



Father Martial Caron, S.J., Looks Back on the Years 1954-1961...

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"The Usage of the Iroquois Tongue at Caughnawaga in the Chanting of Liturgical Services And some Consequences on the Possible Use of Gregorian Chant in the Vernacular. A Musicological and Critical Essay"

By
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Such is the impressive title of a thesis on liturgical chant in the Iroquois tongue at Caughnawaga. This thesis should be published, at least in part. For instance:

1. "The Origins of Liturgical Music at Caughnawaga."
 2. "An Excursus on the Privilege in Use at Caughnawaga."
- As to "A Critical Analysis of the

"Plain Chant at Caughnawaga," by the Reverend Martial Caron, S.J., appeared in the 1961 September issue of *Kateri*. At the last line, in italics, one could read, "To be continued." After ten years, Father Caron has consented, not to continue the same article, but to rewrite it completely. Despite the fact that, during his recent visit to the Mission, he spent most of his time preparing a new *Book of Church Music in Iroquois*, which will shortly come off the press, he kindly consented to revive for us the years he dedicated to Church music at Caughnawaga. These years now belong to the three century history of the Mission. Had Father Caron not written these pages, what would we know about this period in a decade or so? Our friends interested in the Mohawks and their language and in religious music, will enjoy, I am sure, Father Caron as he looks back on the years 1954-1961. . .

H. B.

Recent Iroquois Kyriale and Hymn Book," I take the liberty to make a few observations. As a matter of fact, I simply disagree.

By some unknown plan of Divine Providence, on August 5, 1954, I landed in Caughnawaga to become director of the renowned Iroquois Mixed Choir.

What I Found

At the beginning, I sensed a natural coyness among the singers but I also felt an unreserved collaboration which soon was spelling trust, ease, genuine friendliness. I did and I still do appreciate this attitude, the more so because it has lasted until today.

It has greatly helped me to overcome the difficulties inherent to all new situations from both the subjective and objective circumstances. May I mention a few?

1. Music has no tongue. But in church it serves one: the Iroquois tongue in this case. (And, lest I forget to say it, the Iroquois tongue is the most agreeable tongue for a singer.) At the start, I was nevertheless quite baffled, almost lost.

2. The vast repertory was written by hand on separate sheets, sometimes in small booklets. One piece to one sheet or booklet.

3. There was a volume of liturgical Gregorian music, all in Indian: the contents, the titles, the table of contents and even the name and address of the editor. This was and is still a very precious book, edited by the Rev. N. V. Burtin, O.M.I., and published by Sénécal et Fils, Montreal, 1890, with the imprimatur of Bishop Chs.-Ed. Fabre. The edition was then out of print. The few copies left were quite faded

and tattered. With a sense of humor, Mrs. Josephine Jacobs once said they looked more like "decks of cards" than books. These books now only serve as reference books. My predecessors, Father Conrad Hauser, S.J., and, in particular, Father Alfred Bernier, S.J., D. M. and Mr. Charles Edouard Piché, with more or less care and solicitude, had adapted to the Vatican Gregorian edition, the most commonly used parts of Father Burtin's work: the Ordinary, the Proper of the liturgical year and of the Saints, a number of hymns and motets, etc. This material, as I already said, was written by hand on individual sheets or booklets, and was considered the standard tool in the trade.

4. Among the booklets was the *Iroquois Kyriale and Hymn Book* mentioned by Father McNasky. More about it later.

5. Some manuscripts were excellent. Some were not so good regarding both the printing and the adaptation, for example, the booklet including the four Sundays after Pentecost, which I had to decipher at the very start, in August 1954.

6. I sometimes felt that I had discovered an unknown world with not much preparation and hardly anyone to steer me properly.

Among the Fathers at the Mission, there was Father Georges Brodeur, superior and pastor. He was an alumnus of St. Boniface College where I had met him as a student. There was Father Camille Drolet, known as "the magic priest", known also for his free-hand drawings, an old pal since the novitiate at Sault-au-Récollet. There were Father Henri Béchar and Father

Albert Burns teaching at Tekakwitha School.

They all had their load of work. Their personal field of activity and mine had no close connection. After the untimely death of Father Alfred Bernier, Father Jacques Bruyère had become interim director. But he was leaving for tertianship. Father Conrad Hauser, as retreat master, travelled quite a bit. It was not so easy to contact him for an interview. I knew none of the choir members. Fortunately, Mr. Bernardin Houle, the organist, was very patient. I owe him a lot. Later on, I was to meet Mrs. Annie Lahache, who is now in her fiftieth year of service as a choir member. For the time being, I felt alone and unprepared in a rather unknown field of work.

