

Sacred Music and Salvation

An Interview with Wilko Brouwers

Famous conductors of our day wave their batons in front of big city orchestras, compose electrically charged film scores, and attract adoring crowds. But there is more than one path to greatness. Others follow in the footsteps of Palestrina and Bach with their deliberate commitment to truly sacred music that is truly art. They understand the intimate relationship between music and holiness, and work to make that connection real in our religious lives.



Wilko Brouwers, conductor, composer, organist, and teacher, is a man for whom great music is inseparable from that which is sacred. He understands that it alone is this connection with the Creator that make music worthy of our best efforts, most specifically, within the context of the Catholic liturgy. Mr. Brouwers is unassuming in stature, but immense in artistry, insight, and the relentless pursuit of perfection in the service of the faith.

A native of the Netherlands, Brouwers studied choral conducting at the Music Academy of Arnhem and the Liszt Academy in Budapest, and is the director of the Ward Center Holland, an institute for music education. He has conducted the [Monteverdi Kamerkoor Utrecht](#) since 1989, a group which performs in the Netherlands and abroad, has made recording and earned top honors in the Dutch Choir Festival's mixed choir category in 1997 and 2000. He also directs the Strijps Kamerkoor, the Kinderkoor Keyersshoff, and plays the organ for Saint Christopher Church in Waalre.

Mr. Brouwers was invited to serve as choral conductor for the [Church Music Association of America's](#) 14th annual Colloquium on Liturgical Music and the Restoration of the Sacred, held at Catholic University the during the fourth week of June, 2004. The aim of this annual meeting is to assist church musicians in maintaining the highest artistic standards in composition and execution, and to preserve the Church's treasury of sacred music, especially Gregorian chant. Mr. Brouwers (email: Wilko.brouwers@tiscali.nl) was interviewed during this meeting by Arlene Oost-Zinner (avoz@earthlink.net) in Washington, DC.

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Q: How did you first encounter Gregorian chant?

BROUWERS: At a monastery of Benedictines. I was a little boy, and my father took me there, and I heard the monks sing. The next week I went on my bicycle, and I asked the name of the monk was who was conducting. Fr. Michael came out and introduced himself, and I asked him to teach me what they were doing. He took me into a wood and we sat on a large stone, and I

remember very distinctly what he said to me: “There is a world of melody, and a world of rhythm.”

Q: Did you understand what he meant?

BROUWERS: Not really, but he said it with such a sense of mystery that I was sure that he was right. I went back many times and he explained to me all about the notes and the groups and the chants. He explained about the ictus, and how this is not meant as an accent, but an invisible moment. You can imagine how the world was opening up for someone who had up until then only played the piano, where every tone is percussive. I was thirteen or fourteen years old.

Q: Were you a singer at the time?

BROUWERS: I was too shy. I started singing with Fr. Michael. Slowly I discovered its beauty. Later, of course, in the music academy, I continued learning Gregorian chant. I sang with the schola.

Q: And today?

BROUWERS –I’m a conductor, teacher, and composer.. I conduct three choirs, two chamber choirs, a youth choir, and there is a church choir which is now and then under my direction. I am also an organist in a small church.

Q: And you teach as well.

BROUWERS - The teaching I do is for the Ward Center. We teach courses for music teachers who want to use the method. I teach in the schools, too. I want to keep this contact with real work, and to feel how it is to do this work with children week after week. And composing, hmm, I do whenever I have a free hour or a free morning or a free week. It is mainly choral music.

Q: Is it all sacred music?

BROUWERS: No. Now I do other things as well. I try to use the Dutch language, where Dutch composers don’t want to use their own language. They write in English. They want to be international composers; they want to be sung outside the country. But I think the Dutch language is nice to write in, that I have decided to put an emphasis on it.

Q: Do you approach sacred and profane musically differently?

BROUWERS: No, to tell the truth, when I choose the text for a profane piece, there is always something sacred in it, too. Some poetry contains a higher life, and tells of a life beyond this one. I always try to find texts with depth. In general the idea of composition is the same, only when you compose directly for a particular church choir, and you know that they are not the very best choir, you have to keep that in mind.

You also have to be careful that you are not, how should I put it? Showing your art. You shouldn't be the vain one who says "listen to my piece." That is what I have tried to do with the *Missa Alma Pater* (sung at this colloquium). There is a lot of silence in it; it is prayerful composing. Humble isn't a good word, but you know what I mean.

Q: Do your chamber choirs sing chant?

BROUWERS: Yes, I often combine chant with polyphony in a concert. Of course you feel it when the chant is not part of the sacred action. Still, people buying a tickets and hearing the chant might be touched. Something of the sacred enters in.

