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Press Conference for the presentation of the Music CD of the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir – “Veni Domine – Advent and Christmas at the Sistine Chapel”

Intervention of H.E. Msgr. Gänswein

Intervention of Msgr. Massimo Palombella

At 12.15 today, in the Holy See Press Office, a press conference was held for the presentation of the new music CD of the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir, released by Deutsche Grammophon: “VENI DOMINE – Advent & Christmas at the Sistine Chapel”.

A recording for Christmas with a repertoire drawn from Renaissance manuscripts from the “Sistine Chapel” archive collection held in the Vatican Apostolic Library, containing three world premier recordings, and Perotinus’ “Beata viscera Mariae Virginis”, with the extraordinary participation of Cecilia Bartoli.

The speakers at the conference were: H.E. Msgr. Georg Gänswein, prefect of the Papal Household; Msgr. Massimo Palombella, maestro director of the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir; Dr. Mirko Gratton, director of the Classical and Jazz Division of *Universal Musica Italia*.

The following are the interventions by Msgr. Georg Gänswein and Msgr. Massimo Palombella:

Intervention of H.E. Msgr. Gänswein

For the third consecutive year I have the honour and the pleasure of presenting a CD recorded by the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir, in its natural home, the Sistine Chapel, released under the prestigious recording label Deutsche Grammophon.

If it for me and for the Prefecture of the Papal Household, of which the Sistine Chapel Choir is an integral part,

an appointment that has by now become regular, which has consolidated over time and expresses a wide-ranging project of undoubted cultural and spiritual quality. Sincerely, when three years ago the first CD was recorded I would not have imagined that such an initiative would have received such a warm welcome. Therefore, today is a milestone for several reasons: firstly, for the results achieved by the two CDs already published, which have attracted the interest of a vast public, and then for the CD we are presenting which is particularly rich not only in terms of the quality of production but also for the choice of music, which introduces us to the heart of the Christian mystery: the incarnation of the Word, the Nativity of the Lord. Therefore, texts that inspire intimate joy and immerse us in a horizon of rare beauty that expresses, following the words of Saint Alphonsus Maria de'Liguori, the joy of creation and of man for the birth of the Saviour. In addition, this new production, focusing on the liturgical time of Christmas, is based on the characteristic – more unique than rare – of translating into sound the manuscripts present in the “Sistine Chapel” archive collection conserved in the Apostolic Library, a truly precious treasure chest that the Choir, under the guidance of Maestro Palombella and his colleagues, is wisely opening, indeed almost revealing, to the public. Holding this CD, with its attached booklet, one can easily understand the great work, which this year also involves the collaboration of the famous *mezzo soprano* Cecilia Bartoli, of study and research aiming at an enhancement and promotion of the cultural and musical heritage of the Holy See. Indeed, the “Sistine Chapel” archive collection in the Vatican Library is one of the world’s most extensive archives of Renaissance music, which includes manuscript of the greatest composers of this historical period.

The realisation of the project is the fruit of collaboration between the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir and Deutsche Grammophon, which constitutes an added value for both parties, of which we are proud and pleased.

All this, however, finds its reason for being in the context of ecclesial service which the Pope’s Choir too is called upon to carry out. A recording of this type is, indeed, an announcement of the Good News implemented through art, specifically music, so that the contact of many people of different cultures and origins with a specific musical repertoire and with the search for God that permeates it, may inspire a growth in the spiritual path or even a first interest in He Who is the origin of all beauty. In this way even through music it is possible, as Pope Francis says, to go to the periphery to offer to all the concrete possibility of encounter with a God Who loves, forgives and wants “life in abundance” for every one of us.

In all this we understand the great responsibility of the Sistine Chapel Choir in proposing its musical repertoire, executed with aesthetic perfection and high professionalism. For this historic institution, daily study, constant research, dutiful experimentation and the necessary cultural exchange are the concrete tools for its ecclesial service.

I would like to conclude by expressing my gratitude to all those who, with their passion and professionalism, have enabled this new production: the Maestro of the Sistine Chapel Choir, the adult cantors, the *pueri cantors* and the families of these boys who, trusting in the educational project and serene atmosphere that one experiences in the school annexed to the Chapel, enable their sons to have an entirely unique experience. I also thank Deutsche Grammophon and their directors for their fruitful collaboration with the Pope’s Choir, and for their refined cultural sensibility.

May this new music CD, with its beauty, truly fill our heart with real joy.

Intervention of Msgr. Massimo Palombella

The ancient musical archives of the Vatican Apostolic Library, among the largest and most important in the world, from the second half of the eighteenth century have been indispensable documents of reference for musical historiography and for musicological research. The treasures of polyphony of the humanistic, Renaissance and Baroque period, conserved especially in the *Sistine Chapel* and *Chapel Julia* collections, have been and continue to be the object of study by researchers from all over the world, especially after their transfer from the cantories of their respective original institutions to the Vatican Apostolic Library (in the 1930s to 1940s

for the materials of the Chapel Julia, a few decades earlier for those of the Sistine Chapel). In this way indexes and catalogues were made available that permitted access to and consultation of this patrimony.

The Maestro Director of the Pontifical Sistine Chapel has the fantastic opportunity of having access to all the musical archives present in the aforementioned Library. This places before him a dual cultural responsibility: firstly, to restore life to compositions by now entirely forgotten; and secondly to experiment, comparing manuscripts and ancient prints, a suitable musical practice, that seeks to translate, thanks to scientific studies and the means now available to us, the “graphic sign” into the “musical sign”.

