



Photo by Fabian Bachrach, New York

WALTER E. BUSZIN (1899 – 1973)

... built a career in church music on theological commitments, rooted even in his own name. His grandfather, when converting to Christianity, had dropped the family's previous name ("Levin") taking instead a word based on the German noun for repentance and change of heart (*Buße*), hence Buszin.

Young Walter followed the usual path toward Lutheran ministry by entering Concordia College, Fort Wayne, for his high school and early college years, then moved on to Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis. Along the way he also studied at Chicago's American Conservatory before finishing his seminary curriculum in 1925. Further study at Northwestern University (under Wilhelm Middelschulte and Peter Christian Lutkin) helped crystallize his commitment to the Lutheran tradition in theology and music and provided a threshold into his early career teaching music at Bethany College, Mankato, Minnesota (1929-1935). His principal career posts — following graduate study at Union Theological Seminary, New York — were all in schools of the LCMS: Concordia College, Fort Wayne (1937-1945); Concordia Teachers College, River

Forest, Illinois (1943-1947); and above all Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis (1947-1966), where he influenced a whole generation of students, including this writer, liturgically and musically. Along the way, he also earned a master's degree in sacred theology.

Buszin never wavered in his calling to restore the church's heritage in what he believed to be a time of ecclesiastical crisis. While we today often hesitate and debate about the proper music for our time and in our cultural diversity, Buszin held firmly to the "Golden Age" between the Reformation and Bach as the baseline for musical values. Let us not rush to hasty judgment against such apparent "traditionalism." Buszin also advocated ecumenical, contemporary — though certainly not "Contemporary" as we understand it — styles of music.

Buszin left a deep, uniquely Lutheran theological imprint on church music renewal in the mid-twentieth century. He rested his case for lively church music not on aesthetics but on Luther's idea of the priesthood of all believers and the liturgy centered on proclamation of the Gospel. God's "priestly" people sang the chorale, itself the foundation (*cantus firmus*) for liturgically functional choral and instrumental works. Convinced of the superiority of German church music, he nonetheless avoided cultural relativism. The "Golden Age," he claimed, was golden only because its music proclaimed the *verbum Dei* (Word of God). He therefore appreciated all music that was servant to the Word, from Gregorian to neoclassical styles, from German motets to English service music to more recent repertoires.

To fulfill his mission Buszin worked hard in a career with several dimensions. His greatest influence rested on his writings and music editing. Among his numerous articles, book reviews, and musical editions were major pieces on the great Lutheran composers, among them Pachelbel, Schütz, Scheidt, Johann Walter (the subject of his Union Seminary master's thesis), Sixt Dietrich, J. G. Walther, even J. S. Bach. For years Buszin's writings were the only readily

accessible materials on such historic figures. The article “Luther on Music” probably drew the most attention. For many years it offered the only concise statement of the Reformer’s attitudes on the subject. That article, however, was only one in a long series probing theology and values in church music.

Recognizing a need for accessible scores of good music led Buszin naturally into music publication. Early in his career he launched the famous Schmitt, Hall & McCreary Bach chorale collections, a phenomenally successful project that sold a reputed 200,000 copies. Moreover, his deep involvement with Concordia Publishing House (CPH) and C. F. Peters (also known as Hinrichsen) help chart new programs in church music publication. He may be rightly credited with the formation of CPH’s successful music publishing department. For many years his editorial advice — working alongside Theodore Hoelty-Nickel, Paul Bunjes, and Ed Klammer — fueled CPH’s rise as a prominent church music source. His efforts ranged beyond Lutheranism, however, when he consulted with other denominations on hymnal projects. He also gained scholarly renown for the editions of both Johann Pachelbel’s choral works and Georg Rhau’s early Lutheran publications, the latter issued jointly by CPH and Bärenreiter Verlag of Germany.

