



# **RICHARD WIENHORST (1920-2010)**

Valparaiso University, a cooperative venture originating in 1925 between the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and what is now the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, has long been a center of Lutheran church music in the United States, serving as a rich backdrop for sacred composition throughout much of the twentieth century. The university can claim composer and teacher Richard Wienhorst, associated with the institution from his undergraduate days until his retirement, as one of its most prolific musical alumni.

Born on 31 March, 1920, in Seymour, Indiana, Wienhorst began composing music in high school while serving as an organist at a country church, his son Kurt contending that “They didn’t have any music for him to perform so he composed his own.”<sup>1</sup> He graduated with an AB degree from Valparaiso University in 1942 before serving in World War II as director of the 45<sup>th</sup> Armored Regiment Band in the US Army.<sup>2</sup> After resettling at home in 1946, he received an appointment to teach theory, composition, and to serve as bandmaster at Valparaiso University, where M. Alfred

Bichsel had been cultivating a sacred music program and “supplying liturgical music for campus services,” developing a “worship program [which] respected the ideals of the Lutheran liturgical movement as they existed at the time: careful attention to worship order, observance of the Christian year and the finer details of tradition, [and] the centrality of the Eucharist.”<sup>3</sup> Wienhorst began his teaching career in this sympathetic environment while simultaneously earning a graduate degree in music from the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, which he received in 1948, studying with Leo Sowerby, the “dean of American church music.”<sup>4</sup> Having married Sue Stonebaker in 1947, a leave of absence from Valparaiso allowed the Wienhorsts to travel to Europe, where he studied with Nadia Boulanger at the noted Ecole d’art Americaines de Fountainbleau in 1951 and then with Harald Genzmer at the Albert Ludwig Universität from 1951-1952, where the bombed ruins of Freiburg served as a backdrop for his educational endeavors.<sup>5</sup> American composers had been inclined to burnish their educational credentials through European study particularly at Fountainbleau both prior to and after the war, and numerous church musicians returned to the United States influenced by their time with Boulanger. Wienhorst’s son Kurt was born in Germany; daughter Johanna was born prior to European study.<sup>6</sup> After the family’s return to the United States, Wienhorst earned a Ph.D. from the Eastman School of Music, studying with Howard Hanson and Bernard Rogers, where a setting for soprano, alto, chorus, and orchestra of the Magnificat served as his dissertation project.<sup>7</sup> Even well into his career he would continue musical studies, in the 1960s

venturing into electronic music at Southern Illinois University, eventually teaching that field at



Figure 1 Wienhorst lecturing in his electronic music studio at Valparaiso.

Valparaiso and lecturing

frequently on the topic.

Throughout his long tenure on

the Valparaiso faculty, Wienhorst

would also teach theory and

composition, also serving as

music department chairman from

1966-1970.<sup>8</sup> Wienhorst's service

included terms as president of the

Indiana Music Teacher's

Association and as a member of the music committee of the Indiana Arts Council.<sup>9</sup> His commitment

to new music propelled him to found the University Composers' Exchange, a consortium of

Midwestern composition professors who would write for and premiere each other's works, notable

members including Leslie Bassett, Alexander Tcherepnin, and even John Cage.<sup>10</sup>

Richard Wienhorst's compositional output numbers about 380 pieces total, of which 220 are

published, his breadth of output expressing his musical interests.<sup>11</sup> His choral composition began in

the early 1950s with his *Missa Brevis*, *The Seven Words of Jesus Christ from the Cross*, and the Easter

cantata, *Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands*. The *Missa Brevis*, premiered in 1954 at the Festival of

