



ROBERT R. BERGT (1930 – 2011)

Image courtesy of Concordia
Historical Institute, St.
Louis, Missouri.

. . . was not present on 7 May 2017 at the chapel of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, for what turned out to be the very last of the Bach at the Sem concerts, including three Bach cantatas directed by Maurice Boyer. Bergt* had actually died six years earlier, but many of the listeners knew that the concert rang a final knell for his legacy to the church, for he had formed and conducted the series for over a decade and a half, reaching into his eightieth year. Now, it was announced, the series would not continue and that raised questions. How could Bergt's legacy just disappear? How are we Lutherans faring as stewards of the musical *donum Dei*, the gift of God that Martin Luther taught us to enjoy next to theology itself? How can we best enfold and nurture the great musical talents that God sends among us?

The church's ministry and the power of music as God's gift formed two directions for young Bergt from his earliest childhood years in Schuyler, Nebraska. His father, a pastor and musician, started him on several instruments, then sent the five-year-old to professional teachers

* Full disclosure: I was Bergt's student and later staff assistant at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, during the 1960's. Later he and I also served as members of a Liberty Fund seminar (hosted by Richard and Phyllis Duesenberg) exploring Bach's St. Matthew Passion, and during his later years I wrote program notes for Bach at the Sem concerts.

in Omaha. Young Bob thought it perfectly natural to go out hunting and fishing, then come home, warm his hands, and practice violin.

The young boy was clearly gifted. His violin skills allowed him to sit in with the Omaha orchestra. He also spent time in a music shop learning to repair violins and occasionally demonstrating his precocity for guest artists such as Fritz Kreisler, Nathan Milstein, or Yehudi Menuhin. In his early school years he also served as organist for church services, though he felt that the keyboard was not truly his instrument.

Exempted from the eighth grade, the young boy entered Concordia high school and college at Fort Wayne, Indiana, to pursue his second driving passion: service to the church. In these years he also traveled to Chicago to study music, including string quartet playing, with some of the great teachers there, particularly the Chicago Symphony's Carl Rink. He also made his first contact with Walter Buszin, a pastor-musicologist who later became his mentor and eventual colleague on the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

Young Bob also found an ideal partner when he married Joan Roesener in 1954. Joan was no mean musician herself, having studied organ with Heinrich Fleischer at Valparaiso University. Joan quickly recognized Bob's extraordinary gifts and partnered with him devotedly. She later accompanied Bob's recitals, also regularly performing in St. Louis concerts of the American Kantorei (the choir and instrumental ensemble organized by Bergt) or, later, Bach at the Sem — all this while mothering their four children and serving as a church organist.

By 1958 Bergt was at a fork in the road. He had earned both his M.Div. and S.T.M. degrees at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Both ministry and music, however, pulled at him, resulting in nights spent shedding tears over what looked like an anguished choice between the two. This dilemma, however, was partially resolved when he, after a brief time in parish

ministry, began to teach at Concordia Seminary, directing the chapel choir and offering worship courses. Now he had found a context for his musical-theological career. Bergt's faculty position in music and worship, however, was new territory for the historically German Lutheran seminary, since music had long been considered the domain of parochial school teachers.

During these years, he also came under two influences that marked the duality of his musical calling: Dom Joseph Gajard and Maestro Pierre Monteux. Under Gajard's tutelage Bergt discovered a new understanding of music emanating from the Solesmes community's revival of Gregorian chant. The performance of chant was defined in service of the Word; but the fundamental concepts of chant were also, he learned, the underpinnings for Beethoven, Bach, and all serious music.

Bergt also found himself within the inner circle of conducting students at Monteux's summer institute in Ellsworth, Maine. Bergt told of being chosen to help the aging maestro climb into and out of his special chair in the middle of the orchestra. Monteux affirmed Bergt's musicianship and skill. That inspired the young man to believe in himself and recognize conducting as his true *métier*.

