

*“The Renewal of Sacred Music and the Liturgy in the Catholic Church: Movements Old and New,”
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REGINALD MILLS SILBY The Westminster Connection

[Slide 1]

by

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Prologue

Good morning! My name is KEVIN VOGT. I am very happy to be with you at this conference celebrating the legacy of MONSIGNOR RICHARD SCHULER.

This morning, I would like to introduce you to another figure in the recent history of Catholic sacred music in America, one that has been all but forgotten. His name is REGINALD MILLS SILBY. Monsignor Schuler may have heard of him, and Silby is indeed remembered by a handful of former choristers and students. As their generation passes, however, so will their memories of him—unless I share his story with you. In doing so, I will also shine light on the transmission from England to North America of a great musical tradition—that of London’s Westminster Cathedral. To set the stage for the connections I hope to make, please allow me a brief personal narrative, through which I will also introduce myself to you.

Connections

Twenty years ago, I arrived in St. Paul to serve as director of liturgy and music at the magnificent cathedral we visited yesterday. **[Slide 2]** I knew of Monsignor Schuler at the time, but we never met during the three years I was here. The cathedral was a sleepy place, the parish having been decimated by highway construction during the 1960s. I was hired as part of an effort by ARCHBISHOP JOHN ROACH to restore the cathedral to prominence in the Archdiocese and in the civic community, led by a new rector, FATHER JOHN ESTREM.

Liturgy and music were the first order of business. By the end of my brief tenure in 1996, every Mass on Sunday was fully-chanted in English, according to the pastoral plan outlined in *Musicam sacram*. Gregorian propers and polyphonic music were sung at every Mass with choir. The Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer were sung every day. All of these patterns have continued to the present day. (One thing not implemented was the weekly celebration of the *Novus Ordo* in Latin— recommended to us by a local theology professor: FATHER JAN MICHAEL JONCAS!)

Our efforts were encouraged by colleagues in the Conference of Roman Catholic Cathedral Musicians, including St. Paul-native RICHARD PROULX in Chicago and GREGORY GLENN at in Salt Lake City. The Madeleine Choir School had just been formed under MONSIGNOR FRANCIS MANNION, thoughtfully prepared by Greg Glenn during a three-month sabbatical at the Westminster Cathedral Choir School. The founding of the Madeleine Choir School inspired all of us working in cathedrals at that time, and enthusiasm ran high for presentations of JAMES O'DONNELL at the 1994 Conference in Atlanta, and for the 1998 Conference in England.

Through the generous tutelage of cathedral organist ROGER BURG, I also became aware of the rich history of music in this local Church and of its principal figures:

- LEONARD SMITH—cathedral choirmaster in the 1930s and one-time protégé of Sir Richard Terry at Westminster Cathedral—the earliest known musical link between the Westminster Cathedral and the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis.
- FR. FRANCIS MISSIA, director of music at the cathedral and the diocesan seminary; mentor to Monsignor Schuler;
- RUTH DINDORF, cathedral organist several decades, who was relegated to playing an old theater organ in the West gallery until the Aeolian-Skinner was installed in 1963 because the console of the 1928 E.M. Skinner organ was inside the sanctuary gates;
- BRUCE LARSEN and his successor, RICHARD PROULX, who developed an excellent choir of men and boys at the Church of the Holy Childhood, maintained by what was essentially a choir school nested within the parochial school;
- and, finally, GEORGE CARTHAGE, who in his boy choirs at St. Mary's Cathedral in St. Cloud and Our Lady of Grace Church in Edina formed several priests and church musicians in liturgy, sacred music, and the catechism. I will show that Carthage was acquainted with Silby, suggesting at least a tenuous link between the Westminster tradition and leading Twin Cities Catholic musicians during the late 1950s and 1960s.

Seeking Silby

I first encountered the name of REGINALD MILLS SILBY in 1998 when I began my service to Saint Cecilia Cathedral in Omaha, Nebraska. **[Slide 3]** On a wall in the rectory hangs a

framed program from a 1923 song recital directed by Silby. While I suspected an association between Silby and the cathedral, I found no supporting evidence, and no one seemed to remember him. A couple of years later, I came upon his obituary in the New York Times. After some internet searches, letters and phone calls, I was soon on a plane to Philadelphia to meet Silby's daughter. She had all of his remaining scrapbooks, letters and manuscripts. Silby himself had carefully documented his career, saving press clippings, concert and liturgical programs, lecture notes, published articles and scores, together with a small collection of unpublished compositions and fragments in manuscript. The mystery of the enigmatic concert program on the rectory wall was solved. **[Slide 4]**

