

MARTIN J. BANGERT (1900 – 1988)



Photo courtesy of Mark P. Bangert and Family

. . . was honored at his death by a notice in the respected German church music journal, *Musik und Kirche* (March, 1989, pp. 159-160). It is fair to say that church musicians on this continent (apart from a select few) were generally unaware of his passing or significance. Like the more widely recognized Edward Rechlin (a prominent concert organist) or Walter Buszin (an influential Lutheran seminary professor), however, Martin Bangert was an author — or at least co-author — of many changes that set the scene for Lutheran church music today. To him and his fellow reformers we particularly owe our awareness of the heritage of music rooted in the hymns and liturgy of the worshiping congregation.

Bangert pursued the career of a typical Lutheran parochial school teacher. After studies at Concordia College, Seward, Nebraska, he taught in Sheboygan, Wisconsin; Indianapolis; Beloit,

Wisconsin; and Kendallville, Indiana, eventually retiring in Milwaukee. Like many Lutheran teachers, moreover, he was also the organist and choir director in the congregations he served.

In music, however, he was anything but typical. He championed the renewal of Lutheran church music, particularly the long-ignored German music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a commitment deepened by study in 1935 with the Leipzig masters of the organ, Karl Straube and Günther Ramin. Bangert sensed the profound importance of German church music renewal for the near-dead but reawakening sense of Lutheran musical identity in the United States. He possessed an evangelist's zeal for the chorale and opened his ears to wonderful pre-Bach composers that were virtually unknown at the time. In such music he recognized a model for proclaiming the Gospel. Bangert and his colleagues were in many ways truly visionary in this respect.

Bangert pursued his vision with an entrepreneur's energy. Already in 1924 he founded the Lutheran Chorus of Sheboygan. Combining lay singers, trained vocalists, and instrumentalists, the chorus had much in common with the "Kantorei" organizations of the Lutheran tradition. The Chorus, sometimes in collaboration with Edward Rechlin, traveled all across the USA, once even into Central America, with first American performances of Bach, Buxtehude, Schütz, Scheidt, and others of the Lutheran "golden era." Years later Martin W. Bangert (the elder Bangert's son) recounted how his father had even taken the older German-speaking members of his church choir and the Sheboygan Lutheran Chorus to a prisoner of war camp to perform for the Germans interned there during World War II. The choir's repertoire certainly suited the audience!

Yet another initiative for Lutheran church music grew out of the recognition that there was not enough classic Lutheran music readily available. During his 1935 trip to Europe,

therefore, Bangert made a point of collecting music of the Lutheran masters otherwise unavailable in the USA. Later, to meet the growing need of Lutheran choirs, he collaborated with Paul Rosel, a music professor at Bangert's alma mater, Concordia Teachers College, in Seward, Nebraska. Rosel was sometimes listed as the assistant conductor and organist for concerts of the Lutheran Chorus of Sheboygan. Rosel and Bangert also worked together in editing the *Laudamus Dominum octavo* series that contributed to CPH's growing reputation as a publisher of sacred choral music. The availability of settings by the likes of Vulpius, Schein, Decius, Hassler, Jeep, Gesius, and Praetorius gave choirs a new repertoire rooted in the Lutheran chorale and suitable for worship.

Bangert also played a prominent role in the early years of the Valparaiso University Church Music Seminars, which had been instituted by Theodore Hoelty-Nickel (Valparaiso's Music Department head) beginning in 1944. Hoelty-Nickel frequently included Edward Rechlin as a speaker and organist in the Seminar programs, but he also viewed Bangert as a kindred spirit who shared the sense of commitment to the Lutheran tradition. The Sheboygan ensemble was therefore highlighted in several of the Seminar programs. Bangert as well as Rechlin also appeared among the speakers at these early conferences. In 1946 and 1949, moreover, Hoelty-Nickel actually held the Valparaiso Church Music Seminar in Sheboygan in recognition of Bangert's contributions to the cause of Lutheran church music.

Even in retirement Martin and his wife Lonella pursued their church music vision by purchasing a motor home. With this vehicle they traveled to various camps each summer hauling a trailer with a portable organ (see photo above; note the deliberately displayed Scheidemann organ score plus the flanking busts of Bach and Schütz). At these camp sites the itinerant couple led the "Lutheran Summer Music and Mission Camps," week-long programs designed to help

struggling musicians from small parishes improve their technique, biblical knowledge, and access to good service music — all this, of course, long before there was anything like the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians or nationally sponsored summer workshops to support the mission of those who lead the church's song.

Today, in historically and culturally changed conditions, church musicians still work toward the same goals that Martin and Lonella Bangert pursued: leading music rooted in liturgy and hymns to proclaim the Gospel. We do well if we, like our predecessors, refresh our sense of Lutheran identity in changing times, develop an authentic musical vision for our own moment in history, and invest our energies in service to the same Gospel. Martin Bangert and his colleagues might well serve as our mentors in this respect.

Victor E. Gebauer

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Sources and Further Reference

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Acknowledgments

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