SACRED MUSIC OF THE RENAISSANCE

PALESTRINA

LASSUS

VICTORIA

VIADANA

ROMAN-VATICAN CHOIR

RT. REV. MSGR. LICINIO REFICE, DIRECTOR
Sacred Music of the Renaissance

Roman-Vatican Choir

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During the late summer of 1947, with the express permission of Pope Pius XII, 54 men and boys, hand-picked from the four chapel choirs of the Vatican, arrived in the United States for an American-Canadian tour. Not since 1927, when a group under the late Raffaele Casimiri toured here, had choral singers from the Vatican been heard on this side of the Atlantic. Under the direction of the renowned priest-composer, Licinio Refice, the Roman-Vatican Choir brought first-hand to listeners throughout the country magnificent renditions of sacred music founded on traditions over 1000 years old, extending through the golden age of Palestrina and carried on in our own day by such eminent musicians as Dom Lorenzo Perosi, Ernesto Bozzi, Raffaele Casimiri, and by Msgr. Refice himself. The repertoire of the Roman-Vatican Choir in the course of its North American tour included not only the great masterpieces of the golden age of liturgical polyphony by Palestrina, Lassus, and Victoria, but also the works of contemporaneous church composers at the Vatican—in particular, the music of Perosi, Bozzi, and Refice.

Msgr. Refice has for many years been Director of the Pontifical Choir at the Vatican basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore and Professor Superior of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Vatican City. In addition to a considerable output of sacred music in large and small forms, Msgr. Refice has written operas on sacred subjects, a notable example being Cecilia, the title role of which had its most famous interpretation by the late Claudia Muzio.

By a stroke of singular good fortune, the Roman-Vatican Choir recorded a series of its representative performances during its cross-country tour, as well as a special selection of music for Christmas (Mercury MG 25081, A-84, A-84x45) featuring favorite songs and carols for the season.

There are those who claim that the music of Palestrina is too rarefied and ethereal for modern ears, but a single hearing of the Roman-Vatican Choir in the poignant Incipit Oratio Jeremiae by this master is sufficient to demolish this allegation completely. In the same fashion the Roman-Vatican singers capture in thrilling fashion the immense vitality of Lassus, the impassioned lamentation of Victoria, and the splendor of Viadana.

Orlandus Lassus (1530/32-1594), greatest of the 16th century Franco-Flemish composers, pursued his early career in Rome and Antwerp. From April, 1553, to December, 1554, he was choirmaster at St. John Lateran. Nine months later, the post was taken over by Palestrina. From 1556 to the end of his life, Lassus' professional life was bound up with the musical activities of the Vatican Court, where he became music director in 1568. Unlike Palestrina and Victoria, whose creative endeavors were concentrated almost wholly in the realm of liturgical music, Lassus was a universal musical genius, capable of turning out grandiose masses, searingly eloquent settings of the Penitential Psalms, or madrigals and chansons of all types and moods in Italian, French, or German. The Jubilate Deo (text from Psalm 100—"Rejoice in the Lord, all ye lands") is a fine sample of the composer's creative vitality in festive vein.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525/6-1594) was born in the Roman suburb that bears his name (the Praeneste of the Latin poets). When the Bishop of his city was elected Pope, Palestrina was called from his local cathedral to Rome. From 1550 until the middle 1560's, Palestrina held various important positions in the various Vatican basilicas, including the choirmasterships of the Sistine Chapel, St. John Lateran, and St. Mary Maggiore. In his later years, he enjoyed the patronage of cardinals, the deep respect of all his professional colleagues, and the close friendship of St. Charles Borromeo and St. Filippo Neri. When the Council of Trent took up the question of needed reforms in the liturgical music of the day, it was Palestrina's work which was recognized as the supreme model of liturgical polyphony.

The late Richard Terry offers a wonderfully succinct summary of Palestrina's significance in this respect: "The reason why he remains—as truly today as in the 16th century—the ideal composer for the Roman rite is that he was steeped in the spirit of the Liturgy... When to the inherent 'rightness' of the liturgist is added the gift of music, the result is the Church composer as distinct from the composer (however distinguished) who writes music for the Church. If the art of composition is rightly defined as self-expression in terms of music, then we may say that Palestrina was of set purpose—expressing in terms of music something he felt to be greater than himself—the mysteries of the faith that was his, as symbolized in the pageantry of rite and ceremonial."

