

Monteverdi: Vespers (1610)

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Ideas about the performance of early music have changed radically over the past forty years. There has been considerable research on the vocal and instrumental forces Monteverdi is likely to have had in mind. For most baroque music, we now prefer an athletic and transparent texture to the lush, full sound of yesteryear. Different views of tempo go hand in hand with these ideas; in fact, in some ways they flow almost inevitably from them. Those in their turn lead to a questioning of earlier assumptions about form and design. Pitch, pitch-standards and intonation have similarly been examined exhaustively in a historical context, with results that have a fundamental impact on the performer's approach. In the particular case of Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers there has been enormous discussion of how far it is really to be seen as a single work, whether liturgical material needs adding, and if so how much. Few of these areas of discussion have led to unanimously accepted conclusions: that is often the way with historical investigation, in music as much as in anything else. And not all conductors have shown themselves equally informed or equally prepared to accept the latest conclusions at any one time. But the range of areas in which attitudes have changed means that each performance is to some extent a child of its time. The date of a recording is important.

Not that the date of itself says much about the quantity of musical pleasure to be derived from a particular recording. Most musicians would accept that there are qualities of musicianship which retain their power irrespective of historical purity. Nadia Boulanger's pre-war recordings of Monteverdi madrigals with piano accompaniment are particular favourites because they do manage to touch on something vital in Monteverdi's genius; sadly, she seems never to have approached the 1610 Vespers. A moving performance of baroque music with a band of saxophones remains a moving performance. And it would be easy to argue that the best record of the Monteverdi Vespers is one of the earliest, that conducted by Anthony Lewis – vivacious, exciting, teeming with conviction and above all constantly dancing. It is also, despite its date, recorded with extraordinary clarity. Every detail is audible.

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The search for better informed performances has one main justification: that the correct forces and an appropriate attitude to performance should make it easier to achieve the effect the composer had in mind. Quite often they seem not to do so. The reasons can include the unfamiliarity of the techniques, the insufficiency of the research (which by its nature must always remain insufficient) and the individual qualities of the performers. But the available recordings of the Monteverdi Vespers do show changing attitudes and evolving solutions to the music's problems. They also point the way to the future.

Monteverdi's publication of 1610 has a long and elaborate title that has in itself raised much discussion. It opens, in large letters, with the words 'Mass for the Virgin in six voices for church choirs'. After that comes, in very small type, 'and Vespers for several voices to sing', followed by slightly larger type for 'with some sacred concerti (*sacris concentibus*) suitable for chapels or princely apartments'. The Mass that opens the volume and furnishes its main title is the rarely performed parody-Mass on Nicholas Gombert's motet *In illo tempore*. Only after that comes the music that we think of as the '1610 Vespers'. But at the end of the volume, alongside the seven-voice Magnificat normally used, there is another Magnificat, in six voices – a relatively slight work, sharing some musical material with its grander and more famous companion, but nonetheless a masterpiece. (Some believe it may be appropriate for a performance without instruments or for the 'first' Vespers of the feast.) The Mass and the six-voice Magnificat have occasionally been recorded separately, but the only version of the entire volume is Schneidt's on three records (1975). This is a most impressive set, not least for the wonderfully spirited singing of the Regensburg Cathedral Choir, though the ideals of historical veracity represented by Archiv make it sometimes tend towards the drab and dutiful. It is, however, one of the few recordings to confine itself to the voices Monteverdi is likely to have used, specifically excluding women. (The other is Segarra (1976), in many ways Harmonia Mundi's answer to the Archiv challenge, and curiously similar in its musical effect.)

There are several good reasons why nobody else has attempted to record the entire collection. The Mass is widely regarded as well below the inspirational level of the remaining music; and it certainly inhabits an entirely different world, that of the Roman *stile antico* rather than the new north Italian dramatic style with voices and instruments. In any case the 1610 publication was probably not intended to record a particular performance. There is no clear evidence that it was ever performed as a unit, though there are a couple of conceivably appropriate events at Mantua within the four years before it was published. Several of the pieces may have been composed much earlier. The publication's main aim was probably to display the range of Monteverdi's skill in composing church music. At the age of just over forty, he was beginning to look for a new job. His fame so far was mainly as a composer of madrigals; and this was in a sense his portfolio for a church position. The Mass is in the

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Roman style, and the whole volume was dedicated to the Pope. But much of the Vespers music is in the new style most famously associated with Venice, and three years later it was in Venice that Monteverdi eventually received the post of *maestro* at St Mark's, which he was to hold for the rest of his life.

