Chapter 1
WHO RULES?

Were political ideas embedded in the first operas? If so, what were they and what did they imply? What does the political world in which opera was born tell us about this art form? What do operas tell us about politics? To approach these questions, we turn first not to words and music bound together for the stage, but to a wedding celebration.

The couple didn't marry for love. They wed out of political duty. It was in Florence in the autumn of 1600 that Maria de' Medici, niece of Tuscany's Grand Duke Ferdinando I, became the queen of France's King Henri IV. Their union fortified a partnership between Florence and Paris against Savoy and, in the larger picture of European politics, it strengthened them both against the Habsburg rulers of Spain (with whom Henri had recently been at war) and the Holy Roman Empire.

Spanish imperial power had grown throughout the fragmented political world of the Italian peninsula in the mid-sixteenth century. Ferdinando I had altered past Tuscan policies aiming to balance Spanish power with increased French power. In this context, he had recognized the value to Tuscany of Henri of Navarre's struggle to attain the French throne. By the time Henri, the Huguenot-turned-Catholic, married Maria, he was both King Henri IV and indebted financially and politically to her relatives. Florence's ruling clan and premier banking family supported him in French power struggles. Negotiations for a connubial alliance, with a suitably large dowry, had gone on for some eight years.

The groom didn't come to the ceremony. He was engaged elsewhere—against the troops of Savoy's Duke Carlo Emanuele I. Henri IV's love interests were elsewhere as well, with his mistress, and not with reputedly tempestuous Maria. He sent a surrogate for the nuptials in Florence's cathedral on October 5. The king missed a lavish occasion, the sort of display that princely families gave to promote their prestige at home and abroad. The banquet at Palazzo Vecchio (the old municipal citadel that had once been the seat of Florence's republic) was opulent. Each dish comprised part of an allegory extolling the illustrious couple and their kin. Icing on the

cake was molded as a wintry landscape. Sugar-animals moved about on it, and changed shape.[1] Two hundred and thirty-three years later this "vast magnificence" on which "no expenses were spared" was presented as the "most distinguished occurrence" in the reign of Ferdinando I in a history written by Lorenzo L. Da Ponte, the son of Mozart's librettist, then a professor of Italian literature at a college in New York.[2]

Henri IV also missed a milestone in Western culture. A variety of public and private events celebrated the new union. The principal theme was universal peace. *The Abduction of Cephalus* by Gabriello Chiabrera with accompanying music by Giulio Caccini—most of it is lost—played at the Uffizi Theater. More important historically was *Eurydice—Euridice* in the original—which is often called the second opera. These works originated in efforts within Florentine circles to marry words, music, and tale in a new way. *Euridice* was performed on Friday, October 6, on the second floor of the Pitti Palace, the duke's official residence, in the rooms of a Medici family member. It recounted how mythic Orpheus, armed only with his famous voice and his lyre, braved the Underworld to retrieve his love. Poor Eurydice, the tree-nymph, had died of snakebite on their wedding day. The performance, the first that could be called public, was a present to the new queen from Jacopo Corsi, a nobleman, patron of the arts, and longtime champion of marriage between Henri and Maria. (It had probably been completed by the previous spring because there had been a performance of it in May, also in a salon at the Pitti Palace, at the request of the archduchess.)[3] The librettist, Ottavio Rinuccini, was a Florentine court poet. Jacopo Peri, a musician and singer who played a vibrant role in Florentine commercial life and served in a wide variety of Florentine governmental and legal offices, composed most of the music, although segments were by Caccini.[4] The latter, Peri's arch-competitor, was also known as "Giulio Romano" because he was born and had studied in Rome (Caccini rushed to put into print his own musical setting of the libretto within two months of the performance.)

