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SCHOLA SAINTE CÉCILE: “We Sing of God Alone and for God Alone, Through the Traditional Liturgy.”

In this New Liturgical Movement and Paix Liturgique exclusive, Henri Adam de Villiers, director of the Schola Saint Cécile, presents the rich musical program the Schola will sing during the forthcoming international Summorum Pontificum pilgrimage in Rome, 22-25 October 2015. The Schola Sainte Cécile is a choir made up of parishioners at Saint-Eugène in Paris, where the traditional liturgy has been the order of the day since 1985 alongside the modern liturgy.

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Choir director, Henri Adam de Villiers.

1) Good morning, Henri! For the second time since 2013, the Schola Sainte Cécile comes to Rome with the Summorum Pontificum pilgrimage. What explains this loyalty?

Henri Adam de Villiers: It is an honor, and at the same time a great joy, for us to come back to Rome with the Summorum Pontificum pilgrimage. It's an honor because this international pilgrimage gathers many faithful from the four corners of the world who are coming to give thanks to God at the See of Peter. By participating in this pilgrimage, the faithful are coming to show how the traditional liturgy is a path of conversion and nourishment for their lives as Christians. That means that we have to give the best of ourselves to make the offices and the Masses even more beautiful and magnificent, more “extraordinary” than they ordinarily are the rest of the year!

It is also a great joy because singing in the chief places of our Catholic faith is, quite frankly, deeply moving. I remember being on the verge of tears two years ago in the Vatican Basilica: that's how intense the feeling was, singing the holy Mass near St. Peter's tomb.

2) Would you tell us the program you are going to present during the pilgrimage?

Henri Adam de Villiers: Gregorian chant will have pride of place, and of course it will be sung in toto at each of the Masses where we'll be singing, as is our usual practice.

As for the polyphonic offerings, the program is unusual. We intend to take advantage of the several tribunes available in Roman churches to present works involving several choirs (as we had done two years ago) according to a technique called “cori spezzati,” i.e. “broken choirs”: the choristers take their places in several different tribunes and answer each other, sometimes quite dynamically, which produces stunning acoustical effects. This use of “cori spezzati” flourished in Rome from the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century.

That is how we shall sing Vespers and Benediction at Trinità dei Pellegrini, with three choirs, this 22 October.

But it is especially during the Pontifical Mass on Friday 23 October that we'll deploy this multiple-choir repertoire, taking advantage of the exceptional acoustics and numerous tribunes of Santa Maria in Campitelli church. That's where we'll sing Antoine Charpentier's Mass for 4 choirs (H.4), one of his masterpieces. It is rarely put on because of its difficulty: 16 real voices and instruments! There are some indications that Charpentier may have composed this Mass while at Rome in

his youth, for “Roman bargemen” (!). He unquestionably discovered this polychoral repertoire in the Eternal City: his manuscripts contain a copy of another four-choir Mass by a Roman composer, Francesco Beretta, who was the Vatican choirmaster and whom Charpentier would have met during his years of training in Rome.

To accompany this four-choir Mass by Charpentier, we’ll sing three two-choir motets besides:

**Beati estis*, with the text of the eighth beatitude, by Peter Philips, an English priest who was exiled to Rome in the seventeenth century because of his fidelity to the Catholic faith (he was the choirmaster of the English College in Rome)

**Vox Domini* by Eustache du Caurroy, choirmaster of French King Henry IV [reigned 1589-1610] and fervent promoter of multiple-choir polyphony in France

**Omnes gentes plaudite manibus* by Guillaume Bouzignac (this will probably be the first time this eight-voice piece is executed since the seventeenth century).

The acoustics at St. Peter’s of Rome, where we’ll have the joy of singing the Mass of Saint Raphael Archangel on 24 October, are more difficult to be sure.

Nevertheless we’ll sing *Angeli Archangeli*, a great two-choir motet by Jean Veillor, choirmaster of Louis XIV during the latter’s minority, and the splendid *Pange Lingua* by Michel-Richard de Lalande, another of Louis XIV’s royal choirmasters.

This year we’ll be accompanied by two sackbuts, the Renaissance and Baroque ancestor of the trombone.

3) *The Schola is a choir made up of laymen, whose productions hold their own among professional choirs. What is the secret of your harmony?*

Henri Adam de Villiers: Well, there’s no mystery to it, really: we sing of God alone and for God alone, through the traditional liturgy. Now this liturgy is demanding: one cannot just do whatever, and personal subjectivity must take a back seat, because one must above all follow the path of a centuries-old tradition of sacred music. The traditional liturgy is demanding, but this also means that it is a true school in excellence that draws us upwards and makes us give the best of ourselves. That is why this liturgy has begotten so many artistic wonders throughout history, not only in the realm of music, but also in the other arts, notably architecture. Rome is particularly well served in these wonders. I believe that our choristers—who are only simple parishioners—are very sensitive to that aspect: their generous personal investment is an enthusiastic response that aims to measure up to the traditional liturgy’s inherent beauty. God is the Sovereign Good and the Sovereign Beautiful—and the liturgy is a foretaste of His glory, an epiphany, Heaven on earth! So mediocrity can’t be allowed!

My work as director at the Schola Saint Cécile has above all consisted in schooling myself in the great tradition of western sacred music, which itself can only be fully grasped by a good knowledge of the liturgical and musical tradition of the Christian East. We have the joy of performing works from the great repertoire of western sacred music in the exact setting for which they were created, whereas most often they are only heard at concerts. When they are ordered to their true end, which is to glorify God, these works fully take on their whole meaning, whereas they are tragically amputated of their true dimension when they are heard in any setting but the liturgy. We bring back to life marvelous forgotten works that are otherwise sleeping in the public library stacks, and we regularly stage original liturgical projects, such as singing the Mozarabic rite in Toledo or the Ambrosian rite in Milan. This can only motivate our choristers!

Lastly, I believe that making music together forms deep personal bonds. And singing for the Lord adds an extra dimension, a dimension of spiritual communion: we share a whole lot more than musical notes!

>>> Check the website of the Summorum Pontificum pilgrimage and support the Schola by buying their ultimate CD.