But once the 1610 collection is seen from that angle, further questions obviously arise. After the Mass, the remaining music is as follows:

- EXORDIUM: Deus in adjutorium (6 voices, 6 instruments)
- PSALM 109: Dixit Dominus (6 voices, with optional interludes for 6 instruments)
 CONCERTO: Nigra sum (Tenor solo)
- PSALM 112: Laudate pueri (8 voices with organ)
 CONCERTO: Pulchra es (2 Sopranos)
- PSALM 121: Laetatus sum (6 voices)
 CONCERTO: Duo seraphim (3 Tenors)
- PSALM 126: Nisi Dominus (2 groups of 5 voices each)
 CONCERTO: Audi coelum (2 Tenors with 6-voice close)
- PSALM 147: Lauda, Jerusalem (7 voices)
 CONCERTO: Sonata sopra Sancta Maria (Soprano with 8 instruments)
- HYMN: Ave maris stella (2 choirs of 4 voices with ritornellos for 5 instruments)
- CANTICLE: Magnificat (7 voices and 6 instruments)
- CANTICLE: Magnificat (6 voices and organ)

While the psalms, hymn and one Magnificat are part of the Marian vespers liturgy, the concerti are not and never have been. That could suggest that Monteverdi's Venetian publisher simply put the music in a convenient order that has nothing to do with any intended performing sequence. So Hans Redlich's edition of 1935 reshuffles the music and omits two psalms ('thus the whole work is kept within the limits of a two-hour performance'); that edition was used by Hans Grischkat (1953), in a mistily romantic recording that is very much a child of its time and place. Grischkat's main principle seems to be that sacred music must, above all, not dance. Thus anything that could lilt along is slowed down to the nature of a cortège, very much to the discomfort of the chorus. Its general effect now seems unpleasant and puddingy.

Robert Craft (1967) also resequences the pieces 'according to their individual characters and the "sense" of a concert-hall performance'. But his performing order does in fact work rather well. His chorus is bright and responsive, working against a heavy orchestra.

Another view was that the way the five concerti are described on the title page suggests that they are quite separate from the piece that could be described as Monteverdi's 'Vespers of 1610'. So Denis Stevens's recording (1967) omitted

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them entirely. On the other hand, he added the appropriate plainchant antiphons before and after each psalm, thereby creating something rather closer to a liturgical vespers service. His chorus is less vital than those of Lewis or Craft, and often somewhat wobbly; and for Monteverdi's cornetti he uses oboes, with extremely uneven results. But the general sound is more convincingly Italian than anything offered so far: the consonants, the vowels and the moods represent what at the time was a significant novelty in 'authentic' performance.

In the same year Jürgen Jürgens inserted plainchant antiphons but otherwise retained Monteverdi's sequence. And Harnoncourt did the same in what was evidently intended as Teldec's replacement for Jürgens in 1987.

Others have continued to omit the antiphons, on the surely valid principle that such a grand conception need not doggedly follow the liturgy. The versions of Schneidt, Segarra and Corboz gain considerable power from the way each piece follows directly on from the last.

But Andrew Parrott (1984) makes a comprehensive and radical attempt to reconstruct a festal Vespers service on the basis of recent research. His first principle is that there seems to have been a tradition of replacing the repeat of the antiphon after the psalm with a sacred concerto or instrumental piece. This 'explains' all but one of the concerti: they are simply antiphon substitutes. But the exception – 'Duo seraphim' – has no explicit Marian connections; so it must be treated as a substitute for the 'Benedicamus Domino' and shunted away to the end of the service. Moreover, the 'Sonata sopra Sancta Maria' is put in what seemed musically a more appropriate position, after the Magnificat. There are therefore two psalms that lack adequate antiphon-substitutes to follow them; and here he puts instrumental sonatas (by Giovanni Paolo Cima) in their place.

Another approach comes from Harry Christophers (1989) who, on the advice of Graham Dixon, proposes that the whole volume is a massive palimpsest and that the music was originally a second vespers for the feast of St Barbara. In the 'Sonata sopra Sancta Maria' the words are changed. And, again, the sequence of movements is juggled round in line with what can be discerned from surviving service-books of the time, with inserted instrumental pieces, a Palestrina motet and, to end the work, the 'Sonata' followed by 'Ave maris stella'.

