

Tridentine Community News

August 31, 2008

New Professional Choir for St. Josaphat

Those who attend the Tridentine Mass at Windsor's Assumption Church are blessed to enjoy a full professional choir every Sunday. This choir has a number of polyphonic and Chant Masses in its repertoire. The quality of performance is impeccable, and arguably produces the finest Chant-focused sacred music heard in metropolitan Detroit, dependably heard almost every Sunday of the year. Invited to sing at London, Ontario's St. Peter's Seminary and on special occasions for the Flint Tridentine Mass, this group's reputation is spreading.

Following this example and at the initiative of St. Josaphat and Assumption Tridentine music director Wassim Sarweh, and with the approval of Fr. Borkowski, St. Josaphat has now formed its own professional choir. The volunteer singers who have comprised St. Josaphat's choir thus far will continue in this expanded effort. The new choir is preparing to debut on one of the Sundays in September.

Exactly what is a "professional" choir? It is one where the lead singers for each part (SATB, or Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) are professional singers, people with formal training in voice. The professionals are selected for their ability to sight read music, sing precisely in unison, on key, at the proper tempo, and at the appropriate volume level to fill the space. Some of these individuals earn their livings from music and are paid for their services. This imposes an obligation on those individuals to attend each week, a commitment that cannot reasonably be asked of volunteers. The professionals' predictable presence allows the music director to schedule with confidence more challenging selections which demand experienced lead voices in each part.

After 17 years of organizing Tridentine choirs on both sides of the river, it has become apparent that no volunteer program can match the versatility of one involving professionals. This is not to denigrate the role of volunteer singers; indeed, without them, a choir can sound thin. Volunteers round out the sound, learning from the leads without the pressure of having to lead themselves. The result is a richer sound, and a choir that can undertake a broader repertoire as singers' skill level grows. This structure also helps today's volunteers become tomorrow's professionals.

As at Assumption, it is our intention that the St. Josaphat Choir sing every Sunday. Not everyone in the St. Josaphat congregation attends every week; frequency, as well as quality, of performance allows this effort to reach the maximum number of people.

Professional Choirs of Note

While we are on the subject of professional choirs, it is worthwhile to make mention of some of North America's most prominent choirs. Previous columns have made mention of the Boston Archdiocesan Choir School at St. Paul's Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a choir that represents the very best of the best. Boys, and men who accompany them, must audition for these highly sought-after positions. Unfortunately, they do not yet perform for an Extraordinary Form Mass.

Cantóres in Ecclesia is a Portland, Oregon-based choir under the direction of Dean Applegate. Formed in 1983, this large group sings each week for the Novus Ordo Latin Mass at St. Stephen Church in Portland on Saturday evenings, and on occasion for Tridentine Masses in the region. They just put on the weeklong William Byrd Festival, during which a variety of Latin Masses, Ordinary and Extraordinary Form, were offered. Cantóres has made several CDs and has even spun off a women's choir, In Muliéribus, which also performs sacred music. Listen to samples of Cantóres' rich sound at their impressive web site, www.cantoresinecclesia.org.

Connecticut is a busy place. The Stamford Schola Gregoriána, who sing for the Ordinary Form Mass at the Church of St. John the Evangelist, is the brainchild of peripatetic chant and organ expert Scott Turkington. See www.stamfordschola.org. Norwalk's St. Mary Schola Cantórum (www.stmarynorwalk.net), under the direction of David Hughes, sings at the church's 9:00 AM Tridentine Mass. The St. Gregory Society Schola Cantórum at Sacred Heart Church in New Haven, under the direction of Britt Wheeler and Nicholas Renouf, is comprised of twenty professional members, many of whom have obligations at other churches on Sunday mornings, but who take advantage of the Tridentine Mass' 2:00 PM time to sing together the music they enjoy the most. See www.saint-gregory.org. Like many professional choirs, St. Gregory's releases CDs.

Palo Alto, California's St. Ann's Choir kept the flame going for Gregorian Chant during the dry years of the 1970s and early 80s. Formed in 1963, and since 1964 under the direction of oft-interviewed Stanford University Professor William Mahrt, this choir technically is not professional, yet has acquired a reputation as a training ground for those interested in forming choirs elsewhere. See www.stannchoir.org.

The Schola Cantórum San Francisco, originally the choir for the Ordinary Form Latin Mass at the National Shrine of Saint Francis of Assisi, is now a touring and teaching group. Impressive sound examples are available on their web site, www.scholasf.org.

Many of the choirs in London, England employ professional singers, in large part because of the plethora of interested talent in that cultural capital. The churches of St. James, Spanish Place; St. Mary, Cadogan Street; Immaculate Conception, Farm Street; Our Lady of Victories, Kensington; the Brompton Oratory; and Westminster Cathedral, among others, demonstrate the embarrassment of riches in Catholic liturgy in this city.

Most of the above choirs sing for Novus Ordo Latin Masses, a form of Holy Mass that is rather rare and getting rarer as an increasing number of sites convert to the Extraordinary Form. Perhaps there is an opportunity for a professional choir devoted to the Tridentine Form to step to the forefront with a national reputation. Why shouldn't that be (one of) ours? That kind of effort needs more than just singers; we need volunteers with talent in publicity, web and graphic design, audio recording, and so on. Are we up to the challenge? E-mail the below address if you have any thoughts on this front.

Comments? Ideas for a future column? Please e-mail info@windsorlatinmass.org. Previous columns are available at www.windsorlatinmass.org