

Masterworks Chorale

Fall Concert 2019

PROGRAM NOTES

Claudio Monteverdi: *Christe, adoramus te*, SV 294

Monteverdi: *Cantate Domino canticum novum*, SV 293

Monteverdi: *Adoramus te, Christe*, SV 289

Antonio Vivaldi: *Dixit Dominus* ("Di Praga"), RV 595

Vivaldi: *Gloria*, RV 589

The Baroque Era of Western music lasted at least a century and a half, from the invention of opera around 1600 to the death of Bach in 1750. It encompasses a wide variety of styles that evolved over time in different regions of Europe. Although much of the diversity in Baroque music arises from the differences among national styles (Italian, French, and German), tonight's concert presents temporal stylistic extremes within a single city—or, more precisely, city state—the Republic of Venice.

Unlike the Renaissance, when musical innovations in northern France and the Netherlands spread to the south, Baroque music originated in Italy and moved north. In experimenting with composing music that would deliver text clearly, the Italians invented monody—solo vocal music with plain instrumental accompaniment. Without the contrapuntal constraints of Renaissance polyphony, composers were free to experiment with communicating emotion more vividly through musical rhetoric, instrumental color, and adventurous harmony.

Monteverdi lived through this transition, and his music mixes elements of the old *stile antico* (former style) and the new *stile moderno* (current style). Much of what he did to transform the madrigal can be observed in his motets, where each line of text conveys a different mood. By the time of Vivaldi, the art and technique of both vocal and instrumental music had matured tremendously. Opera featured virtuoso singers, and concertos featured virtuoso players. Vivaldi, who wrote about fifty of the former and over five hundred of the latter, masterfully incorporated elements of both into his sacred works. The *Dixit Dominus* and *Gloria* performed this evening are akin to the late Baroque cantata mass. As multipartite expansions of the motet with each movement dedicated to a line of text, they afford Vivaldi the opportunity to thoroughly explore each contrasting mood.

Claudio Monteverdi: *Christe, adoramus te*, SV 294

Monteverdi: *Cantate Domino canticum novum*, SV 293

Monteverdi: *Adoramus te, Christe*, SV 289

The Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643) was a transformative figure who masterfully negotiated the startling transition from the Renaissance to the Baroque eras. Baroque composers placed a singular focus on portraying specific moods, or affects, through their music. For vocal music, this was dictated by the particular emotions inspired by the text. Monteverdi spent a lifetime writing vocal music: from the age of fifteen, when he published his first sacred trios, to his mid-seventies, when his opera *L'incoronazione di Poppea* premiered, he seems never to have composed a single purely instrumental work. In between, Monteverdi wrote hundreds of compositions for the stage, the church, and the chamber, including nine celebrated books of madrigals. Presenting a shifting series of moods in a madrigal while maintaining musical unity is a skill he applied to his sacred music as well. The motet ***Christe, adoramus te*** (SV 294) is a study in expressive contrast, juxtaposing multiple textures (homophonic, polyphonic, and monophonic) and harmonic palettes (diatonic and chromatic) to convey adoration, agony, and supplication while maintaining complete musical poise. The spirited ***Cantate Domino canticum novum*** (SV 293) is not only more overtly madrigalian, its

remarkable “Cantate et exultate” section is based on an actual madrigal (*Ecco mormorar l’onde* from the second book). The texts of *Christe, adoramus te* and ***Adoramus te, Christe*** (SV 289) are closely related, and the motets project their affects similarly. In the former, Monteverdi builds musical tension by employing, in the words of the musicologist Denis Arnold, “sensuous, ecstatic chromaticism.” But in the latter, he does so by setting the words “quia per sanguinem tuum pretiosum” to imitative counterpoint that becomes denser by the bar. Arnold writes that *Adoramus te, Christe* “is an economical yet strong piece by a master of both choral sound and madrigalian intensity.” All three motets make use of musical repeats in different ways to impart structural unity and integrity to their small but mercurial forms.

Antonio Vivaldi: *Gloria*, RV 589

Vivaldi: *Dixit Dominus* (“Di Praga”), RV 595

Second only to *The Four Seasons*, the ***Gloria*** (RV 589) is the best-known composition of Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741) and among the most celebrated vocal works of the Baroque period. That Vivaldi’s music is as popular as it is today is due to the discovery of what is believed to have been his personal manuscript collection by Luigi Torri and Alberto Gentili in 1926. The approximately 7,800 folios of unearthed music, including sacred and secular works of all genres, are currently housed in the Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria in Turin. The first modern performance of the *Gloria* took place on September 20, 1939, in Siena during a week-long festival that marked the beginning of the Vivaldi revival. Since then, the *Gloria* has enjoyed almost unparalleled popularity among professional and amateur ensembles alike.