Dafne, usually credited as the first opera, was an earlier Corsi-Rinuccini-Peri effort based on another myth. A small audience saw it in Corsi's palazzo during Carnival 1597–98. Corsi and his collaborators were men of the late Renaissance, and they aimed to create a contemporary counterpart to ancient Greek tragedy. Their experiment was also one result of several decades of discussion of music within the Florentine artistic and intellectual worlds; these, in turn, corresponded to historical and political transformations in Florence and, more broadly, Europe. While *Euridice* was published,

Figure 1.1. Jacopo Peri (1561–1633), composer of the early operas *Dafne* and *Euridice* performing in an *intermedio* at the Medici wedding celebrations in Florence in 1589. Biblioteca Nazionale, Florence. Photo: Foto Marburg/Art Resource, NY.

most of *Dafne's* music is lost. We do have descriptions of *Dafne*'s first presentation. "It was performed in a small room and sung privately" with "a consort of instruments" playing, one observer recalled years later. "I was stunned at this marvel."[5] The entire work was sung through with musical accompaniment. Its novelty was a kind of musical declamation or declamatory song that later evolved into the conventions of recitative. Another witness, the composer Marco da Gagliano (he reset the libretto to his own music in 1608), commented that the experiment showed to Rinuccini "how apt song was to express all kinds of emotions," and that it could lead "to incredible delight."[6]

But it was *Euridice*, some two years later, that effectively launched the new art form.

It is improbable that *Euridice*'s audience, estimated at two hundred people, mostly noble, recognized the evening's significance. Responses were mixed, and the failure of the production team to prepare the scenery fully did not help. Some in the audience found its new musical style far from pleasing. Its declamatory singing was compared to "the chanting of the

Figure 1.2. Maria de' Medici, later Marie de Médicis (1575–1642) in a seventeenth century lithograph. What is usually called the second opera, *Euridice*, was performed at the Pitti Palace in Florence as part of the festivities in 1600 for her political marriage to King Henri IV of France.

Passion."[7] Centuries later, an audience is also likely to find tedium in *Euridice*, but historical charm too. An audience won't find in it the vibrant splendor of *Orfeo*, the "myth" or "fable (*favola*) in music" written about the same mythic couple seven years later in Mantua. This collaboration by Claudio Monteverdi and Alessandro Striggio the Younger is usually considered the first "great" opera. Evidently, Monteverdi examined Peri's score in preparing his own, and scholars speculate that he may have been at the Florentine wedding. Then thirty-three years old, Monteverdi was a Mantuan court composer in his liege's entourage there. It included a young painter named Peter Paul Rubens, who may also have attended *Euridice*.[8]

II.

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice made a lasting impression on the Renaissance. Although its origins were Greek, the early makers of opera were inspired by Roman renderings of it by authors such as Virgil and Ovid. The myth tells of art, love, and the defiance of death. Orpheus had many historical trappings and a varied presence in the fifteenth and sixteenth cen-

turies. Cultured Italians recalled how ancient Greeks such as Pythagoras and Plato had been taken by his tale. Or they may have thought of Horace's praise of the mythic singer as an "interpreter of divine will" and founder of civilized life ("While men still roamed the forests, they were restrained from bloodshed and a bestial way of life" by his song).[9]

In some ancient tellings, Orpheus is just an extraordinary vocalist and musician; in others he founds cities or a religious cult. Music could prepare your soul for contemplation and philosophy, thought Marsilio Ficino, the fifteenth-century philosopher and translator of Plato into Latin, the principal language of Renaissance learning. He founded the Platonic Academy of Florence under Medici patronage, and his intellectual sway in his native city would be lasting. Like Plato, he believed that something supernatural possessed poets. Ficino liked to sing hymns with a lyre, as Orpheus, supposedly, had done. And Ficino followed Plato's philosophical idealism, but gave it a Christian guise. Contemplation, he thought, detaches you from the material world. Your inner self is ushered into a purely spiritual and rational realm, which is also that of the cosmos. Like the ancient Pythagoreans and Plato, Ficino compared the structures of the universe to those of music. An imitation of God's mind could be heard in human music. This Neoplatonist also compared medicine and music: the former rids us of physical illnesses while the latter, both vocal and instrumental, rids us of infirmities of spirit and body.[10]

