

Palestrina – Masses CD2 (2001)



Lamentationes Jeremiae Prophetae Feria V in coena Domini 1. *Lectio I* 2. *Lectio II* 3. *Lectio III*
Parasceve Feria VI in 4. *Lectio I*
5. *Lectio II* 6. *Lectio III*
[play](#)

Sabbato sancto

7. *Lectio I* 8. *Lectio II* 9. *Lectio III*

PRO CANTIONE ANTIQUA Countertenors: Timothy Penrose, Ashley Stafford Tenors: James Griffett, Neil Jenkins, Ian Partridge Basses: Michael George, Christopher Keyte, Stephen Roberts Bruno Turner, conductor

Palestrina is a composer who lives on in the minds of the general music-loving public, primarily through church services and community choral concerts, and of course, recordings by premiere touring star vocal ensembles. Usually, when we hear something of this composer live, it's as part of a larger mixed program, along with many other composers who wrote for this kind of setting.

So sometimes, poor Palestrina gets a bit lost in the mix, as one more Renaissance composer who specialized in vocal counterpoint, and wrote some lovely music for a Sunday afternoon service. That's easy to have happen, since that particular era was rife with brilliant choral music to go with such an occasion, and by so many great masters (Byrd, Lassus, Tallis, etc.). So what makes this guy so special within that kind of company?

To answer this, I would first paraphrase a writer I once came across (the name of whom, sadly, I cannot remember) who seemed to really put his finger on what Palestrina's style of vocal

writing was about. He said, in effect: This particular composer was really reviving a form of sacred vocal music that was already quite old when he came along. That music was Gregorian Chant. While his brilliant and innovative contemporaries were composing vocal works of great harmonic and rhythmic complexity, and embracing so many of the colorful compositional techniques of the newer secular/instrumental movements going on at the time, Palestrina kept to a more singular type of vision. He took the basic style of Gregorian chant in all its simplicity of expression, and economy of means, and found a way to 'polyphonize' it without disturbing those very elements that made it work so well as a form of "unison" singing for so many centuries.

After I read this very interesting and seemingly insightful commentary, I pulled out my copy of the Pro Cantione Antiqua singing Palestrina's "Missa Aeterna Christa Numera", and gave it another listen. From the the opening lines of the Kyrie, I immediately got the same impression that the writer was trying to convey, and that was of a kind of unfettered purity, simplicity, and emotional directness that is unique to Gregorian Chant. In fact, the whole thing sounded to me like several monks starting their chants at different times, and singing in different registers, and making the whole thing sound almost IMPROVISED! Some of the more angular archaic church modes are done away with here, and the melodic and harmonic movement has a much more 'contemporary' ring to it, right down to the IV-V-I cadences, and liberal use of major 3rds, but the overall sense and 'flavour' of early European chant is completely intact, and comes through with real authenticity in these wonderful performances.

That improvisational sense I spoke of informs the sounds heard on this recording, and definitely gives me the feeling of a music so direct and 'unstylized', that I would almost hesitate to even categorize it as a "Classical Album". It belongs with the chants and liturgical musics that predate any contemporary notions of style, and as such, could take its place beside any beautifully sung devotional music from any place or time. --- Michael Paull "musicscribbler"

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