

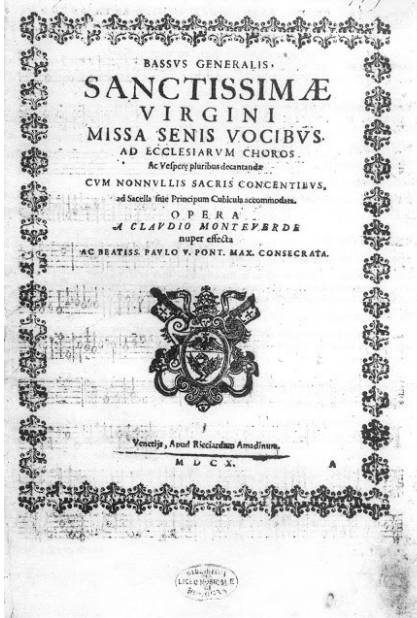


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Monteverdi *Vespers of 1610*; The Sixteen, Harry Christophers; Temple Church. Reviewed by Robert Hugill on 19 November 2019 Star rating: 5.0 (***). Moving fluidly between thrilling brilliance and intimacy, this was performance which really meant something**

Harry Christophers and The Sixteen first toured their performances of Monteverdi's *Vespers* to cathedrals and major churches in 2014 (the first time the group had done a major UK tour with orchestra), and since then I have caught them performing the work in Cadogan Hall. But the chance to hear Monteverdi's *Vespers* in the lovely acoustic of Temple Church was not to be missed.

Harry Christophers conducted The Sixteen in Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610* in Temple Church on Tuesday 19 November 2019 as part of Temple Music's season. The soloists, all singers in the choir, were Charlotte Dobbs, Katy Hill, Mark Dobell, Nicholas Mulroy, Eamonn Dougan, Ben Davies, and the trebles of Temple Church Choir sang the 'Sonata Sopra Santa Maria'.

We don't know a lot about Monteverdi's so-called *Vespers*. We don't know who or where the music was written for, we have little knowledge of performances directed by Monteverdi in his lifetime, and for much of the 20th century there was even disputes about the key some of the movements were supposed to be in!

When it was published in 1610, it was Monteverdi's first published sacred music. By then he had worked for the Duke of Mantua for 20 years, published five books of madrigals and written two major operas. Part of his responsibilities for the Duke included music for the Duke's chapel, but we know little about Monteverdi's liturgical music in detail. We have to assume that the *Vespers*, even if largely written in 1609/1610, were the product of long experience. And there is a good case to be made for the music being written for the public chapel of Santa Barbara in the palace at Mantua.

The publication of 1610 has the complex title of *Sanctissimae Virgini Missa senis vocibus ad ecclesiarum choros, ac Vespere pluribus decantandae cum nonnullis sacris concentibus ad Sacella sive Principum Cubicula accommodata* (Mass for the Most Holy Virgin for six voices for church choirs, and vespers for several voices with some sacred songs, suitable for chapels and ducal chambers), though one of the part-books refers to it as *Vespro della Beata Vergine da concerto composta sopra canti firmi* (Vesper for the Blessed Virgin for concertos, composed on cantus firmi). It was published as a sort of CV, a presentation work to show other employers what Monteverdi could do. He was angling for a post in Rome (the work is dedicated to the Pope), and it almost certainly helped to get him the post at St Mark's in Venice which he took in 1613.

It is not so much a single unified work as a kit for choir masters to use to construct services. Two *Vespers* services are possible, a long elaborate one and a shorter one with few instruments, the motets serve to dazzle and may have been used to replace the antiphons, or they may just be Monteverdi showing off. And, of course, no-one tacks the mass, which was also in the 1610 publication, onto performances of the

Vespers!

Harry Christophers opts for minimal intervention and full grandeur. We get the more complex of the *Magnificats* (in the now unfashionable higher key which maximises the glittering brilliance of the piece), and full instrumental panoply, with strings, recorders, dulcian (a sort of early bassoon), cornetts, sackbutts, theorbo, harp and organ. In all 18 instrumentalists and 20 singers (not including the trebles).

It would be easy to make a lot of brilliant show of the performance, allied to Christophers lively tempos, but what made it work as a whole was the attention to the words and the fact that Christophers brought out the constant sense of contrast in the work, large-scale ensembles versus intimate duos, brilliant solo writing against simple plainchant. Many of the soloists got an admirable amount of words out, and you really felt that this meant something. There wasn't enough space for the choir to give us any antiphonal effects, which was a shame but few English churches are geared up to that sort of thing. Christophers did move his soloists around a lot, and I hope that Mark Dobell was wearing his Fitbit, as he certainly got his step count up. All this is very effective, but what counts is the music itself, and this was thrilling, gripping and moving.

The opening, with its combination of toccata and psalm, was thrilling, with a bright sound and quite a fast speed. Throughout the piece, the large-scale choral pieces flowed finely, moving easily between large-scale grandeur and intimate emotion, recognising the way Monteverdi individually characterised different verses, different phrases, different words. The fluently florid solo interventions in the larger scale psalms flowered easily from the surrounding choral textures. Often, there was a sense of dance and of rhythmic impetus in moments like the opening of 'Laudate pueri'. Whilst the performers themselves always seemed quite dead-pan, the performance brought a sense of joy to the music.

Mark Dobell sang 'Nigra sum' with lovely tone, fine-grained ornamentation and impressive diction, he made it all mean something. Charlotte Mobbs and Katy Hill were wonderfully seductive in 'Pulchra es', an example (one of many) where the soloists were encouraged to introduce elements from Monteverdi's secular music (madrigals and opera) into the sacred concertos. Mark Dobell and Nicholas Mulroy made the opening of 'Duo Seraphim' rather intimate, with a speed which enabled us to relish the dissonances, their two tenors very well-matched, and at the moment when two becomes three, Ben Davies popped up to complete the trio in fine style. Nicholas Mulroy gave a passionate, full-voiced account of 'Audi coelum' with Mark Dobell a very effective echo hidden away in the Round Church. Mulroy was almost operatic, shades of Monteverdi's Orfeo, in his attention to the detail of the words and I loved the seductive way he shaped 'dulcis'.

The 'Sonata sopra Sancta Maria', admirably sung by the boys from Temple Church Choir, was really a showcase for the instrumentalists with Monteverdi using the full range of instrumental colours available to him. 'Ave maris stella' seemed constructed to give different groups a chance to shine in different verses, and this continued with the final 'Magnificat', each verse designed to show off a different pair of soloists, contrasting with the more intimate delivery of the chant. The high key meant that Ben Davies and Eamonn Dougan brought real excitement to their high-vocal line in 'Quia fecit', whilst in 'Fecit potentiam' we had thrilling high-wire cornett playing, and brilliant tone from Charlotte Mobbs and Katy Hill in 'Suscepit Israel'. Nicholas Mulroy brought operatic splendour to the Gloria patri (again with Mark Dobell hidden in the Round Chapel).

I can imagine performances which might be more liturgically correct, performances which might adhere closer to modern scholarship, and which might be closer to the sort of performing forces used in Monteverdi's day, but the Vespers is the type of piece which allows groups to re-make it in their own image. Here Harry Christophers and The Sixteen gave us thrillingly brilliant moments, but also intimate ones, making the words count and leaving us with a sense that this really meant something.