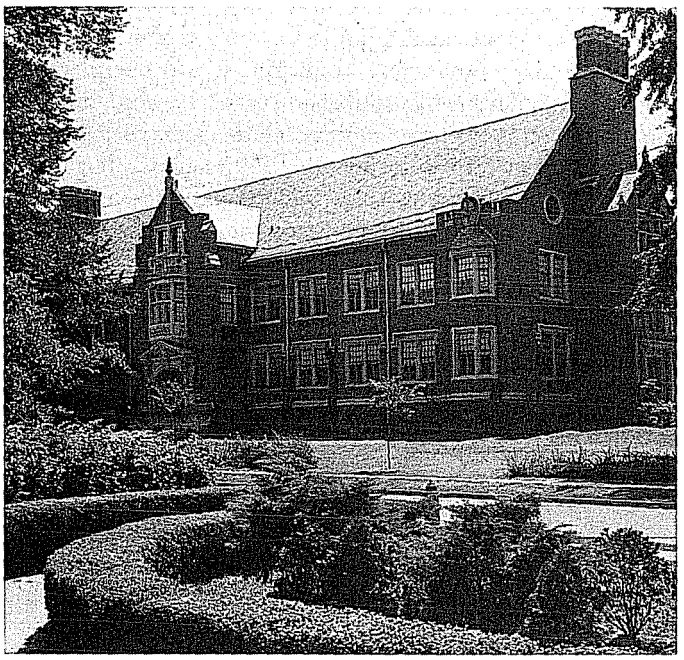
The Illinois Wesleyan University Choral Commission Series (1952–95): Trends in American Choral Music

by David Rayl



Music building, Illinois Wesleyan University

Since 1952 the Collegiate Choir of Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, Illinois, has annually commissioned a choral work, which it then performs on campus and usually on an extended spring tour. With the exception of four years when a completion was delayed or a performance was "in preparation," the choir has been responsible for introducing a new composition every year since the project began. Thirty-eight works have been commissioned, all but four of them from American composers. To this writer's knowledge, the series is the oldest active college choral commission series in the United States.

Because of its continuity and because of the stature achieved by the composers in the Illinois Wesleyan series, choral scholars have a unique window through which to view many of the major trends in American choral music since 1952. This article examines 1) the origins and development of the series, 2) the original goals of the series and the extent to which they have been fulfilled, and 3) representative examples of the compositional styles found in the commissioned works.[1]

History of the Series

On June 28, 1951, Lloyd Pfautsch, then Director of Choral Activities at Illinois Wesleyan, initiated the series with a letter to Earl George at the University of Minnesota:

> I am writing to you to ask if you would be interested in accepting a commission to compose a choral work for our Collegiate Choir. Interested alumni of the past several years are attempting to make this financially possible and offer seventy-five dollars for the work. We are hoping to make this an annual commission and perform the works on our yearly spring concert tour, one of three concerts the choir presents each season.[2]

From this modest beginning the choral commission series developed. Through Pfautsch's tenacious efforts the series became a permanent tradition in the Wesleyan School of Music. Pfautsch remained at Illinois Wesleyan until the fall of 1958, when he left to become Director of Choral Activities at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. He was succeeded by Lewis Whikehart (1958–64) and David Nott (1964–1995).

The process of commissioning works has been a relatively simple one in which the Director of Choral Activities contacts a particular composer in the summer or early autumn and offers the commission, which the composer either accepts or declines. Typically the work is delivered around the first of the year and performed at some point during the spring semester, usually on the Collegiate Choir's spring tour or during the annual Contemporary Music Symposium, or both. There has never been a formal contract between the composer and conductor, although Pfautsch's letters throughout the 1950s frequently mention the need to develop a contract of some sort. All details of the informal agreement have been handled by telephone and/or letter. The university always asks for the right of first performance, and the composer retains all rights to the work itself.

The success of the commission series has been accomplished despite limited financial resources. In 1952, Earl George received $75 for his commission, which Pfautsch admitted was embarrassingly low. Not until 1966 or 1967 was the fee increased to $100, followed by subsequent increases to $150 in

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1976 and $200 in 1984. The university itself has never provided funding for the project. Initially funds came from interested alumni. During the Whikehart years income from sales of the choir's recordings helped pay for the project. In 1969, Illinois Wesleyan's Sigma Chapter of Delta Omicron Fraternity began providing the commission fee.

Although the correspondence reveals an occasional exception, most composers have agreed to the nominal fee quite readily. Only in one case, that of George Rochberg, was a possible commission lost because of scant funds. Rochberg accepted a commission (on several occasions), but the work never materialized. Whikehart first contacted Rochberg on October 4, 1962, asking him to write a piece for the following spring. Rochberg did not reply until December 15, agreeing to the offer, but with the stipulation that he could not deliver the composition until late fall 1963. Other factors intervened, however, and on October 3, 1963, Rochberg responded to Whikehart's inquiries: "The work I promised you has been delayed, delayed, delayed by a complex set of circumstances which I'm afraid have me very much in their grip."[3] Although he had not yet begun writing the piece, he did provide this tantalizing bit of information:

> There is something I have in mind, and I am waiting for an "opening" to begin work . . . you *will* have something from me—that I can promise—eventually . . . The work I have in mind will not be a "choral" piece in the usual sense but almost a "choral-drama" with sung [and] spoken lines which move around each other. The texts I have in mind, while drawn from different sources, will have a common relationship in terms of a central theme dealing with man's travail. This means that the chorus will constitute an ensemble of singers-speakers functioning sometimes simultaneously, sometimes successively . . . As soon as I make a beginning I'll let you know and will keep you posted on my progress.[4]

That piece never developed. Whikehart left Illinois Wesleyan in 1964, and there was no further correspondence on the matter until October 1969, when Nott approached Rochberg to see "if this year finds your schedule any less complicated."[5] The composer declined but asked: "Can we defer this for the present and say that if the spirit moves me and I do write something for chorus I shall let you know immediately and we can take it for granted it will be offered you for first performance on a commissioned basis?"[6] During the 1973–74 academic year, David Ferreira, Nott's sabbatical replacement, contacted Rochberg again. The existing correspondence suggests that Rochberg requested a fee larger than Ferreira was able to secure. In a letter of September 26, 1973, he tells Rochberg:

> I waited as long as possible to see if I could find the necessary money

> for a commission from you this year. I must face a deficit in the budget that provides commission funds at this time. I am very disappointed in the fact that my year here cannot include premiering a work by you.[7]

The correspondence shows that the amount of time between the initial request from the conductor and the acceptance and delivery of the manuscript by the composer varied greatly. For example, Pfautsch's letter to Earl George was dated June 28. Just eleven days later, George sent him a response that began,

> Please forgive my late reply. When I got your letter, I immediately looked up the [William] Blake [*Songs of Innocence*] texts and was so fascinated by their possibilities that I put everything else aside, with the result that the score is now at the blueprinters. You should have it, with the transparencies, in a day or two. Obviously, I accept your commission![8]

This represents the quickest delivery time for any of the series' commissions; though, for the most part, the conductors received the works when they were promised.

