

Lesson 3: Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525?–1594)



Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina represents the culmination of the Roman (Catholic) polyphonic style. His music almost sounds “pure” when compared to some of his associates. The lyrics are clear, and the parts distinct when they enter. His compositions are majestic and are sometimes referred to as “cathedrals in sound.”

There are two interesting notions about him, one factual and one legendary. First is his name. He is often referred to simply as “Palestrina,” which would be the same as people calling you by the name of your city or town (i.e., “Hey, New York, want to go to the store?”). The second is a story about how he supposedly single-handedly saved music in the Roman Catholic Church. The legend is that a pope or a Church Council was considering banning polyphonic music in the liturgy because the words were becoming impossible to understand. This part was true; many composers were layering the different lines of the text so that they sounded together which made distinguishing the words very difficult. Palestrina supposedly wrote a mass to show that the polyphonic style could be written in such a way as to enhance the text, so the Church leaders changed their minds. This has turned out to be false, but the story persists. The following selection is from his best-loved work.

Example 9. Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (mass): Missa Papae Marcelli (Pope Marcellus Mass); Gloria

Gloria in excelsis Deo (Latin)

Gloria in excelsis Deo
et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis
Laudamus te,
benedicimus te,
adoramus te,
glorificamus te,
gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam
tuam,
Domine Deus, Rex caelestis,
Deus Pater omnipotens.
Domine Fili unigenite, Jesu Christe,
Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris,
qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis;
qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe
deprecationem nostram.

Glory to God in the Highest

Glory to God in the highest
and peace to his people on earth.
We praise you,
we worship you,
we adore you,
we glorify you,
we give you thanks and praise you for your glory,
Lord God, heavenly King,
Almighty God and Father,
Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, who
takes away the sin of the world: have mercy
on us;
who takes away the sin of the world, receive our
prayer.

Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis.
Quoniam tu solus Sanctus,
tu solus Dominus,
tu solus Altissimus
Jesu Christe, cum Sancto Spiritu;
in gloria Dei Patris, Amen

You are seated at the right hand of the Father:
For you alone are the Holy One,
You alone are the Lord,
You alone are the Most High
Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Characteristics of Palestrina:

1. Each line has a distinct melody
2. Little use of imitation or text painting
3. Text is clear; strong syllables highlighted with neumatic writing or short melismas, but not long florid passages
4. Strong major/minor sound
5. Dissonances (clashing pitches) are placed on “weak” beats
6. Often has one or more voices moving when another is sustaining; the exception is at cadences, when all voices sustain

Assignment 6. Composition in the Style of Palestrina Lyrics

Latin Mass: Agnus Dei

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: miserere nobis.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: miserere nobis.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: dona nobis pacem.

Lamb of God

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world: have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world: have mercy on us.

Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world: grant us peace.

Assignment 6. Composition in the Style of Palestrina

Consult the lists, Characteristics of Renaissance Music and Characteristics of Palestrina (don't forget the list, Melody Writing) to compose a two-part setting of the "Agnus Dei" lyrics written above. You may use either Latin or English.

Composer: _____

