The Sound of Music

(As related by Mother Josephine Morgan to Clorinda Clarke)
A phone call on a hot July morning was my introduction to "The Sound of Music."

"Mother Morgan, this is Richard Halliday. My wife is going to play a nun in a Broadway musical and we are most anxious to hear some good church music." I asked his wife's name, and well, even I had heard about Mary Martin!

I immediately invited Mr. Halliday up to Pius X, assuring him that we had nuns from forty different orders studying at the Summer School, and every one of them would be delighted to sing for him.

A date was set. Cars drove in bringing our guests: Mr. and Mrs. Richard Rodgers; Vincent J. Donehue, the director; the photographer, Toni Frissell; and Mr. Richard Halliday.

Sisters and brothers, priests and seminarians, were gathered at choir practice in the auditorium. They sang some of our oldest chants, chants simple and unadorned, chant that was elaborate and chant accompanied in pseudo-medieval style. Then the sisters moved to the front of the room, surrounded Mr. Rodgers, singing polyphony. To his right stood sixty to eighty nuns; to his left, young priests — Carmelites, Franciscans, Dominicans, Christian Brothers and seculars. (A Saint Joseph Sister, behind him, turned the pages of his Liber.)

When the singing was over, I asked Mr. Rodgers to talk to us—I knew how much the communities back home would enjoy hearing what he said. He hesitated, then began: "First, I cannot speak to you because I have throat trouble. Secondly, I am too moved to speak. This is one of the happiest moments of my life and I cannot tell you what this means to me. God bless you all." At that Theodore Marier, the conductor, bounding to the stage, led the choir, two hundred strong, in a resounding "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning." And I don't know who was more delighted, Mr. Rodgers or I.

This was just the beginning. Miss Trude Rittman, choral director of "The Sound of Music," has been our dear friend ever since. A fine musician who started life as a concert pianist, she has arranged the music for many Broadway shows, including "Brigadoon," "My Fair Lady," "South Pacific," "Carousel," and "The King and I." Miss Rittman inquired if she could return to the campus to hear us sing, visit the classes, and observe the nuns walking about the grounds. Naturally, we invited her to stay.

For a week she attended Gregorian Chant courses and met with our faculty and studied with Mr. Marier. Then she asked Margaret Leddy, one of our Gregorian Chant teachers, to help her write and arrange the music for the first three and a half minutes of "The Sound of Music," and assist at the rehearsals in the fall. Miss Leddy attended five or six rehearsals, teaching the "stage" nuns how to sing...

*As this issue went to press the alumnæ regretfully learned of the death of Margaret Leddy '41.
church music reverently and rhythmically, how to pronounce the Latin and articulate the text and rhythm. The concentration and care that went into just three and a half minutes of show time impressed her strongly.

I myself was struck by these same qualities when I worked with Lucinda Ballard, the costume designer. Miss Ballard had phoned to inquire if she could come back to Pius X to examine the nuns' garb. She arrived on a sizzling day with two assistants. We lined up thirty nuns in different habits.

She walked up and down in front of them, scrutinizing their veils, coifs, scapulars, beads, cuffs, making such enthusiastic comments as "What a delightful cord. Does it have to be blue, Sister?" ("In our order, yes, Miss Ballard.") She was interested in the varieties of color and pattern. Each religious had a different answer about symbolism, historical background, and the way their founder or foundress had designed their habits. Then Miss Ballard asked how the Sisters managed them when they worked. Every one of them fastened back her robes, in exactly the same way you have seen us do when we are sweeping out the convent.

There was one great topic of debate: How to dress the Abbess? I maintained that in America superiors wear exactly the same garb as the other members of the community and I presented Reverend Mother to prove it. Miss Ballard contended it would be dramatic to put the Abbess in a different color and defended her stand with reams of historical research.

I was sure that American Catholics in the audience would be puzzled by the difference, and suggested a footnote in the program. The answer was:

"Mr. Rodgers hates footnotes." We finally agreed to leave the decision to Father Edwin O'Brien, the chaplain at Yale. ("The Sound of Music" was to open in New Haven.) His vote was that the Abbess wear a maroon front panel with the black. The maroon won and I've heard no complaint to date.

It was a joy to work with such a gifted and dedicated group, so responsive to whatever we could show them of religious life. Apparently, the esteem was mutual, because someone wondered aloud if perhaps I could play the Abbess. The story that my reply was "You couldn't meet my price" is, of course, completely apocryphal.

Though I did not have the pleasure of meeting Mary Martin herself, she wrote me two letters that showed her appreciation of what the Church has to offer spiritually, musically, and artistically. I value them as I do the one from a co-producer, who wrote of our life and work here at Manhattanville: "You and your collaborators made us all understand, and I hope, communicate, with our various skills, your joy, your humor and your devotion."