

REGINA

Inspiring. Intelligent. Catholic.

The Secret Catholic Insider's Guide to Christmas

Christmas 2016:
The Sisters
Adorers of the
Royal Heart of Jesus
in Thanksgiving
after receiving
Holy Communion

They Have A



By Donna Sue Berry

If you have found your way into a pew for a Latin Mass, you may well have heard polyphony and chant — possibly for the first time — in exactly the place where they were intended to be heard. The soul-stirring single melody line of chant. The interwoven melodic lines of polyphony. The splendor of this music prepares Catholics in a most profound way to receive Jesus in the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. A Connecticut couple, Chris and Constanza Mueller, have recently returned from World Youth Day in Poland, where they and their children treated young Catholics to a taste of their patrimony, which for many was the first time, too. The Muellers have also started a foundation

to train singers and choirs in the music of the sacred liturgy, and to integrate polyphony and chant into the Ordinary Form of the Mass, the liturgy which most Catholics experience every weekend. Chris Mueller sat down recently with REGINA to report:

REGINA: First, for the average lay person, what is polyphony and chant?

Chris Mueller: Let's take Gregorian chant first. It's a single melody, sung by a choir of singers. Sometimes the singers sing all together; sometimes they may alternate between the two sides of the choir, or between a small number of singers followed by the full ensemble. At its essence, chant is one uninterrupted

melodic line that most typically sets the text of a verse or two from a psalm.

REGINA: What emotional reaction do people have to chant?

Chris Mueller: When people hear Gregorian chant, they recognize instinctively that this is the music of the church. It brings people peace and enables contemplation, for believers and non-believers alike.

REGINA: Why is this?

Chris Mueller: There is something about the unaccompanied human voice that is deeply stirring. The purity of a single melodic line

presenting a sacred text in a beautiful, unhurried, and non-metrical way (that is, chant doesn't have a "beat" like pop music) gives the listener — the worshiper — a chance to slow down and reflect a little.

REGINA: And polyphony?

Chris Mueller: Polyphony grew organically out of chant, as choristers started singing chants simultaneously at different pitch levels, and later began to ornament the melody and/or vary its rhythm. Then composers began to write down their own ideas, and in time polyphony blossomed into a magnifi-

cently complex and expressive (yet also tightly organized) way to give new depth to the presentation of liturgical texts.

REGINA: What emotional reaction do people have to polyphony?

Chris Mueller: It stirs our hearts and assists in our prayers. Polyphony, as chant before it, “sounds like church” to the general listener. And many people gravitate toward the rich texture of a polyphonic motet, who may not-as-readily find solace in the solemn austerity of unison chant.

REGINA: Are polyphony and chant suited for the Ordinary Form of the Mass?

Chris Mueller: Polyphony and chant are not only suitable for the Ordinary Form of the Mass; they are practically required for use in it! Quoting Vatican II: “The Church acknowledges Gregorian chant as especially suited to the Roman liturgy... it should be given pride of place in liturgical services. But other kinds of sacred music, especially polyphony, are by no means excluded from liturgical celebrations” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium 116).

REGINA: Most Catholics have no idea this is true.

Chris Mueller: And yet it is true! The church bestows upon Gregorian chant “pride of place”, that is, it is the first and most suitable musical option for the sacred liturgy; and other music may be incorporated as well,

The church bestows upon Gregorian chant “pride of place”, that is, it is the first and most suitable musical option for the sacred liturgy;

“especially polyphony.” What stronger mandate could we ask for?

REGINA: How does that work between the choir and those in the pew?

Chris Mueller: Let’s take a step back and consider the structure of the Mass as a whole. From a musical perspective, we can say that the Mass contains both Propers, prescribed liturgical texts that change for every Mass (for example, the Entrance and Communion antiphons), and the Ordinary of the Mass, that is, the parts of the Mass whose texts never vary (the “Lord have mercy,” “Holy holy,” “Lamb of God,” etc.).

