

## A Venetian Christmas (2001)

Written by bluesever

Saturday, 05 December 2009 19:40 - Last Updated Monday, 09 December 2013 15:40

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### *Giovanni Gabrieli*

1. *Intonazione Dell'undecimo Tono, C 249*
2. *Audite Principes A 16, C 123*
3. *Introitus (chant)*

### *Cipriano de Rore*

4. *Kyrie (missa "praeter Rerum Seriem" A 7)*
5. *Gloria (missa "praeter Rerum Seriem" A 7)*
6. *Oratio (chant)*
7. *Prophetia (chant)*
8. *Epistola (chant)*

### *Giovanni Gabrieli*

9. *Canzon Noni Toni A 12, C 183*
10. *Evangelium (chant)*
11. *Credo (missa "praeter Rerum Seriem" A 7)*
12. *Intonazione Del Settimo Tono, C 245*
13. *Salvator Noster A 15, C 80*
14. *Praefatio (chant)*

### *Cipriano de Rore*

15. *Sanctus (missa "praeter Rerum Seriem" A 7)*
16. *Toccata*

### *Giovanni Gabrieli*

17. *O Jesu Mi Dulcissime A 8, C 56*

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### 18. *Pater Noster* (chant)

*Cipriano de Rore*

### 19. *Agnus Dei* (missa "praeter Rerum Seriem" A 7)

*Giovanni Gabrieli*

### 20. *Canzon Duodecimi Toni* (n 3) A 10, C 179

### 21. *Postcommunio - Benedictio* (chant)

*Giovanni Gabrieli, arr. H. Keyte*

### 22. *Quem vidistis pastores, after C 77*

Gabrieli Consort and Players

Paul McCreesh - conductor

McCreesh is a long-standing master of the scholarly-but-enjoyable reconstruction. He first came to the notice of the record-collecting public with another Venetian reconstruction for the Virgin label, *A Venetian Coronation 1595*, music for the enthronement of the Doge, which still retains its full-price place in the catalogue (7 59006 2). After one more such reconstruction, that of the Burgundian *Banquet du Vœu* (deleted but well worth searching for), Virgin let him slip through their fingers to DG Archiv, who recorded him in a reconstructed Venetian Vespers service, another highly recommendable recording which, inexplicably, never seems to have caught on as well as the other reconstructions (Monteverdi, Rigatti, etc, now at bargain-price on 476 1868, 2 CDs for around £7-£8 in the UK).

Recordings of Schütz's Christmas Vespers (463 046-2) and Bach's Epiphany Mass (457 631-2, 2 CDs) followed, as did the present Venetian Christmas CD. A DVD of Christmas in Rome (Palestrina, Vivaldi's Gloria, etc, in collaboration with The English Concert/Trevor Pinnock, on 073 4361) completes the series to date apart from the items contributed from his various Christmas recordings to *The Baroque Christmas Album* (DG 477 5762). (Are there any more in the pipeline?)

The Doge and Signoria of Venice processed from the Ducal Palace to St Mark's at 2.30 p.m. on

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the afternoon of Christmas Eve. During the next six and a half hours they heard Vespers, Compline, Matins, during which the lights of the basilica were gradually illuminated, and finally the first of the three Masses of the Nativity, brought forward by papal dispensation from midnight. The Vespers and Matins would have received elaborate musical accompaniment from an augmented group of musicians – one reviewer even, mistakenly, has described the whole event as ‘Christmas Vespers’ – but the main musical delights would have been reserved for the Mass.

This CD presents an informed attempt to reconstruct the music of that Mass. There are three elements: the plainchant, the polyphonic setting, and the interspersed instrumental and choral music. The chant employed at Venice was different in some respects from the norm of the Roman rite, though less so than that of the Ambrosian rite at Milan and much less so than the Mozarabic rite preserved at Toledo. The Venetian chants are contained in the *Graduale del Tesoro* and these have been employed in this recording.

