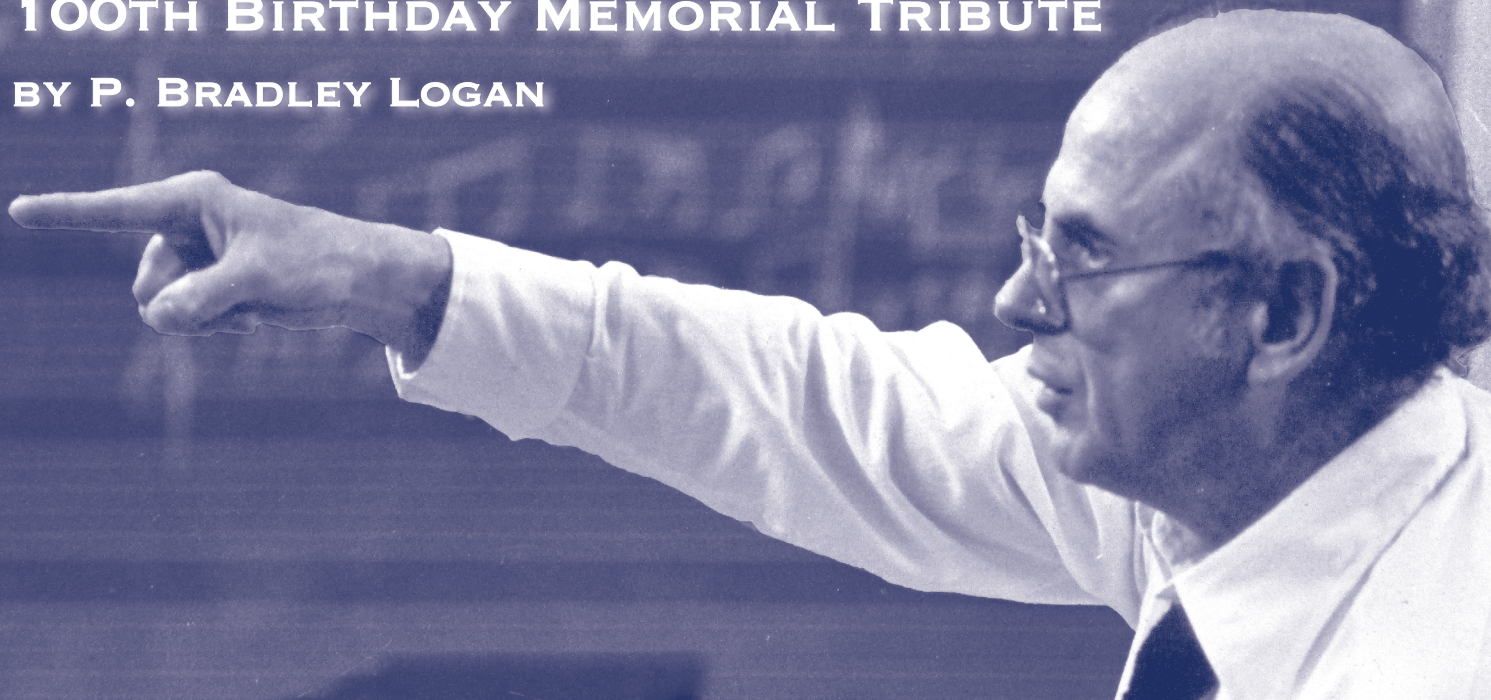


# EDWIN R. FISSINGER (1920-1990): 100TH BIRTHDAY MEMORIAL TRIBUTE

BY P. BRADLEY LOGAN



As a choral director, one of the most important and time-consuming responsibilities is the careful selection of teaching resources and choral repertoire for our students. What parameters do we set before undertaking the search for what we deem to be quality literature? One way is to examine music composed by someone who is or has been an active participant in the art of conducting and educating ensemble singers; their first-hand experience can be channeled into their compositional product.

