

Monteverdi's *Vespers of the Virgin Mary* of 1610 occupies a central place in his canon: it is among the earliest of his large-scale compositions to receive integral performances and recordings, and it remains virtually his only set of sacred compositions in the regular repertory. Ensembles still regard it as a rite of passage to produce full performances, and for audiences the *Vespers* remains emblematic of Monteverdi's oeuvre as a whole, and perhaps even of early seventeenth-century musical style more generally.

Its place in the repertory of early Baroque sacred music assured, it seems reasonable to regard the 1610 publication as an example of Monteverdi's great monumental compositions: to assume that, like the opera *Orfeo*, which precedes the *Vespers* by only three years (it was performed in 1607), these sacred compositions represent a coherent, carefully designed whole with a liturgical purpose; in short, that from Monteverdi's time onwards they were thought of and performed as a complete unit. The organization of the print appears to confirm this belief: a set of imposingly grandiloquent choral concerted psalms integrating voices and instruments punctuated by small-scale, highly virtuosic "antiphons" closed by a double setting of the *Magnificat*—one for concerted forces, and a smaller-scale version for choir alone. Appearances, however, are deceiving: the logic of the print is not congruent with any vespertine liturgy, and the supposed antiphons bear no actual connection to the psalms they accompany. The sequence of movements in the print does not fit any liturgical order, and certainly would not have been performed in that form. Moreover, the intention behind the print is very much unclear: the volume is dedicated to Pope Paul V, but the chant formulas on which the psalms are based were shown by the musicologist Paola Besutti to have originated in the ducal chapel of Santa Barbara in Mantua. And although popular imagination has long associated the *Vespers* with San Marco in Venice, it is more accurate to suppose that although perhaps some part of the music was performed there—one logical occasion might have been during Monteverdi's audition for the post at San Marco in 1613—there is no link between the 1610 *Vespers* and Venice, which at the time of publication was not yet on Monteverdi's horizon. Finally, all evidence points away from the idea that the pieces contained in the collection were composed as a single project and with the idea of their publication as a unit: Monteverdi most likely wrote them piecemeal, and as the title suggests for different venues and purposes—some for church performance, most likely at Santa Barbara, and some clearly for private performance at court.

At this point one might well ask just what Monteverdi's publication represents. The title provides at least a partial explanation: *Sanctissimae Virgini Missa Senis Vocibus ad ecclesiarum choras Ac Vespere pluribus decantandae cum nonnullis sacris concentibus, ad sacella sive Principum Cubicula accommodata* [For the Most Holy Virgin, a Mass for Six Voices for church choirs, and Vespers to be sung by several voices, with several sacred songs, [the whole] suited for chapels or the chambers of princes]. First, the presence of the "In illo tempore" mass before the vespers music places the volume in the category of the "mass and psalms" genre, a type of liturgical miscellany common in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. The function of such publications was practical: they provided repertory any *maestro di cappella* would have needed—most often an *a cappella* polyphonic mass and an assortment of commonly used vespers psalms and Magnificat, frequently offering a number of different types of settings, from small-scale compositions for solo voices and continuo to more ambitious and complex concerted pieces. These settings could be used on any number of occasions throughout the liturgical year, and were designed to fit the resources of both large and small churches; judging by the number of publications of this type that appeared in the years following Monteverdi's, there was a ready market for them. Certainly the Mass, the psalms, and the Magnificat in the *Vespers* fit the bill; any of this music was most likely composed for

performance in Santa Barbara, where Giovanni Giacomo Gastoldi was *maestro di cappella* (Monteverdi's duties never included responsibility for directing music in Santa Barbara, but that does not preclude his being occasionally asked to write music for services—and he clearly coveted such opportunities).

Second, the antiphons or sacred concerti would have been suitable for chamber performance in “princely households.” Monteverdi’s mention of this function clearly reflects his own experience at the Mantuan court, where private non-liturgical devotions were part of the daily routine of the duke’s intimate circle. As a member of the court chapel, into which he was hired as a viol player in the early 1590s, Monteverdi would have participated in such observances as both performer and composer. “Duo seraphim,” “Nigra sum,” and “Pulchra pueri” would have been perfectly suited for such occasions.

