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Charles Hubert Hastings Parry
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STUDIES
OF
GREAT COMPOSERS.

I.
PALESTRINA.

PEOPLE often talk of music as the modern art, but it is not probable that they always realise clearly how very modern it is in the shape we know it. The sister arts, which comprise painting, and sculpture, and architecture, and decorative work of various kinds, can show masterpieces which still impress us as perfect and complete objects of beauty, though they were made or carried out more than two thousands of years ago. But if we go back as much as two hundred years in music, we feel as if we were among things in a crude and incomplete condition, like barbarous examples of the sister arts of races and nations even before history began. It seems indeed as if all other arts began with the beginnings of civilised life, but music came only with its well-advanced development.

The ancients had some sort of music, but it certainly was a very slight and unimpressive kind of thing; not calculated

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to please us much, or to move us at all. Such as it was, however, its system, and some of its actual melodies, lasted on through the dark ages between the collapse of the great states of ancient times, like Greece and Rome, and the days when modern states like Germany, France, and England were rising towards the condition they are in now. Something in the way of art of various kinds was just kept going in monasteries, and such places; where priests and monks lived together, and kept their intellects alive with study and work and interchange of ideas. But music was in such a low state that as little as eight hundred years ago people had not even the means of putting down a tune in which the notes were of unequal length; and they did not dream of such things as bars till quite four hundred years nearer to our time. About the time of our William the Conqueror they were beginning to puzzle out elementary details, and were trying to come to some sort of understanding as to how music might be put down on paper or parchment, and how sundry scales could be settled which would be fit to make music in. But they worked very slowly, and for a long time they did not even get so far as to find out how to make two voices go together in parts, nor even how to sing the simplest second to a tune; and some modern speculators on these subjects think that when they did discover how to do it, it was quite by accident—as if somebody was singing one tune, and somebody else for fun sang another, and as they found the effect amusing, they tried a little more of it, till by slow steps they really found out how to make a couple of voices or so sing different parts in a tolerably agreeable manner. But when they began to consider part-singing or counterpoint—as they called it—seriously, and to make rules to control composers, they became very particular, and would only allow very simple chords indeed. In fact they were puzzled to know what to do with discords, and probably

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thought they were just ugly and nothing more, so of course they had not much to make effective music with. A composer nowadays uses more discords in one page than musicians in those days did in a week; and if he was not allowed to use them as freely as he pleased he would certainly give up composition as hopeless. But though their music was so limited the mediævals managed to enjoy it; and the plain-song, which was the traditional music they sang in churches, had a fine dignified character about it which still impresses moderns as well worthy of the occasions and purposes for which it was reserved.

In that part of the world's history which we call the middle ages, from about the days of the Norman Conquest onwards, Italy was the artistic centre of the world. This was partly because it was in the best position for commerce, and partly because the land itself was so very rich and productive; and the great cities like Rome and Milan and Florence, which had been established in the days of the ancient empire, and had lasted on in tolerable prosperity through troublous times, served as seats of learning and centres of activity. Here painting and poetry began to thrive very early, and here, too, music began, after a time, to be appreciated. But curiously enough it had to be fetched from other countries; for it was not among the Italians, but among the Dutch, that it first made the most successful strides; and the most distinguished members of choirs and church establishments in Rome and Venice and elsewhere for a long time were Dutchmen. The most successful of all of these was a composer called Josquin de Prez, who lived from about 1450 till 1521. He was in his time the great and favourite composer of Europe; and though his works, which are all for voices, seem to most people nowadays singularly unexciting and severe, there is no doubt that they were as much in request amongst musical people of the time as successful

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operas and oratorios are in the present day. He was even personally courted and made much of by princes, and grandees, and dignitaries of the Church. For instance, there were Louis XII. of France, and the Emperor Maximilian, and great Italian dukes like Hercules of Ferrara, in communication with him at different times; and it is particularly interesting to us to know that Henry VIII. was acquainted with his music, and that unfortunate Anne Boleyn is somewhere recorded to have learnt to play arrangements of some of his works on the little keyed instruments which served in those times in the place of the *pianoforte*.

Josquin was really a great and remarkable genius, and produced works which have real beauty in them; but all the Dutchmen were not by any means wise enough to aim, like him, at beauty. In fact, they got altogether upon a wrong tack, and began to mistake learning and ingenuity for art. They invented queer musical puzzles which had nothing to recommend them but their difficulty, and spent all their lives in working them out; and the consequence was that the pre-eminence in composition passed away from them; and then it was that it took root and flourished among the Italians, and with them it arrived before long at a very high pitch in the peculiar style of the time—so much so indeed that some people still speak of the age just after Josquin as the golden age of music.