Orpheus was an obvious protagonist for a new dramatic deployment of music a century after Ficino. Orpheus demonstrated music's powers by facing the sovereign of Hades and pleading, melodiously: return my love to me. His song shook "hard hearts no human prayer can hope to soften . . . ," reports Virgil, "The very halls of Death . . . were awestruck." As Orpheus sang "accompanied by plucked strings," Ovid tells us, "bloodless spirits . . . wept."[11] In the best-known versions of the myth, he persuades the Infernal Ruler, but Pluto lays down a condition if he is to permit what has been previously unthinkable. Orpheus may retrieve Eurydice, but he must not look back at her as they ascend. Alas, he does look back and she is lost.

This tale lends itself naturally to sighs, to music—and to politics in more than one way, although this may not be obvious at first. Since the Florentine *Euridice* was invented for a political-matrimonial event, the familiar end would have hardly been appropriate. How could a love story celebrate a royal wedding and end with the bride in the Underworld because the groom flouted the stipulation of a king? Spectators at the Pitti Palace learned at the beginning of the performance that the account of the

myth they were to behold would not have its best-known dark climax. A figure called Tragedy first addressed them in a prologue. Usually, I make "the faces of the crowd" brim with pity. This evening, however, she sang, I "temper my song with happier notes."[12] In this version, Orpheus and Eurydice ascend safely into a happy future. French guests surely found this appealing. Their realm had been rent by bloodshed among Catholics and Protestants. Henri IV's kingship had offered deliverance. Not only had he abjured his Calvinism for the Church of Rome to secure the French throne, he then, by the Edict of Nantes of 1598, conferred various rights to his former coreligionists to attain civic peace. His marriage to Marguerite de Valois was annulled in 1599 to allow him his marriage to Maria the next year. Tragedy's prologue must have suggested to the French suite at the Pitti Palace that their land's afflictions were to be superseded by sweeter times—thanks, in part, to Florentine support for their king.

This was suggested too by Arcadian scenes that followed. Pastorals had long comprised a popular Renaissance stage genre, and they included tales of Orpheus. As early as the late fifteenth century, a *Fabula d'Orfeo* by the Tuscan humanist Angelo Poliziano was performed with music in Mantua. Often, pastorals presented a "Golden Age" which, depending on when they were written, might suggest a contrast between a happy past world and an unhappy present. Or they may have meant to hint at the good accomplished by an incumbent ruler. Ovid, who lived in the era of Pax Romana, when Rome's first emperor, Augustus, imposed peace on tumult following the collapse of the Roman republic, wrote of an early golden age when men, "though ignorant of laws" and with "no fear of any punishment" were responsible and virtuous. All peoples lived in peace and the earth itself, "untaxed" by hoes or ploughs, provided "freely" all "essentials . . . Spring was the only season . . ."[13] In *Euridice*, the set "showed the most enchanting woods, both in relief and painted," wrote Michelangelo's nephew, who was in the audience at the "premiere." The scenery was "placed in a well-composed arrangement and lit as if by daylight by means of aptly placed lights within."[14] A shepherd cheered the union of "adventurous Orpheus" and "fortunate Eurydice"; a nymph called on Phoebus ("Bright One," another name for Apollo) to double the rays shining down on them. Orpheus sang of how "courtly love" had changed his own celebrated song. No longer would it move people to sorrow. Instead, he told listeners, his voice would now praise love, "whose sweetest roses" hide among "the sharpest thorns."[15]

