

# IN HARMONY WITH THE WORLD: THE SISTERS OF ST. JOSEPH OF BADEN AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH MUSIC

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“Music! Music!! — The ‘Sisters of St. Joseph’ will be prepared to give lessons,” read an announcement in the *Cambria Freeman* newspaper. It was the spring of 1871, two years since the Sisters of St. Joseph had established a new foundation in the Western Pennsylvania town of Ebensburg, and the sisters were advertising their availability to teach music. From those early years in Ebensburg to their lives today, Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden have used music as a bedrock. Woven throughout the history of the congregation, music has been integral to the financial, ministerial, creative, communal, and spiritual aspects of their lives.

## Music: A Means to Raise Money

In 1869, Mother Austin Kean led two sisters from the Long

Island branch of the Sisters of the St. Joseph to establish this new foundation. Shortly after arrival, at the beginning of September, the sisters opened a boys boarding school and started a girls day school by that fall.<sup>1</sup> Within the first two weeks in Ebensburg, the sisters’ first recorded expenditures were on practical items: a washing machine (\$29); boxes (\$1); spoons and forks (\$3); and jars and sugar (\$2). While the first four entries of expenditures dealt with the household, the fifth expenditure was \$40 for “Freight on Piano,” which was an indication of the importance of this musical instrument. That piano proved its worth, for by the beginning of November, the congregation had earned \$24 in music tuition.<sup>2</sup>



Collage of items and images from the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives. Created by Sister Gerrie Grandpre, CSJ

Source: Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden

Perhaps the congregation benefited at the very beginning from the presence of Sister Hortense Tello,<sup>3</sup> who was purported to have been a highly trained musician, and taught music when she was with her original congregation on Long Island. In March 1871, when Mother Austin decided to return to Long Island, Sister Hortense became Mother Superior and by the next month, the advertisements began running in the local newspaper as one avenue of raising revenue. As with many congregations, those early years were challenging financially.

Offering music lessons to help sustain the congregation financially was a recurring theme over the years. For example, in the 1894 lawsuit *Hysong v. Gallitzin School Board*, sisters were asked to testify and they made passing references to music. The purpose of the lawsuit was a challenge by the Junior Order of the United American Mechanics, which was a nativist group in that period, to the sisters teaching in the public schools in Gallitzin, Pennsylvania.

Embedded in the sisters' testimony are references not only to music lessons, but also to the ownership of pianos. Court records show that Sister Mary John Keenan reported teaching banjo, guitar, piano, vocal, and sometimes violin lessons after the school day was completed in order to bring in extra income for the congregation.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, there was a room on the second floor of the newly constructed public school in Gallitzin that housed two of the sisters' pianos to allow the sisters to teach lessons on site.<sup>5</sup> The prosecution scrutinized the fact that the sisters did not keep their wages but rather they gave the money "to the Mother Superior [in Ebensburg]," who was in charge of the money for the entire congregation.<sup>6</sup>

By the early 1900s, the emphasis on generating that much-needed income to supplement the low wages for sisters teaching in the classroom resulted in the school's convent having at least one sister whose main ministry was teaching private piano lessons and music in the school. In a 1981 oral history interview, Sister Assumpta Becker was asked if she taught other subjects besides music from 1928 to 1932 at St. Titus in Aliquippa. She responded that music "was about all you could handle if you taught piano lessons," with private lessons beginning at the start of the school day.<sup>7</sup> In fact, school convents often would have a separate music room with a separate entrance for this express purpose.<sup>8</sup>

After the motherhouse and Mount Gallitzin Academy expansion with a 1901 move to Baden, private lessons would also grow, bringing in substantial revenue. The addition of the all-girls Mount Gallitzin High School in 1934 fed into that system at the motherhouse. Sister Aelred O'Dea,



