Hor mentre i canti alterno: A Study on the Transition from Modality to Tonality in the Music of Claudio Monteverdi

by

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To my teachers.

To Lara Nie, without whom I would not be a musician.
To Steve Rochen, without whom I would not be a composer.
To Daniil Zavlunov, without whom I would not be a theorist.
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How do we think about modality, and why?

“Music is the science of sounds: therefore sound is the principle subject of music.”¹ Or so Jean-Philippe Rameau claimed in his *Traité de l’harmonie* (1722), arguably the most important work of music theory from the common practice period (c. 1600-1910). In his treatise, Rameau manages to build the first cogent analytical framework for what had become the prevailing organizational system of European art music: tonality. This particular application of the word “tonality” postdates Rameau’s treatise by nearly a century. Therefore the issues involved in defining many facets of the term are, to a certain extent, removed from discussion of the treatise itself.² Suffice it to say, the most fundamental principles of tonality found their first voice in Rameau. The subtitle that he chose is telling, not just in terms of the treatise’s purpose and breadth of vision, but also as it relates to the intellectual landscape of Europe at the time; the full title translates to “A treatise on harmony reduced to its natural principles.” Before the reader even begins, Rameau signals that his commentary will not be limited to the practical issues of performance and composition that had been the sole province of European music theoretical thought for over a millennium. Indeed, in the first sentence of *Book One* he defines music not as an art, but as a *science*.

Rameau’s purpose in writing *Traité de l’harmonie*, insofar as he makes it implicitly clear, was to connect the prevailing system of musical materials and structures (tonality) to the philosophy, poetry, and art of antiquity, as well as the

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¹ Jean-Philippe Rameau, *Treatise on Harmony*, 3.
² The term was first used in 1810 by Alexander Choron. Thomas Christensen, *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory*, 726.
fundamental principles of natural philosophy, which in this context we might today
call physics. If indeed Rameau’s goal was to convincingly ground his treatise in
ancient science and art, then he succeeded admirably, to the point of being hailed as
the “Isaac Newton of music” in his own day.³ Like Isaac Newton and his
contemporary Voltaire, Rameau entered the pantheon of thinkers whose triumphant
expositions of human reason would spark the Enlightenment. He achieved this by
tossing out the rulebook, so to speak, and establishing an entirely new theoretical
model for the composition and analysis of music, or at least so it would seem.
Certainly, Rameau’s new conception of music was novel and in some ways it was
truly ground-breaking.

Music is generally divided into harmony and melody, but we shall show in the following that
the latter is merely a part of the former and that a knowledge of harmony is sufficient for a
complete understanding of the properties of music.⁴

Here, he articulates the single most important aspect of the shift in musical thinking
that had occurred over the course of the seventeenth century. Namely, that musicians’
and composers’ conception of music had shifted from being horizontal to vertical,
that is, from being chiefly concerned with melody to being chiefly concerned with
harmony as music’s structural basis.

This paradigm shift into tonality was widely observed and even lauded by the
composers and theorists who preceded Rameau.⁵ However, before Rameau’s treatise,
they had difficulty breaking free of the analytical and organizational vocabulary of

³ Christensen, 759.
⁴ Rameau, 3.
⁵ Lukas Perry, From Modality to Tonality: The Reformation of Harmony and Structure in Seventeenth
Century Music, 3.
the extremely well-established theoretical model known as modality, the music of which is melodically driven and based on unique pitch collections called modes. The roots of modal theory lie in the writings of Ptolemy and Boethius in the second and sixth centuries, respectively. In the sixteenth century, the scholarship on modal music largely culminated in Heinrich Glarean’s *Dodecachordon* (1547), which controversially introduced four new modes to the old eight-mode system, and Gioseffo Zarlino’s *Le Istitutioni Harmoniche* (1558), which was in many ways derivative of Glarean’s work, but became far better-known and widely read.

To Rameau, Zarlino represented the high-water mark of theoretical thought on modality, yet *Traité de l’harmonie* demonstrates a tortured relationship with Zarlino’s work throughout. Rameau is heavily indebted to Zarlino’s pedagogical and analytical approach; it is an integral part of the intellectual lineage that leads directly to his own treatise, and he quickly makes it clear that he considers himself the heir to Zarlino’s legacy as the most important theorist of his era. In some ways the Zarlino-centrism of *Traité de l’harmonie* is unsurprising, given that Zarlino’s work was so highly revered by Rameau’s eighteenth century contemporaries and because *Le Istitutioni Harmoniche* greatly endeavors to ground itself in antiquity.

Since the Doririans used a somewhat grave and severe *harmonia*, with rhythms which were not very quick and words which contained severe and grave things, the ancients claimed that prudence was acquired by means of the Dorian mode, and that through it a chaste and virtuous

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7 Here, the usage of “culminated” denotes that the modal system had extended to its point of greatest complexity. It is in no way meant to convey the notion that Glarean’s model was superior or preferred by theorists and composers, contemporary or modern. Indeed, the issue was so hotly disputed that theorists and composers continued to argue against Glarean’s twelve-mode system well into the 17th century.
8 Powers, ¶ 15.
spirit was induced in us. This was not said without reason, as can be understood from history. For (as Strabo relates) King Agamemnon, before leaving his country to go to the Trojan war, put his wife Clytemnestra in the custody of a Dorian musician, because he knew that as long as the musician was near her she could not be corrupted by anyone. When the victorious Aegistus realized this, he removed the musician from sight, and acted on his own unrestrained desires.\(^9\)

It is flourishes like this one that lend Zarlino’s work the legitimacy that Rameau so wished to imbue in his own. However, as Rameau is quick to point out, most of Zarlino’s conclusions are wholly inconsistent with the principles being asserted in \textit{Traité de l’harmonie}. So he took a lesson from Saul of Tarsus and essentially implied that Zarlino had been working from the correct source materials but came to the wrong conclusions. In this way, Rameau could still use the aspects of Zarlino’s methodology that he needed to, while being deeply critical of most of his ideas at the same time. He goes to great lengths to discredit the notion that Zarlino’s ultimate conclusions have any legitimate basis in thinking from antiquity, usually moments before submitting his own theories to the reader. \(\)

\textit{Traité de l’harmonie} is not only very well-argued, but it is also grounded in some amount of scientific fact and constantly turns to Ancient Greece and Rome to support its conclusions. To the contemporary reader this would have all seemed extraordinarily convincing, as indeed it does to the modern reader in many respects. However, the height of Rameau’s success, coupled with a central deceit in his work helped give rise to an enormous musicological problem for scholars today. Rameau wanted his readers to come away believing that the apotheosis of human reason

occurring in their time was washing away the old way of thinking and ushering in a new, better, and above all, more rational and scientific approach to music. This, he asserted, along with breakthroughs in all areas of human endeavor, would lead mankind fully out of the darkness that had followed the collapse of Rome and into a new Golden Age. To a certain extent, this nonsense became canon in European history. Thus, modal music was grouped with all of the other legacies of Medieval Europe and treated as a bad experiment from the Dark Ages, best forgotten, that would soon be eclipsed by entirely new and superior Enlightenment thinking. The conception of modality as “old hat” began to force it out of mainstream musical thinking during the seventeenth century, so that by the time Rameau and the Enlightenment had arrived in the eighteenth century, there were precious few theorists and composers left who felt that modal thinking bore any relevance to the music of their day. For modern scholars, the abandonment and perceived irrelevance of modal music in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has had the effect of obfuscating exactly how, when, where, and why modality evolved into tonality.