Contemporary Music at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and dedicated to Nadia Boulanger,

arguably treads no new compositional ground. Based on the Ordinary of the Mass, it is largely

diatonic, although his strategic employment of dissonance and his tendency toward a modal

harmonic language reveals a composer searching for emotive expressive potential beyond traditional

triadic harmony. As the title suggests, the movements are fairly brief, in Latin, and eschew excessive

polyphony in favor of distinct, syllabic text declamation, all acappella. Broadly neoclassical with careful attention to clear melodic lines, one detects the influence of Hugo Distler, to whom Wienhorst did acknowledge a certain inspiration.<sup>12</sup> One may even hear the influence of Schütz in the manner in which he utilizes brief motivic fragments to convey text. His *Seven Words of Christ from the Cross*, premiered in 1955, represents a different strand of church music altogether. Although still motet-like and unaccompanied, the text is in English with each Word presented as a single, brief movement, with a single voice assuming the role of the Gospel narrator, the SATB chorus always responding as the voice of Christ. Suitable for liturgical use and simple enough for most church choirs to perform, this music reflects a *Gebrauchsmusik* concept again not dissimilar from Distler's music. The Easter cantata *Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands* (1954) was followed by a *Nativity Cantata* (1955), utilizing the tunes "A solis ortus cardine" and "Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ" as unifying *canti fermi* within the multi-movement texture, orchestrated with three strings, two flutes, and organ accompanying an SATB chorus. These larger works could be performed by a well-appointed church choir, but their unique instrumentation and textures do particularly commend themselves for the university setting within which they were conceived; yet, Wienhorst also produced many modest scale motet-anthems for church choirs during this era as well. Valparaiso University built the Chapel of the Resurrection in 1959,<sup>13</sup> a vast, modern, concrete structure whose modern aesthetic and generous acoustic veritably demanded experimentation with modern compositional techniques, and Wienhorst's musical language began to expand in the early 1960s.

Wienhorst's setting of Psalm 138 (1965) demonstrates the new directions into which his composition would delve. Scored for SAB/SATB, unaccompanied except for handbells, the structure is taken from a series of complementary hexachords which provide the two "key" structures for the piece. He would move even further afield with his serial "Domine in Caelo" (1965), scored for SATB and chamber orchestra, of which one biographer suggests ". . . the tone

row configurations. . . though difficult, are eminently singable, even memorable.”<sup>14</sup> His *Choral Matins* (1964) encompasses the prelude, Venite, the Te Deum, two psalms, and a recessional for SATB choir and percussionist, of whom the composer asks after one psalm to improvise for several minutes. He produced two versions of this piece, one ostensibly for liturgical use (which included options for the lessons, collects, and prayers), and a redacted version for concert use. Perhaps Wienhorst felt compelled to arrange this work for concert use by his realization that the average parish choir probably would be unable to undertake such a musical endeavor. A 1970 reviewer observes of Wienhorst’s music that “. . . although a little dissonant at times, [it] is in the main in the area of orthodox tonal beauty.”<sup>15</sup> If Wienhorst’s primary contribution to sacred music is his choral works, his organ works rank a close second in terms of importance, as they are still in print through many publishers. His small chorale preludes for organ demonstrate a tight and clean compositional approach and are generally accessible to the average parish organist. Many of these works were composed during the 1980s for the *Concordia Hymn Prelude Series*, but his output includes other organ genres, even fugues and a passacaglia from his student days with Sowerby. Yet, his library, the manuscripts of which are still housed at and curated by Valparaiso University, spans the musical compass from opera and theatre to orchestral and chamber groups, band arrangements, ballets, solo works for instruments and voice, and liturgical music for chorus and electronic tape, a genre he championed in the 1970s. He set up an electronic music lab at Valparaiso in the early 1970s and obtained an Eli Lilly Faculty Open Fellowship to get a better understanding of basic electronics by taking classes in the Physics Department at North Texas State University in Denton, Texas in 1976-1977, studying with Merrill Ellis.<sup>16</sup> As part of his scholarly endeavors, he edited works by Distler, Marcello, Praetorius, and Hans Micheelson, among others. In his later years, he explored composing music for children.

