

The New York Times

Winning new Haydn style arrangement
of Haydn's Seven Last Words by José Peris Lacasa

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| MUSIC |

Soothing Sounds for the Pontiff's Ear



VATICAN CITY

IT had been a tough week for Pope Benedict XVI. Accusations about child abuse within the church continued to multiply. The focus of attack turned personal, with claims of cover-ups and quiet interventions in the Munich archdiocese decades ago, when the pope — then known as Joseph Ratzinger — was its archbishop. And if that weren't enough, there were news reports of unholy happenings in the Regensburger Domspatzen, the celebrated German boys' choir that the pope's brother, Msgr. Georg Ratzinger, directed for 30 years, though Monsignor Ratzinger was not implicated.

But as luck would have it, there was a brief respite built into the Ratzinger brothers' schedule on March 19, when the Henschel Quartet from Munich — one of the outstanding German string ensembles of the moment — performed in the pope's private apartments to celebrate his name day, the feast of St. Joseph. As the maelstrom gathered force around him, he and his brother did what they have often done through the years. Sitting side by side, they took refuge in shared music.

What the pope chose to hear for his name day was a touchstone Haydn work appropriate to the Lenten season, "The Seven Last Words From the Cross." And he chose to hear it in circumstances that, on Vatican terms, count as intimate: a 16th-century audience chamber called the Sala Clementina, which, like most of his apartments; celebrates the papal paradox of sumptuous austerity. Approached by marble stairways that recede into the distance like Renaissance exercises in perspective, it's a room for ceremony, not for comfort. But it might have been designed for concerts.

Presumably, the Henschel Quartet (which will perform at the Frick Collection on April 11 and at the Library of Congress in Washington on April 14) was chosen more for its musicianship than for its provenance. Since his election Benedict has taken care not show national bias in the Roman Curia. German origin has become almost a disadvantage when it comes to access and preferment, said Stefan von Kempis, a well-connected insider from the German language department of Vatican Radio.

"It would be easier in many ways if the pope was African," Mr. von Kempis added, "so scrupulously does he avoid any idea of favoritism."

Benedict does like to have his own around him. He has a German, Ingrid Stampa, running his household. And before Ms. Stampa ran the papal household, she was a professor of music: a strange career shift but one that signals another thing Benedict likes having around him in the Vatican.

Benedict is deeply musical and always has been. He expresses his conservative tastes — Bach, Haydn, Mozart — in surprisingly heartfelt terms. Mr. von Kempis recalls a time when John Paul II was pope, and Cardinal Ratzinger organized a Vatican performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony to commemorate some special occasion. The cardinal was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and his reputation was very much that of a hard-liner: the clenched fist behind a charismatic pontiff. Not many people knew about his love for music, so when he got up and made an insightful as well as emotion-

The pope finds refuge in a storm in a favorite composer and a quartet from back home.

ally committed speech introducing the symphony, people were taken aback.

"Most certainly he loves to talk music and to play it, which he does a lot," Mr. von Kempis said. "One of the cardinals here, Cardinal Kaspar, used to be his Vatican-room neighbor, and Kaspar says proudly that every day, he heard the piano coming through the wall and never complained. This is Christian spirit. And one has to admit of the Holy Father that he doesn't play so well.

"His brother always says, he's 'not too bad but still an amateur.' Perhaps you've seen the YouTube clip?"

There is indeed a YouTube clip of Benedict playing the piano, shakily and with mistakes so bad that he has to stop and start again. It's quite endearing, especially given the millenniums of papal history that lie behind it.

Scanning the centuries, you could easily believe that the Vatican had put more effort into suppressing music than supporting it. At times it was a great patron: hence Gregorian chant, hence the music of Palestrina. But for every musical pope, there were more who saw the performing arts as dangerous diversions from true belief. The

musical establishment in the Vatican alternately grew and shrank during the 15th and 16th centuries, sometimes waning to the point where it was far smaller than those privately maintained by individual cardinals. And its status rose or fell accordingly.

One barometer beyond the sphere of purely liturgical music was the fate of the Tor di Nona Theater, which Clement IX and Queen Christina of Sweden jointly established as Rome's first public stage for opera. But it ran only from 1671 to 1674, when Clement X closed it down. Alexander VIII reopened it in 1690. Innocent XII ordered it to be destroyed in 1697. Clement XII rebuilt it in 1732. And the game went on.

There were also popes who went to extreme lengths to stop, sabotage or otherwise confine the Roman carnival season, which was when most public music making of a secular nature took place. Clement XI declared a Holy Year in 1702 for the specific purpose of dampening festive spirits and any inclination to noise.

