



# Reformed vision

In the wake of the Pope's visit to Munich Cathedral, *Malcolm Bruno* finds a rich new music tradition that reaches back to the 14th century

It wasn't only the World Cup in 2006 that put Munich centre-stage. Crowds took to the street again in the hundreds of thousands, waiting patiently in the brilliant late summer's sun for a glimpse of the first German pope for centuries, returning home for his first official visit. And these spectators saw a pope, not only German, but Bavarian, and not only Bavarian, but, as their former bishop, an honorary Münchener. So on that glorious first Saturday of September they welcomed the pontiff to their ancient Marienplatz, the market square in the city's centre which embraces Munich's cathedral – der Dom zu unsrer lieben Frau – and the historic Rathaus (city hall). An equally cloudless following day began with outdoor Matins and Mass just after sunrise at Munich's massive stadium. Accommodating some 250,000 communicants, its Germanic precision to oversee every detail excelled even the smooth flow of a

British coronation. That afternoon, Pope Benedict XVI returned to the city centre for Vespers in the cathedral, with 6,000 congregants. Throughout these beautiful late summer hours, vast audiences shared a sense of joy and pride in the homecoming of their spiritual pilot, much as there had been on numerous occasions in Krakow for John Paul II. But unlike many other papal visits over the centuries, the music for this Mozart-loving Holy Father was superb.

The casual visitor to Germany's Catholic cathedrals will know Cologne's mighty gothic towers and probably ancient Regensburg with its famed Domspatzen, where Pope Benedict's brother Georg was Kapellmeister until recently. But few perhaps think of Munich and its splendid Dom, though its origins, with an outstanding musical tradition, reach back to the early 14th century. Local archives confirm the existence of a choir and a

schola as early as 1300. Two centuries later a flourishing ensemble of 12 boys and 24 men was the pride of Orlando di Lasso, resident at the Bavarian court from 1556. Music making continued unabated through the height of the Viennese Classical and Romantic periods up to Joseph Rheinberger, Kapellmeister from 1877, who introduced a mixed amateur Domchor. But two world wars in the 20th century wreaked cultural havoc throughout Germany. The Lassus choir of men and boys as well as Rheinberger's mixed-voice choir both declined beyond repair by the start of the Great Depression in 1929. In 1940 the cathedral was bombed, and its astoundingly beautiful restoration took 50 years to complete.

In today's ancient yet contemporary edifice, fragments of stained glass or treasured medieval woodcarving are inset in pure white plastered walls. For as with so much else in a new Germany, this is not only a refurbished building but a spiritual mission, uniting the rich heritage of former centuries with a reformed vision of a world very recently born. As the cathedral opened its fully restored doors in 1990, Kapellmeister Karl-Ludwig Nies arrived. 'Much has happened in the 20th century,' he explains, 'not only in European and world history, but in the Church. The effects of the Second Vatican Council, now half a century ago, can be seen in all avenues of worship. And musically, although much opportunity has often been lost by focusing too much on insubstantial contemporary repertory, it has been a time for the Roman Catholic world to reach beyond the counter-Reformation and delve into the great repertory of the time of Bach and later. I, for example, have been very interested in the wealth of post-Reformation Anglican music, in psalms and canticles composed for the non-sacramental services (morning and evening prayer) that have their origin in monastic times.'

But Nies's aspirations amount to more than just finding works of Stanford and his Victorian contemporaries, though they do show the unapologetic Anglican influence on this model music department. 'Starting afresh to create a new tradition, I was very impressed by the standard of the English cathedral choir. In addition to the traditional German Domchor – an amateur SATB choir with 70 or more – I knew that I should have two "Anglican"-style choirs: one of boys and men and another of girls and men, as well as the possibility of each being a treble-voice choir in its own right. I was also adamant that there should be high-level training for the young choristers and supporting professional men. So we have the Domsingknaben (the 25-strong boys' choir with an additional 35 probationers), and the

Mädchenkantorei (the girls' choir of around 55 voices, with a further 50 probationers). These choirs have young voices up to 13 years. Then from 14 to 18 we have a separate select mixed choir, the Junge Domkantorei – a cathedral youth choir (of about 30 voices), while the professionals (6 men and 6 women) also form an English-style consort of their own, the Capella Cathedralis.' This comprehensive mix of choirs is underpinned by a newly designed choir school that capitalises on the early finish of the German school day. 'From 1.00pm until 6.30pm each day the school, through my two choirmasters, provides a place not only for students to complete homework and play sport, but also for vocal technique and work on the historical and theological context of the music we sing, in rehearsals and instrumental tuition.'

