



PALESTRINA



MISSA
Papae Marcelli

MISSA
Assumpta est Maria

FERDINAND GROSSMANN
CONDUCTING
THE PRO MUSICA CHOIR
VIENNA

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THE PRO MUSICA CHOIR, VIENNA—FERDINAND GROSSMANN, conductor

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina takes his last name from the town in which he was born. That town was Palestrina, near Rome, and he was born there in 1524 or 1525. Not much is known about his childhood, except that he was a chorister in the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. By 1544, however, he had been appointed organist and choirmaster in a cathedral of his home town, where he temporarily settled and took a wife. When Julius III was elected Pope in 1551, he called Palestrina to become choirmaster of the Cappella Giulia in St. Peter's. A few years later, Palestrina published his first book of Masses.

Apparently he was a favourite of the Pope. When Julius III died and was succeeded by Pope Marcellus II, for whom the present Mass was written, Palestrina retained his position. Marcellus ruled only for a few weeks, however; and Paul IV, who succeeded him, dismissed Palestrina on the grounds that he was married. Whereupon Palestrina went to the Church of Saint John Lateran as musical director, succeeding the great Orlando di Lasso. Resigning in 1560, Palestrina next took the position of choirmaster at Santa Maria Maggiore. A few years after that he entered the service of the Cardinal Ippolito d'Este and then went on to be the director of the Cappella Giulia. For a short time, after losing his wife and children in a plague (1580), he was considering taking orders as a priest. Something radically different happened, though. He re-married and went into the fur business, becoming quite wealthy. All during this time he was composing, and his reputation was such that Pope Gregory XIII entrusted him and another musician, Annibale Zoilo, with the revision of the Roman Gradual and Antiphoner. Palestrina never finished the task. He died on February 2, 1594, and was buried in one of the side chapels of the old St. Peter's. When the new church was built on the same site, his remains were moved, and the site of his grave remains unknown.

Palestrina was forgotten for many years, though his music continued to be sung in the Vatican. The romantic composers rediscovered him, as they rediscovered Bach; and today Palestrina is held by most experts to be the peer of Bach as a contrapuntist and composer of ecclesiastical music. Einstein, in *A Short History of Music*, calls him "the composer of the ideal type of church music, pure, purged of all subjectivity, marvellously harmonious . . . heir to all the traditions of his Roman predecessors and . . . also steeped in the music of the Netherlands, which he transferred into an expression of utter purity and immaculate, unearthly longing. Palestrina was master of the Mass—we possess ninety-three four- to eight-part Masses by him." There are, in addition, an enormous number of other types of music—280 motets, 41 hymns, 66 offertories, 35 magnificats, many madrigals, litanies and psalms. His complete works, finally published in 1903 after over forty years of labour, take up all of thirty-three folio volumes.

All through Palestrina's active career the problem of church music was troubling the minds of the ecclesiastical authorities. The Council of Trent (1545-63) decreed that "all music in which anything lascivious or impure is mixed, whether for the organ or for the voices, is to be kept out of the Churches; likewise all profane actions, worldly conversations, walking about, noise or shouting, in order that the house of God may be truly a house of prayer."

But the Council never could reach an agreement on liturgical music. Some wanted all counterpoint abolished, with a return to Gregorian chant. Others, more mild, merely wanted to get rid of secular elements like the *canti fermi*. In 1564, the Pope appointed a congregation of eight cardinals and eight singers of the Papal Chapel to settle the question. Thanks to the intervention of King Ferdinand I, who protested the exclusion of contrapuntal music, polyphony was not dropped. There used to be in currency a pretty story about Palestrina hastily composing a few Masses, the *Marcellus* among them, to convince the congregation that counterpoint and religious devotion were not incompatible. It's a nice tale, but entirely untrue.

All of this attempt at reform was reflected in Palestrina's music, which is purer and much more uncompromising in its austerity than anything composed at the time for the Church. Palestrina, too, was intensely interested in obtaining clarity in enunciation from his settings. Pope Marcellus had decreed, not unjustly, that what was sung should be heard and understood. Palestrina was in complete agreement, and also took a severe view of the importance of his music to the ecclesiastical ceremonies. He himself said, in the preface to a book of motets, "If men take such pains to compose beautiful music for profane songs, one should at least devote as much thought to sacred song, nay, even more than to mere worldly matters." Thus Palestrina tried to get entirely away from over-ornament, undue repetition of words, excessive melismas and structural weakness, all of which were, he thought, far too much prevalent in his time.

Palestrina composed the *Pope Marcellus Mass* for the Pope of that name. It was performed for the first time in the Sistine Chapel on April 27, 1565, and was published in 1567 by Dorici in the *Second Book of Masses*, dedicated to Philip II of Spain. One of Palestrina's best known works, it is based on the ecclesiastical modes. There also is something of a secular impact, though that is secondary. The troubadours, minnesingers, frottolists and other secular performers were exerting their influence, and no composer of the day could avoid them: they were part of the blood stream of music. Scholars have pointed out that one of the themes in *Marcellus* can be traced back to a medieval melody called *L'Homme Armé*. But the Mass remains a "marvel of architecture, miracle of scientific complication." Henry Coates writes, in his biographical study of the composer, "In this work, the first of the great Palestrinian masterpieces, the older method with its *canto fermo* (or principal theme) and its display of contrapuntal cleverness merely for the exhibition and exercise of ingenuity has gone. In its

place is a logical scheme, a weaving of the polyphonic strands from certain "germ" themes, artistic effect being achieved by the use of a more restrained type of decoration in the counterpoints . . . and by the more skilful and subtle use of vocal colour . . . Its most striking features are its perfect proportions, architectural in design, its remote atmosphere and its remarkable dignity, at times almost approaching austerity, while liturgically it conforms to the maxims, laid down by Pope Marcellus, of simplicity, clarity, and intelligibility of words."