Now fixed in his Seminary position, Bergt also organized the American Kantorei and initiated the Schola Cantorum, a summer graduate program in church music. He also conducted orchestras and performed instrumentally in the St. Louis musical community, hopefully opening new visions for the church's stewardship of its towering heritage. He conducted the St. Louis String Ensemble and the St. Louis Philharmonic, was concert master for the St. Louis Philharmonic, joined with St. Louis Symphony players to form the Aristeia String Quartet, lectured on church music at Lutheran colleges and universities, published projects for the American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, and served as cantor in local congregations.

Bergt's path veered sharply when the theological conflicts in the LCMS sent the majority of the St. Louis Seminary's faculty into "exile." The Bergts were deeply, tearfully affected by this rip in the Church's fabric. They were additionally burdened by Bob's health and consequent mobility problems that eventually confined him to a motorized chair even when making an entrance to conduct concerts.

While most of Bergt's faculty colleagues ended up in academic "exile" at other Lutheran seminaries, his own career took him first to Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois, as music faculty member and conductor. That move eventually forced him to give up the American Kantorei leadership in St. Louis, a true disappointment. Next, from 1984-1988, he served as music department chair at Valparaiso University in Indiana. Here Bergt had a context that allowed him more contact with church music as well as orchestral leadership in both the academic program and the well-established Institute of Liturgical Studies.

During the next seven years Bergt held a very satisfying post as orchestra conductor at the Musashino Akademia Musicae in Tokyo. There he came into contact with other great teacher-musicians from all over Europe as well as Japan. He and Joan thoroughly enjoyed this final phase of his teaching career.

Bergt also benefitted from the friendship and strong financial support of two brothers and their wives: Robert and Lorraine† Duesenberg and Richard and Phyllis Duesenberg. Richard and Phyllis flew to Japan and invited the Bergts to return to St. Louis and join their vision of an "artist in residence" position at Concordia Seminary. With funding from the Duesenbergs, Bergt spent the last decade and half of his life directing concerts at the Sem, offering instrumental and organ works, but with a major focus on Bach's cantatas.

This was an extraordinary move by all parties, making Bergt the only "exiled" faculty

member to return to Concordia Seminary, resurrecting the ensemble he had once directed in St. Louis, giving him access to Seminary classrooms, and bringing him again to service in the church he loved. With Duesenberg financial support, Bach at the Sem concerts were offered freely to the church and community, thus drawing sizable audiences for many years as Bergt continued to organize and conduct the ensemble. In a sense he never retired. He answered his musical-theological calling into the very last stages of life.

That life was fulfilling in ways few of us can expect to know, yet Bergt's life story challenges all of us to take seriously the relationship of church and music. While he had done what he loved and always associated that work with worship, it turned out that his long association with Concordia Seminary was quite exceptional and unfortunately not sustainable. The Seminary's performance series has now been cancelled, a sad thing in the church that counts the musical legacy of Martin Luther and J. S. Bach as a *donum Dei* to be shared with all Christianity.

The stewardship of music still puzzles us Lutherans, even when and if seminaries try to take its role in liturgy seriously. Thus the ending of the church music degree program at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, is remembered among church musicians all too painfully. Similarly, Concordia Seminary's President Dale Meyer noted that Bergt's legacy could not be sustained financially, even with the Duesenberg family's support. He believes a new "third way" for music will have to emerge beyond classical and popular, and that meanwhile we need strong mentoring of those millennials who grew up without a formative sense of the hymns and music that shaped many of us.

Robert Bergt's work may have shown that hymns, chant, and psalmody are all gifts of God. He also powerfully showed us what Luther knew and that Bach demonstrated: this gift of God in

music extends from congregational hymns also into realms such as Bach cantatas and instrumental masterpieces. All these are our musical responsibility, but we have too often been unable to find the means or agencies to exercise that responsibility as caretakers of God's gift. It is nonetheless up to all of us to nurture the exceptional musical talent given to Bergt and many others if we are to share blessedly that *donum Dei* with the world around us.

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