Only occasionally did the late arrival of a score lead to a less-than-successful performance or necessitate a delay in its premiere. Kenneth Gaburo's *Antiphony II (Variations on a Poem of Cavafy)* (1963) arrived so late that the choir had only five rehearsals in which to learn it. Gordon Binkerd's *Eternitie* (1965) was received too late for the choir's spring tour; Edmund Najera's *Requiem pro amici* (1977), which arrived in January, was so long that the performance was delayed until the following October; and Jan Bach's *A Solemn Music* (1987) had to be premiered in an abbreviated version on the choir's January tour.

Through the forty-three years of its existence, the series has provided several works to celebrate special events in the life of the university. *David's Lamentation* (1975) by R. Bedford Watkins, an Illinois Wesleyan faculty member, commemorated the 125th anniversary of the founding of the university. The 1989 commission, Nicholas V. D'Angelo's *Psalm Triptych*, was written to commemorate the inauguration of Minor Myers, Jr., the president of the university. Recent milestones include the awarding of the 1991 commission to James McCray, a 1960 Wesleyan graduate, and the 1994 commission to Doris Simpson Hill, who received both a bachelor's (1958) and a master's (1971) degree from the university. They are the only alumni so honored.

The Goals of the Series

In the summer of 1977, Lloyd Pfautsch was commissioned to write the twenty-fifth work for the very series that he had initiated. He was subsequently awarded an honorary doctorate by the university at its Founders Day Convocation on February 15, 1978. The occasion was marked by a performance of George's *Songs of Innocence* and the premiere of Pfautsch's *Songs of Experience.* Speaking at the convocation, Pfautsch

Year	Composer	Title	Performing Forces	Original Publisher
The Pfautsch Years				
1952	Earl George	*Songs of Innocence*	mixed chorus	Summy
1953	Anthony Donato	*The Last Supper*	mixed chorus, B solo	Southern
1954	Burrill Phillips	*The Age of Song* "Tell Me, Where Is Fancy Bred"	mixed chorus	Summy
1955	Louise Talma	*La Corona*	mixed chorus	unpublished
1956	Ulysses Kay	*A New Song*	mixed chorus	C. F. Peters
1957	William Bergsma	*Riddle Me This*	mixed chorus	Galaxy
1958	Leo Sowerby	*Seeing We Also Are Compassed About*	mixed chorus	H. T. FitzSimons
The Whikehart Years				
1959	Normand Lockwood	*The Seven Churches*	mixed chorus	unpublished
1960	Jean Berger	*The Prayer of Mannasseh*	mixed chorus, T solo	G. Schirmer
1961	Lewis Whikehart	*Joel: A Short Cantata*	mixed chorus, S solo, 3 speaking voices, hn., 4 tbn., tba.	unpublished
1962	[no commission]			
1963	Kenneth Gaburo	*Antiphony II (Variations on a Poem of Cavafy)*	mixed chorus	Lingua
1964	Ben Johnston	*Of Vanity*	mixed chorus	unpublished
The Nott Years				
1965	Gordon Binkerd	*Eternitie*	mixed chorus	Boosey & Hawkes
1966	Bernard Heiden	*Advent Song*	mixed chorus, SATB soli	unpublished
1967	Relly Raffman	*Psalm IV*	mixed chorus, T solo, brass ensemble	unpublished
1968	John Joubert	*Let There Be Light*	mixed chorus, ST soli	Novello
1969	[no commission]			

Figure 1. The list of works in the Illinois Wesleyan University Choral Commission Series.

Year	Composer	Title	Performing Forces	Original Publisher
1970	Barney Childs	*keet seel*	mixed chorus	American Composers Alliance
1971	Pauline Oliveros	*Meditation on the Points of the Compass*	mixed chorus, perc. (to be played by chorus members)	Media Press
1972	Geoffrey Bush	*A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs*	mixed chorus, opt. STBar soli	Elkin
1973	Joseph Wood	*O All Ye*	mixed chorus	unpublished
1974	Pasquale J. Spino	*Lament*	mixed chorus, T solo, vln., pf.	unpublished
1975	R. Bedford Watkins	*David's Lamentation*	mixed chorus, Bar solo, perc.	Lawson-Gould
1976	John Chorbajian	*Vital Spark of Heavenly Flame*	mixed chorus	G. Schirmer
1977	Edmund Najera	*Requiem pro amici*	mixed chorus, B solo	unpublished
1978	Lloyd Pfautsch	*Songs of Experience*	mixed chorus	Lawson-Gould
1979	[no commission]			
1980	David Epstein	*The Lament of Job*	mixed chorus, SSSAT soli, 3 speakers, pf., perc., vc.	unpublished
1981	David Ward-Steinman	*Of Wind and Water*	mixed chorus, perc., prepared pf.	unpublished
1982	Robert J. Powell	*Prayer for a New Day*	mixed chorus	unpublished
1983	Peter Aston	*Welcome Yule*	mixed chorus, org.	Royal School of Church Music
1984	Kirke Mechem	*Catch 22*	mixed chorus, pf., vc., bells	G. Schirmer
1985	Sydney Hodkinson	*. . . "and yet". . .*	mixed chorus, pf., opt. handbells	unpublished
1986	Jean Eichelberger Ivey	*Entreat Me Not*	mixed chorus	unpublished
1987	Jan Bach	*A Solemn Music*	mixed chorus	unpublished
1988	[no commission]			

Figure 1 (continued)

Year	Composer	Title	Performing Forces	Original Publisher
1989	Nicholas V. D'Angelo	*Psalm Triptych*	mixed chorus, S solo, perc., opt. org.	unpublished
1990	William Mathias	*Hodie, Christus natus est*	mixed chorus, ABar soli	Oxford
1991	James McCray	*Nunc dimittis*	mixed chorus	Music 70
1992	[no commission]			
1993	John Crawford	*Three Poems of Robert Herrick*	mixed chorus	unpublished
1994	Doris Simpson Hill	*God with Us—Alleluia*	mixed chorus	unpublished
1995	commission pending			

Figure 1 (continued)

recalled six principal reasons for beginning the commissioning project:

> First of all, there was the desire to encourage young, unknown American composers to write for choral ensembles. Secondly, as an adjunct to the first purpose, there was the desire to enlarge the repertoire available for choral ensembles to perform. The third purpose was to provide new settings for old and familiar texts as well as settings of texts which had not been used before for a musical setting. A fourth purpose involved an emphasis on varieties of style, the exploration of new and developing contemporary or avant-garde compositional techniques. A fifth purpose was the hope that this new repertoire would be of service to both school and church choral ensembles and thus on alternate years sacred and secular texts were to be used. Finally, it was originally hoped that the commissioned works would appear in print in an Illinois Wesleyan University Collegiate Choir Choral Series.[9]

An examination of all the works composed for the series (Figure 1) reveals that the series has met all but the final one of its founder's original purposes.

