

Austria's singing monks don't want to be pop stars

Father Alkuin, Brother Ignatius and 15 of their brethren may soon have to deal with issues normally far from the mind of a monk: being stars.

The monks from Austria's Heiligenkreuz abbey managed what millions of aspiring musicians can only dream of - they landed a contract with a major record label that produced their CD.

In events worthy of the discovery of any pop star, the Cistercian monks were chosen in an international competition seeking the world's best singers of Gregorian chants, said Dickon Stainer of Universal Music's classic division.

But the monks are now a little concerned that newly found stardom will interfere with their pious lifestyle.

'We will be no pop stars,' Abbot Gregor Henckel Donnersmarck said. 'There will be no driving around in pink Cadillacs in this monastery.'

'Our songs are not music. For us, in the first place they are prayers to praise our Lord,' the abbot, who presides of one of Austria's few thriving abbeys, said.

Heiligenkreuz's fame and fortune came the monk's embracing modern technology and marketing methods. Universal noticed a rising demand for the old sacred music, Stainer said, triggered by its use in computer games and global economic trends.

'It seems that always when the economy does a downturn, Gregorian chants gain popularity. They have a very soothing effect on people,' he said.

The company, which represents stars like rapper Eminem or rock band U2, started a global search for the best plainsong singers, and literally minutes before the deadline's expiry received an email from Heiligenkreuz, complete with a link to video-sharing site YouTube.

'The quality was incredible. We never heard anything like that,' Stainer praised the monks.

Father Karl Wallner, in charge of the abbey's media relations, had no idea what he was getting into when he sent that fateful message.

'I was told by a friend to send it. I had no clue what Universal was,' he said, almost blushing in his black-and-white robe.

'I still cannot believe what happened,' he said.

In a chapel turned into an impromptu studio, the monks then recorded an album with 29 tracks which are part of their liturgy, among them songs for a requiem.

'Gregorian chant', named after Pope Saint Gregory I, are a spiritual form of plainsong which dates back to the 4th century, making it the oldest form of written music in Europe.

Every day the monks gather at the abbey's gothic church several times a day to sing the chants, which are part of their liturgy.

The Cistercian abbey, with its airy cloisters and spacious grounds, a half-hour drive from the capital Vienna, dates back to 1133 and is one of the country's main spiritual centres, home to 70-odd monks and a large number of visitors each year.

Abbot Henkel Donnersmarck said he gave his approval for the project because Pope Benedict XVI had urged the brethren 'not to pray behind closed doors.

'I hope that the pope will be our first and biggest fan,' he said.

Father Karl believes their music presents an opportunity to bring faith closer to those people out there who are normally not too concerned with religion.

'It is a chance for us to promote God,' he said looking at the CD which was now waiting for its global release in the upcoming weeks.

The simple but hypnotic melodies were a kind of therapy for people in a hurry.

'We monks have plenty of time for our prayers,' the 45-year-old priest added.

The brethren are however unsure how to deal with other potential fans.

'We are no boy group, and we will not go on tour,' the monks said.

The proceeds from the CD will be invested in training for priests, where funding was sorely needed, the abbot said.

Yet, there was still some good news for fans wanting to experience the singing monks live on stage, so to speak.

'Should there be groupies...well, we are at church every morning at 5.15 a.m. for prayers,' Father Karl said.

Ivonne Marschall (© IANS / India eNews)