

Jan Bender – Early Life

Jan Bender

A Church Musician of the 20th Century



by David Fienen
Emeritus Professor of Music

Gustavus Adolphus College
Saint Peter, Minnesota

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Acknowledgments

This Catalog is the product of an extended study of the compositions of Jan Bender, and reflects an extended friendship with the composer and his family.

The biographical essay that begins this volume was previously printed in a Festschrift for Heinrich Fleischer (classmate of Bender's with Karl Straube in Leipzig in the early 1930's) titled *Perspectives on Organ Playing and Musical Interpretation*. It was published by the Heinrich Fleischer Festschrift Committee at Martin Luther College in New Ulm, MN in 2002, and is reprinted here with their kind permission. An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Cross Accent* (Journal of the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians) in July 1995.

I received generous hospitality from Charlotte Bender (who passed away on March 2, 2002) during my several stays in Hanerau. She also shared many invaluable insights and memories during our long conversations. I am especially grateful to her and the whole family for having allowed me complete access to all of Jan's papers, journals, contracts, royalty reports, recital programs, etc. Friedemann Bender was of particular assistance explaining many details and sharing his memories. Matthias Bender provided constant support of my efforts to preserve his Father's musical legacy. He also graciously allowed me to reproduce photographs from the Bender family collection and to include scans of several excerpts from Jan Bender's diaries. The newspaper photo on page 79 is reproduced with permission from the Mankato *Free Press*. I took the photos on page 14, 16 and 86, and also made the scans of excerpts from Bender's diaries that appear in several places and provided the translations.

My gratitude also extends to Arndt Schnoor for his unstinting enthusiasm for the music of Jan Bender, for his efforts to honor Bender's legacy through producing exhibitions in Lübeck and Lüneburg, and especially for his eagerness to arrange for the preservation of Bender's Archives in the 630-year old Stadtbibliothek Lübeck, where he is Head of the Music Department. These Archives now join those of Hugo Distler, Bruno Grusnick, Walter Kraft, Karl Lichtwark, and Erwin Zillinger.

To my wife, Judy, I owe special thanks. In addition to putting up with my several trips to Hanerau, she also accompanied me twice, spent long hours transcribing information from documents and recital programs and conducted internet library searches for me after she returned home the last time.

--revised October 2019

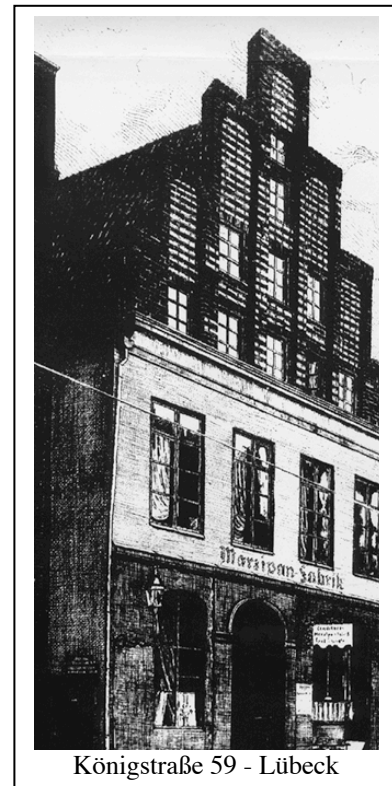
JAN OSKAR BENDER

February 3, 1909—December 29, 1994

Jan Bender, church musician, composer, organist, and teacher, was a product of several currents which were significantly altering the face of the church and its music in Germany between and following the cataclysmic World Wars. The Orgelbewegung (organ reform movement) had been started by Albert Schweitzer's pamphlet *The Art of Organ Building and Organ Playing in Germany and France*, published in 1906. After World War I, the construction of an organ in 1921, based on a disposition and scalings from Michael Praetorius (1618), led to the Freiburg Conference of 1926, at which time the organ reform movement became closely allied with the liturgical and church music reforms being spearheaded by Christhard Mahrenholz. This organ reform movement had a distinct impact on the leading teacher and performer of the first half of the Twentieth Century, Karl Straube (1873-1950), who was to be Jan Bender's organ teacher in Leipzig.

