



PHOTOGRAPH CREDIT

The National Shrine in Washington DC is on the eve of its 50th anniversary. **Malcolm Bruno** steps inside a grand place of worship with ambitious musical plans

Gateway to spirituality

On 20 November 1959, after protracted delays since its conception in the early 1900s, the largest sacred space in North America finally opened its doors. The Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception is the centre of Catholic liturgical life in the USA. Like its Protestant cousin, the National Cathedral, also in Washington, it was conceived as a sanctuary and a place of pilgrimage. A tour of the building gives an overwhelming sense of the very personal devotion it evokes despite its vast scale – the upper church alone accommodates more than 7,000 congregants. The nave and sanctuary are enormous, the latter having 15 apses; in addition there are over 60 chapels, all expressing Marian devotion from different cultures across the globe. Five Masses are held on Sunday, and six on all the other days. Additional Masses and special events abound; small wonder the building is open 12 hours a day.

The mammoth task of providing music in the liturgy falls to the Shrine's director of music Peter Latona and his assistant Daniel Sañez. The Shrine Choir, comprising 24 of the best young professional singers in the Washington area, provides the regular fare of the ordinary and propers at Sunday midday Mass. 'Beyond the weekly big Eucharist,' says Latona, 'there are other feasts and special events – like a papal visit – all with choral music. But on a daily basis, four of the six Masses in the crypt are with cantor and organ. And this year we will introduce a Schola to sing vespers in the crypt church during Advent and Lent.' Importing additional voices at Christmas and Easter gives the choir scope to sing Viennese Masses with chamber orchestra.

Also contributing to the worship are four organs: three by Möller, and a two-manual tracker action Schudi in the more intimate setting of the crypt – it was here that Pope Benedict celebrated Evening

Prayer with the bishops and cardinals of the US hierarchy during his visit in April 2008. The Möllers are located in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, the west chancel and the south gallery. This last instrument especially is on a scale to match the hugeness of the building, with 9,393 pipes and 172 ranks. A rewiring operation in 2003 enables both the west chancel and south gallery organs to be played from either console. The south gallery instrument has been played by an illustrious line of organists including Maurice Duruflé, Virgil Fox and, in 1972, Olivier Messiaen giving the world premiere of his *Méditations sur le mystère de la Sainte Trinité*. The latest addition to this list is the UK's Jeremy Filsell, who in September took up the post of the Shrine's principal organist.

Latona's mission is more than planning services and devotional concerts; it reaches to the core of music's fundamental role in the church. 'It began a long time ago,' he says. 'I knew at 11 years old, as an altar boy, that I wanted to play an active role in the creation of music for liturgy. I am fortunate to do that here, both on a "parish church" daily scale and in epic proportions for Sundays, special Feast days and other major occasions.' His background explains his bespoke musical tailoring. After an undergraduate music degree at Bucknell College in Pennsylvania, he spent a year as a private student of Langlais in Paris, absorbing the French tradition, especially improvisation. He then undertook a Master's at Yale School of Music, and a doctorate at the Manhattan School of Music where he continued to explore his sense of music for liturgy in a study of organ improvisation and pedagogy in the US.

Many church musicians find the demands of liturgical structure a challenge to their ancillary performing aspirations. Not so Latona: 'Although I am an organist and conductor, I see myself first and foremost as the creative force behind music at the

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service of liturgy.' Its dramatic/musical architecture after all echoes the physical presence of a great building, I contend. 'And as the Roman tradition is text-rich,' adds Latona, 'with all the antiphons, propers and readings specific to each day of the year, there is plenty to draw on. For me, great church musicians like Bach and Messiaen are the huge pillars of our art: we must enjoy the "trickle down" effect in our own work, while never losing the sense of their passion and devotion as well as attention to the detail of text and liturgical function.'

Latona enjoys performing – especially the big, French Romantic repertoire – both at the Shrine and in concert elsewhere, and is delighted with the recent appointment of his British colleague: 'He will affirm our position as a major centre of musical excellence among cathedrals and basilicas around the world and act as a musical ambassador for the Shrine. More importantly, having him on board will give me the time for composition and to design liturgies and develop our own choral tradition. And I don't mean writing organ symphonies or oratorios, but small-scale functional music that enhances the liturgy.'

