

## **The A Cappella Oratorio: An Investigation of Interactions Between Ethos and Fine Art in Choral Singing Among Old Mennonites at Hesston College (1912–1949)**

**Matthew Schloneger**  
Hesston College

### **Abstract**

Across nearly four decades (1912–1949), choirs at Hesston College, an Old Mennonite institution in central Kansas, performed oratorio literature by ignoring in performances and rehearsals alike the composers' scored intentions for the use of instruments. This tradition, which later spread to Virginia's Eastern Mennonite College, appears to be unique in the history of American choral performance practice. Drawing upon primary source documents, artifacts, and oral histories, this historical investigation examines these decades of a cappella oratorio singing. The practice arose from a conceptual interplay between (1) a theologically grounded ethos that embraced the a cappella singing of texted music as a community sacrament and (2) a simultaneous commitment to the liberal and fine arts as an important part of higher education. This commitment to higher education, along with increasing exposure to accompanied performances of texted music in and out of worship settings, resulted in an attempted mid-twentieth century compromise that sought to distinguish between music used in worship services to music performed in other contexts.

### **Keywords**

a cappella oratorio, Hesston College, Old Mennonite singing traditions, performance practice

## Introduction

The tiny, second floor Assembly Hall could not accommodate the audience assembled for Hesston College's first performance of Handel's *Messiah* on May 31, 1920. On this warm and windy Kansas evening, over one thousand persons, "the largest crowd of people ever in Hesston at one time,"<sup>1</sup> congregated on the campus of this rural, Old Mennonite school. As the hall filled to capacity, many people squeezed into the Young People's Christian Association room at the rear of the venue. Others scrambled to find a spot outdoors near an open window.<sup>2</sup>

Complete with solos sung by College faculty and staff, Hesston College's commencement weekend rendition of Handel's popular work was "highly successful, probably the best musical program ever given by the College Chorus."<sup>3</sup> When the crowd stood for the Hallelujah Chorus, the forty-five voice student chorus ignored the first four bars written in Handel's score and entered with a rich "Hallelujah" on conductor Arthur Slagel's downbeat. There were no musical instruments in the room. Handel's great oratorio was performed completely a cappella (Figure 1).



Fig. 1. Director Arthur Slagel and the Hesston College Chorus in Assembly Hall, 1920<sup>4</sup>

This practice might appear unusual today. Yet, the 1920 performance of *Messiah* was a part of a forty-year tradition (1909 – 1949) of exclusively a cappella choral music at Hesston College, where

---

<sup>1</sup> "College Notes," *The Hesston Gazette*, June 4, 1920, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Brief descriptions of this event are found in D.H. Bender Diary, May 31, 1920, and Tillman Erb Diary, May 3, 1920, Hesston College Historical Archives. Bender was Hesston College's first president and Erb was its first business manager.

<sup>3</sup> *Hesston College Journal*, June 2, 1920, 1, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Photo courtesy of Hesston College Historical Archives

musical instruments were forbidden. Beginning in 1912, Hesston College choirs performed at least one complete oratorio a cappella each year.

There are no extant recordings of this 1920 *Messiah* performance or any of the a cappella oratorios performed at Hesston College. However, interviews with singers who participated in Hesston's a cappella oratorio tradition, examination of printed programs, and later recordings of such performances after the practice had gained traction at one of Hesston's sister institutions (Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg, Virginia), suggest that the choir used a simple approach to achieve a successful a cappella performance of a concerted choral-orchestral work. The choir remained true to vocal portions of the score and simply removed the instrumental portions. No humming or other vocal devices were used to accompany the aria soloists. When there were several bars of instrumental interlude between voiced sections, those bars were simply eliminated.<sup>5</sup>

Hesston College's centennial history briefly reported these a cappella oratorio performances. However, no historical studies to date have examined the roots and subsequent chronology of this tradition at Hesston, the first college to adopt it, or the cultural changes that accompanied its demise. By exploring these matters, the present study argues that shifting interplay between two, primary factors -- a theologically grounded ethos that embraced the a cappella singing of texted music as a community sacrament and a simultaneous commitment to the liberal and fine arts as an important part of higher education -- broadly defined the rise and decline of this practice.<sup>6</sup>

### Old Mennonite Theology and Singing in Hesston College's Early Years

In October 1907, the Kansas-Nebraska Conference of the "Old Mennonite" church resolved that it would "advance the cause of Christ to establish a school somewhere in the West in which Bible work is made a specialty."<sup>7</sup> The school was to be located in Hesston, Kansas (1908 population of about 150

---

<sup>5</sup> Hesston College graduates Howard (class of '48) and Martha (Buckwalter) Hershberger (class of '48) described the practice in an interview on March 28, 2011. Howard Hershberger was the bass soloist at the college's final a cappella oratorio performances in 1949. While there are no extant recordings of Hesston College oratorios performed without instruments, an example of the college's a cappella choral sound at mid-century can be heard in "God So Loved the World" from *The Crucifixion*, John Stainer, and "Come Unto Him" from *Messiah*, Handel, arr. Lee Rodgers, Hesston College A Cappella Chorus, J.P. Duerksen, dir., 1950-51, reissued with ...*In the Fragrant and Velvety Air: A Centennial Celebration of Music at Hesston College, 1909-2009* (Hesston, KS: Hesston College, 2009), compact disc. Eastern Mennonite College (founded 1917) later embraced the Hesston College tradition of a cappella oratorios. Some recordings of a cappella oratorio performances by Eastern Mennonite choirs still exist, including *The Holy City, Eastern Mennonite College, 1963* (Harrisonburg, VA: Harmonies Workshop, 2008), compact disc.

<sup>6</sup> The centennial history of Hesston College is John E. Sharp, *A School on the Prairie: A Centennial History of Hesston College, 1909-2009* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009). The argument advanced by the present study arises from an examination of hundreds of primary source documents from the Hesston College library and archives, the Mennonite Historical Archives in Goshen, Indiana and North Newton, Kansas, and the Harvey County Historical Archives (Newton, Kansas), in addition to oral histories and writings on music and theology during the first half of the twentieth century. Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio, Vol 4: The Oratorio in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 2000) includes tables of oratorios that contained scored a cappella choruses, but does not mention a cappella performances of entire oratorios in his treatments of the cultural and social contexts of oratorio performances.

<sup>7</sup> *Conference Record: Containing the Proceedings of the Kansas-Nebraska Mennonite Conference 1876-1914*, Compiled by a Committee Appointed by Conference: L.O. King, T.M. Erb, D.H. Bender (Self-published, 1914), 139-140. At that time, the Mennonite Church, a denomination separate from the General Conference Mennonite Church, was referred to colloquially as the "Old Mennonite" Church. Old Mennonite Church members in the United States consisted largely of descendents of seventeenth century Swiss and German immigrants who settled originally along the eastern seaboard.

persons). From its inception, Hesston College considered singing instruction integral to its curriculum. As the “Hesston Mennonite School” prepared to open in 1909, its Executive Committee released a list of nine points that outlined the School’s “scope and purpose.” The fourth point stipulated “that vocal music be a special feature of the school.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, vocal music enjoyed a privileged role as one of the first three College departments (the others being “Bible” and “academic”).<sup>9</sup>

Dismissing the Old Testament psalms’ call to “praise God with harp and lyre,” Old Mennonites cited I Corinthians 14, which called for Christians to prophesy with words that others can understand.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, an ethos, or fundamental cultural characteristic, of worship developed that focused on the Word. Only texted vocal music, unaccompanied by instruments that might draw attention away from the words sung, could address the moral, character, and formation-identity aims of the church community. In abiding by these parameters, the vocal music department maintained and further developed a practice of four-part singing that had become integral to the fabric of Mennonite life by the turn of the twentieth century.

