



AGNUS DEI

(from Missa Papae Marcelli)

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1562)



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*from Missa Papae Marcelli
(Pope Marcellus Mass)*

By Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (Italy)
Renaissance (1562)

LESSON INTRODUCTION

Important Terms and Concepts

- **Timbre:** the “color” or quality of sound
- **Sacred Music:** music that was intended for use in a religious setting
- **Texture:** the way in which the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms of a piece are structured or layered
 - **Monophonic:** one melodic line only
 - **Homophonic:** one main melodic line supported by chords/harmonies
 - **Polyphonic:** more than one independent melodic line

BEHIND THE MUSIC



Giovanni Pierluigi (c. 1525 – 1594) was born in Palestrina, Italy, during the Renaissance. Not much is known about Giovanni’s early life, but it is said that he sold his family farm products on the streets of Rome and would sing songs while he walked around the streets. The choirmaster of Santa Maria heard his impressive vocal talents and started training him in music. Choral music was widely popular, and many composers, including Palestrina, lived their lives attached to the service of the church. At the time, many people felt that music in the church had become too secular. The Pope met with church officials to discuss the situation; and it was suggested that all music be removed except the old Gregorian chant. Legend has

it that Palestrina was commissioned to write a choral mass as a test case. The result was *Missa Papae Marcelli* (the Mass of Pope Marcellus), a work so beautiful that it influenced officials to vote in favor of keeping music.

Published in 1567, the work is well known for its beautiful, intricate harmonies, and it has been studied for centuries as an example of polyphonic choral music. Like all masses, it contains several movements that set the Eucharistic liturgy to music: Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus and Benedictus, and Agnus Dei. At the time the piece was written, boy choristers sang the soprano and alto voices, and the entire mass was sung *a cappella* (without instrumental accompaniment). The focus of the sacred music was that the words should be readily understandable and not obscured by musical elaboration. The Agnus Dei contains "imitative" polyphony, in which the basic melodies and their words are stated clearly in a single voice before the other layers are gradually added.

ACTIVE LISTENING

1. Play the Youtube recording for students as they enter the classroom:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhJTMa8iq3I>
2. Ask students:
 1. **What did you notice about this music? What did you hear?**
 2. **Did you hear a steady beat? Was the tempo slow or fast?**
3. Display the "Agnus Dei" poster (page 1) and explain: **"The song you just heard is called "Agnus Dei." It was written by a composer named Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, more than 400 years ago. Palestrina wrote more than 300 works of music. All of his compositions were sacred music – that is, music that was intended for use within a religious setting – and all of his compositions used the voice as the main instrument.**
4. Ask the following questions (*if necessary, play an excerpt from the recording again for students to refer to*)
 1. **Did you hear any other instruments besides the voice?**
 2. **How many singers do you think there were? Why do you think that? Were the singers singing high, low, or both?**

TIMBRE

5. Explain: **It is easy to tell that there are lots of singers in this piece, because each singer's voice has a different timbre. Timbre is the "color" or quality of sound that makes different instruments, and**

different voices, sound different even if they are playing the same music. For example ... how would you expect an older man's voice to sound? What about a young child? What are some of the qualities that make their voices sound distinct? (Some examples include pitch/range (highness & lowness of the voice); nasality; scratchiness; resonance)

Optional: Have students close their eyes, and take turns letting student volunteers speak or sing a song. After each volunteer has gone, ask the other students to guess who was speaking/singing.

TEXTURE

6. In addition to the timbre of the singers in the piece, we can also describe the texture of the piece. Texture refers to the way in which the melodies, harmonies, and rhythms of a piece are structured or layered.
7. Write the words "monophonic," "homophonic," and "polyphonic" on the board. Ask students to make guesses about what the words mean.
 1. Have the class sing "Row Row Row Your Boat" (see page 7) in unison. Explain that this version of the song is monophonic (that is, it only has one melodic line).
 2. Next, have the class sing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" while you play accompanying chords on the guitar or piano. Explain that this version of the song is homophonic (that is, it has one main melodic line but is supported by chords/harmonies)
 3. Finally, divide the class into three groups, and have them sing "Row Row Row Your Boat" as a round. Explain that this version of the song is polyphonic (it has more than one independent melodic line).
8. Have the class vote on whether they think the texture of Agnus Dei was monophonic, homophonic, or polyphonic.
9. Listen to the Youtube recording one more time so that the students can check their answer. Have them raise their hands when they hear a new voice enter the piece, and point out the way different voices enter at different times, with independent melodic lines, meaning that the piece is polyphonic.

Especially with older or more advanced students, you may want to distribute or display copies of the score (see "Resources," page 7) so that they can follow along and see the way that the melodies are staggered.

GO DEEPER

OPTION 1. MUSICAL CONNECTIONS: EXPLORING TEXTURE

During this activity, students will listen to songs, both classical and modern, that exemplify the three main types of musical texture.

1. Monophonic texture:
 - a. "O Euchari in Leta Via" by Hildegard von Bingen:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctx5fo-8DTI>
 - b. "Taps" at Arlington National Cemetery:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Uw_DojuErQ
2. Homophony
 - a. "Let it Go" from *Frozen*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0MK7qz13bU>
 - b. "The Entertainer" by Scott Joplin:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPmruHc4S9Q>
3. Polyphony
 - a. "Fugue in G minor" by J. S. Bach:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddbxFi3-UO4>
 - b. "Confrontation" from *Les Miserables* (polyphonic section begins at 1:00): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykrB0YbvglA>

OPTION 2. EXPLORING TIMBRE

During this activity, students will listen to short recordings of solo instruments, vocals, and/or small chamber groups. As they listen, they will try to guess which instrument or instruments were playing. How would they describe the timbre of that instrument/voice? Some words that are commonly used to describe timbre include bright, dark, harsh, mellow, flat, resonant, warm, eerie, choppy, rounded, gentle, lush, brassy, reedy, clear, flat, breathy, strident, piercing, having much/little/no vibrato. If you do not have access to Youtube to find short excerpts, you may share other recordings that you have or live demonstrations.

RESOURCES

YOUTUBE RECORDING: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhJTMa8iq3I>
(performance by the Tallis Scholars)

SHEET MUSIC: <http://ks.imslp.info/files/imglnks/usimg/d/d9/IMSLP334033-SIBLEY1802.25717.71e8-39087015868518score.pdf>
(The "Agnus Dei" is on page 52 of the file; or page 48 of the score)

"ROW, ROW, ROW YOUR BOAT" SHEET MUSIC:

Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream;

mer-ri-ly, mer-ri-ly, mer-ri-ly, mer-ri-ly, life is but a dream!

LESSON ACTIVITIES WERE ADAPTED FROM:

Dave Conservatoire video about polyphony:

<http://www.daveconservatoire.org/lesson/polyphonic-texture>

"Music from the Renaissance" lesson series by Lori Boyd:

http://www.coreknowledge.org/mimik/mimik_uploads/lesson_plans/985/Music%20from%20the%20Renaissance.pdf.

Utah Education Network: Classical Music Appreciation Lesson 5:

<http://www.uen.org/Lessonplan/preview?LPid=1723>