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#180

PALISTRINA AND HIS RHYTHMIC STYLE

(faint)

A Special Studies Thesis
Presented to
the Honors Program

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Honors Program

by
Shelby Cowling
May, 1969

Ch. Mus. H491

C. Cowling

#180

Giovanni Pierluigi Da Palestrina, an Italian composer, was one of the greatest musical figures in the latter half of the sixteenth century, the "golden age" of church music. Giovanni Pierluigi was born in about 1525 at Praeneste (Palestrina).¹ The name of the town has been added to his own family name, Pierluigi. Palestrina's fame as a composer rests mainly upon the incomparable liturgical works for unaccompanied voices--Masses, motets, hymns, and canticles--which he produced for the services of St. Peter's and other Roman basilicas. He wrote them in the polyphonic style which for centuries had dominated Europe as a kind of international musical language: the weaving together of melodic strands of tone, more or less of equal importance, according to the principle of alternating consonance and dissonance. Palestrina himself polished and perfected this polyphonic system to produce a new beauty and brilliance in his mature works--a smoothly melodious movement, a more refined harmony, and a subtle treatment of the voices, combining and contrasting them, thus producing a remarkable variety of effects that might almost be called "vocal orchestration."

Palestrina's family had lived for generations on a small holding on the outskirts of the town of Palestrina. From a

¹Homer Ulrich and Paul A. Pisk, A History of Music and Musical Style (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1963), p. 146.

comparatively humble origin, Palestrina rose to a position of eminence in the musical world of Italy which earned for him the title of princeps musicae (prince of music), a title that subsequent ages have fully endorsed.² He was possibly a choirboy in the cathedral of his native town and he received his musical education at Rome. In Rome he sang in the choir of Santa Maria Maggiore. At about nineteen he returned to Palestrina as an assistant at the cathedral, playing the organ and training the singers. He married and became the father of three sons, all musically gifted. In 1550 the Bishop of Palestrina was elevated to the papacy as Julius III, and in the following year he summoned the brilliant young musician to St. Peter's, making him master of the Julian choir, which was responsible for the music of the services.³ Thus at the early age of twenty-five or twenty-six, Palestrina was occupying one of the most important positions in Rome. In 1554 he published his first book of Masses, dedicated to his patron Pope Julius III.⁴ The book of Masses was a thank-offering to Pope Julius III for appointing him choirmaster of the Cappella Giulia at St. Peter's.

²Henry Coates, "Palestrina, Giovanni Pierluigi Da," Collier's Encyclopedia (18th ed.), XVIII, 368.

³Ibid., p. 369.

⁴Donald Jay Grout, A History of Western Music (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1960), p. 238.

Pope Julius III delighted at the compliment, made Palestrina a member of the pontifical choir, a select body of singers personally attached to the reigning pope, presumably intending him to become composer to this choir. But later a new pope, Paul IV, pensioned off all married members of the pontifical choir. Palestrina then went to St. John Lateran (Rome) and took over the post of choirmaster. Six years later he moved to a similar but more important position at Santa Maria Maggiore. From 1565 to 1571 he taught at a newly founded Jesuit Seminary in Rome. In 1571 he was recalled to St. Peter's, where he remained as choirmaster until his death in 1594. During this period his wife, two sons, and two brothers died, as a result of a pestilence which swept through Rome. Overwhelmed by grief, Palestrina decided to enter the priesthood and actually took the first steps. But before his ordination, he made the acquaintance of a well-to-do widow, whom he married in 1581.

Palestrina took over, with the aid of a partner, the business belonging to his second wife's late husband. This business dealt in furs and skins, and had an official appointment to the papal court. The business prospered, and profits were invested in land and buildings. In the midst of all this Palestrina wrote some of his finest music.

Two years before his death, he received a remarkable tribute of esteem from his fellow musicians. They composed

and presented to him a book of psalm settings, accompanied by a laudatory address.

Early in 1594 he was suddenly taken ill and died in a few days, his funeral in old St. Peter's being attended by a vast throng.⁵

Palestrina twice refused offers which would have taken him away from Rome: one from the Emperor in 1568 and another from Duke Guglielmo Gonzaga at Mantua in 1583. Although Palestrina did not accept the duke's invitation, he did write nine Masses for the ducal chapel.

