

The Monteverdi Vespers | Program Notes

The Mysteries of Monteverdi

We will perhaps never understand why great artists often create their most sublime works during periods of personal despondency and depression. From Monteverdi to Mozart, from Dostoevsky to Van Gogh, the world has been graced with beauty that comes out of the suffering of artists. The winter of 1607-1608 was such a period for Monteverdi. Exhausted and despondent over the recent death of his wife, he was also overworked and underpaid as an employee of the Duke of Mantua. Thus, his father wrote to the Duke to request an honorable dismissal for his grief-stricken son, whose health was suffering as well as his spirits.

The plea was ignored and Monteverdi was ordered to return to work. Important things were afoot at the Mantuan palace, and music was needed: the Duke's son, Prince Francesco, was to be married to Margherita of Savoy. Though we don't know for certain, it is probable that Monteverdi was ordered to compose his extraordinary *Vespers* for the wedding celebrations, which took place in Mantua in May 1608 and eclipsed all other events for several years. The eminent Monteverdi scholar Iain Fenlon has argued convincingly that the *Vespers* were most likely composed for performance in Mantua in 1608, not for Venice in 1610 where the work was published.

Monteverdi's *Vespers* are an extraordinary and revolutionary setting of the five psalms, hymn, and Magnificat which make up a Roman Catholic Vespers service. In addition to these standard movements, Monteverdi included four motets (sometimes called "concertos") for one, two, three, and six voices respectively, based primarily on love poetry from the *Song of Solomon*. There is also an instrumental sonata movement over which is woven the chant "Sancta Maria dona pro nobis."

What makes Monteverdi's setting of the Psalms and the Magnificat so remarkable is that he uses the traditional psalm tones that would normally be chanted in a Vespers service, but turns them into a kind of *cantus firmus*--that is a kind of slow-moving, repeated chant--around which he weaves the most elaborate and avant-garde counterpoint imaginable. The relationship between the fixed, archaic Medieval psalm tone and the flamboyant and imaginative Baroque counterpoint that dances around it produces an extraordinary level of tension and beauty-- indeed, it seems to evoke the struggle between ancient mysticism and modern enlightenment.

Three years after publishing the *Vespers*, Monteverdi finally escaped from his unhappy employment in Mantua in 1613 and became music director at St. Mark's Basilica in Venice. Many conductors have assumed that Monteverdi conceived the *Vespers* for the vast and monumental Basilica--even though he had already published the piece three years before auditioning there--and that he composed the piece to impress the staff at St. Mark's. This theory then leads to an interpretation using large choral forces such as one would need in order to make a festive impression in the sprawling Basilica. The fact is, though, that Monteverdi could hardly have had his eye on the St. Mark's job when he published the *Vespers* in 1610, as the preceding St. Mark's music director was still alive and healthy, and no one could have foreseen his unexpected death two years later, resulting in a job opening.

By contrast, there is much evidence to suggest that the *Vespers* were composed and conceived for Mantua. It is apparent even from a quick glance at the score that the *Vespers* were written for the same vocal and instrumental ensemble as Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo*--that is, the small virtuoso ensemble who performed in Mantua in 1607. Both works call for two sopranos, two tenors (one with major solo demands), two basses, and a small part for alto. The ranges of these singers are nearly identical in the two works, including the unusually low tessitura of the lead tenor. The instrumentation is the same. Finally, the opening Toccata from *L'Orfeo* reappears as the opening Respond in the *Vespers*; both are based on material that may well have been the fanfare for the Duke of Mantua.

On May 25, 1608, a contemporary report describes a “solemn Vespers” service that was celebrated at the church of St. Andrea in Mantua, as part of the wedding festivities mentioned above. This was a major event, in which Prince Francesco was installed as the first member of a new order of knights. According to Jaian Fenlon, the term “solemn” Vespers in this period meant “polyphonic” (rather than merely chanted); so, as Fenlon has suggested, it is highly probable that the music performed at this service was Monteverdi’s *Vespers*. Of course Monteverdi may have eventually performed his *Vespers* at St. Mark’s when he took up employment there, and he may well have used the work as his audition piece for the post. But it is clear that he did not originally conceive the piece for that space.

Most conductors who oppose the large-scale “St. Mark’s” approach to this piece have assumed that Monteverdi conceived the *Vespers* for the small ducal chapel at Mantua, which could have only accommodated a one-on-a-part performance (i.e., ten singers for the largest movements). However, there is no record of any festive event taking place in that chapel during 1608-1610 for which music as flamboyant as Monteverdi’s *Vespers* would have been appropriate. On the contrary, Monteverdi’s work would have been extremely appropriate for the wedding festivities at St. Andrea church. Here is why:

Monteverdi’s text draws on the sensuous love poetry from the Old Testament book, *Song of Solomon*. This mystical book of the Bible is a rhapsodic meditation on the bride and the bridegroom, and describes a royal wedding procession. (King Solomon is mentioned by name, and the daughters of Jerusalem are invited to come out and watch the spectacle.) The intimate love poetry Monteverdi took from this book has been revered as the sacred evocation of sexual love by both Jews and Christians since the second century A.D. The text is ideal for a wedding celebration, but would certainly seem out of place at any other Vespers service.

