

“Pope Marcellus Mass” (Palestrina)--The Roger Wagner Chorale (1951)

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Roger Wagner

Roger Wagner's 1951 recording of Palestrina's Pope Marcellus Mass

Roger Wagner's 1951 recording of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's "Missa Papae Marcelli" with his professional ensemble, the Roger Wagner Chorale, stands at the confluence of several important developments in recorded sound and choral music in America.

Organized communal singing has long been part of America's musical soundscape, but early on it was mostly confined to congregational worship. Although larger amateur social singing groups, civic choruses and collegiate choirs began to proliferate in the second half of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th, professional choruses *per se* were not a central part of American culture until the 1940s. Their emergence was propelled by various external forces, the most significant of which were advances in recorded sound, the presence of radio in American culture, and the emerging entertainment industries--motion pictures and (eventually) television.

By the mid-1940s, two American choral ensembles had gained national stature through the medium of radio. From 1929, the Mormon Tabernacle Choir (an amateur group) could be heard in "Music and the Spoken Word," a weekly program on the NBC-Blue Network that was broadcast live from Tabernacle Square in Salt Lake City. (The program moved to CBS in 1932.) By the 1940s, the choir enjoyed a healthy following across the country, one that Columbia Records was eager to promote with the latest development in sound recording: the 33 1/3 LP. Columbia signed the choir (then led by J. Spencer Cornwall) to a recording contract in 1949, just a few years after RCA-Victor, Columbia's chief rival, had signed the young American conductor, Robert Shaw, to his own record deal.

Shaw, a contemporary of Roger Wagner, was already a famous choral director by the time he founded his eponymous ensemble of professional singers in New York in 1948: the Robert Shaw Chorale. This group was a spinoff of Shaw's first independent conducting venture, the 150-voice Collegiate Chorale, which he founded in 1941 and which first gained national attention with its early association with Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra. By 1948, Shaw had already recorded nearly three dozen works for RCA-Victor, including several works for choir and orchestra by the Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), but nothing (yet) from earlier eras.

Thus, by the time Roger Wagner founded his own professional ensemble in 1946, the Los Angeles Concert Chorale (renamed the Roger Wagner Chorale in 1948), the business of commercializing choral music in America was well underway, and both RCA Victor and Columbia were poised to capitalize on it.

As Shaw had done with his Chorale in New York, Wagner formed his Chorale with 16 of the best singers from various amateur Los Angeles area youth choral groups he had directed, the most famous of whom was the young American soprano Marilyn Horne. Whereas Shaw's repertoire focused on American choral music and larger choral-orchestral works, Wagner ventured into territory neither Shaw nor the Tabernacle Choir touched: Gregorian chant and Renaissance music. Whether it was this novel approach to repertoire that attracted the relatively new Capitol Records to Wagner is not known, but the West Coast-based company, which had been founded by Johnny Mercer in 1942 to record popular commercial music, shortly thereafter stepped into the world of classical music, starting first with instrumental works, but eventually branching out to unfamiliar sacred music. Early recordings issued by Capitol include the 1947 release of gospel music sung by the St. Paul's (Baptist) Church Choir of Los Angeles, under the direction of Rev. James Earle Hines (originally named the Echoes of Eden Choir), and, starting in 1951, Renaissance music performed by the Roger Wagner Chorale.

Wagner's reasons for choosing to record the "Missa Papae Marcelli" (the Mass of Pope Marcellus) are unknown. They may have stemmed from his early study of Gregorian chant with the Solesmes monks (in the 1930s) and his familiarity with sacred music as a church choir director and organist, most notably at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Los Angeles. Palestrina was the most important Italian composer of sacred music during the second half of the 16th century, and his compositions were revered throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries by Catholics looking to reform liturgical music. (Significantly, Pope Pius X's Motu Proprio on sacred music, issued in 1903, elevated Gregorian chant and Palestrina's music specifically as superior to all others.)

Born in 1525 or 1526 in Palestrina, a hill town outside of Rome, he spent his entire career serving in the musical establishments of the most important churches in Rome: first in the Cappella Giulia in St. Peter's; then in succession the Cappella Sistina (Sistine Chapel), the official choir of the Pope; St. John Lateran; St. Mary Major; and finally, back to the Cappella Giulia, where he served as chapel master from 1573 until his death in 1594. A prolific composer, he published eight books of masses; six more books were brought out posthumously.