For the most part, the series has followed Pfautsch's plan to "encourage young, unknown American composers." All but four of the invited composers have been American, although by no means have all of them been young and unknown. In fact, many of them possessed substantial reputations at the time of their commissions. Pfautsch veered from one of his original goals almost immediately by contacting Ralph Vaughan Williams in June 1952, the second year of the series. Vaughan Williams politely declined because of "other commitments" but noted that "also I am against writing special composition music."[10] In 1966, Nott sought to broaden the scope of the series by seeking commissions from rather well-known European composers, among them Luigi Dallapiccola, Benjamin Britten, and Ernst Krenek (who was then living in the United States). Each of them declined. Nott then began to seek out "some of the younger European composers of some significance in their own countries whose works [were] not generally or widely known in this country."[11] He was successful in securing the 1968 commission from British composer John Joubert. Three other British composers have followed—Geoffrey Bush (1972), Peter Aston (1983), and William Mathias (1990).

In his 1978 address Pfautsch listed "the desire to enlarge the repertoire" as one of his primary motivations for beginning the series. Its thirty-eight works demonstrate unquestionable success in that regard. He elaborated on this point:

> We wanted the Collegiate Choir to sing choral music representing their

> days in history, coming from men and women who were living and writing during the Collegiate Choir members' student days and from whom the students might receive inspiration.[12]

Whenever possible, the composers have attended the premiere performance of their work, many of which took place during the university's annual Contemporary Music Symposium. This has enabled some lively interaction among composer, conductor, and students. While no composer has ever conducted the premiere of his or her own work, Edmund Najera served as baritone soloist for his *Requiem pro amici* in 1977.

Another goal cited by Pfautsch was the creation of settings of old and familiar texts and of texts that had not been used before for a musical setting. Among the former category are traditional liturgical texts such as Najera's *Requiem pro amici,* Mathias's *Hodie, Christus natus est* (1990), and McCray's *Nunc dimittis* (1991), and Biblical texts such as Ulysses Kay's *A New Song* (1956), settings of portions of Psalms 149 and 103 and all of Psalm 117; R. Bedford Watkins's *David's Lamentation* (1975), a setting of Samuel 2:18–33; and Jean Eichelberg Ivey's *Entreat Me Not* (1986), a setting of Ruth 1:16–17. Several settings of less well-known Biblical texts include Leo Sowerby's *Seeing We Also Are Compassed About* (1958), taken from Hebrews 12:1–2; Normand Lockwood's *The Seven Churches* (1959), with a text from the Book of Revelation; and Jean Berger's *The Prayer of Mannasseh* (1960), whose text is taken from the Old Testament Apocrypha. Several time-honored British poets—including William Blake, John Donne, William Shakespeare, Robert Herrick, Alexander Pope, and John Milton—are represented by one or more works, but the only well-known American poets are Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and Carl Sandburg.

In spite of Pfautsch's desire that commissioned works "come from men and women who were living and writing during the Collegiate Choir members' student days," only a few present texts by contemporary poets: Pasquale Spino's *Lament* sets a composite text that includes a poem written by a relative of one of the students killed at Kent State in May 1970; David Ward-Steinman's *Of Wind and Water* features settings of poems by Richard Shelton, Ruth Stone, William Carlos Williams, and Babette Deutsch; and Sydney Hodkinson's *". . . and yet . . ."* sets a poem by Alvin Greenberg. Noting how few composers have chosen to set contemporary texts, Nott remarked: "Many composers have had major problems securing permission to use the poetry of contemporary writers. It is just too much trouble or often too costly."[13] Thus the disappointing absence of contemporary poetry in the series was the result of practical rather than artistic considerations.

Among the more interesting and revealing aspects of the correspondence between composers and conductors is the discussion of text selection. At the beginning of the series, Pfautsch chose specific texts and requested the commissioned

composer to set them. For example, in his initial letter to George, he writes: "The text I have in mind at the moment is the Introduction to and several poems from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence.*"[14] George responded by setting the Introduction as well as "The Shepherd," "Infant Joy," "The Lamb," and "Laughing Song." For the second commission, Pfautsch asked Anthony Donato for a setting of the Last Supper narrative in Matthew's Gospel because he planned to use this new work in a group of pieces titled "Scenes from the Life of Christ." Donato readily complied. Pfautsch's suggestions were sometimes rejected. When he approached Burrill Phillips about the possibility of a commission in 1953, he suggested several different texts by a variety of poets including Lindsay, Shakespeare, and Blake. Phillips countered by suggesting seven other texts, all by Elizabethan poets, and thus *The Age of Song* was born.

Compared with Pfautsch, Whikehart gave the composer freer rein with regard to text. "I like to leave the matter of text choice and idiom completely to the discernment of the composer," he wrote to Jean Berger in the fall of 1959. His letter to Berger goes on to suggest "something of a bright and/or lighter texture this year" to contrast with Normand Lockwood's "extremely profound and subjective work" of the previous year.[15]

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In the early years of his tenure, Nott occasionally asked a composer to consider setting a specific text. For example, in his correspondence with Gordon Binkerd, he included poems by Edith Sitwell, Dylan Thomas, and W. H. Auden and also suggested a setting of Psalm 85:6, 7.[16] More often he adopted a freer approach. He suggested to Pauline Oliveros that she set a text of a penitential nature but added, "if these restrictions are completely out of line with what you would like to do at the present time, simply ignore them."[17] His invitation to Bernard Heiden was similarly open-ended: "Any sacred text you desire will be suitable. I have several ideas and would gladly make a suggestion if you prefer."[18] Sometimes he suggested that the piece fit in with the projected "theme" of the spring tour, e.g., "Five Centuries of Choral Psalmody" in 1967.

