



## Venice, between the sacred and profane

This evening's programme will take us on a journey into the Venetian musical world of the first half of the 17th Century through two of the most important composers of the time: Claudio Monteverdi and Dario Castello, one representing sacred music, the other profane. Although we know so much about Monteverdi's Venetian experience, the same cannot be said about Castello. «Dario et Domenego», this is how he was baptised on October 19, 1602 in the church of San Barnaba in Venice. Documents about him also inform us about his father, Giovanni Battista, a violinist, and the people close to the Castello family: in particular, three of the godfathers chosen for Dario and his brothers belonged to the world of Venetian ensemble instrumentalism. In fact, Giovanni Battista operated in a company of instrumentalists, most likely a 5 or 6-piece polyphonic ensemble, and the presence in this company of the organist Giulio Piazzola might also suggest that they performed in the churches and entrance halls of Venice with a smaller ensemble of two violins and a keyboard instrument. It was precisely this experience, a forerunner of the new 2 and 3-piano sonata literature that developed in the 1610s and 1620s, that may have influenced the young Dario, who would put this performance practice down in writing in his two collections of *Sonate concertate in stil moderno* (1621 and 1629, reprinted until 1658). Not only that: Dario's training did not stop with his father's experience, but continued at the collegiate church of San Benedetto, whose parish priest Paolo Argentini was a music lover and the animator of a lively circle of *virtuosi*. These included Francesco Sponga *alias* Usper, an important Venetian organist and composer, Andrea's pupil and admirer of Giovanni Gabrieli, perhaps Castello's private maestro. Indeed, in his *Sonate concertate* his debt to Gabrieli is evident (especially in the principle of derivation and thematic connection, according to which each motif seems to spring from the preceding one) and to Usper, whose compositions are quoted in several passages. Thus, in his *Sonate concertate*, Castello combines and integrates his performing skills with his compositional ones. His sonatas for 1, 2, 3 and 4 voices and basso continuo are multi-sectional compositions, organised into three or four larger units, delimited by perfect cadence and rhythmic stop; these in turn are subdivided into several sections of contrasting character in terms of 'affection' and compositional technique. Castello resorts to various oppositional techniques: the «modern» concertato style, i.e. the alternation between solo and full sections; the agogic contrast, marked by indications such as «alegro», «presto», «adasio», involving sudden passages from slow fast tempo or vice versa; the dynamic contrast between «forte» and «pian», combined with echo effects; the alternation between sections written in imitative counterpoint, in which one or more thematic elements are taken up by each voice, varying them or not, and homorhythmic sections, in which all the voices proceed simultaneously with the same

rhythm. A number of expedients related to performance must be added to these compositional techniques, such as the contrast between passages in 'tremolo', typically idiomatic, and in a more legato style. Despite all these discontinuities, the sonatas possess some very strong structural elements, such as certain constant harmonic procedures and the use of the principle of thematic derivation already mentioned, which produce cohesion and unity among the sonatas themselves and between the two collections.

In the same period, Claudio Monteverdi was also fully active in Venice, being appointed maestro di cappella at St. Mark's in 1613. His experiments in these years (the publication of the *Concerto. Settimo libro de madrigali* dates back to 1619) included the use of the concertato style that is, the alternation between sections with a full orchestra and sections entrusted to the soloist or soloists, whether instrumental or vocal. Monteverdi applied this, which is the «stil moderno» referred to by Dario Castello, to both secular and sacred music. Emblematic in this regard is the motet *Fuge, anima mea, mundum* (original for soprano, contralto, violin and basso continuo), which appeared in the sacred anthology *Symbolae diversorum musicorum* edited by Don Lorenzo Calvi and published in Venice by Alessandro Vincenti in 1620. Organised in five symmetrically arranged sections, it alternates between parts where both voices are present (paired or in imitation) accompanied by basso continuo, and those where only one of the two voices is present, with the violin in echo and basso continuo. The last section identically repeats the first. This motet, therefore, represents the transposition into the sacred sphere of the writing that Monteverdi had recently exploited in the *Concerto's* madrigals. Also based on the concertato style is the psalm *Nisi Dominus* for three voices, published in the posthumous collection *Messa a quattro voci et salmi* in 1650. Here, the counterpoint of the voices is intertwined with two violins, and the closing section identically repeats the beginning, as in *Fuge, anima mea, mundum*. It also uses a strophic bass in the opening part. Quite similar to these two pieces is the strophic hymn *Deus tuorum militum* for three voices and two violins, published in *Selva morale e spirituale* in 1641. Here, the two violins interfere with the vocal parts and then play the refrain that separates the stanzas. The hymn closes with the «tutti» on the 'Amen'. Quite another discourse deserves the *Messas a Quattro Voci*, also published in the *Selva morale e spirituale*. Most likely written for ordinary functions, given its small size and small ensemble, this composition seems to take a step back in time returning to typical 16th Century counterpoint, to the *ancient style*, written for four voices *a cappella*, with only a following bass for the organ. All movements exploit the imitative counterpoint typical of Palestrina and Lasso, except for certain chordal passages in the *Credo*. Monteverdi, however, also follows the tendency to transfer the concertato style, traditionally used in the psalmody repertoire (recalling Willaert's broken psalms, where two choral masses alternate in the intonation of the verses), to the *Ordinarium missae*: in the *Selva morale e spirituale*, after the *Messa* there are fragments of an original *Credo* in concertato style, perhaps to be sung in place of the *a cappella* version. *Et resurrexit* is part of these fragments. Two concertant violins are added to a pair of voices (sopranos originally): the two pairs thus function as two trios on the same basso continuo, acting as broken choirs of reduced dimensions, imitating each other. This Venetian journey, therefore, acquaints us with, and listens to, the first developments of the «modern» concertato style, which is used in both the sacred and profane spheres. A style that would undergo great evolution during the 17th Century and become the musical emblem of the Baroque period in all its genres.

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