



The Christiansen Tradition in Sacred Choral Music

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The United States has witnessed a rebirth of choral singing during the twentieth century, and F. Melius Christiansen must be recognized as one of the pioneers in this revitalization. F. Melius Christiansen together with his sons Olaf C. and Paul J. Christiansen were major influences in the development of the *a cappella* choral tradition in the United States; they were the dominant forces in the midwest. F. Melius Christiansen established a new standard of choral performance with his programming of *a cappella* sacred choral literature in the early part of this century.

I. BUILDING THE TRADITION

In examining the influence of the Christiansen tradition in sacred choral music, one must not forget the initial impetus for F. Melius Christiansen's establishing a disciplined choral ensemble of excellence. During the early years of this century the vitality of congregational singing was waning. As chair of the music department at St. Olaf College and organist and choir director at St. John's Lutheran Church in Northfield, Minnesota, Christiansen was a strong advocate of congregational singing. It was his commitment to the revitalization of congregational singing in the Norwegian Lutheran congregations of that day that led to his settings of the Lutheran chorales for choirs. Before coming to St. Olaf College in 1903, Christiansen had studied at the Leipzig Conservatory in Germany, where he was a student of Gustav Schreck, who was also cantor at the famed St. Thomas Church where J. S. Bach had served. There Christiansen encountered the choral sound of men and boys which many believe he tried to emulate as he developed the St. Olaf Choir.

Following the tour of the St. Olaf Band to Norway led by Christiansen in 1906, he returned to Leipzig for a concentrated period of study with Gustav Schreck. During this time he made a major examination of the influence of folk

music on church music and rearranged some seventy chorales in rich contrapuntal settings. This examination of the chorale tradition played an important role in the development of the St. Olaf Choir.

Upon his return to Northfield, Christiansen organized a mixed octet that toured Minnesota and adjacent states during the summer of 1908, singing a program consisting basically of his chorale arrangements. Christiansen's collaboration with St. Olaf College President J. N. Kildahl in the song services at St. John's Lutheran Church in Northfield also contributed to the revival of the Lutheran chorale tradition. These song services alternated singing of the chorales

with brief meditations by Kildahl, who would integrate into his message text phrases of the chorale that would be sung by the congregation. As these song services expanded, Christiansen also began to write more challenging choral settings of the chorale. He infused the St. John's Church Choir with more students who enjoyed the challenges of these more complex settings. Eventually it would be this St. John's Church Choir, under the new name of the St. Olaf Lutheran Choir, that would carry this gospel in song out of the Northfield community.

II. SPREADING THE TRADITION

The early and profound influence of the Christiansen choral tradition is due in large part to the history of touring that dates back to 1912, the date of the first extended trip by the newly founded St. Olaf Choir under the direction of F. Melius Christiansen to neighboring Wisconsin and Chicago, Illinois. In 1913 this touring concept was extended across the ocean, when the St. Olaf Choir became the first American collegiate choral ensemble to tour Norway.

The 1920 tour of the St. Olaf Choir to the musical centers of the eastern United States brought critical acclaim to the ensemble as a leader in the field of choral music. The successful programming of a concert of unaccompanied sacred choral music, unique and innovative for its day, made the choir and its conductor F. Melius Christiansen a pace-setting role model for choral musicians throughout the country. Critical acclaim was showered upon the St. Olaf Choir and its conductor for the singers' purity of tone, unanimity and precision of ensemble, and sensitivity to musical and textual nuance. The choir's touring schedule allowed them access to vast numbers of audiences. Consequently, the St. Olaf Choir's unique method of choral singing and repertoire became the model upon which hundreds of vocal programs in schools, colleges, and churches would establish programs of their own.

Through the years, the tours of the St. Olaf Choir under F. Melius Christiansen and later by Olaf Christiansen, who succeeded his father as conductor in 1941, have been one of the most effective ways of spreading this Christiansen tradition. In similar fashion, Paul J. Christiansen transplanted the Christiansen tradition to Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, when he joined that faculty in 1937. For nearly fifty years Paul Christiansen developed the Concordia Choir into one of the finest choral ensembles in the country. The annual tours of the Concordia Choir served to illustrate another perspective of this influential school of choral singing. The tours of these groups were especially noteworthy in the years through World War II when they served as a primary vehicle for education. Formal training in the choral art was limited in educational institutions at this

time; therefore choral music educators and church musicians found attendance at live concerts a very necessary and rewarding avenue to learning.

