

THE SCHOLA

BY

K.R. Wilson

I got some of my earliest training in vocal technique indirectly, by observing the students at the Vatican choir school, the Schola Cantorum. I wasn't able to be a student myself. You had to be pre-pubescent to get in, and not even I could fake that. But I had a middle management position in the Vatican bureaucracy at that point, and I found a way to leverage it into an adjunct teaching role at the Schola. Some hand stuff with a muscular Tuscan Bishop may have been involved.

I didn't get to teach singing, though. Not in the sense of vocal technique. I wasn't qualified. The Schola had advanced the arts of breath control and tone production beyond anything I could manage. But there was more to the Schola's nine-year training program than technique. My job was repertoire.

"Name this psalm," I'd say. I'd sing a phrase on an open vowel. There would be a few smirks at my tone, but no one would comment on it. Later in their dorm, probably. But not to my face. Up would go a few hands.

"Francesco?"

"*Domine, ne in furore*, Master."

"Right. And when do we sing it? Yes, Felix?"

"Every Monday at the end of the office of Prime, Master."

"Very good. How many of you know it?"

The older boys would raise their hands. The younger ones would look sheepish.

"Right. I'll sing you the first phrase, and you sing it back to me."

And so on and so on through the entire Vatican song book, until everyone knew it all. Which was never, of course. Graduates moved on to the Papal choir, and the Schola filled their spaces with the cream of the latest crop of third sons or gifted orphans. We usually had at least one boy in the school who didn't know his psalms from his canticles. And so, the grind began again.

Over the years I gradually absorbed the lessons their voice teachers taught them. By the time I left, no one smirked at my tone anymore.

Author Biography

K. R. Wilson's debut novel *An Idea About My Dead Uncle* won the inaugural Guernica Prize in 2018 and was published by Guernica Editions in 2019. His second novel *Call Me Stan: A Tragedy in Three Millennia*—in which Stan, a self-described immortal, takes a police interrogator on a wry, anachronistic tour of 3200 years of Eurasian history—was published by Guernica in December of 2021. “The Schola” is a previously unpublished story about Stan.