Singing was central to a church-owned Old Mennonite institution in part because of the denomination’s emphasis on singing as an act of corporate worship. Central to Mennonite theology was the idea that the body of Christ was created through the church community. Mennonite scholars Marlene Kropf and Kenneth Nafziger suggested that “in the absence of a weekly eucharistic tradition, singing functions for Mennonites as sacraments do in liturgical churches.”<sup>11</sup> Thus the education of all students in musical literacy for a cappella part singing was integral to the institution’s goals of Christian formation.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of Hesston College’s first year of classes, the faculty decided that the “closing exercises of school should be an educational-musical program.”<sup>13</sup> The school began a class for “singer teacher

---

General Conference Mennonites consisted largely of Russian immigrants who immigrated to the Midwest in the late nineteenth century.

For an overview of these two Mennonite demoninations, see Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993). Established in 1887 as an institution of the General Conference Mennonites, Bethel College, located just seven miles from Hesston College in Newton, KS, was the first Mennonite college established in North America. These General Conference Mennonites had little in common with the “Old Mennonite” homesteaders from the east. Among other differences, the Russian Mennonites used instruments in worship. Study at Bethel College was deemed too “worldly” and theologically unacceptable to Old Mennonites in Kansas, and there was little interaction between the two schools for decades. The two denominations merged to form Mennonite Church USA in 2002. For more information about this relationship, see Sharp, *A School on the Prairie*, 57

<sup>8</sup> The Executive Committee, Hesston Mennonite School, Hesston, KS to “Brother or Sister”, Feb. 1, 1909, Historical Archives, Hesston College, Hesston, KS.

<sup>9</sup> Sharp, *A School on the Prairie*, 58-62, 70, 88-90.

<sup>10</sup> I Corinthians 14: 7-9, New International Version. The passage stated that “Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played .... unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue.”

<sup>11</sup> Marlene Kropf and Kenneth Nafziger, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 27, 49, 65.

<sup>12</sup> The history and development of Mennonite music is well documented. For the role of music in Mennonite institutions of higher education, see Earl Marion Maust, “The History and Development of Music in Mennonite-Controlled Liberal Arts Colleges in the United States” (EdD dissertation, Northwestern University, 1968) and Roy Roth, “A Curriculum for a Proposed Music Major at Eastern Mennonite College” (Master’s thesis, University of Oregon, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Hesston College Faculty Meeting Minutes, May 2, 1910, Historical Archives, Hesston College, Hesston, KS.



training” the following year as enrollment grew to seventy-six students, the majority of whom took some vocal music class. By the 1914-15 school year, 84 of 107 students were involved in vocal music.<sup>14</sup>

Old Mennonite theology and the ideals of a liberal arts education coexisted without apparent tension during the College’s first decades. Early editions of the College paper, *The Hesston College Journal*, and College yearbook, *The Hesston College Lark*, for instance, depicted a focus not only on biblical studies, but also on the study of literature and world history, with frequent quotations from the likes of Wordsworth and Shakespeare sprinkled throughout. Various literary and philosophical societies existed on campus. The music page of the 1926 *Lark* begins not with a biblical reference, but rather with a quotation from Tennyson about a brook: “Men may come and men may go, But I go on forever.” Thus sang Tennyson’s brook. And what was true of the brook seems to be true of our music department.”<sup>15</sup>

### Educational Vocal Studies

In 1912, the Mennonite Church released a new vocal methods book, *Educational Vocal Studies* (Figure 2) by Goshen College Professor of Music John D. Brunk (1872-1926) (Figure 3). Hesston College’s first President, D.H. Bender (1866-1945), provided an introduction to the book, which was surely incorporated into the music curriculum at Hesston College. Bender used the opportunity to summarize the College’s philosophy of unaccompanied vocal music.

Mennonites, according to Bender, are “distinguished as a singing people.” To maintain that tradition, “a more than ordinary effort” would be required, because musical instruments were not only supplementing singing, “but virtually threatening to supplant the Creator’s highest mechanisms of music--the human voice.” Brunk’s book, he wrote, would help “maintain the true charm of the human voice... in our homes, in social life, in our educational institutions, and in our churches and missions.”<sup>16</sup>

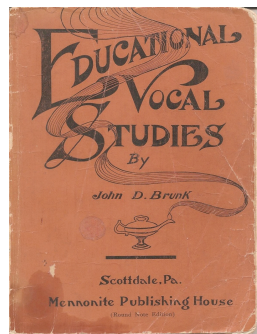


Fig. 2. *Educational Vocal Studies*<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 3. John D. Brunk<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> These developments were reported in the Hesston College Faculty Meeting Minutes, Sept. 16, 1909, Historical Archives, Hesston College, Hesston, KS and in Sharp, *A School on the Prairie*, 90, 104-105, 122-123. Sharp quoted a 1911 “Report of the Principal and Business Manager,” which explained that the college needed to offer a class for “singing teacher training” for Old Mennonite Plains congregations where the “demand.... far exceeds the supply.”

<sup>15</sup> *Hesston College Lark* (1925): 29.

<sup>16</sup> J.D. Brunk, *Educational Vocal Studies*, (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1912), v-vi.

<sup>17</sup> Photograph by the author

<sup>18</sup> Photograph from the Global Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, [www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/B78716.html](http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/B78716.html) (accessed July 12, 2012).

The content of *Educational Vocal Studies* provided a window into the types of music to which Old Mennonites were exposed in the early years of the twentieth century. Brunk's text included graded sight singing exercises, explanations of the rudiments of music, a short chapter on voice use, and graded four-part songs. Among these songs were compositions by Brunk and other American composers such as George F. Root and B.C. Unseld. The bulk of the songs, however, originated with European composers, including J.S. Bach, Praetorius, Arthur Sullivan, Von Weber, and Mendelssohn.<sup>19</sup>

The book's contents mirrored contemporary developments in American music education. A primary belief, promulgated by Lowell Mason and other leading nineteenth century advocates of vocal music education in mainstream churches and schools, was the inherent superiority of songs and hymns that reflected compositional practices of the classical European musical tradition. Beginning with the publication of Mason's *Boston Haydn and Handel Collection of Church Music* in 1822, singing books began to reject the compositional styles and lyrics of earlier American composers and instead included psalm and hymn tune arrangements using themes from great composers such as Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn.<sup>20</sup>

Mennonites, while living "separate" from the world, were susceptible to the musical ideas of the broader culture in part because the music they sang came largely from other-than-Mennonite compositions. Early Mennonite musical practice consisted mostly of unison singing in the vernacular German language. However, the introduction of singing schools and part-singing in the 1840s necessitated new repertoire. Part-singing was possibly supported by the church as "a means of discouraging a problem which faced many congregations, the introduction of musical instruments into churches."<sup>21</sup>

Over the course of the nineteenth century, at least nineteen different Mennonite hymn collections and five Mennonite singing school books were published, all with a common goal of developing musical literacy. These books incorporated very little material written by Mennonites. Rather, they tended to borrow from other musical publications of the period. The Mennonite Church's first hymnal, *The Church and Sunday School Hymnal*, also published by John D. Brunk in 1902, contained three hundred forty nine tunes, only forty-one of which were penned by Mennonite composers. This exposure to other musical traditions helped lead Old Mennonites to the European classical music that had become an integral part of the broader American culture.

