

**CORO della RADIO SVIZZERA, I BAROCCHISTI, Diego Fasolis  
al Lincoln Center di New York**

CLASSIC TODAY *Concert Reviews and Features*

**FASOLIS AND SWISS FORCES IN GLORIOUS MONTEVERDI “VESPERS”**

**Rose Hall; Mostly Mozart Festival, New York; August 20, 2007**

It is not known precisely for what occasion Claudio Monteverdi composed his Marienvespers of 1610, and, in fact, the work includes a piece or two not specifically in praise of the Virgin Mary. Wise conjecture has it that he wrote the grand work as an audition piece for jobs he was applying for in either Rome or Venice; he became the maestro at St. Mark's in Venice in 1613. Designed to impress and show off a composer's ability, it certainly succeeded: in its 95 minutes, it contains pieces for six voice choir, vocal duets and solos, a vocal trio, solo tenor and double choir, double choir and four sopranos, five-voice choir, eight-voice choir, etc. Difficult harmonies, complex counterpoint, virtuoso singing and playing are designed to electrify. Devotional pieces alternate with grander, more theatrical ones. Each section is accompanied by different instruments, and while Monteverdi wrote solo parts for violin and cornetto, he did not specify what instruments should make up the orchestra itself, thus allowing improvisation based on available forces, wherever it was to be played. Nowadays it is left to the discretion of the conductor.

The Swiss conductor Diego Fasolis, his Coro della Radio Svizzera, Lugano, I Barocchisti, and Les Sacqueboutiers made their Mostly Mozart debuts with the Vespers and a full house sat in utter silence and awe while some ravishing music-making took place in front of them. Fasolis opted for six string players (plus lutenist), bassoon, flute, organ, two cornetts and three sackbuts, nine-voice choir and ten soloists (often working with the chorus), and they made a grand sound. Because Monteverdi is known for wedding text to music – one enlightens and defines the other in a way that was new at the time – it was wise to offer translations of the texts above the stage.

Fasolis led with enthusiasm, using grand gestures for the larger moments but keeping his instructions small for the most intricate contrapuntal passages. It worked: the ensemble never faltered and the groups' control over dynamics was spine-chilling. In the powerful “Dixit Dominus,” the line “He will crush the rulers of the whole earth” thundered out; conversely, the solo tenor, the remarkable Marco Beasley, was left alone on stage for his poetic “Nigra sum,” with just lute, organ and cello to back him up. Intricate rhythmic patterns in the “Laudate pueri” came off without a hitch. Vocal and instrumental lines were embellished throughout, always tastefully. With the exception of a weakish second tenor who smeared some coloratura, the solo singing was superb; standouts, in addition to Beasley, were soprano Roberta Invernizzi, with a wonderful, vibrato-free, searing edge to the top of her voice, counter-tenor Roberto Balconi, lending a mellow sound to his lines and baritone Alfredo Grandini. The exquisite riffing of the two violinists took one's breath away, and the cornett players managed to get through the entire evening without so much as one fluff, even in their decorations. The only pity is that this was a one-night-only concert; New York will welcome Fasolis and his singers and players back whenever they'd like.

Robert Levine

# The Star-Ledger

## High praise for 'Vespers' at Mozart fest

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BY BRADLEY BAMBARGER  
Star-Ledger Staff

### CLASSICAL

NEW YORK -- A totem of Western sacred art, Claudio Monteverdi's "Vespers of 1610" had a less-than-exalted impetus for its publication. The Italian composer, like Bach later with his great B Minor Mass, assembled his mosaic of a score as a job application, a sort of résumé for the ambitious 43-year-old's abilities as a versatile master of religious music.

Monteverdi didn't get the position he was after at the Vatican, even though he dedicated his "Vespers" to the Pope. But he soon attained one of Italy's top cultural posts: head of music at St. Mark's Cathedral in Venice. And Monteverdi's rich, color-saturated "Vespers" proved to be a linchpin in music history; he created a Janus-faced work that summed up the glories of the Renaissance even as it explored the future of the Baroque.

Like much early music, the influence of Monteverdi's "Vespers" has been felt keenly in the past half century, as scholars and performers have finally sorted out the myriad structural and sonic options the loosely bound score presents. In a talk before a sold-out performance of the "Vespers" Monday as part of Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival, composer Osvaldo Golijov, 46, said he had been "startled, devastated and inspired" by Monteverdi's work.

Golijov suggested the "Vespers" in his role as Mostly Mozart's first composer-in-residence. Monteverdi's secular Fourth Book of Madrigals was also performed in this summer's festival, in a wonderfully theatrical presentation as "The Full Monteverdi." It's something of an anniversary season for Monteverdi, as this year is the 400th since his pioneering opera "Orfeo." Neatly, the opening of the "Vespers" is a re-arrangement of the iconic fanfare that starts "Orfeo."

