

Workshop Explores What's Behind the Music of Faith

COLLEEN JURKIEWICZ
CATHOLIC HERALD STAFF

Church hymns are more than just songs of praise, supplication or thanksgiving. They emerge from very specific spiritual sensibilities, social conditions and ethnicities that exist in a certain time or place. In a sense, they are primary sources from throughout the history of Christianity — snapshots of the faith at different periods of time.

A workshop hosted by the School Sisters of St. Francis on the morning of Saturday, Jan. 26, took a closer look at those snapshots through the scholarship of historian Juliet Hills and the musical talents of pianist Jack Forbes Wilson. Entitled “Songs of Our Faith: What’s Behind the Music?” the well-attended morning session at the St. Joseph Center on Layton Boulevard was a mixture of performance and presentation, of reflection and recital.

Hills is retired from the Milwaukee County Historical Society, and holds a bachelor’s degree in anthropology from Marquette University and an M.A. degree in pastoral studies from St. Francis Seminary. Wilson is a noted Milwaukee-area church musician, piano teacher and cabaret singer, pianist and actor. He has performed with the Milwaukee Rep, Madison Rep, Skylight Opera Theatre and Next Act Theatre.

During the workshop, Hills touched on both the technical and conceptual aspects of various well-known hymns, covering a songbook that included everything from Christmas carols to African-American spirituals and contemporary praise music.

“If we believe our country is protected by God, we will find national songs in our hymn books. If we believe hell is a real place, our hymns will pull us towards heaven,” said Hills. “If our



▲ Jack Forbes Wilson plays the piano while Juliet Hills looks on during a Jan. 26 workshop at the St. Joseph Center. (Submitted photo)

religion teaches that cleanliness is next to godliness, our hymns will be very different from our desperate cousins following the drinking gourd.”

Hills and Wilson took the audience through 33 separate hymns, delving into the personalities of the songwriters who produced them and, in some cases, the circumstances that inspired them. They also touched briefly on music theory, explaining that hymns written in the same meter can be sung to one another’s tune — a concept demonstrated (to the delight of the audience) by Forbes, who played “Amazing Grace” to the tune of another song written in its same meter:

the theme song of “Gilligan’s Island.”

Several of the songs that the duo explored included:

■ “All Creatures of Our God and King,” derived from the “Canticle of the Sun,” a poem by St. Francis of Assisi. Written in the 13th century, it was one of the first canticles written in the author’s own dialect.

■ “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today” by Charles Wesley, a leader in the Methodist movement in the United Kingdom. Wesley was the writer of 6,500 hymns. This song is set to the tune “Easter Hymn” and was published in

1708. Wesley, an Oxford graduate, would later come to Savannah, Georgia, where he was appointed secretary of Indian Affairs in 1735.

■ “On Eagle’s Wings,” written by Fr. Michael Joncas, a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis. Fr. Joncas wrote this song in the 1970s following the death of the father of a dear friend. The first time it was performed in public was at the friend’s father’s funeral, said Hills. Fr. Joncas was also a collaborator of Marty Haugen and David Haas.

■ “Morning Has Broken,” which is sung to the Gaelic tune of “Bunessan” (so called after a village in Scotland). The words are by Eleanor Farjeon, a British poet who converted to Catholicism at the age of 70; Farjeon also wrote children’s books and plays. The song was made famous by Cat Stevens in 1971.

■ “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” explained Hills, is sung in every town, village and city in her native England every Nov. 11 at 11 a.m. to commemorate British citizens who have died in war. “In my village, we would start in the church, walk down half a block to the war memorial, where all the names were read of all the dead from both world wars,” she said. The words are by Isaac Watts, an English Congregational minister, and are based on Psalm 90. The tune, “St. Anne,” is by William Croft, and was later used by Handel.

■ “What Wondrous Love Is This” is sung to the tune “Southern Harmony,” published in 1835. Originally a Celtic sea shanty, “The Story of Captain Kidd,” published in 1701, the song tells the exploits of pirate William Kidd. The lyrics first appeared in an early 19th century Virginia hymnal, and the hymn today was harmonized by a Methodist professor of church music in the 1960s.