

Jan Michael Joncas Honored as Fellow of The Hymn Society



As is true, no doubt, for most of us, my initial encounter with Michael Joncas came through his song “On Eagle’s Wings,” a version of Psalm 91 he composed upon learning of the death of a close friend’s father. Whether or not we knew the name of the composer initially, it is a fitting point of contact as he is designated a Fellow in this organization dedicated to congregational song.

For an occasion as significant as this, it may seem inappropriate to turn to a cliché, but I do so, observing that clichés aren’t untrue or useless; they are merely fatigued. To know “On Eagle’s Wings” in relation to Michael Joncas’s life work is to have seen only the tip of the iceberg. I can think of no more apt or applicable description. (It was from the always-teaching Michael Joncas that I learned the Council of Trent used the Latin term *aptissime*—the most apt—when it wrote about the eucharistic term “transubstantiation.”)

Anyone with a computer, the internet, and access to a search engine can discover his impressive CV in a matter of moments: ordination to the Roman Catholic priesthood; degree in liturgy from Notre Dame; licentiate and doctorate in theology from San Anselmo in Rome; years of teaching and scholarship at St. Thomas University in St. Paul; visiting professor roles at various universities; innumerable workshops, concerts, keynote addresses, articles, books, and further musical compositions. I would rather explore what I’ve come to learn lies beneath that iceberg peak through some personal experiences and encounters over the years. An *aptissime* use of this space.

In 1994, a few years after I joined the staff of World Library Publications in Chicago, we were invited to publish a collection of music for Evening Prayer to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Notre Dame Center for Pastoral Liturgy. My role (as a *very* novice author) was to be the principal text writer for its ritual elements (invitatories, seasonal thanksgivings for the light, intercessions, blessing/dismissal). The composer for those was to be Michael Joncas. In initial conversations, I informed him that I’d dug around the WLP ar-

chives and discovered “Singing in the Light,” an LP he’d recorded for WLP when he was in his late teens. It was my first encounter with his chuckle-turned-laughter at life’s quirky moments.

Working on the collection, he first shared his setting of “God of Light, Be Praised” (also the collection’s title), a marvelous hymn text by Delores Dufner, OSB, that he’d given a lyrical setting. He subsequently used that hymn tune as the basis for the setting of my ritual texts. I learned of his great sensitivity to text and meticulous compositional craftsmanship, resulting in music that was unified without being monotonous. This gift is one that anyone writing or composing for singing congregations would do well to emulate.

To celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of his ordination, a Mass was held in the chapel of the University of St. Thomas, with Fr. Joncas presiding. I was privileged to be the organist and a choral singer for this liturgy. It was here, perhaps, that I saw most clearly and deeply into what was truly at the heart of this man and his ministry. Though these events, as I’d sometimes experienced, can easily turn into self-celebratory occasions, the transparency of his presiding allowed the sacred rites to be central; the preaching was about the scripture, forthright and honest; the ease and balance of his manner and style, the generosity of his gratitude—all combined to reveal the solemnity and the joy of the day. I felt fortunate to have been part of it, and to have had a glimpse into the priest we celebrated that day.

The Hymn Society has benefited any number of times from Michael Joncas and his knowledge, insight, humor, and pastoral nature. A couple of examples follow. At the 2013 annual conference, organized around the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council and its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, his keynote address, “Catholic Branchings: Congregational Song and the Legacy of Vatican II,” displayed his skill at combining analysis / scholarly research with synthesis / practical application for the majority-Protestant audience in attendance. (A side note: also in 2013 I’d been fired from the Roman Catholic parish I’d served over the course of seventeen years for being married to another man. A brief yet supportive encounter with Michael Joncas that conference week once again showed his shepherd’s heart.) In the Spring 2021 issue of *The Hymn* his article, “Reflections on *Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics*,” appeared, helping us navigate the complexity, authority, and weight of Roman Catholic hierarchical documents while even-handedly critiquing the document’s usefulness and integrity.

Coming full circle, perhaps his most important piece of writing will turn out to be *On Eagle's Wings: A Journey Through Illness Toward Healing*, in which he writes of his struggle with Guillain-Barré syndrome, and the spiritual journey of discernment and growth it led to. It is, in its own way, his own exploration of what lays underneath the tip of the iceberg that is his best-known, best-loved work.

As is true of the other Hymn Society members honored with the designation of Fellow, it is the deep fusion of personal love of and belief in song with the same love of and belief in the power and possibility of congregational singing that provides the foundation of this honorific. Michael Joncas more than deservedly belongs in their company.

Submitted by Alan Hommerding, Liturgical Publications Editor at GIA Publications, and director of music at Edgebrook Community Church (UCC) in Chicago.