

Report on the Sacred Music Workshop

Sponsored by the St. Cecilia Schola

February 21, 2004

St. Michaels Catholic Church

Auburn, Alabama

The Saint Cecilia Schola of Michael's Catholic Church was the host of a wonderfully successful one-day Workshop on Sacred Music, February 21, 2004, Auburn, Alabama. Participants came from all over the diocese, and included choir members, directors of music, organists and pianists, and others (including people from other faith traditions) just interested in exploring music that goes beyond the popular repertoire one often hears in worship settings today.

The unique focus of this workshop, the first of its kind in the archdiocese, was Latin chant and renaissance polyphony. Both have experienced a revival in academia, concert halls, and the commercial marketplace, but are rarely heard in their natural home of the Catholic parish. The goal was to present this music not as art or history so much as a means of liturgical expression that can and should be reclaimed in all parishes, as is recommended by authoritative Church teaching on music for liturgy.



Chant for Today and Tomorrow

Nor was nostalgia the point. Only a few workshop participants above the age of 60 had anything beyond a childhood exposure to this music. Most were younger people who had wanted to get to know this music but had no means for discovering it within this setting, because workshops of this sort are far too rare. Others were just curious to try out a new form of music. Some were sent by pastors or directors of music.

In its pre-workshop promotion and advertising, the St. Cecilia Schola emphasized that the workshop would start with the basics and work fast through a broad range of music in a very

short time, beginning with chant and moving to polyphony later in the afternoon. In addition, the schola provided training for a children's choir, all day-child care, lunch, and lots of coffee, apples, and water to keep participants in good form throughout the day.

After a full day of teaching and singing, the workshop culminated in an evening vigil Mass with sixty singers who had come from across the entire diocese. The workshop schola sang chants from the earliest centuries of the faith and two polyphonic motets from the Palestrina and Giovanni Croce, in a liturgy that was entirely unaided by instruments other than the human voice.

The large numbers of singers might have overwhelmed this relatively small church building, especially with its excellent acoustics. But with a prayerful and contemplative approach to singing, encouraged by the director of the workshop, the sound was not loud or intrusive but quite the opposite: solemn, spiritually affecting, and seamlessly integrated into the liturgy. The contrast between this approach and the contemporary convention was clear to everyone present, including the singers themselves.

Contrary to the impression that this music is only for specialists, all the music sung at this liturgy was prepared in this one day. Most participants had never sung Latin chant or polyphony before, and many had no prior experience in reading music. Some came with some hesitancy about their ability to song anything in Latin. But everyone left the workshop with new enthusiasm for the possibilities of sacred music to become integral to liturgy in any parish. The day underscored how it is not just for cathedrals or concert halls but for everyone to experience as an aid to prayer.

The Guiding Hand

The director of the workshop was the eminent church musician William Mahrt, professor of music at Stamford University and director of the university Early Music Ensemble. He is also the director of a parish choir in Palo Alto that specializes in music for the early 16th century sung alongside Gregorian Chant in its liturgical setting. He experienced at giving workshops but

Auburn, Alabama, is a far cry of the settings he is more used to, such as the Brompton Oratory where he recently gave a workshop.

Sitting under his brilliant guidance as a musician and a teacher of music history was not just a learning experience but an occasion of grace for everyone. His emphasis was not on musical performance but rather on the purpose, meaning, and style of the sacred. The beauty of the music was informed by this sense and naturally followed from it.

The Schedule

The day began with Mass at 8am, assisted by the St. Cecilia Schola, which sang some of the music that would be taught that day. The focus of the morning sessions was the broad framework of sacred music, and the chant tradition.

Dr. Mahrt began with a discussion of the role of memory in the development of sacred music. Long before music could be written down, the psalms were learned and memorized and repeated constantly as a means of spiritual formation. He drew attention to the meaning of the phrase to know something "by heart"—the telling phrase means to draw only on the resources that God has giving us in order to offer praises back to God.

With a voice soft and gentle, and aided only by a tuning fork which he alone could hear, Mahrt began by singing and having participants repeat a simple Gregorian line of notes that would later be used for the Psalm (sung in English). For singers who are used to being attached to accompaniment and sheet music as the two main crutches of singing, this was a remarkable experience: initially alarming but finally comforting.

Singers were challenged, perhaps for the first time, to reach deep within themselves—mind, heart, and soul—for the resources to produce song. Within minutes after we begun, all sixty voices were singing a line of chant in Latin, producing a sound of rare and unmistakable beauty. It was a revelation for many of us, and after the first notes, there was a long period of emotional silence in which singers breathed the air filled with new sounds.

Mahrt emphasized not volume or even tone but clear diction and pronunciation, and on understanding why notes went up and why they went down, in accordance with the meaning of the text. Once all of this was in place, singing felt far more like praying. It was for this reason that one's voice did not grow tired in the course of a long day of singing.

The workshop broke mid morning for a short lecture by Fr. Michael Sreboth on the conciliar and postconciliar documents on music, at which he demonstrated that chant and polyphony remain the normative music of the Roman Rite. During this time, the children of workshop attendees formed a children's schola under the direction of Arlene Oost-Zinner, and learned parts of the sung ordinary in addition to the chant that would be sung at the evening liturgy. The children's participation in the evening liturgy served a special purpose of showing that this repertoire goes far beyond age or other divisions but has the same universal and timeless quality of the faith itself.

