PALESTRINA AND GABRIELI:  
THE ITALIANS ARE COMING!

Two of the most important composers from the country of Italy during the Renaissance were Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525-1594) and Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1612). These composers characterized the music of the high Renaissance and were each innovators in their own right.

Palestrina responded to the call from the Catholic church to further reform the music used in the church. He wrote glorious mass settings throughout the late 1500s. He composed over 100 masses, 375 motets, and over 90 madrigals. His compositional style included the multivoiced (polyphonic) techniques of his predecessors that he refined to produce a texture in which all voices were perfectly balanced.

Giovanni Gabrieli was one of the many composers who bridged the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Gabrieli’s most important contributions to music were his use of multiple choirs placed in different locations in the cathedrals and the use of large forces, including instruments, in his compositions. Gabrieli was the first composer to indicate dynamics (soft and loud volume levels) in his instrumental music. He strove to take full advantage of the dynamic contrasts that were possible between string and wind groups. He was also a prolific composer who wrote 94 motets, 7 mass movements, 30 madrigals, and over 100 instrumental solo and ensemble pieces.

The work of these two great composers helped to establish the foundations in music upon which the composers of the Baroque period would build their musical world.