

Berklee College of Music

**The Music and History of the Reformation
and Counter-Reformation**

The Changing Life of The Arts

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Europe before the Reformation:

Western Europe in the 1500's was spiritually and politically controlled by the Roman Catholic Church, at that time the Catholic Church had a strong relationship with most of Europe's governments which gave them strong political power over its citizens. This authoritarian side of the religion often manifested on questionable practices such as the selling of indulgences, a document or religious artifact which could be bought in exchange of a guarantee way to heaven before or after committing sins. The idea that giving away your wealth to the church became a more evident problem with the increase of mercantilism in the Mediterranean which for the first time allowed the lower classes to collect money starting to shake the pillars of the hierarchical system. With the invention of the printing press, literacy started incising and the Catholic Church's prohibition of a bible translation became more problematic in England and Germany due to the language barrier in those countries, apart from that the ability to easily spread information meant that the hegemony of the Catholic Church was at an unstable position.

Martin Luther's background:

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was born in Eisleben, Saxony (now Germany), he was the son of Margarethe Luder and Hans Luder, a successful miner and ore smelter. Martin Luther studied at Latin schools in Mansfeld and Magdeburg where he was taught grammar and critical thinking, he then enrolled at the University of Erfurt where he earned a Master of Arts degree. Later in life he became proficient composer, a poet, a monk and professor of theology.

After surviving a horrific thunderstorm Martin Luther decided to become a monk and devote his life to God.

“Most historians believe this was not a spontaneous act, but an idea already formulated in Luther’s mind”¹ (biography.com)

Martin became a prominent monk and as he grew in the church he became disappointed with the systematic corruption and the selling of indulgences deciding to study at the University of Wittenberg where he earned a doctorate and became a professor of theology. Martin Luther came to the realization that salvation can be achieved with faith itself without fear of God or the purchase of indulgences and when Pope Leo X announced he was selling indulgences for the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica Martin Luther decided to take action, he published his 95 theses on the reformation of the church and later translated the bible into German giving birth to the Reformation movement and causing the Church to excommunicate him.

Reformation consequences in the service and arts:

The protestant churches were in general strict about the display of religious imagery in sculpture and paintings. Initially Martin Luther banned all imagery from the religious service but later allowed a few selected paintings and books to display religious images. The new scarcity in religious art resulted in sculptors and painters to lose their jobs and seek jobs creating secular art. Paintings of biblical passages and saints were replaced with paintings of Jesus, giving birth to a new visual art form of protestant iconoclasm. Eventually protestant churches started selling illustrations printed with the printing press which helped to spread the faith

(1) “Martin Luther,” A&E Networks Television, 24 Mar. 2016, (<http://www.biography.com/people/martin-luther-9389283>)

and allowed people to learn and practice faith in their homes.

The protestant services were in many ways similar to the Roman Catholic services although simpler and more focused in passion of Christ rather than the fear of God as in the Catholic church, there was however a few changes in the music of the Protestant Churches. Some such as the Calvinists and abolished almost all music from religious services though the Lutheran Church gave birth to a new style of sacred music which still lives on.

The music of Reformation:

Martin Luther himself was a composer and an admirer of Josquin des Prez and Ludwig Sennfl's music. In an attempt to use music as an educational tool and bringing the population into the service, Lutherans simplified their music, limited the amount of polyphony and eliminated melisma. Instead of a professional choir, the congregation sang the service in the top voice with instruments or an organist playing the bottom parts often doubling the singers. The Proper and Ordinary were replaced by shorter strophic pieces called hymns which could contain liturgical or modified secular texts and melodies. In this intent of making the congregation part of the musical act the chorale style became the prominent style of religious music. The first chorale music book was published by Johann Walter (1496-1570) *Geystliches Gesangk Buchleyen* and it was an immediate success, since it was easier to perform. The press enabled chorale books also meant that they were sold throughout Germany allowing the population to practice the religion through music at home and allowing musicians to sell their music to amateurs.

