



REGINA HOLMEN FRYXELL (1899 – 1993)

*Photo from Special Collections, Augustana
College Tredway Library, Rock Island, Illinois*

... was a Lutheran churchwoman who served pivotally in the development of music practice and liturgical song for American Lutherans. She should be referenced carefully. The *Commentary on the Lutheran Book of Worship* briefly mentions Dr. Fryxell's revision of a Sanctus melody in Setting 2 of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW, 1978), which drew in turn upon the *Service Book and Hymnal* (SBH, 1958). LBW's *Manual on the Liturgy* and the "Acknowledgments" in the hymnal itself never mention her. Thankfully she receives appropriate credit for her work on Setting 5 of *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW, 2006). It is safe to say that Regina Fryxell merits our notice still today.

All this emerged, however, from distant beginnings. Hers is a triumphant story that might inspire all the rest of us lesser lights called to do music for the church. Regina grew up in a Lutheran pastor's family in Kansas and Iowa. Her first experiences with music were apparently frustrating, but she buckled down to work on it, even placing wooden blocks under her piano so

she could practice “organ music.” At Rock Island’s Augustana College after 1918, she was the first student to complete programs in both the College and its associated Conservatory, thus earning degrees in music (B.Mus.) and literature (B. A.). She led her class in both programs. Then followed study at Juilliard School of Music under Gaston Dethier and Wallingford Riegger, eventually also with Leo Sowerby. Regina Holmen married the well-known geologist, Dr. Fritiof Fryxell, and settled down as a wife and mother.

Her career then centered on Augustana College of Rock Island where she taught keyboard, theory, and French. The church knew her also as a congregational music director and composer of anthems, especially cycles based on the propers for the church year. These appeared in Fortress Press. She became a recitalist of some note, once performing at the Washington Cathedral (1944). Fryxell was also honored as the organist for both the concluding convention of the Augustana Synod and the constituting convention of the Lutheran Church in America.

Prior to publication of SBH, she was invited by Conrad Bergendorff and Otto Bostrom of Augustana College to work on the new service book. Fryxell began a lengthy and intensive study of the Lutheran sources of liturgical music. From these studies emerged Setting 2 in SBH that was taken up in both LBW and ELW. She is properly named as the major source for Setting 5 in the latter book. Fryxell undertook the painstaking work of adapting the powerful, historic melodies of European Lutheranism to the different gestures and cadences of the English language. For many worshipers her music created continuity between the struggles of the church in Europe and the younger expression of church life here on the New World. Not to be forgotten are her other compositions published by Fortress Press, Westminster Press, and various other church music publishers. Among these was a complete set of Introits and Graduals appearing between 1967 and 1969. In later years she turned her attention increasingly to children’s song.

Still, this legacy might too easily go unnoticed. Luther Reed's magisterial study, *The Lutheran Liturgy* (2nd ed, 1959), characterized SBH's Setting 2 as the "Continental Setting," founded on Lutheran music traditions of northern Europe. It was thus quite different in character from the "Anglican" (Setting 1) and the "Plainsong" (Setting 3) settings. Though acknowledging that this work was "ably edited . . . by Mrs. Fryxell," Luther Reed curiously suggested that Fryxell's colleagues in liturgical composition, the Episcopalian musician Harold Gilbert (SBH Setting I) and Ernest White (SBH Setting 3), had been chosen for their expertise in liturgical music and chant. Regina Fryxell, however, was the only Lutheran and only woman to contribute to SBH's liturgical music. Her work, as Reed put it, was only commissioned because "the Augustana Church [of largely Swedish background] had offered [her] services..." Preparation for Setting 2 in the SBH project had actually plunged Fryxell into a ten-year comparative study of the historic Lutheran service orders, especially the Swedish tradition. Her final product combined chant materials from the middle ages as well as chorale melodies. In any event, her work proved influential for liturgical music even later in LBW, particularly Setting 3, and SBH Setting 5.

Why does someone so important slip from memory quickly? Perhaps Regina Fryxell was an example of those unnumbered servants who took joy in servanthood, a characteristic often noted in comments about this woman. Maybe she deserved more notice, but maybe she found all the reward she wanted as the church's full-voiced praise cascaded around God's throne in music she had crafted. Regina Fryxell's devotion to preserving centuries-old music, even chant and chorales, as a gift to the church might seem historically quirky today. Apparently she wanted us to know our own heritage — especially as it was drawn from ecumenical Christian sources — in a time when it appeared to be dismissed by more urgent cultural imperatives and socio-political passions. And that often seems to be the case even now.

Still, in a time when a group of women known as Anonymous IV makes a name for itself singing medieval polyphony and Benedictine monks hit the charts with Gregorian repertoire, we might be a little more skeptical about facile assumptions that loudly define the cultural imperatives of the moment. Regina Fryxell's quiet service to worshipers and her love of the church's tradition may not be such a bad model after all.

Victor E. Gebauer

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For Further Reference

Boaden, Ann. "Composing a Life for God: Regina Holmen Fryxell," Augustana Heritage Association Gathering. 2012.
http://augustanaheritage.org/A.Boaden_on_Regina_Fryxell.pdf (accessed 15 March 2015).