The generic designation of the print, then, suggests an anthologic purpose—a volume to be “pulled apart” into single works rather than to be performed as a whole. What then of the remarkable organization Monteverdi imposes on it? Surely that makes the case for a unified performance. Once again, the contemporary evidence argues otherwise.

<b>Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers</b>		
“In illo tempore” Mass	Mass ordinary	6 voices a cappella
Domine ad adiuvandum	Psalm 69	6 vv and instruments*
Dixit dominus	Psalm 109	6 vv and instruments*
<b>Nigra sum</b>	<b>Motet</b>	<b>1 voice and continuo</b>
Laudate pueri	Psalm 112	8 vv and continuo
<b>Pulchra es</b>	<b>Motet</b>	<b>2 vv and continuo</b>
Laetatus sum	Psalm 121	6 vv and continuo
<b>Duo seraphim</b>	<b>Motet</b>	<b>3 vv and continuo</b>
Nisi dominus	Psalm 126	10 vv and continuo
Audi coelum	Song of Songs (paraphrase)	6 vv and continuo
Lauda Jerusalem	Psalm 147	7 vv and continuo
<b>Sonata sopra sancta Maria</b>	<b>Litany of saints</b>	<b>1 voice and 8 instruments</b>
Ave maris stella	Marian antiphon	8 vv and instruments*
Magnificat	Closing of vespers (Luke 1: 46-55)	7 vv and instruments*

Since at least the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century composers and publishers had been aware of the possibility of organizing publications of vocal music, both sacred and secular, according to a number of “ideal” or “abstract” principles: some grouped pieces according a strict modal order; others looked to the poetry to generate a narrative or thematic structure for an entire volume. Monteverdi had given his fifth book of madrigals (1605) a dramatic and narrative logic derived from Battista Guarini’s tragicomic play, *Il pastor fido*. The fifth book is also organized by scoring, another strategy that was to become common: a series of *a cappella* madrigals for five voices is followed by a group of five pieces that require *basso continuo* (harpichord or lute) in addition to the five voices; the last piece is a two-part madrigal for two vocal ensembles with continuo, and includes an opening instrumental *sinfonia* for viols that returns between the first and second parts. The fifth book suggests that Monteverdi, in following an established trend, was thinking in terms of large-scale narrative

and structural organization, perhaps prompted by his experience with the stage production of *Il pastor fido* that occupied the court of Mantua off and on during the 1590s. And after the fifth book his remaining madrigal books all follow similar designs. Although the remarkably coherent narratives and structural integrity of the fifth and later books might suggest that they should be performed as “cycles” in their entirety, it is unlikely that Monteverdi intended them as such. Their architectural logic may well have remained “abstract” in the vein of earlier publications of madrigals and motets.

The *Vespers* of 1610 seem to fit this category: their organization is aesthetically pleasing, with the psalms, which already fit into sectional forms (several verses, each verse being divided in half), alternating with the small “antiphons / concertos”, which are themselves distributed according to their increasingly larger ensembles (for 1, 2, and 3 voices, the *Sonata sopra Sancta Maria* with its unusual large instrumental ensemble and monophonic chant *cantus firmus* being last). The vesper music is framed by the first and last pair of full ensemble pieces, which are concerted with instruments (marked with asterisks in the table) which function like a pair of large architectural pillars. Between these, a set of columns (the psalms), frames smaller niches (the motets). But although the overall balance of the design and the alternation of musical styles and textures make for a very effective, even majestic, display of Monteverdi’s dazzling compositional technique, not to mention of the performers’ virtuosity, it is highly unlikely that any 17<sup>th</sup> century audience ever experienced the *Vespers* as we do today.

