Pfitzner’s end

by Adam Kirsch

On Hans Pfitzner & the conservative artist.

When Hans Pfitzner’s opera Palestrina premiered in Munich in June 1917, it found an enthusiastic admirer in Thomas Mann. “Quickly I made this difficult and audacious production into my own, my intimate possession,” Mann said in Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man (1918), the nonfiction book he spent most of World War I writing. “Its appearance at this moment brought me the consolation and blessing of complete sympathy.” Before the year was out, he saw the opera performed five times.

Pfitzner continued to compose until his death in 1949 at the age of eighty, yet Palestrina is his only work widely known today. Part of the reason is that his reputation went into a deep eclipse after World War II—a backlash against his celebrity status in Nazi Germany, where he was one of the regime’s favored composers. It is only in recent years that many of his chamber, orchestral, and choral works have been recorded. None of them, however, seems likely to join Palestrina in the canon. Pfitzner’s magnum opus continues to repay listening and reflection today for the same reason that it fascinated Mann more than a century ago: its powerful expression of the pathos and the perils of conservative artistry in the modern world.

Pfitzner found the perfect vehicle for this theme in an episode in the life of the Renaissance composer Pierluigi da Palestrina. Starting in 1545, the Council of Trent sought to reform the Catholic Church in response to the challenge of Protestantism. Along with doctrine and liturgy, one of the subjects considered was church music: Pope Pius IV proposed abolishing the complex polyphony that had become popular in the Renaissance and returning to the simpler Gregorian chant of the Middle Ages. According to a long-repeated story, Palestrina, the greatest living master of polyphony, was tasked with defending the style, which he did by writing three new masses, including the Missa Papae Marcelli. These were so sublime that they convinced the pope to change his mind.
By Pfitzner’s time, scholars had shown that this “trial” of polyphony was a fiction—for one thing, the Missa Papae Marcelli was composed years before the event supposedly took place. But Pfitzner was happy to make use of what he called a “musical legend,” since the story chimed so perfectly with his own artistic self-image. He, too, was a composer who loved tradition and sought to preserve it in a time of radical change.

In Pfitzner’s case, tradition meant the German Romanticism that descended from Schumann, Brahms, and Wagner—a musical language that was harmonically complex but decidedly tonal, and that cultivated inwardness and depth rather than excitement. This made Pfitzner an aesthetic reactionary at a time when more famous composers were experimenting with atonality and polyrhythms. He wrote the libretto and score of Palestrina between 1910 and 1915, a period that saw the premieres of Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring (1913) and Schoenberg’s Pierrot lunaire (1912).

It was an era of artistic manifestos, and in 1917 Pfitzner outlined his views in a pamphlet titled The Danger of the Futurists. It was written as a reply to an earlier pamphlet by the composer Ferruccio Busoni, Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music, which argued in a futurist spirit that music should be liberated from all rules and conventions. “Music was born free and to win freedom is its destiny,” Busoni wrote (echoing Rousseau’s famous declaration, “Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains”). This included freedom from its own history: “Creative power may be the more readily recognized, the more it shakes itself loose from tradition.”

Busoni’s call for musical liberation echoes the language of political revolution: rules are arbitrary impositions, the work of tyrants, and freedom-loving people ought to resist them. But Pfitzner argues that this is a false analogy. In music, he writes, “there are no rules set up arbitrarily, the way a law of the state . . . only brings benefit to a certain group.” Rather, musical laws codify empirical observations. “Systems, rules, forms in music grow out of their own accord, just like animal and plant species in nature,” Pfitzner writes; “Some die out here and there, many are preserved.” If there is a lawgiver in music, it isn’t a cabal of dead authorities but the human mind, which discovers that certain patterns of sound give pleasure and others don’t.

Pfitzner, in other words, shared the Burkean belief that what already exists must exist for a reason and shouldn’t be lightly discarded in favor of an abstract freedom. “That the nature of music has been grossly misunderstood for four hundred years,” he writes, “I will only believe if I am shown just the glimmer of something positive, something more beautiful . . . than music has produced so far.”

In Palestrina, Pfitzner imagines the sixteenth-century composer facing an equivalent challenge. His style of polyphony is under attack from a new generation of composers, who are experimenting with more expressive songs for a single voice, featuring secular lyrics. The first
music we hear in Palestrina, in fact, is Pfitzner’s modern pastiche on a love song of this type, written in secret by Palestrina’s young pupil Silla. As the master ruefully observes,

A clique of amateurs in Florence

have taken antique, heathen writings

and worked out artificial theories,

according to which music will be made.

