

## **Baroque Music in Venice**

One of the most astonishing – and occasionally, it must be said, the most irritating – aspects of the people of Venice down the ages had been their ability to turn their hand to virtually anything, and then to do it quite superbly well. As seamen, they were already in demand by the sixth century, after which their ships dominated the Mediterranean and beyond for the better part of a thousand years. As merchants, they were regularly trading with Russia, Central Asia, India, Siam and China at a date when such regions were, to the rest of western Europe, little more than fable and legend. As imperialists, they administered their own trading colonies in Dalmatia, Greece, the Aegean, the Levant and the Black Sea, to say nothing of a later land empire that extended westward across north Italy almost as far as Milan. As political theorists, they developed an utterly individual system of government which, though technically an oligarchy, was in fact a good deal more democratic than any other in Europe – with the arguable exception of Switzerland – and which effortlessly maintained itself, with only the barest minimum of fine tuning, from the end of the thirteenth century till the end of the eighteenth and the death of their Republic. As international statesmen, they were the inventors of modern diplomacy. As industrialists, they initiated mass production half a millennium before Henry Ford.

Where the visual arts are concerned, Venice's record is, if anything, more dazzling still. First, and most peculiarly her own, comes that which stems directly from her Byzantine past: the art of mosaic. In all Italy, her only rival is Ravenna. In painting, the great names crowd in

upon us, almost too many to be counted. They are there already in the still Gothic days of the fourteenth century – days before the average man could boast a surname of his own – with Paolo Veneziano and his pupil Lorenzo, breaking the bonds of Byzantine iconography and already clearly pointing in the direction in which Venetian art was to evolve. Then in the fifteenth century come the Vivarinis from Murano and – most important of all – the patriarch Jacopo Bellini, his sons Gentile and Giovanni and his son-in-law Andre Mantegna. Gentile Bellini and his younger contemporary Vittore Carpaccio have, beyond the slightest doubt, introduced more people to the sheer joy of Venetian art than any other two masters; but Giovanni Bellini is the King. Born around 1430 and living on until 1516, he leads the way into the High Renaissance and the Golden Age. With his fluency, his flawless technique and his profound Christian faith, he sometimes strikes me as the Bach of Venetian painting. If this analogy can be accepted we might go on to describe Giorgione, the visionary young romantic who died at thirty-two, as its Schubert; Titian, with his immense range, his feeling for drama and his almost uncanny sureness of touch, as its Mozart; and Veronese, with his intensely Venetian love of colour, sumptuousness and opulence, as its Liszt. As for Tintoretto – austere, withdrawn, living only for his art but a veritable powerhouse of energy and dynamism – he, there can be no doubt, is its Beethoven.

On the seventeenth century, silence is best. The spotlight shifts elsewhere, to Spain and above all to Holland. But in the eighteenth all the old genius flares up again. Canaletto, Bellotto and the Guardi demonstrated once again those qualities that Venice had marked for her own, celebrating their native city as no city had ever been celebrated

before and handling perspective with a virtuosity which is revealed only to those foolhardy enough to try to recapture their effects by modern photography; while Giambattista Tiepolo regularly turned out canvases of such luminosity and radiance as to give one to suspect some hidden source of energy behind them.

As for architecture, here the Venetian achievement is perhaps the most awe-inspiring of all, by reason of their extraordinary ability to transform every succeeding architectural style into something entirely and unmistakably their own. Their first great building, the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Basilica of St Mark, is Byzantine through and through, modelled on Constantine the Great's Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, though nothing remotely resembling its finished form was ever seen in Byzantium. With the coming of Gothic, a still more remarkable metamorphosis took place; for the Venetians, by applying a style which we now see as essentially ecclesiastical to secular building, once again evolved something uniquely their own – producing, in the Doge's Palace, one of the greatest architectural *tours de force* the world has to offer. The colour, to begin with, is magical: in the morning sun it gleams the palest apricot; after a rainstorm it assumes the appearance – and the apparent texture – of smoked salmon. Beyond that, its beauty defies analysis: with all the weight on the upper storey and all the lightness below, it should look top-heavy; instead, that lovely arcading always reminds me of a Victorian fringed tablecloth that just – but only just – touches the ground. But there is another quality about this breathtaking building: its triumphant proclamation of security. Remember that this was not just the residence of the Head of State; it was the nerve centre, not only of the city of Venice but of the entire Republic and commercial

empire; it was, to make another analogy, Buckingham Palace, No. 10 Downing Street and the Palace of Westminster all combined. Now compare it with its equivalent in any other Italian city; virtually everywhere else, the *palazzo pubblico* is a fortress, built for defence. Considering the constant warfare in mainland Italy throughout the Middle Ages, it could hardly have been anything else. Now look again at the Doge's Palace; it couldn't keep out a Pekingese. Only Venice could afford such a building. Surrounded by her lagoon, looking resolutely eastward to Byzantium and the Orient, source of all her wealth, she could afford to turn her back on the eternal bickering and internecine strife of the *terra firma*. Alone of all her neighbours she was safe, and she knew it.