By far the greatest part of Palestrina's work was sacred. He wrote one-hundred-two Masses, about four-hundred-fifty motets and other liturgical compositions, and fifty-six spiritual madrigals with Italian texts. His eighty-three secular madrigals are not particularly outstanding examples of their kind, and in later life he "blushed and grieved" to have written music for profane love poems.⁶

Palestrina's style had various sources: Flemish polyphony and Italian melodiousness were its principal ingredients, but so perfectly blended were they, and employed with so much restraint and taste, that a personal "Palestrina style" resulted.

⁵Coates, Collier's Encyclopedia, op. cit., p. 369.

⁶Grout, op. cit., p. 239.

It is recognized that, better than any other composer, he captured the essence of the sober, conservative aspect of the Counter Reformation in a polyphony of utter purity, completely detached from any secular suggestion. In his studies Palestrina discovered the error of the German and other musicians, who had in a great measure corrupted the practice of music by the introduction of intricate proportions, and set about forming a style for the church which was decent, grave, and plain.⁷ It is quite possible to use that style as a measuring stick for all other Renaissance styles, for in technical excellence and musical appropriateness it is unmatched.

In sixteenth-century counterpoint rhythm is the mainspring of the whole mechanism; the other factors of musical thought are there, but they are mainly a by-product of the process of weaving rhythmical strands into a texture.⁸ The rhythmic aspects of Palestrina's music, and of large quantities of Renaissance music in general, are often obscured by the practice in modern editions of setting a barline after every fourth beat in duple meter. This creates the impression that the music is cast in regular measures and that the first note

⁷Sir John Hawkins, A General History of the Science and Practice of Music (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1963), p. 421.

⁸H.K. Andrews, An Introduction to the Technique of Palestrina (London: Novello and Company LTD, 1958), p. 27.

of each measure receives an accent. It was the practice in the Renaissance to consider the word accents in composing each phrase--that is, to give to the accented syllable a prominent place (a high pitch or a long note) in the tonal structure. A syllable so treated attracted attention to itself, and created a "Psychological accent." In a contrapuntal texture the result of this practice was an unmetrical rhythm, for the word accents did not necessarily coincide in the various parts, nor were the words or phrases of the text set to equally long musical phrases in each part. As a consequence, a typical Renaissance contrapuntal work is composed of a number of overlapping phrases, each with its own scheme of textual accents; a "counterpoint of meters" takes place, and a conflict results between the rhythms of the individual phrases and the composite rhythm of the whole. The phenomenon doubtless has its roots in the principal paradox of Palestrina's style.⁹ The rhythm of Palestrina's music is compounded of the rhythms of the various voices plus a collective rhythm with regularly recurring accents resulting from the harmonic and contrapuntal combination of the lines, so there is a mutual strife and contradiction.

The example shows a typical passage in which the barring is carried out in the usual way. The normal accents of the

⁹Knud Jeppesen, The Style of Palestrina and The Dissonance (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1946), p. 27.

text (Ple-ni sunt coe-le et ter-ra), appearing on weak beats, are obscured, and any sense of the rhythmic counterpoint involved in the passage is lost in the notation as it stands. If, however, the regular barlines are removed and each phrase is barred according to its true accentual pattern, the rhythmic complexity of the passage is revealed (b of example).

Palestrina used a narrower range of time values than his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. The majority of Palestrina's melodies are composed of notes of even length, mainly minims (which are transcribed as quarter notes); longer and shorter note values appear at cadences and within melodies themselves.

A few factors governing his rhythm may be summarized:

1. The relative duration of a note; a longer note tends to carry more potential accent than a shorter note preceding or following it.
2. The relative, and to some extent actual, pitch of a note is considered. A higher note requires more tension in its production than a lower, and thereby has more prominence.
3. The method of approach to a note; a note approached by a leap, especially upward, stands out in its context more than one repeated or approached by step. The nature of the leap, whether upwards or downwards, is important. The more arresting the interval, the more prominent becomes the note to which the leap is made.
4. The position of a note in a phrase; the first note of a phrase is often an anacrusis, and relatively unaccented, and the stronger accentuation being thrown on to the following note.
5. The highest note in a phrase, the melodic climax, may also be looked upon as a potential accent.

Example
Palestrina, Missa Papae Marcelli

(A)

Ple-ni sunt coe-li et ter-ra, ple-ni sunt coe-li et ter-ra

(B)

ple-ni sunt coe-li et ter-ra, ple-ni sunt coe-li et ter-ra

6. The underlaying of the words. As a rule in Palestrina's work the musical and verbal accentuation fit perfectly; on occasions where they seem at variance, the natural rhythm of the words may be an over-ruling factor in the melodic rhythm of the line.

Restraint and proportion are used in rhythm as is characterized in all of Palestrina's music.

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