This was indeed a very extraordinary time in many ways. Things had got into a very bad state among the very people who ought to have set the best example to the rest of the world. There were of course some very good priests and monks, but there were also plenty of very bad ones. And not only priests and monks, but even higher dignitaries, such as cardinals and popes, lived the most worldly and disreputable lives. When Luther came and the Reformation, that frightened them into a better frame of mind; but it

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did not mend matters all at once, for the corruption in the old Church was too general and deep-seated. But their evil ways came to a climax in the end, for after such a pope as Alexander VI. it was almost impossible that they could get worse; and then the reaction began, and for some time it certainly was the object of most men of authority and power to get a better tone into the papal court, and to elect men as popes, not for worldly motives, but because they were most likely to adorn the high position they occupied, and to purge out the accumulation of abuses which had crept into the Church.

It was about this period that the greatest composer of the age came into the world. The name he is generally known by is Palestrina, but this is in reality only the name of the town in which he was born, which is in the Campagna near Rome. His full name given in Italian is Giovanni Pierluigi Sante da Palestrina, and one of the most famous Italian authorities on the music of that time calls him J. P. Aloysius. His parents were poor people, and that appears to be all that is known about them; and even the date of his birth is not known for certain. It probably was somewhere about 1524; so it must have fallen just at the beginning of the reign of the most unfortunate of all popes, Clement VII., and would be making him come to years of discretion just at the time when a better spirit was coming over the papal court; which was no small matter for him, and influenced his career in a healthy way.

As usual there are stories about the early years of Palestrina, as there have been about most celebrated musicians and artists; and they are probably not less mythical in his case than in most others. At the same time these myths, even if not true in details, often have a germ of value in them, in so far as they put under the vivid form of anecdote

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something which at bottom is characteristic of the man or his circumstances. It is of course in reference to his poor origin that the story is told of his having been taken out of the street and put in his choir by the principal musician of the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, who happened to hear him singing ; and no doubt the anecdote was attached to that particular church because Palestrina in later life was so closely connected with it ; and it makes the story more interesting to join his childhood and manhood together in that way. But whether actually true or not, it does point to the germ of truth that Palestrina was of very humble circumstances. People might have been able to find out something about his early history with more certainty but for the fact that the registers of his town were destroyed a few years later by the soldiers of that same terrible Alva with whose name we associate such a host of horrors and massacres in the wars between Spain and the Netherlands. The first thing we really do know for certain is that Palestrina settled in Rome and became the pupil of a certain Flemish or French composer called Claude Goudimel. This fact does not on the face of it seem particularly interesting, but it is really rather curious, and worth taking note of. What is known of Goudimel is that he was born near Avignon, and having great musical abilities naturally moved to Rome, where he set up as a teacher of music. He first wrote quantities of music after the manner of the Roman Church, such as masses and motets ; but later he is said to have become a Protestant Huguenot, and was one of the earliest composers who set a metrical version of the Psalms to music. It had been one of Luther's great ideas that if the people had the Psalms in a metrical form with metrical tunes to sing them to, it would be a great help to their religion ; he himself carried it out with great success ; and we still sing some of the splendid tunes written for the

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purpose by himself and his followers, and very much finer and nobler they are than anything that is produced for the purpose in modern times. Luther's tunes were of course written to German words, Goudimel's to the French version by Marot and Beza. Goudimel is said to have become rather prominent as a Protestant in consequence of this work, and the fruit of it all was that when that terrible night of St. Bartholomew came in 1572, and the French Catholics treacherously set upon the Huguenots in Paris and other great towns of France, Goudimel was one of those who were massacred in Lyons. And this certainly gives additional interest to the curious fact that Palestrina, the greatest representative of Roman Catholic music before 1600, was the pupil of one of the earliest representatives of Protestant music—but of course Palestrina's music is not like the music which Protestant composers wrote for their metrical Psalms, but to the earlier music of his master, which was in the ecclesiastical style of the old Church.