And Silla hurries eagerly towards them,

and thinks and lives only in these new sounds.

This is an allusion to the Florentine Camerata, a group of musicians and humanists whose theories about music drama led to the creation of opera in the early seventeenth century. (The work usually considered the very first opera, Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo*, was performed in 1607, about a dozen years after Palestrina’s death.) In other words, Pfitzner’s Palestrina is complaining about the invention of the genre in which he exists as a character.

This paradox casts Pfitzner’s own hostility to the “futurist” position in an ironic light. The musical tradition he wants to guard against revolution was itself established by revolutionaries, who by the twentieth century had come to be regarded as venerable ancestors. Perhaps futurism is in the eye of the beholder. Palestrina suggests as much:

Maybe the world

is set on pathways never yet imagined,

and what we thought eternal

is bound to pass away.

The last words of this speech—*im Wind verweht* in the German, literally “gone with the wind”—are accompanied by a haunting leitmotif that appears throughout the opera as a symbol of mutability and the fatedness of change.

Palestrina’s sense of irony, his willingness to entertain the prospect of his own defeat, sets him in opposition to Cardinal Borromeo, the prelate who commands him to write a new mass to vindicate polyphony. The composer refuses, saying that he no longer understands the passions of his contemporaries. He compares himself to a man who lies wounded by the side of a road, who

scarce able still to move, just to observe,

sees men rush by him like fantastic monsters,
hunters and hunted, furious and scared,
with aimless, wide-eyed stare . . .

. . .

So I find myself in the middle of life.

Faced with Palestrina’s resistance, Borromeo is first uncomprehending, then enraged. A powerful statesman used to bending the world to his will, he can’t understand why Palestrina seems so resigned to being superseded. Needing the new mass as a weapon to wield against his political enemies at the Council of Trent, Borromeo throws the composer into jail, believing that brute force can create a work of art.

In this way, Pfitzner suggests that the disagreement between conservative and radical artists is essentially a family matter, where both sides have some claim to being right. The gulf between art and politics, the man of inspiration and the man of will, is much deeper and fraught with danger. The opera’s attack on the world of politics is redoubled in Act II, in which the action moves to the Council of Trent and we see how the sausage of Church policy gets made. A nonstop parade of vanity, hypocrisy, and chauvinist posturing, the council ends with a riot that is only quelled by gunfire—Pfitzner’s summary verdict on the value of parliamentary deliberation.

In the end, of course, Palestrina does compose the new mass, but not because he gives in to Borromeo’s pressure. Rather, he is visited by a chorus of spirits of great composers past, who tell him that it is his fate to keep creating music, whether he wants to or not. For the artist, creation isn’t just an ethical duty but an existential assignment—“your earthly mission, Palestrina,/ your task on earth,” the spirits say. Pfitzner’s libretto suggests that God himself works under a similar kind of constraint:

The age-old Master of the world

who has no name, who’s likewise subject

to the primeval word on the brink of eternity,

He does his work, as you do yours.

When the spirits depart, Pfitzner sends in a second deus ex machina. A chorus of angels descends to dictate the score of the Missa Papae Marcelli, the masterpiece that will win Palestrina eternal fame. The opera ends with Borromeo throwing himself at the composer’s feet in gratitude, as Roman crowds shout Evviva Palestrina! outside his window.

The element of wish-fulfillment in this scenario is unmistakable. When the opera premiered in 1917, Pfitzner was almost fifty years old and had known little career success. His music was never popular, and he had worked at a series of provincial orchestras and opera houses. Palestrina
allowed him to imagine a different fate, one in which his melancholy genius would finally be honored by an apologetic world.

Each one of these elements in Palestrina—the aesthetic conservatism, the hatred of politics, the loneliness and pessimism, and the final consoling triumph—appealed deeply to Thomas Mann. Writing about the opera in Reflections, he dwells less on its intrinsic merits—notably, he does not claim that it is a masterpiece—than on the deep congeniality of its worldview. “Its appearance at this moment brought me the consolation and blessing of complete sympathy,” as Mann noted:

> it agrees with my innermost idea of humanity, it makes me positive, releases me from polemics, and in it my feeling has been offered a great object it can gratefully join with until, healed and reassured, it is ready to create again itself.

