

Monteverdi's "Vespers of the Blessed Virgin" of (1610)

By Andy Glover-Whitley



Monteverdi in later life

Whenever we think of Monteverdi most of us probably think of some crusty old codger with a ruff around his neck dressed in some Italianate early 17th century fashion looking glum and distant. Some old so and so who wrote a work that is now very well-known and somewhat over played. Every amateur choir has at some time or other attempted its block sounds with a piano, or if lucky enough with a small orchestra. Dull and boring I can hear you say to yourselves. Think again though about this work.

https://youtu.be/IiwKjNpiC_o

The blazing opening.

It was not always the case of the above. In fact it was only in the 1960's that this work was rescued from near obscurity by a young Cambridge scholar by the name of John Elliot Gardner. He has since gone on to rescue many works of this ilk from oblivion but it is with the Monteverdi "Vespers" that his name is forever linked. He staged the work with a small modern chamber orchestra and full choir and suddenly a world lost to us for over three hundred odd years came to life. A work that looks; if I may make the observation; drab on the score page takes on a life all of its own in performance, a

life that is so totally unique and revolutionary that we are still reeling from its impact on our ideas of the late Renaissance period. Since these heady days of guess work at the true sounds of the period much academic research has been done into the period, the work itself and of course Monteverdi.

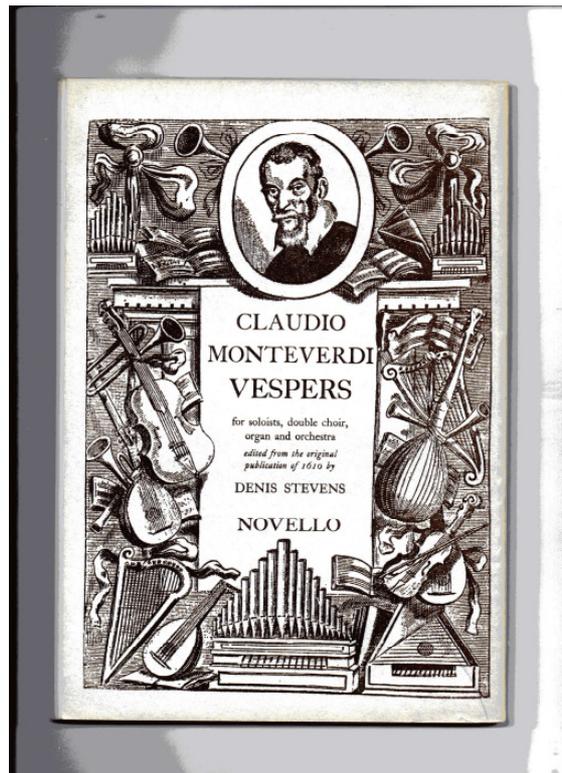


Vincenzo de Gonzague Duke of Mantua

Monteverdi wrote this setting of the “*Vespers of the Blessed Virgin*” between 1608 and 1610 for the maniacal Duke de Gonzague of Mantua in Northern Italy. The Duke was Monteverdi’s employer, and unfortunately for Monteverdi his boss was an embezzler, a con artist, lothario and an all-round rogue and wastrel. He did Monteverdi out of great amounts of pay but still expected obedience and hard work for little or no reward. Even when Monteverdi’s wife died he was still expected to continue his duties. This dictatorship and the damp swampy Mantuan air did nothing for Monteverdi’s temperament or constitution. On many occasions he wrote asking the Duke to release him from his bonds of employment but of course the Duke knew when he was on to a good thing.