Palestrina probably came to Rome about 1540, and for eleven years we hear nothing much about him. He must have been working hard, and learning to master all the science of music as it was then understood; and it is clear that he was also learning some of the quaint puzzles and ingenuities which the Dutchmen thought the highest aim of art; for in the earliest work which he made public there are traces of this pernicious influence. The first actual post that he was appointed to was that of chapel-master in the Capella Giulia in the Vatican in 1551, and it was soon after this appointment that he published his first musical work above mentioned, which was a set of masses. This book he dedicated to the pope of that time, Julius III.,¹

¹ The portrait subjoined is taken from the title-page of the second edition of this collection, in which Palestrina is seen presenting his work to the pope.

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and it is said to have been the first musical work that was ever published and dedicated to a pope by a native-born Italian. In return for this Pope Julius made him one of the singers in his private chapel. But this was not a very fortunate or wise thing to do, for it is said that Palestrina had a very poor voice as a man, whatever he may have had as a boy ; and, besides this, he was a married man, which ought properly to have excluded him from such an appointment. But popes were able to do pretty much as they pleased in those days, for people had not begun to be so very particular about details as they became shortly afterwards ; so it may have appeared a pretty fair and promising advance for Palestrina at the time. But in the end it stood him in very poor stead, for he had to resign his first appointment when he was promoted to the new office, and therefore had nothing to fall back upon if the latter fell through.

When Pope Julius died, a most excellent and earnest man was elected, who was called Marcellus II., and his election marks a sort of turning-point in the history of the Church. But Marcellus himself, after making people hope much from him, only survived twenty-three days. The man who succeeded him, called Paul IV., though not quite such a good man, still had his mind set on doing well and honestly, and began at once to reform in all directions, small as well as great. Poor Palestrina was one of the first sufferers. The pope rightly turned his attention to the affairs of his own household, and finding that some of the singers in his own private chapel had no right ever to have been appointed if the regulations about laymen and married men had been properly observed, promptly turned them out. So poor Palestrina, after being fourteen years in Rome, with a wife and a family of several growing boys, was turned adrift upon the world without any post or definite occupation that could bring him any money—for composition

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did not put him in funds any better than it did Schubert or Mozart, or hosts of other composers who have starved for their noble devotion to their art.

For the time Palestrina was completely beaten down. He despaired utterly of his prospects, and became seriously ill. All the pope could do for him was to allow him a very small pension, which can have been hardly enough to keep his head above water. But, fortunately, Palestrina was not destined to be forgotten or neglected. He was, after all, only without a regular post for about a couple of months; for towards the end of the same year he was made chapel-master at the Lateran, and the pope allowed him to keep his pension as well; so he was not so very badly off considering, though his whole pay seems to have been ridiculously small. He next stepped on to a still better position, namely, that of chapel-master at Santa Maria Maggiore, and here he remained for a long while; and this is how it comes about that his name is so strongly associated with that church, and why it was singled out to give point to the story of his being taken out of the streets in his childhood.

This was no doubt a happy and contented time for him. He had enough to keep himself and his family, and his care must chiefly have been to make his music as good as he possibly could, and to further the musical part of the services at the church with which he was connected. He also took his children's musical education in hand, and three of them promised to do exceedingly well in his own line, which must have afforded him no little contentment.

After Palestrina had been a few years in this position a very important event in his life and in musical history took place, which made him stand out as the champion of the Church music of his day. In order to understand how

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this came to pass it is necessary to go back to some of the abuses which had got into the services of the Church in the lax and evil times before referred to.

The Dutch composers who invented the perplexing puzzles and ingenuities which became the fashion just before Palestrina's time applied them very unsuitably to the services of the Church. This soon had very bad results; as the music appeared to have next to nothing to do with the sentiment of the words either in character or expression, and only proclaimed itself as so much dry science and barren cleverness. But this was not the only evil nor the worst. Composers in those days, as now, were obliged to have some sort of principle to work upon, and one of their favourite methods of making a piece of music was to take some old bit of plain-song and give it to the tenor voices to sing, and then to add other parts for the other voices to sing with it. If they wanted a long movement they put the tune into very long notes, and made the music last just as long as the tune lasted in this form, the other voices singing the words over and over again to different kinds of melodies—counterpoints, as they were called—and ending when the tune ended. They used to vary the process in different ways—as, for instance, by writing the principal tune for the voices to sing backwards; and though this seems rather absurd to us, still, as the effect depended more on the way in which the other voices were managed than on the style of the tune, the composer was often able to insure very good general results all the same. But then they did not always choose tunes which had been originally connected with sacred words. Sometimes they chose common secular tunes, and set the sacred words to them; and there were certain secular tunes which were particularly in favour for such a purpose, as, for instance, one called *L'homme armé*, which was used by many different composers. This