### Regional Popularity of the Oratorio

The vibrant musical culture of the newly populated Great Plains influenced Hesston College as well. The Oratorio Society of nearby Lutheran-affiliated Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas, for instance, began to perform Handel's *Messiah* with full chorus and orchestra annually in 1881.

The city of Newton, just eight miles from Hesston, was a major railroad hub with the ability to attract major performers. In 1907 and 1908, the Newton Oratorio Society hosted the Newton Music Festival, which was designed to bring music lovers from across Kansas via special railroad services to experience the best in classical music. The 1908 festival featured three consecutive nights of concerts

---

<sup>19</sup> Brunk, *Educational Vocal Studies*, v-vi.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview of Lowell Mason and the development of American tunebooks, see Michael L. Mark and Charles L. Gary, *A History of American Music Education*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, Publishing, Inc., 2007), 174-177.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Marvin Yoder, "Nineteenth Century Sacred Music of the Mennonite Church in the United States" (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, Tallahassee, 1961), 86.

with the touring Chicago Symphony Orchestra and world class soloists. The festival culminated with a performance of *Messiah* with the oratorio choir, soloists, and symphony (Figure 4).<sup>22</sup>

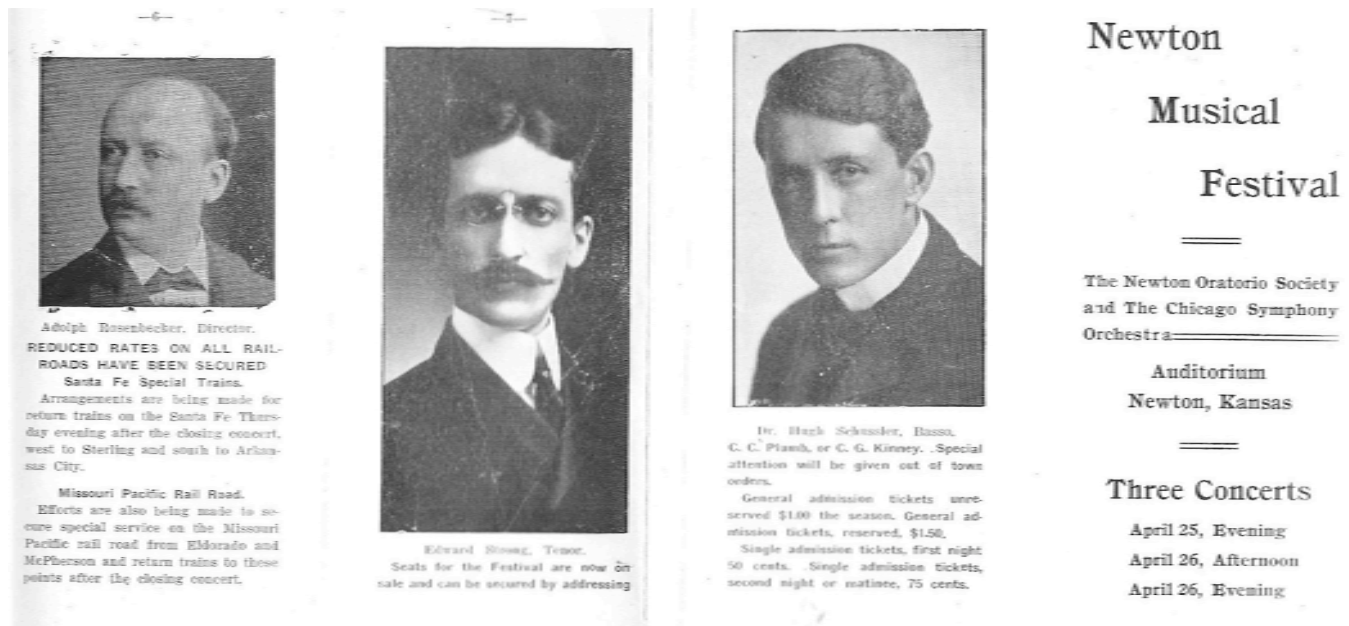


Fig. 4. 1908 Newton Music Festival Brochure<sup>23</sup>

### A Cappella Oratorios at Hesston College

In this environment, early leaders of the Hesston College music department began to search for musical material that would speak to both the spiritual and musical needs of students. Hesston College began its venture into a cappella performances of complete oratorios in 1912. At the close of its third academic year the College choir presented an a cappella performance of David F. Root's (1820-1895) *David the Shepherd Boy* before an audience of seven hundred people.<sup>24</sup> (See Table 1 for a complete list of a cappella oratorios performed at Hesston College.)

<sup>22</sup> Newton Oratorio Society, Promotional Brochures for 1907 and 1908 Newton Music Festival, Harvey County Historical Archives, Newton, KS; For more information regarding the Bethany College *Messiah*, see Bethany College "Festival History: The Messiah at Bethany," Bethany College, <http://www.bethanylb.edu/messiahfest-history.html> (accessed February 12, 2012).

<sup>23</sup> Newton Oratorio Society, 1908 Promotional Brochure.

<sup>24</sup> The 1912 performance was reported in the D.H. Bender Diary, June 3, 1912, Historical Archives, Hesston College, Hesston, KS.

Table 1. Hesston College A Cappella Performances of Complete Oratorios 1912-1949<sup>25</sup>

Year	Work	Composer	Director
1911-12	<i>David the Shepherd Boy</i>	George F. Root	J.B. Smith
1913-14	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	J.B. Smith
1915-16	<i>The Creation</i>	F. Joseph Haydn?	Chester K. Lehman
1916-17	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Chester K. Lehman
1917-18	<i>Light of the World</i>	Arthur Sullivan	Chester K. Lehman
1918-19	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Chester K. Lehman
	<i>Bethlehem</i>	George F. Root & F. Weatherly	Chester K. Lehman
1919-20	<i>David the Shepherd Boy</i> <sup>26</sup>	George F. Root	Arthur W. Slagel
	<i>Messiah</i>	G.F. Handel	Arthur W. Slagel
1920-21	<i>Hope of the World</i>	P.A. Schneckner	S.M. Kanagy
	<i>Faith Triumphant or "The Healing of Naaman"</i>	H. Butterworth & George F. Root	S.M. Kanagy
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	S.M. Kanagy
1921-22	<i>Daniel or The Captivity and Restoration</i>	George F. Root & W. Bradbury	S.M. Kanagy
1922-23	<i>Concerning the Birth of the Good Shepherd</i>	W.H. Neidlinger	Paul Erb
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1923-34	<i>The Ten Virgins</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1924-25	<i>Concerning the Birth of the Good Shepherd</i>	W.H. Neidlinger	Paul Erb
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1925-26	<i>The Ten Virgins</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
	<i>The Conqueror</i>	Charles Gabriel	Paul Erb
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1926-27	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1927-28	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1928-29	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1929-30	<i>The Carpenter of Nazareth</i>	E. K. Heyser	Paul Erb
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1930-31	<i>David the Shepherd Boy</i>	George F. Root	Paul Erb
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb

<sup>25</sup> Some of the listed works, including those by Root and Neidlinger, were given the title "sacred cantata." This was a term used in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially by English composers, for works that were similar in structure to oratorios but were "often deliberately written in a style simple enough for satisfactory performance by amateurs." Leo Plantinga, *Romantic Music* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1984), 402. As these sacred cantatas were for all intents and purposes oratorios, they are referred to as *oratorios* throughout this discussion.

