

Understanding Music

Seventh Edition

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COMPOSERS, PATRONS, AND AUDIENCES

Patronage

Music costs money. Composers have to make a living, and so do performers. In the days before public concerts, ticket sales, and commercial recordings, music had to be financed by patrons (supporters). During the Renaissance, most patrons were wealthy aristocrats who could afford to employ musicians at their courts or palaces. Musicians were on the staff at these courts just like doormen, dressmakers, cooks, and other servants.

Some wealthy aristocrats employed several composers at once. In the later part of the fifteenth century, the duke of Milan appointed the great composer Josquin Desprez to his staff, although he already had four other composers on the payroll.

Sometimes patrons had to pay handsomely to hire the most famous musicians. When Josquin left Milan, he moved to the court of the duke of Ferrara. He was hired in 1503, against the advice of the duke's private secretary, who urged the duke to hire a composer named Heinrich Isaac instead. "Isaac gets on better with his colleagues and composes more quickly," he wrote. "It is true that Josquin is a better composer, but he composes only when he feels like it and not when he is asked. Moreover, Josquin is demanding 200 ducats, while Isaac will take 120." The duke decided to go first-class, and Josquin got his 200 ducats.

The Counter-Reformation and the Music of Palestrina

The Counter-Reformation was not primarily concerned with music, but music played a role in the deliberations of the church reformers. In 1534, the reformer Paul III was elected pope, and in 1545, he convened the Council of Trent, a council of cardinals that met from time to time over a period of about 20 years to discuss needed reforms in church administration and liturgy.

Music was discussed only during the last two years of the council. Many complaints were heard:

- ❑ Secular songs were being used as the basis for sacred compositions.
- ❑ Singers had become too theatrical and were distracting people from the liturgy.
- ❑ Polyphony had become too complicated and florid, obscuring the sacred words.

The council considered banning polyphony altogether, thinking that a return to plainchant was the best solution. In the end, however, the cardinals agreed that polyphonic music could be used in church, in addition to the traditional chants, provided that the words could be heard clearly and the style was not too elaborate.

The composer whose music most clearly represents these ideals is Giovanni Pierluigi da

Palestrina (ca. 1525–1594). Like many people during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, this man took his name from his hometown. He was born in Palestrina, 40 miles from Rome, and was sent to Rome as a choirboy to study and sing. He spent most of his life at some of that city's greatest musical institutions, including the Sistine Chapel (the private chapel of the pope).

The purity, serenity, and perfection of Palestrina's music have made him the most highly regarded composer of late Renaissance choral music. The principal characteristics of his style are balance, control, evenness, clarity, and perfect text setting. The overall effect conveyed by Palestrina's music is achieved by careful control of two primary elements: the structure of the individual melodic lines and the placement of dissonance.

In the structure of the individual melodic lines for his polyphonic pieces, Palestrina followed these strict guidelines:

- a. The melody moves most of the time by steps with no gaps (leaps) between the notes.
- b. If there is a leap, it is small and is immediately counterbalanced by stepwise motion in the opposite direction.
- c. The rhythmic flow is not rigid or regularly accented, but is shifting, gentle, and alive.

Four hundred years after Palestrina, the composer Charles Gounod observed the following: "This severe, ascetic music is as calm and horizontal as the line of the ocean; monotonous by virtue of its serenity; anti-sensuous; and yet it is so intense in its contemplativeness that it verges sometimes on ecstasy."

Agnus Dei from *Pope Marcellus Mass*



Contemporary accounts of Palestrina's music include the following: "Chaste and correct style ... confined with sweet harmony." "His music is extraordinarily acclaimed, and by virtue of its entirely novel character, astonishes even the performers themselves."

The second primary element in Palestrina's style is his careful control of dissonance (notes that fall outside of the basic harmony of the composition). His music has some dissonances (for without them, the music would be very bland indeed), but they appear only in particular circumstances. Usually, they are short passing notes or are off the beat. When dissonances do occur on the beat, they are always prepared and immediately resolved.

It might be thought that such a highly disciplined approach to composition would lead to dull, constricted music. On the contrary, Palestrina's music is so inspiring that it has been taken as a model of perfection for all those wishing to imitate the grace and beauty of Renaissance polyphony. In this case, as so often in artistic endeavors, strict formal rules produced masterpieces of great and lasting value.

Palestrina was a superbly gifted and resourceful composer, and despite the rigor of his approach, he found many ways to introduce variety into his music. In the first place, there is a constant interplay between **counterpoint** (two or more musical lines interweaving) and **homophony** (block chords). And within the sections of counterpoint, Palestrina draws on an almost limitless variety of methods. The imitative entries among the voices can vary in distance, number of entries, voice pairings, and even pitch. Different points of imitation can even be introduced at the same time—something that never happened in Josquin's music. And through it all, the text sounds clearly, with its natural rhythm perfectly conveyed.

Palestrina wrote more than 100 settings of the Mass and several volumes of secular songs, but perhaps his most impressive achievement is the composition of 250 motets. Motets could be written on almost any sacred text: biblical stories, passages from the Psalms, and so on. Almost always, composers chose expressive texts with elements of drama or mystery, and they matched the words with music of remarkable intensity or poignancy. (See Listening Guide.)

The Renaissance Motet

The Renaissance motet usually has four voice parts. It is entirely vocal and is usually sung by a small choir rather than by soloists. All the voices sing the same text—a sacred text—in the same language, almost always Latin. The music may be imitative or homophonic and is usually a mixture of the two.

Motets often have very expressive words. Renaissance composers tended to write richer and more unusual music for motets than they did for the fixed liturgical texts of the Mass. As a result, the music of Renaissance motets is often highly expressive, with a sensitive and compelling approach to the meaning of the text.

The Renaissance Secular Song

The Renaissance secular song evolved in two phases. In the fifteenth century, secular songs (songs with nonreligious texts) were not very different from those of the late Middle Ages (those of Machaut, for example). And an international musical style had been adopted in most countries, resulting in a lack of variety from place to place. But in the late Renaissance, several European countries developed their own distinct national styles for secular songs.

The most influential of all these countries was Italy, and the distinctive type of secular song that developed there was the **madrigal**. Madrigals are secular vocal pieces for a small group of singers, usually unaccompanied. The favorite topics were love, descriptions of nature, and sometimes war or battles. The music for madrigals mingles chordal and imitative textures and sensitively reflects the meaning of the text. The Italian madrigal became so influential in the course of the sixteenth century that composers of many other nationalities wrote madrigals in Italian, and some composers in England copied the style and wrote madrigals in English.

Find the **Quick Listen** on **MySearchLab** "Palestrina"

LISTENING GUIDE

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GIOVANNI PIERLUIGI DA PALESTRINA (ca. 1525–1594)

Motet, Exsultate Deo

Date of composition: 1584

Sopranos, altos I, altos II, tenors, basses

Duration: 2:28

The motet *Exsultate Deo* was first published in Palestrina's fifth book of motets in 1584. This book contains 21 motets written for five voice lines instead of the usual four. (There are two groups of altos.) The text is from Psalm 81. Palestrina uses only the first three lines of the psalm.



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