Such reassurance was very welcome to Mann in 1917, three years into a world war that shook his convictions and severed some of his most important relationships.

Mann had also fallen silent artistically, like Palestrina in the opera. Instead of novels or stories, Mann spent the war years working on *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*, in which he attributes the creative lapse “to the intellectual conditions of the times, to the agitation of everything calm, to the shaking of all cultural foundations, to an artistically hopeless turmoil of thought.” *Reflections* was Mann’s attempt to carve out a piece of steady ground in the midst of intellectual turmoil. From the very beginning of the war in August 1914, Western writers were unanimous in their condemnation of Germany, seeing it as an authoritarian, militaristic state that had launched a needless attack on democratic France and England. As the war stretched on, some German intellectuals began to say the same thing—including Mann’s older brother, the novelist Heinrich Mann.

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In *Reflections*, Thomas Mann laid out his reasons for supporting Germany, which had almost nothing to do with geopolitics. In a series of long essays, he argued that what was at stake in the war wasn’t control of this or that piece of territory, but Germany’s right to chart its own destiny. Kaiser Wilhelm’s Germany had to fight France and England for the same reason that Martin Luther fought Catholicism and Arminius fought the Roman Empire: to preserve Germany’s unique national character from the domineering universalism of the West. Germans, Mann writes, are drawn to tradition and inwardness, pessimism and irony; they instinctively reject superficial notions of progress, rationalism, and political equality. “The German will never mean society when he says ‘life,’ never elevate social problems above moral ones, above inner experience,” Mann declares.
As an artist, Mann felt personally implicated in this clash of worldviews. In works like *Buddenbrooks*, the novel that made him famous in 1901, and his 1912 novella *Death in Venice*, he had glorified the conservative irony he now described as quintessentially German—a sensibility that loves the sick more than the healthy, the past more than the future. In his post–World War I masterpiece *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Mann gave the same sensibility to Hans Castorp, the young protagonist, who loves to listen to his grandfather recite the ancestral names engraved on the family’s baptismal bowl:

> His father’s name was there, as was his grandfather’s, and his great-grandfather’s; and now that syllable came doubled, tripled and quadrupled from the storyteller’s mouth; and the boy would lay his head to one side, his eyes fixed and full of thought, yet somehow dreamily thoughtless, his lips parted in drowsy devotion, and he would listen to the great-great-great-great—that somber sound of the crypt and buried time.

In *Palestrina*, Mann heard the music of a kindred spirit. The character of Palestrina, with his sad solitude and his reverence for past masters, must have reminded him of similar figures in his own work, like Tonio Kröger in the story of that name and Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*.

This impression was confirmed, Mann writes, when he had the chance to discuss *Palestrina* with Hans Pfitzner and proposed a comparison with Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Pfitzner replied that his opera was, in fact, an inversion of Wagner’s: “Die Meistersinger is the apotheosis of the new, a praise of the future and of life; in *Palestrina* everything tends toward the past, it is dominated by sympathy with death.” Mann writes that this last phrase “shook and astounded him”: he had used exactly those words in an unpublished early version of *The Magic Mountain*. He and Pfitzner had come independently to the same formulation of their conservative aesthetic.

Comparing Palestrina with Die Meistersinger also sheds light on the cost of that conservatism. Both operas are set in the sixteenth century and feature real historical figures—Pierluigi da Palestrina and Hans Sachs, a German composer and poet. Both of these characters appear as representatives of a musical tradition that is being challenged by an impatient younger generation. In *Die Meistersinger*, the challenger is Walther von Stolzing, a brash young singer who arrives in Nuremberg and falls in love with Eva Pogner, the daughter of a member of the local singers’ guild.

As it happens, Eva’s father is offering her hand in marriage as the prize in a singing contest, and Walther immediately decides to enter. But while he sings beautifully, he refuses to obey the fussy, pedantic rules of the singers’ guild, which have been handed down through the ages. Very much like his creator Wagner, he employs daring new harmonies and structures that the musical establishment can only hear as ugly. The guild seems determined to award the prize to one of its own mediocre members.