<sup>26</sup> "College Notes," *The Hesston Gazette*, Nov. 28, 1919, 1.

Table 1, continued

1931-32	<i>The Conqueror</i>	Charles Gabriel	Paul Erb
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1932-33	<i>Bethlehem</i>	George F. Root & F. Weatherly	Paul Erb
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1933-34	<i>Bethlehem</i>	George F. Root & F. Weatherly	Paul Erb
	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1934-35	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1935-36	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1936-37	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1937-38	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1938-39	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1939-40	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Paul Erb
1940-41	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	John P. Duerksen
1941-42	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	John P. Duerksen
1942-43	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Eldon Risser
1943-44	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	I. Mark Ross
1944-45	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Verna Burkholder
1945-46	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	Verna Burkholder
1946-47	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	John P. Duerksen
1947-48	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	John P. Duerksen
1948-49	<i>The Holy City</i>	Alfred R. Gaul	John P. Duerksen

The following year, 1913, the College did not perform a full oratorio. The school year ended with a “Music and Oratory program” attended by about eight hundred people.<sup>27</sup> In 1914, the College chorus gave the first performance of what was to become a forty year tradition with an a cappella performance of British composer Alfred A. Gaul’s (1837-1913) oratorio *The Holy City*.

Written in 1882, the work gained wide popularity due in part to its “simple, melodious style” and was influenced by similar works of Spohr and Mendelssohn.<sup>28</sup> The text of the work clearly resonated with the Mennonite community’s leaders during the First World War. Ten days prior to the 1917 commencement, the *Hesston Gazette* published the entire libretto of the oratorio along with an introduction to the work. The newspaper article did not fail to mention that “With the exception of two hymns, a verse from Milton, and three verses from the Te Deum, the words are entirely scriptural.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> D.H. Bender Diary, June 2, 1913.

<sup>28</sup> J.A. Fuller-Maitland: “Gaul, Alfred (Robert)”, *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy, <http://www.grovemusic.com>, (accessed July 16, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> “Hesston Academy and Bible School Musical Program,” *The Hesston Gazette*, 1, no. 12, May 18, 1917, 2.

Hesston College historian John Sharp suggested, “with musical scores based on such texts as ‘Here we have no continuing city,’ and ‘Thy kingdom come,’ the oratorio seemed appropriate for a pilgrim people during a time of war.”<sup>30</sup> The oratorio was first presented on June 1, 1914, but since “muddy roads had greatly hindered attendance on Sunday evening,” the work was offered again the following Thursday.<sup>31</sup>

During the 1915-16 school year, work began on a new administration building, which would feature an “Assembly Hall” for public gatherings (Figure 5). By commencement weekend, the walls of the new building were completed, but it still lacked a roof. Undeterred, the College went forward with a performance of *The Creation* in the new hall. The *College Journal* reported that the “starry canopy served as a roof and the absence of doors and windows assured plenty of ventilation.”<sup>32</sup>



Fig. 5. The Hesston College Administration Building in 1919. Assembly Hall was located on the second floor of the building.<sup>33</sup>

At the May 28, 1917 performance, directed by Chester K. Lehman, the building still lacked a ceiling below its now enclosed roof, but it now provided a more adequate space for public presentations. Seating must have been at a premium as seven hundred people filled the new hall. The program, the main attraction of which was *The Holy City*, also featured choruses from Mendelssohn’s *Athalie* and *Elijah*, two men’s choruses from Wagner’s *Tannhauser*, and the celebrated sextet from Donizetti’s opera *Lucia di Lamermoor*, all performed a cappella.<sup>34</sup>

The 1918 commencement performance featured a different oratorio, *Light of the World* by Sir Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900), which presented a narration on the life of Christ.<sup>35</sup> The Monday evening

<sup>30</sup> Sharp, *A School on the Prairie*, 129.

<sup>31</sup> T.M. Erb Diary, June 4, 1914; Marvin Miller, “Musical Chats with Marvin,” *Hesston College Journal*, March 14, 1949, 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Hesston Academy Journal*, 3, no. 4, June-July 1916.

<sup>33</sup> Photo courtesy of Hesston College History Archives

<sup>34</sup> *Hesston Academy Journal*, 4, no. 4, June-July 1917, 6.

<sup>35</sup> The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive, “The Light of the World, An Oratorio: Extract from *The Standard Oratorios* by George Upton,” The Gilbert and Sullivan Archive, [http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/other\\_sullivan/light\\_world/html/upton.html](http://math.boisestate.edu/gas/other_sullivan/light_world/html/upton.html) (accessed May 11, 2011). The work included 42 numbers, including numerous solos, duets, trios, quartets, and quintets performed by faculty and students.



performance had to be postponed, however, because though Assembly Hall was now fully complete, a “commencement week rain” knocked out the newly installed electric lights. The *Journal* reported:

[Everyone] took the situation cheerfully and seemed to remember the philosophy of one of the readings given the Friday night previous, ‘It ain’t no use to grumble and complain,’ and ‘When God sorts out the weather and sends rain, thy rains my choice.’ Even Bro. Lehman, our Chorus director, kept on smiling and was heard singing ‘Showers of Blessings’ about the halls.<sup>36</sup>

The chorus bid farewell to departing Director of Chorus Chester K. Lehman with a different kind of program at the 1919 commencement (Figure 6). The chorus, “instead of rendering one complete Oratorio as had been the custom for several years past, gave a selection of the best Oratorios of some of the greatest composers.”<sup>37</sup>



Fig. 6. Hesston College Chorus, Spring 1919<sup>38</sup>

Included were choruses, from Handel’s *Messiah*, Haydn’s *Creation*, several works by Mendelssohn and Gounod, and more, interspersed with addresses from the faculty about Handel, Mendelssohn, and Gounod. Following this event, the *Hesston College Journal* reported, “The music program which is

---

<sup>36</sup> *Hesston Academy Journal*, June-July 1918, 3-4. In “College Notes”, *The Hesston Gazette*, (Friday, May 31, 1918) reported that the oratorio was rescheduled for Wednesday morning prior to the commencement exercises to “a good size and we believe an appreciative audience.... The class did remarkably well considering the adverse circumstances and the strenuous days in evidence the last few weeks.”

<sup>37</sup> *Hesston College Journal*, 1919, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Photo courtesy of Hesston College History Archives.

given each year during the commencement week by the College Chorus has become the greatest attraction of the entire Calendar for the people of this community and also of more distant communities.”<sup>39</sup>

The 1919-20 school year saw the College choruses under the guidance of new director Arthur W. Slagel (1891-1943). The *Hesston Gazette* reported, “The College Chorus is exceptionally strong this year and promises to give an inspiring evening of music.”<sup>40</sup> Perhaps inspired by Bethany College and the success of *Messiah* choruses the previous spring, Slagel programmed an a cappella performance of Handel’s *Messiah* for the 1920 commencement. A large portion of *Messiah* must have been performed, because seven different soloists (including the director) were listed in the *Hesston College Journal*’s report of the event.<sup>41</sup>

### The Holy City, 1923-1949: A Community in Song

As pacifists, Mennonites were called to address the suffering caused by WWI and the Bolshevik revolution. In 1920, they formed the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) to facilitate international relief efforts. After just one year leading Hesston’s choirs, Arthur Slagel departed the College to become MCC’s first ambassador to Russia. S.M. Kanagy (1869-1941) took the reins as chorus director.