Three contrasting works of Palestrina are represented on this disc. Next is the beautiful 6-part motet, Regina Coeli, Lietare, the text of which is an Easter hymn to the Virgin Mary—"Rejoice O Queen of Heaven, for He Whom thou wert worthy to conceive has arisen as He said." First is heard the deeply moving setting from the last of the Lamentations of Jeremiah for 6-part choir—"Here beginneth the lamentation of Jeremiah the Prophet: Remember, O Lord, what is come upon us; consider, and behold our approach. Our inheritance is turned to strangers, our houses to aliens. We are orphans and fatherless, our mothers are as widows. We have drunken our water for money; our land is sold unto us. Our necks are bent under servitude, we labor and have no rest." Lastly comes another biblical setting, this one in 4 parts, of the tragic Psalm 137—"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."

In the music of Lodovico Grossi Viadana (C. 1561-1645), Franciscan choirmaster of the Cathedral of Mantua, we leave the purity of the Palestrinian liturgical idiom and venture upon the splendor of the Venetian baroque. The Exsultate justi, with its predominantly parallel harmonic lines and touches of melodic ornamentation, is brilliant and effective. The text is that of Psalm 33—"Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous."

Tomás Luis de Victoria (1535/40-1611), Palestrina's younger Spanish contemporary, has written the most striking dramatic sacred music of the golden age of religious polyphony. Born near Avila, where St. Teresa lived and worked, Victoria went to Rome in the middle 1560's, where for nearly ten years he was associated with the Jesuit College for the training of German priests in the Counter-Reformation. Then he became chaplain to the Empress Maria, younger sister of King Philip of Spain. The Empress remained in Rome until 1568, after which time she returned to Spain. From this time until his death, Victoria lived and composed in his native country.

The impasioned musical language of Victoria has its counterparts in the intense, almost sensuous mysticism of St. Teresa of Avila and in the paintings of El Greco. Although he employed in his music the devices of the advanced madrigalists of the day, Victoria preserved the sacred music. Neither did he allow expressive considerations per se to distort the formal perfection and discipline of his work. Four compositions of Victoria are represented here. First, there is a joyous hymn of the martyrs in heaven—"Rejoicing in heaven are the souls of the sanctified who have followed the path of Christ. For those who have shed their blood for love of Him shall be happy with Him in all eternity." Victoria, the lyricist, comes to the fore in the next selection—a lovely setting of the prayer, Ave Maria—"Hail Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women; and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God; pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death, Amen." Victoria, the musical dramatist and tone-poet, stands forth in the two final works. Tenebrae factae sunt is a terrifyingly vivid setting (equalled only in the Si., a great darkness as they crucified Jesus of Judea. And about the ninth hour He cried with a loud voice, "Father, into Thy hands I commend my spirit," and He bowed His head and died." Animam meam, VICTORIA is an anguished prayer in the spirit of the penitential Psalms. Here again Victoria has underlined with telling emphasis the expressive content of his text.

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MERCURY

SACRED MUSIC OF THE RENAISSANCE

1. Jubilate Deo—Lattas
2. Te Deum—Palestrina
3. Regina Coeli—Palestrina
4. Super Flumina Babylonis—Palestrina
5. Rex Supremus—Palestrina

Sung in Latin

REEVES-FAIRCHILD

ROMAN-VATICAN CHOIR

Rt. Rev. Msgr. LICINIO SEPICE—Director

MG 10063 A

Long Playing MICROGROOVE
SACRED MUSIC OF THE RENAISSANCE

Tomas Luis de Victoria
1. Gaudent in Coelis
2. Ave Maria
3. Tenebrae factae sunt
4. Animam meam

Sung in Latin

ROMAN VATICAN CHOIR
Rt. Rev. Mgr. LICINIO REFICE—Director

MG 10063 B
(By arrangement with Sona Record Corp.)

MERCURY

LONG PLAYING MICROGROOVE