



Abbey of Solesmes Celebrates 1000 Years

James Jordan

As the Abbey of St. Peter of Solesmes in France celebrates its millennial anniversary (1010–2010), Paraclete Press acknowledges gratefully their faithfulness (and industriousness!) in the field of Gregorian chant restoration. Today, Gregorian chant enjoys a renewed vision and use by the Church as well as by the general public. The work of the Solesmes monks has played no small part in this “re-blossoming” in providing written materials as well as a living tradition that helps set an aural model for chanting.

The monastery of Solesmes cites as its founding date October 12, 1010, when the site was donated to the monks of La Couture by a French nobleman. The monastery survived pillaging, fires, English occupation, and other afflictions of the times over the next 500 years. In the latter part of the fifteenth century, the church was rebuilt and changed from its basilican form to that of a Latin Cross. In 1664, the abbey was absorbed by the congregation of St.-Maur, and the property, except for the church, underwent an extensive building project. In 1791, in the wake of the French Revolution, the abbey was closed and the monks dispersed, much to the dismay of the general population. The abbey was officially sold, although no new owner appeared and the buildings were not put to use. Then, in 1831, a young priest by the name of Prosper Guéranger, upon hearing of the abbey’s imminent destruction, with the help of friends gathered together enough money to rent the property and move in. Over the next four years, Dom Guéranger worked tirelessly to restore the monastic life of Solesmes.

In 1837 the monastery received not only Vatican recognition, but also the title of Abbey.

A large part of Dom Guéranger’s efforts in restoring Solesmes focused on re-establishing Gregorian chant and its role in the liturgy. The following extract describes, in brief, the work of the monks of Solesmes in chant restoration:

“In the 1830s, the young French monk Dom Prosper Guéranger reopened the vacant monastery of Solesmes in his hometown and charged his monks with the task of restoring chant to its former beauty. This restoration consisted of two primary components: the study of ancient manuscripts and the development of a lighter style of chanting where ‘words took on their true meaning, and the musical phrases recovered much of their natural suppleness and beauty.’ By the 1850s, Solesmes monks were copying chant manuscripts from all over Europe. Carefully comparing manuscripts containing the ancient neumes to manuscripts containing lines and notes, they set about to determine how the chant would have been sung in its original form.

“In 1903, Pope Pius X authorized the monks of Solesmes to prepare editions of chant for the Mass for the entire Roman Catholic Church, and during the next sixty years, the ‘Solesmes Method’ of chant was taught throughout Europe and North America. Even as scholars debated the value of the Solesmes teachings, the recordings of the Solesmes monks became popular, and their books were widely distributed.

“In the second half of the twentieth century, a deeper understanding of chant taught by Dom Eugène Cardine, a monk



The Abbey of Solesmes

of Solesmes, brought about the publication of chant books containing both line and note music as well as representations of various forms of ancient neumes. These books allowed singers to grasp the subtle nuances of the chants portrayed by the ancient neumes. Before his death in 1988, Dom Cardine insisted that the restoration work should be ongoing, and that he was leaving it to his successors to continue the search for truth and beauty contained in the ancient chants.”

(Adapted from *The Song of Prayer: A Practical Guide to Learning Gregorian Chant*, by The Community of Jesus, published by Paraclete Press, 2010)

The following statement by Dom Joseph Gajard, a choirmaster at Solesmes and leading proponent of research conducted by the Solesmes monk and scholar Dom André Mocquereau (1849–1930), illustrates Solesmes’ ultimate goal in providing a chant discography that would carry on their work for many years:

“These recordings were made on location at Solesmes, with the participation of all the choir monks. Our wish was to give those who cannot come to Solesmes, an idea of what our choir actually sounds like in its daily singing. Had we chosen to record only the best voices, it might have given the false impression that Gregorian chant is concert music, reserved for the talented few. In reality, whether we like it or not, Gregorian chant is prayer, the prayer of the Church, requiring the active participation of the people, one and all, at the sacred liturgy.

“Taken as a whole, these recordings provide various impressions of Gregorian chant . . . an impression of being firm, sustained, perfectly well-balanced and peaceful. Next, an impression of suppleness . . . reinforced by the almost ethereal elasticity of the Latin accents. Finally, the impression of life, deriving as it does from the fluidity of the musical phrase and the meaning of the text . . . and the traditional nuances of the manuscripts, which add so much warmth and

‘soul’ to the prayerful expressivity of text and melody.

