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# 1

# *Introduction*

With its mixture of the splendid and the intimate, the sensual and the sublime, the music of Monteverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (*Vespers of the Blessed Virgin*), often called the '1610 Vespers' for short, has gained widespread and enduring popularity. It was published, together with a Mass setting, in the *Missa ... ac Vespera ... cum nonnullis sacris concentibus* (*Mass and Vespers, with some Sacred Concertos*), which Monteverdi issued at Venice in 1610 (publication at Venice signifies not that it was a Venetian work, but that Venice was the main centre of music publishing in early seventeenth-century Italy). Like most late Renaissance publications of church music, this was a volume intended to serve a number of purposes. At one level, of course, it was a vanity publication, a portfolio of the composer's work gathered together for the world to admire, and the unprecedented way in which Monteverdi set out his Vespers music in the volume – as a set of music for Vespers of the Madonna interspersed with motets and the 'Sonata sopra Sancta Maria' – may have owed something to a wish to make the best possible show with a relatively small collection of settings.[1] At another level, however, it was intended as a resource book for choirmasters, who would have used as many or as few of the settings as they required or their singers could manage. With their needs in mind Monteverdi provided two paths for performance through the Vespers music: one requires a group of expert instrumentalists in addition to the vocal ensemble and organist; the other allows performance with organ alone. For this latter type of performance Monteverdi provided a second, six-part Magnificat in addition to the magnificent seven-part setting with instruments that is most often heard nowadays. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the 'sacred concertos' – the motets and the 'Sonata sopra Sancta Maria' – could have formed part of the celebration of Vespers in the seventeenth century, but equally they could have been omitted



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altogether since none was integral to the official Vespers liturgy. And they could, if desired, have been used in other liturgical contexts or even as spiritual chamber music.

All this would have been well understood by musicians in the early seventeenth century, who would have accepted quite happily that the 1610 publication was a multi-purpose volume: there is not one possible '1610 Vespers' but several, and it is important to understand that to this extent Monteverdi's Vespers is not a work at all, but a group of works, not all of which were necessarily written at the same period. Most performances nowadays, however, even those that re-create the full liturgical context of a Vespers service, treat Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers at portfolio level and in their grandest dress, with a full complement of instruments: that is, they treat the collection as an artistic and liturgical unity.

Whether Monteverdi wrote his 1610 Vespers music simply for publication – an unlikely possibility, but one that cannot wholly be ruled out – or for performance in the north Italian city of Mantua, where he worked as choirmaster to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga, he would not have envisaged the whole of it being performed in a concert version. Even though from 1609 the Gonzagas enjoyed concerts on Friday evenings in the Hall of Mirrors of the ducal palace, only a small proportion of the Vespers music – perhaps some of the smaller-scale motets – could possibly have featured in these. If the Vespers was ever heard as a complete unit during Monteverdi's lifetime it would have been in church, as an adornment of the Catholic liturgy. Monteverdi would have written his music with this in mind, and an appreciation of the 1610 Vespers in its liturgical context is essential to a full understanding of the 'work'. Equally, when analysing the musical settings of the psalms and Magnificat it is important to have some knowledge of the way in which psalms and canticles were customarily chanted in the Catholic Church since Monteverdi was set, or set himself, the challenging task of constructing a rich variety of settings based strictly on psalm tones, which are among the most limiting of plainsong formulae. Chapter 2, then, provides an introduction to the liturgy of Vespers and to plainsong psalmody, though this can be skipped on a first reading if it is found too technical.

The composition, publication and performance of the 1610 Vespers



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are surrounded by questions. Monteverdi was not employed at Mantua primarily as a church musician and the extent of his involvement in writing church music there is unknown. Why then, should he have produced such a magnificent volume of church music, and why in 1610? Was the music written over a period of time, or conceived for some grand Gonzaga celebration? Where was it first performed? Who were the musicians who sang and played it? Was it sung by a choir and soloists, or by an ensemble of solo singers? As we shall see, answers to these questions can be sought by decoding the information offered by the publication itself, by examining its production in the context of Monteverdi's career at Mantua and by interpreting the little documentation that survives. But it has to be admitted that most of the answers are, and are likely to remain, tentative.