Also significant in the transmission of the pedagogical tenets of the Christiansen tradition was the famed Christiansen Choral School begun in 1935 by F. Melius and Olaf Christiansen. These summer workshops continued under Olaf's leadership until 1962. Paul J. Christiansen established his own summer choral school in 1948 and continued it through the middle 1980s. Hundreds of church, school, college, and community choral conductors were introduced to the choral pedagogy of F. Melius, Olaf, and Paul Christiansen through these summer sessions. In these sessions, which included the formation of an institute choir, participants received

invaluable insight into the actual techniques utilized by these men in creating the stunning choral ensembles at St. Olaf and Concordia. Participants were subjected to the audition procedures, the seating and placement of singers in the ensemble, and the vocal and rehearsal techniques of these pedagogues. Choral conductors and singers were exposed to the finest choral literature and fresh approaches to the choral art. Through these choral schools several generations of choral conductors and singers were influenced by the inspirational teaching of the Christiansens.

III. PHILOSOPHICAL CONVICTIONS

While one may focus on the technical musical aspects of the Christiansen tradition, it is the strong philosophical convictions of these men that serve as the foundation for the musical quest for excellence associated with the tradition. While it is widely held that F. Melius Christiansen believed religion to be a private affair, his spiritual life played an important role in his process of making music. In a letter dated 1927, Christiansen wrote the president of St. Olaf College, Lars W. Boe, stating:

It is important that I am in good physical and spiritual condition because the singing of the choir is so dependent on how I feel. I am not sentimental when I say that the spiritual condition is very important in this work. We must give genuine expression to those beautiful works and not merely “vain representations.” May we all be true to our calling. True to our master and true in our work for the master. And may we also be true to Art! The spirit of art is very much like the Spirit of Christ. Here, too, truthfulness is essential if it is to reach the hearts of the listeners.¹

F. Melius Christiansen saw a common bond between music and religion in that both appealed to the emotions of people. In his essay “What Is Sacred Music?” Christiansen responds:

It is the expression of God’s own Word in the form of hymns and spiritual songs written by God-inspired men throughout all ages of Christendom. It is the tone, the feeling, the atmosphere created by the Word of God and by the working of that Word in the hearts of men. It is the character of this feeling which must be preserved by the living Christians because it has emanated from the Word of God and because it has its roots in that Word.²

¹Leola Nelson Bergmann, *Music Master of the Middle West* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1944; New York: DA Capo Press, 1968) 134.

²F. Melius Christiansen, “What Is Sacred Music?” *Lutheran Herald* 14/9 (March 4, 1930) 296.

Christiansen viewed the choir as an environment where there was a constant search for truth. Concerning the responsibility of the conductor and the mission of the choir, he wrote:

The choirmaster...is a teacher, a seer, a prophet. He is a builder of character and of good taste....He knows his singers, the quality of voices they have and what kind of personalities they are and he has told them about their mission and the attitude

they should have as choir members....When you are directing your choir, it is not you that is directing. It is the beauty of the music that directs you. You are only a servant of the spirit of the music and the music has, or should have, the power over you....This very principle holds good also in religion. We will have to surrender ourselves to God in order that His Spirit of love may rule in hearts: "Lord of Spirits, I surrender for Thy gifts to me."³

Olaf Christiansen saw his task of conducting the St. Olaf Choir as kingdom work. His main desire was to present a concert of sacred music sung beautifully and without distraction so that the listener would be sensitized to the message of the Holy Spirit. In 1968, his final year as conductor of the St. Olaf Choir, Olaf Christiansen stated:

When we take the St. Olaf Choir on tour, we plan to present in as highly an artistic manner as possible a program of religious music. We hope this music will at some time or other during each concert move the listener to think differently, to feel more sensitively, and in some way elicit an emotional response that will lift him beyond the ordinary daily experiences.

We sing to a mixed audience. When they come to hear our concerts they expect art; they don't always expect religion. But the primary motive of the St. Olaf Choir from its earliest days has been to promote great choral music with religious texts....We have many educational goals for the students, but the ultimate goal of the St. Olaf Choir goes beyond the members and includes singers and listeners. We aim to sensitize people. We bring them a religious message—not necessarily to convert them, but to sensitize them. If our music can sensitize them, can reach into their emotions then they will leave our concert with a different attitude toward themselves, toward others, and toward God. When this happens, we have reached our highest aspiration.⁴

Paul J. Christiansen espoused a slightly broader view of life and art in his concert programs with the Concordia Choir. The following remarks made at one of his summer choral schools give us a glimpse of his thinking:

You have heard the saying, "Experience is the best teacher." But I don't mean...you have to have done it a long time. I mean rather—you enlarge your concept of life and music.

It isn't the technique. The technique only helps us to provide those experiences. It's these experiences that we hope to hand on to our singers. It takes technique to do it, but it's the experience of Bach—as a man, as a thinker, as a man who feels about life—to pass on some of these big people's thoughts and feelings about life, and to give them to your singers so they will profit by what men before have done, what men who are doing something now are thinking.

I think it's the experiences of life that are the greatest part of life. It isn't the

³F. Melius Christiansen, "To Choir Directors," *Lutheran Herald* 23/1 (January 3, 1939) 30.