With deep appreciation and affection, I mention here some very sympathetic names of this initial period. First the departed: Mr. Peter Taylor, Mr. Joseph Beauvais and Attorney Norman Saylor, who caught my attention the day of the dedication of the new statue of Kateri. He was Master of Ceremonies, and a very efficient one. He introduced Father Michael Jacobs as the first Jesuit to become an Indian. Done on purpose or not, this slip of the tongue most certainly deserves to be remembered. Gone also is Mrs. Emma Rice. With Mrs. Mae Montour, she was my godmother at an impromptu reception in the Gloversville Hotel during a trip to Auriesville in 1958, where I was given the name of "Ravennine". Gone also is Mrs. Mary-Josie Jacobs. For years and years she sang at weekday Masses, at Benedictions of the Blessed

Sacrament and at other ceremonies. If the truth is to be told, sometimes she was present as a singer, sometimes as an organist, sometimes as both, with a fidelity that neither rain, snow nor storm could overcome. Many manuscripts among the best are in her handwriting. Some are dated and initialled J.J., but unfortunately not all. With reference to the daily Mass singers, I also wish to mention Mrs. Agathe Foote, and later Mrs. Esther Phillips who took over successively. I add the names of the Mrs. Eileen LeFebvre, Josie Diabo, Mae Montour, Annie Lahache and those already mentioned who sang at the funerals and at the pilgrimages. Sometimes they had to show up on very short notice; for instance, a last minute phone call, even on a laundry day, would bring them to the church. They were in a way, the Fire Brigade in the liturgical service. No one will be surprised, and even less, be jealous, if I close this long but quite incomplete list by adding the name of Mrs. Montour "*Kwawennawi*." For those who know her, her very name is history. For the others, may I just say that she was a personality, almost an institution, very engaging and in many ways unique.

What I Did and Why

From the very start, two things impressed me: The music and mellowness in the Indian words, and the feeling that the singers used their colorful voices to express something they understood. (In those days, everywhere else in the Church, the liturgical singing was in the not-so-clear Latin vocabulary.) Doubts came to my mind. Were the

Indian words given their proper place, which is the first one? I think it was Dom Pothier who said: "*La parole est reine, la musique est servante*". Which means: "The word is king, the music is hand-maid." Was the music enhancing the musicalness of the Indian words, or were the Indian words used as a pretext to sing high caliber Gregorian, classical or modern compositions? Was the subtle and sometimes disconcerting accent given proper and even sufficient attention? Frankly, I thought that some of the manuscripts and parts of the printed *Kyriale* I had in hand, did not at all make the grade.

I knew that all this was in the realm of impression, being, in the matter, ignorant with a capital I. So I had to investigate, and I did. I consulted those who were patient enough to listen. I consulted on many items. I listened very attentively, with more and more pleasure, to the singers in the choir. One word of Father Conrad Hauser, S.J., confirmed my doubts, "Beware of what has been arranged after 1934." This was the year he left the mission. And he added reassuringly, as one who knows: "Contact Mrs. Annie Lahache; she can and will help you." She did. As the saying goes, "It is not what you give that matters but the way you give it." She gave very much, in a very

pleasant way and over a very long period of time.

But at that moment, my first question was: "Who is Mrs. Annie Lahache?" I soon learned that she was at the hospital off and on suffering from a bruised leg for more than twenty years. How was I to go about my work? Where was I to start? Would she listen to a newcomer with revisionary ideas, more or less pretentious, more or less utopian? She had something else to do than to answer my questions or discuss my viewpoints. Her general health was not too good. It was normal that she should use her rare leisure moments to rest rather than to tell me the meaning of some Indian words, explain their construction, indicate their subtle accentuation. Would she collaborate with my shaky efforts to put music at the service of the Indian words? Father Hauser had given me the right address. From the first interview through seven years, Mrs. Lahache, with unchanging kindness and patience, gave to the cause her time, her experience and her intelligence. Though some of her casual remarks, I felt I was on the right trail.



PHOTO BLACKHAM

"Kwawennawi"

In July 1955, after consultation with the singers and their acceptance, we sang a revised version of the *Asperges me Domine*. It is the first page of the *Kyriale* already mentioned. About this book published in 1945, Father McNaspy writes: "Thus the final product is a tribute to the unselfish competence of many collaborators." This is true and gratifying. Father McNaspy points out a few inaccuracies and adds: "However, one cannot minimize the unity and detailed accuracy of the new *Kyriale*. . . More, it can be said to be a definitive work, and subsequent editions of it will only need to correct the few oversights which we have indicated in our critique."

