



TOP STORIES

St. Cecilia Smiles: A Feast of Liturgical Chant

By Arlene Oost-Zinner and Jeffrey Tucker
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Washington, June 29, 2004 (CWNews.com) - When did you last hear the Psalm at Mass sung in Gregorian chant? Or pray after communion while listening to a 16th century motet by Orlando di Lasso? Or sing a Kyrie in the style that the whole Western church adopted from the earliest centuries? If you happened to be at the National Shrine in Washington, D.C., the 4th week in June, such beautiful sounds were everywhere to be heard.

Catholic singers, choral directors, and organists had gathered for the Liturgical Music Colloquium XIV, this year's annual meeting of the [Church Music Association of America](#) and the Ward Center of Catholic University. Attendees included directors of music at several Cathedrals and many parishes, as well as lay chant enthusiasts and interested learners from the age of 20 to 80. Attendees sang public liturgies every day in the ancient style in one of the many chapels at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

These liturgies were the tangible result of daily workshops, rehearsals, and lectures where chant and sung Mass settings studied and practiced during morning and afternoon, under the leadership of renowned choral teachers. The purpose of this full immersion in sacred music was not performance as such but rather a demonstration of the means by which Catholic liturgy can recapture its solemnity and beauty in our times.

Most people know that chant and choral music in the style of Palestrina were once integral to Catholic worship. But for Catholics over 60, it has most likely been 40 years since this music has been experience as part of worship. Most young Catholics have never experienced its timeless quality.

The conference introduced the chant tradition (English and Latin) to attendees who had no previous exposure. It offered more advanced training in singing the parts of the Mass that usually either spoken or overlooked altogether. Alongside chant, the full choir sang traditional hymns, motets by di

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Lasso, Durufle, Sweelink, and debuted new Mass settings by two members of the faculty.

Though an annual event, this year's events were buoyed by the appearance of a new chirograph on sacred music issued by John Paul II. This document, which holds magisterial status, calls for greater attention to stylistic integrity in liturgical music, and clearly distinguishes sacred music from music that is stylistically inappropriate for liturgy. Sacred music possesses a sense of prayer, dignity, and beauty, writes the Pope: "not all forms of music can be considered suitable for liturgical celebrations."

The meeting was organized by the Association's president, Fr. Robert A. Skeris, musician and scholar who has served on the faculty at Catholic University and many other institutions. His lectures on the theology of worship, drawing on his lifetime of research and practical experience, invited those present to participate in thinking of the highest order. He reminded those present that music is a serious matter and not merely an expression of individual taste.

Gisbert Brandt of the Cathedral School in Cologne, Germany, directed the sessions on chant. In rehearsal he emphasized the need to sing chant with a sense of joy, imparting the chant with a dance-like quality, and childlike enthusiasm. Whereas chant is sometimes rendered as stern and strict, Brandt encouraged singers to treat it as a spiritually exuberant musical prayer.

Wilko Brouwers of the Netherlands directed the choral portion of the colloquium. His teaching and conducting style emphasized the need for musical humility and precision in singing for liturgy. In his own country, Brouwers, also an organist, directs both adult and children's choirs.

He noted in an interview that he was impressed by the optimism and openness he observed among the attendees, something he finds all too rarely in his own country. Although the colloquium choir was far from perfect after only four days together, he was delighted to find that it was able to achieve moments of inspiration during both rehearsals and liturgy. His new Mass setting on the theme of the "Alma Pater" Kyrie, composed especially for the conference, was sung at the final liturgy of the colloquium at the Franciscan monastery.

Scott Turkington of St. John the Evangelist of Samford, Connecticut, directed the introductory chant sessions. Here participants learned the basics of the structure of chant, as well as the technical aspects of reading medieval neumes, the specialized notation that make chant singing more intuitive. Course participants were given their first taste of singing this ancient combination of text and melody, and doing so with

authority and confidence. The experience that can lead to a lifelong devotion to the chant.

William P. Mahrt of Stanford University spoke on the integral relationship between music and the liturgy, while Kurt Poterack of Christendom College presented a paper on recent Vatican documents that place new emphasis on solemn music in the chant style. Calvert Shenk provided organ accompaniment during the liturgies and assisted at rehearsals. His new composition, the "Ferial Mass in the Fourth Mode" was debuted at the Shrine after having won a CMAA competition for new compositions.

There was a sense among all present that this conference is of critical importance right now, given the renewed interest in chant. Mainstream Catholic publishers have begun distributing music from Solesmes, progress is reported at many English-speaking seminaries, and anecdotal evidence suggests more and more parishes are making a shift toward mature music from Christian history.

Conference participants improved their skills and renewed their enthusiasm, and returned to their parishes prepared to feed this growing awareness of the need to adhere to magisterial directives.

The Church Music Association of America was formed in 1964 from the American Society of St. Cecilia (1874) and the St. Gregory Society (1913). The group's purpose is the advancement of sacred music keeping with the norms established by competent ecclesiastical authority. The CMAA publishes *Sacred Music*, the oldest continuously published music journal of any kind in the country.

Educational efforts such as the annual Liturgical Music Colloquium are aimed at assisting church musicians to maintain the highest artistic standards and preserve the treasury of sacred music, especially Gregorian chant, whilst encouraging composers to write artistically fine music. Annual membership is \$30. The CMAA has a [site](#) and a [blog](#). You can write Fr. Skeris at 722 Dilligham Ave., Sheboygan, WI 53081-6028.

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