

**Claudio Monteverdi's Vespers performed by
The Sixteen at Temple Church conducted by
Harry Christophers**

**Tuesday, November 19, 2019 Temple
Church, Temple, London EC4Y**

Reviewed by David Truslove

The Temple Church is as near perfect a setting for Monteverdi's four hundred-year-old Vespers as you can find. The Sixteen Choir and



Orchestra may not be as old as this iconic building tucked away in a web of passageways The City's legal district, but in its fortieth anniversary year we heard a superb account of the composer's historic and ground-breaking work. The 1610 Vespers form a dazzling amalgamation of Renaissance and Baroque styles where traditional polyphony and original monody combined to showcase a daring expressivity and astute theatrical instinct. No record of the earliest performance of this work exists (either at Mantua or Venice), and the inclusion and treatment of each movement and the number of singers and instrumentalists is a matter of conjecture. Despite the best efforts of scholars there are still uncertainties about the purpose of the work, and whether it's a single composition or an anthology of movements comprising five psalm settings, a hymn, several vocal concertos and an elaborate Magnificat. Whatever its purpose it is, without doubt, one of the crowning glories of the early Baroque and has often been regarded as one of the most comprehensive job applications ever made when he was looking for alternative patronage while working at the court of Mantua.

There was absolutely no doubt about the validity of this performance; its strength derived in part from the quality of musicians, but mostly resulted from the direction of Harry Christophers whose every facial expression and physical gesture brought abundant vitality. He's a conductor who electrifies every downbeat, whose hands slice the air like a bird of prey and whose eyes blaze with commitment. Every nuance of the score (Möseler Verlag) was given its due; complex polyphony was perfectly balanced, and an excellent team of instrumentalists added colourful expression and sumptuous grandeur. Sackbutts brought spritely rhythms to 'Nisi Dominus', a pair of recorders cooed in 'Ave Maris Stella' (along with some fleet violin playing) and exquisitely mournful cornetts soared over the tenors in 'Deposuit potentes' to breath taking effect.

It wasn't just the precision of this account that impressed either, nor the clarity of the words from the choir, it was more the dynamism of the combined vocal and instrumental forces that rendered Monteverdi's word painting so effective. In the dancing rhythms and rocketing melodic lines of 'Laudate pueri' Christophers seemed intent on 'raising the helpless from the earth' and the bountiful deeds of the Almighty ('he giveth snow like wool') were generously amplified in the buoyant tempo of 'Lauda Jerusalem'. Text within the work's multi-layered writing sprang off the page, and there was no mistaking a depth of choral weight rounding off each of the five psalms, notably for the closing 'Gloria Patri' of 'Laetatus sum' (Psalm 121).

Individual contributions left a memorable impression too, with Mark Dobell excelling in 'Nigra sum', where 'arise my love and come away' was sung with thrilling intensity. 'Duo Seraphim' enjoyed a refined sensitivity, and the devotional echo duet 'Audi coelum' was given ardent expression by Dobell and Nicholas Mulroy with impeccable support from harp and theorbo. Charlotte Mobbs and Katy Hill were both suitably fervent in 'Pulchra es' and the Temple Choristers added robust tone for 'Sancta Maria ora pro nobis', a movement of remarkable resourcefulness in its eleven elaborately decorated verses. The 'Magnificat' is no less imaginatively conceived and was swept by with a compelling momentum, choir and instruments ravishing the ear most persuasively in its closing 'Amen'.