By the 19th century the papal record for music making was poor; and with few exceptions that remained the case through much of the 20th. The liturgical tradition in St. Peter's Basilica fossilized. Standards of performance were dismal. Occasional pontiffs like Paul VI took an interest in the visual arts but not so much in music. And with John Paul II, things hit a conspicuously low note.

"John Paul was a great man," Mr. von Kempis said, "but if he ever gets beatified, it won't be for his artistic taste. His idea of music was to have the Red Army dancing team in the Vatican audience halls. And if you look at his legacy in cultural matters, it's all quite kitsch.

"When Benedict took over, it was with some reputation for artistic awareness, helped by the association with his brother, who was famous in Germany for his work with the Domspatzen choir. And he made it known that he wanted to invigorate the Vatican's musical life, which he's doing."

Some things have been swept aside, including the large-scale pop-rock concerts that periodically ran in the Vatican at Christmas (to raise money for charities) and as adjuncts to World Youth Days (to encourage the world's youth to turn up). Benedict has strong views about pop and rock that tend not to be complimentary. And one of his first initiatives in office was to start exorcising the gently strummed guitar from its place of prominence in con-

The Henschel Quartet stands for applause from Pope Benedict XVI, his brother and the rest of the audience in the Sala Clementina, in the papal apartments.

temporary Roman Catholic liturgy.

"If you stand close to him," Mr. von Kempis said, "you see on his face when he doesn't like something. Four years ago, on his first trip to Latin America as pope, there was a popular chant that people kept singing wherever he went, and it made him very uncomfortable, as though he wanted to run away."

Pope Benedict is comfortable with plainchant and the unaccompanied vocal traditions of the Renaissance and Baroque that emerged from it. But even within those limits he demands a chaste restraint that the delegates to the 16th-century Council of Trent would have approved.

His book "The Spirit of the Liturgy," published in 2000, warns of a "threat of invasion by the virtuoso mentality, the vanity of technique, which is no longer the servant of the whole but wants to push itself to the fore." And he once told a priestly gathering at Castel Gandolfo that "the liturgy is not a theatrical text, the altar is not a stage." In other words, keep it simple: quality without flamboyance.

As things stand in St. Peter's, quality remains elusive. By general consent the Sistine Chapel Choir (which performs at papal events) sings with an unbalanced, raucous lack of finesse, not helped by the terrible acoustics in both basilica and chapel. And the organ tradition is undistinguished.

But according to Mr. van Kempis, Benedict's pontificate has so far seen an explosion of in-house Vatican concerts by eminent guests. The Henschel concert was a case in point.

Haydn's "Seven Last Words" is a string quartet originally written for church performance as an Easter meditation, with each movement responding to one of the exclamations Jesus made while being crucified. In this case it was actually a modern adaptation involving the addition of a mezzo-soprano — the German Susanne Kelling — singing Jesus' words as an overlay to the string textures.

And though it stretched some of the shorter exclamations to the threshold of endurance ("I thirst, I thirst, I thirst," Ms. Kelling sang relentlessly), it was effective. What's more, it was wonderfully performed, with all the physical, full-blooded vigor for which the Henschel players are known and an exactly secure relationship between the instruments and the voice. It's never easy fitting an outsider into the tight bond of a string quartet, especially a quartet like this, in which three

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members (the two violinists and the violist) are siblings who had huge problems in their early days finding a cellist they could get along with. This time, however, it made for a winning combination and a memorable event.

But that was not completely unconnected with the circumstances. Like so much that counts as “front of house” at the Vatican, the “backstage” of the pope’s private apartments has, for all its

privacy, a monumental grandeur. Frescoed, marbled 16th-century interiors lead from one into another, handsomely furnished with spiritual artifacts and a liberal supply of prie-dieus, should anyone feel the sudden desire to kneel and pray.

The Sala Clementina had a garish floral carpet (possibly a relic of John Paul II) but was otherwise imposing. And as the Henschel Quartet rehearsed on the morning of the concert, it was to the surreal accompaniment of

Swiss Guards padding back and forth, a cohort of major-domos in full court dress doing whatever major-domos do, and the swish of cassocks as assorted cardinals and bishops looked in on what was happening.

