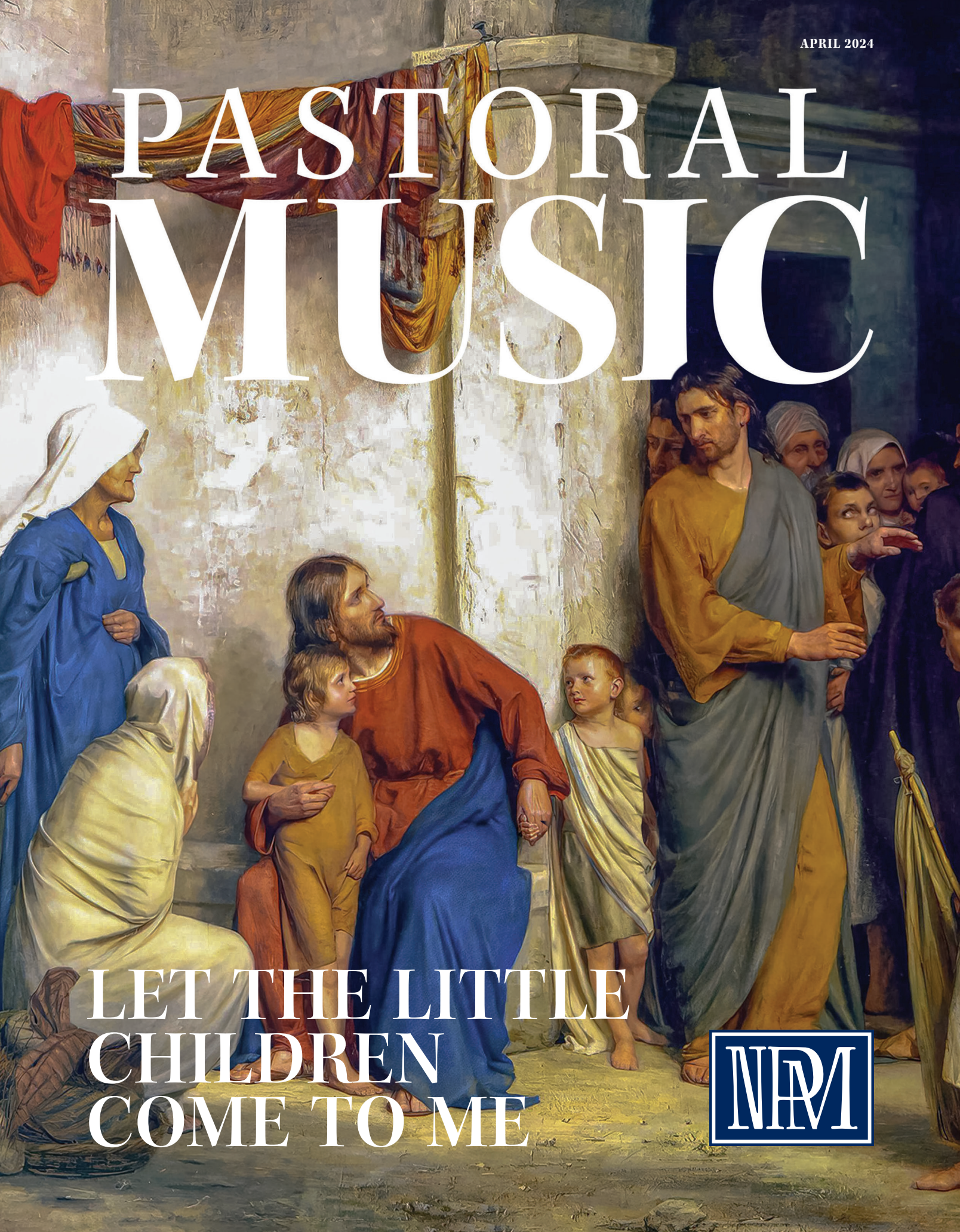


PASTORAL MUSIC



LET THE LITTLE
CHILDREN
COME TO ME





INTERVIEW

Evangelizing Young People Through Sacred Music

By: *Nancy Douglass*

Paul French is the Director of Music at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Chicago, Illinois, where he leads a thriving choral program for both children and adults. He also serves as President of the American Federation Pueri Cantores and Editor of the Pueri Cantores Choral Series (GIA Publications). Paul studied composition, chant, conducting, and organ at Saint John's University (Collegeville, Minnesota), Northwestern University, and the Pontificio Instituto di Musica Sacra in Rome. He has composed more than 200 instrumental and choral works, including pieces for adult and children's choirs, voice, organ, brass, and orchestra.

Nancy: Congratulations on being named NPM's 2024 Pastoral Musician of the Year!

Paul: Thank you. I'm so grateful to have found a place in the world where I can use my musical gifts in the service of the Church. I've done a lot of work in strictly professional musical realms, but when it's connected to the Church, it all makes sense, and there is tremendous fulfillment.

