San Francisco Conservatory of Music
Baroque Ensemble

L'incoronazione di Poppea

(*The Coronation of Poppea*)

Music by Claudio Monteverdi
Libretto by Gian Francesco Busenello
First performance: Venice, Teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo, early 1643

Corey Jamason, Elisabeth Reed,
and **Marcie Stapp,**
directors

Sunday, May 4, 2021, 7:00 PM
Recorded at The San Francisco Conservatory of Music

Cast

(in order of vocal appearance)

La Fortuna	Taylor Husted, *soprano*
La Virtù	Jordan Avellino, *soprano*
Amore	Jayne Diliberto, *soprano*
Poppea	Natalie Mitchell, *soprano*
Nerone	Chen Holtzman, *mezzo-soprano*
Ottone	Alexa Rosenberg, *mezzo-soprano*
Ottavia	Nia Lewis, *mezzo-soprano*
Seneca	Keaton Brown, *baritone*
Drusilla	Kaylee Miltersen, *soprano*
Arnalta	MonaLisa Pomarleanu, *mezzo-soprano*
Nutrice	Lindsay Martin, *mezzo-soprano*
Valletto	Gabriela Martinez, *soprano*
Damigella	Madison Roesler, *soprano*
Liberto	Gabriela Martinez, *soprano*
Pallade	Jasmine Sahd, *soprano*
Mercurio	Lindsay Martin, *mezzo-soprano*

SFCM Baroque Ensemble

Co-Directors	Corey Jamason Elisabeth Reed Marcie Stapp
Harpsichord tuning & Subtitle Preparation	Caitlyn Koester

Continuo band:
Caitlyn Koester, *harpsichord*
Jon Mendle, *theorbo*
Rocío López Sánchez, *cello*

Ritornello band:
Ryan Chen, *violin*
Alexandra Santon, *violin*
Taylor Cooksey, *viola*
Rocío López Sánchez , *cello*
Caitlyn Koester, *harpsichord*
Jon Mendle, *theorbo*

Acknowledgement

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SYNOPSIS

Prologue

Fortune and Virtue are quarrelling about their ascendancy over humankind. Cupid challenges them, proclaiming his superiority.

ACT I

From the presence of Nero's soldiers guarding the residence of his beloved Poppea, Ottone realizes that the emperor has spent a night of love with her. Shortly afterwards, in fact, Nero is seen taking his leave of Poppea.
Meanwhile Poppea, spurred by unbridled ambition, pays no heed to the prudent words of Arnalta. Abandoned by Nero, the empress Ottavia bemoans her fate. The advice of her nurse, who incites her to get herself a lover, falls on deaf ears, as does that of Nero's tutor, the philosopher Seneca, to whom the goddess Pallas Athene announces his imminen death. Nero tells Seneca of his intention to repudiate Ottavia in order to marry Poppea. The tutor resolutely opposes this decision but Nero is annoyed by bis remonstrances and dismisses him brusquely. By now mistress of the emperor's soul, Poppea persuades bim to order Seneca's death. Ottone
reproaches Poppea for her betrayal, but she fIrmly rejects him. To forget his faithless beloved, whom he cannot bring himself to kill, Ottone promises his heart to Drusilla.

ACT II

Sent by Pallas Athene, the god Mercury announces to Seneca that he is to die. Soon afterwards the captain of the guards brings Nero's order to Seneca that he is to commit suicide before dusk. After bidding farewell to his pupils, Seneca kills himself. Ottavia orders Ottone to slay Poppea. In order to act undisturbed and unrecognized, he must wear a woman's clothes. Ottone goes to Drusilla and, after revealing the murder project to her, puts on her clothes and goes to the garden where Poppea is sleeping. But the plan of murder is thwarted by the sudden intervention of Cupid. Arnalta raises the alarm, while Ottone flees.