As the *Gloria* is scored for four-part chorus of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, it is usually performed by mixed choruses, as it is tonight. However, mixed choirs would almost certainly not have performed sacred works in eighteenth-century Europe. The idea of men and women singing together in church was nothing short of indecent. When women were permitted to sing at church, they were separated from the men. Although the *Gloria* was published for “mixed” choirs of men and boys—the soprano and alto parts would have been sung by boys and

countertenors, respectively—Vivaldi actually composed the *Gloria* for a choir comprising only women and girls.

Vivaldi wrote much of his sacred music for the Pio Ospedale della Pietà, one of the four *ospedali grandi* (great hospitals) of Venice. The *ospedali* were charitable institutions that cared largely for homeless children, mainly female wards who stayed until they entered married or convent life, both of which required dowries. Girls earned their dowries either through labor or by serving as musicians in the *coro*. The *cori* of the *ospedali*, which included singers as well as instrumentalists, were an important part of Venetian musical and social life, and many composers wrote music specifically for them. The religious services held in the *ospedali* chapels contained so much music that they were very nearly concerts. They were not only attended by Venetian high society but also drew visitors from all over Europe. With nearly a thousand residents, the Pietà was the largest of the *ospedali* by far and sustained a substantial choir and a diverse orchestra, each approximately twenty members strong. Vivaldi was appointed to the instructional staff, as *maestro di violino* in 1713 and then as *maestro de' concerti* in 1716. Over the course of the rest of his life, the Pietà paid Vivaldi for a steady supply of concertos and other instrumental works as well as for directing performances of them when he was in Venice.

Given that in its only surviving manuscript, the *Gloria* is scored for four-part “mixed” chorus, how might have it been performed at the Pietà? The Vivaldi scholars Michael Talbot and Joan Whittemore suggest that if the tenor and bass parts could not be sung even by girls and women who specialized in singing in the lower registers, they would have been transposed up an octave. Indeed, this is a convenient practical solution for modern treble choruses.

The *Gloria* shares certain characteristics with the other choral works Vivaldi wrote for the Pietà. Because they were performed by females, the choral bass lines are confined to a higher register and doubled by instruments of the orchestra. (The lowest notes of the bass line of the *Gloria*, transposed up an octave, lie near the bottom of an alto’s functional range.) The inclusion of solo movements for female voices only is an obvious consequence of the performing forces that were available. The instrumentation of the *Gloria*—oboe, trumpet, strings, and basso continuo—is somewhat common to the works written for the Pietà. The

pairing of a single oboe and a single trumpet is particularly Venetian; it was frequently used in music performed at the Basilica di San Marco from 1689 to 1732. Talbot speculates that the *Gloria* was written in 1716, possibly celebrating a Venetian victory over the Turks in the sixth war between the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire.

Much of the appeal of the *Gloria* is due to the wide variety of musical styles Vivaldi used in the work. Such diversity was a goal of the Neapolitan school, the dominating influence on eighteenth-century church music. Composers of the Neapolitan school wrote masses in the *stilus mixtus* (mixed style), which combined contrapuntal choruses written in the *stile antico* (old style), concerto-like choruses, and operatic arias for solo voices. To achieve this diversity, the number of movements in a mass was increased by partitioning the text into small groups of phrases or even single phrases. In the *Gloria*, the diversity of style is reinforced by a diversity of mood as well. The four solo movements, or church arias, alone are evidence of this. Those for soprano are the playful duet “Laudamus te” and the lyric “Domine Deus, Rex coelestis,” while those for alto are the mournful “Domine Deus, Agnus Dei” and the powerful “Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris.”

The first movement, “Gloria in excelsis Deo,” is akin to a concerto allegro. The orchestral introduction, based on what Talbot calls “the most famous and instantly recognized motive based on the interval of an octave in the whole of musical literature,” becomes a kind of ritornello over which the choir homophonically declaims the text. This heavenly exuberance gives way to the anguished, earthly calm of “Et in terra pax.” Talbot notes, “There is no word-painting in this movement, but Vivaldi’s control of pace, density of texture, . . . unrelenting use of chromaticism and spine-chilling modulations wind up tension to produce a feeling of desolation and desperation: this is a plea for peace from those who enjoy all too little of it.”

“Laudamus te,” a joyful chamber-style duet for sopranos, relieves the tension of the preceding movement. The dialog between the voices recalls, according to Talbot, “an old meaning of the word ‘concerto’—the idea of vying with someone in order to achieve a common purpose (which in this case is to sing God’s praises).” In “Gratias agimus tibi” homophonic choral declamations introduce a short, imitative setting of the text “propter magnam gloriam,”

in which the multifariousness of God's "great glory" is symbolized by the multiple entrances of the fugato subject. The fugato is written in the *stile antico* with orchestral doubling of the choral parts. As Vivaldi received little or no training in counterpoint, he sometimes borrowed music written in the *stile antico* from other composers. Scholars suspect that this fugato was borrowed, although no model has yet been identified. (As noted below, however, the model for the final movement of the *Gloria* is known.)

