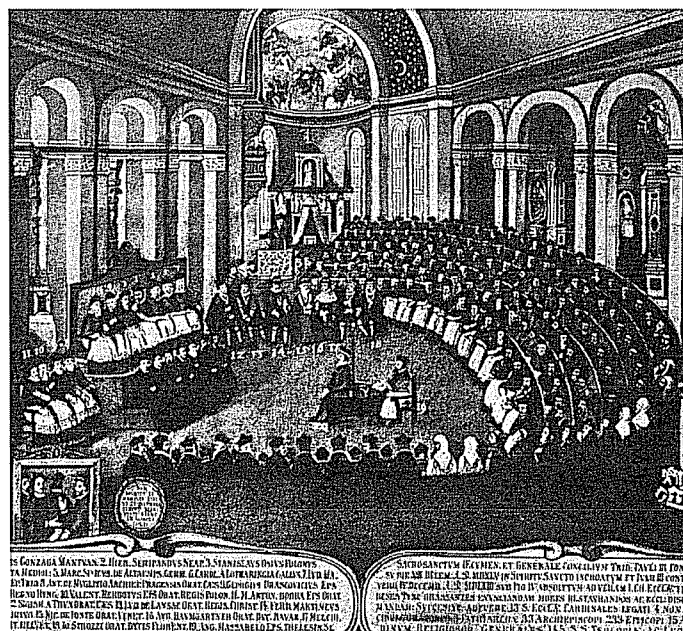


A Reexamination of Palestrina's Role in the Catholic Reformation

by Edward Schaefer



Meeting of the Council of Trent in Santa Maria Maggiore. Painted in 1633.

The story of the 1565 meeting of Catholic church officials, during which Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* is alleged to have been heard and proclaimed to be the consummate example of an appropriate style of music for mass settings, is well documented.¹ Prior to this meeting, however, many discussions were held regarding the banning of polyphonic music from the Catholic church altogether. This article will clarify the contributions of persons, in addition to Palestrina, who might be credited for their part in having "saved church music"² and the polyphonic style.

The State of Church Music during the Early Sixteenth Century

During the first half of the sixteenth century, the Catholic church struggled to correct rampant abuses—in areas ranging from the selection and formation of clergy to preaching and other liturgical practices, including music—in virtually all parts of its domain. Perhaps one of the most revealing descriptions of the musical abuses of the time is found in a report written by Fridericus Nausea Blancicampianus, Bishop of Vienne, France.³ The bishop prepared this report in June 1543 for Pope Paul III in preparation for the day when the Pope would call an ecumenical council to address the many unchecked abuses. The need for musical reforms is mentioned four times in the report. The third reference, which discusses abuses committed by cathedral canons while chanting the Divine Office, is most descriptive of the poor state of affairs:

The first abuse of these singers arises from the fact that many of them do not even know one note from another, as they say, and are in fact unskilled in any phase of music. Therefore they teach through substitute assistants—a course of action not without its derision and mockery from the people.

The second abuse, coming from the first, is that they do not care whether there are either corrected or uncorrected musical books, even daring to use them (uncorrected books) in church. But since even one vowel, incorrectly written, is able to make the sense of the words and prayers perverse and heretical, . . . those most important books which are accustomed to be used, which they call missals and breviaries, ought to be most carefully written and edited.

The third abuse is that they do not care whether their efforts of singing may be a shout or a love-cry, so that they permit themselves rather to roar than to sing in the choir. 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.

The fourth abuse of the singers is that they do not advert to the manner in which they read or sing in the choir, since the chant itself must be equal not precipitous but clear, detached, moderate, pious, and in a temperate manner in all things, in order that the divine services may be performed with reverence.

The final abuse of the singers is that they sometimes permit in the churches songs and organ music which arouse

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wantonness rather than piety. 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.⁴

Two of the other references to music in this report reinforce Blancicampianus's last concern about the use of inappropriate texts in liturgical music:

Nothing may be read or sung in church unless it is taken from sacred scripture, or is at least in accord with it, or not in disagreement with it. It must be serious in tone without exciting laughter, in whatever tongue this is accustomed to be read or sung. . . .

