

BachBeat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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www.bachcantatachoir.org

Palestrina: Life and Legend

By Lorin Wilkerson – Bass

Giovanni Pierluigi was born in 1525 or 1526 in the city of Palestrina, near Rome in what was then the Papal States. He was a musician from an early age, as evinced by his listing in 1537 as a chorister at the Santa Maria Maggiore basilica, one of the four papal basilicas in Rome.

At that time in Rome as in much of Europe, the composition of counterpoint was dominated by the Franco-Flemish school, of which Guillaume DuFay (c. 1397-1474) and Josquin des Pres (c. 1450-1521) were the most famous early exponents. Palestrina made his mark as a composer after having studied with Robin Mallapert and Firmin Lebel, pedagogues of this Northern European counterpoint. Up to Palestrina's day, there had been no truly important composers of church polyphony who were of Italian origin; the Low Countries, France and Iberia had provided the most revered composers. Palestrina's genius was to change all that, as he became one of the founding fathers of what would be known as the Roman School.

He started his professional musical career (like Bach) at about the age of 17 or 18 as a church organist. He was employed by St. Agapito in his hometown, but it was not long before his compositional imagination garnered attention at the highest levels. Pope Julius III, who had previously been Bishop of Palestrina, was so enamored of Palestrina's first published work (a book of Masses) that

by 1551 he held the prestigious title of *Maestro di Cappella* of the papal choir at St. Peter's.

The Roman School operated in an environment dominated by the Counter Reformation. The famous Council of Trent addressed many matters including art, and in relation to music stated among other things that while polyphony was to be allowed in sacred music, the music must be dignified and the text clearly understood. So it was that Palestrina and his contemporaries in Rome began to tame some of the more obscure contrapuntal textual renderings, which in some Early and Middle Renaissance compositions had rendered comprehension of the overall text difficult.

A popular legend in Palestrina lore says that his *Missa Papae Marcelli* (Pope Marcellus Mass) singlehandedly saved polyphony in church music, which was to be axed by the Council in favor of a return to the plainsong of the Middle Ages. While this charming legend has since been proven false, like most legends it bears a grain of truth in the form of analysis of Palestrina's style: he was conscious of setting texts for intelligibility and for composing in a flowing manner and



Palestrina

setting dissonances on weak beats in pursuit of a smoother form of counterpoint. He held other prime posts in his career, including maestro di cappella of St. John Lateran, in which post he succeeded Rolande de Lassus (Orlando di Lasso), who along with Palestrina would ultimately go down in European history as the greatest composers of their age.

Influence on Baroque Composers

Palestrina's influence upon the evolution of Western music has never waned in the intervening years since his death of pleurisy in

1594. The great masters of the late Baroque were keenly conscious of his reputation and studied his works assiduously, as a few examples show.

The great composer Bernardo Pasquini (1637-1710) was a contemporary of Alessandro Scarlatti and teacher to his son Domenico (born in 1685, the same year as Bach and Handel.) He said the following: "Whoever pretends to be a musician, or organist, and does not taste of the nectar, does not drink the milk of these divine compositions of Palestrina, is without a doubt, and always will be, a miserable wretch. Sentiment of Bernardo Pasquini, pitiful ignoramus."¹

During J.S. Bach's Leipzig years, whence come the bulk of his sacred cantatas, he studied the works of Antonio Caldara (c. 1670-1736) Antonio Lotti (c. 1667-1740) and Palestrina. The renowned biographer Schweitzer said of Bach that "to the end of his days, he was, like all the great self-taught men, very receptive, and always sure that he could learn something from others."² The great *Mass in B-Minor* betrays the *stile antico* sensibility that Bach likely learned from analysis of Palestrina's works. The opening chorus of the *Credo* is in the mixolydian mode. "The *a cappella* setting used here and in the *Confiteor* chorus confirms the feeling that this is [the] archaic musical language of the Middle Ages when the Creed was established." (It. Added)³

It is interesting that Bach had so much reverence for the old Italian master because in some ways their footprints on the development of Western music were similar: both fulfilled the particular musical law of their day, and while not generating much in the way of new forms, each so perfected the then-existing styles that they helped open the way for the new things that were to come after them. ♪

¹ *Domenico Scarlatti*. Ralph Kirkpatrick, ©1953 Princeton University Press. p 42.

² *J. S. Bach*. Albert Schweitzer, © 1911 Breitkopf & Härtel. p 198. English Translation Ernest Newman.

³ *The Sacred Dramas of J.S. Bach: A Reference and Textual Interpretation*. W. Murray Young. ©1994 McFarland & Co., Inc. p 91.

Biographical information on Palestrina adapted from Wikipedia.

Bach's Patriarchal-Glorious German

By Bill Fisher* - Bass

I try mightily to convey to first-year language students that assuming word-for-word correspondence between languages is an illusion. We see that in *Herr* ("Lord [God]") – a word so common in the Bible and thus in Bach.

Herr has its origin in the adjective *hehr* ("gray"). In other words, a lord was gray-haired, thus elderly, thus senior (Spanish "señor" and French "(mon)sieur"). Back then, to be old and gray meant that you were a survivor and an authority. Cognate with German *hehr* are English "hoar-", as in "hoary" ("gray-headed", or just "old") and also "hoar frost."

Herrlich, also very frequent in Bach, started out (around 800 A.D.) with the meaning of "worthy / demanding of honor." Gradually *herrlich* has acquired meanings that are equivalent to English "magnificent" and "glorious." So the noun *Herrlichkeit* now means "glory", "gloriousness," or "magnificence."

Gender issues get immensely touchy here. When *Herr* is "Mr.," its counterpart is *Frau* ("Mrs.," now just "Ms."). When *Herr* is "gentleman", its counterpart is *Dame* ("lady"). Yes, the joke, "That's no lady, that's my wife", works in German. Even touchier is *herrlich*. In some feminist and language circles there is a lively and testy discussion about *dämlich* ("stupid"). But etymologists have established that *dämlich* is not derived from *Dame*, but rather from an ancient verb *dämeln* ("behave childishly", "be confused").

And now *Herrscher* ("ruler"), in Cantata 8 (our 20 March, 2011 concert), and of course "Herrscher des Himmels" in the Christmas Oratorio (III). It's associated with the verb *herrschen* ("reign, rule"). But that verb is strange: it ends in the suffix "-schen," and in the whole language there are only a few such common verbs. I confess myself much mystified here.

*Bill Fischer, of the glorious bass persuasion, is Professor of German at Portland State University. His "Bach's German" essays, some with corrections, expansions, sources, and recommended reading, are available at:
<http://web.pdx.edu/~fischerw/personal/html/bachsGerman.html>



BACH CANTATA CHOIR
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Lenten Concert

Sunday, March 20, 2011 at 2:00pm

Featuring works by
Palestrina, Buxtehude,
William Boyce, and
J.S. Bach Cantatas #8 and #111