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Arts

Magazine

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‘The best good in the world’: The US organisations leading a renaissance of Catholic sacred music

Anna Farrow  September 4, 2023 at 3:06 pm



Orange County – the place name conjuring images of the spray-tanned secular class splashing in the salty mist of the Pacific Ocean – may seem an unlikely place to look for signs of a renaissance in Catholic sacred music. But on a golden OC evening in late June, two events took place, eight miles from each other as the seagull flies, that point to the arrival, at long last, of renewal.

On 20 June, at Christ Cathedral, the Pacific Symphony and Chorale performed “Fiat Lux”, a choral work composed by the Scottish Catholic composer Sir James MacMillan. The work was commissioned to mark the reconsecration of the building formerly known as the Crystal Cathedral, the church home of tele-evangelist Robert Schuller and his Hour of Power broadcasts, but now owned by the Diocese of Orange. MacMillan had been in town all week, the world premiere having taken place a few days earlier at the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall.

Down the road, on the second night of a five-day sacred music conference, 75 Catholic organists, choir directors and choristers, of which I was one, gathered in the church of St John the Baptist to sing Compline.

We intoned the psalms and chanted the evocative, solemn-tone *Salve Regina*, and we performed a new composition, conducted by the composer himself: a setting of the *Confiteor* by Kevin Allen.

In 2017, both MacMillan and Allen were among the principal signatories to *Cantate Domino*, an international declaration on the state of sacred music. The statement was published in six languages and signed by over 200 church musicians, scholars, pastors and lovers of sacred music. This *cri de coeur* argues passionately “for the continued relevance and importance of traditional sacred music.”

The authors refer to the situation of sacred music as “desperate”, and list six fundamental areas of concern: the loss of an understanding of the “musical shape of the liturgy”; the embrace of secularism and secular-shaped music in the context of the liturgy; an enthusiasm and insistence in certain quarters for a kind of “renewal” not consistent with the demands of Vatican II; a disdain for tradition; unhealthy clericalism; and the widespread practice of unfair (and at times unjust) remuneration of church musicians. These expressions of concern are matched by eight positive proposals.

At the top of their list is re-affirmation of the rich heritage of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony “alongside modern sacred compositions in Latin or vernacular languages that take their inspiration from this great tradition”.

Steps, they hope, will be taken “to promote it everywhere, in every church across the globe, so that all Catholics can sing the praises of God with one voice, one mind and heart, one common culture that transcends all their differences”.

A recent Pew survey indicated that 40 per cent of US Catholics who regularly attend services think the music at church is mediocre or worse. Yet much that is good and admirable has taken place in the world of sacred music in the six years since *Cantate Domino* was published. Alongside the venerable Church Music Association of America (CMAA) smaller affiliations have been formed to pursue related projects.

The Sacred Music Symposium I attended in June, for example, was launched in 2016 as an annual event. Symposium organiser Jeff Ostrowski is both a choirmaster and composer but, crucially, he is also the president and driving force behind Corpus Christi Watershed, a comprehensive online resource of sacred music.

In addition to the organisation of the symposium, Ostrowski and his team have produced a hymnal that serves as an alternative to the standard pew-fare of US Catholic churches. The Saint Jean de Brébeuf Hymnal was published in 2018; a review on the New Liturgical Movement site describes it as a work of remarkable scholarship “which puts the fruit of that scholarship to work in a practical vehicle for opening the treasures of Catholic hymnody to the people”.

Corpus Christi Watershed is not the only new kid on the block. Two years ago, under the patronage of Cardinal Robert Sarah, the Catholic Sacred Music Project was founded “to provide spiritual and musical formation for Catholic musicians in order to effect a widespread renewal of sacred music in the Church”. The project hosted a Composition Institute in May 2023. Sir James MacMillan led the week-long conference, and the participants had their compositions performed, recorded and showcased on the EWTN cable network.

If the symposium participants and the parishes they represent are anything to go by, focusing on the traditional legacy of Catholic sacred music and on incorporating that heritage into the life of the ordinary parish has real potential for escaping the so-called liturgy wars. It may well go some way to alleviating the acrimony and pain that has ensued in the wake of *Traditionis Custodes* and subsequent rescripts since.

Tess Greco, a choir director from St Joan of Arc Parish in Arvada, Colorado, is young, wide-eyed and enthusiastic. With her background in youth evangelisation, you might expect her to be an advocate of the Hillsong-esque pop-praise style.

When I spoke with her, though, she excitedly told me how she had found Corpus Christi Watershed through a search for the Latin text of the hymn “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” and had discovered, as a bonus, the work of Kevin Allen.

Greco describes the “great” clergy and staff at her *Novus Ordo* parish as “really open to more traditional music. We are kind of stepping away from the more popular stuff that we’ve had for the last 20 years,” she says.

Charles Weaver is on the Corpus Christi Watershed team and taught chant at the symposium. Weaver is a teacher at the Juilliard School and director of music at St Mary’s Catholic Church in Norwalk, Connecticut. He explained that in his parish both forms of the Roman Rite are celebrated.

“At the *Novus Ordo* Mass, we sing all the chant Propers and all the chant Ordinary,” says Weaver. “Pretty much all the music that happens at that Mass is Gregorian chant and we do so in full confidence that what we’re doing is incorporating the vision of the Second Vatican Council as regards the liturgy.”

In the symposium keynote address, Fr James Fryar told participants that in a dark and increasingly morally confused world, “the good things you do in the choir is some of the best good in the world”.

As those participants held on to the closing notes of the beautiful setting of the *Confiteor*, they knew in their hearts that his words were true: “some of the best good in the world”.

Anna Farrow is based in Montreal and writes for the Catholic Register. To hear Kevin Allen’s Confiteor, visit <https://archive.ccwatershed.org/audio/39350-confiteor-kevin-nrm/download/> conducted by Dr. Alfred Calabrese of Texas.