Let them take care that they use in choir only corrected books, and let them not use any other chants than those which are taken from scripture or at least are not contrary to it. Moreover, let learned men cut out those things which in their order and time are not worthy and fitting praise to God.⁵

ecumenical council at Trent in 1543. Preceding the twenty-second session of this council (September 17, 1562), the session in which music was addressed, several preliminary meetings were held in which concerns about music were voiced. These concerns both reiterated some of those mentioned in Blancicampianus's report and also stressed the need for music that was intelligible to the congregation:

Proposal of the schema discussion of August 8, 1562, concerning abuses to be avoided at Mass

Therefore it must be discussed whether that type of music which is now practiced in figured modulations [a term used at Trent to describe any kind of part music, in contrast to monophonic music] and which delights the ears more than the mind and which is seen to excite the faithful to lascivious, rather than to religious, thoughts should be taken away from the masses. For in this type of music profane things are often sung, as for example that of the hunt (*caccia*) and the battle (*battaglia*).⁶

Decree of the same meeting containing the compendium of abuses at Mass

The type of music in divine services is reduced to the norm which Pope John XXII prescribed in his work *De vita et honestate clericorum*, and it should be sung so that the words are more intelligible than the modulations of the music.⁷

From the descriptions in this report, the bishop's concern is clear regarding not only the competency and accuracy of musical performances in the liturgy, but also the textual and stylistic propriety of the music selected.

Church officials also objected to the practice of setting texts to music in an ornate polyphonic style that rendered the texts unintelligible. This concern is most clearly expressed in the proceedings of the Council of Trent, which was ultimately convened to address the many abuses prevalent in the church at the time.

The Council of Trent and the Mandate for Reforms

After several unsuccessful attempts, Pope Paul III was finally able to call an

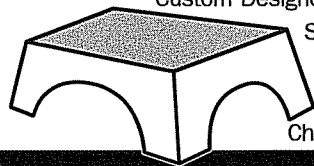
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Canon eight, in the section concerning abuses at Mass, written by a committee in the general session of September 10, 1562

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. If anything is to be sung with the organ from the sacred services while they are in progress, let it be recited in a simple, clear voice beforehand so that no one will miss any part of the eternal reading of the sacred writings. 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 may be clearly understood by all, and thus the hearts of the listeners be drawn to the desires of heavenly harmonies, in the contemplation of the joys of the blessed. Those things which are established for the celebration of the masses should be observed in them and also in the other sacred services, so that those things which are performed in a sacred manner may be understood with greater reverence, piety, and faith.⁸

The formal decree, adopted in the twenty-second session of the council, was a rather short summation of these preliminary texts and a formal mandate for reform:

Decree Concerning Things to be Observed and Avoided in the Celebration of Mass

They shall also banish from the churches all such music which,

whether by the organ or in the singing, contains things that are lascivious or impure, likewise all worldly conduct, vain and profane conversations, wandering around, noise and clamor, so that the house of God may be seen to be and may be truly called a house of prayer.⁹

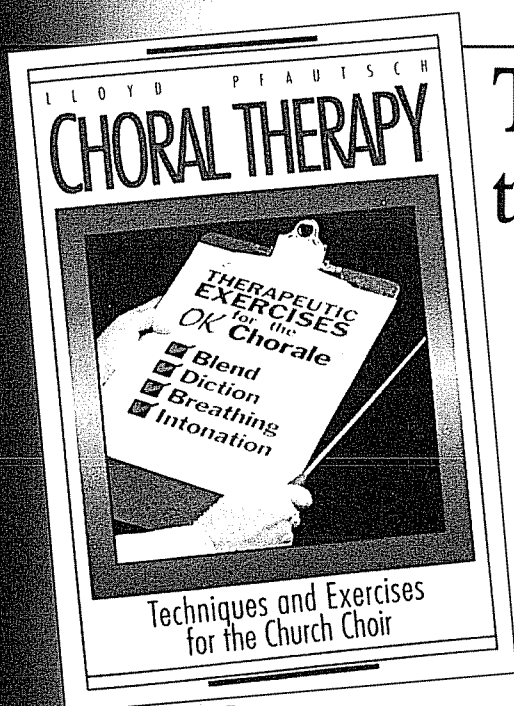
This decree, however, fell short of specifying what kind of music was "lascivious or impure." In addition, it did not address at all the concern about a style of polyphony that would render the texts intelligible to the congregation. The specifics of this mandate—that is, determining exactly what kind of music would be acceptable in the liturgy—were left to future discussions.

