

# The Musical Legacy of F. Melius Christiansen

by Anton Armstrong



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*The first St. Olaf Choir (1912)*

This year marks the 125th anniversary of the birth of Fredrik Melius Christiansen, founder of the St. Olaf Choir and one of the most influential pioneers of unaccompanied choral singing in the U.S. Born in Eidsvold, Norway, on April 1, 1871, he emigrated to America at the age of seventeen.

Christiansen's early musical training was as an instrumentalist. He studied clarinet, violin, organ, and composition. As a youth in Larvik, Norway, he served as organist in the local town church. His first musical employment in the U.S. was as conductor of the Scandinavian Band in Marinette, Wisconsin. There he also taught piano, violin, and organ and served as organist/choir director at Our Saviour's Lutheran Church.<sup>1</sup>

Between 1893 and 1903, Christiansen pursued studies at Augsburg College and Northwestern Conservatory in Minneapolis. In 1897 he began a two-year period of study at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Leipzig, Germany, where he was a composition pupil of Gustav Schreck. Schreck was Cantor at the famed St. Thomas Church where J. S. Bach had served. During this period, and a subsequent time of study in Leipzig in 1906, Christiansen heard the choral sound of men and boys, which many believe influenced his tonal concept as he developed the St. Olaf Choir. He returned to Minneapolis in 1899, and in 1903 he was appointed to the faculty of St. Olaf College to develop its music program and serve as conductor of the St. Olaf College Band.

While serving as chair of the college's music department, he also held the position of organist/choir director at St. John's

Lutheran Church in Northfield, Minnesota. During the early years of this century, church music was in an abysmal state and congregational singing was waning. Christiansen's commitment to the improvement of church music and the revitalization of congregational singing in the Norwegian Lutheran congregations of that day led to his settings of Lutheran chorales.

In 1906, during Christiansen's second period of study with Schreck in Leipzig, he examined the influence of folk music on church compositions and arranged some seventy chorales in rich contrapuntal settings. Upon his return to Northfield in 1907, Christiansen organized a mixed-voice octet that toured Minnesota and adjacent states during the summer of 1908, singing a program consisting primarily of his chorale settings. Christiansen's collaboration with St. Olaf College President J. N. Kildahl in the song services of St. John's also contributed to the revival of the Lutheran chorale tradition. These song services alternated singing of chorales with brief meditations by Kildahl, who integrated phrases of the chorale sung by the congregation and choir into his message texts. As the song services expanded, Christiansen began to write more challenging settings of the chorales. He infused the church choir with students who enjoyed the challenges of the more complex settings. Eventually the St. John's choir, under the name of the St. Olaf Lutheran Choir, carried this "gospel in song" beyond the Northfield community.

## Touring

The profound influence of the school of choral singing that Christiansen developed is due in large part to his choir's history of touring that began in 1912, when the newly founded St. Olaf Choir toured to Wisconsin and Illinois. One year later the choir concertized in Norway.

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Anton Armstrong is Associate Professor of Music at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, and conductor of the St. Olaf Choir.

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The 1920 tour of the St. Olaf Choir to the musical centers of the eastern U.S. brought the ensemble swift recognition as a leader in the field of choral music. The successful programming of a concert

of unaccompanied sacred choral music, unique for its day, made the choir and its conductor models for choral musicians throughout the country. Critical acclaim was showered on the choir for its purity

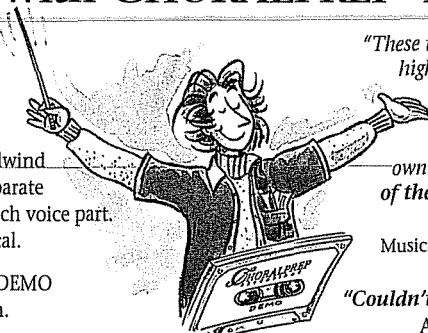
of tone, precision of ensemble, and sensitivity to musical as well as textual nuance.<sup>2</sup> The choir's tour program exposed large numbers of conductors to its singing. Consequently, the ensemble's distinctive repertoire and method of choral singing became the prototype upon which hundreds of vocal programs in schools, colleges, and churches were established.

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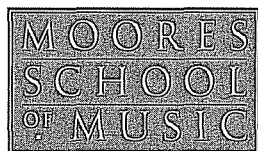
Christiansen's strong musical opinions were chronicled in essays published in the 1920s and 1930s. His philosophy of music was based on the following premise:

Art itself is above nationality, sect, and denominational considerations. Art stands above and alone.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the training and education of choral conductors, Christiansen wrote:

