emotions, and the opportunity to imitate speech tones. Only then could music and drama unite to achieve their first aim: to move the affections.

Monteverdi's first major court position was as musician to the dukes of Mantua, who treated him in a high-handed manner and summarily dismissed him in 1612. When, some years later, after his appointment to the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, Monteverdi was wooed by Mantua once more, the now securely established and successful Maestro delivered himself of the astonishing document given below. This letter, addressed again to Striggio, gives a revealing glimpse of an artist whose awareness of his own gifts emboldened him in his dealings with his social superiors. And nowhere do we get a more vivid and detailed picture of the patronage system in action.

Venice, 13 March 1620

I must tell Your Excellency that the singular honor His Highness has done me in making me this exceptionally gracious offer to return to his service has touched me and pleased me so much that I cannot find words to express my gratitude. The years of my youth that I spent in that Most Serene service have implanted in my heart such strong feelings of devotion, goodwill, and reverence towards that Most Serene house that I shall pray to God on its behalf as long as I live, and desire that it may enjoy the greatest prosperity that a devoted servant could hope and wish for. And certainly if I had thoughts only for myself Your Excellency could rest assured that I should feel bound to return, if I could minister to His Highness's commands without taking other matters into consideration.

But there are two factors—one relating to this Most Serene Republic [of Venice], the other to my sons—that cause me to have second thoughts: perhaps you will allow me to say a little more about these two matters, for I know that I can count on Your Excellency's kindness, and that wisdom and brotherly love are among your greatest qualities. I shall therefore ask Your Excellency to bear in mind that this Most Serene Republic, which has never given a salary of more than 200 ducats to any

of my predecessors—whether Adriano [Willaert], Cipriano [de Rore], Zarlino, or any other—gives me 400, a favor that I must not lightly set aside without taking it carefully into account; since, Excellent Sir, this Most Serene Signory does not make innovations without careful thought, I must regard this particular act of grace very favorably indeed. Nor, having done this, have they ever had second thoughts: indeed they have honored me further, in that they will accept no singer into the choir without first hearing the opinion of the *maestro di cappella*, nor accept organists or vice-*maestri* without the opinion and report of the *maestro di cappella*. There is no gentleman who does not esteem and honor me, and when I go and perform, whether church music or chamber music, I swear to Your Excellency that the whole city runs to listen. My position is the more agreeable also because the whole choir is under temporary appointment except the *maestro di cappella*: indeed it is up to him to appoint and dismiss the singers and to grant leaves of absence or not; and if he does not go into the choir no one will say anything about it. His position is assured until he dies and is not affected by the death of the procurators or of the prince, provided he gives loyal and devoted service and not the opposite. If he does not go and collect his salary at the right time it is brought to his house. This is his basic income. There are also useful additional earnings outside St. Mark's: I have been asked again and again by the wardens of the confraternities and earn 200 ducats a year, for anyone who wants the *maestro di cappella* to make music for them will pay 30, even 40, or as many as 50 ducats for two Vespers and a Mass and afterwards will also thank him very warmly.

Now, Your Excellency, weigh against this in the balance of your fine judgment what you have offered me in His Highness's name and see whether there are any genuine grounds for my moving or not. In the first place, Your Excellency, kindly consider the damage I would do to my reputation with these excellent gentlemen here and with His Highness the Doge himself if I decided to exchange my present income, assured for life, for that offered by the Mantuan treasury, which ceases with the prince's death or his least displeasure; if I were to give up more than 450 ducats (in Mantuan currency), which is what I receive from the Venetian treasury, in order to accept 300 in Mantua, what would not these gentlemen say about me, and with reason? It is true that on behalf of His Highness you add a further 150 *scudi* from land that would be my freehold. But to this I reply that His Highness cannot give me what is mine: there would not be 150 but rather 50, since His Highness already owes me the 100; so he should not take into account what I have earned in the past by great toil and sweat. There would therefore be 350 ducats altogether; here I earn 450, and 200 more on the side.

So Your Excellency can see that people would undoubtedly speak very ill of me, especially as there are others—though I should not say so—who have hitherto been much more liberally rewarded than I have. How ashamed I should feel beside them to see them rewarded better

than me! Compare Venice! Your Excellency should also remember that His Highness made me a better offer, verbally through Signor Capagnolo, when I was staying in the latter's house after Signor Sante's death: this was a salary of 300 *scudi* from land, 200 of which were to be mine up to my death and 100 as a gift as payment of my annual rent. Then when I said I did not wish to have anything to do with the treasury he offered me a pension of 200 more, which came altogether to 600 Mantuan ducats. Now His Highness would like me to settle for so much less, as well as going to the treasurer every day to beg him to give me what is mine! As God sees me, I have never in my life suffered greater humiliation of the spirit than when, almost for the love of God, I had to go and beg the treasurer for what was mine. I would rather go from door to door than submit again to such indignity. (I beg Your Excellency to forgive me if I speak freely and to be so kind, on this occasion, and for the love I bear you as your devoted servant, as to hear me out with your boundless humanity and not in your official capacity.)

When the excellent procurator Signor Landi, together with the other excellent gentlemen, wished to increase my salary by 100 ducats he spoke as follows: "Excellent colleagues, he who desires an honorable servant must grant him an honorable contract." So if the Duke wished me to come and live honorably it is only right that he should treat me likewise; if not, I beg him not to bother me, since, as Your Excellency well knows, I have acted honorably.

I have said nothing of my sons. Yet Your Excellency, who is also the father of a family, knows very well how zealous a father has to be in desiring that honor for himself and for the household depending upon him which by the laws of nature he feels to be their due.

My conclusion, Excellent Sir, is this. As for Claudio, he is already in every way at His Highness's beck and call. As for the above considerations, he cannot honorably change his situation unless it be for the better and thus feel entirely justified in leaving the service of these excellent gentlemen. His Highness has the opportunity, now that the illustrious Bishop of Mantua has passed to a better life, of satisfying Monteverdi with a pension and a little more land without exposing him to the repugnant practices of an unreliable treasury: in short, a pension of 400 Mantuan *scudi* and 300 from land would be little to His Highness, and to Claudio a truly generous settlement. Perhaps Claudio is asking the impossible? He asks in fact for less than [the singers] Adriana and, possibly, Settimia used to get; he asks for what he is getting now. For it is my duty to leave a little something to my sons. If I were to leave something provided by the Most Serene house of Gonzaga it would be to their eternal honor, for they would have helped a long-serving employee not wholly despised by princes. And if this seems too much to His Highness, let him do me the honor of assigning me a little land so that I may have a little capital, since the 400 ducats I am getting now are in effect a pension. In so doing, His Highness will have paid his servant; and if he will

deign to command him, he shall find that I will get up in the middle of the night the more expeditiously to carry out his orders.

Please forgive me, Your Excellency, if I have written at too great a length. It only remains for me to thank Your Excellency with all my heart for the exceptional favor you did me in presenting my madrigals [Book VII] to Her Highness; I am sure that, since they were handed over by no less a person than Your Excellency, they will have been the more gratefully received.

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