A new, more liturgical approach to church music grew from this movement, drawing into its sway, among others, Kurt Thomas, Johann Nepomuk David, and Ernst Pepping. These composers exerted a strong influence on Hugo Distler (1908-42), who became the real leader in choral composition for the church, as well as a new style of organ music. Distler forged a highly successful fusion of late Renaissance and early Baroque structure with a modern rhythmic freedom and expressiveness, elevating church music to the highest levels of craftsmanship while continuing to incorporate the chorale melodies of the church. The freely expressive centrality of the text in Distler's choral works is regularly evident also in the choral works of his only composition student, Jan Bender.

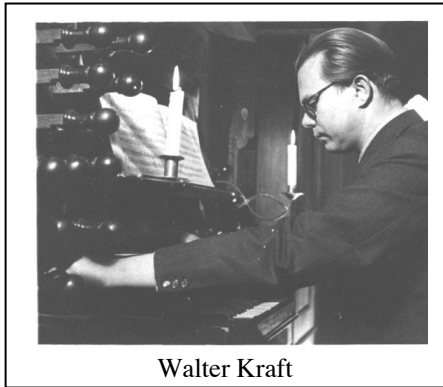
Jan Bender was born on February 3, 1909, in Haarlem, Holland (exactly 100 years to the day after the birth of Felix Mendelssohn). His father, a piano dealer, had died of pneumonia the previous August. When he was 13 years old, his mother moved the family back to her native Lübeck, to live with her Father, a prominent Marzipan baker, at Königstraße 59 (his house and Marzipan Fabrik). This house, built in 1295, is just a



Königstraße 59 - Lübeck

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block behind the Apse of the Marienkirche. While Jan had studied piano in Haarlem, he was drawn to the organ at the Marienkirche, and began studying with the organist, Karl Lichtwark. As a teenager he also began composing, coached by his music teacher at the Oberrealschule zum Dom in Lübeck, Bernhard Cappel. In fact, he wrote a string quartet as his graduation project in 1928! This four-movement work is remarkable for its well-developed control of form, the sweep of its melodies, and hints of the humor and rhythmic



Walter Kraft

complexities to come. His technical skill is particularly evident in the second movement, which he wrote in 5/4, using both regular and triplet eighth notes as well as sixteenths within these asymmetrical measures. In 1929, he began studying with the new Marienkirche organist, Walter Kraft, though these lessons were interrupted twice by extended hospitalizations for spinal tuberculosis. It turned out that he didn't have this disease at all, just an extra rib!

While this delayed him by a year from going on to school after completing his Abitur, he kept on composing and studying scores.

Bender, in an interview with Davis Folkerts (transcribed in Folkerts' dissertation), described in his own words his early influences (pages 139-140):

F.: What was it that influenced you to become a church musician most of all?

B.: When I came from Holland and went with my dear mother every Sunday to St. Mary's church, I was only thirteen or fourteen years old. I could not really quite understand what the pastor was talking about. In the first place, my German was not yet that good. I had learned a little bit from my mom, but otherwise, on the street and in school, we talked Dutch. Certainly this man there on the pulpit was very dignified, but what attracted me more was the organist there a hundred feet high. And this old man, the forerunner of Walter Kraft, kind of liked me. He was already old and couldn't see very well any more, so I was very welcome to him and to his daughter who always had to accompany him. When I was there, she didn't need always to come. I could listen so that when the pastor stopped (you couldn't hear a word up in the balcony there, but you could tell when he stopped preaching), then I had to tell the good organist to ring the bells for the bellows blowers. It was all done by foot in that time. There was no electric motor; that came later in the thirties.

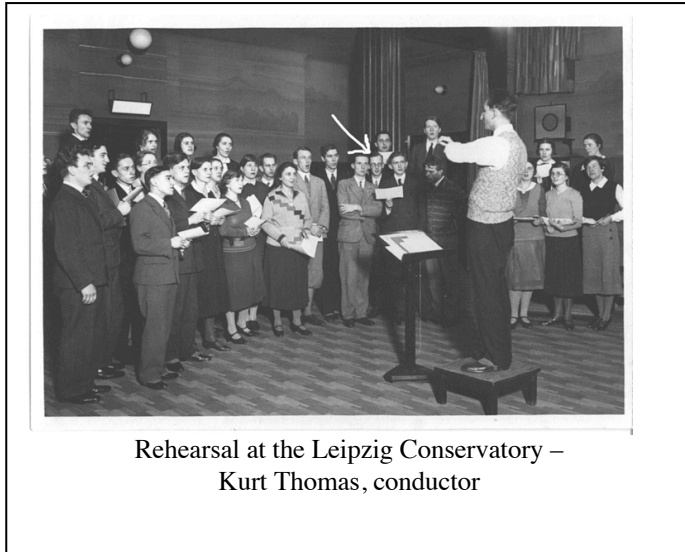
I liked his music, and he liked me. He asked, "Shall I give you organ lessons?"

