

THE LITURGICAL SINGER

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YEAR OF MERCY

A CANTOR TAKES A CHANCE

THOMAS STEHLE

Until that Sunday morning in mid-August, Rome had been its usual sweltering self for weeks, with Romans fleeing the city for the coasts and tourists scurrying to find more *gelati* to savor in whatever shade they could find. But this day was different. The morning brought a fresh, cool breeze that inspired the locals to roll up their awnings, open their windows, and draw back their draperies to let out the stale conditioned air they'd been living with for the last five weeks. You could see the relief of the breeze in every face as people made their way to the cafés and bakeries and even to church.

Giulia had just completed her second Mass as the cantor in her parish on the border of Trastevere and the Jewish Ghetto, two neighborhoods just south of the Vatican. She was meeting friends in a few hours for a midafternoon *pranzo* where they would all undoubtedly commiserate about being left behind in the hot city. She had just enough time to grab a book and find a bench in her favorite park, the Villa Doria Pamphilj along the Via Aurelia Antica. She especially liked it in August, when so many Romans were out of town and few tourists had this park on their itineraries.

One of the quietest spots with plenty of shade was in a grove of umbrella pine trees on a hill overlooking a soccer field. The field was often the practice site for the local Trastevere semi-professional team, but in August it was available for pick-up games for the young local footballers. Today there wouldn't be cheering crowds to disturb her while she caught up on her summer reading, just the players calling out to each other on the field.

She had just finished an older novel by Umberto Eco

IN THIS ISSUE

Welcome to what I hope is another inspirational issue of *The Liturgical Singer*! In each issue, we attempt to help with formation along your journey as a liturgical singer. We start this issue with the second of two articles that focus on mercy as we conclude this special year proclaimed by Pope Francis. Thomas Stehle has a unique perspective on both mercy and Pope Francis: He coordinated the Papal Mass in Washington, DC, last summer.

In this issue, we continue to study the psalms and connect human emotion to those historic words. We explore Psalms 146, 72, and 27, which will be proclaimed during the months of November, December, and January. We contemplate our responses to these psalms and how they influence us and our ministry.

Singers use their body as their instrument, but we do not always take good care of our instrument. So we continue our series on the "The Singer as Vocal Athlete" with Dr. Sandra Fico Charni's article.

Thomas DeLessio writes about a group of often-misunderstood individuals in his article, "Middle School Voices in Parish Choirs." Whether you are a choir member, cantor, or director, take some time to read the article in order to appreciate this special group of singers!

Dan Mahoney helps us to understand the human element of ministry. Many liturgical singers serve their parish for many years. Dan's article, "What Makes you 'Tick'" may be thought-provoking and help you minister to many people!

Psalm 122 is the prescribed responsorial psalm for Sunday, November 20, this year (Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe). Challenge yourself, especially on days when you are feeling overwhelmed or burdened, to pray these words: "Let us go rejoicing to the house of the LORD."

In Peace,
Mary Lynn Pleczkowski
Editor, *The Liturgical Singer*

the previous week and decided to take along a short book that her pastor had given her for Easter, called *Il Nome di Dio è Misericordia (The Name of God Is Mercy)*—a collection of interviews given by Pope Francis about the central theme of his papacy. She was afraid that it might be a bit of dry theology and resisted picking it up for months. But she thought she should take a chance on getting motivated about the Year of Mercy before it closed at the end of the church year.

As she approached her favorite bench, she saw an older priest in a black cassock and broad-brimmed summer hat watching the game. She thought twice about sitting beside him and risk getting caught up in a conversation that would never end. But the next bench had a small family and a dog, and the last bench in the grove had someone stretched out for an afternoon nap. So she took a chance and decided to sit down beside the priest, hoping only to exchange some polite nods. Before sitting down she made a point to pull out the book from her bag to let the priest know that she came here with an intention to read, not chat.

As she was preparing to sit, there was an eruption on the playing field as someone made a goal and his teammates shouted congratulations to one another. The priest was clearly enjoying the change of fortunes and didn't notice Giulia approaching. She sat down gingerly, preparing to acknowledge her seat mate when she realized that the same smiling face that greeted her from the back cover of her book was now also looking at her with the same gentle and welcome smile. She was startled and began to get up and excuse herself, intending to let Papa Francesco enjoy his brief moment of anonymity, when he tapped the seat and assured her that it was all right to sit and that he would welcome the company.

The Pope recognized the cover of the book and asked if Giulia had found anything interesting in it so far. She explained how she had acquired the book and admitted that she hadn't begun to read it. She was hoping to learn what was it about mercy that had caused him to make it the focus and hallmark of his papacy. After getting over the shock of sitting next to the Pope, Giulia tried to think of this gentle priest as the Bishop of Rome and someone who was genuinely interested in her own story and life experiences.