At the 1922 commencement (Figure 7), the College Chorus rendered the sacred oratorio *Daniel or The Captivity and Restoration* by Root and Bradbury. The performance featured business manager T.M. Erb (1865-1929) as “Azariah”, T.M. Erb’s son Paul Erb (1894-1941) as “First President” and future Hesston College President Tillman Smith (1902-2000) as “Solo Voice” and “Third President.”<sup>42</sup>

Paul Erb, who joined the faculty in 1917 after becoming the first Hesston College graduate to earn a four-year college degree at Bethel College, became chorus director beginning in the 1922-23 school year. Erb held this position among others, including academic dean, until his departure for Goshen College in 1941. That spring, the *Hesston College Journal* reported that the music department “helped to further establish a tradition by repeating the old favorite, *The Holy City*” (*italics added*). The work was being performed biennially, but Erb determined that the work’s “general adaptability to our requirements and its general worth and popularity” made it worthy of “annual repetition.”<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> *Hesston College Journal*, 1919, 5. Lehman had apparently done his homework regarding the *Messiah*. In “College Notes”, the April 25, 1919 *Hesston Gazette* reported that C.K. Lehman, among others, had “autoed to Lindsborg Friday evening to hear the *Messiah*” with full orchestra at Lutheran-affiliated Bethany College.

<sup>40</sup> “Chorus Rendition at College,” *The Hesston Gazette*, Nov. 21, 1919, 1; “College Notes,” *The Hesston Gazette*, Jan. 16, 1920, 1; *Hesston College Journal*, 1920. The performance of Root’s oratorio was evidently so successful that the choir repeated it for “an appreciative audience of about six-hundred people” during the college’s Winter Bible Term in early January and also in early March at Hoffnungsfeld Mennonite Church in Moundridge, KS for “a large and appreciative audience.”

<sup>41</sup> *Hesston College Journal*, May-June 1920, 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Hesston College Journal*, May-June 1922, 41.

<sup>43</sup> Sharp, *A School on the Prairie*, 129; *Hesston College Journal*, June-July 1924.



Fig. 7. Hesston College All School Photo, 1921-22<sup>44</sup>

After repeating *The Holy City* in 1924 and 1925, the Hesston College yearbook, the *Lark*, reported, “There seems to be a splendid prospect for establishing this beautiful cantata as a traditional part of our commencement calendar.”<sup>45</sup> Gaul’s oratorio was rendered at the College thirty-four consecutive springs through the 1956 commencement, including twenty-seven consecutive years of a cappella performances. The annual tradition quickly established itself as a highlight of the school calendar and was regularly the year’s most highly attended event.<sup>46</sup> In 1925, the *Gazette* reported a “conservative estimate” of one thousand people in attendance and that “many were unable to get inside the building.”<sup>47</sup> At the 1931 performance, “a number left the grounds because there was no more available space. Aisles, halls, fire escapes and windows were filled to the limit.”<sup>48</sup>

*Holy City* performances included virtually the entire campus. While the College developed several smaller choruses that met and toured throughout the year, including Men’s and Ladies Choruses and a select A Cappella Chorus, nearly every member of the campus community--students, faculty and staff—joined together in the last two months of the school year to participate in the annual commencement rendering of Gaul’s oratorio. The chorus included “any student interested in music who showed he could sing.”<sup>49</sup> By 1926, the annual performances also included ex-students who returned to help, and from

<sup>44</sup> Photo courtesy of Hesston College History Archives

<sup>45</sup> “Music and Chorus,” *Hesston College Lark* (1925): 29.

<sup>46</sup> *The Hesston Gazette*, May 13 and 20, 1921; May 18 and May 25, 1923; May 23 and 30, 1924; May 22 and 29, 1925; May 21 and 28, 1926; May 17 and 24, 1928; June 4, 1931. Until the *Hesston Gazette* ceased to exist in 1932, the paper announced the college commencement week activities, including *The Holy City* rendition, usually on its front page, almost every year for the two weekly editions prior to commencement.

<sup>47</sup> *The Hesston Gazette*, June 5, 1925, 1.

<sup>48</sup> *The Hesston Gazette*, June 4, 1931, 1.

<sup>49</sup> “Singers and Their Songs,” *Hesston College Lark* (1934): 29.

1931, with the chorus exceeding one hundred persons, the *Holy City* chorus became known as the “Community Chorus.”<sup>50</sup>

The inclusive nature of the a cappella singing tradition was a source of pride for the College. Singing a cappella was not reserved for elite choral singers at Hesston. As a religious group for which community was an all-important aspect of faithfulness, daily singing was one of the central expressions of community unity and democracy. Nearly everyone learned to sing.

The 1924 commencement issue of the *Journal* explained, “the life at Hesston College and Bible School gives to every student an opportunity to sing if he can and will. But willy-nilly, he must hear.” This *Journal* account also celebrated the absence of musical instruments, saying that it resulted in “a greater democracy in our singing. Everybody tries it, and the greater power in sight reading upon which we depend increases our sheer enjoyment of singing for its own sake.”<sup>51</sup>

The College’s yearbooks frequently expressed similar sentiments over the next two decades. Director Paul Erb wrote: “Practically every student studies music and does his utmost to develop whatever talent he may have.... The chief expression of our school spirit, it may be said, is through the voice of music.”<sup>52</sup>

The 1936 yearbook stated, “Vocal music at Hesston College has a recognized place in the curriculum and it constitutes the most important of our extra-curricular activities.... Everybody at Hesston has a chance to develop his musical talent.”<sup>53</sup> Director Paul Duerksen, who replaced Erb, wrote that music, “while it is by no means the only act of worship that we have, is the one in which we can all participate.”<sup>54</sup>

For a school owned by the church and focused on serving the church, maintenance of the a cappella singing tradition for the entire church community was central. The forces available for *The Holy City* continued to grow each year. The final a cappella performance of *The Holy City* in 1949 featured a “record” chorus of 226 voices and “also a record audience of approximately 1200 persons” (Figure 8).<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> “Vocal Music at Hesston,” *Hesston College Lark* (1933): 26; “Music Department,” *Hesston College Lark* (1926): 35; “Community Chorus,” *Hesston College Lark* (1931): 34 and (1932): 28.

<sup>51</sup> “Music at Hesston College,” *Hesston College Journal*, June-July 1924.

<sup>52</sup> “Vocal Music at Hesston,” *Hesston College Lark* (1933): 26.

<sup>53</sup> “Music,” *Hesston College Lark* (1936): 24.

<sup>54</sup> “A Cappella Chorus,” *Hesston College Lark* (1942).