**Sister Rose Veronica Wolford and two choirboys,  
St. Raphael Church, Pittsburgh, c. 1945**

Source: Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives

who had completed her undergraduate degree in music in 1936, conducted the music program at the motherhouse until 1960. With her oversight, revenues were strong. The financial report for the three-year period of 1949 to 1952 listed revenues from teaching of music at the motherhouse totaling \$8,591, which would be more than \$94,000 in today's dollars — a needed contribution to the financial health of the congregation as a whole.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 1960s, the congregation turned to music as a focused fundraiser for its novitiate. These were the years of the international sensation of the "singing nun" and congregations such as the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden were able to make use of this opportunity, as music was so integral to their congregation.<sup>10</sup> In 1961 and 1963, the congregation produced two record albums: "In A Manger Lowly" and "A Christmas Gloria." Creating these two albums had its challenges, including obtaining the rights to use copyrighted music.<sup>11</sup> The money realized was nominal,<sup>12</sup> but the experience was memorable for all of the novices who raised their voices in song and for those who know and love the sisters' music — even through today.<sup>13</sup>

### **Music: An Expression of Educational Ministry**

Traditionally, education has been one of the primary ministries for sisters across the United States. The desire of the Baden sisters to impart music education surfaces in letters written by Willie Schmidt, a young lad who attended Mount Gallitzin Academy in the early 1880s. Living at the sisters'





**Sisters teaching music, St. James School, Sewickley, Pa., 1956**

Source: Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives

boarding school for three years beginning at age nine, Willie referenced music several times throughout his correspondence. Initially, he commented on the other boys taking lessons, hoping to take some himself. Once he finally began taking lessons, he remarked proudly of his accomplishment, writing, “I am getting along nicely with my music” and mentioning “Sister Mary” as his teacher.<sup>14</sup>

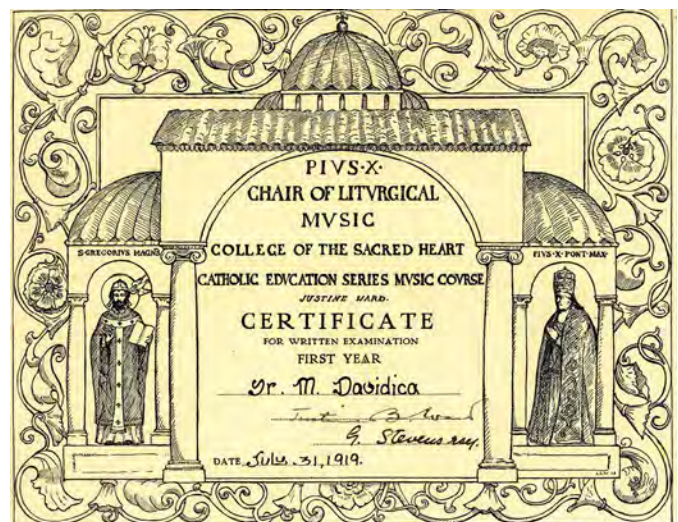
Throughout the congregation’s history, there were certain sisters who embraced the educational ministry aspect. When nineteen-year-old Sister Crescentia Mulvehill was in her first teaching assignment at Sacred Heart School in Altoona in 1936, she offered to be the choir teacher. Upon taking on the choir, she “did the only thing [she] knew what to do [which] was to teach the things ... learned as novices” and she began the choirboys with the Requiem Mass. She loved teaching the boys and succeeded in impressing the bishop at a funeral Mass within a few months of her taking over the choir.<sup>15</sup>

Beginning in the 1940s, Sister Ruth (Venard) Sattler began her ministry in teaching music, and in 1961, she transitioned from teaching music in the parochial schools to taking over the music program at the congregation’s two sponsored schools at the motherhouse. Over the next few decades, she impacted students with her ministry. One former student, Rita Modic Dargan, Mount Gallitzin High School class of 1964, credited not only her continued love for music to Sister Ruth, but also for her and the other sisters for influencing her values. Almost fifty years later, Rita donated the oboe from her school days to a music program in a rural, underprivileged community.<sup>16</sup>

