Culture



Victor Bento performs as St. Adrian (countertenor) in "Sweet Chains" on Oct. 19, 2024, at St. Vincent Ferrer Church in New York City. (Courtesy of David Thompson Fairchild)



by Camillo Barone

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On a freezing February afternoon in New York, a countertenor and soprano singers rehearse in the bright basement of an old Upper West Side church.

Clifton Massey and Margaret Carpenter Haigh sing dramatic musical dialogues about the martyr St. Catherine, accompanied by music composed in 1701 by Italian Pier Francesco Tosi. Between 1701 and that February afternoon, those blissful and delicate chants, attractive for the evocative power of the story they tell, had never before been sung.

Jeremy Rhizor is leading a musical revival that few others have dared to undertake. As the founder and artistic director of the Academy of Sacred Drama, Rhizor has spent the last decade breathing new life into 17th and 18th century oratorios, a genre largely forgotten outside of Baroque masterpieces and that no one has been able to hear in about 300 years.

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This year, Rhizor is focusing on early Christian martyrs, with three upcoming performances titled "Noble Soul" on March 14-16 in churches and halls in New York City, North Salem, New York, and Scarsdale, New York, featuring the story of St. Catherine of Alexandria.

"In the Americas, we're the only ones offering this," Rhizor said to the National Catholic Reporter in an interview. "And even in Europe, there are very few groups that do it, and for the most part, they don't do it as consistently as we do."

Founded by Rhizor in 2013, the Academy of Sacred Drama seeks to revive the long-overlooked genre of Baroque oratorio — dramatic musical works rooted in biblical narratives and the lives of saints. Inspired by the Academy of Arcadia of 17th century Rome, Rhizor envisioned a modern artistic and scholarly institution

dedicated to bringing these sacred stories to contemporary audiences.

What began as intimate, informal performances in New York City private apartments and halls quickly grew into a formalized nonprofit organization in 2017, earning recognition for staging modern and North American premieres of oratorios not heard in centuries.



Academy of Sacred Drama's classically trained mime, Tony Lopresti, teaches singers and players dramatic movements during a rehearsal in a basement of an Upper West Side church in New York City in February. (NCR photo/Camillo Barone)

Rhizor first conceived the idea during his final year studying historical performance at Juilliard. His passion for both music and religion led him to launch the academy with a performance at Corpus Christi Church in New York City. Since then, the group has committed itself to presenting rare oratorios, each requiring new editions, translations and a deep understanding of the music's historical and theological roots.

"It's a little bit like monks approaching an illuminated manuscript," Rhizor said. "When you spend a great amount of time going over something that's beautiful and sacred, you start to incorporate that into your life."

Academy of Sacred Drama's upcoming performances

Theme: Early Christian Martyrs

Performance title: "Noble Soul"

Story featured: St. Catherine of Alexandria

Dates and locations: March 14 — North Salem, New York; March 15 — New York City; March 16 — Scarsdale, New York

Tickets: Available here

Through the years, the academy has explored biblical narratives such as the life of Moses and the story of Judith, as well as thematic seasons dedicated to composers such as Giovanni Bononcini and Antonio Gianettini.

Thinking of this year's March edition, Rhizor said that audiences attending these productions can expect more than just music.

"There will be music happening the entire time. There will be an introduction before you even walk in the door. The audience can expect to get a libretto booklet designed like the booklets that people would receive when they went to the opera or the oratorio in Baroque time," he said.

"At the end of the production, they will have seen something that no one else in modern times has experienced."

The Academy of Sacred Drama's work is filling a significant cultural gap.

"It's not just a void in New York," Rhizor said. "When it comes to the genre of oratorio, something's missing almost entirely from our culture."



Emily Donato as La Madre (soprano) and John Taylor Ward as Il Padre (bass baritone) share a heartfelt moment in "Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi" on Feb. 24, 2024, at St. Vincent Ferrer Church in New York City. (Courtesy of David Thompson Fairchild)

Despite its rich history, the oratorio has largely been left out of modern sacred and secular performance traditions. Rhizor believes that reviving these works helps restore a lost cultural and religious heritage.

"If we aren't actively remembering those stories, if we're not living them in our lives, then those stories are dead and Christianity becomes an empty shell," he said. "Sacred drama is a way of being able to remember the core stories of Christianity that drove people to be extraordinary through the past two millennia."

The academy's work is essentially groundbreaking, reviving oratorios that have been unheard for centuries.

"Many of our performances are at least North American premieres, if not modern world premieres. You know, we haven't done it since the 17th century," said Adam Cockerham, the associate music director of the Academy of Sacred Drama and theorbo player, an ancient classical instrument.

However, he emphasized that the significance of these works extends beyond their rarity.

"I think the idea that we're telling these Catholic stories, but they're really human stories," he said. "And you don't have to be versed on Catholic theology to come in and take away what's happening between the characters on stage."



Andrew Padgett as Demonio (bass baritone) with Academy of Sacred Drama instrumentalists in the background perform "The Man at the Crossroads" on Nov. 24, 2019, at St. Vincent Ferrer Church in New York City. (Courtesy of David Thompson Fairchild)

For the academy's upcoming performance of "St. Catherine's Sacred Drama," Cockerham highlighted the strength of St. Catherine's character, describing her as "a very young woman who was challenging the authority in Egypt at her time, and who converted masses with her strength, just her total centering and pride in herself and in what she was saying and what she believed, and how that caused people to follow her."

Yet, despite the academy's artistic success, finding institutional support remains a challenge. While many churches are structured around liturgical music, education and administration, few have dedicated efforts toward presenting sacred narratives through performance.

"It has been difficult to find a home for this work on an ongoing basis," Rhizor said. "I think most churches can't imagine what role drama or even communicating the stories of Christianity have to do with their mission and their operations."

Nevertheless, the audience response to the Academy of Sacred Drama's work has been profound. Some discover music and composers they never knew existed, while others find new perspectives on religious stories.



Andrew Leslie Cooper as Clizio (countertenor), with Christina Kay as St. Nicholas (soprano) in foreground perform in "St. Nicholas" on Dec. 17, 2022, at St. Vincent Ferrer Church in New York City. (Courtesy of David Thompson Fairchild)

Tony Lopresti, a classically trained mime (namely, a silent actor in the style of Étienne Decroux) and the movement director of the Academy of Sacred Drama, has dedicated the last six years of his career to work with the academy's singers on body language and gesture to communicate the oratorios' narratives.

"The best reaction we got from an audience member was, 'It looks like a Renaissance painting come to life,' " he said. By enhancing the singers' expressiveness, Lopresti aims to make the 17th century Italian language performances accessible to audiences without reliance on translations. "If they can understand just from the movements and gestures of the singers, it starts to create an interaction among the characters, which brings to life more of the themes of the oratorios."

The performances at the Academy of Sacred Drama, for this reason, go beyond traditional concerts, incorporating a significant amount of physicality. One of the most striking audience reactions Lopresti said he has encountered affirmed the power of movement in these performances.

"One person said, 'I could see the music,' " Lopresti said.

"People come to any kind of music concert, expecting that their entire experience is going to be auditory, but this is an experience that's auditory and visual and emotional, so it's multidimensional."