Speaker 1: Yale Podcast Network.

Speaker 2: Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, Emily Judd, interviews Professor Martin Jean, director of the Yale Institute of Sacred Music and World, world-renowned organist. Professor Jean recalls the moment he decided to pursue music instead of a career in science.

Speaker 3: I had a kind of a crisis of conscience. I just didn't think that I could spend my life in a lab somewhere.

Speaker 2: He discusses increasing the popularity of classical music among the younger generations, and the need to highlight the benefits of the genre to the public,

Speaker 3: Why it might be of value, to sit yourself into a piece of music that takes 20 minutes to transpire and to think about what's happening to you and your psyche as that piece is being performed.

Speaker 2: And Professor Jean weighs in on what humanity loses. When sacred practice and gathering decline.

Speaker 3: There is nothing more powerful than a group of people singing together.

Speaker 4: Professor Jean, thank you so much for joining us today on the podcast. Can you talk a little bit about the inception and the history of the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale University?

Speaker 3: So 50 years ago this year, our predecessor, it was actually 51 or 52 years ago that our predecessor organization, which was called the Union School of Sacred Music, was closed. This was a unit at Union Seminary, which still exists, of course, in New York, that was dedicated to train professional church musicians. And for 45 or so years, they produced some of the country's finest professional church musicians, and for a whole bunch of reasons, probably largely Financial Union Seminary, sadly decided to close that school in 1972, which prompted the Irwin Sweeney Miller Foundation of Columbus, Indiana to give a gift to Yale to found something similar but more expansive. They gave a gift, a very sizable gift to Yale that became the corpus of the endowment that on which the institute stands. And the reason for doing this was not only because they valued the work of what Union was doing in those days, which was to train professional musicians, to train them in theological studies as well as musical, but also to see to it that the nation's clerical leaders would also have training in music and the arts in addition to theology. They wanted that connection to stay alive, and they saw that because Yale had a very renowned divinity school and music school, they thought that this was a great place to plant a new seed that would continue some of that work from Union, but extend it.

Speaker 4: Well, it seems like the Institute of Sacred Music has stuck to its original purpose because it has this interdisciplinary nature where it links the resources of Yale School of Music and Yale Divinity School, bringing together a wide variety of students where they're able to collaborate with each other. Can you share what are some of the fruits of that diversity?

Speaker 3: Well, it takes efforts. Interdisciplinary wheels need constant oiling. We discover it happens at our colloquium, right? We, the whole institute gathers 80, 90 people on a Wednesday afternoon. They work together in that space around presentations by faculty or guest lecturers or each other. In fact, they have a capstone project they're required to fulfill, which is a jointly produced research efforts that includes at least one music student and one divinity student. They have to choose a project about which they can both contribute equally and then present that bit of research at Colloquium in their senior year. So that's one logical space, and that colloquium has been going on as long as the institute's been here. This happens in classes, in rehearsal spaces, in worship. Our music students are involved in virtually every chapel on campus, as are our seminarians. Our faculty team teach courses all the time.

Speaker 4: I wanted to ask you about your own musical vocation journey. You began college as a science major. Can you describe the moment when you decided to make the switch to music?

Speaker 3: The advice of my parents who worried about my ability to support myself, they wanted to make sure that I had a good paying job, and they thought doing something, I like computers, computer science would be the way to do it. So I was aiming for a degree from the University of Michigan in computer engineering in the middle of my freshman year. I had at my undergrad school, Concordia, I had a kind of crisis of conscience. I just didn't think that I could spend my life in a lab somewhere, and I was realizing about my own musical gifts and convince them to bless my decision to go into music. There are other personal things along the way that led me to that decision, but it was something I'd never regret.

Speaker 4: Yeah, obviously, I mean, now you're an organist. You've played around the world, almost 50 countries and four continent, sorry, 50 states, sorry, not country. 50 states, almost all 50 states, I should say, and four continents.

Speaker 3: Shout out to the states that haven't invited me yet.

Speaker 4: Oh, no. Which states are those?

Speaker 3: I won't list them. I don't want to make anyone feel

Speaker 4: Bad. We know Connecticut's definitely, honestly,

Speaker 3: I play in Connecticut. Yes.

Speaker 4: But what differences have you witnessed in the way that people experience music across countries and cultures?

Speaker 3: Yeah, such a good question. I would say we all have sort of wonder about the state of sort of classical music, which is how I'm trained. And when I was trained, we were taught the ethics that somehow this music was better than others. And that's crazy. Talk is wonderful. That's a wonderful tradition, but you can't say that it is better. So we're faced with the challenge of being in a very pluralistic world with amazing musical cultures of equal and even more sophisticated traditions than the ones that I grew up in. I think what I'm seeing from my own students and younger performers with a little more bandwidth and a little more courage than me is, is the ability to sort of synthesize their own music making with others collaborative projects that are emerging. And then the most obvious thing is certainly that our repertoire is expanding just by the nature of the composers who are feeding into it. So many more composers from underrepresented populations and women certainly are expanding this repertoire and giving it new life, perhaps saving it from its own self cannibalization.

