

Concert celebrates three-century connection between Maryland and France

Opening with the national anthems of France and the United States, the Orchestre d'Harmonie de Saint-Omer (Saint-Omer Wind Orchestra) celebrated three centuries of shared history between the countries with a concert April 12 at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

After the orchestra performed “Le Marseillaise” and “The Star-Spangled Banner” in the Baltimore Basilica, with the flags of the U.S., Maryland and France off to the side of the sanctuary, Archbishop William E. Lori welcomed the musicians and the audience. He noted that Archbishop John Carroll, who had attended school in Saint-Omer, France, as a teen, had laid the cornerstone for the basilica as first bishop of Baltimore.

“Nothing celebrates our shared friendship and our shared culture like music,” he said.

Maryland Lt. Gov. Boyd K. Rutherford, who traveled to Saint-Omer in northern France in 2017 for the dedication of what had been the Chapel of the Jesuits as a new performing arts space and trade discussions with the region, noted the rich relationship between the countries, especially the towns of Baltimore and Saint-Omer.

“The history of Maryland is intertwined with France,” he said, adding that Maryland is continuing and reviving a sister-state relationship with the Hauts-de-France region, which includes Saint-Omer.

François Decoster, mayor of Saint-Omer and vice president for culture for Hauts-de-France, mentioned that when Archbishop Lori heard the orchestra perform at the chapel opening in 2017, “He said, ‘It’s a beautiful orchestra. Why don’t we invite them to play in our basilica, in Baltimore?’”

"We celebrate music together, we celebrate history together, we celebrate friendship together," the mayor told the audience in Baltimore.

Decoster said it was a challenge to bring the more than 70 members of the orchestra and all their instruments for the tour, which included performances in Annapolis, College Park and Washington at Georgetown University, which was founded by Archbishop Carroll.

He said those logistical challenges were nothing compared to the challenges for Catholic families in the U.S. colonies to send their sons across the ocean to study at Saint-Omer.

The cultural exchange now includes students from Georgetown and the college in Saint-Omer attending each other's campuses.

"People in both places know each other," Decoster said.

Prior to the concert, Tricia T. Pyne, director of the Associated Archives at St. Mary's Seminary and University, which includes the archives of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, gave a historical introduction that recapped the journeys of John Carroll, his brother Daniel and their cousin Charles to attend the College of the English Jesuits in Saint-Omer.

She noted that none of the letters between young John and his family in Maryland have survived, but that there is a reference to John in one of the extant letters from Charles to his father.

"It is most appropriate for this concert to be held at the basilica," Pyne said, because of its connection to Archbishop Carroll and the hope for future cooperation between the regions.

Archbishop Lori used the concert and a reception for supporters the evening before to announce the establishment of a Maryland Chapter of the Saint-Omer Foundation for Transatlantic Values, which draws on the common history between the U.S. and France to promote tourism as well as cultural, religious and economic exchanges.

During the concert, the orchestra, conducted by Philippe Le Meur, performed a

symphonic overture written by James Barnes for the 50th anniversary of the U.S. Air Force and a suite of American dances by Robert Russell Bennett. The final number was a John Philip Sousa march, fittingly titled "Hands Across the Sea."

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