And then: thorns. A nymph arrives from the woods with bad news for Orpheus. A poisonous serpent bit your love. She called to you as she suc-

cumbed. Orpheus, although stunned, insists: her cry shall not be in vain. He prepares to face hell for her. Yet the shepherds and nymphs issue a warning. It begins with an observation: "A good pilot/ constant and strong/ knows how to escape the wrath of the sea."[16] No mortal is skilled enough to circumvent mortality, they point out. Orpheus will not be dissuaded, suggesting not just the strength of his love for Eurydice, but that something else is at stake. When the nymph tells him of his loss, she addresses him as the "worthy sovereign of great Phoebus and the sacred Muses."[17] Orpheus is the Sun God's son. As Phoebus-Apollo navigates through the skies in a blazing chariot, his son must now navigate through the Underworld and take up what is literally a death-defying challenge. All this implies another question: Does Orpheus also have the qualities of a prince, and thus the capacity to be a ruler?

Philosophers, beginning at least in Greek antiquity, likened political rule to captaining a ship. Educated members of *Euridice*'s audience would have detected in Rinuccini's words a debt to Plato's *Republic.* In it he told a parable about mutinous sailors struggling with a ship's master—a burly fellow who is "a little deaf and shortsighted, and no less deficient in seamanship." For Plato, who was hostile to the direct democracy that governed Athens (that is, to the majority rule of the citizens), the ship's master comprised the citizenry; the sailors were the equivalent of demagogic politicians who try to garner support for themselves and claimed that anyone can steer a vessel, whether educated and capable to do so or not. They try to divert the Master with this or that inebriation. It may be drink or an opiate, but when translated politically it means great speechifying and beautiful deceptive words. Each sailor is in fact pursuing his own interests when proposing himself at the helm and deriding anyone actually fit for this role as "a mere stargazer." And so the sailors turn a ship's journey into "a drunken carousel." They don't understand that a true navigator must be predisposed inwardly to his task and then must actually learn it.[18] Plato's point was plain. Neither politicians nor the "People" can govern. Only if you know how to rule and have the capacity for mastery can you steer properly the ship of state.

Plato's metaphors appeared persistently throughout sixteenth-century political discussions and in musical ones too. Just a decade before *Euridice*, Justus Lipsius published a text titled *Politica: Six Books of Politics or Political Instruction.* We will come across this Flemish humanist's name often as he was one of the most prominent continental political theorists of the century, along with Florentine Niccolò Machiavelli (with his "realist" view of

political power), Jean Bodin (French formulator of the idea of sovereignty), and Giovanni Botero (who attempted to Christianize "reason of state"). The issues they discussed, especially what we would now call the nature of the modern state, seeped recurrently into opera. Lipsius had already edited important editions of works by two celebrated ancients, the historian Tacitus and the philosopher Seneca, both of them important for early opera. In *Politica* Lipsius defended in principle emperors, kings, and princes. They kept order in his own era of religious strife. He also compared governing a polity to piloting a ship. How difficult it is for "one head" to control "so many," he wrote. Since the "all-encompassing multitude" is "discordant" and "tumultuous," it needs to be stationed "by gentle means" under a "common yoke." Few have been able to do so, Lipsius remarked, and he observed further that inexperienced men don't see the adversities entailed in preserving "a straight course" on turbulent seas. Great virtues are needed to do so, indeed, "many-sided Prudence" must steer the ship of state "as if by a rudder."[19] The right hand must be in charge. We don't know that the first creators of opera pondered the politics of Lipsius's book, although they may well have and had certainly read Plato well and knew Lipsius's scholarship. While Lipsius's concern was not music, and while he had no role in the birth of opera, his writings and translations colored greatly the entire intellectual world of Europe. The metaphor of a good pilot appealed easily to elites who looked with fear and chagrin at shaken Europe.

III.