It has been a lifetime of work, from when I was in fifth grade and picked up a guitar to learn a few chords so I could play in church, throughout high school and college campus ministry. For me, serious music study started in college, so very late in life. And I was able to come back to Chicago and find a church that matched the very limited skill set that I had.

I've had the good fortune to meet some great and important people along the way. One of them was a Chicago composer, organist, and conductor named William Ferris, who brought me the eye-opening experience of seeing that, yes, you can be an adult man making serious music in the Church as your profession. My wife is a professional singer and possibly the greatest teacher of conducting I've ever had. I talk to her about what makes sense from a singer's perspective—what singers want to see and hear from their conductor, what kind of gestures to use, how to rehearse well.

There has been opportunity after opportunity for me, so I feel overwhelming gratitude for this life and career path. It really is a vocation. After serving as the conductor of the William Ferris Chorale (Chicago) for fourteen years, I left to work with Pueri Cantores. I truly believe in the mission of Pueri Cantores, which is

evangelization for young people through beauty and the arts, rooting them in their faith, and opening their eyes to the power and grace of the Catholic Church.

Being chosen as Pastoral Musician of the Year is a lovely honor, but I'm no more important than anyone else who does what we do. I honor the people who do what we do because of all that we sacrifice. We're all in the field working as best we can to make a difference, because we understand that we are disciples of Jesus Christ. I love the music making. I love the prayer. I love it all. But the reality is I'm just a Chicago church musician doing what we're all doing, in Chicago and across the United States.

Nancy: How have you been involved with NPM along the way?

Paul: I was a teacher in NPM's Choir Director Institutes for a decade, which was profoundly impactful on me as a developing conductor. When you have to formulate in your mind what you want to say and how you want to teach, it helps you synthesize who you are as a musician. The institutes offered lessons in repertoire, conducting techniques, warm-ups, vocal pedagogy, and I formed many friendships through my fellow teachers.

One of the greatest musical experiences of my life happened because of NPM during the 2009 convention here in Chicago. I was conducting the William Ferris Chorale in a concert in Orchestra Hall, and the place was packed. My ensemble gave a concert that ended with an arrangement of the Widor Toccata Festival Alleluias for trumpets, timpani, and choir in eight parts with organ. It was rapturous to be leading 4,000 singers in that moment.

Nancy: What gives you the greatest joy in your ministry?

Paul: A robustly singing congregation is the most glorious sound I know. It's our worship at its most authentic, when everyone is engaged with their hearts and souls and voices. So much of our work is administration—making sure the chairs are in the right place, the music is in the binders, and the pencils are sharpened, and communicating with parents so they know when the rehearsals are. Then you get past all the noise and get to the moment of prayer. When

all the work is put aside, and it's just making music, inspiring the congregation, transforming the liturgy through beauty—when that clicks, it's wonderful. The praise of God is profound, and because of the work we've done, we can get out of the way and just let the music be prayer, let the worship of God be its most authentic.

I just got back from Rome, where the International Federation of Pueri Cantores gathered choirs from twenty-eight countries to sing various events. At the Congress, which takes place every five years, we often have these moments of extraordinariness where we can't speak to each other, but we can sing together. We can praise God together with a common music, a common language. So, we sing and honor the joy of music making. We show the young people of the Church that they matter. One of the missions of Pueri Cantores is to sing God's peace. For one of these peace prayer events, we gathered in an eleventh-century church in Trastevere, where I conducted singers from Lithuania, Poland, Spain, Portugal, Venezuela, Mexico, and the United States. We all spoke different languages, but we sang in Latin because that is the language we could sing in universally.

The most moving event of the Congress for me involved conducting a piece that was probably the least well organized, because it was a new addition. The Pueri Cantores choirs—all 4,200 singers—were sent out to parishes in the Roman suburbs and environs. My thirty-eight singers gathered with a choir from Puglia in the south of Italy. We couldn't speak to each other, and we had to quickly figure out the repertoire we were going to sing. But then, in that moment, the Mass was the Mass: it was this profound experience of praising God with who we are and what we had brought. At the end, we sang a brief concert; we sang three pieces, and the choir from Puglia sang three pieces. By happenstance, I had prepared a piece in Italian, and they had prepared a piece in English that was simply charming. It was so moving that people wept. That was perhaps the most musically inelegant moment of the Congress, but it was profound just to be a church choir singing with a church choir, with our only common language the love of God.

Nancy: *What do you have in store for attendees at the NPM convention in Kansas City this summer?*

Paul: I'm going to do a masterclass and a concert with a children's choir on two rehearsals. It's all about the preparation and making sure these young people know their notes and are comfortable with me. I'm just knocked out working with young people and young singers. They bring such energy and expectation. It will be a delight. Working with children, I find first and foremost that they are curious. We as conductors can open doors to music for them and, in the same way, touch their faith in simple but profound ways.