It is absolutely essential for the leader to have authority. . . . The authority which is based on knowledge is the only rightful authority. Knowledge is power. Hence the importance of a good education. . . . A good choir leader . . . must have developed a musical taste through listening to good music for a long period of time. Only those persons who are well grounded in the classics of music may be said to have good taste. . . . Knowledge is power, but it takes more than professional knowledge. [The choir director] must understand people and he must know human nature. . . . He must have that personal quality that will draw the singers to him. He must be able to win people for the cause he loves so well himself. . . . A combination of the two, professional knowledge and knowledge of human nature, is the ideal, but if I should evaluate the two, I would say that knowledge of human nature is the more important of the two.<sup>4</sup>

Christiansen viewed the choir rehearsal as an environment where there was a constant search for truth. He saw the uniting of individual choir members into a cohesive group with a common goal as one of his greatest challenges. He was very inter-



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ested in the relationship between the singer and the conductor. In a 1930 essay he wrote:

The conductor is not only to beat time, but he is mainly a center or focus-point of thought and feeling to which the singers look for inspiration and encouragement. . . . The inspiration works both ways: from the conductor to the singer and from the singer to the conductor, also from the performers to the listeners and from the listeners back to the performers. . . . "We" is the word to use in talking about choir matters, not "I." The choirmaster can not say I did this or that. He is helpless without his choir and so is any other single member of the choir. They all are dependent on each other in the organization. . . . So the choir conductor is not merely interested in a good voice—he is much more interested in a good personality and character. That is what, after all, sings and gives music its true feeling.<sup>5</sup>

### Choral Tone

Christiansen established a choral sound as conductor of the St. Olaf Choir that was recognized and acclaimed for its excellence. A list of some of the representative characteristics of his approach to choral singing include the following:

- 1) Purity and beauty of tone.
- 2) An emphasis on choral blend and balance with attention to the selection and placement of singers in each vocal section. Singers with excessive and wide vibratos were not desirable ensemble members.
- 3) An emphasis on uniformity of vocal timbre, with a preference for the selection of lyric voices. Also, there is great importance placed upon the uniformity of vowels throughout the range.
- 4) Excellent intonation and accuracy of pitch, with an emphasis on good unisons. Great importance placed on the musical ear of each singer. The tuning of chords occurs throughout the composition, not simply at cadences. Block formation preferred with basses

seated behind sopranos and tenors behind altos.

- 5) Disciplined singing which leads to the precision of ensemble attack and release. Clear textual enunciation achieved by continuous unification of vowels and precise execution of consonants.
- 6) Attention to textual nuance and text painting.
- 7) Flexibility and nuance of phrasing as well as the expressive use of rubato.
- 8) Emphasis on legato singing.
- 9) Impressive use of softer singing which permitted a wide range of dynamics by the ensemble.<sup>6</sup>

### Repertoire

One of Christiansen's greatest contributions to the choral art was his programming of sacred choral music for the concert hall. Previously, much of the repertoire of collegiate choral ensembles consisted of second-rate, glee-club songs. Christiansen's programming of nineteenth-century unaccompanied choral works of the German and Russian schools as well as the motets of J. S. Bach was an important addition to the choral concert repertoire of the day. This rebirth of unaccompanied sacred choral literature not only served as a catalyst for the development of school and college ensembles but also fostered the growth of volunteer

church choirs in the middle decades of this century.

Christiansen's compositions are still favorites with many choral ensembles who have the vocal resources to perform them. His choral arrangements of church hymns are still highly regarded works that deserve study and performance. 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*. Several of his compositions quote 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 chorale tune *Vater unser* in the final section.

Several factors motivated Christiansen to develop a concert program consisting entirely of unaccompanied choral music. First, due to a lack of skilled instrumentalists at St. Olaf College and the nature of the choir's touring schedule, it was far easier for the choir to travel without instruments. Second, there was no assurance that a quality keyboard instrument would be available at tour sites. Third, Christiansen worked mostly with young, developing singers whose sound could not carry over large instrumental forces. Fourth, he advocated unaccompanied singing for its ability to strengthen the skill and technique of the individual



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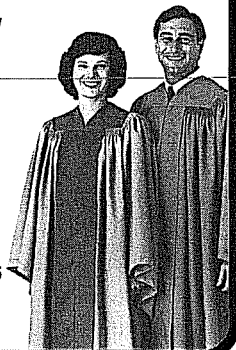
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singer. He felt that unaccompanied choral music could be interpreted in a more refined manner than choral music that utilized instruments, which could obscure nuance. Furthermore, he believed that the union between poetry and music was more evident when the text could emerge naturally.

