After Death, He Did Not Die: An Examination of Palestrina's Continuing Legacy

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What is the significance of a person whose name never disappears from history? Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (ca. 1525–1594) is among the few people who can boast of a reputation that has continued for over four hundred years. As a church musician and composer of the late Renaissance period, Palestrina lived during the Catholic Counter Reformation and adapted to the reforms of church music that resulted from the Council of Trent. His compositions are considered the height of Renaissance vocal polyphony. During the seventeenth century, his works were highly influential on theorist Johann Fux. Through Fux's writings, Palestrina continued to have an impact on composition long after his death. Although Palestrina was respected during his own life, his reputation blossomed and even grew out of proportion in the years after his death. Palestrina's reputation has been maintained throughout music history because of the credit he received for saving church music and his influence on Johann Fux's treatise *Gradus ad Parnassum*.

In response to the Protestant Reformation of the 1500's, the Catholic church reexamined itself and made efforts to fix issues they found within the church. This movement became known as the Counter Reformation. In 1543, Pope Paul III called the Council of Trent to discuss and establish reforms, including those concerning church music.[1] The use of music in

[1] Schaefer, 20.

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the mass was discussed in the Council's twenty-second session on September 17, 1562.[2]

Five main issues identified in church music were brought to the attention of the Council. In much of the music used during the church services, the text was unable to be understood. This was due to dense polyphony where the music was given priority over the words. Not only was the text unclear, but church composers had been omitting liturgical text.[3] The bishop of Vienne, France, Fridericus Nausea Blancicampianus, reported to Pope Paul III a list of abuses in which he included:

> Nor do they recognize the fact that all too often those things which are prescribed for the sacred services are omitted or cut short for the sake of the harmonies of songs or organ music. These parts consist [of] the Prophecies, the Epistles, the Credo, the Preface, the actions of graces, the prayers, and other things of that sort which are of great importance.[4]

Songs in the vernacular that were not acceptable for church were also present in the services.[5] In Blancicampianus's report he states:

> They allow at times things to be sung which not only are not taken from the sacred scriptures, but which are entirely diverse from them, or certainly less spiritual, especially since they are not in the customary language but are in the vernacular, and they allow these to be read. This is contrary to the Catholic usage and custom.[6]

In addition to using the vernacular, secular music was being incorporated into the Mass. Specifically, parody Masses were often derived from secular tunes. Although during the fifteenth century the music itself was considered harmless, in the sixteenth century the original text was viewed as associating alternate meanings to the music, which did not lend the hearers to devotion but rather communicated messages that were "lascivious and impure."[7] Outside of the parody Mass, secular music was incorporated into the organ playing. There was also an issue of organists

[2] Fellerer, 576.
[3] Fellerer, 577.
[4] Schaefer, 19.
[5] Fellerer, 577.
[6] Schaefer, 20.
[7] Fellerer, 581.

taking too long and showing off their skills during the church service. This distracted from worship and did not meet liturgical goals.[8]

Over the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, church music strayed from its original purpose of pointing people to God and instead evolved into something more secular. The Council of Trent recognized the corruptions and during their twenty-second session agreed upon certain reforms that needed to take place. Their ruling was:

> In the case of those Masses which are celebrated with singing and with organ, let nothing profane be intermingled, but only hymns and divine praises. The whole plan of singing in musical modes should be constituted not to give empty pleasure to the ear, but in such a way that the words be clearly understood by all, and thus the hearts of the listeners be drawn to desire of heavenly harmonies, in the contemplation of the joys of the blessed….They shall also banish from church all music that contains, whether in the singing or in the organ playing, things that are lascivious or impure.[9]

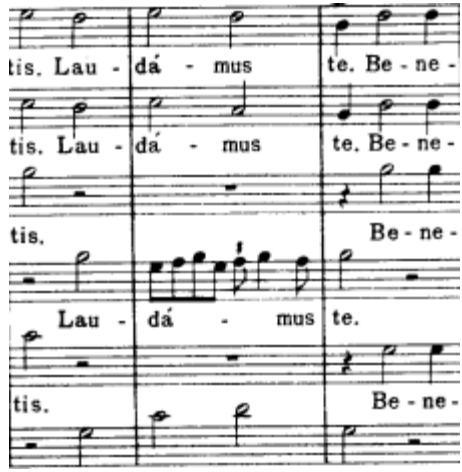
The Council set into motion ridding the Catholic church of secular music in their services and requiring the intelligibility of the text.[10] Although removing polyphony from the church was discussed, it was decided that if the words were able to be understood, polyphony would continue to be permitted.[11] Palestrina along with other composers showed that polyphony with intelligible words was possible. Sometime between 1562[12] and 1564 Palestrina composed his famous *Missa Papae Marcelli* which beautifully accommodated every musical reform of the Council of Trent.[13]

