

# TENTH INTERNATIONAL GREGORIAN FESTIVAL OF WATOU

20 - 24 May 2009  
with pre-programmes on 16 and 17 May

Presentation

Administration:

V.Z.W. Internationaal Gregoriaans Festival van Watou  
Mr. Bernard Deheegher, Moenaardestraat 20, B-8978 Watou

Telephone : +32 57 38 82 67

Email: [bernard.deheegher@telenet.be](mailto:bernard.deheegher@telenet.be)

[www.festivalwatou.be](http://www.festivalwatou.be)

## **A. CONTEXT OF THE FESTIVAL**

Some cities or regions are the centre of the world when it comes to a specific creative discipline. Take Avignon: its reputation for organising a theatre festival is unrivalled. In a similar vein, in a spirit of non-competitive celebration, Watou unites the world's best Gregorian choirs in its International Gregorian Festival, which takes place every three years.

To take part in the International Festival of Gregorian Chant of Watou is an excellent reference for the curriculum vitae of any Gregorian chant ensemble. The artistic standards of the event are widely acknowledged, and the Belgian town of Watou's standing in this musical form is internationally acclaimed.

For over fourteen centuries the melodies of Gregorian chant have resounded, constant throughout the entire period. By its sheer longevity, Gregorian chant has become a universal music. In bringing together choirs from all parts of Europe, Asia, and America, the Festival of Watou has made this dimension a physical reality: an international community of chant choirs and enthusiasts joining together in one voice.

The Festival is heralded for its quality, which can be appreciated in the fine performances of an extraordinary and diverse selection of choirs representing the full spectrum of 'schools of interpretation,' with their distinctive timbres, sonorities, tempi, and manners of singing the legato melodies of the chant.

The audiences at Watou find an embarrassment of riches: an overwhelming choice of concerts, workshops, seminars (featuring scholars and guest speakers) and liturgies, sung by choirs from across the world – male and female ensembles, children and adults – professional groups, and exceptional amateur choirs. The experience is unique, and the emotional impact of the Festival rivals the virtuosity of its singers – all the requisite ingredients for a popular success.

The Festival is also a convivial meeting place for all those who cherish Gregorian chant, both singers and listeners. The musicality and the humanity of the chant touch a wide public, which increasingly respects and treasures the noble simplicity and compelling strength of Gregorian melodies. And for those who have yet to discover this sublime music, Watou provides an opportunity to share in the experience side by side with students and life-long chant enthusiasts.

## **B. THE 'SECRET' OF WATOU**

But what makes a tiny village in western Belgium – a stone's throw from the French border – the focus of all this activity? In other words, what is the 'secret' of the Watou phenomenon?

The answer really lies in the music itself. Amazingly, in this technology-driven day and age, there has been a resurgence of popular interest in Gregorian chant, and, especially over the last decade, a 'Gregorian renaissance' has blossomed. Somehow, people find in this music something that touches the deeper levels of their busy, modern lives.

People sense the serene, noble character of this music, regardless of whether or not they understand its Latin text. The roots of this repertoire extend back to the fifth century and beyond, but the building blocks of its composition are alive in many musical cultures to this day. Gregorian chant is music that speaks profoundly to each human being, something beyond a feeling of joy, love, hope or happiness. It is on the wavelength of the heart, and it answers a deep-felt need for spirituality, even at the dawn of this third millennium.

Of course, this renaissance received a big boost from an unlikely source: pop culture. Now and then, hit songs by groups such as Enigma have incorporated strains of Gregorian chant that still waft through dance bars across the world. One spectacular Gregorian chant profile-raiser of recent years was record company EMI's re-packaging of a twenty year-old chant recording from the Benedictine Abbey of Santo Domingo da Silos in Spain. It sold 350,000 copies, a marketing stunt unparalleled in the world of classical music. According to the abbot of Silos, the result was the opening of doors to spirituality and interiorisation, which clearly seems to have been sought after by legions of younger people who found in the chants a fascinating mix of mystique and mystery. The record company Universal launched a new album "Chant, Music for Paradise," aimed at people who want to re-source and de-stress, a new hype. It is no cross-over product where Gregorian chants are mixed with electronic music, but rather it presents the very soothing Gregorian Requiem. The performers are monks from the Cistercian abbey Stift Heiligenkreuz in Austria. At the end of 2008, they were the number one on several hit parades, thus passing popular songs of Regi, Carla Bruni or Madonna.

But there is an additional reason for the success of Watou. While there are many conferences exploring the liturgical and musicological aspects of Gregorian chant, this is the only 'Festival' of Gregorian chant in Western Europe. Here, the music comes alive. In 2009, no less than 24 ensembles from 15 different countries will present a varied and interesting array of performances. Numerous ensembles in the 2009 Festival have achieved a professional or semi-professional status, notably those of Graz, Vienna, Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels, Trondheim, and Tallinn. And three choirs of young people will also be participating: the boy's choir of Westminster Cathedral, London; the 'Pueri Cantores' of Korea, and the Cantate of Budapest.