Nott and composer Geoffrey Bush had no communication regarding choice of text. The two did correspond rather extensively during the course of the commission, however, and those letters provide an insight into Bush's method of composing. Two months after accepting the commission, he wrote to Nott:

> I have found the theme I need for the text of the work and several passages from different sources. Forgive this cryptic comment, but in a curious sort of way, I feel it unlucky to discuss in advance what I am going to do until at least some of it is actually written![19]

Three and a half months later, in April 1991, he wrote,

> I have found the texts I needed, and I hope to start on the music next week. I will let you know when there is more to report—forgive silence until then, but I have a feeling that it is unlucky to talk about 'work in progress' until it has passed from dream to reality.[20]

It was not until June that he revealed the nature of the work and its text:

> What is the piece? It is a twelve to fourteen minute *a cappella* piece,

with soloists from the chorus, in several short movements, very varied from the deeply serious to the comical, with a title from Sheridan: *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs.*[21]

Pfautsch's original plan, as outlined in his initial letter to Earl George, was to alternate sacred and secular texts from year to year, and he held to this during the seven years of his leadership. Of those seven commissions, four were sacred and three were secular. Whikehart continued that practice: three of his five commissions were settings of sacred texts. The vast majority of Nott's commissions, however, have been sacred or at least spiritual in nature. This preponderance of religious texts results primarily from the fact that the choir ordinarily performs in churches during its annual spring tour.

Pfautsch's final purpose in founding the series was to provide music for both school and church choral ensembles, with the hope that the commissioned works would appear together in a series published by a single publisher. Just over half, twenty of the thirty-eight works, have been published, though not in a single series as Pfautsch envisioned. Some are accessible to the average church choir, but most require the technical skills of a college/university chorus or a well-trained high school or church choir. Interestingly enough, the most popular, in terms of copies sold, is the first commission, Earl George's *Songs of Innocence*—this, in spite of the fact that George initially had difficulty finding a publisher because many thought them "too difficult for the average choir."[22]

Over the years there were several unsuccessful attempts to find a publisher for all the works of the series. Pfautsch approached Carl Fischer in 1951 and C. C. Birchard in 1952,[23] and in 1975 Nott approached both the Roger Dean Publishing Company and Abingdon Press.[24] Writing in 1977, Pfautsch offered this explanation for the lack of publisher interest in the series: they "were all reluctant to tie themselves down to manuscripts unseen and unappraised by their editors. This I can understand, but when one looks at the list (of commissioned works) I feel that they made a big mistake."[25]

Musical Styles in the Series

One of Pfautsch's original goals was to emphasize a variety of styles and to exploit new and developing avant-garde techniques. An examination of the thirty-eight scores reveals a wide range of approaches to choral writing.

The works composed during Pfautsch's tenure are written in what might be termed a traditional twentieth-century tonal and rhythmic idiom, although some are significantly more tonal than others, and some are rhythmically and texturally more complex

than others. None of the settings requires the voices to perform in a nontraditional manner, and there is little evidence of the avant-garde compositional techniques he hoped to encourage.

George's *Songs of Innocence* provides a point of reference. He makes use of what Humphrey Searle describes as "expanded diatonicism"[26]—a harmonic palette consisting primarily of triadic harmonies, with dissonance achieved by the addition of major or minor seconds. His rhythmic approach is sprightly and engaging and takes as its model the natural inflections of the text. In "Infant Joy," for example, the meter changes with each measure, but George complicates this metric scheme by superimposing irregular groupings of two and three eighth notes upon it. This rhythmic technique combined with the harmonic usage outlined above yields a piece that sounds convincingly modern (Figure 2).

Viewed from the end of the twentieth century, this piece may seem rather conservative, but any judgment of its merits must take into account the state of choral music in American colleges and universities at mid-century. According to Pfautsch,

> There was relatively little American choral music available and what was available was not always distinguished. We were still victims of what someone has designated as the "immigrant syndrome." Choral music from the "fatherlands" was preferred and considered culturally or artistically acceptable. Our own creative efforts were deprecated and discouraged. They were often, at best, poor imitations and emulations of European models or traditions.[27]

Pfautsch further reports that when he first began teaching at Wesleyan, even works in so conservative a modern idiom as Hindemith's *Six Chansons* (1939) were considered extremely difficult and that some of the "old timers" in the Collegiate Choir almost refused to sing some of the challenging repertoire.

One can only imagine what those same "old timers" would have thought had they encountered Louise Talma's *La Corona,* a setting of the poetry of John Donne, just three years later. Her style is much more challenging and progressive than that of the George pieces (Figure 3). According to Pfautsch, Talma's works were the most difficult pieces commissioned during his tenure. Despite their difficulty, they were well received by the choir's audiences: "The Talma was a special surprise, for each audience reacted very favorably in spite of her idiom, which one would expect audiences to find difficult."[28]

Beginning in the early 1960s under Whikehart's leadership and continuing into the early 1970s under Nott, the series produced its most experimental, adventuresome works, which use techniques such as serialism, tone clusters, quartertones, *sprechstimme,* and indeterminacy. As early as 1958, Whikehart had demonstrated his openness to new modes of expression: "Where is something new, honest, and compatible, expressed in a unique manner?"[29] But it was not until Kenneth Gaburo's *Antiphony II (Variations on a Poem of Cavafy)* (1963) that he received something truly progressive. The work is built on a twelve-tone row revealed in the first five measures. Textures