Rameau presented the evolution as a clean break, wherein the old system was completely replaced with the new, superior, and unrelated model of tonality. But in reality it was anything but a clean break. The shift from modality into tonality was born of and spurred on by huge changes in the political and intellectual landscape of Europe, which caused musicians to look for new methods to meet new expressive and aesthetic demands. But they had nowhere to look except for the music that preceded them and, as it turns out, modal music was an incredibly rich arena in which to experiment. The materials and structures necessary to redefine the entire philosophy
of music-making were already present in modality and required only sufficient creativity, resourcefulness, and the necessity of the moment in order to be stretched into something like tonality that, on its surface, appeared to be entirely new. This is a testament to the vitality and breadth of modal music, even in its final years.

None of this is to say that the ambiguity surrounding modality’s dissolution can be solely attributed to musicians and theorists turning away from it in favor of the new system; the issue is far more nebulous than that. Indeed, that conception of the shift into tonality seems to imply that it occurred in a ludicrously short span of time, when in fact it took place over the course of the entire seventeenth century and beyond. Edward Lowinsky argues that “[it] is in the works of Arcangelo Corelli and Antonio Vivaldi that tonality emerges as unchallenged victor in a long contest, but not until Giovanni Battista Pergolesi do we find music entirely free of modal residues.”

Pergolesi’s La Serva Padrona did not premiere until 1733, putting the total length of the shift from modality to tonality at no less than one-hundred thirty-three years, by Lowinsky’s reckoning.

While the mistaken assumption that there is little continuity between the two systems has served to muddy the waters, there is no getting around the fact that modal music is nowhere near as easy to analyze as tonal music. Indeed, formal analysis of modal music is nothing short of a perplexing nightmare when it is undertaken using methods designed for tonality. The degree to which modal music resists analysis and categorization makes it quite easy to ignore medieval cantus planus, and easier still, perhaps even attractive, to ignore the enigmatic music of the

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seventeenth century *interregnum*, as Susan McClary termed it, between Renaissance modality and the full emergence of tonality in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{11}

Some modal music almost feels like it was written with the intention of teasing theorists with fragments of what seems to be tonality, hidden in larger modal works. But as a rule, these “fragments” are in no way equivalent to tonal structures in a functional sense. Carl Dahlhaus discusses a common example of this sort of figure, the *clausula formalis* (see Example 1),\textsuperscript{12} pointing out that “the bass’s F is only one of the possible consonances below the discant’s C. It has a contrapuntal, not a harmonic-tonal, basis.”\textsuperscript{13} While the lower voice does map out the common tonal progression of IV-V-I in root position, only the movement from G to C in the bass, from the *reciting tone* down to the *final*, can be considered typical of modality. All of the other parts, even the low F, are generated out of aesthetic and voice leading concerns related to the *diapente* descent cadence and *not* because of a functional relationship between the harmonies. This is a very straightforward example of how tonal-like structures can occur in modal music and there is obviously no question that these sorts of figures are linked to the functional harmonies that later mimicked their form. The *clausula*

\textsuperscript{11} Susan McClary, “Towards a History of Harmonic Tonality,” 117.
\textsuperscript{13} Dahlhaus, 107.
formalis that Dahlhaus presents shares a common lineage with the IV-V-I progression, but there is a significant break between them. The former is a nearly accidental confluence of structurally significant melodic lines moving into a cadence, while the latter is a series of freestanding harmonies (chords), each of which carries a set of functional implications with regard to the other chords in its key. There is no doubt that they are distinct phenomena, but it can be very troublesome to parse out the specifics of what makes outwardly identical modal and tonal procedures different. The difficulties inherent in evaluating these sorts of twin procedures are largely responsible for the relative lack of inquiry into the nature of the transition from modality to tonality.

There was not a single day when the musicians of Europe decided to switch from one theoretical model to the other. Thus, the music that bestrides the boundary between modality and tonality can be notoriously difficult to understand. However, it will fall within the scope of our discussion to attempt to do so. The principle purpose of this paper is to examine how and to some extent why the materials and structures of modal music were reorganized into tonality before dissolving into it entirely.

Claudio Monteverdi: who and why?

Claudio Monteverdi was born in 1567 in Cremona, Lombardy. He received his musical education singing in the choir of Cremona Cathedral, his principal teacher being the composer and maestro di capella, Marc’Antonio Ingegneri. While as a composer Monteverdi was an undisputed master of the late Renaissance madrigal, he is probably best remembered for the seminal work L’Orfeo (1607), the earliest
surviving opera, as well as the much later opera, *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1643), both of which are still widely performed today.\textsuperscript{14} For the purposes of this paper, we will limit musical examples to Monteverdi’s compositions. The reasons to focus on Monteverdi are simple, as Susan McClary points out.

Monteverdi was the greatest and most influential composer during [the early decades of the seventeenth century] when the transition [from modality to tonality] took place. His output includes both the last representatives of Renaissance technique and the recognizably tonal arias of the mid-seventeenth century. We can hence trace the entire change [from modality to tonality] through all its intermediate steps within the works of this single composer.\textsuperscript{15}

Indeed, *Poppea* is so very removed from Monteverdi’s early madrigals, and even *Orfeo*, that some scholars have cast doubt on whether or not the later opera can be attributed to Monteverdi alone. This speculation is largely directed at the final scene and the famous duet *Pur ti miro*, which it is generally believed Monteverdi did not write himself.\textsuperscript{16} However, some have even claimed that the “fingerprints of the younger generation”\textsuperscript{17} can be found in many of the “details of *Poppea’s* metric notation, rhythm, melody, and ornament.”\textsuperscript{18}

That such speculation can reasonably be directed at his later work only goes to illustrate the breadth of the musical vocabulary that Monteverdi used, encompassing parts of both the modal and tonal worlds, in between which he “laid the groundwork” that would lead from one to the other.\textsuperscript{19} However, it deserves to be mentioned that his

\textsuperscript{14} Harold Schonberg, *The Lives of Great Composers*, 25.
\textsuperscript{15} Susan McClary, “The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization in the Works of Claudio Monteverdi,” 7.
\textsuperscript{16} Paolo Fabbri, *Monteverdi*, 260.
\textsuperscript{17} Alan Curtis, “‘La Poppea Impasticciata’ Or, Who Wrote the Music to "L’Incoronazione" (1643)?,” 34.
\textsuperscript{18} Eric Chafe, *Monteverdi’s Tonal Language*, 290.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid. 1.
music is rarely easy to corral into a single theoretical camp; even for the pieces that do lean noticeably towards modality or tonality, his style is stubbornly idiosyncratic in most cases. As Eric Chafe comments, “[Monteverdi’s techniques and materials] belong in a great many cases to the individual work rather than to the style in general (although they may be features of both).”

Monteverdi’s music forms its own little universe in some ways, yet there is no question that the theoretical logic of several musical ages flows into and, in some very special cases, out of his work. Indeed, Monteverdi never seems to have put any school of musical thought ahead of his own aesthetic and expressive concerns. However, this has the negative consequence of making his music fiendishly difficult to nail down, even by the standards of the famously inscrutable modal music of the early seventeenth century. However, Monteverdi’s music is also a firsthand account of the forces that caused the shift into tonality to occur. Consequently, his music is of special interest to us, since examining why modality morphed into tonality is one of the principle purposes of this paper.

Comparing tonality and modality

It was a deliberate choice to avoid discussing the terminology of music theory up until this point in the paper, and even more so to delay establishing a solid definition of what tonality and modality are. Sometimes discussions of the music that illustrates the transition from modality to tonality can get bogged down by analytics

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20 Chafe, 5.
21 Though fortunately, in this regard the analysis in this paper stands on the shoulders of giants like Joel Lester, Carl Dahlhaus, and Susan McClary.
that are extraordinarily difficult to digest; so the sections where those definitions and analytics were nonessential were deliberately left free of them.

In the past three-hundred years, tonality has so dominated western musical thinking and grown so much in complexity that the modern conception of its principals, while still appropriate, is unwieldy and ill-suited to the task of understanding the music of the interregnum. For these reasons, Rameau’s more constricted eighteenth century definition of tonality is perfectly appropriate for the modal and pre-tonal music we will be examining. Rameau wrote,

We distinguish between two types of modes… of which one is [called] major and the other minor. They take their names from the major or minor intervals formed by the third [above the tonic]… The Ancients considered only the melody, which was an error, for the melody completely depends on the chords fixed by the mode.  