'My parents are from Italy and I grew up in New Jersey in their Italian delicatessen,' explains Latona, 'so I love to prepare Italian food – but not with a cookbook. I know the Italian gastronomic traditions, and when I cook for my family and friends, I start with the ingredients on hand or the day's requirements. The relation between music and liturgy is the same: music opens up the sacred, so my job as a church musician is to enrich and embellish the ordinary of the Mass and its propers to each Sunday or feast day as I would a meal of many courses. Setting an antiphon, making an organ accompaniment to a plainsong hymn, creating an interlude, or writing a communion motet: these are small items in them-

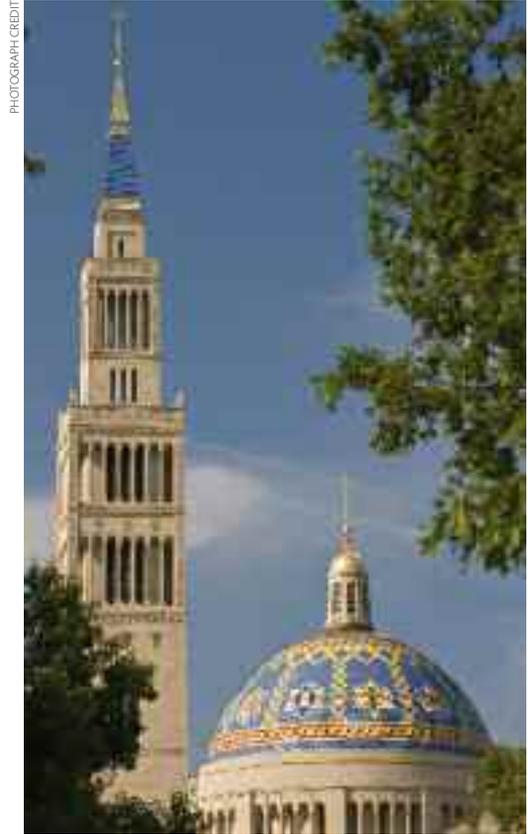
elves, but added together in the right proportions they comprise the banquet – they make it possible.'

Whenever one meets a musician from the Roman Catholic world it is only a matter of time before the historic demarcation line of Vatican II is mentioned. The Tridentine rite that it displaced included a treasury of European sacred music, from Pope Gregory onwards – Hildegard, the heyday of Sistine Chapel polyphony, Monteverdi and the 'seconda prattica', music from the Iberian peninsula, the chapel royal at Versailles and the great polyphonic tradition of the monasteries of pre-Reformation Britain. 'The vastness of this repertoire is overwhelming,' says Latona, 'which is what makes Westminster Cathedral in London so unique. Although essentially new, it was

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able over the last century to capitalise on the strengths of the Anglican collegiate/cathedral tradition, while reaching back to the pre-Reformation period. We lost all that with the call of Vatican II for a liturgy that was not “remote” from the congregation. There was no thought of how amateur musicians would find suitable music in the vernacular, and music that might not be sung by a choir or cantor but by the congregation. Being “participatory” doesn’t mean reducing music to a lowest common denominator: music beyond all else helps a person to enter the sacred.’

Latona’s stance is not new. Bach was criticised by his successors after 1750 for writing an elitist music that was not able to be participatory. The motet, they said, was preferable to the solo cantata for spiritual edification. Since then, the Protestant world has often seen music as a corporate activity through simple anthems or hymn singing. ‘But music in worship must be more than this,’ says Latona. ‘If music is the gateway to spirituality, we must expect something that doesn’t fit in the familiar acoustic of our living rooms and sound like the “easy listening” background music in a mall or the sort of pop music that you’d hear while driving.’

So what precisely can one hear at the Shrine? Latona answers in a nutshell, ‘My taste ranges from Taverner to Tavener!’ Pushed further, he confesses

that Renaissance polyphony occupies much more than 50 per cent of the repertoire: ‘But I am very interested in 20-century music, and we have Rachmaninoff, Tavener, Górecki, Pärt and MacMillan all regularly on offer. We’re also not shy about Anglican music like Stanford and Howells, or the Darke Service in A minor.’

Occasionally there are special tours, like the invitation to perform in Rome this November in the Festival Internazionale di Musica e Arte Sacra. ‘We recorded in 2005 in Santa Maria Maggiore,’ says Latona. ‘Perhaps we will be back there this year. It’s such a revelation to be singing in the choir stalls where Palestrina led his singers. It transforms our sense of music’s place in prayer or the celebration of the Mass.’

With Filsell joining him ‘as part of the team on the shop floor’ as well as his excellent choir, Latona sees his work at the Shrine as a resource with regard to publications and performance for parishioners and musicians who visit from across the world. Together with his colleagues in America and abroad who work toward liturgical restoration, Latona envisages a forward-looking musical future grounded upon a deep commitment to the heritage of more than ten centuries – in short, revitalised with music of an artistic level worthy of the sacred liturgy. ■
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