One can imagine that many Florentine listeners/viewers at *Euridice* nodded in approval when they heard shepherds and nymphs sing of the strength and constancy required of a good pilot. As Henri IV secured his crown and French peace, so the Medici, earlier in the sixteenth century, secured their rule by bringing some stability to Florence. They achieved this after two centuries of struggles, sometimes with rival clans, and oftentimes with republicans, that is, with advocates of some kind of popular rule. Da Ponte's son described it as "the great struggle of power and right," based on opposed principles that are the foundations of all governments. Under one set of principles—those of republicanism—Florence became, he wrote, "the Athens" of the times, a "sacred depository" of liberty under a "people's government" that rested on laws. It had been the only republic in the Middle Ages, he asserted. The other principles, however, were those of the Medici.[20] This historical description is both stirring and a simplifi-

cation, since advocacy of "popular" rule could often mask the ambitions of oligarchic factions (and a republic can be run by an oligarchy rather than by a democratic citizenry).

Grand Duke Ferdinando I was the son of Cosimo I, who had pacified Tuscany and often identified himself with Apollo. Medici minions undoubtedly saw the pre-Cosimo I era as a "drunken carousel" of political events. The Medici were chased from power in 1494 and restored by Spanish arms in 1512. There were, in fact, two republican regimes between those two dates, the first characterized by religiously flavored—saturated—populism, the second dominated by aristocrats. A republic reemerged between 1527–30, only to be ousted by Habsburg soldiers. The Medicis were reinstated, but their new duke, Alessandro, was assassinated. The killer, a shady cousin, proclaimed republican sympathies: "Tyrants, in whatever way they are assassinated, should be slain."[21] (Agents of Alessandro's successor murdered him some years later.)

Following Florentine politics can seem like wandering through particularly convoluted labyrinths with too many signposts. But finally a large stake makes its mark. Alessandro's murder did not bring a republican uprising as his assassin hoped. Instead, Cosimo I came to power and brought order forcefully. He never shrank from harsh measures. Florentines who had served in republican governments were barred from holding positions as he built what one scholar called a "bureaucratic, authoritarian, centralized *Rechtsstaat*," that is, a strong state ruled by law and (a good deal of) equality before the law. Lelio Torelli, Cosimo's legal counselor, paid special attention to ancient Roman law in the process.[22] Law in Europe was a disparate reality after the fall of the Roman Empire—recall that political states as we think of them arose with modernity—but the rediscovery of manuscripts led, beginning in the eleventh century, to a revival of interest in Roman law and the notion of uniform laws over territories (separate from those of the church). The consequences were intellectual, practical, and long-term, spreading from Italy (especially Bologna) across the continent. Under Cosimo I came a time of (relative) quiet and economic well-being. Political ideas and debate withered in a city once famous for them. Florence, after all, had been the home of Machiavelli. The Medici also attained a long-sought family goal thanks to Cosimo I. Instead of simply being its leading clan, the Medici were now recognized as hereditary rulers. Legally, however, their principality was still part of the vast and complicated patchwork of multiple jurisdictions that made up the Holy Roman Empire.

The sixteenth century was particularly knotty in the Empire's history. At its beginning, the Habsburg King of Spain, from that family's senior

branch, was also Holy Roman Emperor (a role identified, since its establishment in 800 CE, as the Christian heir of the founding emperor of Rome, Augustus). In 1521 Emperor Charles V gave the Austrian Habsburg lands to his brother. When Charles V abdicated and then died (in 1556 and 1558, respectively) the Habsburg, Austrian monarch became Holy Roman Emperor. Spain maintained rule over the family's Italian lands. Cosimo I worked for Madrid's interests within the Italian peninsula, much to the anger of France. The Florentine calculation was that friendship was a way of avoiding a repeat of past Spanish intervention. In the meantime, many anti-Medici Florentines went to Paris where Cosimo's cousin, Catherine, had married into the royal family. Her father-in-law, King François I, had been unhappy with Tuscany's geopolitical orientation, and gave succor to Cosimo I's foes. Yet while Cosimo I defended the Habsburg Empire, he also used deft, deceptive, and convoluted formulas to assert Medici prerogatives—and aspirations—at home and abroad. "We are a ruler who accepts the authority of no one," he once explained, "apart from God, and, but solely on account of our gratitude for benefits received, the [Holy Roman] Emperor . . . to whom we have never paid tribute nor offered vassalage. . . ."[23] Finally, in 1569 he was recognized as "grand duke" by the Holy Roman Emperor and the papacy. Following his Medici ancestors, Cosimo I selected a laurel tree as one symbol of his rule. But it was a bent stump from which a new, fresh branch emerged. "*Lauro*" and "*restauro*" rhymed.[24] The Medici, he signaled, were renewed.