What allows *Die Meistersinger* to be a comedy with a happy ending is the broadmindedness of Hans Sachs, who recognizes Walther’s genius and helps him win the contest with the famous “Prize Song.” In his final monologue, however, Sachs encourages Walther not to scorn the guild he
has just defeated, but to join it:

That our Masters have cared for [music]

rightly in their own way,

cherished it truly as they thought best,

that has kept it genuine.

Wagner, himself a musical revolutionary, here offers a model of a healthy musical culture, in which young and old adapt to one another and tradition survives by evolving. It is the artistic equivalent of the traditional happy ending of romantic comedy.

In *Palestrina*, Pfitzner uses a musical vocabulary clearly related to Wagner’s, but the story he tells turns *Die Meistersinger* upside down at every point. Palestrina fails to embrace Silla, his innovative pupil, the way Sachs embraces Walther. (At the end of the opera we learn that the young man has run away to Florence.) In Wagner’s Nuremberg, musicians are publicly honored; in Pfitzner’s Rome, they are bullied and threatened by the powers that be. Hans Sachs is rooted in his community, working as a shoemaker when he isn’t making music; Palestrina is never seen outside his study. At the end of *Die Meistersinger*, we are assured that music has a glorious future ahead. At the end of *Palestrina*, it seems to have reached the end of the line.

Pfitzner’s hero is well aware of his belatedness. When the spirits of past masters tell Palestrina to start composing again, he pleads that he lives in an era hostile to creativity:

You lived strong lives in times that too were strong,

and all unconscious of what was to come,

just like a seed within the womb of earth.

But consciousness, the light that’s deathly glaring,

that rises, troubling like a new-born day,

is enemy to art, to fantasy.

This feeling of coming too late and knowing too much is part of the reason why conservative artists and aesthetes feel closer to the dead than the living. Busoni believed that music’s best days were still to come, but in *The Danger of the Futurists* Pfitzner asks,

What if it were different? If we were at a high point, or if the high point had already been passed? Perhaps the last century and a half marked the heyday of Western music, the height, which will never return and which will be followed by a decline, a decadence.
More than a hundred years later, it is clear that Pfitzner was right. In 1917, European art music was past its zenith, and the last cohort of composers to join the canon had already been born: Shostakovich in 1906, Britten in 1913. The most important classical composers born after World War I, such as Luciano Berio in 1925 or Alfred Schnittke in 1934, addressed a much smaller and more specialized audience.

When Pfitzner’s Palestrina finds himself in a similar position, he writes one final masterpiece and resigns himself to the end. The last words he sings are “I will be of good heart and live in peace.” In his pamphlet, Pfitzner adopts a similar attitude of ironic resignation, noting that it is impossible to argue away the future: “Forces other than the human spirit dictate the course of the world.” For Thomas Mann, this was what made the opera so moving; it represented “the wistful end of a national artistic movement that finished gloriously with Hans Pfitzner, according to his own insight.”

The problem for the conservative artist is that even when history ends, it keeps going. Thomas Mann published Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man, with its strident support for Germany’s war aims and its contempt for democracy, in September 1918. A few weeks later, Germany capitulated to the Allies and became a democratic republic. In Munich, where Mann lived, a communist regime took power and governed Bavaria for most of the next year. His published diaries record the chaos and privation of the era, and he gave fictional expression to post-war culture shock in the 1925 novella Disorder and Early Sorrow.

Yet Mann responded to these upheavals in a surprising fashion. Most Germans who resembled Mann politically in 1918 found themselves on the extreme right in the Weimar Republic’s deadly culture wars. Indeed, there are passages in Reflections—paean to war and denunciations of parliamentary government—that a Nazi orator could have repeated word for word. But Mann’s views soon began to change, and in 1922 he emerged as a public champion of democracy with a famous speech, “On the German Republic.” As he told a surprised and restless Berlin audience,

My aim, which I express quite candidly, is to win you—as far as that is needed—to the side of the republic; to the side of what is called democracy, and what I call humanity.

The writer who once held that Germany was fated to resist Western democracy now declared, “The republic is our fate.”

