



«In churches and other spacious and wide places, music composed for four voices is hardly heard, [...] one can compose masses, psalms and dialogues and other things to be played with various instruments, mixed with voices; and to make greater intonation one can even compose for three choirs». This is how the theorist Nicola Vicentino (1511-1577) in *L'antica musica ridotta alla moderna pratica* informs us about the 'invention' of the *coro spezzato*, a rich dialogue between two independent choral entities capable of interweaving impressive sound masses with meditative solos.

It is August 19, 1613 and the procurators of St. Mark's Basilica have met to elect Claudio Monteverdi as their new maestro di cappella, thus beginning a new phase in his life, no less fruitful than his previous period in the ducal palace in Mantua, where he composed the *Sinfonia a 5* from the third act of *Orfeo*. Thanks to its homorhythmic writing, this symphony creates a sound carpet that precedes Orfeo's famous aria *Possente spirito*, and generates an aura of drama that we will find throughout much of our programme, especially in the vocal compositions.

By the time Monteverdi arrived in Venice, the practice of double choir had long been codified there, and the composer, influenced by the polychoral style, constructed dialogues and sound flows of extraordinary density between the characters he created. This will also be the case in his last books of madrigals, and it is precisely the *Sinfonia* from his eighth book (initially intended to introduce the madrigal *Altri canti d'Amor*) that serves as a prologue to this programme dedicated to the masters of the Doge's chapel.

In 1620, Canon Giulio Cesare Bianchi published his *Libro secondo de motetti* containing for the first time Monteverdi's *Laetanie della Beata Vergine* for six voices and basso continuo. This intonation of the Loreto litanies proved so valuable that it was published again in 1626 in Lorenzo Calvi's *Rosarium litaniarium* and in 1650 in the posthumous work *Messa a quattro voci et salmi*. In the religious life of Venice, the protection of the city was usually entrusted to the Virgin Mary, and this feeling of Marian devotion was further emphasised by Pope Pius V's declarations that the Venetian victory over the Turks in 1571 at the Battle of Lepanto was due to the intervention of Our Lady of the Rosary. It is very likely that Monteverdi composed the *Laetanie della Beata Vergine* on the feast of St Justina, which coincided with both the commemoration of Lepanto and the feast of the Rosary. The *Kyrie eleison* and the *Agnus Dei* open and close this piece, which through strong sound contrasts introduce groups of invocations to Mary as personification of biblical images and from other contexts («Speculum iustitiae», «Rosa mystica»), as mother and virgin («Mater Christi», «Virgo prudentissima») and as queen («Regina angelorum»).

The alternation of vocal and instrumental repertoire highlights the musical development of the Venetian school as early as the second half of the 16th century. During Monteverdi's regency, organists continued to play a prominent role taking on a wide range of tasks; but their importance never equalled that of Giovanni Gabrieli, who held the position from 1585 onwards and then took on the role of principal composer of ceremonial music for the chapel. Among other things, we have some evidence of an ensemble of six wind instruments that held the title of «*pifferi del doge*» (doge's pipers), which escorted the prince in public appearances: the open public spaces, in fact, allowed for the use of a more varied ensemble.

Contrapuntal vocal composition reappears in Gabrieli's *Canzon XII à 8*, in which the ensemble of instruments behaves exactly like a broken choir, alternating imitative sections with homorhythmic sections, and full organ sections with sections of dialogue between the two choirs: the same technique that his successors would use to achieve variations in the sound *continuum*.

Monteverdi's pupil was Francesco Cavalli, who entered St. Mark's as a cantor, then became an organist, and finally in 1668 maestro di cappella. Cavalli's large production of sacred music highlights the close relationship between him and his maestro. Like Monteverdi, Cavalli composed his liturgical and spiritual music using all the stylistic possibilities that had matured during the 17th Century, including composing in the traditional vein of 'prima pratica'. Towards the end of his remarkable career, probably in 1675, Cavalli composed his last work: a monumental *Missa pro defunctis* in preparation for his funeral services to be performed by his new chapel master, Natale Monferrato. The composer's will specified that a part of his estate should be set aside to support the annual performances of his Requiem Mass in perpetuity. The mass, composed for eight voices in two equal choirs, features a basso continuo reinforced by the presence of the violone; the organ is entrusted with the following bass, which merely doubles the voices. The ensemble is therefore extremely sober; the performance proposed by Cremona Antiqua, however, presents an enrichment of instrumental colours, exploiting the available ensemble and characterising the different sections according to the type of writing, taking into consideration of the progressive expansion of the instrumental ensemble during the second half of the 17th Century. The *Dies irae* occupies more than a third of the composition: it is an impressive movement, full of dramatic expedients, contrasts and strong harmonic colours, probably influenced by the excited style that Monteverdi used and introduced in his *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*.

Giovanni Legrenzi could have been appointed chapel master after Cavalli's death; however, the aforementioned Natale Monferrato was preferred to him by one vote, and Legrenzi qualified as vice-master in 1681. This period was very fruitful for his operatic production, but once he obtained the post of chapel master in 1683, he turned again to composing sacred music.

His *Dies irae* survives only in a Parisian manuscript entitled *Prosa pro mortuis*, containing the set sequence for double choir, violas and basso continuo. Although the structure of the composition is still that of the Venetian double choir, the aesthetics are typically late 17th-Century, in contrast to Cavalli's earlier use of the *stile antico*; the alternation of soloists, contrapuntal sections and sound masses provided by the homorhythmic writing persists. Here too, as with Cavalli's Requiem, Cremona Antiqua offers us a particularly rich version in terms of timbre, resorting to various doubling with the wind instruments, also considering the fact that it was precisely during Legrenzi's years that the Chapel of St. Mark's reached the peak of its expansion. Legrenzi made use of various strategies to render the dramatic nature of the text in music. In the strophe that reads «Quaerens me, sedisti lassus:/ Redemisti Crucem passus:/ Tantus labor non sit cassus», for example, the sense of anguish is represented by the two sopranos who, supported by the ostinato bass, end up chasing each other, conceptually forming the figure of a spiral, which will only reach its point of arrival at the end.

The Venetian school contributed to the innovation of the sacred repertoire both in terms of compositional techniques and in terms of sound organisation and expansion of the ensemble. Thanks to the major chapel masters of St. Mark's Basilica such as Gabrieli, Monteverdi, Cavalli and Legrenzi, we can finally say that «in churches and in other spacious and wide places» music will be played and heard and still today.

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