

## Chart-busting chants turn modest monks into boy group stars

Move over Madonna, because a group of modest monastery monks have rocketed into the Top 10 in Germany's charts with an album of Gregorian chants.

The album 'Chant - Music for Paradise' by the Cistercian monks of Stift Heiligenkreuz was only released earlier this month and is already reaped gold for Universal Music, to the utter amazement of the monks themselves, many of whom had never even heard of Universal until the label turned them into gold-winning recording stars overnight.

'The whole thing of the recording happened like a miracle,' says the monk who almost inadvertently turned his monastery, nestled in the Vienna Woods, into one of the hottest venues on YouTube.

He and his brothers had posted a YouTube video of their chants for the benefit of shut-ins and invalids who could not attend mass. He had no idea that it would become an Internet hit.

'I cannot believe this whole story,' he tells interviewers. 'I got this email, and there were only two words, 'Schnell, Schnell (quick, quick)', and there was a link. And I clicked on the link and I found that they are looking for the most beautiful sacred voices.'

They turned out to be Universal Music looking for new talent.

'I just answered it and sent them a link to our homepage where we have an example of Gregorian chants. And it was also the last day of applications that was possible.'

Father Karl admits that he naively thought nothing would come of it.

'After all, our homepage is rather pathetic,' he admits. Even so, the online video of the chanting monks had already registered 80,000 hits at that point. Since release of the album, the video has registered twice that many hits.

Next thing they knew, studio executives were handing them a recording contract and photographers and a film crew were setting up to shoot a professional quality music video to coincide with the album release.

The video was shot in the monastery itself. That was one of the stipulations imposed by the Cistercian monks. They refused to be flown to London to record the album in a studio. Everything had to be done at the monastery.

The monastery choirmaster, Father Simeon, selected 17 monks with the finest voices for the actual recording session. Recording executives were a bit taken aback when Father Simeon informed them he had selected a number of funerary chants owing to the recent deaths of one or two monks.

He insisted it would be inappropriate for the brothers to be expected to do upbeat, joyful chants under the circumstances. In addition, the monastery ruled out any publicity tour or TV appearances.

The funeral dirges turned out to be a stroke of genius since the soothing, gentle tones proved a chart-busting hit in Germany. It is pure 'chill-out' music to untrained ears.

Father Karl says he is not bothered by the way the chants are received by lay listeners.

'It's our way of praying and meditating,' he explains. 'We get up early and begin chanting at 5:15 in the morning. We intersperse chanting with working all day. That's what we do,' he says.

'How the music comes across to other people is in the hands of God,' he shrugs.

It is the biggest media exposure the monastery has had in its 875-year history, and Father Karl concedes that it is all a bit too much for some of the older brothers to cope with.

'I've been told to refrain from posting the chart standings on the bulletin board next to the dining hall,' he says.

But the royalties are welcome for the monastery's earthly work.

'It is a veritable gift from God,' he says of the sudden influx of cash. 'We desperately need this money for our work in training monks from Vietnam, Sri Lanka and Africa.'

Actually, the monks are not as out of touch as outsiders might think. Most of the monks have their own laptops and mobile phones, which they use to text each other so as to keep in touch when in far-flung parts of the monastery. Email and Internet access and YouTube are important parts of their lives.

'After all,' explains Father Karl, 'St. Benedict wisely said in the sixth century that every monk must have stylus and parchment. We have cyber-stylus and cyber-parchment. But the idea is the same.'

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