

Monteverdi's 1610 Vespers: possibilities for instrumental doubling

This is an issue which causes many a headache in preparing for rehearsals of this wonderful piece: of course, any doubling is optional (none is specifically requested by Monteverdi) and so the purist's option could be no doubling at all. When a performance includes a small, elite choir performing one or two singers to a part this is usually the best way to perform as it makes the instrumental interludes all the more special.

At the other end of the scale is the possibility of doubling some, many or most of the tutti choral sections in the psalms. With a larger choir, or one for whom this is their first foray into music of this style or period, this can be very helpful at certain moments.

So the decision about how much doubling to use is one for the conductor, based on the nature of the choir, the venue and type of performance.

However, what may be helpful here is to make a few practical observations about which instruments should double which parts in the places where doubling is required, to avoid common pitfalls.

One important thing is to make a clear distinction between the double choir and single choir movements: one simple way to do this is in the double choir movements (Laudate Pueri, Nisi Dominus, Lauda Jerusalem and Ave Maris Stella) to divide any doubling instruments so that strings double one choir and wind the other.

Another sensible approach is to make sure that any doubling is evenly spread amongst the voices - so that no voices are favoured by having 2 instruments cover their line while another one in the middle of the texture is neglected.

So with this in mind, here are a few notes on each movement:

Dixit Dominus

Since Monteverdi writes instrumental ritornelli, it works well to limit the instruments to these moments, so they are more of a feature. However they could also join for the Sicut erat if you prefer a grander ending.

If you have 6 string players including violone, there is a string part missing (Quintus - ideally suited to a small bass violin tuned in F/G - the "luxury" version of the string band has 7 players to accommodate this!) which could be taken by the bass violin if the violone takes the lowest part. However the second ritornello has rather a high quintus part, so it is better to have strings on the first ritornello, wind on the second and either, both, or a combination on the 3rd, which avoids the problem neatly.

Laudate Pueri (8 parts, 2 choirs)

Any doubling should reflect this: one option would be

choir 1- violin, viola, viola, bass

choir 2 - 2 cornetts, 2 sackbutts (or vice versa)

Laetatus sum (6 parts)

Tenor and quintus ranges don't suit the string band very well, so any doubling should ideally be wind only to avoid some voices losing out.

This is often done with bowed bass on the walking bass line but there is not really any historical basis for this; however with a large choir and a generous acoustic this can be helpful.

Nisi Dominus (10 parts, 2 choirs)

Again, strings for one choir and wind for the other makes sense; this can be done with 2 sackbuts doubling the cantus firmus in each choir, but one viola and one sackbut can also work well, especially with a strings/wind divide.

Audi Coelum from **Omnes** onwards (6 parts)

Like this Laetatus sum, any doubling would fit cornets and sackbutts better.

Alternatively a mixture might also work - just as long as no voice gets missed out.

Lauda Jerusalem (6 parts, 2 choirs plus independent tenor line)

Any doubling again could reflect the 2 choirs: violin, viola, bass violin for one, cornet and 2 sackbuts for the other

Hymnus (8 parts, 2 choirs)

Here is is relatively straightforward to have strings for one choir and wind for the other if you want instrumental doubling in verse 1 or 7

Ritornello (5 parts, instrumental)

This is often done alternating between strings and wind; however while this can work well, it can be equally effective to mix up the instrumental groups a little: for example, it is very common in works of this period to find violins playing with sackbuts.