It is exploration of these questions rather than analysis of the music itself that has occupied most writers on the 1610 Vespers. The only full-length study of Monteverdi's 1610 publication is Jeffrey Kurtzman's *Essays*, now out of print, though Kurtzman is about to publish a revised and extended version of his book, as well as a new edition of the Vespers. Analysis has tended to focus on formal aspects of Monteverdi's settings. This is understandable, since most of the ensemble pieces at least are based on verse-by-verse settings of psalm, hymn and canticle texts and some, like 'Dixit Dominus', are certainly based on abstract patternings. Nevertheless, Monteverdi did draw on his experience as a madrigalist in a number of the settings, finding musical metaphors for the imagery of the texts, sometimes on a small scale, sometimes taking a view of the text as a whole and once, in the case of 'Lætatus sum', providing a musical subtext (see below, Chapter 5, pp. 71–2).

The questions posed by Monteverdi's 1610 publication have exercised performers and historians for more than half a century, and some of the issues involved are still capable of provoking acrimonious debate. Answers to these questions, whether well founded or not, have influenced not only performances, but also editions of the music. This means that many editions of the Vespers, including some still available, do not represent Monteverdi's original print fully or reliably, but belong rather to the history of the reception and interpretation of the work and are discussed in Chapter 6.



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A facsimile of the 1610 publication is available.[2] At the time of writing, however, only one generally available modern edition – by Jerome Roche[3] – can be recommended unequivocally as a study score. Roche's edition includes the full text of the Vespers, including the sacred concertos, both versions of the Magnificat and the organ score published in the *Bassus generalis* part-book. The text is presented in a clean and unfussy edition which preserves the visual aspect of Monteverdi's original notation while providing suggested solutions for the more difficult and controversial aspects of its interpretation.

There are other usable editions, though none in which it is quite as easy to follow all the material presented in this book. Clifford Bartlett has produced an excellent edition which has formed the basis of a number of recent performances.[4] Barring of duple-metre passages is by the semibreve rather than the breve which is the norm in the 1610 *Bassus generalis*; otherwise the visual aspect of the original notation is preserved. The edition lacks only the six-part setting of the Magnificat, which is, though, available on demand. And Denis Stevens's edition, first published in 1961, has recently been reissued to include the sacred concertos.[5] This edition has the advantage of being inexpensive, but it does not represent Monteverdi's text clearly. It was prepared for performance by choir and soloists and by players using modern instruments. Voice and instrumental names, note values and barring are altered and editorial tempi and dynamics added. The motet 'Nigra sum' is rescored from tenor solo to a dialogue for alto and tenor. Only the seven-part Magnificat is included. I have assumed that readers will have to hand one or other of these three editions. Unfortunately, however, the barring is different in each. In this book, bar numbers without a prefix refer primarily to the Roche edition; bar numbers in parenthesis and prefixed by Bt (Bartlett) or St (Stevens) refer to the other two editions where their barring differs.

Though Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers is a much loved 'work' it has also earned the more dubious distinction of provoking some of the most ill-tempered debate in the musicological literature. As Denis Arnold once amusingly put it:

> No doubt all professions have their hazards; and for the student of Monteverdi the principal one is surely that musicological Lorelei, the Vespers (of 1610, of course). To edit it is to receive the kiss of death as a



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> scholar. 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.[6]

With this in mind, the present study is offered with some diffidence.



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# 2

## *The 1610 settings and the liturgy of Vespers*

Monteverdi's 1610 publication contains music for Mass and Vespers, the two services of the Roman Catholic liturgy that were most frequently supplied with elaborate musical settings in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Italy. The Mass remains a central feature of the modern liturgy, though not in the form approved by the Council of Trent (the 'Tridentine' form) that Monteverdi would have known. The service of Vespers is, perhaps, less familiar, but some knowledge of its liturgy – that is, of the texts appointed by the Church to be said or sung at a Vespers service – is necessary not only for understanding why Monteverdi set the particular group of texts that he did, but also when evaluating various arguments about the contents of the 1610 print: arguments that have influenced both editions and performances of the music. And knowing how the psalms and Magnificat were customarily chanted in plainsong at Vespers is a valuable preliminary to analysing Monteverdi's settings, which make play with the ways in which his contemporaries would have expected to hear psalms sung in church. The first part of this chapter, then, provides a brief outline of Vespers, and Examples 1 and 2, below, can be used as a practical introduction to singing psalms in plainsong and *falsobordone* in conjunction with Appendix 2, which gives the texts and plainsongs of the psalms set by Monteverdi, using the same notational conventions. The appendix also begins the process of musical analysis by charting, verse by verse, the part(s) of Monteverdi's polyphonic settings in which the plainsongs appear.