All this is obviously distressing for those who hear the old-style Monteverdi Vespers as reaching an awesome climax in the Magnificat and particularly in its wonderfully conclusive 'Gloria Patri': the way Parrott's performance tails off with 'Duo seraphim' followed by a few gentle pieces of plainchant may be in line with current awareness that baroque 'form' did not work to an inevitable conclusion in the Wagnerian sense, but it is nonetheless disappointing to those brought up on the more common sequence of events. (Harry Christophers's ending is perhaps more satisfactory in its own way

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for those who hear the work in the received manner.) It is also distressing for those who see a musical logic in the pattern of the concerti: solo voice, two voices, three voices, six voices and finally the massive 'Sonata sopra Sancta Maria' before the serene hymn and the Magnificat. Moreover, those who are puzzled that this research can explain the position of all but two works in Monteverdi's collection may wish to reflect on four matters. First, while we know quite a lot about Venetian liturgies during those years we know rather less about the liturgy of Mantua, where Monteverdi composed the music. Second, we know nothing for certain about the event or events for which the music may have been composed. Third, composers throughout the ages have occasionally done strange things with liturgy for their own purposes. Fourth, there is in any case a clear principle going back to the twelfth century that the service had, in Stephen Bonta's words, 'two levels, liturgical and musical, that run along concurrently'; that is to say, liturgical fundamentalism may not be the clearest guide to Monteverdi's intentions. Among scholars who have discussed the matter Denis Arnold, Stephen Bonta and Andreas Holschneider have agreed that Monteverdi's print includes – after the opening Mass – everything necessary for both a first and a second vespers for the Virgin; their view has not been universally accepted, but it seems tenable. That is presumably why the two recordings of 1987 simply follow the printed order. (It may or may not be relevant here that the 11th movement in Monteverdi's sequence contains just eleven statements of the melody 'Sancta Maria ora pro nobis'.)

Another distressing change of attitudes came from a closer examination of the original partbooks. This showed that the last psalm, 'Lauda Jerusalem', and the Magnificat are written in what are known as 'high clefs' and need to be transposed down a fourth to bring them in line with the other movements. The arguments for that were first fully laid out by Andrew Parrott in an article for *Early Music* (November 1984). Here is not the place to justify it except to observe that its history goes back to Gregorian chant. You wrote chant down at the pitch that put the tones and semitones in the right places; and you simply sang it at the pitch that felt comfortable. So for several centuries there were two concurrent ways of thinking about, for example, middle C: as an appropriate frequency obtained from the organ (which itself varied from church to church) and as a step within a tonal, or rather modal, framework. Quite often in a collection of motets from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries there is a sudden change of clefs and ranges. Monteverdi's 1610 collection is as clear a case as any. The Mass, the psalm 'Lauda Jerusalem' and the two Magnificat settings are in high clefs, consistently; the rest is in low clefs which are equally consistent. The voice ranges are higher in the 'high clef' movements. Briefly, the historical and logical arguments for transposing those sections down a fourth in relation to the remaining music seem unassailable.

Of the recordings available so far, only those of Andrew Parrott (1984)

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and Philippe Herreweghe (1987) follow that transposition pattern. Nikolaus Harnoncourt (1987), for example, studiously ignores it even though he must surely have known the arguments. But in the event neither Parrott nor Herreweghe entirely justifies the procedure. Certainly the 'Lauda Jerusalem' sounds considerably better in both. Previously it had always seemed a mess, largely because the tenor line carrying the chant goes uncomfortably high: my notes on these recordings nearly all read either 'tenors ugly' or 'tenors inaudible' (with the significant exceptions being Lewis and Gardiner), though a couple solve the problem by scoring the line for trombones. Moreover the cruelly high cornett parts in the Magnificat become infinitely more comfortable and secure in the transposed version. On the other hand, transposition causes some major problems in the Magnificat. The section 'Et misericordia' lies unusually low, with the basses descending to bottom G. Put that down a fourth and you have something rather freakish, even though David Thomas sings them (for both Parrott and Herreweghe) with miraculous clarity; and Herreweghe goes some way towards resolving the problem by adopting a much slower tempo. Anyone who has done research on performance practice knows that you must suspend value judgements and that ideas contrary to a particular musical reaction are the ones that are most difficult to accept. But the passage is astonishingly low, and makes one begin to wonder whether there isn't some way of softening Parrott's conclusions.