And Bernard Gavoty, writing of this Mass, makes a striking point when he states that "The attitude of Palestrina before the Divinity is that of reverence, of compression of individuality in the face of the mystery that surpasses it . . . We revere above all Palestrina who has given us, in the *Mass of Pope Marcellus*, that which Michelangelo has left us with his frescoes in the Sistine Chapel."

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The *Mass of Pope Marcellus* has a text that follows the Catholic Missal. It is divided into the usual five parts: *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*.

Kyrie: Kyrie eleison. Christe eleison. Kyrie eleison.

Gloria: Gloria in excelsis Deo, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. Laudamus te, benedicimus te, glorificamus te. Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam. Domine Deus, rex coelestis, Deus pater omnipotens, domine fili unigenite, Jesu Christe, domine Deus, agnus Dei, filius patris. Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis, suscipe deprecationem nostram. Qui sedes ad dexteram patris, miserere nobis Quoniam tu solus sanctus, tu solus Dominus, Jesu Christe. Cum sancto spiritu in gloria Dei patris. Amen

Credo: Credo in unum Deum Patrem omnipotentem, factorem coeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium. Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum, filium Dei unigenitum. Et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula. Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine, Deum verum de Deo vero, genitum non factum, consubstantialem patri per quem omnia facta sunt. Qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem, descendit de coelis. Et incarnatus est de Spiritu sancto, ex Maria virgine: et homo factus est. Crucifixus etiam pro nobis, sub Pontio Pilato passus, et sepultus est. Et resurrexit tertia die, secundum scripturas. Et ascendit in coelum: sedet ad dexteram Patris. Et iterum venturus est cum gloria iudicare vivos et mortuos: cuius regni non erit finis. Et in spiritum sanctum, Dominum et vivificantem, qui ex patre filioque procedit. Qui cum patre et filio simul adoratur et conglorificatur: qui locutus est per prophetas. Et unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam. Confiteor unum baptisma in remissionem peccatorum. Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum et vitam, venturi saeculi. Amen.

Sanctus: Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, Dominus, Deus, Sabaoth. Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua. Hosanna in excelsis. Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.

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

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As well known as the *Missa Papae Marcelli* is the *Missa Assumpta est Maria*. The date of composition of this masterpiece is uncertain. Some writers ascribe it to the year 1585, but modern research tends to place the music a little later.

Assumpta est Maria is one of a group of works written upon the antiphons and for the feasts of the Blessed Virgin. By unanimous consent it is one of Palestrina's greatest works. Zoë Kendrick Pyne, in her study of the composer, says that it is hard to speak of the score in sober words. Henry Coates, in his biography, writes that in this work "Palestrina seems to have lavished all his art, as a musical tribute to the Mother of God; indeed, it is a work which many critics hold to be the finest in this form."

It was composed at the height of Palestrina's powers. In his earlier years he had followed composers of the Franco-Flemish school, using a highly polyphonic texture against a *cantus firmus*. About the time of the *Papae Marcelli* Palestrina developed a new style, in which the music is developed in short motives and considerable rhythmic variation. By the time of the *Assumpta est Maria* Palestrina was using a relatively simple contrapuntal style, written (as *Grove* put it) "in a species of imitative counterpoint employing short motives passing from one voice to another, with a subtle ebb and flow of rhythmic tension, giving to the whole tonal weave a peculiar softness of texture. Also at this time we may notice a tendency to write more passages of homophonic character, alternating with polyphony."

According to legend, Pope Sixtus V, on first hearing the *Assumpta est Maria* at S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, is supposed to have come out of the church smiling and saying that the mass could have come from no other pen than Palestrina's. What sets the music off from any equivalent writing of the sixteenth century is its remarkable texture. Although it is composed in six parts and in spots is fairly complicated, it is a model of lightness and transparency in its vocal writing. Mr. Coates, who considers this work "perhaps the finest" of Palestrina's masses, exclaims over the vocal orchestration. "Here much of the light, brilliant effect of the music is due to the choice of voices (2 sopranos, also, 2 tenors, bass) and the continual use of their upper registers, the frequent crossing and interlacing of the parts helping to create a tonal fabric of luminous yet brilliant quality. There is a supremely effective touch in the mass, where, after the outburst of rejoicing which the opening "Kyrie" suggests, the six voices are reduced to four, and in a hushed homophonic passage one is reminded that after all it is a prayer for mercy that is being sung."

Notes by CHARLES STANLEY

For best results: use a diamond stylus with .001" radius and have it inspected regularly; before and after playing treat record surfaces with a barely damp cloth, but never across grooves; those with Wide Range equipment are advised to compensate for the RIAA curve.