### Vespers: liturgy, plainsong, *falsobordone*

The evening service of Vespers was one of seven Offices (or Hours services) celebrated every day in Catholic religious communities dur-



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ing the Renaissance.[1] Like all the Offices its central feature was the singing of psalms – five in most cases – and at its culmination was the Magnificat – the canticle of the Blessed Virgin – during the singing of which the altar was ceremonially censed. The texts for all the Offices are found in a liturgical book called the Breviary, and texts and music in the Antiphoner and Psalter. The outline of Vespers, as celebrated on Sundays and feast days, when elaborate polyphonic settings would have been appropriate, is given in Table 2.1.

If Compline did not immediately follow Vespers, then the Marian antiphon appropriate to the season of the Church year – 'Alma redemptoris mater', 'Ave regina cœlorum', 'Regina cœli lætare' or 'Salve regina' – was sung with its associated devotions.[2]

Of the items in Table 2.1, only the texts of the first and last groups of versicles and responses, together with the Magnificat, remained constant for every celebration of Vespers. All the other texts varied according to the day of the Church calendar on which a specific Vespers service was celebrated. For feast days – such as days which commemorated events in the life of Christ, or the Blessed Virgin, or other saints – Vespers was celebrated twice, once on the evening preceding the feast (First Vespers) and once on the day itself (Second Vespers). Though the texts for First and Second Vespers of a given feast might be identical, generally their texts differed.

Some types of feast had texts in common. For example, at all Vespers of the Blessed Virgin the five psalms to be sung were those found in Monteverdi's 1610 publication – (A) 'Dixit Dominus' (Psalm 109; BCP 110),[3] (B) 'Laudate pueri' (112; BCP 113), (C) 'Lætatus sum' (121; BCP 122), (D) 'Nisi Dominus' (126; BCP 127) and (E) 'Lauda Ierusalem' (147; BCP 147, vv 12–20) – and the Office hymn was 'Ave maris stella'. The same five psalms were also appointed for Vespers on the feast days of other virgins and holy women, but the Office hymn differed according to the saint whose life was being celebrated. For Second Vespers of the feast days celebrating the apostles, on the other hand, the five psalms were (A) 'Dixit Dominus', (B) 'Laudate pueri', (C) 'Credidi', (D) 'In convertendo' and (E) 'Domine probasti me'.

As may be seen from the above, the psalms 'Dixit Dominus' and 'Laudate pueri' figure in Vespers for all these feasts. In fact, Vespers for all 'double' feasts (see below, p. 10) and Sundays of the year use a total of only fifteen different psalms,[4] a fact that allowed composers to



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Table 2.1 The outline of Tridentine Vespers

| | |
|---|---|
| Versicle [V]: | *Deus in adiutorium meum intende* |
| Response [R]: | *Domine ad adiuvandum me festina.* |
| Doxology: | *Gloria Patri, et Filio, et spiritui sancto. Sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper, et in secula seculorum. Amen.* |
| Alleluia: | *Alleluia.* |

Antiphon (a)
Psalm (A)
Antiphon (a)

Antiphon (b)
Psalm (B)
Antiphon (b)

Antiphon (c)
Psalm (C)
Antiphon (c)

Antiphon (d)
Psalm (D)
Antiphon (d)

Antiphon (e)
Psalm (E)
Antiphon (e)

Chapter (short scriptural reading)

Hymn

Versicle and response

Antiphon (f)
Magnificat
Antiphon (f)

Collect (Prayer)

V: *Dominus vobiscum.*
R: *Et cum spiritu tuo.*
V: *Benedicamus Domino.*
R: *Deo gratias.*



