



*Photo courtesy of
Luther Seminary Archive*

JOHN DAHLE (1853 – 1931)

. . . might seem an enviable figure for church musicians today, for he had an unclouded vision of his personal musical mission. Trained in his native Norway as a teacher and gifted as a musician, John was married in 1876 to Johanna Sørli and then flowed to the USA in the tide of Norwegian emigration. Settling briefly in Brooklyn, then in Chicago and Story, Iowa, he began his career as an organist, choir director, and editor of music for Norwegian Lutheran church choirs.

In 1889 Dahle's growing fame earned him an invitation to Saint Paul to become director of the "Nordmaendenes" a singing society. For over thirty years he was also music director at Christ Lutheran Church, across the street from Minnesota's Capitol. At various times he taught music, Norwegian language, theater, and gymnastics at St. Olaf College, Concordia College (Moorhead, MN), and the University of Minnesota. He never stopped publishing music and writing articles on music for both his own periodicals or other newspapers. From 1890 - 1902 he became the leading organizer and music director of the Norwegian Lutheran Singers Choral Union. He organized several choirs, including "Fram," a singing society devoted to Norwegian culture. He was, however, principally associated with Luther Seminary where he was clearly underpaid (students once petitioned church authorities to offer him a salary "more commensurate with the value of his work in the service of our church"). Widowed in 1913, he was given an apartment in the seminary buildings where he stayed the rest of his days.

Dahle's life-long aim was to teach singing and publish better music for use by church choirs. He deplored the popularity of American "gospel" music, which he put down to a lack of training and failure of taste. He also disliked the traditional, deadly slow singing in American Lutheran churches. Already in Chicago, therefore, he published a *Sangbok for Kirkekor* (church choir anthems). Years later he began a musical quarterly, *Jubilate*, which offered subscribers choral pieces by the likes of Spohr, Handel, Gluck, Eccard (whom he especially recommended), not to mention a large number of Scandinavian composers (e.g. Lindemann, Kjerulf). To mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1903, Dahle initiated a new Choral Union movement which first sang at Decorah IA, then achieved high success in performances at district and synod conferences. Over 1200 singers participated in the St. Paul concert in 1911, with many more thousands in the audience. Today we can only dream of such participation levels!

In 1908, leaders of three Norwegian synods appointed a joint committee to publish a new hymnal to serve the growing needs of English-speaking congregations. John Dahle led the committee while F. Melius Christiansen served as music editor. In 1913 *The Lutheran Hymnary* appeared as a herald of the future. Its introduction invoked the need for a new hymnal "in the event of a union of the church bodies concerned." In fact, the 1917 union of the three synods created one of the predecessors to the current Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). This sequence of a joint hymnal followed by church merger may sound familiar to those who remember the origins of *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978) and the subsequent formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1988). Dahle further served the English-language worshipers among Scandinavian Lutherans by editing new books of liturgical music, especially *The Liturgical Service of the Lutheran Church* (1922?) and *Music For the Morning Service*,

published around the turn of the century.

The Lutheran Hymnary was notable in several ways. The turn to English was pathbreaking enough, but the editors also included twenty chorales in original rhythmic versions, an important step in recovery of the Lutheran musical heritage. Already in 1906, Dahle had actually published a series of four articles on “How Our Hymns Ought To Be Sung,” which both deplored the lack of a Norwegian-English hymnal and made a striking proposal to include both the currently favored versions of the hymns along with the original — but largely ignored — rhythmic models.

It is also notable that Dahle later published the *Library of Christian Hymns* in three volumes (1924, 1927, 1928), translated into English by M. Casper Johnshoy. This publication was actually a “companion” to *The Lutheran Hymnary*. Dahle’s hymn comments followed the numerical order of the hymnal. He also embedded composer/author biographies within these comments at the first occurrence of a hymn related to an author or composer, then referenced back to these articles for subsequent hymns. This pattern has become familiar to us in the *Hymnal Companions* to both the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. To my knowledge Dahle was the first to use such a format for an English Lutheran hymnal handbook.

Without doubt John Dahle played a major role within the immigrant Lutheran community in taking the path toward recovery of the Lutheran musical heritage, the rhythmic versions of hymns, and unity in worship. In the process he, a fervent Norwegian, had to rethink the intersection of culture and faith. In 1901 he delivered an emotionally gripping speech to a gathering of Norwegians in St. Paul’s Como Park. From personal reminiscence he spoke of the spiritual terror when an inner voice accused the immigrant of forsaking the homeland that had

given one a “heart language,” culture, catechism, hymns, and faith. In Dahle’s telling, the immigrant’s frightened, guilt-ridden soul protests, “I must admit that I have lost some of the heritage you gave me but I have not forgotten the religious training of my youth.... dear old mother [Norway] of mine.” Dahle realized that national heritage and religion could no longer be one identity. Catechism truths would endure even as traditional language or culture was replaced by New World experiences. It was a hard new thing for many early American Lutherans — whether Norwegian, German, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, Slovak or Russian-German — to think of church and faith without the old language, customs, or treasured folksongs. We Lutherans today are no longer an immigrant church; but we still struggle to discern the markers that define faith and culture distinctly so that we, like John Dahle, can sing the songs which carry spiritual life forward into a future that may seem strange and new.

Victor E. Gebauer

Originally published in Grace Notes, a newsletter of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians; revised for this publication.

Sources and Further References

- Gerhard M. Cartford, “Music in the Norwegian Lutheran Church: A Study of Its Development in Norway and Its Transfer to America, 1825-1917” (Ph.D. dissertation, 1961).
- John Dahle, *Library of Christian Hymns*, 3 vols., tr. M. Casper Johnshoy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1924, 1927, 1928).
- John Dahle and M. Caspar Johnshoy, *The Liturgical Service of the Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House,
- Nell-Marie Hoyem, “John Dahle: A Positive Influence in the Development of Church Music in the American Mid-West” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1967; University Microfilms 68-4373, 1976).
- J. J. Skørdalsvold, “John Dahle” (Typescript, 1918).

Acknowledgments

For archival assistance,

Kari Bostrom (ELCA Region 3 / Luther Seminary Archive, St. Paul, Minnesota)

Jeff M. Suave (St. Olaf College Archives, Northfield, Minnesota)