### ***C. Festival 2009 : The Jubilee-edition is longer and is more spread out in the region.***

The Festival has a large interest. To guarantee its calm and serene atmosphere, we have introduced a regional spreading out since 1997. This vision turned out to be successful and the right way for the Festival. The central part of the Festival takes place in Watou. Other Listening Sessions are held in other cities. We are delighted with the cooperation we have received from the local authorities.

This time, the Festival starts during the weekend of 16 May 2009. That weekend Poperinge celebrates the Centenary Celebration of the Coronation of Our Lady of St. John. On Saturday evening 16 May, choirs from Korea and Venezuela present an evening concert with songs for the Veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary throughout the Continents of the World. This is an exceptional non-Gregorian component of the Festival. On Sunday morning there is a Mass to venerate the Centenary Celebration.

In the afternoon, the Festival visits Veurne for a double programme where the historical organ of Saint Walburga Church plays a major part. The performance of the work "In Circulo Anni" of the contemporary composer Kurt Bikkembergs is followed by "Les Vêpres de la Vierge" Opus 18 of the French composer Marcel Dupré. Also here, we can count on the active participation of the local authorities as well as the local organ commission.

On the evening before the Ascension, Wednesday 20 May, a Listening Session is held in Boëseghem, a quaint little village in French Flanders. The cultural centre "Malraux" from Hazebrouck as well as the local authorities of Boëseghem will put everything into play in order to make the evening a big success.

On the evening of the Ascension, Thursday 21 May, we are in Wervik. In 1997 we held a festival activity outside Watou for the first time – in Wervik. The dynamic coming together of local communities guarantees a successful concert.

The heart of the Festival is in Watou with 4 listening sessions, 2 evening concerts, and 6 liturgical celebrations. In the liturgical component, Gregorian chant come to life in its natural setting.

The restored repertoire is the subject of the four Listening Sessions, the backbone of the Festival, in Watou. This basic programme of four Listening Sessions is complemented with four major liturgical celebrations, where the value of Gregorian chants is put in its natural context.

For the second time, a special choir has been created for the Festival: the Ad Hoc Schola 2009. It consists of the best singers from 14 Belgian Gregorian choirs: a total of 80 voices will sing at High Mass on Sunday 24 May.

### ***D. THEME OF THE LISTENING SESSION: “Imitatio Christi, Following Christ”***

The theme of the 9th Festival in 2006 was: Christ Yesterday – Today – Forever. The theme of the 10th Festival picks up this theme and develops it further: Imitatio Christi – Following Christ. The work of Jesus in this world did not end with his Ascension. After the sending of the Holy Spirit, his work is continued in the life and deeds of Christians – above all those exemplary people who are called the “saints.” The deeds of Christ – his speaking of God, his prayer, his healing of the sick in body and spirit, his concern for the poor and suffering – continues in the deeds of the saints. The liturgy and its music – Gregorian chant – recall this in a second large cycle of the church year, the Proper of Saints or the Sanctoral. Its chants live on the one hand from the spirituality of the psalms, in which the life and thought of the saints is, to a certain extent, “prophetically” declared. On the other hand, the saints are sung of with texts from their biographies, the so-called “historia,” which are to be understood not only as lives of the saints, but also as a continuation of the history of God with his people. The medieval church knew four large categories of saints: apostles, martyrs, confessors, virgins. Above all these was the repertoire for veneration of the Mother of God, which grew out of the general repertoire of the office of virgins. These four large categories will also be the content of the four Listening Sessions. With the psalm texts of the Proper of the Mass, the relationship of the saints to God above all will be sung of: their faith, their faithfulness in the profession of faith, their perseverance, their complete self-offering, their irrevocable service to the Church. The chants of the Liturgy of the Hours will be taken largely from the biographies. From the era of the authentic Gregorian repertoire we know of these for great figures such as Martin or Cecilia. Since the 9th century, cycles of antiphons and responsories were increasingly created in poetic form: the historiae or the rhymed offices. Old and new repertoires complement each other and build a colourful bouquet of chants. In this festival, special musical blossoms will resound, many of them brought to public presentation for the first time after centuries of being hidden in medieval manuscripts. This festival will be marked by breadth of repertoire which extends from the beginnings of Gregorian chant up to its late eras. Of course the accent falls on the oldest layer of chant, in which the notational neumes are in a particular manner at the service of the musical presentation of the liturgical text. There will be many pearls of chant to discover which entirely unjustly have stood in the shadows of the great chants of the Temporal but now will come into the light as they deserve.

