

Monteverdi's Gloria for 8 voices M 31

Learn how Monteverdi uses modulations and discords to keep the music interesting

You need your score to refer to

We know from Monteverdi's letters that he was concerned to ensure his longer pieces of music didn't get boring. One of the ways he did that was alternating sections where everyone sings with bits when fewer do. Those sections can't be dramatic in the same way the big scale ones are. He needs to create variety in other ways - even when he's just got two voices singing.

Find bar 32, in your score (1.43 on the recording), and refer to it as you make sense of this description. Bar 32 is the start of a chain of duets. The Sopranos lead off with a 3 bar duet, the altos follow and then the tenors. Finally everyone joins in with a version of the same music in chords.

When writing the duet passages, Monteverdi clearly wanted to create the feeling of the music lines gradually falling through the choir. Each 3 bar phrase descends, and then a lower voice takes over continuing the descent. How can he avoid it all being a bit predictable? If he had kept it all in the same key it would have been. Instead, he keeps changing the key - modulating. The sopranos start in D minor and end in A minor. The altos pick up in A minor, and modulate to C. The tenors join in in C major and modulate to G, which is the key Choir I adopts to start, though they abandon it quickly. This keeps the musical journey on the move - it's all very fluid. Fantastic to listen to, but harder to sing as you have to watch out for changing accidentals.

Monteverdi does another thing in this passage to keep things interesting. There's just a bit of discord towards the end of each pair's duet. The sopranos' duet is written out below. Refer to that as you read on.

Everything is very sweet and harmonious until the final "ficamus". You can see the clashes between adjacent notes. What's happening is that the first sopranos get far too enthusiastic wanting to get onto the E chord (the dominant). The second sopranos are stubborn - they hang onto their A - "it's not time yet, girls". They take their revenge in the next bar by refusing to budge down onto their G# which is needed for the E chord, until they just have to give in. Finally both voices agree on an A minor chord.

The altos and tenors are much more civilised when they have their turn - just nice suspensions in bars 36 and 38. Look at your score to see those bits

Dm Am G Am E Am

Lau-da-mus te, be-ne-di-ci-mus te, a-do-ra-mus te, glo-ri-fi-ca-mus te,

Monteverdi uses the same technique from bar 152 onwards.

Again, it's the sopranos who set it off with a flowing 7 bar phrase. This time the tune stays around the same notes, but it moves down through the voices. And each time, it's in a different key.

You'll have notice another similarity - the 2 voices are almost always in parallel thirds. Except for the discords. Bar 157 has a classic suspension heralding the perfect cadence into C major. This long section is not easy to sing. See Activity 33, which shows you why you have to keep on your toes key-wise.

Bar 152 (8.17 on the recording)

A major

quo-ni-am to-so-lus sanc-tus, tu so-lus,

bar 158

C major

tu so-lus, so-lus Do-mi-nus,