In order to be effective teachers, many of the sisters were highly educated in music. Periodic entries in the early ledgers itemized money spent on music lessons for sisters. In July 1893, the congregation expended \$5.68 on music lessons for Sister Stanislaus McGinnis.<sup>17</sup> By the early 1900s, the sisters had adopted the Progressive Music Series, which would become a dominant music curriculum in schools across the United States. Starting in 1912, this program of “comprehensive teaching books” was produced by the Art Publication Society in St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>18</sup> The Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden also used this curriculum, sending sisters to St. Louis for training, and in one instance, bringing in an instructor for a ten-day summer workshop in the technique at the congregation’s motherhouse in the 1950s.<sup>19</sup>

By the twentieth century, the congregation was sending sisters for further training to colleges. Sister Assumpta Becker was one of the sisters who took summer courses at The Julliard School in New York City before completing an undergraduate degree at Duquesne University (1943).<sup>20</sup> Sister Kevin Kerwin, who served as school supervisor of music for both the Dioceses of Pittsburgh and Altoona-Johnstown from 1947-1959, had studied at the Pius X School of Liturgical Music in New York in 1937. She also earned undergraduate (1940) and graduate (1950) degrees at Duquesne University.

Duquesne University in Pittsburgh would prove to be the primary university used for music education because it was in close proximity to the congregation’s motherhouse and many of its ministry sites. Sister Donna Marie Beck, who



**1919 Certificate for Sister Davidica Winter from Pius X School of Liturgical Music, which had been established in 1916 as part of the Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart in New York City, which was the first school founded to give American Catholics the chance to share in church music revival encouraged by Pope St. Pius X**

Source: Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives

as a child took private piano lessons from the sisters in Gallitzin, was one of the first students to earn certification from the university's music therapy program in 1976. Serving as part of that department's faculty beginning in 1982, she went on to complete her doctorate in music and spirituality at the university, worked to spread music therapy through her mentoring of students, and at retirement, earned emerita status.

### Music: A Way to Channel Creativity

As with other congregations, individual sisters turned to music as an outlet for their creativity. In 1909, "Memories of Mt. Gallitzin," a series of sheet music for piano, was published, and composed by "A Sister of St. Joseph." With titles such as "Chapel Thoughts," "Come Back to Erin," and "Song of the Ohio," these compositions were a reflection of their lives as members of a congregation of Irish heritage with a motherhouse sitting along the banks of the Ohio River. The 1916 printing of the series included photographs from their campus in Baden, reinforcing the ties to their motherhouse.<sup>21</sup> The Century Music Publishing Company decided to include the "Academy March," a reference to Mount Gallitzin Academy, in a national series of "Standard Marches" of musical compositions for teaching.<sup>22</sup>

From their earliest days, individual sisters would rarely be recognized for any creative work — whether as a composer, a poet, or an author. Instead, the name of the creator was listed as "A Sister of St. Joseph." Through the mid-twentieth century, the vow of poverty was interpreted to mean that a sister had no private ownership of anything, which included the ownership of music composition.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, in 1916, the individual creator of a piece apparently submitted the copyright application for the "A Christmas Carol," and consequently she was acknowledged.

While the words and music were listed as composed by "A Sister of St. Joseph," the copyright owner recorded was "Sister Victoria."<sup>24</sup>

Much of the creative work within the congregation was geared towards

an internal audience. Congregational events would be observed with songs, such as "Fields Afar," which was composed to mark the 1926 departure of four sisters assigned to missionary work in China. From the late 1980s to 2000, Sister Ruth Sattler composed liturgical music relating to the congregation's spiritual life, with titles such as "Jesus is Risen" and "Come to Me."

Tapping into this creativity, sisters were known to compose songs to give as a gift. Such was the case of "Sunset Hour" in 1923, which was a collaboration between Father C. A. Burns, S.J., who wrote the lyrics, and "A Sister of St. Joseph" who composed the music. This piece was written in honor of the golden jubilee of Monsignor Martin Ryan, a priest who had been part of the sisters' lives since the late 1800s.<sup>25</sup> While the song was created in honor of Ryan's anniversary, it was published by Zimmerman Print in Cincinnati, Ohio — an intersection of both public and private facets of the sisters' work.