⁴Olaf C. Christiansen, "Choral Tradition Lives On," *The Music Journal* 26/26 (March, 1968) 36, 84-85.

superficial things that make us happy. It's the things that move us inside that make us happy.⁵

Paul J. Christiansen has had a profound influence on the lives and careers of the thousands of people who were students at Concordia College or studied with him at the summer choral schools. Concordia College president Paul J. Dovre expressed it most eloquently, saying of Paul Christiansen:

The man possesses the soul of a poet, the vision of a prophet, and the heart of a disciple. Those we can only explain as gifts of the spirit—divine and ineffable.⁶

IV. A TRADITION OF EXCELLENCE

One of the greatest contributions made by F. Melius Christiansen was the elevation of sacred choral music to a standard where it was accepted as appropriate literature for the concert hall. Previously, much of the repertoire of collegiate choral ensembles was second-rate glee club songs. This rebirth of sacred choral literature, sung unaccompanied, was also one of the catalysts for the development of the volunteer church choir in the middle decades of this century.

F. Melius Christiansen's compositions are still favorites with many choral ensembles who have the resources to perform them. His choral settings of the great hymns are still highly regarded works which deserve study and performances. Among these are his settings of "Beautiful Savior," "Lamb of God," "O Day Full of Grace," "Praise to the Lord," "Wake Awake," and "Lost in the Night." He also has several of his own compositions which utilize tunes of famous hymns; these include "Psalm 50," which uses the Old Hundredth tune in the third movement, and "How Fair the Church," which incorporates the choral tune *Vater Unser* in the final section of the anthem. F. Melius Christiansen's programming of the nineteenth-century unaccompanied choral works of the German and Russian schools as well as the major motets of J. S. Bach was an important contribution to the choral repertory of the day.

Olaf Christiansen expanded the repertory of the St. Olaf Choir to include more music of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries as well as American sacred folk hymns and spirituals. He also introduced a wider palate of twentieth-century compositions to the choir's programs and was instrumental in introducing the works of Normand Lockwood and Jean Berger to a wider choral audience. He contributed many of his own arrangements and original compositions on sacred texts to the repertory of the St. Olaf Choir.

Paul J. Christiansen has also been active as a composer. Though recognized for his original compositions, his work as an arranger may be his greatest contribution. He has provided some simple, yet truly elegant settings of hymns and spirituals. These works are most noteworthy for their rich, sonorous vocal textures. While more accessible than many of his father's choral hymn settings, they still require great musical artistry and sensitivity. Also unique to his work have been Paul Christiansen's choral settings of ancient plainsong chant. While some musical purists may take issue with the lush romantic harmonic settings of these melodies,

⁵Albert Rykken Johnson, "The Christiansen Choral Tradition: F. Melius Christiansen, Olaf C. Christiansen and Paul J. Christiansen" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1973) 429.

⁶Ronald Nelson, "Reach for the Stars," *The Lutheran Standard* 26/14 (September 5, 1986) 15.

Christiansen has helped preserve these ancient hymns of the church for wider audiences.

Through the many years of touring and the use of the LP recording, the repertoire and choral virtuosity of the Christiansens has been disseminated throughout the world. Television also has been instrumental in sharing one of the great traditions begun by F. Melius Christiansen, developed by Olaf and Paul Christiansen, and continued by their successors—the Christmas programs at St. Olaf and Concordia. The first St. Olaf Christmas Festival was a “song service” held in 1912; it has continued uninterrupted since that time. The festival concerts continue as an outgrowth of Christian conviction and expression of St. Olaf’s rich musical heritage. The St. Olaf Christmas Festival draws over 15,000 people to four concerts held annually the first weekend in December. First in 1975, and again in 1983 and 1989, the Public Broadcasting System taped and aired the Christmas Festival throughout the United States.

Paul Christiansen transplanted and adapted the St. Olaf Christmas Festival for the Concordia College community. Though certain musical similarities exist between the two productions, Concordia’s Christmas offering has become distinctive through the use of huge colorful murals that serve as a visual backdrop and aid in interpreting the theme of each year’s Christmas concert. Twice since 1986, the Concordia Christmas Concert also has been televised by PBS.

The Christiansen choral tradition has been the philosophical model for many church-related institutions in the United States, especially those associated with the Lutheran Church. The Christiansen tradition continues to influence today’s singers and younger conductors because their mentors were directly inspired by these great men and the choral ensembles that they conducted.

Ultimately, it may be the uncompromising commitment to excellence in the choral art that will best characterize the Christiansen choral tradition. In this post-Christiansen era, the proclamation of a religious message in choral song is still central to the mission of choirs like St. Olaf, Concordia, the recently formed National Lutheran Choir, and other college, school, and church ensembles that trace their identity to the Christiansen choral tradition. We who are heirs of this tradition continue this commitment to excellence in artistic singing and quality repertoire while celebrating this art form as a wonderful gift from God the Creator.