It was this successful Medici quest to reestablish, entrench, and legitimize their rule that characterized Florentine politics in the six decades before opera was born. The Medici wanted all Tuscans, as well as outside powers, to recognize their hard-won prerogatives as entitlements. Marriage into other royal families fortified their claims; it gave them an aura. So too did elaborate court spectacles. Cultural creation to political ends was a long-established feature of Europe's Renaissance courts. "Before the invention of the mechanical mass media of today," one historian notes, "the creation of monarchs as an 'image' to draw people's allegiance was the task of humanists, poets, writers, and artists. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the most profound alliance therefore occurred between the new art forms . . . and the concept of the Prince."[25] Princely images aimed also to instruct future rulers. Booklets presenting virtuous, useful, and corrupt behavior by past rulers were a tradition in Renaissance political culture. One Florentine we have mentioned wrote the most famous of these Mirrors for Princes in 1513 and dedicated it to a newly reinstated Med-

ici. Machiavelli's *The Prince* offered bracing, matter-of-fact advice about political power. It was, however, at odds with guidance proffered in *Mirrors* by earlier Christian humanists. An effective ruler, he argued, must address politics dispassionately as organized violence, not as an aspect of God's goodly scheme of things. He must know when to be cruel. Machiavelli admired ancient Roman paganism, not for any truth but because its rites, which were integrated into public life, enhanced devotion of Romans to their polity. Established Christianity simply distracted people with otherworldly concerns.

Machiavelli had a particular problem in holding up a mirror to Medici princes since he had served in high offices in the republican government that was ousted in 1512. Both *The Prince* and his overtly republican *Discourses on Livy*, an examination of the work of the ancient Roman historian, were published some four years after his death in 1527. Yet his legacy wound through the minds of Florentines long afterwards—despite the ban placed on all his works by the Inquisition at midcentury. The Medici, however, did not really need his patriotic realism. They understood power and politics, and also knew well when to be cruel. And Christian legitimacy was especially important to these great patrons of Renaissance scholars and artists who celebrated pagan Greco-Roman antiquity. The Medici made efficient use of authority together with ideology, and their clan included cardinals. One was pope when, in 1517, Martin Luther rebelled against the Roman church, initiating the Protestant Reformation.

IV.

In the latter sixteenth century, Florentine intellectuals and artists, relieved enough by relative political quiet at home and happy for ducal patronage, sought to reinforce both calm and benefaction through ideas and images presented in their art. A prince's job was to make peace, they suggested. Heaven gives to him his right to rule, and a particular power defined a sovereign: his will made temporal rules and it was his business to make sure of their fair application. The Florentine *Euridice* was not only a wedding present and a story about love and matrimony; it included a political brief for this Medici ideology. Before considering it, however, and then Monteverdi's treatment of the same myth, we need to mark out some developments within Florence's intellectual and artistic worlds.