Monteverdi wrote many works for the court and in 1608 he set about setting the “*Vespers*” text. Many composers such as Viadani, Radino, Cima, Molinaro, Funghetto among others had all previously set this text but in a way that was within keeping with the Catholic Churches doctrines and musical rules of the time. Not so Monteverdi who was something of a modern radical thinker when it came to music. It was not meant for the Mantuan Court but was intended as his calling card for any future employer. When in 1627 The Duke died, from Syphilis, he left the court broke and in debt. The new Duke had to make deep cuts and dismissed most of the court musicians from their posts. This was something of a blessing for Monteverdi even

though he was in financial dire straits. A year later the greatest post in all of Western Europe came up for grabs. The role of composer in residence at the church of St Marks in Venice and the “*Vespers*” was his calling card. The work got him the top job not only in Italy but probably at that point in time in the known world. At last he was at the top of his tree and there he remained, composing operas, liturgical works, secular pieces, and continued his endless books of madrigals that show constant modern inventions of the time in vocal techniques and compositional developments.



Front cover from my copy of the “Vespers”

So what was it about the “*Vespers*” that make them so unique and so important. Many words and PhD thesis have been written on this subject alone but I will look briefly at two points that really stand out from the work that are totally unknown before Monteverdi.

The first was the fact that up until this work liturgical works were purely voice with no accompaniment. If there was any form of accompaniment then it came from a simple organ placed in the church and nothing more. This is known from writings, paintings of the period, and existing instruments found in the churches in Italy. All secular work was either small vocal songs called ‘Madrigali’ (Madrigals) or was in the newly developed ideas of Opera (*Opera was only then about thirty years old*). There were consorts of instruments which would play in the court but generally they would seldom mix with voices. Monteverdi not only set voices and instruments together but he flouted all the rules and conventions of the time and wrote a work, the “*Vespers*”, that took a religious text set it in a secular manner with soloists and choir, and on top

of all this he had a group of instrumentalists supporting, and at times soloing against these voices in a way never before heard. The work was structured in such a way that allowed it to be performed in a church setting but in a way that was unique. The instrumentalist would be seated at the front. The choir and some of the soloists behind them on a raised Dias and some soloists were set around the church in various sites to create depth of tone and field as to were some of the instrumentalists such as the Cornetti players. In fact one of the voices is set off in a side chapel so that they are out of sight from the audience listening to create what was then a revolutionary idea. This was noted in a text of the period.

This piece was unique and modern for its time. The compositional techniques and usage of instruments in this way had never before been seen and so created a revolution in musical thought and this lead on to the early Baroque. The “*Vespers*” can be seen as the first piece towards this next movement in stylistic development.

The second point is the setting off out of sight of one of the tenor soloists. Although antiphonal exchanges were nothing new in liturgical works of the time it was the manner of the antiphonal exchange that was so revolutionary. It appears at a point where one soloist, at the front of the choir, sings lines from a prayer. From out of sight the voice is emulated in its last strophic phrase and the line of the prayer is answered. Almost as if someone praying is being answered from heaven above. By placing the out of sight soloist in such a manner a depth of field is created and an echo of the purest simplicity and eloquence is created. Nothing like this had ever been heard before. The church space was being used acoustically not only to create black and white textures and effects in compositional sound but also to create subtle textures and colours in a way that has still yet to be matched with all our advancements in sound technology.

<https://youtu.be/AMd39v-AN0>

The stunning duet.

Monteverdi threw everything that he could into this unique and beautiful work and succeeded in every way possible. It even uses in moderation the new major minor harmony coming into usage at the time, as well as the more usual modal sound world found in this and earlier periods. It is a work that reveals something new on every hearing and as time has progressed and research has developed better and better performances have come into existence, but one of the best has got to be the one created by Harry Christophers and The Sixteen. They use the score that has been extracted from Monteverdi’s set of original parts by Amadino in 1610 and are kept in the Biblioteca G.B.Martini in the Conservatoire of Bologna. They use instruments of the period such as Sackbutt, Cornetti, Theorbo etc as well as a small portative church organ. The choir is limited to just the sixteen voices, probably as Monteverdi would have used, and from this line up come the soloists. It brings more light and shade to the work than any other performance or recording before it. It is well worth searching out and visiting it regularly. A work that is as refreshing today as it was in 1610. Unique and one of the great treasures of Western Music, the type every

musician should have at least a little knowledge and appreciation of.