Music had always played a major part in the society and culture of the Republic of Venice, and the 16th century was a time of great musical innovation. The Cathedral of San Marco was the center of musical activity, and since the Republic and the Cathedral came under the jurisdiction of the Doge - the chief magistrate - rather than any ecclesiastical authority, Venice developed very different musical and liturgical traditions from Rome. There were many parades and processions of state, fusing civic and religious elements, in which music performance was an integral part. The Scuole, confraternities which served as religious and charitable organizations, also played a vital role in the cultural and ceremonial life of the city. The largest and most important of these confraternities, the Scuole Grandi, maintained musical establishments for long periods of time, and employed musicians for their concerts, religious processions, and participation in state celebrations. Wealthy private citizens supported musicians, too, and many music-loving nobles became patrons for ensembles of musicians in the same way as the ruling houses of Mantua, Ferrara, or Urbino. A great number of people possessed musical instruments, and all the classes enjoyed making music and listening to it.

By the 16th century, Venice had also become an important
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center of music publishing, and composers came from all over Europe to benefit from the new technology of the printing press. A lot of printers were also active musicians and composers, and they played a direct role in the arranging of the pieces they published. In addition to being a center of musical excellence, Venice had numerous workshops for the manufacture and export of musical instruments. Still another event in the history of music in the 16th century was the growth of the Commedia dell’Arte, a form of improvisational theatre. After about 1550, troupes of traveling players began to perform in Lombardy and the Venetian Republic, and soon the best troupes were invited to play in courts all over Italy and Europe.

But it was the polyphonic style which developed at the Cathedral of San Marco which became Venice’s greatest legacy to the history of music. Before the 9th century, plainsong, a type of chant consisting of a single, unaccompanied melodic line, sung in a free, rather than a measured rhythm, had been the liturgical music of the Roman Catholic Church. Then an early form of polyphony called organum developed, in which one voice at an interval was added to enhance the harmony. Over time, composers began to write more parts that were not just simple transpositions and created true polyphony, with several interweaving melodic lines. Between 1317 and 1318, Marchettus of Padova, a musical theorist and composer, wrote two major treatises on plainchant and polyphony. These treatises, which were widely copied and disseminated, proved to be greatly influential during the 14th and 15th centuries.

Polyphony became firmly established in Venice by way of the Franco-Flemish school. By the 15th century, musicians in the low countries (modern day Netherlands and Belgium) were already using polyphony in sacred music, and many came to the major centers of Italy: Rome, Ferrara, Florence, and Milan, where they influenced Italian composers. The election of Flemish composer Adrian Willaert as maestro di cappella of the Cathedral of San Marco in 1527 (a post he retained until his death in 1562) proved to be a turning point in the history of music. Employing San Marco’s unique, spacious interior with opposing choir lofts, Willaert divided the choral body into two sections and wrote antiphonal music in which these choirs sang successive, often contrasting phrases of music, united by

Adrian Willaert

...
the sound of the organ. The effect proved to be magnificent, as the sound bounced off the main dome and choir area, aided by the capacious acoustical space. There may also have been additional platforms, or palchetti, built to accommodate instrumentalists during larger festivals. These ‘cori spezzati,’ or split choirs, represented a significant shift from former polyphonic compositions, and through his work as a musician, teacher, and composer, Willaert helped to establish the Venetian School a group of outstanding composers including Cipriano de Rore, Giseffo Zarlino, Claudio Merulo, and Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli. They created great works suited to Venice’s unique cultural and religious traditions and received acclaim from all over Europe. In 1550, Willaert published Salmi Spezzati, antiphonal settings of the psalms, which was the first polychoral work of the Venetian School. A prolific composer of both sacred and secular forms, he wrote over seventy madrigals. A polyphonic composition for between three and six voices, the madrigal is similar in form to the motet (a polyphonic musical setting for chorus of a Latin text, usually sacred). But the secular madrigal was written in the Italian language, not restricted to the style of church music, and the texts were often sentimental or erotic in nature, sometimes set to poetry by writers such as Petrarch, Ariosto, or Tasso. They were sung at all sorts of gatherings, and also at meetings of societies for the study and discussion of the arts and sciences. Willaert and his pupil and future successor as maestro di cappella Cipriano de Rore brought the madrigal to new heights of expression, through their handling of text declamation and the use of ‘word painting’ or madrigalism. In this technique, which can be applied to any form of music, a musical text strictly adheres to a poetic text. This can occur not only from a musical point of view, but also in the way the notes look on the page. For example, using the poetic concept of a wave, the notes written on a musical staff would have the appearance of a gentle rise and fall. The music tries to imitate an emotion, and major and minor harmonies would match happy or sad texts. Composers would set a word like riso (smile) to a passage of quick running notes or sospiro (sigh) to a note which falls to the note below. 