### Music: Fostering Community

As members of a congregation, sisters have used music to connect with each other, forming a community around their love of and abilities with music. The gathering of sisters to sing and play their instruments is chronicled in archival photographs that depict a tradition.

In the years after Vatican II, the sisters became known for coming together publicly to perform music. At St. Mary in Kittanning, in 1974, six sisters not only provided the organist and vocalists for a parish wedding but they received credit for it.<sup>26</sup> By the late twentieth century, several sisters had formed a musical group called the CSJ Musicians. They were popular entertainment at the sisters' Harvest Festival, an annual fundraiser that was held on their grounds until 2002. Focusing on pieces that project-

ed meaning of life, this sisters' group played music, ranging from folk songs to John Denver tunes.

Sisters performed not only with members of their congregation, but also with sisters from other congregations. This



**The CSJ Musicians, 2002**

Source: Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives





**Diocesan Sisters Symphonic Orchestra, c. 1963**

Source: Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives

was highlighted in the early 1960s with the Diocesan Sisters Symphony Orchestra, an inter-congregational group of sister musicians. Sisters from twelve religious congregations from across the diocese would come together on Saturday afternoons at Duquesne University’s School of Music to rehearse.<sup>27</sup> Their repertoire of music was varied, from opera to tango. The admission from their performances went to causes such as the Diocesan Child Center, which supported children with disabilities.

Some sisters would go beyond the Catholic world, as in the case of Sister Corinne Kirsch, who was inspired to audition for the Mendelssohn Choir in Pittsburgh. A few years prior to the audition, she had the opportunity to see the Choir perform Handel’s “Messiah” and soon after, discovered that “ordinary people could belong to that.” After failing at her first audition, Sister Corinne was determined to develop her voice to the level of the Choir. The following summer, she tapped into the knowledge of a retired professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, who worked with her to improve her technique. In 1974, she was selected for the Choir. During her first performance, which was Gustav Mahler’s *Resurrection*, “all of a sudden, the whole Mendelssohn Choir just stood up ... It was glorious.”<sup>28</sup>

Community is not just about the sisters’ congregational community, but also the community around them. In their earliest years in Ebensburg in the mid-1800s, the sisters

would prepare their students to perform piano and vocal solos for end-of-year ceremonies, with families in attendance.<sup>29</sup> This was just the beginning of recitals that the sisters would hold at their ministry sites. In later years, these performances grew in size, depending on the location of the schools where the sisters taught. Bringing neighbors together from the area surrounding the parish schools, the public performances of music by the sisters’ pupils would prove to be a unifying experience. People would come, crowding halls to capacity, bringing a neighborhood together as a community under one roof.<sup>30</sup>

### **Music: Feeding the Soul**

Because sisters are part of the Catholic Church, music is an integral dimension to their spirituality, and was present as a means of prayer from the earliest years of their lives. Perhaps the best representation of this is a reflection that was written about the 1871 funeral of the first death of one of their sisters, who happened to be a young novice:

On the morning of the funeral, after going in procession to the Chapel with the remains of their loved little novice, Mother Hortense took the members of the choir and went to the gallery. Mother herself was the organist and the chief singer. We got through the singing of the Mass fairly well.... This shows the love and union that existed among us from the very beginning.<sup>31</sup>

The spiritual nature of music is such that it is part and parcel of their lives, an intangible aspect of religious life. Throughout the year, whether it is Christmas, Lent, or Easter, music is a companion to the sisters as they lift their voices in unison to praise God.

From their early years in Ebensburg to their lives today, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden have lived their lives “close to music.”<sup>32</sup> This is a topic so broad that this article is but a glimpse into that relationship, one that is so integral not just to the lives of these sisters but also to the lives of women religious in general.

[Editor’s note: This article is adapted from a paper presented by the author on June 27, 2022, at the Triennial Conference on the History of Women Religious.]