Nies continues, 'If we sing Charpentier, it is an ideal time to introduce the history of Versailles; if we sing music from the Spanish, Italian or Austrian courts, we must understand the institutions that commissioned and first heard the music we sing from these lands.' It is not only history that is passed on, but theology as well. 'We sing the Mass in Latin, including the Credo, every Sunday. So the singers must feel at home with this beautiful language. It gives voice to their faith. And all the choirs sing Gregorian chant, which is the starting point of our common music. The Latin language is the basis of this music too, so the singers must embrace it as their own.' As I soon heard in a Lassus Mass and in their singing of chant, Nies's choirs produce a Latin that is entirely second nature.

A distinctly non-Anglican division of labour also helps the Munich enterprise: having two highly skilled choirmasters with a cathedral organist, and then an academic assistant to supervise homework, makes it possible for the Kapellmeister to have a different choir prepared for a full Mass each week,

*left* Munich's cathedral and town hall were at the heart of the welcome for Pope Benedict XVI in 2006 during his first official visit  
Photo Nr.466 Münchner Innenstadt, W.O.  
Hausmann, courtesy of Munich City Tourist Office,  
*below* the organ plays a major role in accompanying extended hymns during the Mass  
Photo Pressestelle Erzbischöfliches Ordinariat München

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Luxury of time allows a Kapellmeister to develop distinct repertoire appropriate to the vocal forces. Gregorian chant remains the most basic diet for all choirs, but it is accompanied by Nies's voracious appetite for polyphony from a wide spectrum – from Naples and Versailles, but also England, and especially the Iberian peninsula, while never forgetting Nies's own great predecessor at home, Lassus. 'The cathedral provides an amazing setting acoustically for this repertoire, but with its seven-second delay it's definitely unsuitable for Bach, which we perform in different venues. The music of the Viennese school works extremely well, as does Rheinberger and, stemming directly from the earlier polyphonic repertoire, Bruckner. Normally we perform in the balcony, but occasionally we do polyphonic repertoire in the chancel.' Unlike the earlier 19th-century chancel full of heavily carved screens, the restored cathedral has a low, open shell that one could imagine greatly enhances the unaccompanied voices.

What is not on the agenda is what the Germans call 'Sakro-pop'. 'Regardless of my own personal taste in music,' Nies continues, 'amplification has no meaning in this space, for voices or solo instruments like guitars. But we're not a museum, and as our music must generate a living tradition we are also interested in contemporary works. We've performed Arvo Pärt's *Berliner Messe* and I'm interested in commissioning new works from composers in Germany and abroad. One important aspect of our musical life we have inherited from Protestant Germany is hymn singing. Every high Mass has at least three or four hymns; we never omit stanzas, but if there are more than four of five we sing the stanzas in the *Wechselgesang* tradition, alternating choir and congregation, with the organ playing a major role. A great number of people are attracted to our cathedral each Sunday because of the music, and making the hymns a central part of the liturgy is a perfect way of engaging non-musicians in the Mass, making for a happy relationship between clergy, congregation and professional musicians.'

The fabric of Munich's cathedral brings together past and present in re-assembled stained-glass fragments alongside a towering contemporary crucifix and carved white marble altar. So, too, the music programme spans five centuries, at the same time looking to the future in its commissioning of new works. It is symbolic that for the first time in centuries a pontiff has emerged from this renaissance of music and liturgy. ■

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as well as the time to create his own arrangements, new works and liturgical accompaniments Sunday by Sunday. 'I would have liked to sing weekday Vespers as well,' Nies smiles with a glint in his eye, 'as you do in England, but that will have to wait a bit longer!' A glance at his autumn programme brochure, though, reveals many Masses with orchestra, on all major feast days in the Viennese tradition, and all located in the towering musicians' balcony about 40ft by 25ft that comfortably accommodates at least 100 singers with an orchestra of two dozen or more. 'We also have, in the early German tradition of the Stadtbläser, a brass ensemble; and it is my ambition as soon as I have the best quality players to have a consort of cornetts and sackbuts.'

*from top* many of the Masses in the cathedral are performed by choir with orchestra in the musicians' balcony; the open chancel gave the congregation full view of the Pope during his first official visit to Munich

Photos Pressestelle Erzbischöfliches Ordinariat München