The Choir is actually considered part of the congregation, but it has a special music-making task. Speaking generally, the role of the choir is to sing the Mass Propers, while the congregation (including the choir) should sing the Ordinary. Thus, at a given liturgy the congregation might sing chants for the Kyrie (“Lord have mercy”), the Sanctus (“Holy holy”), etc., and the choir could sing the more elaborate Proper chants specific to that







day. The choir might sing a polyphonic motet after a chanted proper or even as a substitute for that chanted proper (if the chant and the motet contain the same text).

REGINA: How do we know the Church wants us to sing chant at Mass?

Chris Mueller: The newest English translation of the Mass (which came into effect in Advent, 2011) contains English-language chant settings of the Ordinary, which must be included in any hymnal or missalette published since; this indicates a strong preference that congregations should chant the Mass. The complimentary role of the choir is to elevate scriptural prayers through the use of beautiful music, whether chant or polyphony.

“Polyphony certainly has a place in the Mass, most readily at Offertory and Communion, though due to its complexity, it will be the choir alone who sings it —”

In addition to the monks who crafted and perfected the church’s chants, numerous composers (Palestrina, Lassus, Isaac, and many others) wrote prodigiously to provide worthy liturgical music.

Polyphony certainly has a place in the Mass, most readily at Offertory and Communion,



though due to its complexity, it will be the choir alone who sings it — though choir and congregation experience its beauties together! The words of Pope Benedict XVI regarding the Extraordinary Form of the Mass seem equally appropriate to polyphony: “What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too” (Letter to bishops, accompanying the Motu Proprio Summorum Pontificum).

REGINA: You performed at World Youth Day in Poland?

Chris Mueller: I was the conductor of the choir & orchestra at the Mercy Centre — Tauron Arena Kraków, which held 17,000+ people. It was transformed by the Knights of

Columbus into the principal venue for English-language catechesis & liturgy at World Youth Day. My wife and children sang in the choir that I conducted. (We had a choir of 35 singers and an orchestra of eight instrumentalists.) In addition, my wife and children and I perform together as the Mueller Family Schola, and we had been asked to give two concerts in different churches in Kraków as part of World Youth Day.

REGINA: Did you have one special day/night of singing Polyphony and chant?

Chris Mueller: While all the singing was special, one event that stands out was our first Mueller Family Schola concert, at the Church of St. John the Baptist (Kościół św. Jana



Chrzyciela). The building is a large modern edifice with a particularly resonant acoustic and a 5-6 second reverb. Everything sounded so rich in there! At the end, the pastor — who was very moved by both our singing and by our efforts to encourage the use of polyphony and chant in parishes, families, and with children — had the audience (of over 100 parishioners) stand up and sing a Polish Marian hymn to us! He wanted to share with us their music, after we had shared our music with them. The concert experience was great, and that surprise ending was particularly memorable.

REGINA: What was the reaction to the World Youth Day liturgies?

Chris Mueller: We received many positive comments about the music, from priests and participants alike. I was heartened to hear so many people in the congregation singing during Mass! Bishop James Conley (of Lincoln, Nebraska) and Fr. David Friel (of Philadelphia) both wrote commendatory articles about the music at the Mercy Centre.

REGINA: And overall, what was the reaction of Catholic youth to hearing this centuries-old chant?

Chris Mueller: I think two comments sum up the music's impact: The first was from a seminarian, who said, "I've been to a lot of big Catholic youth gatherings, nationally and internationally, but



"I've never seen such a huge number of people like this so attentive and reverent during Mass. I attribute that largely to the music."

I've never seen such a huge number of people like this so attentive and reverent during Mass. I attribute that largely to the music." The second was from Catholic speaker Chris Stefanick, who was the emcee for the morning catechesis sessions, who said, "I loved how we switched from what was very much a youth event — to Liturgy. And the teens knew, this

is different than the rest of what we're doing here. That's how it should be. People often forget that young people crave solemnity, they crave something that sounds sacred — just like the rest of us! There's nothing more relevant than the transcendent."