And so, finally, we come to Venetian music, the real subject of this talk. And here again Venice's record is enough to leave us gasping. Of all the arts, music knows the fewest frontiers; yet here too, as in every

other field, Venice showed all her old, stubborn individuality. There was no reason why St. Mark's should follow a different liturgy, requiring different music, from that of any other great church or cathedral in Christendom; but it did, and – as happened again and again in Venetian history – the Pope was obliged to accept the inevitable and give it his blessing. There is still less reason – if I may do a very brief fast-forward – why Venetian music in the eighteenth century should have been the special preserve of female orphanages. The results, it must be admitted, did not invariably impress foreign visitors; at their best, however, as in the Pietà under Vivaldi or the Incurabili under Baldassare Galuppi, those girls could enchant all who heard them – and there is no doubt that they were immensely admired and respected in Venice: where else, after all, could one hope to find a bronze plaque like that affixed to the outside of the south wall of the Pietà, calling down the threat of *fulmination* – being struck by lightning – on anyone who attempts to pass off his legitimate daughter as an illegitimate one in order to get her accepted into the music school?

But it is the baroque period – basically that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – that interests us this evening. Already in the sixteenth, the Republic was in decline. The Ottoman Turks had already established themselves in eastern Europe and had mopped up most of the Balkan peninsula; and then, on that fatal Tuesday, 29 May 1453, the young Sultan Mehmet II had smashed down the walls of Constantinople and put an end, after 1,123 years, to the Byzantine Empire. Steadily, too, the Turks had absorbed Venice's trading colonies in the Mediterranean one by one, cutting her lines of communication and supply, relentlessly sapping her power. Then, as the fifteenth century drew to its close, there

came two more devastating blows: first the discovery of the New World, transforming the fortunes of Spain and Portugal but leaving Venice out in the cold; and second, in 1499, when Vasco da Gama landed in Lisbon having made the return journey to the Indies via the Cape of Good Hope. Overnight, the Mediterranean had become a backwater, Venice's occupation gone.

As the new century opened, the situation went from bad to worse. Already in 1508, Venice found the Pope, the Holy Roman Empire and virtually the whole of western Christendom united against her. At sea, she continued her long, desperate struggle against the Turk, but was never able to stem his advance for long. In 1570 Cyprus fell; her general, Marcantonio Bragadin, after making honourable terms for his surrender, was seized by the Turkish commander and flayed alive. It is true that in the following year Venice, with her papal and Spanish allies, took her revenge, utterly destroying the Ottoman fleet at Lepanto, the last great naval engagement in history to be fought by oared galleys. But in the long term the victory, though celebrated across Europe, made tragically little difference. Only two years later the Republic was obliged to make a separate peace with the Sultan.

And yet, strangely enough, it was precisely at this time of political and commercial decline that artistic and cultural life in Venice began to flourish as never before. By 1500 the city had become the intellectual capital of Italy, in which more books had been produced than in Rome, Milan, Florence and Naples combined. Meanwhile Venetian painters were dazzling all Europe, Venetian sculptors were producing superb statuary, and Venetian architects were erecting some of the most

exquisite and sumptuous churches and palaces that the world had ever seen.

And so to music. The first great name in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian music is Adrian Willaert, a Fleming who arrived in Venice in 1527 as *maestro di cappella* of St Mark's and remained in the city until his death in 1562. He introduced into Italy all the new forms of northern European music, pouring out masses and motets of a kind that no Venetian – indeed no Italian – had ever heard before. He it was who prepared the way for the two truly magnificent composers who were to follow him: Andrea Gabrieli and his nephew Giovanni, both of them Venetians through and through. Andrea, who was born around 1515, spent much of his youth in Germany, where at the Bavarian court he was much influenced by the great Orlando di Lasso, better known as Lassus. When he returned to his native city, already well known for his prodigious output of motets and madrigals, he was almost immediately appointed organist at St Mark's, a position of immense authority and prestige. His ceremonial music for the Basilica set a new standard in the use of massed choirs and instruments. In 1585, the year before his death, he produced his ultimate *tour de force*: a *Gloria* in sixteen parts, sung by four separate choirs, which was performed at a special high mass in honour of a group of several visiting princes from – believe it or not – Japan.

