

Monteverdi's Gloria for 8 voices M 38

Find out how the status of the bass line has changed over the centuries, learn en route what a continuo is and enjoy some other composers' settings of the Gloria

If you look up the Monteverdi Gloria on the internet, you'll probably find it described as being for 8 Voices and Continuo. The continuo, or basso continuo is the bass line (hence "basso") that is played all the time) hence "continuo"). Monteverdi was one of the earliest composers to adopt this technique. He gave a lot of thought to the bass line, and built his music on it. You hear it on the recording, often starting sections – helping the singers to get their notes.

It wasn't always like that – and not all that much earlier. Leonel Power was an English composer who died in 1445. His "Gloria" survived, and you can hear it at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orRhbqcJ90I> (The picture's is nice, but about 200 years younger than the music). At this time, and for some years later, the first words: Gloria in excelsis Deo" were sung as plainsong. The setting began with "Et in terra pax". The piece needs 5 singers, but they only all sing together in the last section. Composers at this period put their music together by thinking about how all the lines combined, rather than planning out the chords. The bass line is just the lowest line.

We don't know which instruments Monteverdi had in mind for the continuo in the Gloria. He would probably have had at least 2, one of which could play a strong bass line and the other, the chords that sat on that line. We know that the bass line was taken from the bass vocal parts – using whichever note was the lowest. It probably continued when the bass singers stopped, playing the chords implied by the upper parts. Monteverdi often used a wonderful instrument called a theorbo – a very long lute, created especially to be able to play low notes and chords. He would have placed his continuo players in the middle of the church, so wherever members of the congregation sat they would be able to hear the all-important bass part. Watch a splendid video demonstrating the theorbo and what it does on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVabz8Lnel4>

By the time Vivaldi wrote his Gloria, in about 1715 – nearly a century after Monteverdi, the basso continuo was a fixture in all music. Anyone studying music had to learn to use it to add chords and, if composing, make it the foundation of their piece. By now, the harpsichord was used a lot to play the chords. The harpsichord has a keyboard like the piano, and strings too – but these are plucked, while a piano's are struck by hammers. This gives the harpsichord its twangy sound. At this time, it wasn't usual to have a conductor, instead the person holding the performance together directed from the keyboard. Try this video of the first movement of Vivaldi's Gloria, with Trevor Pinnock doing just that. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQx2TWgxX14> You'll see there's a theorbo too, and an organ – you can just hear the sound of that sometimes.

There's a lovely video of the whole of the Gloria performed in Venice in period costume. Vivaldi worked for nearly 40 years at "La Pietà" an orphanage for girls where all who showed ability were trained to a high level in music. One movement of the Gloria is for solo soprano, and in that section you can see the singer accompanied by theorbo, 'cello and harpsichord covering the continuo, and an oboe. It starts at 10.59. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cgaOVV4JQHA>

J S Bach probably wrote his Cantata BV191 (its number in the catalogue of Bach's works) in 1745. It starts with a Gloria that he later used in his famous Mass in B minor. Bach always used a continuo. On this recording, it's played on the 'cello, double bass and organ. There is a conductor. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eChEWK_4B3Q

Composers such as Mozart and Haydn played the keyboard to direct performances – helpful when rehearsal time was short, but by their time, the glory days of the continuo were over. The bass line was still very important, defining the harmonies, but it was integrated within the orchestra or chamber group. Poulenc wrote his Gloria in 1959, continuo-free. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUaZlIRp8tA>