One of the friends who turned on Mann after his political evolution was Hans Pfitzner. The German defeat had been a personal disaster for Pfitzner, who made his living as the director of the opera and conservatory in Strasbourg. When the city was ceded back to France under the Treaty of Versailles, he found himself unemployed and in his fifties. Mann joined other admirers in creating a Hans Pfitzner Association to promote his music, but it remained a minority taste. Conductors didn’t like to program his operas because they were sure to lose money.
Pfitzner’s professional marginalization only inflamed his cultural and political hostility to Weimar Germany, and he followed the typical reactionary path that Mann avoided. Though Pfitzner had Jewish friends and colleagues—including Bruno Walter, who conducted the premiere of Palestrina—he became a vocal anti-Semite, repeating the Wagnerian libel that Jews were innately incapable of musical greatness. He was also an early admirer of Adolf Hitler, whom he met in 1923, the year of Hitler’s failed Beer Hall Putsch in Munich. They were introduced by a mutual friend who brought Hitler to visit the composer in the hospital while he was recovering from gallbladder surgery.

Inevitably, Pfitzner and Mann’s divergent courses meant the end of their mutual admiration. “We have not seen each other for a long time,” the composer wrote to the novelist in 1925. “I would like to tell you what you have apparently felt for a long time: that your recently published ‘political’ (to use this not quite suitable word) views have painfully alienated me from you.”

When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Thomas Mann fled the country for Switzerland and then the United States, where he became a spokesman for German culture’s opposition to Hitler. Pfitzner, by contrast, believed that his ship had finally come in. During the twelve years of the Thousand Year Reich, Pfitzner benefited from the patronage of top Nazis, especially Hans Frank, who as governor of occupied Poland presided over the murder of four million Jews. When Frank was sentenced to death at the post-war Nuremberg Trials, Pfitzner sent him a supportive telegram: “Take this heartfelt greeting as a token of sympathy in difficult times.”

But to Pfitzner’s frustration, Hitler wanted nothing to do with him, and the composer never got as much glory from the Nazis as he felt he deserved. The reason, explains the historian Michael Kater in his book Composers of the Nazi Era, was that Hitler had come away from their 1923 meeting convinced, incorrectly, that Pfitzner was part Jewish—evidently because Pfitzner, from his hospital bed, opined that one couldn’t expect all the Jews in the world to commit suicide, as Hitler had declared they should. Even at that early date Hitler wasn’t used to being contradicted, and he left the meeting fuming that Pfitzner had a “rabbi’s beard.” As late as 1943, Josef Goebbels noted in his diary that Hitler insisted Pfitzner was half-Jewish and couldn’t be convinced otherwise.

To try to sell your soul to the Devil and find that the Devil isn’t buying is a particularly ludicrous form of disgrace. What makes it all the less forgivable in Pfitzner’s case is that, in Palestrina, he had shown exactly why artists shouldn’t seek the patronage of strongmen. In the opera, Cardinal Borromeo values Palestrina only insofar as he can use the composer’s work to advance his own power in the Church. As soon as Palestrina shows a hint of independence, Borromeo claps him in irons. In Act II, another churchman urges Borromeo to hand the composer over to the Inquisition if he fails to produce a mass: “It’s wished for by the great ones of this
world;/ when such high powers command, it must be done.” When it came to culture, Hitler and Stalin operated on the same principle.

More fundamentally, *Palestrina* views art and politics as opposed spiritual realms. Palestrina lives and works in isolation, communicating only with his muses. Though he is the title character, he doesn’t appear at all in Act II, when the Council of Trent takes the stage to demonstrate the noisy foolishness of public life. Pfitzner’s preference for solitude is mirrored in the score, which has almost no ensemble singing. Characters muse and declaim in long monologues, but they rarely sing together. As the curtain falls at the end of the opera, Palestrina is alone in his study playing the organ, while the Roman crowds celebrate him outside. The last thing he would have done is join them for a torchlight rally.

While Pfitzner accused Mann of abandoning their shared principles, then, it was really Pfitzner who betrayed them. Both men agreed that the conservative artist is ironic and aristocratic, backward-looking and self-skeptical. But only Mann understood that while these qualities may be in tension with the democratic ethos, they are not incompatible with it. They are, however, incompatible with totalitarianism, which wants to destroy the past and drown the individual. “I am in fact a conservative,” Mann declared in “On the German Republic,” and for that very reason he had to support liberal democracy—because “my natural occupation in this world is to preserve, not to destroy.” Pfitzner’s Palestrina would have understood Mann’s irony. If Pfitzner himself had been a greater artist, he might have understood it too.

Adam Kirsch’s most recent poetry collection is *The Discarded Life* (Red Hen).