REGINA: And how did you feel about those comments?

Chris Mueller: I always say to people that if our music helped them to pray, we're doing our job at Mass. It certainly seemed that way! And there's nothing more relevant than the transcendent. (Couldn't have said it better myself!)

REGINA: Tell us about your foundation.

Chris Mueller: Our purpose is to assist



any person, group, or institution that desires polyphony and chant in the Roman Catholic Mass. And as mentioned earlier, I conducted the music at four weekday Masses held at the Tauron Arena Kraków World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, where we included polyphony and chant in each of them. We hoped to set a sort of liturgical template, at Masses attended by thousands of young adults from around the English-speaking world! We've been consulting with a parish in Philadelphia about how they might improve and unify their music program. One of the steps under consideration is a parish visitation, where we would give a workshop (or series of workshops) on the liturgy and liturgical mu-

sic, with a particular emphasis on polyphony and chant as the centerpiece of a parish music program. My family sings polyphony and chant together as the Mueller Family Schola. We've sung Masses for the Knights of Columbus and at the Cathedral of St. Augustine in Bridgeport, CT, as well as Masses and concerts in New York, New Jersey, and throughout Connecticut. We hope that our example of a family singing together will inspire other families to do the same, and may encourage volunteer choirs to try to sing polyphony as well. In fact, we've been working with a Connecticut family to help it start up its own family schola, and we're working with a



group of families in Alaska hoping to begin a multi-family schola.

Mueller Family Schola sings polyphony & chant at Mass: there's something wonderfully connecting about working on a piece of music where every voice is important, and we experience a great joy and sense of accomplishment when we sing music together for the liturgy.

These initiatives are particularly close to my heart, since our Mueller Family Schola sings polyphony & chant at Mass: there's something wonderfully connecting about working on a piece of music where every voice is important, and we experience a great joy and sense of accomplishment when we sing music together for the liturgy. We wish these families well, and we encourage other families to do the same! We've also been contacted by an institute in Rome about helping to form their musical/liturgical life early next year. Another important facet of our mission is curating resources for people who want to get started with this music. We are developing polyphony and chant "starter kits," which



will be collections of simple chants and easy polyphony, designed around seasonal liturgies, to give new ensembles the possibility of preparing music for a Mass. Others may be interested in just the chants, or just the polyphony. We hope to guide people, so that they're not overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of music available; when they're ready to explore further, we'll point them to organizations that do a pretty comprehensive job of collecting resources, including the Church Music Association of America, Corpus Christi Watershed, and the Choral Public Domain Library.

REGINA: What is the “Mustard Seeds” initiative?

Chris Mueller: We started the “Mustard Seeds” initiative to reach out to young people of high school and college age, to stir up a desire in them for polyphony and chant at their own parish Masses. They will be spearheading a variety of social media outreach, and we've already had several Mustard Seeds online videoconferences, something we host every other month.

REGINA: What kind of media exposure have you had?

Chris Mueller: We've been blessed by a lot of media interest in our work. We've been featured on Ave Maria Radio and EWTN Radio, as well as print articles in Catholic Digest, National Catholic Register, and several other outlets. See our website for the full list of

media appearances — and we're grateful for every one of them!

REGINA: What would the future success of the Foundation look like?

Chris Mueller: If there is beautiful and reverent music at more Masses, led by a return to polyphony and chant; if more young people become aware of this wonderful treasury of sacred music, begin to long for it at their own parish liturgies, and subsequently agitate for it by talking with their clergy and/or by singing in their parish choir; if more families start singing together at home; and if people can rely on our Foundation's assistance and encouragement in these endeavors — then we will have succeeded in the first steps of reclaiming aural beauty and enriching the prayer life of our Catholic community. Click for a brief example of what such a Mass can be like.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, please visit our website:

www.polyphonyandchant.org

or email us, at

secretary@polyphonyandchant.org

R.

www.reginamag.com