Among them was the small, stooped form of Monsignor Ratzinger, who sat in the front row and followed the rehearsal intently until he fell asleep (which, at 90, is forgivable). And as he slept, with an attendant nun alert beside him, issues were resolved:

A concert is evidence of how musical tastes in the Vatican have shifted yet again.

where everyone would sit, or stand; which of his many, varied thrones the pope would sit on; and whether Monika Henschel, the quartet’s violist, would or would not play in a mantilla. (As it wasn’t practical, she didn’t.)

Come the evening, the assorted cardinals and bishops multiplied to almost comic numbers: they were nearly half the audience and robbed of their significance by being quite so many, like the chorus from a Verdi opera. But at the front, on what turned out to be a modest choice of throne, was Benedict, his brother Georg beside him: snow-haired men listening to Haydn with the rapt intensity of someone listening to God.

The pope might not draw that

parallel. But he accepts that music validates divine belief: as he once told a Lutheran bishop after a performance of a Bach cantata, “Anyone who has heard this knows that the faith is true.” Presumably, the Henschel Quartet’s Haydn offered comfort at the end of the most challenging week of his pontificate so far.

No day is complete without
The New York Times.

HENSCHEL QUARTETT

Ambassadors of the SOS Children's Village since 2006

**"The Seven last words of Our Saviour on the Cross"
In a new "Haydn style" version of by Spanish Royal Court
composer José Peris for string quartet and mezzo soprano
To be performed at the Vatican in presence of Pope
Benedict XVI on March 19th**

Munich, February 2010:

When the Henschel Quartet received the honourable invitation by the Vatican to perform for Pope Benedikt XVI on his name day the Quartet decided that this should be the opportunity to introduce the new compelling Peris arrangement of Haydn's Seven Last Words. The Vatican invited the German mezzosoprano Susanne Kelling to take the voice part at this occasion.

José Peris Lacasa, composer and musical assessor to the Spanish national patrimony and organist at the Spanish Capilla del Palacio de Madrid, completed his studies in Paris with Nadia Boulanger and Darius Milhaud and in Carl Orff's "Meisterklasse für Dramatische Komposition" in Munich.

Professor Peris Lacasa has created a new version of Haydn's "Seven Last Words" in which for the first time the leading part is taken up by a solo voice, a mezzo soprano. Haydn's original work for string quartet was a commission by a capitular in Cádiz at the end of the 18th century to celebrate Good Friday in the church of Santa Cueva and became one of Haydn's most famous compositions.

In the original work from 1786, each of the seven sonatas (representing seven meditations) were introduced by a spoken explanatory Latin text accompanied by a short sermon. In **Peris Lacasa's** version, the voice assumes the part of the first violin in each of the seven sonatas, the literary phrase always corresponding with the musical phrasing. The original, the quartet composition had spoken comments by a priest with each corresponding sonata. In today's version, only the music is interpreted, and in general without intervention of a priest.

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HENSCHEL QUARTETT

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Composer **José Peris Lacasa** about the performance: "This performance in the Vatican dedicated to a fundamental work in Christian spirituality is a great honour for me. This work is the result of my dedication to sacred music since the days of my youth. Different works reflect this dedication: the *Concierto Espiritual* on a poem of Cristo de Velásquez de Unamuno, the *Te Deum* for the commemoration of the Royal Monastery of the Spanish Court, among others. I think that my sacred music is part and parcel of a tradition of Spanish polyphonists that goes back to the composers of the XVIth century".

The world premiere of Peris Lacasa's version in Madrid was performed by the **Henschel Quartet** on the Spanish court's unique Stradivarius collection to an enthusiastic reception at the Royal Court during the Holy Week in 2008, soloist was the Spanish mezzo soprano Ana María Sánchez.

On **19 March 2010**, the quintet version will be performed in presence of His Holiness Pope **Benedict XVI**, on Cardinal Ratzinger's name day, at the Vatican's Sala Clementina. The solo part for lyrical mezzo soprano will be sung by **Susanne Kelling**. After her studies at Cologne Music High School and at the Academia di Santa Cecilia in Rome, she was engaged to Munich National Opera by Zubin Mehta where she continues to perform. Susanne was recently named "Cavaliere dell'Ordine della Stella della Solidarietà Italiana" (O.S.S.I.), the highest decoration recognized to expatriates for outstanding contribution to the Italian people.

Highly acclaimed debut concerts in many of Europe's prestigious concert halls helped to firmly establish the **Henschel Quartet** as one of today's leading string quartets. Constant critical acclaim has led to an impressive international career which in 2010 will take them back to the Spanish court for a performance of Mozart & Schubert on the court's precious Stradivarius string collection and on a tour of China, Japan and the USA.

www.henschel-quartett.de

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