These musical labors were matched by his leadership in key organizations. As senior member of the Worship Commission of the LCMS (from 1940 to 1967), Buszin labored for authentic liturgy and hymnal publication. His Gregorian settings of the propers were long-time staples for many Lutheran church choirs. Above all, Buszin and his colleagues took the visionary step of forming the Lutheran Society for Worship, Music, and the Arts in 1957. The LSWMA became a major pan-Lutheran forum for music, liturgy and other arts, especially through its journal *Response*. Buszin himself was the first editor (full disclosure: this writer was the last

editor) and set as yet unsurpassed benchmarks for excellence in Lutheran worship journalism. The LSWMA may fairly be counted as one of the catalysts for the work of the later Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship (ILCW) including the eventual publication of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and its successors. Clearly, then, Buszin's work left an imprint on the hymnals we use today.

There is an untold tale behind all of this, as this writer can attest personally from conversations with Buszin and other leaders at the time, including Herbert Lindemann, Robert Bergt, Paul K. Peterson, and Ed Klammer. Especially during the 1960's there was a lot of ferment about a new hymnal to succeed *The Lutheran Hymnal* (TLH) of 1941, the worship book of the LCMS and its Synodical Conference affiliates. Simultaneously there was a growing hope for unity among North American Lutherans, but this led to a divergence of publication strategies. Hope for Lutheran unity led some leaders to move cautiously toward new hymnal that probably would continue to mark the divides between Lutheran synods. In this view a new service book would only hinder Lutheran unity. Others, principally the hymnologists and church musicians surrounding Walter Buszin, were intent on producing a hymnal of the highest possible standards, something they felt was long overdue. They were ready to move ahead rapidly. One resolution to this dilemma was the publication of the LCMS's *Worship Supplement* in 1969. Buszin was also a member of the ILCW for its first three years and made his views very clear to his co-workers, as Ralph Quere reports in *In the Context of Unity*. By 1969 Buszin had retired from both the Worship Commission and the ILCW, but his imprint was unmistakable in the selection and style of the *Worship Supplement's* hymn repertoire. That slim volume had significant influence on the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and its successors.

Walter Buszin worked powerfully for the recovery of the Lutheran heritage at a time when

it was virtually unknown in large sectors of the Lutheran community. A half-century later we face a different world, a changing musical culture, and a barrage of competing views on worship. Buszin's perspectives may no longer answer all our questions, but we do well to follow his example. Above all, as his writings show, the proclamation of the Gospel was his overriding concern, and that certainly must hold true for us as well. He accomplished much simply because he worked harder than others, as attested often enough by colleagues; and we might try to imitate that example. He believed in the primacy of the congregation, the worshipping community; and we share that basic philosophy. Buszin, moreover, was not afraid of the past, as we sometimes tend to be. He knew that only by being true to what was best in our heritage could we make our own contribution to the continuing vitality of a living tradition.

Victor E. Gebauer

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Sources and Further Reference

(Note: Only three of Walter Buszin's most significant writings are identified in this brief article. Kirby Koriath's *Music for the Church* offers a complete index of writings, addresses, and music editions. Robin Leaver's article will also lead the reader into more detailed sources for Buszin's work and thought.)

Walter E. Buszin, "Luther on Music," *The Musical Quarterly*, XXXII, no. 1 (January, 1946): 80-97. Reprinted as Pamphlet Series No. 3, ed. Johannes Riedel, Lutheran Society for Worship, Music, and the Arts (1958).

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-----, "Theology and Church Music as Bearers and Interpreters of the *Verbum Dei*," originally published in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXII (January, 1961): 15-27. Republished in other journals at least four times, most recently by Kirby Koriath (see next item, pp. 211-227).

Kirby L. Koriath, *Music for the Church: The Life and Work of Walter E. Buszin* (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 2003). Originally Dr. Koriath's dissertation, this publication offers both a biography and a selection of Walter Buszin's important essays.

Herbert F. Lindemann, *The New Mood in Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971).

Robin A. Leaver, "Walter E. Buszin and Lutheran Church Music in America," *Lutheran Quarterly*, XVI, no. 2 (Summer, 2002): 153-194.

Ralph W. Quere, *In the Context of Unity: A History of the Development of the Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2003).

Johannes Riedel, "Preface" in *Cantors at the Crossroads: Essays on Church Music in Honor of Walter E. Buszin* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), vii-xiii.

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