

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 11 September 2021 7.30pm

## Vox Luminis

**Zsuzsi Tóth** soprano  
**Perrine Devillers** soprano  
**Victoria Cassano** soprano  
**Tessa Roos** soprano  
**Korneel Van Neste** alto  
**Jan Kullmann** alto  
**João Moreira** tenor  
**Jacob Lawrence** tenor  
**Lionel Meunier** bass, director  
**Sebastian Myrus** bass

**Tuomo Suni** violon  
**Johannes Frisch** violon  
**Benoit Vanden Bemden** violone  
**Justin Glaie** theorbo  
**Sarah Ridy** harp  
**Anthony Romaniuk** organ

**Claudio Monteverdi** (1567-1643)

Gloria à 7 SV258 (1641)  
Dixit Dominus (Secondo) SV264 (1641)  
Beatus vir (Primo) SV268 (1641)  
Adoramus te Christe SV289 (1620)  
Cruxifixus SV259 (1641)  
Laetaniae della Beata Vergine à 6 SV204 (1620)  
Christe, adoramus te SV294 (1620)  
Confitebor tibi Domine (Terzo) SV267 (1641)  
Magnificat (Primo) SV281 (1641)

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Tonight's programme from the Belgian ensemble Vox Luminis begins of a thread of concerts throughout the season celebrating **Claudio Monteverdi's** music.

During his lifetime, Monteverdi published his compositions to initially establish, and later to reinforce, his professional reputation. This enabled him to move from his provincial birthplace, Cremona, to Mantua and finally to Venice. Perhaps the *Vespro della Beata Vergine*, from 1610, helped convince the Venetians of his suitability for the role of maestro di cappella at St Mark's Basilica. When appointed, Monteverdi was the most celebrated composer of the day. He remained there until he died, some 30 years later. His responsibilities were onerous: training numerous permanent singers and instrumentalists alongside others as needed for cantatas honouring the Doge and the many Saints' feast days. All of these events required new music, as did the services at St Mark's.

All but three works performed tonight come from the *Selva morale e spirituale*, literally the *Moral and Spiritual Forest*. Published in 1640, it was the first collated volume containing some of Monteverdi's Venetian sacred music. Later editions bear a dedication to Eleonora Gonzaga, the daughter of his Mantuan patron. The *Selva* contains 37 separate works: movements from Masses; psalms, canticles and hymns for Vespers; madrigals on Latin texts; chants and multiple settings of other texts. They were not conceived to be performed sequentially and also existed as stand-alone pieces, as they do today. The *Selva's* compositions are stylistically varied and extol Monteverdi's dictum of 'recitar cantando' – literally 'speak through singing'. Even in later life, Monteverdi's liturgical writing evolved and stretched the demands made of performers. Through his music Monteverdi expressed humanity with feeling and pathos unlike any other composer. Thus, the *Selva* sealed Monteverdi's reputation as a liturgical composer for posterity.

The magnificent *Gloria à 7* is set for seven voices accompanied by two violins and other optional instruments. Both its length and intricacy of writing led scholars to conjecture it was written for a specific occasion, maybe the foundation of the Santa Maria della Salute church or the cessation of the plague in Venice. However, it is now thought to belong to a Christmas or Easter Mass. Written in five sections, its structure is reinforced by having the elaborate opening figurations return part way through and then at the close. Contrasting slow-moving harmonies draw emphasis to specific phrases.

The *Dixit Dominus (Secondo)* is the *Selva's* second setting of Psalm 110. Scored for eight voices – pairs of sopranos, altos, tenors and basses – it forms the opening psalm of the Vespers in the Roman rite. It was most likely written for performance at St Mark's, which stipulated these forces for feast day services attended by the Doge. Monteverdi utilises the polyphonic possibilities of the eight voices to highlight the majesty and power of God.

For the *Beatus vir (Primo)*, Psalm 111 and written for six voices with a ternary structure, Monteverdi employs elaborated versions of music from his *Seventh Book of Madrigals* (1619) in the outer sections. Each line is first sung by a soprano over an instrumental bass line before being repeated with ornamentation.

In 1620, Monteverdi contributed his tender setting of 'Adoramus te Christe, Vergine', and its variant 'Christe, adoramus te', to Giulio Bianchi's *First Book of Motets*. The former offers a refined moment for inner reflection. The latter is notable for the chromaticism the five voices bring to the words, 'quia per sanctam crucem'. They were written to be performed in Holy Week or when the Holy Blood relic was displayed. A letter conveys that he had 'to be ready with works for the entire day'. The *Cruxifixus* is sparsely written in the conservative *stile antico* for alto, first and second tenors and bass voices with basso continuo accompaniment. It deliberately avoids undue dissonance in the vocal or instrumental parts.

The *Laetaniae della Beata Vergine à 6* was published posthumously in 1650. Devotion to the Virgin Mary was a strong presence in Venetian religious life after Pope Pius V declared that the city enjoyed the Virgin's protection. The Litany's series of saintly invocations, a complex structure of verse settings, appears between the Kyrie eleison and Agnus Dei.

The *Confitebor tibi Domine (Terzo)* the *Selva's* third setting of this text, may be performed by five voices or one voice and four string instruments. Inscribed 'alla francese', some authorities have speculated that like Monteverdi's other French style works, there should be alternations between solo voices and the full choir in performance. Syllables are set to pairs of notes and the ninth stanza's brief volley of semiquavers recalls their warlike use in Monteverdi's 1624 madrigal, 'Combattimento'.

The *Magnificat (Primo)* the finale of the Vespers service, is the Virgin's joyful response upon hearing that she would bear the son of God. Scored for eight voices in two four-part choirs, violins and varied continuo, its publication mistakenly included two alto and bass violone instrumental parts instead of the intended vocal ones. Therefore, Choirmasters must utilise some reconstructed vocal parts in performance. Any successful performance requires judicious tempo choices, security of vocal pitch and accuracy of attack, clarity of enunciation blended with beautiful tone, both vocal and instrumental. These qualities bring Monteverdi's genius to life.

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