Rameau establishes that tonality contains only two modes, what today we call the major and minor scales. He immediately notes that the structural basis of tonal music lies in the naturally occurring triads within those scales and he distinguishes this from the focus on melody, which characterized the structure of ancient as well as contemporary, modal music. In the most basic conception of tonality, each diatonic harmony (i.e. chord) performs one or more of the functions of tonic, tonic expansion, pre-dominant, and dominant, which generally occur in that order before returning to the tonic. The clausula formalis “progression” of IV-V-I, when read as a fragment of tonal music, consists of pre-dominant harmony, followed by dominant, and finally tonic. Thus, tonal music is entirely defined and quite easily understood through a

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22 Rameau, 157.  
23 The use of tonal terminology such as “progression” is necessary for the sake of clarity. Make no mistake, functional tonality is utterly absent from a clausula formalis as it occurs in modal music.
series of relationships between the diatonic chords of the major and minor modes, particularly as they relate to the first note, i.e. the tonic, of those scales.

Modal music derives its structures from pitch collections called modes, or rather from the melodies derived from and written in each of those modes. Glarean and Zarlino submitted that there were twelve of these modes, six authentic and six plagal (see Example 2). Each mode is defined by its final, which is the first pitch in the authentic version of the mode. For example, the authentic Dorian mode begins on D, its final, which would feature most prominently in the melody. The reciting tone, the second most prominent pitch in a mode, occurs on the fifth scale degree in authentic modes, and on the sixth or seventh scale degrees in plagal modes.

The ambitus of a mode is the range of notes that it includes. So the ambitus of an authentic mode spans the octave above its final, while the ambitus of a plagal mode begins one diatonic fourth below the final and stretches up an octave. Some theorists, including Giovanni Maria Bononcini in his Musico Prattico (1673), conceived of the authentic modes as ascending and the plagal modes as descending. This concept is largely derived from melodic conventions surrounding the use of authentic versus plagal modes.

The reader may notice that each diatonic pitch serves as the final for a pair of modes, except for B. There is a modern mode beginning on B, known as Locrian. However, because the fifth scale degree of Locrian, F, is a tritone above the final, it was not conceived of as a proper mode, nor would such a mode have been considered.

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24 Joel Lester, Between Modes and Keys, xiv.
25 Ibid. xii-xiv.
26 Christensen, 416-417.
Example 2: The twelve modes

appropriate for use in the seventeenth century. This is not only because the tritone, which forms the central intervals of the Locrian mode, was considered the most unacceptable of dissonances, but also because F divides Locrian into two halves of equal intervalllic size. Essentially, each of the twelve modes can be divided into a perfect fourth and perfect fifth. In plagal modes the fourth is on the bottom, whereas
in authentic modes the fifth is on the bottom. Locrian, being composed of two equal tritones, does not adhere to this key structural principle. Since the melodies in modal music are largely derived from the character of the mode and since the structure of the music was directly derived from the melody, the Locrian mode throws the proverbial monkey wrench into the works of practical music making, as it would demand near constant use of forbidden tritones. Consequently, Locrian and especially Hypolocrian may be thought of as modern and primarily theoretical inventions. Though by examining how they don’t work from a seventeenth century perspective, it is possible to shed some light on how the other modes do.

While all of the modes seem superficially similar to the major and minor keys (the Aeolian and Ionian modes share their pitch collections with the C major and A natural minor scales), they are not equivalent, insofar as they are used to create music. Joel Lester writes,

> When theorists refer to the Phrygian or the E-mode, they are not merely referring to the final on E, with the octave species of the white note scale E-e. In addition, they are referring to the entire range of compositional possibilities uniquely available in this mode: the melodic lines, skips, ambitus, cadences, points of imitation, and so forth. Contrapuntal theory covered the interaction of notes and lines with one another. But only modal theory covered the unique structural possibilities of each mode. A differentiation of modes based on a single interval over the final is alien to modal theory, whether the distinction be made on the basis of a major or minor third, a major or minor second, or any other interval.27

It should already be clear how and why several of the characteristics that Lester mentions defined music in each mode, more of which will become apparent when we

27 Lester, *Between Modes and Keys*, xvi.
examine some of the music itself in detail. Each of those mode-defining characteristics comes from some sort of melodic consideration, that is, they are derived from conventions related to making melodies out of the modes.

Lester also draws an important distinction between contrapuntal theory and modal theory. He mentions how contrapuntal theory can explain, to some extent, how modal music took shape. Any first-year theory student understands how to write species counterpoint above a given cantus firmus. However, if one were to ask that student to write a cantus firmus in Dorian, it would be something akin to a miracle for him to produce something that took the conventions of the mode into consideration, much less probed its expressive possibilities. Lester is pointing out the issues related to the modal blind spot in conventional musical training, and consequently in conventional musical thinking. Tonal musicians are trained to carry out the process by which a modal melody is expanded into polyphonic music: it can be as simple as writing layers of species counterpoint, while obeying the rules of voice leading. However, the breadth of expressive and aesthetic possibilities that can be inferred from each mode are largely unfamiliar to tonal musicians. That is to say, there is far more to the modes than meets the tonally-minded eye.

Real modal music, as distinguished from classroom exercises, obviously uses far more varied and complex procedures than species counterpoint to expand and ornament the melody. For example, harmonizations of modal melodies can employ a vast array of consonances that would be unacceptable in a strictly diatonic tonal context, especially given the frequent use of local leading tones, which cause the harmonies to break out of the mode’s pitch collection. But unlike in tonal music, local
leading tones do not ultimately serve any sort of hierarchy or progression akin to the tonic, pre-dominant, dominant paradigm.\textsuperscript{28} As a consequence, they can actually weaken the sense of the final within the mode (the opposite effect of a tonal applied dominant) as Lukas Perry points out, “Modal progressions do not effect… modulations, and the often close use of leading tones causes an ambivalence in tonal direction even though such progressions emphasize certain melodic degrees and produce a variety of harmonic colors.”\textsuperscript{29} Simply understanding counterpoint does not prepare one to analyze modal musical structures. The deceptively familiar procedures and implications of the absence of a tonic are simply too complex and idiosyncratic. Thus, as Lester points out, contrapuntal theory alone is insufficient to the task of dissecting modal music.

\textit{Basic modal materials and structures}

The modes may be thought of as their two species, diatessaron and diapente (i.e. fourth and fifth), stacked on top of each other to form the octave. The diatessaron forms the upper half of the authentic modes and it is flipped to the bottom, so to speak, to form the lower half of the plagal modes. The outer notes of the diapente and diatessaron are some of the most common sites for cadences in each mode. For example, the Lydian mode can be thought of as the diatessaron of C-F stacked on top of the diapente of F-C. In music using the Lydian mode, cadences on the final F and the reciting tone C would be quite common. In authentic modes like Lydian, the third scale degree, or mediant, would be another likely site for cadences.

\textsuperscript{28} Perry, 8.
\textsuperscript{29} N.B. Perry acknowledges the inaccuracy of the term “progression” here. Perry, 8.
The importance of these reference pitches in the modes has in some ways bled directly into tonality. For example, the tonal procedure of the authentic cadence (V-I) outlines the diapente that forms the lower half of authentic modes. Therefore, the authentic cadence can properly be thought of as a modal procedure that has been effectively transferred into tonal music.

