

# Palestrina

Missa Papae Marcelli

Missa Assumpta est Maria

Pro Cantione  
Antiqua  
Mark Brown

*alto*

Giovanni Pierluigi was born in either 1525 or 1526 and took the name of his supposed birthplace by which he has been known ever since, Palestrina. After early training in Rome he was from 1544-51 organist at the cathedral in Palestrina, but thereafter all his musical life was spent in Rome where he held successive appointments at S. Maria Maggiore, St. John Lateran and St. Peters, though the year before he died he was making plans to return to Palestrina as cathedral choirmaster. Unlike his great reputation, he never travelled beyond his native land. In 1568 he was offered by Emperor Maximilian II to become imperial choirmaster in Vienna, but his financial demands were too high. About this time that he began his 20-year correspondence with Duke Guglielmo Gonzago of Mantua and his 12 surviving letters shed important light on his character and musical opinions. They also, incidentally, reveal beautiful handwriting. He was a conservative man, strongly religious but with a marked practical and worldly sense. He could certainly look after himself in his dealings with church authorities and after his second marriage in 1581, he was an energetic and shrewd manager of his wealthy wife's business affairs. He died on the 2nd of February 1594.

His musical output was enormous. He wrote 104 masses, more than 250 motets, 68 offertories, at least the same number of hymns, 35 magnificats, 4 or 5 settings of the Lamentations and some 140 madrigals. There are many more pieces whose authenticity is in doubt. The quality of all his music was quickly recognised and that high opinion has hardly changed, but it is arguable that his masses represent his supreme achievement.

Palestrina's masses employ all the forms used in the 16th century, but he particularly favoured the 'parody' or 'Imitation' mass, one based on already available material. Of the 54 he wrote in this form, 27 used other composers' work and 24 his own. The finest of these is the magnificent *Missa Assumpta est Maria*, founded on his own 6-voice motet of the same name and in turn on the antiphon for the day. It is not known when he wrote it, though there is a manuscript copy in the Vatican library dating from 1585-6. At any rate, it was not among the 80 of his 104 masses printed between 1554 and 1601, and a note on the flyleaf of another Vatican library copy, made in 1607, indicates that it had not been printed by 1611, 17 years after the composer's death.

For sheer beauty of sound and spiritual intensity this mass is remarkable even by Palestrina's standards. As is well known, his music perfectly served the ideals of the Counter-Reformation for liturgical clarity and, so far as possible, the elimination of secular influences. By means of seamless melodic balance, dissonance confined to suspensions and passing notes, and scrupulous

attention to the text, Palestrina refined earlier polyphonic techniques to the utmost purity. Such deliberate perfection is particularly well-suited to systematic study and Palestrina's style, having survived being fixed by Fux in his 1725 *Gradus ad Parnassum*, has been definitively analysed by the Danish musicologist Knud Jeppesen. However, technical mastery alone does not entirely explain his greatness. Like Bach, he gives to the self-imposed restraints of his music an unwavering spiritual commitment. He believed utterly in what he was doing. Although the personal tragedy of the death of his wife and family in the late 1570s led to taking minor orders, he never sought a more formal attachment to the church. Again like Bach, he had no need to; his music did it for him, nowhere more strikingly than in the *Missa Assumpta est Maria*.

The ingenious reworking of the motet material into the mass reveals notable examples of Palestrina's genius for textual colour. For instance, the bass theme in the motet 'cum Christo regnat in aeternam' appears, in the same voice, at the end of Kyrie II, Gloria, Credo and Agnus Dei II. Moreover, the use of single voices on this recording heightens the effect of Palestrina's frequent use of high tessitura and crossing of upper parts, as in the final part of the Gloria, where the brilliance of the end of the first part of the motet is transmuted into a lovely richness. There are many such sonorous contrasts - the sudden solemnity of the Christe, the dancing Hosanna after the high-lying interweaving of the Benedictus - all of which illuminate the meaning of the words. Indeed, for textual clarity the mass is second only to the famous *Missa Papae Marcelli* which was, of course, expressly designed to be properly understood.