For the practical use of the immense quantity of material present, it is essential to define a criterion for research. In this CD, the criterion is identified as the liturgical time of Advent and Christmas, a research criterion further “refined” through consultation of various sources which historically describe the Papal Celebrations and their musical practices. This work thus identified a musical offering that takes as its primary source the Sistine Chapel archive of the Vatican Apostolic Library; as a criterion of choice, the time of Advent and Christmas; and as a further criterion for “identification”, the frequency of this music in the Papal Celebrations.

The pieces of music in this CD are united by the intention to form them into a critical edition based either on the manuscript or on the ancient print present in the Vatican Apostolic Library. This painstaking work enabled all the “colores minores” to be identified, offering the proposal of realising those of them which required at times the virtuosity and agility of some sections of the Choir, and made it possible, through the Renaissance script, to define the implicit *tactus* indicated by the composer and to ensure as far as possible the correct relations of proportion.

The exchange between the compositions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the consideration of the role that the Pontifical Sistine Choir Chapel has held historically in this aesthetic change, leads us necessarily to reflect on the Liturgical Reform of the Council of Trent and how much this Council and its application required of music destined for the Liturgy. In summary, attention to the text and the request to modify what was “lascivious and impure” originated from the Conciliar demand to restore music destined for the liturgy to its primary function, that of giving form in sound to a text, through this process performing an “exegesis” of the latter. This is exactly what Gregorian chant did. Indeed, through its “grammar” (modes, tones), in that precise moment it “explained” the Revelation, it performed an “exegesis” of the Word of God. The same process was fulfilled by Renaissance polyphony, with another aesthetic compared to that of Gregorian chant. Through its grammar, more evolved by comparison to monody, it again gave shape in sound to a text explaining, in its own way, the Revelation.

Only from this perspective can we correctly locate the Nativity production of the Renaissance, which today seems slightly far from what we expect musically of Christmas. Indeed, the Christmas climate created by Baroque, and to which we have grown accustomed through subsequent musical production, is not yet found in Renaissance music, where instead the primary concern seems to be that of a theological collocation of the Incarnation in relation to all the life of Jesus. In that cultural climate, along with Christmas, Easter too resounds intrinsically, as the fulfilment of the Incarnation, and as a whole one perceives in the background, almost as an “aftertaste”, the passion and death of Jesus. It is exactly as in ancient iconography, in which the Nativity was represented with the child placed in a manger in the form of a sarcophagus, to clearly state that the newborn must die for our salvation. From this theological perspective the motet *Dies sanctificatus* of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina is emblematic. We find there, in fact, a typically Paschal textual fragment, “Haec dies quam fecit Dominus”, and the final section with the blackened notes on the text “Exultemus, et laetemur in ea”, which, if realised with the pertinence of the *colores minores* indicated, demands and extreme lightness that does not seem conclusive of the motet, but points towards its fulfilment on Easter day[1].

The study of the manuscripts and ancient prints, with the concern of translating them into sound pertaining to the specific sign, necessarily imposes a particular vocality, which permits the agility and refinements demanded by the same musical text. Such vocality is further confirmed by the acoustic characteristics of the architectural space of the Sistine Chapel, which requires a precise sound, very controlled, but also rich in subtlety and colour, exactly like Michelangelo’s frescoes, a sound which is distinctly far from what the Pontifical Sistine Chapel Choir has identified itself with in more recent times, with the illusion of being the heir to an “ancient school”.

All the music present on this CD was historically composed for the Papal Celebrations and continues today, even after the liturgical reform of Vatican Council II, to be part of it, with its careful attention to precise “celebratory pertinence”. The recording of a repertoire qualified as “ancient music” does not mean carrying out an archaeological, or nostalgic, or even simply cultural operation. The operation responds to the wish to restore an “ancient” and therefore “precious” musical sign, capable of fruitfully resisting history and continuing in this way to be current and “living”. This has honestly demanded, in the hymns of Vespers of Advent (*Conditor alme siderum*) and Christmas (*Christe redemptor omnium*), as far as Gregorian chant is concerned, the use of texts and melodies present in Solesmes’ *Liber Hymnarius* (1983), in place of the *Graduale Mediceo* or the *Liber Usualis* or what is indicated in the manuscripts themselves – a book provided to us by the liturgical reform of Vatican Council II, restoring to us, through serious and professional study by Solesmes monks, “ancient” texts and melodies, purified of many historical “encrustations”.

The opportunity and the good fortune to work constantly for the liturgy, and in this to be challenged daily by the last great liturgical reform of the Catholic Church, that of Vatican Council II, slowly guides us beyond the necessary and indispensable scientific studies, towards the objective of serious professionalism in the practice of “ancient” music written for the liturgy. This also demands that, with all the limits and contingencies, through the immense cultural heritage of the Church, the effort of encountering the man of today, as far as possible, to offer him the opportunity to go beyond the contingency, beyond space and time and, perhaps, to rediscover a part of himself.

[1] The use of the *tempus imperfectum non diminutum* as the measure of this motet introduces a tempo proper to the madrigal in the religious motet. This procedure serves to represent the event of Christmas at a joyfully lively tempo and, beyond this, the black notes of the final section – in the sense of a “music for the eyes” – could be interpreted as a symbol of the future road of pain to which Christ is predestined already at birth (cf. Ackerman, P., *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina*, III, 1 [Polygraphic Institute and State Mint, State Library, Rome, 2008], XXXVII).