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produce publications of a reasonable size which could nevertheless claim to contain polyphonic settings for the whole year – publications like the *Sacra Omnium Solemnitatum Vespertina Psalmodia, cum Beatae Virginis Cantico* [i.e. the Magnificat], *6vv* (1593) and *Tutti li salmi che nelle solennità dell'anno al vespro si cantano, con duoi cantici della beata vergine … 8vv* (1601), of Giovanni Giacomo Gastoldi, who served as choirmaster of the ducal chapel of Santa Barbara, Mantua, during most of the years that Monteverdi was court choirmaster there.[5]

Monteverdi's 1610 collection would have had a more limited usefulness, though, as we have seen, its sequence of psalms was appropriate not only for feasts of the Blessed Virgin, but also for the feasts of other virgins and holy women; and individual items in the collection would have had a wider currency still: the opening 'Domine ad adiuvandum' and the Magnificat, for example, could have been used for Vespers on any major feast, providing, of course, that the choirmaster had at his disposal a group of singers capable of tackling elaborate polyphony.

The other variable elements of Vespers – the antiphons, the chapter, the versicle and response that precede the Magnificat, and the Collect – might also be common to more than one feast, but more important feast days were allocated texts specific (or 'Proper') to them alone; these are found in those sections of the Breviary and Antiphoner headed 'Temporale' (for Feasts of Our Lord) and 'Sanctorale' (Feasts of the Saints). By way of illustration, Appendix 1 shows a complete Second Vespers for the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, celebrated each year on 15 August.[6] The psalms and hymn are those common to feasts of the Blessed Virgin, while the antiphons (which on double feasts such as this were to be said or sung in full both before and after their respective psalms)[7] and other Proper elements relate more or less specifically to the concept of the Assumption – the Virgin's bodily ascent to Heaven. Some of the antiphons refer explicitly to this belief, but others express a more generalised devotion to the Virgin, like the antiphon to 'Lauda Ierusalem', which draws on the Song of Songs, the same biblical source from which the text of Monteverdi's 1610 motet 'Pulchra es' was taken. The antiphons thus form a specifically Christian frame for each of the Old Testament psalms.

In the Catholic liturgy, feast days are ranked according to their



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importance. The Tridentine breviary of 1568 established five classes of feast, with a further class – the 'Greater Double' – being added in 1602. These are, in descending order of importance:

| | |
|---|---|
| Duplex i classis | Double of the first class |
| Duplex ii classis | Double of the second class |
| Duplex maius | Greater double |
| Duplex | Double |
| Semiduplex | Semi-double |
| Simplex | Simple[8] |

In this ranking Vespers for the simplest feasts would have been sung to plainsong only, while the most important ones, which would have included the feast of the patron saint of a church, would have warranted the most elaborate music of which the church choir and instrumentalists were capable. When polyphonic settings of the liturgy were used at Vespers they functioned as substitutes for items that would otherwise have been sung in plainsong, though we should not assume that all the substitutable items in the service were actually performed in elaborate settings. So although Monteverdi provided a package of substitutes in his 1610 print he would not necessarily have expected to hear all performed in a single celebration of Vespers.

At sung Vespers, whether celebrated using plainsong alone, or a mixture of plainsong and polyphony, all the texts in Appendix 1 were set to music, producing a seamless sequence of music without verbal interruptions. The types of plainsong used for a celebration of Vespers for the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin are shown in the third column of the appendix, which also provides references to the locations of the plainsongs or plainsong formulae in a generally available source, the *Liber Usualis* (henceforth *LU*), a handy compendium produced at the beginning of the present century.[9]

In sources of plainsong melodies for Vespers, only the antiphons and hymn appear in a fully written-out form; the other texts were sung to formulae usually consisting of a reciting note, with inflections and cadences that parallel the punctuation of the text. Of these the simplest are the formulae for prayers and lessons. The formulae for chanting psalms and the Magnificat – the psalm tones – are rather more complex. One of them – Psalm Tone 8 – is given as Example 1(b), with three verses of the psalm 'Laudate pueri' underlaid, and the end of the



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