

JOSQUIN

JOSQUIN DES PREZ, ONE HISTORIAN tells us, “emerges from the mists” in the 1460s or ‘70s in Milan. He had to come out of the fog to see what he was writing.

Josquin was born about 1440 in Picardy and probably studied music under the composer Okeghem. Okeghem was a big noise in his own time but today we pay more attention to Josquin.¹

Other than that, we don’t know a whole lot about Josquin’s life. He travelled a lot, working as a singer and composer for popes, kings and other bigshots in Milan and Rome, and also at the court of the French king, Louis XII.

Josquin had a reputation for being a bit headstrong — one of those brilliant but moody types. When the Duke of Ferrara was considering hiring Josquin as court composer, the duke’s secretary recommended that he hire Isaac instead. Isaac, the secretary said, got along better with people and composed music more quickly. Not better, but faster. Besides, Josquin wanted 200 ducats and Isaac would do the job for only 120. Josquin got the job anyway. That’s the great thing about being a duke: You can ask for advice and then ignore it.

Josquin also had a wicked sense of humor. After he grew tired of waiting for a raise the French king had promised him, Josquin composed a motet on the text, “Remember thy word unto thy servant.” Louis got the message and Josquin got his money, whereupon he composed another motet, “Lord, thou has dealt graciously with thy servant.”² For Josquin, composing motets was the Renaissance equivalent of writing inter-office memos.

Josquin seemed to have an obsession with money.³ One of his best chansons is *Faulte d’argent*, which is all about what a

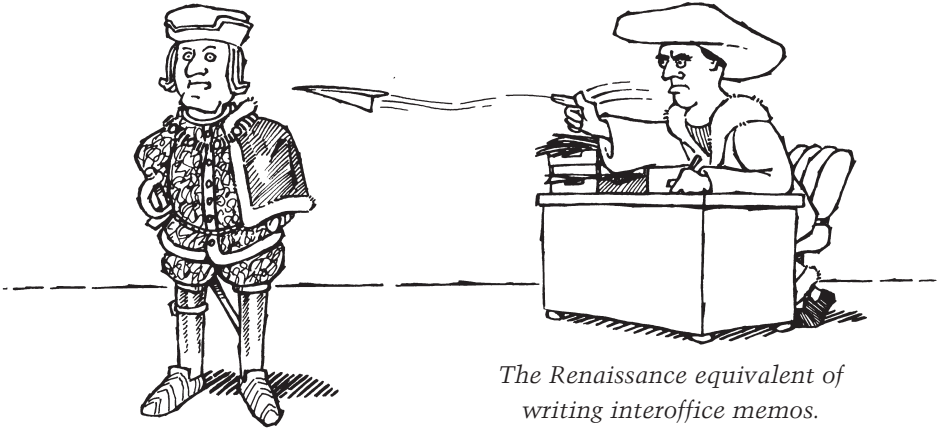
¹ That’s the way it goes

² Subtle, wasn’t he?

³ It comes with the job. The obsession, not the money.

bore it is to have no money. "If I say so," Josquin's text says, "it is because I know."

A popular composing technique in those days was to build a mass or motet around the melody of a *cantus firmus*, or "fixed song."⁴ The *cantus firmus* (C.F. to its friends) was taken from Gregorian chant or from some other well-known song of the day. Try to imagine an entire mass based on the tune of *Home on the Range* and you'll get the idea. Among the best-known C.F. melodies is one called *L'Homme armé*, all about a man with a sword in his hand.⁵



The Renaissance equivalent of writing interoffice memos.

In Josquin's day you were nobody unless you had composed at least one *L'Homme armé* mass. Josquin composed two, just to be on the safe side.

Josquin eventually grew tired of life on the road and returned to his Picardy home in his final years. He died in 1521, leaving the way clear for those composers known as the "post-Josquin generation." These included Nicholas Gombert, Adrian Willaert and Clemens non Papa. The reason for this last man's unusual nickname is not fully understood. But it probably had nothing to do with a paternity suit.

⁴ This implies that at some point the song must have been broken

⁵ If you listen closely, you'll hear that it sounds a lot like the Beatles' song *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Really.

PALESTRINA

IT MIGHT CONFUSE YOU TO learn that Palestrina is not a person but a place. The composer was actually named Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. At various times he was also known as Joannes Petrus-Aloysius Praenestinus, Joannes Praenestinus, Giovanni da Penestrina, Geo Pietro Luigi da Pallestrina, Gianetti Palestina, Gianetto del Palestino, Gio Petralosis Prenestrino and Gianetto Palestrina. Under the circumstances, Palestrina seems the least trouble.