Monday's performers are some of Golijov's favorites, too: the Swiss Radio Choir, from Lugano in Italian-speaking Switzerland; the period-instrument continuo group I Barocchisti, also from Lugano; and the Renaissance brass ensemble Les Sacqueboutiers, from France. The excellent vocal soloists included Milanese soprano Roberta Invernizzi. Leading them was the Swiss Diego Fasolis, who looked like he was conducting Mahler, so intense was his physicality.

One could easily hear what inspired Golijov as these artists brought Monteverdi's musical/spiritual cornucopia to life. The mix of seriousness and sensuousness in the "Vespers," its idiomatic freedom, its aim to balance past and present, the glinting color and vibrancy -- these are touchstones for Golijov's own pieces that have been performed in the festival (including his cello concerto "Azul" and "Passion of St. Mark").

The "Vespers" is a hymn to the Virgin Mary that juxtaposes grandeur (the complex polyphony of the Renaissance) with earthiness (the texturally simpler, more operatic solo

song of the early Baroque). The Swiss choir sang with a beauty that went past perfection -- ideal intonation, rhythmic suppleness -- to something warmer, higher. And Les Sacqueboutiers played their intractable old cornets and sackbuts with a purity that would've probably caused Monteverdi's jaw to drop.

Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater hardly has the atmosphere of a Baroque cathedral, so a 100-minute stretch of liturgical music can be a challenge with amber lighting in place of stained glass. But the atmospheric echo effects in the "Vespers," meant for a cathedral's spaces, were brought off by the vocalists with surprising evocativeness. And the solo singing had an almost erotic allure in the motets, with Invernizzi's voice entwining around that of soprano Laura Antonaz like the limbs of a lover. The Magnificat finale culminated in a glorious "amen," the massed voices and instruments spiraling in another kind of union.

The Mostly Mozart Festival runs through Saturday; go to [www.lincolncenter.org](http://www.lincolncenter.org) or call (212) 721-6500.

## The New York Times

Music Review | Coro Della Radio Svizzera

# Monteverdi, From the Opera to the Church to Lincoln Center



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

"Coro Della Radio Svizzera" at the Rose Theater on Monday night.

By [ALLAN KOZINN](#)

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A theme of this summer's [Mostly Mozart Festival](#) is spirituality, explored by way of works from across the expanse of musical history. Having presented the most recent of its examples, Osvaldo Golijov's "Pasión Según San Marcos" (2000), over the weekend, the festival offered the earliest, Monteverdi's "Vespro Della Beata Vergine" (1610), at the Rose Theater on Monday evening.

The performers were an exotic assembly: Coro Della Radio Svizzera, Lugano — a choir from the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland — supported by I Barocchisti, a Swiss period string ensemble, and Les Sacqueboutiers, a French period brass group. All but the brass players were making their United States debuts, as was the conductor, Diego Fasolis.

Monteverdi couldn't have been more open about his belief that sacred music should be as pointedly dramatic as opera, the new form he helped create. The first music you hear in the Vespers began life as the ebullient toccata that raises the curtain on "Orfeo," Monteverdi's first opera, composed in 1607, although in this version a choral setting, Domine Ad Adiuvandum ("O God, Make Haste to Help Me"), is woven through the rising and falling

brass figures. It appears not to have troubled Monteverdi, or anyone else, that the music in which he was celebrating the Virgin originally introduced an opera peopled with pagan gods.

Mr. Fasolis's performance, in the modern, dry-sounding Rose Theater, showed the work, with all its history and texture, in an odd light. Absent the reverberant bloom of church acoustics, the music's roots in opera and madrigal seemed especially clear.

Did it do violence to the Vespers as such? Probably. It's possible that Monteverdi imagined this music performed in a small, dry chapel. (The score's most famous use, as Monteverdi's application for the position of maestro di cappella at St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, didn't happen until 1613.) But his rich orchestration and his use of the "Orfeo" toccata suggest that an ambient space was part of his compositional calculation.

So was the use of space: much of this music is richly antiphonal and is best heard when groups of singers and players are set apart. On Monday, effective use of distance was the exception.

These would be quibbles if the performance had fully drawn on this score's vigor and expressive power. To watch Mr. Fasolis's calisthenic conducting, you'd have thought it would. But the singing and playing rarely reflected that expansiveness and energy.

The performance did have its moments. Some of the solo singing — most notably by Laura Antonaz and Roberta Invernizzi, sopranos, and Marco Beasley and Sandro Naglia, tenors — addressed Monteverdi's florid writing with both agility and emotional heft. And both the choir and the instrumentalists produced a fine, homogenous sound in parts of the Magnificat and in Nisi Dominus.

But a listener had to wrest those nuggets from amid odd balances, skirmishes with intonation, ensemble slackness and tempos that proved unusually inert in these dry acoustics. If you love this work, you may have found yourself searching for fresh insights even in spite of the interpretive problems, but in the end you had to take this performance for what it was: a spectacular work in a performance that went off the rails.

*The Mostly Mozart Festival runs through Aug. 25 at Lincoln Center; (212) 721-6500, [lincolncenter.org](http://lincolncenter.org)*