

## Monteverdi's Gloria for 8 voices M 40

### Find out about the context of the Gloria

There are 5 sections in the core of the mass which is the same every day. These are the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei. If you sing through each section using plainsong, you can get through a whole mass pretty rapidly, but from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, composers began to set the words more elaborately for groups of singers.

Many composers have written separate settings of just the Gloria. In some cases, such as Vivaldi's, each section is set as a separate movement, making a substantial whole.

We don't know for sure when Monteverdi wrote the Gloria for 8 voices, but around 1625 is thought to be likely. At that time he was in charge of music at St. Mark's in Venice. The piece is in the style that flourished at St Mark's for many years – exploiting the various places round the church where you could perform and the acoustic of the building by writing for groups echoing each other from different positions. It has various names – polychoral is one. There's a good article on Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venetian\\_polychoral\\_style](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venetian_polychoral_style)

Monteverdi was writing for the Catholic church, which allowed the music to be florid. If he had been employed in England or a Lutheran state, he would have been required to set the words simply so they could be heard clearly and understood by all – think of Tallis "If Ye Love Me". Monteverdi could focus on conveying the emotion carried by the words.

Some earlier composers wrote in a polyphonic style (many tunes), where the most important things were the individual lines of the music. These wove together creating harmony from time to time, but the harmony was the outcome of the lines combining. Composers writing for St Mark's could not use this style – the acoustic made it all too muddy. They needed to start with the harmony, in other words the chords sequence, and ensure that was clear. They had to make sure the changes between the chords were not too rapid.

St Mark's was very proud of its music. By 1612, more than 30 adult singers were employed. The number of choir boys is not known, but there must have been at least as many. There were instrumentalists too, as well as the all important organists. Distributing the different groups – of singers, players or a mixture, was quite a logistical exercise. One person held the whole thing together beating time, while groups at a distance had their own sub-conductors who kept watching the person in charge and passing the beat on. That was done by either a down up movement of the arm – a bit like today, or by tapping on performers' shoulders. Those who funded the church and came to the services must have thought it was all worthwhile.

The performers didn't have a score. Good thing, you might think, if you find it tricky to follow when there are so many lines of music. Imagine what it must have been like, though, when you just had your own line of music. You really had to count your rests to get your entire right.

Imagine experiencing the Gloria in St Mark's. Depending on where you are sitting, one or both of the choirs will be out of sight. The music comes to you from two different directions. At the start of the piece you are assaulted by the opening figure again and again, from the left and the left, then the right and the right, until the air is full of it. Imagine the change of mood in bar 16, (0.43) when the tenors from each side are in dialogue, soon to be joined by the altos. Here come the boys (sopranos) in bar 32, (1.43) and the high-pitched figure they introduce gradually descends from heaven to earth as everyone joins in to praise, bless, adore and glorify before coming together to give thanks in a hymn-like section (bar 46) (2.37).

Work your way through the rest of the piece, mapping out in your imagination the spatial aspect of the music and the way Monteverdi plays on the emotions of the listener.