All of this impacts one’s interpretation because there are so many questions left open by the score. The *Vespers* publication of 1610 (which is not even a score but a set of eight individual part-books) is typical of the time in that it contains minimal information about how the piece is to be performed. There are few indications of instrumentation, and none at all of tempo, dynamics or articulation.

Nor do we know what size of forces he conceived. While most scholars agree that instrumental parts were performed with only one player to a part at this period, there is much disagreement about how many singers should be used. Monteverdi lived on the cusp between the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Some conductors take a “Renaissance” approach to the Vespers, using singers one on a part to create a kind of madrigal ensemble. Other conductors take an 18th century (or later!) approach, evoking the image of St. Mark’s and using a large Handel-sized chorus of 25 to 35 and soloists with operatic voices.

The fact is that Monteverdi was neither a Renaissance composer nor an 18th-century High Baroque composer. He was a revolutionary, living at the end of the Renaissance and pushing the limits to forge the new style which we call Baroque (just as Beethoven forged the Romantic style out of the Classical period three centuries later). He used the finest professional singers and instrumentalists in the region and gave them daringly avant-garde music to perform--music that uses the tools of the Renaissance and stretches them to convey the flamboyant, emotional imagery of the early Baroque. This is music full of sudden contrasts, freedom of expression, and spontaneous flights of imagination. I do not think it is ideally suited to a massive Handelian chorus, nor can the necessary contrasts be achieved by a one-on-a-part madrigal ensemble.

We take the cue for our performance from the setting of Sant’Andrea church in Mantua on that spring day in 1608: the grand opening of festivities for an extraordinary royal wedding. The excitement of the cantor is palpable as he intones the chant that sets the drama in motion: *Deus in adiutorium meum intende*. “God, make speed to save me” - the ordinary words of the Vespers, but not so ordinary today. The company of 37 musicians responds with electrifying joy, launching the fanfare, the pageantry, and the royal procession of the Gonzaga family and the House of Savoy.

Thus, our evocation of the “solemn Vespers” at Sant’Andrea church employs forces appropriate to a church of that size - 18 singers and 18 instrumentalists. In choosing for these mid-size forces, I hope to have captured the fleetness, flexibility, and dynamic contrast that Monteverdi must have intended.

It is inevitable that each conductor’s interpretation of this work becomes a highly personal statement, since the composer left us no tempo indications, dynamics, or instructions about when the instruments should play. Though this has led to a messy political fray in the early music scene, we are all indebted to the pioneering generation of early music conductors who have brought this magnificent piece to the public. Whether performed as an à cappella madrigal, or a large-scale instrumental work, Monteverdi’s exquisite artistry and deep spirituality shine through.

This 2010 re-release of our 1998 recording is offered in celebration of the 400th anniversary of the publication of the Monteverdi Vespers. It is intended as a small contribution to the worldwide celebration of Monteverdi’s groundbreaking work.

A Note on Liturgical Issues in the Vespers

Monteverdi's publication of 1610 is problematic as a liturgical Vespers service, in that it includes four motets which do not appear to belong in a Vespers service. Moreover, the opening versicle and the antiphons which would have been chanted before and after each Psalm are missing. In the 1970's some conductors performed the work without the motets, believing them to be extraneous pieces. However, more recent research has shown that it was common Roman Catholic practice in Monteverdi's time to replace the antiphon that followed a Psalm with an "antiphon substitute," which could be a motet or instrumental piece. It thus appears that Monteverdi's motets were intended as antiphon substitutes.

That leaves the question of the missing antiphon that should be chanted before each Psalm. Antiphons generally played the role of tying the Old Testament psalm to the appropriate liturgical theme of the day. We do not know which particular feast Monteverdi's *Vespers* were intended for, but since he entitled his work "Vespers of the Blessed Virgin," it seems appropriate to choose antiphons from one of the Marian feasts, such as Mary of the Snow, the Annunciation, the Assumption, etc. However, if one simply takes the antiphons from a single feast, the result is that the antiphons do not at all match the psalm tone, or even the general tonality, of the the Psalm that follows. I find it crucial that the antiphon should at least set up a tonality that leads naturally to the Psalm. Therefore I have chosen a combination of antiphons from the feasts of Mary of the Snow and the Assumption. In doing this I have tried to strike a balance between issues of text (choosing primarily antiphons on texts from the Song of Solomon, which echo the motet texts) and tonal relationships. Not all of these antiphons exactly match the Gregorian tone of the psalm, (a match which was considered unimportant at the time, according to most scholars) but they do at least set up an appropriate tonality. -JS