<sup>55</sup> *Hesston College Journal*, June 6, 1950, 1, 3. Apparently, Hesston College’s annual tradition of performing *The Holy City* a cappella received some national attention by way of “a report” made to the 1948 Music Educator’s National Conference in Detroit, Michigan. According to the *Hesston College Journal* (March, 1949), Alvin Reimer, Music Director at the Stafford, Kansas high school described the College’s practice at the 1948 MENC convention and thereafter “asked for more information and photos to be formulated into a booklet for national distribution among music teachers.” Though an extensive search has yet to uncover a written report of Reimer’s presentation or the referenced “booklet” (if indeed it was ever produced), this presentation was probably made because the MENC National Conference did take place in Detroit in 1948, and Reimer was an active MENC leader in Kansas. Reimer wrote a regular column for the *Kansas Music Review*, of which he was associate editor in the 1950s. When he died in 1959, very shortly after taking them helm as director of the Bethany College Oratorio Society, his obituary was published in “The Changing Scene,” *Music Educators Journal*, 46:5 (April-May 1960): 10.



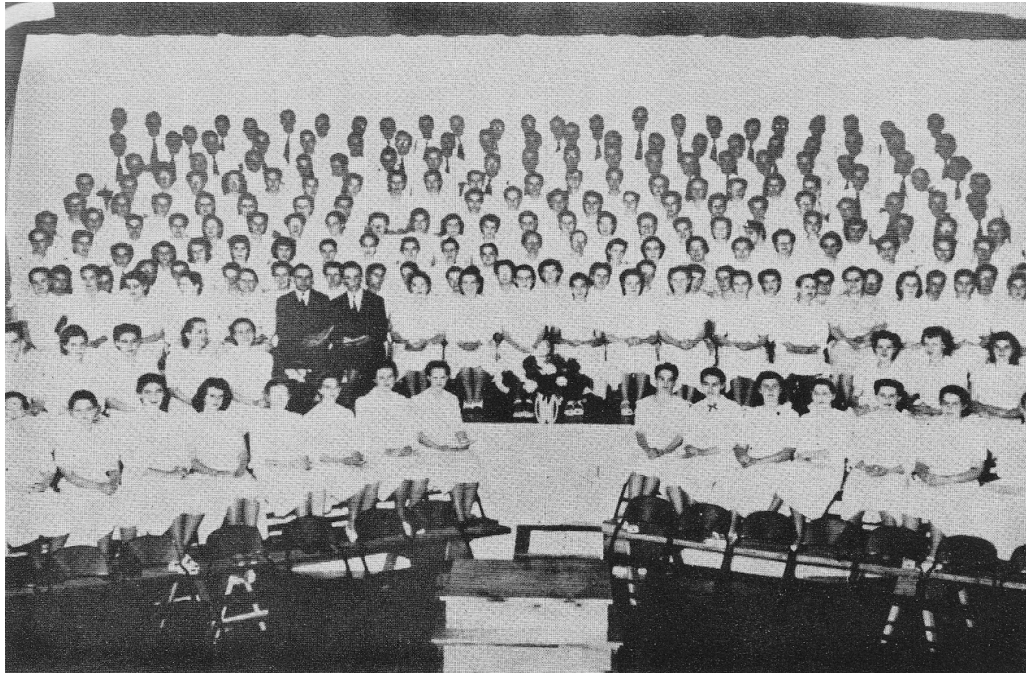


Fig. 8. The Final Holy City A Cappella Chorus, 1949<sup>56</sup>

A cappella presentations of choral-orchestral music continued unquestioned until the mid-1940s and were, in fact, a great source of pride. The 1930 yearbook stated that “usually a better type of singing is the result when unaccompanied music is rendered.”<sup>57</sup> Another yearbook, which first mentioned that “the quality of our music is often a surprise to those who suppose that good music without instruments is impossible” extols the merits of the great European composers such as Handel and Gounod by saying, “We want the culture which comes from contact with the great; that combination is found in the triumph of ‘The Hallelujah Chorus’ and others of that type.”<sup>58</sup> Duerksen declared that singing training should include “an understanding of the best of the world’s sacred music.”<sup>59</sup>

Over the years, and from one director to the next, the ethos of choral singing for the entire community through a cappella renditions of classical vocal music with biblically based sacred texts, remained consistent. According to alumni who participated in annual performances of *The Holy City*, the fact that they performed the oratorio contrary to the intentions of the composer, with the instrumental parts removed, was never addressed overtly. It was simply an accepted and unspoken part of community life. As these singers remember it, many students, who often read from reduced scores that included only their parts, likely were unaware that instrumental parts even existed to *The Holy City*. A cappella was simply the way music was done at Hesston.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Reprinted from *The Hesston College Lark*, 1949.

<sup>57</sup> “The A Cappella Chorus,” *Hesston College Lark* (1930): 53.

<sup>58</sup> “Music at Hesston College,” *Hesston College Journal*, June-July 1924.

<sup>59</sup> “A Cappella Chorus,” *Hesston College Lark*, (1942).

<sup>60</sup> Wilmetta Dietzel (Class of ’42), interview by author, March 26, 2011; Alice Gingerich (Hesston Academy Class of ’29), interview by author, May 1, 2011; Howard and Martha Hershberger, interview. From the first oratorio performance until the official acceptance of the piano for public oratorio performances in 1950, there is not a single known written reference to the fact that any classical music performances were performed with instrumental portions of the score removed.

## Toward a New Paradigm for Mennonite Choral Singing

A cappella singing was entrenched as the only accepted form of music on campus and in Old Mennonite worship, but music making in homes was a different story. Although an 1892 Kansas-Nebraska Conference resolution also forbade musical instruments in homes, this portion of the policy was largely ignored. Many Mennonites had pianos in their home from the College's very early days, including the town's and college's namesake A.L. Hess.<sup>61</sup>

Even music professor Paul Erb owned a piano. In order better to teach his music theory classes, Erb typically held class at his home across the street from campus where the College's strict regulations regarding instruments were not enforced. Students were also free to listen to instrumental music elsewhere--the annual treks to Lutheran-affiliated Bethany College's *Messiah* Festival, for instance, were a regular part of campus life.<sup>62</sup>

As Old Mennonites entered the 1940s, their cherished isolation from the world became increasingly difficult to maintain, and Hesston College was not immune from these changes. World War II presented challenges to Mennonite pacifists, who refused to participate in any military action and served instead as conscientious objectors in the alternative Civilian Public Service (CPS) program across America. CPS exposed many Mennonites to different styles of life and worship, and those persons who served brought new ideas back to Hesston.<sup>63</sup>

As a result, Old Mennonites at Hesston began to change their attitudes and ways of thinking about music. The period of 1920-1945 has been described as a time in which American Christians began to think of worship as an "aesthetic experience" in which "the experience of beauty and the experience of religion seem remarkably similar." This changing paradigm would have a profound impact on Old Mennonites' view of text-centered worship and lead many to question the legitimacy of the church's ban on instrumental music in worship.<sup>64</sup>

## Church-Wide Debate

The church was forced to reexamine its long-standing doctrine in the 1940s as more and more Mennonites began to use instruments. Hesston College and its two sister institutions, Eastern Mennonite College (EMC) and Goshen College in Goshen, Indiana, played an important role in this debate. While Kansas' Old Mennonites were clearly entrenched in the non-instrumental camp, Goshen College, founded in 1903, had permitted instruments on campus from its beginning. EMC (founded in 1917), on

---

<sup>61</sup> Dietzel, Gingerich and Howard and Martha Hershberger reported the presence of home pianos among Old Mennonites in Hesston during their interviews. The 1892 resolution was recorded in the *Conference Record: Containing the Proceedings of the Kansas-Nebraska Mennonite Conference 1876-1914*, 30. The resolution reads: "Resolved, That it is not to the spiritual benefit of the church nor to individual members to use musical instruments of any kind in the home or church workshop. In-as much as we are taught to "worship God in spirit and truth," and to present ourselves in living sacrifice," hence the true Christian worship is spiritual, not mechanical or by a dead instrument."