One of the most fundamental melodic and therefore functional structures in modality is the stepwise descent from reciting tone to final, outlining the diapente in an authentic mode. At Monteverdi’s time, there were some common ways to harmonize the descent, of which we have two examples in Aeolian (see Example 3).^30^ Keep in mind that in these harmonizations the structure is derived wholly from the diatonic stepwise motion of E down to A in the upper voice. The Passamezzo antico and Romanesca forms of the diapente descent were two of many equally valid approaches. All that was necessary to effect a cadence in modal music was to create some sense of finality around a pitch, with the diapente descent being among the most powerful methods of doing so, particularly with regard to the final. Indeed, the word “cadence” comes from the Latin cadentia, which means “falling” or “sinking.” This is an interesting incongruity given that the most powerful of the tonal cadences, perfect authentic, is defined as one where the upper voice ascends to the tonic. Using

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^30^ Susan McClary, Modal Subjectivities: Self-fashioning in the Italian Madrigal, 25.
both local and diatonic leading tones to cadence was an extremely common procedure in modal music, as well. But, as the term itself implies, cadences that descend through the *diapente* are extremely important. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that the melody, falling from E to A, dictates the structure in these two cadences rather than the actual harmonies, which are irrelevant to the function of the *diapente* descent.

As a final and very brief example before we move to some of the music itself, take this fragment of *Anima mia, perdona* (see Example 4)31 from Monteverdi’s *Il quinto libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (1603). The harmonic rhythm in these two measures is no faster or slower than the rate of the melody. That is, each time the melody moves to a new pitch, the other lines form a new harmony around it. This is typical given that harmony in modal music unfolds in a linear fashion, such that it is essentially nothing more than the incidental confluence of consonant pitches around the melody. With that in mind, the jolting harmonic profile of Renaissance-style madrigals like *Anima mia, perdona* comes into sharper focus. The rapid rate of harmonic change demanded a startling variety of harmonic color to avoid aural stagnation, even in pieces with very simple melodies. In many ways it also invited the

spectacular word-painting that has come to define High Renaissance madrigalism, such that imbuing music with poetic feeling was a means of achieving and validating a high degree of harmonic diversity, in addition to being an artistic end in and of itself.

This style of polyphony is extremely relevant to the discussion of how and why modality transmuted into tonality, since it was the point of departure for Monteverdi and many other composers whose work would deeply inform seventeenth century music. Some of its features have carried on in new and extraordinary ways up to the present day, such as the use of local leading tones to vary harmonic color and effect brief tonicizations of important pitches. While other features have largely faded away, such as its fast harmonic rhythm.

Roots in Renaissance style

We will now examine four pieces by Monteverdi that can serve as snapshots of the different developmental stages of his music, which, in turn, represent steps along the pathway to tonality. The first piece will be *Ah, dolente partita* (see Example 5) from Monteverdi’s *Il quinto libro de madrigali a cinque voci* (1603). This piece is firmly within the Renaissance modal idiom and will be used as an example of common modal compositional procedure from that period. Monteverdi’s work can hardly be considered typical. Indeed, the reason we remember him is because of the incomparable quality of his music. However, *Ah, dolente* is representative of his early work and is, consequently, an appropriate starting point for this discussion of modal practice and how it evolved into tonal practice. The piece is set to a poem of the same
Example 5:

Ah, dolente partita
Quarto libro de madrigali

Giovanni Battista Guarini (1538 – 1612)
Claudio Monteverdi (1567 – 1643)

Ah, dolente partita! Ah, fin de la mia vita!
Ah, fin de la mia vita, ah, fin de la mia vita!
Ah, fin de la mia vita, ah, fin de la mia vita!
Da te part'e non moro?
Da te part'e non moro?
Da te part'e non moro?
Da te part'

Ah, dolente partita!
Ah, fin de la mia vita, ah, fin de la mia vita! E pur io fin de la mia vita! Ah, dolente partita, ah!

E pur io provo la pena de la morte, Ah, dolente partita, ah!

Ah, dolente partita! e non moro?

Ah, dolente partita!

Ah, fin de la mia vita! Da te part' e non mora?

E purio provo la pena de la morte, e purio provo la pena de la morte, e purio provo la pena de la morte, e purio provo la pena de la morte, e purio provo la pena de la morte e sen to nel parro? E purio provo la pena de la morte e sen to nel parro? E purio provo la pena de la morte e sen to nel parro? E purio provo la pena de la morte e sen to nel parro?

pro-vo la pe-na de la mor-te e sen-to nel par

pro-vo la pe-na de la mor-te e sen-to nel par

pro-vo la pe-na de la mor-te
name by Giovanni Battista Guarini, which is written from the perspective of a man on the precipice of death, who clings to life for one last moment to bemoan its passing.

Ah! dolente partita! Ah! Sorrowful parting!
Ah, fin de la mia vita! Ah, end of my life!
da te parto e non moro? Do I leave you, and not die?
E pur i’ provo Yet I endure
la pena de la morte the pain of death
e sento nel partire and feel upon our parting
un vivace morire, a lively death
che dà vita al dolore that gives life to sorrow
per far che moia so that my heart
immortalmente il core. may die unendingly.

The ambiguity in whether the speaker is dead or alive was probably a factor in Monteverdi’s selection of the Aeolian mode for this piece. The mode was considered to be grave and dolorous but, far more importantly, it has a strong sense of uncertainty in practice, which lends itself to the uncertain nature of the text. Since Aeolian is an authentic mode, its reciting tone lies on E, the fifth degree of the scale, which together with A forms the diapente that helps give this mode its character. However, since the sixth scale degree of Aeolian is F, not F#, cadencing on E by ascent through D# and descent through F# is impossible. By way of comparison, this procedure would be possible for the similarly dour Dorian mode’s fifth degree of A, using motion through the local leading tone of G# and the diatonic B. As a result,

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33 McClary, Modal Subjectivities: Self-fashioning in the Italian Madrigal, 25.
strong tonicizations of E are absent in Ah, *dolente* and the composer was forced to support the sense of E with A and C collections. This weak sense of the *reciting tone* can cause the listener to confuse whether it is the *diapente* between A and E that defines the mode, or the *diatessaron* between A and D, an uncertainty that Monteverdi uses to great effect, as we will see.

The canto and quinto enter together on E and hold it until m. 4, when the canto rises to F and quinto descends to D, before leaping from C to F and returning to E. The canto and quinto lines in m. 1-6 serve to outline the upper limit of the *diapente*, with the F serving as an upper auxiliary by which the shifting melodies intertwine around E. This sense of E is confirmed with the entrance of the alto, whose low F along with the D in the quinto expands into an octave on E in m. 8. The alto then makes a full *diapente* descent from E to A, but the sense of A is somewhat weakened by the sustained E in the canto and quinto. So the A cadence in m. 9 gives more of a feeling of E, supported by the A collection.

So far, Monteverdi seems to be reinforcing E to the best of his ability, but as we will see, he exploits the expressive possibilities of vacillating between both E and D. He gives the first hint of D in m. 10, when the tenor enters on G beneath the canto, which descends through D down to G. However, this D area is subsumed by the *mediant* collection supported by the bass’s C in m. 11. The quinto enters with E in m. 12 and descends though the *diapente*, with the canto matching in thirds above, ending in a strong A cadence at m. 15. The alto then ascend from the C to E, the *mediant* to the *reciting tone*, leading to a sense of an E region in m. 18 before the C♯ in the tenor, along with the quinto’s descent from E in m. 20-21, tonicizes D. However, this D area
is never confirmed, as the suspensions in the upper voices prevent a stable arrival and are immediately followed by an expansion at m. 25, much like the one in m. 8, from D in the quinto and F in the alto to an octave on E. This is confirmed by the C collection in m. 27. In m. 31, the alto and tenor enter with the opening material, outlining the upper limit A-E *diapente* and thus reinforcing the sense of A, which is briefly echoed in the bass’s m. 35 entrance on A. However in m. 37, the bass ascends to B♭ forcing A to imply not the final, but the upper limit of the D-A *diapente*. This upper level is restated by the high A in the quinto before we arrive at a D cadence in m. 39. There is a strong cadence on F, the *mediant* of C, three measures later, but the journey into D space ends abruptly at m. 43 when the quinto restates E, supported by a C collection in the lower voices. The quinto then descends through the A-E *diapente*, arriving on A at m. 47. However, the cadence is weakened by the absence of A in the bass, which enters a beat late. In m. 56-61 there is another complete A-E *diapente* descent, harmonized as a *Romanesca* (see Example 3), however it pauses and elongates in m. 57-59, when the canto hovers on D before descending to C♯, tonicizing D. The next two measures present a full D collection, including F♯ in the quinto, before the descent kicks back into gear in the second half of m. 59, arriving at the expected A cadence in m. 61. By this point it should be abundantly clear that Monteverdi is trying to enforce an intense sense of ambiguity between the tonal centers of A/E and D, which gives life to the poetic duality of the text.