The Catholic Church's reaction to the Reformation:

In light of the new success of the protestant movement combined with Charles the V's successful invasion of Rome performed by the Lutheran army, the Catholic Church found its European hegemony threatened. As a reactionary measure the Roman Catholic Church took a series of actions known as the Counter-Reformation in order to maintain itself relevant. With the help of the roman aristocracy the Catholic Church used its political power in order to launch a series of Catholic propaganda and anti infidel regimes. In Spain the Jesuits created a religious order which founded schools all over Europe educating the Catholic doctrine through singing and acting. The Catholic church sent missionaries into the colonies of the new world in order to spread the faith throughout the Americas and in Europe the church sent a number of crusades as an attempt to suppress paganism. The most significant of these actions happened in the city of Trent (Italy) where from 1545 to 1563 a group of church officials met in order to discuss changes in the practices of the Catholic service and the practice of faith. These meetings covered a broad range of subjects such as the structure of the mass, the rejection of secular tombs from Catholic Churches, prohibition of nudity in religious among many others.

Palestrina's Background:

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594) was born in the city of Palestrina, near Rome where he learned music working as a choirboy at the Santa Maria Maggiore church. He worked in Palestrina until he became the principal organist and choirmaster but quickly caught the attention of Pope Julius the III who appointed

him as the choirmaster of the Julian Chapel at Saint Petter's Basilica. In 1555 he was offered the privileged position of working as a singer at the Sistine Chapel though due to his marriage with Lucrezia Gori he had to renounce his position at the chapel. Palestrina then worked at the church of Saint John Lateran and later returned to Santa Maria Maggiore while teaching at a Jesuit school. Due to his strong likeness by the pope, Palestrina was commissioned by the Council of Trent to revise the chant books adapting them to the new style of the Counter-Reformation.

*"Palestrina's chief advantage was being in the right place at the right time. The incentive for other composers to continue in his ways was strong, and the Roman school continued to adopt his style long after new developments should have made it seem old-fashioned."*² (Oxford Music Online).

In the end of his life Palestrina remarried and wrote many Madrigals and Motets which are considered some of his best works, he is now the most known composer of the Catholic post reformation period.

The myth behind the savior of polyphony:

The success of Palestrina's music can be highly attributed to a myth started in 1609 by Banchieri and Aggazzari which claimed Palestrina was responsible for the Council of Trent's decision to retain Polyphony in church music. Their account suggested that in order to convince the Council Palestrina composed the "*Missa Papae Marcelli*" with a conservative use of counterpoint which emphasized the listener's ability to understanding the liturgical text, a concern which put polyphony

(2) Arnold, Denis and Tim Carter, "Palestrina, Giovanni Pierluigi da." Oxford Music Online (<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/opr/t114/e4951>)

in debate, he then supposedly performed it to the Council delegates effectively changing their minds about replacing polyphony with Plainsong. The myth however can be proven false due to the fact that the *Missa Papae Marcelli* was conceived in 1564, years after the document in which the debate of polyphony had been decided by Pope Pius IV. Palestrina's mass however later served as a model for the music of the Counter-Reformation which bared elements from Franco Flemish polyphonic compositions with the use of *cantus-firmus* as a compositional device.

Music of the Counter-Reformation:

Although the Council of Trent was the most concrete organ of decision-making during the Catholic Counter-Reformation music was almost entirely left out of the conversation, most of the musical changes were addressed on a 1565 decree issued by Pope Pius the IV. In it the Roman Catholic Church advocates for a more conservative sacred music with simpler rhythms and an emphasis in the listener's ability to understand liturgical texts which now focused in the passion of Christ. Composers were highly discouraged from borrowing from secular songs, the chants were limited to a selected number of texts, melismatic passages were adapted into silabic and polyphony although kept was often simplified in order to maintain the text intelligible. These changes although strict were vague enough that its adoption came in different degrees of success but eventually the Palestrina style of composition became the standard style for the Counter-Reformation music.

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