This article will highlight the life and compositional style of Dr. Edwin Fissinger (1920-1990), a charter member of ACDA and a choral musician who actively integrated and practiced his crafts of conducting, educating, and composing. He wrote for his choirs, was “in the trenches” experiencing that music with the singers as a conductor, and applied his practical experience to

his craft as a composer of quality choral music. Edwin Fissinger’s musical career spanned forty-five years as a conductor, composer, educator, and revered mentor of countless collegiate minds—minds that eagerly strove to answer his subtle call to “live” the music they were experiencing. Fissinger is remembered for his output of artistically crafted original compositions and arrangements, totaling 183, and for his consistent production of outstanding university choirs. As a conductor/educator, Fissinger’s concert programming reflected a historical progression from renaissance through the contemporary. He championed the new works of contemporary midwest composers such as Gordon Binkerd, Robert Kreutz, Milan Kaderavek, James Fritschel, Norman Lockwood, and others. He was a prodigious reader of poetry and took pride in using quality artistic texts. He conducted

choirs at five national ACDA and MENC conventions, three CBS radio network programs titled “The Cavalcade of Christmas Music,” the 1977 American Choral Music Documentary produced by Zwietaes Deutsches Fernsehen, five demonstration albums by Jenson Publications, and annual recordings distributed nationally.

## Background

Music was an integral part of Fissinger’s life from an early age in his hometown of Rockford, Illinois. He was tutored in piano, organ, and voice by Olive Fell, who took him under her wing and provided him musical insight. He became actively involved with popular music in high school, singing, playing the piano, and writing and arranging for his band, Eddie Fissinger’s Orchestra. In 1938 he entered Marquette University on a track scholarship.

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During his freshman year he became engrossed in popular music to such an extent that he opted not to return to college the following year in order to concentrate on music. In 1939 he reorganized his band to focus on writing and piano work. He also sang and played for his local radio program at WROK, “The Voice of Ed Fissinger.” In 1940 he joined the Charlie Agnew Orchestra operating out of Chicago. He acquired practical techniques in orchestration while traveling throughout the country for the next two years as a singer, pianist, and arranger.

Following a tour of duty with the Seventh Air Force in the Central Pacific as a navigator-bombardier, First Lieutenant Fissinger became the first veteran to enter the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. Under the private tutelage of the eminent composer Leo Sowerby, he studied theory, counterpoint, form and analysis, composition, and orchestration. Fissinger described Sowerby’s teaching style as one of practicality and that of a “doer”—rather than talk about something, he would do it. Upon completion of his bachelor’s degree, Fissinger was selected for a faculty position at the same conservatory to teach harmony, counterpoint, form and analysis, sight singing, and ear training. He also directed the Conservatory Choir and assisted Sowerby in his counterpoint classes. While serving on the Conservatory faculty, he completed his master’s in composition under Sowerby’s mentorship. Fissinger continued on the Conservatory faculty for three more years and set out on his compositional



career. His compositional output at this time consisted of fifteen choral compositions, a four-movement symphonic suite, string quartets, sonatas, a symphony, and two song cycles.

In 1953, Fissinger changed direction. Believing the college scene was where things were happening, he left his Conservatory position to pursue a PhD in musicology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The years 1954-57 were spent teaching music theory and directing the Chapel Choir at St. John’s Catholic Church on the University campus. With choral music being an integral part of his life for many years, Fissinger explained why choral music was his logical career choice:

It was a gradual process. First of all, I had probably done more on voice than anything else: I sang with the Halloran Choralists from 1951 [to

1954. This was a semi-professional group in Chicago that in addition to concert work did a lot of recording with popular artists. I learned a lot from Jack (Halloran), who had a great ear and a sense of ensemble balance. I also sang in Leo Sowerby’s church choir for special performances. As far as learning choral techniques, I didn’t learn them directly from Sowerby, although he was a terrific musician. With Sowerby there was no deviation from a pitch, either the note was right on or it wasn’t.<sup>1</sup>

After completing his third year of study, Fissinger accepted the position of Chairman of the Music Department at the Chicago Undergraduate Division of the University of Illinois. He developed the program from the grassroots stage to an eight-faculty department. In addition to his teaching, he actively pursued his writing career and developed a close association first with Summy-Birchard Publishing Company of Evanston, Illinois, and then with World Library Publications in Cincinnati. In August of 1967, he began an eighteen-year tenure at North Dakota State University as chairman of the music department and head of the choral area, while also elevating the department as a result of a rigorous NASM accreditation process. Fissinger’s departmental teaching responsibilities included choral arranging, advanced choral conducting, counterpoint, and directing the Concert Choir



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and Madrigal Singers. During this time, he developed the choral program into one of national prominence and provided the choral world with an abundance of choral compositions and arrangements, writing seventy-five of his 183 total choral works.