The brilliance modern audiences admire in the *Vespers* emerges from the Mantuan environment in which they were composed. Monteverdi’s experience with *Orfeo* and *Arianna* can be felt throughout, first of all in the fine structural balance of the publication, which we also find in *Orfeo*, but especially in the rich use of ornamentation, in the imaginative instrumental scoring, and in the variety of formal solutions to the strophic forms dictated by the psalms. The opening “Deus in adiutorium” clearly signals the integral link between Mantuan sacred and secular music, reusing the opening “Toccata,” or instrumental fanfare, from *Orfeo* as the backdrop for the psalm reciting tone. Originally intended for the entrance of the duke and his court into the theater, it probably served a similar function for solemn occasions in Santa Barbara. It is not far-fetched to imagine that this very fanfare might have served, independently of other music, as Duke Vincenzo’s personal music, announcing his presence at official functions both sacred and secular, and that it was repurposed for both opera and *Vespers*.

The vocal virtuosity of the concerted motets also follows from the operas—although we have nothing of the sort from *Arianna*, from which only the lament has survived, we have the example of the aria “Possente spirto” from the third act of *Orfeo* as ornamented by Francesco Rasi (the ornaments are recorded in the 1609 published score), the Florentine singer who was in Mantua specifically to sing the title role. His ornaments would not have survived were it not for the memorial character of the publication (which casts all performance details in the past tense “as it was done”), since they belonged to oral performance, and not to compositional practice. But beginning with the *Vespers* Monteverdi wrote out all his own ornaments, on occasion (as in the *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* (1624) published in the eighth book of madrigals of 1638) instructing singers to perform them as written and not to introduce others elsewhere in the piece. Although ornamentation was ubiquitous in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Monteverdi’s specificity in writing it out stands out as unusual, and attests to his sensitivity to its expressive potential.

The sumptuous instrumentation also links the *Vespers* to *Orfeo*. The required instrumental ensembles are nearly identical, and reflect the musical resources of the Mantuan

cappella. In *Orfeo*, the instruments had served primarily as “colla parte” doubling of the voices and for independent modules in the larger structure—*sinfonias* and ritornellos. Although in the *Vespers* their function is similar, their treatment differs in important respects. First, the psalm ritornellos emerge without break from the vocal cadences of the *falso bordone* (block chords for choral declamation, as in the opening movement, that were normally used to sing psalmody) verses; second, they integrate vocal and instrumental elements into a true “concerted” style in which musical material is shared between the two ensembles, unlike the ritornellos of *Orfeo*, which in most cases are musically distinct from the vocal pieces they punctuate.

The rich scoring of the *Vespers* represents both an important milestone in Monteverdi’s compositional technique and an enduring witness to the brilliance of the Gonzaga court in Mantua, which reached its highest peak in the final years of Duke Vincenzo’s reign. The Mantuan artistic environment during the period between the 1580s and 1612 had attracted important artistic and intellectual figures, including painters like Peter Paul Rubens, poets like Torquato Tasso, Battista Guarini, Ottavio Rinuccini, and Gabriello Chiabrera, and such composers as Jaches Wert, Benedetto Pallavicino, Giovanni Giacomo Gastoldi, and Monteverdi. The court boasted an enviable array of resources that set it at the forefront of Italian culture: it possessed Vincenzo’s stunning collection of paintings and other art objects; it commanded the resources to produce ephemeral and extravagant theatrical works, like Guarini’s brilliant and controversial tragicomedy *Il Pastor fido*, and to venture into the newly-invented field of opera with masterpieces like *Orfeo* and *Arianna*; and its resident musicians turned out an impressive output of madrigals in the most progressive styles. It should come as no surprise, then, that even in the field of sacred music it should have produced works as splendid and as epoch-making as those that Monteverdi collected in the *Vespers*, his first, and most enduring, sacred publication—ironically, this most Mantuan of publications was to become his calling card to attain the most coveted church post in all Italy, at Venice’s San Marco, bridging the two great chapters of his career.

—Massimo Ossi