

Music Helps Fill the Church At the Co-Cathedral



Music Director Alejandro Zuleta and Choir Leader Cristina Maria Castro from the Co-Cathedral of St. Joseph in Prospect Heights believe that music is the best medicine to bring parishioners back to the pews following the Covid pandemic. The music they provide floods the hallowed halls of the century-old cathedral on a daily basis, along with special events including a liturgy celebrating St. Joseph which took place in March, and Zuleta's conducting of Bach's "St. John's Passion" this past April.

Zuleta is an acclaimed conductor, organist, pianist and composer. He was born and raised in Bogota, Colombia, and grew up in a traditional musical family where he sang in choirs from the age of eight. He studied musical composition in Colombia and moved to New York 10 years ago where he began his conducting career at the Manhattan School of Music.

While Zuleta has always been drawn to sacred and classical music, he does admit a fondness for jazz. Zuleta said he was a huge fan of pianist Keith Jarrett as well as jazz legends Bill Evans, Oscar Peterson and Erroll Garner, along with Miles Davis and Charles Mingus.

"That's another reason I moved to New York, to perform jazz," Zuleta admitted. "Then nine years ago I landed a job as an organist and choral conductor at Trinity Lutheran Church in Bay Ridge, and for the past five years I've been the music director at St. Joseph's."

It was "Missa Pange Lingua" by French Renaissance composer Josquin de Prez that changed Zuleta's life forever. "When I was in college and heard the 'Pange Lingua' Mass by Josquin, that was it for me, and it was from that moment on that I started singing in choirs and embracing sacred music," he added.

Four years ago, Castro met Zuleta by chance, when she and her husband attended Mass at St. Joe's. They had moved to New York and were searching for a Catholic church that was close to where they were living at the time. Castro and her husband both met while singing in the church choir in high school in San Antonio, Texas.

Castro was taken by the splendor of the cathedral and felt that she should be singing there. "So, I went up and in-

troducted myself to Alejandro. I actually tracked him down in the stairwell of the cathedral and told him that I wanted to sing in his choir." Castro holds a B.A. and M.A. in music and found her own inspiration in sacred music, although she admits to listening to Tejano, or Tex-Mex, and country music while living in San Antonio.

Zuleta and Castro explained that it was during the pandemic that work picked up as they were supporting the liturgy in church with music that wasn't performed during daily Mass, and was being watched by parishioners at home via Zoom. "We were here all the time, weekdays and Sundays," she recalled. "It

was awesome to have this incredible outlet as musicians and to be here to support a community that was in need."

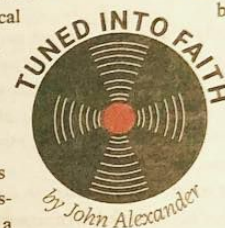
St. Joseph's Co-Cathedral Rector, Father Christopher Heanue praised Zuleta for his accomplishments. "Alejandro and all of the musicians at the Co-Cathedral truly help to

elevate the spirits of the faithful each and every day with daily Mass and always go above and beyond by using their talents and their gifts to give glory to God and the Eucharist at the Mass."

Both Zuleta and Castro view music as a way to bring people back to church. "We now have more people than we ever had attending Mass," explained Zuleta. "And even when they are not physically here, we were seeing 4,000 people watching the Mass online. I think people needed to see it and our audience really grew."

He also believes that attendance at Sunday Mass has grown exponentially from what it was before because now people want to experience the liturgy they had been seeing on Zoom in person as a community. They have been trying to balance performing some new music along with pieces that people are more familiar with.

Father Heanue agreed that the lure of live music has enticed parishioners back into the pews. "While television and social media help to unite with the events taking place at the Co-Cathedral, even the best sound quality through technology is nothing in comparison to the beauty when you hear something performed live."



Castro pointed to "Missa Criolla" by Ariel Ramirez for the Solemnity of St. Joseph as a particular favorite piece to perform during this choral season. It is a stunning mix of classical and choral music with Argentinian and Latin rhythms and drums with Castro as the soloist along with a choir. "It's breathtaking music," said Zuleta. "You have to believe that there is something beyond. It's not just music you can listen to on the radio. That's fine, but what we are doing in our new program, that we call 'Music at Co-Cath,' is introducing people to music that they are not familiar with and has that 'oh wow' factor."

Additionally, Zuleta feels that the outdoor concerts they perform on the steps of St. Joe's may serve as a means to bring younger parishioners back into church. And while he admits that he prefers the intimate feel of a small choir, he would like to possibly add two more members to his current six-person group that performs on Sundays. For special performances, such as the St. John's Passion concert for example, there were 10 singers and a 10-piece orchestra.

"In an already busy period of time like the Christmas season and the days leading up to Holy Week, the music ministry led by Alejandro has put on extra concerts. Apart from preparing for the beauty of the liturgies they already have to prepare for, they've presented these works of art which

just illustrate their dedication, their talent and their professionalism in putting this together," Father Heanue added.

Looking ahead to next season, Zuleta promises more inspiring performances, such as "All Night Vigil" by Rachmaninoff and Monteverdi's "Vespers of 1610."

"We call these events 'concert plus,' as we include lighting and stage direction as a way to make the experience more accessible," he said. "We have screens with subtitles, for example, so it's not just playing music that you can hear on the radio all the time, but special selections performed in a way that makes them more accessible."

Zuleta notes that he is exceptionally pleased that people have been coming from beyond the five boroughs to attend the concerts and to experience the liturgy at St. Joe's.

He also believes that the beauty of St. Joseph's Cathedral factors into the evangelization process, as worshippers are mesmerized by the hymns and Renaissance pieces along with the less familiar samplings of classical and sacred music.

"There's a sense of beauty and wonder people experience when they attend Mass in such a beautiful surrounding and hear the music played around them," said Zuleta. "It's another connection to God, and that's the most important role that music has in terms of evangelization in church," he added.

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Top left: People gather for a concert outside the Co-Cathedral of St. Joseph. Bottom left: Acclaimed Music Director Alejandro Zuleta directs the choir during a concert outside the co-cathedral. Above: Zuleta leads the choir at St. Joseph's. (Photos: Jessica Irani)

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