Q: Should all singing in church be a capella?

BROUWERS: Good accompaniment can add something to singing in a church. I am not talking about merely picking out the melody. That is what you usually hear, and this doesn't take much skill. What I like to do is pick up the melody in the alto or the tenor line, and lead the singing in an indirect way.

Q: How is this effective?

BROUWERS - A person listens to the music and finds the melody buried within it. And once he has found it, he can sing it himself. I once had a gentleman come up to me and motion to his throat and he said, "When you play, I can sing. I don't know what you do, but I feel I can sing." He was overjoyed. I was too.

Q: You also inspire people with visual imagery. You use this when you are conducting a choir.

BROUWERS: Oh, you noticed?

Q: Of course.

BROUWERS - It is a way of working. I like to read and write poetry, so I try to inspire people by giving them some kind of image, and then they can do what needs to be done. Only giving them technical information, about your throat and mouth and lips, can cause everything to become very empty. But a good image inspires you to do something a certain way.

Q: You do the same with children, I assume.

BROUWERS: There is not much difference to me. I work with children as if they were adults, and they respond to this very well. I like to use humor and imagery. Of course there are always some people who tell me that they want more technical information. But the goal, I think, is for people to bring their experiences and their inspiration into the musical work.

Q: All of this assumes, of course, all of your choir members are showing up at rehearsal. How do you deal with attendance issues?

BROUWERS: Yes, that can be a problem. I like to make it the responsibility of the choir itself and not me who tells them they have to come. I remind them that we had all agreed to be there.

We all agreed. If you do not come, it is not only that you are causing a problem for me, because my instrument is not complete, but you are causing a problem for everyone who agreed to be there.

Q: Making attendance an individual responsibility is the answer?

BROUWERS: To be honest, I don't have the type of problem that people aren't coming without good reasons. When it does happen, you have to draw great attention to it. Choir singing demands a certain attitude, and you often have to teach this to people. Not everyone comes in with this attitude.

Q: Do you perceive any trends in attitudes toward liturgy and liturgical music in the Netherlands right now?

BROUWERS: I can't say there is anything characteristic. There are so many different types of churches, including Catholic churches, with different profiles. This is typically Dutch, too, especially these days. There is a great variety of things, and people have the possibility to find their way in this variety. Everyone can find a place where he is at home.

Q: Where are you most at home?

BROUWERS: I like to go to Sunday Mass at the monastery I mentioned earlier. It is right on the border of Holland and Belgium. One can say that when one sits in the dining room, one side of the table is in Holland and one in Belgium. This is really a place of silence. The music is surrounded by silence.

Q: You have mentioned silence now several times.

BROUWERS: Yes. I think silence is a sacred thing in music. It is as important as the notes themselves.

Q: What else moves you, as a conductor?

BROUWERS: Ah, very good question. The thing that makes me say "wow!?" It is the *Vespro della Beata Vergine*, by Monteverdi. That is the thing. That is it. We did it three years ago with fantastic instrumentalists, soloists, and I had the best time of my life. It begins with the same motif as that that begins the opera "Orpheus." It was so great, with tenors standing far away to create an echo.

Q: Was this a convention of the 17th century?

BROUWERS: Yes, Monteverdi had asked for it. The tenor stands in front of the people, and it creates the effect of a real echo. Just fabulous.

Something else I would like to conduct, and I haven't done it yet, is the B Minor Mass by Bach. There is nothing like standing in front of your group and a piece is so big that it is not about you or your group or the singers or the orchestra. It is about something much bigger. You forget yourself completely.

Q: How can you direct if you lose yourself in a piece of music?

BROUWERS: You have to deal with the details during rehearsal, but during the concert, the details need to come from the singers. I use a pencil to mark a few places on my score where I am needed, but during a concert, the details need to come from the group. I don't conduct those.

Q: What was your most memorable conducting experience at this Colloquium?

BROUWERS: I think the Durufle "Pater Noster" was very nice. I felt that people were really watching my hands, and treating the piece very tenderly.

Q: Was not watching a problem with the other pieces?

BROUWERS: There wasn't enough time. When the choir knows the piece well and can watch me, there is a great feeling: the feeling of bodies and minds being connected. But if the choir is not ready and still has to read, we cannot make this contact. When we started the Sweelink's "Venite exultemus Domino," bodies began to wake up. It is very energetic.

Oh, and do you know what I enjoyed very much? I enjoyed standing in the Crypt Church of the Shrine during rehearsal on the Di Lasso "Improperium." It gave you that feeling of "aha!" You could feel the music coming to life.

Q: What can you say of your experience with this Colloquium in general?