The other problem is even more subjective, though it is likely to be shared by most listeners. As we have come to know it in the concert hall, the Vespers leads inexorably towards its conclusion with masterly pacing. The fifth and last psalm, 'Lauda Jerusalem', is in an audibly higher register, audibly more of a strain on the singers, and audibly a culmination to the group of psalms. Then comes for the first time an almost entirely instrumental piece, the 'Sonata sopra Sancta Maria', after which comes the ineffably gentle and luminous hymn setting, 'Ave maris stella', before we launch into the concluding Magnificat, itself bright and colourful, not merely because of its slightly higher pitch but also because of the elaborate instrumental participation. And then at the end of the Magnificat comes the moment that so many listeners have found themselves subconsciously waiting for all evening, those wonderful tenor runs down from the high G in the closing 'Gloria Patri' section. Inevitably these runs lose their steam if they begin only on a D and run down well below the comfortable range of most tenor soloists.

What can be done about this? First, it must sadly be accepted that part of the singular success of the Vespers in the order printed by Monteverdi may be just the chance result of modern misunderstanding of Monteverdi's notation. Second, however, while there can really be no serious argument about the relative pitch of the various movements, there is room for considerable discussion of the actual pitch standard within which these relationships exist. Much baroque music nowadays is performed at a pitch-standard

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a semitone below modern concert pitch; but the available information clearly shows that there was a whole range of pitch-standards used in various places and at various times in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There is in fact some evidence that Monteverdi was here using a pitch-standard somewhat higher than ours. A glance at the voice-ranges throughout the work suggests that much of the music lies uncomfortably low. The beautiful tenor solo concerto 'Nigra sum', for example, makes extensive use of the low D and rises as far as top G just once and almost in passing. It would surely work better at least a tone higher. In 'Audi coelum' the tenor must go down to low A: the most convincing performance of this, incidentally, is in Corboz (1983) where – contrary to the sleeve information – he uses the baritone Philippe Huttenlocher for that solo. For these and other reasons, it seems likely that Monteverdi's pitch-standard here was between a tone and a minor third higher than ours. That would bring all the voices into a more comfortable, brighter, range. It would solve the problem of the low notes just mentioned. And it would particularly restore some brilliance to the evidently brilliant runs at the end of the Magnificat.

So far, all recordings of the Vespers are at modern concert pitch (though Schneidt comes down a tone for the high-clef Mass, thereby bringing that work, at least, to what I would consider the appropriate pitch). To record it at a higher pitch would involve restringing stringed instruments, radically retuning organs and making new sackbuts – all of which at the moment seems disproportionately expensive. But until that is done we are unlikely to hear a fully convincing performance that follows the inevitable conclusions from Monteverdi's clefs. Returning to the points made at the beginning of this chapter: a further new insight into the nature of the Vespers has solved some problems but created new difficulties which will be resolved only gradually.

Scoring has inevitably varied over the years. Only recently has it been agreed that the psalms mainly demand organ continuo whereas the smaller concerted numbers are more in the chamber style (as the title-page indicates) and would be better accompanied by plucked string instruments, probably without even a melodic bass instrument. In 'Nigra sum', for example, the solo chitarrone used by Segarra (1976), Parrott (1984) and Christophers (1989) seems by far the most satisfactory solution. For the larger concerti and the 'Sonata sopra Sancta Maria' there would be a case for a more substantial group of plucked instruments: recent experience with other Italian soloistic music of the time suggests that several lutes, several chitarrones and several harps would be appropriate, though financial considerations have meant that such a solution is still extremely rare. What does need saying is that the earlier approaches with harpsichord and a heavy melodic bass instrument now seem hopelessly unstylistic for this music.

That raises the broader question of 'orchestration'. Jürgens (1967) and Harnoncourt (1987) offer the boldest recent solutions, with a wide range of

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wind instruments and constantly varying instrumentation, based largely on the writings of Michael Praetorius (1619). Certainly Praetorius gives us the fullest and most detailed information about the inclusion of instruments in concerted polyphony; but it is surely dangerous to use a north German writer to tell us about Italian music. Moreover, theirs is merely an extreme case of an issue that has existed as long as the Vespers has been performed. The decision to use a large body of instruments throughout brings with it the need to make the most elaborate reconstructions – indeed, orchestrations – which effectively make Monteverdi's original partbooks entirely inadequate for any performing purposes. Harnoncourt apart, recordings over the years have represented an increasing search for simplicity. They have moved to a position where the cornetti, for example, are used only in the opening 'Deus in adiutorium' and in the later passages where they are specified, namely in the 'Sonata sopra Sancta Maria' and the Magnificat. And other instruments are used only when specified and absolutely necessary. The single exception to this, of course, is in the continuo group: there seems every evidence that such groups were accustomed to devising the most elaborate patterns on the basis of the written bass line. Recent recordings, such as those of Parrott and Herreweghe, more or less follow those principles. In some ways they make the work less colourful; but at the same time they undeniably clarify the texture and focus the ear on the notes that Monteverdi actually wrote.