The chant used on this recording for the Proper of the Mass is from Graduale Romanum (Venice 1611) for the Feast of the Assumption. In 1577 Palestrina and Annibale Zoilo were charged by Pope Gregory XIII with the revision of the plainsongs of the Roman Gradual and Antiphoner to rid them of 'superfluties, barbarisms and obscurities'. Although Palestrina never completed this task, the eventual revision and *Editio Medicaea* of 1614 clearly reflected his views as expressed over a number of years in surviving correspondence with Duke Guglielmo Gonzago.

Few composers' reputations have had such unbroken security as Palestrina's. With Byrd and Lassus he was a towering figure in the late 16th century, writing music of flawless technical perfection, and though the notion of his single-handedly saving church music is rather fanciful, his assimilation and refinement of the rich polyphony of his French and Flemish precursors undoubtedly served the liturgical and aesthetic aims of the Counter-Reformation. He was the right man at the right

time. He has, moreover, survived being the role-model for three centuries of Catholic church music, and now that more is known of his contemporaries, his position in musical history is seen more clearly. He was a summariser rather than innovator; he wrote almost exclusively 'a capella' religious music (late in life he apologised for some of the subjects of his madrigals) which spanned the conflicting demands of polyphonic profusion and liturgical clarity. This was his great achievement - restrained, serene music, melodically balanced, discreetly dissonant (confined to passing notes and suspensions), avoiding empty virtuosity and, above all, intended to enhance sacred texts.

The *Missa Papae Marcelli* holds a central position in this achievement. Palestrina's life and art were inseparably bound up with the Counter-Reformation. Born Giovanni Perluigi in 1525 or 1526, he took his name from the town where he was presumed to have been born (the Danish musicologist Knud Jeppesen has suggested the possibility that he was born in Rome), and after studying in Rome he returned to Palestrina as cathedral organist in 1544, the year before the convocation of the Council of Trent. When the Council ended 18 years later he was an established Roman figure in both a musical and an urban sense, with strong Papal connections. These connections began during his time as organist in Palestrina, where his Archbishop was the future Pope Julius III who, a year after his election in 1550, appointed the gifted young musician Master of the Julian Chapel. In gratitude, Palestrina composed and dedicated a Mass to his patron who thereupon installed him in the pontifical choir (the 'Cappella Sistina') in spite of his having a poor tenor voice, in violation of the rules of celibacy (he was married, with 2 sons) and without the usual entrance examination.

This irregularity lasted just long enough. Julius died a few months later and was succeeded by Marcellus II who reigned only 3 weeks, but whose admonition to the Papal choir on Good Friday 1555 that they should mend the careless way they had performed the liturgy and that 'everything should be both heard and understood properly' must have profoundly impressed Palestrina, not least because it accorded with his own views. The Mass bearing Marcellus' name appeared in Palestrina's *2nd Book of Masses* in 1567. Its origins are controversial. The Council of Trent did not in 1562/3 specifically ban polyphony, but formulated a broad policy for local implementation, and the post-Tridentine Commission of Cardinals of 1564/5 was concerned mainly to encourage intelligible polyphony. Palestrina's early biographer, Baini, believed the Marcellus Mass was composed for performance by the Papal choir in the home of Cardinal Vitellozzi, one of the principal members of the Commission, on 28th April 1565. Others believe the Mass to have been written ten years earlier to celebrate Marcellus' election, as indicated in a letter from Bishop Franco

referring to a discussion in which Marcellus, before becoming Pope, promised to send the Bishop a Mass embodying the principles of intelligible sacred music. Jeppesen's examination of manuscript sources suggests a later date, closer to 1562 than 1555, though he has shown that the Mass was clearly designed for intelligibility. There is, of course, no inconsistency between being performed on 28th April 1565 and much earlier composition. More detailed appraisal of these matters can be found in Lewis Lockwood's critical score of the Mass.