## Compositions

Edwin Fissinger's choral pieces are published by Colla Voce Publications, Pavane Publications (distributed by Hal Leonard), Walton Music (distributed by GIA Publications), Hal Leonard, and Meadowlark Music. His choral music exhibits a style readily recognizable by those who are familiar with his works. One need only reflect upon the individual qualities of the music to understand his important contribution to the choral art, though there is not space here to fully explore the components that comprise Fissinger's compositional style.<sup>2</sup>

By way of example, however, is a piece that some consider to be one of his most significant and creative works: "To Everything There is a Season." It captures the textual essence in an individual manner, exhibits a variety of compositional techniques, and offers its own particular challenge to the performers. We observe the juxtaposition of contrasting tempos, textures, dynamics, voicings, and rhythmic activity to portray a sonic embodiment of its textual dichotomy.

"To Everything There is a Season,"<sup>3</sup> commissioned by the Voices of Mel Olson in Omaha, Nebraska,

was written during the summer of 1976.<sup>4</sup> It is a substantive work with a performance time of twelve minutes. The text is taken from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. The author of Ecclesiastes struggles with the question: How can life best be lived? Little by little, he finds clues pointing to a passageway through life, but even when he follows that passageway, fulfillment is tempered with vanity. Wayne H. Peterson, in his essay on Ecclesiastes, categorizes the third chapter as "Life's Limitations."<sup>5</sup> In his search for life's meaning, the writer considers "everything that is done under the sun" (1:11). He concludes that every human activity has its own appropriate time (3:1-8). Man cannot determine these events (3:10-11), but his life is determined by them.

Verses 1-9 of chapter three are in the form of a brief poem containing seven couplets, each line exhibiting parallelism that expresses two opposing actions. These include the most characteristic activities of an individual's life.

- 1 To everything there is a season,  
and a time to every purpose  
under the heaven:
- 2 a time to be born, and a time to  
die;  
a time to plant, and a time to  
take up that which is planted;
- 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to destroy, and a time  
to build;
- 4 a time to weep, and a time to  
laugh;

- a time to mourn, and a time to  
dance;
- 5 a time to cast away stones, and a  
time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to  
refrain from embracing;
- 6 a time to seek, and a time to  
lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to  
cast away;
- 7 a time to rend, and a time to  
sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a  
time to speak;
- 8 a time for love, and a time for  
hate;  
a time for war, and a time for  
peace;
- 9 What profit hath he that wor-  
keth in that wherein he  
laboreth?

A "season" and a "time" refer not to duration of time but to the period of time when an action must take place. According to Peterson, to be born and to die express the limits of earthly life. "To take up" or "to pluck" should be translated "to harvest," making a better parallel with "to plant." "Weep...laugh" and "mourn...dance" express the sorrows and joys of life. Dancing refers to jumping for joy (see Job 21:11). The phrase "to cast away, and...gather stones" has been interpreted various ways. Peterson believes two of the best interpretations are: first, in reference to the act of marriage and the abstinence

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from it; and second, the scattering of stones from the ruins of an old building and gathering stones to build a new one. Stones were gathered to build many things in ancient Israel—walls, buildings, altars, monuments—and it is probable that the reference is to the gathering of stones for such purposes. “To seek” and “to lose” may refer to acquisition and loss in business or of personal possessions. “To keep” and “to cast away” alludes to the guarding of possessions and throwing away of what can no longer be used. And finally, it was customary to rend one’s garment as a sign of mourning or deep disgust (2 Samuel 1:11; 2 Kings 5:7, 22:19). Later, the garment would be sewn up again.

The poem shows no progress but only an endless round of activity. Basing his theory on verse nine, Peterson feels that the lack of progress “expresses [the writer’s] opinion that man’s labor brings him no gain which is substantial and satisfying.”<sup>6</sup>

Close examination of the text provided Fissinger with the pillars for the musical structure. Since the polarity of time stands out, the creative cell is the phrase “a time,” which appears twenty-nine times in the poem. Fissinger uses the phrase 157 times for textual emphasis, for rhythmical impetus, and for overlapping and connecting phrases. See Figures 1 (mm. 106-112), 2 (mm. 169-180), and 3 (mm.

187-197).

The other musical pillar combines text with musical texture and voicing. Fissinger depicts the dualistic quality of the text with vocal polarity: men versus the women. One set of voices presents one of life’s activities, and the other responds with its antithesis. See Figure 4 on page 62, where we see overlapping dualism with the male voices representing “a time to mourn” through quarter-note rhythmic movement

in 4/4 time, followed by female voices presenting the up-beat motive “a time to dance” in a faster tempo with eighth-note rhythmic movement in 6/8 time. He continues this type of alternating texture throughout the piece, occasionally combining voices in a six-part homophonic texture where textually appropriate. Figure 5 on page 63 goes a step further with an overlapping texture leading to a simultaneous homophonic declamation

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system (measures 106-109) is in 2/4 time and features four vocal parts (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) with lyrics: "dance, a time, a time, a time". The tempo is marked *mp cresc. poco a poco*. The second system (measures 110-113) is also in 2/4 time and features the same four vocal parts with lyrics: "a time, a time, to cast a-way stones, to cast a-way". The tempo is marked *f*. The music includes complex rhythmic patterns such as triplets and sixteenth notes, and overlapping vocal lines.