Which in its turn brings us to the use of the chorus. Was Monteverdi writing for massed choirs or for an ensemble of soloists? The available evidence increasingly favours relatively small forces. A crux can be heard at the end of the second psalm, *Laudate pueri*, where a grand doxology gives way to an 'Amen' section in which the voices drop out one by one and the movement ends with two tenors intertwining with increasingly florid melismas of a kind that surely demand soloists. To perform the main body of the movement with a large chorus involves intricate decisions about where the soloists take over; and albeit less severely, the same problem arises innumerable times in the course of the Vespers. Whatever the specific virtues of Joshua Rifkin's arguments about the appropriate vocal ensemble for Bach's choral works, they draw attention to the enormous body of evidence that much of what used to be thought of as early choral music was designed for an ensemble with just one singer on each line. Here again it is Parrott who adopts the most extreme solution. He does have a chorus; but he uses it very sparingly indeed. Mostly he eliminates the need for painful pragmatic decisions about where soloists take over by allocating everything to solo voices. His results are often highly convincing, though they occasionally underline the fact that much of the homophonic writing does seem to demand a fuller choral sound. At the opening of 'Laudate pueri' one longs for the massive climax produced by Gardiner and Corboz.

Tempo is a matter that in some ways follows directly from the size of

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forces used. With a few solo voices there is little scope for a massive choral climax; but then many of the developments in baroque music over the last few years have been towards eliminating the need for such grand late-Romantic gestures. Parrott and Herreweghe are happy to let the music take its course and prefer to establish a tempo that can be retained throughout a movement. In some ways Schneidt and Segarra are even more cautious: when Monteverdi inserts passages in triple time they interpret it precisely according to the theorists, with results that can be numbingly dull. Others take what could be seen as a more old-fashioned view of Monteverdi as an essentially dramatic composer who strove for effects at every possible point. Here the extreme cases are Gardiner (1974) and Corboz (1983): both seem happy to halve or double the tempo on a whim; they will draw out what seems a significant cadence, insert massive pauses to clarify a textural articulation and rush at a passage that seems geared to generating excitement. I much prefer this approach. Both seem to me to succeed magnificently, not least because of the evident commitment they thereby gain from their choirs. Of the two, perhaps Corboz gains in that he can be gentler, creating large areas of space that contrast even more strikingly with the high-energy passages – though it is easy to predict that Gardiner's forthcoming second attempt will challenge Corboz in precisely that respect. But, then, much depends on whether one believes that Monteverdi's 'Vespers of 1610' is a single work, correctly published, or something of a mixed bag.

J.S. Bach: St John Passion

TERI NOEL TOWE

(Numbers in brackets refer to corresponding numbers in the discography)

The history of the *St John Passion* is more complex than that of Bach's other surviving setting of the Passion story, the *St Matthew Passion* (qv). First performed in 1724, three years before the first version of the Matthew, this direct and deceptively 'simple' oratorio was subjected to a revision the following year that resulted in the substitution of new choruses for the opening and concluding ones, and the insertion of three alternate arias in the body of the work. All of the music for this first revision survives.

In the early 1730s, Bach returned, in essence, to the 1724 sequence, but with a few modifications. In the intervening years, the 'new' opening chorus, 'O Mensch, bewein' dein Sünde gross', became the concluding chorus of Part One of the *St Matthew Passion*, and thus was no longer available for use in the St John. Furthermore, ecclesiastical authorities in Leipzig had evidently objected to Bach's insertion of two intensely dramatic sequences from the Gospel according to St Matthew into the *St John Passion* (hereinafter *SJP*), and he removed them. Bach provided no replacement for the first of these excised interpolations, the passage describing Peter's remorse at his denial of Christ; but for the second, the earthquake episode after the Crucifixion, he substituted an instrumental *sinfonia* that has not come down to us. The aria that he wrote to replace 'Ach mein Sinn' in this third form of the *SJP* has also not been preserved. Finally, this third version did not have the chorale that follows the concluding chorus in the first version.

In the very last years of his life, Bach returned to the *SJP* and confirmed the sequence of the original version, restoring both the final chorale and the interpolations from the Gospel according to St Matthew that he had omitted from the third version. On Good Friday 1749, Bach gave a performance of the *SJP* that turned out to be the last performance of a Passion setting that he himself directed, for the following year he was unwell and he died on 28 July. This last performance was indeed a grand one; it called for a larger ensemble than he had used in previous productions, and it must have been a worthy valedictory to this important facet of Bach's musical life. This