ACT III

Led by Arnalta, the emperor's soldiers arrest Drusilla, who is accused, on the evidence of her clothes, of having attempted to murder Poppaea. Brought before Nero, Drusilla, to save the life of her beloved, pleads guilty. But Ottone steps forward, confessing that he personally acted on orders from the empress. After repudiating his wife, Nero condemns Ottone and Drusilla to exile. While Arnalta rejoices at her mistress' victory, Ottavia disconsolately leaves Rome. Nero crowns Poppea empress.

Synopsis by Alberto Bentoglio for Teatro alla scala website
(*Translated by Rodney Stringer*)

Claudio Monteverdi
Born: May 1567; Cremona.
Died: November 29, 1643; Venice.

L'incoronazione di Poppea (*1643*)

The birth of opera is closely related to the development of the madrigal, a late Renaissance polyphonic vocal genre characterized by counterpoint and text painting. Influential literary thinkers and composers active in Florence at the end of this era sought to elevate textual clarity and expression in such works by reducing their dependence on counterpoint in favor of single melodic lines. Works born of this effort prepared the ground for the development of opera cultivated in Italy around the turn of the seventeenth century.

Claudio Monteverdi expanded the possibilities of this new genre. After studies with the director of music at the cathedral in his native Cremona, he became a musician at the ducal court of Mantua, where he was influenced by many excellent musicians and composers. His first published works were madrigals whose intense use of dissonance earned him a reputation as an avant-garde composer. In 1607, he achieved more widespread fame through the debut of his first opera, *L'Orfeo*, which presents a stark contrast to everything that had come before by extending earlier operatic forms, using expressive recitatives, and matching the music with the emotions of the text.

In 1613, Monteverdi was invited to become the new director of music at St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, where he would spend the next thirty years. In Venice, he focused mainly on church music and madrigals. His last collection of madrigals, *Madrigali guerieri et amarosi* (*Madrigals of War and Peace, 1638*) was a comprehensive presentation of his theories on how best to express human emotion. However, in 1637, opera houses began opening in Venice, bolstering Roman composers Benedetto Ferrari and Francesco Manelli. These composers brought their own style of opera which put musical interest and flashy technical feats above emotional narratives. Spurred by their success, the Grimani family opened their own op-

era house in 1638, giving Monteverdi, now over seventy years old, an opportunity to come out of retirement. He composed his final three operas for this new venue, though only two survive: *Il ritorno d'Ulisse* (*1640*) and his final opera, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (*1642*). These last works solidified Monteverdi's reputation as one of the greatest composers of the age.

Thirty years after *L'Orfeo*, these final operas reflect Monteverdi's deepened mastery of fusing poetry and music. He demonstrated how effectively music can be used to move the drama forward. In one of his letters, he explains that "the changes between the vigorous, noisy harmonies and the weak soft ones will take place suddenly, so that the discourse will come through very well." When taken apart from the text, the sheer beauty of Monteverdi's music allows it to stand on its own. Further, as the musicologist Ellen Rosand writes, "Monteverdi's late works assert the power of music to mean on its own: not to imitate words but to represent emotion."

The libretto of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* is based on Tacitus' "Book XIV of the Annals" and Suetonius' "Lives of the Twelve Caesars." The opera centers on the love affair of Emperor Nerone and Poppea Sabina, ending in the repudiation of their previous relationships. Victory of vice over virtue is a dominant theme: most virtuous characters are mocked and shamed throughout the opera. However, as amoral as the opera is, the true story is much worse, ending with the deaths of Seneca, Ottavia (who is merely banished in the opera), Agrippina (Nerone's mother), and Luciano (Seneca's successor) before Poppea is killed by Nerone three years after their wedding. Though toned down, the opera libretto captures the intense energy and drama of this period of Roman history.

Monteverdi's incredible use of line and harmony to express the text can be heard from the opening bars of the opera. For example, during Ottone's solo "E pure io torno" in Act I, we experience his elation as he is about to see Poppea, through the use of light, happy rhythms in conjunction with mostly diatonic melodies and harmonies.