**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Mount Gallitzin Academy was the boys boarding school. In the early years, it was called Mount Gallitzin Seminary. Holy Name Academy was the girls boarding school; in 1878, it became coeducational. See Kathleen M. Washy, “A Nineteenth-Century Boy Goes to School: Willie Schmidt, the Sisters of St. Joseph, and Mt. Gallitzin,” *Gathered Fragments* 29 (Fall 2019), 41-42.
- <sup>2</sup> Entries for September through November 1869, Financial Journal 1869-1892, RG 210.2, Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden Archives (CSJB Archives). \$40 in 1869 is approximately equivalent to \$870 in 2022.
- <sup>3</sup> While Mother Hortense Tello was known as Hortensia in the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, she signed everything and was known as Hortense by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden. G104 Congregational History, CSJB Archives. Of note, in the 1856 register for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood, the sisters recorded tuition from music lessons conducted by Mrs. Tello, the mother of Mother Hortense. 1856 Financial ledger entries, Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood Archives.
- <sup>4</sup> Testimony of Margaret Conrad, *In the Court of Common Pleas of Cambria County, in Equity, John Hysong et al vs. The School District of Gallitzin Borough et al, #1 June Term, 1894*, Transcript of testimony from May 3-5, 1894, 269. Testimony of Sister Mary John Keenan, *Ibid.*, 380. Copy in the CSJB Archives.
- <sup>5</sup> Testimony of James Bender, *Ibid.*, 9.
- <sup>6</sup> Testimony of Preston Salkeld, *Ibid.*, 177.
- <sup>7</sup> Sister Assumpta Becker interview by Sister Sally Witt, May 6, 1981, transcript. RG509 Heritage Development, CSJB Archives.
- <sup>8</sup> Examples at both St. Titus convent in Aliquippa and St. Richard convent in Pittsburgh. Becker, *Ibid.* Visit by author to St. Benedict the Moor Church convent, originally St. Richard Church convent, May 2022.
- <sup>9</sup> Financial Report for three-year period of July 1, 1949 to June 30, 1952 reported income at the motherhouse for music tuition for boys \$5,297.60 and for girls \$4,904.00. Throughout the entire congregation, for the one-year period of July 1, 1949 and June 30, 1950, “Music Tuition from Music Classes” totaled \$63,924.79 (\$785,600 in 2022 dollars) at a time when the “School Salary of Entire Community Including Supervisor’s Salary” equaled \$130,882 (\$1.6 million in 2022 dollars). The income from those private music lessons was essential to the congregation’s finances. Financial Report, July 1, 1949 to June 30, 1950. RG 210.2 Finance, CSJB Archives.
- <sup>10</sup> The nearby Sisters of Divine Providence recorded two albums as well. “Concert Saturday by Sisters’ Chorus,” *Pittsburgh Press*, October 12, 1966, 84.
- <sup>11</sup> Sister Crescentia Mulvehill handled the first album, Sister Ruth (Venard) Sattler the second. RG 304.4 Music, CSJB Archives.
- <sup>12</sup> Sister Crescentia Mulvehill interview by Sister Mary Louise Wessell, August 10, 1980, transcript. RG 509 Heritage Development, CSJB Archives. Financial ledgers, RG 210.2 Finance, CSJB Archives.

