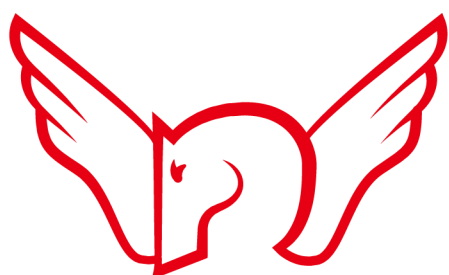




Tilford Bach Society

Monteverdi Vespers (1610)



PEGASUS CHOIR

Conductor: Matthew Altham

14 May 2016

www.tilbach.org.uk

Pegasus

Soprano

Alice Fay**
Emily Benson*
Katy McAdam **
Rosemary Moore
Madeline Smith **
Anne Taylor
Danielle Toyer*
Serena Wilson

Alto

Rose Dixon**
David Gabbe**
Alison Grant **
Celia Tedd

Tenor

Niall Bird
Edward Griffiths
Andrew Milner-White*
Gareth Moss*
Luke Phillips*
Samir Savant *

Bass

James Baer**
Dave Brittain
Peter Hatch**
Andrew Hope*
Tim Peters**
Graham Wood**

* *soloist in Nigra Sum, Pulchra Es, Duo Seraphim, Audi Coelum*

** *soloist in other sections*

Orchestra

Adrian Butterfield - Violin I Leader

Olga Popova - Violin II

Martin Jeriga - Viola II

Lucy Keller - Double Bass

Sam Goble - Cornett II

Chris Ford - Trombone I

Ryan Gray - Bass Trombone

Martin Toyer - Organ continuo

Matyas Csiba - Viola I

Joseph Crouch - Bass Violin

Richard Thomas - Cornett I

Tamsin Cowell - Cornett III

Nic Kent - Trombone II

Johan Lofving - Theorbo continuo

Pegasus

Pegasus is one of London's most accomplished chamber choirs, critically acclaimed and award-winning for its imaginative programmes of music dating from the Renaissance to the present day. The choir gives about a dozen concerts a year with its director, Matthew Altham, and with occasional guest conductors.

Pegasus has performed at the Tilford Bach Festival, the London Festival of Contemporary Church Music and the Proms at St Jude's, and at various venues across London and the South East, including the Queen Elizabeth Hall, St Martin in the Fields and Almeida Theatre. The choir has worked with the Southbank Sinfonia under the direction of John Rutter, and with the London Handel Players under Laurence Cummings and Adrian Butterfield, including Israel in Egypt as part of the 2014 London Handel Festival.

Pegasus won the Chamber Choir prize at the 2013 Florilège Vocal de Tours International Choral Competition in France, as well as an award for its performance of the music of Poulenc. Pegasus has been seen and heard on BBC TV and radio, Channel 4 and Classic FM.

You can find out more about Pegasus and join our mailing list at www.pegasuschoir.org.uk; visit us on [facebook.com/pegasuschoir](https://www.facebook.com/pegasuschoir) or follow us on Twitter @pegasuschoir. Our inaugural CD, Twelve Days – A Celebration of Christmas is available on the internet.

Matthew Altham

Matthew Altham has been the director of Pegasus since 2001. He began conducting choirs while studying at Oxford University and led performances of music by Poulenc and the major English Renaissance composers.

Alongside his work as director of strategy for a business management company, Matthew directs Pegasus, Vox Cordis and the London Bach Players, with whom he has performed on several occasions in Pau, France. He has toured as a conductor to Prague, Tolosa, Arezzo and Antwerp and has broadcast on BBC Radio and Classic FM.

Monteverdi Vespers

Monteverdi's *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin* has become one of the pillars of the classical music repertoire. No other surviving work from that time was written on such a scale; it is a piece of dramatic contrasts, combining the virtuosity required for flamboyant public ceremonies with the intimacy of solo voices, allowing for more prayerful reflection. For its time it was unprecedented and still to our 21st century ears the piece is astonishing for the grandeur of its conception and the opulence of its sound. Like the music itself, the performing forces required are exceptional, with an array of instruments from sackbutts and cornetts to strings and theorbo and up to ten voice-parts singing at any one time, often in a double choir formation.

The term "Vespers" (evening prayers) is taken from the Hours of the Divine Office, a set of daily prayers of the Catholic Church which have remained structurally unchanged for 1500 years. The *Vespers* is composed around several Biblical texts that are traditionally used as part of the liturgy for several Marian feasts in the Roman Catholic church: the introductory Deus in adiutorium (Psalm 69), five Psalm settings, sacred motets (called "concerti") between the Psalms, a traditional Hymn, and a setting of the Magnificat text.