<sup>62</sup> Paul Erb's practice was described in the Dietzel interview. The trips to Lindsborg were described in the Dietzel and Gingerich interviews and were often reported in the *Hesston College Journal*.

<sup>63</sup> Hershberger interview; Sharp, *A School on the Prairie*, 233.

<sup>64</sup> Orlando Schmidt, *Church Music and Worship Among Mennonites*. (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1981), 35, quoting James F. White, *Christian Worship in Transition*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 78-85. Schmidt served as choral director at Hesston College in the 1960s.



the other hand, followed the principle of a cappella music only. In fact, EMC adopted Hesston's tradition of a cappella oratorios in the 1920s, including annual performances of *The Holy City*<sup>65</sup>

During the 1940s, the *Gospel Herald*, an Old Mennonite periodical edited by former Hesston College choral director and dean Paul Erb, began to publish regular commentary regarding the instrumental music debate. EMC's leaders argued frequently for the biblical and historical church roots of a cappella singing and advocated for maintaining the a cappella tradition at Mennonite church schools. Choral director J. Mark Stauffer (1919-2004) argued that the addition of instrumental music would result in "a deliberate drift of the church toward the world" and could cause Mennonites to "be lost in the vast sea of modern professional Christianity."<sup>66</sup> EMC President J.L. Stauffer (1888-1959) addressed the aesthetic argument directly, saying he was "aware of the aesthetic argument" but was certain that aesthetic arts were not part of the early church. "Instrumental music appeals almost exclusively to the emotions," he wrote, "and emotional manifestations such as frequently associate themselves with instrumental music do not add to the spirituality of worship."<sup>67</sup>

Despite the fear that the introduction of instruments would start the church on a slippery slope toward the eventual loss of a cappella part-singing, instruments began to make their way onto the Hesston College campus in the 1940s with the arrival of two practice pianos on-campus. One piano was placed in the snack shop and the other in the dormitory reception room. At first, these pianos could not be used in official College performances. However, in September 1943, the faculty approved a motion that piano be offered for college credit beginning with the 1943-44 school year. By the late 1940s, solo singers in *The Holy City* were allowed to practice with piano accompaniment prior to their solo a cappella performances at commencement. Not long after, campus pianos were used for intimate chamber performances and vocal recitals.<sup>68</sup>

The wider church had never approved these practice pianos. In 1946, President J.L. Stauffer of EMC wrote Mennonite Board of Education (MBE) executive committee member Nelson E. Kauffman and asked, "Is it true? I am told that they have a piano at Hesston this year.... It looks as if they [pianos] are just around the corner unless we bestir ourselves." Kauffman replied that he would preserve the ban

---

<sup>65</sup>Danny Yoder, "Those Famous Mennonite Harmonies," *EMU Crossroads*, (Feb 24, 2011), <http://emu.edu/now/crossroads/2011/02/24/those-famous-mennonite-harmonies/#2>, (accessed April 30, 2011). EMC continued its a cappella only policy and performed *The Holy City* unaccompanied through the late 1960s, long after Hesston College had adopted instruments.

<sup>66</sup> The Stauffer quotation is found in "Lets Think Straight On Instrumental Music," *Gospel Herald*, reprinted from July 28, 1944 on Jan. 7, 1947: 870, 873. Though he held degrees from the Julliard School and Peabody Conservatory, Stauffer remained firmly entrenched in the a cappella tradition. For more information on J. Mark Stauffer see Eastern Mennonite University, "Former Music Prof J. Mark Stauffer Dies," Eastern Mennonite University, <http://emu.edu/now/news/2004/03/former-music-prof-j-mark-stauffer-dies/>, (accessed May 12, 2011), and liner notes, *The Holy City: Eastern Mennonite College 1963*.

<sup>67</sup> J.L. Stauffer, "The Musical Instrument Question," *Christian Doctrine*, April 1946, 85-88.

<sup>68</sup> Hesston College Faculty Meeting Minutes, Sept. 14, 1943, Sept. 19 1945, Oct. 17 1945, Oct. 1 1946 and Oct. 8 1946, Hesston College Historical Archives, Hesston, KS; "To Be Given Duo-Piano Concert," *Hesston College Journal*, 19 May, 1947, 1; Our Schools," *Gospel Herald*, May 25, 1948. On a small campus without a dedicated music building, the noise created by student piano practice quickly caused logistical problems, and in 1945 and 1946, the faculty passed several additional motions regulating the use of campus pianos including a suggestion that "efforts be put forth to provide a piano for the Industrial Arts Shop. A "Duo-Piano Concert" was performed by two students in the dining Hall in May 1947. In May 1948, a "concert of sacred music was given by two students" who had been taking voice lessons at Bethel College, followed by another recital two weeks later by Hesston College's commerce teacher. Both recitals were accompanied on the piano. In an interview with the author, Howard Hershberger described the use of piano accompaniment in *Holy City* rehearsals.

of instruments in the church. Later that year, however, the MBE formed a committee to study the teaching of music at Hesston College and Goshen College and bring a recommendation.<sup>69</sup>

At its February 1948 meeting, the MBE passed a resolution on the use of musical instruments that represented a compromise on the competing positions. While the board made clear that the use of instruments in public worship was still forbidden, it acknowledged that “there has been neither uniformity nor consistency of practice concerning the use of these instruments in church schools.” The resolution stated that unaccompanied four-part singing was still to be the “chief emphasis of the music program,” but it allowed instruments so that students could “scientifically study music theory, composition, and history.” The use of instruments in the academic setting and the procurement of faculty instructors who could “happily and willingly serve and promote” their position was officially approved.<sup>70</sup>

### A Steinway at Hesston College

Choral director J.P. Duerksen, who joined the Hesston faculty in 1939, had been absent from the campus for four years serving in CPS during the war. When he returned, he emerged as one of the strongest advocates for the addition of pianos on campus. Following the 1948 board resolutions, Duerksen began planning and fundraising for a Steinway Grand piano to be placed in the College’s new Hess Memorial Hall, which sat twelve hundred persons and had been dedicated in 1947. Duerksen argued that “such an instrument in the Hall would make it possible to present finer music programs for the students and community, as well as provide an instrument upon which talented students can be trained.”<sup>71</sup>

The new Steinway Model O arrived on November 9, 1949. “Anyone who knows how pleased and excited a child is with a new toy will have a small idea how Mr. Duerksen behaved the day the new Steinway Grand piano was delivered and officially inaugurated as a vital part of the campus,” reported the *Journal* (Figure 9).<sup>72</sup> The new piano was formally introduced in a program featuring student pianists and solo vocalists on December 19.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> The Stauffer quotation was located in Nelson E. Kauffman correspondence, Jan. 12, 1946, MBE Collectoin, Kauffman correspondence, V-1-6, 7/30, Mennonite Church Historical Archives, Goshen, IN, quoted in Sharp, *A School On the Prairie*, 242. The Mennonite Board of Education governed both Hesston College and Goshen College but not Eastern Mennonite College. The church response was discussed in Harry A. Diener, “Report to the Missouri-Kansas Conference, August 13-16, 1946 of Conference Member on Mennonite Board of Education,” Mennonite Church Historical Archives, Goshen, IN.