Andrea's star pupil was his nephew Giovanni. Like his uncle, he too, spent some years in Germany, leaving Venice in 1574 at the age of about twenty – thus luckily escaping the terrible visitation of the plague which occurred in the following year. Again following the family tradition, he returned to Venice to become organist of St Mark's –

where, both as an instrumentalist and a composer, he soon showed himself an even greater musician than his uncle had ever been. No composer before him had managed so brilliantly to combine splendour and magnificence on the one hand with so much deep, heartfelt devotion on the other. Harmonically, too, he was far more adventurous than Andrea, and his improvisations – hugely important in his day, and how sad it is that we never hear any nowadays – seemed to his hearers to be divinely inspired.

The seventeenth century began for Venice with a major diplomatic triumph, she defied the Pope – and won. For long she had been famed for her religious toleration, welcoming Muslims and Jews – as long as they remained in their Ghetto – and, in more recent years, all the various Protestant sects spawned by the Reformation. But these enlightened policies were coming under increasingly heavy fire from Rome, and with the accession of the Borghese Pope Paul V in 1605 her relations with the Papacy reached breaking point. Finally, in May 1606, all Venice was placed under an interdict.

Until that time, even the threat of such a sentence had been the most dreaded weapon in the papal armoury, forbidding as it did all the sacraments of the Church – baptisms, marriages, the saying of the mass, extreme unction and the rest. Venice herself had suffered three previous interdicts – in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries – each of which had cost her dear; this time, she simply ignored it. A decree signed by Doge Leonardo Donà dismissed the Papal Nuncio and instructed the clergy to continue as before with the cure of souls. Suddenly the Pope realised that his sentence had failed; worse, its failure had been revealed to the world. And so in April 1607, after little less

than a year, the ban was lifted. It proved to be the last in the history of the Church.

On 10 July 1613 the *maestro di cappella* at St Mark's, Giulio Cesare Martinengo, died – to the general relief; for some years, the standard of music in the Basilica had been getting worse and worse. The Procurators sent out an appeal to all the major cities of North Italy and even to Rome for suggestions for his successor. One document, dated the 16<sup>th</sup> – less than a week after Martinengo's death – is addressed to the Venetian resident in Milan. It reads:

Since the death of our *maestro di cappella* at our church of San Marco various persons have been proposed, among them Signor Claudio Monteverdi.... We should be pleased to receive information as to his worth and ability.

The information must have been favourable, because Monteverdi was invited to come at once to Venice to show what he could do. He arrived in Venice two months later in mid-August, rehearsed throughout the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> at S. Giorgio Maggiore and that same afternoon conducted his 1610 Vespers in St Mark's. He was hired on the spot, at a salary half as much again as that of his predecessor. He was also given an extra fifty ducats for expenses, with which he bought himself a new serge coat.

By this time he was forty-six. Born in Cremona in 1567, he had already published several books of madrigals and what were called *canzonette* – little songs – by the time he was fifteen, and a few years later joined the Cappella of the Duke of Mantua, Vincenzo Gonzaga. The Duke seems to have liked him well enough, but never showed him much consideration – he often had to wait months for his salary. Still, he

stayed on – largely, perhaps, because he had fallen in love with a lovely young singer, Claudia Cattaneo, a member of the Duke's *concerto delle donne*. It proved the happiest of marriages – but alas, all too short. Claudia died in 1607. Her husband was heartbroken, and never altogether recovered.

In 1601 he had been appointed *maestro di cappella* at Mantua, but although he was never really happy there he was conscious that in his own musical world exciting things were happening. In 1594 the two greatest musicians in Europe, Lassus and Palestrina, had died within two months of each other. The great age of polyphonic music was drawing to a close, and was to be succeeded by one which would give birth to what would become an essentially new art form – that of opera. And, because Italy was now swept up in the High Renaissance and humanism, artists were no longer necessarily seeking their inspiration from religion; instead, they were increasingly looking back to the world of antiquity, to ancient Greece and Rome. Musicologists will argue to the end of time what was the first opera to be composed; it was most probably *Dafne*, by the virtually unknown Jacopo Peri, which was performed during the carnival in Florence as early as 1597. There was another, *Euridice*, two years later; but both were lamentably under-orchestrated and almost unbelievably monotonous and neither, we can be quietly confident, is due for revival. But Monteverdi had been inspired, and was at work; and on 22 February 1607, in the ducal palace of Mantua, a thrilling toccata on the trumpet introduced the first great operatic work worthy of the name, *L'Orfeo*. This, at last, was the real thing: an orchestra of perhaps forty or more, with brass and woodwind as well as strings, with rousing choruses, soulful ariosos and madrigals and love music to die for.