Monteverdi brings techniques and textures from his secular work - his madrigals and operas for which he had become famous - into a sacred context for the first time and we sense the move away from structured Renaissance polyphony to the ebullient freedom of the Baroque. Monteverdi made Venice his home for the latter half of his life, a city with its feet in the West but taking inspiration from the East, and his musical language is imbued with the influences of both cultures.

The story of the creation of the piece is not entirely unlike the plot of an Italian opera, with its many twists and turns. It was published in 1610, three years after Monteverdi had written *Orfeo*, considered to be the first successful opera ever written and a landmark point in the evolution of Western classical music. The 43-year old composer took the piece to Rome in the hope of presenting it to the Pope and perhaps being granted a post at the Vatican, thus enabling him to escape the tyranny of his employer, the mean and manipulative Duke of Mantua, whom he had faithfully served for the past 20 years. Sadly he was not granted a papal audience but the piece was probably used as an audition piece to secure him the prestigious *Maestro di Capella* at St. Mark's in Venice, a position he would hold for the next 30 years until his death, during which he would also take holy orders. To this day, we do not know if the piece was ever performed in a liturgical setting in Monteverdi's lifetime.

The *Vespers* is Monteverdi's manifesto for modernity and a calculated summation of his compositional skill at a time when he most needed to advertise it, consisting, as it does, of an anthology of musical styles, and displaying his prowess in them all. Two decades of Monteverdi's experimentation are distilled into this one work. From the very opening fanfare, lifted directly from *Orfeo*, he mixes sacred and secular, with many theatrical effects, such as the 'off stage' echoes and solo passages, akin to operatic arias allowing for the display of vocal agility. The audience could be forgiven for thinking that they are in a ducal palace rather than a church.

In setting the text, Monteverdi essentially follows the liturgy for the Feast of the Blessed Virgin, including the five psalms appointed for this service. But he also interpolates non-liturgical texts, and daringly blurs the lines between the spiritual and sensual to incorporate a sonata with secular, dance-like rhythms and two settings from the Old Testament *Song of Songs* with unashamedly erotic undertones. Throughout there is a

complex range of vocal and instrumental textures to cover the wide variety of emotions to be conveyed.

A particularly interesting feature is Monteverdi's use of traditional Gregorian plainchant as a unifying factor across the work. The psalm tones – recitations of text from the psalms – are used as a *cantus firmus* around which he builds elaborate vocal and instrumental lines.

In the last movement, the bravura setting of the *Magnificat* or *Song of Mary*, Monteverdi brings together all of the experimental elements he has introduced in the former movements in a musical *tour de force* and we sense his aspirations being realised. He presents us with the most exuberant writing for singers and instrumentalists alike, and the most compelling word-painting from the duelling basses in *Fecit mihi magna* to the heartbreaking simplicity of the solo *Deposuit potentes de sede*.

Rather like Monteverdi in 1610, Pegasus has achieved a significant milestone and stands at a crossroads. This year is our 21st anniversary and the Vespers was our first formal concert which effectively launched the choir, a piece we have not repeated until now. I could never have imagined we would come so far since I co-founded the choir in 1995 and I am particularly proud of our long-standing association with several charities and music societies, including of course our friends at Tilford Bach Society. I only hope that Pegasus will continue to flourish for many decades to come! We hope that you enjoy this evening's performance.

Samir Savant

Claudio Monteverdi 1567-1643

Claudio Monteverdi was born in Cremona, Lombardy and learned about music as a member of the choir of the Cathedral at Cremona, and later at the University of Cremona. He worked at the court of Vincenzo I of Gonzaga in Mantua as a vocalist and viol player, then as music director. In 1602, he was working as the court conductor and master of music. By 1613, he had moved to San Marco in Venice where, as conductor, he quickly restored the musical standard of both the choir and the instrumentalists.

Today, over four hundred years later, the precise intentions of this large work are not clearly known or understood. The work may have been written as an audition piece for posts at Venice where Monteverdi became maestro di cappella at St Mark's Basilica in 1613 or Rome (where the composer was not offered a post). Monteverdi remained at Venice and in 1632, became a priest. He died there, aged 76, on 29 November 1643.

Tilford Bach Festival 10-12 June
Don't delay booking your seats!

TBS Secretary

1 Adams Drive, Fleet, GU51 3DZ

Tel: 0300 201 0070 Email: secretary@tilbach.org.uk

www.tilbach.org.uk