

## Monteverdi's Vespers in Surround Sound

Far from having been weakened by the lockdown, the appetite for live music seems actually to have grown. Saturday's performance of Monteverdi's Vespers in the Cathedral attracted a capacity audience. The Cathedral Choir, directed by David Halls, was joined by Salisbury Musical Society, the St John Singers, the Farrant Singers and the period instrument group Florilegium. This was no ordinary concert: it had been scheduled as part of the Cathedral's eight hundredth birthday celebrations in 2020, but, like other commemorative events, had fallen victim to the lockdown. But if it was a year overdue, it was worth waiting for.

Monteverdi's *Vespers for the Blessed Virgin* of 1610 was published in Venice and probably first performed there. It consists of psalms, motets and other musical settings of vespers texts. Saturday's performance of this large-scale piece, featuring many choirs and sub-divisions of choirs, exploited the full potential of the Cathedral, with performers gliding seamlessly between the tower crossing, the west end and the north aisle. Soloists emerged from their various choirs to deliver their pieces before merging back into them. Apart from being a magnificent performance, Saturday's concert was a remarkable feat of organisation. Scarcely a moment went by without voices appearing from some unexpected direction, voices that ranged from the ethereal to the dramatic, from the ceremonial to the lyrical. This was truly Monteverdi's Vespers in surround sound.

Musical highlights included the Ave Maris Stella with three choirs deployed in three different locations to give a full antiphonal effect; the Magnificat, which is perhaps the showcase of the whole piece, with choirs, sub-choirs and soloists battling against orchestral interjections; and the Audi Coelum with its dance-like rhythms and ghostly echo effect, delivered by a solo voice hidden away at the east end of the Cathedral. Florilegium, too, were a delight. A small band, they never drowned the choirs, but their instruments, especially the brass, gave a distinctive period 'feel' to the whole performance, whilst the long necks of the theorbos rose above the choristers like ships at anchor.

The prolonged applause was a fitting tribute to the performers and an expression of relief that Salisbury's musical drought has at last come to an end.

Stephen Lycett