While Rore, originally from Flanders, composed many masses and motets, he is best known for his Italian madrigals. In the mid-16th century, he became one of the most influential composers of madrigals, and many venues and received acclaim from all over Europe. In 1550, Willaert published Salmi Spezzati, antiphonal settings of the psalms, which was the first polychoral work of the Venetian School. A prolific composer of both sacred and secular forms, he wrote over seventy madrigals. A polyphonic composition for between three and six voices, the madrigal is similar in form to the motet (a polyphonic musical setting for chorus of a Latin text, usually sacred). But the secular madrigal was written in the Italian language, not restricted to the style of church music, and the texts were often sentimental or erotic in nature, sometimes set to poetry by writers such as Petrarch, Ariosto, or Tasso. They were sung at all sorts of gatherings, and also at meetings of societies for the study and discussion of the arts and sciences. Willaert and his pupil and future successor as maestro di cappella Cipriano de Rore brought the madrigal to new heights of expression, through their handling of text declamation and the use of ‘word painting’ or madrigalism. In this technique, which can be applied to any form of music, a musical text strictly adheres to a poetic text. This can occur not only from a musical point of view, but also in the way the notes look on the page. For example, using the poetic concept of a wave, the notes written on a musical staff would have the appearance of a gentle rise and fall. The music tries to imitate an emotion, and major and minor harmonies would match happy or sad texts. Composers would set a word like riso (smile) to a passage of quick running notes or sospiro (sigh) to a note which falls to the note below. 

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Isabella Andreini (1562 - 1604)

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others strove to emulate his work. But it was Claudio Monteverdi, who became maestro di capella in 1613, who brought the madrigal to what many have called the peak of perfection. Monteverdi wrote nine books of madrigals, which showed the transition from the late 16th century style to that of the Baroque. He developed an individual style of composition using the basso continuo technique, a part played continuously throughout a piece, providing the harmonic structure of the music, and he also wrote one of the earliest operas, L’Orfeo.

Madrigals played a part as well in the Commedia dell’Arte, in which the actors often participated in the historically important practice of theatrical solo singing. When Henri III stopped in Venice in 1574 on his way to Warsaw from Paris to take up the crown, he attended a performance by the famed Gelosi, the longest standing Commedia dell’Arte company to hold the Renaissance stage. In Cornelio Frangipani’s Tragedia, the acclaimed actress Vittoria Piisimi and the Gelosi sang music composed by Claudio Merulo (who had become first organist at San Marco in 1566), much of it in the form of madrigals with poetic lyrics written in ottava rima (consisting of eight iambic lines, usually iambic pentameters) and versi scolti (free verse). In 1581, two theatres opened in Venice, the Teatro Michiel and the Teatro Tron, offering theatrical productions to a ticket-buying public for the first time. Owned and operated by noble families, these theatres employed lavish sets, lighting, and decoration, and signed contracts with the best Commedia dell’Arte companies of the day.

Francesco Sansovino, in his guidebook ‘Venice, Noble and Singular City,’ also published in 1581, wrote that ‘Not far from the Church of San Cassan are two theatres, very beautifully built at great expense, one in the form of an oval and the other round, with a capacity for a great number of people, for reciting comedies during the carnival season, according to the customs of the city.’

It was also during the 1580s and into the 90s that the Venetian style of sacred music at San Marco reached giori o minori. La musica cercava di imitare l’emozione, cioè i compositori, per esempio, mettevano una parola come «riso» in un passaggio di note veloci, o «sospiro» su una nota che cade sulla nota sottostante.

