

Scintillating baroque..



.. Serious **fun**



Director from the Continuo
Andrew Lawrence-King
Early Harps & Research

www.TheHarpConsort.com

Early Opera &
Historical Productions



Action! Action! Action!

Claudio Monteverdi's *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin Mary* 'in concerto style, composed on plainchant' (1610) is the great masterpiece of the early 17th century, the period of the emergence of baroque grandeur out of Italian renaissance humanism, of the first operas, and of Shakespeare's plays. Like J. S. Bach's *B minor Mass* almost a century and a half later, the *Vespers* represents a summation of the compositional techniques of the time, combined with exquisitely detailed setting of sacred texts.

Like that *Mass*, Monteverdi's *Vespers* might never have been performed complete in the composer's lifetime. Indeed, it may not have been created as a single work, but rather brought together as a beautifully varied collection for publication. Nevertheless, the 1610 *Vespers* is now an international Early Music 'hit', with countless performances and recordings worldwide, and this evening's concert is a historic occasion, the first-ever performance in Russia.

In the Catholic liturgy, Vespers is the evening service, sung at sunset. Monteverdi sets Latin texts specified for feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who for Catholic believers has a special status amongst the saints, as an intercessor between the human and the divine. The service begins with a Versicle & Response invoking God's help, and proceeds with a sequence of Psalms, richly expressive poetry from the time of King David. After short Prayers and a Hymn to Mary as the 'star of the sea', the service ends with the Magnificat, Mary's great song of joy for the advent of the Messiah.

In the service of Vespers, each Psalm is framed by an Antiphon, a short chant linking the imagery of the Psalm to the subject of the day, in this case a Marian Feast. But Monteverdi offers instead a sequence of Sacred Concertos gradually increasing in size from one to two, three and six voices. Musicologists debate whether these pieces are Antiphon-substitutes, or simply an attractive selection for publication. However, they represent some of Monteverdi's finest music in his most modern style, the *secunda prattica*. This 'second practice' is the theatrical music of the first operas, in which the composer abandons the complexity of renaissance polyphony in favour of direct communication of a dramatic text with thrilling contrasts: high and low, fast and slow, and (a baroque favourite) echo effects.

In the Psalms, Monteverdi demonstrates his mastery of the rich polyphony of the renaissance style, the *prima prattica*. This 'first practice' is more conservative, but certainly not old-fashioned: each Psalm employs different contrapuntal techniques. *Dixit Dominus* weaves liturgical chant into lively rhythms, six-voice polyphony and choral declamation, interspersed with instrumental Ritornelli. *Laudate Pueri* divides the eight solo voices sometimes into two choirs, sometimes into pairs of soloists. *Laetatus Sum* is structured around an ostinato 'walking bass'. *Nisi Dominus* and *Lauda Jerusalem* are both for double-choir, with the chant omnipresent as a *cantus firmus*. In *Nisi Dominus* the two choirs alternate regularly, repeating each phrase in full. But in *Lauda Jerusalem* the two choirs sing short fragments of text, the alternations coming more and more quickly, until they overlap.

Our performance reflects the latest musicological research into the performance practice of Monteverdi's time. The period priorities were Text, Rhythm and dramatic Action. We invite you to follow the Text in the detailed translation, and to enjoy the changing patterns of word-accent in the Italianate pronunciation of the Latin language.

There were no conductors in 17th-century Italy. Rather the Rhythm is controlled by the regular beat of the Tactus, like the slow swing of a pendulum. (The pendulum effect was discovered by Galileo just a few years previously). This steady Tactus is a symbol of the perfect movement of the stars and planets, turned by the Divine hand. The entire ensemble is supported and guided by the *basso continuo*: organ, regal (reed organ), theorbo (bass lute) and baroque harps. Just as in today's jazz, this accompanying rhythm section maintains a steady swing, whilst the singers create syncopations and dramatic changes of emotion.

In a 17th-century Italian church, the Action would have been the beautiful costumes and elegant movements of the liturgy. But for listeners of any century, there is much theatrical imagery and dramatic action in the texts of the Psalms.

The music of the 1610 Vespers is so powerfully beautiful and so well-known that today we think of Monteverdi as a composer of sacred music. But no doubt he considered himself a composer of Madrigals, and (later) of Operas. We hear the style of the first operas in the 1610 Sacred Concertos, and the sound-world of baroque madrigals in the varied ensembles of instruments and voices in the Magnificat. The word-setting in the Psalms shows the attention to poetic detail we would expect of Monteverdi the madrigalist.

The Vespers texts are full of evocative images: crushing enemies underfoot, breaking the heads of kings, drinking from the river, the beautiful daughter of Jerusalem, the City of Peace, the tribes of Israel, the Seraphim who cry "Holy, Holy, Holy!", house-builders at work, a voice that answers from heaven, God's breath that melts the snow and ice. Period medical science believed that such Visions affected the emotions of listeners, moving them to laughter or tears, bringing calm, noble anger, or love to even the most frozen heart. In these Vespers, the sweet accents of Monteverdi's music combine the cerebral subtlety of exquisite polyphony with cosmic rhythm and heartfelt passions, to celebrate sacred joy.

Andrew Lawrence-King