The polyphonic setting, Cipriano de Rore’s *Missa Præter rerum seriem*, is a *cantus firmus* work, based on a motet by Josquin; de Rore was himself briefly *maestro di capella* at St Mark’s and Monteverdi is known both to have preserved several such *stile antico* settings at Venice in the early seventeenth century and to have had a high opinion of the music of Cipriano. It is an appropriate choice here because it fits the festal occasion, yet contrasts with the more flamboyant music of Gabrieli and both contrast with the plainsong propers. The text of the original Josquin 6-part motet refers to the appearance of god-as-man beyond the natural order of things: *Præter rerum seriem / parit deum hominem / virgo mater*. A score of the motet is available online; another (more authentic?) version is also available from the same source.

Gabrieli himself provides the third element. The opening organ *Intonazione* is meditative and restrained, but the 16-part setting of *Audite principes* (don’t you just hate it when the computer thinks it’s smarter than you and changes *principes* to *principles*?) which follows really gets us into the festive mood, with its invocation to the princes and inhabitants of the earth to give ear to the news that the Saviour is born. They could hardly fail to give ear (*auribus percipite*) to the battery of cornets, sackbuts, dulcian, etc., which accompany the three soloists, quietly at first but soon at full blast. This really is Gabrieli at his rip-roaring best and it sets the scene superbly when it is as well performed as here. The Venetian historian Francesco Sansovino records that the original congregation felt that they had heard no finer music, but what we hear on this recording must at least run those original performers a very close second. In fact, though we can never know, they almost certainly excel them. The high parts were presumably originally sung by castrati whose sound, of course, cannot be reproduced, but the four falsettists on this recording (no female voices) do a good job of replacing them. One of them, Robert Harre Jones, also plays one of the organ parts. My personal idea of Heaven leans towards English Tudor polyphony, Taverner and Sheppard in particular, but the de Rore/Gabrieli combination

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here comes pretty close – listen to track 13, Gabrieli's *Salvator noster*, and you'll be sold on it. The recording just breaks the 80-minute barrier but you'll hardly notice the passage of time.

The other Gabrieli items are similarly exuberant and similarly well performed. The *Canzon noni toni* replaces the usual Gradual, another Venetian custom; another organ *Intonazione* and *Salvator noster* (Our Saviour is born this day), provide the Offertory, with the vocalists again wreathed about with cornetts, sackbuts and organs. Similarly an organ *Toccata* (improvised) and Gabrieli's *O Jesu mi dulcissime* (O my sweetest Jesus), with singers and organs only, mark the Elevation of the Host. The *Canzon duodecimi toni* at the Communion and *Quem vidistis pastores* (Whom saw ye, O Shepherds) after the Blessing, round off a very satisfying recording, the full panoply of brass joining the singers again for the final item. This, like most of the Gabrieli insertions, is divided into parts for three 'choirs'; only *O Jesu mi dulcissime* and the *Canzon duodecimi toni* are for two 'choirs', which rather tends to support the modern suspicion that the traditional concept of antiphonal performance at St Mark's is something of an over-simplification. The illustration on the cover of the Prætorius CD seems to suggest a similar three-choir arrangement but I don't wish to get into deep scholarly waters here.

Some of the elements of the reconstruction are controversial. *Quem vidistis*, which seems to have survived in incomplete form, has been extensively re-worked by Hugh Keyte, convincingly to my ears at least. As performed here, it provides a fitting conclusion to a glorious recording.

Both *A Venetian Christmas* and the *Lutheran Christmas Mass* are superbly performed, excellently recorded and endowed with scholarly and informative notes by John Bettley and Paul McCreesh himself. Brinkburn Abbey makes a good substitute acoustic-wise for St Mark's; Roskilde is, of course, an ideal venue on the other CD. I couldn't begin to choose between them, so I recommend that you buy both. If you hurry, you will find that one on-line retailer has a special offer on Archiv CDs at close to DM's target price, £7 plus postage, but you will have to get a move on. Both these CDs are too good to save for Christmas; order them both now.  
---Brian Wilson, [musicweb-international.com](http://musicweb-international.com)

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