His next opera, *Arianna*, is the story of Ariadne and Theseus, who as you remember abandons her on the island of Naxos. Alas, it is lost – all but Ariadne’s famous lament, *lasciatemi morire* – “let me die” – which we are told left the entire audience in tears and was so popular that it was published separately. It was written from the heart: his beloved Claudia had just died and he was on the verge of a breakdown. The lament was not for Ariadne, but for himself. And we can still hear his despair at moments in the glorious *Vespri della beata vergine*, the Vespers of 1610, which followed shortly afterwards and are probably his best-known work.

In 1612 Duke Vincenzo of Mantua died; and his successor, barely six weeks after his accession, dismissed Monteverdi from his court, giving him just twenty-five *scudi* as a reward for twenty-one years of faithful service. He and his two sons returned, virtually penniless, to Cremona where, a few months later, he received the call to Venice. And in Venice everything changed. He was, first of all, treated like the distinguished artist he was, no longer as the menial he had been in Mantua. He was also making far more money than he had ever made before. After three years there he received a note from the Procurators of St Mark:

The Procurators, knowing the work and efficiency of Don Claudio Monteverdi, *maestro di cappella* of St Mark, and wishing to confirm his appointment and to give him the incentive to attend the services of the Church to the honour of God with a whole heart, and in the desire that he will live and die in this service, have by ballot determined that he shall be conformed in his post for ten years with a salary of 400 ducats per year with the usual perquisites.

These perquisites included a large and commodious apartment adjoining the Basilica, furnished according to his wishes, and a generous allowance of free wine. No wonder he cheered up. “Wherever I go to make music,” he wrote, whether it be chamber music or ecclesiastical, the whole city longs to be there. My duties are extremely agreeable.”

In 1631 Monteverdi took holy orders and was tonsured; the following year saw him appointed deacon. But the priesthood made little or no difference to his life, and it was only after his ordination that he looked again to opera. *Arianna* had been produced as long ago as 1608; now, thirty years later, he reverted to Greek mythology with a work inspired by the last books of the *Odyssey*, *Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria*, The Return of Ulysses to his Homeland. You remember the story I’m sure: Ulysses returns to Ithaca, to find that a number of villainous suitors are importuning his queen, Penelope. (Homer suggests there are several; Monteverdi allows us just three.) With the assistance of the gods and his son Telemachus he eliminates them and recovers his kingdom. The opera had a most successful opening run in Venice in the 1639-40 carnival season, but curiously enough there were no further revivals until the twentieth century. I remember seeing it at Glyndebourne in, I suppose, the early seventies, never having heard of it before in my life. Now at last it is becoming popular again – and with good reason. In those thirty years since *Arianna* Monteverdi had come a long way, particularly with his extraordinary gift of musical characterisation and also with his sense of drama. The last time I saw it, six weeks ago in Venice, the audience were on the edge of their seats.

But his work was not yet done. One more opera remained to be written – and that opera was the most astonishing of all. *L’incoronazione*

*di Poppea*, the Coronation of Poppaea, was first produced in Venice for the carnival of 1643. It is one of the first operas, if not *the* first, to desert mythology for history – for here is the story of the marriage of the Emperor Nero to the unscrupulous and power-hungry Poppaea. It is an unpleasant tale, as Nero callously gets rid of his wife Octavia to marry this most sinister adventuress. And, considering the circumstances, it is also a most unusual one: the baddies win. In the seventeenth century, this would surely have been something really shocking: how, people asked, could an ordained priest, now seventy-five years old, write such a worldly and licentious drama? And as for the astonishing love duet at the end: that superb musicologist H.C. Robbins Landon described it as almost obscene, and it somehow seems to be all the more so since the music itself is of such disarming simplicity and purity.

Monteverdi lived to see his last – and greatest – opera staged, but for very little longer. He died at the end of that year, 29 November 1643. His contemporary, Andrea Camberlotti, wrote:

The most illustrious and reverend Claudio Monteverdi, Maestro di Cappella of the church of S. Marco, died aged 73 of malignant fever of nine days' duration. The news of such a loss distressed all the city, turning it to sadness and mourning, and was accompanied, not by singing from the choir of S. Marco, but by their tears.