Frankly, I think Father McNaspy is overindulgent, even a bit superficial. It was my privilege — exactly, my job — to page through the *Kyriale* and to use it Sunday after Sunday, at Mass, at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and at funerals. I could never enjoy "the detailed accuracy" of it. The more I used it the less I could accept it as "a definitive work." The "few oversights" are rather many and most uncomfortable for the singers and for the director. Father McNaspy notes: ". . . the editor, whose name is not even printed in this *Kyriale*. . ." It is nobody's secret that Reverend Father Alfred Bernier, S.J., D.M., is the editor. He signed his thesis on *Bellarmin et la musique*. He signed his *Hymn to the Canadian Martyrs*, his *Hymn to Kateri* and other compositions. As much as I know Father Bernier, he had his reasons not to sign the *Kyriale*. He was a constant hard

worker, careful of details even almost meticulous in the best sense of the word. On this particular occasion, time and probably somebody else were urging. The year 1945 was the centenary year of the Church. I owe a lot to Father Bernier. I had plenty of friendly arguments with him over a period of thirty years, enough to know that he bore no grudge against his friends who did not accept all his viewpoints. And I frankly do not accept his *Kyriale*. But, and I insist, I am positive that he was not completely happy about it.

It would be too long, too technical and surely fastidious to go into a detailed analysis of the *Kyriale* and the other pages I had the nerve to rewrite.

Here are three remarks to close this long chapter:

1. I earnestly insist that I have consulted many persons about many items. I sincerely hope that I did not force my views on anyone. Moreover I do not at all believe that I have the last word, much less that "the definitive work" is here.

One evening I was apologizing to the choir for my bringing up a new revised version of some piece or other. Mr. Peter Taylor, a career member of the choir, who had seen many maestros, said bluntly but very casually: "Father, you are the boss!" This was a surprise. A very comforting surprise.

2. I am probably naïve. Perhaps I have been laboring under a delusion. But I believe that the late Peter Taylor was speaking the mind of a comfortable majority of the

members of the choir. At any rate, the singers volunteered to learn old pieces in a new way. This is less easy and much less interesting than studying new material. They sang them with more than polite cooperation. In a word they accepted me. I possess very few diplomas.¹ I prize this one over all the others.

3. Mr. Bernardin Houle, the organist, has written the accompaniment for the new version of the *Kyriale* and Proper including the Indian words. This gesture goes far beyond the range of "*la conscience professionnelle*." It is not overfrequent in choir lofts. One cannot exact such cooperation. It is priceless and really admirable.

Easter Music

When I came to Caughnawaga, there still remained quite a number of singers of the choir's golden age, let us say 1930-1950. Some had to leave, some died. I was surprised to note that the newcomers were scarce and not quite of the same caliber. The actual repertoire included masses, motets and other compositions much over the range of beginners and amateurs. The old members knew them by heart, sang them with ease and loved to repeat them. The newcomers felt the load was very heavy to shoulder. It was necessary to look for a repertoire of smaller range and of simpler style. With the help of Mrs. Lahache, always available, I impudently went ahead. By that time, I had revised old pieces. I had to test myself on new ones. I had in mind an easy collection built up for college boys at St. Boniface College. Some of these new pieces were enjoyed even

by the old members and are still in use.

Loose-Leaf Booklets

As I said at the beginning, the music here was handwritten on separate sheets except for the *Kyriale*. I soon found it an unpleasant job to carry upstairs an armful of folders every Sunday and at every rehearsal. It was an even less palatable business to sort the sheets after Mass and after rehearsals. The first compilation was that of the material for the new Holy Week, edited in 1956 by Pope Pius XII. Some eighty-eight pages, typed, printed, bound together with book rings. It is quite outdated now.

At the same time, three other booklets were in the making:

1. The Black Book: *Kyriale* and Proper;
2. The Black Book with the Blue Cover: a collection of hymns and motets;
3. The Book for Funerals: a selection comprising the Gregorian Mass for the Dead, the Reception of the Deceased, and the Absolution or Prayers of Intercession for the Dead at the end of the burial service, several polyphonic Masses for the Dead, some complete, others only in parts, and, finally, some Liberas and hymns for the Dead.

In 1959, I suffered paralysis of the left side, and in 1961, circumstances forced me to quit the Mission.

Kahnawake, April 1971

1. Father Caron is modest. Among other honors, he was granted the National Drama Award for outstanding service to the Arts and the Theater in Canada (Editor's note).