Renaissance humanism was less a movement than an array of perspectives held by men who looked back across centuries, past medieval culture,

toward Greek and Latin antiquity. Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, was a primary concern for humanists as they turned to ancients for critical lessons about style and also behavior for their own times. Petrarch, the fourteenth-century poet, is often credited as progenitor of the Renaissance, and by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, humanism was a major intellectual force across the continent. The term itself, one scholar notes, originated probably in a description used by university students for teachers of the humanities (*umanista*), which included history, grammar, poetry, rhetoric, and ethics.[26] Debates took place over which Latin style ought to be emulated, although by the sixteenth century the Tuscan vernacular had also emerged as a literary standard for many Italians.[27]

Musical questions were mostly latecomers to this conversation. An important figure in their development was a philologist named Girolamo Mei. Born in Florence in 1519, he was active as a young man in the city's cultural and intellectual life and became a pupil of one of the most celebrated humanist scholars of the times. Pier Vettori (who published as "Petrus Victorius") was devoted to translating, editing, and commenting on major figures of antiquity ranging from Aeschylus and Euripides to Cicero and Sallust. He paid especial attention to Aristotle. His editions of and commentaries on Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, *Poetics*, *Nicomachean Ethics*, and *Politics* were greatly admired, and the concerns (or many of the concerns) of these books can together be considered harbingers of those that would preoccupy the circles whose experiments led to opera. Florentine intellectuals were shifting some of their intellectual focus from Plato to Aristotle, whose ideas (in varied interpretations) had come to dominate European universities since his works were translated into Latin in the thirteenth century. Now, Aristotelian and Platonic ideas mixed within humanism against the background of a Christendom split between Catholicism and Protestantism. Mei focused initially on literature as a young member of a new Florentine Academy and he shared in Vettori's work on Aristotle and efforts to revive interest in Cicero's approach to rhetoric.

Mei left Florence in somewhat murky circumstances, living for a decade in France and then in Padua. He began research on ancient Greek music as early as 1551 in Lyon, and then devoted himself to it after settling in Rome in 1560. Within two years he had explored, mostly in the Vatican library, a vast array of ancient writings pertaining to music.[28] Virtually no ancient Greek music existed, so he could only read these texts with an eye toward retrieving what could not be heard. He concluded that music in his own day didn't achieve what ancient Greek music did, which was to bring about

what Aristotle called "catharsis"—a purging of emotions. Central to art, for both Plato and Aristotle, was mimesis, that is, imitation or representation. Plato, however, feared unwholesome excitement by art; playing on the emotions, it could undermine rational self-control. Mei, however, followed Aristotle in finding distinct value in works of tragedy since they could arouse and purge powerful feelings such as fear and pity.

Music's particular might, Mei believed, had to be used properly, and that meant imitating and using the human voice in specific ways. He determined that a kind of song-speech gave ancient music its effect. A solo voice or choral music could declaim words in a powerfully communicative way, provided they were composed in a certain way. There had to be a single melodic line and simple accompaniment. Called "monody" in the next century, it became a key expressive aspect of early opera. On one hand, monody was mimetic; it sought a type of vocal verisimilitude. On the other hand, it aimed to enhance the presentation of feelings and ideas. It contrasted to counterpoint, the kind of polyphonic musical composition that crafted two or more overlapping melodies and musical modes for multiple voices singing varied texts. Church masses exemplified the issue. Their polyphonic textures, thought Mei, made words unintelligible and undermined religious purpose.[29]

The same could—and would—be said about polyphonic madrigals. Although they were not Mei's preoccupation, these comprised the most popular form of secular music during the Renaissance. They were well liked at the Florentine court, yet would later become a subject of contention among Florentines influenced by Mei's views. For these musical humanists, "*poesie per musica*" in madrigals appealed to listeners by means of counterpoint; it could be truly beautiful, but words were usually lost in layers of acoustical imagery made by numerous lines of multiheaded sound.[30]

V.