“Gregorian chant is an ideal instrument for prayer and for the deeply spiritual relationship existing between the soul and God. It is a supple and vibrant lyre, sensitive to each and every inspiration of the Holy Spirit who, according to St. Paul, prays in the Church with ‘inexpressible sighs,’ *gemetibus inenarrabilibus*.

“If these records can help develop a taste for the sung prayer of the Church, if they can enhance the chant’s beauty and holiness, while enabling people to better love and understand it, we will consider that our goal has been achieved.”

(Dom Joseph Gajard, adapted from the CD booklet accompanying *Gregorian Chant Rediscovered: The First Recordings by the Choir of Solesmes in 1930*, Paraclete Press, 1995.)

In light of Dom Gajard’s words, we close with a short passage from Fr. J. F. Weber’s recent review in *Fanfare* magazine:

“. . . this recording (*Sundays in Ordinary Time* [1–3], Paraclete SN 18) has remained a touchstone of chant singing. . . . Its elegance, its utter rightness once more became evident as I listened to a continuing flow of other recent CDs for the purpose of analyzing their contents. . . . We can only hope that Dom Lelièvre (choirmaster for this Solesmes recording) will have an opportunity to pursue the series that this disc seemed to have launched. . . . The work of the monks is not yet done.” (*Fanfare*, July/August 2010, review by Fr. J.F. Weber, pp. 538–539)

Please visit the Solesmes website at <www.solesmes.com> to learn more about the monks, their ongoing work, and their history. ■

James Jordan has performed as an organ accompanist and soloist throughout the United States and Europe, and was one of the first American organists to concertize in Siberia. He is currently Artist-in-Residence with Glorie Dei Artes Foundation, and frequently performs and records with the choir Glorie Dei Cantores. Jordan is the Music Development Consultant for Paraclete Press. He has published in the American Choral Review and was a contributing author to American Sacred Choral Music—An Overview and Handbook (Paraclete Press, 2001).

Jordan earned his Bachelor of Music from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, studying with Robert Anderson. As a student of David Craighead, he received his master’s degree, doctorate and Performer’s Certificate from the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. He has made extensive studies of Gregorian chant with the late Dr. Mary Berry of the Schola Gregoriana, Cambridge, England.

THE OHS CATALOG

SHEET MUSIC ♦ BOOKS ♦ RECORDINGS

Join today! www.organsociety.org

ARTIFACTS IN USE is a fresh look at the future of preserving historic organs. This revolutionary guide explores the means and meaning of preservation and restoration for the heritage of worthy pipe organs. Current thought holds that the skin of age, which can be the first loss in conventional restoration, is itself a powerful testimony of the past. In aged surfaces, we now are finding a window to the past, and the implication is telling in the way we think about preservation and restoration.

ARTIFACTS IN USE explores the Paradox of Restoration whereby preservation-worthy historical evidence tends to be lost during conventional restoration. Discover the “restorative conservation” approach by which the renewal of aesthetic and musical qualities is balanced with an equal respect for the physical record of historical organbuilding and early use.

\$34.99 MEMBER PRICE
\$39.99 NON-MEMBER PRICE

PUBLISHED BY THE OHS PRESS IN ASSOCIATION WITH
Colonial Williamsburg

IN STOCK FOR IMMEDIATE SHIPMENT!
NOW CHOOSE FROM OVER 5,000 TITLES!
ORDER ANY TIME ONLINE: www.ohscatalog.org

UPS shipping to U.S. addresses, which we recommend, is \$7.75 for your entire order. Media Mail shipping is \$4.50 for your entire order. Shipping outside U.S. is \$4.50, plus the cost of air postage, charged to your VISA or MasterCard.

ORGAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
P.O. Box 26811 Richmond, VA 23261
Telephone: (804) 353-9226
Monday-Friday 9:30am-5:00pm ET
E-mail: catalog@organsociety.org

SHIPPING

UPS shipping to U.S. addresses, which we recommend, is \$7.75 for your entire order. Media Mail shipping is \$4.50 for your entire order. Shipping outside U.S. is \$4.50, plus the cost of air postage, charged to your VISA or MasterCard.

THE WANAMAKER ORGAN

Listen to it worldwide over the Internet!

Hourlong streamcasts are featured at 5pm ET the first Sunday of each month at wrti.org