Across the movements of this Mass, Palestrina treated text intelligibility with different approaches. Of the six sections, the Gloria and Credo have the most text and therefore require the greatest care in the delivery.[14] In the Gloria, Palestrina relies heavily on a note against note compositional

[8] Fellerer, 577, 579.
[9] Palestrina, 19.
[10] Fellerer, 576.
[11] Schaefer, 21–22.
[12] Palestrina, 130.
[13] Pyne, 55.
[14] Jeppesen, *Style and Dissonance*, 41.

technique. This approach to composing has an influence throughout the entire Mass, which is the reason he was able to accomplish intelligibility,[15] but it is especially apparent in this movement. The style of note against note or note against several notes allows the text in each voice to line up for the majority of the movement. In addition to passages that are completely together like the very opening measures, Palestrina briefly offsets the text and notes within the voices to add interest. The syllables are always brought back together quickly, such as at the beginning of the movement where the cantus, altus, tenor II and bassus II are singing *Laudamus te*. Starting on beat three of measure eight, the cantus, altus, and bassus II sing *Laudamus* over three half notes and *te* on the downbeat of measure ten. The tenor II begins with the other voices singing a half note in measure eight, but in measure nine embellishes -*da* with faster moving notes over three and a half beats. -*Mus* is placed on the and of beat four instead of beat three with the other voices. On the downbeat of measure ten, however, all the voices line back up and sing *te* together. (See Example 1). This kind of technique occurs throughout the Gloria.

Example 1: *Missa Papae Marcelli*, Gloria, mm. 8–10



Since imitation blurs the clarity of the text, Palestrina mostly avoids it in the two sections that comprise the Gloria. There are only two instances where he does use it, both occurring at the end of a section. The first one

[15] Jeppesen, *Style and Dissonance*, 41.

is in measures fifty-five through sixty. After the text is clearly presented in measures fifty-one through fifty-five, Palestrina repeats the words several times in imitation. The second occurrence is at the very end of the Gloria over the word *Amen*. In addition to being sung clearly in the measures before, this text is very easy to understand and is predictable to be at the end of the movement, so Palestrina was less concerned with the listeners being able to distinguish it.

The first two of the three sections that comprise the Credo are very similar compositionally to the Gloria. Palestrina used note against note or note against multiple notes to keep the clarity of the text. As in the Gloria, he frequently offset the text among the voices to allow more rhythmic variety as he gave some voices faster moving parts or staggered their entrances. However, like before, he quickly brings the text back together. The third section of the Credo does not follow the note against note style as uniformly. Instead, there is more imitation and moving notes, and the overall texture is more polyphonic than the previous sections of the Credo or the Gloria.

The Kyrie, Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei have significantly less text than the Gloria and Credo. Because there are fewer words and the text is repeated throughout, the words are naturally easier for the listener to understand.[16] Due to this, Palestrina took more liberty to compose in a denser musical texture. The Kyrie employs a lot of imitation and is written in a polyphonic texture. Right from the beginning, the six voices enter imitatively across the first five measures. Only on the last cadences of each of the three sections do all the voices line up textually and rhythmically. However, the text is not lost to the listener because of its briefness and the amount it is repeated. Texturally, the Sanctus, Benedictus, and Agnus Dei I and II are similar to the Kyrie.

