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Sacred Music Resurgence at Catholic Colleges (3342)

Students are gradually becoming more receptive to the Church's beautiful teaching and practice, according to sacred-music professors.

BY TRENT BEATTIE 10/21/2013 Comments (7)

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STEUBENVILLE, Ohio — According to three notable college professors, a comeback for sacred music is well under way on many Catholic campuses. While incoming students are usually not well-versed in sacred music or the theology behind it, they are generally open to learning both. Once this knowledge is imparted, they are well-equipped to bring its beauty into parishes.

"Students enter with varying degrees of exposure to the Church's musical patrimony," observed Nicholas Will, first-year professor of sacred music at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. "Yet I've found that almost all of them, regardless of their current knowledge level, are receptive to the Church's treasury of sacred music and her teaching on the subject."

Will attributes this receptivity largely to the influence of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, whose knowledge of and love for sacred music have sparked a genuine reform in the Church. "Pope Emeritus Benedict has a refined taste for good music, especially sacred music. He was able to clearly identify worthy sacred music, and he was also able to clearly convey that message to the world through his writings, but also, and more especially, in his example as pope."

The highest form of song, as expressed in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution on the sacred liturgy, is Gregorian chant. The form, history and performance style of this centuries-old liturgical practice are taught by Will to Franciscan music majors. Despite most of them not having prior experience with the subject, they have been comfortable with learning it.

"The students with the greatest exposure levels enjoy learning even more about the art, and those with lesser exposure quickly recognize the timeless beauty and universality of Gregorian chant, as well as its relevance today," Will explained. "Not only do students accept Gregorian chant as a legitimate expression of liturgical music, but they appreciate why the Church values it above all other musical forms. This mindset is remarkable when one considers the state of liturgical music even 10 years ago."

Now, Will deeply appreciates the fact that he can lead others in the exercise of this art form: "While the beauty of our art is witnessed anywhere it is performed, its most fitting place is in the liturgy itself. It's so significant that we are teaching students about sacred music, not just from the standpoint of a hobby, but as an integral part of their lives in the Church. The Church's musical patrimony is an essential part of the liturgy, and the liturgy is a living, breathing entity."

Will takes this to heart while leading the *Schola Cantorum Franciscana* and serving as director



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Ave Maria, Gratia Plena

Susan Treacy, former professor of music at Franciscan University, brought her expertise to Ave Maria University in Naples, Fla., in 2005. In addition to teaching at Ave Maria, which is now located in Ave Maria, Fla., she is a board member of the **Church Music Association of America** and a regular contributor to the *St. Austin Review*.

Reviewing her many years of teaching, Treacy initially found that most students, even those with previous parish music experience, were not aware of what the Church has to say on the topic of sacred music. However, a greater number of them are now more open to this than in the past.

"When I first started at Franciscan, not too many students knew what the Church teaches about sacred music," Treacy said. "Gradually, that number increased, with more of them becoming aware of the Church's glorious musical traditions. This knowledge was usually accompanied by an appreciation of what the Church teaches, but not always."

Some students, even after their understanding has increased, are still attached to their own favorite forms of music. Treacy said: "More students are now aware of what the Church teaches about sacred music, but some of them flatly disagree with it. I'm not sure they'd feel so free to disagree with the Church on other topics, but with music, there's an emotional attachment that's hard to break."

While results can sometimes be swift, Treacy knows that "converts" to sacred music can take time. One illustration of this is a student who graduated from Franciscan around the year 2000. She had learned of Gregorian chant and sacred polyphony in college, but didn't have much of an interest in them. Just last year, however, the student, who is now directing a children's Gregorian chant schola that includes some of her own children, contacted Treacy to thank her for what she had imparted years before.

Treacy is able to witness more immediate results with her **Women's Schola Gregoriana** at Ave Maria. The schola provides music for the extraordinary form of the Mass on most Sundays during the school year. Many members have been in the schola for several semesters, and this fall has seen the entry of new members with a good deal of previous chant experience in their own parishes.

"I am very blessed to have such a great group of young ladies," Treacy enthusiastically stated. "They're bringing the beauty of grace to the lives of others through the liturgy. It's so pleasing to see 'the beauty that saves' implemented on a regular basis in our lives. Music has a wonderful way of opening us up to grace, so that we become more like Mary, the first disciple, who is full of grace."

Music of Christendom

Kurt Poterack is a professor of sacred music at Christendom College in Front Royal, Va., and editor at large of the journal *Sacred Music*. In his 15 years at Christendom, he has found most students to be fairly uninformed about, but receptive to, the Church's sacred music teaching and practice.