After the cadence at m. 61, we see that Monteverdi only used A as a sort of gateway into a D-A *diapente* descent, which is the same elongated *Romanesca* figure that appeared in m. 56-61, transposed down a fourth into D space and given to the
alto, tenor, and bass. The strongest D cadence so far in the piece arrives at m. 66 and, through the use of the same material, this very strongly equates the significance of the D region with that of the A region. The sense of D, as well as the general uncertainty of tonal center, is reinforced by the descent from A to D in the canto, beginning in m. 65. But the entrance of the quinto and alto in m. 67, beneath the G in the canto, creates an A collection, which, along with the canto’s stepwise ascent to E in m. 68-69, challenges D. There is a weak A cadence at m. 70, before a series of overlapping D-A diapente descents begin, supported by C#s in the alto and tenor. But because each descent begins halfway through its predecessor, there is no strong arrival at a D cadence. The bass’s motion from A down to F in m. 76-77 ends the sense that a cadence might be coming on D. The bass then climbs to back A, as motion in the canto, quinto, and alto outlines the A-E diapente once again in m. 77-79, with a strong A cadence at m. 81. In m. 82-89, the extended use of an E collection over a long E pedal in the bass suggests the area is performing a pseudo-dominant function, i.e. the strong sense of E over a long period implies the motion from the reciting tone to the final. That feeling is confirmed with yet another very strong cadence on A in m. 89.

The piece concludes with eight measures of very ambiguous tonal center, though these measures are semi-oriented towards A. The final section leaves the listener unsure of whether it will cadence on A or on D, since A is harmonized both by E and by D/F, and since the more prevalent use of C# is tempered by a single C-natural in the tenor at m. 93. All of these harmonies occur simultaneously, which serves to confuse the sense of tonal center immediately after the cadence at m. 89.
The final cadence is, in fact, a weak A, cementing it as the primary tonal center of the piece. Though the fact that this was questionable up until the last two measures speaks to just how uncertain the sense of A is, in the work as a whole.²⁴

The main reason for this rigorous analysis of *Ah, dolente partita* was to establish an extremely clear sense of the Renaissance madrigal style from which many of the progenitors of tonality, obviously including Monteverdi himself, departed. It should be clear that this piece exhibits a complete lack of chords as we understand them, particularly as that implies a specific function or set of functions within a key. Chords, keys, and functional tonality are absent and the structure of this music has no basis in them. The melody of *Ah, dolente* and the figures therein are integral to the musical structure. It is the melodies that carry the implication of motion to key areas and harmonies, which in this firmly modal style are merely the semi-accidental confluences of melodic lines, that is, the harmonies in *Ah, dolente* carry no functional implication whatsoever.

This analysis consciously omitted any examination of word-painting in the piece because the specifics of those techniques, while vibrant and expressive, are largely irrelevant to the question of how this music fed into the development of tonality. There are, however, certain aesthetic and expressive elements of this piece that are far more pertinent. Monteverdi displays a willingness to manipulate and toy with harmonic space that may be one of the earliest glimmers of tonal thinking in his

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²⁴ This analysis draw extremely heavily from Susan McClary’s analyses of *Ah, dolente partita*, in this case to establish the basics of Renaissance modal practice, in order that they might inform attempts to elaborate on its pre-tonal implications. The subsequent discussions of musical examples follow a similar trajectory, with significantly more original analysis. McClary, “The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization in the Works of Claudio Monteverdi,” 116.
work. Of particular interest is the expanded *Romanesca* harmonization of the *diapente* descent that appears in m. 56-61 and then reappears m. 61-66. Indeed, the fact that it reappears is probably the most significant feature of all. It is not of any great significance that Monteverdi reinforced the D tonal center and, thus, the ambiguity of A and D as reference pitches. However, it is remarkable that he broke up the *diapente* descent to do so. That cadence procedure was not so sacred by 1603 that it would have been inconceivable to alter or interrupt it. However, it is not a transgressive tendency that makes the modification noteworthy, but rather Monteverdi’s willingness to lengthen the duration of harmonies and stretch harmonic space for expressive effect. This is a very minor exhibition of that tendency, but it has significant connotations for the operatic idiom, our next musical example from *L’Orfeo*, and tonal music as a whole.

Perhaps the most important aspect of m. 56-66, though, is that Monteverdi effectively utilizes the *Romanesca* as a modulating sequence, to put it in tonal terms, and that he uses it to explore harmonic space in a manner that is far more characteristic of tonal music than modal music. Even as he used the cadential sequence to move from the area of A to D, he need have only continued from the area of D to G, and so around the circles of fifths; the implication is left open.

[Series] of chords whose roots move down the circle of fifths, falling by a fifth or rising by a fourth… [represent] the normal direction for chord progressions in tonal music, whereas modal music may move up the circle of fifths as easily as down.³⁵

As Peter Burkholder points out, the sort of harmonic exploration we see in *Ah, dolente partita* was not necessarily foreign to modal music, but that does not alter the

fact that it is exemplary of tonal music. It is not as significant as would be the use of a series of applied dominants to create an expanded progression of pre-dominant harmonies, but it is the beginning of that sort of thinking and, in a larger sense, the beginning of the tonal conception of harmonic space.

Expansion and exploration: L'Orfeo

It is scarcely possible to overstate the importance of Monteverdi’s first opera L'Orfeo, favola in musica. The work marks something of a eureka moment in musical history, when the most expressive elements of High Renaissance style, the political and intellectual landscape of Europe, and Monteverdi’s fluid mastery of madrigalism combined to produce something new, groundbreaking, and extraordinary not only in its beauty but also in its sheer depth of artistic possibility. Orfeo lies in a direct line of succession leading to Rameau’s humanist triumphalism and even Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerke, which used the operatic idiom to push the expressive and functional boundaries of tonal music to such an unfathomable extent that composers like Debussy began to turn away from the system entirely. As if its possibilities had been so exhausted that there was nothing left to do but redefine the very structural basis of western art music, an impulse on which Scriabin, Ives, and Schoenberg would follow through in their own remarkable ways.

To the extent that a single work at one moment in time can, Orfeo marks the beginning of one of the most extraordinary progressions of artistic thought in human history: that of opera. But while Orfeo was a watershed development, it still developed out of styles, structures, and tendencies from the music that came before it.
Tonal music, and perhaps opera most of all is such an astonishing art form and casts such an immense shadow that it is all too easy to fall into Rameau’s trap and imagine that it burst into existence without preamble. However, as we will see, if Orfeo heralds the beginning of one progression, it also represents the end of another, or better yet, the bridge between the two.

True to its designation as a “fable in music”, Orfeo recounts the legend of Orpheus, the greatest musician of Greek mythology, and his inamorata, the beautiful nymph Eurydice. We begin our examination of the opera with the opening statement of Act Two, Ecco pur ch’a voi ritorno (Here I am, returned to you) sung by Orpheus as he returns to the stage after his wedding with Eurydice (see Example 6). The B♭ in the signature indicates that the mode is in transposition here. In this case, it is the Aeolian mode with its final on G rather than A. This transposition also requires that E

Example 6: Ecco pur ch’a voi ritorno
be lowered to Eb, however the further alteration of the diatonic scale is communicated with accidentals rather than in the signature itself.