Reginald Mills Silby was born in London on March 8, 1884, into a low-church Anglican household.¹ His mother had Anglo-Catholic sympathies, however, and this led him to singing in the choir at St. Alban's under THOMAS ADAMS. **[Slide 5]** When his voice broke, he went the Brompton Oratory where he studied with ARTHUR BARCLAY. **[Slide 6]** It was there that his gradual conversion to Catholicism began under the influence of the Oratorians.²

When he was 17, Silby was appointed to Westminster Cathedral, **[Slide 7]** where he assisted SIR RICHARD RUNCIMAN TERRY with choir training, Tudor music research, and establishing an exemplary practice of cathedral music in the Catholic tradition. During his tenure at Westminster, Silby founded and conducted the Forest Musical Society, and taught voice at the London College of Music.

¹ Silby, "My Conversion," *Baltimore Catholic Review*, January 19, 1918.

² *Ibid.*

Apostle to the New World

Silby immigrated to America in 1909, and Terry biographer HILDA ANDREWS noted that it was through Silby's appointment to "the organistship of a church in Washington" that the fame of the Westminster Choir "went westwards to America."³ Silby indeed transplanted the Westminster tradition into several important churches in the U. S.: from St. Patrick's in Washington, DC, **[Slide 8]** to Saint Cecilia Cathedral in Omaha, Nebraska, **[Slide 9]** passing briefly through St. Patrick's in Montreal, Quebec, **[Slide 10]** to SS. Peter and Paul Cathedral in Philadelphia, **[Slide 11]** and, finally, to St. Ignatius Loyola Church in New York. **[Slide 12]** Silby's apprenticeship with Terry at Westminster turned out to be the defining experience of this life and career. **[Slide 13]**

The Westminster Tradition

The Westminster Cathedral Choir School was founded in the fall of 1901; a regular round of choral offices beginning in 1902. The Cathedral itself was opened in 1903. The resulting practice of musical liturgy was a watershed in the history of liturgical reform and restoration of *musica sacra*, and has remained something of a "gold standard" for Catholic church music in the English-speaking world.

The vision for the choral foundation of the cathedral was that of Herbert Cardinal Vaughan, Archbishop of Westminster. The restoration of Catholic polyphony was the program

³ Hilda Andrews, *Westminster Retrospect*, 104.

of the choirmaster, Terry, who had done similar work for the Benedictines at Downside Abbey. By the end of his first decade at Westminster,⁴ Terry had established a robust, daily round of fully-sung liturgy, replete with Gregorian chant emulating the practice of Solesmes, Renaissance choral music from the continent, and newly-recovered Tudor polyphony in Latin.

Transplanting the Tradition

It was in such a climate that Reginald Mills Silby was steeped in the ideals of the 1903 *Motu proprio*, to which he rigorously adhered throughout his career. He took every opportunity to speak and write about the Church's ideal of "true liturgical music." He thoroughly absorbed the polyphonic repertory, as well as Terry's programming priorities highlighting peaks in the liturgical year. In each church he served, Silby replicated the early Westminster tradition as closely as possible. **[Slide 14]** Masses and motets by Byrd, Tallis, Tavener, Tye and Weelkes took their place alongside those of Palestrina, Lassus, Lotti, Croce, Anerio, Victoria, Marenzio and Hassler. The Tallis *Lamentations of Jeremiah* and the Allegri *Miserere* marked Holy Week, and the Palestrina *Missa Papae Marcelli* was held in reserve for Christmas, Easter and Pentecost.

Silby's repertoire was understandably limited to Terry's work from Downside Abbey and his first decade at Westminster. While Silby was aware before he left in 1909 that the entire Byrd *Gradualia* was in the cathedral library, the complete cycle was not mounted at Westminster until 1910,⁵ and there is no evidence that the Byrd propers made it onto any of Silby's music lists. Likewise, even though Silby and Terry remained in touch, there is no indication that Silby

⁴ Elizabeth Roche, "'Great learning, fine scholarship, impeccable taste:' A fiftieth anniversary tribute to Sir Richard Terry (1865-1938), *Early Music*, May 1988, 233.

⁵ Hilda Andrews, 106.

incorporated contemporary compositions into his working repertoire. Terry, on the other hand, performed a host of contemporary music after 1910, works by Howells, Wood, Vaughan Williams, and others⁶—such as those by Howells, Wood, and Vaughan Williams— music that did not cross the pond to Silby.