"For the most part, at my institution, new students are receptive to but not well-versed in the Church's teaching on sacred music," Poterack stated. "Even if they come from a parish with a good sacred music program, their taste for that music is still instinctual and not yet reasoned out."

Poterack sees this as a plus, because he believes experiencing beauty is necessary before a rational discussion of it can take place: "A liberal arts college has the responsibility to train students in the contemplation and, ultimately, the rational discussion of music and of all the arts. However, the experience of beauty has to come first, which means the development of tastes for higher things precedes their discussion. Otherwise, students are ill-equipped to discuss things they don't know well."

In this same vein, Poterack believes the best argument for Gregorian chant is the actual demonstration of it.

After repeated exposure has occurred, a rational discussion of it can enter into the picture. Even though some are open to arguments of obedience ("The Church teaches this; therefore, we should do it"), he sees the continual experience of higher things as the best way to begin the process of appreciating those things.

After his work and that of his colleagues, Poterack has been able to witness the departure of well-equipped music minors (there is no music major available at Christendom) to parishes

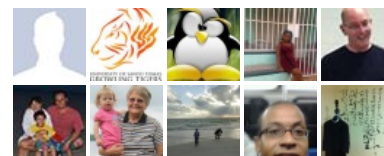
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across the country. This is what he enjoys most about teaching: "My biggest joy is seeing my students go on after graduation to be involved in parish music programs, sometimes directing. They are part of a new liturgical movement which is aimed in the direction of a more traditional liturgy."

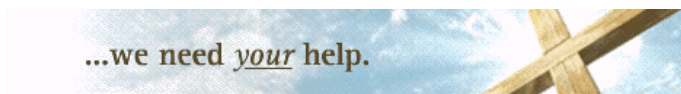
This movement has influenced and been influenced by, sacred-music programs at colleges. The symbiotic relationship has resulted in what Poterack calls "a real explosion in the number of organizations, publications and conferences that embrace the Church's musical tradition."

He cites the resurgence of the once-dormant Church Music Association of America, the publication of the [Adoremus Hymnal](#), [St. Michael Hymnal](#), [St. Edmund Campion Hymnal](#) and the sacred music from the [Society of St. John Cantius](#) and the [Benedictines of Mary, Queen of the Apostles](#), as examples of a renewal that "would have been unthinkable 20 to 30 years ago."

Poterack is grateful for the advances in sacred music, and he is very hopeful for the future: "We've made noteworthy progress, and I think as long as we stay focused and promote sacred music with charity, it will not only continue to grow in popularity at colleges, but it will become the accepted norm once again in parishes."

Register correspondent Trent Beattie writes from Seattle.

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Posted by Jeremy on Tuesday, Oct 22, 2013 8:41 AM (EDT):

It is a shame the article did not examine the sacred music program at the College of Saint Mary Magdalen, a program including the entire student body and well-known throughout southern New Hampshire.

Posted by Stephen Trost on Tuesday, Oct 22, 2013 12:41 PM (EDT):

Nothing moves my heart more than hearing a pipe organ accompanying a choir singing traditional Catholic music such as Holy God We Praise Thy Name. We have been force-fed banal music for more than 40 years now. First it was the guitars with Ray Repp, then it was bongos and now it is piano music. I will only attend Mass in a church that exclusively uses the organ and uses the Worship Hymnal. The years of polka masses, folk masses and dancing at mass are hopefully but a bad memory!

Posted by Magdalene on Tuesday, Oct 22, 2013 2:44 PM (EDT):

Hey, I am in my 50s and have been denied my musical patrimony. If I never hear "Gather us In" or "Sing to the MOuntains" again it will be too soon! I long for sacred music and not pop tunes.

Posted by Anon on Tuesday, Oct 22, 2013 5:18 PM (EDT):

I don't want the usual music our churches have to use to satisfy the "music police." Sunday night our parish hosted an evening for young people. The music rocked! It was greatly appreciated by the young people. I would like to see more contemporary music in church including rock gospel and hispanic. For the record, I am 86.

Posted by Thrift Store Mama on Wednesday, Oct 23, 2013 11:17 PM (EDT):

I'm delighted to hear of this supposed resurgence in sacred music. I generally prefer a good Marty Haugen (or Haas or Foley) song and even better yet if accompanied by a piano, acoustic guitar and a light tambourine. But of the many beautiful things about our blessed Church is the diversity of "worship styles." For although I call myself a "guitar playing, hand holding, swinging and swaying" sort of Catholic, I'm signed up for a beginning Gregorian chant group! Aren't we fortunate to be part of such a diverse Church!

Posted by WSquared on Friday, Oct 25, 2013 2:47 PM (EDT):

Anon, those advocating pop music in our parishes have long functioned as the self-appointed "music