On the one hand, it is not surprising that this conciliar decree is lacking in specifics. Typically, such decrees define a general course of action and leave the specifics of implementation to be addressed at a later time. On the other hand, the vagueness of this particular decree is at least a

little curious given the specific nature of the concerns outlined by various individuals prior to the council session in which it was adopted. Furthermore, since the issue of musical reform was brought before the council again the following year, not all council members considered the matter adequately addressed by this decree. Perhaps one of the reasons for its vagueness is what appears to have been a difference of opinions regarding exactly how church music should be reformed, especially with regard to the use of polyphonic music in the liturgy.

Chant vs. Polyphony and the Contributions of the Spanish

One group of reformers—in particular Cardinal Giovanni Morone, who served as president of the Council of Trent, and Cardinal Bernardo Navagero—advocated banning polyphony from the church altogether. Indeed, in 1538, Cardinal Morone had temporarily banned polyphony from



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his own cathedral in Modena in favor of plainsong because of the clarity that monophonic music gave to the text.¹⁰

Due largely to the efforts of Morone and Navagero, preliminary discussions regarding the matter were held prior to the twenty-fourth session (November 11, 1563) of the Council. Word of these discussions, however, reached Spain, and on August 23, 1563, Ferdinand I, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, wrote a letter to the council requesting that

polyphonic music not be banned from use in the church:

There are some other articles about which we think that we must speak to you. Among these is the last of the third section, which states: "sentimental chants must be outlawed, and in our churches we must maintain grave music which is more fitting to the ecclesiastical simplicity."

We will not approve removing ornate chants (polyphony) completely from our services, because we believe that so divine a gift as music can frequently stir to devotion the souls of men who are especially sensitive to music. This music must never be banned from our churches.¹¹

While the emperor may truly have found polyphonic music to be stirring, at least three other possible reasons exist for his concern about the abolition of polyphony from the church. First, he

might have been aware of the practical difficulties likely to be encountered in enforcing such a ban, because the use of polyphonic music was widespread in the church. Second, if there were difficulties in enforcing such a decree, the church's struggles in this matter might be perceived as a sign of general weakness, thereby diminishing the church's influence. Third, he may have been aware of the universal popularity of music by Spanish composers such as Cristóbal de Morales and Francisco Guerrero, and he may have wanted to preserve the notoriety brought to Spain by their music.

Morales, for example, was one of the most renowned composers in Europe during the first half of the sixteenth century. He served as a singer in the papal choir for ten years (1535–1545), during which time his compositions were heard frequently by rulers from all over the continent. As a result, his compositions enjoyed a rapid diffusion throughout Europe. Even after his death in 1553, his reputation continued to spread not only in Europe but also in the New World.¹² In fact, the eighteenth-century writer Fornari, in "discussing Palestrina's text-setting in the *Missa Papae Marcelli*, praised Morales as the composer who first showed how to set words intelligibly in a contrapuntal fabric."¹³ Indeed, Palestrina looked on the works of Morales as models in more ways than one. He composed at least one mass based on a motet by Morales.¹⁴ In addition, his first book of masses (1544) shared many similarities with that of the Spanish composer:

It opens with a tenor mass with separate text celebrating the reigning pope . . . and it contains a letter of dedication to the pope. Moreover, the woodcut used for Palestrina's print is the very one that had been employed for Morales's. While the faces of both pope and composer have been altered, along with the papal arms, the music in both illustrations is the same, though with the words deleted; thus Palestrina is inadvertently depicted presenting Morales's mass.¹⁵

Ferdinand, as Holy Roman Emperor, had a vested interest in any actions taken

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by the council. He had followed its deliberations closely, and the correspondence and negotiations between Ferdinand and the council indicate that his influence was significant.¹⁶ His August 1563 letter must have swayed the council's thinking, for the final decree on the matter, coming from the twenty-fourth session, allowed local authorities to determine what types of music would be permitted in the liturgy:

