



## THEODORE HOELTY-NICKEL (1894 – 1986)

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. . . was a grand person, a musical entrepreneur who knew with rare personal conviction what the church needed — and he delivered! “Theo” began life as a pastor’s son in the German town of Güstrow in Mecklenburg. Theo’s father brought his family to Wisconsin in 1901, thereafter settling in Australia where he became President of the Lutheran Church of Australia. The “land down under” and New Zealand provided young Theo with his seminary and early pastoral experiences.

While earning theological diplomas with distinction, the young pastor also garnered diplomas in music theory and piano from the University of Adelaide and Trinity College, London. He studied church music at the Conservatory in Leipzig — a leader in the movement toward a new church music in the German tradition. A successful church musician in Germany, Theo was ready for his 1928 appointment as music department head at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa. Although his work there was apparently respected, he was of German nationality in a post-Scandinavian environment during World War II and thus felt constrained to leave after thirteen years. He then moved to St. Louis where he served as music director for Lutheran radio station KFZO until 1943.

All this was preparation for his years at Valparaiso University. There, as music department head, Hoelty-Nickel built a strong faculty and pursued his vision: a forum where

pastors, musicians, and scholars could together rediscover the rich Lutheran musical heritage and create a vital liturgical music for the present era. Thus was born the Valparaiso University Church Music Seminar. There Hoelty-Nickel brought together eager liturgists and parish musicians to learn from a host of knowledgeable scholars, composers, organists, and choir directors. The Church Music Seminar was sometimes held at off-campus sites, such as Sheboygan, Wisconsin, to serve the church more widely.

The still valuable volumes of “The Musical Heritage of the Church” contain the papers of the Church Music Seminar and testify to its extraordinary accomplishments. There many Christians first learned to link music and theology; rediscovered what the Reformation view of music might offer us today; and awoke to what Scheidt, Schütz, Luther, Praetorius, Schein, and Bach might teach the twentieth-century church about authenticity in the post-romantic era. The contributors ranged from international scholars (Friedrich Hofmann, Leo Schrade, Oskar Söhngen, Wilhelm Ehmann) to American Lutheran reformers (Walter Buszin, Ed Klammer, Theo Stelzer, Alfred Bichsel) to practicing parish musicians and pastors (A. W. Mennicke, Herb Bruening, J. E. Sanderson). Mid-century church musicians were given a profound insight into their own heritage at a time when the church music scene around them was primarily tied to the Protestant American tradition.

Hoelty-Nickel also participated in the Lutheran Brotherhood Annual Church Music Seminar in Minnesota, performed frequently around the USA and Europe, and constantly searched for outstanding church musicians to invite to Valparaiso in Indiana. His name appears on publications that offered the church new insights into its musical heritage and how to recover it. For example, he edited *The Little Bach Book* (1950) with contributions by scholars such as Walter Buszin, Paul Nettl, and Heinrich Fleischer. Along with George Forell and Harold J.

Grimm, Hoelty-Nickel also authored *Luther and Culture* (1960), in which he outlined the basic tenets of a truly Lutheran church music. These topics may seem somewhat routine now, but in those days such writings offered a vision of church music far different from what one encountered in the average congregation on a routine Sunday morning.

Hoelty-Nickel now sings with angels after collecting honorary degrees and citations aplenty during his earthly career. He left behind visions of liturgy and musical art which helped make today's music possible, a vision for which we continue to struggle. He was no archival mossback in liturgical and musical thinking. He was a vigorous man, fond of sports, loving his family, enjoying a little earthy humor on occasion along with his tobacco and good drink. He cultivated a certain elegance in his life but never overlooked the more homespun pleasures. And music centered this lifestyle. Music's role in daily human life was one piece with the magnificent art celebrated at Valparaiso's cathedral-like chapel. Valparaiso University Chaplain Norman Nagel noted that Hoelty-Nickel always joined the giving of gifts at the altar on Christmas Eve, offering his own variations on Three Blind Mice. Music and art were the praises we owed to God and each found its benchmark in the liturgy of the church.

Perhaps our own struggles with the politics of worship in an era of multi-cultural, pluralistic, and cross-cultural movements seem confused and frustrating at times. Theodore Hoelty-Nickel's sense of liturgical unity in the arts might help us realize the richness of the heritage God has prepared for us and the power of the new music God is making available through us even now. Valparaiso University's President O. P. Kretzmann caught something of this in the 1967 *Festschrift* for his music department chair.

*The word "sacred" means only and wholly that the music is intended for the glory of God. It is evident that this meaning of "sacred music" makes also for a really valid and wholesome secularism — a glad and high affirmation of the world of*

*God's creation as it is reflected in the work of the artist. All the aisles of creation are open to him, cleared by and for the redemptive Word.*

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### **Further References**

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