"Yes, why not?" I thought. It was romantic there in that big cathedral. I was permitted to study on that little choir organ. I had piano class and organ class. Because I liked the organ so much, I felt at home in the church,

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notwithstanding the German I couldn't understand. Well, this big cathedral, that influences a little fellow! At least at that time we were still susceptible for such a thing. Nowadays my boys run in and out as if it were a fair or a market. The impression is not that dignified any more. But such a big room impressed me immensely, and that probably made me a church musician. Then I heard of Straube and Ramin in Leipzig, and I thought that Leipzig must be a great place to go to study church music.

In 1930, he enrolled in the Kirchen-musikalische Institut of the Landeskirche Sachsen, a part of the Leipzig Konservatorium. While there he studied organ with the famed Karl Straube, piano with Carl Martienssen, and composition, conducting and music theory with



Kurt Thomas. After three years of study, Straube advised him to return to Holland since he was still a Dutch citizen and would probably have trouble getting a job in Germany. Recalling this incident years later, Bender described it in his interview with Davis Folkerts (page 93):



Then the Nazis came, and Straube said, "Bender, you are still a Dutchman." I had been living already a couple of years in Germany, but he said, "You will never get a position here. You are Dutch, and you better go home." Years later I wondered why he did not try to encourage me to become German. Why not? Because he couldn't! He couldn't on account of his conscience. Nobody could become a German [at a time] when Germany [was] becoming Nazi. He [had] already looked through that whole thing, and so he could understand that. He was a very great man.

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Jan took his advice and went to Amsterdam, but was disillusioned with the musical possibilities in the Dutch Church and decided to return to Germany. In 1934, back home in Lübeck, he was appointed Organist at St. Gertrudkirche in June and became a German citizen in July. That fall he enrolled for further study at the new Lübeck



The Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis on tour

Staatskonservatorium where he became an organ and composition student of Hugo Distler. In September 1935, he completed his exams as an organist and choral conductor. He continued studying with Hugo Distler until December 1936. Bender was a frequent participant in the Abendmusik Vespers at Distler's church (St. Jacobi) and sang in the *Lübecker Sing- und Spielkreis* under the leadership of Bruno Grusnik from its founding in 1928. In 1936, he went on an extended tour with the Sing-u. Spielkreise, playing organ on most of the concerts--particularly the Distler Partita "Wachet auf". (This organization continues under the leadership of Domorganist Hartmut Rohmeyer.)



Hugo Distler

As indicated above, Bender developed his gift for composition at an early age. His early pieces and sketches show that he had a marvelous instinct and gift for melody, somewhat reminiscent of Mendelssohn. Bender himself credits Distler for urging him to seriously consider pursuing his talents as a composer, though his journal entries clearly show his preoccupation with the idea already from a much earlier age. On June 16, 1934, Bender wrote: "Ein recht herzliches Verhältniss bekomme ich zu Hugo Distler. Er trietzt mich immer zu componieren." (I am developing a hearty relationship with Hugo Distler. He pesters me constantly to compose.) Later, on Feb. 9, 1935, Bender wrote "Distler ist mit einigen meiner Kompositionen zufrieden." (Distler is pleased with a few of my compositions.) David Herman, in his book *The Life and Work of Jan Bender*, reports that Bender cited discipline as one of the chief lessons he had learned from Distler, telling this story:

I remember once that Distler was very angry with me because I said, "Oh, I can still write more modern." He said, "No, you can only write what you feel, if you can do it still another way then you are on the wrong track." (p. 19)

