

GUARDIAN OF AN UNIQUE TREASURE

On November 5, 2004, surrounded by his friends, acquaintances and former choir boys, the sometime Cathedral choirmaster of Aachen and President of the Consociatio Internationalis Musicae Sacrae in Rome (1985-1996), Msgr. Rudolf Pohl, celebrate four score years of life as a priest-musician. Half a century ago, in September 1954, he took over the leadership and training of the Aachen Cathedral choir boys. Forty years ago, in April 1964, he was named cathedral choirmaster in the ancient church built as Charlemagne's palace chapel. These three jubilees are reason enough to recall the jubilarian's activities in the service of musica sacra.

Rudolf Pohl was born on November 5, 1924 at Aachen, where he was introduced to the wonderful world of musica sacra as a cathedral choir boy from 1933-1942 under the legendary choirmaster Theodor Bernhard Rehmann. Following successful college preparatory studies, military service (and imprisonment as a POW) he studied philosophy and Catholic theology in Paderborn, Frankfurt am Main and Bonn, as well as at the major Seminary of Aachen. He was ordained to the holy priesthood on the feast of Our Lady's Visitation, July 2, 1951. During three years' service as assistant in a Krefeld parish, Pohl's special vocation gradually became evident, and in 1954 Rehmann brought his former boy soprano to the Cathedral, entrusting him with the task of rebuilding the boys' choir and the cathedral choir school in Aachen. It is Pohl's great merit to have re-established the boys' choir as the chief pillar of strength for the cathedral music at Aachen. (Rehmann, in response to the conditions of wartime and the postwar problems, had built up a mixed choir of men and women.) Pohl, who had learned with and from Rehmann, earned his doctorate in musicology at Bonn in 1959 with a dissertation on Johannes Mangon, choirmaster of the collegiate church of St. Mary in Aachen (+1578). His works, composed in the „Golden Age” of classic vocal polyphony, could still be heard at regular intervals in the Aachen cathedral liturgy during the 20th century.

Following Rehmann's sudden death in October 1963, Bishop Pohlschneider appointed Rudolf Pohl in April 1964 as successor, in charge of the entire music programme at the Cathedral of Aachen, where he then definitively restored the classic liturgical choir of men and boys. To ensure the supply of singing lads and to renew a centuries-old tradition, Pohl founded the Choir School as a private Catholic elementary school for boys.

In a systematic process of excellent and solid musical, theological and pedagogical reconstruction work, Pohl created a choir of men and boys which carried the renown of Aachen's cathedral music far beyond the city walls. Concert trips over the years took the choir not only to the Benelux states, but to Ireland, France, Italy, Poland, the former Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, Austria, England, Spain and Israel.

Amongst the high points of musical and cultural life at Aachen were the Cathedral performances of the great masterpieces of church music, from Monteverdi's *Vespro della Beata Vergine* through the Passions and the B minor Mass of J.S. Bach to the oratorios of Handel, Brahms and Mendelssohn, and the great Masses of Mozart, Haydn, Verdi and above all Bruckner. And the musical expression of the 20th century was by no means neglected: Poulenc, Janacek, Vaughan Williams, Britten, Komma, Doppelbauer, Niehaus and Schroeder are few of the composers from this era whose works resounded in the Cathedral of Aachen under Pohl's baton. The Aachen Cathedral music surely experienced one of its most memorable moments at the Boy Choir Festival Week marking the 1200th anniversary of the "Choir School at the Court of Charles the Great" in 1981, an event initiated by Pohl himself. Moved by the realization that during his term of office as Domkapellmeister this „birthday" of the Cappella Carolina, the Aachen Cathedral

Choir (which was thus the oldest choir of men and boys in Germany) was being celebrated, Pohl and his cathedral choir performed (to wide acclaim) Bach's B minor Mass in addition to the E minor and F minor Masses of Anton Bruckner - within a single week.

The extensive activity of the Cathedral Choir and its conductor also included frequent recordings (for instance, with "Harmonia Mundi"), in addition to radio and television broadcasts of liturgical services and concerts. In a booklet describing the history of Aachen's cathedral music, published in 1981, Pohl wrote that "Aachen, the political, religious, cultural and artistic heart and focal point of Charlemagne's empire, preserved with devoted loyalty the unfading edifice of Charlemagne's court chapel. And with this church there was also joined a great tradition of artistic singing."

To maintain and carry on the tradition of artistic choral singing in the divine liturgy, was for Rudolf Pohl a commission, a solemn duty, a high and noble task. He resisted the trendy „pastoral" efforts to impugn the artistic dignity of liturgical music, for as a priest he recognized the theological necessity of high standards of quality in such an apostolate--and that not out of restorative stubbornness or inflexibility, but rather on the basis of man's natural aspiration to offer to God, Who is the greatest and most precious Good, the very highest and most precious artistic Good which can bring forth to the glory of God. And so in spite of widespread postconciliar aberrations and perversions, the Cathedral of Aachen remained a stronghold of Gregorian chant and great polyphonic Masses ... and Rudolf Pohl was the guardian of this precious treasure.

In recognition of his meritorious service in carrying out the apposite prescriptions of the Second Vatican Council, and the preservation of the treasure-trove of musica sacra, in November 1985 at the VIIIth International Church Music Congress at Rome, Pohl was chosen President of the C.I.M.S. (the only professional organization of church musicians erected by the Apostolic See) as successor to the late Msgr. Johannes Overath.

The cathedral choristers who had accompanied him to Rome in 1985, sensed that an era was ending in Aachen. This became very evident when on the feast of Ss. Peter and Paul in 1986 Rudolf Pohl mounted the podium for the last time to conduct one of the standard pieces in their repertory, the Palestrina "Papae Marcelli" Mass. Unfortunately, it proved impossible to retain the position of Aachen Cathedral Choirmaster for Pohl at that time...

At Rome, in the years that followed, he strove, in a different way than at Aachen, to preserve the exceptional treasury of musica sacra. As President of the C.I.M.S. it was his task to support and to promote the cooperation and harmonious action of church musicians the world over, for the cultivation and the progress of Musica sacra in accord with the prescriptions of the Church.

After his departure from Rome in 1996, public attention has shifted away from the jubilarian. But that scarcely means that he is now idle. In recent years he has concentrated his efforts upon preparing a practical edition of the liturgical compositions of the Aachen Kapellmeister Johannes Mangon, which are preserved in three large folios at the Cathedral Archives. The large edition in three volumes has recently been published, which is reason enough to have these precious jewels of liturgical music resound once again, at long last, in the place where they are „at home": in the liturgy of the Aachen cathedral church.

Msgr. Pohl remains in close contact with the Aachen Domchor through the "Rudolf Pohl Foundation" which he recently established. The interest from the Foundation's endowment capital is used to support and promote the training of active boy choristers on artistically valuable instruments from the classical sector, by means of grants based upon achievement. This

complementary musical training also benefits the choral music in the Divine Liturgy, which remains the chief task of the Cathedral Choir.

As an honorary canon of the Aachen Cathedral, Msgr. Pohl is assigned a regular side altar at which each morning he renders present Christ's sacrifice of praise, thanks and reparation at Holy Mass. May he continue to draw from this wellspring of his priestly life the strength for more years of good health and faithful service in the cause of musica sacra. That is the sincere wish of all his friends, colleagues and admirers!

DR. MICHAEL TUNGER

Translated by Fr. Dr. Robert Skeris
© by SINFONIA SACRA e.V. 2004