

Culture



Lise Borel, seen in an undated photo, is already at age 31 a well-known French composer and international prize winner. Her Marian choral piece, "Regina Caeli,"

was performed at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris during the first concerts to be performed in the reopened Gothic structure Dec. 17, 2024. Her new motets will premiere at Notre Dame on March 25, 2025. (OSV News/courtesy Jade Solus)

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With places fully booked at Paris' iconic cathedral for months ahead, Notre Dame is not only back to its former glory but also to its full concert schedule.

After 10 days of solemn reopening Masses, the cathedral's choir La Maîtrise Notre Dame de Paris gave its first sacred music concert in the renovated French Gothic structure Dec. 17. Concerts at Notre Dame usually take place on Tuesdays. Exceptionally, this one was given on two consecutive days.

In the audience was a young French composer Lise Borel, who had brought her entire family with her. On the program, alongside Johann Sebastian Bach's "Magnificat," was her "Regina Caeli" for choir, which she composed for Notre Dame in 2020.

A long-haired brunette, Borel is, at age 31, a well-known French composer and international prize-winner. In Paris, her wide-ranging works for choir and instrument are performed at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and the Cathédral Saint-Louis des Invalides.

She responds to private or public commissions from orchestras and festivals. In 2023, she composed a song for the centenary of the death of Gustave Eiffel, the engineer behind the famous Parisian tower, at the request of the public radio station Radio France. She also sang and taught at Maîtrise de Radio France, a prestigious secular choir.

"I am interested in everything," she told OSV News. "I am open to any style of composition. And I draw on everything I am passionate about, literature, dance, theater, painting, to compose. It is very stimulating."

Borel began composing music very early in her life. "It was a natural expression for me," she explained. "I would play what I composed for my family members. It was a way of offering who I was to those I loved." Music was a family tradition. "My parents worked in music circles themselves, and always encouraged me in my creations," she said.

It was the director and principal conductor of the Maîtrise de Notre Dame, Henri Chalet, who commissioned Borel to write "Regina Caeli," now a classic in the cathedral's repertoire. "It is a joyful, gentle prayer to the Virgin," Borel explained. "I wanted to recall the litanies of prayers that were repeated tirelessly in the Middle Ages. This is evoked by the multitude of voices that intermingle fervently, repeating the words of this Latin prayer."

A few months ago, Chalet commissioned another work from Borel, for the reopening of Notre Dame. "He gave me a lot of freedom," Borel explained. "I was able to choose the texts and the form the music would take. He trusted me!"

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After much research and reflection, Borel composed three short works known as motets, based on prayers by St. Francis of Assisi. They will premier at Notre Dame on March 25.

"The prayers date back to the early 13th century, when motets, which are short texts set to music, were also born," Borel explained to OSV News. "At that time, the Paris cathedral was a major venue for musical creation and innovation. Music notation was becoming more precise, and musicians began to sign their music."

Previously, they did not indicate their name, considering that they were writing for God."

Borel likes to compose about the places she needs to draw inspiration from for her music.

"I could not go to Notre Dame as it was being renovated," she pointed out. "I had to draw on my memories, and my personal history."

Borel recounted that "Notre Dame left its mark on me. I went there several times as a child. I remember being impressed inside, but without feeling overwhelmed. Later, I often went back when I was a student in the nearby Latin Quarter. When I felt lonely, I would go to Notre Dame."

She stressed that "the doors were always open, and anyone could walk in at any time. I loved going there. It seemed to me that I could find refuge and gentleness within those walls. I always felt welcome at Notre Dame."

"I tried to transcribe this gentleness and tenderness in the motets," Borel explained. "Lord, lift me up by the benevolent, burning, gentle power of your love!" is one of the passages. "Fire has many connotations," Borel remarked. "There is the fire that evokes destruction and death, but there is also the one that evokes the sweetness and strength of warmth. This is a fruitful fire, linked to life, which I associate with Notre Dame's gentle warmth," she said.

On March 25, French-American cellist Yo-Yo Ma, born to Chinese parents in Paris, will perform Borel's motets with a choir of children ages 8 to 14. "There will be a dialogue between the soprano voices of the children and the gravity of the cello, reminiscent of the Gregorian chant of the monks," Borel explained. "It will evoke the meeting of the world of human beings, with the world of the spiritual, of the absolute, of heaven," she told OSV News.

Meanwhile, Dec. 17 was a memorable evening for Borel. "It was a moment of grace to be gathered in Notre Dame Cathedral," she testified.

"We were all gripped by a discreet but serious emotion. The audience's attentiveness was exceptional. When I heard my 'Regina Caeli' ring out, I felt that the work was in its rightful place, in a time that was both timeless and yet absolutely present. It was finally taking its rightful place in its home, and thus taking on its full

meaning. You cannot help but feel humbled and delighted by the cathedral's rediscovery and the music it brings to life."

"Notre Dame invites peaceful recollection," Borel concluded. "And at the same time it creates bonds between all kinds of different people, inviting them to reach out to each other and welcome the new. This is precious, especially today, in this unstable world."