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## Perosi Choir unveils Macau's treasure trove of music

Monica Leong

It's like one of those hidden treasure stories that you may find in Europe: a trove of sacred music written by an Austrian priest in the 1940s while serving the Church in Macau somehow ending up in a flea market outside a temple.

This is probably the latest example of the European legacy in Macau, which opened doors for the development of the culture of choral music in the city through the Catholic religion brought here by Portuguese seafarers nearly half a millennium ago.

This previously unknown musical repertoire by Fr. Wilhelm Schmid discovered in 2009 finally had its premiere in Sao Domingos Church on Sunday in a concert delivered by the local Perosi Choir. Locally, he was also known as Guilherme Schmid.

The two-part concert also featured musical pieces written by Fr. Schmid's student, Portuguese Fr. Aurco Castro, whose work features Buddhist chants that he picked up from temples while he was serving in Macau.

A second performance of the choir's "Concert for Promotion of Local Choral Works in Macau" will take place in the same place on Saturday, December 7, at 8 p.m. Admission is free.

### Treasure Hunt

Music plays an important role in Roman-Catholic liturgy and Fr. Schmid (1910-2000) was one of the longest serving musicians the local diocese had to teach liturgical music in Macau.

A missionary for the Salesians of Don Bosco, Fr. Schmid was also the

principal of Instituto Salesiano, led the Macau Police Brass Band, taught at the St. Pio X Academy of Music and composed a plethora of hymns in the 27 years he spent in Macau from 1939.

"I couldn't sleep for many nights," Joao Ng Seng Hong, conductor of the local Perosi Choir told *MPD Weekender* earlier this week, on finding Fr. Schmid's musical work in a flea market outside Lin Kai Temple near Teatro Alegria (Wing Lok) in 2009.

"It was very interesting when I first saw the manuscripts," Ng, who has been in the church choir from an early age, recalled. "I don't know why but I felt drawn to it and when I looked at the composer's name, it says 'Smid s.s' and naturally you'd start to wonder if they were written by Fr. Schmid."

After a year of research, Ng was able to prove that the manuscript of the full Mass found in the flea market was indeed a copy of Fr. Schmid's work that was handwritten by Fr. Cesare Brianza (1918-1986), who was ordained in Shanghai and served in Macau.

"It was a delight to see these manuscripts show up and be able to prove that it was Fr. Schmid's, I was simply overwhelmed," Ng said.

### Digging Deeper

It is not known how the manuscripts ended up in the flea market. Besides, the manuscript of the Mass was without a title, which was unusual for Fr. Schmid, and for that reason, the choir named the work "Mass in B-flat Major".

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The Perosi Choir performs the "Concert for Promotion of Local Choral Works in Macau" in Sao Domingos Church on Sunday.

Photo: Perosi Choir



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The choir then went on a music tour in 2011 to take Fr. Schmid's legacy back to his birthplace in the small Austrian town of Hornstein, a trip that provided more clues for Ng to dig further.

Ng found an archive that shows Fr. Schmid had written "The Lady of Peace" in Macau that was delivered to Shanghai to mark the crowning of a bronze statue of Mary in Sheshan Basilica in 1946.

But there have never been any records of the music scores of Fr. Schmid's "The Lady of Peace".

"Now I want to prove that this manuscript we found in the flea market is in fact the one that was written for the coronation ceremony," Ng said, adding, almost convinced, "When we practiced with the manuscripts, it gave us the impression that the piece was for that purpose."

Ng, who is the conductor for "Mass in B-flat Major" in the first part of the concert, described the piece as "bold with more complex and impressive emotional expressions."

### Buddhist Chants

The second part of the concert looks at the contrasting choral works composed by Fr. Castro (1917-1993), who pursued music under the guidance of Fr. Schmid.

Unlike his mentor, Fr. Castro's music repertoire is largely influenced by Chinese music.

"Father Castro would always go up on the roof to study where he would hear monks chanting in the nearby temples so that he would later blend those elements into his work," Ng said.

Arriving in Macau when he was just 14 to attend the St. Joseph's Seminary, Fr. Castro was exposed to the traditions of many local cultures, which can be heard in his compositions.

A number of Chinese songs written by Fr. Castro will be presented in the second part of the concert, which will be led by the choir's assistant conductor

Katrine Wong Ka-ki.

Fr. Castro's Te Deum (hymn of praise) in its original form, that is, with organ accompaniment, was presented for the first time at Sunday's concert and will once again be the finale of the upcoming concert next Saturday.

"It's very worthwhile to go to this concert because you get to listen to the music composed locally, the two composers have a teacher-student relationship and it's interesting to hear how dissimilar their music is," Wong said.

The local Perosi Choir was formed in 1997 by a group of choral music enthusiasts. It was named after Lorenzo Perosi who led the Sistine Chapel Choir in Vatican City.

Baptised in 1963, Joao Ng Seng Hong joined the church choir and sang at festivals. "We sang the work of Perosi most of the time and its music to everyone's ears," Ng said.

Lam Peng Leong was in charge of the local liturgical music scene in the 1990s and, at the time, needed a choir to sing for an event and looked for Ng for help. About 60 people joined and sang a variety of Perosi's work for the event.

The group then organised a one-off concert to pay tribute to Perosi in March 1997.

"We needed a name for the group and because we were all so fond of Perosi, well, that it was the first name that came to mind," Ng said and in 1998, the Perosi Choir was formally registered as a non-profit music association.

"A choir is very valuable to the community as it brings people together and you need to respect each other's voices," Lai Chan Kei, one of the choir members, said, adding that the choir was eagerly looking for male members, calling out to those with a voice and love to sing to join the choir.



A file photo of Perosi Choir performs in one of their previous concerts. Photo: Perosi Choir



A scan of the first page of the manuscript of the full Mass that was found in a flea market in 2009.



(from left) Perosi Choir conductor Joao Ng Seng Hong, assistant conductor Katrine Wong Ka-ki and member Lai Chan Kei pose for a photo during an interview with MPD Weekender at the association's premises on Tuesday.

Photo: Monica Leong

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