

Missa Aeterna Christi Munera

Giovanni Perluigi da Palestrina (1525 - 1594)

Continental music of the late Renaissance can boast any number of fine composers, but three stand above all the others: Tomás Luis de Victoria, Orlando di Lasso and Giovanni da Palestrina. Of these, Palestrina's work in particular is generally regarded as the culmination of Renaissance polyphony.

Palestrina, who took his name from the town where he was born just outside Rome, held important posts at two Rome churches before being appointed *Maestro* of the *Cappella Giulia*, the choir of St Peter's Basilica, where he remained from 1571 until his death. Palestrina was no innovator, concentrating instead on perfecting a structural balance and purity of sound in his music.

The *Missa Aeterna Christi Munera* (*The eternal gifts of Christ the King*) takes its name from the early Gregorian hymn on which it is closely based. Because of its timeless beauty, the simplicity of its four voice parts (apart from the final *Agnus Dei*, in which the tenors divide) and its conciseness, this has long been considered one of the finest of the composer's 100 or so masses.

In the *Kyrie*, *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* Palestrina passes the three melodic lines of the hymn seamlessly between the four choral parts in a continuous sequence of close imitations and elaborations. In the *Gloria* and *Credo* he adopts a simpler approach, giving the thematic ideas mostly to the sopranos, with the lower parts used mainly to provide harmonic and rhythmic interest. Palestrina reserves his most sublime music for the final 'dona nobis pacem', where the voices move heavenward together in a passage of exceptional inspiration.

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