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One can hear ample evidence of Distler's influence in Jan's compositions, especially in his use and treatment of rhythms. This includes interruptions in the line for expressive purposes, developing a short chorale phrase into a free-flowing rhapsody, and adding aria-like solo lines with different text as commentary above the choir, as in his *Music for Reformation Day* (opus 44). As it turned out, Jan was the only composition student Distler would have. Distler moved to Stuttgart on April 1, 1937, but they carried on an active correspondence until Bender began his military service. Bender kept fifteen letters and postcards written to him by Hugo Distler between 1935 and April 20, 1939. These letters, still in the possession of the Bender family, include continued reactions by Distler to Bender's new compositions, as well as giving evidence of attempts by Distler to sell his harpsichord to his friend and former pupil. Further evidence of the importance of Distler's influence came in an article he wrote in the *Festschrift für Bruno Grusnik* (Hänssler, 1981). Titled "Hugo Distler, Bruno Grusnik, und ich" (p. 23), Bender wrote:

Der Unterricht in Leipzig bei Karl Straube, C. A. Martienssen und Kurt Thomas hatte mich gelehrt, wie ich arbeiten mußte. Der Unterricht bei Bruno Grusnick und Hugo Distler lehrte mich, was ich arbeiten mußte.

(Lessons in Leipzig with Karl Straube, C. A. Martienssen, and Kurt Thomas taught me how to study; lessons with Bruno Grusnick and Hugo Distler taught what to study.)

From his earliest comments in his journals, it is clear that as a composer, Bender was concerned with how to write "modern music", though he wasn't anxious to shock his listeners. Bender came to regard his own music as a bridge between the past and the modern music of the present and future, particularly in the church. In interviews with David Herman, quoted in his book (page 64), Bender said: "The gap between very advanced music and the Christian layman becomes so far that it cannot be understood anymore, therefore, I dared to consider my work as a bridge between them."

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Bender's early career also coincided with the rising impact of National Socialism on both the country and the church. The struggle between the *Bekennniskirche* (Confessing or Orthodox Lutheran) and the *Deutsche Christen* (German Christian) branches of the church came to a head in Lübeck where, as of January 1, 1937, the nine Pastors allied with the Confessing Church were forbidden to preach by the Bishop and were placed under house arrest. At Bender's church (St. Gertrudkirche), there were three Pastors, one allied with the *BK*, one with the *DC*, and one who was neutral. Though according to the usual rotation the *BK* pastor was scheduled to preach on January 1, he was now forbidden to do so and the *DC* pastor took the pulpit instead. Bender, aware of this in advance, refused to play for the service. His predecessor came along, was told by a church elder that he would have to play, and blew the fuse in trying to start the organ blower motor. The elder told the pastor "Bender hat die Orgel sabotiert!" ("Bender sabotaged the organ.") The Pastor told the elder to call the Kripo (Kriminalpolizei). The police came to Bender's house about noon that day (January 1, 1937) and arrested him. He was sent to jail in Lübeck, then on to Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp near Berlin, from which he was finally released on April 20 (Hitler's birthday). He therefore found himself back in Lübeck but without a job. [In an article about the struggles in Lübeck during this time, Dorothea Anderson, Gemeindegemeindeführerin at St. Gertrude states that the organ had been repaired before the end of the service and was used for the closing chorale. (from a typescript of the article in possession of this author) In a document dated January 31, 1946, three members of the church council (Kirchenvorstand) of St. Gertrudkirche stated that Bender had not committed any act of sabotage and that Walter Kraft (organist of St. Marienkirche) and the organbuilder Kemper, had examined the instrument and determined that no act of sabotage had been committed.]



"Mug shot" from Bender's arrest

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Finally, in October 1937, Bender was hired as Organist and Choirmaster at St. Lambertikirche in Aurich (East Friesland), where he remained until 1952. He married Charlotte Peters at her father's church in Heiligenstedten, Holstein, on June 21, 1939. They met for the first time at a Singwoche in Detmold in March 1938, but she had heard of him before. She was a student at a Bible school in Dortmund. While there, she had been attending secret meetings of a group that was praying for members of the *Bekennniskirche* who were in prison. Jan Bender, organist from Lübeck, was the only North German on that list and, since she was also from Holstein, she paid special attention. Her enduring interest and concern for him led to their meeting at the banquet at the end of the Singwoche. They began corresponding, became engaged, married, and spent 55 years together.

(Narrative continued in section "War Years and Career in Germany")