Even for pitch collections with more than a single flat, it was common practice to indicate the B♭ alone from the Middle Ages well into the Baroque.⁴⁶ This grew out of the procedures of medieval musica ficta or “false music”, which is a very early example of music that alters the diatonic collection. The first such modal alteration in musica ficta was the lowering of B to B♭ in situations where B was structurally significant⁴⁷ and the chances of a tritone forming between B and F were high. In fact, the very symbol we use to indicate flat notes (♭) is a stylized lower-case B, which was used in Gregorian chant to indicate a B♭.⁴⁸ So music using modified pitch collections had always had B♭ in the signature and simply did not start adding more flats until well after Orfeo.

Now, on to the music itself. The melody in m. 1-5 of Ecco pur seems to be outlining both the lower and upper boundaries of the essential G-D diapente. However, there is far more going on here than that familiar modal procedure, particularly when the harmony is taken into consideration. From the beginning up to m. 2, the melodic line actually moves up and pauses on the mediant of B, inflects up C, and descends back to G. It then leaps to D in m. 2 and begins an elongated diapente descent and arrives on G again at m. 4. But the arrival of E♭ in the bass at

⁴⁶ David Schulenberg, Music of the Baroque, 72.
⁴⁷ One such situation occurs in the Aeolian mode transposed to G, where B is the mediant, though the Aeolian mode would be anachronistic in musica ficta, as it did not enter into European musical thinking until the 16th century with Glarean’s Dodecachordon.
⁴⁸ Margaret Bent, “Diatonic Ficta,” 4.
the beginning of the descent robs G of its sense of tonal center and implies motion towards a C region. When the C sounds in the melody at m. 3 it lasts half the measure, giving a sense of importance, but by then the bass has moved down to D, which injects dissonance and instability into the C area much in the same way that Eb assaulted the sense of D in the preceding measure. As soon as C arrives in the bass, the melody makes a quick descent to the G cadence at m. 4. In m. 5-6 the melody makes a diapente descent, but doubles back to C at m. 7 and begins a new descent from C to G that elides into the opening material in m. 8. However, these D and C descents are not supported in the bass by D and C area harmonies, but rather by B♭ and F harmonies respectively.39

The question is not only what the form is in *Ecco pur*, but also why the form is the way it is. The opening four measures are truly extraordinary when compared to the materials we saw in *Ah, dolente partita*. For example, in the first six measures of *Ah, dolente* the melody clearly outlines the structural importance of E, but while cadences are approached by descent just as in *Ecco pur*, those descents are incredibly rapid, taking place over the course of just one or two measures as in m. 7-8. Indeed, a very brief glance at *Ah, dolente* as a whole reveals that it is dominated by long periods of melodic stasis followed by rapid descents and changes of harmonic area. This is not the case in *Ecco pur* at all. Over the course of only four measures, the melody ascends through the whole diapente, even pausing on the mediant before descending through the entire diapente again. But what truly separates this procedure

39 McClary, “The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization in the Works of Claudio Monteverdi,” 204-206.
from the parenthetically expanded *Romanesca* we saw in *Ah, dolente*, is the way that Monteverdi handles the descent from D to G in m. 2-4. He lengthens the fourth degree in the *diapente* descent, just as we saw in *Ah, dolente* but he also shifts the fourth degree harmonic area backwards, underneath the melody’s D in m. 2. This is astonishing because it signals a shift in thinking from melodically derived harmonic areas to freestanding harmonic units that can be applied independently, irrespective of the melody. One could argue that this is nothing more than a staggered arrival of two voices on the steps of the *diapente*. Certainly this phenomenon is an evolution of that technique and if it were viewed in isolation, it might be too much to infer vertical harmonic thinking in this figure from the opening of *Ecco pur*. But the piece as a whole also exhibits that sort of shifting and stretching of harmonic areas, within a larger series of functional developments. *Ecco pur* itself can actually be thought of as a twelve-measure *Romanesca* (see Example 7), with sections of the

*Example 7: Larger Romanesca form in Ecco pur*

![Example 7](https://example.com/example7.png)

piece standing in for step along the *diapente* descent from D to G: m. 1-6 for D, m. 7-8 for C, m. 9 for B♭, and the final descent in m. 10-12 to bring us back to G. *Ecco pur* has fully cast off the strict one-to-one relationship between harmony and melody,

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40 McClary, “The Transition from Modal to Tonal Organization in the Works of Claudio Monteverdi,” 205.
41 Ibid. 206.
as we saw in *Anima mia, perdona*. The vastly expanded harmonic steps in the
*Romanesca* that span the entire length of *Ecco pur* signify a notable departure that,
while not necessarily breaking any of the rules of modality, truly begins to stretch the
sense of what modal music can do.

As we saw in m. 2-4, there is an instance of a harmony being used in a quasia-
tonal sense of detachment from the melodic structure of the piece, though it has no
function in and of itself. Even so, Monteverdi has singled out a fragment of modal
music, the *Romanesca* cadence, within which everything has a strong functional
implication. He chose expand the *Romanesca* over twelve measure and thus to
explore the aesthetic and expressive possibilities of working within that rigidly
functional series of tonal centers. This is unquestionably a hallmark of tonal thinking,
even though that paradigm it is not yet developed enough to call *Ecco pur* tonal.

With all of that in mind, why did Monteverdi even bother? There is no
question that madrigalism was extremely expressive and, while it by no means
represents the height of theoretical complexity in the style, even *Ah, dolente* proves
that there was plenty of latitude for composers to work with in modal music. So why
attempt to reformulate the system to this extent? It would be unreasonable to gloss
over the fact that great thinkers are always driven to expand the boundaries of their
discipline and contribute new and exciting things. So it should be taken for granted
that Monteverdi was subject to the same tendencies as all other artists. But there are
practical considerations to take into account, particularly when one considers what the
realities of writing an opera in the madrigalian style would be. To put it bluntly,
nobody actually talks that way. A one-to-one relationship between syllables and
harmonies does not lend itself to the setting of natural speech and the attempt to set natural speech to music is one of the defining characteristics of opera. Thus, the practical necessity of creating his favola in musica forced Monteverdi to stretch modal music to new limits by using specially-crafted melodies to extend their attendant harmonic areas, creating harmonies of varying length to accommodate the contours of more natural speech. But as we will see in the next example, in doing so he began to uncover the principles of a whole new musical world beyond modality.

*Alcun non sia che disperato* (see Example 8) is a duet sung by two shepherds slightly before Orpheus and Eurydice leave the stage to be married at the end of Act One. The singers implore the audience not to give in to sorrow because, although Orpheus was once consumed by a deep sadness, he has now found happiness with Eurydice. It is set in the Mixolydian mode and begins, much as one would expect, with the upper voice ascending the mode-defining G-D diapente, while the lower voice pauses at the mediant. Both voices imply a tonicization of D on “disperato” in m. 1 with the local leading tone of C♯, outlining what in tonal music we would consider the dominant chord of D (A-C♯-E). But both melodic lines avoid actually stating D itself so that when a D does arrive in the bass, the tonicization is relatively weak. The lower voice’s ascent to C in m. 2 almost gives the sense that the D area will be confirmed but instead the harmony shifts into a strong cadence on G. In fact the C remains and ultimately forms what today would be considered a D major-minor seventh or dominant chord, the harmony with the strongest implication of motion to G. This is not functional harmony yet, but it is another example of how the materials of tonality can occur through the confluence of melodic lines in modal music. The
Example 8: Alcun non sia che disperato

Alcun non sia che disperato in preda si doni al duol

benc'è tal l'hor si as.