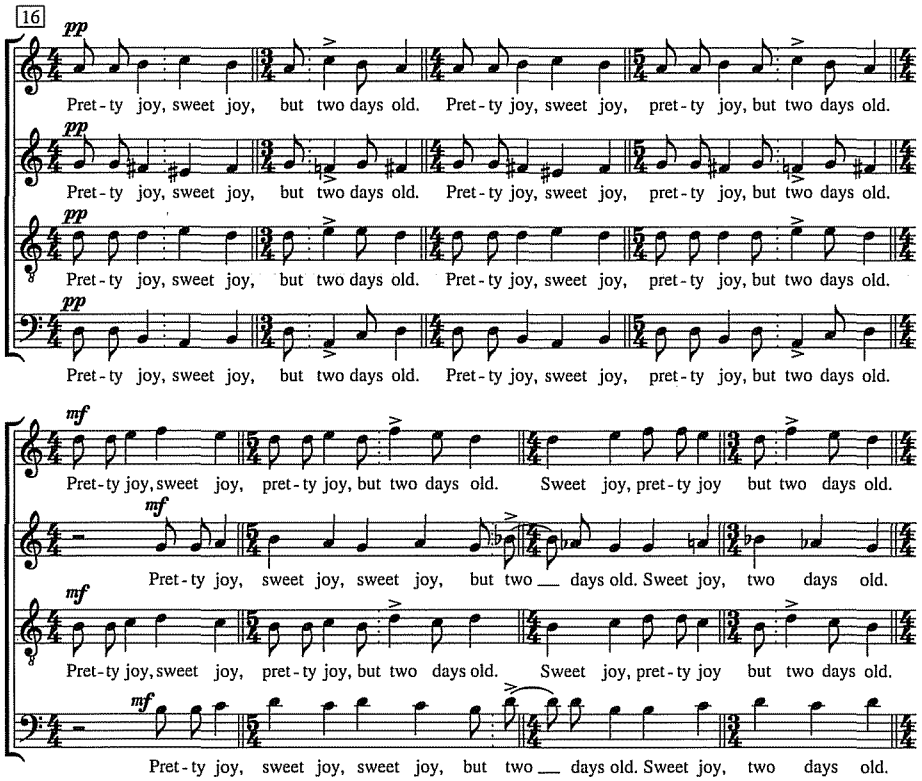


Figure 2. Earl George, "Infant Joy"
Used by permission of Warner Bros. Publications Inc.

are extremely sparse. Specific dynamic levels are fixed to each pitch, and there are no crescendi or diminuendi. Words are broken into "sub-sounds" (i.e., individual syllables are fragmented) and distributed among the various voice parts (Figure 4).

Gaburo's *Variations* proved extremely difficult for the choir, which was forced to learn it in only five rehearsals, but the most difficult work of the series came the following year with Ben Johnston's *Of Vanity*. An examination of the first page of the score gives some indication of the extraordinary difficulties that this piece presented (Figure 5). The piece proved impossible to perform accurately. Johnston came to hear his piece performed during the Contemporary Music Symposium that year. When he heard a rehearsal, he suggested that the performance be abandoned.[30] This is the only occasion in the history of the series when a new work has proven to be too taxing for the choir. This also was Whikehart's final year at Illinois Wesleyan.

The following year, David Nott selected Gordon Binkerd, who composed in a much more conservative style, for his first commission. Binkerd reflected on his own style when he sent the score of *Eternitie* to Nott in January 1965:

> Many performers of late tend to look down their noses somewhat at music which is not in a style filled with challenging difficulties. I hope that you will not feel it time wasted to be concerned with something rather restrained in idiom and vocal requirements.[31]

Nott's early years of involvement with the series, however, were not without interesting and challenging works that exploited avant-garde techniques. Among these were *keet seel* by Barney Childs (1970) and *Meditation on the Points of the Compass* by Pauline Oliveros (1971). Childs's own description of his piece and an examination of an excerpt from the score offer insight into his compositional process (Figure 6):

> The ideas of *keet seel* were developed, as those for at least three other works I have written, from the work as I heard it performed in a

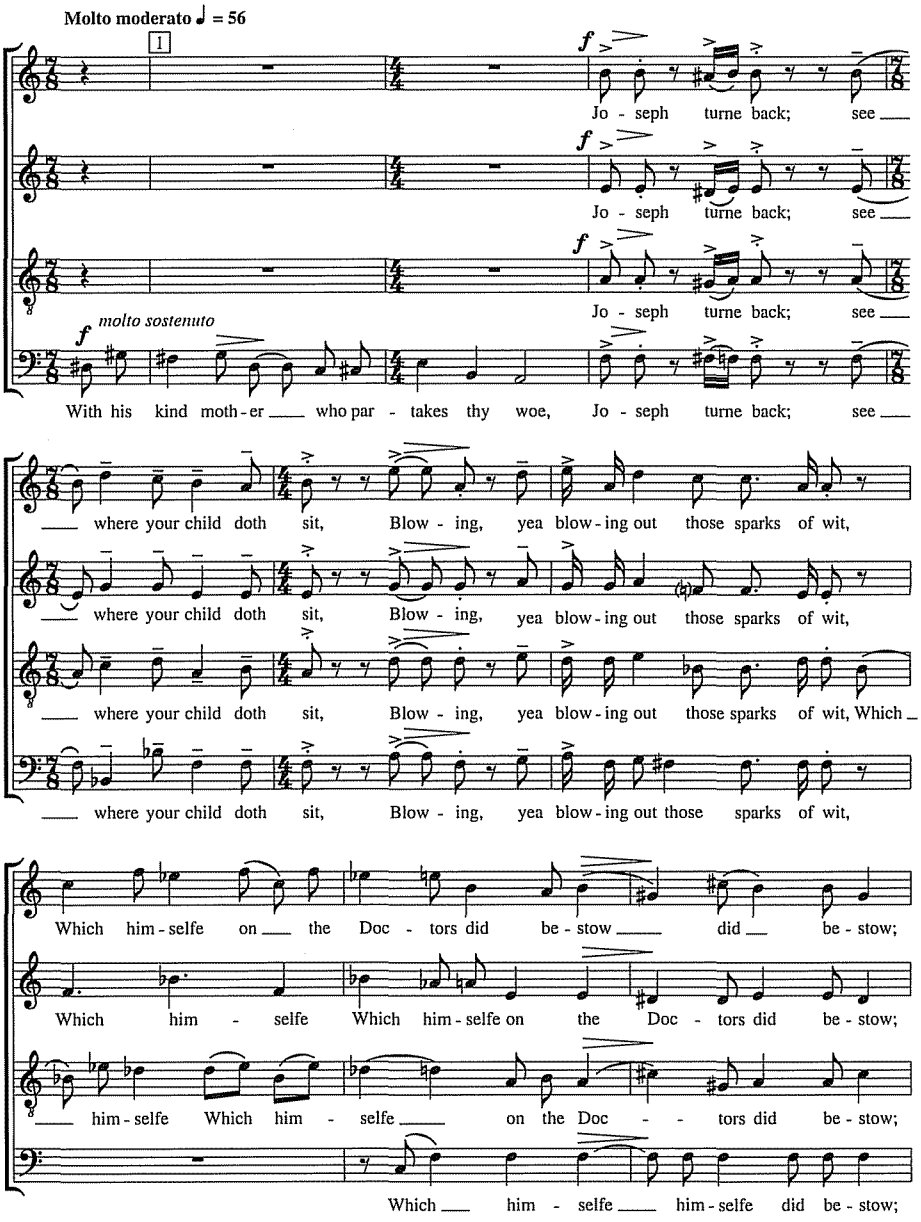


Figure 3. Louise Talma, "Temple" from *La Corona*. Used by permission of the composer.