Monteverdi's influence continued for a while, with his star pupil, Francesco Cavalli, who was also to become *maestro di cappella* at St Mark's, though Cavalli too was to achieve fame through his secular works – above all his operas, of which he produced no fewer than forty-two – rather than his religious productions. Another composer of the time who simply must be mentioned is Barbara Strozzi, who became the

most celebrated female composer of her age – perhaps of any age, since female composers have been remarkably few. With a single exception – one book of sacred songs – she wrote only secular music, much in the style of Cavalli – whose pupil she was – but somehow warmer and more lyrical. She died in 1677, and in the following year there was to be born a composer of a very different stamp. Antonio Vivaldi was also forgotten after his death and became popular only in the mid-twentieth century – a good deal too popular, in the opinion of many of us. Wherever one goes in Venice today, the threat of the *Four Seasons* looms darkly overhead.

But Vivaldi is essentially an eighteenth-century composer; and with him fashions quite spectacularly changed. Life became more frivolous as vast numbers of smart young gentlemen, often accompanied by their valets and tutors, began to arrive in Venice on the Grand Tour. It's unlikely that Mozart, Beethoven or Schubert ever heard a note of Monteverdi's music in their lives. Not until the beginning of the twentieth century did *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* return to the stage. The French composer Vincent d'Indy directed a concert performance in 1905, and that was, as he put it, "limited to the most beautiful and interesting parts of the work". When his version was finally produced at the Théâtre des Arts in Paris on 5 February 1913, it was the first recorded performance of the work since 1651; and as recently as 1932 the Venetian composer Gianfrancesco Malipiero commented that "of all Monteverdi's works, only Ariadne's Lament has prevented us from completely forgetting the most famous composer of the seventeenth century".

But then any production of an opera by Claudio Monteverdi is fraught with difficulties. We can take *Poppea* as an example. First of all, the work was never printed in the seventeenth century and only two manuscripts have survived. The first, now in the Marciana Library in Venice, was discovered in 1888; the second, which came to light as recently as 1930, is now safe in the Conservatory in Naples. For a long time the Venice copy was thought to be Monteverdi's original, but recently scholars have discovered that although much of the manuscript was indeed written by him, there are whole sections in the handwriting of Francesco Cavalli. When the collected works were first published in 1942 the editor, Malipiero, had no idea of this, so all subsequent editions have included Cavalli's contributions instead of Monteverdi's – which, in the Naples copy, remain unchanged.

Now Monteverdi is back in favour, and his three surviving operas in their various editions, together with those glorious Vespers of 1610, are performed everywhere. I remember a superb performance of the Vespers at St Mark's some fifteen or twenty years ago, directed by Sir John Eliot Gardiner, surely the greatest Monteverdi conductor alive; and just six weeks ago I was lucky enough to hear him again, with his semi-staged version of all three of the operas, on three successive nights, at the Fenice in Venice. They are, he told me, much harder work than any other opera, because they have come down to us in shorthand. In *Poppea*, for example, no instruments whatever are specified. The instrumental pieces are written out for four or five parts, but Monteverdi doesn't tell us what instruments should play the individual lines. The vocal parts are fortunately complete, but because the full orchestra was never meant to play while anyone was singing, only the bass line – what

is called the *basso continuo* – is written down; and once again there is no indication of which instruments are required, or when each should play. Another problem is that Monteverdi gives us no suggestions of dynamics or phrasing; all these decisions devolve ultimately on the conductor. In other words, the opera that we hear nowadays is inevitably a reconstruction; the Venetian audiences at the first performance may well have heard something completely different. *Poppea* exists today in probably a dozen different versions. John Eliot Gardiner uses an orchestra of altogether about forty; others have been content with a couple of trumpets and recorders, a few strings and a harpsichord. The late Walter Goehr, on the other hand, scored it for an orchestra that would have done credit to Wagner, with nine trombones for a start. We pay our money and we take our choice; but, so long as the musicians know their stuff, we can be sure that we are in for a sublimely beautiful evening.

Claudio Monteverdi is buried in a little side-chapel in the church of the Frari in Venice. He has no imposing monument, merely a simple slab bearing his name. Most visitors to the great church miss it altogether; but on it there lies – whenever I have seen it – a single red rose.

*John Julius Norwich*