Following Terry’s example of educating church goers and the general public with lecture-recitals featuring chant and polyphony,⁷ Silby organized concerts in churches, schools, and even homes of benefactors, to showcase what he believed to be the Church’s ideal of sacred music, tailoring the form and content of those programs to the prevailing taste and level of sophistication of his audience. In Omaha, he held monthly concerts on Sunday afternoons, preceded by lectures to the League of Catholic Organists, which he founded, and followed by Vespers and Benediction. In New York, he supplemented well-publicized liturgical performances and sacred concerts in church with public performances as elevated societal affairs, such as a 1937 concert of sacred music by the St. Ignatius Choir held in the Ballroom of the Hotel Plaza. **[Slide 15]**

The quality of the St. Ignatius Choir’s performances under Silby drew the approval and admiration of the likes of conductor William Strickland, who published a glowing full-page review of Silby and the St. Ignatius Choir, **[Slide 16]** Composer and critic Virgil Thompson wrote, “Contrapuntalism of the Palestrina school and excellent Gregorian chant are a specialty at St. Ignatius’s, 980 Park Avenue. The Motu Proprio [*sic*] repertory is set forth at this church with

⁶ Andrews, 132.

⁷ Richard Runciman Terry, Program of Musical Illustration to a Concert Lecture on Early English Choral Foundations, Kensington Town Hall, May 10, 1905. Silby scrapbook.

a rather higher cultural tone than elsewhere.” **[Slide 17]** Among the admiring visitors attending Mass to hear the choir sing the *Missa Papae Marcelli* was none other than Leopold Stokowski.

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To support his musical vision, Silby wasted no time in forming a *schola cantorum*—a choir school—in each church. Where there was a day school, as in Omaha and New York, he “nested” the *schola cantorum* within that school. Where this wasn’t possible he founded new schools, such as in Philadelphia where the concept expanded to become the Conservatory of Musical Art, offering applied music lessons in voice and several instruments, as well as courses in music history, theory, composition, and liturgical chant.

Silby was committed to teaching children throughout his career. Among his young students was composer and Duquesne University professor Joseph Wilcox Jenkins, who studied organ with Silby as a child in Philadelphia, and who took particular delight in Silby’s organ improvisations.

Scholarship

Silby’s handwritten lecture notes show that he was thoroughly versed in liturgy, music history, liturgical chant, harmony, counterpoint and composition. He held academic appointments in every city in which he lived: Holy Cross College at the Catholic University of America in Washington; Duchesne College in Omaha; St. Vincent’s Seminary and Villanova University in Philadelphia; St. Joseph’s College in Princeton, New Jersey; and Maryknoll Seminary in New York. **[Slide 19]** He was invited to teach in continuing education programs as diverse as summer courses at Wellesley College and Clifford Bennet’s famous “Catholic

Choirmasters Correspondence Course.” Most notably, he served on the faculty of the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood, along with Serge Koussevitzky, Hugh Ross, Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky, and Leonard Bernstein, teaching Gregorian Chant and Polyphonic Music.

He wrote and published several articles, many in *The Catholic Choirmaster* and in *Caecilia*, and self-consciously compiled a lists of titles such as: **[Slide 20]**

- Some Thoughts on Plain Chant
- The Requiem Mass
- Plain Chant and Harmony
- Methods in Training Boys Voices
- Music in History
- More about Jazz
- Methods of Composing Music
- Strings
- Madrigals
- Polyphonic Music as an Essential Study
- Trying Boys’ Voices
- Training Boys’ Voices
- Church Music and Non-Catholics
- The Mind of the Church in Music
- The Propers of the Mass
- Solesmes Records

Composition

The historical record of Silby as a composer is perhaps most intriguing, both because of what is there and what isn’t. Published music is limited to a couple of early sacred pieces published by Breitkopf & Härtl and McLaughlin & Reilly, a secular part song issued by H. W. Gray, and complete setting of Holy Week Music from 1938. Surviving manuscripts are in a variety of genres, including a handful of unpublished sacred pieces. Printed programs suggest that several, perhaps many pieces were lost, including a tantalizing 6-voice *Missa Brevis* composed in the early 1920s that had received some sort of recognition from the Pontifical

Institute of Sacred Music in Rome. The unfortunate loss of the bulk of Silby's music collection apparently resulted from his widow removing from the St. Ignatius music library everything that belonged to her husband, fearing it would be lost if it remained in the library. She took the collection with her to Argentina where her family owned an *estancia*. The estate itself was lost in a land seizure under the Perón regime, and Silby's collection never returned from Argentina.