<sup>70</sup> The MBE resolution was reported in “Hesston Alumnus Elected President of Board of Education,” *Hesston College Journal*, March 6, 1948, 1. Kauffman was elected MBE President at this meeting and allowed the resolution to go forward despite his earlier assurances to Stauffer. Hesston College leaders must have interpreted the resolution liberally, for one year later on January 18, 1949, the College welcomed the Bethany College Symphony Orchestra for a concert on campus. Despite bad weather, six-hundred people were present to hear the program (*Hesston College Journal*, Jan. 17, 1949, 1, 3). The *Journal* followed the concert by publishing an article listing all symphonic musical programs scheduled to be aired on the radio that week (*Hesston College Journal*, Jan. 31, 1949, 1). The Bethany College Orchestra returned for an encore performance in 1950 (*Hesston College Journal*, March 11, 1950).

<sup>71</sup> *Hesston College Journal*, Nov. 19, 1949, 3.

<sup>72</sup> *Hesston College Journal*, Nov. 19, 1949, 1, 3.

<sup>73</sup> These concerts were reported in *Hesston College Journal*, Dec. 19, 1949, 1,3 and *Hesston College Journal*, Jan. 14, 1950, 1. In a sign that his stance on instrumental music performance at a college school was accepted by the church, Duerksen was chosen both as interim pastor of the Hesston College Mennonite congregation in and as Secretary of Church



Fig. 9. Professor J.P. Duerksen at the new Steinway Piano, November 1949<sup>74</sup>

Shortly after the piano's arrival, College president Milo Kauffman "made known his desire to get the feeling of the faculty as to the policies in our department, especially now that we have the new piano." Faculty meeting minutes of December 1949 recorded, "most of the feeling expressed was in favor of the use of the piano for purposes other than church worship!"<sup>75</sup> From this point, it was a short step to add piano accompaniment to the College's annual oratorio performance in May.<sup>76</sup>

On June 4, 1950, more than 180 singers participated in the twenty-seventh annual rendition of *The Holy City*, the first to employ piano accompaniment (Figure 10). Though the *Journal* gave a detailed account of the performance and a detailed history of the work's performance at Hesston College, no College or church publication mentioned the significant change that made the 1950 performance unique. Interviews of persons who remember the transition to piano indicate that the change simply seemed like a natural outgrowth of trends in the wider community and the church.<sup>77</sup>

---

Music on the Commission for Christian Education and Young People's Work in January 1950. Duerksen's church positions were reported in Nelson E. Kauffman, introduction to John P. Duerksen, "Why We Must Teach Singing in Our Congregations," *Gospel Herald*, February 14, 1950, 155, 157.

<sup>74</sup> Photo from *Hesston College Journal*, Nov. 19, 1949, 1.

<sup>75</sup> Hesston College Faculty Meeting Minutes (Dec. 19, 1949), Hesston College Historical Archives.

<sup>76</sup> The Hesston College Faculty Meeting Minutes of May 10, 1950 reported that the faculty granted "permission for the use of the piano in *The Messiah* and for the solos in *The Holy City*." With the addition of pianos, the college also performed sections *Messiah* at the 1950 commencement.

<sup>77</sup> Howard and Martha Hershberger and Wilmetta Dietzel recalled that the change seemed natural in interviews. In *A School on the Prairie*, 242-244, Sharp reports how the introduction of instruments in the college eventually led to instruments in worship. In 1956, Hesston Mennonite Church created a committee to add an organ for worship for its new building, which was constructed on the Hesston College campus. *The Holy City* tradition would be continued, with piano, through the 1956 commencement. It was revived in 1959 with piano in celebration of the college's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and then was permanently put to bed as the college's music department matured. The use of instruments in worship and performance became common and accepted practice throughout the entire denomination by the late 1960s. The importance of a cappella four-part singing in worship, while remaining an important denominational characteristic, began to decline with the introduction of instruments.



Fig. 10. 1950 Holy City Chorus with the new Steinway Piano<sup>78</sup>

## Conclusion

The history of choral singing in the United States offers a rich and varied tapestry of performance practices. This study documents one such practice, which is today little studied or remembered: the a cappella rehearsal and performance of oratorios across nearly four decades at Hesston College, a school founded by Old Mennonites who had migrated to the Great Plains of Kansas.

This practice arose primarily from an ethos grounded in Old Mennonite theology. At the same time, however, the practice developed in a context that valued higher education and the study of music therein. At Hesston, the juxtaposition of these two, fundamental orientations--music-making as ethos and music-making as a fine art--led, perhaps inevitably, to reciprocal interactions between them.

Given both the theological and educational orientations of the College, the idea of an annual a cappella oratorio made sense in the early 1900s. The theological lens viewed the human voice as superior to mechanical instruments of music because it was fashioned directly by the Creator, and also because, unlike other musical instruments, it could convey and celebrate the words of sacred texts. Instrumental music alone, it was believed, appealed primarily to emotion, while instrumental accompaniment of vocal music could draw attention away from the words. Thus, adherence to the musical score and the wishes of the composer were clearly not foremost in the minds of the College's musical leaders as they selected music. Rather, they sought ways to creatively enhance community through the music that was available to them.

From a vocal music education lens, rehearsing these larger works without mechanical instruments required a certain level of sight-singing skill beyond that needed to sing simpler hymns, chorales, and gospel choruses. The oratorios also exposed students to compositions that many in the larger world deemed artistic.

Being able, indeed encouraged, to travel to nearby towns to hear Handel's *Messiah* sung with an orchestra, students doubtless acquired some appreciation for hearing this particular oratorio score performed as the composer intended. While, in its first decades, the College still took pride in ignoring

---

<sup>78</sup> Reprinted from *The Hesston College Lark*, 1950.

those intentions in its own performances, the increasing presence of pianos in Old Mennonite homes and, particularly, Mennonite participation in Civilian Public Service programs in various places beyond Hesston during World War Two, contributed to growing openness toward accompanied singing.

By the time of the 1948 MBE statement and the 1949 Hesston College Faculty resolution, both of which sought to articulate a compromise position that permitted instruments in the “scientific” study and performance of music, but not in worship, there was little possibility of a true compromise with respect to the original perspectives that gave rise to the a cappella oratorio tradition at Hesston. Interactions between music as ethos and music as fine art had already coalesced these perspectives into a new synthesis whereby accompanied vocal music would find its place as a vehicle of both education and worship.

In looking back, there does seem to be sense of loss. As some predicted, once mechanical instruments had a foot in the door, it was not long before four-part a cappella singing began to decline as a high sacrament of identity and faith among a community that intentionally sought to be separate from the world. In looking forward, however, the spirit of enhancing community through singing the sacred music available to it that characterized the beginnings of annual commencement oratorio performances at Hesston, reminds us that while particular performance practices change and evolve, choral singing remains as a means of both nurture and artistic expression. [IJRCS](#)

#### **Institutional Review Board Approval and Compliance**

The author obtained approval from an appropriate Institutional Review Board to conduct this research in a manner that assured the ethical treatment of participants and the confidentiality of participant information.

#### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### **Images**

The *IJRCS* obtained permissions to publish the images in this article. These images may not be copied, transmitted, or otherwise used except as they are embedded in the entirety of the article.



**Matthew Schloneger** is a professor of music and Chair of the Division of Humanities at Hesston College (USA). His research interests include vocal pedagogy, voice health among students and teachers, and Mennonite singing.