When I was a young conductor, I would prepare differently for my children's choir rehearsals and my adult choir rehearsals. Early on, I used to think, "It's kiddie choir—you know, whatever will be fine." The older I get, the more I learn that it has to be exactly the opposite. It's important for me to schedule every minute of rehearsal, so there's repertoire, a careful warmup, theory, and sight reading. I'm always training young people as musicians, calling them to be better, to be a part of the ensemble, to listen, to not over-sing, to sing with a healthy technique—but also leading them to find the thrill of singing. They sense if you're not prepared or if you're disingenuous. We have a great responsibility to form them as musicians and as young people, to teach them the discipline and the joy of singing in an ensemble, and to do it in an authentic manner that calls them to be their best.

Some of that is merely understanding when the kids are tired and taking a second to tell a few jokes and elicit some laughter. I have a big table of candy, and they understand that, if they work hard, there is a reward. But it's also about the pursuit of excellence—calling young people to open themselves up to the world of beauty, prayer, and praise of God, and helping them understand that the texts they're singing have meaning and history, that they point to God. These are topics I've spent my life pursuing, topics that really matter to me. With young people, we have to share our authentic enthusiasm. If you get them excited, they will respond, and their lives will be changed. That's a big responsibility, and we have to take it as such.

Nancy: It's clear you have high expectations of your choirs. Do you tend to choose songs that are written specifically for children's choirs, or do you prefer more general repertoire, even for younger voices?

Paul: That's a great question. At my church, we've got three levels. In the first- through third-grade choir, I tell their parents not to expect much repertoire from them, because that choir is about learning how to be a singer, how to be in an ensemble, how to stand, how to form your mouth, how to breathe, how to sustain a pitch, how to match pitch. We play games and do a lot of movement. We're certainly learning repertoire, but our goal is really the formation of singers.

The next group is the treble choir, grades four through eight, which sings a wide variety of ancient and modern music. I have never, since my earliest days, done a "kiddie choir" repertoire with a children's choir. I think we do young people a disservice if we are not imparting the breadth and depth of our sacred choral tradition to them.

Much of what we do in our parish is built off the repertoire for the Pueri Cantores festivals, which is very practical, because it's useful at school Masses and parish liturgies. From year to year, we only change about thirty percent of the repertoire, so there's a lot of consistency. That said, I like to put choirs together in various iterations, so next weekend, our parish's two youngest children's choirs will sing together. The week after that, the treble choir will meet up with the men of our top adult choir.

Nancy: Can you tell us more about Pueri Cantores?

Paul: Pueri Cantores in its purest form is the student choral organization of the Roman Catholic Church. It's an international federation that was founded in the 1950s in France and is now based at the Vatican. There are federations in thirty-eight countries, with 70,000 children singing in choirs from around the world—India, Sri Lanka, Rwanda, the Congo, Burundi, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, Costa Rica, Canada, and Europe. Here in the United States, we understand our work to be, at its core, the evangelization of young people through the beauty of sacred music.

In 2024 we will have sixteen festivals in the United States, and I don't think it's a stretch to say that in a year or two we'll have twenty or twenty-five festivals. It continues to grow and expand. One of the challenges is that the more traditional groups think we're not traditional enough, and the more contemporary music makers think we're too traditional, but we actually do try to find a middle ground in terms of repertoire. As the choir director at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, it has been a tremendous boon for me in terms of recruiting singers, because our students love to go to these festivals. They love to meet other kids and exchange information, and then they keep in contact for years afterward.

Having young people gather at the local cathedral or basilica with the local bishop offers choir directors like myself the opportunity to watch the festival conductor in action. It becomes a masterclass for local choir directors, and it offers an opportunity for young singers to look around and say, "Wow, it's not just our church that's doing this!" It's so much broader than that, and so the Church becomes more universal through these events. The Church is in trouble, and we at Pueri Cantores see our work, small as it is, as an opportunity to show young people that there is beauty, prayer, and transforming power in the Church, all pointing to God through the music that we sing.

Pueri Cantores also sponsors webinars for music teachers through the National Catholic Educational Association. There is a real need for practical education, be it how to work with children's choirs, teaching chant, vocal pedagogy, preparing lessons and carols, or planning a diocesan choral festival. This year's webinars are an integrated three-part series with some extraordinary educators from around the country.

Nancy: Do you have any words of advice for our readers, your fellow pastoral musicians?

Paul: The work we do is important, and it's a grind. Oftentimes during the year, as you're working up to Holy Week or Christmas, you're missing so much time with family, with children, in relationships, but what we do matters. Find moments of collegiality where you can support each other, and take care of yourself. Know that God is well praised in the work we do.