Richard Wienhorst retired from the university in 1984, was honored as a Distinguished Alumnus in 1995, and received an honorary doctorate in 1996.<sup>17</sup> Julius Herford and Harold Decker, in their *Choral Conducting: A Symposium* (1973) list his *Magnificat* and *Missa Brevis* as two of the twentieth-century's one hundred "core" works for chorus.<sup>18</sup> In a 1968 article in *Church Music*, George Weller's assessment of Wienhorst's impact arguably still holds true, even though this was written mid-career:

If the works described above are representative, they portray a composer who combines sensitivity and imagination, classic restraint with freedom to enjoy a new vision. Although reflecting a strong modal orientation, Wienhorst rarely indulges in the exotic pandiatonic freedom that modern theory has offered. Syncopation is not taken as an excuse to be jumpy. Seldom does Wienhorst require sonorities beyond four parts. . . . The limitation in voicing stems more, it would seem, from a preference for lean, lineal textures than from identification with the average parish choir. At the



same time, there is an empathy with the worshipping church, a sensing of a person's capacity to comprehend, to enter in, to enjoy, a reflection of insight that the place set apart for worship is not strictly speaking, the house of God, but that is very much "the house of God's people."

Richard Wienhorst died on 31 March, 2010, his music having been performed by orchestras throughout the USA, Africa, Asia, and Europe. From the Pittsburgh and Indianapolis Symphonies,

to the Det Norske Soloistkor and the Dutch Radio Chorus and Orchestra, his music has been performed worldwide in important venues.<sup>19</sup> His organ music, one may dare say, is performed weekly by organists throughout the world, where his music continues to reach new listeners.

--Benjamin Kolodziej

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- <sup>1</sup> Carrie Rodovich, "Man Devotes Life to Music," *The Times of Northwest Indiana*, 28 May, 2010. [https://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/obituaries/man-devoted-life-to-music/article\\_fea19a8e-f80f-541a-83c6-83bfdf250786.html](https://www.nwitimes.com/news/local/obituaries/man-devoted-life-to-music/article_fea19a8e-f80f-541a-83c6-83bfdf250786.html)
- <sup>2</sup> Tom Oram, "Richard Wienhorst Biographical Information," Christopher Center Library Wienhorst Collection. <https://library.valpo.edu/wienhorst/bio.html>
- <sup>3</sup> George Weller, "Composers for the Church: Richard Wienhorst," in *Church Music*, 1968, No. 1, p. 16.
- <sup>4</sup> Tom Oram, "Richard Wienhorst," on AllMusic.com artist biography. <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/richard-wienhorst-mn0002212077/biography>
- <sup>5</sup> Weller, p. 17.
- <sup>6</sup> "Son of Local Woman Now Valpo Prof After European Studies, Trip," *Seymour Daily Tribune* (Seymour, Indiana), 28 August, 1952.
- <sup>7</sup> Oram, "Richard Wienhorst," on AllMusic.com.
- <sup>8</sup> "Electronic Music Topic," *Vidette-Messenger of Porter County* (Valparaiso, Indiana), 30 Nov 1971, p. 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Richard Wienhorst Obituary, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/nwitimes/obituary.aspx?pid=141417165>
- <sup>10</sup> Tom Oram, "Richard Wienhorst" on AllMusic.com.
- <sup>11</sup> For a complete catalogue of Wienhorst's music, see the Christopher Center Library page, <https://library.valpo.edu/wienhorst/index.html>
- <sup>12</sup> Weller, 24.
- <sup>13</sup> Gretchen Buggeln, "The Shape of a New Era: Valparaiso's Chapel of the Resurrection in Historical Context," *The Cresset* (Lent 2010), p. 6-14.
- <sup>14</sup> Oram, "Richard Wienhorst," on AllMusic.com.
- <sup>15</sup> Harvey Southgate, "Choir Concert Rewarding," *Democrat and Chronicle* (Rochester, NY), p. 41.
- <sup>16</sup> Johanna Tunon (daughter) "Stories" on <https://www.fold3.com/page/111664892-richard-william-wienhorst/stories> See this site for family anecdotes and a more personal account of Wienhorst's life.
- <sup>17</sup> Oram, "Richard Wienhorst," on AllMusic.com.
- <sup>18</sup> *Choral Conducting: A Symposium*, Herford & Decker, eds. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1973), p. 144.
- <sup>19</sup> Richard Wienhorst Obituary.

Pictures acquired from the memorial page: <https://www.fold3.com/page/111664892-richard-william-wienhorst/photos>