Palestrina successfully accomplished intelligibility of text, but he also fulfilled the other reforms from the Council of Trent as well. The music for his Mass was not derived from a secular source. Since there is no known evidence indicating otherwise, he appears to have composed it himself.[17] The text is in Latin not the vernacular. Overall, the product is serene music with flowing rhythm and the appearance of simplicity.[18] *Missa Papae Marcelli* may have been presented at Vitelli's house while he and some other church leaders were listening to newly composed

[16] Jeppesen, *Style and Dissonance*, 41–42.
[17] Palestrina, 126.
[18] Pyne, 57.

works to determine the intelligibility of their text. Whether it was heard then or not, Palestrina's Mass was known and respected as being an exemplary composition of the new style.[19]

Shortly after Palestrina's death, the truth about his role in church music became blurry. Before long he was credited with single-handedly saving the music of the Catholic church.[20] The earliest known source that attributes this to Palestrina was a treatise written by Agostino Agazzari in 1607 in which he states:

> And on this account music would have come very near to being banished from the Holy Church by a sovereign pontiff had not Giovanni Palestrina found the remedy, showing that the fault and error lay, not with the music, but with the composers, and composing in confirmation of this the mass entitled *Missa Papae Marcelli*.[21]

This information soon spread around Europe and was incorporated into other writings as well as translated into German.[22] Many other sources picked up the story of Palestrina and continued its spread, including Pietro Della Valle who wrote in 1640, "I too admire that famous Mass by Palestrina that so pleases your Lordship, and which was the reason that the Council of Trent did not banish music."[23]

One of the more influential people for spreading the legend of Palestrina was Giuseppe Baini, who studied the composer and wrote his biography. In 1828 he wrote a dramatic rendition of Palestrina being asked to write a Mass that would determine the future of polyphony in the church. "The fate of church music hung from his pen…"[24] It describes the meeting at Cardinal Vitellozzi's house to hear Palestrina's compositions and concludes with highest praise of his *Missa Papae Marcelli* with the gathered Cardinals encouraging him to "go on writing in that style and to communicate it to his pupils."[25] Through such sources Palestrina has mistakenly been attributed with being the "savior of church music" beginning after his death and continuing even to today. Although this

[19] Schaefer, 23–24.
[20] Palestrina, 28.
[21] Palestrina, 28–29.
[22] Palestrina, 29.
[23] Palestrina, 32.
[24] Palestrina, 35.
[25] Palestrina, 35–36.

legend has given him a name in history, it is not the only means in which Palestrina has had an influence.

Palestrina was considered the utmost example of *prima prattica* composition developed from the early fifteenth century.[26] During his life, he advanced vocal church polyphony to its height,[27] earning himself the reputation of perfecting this Renaissance style. His music is characterized by a mastery of consonance and dissonance, fluidity, skilled alternation between homophonic and contrapuntal textures, balance, "fluent and effortless"[28] sound, equality between all the voices, and "flexibility and freedom in [the] melodic lines."[29] Because of his mastery, Palestrina is considered "among the most profoundly influential composers of all times."[30] In his book on counterpoint, Knud Jeppesen states that "from the style of Palestrina we can learn best what has always been the highest goal of the study of counterpoint."[31] Following Palestrina's example is precisely what has happened over music history mainly due to the contribution of Johann Fux.

Johann Joseph Fux (1660–1741) was a Baroque composer best known for his treatise on composition, *Gradus ad Parnassum*, based upon the contrapuntal style of Palestrina. The contents of *Gradus* are considered by some to be an idealization of Palestrina's style.[32] Some scholars believe that Fux did not write his *Gradus* to provide a formula for replicating Palestrina's style, however. Jen-Yen Chen states that "Fux turned his attention instead to the usefulness of the *broader* features of the idiom for developing principles to be applied to contemporary music."[33] Thus, the ideas in *Gradus* are based in Palestrina's overall style, but the principles are added to and defined by Fux. Fux's purpose for writing, as stated in his introduction to his work, was to instruct young, willing learners to compose[34] by providing a solid foundation in counterpoint.[35] His treatise is structured as a dialogue between a master teacher, Aloysius, representing Palestrina, and a pupil, Josephus. In his

[26]Alwes, 13.
[27]Jeppesen, *Style and Dissonance*, 12.
[28] Alwes, 13–14.
[29] Coates, 84.
[30] Jeppesen, *Style and Dissonance*, 12.
[31] Jeppesen, *Counterpoint*, ix.
[32] Kramer, 107–108.
[33] Chen, 8.
[34] Fux, 17.
[35] Kramer, 108.

introduction Fux writes, "By *Aloysius*, the master, I refer to Palestrina, the celebrated light of music…to whom I owe everything that I know of this art, and whose memory I shall never cease to cherish with a feeling of deepest reverence."[36] Using Palestrina's example, Fux instructs his readers on the very foundation of composition—counterpoint.

