

StarTribune

Minnesota Compline Choir finds 'peace at the last'

Article by: Kim Ode

Star Tribune

September 24, 2013 - 2:58 PM

We tend to note the passage of time with misgivings, seeing in a graying head or weathered fence a lifetime slipping away.

Maybe we need to narrow our focus.

Maybe the passage of a day or a week is enough to note, perhaps even with a degree of serenity.

A group of men gathers on Sunday evenings with that goal in mind, performing the ancient ritual of compline — a service of sung and chanted prayers, from the Latin completorium. It's meant to acknowledge the completion of the working day with songs of contemplation, easing listeners to a place of peace until the next day dawns.

The pace of modern life being what it is, the Minnesota Compline Choir notes the passage of time in two-week intervals. In the scheme of things, that's not bad. As you sit for a half-hour in the gently creaking pews of the Basilica of St. Mary, the mesmerizing tones of monastic chants manage to muffle the various tyrannies of the to-do list, the deadline, the duty.

Compline, in every sense of the word, can feel like a blessing.

For more than 20 years, the Minnesota Compline Choir has performed this traditional service, or “office” in liturgical lingo. It's one of only a few such free-standing choirs — other notable ones are in Seattle and Honolulu. These days, they sing at the basilica in Minneapolis, but they've done stints at Lutheran churches and Methodist churches, and they have been based in both Minneapolis and St. Paul.

“We're nondenominational,” said director Aaron Humble, noting that the text is from “The Book of Common Prayer.” Humble, who also sings tenor with the renowned men's ensemble Cantus, said that in addition to coming from various faiths, most members are amateurs who come to rehearsal from various jobs. They are scientists, real estate agents, funeral directors, woodworkers, ecologists and counselors. The size of the choir has varied from 14 to 20, depending on who's available every other Sunday evening, September through May.

Why do they do it?

Stephen Cornils said he's asked himself the same thing over two decades since he helped found the group. An associate pastor at Mount Olivet Lutheran Church, he's already put in a day's work by the time he arrives for rehearsal.



The Minnesota Compline Choir sang behind the altar during a service at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis.

RENEE JONES SCHNEIDER • reneejones@startribune.com,



Members of the Minnesota Compline Choir rehearsed in a practice room at the Basilica of St. Mary.

RENEE JONES SCHNEIDER • reneejones@startribune.com,

“But when we’re done, I leave feeling so restored and restful,” Cornils said. “Compline is about ‘peace at the last.’ That’s what we’re praying for.”

He leaned back in his chair. It had been a long day, with a big confirmation service on top of his usual duties.

“We’ve done more than 700 of these over 20 years,” he said. “And some may ask, ‘What good does that do?’ Sometimes, when people say things out loud, they can feel more true. There’s something about keeping this office that feeds the cosmos.”

A virtual audience of listeners

Cornils started the group with Charles Parsons, music director at Central Lutheran Church, which became the choir’s first home. They’d heard about how compline service in Seattle, in place since 1956, was hugely popular with students from the University of Washington, who would sprawl each Sunday night in the chapel for a moment of contemplation before diving into their week.

Cornils said that Minnesota’s service gained an immediate audience, as well — although it was one they rarely saw. Central Lutheran already broadcast its Sunday morning services on WCAL-FM in Northfield, and so began airing the Sunday night compline. “To see even 150 people in the pews was huge,” Cornils said. “But we knew there were hundreds more listening in their homes.”

The sale of WCAL to Minnesota Public Radio in 2004 ended that relationship, and the choir shifted to KKMS-AM, a Christian talk-radio station. No longer are the services live, but taped broadcasts air at 11:30 p.m. on Saturdays. The service itself is from 8-8:30 p.m. on the first and third Sundays (and, when necessary, fifth) at the Basilica of St. Mary, 88 N. 17th St. in Minneapolis. The next service is Sunday.

Still, the passage of time also has brought advances in technology. Today, the choir’s website, www.minnesotacompline.com, houses an archive of recorded past services and other performances from the past decade. They also offer an iTunes Podcast.

Prescribed, and yet personal

Shortly before 8 p.m., the lights in the upper reaches of the basilica’s immense nave are dim. About 20 minutes earlier, congregants from the popular evening guitar service had dispersed and ushers now eyeball the aisles, collecting stray programs. Each person arriving for compline causes one of the long wooden pews to creak as they settle in. In all this night, there are six creaks.

Sharon Munkwitz caused one of the creaks. She doesn’t come every time but often is drawn to drive in from Plymouth. “It’s beautiful, for one thing,” she said. “And sometimes, it’s a nice way to end the weekend.”

While its purpose is to bring a day to a close, compline’s very format is designed to open the path to whatever a listener seeks, whether defined as God, or a higher power, or simply their own hearts. It begins without preamble, other than 14 men arranging themselves in a broad semicircle before the altar. Their voices move from unison to four-part harmony and back in plainsong, hymns and chants that have been sung for centuries.

Among the singers is Donald James, in his first time with the choir. He said he’d never sung such music, but Cornils had encouraged him to join. The choir holds no auditions, as such, with Humble relying on newcomers being drawn by a love of singing well.

Later, recalling the service, James said there was a moment when he had to stop singing. “It was just so beautiful, I was overwhelmed by it all.”

A listener can burrow into the words, or allow them to drift past. The rite of compline has changed little over the years, rooted in religious belief, yet also in the practicality of daily life, striving to create an atmosphere in which concerns may be released. Note the passage of time, let it go, and sleep.

As the last tones of the Nunc Dimittis fade, darkness has fallen.

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake we may watch with Christ and asleep we may rest in peace.

By morning, life begins again.

Kim Ode • 612-673-7185

© 2013 Star Tribune