The *Missa Papae Marcelli* is rare among Palestrina's 104 Masses in being based on no known existing material, as opposed to his many 'parody' or 'transcription' Masses. Efforts to identify underlying themes from plainsong or even the 15th century chanson 'L'homme armée' are not now thought to be convincing. The Mass is scored for 6 voices with a 7-voice Agnus Dei II and epitomises Palestrina's perfect grasp of proportion, dignified expression and clarity.

**Peter Bamber**

**Pro Cantione Antiqua** was formed in 1968 by Mark Brown, Paul Esswood and James Griffett, who had met while studying at the Royal College of Music in London. Their object was to create a consort of voices, devoted to the recreation of Medieval and Renaissance music, in which individual vocal quality was as important an element as are the traditional blend and unanimity of English cathedral and collegiate choirs.

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**Project Co-ordinator:** Robin Vaughan (musicalmerit@blueyonder.co.uk)

**(texts) Chant Proper for the “MISSA ASSUMPTA EST MARIA”**

- |   |      |
|---|------|
| <b>1. Introitus-Gaudeamus Omnes in Domino (Gregorian Chant)</b>   | 4.03 |
| <i>Gaudeamus omnes in Domino diem festum celebrantes sub honore Mariae Virginis de cujus Assumptione gaudent Angeli, et collaudant Filium Dei. Ps. Eructavit cor meum verbum bonum: dico ego opera mea regi. Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen. (Solo Cantor - Stephen Roberts)</i> |      |
| <b>2. Kyrie</b>   | 4.23 |
| <b>3. Gloria</b>  | 4.39 |
| <b>4. Graduale- Propter Veritatem (Gregorian Chant)</b>   | 3.11 |
| <i>Propter veritatem, et mansuetudinem et justitiam: et deducet te mirabiliter dextera tua. V Audi filia, et vide, et inclina aurem tuam: quia concupivit rex speciem tuam. Alleluia. V Assumpta est Maria in caelum: gaudet exercitus Angelorum. Alleluia. (Solo Versicles - James Griffett)</i>   |      |
| <b>5. Credo</b>   | 7.04 |
| <b>6. Offertorium: Assumpta est Maria (Gregorian Chant)</b>   | 1.12 |
| <i>Assumpta est Maria in caelum: gaudent Angeli collaudantes benedicunt Dominum, alleluia.</i>  |      |
| <b>7. Sanctus</b>   | 2.18 |
| <b>8. Benedictus</b>  | 2.26 |
| <b>9. Communio: Optimum Partem (Gregorian Chant)</b>  | 0.49 |
| <i>Optimam partem elegit sibi Maria quae non auferetur ab ea in aeternum.</i>   |      |
| <b>10. Agnus Dei</b>  | 4.54 |

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**Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c1525?-94)**  
**Missa Assumpta est Maria**  
**(including Gregorian Chant proper for the Feast of the Assumption)**  
**Missa Papae Marcelli**

***Pro Cantione Antiqua Directed by Mark Brown***

*Charles Brett, Timothy Penrose, Ashley Stafford (countertenors) Wynford  
Evans, James Griffett, Neil Jenkins, Ian Partridge (tenors) David Beavan,  
Michael George, Gordon Jones, Christopher Keyte, Stephen Roberts (basses)*

**MISSA ASSUMPTA EST MARIA**

1. Introitus-Gaudeamus Omnes in Domino (Gregorian Chant)	4.03
2. Kyrie	4.23
3. Gloria	4.39
4. Graduale; Propter Veritatem (Gregorian Chant)	3.11
5. Credo	7.04
6. Offertorium: Assumpta est Maria (Gregorian Chant)	1.12
7. Sanctus	2.18
8. Benedictus	2.26
9. Communio: Optimum Partem (Gregorian Chant)	0.49
10. Agnus Dei	4.54

**MISSA PAPAE MARCELLI**

11. Kyrie	5.01
12. Gloria	6.21
13. Credo	9.46
14. Sanctus	3.59
15. Benedictus	3.24
16. Agnus Dei I & II	8.21

Location: (11-16) St. Alban's Church, Brooke St, London; 1987 (1-10) All Hallows, Gospel Oak, London 1990.

Engineer: Antony Howell; Producer: Mark Brown

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