

**Renaissance Mass Comparison  
Josquin and Palestrina**

The focus of this paper is on the comparison of two Renaissance masses, written by two towering figures of that era, Josquin des Prez (c.1450-1521), and Giovanni Palestrina (c.1525-1594). Because of their many similarities in general style, this paper will try to provide clues for differentiating between them, in order to make an educated guess whether a particular mass might have been composed by Josquin or by Palestrina.

Ever since the *Messe de Notre Dame* of Guillaume de Machaut (c.1300-1377) – written pre-1365, the earliest complete setting of the Ordinary of the Mass attributed to a single composer, and with a stylistic unity<sup>1</sup> – the cyclic mass form had been a challenge for the best composers of the day, with its lengthy texts and their central liturgical function, but also therefore allowing for a broad musical setting with a greater variety of compositional methods. The mass form had developed steadily since the time of Machaut's work, with Josquin's forerunners Guillaume Dufay (c.1400-1474), Johannes Ockeghem (c.1410-1496), and Jacob Obrecht (c.1452-1505) all contributing significant works to the genre.<sup>2</sup>

Toward the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as Josquin was coming to prominence, there were a few common features of the cyclic mass. Made up of the five sections of the Ordinary of the Mass – Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei – they were written for

a *cappella* choir, typically in four parts soprano/alto/tenor/bass (SATB). Most masses featured a *cantus firmus*, a melody used as the basis for the polyphonic writing. The *cantus firmus* could be, and historically had been, traditional plainchant, but other religious or secular melodies could also be used, and Josquin mostly used secular tunes for his masses.<sup>3</sup>

The notation of the score was not standardized like we think of today. This is partly because there was not an emphasis on metrical regularity at a bar level. For example:



This is one editor's attempt<sup>4</sup> to provide a rhythmic context, with regular bar lines marking regular pulses, but not corresponding well to the voices, as well as brackets above groups of notes to show important relationships.



Josquin consciously strove to fit musical stresses to the accentuation of the words, for better understanding of the texts. In contrast to Ockeghem's highly florid lines, Josquin sought after more direct syllabic settings. The note-against-note harmony of Italian popular music was notably influential on him.<sup>6</sup> His own harmonies feature triads on main beats, but sounding less diatonic, and more modal, than Palestrina. He brought a power of construction that was virtually inexhaustible, and with detailed invention.<sup>7</sup>

Taking a look at a page from the Gloria of Josquin's *Missa de Beata Virgine* (Appendix A, p.8), the main thing to see is a smooth style, but also with more "unexpected" progressions and dissonances. (Like it or not, this takes close mental listening.) For example, to note: an open 5<sup>th</sup> in m.3; the D minor 6<sup>th</sup> to G major progression mm.4-5; the F major to G major progression in mm.6-7; the sudden arrival at C major in m.12 before resolving to G major (V-I), the extended pairs of voices S&A, T&B from m.17 to m.27, without no real triadic cadences. Additionally, singing the various vocal lines reveals a few that are somewhat disjointed, such as the alto line in mm. 9-12. These features help distinguish Josquin's writing from Palestrina's.

Palestrina was influenced by Josquin, who had spent time in Rome, as well as by Dufay. His own goal was smoothness of counterpoint, and beautiful sound, e.g. with triads on most beats, rather than strong expressive feeling. The individual parts are almost plainsong-like in quality, with stepwise motion predominating. There is a careful treatment of "dissonance", that is, the sound is very diatonic.<sup>8</sup>

Palestrina wrote 104 masses, which covered all styles, including works consistently contrapuntal or others largely homophonic.<sup>9</sup> As a result he is not easily “pinned down” by looking at a small sample of his music, but the smooth diatonic nature of the voices is his most indicative feature.

Taking a look at a page from the Kyrie of Palestrina’s *Missa Papae Marcelli* (Appendix B, p.9), apart from the obvious fact that this is written for six voices rather than four, the main thing to see is the smooth style featuring triadic harmonies on most beats. For example, to note: the smooth chordal sequence of the four voices, starting in m.1 in G major moving to the chords C major, A minor, G major, and again C major in m.5. The voices all continue in C major until m.7 going to F major, then to an unexpected A minor 6<sup>th</sup>, etc. Additionally, reading the various lines makes it clear how smooth the voice leading is, either moving stepwise or with small, mostly triadic jumps.

The writing for six voices rather than four in itself would rule out Josquin as its composer, who only composed four-voice masses.<sup>10</sup> (An exception is to be noted in the *Missa de Beata Virgine*, where the Credo, Sanctus and Agnus Dei are written in five voices.) However, Palestrina also produced many works for four voices, while other contemporaries were writing for five or more<sup>11</sup>, so he cannot be ruled out as the composer when looking at a four-voice mass.<sup>12</sup>

The *Pope Marcellus Mass*, freely composed rather than an imitation or paraphrase mass, is an example of largely homophonic writing, using a block chordal style with little textual overlapping. This permits the words to be heard clearly, as opposed to many polyphonic masses of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted in passing, that there is a romantic legend that Palestrina composed this mass to convince the Council of Trent (it was dedicated to Pope Marcellus II, who established the Council) not to abolish polyphonic writing, and so “saved church music”.<sup>14</sup> While fanciful, there is a truth behind it, in that Palestrina, partly under the influence of the 1563 Council’s statements on textual intelligibility, composed this and future masses in a style based on textual clarity and variety.<sup>15</sup>

While Renaissance mass scores can give hints and clues as to their composer, in this case Josquin or Palestrina, it is best of course to listen to recordings of them both, to get an appreciation of their wonderful writing, the slightly different, piquant colors that the older Josquin’s harmonies bring out, and the tremendously rich consonances of Palestrina’s harmonies.