- <sup>13</sup> The “In A Manger Lowly” album is still sold in compact disc format by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden.
- <sup>14</sup> Willie Schmidt to G.W. and Ellen Schmidt, October 19, 1883; January 19, 1884; February 1, 1884; February 19, 1884. Transcripts from the Private Collection of Sylvia Francis.
- <sup>15</sup> Mulvehill, transcript, 1980.
- <sup>16</sup> Rita Modic Dargan, “Cherished Oboe Inspires Former Student to Give Back,” *Dear Neighbor*, Winter 2022, 18-19.
- <sup>17</sup> Financial journal 1891-1901, RG 210.2 Finance, CSJB Archives.
- <sup>18</sup> Background on Progressive Music Series: International Music Score Library Project/Petrucci Music Library “Art Publication Society,” accessed September 13, 2022, [https://imslp.org/wiki/Art\\_Publication\\_Society](https://imslp.org/wiki/Art_Publication_Society). “Musical Institute: Interesting and Instructive Session Was Brought to a Very Successful Close Last Saturday,” *Catholic Telegraph* 85, no. 33 (August 17, 1916), 1. “To Teach Gregorian Chant,” *Catholic Advance* (Wichita, KS) 26, no. 15 (January 6, 1917), 5. “Progressive Music Series,” *York Daily News-Times* (York, NE), September 1, 1915, 2.
- <sup>19</sup> Richard Herr Kauffman to Sisters of St. Joseph, November 7, 2005. CSJB Archives. Kauffman taught the Progressive Series Plan for Music Education to teachers during summers, from 1940 until 1989, when the company went out of business.
- <sup>20</sup> Sister Assumpta Becker interview by Sister Sally Witt, May 6, 1981, transcript. RG509, CSJB Archives.
- <sup>21</sup> “Mt. Gallitzin Memories” are still available for resale through the internet — available through websites such as Amazon, ebay, and AbeBooks. Getty Images has a scan available, with limitations on use: accessed September 26, 2022, <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/news-photo/sheet-music-cover-image-of-the-song-memories-of-mt-news-photo/727075065>.
- <sup>22</sup> Century Music Publishing Co., “Standard Marches,” 1916.
- <sup>23</sup> The Sisters of St. Joseph Constitution enacted in Lyons, France, in 1729 and adopted by the Baden congregation at the time of its founding in Ebensburg included the following as part of the vow of poverty: “To banish all idea of property, the Sisters of St. Joseph should not make use of the word *mine*....” Constitutions of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph (New York: O’Shea & Co., 1884), 48. The same wording is in the 1948 revision of Baden’s constitution. Constitutions of the Sisters of St. Joseph Diocese of Pittsburgh (St. Meinrad, IN: The Abbey Press, 1948), 51. After the Chapter of 1967, the constitution underwent a new revision and this wording was no longer part of the congregational constitution. RG 202 Constitutions and Customs, CSJB Archives.
- <sup>24</sup> United States Copyright Office. Catalog of Copyright Entries, 1916 Musical Compositions Last Half of 1916, New Series, 11 no. 2, 1204.
- <sup>25</sup> The Sisters of St. Joseph relationship with Monsignor Ryan dated back to the 1880s, when both were ministering at St. Patrick Parish in Gallitzin. During the early 1900s, he was pastor at St. Brigid Parish and the sisters were teaching at St. Richard. The two churches were about a mile apart from each other in Pittsburgh’s Hill District. In a 1927 reference to the acquisition of relics for the sisters’ new altar, Monsignor Ryan is listed as the congregation’s spiritual father. CSJB Archives. RG 603.3 Chapel, CSJB Archives.
- <sup>26</sup> “Jordan-Patrick Pledges Heard at St. Mary’s Church Altar,” *Simpson’s Leader-Times* (Kittanning, PA), May 6, 1974, 12
- <sup>27</sup> “Diocesan Sisters Swing out on ‘Porgy and Bess,’” *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, April 5, 1960, 8.
- <sup>28</sup> Sister Corinne Kirsch, interview by Sister Sally Witt, August 5, 1981, transcript. RG509, CSJB Archives.
- <sup>29</sup> For example, at the annual commencement for Mt. Gallitzin Academy, several students “displayed great skill in the manipulation of the piano.” *Cambria Freeman*, July 16, 1875, 4.
- <sup>30</sup> *Pittsburgh Catholic*, May 28, 1903, 13.
- <sup>31</sup> “The First Sorrow Experienced by Our Dear Pioneer Sisters and the Recording of the First Death among Them.” RG 104.1 Congregational History, CSJB Archives.
- <sup>32</sup> Sister Fabian Ryan, interview by Sister Sally Witt and Sister Sarah Dixon, September 18, 1979, transcript. RG509, CSJB Archives.