

Quire Cleveland to sing Monteverdi's Mantuan masterpieces at St. John's Cathedral

by Daniel Hathaway



Think of the early Baroque Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi, and images of Venice and its highly photogenic Piazza San Marco inevitably pop up — especially if the work in question is the *Vespers* of 1610. But he didn't write his most famous piece for the Most Serene Republic. Monteverdi composed the *Vespers*, along with the opera *Orfeo*, his first five books of madrigals, and the *Missa in illo tempore* when he was in the employ of the Gonzaga family in Mantua, until the family's declining economic situation made him a free agent in 1612.

Ross W. Duffin and his twenty professional singers of Quire Cleveland will explore Monteverdi's Mantuan legacy in a free concert at the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist in downtown Cleveland on Friday evening, September 30 at 7:30 pm. The program will feature the *Missa in illo tempore*, and as an innovative gesture on Duffin's part, its movements will be interspersed with madrigals from Monteverdi's fourth and fifth books that received new, sacred Latin texts from the pen of the composer's friend Aquilino Coppini.

"I discovered the *Mass* about a decade ago. I just think it's an extraordinary piece and wonder why it isn't better known," Duffin said in a telephone conversation from his office at Case Western Reserve University. "This is my chance to have it sung by a group of great musicians and introduce it to a wider audience."

From all indications, Monteverdi thought highly of the *Mass*, a work based on themes from the motet *In illo tempore* by the Franco-Flemish composer Nicolas Gombert. "This was his *prova*, the audition piece that he chose — rather than the *Vespers* — to send to the committee at San Marco in Venice to prove that he was a terrific composer," Duffin said. "Obviously he felt that it was an important work for him. I'm sorry that it's gotten short shrift to its companion, the *Vespers*, which appears in the same publication."

“Some musicologists have made excuses for the *Mass* in the light of the *Vespers*, which is so groundbreaking as a concerted piece. They say, ‘Oh, it’s old fashioned, it’s in the *stile gravis*, the Palestrina style.’ But when you listen to it, you’re surprised to find Monteverdi employing new techniques to build the music up to incredible climaxes or to wind things down at the end of a movement — techniques he wasn’t even using in his published madrigals at that point.”

Duffin said that the original Italian madrigals were re-texted by Coppini during the same period that Monteverdi worked in Mantua. “Monteverdi went to visit Coppini in Milan where he lived, so the composer must have approved of his friend’s translations. I think that Coppini intended them as church motets. Madrigals are music for soloists, but providing them with sacred texts invites the participation of a choir — and their publication. Out of the three dozen that Coppini edited, some 25 have survived. He was also a professor of rhetoric, so he was able both to match the accentuation of the texts and to write poetry that captured the emotional content of the originals in a surprising way. They’re incredibly beautiful, emotionally charged pieces with unexpected entrances and exciting dissonances.”

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