Speaker 4: Yeah. I was wondering, because my dad loves classical music, but he's a bit worried that it's fading away. But I think what I'm hearing you say is that it's evolving, I guess, and incorporating other types of genres or,

Speaker 3: Yeah, I think that one challenge to repertoires like this, that take a long time to listen to, these are really long pieces, some of them. So one challenge to that is that the way music popular music gets marketed, it's oftentimes is in shorter bursts of energy. So I think our ability to receive music that takes a very, very, very long time to evolve might be a little less than it was, but at the same time, I think we're still developing the rhetoric about why that might a value. It might be a value to sit yourself into a piece of music that takes 20 minutes to transpire and to think about what's happening to you and your psyche as that piece is being performed. A

Speaker 4: Related question to the idea that classical music might be fading away secularization that we see in the Western world especially, do you think that the Western culture is losing interest in and access to the sacred and what's lost for humanity if this sacred shrinks from our

Speaker 3: Lives? Well, you need a scholar of secularization to really speak to this, and I'm certainly not that, so I'll say a word or two from an amateur point of view. First of all, we have to wrestle with this false binary of sacred and secular. We of all units have to do that constantly because we have the word sacred in our name, and there's any number of reasons to challenge who and what has the authority to label what sacred or secular, why that's even an important distinction. But in point of fact, there for a very, very, very long time, humans and others have gathered to do things in regular intervals and to do things that are kind of extraordinary. These ritual acts that both form them as a group, inspire them to act in certain ways, an ethical outcome and change or recalibrate their psyche to understand where their place in the world is and what their future could be with the engagement of what, for lack of a better word, is a higher power or the divine or the sacred or whatever, however you label it.

Speaker 3: So yes, I mean, are there fewer people that do that kind of gather on a weekly basis, perhaps? I mean, that's what the research centers are telling us, pew and others. Is there a loss there? Well, I'm going to betray my age by saying I think so, yes. I mean, I think that there's a real value in groups of people gathering, right, in regular ways and doing things in repeated forms. And for me, I'll also show the bias of my own discipline. I think there is nothing more powerful than a group of people singing together right now.

Speaker 4: I have to argue with you because I'm a horrible voice. So I don't think it's very, my voice wouldn't be powerful, but unless maybe if the other people drown me out. But

Speaker 3: When you are in a group singing or making the sounds that you're able to make, if you're surrounded by others who sing well,

Speaker 4: Yes. If I'm not, yes, definitely.

Speaker 3: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, that's a comforting thing. I

Speaker 4: Think possibly, as you said, church attendance or church gatherings might be going down, but it doesn't seem like our affection for music in the western world has been going down. It's not like concerts are not still popular. So I think it's right, as you said, together, gathering and people singing together, it still holds a lot of weight in the Western culture, and even if it's becoming more secularized,

Speaker 3: I choose to believe that that's true. There's research to the contrary. But yeah.

Speaker 4: Speaking of different events and concerts, we mentioned that it's the 50th anniversary of ISM. What are you all doing to celebrate this year?

Speaker 3: Many things. I mean, we're certainly highlighting just that we're this age. We're trying to highlight that at every stage. We're inviting our own community to give thanks for us by donating to a couple of named organizations that we have on our website, and I refer our listeners to that page if they're feeling that they have the capacity to participate in that way. In April and May, there are kind of culminating events. Again, these are listed on our website. For example, the Yale Symphony Orchestra, the Glee Club, the Camarata are performing Britain's War Requiem in Bulley and in New York. In early April, we will have a concert celebrating the work of Richard Smallwood famous gospel artist with artist Donald Lawrence here on campus in mid the Koola. Krum is performing the Bach B barn mass with Julliard 4 1 5. And then the first weekend in May, we have a massive community hymn festival with community choir of something like 200, 250 gathered in Woolsey Hall with brass and Gospel group and Oregon and Conductors and so on.

Speaker 4: I just had one last question. I know that you've talked about all the different initiatives and huge advances that ISM has made. I think there's also been many advances when it comes to music in the black church, especially with Braxton Shelley being part of ISM. Can you speak a little bit about that?

Speaker 3: Yes. Well, we were lucky to convince Professor Shelley that this might be a good place for him to do his work, and he's just made our life so much richer and better for it. A brilliant, brilliant scholar, a church person, a musician himself. But his being here gives us not only access to his scholarship, but to his leadership, and he's, he's attracting inviting gospel artists from all over the world to come here to perform and teach. We sponsored the Clark Sisters last year. That was amazing. Richard Smallwood coming up, others that we've already had the Ease, of course, teaching, doing research. But there aren't any number of initiatives that we'll be rolling out because of that program, not the least of which I hope will be a series of summer seminars aimed at undergraduate students from around the country who hope to do research and work on the music of the black church and giving them a leg up in a really intensive summer seminar or something that we hope to start. Lots of other aspects to it as well.

Speaker 4: Well, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to speak about ISM from its beginnings to what's next. So we really appreciate your time today. Thank you so much, professor Jean.

Speaker 3: Great pleasure, Emily. Thanks. I.