Two surviving pieces give a good indication of Silby's level of compositional craft. The first is an Epiphany Motet in 6 voices, date of composition unknown. **[Slides 21-34;**

Recording Track 1]

The second is a setting of the Antiphon "Salva nos" from the Office of Compline, dating back to at least the early 1920s. **[Slides 35-40; Recording Track 2]**

A Final Connection

Reginald Mills Silby was indeed the "Westminster connection" for those churches he served. There is little evidence, however, that his work had any lasting influence beyond the personal recollections and anecdotes of a few former choristers and students. There is only a thin thread of speculation that he may have influenced the work and vision of George Carthage, one of the bright lights among the next generation of Catholic musicians in Minnesota. The one person who instantly recognized Silby's name when I first mentioned it was Richard Proulx, who exclaimed, "I think George Carthage studied with him in New York." I was not able to corroborate Proulx's recollection until Silby's daughter presented me with an edition of Thomas Weelkes' *O sacrum convivium*, made from a set of part books for which Silby had supplied the missing alto part. **[Slide 41]** The edition was published in New Jersey by none other than

George T. Carthage. It was printed in Holland in a style similar to the Annie Bank editions, but in the unmistakable hand of George Carthage, who became well-known for his beautiful music manuscript. Silby's daughter remembered also that Carthage assisted her mother after Silby's death with copyright registration of a handful of unpublished pieces. While the evidence is not conclusive, it points to the strong possibility that Proulx' memory was correct, and that in George Carthage may have given expression in his own successful career as a Catholic choirmaster to a musical vision of the Universal Church, handed down to him from the Westminster watershed through the "Westminster connection," Reginald Mills Silby. [Slide 42]

Epilogue

"Every age must stand squarely on the shoulders of those who have gone before."⁸

If it were not so, the story of human progress would span but a lifetime, beginning over and over again from the same *tabula rasa*. On the contrary, our consciousness of past, present and future helps us to understand our own place in the procession of time; to receive tradition as a gift to nurture until it is our turn to hand it on.

Liturgical theologian Robert Taft famously put it:

Tradition is not history, nor is it the past. Tradition is the Church's self-consciousness now of that which has been handed on to it not as an inert treasure, but as a dynamic principle of life.⁹

⁸ Richard Schuler, "Church Music," in *Sacred Music*, Vol. 103, No. 4 (Winter 1976), 17.

⁹ Robert Taft, "Response to the Berakah Award: Anamnesis," *Worship* 59 (July 1985) 305-325.

We receive from those who walked before us not only the artifacts of their pilgrimage — the *ars artefacta*, but more importantly, the art-of-the-making—the *ars artefaciens*—the capacity and craft to make our own contributions. And then, with shoulders squared, we surrender ourselves, our deeds, and our “makings” to the future, where they may be remembered and celebrated...or forgotten, lost, and hidden with God.

Reginald Mills Silby: May his memory be eternal.

KEVIN VOGT is a native of Manitowoc, Wisconsin. He holds the B.M. in organ and church music from St. Olaf College, the M.M. in organ performance from the University of Notre Dame, and the D.M.A. in organ performance from the University of Kansas. He has served a variety of Roman Catholic churches throughout the Midwest. From 1993 to 1996 he was director of liturgy and music at the Cathedral of Saint Paul in St. Paul, Minnesota. There he participated in the renewal of cathedral liturgical life, implementing a practice of fully-chanted Sunday Masses in English with Gregorian propers, and the daily chanting of Morning and Evening Prayer.

He served Saint Cecilia Cathedral in Omaha, Nebraska, from 1998 to 2008, founding the Saint Cecilia Schola Cantorum—a diocesan initiative aimed at developing an exemplary cathedral music ministry, a choir school and an institute of sacred music—and overseeing the commission from organ builder Martin Pasi of a landmark cathedral organ capable of playing in two temperaments. He concurrently held a two-year visiting faculty appointment at The Liturgical Institute of the University of St. Mary of the Lake in Mundelein, Illinois.

Kevin is currently music director for St. Michael the Archangel Catholic Church in Leawood, Kansas, and Lecturer in Organ and Church Music at the University of Kansas. He enjoys a modest but richly-varied career as an organist, conductor, teacher, composer, organ consultant, and scholar. He resides in Overland Park, Kansas, with his wife Susan and their three children.