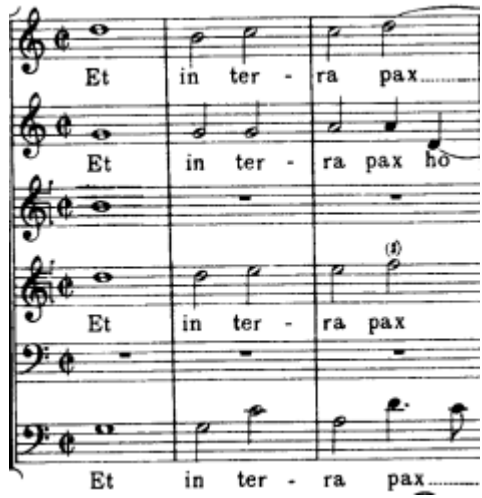
Fux begins his treatise with discussing the nature of scales and intervals, the middle is devoted to counterpoint and fugues, and he concludes with some "comments on various stylistic trends."[37] Throughout his treatise he establishes strict rules for every aspect of contrapuntal composition[38] as he teaches the general characteristics of fourteenth-century compositional style. That style included cantus firmus composition, the use of accents and their relationship to consonance and dissonance, what is melodically derived from using modes, and "preparation and resolution."[39] Although Fux based *Gradus* on Palestrina's style, the entirety of his work does not accurately represent everything about it, nor was this its original intention. It is interesting to note, that Fux does not use any of Palestrina's music as examples in his book. Instead, he composes his own excerpts for examples. Fux also prohibited some practices that Palestrina did use while adding other practices influenced by Fux's own time that were not originally employed.[40] Chen observed, "For Fux, the works of Palestrina furnished the material from which he could distill a set of abstract precepts of composition."[41]

Although *Gradus* does not completely adhere to Palestrina's style, his influence on Fux is very evident throughout. A comparison between Fux's section within *Gradus* on counterpoint and Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* reveals the amount that Fux's ideas drew from Palestrina's compositional style. Fux first presents note against note or first species counterpoint in his treatise. He defines this technique as each voice moving together with equal length notes using consonant intervals.[42] According to Fux, the consonant intervals are the unison, third, fifth, sixth, and octave.[43] The fourth can also be consonant depending on its context. As previously discussed, Palestrina used note

[36] Fux, 18.
[37] Fux, xv.
[38] Kramer, 108.
[39] Fux, x–xi.
[40] Bush, 540.
[41] Chen, 7.
[42] Fux, 27.
[43] Fux, 20.

against note counterpoint throughout *Missa Papae Marcelli.* One such passage is the opening two and a half measures of the Gloria where all the voices move together in consonant intervals. (See Example 2).

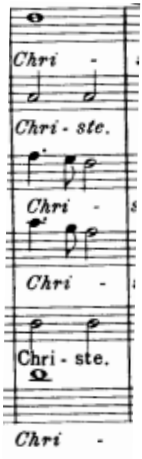
Example 2: *Missa Papae Marcelli,* Gloria, mm. 1–3



Second species counterpoint by Fux's standards must occur in a duple meter context. It sets a whole note against two half notes. The downbeat interval must be consonant. On the second half note the interval can be dissonant if it is approached by step, or if approached by leap, it must be consonant.[44] In Palestrina's Mass, he does not strictly use whole notes set against half notes very often. However, there are instances where he will incorporate it in some but not all of the voices, such as measure forty-four of the Gloria where the cantus and bassus II have whole notes and the altus and bassus I have half notes. The tenor I and II have different rhythms from the other voices. (See Example 3).

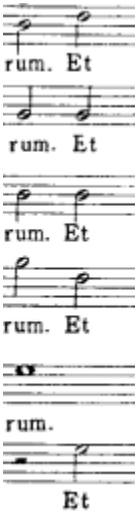
[44] Fux, 41.

Example 3: *Missa Papae Marcelli*, Gloria, m. 44



Measure 165 of the Credo is completely written in second species. The bassus I has a whole note while the rest of the voices have consonant half notes. In this example, however, the bassus II has a half rest on the downbeat and then enters with a half note on beat three. (See Example 4).

Example 4: *Missa Papae Marcelli,* Credo, m. 165



The similarities between Fux's compositional principles and Palestrina's techniques used in his Mass are also observed in the use of third, fourth, and fifth species.