"Domine Deus, Rex coelestis" calls for solo oboe and basso continuo to accompany the soprano solo. The aria takes the form of a gentle siciliana. Vivaldi permeates "Domine Fili unigenite" with repeated dotted (*saccadé* or "jerked") rhythms characteristic of the French style. Vivaldi specifically labels this style as "alla francese" in other similar pieces. The repeated harmonic progressions and triple meter make this movement a type of chaconne. "Domine Deus, Agnus Dei" is composed as a call-and-response movement for solo alto and chorus. The lament-like instrumental introduction and accompaniment for the solo is scored for reduced basso continuo forces. The chorus, doubled by the orchestra, interrupts the aria eight times, at first supplying words not sung by the solo ("qui tollis peccata mundi") and later echoing the alto's cries for mercy ("miserere nobis"). The expressive chromatic harmonies in "Qui tollis peccata mundi" underline the pleading nature of the text. In "Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris," a fiery alto aria, Vivaldi emphasizes the meaning of the text by setting the first syllable of the word *sedes* (sits) on a note sustained for three full bars. "Quoniam tu solus sanctus," which briefly recapitulates material used in the first movement, acts as a kind of introduction to the concluding fugue.

It was customary for *stilus mixtus* settings of the *Gloria* text to end with a fugue. "Cum Sancto Spiritu" is a double fugue in the *stile antico* and was borrowed from the *Gloria per due chori* (RV Anh. 23) by Giovanni Maria Ruggieri, who also worked in Venice. Although Vivaldi's "Cum Sancto Spiritu" and Ruggieri's model, both in D major, only differ in length by a single bar—Vivaldi's is shorter—Vivaldi made substantial revisions to the harmony, text underlay, and part-writing; he had to reduce the original scoring for double choir and double orchestra to one of each. (Vivaldi admired Ruggieri's fugue so much that he also borrowed it to conclude his

only other surviving *Gloria*, RV 588, which is thought to be an earlier work than RV 589.). The lively writing of this chorus brings the entire work to a spirited close.

While it is thought that Vivaldi composed the *Dixit Dominus* (RV 595) around the same time as the *Gloria*, it was not transmitted through the same trove of manuscripts. In fact, according to Talbot, it “is certainly the longest, and arguably also the finest, of the vocal compositions by Vivaldi not preserved among the manuscripts . . . in Turin.” The *Dixit Dominus* earned its byname “Di Praga” because its sole source is a set of parts housed at the Národní Muzeum (National Museum) in Prague, which probably accounts for its relative obscurity. (A modern edition was only published in 1993.) The scorings of the two works are similar, making it likely that the *Dixit Dominus* was also written for the Pietà. Its orchestra requires only an extra oboe, both works feature arias just for soprano and alto, and the choral bass part avoids notes that would be too low when sung by women up an octave.

Even more striking are the structural similarities. The works share an eleven-movement framework designed to exploit contrasts in mood while providing overall musical unity. As in the *Gloria*, the *Dixit Dominus* opens with an energetic allegro in D major (“Dixit Dominus Domino meo”) and moves to a slower, minor-mode, imitative movement in triple time (“Donec ponam”). A sprightly soprano aria (“Virgam virtutis”) and a dignified duet for sopranos and cellos (“Tecum principium”) follow. In the bipartite “Juravit Dominus,” solemn and chromatic choral statements serve as introduction to a fast fugato, a structure that recalls that of “Gratias agimus tibi” from the *Gloria*. (Vivaldi adapted the fugato from a setting by an anonymous composer.) “Dominus a dextris” is a virtuosic aria for soprano. In the dramatic “Judicabit in nationibus,” the call of the Last Trumpet is answered first by a solo alto singing of the Last Judgment and then by driving music for unison chorus depicting the destruction of nations. (Choral unison is a device often employed by Vivaldi to project a powerful image, although he does not use it in the *Gloria*.) “De torrente” is a haunting aria for alto. In the stately “Gloria Patri,” Vivaldi cannily reduces the scoring to altos, tenors, basses, and basso continuo only so that the unexpected entrance of the full orchestra and chorus in the next movement is all the more impactful. (“Gloria Patri” is a heavily transformed version of a trio by another Venetian composer, Antonio Lotti.) As in the *Gloria*, a short recapitulation of the first movement, which

provides cyclic unity to the work as whole, leads to a majestic, contrapuntal finale. In this case, recalling the work's opening for "Sicut erat in principio" ("As it was in the beginning") and setting "Et in saecula saeculorum" ("world without end") to long-breathed, overlapping lines also serve as vivid musical representations of the text.

— *Kevin Leong*

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