

EXPERIENCE  
**Choral Arts**  
THE CHORAL ARTS SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON  
SCOTT TUCKER, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

### *Vespers of 1610*

Music by Claudio Giovanni Antonio Monteverdi (15 May 1567 [baptized] – 29 November 1643)  
Selected texts from the Divine Liturgy for the Marian feasts in the Roman Catholic Church

Hearing a work like Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610* in a concert hall is a little like viewing a religious painting in a museum. The depiction of *Madonna and Child* by Raphael, which hangs in the National Gallery of Art, probably first hung in a Florentine chapel, darkly lit and surrounded by religious artifacts. It was there to inspire devotion, but now it hangs on the wall of an institution, concerned as much (or more) with displaying the mastery of the artist as with the subject of the art. The painting can still inspire religious devotion, though perhaps not in the same way as if seen in its original context. Even those with no religious inclination can experience awe and wonder when they encounter what the most gifted among us can achieve. Monteverdi's *Vespers*, like Raphael's painting, was created for the church and never intended as a concert piece. Nevertheless, it is now often heard in the concert hall because of its stunning artistic merit. Even in a modern hall with modern forces, one cannot help but be inspired by the accomplishment of one of our greatest artists at the height of his prowess.

Claudio Monteverdi wrote his *Vespers of 1610* (formally *Vesperis in Festis Beatae Mariae Verginae*) while still in service to the Duke of Mantua. He had served in the Duke's employ since 1591, first as a string player and later as a director of music for the court. The Duke valued music and knew he had one of the finest musicians in Europe at his court but demanded Monteverdi work with little regard for his health or well-being. Monteverdi grew frustrated with the circumstances of his employment and when his wife died in 1607, sought an honorable dismissal from the Duke. The request was denied and Monteverdi began to quietly seek another position. The *Vespers of 1610* may have been a way to catch the interest of a prospective patron when it was published along with a mass and dedicated to the Pope. Monteverdi visited Rome soon after publication in order to secure a religious post there for his son, but he may also have been trying to increase his own visibility should a position come available. If indeed Monteverdi intended the *Vespers* to help him find a new job, his efforts bore fruit in 1613. Upon the death of Giulio Cesare Martinengo, he was appointed Maestro di Cappella at the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, one of the most celebrated centers of sacred music in all of Europe.

No one knows for certain if Monteverdi ever heard his *Vespers* performed. Indeed, no one knows if it was meant to be performed exactly as it appears in publication. The scholar Jeffrey Kurtzman maintains that it could be a flexible document, allowing chapel directors of the day to use all or part of the *Vespers* and perhaps mix it with antiphons or other psalm settings as circumstances dictated. Some modern-day conductors choose to try to recreate a liturgical

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context, including chants for certain feast days. This always involves a certain amount of fudging however, and it seems to me that Monteverdi's creation stands very well as published.

A Vespers service, known to Anglicans as Evensong, is a liturgy meant to be observed at dusk. The opening response, the five psalms, the hymn and the *Magnificat* which Monteverdi uses are all required parts of the Roman Vespers service of the time. The four motets and the *Sonata Sopra Vergine Maria*, which Monteverdi interpolates between the psalm settings, either replaced or complemented the plainchant antiphons that would have preceded or followed each psalm.

On major feast days, when special music was used in cities like Venice, allowances were made and orthodoxy relaxed, so it is very plausible that no antiphons were inserted into the original performance (if there was one). We do know that if it was performed in Monteverdi's lifetime, it was with much smaller performing forces than you will see on the stage today. In Venice, Monteverdi had access to a choir of thirty singers and a handful of virtuoso instrumentalists.

For the initial music, *Domine ad adiuvandum*, Monteverdi draws on the opening toccata from his early opera *Orfeo* – originally used at the court at Mantua and, according to the historian Taruskin, played three times from various points of the hall to get the audience's attention. The five psalm settings, *Dixit Dominus*, *Laudate Pueri*, *Laetatus Sum*, *Nisi Dominus* and *Lauda Jerusalem*, as well as the *Magnificat*, all use pre-existing fixed chant melodies (cantus firmi) as their unifying musical feature. In this way, Monteverdi observed the technique of earlier masters. Unlike earlier sacred music, he takes the text imagery into account when devising harmony. He had been criticized after the publication of some of his madrigal books by the conservative theorist Artusi for abandoning the tried and true practices of the earlier masters. To this he responded in the forward of his fifth book of madrigals (1605) by saying that the earlier masters had perfected the "Prima Pratica" while he was engaged in a "Seconda Pratica" where the harmony was the "...mistress of the words..." and not the servant of them. Thus while the chants are intoning, around them voices use musical imagery to depict phrases in the psalms such as "raising the helpless man from the earth" or "[He has] broken kings in the day of his anger", and one can almost hear distant hammering in the opening lines of *Nisi Dominus*: "Except the Lord build the house, they have labored in vain who build it." This freedom to paint text imagery with music is apparent in the psalm settings, but even more evident in the motets (Monteverdi calls them "sacred concertos") found between the psalms. The first two, *Nigra Sum* and *Pulchra Es*, are from the Song of Songs, the most sensual verses found in the Bible, and considered by the early church fathers to be symbolic of Christ's relationship to the church (His bride). They are often used in liturgical celebrations of Mary and other female saints. *Duo Seraphim* begins with two tenors representing angels singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" around the throne of God. They are joined by a third tenor, and sing then about the Trinity, coming to a soft unison at the words "...and these three are one." *Audi Coelum* is a liturgical poem that uses

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clever word play which Monteverdi sets as an echo. When the solo tenor finishes a phrase, the echo repeats the final word minus the first syllable to create a complementary thought. For instance, the solo refers to Mary as a 'remedy' for our sins (Remedium) and is echoed with 'Medium' (a mediator).

Although Monteverdi is best known for his madrigals and operas, he was involved with sacred music for most of his life. His many volumes of published music represent only a portion of his output. According to Denis Stevens, Monteverdi wrote 29 masses for Christmas Eve while he was in Venice, all now lost. Scholars and conductors could study this one Vespers for a lifetime and still have more questions than answers. Every performance is different because so little is known beyond the bare notes on the page – but what notes they are! Like Raphael's painting, whether you glance at it in passing on a museum wall, or kneel before it in a chapel, you are bound to be affected by it – maybe even changed a little.

*–Program note by Scott Tucker | © Scott Tucker, 2017*