

## Apollo's Fire: Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610* (Oct. 8)

by Peter Feher



Apollo's Fire can't help returning to the music of Claudio Monteverdi. Cleveland's period orchestra revived its thrilling take on the composer's *Vespers of 1610* to start the season, and you couldn't ask for a better beginning. The 40-odd singers and instrumentalists who filled First Baptist Church in Shaker Heights on Saturday, October 8 had musical riches to spare, and a distinctive creative vision united it all.

The unifying thread wasn't Monteverdi, however, but artistic director Jeannette Sorrell, who's made a focused project out of this sometimes sprawling piece. Part of the challenge lies in the work's sheer scope, which is emblematic of the composer's career. The music looks back on older Renaissance and Medieval styles while also anticipating the innovations of the Baroque era.

But another challenge is distinctly modern. How do you interpret a centuries-old composition when certain details (tempos, dynamics, instrumentation) seem to be absent from the score? That's the basic question animating the historical-performance movement, and Sorrell's solution is the right one: to combine research and rigor with the natural strengths of the performers she's working with.

The *Vespers of 1610* is something of a *raison d'être* for Apollo's Fire — because it's both a period work and a perfect fit for the players. And it helps that the group has been presenting the work for three decades now (including an acclaimed 1998 recording).

Saturday's performance made clear why this is music that invites repeat listening. In thirteen movements, Monteverdi traverses a startling range of styles, from introductory phrases in Gregorian chant, to florid full-ensemble sections that sound like Renaissance madrigals, to solo moments that have the timeless quality of love songs. Sorrell brought

out these jarring shifts in her conducting, setting long passages in motion and then letting cadences pop up by surprise. It was entirely in the composer's spirit.

Soloists added to the drama, sometimes with just a line or two above the chorus and sometimes for a full movement at the front of the ensemble. Baritone Edward Vogel led off the proceedings as cantor, intoning solemn phrases that the rest of the singers would emulate.

Tenor Jacob Perry took center stage for the motet "Nigra sum," the first in a series of vocal showcases that distinguish the piece. This remarkable number — along with the next motet, "Pulchra es," delivered beautifully by sopranos Erica Schuller and Molly Netter — gets its text from the *Song of Songs*, a curiosity in an otherwise chaste religious work. But it's a brilliant exception, the combination of love poetry, vocal virtuosity, and the simple plucked accompaniment of theorbo making for something transcendent.

The singing grew more ornate for two additional motets, with tenors Steven Caldicott Wilson and Haitham Haidar handling vocal writing so extravagant that it could occasionally dwarf its devotional subject.

But pomp was part of the piece for Apollo's Fire, and everyone would get the chance to show off in the final Magnificat. Solo moments were traded naturally between vocalists and instrumentalists — the violin duet between Alan Choo and Emi Tanabe was a particular highlight — almost as if this work had been crafted with one ensemble in mind.

Apollo's Fire follows up last weekend's presentation with two more performances of Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610* — in Akron at St. Paul's Episcopal Church on October 14 and again in Shaker Heights at First Baptist Church on October 15.

*Photo: an earlier performance of the Vespers at Trinity Cathedral.*

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