



Claudio Monteverdi by Bernardo Strozzi (c. 1630)

**Dixit Dominus, Psalm 110:1-7**

<sup>1</sup> The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.

<sup>2</sup> The Lord shall send the rod of thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies.

<sup>3</sup> Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth.

<sup>4</sup> The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.

<sup>5</sup> The Lord at thy right hand shall shatter kings in the day of his wrath.

<sup>6</sup> He shall judge among the nations, he shall fill the places with the dead bodies; he shall wound the heads over many countries.

<sup>7</sup> He shall drink of the brook in the way: therefore shall he lift up his head.

Christian has asked me to explain why a concert entitled "Hope and Joy" features a psalm setting that involves filling the nations with corpses and shattering rulers. Psalm 110 was an enthronement psalm of King David, and when we read about the Lord saying to my Lord, that's understood to mean God speaking to King David. But then who's this Melchizedek? ("You are a priest forever after the order of..."). Melchizedek is a priest and king from the Book of Genesis whose name means "King of Righteousness", and he is understood to be in the ancestral line of David.

Well, Christian writers got hold of this text and said, "You know who else is a descendant of David and therefore Melchizedek? Jesus, of course!" So the psalm was then understood by Christians to be about Christ, which is ok until you get to the part about the Prince of Peace piling up the corpses of enemies under his footstool. But then, those enemies are understood to be the sinful desires of the heart that draw us from the love of God. There's another concept, though, which is the "priesthood of all believers", by which, since Christian theology maintains that Jesus' sacrifice takes away the sin of the world, means that all believers are priests after the order of Melchizedek. And those enemies under our footstool are not Palestinians but that second piece of chocolate cake, smallness of mind, meanness of heart, and you can take it from there.

But let's not forget about Monteverdi, the father of Italian opera, who would do anything for the sake of a good musical story. Indeed, at the time of its writing his music was controversial because of its dissonance in the service of drama. "Dixit Dominus" was written when he was director of music at St. Mark's in Venice. This psalm was frequently used at the beginning of Vespers in the early evening, so there are numerous musical settings. And architecturally this is an incredibly dramatic setting. Built in the 11-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, San Marco is a Western church on the model of the East, with a great dome and arches and balconies galore. The interior is completely covered in gold-ground mosaics, where each tiny piece of glass encases a piece of gold foil (right, April Zilber?). Because they are set by hand, each tessera reflects the light of candles in a slightly different way, so the whole creates millions of minute reflections and a mystical glow. Composers from Gabrieli to Monteverdi (and before and after) used the balconies of San Marco for opposing choirs, vocal or instrumental, that responded musically to one another. So when we sing these battling triads ("Dominare in medio inimicorum", "Rule in the midst of your enemies"), think of those balconies. Imagine yourself, in choir dress of the Venetian 17<sup>th</sup> century, singing from one of them across the vast interior of St. Mark's. Below you the courtiers and populace of Venice gather in their silken finery for evening prayer as this majestic, dramatic cantata unfurls. And THAT's what we're bringing to Santa Cruz and to Holy Cross. To come full circle: 6 days after our Sunday concert I will be at the basilica of San Marco in Venice, and I will bring with me the sound memory of our own voices: our rendition of Monteverdi's "Dixit Dominus" back to the place for which it was written. (Eliza Linley)