## **E. WORKSHOP: THE GREGORIAN CHANT REPERTOIRE AND ITS INTERPRETATION FROM A MUSICAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

In collaboration with the German speaking section of the AISCGre (Associazione Internazionale Studi di Canto Gregoriano), Berlin

*Chant examples:* Studentenschola Kunstuniversität Graz (Austria) and Hartkeriana (Amsterdam) directed by Adrija Cepaitė (Kaunas)

*Working languages:* English & Dutch

Eugeen Liven d'Abelardo is a Gregorian chant scholar and also a Flemish born composer/conductor. It is from this point of view that he will approach the Gregorian chant "vieux fonds" of Mass and Office repertoire. He will try to analyse how Gregorian chant "composers" have structured and formulated their chants throughout the ages. Eugeen will illustrate this with references to the insights into musical phenomenology as taught to him by the legendary Rumanian conductor Sergiù Celibidache (1912-1996) at the Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz.

This workshop is meant for singers, choir conductors and musicologists. Copies of the music examples will be available for all attendees. Chant restitutions will be utilized as published since 1996 in the series "Beiträge zur Gregorianik". There will be ample time for stimulating discussion and exchange of views.

## **F. BEGINNING AND EVOLUTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL GREGORIAN FESTIVAL OF WATOU**

Initially, the Gregorian Festival of Watou was a national undertaking. However, slowly the initiative was taken to develop the event into a professional event on an international level.

The first Gregorian Festival was held in 1981 and six choirs took part. Only one of the participants came from outside Belgium – the Schola Cantorum from Helmond (the Netherlands) – and it attracted the interest of about 1,200 people. The second edition was organised in 1986, and this time ten choirs were involved including the Kölner Domchor; the public audience also grew modestly to around 2,000. However, it was the third edition that proved to be a real breakthrough. In 1988 the Festival was spread over two days and 16 choirs took part, the most well known participants being the Westminster Cathedral Choir from London and the Choeur Grégorien de Paris. More than 4,000 people attended this time, and the Festival organist was Mr. David Hill, Master of Music at Winchester Cathedral. The event received extensive media coverage putting the Festival in a positive light, and this, combined with the impact of the experience on a number of the conductors of foreign choirs, stimulated the important move to international expansion.

In 1991 the fourth edition took place over three days. For the first time, two choirs from former Eastern bloc countries were involved, and scholas from France, England, the Netherlands, Luxemburg, Italy, GDR, USA, Latvia, and South Korea were represented. The Festival definitively won its place of honour as the only international forum for Gregorian choirs. And as the quality of the choirs participating increased significantly, so did the audience (some 6,000 people) and press comments – unanimously positive.

The fifth edition was held 13 – 15 May 1994, and once again proved to be an extraordinarily successful event, greatly surpassing all expectations. More than 8,000 people from Belgium, France, Germany, England, Switzerland, Italy, Portugal, Australia, and China attended the festival programme in part or fully. The festival received excellent media interest from major

players in not only the written press, but also radio and television. KRO, the Dutch TV station, and SFB, the German station, both allocated half-hour timeslots to the event.

When the time came for the sixth edition in 1997, the Festival had grown from three to five days and was held 7 – 11 May. Because of its high standards and character, the festival was honoured with the title ‘Cultural Ambassador of Flanders’ in the same year. The Festival was expanding in many ways, and although Watou was the heart of the event, geographically the Festival was extended out to other locations, namely Poperinge and Hazebrouck in the north of France. The Festival could once again rely on exceptional public and media support and attention: about 10,000 people attended at least one event, and in addition, the opening ceremony was shown on eight European television channels, reaching another estimated 10,000-strong audience. The presence of some outstanding women’s scholas drew particular attention.

The seventh edition took place 31 May – 4 June, 2000. Some 26 foreign scholas from 14 countries participated, with a significant number coming to Belgium for the first time. Alongside a diverse selection of Listening Sessions, a thematic evening was held in commemoration of Hildegard of Bingen.

It became clear that the number of professional and semi-professional ensembles was growing, which in turn ensured the increasing quality of the Festival. In terms of the musical aspect of the Festival, it was also obvious that there was a breakthrough in the participation of women’s scholas. Their interpretation of Gregorian music quickly achieved an outstanding standard, all the more impressive given the relative youth of many of their members.

In particular the last three editions have demonstrated the heightened abilities of the choirs. Where called for, they were capable of adding new expression to familiar pieces. So it seems only natural that these choirs go back to the oldest handwritings for their interpretations. And in spite of its extended duration, the Festival has shown an even stronger sense of unity, thanks to the careful combination of the programme around the millennium theme.

The eighth edition was held 29 May – 1 June, 2003. By this time 25 scholas from 17 countries and three continents participated, with the emphasis placed on geographical and cultural diversities. Again, for a number of scholas attending, this was their first visit to Belgium.

The participation of 4 youth choirs was remarkable. Their contribution was recorded on CD. As was the case for previous editions, the attention of the public was important.

The ninth edition was held 24 to 28 May, 2006. Twenty scholas from 15 countries took part. Nine of them were present for the first time. The core Listening Sessions of the festival were complemented by 4 evening concerts where local traditions were key. One of the evening concerts was a presentation of the alternatim repertoire organ-Gregorian on the historical Van Peteghem organ of Haringe. The opening Mass of the Festival was broadcasted directly by Radio 1, and the Festival enjoyed the attention of thousands of listeners.