

Music and the Council of Trent

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Following the Protestant Reformation, led by Martin Luther, the Catholic Church, seeing its power decline, sought to “resolve the religious differences” created by the Protestants using the Council of Trent (Spielvogel 398). The Council, failing to provide substantive direction with regards to the concerns of the Protestants, especially on the crucial issues of the sacraments, the interpretation of scripture, and indulgences, largely reaffirmed existing Catholic teachings and traditions. This tendency to reaffirm tradition extended to the Council of Trent’s ideas on music.

In one such reaffirmation, The Council of Trent argued that the embellishments that had been added on top of past Gregorian chants were a corruption on top of the divine harmonies in Gregorian chants (Forney 101). Such concerns had already existed, but “medieval singers reasoned, divine ears could still hear the prescribed prayer” (Forney 81). This can be heard quite clearly in *Gaude Maria virgo*, or “Rejoice Virgin Mary”, an early 13th century organum, where the melismatic polyphony on top of the basic lyrics adds texture and much complexity. In contrast to that, in Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina’s *Pope Marcellus Mass*, a clear example of post-counter reformation music, the words are made much more clear and accentuated. While the texture still features some polyphony – the Council of Trent didn’t go that far – there is a clear and distinct focus on making sure the words are understandable.

However, with the exception of making the words more clear, much like the non-music changes, the Council of Trent didn’t seriously diverge from the norm beforehand. Again, looking at *Pope Marcellus Mass*, while it does open with a monophonic texture, with just a single tenor vocalist, immediately after it finishes the first line, the texture becomes polyphonic. You can hear that the different voices are going in different directions so that each word harmonizes creating an overarching polyphonic texture. This is similar to Josquin’s *Ave Maria*, which also features a similar polyphonic texture with the different voices easily distinguishable. Both pieces also feature a conjunct melody, clear harmonies, and a low deliberate tempo. Though the Council of Trent repudiates the protestant ideas of “musical priesthood of all the faithful”, it largely maintained the previous previous traditions of Catholic liturgical music (Forney 103). Much like it refused to deviate from tradition with regards to transubstantiation or simony, it refused to deviate much from tradition with regards to music.

Works Cited

- Forney, Kristine, et al. *The Enjoyment of Music*. W. W. Norton and Company, 2018.
- Spielvogel, Jackson J. *Western Civilization*. Thomson Wadsworth, 2009.