### Notes

1. Oxford Music Online entry “Mass”, subheading II “The Polyphonic mass to 1600, 4. “14<sup>th</sup>-century mass cycles”.
2. Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*. 5<sup>th</sup> edition, pp. 141-170.

3. Grout, p. 175.
4. IMSLP entry for Josquin's *Missa De Beata Virgine* under "Complete Score":  
[http://imslp.org/wiki/Missa\\_de\\_Beata\\_Virgine\\_%28Josquin\\_Desprez%29](http://imslp.org/wiki/Missa_de_Beata_Virgine_%28Josquin_Desprez%29)
5. IMSLP entry for Palestrina's *Missa De Beata Virgine* under "Complete Score":  
[http://imslp.org/wiki/Missa\\_de\\_Beata\\_Virgine\\_%28Palestrina,\\_Giovanni\\_Pierluigi\\_da\\_Monteverde%29](http://imslp.org/wiki/Missa_de_Beata_Virgine_%28Palestrina,_Giovanni_Pierluigi_da_Monteverde%29)
6. Grout, p.176.
7. Oxford Music Online entry "Josquin des Prez", subheading 12. "Masses".
8. Grout, pp.251-255.
9. Oxford Music Online entry "Palestrina, Giovanni Pierluigi da [‘Giannetto’]", subheading 7. "Masses".
10. Oxford Music Online entry "Josquin des Prez", index entry "Works: Masses".
11. Grout, p.252.
12. Oxford Music Online entry "Giovanni Palestrina" index entry "Works: Masses".
13. Oxford Music Online entry "Giovanni Palestrina" subheading 7. "Masses".
14. Oxford Music Online entry "Missa Papae Marcelli".
15. Oxford Music Online entry "Giovanni Palestrina".

Appendix A: Sample page of Josquin's *Missa de Beata*

Virgine:

Et in ter - ra pax ho - mi - - ni - bus  
Et in ter - ra pax ho -  
Et in ter - ra pax ho - mi -  
Et in ter - ra pax ho - mi - ni - bus

bo - - næ vo - lun - ta - - - tis  
mi - ni - bus bo - næ vo - lun -  
- ni - bus bo - næ vo - lun - ta -  
bo - næ vo - lun - ta - - - tis. Lau -

Lau - da - mus te. Be - ne - di - ci - mus  
- ta - tis. Lau - da - mus te. Be - ne - di - ci - mus  
- - - tis. Lau - da - mus te.  
da - mus te. lau - da - mus te.

te. Ad - o - ra - - - mus te.  
te. Ad - o - - - ra - - -  
Be - ne - di - ci - mus te. Ad - o - ra - -  
Be - ne - di - - ci - mus te. Ad - - o - ra -



Appendix B: Sample page of Palestrina's *Missa Papae Marcelli* (Pope Marcellus Mass)

son, e lei son

son, Ky ri e e lei son, Ky

Ky rie e lei son, Ky ri

Ky ri e lei son, Ky ri e

Ky ri e lei son, Ky

son, Ky rie

*mf*

**A**

*dolce* Ky ri e lei son *poco a* Ky ri e e

ri e e lei son, *poco a* Ky ri e e lei

e e lei *poco a*

*ALL.* e lei son, *ALTO.* Ky ri e e lei *poco a*

rie e lei son, *poco a* Ky ri e lei

*p* e lei son, *dolce* Ky ri e lei son,

## Bibliography

Grout, Donald Jay and Claude V. Palisca. *A History of Western Music*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Norton & Company, 1996.

“Oxford Music Online” website, accessed via UNLV Music Library page:

<https://www.library.unlv.edu/music/collections/electronic.php#I>

(articles accessed include: “Mass”, “Josquin des Prez”, “Giovanni Palestrina”, and “Missa Papae Marcelli”)

## Recordings

Josquin Des Prez, *Missa De Beata Virgine* (A Sei Voci):

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZ1aQ62eT7Q> (Kyrie I–Christe–Kyrie II)
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYckR7K71\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYckR7K71_0) (Gloria) – also see Appendix A
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuH9kJaRabs> (Credo)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3utBnjbBLQ> (Sanctus I–Pleni Sunt–Hosanna I)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XD6-sR913WU> (Benedictus–Hosanna II)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xTSMpy6CN4> (Agnus Dei I, II, III)

Giovanni Palestrina, *Missa Papae Marcelli* (*Pope Marcellus Mass*) (Tallis Scholars, P. Phillips): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRff7W4E160> – also see Appendix B

## Links to IMSLP scores

- Josquin Des Prez, *Missa De Beata Virgine*:  
[http://imslp.org/wiki/Missa\\_de\\_Beata\\_Virgine\\_%28Josquin\\_Desprez%29](http://imslp.org/wiki/Missa_de_Beata_Virgine_%28Josquin_Desprez%29)
- Giovanni Palestrina, *Missa Papae Marcelli* (*Pope Marcellus Mass*):  
[http://imslp.org/wiki/Missa\\_Papae\\_Marcelli\\_%28Palestrina,\\_Giovanni\\_Pierluigi\\_da%29](http://imslp.org/wiki/Missa_Papae_Marcelli_%28Palestrina,_Giovanni_Pierluigi_da%29)