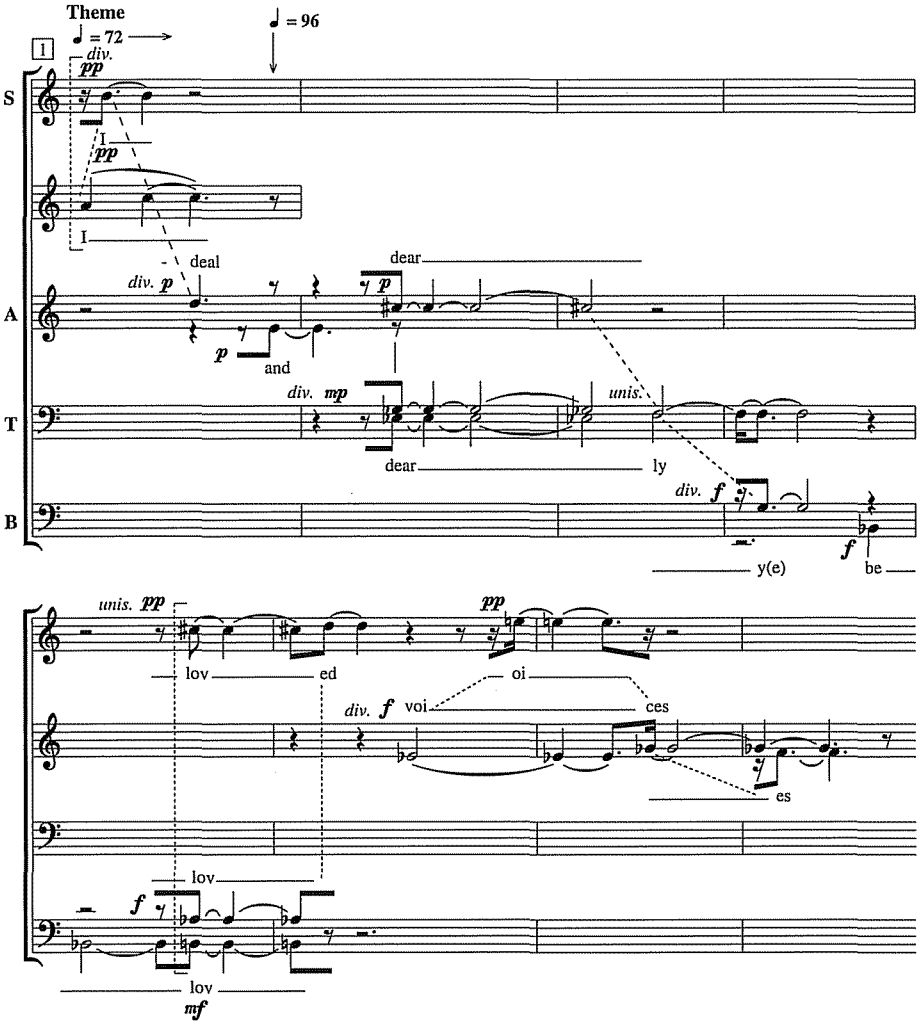
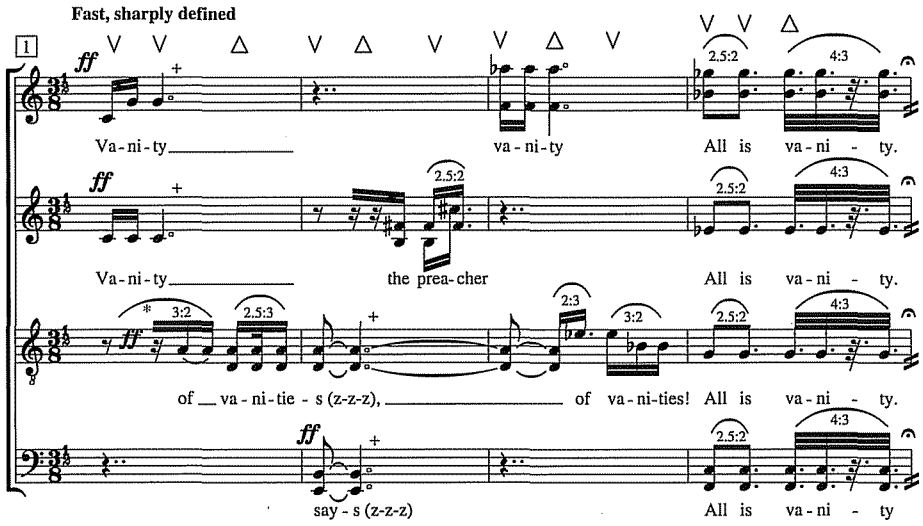


Figure 4. Kenneth Gaburo, *Antiphony II (Variations on a Poem of Cavafy)*
Lingua Press, Used by permission.



* The first number gives the irregular subdivision; the second gives the "normal" subdivision.
\+ The hollow dot adds 1/4 the durational value of the note it follows.

Figure 5. Ben Johnston, *Of Vanity*
Used by permission of the composer.

dream. The "text" as such doesn't exist; it is inseparable from the music. That is, when planning this work I was concerned with sounds a chorus, or a singer, could make (just as when one composes for a clarinet or a trumpet he is concerned with sounds the instrument can make), rather than having the singers read through a pre-musical or extra-musical text with pitches added. On the other hand, I am not at the moment much interested in using choral or vocal sound which is non-referential. What I wanted here was words whose sounds could be developed as part of a musical construct. Actual words come equipped, willy-nilly, with some degree of response to the hearer, connotative and denotative, but I preferred here to subdue this until what was heard was a sound structure with what David Antin referred to once in a letter as an iridescent ripple of "meaning"; this occasionally collects into focuses through recognizable quoted material, but the piece is generally evocative and incantatory, with interweaving repetition of sound of words as in primitive ritual or children's rhymes. At the same time, hopefully the piece's experience is considerably more sophisticated than that of either of those two examples; it contains phrases—syntactical focuses relating loosely to my own past personal experiences. Silence is a living part of the sound continuum of the piece and should be felt as such by the singers and conductor so that, hopefully, it may be heard as such when the work is performed.[32]

An additional aspect of Childs's compositional style, although he fails to mention it in his letter to Nott, is his use of microtones. According to a note in the score, pitches preceded by an asterisk (*) are to be sung approximately a quarter-tone flat. Nott recalls that the Collegiate Choir found *keet seel* challenging, but not overly so, and "had a good time with it."[33] Other conductors, however, apparently shied away from performing the piece. According to the composer, "Some choral folk have looked at it off and on

and felt it wasn't the sort of thing choruses sang."[34]