Figure 1. Edwin Fissinger, *To Everything There is a Season*, mm. 106–113.

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168

S  
A  
T  
B

time to sew, — a time to sew, to sew, a time, a time, a time, a

time to sew, — a time to sew, to sew, a time, a time, a time, a

175

*dim. poco a poco*

S  
A  
T  
B

time, a time, — a time to rend, — to sew, — a time to

*dim. poco a poco*

time, a time to rend, a time to sew, — a time, a time, —

Figure 2. Edwin Fissinger, *To Everything There is a Season*, mm. 168–181.

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187 *Slowly* (♩ = 58 - 60)

S  
A  
T  
B

*p* — To keep\_ si - lence, — to keep\_ si - lence, si - lence, si - lence, —

*p* — To keep\_ si - lence, — to keep\_ si - lence, si - lence, si - lence, —

time; — A time, — time, — a

time; — A time, — time, — a

193

S  
A  
T  
B

keep si - lence, — keep

keep si - lence, — keep

time — to keep si - lence, — a time — to keep si - lence, —

time — to keep si - lence, — a time — to keep si - lence, —

Figure 3. Edwin Fissinger, *To Everything There is a Season*, mm. 187–197.

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88 **Gaily** (♩ = 76) *mf*

S And a time to

A And a time to

T *mp* a time to mourn, to mourn, to mourn,

B *mp* a time to mourn, to mourn, to mourn,

92 **Slowly** (♩ = 60 - 63)

S dance, and a time to dance, to dance, dance, dance,

A dance, and a time to dance, to dance, dance, dance,

T *p* to mourn,

B *p* to mourn,

96 **Gaily** (♩ = 76) *pp* *mf* (/)

S to dance, and a time to dance, to dance,

A to dance, and a time to dance, to dance,

T *mp* a time to mourn, to mourn, *mf*

B *mp* a time to mourn, to mourn, *mf*

Figure 4. Edwin Fissinger, *To Everything There is a Season*, mm. 88–100.

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frain from embracing

to seek (quarter = 58): to lose

to keep (quarter = 66-69): to cast away (quarter = 72)

to rend (quarter = 132-138): to sew

to keep silence (quarter = 58-60): to speak

for love (quarter = 60-63): for hate (quarter = 132-138)

for war (quarter = 132-138): for peace (quarter = 54)

With the form and content of the poem being little more than a listing of life's activities and limitations, lacking any progressive development, a musical setting could become fragmented and monotonous. By overlapping and integrating a variety of textures, Fissinger has managed to achieve continuity and interest. He stated: "I tried to depict as much as I could in tonal terms, the essence of the text, and I felt that I was successful."<sup>7</sup>

Both young and established conductors are encouraged to study his scores and listen to recordings of his North Dakota State University choirs to audibly experience his attention to text and phrase development. To assist choral music educators in their search for quality choral music, pages 66-67 provides a varied sampling from Fissinger's compositional output of 183 choral pieces.

Among Edwin Fissinger's greatest contributions to the arts was his

ability to mold the impressionable minds of future choral conductors. He challenged them to analyze then internalize how notes and text are wedded. His incredible ear allowed nothing to slip through undetected; he had an unmatched facility at the piano and an impressive vocal ability to demonstrate correct tonal production. He taught mental discipline and how to strive for perfection, noting in each situation how his singers could always do better. His mantra, "You can be pleased but not satisfied," was one of his unique motivational tools. Fissinger had a genuine concern for his students and their families, and habit of offering constructive advice when asked—and even sometimes when not asked. He mentored the careers of a generation of choral conductors who went on to earn their doctorates in choral conducting and literature. His compositions

have sold tens of thousands of copies, and his imprint has been left on national and division ACDA and MENC/NAfME conventions. He was a consummate musician who spoke through his compositions, choir performances, and the lives of his students who have followed in his footsteps. □

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Interview with the author. Fargo, North Dakota, May 1-June 15, 1983.
- <sup>2</sup> Readers desiring an in-depth analysis of Edwin Fissinger's choral music, his compositional style and

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influences, and a chronological listing of his compositions through mid-1986, see: Bradley Logan, “The Choral Music of Edwin R. Fissinger” (doctoral diss., University of Illinois, 1986).

