

**Concert Report: Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute:  
Claudio Monteverdi—'Vespro della Beata Vergine' (June 25)**

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The Baroque Performance Institute at Oberlin College has been a fixture of the northeast Ohio summer music scene for decades. Often known by its initials, BPI is a place where seasoned professionals in historically informed

performance practices share trade secrets with up and coming early music performers. For this 39th institute the theme is “Music in Italy from Monteverdi to Tartini,” with an array of classes, Baroque dance lessons, faculty concerts, “fringe concerts,” and other events.

The main concert event for 2010 was a performance of Claudio Monteverdi’s *Vespro della Beata Vergine* of 1610, on Friday, June 25, in Warner Concert Hall on the Oberlin campus. This monumental work, lasting almost two hours -- including an intermission in this performance -- was dedicated to Pope Paul V, a member of the influential Borghese family, and was, as program annotator Steven Plank describes, “a well-aimed attempt to secure financial aid for [Monteverdi’s] nine-year-old son to attend seminary in Rome.” The ploy worked; in 1613 Monteverdi was appointed director of music at Venice’s St. Mark’s Basilica.

The work is not exactly liturgical, although it does follow the basic outline of the Vespers service, a sequence of Psalms and canticles with appropriate antiphons, to which Monteverdi appends several vocal concerti, an instrumental sonata with a vocal ostinato (the wonderful *Sonata sopra Sancta Maria*). Monteverdi chose psalms related to the Virgin Mary, as well as texts from the Song of Songs, or in some cases, influenced by those Song of Songs texts. In some performances of the Monteverdi Vespers, the Gregorian antiphons appropriate

to the liturgical day are chanted before the psalm settings. This performance eschewed that practice, using instead the vocal concerti to punctuate the performances of the psalms.

Monteverdi’s music was cutting edge for its day, and even four hundred years later the Vespers is astonishing for its complexity and brilliance, along with the total virtuosity that is required in its performance, both by singers and instrumentalists. The vocal ensemble of thirteen singers must be a cohesive choral group, but each must be a very accomplished solo singer as well. (I note that the singers were not individually credited by movement in the Vespers, so, regrettably, I can only identify some of them here.) The instrumental ensemble of strings, recorders, cornetti, sackbuts, and organ and theorbo continuo was conducted by BPI artistic director Kenneth Slowik, who also provided organ continuo on some of the smaller vocal concerti. Special credit must go to hard-working theorbo player Lucas Harris for his sensitive support throughout the performance.

The “star” singer of the performance was BPI faculty member and distinguished English tenor John Elwes (who achieved fame early in life as the boy soprano who sang in the first recorded performance of Britten’s *Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac*, with the composer at the piano). Elwes (pictured above with *Santa Fe Pro Musica*) has a strong, flexible voice, almost with some baritonal tinges to it, but he was also able to blend well in the choral ensemble. The beloved veteran soprano Penelope Jensen, also a BPI faculty member, was also a part of this fine group of singers. The two faculty were given a run for their money by the advanced BPI voice students who made up the rest of the ensemble. In particular, tenor Barrett Radziun was brilliant in his solo performances, some of them from afar as an echo to Mr. Elwes.

Monteverdi’s music uses his assembled forces in every conceivable combination, so there was lots of shuffling of people around on the stage in between sections. Mr. Slowik used the space of Warner Hall creatively, with some of the sections

sung antiphonally from the organ gallery above the stage. For me, one of the highlights of the entire performance was the Sonata sopra Sancta Maria, with the orchestra on the main stage and four sopranos (two on each side of the upper organ gallery) singing eleven times the chant Sancta Maria, ora pro nobis (“Holy Mary, pray for us.”) over an ever-changing orchestral texture. It was magical.

The Duo Seraphim movement requires three tenors (here, a high baritone was pressed into service as the third tenor) to sing overlapping solo lines punctuated with the most brilliant ornamentation based on a text explicating the Holy Trinity.

The Vespers ends with concerted settings of the Marian hymn Ave maris stella (Hail, star of the sea) in which Mary is praised as the mother of God, and the evening canticle Magnificat, Mary’s song of praise after the Angel Gabriel announces to her that

she will give birth to Jesus. In these two final movements, Monteverdi summons all of his contrapuntal skill, with decorated passages above the chanted texts, with antiphonal effects.

The performance had something of a tentative feel to it, with a false start at the very beginning, but seemed to settle in as it progressed. There were some minor pitch problems in some of the choral passages, particularly in the women’s parts. But these are minor quibbles in the grand scheme of getting to hear this masterpiece of western music.

Warner Hall was well-filled. The diversity of the audience was notable, from the senior citizens bused in from Kendal at Oberlin, to college students, to adult participants in BPI, to the skateboarder boy (with his wheels in hand) who positioned himself in the front row. All were rewarded with a rare treat.