With regard to matters that pertain to the proper manner of conduct in the divine offices, the proper way of singing or the modulating therein, the definite rule for assembling and remaining in choir, the things necessary for those who minister in the church, and such like, the provincial synod shall prescribe for each province a fixed form that will be beneficial to and in accordance with the usage of each province. In the meantime, the bishop, with the aid of no less than two canons, one chosen by himself, the other by the chapter, may provide in these matters as he may deem expedient.¹⁷

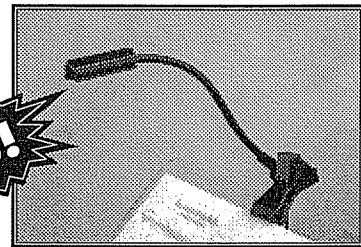
This decree effectively ended the debate regarding the liturgical use of polyphony versus chant. Three weeks later, on December 3, 1563, the council confirmed this, declaring that polyphonic music would be retained in the church but that worldly and profane music should be expunged from the church forever.¹⁸

The Search for an Appropriate Polyphonic Style

In 1564, shortly after the conclusion of the Council of Trent, several commissions of cardinals were established to implement the council's many mandates. Two members of the commission charged with accomplishing musical reforms, Carlo Borromeo and Vitellozzo Vitelli, were ardent reformers with a special interest in finding a style of polyphonic music in which the text would be intelligible. Borromeo, the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, wrote to his vicar in Milan and requested that Vincenzo Ruffo, master of the chapel at the cathedral in Milan, be asked to "compose a Mass that should be

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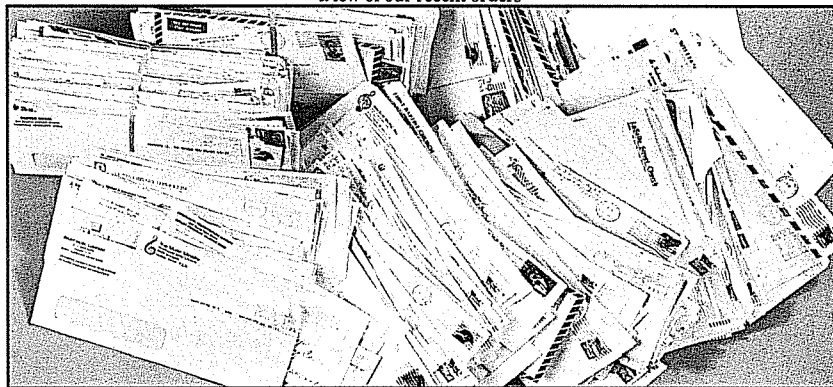
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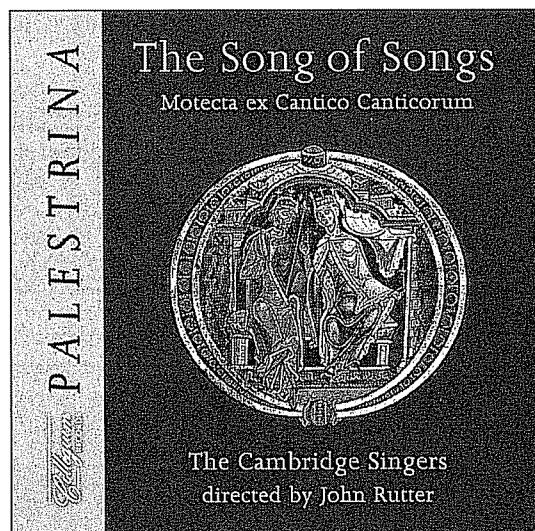


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as clear as possible and send it to me."¹⁹ Vitelli hosted at his house the now famous meeting of April 28, 1565, in which the papal chapel singers "were assembled . . . to sing some masses and test whether the words could be understood,"²⁰ and at which it is suggested that Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* was heard and acclaimed to be the preeminent example of intelligible polyphony.