Gradus ad Parnassum was an immediate success after its publication in 1725.[45] It was "distributed within a short time throughout the entire musical world"[46] and was "sold out within a year."[47] Although it was originally written in Latin for international use, people of importance soon requested its translation into the vernacular. Their wishes were fulfilled. In 1742, Lorenz Mizler, a student of Bach, translated it into German. Nineteen years later in 1761 Manfredi translated it into Italian. In 1773, it was published in French by Pierre Denis. This edition, however, contained many revisions compared to Fux's original text. An English version was published anonymously in 1791. Instead of a direct translation, this edition paraphrased Fux's original work. The nineteenth century did not see additional translations of *Gradus*, but in 1938 and 1951 Alfred Mann translated it into German and in 1943 published it in English.[48] Fux's treatise gained recognition and popularity because, as Jeppesen said, "Its practical significance, which no other work on contrapuntal theory has attained, is due not only to the pedagogically excellent arrangement of the material so that the difficulties increase gradually, but also partly to the fact that Fux was one of the first to take a more modern attitude toward counterpoint."[49] Fux wrote *Gradus* to fix problems he saw in the composition of his time.[50] However, it became a foundational text for composing counterpoint long after Fux's death.

The quick spread of Fux's treatise can be attributed to the importance of counterpoint in the study of composition. Richard Kramer summarized the theorist Heinrich Schenker's (1868–1935) view on the foundational quality of counterpoint when he wrote:

> For Schenker, the power of counterpoint is a given, an immutable inner law that controls the most remote tonal relations as it does the surface of the work, the one indispensable index of coherence, and, consequently, of

[45] Mann, 57.
[46] Fux, x.
[47] Mann, 57.
[48] Fux, xiv–xv.
[49] Jeppesen, *Counterpoint,* 38.
[50] Jeppesen, *Counterpoint,* 38.

> an organic unity in which the quality of the work is proved.[51]

Compositional instruction at the end of the eighteenth century focused heavily, if not almost entirely, on counterpoint.[52] Fux's *Gradus* became a standard text for learning counterpoint and influenced many composers. "Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Rossini, Cherubini, Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Chopin, Paganini, Mendelssohn, Liszt, and Brahms all learned counterpoint by working through the 'Gradus ad Parnassum.'"[53] Haydn taught himself composition using *Gradus*. He is now known as the Father of the Symphony and the Father of the String Quartet. Mozart and Beethoven were also trained by *Gradus*. Mozart is considered one of the greatest composers of the Classical era and Beethoven was the main transitionary figure moving the Classical era into the Romantic era. Both Haydn and Mozart used *Gradus* to teach their own composition students.[54] Similar to the way Fux adjusted Palestrina's counterpoint rules in writing *Gradus*, Haydn and Mozart kept some standards from *Gradus* but changed others. "They [Haydn and Mozart] interpreted the model of the mentor [Fux] in the spirit of a later era."[55]

Eventually, there was a move away from the traditional teaching of Fux's *Gradus*. However, in 1862 Fux's ideas were revived with the publication of Heinrich Bellermann's *Der Contrapunkt*, whose content was derived from Fux.[56] In the twentieth century, *Gradus* itself was revived and translated into modern languages.

Gradus ad Parnassum demonstrated Palestrina's deep influence on Fux. Fux's treatise became widely influential and was formative to many composers great and small long after its first publication. For centuries after Palestrina's death, he continued to have an influence on music composition through Fux's *Gradus*. Fux's reference to Palestrina in his introduction to his treatise and the role that Palestrina plays in Fux's work has kept Palestrina's name known in the musical world.

"More than any other composer of his age or of earlier times, Palestrina's reputation remained alive when the vast bulk of his contemporaries'

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[51] Kramer, 108.
[52] Kramer, 108.
[53] Bush, 540.
[54] Fux, xi–xiii
[55] Mann, 64.
[56] Mann, 70.

music had largely passed into oblivion."[57] After his death, his composition of *Missa Papae Marcelli* written to satisfy the reforms of the Council of Trent became an increasingly dramatized story until it contained little truth. Despite its inaccuracies, however, the legend promoted Palestrina and grew his reputation. More tangible was the impact Palestrina had on Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* and indirectly on many years of composition study. Whether through the legend of saving church music or by his very real impact on Fux and *Gradus ad Parnassum*, Palestrina established a meaningful reputation that continues today.

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[57] Palestrina, vii.

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