Among the most innovative works to come out of the commission series is Pauline Oliveros's *Meditation on the Points of the Compass,* an almost completely aleatoric work. There is no score as such, only a set of written instructions from the composer, a diagram indicating the spatial relationship of the various instruments and singers, and a conductor's cue sheet (Figure 7). The work is scored for four Japanese bowl gongs, each of a different pitch; four Chinese gongs, each of a different size; four Chinese temple blocks, each of a different size; six male and six female singers, preferably of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds, divided into four solo groups of three each; and a large choir, each of whose members is provided with a small bell or finger cymbals. The composition is conceived for a large open space that allows the performers and audience to be placed as indicated in the diagram. The conductor is instructed to carry a compass in order to determine the correct locations. The composer's notes describe how the piece unfolds:

> The audience is invited to participate by the program notes. Before the piece begins, the conductor verbally instructs the audience in when and what sounds to make. . . . The piece begins with a candle lighting ceremony and a silent meditation. The conductor distributes candles to all or some of the audience members . . . then lights each candle from his own. . . . The silent meditation continues for two or three minutes. . . . The four Japanese bowl gongs sound first, *f* in sequence, on cue from the conductor. When the initial bowl gong sounds have died away, the North Chinese gong sounds, *mp* on cue from the conductor. Chorus and audience make wind sounds of all kinds, ca. thirty seconds. On cue the East Chinese gong sounds, *mp.* Chorus and audience make humming or buzzing sounds of all kinds, ca. thirty seconds.

Oliveros's notes continue:

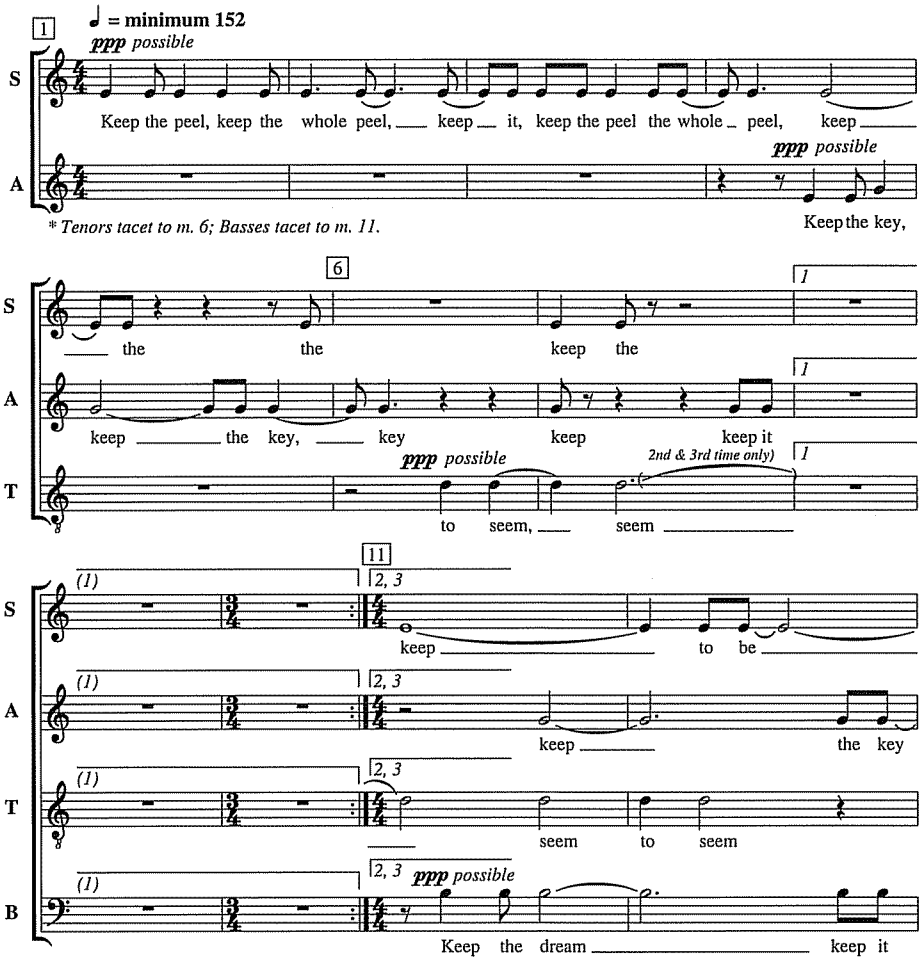


Figure 6. Barney Childs, *Keet Seel*
Used by permission of American Composers Alliance.

> Each of the twelve soloists chooses a text which is appropriate to his own race, knowledge of language, faith, or secular interest. Each group is to consist of three singers and a bowl gong player. Each singer holds a candle. The singers face the audience. The bowl gong player sits cross-legged with his bowl gong and faces the conductor. The fundamentals or any partials of the bowl gongs act as psalm tones for the soloists. Each person intones his own text independently, using the following procedure: Select the fundamental or any partial of the bowl gong as a psalm tone. Do not change the psalm tone once the selection is made. Any mode one whole step above or below the psalm tone may be used. The mode may be micro-tonal or diatonic but the psalm tone must be approached or departed from by a whole step. Rhythms should be derived from the texts, but melismatic treatment of vowel sounds is possible. Dynamics and articulations should be derived from the texts. The singing stops when the text ends or when the conductor extinguishes the candles.[35]

The piece is intended to last a minimum of twelve minutes, but Oliveros preferred a longer performance (with all time proportions expanded), which she felt would have a much stronger impact.

Following the Oliveros commission in 1971, the works in the series return to a somewhat less avant-garde style. Most are written using an expanded diatonicism. Many of the works, however, incorporate