Anche se Rore, originario delle Fiandre, compose molte messe e motetti, resta famoso soprattutto per i suoi madrigali italiani. A metà del sedicesimo secolo diventò uno dei più influenti compositori di madrigali e molti si impegnarono ad emulare la sua opera. Ma fu Claudio Monteverdi, divenuto maestro di cappella nel 1613, a portare il madrigale a ciò che molti chiamano i picchi della perfezione. Scrisse nove libri di madrigali che segnano la transizione dal tardo sedicesimo secolo al Barocco. Monte

verdi sviluppò uno stile individuale di composizione usando la tecnica del basso continuo, una parte suonata costantemente durante un pezzo, che fornisce la struttura armonica della musica, e scrisse anche una delle prime Opere L’Orfeo.
Claudio Monteverdi (1567 - 1643)

its culmination, when Giovanni Gabrieli succeeded his uncle, Andrea, as the organist and principal composer, and when Gioseffo Zarlino was the maestro di cappella. Andrea Gabrieli had been organist of San Marco from 1566 until his death in 1585, and had made great contributions to the grand, polychoral style. He’d also composed music for the celebration of Venice’s victory over the Turks in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. But Giovanni gained greater fame as one of the most influential musicians of his time. He composed most of his pieces so that a choir or instrumental group would be heard first from the left, and then followed by a response from the right. While Adrian Willaert may have been the first to employ this style, at least in Venice, it was Gabrieli who perfected and embellished on it, transmitting the technique of polychoral writing to instrumental ensembles. He was following in the footsteps of his uncle, Andrea, who had tentatively started writing instrumental pieces, but had little of it published. Gio-

Claudio Monteverdi (1567 - 1643)

vanni published his uncle’s work as well as his own, and became particularly known for his brilliant ‘echo’ effects using double choirs and double ensembles of wind instruments. Composers from many countries in Europe, especially Germany, came to study with him. He taught them the Venetian polychoral style, and also the way in which madrigals were being written at the time. These ideas and methodologies were taken back to Germany, and eventually spread to Spain, France, and England, demarcating the beginning of the Baroque period.

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Giovanni Gabrieli (1553 - 1612)

«Non lontano dalla chiesa di S.Cassan ci sono due teatri costruiti con grandi mezzi e assai belli, uno di forma ovale e l’altro circolare, con la possibilità di contenere un pubblico molto numeroso, per recitare commedie durante il Carnevale, secondo le usanze della città. Fu anche durante quegli stessi anni che lo stile veneziano della musica sacra raggiunse il suo culmine quando Giovanni Gabrieli succedette a suo zio Andrea come organista e principale compositore e quando Gioseffo Zarlino divenne maestro di cappella. Andrea Gabrieli era stato organista a San Marco dal 1566 fino al 1585, anno della sua morte e aveva dato un importante contributo al grande stile policorale. Aveva anche composto la musica per la celebrazione della vittoria di Venezia sui Turchi nella battaglia di Lepanto nel 1571. Ma Giovanni guadagnò più grande fama come uno dei musicisti più influenti del suo tempo, rappresentando così il culmine del grande lavoro della Scuola Musicale Veneziana. Compose la maggior parte dei suoi pezzi in modo che il coro o il gruppo strumentale fosse sentito prima a sinistra e poi seguito da una risposta a destra. Mentre Adrian Willaert può essere stato il primo a usare questo stile, almeno a Venezia, fu poi Giovanni Gabrieli che lo perfezionò ed abbellì trasmettendo la tecnica delle composizioni policorali agli ensemble strumentali. Segui le orme dello zio, Andrea, che aveva cominciato a scrivere pezzi strumentali, di cui pochi, però, erano stati pubblicati. Giovanni pubblicò poi tanto le opere dello zio quanto le sue proprie e divenne celebre specialmente per i suoi brillanti effetti di «eco», usando i doppi cori e i doppi ensemble di strumenti a fiato.

Da varie parti d’Europa, specialmente dalla Germania, molti compositori vennero a studiare con lui. Gabrieli insegnò lo stile policorale veneziano ma anche la tecnica con cui venivano scritti i madrigali a quel tempo. Queste idee e queste metodologie furono poi riportate in Germania e alla fine si diffusero in Spagna, Francia e Inghilterra, marcando così gli inizi del periodo barocco.