Claudio Monteverdi: His Life And Contributions Essay, Research Paper

A comparison of two major Baroque composers: Claudio Monteverdi and Domenico Scarlatti

The purpose of this paper is to analyze two psalms by Claudio Giovanni Antonio Monteverdi (1567-1643) and Giovanni Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) and compare and contrast the two pieces to find out how music changed throughout the Baroque period. While historians grouped music of the Baroque period together based on certain characteristics, the music did not remain the same throughout the period, as it would not for any other musical time period. Composers from different points in the Baroque period were chosen, but the things the two composers had in common were the country of residence and their nationality. Special care was taken to chose composers from the same country so that differences could not be accounted as being because of different nationalistic styles.

The piece by Monteverdi, Confitebor tibi, Domine (Psalm 110), was a psalm that was used as part of the vespers on Sundays. This particular psalm is found in varied forms in the publication Selva morale et spirituale, published around 1640. This setting is set for four voices and solo soprano voice, and is accompianed by continuo. The piece begins and ends in C major, with use of very few accidentals. The accidentals in this piece were used to create a leading tone to the fifth or tonic. The piece is mostly homorhythmic and has a combination of polyphony and homophony. Occasionally there is a duet with the soprano and solo soprano lines. The piece is written in Latin, which was common practice for the time. There are no indicated dynamics, and there is use of musica ficta. In the transcription used in this paper, bar lines were added since almost none existed in the actual manuscript, and some corrections were made in the number of rests in some places in the score.

The psalm composed by Scarlatti, called Laetatus sum (Psalm 121), is set for four voices (SATB), continuo, and solo soprano and alto lines. This piece is also a part of the vesper psalms used in church. There is use of imitative polyphony within the chorus parts and within the solo lines, but the chorus lines and solo lines did not imitate eachother so in essence, the piece is a duet and a chorus piece put together. There is figured bass present throughout the psalm setting. The text is actually the text to psalm 122. There is octave doubling in the bass, and the fifth occurs often since it was considered to be perfect or somehow godly. What makes this psalm different from Scarlatti?s other psalms is that it is the only psalm that exhibits an organized concerto style. This psalm is also written in Latin, and has no indicated dynamics. It begins in D major, and switches to A and E major, and b and a minor throughout the setting, and ends back on D major. The piece does have some ornamentation, consisting of argued trills. The argument comes from odd markings on the original manuscript. Some people feel that the markings were just hastily drawn trills, while others feel they may actually be mordants. In the transcription listed here, they are all listed as trills. There probably was not a lot of ornamentation put into the music because there was an idea that if the music became too frilly it took away from the sacred message it was supposed to send.

While both pieces are a part of each composer?s library of sacred music, they are in some respects not very much alike and in others they are very similar. There are the obvious things they have in common such as the fact that they are written in Latin. That is not too suprising considering some churches still used Latin as the primary language in their services, even though in the Baroque period many churches began using the vernacular so the patrons would understand the services. Aside from that, Monteverdi, being more influenced by the Renaissance due to his time of birth, demonstrates music practices that are more indicative of the early Baroque with his use of homophony throughout his setting of Psalm 110. It is obvious that Monteverdi used a blend of ?old? and ?new? styles of writing music, which makes him one of the great pioneers in defining the Baroque period. Monteverdi also had musica ficta present in his music, which was not in practice by the end of the Baroque period and was really a ?leftover? from the Renaissance. Domenico Scarlatti demonstrates the advances made throughout the Baroque period in his piece. He is able to use leading tones and dissonance as a result of Monteverdi?s somewhat controversial composition style. It is hard to decide how really different the pieces really are because the Psalm was not each composer?s best known work, since both composers are best remembered for their secular pieces, although each spent time as the head of the music at some sort of church. Monteverdi is best known for his books of madrigals. Scarlatti is best known for his binary-form sets of sonatas he composed while living in Portugal.

There is no earth-shattering conclusion to be drawn from the comparison of these two pieces. The progression of the Baroque is duly noted, and each composer has his definite style. The nature of each piece is such that it is difficult to do anything besides note the differences, since the pieces are so similar. But perhaps that is what is most striking about the pieces. It is concluded that the pieces are similar because of the location of the composers in their formative years. It seems that indirectly Scarlatti may have learned a lot from Monteverdi, since Monteverdi?s ideas did become popular, so it may have been a bad idea to try to compare the two composers. Originally, the thought was that the composers would not be so much alike, since they belong to opposite ends of the Baroque period. It seems that just being from the same country influences how they write, even though both Monteverdi and Scarlatti had influences from other countries, and they were not even the same countries. It may be possible to track the progression of the Baroque by comparing any two pieces by two composers.

Fabbri,Paolo. Monteverdi. Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1994.

Kirkpatrick, Ralph. Domenico Scarlatti. Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1953.

Leopold, Silke. Monteverdi: Music in Transition.

Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

Monteverdi, Claudio. Rudolf Ewerhart, ed. Confitebor

tibi, Domine. Weisbaden: Breitkopf & Hartel, 1998.

Sadie, Stanley, ed. The New Grove Italian Baroque

Masters. London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984.

Scarlatti, Domenico. Laetatus sum. Stuttgart: Carus

-Verlag, 1988.

Sitwell, Sacheverell. A Background for Domenico

Scarlatti. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970.