<sup>3</sup>To listen to Fissinger’s premier recording of “To Everything There is a Season” go to [Waltonmusic.com](http://Waltonmusic.com) or [youtube.com/watch?v=0XbntFlH5WE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XbntFlH5WE).

<sup>4</sup> During a conversation with Dr. Joseph Testa at the start of the 1976-77 school year, Fissinger shared that his wife’s mother passed away during that summer and he was

unable to travel back to Massachusetts with her for the funeral. Instead, he stayed behind and began work on this text. Fissinger implied that this piece was his artistic response while reflecting upon the loss of his mother-in-law.

<sup>5</sup> Clifton J. Allen, gen. ed., *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 5: *Ecclesiastes*, by Wayne H. Peterson; 12 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 5:100-127.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with the author.

## Selected Compositions

All of these pieces were written for Fissinger’s collegiate choirs or commissioned for other collegiate or accomplished community choirs. Presented chronologically and voiced for SATB/divisi/A cappella unless indicated otherwise.

### Sets

*The Star That I See* (1965)

1. The Star That I See
2. Moon Magic
3. Winter Wren
4. Dandelions
5. Will You Remember

*Three Portraits of Stephen Foster* (1975) w/piano and tenor solo

1. Laura Lee
2. Oh! Susanna
3. Gentle Annie

*Images of the Past*

1. Some Folks (1975) w/piano, soprano & tenor solos
2. Go ‘Way From My Window (1984) w/piano
3. Nelly Bly (1975)
4. Black Is the Color of My True Love’s Hair (1984)
5. Skip To My Lou (1984) w/piano

*Three Sacred Pieces* (1982) w/hand percussion

1. Joyfully Let Praises Ring
2. Of the Father’s Love Begotten
3. Adoro Te Devote

*On Flowers and Love* (1986)

- I. To Daffodils
- II. Sweet-and-Twenty
- III. Tell Me, Where Is Fancy Bred?
- IV. Music, When Soft Voices Die
- VI. Love Is a Sickness

*Set of Three for Treble Choir and Strings (or Piano) SSA* (1988)

1. Reeds of Innocence
2. The Lamb
3. Spring

*Prairie Scenes* (1989)

1. Passing of Winter
2. Dakota Dawn

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3. A Winter Night

4. Prairie Wind

*Dakota Prairies* (1989)

1. The Prairies
2. The Wind In The Wheat
3. The Wild Prairie Rose
4. The Call of Spring

## Spirituals

*Witness* (1970) w/baritone solo

*Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel* (1971) w/mezzo-soprano solo

*Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho* (1979) w/soprano & alto solos

*Wade In the Water* (1984) w/ soprano & baritone solos

## Christmas

*Here We Come A-Caroling* (1964)

1. Here We Come A-Caroling
2. Christ Was Born On Christmas Day
3. O Come, O Come, Emanuel
4. The Coventry Carol
5. Good Christian Men, Rejoice
6. We Three Kings
7. Deck the Hall
8. When Comes This Rush of Wings
9. Bring a Torch, Jeannette, Isabella
10. What Child Is This

*I Saw Three Ships* (1973)

*What Cheer?* (1976)

*The Rarest Gift* (1976)

*The Holly and the Ivy* (1976)

*For Now Is the Time of Christmas* (1978)

*What Is This Fragrance* (1978)

*Love Came Down at Christmas* (1978)

*Patapan* (1980)

*Welcome Yule* (1980)

*Four Christmas Vignettes* (1981)

1. Christmas Festival
2. Recipe
3. Madonna and Child
4. Christmas Greeting

*Past Three A Clock* (1981)

*On Christmas Night* (1985)

## Additional Original Compositions

*O Make a Joyful Noise* (1964)

*By the Waters of Babylon* (1976) w/soprano solo & speaker

*To Everything There is a Season* (1976) w/solo quartet

*Something Has Spoken to Me In the Night* (1978) w/speaker

*Arise, Shine, For Thy Light Has Come* (1981)

*Set Me as a Seal* (1981) w/soprano solo

*Consecrate the Place and Day* (1982)

*Lux Aeterna* (1982) w/soprano and baritone solos

*Incline Your Ear and Come Unto Me* (1986)

*In Paradisum* (1988)

*To Music* (1988) w/cello

*No Man Is An Island* (1989)

*Dover Beach* (1990)

*The Splendor Falls On Castle Walls* (1990)