Here is how Mei argued in 1572. Among the ancients, he insisted, singing, with however many voices, "was in every song a single air." It was understood that nature gave man a voice with various qualities to express his diverse "inner states." Greek song had "a single end" to which the natural and "rightful means" were thereby directed. But if "several airs" mix in the same song, a listener is pulled in different directions, as if laughing and crying at once. Nothing but "supreme vanity" inspired polyphonic composers to use "many notes without natural fittingness." The result was indecipherable,

"disordered perturbation," a "mangling" of words.[31] In these assertions, Mei makes an inquiry that is much like the oldest of questions in political philosophy: who rules? And to what purpose? His answer: words ruled—or should rule—music.

Music must serve what words express. Instrumental sound cannot be "the boss," for it was "invented to imitate the voice." Otherwise, our reason will be subordinate to sensation, and it is our rationality and language that distinguishes us from lower life-forms. "Nature gave the voice expressly to man," he wrote, "not so that he might with its pure sound, like animals which lack reason, express pleasure and pain, but so that, together with meaningful speech, he might suitably express the thought of his mind."[32] In short, music was not an art for its own sake; its purpose was "not to please the ear with the sweetness of consonances." Its delight arose properly when a song's "air" suited thoughts of a text, that is, when a singing voice, with its highs and lows, conveyed something to listeners "completely and with efficacy" yet differently from the "continuous" ways of "common speech."[33] Words and voice could move listeners in ways polyphony's crisscrossing lines did not.

One line, not many; one head, not many. Mei's quarrel with polyphony evokes not just Plato but an argument that took place within the Roman church. He seems to be arguing against pluralism in sound and on behalf of oneness in artistic communication just while the church was asserting—or straining to assert—its singular authority against the volatile pluralism that came of the Reformation. The consequences of polyphony in masses and motets were disputed at the Council of Trent in September 1562, the year in which Mei was hunting for manuscripts in Rome. The Christian world was then divided, the papacy's claim to unique stature wounded, and bloody conflicts consumed Europe.[34] The council was one of the church's responses. It met over decades (with interruptions) to wrestle with the impact of Protestantism, and its debate on music was a relatively minor affair, focusing on questions that had been raised previously in church circles: did polyphonic masses distract the faithful? Did their musical beauties draw believers into perilous sensual pleasure? (St. Augustine, who loved music, worried about music's effect on prayer a millennium earlier in his *Confessions*.) Perhaps monophony, that is, a single, unaccompanied melodic line, most familiar in the form of Gregorian chant, was more appropriate to devotional purposes? It was a complex discussion with much speculation about intelligibility in liturgy. A call went out to reform church music.

A legend grew from these events. Some five centuries later, it became the subject of an opera by the German composer Hans Pfitzner. His *Palestrina* was written as Europe descended into World War I, and it premiered in 1917. It presents the ordeal of Giovanni Pierluigi de Palestrina, whom Pfitzner credited with saving the church's musical heritage during the deliberations at Trent. This composer of many masses came under pressure, notably from Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, a zealous proponent of Counter-Reformation doctrines, to write a polyphonic mass characterized both by beauty and *claritas*. Pfitzner reinvented considerably what took place, and inflated the importance and novelty of the council's debate on music. He also exaggerated the impact of the mass Palestrina wrote (the "Missa Papae Marcelli"). While the Holy See did set the tone for everything, including music, throughout Catholicism, most decisions about musical matters were left usually to local church authorities.[35]

Historical distortions like those found in Pfizner's opera are not blameworthy in themselves. Theater and especially opera do not reproduce past events; they say something while representing them. Pfitzner also meant to address musical culture in his own day and in this there was a political subtext. He was a German nationalist who imagined himself as defender of a musical heritage threatened by new types of music, in particular Arnold Schönberg's "atonality." *Palestrina* was conceived as a barricade against novelties that its composer found alien and unnatural. His opera ends with an allusion linking his contemporary fears to the past. Silla, Palestrina's student has watched the composer's ordeal and decides to leave for Florence, the Tuscan city that would become known for "new music." The issues raised at Trent anticipated deliberations about (and experiments with) secular music a decade later in informal humanist circles known as the "Florentine Camerata." But the innovation was also ancient.