



MISSA IN ILLO TEMPORE ***Claudio Monteverdi***

The conception, writing and printing of the collection containing the *Missa In Illo Tempore* and the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* took place among Mantua, Venice and Rome. It was also a game of different powers. Claudio Monteverdi, from 1601, had an important role in Vincenzo Gonzaga's Mantuan ducal court: he was maestro di cappella. The court was one of the most culturally elevated in the early 17th century, and the patronage from the refined Vincenzo involved, among others, Torquato Tasso and Paul Rubens. The artistic richness and sophistication in the court were decidedly notable: it is no coincidence that the Mantuan years were fundamental to the stylistic development of Monteverdi's madrigal and theatrical and operatic experiences (*Orfeo*, for instance, was created in 1607). However, the pressure was too much. Monteverdi in 1608, also as a result of his wife's death, had a psycho-physical breakdown and asked his patron to allow him to devote himself exclusively to sacred music. The request was denied. He therefore decided to address none other than the papal court; this led to the first printed sacred collection composed by the Cremonese musician in almost thirty years. It was printed in Venice by Ricciardo Amadino; on the frontispiece we can read the composer's dedication to Pope Paul V. Monteverdi, then, travelled to Rome, but without achieving his goal; the Cremonese master's Mantuan period was, however, almost at an end: he left Gonzaga's court in 1613 to go to Venice as maestro di cappella in San Marco. In the lagoon city, he created a great operatic, madrigal and sacred music repertoire: but that is another story.

As above mentioned Monteverdi's purpose in writing the Mass was to get closer to the papal court; in light of this, his stylistic orientation is clear. Compared to the more modern aesthetic choices made in the *Vespro* (concertato style, massive use of instruments, and stylistic variety) in the work we are about to listen the stylistic features adopted are completely different, since they are linked to the great tradition of sacred polyphony of the 16th century. The choice of model follows precisely this line: the motet *In Illo Tempore*, from which Monteverdi extrapolated the themes for his mass, had been written by Nicolas Gombert (1495 – 1560). He is one of the greatest representatives of the Flemish tradition, as well as author of masses and profane *chansons*, master of Renaissance counterpoint, and finally a courtier of Emperor Charles V. A letter sent to Vincenzo Gonzaga by Bassano Cassola, cantor at the court of Mantua, speaks of 'otto fughe', or eight themes, belonging to Gombert's motet and used by Monteverdi. Actually the themes on which the Mass is based are not eight, but ten, elaborated throughout the composition according to the typical contrapuntal processes of the *stylus antiquus*, with the exception of two sections, *Et Incarnatus* and *Benedictus*, which were composed in a completely 'unprecedented' manner. In this sense, the entire mass could also be read as a sort of response to Artusi's criticism against the composer. Artusi believed that Monteverdi did not know how to master the early compositional *prima prattica*, of which it is no coincidence that Gombert was

one of the exponents. In any case, it is undeniable that an imposing mass for six voices written in the severe ancient style carries a profound stylistic as well as (in light of the events connected with it) historical and biographical value.

Monteverdi, therefore, arrived in Venice in 1613, a city of peculiar publishing ferment and significant musical peculiarities. It was not a coincidence that here volumes were published in the first decades of the 17th century showing fundamental developments and changes in the history of many compositional genres, including the sonata. One of the fathers of the latter is Dario Castello (1602-1631): Venetian by birth, violinist at St. Mark's, thus under Monteverdi's direction, and director of a wind ensemble. Very little is known of his biography but his compositions are of great importance to us, including the second book of *Sonate Concertate in stil moderno*, published in 1629 in Venice, dedicated to Emperor Ferdinand II, reprinted in 1644 and again, in Antwerp, in 1656. A characteristic feature of Castello is the use of wind instruments; exemplary is *Sonata no. 9 a tre*, on today's programme, in which the role entrusted to the bassoon is fundamental. The pieces in the collection are then characterised, as the title suggests, by the concertato and modern style: by the former term, which appears here for the first time in reference to sonatas, we mean the use of contrasts that are applied to every aspect of the composition (solo-all, consonance-dissonance, piano-forte, etc.); by the latter we refer to a wider use of dissonances and an aesthetic that distances itself from the austere *prima prattica*. Significant is the warning Castello inserts in the preface to the first book of *Sonate concertate* in which he warns performers about the technical difficulty of the pieces. Virtuosity, for example, characterises *Sonata No. 1 a Soprano solo*, also on the programme this evening.

The composers of this period, therefore, display a strong aesthetic ambivalence and a great ability to master both compositional practices and their related genres. Emblematic of this dichotomy is, once again, Claudio Monteverdi. If the *Missa In Illo Tempore* represents the continuation of a certain stylistic tradition, the *Salmi Concertati* represents the application of the most modern compositional elements to sacred music. Just as the *Vespri della beata vergine*, also in concertato style, provides a stylistic counterpoint to the *Missa In illo tempore*, so the *Salmi* are preceded by a *Messa a 4 voci* in the posthumous collection published by Vincenti in Venice in 1650. The psalms are characterised by their *concertato* style, and the ensembles used are of great interest. The blend of voices and instruments found in the *Laetatus Sum* (7 voices, two violins and basso continuo), the *Beatus Vir* (6 voices, 5 instruments and basso continuo) and the *Confitebor II* (chant, tenor, 2 violins and basso continuo) is particularly relevant. The latter piece presents some singularities: first of all, it was composed as an extension of *Confitebor I*, and, furthermore, contains instrumental refrains typical of contemporary sonata production, such as that of Dario Castello. Monteverdi also drew from the Venetian environment for the *Dixit Dominus*; in fact, this piece takes up the typical Venetian polychoral formula, dating back to, for example, the sonatas of Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli.

Ancient and modern, tradition and innovation. The *Missa In Illo Tempore* on the one hand, the *Salmi concertati* and the *Sonate concertate* on the other. This is the dichotomy that characterises Monteverdi's compositional experience between Mantua and Venice and, more generally, the production of early 17th-century composers. The pieces on the programme this evening will allow us to fully understand this aesthetic and compositional ambivalence, taking us to a distant period whose music still resonates alive and vital today.

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