By noon, the workshop schola had sung through some ten different chants from Catholic tradition, melodies which formed the very sound of the faith since the first millennium of Christianity but which have been tragically neglected today. They included: parts of the ordinary, *Jesu Dulcis*, *Pange Lingua*, *Ave Maria*, *Salve Regina*, *Ubi Caritas*, *Veni Creator*, *Ave Maris*, and others.

The morning sessions were followed by a lecture during lunch from Dr. Mahrt, at which he discussed why liturgical song has been part of the fabric of the faith from the earliest years of the faith, and why it is wrong to believe that any and all music is suitable for liturgy. Far from it, chant and its stylistic descendents are normative because they partake in the same solemnity and beauty of the liturgy itself. He then discussed the meaning of solemnity and beauty from the perspective of the scholastics.

St. Thomas, for example, says that beauty is distinguished by integrity, harmony, and *claritas*, which means radiance and light. The beautiful illuminates the intellectual toward understanding, and in the sacred liturgy it points to transcendence. By way of example, he demonstrated the styles of singing text in sacred liturgy, and how they differ according to the

purpose. The Prophetic readings affect a different sense from the Epistle, which is still different from the Gospels.

Though the lunch hour was too short—we could have heard far more of this exposition—the workshop schola headed for our first polyphony session. If the absence of any accompaniment of note pounding was notable during the chant sessions, it was especially conspicuous during the afternoon sessions. And unlike the chant sessions, our director was called upon for the first time to beat out a meter with his hands in addition to supplying pitches for all sections.

Initially, the change from chant to polyphony required an adjustment—from rich unison to the use of independent voices, and it struck several people that the transition from the morning to the afternoon sessions replicated in miniature the musical transition from the first to the second millennium of Christianity. The change was dramatic but so was the sense that the move from chant to polyphony represented organic development—a point more fully underscore in the evening liturgy.

Mahrt used the same approach to polyphony as he had with chant. His pitches were soft and gentle. Once the first chord was perfectly tuned, he largely let the music take its own course. His hand motions were small and subtle, so inauspicious that that cannot be used as a crutch in any way. Even on tempos, he nowhere attempted to push a piece beyond which the sense of the assembled singers. There was no emphasis on hard entrances or theatrical approaches. Here again, the singers were required to draw on their own internal resources to supply the music.

The feel of singing itself took on an entirely different character, almost akin of being aboard a glider that lifted and soared through the air without the aid of engines. Moving passages were almost an act of faith, as were most aspects of singing in this manner. The director was not making the music but merely acting as a guide for the singers to offer praises through their own internal gifts from God. Few of us had ever encountered such an approach which was at once simple, humble, and suggestive of a lifetime of experience. In the end, it worked brilliantly to bring about the creation of a heavenly sound of sung prayer.

Asked about this approach later, Mahrt stated a point that becomes obvious only once it is made explicit: it is impossible to conduct polyphony. To attempt to do so is foolhardy. One can cue entrances if one must but the important thing is allow the music to sing itself on its own terms. Watching it occur in action caused at least one director to rethink the entire purpose of choral leadership.

As for why he did not spend time knit picking the details, he pointed out that there were grave time constraints but also that simple repetition is a far better use of time than talking or getting verbal guidance.

In the afternoon, the workshop learned four pieces of polyphony and sight read through others as a way of giving participants tools to take back to their own parishes. The balance between preparing for the liturgy that day and building for future liturgies in other parishes was carefully maintained, so that the two goals of the workshop (theory and practice) could both be maintained. The workshop broke at 4:15pm and thirty minutes were left for preparation for Mass.

Parishioners who came to Mass that evening were not expecting to greet a choir of sixty singing this vastly beautiful and expansive repertoire but the comments afterward made it clear how the workshop schola came across: the faithful that gathered that hour for liturgy adored the entire approach because it pointed to the God which is truly worthy of adoration.

The Need for More

After mass, participant shared stories of their impressions of the day, and said goodbye. Some had been asked to come to this workshop by their pastors and had approached it reluctantly. But in the course of the day, they found themselves converted by the sheer beauty and spiritual invigoration that comes from participation in this kind of project. The musicians there left in awe of the master who had guided their studies that day. Children left with a sense of great accomplishment, having learned new Latin chants so well that they could sing along with

this beautiful schola. Everyone seemed to agree that, if possible, this should be an annual affair, with next year's workshop tentatively scheduled for February 19, 2005.

Realistic Expectations

There are many reasons why workshops such as this are not more common. One of them is financial, of course. The director flew coast to coast and stayed two nights in the hotel, and was paid only the smallest honorarium—it was clearly a labor of love for him. The schola saved money by using the resources at cpdl.org. But even there, the suggested tuition contribution of \$30 per singer did not cover all the costs of lunch, copying, and many other expenses, to say nothing of the organizers' time or the time of those in the St. Cecilia Schola who were so dedicated to this project. So, no, a workshop such as this is not and probably cannot be remunerative for anyone. But nonetheless, it profited us all in so many ways.

Another point has to do with attitude and approach. In the rocky waters of Catholic music debates since the 60s and 70s, there has been a great deal of bitterness on all sides. But when it comes to discovering this wonderful tradition now forty years after the Council's call for liturgical reform, it is time to move beyond invective toward constructive work. We all have far too much to do by way of teaching ourselves and others in our parishes how to sing this music, organizing scholas and lectures and finding ways to practice and sing.

Once new scholas are in place in parishes of all shapes and sizes, working and singing, and embracing Gregorian chant and polyphony as an act of faith, hope, and love, who can doubt that the beauty of the music and the grace of God will assist to make the tradition come alive again and sweep through Catholic culture with all its transforming power?