BROUWERS: Of course I was honored when Fr. Skeris invited me to come. It was an exciting opportunity, but I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know if there would be a choir at all. And then to find out on the first evening that we had nine sopranos, nine altos, six tenors, and six basses! I was very happy.

Q: What about the quality of the singing?

BROUWERS: I think everyone was so open, and so motivated to do a good thing. Every day the choir grew in sound and concentration. Although the performances may not be for a recording or the radio, it doesn't matter. We had a good experience with all of the pieces. The most important thing is that there are moments in your rehearsal, or in your performance when you capture the spirit of the piece.

Q: Have you had any personal revelations this week?

BROUWERS: I had many conversations with many people, and it was very interesting to me to see how people try to find their way. They are often quite alone in what they want. I didn't meet any bitter or disappointed people. I meet them in Holland more often.

It was very inspiring for me to see that everyone had his own flame of inspiration still burning. It was also interesting for me to see that the European culture is so highly esteemed: in the liturgy, and in the architecture, for example.

Q: Was this regard for European culture something you hadn't anticipated?

BROUWERS: I didn't know. I thought American culture was something of its own. In this group, as Fr. Skeris said in one of his lectures, our roots are in Europe. That is interesting for me. What kind of feeling is that, to live here, but to say that your cultural roots are elsewhere. Does it feel that you are in exile?

Q: "In exile" is an interesting way to put it.

BROUWERS: Do you feel that you are in exile, or do you feel at home here. Does it feel like something foreign that you are trying to make your own?

Q: Oh, are you asking me?

BROUWERS: Yes, sorry!

Q: Well, I can only speak for myself. My parents were both European, so I spent a great deal of time in Europe as a child. I've always lived with both cultures. In my case, I feel I came to a point where I had to decide where I belong, and where life will continue.

BROUWERS: I wouldn't have known this.

Q: As an artist, in what ways are you aware of your own cultural heritage?

BROUWERS: Well, my wife is a good example. She is from Hungary. I lived in Hungary for a year, and after we were married we decided to move to Holland. We have been living in Holland for sixteen years. She feels at home in Holland, but there is always a part of her soul which is still in Hungary. And when we go to Hungary for the summer holidays, part of her soul is in Holland. She combines the two influences very well. As for myself, I live in the village where I was born.

Q: Where is that?

BROUWERS: In Eindhoven. It is in the south, near the Belgian border. I, for instance, like to compose in my own language. But I try to compose in Hungarian, too. You have your own roots, but you always have something else which attracts you. Orlando Di Lasso, for example, combined everything. He combined all of European culture in his music.

Q: How does this come into play when you are composing for the Church? On the one hand you want to compose something that, like the chant, is universal. On the other hand, you are dealing with an independent and inevitable set of cultural influences.

BROUWERS: You don't do what you do consciously. My wife might come in while I am composing and say, "that sounds Hungarian." And I ask, "does it?" Or I might be composing something in a certain mode without realizing it. Of course with the *Missa Alma Pater* I was working from something already given, but for the most part, the music just comes about. It is in your blood.

Q: What is it in Sweelink's work that makes it Dutch?

BROUWERS: I think that Dutch composers, as Dutch people in general, like to organize things. Dutch music is very organized. Every note is in the right place, and has a very clear structure. Many modern composers over organize, thinking only about the construction of the piece. There comes a moment when you don't feel any soul, or any blood in the piece.

Q: Is this a danger?

BROUWERS: Yes, but it doesn't have to be. Look at the works of the Dutch composers. Look at Josquin Du Pre, Sweelink or course, or Orlando Di Lasso, whom I mentioned before.

Q: Di Lasso was a Dutchman?

BROUWERS: Well, yes, but he worked everywhere. Di Lasso was a "European," *avant la lettre*.

Q: Was Sweelink a contemporary of Monteverdi? There was something modern about the piece we worked on.

BROUWERS: Yes, I have that same feeling with Monteverdi. He is so modern, still. That is why in one of my choirs, The Monteverdi Chamber Choir Utrecht, we sing Monteverdi and contemporary music, and sometimes within the same program. You feel the spirit of the composer. You are so surprised by his ideas and expression and knowledge of the human soul. I feel this in Sweelink, too.

Q: Can music save a soul?

BROUWERS: Yes, it can. In one sense all good music is religious. It is in this sense that it contains this one and only message: Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is the language of comfort.

Q: What music is your avenue to salvation?

BROUWERS: The big organ works by Bach that I listened to as a little boy. They told me that music is the language of heaven, that there is a great world beyond the one we live in every day. They made me decide to make music my profession, and to make my life worth living.