



F. MELIUS CHRISTIANSEN (1871 – 1955)

F. Melius Christiansen lives in memory as one of the most influential choral conductors of the twentieth century and a strong, though somewhat singular model for an emerging definition of Lutheran church music in North America. Though he was firmly rooted in Minnesota's Norwegian immigrant community, his phenomenal work with the St. Olaf College Choir of Northfield created an archetype of choral excellence in America that has not been forgotten to the present day even though history has offered new directions to both colleges and congregations.

Christiansen's ability was obvious already during the early years in Larvik, Norway. His entire family was committed to music, and young Melius quickly was initiated into the clarinet, violin, and keyboard with the strong support of his parents, especially his mother Oleanna. Her death during his teen years deeply affected the family. Consequently,

emigration fever drove Melius to head for America and settle briefly with relatives first in California, then in Wisconsin where he soon was able to earn money as an organist, choir director, band director, and violin teacher.

Minneapolis, however, became his home and it was there that his superb gifts quickly matured into serious musical study, especially as a violin virtuoso and church musician. All the while he continued teaching privately and serving as organist and choir director, especially at Trinity Lutheran Church. Eventually he studied music at Northwestern Conservatory and graduated into a career as composer, choral music publisher, and music leader in the growing Norwegian-American community. Further studies in Leipzig (1897-1899, 1906-1907) under St. Thomas cantor Gustav Schreck prepared him for a faculty appointment in 1903 at Saint Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, the base for his career until retirement in 1942.

Though Christiansen's reputation today is solidly anchored in his role as director of St. Olaf's famed choir, it is worth remembering that the choir, though largely populated by college students and faculty, was first organized to serve St. John's Lutheran Church in Northfield. There had been earlier choirs at St. Olaf, but Christiansen had now taken a role as organist and choir director in the local congregation. Thus it was at St. John's Lutheran Church, within the worshiping assembly, that the famed college choir began its glorious history. Christiansen soon took the choir onto the campus where his strict rehearsing routine developed it as a college ensemble of high achievement.

Although Christiansen was originally engaged as Saint Olaf's band director and music department head, the choir eventually centered his activities. The choral ensemble remained devoted to sacred repertoire as its mission within the Christian church, but

clearly offered itself as a concert organization. Moreover, during his Leipzig studies Christiansen had learned the chorale-based literature of Lutheran church music and thus was able to offer some of Bach's works, especially the motets, but always within the concert-oriented a cappella ideal to which he was committed.

In addition to offering his audiences sacred music Christiansen also spearheaded Norwegian choral activities and was a leader of the choral unions of the time. Already in 1904, for example, he had organized a Music Festival to celebrate recent Norwegian independence, but also to model good church music. His introductory essay expressed regrets about the "superficial church music" that seemed to be gaining popularity everywhere.

Here we see the outlines of the musical relationship between Lutheran colleges and Lutheran congregations. St. Olaf's President Boe articulated this relationship in the *Lutheran Church Herald* while writing about an extended choir tour to the east coast in 1920, "The mission of the St. Olaf Choir," he affirmed, "is primarily to develop in the students at the college a thorough appreciation of Lutheran church music. It welcomes, however the opportunity to serve in the larger field." This is a difficult task and not without some tensions. The college choir must maintain the best standards of concert performance and repertoire but must also articulate visionary possibilities in sacred music. The parish musician may draw inspiration from the college or professional choirs devoted to the church but clearly has a unique mission to serve in worship both as a proclaimer of the message and a leader of the congregation's song. All this is quite different from giving the best possible concerts.

Christiansen remained faithful to the church and its sacred music, but he also became increasingly clear that artistic and musical goals were paramount. Already in a 1920 article he made this clear. "Art itself is above nationality and above sect and denominational considerations. Art stands above and alone." This perspective seemed increasingly important during Christiansen's later years leading the famed choir. Today, in a broader perspective, it still seems true that Lutheran college choirs are intricately related to the music organizations in congregations. The academy and the congregation are bound in a healthy tension, each pursuing its own purposes but always in service to each other, to students, and to worshipers.

At St. Olaf, therefore, Christiansen played a highly influential role in North American choral music. Through extensive touring both in the USA and in Europe, he modeled a choral practice that was widely studied. The Saint Olaf Choral Series, produced by Augsburg Publishing House, placed hundreds of his editions and compositions before the public. Christiansen was succeeded by sons Olaf and Paul, both eminent choral conductors. Through performing and lecturing they spread their father's vision. Many choral directors learned the Christiansens' ideals at their Summer Choral School at Winona Lake in Indiana beginning in 1935 and later at Lake Forest in Illinois. Christiansen's music ideals are still widely practiced even though further reform has displaced them somewhat. Today his ideal of a straight choral tone without instrumental participation, even in Bach performances, cannot be considered definitive.

Christiansen's career challenges us on several points. Our own musical successes will emerge only if we spend the entrepreneurial energy so evident in his work. He was always organizing, publishing, and promoting his cause. His dismay at "superficial" church

music might remind us that the struggle about ideals is nothing new in American churches. Honestly facing that struggle can be enormously productive — if there is also an honest commitment to values consistent with the church's worship. Such commitment need not be exclusive or culturally negative. Christiansen's Norwegian allegiance, after all, did not prevent him from including extensive repertoire in performance. We need to accept the challenge of Christiansen's example, imitating his high standards even in the liturgical and pastoral dimensions of our own practice of church music.

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

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