- - -

benc'è tal l'hor si as.

- - -

- - -

glia pos. sente si che nostra vita in.

glia pos. sente si che nostra vita in.

vi. ta in. for. sa pos. sente for. - -

si pos. sente si che nostra vita in. for. - -

pos. sente si che nostra vita in. for. - -

pos. sente si che nostra vita in. for. - -

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pos. sente si che nostra vita in. for. - -

pos. sente si che nostra vita in. for. - -

pos. sente si che nostro...
potency of this pitch collection (D-F♯-C) to effect motion to G would not have escaped anyone, least of all the composers who were beginning to push music across the gap into tonality.

The bass’s movement to C in m. 3 briefly shifts the harmony into C space before it is used a pivot to shift into E in m. 4. The E area is supported by an A collection and the lower voice actually descends through the entire A diapente from E, arriving at an A cadence in m. 5, which quickly fades in m. 6 with a D cadence. In m. 7 the bass and lower voice suggest a C collection, but the dissonant B in the upper voice prevents C from asserting itself before G is restated, firmly and conclusively, at m. 9.

In m. 1-2 of Alcun non sia we have two more examples of tonally significant structures occurring as a result of the motions and confluences of melodies, which are still “in control” at this point. Even so, the earliest roots of tonality are plainly visible here. We have structures alike in form to functional harmonies, performing those exact functions in a context that implies the dissolution of some key modal principles, such as fast harmonic rhythm and the consequent absence of long periods of music with a strong sense of tonal center, even with regard to the final. The tonal centers of Alcun non sia, much like those in Ecco pur are elongated and quite noticeable. They follow a sort of progression over the course of the whole piece, which has the profile G-C-E-A-D-G. The G region pivots through C, a closely related area, to E and then to A, which is an extremely remote area in Mixolydian. From A it proceeds to D and finally back to G. Monteverdi is not doing anything so complex as using a modulating sequence to explore key areas, but he is making good on the implication that the
expanded *Romanesca* in *Ah, dolente* might have continued to move downward by fifth, travelling from tonal center to tonal center. He used C as a closely related pivot to move into an extended series of pitch regions that are related by descending fifths.

The tonal implications of this are enormous, as Eric Chafe comments,

> Only on direction, the flat, [lends] itself to smooth “chain reaction” progressions, and the extending of chains of fifths beyond the ordinary tonal range pointed up the fact that such progressions, while projecting a quality of direction to the sequential motion itself, had no inevitable stopping point unless a strong tonal center had been established.\(^{42}\)

The sort of large scale, sequential harmonic exploration that we see in *Alcun non sia* actually demands a “home” area. It is necessary to have some natural stopping point, particularly when the music travels to more distantly related tonal centers. Otherwise, as Chafe points out, a descending fifth sequences would jerk the ear into a kind of infinite loop with no feeling of destination and no sense of finality, even if a single tonal center were to eventually be asserted. Thus, the structures we see in *Alcun non sia* carry the tacit requirement of a stronger tonal center than modality could provide.

These two pieces, *Ecco pur* and *Alcun non sia*, not only show how and why some essential tonal procedures began to take shape, but they also provide a natural extension of some of the early innovations visible in *Ah, dolente*. In it, we see hints of the expansive and modulatory procedures that are the defining characteristics of the two pieces from *Orfeo*. We can attribute these developments not only to Monteverdi’s probable desire to create something new and radical, but also to the aesthetic and expressive necessity of the moment in which circumstance, history, and extraordinary talent had placed him. *Orfeo* is still firmly a modal piece of music; its departures are

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\(^{42}\) Chafe, 4.
noteworthy but nowhere near significant enough to say that the work as a whole belongs under the umbrella of tonality. Even so, enough has changed that the writing is already on the wall.

Conflation and resolution

For our next example we leap forward to Monteverdi’s *Concerto - Settimo libro di madrigali* (1619) and the first section of the madrigal for two soprani *Non è di gentil core* (see Example 9). The piece is written in the Dorian mode and begins

**Example 9: Non è di gentil core m. 1-13**

![Example 9: Non è di gentil core m. 1-13]
with a *diapente* descent in the upper voice from A to D, establishing the mode and the
tonal center. The upper voice then ascends to articulate the *mediant* on F, but the bass
enters with C in m. 3, causing instability and forcing the melodic line to G in m. 4 in
order to remain consonant. Leaving the D region so abruptly and only two measures
into the piece is quite jarring to the ear and causes a strong sense of ambiguity with
regard to tonal center. The lower voice enters in m. 5 with a *diapente* descent from A
to a D cadence at m. 7, at which point the upper voice enters with yet another
*diapente* descent, this time from C through B♭ down to a cadence on F in m. 9. Two
more *diapente* descents come in m. 9-11 and m. 11-12, in the upper voice from E to
the A cadence in m. 11 and in the lower voice from A to the final D cadence in m. 13.
Obviously, modal procedures are present here, particularly in the high density of
descents to cadences, which facilitate six changes of tonal center in only thirteen
measures. Consequently, it is very difficult to call this a strictly tonal piece of music,
but some extremely important things have changed since *Orfeo*.

To begin, there is motivic development in this piece completely unlike
anything we have seen before. There are two main motives in this section of the
piece, one is the *diapente* descent on the phrase “Non è di gentil core” and the other is
an ascending tetrachord on “Chi non arde d’Amore”. Motivic development in and of
itself is nothing new. For example, the lower voice’s statement of the descending
“Non è” motive in m. 7-9 and the upper voice’s answer with the same motive
transposed up a fifth in m. 9-11 would have been perfectly at home in *Ah, dolente* and
as well as far less advanced modal music. That sort of motivic development has not
changed. But our two motives are also being transposed and utilized in ways that would have been unthinkable even in *Orfeo*. The ascending “Chi non” motive has *no purpose* at all. Monteverdi uses it in most of the cadences in this section but when it first appears in m. 2-4 it is serving no particular structural function. Even the “Non è” motive, with its blindingly clear purpose of descending to a cadence, effects a *modulation* into the key of F, as indicated by the functionless B♭s in the upper voice and bass at m. 7-9. What’s more, Monteverdi even juxtaposes the two motives, as in m. 5-7, further obfuscating what their unique functions might be in a modal sense.⁴³

In actuality, the motives are being developed, shifted, and transposed with little regard to their functional implications in the piece. The crucial point being that the motives and thus the melody have become unhinged from the structure of the music. Elements of their modal functions are still present but they can now be separated, combined, and floated to entirely new key areas for aesthetic effect. In *Non è di gentil core* the balance has shifted on the fundamental dichotomy between tonality and modality; the melodies perform important functions, but they are now effectively detached from the harmonies beneath them, which opens up a whole world of possibilities for how those motives can be developed.

Be that is it may, *Non è di gentil core* is not a piece of tonal music, not quite. But it is not really modal either. The harmonies are freestanding and are not fully derived from the melody, nor are they an accidental confluence of the melodic lines. But every change of tonal center is still dependent on a local leading tone and/or a *diapente* descent. The final cadence in m. 11-13 is introduced not with a *dominant*  

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chord, but with a journey through an A region and a descent from A to D. If one attempts to subject this piece to thorough Roman numeral analysis, they will find that parts of it are nonsensical from that perspective, particularly later in the piece than this example shows. Yet some parts (see Roman numeral analysis in m. 1-5 of Example 8) can quite readily be understood as segments of functional tonality, with clearly defined key regions and chord functions that correspond to the tonic, tonic expansion, pre-dominant, dominant paradigm. In this way, one’s conception of the first three measures, for example, can include both the understanding that there is a shift from the D tonal center to that of C, and that there is a modulation from the key of D minor to C major. Neither idea is wrong, they are just based on different aspects of the piece. Non è di gentil core is too dependent on principles of both systems to be called firmly tonal or modal. Thus it is an excellent study in how one became the other. Indeed, it is a short journey from here into truly tonal music. All that a composer would need to do is cut away the remnants of modal functional melodies and focus on exploring the possibilities of the functional harmonies and key areas that are already present in Non è di gentil core.