He asked her if there were any songs that she had sung as a cantor that helped her understand the mystery of mercy. After pondering the question, Giulia remembered a funeral in the late spring and how a verse from Psalm 103—"As a father has compassion on his children, the LORD has pity on those who fear him"—had struck her profoundly. Pope Francis admitted that for him that verse captures so much of the way Jesus described God the Father, especially in the archetypal parable of the Prodigal Son. He recalled how Pope John Paul I, when he was



the Bishop of Vittorio Veneto, told his priests that "God waits. Always. And it is never too late. That's what he is like, that's how he is . . . he's a father. A father waiting in the doorway, who sees us when we are still far off, who is moved, and who comes running toward us, embraces us, and kisses us tenderly . . ."

She also mentioned, in planning the music for the next month's schedule, she had been struck by Psalm 146 and by how it made the idea of mercy so real and concrete. "Precisely," the Pope interrupted excitedly. Quoting the psalm, he continued, "He executes justice for the oppressed; he gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the sojourners, he upholds the widow and the fatherless; but the ways of the wicked he brings to ruin." The Pope went on to link this psalm with the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew's Gospel and how each of us is called to share in the corporal works of mercy.

He continued, "We will be asked if we have helped others to escape doubt that causes them to fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness; if we have helped to overcome the ignorance in which millions of people live, especially children deprived of the necessary means to free them from the bonds of poverty; if we have been close to the lonely and the afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence; if we have had the kind of patience God shows, who is so patient with us; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer. In each of these 'little ones,'" Francis concluded, "Christ himself is present."

Giulia mentioned that beyond singing at her own parish, she was also associated with the lay Catholic Sant'Egidio community that meets for prayer every night in an old church in Trastevere. The pope smiled and mentioned that he had hoped that she been introduced to

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CANTOR

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this nearly fifty-year-old community that has been making the corporal and spiritual works of mercy real for thousands of the “little ones” in Rome and throughout the world in their peacemaking activities and work for the abolishment of the death penalty.

The pope also thanked Giulia for sharing her musical gifts, reminding her that on the night he was betrayed, before going out with his disciples to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sang a hymn. Very likely it was the great *Hallel*, whose refrain, “for his mercy endures forever,” repeats after each verse of Psalm 136 as it recounts “the history of God’s revelation.” Pope Francis continued, “To repeat continually ‘for his mercy endures forever,’ as the psalm does, seems to break through the dimensions of space and time, inserting everything into the eternal mystery of love.” The pope affirmed Giulia and her colleagues, who give Christians the words and melodies they can carry throughout their journeys of faith.

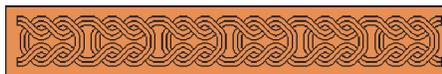
The pope then asked Giulia whether the Year of Mercy has taken hold in her own parish. She said “yes and no” but recounted a story about the Communion hymn which they had been singing frequently for the past eight months—“*Misericordes sicut Pater*,” the hymn for the Year of Mercy. A woman came up to her after Mass, she said, and told Giulia that through singing that hymn, she finally understood what it means to say “*Amen*” when she received Communion. Certain phrases—“He loved us with a heart of flesh” and “As we receive from Him, let us also give to Him hearts open to those who hunger and thirst” and, finally, “he pardons and welcomes his children”—helped this woman understand how her life can be one with Christ in being broken and poured out as Jesus was broken and poured out in his life and

at his Crucifixion.

“And,” interrupted the Pope, “aren’t all those verses punctuated by the phrase ‘*in aeternum misericordia eius*,’ the very same as the phrase from Psalm 136?” Giulia said “Yes, and for this woman, they became a life-changing experience and revelation.”

Just as the soccer game was winding down in the field in front of them, a young priest came and tapped Pope Francis on his shoulder and whispered in his ear. The pope nodded and turned to Giulia, apologizing that the time had come for him to return to the Vatican, but adding that he was very happy that she had taken a chance to sit beside an old priest and risk losing her valuable reading opportunity. Giulia assured him that she wasn’t sorry at all and hoped that he experienced the joy that she was feeling about the chance encounter. The Pope smiled that same smile that had greeted her when she arrived and gave her a hug as he got up and turned toward the path. ❧

Note. This fictional account of a meeting between a cantor and the Pope quotes the Holy Father from *The Name of God Is Mercy, A Conversation with Andrea Torielli*, translated from the Italian by Oonagh Stransky and published by Ransom House, 2016.



SINGER

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foods in moderation, but we first must nourish our bodies with adequate nutrients. Avoid junk food, fast food, high fructose corn syrup, and hydro-generated fats.

Although the voice is a highly delicate instrument, with proper care, a singer can avoid fatigue, strain, and injury and function as a top vocal athlete for many years. ❧

ABOUT THE WRITERS

Thomas DeLessio has been director of music and organist for St. Francis Cathedral as well as director of music for the Diocese of Metuchen since February 2001. He is a graduate of Westminster Choir College and has done graduate work in Liturgy at LaSalle University and Westminster.

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Mary Lynn Pleczkowski, pastoral musician, currently chairs the NPM Cantor Steering Committee, edits *The Liturgical Singer*, and serves as a clinician for NPM’s Cantor Intensive Programs.

Thomas Stehle is the pastoral associate for Liturgy and director of music ministries at St. Matthew Cathedral in Washington, DC. He was the principal director of music for the 2008 and 2015 Papal Masses in Washington and has been active in NPM since the first convention in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1978.

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