Even though Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* is a work composed with intelligibility in mind,²¹ it is not certain that the work was actually performed at this meeting.²² Nevertheless, Palestrina's influence at the time with regard to the development of a new, intelligible style of polyphony must have been considerable. He had spent virtually his entire career in Rome, holding positions in the Sistine Choir and at the three major churches in the city—Santa Maria Maggiore, San Giovanni in Laterano, and San Pietro in Vaticano. One of his masses was selected as a test piece and sung in the Sistine Chapel on June 19, 1563, for the assembled cardinals and pope to judge its suitability. Afterward, it received general acclaim, and the pope "declared that this [polyphonic] music would be retained in the services [of the church] on the condition that its use be moderated."²³

Palestrina was supremely successful in reconciling the techniques of modal counterpoint with the church's demand for intelligible music in a way that was functional enough for the church to accept and yet sublime in its artistic expression. Thus, it is quite appropriate, and especially so in this year marking the anniversary of his death, to honor his contributions both to the church and to the choral art. At the same time, credit is due to Emperor Ferdinand I and to the numerous cardinals and bishops who wrestled with the issue of the suitability of music for worship during a crucial period in the history and development of polyphonic music.

NOTES

¹ The most thorough discussion of the facts and the legends surrounding this meeting can be found in Lewis Lockwood, *Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina: Pope Marcellus Mass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).

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- ² The claim regarding Palestrina as the savior of church music was first made by Agostino Agazzari, *Del sonare sopra il basso con tutti gli strumenti* (1607). The specific reference is translated in Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), 430–31, and Lockwood, 28–29. Lockwood also documents the propagation of the claim in the works of various writers after Agazzari.
- ³ Societas Goerresiana, ed., *Concilium Tridentinum: Diariorum, actorum, epistularum tractatum nova collectio* (Freiburg, Breisgau: B. Herder, 1900–), vol. 12, *Tractatum pars prior*, ed. V. Schweitzer (1930), 364.
- ⁴ Robert F. Hayburn, *Papal Legislation on Sacred Music* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979), 26.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 26, 27.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ H. J. Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1950), 151.
- ¹⁰ Lewis Lockwood, "Palestrina," in *High Renaissance Masters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 105. The original text of a Modena citizen, Tommaso Lancellotti, describing the clarity of plainsong appears in G. Roncaglia, *La Cappella musicale del duomo di Modena* (Florence, 1957), 24, and in Lewis Lockwood, "Some Observations of the Commission of Cardinals and the Reform of Sacred Music (1565)," *Quadrivium* 6 (1966): 44.
- ¹¹ Hayburn, 28.
- ¹² Robert Stevenson, "Morales, Cristóbal de," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980.
- ¹³ Fornari, *Narratione istorica* (1749), cited in Stevenson.
- ¹⁴ *Missa O sacrum convivium*. See Gustave Reese, *Music in the Renaissance*, rev. ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959), 472.
- ¹⁵ Lockwood, "Palestrina," 97–98.
- ¹⁶ Lockwood, "Some Observations," 42–44. See also Ludwig Freiherr von Pastor, *The History of the Popes* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1923–1953); vol. 15, ed. Ralph Francis Kerr (1928), 179ff.
- ¹⁷ Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees*, 202. For examples of various legislative actions taken by provincial councils, see Edward Schaefer, "The Relationship between the Liturgy of the Roman Rite and the Italian Organ Literature of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries" (D.M.A. diss., Catholic University of America, 1985), 14–25.
- ¹⁸ J. Massarelli, ed., *Concilium Tridentinum: Diariorum* (Freiburg: B. Herder, 1901–1924), vol. 6, 754, cited by Hayburn, 29.
- ¹⁹ Lockwood, *Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina: Pope Marcellus Mass*, 21.
- ²⁰ Lockwood, "Palestrina," 98.
- ²¹ Knud Jeppesen, *The Style of Palestrina and the Dissonance*, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), reprint ed. (New York: Dover, 1970), 41–47.
- ²² Lockwood, *Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina: Pope Marcellus Mass*, 6–29.
- ²³ *Bibliotheca Vaticana, Manuscript diari sistini*, no. 7, cited by André Pons, *Droit ecclésiastique et musique sacrée* (St. Maurice, Switzerland: Éditions de l'Oeuvre St. Augustin, 1959–1961), vol. 3, 114.

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