The Mass of Pope Marcellus was published in 1567 in Palestrina's second book of masses. It bears the name of Cardinal Marcello Cervini, whose reign as Pope Marcellus II in 1555 lasted

only three weeks. Unique among Palestrina's masses in naming an individual in the title, it may be a posthumous tribute to his patron. We know that the pope was concerned enough about music that he met with his singers to demand that music for Holy Week be appropriate in style. The mass was probably composed ca. 1562 (it is found in a Vatican manuscript from the mid-1560s) as part of an experiment in the musical reform that followed the Council of Trent (1543-1563). In contrast with most of Palestrina's masses, it does not use an existing composition as a model but presents newly invented material. The movements with short texts--Kyrie, Sanctus and Benedictus, and Agnus dei--are polyphonic and imitative in style, exploring contrapuntal combinations of brief themes. Palestrina creates a sense of coherence by repeating the opening of the Kyrie in the Agnus dei. The most striking movements are the two with long texts--Gloria and Credo--which employ homophony, chordal writing in which, with few exceptions, the words are declaimed in all the voices at the same time. Palestrina exploits the possibilities afforded by a six-voice ensemble to bring out the dramatic moments of the text. His setting exemplifies the intelligibility of the text that was one of the principles of reform.

The Pope Marcellus Mass soon achieved renown, no doubt in part because of the legend dating from early in the 17th century that his mass had saved polyphonic church music from being banished. Its popularity is attested by arrangements made for both smaller (four-voice) and larger (12-voice) ensembles as well as by many copies in manuscripts dating through the 19th century. Although it was recorded in full three times on 78 rpm records issued between 1927 and 1948, the beginning of the mass's extensive discography on 33 1/3 LPs dates from the early 1950s with three recordings: Père Émile Martin and Les Chanteurs de St.-Eustache (ca. 1950-51, a reissue of the 78-rpm recording from ca.1942-48), Felix De Nobel and the Nederlands Kamerkoor (ca. 1951-52), and Wagner's. A search by title on discogs.com shows the continuing popularity of the mass, with no fewer than 150 hits, an extraordinary number for a period of music history in which much music has yet to be recorded even once.

Listeners familiar with recordings of Renaissance choral music produced since the last quarter of the 20th century by ensembles such as the Tallis Scholars (Peter Phillips, conductor), The Sixteen (Harry Christophers, conductor), the Oxford Camerata (Jeremy Summerly, conductor) or any of the half dozen or so issued in the last two decades, might be surprised by Wagner's interpretation: specifically, the singers' use of substantial, full-throated vibrato; the sudden, dramatic shifts in tempo; and the heavy use of block crescendos and decrescendos that are more stylistically appropriate for 19th- and 20th-century music rather than that of 16th-century Italy. None of these performance directions were indicated by Palestrina himself. Indeed, trends in historically informed performances and recordings today take a much different approach, one that conforms more to what specialists in Renaissance music believe were the aesthetics of the day. Wagner's approach, then, reflects his own performance choices, many of which were no doubt suggested by the heavily edited printed scores that were available to him at the time. One of these was probably Otto Goldschmidt's 1881 edition published by Novello, which includes many of the interpretive markings we hear in Wagner's recording. Further, like Goldschmidt, he did not include the second Agnus dei, instead repeating the first Agnus and supplying the text 'dona nobis pacem.' (Palestrina's second Agnus, for seven voices, is found in a Vatican choirbook but not in the 1567 print; it was included in both the Haberl and Casimiri critical editions of Palestrina's music, published in 1881 and 1939 respectively.) Wagner also followed Goldschmidt's part assignments (SSA[A/T]BB), using sopranos, altos, and a combination of

altos and tenors for the second, third, and fourth voice parts respectively, rather than Palestrina's original SATTB voicing.

Despite Wagner's romanticized interpretation of the work, one can listen to and appreciate this recording in the context of choral singing of the 1930s and 1940s, which was heavily influenced by opera, film, and other types of commercial music. Wagner's work with the Chorale at MGM, which led directly to his Chorale's singing in a number of films including Victor Fleming's 1948 "Joan of Arc" (starring Ingrid Bergman), certainly influenced the group's choral sound. More importantly, when Wagner had the Chorale perform the mass live in Los Angeles in December 1950 as part of the Evening Roof Concerts (along with Hans Leo Hassler's 16th-century motet "Cantate Domino" and Igor Stravinsky's cantata "Les Noces," a contemporary work finished in 1923), it was almost certainly the first time the Pope Marcellus Mass had been heard in a public concert performance in the United States by a mixed choir of women and men.

That this 1951 recording appeared several decades before the early music renaissance in America had taken root makes it a significant artifact of American music history. It was the first recording of the work by an American choral ensemble, and the first on an American record label. Wagner himself believed this recording established his Chorale's national reputation, and he often credited it as the reason the ensemble was invited to England to take part in the coronation festivities for Elizabeth II in 1953. It was the first in a long list of Chorale recordings under Wagner's direction, a number of which were devoted to his increasingly refined interpretations of Renaissance music.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the authors and many not reflect those of the Library of Congress.