

MUSIC APPRECIATION SECTION

GREAT COMPOSERS OF MUSIC

SECOND SERIES

By BERT PAUL OSBON *

I. PALESTRINA



PALESTRINA
Born in 1524; died in 1596

in Rome, where he had gone from his home town of Palestrina in Italy for a day of sight-seeing. So clearly and so joyously did he sing that a priest in the church who heard him invited him to become a choir-boy. Young Giovanni promptly accepted the invitation. All the rest of his curiously quiet and uneventful life was passed in writing music for the church and training choirs to sing it.

The composer usually called Palestrina was born in the small town of that name not far from Rome in 1524 or 1525 or 1526—we do not know the exact date. When he was a boy he spent four years in Rome, where he studied music and sang as a choir-boy. Then he returned

“GOD’S in His Heaven; all’s right with the world” is what young Giovanni Pierluigi might have sung one day in 1536 as he passed by the church of Santa Maria Maggiore

to his native town of Palestrina, and became an organist. He was married when he was twenty-one years old.

About 1550 he went to Rome as teacher of the boy-singers in the Vatican. He was wholly dependent for his livelihood upon the favor of the ruling pope. His first book of masses was dedicated to Pope Julius who was a very kindly patron. His glorious *Mass of Marcellus*, one of his finest, was dedicated to the successor of Pope Julius.

Palestrina lost his position in Rome because married choir-masters were displeasing to the pope. So at the height of his powers he was obliged to retire to poverty, illness, the wife he had married, and their two children. In a few months, however, another church sought him out.

At that time church music was in a bad way. The songs of the streets had invaded its purity and vulgarized the church service. Some of the composers took their music for masses from popular songs, even those with vulgar or ridiculous words. They even tolerated the singing of these phrases to their original words, while the mass proceeded with the Latin words.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the middle of the century there arose a sharp debate about the whole method of church music. A committee, the Council of Trent, was in session for twenty years trying, among other things, to determine what should be done about the musical situation in the church.

Finally the council voted against the

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use of music which was "lascivious or impure" and the matter was left to church officials with a general warning.

There were some who thought of excluding music from the service. The Emperor Ferdinand I stated that in his judgment "figured" music should not be excluded, "since it often arouses the feeling of piety."

It was now proclaimed that the masses of Palestrina, being the only ones which had the ideal of pure music, should be used as models. His *Mass of Marcellus* was chosen as a model mass, and thus Palestrina is sometimes called "the saviour of church music," although this estimate is somewhat exaggerated. But from that time there was a marked improvement in the music regularly used in the church.

Of all the musicians who lived in those days, he whose music is most beautiful for its simplicity and sincerity was Palestrina. The music of Palestrina will give you an idea of how greatly the cathedral age encouraged the growth of music. Listen to Palestrina's *Gloria Patria* (in Latin) and his *Hodie Christus Natus Est*.

No wonder the townspeople of Palestrina gave him a great demonstration when he was fifty, as they marched through the streets of Rome, Palestrina at their head, singing in chorus the music he had written.

That music was perfect of its kind. He took the *cantus firmus*, or simple theme,

and wrote two or three harmonizing parts to be sung with it. This laid the foundation for later polyphonic or many-voiced writing. Without a Palestrina there might have been no Bach, no Beethoven.

Palestrina, whose half-century of musical activity was almost wholly spent in Rome, wrote the finest music of his time. In the field of church music it could not be surpassed. When properly performed, Palestrina's works stand among the noblest triumphs of religious art.

In character Palestrina was devout, pious, frugal, and industrious. We can guess his industry from the amount of compositions which he did. As to his piety, all his music is one eloquent demonstration of it.

In dedicating a book of compositions, Palestrina wrote: "Music exerts a great influence on the minds of mankind, and is intended not only to cheer these, but also to guide and control them."

When, in 1594, Palestrina died, almost his last words, whispered to his son, directed the publication of his latest musical compositions "to the glory of the most high God, and the worship of His holy temple." The title *Princeps Musicae*, which was placed on his tomb in Rome, marks him as the first prince of a royal line of composers of music for the church.



Choir Boys of Palestrina's Time

REVIEW

1. Name eleven great composers which