### Spreading the Word

The concert tours of the St. Olaf Choir under F. Melius Christiansen, later led by Olaf Christiansen, who succeeded his father as conductor in 1941, provided a most effective way of spreading the Christiansen school of choral singing. Christiansen's youngest son, Paul, transplanted the Christiansen choral tradition to Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, when he joined the faculty in 1937. For nearly fifty years he developed the Concordia Choir into one of the finest choral ensembles in the country, and its annual tours further spread the influence of this school of cho-

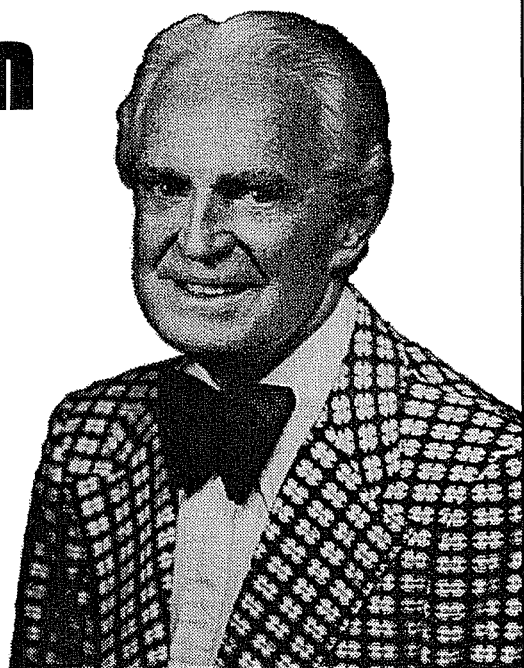
ral singing. Formal training in the choral art was limited in educational institutions prior to World War II; therefore, choral music educators and church musicians found attendance at live concerts a very necessary and rewarding avenue to learning. The tours of both the St. Olaf Choir and Concordia Choir were especially important in serving this purpose.

The first Christiansen Choral School was organized in 1935 at Winona Lake, Indiana. These summer workshops were significant in the dissemination of the pedagogical tenets of the Christiansen tradition. The Christiansen Choral School continued under Olaf Christiansen's leadership until 1962. Paul Christiansen established his own summer choral school in 1948 and continued it through the mid '80s. Hundreds of church, school, college, and community choral conductors were introduced to the choral pedagogy of Christiansen and his sons through these summer sessions. Participants were

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introduced to the audition procedures, the seating and placement of singers in the ensemble, and the vocal as well as rehearsal techniques of these pedagogues. Choral conductors and singers were exposed to fine choral literature and innovative approaches to the choral art. By means of these choral schools, several generations of conductors and singers were exposed to the Christiansen choral method.

Through the years of concert touring and the release of recordings, the repertoire and choral virtuosity of the Christiansen tradition has been heard throughout the world. In recent years television has made it possible to share one of the distinctive 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 annually since that time. The St. Olaf Christmas Festival involves more than five hundred student musicians and draws nearly sixteen thousand people to four concerts held annually on the first weekend in December. First in 1975, and again in 1983, 1989, and 1993, the Public Broadcasting System has taped and aired the St. Olaf Christmas Festival throughout the U.S. More than two hundred noncommercial and nearly four hundred commercial radio stations broadcast the 1993 Christmas Festival in the U.S. and abroad. St. Olaf has undertaken a one-hundred-thousand-dollar project to restore the early recordings of the St. Olaf Choir and the St. Olaf Christmas Festival under the direction of F. Melius and Olaf Christiansen. Due to deterioration these recordings became unplayable. A series of commemorative compact disc recordings are being prepared from these restored materials. The CDs and the collection of archival tapes provide a valuable historical resource for students researching the unaccompanied choral music tradition.

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 by its use of huge, colorful murals.



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was televised by PBS. Concordia College released a two-volume compact-disc retrospective of the Concordia Choir honoring Paul Christiansen's nearly fifty years of musical leadership. It provides listeners with a revealing insight to his contributions to the Christiansen choral tradition.

F. Melius Christiansen and the St. Olaf Choir have been the musical models for many choral ensembles throughout the U.S., especially the church college choirs in the Lutheran tradition. John Finley Williamson credited Christiansen for providing the inspiration and encouragement that led to the founding of the Westminster Choir.<sup>7</sup> The Christiansen tradition continues to influence today's singers and young conductors because many of their mentors were directly inspired by Christiansen, his sons, and the choral ensembles they conducted. This school of singing continues to be an exemplar of excellence in the choral art and a continuing affirmation of the life and work of this pioneering conductor.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Albert Rykken Johnson, "The Christiansen Choral Tradition: F. Melius Christiansen, Olaf C. Christiansen, and Paul J. Christiansen" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Iowa, 1973), 68.
- <sup>2</sup> See reprint of *New York Times* review on p. 65 of this issue.
- <sup>3</sup> F. Melius Christiansen, "To Choir Directors," *Lutheran Church Herald* 23 (September 3, 1939): 30.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.
- <sup>5</sup> F. Melius Christiansen, "The Necessity of Concentration in Choir Singing," *Lutheran Church Herald* 14 (November 4, 1930): 1548.
- <sup>6</sup> Howard Swan, "The Development of a Choral Instrument," in *Choral Conducting: A Symposium*, ed. Harold A. Decker and Julius Herford (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973).
- <sup>7</sup> Ray Robinson, *John Finley Williamson: A Centennial Appreciation* (Princeton: Prestige Publications, 1987), 20.

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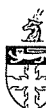
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