With that in mind, the most important question is: how did we get here from Orfeo? Surely, one might say, the altered harmonic rhythm, broader range of tonal centers, and expanded harmonies therein did not imply the severance of the melody from the structure of the music. That much is true. The developments we saw up until Non è di gentil core did not necessarily demand this shift. But it is not hard to see why they occurred anyway. Put yourself into Monteverdi’s shoes. You are trying to push the expressive boundaries of vocal music but you are confronted with a central
difficulty: every pitch, and every melodic motion within every mode has conventions and structural implications attached to it. If you could see a way clear to do so, would it not seem attractive to wrench your melodies free from the structure of the music, so that you could start down the path of motivic development that we saw in Non è di gentil core? Though this line of reasoning does not explain away the difficulty of figuring out how exactly to structure this new style of music, it does present a plausible series of developments that could have caused the shift to occur. As for the question of how to organize the new music without structurally significant melodies, the answer in right here in Non è di gentil core. A composers would only need to explore the tendencies of the different harmonies that were already becoming apparent in modal music. Then note how they relate to each other and how those relationships could be used to structure the music and, when all else fails, revert to the old method until the next opportunity to break into the new presents itself.

This is not to say that tonality was a set goal in the minds of the composers whose music was shifting towards it. It is far more likely that they considered tonal procedures to be nothing more than fancy new means to the end of making compelling and beautiful music; means, which could be applied and withheld where appropriate. The fact that an entire century elapsed between the publications of Concerto - Settimo libro di madrigali and Rameau’s Traité de l’harmonie indicates that most musicians probably maintained this more fluid attitude towards tonality. That practitioners considered it just one of many options would explain why it took a hundred years for the idea of tonality to crystalize as a new, distinct, and all-encompassing theoretical model for music.
Explanations and a few concluding thoughts

We have established quite a few different reasons why tonal procedures and tonality as a whole might have been preferable to modality. But most of these have been highly specific to particular musical situations and not necessarily compelling enough to explain why modality was so completely subsumed by tonality in all areas of music making. There is no real reason why modality and tonality could not have coexisted and remained in the limbo of mutual acceptability that characterized their relationship for most of the seventeenth century. If both Catholicism and Protestantism could survive this period without one completely displacing the other, why not modality and tonality? The real answer is that both the Thirty Years’ War and the conflict in musical thinking could have ended differently. It was entirely possible for modality to endure in one form or another, perhaps only in a single genre or style of music. Just as it was entirely possible for Gustavus Adolphus to survive the Battle of Lützen in 1632, leading to complete Protestant domination of Europe. Still, neither of these things actually came to pass.

With that in mind, the real question is why modality faded away in the manner that it did, rather than whether or not it had to. One of the most relevant factors to this line of inquiry is the rise of humanist and Enlightenment ideals in the eighteenth century. Tonality, as Rameau presented it, was the new zenith of human ingenuity, expressed through art. Not only did tonal music appear to encompass a brand new set of ideas, it also lent itself to an extremely straightforward analytical framework, which made the structure and logic of the music legible to the composer, performer, and listener alike. For practical reasons that we have already discussed, opera was
characterized by tonal thinking, if not true tonality, from its very outset. Though it has not fallen within the scope of this paper to discuss it at length, opera was a titanic influence in eighteenth century culture. Operatic composers and performers, in particular, were the rock stars of their day and their influence on contemporary music was no less significant than the Beatles’ on the popular music of the second half of the 20th century. The bottom line is that, partly through association, tonality was cutting edge, voguish, and inexorably linked to the musical zeitgeist. That undoubtedly played a major role in its eighteenth century ascendancy.

Religion itself certainly helped to facilitate the shift into tonality. In his *Synopsis of New Music* (1612), the German music theorist Johannes Lippius actually argued that music should be conceived of in terms of triadic chords because they reflected the perfection of the Holy Trinity through music.⁴⁴ For Catholic countries, the Council of Trent (1565) expunged many of the more modern elements from the official body of chants, which had the effect of creating a much stronger sense of what was old and what was new music, especially in Italy, the birthplace of opera.⁴⁵ Susan McClary, argues that urban secularization in the wake of large-scale religious wars stamped out the Christian mysticism that had inspired and grown out of the “time-warping” and “out-of-body” qualities of Renaissance madrigals.⁴⁶ Joel Lester, on the other hand, submits that it was Lutheran reforms which pushed the transition forward, saying,

[Because] of Martin Luther’s attempt to narrow the gap between clergy and laity [and his insistence] that the performance of church music be shared with the congregation… the

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⁴⁴ Lester, *Between Modes and Keys*, 50.
⁴⁵ Ibid. 50.
⁴⁶ McClary, ”Towards a History of Harmonic Tonality,” 116.
organist playing a simple block-chord accompaniment to the chorale melody, or the composer writing a simple homophonic harmonization of the chorale melody could not help but become aware of the importance of what we call root-position and first-inversion triads.  

On a closely related note to Lester’s, the rise of thoroughbass procedures in this period also played an enormous role in shifting the way that most musicians thought about musical structure. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, thoroughbass was a practical notation system used for musical performance, rather than music theory, and it was closely linked to opera with regard to performance practice. Thus, thoroughbass was so ubiquitous that its principles could easily have altered musical thinking throughout Europe. Gregory Barnett gives three characteristics of thoroughbass practice that he feels led to the eventual conception of tonal space: “(1) the use of the major or minor triad as the basic harmonizing sonority; (2) generalized scale harmonizations that enable the continuo player to realize harmonies where inadequate or no figures are supplied; and (3) the ability to accompany, or harmonize, at any pitch level.” Barnett’s ideas are closely related to some of developments in thinking we saw in the musical examples, particularly (3) as it relates to the new style of motivic development in Non è di gentil core. That these were the core principles of something as fundamental as thoroughbass procedure could only have served to disseminate tonal thinking further.

Scholars have offered myriad other, smaller-scale explanations, some of which are quite fascinating. Ellen Rosand submits that opera and tonality went hand-in-hand because the system lent itself to quickly providing fodder for commercial

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48 Christensen, 441-442.
Venetian opera, and that more formulaic and thus more legible tonal music was easier for publishers to market to the growing merchant class.49 While Susan McClary argues the shift was spurred on by a larger cultural backlash against “the idiosyncratic extravagances of seventeenth-century musical expression” in favor of “the formal rigidity of opera seria and of the tonal process.”50

In these last two arguments, there is a hint of vitriol regarding the more restrictive elements of tonality. This is not a terribly uncommon feature in the scholarship on modal music. As with all things that have disappeared from the world, one can detect a hint of longing for the rich colors and stunning contrasts of modality, which today seem in some ways to be dead and in others highly inaccessible, even to trained ears. But modal music is not truly that far gone. Monteverdi’s work exposes the elusive thread of continuity between the two great theoretical schools of thought: modality and tonality. Descrying that thread and teasing out its implications has been no small problem for scholars. Indeed, we have encountered many of those difficulties in this very paper. But however much the music’s stubborn ambiguity stands in the way of understanding how tonal music took root, tonality is still directly derived from modality. Its materials and structures may have been scrambled, decontextualized, and reformulated a thousand times over, but they are still present. Monteverdi’s music is truly extraordinary and nothing adds to its beauty so much as uncovering its secrets and, thus, glimpsing the composer’s genius. But the most remarkable exercise of all may be mending a small portion of the thread that leads directly back from today’s music, through Beethoven to Bach, through Monteverdi to

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Josquin, through Guido of Arezzo to Boethius and Ptolemy and the Ancient Greeks, on to the nameless musicians of prehistory. When you put it in those terms, this music is only a heartbeat away.
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