He was born around 1525 to Santo and his wife, Palme Pierluigi, in a little house on the Via Cecconi in the tiny village of Palestrina, outside Rome. When his paternal grandmother died she left him a mattress and some kitchen utensils. But since he was only two years old at the time they wouldn't have been much use to him.

Gianetto (as he was called then) was a happy, playful child who became an altar boy and sang in the local choir. When he was 12 he went to Rome to a choir school, where he was taught elementary composition and how to make spitballs. When he was 20 he got his first job as an organist back in his home town. He married a girl named Lucrezia Gori, whose father had just died and left her some money.¹ At last he found a use for that mattress from his grandmother.

Not long after, Giovanni Maria del Monte, the bishop of Palestrina, became Pope Julius III and moved to Rome. Julius showed his appreciation of local talent by appointing Palestrina director of St Peter's choir.² For this he was paid six *scudi* every month. This would mean more if we knew how much a *scudo* was worth, but we don't.³ Palestrina was later made a singer in that pontifical choir, even though he didn't have a very good

¹ The happy couple also inherited a house, a vineyard, some meadows and a chestnut-colored donkey.

² It just goes to show you should always be nice to people, just in case.

³ It was about equal to one medieval crown, if that's any help.

voice.⁴ His pay went up to 10 *scudi* a month.⁵

Julius III died in 1555 and was replaced by Pope Marcellus II, who reigned for a grand total of three weeks. He died suddenly when something he ate didn't agree with him.⁶ Marcellus II would hardly be worth mentioning except that Palestrina dedicated his *Missa Papae Marcelli* to him, thereby single-handedly saving the future of music forever. Well, that's what his biographer Giuseppe Baini says, and who are we to disagree with him?

It seems that church music at the time had gotten a little too racy and the new pope, Paul IV, called for it to be cleaned up. Composers had been using bawdy songs as the basis for their church music. Worst of all, no one could understand the words.

The story goes that some of the stuffier cardinals wanted to abolish polyphony altogether and get back to the basics with Gregorian chant. Palestrina showed them the *Pope Marcellus Mass* and was able to convince them that some of this music could be quite respectable. Evidently the cardinals fell for it.

Palestrina was by no means your typical artsy-fartsy musician. He was a pretty shrewd businessman who sold barrels of sacramental wine to the church to make extra money. He wasn't very good at saving, though. When his son Angelo died suddenly, Palestrina had to borrow money to repay the bride's dowry, which he'd spent already.

Palestrina's wife died in 1580 of the dreaded sheep flu, which left the composer quite upset. For a while he even considered giving up music and becoming a priest. He got as far as shaving his head and then changed his mind. He married Virginia Dormuli, a rich widow, and took over her dead husband's fur and leather business, which had a monopoly to supply ermine trim to the papal court. Fortunately, he hadn't yet taken a vow of celibacy.

Palestrina went into partnership with the shop's young apprentice and together they made a killing in the market. Palestrina's wife was no fool, either. She invested 500 *scudi*

⁴ It was mediocre, even for a tenor.

⁵ He wasn't always paid in *scudi*. He once led the choir at another church and was given two goats.

⁶ And don't call it poison. That's not polite.

into the business, which she later withdrew and lent back to Palestrina at eight-per-cent interest. He owned four houses, which he rented out to quiet tenants.

In the mornings Palestrina unplugged his tenants' toilets



Palestrina was very busy. In the mornings he minded the fur store and unplugged his tenants' toilets; in the afternoons he composed motets and masses. Somehow he found time to write 93 masses and 500 motets, not to mention the four books of madrigals and other assorted church music.⁷

But this output is nothing compared to the vast number of works — nearly 2,000 — composed by Palestrina's contemporary, Orlando di Lasso.⁸ He was born in Belgium in 1530 or so and had such a fine voice as a boy that he was kidnapped three times by rival choirs.

Lasso did very well for himself, always managing to get hired by rich patrons who let him travel all over Europe in grand style. Once when the church authorities organized a sol-

⁷ The madrigals were a bit embarrassing, since everyone expected him to be the champion of pure church music. He later said "I blush and grieve" to admit that he had written them. Well, he was only young.

⁸ Or Roland de Lassus, or — oh, let's not go through that again.