However, once Ottone discovers Nerone's guards, the mood shifts dramatically; Ottone's singing becomes frantic with shorter, rapidly jagged notes flowing from the character's distress. Similar techniques are used during Ottavia's solo, "Disprezzata Regina." From the very opening, Ottavia's slow lines convey her weeping, and much shorter, quicker two or three note lines imitate crying. All of this attention to emotional expression creates drama that always feels engaging, realistic, and relatable.

At the beginning of Act II, Mercurio brings Seneca the news that his death sentence must be carried out that day, and Seneca sings the acceptance of his fate and informs his household of the decision in the lyrical and unwavering "Amici è giunta l'ora." As Seneca represents morality and virtue, his death foreshadows the triumph of vice and lust over good. Monteverdi then lightens the mood with a humorous and cheerful duet between the page and the maid in Nerone's palace, "Sento un certo non so che."

Meanwhile, Ottone expresses his disappointment in himself for thinking of harming Poppea in a short solo recitative, "I miei subiti sdegni." Ottavia arrives to order him to kill Poppea in the commanding recitative, "Tu che dagli avi miei." Ottone's speech is hesitant and subdued, as he does not want to commit the crime, while Ottavia is clear, determined, and forceful.

In "Felice cor mio," Drusilla expresses her joy over Ottone's love for her in a lyrical aria that uses the title as a refrain. When Ottone comes to her for help with a disguise in "Io non so dov'io vada," she is weary of the crime but agrees to help. The repetition of phrases from her previous aria reinforces the idea that she is willing to overlook anything because of her love for Ottone. However, the plan is ultimately thwarted by Cupid who descends from heaven to save Poppea. Arnalta awakens to call for help in music that escalates as her fear grows, and in response, Cupid sings "Ho difesa Poppea!": a triumphant, lilting song declaring that Poppea will become empress.

Act III opens with Drusilla's song, "Ò felice Drusilla, ò che sper'io?," adorned with coloratura passages in a higher tessitura. Drusilla thinks that she and Ottone have been successful in killing Poppea, and that at last she will have Ottone all to herself. Monteverdi suddenly interrupts this in "Ecco la scelerata," a confrontation recitative between her and Arnalta before Nerone eventually learns of this treachery in "Signor, ecco la rea." Ottone reveals himself and his plan to ultimately kill Poppea by Ottavia's orders, and tries to clear Drusilla of her name in "Nò, nò, questa sentenza." He begs for Nerone to bestow on him the punishment he deserves; instead, Nerone decides to send both of them into exile. Breaking the flow of the recitative, Ottone and Drusilla express their bliss in brief, measured songs.

Poppea follows suit with "Signor oggi rinasco ai primi fiori," her song of desire for Nerone. Nerone interrupts this song and explains to her what has happened, as well as the promise to make Poppea his wife. Ottavia sings of her grief in "Addio Roma," her last song of farewell. Here, Monteverdi uses text repetition, text painting, fragmented phrases, variations of range, and alternations of measured/unmeasured music to depict Ottavia's despair as she is sent into exile by her own husband. This song is immediately followed by Arnalta's declamatory recitative, "Oggi sarà Poppea," acknowledging the rise of Poppea as the new empress of Rome. The opera ends with a love duet between Poppea and Nerone, "Pur ti miro," as vice is victorious over virtue. Poppea and Nerone are now equal in power yet still dependent on each other, demonstrated through imitative repeated melodies, tight dissonances, and cross-voicing.

While the simplicity and beauty of this last duet makes it the most awaited musical number in the entire opera, various scholars believe that this duet was not composed by Monteverdi himself. In fact, no original score for the opera from the composer himself has been found; only two manuscripts from Venice and Naples survived. Textual errors and musical discrepancies are evident among these copied manuscripts. The entire music of the finale is said to have been written by Cavalli or Sacrati or perhaps others.

Regardless of the origins of much of the music in Act III, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* remains a landmark of early opera.

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