

L'Arpeggiata/Christina Pluhar: Monteverdi's Vespers

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate running time: 105 minutes with no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Claudio Monteverdi *Vespro della beata Vergine*

1. Deus in adiutorium meum intende
2. Dixit Dominus
3. Nigra sum
4. Laudate pueri
5. Pulchra es
6. Laetatus sum
7. Duo Seraphim
8. Nisi Dominus
9. Audi coelum
10. Lauda Ierusalem
11. Sonata sopra Sancta Maria
12. Ave maris stella
13. Magnificat. Magnificat
14. Magnificat. Et exultavit
15. Magnificat. Quia respexit
16. Magnificat. Quia fecit mihi magna
17. Magnificat. Et misericordia eius
18. Magnificat. Fecit potentiam
19. Magnificat. Deposit potentes de sede
20. Magnificat. Esurientes implevit bonis
21. Magnificat. Suscepit Israel
22. Magnificat. Sicut locutus est
23. Magnificat. Gloria patri et filio
24. Magnificat. Sicut erat in principio

Alexandra Coghlan sheds some light on the inception of Monteverdi's iconic *Vespers*, performed tonight by Christina Pluhar and her audacious ensemble L'Arpeggiata.

'To perform it is to court disaster. To write about it is to alienate some of one's best friends. Even to avoid joining in the controversy is to find oneself accused of (i) cowardice, or (ii) snobbishness, or (iii) sitting on the fence, or (iv) all three...'

What single piece of music could possibly prompt the kind of divisive passions described here by musicologist Denis Arnold? The perhaps unexpected answer is Monteverdi's *Vespers* – a 'musicological Lorelei' that has confounded scholars and provoked performers for over 400 years.

We know the *Vespers* was first printed in Venice in 1610 – a facsimile of that score is readily available. But, despite a direct paper-trail, the work remains mysterious, a source of questions to which any performance must supply an answer. When was it composed? For what purpose and occasion? Was it ever performed and, if so, where and in what form? Finally – and most significantly – is it, in fact, a unified work at all?

To start the process of untangling these is to travel not to Venice – the city that was home Monteverdi's triumphant final decades – but to Mantua's Gonzaga Court. The ambitious young musician who considered himself 'fortunate' to enter the Duke's service in 1591 was scarcely recognisable as the composer creating '...an a cappella Mass for six voices...together with psalms for Vespers of the Madonna' in 1608.

Aged just 43, Monteverdi was a broken man. The death of his wife had left him alone, 'seriously ill' from overwork and the Mantuan climate, struggling to support his two young sons. Pleas for dismissal were ignored, and Monteverdi was forced to continue in the Duke's demanding service.

christina
l'arpeggiata

It seems an unlikely time for the composition of a large-scale sacred work. Some argue that it was created for the magnificent festivities surrounding the marriage of the Duke's son to Margherita of Savoy in May 1608. Others have argued for the *Vespers* as a musical portfolio to advertise to the visiting Pope Paul V (the work's dedicatee) in hopes of a Vatican job. That both theories persist speaks to the ambiguity of a work that seems designed to serve many functions – at once a compendium and a single work, an advertisement and a functional collection of sacred music.

Vespers – the daily Catholic evening service – follows a set form. Five psalms (each preceded by an antiphon), a hymn and a Magnificat are the key elements. Monteverdi sets each of these (twice, in the case of the Magnificat), but also includes additional elements, including four 'sacred concertos' and an instrumental sonata.

One interesting detail of the *Vespers* is its emphasis – on the title-page, no less – on the work's historical elements. The psalms and Magnificat settings may have been composed separately over time, but all are united by their structure. Each takes plainchant as its basis, treating it as a cantus firmus – a slow-moving central melody – around which Monteverdi weaves intricate strands of counterpoint in both instruments and voices.

The effect is strikingly varied from piece to piece, but retains the same spirit of collision: music at the threshold of ancient and modern. This is a composer who wishes to be admired for his invention, but also his respect and understanding of musical history. Add to this the sheer potential opulence of the settings – scored for up to 10 vocal parts, with cornettos and sackbuts as well as organ and strings – and you have a showcase well suited not only to the splendour of the Vatican, but perhaps even more to the gilded galleries of St Mark's Venice.

Like that building, whose vast scale eclipses all at first glance, the details of Monteverdi's *Vespers* can easily get lost in sheer sonic scale. But once ears adjust, there's much to notice. Has the supplication 'O Lord, make haste to help me' ever sounded more arresting than it does here in music adapted from the opening Toccata of Monteverdi's opera *L'Orfeo*, fizzing instrumental ritornelli breaking up the solid blocks of chant, cornetto and violin soaring high above?

The next musical peak arrives in motet *Nigra Sum*. The sensual *Song of Solomon* text is set for solo voice and accompaniment, exploiting all the expressive freedom of the new operatic style. In contrast, psalm-setting *Nisi Dominus* is thickly scored for two five-voice choirs who pass verses back and forth, imitation intensifying towards an emotional and rhythmic climax.

The instrumental Sonata sopra *Santa Maria* puts instrumental virtuosity in the spotlight, weaving a shifting texture over continuo in a set of variations on three motifs. In and out of this drift soprano voices singing the short phrases of a plainchant litany to the Virgin.

Finally, the Magnificat: a fusion of old and new more audacious than any we've heard so far. A plainchant cantus firmus runs through each of the movements, its slow-moving notes a harmonic core for a kaleidoscope of mood and invention that takes us from the penitential gloom of the lower-voices 'Et misericordia', through a shadowy vision of the Holy Spirit in the echoing et Spiritui Sancto of the 'Gloria patri' to arrive at the blazing final dance of an Amen – music truly, as Monteverdi himself described it, '...suited to the chapels or chamber of princes'.

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Performers

Chorus

Céline Scheen soprano

Giuseppina Bridelli mezzo-soprano

Benedetta Mazzucato contralto

Vincenzo Capezzuto alto

Jan van Elsacker alto/tenor

Nicholas Mulroy tenor

Joshua Ellicott tenor

Dingle Yandell bass-baritone

Hubert Claessens bass-baritone

Greg Skidmore bass

Christina Pluhar artistic & musical direction

L'Arpegiata

Jorge Jimenez baroque violin

Jesus Merino Ruiz baroque violin

Anna Nowak baroque alto

Rodney Prada viola da gamba

Diana Vinagre baroque cello

Doron Sherwin cornetto

Gawain Glenton cornetto

Laura Agut trombone

Emily White trombone

Guy Morley trombone

Josep Maria Martí Duran theorbo

Daniel Espasa organ



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