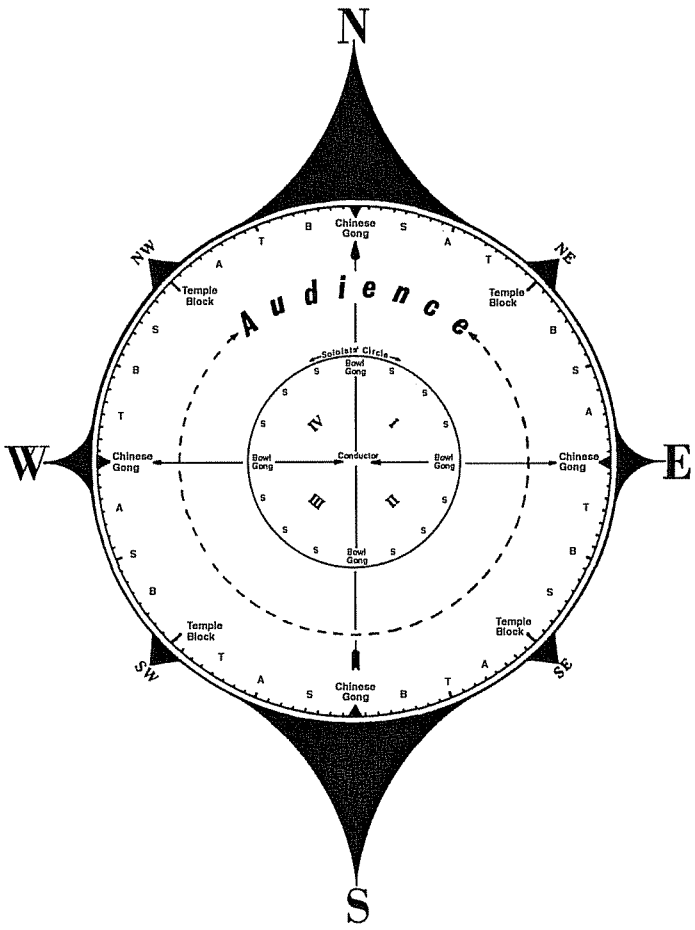


Figure 7. Pauline Oliveros, *Meditation on the Points of the Compass,* complete score
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techniques that may be regarded as unusual or nontraditional. For example, David Epstein's *The Lament of Job* (1980) incorporates speakers and off-stage voices, R. Bedford Watkins's *David's Lamentation* (1975) and John Joubert's *Let There Be Light* (1968) use cluster chords, and David Ward-Steinman's *Of Wind and Water* (1981) requires special techniques from the pianist: claves on the strings, internal string glissandos, and plucking of the strings. It is somewhat surprising that none of the thirty-six commissioned works has made use of electronic tape or synthesizer, in spite of the enormous popularity of these media. According to Nott, this conspicuous absence is not by design but by chance. The Collegiate Choir has performed a number of works with electronic tape, but none of the commission composers has chosen to write a piece using that vehicle.[36]

It is noteworthy that the most important influence on the series has been the discretionary role exercised by the Director of Choral Activities in selecting the commissioned composers. More than any other factor, the personal tastes of Pfautsch, Whikehart, and Nott have determined the type and quality of the music written for the series. In spite of this method of selecting composers, or perhaps because of it, the series has mirrored the trends and preferences in American choral music during the latter half of the twentieth century, with challenging, albeit traditional, idioms employed during the fifties; bold, experimental techniques during the sixties and early seventies; and a return to a less-adventuresome style since that time.

A Call to Action

College and university choral conductors frequently bemoan the dearth of contemporary choral music of high quality, yet for some reason they fail to recognize their role in fostering such a repertoire. If the choral art is to remain alive and not become a museum given over exclusively to music of the past, it is incumbent upon these conductors to nurture the creation of imaginative and rewarding compositions. They have a serious obligation and responsibility to promote new choral music vigorously through the performance of recently composed pieces and by commissioning new works, particularly works by young, relatively unknown composers. As Nott puts it, choral conductors must realize that "music-making also involves making music."[37]

NOTES

[1] The information for this article was acquired from personal interviews with Lloyd Pfautsch, Professor of Sacred Music and Director of Choral Activities Emeritus at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, and former Director of Choral Activities at Illinois Wesleyan University (1949–58) and with David Nott, the present Director of Choral Activities at Illinois Wesleyan. The writer also examined the files of the Illinois Wesleyan University School of Music, which contain the scores of all the commissioned works and the bulk of the correspondence between conductors and composers. Direct quotations from the interviews and from the correspondence have been documented in an endnote. Other corroborating information has not.

[2] Lloyd Pfautsch, letter to Earl George, June 28, 1951.

[3] George Rochberg, letter to Lewis Whikehart, October 3, 1963.
[4] Ibid.
[5] David Nott, letter to George Rochberg, October 9, 1969.
[6] George Rochberg, letter to David Nott, October 14, 1969.
[7] David Ferreira, letter to George Rochberg, September 26, 1973.
[8] Earl George, letter to Lloyd Pfautsch, July 9, 1951.
[9] Lloyd Pfautsch, "Dr. Lloyd Pfautsch Commemorates 25th Anniversary of Collegiate Choir Commission Series on Founders Day," *Illinois Wesleyan University Bulletin*, 78 (January 1978): 13–14.
[10] Ralph Vaughan Williams, letter to Lloyd Pfautsch, July 9, 1952.
[11] David Nott, letter to John Joubert, October 18, 1967.
[12] Lloyd Pfautsch, "Dr. Lloyd Pfautsch Commemorates 25th Anniversary," 13.
[13] David Nott, interview with the author, Normal, Illinois, November 27, 1991.
[14] Lloyd Pfautsch, letter to Earl George, June 28, 1951.
[15] Lewis Whikehart, undated letter to Jean Berger, fall 1959.
[16] Gordon Binkerd, letter to David Nott, October 18, 1964.
[17] David Nott, letter to Pauline Oliveros, November 11, 1970.
[18] David Nott, letter to Bernard Heiden, October 6, 1967.
[19] Geoffrey Bush, letter to David Nott, January 1, 1971.
[20] Geoffrey Bush, letter to David Nott, April 14, 1971.
[21] Geoffrey Bush, letter to David Nott, June 10, 1971.
[22] Earl George, letter to David Nott, January 28, 1978.
[23] Lloyd Pfautsch, letter to Anthony Donato, October 2, 1952.
[24] David Nott, letter to John Chorbajian, October 15, 1975.
[25] Lloyd Pfautsch, letter to David Nott, October 2, 1977.
[26] Humphrey Searle, *Twentieth Century Counterpoint*, 2d ed. (London: Williams and Northgate, 1954), 22.
[27] Lloyd Pfautsch, "Dr. Lloyd Pfautsch Commemorates 25th Anniversary," 13.
[28] Lloyd Pfautsch, letter to Ulysses Kay, October 29, 1955.
[29] Lewis Whikehart, letter to Normand Lockwood, November 15, 1958.
[30] David Nott, interview with the author, November 26, 1991.
[31] Gordon Binkerd, letter to David Nott, January 8, 1966.
[32] Barney Childs, letter to David Nott, March 3, 1970.
[33] David Nott, interview with the author, November 26, 1991.
[34] Barney Childs, letter to David Nott, November 24, 1970.
[35] Pauline Oliveros, *Meditation on the Points of the Compass* (Champaign, Illinois: Media Press, 1971), 1.
[36] David Nott, interview with the author, November 27, 1991.
[37] David Nott, interview with the author, November 26, 1991.

—CJ—